Divergent Paths

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Divergent Paths

by Rigil Kent

Summary

Two officers, believed killed in action, are stranded on a pre-warp planet and must work together to survive while the rest of the NX-01 crew learn to carry on without them. Begins a very AU season 2.

Notes

This is a story totally unrelated to my Endeavour series and begins early in Enterprise Season 2, sometime after "Dead Stop" (the automated repair space station), but before the character assassinating "A Night In Sickbay." Everything after "Dead Stop" is either invalidated or fair game. Obviously, this story is a major AU as it was birthed from my musings on how one could use the Stranded! motif and tell an epic (hopefully) Star Trek story. There is action (it's me, after all), romance, adventure and hopefully a couple of surprises along the way.
The shriek of alarms roused her to consciousness.

Ignoring the dull pain that stabbed through her left leg, Subcommander T'Pol climbed to her feet, even as Shuttlepod One shuddered and shook. Her memory was hazy as to how she got on the floor; the last thing she clearly recalled was Commander Tucker asking her to check the emission output of the sensor mask they were testing.

The commander was strapped into the pilot's seat, and T'Pol suppressed a wince at the livid bruise that covered the left side of his face. Blood was trickling from his ears and his nose, but his attention was focused entirely upon the controls. He gave her a glance, before quickly returning his eyes to the sensor feed in front of him.

"Port thrusters are out," he declared as she dropped into the seat before the engineering station. "And we're venting O2."

"What happened?" T'Pol asked. She began cycling through the damage report as rapidly as she could. It was distressingly bleak.

"No idea," Tucker replied. Already, the exterior of the 'pod was beginning to heat up as the commander sent the small craft diving planetside. With Enterprise at the periphery of the star system and thus out of range, the pre-warp planet was their best option for the moment. "Dammit," Tucker snarled in the half-second before the 'pod abruptly slewed hard to the left. T'Pol felt her breath catch slightly, as she realized that the primary impulse drive had failed. They were now little more than a fast-moving, oddly-shaped rock.

"Two minutes to impact," T'Pol announced before raising an eyebrow at Tucker's rapid unhooking of his seat restraints. She recognized his intent instantly, and slid into the seat the moment he vacated it.

A quick glance over the flight computer revealed that the starboard jets were still functional. The docking thrusters also worked, and T'Pol activated them at once; against the planetary gravity, they would be of negligible use, but she estimated that they might slow their rate of descent slightly. An alarm began sounding as Commander Tucker opened the access hatch to the impulse drive, but T'Pol ignored it as she strained against the flight controls. Through the viewport, she could see a mountain range looming closer. Seconds flashed by.

With a whine, the impulse drive suddenly came online, and T'Pol fired the braking thrusters while raising the nose of the 'pod. A sharp crack echoed through the small craft as the sudden change in momentum ripped the port winglet free and sent it spinning away. Warning lights flashed and audio alarms shrieked as the shuttlepod struggled against the implacable pull of the planet's gravity. T'Pol could taste blood, and realized abruptly that she was biting down hard on her lips. She could hear Tucker muttering something, but didn't try to comprehend what he was saying.

The impact of the shuttlepod against the ground seemed almost anti-climatic, and T'Pol heaved a discreet sigh of relief at Commander Tucker's quick repairs. She glanced back at him, noting without surprise that he was already examining the small craft's primary drive system with a scowl on his face. As if he sensed her eyes, he glanced up.

"Nice flyin'," he complimented as he studied his hand scanner. T'Pol quirked an eyebrow in response, before turning her attention back the flight station. She frowned slightly at the
nonfunctional communications equipment and fought to restrain a sigh at their lack of sensor capability; they had no idea if their approach had been detected or not. Although the natives of this planet hadn't yet reached warp capability, they were well into the atomic age and could have possibly tracked the shuttlepod's descent on radar or some other form of primitive scanners if the sensor mask they had been testing had failed.

The mask had been a joint effort between T'Pol and Commander Tucker, although the engineer had really done most of the work despite having given her the majority of the credit. In the days after their encounter with the Romulan mine, Mister Tucker had spent nearly all of his free time studying the captured Suliban cell ship currently aboard Enterprise. To T'Pol's disappointment, the commander had significantly curtailed his attendance at the captain's mess, often claiming that he was simply too busy. Captain Archer seemed to understand, but T'Pol found herself slightly frustrated at the loss of her more interesting dinner companion. The captain was a capable conversationalist, but his deep-rooted animosity toward her species (admittedly less intense now than when she had first joined Enterprise) and their lack of mutual interests inevitably made the dinners less ... enjoyable.

"The sensor mask is fried," Tucker said after a few silent moments. As was his custom in recent weeks, he didn't make eye contact with her as he spoke, and T'Pol wondered if he was angry at her for some reason. If she didn't know better, she'd almost say that he had been avoiding her. She frowned slightly when she realized that he also seemed to be avoiding the captain as well. Perhaps that had been the reason Captain Archer had sent the two of them on this mission alone.

"Was it functional when we entered the atmosphere?" T'Pol asked, and the engineer shrugged.

"I have no idea," he replied. A sour look crossed his face as he continued. "It's gonna take me at least an hour to figure out what's wrong with this thing," Tucker grumbled while pointing toward the engine.

"We may not have an hour," she pointed out. "We should focus on repairing the communications array and report our status to Enterprise." He grimaced at that before nodding.

"Yeah." The engineer began rooting through his tool box. "Wouldn't want the cap'n to send a rescue party for ya until we know where we stand." T'Pol raised an eyebrow at the hint of bitterness in the commander's words.

"It would be illogical for him to risk detection for two officers," she reminded him. The tragedy with the Paraagan colony had gone a long way in convincing Captain Archer about the importance of discretion; as this was the first planetary system that Enterprise had encountered since the Paraagan incident, it was also understandable that the captain was hesitant about acting without further intelligence.

Within minutes, Tucker had managed to get the communication system functioning, and, once more, T'Pol found herself marveling at his talents. Her initial estimate had been that the comm system was beyond salvage, but the engineer surprised her yet again with his creative repairs.

"Bottom line it for me, Trip," Captain Archer ordered once they made contact and reported their situation. The tension in the captain's voice was thick, and for good reason; Enterprise's long-range scanners had detected several large radio telescopes on the planet that were more than capable of detecting the Starfleet vessel if it emerged from behind the planet's largest moon.

"Right now," Commander Tucker replied grimly, "I don't have a clue, sir." He pressed his tongue against the inside of his cheek without thinking. "I need at least an hour, probably more, to find out what happened."
"Is there any indication that our presence has been detected?" T'Pol asked.

"Not that we can see," the captain said in response. "Hoshi is monitoring their radio chatter, but I don't think they saw you crash." Archer was silent for a moment. "We'll remain where we are for now and keep an eye on the situation. Let me know once you figure out what happened."

"Aye, sir," Tucker responded, before turning back toward the barely functional engine.

"Stay out trouble, you two," the captain finished. "Enterprise out." The comm line went dead.

"How may I be of assistance?" T'Pol asked her colleague. He gave her a quick glance, before sighing and gesturing toward the impulse drive.

"I've got this handled for now," he stated while returning his full attention to the impulse manifold, prompting her to quirk an eyebrow. "If we're gonna get this thing off the ground, though, we're gonna need to track down the O2 leak and repair it."

For the briefest of moments, T'Pol considered asking him if he was angry at her for some reason. Patching the oxygen lines was utterly illogical if they were going to be forced to abandon the shuttle entirely, and she could only theorize that Commander Tucker did not want to work alongside her as they had in the past. That thought left her unexpectedly sad. She had thought that they were friends.

"I will attend to it at once," she responded as she turned away. There would be time later to discern how she had evidently upset the commander.
Charles Tucker was furious.

As he stared at the exposed innards of the shuttlepod's impulse drive, Trip seriously considered using the expensive tool in his hand as a hammer, so as to vent his frustrations on the inanimate object. It wasn't the engine's fault, of course, but the urge to lash out was quite intense. Closing his eyes, he tried to reign in his anger and focus on the job in front of him. Getting the 'pod operational again so they could return to Enterprise was only thing that mattered.

That way, he could go back to avoiding Jon and T'Pol.

Glowing at the uncooperative impulse drive, Tucker began to disassemble the manifold with practiced motions. It was monkey work, something he'd normally have a new crewman do, and gave him far too much time to think. He didn't want to think, didn't want to reflect on the piss poor state of life right now, and certainly didn't want to think about the Vulcan woman currently patching the shuttlepod's oxygen lines.

The realization that he was falling for her had come out of nowhere and hit him hard right before the Vahklas departed. At almost the same time, however, T'Pol seemed constantly in the captain's presence, so much so that the rumor mill on Enterprise had begun theorizing that the two were romantically involved. Recalling Archer's past history with Erika Hernandez, Trip had discounted those rumors as absolute nonsense.

Until he saw Jon entering T'Pol's cabin the night after the subcommander swayed the Vulcans against canceling the NX program.

The realization that the rumors were evidently correct had been like a gut punch, and Trip had retreated to the gym to work out his frustrations; the next day, his muscles felt like so much rubber, but it at least gave him a reason to hide out deep in the bowels of Enterprise for the entire day. From that point on, he had started to make himself scarce whenever possible. When the captain invited him to dinner, Tucker made excuses about his workload in engineering. When T'Pol sent a work order to engineering, or requested some assistance with repairs of some sort, Trip sent his second instead of going himself. And when he received a request from Starfleet Command to consider a transfer to the unfinished Columbia, Tucker didn't automatically discard the request.

Instead, he seriously considered it.

A part of him knew that he was being juvenile, and acting like a stupid teenager, but that didn't stop the frustration that Trip felt whenever he saw T'Pol with the captain. He knew that Malcolm suspected something – the armoury officer had made a couple of leading comments during their ridiculous escapade on Risa – but, to Trip's relief, the lieutenant hadn't pressed him about his sudden antisocial behavior.

The drive manifold came loose, and Trip bit back a curse at what he saw. Where there should have been functional moving parts was now a fused slab of metal and plastic. Without a complete engine replacement, the 'pod wasn't leaving this small valley any time soon.

"Commander." T'Pol's voice caught him by surprise, and Trip jumped slightly before shooting her a frustrated glare. She was studying the mess he was sitting in front of with an upraised eyebrow.

"It's screwed," Trip reported, as he turned his attention back to the fused junk before him so he
wouldn't focus on how gorgeous the Vulcan was, especially with that smudge of dirt on her nose. He swallowed the annoyance that bubbled up within his stomach, and gestured to the ruined engine. "It looks like the coolant system failed, which led to the magnetic containment of the plasma collapsin'." Silently, Trip began composing the scathing report he intended to write on the shuttlepod repair crew; there were only a limited number of people who could be responsible for the sort of sloppiness that led to this.

"We should inform the captain," T'Pol decided. She turned away, and Tucker snuck a quick glance at her retreating form, before returning his full attention to the ruined engine. *Eyes front, Trip,* he told himself bitterly. If there was one thing that Tucker had learned about Jon, it was that he really didn't like his friends checking out the women that Archer was dating.

"So it's not going anywhere?" the captain asked once he had been filled in. He sounded nearly as angry as Trip was over the shuttlepod's current situation.

"No, sir," Tucker replied sourly.

"Hess has already started installing the sensor mask on the other shuttlepod," Archer relayed after a moment of silence. "But that'll take at least two days. Maybe three."

"Why don't you beam T'Pol out of here?" Trip asked abruptly. Instantly, he grimaced at the words that tumbled out of his mouth. His mother had often accused him of suffering from 'single synapse syndrome' due to his tendency to speak before thinking, and, as T'Pol shot him a Vulcan glare, Trip silently acknowledged that his mom had probably been right. From thought to action in a single bound was how his mother had lamented. "I can handle things here until the other 'pod arrives," he pressed on.

"That is illogical," T'Pol nearly snapped. If she hadn't been Vulcan, her expression could have been called annoyed. "Starfleet regulations require landing parties to be comprised of at least two personnel."

"And I'm not going to put *Enterprise* into orbit unless there's no other option," Archer stated. "This planet is on the verge of a global atomic war," he continued, "And I don't want to think about what would happen if we suddenly showed up."

"All the more reason to get her out of here," Tucker muttered. He returned the Vulcan's cold stare with a frown of his own.

"This moon's orbit is taking us out of direct communication for at least six hours," the captain declared, clearly ignoring Trip's suggestion, "So, stay safe, you two. *Enterprise* out."

"Your concern about my safety is appreciated, Mister Tucker, but misplaced," T'Pol pointed out the instant the comm line went dead, and Trip fought to keep the glower from his face. He was mostly successful.

"'Cause that's the cap'n's job," he muttered, eliciting a raised eyebrow from her. "We should start packin' the gear for the evac," Tucker said before she could comment.

For nearly three hours, they worked in virtual silence. Trip knew the subcommander well enough to recognize that she wanted to ask him about his foul mood, but didn't know how to broach the subject. Not too long ago, he would have taken pity on her social awkwardness and given her an opportunity to ask her questions; it had become how they learned to be friends, with him watching her for signs of confusion or discomfort before stepping in to explain some quirk of human behavior. Now, however, he didn't even make eye contact with her in the event that she might see it as an
opportunity to query him about his behavior. It was childish and immature, but according to the Vulcan biographical file on him (which he wasn't supposed to have read in the first place), he excelled at being immature.

When she began studying the darkening sky with the Vulcan equivalent of a frown, however, Trip was forced to take notice. Glancing in the direction that she was studying, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. The tension in the subcommander's body was unmistakable, though, and Tucker found himself growing nervous.

"Commander," the Vulcan said abruptly. "Human night vision is considered superior to Vulcan," she stated, and Trip blinked at the unexpected revelation. She continued before he could give it serious thought. "Our hearing, however, is significantly better." T'Pol pointed. "I can hear what sounds to be primitive engines in that direction, but I cannot see a vehicle."

Trip squinted as he examined the horizon in the direction that she indicated, and, for a long moment, saw nothing. He was about to tell her that when the fading sunlight glinted off of something. His eyes widened.

"Attack planes!" he exclaimed sharply before diving toward the communication array on the 'pod. An angry red light morbidly informed him that Enterprise was still out of contact range; lurking behind the largest moon, it was likely on the other side of the planet and, even if Trip did send a message, it would take at least five or ten minutes to reach the Starfleet ship. That was time they didn't have.

To his surprise, T'Pol hadn't moved, and was still looking in the direction of the approaching aircraft, clearly in an effort to make it out herself. At his incredulous look, she gave him a disbelieving look.

"Are you sure?" she asked. Trip didn't bother to reply as he pushed one of the shuttlepod's survival packs into her hands.

"We need to move now!" he snapped, as he risked another look in the direction of the aircraft. There were three of them now, and, at any other time, Trip would have loved to examine them. Of a swept-wing design, the twin propellers that provided each of the craft thrust were at the aft of the bombers instead of the fore. Aggressive-looking pods were slung under the wings, and Trip didn't want to know if they were bombs or rockets. He sprinted away from the wrecked 'pod, slightly surprised at how easily T'Pol seemed to outpace him. The whines of the primitive internal combustion engines that drove the three aerocraft echoed around them.

Thirty seconds later, the entire valley exploded in fire.
Jon: Atomic Revelations

The comm from the bridge caught Jon Archer in the shower.

Since assuming command of Enterprise, he had quickly learned that the captain was never off-duty, no matter what the duty roster said. He couldn't count the number of times that he had been interrupted during a shower, or while napping, or, embarrassingly enough, while sitting on the toilet. It had become such a regular occurrence, that he was convinced either the bridge staff was doing it on purpose or the universe had an amazingly morbid sense of humor.

Without stopping the shower, he leaned toward the nearby comm panel and depressed the TRNSMT button.

"This is Archer," he said loudly.

"Sir, we're picking up some odd readings on the planet," Lieutenant Reed declared. Even through the commline, Jon could hear the armoury officer's discomfort at relaying the information; it nearly caused Archer to smile since Reed had been the one who urged the captain to get some rest while Enterprise was out of direct contact with the downed shuttlepod.

"What kind of readings?" Archer asked.

"We don't know, sir."

"All right," Jon replied. "I'll be there in a couple of minutes. Archer out."

As he killed the stream of water and reached for a towel, Jon let his thoughts drift toward the two officers currently stranded planetside. Unconsciously, he frowned. He had hoped that this little mission would let his two senior-most officers to deal with whatever it was that was bothering them. Almost at once, though, he recognized that Trip would likely cut off his own hand before admitting that there was something wrong; for someone who was always ready to listen to someone's problems, Tucker had a frustrating tendency to internalize his own issues.

Stepping out of the shower, Archer let his mind wander as he towelled off. It hadn't escaped his notice that Trip had started steering clear of Subcommander T'Pol, and Jon had a pretty good idea why his old friend was doing so. Based on a couple of offhand comments that Tucker had made, it seemed obvious that the engineer thought that there was something going on between the captain and T'Pol, something above and beyond their jobs as commanding and first officers. At first, Jon had been amused at such a ridiculous notion, but he hadn't yet corrected Trip's misconceptions in the hopes that he could first figure out what to do. Anyone with eyes could see that Tucker was infatuated with the subcommander, and, though she was a more difficult person to read, Archer was pretty sure that the Vulcan was attracted to the engineer. A relationship between the two almost seemed inevitable, but the chain-of-command issues that would crop up in such an event made Jon's head hurt.

He had nearly finished dressing when an obnoxious alarm began sounding. As he turned toward the comm panel, Lieutenant Reed's voice echoed from it.

"Action stations!" the armoury officer shouted. The phrase wasn't immediately familiar to Jon, prompting him to suspect that the lieutenant was falling back on his Royal Navy training. "All hands
to general quarters," Reed continued, and Archer did recognize that. "Captain to the bridge at once!"

Jon was out of his quarters and sprinting toward the turbolift even before the armoury officer had finished speaking. In the year plus that he had served with Reed, Captain Archer had gotten to know the man well enough to realize that the lieutenant was nothing if not professional. An emergency summons like that would actually be an emergency.

The tension of the bridge was immediately noticeable as Jon stepped out of the lift. Reed was already at his station, shoulders squared and a grim expression on his face. Ensign Sato was hunched over her board, one hand quickly inputting commands while the other pressed against the earpiece. It was a little odd, seeing someone other than T'Pol at the Science station.

"Report," Archer demanded as he approached his command chair.

"We're detecting multiple explosions on the planet's surface, sir," Lieutenant Reed replied at once. When he looked up, the lieutenant's face was bleak. "Atomic explosions," he continued. Jon's breath caught, but he pushed the worry away and focused on being The Captain.

"Any word from Trip or T'Pol?" he asked, sounding much calmer than he felt.

"No, sir," Hoshi responded. She didn't look up as she continued to work. "I'm trying all frequencies, but we're getting a lot of interference."

"The weapons being used might be causing an electromagnetic pulse," the ensign manning the science board stated.

"Keep trying," Jon instructed, and Hoshi nodded. "How close was the shuttlepod to these detonations?" he asked the science officer.

"They weren't on the same continent, sir," Ensign Ling replied, and Archer exhaled softly in relief as he began to pace, his mind whirring. More than anything, he wanted to order Travis to put Enterprise in orbit over the planet so they could beam Trip and T'Pol out of danger. Doing so could only lead to more trouble though; Jon could only imagine how the warring factions would react to seeing an alien starship suddenly appear in their sky.

"All right," he said, once more trying to sound like he knew what he was doing. "Travis, keep us where we are." The junior officers gave him an incredulous look, even as Reed began nodding in understanding and approval. "Hoshi, I want a status report from Lieutenant Hess. Malcolm, get as much information as you can about the weapons they're using. Doctor Phlox may need it for the decon procedures when we get our people back."

"Yes, sir," the armoury officer said in response. Out of the corner of his eye, Jon saw the ensign manning the science board shift, clearly awaiting orders. For a long moment, Archer remained silent as he tried to remember the young woman's first name; he hoped that it looked like he was coming up with new instructions.

"Keep an eye on things," he told her, deciding to opt for direct eye contact since he couldn't remember her name. She was new to the crew, after all, and usually on the Gamma Shift. "Malcolm, you have the bridge."

The moment that the ready room door closed behind him, Jon let out a worried breath. He should have expected this sort of thing to happen with Trip out there. Trouble seemed to follow the engineer
like a stray dog. At least T'Pol was there to keep him out of trouble. Frowning, Archer tried not to think of how many times she had gotten herself into trouble; she was nearly as bad as Trip when it came to these sorts of things.

An hour passed without incident, and Jon found himself staring at the chronometer on his desk system, wishing that the time would pass more quickly. In another hour and thirty minutes, they would be able to see the landing zone again. His fingers drummed rapidly along the desk, and he jumped when the door annunciator chirped.

"Enter," he called out as he stood. Hoshi's appearance was something of a surprise, and Jon felt his stomach lurch at her forlorn expression.

"Sir," she began softly as she handed him a PADD, "I've detected something I thought you would want to see." Archer began scrolling through the data, unsure of what he should be looking for. It all looked like gibberish to him.

"What am I looking at?" he asked.

"Intercepts from the two nations at war, sir." Sato's expression grew even more sad as she appeared to struggle with something. Jon was about to ask her to explain when he saw it: no longer listen to your lies about a space vehicle, a vehicle that even now lurks behind one of our satellites awaiting the proper time to rain down fire and death upon my people...

"Oh God," Archer whispered as guilt crushed down upon him. He felt his legs give out and he collapsed into the desk's chair. It was Paraagan all over, only this time, they were to blame.

They had started this war.
Her ears would not stop ringing.

As she picked herself out of the debris, Subcommander T'Pol winced as sharp pains stabbed through her body, beating time with her pulse. Sporadic after-images danced across her field of vision, ruining her already poor night vision; the inner eyelid that all Vulcans possessed had likely kept her from permanent blindness when she had risked a glance back at the maelstrom. In that instant, another of the bombs had detonated, leaving her flash-blind and in worst straits than before.

The glance that left her in this current situation had been an attempt to locate Commander Tucker. In the chaos of their sudden flight as the explosives fell from the skycraft, they had been separated, and T'Pol found herself suppressing a very strong sense of worry for the engineer's well-being. He had an unfortunate habit of getting himself injured while on landing parties, and she hated to imagine what sort of peril he could get himself into while primitive but still quite deadly explosives fell from the sky.

Blinking the spots away, she scrambled to her feet and quickly took stock of her condition. Apart from the vision problems and a temporary loss of hearing brought on by proximity to the explosions, T'Pol could detect no other significant injuries. Her left ankle throbbed, but it was not sufficient to slow her down. She frowned slightly when she realized that her communicator was missing.

She jumped in surprise when Commander Tucker's hand dropped onto her shoulder, and shot him a dark look that he ignored. Never before had she realized how much she relied on her hearing for perception; she hadn't even heard him approach! As the commander gestured and spoke, T'Pol glowered at her inability to understand his meaning; given their current situation, such a disability could prove to be lethal. She studied his lips in the hopes of comprehending his meaning, before giving up.

"I cannot hear you," T'Pol told him, speaking perhaps a bit louder than necessary. Her voice sounded, to her, oddly hollow and distorted, though she knew that she wasn't truly *hearing* anything right now. With his left hand, Commander Tucker reached toward her face, fingers touching her right ear, and T'Pol nearly gasped at his audacity; if he had been Vulcan, it would have been a wildly inappropriate action, and T'Pol schooled herself to absolute stillness. He did not need to know how sensitive her ears were. He withdrew his fingers, now damp with blood, and a worried look crossed his face. Nodding his understanding – or at least that's what she hoped he was nodding about – Tucker gestured rapidly to the two of them before pointing in a direction away from the explosions. She gave him a nod of her own.

Within seconds however, T'Pol found herself growing more frustrated. Her vision had cleared, but night had fallen completely, and, with the overcast sky blotting out the planetary moons, she found it nearly impossible to see anything. With each hesitant step, she fell farther behind Tucker, and, for the first time in her life, she realized she was envious of a human.

It was an uncomfortable experience.

"Commander," she said, glad that at least her hearing was beginning to return. Her voice still sounded a little odd, but the ringing had faded. Tucker glanced back, then stopped walking entirely as he waited for her to catch up. His eyes, T'Pol realized, were studying her legs, as if he were
seeking an injury. "Your night-vision," she told him, "is much better than mine."

"Right," he muttered. Tucker reached for her left hand and put it on his survival pack. "Better?" he asked.

"Yes." It was almost embarrassing to be forced to rely on him like a child, and T'Pol wondered if he saw the humor in the situation. She, who was two to three times stronger than he was, over twice his age, and with far more survival training, had to hold onto him so as to not fall or get lost. For a nanosecond, she seriously considered letting go of his shoulder, but logic reasserted itself. Clinging to him might be undignified, but it was much safer than attempting to traverse this area alone.

They made slow time, pausing every hundred meters or so to allow Commander Tucker to get his bearings, but T'Pol found her faith in him growing with each step. It was a curious sensation, one that she would never have expected to experience with a human, and it reminded her of a Vulcan teamwork exercise; by placing her fate entirely in the commander's hands, she was gaining better appreciation of his talents.

"Dammit," Tucker growled sometime later. By her calculations, T'Pol determined that nearly four hours had passed since the first bombs had fallen. They had paused for rest, and the commander was tinkering with something that she could not make out in the low light. Leaning closer to him, she finally identified it as his communicator. "Shrapnel damaged it," the engineer grumbled, before glancing up. Their faces were mere centimeters apart, and T'Pol wondered at the curious expression that flashed across his face. "Yours?" he asked, swallowing as he did.

"I lost it during the bombardment," she admitted. "Can you repair yours?"

"No idea," Tucker replied, a sour look on his face. "Maybe." Worry was clear on his face. "Without better light to see what's damaged, I don't wanna risk opening it up and messin' it up more." He gestured along their path. "It looks like there's a road of some kind down there," he said, and T'Pol strained her eyes in an attempt to see it. "There's also some lights down there that might be vehicles or maybe even civilization. D'ya think we should risk it?"

"Yes," T'Pol said without hesitation. "They may have communication equipment," she continued, "which could allow us to contact Enterprise." She didn't need to remind him that Ensign Sato had been monitoring the primitive radio signals of this planet.

"All right." Tucker shrugged, a wan smile on his face. "You're the boss," he said unnecessarily. He spent long moments studying the route they were planning before sighing heavily. "We should wait until dawn, though," he said. "That's gonna be a rough climb to begin with, and you really need to see where you're going."

"Aerial patrols will be able to see us more easily," she pointed out.

"Have you ever tried to climb in the dark?" Tucker asked. Shadows concealed his face, and it was disconcerting to hear him but be unable to see him. "It's at least a hundred meter drop, T'Pol, and you have to be able to see." He leaned forward abruptly. "You can put me on report when we get back to Enterprise," the commander stated earnestly, "but I am not gonna try and climb that at night."

T'Pol exhaled softly as she grudgingly admitted that his arguments were logical. "Very well," she agreed, and the commander leaned back. They spent a moment in awkward silence, before she broke the silence. "You should attempt to rest, Commander." Even in the dark, she could see that he tensed, although she didn't know why.

"Yeah," he muttered, his voice just soft enough to be heard. "I should." He leaned back against his
survival pack, and said nothing more.

Extracting a hand scanner from her pack, she quickly programmed it to inform them of approaching life signs. It only had a radius of seventy-five meters, but in this terrain, that should be more than enough. Checking the setting on her phase pistol, T'Pol shifted awkwardly on the uncomfortable rock and awaited the dawn.

In the distance, she could still hear the explosions.

Chapter End Notes

The notion of really poor night vision for Vulcans is not mine. I can't recall which fanfic I read it in, but I really liked it and decided to use it.
A local day on this planet is 21 hours long. 2 days (1.875 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

The harsh light of dawn illuminated the valley below, and Trip Tucker found himself frowning in worry.

He had not been lying when he told T'Pol that it would be a difficult climb, and now, with the early morning sun beginning to creep over the horizon, he realized just how hard it would be. The rock face was almost sheer, as if a huge chunk of the cliff had been expertly sliced off by an industrial laser. It was at least a two hundred meter drop to the ground, and a fall from that height would be virtually impossible to survive. Both survival packs contained climbing gear, but the ropes they had weren't long enough to cover the entire distance; they would have to rappel part of the way, and then free-climb the remaining distance. Trip glanced once in the direction of the shuttlepod, before discarding any thoughts of returning to it. Great columns of smoke climbed into the sky, and he could only imagine how little remained of the 'pod.

To his complete lack of surprise, T'Pol had no expression on her face as she examined the cliff face. There was no indication of what she thought, no hint if she was worried or concerned about the coming descent, or even if she had noticed that the bombing had stopped over an hour ago. If anything, she looked almost bored, as if they were simply out for a walk in the park or taking in the sights at Risa.

It was amazingly encouraging, though Trip would die before admitting it.

"We should get started," she said, as she rooted through her survival pack and extracted the climbing gear. Nodding, Tucker followed suit, wishing the entire time that he was still on Enterprise. Silently, he made a vow to never again join a landing party once he got back. Surely, Jon would understand. Everyone knew how often he got injured on these damned things, and Phlox would probably be glad for the extra time off.

The climb was every bit as difficult as Trip expected, and, within the hour, his muscles were groaning with protest. As he slowly inched his way toward the ground, cautiously reaching for hand holds and toeholds, he was inexplicably reminded of an old twentieth century movie that he'd once seen about a spy who worked for an impossible mission force; the absurdity of the thought nearly caused him to laugh, and he smiled at the idea of his sunglasses exploding when they reached the bottom.

As he slowly crept down, he couldn't help but to notice how skilled the subcommander was at climbing. It shouldn't have been a surprise, especially not when he thought about what the surface of Vulcan was like, but seeing how quickly and efficiently she moved in comparison to his snail pace left him shaking his head in wonder. If he hadn't seen how utterly blind she'd been the night previous, he'd have wondered if there was anything that the Vulcans didn't do better than humans.

Trip risked a glance down, before gritting his teeth and reaching for the next toehold. Fifty meters to go. Sweat stung his eyes, but he couldn't afford to wipe his forehead clean. Liquid fire seemed to
burn in his arms, legs and back, and he muttered a soft curse toward all fools who did this sort of thing for leisure. *Reach, Trip,* he ordered himself while trying to ignore the wind that abruptly seemed to spring out of nowhere as if Mother Nature was trying to make him fall. *Just a little more...*

It took nearly three hours to reach the ground. T'Pol had beaten him by almost thirty minutes, and looked only a little winded. She had removed the upper part of her uniform, though, and Trip tried not to stare at her sweat-soaked undershirt as he drained his canteen. Staring, he mused, would be improper, especially for a gentleman. He returned the now empty container to his pack, and wondered how hard it would be to find water.

"You were correct," T'Pol stated abruptly. She was using the binoculars from her pack to study their surroundings. "There is a road three point seven kilometers in that direction," she continued. "It appears to be frequently traveled."

"Great," Trip said unenthusiastically. He pulled his nonfunctional communicator free, and began studying the damage. "Think we can flag down a taxi?" he asked, prompting T'Pol to give him a quick, sidelong glance. For a second, he wondered if he'd have to explain the joke.

"Unlikely," the Vulcan responded coolly. "Can you repair the communicator?" she queried, and Trip sighed.

"I dunno," he replied. "If we were on *Enterprise,* then I'd say yeah." Tucker snorted. "If they hadn't blown up the damned shuttlepod, I'd say yeah. But with the tools we have here? I dunno." He offered her the communicator. "Any ideas?" T'Pol was silent as she studied the exposed circuitry of the small device.

"The transceiver appears damaged," she pointed out after a moment, and Trip nodded.

"But the UT chip and the receiver are okay," he offered, even as he reminded himself to keep his eyes on her face. *Staring is bad,* he reminded himself. "It's the transmitter that's screwed up." Trip said nothing else as he watched her poke at the communicator's insides; not for the first time, he reflected that she'd have made a fantastic engineer. Unlike a lot of people, she was more than willing to get her hands dirty if the situation called for it.

"Don't move!" The sudden order crackled out of the communicator in the same instant that Trip heard an unfamiliar language from behind him. He reacted without thought, pivoting in place to put his body between the source of the unexpected order and T'Pol, even as he raised his hands slightly. His eyes widened at the two figures pointing what appeared to be rifles at them. As far as he could tell, they looked exactly like humans, with no trace of the usual bumpy foreheads or unusual ears that Trip had come to expect from aliens in this quadrant.

"They must be the spies!" one of the two exclaimed, his words converted to English by the universal translator chip in the damaged communicator. At the echo of his comment, the alien frowned, even as Trip realized that it wasn't entirely accurate to think of the two as aliens. "The ones that the sky force were trying to kill last night!"

"Stand ready," T'Pol whispered before she stepped out from behind him, her own hands exposed. The two natives abruptly lost interest in Trip as a sweaty, gorgeous woman in very tight clothes suddenly appeared in their line of sight. Instinctively, Tucker's eyes darted to her ears, and he fought to keep his expression calm when he realized that they were exposed. All these two fools had to do was look up from her chest, and they'd see that she wasn't native to this planet.

And, just like that, one of them did.
The young man's eyes widened in shock, and he shouted something unintelligible. Trip's hand moved, almost of its own free will, and he drew the phase pistol from its holster in a single, smooth motion, like a gunslinger in one of those old Hollywood movies. Both of the natives recognized him as armed, and reoriented their rifles on him.

Time seemed to slow down.

Trip squeezed the trigger of the pistol, striking one of the two with the stun beam, as he dove to one side for cover. A loud crack echoed as the other native fired his rifle, and Tucker could hear the whine of a slug narrowly miss his head as it ricocheted off the rock face. Hitting the ground, Trip rolled and fired again, this time missing as he scrambled for better cover. A second bullet was fired, and the native was shouting something that Tucker didn't need the UT to translate.

And then, silence.

With a gasp, the native gave T'Pol a startled look and collapsed in a heap, victim to her nerve pinch; by her proximity to him, it looked like the native had ignored her once his partner collapsed, likely thinking that she wasn't a threat. Trip grinned, and was about to comment when the unconscious alien began twitching uncontrollably. From the horror on her face, T'Pol had clearly not expected this.

Seconds later, the young man was dead.

"What the hell happened?" Tucker asked, stunned at seeing such a violent demise. The Vulcan subcommander was kneeling next to the corpse, her scanner whirring.

"I don't know," she replied softly. Quirking an eyebrow, she looked up from her readings. "Their nervous system appears to be extremely sensitive," she stated, and Trip glanced at the man – no, the boy – he had shot. There was no sign of life, and Tucker bit back nausea. "The stun setting on our phase pistols also appear to be lethal to them," T'Pol commented, surprise obviously in her voice. "Apart from the sensitivity of their central nervous system, they are identical to humans."

"He's so young," Trip muttered as he knelt alongside his victim. The boy couldn't have been more than nineteen, and probably hadn't even started shaving yet. And now, gunned down by an alien visitor. It didn't seem fair.

"Commander?" T'Pol's hand touched his shoulder, and Tucker glanced up to meet her concerned eyes.

"I've never killed anyone before," he revealed as he looked back at the dead boy.

"It was an accident," the Vulcan stated. She did not remove her hand from his shoulder, and, for that, Trip was grateful. He needed the touch in this moment.

"He's still dead, and I still killed him," he snapped. "Look at how young he is..."

"It is only natural for a civilized person to regret taking a life," T'Pol said, and Trip looked up once again. From the tone of her voice, and the distant, haunted look in her eyes, she was speaking from experience. The moment passed, though, and she was once again all business. "These appear to be uniforms," she remarked, gesturing to the two corpses.

"They look like military," Tucker said. "He did say 'sky force.' Maybe that's like the old Air Force on Earth."

"Possibly." She was silent for a moment. "We should don their uniforms," the subcommander...
decided. "If we encounter additional members of their organization, they are not as likely to fire upon someone wearing their uniform."

"Right." Trip studied the young man he had killed for a heartbeat longer before reaching forward to strip the corpse of its clothes.

His hands only shook a little bit.
Captain Jonathan Archer was going insane.

As he paced back and forth in front of his command chair, Jon could feel the eyes of his junior officers tracking his movements. He knew that his nervous pacing wasn't entirely professional, but his growing concern over his two lost officers – his two lost friends – made it impossible for him to just sit down and wait until they could see the crash site again. Besides, if he sat down, Archer knew that he would end up drumming his fingers on the chair's armrests.

On the main viewscreen, the image of the planet appeared peaceful, despite the fierce fighting that was even now raging across much of its surface. There had been no additional atomic bombs used since the opening minutes, although the conventional weapons being used were no less lethal. According to the intercepts that Hoshi had translated, the warring nation-states seemed intent on utterly obliterating one another with guns and knives instead of weapons of mass destruction. It was the kind of abject insanity that Earth had only recently evolved beyond, and Jon swallowed the self-disgust that tried to swell up from his stomach when he thought about his role in precipitating the war. Though no additional reference to Enterprise's presence behind the moon had been made, Archer still knew that this war was his fault, and he desperately didn't want to add two more deaths to the tally.

A chirp from the science board broke him out of his morose thoughts, and he gave Ensign Ling – Amy, he reminded himself – a sharp look. She input commands into the console before glancing up.

"Re-establishing visual of the crash site," she said. With a flicker, the viewscreen transformed, and Jon heard someone gasp.

There was very little left of Shuttlepod One, and what remained had clearly been smashed into pieces or ripped apart by explosives. The entire area was crawling with soldiers intent on salvaging the shattered chunks of metal, and nearly a dozen prop-driven aircraft circled the crash site. A trio of what looked to be hot air balloons was also orbiting the military formations.

Far, far worse, though, was the sight of two blanket-covered forms clearly visible near the crash.

Jon felt his legs give out, and he collapsed into his command chair. The sound of someone fighting back tears – Hoshi, he realized – hit him like a physical blow, and he closed his eyes against the surge of fury and despair that almost overwhelmed him. After everything that had happened, it seemed absolutely impossible to believe that Trip and T'Pol could be dead.

"Sir." Lieutenant Reed's voice was controlled, and when Jon opened his eyes to look at the armoury officer, he could find no hint of grief in the man's face. "Request permission to leave the ship to retrieve their bodies." He nodded toward the shell-shocked Ensign Mayweather. "Travis can fly the cell ship, and we can use its cloaking device." He was grim as he continued. "I'll make sure that we aren't detected."
For a moment, Archer hesitated. More than anything else, he wanted to be the one to fly that ship. Putting himself into harm's way to retrieve the bodies of his friends seemed the least he could do after sending them to their deaths. At the same time, though, he recognized what Reed left unspoken: as the captain, Jon had a responsibility to his crew, and jumping into the cell ship to assuage his sense of guilt would be an abrogation of that duty. Right now, his crew needed him to act like the captain, not the man who had just lost two friends. Archer nodded.

"Bring them home, Malcolm," he ordered, even as he straightened his posture.

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant replied. He and Ensign Mayweather moved toward the turbolift, the latter still wearing his shocked expression.

"Ensign Sato," Jon said, drawing Hoshi's reddened eyes. "Contact Starfleet Command," he instructed. "I need to speak with Admiral Forrest at once." Archer rose to his feet, schooling his features into a mask that showed nothing of what he was feeling in this moment.

"Yes, sir," the communications officer responded softly, and turned to obey.

"I'll take it in my ready room," Archer declared. "Hoshi, you have the bridge."

Tears pricked his eyes the moment that the door slid shut, but Jon fought to keep them from spilling free. He glanced around the small room, wishing that there was something available for him to punch. With a grunt, he dropped into the desk chair and let his head sink into his hands. It didn't seem fair, after all that happened in the last year, that the two people he cared for the most could be taken away in such a ridiculous manner. The crew would take their loss hard, and Archer couldn't even imagine how hard this would be for Trip's family.

"Oh, God," Jon moaned, "his mother..."

He couldn't stop the tears this time.
Chapter Notes

Malcolm: Not Dead

A local day on this planet is 21 hours long. 2 days (1.875 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

Something wasn't right.

As he stared over Ensign Mayweather's shoulder, Lieutenant Malcolm Reed found that the hairs on the back of his neck were beginning to stand on end, and every one of his instincts was telling him that something was terribly, terribly wrong. In his previous career, the one that no one aboard Enterprise knew about, he had learned to listen to those warnings, and they had never led him astray. Well, except for that one time at Risa, but that was Trip's fault.

"Approaching the target," Mayweather related, sending the cell ship into a gentle dive. Giving the terrain map another quick look, Malcolm pointed.

"Set down there," he said. "Once I'm on the ground, lift off and be prepared for an emergency pickup." Reed shifted his combat harness and checked the charge on his phase pistol. He drew in several rapid breaths as he mentally prepared for the craziness that was about to happen. Part of him knew that he was being reckless, and that he should have one of his security troopers with him to provide back-up, but that didn't prevent him from advancing forward with this plan, even if he had no idea how he was going to get the two bodies out by himself. After all, he did his best work alone. And there was something about this that just didn't feel right...

"Down!" Travis said, and Malcolm darted through the opening hatch, his pistol held at the ready. Keeping low, Reed sprinted toward cover. His heart was already hammering as the adrenaline pumped through his body, and he grimly acknowledged how much he'd missed this sort of thing. Life on Enterprise was great, but sometimes, he really missed the visceral rush of a covert mission like this. Putting his back to the rock, he glanced down at the scanner he held in his other hand, and smiled tightly. No one appeared to have noticed his arrival.

As expected, a pair of native sentries wandered into view several minutes later, their weapons slung over their respective shoulders as they patrolled the outskirts of the crash site. The relative seclusion of this particular area had been the deciding factor for it being Reed's ambush site; in the event that one of the two managed to get away, he still had forty or fifty meters of difficult terrain to cross before he could find reinforcements. Taking aim with his pistol, Malcolm waited for long seconds as they reached the kill pocket before squeezing the trigger.

Neither of the natives had a chance, and toppled to the ground before they even realized that they were under attack. A long moment passed as he waited for someone to react, and when no one rushed toward him, Reed exhaled in relief. He rushed from his concealment, holstering the scanner as he ran. Grabbing the two natives, he dragged them into cover. One of them, he noticed, was his size, and he quickly began stripping the man of his uniform. His own Starfleet jumpsuit he crammed into a hole; it had already been stripped of patches and rank pips to prevent identification if discovered. After making sure that the two natives were hidden from view, he stuffed the phase
pistol and hand scanner into his trouser pockets, and hefted one of the archaic rifles. Armed and looking like a native, he squared his shoulders and started toward the central camp.

No one challenged him as he approached, so intent were they on their own duties, and Malcolm made it a point to look like he had a mission. It was something that he had learned during his previous career; as long as you looked like you were supposed to be there, most people wouldn't even pay you any notice. He had gambled (foolishly, he admitted to himself) on the same being true here.

At sight of the shattered remnants of the shuttlepod, though, he jerked to a stop and barely kept from gasping in horror. If he hadn't already known that it was a 'pod, he doubted that he would have even recognized it, so significant was the damage.

Most of the soldiers present were walking around the crash site, annotating the location of debris or carrying on soft conversations. No one was even around the two shrouded bodies, and Malcolm felt his instincts whispering to him once more. He gave the two corpses another glance as he tried to comprehend the warning his sixth sense was giving him. Something wasn't right ... but he didn't know what was wrong.

"You!" A meaty hand clamped down on Reed's shoulder, and he tensed as a grizzled old native glowered darkly at him. "Help me move these bodies," the native ordered, gesturing toward the two corpses. The earpiece that was lodged in Malcolm's left ear relayed the translation from the communicator hidden in one of his pockets, and the lieutenant silently thanked God for wireless connections; an obvious cable would have been a dead giveaway that he wasn't from around here. Nodding, he swallowed and followed the older man to the targets.

They were already on stretchers, Reed noted, and as he came within a meter of them, he realized what his instincts had been telling him. Instantly, he recognized that both were too short to be Trip, and neither had the feminine curves of T'Pol. Relief flooded through him, washing away the grief that he had buried. Too late, he realized that he had drawn the older man's notice with his stare.

"First time you've seen the dead, huh?" the native said with an almost sinister smile. He reached down, flipping the blankets back from the faces of the two and revealing a pair of young men. Get away now! Malcolm's instincts screamed at him, and he turned away quickly, pretending that he was about to vomit as he did. The old man's laugh was loud, and Reed used the opportunity to sprint away from the crash site. He kept his hand over his mouth the entire time.

Sometimes, he reflected, covert operations training was quite useful.

"Evac in five," he said into the comm before returning the device to his pocket. Glancing around, Reed exhaled a sigh of relief when he saw that the old veteran had enlisted another person to move the bodies. Head down, Malcolm quickly retraced his steps to the exfiltration point.

As he crouched next to the two natives whom he had stunned earlier, Malcolm dug his Starfleet uniform out of the dirt and waited for Travis to make his appearance. For a moment, he considered stripping off the uniform he was wearing before deciding against doing so; it would take too long, he reasoned, even as he wondered what sort of story the unconscious natives would tell when they woke up. His communicator chirped, informing him that Travis was on approach, and Reed prepared himself for a sprint. The uneasy sensation of being watched began bothering him, and he glanced around in an attempt to find any observers. He found no one.
Seconds later, Travis stepped into view – or rather, half of him did – and gestured to Reed. Still unable to shake the feeling that he was being watched, Malcolm leaped up and ran toward the cloaked ship.

"Get us back to Enterprise," Malcolm ordered as he boarded it. He paused for a moment as he once again tried to see anyone watching him, but once again, saw no one. "Those bodies weren't Trip and T'Pol," he grinned.

Seconds later, they were racing home.
A local day on this planet is 21 hours long. 2 days (1.875 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

The wind on her face was quite pleasant.

Perched in the seat of the local vehicle that they had acquired – Mister Tucker had gleefully called it a motorized trike when they discovered it – Subcommander T'Pol found herself momentarily distracted by the soothing sensation of warm air caressing her face. By her calculations, they were cruising away from the crash site at approximately seventy kilometers an hour, and, as he had promised he wouldn't, the commander had not exceeded that speed in the hour since they had climbed onto the vehicle.

The local vehicle was something of a curiosity and reminded T'Pol that, despite the amazing similarities in appearance, they weren't on Earth. Of a three-wheeled design, it was – according to Mister Tucker – completely backwards. Two narrow wheels were at the front of the vehicle, with a larger, wider tire at the rear. The two occupants of this vehicle sat side-by-side, with the pilot on the right side. An internal combustion engine powered the craft, emitting a foul stench in the process that she barely managed to ignore, and it was maneuvered using a pair of levers instead of the more familiar steering system of a cycle. Tucker had identified this system as similar to the differential steering system used on certain tracked vehicles or large utility tractors, and as he had at least a passing familiarity with their use, T'Pol agreed to allow him to "drive."

That it gave him something to focus on other than the young man that he had inadvertently slain was an added bonus.

The vehicle – T'Pol refused to call it a 'trike' – had clearly belonged to the two soldiers that they had encountered, and had been parked less than ten meters from the site of the unfortunate incident. Based on the location and their gear, T'Pol had theorized that the two were motorized scouts who were the vanguard of a much larger force. Given the number of military vehicles that they had passed heading toward the crash site, this presumption seemed to be borne out.

Fortunately, none of the other motorists seemed curious as to why a single vehicle was heading in the opposite direction.

"I think we're runnin' low on gas!" Tucker shouted over the sound of the vehicle's engine. Frowning slightly, T'Pol glanced at the rudimentary console of the vehicle as he pointed to one of the dials. "I'm pretty sure this is the fuel gauge," he explained loudly. He steered the craft off of the central highway, and onto the rocky yet surprisingly wooded terrain. T'Pol barely restrained herself from coughing at the plumes of dirt that were kicked up by the vehicle.

The vehicle's engine died fitfully nearly twenty minutes later, and they coasted to a gradual stop under a cluster of trees. Though they were still very far from their target, the vehicle had served its purpose, and T'Pol was grateful that it had lasted as long as it did. With no sign of communications equipment on the small vehicle when they discovered it, she had proposed that they head toward the nearest population center with the intent of acquiring and using a local radio to contact Enterprise.
There was never any real consideration about ambushing other members of the military force for a radio; from her observation of him, T'Pol knew that Commander Tucker was taking the death of the young man he had accidentally slain quite hard, and the idea of murdering others simply for their equipment was barbaric.

They weren't Klingons after all.

"Yeah," Commander Tucker said several minutes later as he leaned back from examining the engine of their stolen vehicle. "It's definitely outta gas."

"We are approximately sixty kilometers from our destination," T'Pol informed him and he grimaced.

"That's gonna be a tough hike in a week," he commented while gesturing to the rough terrain. "Especially in a place like this and without much water."

"A week?" T'Pol quirked an eyebrow as she spoke.

"Standing order thirty-six," Tucker replied, as if that explained everything. T'Pol raised an eyebrow.

"I am not aware of any such order," she stated, and the commander gave her a sheepish grin.

"I suppose you probably wouldn't be," he stated before shrugging. "It's an unofficial Starfleet regulation for missing crewmembers who might have survived. Enterprise will stay in-system for a week before officially declaring us missing, believed dead."

"Fascinating." T'Pol had never even heard a hint of such a regulation before, and wondered if the Vulcan High Command knew of it. It was, after all, nearly identical to a Vulcan policy for stranded or missing crewmembers. "There are thirty-five other standing orders?" she asked, and Tucker shook his head.

"Not really," he replied. "Thirty-six comes from the year that it became an unofficial-official reg. Twenty-one thirty-six."

"I see." And, for once, she did understand the methodology behind a human decision that, at first glance, seemed completely illogical. "That would be in regards to the UES Pioneer incident?" she queried. Commander Tucker's wide-eyed surprise at her knowledge of human history was oddly gratifying.

"Yeah." He smiled suddenly. "I remember watching the news reports about it," he admitted. "Made me wanna join UESPA." A chuckle followed this. "I tried to sign up the next day, even though I was just sixteen." He gave her a sidelong glance. "And how old were you in twenty-one thirty-six?"

"Older than sixteen," T'Pol replied smoothly, causing Tucker to laugh out loud. It was an oddly pleasing sound, and something that she had missed in recent weeks.

Abruptly, the commander sobered, and reached for his survival pack. "We should probably get moving," Tucker suggested.

It was slow going, especially with their need for caution. Knowing that the natives had aircraft affected their route, and forced them to stick to the scattered flora for concealment. All of the trees were coniferous, and looked remarkably similar to those of western North America. Displaying remarkable woodcraft for a warp engineer, Commander Tucker kept a steady but constant pace that T'Pol had to admire. He consulted the magnetic compass that was part of his survival pack when appropriate, and pointed out several unusual-looking avians. Two hours after they abandoned the
ground vehicle, T'Pol gave up trying to restrain her curiosity and asked him about the unexpected (but quite welcome) skills.

"Summers with my granddad before he died," Tucker stated with a fond smile. "He loved takin' me on hikin' or huntin' trips." He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes as if temporarily lost in memory. "He woulda loved this place," the engineer smiled. "It's like a more pristine version of the Gila Wilderness in New Mexico."

"You hunted?" T'Pol asked, unable to entirely hide her distaste at the idea. Tucker nodded.

"Deer, mostly," he replied, before giving her an amused look. "With a camera, Subcommander. Deer are an endangered species on Earth. Have been since after the Third World War." He squinted and studied the clouds. "And that looks like rain," Tucker said. "We better find high ground just in case there's a flash flood."

He was right once more, and T'Pol found herself revising her mental estimate of the commander upward again when he found them a sheltered location to wait out the storm. It was several meters off the ground and little more than a horizontal depression in the side of one of the large canyons that seemed to ring the entire region, but she doubted that she would have found it before the rain began falling. With a touch of chagrin, she realized her less than positive opinion of his survival ability had been based on faulty information; his misadventure in the desert with Captain Archer had nearly convinced her that he had little to no experience outside of civilization, but that was very obviously not the case. Even Phlox's report about his broken ribs should have been enough to suggest that it was an anomaly, but her own biases had blinded her. It was disconcerting to be so out of her depth, and T'Pol found herself desperately missing her tea and meditation candles.

The rain came, slowly at first, as if the heavens were hesitant about the coming precipitation, but with ever-increasing intensity until it fell in heavy sheets that obscured all vision. Thunder boomed out of the darkened sky with distressing frequency, and the skyline lit up with fierce flashes of lightning. The howl of wind made it difficult to hear anything. It was a primal display of the awesome power of nature, and T'Pol found that she could not look away.

She wasn't sure when she had dozed off, but the moment that Sillick lunged out of the darkness toward her, hands twisted in sinister-looking claws, T'Pol jolted awake. Her heart was beating wildly, and her breath came in rapid gasps. Glancing around, she realized that Tucker had somehow rearranged their bodies while she slept so his back was to the still raging storm and she was protected from the bulk of the inclement weather. Stretched out in the tiny hollow, they were almost chest to chest, and even through his clothes, the warmth of his body heat was remarkable.

"You okay?" he asked, and T'Pol fought for complete control. Tucker's face was close to hers, and she recognized that fear from the all too familiar nightmare wasn't the only thing making her heart beat faster.

"I'm fine," she replied. Even to her own ears, she didn't sound convincing.

"You were havin' a nightmare," the commander pressed, and she could hear his concern. It was touching that he cared, and gave her hope that, whatever his reasons for avoiding her in recent weeks, their friendship could still be salvaged. She didn't want to lose him as a friend. "I didn't know Vulcans had nightmares," Tucker said softly.

"Significant emotional trauma is taxing, even to Vulcans," T'Pol admitted. For some reason, she found that she was unwilling to tell him more, to explain to him that she was still recovering from the trauma of both Tolaris' forced mind meld and Sillick's torture, or that she may never fully recover from either.
"I can't help but to think about that kid I killed," the commander whispered, his voice thick with emotion. In the darkness, T'Pol could not see the engineer's face, but she could easily envision the expression that he was wearing. "I've got a cousin that age," he continued, self-disgust and bitterness in his voice. "And he's just a stupid kid with the whole universe ahead of him. That's no age to die."

"I grieve with thee," she told him solemnly, even as she kept a firm grip on her own emotions. She could not let herself experience guilt, not now and especially not with her own past. If she closed her eyes, T'Pol knew that she could still hear the screams of the wounded and the dying, and the wails of those injured by her mistake still haunted her when her control slipped. Suppression of emotion was the only solution; there were no Fullara Masters on this planet. A long moment passed in silence, broken only by the sharp crack of distant thunder. T'Pol tried not to think about the relative intimacy of their respective positions, no matter how comfortable, and was mostly successful.

"Picked up a signal from Enterprise," the commander said, his tone making her wonder if he had been thinking about how to reveal this. T'Pol glanced up at his face, even though she could barely see it. "We've got about four days to find a way to get in touch with 'em before we're classified as missing, believed dead."

"Standing order thirty-six," she commented, and felt him nod.

"Standing order thirty-six," Tucker repeated. He didn't sound hopeful.

Outside, thunder boomed as if mocking them.
Trip: Sneaking In

Chapter Notes

A local day on this planet is 21 hours long. 6 days (5.25 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

His muscles were howling with protest, but Trip Tucker forced himself to ignore them.

For nearly four days, he had set a grueling pace, knowing that T'Pol would be able to keep up without any difficulty. They rarely spoke during the long hours of hiking and hugging the wood line, and Trip knew that the Vulcan subcommander was watching him discreetly. Part of him was glad that she cared enough to recognize that he was still struggling with guilt over the accidental death of that local, but a larger part argued that, as the first officer, it was her job to keep an eye on him. Her concern didn't really mean anything other than she was a very good officer.

Trip's mood had soured considerably in the days after their awkward conversation in that cave. It had been a surreal experience, sleeping alongside her and feeling her much higher body heat. He was no stranger to sex or women, but as the voluptuous Vulcan had shifted in her sleep and snuggled – snuggled! – closer to him, he had found his mind fixated on how she smelled, or how wonderful her curves felt pressed up against him, or what kind of sounds she made as she slept. The desire to kiss her had nearly undone him, and he was incredibly glad that she hadn't been conscious at the time; his body's reaction to the nearness of her would have been impossible to miss.

Somehow, she remained unaware of the effect that she had on him, and, for that, Trip was grateful. It was already bad enough knowing that she and Archer were together; he could only imagine just how difficult it would be to look either of them in the eye if T'Pol learned that he couldn't control certain parts of his anatomy around her. God, he groused to himself, this is worse than high school. At least then, he hadn't hated his best friend for getting the girl.

Thunder boomed out of the darkening sky, and Tucker sighed. Like clockwork, fierce rainstorms had rolled in almost the very minute that the sun sank below the horizon and forced them to seek shelter from the elements. This close to their destination, though, and with very little time remaining, they couldn't risk hiding from the storm.

"Commander." The Vulcan's unexpected voice caused him to jump slightly before glancing in her direction. She was several meters to the right, crouched behind an unusual-looking rock and looking down at something. Keeping low, he joined her and felt his breath catch at the sight before him.

A large city stretched out on the mesa below this slight drop. For a moment, Trip forgot that he wasn't on Earth as he took in the layout of the city. It reminded him of Atlanta for some reason, although it was much smaller and the Georgia city definitely wasn't constructed atop an elevated slab of land. Dozens of roads and highways spread out from the city, making it appear from this angle almost like a spiderweb.

"The roads appear to be guarded," T'Pol pointed out as she studied the city through her small binoculars. She lowered the binos, a subtle frown on her face. Though he did not know her quite as well as he would have like – not as well as Archer, he reflected sourly – Trip recognized the expression as her 'I've seen/heard/detected something that I don't understand and I don't like it.'
"What is it?" he asked, and she gave him a quick, sidelong glance.

"Have you noticed," the Vulcan subcommander asked, "that for a city this size, it is remarkably quiet?" Trip blinked in surprise, before focusing once more on the mesa-city. He hadn't noticed the silence until now, but once T'Pol pointed it out, it was nearly impossible to ignore. Movement could be seen in the streets, but an ominous silence seemed to be draped over the entire mesa. He swallowed as he tried to figure out what it could mean. Before he could comment, his communicator vibrated, and he sighed. It was that time again, and he pulled it from his trouser pocket and flipped it open.

"This is Enterprise to landing party," came Hoshi's voice. "Departure in H minus three. Emergency frequencies are being monitored." It was the same message that had been broadcast every hour on the hour for over four days. The only thing different was the declining number for the departure time. According to Trip's calculations, the countdown had begun the moment the shuttlepod crashed instead of when they lost contact with Enterprise, prompting him to suspect that Starfleet Command had put its foot down. "This message will repeat in one hour," the recording of Hoshi's voice finished. Trip looked at T'Pol.

"Three hours," he repeated grimly. She made no comment as she continued to study the city with the binoculars. "How far away is that city?" Trip asked.

"Twenty-one point two three two kilometers," the Vulcan replied after consulting the laser rangefinder integrated onto the binos. Tucker grunted as he glanced at the rapidly darkening sky. Twenty-one kilometers wouldn't normally be that hard to cover in three hours, but in the rain and in the dark? And with a night-blind Vulcan in tow? As if reading his mind, T'Pol spoke. "Commander, in the event that we become separated-"

"I'll come lookin' for you," Trip interrupted. The subcommander's lips tightened fractionally, and Tucker gave her a smirk. "Come on, T'Pol. You've known me for over a year now," he pointed out. "What are the chances that I'm gonna leave you behind?"

"I am merely attempting to maximize our chances for survival," the Vulcan retorted, a shade more forcefully than necessary, and Trip's smile grew wider. Fat raindrops began falling from the sky, and Tucker flinched at the coldness of the water when they splashed upon his skin.

"Well, I'm not leavin' you behind," Trip stated definitively. "End of discussion." Overhead, thunder boomed, as if in agreement with him, and Tucker grinned broadly. "See?" he asked. "Even God agrees." If she had been human, the expression on T'Pol's face would have been called disgruntled. She glanced away, muttering something softly in Vulcan that Trip didn't understand. He did recognize his name and the word human, which made him wonder what she had said. Instead of asking, though, he stood and began making his way toward the footpath that would lead to down to the scrub below.

Getting to the city turned out to be a nightmare. The rain pounded the ground with angry force, turning the footing treacherous, and the brightness of the lightning that cracked the sky every few seconds thoroughly ruined Trip's night vision. He didn't know how many times he fell, and the sense of urgency that he'd felt earlier slowly drained away as fatigue dulled his senses and slowed his pace.

If he had it bad, T'Pol had it ten times worse. Whenever he caught sight of her face, Trip could see that her eyes were as wide as she could make them as she struggled to see in the darkness. Rain plastered her hair to her skull, and he could see that she was shivering nonstop; too late, he remembered that she was from a desert planet and had complained – though she always insisted that it wasn't complaining – about the temperature of Enterprise being too low. After the fourth time she fell into a large puddle that Trip could easily make out, he abandoned propriety and grabbed her
hand so he could lead her more easily. That she was quick to let him take the lead in such a way said volumes about her state of mind.

He lost track of how long they struggled against the inclement weather, and it became a task to simply put one foot in front of the other. According to Starfleet standards, the survival pack that he was carrying weighed 13.5 kilograms, but in the slow plod toward the city, he misplaced the decimal point and didn't think that T'Pol would let him go back to look for it. When the bluish-white beam of a spotlight washed across the ground in front of him, it took ten incredibly long seconds for his exhausted brain to identify what it was that he had just seen. T'Pol, he realized, had her head down, evidently focusing upon the ground directly in front of her and relying entirely upon his superior night vision.

For some reason, that sent a surge of pride through him.

"Spotlight," Trip whispered, and her head came up. She looked as miserable as he felt, but offered no word of complaint as she blinked rapidly and squinted. "Looks like seven ... no, eight guards to our right," he reported. "They're not payin' a lot of attention to anything but keepin' out of the rain."

"How far?" the Vulcan asked through chattering teeth.

"Twenty meters?" he guessed. "If we can keep outta sight, I think we can sneak by 'em." He was still holding her hand, Trip realized, but she hadn't said anything so he didn't let go. The spotlight beam crossed their path once again, and Tucker tugged her forward, whispering urgently, "Now!"

It was less a run than a stumbling lurch, but they were just fast enough to avoid the spotlight's next sweep. Jagged flashes of lighting forked across the sky, and thunder shook the ground, covering up the loud splashes that their feet made as they half ran, half crouched up the incline and toward the vehicles that blocked entrance into the city. His breath sounded loud in his ears, and his heart was thudding so hard that Trip expected the guards to hear it, but none of them moved from their place of relative safety from the angry storm. It was the first piece of good luck that he'd seen since they crashed on this godforsaken planet, and Tucker wanted to laugh giddily as he led T'Pol through the cordon and into the city's outskirts.

They didn't stop moving until they were long past the rudimentary barricade. Leaning up against a building, Trip gasped for breath and tried to calm his racing heart. T'Pol, he noticed with no small amount of envy, was barely breathing hard; she did begin hugging herself, though, and was very obviously freezing. Once again, her eyes were as wide as possible, and she was staring at the dark streets with a sort of wary concern on her face.

"We need to find communications equipment," she said, and Trip nodded. As he started to turn away, she surprised him by reaching for his hand. It was a logical thing to do, he mused, especially since it seemed like every light in the city was out. He had to admit, though, that he rather liked the feel of her hand in his.

Using her scanner, they weaved through several alleys and side streets, pausing only long enough to get more accurate readings. Trip wasn't entirely sure what she was focusing on, but trusted her judgment as they crept through the sleeping city. Every noise that they made seemed to be too loud, or echoed in funny ways, and it started to feel like the entire city was holding its breath. Trip tried to shake the uncomfortable feeling off, but wasn't entirely successful.

"There," T'Pol said abruptly, her voice pitched so low that he had to strain to hear it. Even then, it seemed unnecessarily loud. Following the direction she indicated, Trip could see a completely unremarkable-looking building. Unfamiliar squiggles that he took to be letters were prominently displayed, and he grinned at the oddly-shaped structures on the roof of the building. They had to be
"Jackpot," he grinned as he started forward. T'Pol pulled on his hand, though, causing him to stop and give her a surprised look.

"Commander," she said grimly, her scanner still whirring. "Four hours have elapsed since the storm began." Trip felt his stomach lurch, and fumbled for the communicator.

There was no signal.
A local day on this planet is 21 hours long. 6 days (5.25 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Seated at the desk in his ready room, Jon Archer stared incredulously at the image on the small viewer before him. As the deadline elapsed, he had ordered Hoshi to make contact with Starfleet Command in the hopes of talking them into allowing him to extend Enterprise's stay for just a little bit longer. His arguments had been rational and entirely professional; he had taken great effort to make sure that they were devoid of emotional appeals.

And still, the answer was no.

"I'm sorry, Jonathan," Admiral Forrest said. From his expression, the admiral was sorry for being the one to relate Starfleet's orders, but that didn't stop him from doing so. "Command wants you back home immediately."

"Admiral," Jon began, knowing that, if given the opportunity, he could talk Forrest into letting him stay for one more day.

"No," Forrest interrupted firmly. "Your officers have had their seven days, Jonathan, and it's time for Enterprise to come home." The admiral gave a sour look. "This couldn't have come at a worse time. We're just getting over that Paraagan disaster, and the Vulcans are screaming bloody murder."

"They could still be alive!" Archer argued, and his old friend's expression darkened slightly.

"All of your proof is circumstantial, Captain," the older man replied. "This is a direct order from Command. You are to make best speed to Earth." Forrest's eyes narrowed. "There are to be no mysterious warp fluctuations that keep you at impulse, no shortcuts that keep you in that system for another week, no emergencies that you have to attend to. Immediately means immediately, Captain. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir," Jon responded dully. It was easy to forget sometimes that Forrest had commanded a ship for years before rising to the rank of admiral; all of the tricks that Archer knew, he'd learned from the older man, and trying to fool him would feel too much like betrayal. "We'll break orbit at once, sir." Forrest nodded, once more appearing sympathetic.

"Losing people is never easy, Jon," he said sympathetically. "I'll be in touch. Forrest out." The admiral reached forward, and the screen blanked out to be instantly replaced by the UESPA Starfleet seal.

Slumping back in his desk chair, Jon felt like he was about to be sick. Ever since Malcolm had returned with news that the two bodies weren't Trip and T'Pol, Archer had been desperately praying that the two would make contact unexpectedly. They would have a wildly unlikely story to tell, involving giant slug monsters, or telepathic lizards that breathed fire, or maybe even an alien woman
who had tried to seduce Trip and thus earned T'Pol's enmity. Tucker would probably be injured, but not critically so, and there was a better than fifty percent chance that so would T'Pol. Jon had even ordered the Suliban cell ship manned at all times and standing by for departure for when they received the inevitable hail from the two errant officers.

But time had run out.

Reaching for the transmit button on the comm panel was the hardest thing he had ever done, and Jon glared at the Starfleet seal as he spoke.

"Archer to Reed." The reply was instantaneous.

"Reed here, sir."

"Have Hoshi send the last transmission," Jon ordered grimly, "and then set a course for Earth, maximum warp." The long pause that followed his instructions was understandable, and Archer could easily imagine the horrified looks that the junior officers were sharing. It felt like they were abandoning Trip and T'Pol.

"Aye, sir." Reed sounded partially disgusted, which said a lot. Jon couldn't think of a single instance in which the lieutenant had spoken ill of senior officers, but the tone of his voice clearly expressed his opinion. Archer couldn't blame him, since right now, he felt the same way.

"Once we're underway," the captain continued, "I need to see you and Lieutenant Hess in my ready room."

"I'll let her know, Captain."

"Archer out." Jon released the transmit button and stood up from the desk. Anger and despair swirled within his gut as he approached the viewport. He couldn't see the planet, of course — the moon they were hiding behind blocked it out — but that didn't stop him from looking. "Stay safe, you two," he whispered, repeating the last thing he'd told them. Archer's eyes watered slightly as the moon began to slowly recede from view, and he blinked the pain back. For less than a second, he could see a sliver of the planet that had stolen his two best friends from him, and he experienced an entirely unreasonable sense of fury directed toward the uncaring world.

With a flash, Enterprise jumped to warp.

He wasn't sure how long he had stood there, staring out the viewport but not really seeing anything, when the door annunciator chimed. Jon didn't bother speaking as he glared at his reflection, mostly because he didn't want to do what he was about to do. It felt like another betrayal, even though it was entirely necessary.

"Reporting as ordered, sir," Malcolm Reed stated as he and Hess filed in. Archer slowly turned to face them, his face set in a dark frown. Both of the lieutenants wore knowing expressions as they waited for him to speak, evidently realizing what was about to happen, and Jon gave thanks for that. It was always best to deal with professionals, Jon mused.

"Admiral Forrest has authorized me to promote both of you to the rank of lieutenant commander," he said without preamble. A conflicted expression crossed Hess' face, and Archer found that he completely understood. Receiving a promotion was supposed to be a proud moment based entirely upon one's merit and skill, not one brought about by the loss of a superior officer. "As you are senior," Jon continued, directing his comments to Reed, "you'll serve as my first officer until we reach Earth."
"Aye, sir," Reed said. He and Hess exchanged a grim look that was devoid of the usual congratulatory emotion.

"We can arrange a promotion ceremony around your schedules," Jon began.

"With all due respect, sir," Hess interjected, her tone solemn, "I can go without one." She glowered at the floor. "Don't really feel like celebrating right now."

"Agreed." Malcolm muttered. He looked angry, sick and shocked all at once. Abruptly, Jon remembered the unlikely friendship that had sprung up between Trip and the armoury officer. As unlikely as my friendship with Trip, or Trip's friendship with T'Pol, he reflected darkly.

"That's up to the two of you," he decided. "I'll publish the orders on the shipwide web nonetheless."

"Captain?" Hess spoke hesitantly, and Jon gave her a nod to continue. "Should we have a memorial service?" she asked, and Archer felt another stab of pain lance through him. He glanced away so they wouldn't see his expression.

"Yes," he replied softly. "I think that's a good idea." His stomach began twisting into knots.

"Malcolm."

"I'll take care of it, sir," Reed responded to the unspoken question instantly. Jon nodded.

"All right." It was a struggle to maintain his professionalism, but Archer somehow dredged up the willpower. "This is going to hit the crew hard," he pointed out sadly. That was probably an understatement; Trip had been a popular officer, and T'Pol had earned everyone's respect numerous times in the past year. "It'll be our job to set an example, so pay special attention to what you say and do while in the presence of junior officers and enlisted personnel." The two newly promoted lieutenant commanders nodded in acknowledgment, and Jon exhaled softly. "If there's nothing else..."

"Captain?" Malcolm spoke before Archer could turn away, and Jon gave him a nod to continue.

"What happens when we get to Earth?"

"I don't know," Archer replied softly. "An investigation, possibly a court martial." Hess looked aghast, and Jon forced a smile. "We'll worry about that later, though. Right now, the crew needs us and that takes priority over everything else."

As they departed from the ready room, Jon returned to the viewport. He stared at the streaks of light, hoping to find some reason in the chaos. A sense of failure pressed in on him, and he shuddered at what his father would think of him. Henry Archer's words seemed to float to his ears. There's nothing more important than loyalty, Jonny. Don't ever forget that.

"I'm sorry," Jon whispered to the darkness.

But there was no reply.
Subcommander T'Pol was miserable.

In her sixty-four years, T'Pol had never witnessed such a combination of environmental conditions that seemed solely dedicated toward inflicting misery upon a Vulcan. The continuing downpour was unrelenting, and had so thoroughly soaked into her clothes that she seriously doubted any part of her body was still dry. As a native of a desert world, she was accustomed to cold nights, but the rain and the wind had conspired to lower her internal body temperature to the point that it was all she could do to keep from shivering. And the darkness? The almost total cloud cover had turned what should have been a fairly bright planet into an abyss of complete shadow.

Not for the first time, she was grateful for Commander Tucker's presence. While he too was cold and wet, the commander had displayed an ability to deal with the combination of factors that far surpassed hers. She supposed that it was to be expected; Tucker had grown up in a climate where rainstorms of this nature were commonplace, after all, and she hadn't seen rain until after she was twenty.

As the lightning crawled across the sky, T'Pol could just make out the commander's disbelieving expression as he stared at his communicator. Based on her observations of him in the past, it seemed logical to presume that he was struggling with the realization that Captain Archer had abandoned the search for them. Such a struggle would likely be difficult for Mister Tucker, given his close relationship with the captain and his strong sense of loyalty. She realized that she would have to adjust how she interacted with him while he adapted to their new situation.

"Commander," she said, in an effort to get Tucker moving again. They could not risk staying here for very long; the chance of one of them getting sick grew with every second they spent exposed to the elements, and now it seemed probable that their mission had changed from contacting Enterprise to simply evasion and survival. When the engineer did not react, T'Pol decided to gamble. "Charles," she said softly, and he looked up at her, eyes wide at the personalization of her comment. "We have to go," T'Pol reminded him, and the commander nodded. He returned the communicator to his pocket, then gestured toward the building with the antenna array.

"Think we should still go in?" he wondered. It wasn't the question that he wanted to ask, and T'Pol knew it.

"Yes," she said simply. There was, after all, still a chance that Enterprise was in-system and could detect an emergency signal. Once again, Tucker nodded before reaching for her hand. T'Pol allowed him to take it, even though it wasn't entirely necessary for such a short distance. Although Vulcans were generally uncomfortable with so much tactile contact, she had observed that humans in general derived a great deal of comfort from such contact, and this week had been nothing but a series of shocks to someone untrained in these sorts of situation. It seemed likely that the commander needed the physical contact.
They covered the short distance to the entrance of the building, and Tucker spent a moment trying to puzzle out the locking mechanism. T'Pol let him do so, hoping that the task would give him something to focus on other than the fact that they were probably stranded on a pre-warp planet that had already demonstrated its aggressive nature. The cold rain continued to fall from the night sky, drenching them even further, and T'Pol felt herself shivering as she hugged her arms around her chest to conserve body heat. Tucker gave her a quick glance, and she could see the frown on his face. Before she could ask him about it, he drew his phase pistol, aimed it at the lock, and fired a single shot. The beam sliced easily through the metal, and he pushed the door open.

Inside, it was blessedly dry, but not particularly warm. T'Pol glanced around quickly, noting the unusual décor that seemed almost Terran, but not quite. A large transparent window dominated the room, and through it, she could see primitive electronics equipment that she did not immediately recognize. Two doors led from the main lobby, one of which she deduced was to either a bathroom or a closet.

"This looks like an old radio station," Tucker announced, still holding the phase pistol. He was gripping it so tight that T'Pol could see his knuckles were white. "I might be able to scavenge some parts from that thing," he continued. T'Pol nodded as she consulted her scanner.

"There is no power coming to this building," she revealed. It had been the same since they entered the city, and she remained at a loss to explain it. According to her scans, the power systems of the city were functional and undamaged, but not online. She wondered if it was a defensive measure intended to prevent hostile aircraft from seeing the city at night.

"So much for gettin' a signal out then," the commander muttered sourly as he pushed open the door that lead to the electronics room. T'Pol followed, studying the pictures and posters that were on the wall with poorly concealed interest. One in particular drew her notice, and she stepped closer to it to get a better look. From what she could tell, it was a map of the city that they were currently in, with the streets and buildings annotated by the alien writing they had seen on street signs. Lifting her scanner, she made a few minor adjustments and pressed a button. Instantly, the scanner emitted a soft beam of light that T'Pol ran slowly over the entire map.

"That's not standard issue," Tucker commented, and T'Pol gave him a quick glance. He was seated before the primitive electronic array, and disassembling it with an unfamiliar tool. His own scanner – pulled from the dropped survival pack – was whirring, but his attention was on her.

"It is a Vulcan scanner," T'Pol replied. "I modified it to appear like Starfleet standard issue one." On the screen of the device, she could see an image of the map appear. Instantly, the UT chip inside the scanner began laboring to translate the alien text. There was no indication as to how long it would take for even a rudimentary translation, so T'Pol returned the scanner to her belt.

"Dammit!" Tucker abruptly snapped. He threw his scanner down on top of the table as he glared at the electronic array in front of him. From what T'Pol could see of the array's interior, it was a chaotic mess of wiring and electron tubes, the likes of which she had not seen outside of a museum.

"Commander?" she asked, and he shot her a frustrated look.

"What happened to Charles?" he muttered sourly, and T'Pol hesitated, unsure what to say. "I can't use this crap," Tucker continued, evidently unaware of her brief pause. "It's like ... trying to construct a circuit board with stone knives and bear-skins!" His despair was so obvious, that T'Pol took a step closer.
"You cannot be blamed," she started, and he cut off with an angry glower.

"I'm the damned chief engineer," the commander retorted. "If I'd have done my job right the first time, we wouldn't be stuck on this miserable planet!" He covered his face with both hands, and T'Pol could tell that shock and exhaustion were finally beginning to overwhelm him. "Somebody on my team screwed up the maintenance of the shuttlepod," Tucker vented, "which makes this whole disaster my fault!" Lowering his hands, he gave her a sad look. "I'm sorry for gettin' you into this, Subcommander," he apologized.

"Commander." T'Pol paused for a moment, considering his state of mind and their present situation. "Charles," she resumed. Her use of his given name caused him to smile slightly, and she blamed the interesting sensations that tightened her stomach on lack of meditation. "You are an exceptional engineer," T'Pol stated calmly, "even by Vulcan standards." His expression faltered slightly, and she recognized the look as the one he wore when he was attempting to determine if she had complimented or insulted him. "The fault lies with the engineer who was negligent in their duties, not with you."

"I'm sorry," he repeated as he rubbed his eyes. "I'm just so damned tired right now, I can't think straight." She nodded slightly in understanding; with the adrenaline wearing off, their recent cross-country exertions were beginning to take their toll.

"We should find a location in the city to hide," T'Pol decided. As the commander nodded and began gathering his gear, she walked through the doorway that led back to the main lobby. The door leading to the street was still cracked, and she could hear the boom of thunder. Another sound caught her attention, and she tensed in concern.

Seconds later, the door burst open.

T'Pol was lunging toward the armed native even before he had registered her appearance, and caught his arm as he tried to point his weapon at her. Surprise was on his face as he struggled in vain against her superior strength, and, had she been human, T'Pol would have smiled at the sudden flare of fear that followed the surprise. Using less than a fraction of the pressure she would normally use, she applied the to'tsu'k'hy. He crumpled without a sound, and she exhaled a sigh of relief when she saw that he was still alive.

A deafening roar shattered the sudden silence, even as a crushing impact slammed into her shoulder, spinning her around and sending her to the ground. Pain screamed through her body, and she cried out instinctively. She struggled against the urge to collapse into unconsciousness, as a wild cacophony of sound and light assaulted her senses. Another boom sounded, followed by the sound of a phase pistol being fired and shattering glass. A sharp, acrid stench caused her to cough, and her vision swam. Darkness beckoned.

"T'Pol!" Commander Tucker's voice seemed to come from an impossibly vast distance, even though she could see his face looming before hers. "Oh, God," the engineer wailed, his expression a mixture of horror and anger. The smell of blood – her blood, she realized – was mildly concerning.

"I've been shot," she declared with some surprise. This would complicate things somewhat, the rational part of her mind observed. As the experienced field operative, her expertise would be essential if they were to survive and evade capture. She tried to push herself upright from the floor, but agony burned through her body, robbing her of control.

Mercifully, she lost consciousness.
Adrenaline and fear were coursing through his body.

As he knelt over the unmoving subcommander, Trip Tucker found himself struggling with a hysterical urge to panic. He was an engineer, dammit, not a medic! His breath caught at the weakness of her pulse but common sense and Phlox's cross-training lessons kicked in. *Vulcan hearts aren't in the same place as human hearts*, Trip reminded himself. He exhaled with relief when he found the Vulcan pulse-point, and sent up a silent 'thank you' to Denobulan physicians everywhere.

Ripping open his survival pack, he quickly located and extracted the emergency first aid kit. It was rudimentary, but allowed him to stop the bleeding. Once satisfied that T'Pol wasn't going to die of blood loss or that anything important had been hit, Trip took in their surroundings with rapidly deteriorating hopes.

The man he had shot was dead, but the native that T'Pol had pinched was still breathing. Tucker didn't know how long the man would remain unconscious, and decided that he didn't want to stick around to find out. He was just about to grab the native and drag him to what looked like a closet when he realized that both men were wearing identical triangle symbols on their clothes. Trip gave the men's uniforms a closer look: gunbelt, flashlight, handcuffs.

"Oh, God," Tucker moaned. "They're cops..." Suddenly, getting away from this place seemed like an even better idea.

Once he dragged the unconscious man away from the main door, Trip spent another couple seconds figuring out how to use the handcuffs before securing the native to the desk. After a moment of thought, Tucker stripped the man of his gunbelt, and crammed it into his survival pack; he did the same with the dead native, even though it was hard to even look at the man.

The guns themselves were revolvers, with rounds that looked to be six or seven millimeters in diameter. Trip stuffed both of them into his pocket before tying the two survival packs together, and strapping them to his back. T'Pol turned out to be heavier than she looked, although Trip wasn't sure if it was because he was already exhausted, or her stronger bones were heavier, or some combination of the two. With the unconscious Vulcan nestled in his arms, he stepped out into the darkness and the rain.

Almost at once, he drew up short and stared at the four-wheeled ground vehicle parked outside the building. Like the trike, it was just familiar enough in appearance to recognizable as a car, while harboring a completely alien look. Instead of the box shape that Trip was accustomed to seeing on a car, this vehicle had something of a diamond-shape, with two wheels on either side of the body and one at both the front and back. The doors were of a gull wing design, and a single pulsing green light was on the very top of the vehicle. For less than a second, Trip considered his options, before shrugging and maneuvering T'Pol into the vehicle.
Steering the vehicle turned out to be fairly easy. Instead of the differential steering system that had been on the trike, the groundcar had a joystick-like device that controlled the directional systems. Finding the button to turn off the flashing strobe light was a little more difficult; in the process of looking for it, though, Trip found the equivalent of the blinkers as well as the windshield wiper controls.

He never considered trying to leave the city as he accelerated away from the building. The roads had been too heavily guarded for him to get a car out undetected, and Trip doubted that he could get far on foot anyway with T'Pol unconscious and wounded. That left hiding someplace inside the city until he and T'Pol could figure out their next move; she would have an idea, he told himself. She always had an idea.

For nearly thirty minutes, he cruised through the streets of the oddly silent city. Signs of heavy damage were everywhere, reminding him of images of Old Europe after the Second or Third World Wars. Other vehicles could be seen on the streets as well, though, including several police cruisers like the one he was driving. His heart tried to pound its way out of his chest each time he saw one of those vehicles, and he very nearly had a stroke when the driver of one gave him a wave before turning down a different street.

Trip finally found what he was looking for near the outskirts of the city. It was a rundown building that seemed almost exactly like the historically preserved gas station near his parent's house. Based on the level of rust and grime on the windows, this location hadn't been used in years. After struggling with the garage door – he ultimately had to use the phase pistol on the lock – Trip backed the groundcar into cover and pulled the door down to hide their presence. For a little while, they were safe.

His hands started shaking the moment that the door was shut, and Trip balled them together in tight fists. T'Pol needed him, dammit, and he couldn't fall apart now. Especially not now.

He had already removed T'Pol's shirt and was working on extracting the bullet from the meaty part of her upper shoulder when the Vulcan stirred. Her eyes snapped open, and Trip could see her take in her general state of undress and his close proximity instantly. He didn't say anything to her, and hoped that the small penlight in his mouth and the whirring medical scanner balanced next to her head was enough explanation.

"Commander?" the Vulcan asked, wincing slightly as he shifted the extractor tool that was currently gripping the bullet under her skin.

"Don't move," Trip told her ... or rather tried to tell her. With the penlight in his mouth, it came out more like "Dough Woove," along with an embarrassing amount of saliva. She seemed to understand, and only flinched twice as he worked the slug free. "Sorry," he muttered once the bullet was free. She gave him a slight nod as she applied pressure to the wound with the bandage he had given her.

"Where are we?" T'Pol asked. Her eyes were taking in her surroundings with that analytical precision of hers that he loved so much. The groundcar received extra attention, and even earned a slight eyebrow raise.

"A garage on the outskirts of the city," Trip revealed. He slumped back into the driver's seat, so utterly exhausted that he doubted he could move, even to attend to his very full bladder or to strip off his sodden clothes. "It was rundown and abandoned, so I gambled we'd be safe here for a little while."

"And this vehicle?"
"Belonged to those two cops who jumped us at the radio station." At her quirked eyebrow, he explained his theory about the two men being police officers. "If they're anything like the cops on Earth," Trip finished, "they're gonna be lookin' for us since I killed the one." His hands started to shake again, and Tucker tried to hide the trembles from T'Pol's keen eyes.

"I suspect that is a universal desire among law enforcement organizations throughout the galaxy," she stated. Giving him a questioning look, T'Pol continued. "You were unable to reestablish contact with Enterprise." It was more a statement than a question, but Trip answered anyway.

"Yeah," he said sullenly. "There's no carrier signal of any kind up there. No commsat, no shuttlepod beacon, no Enterprise, nothin'." He gave the Vulcan a sidelong glance. "We're on our own."

"Indeed." There was no hint as to what she was thinking, but her lips were pressed together tightly and her eyes scrunched up fractionally. It was the expression she always wore when she was deep in thought, and, for some reason, it made Trip feel a great deal better.

"What do we do now?" Tucker asked, not even bothering to hide his worry. An eyebrow raised, T'Pol turned slightly to meet his gaze.

"We survive," she said simply. Outside, the rain continued to fall.
A local day on this planet is 21 hours long. 6 days (5.25 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

The rain was ice cold as it trickled down his back.

Jon stood silently before the two closed caskets, his expression as bleak as the sky overhead, and tried to pay attention to the service. The priest droned on, his words jumbled nonsense that didn't make any sense. Archer blinked, and suddenly, Phlox was the one giving the last rites. Lightning crawled across the sky, as if in response to the doctor's words, and rain fell in heavy sheets, blocking out Jon's view of the caskets. He opened his mouth to speak...

...and was suddenly in decon. The hum echoed loudly in his ears, and the intensity of the blue lights was almost painful. Raising a hand to shield his eyes, Jon realized that he was wearing his Starfleet uniform.

And it was bloody.

He tried wiping the crimson off of the uniform's sleeves, but the stain seemed to grow with each passing second. His boots were suddenly soaked, and Jon could feel the blood rising up his legs. Desperately, he tried to reach the door release, but found only smooth metal in its place. The blood was past his knees now, and still climbing. Glancing around, he froze at sight of the two people standing across decon, staring at him.

Trip and T'Pol were exactly like he last saw them, with the subcommander wearing her white bodysuit instead of the usual brown one, and Trip in the desert duty uniform. Neither spoke as they stared at him, and Jon screamed for help but no sound emerged from his mouth. The blood was now above his waist, and he again tried to implore his two senior officers to help him. Somehow, they seemed immune to the rising tide of crimson.

Suddenly, the blue lights of decon flashed brightly, and, to Jon's horror, the skin on the faces of his two friends began to burn. Apart from a single sad look that they shared, the two barely reacted as muscle and sinew and bone was slowly incinerated. Archer tried to look away, but his body ignored him. The blood climbed above his chest, and he could smell the stench of seared flesh. I'm sorry! he tried to shout as Trip and T'Pol dissolved away into dust, but the blood choked him as it climbed over his chin. He could taste it now, sharp and bitter and reeking of pain.

It tasted like death.

With a gasp, Jon jerked awake. His heart was racing, and he buried his face in his hands to keep himself from screaming. The smell of coffee was thick, and Archer glowered at the large spill that now covered a significant portion of his desk's surface. It was cold, of course, but had still made quite a mess, and Jon wondered what part of his subconscious had linked the spilled coffee to the dream he had just woken from.

On the monitor of Archer's system, a flashing message from the Science department drew his
attention from mopping up the spill. For a long moment, he hesitated, unwilling to look at this latest analysis of the planetary situation they had left behind. Three hours had passed since they departed the system where Trip and T'Pol had died – or rather, had likely died – and every department aboard the ship had been studying the data in an attempt to understand what exactly Enterprise had done wrong.

So far, they hadn't found anything.

It was frustrating that, even by those impossible Vulcan standards, they didn't do anything wrong. Every one of the new policies put into place by Starfleet Command following the Paraagan colony disaster had been obeyed to the letter. And yet, two integral members of the crew had still been lost in what was shaping up to be a tragic accident.

Porthos whined from where he watched Jon, and the captain gave the beagle a sad look. As if picking up on Archer's emotions, the dog had seemed almost disconsolate or heart-broken. Given how affectionate the beagle had been to Trip or how fascinated by T'Pol, Jon found himself wondering if the dog could comprehend the loss.

"I need some sleep," Archer growled to himself as he pushed himself away from the desk. Today was going to be a tough one, between the memorial service for Trip and T'Pol and the subspace debriefing he was to give to the senior officers of Starfleet Command. He had to be sharp, and nightmares like the one that had just left him in a cold sweat wouldn't do anyone any good. Dressing quickly, he headed for the door.

"Ah, Captain," the doctor said in greeting as Jon entered sickbay. "How can I help you?"

"I can't sleep," Archer replied, before suddenly sighing. "No, that's not right. I can sleep, but the dreams...."

"Entirely understandable," Phlox said in commiseration. His normally jovial features were pinched in sadness. "You've lost two very good friends, and grief is a natural-

"I don't need a lecture, dammit!" Jon snapped before he could stop himself. Suddenly angry at himself, his shoulders fell and he slumped back against one of the biobeds. "I left them behind," he muttered angrily, barely aware of the look of condolence that the doctor gave him. "If it had been me down there, they wouldn't have left."

"They were counting on me to get them back," he said. "And I failed them." His anger grew, and he found himself speaking without thinking. "I promised Trip's parents to keep an eye on him when we shipped out, and now I've got to tell them that I sent him to die."

"We don't know that they're dead, Captain," the doctor pointed out, but Jon didn't hear him.

"What the hell am I supposed to say to them?" Archer pressed his palms into his eyes, and tried to will the pain to go away. It didn't work. "How do I tell them that he's dead?" he wondered. Abruptly, his anger dwindled into regret. "Especially since Trip has been avoiding me," Jon muttered sadly. The doctor nodded knowingly, and Archer frowned slightly. "What?" he asked.

"I have noticed," Phlox remarked, "that you have been spending a great deal of time with the subcommander in recent weeks." Innuendo dripped off of the doctor's words, and Jon's frown deepened.

"She was my first officer," Archer retorted, suddenly angry at the doctor's implication. He wondered
when it became impossible for a man and a woman to work together without people assuming that they were romantically involved. Was this a Starfleet ship, or middle school? "It was my job to spend time with her."

"Are you attracted to her?" the doctor asked, seemingly out of nowhere, and Jon gave him an incredulous look.

"What?" he asked, eyes wide. "What kind of question is that?"

"A simple one." Phlox gave him a smile. "The subcommander is an attractive female by human standards, and you have been working in close proximity to her for a year."

"The answer is no." Jon glared at the doctor. "No, I wasn't attracted to her." He glanced away. "Not like Trip was, anyway," he said softly. Memories of the two commanders watching one another when the other wasn't looking would have caused him to smile if it didn't hurt so much.

"Ah." Once more, the doctor's expression was knowing. "I apologize for any insult, Captain. Some of your human mating rituals are still rather difficult for me to comprehend." The Denobulan's expression bordered on sheepish as he continued. "Besides," Phlox offered, "We don't know that they're dead."

"You've seen the same data I have, Phlox," Archer said grimly. "What are the chances that they survived? Maybe less than five percent."

"Both the subcommander and Mister Tucker are quite resourceful." Phlox offered a wider than normal smile. "Optimism, Captain," he said brightly. "Now let's see what we can do about your insomnia," the Denobulan decided. "I have some Aldebarian leeches that will put you right to sleep!"

Jon groaned.
T'Pol: Gas Station

Chapter Notes

A local day on this planet is 21 hours long. 10 days (8.75 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

The sound of distant gunfire woke her.

Her first instinct was to leap to her feet, but Subcommander T'Pol winced at the twinge of pain that accompanied her first attempts to do so. Grimacing, she let herself relax back onto the vehicle seat that Commander Tucker had insisted she rest on. It was barely long enough for her to stretch out on, but was cushioned and far more comfortable than resting on the hard stone surface of the garage. With the doors of the groundcar closed, it was also less exposed to the cold wind that continually rattled the dilapidated building they were hiding in, and combined with the thermal blanket from her survival packet, proved to be a more than adequate bed.

His own thermal blanket wrapped around him, Commander Tucker appeared to be deeply asleep in the driver's seat of the stolen groundcar. With his head propped up against the window of the vehicle's door, T'Pol had an excellent view of his profile, and she spent a long moment studying him. In slumber, he appeared to be even younger than she knew him to be, and the worry that had hounded him since their crash landing was temporarily absent. His breath fogged up the glassite window that his head leaned against, and T'Pol found herself momentarily mesmerized by the steadiness of his respiration and the peace on his face.

Ripping her attention away from the sleeping commander, T'Pol gave their surroundings another look. Three days had passed since Enterprise had last made contact with them, leaving her and Commander Tucker to fend for themselves, and they had done little beyond rest and plan in that time. Initially, she had been concerned at their vulnerability in the wake of the commander's shooting of the law enforcement officer, but that fear had been assuaged almost as soon as dawn broke on the first day.

"Sounds like they're gettin' an early start today," Tucker murmured as sporadic gunfire increased in volume. He straightened in his seat, wincing almost at once before massaging his neck with one hand. His comment did not require a reply, so T'Pol remained silent as she listened to the sounds of war.

It had begun – or, more likely, resumed – as the sun rose on the morning after Commander Tucker had found their current hiding place. Artillery and aerial strikes by military units encamped outside the city pounded the buildings, reducing the most prominent and exposed of them that weren’t already smashed to burning rubble. The inhabitants of the city retaliated with their own salvo of primitive yet still lethal fire. Each day, the aggressive firefight would trail off with the setting sun only to resume once dawn arrived. Whether the cessation of hostilities was entirely due to the nightly rainstorms or something else, T'Pol had no idea. It was a most inefficient way to wage a war.

"I was thinkin'," Tucker said after a moment. He pressed his tongue against the inside of cheek but kept his eyes fixed on the closed garage door. "We need to get outta the city, right?" T'Pol nodded fractionally in response, and the commander continued. "Which means we're gonna need supplies." Instantly, T'Pol realized what he was considering and frowned slightly.
"You will not venture into this city alone, Commander," she said flatly. He had suggested this course of action several times over the last three days, and each time T’Pol had overruled it. Though he had not admitted it, she suspected that her injury was the only reason he had obeyed in each of those instances; leaving a wounded comrade behind simply wasn’t in his personality. Tucker gave her a sidelong glance before returning his gaze to the entranceway.

"I’m not sure if you’re thinkin’ straight," he declared after another long moment. When he turned his attention to face her, T’Pol barely recognized the grim resolve in his features. "Stayin’ in this city is suicide," Tucker continued. "Especially with you injured." He smiled, but it never touched his eyes. "After all," he smirked, "I’m the logical choice to go get what we need."

"You don’t have the necessary training for a mission like this," T’Pol argued.

"And you do?" he snorted.

"Yes," T’Pol replied evenly, drawing from him a startled look. "By nightfall, I should be well enough to accompany you."

"I wanna be outta the city by then," Tucker said. "If the natives have bad night vision like you said, it’ll give us the advantage over ‘em if we move at night." T’Pol frowned at his assumption; she had based her theory about the night vision of the natives on the relatively high albedo of the three planetary satellites that orbited the world they were currently stranded on. Providing the rainstorms that had plagued them since the day after their crash-landing were only a seasonal event, it was logical to presume that species evolving on this planet would do so without the need for night vision as acute as the commander’s.

"Need I remind you, Commander," she pointed out, "That my night vision is also deficient?"

"Yeah, but you’ve got me," Tucker replied almost absently. He wore an expression that T’Pol had often seen while he worked out a particularly complex engineering problem. "I’m pretty sure that I spotted a store a couple of blocks down the road when I was on the roof last night," he said. T’Pol successfully fought back a frown at that; she had instructed him not to climb onto the roof, even if it provided a better vantage point of their surroundings. As in most things, however, the commander obeyed her only when it suited him to do so. He continued. "We need new clothes, maps, campin’ supplies, food-" At that, his stomach gurgled loudly, reminding her that they had consumed the last of their rations two days earlier; she too could feel the gnaw of hunger but unlike the commander, was better able to ignore it. She opened her mouth to argue again, to point out the inherent danger in him trying to gather supplies for them when he wasn’t trained for such a thing, but found that the words would not come.

He was right.

It was most annoying to realize that she was allowing personal sentiment to cloud her judgment in this matter. Commander Tucker – Charles, she reminded herself – was the logical choice for a mission like this. He was unwounded, in excellent physical shape, and had superior technology at his grasp. Furthermore, a glancing examination at him would not reveal his extraterrestrial origin, something that could not be said of her. Her hesitation was understandable, though; in the short time she had known him, the commander had proven extraordinarily effective at getting himself injured.

"I’ll be careful," Tucker stated as he opened the door of the groundcar. He shot her a look that T’Pol couldn’t possibly comprehend. "I know I’m not your first choice of companions on this rock," he said almost sadly. Emotions that she did not recognize played across his face. "But give me some credit, will ya? I’m not a complete idiot." He pushed the door closed before she could respond and, by the time she had extricated herself from the vehicle, the commander had vanished into the city.
For nearly a full minute, T’Pol stood quietly beside the vehicle, examining the unruly emotions that battered at her weakened control. With a start, she realized that she had not meditated since prior to their crash-landing over ten days earlier; there simply had not been the time or opportunity. The last three days she had spent mostly in a healing trance as she pushed her body to recover more quickly, and while that helped somewhat, it was not an ideal replacement for meditation.

Abruptly, T’Pol narrowed her eyes suddenly as something occurred to her: during the three days she had been mostly unconscious, Tucker had been left with only himself as company and, as she had learned since arriving aboard Enterprise, the commander was very much a social animal. Worry thundered through her then as she realized that he may have decided to act out of a desire to simply do something. He was too reckless for this mission. Too reckless, too emotional, too illogical. Knowing him as she did, T’Pol had no doubt that he would get himself into life-threatening trouble and would need her to rescue him. Her tenuous control wavered and she grimaced at the realization that she had retraced Tucker’s steps to the garage entrance; the urge to pursue him was so overwhelming that she reached for the door before catching herself.

It took more effort than she would have expected, but T’Pol managed to push down the urge to charge after him. Mediation was no longer desirable, it was necessary.

Commander Tucker would have to look after himself.
A local day on this planet is 21 hours long. 10 days (8.75 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

This no longer seemed like a particularly good idea.

Artillery fire boomed all around him, kicking up great gouts of stone debris as the incoming shells detonated with fierce explosions. The chatter of machine guns seemed nonstop and from so many different directions, it was impossible to tell where the nearest weapon emplacement was located. Propeller-driven aircraft roared through the sky overhead, some friendly and dedicated to defending the city while others seemed intent on destroying it with guns and bombs.

It was utter chaos.

Crouching behind a large slab of fallen wall, Trip Tucker looked around desperately for a safer spot to hide in or behind or under. No stranger to firefight since shipping out on Enterprise, he had never before realized the sheer insanity of a pitched battle. The screams of dying or badly wounded men and women could only be ignored when another explosion shook the ground or toppled another building. But then, of course, even more wails would join the terrible cacophony.

Another artillery shell detonation rattled the ground, and Trip grimaced at how close it seemed to his current position. Nothing had gone right from the moment he had left the garage nearly two hours earlier. The building that he had thought was a store turned out to be some sort of office, which in turn forced him to venture farther from where T’Pol was in order to find the supplies they needed. By his reckoning, he was nearly a kilometer away from her, and it almost seemed as if the universe was trying to do him in. Each time he tried to retrace his steps, artillery would begin falling upon the path he needed to take, forcing him to retreat deeper into the heart of the already shattered city.

Without warning, two military groundcars – ATVs like the one he and T’Pol had used days earlier – slid around the wet streets, engines whining with stress. The passengers of each vehicle were standing upright in their positions, manning what looked to be machine guns. With a guttural roar, one of the swept-wing aircraft raced overhead, its own weapons barking angrily. The lead groundcar shuddered as bullets punched into it and sent it tumbling through the air to explode against a building already on fire. The other ATV returned fire, its much smaller gun sending a spray of hot lead into the aircraft’s superstructure. Tires screeching, the surviving groundcar took another hard turn, disappearing from sight even as the aircraft vanished behind the looming wreckage of a multiple-story building.

Trip let out a tense breath and looked once more for better cover. A man could get himself killed out here.

Keeping low, Tucker half-ran, half-crouched toward a three-story building that still seemed mostly intact. In his right hand he held one of the slugthrowers he’d taken from the two cops days earlier; his phase pistol was still securely holstered and within easy access, but he didn’t want to use it unless he had no other choice, especially since the energy beam would be so foreign to the locals. If T’Pol was right – and she usually was – the two of them might be on this backwater rock for a long time and he
had no plans to be dissected by some trigger-happy native wearing a uniform.

The door to the three-story building had been blown off its hinges sometime back, and Trip darted toward the open doorway with the pistol at the ready. Adrenaline was coursing through his body and his breath sounded ragged, even to his own ears. Fear was making him jumpy, a part of him coolly accessed, and he tried to calm himself down. The *boom* of another exploding shell close by ended that attempt rather quickly.

Inside the building were dozens and dozens of cots, upon each of which was a wounded man or woman wailing for aid. Trip’s stomach tightened at the overpowering stench of blood, and he backed away quickly, lowering the sidearm as he did. Though he’d never seen one in person, he knew enough about wars to recognize a casualty collection point. Hoping that he hadn’t been noticed, he sprinted toward another alleyway.

*This is insane,* Tucker thought as he ducked around another corner. *I’m gonna get killed!* As if in agreement, one of the military ATVs that seemed so common raced down the connecting street, narrowly missing Trip’s arm with its protruding mirror. Belatedly, Tucker jumped backwards before glowering darkly at the fast-moving vehicle.

The driver never looked back.

A second close call with one of the military groundcars sent Trip scrambling into a derelict building that was missing most of its roof and two of its outer walls. To his relief, it had once been a private home and still had local clothes in a mostly intact dresser. In a partially demolished armoire, he found a framed backpack that reminded him of his grandad’s old Army rucksack. A few more minutes rooting through the debris netted him a pair of black long-coats that reminded him of dusters; he pulled one of them on – it was a little too small, but still covered up his tan-colored uniform nicely – and stuffed the other into the pack for T’Pol. A pair of maroon-colored pants that he thought she could wear joined the coat, and Tucker spent several more minutes sifting through the remaining clothes but ultimately leaving them behind.

The loud rumble of a tracked vehicle echoed through the house, and Trip watched the self-propelled artillery piece through a shattered window with an engineer’s fascination but a guerilla’s caution. Smoke was trailing off of it as it lumbered slowly down the street, and small impact craters pockmarked its outer armor, clear indication of hard use. Twice, the engine on the vehicle nearly gave out, but each time, the driver coaxed a little more out of it.

Once the artillery piece was gone, Tucker hefted the rucksack and crept from the house. He glanced up into the sky and was momentarily distracted by the aerial acrobatics being conducted by the dogfighting planes that flew overhead; the moment passed quickly, though, and he sprinted toward some cover about five meters away. Another doorway beckoned, this time a plain-looking and mostly intact four-story building that had a parked ATV in front of it, and he considered it for a long moment. In the end, he decided against entering it.

Another hour passed as Trip dodged large pockets of fighting and artillery barrages. Once, he nearly stumbled into a squad of seven locals, all armed with rifles and other military gear, but none of them seemed to notice him as they jogged toward their destination. It took nearly another twenty minutes for his heart rate to slow to normal after that close call.

Fifteen minutes later, he discovered a crashed supply truck that had everything he needed. The driver – a young woman, Trip realized – had evidently lost control of the vehicle when one of the rear tires was hit by shrapnel. Military bags were strewn all across the street, their contents spilling free. Some of them had sealed packages that his scanner identified as rations of some sort; others had camping gear. Still others had clothes he recognized as the local military uniform. For a long moment, he
didn’t know how he would be able to carry everything they needed, but memory of the parked ATV in front of the four-story building caused him to grin. Moving quickly, he dragged several of the bags away from the smoking truck and concealed them under large slabs of rock. Satisfied, he began retracing his steps, consulting his small scanner as necessary.

To Trip’s delight, the vehicle was entirely functional, and the engine caught on the first attempt. He nearly went airborne several times in his urgency to get back to the crashed truck, and what had taken over an hour on foot took only five or ten minutes in the groundcar. His heart was racing as he loaded the gear onto the ATV, and he fought to keep himself from grinning too broadly. This was going to work.

A soft groan sent a stab of panic through him and Tucker spun to face the source of the sound, the slugthrower already in hand. It was the driver, he realized with some shock. She was still alive. Against his better judgment, he approached her and ran the scanner over her body. What he saw wasn’t very encouraging; without treatment, she would be dead in a matter of hours. Trip hesitated as he debated his next course of action. In the end, there really wasn’t any option.

“You’re gonna be okay,” he told her, even though he knew she couldn’t hear him. Even if she could, it wasn’t like she could understand him anyway.

No one challenged him as he parked the ATV outside the casualty collection center, but one of the locals inside approached the moment Trip stepped through the doorway with the unconscious girl in his arms. The man directed them to an empty cot, asking questions in a language that Tucker couldn’t understand. When Trip simply looked at him with a blank expression, the man offered an encouraging but oddly condescending smile, before gently pushing Tucker away from the cot. At the man’s gesture, several other locals descended upon the injured girl with the practiced motions of medical professionals.

The abject stupidity of what he had just done suddenly sent a shiver up Trip’s spine and he backed away as quickly as he could manage without drawing more attention to himself. Relief washed through him when he saw that his ATV was still where he left it; more importantly, though, none of the gear strapped to its “roof” had been touched. He climbed onto it and started the engine once more.

*This is too easy,* he mused as he directed the groundcar down the side streets. Something just had to go wrong in the next couple of minutes.

To his surprise, though, nothing did go wrong and thirty minutes later, he braked in front of their garage hideout. For the first time since they’d crashed on this damned rock, Trip felt optimism returning. Nothing had gone wrong. He hadn’t been shot or stabbed or punched or captured. Not to mention, he’d probably saved that girl’s life. *Wait until T’Pol hears about that,* he grinned, suspecting she’d chew him out for acting illogically and emotionally.

But T’Pol wasn’t there.
8.75 Earth days have passed since chapter 1.

He hadn’t been looking forward to this.

Standing quietly with his hands behind his back, Ensign Travis Mayweather stared morosely at the small lectern that had been erected near the back of the mess hall. The United Earth Space Probe Agency seal was prominently displayed on the wooden stand, and two flags dominated the wall behind it. For a moment, Travis wondered where they had obtained the Vulcan flag before recalling what the quartermaster was capable of. Large photographs of Commander Tucker and Subcommander T’Pol, blown up to three times actual size, were resting just beneath the two flags; they were transposed, with Trip’s image beneath the Vulcan emblem while T’Pol rested under Earth’s.

It seemed oddly appropriate.

Captain Archer stood silently at the lectern, his somber expression reflecting the general mood of the assembled officers and crewmen within the mess hall. Directly to the captain’s left stood Lieutenant Commander Reed, and to Archer’s right stood Anna Hess; both of the commanders wore bleak, almost angry expressions, and Travis wondered if they were still blaming themselves.

Three days had passed since Enterprise departed the system that had (presumably) claimed the lives of her first officer and chief engineer, and in that time, at least six memorial services for the two fallen officers were aborted due to ship emergencies. All but one of those emergencies had been due to the ever temperamental warp drive throwing a fit, and, while well-trained and more than competent, Hess simply wasn’t as skilled at soothing the beast that was Henry Archer’s design as the absent Commander Tucker had been. To a superstitious Boomer raised on tales about the almost mystical bond between engineer and ship, it seemed to Travis that Enterprise herself was grieving over their losses.

To no one’s surprise, Captain Archer was taking the deaths the hardest. Though the captain tried to conceal his anger and grief, Travis had learned to read him well enough to recognize how little sleep the older man was getting. Almost overnight, Archer seemed to have aged a decade; now, instead of the ready smile he had worn since Travis first met him, the captain wore a mask of intent resolve that would have been at home on the sternest of Vulcans.

Despite his emotional pain, though, the captain seemed be everywhere at once, offering soothing words and an understanding ear to any member of the crew who wanted to talk, no matter how mundane or pedantic the topic. Archer’s tone was never condescending or belligerent as he listened to the anecdotes about the two lost officers or worries about the coming inquest. Talking seemed to help everyone come to grips with the losses.

Everyone but the captain.

“When I first met Charles Tucker,” Archer began, his hands gripping the lectern tightly, “He was arguing with a Vulcan.” Despite himself, Travis started to smile as the memory of Commander
Tucker’s sometimes heated discussions with the subcommander came to mind. From the soft chuckles of many of the crew, he wasn’t the only one who thought that. “This was ten years ago, right before the NX-Alpha incident that some of you may have heard of.” The captain was silent for a brief moment and seemed to struggle with something. “And without Trip’s help,” he said passionately, “We might have never broken the warp two point five barrier.

“He was the best friend a man could have,” the captain continued, blinking away tears as he spoke. “Brave, smart, funny, but always there when you needed him.” A number of people – Travis included – began to nod in agreement. “Over the years, Trip became the little brother that I never had…” Another long moment passed as Archer struggled to regain his equilibrium; Travis found himself staring at the UESPA seal, unwilling to watch as the captain fought with powerful emotions. If he did, Mayweather suspected that he would lose his own composure.

“As to Subcommander T’Pol,” Archer said loudly, “I didn’t know her as well as I would have liked.” At that, Travis fought a smile. Fully half of the crew – Mayweather included – suspected that the captain was romantically involved or at least interested in the Vulcan subcommander; the other half – including Hoshi – argued that it was Trip who had attracted her eye. Once or twice, the arguments had even gotten out of hand, but usually only among the junior enlisted crewmembers; Elizabeth Cutler and Ethan Novakovich, for example, no longer even talked to one another over it.

“It’s no secret,” the captain stated, “That I initially resented her presence aboard Enterprise.” A sour look crossed his face but was gone so quickly, Travis wasn’t sure if he’d imagined it or not. “In the short time she was aboard, though, she proved to be as loyal and as dedicated to our mission as any of us.

“Nowhere was this more evident than in the respect that grew between her and Commander Tucker.” Archer smiled slightly. “On numerous occasions, I saw these two put aside their differences and disagreements to accomplish some task. They were,” he remarked with a hint of amusement, “One helluva team.”

“So today,” Archer pronounced sadly, “We grieve the loss of two officers … of two friends who helped us further our journey into the stars.” The sense of finality began pressing in on Travis and he shifted awkwardly in place; at his side, Hoshi sniffled and, to his surprise, reached for his hand. He took it, clung to it, and tried not to weep. “Though they are no longer with us, we must never forget them or forget the lessons they taught us.” Archer nodded to Reed.

“Detachment,” the acting first officer snapped, his words loud and harsh. “Stand at attention!” Travis let go of Hoshi’s hand as he straightened his posture.

“We cannot commit their bodies to the deep,” Captain Archer said softly. “But we can wish them – wherever they may be – a safe journey.” Anger began leaking into the captain’s voice, displacing the sadness and reminding Travis of how vociferously Archer had argued with Starfleet Command over this very matter. To the admirals back on Earth, the two commanders were officially listed as Missing Presumed Dead, while Captain Archer wanted them to be listed as merely Missing. It seemed a minor squabble, but a MPD tag meant that no resources would be expended to verify their actual status.

At the captain’s nod, Lieutenant Commander Reed toggled something held in his hand. Instantly, a mournful tune began playing through the ship’s speakers. Seconds later, Travis could feel a pair of subtle vibrations through the deckplates. Beyond the viewport behind the lectern, he could see two slow-moving objects arc away from Enterprise and toward a far distant star.

The memorial service broke up soon afterwards, with a few of the crew departing for duty stations. Travis remained behind for a little while longer, noting how the captain stood before the viewports
and watched the empty torpedo shells until they were out of sight. There was little emotion on Archer’s face as he stared at the glittering stars.

“How’s he doing?” Travis asked softly as Hoshi joined him, and the linguist gave him a sad look that spoke volumes. There was no need for Mayweather to identify who the “he” was; the two of them had discussed at length the captain’s reaction to the deaths of his two friends.

“Not good,” she replied just as quietly. “He spoke with Trip’s parents before the memorial.”

“Ouch.”

“They didn’t talk long,” Hoshi revealed, glancing at the captain once more. “But whatever was said, it really tore him up.” She blinked away tears and returned her attention to the glass of whatever it was she was drinking. Travis glanced away in understanding; though she’d never confirmed it, he had begun to suspect that Hoshi had something of a crush on the captain. Over the last couple of months, she’d grown out of it somewhat, but every now and then, it resurfaced when she thought Captain Archer was feeling down.

And he was most assuredly feeling down right now.

At a loss for anything more to say, Travis surveyed the crew still in the mess hall. Everyone who wasn’t on duty was present with the notable exception of Doctor Phlox who repeatedly pointed out that attending such a service for people who weren’t dead was a disservice to them. At first, Travis had been mildly insulted by the doctor’s refusal to even make an appearance, but Hoshi had explained it as a Denobulan social custom; without direct, incontrovertible proof, Phlox would continue believing that the two commanders had survived, no matter how slim their chances.

For some reason, that had made Travis feel better.
Chapter Notes

A local day on this planet is 21 hours long. 10 days (8.75 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

Something wasn’t right.

Opening her eyes, Subcommander T'Pol rose to her feet in a single, fluid motion, ignoring the twinge of discomfort that shot through her body as she forced her wounded shoulder into action. With four quick steps, she crossed the distance to the nearest window of the dilapidated fueling facility, drawing the phase pistol as she did. Her every instinct was screaming that she was in danger, though T’Pol knew not why.

For a single, extended moment, she was completely still as she strained her senses to identify the source of her distress. She was about to relax when she heard it again: the muffled creak of leather and the soft ring of metal against stone. Her breath caught when she realized what it meant.

Someone was scaling the mesa.

Instantly, T'Pol sprang toward the ladder leading to the roof the fuel depot. It took every gram of her self-control to keep from groaning as the still-healing muscles in her upper body protested, but she persevered and scrambled up the rungs. She was only partially surprised that the roof door opened without a sound; Commander Tucker had visited the roof several times that she was aware of and it was entirely within his character to pause long enough to conduct some minor repairs.

Once on the roof, she crawled toward the edge, keeping as low a profile as physically possible. Silhouetting herself on the roof would be the act of a rank amateur, and T’Pol had far too much experience to make such a mistake. She paused when she reached her destination, patiently waiting for some telltale sign that she had been detected. A long moment passed in relative silence; the far distant booms of artillery fire and explosions could still be heard and felt, but they had become so common that she had become accustomed to them. It was strange how easily one could adapt to such chaos. Satisfied that she was still undetected, she slowly rolled onto her back and pulled her scanner free from its holster.

Of Vulcan manufacture, T’Pol had modified the device heavily to appear as little more than a standard issue Starfleet scanner, mostly out of necessity. Possession of this particular model of scanner outside the Ministry of Security was technically illegal, after all, and she doubted that the Ministry would be pleased to learn what she had listed as battle loss had in fact survived. The moment the scanner vibrated in her hand, T’Pol lifted it into place some three centimeters below the lip of the parapet encircling the roof. Using her thumb, she input a specific key sequence and an antenna-like rod slid noiselessly from the scanner’s body, telescoping into place above the parapet. A second later, the small display screen flickered into existence as the micro-camera atop the antenna began recording.

She was unsurprised to see shadowy figures slowly ascending the mesa. Though the resolution of the image was far too poor for her to accurately count their numbers, T’Pol grimaced slightly and fought the urge to sigh. Even a single such soldier was one too many, especially if their grasp of tactics was
beyond rudimentary. Upon attaining a foothold, logic would dictate they establish a defensive perimeter so additional soldiers could join their strike team.

Another quick key sequence triggered a laser pulse from the micro-camera atop the antenna and instantly, the distance between the camera and targeted soldier flashed across her screen. T’Pol grit her teeth as she retracted the antenna; if her calculations were correct, she had less than twenty minutes before that native reached the summit of the mesa.

Abandoning stealth for speed, T’Pol scrambled to her feet and darted for the ladder leading back to the garage. Using the specialized training she’d received, she divorced her mind from the pain radiating from her shoulder wound so she could gather their gear more quickly. There would be a price to pay later – additional time in a healing trance or perhaps even permanent loss of some sensation – but for now, she was able to function mostly unimpaired.

Once their gear was gathered, T’Pol slid into the driver’s seat of the groundcar and examined its controls. They were rudimentary at best and she quickly worked out how to maneuver the vehicle. Satisfied, she exited the groundcar and walked to the garage door. It slid open without a sound and with a modicum of effort, prompting her to once again suspect Commander Tucker had been at work. Seconds later, the garage was behind her.

Without an immediate destination in mind, T’Pol directed the groundcar in the direction of the ‘store’ Commander Tucker had mentioned before departing their safehouse, relying heavily upon her admittedly flawed memory to do so. The sound of a rapidly approaching land vehicle caused her to swerve her groundcar into an alleyway to avoid notice and she bit back a sigh when she realized it was Mister Tucker, now piloting a three-wheeled vehicle similar to the one they had utilized days earlier. He failed to notice her and she spent several long moments attempting to reverse the direction of her own groundcar one-handed. The screech of metal grinding against the stone edifice to her left was proof she wasn’t entirely successful.

“Where the hell-” Tucker began to say as she skidded the groundcar to an awkward stop before him, but T’Pol cut him off with a sharp hand gesture.

“T’Pol asked no questions as she slid into the passenger’s seat of the groundcar. She imagined she could hear the commander’s pulse racing.

Tucker had only just climbed into the vehicle and engaged its engine when the first of the soldiers appeared. Almost instantly, the four men detected their presence and began shouting at them. The commander didn’t hesitate as he applied acceleration, and the groundcar’s wheels squealed in protest as it slewed around. Subsonic cracks echoed around them as the soldiers opened fire with their primitive slugthrowers and T’Pol heard her companion curse loudly as the rounds whined past them.

Ignoring Tucker’s flash of panic, T’Pol reached for her phase pistol and selected its highest setting. She took careful aim – not at the soldiers – and squeezed the trigger. The beam flashed out, slicing into the fuel compartment of the now parked law enforcement groundcar.

It exploded with rather spectacular results.

A second later, Tucker took a hard turn and the garage vanished from sight. He made several more course alterations, each seemingly chosen at random, and spent nearly five minutes at what appeared
an inherently unsafe level of speed before wheeling the vehicle around into a skidding brake. Before T’Pol knew what he was doing, he had backed them into a mostly gutted building and idled down.

“Tell me that wasn’t fun!” Tucker grinned, eyes glinting from the adrenaline coursing through his veins. T’Pol raised an eyebrow at his reaction to their narrow escape but chalked it up to human idiosyncrasy. Despite her best efforts, however, one corner of her mouth quirked upward fractionally.

“Fun?” she queried, inexplicably grateful for the reappearance of the old Charles Tucker. “I would not classify it as fun.”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” he chuckled before quickly sobering. “You okay?” he asked, a frown suddenly appearing on his face as he studied her shoulder. It was, T’Pol realized, bleeding once more; in the heat of the moment and with her steadfast refusal to acknowledge her pain, she had failed to notice.

“I am,” she answered. Almost at once, T’Pol grimaced as another wave of agony pulsed through her upper body. “Or rather,” she corrected, “I am in the same condition I was before this latest…”

“Escapade?” Tucker offered with a wan smile. T’Pol nodded at his choice of words. “With all those bullets flyin’ around,” he started before inhaling sharply. “The fuel cans!” he blurted out as he jumped from the driver’s seat. With her shoulder injury slowing her, T’Pol was still climbing out of the groundcar when he spoke again. “We were lucky,” Tucker declared from where he stood at the back of the vehicle. “One of the duffel backs got hit, but they missed both of the fuel cans.”

“That is fortunate,” T’Pol remarked. She touched one of the cloth bags and gave him a questioning look.

“Long story,” the commander remarked with a shrug. He glanced at the skyline and pressed his tongue against the inside of his mouth. Not for the first time, T’Pol observed the gesture with fascination, all the while wondering why she found it so … interesting. “We’ve got about three hours until the sun starts to go down, right? Maybe three and a half?” The question required no spoken response so T’Pol waited, recognizing the commander was verbalizing his thought processes. “They should stop tryin’ to kill each other in about two hours,” he continued, chewing on his lip as he did. He pinned her with his eyes and T’Pol wasn’t able to look away though she didn’t know why. “I wanna run the blockade then.”

“Before dark?” she asked. It was a brash suggestion and one entirely within the parameters of Tucker’s psychological profile according her superiors, but T’Pol had long since realized how inaccurate that profile was. More often than she cared to admit, the commander had surprised her with his decision-making process; to Vulcan standards, it was admittedly emotional but she had learned to trust him.

“Yeah,” Tucker admitted. “If our luck holds out,” he said, “we can catch ‘em napping.”

“I don’t believe in luck,” T’Pol stated flatly.

“Well, you don’t believe in time travel either,” the commander smiled, “but I won’t hold it against you.” Once again, Tucker locked eyes with her. “What d’ya say?” he asked. T’Pol nodded.

“Two hours,” she agreed.
A local day on this planet is 21 hours long. 10 days (8.75 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

With each second that passed, he was getting more nervous.

As he made his last circuit around the ATV, Trip Tucker fought the urge to fidget. This was his plan, after all, and both his and T’Pol’s life were at stake. It wasn’t the first time he’d been responsible for someone else; the advanced command training he’d received had been intended to make him more comfortable with the notion of having another’s life in his hands, but this felt different somehow.

“I have finished,” T’Pol announced, her voice reassuringly calm. She stepped through the doorway leading to the kitchen of the shattered building they’d taken refuge in hours earlier, a crate balanced easily in her good hand. The soft clink of bottles bumping against one another was evidence of what she’d been doing for the last hour and a half, but Trip kept his eyes on his own task. Metal plates, scavenged from the ruins of other buildings and vehicles, had been secured over the most vulnerable spots on the tri-wheeled vehicle. This haphazard armor would slow the trike down more than he liked, but would hopefully provide some minor protection against the small arms fire of the guards most likely to be at the checkpoint. He had also rigged it so the armor could be cut free quickly once they were out of the city.

“That’s great,” Trip murmured softly, too distracted to really notice her comment. He tapped one of the metal plates and pulled on the leather cord holding it in place, again wondering if it would hold. When T’Pol cleared her throat in an obvious attempt to get his attention, Tucker glanced up from where he knelt alongside the ATV. The Vulcan stood silently next to the passenger door, still balancing the crate with one hand. With her injured arm immobilized by the sling he’d fashioned earlier, she needed his assistance in securing her package.

“Sorry,” he mumbled as he stood and reached for the crate. Almost at once, he recoiled at the stench drifting from the bottles. “Damn,” he groused while maneuvering the crate into place. “What the hell is this stuff?”

“Potassium nitrate,” the Vulcan replied smoothly, “phosphorous, and trace elements of calcium phosphide.” She stepped back to give him more room. “It is rudimentary,” T’Pol added, “but should serve accomplish the task.”

“They look like Molotov cocktails,” Trip mused. Satisfied the crate was reasonably secure, he began leveraging himself out of the ATV.

“An apt comparison,” T’Pol answered. She donned an almost proud expression, though Trip suspected she’d claim it was anything but if pressed about it. “The compound should combust when exposed to oxygen and resist efforts to extinguish it.”

“Greek fire,” Tucker identified with some surprise. “You made Greek fire.”

“Technically,” his companion retorted, “I made Vulcan fire. We were using it centuries before your
Greeks first developed it.” She gave him a sidelong glance. “I am surprised you are familiar with it, however. There is little engineering use for such a compound.”

“My mom is a chemist,” Trip admitted. “And Malcolm might have mentioned it once or twice.” He frowned at the pile of books she’d stored in the ATV already cramped cargo compartment; alongside the fuel canisters he’d relocated to the inside of the vehicle, the books had been found in the bombed out home and T’Pol had quickly decided to keep them for intelligence purposes. “I’m not even gonna point out how much those’ll slow us down,” he remarked.

“Good,” T’Pol stated with a hint of smugness in her voice. There was no trace of it on her face when Trip gave her a sour look, but he knew he hadn’t imagined it.

“Ready?” he asked instead. She nodded and climbed into the passenger seat. With the crate of bottles at her feet, she would have ready access to them. Trip leaned in to help her secure the seat harness, ignoring the flicker of annoyance that flashed across her face; it was little more than a tightening of her eyes, but he had learned to read the subtle clues that revealed her mood. She offered no verbal complaint, however, which revealed to Tucker how much her gunshot wound was hurting.

Once more, Trip frowned at the rudimentary door plate he’d cobbled together for T’Pol’s protection. It was little more than a metal slat tied to the trike’s frame and he worried it wouldn’t work. When the Vulcan gave him what he perceived to be an impatient look, though, he decided they would have to risk it. He climbed into the driver’s seat and spent a few minutes tying his own door plate shut.

At his side, T’Pol was comparing the readouts on her scanner with a paper map of the city she’d acquired from somewhere, probably the garage they’d vacated hours earlier. Despite the danger they were voluntarily heading into, she looked completely at ease, as if this was just another scouting mission aboard Enterprise. Trip grabbed the two levers that served as steering for the trike so she wouldn’t see his hands shake.

“We should make for this exit point,” T’Pol announced, her fingers tracing a route along a brightly-colored line on the map of the city. “It is the closest to our current position and has a direct line to the northern highway out of the city.”

“That means the army outside the city will be watching it pretty closely,” Trip pointed out.

“Agreed,” she answered, “which is why we won’t remain on the main highway longer than necessary.” She pointed to several other different-colored lines on the map, all outside the actual city proper if he was interpreting the map’s symbols correctly. “There are numerous smaller junctions available.”

“And this thing is supposed to be an ATV,” Tucker admitted. He started the engine and inhaled deeply. His pulse began beating loudly in his ears and he swallowed the lump that appeared in his throat.

“Relax, Charles,” T’Pol instructed, once again using his given name. Trip didn’t know why it thrilled him to hear her call him something other than ‘mister’ or ‘commander’, but it did. He wondered if he could convince her to do it more often; after all, it was only a short step from Charles to Trip.

“Aye aye, ma’am,” he smiled.

As expected, the fighting had mostly died down throughout the city and thunder was rolling out of the darkening sky with frightening rapidity. The streets leading to T’Pol’s selected exit point were pockmarked with impact craters from artillery strikes and aerial bombs, forcing Trip to maneuver the trike around them. He kept their speed relatively low as they inched toward the target; when it came
into sight, he studied it for a brief, extended second.

Constructed of brick or concrete or something similar, the fortifications had clearly been designed to keep someone out of the city, not in. Over two meters in height, it was little more than a thick wall planted squarely in the middle of the main thoroughfare leading out of the city and down the mesa’s incline. What looked like machine gun nests were at the top of the wall and there was even a place for a larger artillery piece. A conveniently-placed ramp led to the top of the fortification and looked to be used to ferry ammunition to the cannon. In its prime, it would have been impressive and might have even resembled some of the beach fortifications Trip had seen in old World War II movies, but the damage to it was so extensive he doubted it could keep a bored cow from entering. One entire side had nearly collapsed and the rest of the wall seemed to sag under the weight of that missing section. A smoking tracked vehicle that had probably once been a tank of some sort at one time partially blocked the collapsed section, but wasn’t large enough to do anything but slow someone down.

“Now!” T’Pol urged and Tucker obeyed without hesitation. He gunned the engine and the trike jumped forward eagerly. There was a flurry of motion as the locals walking the perimeter scrambled out of the way of the ATV, clearly caught by surprise. Without encountering the slightest of resistance, the trike shot through the gap in the wall and they raced down the road leading out of the city.

Mere seconds later, Trip could see a second fortification looming near the bottom of the mesa road and, beyond it, even more movement that was undoubtedly the attackers of the city. Unlike the previous one, this wall appeared to be more recent and rudimentary, a base camp that had grown up around the highway barricade. Tucker doubted it was more than sandbags, but his breath caught when dozens of armed figures rushed to man defensive positions. Alarms began to wail and the steady report of automatic weapons began echoing with the thunder. Dirt exploded around the trike and the vehicle rocked as slugs impacted against the crudely fashioned armor. Trip reacted instinctively and pulled back hard on the left steering lever, instantly causing the trike to fishtail into a slide.

T’Pol was acting even before he realized it, hurling one of her Molotov cocktails with impeccable aim. The spherical-shaped bottle smashed against the sandbag barrier and erupted in a bright orange-red flame. Shouts of surprise joined the gunfire, but Trip was too busy aiming the trike at the burning section to notice. At the last instant, he jerked the ATV into another skidding slide, radically changing their direction. This close to the barrier, the attackers couldn’t bring their weapons to bear without threatening their allies, and Trip took advantage of that as he raced toward a small gap in the wall he’d just noticed. Moving just under seventy kilometers per hour, the trike slammed into the crudely erected barrier.

A half-second later, they were airborne.

The impact of the ATV hitting the ground and rolling drove the air from Trip’s lungs, but he kept the accelerator mashed to the floor. With a loud crack, one of the metal plates was ripped free as the trike rolled across the ground and Tucker cursed loudly when one of T’Pol’s books smacked him in the back of his head. Another metal plate came free, and another, but they were suddenly upright once more. The wheels of the trike kicked up great gouts of dirt as they found purchase and the ATV surged forward, the sudden acceleration pushing Trip back in his seat.

Almost leisurely, T’Pol hurled another of her makeshift explosives, this time aiming it at a trio of parked military trikes. Fire engulfed the three off-road vehicles instantly and Trip slewed their trike around to give her a shot at another group of parked ATVs. This time, she overshot and the triangular-shaped bottle smashed against the ground, exploding into fire almost instantly but accomplishing little
beyond adding to the chaos.

Recognizing that they were running out of time, Trip angled the trike toward the highway leading away from the city and gunned the engine. With a squeal of rubber against pavement, the ATV darted forward just as T’Pol hurled a fourth Molotov cocktail at the group of vehicles she missed with the previous one. This time, her aim was true.

Risking a glance behind him, Trip cursed at sight of a pair of four-wheeled groundcars rapidly accelerating after them. He gave T’Pol a quick glance, noting instantly that she was down to her last makeshift explosive. She hefted it, gave their pursuers a look and then simply dropped the glass container onto the pavement beside the ATV.

A wall of fire seemed to erupt directly behind them as the trike raced down the highway and, when the two groundcars emerged through it, their tires were already ablaze. One of them slowed to a stop almost immediately followed soon after by the second one. Trip glanced back and smiled when he saw the crews of the vehicles trying to extinguish the flames rapidly engulfing their vehicles.

“We did it!” he exulted to a still calm-looking T’Pol. She raised an eyebrow, though Trip could see the flush of excitement in her eyes.

“Now we must focus on the difficult part,” she commented. “Evasion.”

As if in agreement, thunder rolled out of the sky.
Chapter Notes

10 Earth days have passed since chapter 1.

The door slid open with an ominous hiss.

Holding a PADD before him as if it could afford him some protection, Malcolm Reed stepped into the captain’s ready room. As he expected, his commanding officer was standing before the viewport and staring at the streaking of the stars beyond, a bleak expression on his face. Archer’s eyes shifted slightly, jumping from the stars to Malcolm’s reflection in the viewport before quickly returning to the starfield.

“Report,” the captain ordered.

“We’ve altered course, sir,” Reed replied quickly. “Ensign Mayweather estimates eight to ten days to the deuterium colony,” he added. Archer nodded, but offered no reply. Instead, his gaze seemed locked entirely upon the darkness beyond the viewport. Dark circles ringed the captain’s eyes, aging him a decade or more, and Malcolm realized for the first time how old the other man appeared. Shame bubbled up within Reed’s stomach, and he bit back a soft curse when he realized that Hoshi had been right when she intimated that the captain desperately needed someone to talk to.

“He just lost two friends, Malcolm,” the communications officer had said during breakfast. Travis, who never seemed far from Hoshi’s side these days, nodded in silent agreement as Sato continued. “I’m worried about him,” she had admitted, the words of concern causing Mayweather to grimace slightly and look away, though Hoshi didn’t seem to notice. “All he does is study the data from that planet over and over,” she pointed out. At the time, Reed had still been struggling with his own grief over Trip’s apparent death – despite Phlox’s continued assertion that the two errant officers were alive, Malcolm couldn’t see how they would have survived, and he’d been a pessimist for too long to grasp at straws – but now, seeing the captain like this, he had to admit that Sato was right.

Perhaps sensing Malcolm’s silent appraisal of him, Captain Archer shifted his attention from the starfield and slowly turned to face Reed, frowning slightly.

“Is there anything else, Mister Reed?” Archer asked, the formality of his words as big an indication of his mood as his physical appearance.

“Actually, Captain, there is,” Malcolm replied. He straightened his back, once more wishing that he were a couple centimeters taller. “The senior officers are concerned about you, sir.” At the captain’s obvious surprise, Reed pressed on. “You aren’t sleeping, you aren’t eating-”

“That will be all, Lieutenant Commander,” Archer snapped, glowering darkly as he spoke. Malcolm frowned.

“With all due respect, sir,” he retorted coolly, locking gazes with his superior and refusing to back down, “it will not.” The captain blinked in surprise at Reed’s sudden aggression. “You said it yourself, Captain: as officers, we’re supposed to set an example for the rest of the crew. How does killing yourself with guilt look to everyone?” Archer looked away, remorse stamped upon his face,
and Malcolm played his trump card. “The crew needs you, sir.”

For a moment, Reed wondered if he had gone too far. In the time he’d served under Archer, he’d learned that the captain did not like being told that he was wrong – T’Pol particularly had suffered the brunt of the man’s wrath in the early days of Enterprise’s mission. To Malcolm’s surprise, however, Archer’s harsh expression crumpled and he dropped into his chair, exhaustion so obviously riding his shoulders that Reed wanted to yawn.

“You’re right,” the captain murmured with a deep sigh. He leaned back in the chair and stared at the ceiling. “It’s a bad habit of mine – to get so focused on something I forget about everything else.” Archer smiled – or grimaced, Malcolm couldn’t quite tell which – and sighed again. “Target fixation, they used to call it,” he said. “I relied on Trip to slap some sense into me.”

“Say the word, sir,” Reed said with a forced smile of his own, “and I’ll be glad to slap you around. For the good of the crew, of course.”

“Of course,” Archer repeated, the grim despair that had been surrounding him easing fractionally. “Thank you, Malcolm,” he said, before narrowing his eyes and studying Reed for a heartbeat. “You’re the last person I’d have expected to stage an intervention,” the captain remarked, and Malcolm shifted awkwardly.

“Ensign Sato suggested I say something, sir,” he admitted. Archer chuckled. “Well, she was right.” The captain gestured to the nearby couch, and Reed hesitantly took a seat without actually relaxing. “Since Trip is gone,” Archer continued, staring at the blank monitor before him, “I’m going to need someone to remind me when I’m getting tunnel vision.”

“I can’t replace Commander Tucker, sir,” Malcolm said softly, swallowing the lump that lodged in his throat.

“No one can,” Archer replied, blinking rapidly. He looked away from Reed, and Malcolm guessed that the older man was fighting tears. It was, after all, what he was doing. “I can’t believe he’s gone,” the captain whispered.

“Phlox doesn’t think he’s dead,” Reed pointed out. His breath caught at the sharp look the captain pinned him with.

“Yes, sir,” he said in response. He forced another smile on his face. “But then,” he added, “I thought we were going to die on Shuttlepod One too.” Malcolm shook his head. “If he were here, Trip would tell us to stop being so bloody cynical.”

“And T’Pol would argue with him,” the captain interjected, sudden amusement in his eyes. “She’d quote some ridiculous Vulcan rule or procedure that would piss him off.”

“Verbal foreplay,” Reed said automatically. He inhaled sharply the moment he realized what he had said – the rumors about the captain’s interest in T’Pol weren’t new, and Malcolm didn’t know how the older man would take to him implying that Trip had been interested in the Vulcan that way. Archer’s sudden bark of laughter came as a surprise.

“Sometimes,” the captain admitted with an actual smile, “I just wanted to lock them in a room together so they could figure out whether they wanted to kiss or to kill each other.” He chuckled. “You should have seen them eyeing each other when she told us about T’Mir.” Reed held his
tongue, unsure what to say, but Archer didn’t seem to notice as he lost himself in memories. “I shouldn’t be surprised, though,” the captain said. “Trip always was attracted to difficult women.”

They sat there in silence for a long moment, and Malcolm struggled to find something to say that would break the tension rapidly growing between them. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the captain’s expression tightening, and could see the slow return of the dark mood that had been the entire point of Reed’s visit. *Say something, you silly bugger,* Malcolm told himself. Hoshi would kill him if he didn’t try to get the captain out of this funk.

“Sir?” Archer glanced up at his comment, and Reed drew in a breath before continuing. “How did you and Commander Tucker meet?” The captain smiled slightly.

“He didn’t tell you?” At Malcolm’s head shake, Archer leaned back in his chair once more. Reaching down to open a drawer on the desk, the captain pulled out a bottle and two small glasses. He spoke as he tipped a generous amount of what smelled like bourbon into the shot glasses. “Now, that is a story worth telling.” He offered Reed one of the glasses, and Malcolm cautiously accepted it.

A moment later, Captain Archer began speaking, and Reed found himself relaxing. For a wake, it wasn’t half bad.
A local day on this planet is 21 hours long. 22 days (19.25 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

Icy wind wailed through the starless night, battering the tent unrelentingly with driving rain and sleet. Little more than two long strips of cloth fastened together and secured in place by metal stakes, the crude structure was already soaked through and barely managed to keep out the freezing gusts. The two supporting poles trembled and shook under the onslaught of nature’s fury, threatening complete collapse each time a new blast of wind struck.

His eyes wide open, Trip Tucker stared at the dark canvas cloth above his head and tried to keep from coughing. He was so tired it was almost painful, but despite his best efforts, he couldn’t seem to convince his exhausted mind to turn off long enough for him to get any much needed rest. It was all T’Pol’s fault, he decided with a soft sigh.

As if sensing his frustration, the Vulcan subcommander shifted slightly in her sleep, snuggling closer to him and burying her head in the crook of his neck. Her face was mostly concealed by the prickly blanket wrapped around them, and Trip carefully drew the too thin strips of cloth up to completely cover her face in a possibly vain attempt to protect her from the freezing rain now beginning to drip from the tent’s ceiling. In a way, Tucker found himself grateful for the inclement weather as it gave him something to focus on other than the fact this was the sixth night in a row where T’Pol had ended up in his arms in a decidedly non-romantic nature.

For her, anyway.

Twelve local days had passed since their narrow escape from the mesa city – ten and a half Earth days, according to T’Pol’s calculations – and they had been on foot for the last two once the last of their fuel for the ATV had been expended. With rapidly dropping temperatures and rains that continued sporadically throughout the day, they had been forced to seek shelter earlier and get later starts than desired. Trip doubted they were more than fifty kilometers from where they’d concealed the now useless offroad vehicle, but with the Vulcan still recovering from the gunshot wound, speed had been abandoned for security.

“You need to sleep,” T’Pol abruptly declared, her words causing Trip to jerk in surprise. He froze, realizing almost at once that he had been unconsciously stroking her back with his left arm. When she didn’t chastise him for it or pull away from where she lay, he relaxed as much as he dared.

“I’m tryin’,” he retorted, the tightness in his lungs causing his voice to nearly crack. The Vulcan tilted her head back and peered up at his face, a quizzical expression on her features. It was almost a comical sight, with the ineffective blanket still shrouding all but the very top of her head, and Trip had to bite his lip from laughing at how ridiculous she looked.

“Charles,” she said with a hint of emotion in her voice, “you must rest.” The thrill that pulsed through him whenever she used his given name caused him to smile. “If I must,” T’Pol added, “I will render you unconscious.”
“Believe it or not,” Trip said with a tight smile, “I may just take you up on that.” He coughed, grimacing at how … wet it sounded. A cold was the last thing he needed right now. Feeling T’Pol’s eyes still on him, he glanced down to meet her gaze. “What?”

“You cannot sleep,” she said, “because you are distracted by something.” Trip closed his eyes quickly, suddenly once more aware of how she was almost draped over him like a second blanket to share body warmth, a necessity in these dangerously low temperatures. “I cannot help you if I do not know what concerns you,” she continued. Trip winced. For the briefest of moments – barely a heartbeat, really – he considered telling her how her wonderful curves pressed against him in all the right places was the reason he couldn’t relax. The impulse passed quickly though, especially when he imagined how she would react to the truth. It was bad enough knowing she and Archer had been – were? – involved; he certainly didn’t want to see disgust or, God forbid, 
pity
in her eyes when she looked at him.

“Will you tell me why you keep havin’ nightmares?” he countered, looking down to meet her gaze once more. Instantly, T’Pol glanced away, but not before Trip saw a flash of green wash across her lovely features. Her lips tightened and Tucker could feel her entire body tense underneath the blanket. She gave him a couple of quick looks that would have looked furtive if they were on anyone else’s face, and he held his breath when she opened her mouth.

“This shelter is inadequate,” she said instead of answering his question. A moment later, she returned her head to his shoulder and, although she tried to hide it, Trip could feel her shivering. “Tomorrow,” she added, her voice muffled by the blanket, “we shift focus from evasion to survival.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Trip said with a smirk. He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the pleasant sensation of her warm breath upon his neck. Despite the chill in the air, he drifted toward sleep.

The whine of an approaching internal combustion engine snapped him out of a nice if admittedly confusing dream involving monkeys and pecan pie. T’Pol was already scrambling out from under the blanket, her eyes wide as she darted to their carefully stacked supplies. At her insistence, they stored their bags in the exact same spot each night when they retired so she could rely on her perfect memory instead of her almost nonexistent night vision. As he rolled to his feet, Trip could tell dawn had just broken.

“Ground vehicle?” Trip asked as he joined her. He pulled his phase pistol free from where it was secured to his survival pack and gave her a quick glance. T’Pol’s head was tilted slightly and her eyes were slightly out of focus.

“No,” she replied softly. “An aircraft of some sort.” She frowned. “There are at least two, I believe.”

“Flyin’ this early? That’s a first.” Trip watched her for a long moment, waiting for instructions. He hated how out of his depth he felt in these sorts of situations, and silently gave thanks that the subcommander was here with him instead of someone like Travis or Hoshi who would be looking to him for direction and guidance.

“They are moving in a circular pattern,” T’Pol announced a moment later, “but are definitely moving in this direction.”

“Dammit,” Trip muttered. He wet his lips and met her eyes. “We need to run, don’t we?”

“Yes,” she said as she reached into one of the duffel bags and pulled out a jacket. “I do not think we have time to repack the tent.”

Sharp gusts of icy wind met them as they emerged from the tent moments later, and Trip cursed
softly at the light blanket of snow falling from the sky. It seemed like only yesterday that it was raining, and he had to wonder about the quickness with which winter had set in. Was it normal on this planet, or did they just happen to show up at exactly the wrong time? If past experience was any indication, he suspected it was the latter, no matter how far north they’d traveled in the trike before abandoning it.

As T’Pol readjusted the distribution of her pack, Tucker kicked the support poles of the small pup tent free and let the small structure collapse. If they were lucky, the tent would be covered by snow by the time any search party arrived. Frowning, he watched his Vulcan companion as she silently hefted one of the duffel bags and almost casually slung it over her good shoulder, seemingly ignoring the gear’s considerable weight. The southern gentleman in him revolted against letting her carry the lion’s share of their equipment, even as the Starfleet commander acknowledged the necessity of the act.

“Which way?” he asked as he hefted his own rucksack. T’Pol tilted her head slightly and was silent for a moment, before pointing in the direction Trip took to be northeast.

“If we move quickly,” his Vulcan companion said through tightly clenched teeth, “we should be able to reach the ridgeline before nightfall.” As she spoke, the subcommander began wrapping one of the towels from a duffel bag around her face, and in seconds, only her eyes were still showing. Trip gave her a grin and followed suit.

The distant rumble of the aerocraft continued to pursue them as they stumbled through the forest, slipping and sliding on slick rocks and small sheets of ice, somehow managing to stay ahead of the aerial search. By noon, Trip’s lungs felt like they were on fire, and with each step he took, the urge to cough grew exponentially. Driving wind and freezing rain pelted him nonstop, soaking through his clothes and leaving him more miserable than before. The makeshift niqāb he wore over his face was frozen almost solid from sleet and sweat, but Trip was too exhausted to even consider pulling it away. His shivers had worsened a kilometer or so back, and some part of his brain knew this was a bad thing, yet he simply continued to trudge on, unable to focus on anything else. A sneeze began building at the back of his throat, but seemed permanently lodged there.

They topped a small hill overlooking a well-tended farm valley, and T’Pol’s head snapped around to the left, her body tensing. The tiny part of his reflexes not totally dulled by the freezing conditions recognized that she had detected some sort of danger, and Trip tried to force himself to react accordingly. He half-turned, his hand awkwardly seeking the concealed pistol at his side, and planted his feet.

Too late, he realized he was standing on ice.

T’Pol’s startled cry followed him as his legs shot out from under him and, unbalanced by his ruck’s weight, he tumbled down the hill. He hit the ground butt first, landing on a slick patch that was as smooth as any children’s slide he’d ever seen, and his attempts to slow his sudden race down the incline only succeeded in turning his body around. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, momentarily wiping away the deadly fatigue sapping his muscles of strength, and Trip flailed his arms around in a desperate attempt to find a handhold.

A moment later, he was airborne.

He smashed through the thin layer of ice covering a large pond at the base of the hill, and the shock of the painfully cold water suddenly surrounding him caused him to reflexively gasp. Choking on the flood of water he’d accidentally inhaled, Trip kicked his legs in an attempt to resurface even as he tried free himself from the heavy ruck on his back with uncooperative fingers. With each heartbeat that passed, though, he could feel himself steadily sinking deeper and deeper. Darkness beckoned.
Hands suddenly seized his clothes and pulled him up into the light. Unable to do more than shiver uncontrollably, Trip fought to open his eyes, to look upon his savior even as his body desperately tried to shut down. There were three of them he vaguely realized, and they were chattering away in a language he didn’t comprehend. All three were bundled up against the weather, with wide-brimmed hats and thick beards that were immaculately groomed. Oh, my God, Trip’s frozen brain reflected as stared at them through frost-laden eyelashes, I’ve been saved by Amish aliens.

“Charles!” A voice drifted across the wind, familiar but unfamiliar at the same time. “Charles!” the voice repeated, this time accompanied by a slender hand that gripped his bicep with bruising force. T’Pol was suddenly there, her eyes wide with visible worry, and Trip tried to force a smile on his face.

“I’m inna bad way, ‘Pol,” he slurred through lips that barely worked a heartbeat before he gave into the urge to close his eyes.

A thick blanket wrapped around her, T'Pol watched silently as the natives who had retrieved Charles from the icy lake bustled around the unconscious form of her companion, feverishly working to restore his body's core temperature to normal. Tucker's sodden clothes had been stripped from his body the moment the humanoids— for what else could she call them, these sentient beings who were so like Commander Tucker physically?— carried him into the large two-story domicile. With deft motions, they had towed him dry before laying him down upon a wide bed; two of them were even now wrapping the commander's neck, armpits, and groin with warmed towels to facilitate his recovery, while a pair of women silently observed from the nearby doorway. A third male supervised, issuing instructions with a casual air of command that identified him as the family patriarch far more than the white in his hair.

As their native benefactors worked, T'Pol hugged the comfortable wrap they had provided her closer and took a moment to study them. Compared to Charles, they were relatively short, closer to her height than his, but had a much stockier build. Their skin tone was quite pale, instantly reminding her of le'matya milk, but the epicanthic fold of their upper eyelids brought to mind Ensign Sato. The clothes they wore appeared to be homemade as opposed to mass manufactured, but were no less visually appealing for their simple origin. Every piece of furniture within the room had a similar look of aged comfort and careful craftsmanship.

Several long moments later, the family patriarch placed a hand upon Commander Tucker's forehead and nodded. At the signal, the other two men visibly relaxed, and stepped back from the bed, retrieving the towels as they did. Based on their expressions, T'Pol suspected they were no longer worried about Charles' immediate situation, and she felt her own tension ease exponentially. The elder barked several rapid commands in his native tongue, and the two other men retreated from the room with curious but seemingly respectful hand gestures directed in T'Pol's direction. Following their departure, the patriarch approached her and began speaking softly. At her blank look, he frowned slightly before attempting once more, this time, using a distinctly different tongue that was no more understandable than the first.

"I apologize," T'Pol said in English, knowing the man would not comprehend her words, “but I do not know your language." It had been a conscious decision to utilize Charles' native tongue rather than her own, so as to avoid future confusion, especially if the commander happened to talk in his sleep.

Frustration stamped on his face, the elder turned away and gestured for the two women to join him. He spoke to them for a moment, gesticulating wildly and nodding at their measured responses, before turning once more to examine T'Pol. Suddenly conscious of her appearance and the potentially dangerous situation she could be in, the subcommander shifted closer to Tucker's bed under the guise of checking on him. In the process, she adjusted the blanket wrapped around her, making sure
that her ears were concealed from view. At the same time, she checked the location of their salvaged gear – their rucksacks and duffel bags were still where they had been dropped alongside the bed, although Charles’ dripping pack was slightly apart from the others. None of their benefactors had shown any inclination toward examining the gear.

The older of the two women snapped something to the patriarch before gesturing sharply with her hands. He smirked, inexplicably reminding T’Pol of Charles when the commander was graciously abandoning a losing argument, before backing away toward the door his two juniors had vanished through earlier. With his left hand, he repeated the respectful gesture – touching the tip of his nose with the second knuckle of his pointing finger – before disappearing through the doorway and leaving T’Pol alone with the two women.

Laughing slightly, the older woman followed the man, but stopped at the threshold and pulled the door shut before approaching T’Pol. Speaking slowly – and louder than necessary – the woman began gesturing between T’Pol and the somnolent Charles Tucker. Several crude gestures later, the subcommander comprehended the woman’s meaning, and barely hesitated.

“Yes,” she said with a nod, “we are mated.” It was a necessary deception for the moment, though T’Pol was unsure how Charles would react when he learned of it. For the moment, having these natives believe she and Tucker were a bonded pair would eliminate any misunderstandings regarding why a male and a female might be traveling together, especially in a pre-warp culture such as this one. “T’Pol,” the subcommander said, pointing to herself with her left hand.

“Dena,” the matriarch replied with an identical gesture. She pointed to the younger female – a girl, really, barely out of her teens, but with features sufficiently similar to the older woman that it was obvious they were close kin – and added, “Erela.” Pleasantries over, Dena issued instructions to her daughter in rapid sentences T’Pol couldn’t begin to comprehend. The girl obeyed at once, darting to a staircase that the Vulcan had not, until this moment, even noticed. Before she was gone, Dena began pointing once more to the unconscious Commander Tucker. When T’Pol gave her a tight frown, the matriarch sighed heavily, lifted the covers, and gave the subcommander a telling look. Another quick motion of the female’s hands encompassed the damp clothes T’Pol wore underneath the blanket wrapped around her, and it was accompanied by a sharp shake of her head.

T’Pol swallowed.

Logically, she understood what was expected of her – the sharing of body heat, skin to skin, was likely the most effective means of restoring Charles’ core temperature to normal on a primitive world such as this – but the sudden realization that both of them would be completely nude gave her pause. The commander hadn’t been as effective as he would like to believe in concealing the effect her body had on his over the last several days, especially in the early mornings, and she could only imagine how it would react the moment his subconscious became aware of her nudity. At the same time, her Vulcan upbringing rebelled at the thought of being so close to a male who was not her bonded mate.

Her momentary hesitation was misinterpreted by Dena who gave her a soft smile and a reassuring pat on the shoulder before retreating from the room, making sure to pull the door shut behind her. T’Pol sighed heavily, before quickly frowning at the expression of emotion. Her jumbled emotions raced through her mind at warp speed, reminding her that she had not effectively meditated since before they escaped from the mesa city. Grimacing slightly at her lapse of control, she studied Tucker’s features before exhaling softly and kneeling alongside their packs to retrieve the phase pistols.

A moment later, she was under the covers alongside Charles.

His skin was far cooler than it should be, and subtle tremors shook his body as it struggled to regain
equilibrium. The realization that he was relying completely upon her caused T'Pol to abandon Vulcan propriety and act on instinct. With quick motions, she rolled him onto his side so he faced away from her before inching closer to him so she could hug his back. It would be, she suspected, far safer for the both of them if she were behind him in their present state of undress given Tucker’s evident inability to control his body. Her breath caught slightly at the sensation of his bare skin against her equally uncovered breasts. It was something she had never before experienced, a fact she knew Tucker would, with his many … exploits, find difficult to believe. Humans, with their behavior so utterly rooted in the desire for sex, seemed incapable of comprehending that Vulcans were biologically inclined toward monogamy and simply did not engage in recreational intercourse outside of marriage. T'Pol had matured knowing that, when it became necessary, her mate’s blood fever would infect her and she would instinctively react as nature intended for her to. That Koss’ *pon farr* had never materialized despite their age – a rare, but not entirely unheard of condition for members of his bloodline – had simply given her more time to focus on what was truly important: her career. Now, however, she found herself unable to concentrate on anything else but the proximity of the male before her and their lack of clothing.

This was all Tucker’s fault.

With nothing else to do but wait, T'Pol focused her eyes on the flickering flame in the small wood stove across the small room and let herself slip into a meditative state. The part of her mind that always remained active noticed the reappearance of Erela twenty-three minutes later to add more fuel to the fire. Based on the change in ambient noises of the house, T'Pol suspected that the inclement weather outside had intensified; wind rattled the windows and doors, and she could hear a steady drumbeat of frozen rain clattering against the roof. Erela was gone from the room bare minutes later, once more leaving them alone.

The comfort of an actual bed combined with Charles’ reassuring presence crept up on her, and before she realized it, her meditation became actual sleep as her exhausted body demanded a respite. Her keen awareness of the room faded into the sheer bliss of warmth and a cushioned mattress.

“T'Pol.” Commander Tucker’s tense voice, so close to her ear, instantly roused her some time later, and she instinctively reached for the phase pistol she’d secreted under the pillow. Opening her eyes, T'Pol realized that they had evidently shifted in their sleep – once more, Charles was on his back and she was resting halfway atop him, her head resting on his chest and her arm draped across his naked chest. Their legs were intertwined in a surprisingly intimate manner, but her brain – still not yet fully awake – failed register this as important or even particularly unusual. In the past week, she’d grown accustomed to waking in such a manner, though it was usually on the rough ground with the damp tent dripping on their faces. Panic was bright in Tucker’s eyes, and he was much, much redder than normal, as if he were caught in the grip of some overwhelming emotion. “Where are my clothes?” he asked desperately, but plunged on without waiting for her response. “Where are your clothes?”

“You were hypothermic,” she answered, exhaustion from twenty days of almost nonstop stress stripping her of the will to move. There was nothing more that she wanted to do in this moment than remain exactly where she was. Not for long, though. Just a week or so, until she was fully rested. She could hear the wail of fierce wind clearly, and the entire room was much darker than before, implying a worsening of outside conditions. The lucid part of her mind reflected that this boded well for them as any potential pursuers would be severely hampered by the weather. A chill was in the air, despite the still active stove, and T'Pol could smell the pleasant aroma coming from the burning wood within it. “This was the most efficient way to raise your body temperature,” she added in a voice thick with sleep. Her eyes closed once more but Tucker’s reply was a strangled half-laugh that caused her to shth slightly.

And, in doing so, she freed a fully … erect part of his anatomy that had been trapped against her
Quite suddenly, T’Pol was wide awake.

“Oh, God,” Charles groaned as he rolled away from her awkwardly. At the same time, T’Pol felt her face flame as she retreated to her side of the bed. “Just when I thought this day couldn’t get any damned worse,” Tucker mumbled, though her sharp hearing made out the words. “I’m sorry,” he added.

“It was an instinctive, biological reaction,” she told him, smoothing away most hints of embarrassment from her features. Her ears continued to burn, though, and she was silently thankful that he was facing away from her so she wouldn’t have to look into his eyes. “No apology is necessary.”

For a long moment, silence was her only answer until it was broken by a curious gasping sound emerging from Tucker. Coming so close to his fall into the freezing lake, the sound instantly concerned her – it could an indication of a deeper respiratory problem and they still didn’t know how trustworthy these natives were – and T’Pol stretched out a tentative hand to his shoulder. At her light touch, he half-turned his head in her direction, revealing the source of the sound.

He was laughing.

Or, more accurately, he was trying to keep from doing so and, judging by the strain in his eyes, failing miserably. The moment he looked upon her, Tucker seemed to give up and began chortling. It was a deep, wheezing sound that had a ragged, almost hysterical edge to it, as if he didn’t know whether to laugh or sob. Given the extreme stress they had been under for weeks and his most recent brush with death, Tucker’s reaction was actually quite understandable for a human. Tears sprang from his eyes as he giggled, and she suspected he was unable to stop himself if he wanted to.

Charles’ eyes reflected his mortified amusement as they met T’Pol’s, and the humor of this latest situation they found themselves in caused her lips to quirk upwards fractionally.

Tucker’s laughter ended so abruptly it was as if a switch had been thrown. His eyes widened, and there was no mistaking the open wonder on his face as he stared at her.

“You smiled,” Charles breathed. T’Pol looked away, silently chastising herself for the loss of control. “I have not meditated properly for weeks,” she admitted with a tight frown. “My self-control is not as it should be.”

“Don’t worry,” Tucker said, still staring at her with an expression of almost child-like awe she’d never seen before, “your secret’s safe with me.” He smiled before giving the room a glance. To her surprise, he didn’t ask about how they got where they were. “T’Pol,” he asked sheepishly, evidently unable to meet her eyes, “I’d really like to put some pants on now.” Once again, she felt her lips twitch, and she seriously considered telling him that their clothes had been destroyed simply to observe his reaction. Instead, she nodded.

“I shall retrieve a dry pair at once,” she replied as she started to slide from the bed. Immediately before she slipped from underneath the blankets, T’Pol felt his eyes on her and gave him a questioning look. He flushed and quickly turned away.

“I won’t peek,” he promised with a thicker than normal accent. “You have my word.” Mentally, T’Pol shook her head in bemusement at humans and their silly taboos. They gave no thought to the sheer intimacy of touch, yet seemed to regard the exposure of an unclothed body no matter how innocent the situation as inherently sexual.
Sometimes, they made less sense than Andorians.

“Can we trust these people?” Tucker asked once they had donned relatively dry underclothes. He was still shivering, despite the thick blankets atop him, and his skin was paler than it should be.

“I do not know,” T’Pol replied. “Roll over, Commander,” she instructed. He gave her a confused look. “You are still suffering from hypothermia,” she pointed out flatly. “Roll over.” With a sigh, he obeyed, once more facing the stove. He tensed when she slid closer to him. Wrapping her arms around him was, for a Vulcan, forward and inappropriately intimate, but she was far more concerned with helping him recover than her nonexistent virtue.

“I thought you Vulcans were phobic about touching,” he grumbled.

“We dislike extreme cold more,” she retorted crisply, causing him to chuckle.

“What’s our next step then?” Tucker asked a few moments later. He sounded as if he were on the verge of sleep once more.

“Until you … until we are better rested,” she decided calmly, her body and mind already drifting closer to slumber as well, “and know whether we can trust these natives, I suggest we play our cards close to our ears.”

“Close to our vest,” Tucker corrected absently, his own voice sounding sleepy, “or play it by ear.” He was silent for another long moment. “Just tell me what to do,” he murmured, “and I’ll do it.”

“Go to sleep, Charles,” T’Pol ordered. This close to him, she could hear his heartbeat in her ears, a steady, rhythmic lullaby that carried her to somnolence.

And, for the first time in a long time, her dreams were pleasant.
20 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. This is obviously the AU version of "Marauders."

Fires were still raging across the colony.

His ears ringing from the explosions that had leveled the refining plant only seconds before, Jonathan Archer sprinted toward cover, his phase pistol held tightly in one hand. Disruptor fire screamed by his head, exploding against the already broken rocks where his first officer crouched, and he bit back a curse as spinning shrapnel tore into his uniform. As Jon threw himself forward and cleared the obstacle with a leaping dive, Lieutenant Commander Reed popped up from behind the rocks to provide cover fire.

Archer’s landing was rougher than he expected and the impact left him stunned, but the sharp smell of blood and smoke snapped him out of his momentary daze. He quickly scrambled to his feet and joined Reed at the stony embankment his armoury officer had chosen to use as a defensive position. The lieutenant commander barely acknowledged him, so intent was he on firing at the towering aliens now charging toward them.

“Where the hell did they come from?” Jon demanded as he drew a bead on one of the Klingons and squeezed the trigger of his pistol. The beam flashed out, slamming into the alien’s chest and dropping him with barely a sound. A wail of return fire splashed around the embankment, showering Archer and Reed with debris and superheated sand.

Only a few hours had passed since their arrival on the planet, and the sudden attack had caught them almost completely by surprise. There hadn’t been any hint of anything wrong until the Klingons suddenly materialized in the center of the colony and began shooting anything that moved. If it hadn’t been for Reed’s quick-thinking and quicker reflexes, Jon had little doubt he would have been one of the first casualties. Neither of them had been quick enough to save Crewman Cutler, though, and fury bubbled up from Archer’s stomach as he recalled how heroically she threw herself at the Klingon looming over a little alien boy she’d befriended since their arrival. She’d fallen quickly, victim of a disruptor blast at point-blank range, but her sacrifice had given the child time enough to escape.

Jon only hoped her death had been worth it.

Attempts to contact Enterprise had met with an ominous silence, though Archer hoped it was due to jamming rather than an inability to communicate. Far more worrisome, though, was that Travis was currently in command of NX-01. At the time, leaving the ensign to sit in the big chair for a few hours had seemed like a nice way to encourage Mayweather and give him a little bit of experience.

“We need to fall back from this position, sir,” Reed growled. He didn’t let up with his carefully aimed shots, dropping three Klingons to every one that Jon nailed. “They’re shaking off the stun setting too quickly.” Archer grimaced at that, finally noticing that the Klingon he’d shot earlier was slowly clawing back to his feet; a human would still be unconscious for several hours. “There’s an outcrop three meters behind us,” Reed continued as he shifted fire and targeted a barrel. The
phase beam sliced into the metal container, but had no immediate effect. “When I give the signal, run for it,” the lieutenant commander instructed. Jon gave him a sidelong look, wondering if he should remind his acting first officer that it was the captain who gave the orders, not the armoury officer, but decided to hold his tongue. At the moment, survival was far more important than the chain-of-command. “Now!” Reed shouted as he fired again. This time, the barrel detonated like a bomb, hurling a pair of Klingons through the air as if they were little more than puppets.

Long seconds later, Jon slid into cover behind the outcropping Reed had identified like a runner stealing home plate. His breath was coming rapidly, and adrenaline raced through his veins. Movement drew his attention to his left, and he snapped the phase pistol around but managed to keep from firing as Lieutenant Commander Hess and Ensign Sato sprinted toward him, their own weapons hefted. A trio of Klingons pursued the two women, howling fierce cries, and Archer began firing rapidly. One of the aliens dropped like a stone, and the sheer volume of fire caused his two partners to dart for cover.

“Down!” Reed’s voice shouted a half second before he tackled Archer from behind. They hit the ground hard a half second before something metallic and sharp whizzed through where Jon’s head had been a heartbeat earlier. Malcolm rolled away, his phase pistol coming up and discharging a lethal stream of fire that burned into the throat of a Klingon who had apparently pursued them from their previous defensive dugout. The alien toppled, an overpowering stench of burned flesh following him, and Reed sprang to his feet. “Weapons on kill!” he snapped as he began covering Hess and Sato. “Stun isn’t working on them!”

Within seconds, the two women had joined them. Caked in sweat, dirt and what looked suspiciously like blood, they had terrified expressions on their face, but offered no complaint as they crouched behind the embankment, pistols at the ready. Jon gave them quick once-overs, noting with some surprise that Hoshi seemed to be in better shape emotionally than Anna Hess.

“Fall back!” Reed shouted as he knelt and retrieved the dead Klingon’s disruptor. He gestured toward another ditch with it before rising to his feet and opening fire with weapons in both hands like a gunslinger from one of Trip’s old movies. Jon followed suit, abandoning accuracy for sheer volume of fire, while Hoshi and Hess darted toward the cover Malcolm had pointed out. The two women were firing their weapons while on the run, hitting nothing that Archer could see, but definitely causing enough chaos that the Klingons sought cover.

“Captain, go!” Malcolm urged desperately. The British armoury officer was slowly backing away their previous cover, the weapons in his hand beginning to hiss from overuse. “I can’t cover you much longer!”

“We’re both going, Commander!” Archer retorted. “Now!”

They sprinted toward the ditch under a hail of disruptor fire that buzzed around them like furious hornets. As he raced toward cover, Jon instantly noticed that Hoshi was already kneeling, her phase pistol whining as she provided suppressive fire, but there was no sign of Lieutenant Commander Hess. White hot fire suddenly seemed to explode from the small of his back, and Archer screamed out in agonized surprise. He tumbled to the ground, but somehow let his momentum carry him into a roll that dropped him into the ditch.

“The captain’s been hit!” Hoshi shouted as Reed slid over the lip of the ditch and joined her in pouring fire into the cluster of attacking Klingons. Hess looked up from where she was crouched and, through the searing pain from where she’d been shot, Jon vaguely registered that she had broken open a communicator. Calling in reinforcements, a strangely lucid part of his mind reflected. Good girl.
“I can’t get through!” Hess said loudly, desperation starting to creep into her voice.

“Help the captain,” Malcolm snarled, “and get ready for another assault.”

Things got hazy after that as Jon swam in and out of consciousness. He could recall phase pistol fire, and disruptor fire, and explosions, and screams. Images flashed before his eyes, as if he were watching a slideshow. Hoshi in a martial arts pose before a Klingon male twice her size. Malcolm wielding a bloody knife. Anna with two disruptors in either hand, screaming like a banshee as she fired them. Two Klingons down in front of Hoshi, one writhing in agony and the other not moving at all. Reed surrounded, but showing no hint of fear. More explosions.

And then, silence.
20 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. This happens concurrently with the previous chapter.

His training hadn’t covered this.

A grimace on his face, Ensign Travis Mayweather glanced quickly at the sensor feed upon his control console and fought back a curse at how close the attacking Klingon ship was. The flight stick was still vibrating wildly as he drove Enterprise through another series of wild evasive maneuvers, but Travis ignored the threatened systems malfunction. All that mattered was the safety of his ship and the crew.

Until the armed freighter had roared over the planetary horizon, weapons already charged and ready for action, there had been no indication that there were any other starships in the system. Only Enterprise’s superior capabilities to the outclassed Klingon ship had kept the Starfleet vessel from being destroyed by the opening salvo. Bracketed by hostile fire, Enterprise had held up surprisingly well, and her crew had responded even better. They were breaking orbit and conducting evasive maneuvers well before the Klingon ship could reorient for a second pass, and Travis found himself immeasurably proud of his fellow crewmates for how quickly they reacted.

He shouldn’t have been surprised though; experience was a hard teacher.

The hard vacuum around the starship was suddenly alive with sizzling disruptor beams, brilliant cascades of emerald fire that burned through the darkness and sliced into Enterprise’s already battered hull plating. A geyser of molten metal exploded outward, the superheated fragments freezing almost instantly. Ominous alarms began shrieking the briefest of seconds later.

“Hull breach on C Deck!” the recently promoted Petty Officer Rostov shouted from where he stood at the damage control station. “Pressure doors sealing!”

“I can’t get a lock!” the acting weapons officer exclaimed, stress and panic in her voice. A crewman first class, Stacey Marino had only been manning the station when the Klingons suddenly appeared because she’d drawn the short straw. Though he had seen no real signs of it firsthand, Travis had learned through the ship’s rumor mill that Malcolm Reed was rabidly territorial over the weapons console. In order to avoid getting chewed out for even looking askance at a button or a dial, the members of the security detachment routinely competed against one another in order to determine who had the misfortune to stand watch on the bridge. Only last night, Marino had come in last place during the weekly hand-to-hand training sessions.

“Calm down,” Travis ordered sharply. “Let the targeting computer do its job.” He feathered the maneuvering thrusters, rolling Enterprise slightly as he began feeding more acceleration. “Stand by for an L-4 maneuver,” he added, before shooting Marino a quick look. “We’re only going to get one shot at this,” he said grimly, “so I’d really prefer it if you don’t miss.”

Before she could reply, he gave Enterprise her head, redlining her powerful impulse engines while pulling back hard on the flight stick. The pursuing Klingon ship immediately tried to replicate the
maneuver, but – weighed down by bulky deuterium tanks – moved like the slow, clunky freighter it had become. Brief seconds later, Travis leveled out, completing the inside loop to place *Enterprise* directly aft of the Klingon starship. Like an ungainly bird, the hostile craft tried to shake them.

“Fire!” Mayweather ordered, and a half-second later, every one of *Enterprise*’s phase cannons opened up, spearing the ponderous Klingon ship with lethal fire. Spatial torpedoes leapt from the launch bays and slammed home against the freighter’s hull, detonating with spectacular explosions that ripped into the starship’s superstructure and sent shattered metal spinning into the darkness. Leaking atmosphere and trailing debris, the Klingon ship abruptly banked, still desperately trying to dodge Marino’s phase cannon fire. A moment later, the freighter sprang away at superluminal speeds.

“They’re going to warp!” Ensign Ling nearly shouted from the Science board, her jubilant words causing the rest of the crewmen and junior officers on the bridge to cheer.

“Quiet!” Travis snapped, twisting in his seat to focus on Ling. “I want the sensors monitored at all times,” he ordered quickly. “If they show back up, I need to know at once.” Before she could reply, he turned again, this time directing his comments to Rostov standing at the damage control board. “Is the transporter working?” he asked.

“Uh … I think so,” the engineering petty officer prevaricated, but Mayweather cut him. “Don’t think,” he said quickly. “Find out.” To Marino, Travis added, “I want an armed security team assembled. Make sure they have a medic. If the transporter is working, they’re to beam down and find the captain.”

“Brown-outs all over D Deck,” Rostov interjected off his board.

“Then the transporter is out,” Mayweather decided. “Have your team use Shuttlepod Three,” he told Marino, “but get them down there now!”

“Yes, sir!” she answered quickly. Travis was already turning toward the communications station.

“Anything?” he asked, but Crewman Baird shook his head.

“Still nothing, sir,” the acting comm.-officer answered, a defensive edge creeping into his words as if he thought that Travis was attacking his work. From what Hoshi had said off-the-record about Baird, the man’s work was normally exemplary, but he had a dangerous tendency to fold like a lawn chair under pressure. The more urgent the situation, the quicker the crewman choked.

“Keep working,” Travis instructed, climbing to his feet as he spoke. “Ramos!” he called out, and the gamma-shift helmsman trotted forward. “Take over,” Mayweather said with a gesture to the navigator’s station. He gave Rostov a quick look. “And get me a damage report!”

Travis spent the next several minutes circling the situation table at the back of the bridge in an attempt to hide from the bridge crew how abjectly terrified he was and instead project an air of casual confidence. Lurking around the table was something Mayweather had seen the captain do on a couple of occasions, and the ex-Boomer quickly latched onto the older man’s example, knowing that he was fundamentally incapable of sitting in the command chair with an expression of disinterest like T’Pol had always done. Pacing back and forth behind the helmsman was always an option, but Travis knew how much that disconcerted him and didn’t want to distract Ramos. Travis was finishing his fifth circle around the table when Rostov joined him. The petty officer transferred his report to the table screen without needing to be asked.
“Ensign Taylor is running damage control from Engineering,” Rostov announced as he pointed to several danger zones, “and we’ve got four teams containing the fires on C Deck.” Travis nodded.

“The breach?”

“The pressure doors sealed in time,” Rostov said. “No casualties reported, but there are at least three crewmen trapped in their quarters until we can unseal them.” He frowned. “That gives us about four hours until their oxygen runs out.”


“With your permission, sir,” he said, “I’d like to join the teams-”

“Go,” Travis interrupted, jerking his head toward the turbolift. “Just send me updated status reports every ten minutes.”

“Yes, sir.” Rostov hesitated before dropping a hand onto Mayweather’s arm. When he spoke, his words were pitched low so no one else could hear him. “You’re doing fine, Ensign,” he said softly. Travis gave him a thankful smile and turned back to the table.

“I’ve got something!” Baird shouted seconds after Rostov vanished into the lift. Forcing himself to keep an air of calm, Mayweather walked quickly to the communications console, his stomach dropping at the worried expression on the crewman’s face. “It’s really garbled,” Baird reported, “but I think Ensign Sato said something about injuries.”

“Redirect Pod Three to their location,” Travis said more calmly than he felt. The sudden relief he felt knowing that Hoshi was still alive nearly caused his knees to buckle. “And let Doctor Phlox know we may have casualties.”

The next three hours crawled by with agonizing slowness. Shuttlepod Three returned with the landing party mere minutes after Baird made contact with them, but no one thought to inform Travis of their condition or the number of injuries. Unable to leave the bridge until he was properly relieved by a superior officer (all of whom might be dead or incapacitated) or a duty officer (all of whom were busy with repairs), Mayweather spent the entire time pacing or coordinating damage control teams from the situation table, haunted by worry but unwilling to contact Sickbay to assuage his fears. When Lieutenant Commander Reed exited the lift, a dark expression on his face and the stench of smoke and blood on his uniform, Travis nearly gasped with relief.

“I need to speak to Starfleet Command at once,” Reed told Baird flatly. “Have them wake up Admiral Forrest if they need to.” He blinked in surprise when he noticed Mayweather. “You’re still on duty?” the armoury officer asked.

“Nobody to relieve me, sir,” Travis replied, “or tell me what happened. We had casualties?”

“Crewman Cutler was killed,” Reed announced softly, his face bleak and stony. Mayweather felt a stab of despair – like everyone else aboard, he’d liked Elizabeth Cutler a lot. “Captain Archer is recovering from surgery, and Commander Hess is … I don’t know what’s wrong with her. Phlox does, but he won’t tell me right now.”

“And Hoshi?” The armoury officer nearly smirked at that.

“She’s fine,” he said. “Her knuckles are bruised, and I think she pulled a hamstring throwing some Klingons around, but other than that…” Reed frowned as he glanced around, prompting Travis to suspect he was just now noticing the relative youth and inexperience of the acting bridge crew.
“What’s our status?” he asked. Mayweather straightened, assuming a posture of attention.

“Fully operational, sir,” he replied. “We’ve taken some minor structural damage on C Deck, but Ensign Taylor is on it. There’s no sign of the Klingon ship returning, but we’re still on battle alert in case he does.” Reed nodded in approval, and Travis felt the tension in his shoulders ease slightly. “Why did they attack, sir?” he asked.

“They’re Klingons,” the lieutenant commander replied, his face twisting in a bitter scowl. “Do they need a reason?” Reed made a visible effort to smooth away his anger, but it was still there in his voice when he spoke. “Let me know once Admiral Forrest is online,” he said. “I just can’t wait to tell him that this bloody planet isn’t as friendly as Command told us it was,” Reed growled sarcastically. “You have the bridge, Ensign.” Pausing before the entrance to the ready room, the lieutenant commander offered a final comment. “And damned good job. To all of you.”

From anyone else, it would have seemed like faint praise, but coming from Malcolm Reed, it was the equivalent of a glowing commendation, a promotion, and a pay raise all at the same time. It was almost enough to make Travis forget for a moment that they had lost another crewmember.

Almost, but not quite.
A local day on this planet is 21 hours long. 42 days (36.75 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

He was sick of ice and snow.

Muscles aching from exhaustion, Trip Tucker bit back a curse as his boots failed to make purchase on the slick stone walkway that connected the large house to the much larger barn, and it was only pure luck that he didn’t fall on his ass or drop the stack of firewood in his arms. He wasn’t exactly sure when it had become his job to venture into the freezing cold to get fuel for the various fires in the house they were staying in, but given how well the Amish-like aliens had treated them thus far, he thought it only right he do his part.

The snow that had begun dropping from the sky before he and T’Pol fell – literally, in Trip’s case – into the rural family’s lives had continued piling up almost nonstop for the twenty or so days since it began, accompanied by driving winds and the occasional ice storm that shook the roof of the farmhouse. Temperatures had rapidly dropped from distressingly cold to unbearably cold, and the sky was gray the entire day, with thick clouds shrouding the horizon in perpetual twilight even when the sun had clearly gone down as it had an hour or so ago. To a man from Florida, the frigid air was painfully sharp, like dozens of razor blades slicing across any exposed skin.

Thank God they had indoor plumbing.

True to form, T’Pol never complained about the circumstances they’d found themselves in. She was every centimeter the stoic Vulcan, calm and composed even in the face of temperatures that an Andorian would dislike. If she moved a little more stiffly or wore an extra layer of clothes, Trip never noticed or called attention to it, especially since she still couldn’t look him in the eye since her encounter with his recalcitrant anatomy.

Trip blew out a frustrated breath at that thought, and wondered once again how he could apologize to her without sounding like an idiot. So far, he’d tried everything he could think of, and each time he started to stammer out something that sounded vaguely reasonable, his brain would lock up and he’d receive the Eyebrow of Doom. In the rare event that he actually managed to say something partially coherent, T’Pol’s expression inevitably changed to one that Trip suspected – or, more accurately, feared – was disgust, and she would casually dismiss it before making some excuse to get away from him. Even the attic room they’d been given the day after what he was thinking of as The Incident showed signs of the ongoing problem; there might as well have been an invisible wall that divided it into her side and his side, so clear was the demarcation. No longer did Trip wake up in the morning with a warm, voluptuous Vulcan in his arms, regardless of how cold the room was, and gone were most of her uses of ‘Charles.’

He wasn’t sure which one he missed more.

Trudging along at his side was the younger of the two brothers, Urri, equally laden down with firewood and chattering away in the tongue of his people that still sounded like so much gibberish to Trip. It shouldn’t have bothered him as much as it did that T’Pol was already picking the language
up, especially given how many times he’d heard her brag in that Vulcan way of hers about how more advanced her species was in comparison to humans, but Tucker’s continued lack of comprehension about what was being said made it impossible for him to not be annoyed. The subcommander was far from fluent – she wasn’t Hoshi, after all – but she already knew enough to get her point across most of the time, while Trip still found himself stumbling over how to introduce himself, or ask for directions to the bathroom. According to T’Pol, the language was similar in a lot of way to ancient Latin, with verbs that were conjugated to denote person, number, tense, and a whole mess of other things that Tucker didn’t really understand. As someone who only spoke one language – his partial comprehension of Vulcan didn’t count, because that was mostly the written version and only in regards to warp mechanics – the entire process seemed unnecessarily complex.

With Urri rambling on beside him, Trip staggered the remaining distance to the closed door leading into the farmhouse. His vociferous companion quickly took the lead, kicking the base of the door several times to alert those within to open it, and Tucker found himself staring in the distance through fatigued eyes. He couldn’t remember the last time he was so tired, and his sleep schedule remained out of whack with the local day-night cycle. T’Pol had mentioned something about Circadian rhythms a few nights earlier when she found him sprawled out on the bed, unable to sleep despite the ungodly hour, but Trip had no idea what she had been talking about. All he knew was that he would give his left arm for one night of good, solid, dreamless slumber. Maybe his left leg too.

A small, warm hand on his bicep snapped him out of his fugue, and Trip blinked in mild surprise when he realized it was T’Pol standing before him, wearing an expression of Vulcan concern on her lovely features. He didn’t know how long he had been standing there, holding the firewood and staring at nothing, but based on the shivers crawling up his spine, it was at least several minutes longer than it should be. Forcing a grin that he didn’t really feel on his face, he followed her into the house, kicking the door shut behind him as he did.

“Sorry,” he muttered, as he began piling the wood next to the fireplace. The sensation of being watched caused him to glance around, and he was unsurprised to find the family studying him from the kitchen. Urri was already standing next to his father, Aron, and his mother, Dena, but the elder brother, Daveed, was nowhere in sight. Erela, the girl who reminded Trip so much of his sister, Elizabeth, was staring at him as if she expected him to grow a second head.

“They are concerned about you,” T’Pol murmured from beside him. She was quickly piling the wood in perfect stacks, but had pitched her voice low enough so that only he would hear her words. “Aron believes that the hypothermia may have affected your cognitive functions.”

“Excuse me?” Trip demanded, suddenly offended. “They think I’m an idiot?” He grimaced. “Well, this just keeps gettin’ better and better all the damned time.”

“I am concerned about you also,” the Vulcan said calmly. She locked eyes with him, and Trip found that he could not look away. “You barely eat,” she pointed out calmly. “You are easily distracted, and you aren’t sleeping.”

“It’s not from lack of tryin’,” Trip grumbled. He sank down before the fire, and let himself bask in its warmth for a moment. “I’m so damned tired all the time,” he admitted, “but I just can’t go to sleep!”

“The human body follows an endogenously generated biological rhythm in a twenty-four hour cycle,” T’Pol said, her tone instinctively sliding into what Tucker thought of as ‘Vulcan super science mode.’ Normally, he found it annoying as hell, but right now, her body language hinted at a possible solution to his problem so he listened with rapt attention.

Although, if he was entirely honest, he’d listen to her read the Starfleet charter as long as she kept paying attention to him like this.
“Ekos has a twenty-one hour rotational period,” she continued, “and the sun has been concealed for much of time we’ve been here, so it is possible your body is still having problems adjusting.”

“Jet lag from hell,” Trip muttered, running his fingers through his hair. He frowned. “Wait. I thought you said they called themselves Zeons,” he said. “Is Ekos the planet name? Like Earth?”

“It is,” she confirmed, her lips pursing. “I suspect the term Zeon may indicate a religious or ethnic difference.”

“Like the Amish,” he said with a tired grin.

“Like the Amish,” T’Pol agreed. “If it has some other meaning,” she continued, “I do not yet know and they are not being forthcoming about it.” The Vulcan was silent for a moment as she studied him, and Trip shifted self-consciously under her appraisal. “Tonight,” she said calmly, her words firm, “I will begin instructing you in meditation. It may help your body adjust to the Ekosi day-night cycle.”

“Meditation?” Trip repeated, making a sour face at the word. “How is sittin’ on the floor and contemplatin’ my navel gonna help?” he asked. T’Pol quirked an eyebrow at the question, her eyes flickering quickly to his stomach before jumping back to his face.

“Meditation helps my people become more in touch with our physiology,” she explained. “I am unsure if it will provide the same benefit to you, but…” She trailed off, once more studying him with a weighing look, almost as if she were thinking of retracting the offer. Trip waved off whatever else she was about to say.

“Right now, T’Pol,” he said, “I’m willin’ to try anything if it means I can get some damned sleep.”

“Chalz, Tupol,” Dena called out from the kitchen, mangling their names as usual. She continued in a string of gibberish that included perhaps two words Trip recognized, one of which was food. The ‘come here’ hand gesture that accompanied the Zeon woman’s words and the pleasant aromas drifting from the kitchen were more than enough to get her point across, however, and Tucker silently followed T’Pol to the table. He took the seat next to the Vulcan, noting the complete lack of meat products on her plate – evidently, their benefactors had finally realized that she was a vegetarian. Once everyone was seated, Aron and his family began their usual pre-meal ritual that always reminded Trip of his dad saying grace. Even to an engineer without much interest in xenosociology, it was fascinating.

Each member of the family placed their hands palm down upon the table, their elbows firmly planted along the edge and their arms angled so they formed an almost triangle shape. The fingers of their left hand covered those of their right, and they tilted their heads back so they were looking at the ceiling. Eyes were closed – not tightly – and Aron’s words had a sonorous sound to them that had the ring of an invocation, though the words completely eluded Trip’s comprehension. Since the second night, T’Pol had copied the placement of her fingers, and Tucker hadn’t needed her encouragement to follow suit because of how familiar it was to him – in an oddly alien way, of course.

Tonight, however, he felt a stab of homesickness hit him hard.

*I’m going to die on this damned planet,* Trip realized as Aron spoke. Never again would he hear his father purposely mangling the words as he said grace, knowing it would amuse and irk his mother at the same time. Never again would Trip be able to listen to his sisters arguing over something he didn’t care about, or hear his brother brag about his day at work, or see his parents bicker over who got to carve the turkey on Thanksgiving. Never again would he see his friends and co-workers aboard *Enterprise,* or listen to the captain ramble on about a sport that really wasn’t a sport, or wake
to the comforting sound of the warp engine.

Never again.

He ate mechanically, swallowing everything put onto his plate without actually tasting it, and quickly excused himself the moment he finished. Retreating into the cramped attic room, he collapsed onto the bed and pressed the palms of his hands into his eyes. His head pounded, and every muscle in his body ached. The urge to scream kept building and building.

“Are you well?” T’Pol asked, her voice startling him out of his spiraling black mood, and Trip lowered his hands to study her as she climbed the stairs, a lit candle in hand to ward off the growing darkness. She was still wearing the head scarf that she’d adopted since their second day here, and a plain-looking dress given to her by Dena emphasized her feminine curves in a rather spectacular manner.

Trip tried not to stare.

“We’re never gettin’ off this planet, are we?” he asked.

“It is not likely,” the Vulcan admitted as she shut the door behind her and firmly secured it. “Are you just now realizing this?” she wondered, though there was no rancor behind her words.

“No,” Trip said, letting his head fall back onto the mattress as he spoke, “but it didn’t really hit me until now.” He exhaled deeply, trying hard not to wince at the hollow ache that seemed to throb through his bones. “It must be worse for you,” he commented after a moment, “since you’ll be stuck here even longer than I will.”

“I do not let it concern me,” T’Pol said calmly. She tilted the candle slightly, touching its flame to the wick of another of the wax cylinders sitting atop a small wooden crate. “We will adapt,” she added as she crossed to the other side of the small room and repeated the motion to ignite a third candle, “and overcome the adversity before us.” Sliding the candle into a holder intended for it, she gestured for him to join her. “Our first lesson will be in breathing,” she said.

“It may come as a shock to ya,” Trip grumbled half-heartedly as he forced himself off the bed, “but I do know how to breathe. Been doin’ it my whole life.”

“There is breathing,” T’Pol replied, “and there is breathing. This will be the latter.” She sank down onto the floor and assumed an uncomfortable-looking sitting posture, placing the candle holder on the floor before her and gesturing for Tucker to do the same. “Sit like this,” she instructed, “with your arms resting lightly upon your legs.” Trip grudgingly obeyed, his muscles complaining the entire time.

“What if this doesn’t work?” he asked.

“Then we will seek alternate options,” she answered. “Inhale deeply through the nostrils and draw the oxygen into your lungs. Hold it there for six seconds, before slowly exhaling through the mouth.” She demonstrated, and it was a measure of his absolute exhaustion that Trip barely noticed how wonderfully it emphasized her breasts, especially in the dress.

So instead, he focused on his breathing.
T'Pol: Touchy Solutions

Chapter Notes

An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 52 days (36.75 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

T'Pol was worried.

She had spent the last ten days trying to hide her concerns from Charles as they centered on his well-being, but, if his recent reactions were any indication, he was at least peripherally aware of her silent regard. Since she had begun instructing him, he had thoroughly impressed her with how quickly he picked up the basics of meditation. In retrospect, she shouldn’t have been surprised. Tucker approached every new task placed before him with commitment and dedication, displaying a zeal for perfection rivaling that of the strictest Vulcan, even if he cloaked it with an image of sloppiness. It had taken her nearly six months aboard Enterprise to comprehend that he never did things halfway, another two to realize that his appearance of unprofessionalism was an illusion designed to conceal intense self-doubt, and yet another month and a half to discover that even the captain seemed unaware of his friend’s deep-rooted insecurities. Few humans seemed willing to look beyond the surface, to notice how Charles always made himself available to others while carefully hiding the truth about his own fears and worries.

It was a surprisingly Vulcan thing to do.

At the moment, however, T'Pol’s primary concern revolved around Charles’ continued inability to sleep properly, especially as it had begun to affect his mental faculties. Meditation had helped somewhat – he was getting just enough rest to continue to function – but it clearly wasn’t a viable substitute in the long term. Normally an observant man, Charles was failing to notice important things, such as the indications the Zeon family sheltering them had secrets they didn’t want anyone to know. T'Pol had not bothered attempting to discern what these secrets were, but the fact that Charles seemed oblivious to their existence was worrisome. Inattention was something they could ill afford.

His health had begun to suffer as well, as his exhausted body struggled to ward off the freezing temperatures. Even when he was wrapped up in blankets or sitting before a fire, Charles would shiver or sniffle. He coughed late at night when the temperature was at its coldest, and the wet, raspy sound invariably caused T'Pol to wince in sympathy. He was ill and getting more so by the day; that he no longer complained about it was an indication of how grave the situation had become.

All of which left T’Pol in something of a quandary. Having considered the problem carefully, she suspected that a proper application of neuropressure might be the solution to Charles’ sleeping problems. Following her assignment to Earth, she had spent several weeks familiarizing herself with humanity in all its disparate forms; apart from the extensive anatomical records provided by the Vulcan consulate, she had even observed several autopsies of cadavers at a teaching hospital to better comprehend how their fragile bodies functioned. In her mind’s eye, she had already mapped out which pressure points would be effective, and which of them would be useless or even potentially dangerous to his physiology. Unfortunately, neuropressure could easily cause an entire new set of problems that neither of them were prepared to deal with at the moment.

It was a most vexing dilemma.
The sound of Tucker’s breathing drew her slowly out of her meditative trance, and T’Pol took a moment to study the man seated in front of her. Despite the dark circles under his eyes and the sparse, patchy beard he was beginning to cultivate for lack of shaving tools – she was looking forward to the day when he could remove the facial hair with something akin to undue haste; it was not a flattering look for him in her opinion – Charles remained an aesthetically pleasing male. She firmly suppressed her pleasure at his posture – for a human, it was perfect, though the lack of peace on his face was an indication of his continuing difficulties, and his obvious discomfort quickly chased away any satisfaction she may have experienced. Her eyes instinctively sought out his rounded ears, so different from those of a Vulcan, and a frisson of illicit emotion washed through her, forcing her to admit, if only to herself, that a sexual relationship between them seemed inevitable.

For her, he was her only potential partner on this world given her species, although it would be a mistruth to say she would not have considered mating with him otherwise, especially since she had canceled her union with Koss and likely ended any chance she had of obtaining a marriage with another Vulcan. While Tucker had many more possibilities available given his physical similarities to the Ekosi, his alien origin would make such a liaison dangerous at best. Still, T’Pol decided wryly, it would be best to keep him isolated from native females who might seek to attract his attention. He had already displayed a decided lack of judgment in that regard, and she had a duty to protect him from harm, even if that harm was from his own poor decisions.

Tucker’s eyes began fluttering underneath their lids, a clear sign that he was emerging from the meditative trance, and T’Pol’s lips tightened. There was no longer a reason for her to vacillate – a decision needed to be made. Logic demanded that she do whatever necessary to see to Charles’ health, even if that something made her uncomfortable. The only other option would be to leave him behind, and fend for herself, and every part of her revolted at that idea. Words he had spoken forty-six days earlier (forty point two-five Terran Standard, by her calculations) whispered across her consciousness.

“Come on, T’Pol. You’ve known me for over a year now. What are the chances that I’m gonna leave you behind?”

Zero, she answered the memory with grudging affection. Loyalty was in Charles Tucker’s blood, and she could not but return the precious gift he offered her with equivalent sincerity. It was not logical, but, since joining Enterprise’s crew, she had learned that logic was not always the only solution.

Though she certainly wouldn’t tell Charles that.

“Dammit,” Tucker muttered a moment later. He opened his eyes, and T’Pol studied the fatigue still swimming within them. Her concern increased exponentially. “I can’t feel my legs,” he complained good-naturedly. The comment had become something of a tradition – each time he emerged from meditation, he repeated it, usually varying the exact phrasing slightly. In response, T’Pol quirked an eyebrow, which was her regular response.

“How do you feel?” she asked, spearing him with a look that threatened dire repercussions if he tried to deceive her. Charles sighed heavily, the sound so heartfelt it seemed to have come from his very katra itself.

“Exhausted,” he admitted, “sore, cold, pissed off, and a little hungry.” He ran his hands through his hair. “I would kill for a hot shower right now,” he continued, wincing as he tilted his neck to one side. A cacophony of pops resulted, and T’Pol gave him another tight frown. “I don’t think this is workin’, T’Pol,” Charles said, defeat in his voice. “I’m not gettin’ any better.”

“Then we proceed to alternate options,” she told him. “Remove your shirt.”
“What?”

“Vulcan science teaches us to prompt our bodies to create their own medicines,” T’Pol began to explain carefully. “There are neural nodes on your body that may be stimulated to aid in this process.” Charles’ eyes widened.

“You want to … stimulate my nodes?” he asked incredulously. There was no disguising the double entendre in his words, and T’Pol fought back a sigh of her own.

“This is not a sexual advance, Charles,” she told him flatly. It wasn’t entirely a lie – he had no way of knowing that neuropressure was one of the principal ways in which newly married Vulcan couples became familiar with one another so as to prepare for their eventual mating cycle. Because he was human, she could proceed without worry. What were the chances, after all, of such a bond even being possible between them? “You require rest,” she continued calmly, “and we have exhausted all other alternatives.”

“But … my shirt?”

“The nodes in question are three centimeters on either side of the fifth vertebrae,” T’Pol said. “I cannot access them while you are wearing your shirt.”

“Oh.” Tucker hesitated, before slowly removing the tunic. He frowned. “This is Vulcan therapy, right?” At her nod, his frown deepened. “Then how do you know it’ll work on a human body?”

“I have studied human anatomy extensively,” she admitted, hoping it would cause him to relax somewhat. To her surprise, his expression darkened instead and the muscles in his jaw tensed. He broke eye contact with her, glancing away and glowering at the floor for reasons that defied her comprehension. Despite speaking English, she sometimes longed for a universal translator while dealing with this man. “Relax,” T’Pol ordered him. “Focus on your breathing. It will facilitate the process.”

“Breathin’,” he repeated sourly. “Right.” T’Pol observed him for a moment before rising to her feet and skirting the candle so she could be at his back. She knelt smoothly.

“I have been examining the data from the books we salvaged,” she announced as she pressed her fingers into the appropriate nodes. Charles inhaled sharply at the touch of her hands, and, to T’Pol’s utter lack of surprise, a flood of alien emotion coursed through her mind. The empathic abilities of her people were a closely guarded secret, but, in that moment, she found herself wondering if the banned teachings of the Syrannites were true after all. Her research into melds after Tolaris had given her no clear insight into why he had acted as he had, and, with the ease of long practice, she carefully pushed the memory back into the small corner of her mind where she could continue to ignore it.

“D’ya got a destination in mind?” Tucker slurred, his voice thickening as the neuropressure released the proper chemicals into his system. Already, his body was relaxing, as his mind began sliding toward somnolence. “After the snows o’course.”

“There is a sparsely populated desert on the other side of this continent,” T’Pol told him. “I suggest we seek refuge there.”

“I’m not good in deserts,” Charles murmured, “but you’re the boss.” He slumped back, his entire body going limp as he slipped into unconsciousness. T’Pol froze in startled surprise as his head came to rest on her shoulder, his warmth breath caressing the side of her face. Though she had become inured to his scent over the last several weeks, the smell of his breath was oddly pleasant, informing
her that he continued to be quite fanatical about his oral hygiene, despite their dwindling supplies.

*The neuropressure worked better than I anticipated,* she mused as she carefully extricated herself from Tucker. Easily lifting him from the floor – there wasn’t even the slightest of twinges in her shoulder from the healed bullet wound – she placed him in the bed and quickly extinguished all but one of the candles. Satisfied that the door leading to the rest of the house was firmly secured, she crouched before her duffel bag and quietly eased the scanner from its place of concealment. Sliding underneath the covers alongside Charles, she activated the small display and brought up the latest results of the translation software built into the device. Another of the books she had scanned was now available, so T’Pol pulled it up and began to read. Within seconds, she was thoroughly engrossed in the political history of the Ekosians.

When Charles rolled over in his sleep and curled an arm around her waist an hour later, T’Pol made no effort to push him away. Instead, she silently acknowledged that his extra warmth was appreciated, and continued reading. Nor did she give any thought to putting any distance between them when she slid the scanner underneath her pillow and closed her eyes. The howl of the wind caused her to shiver, and she let herself relax. It had been a good day.

But that night, her nightmares returned.
He was not looking forward to what was about to happen.

A soft rumble of voices filled the large courtroom as observers filed in and took their seats, but Ambassador Soval of Vulcan paid it little mind. Seated in a boxed off section reserved for diplomatic visitors, he had a clear view of the proceedings to come and found himself frowning slightly as unease grew within him. Instinctively, his eyes sought out the defendant, and Soval could not help but to admire the almost Vulcan-like absence of expression on the features of Jonathan Archer. The captain sat alongside his counsel, back straight and eyes locked on the United Earth seal behind the presiding court officer’s raised chair. Only the captain’s white-knuckled fists resting on the table before him gave lie to the image of poise and control he was projecting.

For just under two weeks, Archer’s court martial had monopolized Soval’s time. As the representative of Vulcan, his presence had been officially requested as an observer, and he had grudgingly sat through testimony after testimony, initially feigning disinterest in the outcome while secretly longing for it to be over so he could return to grieving for the loss of Subcommander T’Pol. Even now, fifty days after her death, he struggled to accept that someone so talented and so young had been lost in such a senseless way. The broken expression that had crossed T’Les’ face for the briefest of seconds when Soval initially contacted her concerning her daughter’s demise continued to haunt him, forcing him to dramatically increase the amount of time he spent in meditation.

“It appears,” T’Les had told him flatly, visibly struggling for control, “that my husband’s faith in your ability to watch over and protect my daughter was misplaced.” She made no effort to conceal her anger at him, and it flared so brightly within her eyes that it caused him to stumble over his next words. T’Les had ended the transmission before he could recover, and had refused further attempts to contact her. Through proxies, she let it be known that she had nothing further to say to Soval, and that she would never forgive him for his failure.

Which was just as well, Soval reflected, since he would never forgive himself.

The court martial proceedings seemed to have begun almost before Archer had arrived on Earth and surrendered himself to Starfleet custody. They were entering the final day, with no further information to present and the last of the character witnesses – an illogical and completely emotional tradition; whether Archer was a “good” man or not had no bearing on his guilt or innocence – having been called to the stand the day previous. At first, Soval had paid little attention to the evidence – he had long ago decided that Archer was not ready to command a starship such as Enterprise – but at some point in the second week, the ambassador’s interest had become piqued, which forced him to begin carefully re-examining the data available. Covertly, of course, as it wouldn’t do to have Starfleet realize he was second-guessing them. And in his study of the evidence, Soval had discovered something quite unexpected.

Captain Archer had done nothing wrong.

It was a bitter admission, but one that Soval acknowledged to be incontrovertible. Following the
Paraagan disaster, Starfleet had instituted new protocols for their starship commanders in an attempt to avoid replicating that catastrophe, and Archer had obeyed every single one of those procedures to the letter. *Enterprise* had monitored the planet – Ekos, according to Lieutenant Sato’s translations – for the appropriate amount of time before the sensor mask test went forward. Lieutenant Mayweather’s duty logs showed that the helmsman had taken great care – on Captain Archer’s orders – to keep a moon between *Enterprise* and the planet at all times to prevent detection. Ship-to-shuttle communications had been kept to a minimum to avoid being intercepted, as unlikely as that would be on such a primitive world. When Subcommander T’Pol and Commander Tucker – another tragic loss for Starfleet, though Soval would never admit it publicly – had appeared to be lost, Archer had not abandoned procedure to conduct a fruitless search-and-rescue attempt. Use of the cloaked Suliban cell ship had been a logical course of action, and even the mention by one of the warring factions on the planet of a space vehicle believed to be a sighting of *Enterprise* had been a random event, never again referenced, which meant it could easily be – what was the human term? – saber rattling. Any evidence linking Archer’s actions to the outbreak of atomic war was circumstantial at best.

And yet, with each passing moment, Soval could sense the captain’s career nearing its end. For all of his negative history with the man, he was strangely ambivalent about Archer being cashiered from Starfleet, but was unable to comprehend his misgivings. Soval’s distrust of the captain was public knowledge, but even he had admitted that Archer was beginning to develop better instincts. T’Pol’s most recent reports had been littered with honest respect, and even the Vulcan ships assigned to discreetly shadow *Enterprise* had relayed their own grudging approval of the Starfleet vessel’s recent activities.

A flurry of activity heralded the arrival of the three senior officers overseeing the court martial. Taking his seat first was Admiral Gardner, followed quickly by Captains Leonard and Ramirez. Claiming a conflict of interest, Maxwell Forrest had recused himself from the trial, and Soval keenly missed the man’s presence. Gardner, who had never hid his dislike of Archer, allowed his personal biases taint much of the affair and permitted numerous assaults on the captain’s personal character that had nothing to do with the issue at hand. Fortunately, Leonard and Ramirez reined the more excessive of Archer’s detractors, and seemed to be uninterested in settling personal scores.

Nonetheless, Gardner’s role as chief magistrate did not bode well for *Enterprise*’s captain.

“Court is now back in session,” the admiral said coldly once the three had taken their seats. “Does the prosecution have anything else to add to the record before we proceed to closing arguments?”

“No, sir,” came the prompt response from the portly lieutenant leading the attack on Archer. Gardner nodded.

“And the defense?”

“My client wishes to make a statement to the court,” replied the defending lawyer, a sour expression on his face. “Against my advice,” he added with a frustrated look directed in Archer’s direction. Admiral Gardner conferred softly with the two captains on either side of him, their voices pitched too low for even Soval to make out what they said, before nodding.

“The court will hear Captain Archer’s statement,” the admiral decided. Archer rose to his feet slowly, his face resolute.

“Thank you, Admiral,” he said. “I will be brief. The decisions made over the planet we now know as Ekos were my decisions. As captain of *Enterprise*, I hold all responsibility for what occurred there and for the officers we lost.” To Soval’s surprise, Archer directed his next comments to the Vulcan
ambassadors. “I can only ask,” he said with a decided lack of emotion that had to be intentional, “that the citizens of Earth and our stellar allies will not judge Starfleet by the mistakes of one man.” Back he turned to Gardner, his hands tightly clenched at his side. “I will not plead for clemency from this court, Admiral,” Archer continued, “but I do ask that my crew not be punished for any crimes I may be found guilty of. The errors that were made were my errors, not theirs.” Without further comment, he sank back into his chair.

Like soft thunder, the murmur of many conversations rumbled through the courtroom as the observers reacted to the captain’s short speech. Soval exchanged a subtle look with his associate, Tos, who sat alongside him. An expression of abject disdain was stamped upon the other Vulcan’s face, though to a human, he would simply appear bored.

Closing arguments consumed the remainder of the day, and as Soval expected, they were emotional diatribes espousing or condemning the virtues of Jonathan Archer rather than a logical recitation of the facts. Admiral Gardner recessed the trial shortly before dusk so he and the two captains could make a judgment. As he strode from the courtroom, the admiral gave Soval a telling look that clearly communicated a desire for Vulcan input.

Soval answered with a single, grave nod.

Twenty minutes later, however, he and Tos were standing before a comm.-panel inside their office, debriefing Administrator V’Las on the progress of the trial. It was an indication of how important the humans had become in regards to stellar affairs that the leader of Vulcan was keeping such a close eye on what should have been beneath his notice.

“What do you recommend?” V’Las finally asked. Tos did not hesitate.

“We should do nothing,” he replied. “Archer’s removal from command is long overdue, and this will prove to the humans that they are not ready for deep space exploration.” Soval frowned.

“I disagree,” he said flatly. “Unlike my associate,” Soval continued, “I have examined the data regarding this incident extensively, and concluded that there is no evidence of wrongdoing on the part of Captain Archer.” Tos shot him a look of mild disdain, but Soval ignored it as he spoke.

“Allowing him to be punished for obeying the first contact protocols we encouraged Starfleet to adopt after the Paraagan disaster will set a bad precedent and likely lead to a greater number of situations that would otherwise be avoidable.” V’Las leaned back in his chair, silent as he reflected upon Soval’s words. “Archer is often insufferable in his emotionalism,” the ambassador added, “but we have no idea whom Starfleet will appoint to replace him as Enterprise’s captain.” He paused for effect. “The humans have a saying that is surprisingly apt for this situation: better the devil you know than the one you don’t.” Hiding the dismay he felt at the very idea of defending the frustrating human, Soval continued. “I recommend that Vulcan make official its support of Captain Archer’s actions in light of the evidence provided,” he pronounced.

“I concede the argument to my associate,” Tos declared abruptly. “His logic is flawless in regards to this crisis.” His eyes glinting with something dangerously close to malice, he focused his entire attention on the vid-screen and the image of V’Las. “With Subcommander T’Pol deceased, however,” he said almost eagerly, “Vulcan High Command should insist on placing an observer aboard Enterprise, someone who has great understanding of and experience with human behavior.”

“A logical request,” the administrator agreed. “This liaison will require sufficient gravitas to deal with a human as recalcitrant as Archer.”

“Ambassador Soval fits the necessary criteria,” Tos interjected smoothly. The sidelong look he gave the ambassador reminded Soval of a le-matya pouncing upon its prey. “He has had many years to
cultivate a relationship with the members of Starfleet, and is well known among their officers.”

“May I remind my associate that my … relationship with Captain Archer has been antagonistic at best?” Soval asked, his temper rising though the only evidence of it was a subtle flaring of his nostrils. He had long known that Tos desired his position as head of the Vulcan consulate on Earth, but had clearly underestimated the younger male’s ambition. It was yet another subtle reminder of how Vulcan had changed over the decades, more often than not for the worse.

“Yet you are willing to come to his defense when logic demands it,” Tos retorted. “Unlike Subcommander T’Pol,” he added smoothly, “you are unlikely to be corrupted by human emotion and will be better able to reign in his illogical impulses.”

“I concur,” V’Las said with approval glinting in his eyes. “This will solve many of our difficulties with the humans. See to it at once.” His image vanished as he terminated the transmission, and Soval turned cold eyes upon his fellow ambassador who was barely able to conceal his glee.

“I will speak with Admiral Forrest,” Tos offered, his lips turned upward slightly in an expression of delight that had no place upon Vulcan features. “And I am sure that you desire to coordinate with Captain Archer in regards to your new assignment.” He turned away and walked from the office.

Alone, Soval collapsed in the nearest chair. Frustration bubbled up within his stomach, but he firmly suppressed any sign of it from showing. He inhaled deeply, drawing the oxygen into his lungs where he held it for a long count of six before blowing the breath – and his rampant emotions – out through his mouth. It would have to do until he reached his quarters and the candles within.

If he was going to face Jonathan Archer today, Soval needed to meditate first.
60 Earth days have passed since chapter 1.

The sun glinted overhead, bathing the earth below with warmth and life that burned away the last remnants of early morning dew. A pleasantly cool breeze rolled out of the north, carrying with it the distinct smell of freshly mowed grass, and the sky was a pure, clear blue that seemed to stretch on forever. For June in Ohio, the day was quite comfortable, not too hot or too cold, and the lack of clouds for as far as the eye could see promised that the night would be equally lovely.

In the distance, a cheerful tune could be heard, and Jonathan Archer continued his slow walk toward the source of the music. Porthos was several steps ahead of him, ears twitching as he took in the unfamiliar sights, sounds, and scents. Every few moments, the beagle would dart forward until his leash would not allow him to go any further. Most times, the dog would then pause and give Archer an intent look, as if to say ‘hurry up,’ but on at least two occasions, Porthos rushed back to join his master, seemingly intent on tripping Jon with the leash.

The sidewalk led them closer to the music, now clearly identifiable as ancient jazz tunes, and Jon’s steps faltered as he finally caught sight of their destination. A fairly new-looking complex dominating the entire block, the Cochrane Academy was one of the region’s most prestigious high schools in the entire state, despite only having been in existence for fifteen years. Catering to the top percentile of students in the region, it had been Elizabeth Cutler’s alma mater.

And now, it was the site of her long-overdue memorial service.

Over a month had passed since her tragic but heroic death – forty days exactly, to be precise – and Starfleet bureaucracy had finally allowed her body to be removed from stasis and returned to her grieving parents. When Jon had learned of the planned service, he had contacted the Cutlers and requested permission to attend. At first, he had feared they would blame him for their daughter’s death – he blamed himself, after all – and had prepared himself for justly deserved recriminations from them. Instead, her parents had told him they were glad he could make it, especially since the late Elizabeth had spoken so glowingly about her commanding officer in the infrequent letters she sent.

That in and of itself nearly made Jon weep.

He was still coming to grips with his unexpected exoneration for the incident that claimed Trip and T’Pol’s lives, no matter how many times he went over the data himself. The official support of his actions at Ekos by the Vulcan High Command occasionally caused him to consider pinching himself, though Archer knew it had only been politics, especially after Admiral Forrest announced the identity of the new “diplomatic and liaison” officer who would be shipping out with Enterprise when she left Earth again. Part of Jon was openly aghast at the idea of Ambassador Soval being aboard the NX-01 for longer than a few days, although many of his concerns were eased by the grumpy Vulcan’s utter lack of bridge rank or authority, not to mention Soval’s evident dislike of the idea himself. He was to be an ‘advisor,’ nothing more, though Archer knew that was a fancy way of saying ‘minder.’ Given their many disagreements in the past, Jon had little doubt that he had many personality clashes and arguments to look forward to.
Still, as a replacement for Subcommander T’Pol, Soval was certainly no improvement.

“Captain!” the voice of Lieutenant Commander Reed brought Jon back to the present and he gave the approaching armoury officer a nod of greeting. Archer wasn’t surprised to see the other man – through the grapevine, he had heard that the crew of Enterprise was going to be attending en masse to pay their respects for their fallen comrade who had died trying to protect an innocent – but he was taken aback by the obnoxious, almost Trip-like shirt that Reed was wearing.

Clearly, Malcolm had taken to heart the Cutlers’ insistence that this gathering be treated as a celebration of their daughter’s life rather than a wake.

“Glad you could make it, sir,” Reed said as he approached. Porthos barked several times and lunged forward to offer his own eager greetings to the armoury officer.

“Meeting went longer than I expected it to,” Jon replied with a forced smile as Reed knelt awkwardly to pet the beagle. “Malcolm,” he said, causing the lieutenant commander to look up. “Admiral Forrest rejected my appeal,” Archer revealed grimly. “When we ship out next week, Commander Hernandez will be my first officer.”

“Yes, sir.” The armoury officer shrugged, as if the implied insult in his professionalism by Starfleet Command didn’t bother him, but Jon could see well hidden anger in the other man’s eyes.

“It’s nothing personal, Malcolm,” he rushed to explain. “Command is grooming her to take over the Challenger when she launches in two years and want her to get a little more experience under her belt.”

“And they think I’m not qualified,” Reed guessed, rising to his feet as he spoke. They began walking toward the school slowly as they continued their conversation.

“If they think that,” Archer said with a wry smile, “then they’re more foolish than we thought.” He clapped a hand on Reed’s shoulder. “You’ll still be third-in-command,” he added, “and I’ll be relying on you more than ever since Erika is so … green.”

“You can count on me, sir.” Malcolm snorted in amusement. “I guess it was too much to ask,” he said, “expecting to get full commander so soon after my last promotion.” Shaking his head, he added, “The officer corps would have gone ballistic.”

“They still might when you make commander a year or so from now,” Jon promised. The brightening of Reed’s expression was wonderful to behold, and instantly made Archer wonder if this was the first time since Trip’s death two months earlier that the armoury officer hadn’t looked like he had swallowed a rock.

“Any news on Commander Hess?” Reed asked abruptly, his tone pitched low. Jon’s good mood faded.

“Starfleet Command has transferred her back to Earth,” he replied. “Officially, it’s a lateral promotion. She’ll be taking over from Kelby aboard the Columbia.” Malcolm nodded.

“And unofficially?”

“PTSD,” Jon said sadly. “Phlox told me that it’s a wonder we haven’t had more members of the crew react like that, what with the amount of stress we’ve been under since Enterprise launched.” He shook his head. “I wish there was more I could do for her,” he admitted, “but the doctors insist that this transfer is necessary for her recovery.”
“She’ll be missed,” Malcolm declared.

“Who will?” a feminine voice asked. Jon glanced to the source – an approaching young woman with strong features and a familiar-sounding accent – and his breath caught slightly in surprise.

“Hello, Lizzie,” he said as Elizabeth Tucker drew closer. She smiled.

“Hello, Jon.” There was no anger in her voice or expression, only a visible sadness that Archer recognized all too well. The youngest Tucker sibling stepped around the Reed-Porthos obstruction – the beagle was once more trying to get the armoury officer to pay attention to him and Malcolm didn’t seem to know how to react – and wrapped her arms around Jon in a friendly hug. “You’ve looked better,” she commented wryly.

“Felt better too,” Archer replied. She gave him an understanding look. “How are your parents?” he asked.

“Taking it one day atta time,” Lizzie replied. “Dad’s still pretty torn up,” she continued, her eyes watering slightly, “but nobody blames you.” She blinked. “Well, nobody but Melissa,” Lizzie added in reference to Trip’s older sister, “and you know how she is.”

“I do,” Jon said. Many had been the times that Trip regaled him of the eldest Tucker sibling’s radical politics and her insistence that Starfleet was Earth’s new imperialism cloaked in the guise of exploration. “And how are you doing?”

“As well as can be expected,” she answered. “I try to keep busy so I don’t have to think about it.” She watched with an amused smile as Porthos continued pawing at Malcolm’s leg. “Trip wouldn’t want me to waste my life grievin’ for him, especially since he died doin’ something he loved.” When the beagle whined loudly and piteously at Reed, she laughed. “Scratch him behind the ears, Mal,” she instructed. The armoury officer gave her a sour look that seemed far more familiar than Archer expected.

“You two know each other?” he asked. Once again, Lizzie laughed.

“Yep,” she said. “Seems my idiot brother asked Mister Reed here to look after me if something ever happened to him.”

“We were drunk at the time,” Malcolm said stiffly, although he knelt to scratch Porthos’ ears as instructed. “And in my defense,” he added, “I also asked him to look after my sister if duty called.” Lizzie grunted at the nonchalance in Reed’s reference to death, but Jon nodded in understanding. For men and women of their calling, dying in the line of duty was always a possibility, and no one knew when it would happen or how. Trip’s death – and T’Pol’s – was ample evidence of that.

“We ran into each other last week when I was in San Francisco bein’ wooed by Starfleet Command,” Lizzie said, crouching to take over the petting of Porthos.

“I understand congratulations are in order,” Jon said, referencing Command’s hiring of Lizzie to design a new memorial in honor of the members of Starfleet who had died over the years. It was primarily a political move, since having Trip’s sister on the project would be fantastic public relations in the wake of the tragedy, but having seen some of her past work, Archer knew she was up for the task.

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“Thank you,” she replied. “That’s why I’m here, actually. I wanted to get some insight into who this Elizabeth Cutler was.” She smirked. “I’ve even talked your stuffy admirals into arrangin’ a fact-findin’ tour of Vulcan. I’d love to incorporate some of their architecture into my design.”
“T’Pol would like that, I think,” Jon said.

“I hope so,” Lizzie murmured. “I love Trip,” she added, “but I don’t think he’d approve if I turned somethin’ like this into a shrine to his memory.” The sadness resurfaced in her eyes. “I’m not the only one who’s lost a loved one,” she said.

“Wherever he is right now,” Jon said, “I’m sure he’d approve.”

“Captain Archer!” Rudolph – ‘call me Rudy’ – Cutler called out in greeting as they drew closer to the entrance of the high school gym. His eyes were bright and shiny with a mixture of grief and contentment, as if he had reached some sort of equilibrium over the recent tragedy afforded to his family. “I’m glad you could make it,” Rudy said.

“Call me Jon,” Archer replied as he offered his hand. “I just wish it were under better circumstances.” They shook – Rudy had a strong grip – and Jon gestured to two people with him. “My armoury officer, Malcolm Reed, and Elizabeth Tucker.”

“An honor, sir,” Reed said. He held himself erect and straight. “I’m sorry I failed your daughter, sir,” the Brit began, but Cutler waved it off.

“We’re here to celebrate Liz’s life,” Rudy interrupted, “not mourn how she passed.” He blinked away several tears as he continued. “Your Admiral Forrest let us read the mission report you filed, Commander Reed,” the older man said, “and my wife and I know you couldn’t have done more than you did.” Wiping away an errant tear, Cutler gave Lizzie a glance. “Tucker?” he asked. “As in Commander Tucker?”

“He was my brother,” Lizzie replied softly. The two gave each other a look that carried with it understanding and shared pain. Rudy’s lower lip trembled slightly as he fought to control his emotions, and Jon could see an identical reaction on the face of Trip’s sister. She took a half step closer to Malcolm, and the armoury officer shot a ‘what do I do now?’ look in Archer’s direction.

“Come in,” Rudy said before Jon could offer any suggestions – or decide if he should offer any – and preceded them into the bustling gym where the rest of Elizabeth Cutler’s family waited. Malcolm and Lizzie followed him, the lieutenant commander hesitantly giving the youngest Tucker sibling a quick, supportive hug. Breathing deeply, Archer pushed down his own grief, knowing that he needed to be strong for everyone inside. He would be their rock, no matter how difficult it may be personally, and would gladly do whatever necessary if it would make them feel better in this time of crisis.

And then, he stepped into the gym.
An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 82 days (71.75 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

The bolt would not come loose.

Kneeling alongside the ATV, Trip Tucker glowered at the stubborn engine housing and once more wished for his old tools. He would given nearly anything for a single hyperspanner right now, or even a couple of his dad’s antique socket wrenches, anything that would work better than the antiquated pieces of junk Aron had lent him. At the moment, the so-called tools he had were really only good for being used as hammers.

“You need this,” Urri said, offering an extensor attachment to the subpar wrench Trip was using. It took an extra half second for Tucker to comprehend exactly what the younger man had just said, but the fact he succeeded caused Trip to smile. In the month since T’Pol began the neuropressure treatments and sleep finally ceased eluding him, understanding of the local language had come much easier. He wasn’t sure if it was some Vulcan mojo that T’Pol had done to him, or if it was the fact that he was getting a good night’s sleep, but whatever the reason, the rural family no longer treated him like their slack-jawed idiot cousin who was barely capable of carrying firewood without tripping over his own drool.

“You thank,” Trip responded in Ekosi before grimacing at once again mixing the words up. Urri grinned, obviously recognizing what he meant. “Thank you,” Tucker said, this time getting it right. He turned back to study the mostly exposed engine of the three-wheeled vehicle.

It had come as something of a surprise to learn that Aron and Daveed had backtracked the route Trip and T’Pol had taken, but an even greater one when the Zeon patriarch revealed that they had retrieved the trike from where it had been abandoned. Covered with ice and in desperate need of repairs thanks to hard use and exposure to the remorseless elements, it was nonetheless salvageable, providing they could locate fuel or Trip could jury-rig some sort of solar battery array (without revealing what he was doing to the locals, of course.) When pressed for an explanation about why he retrieved the ATV, Aron had calmly pointed out that the two refugees would eventually need transport once the winter broke.

Trip got the hint.

The first thing he did was familiarize himself with the basics of the trike’s engine. He was quite astounded at the similarities between it and the ancient jet ski that had been in his family for four generations, a vehicle that Trip had spent his misspent youth tearing down and rebuilding in an attempt to make it faster, more maneuverable, and far more dangerous to use. The drive system on the trike was almost completely foreign, but the general principles of everything else were pretty much identical to every motorcycle he had ever played around with in high school, which caused him to marvel at what T’Pol had called parallel development.

“You are quite good at this,” Urri remarked, carefully pronouncing the words while he watched Trip trace the fuel lines of the trike along the unnecessarily circuitous route they took from the tank. “Is
“No and yes,” Trip replied cautiously. T’Pol’s warning that the Zeon family appeared to be concealing some secret gave him pause, and he glanced at the young man beside him. By human reckoning, Urri couldn’t be more than twenty-five, but had an aged wisdom to his eyes that was easily twice that. Stocky but not fat, the boy carried himself with an easy grace that reminded Trip of the way Malcolm walked. Now that Trip thought about it, every member of the family had a similar style of movement, as if they were coiled springs, always poised to jump into action, though whether it was to fight or run, Tucker didn’t quite know. Whatever it was, it lent credence to T’Pol’s concerns.

“And you?” Trip asked in an attempt to change the subject. “You a farmer want to be like your father?” he queried, sighing at the smirk Urri gave him. He tried again … and screwed it up once more. “Know what I mean you did.” Dammit, Tucker growled to himself, I’m starting to talk like Yoda.

“I did,” Urri confirmed, “and yes, I wish to follow in the footsteps of my father.” Trip nodded, but kept his eyes on the ATV engine. He couldn’t help but to notice that the young man’s answer could be taken many ways. “What is that?” the Zeon man asked, pointing to the now exposed engine.

“Carburetor,” Trip answered automatically in English. At Urri’s blank look, Tucker spent a moment trying to formulate an explanation in his mind that would make sense to someone with limited mechanical understanding or knowledge. “Controls air and fuel,” he said in Ekosi, before frowning. That was entirely too vague. “Makes engine run properly.” Not much better, but it’d have to do.

“Ah.” Urri was silent for a moment. “Do you and Tupol wish to have children?” he asked. At Trip’s shocked, sidelong glance, he held up his hands. “Apologies. Erela wished me to ask.”

“Why?”

“She is young,” the young man replied, “and wonders why you do not act like love-mates.” Urri smiled, but it barely touched his eyes. “Erela thinks you are not wed-bond,” he added, “and that you are hiding a truth from us.”

As soon as Trip mentally translated the statement, he frowned. Forcing himself to keep his expression as neutral as he could manage, he replaced the tools in the metal box and pulled the protective tarp over the trike before slowly rising to his feet. Urri stood with him, a wary expression on his face, and waited calmly.

“Before we came here,” Trip said very carefully, “she was … hurt by a man.” It wasn’t that much of a stretch; though she thought she’d concealed it from him, Tucker had figured out weeks ago that the source of her nightmares revolved around whatever it was those Suliban bastards did to her months ago while Captain Archer was off in the future with Daniels. He also suspected that something bad had happened with the Vulcan, Tolaris, though he had no real proof or idea what. Archer knew, of course. That was the only explanation for some of the captain’s statements to ‘go easy’ on her after both incidents, and the bitter taste of jealousy burned within Trip’s belly. It rankled that she trusted the captain enough to tell him, but wouldn’t confide anything to Tucker. On the heels of that emotion, however, came a sense of self-loathing so intense that Trip nearly groaned. She had been assaulted, for God’s sake, and here he was whining over the fact that she didn’t want to talk about it. How pathetic can you be, Tucker? he asked himself, as guilt swelled. He knew it showed on his face, but it was already too late to try and hide what he was thinking. It was probably just as well that he wasn’t aboard Enterprise anymore, though, because if he ever encountered either of those two pieces of crap, he was just as likely to shoot them as look at them.
And use of the stun setting would be optional.

“Apologies, again,” Urri said. He appeared embarrassed, almost downcast. “This is why she does not like to be touched?”

“A private woman she is,” Trip replied. He sighed and wondered how long it would be before he stopping messing up the syntax. At least I know what they’re saying now, he reflected. “Night comes,” he said. “Inside we go?”

The trip from the barn to the main house was as treacherous as ever, made more so by the thick layer of ice that covered the stone walkway and the unbalanced stack of wood in his arms. Four nights earlier, the snows had slowed and the sun peeked out from behind the clouds for most of the day, providing just enough warmth to melt some of the surface powder and turn it into filthy slush. The very next morning, however, another cold snap froze the entire mess all over again. A sleet storm had accompanied the second wave of cold, and Trip found himself eagerly looking forward to that desert T’Pol had located. He’d had enough of freezing temperatures to last a lifetime.

Once inside the house, he and Urri stacked the firewood they’d carried in the proper place and shucked their coats. The feel of T’Pol’s eyes on him – how was it, he wondered, that he was always able to tell it was her? – caused Trip to tense slightly, and he gave the large living area a quick glance to find her. Seated at the table in the dining area with the other females, the Vulcan woman gave a slight nod to his subtle head jerk toward the attic room that had become theirs. She politely excused herself, earning curious looks from both Dena and Erela, before following Tucker up the stairs. Without being asked, she secured the door behind her once they were inside.

“Number Two Son tried to interrogate me in the barn,” Trip said in English without preamble. The absence of proper names was intentional to avoid raising suspicion, and had been one of her suggestions. “Seems Baby Girl was curious why we’re not makin’ out in the closet every chance we get.” T’Pol raised an eyebrow at the idiom, but clearly comprehended his meaning.

“How did you respond?” she asked, and Trip sat down on the bed, rolling his tongue along the inside of his mouth as he tried to determine how to answer her question.

“I told him,” he replied slowly, “that you were assaulted by someone before we came here. I’m pretty sure he took that to mean rape.”

“A believable story,” T’Pol said, “especially in a time of war.” Trip hesitated before deciding to go for broke.

“It’s also kinda true, isn’t it?”

T’Pol flinched. At any other time, it would have been barely noticeable, but since she had begun training him in neuropressure, Trip had become fairly proficient at reading her body language. Still, had he not been watching her for signs of distress, he suspected he would have missed the telltale tightening of her muscles.

“Look,” he said carefully, “I’m not askin’ you to tell me any secrets you don’t want to, T’Pol, but you’ve been downright squirrely the last two or three weeks and I’m worried.”

“Squirrely?” the Vulcan repeated, hyper-enunciating the word.

“It means fidgety, off-center, restless.” He scratched the hated beard and longed for a good electric razor. “And don’t change the subject.”

“I was not changing the subject,” T’Pol retorted, a faint hint of annoyance creeping into her words.
“I was merely seeking clarification over an expression I was unfamiliar with.”

“You were tryin’ to change the subject ‘cause I’m right,” Trip said. He locked gazes with her and crossed his arms. “For the last three weeks, you’ve been telling me we’ve gotta trust each other unilaterally if we’re gonna survive,” he added, “and I’m not tryin’ to stick my nose in your business.” When she said nothing, he pressed on. “But I am gettin’ worried about you, T’Pol. It’s can’t be right that you’re having nightmares every night, and I want to help in whatever way you’ll let me.” The muscles in her jaw tightened, and Tucker imagined that he could hear her molars grinding together, but he did not look away. Finally, after several long seconds, she did something unexpected.

T’Pol sighed.

“Your logic is flawless, Charles,” she said softly, breaking eye contact and looking away.

“Did you just give me a compliment?” he asked with a smile, hoping to lighten the mood. To his delight, she returned her eyes to his, one eyebrow quirked slightly and an almost teasing sparkle in her hazel orbs.

“It has been a long day,” she admitted, “and I am in need of meditation, so a compliment may have slipped out.” Trip laughed – he couldn’t stop himself – and wondered again whether all Vulcans were as funny as T’Pol, or if she was simply a wonderful exception. For a brief second, he tried to imagine Soval telling a joke, but quickly abandoned the attempt.

“I don’t wanna pry,” he said as T’Pol carefully sat down next to him, “and I’m not tryin’ to offend.” He fought the urge to reach out, to enfold her in a hug like he would if she were a human woman. The last thing he needed right now was for her to think he was putting the moves on her. “I just want to help.”

“Nam-to ri thrap wilat nem-tor rim,” she murmured in her native tongue. Trip flashed her a grin.

“There is no offense where none is taken,” he translated easily. T’Pol gave him a wide-eyed look of open surprise. “I borrowed the captain’s book,” Trip said, hoping she wouldn’t notice the wince that accompanied the admission. He well remembered the stab of envy that had lanced through him upon learning that she had given Archer a gift. “Just in case they might come in handy some day,” he added. When she said nothing, Trip spoke once more. “If you ever need to talk,” he said, “I’m all ears.”

“I am not human, Charles,” T’Pol said softly long seconds later. “I do not talk about my feelings.” Scorn was heaped upon the last word, but it didn’t seem to be directed at him. “Your concern is appreciated, but additional meditation and mental reflection will allow me to properly resolve any issues I may have regarding Tolaris.” Another piece of the puzzle fell into place and Trip silently hoped it wasn’t uncivilized to actively hate a fellow sentient.

No, scratch that. He didn’t care if it was uncivilized or not.

“And Silik?” he asked cautiously. She gave him another mildly surprised look before nodding tightly.

“Him as well.” T’Pol rose to her feet gracefully. “We should return downstairs and join our benefactors.” At the doorway, she hesitated. “There are additional neuropressure postures and techniques that might be of assistance in facilitating my recovery,” she said hesitantly, “but they are … you might consider them … intimate.” Trip swallowed and pushed down vibrant mental images that had no place in this conversation.
“If they’ll help you,” he replied, swallowing the urge to request a definition of ‘intimate,’ “then I’ll do whatever you need me to.” He forced a smile on his face. “Just … just give me some warning beforehand, okay?” She nodded, a purely human gesture, and he wondered if she was even aware of doing it.

“Thank you, Charles,” T’Pol said, the tension in her shoulders easing as she unbarred the attic door.

“Can’t you call me Trip?” he asked. He fell into step behind her and followed her down the stairs.

“No.”

“Please?”

“Begging is unattractive, Charles,” T’Pol countered. “If you can get through an entire neuropressure session without falling asleep,” she added, “I shall consider it.”

“Really?” Trip asked gleefully.

“No.”
Blinking against the dim light beginning to peek through the single window in the attic room, T'Pol slowly rolled to a seated position, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed and placing her feet on the cold wood floor. She barely restrained a shiver at the uncomfortable sensation, and quickly began pulling on her clothes, starting with the scratchy socks Dena had provided her weeks earlier. Not for the first time, she longed for the insulated white uniform she had worn at the beginning of this mission, and actually glanced at the carefully packed duffel bag where the thermal-lined suit was currently concealed. Donning it would be too risky, however, and she instead drew on a pair of poorly fitting pants, shivering the entire time.

None of the members of the Zeon family were awake as she made her way down the stairs, which only served to confirm T'Pol’s growing suspicion that they were concealing the truth of their origins. From what she knew about subsistence agrarian societies, a work day for a homestead such as this one should begin prior to dawn and last well into the night. There were too many unanswered questions involving these people, and T’Pol had little doubt that they knew her to be suspicious of them.

After searching the main floor of the home and not finding Charles, T'Pol pulled on a thick coat – from the smell, it normally belonged to Erela – and carefully opened the back door. Fresh footprints in the virgin snow led directly to the barn, and as she paused to make sure the head wrap concealing her ears was still secure, T’Pol could detect the sounds of activity within the structure. Sighing – and silently chastising herself for the lapse of control – she stepped out of the house and walked toward the barn, taking care to place her feet in the footprints already present.

Charles was hard at work over the three-wheeled vehicle when she entered the large structure, though T’Pol initially could not see what he was doing. A pair of foul-smelling oil lanterns hung on hooks over his head, the small flames within flickering and casting dancing shadows across the floor. As she examined his body language, she heard a distinctive whine– the discharge of a phase pistol – followed promptly by the sound of a file being used against metal. Pausing at the entranceway, she glanced quickly around to reassure herself that they were alone before securing the door.

“I know what you’re gonna say,” Tucker said, his voice muffled by cold weather gear and his awkward position over the ATV, “but I made sure nobody would catch me.”

“I caught you,” T'Pol retorted as she drew closer to her companion. He glanced up at her but didn’t make eye contact.

“Yeah, but you don’t count,” he said before gesturing to the ground. There, hidden by the off-road vehicle’s bulk, was her scanner. “I programmed it to warn me of approachin’ life signs within fifty meters so I knew you were comin’,” Charles continued. He lifted the phase pistol and aimed it at the engine casing he was working on. A coherent stream of light flashed out, superheating the metal.

An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 90 days (78.75 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.
Comprehension dawned instantly: he was using the weapon as a welding torch. “Since you’re here,” he said, “you can lend me a hand. It’s slow going since I don’t have goggles.”

“I do not require eye protection,” T’Pol declared as she bent over the frame to take the pistol from him. “My species have a second set of inner eyelids,” she revealed calmly, “that helps shield our eyes from the harsh sunlight on Vulcan.”

“Damn,” Charles grumbled as he passed the weapon-turned-welder over to her. “Wish I’d known that on Enterprise. Coulda used it a couple of times.” He was silent as T’Pol worked, and she could feel the tension radiating off of him as he looked everywhere but at her. She should not have been surprised – last night had been unbelievably awkward.

“What are you hoping to accomplish with these repairs?” T’Pol asked in an attempt to direct his thoughts away from the events of seven hours earlier.

“Increase the fuel efficiency for starters,” Charles said. “I think I can double or maybe even triple how far we can get on a liter of gasoline,” he added. “I’ve also been thinkin’ about how we can eliminate the need for liquid propellant entirely.” He rolled his tongue around inside his mouth. “You ever heard of a Stirling engine?”

“Should I have?”

“It’s a heat engine that uses a fixed amount of gas sealed inside the engine,” he said. “Since you have a fixed amount of gas inside a fixed volume of space, raisin’ the temperature of the gas increases the pressure.”

“And decreasing the volume of space available increases the temperature of the gas,” T’Pol finished. “Yes, I am familiar with it, though not by that name,” she added, not bothering to point out that Vulcan had developed an engine based on those principles while humans were still killing one another with swords and clubs. “You are considering rebuilding this engine in that fashion?”

“Not with the tools we’ve got here, no.” He frowned. “Ideally, I’d like to build some solar collectors, eliminate the need for gasoline entirely, but doin’ that means I’m gonna have to remember some things I learned back in grade school and haven’t used since then.” He leaned forward, nodded, and then touched her hand to let her know that she could cease welding. At the admittedly brief touch, a flood of alien emotions coursed through her mind, and T’Pol frowned tightly.

Clearly, her mental shields needed work.

A flash of embarrassment crossed Charles’ face, and he quickly jerked his hand away as if it had been burned. He shifted a half-step away from her, once again focusing so resolutely upon the exposed engine components that it was impossible for T’Pol to not realize he was trying to avoid her eyes. Her frown deepened – he could not have sensed her mind, could he? Humans weren’t empathic or telepathic. More likely, she realized, he was remembering the unexpected result of last night’s neuropressure session.

As their sessions progressed to more advanced postures intended to aid her recovery from the mental abuses she’d suffered at the hands of Silik and Tolaris, T’Pol had become increasingly aware of Charles’ discomfort. It was to be expected – to a Terran, many of the pressure points that needed to be stimulated were located in or around the erogenous zones of human bodies, a fact she tried to impress upon him as often as possible. Charles’ subconscious reacted to her proximity and relative nudity exactly as his biology intended it to, however, and T’Pol found that the potency of his scent while he was aroused had an unexpectedly similar effect upon her. Every bit of her mental fortitude was required to prevent him from discovering this fact, especially when their light empathic
connection during the neuropressure revealed to her that he was experiencing an overpowering sense of disgust at his base reaction. By keeping the sessions as clinical as possible, she hoped to ease his awkwardness. Last night, however, her every effort in that regard proved to be for naught.

Since joining the Zeon family, they had discovered that not all of the Ekosi food sat well with them, an understandable fact given that there were likely trillions of bacteria in every gram of sustenance that their bodies had never before faced. To combat this, T’Pol had begun instructing Charles in neuropressure techniques intended to aid digestion. These particular pressure points were located near the base of the spine and, coupled with the previous stimulation of other neural nodes, had a completely unexpected result on his body.

Without warning, Charles had ejaculated.

It was difficult to say which of them was more surprised – or embarrassed, though T’Pol would never admit experiencing such a thing – as Tucker’s body accelerated into a rapid and intense orgasm. To her silent shock, T’Pol had experienced a reciprocal rush of pleasurable sensation, as if she were feeling psychic feedback from his body, something she knew to be categorically impossible; it was nowhere near as potent as what affected Charles, but was no less unforeseen. His face crimson with mortification, Tucker had quickly retreated from the attic room the moment he was able to recover, pausing only long enough to grab a change of clothes to replace his soiled underwear. When he finally returned several hours later, T’Pol had feigned being asleep to avoid further upsetting him, even as she tried to comprehend why his body had responded to neuropressure in that manner.

Or why her body had reacted the way it did.

“I am familiar with numerous types of solar-powered systems,” T’Pol said in response to his last comment. “Vulcan makes extensive use of such self-renewing energy sources.”

“Yeah, I figured as much.” Charles bit his lower lip as he began testing the efficacy of their weld job. “You seen anything like paper in their house?” he asked. “I’ve looked – discreetly, of course – but haven’t seen anything we could use to draw the plans on.” T’Pol’s eyes narrowed, and she frowned.

“They have no paper products whatsoever in their home,” she said. Charles gave her a questioning look, but she continued before he could speak. “There should be some sort of paper product present,” T’Pol remarked, “especially given this culture’s level of technology.”

“Like a Bible,” Tucker offered, “or their equivalent.”

“Correct.” She was silent for a moment as she examined their options and found them to be distressingly few. “Charles,” she said, drawing his attention by her very tone, “we should begin preparing to make an immediate escape, regardless of the weather conditions.”

“Escape?” he repeated. “You make it sound like we’re prisoners.”

“Too many variables about this family do not add up.” T’Pol argued. “We could be in greater danger than we know.” She pursed her lips. “The best prison is one where the captives are unaware that they have been incarcerated.” Tucker abandoned whatever it was he was attempting to do and straightened, his eyes on her.

“You sound like you’re speakin’ from experience,” he ventured. T’Pol hesitated for a moment, wondering if the revelation she was preparing to give him would change his opinion of her before nodding tightly.
“I served for several years with the Ministry of Intelligence,” she admitted hesitantly. Charles’ eyes widened.

“You were a spy?” he asked.

“Hardly,” T’Pol replied. “My primary task was fugitive retrieval.” Once again, his reaction came as a surprise to her.

“A bounty hunter?” Tucker exclaimed incredulously, his eyes glinting with mirth and what looked to be excitement. “That is so … neat!”

T’Pol blinked. There were times – quite often, actually – when she doubted she would ever understand this man. She had anticipated the confession to cause him some angst, perhaps even damaging the level of trust between them as logic would dictate he suspect she had acted as an intelligence agent while serving aboard Enterprise, reporting back to the Ministry about the capabilities of her human crewmates. Instead, he reacted with something akin to childlike glee.

“Did your boss ever tell you no disintegrations?” he asked with a broad grin, his voice deepening with the final two words of his question as if he were quoting something.

“This is not a laughing matter, Charles,” T’Pol told him flatly. He sobered almost instantly to her silent relief. “We need to begin making plans.”

“All right,” he said. “Tell me what to do.”

So she did.
Hoshi: Briefing Observations

Chapter Notes

An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 87 Earth days have passed since chapter 1.

The tension in the conference room was thick enough to cut with a knife.

From where she sat at the far end of the long, narrow table, Lieutenant Hoshi Sato was able to easily see the faces of *Enterprise*'s command staff with the notable exception of Travis who was seated directly to her right. With little to offer during these early morning status briefings once her initial report had been given, she instead turned her attention to watching the usual personality conflict play out. Months ago, before Ekos and the tragedy that had taken place there, she had actually enjoyed these moments as they always seemed to result in good-natured disputes between Commander Tucker and Subcommander T'Pol over whatever happened to be on the docket that day. More often than not, Captain Archer would let their lively arguments continue longer than was entirely necessary, a glint in his eyes always revealing that he took great pleasure in refereeing the debates.

Today, however, the captain was certainly not enjoying himself.

“The Alvera trees that surround the Hall of Diplomacy are considered sacred to the Kreetassans,” Ambassador Soval was saying, his words and his unblinking gaze directed at Archer. “It is essential that you do not get closer than two meters to these trees.”

“Why would they consider trees sacred?” Commander Hernandez asked, curiosity written upon her face. She was seated next to the Vulcan ambassador, directly across from Malcolm and to the left of Captain Archer. As was normal for her since her assignment to *Enterprise*, the commander avoided making eye contact with either the captain or Lieutenant Commander Reed, though Hoshi had long since deduced it was for different reasons. To someone trained in deciphering body language, it was obvious that Hernandez and the captain had a history, one that made both of them uncomfortable which meant it had to be sexual in nature. With Malcolm, however, it was something else, a sense of jealousy or discomfort that Hoshi believed to be rooted in the new first officer’s annoyance that Archer persistently turned to the armoury officer for advice rather than Hernandez, or that Reed’s suggestions were correct more often than not.

“The tradition dates back to First Contact between the Kreetassans and the Tellarite Consortium,” Soval answered, automatically lapsing into a lecturing tone that prompted Hoshi to tune out what he actually said. She wasn’t missing anything – unlike Hernandez who was still learning the ropes of her new job, Sato had plenty of spare time at her disposal when she was off duty, so she’d already committed to memory the pertinent facts about the Kreetassans that directly affected her department.

Out of the corner of her eye, Hoshi could see Captain Archer grimace and look down at the PADD in front of him so he could focus on something other than the Vulcan ambassador. The antipathy between the two men was almost always present, but they made a calculated effort to rein it in while around other members of the crew. Hoshi wasn’t sure if their mutual dislike of the situation they found themselves in had resulted in that unspoken pact, or if it was something else entirely, but in the fourteen days since *Enterprise* left Earth, Archer and Soval had somehow developed a way to interact that bordered on professional.
It still didn’t mean they liked each other, though.

Uninterested in the history lesson regarding the Kreetassans, Hoshi left her eyes drift around the table so she could study her fellow officers. Only Hernandez, Doctor Phlox and Ensign Ling actually seemed interested in the ambassador’s explanation, though the other four – Archer, Reed, Lieutenant Commander Kelby, and Travis – were at least making the effort to appear like they were listening. Reed was the hardest to read, with only the tightness of his lips revealing his utter disinterest in the subject matter, but Kelby appeared openly bored. Or maybe that was tired – he was still settling in as the chief engineer and Hoshi doubted he’d had a full night’s rest in three weeks.

“We have interacted with them before, Ambassador,” the captain said, interrupting Soval.

“And had it not been for Lieutenant Mayweather’s quick thinking,” the Vulcan retorted, “you might have caused a diplomatic incident because of your lack of proper preparation.” Travis squirmed slightly at the compliment, and Hoshi shot him a quick smirk. For reasons that continued to elude understanding, the Boomer had been constantly singled out for praise by Soval – in his Vulcany way, of course, which was more often than not veiled within sarcastic jibes directed at the captain. Not to be outdone, Archer had started taking Mayweather under his wing, giving him more important responsibilities and duties.

Needless to say, the sudden attention was driving Travis up the wall.

“It’s like I’m some sort of damned trophy for their pissing match,” he had grumbled to her after one particularly frustrating day that had begun with Soval cornering Mayweather to quiz him about his life as a Boomer and ended with the captain calling Travis into his ready room to inquire about the lieutenant’s career goals. “Why me?” he had moaned.

At the captain’s side, Commander Reed raised a hand to conceal the smirk threatening to spill across his face, and Hoshi caught his gaze. The armoury officer rolled his eyes briefly before turning his attention back to the latest escalation of the Archer-Soval conflict. Since Ekos, Reed had become closer to the captain, stepping in to assume Commander Tucker’s role as sounding board for Archer. Neither man seemed fully comfortable with one another, though they certainly made the effort. It was as if they were trying – too hard, in Hoshi’s opinion – to be to one another what Trip had been to them in the late commander’s memory.

“Once Enterprise enters orbit,” Soval continued, as if the captain had not spoken at all, “we are expected to synchronize our schedules with that of the planetary capital.”

“Makes sense,” Commander Hernandez admitted. “I’d sure hate for visitors to knock on my door at three in the morning just to say hi.”

“Everything we have on the Kreetassans has been published on the shipwide web,” the captain said, his tone hinting at his eagerness to get onto other matters. “Make sure your departments have studied it. We can’t afford any mistakes.” Soval grunted slightly at the comment, though whether it was in agreement or disapproval of Archer’s statement, Hoshi couldn’t quite tell. From the captain’s quick, sidelong glance in the direction of the ambassador, he wasn’t sure either, and the frown that had been on his face for months – since Ekos, actually – deepened. “Commander Kelby,” he said, his attention shifting to the new chief engineer. Seated to Hoshi’s immediate left, the lieutenant commander still looked uncomfortable, made more so by Enterprise’s always temperamental engines. When Kelby simply looked at his commanding officer for an extended heartbeat, Archer sighed and voiced the question he’d clearly thought to be implied. “What’s the status of engineering?”

“We’re still having a problem with the port nacelle,” Kelby said, his words causing Travis to tense. Ever since Anna Hess was reassigned, Mayweather had been insistent that Enterprise was still upset
over Trip’s death. Kelby was cursed, according to Travis, doomed to fight a never-ending battle against a starship still grieving over her lost engineer. For that matter, *Columbia* had a dark destiny ahead of her too, since Kelby transferred from the partially complete NX-02 to serve under Captain Archer. Even the man’s close friendship with Tucker and his personal involvement with the construction of *Enterprise* would not help him. According to Boomer lore as told by Mayweather, one did not change chief engineers without there being terrible, life-threatening consequences, especially if the starship in question wasn’t fully constructed. To Hoshi, it sounded like superstitious nonsense.

And she still wasn’t sure if Travis actually believed it or was just playing a practical joke on her.

“It shouldn’t affect our capabilities, Captain,” the engineer continued, “but I *would* like to take the nacelle offline while we’re in Kreetassan orbit to find out what’s wrong with it.” Archer opened his mouth to answer but hesitated. A moment later, he looked directly at Soval.

“Will *that* offend their sensibilities, Ambassador?” he asked.

“Probably,” Travis muttered under his breath. Soval raised an eyebrow, shot a quick glance in Mayweather’s direction, and pursed his lips.

“I would advise against doing so while in orbit over their homeworld,” he replied. “The Kreetassans have a reputation for being …”

“Prats?” Malcolm offered helpfully. Hoshi snorted lightly as Travis and Kelby snickered. Phlox’s ever-present smile widened though whether he understood the meaning of the word was questionable, and even the stern Commander Hernandez nearly cracked a smile. Only the captain and Soval seemed unamused.

“Difficult,” the ambassador corrected.

“Then we wait to take the nacelle offline until this mission is over,” Archer decided. “Anything else?” he asked, his eyes quickly darting from officer to officer.

“Yes, Captain,” Phlox said. “We have several members of the crew whose annual physicals are outstanding,” the doctor continued at Archer’s nod. “I am having difficulty convincing these recalcitrant individuals of the importance of a medical screening.”

“Give me their names,” the captain said with a sigh, “and I’ll order them to Sickbay.” Phlox glanced down at the PADD in front of him, making such a great show of examining the data device that Hoshi knew it was an act.

“Ah, here we are,” the Denobulan said. “The names are … Archer, Jonathan and Soval of Vulcan.” Phlox looked up, his smile widening to inhuman proportions. “Is ten hundred hours good for the two of you?” The disgruntled expressions the two men gave the doctor were utterly identical, and forced Hoshi to do the one thing she knew she shouldn’t.

She laughed.
Trip: Nighttime Drive

Chapter Notes

An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 102 days (89.25 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

Despite their best efforts to be stealthy, the floorboards creaked under their weight.

Biting back a curse, Trip Tucker froze in place, his eyes wide, and he could feel T’Pol do the same behind him. Laden down with their duffel bags and rucksacks, anyone happening upon them would immediately recognize what their intentions were, especially with only two of the three planetary moons in the sky and Ekos’ sister planet yet lurking below the horizon. By Trip’s reckoning, there were still another three hours until dawn, and at least twice that before their hosts would be up and about. There was plenty of time to make a discreet escape, providing their luck held out.

Although given the experiences of the last couple of months, Trip was starting to suspect that the only luck they had was bad.

“Go,” T’Pol ordered softly. She was carrying the lion’s share of the weight and was holding onto his shoulder with her right hand so he could lead her through the darkness. Using even a candle might reveal that they were on the move, so Trip’s superior night vision would have to do.

With a nod, Tucker continued to inch down the stairs, T’Pol a bare half step behind him. He winced with each step that he took, his keyed up senses screaming that they were making too much noise no matter how quiet they might have actually been. Any second now, he expected Aron or Daveed to appear at the doors leading to their respective rooms, some sort of weapon in hand and shouting for aid. Trip’s heart pounded loudly in his ears like distant thunder, and even his breathing sounded impossibly loud.

But no one appeared.

They paused at the back door of the house, and Trip slowly opened it, grimacing at the wash of cold air that greeted him and the slight shudder he felt run through T’Pol. Newly oiled hinges barely made a sound, and they silently exited the Zeon home, shutting the door behind them just as carefully as they opened it. Snow was still on the ground outside, but gradually warming temperatures over the last week had melted much of it. The air was still crisp and sharp, though, with a biting taste that never smelled quite right to him.

Though the distance between the house and the barn couldn’t be more than four meters, it seemed to stretch on into infinity, and by the time they reached the door leading into the large structure, Trip was fighting the urge to jump at every shadow or noise that he saw or heard. Only T’Pol’s hand on his shoulder and her poised, unhurried breathing kept him from over-reacting at unexpected sounds like the distant baying of what sounded like a wolf (or rather, the Ekosi equivalent, whatever that might be), or the soft clang of metal upon metal as the wind knocked oddly-shaped horseshoes hanging from the barn’s roof together. Why do they have horseshoes, Tucker wondered abruptly, but no horses? He suspected T’Pol had already noticed the inconsistency. She seemed to see everything, no matter how minor, and he wondered if it was her super spy training or just a Vulcan thing.
Whatever it was, he was glad for it.

Relief flooded through him when the barn door opened with barely a squeak – he had spent the last two days covertly greasing its hinges in preparation for this moment, and had been desperately afraid another cold snap would freeze the cooking oil he’d used. The ATV sat exactly where they had left it earlier, in the very middle of the open barn with the protective tarp secured over it. Trip spent several long moments double-checking everything, T’Pol a silent, watchful shadow at his back, to make sure nothing had been tampered with or added, before finally grunting in satisfaction. The Vulcan offered no comment as they unsecured the tarp and quickly lashed their gear into place. Reflexively, Trip’s eyes sought out the fuel cans – the full fuel cans – and he shivered slightly.

There had been no explanation offered by the Zeon family as to where the fuel had come from – one day, the cans had been empty, and the next they weren’t – but T’Pol immediately pushed forward their time table as a result. In the last week, her level of paranoia (even if she wouldn’t admit it was paranoia) had skyrocketed, and Trip found himself almost wishing she hadn’t shared her concerns with him. The unanswered questions piling up had reached, in her opinion, critical mass. Where had the fuel come from? How did it get here without any of the family members seeming to make a trip? If the Zeons acquired it from somewhere else, did they explain why it was necessary? To who? Even if the family wasn’t working with local authorities, did she and Trip dare wait any longer to make their escape?

“I’m ready,” T’Pol murmured. She was at the aft of the trike, awaiting Trip to slide into the driver’s seat and disengage the parking brake so she could begin to push the vehicle clear of the barn. A part of Tucker – the part that labored in caveman chauvinism under the guise of being a southern gentleman – wanted to revolt against the notion of her doing the heavy lifting while he steered, but another part, the logical part that his Vulcan companion had been training him to utilize more frequently, admitted it was necessary. She was significantly stronger than he was, and he could see better in the dark so he could guide them around any obstructions until they reached a safe distance to engage the engine. Logic demanded the best people for the correct jobs, and who was he to argue with that?

“Right,” Trip replied, equally soft. “Let’s get the hell outta here.”

Snow crunched under the ATV’s wheels as T’Pol pushed it from the barn, and Trip forced himself to focus entirely on steering instead of the sound. Using the levers that reminded him so much of his great-uncle’s heavy tractor, Tucker angled them in a general southwesterly direction. Chosen mostly for its slight downward slope, this particular route also carried them closer to a major highway that would carry them to their ultimate destination, the Priipan Desert some twenty-eight hundred kilometers away. Once on that main thoroughfare, T’Pol had mapped out a meandering route intended to throw off any pursuit while keeping a maximum amount of cover from aerial observation.

They crested the slight hill, and a moment later, T’Pol slid into the passenger seat, her breath coming much faster than normal. Recognizing his cue, Trip started the engine and mashed the accelerator to the floor. Dirt and snow churned up behind them as the tires sought purchase, but the ATV sprang forward rapidly and raced down the incline. Out of the corner of his eye, Tucker saw his Vulcan companion clutch the rollbars tightly, a grimace briefly flickering across her face.

He tried not to grin.

“Should you not engage the lights?” she demanded, her eyes as wide as they could be.

“No yet!” Trip replied quickly as he aimed the ATV toward a cluster of bushes drooping with ice. If memory served from last night’s walkabout, there was a sharp drop just beyond the shrubs, and two
or three meters beyond that was the road. A heartbeat later, the vehicle went airborne, and Trip knew that he didn’t imagine the startled gasp from his left. They hit the ground seconds later, an explosion of dirty snow erupting around them, but the wheels of the trike found enough traction to keep them moving forward. A distinctive squeal sounded – rubber against icy pavement – and the ATV darted forward once more as they hit the road, fishtailing only slightly before he regained control.

They drove in relative silence for nearly half an hour, the engine growling at the speed Trip was demanding of it, and he noticed T’Pol shooting him uncomfortable looks every few minutes as he kept the headlights off. He knew she didn’t like being in the dark – though Tucker really didn’t consider this dark since there were two moons out, for Pete’s sake – but Trip wanted to cling to any advantage they might have at the moment, especially if they had any pursuers. Back when they had first crashed on this rock, the Vulcan had theorized that the natives likely had poor night vision due to the presence of three moons, not to mention the sister planet that had started appearing in the night sky three weeks earlier. So far, they hadn’t been able to determine if she had been right, but in the year plus he’d served alongside her, Trip had quickly learned that, excepting engineering-based problems, T’Pol was always right.

When he finally turned on the headlights and reduced his speed to something potentially less life-threatening – the road was still covered in snow and ice, after all – Trip could sense rather than see her relaxation. He couldn’t have explained if he tried how he knew she was no longer freaking out in her Vulcan way, but somehow, someway, he did know. Shrugging, he kept his eyes on the road. Three months alone – God, was it really that long? – with her had clearly provided some insight into her moods, and he’d long since given up trying to explain the weirdness that was his life. Just roll with it had become the mantra he clung to in order so as to stay relatively sane.

The sun slowly crept into view some hours later, brightening the sky with splashes of crimson and gold that stretched out across the blue-white ocean of air. A carpet of rough-looking clouds, fat and bloated with precipitation waiting to fall, crowded the horizon, blocking out most of the local star’s life-giving illumination. Even the brightness of the two moons, now dropping behind the mountains far to the west, had waned so they were little more than distant specks. If they had been anywhere else but here, anywhere but on a planet where a mere whisper of their true origins would lead to potential imprisonment or painful death by dissection, Trip would have said the view was breathtaking.

“I recommend we continue along this highway for another two hours,” T’Pol said, her voice muffled from the scarf she had wrapped around her face to protect it from the bracing air, “before deviating our course.” Trip nodded.

“You’re the boss,” he replied. To his surprise, she turned her attention away from the scanner in her hands and focused on him.

“Charles,” she said, and once again, the thrill of the personal address coursed through him. He doubted it would ever get old … though he did wish she would call him Trip instead. “It is not accurate to continue referring to me as your superior officer,” T’Pol continued. “You have an equal say in our course of action. We are … what is the human phrase? … in this together.”

“I know,” Trip murmured. He knew she would hear him with her keen Vulcan ears, so he didn’t bother raising his voice beyond a whisper. “Right now, though,” he admitted, “I really need you to be in charge, to tell me what to do.” There was no visible change in her appearance – the concealing scarf hid her features from view – but somehow, he knew she had raised an eyebrow. “I’m an engineer, T’Pol,” he said, “and I was trained to fix things, not spend a life on the run.” Trip risked a look in her direction. “I don’t know what to do,” he revealed.
For a long moment, T’Pol was silent. Finally, she nodded.

“Then I shall teach you,” she said calmly, “everything I know.” The Vulcan returned her attention to the scanner. “We will survive this, Charles,” she said, her voice so casually confident that Trip couldn’t help but to feel positive about their chances. “You may not know what to do now,” T’Pol continued, casting him a sidelong glance as she did, “but you will.”

“I hope you’re right,” he muttered.

“I usually am,” she retorted calmly, “when I have the appropriate data at hand.” Her eyes studied him for a long moment. “Survival in this situation requires intelligence and creativity,” she added, “two traits you have displayed in abundance while aboard Enterprise.” She glanced once at the scanner before returning her young-old gaze to his profile. “For a human, that is,” she added, her eyes were sparkling with the restrained humor he’d grown to love.

“Stop,” Trip told her wryly, smiling as he spoke. “You’ll give me a big head with all this praise.”

“We cannot have that,” the Vulcan deadpanned. Tucker laughed.

And, though he couldn’t see it because of the scarf, Trip thought she just might be smiling too.
An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 104 days (91 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1.

By the end of the second day, they were already nearing the end of their fuel.

It didn’t surprise T’Pol – the ATV only had a twenty-eight liter tank, and the two fuel cans they possessed held only nineteen liters apiece – but it was nonetheless discouraging that they had barely covered five hundred kilometers thanks to the treacherous road conditions. According to her companion, they were fortunate to get as far as they had: the primitive fuel delivery system of the ATV was wildly inefficient, and even his repairs left much to be desired.

For the first time all day, Charles was silent. He had been talking since almost the moment T’Pol took over the driving early in the morning, reminiscing about his past and telling her colorful anecdotes about growing up a Tucker. At first, T’Pol had simply let him talk because she hoped it might help him get over the depression that had consumed him for weeks, but by noon, she was fascinated by what he referred to as the adventures of his misspent youth. Tales of his youth quickly segued into discussions about his career with Starfleet, and before she knew it, T’Pol found herself reciprocating. To her surprise, she found herself telling him about her father, her difficult relationship with her mother, and even about several of her missions for the Ministry of Intelligence. Charles was a rapt listener, interjecting only occasionally to seek clarification about Vulcan terms or traditions he did not understand. His expression was incredulous when she described the exact nature of her covert training, and it was those descriptions that resulted in him now looking away and staring at the passing landscape.

“Charles?” T’Pol said when his silence stretched out for too long. It should have concerned her that she had revealed such intimate details about her life, but for reasons she didn’t want to focus on at the moment, it didn’t. “You are very quiet,” she said when Tucker grunted.

“Just thinkin’,” he replied before sighing heavily. “Just thinkin’ about how unprepared I am for this,” Charles expounded a moment later, “and how much I must be slowin’ you down.”

“Stop,” she ordered sharply. He almost jumped at the terseness of her words, and shot her a surprised look, but T’Pol continued. “Do not continue along that line of thought, Charles,” she told him.

“I can’t help it,” Tucker muttered. He gave her a frown. “I mean, I’m just a glorified mechanic, and you’re Jane Bond.” Her confusion must have shown on his face, because he blew out a breath and explained. “A super spy,” he said.

“I was not a spy,” T’Pol retorted, hyper-annunciating the word as she spoke. “You have no reason to feel inadequate, Charles,” she added. “If not for your skills and talents, it is highly probable I would have been killed months ago, perhaps even with the crash.”

“Can’t you call me Trip?” he asked softly, discomfort warring with pleasure on his face at her open compliment. His rapid change of subject did not fool her, and she marveled at his upbringing, that a human so wonderfully talented would think so little of himself.
“No.”

“Why not?” T’Pol gave him a quick look before returning her eyes to the icy road before them. “Bet you called the cap’n Jon,” he grumbled.

“Only once,” she replied calmly, thinking instantly of the Akaali mission. Charles’ eyes widened slightly, and he was silent for several long moments. From the way he kept shooting her furtive, almost hesitant looks, T’Pol suspected that he wanted to ask her something, but did not know how to phrase it. He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, and then tensed abruptly, narrowing his eyes and cocking his head as if he were listening for something. Charles frowned.

“Pull over,” he said. “There’s something wrong with the engine.” T’Pol quirked an eyebrow, but did not argue his assertion. Instead, she angled the three-wheeled vehicle toward a concealed embankment along the side of the road. The front wheels of the ATV sent a geyser of dirty snow and ice into the air, and T’Pol winced at the momentary loss of control. A second later, she found a relatively flat piece of land to park on – there would be sufficient room for Charles to conduct any repairs, as well as adequate space for them to erect a lean-to from the protective tarp should they need to stay overnight. The moment T’Pol slowed the vehicle to a stop, Charles made a beeline for its engine housing.

“Can I borrow your scanner?” he asked after several long seconds of examination that looked to be little more than pushing and pulling hoses seemingly at random. T’Pol passed the device over and watched in silent interest. “Fuel’s contaminated,” Charles identified a moment later. “Must have gotten some dirt into it, and that’s messin’ up the whole system.”

“Can you fix it?”

“Not with what we’ve got on hand.” Charles leaned back and glowered at the ATV. “For now,” he said, “I think it’ll keep runnin’. For a while, anyway.” He shrugged. “But then, we’re not gonna get very far tomorrow before we run outta gas anyway,” he added.

“Then we shall proceed on foot,” T’Pol said. Charles snorted.

“That’s what?” he asked. “Over two thousand kilometers? Through the ice, snow, and whatever other surprises this planet throws at us?” He shook his head, and T’Pol gave him a sidelong look.

“I did not say it would be easy,” she deadpanned. To her secret delight, he grinned broadly – a real smile, not the pale imitation he’d be flashing for months.

“You’re the master of understatement, T’Pol,” Charles said with a soft laugh. He crouched over the engine once more, absentmindedly offering her the scanner as he did. In the far distance – to the south, T’Pol believed – a steady, rhythmic thumping drew her attention away from him and she spent several long heartbeats studying the skyline for indications of danger. At first, Charles didn’t seem to notice, so intent was he on the engine, but when she failed to take the scanner from him, he looked up.

“Something wrong?” he asked. Charles glanced in the direction she was facing, a frown starting to appear on his face. A moment later, he grimaced. “Please tell me that’s thunder,” he muttered.

“Unlikely,” T’Pol replied. “It is too repetitive to be natural.” She closed her eyes, pushed away every distraction, and listened. “Artillery,” she theorized.

“How far away?” Charles asked.

With a hollow boom that rattled the ground, an immense fireball suddenly climbed into the sky
before she could respond, forming almost instantly in a distinctive mushroom shape as condensed debris and water vapor exploded outward. From where he stood alongside the ATV, Charles gasped. Horror and fear flashed across his face as he shot T’Pol a startled look, but she ignored it as she took her scanner from him and activated it. There was no reason to hurry, she told herself as she suppressed her own flash of panic. If the detonation had been atomic in nature, they were already too close to the blast radius to avoid lethal doses of ionizing radiation.

“It appears to have been created using conventional explosives,” T’Pol announced a single, agonizing minute later. “I am detecting no indications that a fission or fusion weapon has been used.” Charles sagged backwards, suddenly limp with relief, but seemed unable to tear his eyes from the expanding cloud.

“I thought mushroom clouds only came from nuclear weapons,” he whispered in disgusted awe. A second and third explosion joined the first, though they were much smaller in size, and he flinched with each one. T’Pol shook her head as she studied her readings.

“Any sufficiently large blast will create one inside an atmosphere,” she explained. “I estimate that they are over twenty-five kilometers away.” More booms echoed across the distance.

“Do we run?”

“Not at the moment,” T’Pol decided. “Tomorrow, we will remain here and observe,” she said. “It is far easier to detect a moving target than a concealed, stationary one, so we should be able to determine if the conflict is moving in our direction.”

“And afterwards?” Charles wondered, wincing with every additional explosion.

“We investigate.” At his startled look, she continued. “You were correct when you pointed out that we will not get very far without fuel.”

“And you think we might find some down there,” he finished.

“Among other supplies,” T’Pol replied. She didn’t bother mentioning the possibility of survivors since she didn’t know what they would do if they found any.

Using the tarp, they erected the lean-to by securing it to the ATV and tying it to the unimpressive-looking trees they had parked next to. A second, much smaller tarp was placed on the frozen ground, and atop it went their respective bedrolls. They had replaced the thin, military-issued blankets obtained from the mesa city with much thicker and warmer ones stolen from the Zeon family, but even with them, T’Pol suspected she would shiver most of the night. Charles was asleep within seconds – the stress of their escape the previous night had clearly drained him, but the noises and general discomfort of the ATV seats made sleep impossible for him while she drove.

Nearly an hour passed before T’Pol opened her eyes, unsure exactly why she wasn’t able to get to sleep. She carefully sat up, moving as quietly as possible to avoid waking her companion, and gave the scanner a quick glance, satisfying herself that no other life forms were within seventy-five meters. The booms of artillery and explosions had long since faded away, leaving only a deathly silence that was mildly disconcerting, even to her. A long moment passed before T’Pol realized she was watching Charles sleep, his features illuminated by the light of three moons now bathing the entire snow-covered valley with soft light.

Frustrated at her inability to rest, T’Pol decided that meditation might be in order. She closed her eyes, adjusted her posture slightly, and pushed all other distractions from her mind. With calm breaths, she inhaled control and exhaled chaos. Here, in this place, there were no sounds, no images,
no smells. Only peace.

And Charles’ snoring.

To her surprise, she realized that she had incorporated the soft, raspy sound into her meditation, and was using it as a focus. The instant her mind processed this new bit of information, T'Pol’s eyes snapped open. Comprehension dawned, and she stared at his sleeping form. You are a fool, she told herself. You should have expected this.

At some point, her subconscious had apparently linked Charles’ presence with rest and sleep, and the extent to which Vulcans were controlled by their instincts was a closely guarded secret among her people. One hundred and two Ekosi days – eighty-nine point two-five Earth standard, the analytical portion of her brain whispered – with only Tucker as a companion, and at least three-quarters of that time sharing blankets with him had clearly played havoc with her normal sense of privacy. The neuropressure certainly had not helped in that regard, she reflected wryly, no matter how necessary it had been, and T'Pol wondered how she should proceed. To continue along this path, to allow herself to become emotionally invested in Charles, could only lead to pain, especially if the ancient stories about psychic bonds were true.

You are already emotionally invested in him, her conscience pointed out flatly. He was her only companion, her only friend on this world, and T'Pol instinctively knew that he would give his life to protect hers. A primal part of her shivered at the thought, but she pushed the emotion out of her mind to focus on her next course of action. Trust had been earned between them, but it was still fragile, and if she made a misstep, all of their efforts to this point could be for naught. She frowned, considered, reflected.

Without giving herself time to second-guess her decision, T'Pol quickly gathered her blankets and crossed the short distance to where Charles slept. He stirred almost instantly as she draped the second layer over him and woke the moment she slid underneath the covers beside him. Blinking rapidly, he gave her a questioning look through bleary eyes.

“T'Pol?” he slurred.

“I am cold,” she answered, suddenly embarrassed by her weakness. How could she explain to him what she did not entirely understand herself? To her relief, he accepted the answer as the truth and shifted closer to her. T’Pol instinctively relaxed against him, her head dropping onto his chest where she could hear the steady and reassuring beat of his heart. His arm came up around her, pulling the blankets closer, and she could sense him beginning to drift back into unconsciousness. “Go to sleep, Charles,” she whispered as her own eyes slowly closed.

“’s Trip,” he mumbled. “Name’s Trip.” A moment later, he was asleep, and T’Pol realized she was smiling.

“Go to sleep, Trip,” she whispered.

But only the wind heard her words.
Sometimes, he really hated his job.

One hand resting lightly upon his holstered phase pistol, Malcolm Reed glowered at the scene before him and fought the urge to curse. At any other time, he suspected he would be having a loud laugh at Captain Archer’s current situation and appearance. Ridiculous-looking braids hung from the captain’s head, secured to his scalp in some fashion that Malcolm didn’t quite understand, and brilliant body paint covered every exposed centimeter of Archer’s body, which, at the moment, was quite a lot. Thin strips of some sort of cured animal hide served as a loincloth and were the only piece of clothing the man had been allowed. Displaying grace Malcolm didn’t realize he possessed, the captain danced around a tall, leafless tree set atop a raised dais with a similarly dressed Kreetassan who towered over Archer. A sea of robed and hooded Kreetassans encircled the dais, swaying to the beat of unseen drums and watching the captain and their ambassador dance with unblinking eyes.

If Archer wasn’t so bloody exposed, Reed would have found the entire situation hilarious.

“I don’t like this,” Commander Hernandez murmured from where she stood next to him. Like Reed, she was wearing desert utilities and carried a pistol at her side. Worry lines were carved in her forehead as she stared at the curious greeting ritual being played out before them, though Malcolm wasn’t sure if her concern revolved around the captain’s safety or the possibility that she might have to do something similar one day. Based on what Reed had learned about the older woman’s Starfleet service, he suspected it might be a combination of both.

With a background in xeno-anthropology, Erika Hernandez hadn’t served aboard a starship since her junior lieutenant days, and instead had spent the last ten years working alongside human diplomats. According to her official record, she spoke six languages fluently, including High Vulcan and Denobulan, and had close contacts within every major human embassy throughout the quadrant. Her last duty assignment had been on Vulcan as a Starfleet liaison to Ambassador Pollock and, prior to the Paraagan catastrophe, her name hadn’t even been considered for the captaincy of a warp five capable starship. Afterwards, however, her exceptional diplomatic record had shot her to the top of the list, and, for a while, rumors that she would actually displace A.G. Robinson as the captain of Columbia when the NX-02 launched next year began making the rounds. Only her lack of command experience made such an appointment untenable, and Reed wasn’t surprised that the Admiralty had instead assigned her to Enterprise to gain some much needed time in the Big Chair.

Unfortunately, she also knew that she was green, which inevitably led to her being defensive about the decisions she made. Where Captain Archer was, in Malcolm’s opinion, sometimes too bold by half, Commander Hernandez was far too cautious.

“How do you think I feel, ma’am?” he growled, more tensely than he intended. Finishing his latest scan of the crowd, Reed shifted his attention to the upper levels of the almost-coliseum they were in. The hairs on the back of his neck tingled as his eyes sought out the most likely spots for a sniper’s nest. There were too many of them!
Hernandez gave him a quick look – he noticed her well hidden annoyance at his tone, of course, but it was his job to observe those sorts of things – before quickly returning her attention to the captain’s dancing form. Without realizing it, she shuffled a half step closer to where Soval stood next to her, prompting the Vulcan ambassador – was it still correct, Reed wondered, to refer to him as such? – to discreetly put an equivalent amount of space between them once more. Malcolm frowned again; it hadn’t escaped his notice that the two generally sided with one another – Hernandez fancied herself a diplomat, after all – and Reed himself backed most of the captain’s decisions. The tug-of-war between the command crew was in desperate need of a mediator, someone who could bridge the impasse between the two sides…

Someone like Commander Tucker.

It was still hard for Malcolm to accept that his friend had likely been dead for three months now, and he pushed down the guilt that always surfaced when he thought of Trip. Like the captain, Reed had spent every spare moment poring over the data, looking for anything that might reveal the two commanders hadn’t perished in the bombing run by one of the warring factions on Ekos. He’d lost track of how many hours of sleep he had lost studying aerial images obtained by the inconspicuous satellite they’d put into geosynchronous orbit over the landmass Shuttlepod One crashed onto, but no amount of examination had revealed any hint that the commanders survived. The only way they wouldn’t have been noticed, Malcolm had decided, was if they stayed under constant cover by sticking to the treeline, but he didn’t think they would have done something as silly as that knowing that Enterprise was looking for them.

Once again, the back of Reed’s neck began itching, and he realized that he had foolishly allowed himself to get distracted. Trip’s dead, he told himself. Deal with it and move on. Scowling, he let his eyes sweep over the crowd once more, looking for some sign that trouble was coming. On the dais, the captain was twirling and spinning, his every move matched by that of the Kreetassan leader.

“How much longer is this bloody thing going to be?” Malcolm grumbled, suddenly unable to hold his tongue.

“Approximately nine point three minutes,” Soval replied calmly as Hernandez shot Reed a frown. “Providing Captain Archer has sufficient endurance to last that long,” the Vulcan said almost snidely.

“It was in the cultural packet, Mister Reed,” Hernandez said, a chastising tone in her voice. “Didn’t you read it?” Malcolm’s eyes narrowed.

“No, ma’am,” he replied flatly, ignoring the identical expressions of disgusted surprise upon the faces of the Vulcan ambassador and Enterprise’s first officer. “I was too busy studying the tactical analysis of the ongoing hostilities between these people and the Klingons,” Malcolm added as he met Hernandez’s eyes.

She winced and quickly looked away. A completely unprofessional thought flashed through Malcolm’s mind in that moment: Reed 1, Hernandez 0.

Movement among the Kreetassans surrounding the dais drew his attention, and Reed tensed as one of the hooded figures began weaving his way to the elevated stage. He silently cursed himself for not reading the appropriate information – this could be a legitimate part of the ceremony, after all – and mentally began drafting the reprimand he would submit on himself later. Tightening his hold on the grip of his phase pistol, he narrowed his eyes and held his breath. Light glinted off of something the hooded figure held in his hand, and recognition flared instantly.

“Gun!” Reed shouted, drawing his phase pistol and aiming it in a single, smooth motion. At the exact moment, the figure brought his own weapon up, pointing it at the dancing Kreetassan leader while
bellowing something that sounded Klingon. Captain Archer was already moving, diving forward into a body tackle that knocked the Kreetassan clear, even as the hooded assassin discharged his disruptor. A flash of emerald light sliced through the air, burning a ragged scar across Archer’s back and slamming into the leafless tree that dominated the dais with an explosion of bark and pulp. Despite the range and the difficulty of the shot, Malcolm squeezed the trigger of his pistol, and a lance of fire flashed out, punching into the back of the now revealed Klingon and dropping him without a sound. A half second later, the Kreetassans around the assassin swarmed him, howling in fury.

The Klingon was dead seconds later, ripped to bloody chunks by the enraged aliens.

His pistol still drawn, Reed darted forward, pushing through the mass of Kreetassans as he tried to reach the dais. He could hear Captain Archer’s groans of pain, as well as Commander Hernandez’s urgent demand for a medic from Enterprise. A heartbeat later – or maybe it was a minute; Malcolm couldn’t tell in the rush of adrenaline and fear – Reed sprang onto the raised stage, his weapon primed. The Kreetassan leader was kneeling over a still conscious Archer, eyes wide.

“Captain!” Malcolm shouted as he reached his commanding officer’s side. To his surprise, Archer began struggling to rise. “Sir, you’ve been hit!”

“It’s just a flesh wound,” the captain retorted, grabbing Reed’s arm for the leverage he needed to stand. The Kreetassan leader rose with him.

“You risked your life for mine,” the alien said, his voice quickly translated to English by the communicator at Malcolm’s side. At his words, the rolling mass of hooded figures surrounding the dais quieted, and Reed suddenly felt the weight of a hundred eyes upon him as he supported the captain’s weight. Commander Hernandez was still trapped in the midst of the crowd, hemmed in by the aliens now staring at the raised stage, but Ambassador Soval had not moved from where he stood. A bored, almost indifferent expression was upon the Vulcan’s face, though Malcolm could see that he held a Starfleet communicator in his left hand.

“That’s what allies do for each other,” Captain Archer said in response to the Kreetassan leader’s comment. He tried to straighten but winced and nearly fell; only Malcolm’s support kept him on his feet.

“Why do you do this thing?” the alien asked.

“There is an old adage on my world,” Archer replied. “Greater love hath no man than this,” he said through clenched teeth, “that a man lay down his life for his friends.” A soft murmur of approval swept through the assembled observers.

“A debt is owed to you, Jonathan Archer of Earth,” the Kreetassan announced loudly. “We name you and yours … Friend.” He abruptly bowed deeply, holding it for long seconds.

“Malcolm,” the captain whispered, “help me.” Wincing at Archer’s hiss of pain, Reed obeyed and then pulled his commanding officer upright once more.

“Attend to your wounds, Friend Archer,” the Kreetassan said a moment later, “and return when you are hale once more so that we may treat you with the honor you merit.” As if by magic, the crowd parted, creating a clear path from the dais to where Soval stood. Suddenly freed, Hernandez sprang forward and slipped the captain’s other arm over her shoulder.

“I didn’t know you were religious,” she said softly as they began half-supporting, half-carrying Archer toward the waiting Vulcan ambassador.
“I’m not,” the captain replied. He grimaced. “Trip’s death just gave me a lot to think about,” he admitted a moment later. Reed nodded in understanding.

“Doctor Phlox is standing by,” Soval said as they drew abreast of him. He raised an eyebrow. “An effective, if painful method of acquiring allies, Captain,” he remarked, almost wryly.

“Gotta keep things interesting,” Archer replied with a wince. Soval frowned slightly, before exchanging a look with Commander Hernandez. She nodded slightly, and the Vulcan suddenly reached forward, clamping fingers down on the captain’s shoulder and squeezing. A bare second later, Archer was unconscious.

“If you will allow me, Commander Reed,” Soval said as Malcolm staggered under the captain’s dead weight. Without waiting for a reply, the ambassador easily hefted the unconscious Archer over his shoulder. At Reed’s questioning look, Soval raised an eyebrow. “We do not know if the Klingon was acting alone,” he remarked flatly, “and I am uninterested in being shot at today.”

“I’m not interested in it any day,” Hernandez grumbled as she began striding quickly toward the waiting shuttlepod.

“Then I suspect,” the Vulcan declared, displaying no hint of strain, “that you have chosen the wrong profession, Commander.” Malcolm gave the ambassador a startled look: was that a joke? He shook his head and returned his attention to watching for any bloodthirsty, suicidal Klingons.

“So much for honor,” he muttered sourly.
The crack of a gunshot woke him from a deep sleep.

Rolling to his feet, Trip instantly realized he was alone underneath the lean-to and there was no sign of T'Pol. Almost at once, panic started to set in, and he scrambled to locate his phase pistol before darting out of the crude structure and into the biting wind. His heartbeat pounded loudly in his ears as he quickly scanned the immediate surroundings, and fear turned his muscles into rubber when he could find no sign of his Vulcan companion. A second distant gunshot echoed across the valley and he sprang forward in the direction it had come from, barely noticing that he hadn't pulled his boots on despite the snow still on the ground.

“T’Pol!” he called out desperately, jumping in surprise at her nearly immediate response.

“I am here.” T’Pol’s muffled voice drifted from his left, and Trip froze in place, his head snapping toward her. Crouched within a large copse of iced-over trees, she was studying the valley below them with the small binoculars that had been included in one of the survival packs. Very little of her skin was exposed to the cold, but there was no indication that she had been wounded.

“Are you all right?” Trip asked urgently. In response, she tilted her head to one side and gave him a slightly confused look – or at least as confused as a Vulcan could appear with a scarf wrapped around her face and leaving only her eyes visible.

“Why would I not be?” she wondered. Relief washed through Trip so intensely that his knees nearly buckled. He opened his mouth to explain, but T’Pol was already speaking, “Where are your boots, Charles?” she asked. At her words, the sensation of bare feet in frozen slush caught up with his adrenaline-fueled brain, and Trip shivered. Cursing softly, he quickly retraced his steps, grimacing at the burning cold of the snow that crunched underfoot. It didn’t seem fair, he mused darkly as he toweled his skin dry before pulling on some socks, that the feel of freezing snow was almost the same as a plasma burn. Stamping his feet to settle his boots, he paused to flip the blankets back over the single bedroll in what was probably a vain attempt to hold in any residual body heat left there.

T’Pol had not moved from where she was hidden, her attention yet on the valley below, and Trip drew abreast of her as stealthily as he could manage. More gunshots echoed through the hills, sporadic pops that were a constant reminder of the danger they were getting closer to. The sounds weren’t any closer, nor did they seem to be the noises of a pitched battle, but their very existence caused a sliver of concern to crawl up Trip’s spine. Before he could ask her to, T’Pol offered him the binoculars.

“What’s going on?” he asked as he accepted the binos.

“The aftermath of yesterday’s battle,” the Vulcan replied. She pointed, and Trip hefted the binoculars to look in that direction. Large craters littered the terrain around what looked to have once been a train, now derailed and lying on its side like a giant metal centipede. Boxcars, many of which
appeared to have recently been consumed by flames, were yet smoldering. Dark plumes of smoke climbed into the sky from both the train and the impact craters that had warped the tracks. Bodies were everywhere, scattered across the battlefield like broken toys.

“I thought you said they were twenty klicks away,” Trip said.

“Twenty-five,” T’Pol corrected, “and that was in reference to the largest of the blasts we saw.”

As Trip swept the binos across the valley, movement caught his eye. Uniformed Ekosians moved through the carnage like vultures, picking through the bodies as if they were seeking wounded. A pair of the soldiers pulled a native to his feet and shoved him toward a cluster of other survivors already ringed by a squad of men carrying rifles. To Tucker’s horror, the soldiers quickly conversed before raising their weapons and firing at point-blank range. A dozen bodies hit the ground.

“They’re killin’ the prisoners!” Trip exclaimed. He gave his companion a horrified look. “We’ve gotta do something!”

“There is nothing we can do,” the Vulcan replied softly, a hint of sadness in her voice. Trip shot her an incredulous look.

“How can you say that?” he demanded. A second volley of gunfire sounded, and another group of natives fell. “We can’t just sit here and do nothin’!” He glared at her, suddenly hating her Vulcan indifference. “You said we were in this together,” he growled, “and I’ve got a say! Well I say we do something!” T’Pol was silent as she gave him a long look. Finally, she exhaled deeply in what he took to be a Vulcan sigh.

“Very well,” she said calmly, her eyes never leaving his. “Which side shall we murder?” Trip blinked.

“What?” He rocked back on his heels, unable to believe what he had just heard.

“We do not have sufficient ammunition for the small arms you acquired from the law enforcement officers for those weapons to be useful,” T’Pol said, “which means we will need to utilize our phase pistols.” She was openly studying him, her eyes unblinking and more alien than he had ever seen them. It didn’t help that her protective scarf concealed the rest of her face. “Since the stun setting appears to be lethal to the natives of this world,” she continued dispassionately, “our intervention will result in fatalities.” At his continued silence, she pressed the point home. “Of course,” she said flatly, “our use of the phase pistols might also lead to difficult questions with the group we aid, so we should be prepared to defend ourselves from them as well.”

“All right,” Trip snapped. He looked away. “You’ve made your point.”

“Have I?” To his surprise, T’Pol reached and placed her hand upon his shoulder, almost forcing him to meet her eyes once more. “I do not wish to allow such barbarity to continue either, Charles,” she said softly, “but we do not have the luxury of mistakes.” The report of another rifle shot echoed through the valley, causing Trip to wince. “At the moment,” T’Pol continued, “we do not know the circumstances leading to this conflict and acting without that knowledge is both dangerous and foolish.”

“So we do nothing,” Tucker muttered bitterly.

“What would you have us do, Charles?” the Vulcan asked. “Pick a course of action that does not involve wholesale slaughter or our deaths, and I will support it completely.” She nodded in the direction of the valley. “By acting without full understanding of the conflict,” she said, “we could
inadvertently make it worse.”

“By pickin’ the wrong side?” Trip asked.

“That is one possibility,” T’Pol replied. “We do not have sufficient information to form a valid opinion in regards to these hostilities.” She removed her hand from his shoulder and returned her attention to the valley below. “It is entirely possible,” she said with distaste in her voice, “that the cultural standards of this planet are such that the actions we are witnessing are expected.”

“Doesn’t make it right,” Trip retorted.

“No,” she said, “it does not. But it may be, in their eyes, justified.”

“Nothing justifies that,” Tucker said angrily. As if to punctuate his statement, another gunshot cracked the sky. Grimacing at the sight of one more victim falling, Trip tossed the binos to her and walked away, flinching at each additional rifle report. He could feel T’Pol’s eyes on him as he climbed into the driver’s seat of the parked ATV. “There’s a quote on Earth,” Trip said, knowing she would be able to hear him despite the distance between them. “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”

“A noble sentiment,” the Vulcan remarked as she drew closer to where he sat, “but one that could easily be used to justify action where none is warranted.” She shivered slightly as the wind picked up, and Trip slid into the passenger’s seat so she could take his spot behind the steering columns. It wouldn’t be much – the ATV wasn’t sealed very well – but at least it would give her some protection from the cold breezes. “What you or I define as evil may not be construed as such by others in the galaxy,” she added as she accepted the offer and climbed into the vehicle.

“I’m not gonna abandon my morals, T’Pol,” he said tightly.

“Nor would I ask you to,” she replied calmly. “Your moral code is part of what makes you who you are, Charles, and it would be a great tragedy if you lost that part of yourself.” She pinned him with a look. “But not every species we encounter will necessarily share your morals or mine.” He frowned, suddenly reminded of their very first landing party together and the assumptions he had made in regards to a pair of Lorillians. When the hell are you gonna learn, Tucker?

“I’m doing it again,” he muttered darkly. T’Pol watched him without comment, and he continued. “Drawin’ conclusions based on how I was raised,” he said with a heavy sigh. “You warned me about it on Rigel, and I still haven’t learned.”

“You are learning now,” T’Pol pointed out, “but, in this case, I fully share your desire to act.” Her eyes narrowed, and she glanced once more in the direction of the. “Civilized cultures do not act in the manner that these Ekosians are.”

“Humans did,” Trip murmured sadly.

“As did Vulcans,” his companion said, “but both species eventually evolved beyond such madness.”

“So I guess there’s still hope for these people,” he said.

“If I have learned one thing from working alongside humans,” T’Pol replied, “it is that there is always hope.”

“That’s a really … emotional sentiment, T’Pol,” Trip said slowly. The urge to smile despite the grim circumstances was powerful. Her response was instantaneous and thick with frosty annoyance.
“There is no reason to be insulting, Charles.” Before he could apologize, she was continuing. “I suspect the Ekosians not in uniform are some form of insurgency,” she said. “It is logical to assume that there are more such guerilla units between us and our destination.”

“It can’t ever be easy, can it?” Trip asked before sighing. “So do we stick to the plan? Head for the desert?”

“I do not know,” T’Pol replied. “We need additional intelligence regarding these hostilities before we act. It might be localized to only this continent—”

“Which would track with our crappy luck so far,” Trip interjected. T’Pol continued as if he had not spoken at all.

“-but it is entirely possible this is a global conflict, in which case locating a place of relative safety could be difficult.”

“How do we find out?” Trip asked.

“If this were a more advanced culture,” T’Pol said wryly, “I would suggest locating a computer with the appropriate information.” Tucker shook his head.

“I’m not sure if these people even have television yet,” he remarked.

“Exactly. Which means we must consider alternate methods of gathering intelligence.” T’Pol was silent for a moment before turning her full attention to him. “I owe you an apology, Charles,” she said. Trip blinked in surprise at the non sequitur, but his companion continued before he could respond. “I should have begun teaching you mental techniques when we were first stranded,” she continued.

“It’s okay,” Trip said hesitantly.

“No,” she replied instantly, “it is not. To maximize our chances of survival, we must both be as skilled as possible. Delaying the beginning of your training was illogical and an error in judgment on my part.” She drew in a deep breath. “Therefore,” she said a moment later, “we shall begin at once. Are you ready?”

“For what exactly?” Trip wondered. He didn’t bother trying to hide his discomfort.

“The techniques I will teach you are intended to augment your own natural talents,” T’Pol said. “Acute observation, the ability to read low-level, passive body language. The ability to notice and compare. To analyze.” She spoke as if reciting from memory. “By necessity,” she added, “I will also need to teach you Vulcan since many of the concepts do not translate well to English.”

“Okay.” Tucker swallowed, hoping she wouldn’t realize how intimidated he was at the notion of her training him. From what he had seen of how she ran her department on Enterprise, he knew she would be a harsh taskmaster.

“Tomorrow,” T’Pol continued, “I also want to begin instructing you in Suus mahna.” Trip frowned at the unfamiliar terms. “It is an ancient Vulcan martial arts fighting style similar to judo,” T’Pol explained, “and your hand to hand skills are … deficient.”

“Hey! I can take care of myself!” Trip retorted instantly.

“Like you did on Risa?” T’Pol asked, and Tucker flushed.
“That was Malcolm’s fault,” he muttered.

“Of course it was,” T’Pol said, dry amusement in her voice. “We will begin with simple observation. Three meters directly behind you is a tree that you passed several minutes ago. Do not look at it!” Her sharp words arrested his half turn and forced his eyes back to hers. “From memory,” she ordered, “describe the shape, the size and the number of its existing leaves.”

“Are you serious?” Trip asked. “I don’t even remember looking at it!”

“You did,” she replied. “Three times, in fact.” She tilted her head to one side. “You stared at it for six full seconds the second time you looked in that direction.” When he still hesitated, T’Pol reached forward and placed a gloved hand on his shoulder. “The mind – human or Vulcan – is capable of far more than you believe, Charles. I am confident you can master this.” He nodded hesitantly; if T’Pol said he could do something, he knew she wasn’t just blowing smoke. “Now close your eyes and concentrate on the leaves of the tree,” she instructed. “Shape, size and number.”

Trip swallowed.

It was going to be a long day.
Snow crunched underfoot as they crept toward their target, and T'Pol winced at the sound.

Thick, gray clouds filled the night sky, blotting out the moons and the stars, and draping the entire valley in an oppressive darkness that the subcommander loathed. Perspiration dotted her forehead, though it came more from the stress of being almost completely blind than from exertion. Reflexively, she tightened her grip on Charles' hand as he carefully led her through the inky blackness. That he was able to see anything at all seemed beyond comprehension, though she had long since grown accustomed to his superior vision at night.

The distant crack of wood snapping caused her to freeze in place and yank Charles to a stop as well. She sensed rather than saw his glance at her, and held up her hand to forestall any question. He tensed, seeming to recognize that she had detected something with her greater sense of hearing or of smell, and was silent as he waited for further instructions. When the sound did not repeat – she guessed it was limbs breaking under the weight of too much snow or ice – she nodded.

"Proceed," she murmured, just loud enough for him to hear her voice.

They continued their slow approach, inching toward the overturned shipping cars of the derailed train. Even to T'Pol's poor night vision, the containers loomed large, dark voids of utter blackness in the already impenetrable night, and she silently wondered at the wisdom in their mutual decision to investigate now. Moving once the sun went down was obviously the best tactical option, but she could not help but to think she was slowing Charles down. It was ironic, she mused, that he remained self-conscious about his own contribution to their survival yet seemed utterly unable to fathom just how much she relied upon him at night.

Fifteen tense days had passed since they blundered into the combat zone, and the continued hostilities raging around them had forced them to abandon plans for a quick escape even if they had managed to acquire additional fuel. In the first two days, they had been forced to relocate their rudimentary camp site three times to avoid detection by the arriving guerilla reinforcements intent on capturing the derailed train. Near dusk on the second day, however, Charles discovered an ideal hiding spot for them to lay low until the situation resolved itself. Situated in a sandstone caprock escarpment and sheltered from view by thick, snow covered bushes, the hidden cavern he happened to stumble upon while relieving his bladder extended just over six meters into the rock and provided an adequate view of the conflict zone. Wide enough for the ATV to be backed into it, the cave appeared to have been carved out of the largely sedimentary rock by wind, rain, and snow over centuries, yet remained surprisingly devoid of native animals.

With little to do apart from remaining undetected, they spent the time formulating plans and training. Although his dedication was admirable, Charles continued to struggle with the lessons he was being presented, whether it was the basic maneuvers of Suus mahna or the advanced mental techniques many Vulcans took for granted. Rather than coddle him, though, T'Pol continued to push him hard, knowing how much he detested someone patronizing him or his abilities. The intensity of these
sessions left him frustrated, sore and occasionally hostile toward her; she suspected he recognized on some level why she did not let up, however, as their evenings invariably ended with neuropressure (which was quite difficult to do with the limited space and the inability to disrobe) and soft, friendly conversation. When they retired for the evening, it was always together, and Charles neither commented nor complained that she shared his blankets and body warmth against the bitter cold that continued to seep into her very bones.

To her great surprise, T’Pol found herself more content during those nightly dialogues than she recalled being since her father died. She had long known that Charles Tucker was an enjoyable conversationalist, but without the distraction of potential engineering problems or unexpected interruptions by Captain Archer, Tucker revealed a side of himself that she found absolutely fascinating. They did not limit themselves to topics both were already familiar with – his grasp of warp mechanics would always be superior to hers, just as her understanding of stellar dynamics far exceeded his – and instead turned to subjects that would not normally come up in their daily interactions. Charles surprised her with his knowledge of Surak’s tenets, for example – he admitted to having read the book she gave to the captain as well as having taken a Vulcan philosophy course during his years at the University of Florida – and even brought up a number of valid points regarding the interpretation of those teachings, though she remain satisfied that she had adequately defended her stance. More often than not, they argued, though it was rarely heated and began to take a more affectionate, almost teasing tone as the days passed. That these discussions almost always occurred during neuropressure or while they were wrapped up in blankets together only served to increase the sense of intimacy T’Pol had been fighting to avoid.

With the apparent cessation of hostilities in the valley below and the near exhaustion of their food stores, T’Pol had suggested they investigate the wreckage of the train in order to hopefully replenish their supplies. Tucker insisted on them venturing out at night, despite her night blindness, and T’Pol finally agreed that it was the most logical course of action.

Now, however, she wasn’t so sure.

“I think this is a truck,” Charles whispered as he drew abreast to one of the overturned cargo containers. T’Pol frowned when he let go of her hand and she instinctively took a step closer to him. “Yeah,” he repeated a moment later, “definitely a truck. Looks a little like an ambulance from World War Two.” He glanced in her direction. “If I can get this thing runnin’,” he said softly, “I really think we should ditch the ATV.” At her look, he shrugged. “Yeah, yeah,” he said, “I know it’ll draw more attention than the trike, but at least with this thing we can carry some actual supplies.”

“Can you?” T’Pol asked, shuffling closer to him in an attempt to make out the vehicle he was referring to. Like the trike, the ambulance shared the three-wheeled frame, though it bore only a single wheel in the front and a pair of extraordinarily thick ones in the aft. The truck bed was enclosed, no doubt to provide cover for the wounded it was meant to transport, but she doubted there was sufficient space for more than a single patient and the attending medic. Still, she had to admit that the extra cargo space and the possibility of a sleeping cot would be greatly appreciated. An unusual symbol was emblazoned upon the side of the vehicle: three concentric, orange circles of equal size oriented in such a way that they would be centered upon the angles of an unseen equilateral triangle. Currently, the truck was tipped over on its side and, based on what little T’Pol could see, appeared to have been knocked free from the freight container when the train derailed. “Repair it, that is?” she added, purposely speaking in her native tongue to test his comprehension.

“I have absolutely no idea,” Charles replied. She froze in place at the feel of his hand upon her waist, but the protest she was about to voice at his audacity died when he pulled her scanner free. Charles did not seem to notice. “We’ll need to roll it over, though,” he murmured as he began circling the vehicle. T’Pol followed without hesitation, her eyes as wide as possible.
“That could be difficult,” she remarked, wincing when she stumbled over something unseen. “There are only two of us and it appears to be quite heavy.” Charles stopped so abruptly to face her that she nearly collided into him.

“I thought you Vulcans were supposed to be really strong,” he said, and T’Pol could hear the tension in his voice.

“We’re not that strong,” she retorted wryly. His answering chuckle was soft, but sounded forced and did nothing to soothe the knot of worry twisting within her stomach.

A moment later, one of the moons peeked through the cloud cover, bathing the entire valley in a pearly luminescence that gave the fractured landscape an eerie, almost unreal sense to it. T’Pol’s breath caught at the horrific sights before her and she suddenly understood Charles’ discomfort. Bodies, broken and mangled, littered the entire field of battle. Most were covered in a soft blanket of snow and ice, which explained the general lack of smell; she could only imagine what this valley would smell like once the region warmed and the cold could no longer slow decomposition. T’Pol counted twelve off-road vehicles in various states of disrepair scattered throughout the combat zone; only four of them appeared to be of the same style as the one she and Tucker had acquired months earlier. Even more ominous was the presence of a large tracked vehicle at the very edge of the forest; once, it had likely been an armored personnel carrier, but with the damage it had received, it was little more than scrap metal.

“I think I can get it runnin’ again,” Charles declared as he stepped closer to her. T’Pol could not help but to notice that he kept his eyes firmly locked on her or the ambulance, as if he were attempting to ignore the charnel field they were standing in. “But I’m gonna need some more light,” he continued. “Can we risk it?”

“We have no other choice,” T’Pol said in response. She reached for the scanner and he relinquished it without comment. For a moment, she frowned at the fluctuating life signs detected by the device – they were weak and thready, almost as if the scanner could not quite determine what to make of them – but the lack of significant biological signatures within one hundred meters eased her concern. Programming the scanner to alert her should new life signs enter the detection zone, she attached it to her belt and turned her attention back to Charles.

“You know,” he said as he tested the stability of the ambulance, “this reminds me of my junior year in high school.” Pushing hard against the vehicle, he nodded for her to do the same. “Me and a bunch of guys went to Interlachen and ended up with two trucks, a bus and a car in Chipco Lake.” T’Pol raised an eyebrow as they let the ambulance rock back before applying more force.

“How did they get into the lake?” she asked, knowing she really shouldn’t ask. Tucker flashed her a grin that lit up his face.

“Now that is a really good story,” he replied. “It was all my buddy Tom’s fault, since he brought his pet gator into the dorms…”

Several minutes – and one incredibly unlikely tale of juvenile misbehavior – later, the truck was back in its normal upright position. T’Pol checked her scanner once more.

“I am detecting no coolant leaks,” she said once the sweep was complete, “and the fuel tank is full.” Charles nodded.

“Ignition system looks fine,” he offered. “Can I start her up?” T’Pol gave her scanner another look, frowning at the continuing instability of the readings. She spent a moment trying to isolate the abnormalities without success.
“No life signs detected,” she finally declared. Charles nodded before scrambling into the driver’s seat. A moment later, the truck’s engine rumbled to life.

“You keep an eye on the engine,” Tucker said as he slid out of the vehicle, “and I’ll start lookin’ for supplies.” That had been the condition Charles insisted upon for ‘allowing’ her to accompany him tonight rather than venture forth alone – he had threatened to sneak out when she was asleep if she did not agree to it – and his concern about her safety was both frustrating and oddly touching.

“Do not venture too far,” she instructed coolly before offering him her scanner. “I would prefer it if you did not get lost.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Charles said with a smirk. Even with the limited light available, T’Pol could see his amusement fade quickly as he glanced at the corpses strewn about. He visibly pushed aside his emotions – she felt a flash of pride at how well he had taken to the lessons she’d offered but quickly suppressed it – and focused on the task at hand.

Suddenly, the scanner chirped softly and Charles froze in place. A second beep followed the first as he hurriedly offered the device to T’Pol – she accepted it with a touch more haste than was entirely appropriate for a Vulcan – before drawing his phase pistol.

“Faint life signs,” T’Pol declared, pointing as she spoke. “Approximately three meters in that direction.”

“How did you miss it?” Charles demanded. He crouched alongside the ambulance, his weapon at the ready, and peered into the darkness to find the source of the signal. T’Pol joined him.

“I do not know,” she replied. Even now, the scanner was displaying wildly fluctuating readings. Worry suddenly washed over her: what if the device was damaged? She would need to carefully examine it in the light of day at the earliest opportunity.

“It’s a person,” Tucker announced. “There’s somebody alive out there.” As if in response to his comment, a pained moan echoed across the valley, muted by the noise of the idling engine. Before she could reply, he darted forward, keeping low as he moved. The urge to curse died in her throat – she should have known that Charles’ natural empathy would cause him to act without thinking – and T’Pol reached into the cab of the truck to turn the engine off. A heartbeat later, she began creeping forward, eyes straining to make out shapes in the dimness.

She found Charles mere seconds later, kneeling alongside a girl barely out of puberty but wearing a distinctive uniform. The child’s wounds were horrific – shrapnel had perforated her torso and abdomen, spilling her intestines out and into the snow. Fractured ribs were exposed to the freezing weather. Blood was everywhere. T’Pol could not fathom how this girl had survived as long as she had, not with the wounds she had sustained in a firefight two days old.

“We cannot help her,” T’Pol murmured in English. “Even Doctor Phlox could not save her.” Charles grimaced, but remained where he knelt, holding onto the girl’s hand and stroking her hair. T’Pol hesitated, momentarily unsure what they should do. Abandoning the badly injured girl was the logical course of action, but she knew that her companion would see it as unnecessarily cruel.

For that matter, T’Pol did not think she could abandon someone to perish in this way.

“No one should die like this,” Charles said, his voice thick with emotion.

“Hurts,” the girl whimpered. “Hurts … bad…” Her face was twisted in agony, a hideous mask of torment that forced T’Pol to look away. Sense memories long thought to have been locked away...
suddenly assailed the subcommander – the stench of seared flesh and smoke, the screams of the dead and dying, the heat of flame licking her skin – and T’Pol closed her eyes. She was stronger than this! Her muscles trembled as she struggled for control.

The whine of a phase pistol discharge snapped her head around, and she stared at Charles with wide eyes. With an expression so resolute that a kolinahr master would have been pleased, he stood, the weapon clenched tightly in his left hand. As he awkwardly holstered the sidearm, T’Pol could see that the selector switch on the pistol was set to ‘kill.’ He turned away without a comment but barely managed a dozen steps before dropping to his knees in the snow and vomiting loudly. Unsure how to offer aid, T’Pol joined him, wincing at the acrid stench of the regurgitated matter as she knelt alongside her companion.

“You did her a service,” she said cautiously. “Her injuries were too severe … the pain would have been excruciating.”

“I know,” Charles replied. “God, I know.” He ground the palms of his hands against his eyes, as if he were trying to force the memory away. Hesitantly, T’Pol reached out and placed her own hand upon his shoulder. Tucker leaned toward her, his entire body shaking, before abruptly straightening. He rose quickly. “We need to get those supplies and get the hell outta here,” he said. T’Pol nodded as she stood.

“Agreed,” she said. She did not bother asking him if he required assistance, and instead simply followed him through the darkness as he retraced his steps to the derailed train.

They worked in relative silence for nearly two hours, recovering more than enough equipment and fuel to keep them on the road for some time. When they found the bulk of the supplies they needed already gathered in a central location, T’Pol theorized that the guerillas who had attacked the train in the first place attempted to do exactly what she and Charles were doing, but had been caught unprepared for the military’s response. Tucker merely grunted in response.

A third hour passed before they had retrieved all of their belongings from the cave and secured them within the ambulance. Trip stared at the entrance of the cavern, an expression on his face that T’Pol could not begin to comprehend. He gave her a sidelong look, his eyes suddenly old.

“I’m afraid this planet is gonna kill us, T’Pol,” he said softly. She blinked before stepping closer to him, consciously invading his personal space so she could rest her hand upon his shoulder.

“Only if we let it,” she replied. “Together we are greater than the sum of both of us.” He offered a wan smile that did not touch his eyes, and T’Pol hoped he could not see through her bluster.

Because deep within her katra, suppressed under layers of iron control, she was terrified that he was correct.
He always did his best thinking in the sweet spot.

Legs crossed and hands interlocked behind his head, Travis Mayweather stared at the small porthole Commander Tucker had installed several months after they left Earth the first time. Beyond it, Travis could see part of the Kreetassan homeworld as Enterprise slowly crossed the planet’s terminator and into the nightside. Beyond the brown and white orb, a glittering field of stars burned and twinkled like a billion diamonds, each as precious as the other. A feather of red and blue and green from a distant nebula drifted into view as the starship continued her silent journey, and Mayweather blew out a soft breath at the beauty of the sight.

This was why he had joined Starfleet.

At the moment, he needed every reminder he could find. In the month or so since Ambassador Soval joined the crew, Travis had found himself the unwilling prize in a constant tug of war between the Vulcan and Captain Archer. At first, Mayweather rather enjoyed the newfound attention, especially since he’d often felt like little more than a glorified chauffeur, but in recent weeks, it had turned positively stifling. The limited free time in his schedule vanished as Captain Archer began scheduling new duties for him, or the ambassador cornered him with quizzes about his experiences as a Boomer. Even worse were the breakfasts that had become a routine occurrence; nothing in his short life had prepared him for the sheer discomfort of sitting at a small table with a Vulcan and a captain talking at him rather than to him. Only the glint of sympathy in Commander Hernandez’s eyes kept him from going completely mad.

And he still didn’t understand what either of the two expected to get out of driving him up the damned wall.

To his utter lack of surprise, Travis found most of his fellow officers and crewmen did not envy his position in the slightest, no matter how much personal instruction he was receiving from the commanding officer of the ship. More often than not, his crewmates would cover for him when he was desperately trying to keep out of sight of either Archer or Soval. Some, like Hoshi or Petty Officer Rostov, had become veritable life savers as neither would hesitate to sweep in and rescue him if they found him cornered by one of the two crazy people stalking him; Rostov especially was good at creating engineering problems that only Mayweather could help him solve and Travis had already promised to name his firstborn after the petty officer. Unfortunately, there were also those who would intervene only to egg the insanity on – Lieutenant Commander Reed was especially bad about that, though Travis suspected it was mostly due to the armoury officer’s lingering annoyance at an especially humiliating practical joke Mayweather had played on him some months earlier involving a snipe hunt for imaginary ship components.

Tonight, though, the troubles Travis had with his captain and a grumpy, old Vulcan were barely a blip on his internal radar. Tonight, every gram of his being was focused on a letter he’d received from his mother.
Tonight, he was grieving for the loss of his father.

There weren’t any tears at the moment though Travis suspected that when they did come, they would cripple him – he had never been good at dealing with loss, and could still remember how he completely shut down when his grandmother passed away so many years ago. So instead, he stared at the starfield as he struggled to comprehend a world without his father in it. Part of him understood that he was in shock, that it wouldn’t last forever, but he honestly didn’t know what to do that didn’t involve curling up in a ball someplace cold and dark or crawling into a bottle of something that would normally be used to clean engine parts. He didn’t have anyone to talk to right now – Hoshi was still on the planet with the captain, Rostov was busy trying to keep Enterprise from eating Commander Kelby alive, and Trip, the one person he really wanted to talk to, was dead – so Travis had retreated to the sole place aboard the ship that still felt like someplace safe so he could simply turn his brain off. Life could be dealt with later, once he was able to start thinking straight again, once he wasn’t on the verge of sobbing like a baby.

Travis didn’t know how long he floated there, untouched by the harsh constraints of gravity or the terrible truth that he would never be able to apologize to his dad for the last argument they’d had. He lost himself in the endless blanket of stars that stretched into infinity, a sight so perfect, so pure, that he couldn’t help but to smile. The only thing that would make it even better, he mused, is if he was out there now, in only an environment suit or a tricked out shuttlepod, dancing through the darkness without a single care in the world.

“You stood me up.”

The unexpected voice caused him to jump in surprise, and he half-twisted in place to find Hoshi slowly drifting up from the hatch, a bemused expression on her face. She was dressed in exercise clothes, and her hair was damp with sweat. Her face was glowing from recent exertions and it gave her a sensual appearance he doubted she was even aware of. Swallowing hard, Travis jerked his eyes away from her; she hated it when men leered and he didn’t want her to think of him as merely another guy.

Well, that wasn’t exactly true. Just mostly true. Mind out of the gutter, Mayweather, he reminded himself.

“Did we have a date?” he asked with a forced smile. Her sudden appearance made him realize that he couldn’t hide in here forever. Already, his mind was starting to recover from the state of shock he’d been in since reading that damned letter, and soon, the tears would come.

“You, me, the gym,” Hoshi retorted as she held out a hand and caught one of the protruding ledges to arrest her momentum. “You were going to help me with my aikido throws?” At his continued silence, she grimaced. “I had to get Tomlinson from the Armoury to help and he gets … grabby when I’m tossing him around.” Travis grunted in amusement at the mental image of her beating up the ex-linebacker in question. “When you didn’t show up to dinner,” she said, “I figured Soval must have cornered you somewhere since the captain was with me.”

“I’ve successfully dodged Ambassador Cranky all day,” Travis said. His eyes instinctively sought out the viewport and the stars beyond. “Any news?”

“We should be breaking orbit tomorrow,” Hoshi replied hesitantly. Though she didn’t say it out loud, Travis could hear the unspoken ‘finally’ in her tone. He completely agreed; they’d already been here for a week longer than planned, and everyone was itching to get away from this planet. The captain particularly seemed to be on the verge of a mental breakdown as he carefully navigated the minefield that was Kreetassan culture, especially as the story about how he saved the minister grew out of proportion. At last count, the story was that there were twelve Klingons and Archer fought them
single-handedly before completing the greeting ceremony. Twice.

Out of the corner of his eye, Travis could see Hoshi studying him with a worried frown. “Starfleet Command wants us to check out a trinary system about three weeks away,” she said slowly.

“Why?”

“The stars are supposed to be orbiting a black hole or something.” She placed a hand on his arm. “Is something wrong, Travis?” The concern in her voice nearly broke him and he closed his eyes.

“Got a letter from Horizon with the morning data dump from Earth,” he revealed after a moment. Hoshi’s fingers tightened around his bicep, a reminder that she was here and willing to listen. The fog that had enveloped him began to lift. “My dad died,” Travis finally said. His eyes watered and his nose burned. *I’m not going to cry,* he told himself.

“Oh, God,” Hoshi said with a gasp. She pulled him closer and wrapped both of her arms around him. Her warmth seeped into him but still he shivered. “I’m so sorry, Travis!”

“I didn’t even know he was sick,” Travis admitted, fighting for control as his spoke. A fat tear trickled down his face. “And now he’s gone and I can’t tell him how much...” He trailed off, unable to continue as his throat closed up. Hoshi tightened her hold on him, her own eyes gleaming wetly.

It was too much.

The tears came before he could fight them down, and he clung to Hoshi. She whispered soothing words as he lost it, speaking in a language he didn’t need to understand. Her arm stroked his back while he wept silently.

“Oh,” a masculine voice said from the open hatch, “I’m sorry.” Travis didn’t look up from where he embraced Hoshi – he was only vaguely aware of the comments in the first place – but Hoshi shifted slightly, as if she were craning her neck to see who had interrupted them.

“Travis,” she whispered, “we need to get out of here.” There wasn’t any censure or embarrassment in her voice for being caught in such a compromising position no matter how innocent it may have actually been, and for that, he gave silent thanks. The one thing he did not need right now was for her to remind him that she saw him only as her best friend on this damned ship. “You haven’t eaten,” she pointed out when he didn’t move, “so let’s hit the mess hall and you can tell me all about your dad.”

“Okay,” he replied. Forcing himself to let go of her, he wiped his eyes with the palm of his left hand and blinked away errant moisture. They pushed off together, landing lightly near the now closed hatch, and Travis gestured for her to take the lead. He followed a moment later, surprised to find the corridor empty. “Who was that?” he wondered aloud.

“Commander Kelby,” Hoshi answered. “He likes to visit the sweet spot when he’s working on engineering problems. Helps him think.” Travis tried not to frown.

“And you know this how?” He thought he was successful in keeping the jealousy from his voice, but Hoshi gave him a sidelong look so he probably hadn’t done as good a job as he thought.

“He told me,” she said before giving him a discreet shove in the direction of the nearest turbolift. “Food first,” the communications officer ordered, “and then we talk.”

“I don’t want to talk,” Travis groused as she fell in step beside him. “I think I’d rather get drunk.”
“And when has that ever helped the situation?” Hoshi asked. He shrugged.

“It’s not supposed to.” A thought suddenly occurred to him, slicing through the guilt and sadness churning in his stomach. “Do you think,” Travis wondered, “if I showed up for duty plastered, they would leave me alone for a couple of days?” He didn’t need to identify the ‘they’ he spoke of, and Hoshi smiled, the expression momentarily wiping away the pain.

“It might,” she conceded slowly, “but it might also get you a week in the brig.”

“I could use the sleep.”

“Food first,” Hoshi repeated. “Then we can think about getting drunk and swapping stories about your dad.” She linked her arm with his. “I’m pretty sure Commander Reed has some premium hootch in his quarters we can steal.”

“I don’t think he’ll give it up easily,” Travis muttered. Hoshi grinned.

“Then we’ll have to kick his ass,” she declared. “I think I can take him.” Travis couldn’t help it.

He laughed.
Erika Hernandez fumed.

She had been in a foul mood long before entering the captain’s mess – personnel problems continued to plague her and ongoing difficulties with Enterprise’s ever-temperamental engines had already thoroughly ruined her day – but the antics of her commanding officer and the Vulcan liaison as they fenced over Junior Lieutenant Mayweather were making her see red.

For the first time in her career, Erika wanted to smack a superior officer.

“Have you given any thought to the admiral’s offer, Travis?” Captain Archer asked. His plate was loaded with foodstuffs clearly intended to annoy Ambassador Soval – scrambled eggs, bacon, ham, and pancakes dripping with syrup – but he was only playing with his fork and seemed barely interested in actually eating. “Teaching at Starfleet Training would do wonders for your career.”

“Such a course of action would be highly illogical,” Soval interrupted. “Lieutenant Mayweather’s career would be ill served by choosing to relocate at this time.” The Vulcan placed his fork atop his empty plate. “He should instead focus on acquiring diplomatic instruction that would aid him in future promotion.”

“Instructing young recruits is hardly a waste of time,” the captain said. “And while he’s on Earth, he could always look into continued development courses.”

Fury flared within Mayweather’s eyes and he glared at his plate. He visibly swallowed and Erika knew he was a heartbeat away from exploding. She acted first, not willing to let him throw away such a promising career because of a pair of idiots who were more interested in making jabs at one another.

“Lieutenant,” she said, her voice cutting through the tense silence that had enveloped the mess as the two combatants waited for his response. His eyes came up, meeting hers, and she gave him an understanding nod. Relief was visibly stamped upon his face. “You may go.”

He was up and through the door before Archer or Soval could react. Both of them turned on her with identical expressions of muted outrage, but Erika felt her own temper explode.

“Lieutenant Mayweather is off limits to the both of you,” she snapped harshly, “effective immediately.” They stared at her with shock as the anger that had been building for weeks surged. “If the two of you had bothered pulling your heads out of your asses,” she growled, “you might have noticed that Travis hasn’t been himself since before we broke orbit.” Archer blinked, glanced away, and frowned; at the same time, Soval leaned back in his seat and narrowed his eyes.

“He has been … distracted,” the Vulcan remarked.

“That’s because his father just died!” Erika hissed. Both men recoiled in dismay. “But the two of you were too damned busy trying to one-up each other.”
“That will be enough, Erika,” Archer said, a disgusted expression on his face.

“No, sir, it will not,” she retorted. “Both of you should be ashamed of yourselves. He’s just a kid and you had to drag him into this pissing contest of yours!” She slammed her hands down on the table. “Well, enough! If either of you so much as looks at him outside of duty hours, I will forward a report on your actions to Earth and Vulcan.” Erika balled up her fists. “And trust me, gentlemen, you do not want this critique to get out into the open, not after what I’ve seen you put that poor boy through.”

“Are you threatening me, Commander?” Jon asked. He seemed stuck between shock and anger, disgust and outrage, and Erika knew him well enough to recognize that it was all directed inward in this moment. As well he should, she mentally snarled.

“No, sir,” she replied sharply. “I’m promising you.” Erika stood, vibrating with anger, and gave the two men glares. To her immense satisfaction, both of them broke eye contact first, glancing away. A flush of green even crossed Soval’s face. “If you want to speak to the lieutenant while not on duty hours,” she said coldly, “you arrange it with me. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly,” the ambassador stated. “I would like the opportunity to convey my condolences to Mister Mayweather,” he added. Erika crossed her arms.

“I’ll check with him to see if he’s interested in hearing it from you.” She cut her eyes to Jon. “Either of you,” she added. “This bullshit between the two of you ends now,” Erika ordered. “I don’t care whether you have to lock yourselves in a shuttlepod or seal off the gym to beat the crap out of each other or break out the pistols at ten paces, but it ends now.” Without pausing for a response, she stormed around the table and headed toward the door but paused before triggering it. “You’re supposed to be responsible leaders to this crew,” she pointed out. “For God’s sake, try and act like it.”

A moment later, she was out of the captain’s mess and into the main dining facility.

Dozens of eyes were on her, suddenly reminding Erika of how pathetic the soundproofing was for the small dining facility, and she flushed in momentary embarrassment at the realization they had likely overheard her entire rant. Petty Officer Rostov gave her an approving smile before turning back to his meal; it seemed to be a signal of sorts, as every other officer or crewman present followed suit, and Hernandez made careful note of this. She had suspected that Rostov was more important in the social hierarchy than he appeared to be, and this only confirmed it. Idly, she wondered whether he held such a prominent role before Tucker died or if this was new.

Erika was halfway to the door leading to the rest of the ship when she caught sight of Lieutenant Sato and instantly altered her trajectory so she could join the communications officer.

“Good morning, ma’am,” Sato said as Hernandez approached. The younger woman’s eyes sparkled. “And on behalf of Travis,” she added, “thank you.”

“No,” Erika replied as she sank into a seat across from the junior lieutenant, “thank you for bringing this to my attention.” Sato shrugged as if she hadn’t done anything worth merit and it only intensified Erika’s suspicion that the communications officer was closer to Lieutenant Mayweather than was entirely appropriate. With her own history, though, Hernandez didn’t think she could really throw stones and she’d always thought the no-frat policy was intrinsically flawed in the first place. It was like asking humans not to be human. As her thoughts momentarily flashed to the past and the aftermath of breaking regs, she shot a scowl in the direction of the closed door leading to the executive dining facility. “It will not happen again,” she said. “Not while I’m the first officer.”
“Good to know, ma’am.” Sato’s smile grew. “Travis will be glad they’ve backed off. He was getting a little desperate.”

“I wish he’d have come to me,” Erika said. “Let him know my door is always open if he needs someone to talk to who isn’t going to pull this crap.” She jerked a thumb in the direction of the captain’s mess.

“Will do, Commander,” the communications officer said before leaning forward. “And may I be the first to say, ma’am,” she added with a broad grin, “that was awesome.” Erika laughed.

“You just need to know how to handle them, Lieutenant,” she replied. Sato grinned.

“It’s Hoshi, ma’am,” she said. Erika smiled.

“I’ll keep that in mind, Miss Sato,” she said as she stood. “But if you’ll excuse me,” Hernandez continued, “I’ve still got a ton of paperwork to deal with before my duty shift begins.”

“Ma’am,” Hoshi said by way of goodbye before returning to her meal.

No one stopped her as Erika made her way to the door, though she could feel everyone’s attention on her nonetheless. The moment of relative isolation gave her the chance to reflect on what could have been a very dumb move on her part. She had been blatantly disrespectful to her commanding officer, refused a direct order, and insulted an ambassador of a foreign power, all before breakfast was over. Maybe I should go down to sickbay and punch Phlox, she mused darkly, just to round out the list of charges. Shaking her head, she stopped before the turbolift and pressed to summons button. A whisper of movement announced the arrival of Petty Officer Rostov as he took up a waiting position beside her.

“I know you’ve already heard it before, ma’am,” he said, “but welcome to Enterprise. I think you’re going to do fine.”

Erika had never heard more beautiful praise.
Trip woke with a scream.

His heart pounded loudly as he struggled to breathe through the fog of adrenaline-laced terror coursing through him and, for an impossibly long moment, he had no idea where he was, only that it was dark, cold and made of metal. Accusing eyes stared at him from the darkness and Trip covered his face with his hands in an attempt to block out the bloody visage of the Ekosi girl he had murdered eleven days earlier. She was still there, though, a silent ghost who glared at him with silent fury at having been robbed of her future. The young soldier he had shot on their second day here on this planet stood alongside her, joined suddenly by the police officer from the mesa city. All three stared at him, faces creased with dark expressions.

The sensation of a warm hand upon his shoulder suddenly grounded him in the now, and Trip instinctively reached out to place his own fingers atop those of T’Pol’s. He drew in a shuddering breath as he clung to her offered comfort. Tears pricked his eyes, threatening to spill out, and he struggled for control.

“Relax,” T’Pol murmured, her lips so close to his ear that he could feel the warmth of her breath. “I am here.”

“I’m okay,” Trip replied. He pushed himself off the cot, suddenly desperate to get out of the ambulance and away from the intoxicating presence of the woman at his side. It wasn’t her fault – she didn’t even seem to have a libido and was interested only in sharing the body warmth they needed to survive in these temperatures, while his own desires were rapidly spiraling out of control – but he had to put some space between them before he did something they would both regret.

Cold air burst into the ambulance as he kicked open the rear door and jumped through the hatchway. Snow crunched under his feet as he landed, and Trip quickly grabbed the door to keep from slipping on the slick ice beneath the dusting of white powder. He bit back a curse at his stupidity – at least he remembered his damned boots this time – before carefully closing the door behind him and turning away from the parked vehicle. His feet had a mind of their own and he suddenly found himself several meters away from the ambulance, staring at the landscape stretching out before him with wide eyes.

It reminded him a lot of Montana, with distant snow-capped mountains ringing the valley they were currently hiding in like a mighty wall. Coniferous trees, shrouded in snow and ice, dominated the view and stretched out for as far as he could see. The road they had been following for eight days vanished behind a particularly impressive rocky outcrop, but reappeared a hundred meters or so away as it curved up and around a gentle slope. Overhead, one of the planetary moons shined brightly in the pre-dawn sky.

“Charles?” T’Pol’s voice was soft, but carried nonetheless. He tried to ignore how unbelievably sexy she sounded this early in the morning but was only partially successful.
“I’m fine,” he said with forced levity. When she drew alongside him, a blanket wrapped around her body and her hair disheveled, Trip felt a pang of longing shoot through him. He quickly looked away, hoping against hope that she hadn’t seen his expression.

“You were dreaming again,” T’Pol said. She shuffled closer to him and Trip could feel her eyes, peeling away his secrets. He sighed.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “I keep seein’ that girl…” T’Pol gave him a look of understanding so intense, so profound, that it caused him to close his eyes.

“You did the right thing, Charles,” she said, once more dropping her hand upon his shoulder.

“I know.” Trip blew out a frustrated breath. “But I still-”

“Wonder if there was not something else you could do?” T’Pol asked, gently interrupting him. She glanced away, her eyes suddenly distant, and Trip couldn’t help but to study her profile. “You know that you took the only option available,” she continued, her voice still low and more emotional than he recalled ever hearing it, “but you cannot help but to wonder if you overlooked something, if there was anything you could have done that would have caused things to end differently.” She frowned slightly. “But no matter how many times you tell yourself that you did the right thing, your guilt remains.” Trip swallowed the lump that was suddenly in his throat.

“Sounds like you’ve been in my shoes before,” he offered hesitantly. Getting her to reveal things about her past was like pulling teeth and he didn’t want to upset the fragile relationship that had been building between them for weeks by pushing too hard. T’Pol was an intensely private woman, and if she didn’t want to tell him something, she wouldn’t, no matter how badly he pestered her about it.

“Your shoes?” the Vulcan asked with a cocked eyebrow. She glanced briefly at his feet before comprehension flickered in her eyes and she gave him a long, measuring look before finally nodding slightly. “My last mission with the Ministry of Intelligence ended … poorly.”

“Is that why you started working for Soval?” Trip asked.

“No,” came her immediate response. “My tenure with the ambassador came many years later, after I served aboard the Seleya as deputy science office.” Trip did some quick calculations and added a new note to the mental equation he thought of as T’Pol’s Mystery Age. Based on the things she’d let slip, he had a pretty good ballpark for how old she was but set it aside for the moment.

“So, what happened?” For a moment, he was afraid that he had overstepped his boundaries, that she would shut him down or tell him that it was classified. Instead, her expression went blank; it was her Pure Logic face, the mask she wore when she was consciously focusing on not displaying even a hint of emotion.

“I was assigned to apprehend a Vulcan dissident responsible for a number of terrorist acts,” T’Pol revealed. “Until he began murdering innocents, he was a highly regarded social scientist.” At Trip’s surprised look, she continued. “His ethics and judgment were impaired, but his logic was not.” She frowned. “He was very ... brutal.”

“Logic without compassion is just an excuse for tyranny,” Trip said, though he couldn’t remember where he’d heard the quote, and T’Pol gave him a wide-eyed look of momentary amazement. It vanished almost immediately, and she nodded.

“When I finally located him,” she continued a moment later, “he nearly escaped in a groundcar loaded with explosives he intended to detonate during a kolinahr ceremony later that day.”
“Nearly escaped,” Trip repeated. He had a terrible feeling he knew what was coming.

“I shot him as he fled,” T’Pol said. “He died instantly, but lost control of his vehicle.” She turned soulful young-old eyes upon him. “It struck an outlying building and detonated on impact. Thirty-four civilians were killed and seventy-three were critically injured.”

“Oh, God,” Trip whispered in horror. Suddenly, the guilt he was struggling with over a handful of deaths seemed insignificant in comparison.

“If he had not been stopped,” she continued, “the number of fatalities would have been at least four times that, so I attempted to seek solace in that fact.” She pursed her lips, mashing them together tightly as she stared at the sinking moon. “Unfortunately, I was … less successful than I would have liked and was forced to seek counseling.”

“Did it help?”

“Eventually.” T’Pol smoothed away the last hints of emotion. “I was taught methods that allowed me to … segregate parts of my mind so I could focus on resolving the guilt in incremental stages. As I reached equilibrium, I was able to remove these partitions and focus on integrating the next level of grief with my control.”

“Like a dam in a river,” Trip mused.

“An apt comparison,” T’Pol noted with approval. “Once my functionality was restored, I realized I had no desire to continue serving with the Ministry of Intelligence and requested an assignment with the fleet.”

Trip was silent for a moment. “Do you think you could teach me this partitioning thing?” he asked.

“No,” was her instant response. “Allow me to explain, Charles,” she urged when he looked away, suddenly angry and depressed at the same time.

“My name is Trip,” he snapped. He wanted to get away from her, away from the unspoken implication he wasn’t smart enough to handle this Vulcan mojo, but she tightened her grip on his shoulder, suddenly reminding him that she had never removed it.

“The Fullara is not a thing to enter into lightly,” T’Pol said, stepping into his field of view as she spoke. “It is a last resort for Vulcans, one chosen only when all other options have been exhausted.” When Trip didn’t reply, she seemed to relax fractionally. “A petitioner is utterly reliant upon the Masters when they enter the second stage of the process,” she said. “I was barely able to feed, or clothe, or even relieve myself without one of the priests there to direct me.” Trip winced at that mental image, and T’Pol nodded. “And it requires complete, absolute trust between the petitioner and the Master.”

“I see your point,” Trip remarked. “But I do trust you.”

“And I trust you, Charles,” she replied, her eyes suddenly glittering with amusement at the emphasis she placed upon his given name. He had to grin at the teasing in her voice. “After all,” she said, “you are the only one I have ever told about the Fullara.” Trip blinked in surprise.

“Really?” he asked. “Soval doesn’t know?”

“He may suspect it was the reason I visited Gol,” she replied, “but he has never asked me for the truth of the matter and I have never offered to explain.”
“What about the cap’n?” Trip asked, the words tumbling out of his mouth before he could stop them. Inwardly, he kicked himself when she gave him the Eyebrow of Confusion.

“Why would I tell Captain Archer?” she queried as she retracted her hand from his shoulder; he instantly missed the warmth. “Knowing the specifics of this event would have accomplished nothing beyond causing him to question my abilities to act as his first officer.” T’Pol frowned. “You told me that you trusted me,” she said, “yet you immediately questioned the truth of a statement I made to you. Why would you assume I was deceiving you?” Trip grimaced.

“I’m sorry, T’Pol,” he said. “I’m not thinkin’ straight – haven’t been in a couple of days.” The Vulcan nodded.

“Meditation will help,” she said. “I predict we have just over an hour before dawn. We should use this time wisely.”

“Great,” Trip muttered, his complete lack of enthusiasm plain for her to see. He hated meditating. “Can’t wait.”

“That is a lie,” T’Pol said with a hint of a smirk – or was he just projecting what he wanted to think? With her, he could never tell.

“How long were you aboard the Seleya?” he asked in an attempt to change the subject as he followed her back to the ambulance. The cold was beginning to seep into his bones, and from the way she was nestling herself in the blanket wrapped around her, Trip suspected his companion was feeling it even worse.

“Why?” she asked. Trip grinned as he watched her climb into the ambulance before following her.

“Just tryin’ to get a picture of your past,” he said.

“Why are you so interested in my age?” T’Pol wondered. She sat down on the single cot present in the vehicle as Trip pulled the door shut, closing out the foul weather.

“Curiosity, I guess,” Trip replied. “You’ve dropped enough hints for me to guess that you’re between sixty and seventy, but every time I look at you, I see a woman not even in her thirties yet.” He shrugged as he took a seat beside her on the cot. “It fascinates me, that’s all.” At her continuing silence, he gave her a worried look. “I don’t mean any harm,” he said quickly.

“I know,” T’Pol said. She studied the floor for a moment. “To Vulcans,” she continued a moment later, “certain information is considered … intimate.”

“Sonuvabitch,” Trip muttered. He slid off the cot and knelt in front of her, taking care not to actually invade her personal space. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know.”

“We are from different cultures, Charles,” she said. “It is inevitable that that we will encounter different social customs as we learn more about one another.” She met his eyes. “Your apology is accepted.”

“That’ll teach me to watch where I stick my fingers, right?” he asked with a slight, hopeful smile. T’Pol cocked an eyebrow at the comment, but Trip could see humor dancing in her eyes.

“I am gratified that you are learning,” she deadpanned, “but it will not get you out of meditation.”

“Damn. There’s no foolin’ you, is there?” He reclaimed his seat on the cot, but turned to face her instead of letting his legs dangle over the side. The first day they’d meditated on the cot, Trip had
learned not to sit that way as his legs had gone to sleep from lack of blood. T’Pol hadn’t commented at the time, but he was convinced she had been laughing hysterically on the inside. She shifted in place as well, turning to face him as she crossed her legs and assuming a lotus position that made his body hurt just looking at it. Trip didn’t bother trying to follow suit – he suspected he’d break something important if he did – and instead simply closed his eyes.

“T’Pol?” he said after a moment of silence. He couldn’t explain how, but Trip somehow knew she was looking at him. “Am I ever gonna get you to call me Trip?” he asked.

“The future is full of surprises,” she replied calmly. He grinned.

“That wasn’t a ‘no.’”

“It was not a ‘yes’ either.” Trip chuckled, suddenly in a better mood than he had been for a week. He opened his eyes slightly so he could watch her.

“But it wasn’t a ‘no.’ That’s the most important part.”

“Until you can remain awake for an entire neuropressure session, Charles,” T’Pol said, “I will not even entertain the notion.”

“But you will think about it, right?”

“Close your eyes, Charles,” T’Pol ordered, “and focus on meditation. We have a long day ahead of us.”
An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 135 days (118 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's August, 2152.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

T'Pol’s hand trembled.

She did not think that her companion saw her momentary weakness – at the moment, Trip was hunched over the exposed circuitry of her scanner trying to locate the reason for fluctuating readings on the device – but she quickly thrust the offending limb behind her back to hide it from view just in case. A deeply buried part of her psyche moaned in distress at what the spasms meant, even as a greater part silently acknowledged that she had been fortunate the symptoms were only now beginning to manifest. By her calculations, over four months (Earth standard) had passed since her last treatment, and Phlox was no longer available to lend his medical brilliance toward slowing the onset of the condition. Though it was completely illogical, she had desperately hoped the Denobulan had – what was the human phrase? – pulled the proverbial monkey out of the hat and developed a miracle cure.

Obviously, he had not.

Carefully smoothing out any hint of emotion from her expression, T'Pol began making adjustments to her mental timetable. Now that she knew the Pa’nar was not in remission as she’d hoped, she would have to push Charles even harder, would have to redouble her efforts to turn him into a highly skilled operative capable of surviving any situation he found himself in. It would be difficult, especially with her concealing the nature of her haste, but if anyone could do this, Charles Tucker could.

She only hoped he would not hate her once he learned what she was hiding from him.

“Damn,” the subject of her musings muttered. Seated on the cot with his legs hanging over the side, Charles had the lid of a crate on his lap acting like a makeshift table for the scanner. He leaned back, shaking his head. “I was afraid of this,” he said before looking up at her. “It looks like the power cell was damaged somehow.” T’Pol leaned forward to look at the partially disassembled device on the makeshift table.

“Can you repair it?” she asked, noting once more the sudden tension that caused the muscles in his neck and shoulders to tighten. It was ironic, T’Pol reflected as she shuffled back a half step, how sensitive he had become to her invasion of his personal space. When Enterprise first deployed, it had been she who always seemed discomfited by his proximity, yet at some point, the situation had reversed. She wondered why.

“With the tools we’ve got here,” Tucker said, gesturing toward the crude array of wrenches meant entirely for the maintenance of a primitive internal combustion engine, “I sincerely doubt it.” He ran his fingers through his lengthening hair and sighed. “We need a dedicated electronics repair kit. Something with a soldering iron, some tweezers, a magnifyin’ glass…” Trip gestured to the carefully stacked duffel bags and wooden crates containing the supplies they had obtained. “We’ve already
been through this stuff twice without finding what we need.”

“Then we shall seek it elsewhere,” T’Pol declared. “How long until the power cell is completely expended?” She hoped that Charles did not realize that she was more than capable of determining the answer herself; by keeping his mind busy in this way, she was able to prevent him from relapsing into the depression he’d been poised to spiral into.

“Depends on how often we use the scanner.” He pressed his tongue against the side of his mouth as he considered. “If we turn it off and don’t use it at all,” he said, “I figure the battery will hold a charge for at least a year.” Tucker’s expression turned resolute. “But if we keep usin’ it like we have,” he added, “it’ll be a pretty paperweight within a month.”

“Then we adapt,” T’Pol said. She took a seat on an uncomfortable box in front of him and watched silently as he began reassembling the scanner. The precision in his fingers was astounding for a man who came across so bluntly. She had never quite understood the dichotomy.

*Now is not the time to get distracted,* she reminded herself. Charles was relying upon her to teach him how to survive and it was long past time for the lessons to resume.

“How much time has elapsed since we meditated?” T’Pol asked, her voice brisk. He recognized her tone and reacted accordingly. His entire body language … shifted, as if he flipped a switch inside his brain. Although he continued to reassemble the scanner, his eyes closed.

“I estimate … three hours, thirty-six minutes,” he replied. She cleared her throat and he grimaced. “I don’t know the number of seconds,” Tucker admitted.

“Twenty-nine,” she said. “But better. Your sense of timing is much improved.” He smiled, but did not open his eyes. “Seventeen minutes ago,” T’Pol said, “I placed six objects on the dashboard of this vehicle. Describe them.”

“Two rounds from one of the rifles we picked up,” Trip began instantly, “a roll of tape—it was medical tape from your aid kit and not the cheap stuff from mine – that small mirror we cut up yesterday, the metal pin to open the breakfast entrée…” Tucker trailed off as he concentrated on his memory. Suddenly, his eyes snapped open and he grinned at her. “You liar,” he said. “There were only five things on the dash.”

“Very good, Charles.” He beamed at the compliment. “Eyes closed,” she reminded him. He obeyed. “There is an object directly behind you that should not belong. Describe it.” Tucker was silent for a moment before frowning.

“I don’t remember anything out of place back there,” he admitted.

“You aren’t concentrating, Charles,” T’Pol said. “Focus on clearing your mind of clutter as I showed you. Breathe in, breathe out. Allow your thoughts to become an empty space, an expanse of white that stretches on into infinity.” She waited for a long moment as he sat there quietly, his face reflecting the effort it was taking for him to avoid fidgeting. “Now envision a flame. Feed all of your emotions into this fire. Let it consume them.” Another long moment passed, but this time, Charles seemed to be relaxing. T’Pol nodded. “There is an object directly behind you that should not belong,” she repeated. “Describe it.”


“Begin calculating $\pi$ until I tell you to stop,” she instructed as she glanced down and saw that he
was done reassembling the scanner.

“That I can do in my sleep,” he said with a smirk. “Three point one four one five nine two six-”

As he recited the numbers, T’Pol slowly, stealthily reached forward with her left hand and stroked his ear. Charles jerked away from the unexpected sensation with a startled yelp, his knees knocking the makeshift table from his lap and sending the scanner tumbling. Almost casually, T’Pol snatched it out of the air with her other hand and leaned back, meeting his wide eyes with a single, upraised eyebrow.

“You allowed yourself to become distracted,” she told him.

“You tickled my ear!”

“I did,” T’Pol agreed. “You must be capable of divorcing yourself from sensation should the need arise while retaining your cognitive abilities.” She gestured toward his ear. “My hand could have represented a serpent drawn to your body heat but relying on movement – your movement – to know when and where to strike.” Charles swallowed. For the span of a heartbeat, T’Pol allowed herself to feel pity for the lost innocent he had once been. His desires had been so simple, so appealing: to build a warp drive and see the stars. It pained her to be the person molding him into a potential weapon. “I am confident in your ability to master these techniques, Charles,” she said, her words causing him to sigh.

“I’m not,” he admitted. “I’m afraid I’m gonna disappoint you.” T’Pol raised an eyebrow in surprise at how heartfelt he sounded.

“You must cast out fear,” she began.

“Because it’s the mind-killer, right?” Tucker interrupted. “I’ve heard that one before.” T’Pol gave him a confused look. “From Dune?” he asked. “Don’t tell me you haven’t heard of it?”

“Then I will not tell you,” she retorted. Charles grunted and glanced away, his eyes momentarily swimming out of focus as he concentrated. She felt an entirely unVulcan-like sense of pride at her student’s accomplishments as he began reciting from memory.

“I must not fear,” he said. “Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration.” T’Pol felt her eyebrows climb at the pure logic behind the words. “I will face my fear,” Trip continued, an expression of growing surprise on his face. “I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.” He rocked back, a riot of emotions crossing his face.

“Fascinating,” T’Pol murmured. She never would have suspected humanity was capable of something that sounded so profoundly … Vulcan.

“I’ve never been able to remember that whole thing,” Tucker said. “Never.” He shook his head in amazement. “But now, it’s like I’ve got the whole thing runnin’ in my head.” T’Pol nodded.

“That is because you are making progress,” she said. “The mind – human or Vulcan – is capable of far more than you may think. Your preconceptions about what you can and cannot do limit you, so you must cast them aside.”

“I guess so,” Trip said as he seemed to rouse from the momentary stupor he had slipped into. “We’ve still got an hour and a half before it gets too dark to even see,” he remarked with a broad grin. He leaned forward. “What other secret Vulcan mojo can you teach me?” T’Pol steepled her fingers.
“As I promised,” she told him smoothly, “I will teach you all that I know.” She nearly gave into the urge to smile at his sudden eagerness. “I have already taught you things that would lead to my exile from Vulcan, Charles,” she remarked wryly. “Do not expect to learn all of my secrets at once.” His enthusiasm vanished almost instantly.

“I hadn’t thought about it like that,” he said. “I guess it’s a good thing we’re probably never gonna get off this rock, huh?”

“Evidently.” They sat in comfortable silence for long minutes before T’Pol made a decision. She would begin pushing Charles’ hard tomorrow. Tonight, she wanted to remember the Commander Tucker who had championed the ridiculous movie nights on Enterprise, the Commander Tucker who had become the de facto ship’s counselor, the Commander Tucker who had offered her the hand of friendship. “This … Dune. What is it?”

“A movie,” he replied before shifting on the cot to make room for her; it was entirely too small for two people, but the warmth Charles’ body provided during the freezing temperatures at night more than made up for the lack of comfort. T’Pol rose and took her usual place in front of him. “Well,” Trip corrected himself as she folded her legs under her, “a couple of movies actually. It’s been remade a half-dozen times, though I think the one from ten years ago was the best.” He leaned back against the wall of the ambulance and scratched the uncomfortable-looking beard he hadn’t been able to cut off yet. “Based on a book written back in the twentieth century, I think,” he said before abruptly snorting. “Now that I think about it,” he said with a grin, “Dune is right up your alley.” At her upraised eyebrow, he explained. “It’s set on a desert planet, and has these guys called Mentats who are dedicated to pure mathematics and logic.”

“Indeed?”

“It’s about religion, and politics, and all sorts of messy emotions. A real classic.” Tucker crossed his arms. “If … when we get back, I’ll have to get you a copy of the movie.”

“Perhaps a dramatic reading would be more illuminating,” T’Pol interjected, “but I look forward to it nonetheless.” She pulled one of the carefully folded blankets down from where it had been stored and drew it around her shoulders. “In the interim, however,” she said, “you may tell me about this … classic.” Trip nodded.

“Well, it all begins with this boy Paul Atreides…”

Chapter End Notes

FYI, if you haven't actually read "Dune," then something is terribly, horribly wrong with you.
The muted buzz of the oxygen scrubbers was giving him a headache.

Hiding his distaste behind a mask of stoic indifference, Soval stepped through the open doorway leading to the dining facility. Despite his best efforts, he had yet to discover why his human crewmates referred to it as a ‘mess deck’ – it was neither disorganized nor a hall in the proper sense of the word – and was seriously considering a visit to Lieutenant Sato. If anyone aboard Enterprise could explain the etymology of the term, it was she.

Despite the hour, the cafeteria was almost filled to capacity with crewmen and officers who spent more time talking and interacting socially than they did consuming food. The emotions from the assembled humans swelled and thundered like a physical thing, pushing at Soval’s finely honed senses and causing him to inhale sharply as he redoubled his mental shields. Not for the first time since coming aboard Enterprise, he experienced a flash of muted awe directed toward the late Subcommander T’Pol – how in Surak’s name had she managed to survive an entire year without going mad? He himself had been aboard for less than two months and he never failed to end a day without suffering from a crippling headache from the unrestrained emotion that bombarded him like unrelenting thunder. Things were even worse in times like this, when they had narrowly escaped certain death as they had following the incident at the trinary star system. Eager to remind themselves that they were still alive, the humans laughed and played and cavorted like children.

And Soval envied them. Oh, how he envied them.

He pushed the illogical thoughts aside and walked slowly to the line in front of the serving counter. Two of the crewmen in front of him – he recognized the male as part of Lieutenant Commander Reed’s armory team and the female as an engineer, but their names escaped him – did not notice his arrival and continued their heated discussion – or was it an argument? Soval could not quite tell, although he suspected it was actually some form of human mating custom. The third person in the line, however, was quite cognizant of Soval’s presence and gave the ambassador a quick, tight-lipped nod before clearing his throat. He fixed the two bickering crewmen with a look.

“You two done yet?” Petty Officer Rostov asked in a voice that rang with authority. “Make a hole for the ambassador,” he ordered.

“That is not necessary,” Soval began, but the engineering petty officer snorted.

“After you saved our collective asses yesterday?” he asked. “I think it is, sir.” He glanced back at the two crewmen. “Thought I told you to get out of the way,” he said softly.

They got out of the way.

“Subcommander T’Pol seemed to like the pasta,” Rostov said as he gestured for Soval to take his place in the line. “Chef sucks at making plomeek.”
“I heard that!” a voice echoed through the closed doors leading to the kitchen, but Rostov ignored it and continued.

“But he’s a master at making anything resembling pasta taste good.”

“Thank you,” Soval said after a moment. He was unsure exactly how to respond – since he came aboard Enterprise fifty-three days earlier, the only humans who had not treated him with open distrust were Commander Hernandez and Lieutenant Sato, although his own less than agreeable attitude toward the assignment had likely affected how he was perceived – so he opted for cautious gratitude.

He also could not disagree with Petty Officer Rostov’s assessment: the plomeek served on Enterprise was beyond deficient – it was positively criminal.

Since his choices were the recommended pasta or a salad with far too many carrots, Soval selected the former, noting the pleased expression that momentarily flickered across Rostov’s face when he did. On impulse, the ambassador also decided to try the small bowl of fruit, which necessitated his need for another utensil. As he stepped clear of the serving counter, he found Rostov standing next to the beverage dispenser.

“The officers tend to forget this sort of thing,” the petty officer said as he met Soval’s eyes, “so I figure nobody bothered to actually thank you for saving our bacon yesterday.” He smiled. “Welcome aboard, Ambassador,” Rostov added with a smile that was both open and sincere.

Soval blinked.

Humans had never ceased to amaze and confuse him – usually at the same time – and this was no exception. Was this the reason that T’Pol had championed the Terran cause as frequently as she had? This sense of … belonging that only humans seemed truly capable of?

Rostov turned away before Soval could respond and took a seat with several other senior enlisted personnel, leaving the ambassador standing there with his tray and a dozen questions racing through his mind. Soval frowned and took a long moment to study the options available on the beverage dispenser. In the end, he decided on simple water even as he silently acknowledged how seductive it was to have so many choices. On a Vulcan starship, one did not have the luxury of choice and accepted what was present without complaint. It was considered an illogical waste of time to have more than one option. His lips tightened.

T’Pol never had a chance. These humans and their seductive openness …

He sighted Lieutenant Mayweather sitting by himself and made a snap decision to avoid eating in the empty captain’s private dining facility. It was only logical, after all; both Captain Archer and Commander Hernandez were in engineering, conducting one of their weekly spot inspections while consulting with Commander Kelby about the state of repairs in the wake of the singularity incident.

“May I join you, Lieutenant?” Soval asked as he drew abreast of Mayweather. The helmsman was haphazardly stirring his meal around – Soval had no idea what it was supposed to be, only that it seemed to consist mostly of carrots. He visibly jumped at the ambassador’s words and shot a quick, panicked look toward the door before grimacing.

“Sure,” he said, sounding much like he’d prefer to walk across the Forge in only his undergarments Soval bit back a sigh – he and Captain Archer had truly done this young man a disservice in their ridiculously illogical power struggle. While he knew the captain was making every effort to make recompense for their foolishness, until now, the ambassador had not had the opportunity and had, in
fact, made a conscious effort to limit his interactions with Mister Mayweather. As much as Soval hated to admit it, the emotion of shame had been the driving force behind this avoidance.

“Are you recovering well?” he asked as he took the seat across from the lieutenant. Mayweather shrugged – a purely human gesture that could mean so many different things – before returning his attention to the … food before him. Soval raised an eyebrow. “Is there something wrong with your meal?” he inquired after a moment.

“Yeah,” Mayweather muttered. “It’s horrible.” Soval’s eyebrow climbed even higher.

“If the taste is disagreeable,” he asked, “then why are you continuing to eat it?”

“Because Hoshi made it,” the lieutenant revealed glumly. “She thinks it’s great but honestly? I wouldn’t feed this sludge to a Nausicaan.” Despite his best efforts, Soval felt his lips twitch.

“I see,” he said instead. Mayweather glanced up.

“You’re a diplomat,” he mused. “How do you tell somebody their cooking should be classified as a weapon?”

“Very carefully,” Soval said calmly. “After all,” he added, “she may feel the need to inflict it upon you again in retaliation.” When Mayweather sighed again, the ambassador took a bite of his pasta. He inhaled sharply at the taste – Petty Officer Rostov had not been in error when he recommended this meal.

When the door to dining facility slid open, Mayweather’s head automatically snapped toward it. He visibly relaxed at the sight of Crewman Fuller, and Soval suspected that knew the source of the young lieutenant’s distress. The ambassador had, after all, been forced to render Commander Hernandez unconscious with a nerve pinch when he discovered that she was keeping Mayweather in her cabin against the younger man’s will. It did not appear to be due to any subconscious sexual desire on the commander’s part, but rather because of her aggressive defense of Mister Mayweather against the perceived threats in the form of Captain Archer and Soval himself. Afterward, when the radiation was no longer affecting her, Commander Hernandez had apologized profusely to the helmsman, but it had clearly had an effect.

“Ambassador?” Mayweather had abandoned even the pretext of enjoying his food and was now looking up with a conflicted expression on his face. Soval inclined his head as an indication to continue. “Why did you come looking for me? To fly Enterprise, I mean.”

“You are the chief helmsman, Lieutenant,” Soval said simply, as if that were the only reason. In truth, he had first sought out the captain – no matter his personal disagreements with Archer, Soval could not deny that the man was a superlative pilot and had been the best option to navigate Enterprise through the dangers they faced. Seeing Archer incapacitated by self-doubt and recrimination thanks to the singularity’s radiation eliminated that option, however, so Soval had been forced to rely on his second choice in the matter.

Even if had meant going through Commander Hernandez who had become deranged in her obsessive need to protect Mayweather.

“Guess we were lucky you were aboard, huh?” Mayweather glanced down at his bowl and made a curious face that was both disgusted and resigned, all at once. “I heard Phlox was bouncing off the walls.”

“He was … inconsistent,” Soval admitted. He frowned slightly at the memory of Doctor Phlox under
the radiation’s influence; while the humans focused on one single thing to the detriment of everything else, the Denobulan had been unable to finish a single thought and jumped between subjects so quickly and randomly that it was all but impossible to understand his train of thought. Recovering from the radiation’s effects had the side-effect of pushing the doctor’s hibernation period months ahead of schedule.

Peals of laughter rang out from one of the tables closest to the door, and Soval glanced in that direction, raising an eyebrow at the sight of two junior crewmen – Masaro and Fletcher, if the ambassador was not mistaken – engaged in what appeared to be some sort of speed-eating contest while other members of Enterprise’s crew cheered them on. Both of Soval’s eyebrows shot up in surprise when he realized that the two men were consuming Lieutenant Sato’s dish … and both looked to be on the verge of being sick. To the ambassador’s surprise, Mister Mayweather was watching with a smirk and even Petty Officer Rostov appeared to be paying attention, albeit in a bemused sort of way that reminded Soval of a parent watching his children do something illogical.

The hilarity stopped the moment the doors to the cafeteria slid open and Captain Archer entered. He gave the two crewmen a knowing look before rolling his eyes.

“Carry on,” he said wryly before turning toward the serving counter. Still shaking his head, the captain retrieved a cup of coffee from the beverage dispenser and headed for the door. He paused in mid-step. “In my day,” he declared, directing his remarks to Petty Officer Rostov, “we had the loser of these things scrub the impulse manifolds with a toothbrush.” He was through the door before anyone could respond.

“I’m not letting either of you two idiots near my impulse manifolds,” Rostov grumbled as he resumed his own meal. More laughter answered him, and Soval gave Lieutenant Mayweather a look. The helmsman shrugged.

“They’re just blowing off steam,” he said. “We humans tend to do really stupid things after a close call.”

“In my experience, Lieutenant,” Soval replied, “humans do not need close calls to take actions that are questionable.” Mayweather laughed.

“That’s true,” he agreed brightly. “But it sure beats sitting around and doing nothing, right?”

Soval sighed. Sometimes, humans made no sense.
T'Pol: Meeting Raspos

Chapter Notes

An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 140 days (122.5 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's August, 2152.

The attack came without warning.

As had become their standard practice since acquiring the ambulance, they had stopped at midday so as to eat, practice their Suus mahna throws, and perform any necessary maintenance on the vehicle to keep it functional. According to Charles, the ambulance was a wreck and they were lucky to have made it this far without its engine ‘freezing up’ or ‘throwing a rod.’ He often went on at length about the state of the ‘tranny’ or the ‘jug,’ or how the ambulance was barely a ‘four-banger’ despite the size of the engine. Most of the time, T'Pol barely had any idea what Trip was talking about when he began trying to explain what he was doing to the ambulance and why, but she listened quietly and gradually began to comprehend his meaning when he used slang she had little to no frame of reference for. It was in those rare moments when their roles switched – he became the mentor, and she the student – that she found herself unable to entirely regret the crash that had stranded them here.

Trip had just climbed out from underneath the ambulance when the fixed wing aircraft appeared. Twisting around one of the rocky outcroppings that the road followed, the attack plane abruptly leveled off and accelerated toward the parked ambulance. The noise of its engine suddenly filled the valley around them and T'Pol reacted without hesitation. She sprang toward Charles who was just now turning toward the aircraft and slammed into him. Her unexpected tackle took him completely by surprise – the impact knocked his breath from him in an explosive gasp – and carried them both clear of the ambulance. They hit the ground hard mere seconds before the guns on the aircraft began barking. Large slugs whined through the air, ripping into the road and the truck. Dirt, metal and glass exploded into the air, showering down upon them like rain. As if to mock their inability to retaliate, the aircraft climbed higher into the sky, its wings waggling. The pilot did not even bother to turn back and see how much damage he or she had wrought with the strafing run.

Without waiting for Charles to recover, T'Pol scrambled to her feet. At a glance, she could tell that the ambulance was a loss – the engine was on fire and bullet holes riddled the front tire. She shot a quick look in the direction that the plane had come from, noting now thick plumes of smoke rising into the sky beyond the horizon. It was probable that they had been nothing more than a target of opportunity by an aircraft returning from a strike mission, a realization that made her relax slightly. The fire was spreading from the engine compartment, however, and T'Pol knew that there was very little time left before anything within the vehicle was consumed. She sprinted toward the back of the now ruined ambulance and pulled the door open. Smoke billowed out of the enclosed truck bed, but she ignored the discomfort and climbed in. Relying on her flawless memory rather than her vision – the smoke was getting quite thick – she located the two survival bags and flung them toward the open hatch at the aft of the vehicle. She spent several more long seconds gathering what items she thought necessary and throwing them out of the ambulance before finally exiting the vehicle herself.

A soft groan caused her to glance toward Trip and her breath caught at the sight of him still flat on
his back.

“Trip?” T’Pol gasped softly before springing to his side. She could not help but to touch him and relief washed through her when he opened his eyes.

“What the hell happened?” he asked as he pushed himself into an upright seated position with her help. “I feel like I got hit by a truck.”

“You did not,” T’Pol replied. Silently, she chastised herself for the momentary loss of composure. At least Charles had not noticed her slip. “I knocked you to the ground,” she added, earning herself a wry frown.


“We should leave as quickly as possible,” T’Pol said. She straightened, pulling him to his feet as she did. When he gave her a look, she pointed toward the distant indications of a much larger fire.

Tucker sighed.

“Well,” he remarked with a hint of disgust in his voice, “so much for heading in that direction.” He pointed to her left – planetary west, according to her internal compass – and T’Pol followed the gesture with her eyes. “That way?” Trip asked, crouching alongside the pile of gear and hefting one of the rifles. T’Pol studied the landscape for a moment – it was rocky, but dotted with enough trees so as to provide some cover from aerial reconnaissance or inclement weather.

“Yes,” she said simply.

On foot, they made … adequate time. Weighed down by their packs and forced to test boots that were beginning to wear out, their progress was slowed considerably, and they barely reached the treeline before the sun vanished behind the mountains. All three moons were out and the skies were clear for a change, which made it about as bright as an ordinary Vulcan night. Trip seemed to find the slight breeze only mildly bracing, but T’Pol found herself desperately longing for the enclosed ambulance. She was unsure whether her inability to get warm was another symptom of the Pa’nar or simply a sign of her body trying to fight off illness, but whatever the reason, T’Pol hated it. Viscerally.

They had only begun to set up camp when she heard the sound of approaching creatures moving stealthily through the trees. At her rapid gestures, Trip dove for his rifle and took up a position behind an overturned tree. T’Pol put her back to one of the thicker trees and checked the load on her own weapon. Salvaged from the wrecked train – had that truly been thirty-five days ago? – it bore a startling resemblance to weapons used on Earth centuries earlier. Tucker’s familiarity with slugthrowers had proved to be quite helpful, as he already possessed basic understanding of how they were to be used.

Nearly five minutes passed before four figures emerged from the darkness. Each was dressed in thick coats, although they were too ragged to be military issue. Three of the figures raised their weapons almost immediately, though they did not ease their grips on the longarms.

“Stay your shots,” the lead male ordered sharply. He stepped closer, pushing back the hood on the jacket he wore to reveal the weathered face of a man nearing the twilight of his life. His eyes were still sharp, if the way he took in their appearance was any indication. At his gesture, the three men accompanying him lowered their rifles slightly, though they did not ease their grips on the longarms. “We are no enemies.”
“Nor are you friends,” T’Pol declared coolly. Her mastery of the local dialect was far from perfect, but compared to Charles, she was nearly fluent. “Who are you?” she demanded, noting out of the corner of her eye that Trip had not budged from his cover and had not lowered his own weapon. Instead, he was very specifically aiming at the leader of these men.

“Refugees like you,” the man declared before frowning in Trip’s direction. “You must be outlanders,” he decided, “because only outlanders allow their women to be so free with their tongues.”

“Better speaks than I she does,” Tucker replied haltingly.

“I can hear that,” the man said with a chuckle. “I am Dahnel Raspos,” he continued, and these are my friends.” T’Pol frowned tightly – she doubted anyone but Trip or another Vulcan would have even noticed the change of expression, so minute was it – and shot Tucker a quick glance. From her study of Ekosian culture, this man … this Dahnel had either made a serious breach of etiquette or had intentionally omitted perhaps the most important aspect of his introduction: his social standing and the city-state from whence he originated. In either case, it could only mean that he was one of the many overthrown ‘highborn’ who had, until twenty-five years ago, ruled this continent.

“We greet you, Dahnel Raspos,” T’Pol said in response, suddenly very glad that she had actually bothered to read the translated text on protocol that had been among the books taken from the mesa city. “I am T’Pol,” she continued, “and he is-”

“Trip,” Tucker interrupted before she could use his given name. She narrowed her eyes fractionally at the triumphant look he shot her, but otherwise ignored it as Raspos – that was his family name, and according to what she understood, derived from his mother’s line; it was ironic, she thought, that a culture which used a matrilineal naming system and revered females as the progenitors of the society remained so mired in male-dominated thinking – gave his men a clear hand gesture to relax.

“We came to see the source of the small fire,” he declared, gesturing in the direction she and Tucker had come from, “but I see now that it was you.”

“Our … transport was attacked by a skycraft,” T’Pol said. She nodded slightly at Trip’s sidelong look and, in response, he eased his hold on his rifle.

“Pah,” Raspos growled, spitting on the ground as he spoke. “The Alliance,” he snapped. “Their patrols attack anything west of Tulindos. You are fortunate to have escaped.” His eyes darted to the two packs stacked near Trip’s feet. “Is there anything else to salvage?”

“You may look if you wish,” T’Pol said. “It burned until sundown.” Once more, Raspos’ expression darkened and he gave two of his men a sharp head gesture that sent them back into the woods, this time angling toward the distant ambulance.

“We have a camp some distance from here,” Raspos declared. “It is not much, but we have fires and blankets for fellow refugees.” Trip tensed at the open invitation and clearly did not do as good a job as hiding this fact as he could have if their guest’s reaction was any indication. “I make this offer not out of malice,” he said, the words sounding rehearsed but sincere, “and understand if you decline. Most of the refugees we encounter do so refuse.”

“And die because of it,” the remaining Ekosi guard muttered, his voice not meant to carry. Raspos gave him a flat look. “Forgive me, Steward,” the man said, and the utterance of the title removed any doubt that T’Pol might have had about their guest’s social standing. Steward was the name of the rank afforded to only the greatest of the highborn, the equivalent of a prince or count in human terms.
“If you are concerned for your woman,” Raspos said, this time directing his comments to Trip, “you need not fear. We follow the Old Code – if you are wed-bond, then no other man may touch her or look upon her uncovered hair.” Tucker wet his lips, but did not have a chance to respond as Raspos continued. “And there are nigh twenty families in our camp now, all seeking refuge from the Tandos Alliance and their war of unification.”

“Talk we must,” Tucker replied. “She and I,” he added with a frustrated grimace. Raspos nodded and fell back several meters to converse softly with his guard. The moment they were out of hearing range, Trip stood and fast-walked to where she was crouched. “He’s got three more sharpshooters hiding in the woods,” he said softly in English.

“I know,” she said, her voice equally low. “I can hear them.” Trip blew out a defeated breath.

“Is there any way we can get out of going with them that won’t look suspicious?” he asked.


“Yeah,” he interrupted, “I caught that. He’s one of the nobles, right? The guys who got overthrown a while back?”

“Highborn,” she corrected, inexplicably pleased at the revelation he had been paying attention to her discourse on the local culture. “And yes,” T’Pol added. “His companion called him Steward, which indicates very high social status.”

“So that’s what that word was,” Trip mumbled. “How do we play this?” he asked.

“As we did previously,” she decided. “We are wed-bond and foreign, which will explain our cultural ignorance,” she continued. “Remember to keep your hair covered at all times – that is an indication of marriage – and do not meet the eyes of women with uncovered hair…”

“That’s not what I’m talkin’ about,” Tucker interjected. “This could be a trap, T’Pol,” he pointed out. “These people are killing each other with wild abandon – God only knows how they’d react if they saw your ears or if you cut yourself in front of them.”

“I am well aware of the dangers, Charles.” He gave her a quick, disgruntled look at the use of his given name, but T’Pol pressed on. “As you pointed out,” she said, “we are outnumbered, so cooperation is the least dangerous option currently at our disposal.” When he frowned, she reached out and touched his hand. “If you have an alternate idea,” she murmured, “then I am quite willing to listen.”

Trip was silent for a long moment, and T’Pol snatched her hand back the moment she realized that it was trembling. There was no way he failed to notice but, to her surprise, he said nothing. Instead, he closed his eyes and drew in a steadying breath before nodding.

“All right,” he said. “We play along for now. But we bolt the second it starts to smell like a trap.” T’Pol nodded.

“Agreed,” she stated before glancing in Raspos’ direction. The man responded to the look and approached. “We will accompany you,” she said in the local dialect.

“Lead the way,” Trip added as he shouldered his backpack and tightened his grip on the rifle. He did not bother to hide his distrust of Raspos and intentionally stepped closer to T’Pol than was entirely necessary. And yet, she could not find it in herself to call him on his overprotectiveness.

It was most illogical.
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It was midnight before they reached the refugee camp.

Trip had far less trouble navigating through the forest than the rest of the group, which made it a lot easier than he expected to keep an eye on them. The leader – this Raspos guy – actually seemed taken aback at their lack of surprise when the three hidden sharpshooters joined the merry band, and then spent the next half hour trying (and failing) to engage T'Pol in conversation. She had donned the haughty 'you remind me of something I scraped off of my boot' expression that Trip knew far too well from the early days of her assignment to Enterprise, and it apparently worked far better against Ekosians than it had Floridians.

For his part, Trip was mostly busy focusing on putting one foot in front of the other while hiding just how badly parts of his body ached. He doubted that T'Pol knew just how much pain he was in at the moment – in college, he'd been tackled by linebackers who hadn't hit as hard as she had, and he briefly entertained himself by imagining her in football gear, dropping guys twice her size without even breaking a sweat. If he'd been stuck here with Jon or Malcolm, he'd be complaining nonstop, but it just wouldn't seem very masculine if he started whining about being knocked onto his ass by a tiny slip of a woman, no matter that she was probably twice as strong as he was.

The camp wasn't much to look at. A ramshackle collection of hastily erected cloth tents and poorly concealed firepits, it stunk of sweat and fear. There were only ten or fifteen people awake as Raspos led them into the site, but Trip could tell that there were probably three or four times that number asleep, whether huddled together in large clumps to share warmth or lurking underneath their poor shelter. Those awake were all men and they were armed with a variety of firearms, some of which looked relatively new (for this planet anyway) while others looked so worn they had to be antiques. None of the men were wearing shoes, despite the snow still on the ground, and every single one of them had a haunted, desperate look in their eyes that Trip had only seen in photographs. It was like he and T'Pol had been dropped into the middle of a war movie.

One of the apparent sentries barreled forward, his face pinched in anger and his hands clutching his rifle so tightly that his knuckles were white. He was a few centimeters shorter than Trip, but very wide, with thick arms and a rough, weathered look about him. T'Pol's whacky lessons had to be paying off because Tucker realized that he was unconsciously registering things about the man that he doubted would have even occurred to him before. The man was left-handed and had the barest hint of a limp – likely an old break that never healed entirely right. His body language screamed bully; the man shouldered past his fellows with open disdain for them, and, if it was possible, he became even more aggressive as he approached Raspos.

"You go for food and water,” the stocky male growled. His accent was thick and hard to understand, as if he was gargling with marbles while he talked. “And instead, you come back with … this.” He gestured toward Trip and T'Pol as he finished, anger dripping off his words.

"They are refugees, the same as you, Pater Undil,” Raspos replied frostily. He drew himself upright
as he spoke and open dislike flashed in his eyes. “Should I have not offered them the same hand of friendship I offered you and yours?” The older man seemed to be on the verge of spitting and Trip could see the well-armed men at Raspos’ back visibly tensing, even as nearly half of the other refugees looked on.

**Well,** Trip reflected bitterly, **so much for this being a good idea.** He wondered whether there was anyone on this stupid planet not trying to start a fight.

“We have barely enough food for ourselves!” the man – Pater Undil, Trip reminded himself. “And now you expect us to feed two more mouths?”

“We will make due,” Raspos answered coldly. “See to your duties,” he ordered and fully half of the sentries turned to obey, making odd gestures with their hands that Trip took to be signs of respect. The others, though, looked to Undil who visibly bristled.

“You are no master of mine,” the stocky man hissed through clenched teeth.

“For which you should give thanks,” Raspos retorted sharply. “Were that the case I would have you beaten for insolence.” The two men glared at each other and Trip gave T’Pol a look. Her expression was rueful, almost worried, and she gave him the tiniest of nods, which he took to mean she agreed with the concern he suspected was on his face.

“We have no desire to be a burden,” T’Pol said into the tense silence. Her voice caused both of the men to start in surprise. Undil glanced once at her before blinking and giving her a second look, his eyes widening with an appreciative glint that Trip knew all too well. On instinct, Tucker shuffled closer to her, his actions instantly drawing the stocky man’s attention. Their eyes met and Trip let his … displeasure shine through.

“I do not recognize your accent,” Undil stated, shooting another glare at Raspos before turning his back on the older man. From the way the Steward’s guards reacted – eyes narrowing and hands tightening on their weapons – it was some sort of calculated insult that Trip didn’t entirely understand. Inwardly, he sighed in despair – it was just their luck to meet up with a refugee group about to self-destruct over social issues he and T’Pol barely understood. “You are outlanders,” Undil guessed.

“We only recently came to these lands,” T’Pol replied smoothly. As the stocky man’s eyes wandered, the expression on her face shifted so fractionally that Trip doubted anyone but him even noticed her displeasure over the man’s boorish behavior. Even Malcolm had been more circumspect when he was ogling her butt. “I am su’Vulcan T’Pol Tucker,” she said calmly before gripping Trip’s left bicep. According to the book on societal norms on this continent – Tandos – it was the traditional manner in which married men and women touched; Trip had likened it to the human tendency to hold hands, and T’Pol had agreed. The name she had offered – su’Vulcan – indicated both their status in society – tradesmen, which was considered slightly more important on the social scale than a lowborn farmer but still well below that of a highborn – and their ostensible city-state of origin. Her use of his family name was simple expediency: she’d told him her clan name during one of their random conversations and, even with his growing proficiency with her native tongue, Trip couldn’t even begin to pronounce it. He could only imagine how the Ekosians might react to hearing it.

Still, he tried not to think about how much he liked the sound of T’Pol Tucker.

“This is my spouse,” she continued, her lips tightening slightly before she added, “Trip.”

“Are you mute?” Undil demanded of Tucker, once more giving T’Pol a less than discreet once-over.
“No,” Trip replied. It came out so rough and hostile that T’Pol tightened her grip on his bicep in warning. “I speak tongue bad,” he continued, grimacing the moment he realized that the words came out wrong.

“If our presence is an issue,” T’Pol interrupted, directing her remarks not to Undil but to Raspos, “then we will depart.”

“Perhaps I misspoke,” Undil said quickly, offering her a smile that faltered when she studied him with the same sort of clinical dispassion she’d give a bug under a microscope. “What is your trade?” he asked abruptly.

“Fixer,” Trip replied. They had been unable to figure out the proper word for engineer – if this dialect even had one – and had settled on a close approximation.

“It is quite late,” Raspos interjected smoothly, “and we have far to go upon the morrow.”

“What is your goal?” T’Pol asked before the man could continue. “Is there anywhere safe from conflict?” The older man nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “There are some … lodges in the mountains to the southwest that will be our sanctuary.” Undil and his cohorts glowered, which prompted Trip to suspect these lodges were not well-regarded by the lowborn farmers. Idly, he wondered if they were anything like the dachas in ancient Soviet Russia … and how the hell had he even remembered that little tidbit of information? He decided to blame it on T’Pol’s freaky but surprisingly useful mind training. Why, just the other day, he’d recited the entire Starfleet charter from memory and he’d only given it a cursory glance once while in college. “They are remote and far from the Alliance’s war,” Raspos continued. “We will be safe there for a time.”

“I am sure we can find a use for you,” Undil remarked with another leer. The feel of T’Pol tightening her grip on his arm was the only thing that kept Trip from responding. “For both of you,” the stocky man continued, his eyes once again meeting Tucker’s.

The impromptu gathering broke up shortly afterward, with the sentries returning to their duties while Raspos disappeared into a tent that looked of slightly better quality than the others strung up. Undil loitered around one of the firepits, doing a poor job hiding his observation of T’Pol while she helped Trip set up their rudimentary sleeping area. With each second that passed, the stiffness in her spine increased even as Tucker fought down the growing urge to simply shoot the stocky man. He waited until their jury-rigged tent was complete and T’Pol had slid inside before turning his furious gaze on Undil.

“Your spouse is very beautiful, sut’Vulcan Trip Tucker” the man said with another leer that caused Trip to tighten his hands into a fist.

“Yes,” he replied. “Mine,” he added through clenched teeth, hoping T’Pol couldn’t hear him. “Not yours.”

“No harm was meant,” the man said with a smile that didn’t touch his eyes and didn’t sound remotely sincere. “I was merely … admiring your spouse.” Trip glowered.

“If harm you wish,” he retorted roughly, “then keep … admiring.” Undil’s eyes widened and he took in Trip’s stance before offering a tight nod and turning away. Tucker watched him until he disappeared into his own ragged tent before glancing back at his sleep area. Their packs were concealed underneath the cloth tarp now suspended between two leafless trees by a thin but sturdy line of cord they’d stolen from the Zeons, but he still couldn’t shake his uneasiness with how
vulnerable the entire position was. This was not going to end well.

“What a jackass,” Trip muttered under his breath in English as he crawled into the tent. Already wrapped up in their blankets, T’Pol gave him an appraising look. “He’s gonna be trouble.” She pursed her lips.

“Agreed,” she murmured.

“Which part?” he asked with a tight smile that, to his shock, she came dangerously close to returning. Trip blinked the moment away – she had been doing that a lot recently, and while he loved seeing her show emotion, he wasn’t sure what it meant. Sure, he’d learned enough about Vulcan culture to know that, if the emotions weren’t there in the first place, they wouldn’t need to be suppressed in the first place, but was it a good thing that she had started letting her control lapse around him? With the way her hands trembled from time to time, or how often she suffered from headaches, it was just another one of those mysteries about T’Pol that he wanted to uncover but didn’t know where to begin asking.

“Both, I suspect,” she replied softly as she lifted the blankets up so he could slide under them. “I am beginning to regret not declining Dahnel Raspos’ offer to join him.”

“Yeah,” Trip grumbled as he tried to get comfortable on the lumpy ground. “Who knew we’d be walking onto the set of Jus in Bello?” he asked rhetorically. At her questioning look, he added, “Eugenics War movie about a band of soldier-refugees. Swept the awards a couple of years back.”

“I see,” she said. The moment he stopped moving, she slid closer and placed her head on his chest like she had dozens of times before in the months since they crashed here. Trip felt another pang of desire shoot through him, but he pushed it down and frowned.

T’Pol was shivering.

“You okay?” he asked. “It’s not that cold.”

“I know,” she replied with a flash of actual irritation in her voice, “but that does not mitigate the fact that I am having difficulty getting warm.” Concern washed away the amorous thoughts that always plagued him when they were together like this, and Trip began rubbing her back, hoping that it might help.

“Do Vulcans get sick?” he asked. “If you picked up a bug,” he continued, “that might explain why your hands are always shaking and the headaches you keep getting.” The effect his words had on her was immediate: she tensed and drew in a sharp breath. Trip looked down and found her staring at him with open fear in her eyes. “T’Pol?” he whispered, swallowing the lump that lodged itself in his throat at the sight of such naked emotion on her face. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

“I need to tell you something,” she said after a moment. Her mask of controlled poise was back, but Trip could hear the minute tremble in her voice. Whatever she was about to lay on him, he knew it was going to be big. God, he prayed silently, please don’t let her be pregnant. He figured that he could deal with anything else as long as that wasn’t the case.

But he was wrong.
Chapter Notes

134.75 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's September, 2152.

All things considered, sleeping with an alien princess wasn’t all it was cracked up to be.

Certainly, the sex had been pretty good, and it definitely made up for Kaitaama being the worst kind of bitch imaginable when she woke up, but in retrospect, Travis wished he’d just kept it in his pants. From the moment the Kriosian princess had lunged at him and locked her lips with his, things had just gotten progressively worse. Oh, not in that department – she’d seemed more than satisfied with the result of his … technique if her insistence for a repeat performance immediately afterward (and then again later, aboard Enterprise while they were waiting a rendezvous with a Kriosian ship) was any indication. No, the problems really began when the landing party showed up.

The open amusement on the faces of both the captain and Lieutenant Commander Reed at Mayweather’s general lack of clothes had been one thing, but Travis didn’t know how to react to Hoshi’s anger. Her face had tightened at the sight of a mostly nude Kaitaama nearby and a week after the fact, the communications officer was still ignoring him. If he didn’t know better, Travis could almost fool himself into thinking that Hoshi might actually be jealous, but that just couldn’t be the case.

Could it?

He sighed and went back to stirring his soup. After his latest attempt to talk to Hoshi had blown up in his face thanks to Rostov’s big mouth, Travis had retreated to the mess hall for some comfort food. Unfortunately, chef was experimenting again – he was on a British food kick this week and the results had been inconsistent at best, inedible at worst – so Mayweather grabbed a bowl of soup rather than press his already questionable luck and retreated to the darkest corner he could find, thinking that nobody could ruin soup.

Apparently, he was wrong.

As he stared at the dirty dishwater that chef called soup, his thoughts drifted back to the entire Kaitaama mess. No matter how bad the situation had seemed at first, what with Hoshi angry at him, most of the females on the crew looking at him like he was either a walking sextoy or the lowest form of life imaginable, and nearly every single guy aboard including Ambassador Soval giving him subtle attaboys, the long-term aftermath was even worse. On paper, the preferred trading status that Princess Kaitaama gave human ships in gratitude for Enterprise’s part in rescuing her – and Travis’ role in … ahem … making her stay on the swamp planet (and the Starfleet vessel, thanks to the captain’s damned spur-of-the-moment decision to assign Travis the role of Kriosian “liaison”) comfortable – was an astounding coup for a junior officer like him, especially when coupled with the commendation for ‘creative thinking in the face of danger’ attached to his file and jointly written by the captain and Soval, or the dozen private messages from Boomers in the area thanking him for opening up new shipping routes. If hadn’t been for the name given to the agreement by Princess Kaitaama, Travis honestly wouldn’t have minded the attention. But that name …

The Mayweather Sha’eg.
Travis shuddered. In Kriosian, “sha’eg” apparently meant accord or agreement or something like that, but it hadn’t taken any time at all for the jokes to begin making the rounds with the Enterprise crew, especially when the Brits like Malcolm saw or heard it. Even Captain Archer had chuckled at it, and Travis was absolutely convinced that Soval had almost cracked a smile when he overheard Reed explaining the joke to a baffled Doctor Phlox. Since then, the jokes and pranks hadn’t stopped coming. If Mayweather found out which engineer had broken into his cabin to install the mood lighting or the smart-ass that reprogrammed his personal computer to play overly sexualized songs from the twentieth century every time the door opened… well, his vengeance would be swift and brutal and Biblical in scope.

If there were pranks in the Bible, that was.

“Plotting your next conquest, Lieutenant?” Reed’s voice caused Travis to flinch and he looked up to find the armoury officer standing in front of his table, a tray with some sort of food substance in hand. The lieutenant commander’s smirk looked like it was a permanent fixture on his face.

“Absolutely, sir,” Travis replied crossly. “Doesn’t England have a couple of princesses?” Reed snorted in amusement before taking a seat from Mayweather.

“Caroline and Elizabeth,” he said. “A bit long in the tooth for you, I’d think.” Reed grinned openly as he began stirring … what the heck was he eating? Was that sausage in pudding? Travis made a face. Earthers were weird. “Perhaps you should stick to non-humans,” the armoury officer mused. “Do Andorians have princesses?” he wondered aloud. “Or Suliban? Although I guess they could look like anyone you wanted them to, if you asked nicely.”

“You know, sir,” Travis grumbled, “I’ve built up enough good favor with Starfleet that they might just overlook me punching a superior officer in the face.” Reed laughed out loud.

“Not feeling the heat, are you?” he asked. “Cheer up – we harass because we’re jealous. It’s not often an officer gets to shag a beautiful princess.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” The armoury officer snickered once again.

“More than you can possibly imagine,” he replied. To Travis’ surprise, Reed sobered and glanced away. “Since Trip and the subcommander died,” he said, “there hasn’t been much to really laugh about.” He shrugged. “Between Crewman Cutler getting killed and the possibility of Starfleet yanking our charter … I think the crew just needs something to cheer them up.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Travis pointed out. “You’re not the one being laughed at.” He gave up trying to eat the faux soup and leaned back in his chair. “Do you have any idea what my mom is going to say when she hears about this?”

“That’s my boy?” Malcolm offered with a smirk. When Mayweather shot him a dark look, Reed snickered. “How about ‘he certainly got an excellent rate of return for his … investment’?”

“At least she didn’t turn out to be a shapeshifting alien guy,” Travis retorted. Malcolm’s grin grew even wider.

“That’s the spirit,” he said. “Always counterattack, Lieutenant. The best defense is to have your enemy on the ground, moaning in pain.” He sipped his coffee. “Well played, by the way.”

“Thanks,” Mayweather muttered dryly.

“Cheer up, Travis,” Reed said as finished his coffee. “Your name is now known by every member of Starfleet, not to mention the Boomers and the Vulcans. You’re the envy of most of the male
personnel serving – some of the women too, I bet – and you now have a quadrant-wide reputation as a manwhore.” He smiled maliciously. “An entire generation of horny teenage boys will read about your exploits and join Starfleet because they want to follow in your footsteps.”

“And boldly go where no man has gone before;” Commander Kelby interjected with smirk as he took the unoccupied seat next to Reed. Malcolm snorted his approval. “I heard a rumor,” he began, his eyes bright. “Is it true that the captain is naming you morale officer?”

“Just for the women aboard,” Malcolm added.

“I don’t know about that,” Kelby said. “Crewman Smith said something about wanting to ‘ride the Mayweather Express’ and you know how honest he is about everything.” The two commanders snickered at the expression on Travis’ face and he glared at them. A moment later, the chief engineer leaned forward and lowered his voice. “So,” he said softly, “was she … different? Anatomically?”

“I’ve been wondering about that myself,” Reed said. “I mean … she was an alien, after all.”

Travis sighed and leaned his head back to stare at the ceiling, wondering if this could possibly get any worse.

And just like that, it did.

“Bridge to Lieutenant Mayweather.”

“You had to think that, didn’t you?” Travis hissed to himself as he stood and walked toward the nearest comm.-panel, desperately trying to ignore the sinking feeling in his gut. “This is Mayweather,” he said after pressing the transmit button.

“Sir, we have an incoming transmission for you,” Crewman Baird said and, even with the slight distortions in the signal, Travis could hear the man’s smile. “It’s from the ECS Horizon.” The urge to throw himself out of the nearest airlock was hard to fight down and, when Mayweather glanced at his table, he could see both Reed and Kelby laughing.

“I’ll take it in my quarters,” Travis said glumly.

He passed Captain Archer, Commander Hernandez and Ambassador Soval in the corridor leading to his cabin, but the three were so busy arguing over something that they didn’t seem to even realize he was there. A song began playing the moment his door slid open – something by Barry White, but he couldn’t remember the name – and his eyes automatically fell on the glittering ball hanging suspended in the middle of his cabin. Multicolored lights seemed to be radiating from the device, pulsing in time with the beat of the music emerging from the hidden speakers. What the hell was that?

“Travis Anthony Mayweather!” His mother’s voice ripped him out of his horrified fugue as he stared at the gleaming monstrosity. Tearing his eyes away from the hideous-looking thing, he glanced sheepishly at the staticy image of his mother, now displayed on the small monitor. “You better have a damned good explanation for this!”

“Hi, mom,” Travis replied as he fumbled for the music off switch. “I guess you heard-”

“That the boy I raised is trying to sleep his way through the Alpha quadrant?” she responded hotly. “Damned right I did!” Travis blew out a breath as he collapsed in the small desk chair. This just wasn’t fair.
Fifteen days after she and Trip joined the refugees, T'Pol lost her temper.

Her control, already weakened by the Pa’nar, grew steadily less effective as the days passed without an opportunity to properly meditate. The constant onslaught of negative emotions radiating off the terrified refugees was unrelenting, and each day was an effort in simply functioning. Had he not already been struggling with her revelation about the Pa’nar and her terminal condition, Trip might have been able to assist her, but she did not wish to burden him any further.

So she struggled on alone.

The camp itself was mobile – each morning at dawn, the refugees gathered their sparse belongings and set out, using the woods as cover from the constant aerial patrols. With so many sick and wounded among their number, they made poor time, covering no more than twenty-five kilometers a day, but Dahnel Raspos seemed less concerned about when they reached their destination than he was about all of them reaching it.

By the third day, Trip had made himself invaluable among the refugees in his capacity as a ‘fixer.’ He was seen as a ‘glorified handyman,’ according to muttered complaints when he thought no one was close enough to hear them, but he turned away no one when they came to him for assistance. Initially, T’Pol was virulently opposed to him offering his skills in such a manner, particularly since she feared that someone would bring him something that the Ekosians considered commonplace but he had never seen before. Her concerns dwindled away, however, when she realized he was actually gathering remarkable intel about their situation in the process. She had long suspected that his difficulties with languages stemmed from him over-thinking, and her observations of him as he attended to refugee weapons, or radios, or even the numerous carts being drawn by strangely-colored equines seemed to bear this theory out. While he was distracted with repairs, his comprehension of the native dialect was greatly improved.

And what he discovered in the process shifted their entire understanding of the situation. What they thought was a global conflict was, in fact, a regional one. Until approximately fifteen years earlier (not the twenty-five she had read), this continent had been disorganized and almost feudal in nature, with individual city-states ruled by the highborn nobility that constantly warred with one another. Following the popular overthrowing of these rulers – which she and Trip did know about, thanks to the obviously flawed histories she had acquired – a unified government led by tradesmen and lowborn had been formed. It lasted only a few years before petty squabbles and regional disputes caused it to break apart. The surviving highborn families then began another civil war to reclaim their old authority, but it was smashed almost before it began. On the heels of that failed conflict, a new government emerged, the Tandos Alliance, and what began as a loose confederation of city-states had slowly transformed into an oppressive regime devoted to unifying the entire continent under their banner by force.

The situation overseas was no better, with dozens of nations both great and small, warring with one
another over territory and wealth and nationalistic pride. Hardly any of the refugees could name a single foreign power because of how frequently they rose and fell. The greatest accomplishment of the Ekosians seemed to be their talent for murdering one another.

It was an altogether too familiar story, one which only served to depress Trip even more.

When she was not assisting Trip with his work as was apparently expected of a ‘spouse,’ T’Pol did her best to keep a low profile, which was far from an easy task with the way Pater Undil watched her. No matter where she went, his eyes were always there and, coupled with her inability to meditate, it was further fraying her control. Trip was at least partially aware of the problem if his sporadic encounters with Undil were any indication. Twice in the first week alone, Trip very nearly assaulted the former farmer for comments that T’Pol did not hear, and on the tenth day, Tucker returned to their lean-to with blood on his knuckles.

When she saw two of Undil’s cohorts with bruised faces and visible limps, T’Pol knew what had happened.

As these confrontations continued to build, they discussed abandoning the refugee band entirely and resuming their trek alone. Ultimately, they decided against doing so for the simple reason that Raspos’ hunting lodges seemed like the best option for an extended stay. More than anything else, T’Pol wanted a place of relative security where they could recover and she could push forward with Trip’s instruction to maximize his chances of survival once she was gone.

Today, however, things had gone from bad to progressively worse. Thanks to melting snows, Raspos’ intended path had to be revised and they were forced to cross a field that seemed to consist entirely of mud. None of the carts were capable of traveling more than a meter without getting stuck, which led to an entire day of struggling to free them and get them under cover before another aerial patrol overflew their position. The mud itself reeked so badly that T’Pol feared she would vomit. By nightfall, most of the refugees were filthy, exhausted and simply ready to collapse where they stood.

Most, but not all.

Undil waited until she and Trip were separated – Tucker had gone to get some water so they could clean most of the mud from their clothes – before approaching her, his ever-present leer fixed firmly on his florid face. T’Pol heard and smelled him long before she saw him, but she decided to ignore his presence while she continued to set up her and Trip’s tiny sleeping area. Within seconds, Undil broke the silence.

“Your spouse is a fortunate man,” he said. T’Pol gave him a single, sidelong glance without bothering to conceal her distaste for him, but did not bother to respond. The rope holding the tent up was proving to be bothersome so she walked to where her pack was stored. Undil followed, even though she made no effort to hide the knife she extracted from her gear. “You are truly a lovely woman,” he offered.

“I have no interest in a liaison with you,” T’Pol told him flatly, annoyance beginning to leak into her words. Her head was pounding and all she wanted to do was curl up alongside Trip so he could discreetly manipulate the neural nodes along her spine.

“That’s because you’ve never had me before,” Undil said with another leer. He took a step closer. “And I’ve never had a tradeswoman,” he added before reaching out with thick fingers to paw at her breasts.

It was too much.
She reacted without thought and struck blindingly fast. Grasping Undil’s hand, she twisted hard, ignoring the startled yelp ripped from his throat that drew the attention of every eye in the camp. The distinct snap of bones fracturing under her crushing grip presaged his agonized shriek, but T’Pol was lost in the sudden fury that stripped away her conscious mind and paid the sound no mind as she continued to apply pressure. Undil collapsed to his knees before her, howling in pain as broken bones were ground together under her implacable grip, and she drew her other hand back, gripping the knife tightly. The smell of feces filled her nostrils as his fear overwhelmed him and she sneered. How dare this primate touch her with his filthy fingers? How dare he even presume to think that he was worthy of her? Her eyes darkened and her nostrils flared. She would teach him what it meant to assault a daughter of Vulcan and it was a lesson he would, unfortunately, be in no position to remember.

“T’Pol!” Trip’s voice pierced the emerald haze that had clouded her vision, and a heartbeat later, she felt his cool hand grab her forearm. Brilliant blue eyes suddenly loomed before her, wide with fear and worry, and she inhaled a familiar, steadying scent. Her blood continued to thump loudly in her ears and she looked down at the stinking creature kneeling in the muddy snow before her. Tears streaked down his face and his cries had turned to pathetic whimpers.

“He touched me,” T’Pol hissed, so lost in the blood haze that she unconsciously lapsed into her native tongue. “He fondled me,” she growled. “As if I were his chattel.” Trip’s eyes narrowed and, before she could react, his fist lashed out, smashing into Undil’s jaw with a loud crack that made her jump. Unconscious, the Ekosian fell back, limp.

“You can let him go now,” Trip murmured. “I swear, he will not touch you again.” His Vulcan was better than she recalled, although a hint of his natural accent was yet present. The effect was quite appealing in her opinion, causing his words to flow like a warm caress. Despite her efforts, T’Pol smiled softly.

And let Undil go.

The Ekosian collapsed into the muck, and T’Pol suddenly became aware of the many eyes upon her. Most were amused, some were approving and a number fearful, but all were surprised. She blinked rapidly, fighting down the tide of fear and anger and confusion beginning to thunder through her mind.

“You okay?” Trip asked. He had returned to English, but she nodded tightly. When he reached up to adjust her head shawl so it would cover more of her face, she looked up and met his eyes. “You’re flushed,” he said softly, his eyes darting. T’Pol’s breath caught, but he shook his head in reply to her unasked question. No one seemed to have noticed.

They were not stopped by anyone when Trip led her into their lean-to, and T’Pol kept her head bowed, so as to prevent the exposed skin on her face from showing. Her keen hearing allowed her to detect the mocking insults aimed in Undil’s direction now that he had been humbled by a woman half his size as well as Raspos’ quiet instructions to one of his men to attend to the unconscious man’s injuries, but she was having so much trouble clinging to the tatters of her self-control that it took long seconds for any of the words to even register. When Trip pushed her into their tent, she automatically sank into a meditative posture.

“T’Pol?” he asked hesitantly, and she flinched at the hint of fear she could hear in his voice.

“I need to meditate,” she hissed, once again lapsing into Vulcan. Her hands trembled at the effort it took to maintain control.

“How can I help?” Trip asked as he crouched before her. She grimaced and kept her eyes closed. If
there was one thing she did not want him to see, it was the shame of all Vulcans, especially one as weak as she. When she did not answer, he placed a hand on her shoulder, exactly as she had done so many times in the last few months. “T’Pol?”

“I cannot concentrate,” she admitted cautiously. “There is too much noise, too many distractions … my subconscious knows I am not safe so I cannot reach the proper meditative state.”

“How about we leave the camp?” Trip wondered. “Get away from these people so you can concentrate.”

“I still will not be safe,” T’Pol retorted sharply.

“Yes,” he said softly, “you will.” The intensity in his voice caused her to glance up and Trip gave her a smile. “I’ll be there,” he pointed out, “and I’ll make sure you stay safe.” There was something in his eyes, in his posture that reached past her fractured mental defenses and caused her to relax. This man, some part of her knew, would fight to the death to keep her from harm. It was a realization that was both alarming and reassuring.

So, she nodded.

No one appeared surprised when they emerged from the lean-to carrying their framed backpacks. T’Pol surveyed the refugees, noting at once how most of them looked away from her and would not meet her eyes. She caught sight of a now conscious Undil sitting on an overturned log, biting on a strip of leather to keep from crying out as one of Raspos’ men attended to his ruined hand. As if sensing her gaze, the lowborn farmer looked up, hate and fear stamped on his face, and glared at her. It was a struggle, but T’Pol kept her face impassive.

Trip, however, did not. Instead, he visibly checked the ammunition on his rifle before pinning Undil with a look capable of igniting stone.

“I regret that this has happened,” Raspos said as he met them near the periphery of the camp once they tore down their tent and stored it. His grave expression belied the anger in his eyes when he glanced toward Undil. “Some men do not know when to stop.”

“And some do,” Trip interjected darkly, “but keep pushing anyway.” Raspos’ frown conveyed his own dismay, but he nodded in agreement.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Dahnel Raspos,” T’Pol said formally. “We came in peace and now go in peace.” The Ekosian man’s eyes widened slightly and he offered her a smile.

“And may you always find peace wherever your travels take you,” he stated, finishing the ceremonial goodbye. When she originally read the phrase, it had struck her as ironic that a culture so self-destructive would have traditions invoking peace as if it were something foreign to them. Trip had theorized that it perhaps was more of a wish, a dream for better times as opposed to the nonstop warfare they had to face.

With the sun gone from the sky, T’Pol found herself relying on Trip as he led them through the forest. His cool hand clutched hers and she focused on the rhythmic beat of his pulse to the exclusion of everything else. It was strangely hypnotic and T’Pol was startled to realize that she was easily able to slip into the first stage of her meditative trance, so when Trip drew to a halt nearly an hour later, it caught her by surprise. He frowned at the expression on her face.

“Still with me?” he asked. Another slight smile slipped past her frayed control but she could not work up any anger at herself. Trip had already seen her at her worst; what difference did another slip
“Partially,” she admitted before glancing around. “Why have we stopped?”

“There’s a cave … well, not a cave, really, but more like a grotto.” He pointed, but T’Pol could not make out anything beyond the tip of his hand. “I think we can park it here for a while so you can meditate.” The shadows on his face seemed to lengthen. “Are you sure you’re gonna be okay?” he asked as he led her toward the grotto she could barely see. “You really scared me back there. I thought you were really gonna kill him.”

“I was,” T’Pol said simply. When he looked at her with surprise, she sighed. “Now you see why Vulcans must always control themselves. When our emotions are roused, they are … frightening.”

“Yeah,” Trip murmured. “I can see that.” He did not seem repulsed as he slid his backpack to the ground. “You seem better now.” T’Pol nodded and placed her own pack alongside his.

“I am better now,” she said. “But I still need to meditate.”

“Okay,” her companion said. “Let’s get the tent up and then we can get you back to normal.” T’Pol raised an eyebrow at the teasing she could hear in his voice and he smiled. “It’s simple self-preservation, darlin’,” he stated brightly. “I don’t want you to break my hand ’cause I screwed up a neuropressure posture.”


It was a wonderful sound.
Chapter Notes

An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 157 days (137.4 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's September, 2152.

T'Pol was beautiful when she meditated.

He knew that he shouldn’t stare, that it was both impolite and more than a little creepy, but Trip simply wasn’t able to tear his eyes away from the Vulcan woman as she sat quietly, her eyes closed and an expression of peace on her face. Light from the rising sun bathed her face like a halo, giving her an almost ethereal quality. The only downside was that damned shawl on her head, concealing her elfin ears from sight and hiding the hair that now tumbled down past her shoulders.

This was the second morning since they’d put the refugee band behind them. Although she had expressed a desperate need for mediation, T'Pol had fallen asleep shortly after their tent was set up on that first night and, if he hadn’t been so worried about her, Trip might have thought the sight of her slumping over in her seated position funny. Instead, he had urged her to stretch out, covered her with the blankets, and spent the rest of the night either watching her, watching their surroundings or thinking. After waking near dawn, she had spent all of the following day in mediation, which gave Trip plenty of time to catch a couple of naps himself as well as scout out their surroundings a little better. When the sun went down, he’d relocated their rudimentary camp to a more defensible location, one that was more easily hidden from sight as well as being on some higher elevation.

He still wasn’t sure how to entirely react to her revelation about the Pa'nar and just the thought of that slimy asshole Tolaris doing this to her made him see red. T'Pol had insisted that she was at least partially responsible – she had initially agreed to the meld, after all – but Trip knew a case of date rape when he heard it. That bastard had manipulated her and then abused her trust to get what he wanted. Even now, seventeen days after the fact, he could remember the despair and fury that had warred within his belly when T'Pol explained the specifics of her condition in a voice that cracked several times. She’d answered all of his questions honestly and forthrightly, but Tucker had seen the toll reliving the incident was taking on her and pared down his inquiries to the bare minimum.

Inhaling deeply in an attempt to calm down, Trip focused on some of the mental techniques she had taught him, all the while watching her breathe. No matter how badly he tried, though, he couldn’t quite shake the knowledge that he was probably going to outlive her now. It didn’t seem fair. T’Pol was supposed to outlive everyone Trip knew, was supposed to look back at her time working alongside the smelly, impatient humans with fond exasperation, not die because of some jackass who needed to have a less than tragic accident in an airlock. He frowned – was this why Jon had made sure he was busy when Tolaris left Enterprise? Had the captain been worried that Trip might find out the truth and take matters in his own hand? Sighing deeply, Tucker silently acknowledged that he probably would have done something stupid if he’d learned what that piece of crap had done to her. Hell, Trip knew that Malcolm would have helped if he found out and there were rumors that the Boomers airlocked rapists so Travis probably could have offered some pointers…

Stop it, he told himself. Focus on the now, on what you can do, not something that has already happened.
He had very nearly wrestled his emotions under control when a dozen cracks echoed through the forest, and Trip recognized the sound instantly as gunfire. He tore his eyes away from T’Pol and grabbed the rifle he’d been carrying since they raided the overturned train. Nothing was immediately visible – the terrain was mostly rocky hills with enough trees present to probably be classified as a forest – but he didn’t relax, not when more gunfire sounded.

“T’Pol,” he called out softly. A whisper of movement from behind him was the only indication he had that she heard him until she slid into place next to him, her own rifle in hand. The stress that had been on her face for so long was absent and she looked more like the subcommander he first met so long ago. She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head to one side.

“Multiple firearms in use,” she remarked with a tight frown. “I can also hear the sound of equines.” She met his eyes and Trip was surprised to see that she did not even bother trying to hide the emotion in her eyes.

“The refugees?” he guessed sadly.

“That is the logical deduction,” she replied. She pointed to the northeast. “That direction,” she revealed. “We should…”

“Not get involved,” Trip finished tightly. He bit back the urge to curse. “I know.” When she placed her hand on his shoulder, he exhaled bitterly. “You don’t need to remind me, T’Pol,” he said. “I know what we’ve gotta do.”

“That was not what I was going to say,” the Vulcan woman interjected. Trip looked up and met her unwavering gaze. “We need to know if our position is compromised,” she pointed out. “If … Undil is behind a successful unseating of Dahnel Raspos’ leadership,” she continued with a slight frown, “it is possible that he will encourage pursuit of us.” Trip grimaced at the thought even as he admitted she was probably correct. What was it about her, he wondered, that drew psychos like Tolaris and Undil? For that matter, what did it say about him that he was just as drawn toward her?

His mood darkened even further at that thought.

The sun was high in the sky when they reached the source of the gunfire which had long since died away. From the looks of it, Raspos’ refugee caravan had been ambushed while trying to cross a fast-moving river likely swollen to twice its normal size thanks to the melting snows far to the north. Corpses were everywhere, most appearing to have been cut down by well-aimed sniper fire before they were even aware of the danger they were in. Two of the carts that Trip remembered spending hours working on were overturned, and a trio of men were slumped behind them, sightless eyes staring into the blue sky without seeing. Judging by the state of the carts, the men had used them as rudimentary protective barriers while they tried in vain to defend themselves. One of the weird-looking horses was still alive but crippled, moaning in agony.

It was a massacre.

Closing his eyes, Trip breathed through his mouth and fought to keep from vomiting at the sight. Knowing these people – the men, women and children – only made it worse. Daugrey there snorted when he laughed, and little Navalia was the cutest six year old Tucker could remember ever seeing. He bit his lip and struggled to hold it together.

At his side, T’Pol studied the charnel ground with apparent dispassion, but Trip could see that she was affected too. No matter what she felt, though, she simply pushed it down and carried on. Never in his life had he envied Vulcans as much as he did now.
“There were two groups firing upon the refugees,” she murmured, nodding in two different directions. “They did not emerge unscathed,” she added a moment later. “I can see numerous bodies.”

“Good,” Trip growled. He hoped they all had died, every last one of the bastards. “Can you tell who they are?” he asked softly. “Undil’s thugs or soldiers?”

“Both, I think,” T’Pol said.

“That sonuvabitch sold them out.” The Vulcan nodded.

“A probable scenario,” she agreed. The quick glance she gave him instantly caused the hairs on the back of his neck to stand up. Whatever she was about to say, he just knew that he wasn’t going to like it. “We must find Dahnel Raspos’ body,” T’Pol declared.

“Why?”

“He had in his possession a map,” she said, “and I suspect he was using it to navigate.” At Trip’s slight frown, she continued. “I recommend we begin there,” the Vulcan stated, pointing to one of the elevated ambush positions. A rocky outcrop that rose a half dozen meters into the air, it jutted over the river and overlooked the comparatively narrow ford the refugees had been using to cross. Trip frowned at the idea of T’Pol climbing it.

“You cover me,” he instructed, “and I’ll check it out.” She raised a single, elegant eyebrow at the comment and Trip intentionally looked at her hands. They weren’t shaking at the moment, but she recognized his meaning and a slight emerald flush colored her cheeks. She nodded.

“Very well.” There was no trace of embarrassment in her voice, although her expression was rueful. “I would advise you to be cautious,” she added with a tightness to her voice Trip wasn’t sure about.

He gave her a bright grin before pushing away from their place of concealment.

Hugging the ground and moving carefully, Trip crept closer to the rocky outcropping, tensing at every sound he made or heard. Exactly as he feared, the stone was slick from melted snow and spray from the fast-moving river as it crashed against the rocks, and he shivered at the thought of T’Pol trying to scale this with her poorly hidden muscle spasms that came out of nowhere. He was able to find plenty of handholds in the pitted rock and began to climb, paying no attention to the thought that this was a bad idea. It wasn’t as hard as he thought, but then, he’d gotten pretty good over the last couple of months at ignoring things that he didn’t want to think about.

Unbidden, the memory of waking on a bed, naked, with an equally nude and astoundingly warm T’Pol sprawled out atop him, popped into his mind’s eye, but he pushed it down.

And ignored it.

By the time he reached the top, the muscles in his arms and back were burning, but Trip kept himself moving. He quickly pulled himself onto the top of the mini-cliff, wincing the moment he realized that there was a small footpath curling up from the other side of the outcropping which would have made the ascent a whole lot easier. Two unmoving bodies were near the far ledge, both missing significant portions of their skulls thanks to perfectly placed rifle shots very likely thanks to one of Raspos’ bodyguards. The two corpses were dressed in the military uniforms Trip now knew as belonging to the Tandos Alliance, and he slid closer to them so he could get a better look at the killing field, once again fighting against the urge to gag.

From this high – it was closer to seven meters than six, he guessed – the carnage actually seemed
worse. Now, instead of seeing just a few isolated bodies, Trip had a clear view of all of them. Bile tickled the back of his throat as he scanned the ambush site for Dahnel Raspos’ body. He finally found the Ekosian man, facedown over what looked to be the corpses of two children, and Tucker closed his eyes the moment he realized that Raspos had died trying to protect his people. And to think, Trip reflected bitterly, he’d feared the man was trying to build his own fiefdom. Blinking the moisture away from his eyes, he glanced toward where T’Pol was hidden and then pointed. A moment later, the Vulcan crept out of the bushes. 

Pushing himself away from the ledge, Trip gave the two dead Alliance soldiers another quick once-over. Both were wearing ammunition belts – Tucker unhooked one of them, and donned it around his own waist – and two military rucksacks were half hidden several meters farther down the outcropping, just at the lip of the footpath. Trip climbed to his feet and, keeping low so he wouldn’t silhouette himself, duck-walked to the packs. The first thing he examined was the small shovel strapped to the outside of a ruck; it was probably half the size of a normal one, but he unstrapped it anyway, suspecting it might come in handy down the road.

He’d only just begun to open the ruck when the sound of someone charging up the footpath caused him to scramble for a weapon. Pater Undil, eyes wild with fury and madness and bruises on his face, sprinted into view, a machete-like weapon held tightly in his uninjured hand. He swung the blade without warning, and Trip threw himself back in a desperate dodge, landing awkwardly atop one of the Alliance corpses. The body slid away, tumbling over the lip of the outcropping and into the river below with a loud splash.

Undil snarled something in the local dialect that Trip, in his adrenaline-laced fog, didn’t understand, and lunged forward again, the machete whistling through the air. Tucker’s hand closed around a weapon – the rifle of the corpse that had gone over the side – and he brought it up quickly to block the blade. Sparks flew as the metal blade bit into the longarm’s barrel, but Trip ignored it as he pushed back, angling the momentum of Undil’s attack toward the ground. At the same time, he kicked out, his Starfleet-issue boots slamming into the meaty portion of the Ekosian man’s thigh. Undil howled and backpedaled rapidly, which gave Trip enough time to scramble to his feet and to determine that the rifle he’d grabbed was empty.

“When I’m done with you,” Undil growled, “I’m going to find your woman.”

He attacked again without waiting for Trip respond, again bringing the machete down with all of his strength. Tucker moved at the same time, stepping forward and dropping the useless rifle as he reached for Undil’s arm. Another shift of his feet and his waist, a hard tug, and suddenly, Undil was in the air, his battle cry abruptly transitioning into a shriek of fear. The Ekosian man hit the ground hard, bounced and slid to the ledge, his fingers scrambling to find purchase on the slick rock. He hung there for a long, extended heartbeat, his terrified eyes locking with Trip’s.

And remembering Undil’s open threat against T’Pol, Trip didn’t even bother trying to help him.

With another cry, the Ekosian man lost his battle with gravity and plunged into the fast-moving river. His head popped up once, twice, three times before the current carried him out of sight and Tucker slumped back, suddenly at war with himself. A better man would have felt guilt or disgust over this, but all he felt was relief.

Relief, and a sense of triumph.

Shaking his head, he straightened and glanced in the direction of Raspos’ body. T’Pol was there, lowering her rifle from the ready position, and somehow, Trip knew she had been trying to get a clear shot at Undil. One of Surak’s most important tenets was to avoid killing if at all possible, and Tucker was suddenly and absurdly glad that she had not been forced to violate that belief to save
him. He raised a hand in her direction, hoping she would recognize that he was showing her that he was fine, and turned away.

Using the hidden footpath, he descended from the ledge. At the last minute, he decided to bring both rucksacks with him, and, when he joined her, T’Pol was studying a large map that looked ancient. A small leather tube – probably for Raspos’ map – was now secured to her personal pack, along with a sheathed machete seemingly identical to the one that had gone into the river with Undil. Two more blankets were strapped to the top of her ruck, along with a trio of metal canteens and a small axe. An ammo belt similar to one Trip was wearing encircled her slender waist.

Clearly, she’d been busy.

“On foot,” she said as he approached, “I estimate we should reach these lodges within a solar month.” Trip grunted as he dropped the two Alliance packs onto the ground. He gave his own ruck a glance – T’Pol had brought it along with her, and compared to her pack, it looked positively under-packed – and knelt before them. Despite his best efforts, he couldn’t quite ignore the fact that there were bodies all around them or that the body of a man whom he’d grown to like was barely a meter away. So instead, he tried to distract himself by focusing entirely on searching the packs of the two dead soldiers.

“Are you well?” T’Pol asked softly after several long moments of silence. She was studying him with that warm, worried look she sometimes donned, and Trip shrugged. When her eyebrow climbed in confusion, he frowned.

“I joined Starfleet to be an explorer,” he said through clenched teeth, “but look at me now.” He gestured toward the bodies scattered around them. “I’ve turned into a goddamned scavenger.” To his surprise, T’Pol reached out and touched his arm.

“We have all of the supplies we need,” she said. “And we do not know if these soldiers were operating alone or were part of a larger force.” Her old-young eyes drifted to Raspos’ body and Trip thought he could see sadness in them. “We should leave before we are discovered.”

“Right.” Trip straightened, reaching for his ruck. He gave the ambush site another look and promised not to forget these people. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”
He desperately wanted a shower.

Soval had vanished the moment they returned to Enterprise, although whether that was due to some residual ‘non-anger’ anger over some of the barbed remarks Shran had sent the former ambassador about his demotion – they had been in Andorian, so Archer remained in the dark about what exactly was said – or the tense discussion – Vulcans would never call it an argument, even on pain of death – that Soval had with V’Lar earlier, Jon didn’t know or, for that matter, care. The only thing he was focused on at the moment was getting the stink of Weytahn (or Paan Mokar, or whatever the hell it was called) off his skin. As for the uniform, well, he’d already decided that it was a lost cause and it was going into the trash the first chance he got.

Erika was waiting for him outside his cabin, a PADD in hand and a worried expression on her face. She gave him a quick head to toe once-over as if she didn’t entirely believe his earlier report that he was fine before visibly relaxing. The worry lines that recent weeks had carved into her forehead eased slightly as she offered him the small storage device. Jon immediately held up a hand.

“Can it wait?” he asked quickly. “I’m filthy and so tired right now that I can’t think straight.” Hernandez smiled.

“Just my preliminary report, sir,” she replied, lowering the PADD. “It can wait.”

“Good,” Jon breathed. He reached for the door annunciator but hesitated. “You made a hard call,” he argued. “Yes, it was risky, but it worked and in the grand scheme of things, that’s all that matters.” When she continued to frown, Archer took a step closer to her, noting with some amusement how she scrunched up her nose at his smell. “Because you acted,” he said, “the Andorians and the Vulcans didn’t start shooting at each other, which gave us a chance to resolve that whole mess on the planet.” He shook off the memory of his own hesitation planetside and silently gave thanks that Malcolm had been there to pick up the slack. When exactly, Jon wondered, had he become so damned cautious? “This is the best chance in a long time for there to be real peace between the Andorians and the Vulcans,” he continued, “and it couldn’t have happened without you making a hard call.”

“If you say so.” Erika still sounded skeptical and Archer nodded.

“I do say so,” he insisted. “And my report to Starfleet will say so as well.” Erika smiled then.

“Thanks, Jon,” she said softly, voice pitched for his ears alone. She gave him a half-hearted shove toward the door of his cabin. “Now go take your shower, sir,” she ordered as she turned away and started walking toward the turbolift. “You really do stink.”
He spent entirely too much time under the hot spray, using both his daily allowance of hot water and an entire container of liquid soap in his attempt to wash away the stench of Weytahn – or was it Paan Mokar? Jon glowered and decided right then to start calling it Planet Fubar. He wondered if he could get Admiral Forrest to sign off on the new name – it wasn’t like the Andorians or Vulcans would understand it.

When he finally stepped out of the shower, his skin was bright red and wrinkled, but he still didn’t feel clean and, from the way Porthos retreated from him to hide in the corner, he didn’t smell clean either. He was still wearing nothing more than a towel around his waist when the comm. chirped.

“Bridge to Captain Archer.” Hoshi sounded more cheerful than she had in a while, which Jon hoped meant she had finally forgiven Travis for that whole Kaitaama mess a couple weeks back.

“This is Archer,” he said after thumbing the transmit button.

“Sir, I have Admiral Forrest on the line for you,” Hoshi announced. Archer sighed – that certainly hadn’t taken long – and glanced in the direction of his desk computer.

“I’ll take it here,” he said before pressing the button again. He was only halfway across the cabin when Maxwell Forrest’s image appeared on the screen of his computer.

“Did I catch you at a bad time, Jonathan?” the admiral asked with a smirk. Archer shook his head even as he double-checked that his towel was firmly secured. He took a seat in front of the computer.

“No explanation necessary,” the older man said. He glanced down at his desk. “We just received the initial report from Ambassador V’Lar’s office regarding the situation there and I wanted to see if you could shed any light on it.”

“I don’t know, sir,” Jon admitted. “I haven’t read it yet.”

“I wouldn’t call it a page-turner,” Forrest said with a smile, “but the Vulcans seem … well, I don’t want to say happy. Satisfied, maybe?”

“Good.” Archer exhaled deeply. “It’s a mess out here, Max,” he said after a moment. His use of the admiral’s first name caused the admiral to relax slightly. “They were fighting over this stupid rock for a hundred years and if it hadn’t been for Shran bending first, I think they’d still be fighting over it for the next hundred years.”

According to V’Lar,” the admiral said, “you and your crew were instrumental in preventing that from happening.” Jon tried to push back the self-disgust he felt and keep his expression calm.

“Yes, sir,” he said. “I’d like to single out both Commander Hernandez and Lieutenant Commander Reed for their exemplary actions today,” he added. “They made this possible, Admiral, not me.”

“Care to explain that, Captain?” Forrest’s voice was deceptively casual, but Jon recognized the underlying worry in the man’s tone. “Because both V’Lar and Soval were pleased with you for a change.” The admiral picked up a PADD and waved it in front of the camera. “Ambassador V’Lar said, and I quote, ‘during the course of the situation on Paan Mokar, Captain Archer displayed both caution and inventiveness, and should be commended for his role in crafting this cease fire.’ End quote.” Forrest lowered the PADD and looked up at the camera. “Well?” he demanded.

“Don’t you see the irony, sir?” Jon asked heavily. “Vulcans complimenting me on being cautious?” He shook his head. “I think I’ve lost my edge, Max.” The admiral’s eyes widened, but Archer kept
talking. “When we were down there,” he said grimly, “I froze. I was so busy considering options, so busy second-guessing myself, that it paralyzed me.” He shook his head in disgust. “If Malcolm hadn’t been there to salvage the situation,” Jon grumbled, “I’m afraid I could have gotten us all killed.”

“Is this about Tucker?” Forrest asked a long, silent moment later.

“It’s about Trip,” Archer retorted tightly, “and T’Pol, and Cutler, and all the people at the Paraagan colony, and all the people on that planet where Trip died…”

“Jonathan.” There was steel in Forrest’s voice and it caused Archer to shut up. “We need you out there,” the admiral said calmly. “Right now, you’ve got the most deep space experience out of all of our ship captains, and we need that. Earth needs that.”

“Yes, sir,” Jon said automatically. “I’m sorry, sir. I’m just …”

“Tired,” Forrest finished. “I know.” He frowned. “And if I know you,” he added, “you’ve never really let yourself grieve for your friend.” The admiral shook his head. “Take it from me, Jonathan,” he said. “If you let it, that sort of thing will eat you up from the inside.” Though he knew that Forrest expected a response, Archer said nothing and simply sat there, waiting for the admiral’s next words. With a wry shake of his head, Forrest glanced down and Jon could see the stack of PADDs on the older man’s desk. “Before I let you go,” the admiral said, “I thought you should know that EarthGov is in official talks with opening an embassy on Krios Prime.”

“Travis is going to love that,” Jon remarked and Forrest laughed out loud.

“Speaking of Lieutenant Mayweather,” he said, “it seems he was requested by name to head up the embassy.” With a wicked smile, the admiral added, “Sounds like he definitely made an impression on the First Monarch’s daughter.”

“I hope you told them no,” Jon stated as he struggled to keep from snickering at the memory of Mayweather wearing only his underwear while Kaitaama was desperately trying to pull something on over the tee shirt she’d clearly borrowed from the lieutenant. It hadn’t taken a genius to figure out what had happened. “Travis is an integral part of this crew,” he continued, “and the ship wouldn’t be the same without him.”

“Relax, Jonathan.” The twinkle in Forrest’s eye stripped him of years. “I told them that he couldn’t be even be considered for an ambassadorial post until he’s made lieutenant commander at the very least.” His smile faded slightly. “So, of course,” the admiral muttered, “the Diplomatic Corps is pressuring us to promote him even though he isn’t ready.” He shook his head again. “I’ve held them off for now, but I thought you might want to know that they might go over my head on this one.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jon said honestly. He frowned – maybe he could enlist Soval’s aid in keeping Travis on the ship for now? Unless Mayweather actually wanted to take the position. He had seemed to like Princess Kaitaama well enough, although in Archer’s opinion, she had the personality of a particularly uninteresting toaster.

Forrest signed off soon after, and Jon quickly dressed in a clean uniform, using more deodorant than was probably advisable. Porthos whined pathetically in the corner, and Archer rolled his eyes but pulled a cube of strong cheddar from his tiny refrigeration unit anyway. The beagle barked loudly in approval and began wolfing down the cheese the moment Jon gave it to him.

None of the crew gave him so much as a second look as he walked through the corridors, and Jon once more felt a hint of depression begin to set in when he realized just how isolated he had become.
in the last few months. More and more, he relied on Erika or Malcolm to deal with the day-to-day running of the ship while he focused more on either interfacing with Soval over points of diplomacy or brooded in his cabin. Since Trip had died – T’Pol too, but Jon’s thoughts invariably turned first to his friend of ten years – he had felt lost and rudderless. It wasn’t until Tucker was gone that Archer realized how much he needed the younger man’s friendship to keep him stable and grounded. And how had he repaid Trip for all of those years of friendship? By getting him killed. What sort of man did that to his best friend?

He paused just over the threshold of the mess hall, noting with some relief that Ambassador Soval and Travis were sitting together once again, although Reed was also present this time, looking far more rested than Archer felt. The three men stirred at his approach.

“Gentlemen,” he said by way of greeting. “Ambassador, Lieutenant, I need to speak with the two of you, if you don’t mind.”

“I was on my way to the bridge anyway,” Malcolm said, although his meal was barely touched. He was up and heading toward the door before any of them could really react, or before Jon could offer praise on the armoury officer’s actions planetside. He made a mental note to do so later, maybe before his scheduled visit to Phlox for those damned leeches that helped Archer sleep.

“Earth is working on opening diplomatic relations with Krios Prime,” Jon said as he took Malcolm’s vacated seat. Travis suddenly looked tense. “Apparently,” Archer said softly, making sure that only Mayweather and Soval could hear him, “the First Monarch has requested you by name, Lieutenant, to head up the embassy.”

“Oh, God,” Travis moaned. He looked like he was about to be sick.

“This news does not please you?” Soval asked, one eyebrow climbing.

“Are you serious?” Mayweather asked. “I’m a pilot, dammit, not a diplomat!”

“It’d come with a promotion to lieutenant commander,” Jon remarked, “so if you’re interested-”

“I’m not!” Travis interrupted quickly. “Sir, I don’t want to leave Enterprise!” The former Boomer grimaced. “Besides,” he said, “I’m not exactly diplomat material.”

“I disagree,” Soval interjected, the remark causing Travis to shoot him a wide-eyed look of despair. “But I will concede that you need additional instruction before becoming an effective ambassador,” he added before shifting his eyes toward Jon. Archer nodded in understanding of the unspoken promise that the Vulcan would assist him in keeping Mayweather aboard. A carefully wordedmissive with both of their signatures would probably go a long way in keeping the vultures at bay for a while, at least until Princess Kaitaama moved on.

And when, Jon wondered, had he learned to communicate with Soval like this? Hell, he didn’t even like the Vulcan ambassador!

“You’re sure that you want to stay, Travis?” Archer asked. “This is a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

“Well, somebody else can have it,” Mayweather said with passion. “I’m a spacer, sir. I belong in space, not on some planet most people haven’t even heard of.” He glowered. “I’d rather visit Andoria than go there.”

“Are you aware,” Soval asked blithely, “that the Andorian word for ‘accord’ is pronounced ‘fook’? The Mayweather Fook has a pleasant ring to it, does it not?”
“Not you too,” Travis groaned.

And Jon laughed.
A sharp intake of breath caused him to twist in place and his grin broadened at the open surprise he saw on T’Pol’s face. She was standing just past the lip of the door, dressed in the scratchy clothes she’d been wearing for the last few weeks instead of the catsuit he had expected to see her in. Trip shrugged – this was a dream, after all, and he’d seen her dressed like this for months now so of course his subconscious would give her the clothes he was more accustomed to seeing. Besides, the dress was far more flattering than that ugly as sin carpet suit she’d worn aboard Enterprise, even if it didn’t hug her curves quite as well.

And, if he hadn’t already figured out that he was dreaming before, the naked emotion on her face was a dead giveaway.

“You cannot be here,” she said, her eyes wide. Trip grinned.

“Engineerin’ is my domain, darlin’,” he replied. The endearment fell from his lips as if he had used it a million times and he laughed again at the expression on her face. “Gotta say, though,” Trip added, “I’m a little surprised you’re actually wearing clothes for a change.” The imaginary T’Pol shot him another look of surprise and he shook his head. “Usually when you show up in my dreams, you’re naked.” A green flush crawled across her face. “And horny,” Trip added with a bright grin.

“You cannot be here,” she repeated. Panic was starting to appear on her face and Trip’s good humor...
began to recede as a sense that something wasn’t right began to twist his stomach into a knot. His smile faltered. “How is it that you are here?” T’Pol demanded, her nostrils flaring and her eyes narrowing.

“This is a dream,” Trip answered hesitantly, even as he began to wonder if that were truly the case. “I just … wished real hard.” He wet his lips. “This is a dream, right?”

In response, T’Pol whirled away, murmuring something in Vulcan that sounded like a cross between a prayer and a curse. She sank into that uncomfortable-looking meditative posture she always used and began breathing in a distinct pattern. Around them, engineering faded away and their surroundings returned to the overwhelming white space that Trip had woken up to. It suddenly seemed hostile and sterile and totally alien and oh God he was going to be sick.

“This is a dream,” Trip repeated. He knelt and touched T’Pol’s shoulder, causing her to immediately flinch away from him.

“You cannot be here,” the Vulcan said for a third time. Fear was in her voice and on her face as she looked at him, and Trip felt his stomach plunge to his feet. If this was a dream, then it was quickly turning into the most terrifying one he’d ever had and that included the one with the clowns riding sharks he’d had when he was nine.

“You’re real, aren’t you?” he asked hesitantly. “You’re really T’Pol …” Fear coursed through him then, so overwhelming in intensity that he staggered away from her. Almost at once, he realized that it felt … different, like it wasn’t his fear at all. His eyes widened in sudden comprehension. “What … how … why …” The questions died half-formed on his lips as his eyes locked with hers, and he saw his confusion mirrored back at him. She didn’t understand either! Anger washed away his fright, and T’Pol rocked back as he sprang back to his feet and screamed a wordless cry of terrified rage. This was just so … typical!

“Trip.” He automatically glanced back to where T’Pol still sat, freezing at the sight of her visibly wincing and pressing her fingers to her temples as if suffering from a powerful headache. “Please control your emotions,” she said through clenched teeth. “Your outburst was … painful.”

“What the hell is going on?” Trip demanded sharply. At her flinch, he took a deep breath and sank down onto his knees in front of her. When he spoke next, he made an effort to rein in his temper. “This isn’t a dream, is it?” he asked.

“I do not think it is, no,” the Vulcan replied. She frowned. “I have full control of my faculties, as do you, so it is logical to presume that this is some sort of … telepathic connection.”

“How the hell-” Trip snapped his mouth shut when she recoiled, and clenched his eyes shut. “How is this possible?” he asked. His eyes snapped open. “Could it be the Pa’nar?” T’Pol pursed her lips.

“That is a … possibility,” she mused before frowning again. “There is … an alternate explanation,” she said finally. Trip nodded for her to continue. “On Vulcan, there is a dissident group who call themselves Syrranites,” she said, the revelation causing Trip to blink in surprise. Who knew that the Vulcans had internal problems too? “They teach that all Vulcans are capable of telepathy, and that the High Command has suppressed this knowledge. This … situation would seem to lend credence to their argument.”

“You can read my thoughts?” Trip swallowed, suddenly unsure how to react. If she knew about the kinds of dreams and fantasies he’d had about her from the first moment she entered the captain’s ready room, then he was in a whole lot of trouble. Do not think about decon, he told himself.

Whatever you do, do not think about decon and how badly you wanted to throw her down and...
“If I can,” T’Pol replied, evidently ignorant of his racing thoughts even though Trip thought the white space had turned a little blue, “I do not know how.” She sighed heavily, a reaction that he found totally out of character for her. The more he thought about it, though, the more he realized that she had been openly displaying emotion from the moment she appeared in his imaginary engineering. Comprehension came at once – this was the true T’Pol, the inner T’Pol before her instinctive control suppressed any hint of emotion. She was frightened and worried and so frustrated that Trip thought she might explode at any moment.

“Then how…” He trailed off, unsure about how to phrase his question.

“I do not know,” T’Pol answered nonetheless. “You went to sleep, I meditated, and then followed suit.” Her eyes widened. “Physical contact,” she said abruptly, the emerald blush returning to her face. “The Syrannites claim that Vulcans are touch telepaths and I ... I was cold.” Despite the situation, Trip couldn’t help but to grin.

“So,” he guessed, “you’re snuggled up to me?” As her blush deepened, his smile widened.

“Shouldn’t you have bought me dinner first?”

“I was under the impression that you preferred bowls of pebbles,” T’Pol retorted smoothly. At his laugh, her own lips quirked upward. Trip decided against mentioning it, though; they had other things to worry about without him calling attention to her momentary lapse of control.

“So how do we get back?” he asked instead. “As scenic as your brain is,” he continued with a gesture that encompassed the featureless whiteness, “I’m not sure it’s a good idea for me to stick around.” God only knew how much he did not want to stumble on any memories she might have of the captain. Something of his thoughts must have reflected on his face, because T’Pol frowned tightly. She didn’t say anything, though, but instead closed her eyes tightly.

And just like that, Trip found himself back in his bed.

The transition was so startling that he jerked awake and tumbled out of the too narrow bed, smacking his head on the wooden floor below. He cursed loudly but froze the moment he realized that T’Pol was leaning over the bed and looking at him, her ears sticking up through the disheveled hair that now fell to the middle of her back. The shirt she was wearing had twisted around while she slept, and was now bunched up just under her breasts, revealing her taut stomach. She looked so unbelievably sexy in that moment that it hit Trip like a physical blow.

He rolled to his feet, making sure that his back was to her so she couldn’t see the state he was in thanks entirely to her, and headed toward the door of the lodge. The wooden floor creaked underneath his weight, but he ignored the sound. In the two and a half months they’d been hiding here – seventy-four local days, the part of his brain that refused to switch off reminded him – he’d gone over every square centimeter of the old cabin and now knew the layout so well he could navigate through it blind-folded.

Which he had several times, thanks to Taskmaster T’Pol and her insane training.

His erection hadn’t subsided by the time he threw on his shirt and headed for the door, knowing that T’Pol’s eyes were watching his every move. Trip was surprised that she remained quiet – she usually had something to say when he went off alone like this – but gave thanks to minor miracles and darted through the door, pausing only briefly to send a quick, gruff, “Goin’ swimmin’,” in her direction.

Outside, he breathed in the crisp, early morning air and began walking briskly toward the footpath.
leading down the hill and to the lake that had turned into his own personal refuge since they arrived here. At any other time, he would have even enjoyed the sights along the way – the almost pristine forest was brilliantly lush, with leaves so green that, if they were on Earth, would make him suspect paint. Even the lodge they’d claimed was beautiful in its own way, reminding him of his late grandpa’s hunting lodge in Washington state that it sent another pang of homesickness through him. A one-story construction, it had three bedrooms, a kitchen, and a direct line to the well behind it. The outhouse was the only drawback, and he could only guess how badly it must stink to T’Pol.

The lake was five or six kilometers away from the cabin, but Trip wasn’t even breathing hard when he arrived even though he’d jogged the entire way. T’Pol’s slave-driving demands when it came to his training admittedly had some benefits – he was in the best physical shape of his life – but her work ethic was even stricter than his and he doubted that vacation was even in her vocabulary. Eventually, Trip had been forced to put his foot down – he needed a day off to just relax, or his brain might explode – and they’d reached a compromise that the deep-rooted Baptist in him approved of: every seventh day, training was off-limits.

Trip blew out a frustrated breath as he stared at the lake. Light from the rising sun played upon the water, sparkling like tiny jewels dancing on the surface, and he inhaled deeply in a vain attempt to clear his mind. For a moment, he seriously considered diving into the water – it would be the same thing as a cold shower – but decided to deal with his problem in an older, more traditional manner. It didn’t take long – thanks to T’Pol’s damned mental training, he had perfect recall, and just last week, he’d accidentally stumbled on her bathing in the lake. He’d been completely unable to look away as water dripped off her curves and ran down the length of her toned body, and just the memory spurred him toward completion.

Afterward, when he discovered that masturbation hadn’t completely relaxed him – that damned image of T’Pol kept popping into his head, along with the memory of her nude body draped over his in the Zeon house, not to mention the sounds she sometimes made during particularly effective neuropressure – he stripped out of his clothes and dove into the lake. The shock of the cold water made him gasp, but accomplished exactly what he’d hoped for. With strong, sure strokes, he swam, momentarily losing himself in the rhythmic motions. He’d forgotten just how much he loved the water.

“You must never allow yourself to become so focused on a single task that you become distracted.” The memory of T’Pol’s voice jolted him back to reality, and Trip winced. He flip-turned in the water and increased the pace of his strokes. Within seconds, he was back at the shore and he pulled his underwear on quickly.

“You’re an idiot, Tucker,” he said aloud as he finished dressing. T’Pol was Vulcan, dammit. She probably didn’t have the first clue about what she was doing to him and nothing would change until she did know. Trip frowned and began walking toward the footpath. How would things change if he told her? Sure, she had started to let her emotional control slip around him more frequently, but as far as he could tell, that was just a symptom of the Pa’nar, and it never ceased to embarrass her – although she insisted that she wasn’t embarrassed since that was an emotional reaction – whenever that happened. Hell, he wasn’t even sure how to begin the conversation in the first place! They’d been on this stupid planet for eight human months or so and he still didn’t know how her damned mind worked. He knew she trusted him, thought some of his jokes were funny if the occasional smile she let slip were any indication, but he had absolutely no idea what she thought about him personally. God, that woman had him tied up in knots and she apparently didn’t even know it!

Trip was so lost in thought that he didn’t realize that he’d taken the wrong path until he was a dozen meters or so away from the lake. Cursing softly, he turned in place in an attempt to identify exactly where he was, and in doing so, caught sight of the bear.
Oh, it wasn’t *exactly* a bear – the shape of the head was a little different, and its eyes were larger – but it was close enough that Trip identified it as such. The creature seemed to see him at exactly the same moment and Trip automatically reached for the pistol at his side.

The pistol that was, at this very moment, still in the hunting lodge.

With a roar, the bear-creature sprang forward, moving more quickly than something its size should have been capable of, and Trip threw himself to the side. Claws ripped through the shirt and into his side, carving a vicious trail of liquid agony.

Trip screamed.

And the bear attacked once again, its paws slamming into Tucker’s side and sending him sprawling. He hit the ground hard, fighting to stay conscious as his entire back felt like it was on fire. Breathing was difficult and all he could smell was blood. He tried to move, tried to make his arms and legs obey, but the pain … oh, God, the pain. It was too much and Trip realized that he was going to die. *I’m sorry, T’Pol.*

The ground shook as the bear-creature sprang toward him.

So Trip closed his eyes and let the darkness swallow him.
An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 259 days (226.75 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's December, 2152.

She could not move.

Even as Trip disappeared through the door of the cabin, T'Pol found herself frozen in place on his bed, her eyes wide and her mind racing. What had just happened … it was not possible. It could not be possible. And yet, logically, she knew that it had. She had been in Trip’s mind. And he had been in hers. Which could mean one thing.

She was a melder.

Pushing her rising panic down, T'Pol slid off the bed and reached for the long shirt she had begun to use as a robe. It only reached her upper legs, just above her knees, but with the pants she consistently wore at night, it helped ward off the early morning chill. She still had not determined if her continuing inability to get warm was due to the Pa’nar or some facet about this planet’s ecology that did not affect Trip in the same way.

Automatically, her eyes locked on the door that he had vanished through and she struggled to fight down the fear threatening to overwhelm her control. If she had unconsciously melded with him while they slept as it appeared, then there was a good chance that she might have infected him with the same terminal condition that she had acquired from Tolaris. How would Pa’nar affect a human? Had her foolish attachment to Trip endangered his life? She didn’t know and had no idea how to find out. It was bad enough that her stupidity had significantly curtailed her own life expectancy, but if she had permanently damaged Trip? There were no words for such an appalling loss of judgment.

Even more troubling was the realization that the Syrannites were likely correct. If all Vulcans were truly capable of mind melds, then that meant the High Command had lied. Admittedly, that was not as big a surprise now as it would have been before she learned how far they would go, but it still went against everything she had been taught. If they had deceived Vulcans about this, something that may very well be at the core of all Vulcans, then what other truths had they concealed? What else had she been taught that was a lie?

Her eyes fell on Trip’s phase pistol resting atop the small, wooden chest near the head of Tucker’s bed so it was close at hand while he slept. She flushed as soon as she realized that she was responsible for him forgetting it. If he had not been so … distraught following their shared dream, she knew he would not have forgotten the weapon. A sigh escaped her lips before she was able to stop herself and she secured the pistol before retracing her steps to her own room. She had not been deceiving Trip when she told him that she was cold the night before, but neither was she telling the entire truth. At some point in recent months, his presence had become a necessary element for her sleep to be fulfilling or her meditation to be effective. It was difficult for her to admit to such a reliance on another person, but it was the truth.

Abruptly, T’Pol’s eyes widened. If all Vulcans were capable of melding, could this mean that the myths about mating bonds had a basis in fact? She had never questioned exactly why newly married
spouses were expected to spend their first year together, but perhaps …

No. Surely not. T’Les would have warned her.

She dressed quickly, acknowledging at the back of her mind that she had ulterior motives about taking the phase pistol to Trip. Although he had tried to conceal it, she had seen (and smelled) the state of his body when he made his escape, and twice in the last month, she had discreetly observed him relieving his tensions after witnessing a similar condition. At neither time had her presence been intentional and she could not entirely comprehend why she was so eager to observe a third time, only that her every nerve ending felt … aroused at the thought. Even the possibility that he might in fact be swimming failed to arrest the subtle excitement, not when she considered how he preferred to wear nothing at all while in the lake. T’Pol shook her head – this was not like her! It was illogical.

Still, she walked more quickly than was probably appropriate as she exited the cabin and angled toward the footpath leading down the hill. With the two phase pistol holstered on either side of her waist, she felt slightly ridiculous but suppressed the emotion. Curiously, the rush of excitement that had coursed through her moments earlier had dwindled and T’Pol shivered against the morning air. It seemed far colder than it actually was and she more lamented the damage done to her scanner. The one that Trip possessed as part of his survival pack was grossly inferior to hers, and she wished they had acquired the appropriate tools that would have allowed Trip to cannibalize his scanner to repair hers.

There was no trace of him at the lake when she arrived, and T’Pol frowned in slight worry. She cast around for a moment, studying the soft ground around the water for signs of his passage. After a moment, she located his distinctive footprints leading from the lake to a second path that would take him to a cabin not theirs. T’Pol raised an eyebrow at his unusual actions and took a step toward the path.

And a heartbeat later, she heard Trip scream out in agony.

T’Pol reacted without thought. She sprang forward, both hands wrapping around the grips of the two pistols and drawing them in mid-stride. Up the trail she sprinted, terror that she did not bother trying to suppress fueling her muscles. The sound of a low roar warned her a single, thudding heartbeat before the sehlat-like creature came into view. Trip was on the ground before the beast, unmoving, and T’Pol shrieked like a le-matya as she brought the two pistols up to fire. The creature twisted around, as if to defend its meal, but she was already squeezing the triggers. Twin lances of energy flashed out, boring into the sehlat-like creature. It collapsed instantly, twitching and shaking as if in the throes of an epileptic seizure, but T’Pol did not stop firing. With a hideous shriek and a bone-cracking shudder, the beast stopped moving entirely.

She slid to a stop alongside Trip, her heart pounding and tears beginning to trickle down her face. Here, on this world, with no one to see, what did it matter? With a trembling hand, she reached out to touch him.

And he groaned.

Later, T’Pol would not be able to piece together exactly how she got Trip from that spot back to their cabin without killing him. She used the last of their remaining Starfleet medical supplies to stabilize him – the tiny medical computer was of little help as it recommended an immediate trauma surgeon be located – and seal the worst of his lacerations, but still his vital signs continued their gradual decline. Panic set in as T’Pol realized she was about to watch him die.

And that was the one thing she did not want to do.
Grief began twisting her stomach in knots and she brushed his too long and still wet hair out of his face. She had tried so very hard not to feel more than collegial affection for this man and yet now, she knew that her efforts had been for naught. It was simply too difficult to envision a universe without Trip Tucker in it. On instinct, she cupped his face with her hand, fingers almost moving of their accord, and as soon as she realized what she was doing, T'Pol pulled her hand back.

But not before she felt the whisper of pain that she knew wasn’t hers.

Swallowing, T’Pol gave Trip another look before glancing down at her hand and then his face once more. The Syrannites argued that this was a natural talent for all Vulcans, not something to be despised or feared. More importantly, if her understanding of their banned teachings were accurate, it might be possible for her to lend Trip her strength. If he was a Vulcan, he could enter a healing trance so perhaps she could do the same for him? Was it worth the risk? Tolaris had permanently damaged her brain chemistry with his meld …

“He will die otherwise,” she murmured.

So she touched his face once more.

Dull pain echoed through her fingertips and T’Pol concentrated on the sensation to the exclusion of everything else. It felt as if she were slowly siphoning raw acid into her body, but somehow, she could sense that Trip’s pain was easing. She grit her teeth together – it wasn’t enough.

“Trip,” she said aloud, hoping that some part of his consciousness could hear her. “I need you to trust me.” There was no answer – she hadn’t truly expected one – but T’Pol decided that she had no more time.

She pushed.

“My mind to your mind,” she murmured, reciting the words she’d read in a banned text that possession of alone was considered a level two misdemeanor. Her sense of self seemed to … shift, as if she were moving without actually changing physical position. “Our minds are joining,” T’Pol continued. Her other hand came up and anchored itself on the other side of Trip’s face as she felt her consciousness continue to expand and slide toward a raging torrent of foreign colors and images. It was an amazing and terrifying sensation, but she focused on her need, on Trip, and pushed away the fear. “Our minds are one,” she finished.

Our minds are one, a distant, masculine voice echoed from an eternity away that was no space at all.

T’Pol opened her eyes.

And found chaos.

She recognized Enterprise’s engineering deck immediately, despite the fires raging and the damage. Smoke filled the air and, although she knew that it was all in Trip’s mind, she coughed nonetheless and instinctively reached up to cover her mouth. Another explosion ripped apart a nearby conduit and warp coolant sprayed out.

“What the hell are you doin’ here?” Trip screamed as he darted out of the maelstrom. His Starfleet uniform was burned and charred, blood caked the side of his face, and he was limping, but that did not stop him from grabbing her arm and shoving her toward the main entrance. To her surprise, Captain Archer was standing there, his own uniform spotless and his physical appearance more idealized than realistic. T’Pol blinked when Trip shoved her toward the captain, an expression of bitter remorse flashing across Tucker’s face. She felt a sharp pain stab through her then – it was Trip’s, not hers – and another fire erupted. Engineering was falling apart.
When the imaginary Archer took her arm, she resisted and pulled away from him, sparing him only the briefest of glances before returning to her attention to Trip.

“I am here to help you,” she declared. Again, the faux captain reached for her arm, and again, she slapped him away.

“You need to get out of here!” Trip urged. He flinched when another conduit erupted in flames.

And quite suddenly, T’Pol finally understood. She silently chastised herself for being oblivious before taking a step closer to the bleeding Tucker. His eyes widened when she raised her hand toward his face.

“I am here to assist you, Trip,” she told him coolly.

“I don’t…” Trip’s eyes darted toward where she knew Archer was standing, and T’Pol followed his gaze. Her breath caught at the sight of the captain standing there.

Holding her.

Or rather, her as she appeared before they crashed on Ekos. The imaginary doppelganger was wearing a vague approximation of her High Command uniform, although this version seemed unnecessarily tight and was so revealing it bordered on the scandalous. Her hair was cropped short and she seemed quite pleased to be there, in Archer’s arms, as the captain stroked her face. T’Pol’s eyebrows skyrocketed as a dozen images suddenly flickered across her mind’s eye, like video captures on a computer screen. She saw things as Trip saw them, saw the captain entering her cabin after hours following the Paraagan incident, heard comments by Archer taken out of context, felt Tucker’s hidden disappointment as he perceived a romantic connection where there was none. The depth of this man’s regard for her was powerful…

And frightening, but she refused to dwell on that now, not when he was still in such terrible shape.

“Trip.” He refocused on her and a soft smile curled his lips.

“You called me Trip,” he remarked. “Best going away present a guy could have.” T’Pol inhaled sharply.

“Focus on me, Trip,” she ordered. “I need you to focus entirely on me.”

“Well, that’s not hard,” Tucker remarked with a hint of his old spark. T’Pol eased her control and gave him a soft smile.

“You are gravely injured,” she revealed. “I can help you but only if you focus.” Another explosion of fire caused Trip to drop to his knees with a groan.

“It hurts,” he moaned. T’Pol knelt before him.

“Then give it to me,” she instructed, placing her hands on his face.

“No!” Trip tried to pull away from her, his face aghast. “Don’t wanna hurt you!” T’Pol saw her chance then and pounced.

“You are already hurting me, Trip,” she told him. “Watching you suffer pains me.” He looked disbelieving, as if she were trying to trick him, so T’Pol did the only thing she could think of.

She leaned forward and kissed him.
It was a light touching of the lips, no more, but she felt a surge of alien emotion respond to the gesture and push toward her mental barriers. Without hesitation, she accepted the foreign sensations, drank in Trip’s wonder and fear and agony, and concentrated entirely on maintaining the connection between them, no matter what her reflexes urged her to do. Trip’s hands came up to caress the side of her face and the intensity of the sensations increased almost exponentially, nearly overwhelming her. T’Pol opened her eyes – when had she closed them? – and locked gazes with him.

“Trust me, Trip,” she pleaded. This human, this man could not die, not now.

Hesitantly, he nodded.

And acting entirely on instinct, T’Pol opened her mind to him.
The damage to the timeline was more extensive than he had thought.

Seated within his protective temporal containment bubble, Matthew Daniels studied the readouts before him with growing concern. Nothing was turning out the way he’d hoped, and with each passing second, he feared that all of his work was about to unravel. It was on days like this that he wished he’d become a doctor like his mother had wanted, or maybe a botanist like his father.

“Incursion detected along temporal axis one-five-three,” an emotionless, almost mechanical-sounding voice intoned, and Daniels bit back a sigh of frustration when he glanced at the appropriate display. It was Braxton again, sallying forth from the 29th century in another futile attempt to avenge himself against Captain Janeway and the crew of the NCC-74656. The effort was doomed almost from the beginning, but the resulting temporal eddies would need to be examined, investigated, and then pruned as necessary lest they damage the core timeline.

Matthew Daniels, he thought wryly, _temporal horticulturalist at your service._

“Log incursion,” Daniels instructed calmly, no trace of the annoyance he was experiencing in his voice, “and inform Director Ducane. Braxton’s his problem, not mine.” The computer chirped its obedience, and Matthew returned his full attention back to the matter at hand, specifically 2152 and the crew of _Enterprise._

Viewed dispassionately, his efforts to fix some of the growing timeline inconsistencies appeared to be a success. Many of the snarls and hiccups that plagued the period were gradually smoothing out as the elastic nature of temporal mechanics compensated for the rearrangement of key players. In the grand scheme of things, it didn’t matter if T’Pol and Tucker were no longer a part of _Enterprise’s_ crew providing they were reintegrated into history at the appropriate fulcrum point prior to the destruction of Salem One. As long as Archer was captain of the NX-01 during the Xindi crisis and then later, the Kir’shara crisis, time would march on, pressing others into the roles that had once belonged to officers believed dead by their contemporaries. If things played out like they had in his simulations, by the time T’Pol and Tucker reappeared on the scene, the stage would be set for a more rapid elimination of Terra Prime and the Romulan-influenced Vulcan High Command. And if Matthew was very very lucky, the Vulcans might actually be able to do more than offer empty words when the war with their lost cousins broke out.

And all because Daniels had sabotaged the engines on a single shuttlepod. _For want of a nail,_ Matthew mused idly.

At the time, it had seemed like the correct course of action. Not only did it assure that Tucker would survive the confusing (and frankly self-contradictory) incident that originally claimed his life in 2161, it also provided the impetus for a long-overdue self-examination on Jonathan Archer’s part. Until the ‘deaths’ of his two closest friends aboard _Enterprise_, Archer had lived what could be construed as a charmed life. Yes, his father’s death had been tragic, but beyond that, the man had never been truly forced to face the ramifications of his decisions.

Unfortunately, it seemed to have backfired if Matthew’s readings were any indication. Jonathan was too cautious now, especially when compared to his previous devil may care attitude. The drive he needed to be truly great appeared to have been lost alongside his two friends. Instead, he approached matters with the wariness of a diplomat when a ‘space cowboy’ was needed. Something would need to be done to compensate … perhaps Daniels should pay Archer a visit and imply that the two officers weren’t dead? No, that would likely lead to Jonathan redirecting _Enterprise_ to Ekos, which
would lead them to never interacting with the Vissians. For that matter, who knew what effect such an action would have on the development of the Ekosians?

Matthew sighed.

“Incursion detected along temporal axis nine-six-three,” the computer announced. It was the NCC-1701 and one of their escapades in the 20th-century. Matthew shook his head and silently gave thanks that he hadn’t been assigned to Kirk. Compared to him, Jonathan Archer was a walk in the park.

So instead, he returned his attention to the points of deviation already in play.

As far as he could tell, the biggest change to the timeline revolved around Travis Mayweather. In the core timeline, the former Boomer had served admirably, but retired at the rank of lieutenant commander to take over his family’s starship, but now, with Captain Archer and Ambassador Soval both urging him to push himself harder than ever before, things had changed dramatically. After serving as Captain Hernandez’s executive officer aboard the Challenger, Mayweather became the youngest member of Starfleet to reach the rank of captain until James Kirk beat his record by six months. Mayweather would go on to join the UFP Advisory Board and would serve as President Archer’s commander-in-chief of Starfleet. At his urging, the Federation would get into a small shooting war with the Klingons when they annexed Krios Prime, but beyond that, Mayweather’s impact on the timeline seemed entirely positive.

The same could not be said of Malcolm Reed. From the moment of the Xindi assault on Earth, Reed’s presence in the timeline seemed … spotty, almost as if he were a walking temporal eddy that was constantly in a state of flux. Dozens of splinter timelines branched off of him as the core timeline tried to compensate. In one, Reed died when Rajiin was aboard Enterprise, but in another, he was among those killed at Azati Prime, and in yet another he died aboard the Xindi sphere while attempting to rescue Lieutenant Sato. Daniels grimaced. Was it really that hard just to stay alive, even for a security officer? Reed’s role in history was no less important than Archer’s, albeit in a more subtle manner, so why was the man trying so hard to make Matthew’s life a living hell?

Soval’s presence aboard Enterprise was another unintended consequence that had interesting alterations to the core timeline the specifics of which Matthew hadn’t yet been able to fully nail down. With the former ambassador actively serving aboard the NX-01, there was no need for Maxwell Forrest to travel to Vulcan prior to the Kir’shara crisis, and instead, Hannibal Black went in his stead where he perished in the same explosion that claimed Ambassador V’Lar’s life. Forrest’s continued leadership of Starfleet was already shifting the dynamics of the Earth/Romulan War in curious ways – the use of atomics was becoming less probable and a greater dedication toward research seemed to indicate the discovery of the Romulan/Vulcan connection occurring long before the Kirk Era. And with Forrest providing capable leadership on Earth, Archer was not pressed into flag rank as early as he had, which kept him on the front lines of the war and further tempered the future UFP president’s sense of duty.

Matthew’s head swam. Few comprehended the intricacies of temporal dynamics like he did, but right now, he was beginning to regret making the alteration. He traced one of the fulcrum points – Hoshi Sato, 2157, and the cracking of the Romulan communications code that made Cheron possible – and frowned when he realized it had moved forward three months. Starfleet’s successes in those three months forced the Romulans to revise their battle plan, which made Cheron less of a pivotal battle as previously and extended the war into early 2161. Using his light pen, Daniels moved back along the Sato axis in an attempt to determine the nature of the deviation. He bit back a curse when he realized it was tied to Mayweather and his transfer to Challenger.
“Incursion detected along temporal axis three-two-seven,” the computer announced, and Daniels tapped one of the holographic displays seeming suspended in mid-air before him. A data readout appeared instantly and he raised his eyebrows in surprise. Archer was accessing the temporal database Matthew left aboard the NX-01. For a moment, Daniels was tempted to intervene – there were things in that database that Jonathan had no business learning – but the moment he realized the nature of Archer’s inquiries, he decided to do nothing.

Besides, it was nice to see a flash of the old Jonathan Archer in play.

So he simply logged the incursion and went back to work. There was too much to do.
T'Pol: Bonding Realization

Chapter Notes

An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 269 days (237.375 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's December, 2152.

She was strangely eager today.

The morning dawned as it had the previous ten days, with no sign that anything was different, but T'Pol was unable to shake the sensation that everything was about to change. She took extra care during her morning routine to ensure that there was nothing amiss or that anything had penetrated the perimeter of their sanctuary, whether it be rabid beasts of the two or four-legged kind. Nothing was ever out of place, no matter how often she checked, but T'Pol simply could not entirely suppress the unexplained agitation that was driving her.

So instead, she ignored it.

She could not remember the last time she heard anything but the sound of her own voice and, with each day that passed, T'Pol had grown more concerned. Trip remained where he was, flat on his back and so deeply unconscious that it was almost impossible to tell that he was still alive. He hovered in the twilight state between living and death, accepting the water and other liquid nourishment she fed him but never waking, never stirring, never opening his eyes and becoming Trip once more. She clung to the fact that his condition was not worsening.

But neither did it appear to be getting any better.

The first three days following the meld had left T'Pol in a constant state of anxiety. She had been hyper-sensitive toward Trip’s condition, incorrectly interpreting any change in his breathing patterns or change of expression, and the hours crawled by as she stared at his unmoving body, urging him to wake if only for a few seconds. Every hour, she would touch his face, her fingers automatically falling into the proper alignment, but she did not actively seek to meld with him out of fear that she might inflict additional harm. Instead, she simply stretched out with her consciousness, desperate to find a spark that would indicate he was finally rousing from the torpor.

And every hour, she would withdraw her hand, disappointed and terrified that the Trip she knew was gone, that this was nothing more than a hollow, empty shell, and that she would never again hear his laugh, or see his smile, or feel his touch.

Without the control that he had learned as a child, Trip urinated and defecated whenever his body required it, and T'Pol dutifully attended to cleaning him up afterward. After the second time this occurred, she left him unclothed but covered his body with one of the many sheets found in the cabin. By the fourth time, she had rigged a rudimentary condom catheter from the remains of their medical kits that fit around his penis for his more frequent urinations as she worked to keep him hydrated.

She was struck by the similarity in his current position to how helpless she had been during the Fullara, although admittedly, she did not have deep lacerations on her torso as he did. The comparison was still apt, however. She had been totally reliant on others for even the most basic of
tasks and, despite acknowledging the illogic of the thought, she hoped that this was simply the universe’s way of achieving equilibrium.

Curiously, during this time, T’Pol felt more centered and in control of herself than she had for months. Her mind was clear, her thoughts sharp, and her meditative state was easily reached. Once she considered it, she realized that she had not felt this stable since before Tolaris entered her life, and not an hour passed without T’Pol casting worried looks at Trip. More than anything, she desperately hoped that she had not compounded the error by somehow transferring the worst of her condition to him.

For reasons she could not adequately explain, however, she did not think that was so. Despite him showing no sign of recovery, a part of T’Pol was convinced that Trip would survive. She briefly blamed it on her exposure to humanity and their ridiculous belief in ‘hope,’ but that did not prevent her from clunging to the curious feeling.

By the second day, she had established a pattern. When the sun rose, she would attend to Trip’s bodily needs, whether it was washing urine or feces away, or checking his bandages to make sure he was not bleeding, or even giving him a dose of the painkiller she had developed from a local plant that was, according to the tiny medical computer in their survival kit, entirely safe for human use. Afterward, she would spend an hour in meditation before feeding him – she recycled parts of the now depleted medical kit to craft a liquid drip for food and water – which she would follow by once again making sure his body was clean. She would then do whatever chores were necessary around the cabin, sometimes meditating again until midday, at which point she would attend to Trip, feed herself, and continue whatever had been occupying her attention from the morning. Throughout the rest of the day, she would periodically check on him, attending to his needs as appropriate, until the sun disappeared. At this point, she would either meditate or simply retire to the bed she had set up in Trip’s room.

And, as she quickly discovered, even asleep or meditating, she was always cognizant of the sounds he made.

On the third day after the attack, T’Pol began talking to his comatose body. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision brought on both by her desire to actually do something and the growing sense of loneliness that she was not entirely able to suppress. She spoke about everything and anything that came to mind – her father, Enterprise, her thoughts on various stellar anomalies, her thoughts about some of Surak’s teachings and how they clashed with many of the High Command’s actions, her time aboard the Seleya, her strained relationship with T’Les – and she only stopped when she meditated or slept. It pained her that he could not respond and she quickly realized that what she missed the most was talking with him, not at him.

Today, ten local days after the meld, something was different. Every time she opened her mouth to speak, the words either stalled in her throat or hung heavy in the otherwise silent cabin. The ambient noises were louder than they should have been, and every one of T’Pol’s senses seemed to be keyed up, to the point that it was impossible for her to even find her whitespace.

And when Trip groaned, she suddenly knew why.

The sound spurred her into immediate action and she virtually sprinted across the lodge, desperately trying to ignore the unusual sensation tickling the back of her mind while she focused on Trip. His eyes were still closed, but he was wetting his lips with his tongue, which she took as a clear sign that he was thirsty. Reaching for the water bottle she had already laced with the painkillers, she quickly took a seat on his bed.

“Drink,” T’Pol instructed smoothly as she pushed the nipple of the plastic bottle against his lips while
carefully helping him lean forward slightly. “Slowly,” she cautioned as he sucked greedily, water spilling out of his mouth. “It will make you drowsy.” Trip opened unfocused eyes and locked gazes with her.

“T’Pol?” he ventured. His eyes slid shut almost immediately.

“Yes,” she replied, pulling the bottle away and reaching for a nearby piece of cloth so she could wipe down his damp face and neck. The tickle increased in intensity and she drew in a steadying breath. Surely it could not mean what she thought it might.

“Where’s Phlox?” Tucker asked abruptly, his voice slurring almost to the point of incoherence.

“We are not aboard Enterprise, Trip,” T’Pol told him as she angled the bottle closer so he could sip once more. Tucker wrinkled his brow in confusion.

“What?” he asked. “‘Member ‘splosion in ‘ngineerin’ and …” His accent was even thicker than normal, though she suspected that was due to his barely conscious state. She pushed down the sensation of drowsiness and successfully managed to ignore how … alien it felt. “Shuttlepod crash?” Trip asked a moment later, once more trying to focus his eyes on her.

“We crashed on Ekos some time ago,” T’Pol reminded him. She set the water bottle aside and reached for the medical scanner. “You were attacked by a local creature,” she began as she began taking his readings.

“A bear,” Trip murmured. His eyes closed and he sagged back against the bed, wincing as he did. “Was a bear,” he muttered. Again, his bright blue eyes snapped open and he pinned her with a look that seemed to pierce through to her very katra. “Gonna be okay?” he asked.

“I think so, yes.” T’Pol continued to stroke his upper chest, neck and chin with the damp rag and felt an immense pressure lift from her shoulders. The smile he gave her was soft, warm and so heartfelt that she could almost feel his regard for her rolling off him. Despite her best efforts, she realized that she was returning the gesture although he was likely unaware of it if the lack of focus in his eyes was any indication, and she quickly schooled her face to stoicism. Closing his eyes, Tucker slumped back into the bed.

“T’Pol,” Trip said a moment later. “I can’t feel my arm.”

Her breath caught. The medical scanner had not indicated any nerve damage, but it had been wrong before and was barely worth calling a scanner, so limited in capability was it. If one of Trip’s arms was permanently paralyzed … it would change the entire dynamic of their survival approach. For that matter, how would he react to such impairment? As she had seen during the meld, he still defined himself by his position in Starfleet, and a one-armed engineer would have considerable difficulty. When Tucker opened his eyes, T’Pol was surprised at the lack of fear on his face. Clearly, she had overestimated his coherence, although she did not rule out misjudging the effectiveness of the analgesic compound. She wet her lips and swallowed.

“I’m sorry,” she began and Tucker gave her a sleepy smile.

“T’Pol,” Trip murmured, “you’re sittin’ on mah hand.” Startled, T’Pol glanced down to where Tucker’s hand vanished underneath her posterior. She flushed dark green.

And stood up.

A moment later, Trip was deeply asleep once more, but she could tell that this was a natural, healing sleep, not the frightening comatose-like state he had been in since the meld. Relief warred with
concern – she could not recall an instance when she was more comforted over hearing a few simple words from an alien male, but at the same time, she could not shake the feeling that the meld might have damaged him somehow. Humans did not naturally linger in trance-like states following an injury, did they? She consulted the limited database available within the hand-held medical scanner but it provided no answers; instead, the device simply informed her to seek a medical professional to attend to Trip’s injuries. T’Pol frowned and silently wished she had spent additional time studying human anatomy and biology instead of focusing her attention on their history and politics.

With nothing else to do but wait until he woke once, T’Pol walked to the small area she had set aside for meditation and sank down into the proper posture. Her eyes remained locked on Tucker’s slack face and, with a jolt of surprise, she realized that at some point she had synchronized her breathing with his. It was most illogical.

Meditation did not come easy for a change. Continued worry over Trip as well the lingering sense of … something amiss conspired with the curious sensations in her mind. At first, she had thought they were lingering after-effects from the meld, or perhaps some unexpected aspect of the Pa’nar causing her to experience hallucinations. Such symptoms were not entirely uncommon – some of the sufferers of the melder’s disease claimed to be more sensitive to the emotions of others than ever before, especially in the later stages. This was different, though, and, now with concern over Trip lessened, she focused her full attention on the sensations.

And almost at once, she felt a rush of foreign emotion and sensation – confusion, exhaustion, pain, relief – course into her, as if she had suddenly removed a dam. Under the unexpected deluge, she struggled for control, fought against a tidal wave of alien experiences that momentarily threatened to overwhelm her. Her body was sluggish with agony, heavy with arousal, tense with excitement, quivering with fear … and none of it was hers.

T’Pol’s eyes snapped open and her breath caught. She stared at Trip with wide eyes. Apparently the ancient stories were true. Direct cerebral linkage was possible between mates and the explanation for the tradition of newlyweds living together for a year suddenly made perfect sense.

She swallowed.

And wondered how in Surak’s name she was going to explain this to Trip, especially after she had been so merciless with her … teasing about Ah’len and the bowl of pebbles. T’Pol sat there in silence, staring at Tucker, unable to determine whether she should be angry, content, terrified or horribly amused. She closed her eyes once more and began breathing in a careful pattern. Meditation was no longer desired, it was now necessary. Once she understood her own turbulent emotions in regards to this new development, she could begin to formulate a plan to inform Trip of their altered status.

Life was certainly never dull around Charles Tucker.
This was a nightmare.

Erika sat quietly in the darkness of her cabin, her eyes locked on the glittering starfield beyond the porthole. Her knees were pulled up to her chest and she hugged her legs similar to how she had sat when she was a child. Now, thirty-plus years later and far more miles than she wanted to consider, sitting like this was beyond uncomfortable. The muscles in her thighs protested, her knees ached, and she couldn’t quite feel her toes, but Erika didn’t move. She couldn’t move.

She had lost track of how long she’d sat here, in the pitch black, losing herself in the stars and trying to figure out what to do next. Her deskcomp had long since clicked into standby mode, but she didn’t need it to remember the words of the report still waiting her final approval. Every damned word David Kelby had written was permanently seared into her brain and, for the first time in five years, she desperately wanted something alcoholic to drink, preferably something that could double as engine degreaser.

The chime of her door annunciator snapped her out of the simmering anger that she’d been stewing in for – she glanced in the direction of the wall chronometer and winced – almost four hours. A dark glower on her face, Erika pushed herself out of the chair, inhaling sharply as the muscles in the small of her back howled in discomfort. The stiffness and dull pain along her spine was another reminder that she wasn’t twenty any more – hell, she couldn’t even lay a decent claim at thirty – and, in this case, merely served to infuriate her that much more. Only two people would be buzzing her door right now, and she wasn’t in the mood for either of them. Jon had very correctly appointed her to deal with this situation since it had transpired on her watch and Kelby … well, he was the situation.

With that in mind, she was utterly unprepared to see Ambassador Soval standing just outside her door.

The Vulcan was as inscrutable as ever, but Erika thought she could see weariness around his eyes that hadn’t been there before. Ever since he and Jon returned to discover the mess Kelby had gotten them into, Soval had been working nonstop with the Vissian government in a last ditch effort to prevent a complete collapse of what had looked to be a promising first contact.

“May I enter?” the ambassador asked calmly. His hands were clasped together in front of him, hidden from view by the voluminous sleeves of the strikingly elaborate robes he was wearing. Erika nodded, backing out of the doorway and gesturing for him to enter. He did so, his steps brisk and economical, and the door slid shut behind him with a sharp hiss. “The Vissian government has decided against pressing charges,” Soval said without preamble and the words caused Erika to sag in relief. “It should not come as a surprise, however,” the ambassador continued, “that Lieutenant Commander Kelby has been permanently barred from entering their territory upon pain of death.”

“No,” Erika agreed softly. “No surprise at all.”

“Captain Archer is continuing his efforts to salvage this first contact,” Soval revealed, “but I suspect
that it is already too late.” He glanced in the direction of the darkened monitor. “Have you decided upon an appropriate punishment?”

“Part of me wants to throw the book at him,” Erika growled. She took a seat on the edge of her bed and gestured for Soval to take her desk chair which he accepted with a slight nod. “But another part of me … I can’t really blame him for what he did with the cogenitor.” Her lip curled in either annoyance or bitter amusement, although she couldn’t quite tell which. “Charles,” she pronounced. Soval’s left eyebrow climbed and Erika recognized his subtle request for additional information. “He apparently spent a lot of time telling the cogenitor about Commander Tucker and Enterprise,” she said flatly, “and it adopted Tucker’s name as a sort of tribute.”

“I was not aware that Mister Kelby and Commander Tucker were close,” Soval mused. Erika shrugged.

“Tucker took Kelby under his wing after that whole NX Alpha mess,” she said, “and they’ve worked together for most of their careers since.” She shook her head – this wasn’t important. She needed to focus on the task at hand, not on Kelby’s history with Tucker. “He disobeyed a direct order not to get involved,” Erika began tightly, “and then, his involvement with the cogenitor nearly precipitated an interstellar war.” She glowered at the floor. “If I don’t slap him down hard, it’ll send a message to the other officers and crew that this sort of nonsense is okay.”

“In theory,” Soval said slowly, “I agree.” Erika glanced up and met his eyes. She wondered when they had lapsed into High Vulcan and silently took it as a compliment that the ambassador did not change back to English. “I have noted that Lieutenant Commander Kelby has become a popular officer,” the ambassador said in response to her unspoken urge to continue. Erika frowned.

“I know,” she muttered. “The crew is just now getting over losing Tucker and Hess,” she continued darkly. “If they lose a third chief engineer in under a year … I don’t want to even guess what that’ll do to morale.”

“Have you spoken with Captain Archer?” Soval asked after a long moment. Erika bit back her instinctive remark, that no, she had not talked to the captain about this mess because she barely recognized the space lawyer who had taken up residence in Jonathan Archer’s body, but from the studious look he gave her, Soval clearly knew what she was thinking.

She still didn’t know what to make of the change that had come over her former lover and now commanding officer. When they’d split up following his promotion to captain before Enterprise even launched, Jon had been a balls to the wall, damn the torpedoes sort of man, the exact sort of type A personality that Starfleet wanted commanding their ships. It had been his devil may care attitude that had originally attracted her to him – well, that and his smile – but since she’d come aboard, she hadn’t seen a hint of that old personality. Tucker’s death had changed him, made him overly cautious and borderline paranoid when it came to the safety of his crew. Sure, a captain who would walk through fire to bring every member of his crew out of hell quickly earned almost fanatical loyalty from those very officers and enlisted that he was so willing to die for, but there were times when Erika felt like he had lost his edge. Would this Jonathan Archer help steal the NX Alpha with A.G. Robinson? Would this Jonathan Archer stand firm and tell the Vulcan High Command where they could stick their warnings about humanity not being ready to see the stars?

Somehow, she doubted it.

“As first officer,” she said in response to the ambassador’s question, “crew discipline falls under my jurisdiction.” Erika returned her eyes to the porthole and the starfield beyond. “That’s how it works in Starfleet, Ambassador. I make the recommendation to the captain, he makes the final decision.”
“And what will your recommendation be?” Soval queried.

“Thirty days in the brig,” Erika replied instantly, “and an immediate demotion to lieutenant.”

“A harsh sentence,” the ambassador remarked. Erika nodded – the demotion alone would doom Kelby’s chances of ever reaching captain’s rank, and very few commanders would be willing to take him on as chief engineer, but it was, as far as she could tell, the lightest possible sentence she could give to him given how badly he’d screwed up. A sentient being was dead because of his refusal to listen to her, a first contact potentially ruined, and God only knew what else this could lead to.

“I’m trying to avoid a general court-martial,” she said simply. “If Starfleet Command thinks I’m being too lenient on him, they’ll order JAG to get involved and he’d be lucky if they didn’t just drum him out of the service entirely.”

“May I offer another suggestion?” Soval ventured. Erika nodded. “This entire incident occurred because members of your crew continue to judge other sentients by human standards.”

“That’s unavoidable,” Erika started to argue, but the ambassador held up a hand and she nodded for him to continue.

“As my duties are light aboard Enterprise,” he said, “I think it would be wise to schedule a series of training seminars to better prepare your crew with non-human interactions.” Erika’s eyes widened.

“That’s … a really good idea,” she said. Why hadn’t they thought of it before? It had been naïve of Starfleet to not provide this crew with specialized diplomatic instructions on how to act during first contacts. Naïve, or stupid, she wasn’t sure which, and with how often Command barely seemed to understand the reality of the situation beyond Earth itself, she figured it was dealer’s choice which was more probable. “And knowing that we’re taking steps to avoid repeating this mistake,” she mused, growing more pleased with the idea by the second, “Command isn’t as likely to second guess Kelby’s punishment.”

“Agreed,” Soval declared. He rose to his feet. “I will forward you an initial lesson plan once I have completed it,” he said. Erika slowly climbed to her feet. “If there is nothing else, Commander,” the Vulcan said, already turning toward the door, “I will leave you to your duties.”

“Thank you, Ambassador,” Erika called out as Soval exited her cabin. She waited for a few seconds before retracing her steps to the chair he had recently vacated. The monitor snapped alive the moment she touched it. After double-checking the wording of the report she’d composed and adding the suggestion of Soval’s formal training for the entire crew, she forwarded the entire thing to Jon’s terminal. With a chirp, the computer announced that it had been received and Erika frowned at what that meant: Jon was still up and working. She sighed and headed for the shower.

A response was waiting for her when she finally exited her steaming bathroom, and Erika stared at the blinking words with trepidation. Approved, the comments read. Are you sure that you want to be the one to inform Kelby?

“Not really,” she murmured under her breath before quickly composing a quick reply in the affirmative. Without waiting to see if Jon would reply again, she turned away and walked to her closet. She took longer than normal to dress, intent on presenting a professional appearance. For a moment, she considered donning her formal uniform, but decided against doing so at the last minute. Picking up the PADD resting atop her desk, she transferred the official orders recently confirmed by the captain and walked to the wall comm.-panel.

“Hernandez to Lieutenant Commander Reed.” The reply was almost instantaneous.
“Reed here, ma’am.”

“I need you and one other security officer at my quarters in five minutes,” Erika instructed. When the armoury officer spoke, she could almost hear the dread in his voice.

“Five minutes, yes, ma’am.”

They were there in under three, and Erika gave Reed an approving nod when she saw that both were wearing phase pistols at their side. She did not expect this to get out of hand – when she’d ordered Kelby to his quarters after learning about the cogenitor’s suicide, he’d obeyed without hesitation, shock, despair and anguish in his eyes. On Reed’s recommendation, she also ordered Phlox to monitor the chief engineer’s life signs.

Just in case.

It took only seconds to reach Kelby’s cabin, and Erika could feel her stomach tightening with each step she took. Reed and his security crewman – Johansson – were a half step behind her, their strides matching hers.

“Enter,” Kelby’s raspy voice answered her when she buzzed the annunciator, and Erika stepped through the opening door with confidence she did not feel. The moment he saw her, Reed and Johansson, Kelby shot up off the bed and assumed a position of attention. Erika swallowed.

“The captain and I have reviewed your report,” she said as smoothly as she could manage, “and we have reached a decision. You have two options, Mister Kelby.” Erika offered the PADD and the chief engineer accepted it quickly. His eyes darted as he quickly scanned the device.

“If I chose the thirty days,” he asked softly, his voice trembling only slightly, “what happens after?” He was accepting the demotion as a fait accompli, she noticed.

“You go back to work,” Erika replied. “Your skill as an engineer is not in question, Commander.”

“Just my judgment,” Kelby retorted bitterly. Johansson tensed slightly at his tone, but Erika shook her head. It was clear to see that the engineer was angry at himself. “Lieutenant Taylor will need to be briefed,” he said a moment later, straightening once more, “and I’d like to have her on the approved visiting list since Trip’s engine is touchy.”

“I’ll see to it,” Erika said. “This is the best I can do for you, David,” she offered softly. Kelby gave her a wry smile.

“It’s okay, ma’am,” he replied. “I should have listened to you when you ordered me to stop.” He shrugged sadly, his face crumpling briefly before he regained control. “At least I get to keep my job,” he said, glancing once in the direction of his desk. “Not everybody is that lucky.” Without another word, he began walking toward the doorway and Erika gave Reed a grim nod. Flanked by the two security personnel, the chief engineer marched from his cabin, his head held high and his back straight. Hernandez took two steps toward the door, but paused, unable to ignore her curiosity. She looked at his desk and immediately recognized what Kelby had glanced at.

It was a photograph of Kelby and the cogenitor, Charles.

Erika shook her head sadly and turned away.
An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 289 days (253 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's January, 2153.

Trip: Slowly Recovering

Chapter Notes

Every part of his body ached.

It was certainly better than the other option – death always seemed to ruin a person’s day – but not a second passed without Trip longing for the pain to just go away for a while. He was on his feet again and capable of walking mostly without difficulty, but each step still sent a spike of agony up his side. T’Pol continued to insist that this was a positive development, that it was his body letting him know when he had pushed himself too far, but Trip didn’t care. He just wanted things to get back to normal.

Right now, as he continued his third circuit through the lodge, he could see T’Pol seated in her meditation space, eyes closed and her breathing regular. Something fundamental had changed between them since the bear attack, but Trip remained mystified as to exactly what it was that had altered. T’Pol was different now … but, at the same time, she was exactly like she had been before which he had to admit really didn’t make much sense, no matter how true it was. She watched him when she thought he wasn’t paying attention, and the look in her eyes when she studied him … well, it was confusing as hell. Sometimes, Trip thought he saw longing, sometimes it was fear, but generally, it was confusion.

Which didn’t reassure him one bit.

For his part, it was already hard enough to look her in the eyes, knowing just how much of a burden he’d been over the last month since she apparently saved his ass from being a snack for the Ekosian Yogi Bear, no matter that he honestly couldn’t remember much beyond waking up after that weird shared dream in the white room. Not only had she rescued him from certain death, she’d also tended his wounds, kept him hydrated and … cleaned him.

Flushing, Trip pushed away from the doorway leading into the living quarters that originally belonged to him but had, at some point, become a joint domicile. He continued his limping circuit, struggling to suppress the memory of waking in his own filth because his muscle control wasn’t quite what it should have been. T’Pol hadn’t complained even once while she wiped him down with a warm, wet cloth, and when certain portions of his body had instinctively reacted to the feel of her hands on his bare skin, she hadn’t even blinked an eye before continuing to ensure his cleanliness without even mentioning his obvious arousal. At the time, Trip had been torn between being mortified by his treacherous anatomy and being soothed by the feel of her warm hands, but now, nearly two weeks after the fact, he was utterly convinced that he saw her lips twitch up into a slight smile.

The realization that she had to be aware of the effect she had on him bothered Trip more than he really wanted it to and made him wonder if she sometimes did things just to get a metaphorical (or literal, in some cases) rise out of him. She’d certainly made some cracks when they were aboard Enterprise implying that she was aware of his sex drive – he vaguely recalled her commenting about one of his shirts when they were above Risa – so did this mean she was just being a tease? Hell, did
Vulcans even tease in the first place? Or was it just his Vulcan who did this sort of thing? He was going to have fantasies for months about the sight of her leaning over his crotch, wet cloth in hand, and somehow, he just knew she had to be aware of that fact.

Wait a damned minute, he told himself sharply. She’s not my Vulcan. Hell, he didn’t have the first clue where he actually stood with her anymore! It was as if she was waiting for something from him and he honestly had no idea whatsoever how to proceed. If he’d learned anything from her in the last nine and a half months – eight and some change in human months, his brain whispered – it was that she loathed discussing emotion for any reason, so telling her how he felt? Well, that was right out.

Something tickled at the back of his brain and Trip glanced in the direction of their … his room. Exactly as he suspected, T’Pol was emerging from her meditative trance. Her long hair was pulled back and tied together in a tail that fell to mid-back, and Tucker took a moment to admire her profile. In recent weeks, the color of her hair had lightened, changing from the dark, almost black to a softer brown. Even her eyebrows seemed sharper, more angular, but Trip wasn’t sure if that was just his imagination or some other facet of Vulcan physiology that he didn’t understand.

“You appear better.” T’Pol’s remark jolted him out of his musings, and Trip flushed when he realized she was studying him. It wasn’t the usual, dispassionate observation he’d grown accustomed to while they served aboard Enterprise, but rather something warmer. If she’d been human, he’d call it affection at the very least.

“Feeling better,” he replied. She nodded before rising to her feet in a smooth movement that showed no hint of the earlier muscle spasms she’d been suffering. In fact, now that he thought about it, she’d seemed more stable and centered than he recalled her being since before they crashed on this miserable planet. Her hands didn’t shake and, as far as he could tell, she wasn’t having headaches as often as she had.

“How is your pain?” T’Pol asked as she drew closer to him, her eyes locked on his face.

“Manageable,” Trip answered. When she frowned, he shrugged … and then winced at the tug of still healing muscles around his chest. “I’m not saying that I don’t hurt,” he admitted, “but at least I’m mobile.”

“Have you finished your stretching exercises?” the Vulcan asked calmly. She began circling him, her eyes tracking him from head to toe, and Trip tried not to flush at the feeling of being sized up like so much meat.

“Did ’em twice,” he replied. “I was bored while you were meditating.” Abruptly, he realized that she had spoken to him in the local Ekosian dialect and he had replied automatically in the same language. Trip narrowed his eyes and gave T’Pol a sidelong look.

“How is your memory?” she continued, this time slipping into Vulcan. Trip grimaced, but responded in the same language, recognizing the return of the unlamented Taskmaster T’Pol. He wondered what the next stupid human trick would be.

“I still have a large, empty hole in my mind,” he said softly. Try as he might, he couldn’t remember a single thing from the point he woke up and fell onto the floor, to two weeks ago when he finally regained consciousness for longer than a few seconds. Oh, sure, there were some disjointed flashes of sensation and images that he suspected were memories, but none of them made any sense to him. Why would he remember seeing two T’Pols in Engineering? Or think of his arm being completely trapped, like it had been gnawed off or the nerves had been severed? He shook his head. “If it was as bad as you said it was,” he added, “I’m not sure I want to remember.”
“Hiding from the truth is still hiding,” T’Pol said simply, her expression transforming for just a heartbeat into one of sadness. Trip stared at her for a second and was momentarily disconcerted when she returned his examination with equal forthrightness. God, a man could get lost in those eyes. He wet his lips and tried to push the errant thought away.

“Something happened,” he guessed hesitantly. T’Pol’s eyes widened fractionally, but it was enough of a sign to let him know that he was correct. “Something happened between us.”

“Trip,” T’Pol began, her tone and body language both placating, but Tucker interrupted her before she could verbally twist him into knots.

“See!” he exclaimed sharply. “When did you start calling me Trip?” To his complete surprise, T’Pol didn’t try to change the subject, or distract him with one of her usual logic puzzles, or simply ignore his argument. Instead, she inhaled deeply and sighed before pursing her lips.

“You are not … incorrect in your assumption that something occurred,” she admitted slowly. For another long moment, she was silent and Trip swallowed the lump in his throat at her clear reluctance to continue.

“Did I do something?” he wondered, fighting back the surge of sudden fear that strangely did not feel like it was entirely his. When T’Pol gave him a sharp glance, he groaned. “Oh, God,” he muttered. “I did do something, didn’t I?” Tucker’s imagination ran wild – what could he have done or said that was making her so skittish? He had the terrible vision of him having a wet dream while moaning her name, or vomiting on her boots. No, none of those were bad enough, not if the thoroughly freaked vibes emanating from T’Pol were any indication.

“It is not something you did, Trip,” she stated, her eyes once more locked on his boots, “but rather something I may have … inadvertently done to you.” Her body language screamed worry and borderline despair, though Trip suspected that very few people would even realize it.

“I’m not pregnant, am I?” he asked with a forced smile. T’Pol glanced up, her own lips curving slightly.

“Vulcans procreate in the same manner as humans,” she said. “Only the females can become pregnant … barring certain bowls of pebbles, of course.”

“Well that’s good to know,” Trip muttered. The pain in his side became too much to completely ignore so he began hobbling toward his bed. T’Pol reacted instantly, offering her arm to him for additional support. She said nothing else even after he sank down onto the thin mattress. “Hiding from a truth is still hiding,” Trip said when the silence became too much for him to handle. T’Pol’s head came up sharply at the words she’d used against him earlier, but there was no heat in her expression, only confusion and fear.

And into the silence, Trip’s stomach growled.

Both of T’Pol’s eyebrows shot up at the volume of the sound and she gave him a tight frown before glancing in the direction of their go-bags. Even without her saying anything, he knew what she was thinking. They had finished the last of their food yesterday afternoon and T’Pol had already planned to go foraging later today. When they arrived at this lodge, they had discovered some canned foodstuffs and, while the food inside wasn’t particularly tasty, it was edible, so she’d theorized that it was logical nearby lodges – the closest being five or ten kilometers away – would have similar stores. Before he’d gotten himself jumped by the angry bear, they’d made plans to raid those other lodges in the hopes of finding useful materiel.
“You need food,” she said as she turned away. Trip bit back a scream.

“Dammit, T’Pol,” he snapped. “I’m not a mind reader!” The Vulcan paused momentarily in front of the overturned crate where their phase pistols were generally stored, and then turned her young-old eyes on him once more.

“This is not a short conversation, Trip,” she said calmly. “You are still recovering and need as many nutrients as possible,” she continued as she secured her pistol at her side, “but we will talk once I return.” Trip’s expression darkened.

“Not sure I like you going out there alone,” he muttered. When she glanced at him once more, he quickly added, “Too many bears.” T’Pol’s right eyebrow climbed.

“I will be careful,” she said simply. “You should try to rest.”

A moment later, she was gone.

He was under no illusions that he could get any rest with her out there, alone, in a forest full of carnivorous bears that apparently attacked on sight and … dammit, there he went again. Grimacing, Trip forced himself off of the bed and inched toward T’Pol’s meditation space. He slowly lowered himself into as close an approximation of the proper posture that he could manage, wincing as each movement sent another blast of fire through his chest. Leaning back against the wooden wall, he began the stretching exercises once more, hoping against hope that all he needed to do was loosen his muscles a bit.

No matter how he tried, though, Trip couldn’t stop wondering what it was T’Pol wanted to talk about. A dozen different scenarios, each more outlandish and ludicrous than the next, came to mind, and Tucker silently cursed when he realized just how counterproductive this was. Whatever was freaking T’Pol out had happened during the period of time he couldn’t remember. The easiest solution, he decided, was to force his brain to start functioning like it was supposed to.

With that in mind, he straightened his posture and began breathing like T’Pol had taught him to. In seconds, he had slipped into the first stage of the meditative trance and he drifted there for an eternity that could not have been truly longer than thirty minutes. Here, he could still feel the pain making his body ache, but it no longer seemed to be important and he pushed farther back into his memory, relying on the various mental tricks T’Pol had shown him over the last several months. Once again, he was assailed by images and sensations out of context – engineering on fire, T’Pol’s fingers on his face, the feel of the bear’s claws as it tore through his skin – and once again, Trip wasn’t able to put everything in its proper order.

And suddenly, T’Pol flooded his awareness.

_Flee!_ The order and the accompanying emotions – fear, panic, anger – slammed through him, jolting him out of the trance so harshly that he nearly jumped. Trip was up, on his feet, and reaching for his phase pistol before he was even aware that he was moving. His earlier sluggishness and pain was gone, washed away by the sense of impending danger that grew with every second. There was no time to think, no time to try and figure out what was going on, and Trip bounded across the lodge to where the two bags were stored, suddenly glad that T’Pol continued to insist they be prepared to leave at a moment’s notice. He hefted first her rucksack – it was the heavier of the two – and then his, before darting toward the back door. With the phase pistol at the ready, he exited the lodge and sprinted toward the footpath leading down to the lake.

Exactly ten seconds later, two large trucks rumbled up the main road in front of the cabin, disgorging two squads of armed soldiers wearing the uniforms of the Tandos Alliance. Five of them raced
toward the lodge, smashing through the doors and windows with the appearance of men expecting resistance, while the rest fanned out to establish a perimeter.

Hidden behind one of the larger trees, Trip fought to keep from panicking as he watched the Alliance soldiers rip the lodge apart. Clearly, they were in search of someone and it didn’t take a genius to figure out whom that someone was. His hands began to shake and he drew in a careful breath. With unsteady hands, he extracted the binoculars from his pack and raised them to his face. He swept over the soldiers, freezing the moment his eyes fell upon someone he recognized.

Pater Undil.

The former farmer looked ill at ease in the Alliance uniform and was gesticulating wildly as he spoke with another man. When the other man – the officer, Trip suspected – shook his head, Undil pushed something in his face, something that made Trip’s blood run cold.

It was T’Pol’s head scarf. These bastards had T’Pol. He tightened his grip on the phase pistol and slowly took aim at Undil.

But a moment later, he realized that he could still feel her. She was there, in his mind, a soft tug in that direction, away from the lodge. Trip lowered his weapon, confused but suddenly feeling the pieces fall into place. This was what she was afraid of. It had to be. She’d done one of those mind meld things that Tolaris the shitbag did to her and it probably saved his life.

*Time to return the favor,* Trip decided. He flipped open the phase pistol, pulled one of the energy connectors loose, then closed the weapon back up. With a tight smile, he raised the pistol once more, this time taking aim at the empty truck farthest away. The weapon whined softly when he squeezed the trigger – he could only pull this trick two or three times before the power cell burned out – but there was no visual sign of the energy stream as it flashed out and burned a jagged hole into the truck’s fuel tank. With a *boom,* the gas ignited and tore apart the tank, ripping the truck in two and sending the cab tumbling into the other vehicle. Panic set in at once as the Alliance soldiers scrambled to put out the fires.

And without a sound, Trip shouldered his two packs and melted away into the woods.
Stop, she ordered herself sharply. Dwelling on what had not happened was both counterproductive and patently illogical. Until Trip had all of the facts, automatically fearing the worse from him was foolish, especially since he had consistently shown himself to be a better man than High Command believed. From day one, he had challenged her preconceptions about what a human was truly capable. Yes, there were instances where he allowed his emotions to dictate his decisions which led to imprudent actions, but since crashing on Ekos, he had surprised her time after time with both his capabilities and his aptitude for new talents. Would any Vulcan truly believe that a human was capable of mastering third-tier mental techniques in such a short period? If the diplomatic briefing she had received upon being assigned to Earth were any indication, the High Command seemed to doubt that humanity was truly any more advanced than an especially intelligent sehlat.

And, to her continuing remorse, she had once shared that opinion. Before Enterprise. Before Trip.

T'Pol shook her head slightly at the thought and tried to focus on the rocky trail in front of her. Winding around a fairly substantially-sized hill, it was wider than the footpath connecting their lodge to the lake and bore divots she took to be tracks from the sort of two-wheeled carts that had been so prevalent in Dahnel Raspos’ refugee band. They were very old, which T’Pol took to mean that this trail had once been much used, though the roots and tiny plants pushing up through the gravel certainly indicated that no one had passed this way for a very long time. With the sun high overhead and a warm breeze weaving through the trees, the walk was quite pleasant, and T’Pol pushed the cloth covering her head back so it was more of a neck scarf.

She had covered a fair distance – over a kilometer and a half – when she became conscious once more of the curious link connecting her and Trip. He was meditating, she realized, and T’Pol frowned at the distinct feel of his confusion and worry. More than anything else, she wanted to ease those fears … but at the same time, she had to acknowledge that she was quite possibly the last
person in the quadrant who should even make the attempt to improve Trip’s mood, a thought that once more made her despair at explaining this curious … bond.

The crack of branches breaking snapped her out of her momentary distraction, and T’Pol froze in place, her hand instinctively darting toward the holstered phase pistol at her side. A trio of armed men stepped into view, their rifles aimed at her. All three were wearing unique-looking clothes, with tatters of cloth and leaves hanging free so they blended into their surroundings with astounding ease. Even their scents were muted, although now that she was aware of their presence, T’Pol could detect a faint odor that she suspected intentionally masked their smell from local wildlife.

“Move and we shoot,” one of the men declared. At the words, T’Pol could hear additional movement to her side and another pair of identically-garbed figures stood up from concealment. All were three meters or more distant from her, with the two to her left almost a meter higher as they crouched just below a hilltop. “Contact headquarters,” the speaker continued, his words obviously meant for one of the two standing with him upon the gravel trail, “and let them know that lodge sixteen is the target.”

T’Pol’s breath caught. Trip was in danger. She narrowed her eyes and focused on the men around her.

Compared to Trip or even Captain Archer, they were all rather short, barely taller than T’Pol herself. The sheer amount of equipment they were carrying would slow them down, she decided, and make it difficult to maneuver through the wooded environment. Their rifles were the only true advantages they had – a single, well-placed round could easily kill.

The crunch of vegetation being crushed underfoot warned her that the two hilltop snipers were approaching from behind her, and T’Pol slowly tensed her muscles in preparation. She kept her eyes locked on the leader and his two subordinates – one had lowered his weapon and was speaking softly into what looked to be a bulky backpack radio. They were watching her, but with the casual expectation of men long accustomed to subservient females.

Thus, when T’Pol moved, none of them were expecting it.

As soon as the two hilltop snipers were within reach, she struck, pivoting on one foot as she slammed both of her palms into the chest of the nearest of the pair with every gram of her strength. He flew back a full meter and a half, smashing into a tree with a bone-jarring thud before falling face forward onto the dirt. T’Pol continued her half-spin, well aware that the other four soldiers were beginning to react, and sprang toward the remaining hilltop sniper. She caught the barrel of his rifle as he tried to orient it on her, and pulled hard, easily ripping it from his grip. Without pausing to aim, she slung the rifle in the direction of the leader and his two subordinates while grabbing the arm of the man in front of her with her free hand. Twisting his captured limb sharply, she pulled her prisoner toward her as she spun them both around so he was now shielding her from weapons-fire.

The three men were staring at her with wide eyes and readied rifles, and T’Pol fought the urge to smile as she backed toward the first man’s dropped rifle. Her prisoner struggled briefly, but she simply tightened her grip and pushed his arm even higher into his back. If the man’s yelp was any indication, she was apparently applying the proper amount of pressure.

“Serjeant!” the lead man bellowed sharply. His eyes darted briefly to the still form of the first man who T’Pol could tell was thoroughly unconscious, and then back to her.

“Sir!” T’Pol’s prisoner moaned. “She’s really-”

“Silence!” T’Pol hissed. Her foot connected with the butt of the fallen rifle and she stopped, once
more eyeing the three men in front of her. They were beginning to spread out in an attempt to get a better field of fire, with the lead man – he was wearing the rank of a ‘lancer,’ which T’Pol translated to junior officer; a lieutenant or perhaps even a lowly ensign – slowly walking toward her. “Cease moving,” T’Pol ordered. Working the toe of her boot under the rifle’s trigger mechanism, she kicked the weapon up into the air before catching it with her right hand. The three men froze when she leveled it at the lancer. “Cease moving,” she repeated calmly.

“How long can you hold it like that?” the lancer asked, gesturing briefly for his two subordinates to hold position. “Not long I wager.”

“You would be surprised,” T’Pol retorted as she began side-stepping her prisoner toward the edge of the gravel trail. The slope of the hill was not especially significant, perhaps twenty degrees at its steepest, but the angle was just enough that it would make pursuit difficult. Providing she was not shot in the back, of course.

“This does not end well for you, Lady,” the lancer stated flatly. The honorific he used caused T’Pol to raise an eyebrow. “These hills crawl with my warriors.”

“I am not highborn,” she declared as she continued to inch toward the lip of the gravel trail. She drew in a deep breath.

And tossed the rifle aside.

The three men reacted exactly as she expected them to, their eyes instinctively tracking the weapon as it sailed through the air, and their momentary distraction gave T’Pol just enough time to grab the belt of her Ekosian shield with the now empty hand. She heaved him effortlessly, letting her desperation fuel muscles already taut with tension, and he slammed into the lancer, knocking them both off their feet. Into that moment of chaos, T’Pol dove off the trail and into the brush along the side of the path. She hit the ground and rolled to her feet before sprinting headlong down the hill. Startled shouts echoed from the small group, and a heartbeat later, twin gunshots boomed. The bullets whined past her, smashing into two different trees and showering her with spinning shards of wooden shrapnel. T’Pol bit back a cry when she felt the splinters slice into her exposed cheeks, but the sharp pain wasn’t enough to cause her stride to falter even a step.

_Flee!_ she mind-screamed across the fledgling connection linking her mind to Trip’s, and she could feel his startled but instinctive obedience. T’Pol felt relief wash through her, knowing that he would be safe. And right now, his safety was her only true concern.

Down the hill she ran, weaving and darting into cover as the quartet continued to pursue. She was faster and more agile, but they had the benefit of numbers and a willingness to use their firearms to great benefit. Twice, she was nearly hit by carefully placed shots and T’Pol grimly acknowledged that they were very likely herding her into a trap. If the lancer had any tactical understanding, he would have used his radio to coordinate with additional forces.

And the distant sound of approaching off-road vehicles of her confirmed this assessment.

_This was always a possibility_, T’Pol admitted to herself as she crouched behind a thick, leafy plant growing alongside a half-fallen tree. She drew the phase pistol from its holster and studied it for a moment – the likelihood that she would be captured was exceedingly high, even if she killed in self-defense, and it would be irresponsible of her to allow a culture this mired in self-destructive warfare come into possession of a weapon this advanced. If it had been a Vulcan disruptor, she would have known how to rig it for an overload, but her familiarity with this pistol … it was insufficient to trigger a self-destruct and she simply did not have the time to study the weapon in depth. Nodding at her logic, she concealed the weapon within the plant’s confines, drew another deep breath and began
studying her surroundings for signs of her pursuers.

Now that she knew what to look for, their concealing suits were not difficult to identify for someone with visual acuity as sharp as hers. Three of them – the two junior soldiers, including the one she had thrown – were approaching from the north, while the lancer was attempting to flank her from the west. None of them seemed entirely sure of her exact location, but any attempt to flee from her current position would reveal it instantly and it was only a matter of time before one of them saw her. T'Pol glanced around for something substantial to use as a decoy, quickly locating a fist-sized piece of rock. She seized it quickly and hurled it toward another thick bush fairly close to the trio. They reacted instantly, storming toward the distraction, and giving her the opportunity to spring up and charge.

Directly toward their leader.

He had just enough time to cry out a warning before T'Pol plowed into him, knocking him bodily into a thick tree. The impact ripped his breath from him in a single, explosive gasp and his weapon fell free from his grip to tumble away, but she paid it no mind as she sprinted toward another copse of trees. Familiar booms pursued her and bullets screamed past her ears. Another pulpy explosion of bark and tree rained down on her, but she kept moving, kept scanning the terrain for something else she might be able to use as a weapon.

She did not see the sixth man until it was too late.

He had apparently been lurking in wait and was dressed similarly, in clothes intended to allow him to blend into the surroundings. T'Pol heard a whisper of movement coming from her left less than a second before his weapon – a braided leather cord with wooden balls at either end – wrapped tightly around her legs. Suddenly unbalanced, she fell, her head bouncing off the tree directly in front of her. She lost consciousness for only a few seconds, but it was enough time for the sixth man to bound forward and expertly tie a second rope around her hands, binding them firmly at her back. T'Pol struggled against the darkness that threatened to swallow her and was only vaguely aware of the sounds announcing the arrival of the other soldiers as she fought to stay awake.

“Guess my antiques did come in useful,” the sixth man said to someone she could not see, his tone mocking. He grabbed her arm and rolled onto her back.

“Spirit save us!” one of the men suddenly gasped. “Her blood!” T'Pol’s vision swam in and out of focus as the voices echoed around her, and she could feel dampness on her face. I must remain conscious, she told herself, even as her body disagreed.

“And her ears!” another exclaimed.

“Shoot it!” the first one shouted, and T’Pol closed her eyes in preparation for the killing blow at the sound of a round being chambered. Her last thought, she decided, would be of Trip and the pleasant emotions he stirred within her. Yes, thoughts of him were most appealing. She fixed an image of his most brilliant smile in her mind’s eyes and clung to it.

“Stop!” It was the lancer, and she could hear strain in his voice, as if he were in pain. “Bind her arms and legs tightly,” the man ordered crisply. “Triple strength. I don’t know what she … it is, but the field-adjutant will want to see her.”

“But the old tales!” the one who had clamored for her to be shot whimpered. “She might be a fetch!”

“Then gag and blindfold her,” the lancer ordered. “She can’t spell your spirit if she can’t speak.”
Something blunt and heavy came down on her head then, stealing away consciousness and sending her tumbling into an endless void of nothing. But exactly as she intended, her last thoughts were of Trip.

And how she’d failed him.
An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 289 days (253 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's January, 2153.

The tickle in his brain drew him along, like an invisible rope.

Ekosian soldiers were everywhere, but Trip ghosted through the trees, ducking into cover and successfully avoiding the patrols at every step thanks to his blatant abuse of T'Pol’s damaged scanner. He no longer cared that using the device like this was rapidly turning it into a very pretty paperweight – without T'Pol, nothing in his possession was worth having. Nothing in his life was worth having.

At the moment, Trip was crouched behind a thick, leafy plant growing alongside a half-fallen tree. He was barely two kilometers away from the lodge he and T'Pol had been using as their refuge, but something … he couldn’t quite define had drawn him here. It had taken him nearly three hours to reach this location as the presence of the Ekosian soldiers crawling all over the area made things quite difficult, but the moment he saw the plant, Trip had known it was important.

And the moment he extracted T'Pol’s phase pistol from its place of concealment, he understood why.

“No,” Trip murmured under his breath as he stared at the weapon with wide eyes, “that’s not creepy at all.” He shuddered – how in the name of God had he known it was there? – and reached for his pack.

He was down to a single rucksack, having discarded everything that wasn’t absolutely essential or part of their original Starfleet load-out. Both of the uniforms they’d arrived in – T’Pol’s surprisingly heavy white catsuit and his own tan utilities – were at the bottom of the pack, although Trip had seriously considered burying them somewhere to free up a little space. The part of him that still clung to his identity as a Starfleet officer and remained desperately hopeful that, someday, he and T’Pol could get off this world thoroughly rejected the notion of abandoning the last sign of his past career.

The scanner beeped softly, and Trip grabbed it, cursing under his breath at the three Ekosian life signs approaching his position. He hefted the ruck and slid his arms through the straps before pushing himself to his feet. His still recovering body should have hurt – no, he corrected himself, it did hurt, but for some reason, the pain was distant, muted, like he had managed to find an off switch that allowed him to function like normal. He chalked it up to some of the crazy mind training T'Pol had insisted on; she’d claimed that it would help and, if this was any indication, he had to admit there were benefits to having his own personal Vulcan sensei. As an engineer, he knew there would be a price to pay at some point down the road – one did not run a reactor at a hundred percent with damaged injectors and not have to deal with a core breach or meltdown eventually – but right now, with the distance between him and T’Pol rapidly increasing every second, he simply didn’t care what the cost would be.

With the sun beginning to sink beyond the horizon, the Ekosian soldiers appeared to be setting up camp, which Trip took to be further proof bearing out T’Pol’s theory about their limited ability to see in the dark. It was an advantage Tucker knew he had to capitalize on if he was going to have any
chance at retrieving his Vulcan. Already, the soldiers were setting up more gas-powered lamps than Trip thought were entirely necessary, which had the benefit of ruining their already poor night vision. It was pretty clear that they weren’t afraid to let people know they were here, but it also made it very easy for Tucker to identify exactly where he needed to avoid.

By midnight, Trip had cleared the outer perimeter of what was beginning to look like a major ground offensive into this region, which prompted him to suspect that Undil, wherever that bastard might be at the moment, was being used as a native scout, sort of like how certain Native American Indian tribes had been utilized by the United States Army back in the 1800s. In the brief time he and T’Pol had traveled with Raspos’ refugee band, Trip had heard Undil make several disparaging remarks about these lodges, which Tucker took as familiarity with them. It was only logical to utilize the best assets available.

Logical? Trip shook his head and checked the scanner once more before breaking into a quick jog. Five minutes later, he picked up the pace until he reached his optimal running speed. It was a trick T’Pol had taught him in the weeks before the bear attack – rather than pushing himself until he felt the strain, he simply paid attention to what his body was telling him, speeding up and slowing down as necessary. At his peak, he was able to maintain a constant speed of a little over thirteen kilometers an hour for sixty minutes or so, but right now, he doubted that he was making eleven kph. He slowed to a walk whenever he began straining to let his heart rate and breathing settle, but began running again as soon as he had recovered.

And with every step, the invisible connection to T’Pol led the way.

Dawn found him on one of the numerous rocky knolls, looking down into a small valley below while immense, snow-capped mountains loomed overhead to the north. Curving between two fairly decent-sized foothills was a set of train tracks, with the tri-rail system that Trip still thought to be weird-looking, no matter that he’d already seen the sort of train that would run on these rails up close. A wide, dusty road ran parallel to the tracks for as far as the eye could see.

A trike was parked just off the road, several meters away from the rail line. One figure was up and moving, apparently breaking camp, while a second continued to slumber away nearby. Despite the dull ache in his legs and back, Trip didn’t even hesitate.

He kept low during his approach, pausing only long enough to drop his ruck to the ground before he reached the point of no return. By the time he was within striking distance, both men were up, jabbering away in the local dialect about the same kind of trivial complaints Tucker recalled hearing from Masaro or Jenkins or even Rostov on really bad days back aboard Enterprise an eternity ago. He didn’t … he couldn’t allow it to keep him from acting, not with T’Pol relying on him. One of them – the shorter of the two – was half-turning when Trip sprinted over the hill, and the man had just enough time to shout a warning to his comrade.

And then, Trip was upon them.

Later, he wouldn’t be able to really remember what happened, only that the two soldiers seemed to be moving slower than they had any right to be. It wasn’t quite like they were in slow motion, but throughout the short melee, they were always a half second behind him and did such a poor job of hiding their intentions that Trip would have thought they were intentionally throwing the fight. He knew that wasn’t the case, though, not with the open surprise and fear on their faces when he dodged or parried their strikes with frightening ease. In no time at all, both men were on the ground, bloodied and thoroughly unconscious but still alive, while Trip stood over them, completely untouched.

He swallowed, suddenly very freaked out. What the hell had T’Pol done to him? In the weeks immediately before his bear encounter, she’d incrementally increased the intensity of their sparring
fights and this was the first time he’d tested himself against anyone but her but still … had her training been *that* effective? He shook his head – there would be time to react to this later, after he’d found her and they found a better place to hide.

After dragging the two men out of sight, he stripped the uniform off of the taller man and quickly dressed in the uncomfortable clothes. He found a nice piece of rope in the ATV and tied the two together rather securely; if they cooperated with each other, they shouldn’t have much trouble escaping, but it would still take a while. On instinct, Trip left one of the rifles at their feet, but took the other one back to the off-road vehicle. As soon as he secured his rucksack in the ATV and used one of the numerous jerry cans in the back to fill the fuel tank, he sank into the driver’s seat and gunned the engine.

“I can do this,” Trip said aloud as he angled the trike in the direction of the incessant mental tug. He didn’t know whether to be grateful or terrified that he could still feel T’Pol … and desperately hoped that he wasn’t actually on the verge of a psychotic break. What if he was just imagining this … connection? What if T’Pol had accidentally fried some of his neurons with the meld he was assuming she’d performed on him? She’d insisted that she had no training in this sort of telepathic contact the one time they’d actually discussed Tolaris’ attack and the resulting Pa’nar.

He drove for several hours, passing several identical vehicles heading in the opposite direction along the way. Most were crewed by a pair of soldiers, but two were manned by a single driver, and none of them did more than give him a quick wave of acknowledgment. Each time one of the ATVs came into view, Trip tensed and gripped the phase pistol tightly.

As the sheer volume of traffic increased, Trip decided to get off the road and wait until night fell. He spent almost an hour searching for a place of concealment where he could park and wait for the sun to go down. It went against every one of his instincts – T’Pol could be out there right now, desperately in need of his help – but he knew that it was ultimately necessary. He couldn’t help her, after all, if one of these Alliance troops stopped him and asked for papers or documents he didn’t have. Still, the images of T’Pol being beaten or tortured or … or raped wouldn’t entirely go away, and, once he programmed her scanner to warn him of any bio-signs that approached within its maximum range, he leaned his head back in the seat and tried to relax.

He was asleep almost as soon as his eyes were closed.

His dreams were scattered, fragmented, and confusing as hell. T’Pol was there in that strange white room, curled up on the featureless floor as if she were asleep or unconscious, but with each step Trip took toward her, she seemed to pull farther away. His screams made no sound while echoing around him like thunder. Finally, after an eternity that could have been only seconds, T’Pol stirred and looked up, her eyes instantly locking onto his. She mouthed his name before jerking back as if something he couldn’t see had struck her in the face.

And Trip snapped awake, his jaw aching from a blow he hadn’t felt.

The sun was already down and he could make out a fairly impressive number of lights some kilometers farther down the road that was either another military encampment or a really unusually placed town. Trip shook his head and climbed out of the ATV, wincing at how stiff and sore his entire body was. He spent several minutes stretching the kinks out, struggling to hold onto his self-control. The gentle tug of T’Pol was more insistent yet less powerful, and he tried not to think about how much distance could be between them now. Concentrate, he ordered himself. *You’re no good to her if you lose your head.*

“*Above all else,*” T’Pol had told him when she began instructing him, “we are taught to focus on the objective. Panic is counterproductive and ultimately self-destructive.” Just thinking about those
lessons allowed him to regain his equilibrium. It didn’t matter how far they took her … he’d follow, even if it meant storming the gates of hell themselves. Surely he could find a bucket of water somewhere.

The lights turned out to be another military encampment, this one significantly larger and better fortified than the one that had encircled the lodges. Trip ditched the ATV a kilometer or so away from the nearest sentry point, and then spent an hour trying to find a weak point in the perimeter. His stomach growled as he watched the sentries make their rounds, but he ignored the hunger for the moment and sprinted toward the gap.

No one paid him much attention once he’d penetrated the sentry line and it wasn’t difficult to emulate the exhausted look of a soldier returning to his bunk for a few hours of sleep, even with the rucksack on his back. It was rare to see an Ekosian without a beard, so he didn’t stand out, even with his lighter than average hair color. Still, he didn’t try to press his luck and hugged the outskirts of the camp. It drew a few eyes, but each time he started to suspect he’d been noticed, Trip started fumbling with the front of his pants and casting his attention around. Invariably, he would be pointed toward a latrine, most often by the soldier giving him the hairy eyeball.

And it was at one of those hastily dug pits that he found the confirmation he needed that he wasn’t going mad.

Three men were already at the makeshift latrine, standing silently in a way that reminded Tucker of every urinal he’d ever seen. At any other time, he might have laughed at what appeared to be a universal law of males.

“Did you see it?” one of the soldiers asked abruptly, glancing toward the soldier standing near the center of their uneven row. The target of his questioning shot the other man a fierce glower even as he adjusted his trousers and continued to urinate. “I heard you saw the fetch,” the first soldier said.

“ Didn’t look like a fetch to me,” the peeing man declared. “If not for the ears and the blood, I would say she was a sight of beauty.”

Trip froze.

His first instinct was to pounce on the man who had seen T’Pol and beat her location out of him, but he somehow managed to push down the sudden urge. There were four right here, and possibly thousands more without shouting distance. And he was so tired that his very bones throbbed.

“I heard the field-adjutant soiled himself at the sight of her,” the third man declared with a hearty guffaw. “Ordered her on the first rail to take her to the staff-adjutant at the skyfield.”

“Truth,” the first man said. “I heard and saw that firsthand.”

“The field-adj is a fearful man,” the man who had seen T’Pol mused, before shaking his head. “Even if she is a fetch,” he said, “I would not wish her into Ferran’s grip. He has a sinister name.” His business complete, the man glanced in Tucker’s direction. “What say you, brother? Is she truly a fetch or just an illusion to us footsloggers?”

And in response, Trip yawned widely and shrugged as if he didn’t care.

The man laughed loudly and turned away, readjusting his pants as he began walking toward some tents. His two companions followed him, still discussing whether the fetch was real or just rumor. Trip waited another few heartbeats before heading in the opposite direction, his heart pounding loudly. He’d run out of time. If T’Pol was being taken to a ‘skyfield’ – he guessed that was the
equivalent of an airfield – then God only knew where they could take her without him being able to catch up.

*Like hell,* he reflected darkly.

All of the vehicles were parked together near a small path leading toward the main road with only a single bored-looking guard standing watch over them. He didn’t even hear Trip’s approach and struggled for only a few seconds when Tucker caught him in a choke hold from behind. Concealing the unconscious guard in one of the larger vehicles after tying the man up and gagging him, Trip then piled as many of the fuel cans as he could into one of the ATVs chosen entirely at random. He consulted T’Pol’s scanner before putting the trike into gear and pushing it toward the road. It was tough going for a few moments, but the moment the hill began to slope downward, he sprang into the driver’s seat and let gravity carry him away from the camp. As soon as the hill began to level out, he started the engine and punched the gas. The ATV sprang away quickly and Trip clung to the two steering levers with a dead man’s grip.

“I’m coming, T’Pol,” he murmured into the wind.

Unmoved, the moons twinkled brightly in the night sky.
Malcolm: Morale Officer

Chapter Notes

258 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's January, 2153.

He had seen more cheer in a graveyard.

Lieutenant Commander Malcolm Reed walked quietly through the corridors of Enterprise, unable to shake the feeling that he was aboard a ghost ship. Before the Vissian incident almost ten days ago, this part of the ship would have been bustling with activity despite the late hour, but now, he didn’t see anyone. It was more troubling than he wanted to admit.

Since Kelby’s demotion and the beginning of his thirty day brig sentence, crew morale had plummeted. Most of the senior enlisted personnel appeared to understand that Commander Hernandez had quite possibly prevented the chief engineer from being court-martialed and ejected from Starfleet, but the junior crewmen seemed to take his punishment as a personal affront since the general consensus (which Malcolm actually agreed with for a change) seemed to be that Kelby had been right to interfere. Overnight, the first officer became persona non grata wherever she went. Already, there were five outstanding transfer requests and, in at least one instance Reed knew about, one of Kelby’s engineers was facing a charge of insubordination.

Which was why Malcolm was now heading toward the enlisted crew lounge on D Deck.

Normally, he wouldn’t even consider setting foot in what was often called ‘lower deck territory,’ but tonight was different. Tonight, he was too worried about the state of the crew to be concerned about propriety or unspoken rules of conduct. Tonight, he was going to do the job that Captain Archer and Commander Hernandez were incapable of doing.

Tonight, he might very well be on the verge of making an enemy of every single enlisted crewman aboard.

Jaime Martinez, one of his senior-most security crewmen was standing watch outside the lounge as Malcolm approached, but to Reed’s surprise, the burly Texan simply gave him a nod and hit the wall annunciator with his fist. The door slid open with a soft hiss and Martinez jerked his head toward it. “They’re waiting for you, sir,” he said.

“You’re later than we expected,” Petty Officer Rostov announced as Malcolm stepped into the dim lounge. The engineering lead petty officer was sitting at a table and playing cards with four other noncoms. Reed blinked, suddenly feeling like he was walking into a trap the moment he recognized the other crewmembers. There was Chef Killick, and Wu from the science department, and Hassan from flight ops, and even the recently promoted Baird from Hoshi’s linguistics team.

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“Had a meeting with Commander Hernandez that ran late,” Reed replied. He pushed down his wariness and approached the table. On instinct, he pulled the rank pips from his uniform and pocketed them, noting the instant nod of approval he received from Rostov. None of them were wearing rank either, so that meant this meeting was entirely unofficial.
“And how is our lovely first officer?” Wu asked wryly. She glowered at her hand and folded.

“Concerned,” Malcolm answered. He grabbed an empty chair and dragged it to the table.

“She’s not the only one,” Rostov muttered before tossing his own cards down. “We’ve got a problem, sir,” he said flatly. “You heard about Wilcox?”

“I was the one who escorted him to the brig,” Reed replied. “He was completely out of line with what he said to the commander.”

“He also wasn’t entirely wrong,” Hassan pointed out. “Since she came aboard, Hernandez hasn’t done a very good job integrating into the command structure.”

“You’re an idiot, Malcolm Reed,” he told himself. Trip would have been disgusted with him. He had one real task aboard this ship – to protect the crew – and he’d been letting them all down. Well, no more.

“The captain could do a better job too,” Baird interjected softly. He tossed his own cards onto the table, leaving Killick to reach for the pot – a stack of actual credits. “When he ignores the first officer and turns to you, the crew notices.”

“Where is Archer anyway?” Wu asked as she sipped from a coffee cup. “I never see him except when I’m doing bridge duty.”

“It’s that bloody engine of his dad’s,” Killick growled. “It’s cursed. Took two engineers already, now it’s working on a third.”


“We’re doing what we can to contain this on our end,” Rostov declared, shooting Petty Officer Hassan an exasperated look, “but we need leadership at the upper levels too.” He leaned forward. “Hernandez needs to step up and act like an officer instead of moping around like she just shot somebody’s dog.” At Malcolm’s questioning glance, Rostov continued. “You expected me to be angry at her for demoting Kelby,” he guessed.

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Reed admitted. “He is your boss, after all.”

“My boss died almost nine months ago with the subcommander,” the engineering LPO retorted. “I like Kelby,” he added, “and I don’t think he was entirely wrong helping out the cogenitor the way he did, but he ignored a direct order to not get involved. Frankly, he’s damned lucky that Starfleet accepted the first officer’s decision and didn’t court-martial him instead.” Malcolm nodded in agreement.

“I’ll talk to Commander Hernandez,” he said, already dreading that conversation. They barely tolerated each other in the best of situations – she fancied herself a diplomat, and his profession
existed solely to save the day when negotiation inevitably failed – but him telling her how to act as an officer? That was a recipe for disaster if ever he heard of one. It was a good thing he had several black belts.

“You also need to speak to the captain,” Rostov said. The other four petty officers nodded.

“He needs to stop hiding in his ready room,” Wu added. “I think most of the crew understands that he feels guilty about losing Tucker, T’Pol, and Cutler, but beating himself up over isn’t going to bring any of them back.”

“Space is dangerous, sir,” Hassan remarked. “We all knew the risks when we signed up.”

Malcolm glanced away, not entirely sure how he should respond to that. Part of him wholeheartedly agreed with them – Archer’s willingness to get his hands dirty and work alongside every member of his crew, no matter what their rank or station, had been a significant reason he had been an effective commanding officer. There was an openness to him that was quite appealing, and it truly seemed as if he would listen to anyone’s problems. At the same time, though, it had led to an overly casual command structure, which had very likely been fully half of the reason Trip and the subcommander argued so often. Since Archer allowed Tucker to speak his mind (even if the captain then ignored him), the chief engineer had presumed that freedom of expression applied to everyone. To Malcolm, who had grown up with harsh discipline, Archer’s previous leadership style seemed too lax, too unprofessional, too sloppy.

Who knew that he’d grow to miss it?

Now that he thought about it, Malcolm wondered why he had failed to notice the clear symptoms of post-traumatic stress in the captain. The man was slowly but surely isolating himself from any sort of effective support structure, all the while swimming in misplaced guilt over having issued the orders that sent Trip and T’Pol and then later Crewman Cutler to their deaths. No wonder Doctor Phlox was constantly pestering the captain and this certainly explained Archer’s frequent visits to sickbay. Reed made a mental note to drop by the medical bay after this meeting for a chat with the Denobulan. If anyone could offer him advice about how to help the captain, it was Phlox.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said cautiously.

“And tell Soval to stop drinking all the damned chamomile,” Killick interjected. “He’s worse than T’Pol ever was.”

“That’s because she was usually distracted by Tucker,” Wu stated with a grin. “We used to know what kind of day it was going to be by how early those two started arguing.”

“She sure liked her pecan pie, though,” Killick said fondly, the words causing all of them – including Malcolm – to give him surprised looks. “What?” he demanded. “Tucker must have gotten her hooked on it. She kept it under wraps, but I don’t think she went to bed once without having a slice in the four or five months before …” He trailed off.

“Trip, you sly dog you,” Rostov said with a broadening grin. Sensing that he had outstayed his welcome, even if this encounter hadn’t turned out the way he expected it to, Malcolm rose to his feet.

“We should do this again,” he said as he stood. “Entirely off the record, of course.” He fervently hoped that they would agree to have these sorts of informal gatherings fairly regularly. With Archer turning into the sort of distant captain who would have been at home alongside Nelson at Trafalgar, and Hernandez still struggling to gain acceptance, and Reed himself dealing with his social incompetence, there really needed to be a way to bridge the gap between officer and enlisted that
would allow the command crew to be aware of any morale problems. If Trip had been here …

“Of course,” Rostov replied after a moment. He gave his fellow petty officers a quick glance before glancing up at Reed. “How’s Wednesdays sound? Say … twenty-two hundred?”

“I’ll see you then,” Malcolm answered before turning away. Now, all he had to do was figure out a diplomatic way to tell both Captain Archer and Commander Hernandez how to do their jobs. He grimaced.

Nope. No pressure at all.
He was coming.

The thought pounded through her brain as T'Pol struggled against the tide of mind-altering substances that had been fed into her body. Since her arrival … here, wherever here actually was, her captors had experimented with a wide variety of drugs in their attempts to find one that would function with her biochemistry, and as a result, she felt … disconnected, detached. Her control remained mostly intact and she suspected that she was lucid enough to resist their primitive attempts at interrogation, but this was still an uncomfortable experience.

T'Pol tried not to think of the similarity to when Silik had interrogated her. At least there was no pain. Yet.

She had only recently regained consciousness, although she'd spent several long minutes feigning a continued torpor while she struggled past the haze shrouding her mind to get her bearings. The cell was relatively luxurious in terms of physical size, but had only the chair she was firmly secured to and a wide, pockmarked table for furniture. A large, tinted window dominated the wall directly across from her and she presumed that there were Ekosians on the opposite side, observing and recording. Her cell was lit by a single, gas-powered lamp in the far corner that was belching a steady stream of mostly odorless smoke that vanished into the cracks in the ceiling. The stench of old sweat and fear was heavy in the room, and T'Pol thought she could detect the faint tang of iron-based blood. Even to her dulled perceptions, this room had ominous connotations and she was silently grateful that they had not yet stripped her clothes from her body. That would come later, once the initial interrogation ended and the physical coercion began.

But none of that truly mattered, because he was coming. And nothing would stop him.

The sole person in the cell with her was a stocky Ekosian male, with graying hair and piercing blue-green eyes. He was a large man, perhaps a few centimeters taller than Trip, and the lines time had carved in his face indicated that he had led a harsh life. His uniform was more elaborate than any T'Pol had seen before, with curious decorations and highly polished buttons that sparkled in the limited lighting in this tiny room. In his gloved hands, he held a beautifully carved wooden stick that he periodically trapped underneath his arm in what she took to be a nervous gesture. Despite the man's age – she put him at the Ekosian equivalent of Soval or perhaps Admiral Forrest – his posture was superb and he appeared to be in surprisingly excellent physical shape.

"I know you are awake," the Ekosian interrogator announced. He circled her chair, his hand gripping the stick secured under his arm. "May I presume that you speak my tongue?"

"You may," T'Pol rasped. She tried to focus her eyes on the male, but her vision swam.

"Excellent." He paused in front of her. "I am Staff-Adjutant sut'Tanaros Mikal Ferran." When she did not reply, he frowned. "It is customary in my culture to introduce one's self in return."
"I am su'Vulcan T'Pol Tucker," T'Pol replied through thick lips. She did not intentionally mispronounce her homeworld or Trip's surname, but both sounded unusual even to her ears.

"How much of that is even true, I wonder," Ferran mused. He resumed pacing around her, smacking the stick against his left palm for emphasis as he spoke. "No one of this world has ears shaped thus," he said, "or blood that color." The staff-adjutant – she was not sure what the equivalent was. Fleet Admiral, perhaps? Commodore? It was certainly greater than captain – paused behind her and used the end of the stick to brush her hair aside to reveal her ear. "Are you even truly female?" he wondered. The question required no answer, so T'Pol remained silent. "We will discover your truths soon enough," Ferran continued, resuming his slow circle. "I have learned men waiting to open you up and see if your organs are the same as the others."

"Others?" The word escaped T'Pol's lips before she could stop them, and the staff-adjutant leaned toward her, a dark smile on his face.

"Yes," he said simply. "They came here during my father's father's time like all of your kind do, to steal and murder and rape, but we threw them down in the salt." His eyes were cold as they tracked over her face. "You do not share their coloring," he added, "though their blood was just as green as yours." He reached out with his gloved left hand and gripped her jaw, tilting her head back and forth. "Is it age that darkens your skin to that color?" he asked. "Or are only the menfolk of your kind green?"

T'Pol blinked. Orions. He was speaking of Orions. She considered this revelation for a long moment, but did not reply. The man was … what did the humans call it? Ah, yes. He was 'fishing' for information and she had no desire to give him more than necessary. In the end, it would not matter. Because he was coming.

"It is of little importance," Ferran decided as he let her go and straightened. "We shall know your secrets soon enough."

"You are very confident," T'Pol remarked.

"And why should I not be?" the staff-adjutant demanded. "I have the stone!" T'Pol frowned at the unfamiliar expression, but Ferran continued. "We own you and the skycraft your men sent you to retrieve and when we unlock its truths, all will kneel before the Tandos Alliance and acknowledge us their master."

Skycraft? T'Pol narrowed her eyes and wished she could concentrate. If only he would arrive and take her away from this place. She knew he was coming – with each second, the subtle beat of his mind drew incrementally closer – but … skycraft? Could that mean starship? She looked up and pushed through the haze that had enveloped her thoughts. This man … this staff-adjutant knew things and she needed to focus on drawing that knowledge out rather than letting herself ruminate on the intoxicating taste of the one drawing ever so close.

"I was sent to retrieve nothing," she said, gambling on her initial impression of this man. He reminded her of many Andorians she had encountered over the years and not a few Vulcans as well: belligerent and not nearly as intelligent as he thought he was. Vanity was also a weakness of his if the overly ostentatious uniform he wore was any indication. Sentients like this man were excessively proud of their accomplishments, no matter if they were many or few, and greatly desired to boast.

She was not disappointed.

"You deceive!" Ferran exclaimed. "Why else would you come here if not to retrieve what was lost?"
Once more, he leaned closer and T'Pol's nostrils flared at his disagreeable scent. "We will never give it to you," the Ekosian hissed. "Never!"

"Never is a very long time," T'Pol replied calmly.

Ferran straightened and sat back against the table. He tapped the stick against his thigh in such a way that T'Pol doubted he was even aware of the action. For her part, T'Pol returned his gaze with an expression she hoped hinted at utter disinterest.

"You have one chance at survival, creature," the staff-adjutant began after a moment. "Cooperate with us and I can ensure your safety. What say you?"

"I say that you have the sound of a desperate man," T'Pol replied flatly. "You have promised your masters results that you cannot produce," she guessed and, from the gratifying way the staff-adjutant's eyes widened, she was right. "Have you given them dreams of skyships the likes of which you captured by happenstance?" Ferran's face darkened with fury, but T'Pol could not have stopped if she wanted to. Apparently, some combination of the drugs she had been given had loosened her tongue somewhat. "That technology is hundreds of cycles beyond you," she stated coolly. Her control fractured and she offered him a slight, mocking smile. "Can you even understand the basic theories behind the least of its functions?"

"I would keep my teeth together were I you," Ferran snarled, jabbing the wooden stick against her sternum. T'Pol suspected it was supposed to hurt, but with the drugs coursing through her veins, she barely noticed. "I can turn you over to my physicians sooner than later, creature," the Ekosian man threatened. His face a riot of emotion, he stormed to the door, yanked it open and exited, sealing her in. T'Pol relaxed in her seat and closed her eyes to block out any visual stimuli as she focused on the angry voices she could hear.

"How could she know these things?" a feminine voice was demanding. Panic was in this woman's tone. "She looked at you and knew your mind!"

"Do not be absurd," Ferran replied. He sounded confident, but there was the faintest tremor to his words that belied the appearance he meant to project. T'Pol fought to keep from smiling at that – she had apparently shaken him with her wild guess, which could be both a benefit and a threat. He appeared to be a powerful man normally, and those in authority rarely appreciated being challenged in any way. It was a universal constant. "She is wily, like a fetch from the old tales, but nothing more."

"We should not risk ourselves with this … creature," a third voice announced. He sounded old, as if he was well into the twilight of his years, and if the woman had sounded fearful, he was positively petrified. "Kill it now."

"No." The staff-adjutant's reply was firm, unyielding. "We need the truths she hides if we mean to gain entrance to this skyship. And I mean to peel them from her."

"It," the old man corrected. "Do not be swayed by its form. That creature is not of this world and should be destroyed as such."

The three continued to bicker for some time after that, each basically rephrasing the same thing they had already stated while using different words, but T'Pol paid only scant attention and instead reflected on what she had learned. They had in their possession a starship and had not yet discovered how to enter it, which could imply any number of things. Orions were not known to be particularly impressive shipbuilders, but given their predilection for piracy and theft, the origin of the craft could be any number of species. Ferran stated that it came during his first forefather's time, which T'Pol
estimated was likely a minimum of thirty years ago and a maximum of eighty or ninety given the likely life expectancy of Ekosians with this level of technology. Depending upon the vessel, it was possible the reactor was still capable of providing power. And if they could locate this mystery starship, it could mean one thing.

Escape.

Ferran returned several minutes later and resumed his attempts at interrogation, but T'Pol said nothing else and instead simply watched him with an impassive stare as his ire steadily grew over her continued silence. The tickle in her mind grew in strength until it was a raging torrent – he was so close now! – and T'Pol allowed her lips to curl upward. The change in her expression momentarily gave Ferran pause, and he was on the verge of completely losing his temper when the sound of activity outside the cell drew both of their attention. The staff-adjutant gave her another sour look before heading toward the door.

"We are not done, creature," he said over his shoulder, clearly intending for his words to sound like a threat. T'Pol was not intimidated, though.

Because her mate had arrived.
Trip: Frontal Assault

Chapter Notes

An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 295 days (258 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's January, 2153.

It was dark when he reached the airfield.

To someone like him, who had grown up a proverbial stone's throw from an actual international airport that never, ever slept, no matter the hour or day or weather, this place was barely worthy of the name. Four buildings squatted around a dirt path that served as the landing strip, with a fifth appearing to serve as the equivalent of a flight tower and headquarters. The latter was the only construction that was more than a single storey and behind it, half concealed by an outlying shed construction, a very loud generator growled and rumbled, apparently providing power to the entire airfield if the various wires stretching away from it were any indications. There were four propeller-driven single-seat planes parked alongside the runway and two large refueling trucks sat between the aircraft. A third truck was next to the tower building, although it looked more like a troop transport than a fueling vehicle, and a trio of four-wheeled vehicles he took to be the equivalent of a jeep were parked next to it.

A rickety-looking fence encircled the entire airfield, with perhaps a dozen small guard towers scattered along its length. The only thing that gave Trip pause was how bright the entire area was – he counted at least fifteen lamps of varying intensity just in the vicinity of the control building alone. A dozen or so Ekosian soldiers could be seen – some were walking the perimeter of the fence, some were inside the guard towers, and some were simply loitering outside the various buildings. None of it was going to stop him from entering either the airfield or the headquarters building, though. Because T'Pol was inside.

He could feel her through this weird as hell psychic connection thing they had going on. It had pulled him along for four, almost five days, steadily growing more intense as he drew closer. Now, it was like a soft rumble inside his head – he thought of it as thunder without sound – and the exhaustion and pain he'd barely been holding back was gone, washed away under the unrelenting call only he could hear. Only by focusing entirely on developing a plan to get T'Pol was he able to suppress the nearly overwhelming urge to draw both weapons and run screaming forward, killing any and everything that dared get in his way. They would certainly need to talk after this – a deeply-buried, primitive part of Tucker was howling in fear at what she might have done to him; did he even still have free will or was this some Vulcan mojo that made him little more than her puppet? – but right now, he could care less about the whys or whats. All that mattered was getting her out, safe and sound. Until then, nothing else mattered. Nothing else was important.

Nothing.

With the binoculars from his survival pack set to night-vision, he swept up and down the fence in an attempt to find a likely entry point for his assault. As barriers went, it was pretty pathetic – a single strand of some sort of metal that looked a whole lot like barbed wire was stretched between wooden posts set about three meters apart. The wire was about waist level and appeared to be a lot older than the rest of the facility.
Trip lowered the binos and considered. With the lights illuminating the whole damned complex – if it could truly be called that – getting in undetected would be virtually impossible. He glanced in the direction of the generator before looking down at the phase pistols strapped to either side of his belt. If he came in from the south, he might be able to get within range of that shed without being detected. Two shots fired at maximum power should kill all of their juice. Trip nodded. The plan sucked, but he liked it anyway.

Twenty minutes later found him within ten meters of the generator building. He was flat on his stomach, having been forced to crawl most of the way to avoid being detected by the spotlights periodically sweeping the area. Moving as quietly as possible, he slid forward over a small hill and took aim with one of the pistols while fumbling for the scanner with his other hand. Satisfied there was no one inside the generator building, he placed the scanner back on his belt, drew the second pistol, aimed and fired.

The resulting explosion was … anticlimactic.

Sparks flew for barely a second as the twin lances of phased energy burned through wood, metal and wire. Almost at once, the lights throughout the airfield flickered twice and died, dropping the entire area with darkness so abruptly that it was almost jarring. Trip was up and sprinting toward the fence even before the last of the lights faded away, and he could hear some cries of surprise, dismay and annoyance at the sudden loss of illumination. He hurdled the low fence easily before darting in the direction of a door leading into the main building, holstering one of the pistols in the process. With that empty hand, he reached for the handle.

And in that moment, the door began to open.

Trip jerked back out of sight as two Ekosian soldiers exited, rifles slung and holding aloft what smelled like kerosene lanterns. Neither appeared to notice him as they leisurely walked toward the generator shed, but an all too familiar sensation tickled the back of Tucker's brain. It was worse than simple déjà vu – he could actually remember seeing these two even though he knew that he'd never met them before – and they were barely three steps away when the pieces fell into place.

T'Pol. These were two of the Ekosians that had captured and beaten his T'Pol.

His hands trembled at the effort it took to keep from simply throwing himself at these men in an unreasoning fit of madness and fury to avenge what had been done to his Vulcan. With his self control in ragged tatters, Trip instead glanced around for a weapon and, upon finding a fairly stout stick that reminded him far too much of a baseball bat, he seized it.

And pounced.

Neither man even had a chance.

He dragged their unconscious bodies out of sight and left them there, beaten and bloodied but still alive. Fury continued to build within him, an insane, murderous wrath that felt … alien even to him, but Trip shoved it into the same corner of his brain where the crippling physical pain from his still unhealed injuries was locked away so he could continue to function. His heart pounded a fierce refrain and its rhythm sang a familiar tune: t'pol t'pol t'pol.

Grabbing one of the rifles and slinging it over his shoulder, he quickly darted to the door and ducked inside the building. The invisible tether tugged him toward a door several meters distant and Trip followed it, his grip on the rifle tightening with each step he took. A pair of Ekosians – a white-haired man who had to be seventy or eighty, and a slender woman with a prominent nose and an overly elaborate coif of hair – stood in front of a window looking into a darkened room. Neither of
them paid attention to his approach as they continued their soft conversation.

"You must speak to him," the old man was stating passionately while gesturing toward the window. "He listens to your voice."

"But he may be correct," his companion countered. "We may need this woman."

"That thing is not a woman!" the man nearly snarled. Trip drew alongside them, his eyes automatically locking on the seated figure of T'Pol through the glass. A pompous-looking reject straight out of the worst sort of bad war movie was circling her, a swagger stick in hand. As Trip stared at T'Pol through the window, the two Ekosians finally seemed to take notice of him. The woman gave him barely a glance but the white-haired man began to frown.

"She is a woman," Trip countered softly in their dialect, drawing their full attention. The man's eyes widened in fear at the sight of the phase pistols at Tucker's side and he seemed to freeze completely in place. "And her name is T'Pol."

The woman reacted with surprising speed, half-turning and springing away from them and toward some sort of device secured to the far wall. Trip was ready though, and tackled her into the wall before she could reach what he suspected was an alarm. His body-check appeared to knock the wind out of her and, although it went against everything his dad had ever taught him about not hitting girls, Tucker clocked her across the jaw. She went limp and he glanced up at the sound of the old man collapsing to the floor. He was gasping and clutching at his chest in the same way Trip's grandfather had when Charles Tucker Senior died of a massive heart attack. For the briefest of seconds, Trip considered going to this man's aid.

But the moment passed. He couldn't … he wouldn't do anything for this man, not with them treating his Vulcan like she was some sort of feral animal.

Instead, he pushed down what his reflex told him to do and headed for the door leading into the large interrogation room. Through the apparent one-way mirror, Trip could see the flamboyantly dressed man walking toward the door as well, so Tucker hefted the rifle. As soon as the door opened, he struck, smashing the butt of the weapon forward into the face of the unsuspecting Ekosian man who staggered back in pain, dropping his swagger stick as his hand came up automatically to cover his smashed nose. The anger and confusion and fear swimming in his stomach gave Trip more strength, and he attacked again, this time slamming the rifle butt into the Ekosian peacock's vulnerable belly. With a gasp, the man collapsed to his knees and Tucker brought the weapon down across the back of the Ekosian's head slightly harder than was probably necessary.

T'Pol was slumping slightly in her chair, but her unblinking eyes were wide and locked on him as he approached. He tossed the rifle aside when he noticed that she was shackled to the uncomfortable looking chair by crude-looking cuffs.

"Trip?" she asked softly, as if she wasn't entirely sure that he was actually here.

"Lucy," Tucker replied with a pained smile, "I'm home." T'Pol gave him a confused frown, but he ignored it as he drew one of the pistols, took aim at one of the chain links holding her in place, and fired. The metal parted like water and Trip quickly took care of the other three. "Can you walk?" he asked.

"You came for me," T'Pol replied as if that was actually an answer to his question, her eyes swimming in and out of focus. She smiled then, a large teeth-baring smile that just looked wrong on her Vulcan features and sent a shiver up Trip's spine. Her eyes fluttered and, a half second later, she was unconscious.
"Wonderful," Trip muttered as he pulled her out of the chair and hefted her onto his shoulder, grunting at the effort it took. For such a delicate-looking woman, she was heavy!

The old man was still alive as Trip exited the cell, but remained slumped on the floor, his back to the wall and one hand clutching his chest. He stared at Tucker with wide, terrified eyes, as if he was expecting impending violence, but Trip simply gave him a dark look and headed toward the back door. Pushing it open with one of his toes, he exited the building but angled toward the parked groundcars instead of retracing his steps out of the compound. Leveraging T'Pol into the car was difficult – and sent a flash of déjà vu through him as he recalled doing something similar after she'd been shot – but once she was secure, he gave his surroundings another quick look. No alarm seemed to have been sounded, which made him suspect they often had trouble keeping on the lights. Still, it would only be a matter of time before one of the people he'd knocked out regained consciousness or somebody stumbled upon his handiwork.

Moving as quickly as he could manage while still being silent, Trip darted to each of the other parked vehicles and used the phase pistol at its highest setting to burn through the engine block. He then spent several more agonizingly long moments liberating the full jerry cans from the now useless vehicles and transferring them to his and T'Pol's groundcar. Once satisfied that he'd gotten everything he could from them, he turned in the direction of the aircraft and leveled the pistol once more, this time aiming at the fuel trucks. Holding his breath – there was no way the phase pistol beam wouldn't be noticed; he just hoped they'd be too busy trying to save the planes or putting out the fire to react – Trip fired at both of the refueling tanks.

Unlike the generator, these explosions would have made Malcolm proud.

Shouts of alarm sounded instantly, and, a few seconds later, soldiers streamed out of the four smaller buildings, most barely dressed, and raced toward the burning vehicles, gathering buckets and other paraphernalia that appeared to be intended to fight the fire or save the already damaged planes. Trip waited for only a few heartbeats before sliding into the seat of the off-road vehicle and starting the engine. It caught instantly, but no one seemed to have noticed as all eyes were focused on the chaos he'd just caused. He flashed a quick smile in T'Pol's direction – she was still unconscious, with her head tilted back and her mouth open – before putting the groundcar in gear and punching the accelerator.

The single strand of wire didn't even slow him down – it snapped apart when the jeep-like vehicle hit it at twenty kilometers an hour – but Trip slowed to a stop as soon as they were out of visual range to make sure it hadn't gotten tangled up in the wheels. He then drove to where the ATV he'd liberated days earlier was concealed and transferred all of the important gear – his rucksack with all of their remaining Starfleet gear, the two canisters that still had fuel in them, and the wooden box of extremely bad-tasting military rations he'd discovered in the ATV's backseat on the second day after its theft – to the jeep. Just to be safe, he pulled the pistol and burned through the engine housing so it wouldn't be going anywhere soon.

As he returned to the jeep, Trip glanced once more in the direction of the airfield. Even though it was concealed from view by a slight hill, the sky over it was brighter than normal, with sporadic flashes of fire appearing as the fuel continued to burn. Nodding tightly, he reclaimed the driver's seat and gunned the engine. South, he decided. They would go south.

He didn't stop driving until dawn.
With an abbreviated gasp, T'Pol jolted awake.

The first thing she realized was that she was completely and utterly alone. Apart from the sole rucksack pressed up against the wall of the small cave next to her head, there was no sign of Trip and if she had not been able to feel him in the back of her mind, she very likely would have panicked. The last thing she remembered with any real clarity was seeing Ferran topple and Trip enter her cell, his body taut with tension and his eyes filled with barely suppressed fury. He had come for her, just as she knew he would, and suddenly, the forbidden tales of pre-Surak Vulcan males who would burn worlds and cross endless expanses to reunite with their chosen mates had not seemed so unlikely. T'Pol could remember him speaking, but his words had been jumbled nonsense that her drug-addled mind could not quite comprehend. It had not mattered, though.

Because he had come for her.

She gave her surroundings a closer look, noting instantly the sound of rain outside, beating a steady but soft tattoo against the rock. Here, in this cave, she was sheltered from the elements which had no doubt been Trip’s intention. An old, musty smell filled the air and there was so little ambient light present that T'Pol could barely see anything more than a meter distant. After several long moments, she was finally able to identify the entrance – it was in the floor of the cavern and overlooked the sharp incline leading down, out of the cave – and crawled to it.

The cave appeared to be high in a series of low cliffs that overlooked rocky terrain with numerous pathetic-looking trees and bushes. From the placement of an overhang concealing the cavern’s mouth, T'Pol suspected that locating this spot was quite difficult and would normally require considerable happenstance or judicious use of advanced technology. That Trip had found it at all would seem to indicate that he was using her personal scanner.

She retreated to the small bedding area – it was little more than a thin blanket stretched out atop the hard rock – and assumed her usual meditative posture. The urge to panic remained quite strong, but she could feel Trip growing closer with each moment and that reassured her more than she wanted to admit. Her relief – and bemusement – grew at the sight of her holstered phase pistol atop the rucksack. She checked the weapon’s charge and placed it on the cave floor near her waist before leaning back. There was nothing else she could do but wait.

So she closed her eyes and began to meditate.

She felt Trip’s approach long before she heard it, and the warm knot of foreign emotions filling her senses roused her from her recuperative trance. When Tucker finally crawled into the cave, a flood of exhaustion and pain almost knocked T’Pol down. She started to rise, but he waved her back to her seat and staggered across the tiny cavern so he could drop a second but much smaller pack alongside the first.
“You okay?” he rasped with a voice that seemed rough and broken.

“I am,” T’Pol replied, her eyes as wide as she could get them as she watched him detach his holster.

“I think we’re safe for a while,” Trip said. He half-pulled the pistol free to check its charge and T’Pol flinched at the white-hot spark of anger that rolled off him. “I found a river about ten kilometers from here, ditched the groundcar and then sank a boat.”

“A boat?” T’Pol repeated.

“Yeah,” Tucker replied. “Used up the last of this pistol’s power making sure that thing went to the bottom.” Comprehension came at once.

“You hope any pursuers believe that we escaped via this watercraft.”

“’cordin’ to the map you had,” Trip said, his voice growing thicker and more slurred with each word, “it’s a tributary that connects to their equivalent of the Mississippi.” He placed her scanner on the ruck next to his depleted phase pistol and began staring at her.

“An effective ruse,” she commented before leaning toward him in an attempt to make out his features in the dark. “You came for me,” T’Pol said abruptly, surprising even herself. That was not what she had wanted to say, although she could not have stopped the words from tumbling out of her mouth if she’d tried. It was too dark for her to make out his expression when he glanced at her, but judging by the bright flash of surprise she felt through this … bond, it would have been fascinating to see.

“Of course I came for you,” he snapped back. “Did you expect me to just abandon you?” he demanded. T’Pol shook her head.

“It was not logical for you to endanger yourself for me,” she murmured, even though a part of her silently acknowledged that she would have done the same without hesitation. Trip grunted.

“Do you think I give a damn about logic when it comes to your safety?” he asked rhetorically. “You’re all I’ve got, T’Pol.” Another jumble of emotions slammed into her and she could not begin to decipher their meaning. “You’re all I’ve got,” he repeated softly, the comment so heartfelt that it was almost physically painful to T’Pol.

“How long has it been since you slept?” she wondered. Trip shrugged.


“Then if we are safe for the moment,” T’Pol said, “you should rest.”

“Not before we talk,” Trip retorted. He crouched in front of her and she was struck by how bad he truly looked. Dark rings were under his far too bright eyes and he was not blinking as often as he should. His wet hair was plastered against his skull, which only served to emphasize the gauntness of his face. The unappealing beard he had not yet been able to rid himself of dripped and he absently scratched at it. Trip had the look of a man on the verge of utter collapse but, if the turbulent emotions rolling off him were any indication, he was desperately afraid to do so. “What the hell did you do to me?” he demanded sharply.

T’Pol looked down, unable to meet his eyes.

“I do not know,” she admitted softly. Another spike of alien emotion jabbed into her brain – it ran the gamut from anger to fear to surprise and sadness. “Trip, you must believe me that this as foreign to
“But you suspect something,” Trip guessed flatly. T’Pol looked up and met his eyes.

“Do you remember when we spoke about Koss?” she asked. He nodded. “I have reason to believe that there is a … physiologic basis for the tradition of new spouses spending a year together.” Trip’s eyes widened, but she pressed on quickly. “There are legends among my people about psychic connections we call mating bonds, but they are generally given no more credence than the human myth about love at first sight.” He opened his mouth to reply, then apparently thought better about what he was going to say, and hesitated before plunging on.

“And you didn’t know this could happen?” T’Pol instinctively bristled at the accusation.

“As I have never been married, Charles,” she retorted tightly, “I have no way of knowing whether this hypothesis is accurate or not.”

“I just …” He trailed off and ran his hands through his wet hair. “So this is just a natural thing for Vulcans,” he said. “Would have happened regardless of who you were stuck here with.” Overwhelming surprise and sadness merged with disgust, and it took T’Pol a long moment to realize he was disappointed. On instinct, she reached out with one hand and touched his face with her index and middle fingers.

“You believe there was a romantic connection between myself and Captain Archer prior to our crash landing here,” she said simply. Tucker’s eyes shot up and he started to speak. “You were in error, Trip,” she continued over his stumbling remarks. “I was never more than the captain’s friend.”

“T’Pol,” he began, but she kept speaking.

“In the stories of my people,” she said, her fingers continuing to caress the side of his face, “the mating bond is something that cannot come into being without mutual consent and was cherished as a union of two *katras*.” She frowned slightly at the sliver of fear still echoing through the bond. “You are afraid that your will is not your own now,” she ventured, and from the way Trip’s jaw tightened, she’d guessed correctly. “I cannot control you, Trip,” she said.

“Darlin’,” he replied with an exhausted smile, “you’ve never needed some sorta brain connection to control me.” T’Pol raised an eyebrow at the illogical statement – she was able to instantly recall a dozen different instances since she came aboard *Enterprise* where he had been unnecessarily recalcitrant toward her – and his smile brightened for a moment before fading. “I wasn’t in control of myself,” Trip admitted. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I could feel you in my head but it was like someone else was callin’ the shots.”

“I suspect the bond drives mates to protect each other,” T’Pol said. Trip blinked again, suddenly seeming to notice for the first time her hand on his face. She watched as he unconsciously leaned into her touch, his eyes slipping shut and an expression of peace chasing away the exhaustion. Physical contact seemed to further enhance their psychic connection and the deluge of emotions racing through him were so powerful, so overwhelming that she had to fight the urge to pull her hand away. They sat there in silence for long moments, not speaking.

T’Pol could not remember ever being so content.

With a sudden hiss of pain, Trip lost his balance and fell forward, nearly knocking T’Pol to the ground when she instinctively reached out to steady him. She almost gasped at the tidal wave of muted agony and bone-deep weariness coursed off him. On the heels of that, a rush of self-recrimination made her head spin. She had done this to him. If it were not for the bond, he would not
have driven himself to the brink of emotional and physical collapse.

“You need to rest,” she said smoothly.

“I do,” Trip agreed in a dully, emotionless voice. “I really, really do.” He slumped back into a seated position and began fumbling with his boots. T’Pol batted his hands away and took over for him, quickly stripping off his shoes and damp shirt. Trip’s eyes drooped closed as she worked his equally wet pants free and he fell heavily against her. By the time she was done, he was already losing the battle with his body’s demand for slumber. She pushed him to stretch out over the thin blanket but, to her surprise, he curled toward her, his head finding a pillow in her lap and his arms wrapping around her waist possessively. “Haven’t even got to kiss you yet,” he mumbled.

A heartbeat later, he was asleep.

T’Pol considered her awkward position for a moment before using her arms to shift her body closer to the wall. With a solid surface at her back, she relaxed slightly and looked down at the sleeping man who had become so essential to her well-being. A sigh escaped her lips before she could prevent it, and she began carding her fingers through his too-long and still damp hair. Not for the first time, she had no idea what to do.

Her remarks to Trip about mating bonds had been rampant speculation on her part with little intrinsic evidence to support her theories beyond this unexpected firsthand experience. It was entirely possible this … connection was simply a by-product of a meld performed incorrectly, and would eventually fade with time. And then there was the Pa’nar. Had she infected Trip with it as well? Would it even affect humans? What if she had permanently shortened his life expectancy because of her illogical and overly emotional connection to him? T’Pol did not think she could live with herself in that case. The innocents who had died when she shot Menos were one thing, but Trip? He was something else entirely and she knew that she would not survive him long in that case.

The list of questions continued to mount, each as troubling as the previous. What happened now? Trip had great regard for her, true, but was she truly capable of giving him what he needed in a mate? For that matter, was he capable of providing her what she required? Admittedly, she had begun to rely on him far more than he likely realized, but was she foolish enough to deepen this … relationship with him knowing full well that the Pa’nar made her time limited? It seemed selfish on her part – Trip was a man who cared deeply, so her death would hit him hard even without the added emotional entanglement inherent in the sort of relationship he clearly desired of her. And why had T’Les not told her about these bonds? Surely, one’s offspring needed to know this sort of thing.

*Cast out fear,* T’Pol told herself sharply. Right now, Trip needed her alert and awake, not struggling with questions that had no answers. Whatever was decided, it would need to be made by both of them now. Their every option had to be examined in a logical manner – no matter their personal desires, survival remained their primary goal. Indulging in dangerous emotions like affection and longing while in their current situation was both illogical and dangerous. Surely Trip could understand that.

She sighed.

Once more, she found herself staring at Trip’s sleeping form, her fingers moving through his hair rhythmically. It was soothing, hearing his breathing and feeling his heart beat under the fingers of her other hand. The turbulent emotions that had been pressing at her mental defenses were quiescent now, but she could still feel the strange non-Vulcan flavor of his mind as he slumbered. Random images occasionally flickered across her mind’s eye, but they were too disjointed and without any context for her to make sense of them. Trip began shifting in his sleep, making distressed sound while his eyes twitched, and T’Pol reached for her ruck with one hand. It took several long moments,
but she found one of the thermal blankets salvaged from their survival pack.

“I am here, Trip,” T’Pol whispered as she draped the blanket over his body. At the same time, she stretched out with her thoughts to brush up against his mind. He relaxed instantly, though she was not sure if it was due to the psi-touch, her voice, or the added warmth. “When you wake,” she promised, well aware of how illogical it was to speak to someone this deeply asleep but not caring, “we will talk.” Her lips curled up once more as hope, long suppressed flared brightly. “And I will tell you about the starship I learned of,” she said. “Perhaps we can go home after all.” She fought the urge to laugh as a ridiculous thought occurred to her. “And perhaps one day,” she added with a smile that she never would have given if someone were present to see it, “I may introduce you to my mother.”

In response, Trip mumbled something incoherent and wrapped his arms around her waist even more tightly.

And outside, the rain continued to fall.
325 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's March, 2153.

“You’re late, Captain.”

The doctor’s words greeted him as Jon stepped into Sickbay, causing Archer to hesitate in mid-step and glance in Phlox’s direction. With his back to Jon, the Denobulan was attending to one of the many cages of his menagerie, a cheerful smile on his ebullient face. He gestured for Archer to enter before turning his focus back to the … thing inside the wire mesh cage making sounds that shouldn’t come out of anything smaller than a bus.

Directly to Phlox’s immediate left, attached to the wall and enclosed in a decorative frame, was a slightly larger than life photograph of Elizabeth Cutler’s smiling face and, as it did every other time he stepped foot in the medical bay, the sight of the photo sent another rush of guilt through Jon. According to the doctor, this was part of an ancient Denobulan grieving tradition – when a close associate or friend died tragically, a representation of them in happier times was prominently displayed for at least a sidereal year – which translated to approximately a year and a half on the human calendar. From what Archer had gleaned from Phlox over the last eight and half months, the tradition was rooted in ancient Denobulan spiritualism and had once been intended to appease the spirits of those taken away far earlier than they should have been.

When Phlox had put up Cutler’s photograph but intentionally refused to do so for Trip or T’Pol, more than a few crewmembers initially took offense at the perceived slight, but the doctor had persevered, telling anyone who would listen – and a couple who didn’t want to – how he continued to believe their lost senior officers were simply missing. His constant insistence that they would eventually see the two commanders again was eventually accepted as one of the unusual quirks that made him so interesting, even if everyone else aboard thought he was refusing to accept reality. In fact, Jon had seen on no less than three occasions in the last week where one crewmember gave another a wide grin and said ‘Optimism!’ in a voice that sounded eerily like Phlox’s after being presented what was a daunting task. None of them seemed to be mocking the doctor – as far as Archer could tell, the Denobulan was the one person aboard who was universally liked – so he simply pretended not to notice.

The Denobulan tradition had caught on very quickly, though, and both the engineering and science departments had adopted it themselves. They had even agreed to use the same image – a candid image taken by the late Crewman Cutler herself of Trip laughing at something a vaguely amused-looking T’Pol had said to him during one of their later landing parties before the whole Paraagan disaster. Jon remembered the first time he saw the photo – he had been paying then Lieutenant Commander Kelby a visit and had been startled to find the image posted on the bulkhead next to the main engineering duty roster. He’d done a double take, but upon realizing that all eyes were upon him had nodded his approval and turned back to Kelby.

And then, secretly, obtained a copy himself for his quarters.

“And how are you this afternoon, Captain?” Phlox asked as he finished feeding the bat-looking thing in his cage. He turned to face Jon.
“Tired,” Archer replied calmly. He sank down onto his usual seat and leaned back to brace his head against the wall. As expected, Phlox approached, whirring hand scanner in hand.

“You appear to have fully recovered from your latest misadventure,” the doctor declared with a bright smile. The scanner vanished into one of Phlox’s pockets. “How have you been sleeping?”

“Not bad,” Jon replied. “No nightmares for a change,” he added.

“That’s excellent news, Captain,” Phlox said. He took a seat in the other chair and leaned forward.

“You know,” Archer said softly, “I think this whole mess with Skalaar was actually good for me.”

“In what way?” the doctor asked. As was usual in these informal counseling sessions, he wasn’t taking notes or recording their discussion, even though, according to regulations, he was required to do so in the case of any officer or crewmember seeking psychological counseling. For Archer, it was doubly important that these sessions remain unofficial; if Starfleet Command learned that the captain of their flagship exploration vessel was seeking help for what could only be a mild case of post-traumatic stress, they’d be forced to relieve him of command and his career would come to a virtual standstill. The one time Jon had asked Phlox about his ignoring regs, the doctor had pointed out with a wry smile that he technically wasn’t a member of Starfleet, so they didn’t apply to him.

It had been Phlox himself who initiated these meetings almost five months ago. The doctor had cornered Jon in the gym a little after midnight ship-time and threatened to exercise his right as chief medical officer to remove him from command unless he agreed to Phlox’s help. At first, Archer had balked – he was fine, he’d insisted, and didn’t need help – but the doctor continued to pester and harass him with questions about his diet, or his sleep schedule, or his increasing tendency to distance himself from the crew. It wasn’t until Malcolm began asking similar questions in a concerned tone of voice that Jon realized how badly he did need someone to talk to. One session with Phlox had turned into two, and then three, and suddenly, Archer discovered that his schedule was constantly cleared for this day and time thanks almost entirely to Reed.

And slowly, ever so slowly, Jon started to open up more and more to the non-judgmental Denobulan doctor.

“I felt more like my old self than I have for a long time,” Archer finally replied. “No second guessing, no hesitation, just … action.” He exhaled softly before smiling slightly. “I knew what had to be done and just did it for a change.” Phlox nodded for him to continue, so Jon added, “Sitting in that cell also gave me a lot of time to think.”

“And what did you think about, Captain?”

“Trip,” Jon said softly. “T’Pol.” He nodded in the direction of Cutler’s image. “Elizabeth,” he continued, using her given name rather than her rank. ‘Crewman’ was too dehumanizing.

“And what did you discover?” Phlox inquired. Archer was silent for a long moment.

“That I’ve been blaming myself for something that really wasn’t my fault,” he admitted. “I know you’ve been telling me that for months now, Phlox,” he said, “but I guess it never really sank in until then.” Jon made a face. “Trip was my best friend for almost ten years,” he said, “and he was only on that shuttlepod because I made it an order. So I’ve been blaming myself, even though I knew it was just an accident.”

“Such a reaction is only natural, Captain,” Phlox stated calmly. He was about to continue when Hoshi’s voice echoed over the intraship.
“Captain Archer to the bridge.” Jon shook his head as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Duty calls, Doc,” he said.

“Of course, Captain,” Phlox replied. He smiled broadly. “I would like to continue this conversation later,” he said.

“Why don’t you join me for dinner tonight?” Jon suggested. “I can’t seem to get Erika and Soval in the same room for longer than a few minutes and Malcolm has some sort of armoury inspection scheduled, so I’d be eating alone otherwise.”

“I’d be happy to join you, Captain,” Phlox said. At the mention of Commander Hernandez and the ambassador, the doctor quickly glanced away, his smile faltering slightly, and once again, Jon wondered what exactly it was that had happened while he was off-ship. Malcolm had been in command when Enterprise caught up with Goroth’s ship to retrieve the escape pod Archer was in, and afterward, Phlox’s report had only stated that he, Erika and Soval had been forced to remain in decon to deal with an unexpected microbial infection. The first officer’s after-action-review had been equally succinct, which, for a woman as in love with words as Erika was, sent up all sorts of alerts.

“Commander Hernandez was instrumental in resolution of this crisis,” Soval had said simply when Jon asked him about what happened, and the ambassador’s expression even more blank and rigid than normal. Further discussion was irrelevant, the Vulcan insisted before making excuses about needing to prepare for one of his daily seminars with selected members of the crew. Since then, Archer had seen them together exactly once, and that had been for all of ten seconds before Erika found a reason to be elsewhere and Soval excused himself without offering an explanation.

“I’ll see you then,” Jon said to Phlox as he headed for the door, still wondering what the doctor was concealing. He’d used the ‘doctor/patient confidentiality’ defense to skirt around going into any detail, and his general explanation bore a striking similarity to what Soval had said.

Shaking his head, Archer strode quickly to the turbolift, all the while wondering if he was imagining things. He’d been on edge for several weeks now, ever since Starfleet sent them on that wild goose chase after the missing research team. Despite their best efforts, they hadn’t been able to find even a hint of the missing scientists. There had been a decaying warp trail and then … nothing, as if the ship simply ceased to exist. A nearby Tarkalean freighter had provided them with their own sensor readings, which only confirmed Ensign Ling’s analysis – one moment, the transport had been traveling at warp 3.9, the next it was simply gone. The whole situation reeked of Daniels’ damned temporal cold war and Jon jumped at shadows for nearly a week afterward.

And then, just as he was about to relax, A.G. Robinson nearly got himself killed climbing Mount McKinley. If it hadn’t been for Anna Hess, Trip’s old number two and Robinson’s current chief engineer, A.G. probably would have never lived to see Columbia launched. According to the letter A.G. had sent later, he’d taken Hess along with him mostly because she was burying herself in work and looked like she needed to get off the ship for a while, but knowing him, Archer wondered if Robinson had really been trying to get into her pants. It would be just like the man, to sleep with a subordinate and not see anything wrong with it. As it was, Robinson ended up with a broken arm and a stern letter of reprimand from Admiral Forrest for being an idiot.

But still, Jon couldn’t quite shake the feeling that something bad was on the horizon.

“Good evening, Captain,” Malcolm said as he drew abreast of where Jon was standing, waiting patiently for the turbolift. “They’re running a bit slow today,” he added with a nod toward the still closed doors.
“Any idea why?” Archer asked.

“Depends on who you ask, sir.” At Jon’s sidelong look, Reed smirked. “Mister Kelby was trapped between C and D deck for almost an hour today,” he revealed. “They traced the fault to some faulty wiring that was damaged during that singularity incident but somehow missed being repaired.”

“Sometimes,” Jon mused as the door finally slid open, “I wonder if Travis isn’t onto something.”

“Superstitious rubbish, sir,” Reed retorted. He followed Archer into the lift. “I think its Rostov’s team keeping Kelby on his toes.” Jon chuckled softly and leaned against the wall. He was about to offer his own theory when Malcolm reached forward and pressed the emergency stop. The lift shuddered to a halt.

“Something on your mind, Commander?” Archer asked.

“I didn’t want to put this in an official report, sir,” the armoury officer said flatly, his eyes locked on the doors in front of him, “but I’ve discovered a number of security breaches in sickbay dating back almost nine months.”

“What kind of breaches?” Jon asked tightly.

“Someone accessed the DNA records of members of the crew,” Reed stated. “Whoever was behind it,” he added grimly, “knew exactly what they were doing. I was damned lucky to find the discrepancies in the access log in the first place.”

“Who are we talking about exactly?”

“Who accessed the records or whose records were taken?” Malcolm asked.

“Both,” Jon said.

“I have no idea who is behind it, sir,” Reed replied. “They deleted any recordings, wiped their digital fingerprints, the whole bloody nine yards.” He grimaced. “I’m going to keep digging, sir, so I will find them.” Jon nodded. “As to whose records were taken, well that’s where it gets confusing.” Malcolm’s expression darkened. “It doesn’t look like anything has been removed, but I think copies were made of your DNA code, as well as Subcommander T’Pol’s, Commander Tucker’s, mine, and Lieutenant Mayweather’s.” Archer frowned – four males and a female. Was that significant? Why wouldn’t they also copy Hoshi’s? Or Phlox’s? He was missing something but couldn’t for the life of him figure out what.

“Have you told Phlox?” he asked.

“Not yet, sir.” Reed glowered. “Until I have a better idea of who is behind this,” he added, “I’d like to keep it between us.”

“Very well,” Jon decided. “Do what you have to, Malcolm,” he said. “You cut the angle,” he added, “and I’ll cover your play.” Reed blinked, a look of confusion momentarily flashing across his face before vanishing behind the usual mask of detached professionalism he wore. Before Jon could explain – honestly, if these people would just watch water polo, they’d know what he was talking about – an alarm began sounding. Less than a second later, even as Malcolm was reaching for the emergency stop button to resume their journey, Travis Mayweather’s voice echoed over the intraship comm-line.

“Tactical alert,” the former Boomer said urgently. “All hands to emergency stations. This is not a drill.”
The bridge was a scene of chaos when Jon stepped off the turbolift, and his eyes darted immediately to the main viewscreen where he was surprised to see a grim-looking Admiral Forrest staring out. Hands clasped behind his back, Lieutenant Mayweather was standing in front of the helm station.

“The captain is on his way, sir,” Travis was in the process of saying, enough tension in his voice to indicate that he had been stalling for a few seconds.

“I’m already here,” Jon said as he fast-walked into the line of sight for the bridge cameras. “Admiral,” he greeted.

“You are to drop everything and get your ass to Earth,” Forrest said without preamble. “I want you here yesterday, Captain, so redline your engines.” Jon gave Malcolm a confused look even as he heard the soft hiss of the lift door opening once again.

“Yes, sir,” he replied hesitantly. A familiar scent – Erika – caused him to glance to his side where he saw his first officer wearing off-duty exercise clothes. “We’ll set course immediately, Admiral,” Archer added. “Can I ask why?” The answer wasn’t anything Jon was expecting.

“Earth has been attacked.”
Trip: City Jackpot

Chapter Notes

An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 409 days (358 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's April, 2153.

He was thoroughly sick of sneaking into Ekosian cities.

This was the fifth in the last two months, with each becoming progressively more difficult to enter thanks to added security, and all in an attempt to find some tiny scrap of intelligence that might lead them to this starship T'Pol had learned about during the whole interrogation incident that they rarely talked about. The first two cities had been utter wastes of time – their ‘information repositories’ (T'Pol’s words; Trip just called them libraries, even if that wasn’t entirely accurate either) had long since been looted and pillaged, so they were little more than burnt out husks. Number three actually turned out to be vaguely useful, which led to the fourth city where they had almost run afoul of Tandos Alliance troops conducting a house-to-house search for squatters.

Which led them to number five.

As alien locales went, it wasn’t particularly impressive and honestly looked like any number of European cities that Trip had seen over the years. There was a really tall fortress-like construction at the very center, with dozens of outlying buildings crouching in its shadow like sullen children. The farther away a house or shop was from the fortress, the newer it appeared to be and the more haphazard the street layout was. At least seven different rail tracks converged within, although only three of them really appeared to be used very frequently. And while the Alliance military was ostensibly guarding entrances of the city, its sheer size made gaining entrance almost ridiculously easy.

Unfortunately, they hadn’t quite planned for the almost xenophobic mindset of the locals. Almost from the moment they stepped onto one of the cobblestone roads, there were furtive eyes watching them, studying them, taking note of where they went or what they did. This scrutiny only intensified the closer they got to the information repository – Trip wondered if T'Pol thought of laxatives every time she thought of the name like he did, although for some reason, he doubted it – as did the sheer number of armed guards, who appeared to be checking the papers of anyone this deep in the city. Papers that Trip and T'Pol didn’t have.

And that had led them to their current location: the roof of a building overlooking the main thoroughfare that passed in front of the Ekosian library some twenty or thirty meters from them.

It took Trip nearly ten minutes to figure out why the ‘information repository’ looked so familiar – if he didn’t know better, he’d think he was looking at the Hall of Justice from some of the old Superman comics he’d read as a kid. Unfortunately, once that mental image came to mind, he couldn’t shake it no matter how hard he tried which led to a chuckle every time he looked in its direction. T'Pol gave him sidelong glances the first few times before simply rolling her eyes and utterly ignoring him.

With her keeping a look-out and trying to determine their best plan of action, Trip let his attention wander and gave the city – which he honestly didn’t know the name of – another, more in depth
look. Up close, the buildings had a slightly more Middle Eastern flair to them, with domed rooftops and arched doorways. It was some sort of strange juxtaposition of Europe and the Middle-East that just didn’t make any sense but still managed to send a surge of homesickness through him.

“You aren’t paying attention,” T’Pol said flatly. Her attention hadn’t wavered from the – he snickered – hall of justice, but Trip gave her a quick look nonetheless.

“Guilty,” he admitted softly. “That … thing,” he said, gesturing toward the library, “reminds me of something that it really shouldn’t.”

“I see,” T’Pol declared, even though Trip could tell that she really didn’t get it. He exhaled and tried again to focus on the … dammit … the hall of justice.

“Do we have a plan?” he asked. T’Pol’s expression tightened.

“Not as of yet,” she said. “I would appreciate your input.” It was on the tip of Trip’s tongue to make a smart-ass comment about how her asking for his advice was a nice change of pace when he suddenly realized that he could feel her annoyance and frustration and worry. Her feet hurt too and, contrary to what she had told him earlier, she was hungry.

These sorts of moments were starting to be more common as he became more comfortable with this … bond thing. At first, Trip had been terrified that this psychic connection was going to mean a permanent end to his privacy, but he was relieved to discover it wasn’t that obtrusive. T’Pol remained as mystifyingly obtuse as ever, even if he suddenly developed a slightly keener understanding of how her brain functioned at times. More than anything else, though, it had been a monumental relief to learn that she shared every single one of his fears. Most of the time, he barely noticed the bond – there was a slight, low-level … buzz (for lack of a better word) at the back of his brain he’d learned to associate with his Vulcan companion (Trip still wasn’t comfortable using the word ‘mate’), and occasionally he had flashes of insight into her – but it was impossible for him to simply pretend nothing was different.

What continued to surprise him, though, was how things really hadn’t changed since their discussion almost three months ago. Sure, T’Pol was more open to him than ever before, tolerated his unconscious touches without ever once complaining, and even instigated her own Vulcan displays of affection from time to time. There was never any question about their sleeping arrangements now – Trip would retire long before she did, but would always wake up with the Vulcan snuggled against him or draped over him like a living blanket. At the moment, though, it didn’t go beyond that.

And Trip was honestly okay with their current status.

In between reeling from the revelation that he’d been blatantly wrong about the nature of T’Pol’s relationship with the captain (and how stupid did that make him, Trip wondered, since he’d labored for well over a year under that delusion), Tucker was also coming to grips that T’Pol cared deeply for him, perhaps even loved him in her own way. Yes, he was positively giddy that his attraction was reciprocated, but the more logical part that she had spent so much time nurturing questioned whether their mutual feelings were enough to get past the species difference. The things he thought most important in a relationship – affection, love, sincerity, desire – were all deeply rooted in emotion, and ranked far lower on T’Pol’s list (if she even had a list.) And then, halfway between city number two and three, she’d given him a matter-of-fact dissertation about her race’s mating cycles and how she doubted they would be forced to endure a pon farr since he wasn’t Vulcan, which had finally hammered home the fact that, despite the similarity in physical appearance, T’Pol was not human.

It had been an eye-opening moment, one that continued to make him second guess everything about himself and where they were going as a couple (if that was actually the right way to describe them.)
From the moment he’d met her, Trip had been treating T’Pol like he would a human woman and it 
was long past the moment when he started respecting her own culture and traditions instead of trying 
to shove his own down her throat. In retrospect, her clear hesitation to enter a relationship with him 
actually made perfect sense from a purely logical standpoint, especially since she had to know he 
was going to be devastated when the Pa’nar eventually killed her (and if there was any justice in the 
world, he’d get a chance to run into Tolaris and rip that sonuvabitch into pieces.)

So he’d put the ball firmly in her court, and told her point-blank that the decision about where they 
went from here was entirely up to her. He would support and respect her call, even if it wasn’t what 
he wanted. As his dad had always said, if you loved something, you had to let it go. Of course, he’d 
been talking about the snakes that Trip wanted to keep in the house so he could screw with Lisa and 
Lizzie, but the point remained the same.

Besides the one time he’d hinted at a desire to kiss T’Pol, she’d shot him down by calmly reciting 
just how unhygienic the human mouth was. Who knew that Porthos’ mouth had fewer bacteria than 
his?

“It looks like this place is gonna be lit up like a Christmas tree when night falls,” Trip mused. “But I 
still don’t see what the big deal is. We’ve snuck into more heavily guarded places than this.”

“Look more closely,” T’Pol suggested, her tone slipping into Taskmaster mode. Tucker blew out a 
slightly frustrated breath – honestly, did she ever just let it rest? – noting at once how she flinched 
almost imperceptibly at the same time. That was another thing he’d started to notice over the last 
couple of weeks: his mood directly affected hers. Whenever he was angry or just really, really 
annoyed, T’Pol acted as if she were experiencing mild pain. Even his more positive emotions – 
amusement or happiness, for example – seemed to make her uncomfortable. Trip wasn’t sure if it 
was because of the bond thing or the Pa’nar or just her, but he’d started making an effort to control 
himself more. Meditation actually did help, even if he hated every damned second of it, but as long 
as he remained centered, T’Pol wasn’t in discomfort.

And that was all that really mattered, right?

Blinking away the errant thoughts, he obeyed her politely worded instruction. At first, he didn’t see 
what it was she was trying to point out, but after a few seconds, he finally noticed how jumpy the 
local soldiers were. They were crisscrossing the square in front of the information repository, double-
checking everything and even stopping to polish the occasional metal statue – all of stinking bears, 
he realized darkly.

“A VIP is coming to town,” he guessed. “Very Important Person,” he clarified at her quick glance. 
Trip wasn’t sure if she knew the acronym or not, but figured it was better safe than sorry. He began 
searching the other rooftops for signs of snipers. “Should we pull back?” he asked.

“It is too late for that,” T’Pol replied, nodding in the direction of an approaching convoy of vehicles. 
Most were the usual sort – three-wheeled ATVs and troop transports, four-wheeled off-road vehicles 
– but the centermost vehicle was something they’d not seen before. Long and wide, it was pretty 
obviously the Ekosian equivalent of a limousine and Trip theorized the car had six or eight wheels. It 
slowed to a stop in front of the information repository and was promptly surrounded by heavily 
armed soldiers. The gullwing door opened and a familiar-looking Ekosian staff-adjutant crawled out.

A white-hot flash of hate and fury coursed through him, and Trip rocked back on his heels, 
momentarily stunned by their overwhelming intensity. It took him long seconds to realize that he’d 
just felt T’Pol’s emotions, not his own, and he quickly looked at her with concern. The muscles in 
her jaw quivered tightly but she did not turn her eyes away from the Ekosian who now stood on the 
steps of the fortified library, conversing with another uniformed man. T’Pol tilted her head.
“Can you hear them?” Trip asked softly.

“Yes,” she replied simply. She glanced quickly at Trip. “Do you trust me?” she inquired. Trip gave her an incredulous look. What kind of stupid question was that?

“With my life,” he replied automatically. T’Pol’s lips twitched upward.

“I wish to … try something,” she said, her eyes seeking his. Trip nodded his permission. To his surprise, T’Pol’s hand came up slowly and touched the side of his face.

For a moment, nothing happened, but then suddenly, the ambient noises around him seemed to spike in volume. A thousand sounds assailed him at once, merging together in an incomprehensible cacophony, but an invisible … force swooped in and cushioned him against the worst of it, channeling his attention in a specific direction. It reminded him of the one time he’d played around with one of his brother’s directional microphones.

“-did not come to witness an overthrow celebration, Field-Lancer,” an Ekosian voice was saying. Trip’s eyes widened as he stared down at where the two men were talking.

“No, of course you did not,” the other man replied. He looked and sounded nervous. “I simply thought that …”

“That I thought this place worthy of my time?” Ferran interrupted. “You overstep yourself.”

“Forgive me! I”

“I have need of this hovel until daybreak,” the staff-adjutant continued, gesturing toward his entire convoy. “You will see that my baggage is stored upon the southbound railcar before then,” he added. “I mean to depart with the sun.”

“South?” the field-lancer – what was that? Lieutenant? – glanced in the named direction and, even from this distance, Trip could tell he was confused. “The only thing south is…”

“Yes, field-lancer,” Ferran said in a mocking tone. “I mean to see the salt reaches and the facility there.” He took a step away before pausing and swing back to face the younger man. “And if they are told of my approach, I will be displeased.”

“Surprise inspection,” Trip mumbled. T’Pol nodded as she pulled her hand away, her eyes on the retreating staff-adjutant as he disappeared into the hall of justice. Trip wasn’t prepared for how abruptly the sounds changed back to normal and winced. “Is that how it is for you all the time?” he asked softly.

“One adapts,” T’Pol answered. “The salt flats,” she repeated slowly, one of her eyebrows climbing. “Ferran made mention of salt during my interrogation,” she revealed. “He said they threw the Orions down in the salt. At the time, I thought he was using a local idiom I was simply unfamiliar with, but perhaps…”

“Perhaps it actually was in the salt,” Trip finished. He frowned. “Getting on that train isn’t gonna be easy, T’Pol.”

“No,” she replied. “I suspect it will not be.” Her eyebrow went back up. “But together,” she said, “I am positive we can develop an effective plan of action.”

“As long as it doesn’t include getting shot,” Trip muttered. “Or captured.” Once again, T’Pol’s lips twitched.
“I believe,” she said smoothly, “that it is your turn to do both.” Trip scoffed.

“Did you forget the bear?” he asked flatly before pointing to where the scars were hidden underneath his clothes. “I think getting mauled trumps your itty bitty bullet wound.”

“No,” T’Pol said, her voice thick and very, very soft. When Trip looked up, she was watching him. “I could never forget the bear,” she added. Her eyes darted quickly away, but not before he saw open pain on her face. “We should get moving,” she said before scrambling toward the ladder they had used to reach the roof.

And without a word, he followed her.
359 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's April, 2153.

The damage was catastrophic.

Standing on the bridge of Enterprise, Soval stared at the jagged scar on Earth's surface currently displayed on the viewscreen with poorly concealed horror. He was no stranger to violence – in his youth, he had served with the Ministry of Intelligence and had witnessed firsthand how brutal war could truly be, especially with species like the Andorians – but this? This was monstrous. It was barbaric.

It was … illogical.

The space around Earth was dense with debris from shattered Starfleet vessels as well as the remains of the massive, spherical object that had appeared out of nowhere to unleash horrific carnage on humanity's homeworld. Very little of the weapon truly remained – the dying actions of a man Soval had once disparaged had seen to that – but what little could be salvaged was still being shipped back to Starfleet headquarters for analysis and study in the hopes they could uncover who was behind this act of unspeakable terror.

No one spoke as they stared at the destruction before them. Lieutenant Sato had already fled from the bridge in hysteric tears the moment the jagged scar that bisected both Japan and Korea before cutting through mainland China came into view, and no one, not even the captain, thought to call Mister Mayweather back to his post when the helmsman instinctively pursued Sato. Archer simply grimaced and sank down before the flight controls to assume control of Enterprise. Commander Hernandez had followed her captain's lead and taken over the communication board without comment, although Soval could see that she was near tears.

Only Lieutenant Commander Reed seemed visibly unaffected as he stood at his station, his face a mask of rigid control that even a kolinahr master would have approved of, although Soval suspected Reed was far from fine. According to the preliminary reports they had received during their return trip to the Sol System, Malaysia, where the armoury officer's family lived, had been devastated by tsunamis as a result of the weapon and the Reeds remained among the many still yet unaccounted for. Millions were already dead, three or four times that number missing and the whole quadrant seemed to be in shock. Not an hour had passed since the attack that they did not receive a casualty list update from Starfleet Command and each new name made a visible impact. And far too many of those names were familiar.


It had taken Enterprise thirty-four days at maximum warp to reach Sol, during which time the sheer scope of the attack slowly became known. The spherical weapon had mysteriously appeared just beyond the Terran moon's orbit, somehow evading the numerous detection systems in place for this very situation, blown through the perimeter defense ships, before opening fire on Earth. Had it not been for Captain Robinson's decision to ram the heavily damaged Columbia into the weapon array,
which then triggered a catastrophic explosion that ripped both vessels apart, there was little doubt that the rapidly increasing power of the energy beam would have ultimately destroyed the planet. Billions had been saved with that heroic action, and Soval swallowed the bitter taste of self-disgust. His had been one of the loudest voices decrying Robinson as unworthy of command.

"Incoming transmission from Admiral Forrest," Commander Hernandez announced abruptly from the communications panel. Archer nodded.

"Onscreen," he ordered, his voice dark.

Maxwell Forrest looked haggard, with dark circles under his eyes and two days worth of stubble on his chin. His uniform was rumpled, as if he had recently slept in his clothes, and for someone as conscious of appearances as the admiral, it was telling.

"Admiral," Archer said by way of greeting. Forrest nodded, his expression never once changing.

"Good to see you, Jonathan," he replied before glancing in Soval's direction. "Ambassador."

"It is agreeable to see you, Admiral," Soval said smoothly. "I grieve with thee." For a moment, Forrest's face crumpled at Soval's heartfelt words, revealing the admiral's inner turmoil and absolute anguish, but his mask of professionalism reappeared almost at once.

"As soon as you're docked," Forrest said, once more directing his full attention to Archer, "we need you at Command for a full debrief." His eyes cut toward Soval quickly. "Ambassador," he added, "I'd appreciate your presence as well."

"Give us thirty minutes, sir," Archer stated. The admiral nodded once and reached toward the screen. A moment later, the transmission ended. "Ensign Hutchison," the captain called out as he pushed back from the flight controls. The relief helmsman darted forward, ducking around Soval and sliding into the seat Archer vacated. "Erika," Archer said darkly, giving the image of Earth now on the viewscreen another dark look. "You have the bridge."

"Aye, sir." Hernandez gave Soval the briefest of glances before quickly looking away, her expression tightening.

Soval bit back a sigh.

Thus far, he had been utterly unable to issue her the apology she sorely deserved for his actions in decontamination a month earlier. He had been so far gone in the emerald haze of the artificial blood fever that, even if she had not consented to mating with him, Soval truly feared that he might have simply taken her on the spot. And even though she had consented, he continued to struggle with both embarrassment and guilt.

Knowing that Phlox had recovered from Soval's nerve pinch in the middle of their mating only served to make the situation even more uncomfortable.

"Shall we?" Archer asked as he strode by Soval, the words jerking the ambassador out of his momentary reverie. He followed the captain to the turbolift without a sound, pausing only briefly to glance once more at the scarred Earth still displayed upon the screen before stepping across the threshold. "What kind of monsters would do something like this?" Archer wondered aloud. Soval was unsure if it was intended to be a rhetorical question or an honest one, so he chose to presume that it was the latter.

"I can name any number of species that would be willing to make an attack like this, Captain," he said simply, "but capable of it?" Soval shook his head. "That is another matter entirely." Archer
frowned and began to respond when the lift door slid.

And revealed … chaos.

Where an empty corridor should have been, there was instead a kaleidoscope of color that stretched on into infinity. It seemed to have no form or substance, no beginning or end, no logical explanation for even existing. Images of other places, other times appeared at seemingly random and haphazard intervals with no apparent context or apparent order. Soval automatically took a step back from the unexpected view, but Archer harbored no such fears. Instead, the captain stormed forward, his face pinched with fury.

"Daniels!" he bellowed as he strode through the swirling multi-colored mists. The captain's hands were balled up in tight fists. "Show yourself, dammit!"

"Hello, Jonathan." Matthew Daniels – if that really was his true name – stepped into view, his form coalescing as if he had been transported, and Archer rounded on the man.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't punch you in the goddamned face," the captain snarled.

"Because I'm here to help," Daniels replied quickly. He gestured toward one of the larger images where the last moments of Columbia were being replayed. "This wasn't supposed to happen," the erstwhile crewman declared. "History records that you and I have a conversation about the Xindi on this day and I warn you about their weapon … but they weren't supposed to attack!" The image abruptly shifted to what was clearly a construction facility, with a distinctive-looking spherical device taking shape.

"They're building another one?" Archer asked with horror. Daniels shook his head.

"No," he said flatly. "This is happening right now," he continued grimly, "but the weapon they're building is the same one that attacked Earth."

"I don't …" Archer began before frowning. "Someone moved it out of the timeline," he guessed. "The Suliban's benefactor?"

"Yes," Daniels said.

"Then we can still stop this thing," the captain said with growing enthusiasm. "There's a chance we can undo all those deaths!" He immediately began peppering Daniels with questions and demands about these Xindi and where they could be found.

Cautiously inching forward out of the lift, Soval fought the urge to dismiss these wild claims as nothing more than fantasy or utter fabrication. Once, long ago, he would have pointed out the scientific impossibility of time travel, but that was before T'Pol sent her private reports concerning the nature of this Crewman Daniels and his alleged temporal cold war. She had tried to remain skeptical, but in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, she had been forced to reluctantly concede that she simply did not have adequate data to formulate a purely scientific rebuttal to what she had witnessed firsthand. As her skills in that area far exceeded his own, Soval had silently deferred to her judgment, even as he continued to spout the dogma demanded of him by the High Command.

With his attention only partially upon Archer and Daniels, Soval let his eyes wander over the various images flashing into existence around them. None of them really made sense and he was about to put them out of his mind entirely when his attention was drawn to a specific block of images, all centered on members of his species.

There was a dark-skinned Vulcan male whose features indicated a rare deep-desert genotype
wearing an uniform of gold and black; a Vulcan female sleeping in the arms of a blonde Human male; a composed-looking Vulcan male in a blue shirt with the Starfleet seal upon his chest; a Vulcan who could only be Surak interacting with the blue-shirted Vulcan and another Human male, this one wearing gold; a Vulcan male kneeling before a Human woman, their fingers touching as a priest droned on; another Vulcan female wearing medical smocks and assisting an operation alongside a red-haired Human woman; another male…

Wait. Soval paused and searched back through his memory to focus on one specific image. Could it be…

His breath caught. It was.

Subcommander T'Pol and Commander Tucker.

They were thinner than he recalled, and dirtier, but otherwise appeared to be in good health. A light blanket covered their bodies, making it impossible to tell if they wearing clothes or not; Tucker at least was shirtless and Soval could not decide if it was a good thing or not that he was unable to determine whether his adopted brother's daughter was nude or not. T'Pol's long hair seemed strange to behold – no more stranger than the shoulder-length hair or light beard Tucker possessed, the ambassador finally decided – but it was most assuredly her. From the possessive hold Tucker had on her and comfort she appeared to be deriving from the engineer's presence, only one explanation came to mind. Soval raised both eyebrows a full millimeter in surprise.

T'Les was not going to approve.

The sensation of being watched caused Soval to glance away from the images of other Vulcans continuing to appear at haphazard intervals, and he found Daniels studying him with the calculated dispassion of an experienced operative. Archer seemed unaware of the moment and, when Daniels returned his attention to the captain, the temporal agent abruptly underwent a phase-shift in attitude, once more appearing to be a harried, barely competent man one would barely trust to carry discarded animal waste to the nearest receptacle bin.

"I've already told you everything I can," Daniels said quickly, interrupting Archer's latest demand for vital intelligence. The captain's face tightened.

"Then send us back," he ordered softly. It had a far more menacing sound than Archer's usual boisterous anger, and when the temporal agent visibly hesitated, the captain leaned forward. "I said," he began angrily.

But he vanished in mid-sentence.

"State your case," Soval instructed the moment Daniels turned toward him. The temporal agent once again seemed to shift in personality, this time so abruptly emulating a Vulcan that it was quite startling.

"It is essential that Captain Archer returns from the Expanse," Daniels said simply.

"And you believe I can ensure this outcome," Soval said dryly. If he had a sense of humor, he would have found the notion positively hysterical.

"Yes." The simple statement hung heavy in the air. "He will require your assistance to deal with the Xindi threat."

"You presume much, Mister Daniels," Soval declared. "It is not likely that the High Command will agree to assist in an endeavor such as this."
"Which is why you'll need to act appropriately, Ambassador," Daniels replied. "The fate of Vulcan is more closely tied to that of Earth than most comprehend. What affects one will affect the other." Soval raised an eyebrow – he recognized the words just spoken as something he himself had composed and shared with like-minded diplomats some months before Enterprise launched the first time. "And she is alive," Daniels added suddenly. "You will see her again." Soval's lips tightened.

"And Commander Tucker?" he asked calmly. Daniels' mask of composure slipped as he smirked.

"Him too," the temporal agent said. "Where one goes, the other will follow. Think of them as a more intimate example of how Earth and Vulcan are … bonded together." Soval's nostrils flared as he struggled for control. No, T'Les was not going to approve in the slightest.

"I see," he said, wondering at his own thoughts on the matter. It would require meditation and deeper contemplation.


"That name is not familiar to me," he lied.

"Would you prefer I called them Rihannsu?" the temporal agent demanded. "A war is coming," he said grimly, "and your distant cousins are coming home." He gestured.

And Soval found himself once more in the turbolift.

"Send us back!" Archer's words came as a surprise and nearly caused the ambassador to jump before he realized that the captain was finishing his earlier order. "I hate it when he does that," Archer muttered a moment later. He slammed his hand down on the emergency stop button. "I'm going to need your help, Soval," he said through clenched teeth. "If Daniels was right, we have a chance to actually stop this weapon from being launched."

"You are presuming that his information is completely accurate," Soval pointed out. "The Vulcan Science Directorate has determined that time travel is impossible," he added. Archer hissed out a frustrated sigh.

"Yeah," he snapped back, "but they also said my father's engine would never work and that Emory Erickson was crazy." Soval could not help but to nod slightly.

"Conceded," he admitted calmly, deriving more satisfaction from the dumbfounded expression on Archer's face that was entirely appropriate. "You realize," he said after a moment, "that without actual evidence, the chances of convincing Starfleet Command to mount an expedition into the Delphic Expanse is miniscule at best."

"I know," Archer said softly. "But I plan to do whatever is necessary to stop this threat."

"You have a plan," Soval theorized. The captain nodded. For a moment, Soval remained silent, unsure about his course of action. He briefly considered informing Archer about T'Pol and Tucker, but just as quickly discarded the notion; the captain needed to focus on the immediate mission rather than contemplating mistakes of the past. And Vulcan's fate, however much the High Command wished it otherwise, was intrinsically connected to humanity. "I will assist however I can," Soval declared simply. The captain nodded his appreciation.

And then, he began to talk.
Jon: Going Rogue

Chapter Notes

360 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's April, 2153.

He was furious.

His face bleak, Jon marched through the corridor leading to his newly assigned private quarters here at Starfleet Command, not particularly caring at how unprofessional his behavior was. Right now, the only thing that mattered to him was holding onto his temper and not giving into the urge to strangle every single member of Starfleet Command with his bare hands. Even Admiral Forrest was being particularly obtuse, and Archer had spent the last two days arguing himself hoarse with his old mentor.

But no one seemed interested in what he said or thought.

Instead, the whole of Starfleet had inexplicably begun listening to hypocrites like Ambassador Tos, who preached pacifism and non-action in the wake of a massive attack while he made backroom deals between politicians with an eye toward potentially drawing Earth into a shooting war with the Andorians down the road. Logic and facts no longer seemed to matter to the admirals or the politicians they answered to. It didn't seem relevant to them that this Xindi weapon had blown through the best defenses Earth had without much difficulty, or that they hadn't even detected the damned thing before it was almost too late. No, the politicians on Earth wanted Enterprise in orbit over humanity's homeworld for the foreseeable future and the Admiralty was inclined to obey them.

Which meant one thing to Jon: time was up.

A uniformed security crewman was several steps behind him and had been his shadow for most of the day, no matter that Archer knew this facility well enough that he could navigate it blind-folded and drunk – which he had once, on a dare from an equally intoxicated Trip Tucker, an eternity ago when their warp trials for Enterprise succeeded. When questioned about the necessity for an armed guard, Admiral Forrest had spun an elaborate fantasy about how they wanted to make sure nothing happened to him since Jon, as the captain with more deep-space experience than anyone else in the entire fleet, was one of their most valuable resources. The excuse hadn't passed the smell test but Archer swallowed his fury at the 'house arrest' and generally ignored his escort whenever possible.

"I'll be right here if you need me, sir," the crewman announced once they reached the door to Jon's assigned quarters. Archer gave him a dark look.

"I'm going to sleep, Crewman," he said flatly. "I don't think you need to stay here."

"Orders are orders, Captain," the young man muttered. "I don't think you need to stay here."

"Orders are orders, Captain," the young man muttered. He was unable to make eye contact with Jon, and Archer fought down another surge of anger. It wasn't this young man's fault that the Admiralty was afraid that Jon was going to do something stupid.

Especially since … well … he was.

He ducked through the door of his assigned cabin quickly, not bothering to turn on the lights until the
hatch was sealed behind him. As quarters went, the room wasn't much better than an average motel room, with a bed that could double as a torture device, a shower that had two settings – cold and slightly above freezing – and flatscreen wall monitor set in a location that made it impossible to watch without standing. There was even a faint, unidentifiable smell lingering in the air that made sane officers desperate to get out of this … cell and back to work, which often caused Jon to wonder if that was the entire point.

But it was the sight of Malcolm Reed sitting quietly in one of the uncomfortable-looking chairs near the far wall that made him jump.

The armory officer looked grimmer than usual, with his expression hovering somewhere between angry and furious, and an air of barely controlled violence surrounding him. Reed had been like this since they first learned about the Xindi attack, and not a day went by without Jon realizing just how necessary Trip had been for the welfare of the crew. Tucker would have been able to get through the bitter shell of seething rage that Malcolm had wrapped around himself. But Archer? He could barely get Reed to say good morning without an automatic 'sir' being attached to the greeting, and he had absolutely no idea how to express his condolences without them sounding trite or clichéd.

"You're early," Archer said as he gave the small apartment a quick once-over.

"We're running ahead of schedule, sir," Reed replied while quickly pushing himself to his feet. His expression barely changed. Jon gave him a glance.

"How ahead of schedule?" he asked. Archer's eyes widened when the lieutenant commander pulled a communicator from one of his many uniform pockets and offered it. "Already?" Jon wondered with a head shake. "You and Erika didn't waste any time."

"No time to waste, Captain," Reed retorted smoothly. "New ordnance is completely loaded, provisions stocked, and the crew is standing by for your order." He stared at Archer with unblinking eyes. Jon stared at the communicator for a long moment. This was it, he realized. He was on the verge of committing treason, all on the word of a time traveler that he didn't trust in the slightest, and all in the vague possibility that they might be able to undo something that already happened.

But it was still a possibility.

"Consider the word given," he said softly. "Operation: Memorial Service is a go."

Flashing a feral smile, Reed reached into another pocket and produced a second communicator. He flipped it open and manipulated the tiny device.

"Galahad to Camelot," the lieutenant commander said flatly. "Arthur has drawn Excalibur. I repeat, Arthur has drawn Excalibur."

"Acknowledged," a distorted voice replied. It was impossible to identify the speaker, which Jon supposed was entirely the point. "Stand by."

"I hate this part," Reed muttered, even as Archer glanced around his quarters once more.

"Where's Porthos?" he demanded. The armory officer gave him a wan smile.

"Already aboard Enterprise, sir," he said. At Jon's look, Reed shrugged. "Commander Hernandez stopped by and took him with her. We thought it would look less suspicious if she were seen walking around with him." Archer grunted and was about to comment about Erika's utter inability to handle dogs when he heard the distinctive sound of a transporter. He closed his eyes at the disturbing sensations that always accompanied this mode of travel. It was like diving into a pool of ice water
and Jon was convinced he could actually feel his molecules coming apart, one by one.

An eternity later, it was over, and Archer drew in a deep breath to remind himself that he was still alive. His hands automatically went to his chest, his stomach, his face, but realizing how unprofessional it had to look, he lowered his arms and opened his eyes to find himself facing the rear of the transporter array. Frowning, he turned, freezing the moment he caught sight of the armed men standing around Rostov who was manning the controls. Their uniforms were as distinctive as the slung rifles over their shoulders or their unmistakably aggressive body language.

MACOs.

"Status report," Reed demanded sharply as he stepped down off the transport platform. The lead MACO nodded briefly to three men at his back, and they disappeared down the corridor.

"Enterprise is secured," the MACO major replied smoothly. "I have people stationed at every access point per instructions." He offered Reed a PADD, nodding briefly in Archer's direction. "Captain," he said by way of greeting before returning his attention to the armoury officer. "No one is aboard who shouldn't be here," he added.

"Good," Lieutenant Commander Reed said. "Captain Archer," he stated, nodding toward the MACO, "Major Joss Hayes. We've worked together in the past and I thought we could use the added firepower."

"My people are the best, Captain," Hayes said as he offered a crisp salute. "We're with you until the end."

"Good to have you aboard, Major," Jon said with a quick, sidelong glance at Reed, wondering exactly when the armoury officer had worked with Hayes. There wasn't anything in Malcolm's file about having participated in joint Starfleet/MACO operations.

"Commander Hernandez is already on the bridge, sir," Hayes added before backing away and heading in the same direction his men had gone.

"MACOs, huh?" Archer asked once he and Reed were alone in the turbolift. The armoury officer tensed abruptly.

"We're going into hostile territory, sir," he said flatly. "Hayes' people will free up my personnel to focus on shipboard operations." Reed's bleak expression didn't shift in the slightest. "I apologize if I overstepped my boundaries," he began, but Jon waved it off.

"No," the captain said quickly. "It was good thinking." He paused. "They are aware that this isn't exactly a legal operation, right?" Malcolm smiled darkly.

"That was the final selling point, I think," he replied. At Jon's look, he shrugged. "Joss has always had … issues with the reactive stance of EarthGov's foreign policy." Reed's body language discouraged further discussion about the MACO major, and Archer made a mental note to quiz his armoury officer later. For now, though, he simply nodded and remained silent for the rest of the trip.

"Captain on the bridge," Erika announced loudly as Jon stepped out of the turbolift. The entire alpha shift was on duty and Archer immediately looked to where Hoshi sat before her console. She met his eyes before quickly glancing down, and Jon once more felt his heart go out to her. Just like Malcolm, she had lost her entire family in one fell swoop, and just like the armoury officer, she refused to let it defeat her.

"As you were," Jon said automatically. He walked the short distance to the command chair Erika had
just vacated. "Status?" he asked more calmly than he felt.

"All departments report ready," Hernandez replied. "Petty Officer Baird is standing by for our signal." Jon flinched at that – their plan required someone be planetside to upload a virus into Starfleet's computer systems that would free *Enterprise* from the automated but otherwise unmanned spacedock, and Baird had volunteered to do so, even though it meant he would be stranded on Earth and would likely face the brunt of Starfleet Command's fury. The communications petty officer had been unconcerned about his probable fate and asked only that they bring a piece of the weapon home for him.

And Archer intended to do exactly that.

"Send the signal," Jon ordered before half turning in his seat to give Ambassador Soval a questioning glance. "I'm a little surprised to see you here," he said wryly. "Isn't helping us steal *Enterprise* a little illogical?" The Vulcan raised an eyebrow.

"There are rare instances," the ambassador replied, "when committing an act of defiance against legal authority is the logical course of action." Jon almost smiled, even as Soval continued. "Sixteen Vulcans also died, Captain. Humanity was not the only species attacked," he pointed out, as if that was an explanation that made some sort of sense. Archer nodded – he knew Vulcan circular logic when he heard it – before turning back to face the main viewscreen.

"Hoshi," Jon said softly, his voice drawing her immediate attention. "I'd like to address the crew." She nodded and depressed a button on her console.

"Intraship ready, sir," she stated. Archer inhaled deeply.

"This is the captain," he said. "We are minutes away from launching what Starfleet Command is calling a foolhardy waste of resources and time. I want to thank you, each and every one of you, for being here, ready and willing to put your lives on the line so that we might be able to stop this weapon from ever being deployed against Earth." Jon tightened his hand into a fist and nodded in Soval's direction. "As our resident ambassador just told me," he said, "there are instances when an act of defiance is the only course of action a person can take." Archer swallowed. "It has been my greatest honor to command you, the finest crew in Starfleet, and together, we will see this through to the end."

"So help us God," Malcolm muttered. It was clearly not intended to be overheard, but Jon nodded his agreement nonetheless.

"So help us God," he repeated. "Mister Kelby," Archer added a moment later, "stand by for maximum warp." He stared at the viewscreen a heartbeat longer. "That is all," he said before gesturing for Hoshi to end the transmission.

"Moorings released," Travis stated several seconds later. Jon inhaled.

"Here we go," Erika murmured from where she stood just behind Archer's left shoulder. He nodded and leaned forward in his seat.

"Take us out, Mister Mayweather," he ordered. "Full impulse." *Enterprise*'s engines growled, and the ship thundered forward, rapidly accelerating away from enclosing drydock hanging high above Earth.

The response was almost instantaneous.

Hoshi's board lit up with incoming transmissions as the starships patrolling the system suddenly
oriented toward the NX-01. Several chimes echoed from both the science board and the helm station as their respective sensors detected sudden contacts responding to their unexpected maneuvers. On the viewscreen, Jon could see a half dozen Iceland-classes angling toward them.

"Incoming transmission from Starfleet Command," Hoshi said. She glanced up. "It's Admiral Forrest."


"What the hell are you doing?" Forrest screamed the moment his image appeared. There were at least three other senior officers in the background, as well as Ambassador Tos and Minister Samuels, all of whom looked shell-shocked.

"Our jobs," Jon replied flatly. "If there's even the slightest chance in hell we can stop this thing," he continued, "then we're going to do everything in our power to do so."

"Turn that ship around, Jonathan," Forrest demanded. "That is a direct order."

"Article fourteen," Archer retorted, "section thirty-one of the Starfleet charter is clear, Admiral. In times of extraordinary threat, normal rules of conduct may be bent." Reed's head shot up from where it was bent over the tactical console and the look he gave Jon was one Archer couldn't begin to decipher. "This is just such a time."

"Don't you dare quote regulations to me," Forrest growled. "This is a court martial offense, Archer. For every single member of your crew."

"Course laid in, sir," Travis murmured softly. Jon nodded.

"We are aware of that, Admiral," he said before standing. "And every one of us will answer for our crimes when we stop this weapon from attacking Earth." He dropped a hand on Mayweather's shoulder. "Maximum warp, Lieutenant Mayweather."

"Jonathan!" Forrest looked apoplectic as Jon gave Hoshi a telling look. She terminated the transmission at the very instant Enterprise sprang away from Earth at superluminal speeds.

"Any chance the High Command will send any ships after us?" Archer asked of Soval. The ambassador gave him a bland look.

"Curiously," the Vulcan replied, "all vessels within intercept range have been directed to maintain communications silence for a period of no less than four weeks." Soval's eyebrow climbed. "I imagine that Administrator V'Las will be most displeased with Ambassador Tos since those orders were issued by the Earth consulate."

"Good to know," Jon remarked with a slight smile. Soval never ceased to amaze him. Archer gave his command staff—sans Kelby, who was in engineering—another look. "As Benjamin Franklin said," Jon added, "we must hang together, gentlemen ... else, we shall most assuredly hang separately."

"Bloody Colonials," Reed grumbled under his breath. Archer shot him a slight smile, but his good mood faded quickly as the scope of exactly what they had just done and what they were about to do began to settle in. He swallowed.

And silently began to pray.
Her body ached.

They had spent two days, nearly three, concealed in the undercarriage of a rail car. As hiding places went, it was one of the worst T'Pol had ever had the misfortune of knowing. There was barely enough room for one person, let alone two with a pair of lightly packed rucksacks between them, and their proximity to the central wheel assembly meant she and Trip had to maintain an almost constant balancing act atop a steel column. Since he required more space, Trip had the dubious honor of spending the entire trip on his back, his hands holding onto metal gaps as if they were handles. This meant that T'Pol was astride his body for the duration of their journey, her own hands and legs awkwardly braced against the internal superstructure of the rail car in a desperate attempt to maintain balance. Even at night, when the train slowed to a virtual crawl, they were forced to constantly be aware of the dangerous situation they were in. Sleep was possible, but only in shifts, and the one awake had to be even more alert.

Early in the trip, she had felt the evidence of Trip's arousal against her leg at their intimate position, and T'Pol was startled to realize that she could also taste it through their mysterious psychic connection. He had been embarrassed at his body's reaction at first, but that quickly faded once he felt her hesitant but honestly curious interest across their cerebral linkage. T'Pol knew that she should not encourage him, not with the lingering possibility that she had infected him with Pa'nar yet hanging between them, but she had never experienced sensations like those coursing off him and, like an addict, she drank them in. They were … intoxicating and, if their situation were not so dire, she suspected that she might very well do something they would both regret.

Or something they would both appreciate. She couldn't quite figure out which, and was silently grateful when his arousal gradually faded away in the wake of their precarious balancing trick.

Conversation, which would have made the difficult journey easier, was not an option, both with the constant noise of the train – T'Pol had not removed the specially formed earplugs taken from her almost depleted survival pack a single time since they fashioned this possibly ill-advised course of action – and the ever-present threat of detection, so they spent almost the entire fifty-three hours without speaking a single word. It was not altogether unlike how they often slept – T'Pol's head tucked underneath Trip's chin and the offensive beard he had been unable to completely rid himself of, and she could feel his warm breath upon her filthy hair – but neither of them was remotely well rested when the train finally came to a lumbering but complete stop.

Lifting her head from his chest, T'Pol met Trip's eyes and raised a questioning eyebrow. He nodded silently and slowly released his hold on the train, grimacing as he lowered his arms to her waist where he could anchor her against him. She flinched at the lances of phantom pain she knew to be his before following suit, hissing with displeasure as her own muscles protested the long abuse. With Trip's hands at her waist, she slowly reached up and pulled one of the earplugs free.

Sound struck her like a physical blow and T'Pol almost recoiled in shock and pain. Only Trip's hands...
one at her waist, one against her back – held her in place and she gave him a grateful look before shaking off the worried question in his eyes. She focused on deciphering order from the unrelenting cacophony and spent several long minutes isolating different noises. Even to someone with as acute hearing as hers it was difficult to discern the muffled orders and shouts of the soldiers from the loud groans and hisses of the train. Finally, she found what she was seeking – a masculine voice she recognized, demanding familiar concessions and identifying their location – and glanced up to give Trip another slow nod.

They had arrived at the Salt Flats.

Nearly an hour passed before they dared to begin easing from their place of concealment, and it took almost another sixty minutes for them to regain full mobility. Even before they crept out from underneath the train, the sun had vanished below the horizon and, with thick cloud cover overhead blotting out the moons, the entire complex was cast into darkness. There were a few lights here and there, but they seemed to be illicit flashes – matches used to ignite smoking materials, or lanterns to guide a patrolling soldier's path. Dark shapes loomed around them and, although T'Pol knew the shapes to be buildings, her utter inability to identify them sent a jolt of unexpected fear through her. Trip glanced quickly in her direction, apparently sensing her uncontrolled emotions, and she glanced down slightly in embarrassment.

That did not stop her from accepting the hand he offered a moment later.

Trip led them toward a dark blob that T'Pol suspected was a building, but she pulled back on his hand the moment she heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Together, they navigated around the numerous guards patrolling the complex – Trip's eyesight and her hearing were a more than effective combination – and finally located an ideal vantage point. Located near the outer perimeter of the complex, it was an apparently abandoned storage building that stank of animal feces and long decayed plant matter. An old ladder was propped against the side of the construction and, after leaning his rucksack against the building, Trip scrambled up the rungs with barely a sound before clearing his throat in a signal for her to join him. T'Pol followed more slowly, wincing at each creak or groan the wood made, but reached the top without incident.

Trip was already stretched out atop the roof, his binoculars pressed against his face as he swept across the complex, and T'Pol crept closer to him. She thought nothing of the casual physical contact with him that was necessary to get into position, and it was not until she was next to him, their shoulders and legs bumping into each other, that she even realized how often she touched him now. Was it because he was human? She had no recollection of her parents being particularly affectionate with one another. In fact, one of the many reasons she'd long dreaded her marriage to Koss was due to the distance and constant formality she'd witnessed between her mother and father. T'Pol had always longed for something else, something … deeper than traditional Vulcan relationships, something that was unmistakably more emotional. She gave Trip's shadowy form a sidelong glance and silently shook her head in wry amusement. Mission accomplished, she reflected with a slight smile that she did not bother to conceal.

A sudden spike of surprise from Trip shot through her mind and T'Pol froze in place. When Trip spoke, he did so in a hushed whisper.

"The ship," he said, shock and disbelief in his voice. "It's Vulcan." T'Pol turned to look at him and he pushed the binoculars into her hands. "One o'clock," Trip murmured. "About twenty meters." Even with the night vision setting activated, she had difficulty locating the building in question until Trip leaned closer to her and pointed it out. Her breath caught at the unmistakable lines of an old Vulcan starship. "That's the same kind of ship that made first contact with Cochrane," Trip said with surprise in his voice. "The one Solkar commanded."
"The T'Plana-Hath," T'Pol replied softly. "A type four deep-space exploratory vessel," she identified. From her vantage point, it was clear that the landing ramp was not deployed and the outer access hatch remained sealed. Carbon scoring marred the reddish-brown hull and T'Pol could see the distinctive marks atop the upper airlock she took to indicate a boarding party, which was likely how the Orions acquired this vessel. With a frown, she lowered the binoculars and handed them back to Trip before sliding her rucksack off her shoulders.

"T'Pol?" Trip's voice was confused as he watched her extract her still damaged scanner from the pack. Its energy cell was nearly expended, but she suspected there was still sufficient power for what she planned.

"How long would Enterprise remain functional if the crew simply abandoned it?" she asked.

"Depends on what systems were active at the time," Trip answered automatically. He frowned. "You think this thing is still running?"

"Vulcan starships are equipped with automated power-saving systems that activate when no life signs are aboard for extended periods of time," T'Pol said. "Theoretically," she continued, "a type four exploratory vessel is capable of remaining in such a stand-by mode for a century or more." Trip grunted. "I am detecting only faint power signature readings," she added as the results of her scan crawled across the tiny screen, "but they conform to a functional power plant in stand-by mode."

"You want to get closer," Trip said. It was not a question and T'Pol frowned at his sudden reticence. "T'Pol, there are at least twenty guards in there," he pointed out. "We have exactly one working phase pistol between us and you're as blind as a bat." Trip shook his head. "Charging up there just to see if it still has power is a very bad idea." He opened his mouth to continue elaborating his opposition to the plan, but T'Pol reached out with her hand and placed two fingers atop his lips in an attempt to silence him. Trip's emotions flared brightly – painfully, she had to admit – but when she held up her other hand and tilted her head, he recognized her warning.

Long heartbeats later, a pair of patrolling Ekosian soldiers walked into view, pausing for several seconds to angle the light of their foul-smelling oil lamp around the area. Both were men, a few years younger than Trip, but neither seemed particularly interested in finding any potential opposition and their search was haphazard at best. The shorter of the two yawned broadly as they continued their slow patrol around the perimeter.

"I am obligated," T'Pol whispered, inching slightly closer to Trip so he could better hear her words, "by my duties as an officer in the High Command to make every attempt to ensure that our technology is not abused by non-Vulcans."Trip frowned and, in doing so, abruptly reminded her that her fingers were still touching his lips. She yanked her hand away and looked down. A long moment passed in silence and, when she glanced up, T'Pol found Trip studying her, his face devoid of any actual emotion.

"We'll need clean uniforms," he finally remarked, "and a good reason to be near the hangar."

Without another word, he pushed the binoculars back into her hands and slid off the roof, dropping to the ground with barely a sound. T'Pol blinked in surprise – it was moments like this that made her wonder if she would ever understand him – before raising the binoculars to her eyes so she could track his movements. At no time did she even consider trying to join him; her night blindness would make her a liability to him and she was confident in his the skills he possessed to both defend himself and to accomplish his goal.

Exactly as she suspected, Trip crept toward the two patrolling guards, pouncing the moment he was within range. Now fully healed from the bear attack, he seemed almost exponentially faster than the
pair as he struck and both were sprawled out on the ground before they seemed entirely cognizant of
the fact that they were under attack. T'Pol bit her lower lip and pushed down a sudden surge of guilt.
She had done this to him, had turned an idealistic explorer into a living weapon. Even if this starship
turned out to be entirely functional and they were able to reach civilized space without incident,
could Trip ever return to the life he had before?

For that matter, could she? It was yet another question with no answer.

By the time she reached the edge of the roof where they'd climbed up, Trip had already dragged the
two unconscious Ekosians into the darkness behind the small building. T'Pol grimaced at her
fumbling attempts to locate the ladder and blew out a frustrated breath.

"Trip," she called out softly. A moment later, she felt his fingers touch her wrist.

"A little more to the left," he instructed, pushing her hand in that direction. "Wait," Trip added as her
fingers contacted the wooden ladder. A half second later, she heard a sharp crack and his hand fell
away from her wrist as he sprang back off the ladder. "Dammit," he growled under his breath. T'Pol
strained to make out his form as he did … something and she bit back a gasp at the sharp spike of
frustration course through their connection. "The damned ladder is broken," he revealed. "It's a
wonder this stupid thing held up under our weight in the first place." He shook the ladder, as if
testing its stability, before sighing. "This thing is comin' apart at the seams, darlin'," he muttered, and
T'Pol raised an eyebrow at both the sudden thickness of his accent and the unexpected term of
endearment.

"Then you will need to catch me," she declared after a second of consideration.

"You trust me?" Trip asked and T'Pol's lips twitched upward.

"With my life," she said, using his words from days earlier. Once again, another emotional surge
coursed through the bond and she could hear him inhale sharply.

"Hold on," he muttered before moving the ladder completely out of the way. "Okay," he said. "I'm
ready." Nodding at him, T'Pol swung her legs over the side of the roof before rolling onto her
stomach. She wiggled backwards, relaxing the instant she felt Trip's hands grab her legs. Her grip on
the ledge tightened as she continued to inch herself off the roof. "I've got you," Trip said as he
stepped forward, sliding his head between her legs so that she effectively sat on his shoulders. T'Pol
raised an eyebrow – that was not how she had expected him to assist her, although she had to admit
it was surprisingly effective. "You can let go now," he said and she obeyed, releasing her death grip
on the roof and quickly transferring her hold to his shoulders. A moment later, he knelt and she slid
to the ground.

"Thank you," she whispered, cocking her head and listening for any indications this minor
misadventure had been detected.

"You don't need to thank me, T'Pol," Trip replied as he led her to where the two unconscious
Ekosians were laid out. "We're in this together, remember?" He knelt and began stripping the clothes
off the taller of the two males. "Can you remotely access the landing ramp?" he asked. T'Pol pursed
her lips before crouching next to the other Ekosian. She had just enough ambient light to make out
the buttons on his jacket and began undoing them.

"I believe so," she replied to his question. "There is a master access code hardwired into all Vulcan
starships that only Ministry of Intelligence field personnel are aware of. It should function for this
ship as well." She frowned. "If it does not," she added, "Type Fours have a biometric identification
system that should recognize me as Vulcan. The security protocols should be programmed to
consider me part of a salvage party and grant access."

"I'm hearing a whole lot of 'shoulds' in that," Trip grumbled. He twisted his discarded shirt around and began using it as a rudimentary rope to bind the hands of the man in front of him. "Why would a modern security code be able to access a ship of a class decommissioned forty years ago anyway?" T'Pol raised an eyebrow. She should not have been surprised that he was aware of the specifics of Vulcan starships, not with his background in warp mechanics, but she was nonetheless.

"Thirty-eight," she corrected softly, wrinkling her nose in distaste at the smell of the Ekosian male's shirt she was now donning. Either this part of the planet had not discovered soap or this man was simply an extraordinarily unclean individual. "And this code has remained unchanged for almost one hundred and three human years."

"Well, that's not very logical," Trip said. "How close do you need to be before you can try your master code?" he asked.

"Three meters," she replied. "Perhaps less depending upon the strength of the signal I can generate with my scanner." Even in the dark, she could tell that he was frowning.

"Great," he muttered before standing. He picked up his rucksack and slid his arms through the straps before hefting one of the rifles taken from the two unconscious me. "Ready when you are," he said. T'Pol exhaled and stood as well.

"I am ready now," she said.

And together, they stepped out of the darkness.
An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 411 days (360 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's April, 2153.

The closer they got to the hangar, the harder Trip's heart pounded.

At his side, T'Pol concealed her use of the scanner behind the lantern taken from the two unconscious soldiers they left tied up in the dark. Her long hair was tucked into the back of her jacket or underneath the absurd-looking hat that the natives wore, but neither did anything to hide the fact that she was definitely not a man by any stretch of the imagination. If the ill-fitting uniform she wore was any tighter, it would have to be made of spandex.

Not that he would normally complain, of course.

Thanks to the darkness and the general lack of effective lighting, though, none of the Ekosian soldiers in the vicinity of the hangar seemed to notice. Most appeared more concerned with keeping their heads down or getting to where they were going than giving either of them a second look but Trip simply couldn't shake the feeling that they were walking into a trap. And, from the way T'Pol was tensing, he wasn't the only one, so it was hardly a surprise when they both jumped at the voice that accosted them.

"You there!" a familiar-sounding male called out. "Sentries!" Staff-Adjutant sut'Tanaros Mikal Ferran stalked forward out of the darkness, his swagger stick tucked under one arm and a fierce expression on his face. "What in the name of the stone do you think you are doing?" Trip automatically took a half step in front of T'Pol in an attempt to shield her from the Ekosian's sight and opened his mouth to reply, but Ferran continued speaking without even waiting to hear an excuse.

"Has this facility lapsed so completely in discipline that night sentries patrol with open lights?" he asked angrily. "Any of our foes could see it!"

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"Has this facility lapsed so completely in discipline that night sentries patrol with open lights?" he asked angrily. "Any of our foes could see it!"

And any one of them could hear you, Trip mused darkly. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed another pair of sentries exchange looks before quickly changing direction to avoid Ferran's ire.

"Where is your adjutant?" the Ekosian man demanded, and, on instinct, Trip nodded in the direction of the hangar. Ferran pivoted on his heel and marched away, pausing only long enough to give them a distinctive hand gesture indicating that they should follow. Trip looked at T'Pol and she nodded slightly while sliding the scanner into a pocket. Without a word, they fell into step behind Ferran. At least this would get them within striking distance of the ship.

Once inside the hangar, the staff-adjutant angled sharply in the direction of a small office currently manned by a single soldier who looked to still be in his teens, despite the pathetic-looking beard he was trying to cultivate. He sprang to his feet when Ferran stormed in and darted out from behind the desk he'd been sitting at.

"Where is your adjutant?" Ferran asked without waiting for the young boy to speak.

"It is after sundown, Master," the terrified soldier replied. "He is likely abed." The staff-adjutant's
"I want him here at once!" Ferran snarled. "This facility's utter lack of discipline must be corrected at once!" The Ekosian soldier began to back out of the small room. "And find my scout!" the staff-adjutant added abruptly as the boy disappeared through the door. "That Undil lout. I mean to have words with him."

Trip's breath caught, even as he felt a flash of quickly suppressed alarm through the weird bond thing he shared with T'Pol. If Pater Undil was here, then there was absolutely no way they'd be able to pull this off. Time had officially run out.

"Master," he began, his lip twisting at the ridiculous honorific, but Ferran was no longer looking at him. Instead, his eyes were locked on T'Pol who still had her head downcast in order to hide her features. Trip felt his stomach plunge.

"By the stone," the staff-adjutant remarked abruptly, his eyes narrowing, "you are no man." He stepped closer, frowning. "Lift your eyes, woman," he ordered darkly. Her nostrils flaring, T'Pol obeyed and Ferran recoiled in shock, recognition stamped on his face. He opened his mouth to cry out a warning.

But Trip was faster.

He lunged forward, his right fist connecting with Ferran's jaw even before the man realized he was under attack. As the staff-adjutant reeled back a step, Trip advanced, quickly wrapping his left arm around the Ekosian's throat and locking him in a tight sleeper hold. With his other hand, Tucker grabbed Ferran's wrist and twisted, jarring the swagger stick free so it couldn't be used as a weapon. They struggled for a long, extended heartbeat as the staff-adjutant tried to get free of Trip's hold to shout out a warning.

By then, T'Pol had reached them.

Almost casually, she reached forward and clamped her fingers down on Ferran's neck. He instantly went limp and Trip let him slide to the floor, not even bothering to stop the man from smacking his head against the nearby desk. Instead, he gave T'Pol a look.

"Undil," Trip began, but she turned away, fishing her scanner out of her pocket. It buzzed as she rapidly input commands.

"We will need to move quickly," she stated before frowning. "A distraction of some sort would be most helpful," she added wryly.

"Got just the thing," Trip replied. Reaching under his shirt, he extracted the functional phase pistol and popped it open, noting with some slight amusement how closely T'Pol watched what he was doing. He pulled the appropriate energy connector loose before inching toward the door. A moment later, he found his target – what appeared to be an acetylene tank for a nearby welding torch currently abandoned – and took aim. "Give me the word," he whispered. To his slight surprise, T'Pol placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Now," she ordered. Trip squeezed the trigger.

And a heartbeat later, the tank exploded.

The reaction of the Ekosians was exactly as he'd hoped – to a man, they darted away from their posts and toward fire-fighting equipment so they could combat the flames threatening to envelop other tanks. None of them seemed remotely aware of Trip and T'Pol's flight to the primary access hatch of
the Vulcan starship, nor did they notice the vessel's landing ramp silently extending in compliance with the code T'Pol had sent. Trip let her take the lead into the starship and backed through the darkened hatch, the phase pistol held at the ready in case they were detected. The moment he crossed the threshold, T'Pol pressed a button on a nearby wall panel and the hatch sealed as quietly as it had opened. Even the retraction of the ramp was noiseless.

In slow, incremental steps, the internal lighting within the starship began to activate, gradually increasing in brightness over a period of long seconds until it actually began to hurt Trip's eyes. T'Pol, he observed, barely seemed aware of just how intense the lights were until he brought his hand up to shield his eyes. A sheepish expression flickered across her face for the briefest of seconds.

"Illumination," she said sharply in her native tongue, "half intensity."

"Thanks," Trip muttered as the lights faded to something far more reasonable. He glanced around, blinking the spots away.

Despite its size, the Vulcan ship had a single actual deck, which was oriented around the reactor in the very center of the ship. A central corridor wrapped around engineering and, from what Trip recalled about this class of vessel, there were five other compartments on this deck – the living quarters, with fold-down beds and toilet facilities; the science lab; the combined kitchen/medical station; a storage compartment for supplies and spare parts; and a miniature gymnasium that doubled as a meditation chamber. The ship itself was flown from a small 'mini-deck' at the top of the ship, which had only two stations – the pilot/commander and the communications/sensors.

The first thing Trip really noticed was how clean the inside of the ship appeared. Based on what T'Pol had told him of the Orions and their general disposition, he'd envisioned them as green-skinned Blackbeards, with metal peg-legs and maybe even robotic parrots, an image even he admitted to himself was pretty silly, but the complete lack of clutter or detritus inside this vessel seemed entirely at odds with her description of the pirates as barbarians of the worst order. If he hadn't known better, he'd have assumed that this ship was still being operated by Vulcans. Even the floor appeared clean of dust, which after he thought about it, wasn't that big of a surprise if the life support systems continued to function. Recycled oxygen would keep any dust particulate from accumulating … although he honestly didn't know if Vulcans constantly actually lost skin cells like humans did.

"The T'Muna-Doth," T'Pol said suddenly, her words jerking him out of his reverie. He looked in her direction and found her standing before an ornate-looking Vulcan glyph on the bulkhead that he guessed was the equivalent of the dedication plaque. "This vessel was lost sixty-one years ago," she continued. Despite his better instincts, Trip grinned.

"And how old were you then?" he wondered. She gave him an unamused look.

"Four," she answered calmly. Ignoring his surprised expression, she pointed to a ladder. "I will be on the command deck," she said.

"I'll see what I can do about the reactor," Trip replied, pushing down his shock at how casually she mentioned her age. An eternity ago, she had told him that Vulcans considered some information intimate, and he felt both humbled and intimidated by the fact she seemed to think nothing of revealing something like this to him.

And it didn't escape his notice that neither of them mentioned what their next course of action would be if this ship, this … T'Muna-Doth wasn't capable of flight.

He spent several minutes just trying to keep from losing his temper at the general state of disrepair of the warp core that he saw. Oh, it wasn't anything that a non-engineer would notice, but Trip fumed at
just how poorly the ship had been maintained long before it ever landed. Just glancing over the preliminary status readouts, he found at least half a dozen lazy mistakes that should have grounded this vessel long before the pirates seized it. None of the injectors seemed aligned properly, the intermix ratio was just flat out wrong, and he doubted the warp coils themselves had even been touched since this pretty lady was originally launched. It was positively criminal to abuse a starship like this.

"It's all right, girl," Trip muttered as he patted the bulkhead. "I'll take care of you."

Several more minutes passed before he finally finished examining the automated system log. According to what he read, the reactor was barely drawing a tenth of a single percent of the power it could normally generate, but automatically cycled up to twenty percent capacity every twelve hundred hours. As a result, the deuterium tanks were still half full, although he wouldn't know if the fuel had remained uncontaminated until he got his hands dirty. The impulse manifold seemed entirely functional and ready to go, but some of the structural damage to one of the three nacelle pods worried him. They could fly, he realized, but not well and probably not far. He reached for the intraship comm. panel.

"Tucker to T'Pol," he said, automatically lapsing into old habits. When she responded, he could swear that he heard actual amusement in T'Pol's voice.

"T'Pol here, Commander," she said, emphasizing his Starfleet rank in such a way that it made him smile.

"I'm gonna bring the reactor up to twenty percent," he said. "Let's stay in the atmosphere until we've done a full diagnostic."

"Agreed." She was silent for a moment. "Do we have weapons?" she asked. Trip blinked.

"Didn't check," he admitted. "Why?"

"The Ekosians appear to have discovered we are aboard and are most displeased." Tucker frowned and gave the readouts another glance.

"I'm coming up," he said.

The command deck was smaller than he expected it to be, with a viewscreen that seemed to encompass the whole curving wall. T'Pol was seated in the commander's station, cycling through the various systems now coming online, but Trip's attention was immediately drawn to the sheer number of Ekosian soldiers arrayed around the starship. Ferran was there, he noted, as was a sour-looking Undil and several other vaguely familiar soldiers. The staff-adjutant was using a bullhorn, but there was no sound apart from the muted rumbling of the reactor as it began building.

"Four minutes to optimum power levels for lift-off," T'Pol announced as Trip slid into the other chair. He tapped a few buttons and the image on the viewscreen shifted to one of the roof above them. Another button brought up a shipboard damage report.

"Looks like only one of the particle cannons is functional," he said with a frown. "And even that one is only capable of putting about ten or eleven percent power."

"Against the hangar roof," T'Pol remarked wryly, "I suspect ten or eleven percent will be more than sufficient." She returned the image on the viewscreen to Ferran, only this time, there was sound.

"-exit the vessel at once!" the staff-adjutant was saying.
"Or what?" Trip wondered. "He'll shout us to death?" A frisson of amusement through the magical bond caused him to glance in T'Pol's direction, but her placid expression was unchanged. She did, however, push a series of buttons that caused several Vulcan characters to crawl down the screen. Trip's eyes widened as he mentally translated them: *external speaker activated.*

"I regret that I am unable to comply," she said flatly in the local dialect and the effects of her booming voice echoing through the hangar were comical. The Ekosians visibly reacted, some backpedaling rapidly while others sought cover. Ferran recoiled as if he had been slapped and Undil's eyes widened. T'Pol's eyes narrowed suddenly and Trip winced at the bright flare of fury he felt from her. "We shall be departing now," she said through clenched teeth, "but before we go, please express my most sincere apologies to Pater Undil for being unable to fulfill my part of our agreement." All eyes – including Trip's – turned to the former farmer turned scout as the blood drained from his face. "He was most helpful in assisting us to locate this vessel," T'Pol continued grimly, "but I fear that we will not be able to support his lowborn coup as promised." She deactivated the external speakers with a flip of her hand.

"That wasn't very logical," Trip remarked with a slight smile and more than a little approval. On the screen, he could see Undil desperately shaking his head and pleading with a furious Ferran even as several of the soldiers advanced on the former farmer.

"No," T'Pol replied, "it was not." She glanced in his direction. "It is your fault, of course. You are a very bad influence on me, Trip." He grinned broadly and her young-old eyes returned to the viewscreen. "Perhaps a measure of justice will be enacted for the beings that man murdered," she mused before glancing at her control board. "One minute," she said.

"Powering up the particle cannon," Trip announced as he tapped a couple of commands into his board. "Firing … now."

Emerald fire exploded from the concealed weapon and lanced out to smash into the thin aluminum roof, ripping great chunks of it apart. Trip fired a second time, shifting his aim slightly this time, and the effect was identical. Metal debris rained down around the ship, and the Ekosian soldiers either scrambled for cover or began shooting with their primitive rifles, none of which could even do the slightest bit of damage to the hull of the vessel.

"Engaging impulse drive now," T'Pol said. With a soft whine, the *T'Muna-Doth* slowly lifted off the ground and climbed into the sky, rapidly accelerating to speeds the natives could not begin to emulate with their primitive propeller-driven aircraft. The landing struts at the base of the starship immediately rotated into flight position and retracted under the nacelle array, and the last image Trip had of Mikal Ferran before the viewscreen automatically shifted to a forward-facing view was of the staff-adjutant staring at the departing Vulcan starship with horror in his eyes.

Trip decided that it was a good look for the man.

"Curious," T'Pol murmured as she began leveling the *T'Muna-Doth* off. "I am detecting faint Starfleet transmissions above this continent." Trip gave his own panel a quick glance.

"Observation satellite," he guessed. He tried to open a hailing frequency with the spy-sat, but an error message crawled down his screen. "We've got no communications," he said sourly. "The Orions must have intentionally targeted the comm.-array when they attacked."

"That is a logical assumption," T'Pol said. She adjusted their course slightly and Trip watched as their field of view indicated a slight turn. Clearly, T'Pol had a destination in mind.

"Where are we going?" he asked.
"South," came the instant reply. T'Pol half turned in her seat and gave him that not-quite-there smile of hers. "I have tired of being cold," she admitted, "and thought an isolated island would be an ideal location to land while we conduct repairs." Trip smiled.

"A tropical island," he said brightly. "A beautiful woman." To Trip's delight, T'Pol blushed slightly and quickly looked away. "And a pretty starship who needs some TLC," he finished. "Best vacation ever," he finally pronounced before pushing to his feet. "I'm gonna go check out the reactor and make sure I didn't miss anything." On impulse, he leaned forward and kissed T'Pol lightly on the cheek. "Let me know if you need anything, darlin'," he said before heading for the ladder leading to the alpha deck. As he climbed down, he saw her reach up and touch the spot where he'd just kissed her, her eyes wide with what he could only call wonder.

Trip was still smiling when they touched down.
360 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's April, 2153.

Also? A reminder is in order. This incarnation of MAJ Hayes' MACO team is vastly different than the canon version (they're actually competent for starters.) Think of them as Navy SEALs-slash-CIA wetworks agents. Keep that in mind.

He was fine.

Rage thundered through his veins as Malcolm pushed himself as hard as he could. Unable to sleep where he would have to deal with the blood-soaked dreams that were so often waiting for him when he closed his eyes, he'd decided to visit the gym and, for once, had found it completely empty. The treadmill had beckoned and he found one of T'Pol's higher settings still available for use. It was exhausting beyond belief – never before had he realized just how hard the Vulcan subcommander had pushed herself – but he kept at it, legs churning, arms pumping, lungs burning. Anything that would keep his mind off the crimson fury that threatened to blot out his vision and strip away his sense of control.

So he kept running.

No matter how he looked at it, today had been an unmitigated disaster. In between ducking Phlox's mandatory grief counseling sessions – why bother? He wasn't keen on sitting in a circle and sharing his bloody feelings with a bunch of crewmen he might have to send to their deaths in a few weeks – and getting up to speed with the new photonic torpedoes that had been loaded aboard Enterprise – Malcolm couldn't wait to blow apart a Xindi ship with them – he'd been forced to defuse a situation between Hayes and Commander Hernandez. As career military, Joss saw diplomats as (in his words) about as useful as 'tits on a bull.' Diplomats, the major insisted, never ceased to make a situation worse for the troopers in the mud, and amateur diplomats? They were twenty times worse.

After somehow settling the situation between the first officer and the MACO major, Reed had then been forced to endure one of the captain's strategy briefings with the entire command crew. Over the course of three miserable hours, Archer and Soval had discussed tactics about how best to proceed in order to resolve this mess peacefully. For some ridiculous reason, both of them seemed convinced that they could undo what had already happened and somehow save millions of lives already lost.

Reed, however, was a realist. Those people were dead and gone. No amount of wishing could bring them back. Just like Trip and T'Pol of the lovely bum and Liz Cutler whom everyone aboard liked, they weren't coming back. Hoping for miracles was an utter waste of time and all they had now was vengeance. Blood-soaked retribution of the sort one read about in the Old Testament.

And that was the only thing keeping Malcolm going right now.

The treadmill beeped, informing him that he had reached the end of this particular program, so Reed slowed his pace. His leg muscles felt like rubber but his mind was still buzzing, still turning over the names and faces of the people he'd lost, and Malcolm exhaled bitterly. What he needed right now was sleep but there wasn't a chance in hell he was going to go see Phlox, not with the Denobulan
constantly wanting to talk about his feelings or his support structure or how he was dealing with his grief. None of them seemed to understand – he wasn't grieving, he was enraged. All he needed were some Xindi to kill. Preferably with a dull spork so it would last for a while.

"Damn, sir," a feminine voice said, catching him off guard and causing him to whip around to face the intruder. "That's a helluva workout," the MACO declared with approval. She was only a little shorter than he was, but solidly built with a frame that hinted at sensual deadliness. It took him a long moment to finally place her name – another symptom of his lack of sleep he suspected.

"Corporal Cole," he said by way of greeting before glancing around the otherwise empty gym. His eyes locked onto the heavy bag in the corner and he started to walk in that direction.

"Commander?" Cole called out and Malcolm paused, drawing in a deep breath. He swore, if she was going to offer her condolences on his loss like nearly every other person on this ship, he couldn't be held accountable for his actions. "Could you spot me, sir?" she asked while gesturing toward the free weights bench that the MACOs had brought with them. It was a simple enough request, one that made perfect sense, but Reed couldn't help but wonder if Joss was behind this, especially when the corporal began stretching. Better than most, Hayes would know that Malcolm didn't want to talk about Malaysia, or Maddie, or his parents, and it wouldn't surprise Reed in the slightest if this was one of the major's overly complicated plans.

Still, Cole did have an exceptional bum.

"I suppose I can," he said carefully.

They worked out in silence and Cole impressed him with both her stamina and general strength. He automatically began comparing her to his own abilities and ended up deciding that he had the edge in raw might, but her staying power was superior to his. The corporal also knew what she was doing when it came to seduction – when she needed help with the bench press, the bar was invariably quite close to her breasts and she made a point of brushing past his groin with her hand or her glorious bum at every opportunity. It was an interesting game, with the seducer and the target both aware of the objective but still going through the motions.

And Malcolm was very tempted. She was young, attractive, eager, and very probably exceptionally skilled in bed. A shadow team like Hayes commanded were expected to be both spies and commandos, capable of seducing their targets or sniping them from two kilometers away, and the fact that Joss cared enough to send one of his black widows on a mercy mission … well, that said it all, didn't it? Meaningless sex had always helped before, but back then, he always had the ability to sever ties with the woman in question and never again see her. That certainly wasn't possible here aboard Enterprise, not with how cramped the quarters already were thanks to the sudden addition of another thirty-five bodies. And he'd never been any good with women he had to work with. Look at how badly he'd botched up his friendship with Hoshi when she was just trying to find out his favorite food. Reed grimaced.

"Sir?" Cole asked and Malcolm knew that his expression had given away his thoughts. He sighed.

"I'm flattered, Corporal," he began, but Cole placed her fingers on his mouth.

"My name is Amanda," she said simply, "and before you ask, the major did not send me." Malcolm blinked.

"Really." He knew that he sounded disbelieving but honestly didn't care. Did she think he was a complete idiot? Hayes owed him his life three times over and if there was one thing Joss never forgot, it was a debt of honor.
"Really," she repeated. "I volunteered," she added with a warm smile. "He told me I was wasting my time, that Galahad was made of iron and too good for us common MACOs, but I figured I'd at least make the offer." Malcolm winced at the codename – what the bloody hell had he been thinking when he used it again to extract the captain? He'd walked away from that life, had walked away from Harris' machinations and being 'Galahad' for good years ago. Cole stepped closer, her hand dropping to his chest. "I know you're hurting, sir," she said softly. "And I'm not asking for anything in return." Malcolm swallowed … and silently amended his earlier thoughts: she wasn't just *good* at seduction, she was exceptional. "I just want to help however I can."

"I'll consider it," Malcolm rasped. He backed away from her, noting how easily Cole – Amanda, he corrected himself – slid back into a purely professional mode. A part of him wondered how many of his Starfleet crewmates would look at her with disdain for using her body in such a way, even as he realized that he was truly no different. He'd used women to get what he wanted in the past and had even once utilized what the MACOs called recreational therapy to recover from particularly traumatic missions, including the one that had caused him to walk away.

"See you around … Malcolm," the corporal said as she headed for the door, her hips swaying in such a way that it was impossible for him to look away. He sighed again before grabbing his towel and following her out. Cole was already out of sight when he exited the gym, and Reed decided that was probably for the best.

The mess hall wasn't as empty as Malcolm expected it to be, and he winced at the sight of Hoshi and Travis sitting together near one of the far windows. He was honestly glad that Sato had someone like the Boomer there to talk to, but the sharp stab of envy still coursed through him. The only person Malcolm *truly* thought of as a friend was long dead, killed on a stupid landing mission for no reason, and now, his entire family was gone too. He was utterly and completely alone because aliens who nobody had even heard of decided it had been a good idea to attack Earth.

Rage once more bubbled within his stomach, and Malcolm stormed toward the beverage dispenser for the largest container of water he could get. It was already half empty by the time he reached the door where he found Travis waiting.

"Lieutenant," he greeted. The helmsman frowned.

"You okay, sir?" he asked. "Because you look like crap."

"How's Hoshi?" Malcolm asked without bothering to answer the question. Travis' features reflected his growing despair and he glanced immediately in the direction of where the communications officer was sitting. She was staring at the glittering starfield with a distant expression.

"About as well as you'd expect," Mayweather replied. "I'm trying …" He trailed off and glanced down.

"You're doing fine, Travis," Reed said. "She's lucky to have you." At any other time, Malcolm might have even teased the helmsman for the obvious crush he had on Sato, but right now, he was too bloody tired to even care.

On his way back to his cabin, Malcolm narrowly avoided Phlox, knowing that if the doctor *did* corner him, he'd have to suffer through another lecture about the natural process of grief. Dodging the Denobulan required him to take an alternate route to his quarters, and it was a little after two shipboard-time when he reached his door. His shoulders slumped at the thought of yet another night of tossing and turning, but he input his code anyway, resigning himself to more nightmares. Even the steaming shower he took did little to ease the tension in his shoulders. The rage and … yes, the grief twisted his stomach in knots so badly that he wanted to scream.
So when his door chirped, announcing someone wanting to enter, he didn't even hesitate. And when it slid open and he saw Amanda Cole standing there, a question in her eyes, Malcolm did the only thing he could do.

He stepped aside and let her enter.
An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 415 days (363 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's April, 2153.

Her task was finally complete.

Leaning back in the pilot's chair, T'Pol placed her handheld computer on top of the command console and pursed her lips. She had spent the four days they had been on this island conducting a thorough examination of the supplies available aboard the *T'Muna-Doth*, as well as carefully studying the automated ship-log for some clue as to the fate of the crew. Based on those recordings, as well as the previous commander's final entry, the *T'Muna-Doth* had not been in the possession of the Orion pirates for longer than a few hours after the ship's capture, which no doubt explained the mostly pristine state that the vessel remained in. T'Pol suspected that Ekos had been the nearest inhabitable planet that the Orions could set down upon to conduct repairs, but they were killed by the natives during a raid likely intended to obtain supplies or even new slaves. She shook her head in mild disgust; the humans had a saying that fit this situation quite well: those who lived by the sword, died by the sword.

The damage to the *T'Muna-Doth* was extensive, but not especially significant, which was eminently logical. A starship too badly damaged to be useful was far less valuable than one that was functional. As far as she could tell from the shipboard damage assessment, the only component completely destroyed was the communications array, which had likely been targeted intentionally to prevent the Vulcan crew under Commander T'Mom (a name that caused Trip to chuckle every time he heard it) call for reinforcements. Even with the supplies they had aboard, repairing the array was not an option, although T'Pol already had some ideas about how to develop a stopgap measure.

Her evaluation of their supplies had been almost uniformly positive. The Orion pirates had evidently not had the time to raid the ship's stores, so everything they needed to survive – food, weapons, tools, clothes, and even uniforms, albeit of a style that had been phased out when her second foremother T'Mir was still alive – was available. Trip's delight at the presence of shaving equipment was only a shade less intense than T'Pol's, and she was unsure which of them was more pleased to see his beard vanish. Curiously, the one time she had mentioned trimming her own hair to a more appropriate length, Trip had barely been capable of hiding his dislike of the idea. At first, T'Pol had thought he was using simple logic – there was no guarantee that they would be able to escape Ekos with this vessel, and longer hair made it easier to conceal her ears – but Trip had sheepishly admitted that he hadn't even thought of that fact. He simply liked her hair the way it currently was. For that reason alone, she decided to keep it, even though this meant additional care was necessary to maintain a professional appearance.

It was most illogical.

As was always the case in recent days, her thoughts inevitably turned to Trip. He had spent most of the four days in the reactor room or the crawlways leading to one of the three nacelles, and had been utterly unable to hide his disdain for the *T'Muna-Doth*'s previous engineer. According to Trip, not only had Subcommander Tykath been incompetent, he had also been remarkably lazy. Tucker had
needed most of an entire day to simply gather the necessary tools – which were evidently not stored in any logical manner – and then bringing them up to his specifications. T'Pol had listened with growing amusement she was barely able to conceal as Trip's soft tirades and soothing whispers to the inanimate warp reactor continued unabated. It was the first indication she had seen that the man who had once served aboard Enterprise was not entirely gone and no matter that talking to the T'Muna-Doth was patently illogical, she welcomed it gladly.

Unfortunately, the numerous repairs that Trip insisted were necessary had kept them from interacting for more than a few minutes at a time. More often than not, he was still in the reactor room when she retired for the evening, sometimes crawling into bed hours after she did but just as frequently sleeping in front of the main engineering console. Even when he visited the sonic shower that was part of the shared sleeping compartment, he was rarely under the stream for longer than a few minutes before vanishing back into the reactor room to throw himself into work once more. If he had been Vulcan, his dedication to the job would have been admirable.

But he wasn't Vulcan. And T'Pol … missed him.

She could not help but to think that this was mostly her fault. When Trip placed the future of their relationship (or lack thereof) firmly in her control, she had initially been puzzled and frankly worried that he no longer desired her, but she soon realized that this could not be more wrong. Rather, his decision was intended to show that he understood her reticence about deepening what they already had, even if he did not entirely agree with her concerns. Knowing him as she did, T'Pol suspected that Trip was very likely using his work as a way to distract his mind from dwelling upon their current undefined status. Which meant it was entirely up to T'Pol to take the next step.

And she had absolutely no idea how to proceed. If he were Vulcan, there would be no need to be concerned. When his pon farr came, she would freely give herself to him as biology demanded and, once the blood fever was slaked, they would continue as a mated pair. But Trip was not Vulcan and would never experience the plak tow so a different path would be required, one that did not offend either of their cultures.

T'Pol sighed.

From the command deck, she went directly to the kitchen/medical compartment to consult the bio-scanner once more. The results had not changed and she exhaled softly in slight confusion. If she was reading this correctly, the degradation to her neural pathways caused by the Pa'nar had been slowed substantially, and, in some instances, circumvented entirely, as if parts of her brain had been … rewired, for lack of a better expression, to compensate. Equally fascinating were the hotspots indicating new activity at locations normally quiescent. T'Pol's thoughts immediately drifted in the direction of the reactor room and she shook her head. No matter how badly he despised medical examinations, Trip had to understand why she needed to run a full scan. What if she had damaged him? Surely he would wish to know that.

At the open door leading into the engineering compartment, she paused, tilting her head slightly to listen as Trip murmured soothing nonsense to the T'Muna-Doth's warp core as if it were a crying infant. She could only see his feet at the moment – the rest of his body had vanished into an open maintenance hatch in the floor – but his voice carried.

"Now don't worry, girl," he was saying and T'Pol could hear the subtle whine of a laser welder, "this won't hurt a bit and I'll have you up and runnin' in no time." Shaking her head once more, T'Pol strode across the reactor room, noting at once how less chaotic the entire compartment appeared. Who would have ever thought that a human as emotional as Trip had such a need for order? "I know you're there, T'Pol," he suddenly called out. "What d'ya need?"
"You have been working nonstop for sixteen hours," T'Pol said calmly. "I suggest a period of relaxation."

"Just a sec." The laser welder activated once more and the stench of burning metal caused T'Pol to take a step back. A moment later, Trip slid out of the maintenance tube, removing the protective goggles he'd found in the stores from his face. He looked out of place in the Vulcan uniform – sans the jacket, of course – especially when one realized he was still wearing his Starfleet boots since the previous owner of the clothes he now wore apparently possessed comparatively tiny feet. This too had amused him for some reason, but Trip had refused to explain why he derived great satisfaction at knowing Subcommander Tykath's feet had been substantially smaller than his.

Sometimes, T'Pol feared she would never understand him.

"You didn't come down here just to make me take a break," he said with a lopsided smile. T'Pol raised an eyebrow as she looked down at him.

"Actually, I did," she retorted before offering him her hand. He accepted after a heartbeat and T'Pol pulled him to his feet. "I thought we could share a meal outside the ship," she added, hoping he didn't notice the slight blush crawling up the back of her neck.

"You wanna go on a picnic?" Trip's accent thickened with his surprise, and T'Pol gave him a hopeful look. He shrugged, as if it didn't really matter, but she could sense that he felt otherwise. "Okay," he agreed. "Let me take a quick shower and clean up," he added as he secured the laser drill in its proper place. T'Pol nodded and backed toward the door.

Twenty minutes later found them sitting at the top of a tall hill that overlooked the rest of the small island and provided them with an excellent vantage point of their surroundings. The ocean stretched out in all directions, with another ten islands this size or smaller within visual range. With the sun high overhead and a soft breeze blowing off the water, T'Pol had to admit the view was quite appealing.

"Hard to believe this is the same planet at all," Trip murmured, his eyes sad as he stared out at the ocean. He inhaled deeply. "Thanks," he finally said. He took a seat on the ground. "I guess I lost track of time working on the T'Muna."

"T'Muna-Doth," T'Pol corrected lightly. She sank down into her usual cross-legged position. "I was under the impression the damage was not that extensive."

"It is," Trip replied, "and it isn't." He accepted one of the nutrient bars she'd pulled from storage earlier. "All of the injectors are damaged," he explained while he pulled the rectangular bar from its packaging. "I'm pretty sure we can reach warp four for about an hour at a time, but we'll have to take the injectors off-line for ten to twenty hours so they can cool down afterward." He shook his head. "The coil in nacelle number three is also cracked, so it'll have to be monitored the entire time we're at warp so we can avoid a catastrophic failure." Without thinking, he took a bit of the nutrient bar and instantly made a face. "What is this?" he asked in disgust as he spat the food onto the ground. "It tastes like … God, I have no idea what it tastes like, but it's awful." T'Pol sniffed her own bar and took a small bite but quickly spit it out.

"Apparently," she said, "the food stasis system does not function as well as I thought it did."

"Guess that means we'll have to find another source of food," Trip remarked. He sniffed his bar again before tossing it into the small bag they'd carried with them. "I'll take a look at the stasis generator when we get back."
"No." Trip looked up at her tone. "When we return," T'Pol said flatly, "you will allow me to run a full medical scan to ensure that our meld did not damage you."

"I feel fine," Trip muttered, but T'Pol ignored him.

"Once that is complete," she continued, "we will resume our neuropressure sessions and you will sleep for no less than eight hours."

"Eight!" Trip gave her a disbelieving look. "I've never needed eight hours in my entire life!"

"Six then," she conceded. "But no less." When he started to reply, she reached forward and touched his lips with two fingers. It was a remarkably effective way to keep him silent. T'Pol reflected, and she made a mental note to use it again in the future. "We have been on this planet for just under a human year, Trip," she pointed out. "A few more days will not matter." His shoulders slumped.

"Yeah," he said. "I guess you're right." Trip glanced away. "I just want to get as far away from this damned rock before something else goes wrong," he said. He spent another few seconds breathing deeply and T'Pol could feel his frustration coiling around them like an invisible serpent. "So," he asked with forced good cheer, "how was your day?"

They spent another two hours sitting there, formulating plans and discussing ideas. Trip's emotions – and thus, T'Pol's as well – settled as they talked, and before they knew it, both of them were leaning over her now repaired PADD, examining the list of stores while they contemplated the feasibility of constructing a small transporter. Trip was convinced that they had adequate materials and believed that what they did not already have, he could fabricate using the small workshop inside the reactor room. Although she generally agreed with his assertion that such a device was within their capabilities, T'Pol nonetheless took the opposite side of the argument simply because she derived a great deal of satisfaction out of disagreeing with him. Ultimately, they decided to table the discussion for the moment – the sun was beginning to disappear beyond the horizon and the footing had been treacherous enough with full light – and retraced their path to the T'Muna-Doth. T'Pol intentionally stepped in front of the hatch leading to the reactor room once they boarded and gave Trip a knowing look when he grimaced.

"Medical," she ordered. Trip frowned and looked to be on the verge of arguing, but faltered under her unyielding gaze. Didn't he understand? She had to be sure that he was safe, that she hadn't ruined his life. "If I need to," T'Pol said calmly, "I will render you unconscious and carry you there." For reasons she did not understand, her comment caused him to smirk.

"Aye, aye, ma'am," Trip said and preceded her into the kitchen/medical bay. "Do I get a lollipop for being a good boy?" he asked once her scan was complete long minutes later and T'Pol gave him a confused look. "Never mind," he said before standing so he could watch her input the results into the nearby wall monitor. "Am I gonna live?" he wondered, the thickness of his accent betraying his trepidation.

"There are a number of inconsistencies in your neural pattern," T'Pol said slowly. She was relying entirely upon her memory of having seen Trip's brain scans more than a few times in sickbay on Enterprise – the Xyrillian incident, for example, or after his near death experience aboard Shuttlepod One with Lieutenant Reed – but she was certain that his neural patterns had never been this active before. Once more, she felt the crushing weight of guilt bearing down upon her. She had done this to him. This was her fault.

"Knock it off," Trip grumbled. He reached past her and killed the power to the monitor. "If you hadn't done your Vulcan mojo, I'd be dead," he pointed out. "Besides," he continued, "we've got this pretty lady now." As he spoke, he patted the bulkhead. "She'll get us off this rock," Trip said, "and
we can track down Phlox for one of his miracle cures." He hesitantly touched the side of her face where he'd kissed her days earlier with just his index and middle fingers, and she wondered if he was simply emulating her or if he had learned about the ozh'esta. "But this whole blamin' yourself?" he added. "It needs to stop."

"Trip…"

"I'm alive because of you, T'Pol." A warm buzz echoed within her mind as his fingers caressed her sensitive ear. "The way I see it," Trip added softly, "my life wouldn't be complete if you weren't around anyway, so if this means we both die early, then so be it." Her breath caught at the naked honesty in his voice and she felt the loss of his fingers keenly when he dropped his hand. "Now I believe I was promised neuropressure." His attempt at humor felt strained, as if he was trying to give her a way out of a conversation he recognized to be too emotional for her tastes.

"Yes," T'Pol said, her voice thick. "I will join you momentarily." She watched him walk to the sleeping compartment while her mind raced. Never before had she felt such intense emotion from such a simple statement. With just a few words, Trip had once again thoroughly upset her equilibrium. Through the touch of his fingers, she had felt his emotions, had tasted his regard for her and his barely suppressed desire, and it triggered something … primitive deep within her. T'Pol drew in a deep breath.

And made her decision.

Trip was facing away from the door when she entered the sleeping compartment, having already stripped down to his shorts in preparation for neuropressure. As he always did when his shirt was off, he was unconsciously rubbing the scars that marred his otherwise flawless torso. His attention was riveted on the antique lirpa inside one of the now open wall lockers and, as she approached, he spoke.

"What is this thing, T'Pol?" he asked. When she did not answer, he turned to face her.

And froze.

His eyes widened and he drank in the expanse of her nudity with shock. T'Pol could smell his sudden arousal, could see the instant reaction his body had to the sight of her unclothed body, and she took a step forward, raising her hand toward him with only the index and middle fingers extended. Hesitantly, Trip reciprocated and their fingers touched. Through the conduit that brief connection formed, their minds brushed against each other.

Trip's need called out to her.

And willingly, eagerly, she went to him.
Trip: Morning After

Chapter Notes

An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 416 days (364 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's April, 2153.

He woke alone.

T’Pol’s side of the bed was cool to the touch and the distinctive albeit subtle smell he’d learned to associate with her – the deep-rooted romantic in him likened it to sand and fire, but the engineer simply classified it as a by-product of her copper-based biochemistry – was absent. He automatically sat up and gave the sleeping compartment a quick once-over. Neither of the two other beds had been pulled down from their storage positions in the wall, but that wasn’t a surprise since Trip could count on one hand the number of times he and T’Pol hadn’t slept under the same blankets in the last six months. He frowned and rolled to his feet, tensing unnecessarily in preparation for the feel of cool metal under his skin. As usual, though, he instead marveled at how warm the floor panels were, even though he shouldn’t have really been surprised.

After pulling on his trousers – he didn’t bother with the outer jacket; the undershirt and pants were more than enough in these tropical climes – Trip gave the bed a glance but ultimately decided against hitting the button that would cause it to retract into the wall. It might have been wishful thinking on his part, but he hoped to put that surprisingly comfortable mattress to use again in the very near future, providing T’Pol was as eager and as willing as she had been last night. He grinned broadly as he sauntered toward the fold-down sink in the corner of the sleeping compartment. For the first time since even before they crashed on this miserable rock, he felt like all was right in the world.

He spent a few minutes longer than normal over the sink, shaving, desperately trying to avoid looking at the still angry scars on his chest that never ceased to remind him how close he came to death, before using the weird Vulcan oral hygiene device T’Pol called a mouth sterilizer. It reminded him of the mouthguards he’d worn while playing football and, if they had more than two, he’d have torn it apart just to see how it worked. When placed in his mouth, the material that looked and felt like but wasn’t plastic molded around his teeth before bombarding them with sonic pulses (or something – he wasn’t sure and T’Pol had admitted that she’d simply taken them for granted all her life so she had never sought to find out how they worked.) During this process, they also secreted a toothpaste-like substance that he’d already checked to ensure was safe for human mouths. A full minute later, the cleansing cycle ended and, even after rinsing, he was left with the taste of almonds for the rest of the day.

His good mood began to fade when he didn’t find T’Pol in any of her usual haunts. She wasn’t in the meditation chamber/gym, or conducting another inventory of the ship’s stores in the hopes of finding some food that might still be edible so they wouldn’t have to rely on those weird-tasting mango-flavored coconuts on the trees around the island for sustenance. The science lab – which had become her territory sort of like how the reactor room was his – didn’t look to have been entered since yesterday, and even the command deck was mostly powered down except for the bare essentials. When he saw that her recharged phase pistol was gone from where they stored it, Trip’s worry only intensified. There wasn’t any reason to leave the ship without letting him know …
After securing his own pistol to his waist as well as attaching one of the communicators they’d found aboard the *T’Muna-Doth* to his belt, he opened the outer hatch and stepped out into the early morning sunshine. It felt good on his face, especially since that damned beard was gone, and he inhaled deeply, smiling at the familiar smells of the ocean. He glanced around for any sign of T’Pol, but when he couldn’t see her, he started walking.

He found her atop the same hill they had picnicked on yesterday – was it only yesterday? – wearing one of the excursion jackets they’d found in the ship stores. T’Pol was sitting in her familiar meditation posture with her eyes closed, but her expression and her body language seemed to indicate that she was anything but relaxed. He hesitated for a moment, then decided to go for broke and took a seat behind her, scooting forward so she was nearly sitting in his lap with her back to his chest. Instantly, she tensed, but when he just sat there, his arms wrapped around her, she gradually began to relax against him. With a satisfied smile, Trip closed his eyes and concentrated on feeding his emotions into the imaginary fire like she taught him.

And a moment later, he was … elsewhere.

The expansive white nothing stretched out in all directions, with form but no substance. Trip recognized the place immediately from that shared dream he and T’Pol had shortly before he got himself mangled by the bear even if he had absolutely no idea how he got here. He found T’Pol in the same position as she was in the real world although her clothes here were the ornate ambassadorial robes he’d only seen her in once or twice and, on instinct, Trip decided to follow her lead (which was something he was getting pretty good at doing.) Taking a seat behind her on the imaginary floor, he scooted forward and exactly like she had outside this big, white nothing, T’Pol initially tensed but gradually relaxed.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asked as soon as she sagged back against him. His lips were mere centimeters from her left ear and he frowned when she shuddered. It didn’t look to be from disgust, but rather something else entirely.

“No,” she replied tightly, her voice ragged with feeling.

“Then why are you pushing me away?” Trip wondered. She half-turned to face him and her eyes automatically flickered down to his lips. “You’re putting off some pretty intense ‘go away’ vibes, T’Pol.”

“I am … confused,” the beautiful woman in his arms admitted.

“About last night?” Trip bit back a frown and felt his stomach plunge. Making love to her had been one of the most sensual and memorable experiences of his entire life, and he had been certain she enjoyed it.

“I did enjoy it,” she said suddenly, prompting him to wonder if he’d spoken aloud or she simply plucked the thought from his mind. “And that is why I am confused.” At Trip’s expression, she sighed. “Humans,” T’Pol said carefully, “are driven by the subconscious desire for sexual gratification due to the pleasure they derive during intercourse.” She leaned back. “Vulcans do not experience pleasure.”

“At all?” Trip asked in disbelief. He felt his stomach twisting.

“Sexual intercourse is simply another biological function for Vulcans,” she replied, “no more pleasurable than breathing or sleeping.” At his appalled look, T’Pol gave him an almost indifferent shrug that seemed oddly out of place on her. “Had it not been for the evolution of the mating cycle in my people,” she continued, “we would likely have never reached a sustainable population.”
“But you did enjoy it,” Trip said. “I could feel that through this … bond thing.” His eyes widened in sudden comprehension. “You’re afraid,” he guessed.

“According to everything I have been taught,” T’Pol said simply, “the Vulcan body does not have the erogenous zones necessary for me to have experienced what I felt last night.” Her shoulders slumped in despair. “What I am experiencing right now here with you,” she corrected herself with another deep frown. “This leaves me with one of two explanations. Either everything I have been told about Vulcan culture is a lie or I am simply … deviant.”

“There’s a third option,” Trip offered quickly, his expression souring at her suggestion that she was a freak. He tightened his hold on her and wished he could just kiss away her fears. “It’s my fault.” T’Pol glanced at him once again. “I’m human, after all,” he pointed out. “So maybe … maybe you just felt what I felt?”

“That is … possible,” T’Pol admitted softly. The tension in her muscles did not ease, though, and Trip suspected she was still blaming herself. Knowing her, she’d already decided that the High Command – which was filled with lying, self-serving scumbags who would gladly sell their mothers up the river without losing a night of sleep, all the while claiming it was logic that drove their actions – couldn’t possibly be responsible for a deception this large, so it was more likely that she was some sort of aberration. She’d mentioned before during their random conversations how her difficulty with emotional control had always set her apart from the rest of her species and now she had another metaphorical albatross to wear around her neck.

And Trip was desperately afraid that this would turn out to be his fault.

“We’ll figure it out, T’Pol,” he said. “If you need us to back off, to not … to not have sex again, then that’s what we’ll do,” he continued, unable to ignore the ball of ice forming in his stomach. Now, after having touched her, having tasted her, having felt her passion envelop him, the idea of never making love to her again … it caused an ache deep within him that hurt worse than anything he’d ever felt before. But if that was what she needed from him, he would give it to her, no matter that he needed her like he needed water. At least he had his memories…

“No,” T’Pol murmured. She twisted around his arms until they were facing each other. Her eyes flared with something that could only be hunger and Trip felt his body instinctively respond. “I do not want that at all,” she told him before lunging forward to capture his lips with hers. The white space splintered around them and fell away, and suddenly, Trip found himself back in the real world, flat on his back with T’Pol atop him. Her fingers were everywhere, branding his very soul with her touch.

After that, well … things got a little hazy.

“What the hell was that?” Trip asked sometime later. She was draped over him like a living blanket with an especially important part of his anatomy he was rather proud of still captured within her. His muscles felt like rubber and the bond crackled between them, stronger than ever. T’Pol did not move her head from where it rested atop his chest as she stroked his forearm with the two fingers – index and middle, as usual – of her right hand, but he could actually feel her confusion and her satisfaction warring with one another. It was one of the weirdest sensations he’d ever experienced but, for some reason, it just felt … right. “Talk to me,” he urged.

“I do not want to talk,” T’Pol replied. “I am content to remain where I am for now.”

“A few minutes ago you were freaking out,” Trip said. “But now, you just want to lay here?”

“Yes.” He frowned at her reply.
“T’Pol…” Her right hand came up and she touched his lips with the two fingers he’d seen her use every time she wanted to express affection. A jolt of something that felt like amusement coursed through the magical bond thing.

“Don’t talk,” she said. “I do not understand this,” she admitted, “and I am not sure I want to.” She wiggled slightly to get more comfortable and Trip groaned when he felt his body responding to her heat once more. He had to admit that he was surprised – it wasn’t like he was eighteen anymore. “I simply wish to enjoy it,” T’Pol finished, her fingers moving from his lips to caress his face, as if she were a blind woman trying to get a grasp of what he looked like. She tilted her head and stared intently at the path her fingers were tracing.

When his stomach growled long minutes – or hours, he wasn’t quite sure – later, they still hadn’t moved from their spot on the hill and Trip glanced down to find T’Pol staring into the distance, her eyes unfocussed. Her thoughts brushed up against his – which was an even weirder sensation he couldn’t possibly begin to describe – but she barely stirred, even when fat raindrops began falling out of the sky. Trip finally sat up, forcing her to snap out of her fugue, and an emerald blush crawled across her face the moment she realized how distracted she’d become. She reached for her discarded excursion jacket and it finally occurred to Trip that she wasn’t wearing shoes. Or pants.

“Is that all you were wearing?” he asked while buttoning up his pants. T’Pol’s blush deepened.

“Yes,” she admitted softly, “I needed … I needed somewhere to think where I did not smell you.” Trip frowned, not sure whether he’d just been complimented or insulted, and she gave him that not-quite there smile of hers.

They made it back to the T’Muna-Doth before the rain really started coming down, but Trip paused in the open doorway of the ship and watched the downpour, fighting down another surge of homesickness. God, he hated how these moments seemed to come out of nowhere! Behind him, he heard T’Pol hesitate in mid-step and, a moment later, felt her warm fingers touch his shoulder. Automatically, he reached back and covered her hand with his.

“Tomorrow will be a year,” he said softly.

“I know,” T’Pol replied.

“Do you ever think about them?” Trip asked. “About Enterprise or the crew?”

“Not often,” she answered calmly. She gave him a teasing glance. “Ensuring your safety requires far too much of my time as it is.” Trip rolled his eyes and thought about mentioning her own less than stellar track record, but decided against it.

“I’m glad it was you,” he said instead. “Trapped here with me.” T’Pol’s right eyebrow climbed a couple of millimeters and Trip grimaced. “Not that I’m glad we’re actually trapped or anything,” he added quickly, “but if I had to be trapped anywhere, I’m glad it’s with you.” At the back of his mind, the unspoken question – would she have developed this bond thing with whoever she was stuck here with? Sure, she’d insisted that she and the captain weren’t involved aboard Enterprise, but they had been awfully close – continued to linger, but he did his best to ignore it like he usually did. When she remained silent for a long, extended moment, Trip almost opened his mouth again and tried to reassure her that he wasn’t just saying this because they’d had sex, but fortunately, his brain chose that moment to begin filtering his comments.

“I share your sentiment,” T’Pol finally said, her eyes locked on his lips. Her eyes flickered up to meet his before quickly dropping back down almost bashfully. “I wish to clean up,” she said abruptly before wheeling around and walking away. Trip watched her disappear around the curving corridor.
and into the living compartment. As soon as she vanished into the cabin, he slumped back against the bulkhead and turned his attention back to the rain.

*What the hell do I do now?* he wondered. T’Pol’s transformation from confused woman to eager rebel seemed too … abrupt to be anything but trouble. She’d mentioned that skipping meditation had resulted in her lack of judgment with Tolaris which had led to the Pa’nar, so was this the same sort of thing? Was he just another really stupid mistake on her part that she’d ultimately regret? Even the High Command couldn’t conceal something as easy to disprove as what she’d been taught about Vulcan sexuality, could they? There were so many factors unaccounted for right now that he didn’t know what to think. It could simply be another of the lies told by the fascists at High Command, or it could be this miraculous but always freaky bond thing, or it could the meld, or the fact that he was human. Hell, for all he knew, it could be the Pa’nar messing with her head!

Trip sighed. He had absolutely no idea what to do.

So instead, he quietly ducked into the reactor room and went to work.
An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 426 days (373 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's May, 2153.

She slid out of their bed without a sound.

Trip continued to sleep as she reached for his undershirt and pulled it on. He had tossed it aside the night before, right before they mated for the thirty-sixth time in the eleven days since she first bared herself to him, and even now, it still bore his unmistakable scent. T'Pol inhaled deeply, her eyes locked on the sleeping form of her human partner, before backing to the open hatch leading to the rest of the ship. Had there been anyone else aboard, she would have insisted that they close the door, but such a demand was patently illogical in their current situation.

Meditation beckoned, but T'Pol instead angled directly toward the medical suite, hoping to finish her latest scans before Trip woke. In between thoroughly enjoying their sexual relationship even though a deeply buried part of her insisted that she should not, she had been steadily gathering data about her current bio-chemistry in an attempt to understand what exactly it was that was happening to her. Every variable needed to be considered and this would be the first opportunity she had since day three to make a scan while Trip was asleep.

Even with the outdated equipment aboard the \textit{T'Muna-Doth}, she was able to take detailed readings of her brain patterns and, once the task was complete, she sat quietly at the small table to study the results of her scan. Until now, she had resisted formulating a hypothesis as to why she seemed unable to control herself around Trip when he was feeling aroused, and despite the scans in front of her, she still resisted putting her thoughts into actual words. \textit{Never theorize before you have all the data,} her instructors had told her at the Science Academy. \textit{Invariably, you manipulate the facts to suit those theories instead of manipulating the theories to suit facts.}

“You’re up early,” Trip mumbled a short time later as he stumbled into the joint kitchen/med-bay, wearing only his pants. His hair was sticking up in unusual directions and he gave her meal – the curiously flavored fruit that could be found all over the island – a shudder before taking a seat in front of her. As he did every single time he entered this compartment, Trip shot the medical suite on the far side a disgusted look. T'Pol had attempted to explain the thought processes behind combining a dining area and a sickbay – both locations required extensive sterilization, as well as cooling and heating units so combining them had seemed to the shipbuilders to be logical – but Trip had countered that the entire layout was simply ‘creepy.’

Unfortunately, T'Pol could not entirely refute that argument, and it may very well have been at the heart of the reason the type four was ultimately decommissioned. No one, not even a Vulcan, wanted to consume a meal on a table that had used to perform emergency surgery.

“I had a task to complete,” she replied before pushing her unfinished ‘mango-nut’ (as Trip called them) toward him. He sighed but accepted the fork she offered and slowly began to eat. His eyes narrowed as she picked up the two medical electrodes that had been concealed behind her plate and began to affix them to her temples. “As you know,” she said as she worked, “I have been attempting to understand my condition.”
“And from the look in your eye,” Trip said with a smile, “you’ve figured it out.”

“Not yet,” T’Pol corrected. She glanced in the direction of the monitor on the wall to confirm that it was in fact receiving the signal from the two electrodes. Once satisfied, she returned her attention to the human sitting across the small table from her. “Trip,” she said simply, locking eyes with him, “I am wearing absolutely nothing under this shirt.” His eyes immediately darkened and T’Pol could feel a reciprocating swell of sensation as her body immediately responded to his sudden arousal. She could feel her nipples suddenly strain against the thin material of the shirt, could feel her heart rate increase, could taste the sudden desire for this man racing through her.

And exactly as she feared, the medical computer began blaring an alarm.

Trip sprang out of his seat with surprise, his eyes darting back and forth between her and the wall monitor. His arousal was gone almost at once, replaced by an almost suffocating concern and fear that faded only when T’Pol casually removed the electrodes and rose to her feet. She walked unhurriedly to the medical computer and examined the results.

*Subject displaying symptoms of early onset of blood fever,* the readout declared. *Recommend immediate relocation in preparation for time of mating.*

T’Pol frowned.

“Time of matin’?” Trip read aloud from over her shoulder. “But I thought you said … does this mean we’ve gotta deal with that *pon farr* thing after all?”

“Not exactly,” T’Pol said. *Pon farr* is almost exclusively a male condition, she continued. There were a few instances that she knew of where an unmarried, unattached female nearing the end of her childbearing years had entered such a cycle on her own, but they were rare. “When the male enters his Time,” she said, “he is secluded with his mate who enters a reciprocal state.” Her eyebrows shot up as she realized that this likely meant a mental bond was present in that situation. How else would the female’s body know when to trigger its own cycle?

And why had T’Les never warned her about this?

“Is that what’s happenin’ to you?” Trip asked. He was pale and clearly worried if the thickness of his accent was any indication, but managed to avoid an emotional display for which T’Pol was quite grateful. “You’re enterin’ this … *plak tow,*” he said, reading the word off the monitor.

“In part,” T’Pol replied, “I think that might be the case.” She powered the monitor down and returned to her seat. “I do not believe that it is a complete blood fever, however,” she continued, “but rather … something else.”

“Well … crap,” Trip grumbled. He dropped heavily into his seat. “This is because of me, isn’t it?” T’Pol quirked an eyebrow, but he kept talking. “Since I’m not Vulcan,” he guessed, “and I’m not tied to a seven year cycle, I’m messin’ you up somehow.” His shoulders slumped and he shook his head. “I *knew* this was my fault,” he grumbled.

“Trip, stop.” He refused to look at her and T’Pol winced at the waves of guilt rolling off him. “I am alive because of you, Trip,” she said, intentionally using the same words he had used the night they had first mated in the hopes it would cause him to at least smile. “We are the first of our species to have joined,” she pointed out when he did not react, touching his face with the fingers of her right hand. “It is inevitable that there will be a … learning curve.”

“Pretty steep one,” he muttered. “This *has* to be screwin’ your body chemistry up,” he said. “If your
people evolved to only go through this every seven years, then you havin’ to deal with my human urges every seven minutes is gonna burn you out.”

“We have differences,” T’Pol quoted. She was surprised at how calm she felt. “May we, together, become greater than the sum of both of us.”

“Ideally, do no harm,” Trip retorted. “How is this not doing harm to you?” Another bright flash of guilt lanced through her and she recoiled from it, recognizing the distinct flavor of Trip’s emotions. She breathed through the moment and used her hand to tilt his face up so their eyes could meet.

“Do you wish to end this?” she inquired. “Do you wish us to return as we were before?” she clarified when he gave her a confused look.

“God, no,” he replied and she could feel the strength of his conviction. It caused her to offer him a discreet smile that T’Les would have chastised her for. She extended her hand to him and, with no hesitation at all, he followed suit, touching their fingers in the ozh’esta. The bond between them hummed.

“Then we shall find a way to adapt,” T’Pol said simply.

“Right.” Trip glanced down. “I’ll start workin’ on controllin’ myself more,” he said before making a face. “Includin’ meditation, I guess.”

“A strict regimen of physical exercise and mental disciplines would not go amiss,” T’Pol said. Although she did not admit it out loud, she was curious as to how long it would take Trip to master fourth-tier mental disciplines. She never harbored any doubts that he was capable of such a feat, no matter that the level of control and general intelligence was beyond most Vulcans. In the time since she had known him, he had consistently surprised her, so why should this be any different?

“Maybe you could show me how to use that lirpa,” he suggested. From the casual way he mentioned it, T’Pol was sure he had no idea how important the weapon was to her culture, but she nodded in acquiescence nonetheless, recognizing his attempts at making an effort to understand her people better.

“And, of course,” she deadpanned, “a regular schedule of sexual intercourse to ameliorate your urges is absolutely necessary.”

The color he turned then was most gratifying.

Trip retreated to the reactor room moments later where he clearly intended to spend the rest of the day working on various shipboard repairs. For her part, T’Pol retired to their cabin so she could dress more appropriately (although she inexplicably decide to continue wearing his shirt under her uniform) before secluding herself in the mediation compartment. Her whitespace came easily today which she attributed to finally understanding what had been happening to her over the last two weeks. Refreshed and controlled, she joined Trip in the reactor room to lend aid as appropriate; T’Pol found it strangely satisfying that, despite being twice his age with considerably more education and training, she always learned something new in Trip’s presence. They spent an hour discussing his idea about constructing a transporter, which turned into an argument.

And that turned into an especially heated sexual encounter.

Afterward, Trip exiled her from the reactor room, claiming that he would get more work done if she was not ‘tempting him with her feminine guiles,’ although T’Pol suspected he was suffering from another bout of misplaced guilt at having failed to ‘control himself’ as he’d intended. She retreated to
the command deck where she busied herself with examining the sensor capabilities of the T'Muna-Doth. It took nearly an hour, but she successfully managed to conduct a detailed scan of the surveillance satellite Enterprise left in orbit. Another hour passed as she studied the schematics of the orbiting device in order to determine how much of it they could salvage for spare parts, during which time she also set the sensors to cycle through all of the standard scans. It was illogical, she thought, to not bring back as much useful scientific data as possible.

“I want to do a level ten diagnostic,” Trip announced some time later, his unexpected voice causing T’Pol to nearly jump. She glanced toward where he perched atop the ladder leading down to the alpha deck and leaned on the floor of the bridge, half in and half out. “I know you normally don’t do tens outside a spacedock,” he continued, “but I keep findin’ ghosts in the coding and there’s a power fluctuation in nacelle two that I can’t seem to lock down.”

“How long will that take?” T’Pol asked. They were already running low on food other than the ‘mango-nuts,’ although Trip could easily survive on some of the fish in the ocean. She made a mental note to encourage him to look at obtaining some of the aquatic creatures for consumption to supplement his diet.

“I have absolutely no idea,” he replied sheepishly. “Ideally, this is a two-person job,” he added, looking anywhere but at her. T’Pol could not but to be amused at his implication, although she managed to keep it from her face.

“We will find a way, Trip,” she told him and he nodded. “Shall we begin tomorrow?”

“Day after,” Tucker answered. “Tomorrow, I’ve got to shut the reactor completely down so I can clean the intermix chamber.” He half-smiled. “Plus, we should get started on the whole exercise and brain camp thing in the morning.”

“Agreed,” T’Pol said. She gestured to the curving viewscreen that was displaying a blown-up schematic. “I have been examining the satellite Enterprise left behind,” she said. “I believe that we might be able to use some of the components to partially repair our communications array.”

“It’ll have to wait,” Trip declared. “Right now, I wouldn’t even think about taking the T’Muna into orbit, not until we’re sure there aren’t any microfractures.” T’Pol nodded slightly in acknowledgement and opened her mouth to speak when the sensor console chimed. She frowned and brought up the appropriate display on the main viewer. Trip climbed the rest of the way into the command deck and leaned forward. “Something up?” he asked.

“There are radioactive isotopes of barium, cerium, lead, molybdenum, and zirconium in the atmosphere,” she said as she rapidly input a series of additional commands. Instantly, the shipboard computer began measuring the rates of decay and counting backward to establish when each of the isotopes was created. They were all identical. “A fission device was detonated on this planet shortly after our crash-landing,” she revealed, one eyebrow climbing.

“They used an atomic bomb?” Trip was clearly aghast. “These people aren’t capable of building one of those!” T’Pol looked at him.

“We have been exposed to only one continent, Trip,” she said. “It is not illogical to presume that there are different technological levels around this planet.” T’Pol paused. “The detonation of this weapon is likely the reason Enterprise was not allowed to provide us with the entire seven day grace period,” she theorized. Trip grunted in agreement but didn’t take his eyes off the viewscreen. “If you are concerned about radiation sickness,” T’Pol began, but he shook his head.

“I’m not,” he said. “We’re too far away and it was too long ago. If we were gonna get sick, it
would’ve already happened.” When she gave him another questioning look, he sighed. “It’s just … we might have been responsible for this, T’Pol.” He shook his head. “First, Paraagan, now this.” Disgust was in his voice when he next spoke. “Maybe you Vulcans were right. Maybe we weren’t ready to be out here.”

“From what we have seen,” T’Pol said softly, “the Ekosians do not need an outside force to encourage them to wage self-destructive wars.” She considered standing and approaching him, but decided against it. Rather than help, her proximity to Trip might actually hinder him for a change and having a sexual encounter on the command deck was most inappropriate.

“Yeah,” Trip said. “God,” he murmured suddenly. “The cap’n. He probably thought he caused this.” T’Pol winced – she had hoped that Trip would not consider that, but once again, she’d underestimated him. “Starfleet probably thought he caused this,” Trip added with growing despair. “Which means he was probably ordered back to Earth to face a court-martial.”

“That is likely,” she agreed sadly. “There is nothing we can do, Trip,” she pointed out rationally. “If we focus on our jobs, we can take the truth back to Earth.”

“And clear Jon’s name,” Trip said with a nod. He glanced once in her direction but intentionally avoided eye contact. “I’m gonna go meditate,” he declared. “I think it might do me good.”

“It will beneficial for both of us,” T’Pol said. She pushed out of the chair and powered down everything but the essentials. The sensors were already programmed to conduct an omnidirectional sweep every thirty minutes with an alert subroutine in place should anything be detected within certain parameters. “If it is agreeable with you,” she said, “I would like to join your meditation.” Trip nodded.

But at the last moment, T’Pol changed her mind and pulled him into their sleeping compartment.

Meditation could wait.
Hoshi: Battle Drills

Chapter Notes

An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 393 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's June, 2153.

The klaxon jolted her from sleep.

Hoshi was out of bed and partially dressed before she fully registered that the alarm was sounding, which could be laid solely at the feet of one Lieutenant Commander Malcolm Reed. In the five weeks since they had departed Earth space, the armoury officer had become so obsessed with the level of readiness for the crew that he’d quickly eclipsed Commander Hernandez as the least liked senior officer among both the enlisted personnel and the junior officer corps. Drills of all sorts – repel boarders, general quarters, fire in the armoury – came without warning and always seemed timed at the most inappropriate times. While Hoshi understood and agreed with the point of these drills, being roused out of a deep sleep to go sit at her station on the bridge for an hour without actually doing anything never ceased to be annoying.

Nearly as frustrating was the captain’s decision to let Major Hayes and his insane MACOs start overseeing physical training for the Starfleet crewmembers. Hoshi generally considered herself to be in good shape – she spent an hour and a half in the gym every other day and ate fairly sensibly – but the level of fitness Hayes and his people demanded was bordering on the absurd. Six minute miles, push-ups until one’s arms fell off, sit-ups until a person could barely bend over to lace up their boots, and other calisthenics that seemed solely intended to embarrass the Starfleet crew. The only bright side was that her aikido training ensured that she mostly held her own during the self-defense courses mandated by the captain and ironically led to Sergeant Kemper using her as a co-instructor.

And nothing was more amusing than the two times she’d been paired off with the captain. Throwing Jonathan around without repercussion had turned her into the envy of many crewmembers.

The corridors were thick with personnel rushing to their alert stations, but most appeared to already be stationed on this deck so Hoshi suspected the wait for the turbolift would be minimal. She reached it mere moments after departing her cabin, pausing in mid-step when she caught sight of Corporal Amanda Cole waiting in front of the closed door. The MACO was balancing on her left foot, with the right one braced against the wall so she could lace up her boot. Automatically, Hoshi’s lips turned downward and she barely restrained the urge to remind the MACO that she wasn’t even supposed in officer country this time of night. It was almost an open secret aboard Enterprise that Cole was spending nearly all of her nights in Malcolm’s cabin, although she’d not seen any indication that the captain or Commander Hernandez were aware of it. The mostly male crew of the ship seemed either openly envious of the armoury officer’s dalliance with the attractive corporal or generally indifferent to it, but the women were starkly divided in their opinion. Fully half of them thought it was noble of the MACO to help Reed through his grief this way, with many of them theorizing a past relationship during the lieutenant commander’s mysterious (and completely unofficial) work with the MACOs, whereas the other half thought Cole was acting little better than a prostitute.

Even though she knew it was a little hypocritical on her part after her escapade on Risa, Hoshi fell
firmly in the latter camp. For some reason, she simply could not shake her distrust of the corporal and very much feared this entire relationship was going to mess Malcolm up even more.

“Ma’am,” the MACO corporal greeted with a quick nod toward her boot. “Sorry about this,” she said.

“It’s no problem,” Hoshi replied, her voice a shade frostier than she intended it to be. Cole gave her a quick, sidelong glance and frowned slightly. She didn’t say anything, though, for which Hoshi was grateful. She had seen the other woman systematically take apart Crewman Zabel during one of the mandated sparring sessions without even breaking a sweat, which was impressive in and of itself since Zabel was one of Malcolm’s top security personnel. It wasn’t like Hoshi thought Cole would do something as stupid as taking a swing at her, but just the memory of watching the MACO wipe the floor with the much larger, much heavier, much stronger Zabel … well, that image just wouldn’t go away.

When the lift door finally opened, Hoshi exhaled softly in relief and stepped forward, Cole a step or so behind her. They both reached for the wall panel at the same time, but the corporal quickly drew her hand back so Hoshi could hit the ‘A deck’ button first.

“The armoury?” Sato asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Cole replied. “Thank you.” With a hiss, the doors of the lift slid shut and Hoshi felt the subtle vibration that was the only way to really tell that they were moving.

It was easy to tell when they had stopped though. The abrupt, screeching halt caused Hoshi to stumble slightly and quickly grab for the central handhold to keep her balance. She started to reach for the call button on the wall panel to contact engineering when it crackled to life.

“This is a damage control drill,” a recording of Malcolm Reed’s voice announced and Hoshi heard Cole mutter a soft, annoyed curse. “Please identify yourself so your current location may be logged.” Hoshi sighed.

“Lieutenant Hoshi Sato,” she said flatly before glancing in the direction of her companion.

“Corporal Amanda Cole,” the MACO said. She leaned back against the wall and crossed her arms, glowering at the closed doors.

“Drill specifications are thus,” the recording continued after beeping. “You are injured and unable to call for assistance. Do not attempt to contact anyone outside this turbolift. Estimated time of drill duration unknown. If an actual emergency is encountered, this drill will be automatically suspended. That is all.”

“I swear to God,” Cole muttered darkly. “I’m going to punch him in the face if I find out he did this on purpose.” Despite herself, Hoshi couldn’t help but to smile.

“Do it during one of the training sessions,” she suggested, “and I think you can get away with it.” Cole’s expression brightened.

“Good point,” the MACO said. She slid to the floor and leaned her head back against the wall. “Might as well get comfortable, ma’am,” she pointed out. “We could be here for a while.” The corporal had already closed her eyes. Hoshi shook her head – these MACOs seemed capable of sleeping anywhere, anytime, which was something she seriously envied. These days, it was hard enough for her to just sit in the dark for any length of time because her thoughts always turned to the ragged scar that had cut through her home city, bisecting the nation of her birth, and turning her into
an orphan. Hoshi’s eyes welled at that thought. So few of these ... gaijin realized just how important family was to her cultural identity. Even with all the problems she had with her distant father, he had still been her otoosan who gave Hoshi her first book on languages.

“I thought you were from Florida,” Hoshi said suddenly, desperate to find something else to focus on so she wouldn’t break out into tears, and her words caused Cole’s eyes to snap open. “You have some interesting vocal inflections,” Sato explained. “Israel?” she guessed. The corporal snorted.

“You are good,” she murmured. “I was born in Florida,” Cole said, “but spent the first ten years of my life in Tel Aviv with my mother.” Hoshi nodded. She was about to test her veryrusty Hebrew on the corporal when Cole abruptly spoke once more. “Can I ask you a question, ma’am?” The hairs on the back of Hoshi’s neck stood up and somehow, she just knew that it would be smarter to simply ‘no, you can’t.’

“Yes,” she said instead.

“You’re Malcolm’s friend, right?” the corporal said and Hoshi felt her face harden.

“I don’t think it is appropriate for you to discuss him with me, Corporal,” she nearly snapped. Cole’s body language shifted fractionally from open but reserved to defensive and wary – most people wouldn’t have even noticed it, but then, Hoshi wasn’t most people.

“Is this because I’m sleeping with him?” the MACO asked bluntly. “It’s just sex.” Abruptly, the corporal’s eyes narrowed. “Are you interested in him?” she asked. “Just say the word, ma’am,” Cole continued calmly, “and I’ll steer him in your direction.” Hoshi blinked in sudden surprise and confusion. It must have shown on her face because Cole offered a tight smile. “My arrangement with the commander is purely sexual, ma’am.” She shrugged. “I was hoping I might be able to get him to open up a little bit about his family,” she admitted, “but I swear, he’s locked down tighter than a damned Vulcan.”

“Why would you care about his family?” Hoshi demanded. She didn’t even bother trying to keep the suspicion out of her voice and Cole’s eyes narrowed.

“Why wouldn’t I?” she retorted. “The commander is the third-in-command, ma’am,” Cole stated flatly. “We’re heading into enemy territory with no guarantees that Archer and Hernandez won’t buy the farm along the way.” She frowned. “Don’t know about you, Lieutenant,” she said softly, “but I’d rather not go into combat with an armoury officer who can’t concentrate on his job.” The smile she flashed was both predatory and sensual. “If that means I’ve got sleep with a damned sexy man who knows what he’s doing in the sack,” Cole said brightly, “well, hell, I’ll gladly jump on that grenade for the sake of the crew.” Hoshi stared at the other woman for a long moment before finally cracking a smile.


“I am so going to us that,” she said with a snicker.

“You’re nothing like I thought you would be,” Hoshi murmured. The MACO smiled and her body language indicated a slight relaxation.

“Toda,” Cole said. She sobered a moment later. “I know a lot of you Starfleeters think I’m just taking advantage of him,” she said, “but I do know what I’m doing.” She pinned Hoshi with her eyes. “And I was serious earlier, ma’am,” the corporal said. “If you’re interested in the commander, I’ll get out of your way. You won’t have anything-”
“No,” Hoshi interrupted quickly. “No need for that. I like Malcolm, just … not like that.” Unbidden, an image of a shirtless, sweaty Travis sprang to mind, but she quickly pushed the thought away, especially when she remembered the skinny, whiny Kriosian *yariman* he’d clearly slept with. “I was just … worried…”

“That the big, bad MACO was going to break his heart?” Cole asked with another grin. “Not going to happen, ma’am. I know my role.” It was said with such simple honesty that Hoshi once more found herself gaping. This woman was turning out to be more complicated than she’d thought.

“And it doesn’t bother you that people think you’re …”

“A whore?” Cole finished wryly. She shrugged. “If I spent all my time worrying about what people thought of me,” she said simply, “I’d never get anything done.” The MACO leaned her head back against the lift wall. “I just focus on being me and let the rest sort itself out later.”

Hoshi was silent for a long moment as she studied the reclining woman with open curiosity. There was something very attractive about Cole’s outlook on life and Hoshi silently acknowledged that she was more than a little jealous. This woman knew who she was and wasn’t afraid to let other people know.

“I owe you an apology,” Sato began, but the corporal waved it off.

“No need, ma’am,” she said. “Malcolm’s your friend and you were worried about him.”

“He is my friend,” Hoshi agreed as she took a seat across from Cole, “but I don’t really know a lot about him.” She nodded toward the corporal. “Like you said,” she remarked, “he’s as bad as some Vulcans when it comes to talking about himself, so if you were hoping I could tell you what makes him tick, I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed.” Hoshi looked down. “I think Commander Tucker was the only person aboard who really got Malcolm.”

“No surprise there,” Cole said. “Trip’s been like that since elementary school.” Hoshi’s eyes widened.

“You knew Trip?”

“Went to school with his sister, Lizzie,” the MACO said before shaking her head. “I was really hoping that you of all people would know how to get into Malcolm’s head,” Cole muttered. The expression that appeared on her face was bleak. “Keeping all his anger and grief bottled up might work for Vulcans, but it sucks for us humans.” Hoshi started to nod…

But almost at once, she realized that Cole’s remarks weren’t *just* about Malcolm. Both Doctor Phlox and Travis had been after her in their own ways to open up to them, to talk and let the healing process begin, but she’d pushed them away because it just hurt too much to think about the watery grave that had once been her family home. She’d spent the last sixty-seven days hiding from everything and going through life in a numb fugue because it was just easier than dealing with the tragedy that her life had become. Swallowing, she looked up and met the steady gaze of the MACO now studying her with something akin to clinical dispassion.

“You do know what you’re doing,” Hoshi remarked. Cole’s eyes twinkled.

“I did warn you, ma’am,” she said. Sato shook her head before smiling.

“Hoshi,” she said. “My name is Hoshi.”

“And I’m Amanda. Pleased to meet you, Hoshi.” Before Sato could continue, the lift suddenly
shuddered and the door slid open, revealing C Deck. A trio of Kelby’s engineers stood there, harried expressions on their faces. The moment the door retracted, the wall panel crackled to life and Malcolm’s voice emerged.

“Attention, damage control personnel,” the recording announced, and all three of the engineers groaned. “The personnel inside the turbolift are to be considered badly injured and require immediate medical attention.”

“That man needs to get a hobby,” Crewman Mammana muttered as he stepped into the lift and hit the comm. button. “Simulated medical emergency in alpha lift,” the crewman declared flatly.

“This is Phlox,” came the instant reply and Hoshi had to smile at the unbridled enthusiasm in the doctor’s voice. “I’m on my way!”

“Damn,” Amanda abruptly said. “I wish I could bottle his energy and sell it.”

“You’re supposed to be very badly injured,” Hoshi pointed out with a smile.

“Right.” The corporal turned her attention to the sleepy-looking engineer. “It hurts,” she said in an astoundingly bored-sounding voice. “Oh, God, oh, God. It hurts so much.” When Mammana gave her a flat, unamused look, Cole’s lips curled up into a mocking smile. “I don’t want to die,” the MACO continued, still sounding like she was reading off a script. “Oh, God, the pain.”

Hoshi chuckled.

And decided right then that she was going to be friends with Amanda Cole.
An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 456 days (399 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's June, 2153.

Every part of his body was sore.

It wasn’t anywhere near as bad as the first week after he’d rescued T’Pol from that Ferran jackass, when his body made him pay for the days of over-exertion and constant abuse, but Trip was finding it increasingly difficult to move without wincing. He wished that he could blame it on anyone but himself, but the intense physical exercise and training necessary these days to keep his mind off T’Pol’s glorious naked form and what it felt like when her body touched his and the sounds she made when … dammit. Blowing out a frustrated breath, he concentrated once more on the mental image of a fire and slowly began feeding his emotions into the flames. If they were going to pull this off, then he needed to have his head clear and the very last thing they needed was for his errant thoughts to set T’Pol off again, no matter that the last four or five times that’d happened, the end result had been very enjoyable for both of them. The way her eyes had gleamed with hunger when she stepped into the reactor room, her uniform already halfway off and her skin flushed, had caused him …

Sonuvabitch. There he went again. Already, he could sense the primal part of T’Pol stirring despite her best efforts to suppress the reaction. Trip sighed and decided to try something else. Clearly this ‘emotions into the flames’ thing that T’Pol used wasn’t working as well as it should, so he wondered if pure mathematics might be a better way to go. Closing his eyes, he breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth.


He’d reached one hundred twenty-seven before he felt sufficiently in control of himself to risk speaking to the woman currently ensconced behind the commander’s station on the bridge. With a quick glance to double-check that everything was squared away, Trip reached for the wall panel and hit the transmit button.

“Ready,” he said simply, noting how flat his voice sounded even to his own ears. Part of that was no doubt due to the EV suit helmet he was wearing, but there was also no denying that the emotion suppression techniques he was learning for the benefit of them both were also a factor. At first, they had thought T’Pol was the only one affected by this … partial blood fever he kept almost triggering (accidentally, of course), but Trip quickly learned that he would experience some weird symptoms himself sometimes. Constant headaches, frequent double-vision (which honestly wasn’t all that bad when he was looking at a naked T’Pol – two of her was always better than just one), persistent arousal, not to mention the occasional muscle spasm that came out of nowhere. He knew for a fact that T’Pol was absolutely terrified that she’d given him Pa’nar even if she didn’t want to vocalize her fear, but Trip thought it was just a sort of feedback coming from her confused bio-chemistry.

Or at least he hoped that was the case.

“Acknowledged,” T’Pol said in response. At the back of his mind, Trip could feel the tangled knot
of her emotions as she powered up the *T’Muna-Doth*’s impulse drive. She was excited to be getting back into space, even if it was only for twenty or thirty minutes (hopefully less, if they were lucky); worried that he was going to be putting himself into danger; frustrated that all of their efforts to repair the communications array with the supplies at hand had failed; and relieved that he had managed to effectively control his libido for a change. Despite thoroughly enjoying their sexual relationship – the woman could be insatiable at times and the intensity of their respective orgasms had increased so much so that they were bordering on the painful – T’Pol continued to struggle with embarrassment over just how much power he seemed to have over her, power that he could barely control half the time. And speaking of which…

One hundred thirty-one. One hundred thirty-seven. One hundred thirty-nine.

The *T’Muna-Doth* shuddered slightly and a subtle rumble echoed throughout the ship as the main drive came online. Trip tilted his head and closed his eyes, listening for any hint of engine trouble, but the old girl was purring like a kitten. He smiled and patted the bulkhead affectionately, all the while wishing he wasn’t wearing this stupid EV suit so he could feel the warm metal under his hand. Idly, he wondered how the High Command would react to the knowledge that he had basically torn apart one of their still classified warp drives (despite this hull having been retired for forty years) and put it back together better than before. He spent a few seconds imagining himself explaining just how antiquated certain Vulcan designs actually were to Soval and Tos and that jackass from the Science Directorate whose name he couldn’t remember that had been such a common fixture at the Warp Five complex back before *Enterprise* was even drafted. Could their eyebrows even go that high or would they strain something?

The daydream made him smile.

“Two minutes to target,” T’Pol’s voice announced, breaking into his train of thought, and Trip shifted awkwardly, once more checking his gear. The tools he had strapped to his thighs were secure, the uncomfortable Vulcan EV suit checked out as functional with a full canister of oxygen set for human consumption, and the hand-portable grappler was ready. He grimaced – if only they’d been able to fix his damned communicator, this little space walk wouldn’t even be necessary, but no, that stupid thing just had to have managed to get even more screwed up thanks to his little ice-water dip over a year earlier.

With the communications array aboard the *T’Muna* little more than scrap metal, T’Pol had suggested they retrieve the spy-sat *Enterprise* left in orbit and cannibalize it for parts. The transmitter dish could hopefully be jury-rigged to provide at least short-range comms – maybe a couple of light-minutes or light-hours in terms of range, which was certainly better than their current status consisting of running lights and Morse code – and, if they were very lucky, it might even have a live connection to the nearest subspace amplifier, in which case they could send a request for aid. Unfortunately, with the *T’Muna*’s comm. array shot and the Starfleet communicator only good for target practice, someone would need to manually open the satellite’s access port, hack into the system network, and override the auto-destruct built in, and Trip was really the only option. T’Pol was an excellent scientist and rapidly becoming a superlative engineer under his tutelage, but he’d had been part of the design team for this particular satellite and could take the damned thing apart blindfolded.

To minimize the chance that the warlike Ekosians would notice the *T’Muna* from ground-based telescopes, they had waited until a particularly cloudy day to try this (as if that would actually work, he thought wryly) and even now, a minute and thirty seconds from the point of no return, Trip had to shake his head at their crazy plan. Using the ship’s tractor beam wasn’t an option – these satellites had built-in detection software and, if moved out of its orbital alignment without first receiving an authorization code, the entire thing would self-destruct – so Trip had hit on the idea of using one of the personal grapplers instead. T’Pol would get him close enough to it, he’d fire the line, hit retract,
and go to the satellite so he could do his thing. She would then get clear of the planetary mass and
give the entire system an active sensor sweep for anything else Enterprise might have left behind.

*This is a really stupid idea,* Trip mused. He shook his head before suddenly realizing that he hadn’t
actually lost the track of his count. *Five hundred forty-one. Five hundred forty-seven. Five hundred fifty-seven.*

“Target in sight,” T’Pol declared. “Stand by.” A sharp spike of emotion stabbed through their
mysterious connection and Trip smiled slightly once he deciphered its meaning.

“I’ll be fine,” he promised. *Five hundred sixty-three. Five hundred sixty-nine.*

“And I will hold you to that,” T’Pol retorted tightly. “Evacuating oxygen from airlock now.” Trip
hefted the remarkably heavy grappler and lifted it onto his shoulder while aiming it in the direction of
the sealed hatch. *Five hundred seventy-one. Five hundred seventy-seven.*

“Initiating retrograde burn,” T’Pol said a moment later. “Outer airlock door opening.” Without a sound, the named hatch slid
away and Trip’s breath caught at the sight before him. Ekos hung suspended against a backdrop of
complete darkness, with millions of tiny stars glittering and sparkling like jewels. One of the
planetary moons could just be made out, but the other two as well as the sister planet were concealed
behind the blue-green orb that looked so much like Earth that it hurt. As he took in the planet, Trip
couldn’t help but wonder what his family was doing at this very moment. A barbeque perhaps?
Lizzie’s birthday was coming up and the Tuckers often celebrated it early so everybody could be there…

He shook the moment off. There was work to do.

“Activating grappler,” he said while reaching up to hit the power button atop the large targeting
array. He leaned forward so his faceplate touched the device and it instantly snapped alive. Vulcan
characters crawled down the side of the heads-up display as the software identified numerous objects
in range over the planet. Most were normal stellar detritus captured by Ekos’ gravity that hadn’t yet
reached terminal orbit decay, but the spy-satellite – mocked up to look like a tiny asteroid – gave off
a slightly different mass signature that identified it as unnatural. Trip inhaled. *Six hundred forty-one. Six hundred forty-three.*

“Firing now,” he declared before depressing the trigger. The grappler
vibrated slightly against his shoulder and the cable shot out, vanishing against the darkness of space.
“Got it,” Trip said when the viewer flashed a message. He crouched and placed the grappler on the
deck before attaching the reel line to his EV suit. “Beginning retraction,” he stated before hitting the
appropriate button. In the instant before he was yanked out of the *T’Muna-Doth,* he heard T’Pol
speak once more, her voice so soft that he almost missed it and thick with emotion he doubted most
humans would even notice.

“Be careful.”

Within seconds, he reached the satellite. His mag-boots activated the moment his feet hit the faux-
rock surface and Trip winced at the shock of impact as it traveled up his legs and spine. *Definitely
gonna need some neuropressure tonight,* he mused as he knelt and triggered the helmet lamp. He
finally found the access panel – it was a meter to his left, facing away from the planet – and quickly
located the concealed button that flipped it open. A single green light informed him that satellite was
functional but that there was no live connection with a subspace amplifier. He sighed. Of course not.
That would make this too easy, wouldn’t it?

Accessing the satellite controls took longer than it should have thanks to some system damage that he
couldn’t quite explain. There were some unusual scars around the access panel that almost looked
like someone had tried to pry it open with a drill or crowbar. Trip frowned but decided to ignore it
for the moment – it was probably one of Enterprise’s sloppier engineers, like Masaro, who screwed
up and then tried to hide the evidence of his error – while he concentrated on inputting his command codes, not an easy task thanks to the thick EV suit gloves no matter that the pad was intentionally oversized for that very reason. The moment the system accepted his codes, he could feel a subtle tremor as the satellite began powering down.

“T’Pol, can you hear me?” he asked, glancing in the direction of the *T’Muna*. The response was almost instant.

“Yes.”

“We’re good to go,” Trip said. “Auto-destruct is deactivated and the satellite is ready for pick-up.” Once again, he smiled at the rush of alien emotion he felt for the briefest of seconds. If he understood how to send feelings or thoughts, he’d try to reciprocate her affectionate relief … although from the subtle shift he felt across their connection, Trip wondered if she got the meaning anyway.

“Stand by,” T’Pol instructed and bare seconds later, the Vulcan starship blotted out the exquisite view of Ekos as she moved it into position. The tractor beam activated almost instantly, grasping both Trip and the deactivated satellite with an implacable grip and directing them toward the still open airlock hatch at the base of the *T’Muna-Doth*. When landed on a planetary surface, the hatch would be unseen as the deployed landing struts would conceal it, but here in space, it made ship-to-ship transfers surprisingly easy.

“We’re in,” Trip announced once the bottom of the satellite cleared the open hatch. He reached for the nearest handhold and pulled himself away from the heavy spy-sat. “I’m clear of the door,” he declared. With a soft vibration that caused his fingers the tingle, the hatch silently closed.

“Equalizing interior pressure,” T’Pol said. “Internal gravity being restored.” Trip winced as he felt his body weight slowly return to normal – did she have it set for Vulcan normal? Or was he just that tired? The spy-sat dropped lightly to the deck and he reached for the straps that would hold in place. “Oxygen system reads amber … you may remove your helmet.” Trip smirked at the hint of sheepishness he heard in her voice when she quickly elaborated – on a human starship, it would have been green, not amber, and he suspected the vague sense of distraction he could feel through their magical bond had caused her to momentarily forget that. His amusement faded a moment later when he wondered why she would be distracted. He hadn’t screwed up and triggered another almost *plak tow*, had he? Trip shook his head as soon as he realized that wasn’t the case at all.

He didn’t bother stripping the entire EV suit off before heading toward the command deck, pausing only long enough to store the helmet and control pack in their proper place. T’Pol was sitting at the sensors station, her attention riveted on the data readouts dominating the remarkable display monitor that wrapped around the entire bridge. Trip gave it a quick look before frowning.

“Something up?” he asked.

“There are multiple artificial satellites in orbit over both planets,” she replied. She nodded toward one section of the curving monitor. “They appear to be functioning as global positioning systems.” One of her perfect eyebrows climbed. “The technology required for these satellites far exceeds what appears to be norm on Ekos and I am unsure how *Enterprise* failed to detect them earlier.” Trip glanced in the direction of the ladder, suddenly recalling the weird scratch marks on the surface of the spy-sat they’d just retrieved. “Trip?”

“Somebody tried to access our satellite,” he said. “There was some surface scarring – a drill, I think – but I didn’t think it was that important.” T’Pol pursed her lips and input some additional commands. A second later, another section of the viewscreen changed to what looked like a frequency scanner.
“Detecting a low-band radio transmitter on the base of the satellite,” she revealed. “It cannot penetrate the hull of the T’Muna-Doth.”

“Still,” Trip muttered as he slid into the commander’s station, “we probably shouldn’t hang around here like this.”

“Agreed.” T’Pol did something at her console and a flight plan suddenly appeared on the main display. Trip’s eyes widened slightly – it did not take them back to Ekos, but rather to the dark side of the nearby moon. He gave her a look and she responded with a single, upraised eyebrow. “I have not completed my sensor sweep of the system,” she revealed.

“And you think whoever planted the bug on our satellite might come looking to see why it went silent,” he guessed.

“That thought had crossed my mind,” T’Pol admitted with that not-quite there smile of hers. “We have sufficient food stores to remain in orbit for a solar week,” she said, “and you have often stated the only way to test systems is-”

“T’Pol.” She broke off her explanation and looked at him. “You don’t need to explain,” Trip said. “I agree with you.” He tapped a series of keys on the pilot’s station and the T’Muna’s impulse drive responded at once. The graceful ship rapidly accelerated, banking slowly in response to the preprogrammed route, and in mere seconds passed behind the moon. Once satisfied that station-keeping mode was activated, Trip stood. “I’m going to go clean up,” He said, wincing at the slight twinge in his side. Stupid bear, he grumbled mentally.

“Once you are done,” T’Pol instructed, her head bent over the sensor board, “let me know. Your … discomfort is distracting.” Once again, she offered him that almost-smile of hers. “Neuropressure will help.” Trip smirked.

“I didn’t want to beg,” he said as started down the ladder. Abruptly, he realized that he’d lost track of his count and sighed.

She derived a great deal of satisfaction from watching her mate sleep.

It was an illogical waste of time that could be better spent attending to her duties aboard the *T'Muna-Doth*, but in the weeks since she and Trip had become intimate, T'Pol had found it increasingly difficult to pry herself away from his sleeping form. He looked so peaceful, so innocent, so … young while he slept that she could spend hours simply observing him. Even the scars from the bear attack – which he hated with a terrible passion – could not mar his beauty, and in those twilight hours, it took every gram of T'Pol's willpower to keep from touching him.

And sometimes, like this morning, even that was not enough.

Trip’s skin was slightly cool to her touch, although she had long since become accustomed to this fact and, in fact, had grown to appreciate it more than she had thought possible. Their differing body temperatures added an unexpectedly exotic flavor to their sexual relations and T'Pol flushed lightly at the memories that abruptly flickered across her mind’s eye. Her strict upbringing in T'Les’ home had left her ill prepared for the sensations and feelings Trip could evoke in her with nothing more than a heated look, but the part of her that remained uneasy with how her life had unfolded was rapidly becoming overwhelmed by the contentment her relations with Trip provided. He brought something to her life that had been missing since her father was lost, something that she was loath to give up no matter that she sometimes felt it made her less a Vulcan.

Eleven days had elapsed since their recovery of the surveillance satellite and two since their return planetside. There had been no further sign of whoever was responsible for the various global positioning satellites arrayed over the two planets, although T'Pol had detected some curious energy patterns on Ekos’ sister world. If their supplies had not been nearly expended, she would have recommended that they investigate, but in the end, decided it was too risky. Trip needed more food than she did and the few remaining edible protein packs were insufficient for him, particularly in light of the considerable physical exertion he had been doing for quite some time now. In between daily sexual encounters – often two or three times a day, although they were finally discovering a long overdue equilibrium in that regard – her mate was becoming quite proficient with both *Suus mahna* and the lirpa, a fact that never ceased to amuse and arouse her. Trip had been surprised when she explained the role the ancient weapon played in Vulcan tradition, but insisted on learning how to wield it nonetheless.

“This is an important part of your culture,” he said when she asked him why, “so that means it’s important to me too.”

And, after they recovered from the sexual encounter those simple words had spawned, she’d acceded to his request and began teaching him. There was something quite appealing about seeing a shirtless Trip with a lirpa in his hands.

A subtle chime echoed throughout the *T'Muna-Doth*, causing T'Pol to stir and slowly pull away.
from where she was stretched out before Trip. Silently, she slid out of bed and pulled on the undershirt he had been wearing the previous day. Her illogical preference for his clothes never ceased to make Trip smile and, as he became less outwardly emotive to assist her in maintaining her own stability, it was always pleasant to see a hint of the man he once was. She paused beside the bed, her eyes automatically tracking over Trip’s sleeping form, and T’Pol swallowed the sadness that suddenly swelled within her stomach. It was unfair, she reflected bitterly, that he had to change so much just for her. She sighed and caressed his lips briefly with the fingers of her right hand before reaching for her pants and heading toward the door.

The results of her latest scan were flashing on the main monitor when she climbed into the command deck and T’Pol studied them with a slight frown. Upon their landing, she had programmed the T’Muna-Doth’s sensors to sweep the atmosphere for indications of extraplanetary activity. While not conclusive, there was certainly sufficient evidence to indicate that someone was routinely traveling between Ekos and her sister planet using what appeared to be primitive nuclear pulse propulsion. T’Pol unconsciously raised an eyebrow and directed the sensors to concentrate on the global positioning satellites. If she could access their crude software algorithms, not only could she and Trip utilize the GPS when they inevitably departed this island to obtain additional supplies, but they might also be able to identify the creator of the satellites. Providing they were not hostile (which was never a guarantee in this galaxy), they might prove to be beneficial allies.

Of equal importance was the data downloaded from the retrieved surveillance satellite. By feeding it into the T’Muna-Doth’s computers, T’Pol was able to get a far more accurate overview of Ekos than any of the local maps. She now had a solid understanding of where the largest population centers were located at, where prominent military facilities could be found (and thus, avoided), and had even developed a hypothesis concerning the detonation of the atomic weapon based on this visual evidence. If she was interpreting the scans made by the satellite correctly, ground zero for the fission device was deep in the heart of a densely populated continent and occurred on a military testing facility. It seemed probable that the scientists responsible had grossly miscalculated the destructive yield of the weapon and, as a result, been responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths of their compatriots in their rush to produce a decisive victory.

Of course, she had also not ruled out sabotage. On this world, it seemed just as probable that an outside force was responsible for the tragedy that appeared to triggered a regional conflict.

Using the T’Muna-Doth’s sensors to intercept the various radio transmissions on the planet was not difficult, and T’Pol scanned through a number of different stations before finally settling on one from the continent of Tandos that seemed to focus on the Ekosian equivalent of jazz. The instruments were obviously not the same as what would have been found on Earth, but the emotions at the heart of the music were certainly no different. A great number of the songs seemed to be overly commercialized, as if an outside force had dictated to the musicians what was required of them, and T’Pol was quickly able to discern which pieces were intended to act as propaganda for the regional government and which were not. A surprising number of pieces bordered on the seditious if she comprehended the meaning behind the words.

Every twenty minutes, the music was interrupted by a news broadcast, usually detailing ‘heroic victories’ against the enemy, the identity of which was often left unclear, or the ‘good works’ of the Alliance government. On the third broadcast, however, the canned news program was replaced by a live update announcing the confirmed execution of Staff-Adjutant sut’Tanaros Mikal Ferran and three of his lowborn co-conspirators – among them, Pater Undil – for treason against the state. The broadcast went on to detail Ferran’s supposed crimes, but T’Pol heard none of it. Instead, she powered off the radio transmission and retreated to the meditation chamber.

Surak asked, “Can you return life to what you kill?”
And T’Pol knew that, ultimately, she had killed Ferran and Undil, even if her hands had not been on the weapons that took their lives. Trip would no doubt say that they had deserved their fates, that justice had been done for those who had been murdered by the two, and indeed, a part of her was pleased that both men were dead, but Surak’s teachings were clear that this sort of thinking led to the barbarism her culture had put behind them. She frowned – when was it appropriate to do violence in the name of Vulcan, she wondered. And how could the High Command still claim to follow Surak’s tenets when so many of their actions were diametrically opposed to what the Father of Logic taught?

She was still trying to meditate when Trip woke and the pleasant feel of his sleepy mind automatically reaching out toward her made T’Pol’s lips quirk upward slightly. When he entered the meditation chamber long minutes later, he was already dressed.

“So that’s where my shirt got off to,” he said in lieu of a more traditional greeting as he crouched before her. T’Pol gave him a quick look, hoping he did not notice the subtle flush of emerald crawling up her neck. From the soft, affectionate smile he gave her, though, he did see it, but thankfully said nothing. Instead, Trip caressed the side of her cheek with two fingers and the warm hum of his mind brushed against hers. T’Pol automatically leaned into his touch but was surprised when she didn’t feel the rush of blood fever arousal that usually accompanied such gestures.

But the moment was shattered when Trip’s stomach growled.

T’Pol looked up at him, one of her eyebrows climbing in amusement even as she struggled to contain the smile the threatened to spoil her poise. Her mate rolled his eyes before sighing.

“The sun isn’t up yet,” he said calmly, “so I’m going to go try and catch some fish before it does.” T’Pol opened her mouth to comment, but Trip continued over her. “I need some real food, not those damned mango-nuts you seem to like.” His expression barely changed, although she could feel the hint of suppressed disgust he felt at the idea of consuming another of the tropical fruits. “I figure it can’t be that hard to make a good fishing rod out of nothing but sticks, right?”

“I suppose not,” T’Pol conceded although she had given very little thought about how one would go about constructing such a device. Even the thought of consuming such a creature caused her stomach to squirm in discomfort although she did not begrudge Trip for doing so.

“I could always try spear fishing if I can’t get the rod to work,” Trip mused. T’Pol let one corner of her mouth curl up.

“And failing that,” she remarked, “you will have your phase pistol.”

“I’m not going to shoot the fish, T’Pol,” Trip retorted with a shake of his head. He pushed himself to his feet. “When I get back,” he said, “I want to give our transporter another try.” T’Pol pursed her lips but did not comment about their ongoing attempts to construct a functional replica of Doctor Erickson’s matter teleportation device. Thus far, thanks to their limited supplies aboard the T’Muna-Doth, they had been unable to maintain pattern cohesion for more than twenty percent of their attempts, even with the inclusion of the transmitter tags that T’Pol had recommended.

Once Trip departed, T’Pol returned to her meditation, but found herself unable to fully concentrate, knowing as she did how accident prone her errant human could be. She exhaled softly before rising and making her way to the command deck. A quick glance at the sensor display allowed her to easily locate Trip – he was already near the beach, some fifteen meters away from the T’Muna-Doth – and T’Pol input additional commands into the board. With a subtle hum, one of the stealthy aerial sensor drones launched from the port tube and began a slow circuit of the island with instructions to keep a silent watch over Trip.
Just in case.

Easing back slightly in the chair, T'Pol brought up the orbital scans of the continent Tandos once more so she could study them. They had hoped to have the transporter functioning before their food stores were completely expended as it would make obtaining supplies from the Alliance far less dangerous than attempting to obtain them physically. Unfortunately, it appeared that time had run out and, unless Trip successfully pulled a metaphorical – what was that human phrase? – monkey out of his engineering hat, they would be forced to risk venturing into one of the cities before they could even consider departing the planet and begin what could very well be a long journey to civilization. There was already the matter of the deuterium aboard the *T'Muna-Doth* being inadequate for an extended trip, but without food? That would only lead to a slow suicide.

With a soft sigh, T'Pol leaned forward and pushed all other concerns away. If they did end up being forced to enter an Ekosian city as it appeared was likely, then she wanted to have a target already selected.
416 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's June, 2153.

This chapter is set several weeks before 3.01 "The Xindi."

Once she was off duty, Erika took a walk.

It had become a habit of hers in recent months, ever since the mess with Lieutenant Kelby and the Vissian cogenitor, and was mostly intended to act as her ‘open door’ time. Through the department heads, Erika let it be known that she was available to talk with any member of the crew on any subject while she was walking around. At first, no one seemed to take her offer seriously, which gave her plenty of time to just get familiar with Enterprise, something that Starfleet’s rush to put her back into the field had always prevented. Rather than stick to the places she found more familiar – the bridge, the science labs, the mess deck – she began poking around in areas she’d otherwise have little need to visit. Engineering, for example, where she insisted on Kelby putting her to work so she had a better understanding of what Rostov’s people did – and they were right: cleaning the impulse manifolds was an ideal punishment detail as no one sane really wanted to do that job – or the armoury, where she spent three days helping Crewman Zabel tear down and rebuild one of the phase cannons. She even spent a week in the galley, listening to Chef Killick moan and complain like a superstitious Boomer while she tried to avoid burning water and proved to everyone that she sucked as a cook. Eventually, the crew started accepting her presence, especially when she made a conscious effort to act more like an officer than a diplomat, and she slowly found herself holding court with enlisted men and women who wanted to vent grievances, make suggestions, or just ask questions about things that fell into her area of knowledge.

And finally – finally – Erika started to feel like a member of the crew.

Jonathan had teased her nonstop about her ‘walkabouts,’ even though she had gotten the idea from his stories about how he’d gotten the crew of the Saratoga to accept him shortly after his reassignment to the older ship following the NX-Alpha misadventure. She took his jokes in stride, though, especially when she heard the subtle approval and pride in his voice at her proactive attempts to make a better impression on the crew. For the first time since she came aboard Enterprise, Erika didn’t feel like an outsider. And it was all due to Lieutenant Commander Reed.

“We need to talk,” the armoury officer had told her two weeks after Kelby’s demotion. He had appeared at her cabin long after she went off duty and the first thing she had noticed was that he wasn’t wearing his rank. Erika had been caught completely off guard when he began their ‘off-the-record’ conversation by listing his own deficiencies as an officer and a gentleman with frightening accuracy, so much so that Hernandez had actually started to feel uncomfortable and embarrassed for him. And then, after apologizing for not doing a better job for helping her become part of the crew, he began listing her flaws without any malice in his voice.

It had been an eye-opening experience.

From that point on, Reed had made a visible effort in front of other personnel, both officers and enlisted, to defer to her whenever appropriate. When the captain issued an order that should have
actually come from her, the armoury officer would look to Erika for approval, and whenever
crewmembers came to him with personnel issues, he promptly sent them to her. In return, Hernandez
began actively consulting the lieutenant commander on many shipboard and policy matters to the
point that she realized that she was treating him as if he were her de facto number two as well. Both
Lieutenant Kelby and Petty Officer Rostov followed Reed’s example without hesitation, and slowly,
the rest of the crew began to do the same. Jonathan was actually the last person aboard who seemed
aware of the subtle shift of power, but he was so busy dealing with his own issues – Erika wasn’t
ignorant of the routine visits to sickbay or what they entailed; she had cornered Phlox out of concern
that her former lover’s career was about to implode and the doctor had assured her that he was taking
steps to help Archer – that she forgave him for not noticing.

Although, now that she thought about it, Jonathan had started to act more like the man she once
knew at around the same time that Reed paid her a visit…

As it did every time she thought about Commander Reed, Erika’s thoughts turned to the improper
sexual relationship he was engaged in with the MACO corporal, Amanda Cole. The moment she’d
become aware of the relationship, Hernandez had retreated to her cabin where she spent several
hours researching Starfleet regulations, not in order to punish Reed, but rather to find a loophole that
would excuse what he was doing. Officially, Starfleet fraternization regs were pretty clear and since
Jonathan had effectively incorporated the MACOs into the command structure before they even
reached this damned Expanse – despite technically outranking them, Hayes fell below Kelby and
Mayweather in the chain of command – Cole was definitely considered to be one of Reed’s
subordinates. Erika had briefly considered making a discreet suggestion to the armoury officer to
cease and desist, but after having seen him in the gym, seemingly trying to kill himself with exercise
so he wouldn’t have to face his demons, she’d decided to simply hold her tongue. If this dalliance
with Cole – who, according to her declassified education transcript, was well on her way to
becoming a clinical psychologist – helped Mister Reed grieve, then who was Erika to get in the way?

So instead, she’d surreptitiously begun to enable the relationship. Cole, she assigned – with Hayes’
approval – to sickbay where the corporal would no doubt begin picking Phlox’s brain and hopefully
obtain new weapons to help Reed through his recovery. To cover for the fact that Cole was quite
often in Reed’s cabin (which was in officer country), Erika then proposed a billeting arrangement for
the MACOs that would spread them all across the ship rather than concentrating them solely in one
area. Not only would it allow them to more easily integrate into the crew (always a plus), it would
also help in the event of a boarding action. Naturally, when Jonathan approved it, she then relocated
Corporal Cole to a cabin close to Reed’s. Erika had been quite pleased with herself at that stroke of
subtle manipulation, right up to the point when Jonathan showed up at her cabin later that very night.

“That was good work today,” he told her with that all too familiar smile of his. “How long have you
known about Malcolm and Cole?” Jonathan then asked with the casual air of someone who wasn’t
as oblivious as everyone thought he was. They’d talked then, like they used to even before they
started sleeping together, and it reminded Erika of what she’d always liked about this man. It
shouldn’t have surprised her that Jonathan was looking the other way in regards to the Reed/Cole
mess – he’d have been a hypocrite if he hadn’t given their own past – but when he’d sheepishly
revealed that he had known about it from the first day thanks to insomnia that had sent him to the
gym where he’d overheard some of their initial conversation, Hernandez had laughed out loud.

“Good evening, ma’am,” Crewman Wilcox greeted as he strode by her. His words snapped her out
of her momentary distraction, and Erika gave him the engineer a quick nod. Ever since she’d decided
against charging him with insubordination after their previous confrontation, the damage controlman
had gone out of his way to treat her with respect and Hernandez knew it had made an impact on his
fellow engineers.
“How’s the hand?” she asked with a smile. Wilcox flushed in slight embarrassment – he’d broken two of his fingers during one of the MACO training sessions and still hadn’t quite lived down the blue streak he’d cursed afterward – before showing her his hand and waggling his fingers.

“Doc fixed me up, ma’am,” he replied. “Could have done without the eels, though.”

“You should see what he recommends for headaches,” Erika retorted, and Wilcox shuddered theatrically before continuing on his way once she gave him another nod.

The mess still bore the evidence of Ambassador Soval’s most recent lecture on diplomatic training seminar, although the Vulcan himself was nowhere in sight for which Erika heaved a silent sigh of relief. Just over three months had passed since that decon nightmare and she still hadn’t found a way to really interact with the ambassador without blushing. By mutual agreement, they didn’t talk about it at all, although Erika sometimes lamented that the unexpected encounter had been the last really good sex she’d had since … well, since she and Jon broke up. At first, when those thoughts struck late at night while she was lying alone in bed, Erika had been suddenly afraid she might be harboring some subconscious desire for the ambassador, but upon further reflection, she’d realized she was just feeling a little sorry for herself because of her long period of celibacy. She wasn’t harboring some unrequited longing for Soval – the very thought about getting involved with a Vulcan just didn’t appeal to her in the slightest and she had to question the judgment of any human who thought it would be a good idea – and she wondered if having to work alongside Jonathan for the first time in ten years was responsible for the prurient direction her thoughts went to.

Of course, knowing that Phlox had been there in decon, watching while she was in the most vulnerable state a person could get … she grimaced.

And then, just because the universe had a perverse sense of humor, Hernandez realized that the doctor was there in the mess. Fortunately, he didn’t seem to notice her, so engrossed was he with whatever it was that he was doing with Lieutenant Sato at their table. For a moment, Erika considered joining them – she had missed dinner, after all, thanks to the overly long briefing she’d had to sit through with the science department as Lieutenant Ling reported their findings over the last few days (which could have easily been boiled down to a simple ‘we haven’t found anything of actual note, Commander,’ instead of the abundant thirty syllable words that were all synonymous with ‘nothing.’) From their body language, though, Hernandez suspected the doctor and Lieutenant Sato were discussing something personal – perhaps Hoshi was finally seeking grief counseling? – and Erika decided to simply get something small and take it with her.

Crewman Masaro was at the beverage dispenser, dividing his attention between making a cup of coffee and shooting unusual looks in the direction of the Denobulan doctor and Lieutenant Sato. When Erika approached, he mumbled a quick greeting before darting for the door, nearly forgetting his coffee in his haste. Hernandez shook her head – according to what she’d read between the lines in Kelby’s crew evals (and Tucker’s as well), Masaro was technically astute but admittedly odd duck, with a remarkable talent for coaxing a little extra out of the injectors.

But that didn’t stop him from being just a little creepy.

From the mess, she wandered toward the command center, noting with an utter lack of surprise that Mayweather and Kelby were ensconced within. Since they’d arrived in the Expanse a week earlier, the helmsman had spending all of his free time trying to plot successful routes through this part of space and had been coordinating often with the chief engineer regarding just what Enterprise could handle. The two men made an unusual but surprisingly effective team, and she spent thirty minutes listening to them debrief her about the difficulties they were facing. Ultimately, she simply recommended they bring Lieutenant Ling’s science team into the equation – something that they
should have thought of themselves – before excusing herself and leaving them to their argument-slash-discussion.

On impulse, Erika decided to pay one of the hydroponics bays a visit and was pleased to discover it empty. She took a seat in between the larger plants and breathed in the calming scents that filled the air around her. Once, an eternity ago, she’d loved sitting in her grandmother’s garden and listen to the elder woman regale a wide-eyed innocent with unlikely tales about what was waiting for her. Even now, thirty … something years later, Erika could still see the wrinkled face of the woman she’d been named for and it made her smile.

She had lost track of how much she sat there, simply relaxing and enjoying smells, when the shrill chirp of the intraship sounded.

“Archer to Hernandez.” Erika sighed – so much for having an uneventful night – and rose to her feet.

“Hernandez here,” she replied once she crossed the hydroponics bay and located the wall panel.

“I need you on the bridge,” Jonathan declared. “We just detected a freighter that’s about three hours out and I sent Malcolm to his quarters.” Erika nodded, even though Archer couldn’t see her – Lieutenant Commander Reed had been on watch, but it made sense to have him get some rest just in case this freighter turned out to be hostile. And if they were very lucky, this ship might give them a lead on where the Xindi might be found.

“I’m on my way,” she said. At the door, she paused, giving the bay another long look in the hopes she would be able to remember this sense of peace. Sighing, Erika turned away and began walking toward the nearest turbolift.

And behind her, the overhead lights blinked out.
They waited until midnight to make their move.

Their target was a military convoy – seven trucks carrying food supplies to the northern front – and they had intentionally held off from making their move until now. The caravan’s route had taken them into rugged, mountainous terrain, and the road it was following curled around some of the smaller foothills like a coiled serpent. Rarely was the dusty path wide enough for more than a single truck, which forced the convoy to travel in a slow, single-file column. The soldiers themselves were sufficiently alert to be a problem – according to the radio reports T’Pol had intercepted, a particularly troublesome band of highborn partisans was making things difficult for the Tandos Alliance on this part of the continent.

Originally, the plan had been for him and T’Pol to sneak into a city once they located a supply depot that met their criteria, but the Alliance had tightened their stranglehold on the population centers to the point that doing so was no longer an option. Trip had even suggested they try a different continent, but that hadn’t worked out either, especially once they realized that they couldn’t understand the local language without the use of a translator. Continent number four was even more troublesome, as its inhabitants were all much darker than even Travis, so they naturally returned to Tandos where they at least had a rudimentary grasp of the political situation.

All of which led Trip to his current situation: perched at the top of a fairly large mountain overlooking a caravan of vehicles, parked for the night, in the middle of the woods. He was dressed entirely in black, wearing what T’Pol had identified as a ‘covert excursion uniform.’ Most of the outfit was skin-tight, but the hardened chest and back pieces provided some decent protection against small arms fire should this entire operation blow up around him (which, knowing his luck, was better than sixty percent likely.) A throat mike and earpiece made communication hands-free, which would be essential for a stealth mission like this. The night-vision goggles that were part of the uniform’s hood doubled as a heads-up display that could receive valuable sensor information from the nearby T’Muna-Doth, and Trip had to admit that he was looking forward to experimenting with them.

Even so, he’d made a point of not asking her why an exploratory ship would even have equipment like this aboard. Although she’d insist otherwise, T’Pol always got a little tetchy when he questioned the High Command’s more illogical decisions.

“Sentries are moving,” T’Pol’s voice informed him, and even across the comm.-line, he could hear the tension in her voice. Underneath the mask that concealed his face, Trip smiled tightly. This entire operation had been her idea, but Tucker had lobbied hard to keep her sidelined aboard the T’Muna-Doth while he did the more physical (and dangerous) part, no matter that her training would normally make her a far better choice for this task. Having some idea how her brain worked now, he’d made a point of relying entirely on logic when framing his argument. First, he’d pointed out that there weren’t any women in this convoy and, if it went south, he could more easily pass as a local. The person on the ground was also going to need an expert sensor operator to act as an overwatch, and
the one left behind on the ship would need to be able to easily divide their attention between the sensors, the communication system, piloting the T'Muna, and operating the transporter when the time was right. Sure, Trip could theoretically do all that, but she was far, far better at it than he was. Mentioning how her hand still occasionally trembled – not as often as before, but enough that it was noticeable even to him – wasn’t necessary since she knew better than he did how often that happened and T'Pol was nothing if not honest regarding her own capabilities. He also factored in their ignorance about just how far her image had been disseminated by Ferran’s people following her capture, and, when those arguments didn’t sway her, Trip had simply let himself envision how unbelievably sexy she’d look in the covert excursion uniform. Afterward, once they recovered and dressed, T'Pol had grudgingly conceded that he was ‘probably’ the best choice to go in on the ground.

Trip didn’t gloat even once. Instead, he simply pretended like that had been her idea in the first place. It was always safer that way.

“Do I have a go?” he asked softly, double-checking the rappelling gear as he spoke.

“Stand by.” T’Pol was silent for a moment that seemed to stretch on forever. Just as Trip was about to speak or fidget or just do something, she spoke. “Go.”

Without hesitation, Trip sprang forward and jumped over the ledge. He fell quickly, but the Vulcan deceleration cable attached to his back crouching slowed him just enough so that, when he hit the ground long heartbeats later, it was softly enough that he barely felt the impact. Automatically, he slapped a hand on the quick-release button on the center of his chestplate, detaching the cable from the harness, and it retracted up the cliff face without a sound, leaving Trip crouching in the darkness. He glanced in either direction, mostly ignoring the scrawl of Vulcan letters appearing as the integrated heads-up display on the goggles identified numerous different targets while concentrating on trying to locate the target vehicle. When he found it, he darted forward quickly, scrambling up and into the back of the truck. Keeping low – it didn’t have a back cover – he reached into the tiny pack secured to the bicep of his left arm and pulled out the small transmitter tags that T'Pol had designed. If they worked like they were supposed to for a change, they would greatly increase the chances of a successful transport. Each one was barely the size of a quarter, but easily attached to the wooden crates inside the bed of the truck.

“Receiving uplink information,” T’Pol announced. “Initiating transport for tag one.” Trip winced at the soft whine of a transporter beam as it enveloped one of the crates, and eased one of the phase pistols out of its holster – it was the one on his right that fired a significantly lower-powered beam T’Pol was confident would only stun an Ekosian rather than kill them. The other weapon had been modified to fire a full power beam that would be mostly invisible to the naked eye; he had five, maybe six shots with it before the focusing crystal fused and the pistol turned into a projectile weapon good for one throw. “Transport … failed,” T’Pol declared a moment later. “Initiating transport for tag two.” Once more, the transporter beam whined and long seconds passed as the crate dematerialized. “Transport success,” T’Pol said. “Correction,” she stated abruptly and he could hear the frown in her voice. “Transport failed.”

“What happened?” Trip asked softly.

“Molecular de-coherence,” T’Pol answered. “The cargo bay will need to be cleaned,” she added a heartbeat later and Trip winced at the mental picture that painted. He opened his mouth to comment and a jolt of foreign emotion spiked through his brain. “Ekosian bio-signatures approaching your location,” T’Pol warned suddenly. If it wasn’t for the weird sensations in his skull, he’d almost believe she wasn’t the slightest bit worried.
“From where?” Trip hissed. He tensed his muscles in preparation for action.

“North,” T’Pol replied and Trip blinked the moment he realized that he didn’t know what the Vulcan symbol for north was. He glanced once at the remaining two crates that he’d already tagged before mentally flipping a coin and sliding out of the truck bed.

Naturally, he picked the wrong side.

The two sentries froze in surprise when they saw him, but reacted quickly. Both shouted out warnings as they fumbled with their slung rifles and tried to bring the weapons to bear, but Trip was faster and his weapon was already out. He squeezed the trigger of his pistol twice, sending short bursts of phased energy into the chests of the two soldiers. They fell without another sound, dropping to the ground like marionettes whose strings had just been cut, and, although he knew it was dangerous, Trip hesitated for a single, extended heartbeat, his eyes locked on their still forms. He exhaled with relief as soon as he saw they were still breathing.

“Move!” T’Pol hissed through the comm.-line, the obvious concern in her voice snapping him out of his momentary hesitation, and Trip threw himself into a sprint down the road. “Multiple bio-signs converging on your location,” she continued, and he winced at the sudden flare of fear he felt spike through his brain. Behind him, he could hear shouts of alarm and fear as the Alliance soldiers responded to the cries of the two now unconscious men. Another frisson of terror coursed through him – it wasn’t his – and it was so intense that he actually stumbled in mid-step.

“Not helping;” he growled tightly as he righted himself. Loud cracks pursued him down the trail and the angry whines of bullets screaming past his head sent another jolt of fear through him that was definitely his own. “Lightning strike!” Trip snapped a second before a trio of solid impacts against his back knocked him off balance and sent him tumbling forward. He hit the ground and rolled.

And exactly two seconds later, the space around the convoy exploded with sound and fury.

To someone familiar with advanced technology like Trip, it was clearly a low-yield particle cannon being fired from behind cloud cover, but to the Ekosians, it must have seemed like an astoundingly accurate artillery strike that flattened trees and smashed one of the parked trikes into a smoking wreck.

“Seek cover!” someone from behind him bellowed, and fully half of the soldiers scrambled away from the smoking crater and shattered fragments of a three wheeler. Unfortunately, that left ten or twelve men still in hot pursuit, and none of them seemed inclined toward ignoring him. At a glance, Trip could tell their already substandard night vision had been spoiled by the explosion if the way they were blinking rapidly or rubbing their eyes was any indication, so he took the opportunity to spring back to his feet. Down the road he ran, thunder pounding in his ears, beating time with the trihammer that was his heartbeat. He was vaguely aware of T’Pol’s voice, but the overpowering (and distinctly alien) fear coursing through his veins made it hard for him to focus on anything but escape.

The sound of gas-powered engines snapped him out of the weird as hell brain meltdown, and Trip drew in a sharp breath the instant he realized that there were ATVs coming up the road. He skidded to a halt, glancing quickly in the direction he came – there were still a number of Ekosians coming toward him, all armed with longarms and if his ears weren’t deceiving him, they had dogs too – and then to either side of the trail. The mountain face to his immediate left would take too long to climb, and the sheer drop to his right was … it was …

It was his ticket out of here.
“You’ve got me on your screens?” he asked as he slid this phase pistol back into the holster at his side and secured the weapon.

“Yes,” T’Pol replied hesitantly, and Trip could feel the muted buzz of her thoughts pushing against his. She was terrified that he was in mortal danger – which, he had to admit, he kind of was – and that she wasn’t smart enough or fast enough or creative enough to save him. The only thing she had at her disposal was a transporter that barely functioned correctly. Panic and fury were warring within her, and leaking into his thoughts. Trip ground his teeth together – this was worse than the first time he’d gone up in a starship with a mischievous Jon at the helm. How the hell did Vulcans manage to even step foot out of their damned doors?

“Then I need you to catch me,” Trip snapped, fighting the nearly overwhelming urge to fall to the ground and curl up. Instead, he sprang forward once more.

Toward the edge of the cliff.

He half heard, half felt T’Pol’s gasp of astonishment in the second before he threw himself off the mountainside, but her surprise was washed away in an instant and replaced by a rush of thoughts, emotions, and calculations that came so quickly they hurt Trip’s brain. Wind tore at the black uniform as he plummeted toward the ground, and he had a magnificent view of the far distant lake near the base of this particular mountain. Not wanting to watch the digital altimeter on the goggles tick off, he closed his eyes, hoping that his latest stupid decision hadn’t totally thrown T’Pol for a loop.

The air around him changed suddenly, and the moment Trip opened his eyes, he realized he was facing the aft of the T’Muna-Doth. Her running lights were completely deactivated and she was fully in stealth mode, making it virtually impossible to make out more than a dark shape that was otherwise impossible to identify. A flash of greenish-blue enveloped him, tugging him toward the waiting cargo bay, and he pulled his legs up to his chest to minimize any damage. The very second he hit the internal bulkhead – hard; apparently, T’Pol was a little annoyed at him – the outer airlock door was sliding shut and Trip could feel the artificial gravity aboard the ship shudder slightly as T’Pol demanded some sort of evasive maneuvers.

With a groan, Trip slowly forced himself to his feet, wincing at the complaints from his muscles as he pulled the hood off his face. Already, he could feel his heart rate sliding back to normal and he took a few long seconds to focus on his breathing like T’Pol had taught him. No longer in purely fight or flight mode, he suddenly became aware of just how badly his back was throbbing, and he’d barely stumbled to the small hatch leading up to the primary deck when it slid open, revealing a seemingly composed T’Pol standing there. Her nostrils were flaring, though, and her lips were pressed together so tightly that Trip expected to hear teeth grinding.

“Shouldn’t you be flying this thing?” he asked wryly as he began climbing up the small ladder.

“We have landed,” T’Pol replied flatly. Trip gave her a quick, surprised look that she ignored. “We are at the bottom of the lake,” she admitted. Her frown deepened once he was out of the cargo bay and she stepped closer to him, her fingers coming up to the back of the hardened cuirass. Once again, Trip winced at the blatant flash of emotion – terror, surprise, relief, despair, all rolled up in an intense bundle that burned his brain like liquid fire. “You are very fortunate,” she murmured softly, her voice thick as she began unstrapping the chest piece. Trip started to reply but froze when she pulled the backplate free and offered it to him.

There, directly over where his heart would have been, were three indentions that could have only come from bullets. Trip swallowed and mentally saluted the aim of the shooter in question.
“At least he didn’t aim at my head,” he muttered, the comment earning a sharp glare that T’Pol didn’t even try to conceal. “Please tell me this wasn’t a waste of time,” he said a moment later, glancing back at the mess in the cargo hold. The walls were splattered with … something that bore a startling resemblance to gelatin. Two supply boxes were present, but one was a misshapen mess that looked partially melted.

“As you can see,” T’Pol replied, her voice still tight and her fingers still working on removing the covert excursion uniform from Trip’s body, “only one of the boxes maintained pattern coherence during transport.” Trip flinched – twenty-five percent success was terrible – and then jumped when T’Pol’s warm hand touched his bare skin. He gave her a startled look, swallowing at the emotions swimming in her eyes.

“T’Pol?” he asked softly. He could feel his body stirring at her obvious intent.

“My control was inadequate,” she declared, “and it endangered you.” She stepped closer, her hands busy with his pants. “You felt my concern for your safety,” she said. It was not meant to be a question, but Trip decided to treat it as one.

“Yeah,” he said in a husky voice, “I did.” With two fingers, he pushed her hair behind her ear and stroked the subtle point, smiling when she shivered. “We’re gonna haveta do something about that,” he admitted. T’Pol nodded before wetting her lips with her tongue. Their eyes met. Her sudden need sang to him through their magical connection – she desperately craved some form of validation, some proof that he was fully intact and uninjured, and Trip briefly wondered if it was a purely subconscious thing, if she was even remotely aware of it. But when she brought her hand up, index and middle fingers extended, Trip mirrored the gesture instinctively and the bond sparked between them, exploding like a supernova that ignited the blood in his veins and sweeping away any fears over lack of control or psychic feedback.

T’Pol’s need called out to him.

And willingly, eagerly, he went to her.
An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 500 days (437 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's July, 2153.

She longed for meditation.

Six days had passed since she last saw Trip in person and, even though she knew exactly where he was and what he was doing at the moment, T'Pol could not shake the growing sense of unease building in her stomach over his continued absence. It did not matter that all four of the surveillance drones were deployed and circling Trip’s location, or that she could see him on the main display as he worked, or even that she could feel him through their fascinating psychic connection. All that truly mattered was that he not here, at her side, where he belonged.

With the near catastrophic failure of their previous attempt to acquire supplies, they had decided again to make an attempt to infiltrate one of the Alliance-controlled cities and the supply depots within. As before, Trip had made the argument for being the person most suited for this mission and, as before, T'Pol had been unable to entirely refute his logic, especially now that the Pa’nar seemed to slowly be creeping back out of the unusual remission it had been in. Anger skittered across her consciousness, anger and despair that this short time she had with Trip truly was going to end before she was ready to give him up, but she pushed the emotions down, wrestled them into submission and focused again on the images of her mate.

At the moment, Trip appeared safe. He was dressed in the uniform of an Alliance soldier, laboring alongside Ekosian men ignorant of Tucker’s identity. This had not been part of their plan – originally, his intent was to sneak into the depot, place transporter tags on supply crates, and then depart without detection, but instead, he’d found himself noticed by the locals and pressed into service loading those same supplies onto vehicles bound for offensive theaters. Trip had adapted more quickly than T’Pol would have, improvising an explanation for his presence that appeared to be acceptable to the guards, and sliding into the role of common laborer without hesitation. Once again, he’d utilized the easy charisma that had drawn T’Pol to him in the first place, and within the first hour, the Ekosians he was working alongside laughed and joked with him as if he were an old friend.

So, for the last four and a half days since Trip’s discovery, T’Pol had watched as her mate loaded crates aboard trucks, or ate alongside the Ekosian soldiers, or slept on uncomfortable-looking cots set up for these workers, all the while struggling to suppress her worry that he would be found out. The amount of time she was willing to spare from monitoring his status was minimal, so she had not meditated properly since before he departed the T’Muna-Doth, and the naps she managed were unfulfilling at best. In between that, she also operated the barely functional transporter device to beam aboard the supply crates that Trip discreetly tagged during the course of his work.

Or rather, try to beam aboard. Thus far, the average success rate of these transport attempts continued to fluctuate between eighteen and twenty-two percent success, with streaks where the device functioned perfectly or not at all. No matter how much work she or Trip put into the device, it seemed to be intrinsically flawed in some way they could not quite detect.
Her console chirped, and T’Pol refocused her full attention on the main viewer before her as data began crawling down the screen, informing her that Trip had placed the last of his transmitter tags and it was moving. With her left hand, she tapped her control board and changed one the many images before her to a larger overview of the city. A dark green dot began flashing upon the screen – the location of the transmitter tag – and T’Pol frowned at the anomalous sensor readings that appeared next to it. Frustration bubbled within her but she successfully bit it back. These sorts of glitches were routine whenever the surveillance drones were deployed, no matter that the resources they all shared should have been more than enough to compensate for any data-lag. Trip had theorized that it was due to the wear and tear of the starship’s systems over the years, coupled with the late Subcommander’s Tykath’s apparent incompetence. The sensor dish, just like the communications array, had evidently been in such poor shape before the Orions seized the T’Muna-Doth, that it made repairs without the benefit of a spacedock exceedingly difficult. T’Pol had witnessed this firsthand, when they cannibalized the Starfleet satellite in an almost futile attempt to craft functional ship-to-ship comms. Currently, they were capable of communicating out to sixty light minutes or so with no discernible transmission delay, but long-range contact was still beyond their capabilities.

She sighed.

The anomalous reading – a sensor ghost Trip would have called it – continued to flicker in and out of existence, sometimes indicating bio-matter, sometimes not. With a flick of her wrist, T’Pol increased the intensity of the scan, but with minimal results – the ongoing system errors limited the T’Muna-Doth’s sensors to less than thirty percent capability. She could not determine the size of the anomaly, how far it was from the transport tag, or even if there was actually anything there. T’Pol gave her panel another quick once-over – if she landed one of the surveillance drones, the corresponding increase in system resources might be adequate to isolate the anomaly before the vehicle was out of range … but doing so would potentially endanger Trip by removing one piece of his support structure. She frowned tightly. No, T’Pol decided firmly. Under no circumstances would she divert even one of the drones away from its tracking pattern. Trip remained her first priority.

Before she could further consider the situation, a sudden flash of sensation caused her to glance up at the viewscreen highlighting Trip’s location. To her surprise, he was moving steadily away from the loading dock and the cluster of bio-signs that represented the Ekosian workers. Tucker’s intentions, always confusing, had suddenly become a wild cacophony of thoughts and emotions and images she couldn’t begin to comprehend. The ‘open channel’ symbol abruptly appeared on her screen, indicating that Trip had activated his comm.-line. “What are you doing?” she demanded by way of greeting, not even bothering to conceal the concern in her voice.

“Just saw someone I shouldn’t have seen,” he replied. “Can you give me remote control of a drone?”

“Yes,” she answered automatically as she input commands into her console. “The loaders,” she began.

“Aren’t important,” Trip finished. “It’ll be an hour or more before they notice I’m gone.”

The designated drone suddenly altered its course, this time flying under Trip’s direction. T’Pol didn’t bother pointing out that Tucker wasn’t supposed to be carrying anything with him that was even capable of remote-piloting the aerial vehicle, and instead simply sat quietly in her seat. Knowing that her mate was no longer in immediate danger allowed her to relax slightly, which turned out to be something of a mistake. The stress of the previous six days pressed in upon her and T’Pol once more longed for meditation.

“Where the hell did you go?” Trip mumbled under his breath, his words clearly not meant to be
heard over the comm.-line, but before T’Pol could even consider commenting, a sharp spike of emotion – surprise, excitement, worry, fear – erupted through their mental connection and caused her to flinch. The video image from the drone zoomed in on a young adult male picking his way through the rubble of the city’s southwest corridor. He was dressed like a local but still, T’Pol’s eyebrows rocketed up.

It was Urri. One of the Zeons who had aided them so long ago.

“Gotcha!” Trip hissed. The image panned around – clearly, the drone was now circling – but always remained focused on Urri. “Correct me if I’m wrong,” Trip stated softly, “but that looks like a camera in his hand.” T’Pol blinked.

“Agreed.” She watched the Zeon for a moment, noting without surprise that he seemed oblivious to the fact that he was under surveillance. Noiseless and barely the size of a small bird, the aerial drone would attract very little attention providing they remained at a safe distance. “It appears to be far more advanced than Ekosian culture should be capable of,” she said of the camera in Urri’s hands.

“Yeah.” Trip was silent for a moment. “We should follow him,” he said. “Find out what the hell is going on. Why he’s half a continent away from the rest of his family.”

“I concur,” T’Pol said. She sat quietly for a long moment, aware of but not really paying a significant amount of attention to Urri since Trip was monitoring the Zeon. Instead, her eyes were focused on the flashing light on the city overview indicating the location of the last transporter tag. It was already nearing the periphery of the transporter’s range; she had five minutes, maybe six before it was gone and Trip’s efforts were wasted.

After another moment of consideration, she reached for the controls of the transporter and keyed in the commands to activate it. Twenty long seconds passed as the antiquated systems labored to obey her instructions, which was a small eternity to someone long accustomed to modern hardware. Once, so long ago, she’d mocked Enterprise’s sensors, stating that Vulcan children played with toys more advanced than the best detection suite the humans could field, but right now, as she waited for the transport sequence to begin, T’Pol longed to have human ingenuity at her fingertips once more.

Another thirty seconds elapsed as the primitive transporter struggled to successfully maintain the pattern lock it had acquired upon the target. From her understanding of the mechanics behind this process, the item was first scanned on a quantum level before the matter stream systematically broke it down into subatomic particles before reassembling it at the destination point, in this case, the cargo bay. Despite being effectively two decks away, T’Pol could hear the whine of the energizing coils as they powered the annular confinement beam that would rebuild the supply crate, quark by quark, lepton by lepton, atom by atom. She fought the urge to grimace at the pitch of the noise but a nanosecond later, T’Pol felt her stomach tighten.

Something was wrong.

She frowned at the data crawling across her screen – there was already a twenty-five point three two percent increase in the power usage and it was increasing – and keyed in another series of commands. Instantly, the main viewer shifted to an internal diagnostic – she barely fought down the urge to mutter one of Trip’s favorite curses; of course he would choose now to not be here, when his creative engineering skills were most needed – and T’Pol raised both eyebrows at what she saw. The pattern buffer was at capacity and still data was incoming. It could mean only one thing: Bio-matter, and of a complexity significantly greater than that of foodstuff.

A lifeform. An Ekosian. A sentient being.
Bile swam in her stomach and she could feel Trip’s sudden reaction to the flare of her emotions, but T’Pol drew in a sharp, steadying breath. Her fingers danced across the keys – one of the viewscreens immediately transformed into a view of the cargo bay and the semi-materialized shape within – as she transferred all available resources to the transport sequence. The remaining three surveillance drones she quickly landed – one in the river that crawled by the city, the other two in abandoned buildings already shattered by artillery fire – while leaving the fourth under Trip’s control. Every spare joule she could locate, she poured into the transporter, and entire terabytes of data from the previous crew’s mission of exploration was deleted to make room for the swelling demands of the pattern buffer.

But it still wasn’t enough.

With a sharp pop that echoed throughout the ship, the transport sequence abruptly terminated, and the matter stream coalesced into a vaguely humanoid shape. He was frozen in place, a hideous distortion of a sentient being, with misshapen limbs and distended flesh blisters bubbling up off his skin. Wooden slats from the partially materialized crate that Trip had targeted were embedded within the Ekosian’s flesh, but the re-integration was such that there was no way to determine where he began and the box ended. His muscles twitched and convulsed, and his skin was too shiny, as if it had been recently bathed in liquid. T’Pol stared at the image with horror stamped on her face.

And then, he exploded.

“T’Pol!” Trip’s voice echoed loudly through the ship’s comm.-system, snapping her out of the fugue state that had momentarily frozen her in place. Even if she could not hear the terror in his voice, she could certainly feel it across the surging psychic connection. Her control in tatters, T’Pol deactivated the cargo bay image and half crawled, half fell out of the command chair. She dropped to her knees and barely managed to get clear of the flight console before retching upon the floor. Again and again, she vomited and her muscles quivered spasmodically as she purged herself. Finally, long moments after the last of her dry heaves subsided, control returned.

And with it came a crippling guilt that threatened to destroy her utterly.

“Trip,” she rasped softly, her voice harsh and ragged, “I need you.” It was the height of Vulcan impropriety to admit such a thing out loud, but T’Pol no longer cared. Without her mate, she would collapse under the crushing tide of guilt over the unintentional death at her hands.

“I’m on my way,” he replied tightly. He didn’t ask why, didn’t ask for further clarification regarding her loss of emotional control and T’Pol felt a tiny bit of the shame pressing down upon her ease fractionally. Her mate was coming. He would make things better.

But that didn’t stem the tears that began to trickle down her face.
451 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's July, 2153.

Nothing made sense anymore.

Leaning back in his seat, Travis stared quietly at the dark control panel of the Suliban cell ship and once more tried to wrestle his thoughts into submission. In recent weeks, the captured craft had become his favorite place to hide, not only because Kelby was quite often using the sweet spot to do his own thinking, but also because no one seemed to look for Mayweather here. Sure, if an officer or crewman really tried, it wouldn’t be hard to actually find him – internal sensors would inevitably log his entrance into this otherwise restricted location – but so far, nobody had bothered, which gave him plenty of time to be alone.

And right now, he needed that more than anything.

He wasn’t sure how long he’d been sitting here, his fingers scratching out a distinctive pattern on the control panel, or how much time had passed since Enterprise went to warp to get clear of that trellium mining facility, but every time he closed his eyes, he saw the same damning images over and over, flashing across his mind’s eye like a movie that wouldn’t advance to the next scene.

On paper, the op to rescue Captain Archer, Ambassador Soval and Major Hayes from the crazy mine foreman while they were trying to get that Xindi out alive had gone off without much of a hitch, even if the Xindi died before he could provide them any useful intelligence. No one had detected the cloaked cell ship Travis piloted planetside to carry two heavily armed MACOs – Chang and Cole – and one equally equipped Malcolm Reed, and that trio had cleared the landing zone of hostiles with terrifying efficiency before the second shuttlepod, this time piloted by Sergeant Kemper, landed with the full assault team. It wasn’t until the whole thing was over and Travis was reviewing his flight data recorder that he realized Lieutenant Commander Reed and the MACOs had used lethal force throughout the entire engagement. Malcolm had fired the first shot, had killed the first non-human guard, but the MACOs had done the same without hesitation or question. No matter how he looked at it, Travis was unable to ignore the truth staring him in the face: he – and the crew of Enterprise – had just participated in a bloody massacre the likes of which humanity hadn’t seen since the Eugenics Wars.

And apparently, he was the only member of the Starfleet crew who knew it.

The data recorder on the other shuttlepod had ‘mysteriously’ malfunctioned, and, if Travis had actually obeyed his unspoken orders to return to Enterprise the moment Commander Reed and the two MACOs were deployed, he probably wouldn’t be aware of it either. Instead, though, he’d loitered over the mining facility, cloaked and unseen, wanting to be on hand to help out if the mess deteriorated, and as a result, he now had damning evidence that Malcolm had violated the rules of engagement laid out by Commander Hernandez when she authorized the mission.

“Minimal casualties,” she’d insisted. “We’re trying to prevent a war, not start another one.”

All of this boiled down to two options, neither of which were especially good. One, Malcolm’s
definition of ‘minimal casualties’ was significantly different than the first officer’s, or two, he had flat out ignored her. Travis figured that the MACO whisper team had eagerly agreed to avoid using non-lethal options … although now that he thought about it, he realized he wasn’t even sure if their pulse rifles had stun settings. Regardless of what the truth turned out to be, it would destroy Malcolm’s career. If he hadn’t intentionally set out to … to murder the alien guards, then that meant he hadn’t been paying attention to Commander Hernandez’s instructions or they had slipped his mind, which meant he had no business acting as either the third-in-command or the armoury officer.

Travis thought he was going to be sick.

Normally, he’d go to Hoshi and pick her brain about what to do, but recently, all of her free time was taken up by counseling sessions with Doctor Phlox or ‘girl talk’ with that really hot MACO Malcolm was sleeping with, and if Travis was honest with himself, he wasn’t sure he wanted to bring Hoshi into this mess anyway. Right now, she had enough things to worry about than whether their mutual friend was a murdering psychopath. He shivered – over the last couple of weeks, he’d overheard some of the MACOs discussing amongst themselves some positively scary stories involving Malcom and covert ops back on Earth, and if even a tenth of those stories were true … well, it made Travis seriously wonder if anyone aboard actually knew who Malcolm Reed really was.

“What the hell do I do now?” he murmured aloud.

“You could do like the rest of us and keep your mouth shut,” an unexpected voice answered his soft question, causing him to jump out of the seat with a strangled yelp. He smacked his head on the low overhang as he twisted around to find Amanda Cole leaning against the bulkhead. She was no longer wearing the combat armor she’d had on planetside, but even in nothing but combat fatigues, the MACO corporal looked to be on the verge of action. “Sorry,” she said with a smirk that didn’t touch her eyes. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Yes, you did,” Travis retorted angrily. “I don’t think you’re authorized to be here, Corporal,” he added a second later in a quick attempt to regain his equilibrium.

“Probably not.” Cole replied. She didn’t move from where she stood and Mayweather felt an icy chill crawl up his spine. “Don’t think you are either, sir,” she retorted wryly. They stared at each other for a long, silent moment before Travis blew out a frustrated breath.

“You want my data recorder,” he guessed. Cole nodded. “I can’t let you have it,” he said softly. “What Malcolm did was wrong,” he added a moment later. “What you did was wrong.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” she said with a frown. “This is war, Lieutenant,” Cole said a moment later, “and in war, people die.” Her expression darkened. “How many millions back on Earth are already dead because of these Xindi?”

“So we should start killing until we even the score?” Travis demanded. He kept talking, even though she opened her mouth to respond. “And the aliens you killed down there weren’t Xindi,” he snapped sharply.

“But they were hostile,” Cole replied. “We did what we had to do,” she began, but Travis interrupted her angrily.

“You had orders to use stun settings and ignored them!” he nearly shouted. Cole’s expression shifted slightly – it was barely a flicker of a change, but Travis felt his stomach plunge to his feet the moment he realized what it meant: she hadn’t known. “Oh, God,” he murmured. “He didn’t tell you.”
“Not important,” Cole declared, her expression of feigned indifference falling back into place. 
“There were too many variables to take into account with the stun settings on your Starfleet 
weapons,” she said. “Would they even work on those aliens?” she began, ticking off fingers as she 
made her points. “How long would they be unconscious if it did work? What happens if they’re out 
for a few minutes and the team moves on? Then, we’re caught between two groups of hostiles and 
the whole thing turns into a charlie foxtrot.”

“Would you listen to yourself?” Travis stared at her in appalled horror. “You’re coming up with 
excuses for why you helped murder people!” Cole shot him a condescending look that reminded him 
far too much of his mother when she was annoyed at his father.

“I’m a soldier, Lieutenant,” she said. “First and foremost, my job is to kill things and break stuff.”
She shrugged. “Sometimes, what I’m supposed to do isn’t pretty, but it has to be done so people like 
you have the freedom to be judgmental.” Cole glanced away from him and, for a moment, looked 
older than her years as her eyes momentarily turned inward. “Gal … Commander Reed made an 
error in not passing on those rules of engagement,” she began, correcting herself so quickly that 
Mayweather almost didn’t notice, “but I don’t think he did it maliciously.” Travis grimaced.

“So I’m supposed to just look away?” he asked softly. “Look away and pretend I don’t know 
anything because Galahad doesn’t make mistakes?” The moment he uttered the name he’d 
overheard, he knew it was a mistake. Cole’s head snapped around and she pinned him with an 
expression so predatory, so dangerous, that Travis had the sudden feeling he was on the verge of 
having a tragic ‘accident.’ He swallowed.

And then decided to press on.

“I’m not an idiot, Corporal,” he said. “I know all about you MACO whisper teams and the kind of 
stuff you do.” Instinctively, he pushed down the memory of Horizon’s one encounter with such a 
unit that had been pirate hunting – to a wide-eyed ten year old, they had seemed to be larger than life 
action heroes like he saw on the vids, but as he grew older, that awe had passed into muted fear and 
distrust. These were people trained to take lives, to do things humanity was supposed to have long 
since evolved beyond, and now having witnessed firsthand what they were capable of, Travis’ 
hesitation about them had returned tenfold.

“Good for you,” Cole said, her voice low and hard. “Where did you hear that name?” she demanded 
tightly.

“Around,” Travis replied. “You MACOs don’t realize how far sound travels on this ship,” he added.
He didn’t bother verbalizing that Malcolm and Galahad were one and the same – even if Cole hadn’t 
early screwed up earlier, Mayweather had long since put two and two together. “Like I said, I’m 
not an idiot.”

“That remains to be seen,” the corporal hissed. “Forget you’ve heard that name,” she ordered 
sharply.

“And you can forget getting the data recorder,” Travis retorted. He gestured to the Suliban pod. “It’s 
not even in there anymore.” Cole’s eyes narrowed and Mayweather crossed his arms. He was not 
going to be intimidated by her, no matter that she could probably kill him with her pinky.

“So you’re going to throw him to the wolves then,” the MACO said softly. She shook her head. “I 
can’t let you do that.”

“You won’t need to.” The soft voice of Malcolm Reed caused them both to jump in surprise, and 
Travis’ head snapped around to the door where he found the grim-looking armoury officer watching
them. Still dressed in the combat armor he’d obtained from the MACOs – a black cuirass, thigh and elbow pads and protective cup – he looked every centimeter the frightening assassin that Hayes’ whisper team gossiped about. “Thank you for your concern, Corporal,” Reed said flatly, his eyes never leaving Travis, “but that will be all.”

For a long moment, Cole hesitated. She opened her mouth to say something, but Malcolm gave her a quick sidelong look that caused her to nod and back away. Moments later, she was through the door, sealing it behind her and leaving them alone.

Travis leaned back against the cellship, crossing his arms and studying the man he’d once considered a friend but now realized he truly didn’t know. Malcolm – Lieutenant Commander Reed, he reminded himself sharply – looked exhausted, with dark circles under his eyes and an air of weary resignation hanging over him. Gone was the image of the grim, implacable warrior and in its place was a grieving, exhausted man. If Travis didn’t still have the memory of thirty-plus corpses seared into his mind’s eye, he might actually feel sorry for Reed.

But he couldn’t. And he wouldn’t. No matter that it felt like betrayal.

“We need to talk,” Malcolm said slowly. “About what happened down there.” He paused, drew in a deep breath and was once more the unstoppable armoury officer. “And what happens next,” he continued flatly. Travis nodded.

“So talk,” he replied.
An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 530 days (464 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's August, 2153.

He was tired of waiting.

For the last thirty days, they had been shadowing Urri as he wound a long, circuitous route across the continent of Tandos on what was clearly a mission of espionage. If it were not for the advanced technology they had at their disposal, Trip had to admit that the Zeon would have lost them weeks ago thanks to the positively insane lengths that he went to in his attempts to avoid notice or detection. Rather than taking a well-traveled road, the Zeon would instead risk a dicey midnight mountain climb or a crossing of a fast-moving river overflowing with water from melting snow. Trip wasn’t able to tell if the man was brave beyond measure, insane, or a mixture of the two.

The T'Muna-Doth’s aerial surveillance drones proved to be a godsend. Small, stealthy, and so quiet even a Vulcan would have trouble hearing them, they were equipped with a sensor array that never ceased to amaze Trip. The bio-sniffer was especially fascinating – keyed to Urri’s distinctive molecular pheromone signature, the small devices were able to keep a steady lock on him no matter the weather. Once, an eternity ago, T’Pol had arrogantly told him that Vulcan children played with toys more advanced than the sensor suite aboard Enterprise, but Trip had scoffed, thinking she’d been making an idle boast.

Clearly, she hadn’t.

Shifting anxiously in his seat, Trip pushed the thought away and once more concentrated his full attention on the sensor board in front of him. Today marked the fifth day in a row that Urri had remained concealed within the small cave he’d retreated to just before a late evening rainstorm reduced visibility to around zero, and Trip couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right. He knew the Zeon was still there – the T'Muna-Doth’s sensors confirmed that, even from this great distance – but the fact that Urri had inexplicably decided to take a break … well, it was throwing up all sorts of red flags.

For a long moment, Trip wondered if his concerns were sufficient to rouse T’Pol from the healing trance she’d been in for the last week – six days, three hours, and twenty-two minutes actually, but who was counting? – though he discarded the notion as quickly as it occurred to him. Yes, he missed talking to her or feeling her touch or just hearing her breathing, but her well-being was too important to risk on just a hunch. He could barely close his eyes anymore and not see the raw anguish on her face as her guilt over the dead Ekosian overwhelmed her.

Trip swallowed.

Automatically, his attention drifted to the monitor displaying the view from inside the meditation chamber. Her eyes closed, T’Pol sat in the very center of the room, breathing calmly and regularly. At any other time, Trip would have let himself enjoy the sight of her nude body (which could have had … unfortunate results), but the worry that had been hounding him for the last month overwhelmed his base instincts. The first week had been the worst, with T’Pol alternately catatonic
or virtually hysterical as the overwhelming emotions that her species struggled with on a daily basis ran amok and shattered her self-control. She’d required constant physical reassurance of his presence – a touch here, a caress there – but, as long as he was there, she’d managed to enter her trance-state with minimal difficulty. For his part, Trip had done his best to keep his own overpowering self-disgust in check, knowing that the very last thing she needed was to deal with his guilt on top of hers, even if he was firmly convinced that this was sixty to seventy percent his fault – whose idea had it been to build the damned transporter in the first place? T’Pol had tried to talk him out of this, had pointed out the numerous flaws in his reasoning, and now a man was dead because of his refusal to listen. But that wasn’t relevant then or now, not with her depending on him to provide her with a sense of equilibrium, so he swallowed the crippling dismay and did what was necessary to help her. And it seemed to work: by the middle of the second week, the openly anguished expression she wore while meditating had begun to transform into a puzzled one.

“There is something wrong with me,” T’Pol had announced when she emerged from her third week-long meditative trance. Her tone had been matter-of-fact and Trip didn’t need a psychic mental connection to recognize that she was more curious than worried. “My memories are inconsistent regarding my time with the Ministry of Intelligence,” she’d added, as if it were a trivial matter that didn’t really warrant discussion.

“Inconsistent how?” Trip had asked and T’Pol gave him that sidelong ‘don’t be dense, you silly human’ look he loved seeing on her face before responding.

“I have overlapping memories of events that conflict with one another,” she said. “This will require further investigation.” She refused to comment further on the matter because it was not ‘relevant’ at the moment, but Trip could tell she was worried. She had spared only a few hours to eat, drink, shower and seduce him into bed – which admittedly hadn’t been that difficult – before returning to the meditation chamber, and now, almost a week after that all too brief interaction, Trip was getting antsy.

Antsy and just a little bored.

Beyond the polarized viewport, lightning danced across the night sky, flashing and flickering at intermittent intervals and illuminating a barren landscape straight out of nightmares. None of the three moons were readily visible – the bigger, uglier one hadn’t risen yet and the other two were hidden behind swollen gray clouds. Rain fell in heavy sheets, pounding away at the skeletal leafless trees and drumming a steady cadence against the T’Muna-Doth’s hull. Thanks to the Vulcan starship’s soundproofing, Trip couldn’t hear the thunder booming across the horizon, but having ventured outside just a few hours earlier, he knew it was fierce. All in all, it was not a day one wanted to be caught unprotected. Even the local wildlife was steering clear of the forest – a quick glance at the sensor feed confirmed Trip’s previous scans: there wasn’t anything more advanced than bacteria within fifty kilometers of Urri’s current position.

And just like that, the pieces fell into place.

With a frown, Trip began cycling though the data he’d accumulated over the last five days. Yes, this storm was pretty bad, but Urri had started acting weird long before the first raindrops fell. In fact, now that Tucker thought about it, the Zeon hadn’t started acting squirrelly until he reached the outskirts of this forest a week earlier, at which point he’d begun taking evasive measures that were extreme even for him. The results of his search crawled across the screen: thanks to the utter lack of nutrients in the region, nothing lived in this forest.

Especially not vaguely bird-shaped recon drones …

“You stupid sonuvabitch,” Trip muttered softly to himself as he reached for the control panel and
brought up the scan results on the secondary monitor. They confirmed his worst suspicions – there wasn’t an actual bird within a hundred and fifty kilometers or more – and he bit back a curse. A subtle chime drew his attention to his T’Pol-cam – she was stirring slightly and her life signs were elevated, which he took as her detecting his furious self-recrimination – and Tucker inhaled a deep, steadying breath. *I will permit it to pass over me and through me*, he recited carefully. Almost at once, the analytical part of his brain kicked in.


He was at one hundred and thirty-seven when T’Pol’s biosigns finally slid back to trance normal and the anger he felt toward his sloppiness was adequately suppressed. Now wasn’t the time to focus on the mistake he’d made – he could do that later, when T’Pol was stable and able to withstand his emotions flaring up. After only a brief moment of hesitation, he keyed in a new set of commands to the drones. The one that had the clearest view of Urri obeyed immediately, relocating to a position that essentially put rocks between it and the Zeon.

And exactly as Tucker expected, Urri shifted his own position to maintain clear line-of-sight.

Trip slumped back in the chair and sighed. He drummed his fingers against the armrest and chewed at the inside of his mouth. Automatically, his eyes sought out the image of T’Pol. She was thinner than was probably entirely healthy thanks to their crappy diet and, though she tried to hide it from him, the Pa’nar was beginning to show signs of coming out of remission. Her hands shook, she suffered from headaches, and he knew for a fact that she wasn’t sleeping well, even before the transporter incident. This goddamned planet was killing them by centimeters and Trip was sick of it. They needed Phlox.

His decision made, he leaned forward once more and cycled through the various command options at his disposal. Minutes passed as he calculated the best way to make contact. In the end, he decided to go all out. *If you’re going to do something*, his dad had always told him, *do it right and do it with style.*

The engines of the *T’Muna-Doth* came alive with barely a sound and the lift-off was equally smooth, although the engineer in him couldn’t help but to frown at a subtle shudder running through the deckplates. Nacelle Three still worried him – the microfracture in the warp coil he’d detected hadn’t gotten worse, but none of his stopgap measures were that effective and those jury-rigs had the unfortunate side effect of messing with the maneuver drives as well. A quick glance at his T’Pol-cam indicated that she hadn’t stirred, which he took to mean she hadn’t noticed the reactor powering up or the main drive firing. That wasn’t a major surprise since the meditation chamber was hermetically sealed and heavily soundproofed.

Thirty seconds out, Trip activated the landing lights.

On the sensor feed being transmitted by the drone, he could see Urri reacting to the *T’Muna-Doth’s* descent – abandoned were the Zeon’s attempts at stealth, only to be replaced by open wonder. Urri stumbled out of the cave, ignoring the pelting rain, and watched with wide eyes as the Vulcan ship broke through the gray clouds and rotated into the landing position.

“Fascinating.” T’Pol’s dry remark caused Trip to jump and his head snapped around to where she perched atop the ladder leading down to the alpha deck and leaned on the floor of the bridge, half in and half out. She was wearing one of the heavy robes that had likely belonged to the previous ship commander and the expression on her face showed only a few hints of her recent struggles. “Were you planning on informing me before inviting Urri aboard?” she asked with an eyebrow upraised. If it hadn’t been for the wry almost-smile, Trip might have thought she was legitimately angry.
“It’s easier to ask for forgiveness than permission,” he said with a soft smile before pushing himself to his feet. “How did you know something was up?” he asked.

“I sensed your excitement,” she replied calmly. Trip flinched – he thought he had done a better job at hiding that – before gesturing toward the main viewer where Urri could be seen, still staring at the *T’Muna-Doth* with open-mouthed disbelief.

“Do you want to handle this?” he asked.

“No.” The succinctness of T’Pol’s answer almost caused him to laugh out loud. “I will be in the meditation chamber.” She disappeared through the hatch without another word. Trip shook his head – this *had* been his idea, after all – and followed her off the command deck.

A biting wind greeted him as the main hatch curled open long minutes later and Trip automatically lifted a hand up to protect his eyes from the driving rain. He took a single step forward, glancing around for any sign of Urri. The Zeon hadn’t moved from where he stood. Trip smirked before thumbing the remote control for the drones. Instantly, the three surveillance devices powered up, abandoned their places of concealment and zoomed toward him. He took a step forward so as to allow the trio enough space to enter the *T’Muna-Doth* without hitting him.

“Urri, son of Aron,” Trip said loudly as he stepped onto the landing ramp, a broad smile on his face. How many humans, he wondered, legitimately had a chance to say these words? “We come in peace.”
An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 531 days (465 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's August, 2153.

It was difficult to tell which of them was more ill at ease.

Dena, the matriarch of the Zeon family, sat quietly on the folding wooden chair her eldest son, Daveed, had placed on the dirt field, awkwardly fumbling with the glass in her hand while doing her best to look anywhere but at T'Pol. The Zeon woman’s daughter, Erela, stood quietly at her side, openly staring at the T'Muna-Doth and paying little attention to her mother, even though she was clearly expected to act like an attendant. For her part, T'Pol shifted only fractionally in her own seat – Trip had assembled it out of spare parts and it was extraordinarily uncomfortable, though she had no intention of telling him since he took such pride in his engineering talents – and kept her own gaze locked on Dena. Several meters to their immediate left, the males had gathered in a loose circle and were quietly conversing; from the emotional spikes and valleys she could sense from Trip, their discussion was evidently quite fruitful … or at least more interesting than this awkward silence T'Pol found herself suffering through.

They had made contact with the Zeon family while still aboard the T'Muna-Doth several hours earlier, with Urri – who currently stood next to Trip, an immense grin on his face as his father and elder brother oohed and aahed over whatever it was her mate was telling them – providing them with both the proper frequency and the global coordinates for his family’s farm. He had been quite cooperative, confirming T’Pol’s theory that the Zeons were from Ekos’ sister world and possessed a significantly higher level of technology. Despite the family’s otherworldly origins, he and his sister had been born on Ekos, and Dahveed had only been a child when their parents made the journey to this planet decades suffering earlier.

“We are … missionaries of a sort,” he had explained. “The Ekosians are our brothers and sisters, and we have a duty to guide them out of these dark ages and into a brighter future.”

Dena abruptly cleared her throat and T'Pol could not help but to notice how her entire family took note – Erela straightened slightly, her eyes darting to her mother, while the three males all tensed.

“I apologize for our lack of preparation, T'Pol, daughter of T'Les,” the Zeon matriarch said, taking care to properly enunciate the names she had only recently been provided. Trip had given them to Urri long before T'Pol had emerged from the meditation chamber and the young male had then passed them on to his family when they made radio contact. That they focused only on maternal parentage was illuminating – Trip, for example, had been identified to Urri’s parents as Charles, son of Elaine, and as far T'Pol could tell, the entire basis for his nickname still eluded their understanding. “When Urri advised us that you would be arriving soon, we anticipated a week or more.” Dena’s eyes darted to the T'Muna-Doth. “And we certainly did not anticipate the form of your travel.”

“There is no offense where none is taken,” T'Pol replied smoothly. Her head continued to throb mercilessly – the headache had been her constant companion since before the transporter incident but had intensified threefold during her first attempts at meditation. Even worse than the persistent pain
were the flashes of … she hesitated to call them memories since they fundamentally clashed with what she knew to be her past. Fragments of conversations she had never had tended to bubble up at the most inopportune moments, complete with a frustrating sense of near comprehension, as if everything was on the verge of becoming clear yet never did.

“I was not aware that we were en route to this location until shortly before we landed,” T’Pol continued, glancing wryly in Trip’s direction. At that very moment, he looked in her direction and gave her a quick, tight smile. A flash of pure emotion – affection, contentment, desire, glee, lust, relief – pulsed across the ever fascinating cerebral linkage and, despite her best efforts, T’Pol felt the corners of her lips curl upward slightly. It was a breach of Vulcan etiquette that she knew would have horrified her mother – even though T’Les would never let such disdain show – but T’Pol had long since abandoned the dreams of ever being a perfect student of Surak.

“I see.” Amusement dripped from Dena’s voice and she followed the direction of T’Pol’s eyes, offering a smile to her husband. Aron returned the look and, with his left hand, touched the tip of his nose with the second knuckle of his pointing finger, a gesture T’Pol remembered seeing previously when they wintered with the Zeons. This time, though, there was something extra in Aron’s curious salute, something more … intimate that T’Pol wondered if she would have noticed before her relationship with Trip became what it was.

Somehow, she doubted it.

“Our men oft make foolish decisions without consulting their betters,” Dena said with a smirk. Aron, who likely could not hear her, nonetheless chuckled before returning his attention to his conversation with Trip. “I am unsure whether to be pleased or saddened that the same holds true of your species,” the Zeon matriarch continued.

“Why doesn’t Chalz have your ears?” Erela asked suddenly, her words tumbling out quickly. Even as her mother gave her a sharp, quelling look, T’Pol frowned.

“He and I are not of the same species,” she admitted slowly.

“We knew the first night,” Dena said a moment later. “You slept and your hair parted.” She sipped from her glass. “We thought Chalz … Charles to be an Ekosian caught up with you but he possessed knowledge far beyond any of this world.”

“I see.” T’Pol breathed in calmly through her nose, shaking her head subtly when Trip glanced in her direction, a question in his eyes.

“So speak to me, T’Pol, daughter of T’Les,” Dena said heartbeats later, her voice firm and commanding. “How did a daughter of the stars come to this world?”

“Accidentally,” T’Pol replied. She was silent for a moment as she considered her options. And then, she told their tale.

Some parts of it she left unspoken – the Zeons did not need to know about the transporter incident or the specifics of her relationship with Trip – and she touched only briefly on their lives aboard Enterprise, but still, the tale was of sufficient length to attract the attention of the males. Her retelling faltered briefly when Trip took a place at her side, squatting down so he didn’t tower over them – his scent was overpowering and reminded her that they had not copulated in seven days; surely the desire curling within her stomach was his fault even though his attention seem solely focused on the Zeons – but she recovered and finished with their discovery of Urri in the war-torn city.
“Astounding,” Dena murmured once T’Pol had finished. The Zeon matriarch gave her husband a glance and he nodded in agreement.


Trip froze.

“Where?” he asked. None of the Zeons seemed to notice the sudden tension in his voice, or how taut his muscles had become, or even how sharply he was studying Aron, but T’Pol did. She gave him a quick, sidelong look that he ignored as the Zeon patriarch began to speak.

“Ot’Lan’Tith,” Aron repeated. “It comes from our High Annals, which are long venerated as books of worship.” His family all reacted with the bemusement T’Pol recognized as coming from something they had heard numerous times – Trip’s engineers aboard Enterprise had often reacted similarly when he began discussing warp theory, and Tucker himself had showed the same tolerant lack of attention when Captain Archer was especially vexed and vocal about the Vulcan High Command – but Aron ignored them as he warmed to his subject. “According to legend,” he said brightly, “there was once a great city of glass and light that was consumed by a god or many gods or simply a terrible cataclysm.” He shrugged. “Interpretations vary. Those That Follow – Zeons, according to many legends, and also Ekosians – escaped upon a Sea of Darkness but were scattered to many distant shores.”

“Father,” Erela began, a placating tone in her voice, but Aron continued.

“I have long thought Ot’Lan’Tith to be the home of a great space-faring civilization – a world, perhaps, or an orbital station – and the survivors, Those That Follow, were sent forth in colony ships to find new homes in the stars on worlds that could sustain them.”

“The sun dwindles,” Dahveed interjected and Dena nodded.

“And we must make contact with our homeworld,” she said quickly as she rose to her feet, giving her husband a look that clearly expressed her lack of interest in hearing his lecture on Zeon mythology. He shrugged and T’Pol shivered slightly at how familiar their interactions were. The subject of the conversation was different and the words, but she could easily recall having similar exchanges with Trip even when they had been aboard Enterprise. “We have not the supplies to provision you for your trip back to your peoples,” she said, “but the Governing Council on Zeon will no doubt wish to learn of you and may be able to provide what you need.”

For a long moment, T’Pol was silent. As she stood, she glanced in Trip’s direction and found him staring off in the distance, a conflicted expression on his face. Realizing he was likely unaware of Dena’s offer, T’Pol glanced back at the Zeon woman and pursed her lips. “We can provide your culture with nothing in return,” she said flatly. “We are forbidden from interfering with cultures that have not yet reached a certain level of technological achievement.”

“And yet, here you are,” Dena pointed out without rancor. “I will not dissemble: there is much that our people could learn from yours, but we recognize the folly of intervention before it is time.” She frowned. “You are aware of the atomic detonation a year past?”

“We are,” T’Pol said, nudging Trip with her knee. He glanced at her and rose stiffly to his feet, his eyes still distant.

“A separatist faction of Zeon culture is responsible,” Dena said. “They came to Ekos with a plan to
uplift our brothers and sisters with knowledge of the atom, and were instead turned into weapons.”

“And their masters pushed them too quickly,” Aron added sourly. “It would be grand hypocrisy for the Council to demand from you that which they censured others for.”

“Then I will consent to speaking with your Governing Council,” T’Pol decided.

“If you desire,” Dena said, “you may sleep under our roof once more.” T’Pol did not bother even glancing in the direction of the farmhouse.

“Your offer is appreciated but unnecessary,” she replied carefully.

“At least share our table,” Dena urged. “Urri does not speak well of your provisions.” Despite herself, T’Pol could not help but to instinctively flinch – the remaining foodstuffs they aboard the T’Muna-Doth were all unappealing. It would be undiplomatic to refuse, she told herself, recognizing the lie for what it was.

“That would be agreeable,” she said with a slow incline of her head.

She waited until the Zeons had vanished back into their home before turning toward Trip. He was still staring at the horizon, a frown on his face and she could taste the flavor of his thoughts as they raced. The instant her eyes fell upon him, he spoke.

“Atlantis,” he said flatly, his voice devoid of emotion. “That was the legend of Atlantis he was talking about.” T’Pol raised an eyebrow.

“Trip,” she started, but he continued as if she had not spoken.

“Ot’Lan’Tith,” he said tightly. “It even sounds the same.” Once more, his eyes drifted away and turned inward. “God, what if he’s right? What if humans didn’t evolve on Earth? Maybe this is why so many aliens we run into actually look so much like humans…”

“In the unlikely event this mythological event has some basis in truth,” T’Pol said calmly, “it has very little bearing on our current situation.” She began rubbing her temples in a futile attempt to ward off the headache still pounding through her skull.

“Is that your way of telling me to pull my head out of my ass?” Trip asked with a soft smirk. T’Pol raised an eyebrow and automatically glanced down at his well-formed posterior concealed underneath the Vulcan uniform he wore – how would something like that even be possible? – before piecing together the metaphor.

“We have an outstanding dinner invitation,” she said in response, “and it would be improper to attend without first dressing appropriately.” The desire to be clean was suddenly overwhelming and she began striding toward the T’Muna-Doth’s landing ramp. She felt him fall into step behind her.

“Your head is killing me,” Trip muttered the moment they were inside and the hatch was sealed behind them. He peeled her uniform jacket off and began manipulating the neural nodes along her upper spine without bothering to ask for permission, but T’Pol had no intention of complaining. The sheer relief that his touch provided was too intense to do more than moan. Once more, the desire swelled up within her – this time, there was no mistaking that it was hers, not his, but strangely, she felt no embarrassment over this fact – and she turned to face her mate. She began pulling at his clothes.

“You keep that up,” Trip said, his voice husky with arousal, “and we’re gonna be late.”
“Then we shall be late,” T’Pol replied before pushing him to the floor.

And, as it turned out, neuropressure wasn’t the only activity that ameliorated her headache.
Chapter Notes

472 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's August, 2153. Enterprise has been in the Delphic Expanse for two months.

He sensed her before he saw her.

His cabin was dark as Soval entered, with no immediate sign of a foreign presence but the atmosphere of the room had clearly been disturbed since he departed earlier this morning. A tangible sense of Other filled it, causing instincts long dormant to rouse. He tensed his muscles, controlled his breathing, and tilted his head to one side as he focused on auditory clues as to the identity of the trespasser.

There. Breathing, steady and rhythmic. A subtle shift of cloth. The muted but distinctive beating of a heart. If he had been female, he might have been able to identify the interloper through scent alone, but even without their superior olfactory capabilities, the trespasser's distinctive smell was undeniable.

"Are you lost?" he asked aloud as he reached for the door annunciator and the 'emergency distress' alert next to the transmit button. It was a new installation, one that Lieutenant Commander Reed had insisted on for all comm-panels, and would send a ship-wide alarm to all security and MACO personnel. With one press of this button, heavily armed and overly aggressive humans would converge upon his cabin within seconds.

But his finger would not move.

The temperature in his quarters dropped precipitously – a full two degrees – and Soval grimaced at the sudden sensation of immense pressure closing in upon him, almost as if internal life support had been dramatically altered. Once, shortly after he'd accepted the assignment to Earth as the ambassador, he'd joined a deep-sea diving expedition, both to overcome his secret, illogical fear of open water and to acclimatize himself to the new environment, and the crushing force that now pressed in on all sides reminded him far too much of the more dangerous moments from that experience. Beyond that sensation, he could feel a foreign mind pressing in against his, demanding obedience and short-circuiting his muscle control. The four centimeters between his finger and the distress button seemed an unfathomable gulf.

"You are different," Rajiin murmured as she emerged from the shadows, her eyes glittering. An unseen force compressed tightly around his thoughts like a vice, and Soval drew in a sharp, surprised breath. He had disapproved of Captain Archer's decision to bring the woman aboard, but had been unable to determine the nature of his distrust for her. The story she told was too convenient, too practiced, even if significant parts of it rang true. As neither Lieutenant Commander Reed nor Major Hayes contested the captain's decision, Soval had presumed that the confusion plaguing him over how many of the market vendors reacted to his presence – recognition in some instances, open fear in others – had distracted him from the truth of the matter.

Clearly, his distrust of her had not been misplaced.
"You are not like the others," the woman said as she stepped closer. Soval inhaled slowly. An eternity ago, when he was young and foolish and newly wed to a woman he sincerely cherished, he had studied the forbidden mental techniques of his ancestors, principally because his mate had encouraged it and he'd been more than slightly obsessed with ensuring her contentment, but also because of rampant curiosity. The very idea that he could touch another's mind was fascinating and, in the end, these same practices served him well when he joined the Ministry of Intelligence following the death of his son and the later loss of his wife to the kolinahr. It had been nearly six decades since he had last needed to utilize any of these techniques, but the memory of what to do came easily enough.

"No," he said in response to her earlier statement as he wrapped a shield of pure thought around his mind. Rajiin's influence fell away like ice suddenly melted away in the heat of a star. "I am not."

He pressed the button.

"What did you do?" Rajiin hissed, psychic energy boiling off her and freezing the air. Soval could feel his teeth rattle as the pressure differential increased.

"I summoned security," he replied. Even to his own ears, his voice sounded flat, foreign, and distant, but here, in this place where his will buffered his mind, such matters were not relevant. "They will be here in moments." Fury flashed across her face and, with an inarticulate scream, she attacked.

But not physically.

Blades of mental energy lanced out, piercing Soval's hastily erected psychic barriers and rocking him back on his heels. Rajiin's telepathic storm swelled, crackling with unfocused fury and power. She was, he realized at once, immensely powerful and if he had not been so totally focused on survival, he might have briefly wondered how she had managed to conceal such frightening capability from him while they were planetside, or how he could have failed to have noticed that she clearly must have manipulated Archer and Reed and Hayes to gain access to Enterprise.

But none of these thoughts occurred to him as he parried her mind-thrusts, blocked the psi-lances she sent hurtling at him, or dodged the mental tripwires and webs she spun. It was an unseen war, waged entirely in silence. Exposed surfaces – the desk monitor, the glass sculpture that was all he had left of his artistically minded son, the viewport – dripped with psychic frost as they pitted their respective minds against one another and Soval could feel the temperature continue to plummet as Rajiin drew more deeply of her gift. She held the edge in raw power – he knew that he could not begin to stand against her in a pure strength against strength contest – but Soval's skill was superior. Her every assault he could defend against, whether by turning aside and deflecting or by simply eluding it entirely, and her own mental shields were more than sufficient to protect against his rare counter-attacks. It was, in a word, a stalemate.

And with the hiss of an opening door, a third mind entered the duel.

Rajiin's reaction was instant and lethal. Expertly splitting her concentration, she stabbed a pulse of raw psionic power into the unprotected thoughts of the human male entering. He crumpled immediately, his mind already convulsing with death spasms, but Soval did not spare the male a second glance. Instead, he concentrated on offense, shaping his thoughts into a weapon and lashing out at Rajiin with the focused totality of his telepathic might. Her attention momentarily divided, she was able to blunt only a fraction of his assault and Soval felt a primal flash of victory when she staggered back, blood spurting from her nose. Their eyes locked and the instant he saw fear flicker across her face, Soval did the only thing he could.

He took a step forward.
In a single, fluid move, Rajiin twisted around and sprang toward the open door. With an audible pop, the psionic pressure differential vanished, the abruptness of the change causing Soval to stumble. Too late, he realized that the telepathic duel had relocated him – he vaguely recalled circling the cabin and Rajiin doing the same during that short-lived eternity where the entire galaxy had fallen away – and his back was now to the viewport. Intent on pursuing the woman, he took another step forward, but this time, his muscles quivered and failed, dumping him unceremoniously onto his knees. His vision swam.

"Shit!" The exclamation pulled his attention up from the floor and he blinked away the spots that danced in his vision. One of the female MACOs – Corporal Cole, he thought – was kneeling alongside her fallen comrade, a black expression on her face. With the ease of long practice, she rose and slammed a fist against the annunciator. "Medical emergency in Ambassador Soval's quarters!" she bellowed before taking three long steps forward. "Ambassador?" she began. Soval tried to look up but his vision dimmed abruptly and he felt the sudden urge to vomit.

"Rajiin," he gasped through clenched teeth before closing his eyes once more.

Mercifully, consciousness fled.

The sound of soft but urgent voices roused him from the darkness some time later. His head felt like it was on fire. For a long moment, Soval was confused – his cabin was never this loud and he'd long since reprogrammed the wall alarm to not make such an obnoxious beep when it sounded – but the strong smell of antiseptics and blood finally forced his exhausted mind to the obvious conclusion that he was in Sickbay. Opening his eyes was more difficult than it should have been.

"Ah," Doctor Phlox said with a broad smile as he loomed over him, "I see you are awake." The Denobulan glanced up at the biobed's readings, then looked back down. "And how do you feel?" he asked.

"The pain is manageable," Soval replied tightly, hoping the doctor would not notice the effort it took to speak. Phlox made a curious sound – it was a disbelieving click of his tongue – before pressing something against Soval's neck. A heartbeat later, relief washed away the agony.

"This should help," Phlox said. "I was concerned when you slipped into a light healing trance," he continued, his words causing Soval to frown tightly. "Fortunately," the doctor added with another smile, "I had an effective treatment already on hand and your neurolytic enzymes stabilized rather quickly." Soval inhaled slowly.

"Rajiin?" he asked. The doctor's frown vanished and he glanced to his right. An unmoving but distinctly female body was atop the other biobed, its identity concealed underneath a white medical shroud. At the foot of the bed, Captain Archer was engaged in a soft, angry discussion with Commander Hernandez, Lieutenant Commander Reed and Major Hayes. Curiously, the major's right arm was in a sling.

"She was killed during the boarding action, I'm afraid," Phlox said. Soval blinked – what boarding action? but pushed the thought aside for the moment.

"There was a MACO," he began and Phlox nodded again, his face drooping with sadness.

"Sergeant Kemper," he said. "I was unable to save him. By the time I reached your cabin, he had suffered a series of cerebral infarctions and I was unable to resuscitate him." His expression tightened. "May I presume that Rajiin was responsible?" he asked.

"Yes," Soval replied.
"She was responsible for a lot of things," Archer interjected as he joined them. "Three people are dead because of her," he said darkly. A fraction of a second later, he pinned Soval with hooded eyes. "She was a telepath," the captain said. It was not a question, but Soval treated it like one nonetheless.

"Yes," he said.

"Interesting that you could go toe to toe with her," Archer murmured. Soval tensed for the inevitable question, but to his surprise, it did not come. "We were boarded by a group of insectoid aliens shortly after you sounded the distress alarm," the captain said. "We're pretty sure she contacted them somehow and they were here for her."

"Have you ascertained their identity?" Soval asked. Archer shook his head.

"Not yet." He exhaled bitterly. "They damaged the port nacelle during their retreat so we couldn't pursue and then used some sort of FTL drive we've never seen before … but we're pretty sure they're Xindi." Soval raised an eyebrow.

"That is … illogical," he said flatly. "The Xindi we encountered previously was not insectoid." For the span of a single second, Soval considered the notion that the two species were, in fact, one, but just as quickly discarded it. At best, they could be linked to the same ecology in fashion, like a sehlat or le-matya to a Vulcan, but two such radically disparate sentient species evolving on the same planet? It defied all science.

"Which makes me wonder," Archer mused aloud, "are the Xindi a race or just some coalition of different species?"

"A question for another time," Phlox said abruptly. "The ambassador needs to rest, Captain," he added in a rush when Archer began to reply. "I will contact you when I release him to quarters, but until then, I must insist that he be given time to recover!"

Later, after the doctor had driven the humans out with threats of intrusive examinations and had disappeared to do whatever it was he did while there were no medical emergencies, Soval found himself unable to concentrate adequately to enter even the early stages of a meditative trance. The pounding in his head was slowly beginning to return, a sure sign that Phlox's analgesic was wearing off, but all he could focus on was the corpse one biobed over. What had been her mission? How had they known to place her at the very market that Enterprise had visited? Were these Xindi that well-connected? What good could a single science vessel do against such a formidable foe? Soval sighed. They were troubling thoughts.
An Ekosian day is 21 hours long. 530 days (472 Earth days) have passed since chapter 1. It's August, 2153.

If nothing else, the planet Zeon definitely fit the definition of a ‘strange new world.’

From his vantage point at the open window of the temporary living quarters he and T’Pol had been provided, Trip had a fantastic view of the amazing underground building they were housed in. The apartment itself was fairly close to the surface of Zeon, which meant there was at least a hundred more floors that descended deeper toward the planet’s core. This particular … earthscraper, for lack of a better word, served principally as the Governing Council’s headquarters – it was like the United Earth legislature, the Supreme Court, the central bank, and living quarters for the people in government, all rolled into one building – and was connected to dozens of other such constructions by way of tunnels, some designed solely for pedestrians, but others wide enough to fly Enterprise through.

The earthscraper itself was organized in a circular design – four distinct, half-moon-shaped sections surrounded the open center, which was a yawning chasm that stretched down as far as the eye could see. Elevator tubes and opaque tunnels crisscrossed the open space, passing by and around an immense central platform upon which sat the T’Muna-Doth. The starship itself was surrounded by a half-dozen smaller, boxy shapes, some of which were ground-rovers for surface expeditions while others were crazy-looking aerocrafts. The platform was a marvel to behold, even to someone from a more advanced culture like Trip. Set upon a monstrously-large pneumatic column that climbed up out of the dark hole, it was a mobile airfield completely with refueling facilities and a flight control tower, all of which could be raised to the surface of the planet if necessary. A retractable roof hung over the platform and reminded Trip of the sorts of ceilings he’d seen at numerous human stadiums back on Earth.

As he leaned forward onto the cool metal railing, Trip inhaled the curious scents that surrounded him. It was a sharp, metallic, earthy smell like nothing he’d ever encountered before, and he let the surprisingly pleasant aromas soothe the worry that had been hounding him for weeks. Today marked the eighth day – give or take; he hadn’t quite figured out how long the Zeon day-night cycle was, what with them being underground all the time – since they’d arrived planetside with Aron and Dena’s family, and was the third day in a row that T’Pol had returned from a private session with the Elders of the Governing Council in a foul mood. Males were evidently forbidden from attending Elders without direction invitation and T’Pol had insisted she was more than capable of dealing with these women without his assistance or protection. In fact, she’d added, knowing his track record with non-human females, it was probably for the best that he was not present.

Trip was still trying to figure out if she’d insulted him or if this was another example of her trying to tell a joke.

“Do not lean too far out, my friend,” Urri called out in the Tandosian dialect as he entered the apartment through the open doorway. Trip gave him a nod before shooting a quick sidelong glance toward the bedroom to make sure that T’Pol’s privacy remained intact. The utter absence of internal
doors throughout the earthscraper was the hardest thing to get accustomed to so far – a cultural thing rooted in the Zeon communal thinking mindset, they all took it for granted and didn’t seem to comprehend the need for privacy, but it was slowly driving Trip insane. He could only imagine how difficult it was for T’Pol.

“Good morning, Urri,” Trip said in greeting. He easily suppressed a smirk at the curious look the younger man shot the blanket hanging over the doorway leading to the bedroom. A subtle itch tickled the back of his brain – T’Pol was stirring from her meditative trance – and Tucker quickly gestured for Urri to join him at the window. The two men stood in silence for a long moment.

“How are you liking your homeworld?” Trip finally asked. Urri snorted.

“Truthfully,” he said with a shake of his head, “I like it not.” He blew out a heavy sigh and leaned forward onto the rail himself. “Ekos was my home, not this … this … this cave.” Trip nodded in understanding before glancing at the younger man.

“Why is that anyway?” he asked. “Why live underground?”

“Because we ruined the surface.” At Trip’s look, he sighed. “Our culture was once as aggressive and as self-destructive as the Ekosians. In my mother’s foremother’s time, we waged a war – the Century War, though it only lasted ninety-eight solar revolutions – that scorched the sky and burned the rock.” Urri shook his head. “I have seen the images – we had great cities that were wiped away in seconds. Millions died and all for causes I can barely comprehend.”

“Sounds familiar,” Trip offered softly.

“The survivors sought refuge below the surface, away from the storms that the war caused, and they turned to these caverns.” Urri gestured toward the chasm before them. “This place was once an extraction site,” he said, “where minerals and ores were pulled from the ground, but the Second Wave transformed it into what you see before you.” Trip frowned.

“Second wave?” he repeated. The younger man chuckled.

“Of course,” Urri said, shaking his head in admonishment. “You would not know that phrase – the Second Wave is what we call the survivors of the Century War.” He began tapping his fingers on the metal railing in what appeared to be an unconscious nervous tick. “Father told you about Those That Follow, yes? The survivors from Ot’兰’Tith?” Trip grimaced – he still wasn’t comfortable knowing that a non-human species had their own Atlantis legend and had to wonder if there were others out there with similar stories. More importantly, did they all have some sort of basis an actual event lost to the ages?

“Yes,” he said in response to Urri’s question. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed T’Pol discreetly exit the bedroom, but she made no effort to join them and instead simply stood quietly in front of the blanket door, an openly curious expression on her face and her head tilted slightly in a way that Trip recognized all too well.

“Those That Follow became known as the First Wave,” Urri continued, his fingers still moving, “and it was they who colonized Zeon despite its thick atmosphere.” A flicker of light – it was one of the elevator tubes in use – drew his attention as he spoke. “By the time my mother was born,” he said, “those that led the colonization of the underworld became known as the Second Wave. They were like our ancestors, another group of Those That Follow fleeing a terrible catastrophe.”

“Let me guess,” Trip interjected with a smirk. He was certain that he’d heard this story before. “This … Second Wave just happened to appoint themselves the new leaders of your culture.” Urri smiled.
“Yes,” he admitted, “but they have been benevolent rulers.” His smile faltered. “You must understand, Trip,” he said, pronouncing Tucker’s nickname as if it had two syllables or a apostrophe like T’Pol’s, “our culture had nearly destroyed itself. When the Second Wave urged us to adhere more strictly to the Book of Lost Virtues, there were few who disapproved.” He gestured once more toward the cavern and the twinkling lights that were the other three half-moon sections of the earthscraper. “I would say that their efforts have yielded some success.”

“Book of Lost Virtues?” Trip repeated, his tongue stumbling over a few of the unfamiliar words.

“It is a code of conduct that we are encouraged to obey,” Urri said. He shrugged. “I have never seen the point in writing such things down – they seem self-evident and obvious to me. Do no harm to others, speak the truth always, steal not and always be generous. These things are easily done.”

“Not always,” T’Pol said as she glided across the apartment to join them. At her remarks, Urri jolted in surprise and spun around, his eyes widening. He quickly offered her the curious knuckle salute that Trip had seen quite frequently and she responded with a slight incline of her head that was almost a nod but not quite. “I did not mean to startle you,” she told the young Zeon.

“It is of no concern, Lady Tupol,” he replied quickly. Trip smirked at his continued mispronunciation of her name, but silently let her take the lead.

“You are aware that I have been meeting with your Governing Council?” she asked and Urri nodded quickly. “I have made very little progress and I suspect this is due to my ignorance of your culture.” Trip frowned slightly – that wasn’t entirely true; according to what T’Pol had told him, there were several Elders who were more than happy to talk about the Zeon society at length, sometimes for hours on end without pause – but he held his tongue, knowing that nothing she did was without a reason. “If you have a few moments,” she said, “your assistance in these matters would be most helpful.”

A few moments soon turned into several hours as T’Pol quizzed Urri on a dozen different matters, sometimes bringing up elements about his society that he clearly knew next to nothing about, and by the time she let him depart (after getting him to agree to a second visit), Trip’s head was spinning. He watched silently as she sat on the floor – the furniture in the temporary quarters was not exactly comfortable for either of them and their few visitors seemed to prefer standing as well – her legs crossed as if she were about to meditate. After several minutes, she glanced up at him, her left eyebrow inching up.

“A most curious society,” she said simply.

“Did you get what you wanted out of him?” Trip asked with a slight smile. He pushed himself off the wall where he had been reclining and walked to the ugly couch where he grabbed the carefully folded blanket resting atop it.

“He did not tell me anything I had not already learned,” T’Pol admitted. She did not bother hiding the fact she was watching him as he secured the blanket over the main entranceway to the apartment. “Elder Sarai has been quite … diligent in her instruction regarding Zeon traditions and culture.” The hint of annoyance in T’Pol’s voice barely gave away her frustration, but the sharp stab of emotion that coursed across the their mental connection caused him to inhale sharply. “I apologize,” T’Pol said instantly, her tone contrite and embarrassed.

“Felt it,” Trip guessed. Finished with the rudimentary ‘door,’ he turned back to face her. She had not moved but was now staring at the floor with a blank expression.

“I am.” T’Pol’s lips tightened. “Even your presence is not assisting as much as I would hope.” Trip...
blew out a breath and walked back where she sat. He offered her his hand.

“Tell me how to help,” he said, a note of pleading creeping into his voice. He hated seeing her like this, so vulnerable and scared and fragile. She was the strongest woman he’d ever met, stronger even than his mother or Grandma Tucker who still scared the hell out of him, even though she had to be a hundred, and he knew that he’d be lost without T’Pol.

“Meditate with me?” she asked as she took his hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet.

“Whatever you need,” Trip replied instantly. On the spur of the moment, he wrapped his arms around her. T’Pol instinctively tensed at the unexpected action but almost immediately relaxed against him. She exhaled raggedly and another rush of emotion flooded into him. Though she tried to hide it from him, Trip could almost taste the deep-rooted fear buried within her. Even though they seemed to be poised to leave this miserable star system for good, it just seemed like too much was piling up: the Pa’nar was coming back; her memories were a jumbled mess; they were dozens of light years away from anyone that they could truly trust; and so on. Time seemed to be running out and she was afraid. “It’ll be okay,” Trip whispered into her hair. “It’ll be okay.”

He just wished he could believe it himself.
Jon: Impulse Decisions

Chapter Notes

480 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's August, 2153. Enterprise has been in the Expanse for two months.

The pain was excruciating.

Leaning back in the navigator’s seat of the shuttlepod, Jon ground his teeth together and clung to the last shreds of his dignity in a failing attempt to stay conscious. His shoulder felt like it was on fire each time he shifted his left arm in the crude sling, which he took as a sure sign of a broken collarbone. Breathing was an exercise in futility – no matter how deeply he inhaled, it seemed like he just couldn’t get enough oxygen! Just a little longer, he told himself, fighting the urge to glance toward the pilot’s controls in order to see how Travis was doing.

Near the back of the ‘pod, Soval sat hunched over, his lips moving rapidly and his fingers twitching as he fought against whatever it was that had driven the other Vulcans aboard the Seleya mad. Even at this distance, Jon could see that the former ambassador was getting worse – sweat was pouring down the Vulcan’s face and he snarled furiously at anyone who came within arm’s reach.

Anyone but Erika.

She was seated alongside Soval, murmuring something in the ambassador’s native language that he seemed to be responding to. They weren’t touching, but having witnessed firsthand just how irrational and dangerous Soval could be, Jon was baffled why the Vulcan was letting her get this close without lashing out. Hell, the two hadn’t been in the same damned room for longer than thirty seconds for as long as Archer could remember!

“Fifty seconds,” Travis called out from the pilot’s station, his voice calm and professional. Newly promoted Lieutenant Cole shifted slightly in her seat at the helmsman’s voice, but otherwise kept her eyes on Soval, almost as if she expected him to suddenly grow a second head or start foaming at the mouth. Jon couldn’t help but to notice that her rifle – and Private Chang’s as well – just conveniently happened to pointing in the ambassador’s direction. The two MACOs seemed to be poised for immediate action and with good reason.

Automatically, Jon’s eyes drifted to the unmoving body of Corporal McKenzie. Stretched out on the deck, the dead MACO woman’s eyes were still open – contrary to popular entertainment, closing a corpse’s eyes wasn’t very easy – and Archer swallowed the thick lump building in his throat. The insane Vulcan who had killed her was dead himself – Soval had seen to that and the ambassador’s almost feral assault had been the first warning he was also affected by whatever had turned the crew of the Seleya into savages – but it didn’t stop Jon from feeling nauseous. How many more were going to die under his watch?

“Captain,” Cole hissed, the sharpness of her words snapping Jon back into the present. He glanced up and found her still studying Soval. “Are you all right?”

“I’ve been better,” Jon admitted through clenched teeth. Cole and Chang exchanged a quick glance, but neither of them moved from their seats nor did their attention truly waver from Soval. Chang’s
fingers began moving, as if he were using some sort of sign language Archer didn’t recognize, but Cole simply shook her head once. In response, Private Chang’s lips tightened but he fell back against his seat, a slightly sour expression on his face. His reaction caused Cole to grimace as well, and if it wasn’t so damned painful, Jon would have sighed with frustration.

Despite his best efforts, he’d never been able to understand these MACOs. Cole was a perfect example – as the second-in-command of Major Hayes’ team now that Kemper was dead, she should have accepted the fact that a battlefield promotion was in store for her as a fait accompli. Starfleet regulations were clear: anyone who was expected to serve as officer of the watch needed to be an officer. Before his demise, Sergeant Kemper was slotted to receive the brevet field commission at the lowest rank in the MACO officer corps, so now it fell to Cole.

And she had yet to stop complaining about it.

If the MACO rank structure made a lick of sense to him, Jon supposed he might empathize with her, but it was a throwback to militaries from the age of the horse, with personnel often serving their entire time in service at the same rank, no matter how well they knew their job. According to her record, Cole, for example, had been slotted as a career Corporal – whatever the hell that meant. Her technical expertise and skill level was equivalent to that of a junior lieutenant in Starfleet, but she’d been perfectly content to remain exactly where she was. Even with this bump to lieutenant, nothing really changed for her – her job remained the same, she was still Hayes’ number two, and all of the other MACOs still called her ‘ma’am,’ exactly like they had before – but she treated the entire promotion as if it were a scarlet letter. Archer wasn’t sure if it was a MACO thing, a female thing, or some weird combination of the two.

“Dammit,” Travis growled a heartbeat before the shuttlepod began shaking and vibrating. Mayweather’s emergency maneuvers threw Jon back against the navigator’s seat, knocking his arm free of the sling and jarring his broken clavicle. The universe tilted up and around him – he heard someone cry out in agony – and then … blessed darkness.

When he swam up out of unconsciousness, Jon recognized the distinctive sounds of Sickbay long before he was fully awake. It bothered him on a fundamental level that he’d become so familiar with Phlox’s domain. Barely a week passed without someone on the ship finding themselves in the doctor’s hands because of some potentially life-threatening illness or injury, and Jon made a point of visiting each and every one of them when they were here. He had learned to recognize each of Phlox’s menagerie by the hiss or chirp or growl it made, could tell when the imaging table was acting up by the pitch of the sensor array, and could even identify some of the doctor’s crazier treatments by smell alone.

Yes, he decided in the hazy world of near consciousness, he spent entirely too much time here.

“A word before you go, Lieutenant,” Erika was saying as Jon struggled to regain his bearings. His entire body felt numb and disconnected, like he was present but only partly there, and he wondered just what Phlox had given him this time. “Do I need to remind you that it is illegal for you to be in possession of a Vulcan database?”

“No, ma’am,” came the response. It took Archer a single heartbeat to identify Travis Mayweather’s voice – the former Boomer had become so cool and distant lately that Jon hardly recognized him at times. Travis was even worse around Malcolm – when the two were together these days, it was like they were competing to see which of them could out-Vulcan Soval. Oddly enough, Mayweather seemed to work with Erika or Kelby pretty easily. “I know the regs pretty well.”

“I see.” Erika’s voice had a touch of humor in it. “So if I took a look at those data cubes you’re carrying,” she added calmly, “I wouldn’t find the Seleya’s database, would I?”
“I’m shocked, ma’am,” Travis replied. “I would never do such a thing, knowing how much trouble it might get me in with Starfleet Command.” When Mayweather spoke again, Jon could actually hear the smile in his voice. “Even though Starfleet will probably court-martial us all when we get back. I wonder if they’ll use MACOs for the firing squads…”

“Earth phased out capital punishment a century ago, Lieutenant,” Erika remarked. “Just so we’re clear,” she said calmly. “Carry on, Mister Mayweather. I trust you’ll make good use of … whatever happens to be on those cubes.”

“I plan to, ma’am.” The hiss of Sickbay’s door open and closing echoed loudly in Jon’s ears. Once again, he tried to open his eyes and this time, they obeyed.

“Hey,” Erika said with a soft smile as he blinked rapidly against the bright lights. “Glad to see you’re back in the land of the living.” Jon wet his lips.

“Soval?” he asked through thick lips. Hernandez’s smile turned into a smirk, though Archer had no idea why.

“He’s stable and resting in his cabin,” she said. Her good humor faded almost instantly. “Turns out that trellium is toxic to Vulcans and that’s why he went nuts.” Jon inhaled sharply – he had sent Kelby to obtain more of the ore to line the hull of Enterprise against the damned anomalies – but Erika shook her head. “Don’t worry – I’ve got it secured in the biohazard locker and Phlox has made sure that it’s safe for the ambassador.” She glanced away and Jon wanted to crane his head to see what she was looking at, but he was just too tired. “I’ve got Kelby looking into a substitute that is safe and Phlox is working with the science department to try and find some way to inoculate Soval against trellium poisoning.”

“Good work,” Jon muttered. He briefly considered asking her about the Seleya but pushed the thought away almost before it had fully coalesced – none of those Vulcans could have survived a reactor breach.

“You’re pretty lucky,” Erika said after a moment. “Phlox said you had some internal bleeding. One of your lungs was punctured and you had a pretty bad concussion.”

“Soval hit me really hard,” Archer murmured, wincing at the flood of memory. In all of his years dealing with the ambassador, he’d never imagined seeing him so enraged, so out of control, and the speed in which Soval lunged at him had been terrifying. “Remind me not to piss him off,” he added.

“I’d hold you to that,” she said with a snicker, “if I didn’t like watching you two fight so much.” Jon frowned – he hadn’t forgotten how Soval had answered to her and, if memory served, the ambassador had actually called her by her first name once. Jealousy fought with nausea in his stomach. It must have showed on his face because Erika’s amusement faltered and was replaced with open worry. “Are you okay?” she asked. “Do I need to get Phlox?”

“Are you sleeping with Soval?” Jon asked, the words tumbling out of his mouth before he could stop them. At Erika’s startled expression, he grimaced. “I know it isn’t any of my business,” he added quickly, “but he just reacted to you differently and I thought …” To his dismay, she blushed and glanced away, all but confirming his worst fears.

It was like a kick in the gut by an especially strong mule.

Thanks to extensive self-reflection at the behest of Phlox’s grief counseling sessions, Jon had only recently come to terms with the realization that, yes, he had been nursing something of a torch for T’Pol and this unacknowledged interest had been yet another one of the reasons he’d suffered so
much guilt at her death. Nothing could have come of it, even if she’d survived – he was the captain, after all, and it was immoral and flat-out wrong for the commanding officer to have sexual relations with any member of his crew, and that didn’t even take into account his knowledge that Trip had been barely hiding a far more obvious and considerably more intent attraction toward the subcommander – but knowing now that Erika, a woman he’d never really gotten over, was lost to him only intensified the unresolved emotions still swimming in his stomach.

“Right,” he said brightly, trying desperately to hide his discomfort behind a false smile. “Are congratulations in order?” he asked hesitantly.

She was still laughing when Phlox returned.

To Jon’s great surprise, the doctor released him to his quarters with strict orders for eight hours (minimum) of bed rest. Erika volunteered to escort him there, ostensibly to make sure he didn’t try to visit the command center or the bridge for a status report, but Archer knew from past experience that she had something to tell him that wasn’t meant for Phlox’s ears.

“You’re an idiot,” she told him once they’d reached his cabin. “I’m not sleeping with Soval so please, for the love of God, get that image out of your head.”

And then, she kissed him.

It was over before he really realized what was happening and she was through the door an instant later, but Jon started to smile once he realized what she’d just told him without so many words. He limped slowly to his bed, pausing in front of his desk to activate his monitor. A dozen messages were waiting for him, most inconsequential, but the most recent from Lieutenant Commander Reed sent another jolt of pain through him. He read the subject line slowly: Letter of Condolence, family of CPL J. McKenzie.

“How many more?” Jon whispered softly to himself.

“Got another one killed, Cap’n,” a disembodied voice whispered across the dark, empty room. His head snapped around and he cast a quick glance around his cabin for the source of those words. His heart suddenly began to pound – that had been Trip! – and he thumbed on the overheads. Light instantly illuminated his quarters.

But there was nothing and no one there.
486 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's late August, 2153.

With every second that passed, it seemed more probable that the decision to visit the Zeon homeworld was a mistake.

For the last twenty days – Ekosian; she still was unsure what the synodic day period was for Zeon, although it seemed to be around twenty-three hours – T’Pol had visited the Elder Governing Council for a period of no less than eight hours as they ostensibly heard her formal petition for assistance. In that time, she had silently observed as the twelve Elders – each represented some aspect of the Zeon society, though it remained unclear whether they were clan-based, tribe-based, or something else entirely – as they bickered and debated and pontificated on the merits of providing supplies to the two offworlders in their midst. Only one of the Elders was a male, though he was treated in exactly the same way as his fellow octogenarians so T’Pol was unable to determine if his inclusion was indicative of special status. A significant portion of the time in session was spent waging pointless arguments between Elders who clearly had pre-existing personality conflicts. Ultimately, very little was actually accomplished.

Which sadly made the Zeon system of leadership exactly as dysfunctional as every other form of government T’Pol had the misfortune of having interacted with, regardless of species.

The Council Chambers themselves were quite impressive. Located at the lowest point of the underground construction – she had not yet begun to use Trip’s ‘earthscraper’ term, although she was forced to admit it had merit – the Chambers were the only location T’Pol had seen that actually possessed functional doors. An ornate, circular room with an elaborate semi-transparent crystalline floor, the Chambers possessed a series of elevated seats and benches carved from the rock, most of which were empty at the moment. The benches were plain, unadorned, and appeared to be remarkably uncomfortable, while the seats ranged from only slightly more elaborate than the straight slats of chiseled marble or stone to gilded monstrosities that dominated the rest of the room. There were only a dozen of the larger chairs and they were located at twelve equidistant points around the chamber, each at the exact center of their respective delegations. Given that the Elders were utilizing these massive seats, T’Pol presumed that one’s seniority in the Council determined where one sat.

An elevated dais was in the very center of the Chambers, and it was here that T’Pol sat. Wide enough for several people – likely twelve, T’Pol reflected, giving the importance Zeons seem to give to that particular number – it had a circular desk (also carved from the rock) that curved around the raised platform. There was also a lectern and several chairs, all of varying qualities.

The abundance of chiseled stone gave the entire chamber a weathered sense of antiquity and primitiveness at odds with the various technological implements concealed in key locations. Brilliant halogen lights hummed from the corners where they were hidden and T’Pol had already been able to pick out a dozen camera positions. The room was also wired for sound, with each person present possessing a microphone that transmitted to well-hidden speakers in the ceiling and walls. Such an image had to be intentional and T’Pol could not help but to wonder about the psychology of such action.
Currently, two of the more argumentative Elders were bickering over some esoteric point of Zeon law that had been brought up during this latest round of debates over the wisdom of providing assistance, but T’Pol had long since tuned out their exact words. Seated next to her, Dena was wearing a conflicted expression – she seemed alternately bored and displeased at what she was witnessing, though anger also appeared rather frequently. Almost from the instant they arrived, she had been at T’Pol’s side, having been appointed First Arbiter, a title that seemed to have some significance in the Zeon culture that eluded T’Pol’s comprehension. As none of the Elders spoke or even comprehended the Tandos dialect, T’Pol had been forced to rely on Dena to translate for her.

“Enough.” First Eldest Sarai, who seemed to be the driving personality in the council, tapped a crystalline bell hanging beside her seat with the tip of her walking stick and instantly, the argument ceased. “First Arbiter,” Sarai continued, her voice booming out of the hidden speakers, “have you more to add?”

Shifting slightly in her seat, Dena gave T’Pol a quick look, as if she were about to translate the Eldest question. So far, the Zeons seemed unaware that T’Pol knew what they were saying, thanks to the universal translator chip cannibalized from Trip’s broken communicator. After the first, interminable day of being questioned in a language she did not comprehend, T’Pol had made an offhand remark to her human about missing Ensign Sato’s capabilities, and by the following morning, Trip had turned the receiver of his otherwise irreparable communicator into what looked like a simple piece of decorative jewelry. None of the Zeons looked twice at the earpiece, likely presuming that it was some part of her culture they did not understand, and T’Pol had allowed them to labor under the misconception that she was ignorant of their discussions.

Until now.

“I will speak directly to the Elders if you will translate,” she said flatly. Dena’s eyes widened as T’Pol rose without waiting for a response. “You have been most generous in providing housing for Staff-Lancer Tucker and myself,” she began, using the Tandosian equivalent of Trip’s rank rather than the English term simply for ease of comprehension, “and we are grateful.” When Dena hesitated, T’Pol gave her a look and an upraised eyebrow. It worked. “The time has come for he and I to depart,” she said firmly once the initial translation was complete, locking eyes with Sarai and ignoring the others. “We do not ask for any further assistance from you and yours beyond what you have already provided, nor do we seek to endanger this world in any fashion.”

“Pretty words,” First Eldest Sarai intoned, “but what guarantees do you give to prove your trustworthiness?” T’Pol did not bother waiting for Dena to translate.

“None,” she said flatly. “We came in peace and we ask to depart in peace.”

The Council was silent for a long moment as it slowly sank in that T’Pol could understand them and even Dena studied her with open surprise before finally relaying the words T’Pol had spoken.

“Well,” Elder Sarai mused, her words low but quite audible nonetheless thanks to the Chamber’s acoustics, “you are certainly full of surprises.”

“It would seem our visitor has little need for arbitration,” one of the other Elders murmured, and at T’Pol’s side, Dena stiffened.

“Not so,” T’Pol interjected immediately. “While I may comprehend your tongue, I cannot speak it and Arbiter Dena has been most illuminating about facets of your civilization.”

“If you know our words,” another of the Elders intoned, “then you know our fears.”
“I do,” T’Pol replied, shifting her position so she could look at the speaker, “but your concerns are misplaced. Ours is a vessel of exploration, not of war, and neither Staff-Lancer Tucker’s people nor mine have hostile designs upon this or any other world.”

“So you say,” came the immediate retort, “but words are easy.”

“What would you have her do?” the male Elder asked suddenly. “Open their craft to us and repeat the error we made with Ekos?” His tone was sharp and biting, and had the intended effect as the belligerent Elder he addressed glowered and fell silent. “Eldest,” he said then, “is not the First Virtue to be generous without expectation of recompense?” His question seemed rhetorical as he pressed on without waiting for a reply. “And is not the Second to do no harm? I put forth that, by violating the First in this instance, we also damage the Second.”

“Arbiter,” one of the youngest Elders called out. “Can you absolutely verify that our visitor were in no way involved in with the Kellask incident?” T’Pol frowned – the word or place was unfamiliar to her – and glanced at the woman standing beside her.

“I can,” Dena replied. “My senior son retraced their steps on Tandos and saw with his own eyes where they first set foot on Ekos. Neither they nor their mother-craft were involved in any fashion.” She exhaled heavily. “Only Zeons hold blame.”

“To our eternal shame,” someone murmured, though it was not clear who.

“Then I withdraw any opposition to the First Virtue,” the questioning Elder declared. “Let it not be said that we have failed our duty.”

“Thus, we shall speak with one voice,” the First Eldest intoned before tapping her crystalline bell twice.

“With one voice,” every other Zeon in the room repeated, as if it were a benediction or had some other special weight T’Pol remained oblivious to. Without another word, the twelve representatives of the Governing Council rose from their seats – some with great difficulty – and promptly disappeared down flights of cunningly concealed steps directly in front of where they sat, appearing almost to sink through the floor in the same manner that Crewman Daniels had once phase-shifted through an Enterprise bulkhead. In mere seconds, T’Pol and Dena were completely alone in the cavernous Chamber.

“Your petition has been approved,” Dena announced as she began gathering the documents spread out on the table before them. “Over the next twelveday,” she continued, “the requested supplies will be assembled and stored upon your vessel.”

“Thank you,” T’Pol said simply. “Your assistance in this matter has been most helpful.”

“You had a need,” Dena replied instantly. “It would have been an abrogation of the First Virtue to do otherwise.” She gave T’Pol a sidelong look. “I must admit,” she added, “it would be a lie to say I do not benefit – the First Arbiter is oft called upon to take a Council seat.” She turned away and began walking toward the exit before T’Pol could reply or question why her companion did not seem especially pleased by her words.

As she knew he would, Trip was waiting for them in the anteroom connected to the Council chamber. His expression did not change as he rose from the straight-back chair, and even T’Pol’s sense of him remained calm, sedate almost, which only lent further credence to her theory. In the days since he had resumed meditating with her, her sense of equilibrium had returned. Gone were the inconsistent mood swings or the sharp spikes of painful sensations she knew to be his unregulated
emotions. Trip obviously noticed the difference himself and, no matter that he utterly loathed meditation and had perfectly legitimate reasons to avoid it – the minor repairs to the *T’Muna-Doth* never ceased, given the starship’s former state of disrepair, and T’Pol had once read of the danger that humans could suffer if they internalized all emotions – he never complained a single time. Instead, he made it a point to join her in her whitespace at least twice a day. It was yet another reminder of what he was giving up for her.

And T’Pol never once let herself forget it.

“Congratulations,” he said as they approached. At her eyebrow twitch, Trip nodded in the direction of a wall monitor that was not terribly different from those she had seen aboard *Enterprise* or on Earth. “They’ve been broadcasting the equivalent of breaking news so I guessed that the Council agreed to give us the supplies.” Slipping back into the Tandos dialect, he continued as he held a folded envelope. “One of the diplomats gave this to me,” he said, “and used your name.” The smile he flashed was gone almost before T’Pol noticed it. “Obviously, I had no idea what she was saying…”

“That would be a formal meal invitation,” Dena identified. “It will come from one of the Lesser Seats – each of the Twelve will expect you to dine with them as they strive to show all who observe how generous they are and how dedicated to the Virtues.”

“I see,” T’Pol said as she accepted the envelope, even though she truthfully did not understand the point to such a meeting. Since they had been on Zeon, she and Trip had been virtually sequestered and all interactions with anyone outside Dena’s family had been strictly regulated or controlled.

“In truth, this is an old, senseless tradition,” Dena added. “Since we filed a formal petition to the Twelve, it is the Twelve who are expected to provide their ability to all who can see.” She frowned. “The Lesser Seats are the least powerful and will likely be the most lavish in their efforts to supply you.”

“That is a most inefficient way to run the government,” T’Pol mused. A flash of emotion – pure delight mixed with mischief – pulsed off Trip, but was quickly suppressed. She glanced in his direction and met his warm, blue eyes. To her great surprise, he quirked a questioning eyebrow in an eerily familiar fashion. Unaware of the silent discussion or at least ignoring it, Dena nodded.

“It is,” she agreed.

“No,” Dena replied hesitantly. “Why would you … oh.” She snorted then, a purely human-like sound of amusement. “You think we are biased against males,” she guessed. “To an alien, I suppose that would seem to be true.” Her smile faltered as she studied Trip and T’Pol silently took a step back, still secretly amazed at how easily she and her human were able to work together. She too had suspected the Zeon culture was female-dominated, but had chosen to say nothing out of concern they might perceive an insult where none was intended, yet Trip had managed to address the issue in a way that circumvented any potential affront. “Historically,” Dena began, her words taking on the tone of a lecturing scholar, “Zeon females have ever outnumbered males.” She frowned. “I do not understand the biology or the genetics, but we have only recently begun to stabilize our population. My birthing two sons is considered an aberration of sorts – my mother bore six daughters and her mother brought ten into life.”

“No offense was intended,” Trip said calmly, his body language still wary. “I apologize if you feel insulted.”
"I have spent the last twenty cycles on Ekos, Charles," Dena said with a slight smile. "A genuine question about my culture asked by an explorer who has no need to lie would never insult." She sighed. "I am proud of Zeon culture," she said, "and I will admit that there are gender issues yet to be fully redressed, but old habits are difficult to rid one’s culture of." When he did not reply, Dena gave him another maternal smile. "So yes, Charles," she said, "you and T'Pol are both included in this invitation."

"Well," Trip said in English with another tight, wry smile to T'Pol, "I guess we’re going to a party.” He gave her a quick wink before launching into another round of questions for Dena, mostly about what to expect at this dinner. As she described similar social gatherings, T'Pol blew out a breath that was not a sigh, no matter what her human might say. From a diplomatic standpoint, there was simply no way to avoid this gathering, not after having requested aid from them in the first place. She would have to simply – what was the human phrase? – grin and bore it.

This time, T'Pol did sigh.
Frustrated didn’t begin to describe her mood.

Erika stood before the main viewscreen of the command center, her expression tight as she fought to control her temper over Jon’s latest declaration. Less than a week had passed since the incident with the alien, Tarquin, and she still hadn’t quite shaken her sense of unease over how the telepath had been handled. Yes, Tarquin’s demand that they leave Hoshi behind permanently had been beyond the pale, but Lieutenant Commander Reed’s action – to shoot the alien before he even realized he was in danger – had been unnecessarily violent in Erika’s opinion. Reed hadn’t hesitated in the slightest when he drew and fired, and it was only after the fact, when Tarquin crumpled to the ground in an unmoving heap, that the tactical officer even checked his phase pistol to verify that it was set to stun.

So far, Erika hadn’t reported the incident to Jonathan – the only Enterprise crewmembers aware of Reed’s action had been herself and Sato, and Hoshi was certainly looking at Reed differently as a result – but that was mostly because she wasn’t entirely sure whether the tactical officer had been wrong to do what he did. Tarquin had essentially tried to blackmail them into leaving Hoshi behind and God only knew what sort of horrors the alien had in mind for her if they had. What would it have said about them that they were willing to sell one of their own into what amounted to slavery for a sliver of possible intelligence that might or might not even pan out?

*He who fights with monsters,* the old saying went, *might take care lest he thereby become a monster.* Could they have even considered such a course of action without it seriously impairing the moral certitude of their current path? Erika didn’t know … and in the silence of her cabin late at night, she had to admit that Reed had only done what she herself had wanted to do when Tarquin made his demand.

Still, she made a silent note to keep a closer eye on Reed in the future.

Armed with the information they’d obtained from ransacking Tarquin’s home while he was unconscious, Enterprise had departed the system and was now only hours away from the coordinates of a Xindi colony that was already turning out to be nothing like they had expected. While there were curious energy readings emanating from the planet in question, there weren’t any indications of defenses otherwise.

Far, far worse, though, was Jonathan’s declared intention on being part of the team they were planning on sending to investigate.

“Commander, Major,” she said softly, her eyes locked on Jon, “clear the room, please.” The captain frowned briefly at her words, but Reed and Hayes sprang to obey immediately. Soval gave her a single bland look, complete with raised eyebrow, before turning and striding away as if the decision to leave had been his idea alone. Within seconds, Erika was alone with her former lover. “Are you insane?” she asked sharply. “This is a recon mission, not something the captain needs to oversee personally!”
“My decision is final,” Jon said darkly. He continued to stare at the viewscreen and Erika couldn’t help but to notice just how exhausted he appeared. For a long moment, she hesitated – over the last month or so, she had notice how he was distancing himself once more, although this time it was different somehow; there was less guilt and more fear. These days, he was jumping at shadows and looking at people as if he wasn’t sure if they were really themselves. Erratic was the word Erika herself would use when describing him.

Dangerous was another.

“This mission is too damned important to be screwed up by you trying to prove something,” she finally declared. Exactly as she expected, Jon’s head snapped around and his eyes narrowed, but she continued. “I don’t know what’s got into you lately,” she said, “but we don’t have the time to rush off on a mission to prove to everyone how brave you are!”

“I’m fine,” Archer said through clenched teeth.

“You’re not fine,” Erika retorted instantly. “You’re not sleeping or eating. You’re on duty twenty-four, seven and if I need to find you, ninety percent of the time, regardless of what time it is, you’re in here.” At his frown, she drew in a deep breath and locked eyes with him. “If you keep this up,” she said softly, “the first officer is going to have to officially note your behavior.” Jon recoiled at the implicit threat – identifying his out-of-character actions in the ship’s log would be the first step in removing him from command, no matter how repugnant the thought was to her. He was silent for a long time, but when he finally responded, it surprised her.

Because he sighed.

Archer’s entire body language transformed, as if he was finally allowing himself to take note of the exhaustion riding his shoulders, and he lifted one of his hands to cover his face. With his other hand, he braced himself on the computer console and slumped forward slightly.

“That might be for the best,” he murmured. “I’m not sleeping because I can’t sleep.” He shook his head and sighed again. “I’ve been seeing and hearing … things,” he admitted softly.

“What sort of things?” Erika asked.

“Things that can’t exist,” Jon replied. “Dead people mostly. Trip, T’Pol, Cutler … a few others.” Hernandez blinked.

“Have you spoken to Phlox?” she asked, even as she made a mental note to check with the doctor herself. The last thing they needed was a commanding officer on the verge of a mental breakdown. Even as the thought occurred to her, another came on its heels: this was the Delphic Expanse and they had seen all sorts of weird things in the last two months. This could be one of those anomalies like the one that made all of the clocks count backwards last week or the scare Crewman Burris had with the transporter the week before that…

“No,” Archer said. “I’ve been ignoring them mostly.” His lips tightened. “But seeing them, hearing them … well, they’ve made me … re-examine some of my previous decisions over the years.”

“That’s why I’m here, Jon,” Erika said calmly. Inside, her heart was racing – how the hell did you ask someone if they were crazy? For that matter, what were you supposed to do? – although she did her best to keep it from showing on her face. “Talk to me, not to ghosts.” A wry smile flickered across his face.

“It was easier with T’Pol,” he admitted. “She and I weren’t … we hadn’t …” Erika smiled and
dropped a hand on his shoulder.

“I know,” she said. “But I’m here, whenever you need me.” He nodded and they stared at one another for seconds too long. Suddenly desperate to get the conversation back on track, Erika reached for humor. “This would have been a lot easier if you brought Porthos along,” she said with a grin. “At least then, you’d always have someone who could listen.” To her surprise, Jon didn’t smile or laugh or chuckle. Instead, he went completely still – she could feel his muscles tighten underneath her hand – and his expression turned blank. He gave her a look she couldn’t begin to decipher before grunting softly.

“Well, isn’t that interesting,” he murmured under his breath, his words clearly not intended for her ears. The steel in his voice made her drop her hand and look at him with wide eyes. In the span of a single second, the hesitant, self-doubting man was gone, only to be replaced by a grim, battle-hardened man she barely knew.

An angry man, she realized, though she didn’t know why.

“Who are you recommending we send on this mission since I’m sidelined?” he asked flatly, his eyes once more riveted on the viewscreen. It took Erika a long heartbeat to catch up.

“Travis to fly the shuttlepod,” she answered slowly, “Reed to command the ground team, and however many MACOs he thinks he needs.”

“No,” Jon said with a shake of his head. “That’s too much force and they might decide to conduct a ground assault because an opportunity presents itself.” He frowned. “And I’m not sure how wise it is to put Travis and Malcolm in the same room these days.” He gave her a sidelong, questioning look.

“Sorry,” Erika said in response to his unspoken question, “I don’t know what’s going on between them.” She had a few theories, some that made more sense than others like the idea of a love triangle between the two bickering officers and the attractive MACO sleeping with one of them, but sadly, she had nothing concrete yet. Jon grunted but his eyes brightened.


“What about Soval?” she asked.

“Good call,” Jon said with a nod. “Check with him and let all of them know that this is a recon mission, not a ground assault.”

“And you?” she asked as Archer turned away. “What are you going to be doing?” The smile he flashed was wolfish and dark.

“Looking into some things,” he said calmly, even as his eyes glittered with hidden anger and confusion. “Tell Malcolm that I’d like to speak with him.” Erika hesitated for a moment but finally gave Jon a nod.

“Aye, sir,” she said. Erika slowly walked toward the door, pausing only briefly to give Jon another look. He was intent on the main viewer, although this time, he had brought up a deckplan of Enterprise and, if she wasn’t mistaken, it looked like he was studying bio-signs. The expression on Archer’s face was unyielding, resolute … frightening. She didn’t know this man, didn’t recognize the simmering fury that bubbled just below the surface, and she was suddenly very afraid that one day soon, she would look into his eyes and see a stranger.

It made her shiver.
But first, she had a job to do.
Chapter Notes

500 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's September, 2153.

On the day of his and T’Pol’s departure, the Zeons threw them a parade.

It was a positively surreal experience, standing at the base of the ramp leading up to the T’Muna-Doth while the denizens of this underground city filed by in lazy columns. There were marching bands playing instruments bearing only a passing resemblance to what he would find on Earth, uniformed soldiers (or at least Trip thought they were soldiers; they might be the Zeon equivalent of police officers instead) carrying foreign-looking weapons, and even slow-moving floats with excited, dancing children atop them. Once the last of the vehicles passed them by, the speeches began as each member of the Council stepped forward in turn and began a long-winded proclamation broken up by frequent, boisterous applause. The day vanished into early evening and still … still they talked.

At least they’re not shooting at us, Trip told himself wryly when the urge to fidget started to become too much to bear.

At his side, her expression calm and resolute, T’Pol did a nearly perfect job of pretending that she was actually paying attention to the proceedings, although Trip knew for a fact that she had discreetly turned off the translator earpiece almost two hours earlier. He had filed the information away for later harassment – he looked forward to hearing her tortured reasoning as she explained to him why doing so was in any way logical – but made no effort to bring it to the attention of the Zeons.

Instead, he focused on watching the locals. This was why he had joined Starfleet in the first place, to see things no humans had seen before and visit worlds that Earth had only imagined. He intended to enjoy the moment, no matter how unbelievably bored he actually was.

And God help him, he was bored out of his skull.

Eventually, the speeches began to wind down, no doubt encouraged by the waning attention of the crowd – there were fewer and fewer applause lines, more attendees carrying on their own conversations, and quite a number simply walking away. When First Elder Sarai came to the podium, her remarks were short and succinct – Trip didn’t know what she said, but it resulted in laughter and cheers.

“Think you better turn your earpiece back on,” Trip muttered under his breath. T’Pol gave him a sidelong look, complete with raised eyebrow. Less than a heartbeat later, her lips curved up ever so slightly in that not-quite smile he loved so much.

“Yes,” she murmured so softly that he had to strain to hear her, “that certainly seems the logical course of action.” A slight frown marred her otherwise flawless features. “I believe they expect me to make a speech,” she announced softly, dismay and nervousness lurking in her eyes.

“Pity the captain’s not here,” Trip said with a tight smirk. “He loves this sort of thing.” T’Pol responded only with a flat look before returning her attention to the podium.
A speech was expected and Trip watched as she took the stage. Not for the first time, he wondered how to reference her in terms that made sense to a human. Girlfriend seemed too … high school and not serious enough for what they were; the word lover didn’t fit either as it carried illicit undertones that simply weren’t apt; and unlike her, he wasn’t entirely comfortable using the term ‘mate.’ Partner almost worked, although that too wasn’t entirely the correct word. Shaking his head to clear it – you can think about this later, he told himself sharply – Trip focused on the words of the petite woman who had so changed his life.

“We thank the Council and the Zeon people for their assistance,” T’Pol said in a seemingly calm voice that would have fooled him a year ago. She was beyond uncomfortable and he automatically took several steps closer so that he was at her shoulder. From where she stood, Dena paused slightly before resuming her translation from Tandosian to her native Zeon, but Trip ignored her. T’Pol continued in a stronger voice, thanking individual people – Dena’s family received special accolades – before she shifted into a more professional-sounding speech that was tantalizingly familiar. Long minutes later Trip finally realized that T’Pol was regurgitating, word for word, one of Jon’s better First Contact speeches.

It took every gram of his self-control to keep from grinning, although from the glances she gave him, T’Pol knew he was laughing inside.

The applause T’Pol received when she finished was so loud and extended that it caused them both to flinch. To Trip’s surprise, T’Pol discreetly reached for his hand. He blinked in astonishment – she so rarely initiated physical contact in public that it almost seemed out of character for her – and then barely kept from grimacing when she maneuvered him to the podium that had the microphones atop them like a ridiculous-looking basket of alien fruit. The flicker of nearly malicious amusement that flashed through his head had a distinctly Vulcan feel to it.

That’ll teach me, he reflected while forcing another smile on his face. The crowd went silent absurdly fast and he swallowed. “I am not especially good at this sort of thing,” he said in his best Tandosian, pausing to allow Dena to translate before resuming, “so I will keep this short.” The smile he flashed this time was heartfelt. “First, thank you for not shooting at us,” he said wryly. “I cannot speak for T’Pol,” he added, “but I lost my taste for that after the first dozen times.” Laughter rippled through the crowd. Trip inhaled – what to say next? T’Pol had covered all of the important parts and he had never been any good at this in the first place – before straightening his posture slightly. “Second and far more important,” he said with another smile, “be excellent to each other.” The movie fan buried deep inside him snickered at the resulting applause – who knew stupid comedies from the twentieth century were good for speeches? – and, on instinct, he lifted his hand and saluted the audience with the ta’al. He felt rather than saw T’Pol start at his adoption of the Vulcan gesture. The urge to tell them to ‘party on’ was nearly overwhelming.

When he stepped back from the podium, the crowd once more erupted in cheers, and the First Elder swept in to take his place, once more chattering away in the gibberish they called a language. Trip reclaimed his place next to T’Pol.

“An interesting phrase,” T’Pol murmured softly and Trip smirked.

“At least I managed to avoid mentioning gazelles,” he replied in an equally low voice. “For a second there,” he added, “I thought you were going to mention how you once watched sehlats grazing near the Forge.” T’Pol glanced at him before pursing her lips. Even through the magical psychic connection linking them, Trip could not tell if she was amused or irritated. From her body language, though, he guessed it was a little bit of both.

“Be well,” Dena instructed as she gave them both a quick hug. T’Pol froze in surprise and
discomfort at the blatant physical invasion of her personal space but just managed to not flinch or recoil. She backed away from further contact and, without hesitation, Trip stepped forward to run interference. He smiled and shook hands and accepted back-slapping hugs, all the while slowly backing toward the *T'Muna-Doth*. At the open hatch, he paused and offered a wave to the assembled Zeons gathered around the Launchpad. Their applause was deafening.

“Finally,” he murmured as he stepped onto the ship and pressed the button that sealed the hatch. T’Pol was already halfway for the ladder leading to the command deck, so Trip made a beeline to the reactor room where he spent several long moments re-checking the various readouts and displays. Nothing had truly changed – while relatively advanced, the Zeons were still not a warp-capable culture so they hadn’t developed any way to obtain deuterium, which left the *T'Muna-Doth* dangerously low of the isotope. The supply of warp plasma was equally limited, although Trip was less concerned about this since they wouldn’t be able to maintain a steady warp four for very long. Hell, he wasn’t sure they could stay at warp three!

“We have received clearance for departure,” T’Pol’s voice crackled out of the nearby wall panel.

“Bringing reactor online now,” Trip said in response. He frowned at some of the fluctuating readings – nacelle number three continued to worry him – but nothing was below the danger threshold. “All systems reading amber,” he said with a slight smirk. “You are good to go.”

“Acknowledged.” A subtle tremor rolled through the floor as she engaged the engines and slowly fed power into the maneuvering drive. Automatically, Trip activated one of the wall displays that provided the exterior view. He felt the tension in his shoulders ease as the Zeon landscape rapidly fell away. It was not that he had distrusted them – out of all the aliens he’d met over the years, they’d been among the friendliest, but by God, they liked to talk. Trip smiled: Jon would have been right at home.

“Accelerating to warp factor one,” T’Pol announced long moments later. Soft chimes echoed throughout the ship and Trip leaned forward to watch his panel. Excitement warred with trepidation, but he pushed it aside and focused on making sure everything was working as expected. The *T'Muna-Doth* shivered slightly as they went superluminal and the nacelle temperatures spiked more than he expected, but it was well within safety parameters.

“You are go for warp two,” Trip said. T’Pol did not respond vocally as she eased the starship to eight times the speed of light. “Now bring her up to warp three … slowly …”

“I have done this before, Commander,” T’Pol remarked, her voice nearly dripping with amusement. “Transiting through the heliopause … now.”

And just like that, they were out of the system.
Chapter Notes

521 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's October, 2153.

The hum of Enterprise was soothing.

Malcolm sat quietly in the darkness, his back to the wall, and stared at the viewport without really taking note of what he was looking at. The monitor of his desk terminal had long since switched to standby mode, clicking off and leaving only the ambient light streaming in through the viewport to illuminate his cabin. At any other time, that wouldn’t have been enough – space was dark – but the ugly gas giant Enterprise orbited was bright orange and red, which provided more than enough light to see.

A soft chirp from his desktop computer caused him to stir and Malcolm half turned toward the monitor, his face betraying the tension coursing through him more easily than the rest of his body language. The noise was not repeated though, and, after long seconds, Reed slumped back into his seat. He pulled a phase pistol from out of concealment and studied the weapon with a dark look on his face. A moment later, he pushed the weapon back into the seat cushions.

Exhaustion pressed down on him and he closed his eyes for a few seconds, desperately wishing he could force himself to sleep. God, he was tired. Nothing made sense anymore and he knew exactly when this already insane universe had grown even more chaotic.

“I think there is a Suliban aboard,” Captain Archer had told him three weeks earlier. He’d laid it out then, starting with the not quite hallucinations he had been experiencing, delusions that would have normally caused Malcolm to back away slowly and summon Phlox to sedate the captain if Archer’s experiences hadn’t matched some similar events that Reed himself had heard other crewmen discussing.  The kicker turned out to be Commander Hernandez’s unwitting revelation – that she evidently thought Porthos was not aboard when Malcolm specifically recalled letting her take the dog from Archer’s temporary quarters on Earth. “We need to find this spy,” the captain said darkly, “and stop him.”

Which was how Malcolm found himself awake at zero dark thirty yet again. Initially, he’d considered bringing in some others to assist with this hunt, but having witnessed firsthand how close the entire crew was to utter collapse, he quickly discarded that notion and shouldered the burden himself. If word got around that a Suliban had been running amok on the ship for the last one hundred and fifty days, Malcolm could only imagine the panic that would ensue. Everyone was already stressed to the breaking point and this would be akin to throwing pure deuterium onto an already raging fire.

Under the guise of random inspections to determine combat readiness, Reed had visited every square centimeter of Enterprise over the last fourteen days, thoroughly earning the top spot on the unofficial lists of most hated officer, and even though the target remained elusive, his efforts had not been completely in vain. In addition to confirming the presence of the Suliban – DNA scans were still inconclusive, but Reed’s gut whispered it had to be Silik himself – Malcolm had also discovered a dozen security breaches, two of which were critical, five separate violations of the no-frat policy, and a long overdue answer to who was behind that sickbay break-in Reed uncovered back in March.
The security breaches were fairly easy to resolve – threats and dire warnings of impending doom were simple enough to hand out, especially given their current mission and location – but the no-frat violations were a little more … sticky. A year ago, hell, six months ago, he wouldn’t have hesitated: discipline aboard a ship of the line wasn’t just a good idea, it was necessary. Dalliances like the one Lieutenant Taylor and Petty Officer Rostov were involved in had the very real potential to endanger the entire crew. It didn’t matter whether their … relationship imploded or was a love story for the ages – every junior officer or non-rate would second guess any assignment Taylor handed out if Rostov was involved, which could easily lead to resentment or questions of favoritism. This deep in the Expanse, with no one but enemies on all sides, was something they couldn’t afford. Malcolm knew he would be perfectly within his rights to come down hard on the two. He could nail their arses right to the bloody wall and no one, not the captain or even the first officer, would intervene on their behalf. Everyone knew the regulations. And yet…

And yet…

Automatically, his eyes darted toward his bunk. Amanda was still asleep, her lovely curves barely concealed under the thin sheet draped over her. Malcolm grimaced. At some point in the last two or three weeks, the bloody woman had essentially moved in. officially, her cabin was next door to his, but Reed couldn’t remember the last time Amanda hadn’t slept over. For space reasons, she wisely kept most of her spare uniforms and gear in her assigned quarters, but the few personal items she’d brought aboard – the ridiculous Mickey Mouse hat that looked nearly as old as she was, the battered Klingon sword-thing Malcolm secretly coveted, even the folded up blue and white flag from Israel – were all here. He should have said something, should have complained or demanded she move the items back to her own cabin …

But he couldn’t. God help him, he actually liked having her here.

“You’re still awake,” Amanda murmured a few moments later causing him to jerk in surprise. Clearly, he had watched her for too long. She barely moved from where she was stretched out as she gave him a sleepy smile and Malcolm felt something stir within him. He frowned again.

“Work to do,” he said more sharply than he intended. Even before the words were out of his mouth, he regretted them for the simple reason that Amanda knew him too well. Exactly as he feared, she blinked the sleep out of her eyes and gave him a long, silent look. He tried very hard not to squirm.

“Is this about Mayweather?” she asked. Malcolm winced and instinctively looked away. Travis still looked at him like he was something to be scraped off his boots and, not for the first time, Reed felt a swell of self-disgust. Yes, he still felt that Travis was a little naïve – most of the people in Starfleet seemed naïve to be perfectly honest – but in this, Mayweather was entirely in the right. Commander Hernandez had issued orders to use non-lethal measures against the trellium mine guards … and Malcolm had been barely paying attention to her when she spoke so he never passed on those instructions. How many aliens died because he was too tired, too angry, too unsuited for his current position? How many more humans were going to die when he made more mistakes like agreeing to allow Rajiin to come aboard? In the unlikely event he actually survived this mission, Malcolm fully intended to fall on his sword. He’d already recorded an in-depth confession of wrongdoing and programmed it to be delivered to the first officer and captain in the event of his death, but for the moment, his expertise, his skills were needed…

But, by God, he was tired of having that sword hanging over his head…

“No,” he replied softly. “It has nothing to do with Travis.” Too late, he realized that his statement confirmed that there was something.

“Crewman Masaro, then?” Amanda asked. She slid her legs over the side of the bunk, holding the
Malcolm frowned. He didn’t know how to answer this without revealing some things he did not think she needed to know. Only Captain Archer knew about the sickbay break-in and the copying of genetic codes of the Enterprise command staff, but even the captain remained unaware that Reed had identified Masaro as the most likely culprit. Additional digging and a judicious bit of hacking into personal files strongly indicated that the crewman was at the very least a sleeper agent for the Terra Prime organization, and the last security briefing Malcolm had attended on Earth strongly indicated that the terror group was expanding fairly rapidly. If Amanda knew, it was probable that Joss would learn of Masaro’s dual loyalties and, knowing Hayes, the crewman would shortly have a tragic accident in an airlock. Admittedly, if even half of what Malcolm suspected was true about Terra Prime, Masaro’s death wouldn’t be a total loss, but it would also neutralize any chance Reed had of finding additional conspirators.

He clearly hesitated a moment too long as Amanda’s expression tightened. In the span of a single heartbeat, her entire body language transformed. Gone was the sleepy lover and in its place was the dangerous second-in-command of a MACO whisper team. Malcolm silently cursed at his sloppiness. If only he wasn’t so damned tired …

“He has Terra Prime affiliations,” he said a moment later. “I need this to stay between the two of us, Amanda,” he added when her face darkened. “I know you answer to Joss but …”

“The major is a hammer, not a scalpel,” Amanda said with a nod. “If he knew about this crewman, his solution would cut off any intel before it was gathered.” Malcolm gave her a wan smile, hoping that she would drop the subject. He should have known better. “But that isn’t why you’re sitting there, is it?” she asked. “Or why you have a phase pistol in your cabin, which is, by the way, against Starfleet regulations.” She frowned. “Do we have a saboteur aboard, sir?” she asked, the honorific causing him to twitch. He could count on one hand the number of times she’d used it or his rank when they were alone. Belatedly, he realized she was making this an official inquiry.

“Dammit,” Malcolm murmured as he slumped back further into the uncomfortable chair. This was why he hadn’t wanted to get involved with this woman. She was too bloody sharp. He reached up to pitch the bridge of his nose. Why was it so damned hard to think? The fury that had burned through him for weeks seemed to have flickered and died, or at least become so muted that it might as well not be present, and it had been the thing he relied on the most. Now, he just felt tired. Tired and old.

“Mal?” Amanda was kneeling in front of him, the sheet still wrapped around her body, and he didn’t recall hearing her move closer. She was watching him with that worried but slightly clinical expression he hated so much. “I can’t help if you keep me in the dark,” she said simply. He nodded. And made a potentially dangerous decision.

“Wait.” Malcolm half-turned toward his desktop computer. As he expected, it drew her attention and so she did not see him pull the phase pistol from where it was concealed until he had it leveled at her. To her credit, Amanda did not scream or recoil. Instead, she very wisely froze in place. “Computer online,” Reed said aloud. The system chirped and his monitor sprang to life. “Command: internal scan, this compartment. Scan parameters: use alpha three tango four settings.” Another soft beep answered him. “Please don’t move,” Malcolm said as Amanda met his eyes, rage and confusion on her face. “My weapon is set to kill.”

She did not move.
A solid beam of light emerged from an unobtrusive alcove set near the ceiling and swept through the cabin. It passed over them once, then again as it split apart into multiple horizontal and vertical shafts of energy. No surface of his remarkably neat cabin was untouched. Another chime sounded the instant the light vanished and Malcolm sagged in relief.

“Command: null field. Authorize on my voiceprint.” He lowered the pistol, flicking it to safe with his thumb.

“What the fuck?!” Amanda hissed as she sprang to her feet and backed away from him. “Have you lost your goddamned mind?”

“I wish it were that simple.” Malcolm gestured toward his computer. “I’ve activated my surveillance counter-measures,” he said and, at those simple words, her anger vanished. “You asked if we have a saboteur aboard Enterprise,” he began.

“Masaro?” she asked. Reed gave her a wry smile that didn’t touch his eyes.

“I wish it were that simple,” he replied. “No, we have a Suliban aboard.” Amanda’s eyes widened. “And I need you to help me catch it.”
T'Pol dreamed.

The smell of burnt flesh and melted circuitry filled her nostrils with such intensity it nearly made her gag. Overhead, a swollen moon rapidly changed colors – first, it was blood green, then orange, then blue, then red and so on, throughout the spectrum until it began repeating. She could feel spongy soil underfoot, even though her eyes told her that she was standing upon a paved road. Around her, buildings of an unfamiliar design loomed but flickered in and out of sight, as if they weren’t really there or simply weren’t that important. She wet her lips and tasted moist air bearing an unmistakable iron tang.

Earth. This was Earth, but a part she had never seen, never visited.

A distant part of her mind recognized that she was not fully conscious, that she floated halfway between memory and illusion, but she was not strong enough to seize control of the dream and simply end it. Instead, T'Pol took a step forward, less from having a destination in mind than half-remembering doing so in the past. The landscape around her blurred and, with that single step, she was … elsewhere.

This time, she recognized Vulcan. The agreeable heat, the sensation of the sun upon her skin, the smell of sand and fire, all told her where she was. Shadowy images paced around her in silence, saying nothing and seemingly intent on their own tasks. One of them stood out, his features all too familiar.

Menos.

The part of her aware of who he was recoiled in remembered guilt and pain, but could not prevent her dream self from striding toward him. He turned at her approach … but did not run. Instead, he advanced to meet her.

T'Pol blinked – this was not how she recalled their sole meeting – and in the span of that single, confused heartbeat, Menos flashed across the distance to stand before her. His posture was straight and firm, so unlike her memory, and he bore no sign of the barely restrained fury she recalled seeing upon him.

“Your request for a meeting was artfully phrased.” Menos declared. He studied the horizon, a vague air of discomfort or perhaps disapproval stamped upon his face. Words tumbled from T'Pol’s lips and she could not stop them.

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“What I do, I do for the betterment of Vulcan.” The voice was not Menos’ and T’Pol opened her eyes once more. She was suddenly a child once more, staring up at her parents who rose above her impossibly tall. Father was frowning at Mother who bore a strangely emotional expression. “In my judgment,” Father said, “T’Pol is necessary.”

“Your judgment is flawed,” T’Les retorted hotly. “Explain to me the logic of this decision,” she demanded. “I will not allow you to endanger our child thus.”

Blink. Her home was gone, replaced once more by the Earth place she had never visited but knew so intimately. Someone was approaching but she could not find them. She turned in place, desperately trying to ignore how quickly her heart was pounding. Someone …

Blink. She stood before Menos once more under the hot sun of her homeworld. He was staring at her intently, his eyes swimming with something that could only be surprise. The stench of blood and ozone hung in the air. With exaggerated slowness, he began to fall, his face smoking, and T’Pol’s dream self twisted around, her hand darting for a concealed weapon as she sought the culprit responsible.

Blink. Her mother stood between her and Father. T’Les’ face was dark with rage as Father turned away.

Blink. She was running through the streets of ShiKahr, away from those who had murdered Menos. A building beckoned and she stepped through its doorway. Light exploded around her and she felt her muscles go limp.

Blink. Darkness enveloped her. She could feel manacles around her wrists and ankles. Her body was slack, unresponsive, but she could taste the familiar scents of Vulcan in the air. There was chanting in the distance, but her attention was on two nearby figures. One of them she recognized as the executive priest who had oversaw her Fullara. The other stood in shadow.

“It would be more efficient to simply terminate her,” the priest announced. His voice was soft and hesitant, almost diffident, so different from how she remembered him. “I can arrange for disposal if you are unwilling.”

“Do so and I shall personally ensure your demise is exceedingly painful,” came the cold response. Icy shock washed through T’Pol the instant she recognized the voice. It was her father.

Her dead father.

T’Pol woke with a muted gasp. Her subconscious instantly recognized that she was safe, once more aboard the T’Muna-Doth as it cruised silently through space. Trip was asleep at her side, twitching and grimacing despite his somnolence, which T’Pol suspected was likely her fault. If he could tumble into her whitespace from time to time, there was no reason they could not share dreams, even if it had not happened to her knowledge thus far. She reached out and caressed the side of his face with her index and pointing fingers. To her relief, he relaxed at once and rolled to face her, tightening his hold and further entangling their legs.

The soothing sounds of the T’Muna-Doth washed away much of the confusion wrought by the dream and allowed her to quickly recenter herself. For a moment, T’Pol considered climbing out of bed to attend to her duties – she was certainly no longer tired, not after that dream – but just as quickly discarded the thought. Her duties were light, after all, and the wall monitor Trip had installed here in the sleeping quarters was more than adequate to determine there had been no change in their status since she retired four hours earlier. They were still cruising through deep space at impulse – Trip felt that the warp drive should not be operated without constant monitoring and T’Pol agreed.
with his assessment – and there was nothing of interest within sensor range. Had something approached or been detected, alarms would have sounded. She could think of no reason to leave the comfort of the bed.

And Trip was warm. Not that she allowed such a thing to dictate her decision making paradigm. It was simply one more factor.

Already, the dream was beginning to fade from memory, so T’Pol focused on what she could recall. The Earth place was not new, even though she could not remember ever visiting such a location. Initially, when her memories began displaying such inconsistencies, she’d suspected this image was bleed thorough from Trip, but that proved to not be the case. Together, they had isolated the location to somewhere in Asia or Eastern Siberia based on half-remembered landmarks, but Trip had never visited that part of his homeworld, so it was more probable she had…

Even if she no recollection of doing so.

She now had two distinct memories of Menos’ death. The first was what she had thought to be the truth for eighteen years and involved her shooting him to prevent the murder of hundreds, but now, that entire scenario felt … wrong, false even. Elements of the event she would have normally classified as trivial – the color of Menos’ shoes, for example, or the news broadcast playing across a nearby street monitor – consistently leapt out at her when she turned her memory toward the incident, while relevant items, such as the exact numbers of explosive charges in his vehicle, remained frustratingly out of reach. For years, T’Pol had presumed this was an after-effect of the Fullara, but now? Now, she suspected otherwise.

Several long minutes elapsed as she compared the respective differences in the two sets of memories, which was long enough for her to grow positively annoyed at herself. She was avoiding the high probability that her father’s death did not occur as she had always believed … if it occurred at all. Her frown deepened at the inevitable direction such thoughts led: could T’Les know? If she did, why had she concealed the truth? And why had her father altered her memories thus? None of the possible answers were appealing.

“You need to meditate,” Trip murmured, his eyes still closed. T’Pol pushed away the conflicted jumble that were her thoughts and studied him for a single, extended heartbeat. He was quite appealing like this, with his too long hair sticking up in random spots and his entire body relaxed against hers.

“Did I wake you?” she asked. The corner of his lips curved up slightly. Once, he would have given her a full smile, but that time seemed to have passed. Silently, she grieved for the loss of that man.

“You were thinking so hard,” Trip replied, “that I couldn’t help but to wake up.” He opened his eyes. “Do you have any idea how weird that is?”

“Yes,” T’Pol replied wryly, glancing toward his groin. “I do have … some idea.” It was enough of a reminder about his recalcitrant hormones and the affect they had on her to cause Trip’s almost smile to broaden ever so slightly.

A soft chime interrupted whatever he was about to say and both of them automatically glanced in the direction of the wall monitor. The data display flickered briefly before changing to a sensor feed. T’Pol frowned again – before retiring, she had programmed the T’Muna-Doth’s antiquated sensor array to broadcast a high intensity, narrow frequency burst transmission to the nearest Starfleet comm buoy, a device she had personally deployed from Enterprise prior to the their arrival at the periphery of the Ekosian system, but according to the results now crawling down the monitor, there was no such buoy.
Trip grunted softly. The flavor of his thoughts as they drifted across their cerebral linkage was one of worried surprise – he knew as well as she that the device should have been there. Part of their escape strategy hinged on making contact with Starfleet or the VHC. At this point, with the T’Muna-Doth’s fuel reserves as low as they were, T’Pol would even tolerate an Andorian scout craft. Not a cruiser, though. That many Andorians in such close quarters intensified their natural belligerence by least thirty percent and T’Pol would be quite unsurprised if such a warship simply opened fired upon a Vulcan craft this far from accepted borders.

“Well,” Trip muttered, “so much for Plan A.” To T’Pol’s very mild dismay, he sat up and swung his legs over the side of their bunk. “Deuterium colony it is.” He paused and gave her a sidelong look. “What had you thinking so hard anyway?” he asked. “Something I need to know about?”

T’Pol hesitated. She had no idea how to tell him about her fears, about the very real possibility that her entire life had been a lie. How would he react to something she did not understand herself? She glanced away.

“No,” she replied softly. “There is nothing new.” It was a blatant lie and from the way Trip stiffened, he recognized as such. For a moment, he hesitated, studying her with his soothing blue eyes. Finally, he nodded.

“All right, then,” he said simply. “I should get to work.” He pulled away.

And T’Pol watched him go.

She needed to meditate.
She was terrified.

For the last thirty days, ever since Malcolm dropped the mother of all secrets on her head, Amanda had been living in a state of constant paranoia. The damned Suliban could be anyone he wanted – was *he* even the right pronoun? Did these shapechangers even *have* genders? – so she found herself watching everyone, waiting for the smallest hint that they weren't who they appeared to be. She even began seeding conversations with leading questions, references to things that never happened, or intentionally misremembered events, just to get a reaction. If they had been anywhere else, she suspected her behavior might have gotten her removed from the XO position of the whisper team and probably subjected to a battery of intense psychological screenings, but here, in the Expanse, even her fellow MACOs just chalked it up to stress.

That didn't stop many of them from looking at her funny every now and then.

The paranoia did absolutely nothing to heighten her senses like the vids always claimed. Instead, it was exhausting. Five years ago, Amanda had participated in the five hundred kilometer RMOD – Command had another name for it, something involving Readiness and Fitness, but every MACO in uniform, including the staff officers, called it the Road March of Death – and even that had not left her so mentally drained that she could barely do her normal job like this did.

She very briefly toyed with the possibility that this entire thing was simply a snipe hunt and Malcolm was using it to avoid discussing this changing … thing between them, but she discarded that notion the instant Reed brought her along to discuss the hunt's status with Captain Archer. Yes, Malcolm would go to great lengths to *not* talk about them, but under no circumstances could she envision him enlisting Archer's assistance. Hell, she wasn't even sure if the two liked each other or not!

So here she was, skulking about on E Deck, at oh-dark-thirty, following up on something she'd overheard during chow. Two of Kelby's junior engineers – the creepy one, Masaro, who really needed to be sucking vacuum instead of oxygen, and one of the life support techs – had been arguing about some abnormal power consumption near the former quarters of a steward named Daniels. For reasons Amanda still hadn't been able to figure out, this Daniels was listed as MIA and his cabin was completely sealed; only the captain could gain entrance and event then, *Enterprise*'s security system required authorization by three other senior officers. There was nothing in the official log explaining this unprecedented layer of encryption and the one time Amanda mentioned it to Malcolm, he'd looked at her like she grew a second head before stating that it was classified. From his tone and body language, he clearly thought the matter closed.

But Amanda didn't.

From before she could even walk, Amanda had hated secrets. Her parents split apart because of them and Amanda could count on one hand – one finger, really, and so far, it was still active – the number of romantic relationships she'd involved in that did not disintegrate due to deception and lies. Which was ironic, really, given the layers and layers of secrecy intertwined with her life these days. She was
part of a covert – read: secret – taskforce that, according to the United Earth charter, was officially not supposed to exist. Even though pretty much everyone aboard (including the captain and the first officer Amanda suspected) knew she was sleeping with Mal, she couldn't talk to anyone about how her intent to not get emotionally involved with the armoury officer was blowing up in her face, since the relationship was against regs … which made it an open secret. And now, her lover, whom she had developed legitimate feelings for despite her best efforts otherwise, had recruited her to help him hunt down a shapechanging alien … and of course, she had to keep this op a fucking secret.

Yes, the universe had a very finely honed sense of irony.

The clank of metal against metal allowed her to push aside her angst and refocus on the mission at hand. Gripping the PADD that was the primary part of her 'disguise,' she strode forward, an annoyed look on her face. She kept her shoulders straight and concentrated on presenting the image of a pissed off commanding officer. Three of her MACOs were billeted in this section, which gave her a perfect excuse to be here.

She rounded the corner soundlessly – a good soldier knew when to be heard and when to be a ghost – and her eyes automatically darted to the only other person present in the corridor. Amanda hesitated, her stride faltering ever so slightly. What the hell was Masaro doing here? According to the duty roster, which every she and every other MACO memorized at the beginning of each duty morning, the damage controlman was on midwatch – twenty three thirty to zero five thirty – and had no business even being off of D Deck.

"Shouldn't you be in Engineering, Crewman?" she asked, the words tumbling from her lips before she could stop them. Disgust dripped from her words.

With an inarticulate cry of surprise and fear, Masaro sprang away from the door he'd been standing in front of – it was the one that Archer had sealed off – and twisted around to face her. In his left hand, he held a universal spanner and his right …

In his right hand, he had a plasma torch.

Time seemed to freeze around them, though Amanda knew it was just her adrenaline surging. For a lowly engineer, Masaro recovered amazingly fast. His left hand blurred forward and he hurled the spanner at Amanda with surprising accuracy. He continued the motion by bringing the torch up with his other hand and steadying its aim with the newly empty left one. His features were abruptly contorted with fury, a soundless snarl that turned him ugly. At this range, a plasma torch could seriously maim or even kill an unsuspecting target.

Amanda was not such a person.

Even as Masaro threw the wrench, she was already reacting with the instincts of a highly trained combat specialist. Dropping to one knee, her gun hand flashed to the holstered weapon at her side. In a single, fluid motion, she drew the EM-33, brought it up to chest level, sighted her target and fired. Too late, she realized that the weapon was set at its highest intensity.

Masaro was dead before he hit the ground.

Alarms began howling instantly as Enterprise's internal sensors detected the unauthorized weapons fire and sounded the alert. Having spent more than a few hours familiarizing herself with the bridge tactical controls, Amanda knew the procedure by heart. Grimacing – Malcolm was going to kill her; he’d wanted to trail Masaro, not shoot him! – she reached for her communicator to identify herself and orient the security response teams to her location.
But something, a giant's fist or perhaps a runaway truck she hadn't seen, smashed into her and sent her tumbling into darkness.

When she opened her eyes again, everything hurt. A rhythmic tone beat time with her heart and she frowned at the annoying sound. There was a heavy weight holding her arm down. She couldn't see.

She couldn't see!

"Ah, I see you're finally awake, Lieutenant." The voice was familiar but it took Amanda long moments to recognize Phlox. "Now don't worry – you're quite safe. Try not to move." The doctor moved around – why couldn't she see? – and something buzzed. "I've temporarily immobilized your left arm. The break was quite severe and I was worried you would damage it further. In a few moments, we'll get you set up with a working cast." Phlox clucked over something. "You were quite lucky, being that close to the explosion." Amanda moaned – why couldn't she see?

"Eyes," she managed to get through her less than cooperative lips.

"There was some … unexpected damage," Phlox replied, his voice sympathetic but still quite jovial. "Don't worry, Lieutenant Cole," he said, gripping her shoulder. "I already have a treatment plan in mind. I believe you can make a full recovery."

Amanda almost sobbed in relief.

Some time later – she wasn't sure how long; floating in this unrelenting blackness left her with no real sense of time – she heard the hiss of sickbay's door opening followed by approaching footsteps. There were … four of them? Yes, it sounded like four. She recognized Malcolm's distinctive aftershave instantly and was about to greet him when the captain spoke.

"How are you doing, Lieutenant?" Archer asked. Amanda smiled in the direction of the man's voice, hoping she looked less terrified than she was. Phlox's description of his treatment plan was still ringing in her ears and she doubted the captain would appreciate her vomiting on his boots.

"I've certainly been better, sir," she replied quickly.

"Then maybe you can tell me why I have a dead engineer splattered across two decks and a critically injured MACO in sickbay." Archer's tone was frustrated and dark. "And why internal sensors reported weapons-fire immediately before the explosion."

"The second part I can answer, sir." Amanda squared her shoulders – she was a MACO, dammit, and blind or not, MACOs held onto discipline. "I encountered Crewman Masaro outside those sealed quarters," she began more calmly than she felt. "As he was supposed to be on duty in Engineering, I challenged him. He responded by first throwing a wrench at me and then, trying to use a plasma torch on my face."

"So you shot him." Commander Hernandez. Curious. She smelled more like Archer than Amanda expected. Were they knocking boots or did they just use the same deodorant?

"That's correct, ma'am." Amanda frowned. "I was about to call it in, but … there was an explosion, I think. I … honestly, I don't remember much anything past shooting him. He hit the deck and then I woke up here."

"Preliminary analysis indicates Masaro was fitted with a heartbeat monitor attached to some sort of trinary explosive material in his body," Malcolm announced. He sounded furious.

"What?" The shock in Hernandez's voice could not possibly be faked and Amanda could easily
imagine the commander's aghast expression. "Why?"

"I am reviewing that now, ma'am." Malcolm's voice was harder than Amanda recalled ever hearing. "I would like Major Hayes' demolition specialist to coordinate with my department in this investigation."

"Done." Hayes. Ah. So, he was number four. Of the officers arrayed around her, he was the quietest.

"Agreed." Archer sounded grim. "One last thing, Lieutenant. Why were you in that corridor in the first place?" Amanda turned her face toward his voice.

"Corporal Chang needs some wall-to-wall counseling, sir." It was a partial truth – ever since her battlefield promotion, Chang had been a serious thorn in her side and still needed someone to slap some sense into him – which was always the best way to lie.

"That's God's honest truth," Hayes muttered. He, the captain and Commander Hernandez withdrew a few moments later, after expressing their well wishes. The major promised to stop by again later and Amanda could hear the three begin a discussion with Phlox regarding her injuries, but she tuned it out the instant Malcolm touched her right hand. She reacted without thought and gripped his fingers tight.

"I'm sorry," Amanda whispered, her voice pitched for his ears only. "I know you wanted him alive."

"That's bollocks," Malcolm replied. "I'll take a live you over him any day." Amanda grinned, hoping that she did not look like a goofy, lovesick fool. It would be bad enough if the captain and Hernandez saw it; God help her if Hayes did. She'd never live it down. "I'll be back later," Mal whispered. She heard movement – it felt like he had turned but hadn't left – and then, for a single, impossible moment, his lips were on hers. He was gone before she could react and Amanda knew he wouldn't have done that if anyone could see it, but the fact he did so in public? Her breath caught.

She was still grinning when Phlox approached with the Aldebarian maggots.
God, he was frustrated.

Not in the traditional way, the way he had been while stuck aboard Enterprise when he had the urge to take a very cold shower every time he argued or flirted with T'Pol, but in a different manner. His instincts were screaming at him that she was lying, that something big had come up in her meditations, but for the life of him, Trip didn't know how to ask what it was without feeling like he was being unnecessarily nosy. He had made a concentrated effort to not be That Guy from the moment they officially became a couple – since a little earlier, actually – mostly due to his now better than average understanding of Vulcans. T'Pol's species were intensely, absurdly private and Trip wanted to respect her and her culture. Sure, he shared anything and everything with her, but went out of his way to not push her out of her preferred boundaries.

Usually.

This felt different for some reason, but then, his instincts had been so out-of-whack in regards to her – how long exactly had he suffered under the delusion she and Jon had something going on? – that he remained confused as to the source of his feelings. Did he just want it to be different or was this one of those weird instances where she wanted him to bring it up, but due to her upbringing, wouldn't actually initiate the discussion and was thus relying on this bond thing? God. And he'd thought human women were complicated.

To make matters worse, the closer they got to the non-responsive communications buoy, the more apparent it was becoming that the thing had been destroyed. Trip had been desperately hoping it was a simple software glitch or system malfunction, something he could repair here on the T'Muna-Doth or there on the buoy, so they could make contact with Starfleet Command. He didn't want to admit it to T'Pol, but he had serious doubts this ship could make it back to civilized space. Sure, she was tough and resilient, but the evidence was pretty clear that her psychological damage was a lot more severe than he thought.

Trip frowned. Structural damage, not psychological. He was thinking about the T'Muna-Doth, not T'Pol.

Dammit.

"We are nearing visual range of the communications buoy," T'Pol announced over the intraship loudspeaker. "Five minutes."

"On my way," Trip promptly replied. He gave the engineering displays a quick once-over, trusting that his instincts would note any potential issues that would need immediate attention. Nothing leaped out at him and he was three steps out of engineering before he realized that he had automatically used one of T'Pol's mental techniques to record everything he saw with the quick scan, and then review the mental snapshots in more detail after. He shook his head in wry amusement and idly wondered if all Vulcans had this sort of training or if it was only the spooks.
He climbed up the ladder leading to the command deck and unconsciously strode to where T'Pol sat. Leaning down, he peered over her shoulder.

"Visual range … now," she announced as the timer reached zero. Instantly, the main viewer flickered and changed to an image of an empty starfield. For a moment, Trip thought the powerful optical telescopes were pointed in the wrong spot. There was nothing there. He opened his mouth to speak in the same instant T'Pol keyed in a new set of commands. Bright green digital brackets appeared on the viewscreen as the T'Muna-Doth's computer began identifying and isolating non-natural elements.

"The debris field is substantial," T'Pol declared as the results began flashing. "It is highly unlikely that this destruction occurred naturally."

"So much for the random collision theory," Trip muttered. Neither of them had really believed the destruction was anything by intentional: deployment of these buoys generally took place in regions of space that had been pre-analyzed and determined to be utterly boring. Try as he might, Trip couldn't actually think of a single incident of "accidental" destruction. Starfleet intentionally made these things tough and it showed. "Any idea when it happened?" Trip asked.

"No." T'Pol frowned slightly. "We would need to approach closer and perhaps obtain some samples to examine."

"Yeah, I don't think that's a good idea," Trip replied. He leaned back to give T'Pol more space when she half-turned in the seat and gave him a questioning eyebrow. Once, he would have taken this look as a challenge or even an expression of doubt that he had fully thought his statement through, and he would have instantly (and loudly, he had to admit) defended his argument. Now though, he could see it for the genuine interest it was. She simply wanted to hear his reasons. "We're going to be flying on fumes even if we maintain our current course to that deuterium colony," he said calmly, "and I don't actually see any benefit in us deviating."

"Agreed." T'Pol tapped another key on her console, logging the destroyed buoy's location in their navigation computer and then minimized the view of the debris field. "If Enterprise was recalled to Earth as we suspect," she added, "it is probable that they visited this colony to refuel as well."

"So there might just be a buoy there as well," Trip finished with a nod. "That would be logical," he remarked with a very slight smile. Normally, complimenting her logic invariably caused her to … well, Trip couldn't think of calling it anything but preening, even if he'd never admit that to her given the emotional underpinnings of such a response, but this time, she barely even acknowledged the comment. "Are you okay?" he asked after a moment of contemplation. Her eyes shot to his and he felt her sudden flash of fear and confusion across their magical connection.

"My meditation of late has been unproductive," T'Pol prevaricated. The excuse was a poor one and Trip's disbelief must have shown on his face (or she sensed it via this bond thing) because a moment later, she sighed heavily. "I have not been entirely truthful to you," she said softly. Trip nodded. "I know," he said flatly. He made no attempt to hide the anger and hurt her lack of trust caused and a verdant flush climbed up the back of her neck. "I can't help you if I don't know what's going on."

"And that is the crux of my dilemma, Trip. I cannot tell you what I am experiencing because I do not understand it myself." She flowered at her lack of understanding and a white-hot spike of fury drilled through Trip's skull. He gasped in pained surprise and almost lost his balance before the sensation vanished. T'Pol grimaced. "I apologize," she said softly, emotion thick in her voice. "My control is … inadequate."
"Just tell me how I can help," Trip whispered. On instinct, he snagged her hand and pulled her from the chair before enfolding her in a tight hug. As he expected, T'Pol stiffened momentarily – he doubted she would ever be fully comfortable with an embrace, even when they were completely alone – and then relaxed against him. He pretended that he did not notice the stifled shudder that came dangerously close to being a sob.

"Patience," she murmured. "Please, just be patient with me." She tilted her head up and looked at him with her young-old eyes. Trip swallowed. He could still feel the after-effects of her lapse of control, could sense the barely suppressed terror swimming within her, could taste her need…

Her need.

Oh … crap.

He barely had time to react before she was pushing him to the deck, desperate fingers pulling and tearing at his clothes. Comprehension came at once – with her confusion mounting, she needed something she could cling to, something that was absolute and untainted by what may have happened nearly twenty years ago.

T'Pol's need called out to him.

And willingly, eagerly, he went to her.
606 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's late December, 2153.

This takes place during "Harbinger", but is obviously a very different version...

Panic was in the air.

Most days, it was subdued, barely noticeable, but in moments of stress which here in the Expanse were all too often, Travis was sincerely surprised there weren't riots or even a blood-soaked mutiny. Every member of the crew was watching everyone else, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Friendships were strained, illicit romances sundered, and the espirit de corps that had been so evident when they launched from Earth was gone, replaced by borderline hysteria and panic. Even the recent successes against the Xindi – destruction of that prototype weapon with Andorian assistance, for example, or the rope-a-dope the captain had pulled on that Degra guy – hadn't helped the crew's mood.

And all because of Masaro.

The damage controlman's death fifty-five days ago had caught everyone by surprise. Not that Lieutenant Cole shooting him was entirely unexpected – the little bastard had been so freaking creepy that the rest of Kelby's department had taken to calling him Gollum long before he stupidly tried to outshoot a MACO – but the aftermath, the startling revelations about him that came to light after his death, those no one had expected. And it terrified them.

Because if there was one Terra Prime sympathizer-slash-operative aboard, then why not two? Or five? Or ten? And even more worrisome, who gained by revealing his affiliations to the crew? Captain Archer had certainly tried to keep a lid on it...

The hiss of the command center's door sliding open warned Travis that he was no longer alone and he glanced over his shoulder to see Kelby entering. David looked more tired than usual, but that was unexpected was Hoshi's presence at the chief engineer's side.

Things had been strained between them for a long time now, probably since Kaitaama and that mess, and everything Travis tried to get them back to the way they'd been seemed to explode in his face. As horrifyingly self-centered as it sounded, the Xindi attack on Earth and the death of her entire family had actually gone a long way toward equalizing things between them.

And it was disgusting thoughts like that one that convinced Travis he was not a good man, despite what everyone else seemed to think.

"So this is where the two of you always disappear to," Hoshi exclaimed with something vaguely resembling her former cheer. "Did you know that probably half of the ship thinks the two of you are dating?"

"Only half?" Kelby smirked. "I must be losing my appeal."
"Bet they wouldn't be saying that if I crashed us into one of these damned anomalies," Travis muttered. He powered up the main display and opened the navigational starmap necessary for plotting courses through the Expanse. It was a hodgepodge of different starmaps, tacked together and overlaid atop Enterprise's stellar charts. Out of the corner of his eye, Travis noted the instant Hoshi recognized some of the alien references and nav-alerts from the way she narrowed her eyes.

"That doesn't look good," Kelby remarked as he studied the proposed route. It would take Enterprise through a dense cluster of gravitational signatures that had no corresponding stellar mass. From past experience, Travis knew there was a better than eighty percent chance they were looking at an anomaly field and God only knew what waited there there. Time could start running backwards, or gravity could suddenly start working differently, or hell, the nacelles might inexplicably start misfiring and shoot them through a wormhole.

"Here be dragons," Travis said with a glower as he overlaid an Ossarian star chart atop stellar cartography. "I don't have a clue what this says-"

"I might," Hoshi interjected softly. She stepped closer and frowned at the display. "Something something field ... axis, I think? I can't make all of it out." She pointed to a string of gibberish. "These are definitely numbers though. One, two, nine, six, five, three, zero, zero."

"And this is why I brought you along," Kelby said with a grin. "We ran it through the universal translator it spat out some nonsense that neither of us could figure out."

"One-two-nine by six-five by three-zero-zero," Travis mumbled. It sounded like stellar coordinates, with an x, y and z axis. On instinct, he split-screened the display, pulled up a blank copy of the nav-display, and then imported all of the Ossarian charts. He located the annotation Hoshi had just identified and set it as the primary datapoint: x as 129, y as 65, and z as 300.

"What about this one?" he asked, as he highlighted another row of unintelligible symbols.

"Nine, nine, zero, one, two, zero, four," Hoshi dutifully replied. She pushed him out of the way and took over. Fingers flying, she opened a third window and activated a program from somewhere on Enterprise's internal servers. Both of Travis' windows flickered and, within seconds, some of the squiggles and symbols began changing to English. "I'm sorry," Hoshi said quietly. "Baird was the one who always imported my datasets to the UT matrix," she continued, "and I just forgot to start doing it since we left him on Earth."

"We've all been stressed," Travis said with a smile. "If Commander Hernandez wasn't always on me about my stupid TPS reports, I'd forget about them every week and you know how important those things are." He gave Kelby a prompting look.

"Hell," the engineer muttered, "I haven't filled out a requisition form since I came aboard. If Taylor dropped dead tomorrow, I wouldn't have the first clue what went where or who needed what."

As motivational speeches went, that one pretty much sucked, which was totally in-character for David. The man was technically astute and a borderline genius, but sadly, he had the people skills of a rock. An especially dense rock. Travis rolled his eyes.

The klaxon suddenly blared, causing all three of them to jump in surprise. They were two steps closer to the door when Malcolm's voice echoed from hidden speakers.

"Repel boarders. Repeat: repel boarders. Security teams to D Deck." Travis was about to mutter a curse about Reed and his stupid training regimens when the tactical officer continued. "All hands: repel boarders. This is not a drill. Repeat: repel boarders. This is not a drill."
By the time Travis reached his duty station, the situation was contained and the alien responsible – the same one they’d pulled from one of the spheres, though the cellular decay made it look like a zombie from one of Commander Tucker's monster movies; it even had pointed ears like an evil Vulcan! – was dead. Lieutenant Cole had fired the killing shot but Travis couldn't even look at her when Major Hayes and Captain Archer both congratulated her on her team's prompt response. Anymore, it wasn't lingering distrust of her over her actions following Reed's colossal screw-up at the trellium facility. No, this was all Phlox's fault. Now, Travis couldn't look at Cole and not think of the alien maggots the doctor injected into her eyes to fix the damage – while she was sedated, of course, because even a scary badass like the lieutenant could not possibly go through a procedure like that while conscious without going mad. And, if that image wasn't disturbing enough, following the Denobulan's removal of the things, Cole's previously green eyes had turned completely white, with only the black pupil showing in the very center. Hardly anyone could meet her gaze now, which the woman took ridiculous amounts of glee over. Even Major Hayes, one of the most terrifying men Travis had ever met, always seemed to be thoroughly engrossed in a PADD whenever he had to speak to her.

Naturally, only Malcolm and Soval seemed immune.

At the earliest point possible, Travis excused himself and retraced his steps to the command center. He knew that Lieutenant Commander Reed wanted to speak with him – not a day elapsed where the armoury officer didn't offer an olive branch – but Travis ignored it each time. Reed had violated one of the core tenets of Starfleet and, even if Mayweather could now admit that the level of violence of the MACO assault on the trellium facility had probably been necessary, Travis couldn't quite forgive him for it. There was mounting evidence that indicated Reed's pre-Starfleet career was soaked in blood, which left Travis with the uncomfortable realization that he'd never really known Malcolm at all. What else was a lie, he wondered.

Hoshi's translation program was still running when he entered, but chirped in completion the moment the door hissed shut. Travis crossed the room and glanced at the results with growing optimism. It wasn't a magical roadmap or anything, but there were references to the kinds of anomalies in the region that would be invaluable. Heck, Enterprise's main computer had even been smart enough to shuffle the potential coordinates around and test various permutations – it turned out the Ossarians inverted the x-y-z axis so the z came first, which made no sense at all – until it identified the arrangement that was most probable sequence. Travis was about to power down the display when his eyes happened to fall on an outlying red giant stellar cartography had originally tagged as a system holding no interest to them. The Ossarian name of this system flashed and pulsed.

Azati Prime.

Travis reached for the comm.-panel without hesitation.

"Captain Archer, Commander Hernandez to the command center," he said sharply, unaware of how much it sounded like an order. Even if he had, he wouldn't have hesitated.

They were going the wrong way.
06 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's late December, 2153.

This takes place concurrently with the previous chapter.

T'Pol remembered.

The desert air was dry, carrying with it the unmistakable scent of sand and heat. This near to the Forge, one could hear the wailing of the wind as it roared through the twisting canyons. There was no spot in ShiKahr closer to the Vulcan heritage.

Clad in the unremarkable work robes of a low-level bureaucrat, T'Pol stood quietly before the elaborately carved overlook that dominated the view. From here, she could see nearly all of the streets and curved alleyways leading to or past the ancient gates that had once marked the border of Surak's demesne in antiquity. Over the centuries, those gates had been expanded and reduced and rebuilt again so many times it no longer resembled its original appearance.

She heard the traitor approach long before she saw him. Menos did not hurry as he strode toward her, but neither did he tarry. Like her, he was dressed to blend, complete with concealing hood still hanging down past his mid-back. He carried no visible weapons, but T'Pol knew it would be illogical to presume he was unarmed. She certainly wasn't and he had been one of her primary instructors.

"I congratulate you on a most effective ploy," Menos said once he drew alongside her. "Your request for a meeting was artfully phrased. It effectively straddled the line between openly resentful of the system and sullen naivete." He offered her the tiniest of nods. "I was unaware that my extracurricular activities were known to the Director."

"You could have run," T'Pol said calmly. "There is no logic in your decision to remain on Vulcan."

"On the contrary," Menos retorted in an even voice, "my every action has been logical." He turned to face the open desert. "A war is coming, T'Pol-kan, and the allegiance I have chosen is one which offers the highest chance of survival." T'Pol studied him for a long moment, wondering exactly when his considerable intellect had tipped into insanity.

"The Andorians are," she began but Menos interrupted, but his voice was several decibels louder than necessary.

"The Andorians are not relevant," he snapped. "They are a momentary distraction before the true danger to Vulcan." He pinned her with a look. "The Humans will destroy us if we do not act … and we will let them." His expression darkened fractionally. "They will seduce us from our rightful place of power and supplant us." Menos turned to face her once more. "Thus have I allied with our Lost cousins," he said. "For the good of Vulcan."

T'Pol stared at her former instructor with a disturbing sense of unease swimming in her stomach. Every Vulcan knew the legends of the Rihannsu and how they had been cast from this world into
eternal exile, but no one truly believed they still existed. They had been too barbaric, too uncivilized, too poorly equipped to long survive their great exodus, so only madmen claimed their support.

And yet … Menos’ gaze was still sharp, his actions coherent and focused, directed toward an unseen but identifiable objective, so unlike the other illogical fools who referenced those who marched under the Raptor's wing. He had been recorded in the company of unknown Vulcans who did not exist in the planetary census. Was it possible he was not delusional?

"You are considering my actions without filtering them through officially-sanctioned biases," Menos said approvingly. "This is why your record as an intelligence operative is so inconsistent," he added. "You have become accustomed to failure." He frowned. "How many times have your assignments been weighted against your abilities? How often have you been sent into a situation long past the moment you could have altered the result?"

"Quite frequently," T'Pol admitted. She knew quite well that her performance was listed as marginal and was capable of suppressing her resentment over this only after extended meditation. Logic told her that someone in the Ministry harbored an emotional dislike for her, though she had yet to discern their identity.

Menos opened his mouth to comment further, but visibly hesitated. He frowned slightly, his eyes narrowing, and then, to T'Pol's great surprise, he sighed heavily.

"Well executed, Director," he murmured under his breat. "This is a trap," Menos said calmly, "and both of us are the targets." T'Pol tensed.

But it was already too late.

A brilliant lance of living fire flashed over her shoulder, striking Menos squarely in the chest. He remained standing for several heartbeats, his expression frozen in pained shock, and finally, he slowly toppled to the street. There was never any doubt that he was dead.

Even before he fell, T'Pol was twisting in place, her right hand darting for the concealed disruptor in her belt. With her left hand, she slapped the communicator disguised as a badge of administrative rank, triggering the agent in distress alert. A second bolt of weapons fire slashed out at her, narrowly missing as she threw herself into a jumping dive that carried her off the overlook and into the street below.

She hit the dirt walkway hard, rolling to distribute the impact more efficiently. A trio of pedestrians – two males twice her age and a matronly female who looked to be of sufficient age to have known Surak personally – calmly stepped out of her way and continued on their way, sparing her only a single, disapproving look so identical on all three faces that T'Pol recognized them as blood relatives.

"Code in," a disembodied, gender-less voice ordered through the tiny receiver secured in her left ear. "T'Pol," she replied sharply as she half-sprinted, half-walked down the street. "Code: one, seven, zero, one." An alleyway beckoned – it was sheltered and curved away from the overlook. "Shots fired," she continued. "Target is deceased and I am being pursued by an unknown number of hostiles." She risked a glance behind her and suppressed a flash of anger at the sight of the pedestrian trio now in conversation with two hefty males wearing the gear of Internal Security sweeper teams.

"We are monitoring the situation," the gender-less voice said. "Evade capture and proceed to contact point three-three-six." T'Pol's nostrils flared with irritation but that was the only indication of displeasure at the extraordinarily unhelpful instructions she allowed show on her face. She ducked into the alley, removed her outer robe, and then reversed it before slipping it back on. When she
emerged from the small side street again, she wore the uniform of a low-level sanitation disposal worker.

Contact Point Three-Three-Six was an unremarkable shop specializing in decorative, hand-crafted urns, usually used in remembrance rituals for the recently deceased. T'Pol observed it for several moments from a place of relative concealment, but saw nothing out of place to indicate that it was a trap. Still, she approached with no small amount of trepidation and entered cautiously, the disruptor held tightly in one hand. The proprietor, a male of indeterminate age, looked up from where he sat behind the counter and raised a single, questioning eyebrow. T'Pol drew breath to address him.

And, in that moment, a stun field enveloped her.

She was unaware of how long she was unconscious and as she slowly surfaced toward coherence, T'Pol could sense the sedatives coursing through her bloodstream. She was secured to a bed of some sort – it reminded her of a physician's biobed – and there were voices hovering near her. Try as she might, though, she could not force her eyes to open.

"It would be more efficient to simply terminate her," a voice declared. To her ears, he sounded diffident, obsequious even. "I can arrange for disposal if you are unwilling."

"Do so and I shall personally ensure your demise is exceedingly painful," an all-too familiar male declared. The drugs must have been particularly effective because he sounded like T'Pol's late father. "You have your instructions. She is to remember what I want her to remember." The other man murmured something that sounded like acquiescence and T'Pol heard him back away. She struggled against the drug-induced torpor that stripped away her control, but her body refused to obey her desires. "I am sorry, Daughter," the male who sounded like Father whispered. He stroked the side of her face and she felt a whisper of foreign emotion brush against her mind. Her thoughts tumbled over one another. It could not be. He was dead.

A sudden rush of displaced air warned her that they were no longer alone. The knot of emotions that she recognized as belonging to her father, even though she knew it could not possibly be him, hardened, turned darker and angrier.

"You come when you are not asked ... and pay no heed when I call you," Father said in a growl.

"I do not answer to you," the newcomer replied. He spoke Vulcan with a curious accent. "There is no logic in this course of action, Director."

"Menos was the final piece," Father said. "With him removed, you are the only one remaining alive who is aware of my former identity. I am now free to implement Phase Two."

"Infiltration." The other man sounded disturbed. "This was not why I revealed myself to you. It will complicate things immeasurably."

"Reveal? I found you out, if you recall." Father exhaled deeply. "It is logical for me to do this."

"You have irreparably damaged your daughter's career in the Ministry," the stranger said, disapproval evident in his voice. "And now, you conspire to harm her credibility further by implying she experienced a psychotic break. Is this how you see to your child's well-being?"

"You misunderstand my intent," Father said. "I intend to place the blame squarely upon Menos. My daughter's reaction will be understandable in light of the tragedy she has averted." T'Pol felt him shift his stance. "I do not wish this life for her."

"She chose this career because of you."
"I know." Father shook his head. "She is too much like me," he said. He suddenly sounded bitter. "Our breeding runs true," he murmured. "You wonder how I will succeed in my infiltration? It is because I am already Rihannsu." The stranger's silence must have indicated shock as Father continued. "My foremother returned to Vulcan on a mission of espionage but bonded so intently with her mate that she abandoned it."

"I was … unaware," the other man stated.

"And T'Pol is doubly so. Her second foremother mated to a Rihannsu as well, though I doubt T'Mir knew this until many decades after the fact." Father's voice hardened. "I do this so T'Pol will not be asked to in twenty years when the High Command inevitably realizes the extent of chi'Rihan's infiltration of Vulcan." The oh so familiar mindtouch slowly vanished as Father retracted his hand. "Barring direct intervention," he said, "you cannot prevent this." Another hiss of displaced air announced the stranger's departure. "As I suspected," Father said softly, an amused tone in his voice. "Be well, my child" he said a moment later. "Remember the dreams of your youth and seek a life among the stars," he whispered. "Let nothing and no one restrain you."

He withdrew then, calling out for an attendant. They conversed, their voices too soft for her to comprehend, and then, the first male joined them. A few moments later, he approached with the unseen attendant. Dry, overly warm fingers touched her face in a way that was tantalizingly familiar.

"She is partially aware," the older man announced. Gone was the hesitation and hesitancy that had been in his voice when he spoke to Father. "Sedate her again," he ordered. "I will not risk this while she is conscious. Even for him." Something touched her neck and she fell into oblivion, knowing that when she woke, nothing would be the same.

T'Pol woke.

She blinked away the last vestiges of confusion and inhaled sharply. The imposed memories she had known for eighteen years fell away, collapsing like spider-webs in strong rain. Anger replaced the guilt she'd struggled with for years. It took little less than a minute for the last of the High Priest's work to vanish as she integrated what she now knew to be the truth with her memories of life since the Fullara that wasn't. Abruptly, her breath caught. The stranger speaking to her father … she knew him. She knew him.

Crewman Daniels.

Suddenly, she needed to meditate very, very badly.
Erika: Delicate Negotiations

Chapter Notes

618 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's early January, 2154.

The situation had just gone from bad to worse.

Behind her, crouched in the narrow crawlspace leading to engineering, Lieutenants Mayweather and Kelby waited, their eyes wide. Both held phase pistols at the ready. Thus far, neither of them had been forced to fire, but Erika was desperately afraid that it was only a matter of time. She hadn't pulled the trigger yet either and the reason for that knelt beside the access hatch in front of her.

Lieutenant Cole's decision to back Erika in this ... impromptu mutiny was more than a little surprising, but the MACO's capabilities had been undeniably useful. She moved like a ghost, struck like a cobra when necessary, and possessed an uncanny ability to recognize the traps that Major Hayes' team set up. The latter shouldn't have been a surprise, really, considering Cole had been on Hayes' team longer than anyone else and, as far as Erika knew, none of the other members of her team even knew she had defected yet.

They were creeping toward engineering with the intent of trying to undo the damage caused by Jon's command override and Lieutenant Taylor's neurotoxin-induced meltdown. The plan was simple: neutralize any of the crewmen infected by the insectoid venom, reinitialize the warp core, and then use the master controls in engineering to seal off all the interior bulkheads so they could sort out this mess later.

Unfortunately, it appeared that the MACOs, led by Commander Reed and Major Hayes, had beaten them to it.

Erika bit back the urge to curse. From what she could tell, Reed believed she was infected as well, so attempts to negotiate weren't an option. On the bright side, Reed's team had already secured Jon before he could do any more damage and were, even now, transporting him back to Enterprise via shuttlepod. Once the captain was aboard and they had regained control of the ship, the armoury officet evidently intended to destroy the rest of the derelict ship, thereby spoiling what Erika saw as the best chance at peace.

And to think, this entire disaster could have been avoided if they hadn't found this damned ship.

When Jon began talking about trying to salvage the ... hatchery, Erika had been relieved. That act of compassion she took as a sign the Jonathan Archer she knew wasn't wholly lost in this war, but his inexplicable decision to relieve Lieutenant Commander Reed of his duties for simply opposing the decision had staggered her. When she questioned that decision, Jon had once again surprised her by doing the same to her; at least she was only confined to quarters and not escorted to the brig. She had been so stunned at his actions that she hadn't known what to do until long after the two MACOs assigned to her sealed her cabin door behind her.

By then, of course, it was too late. Her door was security sealed and, even when Enterprise shivered and manuevered in a way that could only mean combat nearly an hour later, Erika hadn't been able to leave to reach her duty station. Later, when Cole entered, accompanied by Phlox and Soval, she
learned that Mayweather had been on watch and, under his command, the Starfleet vessel destroyed an insectoid craft investigating the distress signal from the crashed hatchery ship that had drawn Enterprise's notice in the first place.

"The captain is acting erratically due to a neurotoxin in his system," Phlox announced grimly. "And it appears that, under its influence, he has exposed other members of the crew to these chemicals."

"He has also relieved Lieutenants Mayweather and Kelby," Soval added with something vaguely resembling annoyance. He went on to explain how, following the destruction of the investigating insectoid craft, Jon lost his temper and ordered Travis to the brig. Kelby, who had been on the bridge at that time, refused to stand down when Archer ordered Mayweather into custody out of either misguided loyalty or friendship to the helmsman and quickly found himself sharing a cell with Mayweather in the brig.

"It gets worse," Cole said grimly. "Malcolm thinks you're infected too and has convinced the major to help him secure Enterprise. They're going to reduce that derelict to scrap."

That decided her then, and Erika decided to take a gamble. Phlox and Soval were sent to the bridge in an attempt to talk some sense into Reed, while she and Cole headed to the brig to spring Mayweather and Kelby. Under normal circumstances, there would have been little chance of getting to the brig without detection, but Erika had an ace-in-the-hole named Hoshi.

Sato wisely kept her mouth shut on the bridge when Jon had Travis and Kelby relieved of their duties and then did everything to avoid drawing attention to herself. Thus far, no one – the infected personnel under Jon or the MACOs under Reed – seemed to have realized she was actually making the situation even more chaotic for all parties while discreetly providing Erika with updates on MACO positions. What should have been an impossible mission – sneaking to Deck F without being detected, disabling the two MACOs on duty inside the brig before they could sound the alert via the hypospray Cole possessed before they even knew they were in danger, and then liberating the two officers secured within – almost seemed too easy thanks to Lieutenant Sato.

"We have a problem," Cole hissed softly. She was kneeling next to an access hatch, having attached some sort of device to the wall terminal next to it. Travis' head snapped around to lock onto the woman's form. Fear warred with disgust and fury on his face for the briefest of seconds, but vanished behind his mask of professionalism almost before Erika noticed it. He didn't like Cole, it appeared, or didn't trust her. Or both. In any event, this hint of deeper emotion put a stake through the heart of Erika's theory as to why he and Reed were at odds.

Worry about that later, she told herself.

"What kind of problem?" she asked in a voice that was equally low.

"A Chang-shaped one." Cole glowered and narrowed her white on white eyes. "Looks like he's the only MACO in there, but he's in the perfect spot. He has clear lanes of fire and pretty good cover."

"Can we sneak past him?" Kelby asked. Cole shook her head.

"Not through here," she said. "He may be a lazy showoff, but Chang is one of the best shooters on the team. He'll drop us all before we could even get clear of the hatch." Erika frowned.

"Options?" she asked.

"We can't trigger anything engineering-specific because it'll alert Commander Reed," Kelby mused.

"It's worse than that," Travis said. "If we do anything from that terminal, it can be traced to that
terminal inside twenty seconds." He glowered. "And it'll look suspicious if Hoshi suddenly can't track it down."

"Damned if we do, damned if we don't." Kelby blew out a frustrated breath. "Sure hope Phlox and the ambassador can get through to Reed."

Erika nodded. Negotiation was always preferable to violence and was certainly more her area of expertise than all of this sneaking around. She frowned. That was certainly an interesting idea…

"How is the corporal receiving his instructions?" she asked suddenly. Three pairs of eyes swivelled toward her. "If we could hijack his comm-signal," she began.

"We could prevent him from calling for reinforcements," Cole quickly said, nodding her approval.

"That wasn't quite what I had in mind," Erika remarked dryly. She'd reviewed the declassified parts of the MACO team's files and had observed several notes in Chang record that indicated he had a tendency to question orders much to his commanding officers' annoyance. Perhaps she could use that to her benefit.

It took several long minutes – and some covert assistance from Lieutenant Sato; Erika made a mental note to attach a glowing commendation to the linguist's file later. She was extremely impressed by Sato's cool head in this crisis – but finally, Cole nodded. The jury-rigged device wasn't Kelby's best work, but they'd only had a pair of scanners, some communicators and a handful of power cells to work with. When Cole expressed her surprised pleasure that Kelby actually carried tools everywhere, he gave her a withering look.

"Engineering rule number one," he said. "Do you ever go anywhere without a knife? Same principle."

"Only less bloodshed," Travis interjected. Cole's head snapped up in an almost repeat of how he had looked at her earlier and they locked gazes. To Erika's surprise, it was the MACO who looked away first. She filed the interaction away for further review later and reached for the communicator.

"Corporal Chang," she said into it once both Cole and Kelby gave her the thumbs-up, "this is Commander Hernandez."

"I wondered who was dicking around with that hatch," he replied almost instantly. "Neat trick with the personal comm … you do realize I can just use the wall panel to call the bridge, right?"

"Harah," Cole muttered.

"Don't try to breach that hatch," Chang continued. "If Lieutenant Cole is with you, tell her it's like Blagee." Erika gave Cole a sidelong look.

"Wired to explode," the MACO replied. "I should have thought of that. Chang really likes making things blow up."

"I just want to talk, Corporal," Erika said calmly.

"No," Chang interrupted. "You want to try and convince me to switch sides." Even across the comm-line, Erika could hear the frustration. "So tell me, Commander," he said darkly, "what the hell is going on? Have all of the officers on this boat gone insane?"

"It sure seems that way, doesn't it?" Erika tried to inject some calm in her voice. She considered her options and decided to gamble on the truth. "As best as I can tell," she began, "it started when the
captain went down to that insectoid ship."

She left nothing out, telling him how Jon foolishly (in her opinion) removed his EV suit helmet while in the hatchery and, as a result, received a face full of the self-defense neurotoxin that caused him to act so erratically. Even now, after this entire mess, she still thought helping the defenseless insectoid eggs was the right thing to do – these unborn children weren't guilty of any of the crimes of their parents – and she said so, while acknowledging that the captain's way of helping was not hers. She only briefly touched on Reed being relieved of duty and escorted to the brig – when it originally happened, she had not been on the bridge, though Travis tracked her down and advised her of the tense situation soon after – but her own confrontation with Jon wasn't something she would soon forget. Some things – Taylor and Rostov being exposed to the bugs, for example, or how Reed got out of the brig – she made educated guesses about since she had no idea how those events actually played out. Rather than incriminate the doctor or Soval for any wrongdoing, she bent the truth slightly and made it appear as though everything that happened after was her idea.

"At that point," she said, "I attempted to make contact with Phlox to initiate a command change under Starfleet Order 104, Section C." She frowned. "Unfortunately, by then, Commander Reed had already enlisted Major Hayes' assistances and the two had decided to act themselves which is when things went … crazy."

"The major said you were infected like Lieutenant Taylor and Petty Officer Rostov," Chang said.

"Not sure how that could have happened, Corporal," Erika replied, "since I didn't go planetside with them and haven't come into contact with any of those affected since." She shrugged even though he couldn't see her. "Phlox can verify that I'm not under the influence."

"Say that I believe you," Chang said slowly. "What then? What are your intentions?"

"We need to get clear of this planet," Erika said at once. "Everyone … and I mean everyone needs to go through decon and be given a clean bill of health before any new decisions are made. We still have a mission to complete and right now, we're more of a danger to each other than the Xindi could possibly be."

Silence answered her and Erika held her breath. It was all out of her hands now.

"Commander Hernandez, this is Lieutenant Commander Reed." The armoury officer's voice across the intraship caused Erika to jump. "The ship is yours," Reed said flatly. "As Lieutenant Sato is the only bridge officer present, I am surrendering command to her and remanding myself to her custody. Lieutenant, you have the conn."

"That little …" Cole glowered at the hatch, her expression seemingly torn between annoyance and approval. "Chang piped you to the bridge."

"Good thinking on his part," Erika said with a nod.

"This is … this is Lieutenant Sato." Hoshi's trepidation was apparent in her voice – she didn't quite squeak but came really close – but she did not sound under duress. "I have the bridge. Commander Reed and Major Hayes have surrendered their sidearms to me." A murmur of voices could be heard briefly. "Doctor Phlox is scanning them now."

"Commander, I recommend you return to the bridge to assume command." Soval sounded like he usually did – bored and perhaps a tiny bit angry.

"Yes, please," Hoshi added, a trifle too eager. Erika made another mental note: clearly, Sato needed
some more time in the Captain's Chair.

Before she could respond, the hatch they were crowded around swung open. Kelby jerked back in surprise, losing his precarious footing and falling onto his butt, but both Mayweather and Cole reacted identically, swinging their respective pistols around to cover the hatch. Chang stuck his head through the open access point, a bright grin on his face.

"Make sure you spell my name correctly on the citation for creative thinking," he said as he gestured for them to follow. "Hideaki. E before the A. Ends with an I."

"To hell with that," Cole muttered. She was the first to follow the corporal. A positively feral smile crossed her face. "That's the kind of thinking you see in sergeants." Chang stumbled and he gave her a horrified look.

"You wouldn't dare," he said. Cole grinned.

"Whatever you say, Sergeant." She glanced back at Erika. "Looks clear, ma'am." Erika nodded and leaned down so she could step through the hatch.

"Kelby," she called out as she straightened, wincing at the resulting pops and crack, "see about undoing the damage Taylor's people did." Kelby nodded. "Lieutenants … Sergeant." Cole snickered and Chang actually looked sick. "With me."

"Come on, Mandy," she heard Chang grumbling as they strode toward the exit. "I tried to help you guys."

"The reward for work well done is the opportunity to do more," Cole replied. Travis snorted, though it sounded to be more of an agreement than anything.

"And we have a lot of work to do," Erika added.

It was going to be a long day.
Trip: Anger Management

Chapter Notes

618 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's early January, 2154.

This damned ship was going to make him lose his mind.

Today marked the third day in a row they had not taken the *T'Muna-Doth* past warp one and Trip was finding it increasingly unlikely they’d do so tomorrow either barring unexpected miracles or another one of those magical repair depots *Enterprise* had stumbled on … although in retrospect, they’d probably steer clear of that, knowing how much trouble the last one gave them. Decades of neglect had so thoroughly degraded the Vulcan ship’s internal works that it was a wonder she flew at all and it wasn’t until they pushed her past the light barrier that the full extent of the damage became clear. Maintaining a stable warp field was honestly a three person job, what with the microfractures throughout nacelle one, the cracked coil in nacelle three, and the general refusal of nacelle two to operate in anything resembling a consistent manner. They were also burning through deuterium and warp plasma at a faster than expected rate, so Trip had shut down everything that wasn’t essential … and a few things that were whenever he could get away with it. Hell, the co-pilot station wasn’t even powered up since T’Pol never used it and the rare instances he ventured to the command deck anymore, he just peeked over her shoulder.

The angry whine alerting him to the intermix balance being out of whack *again* sounded and Trip shot the responsible control panel a sour look. Rather than react the way he really wanted to – by manually adjusting the exterior casing of that panel, preferably with a twenty or thirty kilogram sledgehammer – he instead closed his eyes, inhaled deeply through his nose, and then held the breath for a long ten count. When he exhaled, he did so slowly and through his mouth, silently counting to another ten. It helped only slightly – he still wanted to smash something until it shattered into a gajillion pieces – so he repeated the process several more times.

Barely contained rage simmered just out of focus as Trip abandoned the attempts to recenter himself and instead, bent to begin the frustrating task of wrestling the intermix ration back to sane levels. It was a damned good thing the previous engineer was no longer around to defend his sloppy ass maintenance because Trip honestly wasn’t sure if he’d have the self-control to keep from grabbing the nearest wrench and beating the lazy bastard to death with it. It was even odds whether he’d just space the corpse or find some way to shoot it into a sun. And then … and then …

Dammit.

Trip closed his eyes once more and concentrated on his breathing. Furious rage pounded at him, pushing at his thoughts like an implacable tide. It had been this way for twelve days, from the instant T’Pol woke him for the most intense bout of lovemaking he’d ever conceived of and continuing following her vanishing act into the gym-slash-meditation chamber. She surfaced every few days for food, a shower and sex – not necessarily in that order – but so far, he hadn’t clued into what had spawned this flare up of thunderous rage. Even worse, Trip had noticed no discernible lessening of her anger and right now, his head was killing him. Just the spillover alone … God help him, but he owed every Vulcan he’d ever called unfeeling a groveling apology.
Burying himself in work simply wasn’t doing it – minor frustrations trended toward violent, homicidal urges – so Trip made a decision to alter tactics. He was done being reactive, dammit. He was tired of never knowing what to do or hoping she’d come out and tell him what was wrong.

First, he dialed their power usage down another notch, programming the ship computers to sound alerts if any of the essential systems hit critical levels, and then exited the engineering deck. The meditation chamber was only a few steps away, but he intentionally paused at the door, trying as hard as he could to both clear his mind and draw T’Pol’s attention. It must have worked because he felt the … presence in his skull shift slightly which again, was the weirdest damned sensation he could imagine. The door hissed open and T’Pol stood there, clad only in her skin.

Her eyes burned – the heat of her fury washed over him, but he couldn’t actually feel it – and her jaw was clenched so tightly that he could actually see the muscles in her neck twitching. Both hands were balled up into fists, but again, he could see her limbs trembling with the effort to contain her wrath. Her entire body quivered, as if she was on the verge of springing forward or attacking someone with her bare hands. Trip swallowed.

She was stunning.

He quickly pushed those thoughts away and stepped closer, noticing without surprise how she refused to give ground. T’Pol’s nostrils flared and another emotional spike stabbed through his brain, causing Trip to instinctively wince. Almost at once, a deluge of new sensations – despair, pain, longing, sadness – hammered him in rapid succession, but he thrust them aside and took another step closer to the Vulcan standing before him. Her eyes locked on his and he felt … something tickle his mind.

“Enough,” Trip said softly as he pulled her into a tight embrace. She trembled and then slumped heavily against him – the rage was still there, barely contained, barely controlled, but somehow, he could tell it was directed outward, toward someone else. “You’re not in this alone,” he whispered, his breath caressing her ear. When she shuddered again, he felt her directing the fury into passion. She looked up at him, an emerald flush crawling up her neck. Her breath quickened. Trip knew exactly what was coming next so he reacted first and picked her up. Open surprise danced across her face but vanished as he carried her toward their cabin.

They barely made it.

“My Trip,” T’Pol murmured afterward. She was stroking the ugly scars on his chest with the two fingers – index and middle, as usual – of her right hand and the anger seemed momentarily lessened, muted almost. “My beautiful, beautiful Trip.” He swallowed his own confusion at this unusual mood of hers. Anger to contentment and despair? What the hell?

“I’m getting worried about you,” he said. T’Pol exhaled deeply – if he were in a teasing mood, he’d accuse her of having sighed – and turned her young-old eyes up to meet his.

“My past was not as I thought it to be,” she said a moment later. She glanced away, frowning, and Trip could almost sense her thoughts coalescing. God, that was weird. In a good way, though. He loved the sensation and wondered if touching minds was addicting or if it was simply T’Pol herself who was habit-forming. “My father may yet live,” she continued after several long seconds of silence. Trip blinked.

“Well, that’s good, right?” T’Pol’s expression was dark.
“I do not know,” she replied. Her eyes still locked on the distant bulkhead, she began to talk, telling him of the true events of her life as she now knew them. Trip didn’t know what to think so he said nothing as she told him of her less than ideal career in the Ministry of Security that, knowing now of her father’s actions and intent, made sense. The true circumstances of Menos’ death, which had haunted her for eighteen years, caused him to frown and the revelation that her father had been behind all of the crap she’d gone through for the last twenty years ignited the slow burn of his own anger.

“I hope he is alive,” Trip muttered when she faltered in her recitation. “Just so I can punch him in the goddamned face.” T’Pol jolted in surprise at that and looked up at him. “Don’t take this the wrong way, darlin’,” he added, “but your dad sounds like a complete jackass.”

“I am certain he thought his course of action a logical one,” T’Pol remarked even as another flood of anger pushed against his mind. “It is a very Vulcan thing to do,” she said flatly, “to put the needs of the many before the needs of the one.”

“Not when that one is family,” Trip retorted. He didn’t know when they had slipped into Vulcan but didn’t let that stop him. “Who are these Rihannsu people?” he asked. “Some sort of subculture I haven’t heard of like the Vulcans without Logic?” T’Pol tensed slightly. Their amazing mental connection was suddenly still and silent. A long moment passed.

“What I tell you,” T’Pol said slowly, “you must not repeat. To anyone. Ever. If the High Command learned that you knew this, they would have you killed without hesitation.” Trip blinked – she was deadly serious … and utterly terrified that he would not take her warning seriously. That more than anything else sank in. He nodded. “The Rihannsu are distant cousins to my species whom we exiled centuries ago,” she began slowly. “They are also known as Romulans.” Trip frowned – that name was familiar…

“The aliens who tried to kill us in the minefield?” he asked. T’Pol nodded slightly. “But …” He pushed his tongue against the inside of his cheek. “Did you know about them back then?”

“No.” T’Pol’s anger once more surged, but it seemed less intense now. “There are many things I did not know when I served aboard Enterprise that I recall now.”

“Pekh-vat,” Trip muttered. It was the closest Vulcan equivalent he could think of to match the term he wanted to use – asshole – in relation to her dad, and to his delight, T’Pol’s lips curved up slightly. A blast of amusement struck him but faded alongside her very slight smile.

“There is more,” she said. “The male my father spoke to?” Trip nodded. “I recognized him: Crewman Daniels.”

“What?” Trip sat up in bed and stared at her with open surprise. In response, she merely quirked an eyebrow. “That’s … that’s …”

“Unexpected?” T’Pol offered. “It certainly damages the Science Directorate’s stance on time travel,” she said. “The man who met with my father was considerably older than Crewman Daniels could have been at that point in his life.”

“Yeah,” Trip muttered. He shook his head. God … he’d always thought that temporal cold war nonsense Jon and Daniels went on about was … well … nonsense. Sure, he’d always argued with T’Pol over the existence of time travel, but that was mostly because he’d just liked arguing with her,
not because he honestly believed in it. The scientist in him had never really bought into it even if he’d actually tried to keep an open mind about the possibility. He’d halfway convinced himself that Jon’s little expedition to the future following the Paraagan disaster had been some sort of illusion – hadn’t Ah’Len showed him some amazing things with holograms? Surely the scene of destruction Jon had described could be faked, right? – but this … this drove a stake through any chance of it being an elaborate lie.

And what did it say that Daniels hadn't showed up to pull his and T’Pol’s ass out of the fire? *Guess we’re not as important as the captain.*

T’Pol drifted to sleep a few moments later, her body exhausted by the effort to contain the fury these revelations had caused, and Trip once again experienced the unusual sensation of another mind touching his as her slumbering thoughts brushed up against him. He shivered, wondering when he’d become so accustomed to this sort of thing and when he’d come to instinctively seek it out. Anymore, he couldn’t even doze off unless he felt T’Pol’s mindtouch. Not for the first time, he wondered if this was natural for Vulcans or if the connection the two of them had was abnormal. What would happen when they got back to civilization? Starfleet definitely wouldn’t be keen on him refusing to accept another assignment that took him away from her and he doubted the High Command would be happy to know she felt the same way. More importantly, though, he wondered what their respective families would think. His own mom and dad probably wouldn’t understand – well, Dad might, he mused, especially once he argued with her the first time, but Mom? She’d never liked any of Trip’s girlfriends. She’d never admitted it, but he was absolutely convinced she’d hated Natalie and had scared Mary off when he wasn’t looking. Lizzie would be fascinated and probably drive T’Pol nuts with questions, while Lisa and Billy … God only knew how they’d react. And it wasn’t like he was the same guy either. The old Trip, the one who shipped out with *Enterprise*, was a grinning goofball who was sometimes embarrassed by his intelligence and hid it behind the image of a good ole boy from Hickstown, USA. How would they react to the new him, who didn’t smile that much anymore, laughed only occasionally, meditated like a Vulcan and generally tried to keep his emotions in check? How could he even explain how his emotions affected T’Pol’s and hers did the same for his? Would they freak out? Could they possibly understand how important this was to him?

And T’Pol’s family? T’Les was the only direct blood relation still alive – ignoring the possibility her jackass dad was still kicking around – and the picture that T’Pol had painted of her mother was a scary, scary woman who had ice in her veins and laser eyes that could cut through you like a scalpel. If T’Les was the perfect Vulcan like T’Pol thought, there was no way in hell she would approve of them being together, especially not when she saw T’Pol smile like she did sometimes or glared and vented and showed exasperation. Would she try to drag T’Pol off to Gol and get her brain wiped? Would Soval help? What about the rest of T’Pol’s clan? They counted as family. Panic started bubbling up within his stomach. He couldn’t lose her.

“Nirsh,” T’Pol said suddenly. She was still mostly asleep but pulled herself closer to him, intertwining their legs and tucking her head under his chin. “K’hat’n’dblawa, Trip,” she murmured. It took him a few heartbeats to translate the statement in his head and when he did, he smiled. She would never say something like that normally – he guessed it was an indication of how close he was to panic that she even thought it necessary – but just hearing it … it made him smile.

“K’diwa,” he whispered in response. Her own lips curved up as she slid back into slumber. Trip caressed her back, enjoying the feel of her mind wrapping around his. She would not give him up and he wouldn’t let her go. *Starfleet can go to hell,* he reflected, *and the High Command can join them.*
And thinking such pleasant thoughts, he followed her lead and slept.
Jon: Azati Prime

Chapter Notes

630 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's early January, 2154. Enterprise has been in the Expanse for one year, two months.

He couldn’t think straight.

A burning spike of raw agony throbbed through his skull, beating time with his pulse like an army of angry drummers, but Jon grit his teeth and tried very, very hard to ignore it. He’d already let his crew down once thanks to that disgusting bug juice he’d gotten a faceful of twelve days ago and he wasn’t about to let it happen again. Not to mention, it had been hard enough convincing Phlox that he was ready to return to duty in the first place; asking for an analgesic for a headache he’d promised the doctor he wasn’t experiencing would be a quick way to find himself back in Sickbay for another battery of humiliating tests.

Fighting the urge to fidget, pace, or even worse, rub his temples, Jon instead leaned forward and stared at the blank viewscreen. Soval had been gone for nearly three hours now and they still hadn’t received any indication whether he was alive or dead, let alone if he’d even made contact with Degra. The success or failure of this entire mission rested on the shoulders of one Vulcan who didn’t even like humans that much...

*It should have been me*, Jon mused darkly. *I should have been the one to go.*

That had been his original plan, once Travis and Kelby returned with confirmation of the Weapon’s presence on the main planet. He’d thought to arm their captured insectoid shuttlecraft with the last of their photonic torpedoes and personally blow that monstrosity to hell, but a combination of factors - Malcolm recommending against the frontal assault due to the Xindi detection grid protecting the inner planets; Erika and Soval ganging up on him and pointing out that this was possibly the best chance to forge an actual peace between Earth and the Xindi; and of course, Phlox threatening to exercise his authority as chief medical officer to *permanently* relieve Jon of duty if he took a single step closer to the shuttlecraft - had convinced him otherwise. Sending Soval alone was, to coin a much hated phrase, the logical decision, even if it made Jon sick to his stomach.

“Incoming transmission from the strike team,” Hoshi announced suddenly. Jon looked up, realizing as he did that he’d been pinching the bridge of his nose in a vain attempt to ward off yet another wave of brain-twisting pain. He was only vaguely aware of how the tension on the bridge jumped at Sato’s remarks. “Lieutenant Cole reports facility secure,” the linguist said. “No casualties.” Jon eased back in his seat, exhaling in relief. With *Enterprise* lurking here behind this particular planetoid, they were out of range of Azati Prime’s detection grid, but the small lunar base they’d identified had the potential of being a threat. With Major Hayes still sidelined due to minor injuries sustained during the almost mutiny – Rostov had put himself on report for the incident, but oddly, the major had instead composed a commendation in regards to the petty officer’s excellent hand-to-hand abilities – Cole had suggested the surgical strike by her team while Hoshi blocked outgoing transmissions from the small moonbase. Malcolm’s suggestion – to simply destroy the facility with a well-placed barrage of fire – Jon had promptly vetoed; yes, it had the advantage of being the simplest and safest course of
action for all humans involved, but they were trying to broker a peace here and a photonic torpedo
didn’t exactly send the correct message here.

“Any Xindi casualties?” Erika asked from where she stood just behind the command chair. There
was a slight edge to her voice and, interestingly, Travis glanced in Malcolm’s direction. The armoury
officer scowled at his monitors. What was that about?

“Negative,” Hoshi replied. “Zero casualties.”

“Good.” Erika’s voice was firm. “Let’s keep it that way.” She glanced at Lieutenant Ling.
“Anything on the scopes?”

“No, ma’am,” the young science officer said quickly. Jon half-turned in his chair and shot a wry
smile at his first officer.

“Isn’t that my job?” he asked with a smirk. “Bucking for an early promotion?” Erika returned his
smile, but her eyes were worried. She’d been harder to convince that he was okay than the doctor,
probably because she knew his tells a lot better than the Denobulan.

“I’m just trying to get prepared for when Phlox finds out you do have a headache,” she retorted.

“Good thinking,” Jon murmured as he straightened. He was about to toss another tension-easing joke
her way – maybe something about his suspicions she had bribed the good doctor in order to clear the
way for her ascension – when the tactical board chirped, drawing all eyes. Reed was already
frowning at whatever he saw and had donned his own earpiece.

“Say again,” the armoury officer ordered. His expression darkened. “Safeties off,” he snapped in
response to the person he was speaking to. Without looking up, he stabbed another button and a
klaxon immediately sounded. “All hands: repel boarders,” he nearly snarled into the intraship.
“Security teams, converge on D Deck, Quadrant Bravo. This is not a drill.”

“Commander?” Jon’s tone caused Reed to look up.

“We have a confirmed sighting of Crewman Masaro on D Deck, sir,” came the unexpected reply.
Jon barely bit back a startled oath as the other members of the bridge crew stirred and looked at Reed
with visible surprise that was all too understandable. Masaro was dead, after all, shot by Lieutenant
Cole and then spread all over E Deck because he was fitted with a bomb of some sort. Reed stared
silently at Jon, a question in his eyes, and finally, Archer nodded. “All hands,” Reed said into the
commlink, “be advised that we have a hostile Suliban aboard. Security teams, initiate threat response
delta.”

Suliban. The word hung heavy on the bridge and Jon could feel Erika’s eyes boring a hole through
him from where she stood. From her body language, he could tell that she was pissed he had not
advised her of the extent of the threat, but he pushed it out of his mind. There had to be a reason why
Silik revealed himself now. Scenarios tumbled through his mind in slow motion – why was it so
damned hard to think? The headache intensified to crippling levels.

“Captain!” Hoshi jerked her head around to look at him. “Someone just sent an unauthorized comm-
signal to Azati Prime!”

Oh … hell.
Jon’s instinctive response – to order them to tactical alert – came slower than it should have. By the
time his sluggish brain translated Hoshi’s words, Erika had recognized his hesitation and was already
acting.

“Battle stations,” the first officer ordered. “Commander Reed, I want all weapons primed.” She
stepped off the small platform and took up a place between the command chair and Travis, still
speaking even as she gave Jon a concerned look. “Mister Mayweather,” she continued, “stand by for
combat maneuvers.”

“Hoshi,” Jon said belatedly, “isolate the location of that transmission and feed it to the security
teams.”

“Sensor contacts!” Lieutenant Ling exclaimed. “Three … correction: four Xindi craft on attack
vector!”

“Onscreen,” Jon and Erika said at the same time. She gave him a quick, apologetic glance, but he
ignored it as he studied the approaching warships now on the main viewscreen. They were quite a
bit smaller than Enterprise – he doubted they had more than ten or fifteen crewmembers total – but
just from appearance alone, it was immediately obvious that they were designed for battle.

“Have they detected us?” Erika asked a good half second before the thought occurred to Jon. He
shook his head in an attempt to clear it – Phlox had been certain that damned neurotoxin was gone
but, by God, Jon couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this hesitant, this … slow.

“Confirmed!” Ling glanced up from her controls. “Scans indicate their weapons are charged.” Her
board pinged at the same time Malcolm’s did but he recognized what it meant more quickly.

“We’re being targeted,” he said flatly.

“Evasive maneuvers,” Jon ordered. Travis obeyed his instructions at once and the muted hum of
Enterprise’s impulse drives became a fierce growl. The Starfleet vessel darted out from behind the
cover, corkscrewing through the void as the Xindi ships opened fire. Sizzling streams of coherent
light flashed across the darkness, most missing. Enterprise rocked with the impact as two shots struck
home.

“Return fire!” Erika snapped. That order should have come from him, but Jon’s thoughts suddenly
felt like they were cocooned in wool. One of the ships was an insectoid one and he couldn’t look
away from that vessel for some reason. Around him, his officers were shouting – mostly at him, he
realized – but they sounded an impossible distance away.

Enterprise trembled and shook, with
junction boxes exploding in showers of sparks that rained down like bloody snow. Flashing red
lights bathed the bridge in a surreal fog.

“Hull breach on E Deck!” someone shouted through a tube or tunnel – why else would they sound
like that? “Port nacelle is damaged!”

“Hull plating is down to twenty percent!” another voice exclaimed.

“We have two more hostiles incoming!”

“Get that damned fire out!”

Jon’s head swam. He smelled blood. Something wet trickled from his nose. His vision swam in and
out of focus. He opened his mouth to issue orders and nothing came out.

“Dammit, Phlox,” Erika was shouting. She was leaning over him, one hand braced on his chest and keeping him anchored in his seat. “I need you here now! He’s bleeding from his fucking eyes!”

“Port nacelle is leaking warp plasma!” someone bellowed. It sounded like Trip … but he was dead. Long remembered emotional pain stabbed through Jon then and he wanted to weep.

“Commander!” That was definitely Reed but why was he calling for Erika? Jon was in command.

“I think,” he began to say, wincing at the taste of blood. Erika shoved him back into the captain’s chair.

“Be quiet,” she hissed. Glaring, she turned her head to the viewscreen. Even through the haze wrapped around his thoughts – when did his headache go away? – Jon could see a lot of ships. Most were Reptilian, but a trio of them were Insectoid … they were friendly, weren’t they? He had something that belonged to them but he couldn’t remember what it was. “We can’t stay here,” Erika said, her voice hollow and distant. “Travis, rig for emergency warp.”

“The strike team…” Reed trailed off, his face bleak. Jon knew there was something important about Malcolm and that team, but again, it didn’t come to him.

“We can’t do anything for them,” Erika said harshly. “Get us the hell out of here, Travis.” Again, Enterprise shook and shuddered. Loud clangs echoed around them and more alarms joined the cacophony. Jon brought his hands up to cover his ears.

“Warp one … now!” Travis did something – there was another sonorous whine – and Enterprise shivered yet again before smoothing out.

“Stay with me, Jon,” Erika’s voice whispered. He tried to open his eyes but the pain in his head that had been missing made an abrupt reappearance. Something hissed at his neck an eternity later and a torrent of ice coursed through his veins, washing away the raging fire in his skull. He had a second of complete disorientation – how did he get onto the bridge? Wasn’t he just in Engineering? – and a momentary memory of Phlox looming over him, a wide-eyed and terrified-looking Erika Hernandez behind him.

But then, the world went away and he felt only blessed relief.
Her caution had paid off.

When she announced her intent to exit warp several hours earlier than initially planned and then enter the target system at impulse, Trip had accused her of being slightly paranoid. At first, T'Pol had perceived this comment as an indictment of her recently uncovered past and spent several minutes defending the decision – the comm-buoy that should have been at the periphery of this system was non-responsive, after all, and some of the sensor readings she’d detected were quite troubling if a bit garbled – before finally realizing he was attempting to be humorous. It was gratifying to realize he was not looking at her differently following her revelations and even more satisfying that he did not inexplicably begin treating her as if she suddenly possessed the capabilities of an infant. Her mother had a terrible tendency to do that sort of thing and it aggravated T’Pol rather significantly.

Which, in retrospect, may have been why T’Les did it in the first place. What better way to teach a young Vulcan how to suppress their emotions by provoking an emotional response? She filed that observation away for further reflection at a later time.

At T’Pol’s direction, the T’Muna-Doth slowed to impulse just inside the D’Var Boundary – Trip referred to it by its human name: the Oort Cloud – which placed them approximately nine-tenths of a light year from the local star. To further reduce their own sensor signature, Trip deactivated all but the most essential systems – life support, impulse, and because he did not trust taking it offline, the warp reactor. The latter he was able to safely place in stand-by mode, but he steadfastly refused to take it offline.

“With the damage she’s sustained,” her k’diwa said tersely, “I’m afraid we might not be able to bring it back online if we shut it down all the way.”

They crept forward, relying entirely upon the powerful optical imaging telescope embedded within the heart of the T’Muna-Doth to identify any threats. In the event they encountered trouble, their options were quite limited – the starship’s hull polarization arrays nominally functioned, but Trip had little faith in their capability to withstand anything larger than a mining laser, and the electronic countermeasures barely functioned at all. This particular vessel predated the use of shields apart from the standard deflector array. Evasion was also difficult given the exceedingly low level of deuterium still remaining – exactly as Trip had feared, they had nearly expended all of their fuel reserves and any combat maneuvers would likely result in the T’Muna-Doth simply drifting. Thus, identifying any threats and avoiding them entirely was the most logical course of action.

And so, when her board chimed an alert, T’Pol did not try to suppress the triumphant look she gave Trip.

“What do we have?” he asked as he leaned over her, bracing himself against her chair so he could
look over her shoulder. It should have annoyed her – there were times when it did, actually – but at the moment, she simply enjoyed the extra warmth he provided. The command deck currently felt rather cool to her, though she was unsure if it was due to Trip’s adjustment of the life support settings or if this was yet another indication her Pa’nar was emerging from remission. She hoped it was the former.

By way of response, T’Pol tapped a series of buttons that transferred the images being received by the imaging telescopes to the main viewscreen that curved around the command deck. At this distance, the vessels were little more than dark smudges silhouetted against the bright planet. The T’Muna-Doth’s computers struggled to make sense of what they were observing and, long minutes later, four tentative ship identifications popped up on the screen.

Klingons.

The quartet appeared to be the standard bird of prey class, which meant they would have easily outgunned the T’Muna-Doth even if the type four deep-space exploratory vessel had not been obsolete for well over three decades. With four of them, she and Trip would not even stand a chance. Fortunately …

“Are they fighting with each other?” Trip asked suddenly, voicing her thought, and indeed, the four Klingons did appear engaged in a space battle with one another. There did not appear to be sides in this engagement – their fire was indiscriminate, although at a glance, T’Pol thought three of the vessels were using standard predator tactics: isolate the weakest member and eliminate it. The vessel in question was, according to the T’Muna-Doth’s computers, heavily damaged, with a wavering reactor signature indicative of a massive breach. It was unlikely that even Klingons could long survive a radiation leak of that size and indeed, the vessel’s evasive maneuvers ceased altogether, allowing the remaining ships to pound away with their disruptors.

The destruction of the Klingon ship was rather anticlimactic: no explosion tore it apart ... which, T’Pol supposed, was to be expected if the captains of the other vessels intended to strip it of valuables or spare parts. Instead, it simply continued coasting in the same direction it had previously been traveling, slowly rolling along its horizontal axis as it tumbled powerless through space. With that vessel no longer a threat, the remaining three promptly oriented upon each other.

“Good Lord,” Trip muttered. “Is there even a point to this?”

“To you or I?” T’Pol frowned slightly. “Unlikely.”

“They’re acting like …” Trip trailed off as the word he sought eluded him. T’Pol glanced up at him.

“Barbarians?” she offered. He nodded. “Their continued existence in the face of such rampant barbarism is the subject of numerous Vulcan sociological research projects.” Trip grunted, his eyes still locked on the engagement.

“Any chance of them detecting us?” he asked softly. T’Pol quirked an eyebrow.

“This engagement transpired approximately six hours ago,” she pointed out, the corners of her lips curved up in a slight smile of amusement. The wash of his self-annoyance pulsed across their psychic connection – belatedly, he realized that he knew they were effectively looking at past events, but he had become so accustomed to viewing events in real-time over the years that he’d forgotten. On the heels of this, however, she experienced a rush of curiosity.
“Wait,” he said slowly. “We’re eight and a half trillion kilometers from this star.” He blinked and T’Pol experienced a curious sensation. Their cerebral linkage momentarily felt different, as if Trip was suddenly a vast distance away instead of standing within centimeters of her. He was making mental calculations, she realized with some mild surprise; why would their bond react in this way to that? “It should take most of a year for the light of that engagement to reach us,” he continued. “How are we seeing it so quickly?”

Before T’Pol could respond – she fully intended to simply pull up the schematics of the telescopes and allow Trip to determine the answer himself; she understood the science but suspected he would more readily comprehend the answer when couched in engineering terms and expressions that were still occasionally foreign to her – the T’Muna-Doth’s computer identified a major aspect change of the three remaining Klingon ships and chirped a soft warning. T’Pol lifted one eyebrow slightly as the ‘weakest’ bird of prey abruptly wheeled away from the planetoid and sprang away at superluminal speeds. Without hesitation, the other vessels followed suit.

“Huh.” Trip leaned back, robbing her of his much appreciated warmth. “Should we move now? While they’re off shooting at one another?”

“I think not.” T’Pol tapped a few more buttons and the image changed to a system overview. “Until we know they did not immediately return,” she said simply, “it is illogical to move.” She selected one of the outer gas giants and zoomed into it. “I do recommend that we relocate to this point,” she said as she highlighted one of the dozens of moons orbiting the massive blue and green planet. It was too small to classify as a brown dwarf, but only by a small fraction. “This will provide us additional cover to monitor the deuterium colony without detection and our observations should be in real-time.”

“That’s some pretty nasty radiation it’s spitting out,” Trip mused.

“Which is an added bonus,” T’Pol replied. “Klingon sensors are widely considered inferior and I consider it improbable they will be able to identify the T’Muna-Doth against such background noise.”

“Granted.” Trip pushed his tongue against the inside of his cheek and T’Pol allowed herself to be momentarily distracted by the unconscious gesture. “I’m more worried about the hull being able to handle those stressors,” he said a moment later. “We should probably keep the hull polarized while we’re there, just in case.” He frowned. “Hopefully,” he muttered, “the generators can take the load.”

“Agreed.” T’Pol minimized the image of the gas giant but hesitated before inputting new commands. Trip clearly noticed but said nothing as she stared at the six hour old data. Finally, she brought up another window and targeted the derelict Klingon craft. Instantly, the T’Muna-Doth’s computers began plotting the vessel’s likely course and comparing it with her planned route to the gas giant’s moon. Another heartbeat later, the navigation software had identified the best possible intercept point. Comprehension filtered through the psychic connection she shared with Trip, followed quickly by expertly concealed disgust. She glanced up at him, lifting an eyebrow.

“You want to board that ship,” her mate guessed. “Maybe see if they have some things we can use.”

“I do.” T’Pol continued to look at him. “You disapprove?”

“I do,” Trip replied in an almost perfect imitation of her previous tone. He exhaled deeply. “But I don’t see how we have much of a choice either,” he said. “We need more warp plasma and I doubt this colony will have any.” Trip shook his head. “It just … it just makes me feel like a scavenger and
I hate that feeling.” T’Pol nodded slightly.

“I concur with your sentiment, Trip,” she said softly. There were times when the logical course was not the most ideal one and this was certainly such an instance. Looting from the dead Klingon vessel was distasteful.

But T’Pol would do it anyway, if it meant survival for her mate.

So she completed the plot for the intercept course.
631 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's late January, 2154. This chapter transpires mostly concurrently with the previous two.

He was … confused.

There was no other word to adequately convey the emotions swirling through his stomach as Lieutenant Cole entered his cell without warning, stunning or killing the Reptilian guard in charge of his torture while Dolim was away before the thoroughly disagreeable creature was even aware of her presence. Before the Xindi had struck the floor, two more MACOs had entered the cell, all bearing signs of recent combat. Cole turned her bizarre white on white eyes on him and frowned. “Looks like we got here just in time,” she remarked as she made some complicated hand gestures to the other two soldiers. Without speaking, they took up defensive positions alongside the door while Cole stepped closer to where Soval was secured. “Guess your negotiations didn’t go that well,” she remarked as she lowered her rifle and produced a long knife to cut him free.

“They were … less productive than I would have preferred,” Soval admitted. Events had transpired at a far faster rate than he anticipated. The death of the so-called Sphere Builder twenty-four days earlier had confirmed his suspicions about the nature of the Delphic Expanse – although it was barely recognizable as Vulcanoid thanks to the trans-dimensional anomalies that had ravaged it, certain of the words it used prior to its death were unmistakably Rihannsu, which only further verified the assertions made by the time-traveler, Daniels, regarding Vulcan’s lost cousins. Upon his arrival on Azati Prime, Soval had been treated with extreme deference, which prompted him to suspect the Xindi thought of him as an agent of these ‘Sphere Builders,’ a fact he had not anticipated but promptly abused for his benefit. The Reptilian war-leader he made no attempt to convince of humanity’s innocence – Dolim clearly had exactly zero interest in ceasing the hostilities as it firmly cemented his position in the Xindi hierarchy – but in the Primate, Degra, whom he recognized from Captain Archer’s successful stratagem to locate Azati Prime, Soval found a learned man who had clearly begun to question his faith. Their discussion had been quite agreeable and Soval was certain Degra was at least considering the truth.

And then, a furious Dolim entered once again, claiming to have had contact with their Sphere Builders. His soldiers seized Soval and dragged him to this holding cell. Much of that time was lost to a haze of pain and questions, right up until Lieutenant Cole and her team entered.

They departed the cell with no undue haste, entering a corridor already littered with downed Xindi. As they passed the first of the Reptilians, Soval was surprised to see that it still drew breath – he had not expected Lieutenant Cole’s team to exercise such judicious restraint. A fourth and fifth MACO seemed to materialize out of the darkness as they left their places of concealment and quickly joined them. The fifth – Sergeant Chang – was visibly injured, with his left arm bound to his chest by blood-stained bandages, and paused long enough to discharge his firearm into a stirring Xindi. It ceased moving … but not breathing.
“We don’t have time for that,” Cole growled, her expression fierce. Chang shrugged – or rather, tried to shrug; he winced almost at once, and then glared at his wounded limb. “Three, Six,” Cole said into the microphone integrated into her helmet. “SitRep.” An unfamiliar voice answered through her earpiece – Soval doubted most species would have been able to eavesdrop. Fortunately, he was Vulcan and his hearing was quite exceptional.

“Six, Three,” the voice said. “Copacetic. Advise you pick up the pace, though. Getting some hairy eyeballs out here.”

“Roger that.” Cole issued another set of instructions via the complicated hand gestures – Soval idly wondered if he could convince the MACOs to instruct him on their meaning; they seemed quite useful – and the two lead commandos sprinted forward. Chang drew closer to Soval and, to the ambassador’s surprise, offered his rifle.

“You need two hands to use this thing effectively,” the sergeant said in response to Soval’s raised eyebrow. It was a logical action – they were surrounded by numerous hostiles, after all, and the Xindi had shown no inclination toward proper treatment of consular rights – and he accepted it, taking the briefest of moments to familiarize himself with the weapon. The moment Soval took the rifle from him, Chang reached for his holstered pistol and drew it.

They exited the facility that Soval had been transported to several moments later, and to his great surprise, a Reptilian warship waited for them on the tarmac. His initial response was to seek cover out of concern that their escape had been noted – surely, someone must have noticed the unconscious bodies by now – but Cole and her team continued toward the vessel at a trot. Two additional MACOs climbed up from concealed positions alongside the small starship, their weapons still at the ready. Soval’s eyebrow climbed even higher – how had the humans procured this? For that matter, how had they evaded detection? – but he held his tongue and continued forward.

At the last second, just as he was about to board, he glanced back toward the entranceway of the holding facility. One of the Reptilian guards was partially conscious and trying to regain his feet, but it was not he who drew Soval’s attention. Framed in the open doorway was another Xindi, one Soval recognized instantly.

Degra.

The Xindi-Primate stared at Soval and the MACOs with shock on his face, and then glanced at the stirring Reptilian, before frowning. Soval did not need to utilize his telepathic talents to comprehend the thoughts racing through Degra’s mind then. During their discussions, Soval had made it a point of telling him that humanity only killed when necessary, that they were of no threat to the Xindi, and the Reptilian’s continued existence when the MACOs could have very easily killed all of them during their raid added further weight to Soval’s insistence. As Degra looked up once more, Soval silently gave thanks that it was Lieutenant Cole who was in charge of this rescue mission and not Major Hayes. In the field, the major answered to Hammer Six – six being human military slang for a command element – and it was, in Soval’s opinion, a justly deserved designation given the man’s predilection for the use of overwhelming firepower, even when a lighter touch was justified.

Degra nodded.

And Soval returned the gesture.

“Move it, Ambassador!” Cole hissed, half shoving Soval toward the captured vessel. He gave her a sour look but stepped onto the craft. The lieutenant followed him, sealing the hatch the instant the last
remaining commando was aboard. “Three, Six, go!” The ambient noises of the Reptilian vessel changed and Soval could feel a sudden pressure push down upon him. They were airborne.

He followed Cole toward the command deck as the rest of the MACOs turned to other tasks without needing to be given instructions – one of them began unwrapping the crude bandage secured around Sergeant Chang’s arm, while three others headed toward what were likely weapons stations. The moment the hatch for the bridge opened, Soval once more raised an eyebrow in surprise at the tableau before him. A MACO he vaguely recognized – he thought it was Corporal Hawkins – stood just out of arms’ reach of a Reptilian-Xindi who was seated before the flight controls. Hawkins held an especially brutal-looking weapon in the direction of the Xindi who, in Soval’s estimation, appeared quite young.

And absolutely terrified.

“Status,” Cole demanded as she strode toward the helm. The Xindi flinched away from her, prompting Hawkins to smirk.

“We should be exiting the atmosphere in a few minutes,” he said. His expression darkened. “Isn’t that right, Drac?” Soval almost frowned at the name or appellation, but then promptly decided it was not relevant.

“Yes,” the Reptilian-Xindi said quickly, the universal translator on Hawkins’ communicator turning his words into broken but understandable English. “We exit planet in ninety seconds.” He flinched again. “White-Eyes no kill,” he added. The expression caused Soval to give Lieutenant Cole a questioning look. She shrugged.

“We’ll see,” she replied. “How long until we reach the rally point?”

“Three or four hours,” Hawkins said. “Give or take.” He glowered at a flashing blue light on a nearby panel. “Incoming transmission from planetside.”

“Ignore it,” Cole instructed. She turned her attention to Soval and gave him a quick once-over. “Are you okay, sir?” she asked.

“I am adequate.” Soval glanced around the command deck, and then turned to face the lieutenant once more. He raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Enterprise had to bug out,” she said in response to his unspoken question. “My team was on a lunar facility. We waited until this ship docked, then seized it.”

“Along with Ensign Drac here,” Hawkins added. “Your ninety seconds are up, by the way.”

“No kill!” the Reptilian hissed. He slowly reached for another set of controls, hesitating as he looked to Hawkins for permission. The corporal nodded. With another head duck, the Xindi manipulated the controls. On the main viewer, the space around Azati Prime seemed to ripple and fell away, leaving a tunnel of blue and white. “Away to safety,” the Xindi said hesitantly. “White-Eyes no kill.”

“Like I said,” Cole replied, “we’ll see. Hawkins, secure him someplace until we need him again.” The corporal jerked his rifle and the Xindi sprang up, still muttering under his breath. A moment later, Soval and Lieutenant Cole were alone on the command deck. “I don’t know how damaged Enterprise is,” she began, “but when they bugged out, they were getting mauled.”
“One of my Xindi captors – the Reptilian commander – indicated as much,” Soval said. His back ached and he suddenly wanted to sit down, but displaying such weakness before a human was unacceptable so he clasped his hands together behind him and forced himself to stand straighter. “He implied Enterprise’s destruction.”

“I saw her get away.” Cole removed her helmet and took a seat. She suddenly looked tired. “If this all blows up in our face,” she added, “it was my decision to lead the team to extract you. My boys were just following orders.” Soval gave her a raised eyebrow – there was no logic to her statement; if this situation did result in their recapture, he doubted the Xindi would care who originally developed the plan of action. Unless he misunderstood her point, which was not entirely out of the case. She was human, after all, and they rarely made sense.

“Where are we going?” he asked instead. Cole gave him a tight smile.

“Rally point,” she replied. “Right before they went to warp, Enterprise shot us an encrypted burst transmission with rendezvous coordinates.” Soval almost frowned – that certainly sounded well within Lieutenant Sato’s capabilities, but the potential danger if those coordinates were intercepted seemed too great a risk. He mentioned this concern and Cole smiled again. “Hoshi knows that,” she said. “Per standard MACO E&E tactics, she added forty-two to each of the stellar coordinates.” Her smile broadened. “Even included a heads-up in that transmission that only I would have recognized. I owe that girl a drink or three.”

Three and a half hours later, they exited the subspace vortex and returned to normal space. Almost at once, the captured ship’s sensors detected Enterprise lurking inside a comet dust cloud alongside another, smaller vessel of unknown origin, and Cole gave quick instructions to head toward the Starfleet vessel. Soval was initially concerned that Lieutenant Commander Reed would perceive them as a threat, but Cole waved away that worry.

“We’re squawking friendly,” she told him before she turned away, leaving Soval alone to decipher what ‘squawking’ meant.

Another team of MACOs, this one led by Major Hayes, met them when they docked alongside Enterprise and the Reptilian-Xindi – who was still being referred to as Drac for reasons that eluded comprehension – was quickly taken to the brig. Within moments, Commander Hernandez joined them, her face hard.

“Good to see you, Ambassador,” she said quickly.

“Lieutenant Cole and her team are to be commended for that,” Soval replied. Hernandez almost grimaced and gave the lieutenant a nod.

“I’m sorry we had to leave you behind,” she began, but Cole interrupted.

“We could see the battle from the base, ma’am,” the lieutenant said. “You made the right call.”

“And it looks like you nabbed us a new ship,” Hayes remarked with approval. Hernandez nodded.

“Major, please inform Lieutenant Sato I want her to pull this ship’s database and see what she can get from it ASAP,” she instructed. “Lieutenant,” she continued as Hayes nodded and trotted off, “see to your team and then get some rest. You’ve earned it. Damned fine work.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Cole saluted and pursued the major, leaving Soval alone with Enterprise’s first
“Where is Captain Archer?” he asked as Hernandez gestured for him to accompany her.

“In Sickbay,” she replied grimly. “Phlox didn’t get all of the Xindi bacteria out of his bloodstream and he … well, he experienced some after-effects.” From her tone, Soval suspected it had been unpleasant to observe, especially to one who so clearly harbored an emotional attachment to Archer. “So,” she said flatly, “in addition to a captain who is in a medical coma while the doctor makes sure the neurotoxin is completely gone this time, we have fourteen dead and three missing.”

“I grieve with thee,” Soval said automatically, but he doubted she even heard him.

“We also lost most of the warp plasma in our port nacelle,” Hernandez continued, “and Kelby is afraid several of the coils are fractured.” She grimaced. “I hate to put you right back to work, Ambassador,” she said as she gave his face a frown – he could feel the bruises forming, “but I’m afraid we need you again.”

“The other vessel?”

“Yeah.” Commander Hernandez sighed. “We need replacement parts and warp plasma, but he isn’t especially interested in giving them to us.” She shook her head. “We could take them, but that would make us as bad as those damned pirates we ran into a couple of months ago.”

“I will speak to him,” Soval promised, inwardly wincing at the delay. He desperately needed to meditate and was in no mood to begin a new round of negotiations.

As it turned out, his simple arrival was more than adequate to cause the Illyrian captain to lose any trace of intransigence and quickly agree to assist them. In mid-sentence, he shifted from understanding but firm to obsequious, fearful even. With a trio of engineers to assist and a pair of grim-faced MACOs to oversee the process, he fled, leaving Soval to once again wonder why his visage had such an effect on aliens in the Expanse. On no less than six occasions in the last five months, he and other members of the crew had observed belligerent natives of this section of space take a look at him and quail. In one instance, the alien in question even knew his name.

Soval retreated to his cabin at the first opportunity, following a very quick visit to Sickbay where Phlox gave him little more than a cursory examination – the number of casualties from the recent firefight meant the doctor was simply too busy to do any more. By the time Soval sank into the traditional meditative posture, his mind burned from the stress of maintaining control. His whitespace did not come easily and, with a mental shout, he vented his rage and fear and confusion. Here, he could harness his emotions and bury them under a new layer of control. Here, he could be at peace.

Naturally, his wall panel chirped at that moment.

“This is Soval,” he snapped into the speaker, his control barely intact.

“This is Lieutenant Sato,” came the calm, measured response. She spoke in flawless Vulcan and the sound of his native language was a soothing balm. “I apologize for interrupting you, Ambassador, but I am on the Xindi ship and found something in their communications buffer addressed to you.” Both of Soval’s eyebrows climbed.

“Indeed?”
“It is from Engineer Degra,” Sato continued. “He provided you a set of coordinates and wants to
meet with you in twelve days.” Soval’s control slipped – the corner of his lips climbed very slightly –
and he felt a pressure lift from his shoulders.

“Please inform Commander Hernandez,” he ordered. “And advise her I am available to discuss this
at her convenience.” In Sato’s response, he could hear her smile.

“I doubt she will be available for at least an hour, Ambassador,” the linguist said. “With your
permission, I will also set your status as do not disturb so you may finish your meditation
uninterrupted.”

“That would be most agreeable, Lieutenant.” Were he human, Soval suspected he would sigh in
relief. He wondered briefly if there was some other way to express gratitude to the efficient and
capable young officer, but pushed the thought aside.

Moments later, he was deep within his whitespace, restoring control.
642 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's 1 February, 2154.

The Klingon ship was a mess.

Staying at an absurdly slow half impulse to avoid potential detection, they intercepted the bird of prey three days after arriving in-system as it continued its slow transit away from the planet. Docking was never an option as the structural damage inflicted by the other three Klingons had thoroughly ruined the mating hatch, so T'Pol secured the holed derelict by way of the T'Muna-Doth's tractor beam. The three day travel time had also given them more time to study the data at their fingertips which forced T'Pol to alter her original plan; rather than hide on one of the many satellites orbited the massive gas giant, they angled toward the moon of the deuterium colony. Not only was it safer – the colony wasn't spewing lethal radiation and even the moon furthest from the Jovian monster was probably still too dangerous for the work they had to do – but the colony moon was also closer and required expenditure of a lot less fuel.

After lowering the Klingon derelict to the moon's surface – they chose a spot sandwiched between two fairly impressive peaks on the dark side to avoid detection from planetside – T'Pol set the T'Muna-Doth next to it. For the next week, they stripped the bird of prey of anything salvageable … which sadly, turned out to be not a lot. There was just enough warp plasma available to replenish their supply, though Trip had to jury-rig a syphon system which was both exhausting and frustrating, particularly since much of the work had to be done in uncomfortable EV suits designed for Vulcans. As T'Pol had indicated, the Klingon sensor suite was complete junk and they didn't even bother raiding it for spare parts. The comm array was only nominally better and incorporating it only extended their real-time communication by about a light-hour. Fortunately, the Zeons had provided them with plenty of foodstuffs because what little remained of Klingon rations looked to have been barely edible before the ship got all shot up to hell.

To Trip's silent relief, they found surprisingly few bodies. Most of the crew appeared to have been lost via hull breaches … of which there were a lot … and four of the five corpses they did find were barely recognizable as such. At a glance, Trip suspected they'd been too close to a major EPS conduit when it ruptured. In the span of a single second, they'd been enveloped by electro-plasma likely hovering at several million degrees. They were probably dead before they even what was happening.

Still, it was a pretty terrible way to die.

The sole body they found that could be recognized as a Klingon was the helmsman, though T'Pol suspected he was also the ship's captain based on the decorative insignia on his jacket. Cause of death wasn't immediately obvious – if the hull breach hadn't asphyxiated him first, the duranium girder that impaled him to the deck certainly did the trick. His features were relatively intact and, strangely, he'd been smiling when he died.

Or maybe that was a grimace. Trip honestly couldn't tell and truthfully didn't look too closely.
Klingons were insane, after all.

The final thing they salvaged from the Klingon wreck was one of the functional disruptor cannons, which turned out to be the most labor intensive job of them all as well as the most psychologically difficult. As much as he hated to admit it, Trip knew the weapon was absolutely necessary but at no time as he struggled to marry the Klingon tech with Vulcan components did he ever once exult at the increased firepower. It wasn’t anything to get excited about, not like when they broke the warp five barrier or when Doctor Erickson developed the first successful sub-quantum teleportation device. In this case, he was hoping it would act as a deterrent more than an actual weapon – Klingons might suck at sensors or warp drives, but man, their weapons could pack a punch – especially since he doubted the T’Muna-Doth’s hull could stand up to much more than low-intensity lasers. If they were very, very lucky, Trip hoped they wouldn’t even encounter a single soul between now and reaching civilization; it wasn’t that he didn’t look forward to visiting strange new worlds or encountering new species. He was just sick and damned tired of getting shot at. Rare were the aliens they encountered who were not openly hostile and belligerent, and even the friendly ones had their own goals that did not often coincide with those of humanity. The dream of peaceful space exploration had died long ago, and Trip was too much of a realist these days to even try to fool himself into thinking that the best form of diplomacy wasn’t a well-charged phase cannon.

Knowing T’Pol shared his discomfort over their wonderful new career as scavengers was no consolation. If anything, it made the entire situation worse and highlighted a serious drawback of this bond thing. Trip’s disgust over them turning into vultures, necessary or not, fed upon hers and was reflected back onto him, now twice as intense. This promptly led to a further intensification of his sense of revulsion, which he would then accidentally broadcast at her, which she would unconsciously reciprocate and so on, creating an ever-escalating feedback loop that threatened to turn them both into backetcases. The only way to break the cycle was to replace those negative emotions with something equally intense or at least wholly distracting. Sex worked really well for that – boy, did it; if anything, the Vulcan Love Slave vids, which Trip would go to the grave swearing he had never watched let alone owned while serving aboard Enterprise, underestimated the sheer passion of a horny Vulcan – but it didn’t last long enough for either of them and wasn’t all that constructive. Pleasurable as hell, yeah, but not very constructive.

As it turned out, burying themselves in work was an even better solution. As long as they were too busy to do much thinking, everything was fine, so they decided upon wildly unrealistic deadlines for their repairs and installation and then, did their best to actually meet them. Being Vulcan, T’Pol should have required less sleep but the necessary meditation period and her constant fatigue – likely the damned Pa’nar coming out of that strange remission – led her to retire at the same time Trip did, which almost always led to another burst of exhausted passion and lovemaking before they both collapsed into an unconscious stupor. When one woke – usually T’Pol – both of them did, and they would start the whole process over again.

By the tenth day of this insane workload, neither one of them was thinking straight and it showed.

“I wish Malcolm was here,” Trip remarked shortly after they abandoned their latest attempt to trick the disruptor cannon into working and retreated to the kitchen to eat. The damned thing was touchier than the phase cannons had ever been aboard Enterprise and the systems aboard the T’Muna-Doth were being even more recalcitrant than normal. Thus far, they’d had six false starts, at least that many power surges, and a pair of energy spikes that had threatened a runaway cascade failure throughout the entire EPS conduits.

“I do not,” T’Pol replied flatly. “We do not have adequate gravity plating to absorb unnecessary plasma recoil.” Trip blinked.
“That wasn’t my fault,” he said sourly. T’Pol offered him a tight smirk – God, he loved seeing her do that, even though he worried about how she would be treated by her fellow Vulcans because she dared to show emotion – and continued working on whatever it was she was doing. He suspected she was still attempting to rebalance the power draw against the shipboard necessities, even though they’d gone over the numbers a dozen times. “This isn’t working,” Trip said after a long moment of silence. “We need external access and I sure as hell don’t want to try installing this thing while I’m wearing an EV suit.”

“Agreed.” T’Pol frowned but did not look up from the data-slate she was working on. “I am having difficulty identifying several objects in orbit over the colony,” she said a moment later. At his questioning glance, she offered the data-slate and Trip gave the display a quick glance. “Their placement indicates artificial satellites,” T’Pol added as Trip grunted at the complete lack of useful data. As far as the T’Muna-Doth was concerned, there was six, maybe seven, objects in orbit over the deuterium colony, no two closer than fifty kilometers. Until they lifted clear of their current hiding place, use of the optical-imaging scope wasn’t available since they couldn’t get a direct line of sight on even one of these things and the sensors were simply returning a fuzzy, indistinct energy signature that told them exactly nothing. He made a mental note to recheck the sensor array – had their attempts to tie the disruptor cannon into the network screwed something up? Trip opened his mouth to reply – they could take their time and be cautious – but a strident alarm began sounding.

He and T’Pol were both up and heading for their respective stations – she the command deck, he engineering – before either of them had fully comprehended what the alert meant. In mid-step, recognition flared and Trip shot her a quick, surprised look before throwing himself into a quick sprint. He covered the short distance from kitchen to engineering in a handful of steps and skidded to a stop in front of a flashing console. Once, he would have cursed out loud and maybe kicked the wall, but now, he simply glowered slightly. They didn’t have time to waste on him venting.

“Life support is failing,” he reported over the intercom. “We’ve got ten, maybe fifteen minutes.”

“Understood.” Additional consoles began flashing and the muted hum of the main reactor trebled in intensity. “Initiating maneuver drive now.” His eyes still locked on the flashing displays arrayed around the reactor, Trip quickly input a rapid series of commands and swapped out several of the unnecessary status reports for a live feed from the bridge. T’Pol wasn’t wasting any time he saw: the T’Muna-Doth climbed rapidly, blowing by the peaks of the concealing mountains and rapidly orienting toward the planet. He grimaced at several new alerts – oxygen levels were dropping dramatically – and pulled up a diagnostic of the system. Almost at once, he recognized the problem: their last failure with the disruptor cannon had fried several dozen circuits, which caused the primary fan on the atmo-scrubber to freeze. It was an easy fix … normally, but right now? With them uncovering new faults every step along the way? Trip shook his head. They’d been damned lucky to get this far. Now they just needed their luck to hold a little bit longer…

Naturally, it didn’t.

As they entered the upper atmosphere of the planet, every panel in engineering went dark. The overhead lights flickered and died, and to Trip’s surprise, the rumble of the maneuver drive faltered before going silent. T’Pol’s sudden flash of horrified surprise confirmed his worst fears: they’d lost power. Trip didn’t hesitate for even a moment: at any moment, the T’Muna-Doth could start tumbling, end over end, and the G-Forces would make action impossible. He had to act now.

He covered the distance to the reactor master control in a single, diving leap. The subtle hum of the warp core was all the proof he needed that the system failure they’d experienced wasn’t catastrophic
… well, if you didn’t count being aboard a powerless starship tumbling out of orbit with no systems online as catastrophic. Using only his sense of touch and thankfully excellent memory, he found the mesh cage that protected the master reset button and pried it open, losing only a tiny bit of skin in the process. The three buttons underneath the small metal shield he stabbed in rapid sequence: one, two, three. Instantly, every display in engineering snapped on and the ‘Stand-by’ prompt appeared. Overhead lights began powering back up, but Trip kept moving. In his head, he raced through the emergency start-up sequence he’d memorized weeks before they even lifted off from that desert island on Ekos.

Kneeling before the primary reactor manifold – the T’Muna-Doth was starting to tremble and shake as the outer atmosphere buffeted her; any second now, they might start rolling and that would be that – he yanked one of the floor grates free and reached for the emergency levers hidden underneath. The left one slid into place easily enough, but he had to struggle with the right one but it finally clicked into position and he was rewarded with a hiss as fuel flow was restored. Just behind those levers was another valve: this one he had to pull out, rotate exactly ninety-three degrees – stupid fricking Vulcans; why ninety-three? – and then push back into place. He risked a glance up at the monitors and winced. The computer was taking too damned long to reboot!

Trip sprang to his feet and scrambled toward another set of controls. Already, the deck was tilting – dammit … they were running out of time! – and he reached out for the console to keep himself from falling. The progress bar was in Vulcan and it took him an impossibly long second to recognize that it was only at seventy percent. That’ll have to be enough, he thought. He flipped another mesh shield up, reached in with both hands and turned the two heavy switches to the left.

EPS junctions sparked and blew as the sudden power draw proved too great for T’Muna-Doth’s antiquated electro-plasma system. Alarms began shrieking – he sincerely hoped they weren’t useless ‘danger, power loss detected’ alerts – but he ignored them as he staggered across the wildly tilting deck toward the final console in this sequence. Each step turned into a mad dance – gravity pushed at him, desperately trying to hurl him backwards into a waiting bulkhead – and Trip gave a wordless shout as he threw himself the final meter and a half. The metal protective shield resisted his initial attempts to flip it up and he was certain that he’d torn a fingernail completely free before getting it up. He jabbed his hands in, grabbed the thing keys and turned them.

But the switches would not turn.

Panic very nearly undid him then – his own fear and T’Pol’s swelled, feeding upon one another – but somehow, he found an inner reserve of control and bit back the hysterical scream building in his throat. Trip wasn’t sure if it was all him, or T’Pol brushing aside his terror, or a combination of the two, but he inhaled deeply, let his mind flash through the emergency manual startup sequence again to see what step he’d missed. Grimacing, he shook his head in disgust.

And then, he turned the switches the correct direction this time.

The T’Muna-Doth’s sublight maneuver drive roared to life and Trip felt a flash of T’Pol’s relief stab through their magical bond before it was swept away by a tide of other emotions that came too quickly for him to even remotely comprehend. He glanced up at the nearest monitor and winced – they were coming in too fast, too steep; there was no way in hell that their arrival had been missed by the colony. Hell, they were probably leaving burning contrails that could be see halfway across the damned planet.

“Brace for impact,” T’Pol’s voice ordered sharply across the intercom. Trip grimaced again – the functional crash harness was on the other side of the reactor room; he’d raided the other five
throughout engineering for spare parts. He silently cursed Vulcan engineering: this entire reboot sequence was supposed to be done by three people, not one, and it sure as hell wasn’t supposed to be done while they were falling from orbit. Once again, gravity pushed down at him as T’Pol tried desperately to keep them from crashing. According to the digital altimeter flashing on one of the screens, they had maybe thirty seconds before they hit ground. Inhaling sharply, Trip braced one leg against the bulkhead and then used it to push off. He staggered drunkenly toward the crash harness.

And he almost made it.
This was … not what he had expected.

When the second NX-class starship first showed up on their scopes, Jon very briefly thought that Starfleet Command might have possibly (finally) pulled their collective heads out of their butts and gotten *Challenger* operational on time. Being this close to the rendezvous point with the Xindi engineer, Degra, he'd also contemplated giving the order to make a run for it – if *Challenger* was carrying Admiral Forrest or, God help them, Gardner, then it was entirely possibly Jon would no longer be considered the theater commander, ignoring the fact that he and the crew of *Enterprise* were technically guilty of desertion, theft, disobeying a direct order from a flag officer, and a whole host of other crimes. Almost immediately, Archer rejected the instinct, though; this mission was too damned important to get mired in petty squabbles and Jon wouldn't hesitate to accept any punishment meted out as long as he knew the mission would be completed. Too many had already died to not see this through.

As the vessel drew closer, however, it became readily apparent that she wasn't *Challenger*, not with that power signature or sensor silhouette. No surface of the ship appeared unscarred and entire sections of the upper hull looked to be exposed to space. Buried in those vicious gaps were weapons of alien design including something that looked like an overamped disruptor cannon. Adding to the starship's ungainly appearance was a completely new port nacelle – easily twice as wide as the one on the starboard side and half again as long, it emitted an odd greenish glow.

And then, the final surprise: the name still embossed upon the upper hull.

*Enterprise*.

Communications were still spotty in the wake of Azati Prime – Lieutenant Kelby's team had been more focused on restoring warp drive and sealing up any hull breaches than dealing with other damaged necessities like comms – so the digital image they received from the Frankenstein ship was garbled and distorted. They saw flashes of humanoid figures on the same bridge Jon stood upon, but the transmission froze and stuttered, making it impossible comprehend what was being said or even who was saying it.

"I can't clean it up anymore, sir," Hoshi said when Jon looked at her. She frowned. "They should be able to boost the power of their transmission," she added, "and compensate for our signal loss."

"Unlikely," Lieutenant Ling interjected. She was bent over her console, eyes glued to the displays in front of her. "I am detecting massive damage on their end as well. I can't even tell what their comm array is made of, but it certainly isn't human technology." Jon grunted and gave his armoury officer a glance.

"Their weapons don't appear to be charged, sir," Reed said automatically. "I have already polarized
the hull and instructed torpedo tubes to be loaded." Jon wished he could accuse Malcolm of overreacting, but the way the last few weeks had played out, he instead was tempted to ask for targeting solutions as well.

"That doesn't look like an attack vector," Travis offered quickly. "It actually looks more like a docking approach." Mayweather glowered. "Their impulse manifold is running way too hot," he remarked as if insulted. " Whoever they've got at the helm doesn't have a clue what they're doing." Jon nodded. He'd noticed the same thing just at a glance over Travis' shoulder.

"Hoshi," he began, but to his great surprise, she held up her right hand – a clear 'wait' gesture if he ever saw one; if he wasn't the captain and she his communications officer, it might have been amusing. Hell, if he'd seen her do this to Erika, he would find it funny. Still, he took great comfort in how far she'd come in the last few years; she certainly wouldn't have done anything like this when they first shipped out.

At almost the same moment, though, Travis twitched in his seat and glanced up at her, his own expression one that was a mixture of curiosity and questioning. Hoshi nodded in reply to whatever Mayweather had observed, which caused Jon to almost shake his head. Sometimes, those two seemed to have their own language, one that no one else aboard was privy to.

"They're using their navigation lights to signal us," Lieutenant Sato finally announced. She frowned. "That's old Morse code," she mused before she began tapping her finger against the hard console surface. It took Jon a moment to realize she had to remind herself what the dashes and dots meant. "To, Commander, Enterprise," she relayed slowly. "Request meeting. Important information. Route to Degra not clear." The tension on the bridge dramatically increased at that pronouncement, but Hoshi continued translating, either oblivious or, more likely, intentionally ignoring it. "Recommend dock. Can come to you. Please respond. From, Commander, Enterprise." Jon leaned back in his command chair.

"Well, that's interesting," he murmured. Out of the corner of his eye, he noted the sour look that flashed across Reed's face and turned his attention toward the armoury officer. "I know you don't like it," Jon said, "but if they have intel on Degra, we need it."

"Yes, sir," Reed replied tightly. "Security team bravo to port docking hatch," he ordered into his comm. Jon shifted his attention to Hoshi.

"Let Commander Hernandez know," he instructed. "I want her on overwatch while this is going on to make sure it isn't a trap." It had been Malcolm's idea to form a 'prize crew' under Erika to command and operate the captured Xindi warship which Jon had grudgingly agreed to. He hated not having her around to bounce things off of or even to just talk to, but having a heavily armed starship – Reed had classified it as a corvette and was openly envious about some of its firepower – providing additional fire support while the engineering teams focused on patching up Enterprise was a monumental relief, even if it made Archer feel less like an explorer and more like a soldier. That feeling was mitigated only slightly at the name the crew hung upon the captured warship: S.S. Minnow.

"Hoshi," Jon said slowly, "signal back to them that we're prepared to greet them but to only send three personnel."


"Amy," Jon continued, this time addressing his senior science officer, "keep an eye on our sensors."
We don't want to get caught with our pants down again."

"No, sir," Ling said. "I mean, yes, sir. I mean…"

"Commander Reed, with me," Jon ordered as he stood. "Let's go meet our visitors. Travis, you have the conn."

"I have the conn, aye," Mayweather replied automatically. He did not budge from his station, but that was not unexpected for a pilot. It had taken Jon years to get out of the habit of staying at the helm and he was still doing it right up until he was promoted to commander.

"And let Soval know as well," Archer added as he strode toward the turbolift, Malcolm several steps behind him. "We might need him."

"Time travel or alternate universe doppelgangers?" he heard Hoshi ask Travis in the seconds before the lift door fully closed. It was a good question and, for a moment, Jon considered repeating it to see what Malcolm thought – Jon was leaning toward time travel though that was probably due to his past experience with Daniels and the fact he had trouble wrapping his head around the concept of alternate dimensions; was there one where he was irredeemably evil? Or one where Jonathan Archer was actually Joan Archer? That sort of thing always caused his brain to ache. – but the bleak, distracted look on Reed's face changed his mind. He didn't know whether the armoury officer was busy thinking about potential security scenarios they might be facing in the very near future, or how the frustrating hunt for Silik was going – that slippery bastard had vanished once again, though Malcolm had expressed confidence that the MACOs had injured the Suliban – or even what Lieutenant Cole was doing over on the S.S. Minnow, but whatever was on the tactical officer's mind, it looked to be important. Besides, Jon suspected they were ready for anything.

But, as it turned out, he was completely wrong. He wasn't ready for this at all.

The other Enterprise had sent just three people as instructed and they waited patiently just beyond the airlock while Major Hayes' team kept a close eye on them. Two of their visitors were human in their mid to late thirties and looked enough alike that Jon suspected they were siblings. Both were oddly familiar-looking for some reason, though Archer didn't think he'd met them before and couldn't quite put his finger on who they reminded him of. Their hair was dark and full, and both had sharp, almost angular cheekbones. They also shared those disconcerting white on white eyes that made Lieutenant Cole so hard to talk to, and at his and Malcolm's approach, they fell silent and stared at Reed. The third man was Soval.

Or rather, a Vulcan who looked disturbingly like a much younger version of the ambassador. A son, perhaps? Or a clone?

"Captain Archer," the Vulcan said, his lips curving up in an unmistakable smile, which was enough of a shock on that face that it made Jon stumble. "I am the commanding officer of Enterprise," the Vulcan said calmly, "and these are my senior officers." He gestured to the woman. "First Officer Maddie Reed," he said, the words causing both Malcolm and Major Hayes to frown. "And Weapons Officer Galahad Reed," the Vulcan added with a nod toward the other human. If the woman's name caused surprise, the man's resulted in every single MACO present going rigid with shock though Jon had no idea why. Malcolm himself looked like he had been punched in the stomach by a very angry, very strong Klingon.

"Galahad?" Hayes repeated, his voice strained. The white-eyed man glanced at him.
"A family joke, sir," he said with a tight smile. His voice was deep and hinted at an accent that was nearly impossible to identify. "My grandmother called my grandfather Galahad when she was angry at him, and when I was born, my parents thought it would be amusing to give me that name."

"We tried to intercept you before Azati Prime," the Vulcan commander said, his expression betraying annoyance at the side conversation, "but encountered some trouble along the way." He held up a hand and the woman – Maddie? Why was that name so familiar? Didn't Reed have a sister by that name? – quickly placed a battered-looking PADD in it. "The subspace corridor you are heading for isn't an option," he said as he offered the data device to Jon.

"And we have it on good authority that the corridor is an option," Archer replied. The sound of approaching boots caused him to briefly glance away from the Vulcan and allow him to confirm that it was Soval. From that brief look, Jon could tell that Soval was staring at the Vulcan with as close to open shock as he would allow himself to show.

"From Degra," the Vulcan commander said with a nod. "His information is flawed. He's presuming you'll be using their subspace vortex technology, not warp drive. The corridor reacts negatively to warp fields."

"Negatively how?" Reed demanded.

"It threw our Enterprise back one hundred and seventeen years," Weapons Officer Reed stated. Jon blinked and returned his attention back to the Vulcan standing in front of him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Soval," came the response. The younger Vulcan smiled again as he met Jon's eyes.

And then, dropped the biggest bombshell of all.

"Hello, Dad," he said.
Nothing was ever easy in the Delphic Expanse.

Barely fifteen minutes had elapsed since the other Enterprise docked with the NX-01, ten since Jon's urgent but frustratingly unclear message to get her ass back here because they "had a situation to deal with," and five since she entered Sickbay to discover two Sovals and a pair of white-eyed humans who looked enough like Malcolm Reed that they could have passed as siblings. Phlox's pronouncement that these people were who they claimed to be left the other Enterprise personnel present – Jon, Reed, Soval, Hayes, and the two MACOs standing guard by the door – reeling in open, visible shock, but did nothing to clue Erika in on what exactly was going on. So she'd asked, rather politely she thought, exactly that.

Which was how she found herself here, in this conference room, listening to a story that she could hardly believe.

The younger-looking Soval – how was she going to tell them apart? Soval the Younger versus the Elder? No, that sounded stupid – was vocally and physically emotive as he spoke, with flashes of barely restrained anger appearing and vanishing at random, unexpected intervals. His mood seemed to alternate from one heartbeat to another, transforming from giddy and excited to almost depressed in mid-sentence, and never with any explanation for why it changed the way it did. The other members of his crew seemed to accept it without blinking – First Officer Reed was especially good at redirecting the young Soval – Captain Soval, maybe? As opposed to Ambassador Soval? Yes, that would do nicely – when his mood darkened, though Erika did not get the sense the two were romantically involved. Rather, she simply seemed to expect his quicksilver emotions, as if she had dealt with them for decades.

This second Enterprise's arrival had thrown everyone for a loop, but, despite the shock that clearly hadn't set in for her yet, Erika had to fight the urge to snicker every time she glanced at Jon. Flabbergasted did not begin to describe his expression. As the unlikely story emerged from the younger-looking Soval, Archer alternately stared at him with barely contained disbelief or shot covert looks at the ambassador, as if trying to figure out how to blame this on him. Oh, there was no denying that Captain Soval was exactly who he claimed to be thanks to Phlox's examination, but the story itself? Well, even with the weirdness they'd experienced over the last year, it was difficult to comprehend, let alone buy.

Excepting, of course, the evidence staring them in the face. Erika shook her head in a vain attempt to clear it.

"Once they confirmed that Enterprise had, indeed, traveled back in time," Captain Soval was saying, "the command crew began investigating ways to return to their correct era."

"The Vulcan Science Directorate has determined that time travel is impossible," Ambassador Soval
replied flatly, every centimeter the perfect Vulcan. For the last five minutes, he had been staring at his younger counterpart seemingly without blinking. Little sign of what the ambassador thought or felt at Doctor Phlox's pronouncement showed on his face, but Erika caught glimpses of the occasional facial tick that hinted at shock. Captain Soval gave the ambassador a look of open hostility.

"You've said that," he replied hotly. "Three times in the last ten minutes."

"Not to belabor the point," First Officer Reed interjected, casting a long suffering look at her commanding officer, "but they were unsuccessful." She frowned. "We were fortunate at the time that the captured Xindi warship was docked with Enterprise for repairs when they passed through the subspace corridor or key members of the command staff would have be lost." Erika blinked – that was interesting. According to their original schedule, they had planned on docking the Minnow to Enterprise so Kelby could lock down some abnormal power fluctuations in the smaller ship.

"None of that explains … this," Jon said, once more staring at Captain Soval. "The last time I checked, Vulcans don't get younger."

"We do not," the two Vulcans said simultaneously. The ambassador's expression tightened fractionally and he inclined his head toward his counterpart. "Three months after we arrived in that time," Captain Soval said, "several crewmembers of Enterprise were exposed to a spatial anomaly that caused them – us, I should say – to begin aging in reverse."

"According to the medical records our Phlox left before he passed," First Officer Reed added, "there were six officers and crewmen who suffered from this Merlin Sickness." She looked at Reed … Malcolm Reed, that was. Erika shook her head. Lord, this was going to get confusing. "You coined the term based on something from your childhood, sir."

"I was the only one still alive when the doctor discovered a cure but had regressed to infancy," Captain Soval said. He made a gesture that included both Jon and Erika herself. "The two of you raised me as your son once it became clear Phlox could not reverse the process."

"Enterprise became a generational ship after that," First Officer Reed said, her disconcerting white on white eyes drifting back toward Lieutenant Commander Reed. "We encountered a number of difficulties along the way," she said. Captain Soval snorted, which earned him a dark glare Erika recognized as having seen on Lieutenant Cole's face a time or two. Not that there was ever any doubt who Miss Reed was descended from, Erika thought wryly. She made a mental note to arrange for Lieutenant Cole's duties to bring her back aboard Enterprise, just to see what happened. And to make sure that there was a recording device somewhere in the vicinity. "The Captain … you, sir," she said, directing her next comments to Jon, "warned us to avoid contaminating the timeline as much as possible, so we could not make contact with Earth or warn them of the attack."

"I can't see myself giving that order," Jon mused with a frown. "Our entire mission right now is geared toward trying to undo something that already happened."

"No one ever accused you of being consistent, Dad," Captain Soval remarked without thinking. He grimaced the instant everyone reacted to the title he automatically applied to Jon, and Erika suddenly felt a rush of empathy for him. From her studies of Vulcan culture, she knew that they experienced immensely powerful emotions and spent their entire lives working to suppress them. This young man had grown up without the benefit of that training and had likely spent his formative years being treated differently by those who remembered him as the cranky, old ambassador. And now, to
actually face that cranky old ambassador and to see the disapproval mirrored in eyes he knew as his own? If she was in this situation, could she have done better? Somehow, she doubted it.

So she cleared her throat.

All eyes jumped to her, which gave her a moment of hesitation. Jon had the expression of a man on a sinking boat, desperately looking for a life preserver wherever he could find one, Ambassador Soval wore his Vulcan mask, though the effort it was requiring was plainly visible if you knew his tells, and the rest of the Enterprise crew … her Enterprise, that was, not this other one, all looked at her with open relief, as if they expected her to work miracles. At the same time, Captain Soval gave her a bashful half-smile that reminded her of her nephew when he looked at Erika's sister which only served to remind her of his words earlier and her alternate's maternal role in his life. The two other Reeds straightened and studied her with those creepy eyes.

Right. So … no pressure.

"Temporal mechanics aren't my strong suit," she said in a voice that sounded far calmer than she actually felt, "but isn't this action going to wipe you from the timeline somehow?" She noted several frowns. "If you warn us not to go through the subspace corridor and we don't, then how can you be here to warn us not to go through it in the first place?"

"Ugh," Weapons Officer Reed muttered. He grimaced, which instantly resulted in an annoyed look from the woman Erika suspected to be his sister.

"You are referring to a grandfather paradox, ma'am," First Officer Reed said. "It is not relevant in this case, as we have already passed the point when our history states your Enterprise passed through the corridor in the first place."

"And no one has inexplicably vanished yet," her brother chimed in, earning himself twin glares from both his sister and Captain Soval. He ignored them both with the casual ease of someone long accustomed to such expressions.

"We're here to help, Mo … ma'am," Captain Soval said, his body language open and positively vibrating with emotion. His verbal misstep caused Erika to almost flinch. Instead, she glanced away from him and met Jon's eyes. He pursed his lips.

"I'd like to discuss this with my first officer and Ambassador Soval if you don't mind," he said after a moment. Without waiting for any response, he shifted his attention to Lieutenant Commander Reed. "Malcolm, could you show our guests to the mess deck? I'm sure they would like some refreshment."

All three Reeds rose – the woman was fractionally taller than either of the men, Erika noticed – and Captain Soval glowered for an extended heartbeat before standing himself. He was the first through the door, followed closely by Major Hayes and the three Reeds, and a moment later, the conference room was silent. Jon drummed his fingers against the table before looking up. "Recommendations?"

"I'm inclined to believe them, sir," Erika said automatically. "We've seen stranger things here in the Expanse and I don't see the advantages of them lying to us like this." She frowned. "And their presence … well, it explains why we've been greeted the way we have at the commerce planets."

"Agreed." Jon's fingers continued their steady cadence against the table though he appeared unaware of the unconscious gesture. "If they're really here to help," he said, "we should request a data dump
from their computer, maybe get a leg up on the Xindi for a change." He didn't have to mention
sicking Hoshi on the data – if this was an elaborate ruse, there really wasn't anyone better to find the
flaws. "Ambassador?"

"I have nothing constructive to add to this discussion," Soval said flatly. "Both you and Commander
Hernandez have adequately identified the logical course of action." He rose. "If you will excuse me,
Captain," he said before striding toward the door. He was gone a heartbeat later.

"That looked suspiciously like an emotional reaction," Jon remarked wryly. He leaned back in his
chair and almost smirked. "So," he said. "You and me, raising a Vulcan together."

"Raising Soval together," Erika corrected. She shook her head – how had her alternate managed?
Especially given what had happened between her and Soval back before the Xindi attack on Earth?
A slight shudder crawled up her spine. "Only in the Expanse," she said with a soft chuckle.

"Let's play ball for the time being," Jon decided. "Get as much data from them as possible and let our
people know to keep their eyes open." He finally seemed to notice his impromptu drum solo and
tightened his hand into a fist. "And prep the Minnow for extended operation," he ordered.

"She can take Soval to meet with Degra," Erika guessed. Jon nodded.

"We can't miss that rendezvous," he said. "Enterprise … both of them, I guess, can take the longer
route." His expression turned grave. "It means you'll be out of contact for a while…" Erika blinked –
she'd expected him to assume command of the Minnow on a mission of this importance and the fact
that he trusted her abilities sent a rush of warm pride through her. She nodded.

"I'm confident my prize crew can handle it," she said simply. With a nod and half smile, she stood.

"Before you go, I'd like to rotate Lieutenant Cole back to Enterprise briefly," Jon said suddenly. He
gave her a smile that was positively malicious. "I would be very curious to see her reaction to certain
of our visitors."

Erika laughed out loud.
Travis: Bitter Discoveries

Chapter Notes

642 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's 1 February, 2154.

He fled from the mess deck at first opportunity.

The impromptu gathering to officially greet the second Enterprise crew was really a party of sorts and had been, to no one’s surprise, Hoshi’s idea, but at the moment, Travis had absolutely zero interest in interacting with any of these people. He could blame it on having too much work to do – which was certainly not untrue by any stretch, especially if Commander Hernandez managed to talk Captain Archer into letting her take Reed on this planned mission to meet Degra – but doing so wouldn’t be entirely truthful. Travis knew full well why he didn’t want to speak with these strangers.

He ducked into the command center and found it thankfully empty. The main viewscreen snapped to life upon his entrance and Travis winced at the results flashing upon the display. Evidently, the data dump from the second Enterprise was complete and Hoshi’s automated search algorithm had completed its initial sweep, finding no discrepancies in the process. It was almost too much to ask, Travis mused darkly, to find out that these people were all liars and this was some elaborate scam. He shook his head and went back to work.

The very first thing he did was locate the anomaly that caused the … what did they call it again? Merlin Sickness? Yeah, that was it. Travis tagged that location as one of the four or five Class IX threats they’d already noted – once identified as such in Enterprise’s computers, the astrogation system would automatically alter the NX-01’s flight path around the threat zone, keeping a safe buffer zone of twenty-four light-hours between the starship and the anomaly. After a moment of consideration, Travis bumped that up to forty-eight – doing so would require the captain’s approval, so he quickly submitted a formal request. Ideally, he’d like to put some warning buoys in place, but that would require actually getting close enough to be in danger, although he did include a recommendation that they consider options about how best to get such devices in place. Kelby had chomping at the bit for awhile now to test a new probe deployment method he’d modified based on some notes he’d found in Commander Tucker’s logs. Just to be safe, he also forwarded the alternate Phlox’s cure for the age regression to sickbay knowing the doctor would want to review it anyway.

He spent the next two hours reviewing data that Hoshi’s search algorithm had identified as potentially useful, though he had absolutely no idea what kind of parameters she’d set because the results were sometimes confounding. There were schematics and formulas for maintaining a stable warp five point five – those went straight to Kelby’s inbox – as well as extensive sensor logs of all known Xindi starships from the last fifty years and what looked like an in-depth sociological study of various species here in the Expanse.

Most of the data Travis barely skimmed, pausing long enough to shoot a copy of the pertinent files to the person who seemed most suited, but he lingered on the sensor scans and related information of the various Spheres. Evidently, Captain Soval had spent the previous sixty-seven years very carefully studying them for any tactical advantage he could find. From the looks of it, he and his crew had only recently developed a plan of action to take down the entire network, though at a glance, Travis
suspected it was pretty dangerous. They would need at least two ships, maybe three, and the chances of everyone coming out of this alive were pretty low …

Ah. So that was why they decided to make contact with Enterprise. Travis shook his head again and forwarded the plan to several different people: Captain Archer, Commander Hernandez – to her shipboard internal account as well as the hashed together system over on the Minnow – Lieutenant Commander Reed, Amy Ling in Sciences and even Kelby. He bumped the priority of that particular task to urgent and then put it out of his mind. There were a dozen different medical treatment plans that Phlox would want to review, and the schematics for a new torpedo delivery system that Reed might be interested in, and a more comprehensible star chart that needed to be uploaded …

But inevitably, Travis found himself drawn to the logs of the alternate Enterprise. There were photo captures of the captain and Commander Hernandez, laughing and playing with a little Vulcan boy who had to be Soval on a beach somewhere, and vids of Malcolm and Lieutenant Cole leading their platoon of creepy, white-eyed kids on what almost looked like actual combat maneuvers through a frozen tundra until Travis noticed the snowballs they were all carrying, and a series of data captures of Kelby and some alien whose gender Travis couldn’t quite decipher (not that he looked that closely.) The worst, though, was seeing Hoshi and Phlox together. She looked happy … or at least content, which he suspected should have been enough, but for some reason, it just made him angry. These people … their lives may have sucked, but everyone seemed to have their moments of joy, moments his alternate never had a chance to experience.

With a sharp gesture, Travis killed the power to the viewscreen and went back to work.

His stomach growled a while later, reminding him that he hadn’t eaten since sometime yesterday, but he ignored it and continued to focus on integrating the new star chart. Some of the other Enterprise’s software had been manually updated and revised by the crew, which made direct communication between the two computer systems difficult at best, nearly impossible at worst. Normally, this wasn’t his realm of expertise, but over the last couple of months, he’d become extremely proficient at ferreting out and fixing system bugs and everyone else good at this was at Hoshi’s stupid party.

The hiss of the door to the command center sliding open caused him to glance back and he frowned very slightly as Lieutenant Commander Reed entered. Malcolm’s eyes locked onto him immediately – Travis immediately suspected the armoury officer was actively looking for him – and he began walking slowly toward the main console. Travis wondered if it was worth the effort to leave.

“Care if I join you?” Malcolm asked a few moments later. He immediately assumed a position of parade rest with both hands clasped together at the small of his back, but his body language was guarded. Travis shrugged – he was too tired to work up his usual indignation at the armoury officer’s actions and it seemed so very long ago. “You missed Hoshi’s party,” Malcolm remarked softly after a moment of silence. It wasn’t an accusation per se, but it felt like one.

“Work to do,” Travis replied. Frowning, he gave up on trying to force the code to function as he wanted it to. Instead, he forwarded the error messages to Hoshi’s department. Let them untangle this godforsaken mess. “None of them know who I am anyway,” he said flatly.

“Meaning?”

“Not all of us had nine kids and lived to be a hundred,” Travis replied crossly.

“Ninety-six, actually,” Malcolm replied with a tight smirk. “Is that what you’re sulking about?” he asked, sounding so much like the Reed that had first boarded Enterprise that Travis momentarily
forgot his anger. He scowled at the armoury officer who blithely ignored it. “That isn’t you, Travis,” Reed said. “You’re not going to die like that.”

“Nobody should die like that,” Travis muttered before realizing that Malcolm clearly knew his alternate’s fate. He gave the older man a questioning look.

“Amanda has been … less than pleased about certain elements of our alternate’s lives,” Reed began hesitantly. Seeing him this uncomfortable was actually rather weird, mostly because it made him look human once again. “To be perfectly honest,” Malcolm admitted, “I had intentionally avoided the entire thing until she started in on me and then I became … curious as to why we named our firstborn Travis.”

Very few things could render Travis Mayweather speechless – his mother’s glare, for example, or the rush that accompanied really good sex; once, when he was sixteen, the former followed the latter when his mom stumbled upon him post-coitus with a lovely young passenger aboard Horizon and he’d wisely kept his mouth shut for a full two weeks afterward – but Reed’s comment simply stole his breath away.

“Naming one of the children Charles I understood,” Malcolm continued, keeping his eyes locked on the screen though he was very obviously not actually looking at it. “I suppose Pauline was close enough to T’Pol and Madeline was to be expected.” His lips tightened in something that could have been a smile or a grimace. “We even named one after Amanda’s father and she can’t stand the man.” He stood silently for another moment. “But Travis? That … surprised me given our … recent past.” Finally, he turned his eyes toward Mayweather. “So I started digging.”

“And what did you find?” Travis didn’t think he could have kept from asking, even if he tried, and he hoped Reed did not notice how thick his voice sounded.

“Nothing I did not already know,” Malcolm replied. “I’m sorry that this mission has cost me your friendship, Mister Mayweather,” he said stiffly. “The captain wants me to accompany Commander Hernandez so in my absence, you will be acting first officer.” Travis inhaled sharply – he felt a sudden weight push down on his shoulders, as if the grav plating was malfunctioning, even though he knew it was just his imagination – but Reed kept talking. “It is – and I cannot stress this enough – absolutely essential that you keep an eye on the captain,” he said. “As the first officer, your primary job is the welfare of the crew but don’t be afraid to challenge him.” There was that grimace-smile again. “He hates being told no but just remember: he’s as tired and as scared as the rest of us and sometimes needs someone to slap some sense into him.”

“Got it.” That imaginary weight doubled.

“You’ll do fine, Lieutenant.” Abruptly, Reed smiled tightly. “Just keep doing what you’ve been doing around me.” He spun on one heel and marched toward the door.

“Nine children?” Travis asked suddenly. The question caused Reed to hesitate … or perhaps it was the tone? For the first time in forever, Travis didn’t feel the urge to rage at the armoury officer. No, right now, he was just so damned tired that anger seemed like too much work. “How did Cole take that?”

“I still have the bruises,” Malcolm replied with a ghost of a smile. They stood in silence for a moment longer – Travis could see Reed considering something – before finally, the armoury officer stepped closer, offering his hand. “If I don’t see you again, Travis,” he said, “I would like you to know that-—”
“Stop.” Mayweather held up both hands. “None of that crap. Don’t you have any idea how much bad luck it is to start saying that kind of thing?” He was only half-joking, but he took Reed’s offered hand. “Bring them back alive,” he instructed.

“I’ll do my best,” Reed said. “I’ve grown rather fond of Enterprise,” he said with another slight smile. “Do try to keep the captain from breaking her?”

“I’ll do my best,” Travis replied. “Good luck,” he added as Reed backed away.

“And to you.” Nothing else was said – nothing else needed to be said – as they parted, and Travis turned his attention back to the main viewer in front of him.

There was work to be done.
Trip: Greeting Party

Chapter Notes

642 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's 1 February, 2154.

He ached all over.

His head pounded furiously, beating time with his pulse and hurting more than the worse tequila hangover he'd ever experienced. The scalp wound that he'd gotten following the T'Muna-Doth's extraordinarily rough landing had finally dried, but Trip still hadn't had time to wipe it clean, not with the danger they were currently in and the absolute lack of options on-hand. Not for the first time, he was thankful for T'Pol's pain management training – it required a bit of concentration, but he was able to push aside the nearly crippling agony of cracked ribs and bruises that decorated his body like a second skin; the pain was locked away in a tiny little box at the back of his mind so he could continue to function while the situation remained severe. Eventually, of course, he'd pay a price for this, would probably even lose a couple of days or a week as his body stitched itself back together, but at the moment, they were simply out of time.

Throughout the entire ship, power was out and Trip had absolutely no idea why. Everything had been fine as they descended – okay, not fine per se, not with them screaming toward the ground at terminal velocity, but they'd at least been able to fire the rebooted maneuvering drives to bleed most of their speed – and then, at around five thousand meters, everything just went insane. It was as if the ship simply started powering down again. Not just one system, but everything. The lights and the gravity and the atmo scrubbers and the main drive and the sensors … they all just slowly faded away to nothing. Even their handheld devices – T'Pol's scanner, their firearms, the mouth sterilizer, for God's sake! – just went dark. Thankfully, T'Pol had wisely kicked in the landing cycle before they lost everything, so the T'Muna-Doth came to thudding stop nearly smack dab in the middle of a wide valley.

Exiting the ship had been difficult enough – they'd had to manually unseal the airlock, which frankly sucked even worse than it sounded, especially in the pitch black where T'Pol was less than useless thanks to her crappy eyesight in the dark – but now that they were out, things were already starting to get worse. There, just now cresting a ridge, were a quartet of riders, all oriented in their direction. And Trip just knew they weren't going to be friendly…

"Klingons," T'Pol announced grimly. Trip blew out a frustrated breath. Of course it had to be Klingons. It was far too much to ask for them to be friendly, happy aliens who were just out to lend a helping hand because they were genuinely nice people. "They are all armed with bladed weapons," she continued with a frown and narrowed eyes. "I observe no energy weapons."

"Maybe they're stuck here too," Trip muttered. T'Pol studied the approaching riders for a moment before her eyes slid to him.

"Get the lirpa," she instructed. Concern coursed across the magical bond, along with tendrils of dread, fear and an anger that could melt steel. For a moment, Trip hesitated, but only for a heartbeat or so. He nodded and quickly darted back into the darkened interior of the starship, relying on his
nearly perfect memory to retrace his steps to the living quarters where he hefted the ancient Vulcan
weapon. By the time he had rejoined T'Pol, the Klingons were almost within spitting distance.

Up close, they looked even more barbaric than normal, with heavy woolen longcoats hanging off
their shoulders and filthy stains that Trip hoped wasn't blood upon the rest of their clothes. One of the
Klingons was a woman … he thought, though she was as muscular and as ugly as the other three so
it was kind hard to tell. The animals they were riding were even worse – they looked like some
bizarre melding of a monstrous dog and a lizard, maybe with a bit of chicken thrown in for good
measure – and the four slid off their steeds with casual grace, drawing their curious half-moon
weapons. Bat'leth, T'Pol had called them. All of the Klingons wore prominent sigils of some sort
upon their hardened cuirasses and Trip could feel the instant T'Pol recognized it. Her concern fell
away and was quickly replaced with an even more intense anger.

"They will divide by pairs," she murmured. She did not bother reaching for the lirpa and Trip
realized with some surprise that she meant him to use it. Panic almost set in – what was she going to
use? – but it vanished the instant he felt her sharp determination. She'd already picked her target.
When things went sideways (like they always did), she intended on taking a weapon away from a
Klingon.

Words were exchanged in that gruff, aggressive language of theirs – T'Pol sounded almost
contemptuous when she responded, though if he was honest, Trip would have to admit that might
just be because their language sounded like she was trying to hack up a lung – and whatever she said
made the four laugh. Two of them split off from their party at a gesture from the ugliest of the four
and approached.

"They mean to murder us," T'Pol ordered. "Do not hesitate to kill if necessary." Trip swallowed the
sudden lump in his throat, pushed down the instinctive urge to start trying to talk his way out of this,
and instead forced his body to relax. His foe was several centimeters taller than him and was
weaving that bat'leth thing around like someone who knew how to use it but appeared to be
distracted. Trip followed the Klingon's eyes for a heartbeat. Ah. He recognized T'Pol as the superior
combatant and thought Trip would be easy meat. Okay. Trip could work with that. Overconfidence
was an excellent tool in the arsenal...

He took three quick steps forward, intentionally telegraphing his wild overhand blow in the hopes
that his attack would look sloppy, and it worked marvelously. The Klingon almost leisurely blocked
the strike with his bat'leth, most of his attention still focused on T'Pol. Even as Trip felt the shock of
impact from the parry, he was reversing the blow, driving the heavier bludgeon at the base of the
lirpa forward in a blinding counterstrike. Caught unprepared, the Klingon staggered back, blood and
shattered teeth spraying from his mouth. Reflex drove Trip on then – he came in low this time,
pivoting on one leg as he spun, allowing the momentum from his turn to add velocity to the strike.
The blade sliced deeply into the Klingon's leg and he howled, dropping to a knee. Letting his grip
slide down the lirpa shaft as he straightened, Trip brought the bludgeon back and over his shoulder
like a sledgehammer, smashing into his opponent's collarbone with a bone-crushing snap.

The Klingon fell.

Acting on instinct, Trip danced back a step, just in time for the sudden arrival another Klingon – it
was the female and her eyes were furious. She came in strong, her bat'lethwhistling as she tried to
simply decapitate him. Trip let his body collapse back into a sideways roll that carried him just out of
the way. His feet slid across the dirt and something – it had to be T'Pol who was probably still
keeping an eye on him even though he could feel and hear her own duel transpiring – urged him to
strike now. He thrust the blade of the lirpa forward, even before his feet were fully set, and the shiver
of impact as the weapon struck true very nearly tore it from his grasp.

Eyes wide, the female Klingon froze, her bat'leth held high. She looked down in disbelief at where the blade was buried deep within her belly, having punched through her cuirass easily enough, and her own weapon clattered to the ground as it slid from nerveless fingers. Trip blinked – he realized with some surprise that his breathing was still even, his heartbeat was still calm – and then pulled the lirpa free. Blood spurted from the deadly wound instantly, even though the woman tried to stem the flow. She fell forward, still struggling but rapidly weakening.

Out of the corner of his eye, Trip could see that T'Pol had already downed her first foe – he was also on his knees, hands on his throat as he desperately tried to breathe through a collapsed trachea – and was facing off with the leader, spinning a captured bat'leth with a skill and ease that made Trip feel like a four year old swinging a stick but insisting it was a sword. She flowed past the Klingon's defenses, batting aside his counterstrike and knocking both weapons out of alignment, which left him wide open for her coup de grace.

It was a brutal, crushing kick.

In the groin.

Trip winced from where he stood as the Klingon went down into the dirt with a loud clatter. With perfect poise, T'Pol knelt, seized his bat'leth and sent it spinning away into the distance. Her eyes swept the brief battlefield – she looked first at Trip, then at the three other downed Klingons – and Trip could sense her mind racing as she tried to identify their next course of action. He hesitated not in the slightest, first driving the lirpa blade first into the ground before darting into the darkened interior of the T'Muna-Doth where he grabbed a handful of items from engineering. T'Pol's eyebrow climbed slightly at the tape though she nodded approvingly when he began to bind hands and feet together.

Only then did he break out the first aid kit.

As it turned out, none of the Klingons were dead. While he was attending to the unconscious woman and ensuring she didn't bleed to death, T'Pol performed an emergency tracheotomy on her first victim. Without the use of their scanner, Trip had no idea how bad off these clowns were but from the wary, almost disgusted way T'Pol watched them, he suspected the universe wouldn't miss them if they shuffled off this mortal coil. And that told him everything he needed to know about these Klingons.

"The House of Klunk," she identified coolly when she caught his curious look. "They have a well-deserved reputation for brutality and barbarism." The other bat'leths joined the previous one and she quickly patted their foes down, locating another nine weapons, all sharp, lethal, and well-used. "They are considered a dying House," T'Pol continued, eyeing the slowly recovering leader. "And a strange one." At Trip's questioning look, she glanced skyward. "They are scavengers," she said darkly, "and one of the things they prefer to utilize against ground targets are Wewokiun pulse dampeners – airborne devices that emit a specific resonance wave neutralizing most modern technology." She frowned slightly. "Vulcan has never been able to replicate the effects."

"I've never heard of these … Wewokiuns."

"You have never heard of them because they are extinct." T'Pol turned her cold eyes on the leader. "The House of Klunk murdered the last of them three years after Vulcan made first contact with Earth." Again, her eyes flickered. "Four of them," she mused. "If they follow their standard
procedure, there will be at least another eight still in the camp." She knelt before the now stirring
Klingon leader and snapped out several questions in his guttural tongue. He snarled some responses
– from his body language, Trip guessed they were threats – and T'Pol gave him a cold look before
reaching forward to render him unconscious. At the last moment, the Klingon tried to snap at her
with his teeth, but she'd clearly anticipated this and applied the to'tsu'k'hy with her other hand.

"What now?" Trip asked as she straightened. He winced at the flood of emotions thundering through
their magical psychic connection.

"Something foolish and exceptionally dangerous," T'Pol replied. "We need to disable the pulse
dampeners," she continued, "but attacking a fortified position will not be easy." Again, a pulse of
hardened emotion – discomfort, fear, anger, more fear – stabbed at him, but Trip managed to keep
from grimacing. Right now, the last thing he wanted to do was show how badly he was affected by
T'Pol's concerns. "I have a plan," she said slowly, hesitantly, "but it will require you to do something
… dangerous."

"I'm not going to like this, am I?" Trip inhaled deeply.

"I don't," T'Pol said tightly. And then, she told him her plan.

No, Trip decided sourly, he didn't like this at all.
T'Pol: Flanking Maneuver

Chapter Notes

642 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's February, 2154. This chapter occurs concurrently with the previous one.

As we get closer to the return of TnT to 'civilized' space, expect some fast-forwarding through some of the season 4 events on the Enterprise side. So pay attention to the timeline.

She was almost within striking distance of her target when Trip made his dramatic appearance.

From where she was crouched, in the shadows of one of the large rocks overlooking the small mining facility, she had a clear line of sight for his approach and had to admit that his choice of avenues was ideal. Dressed in heavy Vulcan expedition robes with the hood drawn up to conceal his features, he had a vaguely ominous appearance as he led the four surprisingly docile *khruns* forward. The quartet of Klingons, still safely secured by meters of vacuum tape, swayed in the saddles they were strapped to, which provided Trip with an immediate air of danger.

Trip's appearance drew every eye in the colony – the locals who were herded together in pens along with the stinking corpses of their dead looked toward him with visible hope and desperation, while the Klingon looters paused. The biggest of the raiders was a burly male with dark hair going silver and gray, and T'Pol could see him frowning as he studied her mate's bold approach. When Trip stopped a dozen meters before the colony, tension ramped up. Would this work? It had to. There were no other options in the limited window of opportunity before them…

"I am here to chew bubble gum and kick ass!" Trip bellowed in English, his voice carrying across the suddenly silent valley. He braced the lirpa over one shoulder as he pulled the four *bat'leths* he'd taped together off one of the *khruns* and tossed them to the ground in front of him. "And I'm all out of bubble gum!" Quickly suppressed amusement skittered across their psychic connection – at another time, Trip would likely have been snickering, though T'Pol did not know why.

Silence reigned for a long moment as the Klingons bickered amongst themselves. T'Pol was too distant to make out the specifics, but from what she could hear, she quickly deduced that they were arguing over what Trip had said. None of them appeared to comprehend English and they were all confused. By their body language, she suspected at least a sliver of fear was involved as well. She fought back the urge to smile.

"Do none of you speak a civilized language?" Trip called out loudly a moment later in Vulcan. His natural accent was nearly gone which T'Pol felt a flash of pride over. It had been difficult, training him to speak without backsliding into bad habits, but the results were more than slightly appealing.

"I speak tongue of Vulcans," the lead Klingon declared in a booming voice. Surrounded by most of his warriors, he stalked toward where Trip stood and T'Pol held her breath for a long, extended moment, her eyes darting for the most logical location for the pulse dampener controls. There. One Klingon was hanging back, trying very hard to look like he wasn't actually lurking around a handful of boxes that were certainly not from this world. T'Pol frowned slightly – he was wearing type IV
ballistic armor with protective neck guards that would make application of a nerve pinch impossible. "You are bold one."

"That I am." Trip jerked his free hand back toward the unmoving forms atop the khruns behind him. "I am returning these four to you," he said in a boastful, arrogant voice that expertly concealed the trepidation and fear swimming across their cerebral linkage.

"I am Krapp, son of Kunk," the Klingon said and the blast of hysterical amusement that thundered through their bond very nearly caused T'Pol to cry out loud. Even at this distance, she could see Trip's body language – he was trying very, very hard to keep from laughing.

"And I," her mate stated, "am Spartacus." He glanced between the Klingons spreading out in a semi-circle around him. "I had heard the House of Klunk fought by the Old Ways," Trip said as he gestured with the blade of the lirpa.

T'Pol pushed the conversation away as she ghosted forward, keeping low and making sure that the lurking Klingon never had a clear view of her approach. The acrid stench of the rotting dead threatened to make her gag, but she suppressed the urge, focused on the mission. With each moment that passed, she drew closer to her target, neared her goal …

"You would challenge us?" the lead Klingon demanded. He laughed before hefting his bat'leth. "You face death, Vulcan!"

"I am not a Vulcan," Trip snapped. He pushed his hood back.

Rocks clattered as T'Pol drew closer, but the Klingon guard was too focused on Trip's exceptional distraction to notice her approach and, by the time he did realize he was danger, she was already on him. The ballistic vest would absorb any of her blows and she could not afford to allow him to cry out, so she targeted his throat. She struck hard with her left fist, kicking at his knee the moment he started to reel back. With a half-gasp, half-gurgle, he started to fall, but T'Pol struck again, this time with a roundhouse kick that caught him in the temple. The Klingon toppled, unconscious and struggling to breathe but still alive, and she spent additional long seconds securing his hands, feet, and mouth with Trip's welding tape. According to her mate, nothing shy of solvent would remove these restraints.

The ring of metal against metal caused her to look up – her heart lurched at the sight of Trip battling with the Klingon leader while the others watched – but she forcibly suppressed her turbulent emotions and flipped open the hardened case before her. Yes. It was exactly as she expected. The controls were hidden underneath a protective sheet of transparisteel that would resist even a disruptor at high intensity. If memory served, however, there was a hidden switch located…

With a soft click, the transparent metal detached and T'Pol let it slide to the dirt as she studied the unlabeled controls. The language was foreign to her – it certainly wasn't Klingon – and she quickly abandoned attempts to decipher it. Instead, she grabbed the nearest heavy, blunt object and smashed the device into fragments.

Instantly, a soft whine echoed around her as the unfamiliar technology ceased its dampening effects, allowing various bits of technology to being functioning as intended once more. She drew both phase pistols, gave them quick glances to confirm that they were functional and charged, and then threw herself forward. Her legs ate the distance quickly – the grunts and sounds of battle pulled her toward him – and finally, her rapid approach drew attention. Several of the six Klingons watching as Trip dueled with their master started to turn.
T'Pol opened fire.

The sudden streams of phase pistol fire caught them by complete surprise – two fell instantly, stunned, and then another, before the rest fully realized they were under attack – and Trip took advantage of her sudden appearance without hesitation. As Krapp jerked back in shock, his head snapping around to find the source of the energy discharge, Trip slid forward. The bludgeon of the lirpa slammed into the Klingon's stomach, folding him over with an explosive gasp, and her mate spun, shifting his hold on the weapon before bringing it down, as if he were chopping wood. Again, the blunt end of the lirpa struck home – Krapp's skull – and the Klingon collapsed in a motionless heap. By then, she was there, the phase pistols still tracking her downed targets.

"Krapp," Trip muttered. He was breathing faster than normal, but apart from that and a few nicks upon the Vulcan robes, he appeared fine. When he glanced up, his eyes flashed brightly. "I just beat the crap out of Krapp," he said.

T'Pol felt her lips twitch.

"So it would seem," she replied. One of the Klingons was beginning to stir so she stunned him again. "I do not think we have adequate tape to secure them all," she began before the sound of approaching feet caused her to look up.

The surviving locals had armed themselves with a wide variety of weapons – T'Pol saw pickaxes, shovels, welding torches, and even what looked like a hydro-drill – and they were approaching with murder in their eyes. She watched for a moment and then, just to make a point, fired another stun burst into one of the Klingons. It was enough to cause the infuriated locals hesitate.

"Greetings," she said in her native language. "Do any of you understand me?"

"They do not," a heavyset male with dark skin replied, "but I do." He was the one carrying the hydro-drill and spoke Vulcan passably well. T'Pol's left eyebrow shot up at the same moment that she felt Trip's sharp inhalation of surprise.

This man was human.

"I'm Esteban Morales," the human said before speaking slowly in a language T'Pol did not recognize. A moment later, the survivors relaxed slightly. Several sprinted away, back toward the mining colony. "They'll secure the Klingons for now."

"Wonderful," Trip muttered. Despite the overwhelming curiosity his body language betrayed to her, her mate was watching the rest of the crowd of locals without actually relaxing. T'Pol glanced at him, then passed over one of the phase pistols.

"I expect they'll want to … Dios!" Morales' eyes had widened. "You're Charles Tucker!" he gasped before his gazed snapped to encompass her. "And Commander T'Pol!"

"Subcommander," T'Pol corrected calmly. She took a tiny step closer to her mate and spent slightly more time than was probably appropriate examining him for any sign of injury.

"From Enterprise!" Morales continued, as if she had not spoken. The name of their former ship caused an immediate change in the mood of the locals. Gone was their aggression and rage, and in its place was … something she did not recognize.
"Enterprise." The name was repeated, over and over, as if a mantra, and then, another name began working its way through the crowd. T'Pol blinked in surprise and exchanged a confused look with Trip.

Why were these people whispering Cutler's name?

"Everyone thought you were dead!" Morales said. Trip gave him a cool look.

"Long story," he said. He nodded toward the Klingons, some of whom were beginning to stir again, and glowered. "Let's get these morons secured and then we can talk."
655 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's February, 2154.

Obviously, this is my heavily revised "Zero Hour" (but without any space Nazis.) You'll note I skipped straight past "Countdown" which is still implied to have happened. Why did I skip that episode? Because I sincerely don't know how to improve it. "Countdown" remains my favorite episode of the entire series.

Chaos reigned.

Alarms shrieked their warnings as the team steadily advanced toward their target and smoke filled the misshapen corridors, but Malcolm put that out of his mind and focused on their objective. He was not on point – that duty fell to Hawkins, who frankly had better response times than anyone else Malcolm had ever met – which allowed him the opportunity to keep an eye on the captain. It was strange, seeing Archer in the combat armor, and from the awkward way he moved, it was bothering the captain just as much.

Around them, the Weapon rocked and shivered, a sure indication that they had come under attack by someone. Malcolm didn't know who it was – as far as he knew, Degra's ship, the Xindi craft that they'd come on, was the only warp-capable vessel within twenty or thirty light years, but things had gotten weird after they boarded, like they had hit one of the anomalies so prevalent in the Expanse, so he wouldn't bet his life on them being alone – but neither did he care, not as they drew closer to the power core and the monsters within. His blood was hot … no. That wasn't true. His blood was boiling. The rage he'd thought to be under control was now thundering through his belly, demanding violent retribution for the death of one friend and the torture of another. He would avenge Joss and pay these bastards back for what they did to Hoshi, if it was the very last thing he did.

Even now, as they raced toward their objective, Malcolm could still feel the knot of terrified failure that had caused his heart to clench when the Weapon evaded destruction earlier, despite the numbers arrayed against the Reptilians. It had loosened only slightly when the captain hatched this mad scheme to pursue it in Degra's much faster ship, but now, as the target loomed, he could feel that bundle of nerves and fear tightening up once more. They would only have a limited window of opportunity at this, one bloody chance in a million before the Reptilians realized they were aboard and locked everything down …

Hawkins flashed a rapid hand signal back as he drew alongside a sharp corner – hostiles sighted – and Malcolm acted on instinct, stepping closer to the captain and pushing Archer against the wall to better protect him. At the same time, the rest of the MACO team took up their defensive positions, weapons primed and ready. Even as Archer was tensing, likely to react angrily at being thrust into the wall, Reed was issuing quick, silent commands himself. Azar and Woods to flank, Hawkins and Money to deploy grenades, then everyone to assault with maximum firepower. The MACOs obeyed instantly, sliding into position or pulling flash-bangs free. Archer gave him a questioning look and, in response, Malcolm held up three fingers. He folded one down – two – and then another – one – before forming a fist.
The MACOs moved.

With a sharp bang, the stun grenades that Hawkins and Money sent spinning into the corridor detonated, and a bare heartbeat later, Azar and Woods charged forward, side-by-side, their rifles barking out rapid, staccato bursts. The two grenadiers fell behind them without hesitation, their own weapons sweeping for any stragglers, and it was only then that Malcolm eased his grip on the captain.

"Stay alert," he hissed to Archer as he fast-walked after the MACOs. The captain was only steps away – too close, especially if a grenade was brought into play, but so far, the Xindi hadn't seemed to use explosives – and Malcolm led him around the corner. A half dozen Reptilian Xindi were already sprawled out on the floor, smoke curling up from the charred blast points upon their chests, but Reed barely glanced at the corpses.

"They've sealed off the core," Woods growled from where he was crouching next to a closed hatch. He'd already pried the wall panel free and was frowning at the bizarre wires or diodes or whatever the bloody hell they were within. "It'll take me too long to hotwire this, sir."

"Then blow it," Archer ordered tightly. The Weapon shuddered once again, but the ambient sounds had changed around them. It was building power. Time had officially run out.

"Breaching charges, aye," Azar said. He pulled a pair of the portable explosives out of his pack and quickly affixed them to the hatch, then knelt and applied another two near the base of door. "Get to cover," he instructed as he quickly primed the devices.

"Once we're through," Malcolm ordered as he and the others put some distance between themselves and the hatch, "shoot anything that moves." It was mostly meant for the captain – the MACOs were already planning on doing just that – and he reached over to Archer's weapon, flicking the selector switch from stun to kill. The captain met his eyes. Finally, Archer nodded. This was not the time for mercy or compassion.

"Stand by," Azar murmured as he retreated from the door. "Three, two, one." He stabbed his thumb down on the detonator and almost instantly, the explosives went. The shockwave was immense – it actually staggered Money, but then, she was a tiny slip of a woman anyway– and tore apart the hatch, sending a blizzard of lethal shrapnel spinning into the central power control.

"Go! Go! Go!" Malcolm shouted, though it was unnecessary as Hawkins and Woods were already through, their pulse rifles chattering. Money was right behind them – Reed saw her jerk back a step as return fire slashed across the air and splattered against her armor – and then Azar. Malcolm followed suit, opting more for accuracy than volume of fire as he took the extra half-second to confirm his sight picture before firing. His target crumpled without a sound.

"Find the primary controls!" Archer roared. He was crouching just inside the hatch, wisely having found some hard cover, but Malcolm was pleased to see that the captain wasn't hesitating. Instead, he was blasting away wildly, not really hitting much but definitely causing enough of a commotion to add to the chaos. Reed dropped a second Xindi, and a third, and then a fourth – dammit. How many of these things were there? – and it was only then, as he was scanning for another hostile, that he caught sight of the viewscreen and the planet displayed.

It was Earth.

Asia was just coming into view … and it was untouched. There was no immense scar cut across
through Japan and into China. He blinked. How …?

And in that moment, as his brain pieced together the what – or more accurately, the when – the Weapon fired.

The massive energy beam stabbed Earthward, right into the Pacific Ocean where it began its slow, inexorable crawl toward land. Someone was screaming – it was him, he realized – and the smell of ozone and seared flesh filled the air as Xindi reinforcements spilled into the primary core from other entranceways, their weapons shrieking. There were too many of them…

Azar was the first to die – a dozen disruptor beams converged upon him, tearing through his armor and cooking him alive. He tried to scream, but the air around him was superheated and his lungs were already boiling so it came out as little more than a hiss, and as he fell back, Money caught an unlucky shot to the face. She collapsed without a sound, an armed grenade slipping out her fingers and rolling away. It detonated with a fierce *boom*, tearing free one of the control consoles and showering another squad of reinforcements with shattered fragments of metal and plastic.

"Got it!" Woods shouted. He was kneeling alongside a console, crouching down as low as he could manage while he worked on the system's insides. Hawkins was a few steps away, providing as much covering fire as he could manage, but Malcolm could see how red-hot his rifle's barrel was – at this rate, it would fail very soon. "Shields down, fuckers!" Woods roared, half in glee, half in terror.

Instantly, more alarms began howling and the Xindi counter-attack visibly faltered. The Weapon shuddered and rolled – on the viewscreen, Malcolm could see dozens of Starfleet ships all converging upon them, phase cannons and obsolete spatial torpedoes screaming across the void. One of the large Vulcan ambassadorial ships lumbered into view, its own weapons flashing.

And then … *Columbia*, trailing warp plasma and debris.

The NX-02 struck at maximum impulse, the impact throwing them all to the ground as the entire Weapon shuddered. Explosions boomed, filling the air with a deafening cacophony. With a thunderous groan, the entire power core split open – Malcolm had just enough time to see Hawkins and Woods vanish over the side before he too was sliding straight to his doom. *This would be a good death*, a tiny part of him whispered.

But Jonathan Archer didn’t let him fall.

Diving forward with grace that Malcolm didn’t realize the man possessed, the captain seized his arm with one hand while grabbing one of the now inert power conduits with the other. It slowed Reed’s slide just enough for him to find his own handhold.

"Sir!" It was Woods, two decks down. Hawkins was there as well, but from the way he was leaning against the trembling bulkhead, he probably had a broken leg. The two MACOs were standing in front of something that looked like … was that an escape pod?

Malcolm was just about to point it out to the captain when he caught sight of something utterly bizarre materialize just behind Archer. A humanoid silhouette that almost looked like a shadow come to life, it shimmered and glittered as it advanced, somehow managing to maintain its footing in the rapidly disintegrating Weapon. Reed had just enough time to shout out a warning before the figure reached the captain and seized him. With an inarticulate cry of rage, the silhouette hurled Archer back into the bulkhead.
"I will destroy you!" the figure exclaimed, somehow managing to cover the distance between where he stood and where the captain was sliding down the wall within the span of a single second. Again, it seized Archer, this time by the neck, and pulled him up. "You have interfered with the plans of the Romulan Empire for the last time!"

Malcolm shot him in the back.

It was a difficult shot, firing a rifle with one arm at a fairly distant target aboard an extraordinarily unstable platform, but he knew that if he didn't squeeze the trigger, whoever or whatever this damned thing was would kill the captain. The excited plasma burst didn't do nearly as much damage as it should have – it seemed as if most of the energy was bled away or absorbed by the glowing blue field flickering around the silhouette – but what got through was just enough to cause pain as the figure cried out, dropping Archer in surprise. Even as the silhouette was half turning to face Reed, the distortion field surrounding the figure began to falter and fail, revealing the man's features in bits and spurts.

He was a Vulcan.

Or at least partially, though Malcolm had never seen a Vulcan with those kinds of cranial ridges before … except on that dead Sphere-Builder that had caused Soval's nostrils to flare and his eyes to narrow. At the time, he'd not given much thought to the ambassador's reaction, but clearly, it meant more than he'd thought. The realization flashed through his mind at the same instant that the unknown entity once again crossed the distance with impossible speed. He flickered in and out of existence, travelling two or maybe three meters without actually covering the distance, snatched Malcolm's rifle out of his hands with a casual, almost contemptuous gesture, and sent the weapon spinning away with a flick of his wrist.

"I will kill you for that, Malcolm Reed," the not-Vulcan hissed, rage stamped upon his face. He kicked Malcolm – ribs fractured under the impact – and sent him sliding across the wildly tilting platform. Pain caused Reed's vision to momentarily white-out, but he ground his teeth together and clung to consciousness. The captain … he still needed to …

The whine of a phase pistol discharge set to kill echoed in his ears and Malcolm blinked away the spots still dancing in his vision in time to see the not-Vulcan looming over him suddenly twitch. The alien looked down at the smoke curling up from his upper abdomen – it was a heart shot for a Vulcan, Reed recognized with some distant approval, though he half doubted that had been Archer's intent – and then dropped to his knees. He coughed once before toppling forward.

And a heartbeat later, he vanished entirely.

"On your feet, Mister Reed," the captain said through clenched teeth as he drew closer, his phase pistol gripped tightly in one hand. Archer's legs wobbled slightly – so he was just as unsteady; for some stupid reason, that made Malcolm feel a little better – but he helped Reed up. The shuddering was getting worse and it was getting absurdly hot.

"Time to go, sir?" Malcolm asked through the haze of shock and pain. He was vaguely aware of someone – he thought it was Woods – gripping his arm. Something pinched his neck and torrent of ice roared through his body, momentarily wiping away the pain. Reed blinked in relief. Dear God, these MACOs had good drugs.

"Time to go indeed." Archer scrambled down the makeshift ladder that Woods gestured toward – it was more of a ramp, really, and from the way this thing was shaking, Malcolm doubted it would stay
put for very long. With Woods' half-carrying him, he limped down to where Hawkins waited. "Let's get the hell out of here," the captain said as he helped the MACO into the escape pod.

Around them, the Weapon continued to break apart.
Erika: Sphere Breaker

Chapter Notes

655 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's February, 2154.

Obviously, this is my heavily revised "Zero Hour" (but without any space Nazis.) You'll note I skipped straight past "Countdown" which is still implied to have happened. Why did I skip that episode? Because I sincerely don't know how to improve it (apart from maybe showing the MACOs in a more competent light.) "Countdown" remains my favorite episode of the entire series.

She wasn't trained for this.

"Hard about!" Erika ordered, her hands clutching the armrests of the captain's chair so tightly that she was almost afraid that she was going to break them off. Petty Officer Ramos obeyed instantly and Enterprise banked sharply, dipping down and below the rapidly approaching Xindi warship seemingly materializing out of nowhere. Explosions wreathed the smaller ship as the Minnow streaked past them, its weapon systems scoring yet another kill, and not for the first time, Erika silently gave thanks for competent junior officers. In the unlikely event they survived this catastrophe, she fully intended to see that Lieutenant Mayweather, the corvette's acting commander, was so heavily decorated he would need a loadmaster to help him don his dress uniform.

"Enterprise Two engaging," Lieutenant Sato exclaimed and Erika almost grimaced as the other Starfleet vessel streaked by, the immense disruptor cannon in its hull lashing out and carving a crippling furrow across another Xindi vessel. She pushed the fear and anger down, and focused. They had a mission to complete, dammit. There would be time for her to panic and lose control later.

"Signal to Kumari," she snapped. "Move to engage. Punch us a hole to Sphere 41."

The Andorian vessel was already in motion, its heavier weapons tearing into the Xindi defenders with brutal force. It hadn't been that big a surprise to discover that Shran had been shadowing them – he was like a bad penny, turning up at the worst of times – but when Erika had laid out their plan to assault the central sphere of the entire network, the Andorian captain had been almost ecstatic at the notion of assisting. He'd been even more gleeful at the discovery of a younger, more emotional Soval and she suspected that was really the reason he wanted to help, but who was she to look a gift horse in the mouth? She wondered how she'd let Jon talk her into this, how he'd managed to convince her that her place was aboard Enterprise in this all-out offensive against Sphere 41 in a mad attempt to shut down the entire sphere network while he joined Reed and a team of MACOs in a last ditch attempt to destroy the Weapon from within. Dear God, but she was going to punch him in the damned face when she saw him again.

If she saw him again.

"Tactical assessment?" she demanded.

"There are still thirteen destroyer-analogues in defensive orbit around the sphere," Soval announced from the weapons board. That had also been something of a surprise – not only did he know what he
was doing at tactical, he was a damned good shot too which led to all sorts of questions – but if she'd learned one thing from her time in the Expanse, it was how to roll with the punches. "A frontal assault is unlikely to succeed."

Which was probably why the Kumari was doing exactly that. Erika swallowed a groan as she watched the Andorian warship thunder toward the densest cluster of Xindi starships protecting the sphere, its guns booming nonstop. If they only had one or two of those Aquatic ships, this would be a helluva lot easier, but they'd all been lost during the first attempt to take out the Xindi weapon. At least they'd manage to retrieve Lieutenant Sato. Automatically, her eyes flickered to the communications officer – Sato was still pale, with livid bruises standing out upon her face and neck, but her expression was hard and unyielding. Phlox hadn't wanted her to leave sickbay, but she'd insisted and Erika just didn't have the heart to say no…

"Signal from Travis," Hoshi said. "Minnow requesting permission to engage from galactic north." Erika's eyes flickered up to the display on the viewscreen and then slid back to Soval. She was no tactician, dammit. Her training had never covered this.

He nodded ever so slightly, clearly recognizing whatever it was Travis and his acting tactical officer – Lieutenant Cole – had in mind.

"Recommend Enterprise and Enterprise Two proceed along the same vector," he said. "Assault deviation at … this point." He pressed a button and the tactical plot shifted.

"Make it so," Erika ordered. She stabbed the intra-ship comm. "Engineering, stand by for emergency burn."

"Engineering standing by," Kelby replied almost instantly.

They darted forward, the Xindi corvette that was Lieutenant Mayweather's unofficial first command in the lead with Captain Soval's Enterprise less than three kilometers behind it and half that ahead of Enterprise. Erika risked a quick glance to the situation display – the remaining Arboreal and Primate ships had broken off and were falling back, hotly pursued by a handful of Reptilian ships … ah. So that was what Cole and Soval had observed.

Alarms began pulsing a moment later and Erika watched as Mayweather abruptly rolled the Xindi corvette, narrowly evading a fast-developing sphere anomaly. Seconds later, he threw the captured ship directly down the throat of two larger destroyers, somehow spinning and banking in such a way that every one of their shots went wide even as the Minnow's own weapon systems tore brutal holes through their attackers' hulls. One of the destroyers suddenly vanished in a massive fireball – Enterprise Two had reached weapons' range and unleashed that massive gun of theirs – and the shockwave sent the other defender tumbling. Somehow, some way, Mayweather radically altered the trajectory of the corvette and then, to Erika's stunned disbelief, skipped the damned thing off the rapidly expanding fireball to obtain even more speed.

How the … ?

"Engaging," Soval announced, and a rumble vibrated through the deck as phase cannons went active. A steady thrum thrum thrum echoed through the Starfleet vessel as photonic torpedoes roared from their tubes and streaked across the void to detonate against their targets. "Helm, come about to zero nine zero mark zero," the Vulcan ordered calmly, "maximum impulse." PO3 Ramos obeyed without bothering to double-check with Erika, though if he had, she would have very likely shouted at him to just do it. Her hands were trembling nonstop – dear God, why had she ever wanted to
command her own ship?

*Focus,* she told herself angrily.

"Lieutenant Ling," she said in as cool a voice as she could manage, "status on anomaly field?"

"Growing rapidly, ma'am," came the quick but frankly less than useful answer. "Sensors are having difficulty."

*Enterprise* shook hard – alarms howled, drowning out the rest of the lieutenant's comments, and Erika's breath caught slightly in recognition. Hull breach. She flicked a switch on the left armrest of the command chair and the main viewer transformed to an internal cutaway. F Deck. That was the Atmospheric Studies Lab – no one should be there during a tactical alert. She switched the viewer back to tactical plot the instant she noted Engineering reported blast doors had sealed.

"Helm to one eight zero mark zero four zero," Soval said.

"*Enterprise Two* reporting fires on all decks," Hoshi announced. Erika glowered. Dammit. She'd lost track of that ship in the chaos. How the hell did Jon do this?

"Order them to pull back," she snapped. On the tac-plot, she could see *Minnow* lurking in *Kumari*'s impulse wake– what were they doing? – and was about to issue instructions to Mayweather when the Andorian ship suddenly banked hard. The captured Xindi corvette shot forward like a bullet from a gun, twisting around another salvo of enemy fire as it angled sharply toward the sphere. Erika heard Hoshi draw in a sharp breath...

And then, the *Minnow* was past the sphere, wreathed in flame as its well-placed ordnance tore free great chunks of the massive satellite's hull. Instantly, a quartet of Reptilian destroyers gave pursuit.

"Commander," Soval began, but Erika was already triggering the intra-com.

"Engineering, go for full burn now!"

"Full burn, aye!"

*Enterprise* shuddered as Kelby radically altered the intermix ratio – it was, according to what Erika had been told, akin to using afterburners on an old supersonic jet and was just as bad for the engines to use. Thrust was doubled, maybe trebled, and they shot toward the gap. The Xindi defenders were already recognizing their error – the ships pursuing Mayweather and the *Minnow* sharply banked in a clear attempt to get back into position even as other vessels were shifting to cover the gaps – and Erika realized it would be tight. They would have one shot at this...

And then, *Enterprise Two* changed the equation.

Escape pods were steadily streaming away from the other savaged Starfleet vessel, but its impulse engines flared brilliantly, hurling the starship at the sphere with even greater speed than *Enterprise* could manage. Erika recognized Captain Soval's intent immediately – his ship was mostly combat ineffective so he was taking the most logical course of action available at the moment; were she in that situation, with a dead or dying ship and lives relying on her, she'd like to think that she would do the same. The mammoth disruptor cannon fired – once, twice, then again – and the emerald blast stabbed through one of the destroyers with explosive results. Defensive fire tore into the other *Enterprise,* punching great gaping holes in its hull plating. One of the nacelles suddenly blew,
spraying warp plasma everywhere.

"Commander!" Erika's head snapped to Lieutenant Ling. "Their warp core is going critical!"

"Hard about!" Erika ordered without hesitation. "Helm, plot an intercept course for their pods. Let's put us between them and the explosion." She hit the transmit button. "All hands, brace for impact." She glanced to Hoshi. "Signal Minnow and Kumari," she instructed.

With a flash, the second Enterprise struck home, vanishing instantly as it collided with the sphere at hundreds of thousands of meters per second. The warp core breached in that very instant – there seemed to be no way for that to have not been entirely intentional, which Erika immediately realized meant someone had to have remained aboard to trigger it at the very last moment – and the sudden explosion simply vaporized the nearest Xindi destroyer. Two others were smashed into scrap and, based on the rapidly expanding debris field, most of the others were crippled at the very least. Erika swallowed.

"Status report," she demanded.

"Sphere 41 is breaking apart," Lieutenant Ling announced.

"And Kumari is engaging," Soval said in that wry, borderline disgusted tone of his he used whenever he spoke about Andorians. Erika glanced at the tactical plot and bit back a tight smile at the sight of Shran's warship conducting an attack run on the sphere.

"Keep an eye on them," she ordered. Soval lifted an eyebrow that Erika translated as 'of course I'm going to be doing that' before returning his attention to his displays.

"Scanning for sphere network," Ling said the moment Erika glanced in her direction. "I'm not detecting … wait." Her board pinged and she frowned. "The thermobaric clouds are changing, ma'am," she said. "I don't have the specifics but …" She trailed off.

"Keep an eye on them too," Erika said. "Status of the hostiles?"

"Combat ineffective," Soval announced.

"Good." Erika forced herself to stand. "Let's start conducting rescue ops," she said. "Hoshi, find out Minnow's status. If they're still fully operational, instruct Captain Mayweather to stay on combat footing in case there are still some surprises ahead of us."

"Aye, ma'am." Erika paused for another moment.

"And get me a damage report as soon as possible." She jammed her hands together at the small of her back. "I'll be in the ready room. You have the conn, Lieutenant Sato." With her head held high, Erika walked leisurely away from the command chair. The moment she was in the ready room, she slid to the floor and tried very, very hard to stop her damned hands from shaking.

It took a long time.
655 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's February, 2154.

No matter where he stood, Elizabeth Cutler's eyes followed him.

The statue loomed high – the real Cutler had never been that tall or that chiseled, and she certainly hadn't been crafted from clay or brick – and watched over the deuterium colony like some sort of guardian angel. Whoever had sculpted this representation had thoroughly captured her essence – she was smiling, as if she knew something no one else did and was more than willing to share her secret if you just agreed to be her friend – and try as he might, Trip couldn't tear his eyes away from it. He'd heard the story about how she sacrificed herself to save one of the local boys from Klingons and every time he stepped out of the T'Muna-Doth, he found himself staring at the statue while wondering if this too was his fault.

Today was no different. Repairs were almost complete and they already had a full tank of deuterium thanks of the grateful locals who were, for some bizarre reason, not relocating, despite the damned Klingons and what sounded like constant raids. Krapp – not a day passed that Trip didn't find that name hysterically funny, even if he kept it to himself – and his ilk were no longer a problem; to a man, they had committed suicide while secured in the makeshift prison. This had not surprised T'Pol in the slightest.

"As I said," she'd told him, "they are considered strange, even among other Klingons." A tiny glimmer of satisfaction trickled through their strange psychic connection, which almost made Trip ask her what her history was with this House of Krunk, but he'd shelved the Q&A for the time being since it wasn't all that relevant, not with all of the other insanity they'd discovered.

Mister Morales had turned out to be a wealth of information, even if almost all of it was terrible. The Xindi attack and all those dead was easily the worst – Trip couldn't help but to think first of Malcolm's family and then Hoshi's, but his thoughts always went to all of the other people he'd served with or had known who were from that part of Earth; there was Andy Sanada in the Warp Five program, and Togo Kikuchi who had been one of his best friends in college, right up until that jerk slept with Trip's girlfriend, and Jackie Li who gone through officer training with him, and …

The list, as it turned out, was a lot longer than he wanted to think about.

On top of that, he and T'Pol had listened to Morales' strange tale about the crew of Enterprise vanishing along with the NX-01 – according to the Boomer, the explanation for this varied: they had either been assigned a covert mission intended to prevent another attack or had actually stolen the starship for reasons yet unknown. Morales himself preferred the theft story mostly because it had more style and flare, even if he admitted that the Starfleet mission was more probable.

"What do you think?" Trip had asked T'Pol shortly after they first heard the news. She'd frowned.

"I do not know," she'd replied. "It is entirely within Captain Archer's personality to abscond with
"It is," Trip had frowned then. "But with Soval going along with it?" He shook his head. "That hardly seems likely."

T'Pol had not bothered responding to that, although honestly, what could she say? They didn't have enough facts, just a whole of rumor and wild guesses from a stranded Boomer whose entire livelihood had been destroyed by Klingons when they shot down his ship. Morales was almost as desperate to get off this planet as Trip was, though Tucker wasn't sure if that was because the man's wife hated this rock or her sister did. If he were a betting man, Trip would say that it was the latter, mostly because Rosa Mazaheri was very vocal about what she liked and disliked.

And to his barely hidden disgust, Trip was firmly in her 'like' categories.

Once, he might have been flattered at her constant attempts to corner him when he was alone – she definitely wasn't unattractive by any stretch of the imagination and as an engineer herself, they at least had a few things in common – but now, the woman just irritated him. Trip wasn't sure if it was T'Pol's unstated (but very apparent) dislike of Ms. Mazaheri, or if it was because he was so easily able to see through the woman's stupid, immature games for what they were, but each time he had to interact with her, Trip's skin crawled. He minimized the amount of time he spent in her presence, scowled at her when she flirted, and generally just ignored her, but dammit, she seemed to take that as a challenge.

"Teban tells me you've agreed to take us back to civilization," Ms. Mazaheri said abruptly. They were both outside, working in the T'Muna-Doth's shadow, although she was supposed to be cleaning the intermix chamber while he worked on the injectors. As usual, though, the woman was leaning against the ship's hull in what was obviously intended to be a seductive manner. Trip glanced once at her and frowned slightly.

"We're not going to get anywhere if these repairs aren't finished," he said flatly, returning his attention to the task in front of him. The ball of emotions in his mind that were T'Pol tightened – she was suppressing another flash of rage, even though she was on the other side of the colony with Morales and his wife, although to be fair, Trip didn't know if it was because she could sense Mazaheri's latest attempt to get him in bed or if it was because Morales was being his usual overly emotive and talkative self. God, he hoped he hadn't been that irritating when Enterprise first launched.

"There's plenty of time," Mazaheri said. She gave him a smile. "I never know what to call you," she continued. "Teban and Karrin are still using your rank … but surely there's something more … intimate we can call you."

"Commander will do," Trip replied. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught her expression falter slightly. A stunning woman like her? She probably wasn't accustomed to men ignoring or outright rejecting her. "Have that intermix chamber cleaned by the time I get back," he instructed as he hefted the damaged injector port over one shoulder and turned away.

Warm air caressed his face as he walked away from the T'Muna-Doth, and Trip inhaled deeply, letting the pleasant heat bake away at least some of his simmering frustration. He needed to talk to Morales, to find a way to curtail the man's sister-in-law's flirtations before T'Pol lost her temper and broke some bones or tore out the irritating woman's throat. Hell, at the rate that woman was going, Trip wasn't sure that he wouldn't be the one who snapped.
He cut across the colony to the blacksmith under Cutler's steady gaze, nodding a greeting to the old man sitting there. At the moment, T'Pol had the functioning UT chip, so Trip was forced to use hand gestures to convey his request, but within seconds, he was hard at work, filing down the lump of dried sealant that was causing so much trouble with the injector port. Once again, he was cleaning up the messes left behind by Subcommander Tykath – by the looks of it, the dead Vulcan engineer had repaired the injectors at least three times and each time, did just the bare minimum amount of work necessary. God, it was a wonder the T'Muna-Doth hadn't just fallen apart before they even encountered the damned Orions! Honestly, he thought Vulcans were supposed to be more evolved than this…

The world fell away while he worked, though thanks to T'Pol's training he never quite lost track of everything going on. He was aware of the five different locals who made unnecessary visits to the blacksmith, trying their hardest to not actually draw attention to themselves while at the same time desperately wanting to talk to him, or the three kids who were staring at him as if they expected him to grow wings and fly. When Karrin Morales slipped into the smith's little outdoor shop and took up an unobtrusive spot that was both out of the way but within line of sight, Trip almost groaned. He didn't stop working, though. There simply wasn't any time to waste.

"Is there something I can help you with, Mrs. Morales?" he finally asked as he eyed the results of his labors. It wasn't perfect, but it was a damned sight better than what Tykath had done.

"Just a few words, if you please.\" She spoke with a curious accent that he couldn't quite identify; her sister had traces of it as well, but appeared to have made more of an effort to train it out of her voice. "I wanted to apologize." At that, Trip glanced up and looked her. Like Rosa, she was an attractive woman, with dark hair, darker eyes and complexion that was just a few shades shy of being considered caramel. "My family keeps … misstepping with respect to you and the subcommander." She offered a shy, tentative smile. "Teban does not know when to shut up and Rosa … well, I love her, but my little sister is an idiot."

"You don't put idiots in charge of engineering," Trip pointed. He blew on the now smooth injector port to clear away the errant sealant parts he'd filed down.

"She's not that kind of idiot," Mrs. Morales said with another slight smile. She glanced away briefly. "I've seen the way you and the subcommander watch each other," she said. "Rosa … she's blind to that sort of thing. Sometimes intentionally so when it involves someone she's interested in." There was a slight edge to her words that hinted at bitter feelings. Trip made a mental note as he chose his next words carefully.

"It's going to be a very long trip for everyone involved if she doesn't stop with the seduction games," he declared calmly. Inside, he was tense – it didn't surprise him that Mrs. Morales was sharp enough to recognize why he wasn't interested in her sister; what really interested him the most was how she planned on using this knowledge. There was always the possibility of lingering xenophobia, even with Boomers. "Especially if I'm forced to lock her up in the cargo bay." Karrin Morales' eyes widened slightly but her alarm vanished the moment she realized he was joking. Which he was. Mostly.

"I'll talk to her," she promised.

"Good.\" Trip finished his examination of the injector port and finally decided it would have to do. He straightened. "I would appreciate it," he said calmly, "if you spoke with your sister sooner than later." Mrs. Morales nodded her understanding and turned away, clearly intent on doing that now.
Trip gave the injector port another look before offering a sort of half-bow of thanks to the owner of the shop – the grizzled old man grinned broadly and returned it before going back to work on whatever it was he was making – and setting out for the T'Muna-Doth himself. His legs were much longer than Mrs. Morales', but he intentionally moderated his pace so she would reach the ship long before he did.

"The last of our supplies will be loaded by dusk tomorrow," T'Pol informed him when he finally reached the ship. Her eyes flickered very quickly to where the two human women were standing and Trip could sense her mild surprise – and relief, though he didn't quite understand why – regarding what the two women were talking about. "Will we be able to launch?"

"We will." *Even if I have to do all of the work myself*, he added privately. By his calculations, they would be lucky to reach Earth (or Vulcan)-controlled space in seven months with their current speed … and he intended to minimize as much of that time as possible. If Mrs. Morales could get her damned sister in line and Ms. Mazaheri was at least a vaguely competent engineer, they could probably reduce that to five months. Four if they were very, very lucky … but he already knew that wouldn't happen, not with how the universe loved toying with them. T'Pol must have caught at least the thrust of his emotions as she lifted one eyebrow. "Meditation tonight?" Trip asked abruptly, which threw her slightly. She frowned slightly, studying him in an attempt to determine if he was teasing and then relaxing when she observed that he was not. Almost regally, T'Pol inclined her head slightly in a very tiny nod.

And then, very discreetly, they touched fingers in the ozh'esta. Trip could feel how wound up she was, could almost taste her suppressed fear that he would lose interest in her now that an attractive (and willing) human woman was present, and he gave her an incredulous look. T'Pol shrugged – it was only a slight shift of one shoulder and he doubted she was even aware that she'd done it – and glanced down, embarrassment coloring her cheeks and neck slightly. Ah. Vulcan emotions running amok again. She couldn't help the patently illogical direction that her thoughts ran, even though she knew perfectly well that he had less than zero interest in an immature girl who thought she could hide her crippling self-loathing and doubt by sleeping with as many men as possible.

"How does one hour from now sound?" Trip asked. T'Pol nodded.

They parted, each to their duties, but the warm bundle of emotions in the back of his brain reminded Trip that they weren't parted. He smiled ever so slightly and went back to work.
Jon: Temporal Paradox

Chapter Notes

367 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's May, 2153. Again. Stupid time travel.

His body still ached, but considering the alternative, Jon was happy to deal with it.

For the last two or three hours, he hadn't moved from where he reclined on the hard, uncomfortable bed of the dark cell, but that was at least partially because he'd finally found a perfect balance between the dull pain in his chest and something reasonably close to relaxation. In fact, he was drifting dangerously close to actually dozing off, even though the painkillers the Starfleet physicians gave him earlier this morning were finally beginning to wear off. He wasn't cold, though, not with Porthos nestled at his side, snoring softly in that hilarious way of his. All things considered, this hadn't been a completely terrible day, even if the Admiralty and the United Earth government didn't agree.

Jon exhaled slowly, letting his mind wrap around the sheer oddness of his life at the moment. Today was the second of May, 2153, exactly one week after he and the crew of Enterprise had stolen the NX-01, even though his brain and biological clock told him it was the day after Valentine's Day, 2154. He shook his head in mild disgust – Daniels had to have known this would happen. In retrospect, as he reviewed his conversations with that damned time traveler, Jon realized that the man had never really admitted they could actually prevent the Xindi attack on Earth. He'd simply let Archer believe it was possible when, in fact, Jon's future self had already been on Earth with Malcolm, Hawkins and Woods, keeping themselves out of sight until after history played itself out as it had to. In the chaos following the attack, as humanity panicked or prepared itself for war, staying out of sight had actually been rather easy. Reed had even snuck into Starfleet Command the day before Enterprise roared out of Stardock and then conducted some elaborate rope-a-dope with his younger self, Erika, and Crewman Baird to ensure that everything played out exactly like they remembered it.

God, he hated time travel.

Exactly three hours after the NX-01 departed Earth, Jon had marched to the main gate of Starfleet Command, flanked by the three other men, and let the security patrol swarm over them. Almost at once, they'd been split up, and Jon was hustled off to a cell – he didn't think this was the same one he'd originally been incarcerated in – where he was searched, scanned, searched again, scanned again, and then dragged into an interrogation room where fierce-looking officers and investigators demanded to know what the hell was going on.

So he told them.

This led to another round of scans, though they were medical this time, and whatever the physicians found clearly gave them pause because Jon was forced to undergo another battery of unbelievably uncomfortable (and frankly, embarrassing) round of tests before he found himself in another room. The interrogators were friendlier this time and more polite, but were even more skilled. They went over his story again and again, asking him about things he'd mentioned and then backtracking to
cover a point he'd mentioned in passing. They'd reunited him with Porthos on day two – evidently, the beagle had been found in a maintenance closet an hour or two after Enterprise vanished – and Jon was embarrassed to admit that he'd actually teared up when his beagle barked loudly and jumped up into his lap.

In the week of his … debriefing, he'd yet to see anyone above the rank of commander, though he didn't delude himself in thinking that the Admiralty wasn't watching. He also hadn't seen Malcolm or the two MACOs; from the line of questioning he received, however, and the subtle changes in the inquiries, Jon guessed they were getting the same treatment. At least the food wasn't terrible. He'd forgotten how much he loved coffee since they'd run out on Enterprise three or four months ago. Or rather, they would run out.

God, he really hated time travel.

He'd just started to drift off to sleep when the hiss of the door and the sudden illumination of the cell lights caused him to snap awake. Porthos jumped at the distraction as well, but upon seeing that it was just Max, the beagle lowered his head back to the bed. Jon, however, forced himself to his feet.

"Admiral," he began, but Forrest waved it off and took a seat on the tiny metal stool. The door slid shut behind him.

"As you were," he said. It didn't really mean that, so Jon made sure to just sit down, keeping his back as straight as he could manage. A seated position of attention, as it were. "You never do things halfway, do you?" Forrest asked with a tight smile. "I've got half of Command demanding that I bust you down to able crewman and throw you in the darkest hole I can find and the other half insisting you should be immediately bumped to commodore."

"Sir?" Jon blinked in vague surprise. What was this?

"Medical has been going over your tests and everything they find seems to confirm this story of yours." He held up one hand to forestall Jon's next question. "I don't begin to understand the science behind it, but I think I got the gist of it: you and the rest of your team are … well, you're out of sync or something with the now." Jon's lack of comprehension must have shown on his face because Forrest chuckled. "That's how I reacted too," he said.

"Out of sync?" Archer looked down at his hands. As far as he could tell, they looked normal to him. "What does that mean?"

"I have no idea." Forrest offered a wry smile. "More importantly," he said, "that armoury officer of yours was carrying his duty log on a PADD." Max shook his head. "Our computer techs have confirmed that, if his year of entries was faked, then it's the best damned forgery they've ever seen."

"Damn," Jon muttered. "I wish I'd thought of doing that."

"Commander Reed has also admitted to some other actions during your mission that are … troubling," Abruptly, Max frowned. "Which leaves us in something of a quandary. How do we punish someone for something he hasn't done yet?" Jon gave him another look – what was he talking about? – but Max shook his head and kept talking. "I've been in contact with Geneva," he said, "and the president has decided to punt." His good humor fell away, revealing the man of steel and iron that Jon knew all too well. "So, Captain," the admiral said in a low, hard voice, "explain to me why I shouldn't find that deep, dark hole and throw you into it."
"Because I don't know if we accomplished our mission, sir," Jon said softly. "Erika – Commander Hernandez – was taking Enterprise and attacking the central sphere." He grimaced. "If our scans were right," he added, "the Delphic Expanse was … is getting bigger." Jon shook his head. "If those clouds reached Earth," he began before shaking his head again. "We need to be ready if she … if they don't succeed, sir."

"And you think you're the man for the job?" Forrest gave no sign of what he was thinking. "Gardner is already foaming at the mouth because I haven't lined up a firing squad for you yet."

"With all due respect, sir, Admiral Gardner hasn't seen the Expanse like I have." Jon bit back his instinctive anger when it came to that … martinet? Yes. That was the perfect word for a clown like Gardner. The man hadn't been out of the solar system in twenty-five years. Hell, Jon had logged more time in deep space by the time he hit lieutenant commander than Gardner had in his entire career! "Bust me down to able crewman if you must, sir," Jon continued, "but at least let me advise! Earth has to be prepared for the worst!"

He saw it then. Forrest's mask cracked ever so slightly, revealing a hint of subtle approval and relief. Anger flashed through Jon the moment he realized that this had been a test. He scowled.

"Don't give me that look," Max ordered as he stood. Automatically, Jon rose with him.

"You've already made your decision, haven't you?"

"You and your officers are confined to Starfleet Command until otherwise noted," Forrest said. "As soon as Medical gives you the all-clear, I want you at Jupiter Station. You'll be overseeing construction of Challenger and Discovery." Jon blinked – that sounded an awful lot like a promotion to a desk which wasn't something he really wanted. "I'm going to have Reed assigned to you as chief of security. Those two MACOs also."


"Yes, them." He paused. "While you're on Jupiter Station," he continued, "the four of you are to maintain as low a profile as humanly possible. All of you are going to be on duty twenty-four seven, without leave or two day passes. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want those ships operational yesterday." The admiral paused in front of the door. "I'm going to be riding your ass like never before, Jon," he said. "If Enterprise does make it home," he added grimly, "how her crew is treated by Command rests entirely upon your shoulders."

"I understand, sir." Jon exhaled. "Are there any plans to send reinforcements?"

"What reinforcements?" This time, it was Forrest who scowled. "We lost sixty percent of our fleet when those goddamned Xindi attacked and most of the rest are damaged or obsolete. There aren't any ships to send!" Again, he paused in front of the door. "These … Spherebuilders. Reed said they were behind the Xindi. Any idea why?"

"No, sir," Jon lied. "Most of the Xindi were bullied into this, sir. By the Reptilians and the Insectoids."

"I don't know whether I should be relieved or horribly depressed to learn that these aliens are just as
screwed up as the rest of us," Max said darkly. He banged his hand upon the door and it slid open. "Get some sleep, Captain," he ordered. "Tomorrow is a big day."

Jon waited until Forrest was gone and the door was shut before exhaling deeply. He retook his seat on the bed, scratching Porthos' ears when the beagle thrust his head closer. His thoughts were racing at warp speed – until he found a way to communicate with Malcolm discreetly, he wasn't going to even whisper the word Romulan, not until he'd found some way to confirm some of the terrible theories he and Reed had bandied about quietly in the month plus that they'd spent staying out of sight. Careful examination of Vulcan history hadn't turned up much, but there were a handful of references in some of the really old texts to extremists exiled from their homeworld in the age of Surak. Could these Romulans be those extremists, now returned? He vaguely remembered a book about them that he'd seen, when Daniels pulled him into the future during that Paraagan mess …

And what the hell had Malcolm done that was worthy of punishment? Jon frowned. From the expression that had been on Max's face, it was bad. He shook his head – there would be time to interrogate Reed later, once they were on Jupiter Station. Jon leaned back, already making plans. Trip wasn't here to pull out some engineering miracle, but dammit, Archer intended to see those ships launched before Enterprise hit Sphere 41. Maybe, just maybe, he could see to it that Erika and his crew had some help. God, he hoped she was safe.

He was still thinking about her when sleep crept up on him.
Amanda: Hunting Party

Chapter Notes

665 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's February, 2154.

She was a ghost.

Wearing only the bare essentials for an op like this – battle fatigues, a head-mounted display that mostly covered one eye, and of course, the touchpad strapped to her primary shooting arm – Amanda crept forward, her muscles tensed as she slowly advanced upon the port water processing tank and waste extraction turbine. Corporal Richards was a few steps behind her, moving just as quietly as she was, though he was certainly no Woods who could give ninjas and ghosts tips on staying silent. The plan was a good one: engineering had remotely (and discreetly) sealed off all but two of the access hatches or ladders, and Chang would lead his team through the one she wasn't watching, making as much noise as they could in the process. It was no different than flushing a rabbit or deer out of hiding. Admittedly, rabbits and deer didn't shoot back so that was an imperfect analogy.

There wasn't much room to maneuver in this cramped alcove, especially with the access ladder behind them that led down to D Deck, but Amanda was accustomed to cramped quarters and carefully found a good, solid supported firing position. From here, she would have a clear line of sight on the unsealed access hatch. Richards slid silently to another position, though from what Amanda could see, his location was even more difficult to maneuver in. She double-checked the loadout on her rifle – triple-checked, really, as she'd verified it was all good long before setting out from the armoury – and then reached for the touchpad on her left arm. At no time did she look away from her target or relax her hold on the rifle; she'd used this pad so many times in the past that typing on it was second nature.

cole rdy, she typed. The words appeared in head-mounted display, seeming to float there in her field of vision. Seconds later, a reply materialized.

chang rdy. Amanda drew in a slow, steadying breath, waiting. Her fingers moved slowly across the touchpad once more and her question appeared in her HMD as she typed.

hoshi status. Lieutenant Sato's reply was fast.

No change, it read. Five humans detected in target radius. All personnel accounted for. CDR Hernandez gives green-light.

Again, Amanda inhaled slowly, carefully. For the last ten days, immediately after they'd destroyed that Sphere, her team had been aboard Enterprise hunting down Silik. Even before then, they'd been doing so when they could spare the time and personnel, but in between tangles with the Xindi, there simply had not been the time to devote for a dedicated hunt. If the reports were correct, though, Money had winged the sneaky bastard when he popped up the last time during that battle at Azati Prime, and he'd stayed off the radar as much as possible since then. Now, with Enterprise limping home alongside the Minnow (which none of the other Xindi had contested their ownership of, strangely enough) and the Kumari (with an unbelievably exuberant Andorian crew, aggressively
flushed over the still recent battle), Amanda had focused the efforts of the entire MACO unit toward this particular end. They had scoured the Starfleet vessel from bow to stern, deck by deck, room by room, pressing closer to their target with each moment. And now, they had the sonuvabitch.

execute, she typed before quickly returning her right hand to the rifle and rotating the selector switch off of Safe. At any minute, she'd hear ... there! Sergeant Chang's rather loud orders and the stomping of many boots could be heard even despite this distance and bulkheads between them, but then, the acoustics of this ship were still utterly bizarre to her. If they were right, then ...

The hatch she was monitoring slid open and an Enterprise crewman darted out, panic on his face. Amanda took an extra second to confirm her sight picture and then fired. With a surprised squawk, the crewman went down.

So she shot him again. And again. And again. Just to be safe.

Unconscious, Silik's disguise melted away, revealing the Suliban in all his feral glory. His clothes were ragged, torn and burned. He was cadaverously thin, to the point of almost looking skeletal. One of his hands – the left one – was misshapen, like it had been broken at some point or smashed but had not been properly attended to. None of that really mattered to her, though, not as she held her steady aim at his unmoving body. If he so much as twitched, she intended on pumping another handful of shots into him. She was pleased to note that Richards hadn't budged – he was just there as backup really, since she was such a much better shot.

Chang appeared a moment later at the hatch, along with Kelly and Parsons. Without a word, Kelly knelt before the Suliban and quickly secured the alien with a pair of zip-ties. They were only intended as a stop-gap measure, until they could get Silik somewhere more secure, but from the utter lack of resistance offered, the Suliban was either more unconscious than expected or had just given up. Amanda suspected it was the former – she'd seen it before, during training, when a trooper pushed themselves so hard that they were operating on willpower alone; once stunned, the body's need for rest took over and refused to let them wake. Kelly looked up and nodded, which allowed Amanda to relax. She slid her communicator out of a shoulder pocket and flipped it open.

"This is Hammer-Six," she announced across the comm-line, trying hard not to grimace at her legitimate use of the late major's call-sign. "Target is secured."

The rest of the day flew by and, for a change, she was too damned busy to think. First, they had to transport Silik to sickbay so Phlox could check on him – and, exactly as she suspected, the Suliban was borderline malnourished, suffering from a dozen untreated injuries, not to mention desperately needing a shower, preferably in decon – but to her surprise, the doctor was surprisingly curt in his examination. Later, she would learn from Hoshi that the Denobulans considered sabotage a crime right up there with child molestation and talking in the theater, but at the time, it was just one more unexpected thing to deal with. After that, they had to secure their prisoner in the brig after ensuring that it was escape proof … which was categorically impossible since no jail cell was wholly escape proof. And then, there were more of the endless, inane briefings with Commander Hernandez and the rest of the command staff of Enterprise. Lieutenant Mayweather wasn't physically present, of course, but he at least had a virtual presence from the command deck of the Minnow and Amanda tried very, very hard not to look at the white-eyed man who looked so damned much like Malcolm standing just behind Mayweather.

It had been yet another surprise to discover that her two … kinsmen had survived the destruction of the second Enterprise, though neither of them seemed especially pleased by this fact, not after revealing that their captain, the young Soval, had nerve pinched them both and intimidated junior
members of his command staff into carrying them to escape pods right before he conducted his suicide run. It had been Commander Hernandez's idea to reassign Galahad Reed – ugh. What had her children been thinking? And how bizarre was it, knowing that these two were her *grandchildren*? – to *Minnow* to assist Mayweather on tactical matters while Amanda conducted her Suliban hunt.

To her astonishment, Amanda also realized that she was disappointed she would not be returning to *Minnow*. For all of their conflict early in this mission, she and Lieutenant Mayweather had turned into a finely oiled machine. He was sharp, decisive, with a natural sense of command and absolutely none of the irritating 'knowitallitis' that most Starfleet officers seemed to naturally possess. When he didn't know something, he didn't put on airs or try to hide the fact, and instead turned to the person who did have a clue in that area and asked them. During combat, he told tactical what he wanted done and then let them figure out how to do it rather than trying to micromanage every damned thing. In fact, he was the kind of officer she'd gladly follow to the gates of hell … and that, more than anything else that had happened, surprised the crap out of her.

She retreated to Malcolm's cabin the moment she was able and burned through her entire day's allotment of hot water for the shower. Officially, these were now her quarters – Commander Hernandez had pulled her aside and discreetly informed her of this fact, with the clear implication that the entire command staff including the captain had known of her arrangement with Malcolm which was only slightly humiliating – and she was damned lucky she didn't have a roommate, what with all of the rescued crew from the second *Enterprise* now aboard. Tears once again threatened, but she pushed them back and let her anger cool her grief. What the hell had Reed been thinking, going off on a stupid mission like this without even letting her know? She hadn't learned about the captain's desperate pursuit of the Xindi weapon until several hours after Sphere 41 was scattered debris…

The door chimed and Amanda grimaced. It would be Hoshi, here to check up on her, to ensure she hadn't gone over the edge or done something equally stupid. A tiny part of her wanted to rage at Sato, to scream at her to go away and leave her to her pain, but Amanda ignored it, instead, focusing on the much larger slice of her conscious mind that was so grateful at having a friend who could understand what she was going through. Killing the stream of water, she grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her torso, then reached for another to dry her hair. It was getting too long again – she needed to get it chopped off to something more manageable.

"Yeah?" she demanded through the annunciator.

"It's me," Hoshi said. Amanda smirked as she released the door lock. "Oh," Sato said as she took in Amanda's state of undress. "Did I come at a bad time?"

"Water was turning cold anyway," Amanda replied. She walked to the wall locker and opened it, aware of how Hoshi stepped into the cabin and allowed the door to hiss shut. "What's the good word?" Amanda asked as she first tossed her hair towel aside before pulling the other one free. "Any news?"

"Do you *have* to do that?" Hoshi demanded. Amanda glanced her way, then fought back the smile at how intently Sato was avoiding her.

"Right." Amanda stopped fighting the urge to grin. "You're not comfortable with naked people."

"I'm not comfortable with exhibitionists," came the sharp reply. Amanda chuckled.

"I keep forgetting you're a prude," she said before reaching into the locker and extracting a pair of
"I am not a prude!"

"Liar." She pulled on the sweats and then donned one of Malcolm's shirts (principally because all of hers were dirty, not because she was still moping.) "You don't need to check in on me, Hoshi," she said calmly. "I'm fine." The disbelieving look that remark received actually stung. "I am," Amanda insisted.

"We don't know they're dead," Hoshi started, sounding so much like Phlox that it was almost irritating. Amanda tuned it out – she'd heard the Xindi-Primate tell Commander Hernandez how the Weapon just vanished shortly after the captain and Malcolm led their team aboard, which could only mean one of two things: it hit some stupid Expanse anomaly and was destroyed or, more likely, it successfully made the jump back one year where it was destroyed over Earth. So many of the crew seemed to forget the second option, that their entire objective here had been to prevent the superweapon from being deployed in the first place, but Amanda hadn't. In either case, Malcolm was probably dead. Hiding from the truth accomplished nothing. And since they were still technically on a combat footing, getting so drunk she couldn't remember her name was right out too.

"So Phlox had a couple of kids in sickbay with him today," Amanda said, interrupting Hoshi's train of thought. She almost smiled at how quickly Sato blanched – knowing that her alternate and Phlox had become romantically attached in the past was one thing, but seeing firsthand knowledge? Hoshi was still freaking out over that, especially since she'd once admitted that she didn't find Phlox even slightly attractive. For her part, Amanda suspected it had been a matter of circumstance – according to the logs, the other Hoshi had taken Lieutenant Mayweather's death very hard and Phlox had been responsible for helping her through her grief. That hinted at much deeper feelings toward the Minnow's acting commander, but Sato had laughed off any intimations she might see Travis as more than a friend. Amanda let her … for now.

"Nice change of subject," Hoshi muttered. She scowled briefly, then brightened. "Speaking of unexpected offspring," she said, "did you hear that Commander Hernandez is talking to Madeline about a field commission?" Amanda grimaced and looked away. She'd have to introduce these Reeds to her mother, dammit. Mom wouldn't forgive her if she didn't. If she was lucky, it might even buy her a couple of years freedom from the usual 'when are you going to settle down and give me grandkids?' Technically, she'd given Ima grandchildren and great-grandchildren so that had to count, right?

"I'd heard something along those lines." Her stomach growled. "I need food," she said quickly, which was both true and a way to get out of this uncomfortable conversation. "I need food and I have bridge duty in a few hours."

"Chef's in a weird mood," Hoshi warned as Amanda pulled on some shoes.

"We're all in weird moods," Amanda retorted. She just wanted to find someplace quiet, where she didn't have to think, where she could forget if only for a few minutes that Malcolm was gone.

Naturally, Madeline Reed was on the mess deck and, naturally, Hoshi wanted to sit with her. There were times when she wanted to strangle Lieutenant Sato. Today was most certainly one of those times.
T'Pol was irritated.

It was difficult for her to admit that she was experiencing this emotion, even to herself, but the sensation was undeniable. She was irritated, at herself, at the three other humans aboard, at the uncomfortable circumstances she was in and yes, with Trip. Perhaps especially with him. Logically, she knew that he was innocent of any offense – in fact, he'd been nothing but calm and understanding as she struggled with their sudden loss of privacy – and, in her more rational moments, she would acknowledge that his refusal to provide her with a target for her ire was the principal reason she was irritated at him. Why couldn't he snap at her when she was being difficult so she could retort and they could argue? And why were her thoughts going into such an illogical direction?

She sighed and made a conscious effort to suppress the emotions once more.

As had become her habit, she was still on the command deck. Barring brief trips to the toilet facilities, she had remained here for the duration of their time at warp, ever since they had departed the deuterium colony twenty-three days earlier. Here, she had slept, meditated, eaten, and even engaged in sexual activity with Trip. After ensuring the deck was sealed off, of course. At the moment, she was seated on the mat relocated from the gym, legs underneath her as she tried to reach the proper mindset to achieve an effective meditative state. It was proving … difficult.

Their situation had improved substantially – with additional personnel monitoring the warp core, they were now able to maintain a relatively steady warp factor three point eight at all times; they were still incapable of accelerating to warp four for longer than an hour and as that led to taking the injectors offline for a minimum of fourteen hours, she had decided that the wasted time simply was not worth the trouble at the moment. Later, as their supplies dwindled or should they encounter another catastrophic failure, this decision might be reconsidered, but at the moment, T'Pol was satisfied that it was the logical one.

Her board chirped softly and she opened her eyes long enough to confirm that it was simply Trip making a system update. Tonight was his engineering shift and T'Pol could sense his distraction. In addition to monitoring the temperamental warp core, he was also working on at least three other tasks of varying levels of importance. With their absolute failure to merge the Klingon weapon system to the T'Muna-Doth – Trip was convinced it was still feasible, but not with the supplies they had on-hand or upon a vessel already plagued with as many issues as this one – he had begun researching methods to increase the hull integrity. In T'Pol's opinion, this should have been priority one, but to him, it was three, with a modification of the protein resequencer being first (he did not like the taste of the foodstuffs generated) and some sort of enhancement of the internal lighting system following that.
Automatically, her eyes flickered to an integrated clock on the wall display. Trip was only on duty for another fifteen minutes, at which time Mister Morales would relieve him. If the past was any indication, the two men would interact for another five minutes before Trip would visit the toilet facilities, shower, and then join her here. Her lips tightened fractionally. With her hearing, it had not escaped her notice how uncomfortable her mate made the other humans. Even Miss Mazaheri had expressed discomfort to her sister regarding Trip's extraordinary reserve and almost Vulcan-like dispassion.

"That bitch has turned him into a robot," Miss Mazaheri had exclaimed once. It was not true – Trip's emotions still flared as brightly as ever, but T'Pol was forced to admit that his time around her had changed him rather significantly. He did not smile as often as he once had, nor did he laugh or vocally express himself in the manner she'd first experienced. Now, he would wait until they were alone and inform her calmly what he thought. Sometimes, they would disagree – quite often, actually – but when that happened, they discussed the nature of their disagreement in calm, rational tones. One of them would convince the other or they would reach some sort of middle ground, but T'Pol could not recall the last time they had a dispute that lasted longer than an hour. It was strangely … boring.

She frowned once more. What was wrong with her? Mated pairs were not supposed to seek disagreements! And Vulcan women certainly were not intended to experience dismay that their mates did not smile. Anger warred with frustration and despair, and she suppressed them all.

T'Pol had just managed to reach her whitespace when she heard Trip enter the command deck. He sealed the hatch behind him and joined her on her meditation pad without a word. To her silent disgust, she felt her jumbled thoughts and emotions almost instantly begin calming as she breathed in Trip's familiar scent. Muscles tight with stress and frustration relaxed. She slid toward serenity, well aware of the masculine presence accompanying her.

"Care to tell me what's been bothering you all day?" Trip asked later, once she'd completed her meditation. They were still on the pad, though, and his deft fingers were working their way along the nodes upon her back. It required more effort than it should have to keep from moaning in pleasure and she was not entirely sure why she suppressed the urge. Rather than reply, she simply glanced at him and raised an eyebrow. "It isn't Miss Mazaheri again, is it?" T'Pol's lips tightened once more.

"No," she said flatly, honestly. She and Miss Mazaheri had little interaction, despite the limited space aboard the T'Muna-Doth, and that was entirely intentional on both of their parts. Three days from the deuterium colony, they had reached an understanding: Mazaheri would desist in her attempts to seduce Trip and T'Pol would cease using the T'Muna-Doth's systems to make the young woman's life extraordinarily difficult. Manipulation of shipboard controls to ensure that the food delivered to Miss Mazaheri was notably unappetizing was easy enough, but seeing to it that the temperature in engineering was appropriate for an Andorian while the young woman was alone without leaving a way for her to reverse it? Or arranging for the waste reclamation system to always require maintenance during Mazaheri's shift? Those were inspired options and T'Pol's lips curved very slightly at the guilty pleasure she associated with those successes.

"Tilt your head to the left," Trip instructed. She obeyed, inhaling slowly and steadily as he applied pressure to that node. "I've been working on a way we might be able to boost our speed for longer periods of time." T'Pol looked at him. "If we compress the antimatter stream," he continued, "the entire drive core should operate more efficiently." His expression soured slightly – no, that was not correct. She tasted the feel of his emotions, but his expression actually changed only slightly. Why had she not noticed that before? No wonder the humans were uncomfortable around him. "The big
question is whether the injectors can handle the strain."

"I would like to review your calculations," T'Pol said. He nodded.

"There's no way I'm going to even consider trying this unless you sign off on it," he said. "The last thing we need is to blow an injector out here."

"Agreed." They continued the application of neuropressure in silence for several long minutes. T'Pol could almost sense his distraction – he was thinking about this engine test of his – and her irritation suddenly flared brilliantly once more, though this close to her mate, she realized that it was frustration she was experiencing, not irritation. Trip recoiled at the intensity of the unexpected emotional surge, but T'Pol twisted toward him before he could react. With one hand, she pushed him down to the mat, pulling at his clothes with the other.

"The things you do to me," Trip murmured later, as they were sprawled out together atop her meditation mat, their skin still glistening from the exertions from only moments earlier. T'Pol's lips twitched at the humor she felt in his mind – by his estimation, they had engaged in sexual relations in every room aboard this ship.

"As I recall," she replied, only aware of how husky her voice was at the moment because of their strange cerebral linkage, "you were the one doing things this time."

"True." Trip hugged her tight and T'Pol hated herself a little bit for the frisson of enjoyment she experienced from this very human gesture. "But you started it."

"I did." T'Pol considered moving – they were still unclothed, after all, and she still found the temperature was less than optimal – but discarded the thought almost in the same instant that Trip reached up to the nearby control console. He tapped in a rapid command and instantly, a rush of pleasant heat coursed through the air. At her glance, he offered another of his not-quite smiles.

"This is actually good for the ship," he said. "I need to vent some of the excess waste heat and you don't like the cold." He paused. "Do you approve?"

"It is … agreeable."

"Morales to bridge." Mister Morales' voice was loud in the confined space and T'Pol nearly winced. "I'm seeing some strange fluctuations here." Trip's hand was still on the control console and he shifted to another button.

"This is Tucker. I'm venting some waste heat."

"Oh." Morales paused. "That explains these readings."

"Keep an eye on injector three," Trip continued in the tone of someone who had repeated himself a dozen times. It was to be expected – Mister Morales was an accountant and negotiator by trade, not an engineer, and had a terrible tendency to forget important mechanical issues; according to his wife, he'd been the captain of their ship because he always got them good deals, not because he had any significant skill as a spacer. "If it hits green anywhere, alert me immediately."

"Gotcha."

"Tucker out." He tapped the button again and the 'connection closed' chime sounded. "So, have you
worked out whatever was bugging you?” he asked wryly. T'Pol felt her face warm at his knowing tone.

"Presumably," she replied. Without warning, Trip began working his lips up the side of her throat as his free hand began stroking her left ear.

"Let's make sure," he murmured before doing something utterly marvelous with his other hand.

And just like that, T'Pol was no longer irritated.
Hoshi: Slow Recovery

Chapter Notes

679 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's March, 2154. This chapter occurs concurrently with the previous one.

As we get closer to the return of TnT to 'civilized' space, expect some fast-forwarding through some of the season 4 events on the Enterprise side. So pay attention to the timeline.

She hated serving as the officer of the watch.

For the tenth time in the last hour, Hoshi shifted in the captain's chair, hoping to find a more comfortable position even though she knew that wasn't likely. Logically, she knew her discomfort was almost entirely in her head, but that didn't stop her from at least making the attempt. Perhaps one day she'd find a perfect equilibrium or, failing that, she'd learn a much better way to hide how badly she hated being the person in charge. Unlike Travis, she'd never had any desire to command.

Almost instantly, her expression soured slightly at thoughts of Lieutenant Mayweather – how long had it been since she interacted with him in person or even in a non-work related manner? The instant Commander Hernandez appointed him as acting-commander of the Minnow, he'd turned into a stranger. His every communication (which she, as Enterprise's chief comm officer, had access to) was stiffly professional, reminding her how any junior officer acted when an admiral was nearby. Even during Commander Hernandez's daily officer briefings which he'd attended from the bridge of the Minnow, Travis had stood ramrod straight, both hands clasped together at the small of his back. Everyone had been addressed by their rank, even her! She was certain something was going on with him, even if Amanda still thought she was crazy. But then, the MACOs had nothing but good things to say about Travis' leadership style these days which was frankly kind of weird given how indifferent (or openly irritated at) Cole had been with how either Captain Archer or Commander Hernandez commanded. Hoshi frowned. Apart from Travis, Weapons Officer Galahad Reed, and Lieutenant Taylor, the crew of the Minnow was almost entirely MACO. Had Mayweather gone native with the military types? That might explain why Amanda and the rest of her team were so enthusiastic about him.

The science board pinged softly, drawing all eyes. As this was the middle watch, none of the personnel on duty were officers and Petty Officer Alumbaugh took several long moments to identify the reason for the chime. Hoshi glanced away, both to hide her slightly amused smile and to give the science specialist time to work without the senior officer looking over his shoulder. Nothing irritated her more than when the captain … when Captain Archer had done that, back when he was still alive so very long ago, even though she knew he had not been trying to catch her in a mistake but had simply been curious as to her process.

"Unknown sensor contacts at extreme sensor range, ma'am," Alumbaugh announced. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught his grimace. "I'm having trouble getting a solid lock on them." Hoshi pursed her lips. They were very near the edge of what had been the Delphic Expanse and, thus far, had not encountered any hostiles in the three week transit from the remains of Sphere-41. Still …
"Why is that?" she asked calmly, taking great effort to ensure her words did not sound accusing.

"I don't know, ma'am," the science specialist replied hesitantly. "The thermobaric clouds have mostly vanished, but there's still a lot of interference making it hard to get an ID."

"Pass that on to Minnow and Kumari," she instructed. For a moment, she considered raising the alert status of Enterprise but just as quickly discarded the thought. Extreme range, even at this steady warp factor four would take a while to reach. "Keep working on it," she added, "and let me know the instant we have a positive ID." That sounded sufficiently competent so she went back to the PADD in her hand, well aware that the enlisted personnel manning the duty stations were watching quietly.

It was strange, reading the words of her alternate self and seeing a life she had not actually lived unfold before her very eyes. Hoshi was still a little creeped out over the very notion of being involved with Phlox – she liked the doctor well enough, but not like that! – and had turned to these personal journals in an attempt to figure out what could lead her to him. To her mild surprise, the answer had been staring her in the face the entire time and made her squirm with even more discomfort.

Travis.

Based on what she had read thus far, when her closest friend aboard Enterprise died in that alternate timeline, it had hit her hard and her personal journal, a habit she'd carried over from childhood, reflected that unexpected trauma. Phlox had helped her recover and they'd been content. Nothing in the journal reflected any sort of passionate love for the doctor, which clearly bothered the alternate Hoshi quite a bit. She spent a great deal of time beating herself up for this even though she insisted that her Phlox seemed quite satisfied with their relationship. And when she passed away from old age, her Denobulan husband had made several final entries to her journal that revealed he'd been completely forthright in what he told his wife. The marriage customs of his species did not call for the kind of romantic, storybook love that she'd struggled over not possessing. But it was one particular paragraph that Hoshi kept re-reading.

*My greatest regret,* Phlox wrote, *is that I was never able to help Hoshi fully recover from Lieutenant Mayweather's death. She cared a great deal for me for which I am grateful but Travis was her one great love and neither of them had the opportunity to realize it. Even in her last hours, it was not her husband of thirty years she called for, but rather the young man who died fifty years ago. While I cherished my time with her, I can only hope that she is finally at peace with the one her inner spirit longed for even if she herself was blind to that fact.*

Hoshi leaned back in the captain's chair and tried very hard not to reveal how twisted her emotions were at the moment. Was it really that simple? Yes, she'd nearly thrown a fit when Amanda repeated some of the rumors about Travis' behavior over on the Minnow with one of the female MACOs – when her brain kicked back in, she'd recalled that there weren't any MACO females over on that little boat, which made Cole's intent suspect in the first place – and yes, she really missed just talking to or joking with him, but … but …

"Bakayarō," she muttered under her breath. How the hell did this sneak up on her like this? She was a smart woman who was an expert in body language. How could she have possibly missed this? Her eyes darted to the communications station as the idle thought about hailing Minnow and chewing Travis out for doing this to her came to mind, but Crewman Kamnitzer automatically tensed under her gaze. Hoshi glanced away.
"Contact!" Alumbaugh declared, his eyes wide. "Ma'am, they're pinging Starfleet!"

Hoshi fell back into the captain's chair, relief and giddy delight blasting through her so sharply and suddenly that she nearly giggled. That would not do, though, not for an officer, so she simply nodded and gave Kamnitzer a look.

"Hail them," she ordered. "Let's get confirmation before we wake Commander Hernandez up." Even as the crewman was turning to obey, Hoshi was continuing. "Alumbaugh, get an ID on them. Let's find out-

"We're being hailed," Kamnitzer said sharply. The crewman was grinning broadly as she stabbed a button. Instantly, the main viewscreen flickered and resolved into …

Captain Archer.

He was sitting on an almost identical bridge though this one was filled with a handful of strangers Hoshi did not recognize. The image froze and stuttered slightly – Hoshi did some quick mental calculations and deduced that there would probably be a nine or ten second delay due to distance and the still unrepaired damage to Enterprise's transmission array – which seemed to make the captain speak almost out of sync with his video capture, sort of like those really badly dubbed movies that Commander Tucker had loved so much.

"This is Captain Jonathan Archer of the United Earth Ship Challenger to Enterprise. Please respond."

"Challenger?" Alumbaugh repeated but Hoshi paid him little mind.

"This is Lieutenant Sato of Enterprise," she replied quickly. "It's good to see you again, Captain." On the screen, she saw Archer's delayed reaction. His face lit up with a broad smile.

"Hoshi! It's good to see you again!" Even on the stuttering image, she could make out the concern lurking in his eyes and knew what he didn't want to ask.

"I can have Commander Hernandez on the bridge in five minutes, sir," she said, trailing off when the comm board pinged and Kamnitzer split-screen the image. Travis was suddenly there, larger than life and beaming.

"Or better yet," he said quickly, "let's surprise her!" He had that devil-may-care glint in his eyes again and Hoshi could not help but to return his grin. A long moment passed before Captain Archer received both of their messages. The smile he gave them robbed him of at least a decade.

"Now that is a fantastic plan," he said. "But I expect that sort of thing from the two of you. Maintain your present course. We'll rendezvous with you in … six hours." His eyes danced. "See you soon, Lieutenant Sato, Captain Mayweather."

"You realize that the commander is going to murder you when we spring this on her," Travis said the moment Captain Archer's transmission ended. The bridge crew snickered at the remark and Hoshi chuckled herself.

"I'm going to tell her it was your idea," she retorted. "Any chance you can get us a revised flight plan to shave some time from the captain's estimate?"
"On it." Travis glanced away, frowning slightly. "You get to tell Shran though. Minnow out."

The rest of the duty shift flew by and Hoshi marveled at how the mood of the bridge crew had so completely transformed. No longer did they sit quietly at their stations and try to avoid being noticed; now, they laughed and joked and teased one another, sometimes even including her. When Madeline Reed – acting Lieutenant Commander Reed, Hoshi reminded herself – exited the turbolift at exactly zero five twenty to prepare for her rotation as morning watch officer, she visibly hesitated at the exuberance she saw, which caused Hoshi to laugh. The white-eyed woman nodded in approval once Hoshi filled her in.

"Commander Hernandez can certainly use the good news," she declared in a soft voice. "I have the bridge, Lieutenant."

"You have the bridge," Hoshi replied automatically. She flashed another grin. "I'll run cover for you," she added. "There are a couple of things I need to go over with the commander and they should take ..." Hoshi glanced at the time. "At least another hour and a half," she finished.

Keeping Hernandez distracted turned out to be a whole lot easier than Hoshi expected as the commander was knee deep in reports and her daily review of shipwide status. Rather than simply read the division updates from the ready room, Commander Hernandez tended to drop in personally where she would spend at least a couple of minutes chatting in with the officer-in-charge and any enlisted personnel on duty. Today, she was touring the Armoury and as Amanda had taken over Malcolm's job, Cole was there as well. Neither of them seemed to know quite what to think about Hoshi's presence, but they mostly let her tag along without questioning. Everyone knew that Hoshi was still recovering from what the Xindi did to her and, for the first time ever, she flagrantly abused that.

"We just dropped out of warp," the commander said with a frown when the ambient sounds of Enterprise changed. She had just started to turn toward the nearest wall panel when Madeline's voice echoed across the intraship.

"Commander Hernandez to port docking airlock." Automatically, the acting captain groaned. "If this is Shran being difficult again," she muttered, "I'm going to punch him in his smug, blue face." Hoshi snickered even as Amanda's fingers flashed in those MACO hand gestures. Sergeant Chang obeyed immediately, pulling one of the pulse rifles free from where it was secured in an armored locker and tossing it to her. Cole checked the weapon quickly, then fell into place behind Hernandez. Barely a step behind her, Chang followed suit.

The airlock was just beginning to cycle open when they reached it and Hoshi held her breath. With a soft hiss, the hatch slid away.

And Malcolm Reed returned to Enterprise.

Hoshi heard Amanda make a single, inarticulate sound that could have been delight or surprise, and then, the MACO shoved her rifle into Chang's hands without bothering to see if he actually held onto it. A moment later, Cole had closed upon Reed, her eyes wide and gleaming as she very nearly tackled him. He grunted and staggered back a step under the force of her fierce embrace, almost colliding with Captain Archer who nimbly stepped aside, his grin so broad it very nearly split his face. He winked once at Hoshi before turning to face Hernandez.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain?" he asked. A moment later, he too was being tightly hugged
and Hoshi watched with tears streaming down her face.

They were home.
689 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's March, 2154.

The four silver rectangles denoting her new rank of captain felt heavier than they should have and Erika found that she could not tear her eyes from them.

It was hard to believe that they had back on Earth for two full days already and her ears still rang from the sheer volume of the applause that had greeted them when they stepped back onto Spacedock. Seeing Admiral Forrest there, leading the cheers, had been a big enough shock but when President Gomez stepped forward to give a clearly prepared speech on the heroism and valor of Enterprise's crew in the wake of impossible odds, Erika's brain had stopped working. And from the stunned expressions on so many of her crew … of Enterprise's crew, she wasn't the only one struggling to comprehend that the Xindi conflict was officially over.

Her door annunciator chimed and, automatically, Erika straightened, giving her dress uniform another glance to ensure nothing was out of place. There were new medals there that had not been awarded in over a century and she swallowed the strange sense of displacement that threatened to overwhelm her. Why couldn't she relax? They were back home. The mission was over.

"Enter," she called out, turning to face the door. It slid open, revealing Jon who looked as sharp as ever in his dress uniform. Erika started to take a step toward him and then hesitated. He must have noticed from the way he smiled.

"Looking good, Captain," he said brightly. She flushed slightly then – damn him for being able to make her feel like a teenager again – before forcing herself to meet his eyes. Any retort she'd planned died on her lips the moment Admiral Forrest followed Jon in.

"As you were," the admiral said even before she managed to go to attention. He glanced around the cabin with a fond smile. "A bit larger than I expected them to be," he remarked calmly before chuckling. "I bet you could cram the entire command deck of the Saratoga in here."

"Not the entire deck," Jon replied wryly. The admiral shook his head before giving Erika an approving once-over.

"I wanted to personally give you your orders, Captain," Forrest said as he held out a PADD. "I know you've become attached to Enterprise but I'm afraid that if I gave her to you, Jon might shoot me." Erika stared at the words on the PADD without fully understanding what she was reading. She blinked.

"Challenger?" she said hesitantly. "You're giving me Challenger?"

"She's a good ship," Jon said with his broad smile.

"You'll need a solid command crew to fill her out," Forrest remarked, his words immediately causing
Jon's good cheer to falter slightly. "I know you don't want to lose any people, Jon, but we're going to have to pull some Enterprise crew and spread them around the fleet. Right now, they're the most experienced deep spacers we have."

"Yes, sir." Jon could not have sounded more unenthusiastic if he'd tried and the admiral smirked.

"I'll expect the two of you in my office by oh-nine hundred tomorrow so we can discuss some command transfers." He offered his hand to Erika. "Congratulations, Captain," he said again.

The moment Forrest exited her cabin, Erika collapsed onto her bunk, eyes still locked on the PADD. When she'd first been assigned to Enterprise, she'd known that she was being groomed for higher command but since then, she'd learned enough to know that she wasn't ready for this after all. Not by a long shot.

"Hey." Jon crouched before her, his expression concerned. "You okay?"

"Not really, no." She swallowed. "I'm not sure if I'm ready…"

"You are," he interrupted quickly before grimacing and taking a seat next to her. "Stupid knees," he muttered under his breath. "I wouldn't have recommended your promotion if I didn't think you were ready." Erika gave him a dark look. "Hey, Soval agreed with me. I was there when he told the Admiralty that not promoting you would be the 'height of illogical behavior.'" Jon's voice dropped an octave as he quoted the Vulcan but if he was trying to sound like Soval, he failed miserably.

"At the Sphere," Erika said a moment later, "I didn't know what to do." She shivered and then leaned into Jon when he draped an arm over her shoulders. "I just wanted to crawl into a hole and hide."

"But you didn't." Archer gave her a knowing look. "You held it together and brought Enterprise home." His eyes turned inward. "Hell," he added, "you did a better job than I did." She gave him a look but he refocused on her. "Just keep doing what you've been doing, Erika," he said.

They both became aware of how close they were to each other at the same time. Once, an eternity ago, one or both of them would have backed away, hid behind the convenient shield of duty, and the moment would have passed. This time, though, their eyes met and Erika saw nothing but longing and the same bone-deep loneliness that clung to her shoulders. Later, she would insist that she was the person who made the first move, but in truth, she had no idea which of them initiated their first real kiss in a decade. Hunger flared and then they forgot all of the reasons why this was a bad idea. And it was just as good as she recalled.

"I've missed that," Jon murmured much later. Her bed was really too narrow for the two of them, but Erika didn't mind that much as she luxuriated in the familiar feel of his skin against hers. She smiled.

"Seducing me isn't going to stop me from trying to steal some of your people," she replied through a slight yawn. He wouldn't fight her over Kelby, she suspected, even though he respected the engineer's talents but Travis? There was no way he would give up the newly promoted Lieutenant Commander Mayweather without a long, brutal fight. "You still haven't told me what happened to you." Jon sighed.

"A lot of it is still classified," he began, wincing when she elbowed him sharply. "We caught up to the weapon right before it passed through the anomaly that took it back in time." Erika's eyes
widened. "We didn't realize that until we were assaulting their central power core. So Woods took
down their shields and … and Columbia rammed the weapon." His voice caught, reminding her that
A.G. had been his good friend even if she'd never been able to stand Robinson for longer than a few
minutes. "Afterward, we got to an escape pod."

"So you were here the entire time." Jon nodded.

"We had casualties and injuries – Malcolm was pretty messed up – and it took a while for us to get
back to civilization." Jon frowned. "I made the call to stay out of sight until we … until our younger
selves made off with Enterprise." He made a face. "Hard to believe I'm using that in an actual
sentence. 'Our younger selves.' God."

"Daniels?" Erika asked.

"Haven't seen him," Jon replied instantly. From his expression and his body language, he was telling
the truth but was most definitely holding something back. Erika guessed that he'd seen something on
the weapon that he either wasn't cleared to tell her or hadn't told anyone. Whatever it was, he was
seriously spooked. In fact, Erika had never seen him like this before. Rather than push him on it, she
changed the subject. He would tell her when he could.

"So why aren't you a commodore?" she asked. It seemed a logical question. Everyone aboard
Enterprise had been hit with the promotion stick, some more intently than others. Rostov, for
example, had been given a battlefield commission at the rank of Lieutenant Junior-Grade, and
scuttlebutt was that Cole's promotion had been confirmed by General Casey himself. Like Travis,
both Hoshi and Taylor had been jumped to Lieutenant Commander. Even Kelby had his old rank
back, though Erika doubted he'd advance much beyond that for a while.

"Turned it down," Jon said. "I belong on Enterprise," he added before smirking. "Pretty sure Max
was relieved when I asked to stay a captain." Erika grinned.

"Good," she said. "Because if you had taken the promotion, it would have been against regs for us to
do this." She slid closer to him, lips finding his. For a time, the concerns and worries of her new rank
fell away.

It was good to be home.
His head ached.

His expression sour, Commander Malcolm Reed walked quietly through the corridors of Enterprise, wondering if he had been mad to accept the promotion to first officer in the wake of Captain Hernandez's departure. For the better part of two months, he'd struggled to balance the demands of his twin jobs. As Armoury Officer, he was responsible for shipboard security, but more and more, he'd pushed those duties off onto Amanda's MACOs in order to focus on the surprisingly demanding job of Captain Archer's XO. No matter how hard he worked, how many hours he spent with the endless routine paperwork that came across his metaphorical desk, he couldn't seem to actually make a dent in what was left to do. There were personnel jackets to update, medals and promotions and commendations to sign off on (or reject in rare cases), not to mention the oversight of personnel issues like the ongoing (and unstated) rivalry between Science and Engineering. And that didn't even take into account his regular watch duties or the captain's all too often 'make this happen, please' assignments that couldn't always be foisted off on junior officers.

Yes, he was quite convinced that taking this job had been a terrible, terrible mistake.

He caught sight of Hoshi – Lieutenant Commander Sato now – in the mess as he ducked in for his morning coffee, but did not even make eye contact, all the while trying to remember the last time they'd even served a bridge watch together. She was at least smiling and talking with several of her division, so that was a good sign. Ever since Enterprise had relaunched from Earth, Hoshi had seemed to be in a persistently bad mood. Amanda insisted that Sato was pining over Travis who was now on Challenger, doubling up as chief helmsman and first officer, but Malcolm still thought that was utter bollocks. Those two had been friends and that was it. Right? He frowned. What did he know? His friendship with Travis was still in shambles since it evidently required more than just one conversation to move past such difficult issues, and with the former Boomer on Challenger, it seemed unlikely that he would manage to ever fully mend those fences let alone figure out what had been going on between Hoshi and Travis.

Malcolm shook the thought away – it wasn't any of his bloody business – and glanced at his PADD. Why did he have an appointment with Phlox in five minutes? He sighed. Had the doctor really pulled an end around on him? He brought up the scheduled meeting and glanced briefly at the notes before groaning.

"Your annual physical is now nine days overdue, Commander," the doctor said when he stepped into Sickbay. "I am exercising my authority as chief medical officer to inform you that there will be no additional delays." He gestured toward a nearby biobed. "Please disrobe, Commander."

"I hate you right now," he grumbled as he moved to obey. He heard the doctor chuckle.
By the time Phlox was done, Malcolm was in an even fouler mood than normal, though that might have been due to just how embarrassingly in depth this particular exam went. The doctor laughed—maliciously, Reed thought—when this was brought up and stepped back.

"The next time," Phlox said as he smiled that insane smile of his, "you will know not to miss appointments with me."

"You look terrible," the captain said with a smirk when he joined Archer in the ready room long minutes later. "Phlox?"

"Phlox." Malcolm scowled slightly.

"The next time, don't miss your appointment with him." Archer shook his head. "When I served aboard the Saratoga, our chief medical officer was even worse. If you missed or tried to get out of a physical, she put a non-deployable tag on your record and wouldn't remove it until she'd finished the most invasive exam you can image." He shuddered. "I was late for my first physical because our captain was being … difficult and after that, I made a point of never ever being late for anything with that woman."

"I'll keep that in mind, sir." He took the seat in front of Archer and offered his PADD. "With your permission, Captain, I'd like to run an unscheduled drill this evening."

"Repel boarders and fire in engineering?" The captain glanced up from the data device. "At the same time?"

"Yes, sir." Malcolm made a face. "We've got too many new people aboard, sir, and even our veterans have gotten rather sloppy since the Expanse." He drummed his fingers on the armrest of his chair. "I would also like your permission to appoint Lieutenant Commander Sato to serve as morale officer." At that, Archer blinked. "The mood of the crew is … conflicted."

"Because we lost a lot of good people to Erika." The captain glanced away, his own expression irritated. "I can't blame her for that, not really, and different duty assignments is a way of life for those of us in Starfleet, but I can see how some might take it." He pursed his lips. "Why Hoshi?" he asked.

"She's more of a people person than I am," Malcolm replied wryly which caused the captain to chuckle. "Major Cole has informed me that Commander Sato has already been unofficially acting in this capacity so I thought we might simply make it official." At his use of Amanda's name, Archer's eyes narrowed, though thankfully, he made no other comment about her. Technically, she wasn't actually a major, but Starfleet, in all of their brilliance, had decided using her actual rank—captain, in MACO terms, which would be Lieutenant in the fleet—might be confusing so it was decided to call her by a higher rank. There were centuries of precedence of this—in the ages of wet navies, an Army or Marine captain was addressed as Major while aboard a ship to avoid confusion with The Captain—but still, Malcolm thought it was a ridiculous tradition.

"I'll defer to your judgment there," Archer said and, from his tone and posture, he was also making a subtle point about Malcolm's continuing relationship with Amanda. Automatically, Reed straightened in his seat, knowing that his expression had hardened and not really knowing what else to do or say. He and Amanda had gone out of their way to avoid drawing attention to the nature of their relationship and Malcolm knew no one could accuse them of acting improperly while underway. They never spoke without at least two other people being present and both of them made sure they addressed one another in a perfectly professional manner. The Expanse veterans all knew the truth,
but the new enlisted personnel and junior officers almost seemed convinced that they loathed each other.

Which was good enough for now, at least until he and Amanda could figure out where the hell they were going with this.

"What time are you thinking about running these drills?" Archer asked after a long moment. Silently, Malcolm exhaled, suddenly relieved that the captain wasn't going to launch into another very awkward discussion about regulations though honestly, that wasn't particularly surprising, not when factored against the captain's own history as well as his very clear efforts to … well, to facilitate Malcolm's relationship with Amanda while in the Expanse.

"I haven't decided, sir," Malcolm replied. "You are the only other officer who is aware that this is going to be drill."

"Soval is going to nerve pinch you into next week," the captain said with a smirk. He was about to say something more when his desktop chirped. "This is Archer."

"Sir, we have a priority one transmission coming in from Starfleet Command," Petty Officer Jameson stated calmly.

"Pipe it here," the captain said before straightening in his chair. A moment later, he nodded to the screen. "Admiral. Good to see you, sir."

"I wish I had better news, Jon." Admiral Forrest. Malcolm started to stand in order to make a discreet exit but Archer gestured for him to stay.

"Sir, I have my first officer here. Is there anything he isn't cleared to know?"

"Commander Reed's security clearance is higher than yours, Jon," Forrest revealed with what sounded like forced humor. "Six hours ago, a Klingon warship was hit by what appears to be human Augments." Malcolm froze in place, the same shock he felt reflected on the captain's face. "Enterprise is closer so I'm sending you to investigate. Challenger will join you once they pick up Doctor Soong."

"Soong? Arik Soong?" The captain glowered. "Why are we involving that maniac?"

"The DNA that Intelligence retrieved from the transport we believe the Augments used to board the bird of prey matches that of some embryos Soong stole twenty years ago." Archer exchanged a look with Malcolm. "We can't afford a war with the Klingons, Jon. Get to the Borderlands and find these Augments. I'll have Hernandez contact you as soon as she can."

"Well." Archer stood. "So much for a nice leisurely cruise." His eyes flickered to Malcolm. "By the numbers, Commander," he ordered. "Alter course. I want full division readiness reports as soon as possible."

"Aye, sir." Malcolm turned away.

"Malcolm?" At the captain's call, Reed paused and glanced over his shoulder. "Pass the word to the command crew. We'll debrief in thirty minutes," Archer frowned. "Make sure Major Cole is present. If Augments are involved, we should be ready for a fight."
Malcolm wondered if the captain knew how sad he looked when he said that.
854 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's September, 2154.

Note the time jump. We are post-Vulcan arc.

The hum of the engines was soothing.

If he was entirely honest, Trip would admit that he really didn't have much to do right now – the T'Muna-Doth was operating as well as this old bird was capable of without tearing her down and rebuilding her, all of the busy-work he'd come up with was done, and thankfully, none of the Boomers were awake at the moment – so he closed his eyes and concentrated on peace. T'Pol was there, waiting, like usual, a tiny knot of emotions and presence that he could never quite ignore, even when she was being particularly trying and doing her level best to start a fight. That thought almost made him smile but he thrust the emotion aside and concentrated on his breathing. His engineering watch wasn't over for another forty minutes and he knew that T'Pol would very probably tackle him the instant he joined her on the command-bridge since she'd been fighting with Miss Mazaheri again. About what, Trip didn't know – he generally tried to steer clear of the two when they were in a combative mood – nor was he particularly enthusiastic about finding out.

By his calculations, just under seven months had elapsed since they departed the deuterium colony where they had picked up the Morales and Miss Mazaheri. One hundred and ninety-eight very long days with only each other as company and very few options to break the monotony. Strangely, Trip found himself thinking that Miss Mazaheri had it the worst primarily since she was, for all intents, a fifth wheel. He had T'Pol and Teban had Karrin, but Miss Mazaheri was all alone. As something of an expert on how lonely one could be when surrounded by other couples, Trip empathized with the woman even though he wouldn't touch her with a three meter pole. They could have made better time if it wasn't for the T'Muna-Doth's always temperamental engines. How many weeks had they lost cruising at impulse while trying correct the warp field imbalance?

"Are you asleep?" Karrin Morales asked when she entered engineering thirty-six minutes later. From where he sat on the floor, legs crossed and hands resting on his knees, Trip opened his eyes and glanced up at her. The expression on her face seemed torn between amusement and irritation.

"No," Trip replied calmly. "You stood in the hatchway for five minutes before going to the kitchen and then returning," he said, delighting in the surprise that flashed across her face though he didn't show it.

"That is really creepy," Mrs. Morales said as Trip rose to his feet. He gave her a very tight smile before gesturing toward the pulsing warp core.

"It's all yours," he remarked. "Everything is still operating in amber parameters," Trip added, grimacing slightly as his eyes flashed over the still fluctuating warp field. They'd already done everything they should to stabilize it but he tapped the readout again, as if that would actually change anything. It didn't, of course, but he had to make the effort.
"Go," Mrs. Morales said with a shooing gesture. "Go get some sleep." She made a face. "And keep the subcommander from blowing my idiot sister out of the nearest airlock."

"The impossible takes a little longer," Trip replied in a slightly flippant voice though he suspected it did not show on his face based on her reaction. When was it, he wondered, that he'd stopped knowing how to act around other humans? Was this T'Pol's training or just the school of hard knocks that had battered the two of them so very hard for several years now? *Six of one, half dozen of the other*, he mused as he deviated to the kitchen/med-bay to retrieve food for T'Pol. He wasn't sure if it was this bond thing or just his knowledge of how her brain worked, but he doubted she'd eaten anything since he forced that soup into her last night.

When he climbed through the small hatch, he found her seated on her meditation mat, eyes closed and an angry scowl on her face. Well, it was an angry scowl to him. To any of the other humans, she probably looked like she normally did or maybe appeared to be suffering from some mild indigestion. Trip paused as he set the covered bowl down beside her, his eyes instantly going to her hands.

They were trembling.

He didn't bother speaking. Instead, he took a seat next to her and all but dragged her into his lap where he wrapped both arms around her and held her tightly. T'Pol trembled, almost as if she were cold though he knew that wasn't the case, and Trip winced very slightly at the torrent of alien emotions that blasted through their strange, magical connection. For a change, she did not immediately clamp down on the flood of sensation and Trip rode it out, concentrating on his breathing and focusing on being calm. Right now, the last thing T'Pol needed was his own emotions hitting her in the face.

They could no longer deny that her Pa'nar was resurfacing from the strange remission it had gone into. Her emotional control was in tatters, she could barely sleep or meditate, and the less said about her appetite the better. If Trip wasn't here to all but bully her into eating, he had his doubts she would ever do so and it was already taking a terrible toll. Never a particularly large woman, T'Pol bordered on gaunt at the moment. Even worse, she was categorically incapable of entering a healing trance.

"Thank you," she murmured softly an eternity later. She made no effort to leave the circle of his arms so Trip maintained his hold, wishing there was something – anything – he could do to make the *T'Muna-Doth* go faster. T'Pol needed medical attention and she needed it now. He opened his mouth to reply, to remind her that they were in this together.

And in that moment, the *T'Muna-Doth* lurched out of warp.

Alarms began shrieking immediately as onboard systems automatically hard-sealed all of the hatches throughout the ship. T'Pol sprang up instantly, wobbling only slightly as the ship's internal gravity momentarily faltered, and Trip scrambled to his feet a heartbeat later.

"Nausicaan corvette on hostile approach," T'Pol hissed as he fingers flew across her console. "Initiating evasive maneuvers." Trip cursed softly as he took the other station.

"We hit some sort of pulse beacon," he said darkly. "It completely blew out nacelle three." There was no way they would be able to hit warp now, not with the damage alerts flashing all over the board. He tabbed the intraship. "Brace for emergency maneuvers," he ordered. "Nausicaan hostiles on attack vector."
Engines howling, the *T'Muna-Doth* dove, corkscrewing away from the much faster, much more dangerous Nausican corvette that was already maneuvering to bring their weapons to bear. Trip glanced at the sensor feed again – there were four other ships at the very edge of the *T'Muna-Doth*'s sensor capabilities, but there was too much interference for him to identify them. The feed fuzzed over for a second as one of the four vanished.

"We need more acceleration," T'Pol said through clenched teeth. The *T'Muna-Doth* rocked and shook as the Nausican opened fire. Emerald pulses of light burned across the void, and even the near misses were trouble. Already, alerts were flashing, warning of critical overloads through the hull polarization system. Trip scanned the available systems before abruptly killing power to the comm array. His fingers darted, deactivating unnecessary power draws and redirecting as much as he could to the main reactor. If the hatch wasn't sealed, he'd be making a beeline to the engineering deck where he knew he'd be able to do this faster but right now, it would take more time to circumvent the main computer's programming than it would to just work here.

A quick glance to the sensor confirmed his worst fears – the Nausican was drawing even closer – and he bit down on the flood of fear that turned to ice in his stomach. They were so damned close to home.

"Brace for impact!" T'Pol exclaimed. She sent the *T'Muna-Doth* into a sharp dive that was almost enough to evade the lethal disruptor fire. Almost.

Sizzling streams of energy stabbed into the heart of the *T'Muna-Doth*, burning through the antiquated defenses and tearing apart critical systems. Explosions shook the Vulcan craft, throwing it into a wild, uncontrolled spin that the inertial dampers were only partially capable of compensating for as another nacelle blew apart under the sudden overload that tore through the EPS conduits. Safety measures failed through the ship – core containment began to fail and the entire vessel was abruptly flooded with dangerous levels of radiation. Junction boxes self-destructed and through the hazy fog of near-unconsciousness, Trip realized that they were looking at a runaway cascade failure. He instinctively keyed in the override code, hoping to God that the emergency ejection system would not fail.

Naturally, it did.

He stared at the flashing alert on his console with uncomprehending eyes. Triggering of this override should have blown the aft cargo bay free and ejected the rapidly failing warp core. Why … ? Oh. Engineering still had someone inside and the error-riddled computer system was crashing as it facing conflicting directives. He started to reach for the console, fighting against the implacable crush of gravity holding him down in place. Trip knew what had to be done, knew he had to trigger the ejection, but still, he hesitated.

But Karrin Morales took the decision out of his hands.

The pulsing green alert abruptly changed to amber as the manual release was triggered. Tiny explosives detonated, tearing the aft cargo free, and bare seconds later, *T'Muna-Doth* spat her malfunctioning warp core free. Trip had a fantastic imagination and could all too well guess what Engineering was like right now. Vented to space, the atmosphere was sucked free along with anything … or anyone still present. He wanted to close his eyes but couldn't.

Twelve seconds later, the warp core went critical. And two seconds after that, the shockwave
slammed into the *T'Muna-Doth* with hull-crushing force.
854 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's September, 2154.

He itched to deal some damage.

Seated behind the controls of *Challenger*, Travis watched the countdown on his board tick off the time remaining before they reached the source of the distress signal. Luck had been with them – five more minutes and the NX-03 would have been too far away to receive this signal in time to do anything about it. Just the nature of the threat caused his muscles to tighten up and his jaw to clench. Nausicaans.

“One minute,” he announced as he concentrated on pushing the fury aside. Right now, it didn’t matter that the Nausicaans had been plaguing the shipping lanes even worse than before the Xindi attack. It wasn’t relevant that his brother would probably never walk again thanks to these bastards or that his mother had been forced to sell the *Horizon* for scrap after the damage the old ship had taken during a recent engagement. And it certainly didn’t matter that his sister was gone, dead or sold into slavery no one knew. No. All that mattered was the job.

“Battle stations,” Captain Hernandez said in her calm, reassuring voice he knew was masking her worry about the coming encounter. She always did this right before combat, withdrawing into herself so she was an impossibly remote ice queen and Travis wondered if she knew how much it terrified the newest members of the crew. “First Officer, orient on the nearest hostile upon exit. Tactical, get me targeting solutions as soon as possible.”

“Aye, ma’am,” Travis said as he reached for the controls that would bring them back to impulse. He heard Galahad reply in an identical tone from the weapons board. “Reverting to real-space in five, four, three, two, now.”

*Challenger* shivered slightly as she slowed, almost angrily, and Travis wondered briefly if the young ship was irritated that they were no longer able to stretch their legs at maximum velocity. From the moment he first felt her jump to warp, he likened the NX-03 to a young racehorse, eager to get out there and prove just how fast she could go. He loved that about this ship. *Enterprise* had never quite felt like this to him.

“Multiple contacts,” Lieutenant Reed announced from the tactical board. “One Nausicaan corvette, two J class freighters, both lightly damaged.” He paused before continuing. “One Vulcan type four explorer, heavily damaged.”

“Get me firing solutions on that Nausicaan,” the captain ordered. “Communications, hail them and order them to stand down or we will fire.” There was steel in Captain Hernandez’s voice.

“No need,” Travis muttered. “They’re running.” With a flash, the Nausicaan corvette sprang away, vanishing at warp speed, and Travis fought the instinctive urge to pursue. He scowled briefly before noticing the debris field that looked to have been another Nausicaan ship. Following the Xindi
attack, Starfleet had started a massive upgrade program with Earth Cargo Authority, ramping up Boomer offensive and defensive systems so they could hold their own against scum like this.

“Maintain alert status,” Hernandez ordered, “but get us closer to that Vulcan ship.” Travis heard her lean forward. “Commander Mayweather, can you match that spin?”

“I can,” Travis replied before shooting a glance toward Reed. “Ready grappler,” he ordered.

“Grappler ready.”

Matching the Vulcan ship’s uncontrolled tumble turned out to be more difficult than he’d expected, but Travis managed it, fighting with Challenger’s anxious aggressiveness the entire time. He knew that most people didn’t really believe him when he said starships had personalities, but right now, everyone could feel it. Whatever they’d done to Challenger’s engines during her construction had turned her into a beast.

“Life signs?” he heard the captain ask as he feathered the maneuvering thrusters once more.

“There’s a lot of radiation interference,” the girl at the science board said. She was from Alpha Centauri and, though Ensign Dometz was officially twenty Standard years old, every time Travis looked at her, he thought she was barely into her teens. If he hadn’t actually pulled up her record, he’d insist she was maybe twelve or thirteen. “But I am reading four. Three humans and a Vulcan.” Travis gave a quick glance to Lieutenant Reed.

“Deploy grappler … now.” It was an excellent shot and Travis exhaled in relief even as he triggered another burst from the jets.

“Firing second grappler … now,” Galahad announced. This too struck home and Travis keyed in an automated program that would allow Challenger to slowly reduce the spin to non-existent. He felt the NX-03’s thrusters begin firing in slow succession and glanced down at the digital readout.

“Ninety minutes until vessel is fully stabilized,” he announced before glancing back. “I could reduce that a lot more from their bridge.” Hernandez frowned slowly before giving Dometz a look. To her credit, the woman-child knew what the captain wanted to know.

“Transporters are not advised, Captain. Radiation levels are still too high.”

“Then we take a shuttlepod,” Travis said. “I’ll need Kelby to help with the engines and Doctor Yuris for the wounded.”

“Take Chang as well,” the captain instructed. “He’s got extensive zero-gee training.” Travis nodded as he stood.

“Pass the word,” he instructed to Baird, smirking at how eagerly the newly commissioned ensign leaped to obey.

“And ask Ambassador V’Lar to join us on the bridge,” Hernandez added. “She might be able to identify this vessel.”

With Travis at the helm of the ‘pod, it took them less than twelve minutes to deploy from Challenger and hook up to the Vulcan starship. Both Chang and Kelby grumbled the entire time, the former about not having enough time to grab more than the four or five weapons he was carrying and the
latter complaining about how much he hated spacewalks. Yuris said nothing, but then, he was so very Vulcan at times like this that Travis could sometimes forget the doctor wasn’t just a robot.

“We have hard seal,” he announced long moments later. “Chang, get the door. Challenger, this is Mayweather. We’re proceeding in.” He paused. “Do we have an identification on this ship yet?” The voice that responded was unmistakably that of Ambassador V’Lar who had been aboard since that mess with the Vulcans several weeks ago. She was nice enough for one of her species and, as an added bonus, wasn’t involved in a pissing contest with the captain to decide what was best for his career.

“Lieutenant Commander, the vessel in question is the *T’Muna-Doth*. It was lost to Orion pirates sixty-two years ago.”

It was slow-going, even after they managed to breach the outer airlock. Internal hatches were vacuum-sealed – that was probably due to some stupid automated system; *Horizon* had been like that for years until Travis’ dad got sick of electrical shorts triggering it and ripped the damned thing out – and they had to be careful of any survivors so simply blowing open a hatch (which was always Chang’s preferred solution) wasn’t an option. Even with a fusion torch, it took a long time to cut through the hatches. Engineering turned out to be a no-go: evidently, it was open to space, which Travis hadn’t noticed on their approach. To his very great surprise, Kelby simply turned around and retraced his steps to the shuttlepod, muttering the entire way. From the words Travis did catch, he figured that the engineer was going to cross the hull of the Vulcan ship and enter engineering through the already prepared hole.

“Both are injured but not critically,” Doctor Yuris announced once they breached the living quarters and found two of the three humans. “I am highly concerned about the level of radiation they have been exposed to,” he said. “Are we certain that we cannot utilize the transporter? It would expedite their treatment.” Travis quickly relayed the question.

“Get them to the shuttlepod,” Dometz said long minutes later. “We can lock onto them there.”

“Chang, help the doctor,” Travis ordered, inwardly smirking at the foul look on the MACO’s face. No one knew the specifics of why Chang and Yuris hated each other, but sometimes, it was worth the fireworks to make them work together. Travis hefted the breaching equipment. “I’ll get started on the bridge.”

He was only halfway through the hatch leading to the bridge when Kelby contacted him.

“It’s a no-go on maneuvering,” the engineer announced over the commline. “Looks like they had to eject their warp core and the damage this pig has sustained means she’s not going to fly anytime soon.”

“Copy.”

“I’m going to see what I can do about sealing off the radiation leak,” Kelby continued. “Challenger, I heard you are able to transport to the shuttlepod. Please have Petty Officer Jacobsen and Crewman Xi suit up and bring their gear. They’ll know what I need.”

“Understood, Commander.”

“And tell Jacobsen he is not to send Wilcox in his place this time,” Kelby added. Travis smirked at the irritation in the engineer’s voice.
“This would be easier if you let me use just a little bit of explosive,” Chang said as he drew alongside Travis. The MACO lieutenant grinned at the scowl Mayweather shot him before accepting the torch and taking over.

“How long until we’re through?” he asked. Chang shrugged.

“Seven minutes?” the MACO guessed. “Maybe eight?”

It was closer to eight than seven and by the time they pulled the ruined hatch open, Travis could see that Chang was exhausted. Fighting that breaching torch was nearly as hard as wrestling with a pissed off bear. Sure, there wasn’t much gravity here to complicate matters, but still, you were trying to push a really hot flame through starship armor. Taking pity on him, Travis climbed up the ladder first, scanning quickly for the remaining two people. He found them at once – both looked to have been seated when this ship was hit but only the larger of the two was still mostly in his chair. The man’s foot had been caught when he was thrown free and, just at a glance, Travis suspected it was sprained or maybe broken, but the female … the female was Vulcan. He blinked at her face, his eyes widening in recognition as he took a closer look at the man.

“Omigod,” he breathed, forgetting for a moment that he was transmitting across a live connection. “Medical emergency! Yuris, get up here now!” Travis stumbled closer. “Chang, get your ass in here! I need a medkit now!” He knelt beside the woman and fumbled with his gloves, tearing them free before placing pressure on the open wound that still slowly leaked blood.

There was no way in hell he was going to let Subcommander T’Pol die.
Jon: Unexpected Reunion

Chapter Notes

858 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's September, 2154.

His skin tingled.

Pushing the strange sensation aside, Jon jumped down from the transporter pad and eagerly accepted Travis' outstretched hand, wincing only slightly at his former helmsman's grip as they shook hands. Lieutenant Commander Mayweather's grin was nearly as wide as Jon's and Archer knew that the two of them had to look like idiots to Soval who slowly stepped off the transporter himself, an expression of calm resoluteness on his face. Right now, though, Jon couldn't care less. His friends were alive!

"Good to see you, Travis," he said as he shook his former helmsman's hand. "I hope Erika is treating you right."

"There's a high learning curve, sir," Travis replied quickly, "but she hasn't fired me yet so I guess I'm doing okay." He nodded to Soval. "Ambassador, it is agreeable to see you," he added in slow, halting Vulcan, the use of which caused Soval to lift an eyebrow. "You guys must have redlined Enterprise's engines to get here so fast," Travis continued as he gestured for them to follow him.

"Guilty as charged," Jon replied. He was about to remark about how Taylor hadn't budged from engineering since they received Challenger's message, but the intraship crackled.

"Security team bravo to sickbay!" Even before Jon could ask what that was about, Travis was in motion. The former helmsman spun and sprinted away, rounding a corner and vanishing down a corridor with a speed that Jon didn't think he'd been capable of twenty years ago let alone now. Exchanging a quick, confused look with Soval, Archer pursued, albeit at a much slower pace.

By the time he and Soval reached sickbay, the security team in question was already there, arrayed in an unmistakably aggressive posture outside the main entrance. Jon recognized Lieutenant Chang of the MACOs as well as the Vulcan doctor that Phlox had recommended for Challenger, but he wisely kept his mouth shut as he drew closer.

"And that's when he barricaded sickbay," Chang was saying to a scowling Mayweather.

"Perhaps in the future," Doctor Yuris added coldly, "you will reconsider using heavily armed soldiers to transport traumatized patients." Chang rounded on the Vulcan, his expression fierce, but Travis interrupted whatever he was about to say.

"Enough." The order was obeyed instantly – and when, Jon wondered, had his former helmsman learned that trick? Hell, Archer still struggled with getting recalcitrant officers to shut up at times. "How did he get a rifle? Those are only supposed to work if your thumbprint is in the system."

"The commander circumvented the biometrics in under ten seconds," Chang replied. He pursed his
lips. "I'd like to know how he did that, actually. I didn't think it was possible." Trip. They were talking about Trip. Jon inhaled sharply. What the hell happened? "My team is ready, XO," the MACO lieutenant said. "We can assault in and stun him."

"No." Yuris' face could have been carved from granite for all of the emotion he was showing. "Stunning the commander could have seriously detrimental effects at this time."

"And he already took down three of your guys before he was armed," Travis added. He glanced in Jon's direction and straightened abruptly, even as an all-too familiar presence drew closer.

"Can someone tell me why I have my security chief trying to talk my first officer into storming my sickbay?" Erika demanded. Ambassador V'Lar stood calmly at her side, watching everything with open curiosity. Travis made a face.

"Commander Tucker." He jerked his head toward the door. "He woke up and … well, he took out a couple of MACOs and seized sickbay." Jon blinked. Trip did that?

"I do not believe the commander is entirely aware of his surroundings," the doctor stated. "His prime objective appears to be defense of Subcommander T'Pol who remains heavily sedated." That statement caused Soval to stiffen slightly as well as tickle the lingering after-effects of Surak still in Jon's brain. It was important somehow, but he thrust it aside and let his subconscious chew on whatever it was. "When the commander woke, he was surrounded by armed personnel in an unfamiliar environment. It is not illogical to presume that he is confused."

"Not that confused," Chang retorted. "He incapacitated three of my troopers and locked us out of sickbay!"

"Providing we do not make hostile moves against him," Yuris added, "I do not believe he is a further threat." He frowned slightly. "And yes, Captain Hernandez," he said. "That is my professional opinion."

"He is … defending the subcommander?" Soval asked abruptly. "You are absolutely certain about this?" The two Vulcans locked eyes and Jon could see the doctor visibly hesitate, especially when V'Lar also tensed. As a veteran of dealing with Vulcan secrets, Archer recognized the subtext immediately – there was something cultural going on, something that Soval was not comfortable expressing in front of humans.

"I am." Yuris straightened under the two ambassadors' gaze. "He has taken no offensive actions once assured that she is in no danger." Two eyebrows climbed – Soval and V'Lar – and Yuris countered with an identical gesture.

"We could pump some sleeping gas into sickbay," Chang said suddenly. "That way, we won't have to breach."

"Doing so might be construed as an aggressive action," the doctor stated flatly, his tone bordering on irritated. "He is defending his … Subcommander T'Pol. Move against her in any fashion and he will retaliate."

The two fell to further bickering, with Travis moderating (and sometimes interjecting to prevent open hostilities), as Soval and V'Lar stepped aside to converse in voices pitched too low for anyone else to hear. Jon gave Erika a look and she returned it with a slight shrug. This certainly was not how he'd expected the reunion to play out. Dammit, he wanted to see his friends!
"Don't worry," Erika murmured softly. "Everything will be okay."

"I'm going to hold you to that," Jon replied. He watched the Chang-Yuris argument for a moment longer – the two men seemed to legitimately dislike one another for some reason – and frowned again when V'Lar stepped closer.

"I have a theory," the ambassador said. Her words cut off Yuris in mid-sentence and he gave her a respectful nod. "Vulcans are touch-telepaths," she began, the remark causing several of the MACOs to give her surprised looks though Jon already knew this. "In times of extreme duress, an injured Vulcan may exceed these limits and reach out telepathically for assistance."

"And you think this is what is happening?" Jon asked. Erika gave him a wordless look – this was her ship, after all; she should be the ones asking the questions, not him – but otherwise barely reacted.

"It is logical to presume that the subcommander has sought out the mind most familiar to her," V'Lar said by way of an answer. "If this is the case, then your Commander Tucker is standing proxy for her nearest blood relative or spouse."

"So what do we do then?" This time, it was Travis who earned Erika's disapproving scowl and he replied with a sheepish half-shrug.

The sickbay door hissed open.

Soval was through it before anyone could react – only V'Lar seemed unsurprised, which prompted Jon to suspect some collusion on her part – and the ambassador paused at the door to manually lock it down once more. He then turned away, clasping both hands together at the small of his back. And then, he waited.

Trip rose up into view a moment later.

From his vantage point, Jon had a clear line of sight and what he saw shocked him. Tucker was shirtless at the moment and his torso was decorated with a handful of new scars, including some positively vicious-looking ones that looked to have come from a wild animal of some sort. Never a particularly imposing man, Trip was now on the low end of thin, as if he'd been forced to go hungry for far too long. Still, despite that, the muscles in his upper body were tight and clearly defined. His face was mostly the same if thinner, even if his hair was a little longer than Jon ever recalled seeing it and he desperately needed a shave. Tucker's eyes were different, though. Harder, colder, not to mention much, much older.

"Greetings, Commander," Soval said in Vulcan. Slowly, he raised one arm – Trip's aim with the MACO rifle never wavered in the slightest – and he offered the ta'al salute. "It is agreeable to see you again."

The ambassador took a half-step forward, freezing when Trip shifted very slightly. From where he stood, Jon couldn't see why, but the MACOs around him tensed. "You know who I am," Soval said. "I will not, by action or inaction, allow harm to come to Subcommander T'Pol."

"Stand ready for assault," Chang murmured. "If he drops the ambassador, we're out of options."

"Lieutenant," Doctor Yuris began but the MACO cut him off with a fierce gesture.

"That weapon is set to kill, Doctor," he hissed. Jon's breath caught.
"I am concerned about the subcommander's condition," Soval continued. He had not moved in the slightest and Archer knew he had to be at least a little worried, though no one could tell from his body language. "Will you allow me to examine her?" Another long moment passed.

And Trip nodded.

He lowered the weapon slightly, his hard gaze shifting from Soval to the door to sickbay, and Jon could feel the MACOs relax fractionally. Beside him, Ambassador V'Lar stirred slightly.

"Fascinating," she murmured. Jon gave her a look and her eyebrow climbed slightly. "Your commander is likely barely conscious, Captain, but is aware enough to recognize that Ambassador Soval is not a threat." She tilted her head. "In this exact situation," she continued aloud, "a Vulcan male would likely be incapable of differentiating ally from threat."

"And Soval walked in there knowing that?" Erika demanded, aghast.

"Logic demanded it," Yuris stated flatly. Jon smirked.

"Plus," he added, "Soval's crazy."

They watched in rapt silence as the Vulcan ambassador crossed the distance to the biobed where T'Pol was stretched out and Jon grimaced at his first sight of his former first officer. If Trip was too thin, then T'Pol was positively gaunt. The clothes she wore hung loosely upon her tiny frame and, as he stared, Archer could see tremors shake her limbs. Long hair framed her elfin face, but no one could look at her and not think she was sick. It reminded him far too much of his father in the later stages of the Clarke's Syndrome.

"Mister Tucker," Soval said, his voice still carrying, "I wish to initiate a brief diagnostic meld with Subcommander T'Pol to assess her situation." Trip's head snapped around to pin the ambassador with a look and, for the first time since entering sickbay, Soval spoke softly, his words pitched only for Tucker's ears. Whatever he said, it was adequate as Trip nodded tightly. The Vulcan leaned over T'Pol, touching her face with the fingers of his right hand.

And a moment later, Trip collapsed.

The MACOs flooded into sickbay almost before Jon realized what happened but froze in place at a single, harsh command from Travis. He strode in behind them, gesturing quickly in the direction of the three soldiers lying on the floor on the far end of sickbay – the ones that Trip evidently 'incapacitated,' Jon realized – and to Archer's surprise, Lieutenant Chang's men obeyed the instruction.

"You are capable of treating her condition?" Soval was asking Yuris in their native tongue when Jon drew closer. He pursed his lips at the sight of Trip, now deeply unconscious and on another nearby biobed thanks to Travis.

"I am." The doctor glanced at the number of personnel present and scowled. Without showing much emotion, of course. "Everyone not undergoing treatment is to exit my medical facility immediately."

"Two of my men will remain here for support," Chang began.

"Absolutely not." Yuris turned his back on the MACO.
"If this goes south again, we need people in place to deal with this."

"I will not have armed personnel in my place of healing," Yuris snapped. Chang gave the Vulcan a glare.

"Enough." Once again, Travis spoke up, his voice firm and unyielding. "Two armed security personnel outside sickbay," he instructed. "They will not enter unless there is a clear and present danger to the doctor or any of his patients." Both Chang and Yuris looked displeased but they nodded. "Make it happen," Travis ordered.

"Shouldn't you be the one barking out orders?" Jon asked Erika softly. She smirked.

"Oh, hell no," she replied. "I leave dealing with MACOs to Travis. For some reason, they actually listen to him." She stepped closer to the biobed Trip was on. "Damn, he looks terrible." Jon had to agree. Up close, the scars on Trip's torso looked even worse. How had he even survived the animal attack?

"How are they, Doctor?" he asked. Yuris gave him the flat, irritated look that had to be a species-wide trait.

"I will know more when my medical facility is not filled with distractions, Captain Archer," the Vulcan said crossly.

"That's our cue," Erika said. "Keep me updated, Doc," she instructed as she turned toward the exit. For a moment, Jon lingered, wanting to stay until his friends woke, but he grudgingly followed.

"They're alive," Travis said with a broad grin that Jon immediately returned. He glanced back, eager to see his friends again, but instead, he saw only the three unconscious MACOs being manhandled onto biobeds. Trip and T'Pol were alive.

So why was he so worried?
862 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's September, 2154.

She could not get comfortable.

The steady hum of Enterprise was both familiar and strikingly discordant, though T'Pol suspected her subconscious was simply trying to locate the hiccup in the warp field that had caused the T'Muna-Doth’s superluminal transit to feel so bumpy. Given how critical she had been about the Enterprise’s capabilities when she first came aboard, it was strangely unsettling to be aboard the Starfleet vessel and consider it vastly superior in every way to a Vulcan craft. Silently, she filed the thought away for later review – Trip would find it amusing.

Today was the third day since her awakening in Challenger’s medical facility and she was still struggling with the vast changes that had greeted her. For the first time in a very long time – before Tolaris actually – her thoughts were clear and ordered. Gone were the sudden flashes of rage or grief or despair … no, that was not accurate. They were still there, along with all of her other emotions, but she could control them once more. Her hands were steady, her body free of the aching, persistent pain that she’d sadly grown accustomed to. She felt more like her than she had in years.

Knowing that the Pa’nar had been so easily eradicated by a stranger when both she and Phlox had struggled so hard was at once frustrating and amusing. That a second mind meld could resolve what a first one had caused was ironic. She frowned very slightly.

“I do not know,” Doctor Yuris has told her when she asked if her own missteps with Trip might have caused neural damage to her human mate. To her relief, the doctor did not give her a disapproving look or even hint at understanding the implications behind her questions, and it would be illogical to presume he did not correctly assume the nature of her concerns. Later, after she was fully settled, she would pose the same questions to Phlox.

Shifting her posture slightly, she resumed focusing on rebuilding her mental whitespace as she fed the extraneous worries and concerns of the day into the nothingness. Meditation was so much easier than before – T’Pol truly did not recall ever feeling this … balanced before, not even before Tolaris’ assault. This was the first time in three days that she was completely alone and she fully intended on utilizing the solitude to reconstruct her still tattered control. Trip was away, with the captain and Commander Reed, ostensibly celebrating their return in a traditional human male bonding ceremony involving alcohol and stories of past events that were both untruthful and wildly improbable – though from the sensations she could feel from their cerebral linkage, it did not seem that the reunion was going as well as any party would like. T’Pol shoved it aside. Her time was limited before…

The chirp of her door annunciator came almost exactly when she suspected it would – her estimate was off by only two and a half minutes, well within the margin of error – and T’Pol allowed herself a tiny smile before focusing on clearing away any hint of emotion. Ambassador Soval would not understand and much depended upon her ensuring that he remained an ally. Whether Trip wanted to admit it or not, T’Pol knew there was much difficulty for them still ahead. She inhaled control and
spoke.

“Enter.”

Soval was dressed in his most ornate robes – again, she felt amusement curl her lips slightly and from his reaction, she had done an inadequate job at concealing the emotion – and he visibly faltered at the sight of her kneeling on the floor before a flickering candle. T'Pol gestured very slightly for him to join her without rising. Again, the ambassador hesitated.

“I did not mean to interrupt,” he began in their native tongue. T'Pol looked up to meet his gaze.

“You did not,” she said simply. With her left hand, she picked up the PADD resting at her side. “I have finalized my report to Vulcan High Command regarding the events Commander Tucker and I were involved in.” Soval’s lips tightened.

“There is no High Command now.” He knelt smoothly before her but accepted the data device. “I will forward this to the proper authorities.” T'Pol inclined her head very slightly in appreciation.

“I have also been reviewing this … *Kir'shara*.” She frowned slightly. There was still so much to digest and T'Pol was unsure how certain of these teachings would apply to the person she was now. In at least one section, she'd already noticed blatant contradictions and wondered if Surak had composed his teachings at various dates throughout his life. “It is quite fascinating.”

“The discovery of these teachings has changed the very fabric of our society.” Soval was silent for a moment. His eyes darted and T'Pol knew he could see the signs of Trip’s presence. “Your mother will be gratified that you are alive,” he said. It was clearly not what he had meant to say, but T'Pol accepted the shift of topic.

“Perhaps.” She frowned again. “I suspect she will not be pleased with everything I have to tell her, however.” At that, Soval’s expression tightened. “I have reason to believe my father is still alive,” T'Pol said. In her many years of interaction with the ambassador, she had never before witnessed this expression on his face.

Raw, naked surprise.

“You are aware of my Pa'nar,” T’Pol continued. “During our time on Ekos, I experienced an … emotional trauma.” Even now, more than a year after the fact, she could still see the unfortunate soldier exploding in the *T'Muna-Doth*'s cargo bay due to the failed transport and could taste the raw, anguished guilt coursing through her, but she pushed it down, locked it away, and continued. “While I was recovering, I discovered certain inconsistencies with my memory.” She allowed irritation to appear on her face. “When I came into your employment, were you aware of the extent of my intelligence background?”

“No.” Soval quirked an eyebrow. “I reviewed your record, of course, but it was not particularly illuminating.”

“That is because my record is a carefully forged lie.” T'Pol inhaled carefully. “I now recall, quite clearly, my father visiting me while I was at Gol.” Again, Soval’s surprise was clear and T’Pol allowed another tiny smile to appear. “By my calculations, this event transpired twenty-six years after his recorded death.” Soval opened his mouth to speak. “There is more. He was interacting with the temporal agent, Daniels.”
“This is … unexpected,” Soval said after a long moment of consideration. “Are you certain that your memories are not flawed?” T’Pol gave him a flat look.

“I do not know how to properly meld,” she said, “but if you wish to view these memories yourself, I would be willing to allow you touch them.” The offer caused him to flinch – a human would not have noticed it … well, Trip would have, but he was different.

“T’Les will be … displeased.” He turned his head fractionally to examine the carefully folded Starfleet uniform on the tiny couch. “About a great many things, I suspect,” he added.

“You are referring to Trip.” She smirked at the subtle reaction he betrayed, though whether it was due to her use of her mate’s nickname or the simple acknowledgement of his suspicions she did not know. “I trust your wisdom,” she said, intending it as encouragement for him to speak his mind, not as an ambassador but as a very old friend of her family. Soval took it.

“I will not dissemble,” he said flatly. “Your well-being … I am concerned that your … connection with Mister Tucker has had a detrimental effect on you.” He almost grimaced. “You are more … emotional than you were before this incident.”

“Trip has had an effect on me,” T’Pol replied calmly, “but it is far from a detrimental one.” The disbelief in his eyes caused her to frown slightly. “I do not deny that I am more comfortable expressing emotions, but Doctor Yuris confirmed certain of my suspicions regarding my … connection with Trip.” Outwardly, Soval barely reacted to the emphasis she put on the same word he had used though she could see him struggling to contain his own emotions in regards to the implication about what it meant. She pressed on. “The Pa’nar degraded enough of my neural pathways that I would have died had it not been for Trip.” It was much more than that, of course, but the more emotional reasons would likely make the ambassador uncomfortable so she did not address them, instead leaving them implied. To her great surprise, however, Soval nodded slightly.

“T’ has affected you,” T’Pol replied calmly, “but it is far from a detrimental one.” The disbelief in his eyes caused her to frown slightly. “I do not deny that I am more comfortable expressing emotions, but Doctor Yuris confirmed certain of my suspicions regarding my … connection with Trip.” Outwardly, Soval barely reacted to the emphasis she put on the same word he had used though she could see him struggling to contain his own emotions in regards to the implication about what it meant. She pressed on. “The Pa’nar degraded enough of my neural pathways that I would have died had it not been for Trip.” It was much more than that, of course, but the more emotional reasons would likely make the ambassador uncomfortable so she did not address them, instead leaving them implied. To her great surprise, however, Soval nodded slightly.

“The path you have chosen with Mister Tucker will be … difficult,” he said slowly. “Humanity, as a species, is still quite young and our own people are not known for their compassion.”

“An error on our part,” T’Pol said. Something Trip had once told her came to mind and she repeated it without thinking. “Logic without compassion is simply an excuse for tyranny.” Soval’s eyebrow climbed as he digested the phrase but finally, he nodded again.

“Your mother will be on Earth when we arrive,” the ambassador said as he stood, once more glancing in the direction of Trip’s belongings. “Do you intend to introduce Mister Tucker to her?”

“I do.” This time, T’Pol did not try to hide her amusement at his question and the way Soval stiffened even further was telling. Yes, her control was worse than she feared. Interacting with other Vulcans would be difficult if she did not find a better equilibrium. Lowering her eyes, she once more stared at the candle. Recognizing her unspoken request for privacy, Soval turned away but T’Pol realized she could not let him go without asking a question that had been gnawing at her since she’d begun reading the Kir’shara. “Ambassador?” He paused and looked at her. “You were with Captain Archer on Vulcan,” she said. “Why did you not carry Surak’s katra instead of him?” Soval’s face was perfectly devoid of any expression but his eyes … they swam with a dozen emotions, none of which T’Pol could identify. She knew the ambassador well enough to recognize when he considered lying to her and then decided against it.

“Surak chose his vessel,” Soval said, his tone bleak. “I was deemed unworthy. Corrupt. Incapable of accomplishing what needed to be done.” Without further remark, he turned and departed from the
guest quarters that Captain Archer had so readily offered for her use. She pushed down the instinctive urge to leap up and follow Soval, to demand a further explanation for his cryptic remarks. Corrupt? The ambassador was the least corrupt male she’d ever known. The explanation defied understanding. According to the official, sanitized description of the Kir’shara’s recovery, the ambassador had suffered great hardship, physically carrying the mostly delirious Captain Archer through the Forge itself, standing at his side and defending him when the human was too weak, too exhausted by Vulcan’s merciless climate to even stand. And yet, his actions had been relegated to little more than a footnote in that same report.

T’Pol shook her head. There would be time to investigate this later. She closed her eyes and focused on her breathing.
862 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's September, 2154.

Nothing was the same.

He tried to keep the strange feeling from showing on his face but from the way everyone reacted to him, Trip knew he was not successful. Taylor had initially been positively giddy when the captain took him to engineering, but her excitement faltered more quickly than it should have and was promptly replaced by an unusual combination of confusion and resentment. Even when he tried to head it off by complimenting her on the solid work she was doing, Trip could see his efforts were less successful than they should have been and instead had the opposite effect. He was almost grateful when the captain suggested they move on.

Unfortunately, the weirdness didn't stop there. Hoshi was exuberant but reserved (and a little depressed about something, though she hid it really, really well), watching him with sharp, questioning eyes, as if she expected him to suddenly sprout a third arm. Rostov was even worse – and how weird was it seeing him with lieutenant's rank instead of enlisted? – and stared at him with open suspicion.

No. That wasn't correct. He was simply wrong-footed by Trip's presence and how different he was now, as if the last two years, almost two and a half, had never happened. Every single one of them was expecting him to be the old Trip, the one that they had thought was killed and, in a very real way, had died on Zeon. They were all struggling with the changes, even the captain, and when they instead realized that time had not stood still for him either, no one knew how to react. Well, no one but Phlox.

"It is absolutely wonderful to see you again, Commander," the doctor gushed. He offered a very wide grin. "I never believed you or the subcommander were dead!"

"He really didn't," Jon said with a tired smile. Trip wondered when his former commanding officer … when his friend had gotten so old. No one else seemed to notice, but then, they'd been acclimated to it, had probably never noticed the gradual transformation from the vibrant Starfleet officer to this tired and weathered man whose eyes hinted at dark and terrible secrets. The weight of command and unspoken knowledge hung heavy upon Jon's shoulders, and to his utter disgust, Trip didn't know how to respond.

"Thank you," he said to the doctor, forcing a slight smile that felt strange on his lips. I've spent so much time with just T'Pol that I've forgotten how to speak to other humans. The three Boomers – two now, since Mrs. Morales died to save her husband and her sister – did not count, mostly because he'd frankly minimized the amount of time he spent around them, not just because of how he always felt guilty about leaving T'Pol alone but because he had so little in common with his fellow humans. Now, in retrospect, he realized that he should have made more of an effort.

"Once you are settled," the doctor continued brightly, ignorant of or probably more likely blatantly
ignoring Trip's discomfort, "I would like to do a full workup for you." He shared another broad smile. "It is not that I distrust Doctor Yuris, far from it, but I do have the benefit of knowing better what your baseline should be."

From sickbay, they headed for the bridge. There were MACOs stationed here, strangely enough, though the watch crew – none of whom were in any way familiar to him, even with all of T'Pol's memory-enhancement training – took their presences for granted. Everything felt more … militarized, as if they were balanced on a knife's edge and waiting for the next attack. It was, sadly, a very familiar feeling and one Trip wasn't sure he'd managed to set aside.

More interesting than the battle readiness of the crew, though, was the MACO commander who tried to lurk in the background without attracting his attention. Trip recognized Amanda Cole from high school almost at once, though her eyes certainly weren't like that back when she and Lizzie were hanging out, nor did he recall her being quite that graceful on her feet. Automatically, he evaluated her balance – it was exceptional, as good T'Pol's or Malcolm's, and from the way her eyes tracked over everyone present, she would be a dangerous opponent – and in that single moment when he looked at her, he noted how her muscles tensed.

It was a subtle thing, with her shifting her balance slightly as if she was preparing for imminent combat, and Trip wasn't sure if she was entirely conscious of her reaction. Even more fascinating, though, was how Malcolm remained completely aware of Cole's every movement, despite the fact that he wasn't looking at her. The instant she ramped up into fight mode, so did he. Interesting, that. It implied an awareness that came from very close interaction and familiarity, intimacy even, and from the way they intentionally moved around the bridge to always keep the other in at least their peripheral vision, there really seemed to be just one explanation. Trip wondered if the captain was aware of what was going on between these two and, at a glance, realized that yes, Jon did know. From Archer's body language, the relationship between Reed and Cole amused and irritated him at the same time, as well as making him slightly envious. Forcing his own body to relax – and how frustrating was that? He was supposed to be an explorer and an engineer, not another scary bad-ass – Trip gave them both another look and a nod, noting the identical frowns that crossed their faces, before following the captain into his ready room.

"I just can't get over how quiet you are," Jon said once the door slid shut. "A couple of years with only T'Pol as company will do that to you, I guess." He clearly meant it as a joke but his tone and the way he held himself were all wrong, so it fell flat. Archer grimaced then and rubbed his temples, as if warding off a headache. He'd done that a lot in the last couple of days and whenever he had, Malcolm had frowned. "Look at us," Jon stated softly as he collapsed into his chair. "It's like we're strangers!"

"In a way," Trip replied, "we are." He sat, trying to make himself comfortable in the chair. Memory flared – once, an eternity ago, he'd been slouching here, totally at ease with the man sitting across from him, and then the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen entered. At the time, his first thought had been simple enough: wow. "Two years is a long time, sir."

"And a lot has happened since then," Archer admitted. He slumped back in his chair. "For all of us." He frowned. "Speaking of things happening," he continued, "I glanced over the report you sent to Starfleet. You know they're going to want one just from you, right?"

"They can ask," Trip replied calmly. "There's nothing more to add. That's the exact same report we're sending to the High Command." Too late, he realized that he'd used 'we' while referencing himself and T'Pol. He considered the slip for a heartbeat, then decided against expanding. It wasn't like they were hiding much of anything.
"The High Command is gone," Jon said. "I don't know who's in charge these days ... I think it's T'Pau?" The name didn't mean anything to Trip, and he wondered if T'Pol knew who she was. "Anyway, they're a Council now." Archer flashed a weak grin. "Still the same old Vulcans, though!" When Trip didn't react – he didn't know how to react really; was the captain trying to make a joke or was this yet another subtle inquiry into the exact nature of his relationship with T'Pol? – Jon's good cheer faltered again. They sat in relative silence for a moment, surrounded by Enterprise's familiar hum while both struggled to find the right thing to say.

Is it going to be like this with everyone now? Trip wondered sadly. He could see that Jon wanted to ask him something, probably about T'Pol and the whispered rumors that Trip wasn't supposed to be aware of yet, but didn't know how without sounding crass. For that matter, Trip had no idea how he would respond if Archer decided to go for bluntness – it was frankly none of Jon's business and he knew that addressing the relationship even obliquely would upset T'Pol – and he found himself tensing. He had questions himself, like what had happened in this war with the Xindi or why Soval was assigned to Enterprise. Mostly though, all he wanted to do was get out of here, find T'Pol and lock the damned door. There were too many damned people here, constantly watching him and waiting for him to do something that he didn't know how ...

"You mentioned in your report that you thought the Romulans were responsible for destroying the comm-buoys we left behind?" Jon's question came out of nowhere and, from the way he was intentionally trying to look nonchalant, Trip knew something was up. Did he know the truth that T'Pol had remembered linking them to the Vulcans? Tread carefully, Trip reminded himself.

"That's T'Pol's theory, not mine," he said. "She recognized the energy signature from that minefield incident."

"Oh." Once again, Archer made an effort to look uninterested which had the exact opposite result. He was still a terrible liar, Trip mused. The door chirped before the captain could speak again and Trip tried not to feel a stab of relief at the interruption. Why was this so hard? "Enter," Jon called out, his own expression one that looked guilty.

"You wanted to know when we were within range of a communications buoy, sir," Malcolm said as he stepped through the hatch. He was tense, eyeing Trip warily with the same sort of caution Tucker remembered from his youth when his brother dared him to harass the sleeping alligators. Reflexes honed to razor-sharp fineness by Taskmaster T'Pol had already taken over his own muscles and Trip realized that he sitting awkwardly, poised on the verge of action. He'd already taken note of a half dozen ways to get out of this vulnerable position should his opponent make even the slightest move toward him – there was a PADD on Archer's desk within easy reach; thrown accurately, it would slow Reed down just long enough for Trip overbalance his chair so he could fall backwards and roll to his feet. From there, he could …

Stop. This is Malcolm. He's not a threat.

But he was. Reed was watching him warily, the exact same kind of calculations flickering in his eyes. They stared at one another, each struggling to contain the instincts that were screaming about the potential threat only a handful of steps away. Trip's heart began to beat faster – logically, he knew that Malcolm wouldn't attack first, but those hard months of constant action, of having to constantly walk the tightrope of absolute awareness and readiness ... it was so very hard to flip the switch and turn those reflexes off. Trip did not feel safe here, not without T'Pol present and backing his every move, and his discomfort was only ramping up the urge to do something…
Thankfully, the universe took mercy on him and Jon's computer beeped.

"This is Archer," he said. Trip did not recognize the voice that responded.

"Sir, we have a priority one transmission from Starfleet Command marked your eyes only." Jon sighed.

"I'll take it here." He glanced up. "Sorry to cut this short, gentlemen…"

"It's fine," Trip said as he stood quickly. Malcolm very nearly took a step back from him, but arrested the motion, and Trip gave him another quick look. "I should check back in with Phlox anyway," Tucker added, seizing the first thing that came to mind as an excuse.

"I'll see you there, Commander," Reed offered as he triggered the door release. "I apologize," Malcolm added the moment they were alone in the turbolift. "You're wired and still in survival mode." His insight was a little surprising and Trip inhaled carefully, mentally cycling through one of T'Pol's breathing exercises. He felt control returning but found he could not quite fully relax in Malcolm's presence. This is ridiculous.

"Yes," he agreed after a moment. "This does still feel a little like a dream to me." He felt Malcolm's glance and started to tense up again. Dammit. This was going to get old really fast.

"The subcommander taught you well," Reed stated as he returned his gaze to the closed doors. "Suus Mahna?" he guessed.

"With a bit of Krav Maga that the Vulcans absolutely insist they did not steal from humanity," Trip replied wryly. For a moment, things were as they used to be and Malcolm offered the tight smile Tucker remembered, but it passed too quickly and they stood in awkward silence the rest of the way to G Deck.

"Are the guest quarters to your liking?" Malcolm asked as the door whisked open. "As first officer, it is my duty to ensure you are comfortable and I thought you would appreciate the aft guest quarters for the view of the nacelles." Trip paused in mid-step – there had been a knowing tone to Reed's question – and glanced over his shoulder.

"I'm sure they're fine," he replied, knowing but not caring that his response implied he hadn't bothered setting foot in the aft cabin, before resuming his stride. "Say hello to Amanda for me."

Despite his desperate urge to move faster, to get to the forward cabin that he and T'Pol were sharing were he knew he'd feel at least partially safe, Trip forced himself to keep to his normal pace. His skin felt too tight and he paused each time he passed a door just long enough to ensure that it was completely sealed and no surprises were lurking on the other side. When the door slid shut behind him and he saw T'Pol sitting upon the floor in front of the small couch, Trip felt relief blast through him so powerfully that both of them staggered slightly. He glanced down in irritation when she very briefly opened her eyes to look at him, and then quickly stepped closer. Taking a seat in front of her, Trip concentrated on his breathing. Why was this so damned difficult? All of their efforts had been intended to get back here but it was taking every gram of concentration to talk to other people without panicking.

"I too am finding it difficult to readjust," T'Pol said softly.

"It shouldn't be this hard," he muttered. T'Pol tilted her head slightly and gave him that non-smile of
hers.

"We will adapt," she stated calmly.

Trip hoped she was right.
Soval: Vulcan Discussions

Chapter Notes

31 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's late January, 2154.

Despite his career, Soval loathed diplomatic gatherings.

He found them utterly illogical, senseless wastes of time that accomplished little beyond existing as events allowing the participants to preen and pose in front of aides and fellow bureaucrats, all the while pretending they were more important than they truly were. As an ambassador, he'd made a point of attending such gatherings as rarely as possible and, when duty required his presence, he inevitably arranged for an 'emergency' to come up as soon as possible that would require him to leave. T'Pol had excelled at generating creative excuses and her absence was keenly missed.

According to the original plan, this particular gathering was intended to be official recognition and honoring of the two Starfleet crews that had been invaluable during the recent Kir'shara crisis but, as was so often the case since the establishment of the new High Council, it quickly transformed into yet another minor crisis thanks to Minister T'Pau successfully alienating even those most open to Vulcan interests. It should have been anticipated or even expected – as an adherent to Syrran's teachings, she had earned a reputation not as a politician, but as an extremist and a hardline logician. She'd undertaken the kolinahr ceremony at a very early age and had been elevated to the rank of master even before her fourth decade, so as a result, she'd never bothered learning important elements necessary for a successful leader, namely diplomacy. As far as T'Pau was concerned, there were two ways to accomplish a task: her way and the wrong way. Such an all or nothing mindset was exactly the wrong one to possess as a leader.

T'Pau was in rare form today. In addition to making several offhand comments to Admiral Forrest that could be (and were) perceived as implying incompetence at the highest ranks of Starfleet, she'd also unintentionally insulted both Captain Archer and Captain Hernandez with her remarks about them being fortunate their junior officers were as effective as they were. She topped that with a series of off-the-cuff statements to other human officers that immediately caused offense, though she failed to even notice the foul looks that followed her wherever she went. And that was all before she was scheduled to speak the public.

"We cannot allow her to address the human journalists," V'Lar mused. She was watching T'Pau with a critical eye, though Soval suspected that she was actually more interested in the damage left in the minister's wake. There were irritated expressions, scowls, dark muttering … no. They could not allow T'Pau's abject disinterest in anything resembling diplomacy to cause further strife, not if they were going to salvage Vulcan's tattered relationship with Earth.

"She will not." Skon, the new ambassador to Earth following Tos' unceremonial dismissal (and imprisonment due to his Romulan connections, though few knew this fact), straightened his robes with one hand. "In exactly two minutes, word will reach her of a crisis on the homeworld that requires her immediate attention." He quirked an eyebrow. "Apparently," Skon continued in a dry tone, "certain elements in the reform government vehemently disagree on how best to disseminate the Kir'shara to our colony worlds." Soval gave the younger ambassador an approving nod – that was
exactly the sort of thing that T'Pau was best at handling.

"We will need to … how do the humans phrase it?" V'Lar tilted her head slightly. "Conduct damage control?"

"It has been my experience," Soval said flatly, "that humans react best to honesty. Ensure they are aware that we too are struggling to adapt to Minister T'Pau's … unconventional leadership style."

"Is that wise?" Skon was frowning. "It implies a lack of stability within our government."

"Human governments are never stable," Soval pointed out. "Show them that we are experiencing the same kinds of transitional difficulties they face following every election and you will find them more willing to give us the latitude we need to mend the damage caused by poorly chosen words." Both ambassadors considered his remarks before signaling in their own ways that they would defer to his superior understanding of humanity. By all rights, Skon's position should be his and, in fact, T'Pau had offered a reinstatement to his previous role, but for reasons Soval could not adequately verbalize, he had declined. Surak's condemnation of his failures continued to ring in his ears and until he understood why the Father of Logic considered him corrupted by the system, he had no plans to reclaim a true position of authority.

Exactly on schedule, T'Pau's aides hurried to her side and, twenty seconds later, she swept from the room without bothering to explain her departure. Soval swallowed a sigh of irritation – her focus was admirable, but would it physically pain her to learn some social niceties? – before advancing on Admiral Forrest. Behind him, the other two ambassadors spread out, with Skon making for the Earth president while V'Lar descended upon a quartet of irritated-looking admirals.

Nearly an hour passed before Soval was able to excuse himself from the gathering. He left behind a dozen of vaguely amused humans who had, upon hearing his initial apology for the minister's lack of social grace, nodded their understanding, usually right before launching into unlikely stories about similar incidents they'd personally witnessed or experienced with well-meaning but highly positioned amateurs. Passing through the doorway, Soval paused, grimacing very slightly at the crisp air that greeted him. Officially, it was still summer here in Geneva, but to him, the temperature was far too cold. He missed Vulcan.

"Greetings, Ambassador." The woman who fell into step alongside him was a surprise – he knew T'Les was planetside but he'd certainly not expected to see her here – and Soval hesitated for a long moment, unsure how best to respond. Their last interactions had been strained to put it kindly.

"Professor," he greeted calmly. "It is agreeable to see you." T'Les gave him a look that he could not quite decipher – was she amused, irritated or simply disinterested as she appeared?

"Might I have a few moments of your time?" she asked. "It regards my … late husband." Ah. So T'Pol had spoken to her mother about her theory. Soval inclined his head slightly.

"Of course." They walked in silence for a moment. "I presume your daughter has spoken to you." T'Les' expression tightened.

"She has. I find her arguments … compelling."

"As do I." Soval exhaled. "Forgive me for saying this, but I find this sort of action exactly the kind of thing your husband would consider logical."
"You are simply stating the truth," T'Les said. "I can take no offense to that." She looked at him. "I wished to inquire as to whether the government possessed insight regarding his actions."

"Not that I am aware," Soval replied immediately. He hesitated, then pressed on, once more opting for honesty rather than prevarication. "I have made inquiries but no additional information has been made available to me." He pursed his lips. "I will continue my efforts."

"That would be … appreciated, Ambassador." Neither spoke for a long moment but, to Soval's mild surprise, it was not awkward. "I am … concerned about my daughter's mental well-being." T'Les said in a very tense voice. She looked straight ahead, refusing to look at him, and Soval followed her example. "Certain of her … associations are … troubling."

"You refer, of course, to Commander Tucker." A flicker of emotion flashed across T'Les' face but was gone nearly before he saw it.

"I do." T'Les nearly frowned, then evidently thought better of it. "I will concede that Commander Tucker is not entirely unpleasant, but … I am … concerned about how T'Pol's … association with him will affect her future."

Inwardly, Soval winced. He did not know how to respond without offending the woman next to him or insulting her daughter. To his very great surprise, he was also rather leery about insulting the human in question – in the fourteen days since T'Pol and Commander Tucker rejoined Enterprise, Soval had been consistently impressed with the human's adoption of many Vulcan traits. Gone was the wildly exuberant and overly emotional young man he'd been when Soval first met him, and in his place was a calm, calculating, intelligent sentient who knew when to stand aside and when to speak. If only it had not also led to T'Pol's strange behavior…

"I am unsure if I am qualified to comment on any … relationship your daughter might have with the commander," he said after a long moment of contemplation. T'Les lifted an eyebrow.

"I trust your wisdom," she said, her words and tone eerily similar to that of her daughter's. Soval fought the urge to sigh.

"May I speak frankly?" he asked after another long moment. T'Les nodded. "While I was aboard Enterprise, I overheard much discussion about your daughter and the commander." He frowned and let T'Pol's mother see it. "There were many theories, of course, but to his credit, the commander refused to comment on the nature of his relationship with Subcommander T'Pol, even when interacting with those he was once closest to." Soval frowned again – why was he defending Tucker? Was it because the temporal agent Daniels had hinted at this prior to the beginning of the Xindi mission, thus giving him more time to grow accustomed to the idea? Or was it because he had witnessed firsthand how isolated from his fellow humans Commander Tucker had become thanks to his relationship with T'Pol? "I cannot advise you about how to proceed, Professor," he said carefully, "but I will say that, having interacted with the commander, I am suitably impressed with his capabilities."

T'Les was silent for a very long time. They continued their slow stride through the streets of Geneva, flanked by a trio of exceptionally skilled Vulcan commandos whose sole purpose was to ensure that Soval did not encounter trouble, especially from the more vocal xenophobes among humanity. Soval had grown so accustomed to the silent bodyguards that he only rarely gave their presence any thought.

"He is human," T'Les stated softly. Her expression was conflicted and Soval thought he knew the
crux of her dilemma: she wanted her daughter to be content, no matter how that state of being came about, but remained concerned that an emotional, reckless, youthful human was incapable of providing what T'Pol needed. It was an understandable worry given Earth's history.

"Have you interacted with the commander?" Soval asked cautiously. This was treading dangerously close to intimate family matters. "He is not an altogether unpleasant individual."

"At the moment, I cannot." T'Les' expression flattened out into irritation once more. "T'Pol accompanied him to ... Pinnamuh City?"

"Panama City," Soval corrected. "It is a city in Florida, located in North America, where the commander is from, I believe." They rounded a corner and began the long journey back toward the government compound.

"Yes. That is the place." T'Les nearly scowled. "This is her father's fault," she muttered. "He allowed her too much leniency as a child and encouraged her to daydream when she should have been focusing on control." Wisely, Soval kept silent. He did not think it would be an especially brilliant move on his part to state that he found T'Pol to be very much like her mother in terms of temperament and personality. "Advise me, old friend," T'Les said abruptly. "Should I be pleased or irate at the thought of his survival?"

"You did not sense his death through the bond?" Soval asked hesitantly. At this, T'Les glanced away.

"We were wed but I never touched his katra," she said simply. Such a revelation caused Soval to nearly stumble – he well recalled T'Les in her youth and how enthusiastically she'd approached marriage. To not bond with her … that was unconscionable and patently illogical. He felt a surge of contempt for his onetime friend.

"I would say … irate." He frowned. "Abandoning one's mate and child in such a way is illogical." And immoral, he almost added. It took a conscious bit of effort to rein in his irritation at the male in question and, by the sidelong glance T'Les gave him, he was not as successful as he'd have liked. "I regret that I must return to San Francisco, Professor," Soval said. "May I escort you to your lodgings?"

"I have none in this city," T'Les replied. "I came here solely to seek your counsel." At that, Soval blinked. He suppressed the surprise, however, and simply nodded.

"Then if it is agreeable to you," he said, "I will invite you to join me on my shuttle back to the Vulcan compound."

"It is." T'Les narrowed her eyes slightly. "And this will give you the opportunity to tell me everything you know about Commander Tucker."

This time, Soval did sigh. It was going to be a long trip.
Trip: Sisterly Interventions

Chapter Notes

876 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's September, 2154. This chapter happens mostly concurrently with the previous one.

He found T'Pol exactly where he expected her to be.

Picking his way across the sandy beach, Trip took a seat alongside her, noting how she barely reacted beyond a subtle flicker of her eyes in his direction. She continued to stare silently at the dark ocean, breathing slowly and regularly as she watched the waves wash up onto the sand. It almost made him smile – he recalled her doing something quite similar during their brief exile on that Ekosian island so very long ago – but he was too tired from his latest round of social conflict to do more than exhale angrily.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" his father had demanded in a confused voice. "You don't smile or laugh. Hell, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were a goddamned Vulcan!" It was only the most recent such conversation and the irritation at having to explain – or at least try to explain – was rapidly driving him insane. Why was it so hard for people to understand that life had gone on for him too? Bad enough that half of them looked at him like he was some sort of freak for even being with T'Pol …

"I am sorry," the subject of his musing said abruptly. To anyone but him, her expression would have been called detached but he could see the turmoil there which shouldn't have surprised him. After all, she was experiencing the same sort of reaction from those of her species. Hell, her own mother had been visibly appalled when T'Pol introduced him.

"Not your fault," Trip replied. "I'm just as guilty as you are." He smirked. "If you want to take all of the blame, though, I'm okay with that." She lifted an eyebrow before allowing her own lips to curve up slightly.

"I will accept the blame when we interact with your family," T'Pol said wryly, "if you do the same with T'Les." Trip blinked.

"Are you insane?" he asked softly. "Your mother scares the hell out of me!" They shared a brief, vaguely amused look and Trip leaned back in the sand, simply enjoying the warm sensation in the back of his mind that was T'Pol's affection. It was better than a laugh or a smile, but for the life of him, he couldn't figure out how to actually explain it to his family without going into details they didn't need to know about. He'd never really thought of the Tuckers as bigots – his brother was married to another man, after all, and his older sister claimed she was a witch in the service of the Earth-Mother Gaia, whatever the hell that meant – but right now, he just wanted to hit them all with large, heavy rocks. The way they looked at him or, even worse, the way they watched T'Pol with suspicion and distrust in their eyes … God, it made him furious. He swallowed the irritation, pushed it down, and made a brief mental note to check in with Phlox at the next available moment about how to handle this. As the doctor had pointed out during the last horribly in depth examination, emotion suppression was fine for Vulcans but wasn't a good option for a human. The last thing he
needed to do was to get an ulcer or give himself a heart attack from stress.

"I received a communication from Fleet Command," T'Pol said moments later. She had slipped back into her native tongue. "They have expressed a desire to debrief you regarding your work on the T'Muna-Doth." Trip nodded.

"I got the same request," he replied, also in Vulcan. "Starfleet Command sent a follow-up to me and I read between the lines; seems like the Admiralty almost wants me to outright refuse to meet with them." He frowned slightly – the tension between Earth and Vulcan was almost tangible these days and he still didn't know what it was all about. From a few overheard conversations and a bit of digging into the official record, he suspected it was the High Command's utter lack of assistance during the Xindi mess but all of those fascists had been kicked out or thrown in prison.

"Will you?" For the first time since he'd joined her on the beach, T'Pol turned to look at him.

"Ignore their request? No." Trip offered her a very tiny shrug. "I have never been to Vulcan. I would like to see your homeworld." A sudden flare of raw emotion – approval, desire, happiness, worry – pulsed across their magical connection and he smirked at the sheepish glint that flickered in T'Pol's eyes at her momentary loss of control. "I will need a native guide, of course."

"Of course." T'Pol returned her attention to the sea. "Mother has extended an invitation to both of us as well." This time, there was no denying her wariness and Trip briefly considered asking her when she'd spoken to T'Les. As far as he knew, the last time they'd chatted was before he and T'Pol left San Francisco to come here. He discarded the question almost before it occurred to him.

"Here you are." Lizzie's voice was, as usual, louder than it had any right to be for such a tiny little woman, and Trip glanced up to watch his sister stomp through the sand. It never ceased to amuse him that, for someone born and raised in Florida, she'd never been able to master the skill of walking across a beach without kicking sand everywhere. When they were growing up, he'd called her Lizzie Kong as a result, thought he'd always wanted to find a way to work in Godzilla in a way that wasn't hard to say. Lizilla just didn't flow…

"Here I am," he replied without moving from where he reclined. He felt T'Pol tense slightly, but Lizzie surprised him again.

"I did not mean to interrupt," she said in surprisingly fluent Vulcan. "If this is an awkward time, then…"

"No," T'Pol interjected, watching Lizzie with no real expression on her face. "Commander Tucker and I were not discussing anything private."

"Commander, huh?" Lizzie smirked slightly at Trip as she took a seat in front of both of them. "On behalf of my ignorant family," she continued, once more addressing T'Pol, "I wish to apologize for the confusing reception you have received." Trip blinked – what the hell was this? The Elizabeth Tucker he remembered was a combative little brat who had to be dragged kicking and screaming to anything resembling an apology! "Since the attack on Earth by the Xindi," Lizzie continued, "there has been an unfortunate increase in xenophobic sentiment and to my great dismay, my family … our family has not escaped these illogical beliefs."

"There is no offense where none is taken," T'Pol replied slowly. Her eyes flickered to Trip – he could feel her surprise and offered a slight shrug – before returning to Lizzie. "I must congratulate you on your mastery of my native language," she said, returning to English.
"It's better than mine," Trip offered.

"As is her English," T'Pol added.

"If you keep this up," Trip said, "I'm going to go rent a boat and take you out on the ocean." T'Pol gave him a look. "And it'll be a little boat so you can really feel the waves underneath you. All of the waves. Including the really big ones. Maybe we might get lucky and find a squall to sit out."

"When we arrive on Vulcan," T'Pol retaliated, "I will arrange for you to attend a kolinahr ceremony."

Lizzie winced at that, though she kept smiling and her eyes were dancing. From what he'd read about such ceremonies, Trip suspected he'd be bored senseless and there was nothing worse than a bored engineer.

"Détente?" he offered and T'Pol accepted with a slight nod.

"Why are you two going to Vulcan?" Lizzie asked when it became clear they weren't going to continue.

"Debriefing," Trip said. "The High Command is probably…"

"High Council." T'Pol corrected softly.

"...worried that I'm going to reveal all of their secrets from working on a Vulcan starship phased out of service forty years ago."

"Thirty-nine," T'Pol interjected. Trip gave her an irritated look that she returned blandly.

"It's nothing major," he told Lizzie. A flicker of emotion with a distinctive alien taste to it momentarily caused him to falter – so, T'Pol was a little worried. Maybe it was major after all – but he easily concealed it from view. "When did you start speaking Vulcan?" he asked in a blatant change of subject.

"When I visited there," his sister replied. Her good cheer suddenly looked forced. "A little bit after you got yourself killed in action," she added tightly. "I wanted to study the buildings, see if I could incorporate some of the features in my designs."

They sat there for some time, with Lizzie somehow managing to make T'Pol (and Trip himself, if he was honest) feel more welcome than at any time since they'd returned to Earth. His sister asked questions about everything, though she somehow knew where to draw the line in regards to her line of inquiry. Anything that remotely touched on the relationship between him and T'Pol was off-limits and Lizzie respected that … or at least she did a really good job at faking respect. Trip knew her well enough to see that she desperately wanted to ask some things that neither he nor T'Pol would be comfortable answering. She even managed to hold her tongue when Trip shucked his jacket and draped it over T'Pol's shoulders without asking for permission once the sun started to go down and the temperature dipped dramatically.

"Are you coming back to the house?" Lizzie asked once night had fully set in. All along the beach, lights activated, illuminating the stretch of sand well enough that even T'Pol could navigate without trouble. Her discomfort with the darkness seeped across their mental connection, though, and Trip knew she wouldn't be comfortable until they were indoors again.
"No," Trip said flatly. He was still seething over a couple of things he'd overheard – his brother and dad discussing ways to 'deprogram' him, or his mother complaining about not wanting her friends to know about Trip's 'weird fetish for alien women' – and knew that if he did step back through the door of his parents' home, he would say or do some things that he would regret. T'Pol glanced at him and he could taste her sudden worry.

"What should I tell dad?" Lizzie asked. She looked about as uncomfortable as T'Pol did. Trip shrugged.

"You know what? I don't really care right now."

"Trip." T'Pol placed one hand on his arm, only intensifying their magical connection, but he ignored her concern.

"You heard the kind of crap they were saying," he said. "If I go back in there, I'm going to punch him in the face."

"Trip, you have to understand, the Xindi attack … a lot of people are really angry and scared right now." Lizzie didn't look like she fully believed the excuse but, to her credit, she was making the effort. That didn't surprise him either – she'd always been a better person than he was.

"And that gives them the right to take it out on T'Pol?" All of the anger and frustration he'd been suppressing since he first woke up aboard Challenger and started dealing with everyone looking at him like he was doing something wrong with T'Pol bubbled forth. "Newsflash: she wasn't even on Earth when a completely different alien species decided to attack us." He scowled. "And if she had, I know her well enough to know that she'd been one of the first people to throw themselves in the fire to save as many lives as she could. But because she's not human, the … the bigots in our family look at her like she's some sort of thing!" He crossed his arms. "So to hell with them. I don't need that kind of crap in my life."

"Trip." This time, T'Pol sounded pained and, all at once, he could feel how his flash of rage had washed over her. Closing his eyes, he turned away and concentrated on the sound of the ocean. Breathe in, breathe out. Be the water. Calm and relaxed. "Please inform your parents that Starfleet Command summoned your brother back to headquarters for further debriefings."

"Yeah." Lizzie's voice was soft and sad. "That sounds believable." She was silent for a long moment but Trip barely noticed. He was too busy trying to be water, to be calm and placid and not ready to rip someone's damned arm off and beat them to death with it. "I'm sorry," she said. "The two of you deserve better than this."

"We will adapt, Ms. Tucker," T'Pol replied.

"Call me Lizzie. Or if that's too much, Elizabeth will do."

"Elizabeth." Even with his eyes closed, Trip could feel her move. It would be the ta'al, he knew. "If it is agreeable," T'Pol said slowly, hesitantly, in Vulcan. "I would instead refer to you as the sister of my husband." Trip could almost hear Lizze's sharp inhalation.

"I would be honored," she said in a breathless voice. "Go," Lizzie said a heartbeat later. Her smile could be heard in her voice. "I'll work on the family here. You go handle the numbskull there."

"Numb … skull?" T'Pol sounded alternately confused and bordering on actual laughter.
"As I understand it," Lizzie added, "he was dropped on his head a lot when he was a baby." Startled confusion coursed through their bond, though T'Pol almost immediately realized that it was a joke if he understood the sensations that followed.

"Are you well?" she asked softly once Lizzie had departed. Trip blew out a frustrated breath.

"Evidently not," he replied. "Sorry about that. Didn't mean to lose my temper."

"We will adapt," T'Pol repeated. She shifted closer to him. "I do not wish you to sever ties with your family because of me."

"You're not the problem," Trip pointed out sourly. He took her hand, interlaced his fingers with hers, and smiled softly at the frisson of illicit enjoyment he felt pulse off her. "Come on," he said. "Let's get out of here."
T'Les: Human Reactions

Chapter Notes

891 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's October, 2154.

Nothing was transpiring as she had anticipated.

When she'd extended the invitation to T'Pol and her ... companion, T'Les had expected events would play out in a specific sequence: the commander, in an effort to ensure she thought highly of him, would graciously decline, thus trapping her daughter in a web of familial duty that would ensure T'Les had the opportunity to convince her daughter of the illogical decision she'd made. When Commander Tucker instead appeared alongside T'Pol at the starport instead, dressed not as a Starfleet officer but as a civilian, T'Les had legitimately experienced a flash of panic. She knew little about the needs of a human! Could he even survive the thinner air of her homeworld? Here, on Earth, it was a struggle for her to keep from choking – Soval had wryly referred to it as drowning in soup, which she had to admit was an apt if admittedly macabre analogy – so she suspected that Tucker would experience similar difficulties on Vulcan.

Still, he was adequately pleasant and personable with her during their long transit, maintaining a distance that was completely at odds with what she had been prepared for. The commander seemed intelligent and wise enough to give her the distance she found necessary to acclimatize to his presence. According to the crew of the transport, he was also quite competent with regards to his chosen field. When their reactor faltered due to overuse – thanks to the radical reshuffling of the Vulcan fleet, there were apparently an insufficient number of talented engineers available to ensure proper maintenance – Mister Tucker assumed command of the repairs at once, directing the transport's crew expertly and handling the worst of the damage himself. The one time he displayed emotion was when the transport commander attempted to countermand his instructions, but T'Pol had promptly interjected herself at that point. Her rank was superior to the ship captain, which allowed her to displace him until they reached Vulcan.

Ahead of schedule despite what should have apparently been crippling damage.

Once on Vulcan, Mister Tucker had alternated his time in briefings at Fleet Command – through several of her associates at the Science Academy, T'Les had learned that he refused Starfleet's attempt to appoint him legal counsel and instead answered every single question posed to him that was of a technical nature; there were even rumors he'd offered several suggestions for upgrades to standard designs that were being evaluated for efficacy – or with T'Pol, touring the planet with great interest. When he was in her home, T'Les found him to be an unexpectedly appealing guest. He helped with the cleaning, repaired certain of her appliances that had begun to fail, and, in general, was as unobtrusive as possible. There was only one real negative aspect to him that continued to haunt T'Les.

She liked him.

T'Les could only admit that strange emotional reaction to herself while in the privacy of her own room, but it was utterly undeniable. He was pleasant, intelligent, and very obviously cherished T'Pol.
with an intensity T'Les had never before witnessed. Had he been a Vulcan, she would have been quite pleased that her daughter had chosen such an individual as her life partner.

Unfortunately, he was not Vulcan and, while T'Les herself was learning to look past such a minor flaw in his existence, there were many who could not. Over the last several weeks, as Mister Tucker and T'Pol had done an exceptional job of convincing her that perhaps her concerns were misplaced, the unwanted scrutiny that the two received from other Vulcans began to wear on them. Curiously, it was not Mister Tucker who was the more uncomfortable of the two, but rather T'Pol. The flashes of emotion that were now so close to the surface appeared more and more frequently, and each time they did, T'Pol drew even more attention. It all added up to a terrible realization: Vulcan was no longer T'Pol's home.

None of that mattered at the moment, however, and T'Les had pushed all of her concerns away as she strove for her whitespace. The formal Writ of Demand from Kolak had arrived early and, even now, sat unopened on the floor before her. She knew what was within – Kolak had petitioned a senior arbiter of justice to ensure that T'Pol lived up to her part in the marriage contract which had been arranged so very long ago. It mattered not to him that Koss had no desire to wed T'Pol – according to everything T'Les had been able to learn, he was quite content in his relationship with Junior Diplomatic Attaché T'Pel, which likely meant he too was being pressured into this – or that T'Les had already made the proper restitution to his family for a broken contract. She should have anticipated this. Former Minister Kolak was one of the very few of V'Las' regime who had not been imprisoned and now he was likely seeking any means to hold onto power. T'Pol was well known among their people and tying his family to her was … logical.

But still, it offended her sense of morality.

If Kolak was as desperate as T'Les feared, the Writ would be worded in such a way that any attempt to circumvent it outside the Challenge would result in T'Les forfeiting all of her assets as well as her reputation. She felt the first hints of rage crack the icy control she had spent a lifetime erecting and fought to contain it. No, she did not entirely approve of her daughter's … relationship with Mister Tucker – Charles, she told herself; his name was Charles – but by Surak, it was T'Pol's choice!

"Mother." T'Les could hear the same rage she was experiencing in T'Pol's voice and she opened her eyes. Exactly as she feared, her daughter stood in the doorway, an unsealed Writ of Demand in one hand and open fury on her face. "You have read this … drivel?" T'Les raised an eyebrow.

"I have not," she replied, somehow managing to maintain her own control. "Though I suspect I know what is within."

"I will not bond with that male," T'Pol hissed, her eyes hot. "I already have a mate!" T'Les raised an eyebrow at that.

"T'Pol," she began, but her daughter had already whirled away and stormed out. By the time T'Les managed to reach her feet, T'Pol had already departed through the front door.

To her surprise, however, T'Les discovered Mister Tucker was still here.

He was sitting upon the stone bier in her garden, legs crossed and hood up to protect from the merciless sun. T'Les was unsure when he'd donned garments more appropriate to the environment, but she realized that she was pleased. With the hood drawn up as it was, one could almost think he was a Vulcan, particularly when one recognized the nature of the breathing exercises he was undertaking. A single look at his face and the emotion that kept appearing there would break the
illusion as no Vulcan would allow themselves to be seen thus in public. No, that was not correct. T'Pol had made no attempts to conceal her rage.

"Ma'am," Tucker said with a slight nod. He grimaced for some reason but did not make an attempt to rise.

"I presume that you are aware of what transpired?" T'Les watched him, half expecting him to lose his temper as the High Command propaganda concerning humanity had said, but he did not. Instead, he nodded.

"T'Pol is being blackmailed into marrying Koss," he said. "They're using your well-being as leverage … which is pretty low, even for a lawyer." T'Les raised an eyebrow, momentarily confused before she recalled that the humans referred to their arbiters as such. "I guess they didn't take kindly to the first time she said no, did they?"

"Minister … former Minister Kolak did not." She momentarily wondered if this human was the reason her daughter had terminated the initial contract but quickly decided that she did not want to know. "With the dissolution of the previous regime," T'Les added, "he seeks an alternate means to maintain power."

"Through T'Pol." Tucker flinched again – why was he doing that? She could see nothing causing him pain – before exhaling bitterly. "On Earth, we have a saying: power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." T'Les tilted her head slightly – it was a logical assertion, even with Vulcans – and was about to remark on the accuracy of his statement when he spoke again. "Kolak isn't going to let this go, is he?" There was steel in his voice. Steel and concern and tightly controlled rage.

"He will not." T'Les allowed her control to slip fractionally and sighed. "It would be safer for you to return home, Commander." Charles looked up at her.

"T'Pol is my home, ma'am." This time, she heard sadness and a weariness that seemed infinite. "I will do whatever I must to ensure her safety," he added, a hardness returning to his words that nearly caused her to shiver. T'Les gave him another look and Tucker met her eyes. She saw no weakness there, no fear or worry, only a barely contained rage that called to the same fury swimming in her katra. In this moment, he was no mere human. No, he was an unstoppable force, a cyclone of implacable wrath that sensed an interloper trying to steal away his mate. Every Vulcan knew what came of such madness. Once unleashed, there would be no mercy.

T'Les retreated.

She was still kneeling upon her meditation pad, struggling to contain the wild thoughts coursing through her mind, when T'Pol returned. To see a human undone by the very same emotions that all Vulcans fought against … it could mean only one thing and T'Les did not know how she should react. Knowing that her daughter was legitimately bonded to a mate changed everything, even if the courts, in all of their ponderous wisdom, had still not officially weighed in on the matter of bonds in regards to marriage ceremonies. The Kir'shara was explicit in what Surak had thought but the centuries of bureaucracy that had been put into place were only gradually being torn down. It would be years until a telepathic mating bond was officially recognized as a legal marriage …

The sound of voices momentarily roused her interest. She recognized T'Pol, of course, and had grown attuned to Charles' voice since their arrival that he was easily identified as well, but the acoustics of her home were inadequate to carry sound well enough to understand what was being said. T'Pol was still quite emotional from the volume of her words, but her mate's calm, measured
responses were oddly reassuring. T'Les blinked. Mate. She had used the word as identification for the commander. How very interesting.

"We have differences," Surak said. "May we, together, become greater than the sum of both of us." Was it truly that simple? T'Pol had never been at peace here on Vulcan. Could Charles bring her that peace?

The sounds continued, then abruptly transformed to a far different set that T'Les recognized at once. Her eyes widened and she flushed verdant at the carnal noises emerging from her daughter's bedchamber. She considered herself strong, but there were some things that even a strong woman had to flee from and she rose quickly to her feet. Once outside the house and seated upon the stone bier that she'd observed Charles upon, she was able to block out errant sounds and concentrate on control. Amusement washed over the mortification and T'Les made silent plans to find a way to humiliate her daughter over this loss of control. That was her right as a mother, was it not?

She meditated for a time but when she reached no conclusions, re-entered her blissfully silent home and retrieved her personal communication device. Soval was on Vulcan to address the new High Council and he had promised to answer her call should she require his assistance. He was competent and knowledgeable about Vulcan law; hopefully, he might even have some suggestions about how to respond to this latest attack upon her family. T'Les glanced at the wall chronometer and frowned. The hour was growing late. She would need a shawl … but could she risk passing her daughter's room, knowing as she did that the door to it never stayed shut?

A desire for warmth won out and she crept to her quarters and retrieved the shawl. As she passed T'Pol's room, curiosity turned her head and T'Les froze in mid-step. For a long moment, she found herself utterly unable to tear her eyes away from the tableau before her.

T'Pol and Charles were both asleep and, though they had drawn a light sheet up to cover them, there was no way for her to not realize they were nude but that was not what struck her. Her daughter's mate was more muscular than she had expected, but that also was not what stole her breath. Nor was it the intimate but protective way he held T'Pol: chest to chest, with T'Pol's head tucked underneath his chin while his arms wrapped around her. No, what tore something free deep within T'Les' chest was the peaceful serenity on her daughter's face. Never before had she ever seen T'Pol look so … content. Never.

Once again, T'Les retreated. This time, however, her face was set and her mood resolute. There was no way she was going to allow this farce of a wedding to transpire, even if she had to tear down institutions that had stood since the days of Surak.

Her daughter already had a mate.
Trip: Desert Sun

Chapter Notes

895 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's October, 2154.

IT WAS A lovely day.

Trip stood quietly in the shade, the hood of the robes T'Les had provided him drawn up to protect his head from the fierce sun. He watched silently as Koss' marriage party approached, schooling his body into stillness even though his every instinct was screaming to run to T'Pol, to snatch her away from here and to never stop running. No, there would be time for action very soon and he needed to conserve his energy.

At his side, Ambassador Soval stirred slightly, once more glancing in Trip's direction and frowning very tightly. His presence on Vulcan had been something of a surprise, but over the last four days, the ambassador had been invaluable.

"Professor T'Les has requested that I inquire about your intentions, Commander." The ambassador's voice was calm, measured, but tinged with worry. Trip wondered if Soval knew how much like a dad he sounded in this moment. But then, with how close the ambassador had seemed to be with T'Les recently, maybe that was the wrong question to ask. Maybe Trip should have been asking – for T'Pol's sake, of course – what Soval's intentions were with T'Les.

The thought almost made him smile.

"Offworlders are rarely allowed to witness our ceremonies and we can ill afford an … incident," Soval continued. The wedding ceremony was almost here.

"I will do what is necessary," Trip said cautiously. When Soval frowned very slightly, Trip forced his body to relax even more. "I will do what T'Pol requires of me." That certainly drew notice. Soval turned his head to openly look at him.

"She will choose the Challenge?" Both of Soval's eyebrows climbed. "Commander, are you aware of what this entails?"

"When was the last time," Trip asked softly, "that Koss has touched a lirpa?" He could see the man in question and took a moment to evaluate him. Thick but not fat. Heavy with mass, he would be strong but likely not fast, not with the way he plodded forward. He favored his right leg but none of T'Pol's observational techniques hinted at an old injury. This was doable.

"That question is not-"

"Because in the last year," Trip interrupted the ambassador, "I've killed three Klingons with one." A slight exaggeration – he had defeated them with the lirpa, though only one would have actually died of her wounds – but the point was relevant. From the shift in Soval's expression, he was considering the implications. Finally, he quirked an eyebrow.
"Then I will simply wish you good fortune, Commander." The ambassador stared at him for a moment longer. "T'Pol has chosen well, it seems," he mused softly.

Trip could not possibly imagine a greater compliment than that.

And then, nothing more could be said. The wedding party had arrived, arraying themselves in their proper places. Trip eyed the ceremonial guards carrying the lirpas, noting how all of them appeared bored. This was simply one more onerous duty to carry out. He found former Minister Kolak a moment later – there was enough of a resemblance to his son to recognize their blood relation but where Koss had nothing to make him stand out, the former minister somehow managed to look ferret-like, although Trip knew it might simply be his opinion. Anger started pulsing through him but Trip swallowed it, recognizing the flavor of T'Pol. She too had looked upon Kolak and the tightly controlled fury swimming in her belly required considerable effort to suppress. It still burned that, despite being cured, she still struggled with some emotions thanks to some permanent damage. When their moods matched, it was even worse as his anger would bounce off hers, intensifying with each moment, and when she was really furious, like right now, it was all he could do to keep from passing out…

There was a moment of confusion – the priest (if that was the proper term) had to respond to Kolak's question regarding Trip's presence and backed T'Pol's right to invite anyone she desired, and then the former minister complained about the extent of the ceremony; Trip bit back a smile the moment he realized that Kolak was uncomfortable with the lirpas present. According to T'Les, it was rare these days for a bride to demand the full trappings, principally because it hinted that she was either what Trip would call high maintenance or intended to call the Challenge. Not surprisingly, many would-be grooms canceled their planned marriages the moment they learned of the trappings necessary.

"What ye are about to witness," the priest began to intone. T'Pol had not budged from where she stood in front of the almost diamond-shaped gong, her face imperious. She watched Koss as if he were a bug or something she would scrape off her shoe. A moment later, her eyes flickered to Trip and he felt her flash of fear and worry and hope.

"Kal-if-fee!" T'Pol snapped, her voice hard and fierce. There was the expected reaction to that – the priest almost recoiled in shock though he might have just been upset at being interrupted – but she did not budge. Trip could not help but to notice how the guards suddenly perked up, truly interested in the goings-on for the first time. Koss appeared startled himself but Kolak was furious.

"T'Pol, thee has chosen the Kal-if-fee, the challenge," the priest intoned. "Thee are prepared to become the property of the victory?" The very notion of someone being owned caused Trip to frown, but he shoved it aside, tried to focus on the now. T'Pol spoke, not even bothering to wait for Koss to accept the Challenge.

"As it was in the dawn of her days," she said, stepping away from the gong, "as it is today, as it will be for all tomorrows, I make my choice." She stopped in front of Trip and their eyes met. "This one."

There were the expected reactions to her selection, but Trip paid it no mind, concentrating instead on preparing mentally for what to come. He stared at Koss, his face as expressionless as he could manage, noting how the other man refused to make eye contact. When the guards approached, bearing the lirpas, Trip accepted the weapon without hesitation. He tested its balance, frowning at its weight before readying himself. The guard raised an eyebrow in surprise at his clear competency before exchanging a look with the other who had brought the lirpa to Koss.
"Point of order," Trip called out, turning slightly to address the priest. "I am wearing a body glove underneath these robes." The priest lifted an eyebrow. "A high-efficiency filter and heat-exchange system. Your environment is a harsh one."

"I see no reason he should be required to remove it," Koss said, more than a little hint of arrogance dripping off his words. He was holding the lirpa awkwardly, as if trying to remember old lessons.

"Then it shall be allowed, Charles, son of Tucker." Trip almost smirked at the improper naming but held it back. Instead, he side-stepped into position and prepared himself. There were so many factors here that needed to be handled delicately. He was confident that his skill and speed were superior, but one solid blow from Koss could shatter bone if properly struck. The heat and atmosphere was even more of a threat – he'd dosed himself with triox the moment he saw the marriage party approach, but it would only last for so long. Already, he could feel sweat trickling down his face from the heat of the merciless sun. Time was his greatest enemy. He would need to strike quickly and aggressively.

"I will regret killing you," Koss said as he lumbered toward his own position. This time, Trip did not make any effort to hide the contemptuous smile he gave the Vulcan.

"May thy knife chip and shatter," Trip retorted, knowing Koss would not recognize the reference.

"Begin," the priest said.

Trip was already in motion.

He threw himself forward, covering the distance in three leaping steps even as Koss was bringing his lirpa to a ready position. At the last moment, just as Koss committed to a wide, decapitating swing, Trip dove to the ground, rolling across the burning sand. His unexpected movement carried him behind Koss and he swung his lirpa, not at a killing height but at his opponent's ankles. The blade sliced through boot and skin and tendon almost as if there was nothing there, and Koss bellowed a startled cry of pain. Lamed, he staggered away, losing his balance and toppling when he misstepped and applied too much weight to his crippled ankle, but by then, Trip was on his feet again. He caught Koss' awkward thrust with his own lirpa and batted it aside, throwing the Vulcan out of position before spinning in place. His grip on his weapon slid – intentionally so – as he allowed inertia and momentum to add power to his strike and Koss was unable to duck out of the way before the blunt end of Trip's lirpa caught him squarely in the head. The sharp crack of the metallic club connecting with flesh echoed loudly.

Koss fell.

And silence descended upon the courtyard.

Trip fast-stepped back away from Koss' unmoving form in case he was feigning unconsciousness and fell into a ready stance. His breath was already coming faster than it should and his body glove was slick with sweat. God, this planet was a furnace. He waited for another long heartbeat, side-stepping around the courtyard until he could see Koss' face. Emerald blood seeped into the sand – it looked as though Trip's blow had broken the Vulcan's jaw as well as his nose – and he could tell that Koss was struggling just to hold onto consciousness. The fight was certainly gone from him though and Trip glanced around.

To his utter lack of surprise, T'Pol was very nearly beaming with pride over the quick, decisive victory of her chosen champion, but what did catch him unprepared was the visible approval he
could see on T'Les' face as she stood beside her daughter. Soval also looked to be satisfied and every single one of the guards – even those that had accompanied Kolak – were eying him with at least a modicum of grudging respect. The priest still seemed bored. But the former minister and the other members of his party looked … horrified. No doubt they had expected to see something very, very different.

"You must finish this, Charles, son of Tucker," the priest intoned. "The Challenge was made and accepted. It must be to the death."

"Not according to the Kir'shara," Trip retorted. He watched with amusement as the priest rocked back – if he'd been bored before, the old man certainly wasn't now. "The wording is clear: the challenge shall continue until one has fallen."

"In this context, fallen has always meant death." The priest was warming to him and Trip fought down another smile. It was just like back home when he intentionally picked arguments with his pastor – every religious leader worth their salt wanted to be challenged so they could convince you how completely wrong you were. Only those that truly lacked the courage of their convictions wished to silence anyone who questioned faith.

"Fallen can mean many things," Trip said. "My opponent has fallen. He cannot continue. Killing him now would be murder." He paused to let that sink in before continuing. "As far as possible, do not kill." Quoting Surak to a Vulcan priest … could this day get any better? "As I cannot return life to those I kill, I wish to be slow in taking life." For a moment, the priest seemed poised to argue. He tilted his head.

"Change is the essential process of all existence," he quoted. "Fascinating." He gestured with one hand and two of the guards – the same ones who had carried the lirpas – advanced upon Koss. They examined him before looking up with bland expressions. "Koss, son of Kolak, is judged fallen. Charles, son of Tucker, thee are considered the victor."

Without a word, without even looking at his son, former Minister Kolak strode away, rage in his eyes even if his face was mostly impassive. Trip watched him depart before holding out the lirpa to the nearest guardsman. The Vulcan glanced at it, then at him.

"As victor," the man said, "this lirpa belongs to you." His eyes flickered to the left, to where T'Pol still stood. "Wield it in defense of your … mate."

"There is a matter of propriety," T'Les stated as she stepped closer to the priest. "My daughter issued the challenge. This male stands victorious." Once again, the priest seemed poised to argue. "The law is clear," T'Les said.

"It is." The old man glanced around, looking at the silent Vulcans who watched and waited. Trip suddenly felt a surge of empathy for the man. He would be setting precedent here.

"Hear me," Trip called out, hoping against hope that he had chosen the correct form. "I have made the ancient claim," he said. T'Pol's eyebrows shot up – the surge of surprise he felt through their magical connection almost made him smile – and even Soval looked stunned that he would dare this so openly. Only T'Les seemed unmoved … but then, she had subtly pointed him in this direction in the first place so that wasn't a big surprise. "The woman T'Pol I claim as my mate. Any who oppose this may face me in combat." God, he hoped everyone 'held their peace.' The sun glared down at him, baking him and burning away any semblance of sanity he might have still possessed.
"The claim is made," the old priest rumbled. He glanced around again. "None contest your claim, Charles, son of Tucker." He turned to T'Pol and waited. She met Trip's eyes and then, without a word, knelt. It as the required act of submission on the part of a Vulcan female which was yet another one of the bizarre elements about this strange alien culture that Trip doubted he would ever fully understand, but it showed to the world that she was accepting his claim on her. He swallowed and approached, shifting the heavy lirpa to his left hand before taking up an identical position in front of her. She extended her hand to him and, with no hesitation at all, Trip followed suit, touching their fingers in the ozh'esta. The bond between them hummed.

"What ye are about to witness comes down from the time of the beginning without change," the priest began, his voice deeper and more expressive than before. But Trip barely heard him.

His eyes were upon his wife.
Jon: Discomfiting Realizations

Chapter Notes

900 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's October, 2154.

Today was turning out to be a terrible day.

_Enterprise_ was in orbit over Vulcan, dispatched her by Starfleet Command to carry Commander Tucker and Subcommander T'Pol back to Earth for the latest debrief regarding their activities while on that Zeon world. Or was it Ekos? He couldn't quite recall. From the tone he perceived in his instructions, Command was pissed about something, though to be honest, it could be anything from Vulcans being Vulcans to Trip eloping with Jon's Vulcan former first officer (if the rumors were true.) Orders were orders, however, and since he was to make 'best speed' back to Earth, Archer was eager to once more get underway.

So naturally, they couldn't locate Trip or T'Pol.

Ambassador Soval had rejoined the crew only hours earlier and had indicated that the two missing officers were likely with Fleet Command, going over something involving that Vulcan ship they'd finally got back in-system. Orbital Control was giving Hoshi the runaround, first directing her to one department and then to another, but she'd indicated that she doubted this was intentional. Rather, it was just one more sign of how badly the post- _Kir'shara_ reforms had gutted what had once been a powerful military.

Retreating to his ready room, Jon stared at the planet below. He was in a really weird mood today and could not quite figure out why. At least part of it was the rash of recent diplomatic assignments that _Enterprise_ had been tasked – they were supposed to be the tip of the spear, out there exploring strange new worlds, but recently, Command had kept the NX-01 close for irritating escort missions or to ferry ambassadors back and forth. Meanwhile, _Challenger_ was out there, seeking out new life and new civilizations. Dammit, that was supposed to be his job, not Erika's.

His continuing discomfort with the new Trip Tucker was also another major component to strange mood. They'd both made the effort but Jon was saddened to learn that he could no longer talk to his old friend the way he used to. It was not either one's fault – Trip obviously still struggled with re-acclimating to large groups of people but Jon's temper, honed to a fine edge during the Xindi campaign, bubbled up at various inopportune times and he still woke screaming from time to time thanks to that Insectoid goop that had rewired his brain for a while. Jon scowled. His friends were alive. That should have been enough. He should have still been giddy over their survival.

But he wasn't.

Sighing angrily, he retook his chair and once again, pulled up the joint report that Trip and T'Pol had issued to both Starfleet Command and the Vulcan High Council. Reading this was like reading the tale of Odysseus struggling to get home after the Trojan War, and Jon inevitably turned to it whenever he was feeling angry or irritated at Trip for changing into the man he currently was. No one could live through these events and _not_ change. Hell, hadn't he himself changed following the
"Xindi attack? He'd done a lot of things he wasn't proud of, things he still lost sleep over or wished he could have done differently, but the past was the past.

"This is Archer," he said when his comm-panel chirped.

"Commander Tucker and Subcommander T'Pol are on their way, sir." Hoshi sounded relieved which was frankly better than the way she usually sounded these days. Not for the first time, Jon wondered if should have discreetly suggested Erika take his communications officer with her when she absconded with Travis. He shoved the thought into a corner. "Estimated time of arrival: nine minutes."

"Thank you, Hoshi." Jon drummed his fingers along his table. "Have a course set for Earth. Once we've got confirmation they're on board, let's get underway."

"Aye, sir."

He was halfway through his latest re-reading of the report – had Trip seriously fought a Klingon named that? Or was he screwing with Starfleet Command? – when Malcolm entered his ready room. The diminutive commander did not even bother buzzing the door, but then, that was fine. They'd found a tolerable equilibrium these days.

"Something on your mind, sir?" Reed asked as he took the seat across from Jon. Enterprise's engines growled as they accelerated to warp speed. "You've been hiding again."

"Have I?" Jon frowned. "Dammit." He shook his head. "Didn't mean to." Malcolm remained silent which was quite possibly his favorite trick at making suspects – or senior officers – talk. "To be honest, I'm a little irritated at these milk runs that Command keeps sending us on."

"I had been wondering about that."

"The official explanation is that we're the most famous human ship in this quadrant and we have a record for resolving trouble spots before they go critical … but I think it's something else." Jon frowned again. "Have you read the latest intel about the xenophobes back home?"

"I have." Malcolm expression was bleak. "It's … troubling."

"I have." Jon said automatically. He wondered for a moment if he wanted them to come back. "Right now, I'm as much in the dark as everyone else. Command hasn't seen fit to even give me a hint." He shook his head. "And speaking of our commanders…"

"Safe and secure, Captain." Malcolm offered a tight smirk. "Doctor Phlox has already scheduled a
detailed check-up to ensure that they did not get themselves into too much trouble while away.” Once, that would have been a joke – Trip and T’Pol had been running neck and neck in the contest over which one of them was the more danger prone – and Jon suspected his first officer was trying to be funny even though he was frankly rather terrible at it, but in the wake of their previous escapades, the attempt at levity fell flat. To his credit, Malcolm realized that immediately, but he clearly didn't know how to recover from some a poorly timed crack. In the end, Jon took pity on him and simply redirected the subject.

"What's the mood concerning their return anyway?" he asked. At this, Reed's expression closed up. Ah. That couldn't be good.

"Conflicted, sir." Malcolm seemed intent on picking his words carefully. "They've been gone for a very long time, Captain. Questions regarding the chain of command will inevitably come up and certain of the junior officers might wonder if we do not have faith in them if they are effectively demoted." He was talking about Taylor, of course.

"Have you read their report?" Jon asked abruptly. "I'm not even sure they want to come back, Malcolm." He glanced away. "But please let the crew know that I am aware of their concerns." Dammit, he really needed to speak with Trip and T'Pol. "Where are they quartered?" he asked.

"Forward guest quarters." Well, that in and of itself said something, didn't it? If they were sharing quarters, it wasn't likely that they were just friends. Oh, Jon had known better for a while now – the itch in his brain that was the lingering after-effects of Surak had finally rattled free, leaving behind a wealth of mostly useless information regarding Vulcan marriages – but as long as he didn't take official note of it, he could easily plead ignorance if Command freaked out.

"All right." Jon stood and Malcolm automatically followed suit. "I plan on inviting them to join me for dinner tonight. I'll try to figure out their plans." If they'll tell me, he added to himself.

"Very good, sir." Commander Reed flashed one of his rare smiles. "With your permission, sir, I would also like to run an unscheduled drill today."

"Which one?"

"I haven't quite decided, sir."

Once Malcolm had left, Jon leaned back in his chair once more. He composed a quick message inviting Trip and T'Pol to dinner and shot it to the guest quarters. And then, like clockwork, he was back to reading their report.
Chapter Notes

920 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's November, 2154.

Days like this made her wonder about the sanity of Starfleet Command.

November in San Francisco was still quite lovely, so Hoshi did not mind terribly that her duties today required her to be here, sitting on a bench outside Headquarters. The sky was clear and blue, after all, and it was pleasant enough that she did not need a jacket. There was even a nice breeze coming in off the bay that, thankfully, did not reek of dead fish and motor oil for a change. So all in all, she’d been in worse places. What did bother her was the nature of the job she’d been tasked to do.

Dressed in surprisingly trendy civilian clothes, Subcommander T’Pol sat alongside her, watching the comings and goings of Starfleet with a dispassionate, almost bored expression. The Vulcan’s hair was short once more – longer than Hoshi recalled it ever being while the subcommander served aboard Enterprise, it was nowhere near what it had been when she and Commander Tucker reappeared. T’Pol was also no longer on the unhealthy side of thin, once more looking to be epitome of health and fitness. Officially, the Vulcan was here on business – Hoshi had heard through the grapevine that Starfleet Intelligence had wanted to speak with her about something – but anyone who actually knew the subcommander could see that she was just killing time without actually looking like that was what she was doing. And that meant she was simply waiting for Trip to get out of his latest briefing with Command.

To her great disgust, Hoshi had been given orders to keep an eye on T’Pol and act as an ‘assistant’ while the subcommander was present at Headquarters. The orders had come from an irritated Malcolm, who had passed them on from a righteously indignant Captain Archer, who had been given the orders by some admiral in Command who clearly needed to retire. Yes, T’Pol was technically a foreign national, but it wasn’t like she was a spy or anything! But orders were orders and Hoshi wasn’t going to lose her commission over something stupid like this …

And the idiot admiral never told her she couldn’t tell T’Pol about her instructions.

With the truth out in the open, it was much easier to talk to the subcommander and Hoshi spent a couple of hours quizzing T’Pol about the Ekosian language that she and Commander Tucker had been forced to learn while stranded on that planet. It was a fascinating language, with enough similarities to human dialects that picking it up was frankly rather easy for Hoshi. She still stumbled over particularly complicated words or concepts, but overall, she was confident that she could at least make herself understood.

Of course, picking it up this easily was one of the reasons Starfleet Command had yet again threatened to transfer her back to the Academy. If she was honest with herself, Hoshi would admit that for the first time in a long time, she was seriously considering just saying okay. Enterprise wasn’t quite the same without Travis there and here on Earth, she was more likely to be able to communicate with him more frequently than while aboard the NX-01. That was far from the primary reason to accept such a transfer – her career wasn’t going to really advance any further while she was
aboard *Enterprise* and she really did miss teaching students – but she would be a liar if she claimed it wasn’t at least a factor.

Hoshi shook her head. Now was not the time to get distracted by thoughts of a certain Travis Mayweather, not when their friendship was better than ever before thanks to the weekly letter exchanges that she’d started. They were both cautiously moving forward in setting out the groundwork for any future relationship by discussing every feasible topic that could possibly come up, particularly things that they’d never have talked about before. Hoshi was actually quite pleased with their progress – she knew that Travis was interested in her, he knew that she felt the same way, so there really wasn’t anything to complain about.

Glancing up, she caught sight of T’Pol still watching the crowds with that enigmatic non-expression expression of hers. The subcommander had been rather quiet for the last thirty minutes or so which normally would not have been a surprise, not this soon after their most recent escape from yet another irritating journalist. Hoshi still wasn’t sure why these reporters kept thinking that they would convince T’Pol to answer personal questions that no Vulcan anywhere would ever consider responding to but, to her disgust, they persisted in asking. It was not totally a surprise, of course. Ever since those two Boomers had released their own version of the events that led to the Nausicaan ambush, the press had gone into a feeding frenzy regarding the relationship between Trip and T’Pol. The more professional networks had tried to strike a balance between fact and supposition, but even they occasionally slipped into the sort of salacious theory that their tabloid brethren lived and breathed. Neither of the commanders would comment – not even on the latest bit of gossip making the rounds that something big had happened on Vulcan – and their steadfast refusal to play the game only fired the imagination further. Hoshi had her own theories based on her understanding of T’Pol’s culture and her study of the *Kir'shara*, though she would never embarrass the subcommander by asking for anything resembling confirmation.

But by God, she was tempted.

In the instant that she looked at T’Pol, however, she noticed the subcommander’s body language change to one of alertness. It was a subtle thing – a minute stiffening of the spine, the barely perceptible narrowing of the eyes, even a fractional tightening of the jaw – but as an expert in most forms of communications, the change stood out to Hoshi at once. She followed the line of the subcommander’s gaze and tried to figure out where the threat was. There were the usual assembly of Starfleet personnel, moving to and from duty locations or on errands. More than a handful of civilians were out today, but given how close they were to the Academy graduation ceremony, that wasn’t an especially big surprise. No one really stood out … wait. Those men there. The way they were watching people, the way their bodies talked…

“Starfleet Security, Crewman Womack speaking.” Hoshi almost jumped at the sudden words and shot a look at T’Pol. The subcommander had discreetly pulled out her personal communicator and activated it, all without drawing notice.

“This is Subcommander T’Pol,” she said flatly. “Connect me to your supervisor at once.”

“Ma’am…?”

“I am well aware that I am under Security surveillance, Crewman. Connect me to your supervisor immediately.”

“This is Lieutenant King,” came a new voice moments later.
“Be advised, Lieutenant,” T’Pol said without bothering to reintroduce herself, “that there is a security issue developing near my location. I have visual on six … correction: seven unknown civilians acting in a suspicious manner near the central hub.”

The sudden, violent explosion of a parked vehicle drowned out whatever else T’Pol intended to say.

Hoshi was caught unprepared by the sheer force the detonation. The fierce thunderclap of sound and light blew her backward, knocking her from her seat and hurling her onto the ground with bruising force. Her breath was momentarily torn away by the force of the impact and she fought to recover, sucking in oxygen desperately. For a moment, she couldn’t hear anything but a loud, hollow ringing, but her ears recovered just in time to be assaulted by a terrible cacophony of agonized screams and combat alerts. It was the klaxons that snapped her out of shock – battle-hardened instincts drilled into her by a year in enemy territory and an insane tactical officer who demanded perfection kicked in and Hoshi scrambled to her feet, swaying only slightly.

T’Pol was already in motion, having recovered her footing moments before, and was charging down the small incline toward the burning wreck that had been a groundcar. An armed man lurched into view, automatically turning toward the sprinting Vulcan, but T’Pol was too fast for him. She hit him low and hard, driving him back into the ruined vehicle with such power that the groundcar actually shifted in place. The man was out of the fight almost at once, likely suffering from broken bones or internal trauma, and he fell senseless to the ground the moment T’Pol released him, his weapon tumbling free from nerveless fingers.

Hoshi knew this because she was exactly three steps behind the subcommander.

She scooped up the dropped weapon – it was a much older version of the MACO particle rifle – and quickly checked the ammunition counter before sliding into place beside T’Pol. To her surprise, the Vulcan was focused on the door of the burning groundcar and, with a grunt, tore it open.

The whine of a weapons discharge prevented Hoshi from seeing whatever T’Pol was trying to do and she snapped her head around, instantly locking in on one of the men she’d noticed earlier. He was crouched behind another vehicle and exchanging fire with newly arrived Starfleet Security personnel.

“Terra Prime forever!” someone bellowed and Hoshi felt her temper spike. She’d read the security reports about these terrorists, but to see their madness firsthand? Without realizing her intent, she’d aimed her captured rifle at the terrorist she could see, confirmed her sight picture exactly like Amanda had taught her, and squeezed the trigger.

The weapon was not set to stun.

His back smoking from where she’d shot him, the terrorist fell forward, his own weapon slipping free, and Hoshi scanned the hub for another target. She found two, one of whom was advancing on a cowering family of Denobulans and the other who was wrestling with a man in a Starfleet uniform. Making the choice to aid the civilian family was easy and her second shot was just as lethal as her first. Part of her knew she had likely just killed two men, but she could not bring herself to mourn these monsters, not when she saw the charred body of the young girl T’Pol had pulled from the wrecked car. She met the subcommander’s eyes, saw the grief and rage swimming there, and went back to scanning for more terrorists to shoot.

By then, it was over. Starfleet Security and armored MACOs had flooded into view. They swept through the courtyard aggressively, dropping the remaining terrorists in fierce exchanges of fire that
left nine Starfleet personnel dead or critically injured but none of the other Terra Prime hostiles still active. Hoshi tried to surrender her captured rifle to the first MACO who approached, but his attention was too focused on the terrorist stretched on ground to notice.

“Medic!” he bellowed. “I need a medic here now!” When no one immediately responded, he keyed his headset communicator. “This is Danvers. I need a medic at my location ASAP.” Hoshi couldn’t hear the response he received but she definitely saw his scowl. “Because I have a surviving terrorist here, that’s why! Get a fucking medic over here now, dammit!”

Paramedics appeared within minutes, stabilizing the terrorist but ensuring that he would not wake up any time soon. He was whisked away under armed guard and it was only when Hoshi found herself ordered by a captain from Starfleet Intelligence to keep her mouth shut about any survivors that she wondered about the man’s fate. Would he be aggressively interrogated and then charged for his role in this madness? Or was he simply going to disappear entirely and never been seen or heard of again?

And looking at the carnage wrought by him and his associates, at the bodies of the men and women and children who had been only hours earlier excited about being her to see their friends or loved ones graduate, at seeing the lives forever shattered by Terra Prime’s madness, Hoshi realized that she honestly didn’t care what happened to him.
Malcolm: Moon Fall

Chapter Notes

923 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's November, 2154.

This is a fairly dark chapter in terms of subject matter.

On day two of Operation: Cleansing Flame, Commander Malcolm Reed found himself falling toward the moon.

The built-in rangefinder that was part of his armored environment suit ticked off the range until contact and he fought the urge to trigger the attitude jets on his maneuvering harness. He didn’t know how effective the sensors were on the compound below but there was no sense in testing fate. Underneath his helmet, Malcolm scowled.

“We’re shutting them down.” Admiral Harris’ words from two days earlier still rang in his ears. “With extreme prejudice.” The head of Starfleet Intelligence had leaned forward, fire and rage in his eyes. “As of today, they are done.”

The admiral’s involvement hadn’t surprised Malcolm terribly. Twenty-three had died in Terra Prime’s attack on Starfleet Command, among them Harris’ own niece and her new husband of less than a month, and that had only been the beginning. Six more simultaneous attacks across the planet claimed the lives of four hundred and six, at least half of which were children under the age of ten, and the entire planet was screaming for vengeance. Whatever Terra Prime had intended to accomplish with their strike, it had backfired terribly.

And for the first time since this organization had started making waves, Starfleet Intelligence had officially taken the gloves off.

All across the system, assault teams were descending upon known enclaves or arresting personnel with ties to the terrorist organization. Enterprise was in orbit over Earth to provide support planetside while Challenger did the same over Mars. Malcolm already knew of three admirals who had been taken into custody as well as a pair of senators and five journalists who had helped disseminate propaganda and classified intelligence. Fifteen separate terror attacks had been shut down in just the last day alone but as long as the snake still had a head, it would go on and on.

Which was where Malcolm came in.

His team’s deployment had been timed to avoid detection. From Enterprise, they’d beamed to an automated orbital platform that was carefully selected. Serviced by a team based on the moon, the platform was principally a relay station for inter-system communications and, when Sergeant Woods messed with certain circuits, a repair team was dispatched to fix the issue. The techs on shift were both Starfleet Intelligence, put into place months earlier when Terra Prime made a failed attempt to hack EarthGov’s communication net. Until they docked their repair pod on the comm platform, though, the two Intel agents weren’t even aware that an op was underway. Had anyone but Harris vetted this pair, Malcolm would have probably been forced to kill them both to maintain silence, but instead, he had them return to their ‘home’ base for additional supplies.
Midway there, as the repair pod passed over a certain spot on the moon, Malcolm’s team detached from the exterior of the pod and dove toward the surface.

The automated systems in his maneuvering harness fired ten seconds before impact, allowing Malcolm to touch down lightly. He crouched for a moment, releasing the harness with one hand while pulling his rifle free with his other. A moment later, he heard a rapid succession of soft chimes echo in his ear, advising him of the successful landing Strike Force Alpha. There were fifteen of them, all hand-picked from what remained of Joss’ whisper team. Amanda had vouched for all of them and Malcolm had no reason to distrust her judgment. Half of the team had been pulled from Challenger, half from Enterprise, which likely meant that the crews of both vessels were aware something was going on. At the moment, it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered but the mission.

With a quick glance around, Malcolm was able to confirm the presence of his entire team. They were already spread out to minimize potential detection but all helmets were facing his direction. Malcolm inhaled deeply before giving the go signal. Chang and Woods immediately bounded forward, covering the distance to the concealed venting port that would be the primary access point, while the rest spread out. Some would remain on the surface to ensure no one escaped, but the majority would accompany him into this facility.

“Six, Three.” It was Chang across the tightbeam comm-line; short of stepping in front of the laser, there was no way to eavesdrop. “They’ve got sensors in place. Will take one zero mikes to circumvent them.”

“Three, Six,” Malcolm replied, his voice soft even though no one else could hear him. “You have five.”

Chang managed it in four minutes, thirty-six seconds, and at Malcolm’s signal, the entire assault team advanced in a bounding overwatch, with half of them springing forward in great, prodigious leaps while the other half held position, weapons at the ready as they scanned for hostiles. Once the initial group reached cover, they covered for the second unit.

They hit the first group of defenders within seconds of entrance, but these men and women fell before they were even aware their base was under assault. No one bothered using the stun setting for this op – the risk of being flanked by hostiles who regained consciousness was simply too great and these pieces of crap had long ago given up any right to coexist alongside civilized human beings – which was a very large reason why Malcolm had selected this team. Every one of them was an Expanse veteran and most had been on the assault team that had rescued Captain Archer and Ambassador Soval from that trellium mine so they knew the necessity of swift action and lethal results. These terrorists would offer no mercy nor would they receive any in return.

By the time they hit the inner ring, the facility was in lockdown and alerts were shrieking. Thanks to the team moonside, there was no escape – some well-placed ordnance had reduced the concealed sublight engines of this mining facility to nonexistent – and the fighting grew fiercer the closer they drew to what Intelligence thought was command. Malcolm lost three men taking the location – Parsons, Richards and Romero – and then Hawkins fell when the Terra Primers counter-attacked with suicide vests. Malcolm shot the bastard who’d killed Hawkins personally. Only then did they take a real look around their surroundings.

It wasn’t a command deck.

It was a nightmare.
Horror did not begin to describe it. Row upon row of glass cylinders, each with half-formed fetuses inside. Most of the clones were misshapen or almost hideous, but a handful looked like they might have been healthy children if brought to term. Some had Vulcan ears, some had strange ridges upon their too smooth foreheads, but all … all of them were innocent.

And these monsters had killed them all.

Some were partially dissected, others had been closed back up post mortem and bore the unmistakable scarring of an autopsy. Malcolm blinked, trying very hard to fathom the madness behind this, and then swallowed the urge to vomit as he took in the extent of what these … these creatures had done to the innocent. Confusion was suddenly and abruptly overwhelmed by a seething rage that turned his vision scarlet.

There were twelve … scientists – if they could be called that – in the breeding laboratory and they’d surrendered the moment his team dropped the last of the armed personnel. Most were men of varying ages with only three women, and they stared at his team with fear in their eyes. Malcolm returned their looks even though they couldn’t see his face through his polarized visor.

“Sir.” It was Woods who had already hacked their computer systems. Malcolm closed his eyes – he could hear it in the sergeant’s voice. There was no way he was going to like this. “You need to see this.”

Most of the notes were well beyond his understanding as they dealt with genetics and xenobiology, but he recognized a handful of familiar markers from files that could only have come from Enterprise. It took him a long moment – his mind was still reeling in shock over what he was seeing – but suddenly, he remembered. Once, an eternity ago, before fire fell from the sky and obliterated his family, Malcolm recalled having a conversation with Captain Archer about a security breach in sickbay. Masaro. This was because of that piece of…

He could feel eyes on him – Amanda, of course, but also Woods who had already skimmed some of the contents – but Malcolm focused on the computer system. Two keystrokes brought up an overview and his stomach nearly seized at what he found there. Forty-seven attempts. Forty-seven failures. Half of the genetic structure was T’Pol’s in each of the attempts, but the other half … dear God, nine of these almost-infants were his.

Malcolm was moving before he realized it, advancing on the cowering scientists with fury singing in his veins. How dare these monsters? He shot the first of the men in the head with his pistol, which naturally caused the others to begin panicking. Two more fell to his sidearm before Amanda’s team hosed down the rest. No one asked why – they were a whisper team, after all, and each one of them had blood on their hands – but then, in this room filled with absolute horrors, did they need an explanation? They were soldiers and killing monsters like this was what they were supposed to do, after all.

“Woods,” Malcolm said through a snarl. “Download everything and then crash their entire system. Kill everything. Lights, power, life support. Every bloody thing.” The sergeant nodded and went to work. “I want Paxton,” Reed continued to the rest of the team. “We find him and we kill him.”

They found Paxton in the command deck, already dead from what appeared to be a self-inflicted gunshot. Malcolm stood before the corpse for a moment, wishing he could remove his helmet and spit on this monster. Instead, he waited until they confirmed his identity via genetic scanner and then shot the body two more times with his rifle set at the highest intensity possible. It wasn’t nearly
enough to assuage his fury.

An hour later, he was back aboard Enterprise, standing on the bridge while still in his combat armor much to the confusion of the duty officers. Captain Archer was there as well, his own expression tight. The captain remained ignorant of the twelve almost-children he and Subcommander T’Pol might have found themselves the parents of had the monsters in Terra Prime accomplished whatever mad schemes they’d had in mind and Malcolm had no plans whatsoever of informing him. It did encourage him somewhat that Archer asked no questions when Malcolm made this request of him.

“We’re in position,” the helmsman announced. Reed nodded and turned his head to the petty officer manning the tactical board. It was Zabel.

“Fire,” Malcolm ordered, his voice hard. The subtle thrum thrum thrum of launched photonic torpedoes rumbled through the ship and Reed watched silently as the payload flashed through the void, smashing into the exterior of the now dead mining facility that had once housed Terra Prime. Explosions tore the structure apart as the warheads detonated. A second salvo obliterated what remained and a third reduced the remains to ash. Malcolm watched coldly until he was satisfied that they had scrubbed the universe clean of these monsters.

And then, he turned and left the bridge.

On the way to the armoury, he detoured briefly to sickbay where he had a very discreet, very sensitive discussion with Doctor Phlox. The Denobulan was suitably horrified at the information provided and then more coldly furious than Malcolm had ever seen him but agreed to undertake some research of his own, armed as he was with every scrap of data they’d pulled from Terra Prime’s computers. It would no doubt piss off Admiral Harris if he learned but right now, Malcolm didn’t bloody care.

“I will see that some good comes of this … madness,” Phlox said grimly as he made the data cube vanish with some impressive sleight of hand. “I swear it.”

“Thank you,” Malcolm said before he retreated once more.

Woods gave him a knowing look when he entered the armoury and Reed could not help but to see how the MACO sergeant appeared to be on the verge of throwing up. He considered saying something to Woods, especially since they’d lost Hawkins down there, and ever since the Xindi sphere and that bizarre time-jump, the two MACOs had been inseparable friends, but Malcom had never been good with words so he offered only a thankful nod. The other members of the team were waiting with Amanda standing watch near the doorway so no one could accidentally eavesdrop.

“Good work,” Malcolm told them. “I will be attaching commendations to everyone’s files but I think we all know that they’ll probably never see the light of day.” They watched him with steady eyes, as unconcerned about medals as he was. There had been a mission that needed doing and they did it. “You’re all professionals,” Reed added, “so I don’t need to go over the usual threats to keep your lips sealed.”

“Like I want to tell anyone about that,” Chang muttered darkly. His statement drew many nods, Malcolm included.

“Sir.” It was Woods. “Was it enough? Did we take out these bastards?”

“I don’t know,” Malcolm replied. “I think so, but … I don’t know.”
“If they reappear,” Sergeant Woods said, “I want in on the op to shut them down.” There was tightly controlled anger in his voice and in his eyes with barely controlled grief over losing friends. Each and every one of the MACOs nodded their own agreement with the sergeant. Malcolm nodded.

“I’ll make it happen.” He gave the team another nod. “Dismissed.”

Amanda was silent as she followed him to his cabin, which was a flagrant violation of their usual ‘keep your head down and attract no attention’ policy but right now, Malcolm realized he didn’t give a damn. Not about Starfleet regulations or the disapproval of Captain Archer or any of that sort of crap. Right now, he just needed …

“It’s okay,” Amanda said once they were alone in his quarters. Malcolm felt her wrap both arms around him and he reciprocated without hesitation or thinking. His self-control faltered. Nine. Nine almost children that he’d never have met. Was it the universe’s idea of a joke? His alternate on the other Enterprise had fathered nine children with Amanda and now this?

“I wanted to murder that monster with my bare hands,” he whispered.

“I know.” She sounded as shaken as he did so Malcolm stopped talking and just held her.

Neither moved for a long time.
His head ached.

Travis opened his eyes, for a moment so confused as to why he was lying on the floor that he simply stared at the ceiling and tried to jar the memories back into place. The steady hum of Challenger's warp reactor was so much louder here … engineering. He was in engineering. Why was he here? And why the hell was he on the floor? He remembered someone behind him …

The sound of alarms echoing throughout the ship finally penetrated the hazy fog that his brain had been lingering in and he blinked away the pain. They were in orbit over Mars and there had been … a fight? Yes. That was it. That new security team that had arrived on the ship the day before the terror strikes on Earth, the men that Galahad said felt weird, they'd seized the armoury and Captain Hernandez had sent him here to help Kelby hold engineering.

Good job, Travis, he told himself bitterly as he very cautiously looked around. He found Kelby at once – the engineer was leaning against a bulkhead, barely breathing, with blood covering the front of his uniform and it looked bad. Travis knew enough about first aid to recognize the need to get Kelby to sickbay as soon as possible. There were a handful of other engineers nearby, though they were all unconscious or, in one case, secured by vaccuum tape. Travis winced – they wouldn't be much help – and kept looking. He needed to know the scope of the threat.

And it was bad.

There were only four of the false security personnel here, which meant two others were either dead or sent elsewhere. The leader was that Greaves fellow with a sinister face and even scarier eyes. He was directing the other three with sharp gestures and angry glares from atop the upper catwalk. All of them wore Starfleet uniforms and everything about them had checked out, right until they went rogue … which meant these Terra Prime scum had infiltrated Starfleet somewhere down the line.

"Warning," the computer system announced. "Reactor meltdown in five minutes. Please initiate emergency containment procedures."

"Shut that thing off," Greaves ordered. "We need more speed if we are to hit the Sagan dome on schedule!"

"The bridge is still trying to hack us!" one of the men exclaimed. Greaves sneered.

"They're already too late." He held up both arms. "Terra Prime forever!"

"Terra Prime forever!" his cohorts repeated.
Travis moved.

It was a slow, cautious motion, intended not to draw attention while he inched toward the nearby warp coolant monitoring station. At the same time, he knew that he could not waste time, not if any of them were going to get out of here alive. All he needed was one more meter …

None of the terrorists were facing his direction when he lunged up to his feet, his fingers stabbing down on the flashing 'emergency vent' button. With a shriek, escaping coolant flooded into the reactor, drowning the threatened overload. Steam roared out of the reactor as Challenger shuddered and slowed sharply, the sudden and drastic deceleration straining the capabilities of the inertial dampers. One of the terrorists shrieked in agony and staggered back, his skin bubbling and hissing from where the emergency vent had bathed him in superheated gases.

But Travis still wasn't done.

His fingers danced across the monitoring console, keying in the automated shutdown sequence that would prevent these bastards from restarting the meltdown. He was just about to kill the safety measures on the accelerator coils when phase pistol fire lanced down toward him, narrowly missing as it sliced through the console and caused it to explode. Travis reacted without thinking, turning and diving toward the opening door that led to the reactant monitoring room. One of the terrorists that had missing was just appearing and Mayweather slammed into him, his shoulder lowered so he caught the man squarely in the abdomen. The force of the impact carried them both back into the room beyond and Travis tore the man's pistol free. He didn't bother checking its settings before jamming it into the man's chest and firing.

Unfortunately for the terrorist, his weapon was set to kill.

There wasn't any time to think about that, though, not with Greaves probably hot on his tail. Travis scrambled to his feet and darted for cover, orienting his captured weapon in the direction of the door he'd just used. With all of the steam billowing in, it was impossible to identify the shape that appeared but it looked like Greaves so Travis fired, dropping his target instantly. Another pulse of return fire slashed through the air, burning into the deck near him but it looked to be a wild shot. Still, he barely hesitated before opening his mouth.

And screaming like he'd been hit.

To his absolute surprise, it worked. Two more shadowy forms lunged out of the steam, both holding pistols. The first dropped without a sound when Travis shot him, but he missed the second who ducked back into the steam.

*Come on*, Travis told himself. *Think! You know this boat better than they do! Use that!*

Staying low, he backed toward the hatch behind him, ducking through it and into the main battery room. A moment later, he was sprinting toward another hatch – this one would take him to the corridor that looped around engineering so he could come in behind these guys. He glanced once at his captured pistol, contemplated switching it to stun, and then promptly discarded the idea. If this didn't work or if he only managed to tag one of the hostiles, the others could hold position until their unconscious buddy woke up. For some reason, that line of thinking felt familiar but adrenalin thudded through his body so powerfully that he gave it little thought.

The morons had not even secured the fore hatchways to engineering and Travis was just about to enter when he heard someone approaching. Panic was just about to set in when Galahad rounded the
corner, accompanied by a trio of pissed off looking Security types. They caught sight of Travis immediately and he gestured rapidly for silence. Reed nodded and then flashed several hand signals to him that made absolutely no sense whatsoever. Travis guessed at the question and held up three fingers. At that, the white-eyed lieutenant nodded and issued another set of incomprehensible instructions via gestures. All three of the security personnel peeled off, clearly racing toward another entrance to engineering.

"Wait," Galahad ordered softly as he drew alongside Travis. Long seconds later, Reed's commlink crackled. He held up five fingers, then folded one down, and then another, and so on. The moment he made a fist, Galahad was moving through the hatch.

Steam still blanketed engineering but it had lessened enough so visibility was no longer impaired and the two Terra Primers Travis could see reacted to their approach immediately, abandoning whatever it was they were trying to do so they could open fire. Travis dove for cover, noting how Galahad automatically chose the opposite direction. Reed hit the deck, rolled, and then came up, his phase pistol spitting out a solid stream of fire. Travis popped up then, squeezing off a lucky shot that caught one of the terrorists high in the neck. Even as the man toppled, his partner was also falling thanks to Reed's good aim. Both of them spun toward the sound of additional fire but Galahad relaxed when one of his security men called out.

"Clear!"

"That's all of them, I think," Reed said bitterly. He produced binder-cuffs as he approached the fallen but hesitated when he realized that Travis had been shooting to kill. Glancing up, he met Mayweather's eyes.

"We need a medic down here now!" Travis said as he slid his pistol into a pocket and went for one of the wall-mounted medical kits before sprinting toward Kelby. He spared only a glance toward his second target, the man he'd shot in the steam. It was Greaves and his expression looked startled.

"We lost fifteen people to these madmen," Captain Hernandez told him later once he reported in. She looked alternately exhausted and furious, not to mention a decade older than she had been when he first met her. "I want Baird looking into how these … dammit." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Who is Baird's second?" Travis blinked before comprehension set in. He scowled.

"Hernandez," he said. Once, that would have amused him and from the sad shake of her head, the captain felt the same way.

"Tell her that I want her looking over the orders these bastards used to get aboard my ship." Her exhaustion was brushed aside by the anger that Travis could also feel burning in his belly. "I want to know who issued them, who signed them and I want it now."

"Aye, Captain," Travis said. He started to turn.

"Travis." Glancing back, he found her looking at him. "My chief of security informs me that you killed four of them." Travis looked down, his stomach suddenly coated in ice. "Including their leader." He inhaled and straightened.

"I didn't have time to set it to stun at first, ma'am," he said. "And then … I wasn't sure if I could take them all on so I didn't want to run the risk of one of them waking up while we were trying to retake engineering."
And then it hit him. Hard.

"There were too many variables to take into account with the stun settings on your Starfleet weapons," Amanda Cole had told him so very long ago. "How long would they be unconscious if it did work? What happens if they're out for a few minutes and the team moves on? Then, we're caught between two groups of hostiles and the whole thing turns into a charlie foxtrot." He'd hated Malcolm Reed for that and here he was, explaining his decision using the same coldly rational reasoning.

Travis felt sick.

"For what it's worth," Captain Hernandez said, "I think you made the right call. Lieutenant Reed thinks so too. And the official report will reflect that."

"Thank you, ma'am." He knew that his voice sounded hollow, that he probably looked as horrified and as shocked as he felt, but there was nothing more he could say or do.

"Tell Hernandez I want that information as soon as possible." Travis nodded sharply as he fled her ready room. He found Petty Officer Hernandez already manning the comm-station and, if her eyes were red-rimmed from crying, he didn't call attention to it. She nodded quickly when he issued the captain's instructions and almost sprang to obey. Travis glanced around, aware that the gamma watch crew were trying hard not to attract his notice. He frowned slightly, noting how that caused them to all wince, before nodding at … well, at nothing really and heading toward the turbolift. Of course. The ship's grapevine was already at work. By tomorrow, he would have singlehandedly killed an entire platoon of battle-hardened troopers with nothing more than a rusty fork. Even though it made him a little sick, Travis supposed there were worse reputations to have among his crew. He wondered how Kelby would react to it.

But he was never given the opportunity to find out.
T'Pol: Covert Opportunities

Chapter Notes

930 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's November, 2154.

She was meditating when the door chimed.

T'Pol instantly opened her eyes, frowning at the unexpected sound. As far as she knew, no one outside the Tucker family (and her mother, of course) knew she and Trip were living in this particular apartment which had frankly been the point. Even before last week’s terror strikes (and the resulting Starfleet response) momentarily distracted them, human journalists had been very … aggressive in their attempts to spy on her and Trip, going so far as to stake out their respective quarters at the Starfleet dormitories and the Vulcan embassy, which made interacting with her mate unnecessarily difficult. Trip had even discovered a cleverly concealed recording device in his own cabin, the origin of which could not be readily determined. With his sister’s assistance, they had thus secured this domicile through an intermediary to avoid further attention while they determined their future.

Evidently, it had not worked.

She rose from her meditation pad and checked her clothes, ensuring that nothing would stand out in this neighborhood. Once satisfied, she then pulled on a tight-fitting, wool cap that would cover her ears from any visual inspection before striding toward the main entrance. As she drew closer to the door, she heard the upstairs shower end and briefly considering waiting to allow Trip time to dress so he could greet their unexpected visitor (or visitors). He was, after all, far better at handling overly inquisitive humans than she was.

The door chimed again.

Suppressing an exhalation of pure irritation, T’Pol padded closer to the security system she and Trip had installed. Intended to be subtle, it mostly consisted of passive sensor arrays and carefully concealed miniature cameras hidden in the alcoves outside the apartment. She activated it and instinctively raised an eyebrow in surprise at the two men standing outside the door. Ambassador Soval was sufficiently unexpected, but the presence of Admiral Harris of Starfleet Intelligence could not bode well.

“Something up?” Trip asked as he fast-walked down the stairs. His hair was still wet and T’Pol frowned at the trail of water he was leaving in his wake. Did he not realize how that could potentially discolor the carpet? She pushed aside the random thought and turned to cease blocking his view of the wall display. “Huh,” he murmured before giving her a questioning look. T’Pol shrugged very slightly – she doubted anyone but Trip would have been able to detect the motion – and he nodded.

So she opened the door.

Behind her and a meter or so to her left, Trip was tensed to react should this meeting go poorly. There were at least five weapons within easy reach for him, not including the phase pistol he’d
already drawn and kept hidden from sight. T’Pol also had carefully placed herself in a position that would afford poor visibility for anyone outside the apartment but that gave her an excellent vantage point. She had not gone for the Vulcan disruptor concealed next to the doorway yet, but retrieving it would require little more than two seconds.

“Ambassador, Admiral,” she greeted coolly, surveying them quickly before allowing her gaze to encompass the corridor beyond. She saw no one else, but that did not mean they were alone. “We were not anticipating your visit.”

“It was unscheduled,” Soval replied.

“Unscheduled and unofficial,” Admiral Harris added. “Knowing your reputation, Subcommander, I’m guessing you’ve scanned us for weapons.” T’Pol raised an eyebrow slightly but made no further reply. “I’d rather not do this in the hallway where people can eavesdrop.”

“Do what, exactly?” Trip asked as he stepped into sight. He was studying Harris with a frown. The admiral sighed.

“Can we please do this inside?” he asked again, glancing over his shoulder and nearly fidgeting. T’Pol glanced quickly to Soval who stared back at her impassively, showing not a hint of emotion or the direction of his thoughts.

“It concerns your father,” the ambassador said. T’Pol stiffened, felt Trip tense at the same time, and nodded very slightly. She stepped aside.

“Guess I should have started with that,” Admiral Harris remarked as he stepped through the doorway. He glanced around quickly, smiling tightly the moment he realized that Trip was armed. Soval followed, quirking an eyebrow as he took in the bland décor that had come with the apartment; his expression faltered for a heartbeat when he caught sight of the lirpa prominently displayed upon the living area wall but he recovered almost at once. “You know who I represent?” the admiral asked.

“You are the director of Starfleet’s Special Operations Group,” T’Pol said. “A division that, according to official documentation, does not exist.”

“That’s correct.” Harris’ false smile fell away. “We’re in the business of … let’s call it crisis management, something that you are quite familiar with, I believe.” T’Pol said nothing and schooled her expression to stillness. “You are no doubt aware of the events of this month,” the admiral said. “In addition to the Terra Prime crisis, we’ve also been struggling to deal with Romulan encroachment in this quadrant.” He grimaced. “Enterprise and Challenger handled that recent drone nonsense to the best of their abilities, but it’s only a matter of time before the Romulans move against us again.”

“You still haven’t gotten to how this concerns T’Pol’s father,” Trip said flatly. “Sir,” he added as an afterthought.

“SOG has been aware of Romulan activity for years now,” Harris said. “My predecessor … actually, his predecessor was also in contact with certain elements inside the Vulcan government who were convinced that the Romulans had infiltrated High Command in some fashion.” He reached into his pocket, freezing in place when Trip shifted slightly which once more drew attention to the fact that he was holding a pistol in one hand. Harris drew out a PADD very slowly, offering a wry smile in her mate’s direction. “I’m going to go out on a limb,” he said, “and guess that you’ve had some
“Trouble settling back in?”

“With respect, sir,” Trip replied, “I don’t know you. For all I know, you could be a Terra Prime operative who has hoodwinked the ambassador here into thinking you’re a good guy.” He blinked. “No offense intended, Ambassador.”

“You don’t know me,” Harris replied, his voice low and hard, “or you would know how wrong you are. I lost family to Terra Prime so don’t you ever compare me to those butchers.” He inhaled slowly, visibly regaining control. “This documents all of the interactions the Special Operations Group has had with Vulcan personnel investigating Romulan infiltration of the High Command.” T’Pol hesitantly accepted the data device but did not look at it. “When you review that information, you’ll note that all of those Vulcans have one thing in common: they’re dead.” The admiral frowned. “Every single one of them that reached a certain point in their investigation suffered a sudden, unexplained accident.” He nodded in Soval’s direction. “Until the ambassador began digging into your father’s death,” Harris said, “I thought he was just one more casualty.”

“And now?” Trip again.

“Additional digging has turned up information indicating that SOG’s original sources were wrong.” The admiral rubbed his temples. “We are now of the opinion that your father, operating under the assumed identity of either Solok or Tavok, entered Orion space in May of 2134.”

“This matches the intelligence I have obtained,” Soval said calmly.

“Which leads me to why I’m here,” Admiral Harris said. He looked between the two of them and T’Pol could feel Trip’s sudden flare of dread. Automatically, she took a half step closer toward him without realizing it. “It’s not exactly a secret that no one knows what to do with you two.” He smiled, though from her study of human body language, T’Pol thought it looked forced. “Starfleet Command believes that your requirement to be stationed together to be unreasonable and fears it would led to accusations of favoritism.”

“And the Vulcan High Council is uncomfortable with the concept of having a human aboard one of their capital ships.”

“We’re already aware of this,” Trip said through clenched teeth.

“Which is why I want the two of you to work for me,” Harris said. “We know the Romulans are coming but I don’t have the resources or intelligence apparatus to uncover what their plans are.”

“Vulcan has both,” Soval said, “but the discovery of the Kir’shara has left us critically short on capable personnel.” He straightened. “We propose a joint intelligence effort, Human and Vulcan, to uncover the vital information necessary to prevent if possible the coming war.”

“And if we can’t stop it,” the admiral added, “we need to be prepared.” Again, he offered the false smile. “You two are ideally suited for this.”

“Are the two of you insane?” Trip glowered. “I’m an engineer, not a spy!”

“You are an engineer who has spent the last two years learning under one of Vulcan’s most capable and highly skilled intelligence agents, Commander.” Soval inclined his head toward T’Pol slightly. She raised an eyebrow at the compliment.
And seriously considered the offer.

Trip could sense her thoughts and bit off whatever it was that he was about to say, turning his head toward her. She met his eyes and tilted her head very slightly. In an instant, his mood and thoughts were open to her: he was concerned that there was more to this than indicated, that Harris was playing some unseen game with them as pawns, that he was ill prepared for the demands that an operation like this would require. At the same time, he knew that she was at least slightly intrigued by the opportunity before them – this would require a level of creative thinking that both of them excelled at, not to mention how much autonomy they would possess. Neither were particularly enthusiastic about simply returning to their previous jobs and the actions of their respective governments had not left positive impressions on them.

“May I presume that the operational proposal is also on this PADD?” T’Pol asked. She could see the admiral’s reaction – he was convinced that she had agreed – and frowned. “The commander and I will review your offer and discuss our options.” Soval was already beginning to retreat, but Harris was clearly about to say something more, likely in an attempt to further ‘sell’ them on the idea. “Thank you for your visit,” T’Pol said flatly. There was no way to ignore her dismissal.

“You want to do this,” Trip said as soon they were once again alone. T’Pol gave him a look.

“I have not made a decision yet,” she replied. “There are considerable benefits and drawbacks to undertaking such a venture.”

“But you want to do this.” Trip was watching her, his expression curiously blank.

“I … I think it is at least worth considering.” Everything she’d learned about the Romulans indicated they would be back, even after their recent setback with the drone attacks. And if they could save even one life by accepting this offer, could they not at least consider it?

“All right,” Trip said. “Let’s take a look at what Admiral Spooky has in mind.” He flashed her a quick, barely there smile, and T’Pol felt the flare of emotions surge between them. “And if you still think this is a good idea, I’ll let you sell me on it.”

T’Pol nodded.

And they went back to work.
940 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's December, 2154.

It felt like the end of an era.

*Enterprise* was ninety minutes out from the Vulcan transport that would take Commander Charles Tucker – soon to be private citizen Charles Tucker – on to T'Pol's homeworld, possibly for the last time, and Jon couldn't shake the feeling that something about this entire scenario felt wrong. He knew the official story, had actually seen the recording of Trip punching that jackass Admiral Harris from Intelligence in the face, but still … his gut was telling him that he was missing something. Something big. If Erika was here, she'd see it at once.

At the moment, he was sitting in the captain's dining quarters, waiting for Trip to arrive so they could have one more toast before Tucker officially resigned from Starfleet. It had taken every bit of Jon's gravitas to talk Command into letting Trip serve as an attached mentor for the new acting-Chief Engineer for Enterprise, the former Chief Petty Officer but now Lieutenant Rostov. Everyone, including Rostov himself, knew this was just a temporary measure until Starfleet got their crap together and figured out who would step in to handle the position now that Taylor had been reassigned to *Challenger* in the wake of Kelby's tragic death. And with *Discovery* scheduled to launch next month … the Admiralty was still wrangling over who would command the NX-04, so God only knew when they'd assign a new chief engineer.

Jon's intent had been simple: get Trip aboard and find some way to repair the tattered remnants of their relationship. He'd seen firsthand how Reed continued to blame himself for the way Malcolm's friendship with Travis had deteriorated to the point that it no longer could really be called that thanks to the very bad call Reed had made during the Expanse mission and Jon didn't want to see the same thing happen to him and Tucker. In the nine days since the former chief engineer came aboard, they'd made some decent progress – conversations no longer ended with both of them irritated at each other and unable to express why – but still, they were a long way from the close bond they'd had when *Enterprise* first shipped out. If only they had more time…

"You're fidgeting, sir." Malcolm sat quietly in his chair, smirking, and Jon realized that he had been drumming his fingers against the table in an unconscious gesture. Archer scowled before leaning back and studying his first officer. He still didn't know exactly what it was that Reed and those MACOs had done on the moon last month or why Malcolm had been so insistent on obliterating the derelict mining facility, but when Starfleet said nothing about the expenditure of nine rather expensive photonic torpedoes, Jon had deduced it had something to do with that anti-Terra Prime operation that had gone down. Which, now that he thought about, had been developed by the same admiral Trip had evidently punched out during a classified briefing. The admiral who had also once been Malcolm Reed's commanding officer many years ago, though the record on Reed's service from that time was mostly expunged. What a very interesting coincidence. He made a mental note to compare notes with Erika when he spoke with her again later this week. Providing, of course, they scheduled time to actually talk instead of skipping straight to bed.
"I received official confirmation from Command about Hoshi today," Jon said rather than vocalize the theories tumbling around in his head. He nodded when Malcolm frowned. "They're reassigning her to the Academy full-time."

"Bollocks." Malcolm shook his head. "Well, we knew it was only a matter of time," he said to which Jon nodded bitterly. Less than a quarter of his current crew had shipped out with Enterprise when she first launched and ever since the Xindi mission, Starfleet hadn't shown any hesitation in transferring his people. If he'd been remotely paranoid, he'd think that they were trying to ensure that the Expanse crew was too spread out to do much damage if he had to go rogue again because Command couldn't get their heads out of their butts. Hell, they'd even split up the alternate Enterprise crew!

The door hissed open before he could respond to Reed's remark and Trip entered. Jon almost winced at the packed bag that Tucker set aside as well as the civilian clothes he wore. Thankfully, he was no longer on the unhealthy side of thin, instead looking fit and healthy. If anything, he looked healthier than Jon ever remembered him appearing.

"Sorry I'm late," Tucker said as he took his seat. "Had to talk Rostov off a ledge." He flashed a very brief smile that was gone almost before it appeared "If he asks," he added, "could you let him know that Starfleet is considering Commander Stiles as a possible chief engineer?"

"Stiles?" Jon frowned. "Isn't he the captain of the Ganymede?"

"No, not him. The other Stiles." Trip considered. "His cousin? Nephew? Something like that." He shook his head slightly. "He's … I hesitate to call him a legend because that implies positive things."

"He can't be that bad," Malcolm offered.

"Stiles managed to make a training reactor go into meltdown during his initial certification." Jon blinked.

"Is that even possible?" he asked, horrified.

"Apparently." Trip shrugged slightly. "As long as Rostov thinks that clown might replace him, I think you'll get a hundred and ten percent from him. Maybe a hundred and fifteen if you push your luck"

"I'll keep that in mind." Jon stood and reached for the bourbon on the table. "Hard to believe you're resigning," he said as he tipped generous splashes into each glass. "Why exactly did you punch the admiral?" Almost instantly, Trip's vaguely amused expression vanished and was replaced by that carefully blank mask he'd taken to wearing these days. At the same time, Malcolm intentionally glanced away, his own face studiously empty.

So … Reed was in on it too? The pieces started falling into place and were adding up to something that Jon didn't like.

"I don't quite recall," Trip replied. It was an obvious lie – Tucker's already really good memory was positively photographic these days – but Jon didn't call him on it as he offered one of the glasses. Trip accepted and gave it a frown. "Afraid I don't have much tolerance for alcohol these days," he said.

"Too busy doing other things?" Malcolm asked, his tone both knowing and slightly teasing. Trip
"Like dodging bullets or hiding from insane military commanders, yeah," Tucker replied. "There was also the random alien bear attack or trying to keep a forty-year old ship from falling apart on me." Jon smiled.

For a moment, it was almost as if Trip had never left and things hadn't gone crazy. He knew it wouldn't last – none of them really knew how to interact with one another for longer than a few minutes; inevitably, someone would misstep and say something they shouldn't have which would then lead to uncomfortable silences that were at least better than angry glares – but he simply let himself enjoy it while it lasted. It was just too bad T'Pol was not here; according to Trip, she'd accompanied Soval to Vulcan a week and a half ago to resolve some sort of family crisis, though Archer now had his doubts about that excuse.

"Well, for what it's worth," Jon said as he held up his glass, "you will be missed, Mister Tucker."

"Here, here," Reed said as he lifted his own glass.

"Just avoid punching any Vulcan admirals," Archer finished, once more noting the look in his first officer's eyes that always meant Malcolm knew more than he was admitting. Reed was usually exceptional at hiding things but when he did not agree with the methodology behind something, he had a tendency to not do as good a job as he should at keeping things under wraps. "You have something lined up, I'm guessing?" Jon asked.

"I have something in mind, yeah." Trip sniffed the bourbon then downed it in a single gulp that instantly caused a grimace. "I just know I'm going to pay for that later," he said.

They chatted for a while longer but kept the subject matter light – the chances that the Coalition would last or who was the most likely to command Discovery when she launched – and it was pleasant enough. Trip was less vocal or as opinionated as he once had been, and he listened with a laser focus that once again reminded Jon of T'Pol. When he did speak, it was calm and collected, which was still something Archer was getting used to. And when Malcolm rose to his feet about ten minutes before they were scheduled to meet up with the Vulcan transport, Jon once again noticed how utterly aware Trip was of Reed's every movement. It was in his posture, the deceptively relaxed way he sat while constantly keeping Malcolm in his peripheral vision. Having seen Reed do the exact same thing ever since Trip rejoined the living, Jon had finally given into his curiosity and asked his first officer about it.

"That's difficult to explain, sir," Malcolm had told him. "My instincts recognize the commander as a very dangerous threat." That alone had been surprise enough but Reed had continued. "His reflexes are still tuned to … I guess you would call it life-threatening danger, so a part of him perceives me as a threat as well which is why he tenses. Once he adapts to a life not surrounded by danger, things will be less awkward."

Trip Tucker. A 'very dangerous threat.' It hardly seemed possible. If Jon had not observed firsthand how much T'Pol herself had changed, how her fellow Vulcans treated her as if she was some sort of degenerate or freak, he might have been angry at her for what she'd done to Trip but, after a great deal of self-reflection and some off-the-record conversation with Phlox, Archer had finally understood how much the two had changed each other. The only thing to do was accept it and move on.

"I should check in with the bridge," Malcolm declared as he offered his hand to Trip. With only a
heartbeat of hesitation, Tucker took it. "Stay safe, Trip," Reed added. There was the slightest hint of emphasis to his words and, had Jon's suspicions not already been roused, he might have missed the very discreet way Malcolm passed something to Tucker. Whatever it was, it fit easily in the hand and Trip expertly palmed it.

Jon scowled.

"I hope you know what you're doing," he said once Malcolm had departed. Trip glanced at him, no expression on his face but one of his eyebrows quirked in a hauntingly familiar gesture. Did he even realize how many of T'Pol's mannerisms he'd taken on? Archer made a face. "I'm not an idiot, Trip," he pointed out bitterly. "I know who Harris is, who he represents."

"Good." Trip's expression didn't alter but he seemed to relax slightly. "Don't be surprised when you get a time-delayed message. I know better than to trust Harris, even if T'Pol is there to watch my back." That was just enough of an admission to make Jon hesitate. "We're going into this with our eyes open, sir." After a moment, Jon gave Trip a questioning look but Tucker shook his head. "I can't go into specifics, not here." He pursed his lips. "Malcolm knows the op."

"Of course he is." Was that irritation in his voice? Jon hoped not. Enterprise's ambient sounds changed – they'd slowed from warp. "If you need us, we'll be there."

"I'll keep that in mind." Trip stood and Jon followed suit.

"And you look after T'Pol," Jon ordered. He offered his own hand and was pleased that Trip took it without even the briefest of hesitation. "Keep her safe."

"I'll do my best," Tucker replied, this time with a wry smirk that was so familiar. "But you know how hard that can be." Jon laughed.

And twenty minutes later, he stood on the bridge of Enterprise and watched the transport carrying his friend spring away at warp speed. He only hoped it would not be the last time he ever saw Trip.
895 Earth days have passed since chapter 1. It's December, 2154.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

His communicator chirped.

Trip rolled off his bunk instantly and covered the five steps to where the device was resting in two long strides. Ostensibly a civilian model, the communicator was actually of Vulcan manufacture and possession of this model by anyone outside of V'Shar operatives was considered a crime against the Vulcan government. He flipped it open and stared at the single number message blinking on the tiny screen: 9. Trip inhaled deeply, held the breath for a long moment, and then exhaled it through his nose.

Nine minutes. Okay. He could do that.

From his pocket, he pulled out the hacking pad that Malcolm had provided him on Enterprise five days earlier. It was tiny, barely three centimeters square, but was one of the most advanced pieces of tech he'd ever had the opportunity to study. Trip had spent the first two days aboard this transport trying to forget he carried this thing, then all of day three attempting to figure out a way to take it apart without ruining it. Yesterday, he'd finally given into the urge and disassembled it before putting it back together. Would the Special Operations Group be pleased or upset that he'd already figured out five different ways to improve its function? Providing he bothered telling Harris, that was.

The patch he applied to the main power cable on the desktop computer. Almost instantly, the miniaturized tech within activated with a soft whir and, within seconds, had successfully broke into the transport's data core. Hacking worms cut through the normally effective firewalls with the ease of a laser through warm butter. On his screen, a countdown appeared for mere moments: 8:45.

Alarms began shrieking as the transport stumbled out of warp. Right now, Trip knew, the engineering team would be scrambling to figure out what was happening. They would see only a reactor going into meltdown with no sign of why. And, as this particular vessel had already suffered three near breaches in the last seven months, panic would be setting in, regardless of the fact that the crew was Vulcan. Trip knew he had perhaps a minute.

He didn't even glance to his duffel bag sitting on the floor near the far wall. It had been mostly for show in the first place and had been filled with easily replaceable clothes. The truly important things he would need were already secured in the pockets of his pants and jacket. He touched each item quickly, mentally cycling through his checklist. Everything was in place. It was time to go.

The door whisked open, revealing a corridor that was rapidly filling with other Vulcans, all of whom were looking around with dispassionate expressions. Two of them looked him over, disdain momentarily crossing their faces, but Trip ignored them as he marched directly toward the access hatch leading to engineering.
He found Tokov, the ship's former captain, standing before the main display of the reactor, shock and dismay fighting to shatter his control. Trip already knew what the Vulcan would be seeing – a series of rapid collapses of containment that were leading to an imminent cascade failure – and also knew that this vessel was doomed. After all, he'd designed this particular program at T'Pol's suggestion once they'd decided to accept Harris' offer. It was only logical – he'd managed to prevent exactly this sort of total system collapse on his first trip to Vulcan and now, he was just righting that wrong. And if it further ruined a specific Vulcan's career, well that was fine. Tokov should not have called T'Pol an illogical deviant the first time they were aboard.

"We must evacuate the ship," he said in his carefully measured Vulcan. Tokov glared at him but Trip pointed to the display. "We have … five minutes. Perhaps six if you get out of my way."

One of the younger engineers reacted long before Tokov could make a decision, covering the short distance to the emergency action panel and triggering the abandon ship alert. Soft sirens began wailing – to a human, they would not sound strident enough, but the Vulcans visibly winced at the noise before they began filing out.

And then, Tokov did something utterly stupid and heroic that threatened to completely ruin the plan.

"How may I assist?" he asked. Inwardly, Trip cursed. He needed Tokov out of the engineering bay, dammit.

"You cannot," Trip replied flatly. "Get out so I can work." He let a tiny bit of the excitement and fear leak into his voice, hoping that it would be enough. Tokov raised an eyebrow, clearly intending to argue the point and insist that he was more than capable of assisting.

So Trip hit him.

He chose a specific nerve cluster in the Vulcan's side that, according to T'Pol, would cause excruciating agony in a male of her race without actually doing any lasting damage. It wasn't quite a knee to the groin but the result was pretty much identical. His unexpected blow sent Tokov to the deck with a howl of pain, which was enough to draw the attention of two junior engineers. They hesitated for a moment, clearly confused, but Trip pointed.

"Get him clear!" he ordered. "Go!" He glared at them like they were his engineers and he'd caught them slacking instead of cleaning the injectors as instructed, and something in his tone or body language convinced them to obey. They seized Tokov, who was still groaning though it looked like he was beginning to recover, and dragged him out. Trip followed them to the hatch before slapping his hand on the emergency shut. With a boom, the door sealed.

Four minutes, thirty seconds, he told himself. That would be cutting it damned close. He shrugged out of his jacket and pulled the first piece free. The temperature climbed rapidly as the reactor continued its inexorable slide toward critical failure. Mentally, he chopped an additional thirty seconds off the time-table and pushed himself to work faster. An all too familiar tickle at the back of his brain turned into an almost tangible sense of concern, but Trip shoved it aside.

Three minutes and forty-five seconds later, he finished assembling the small pattern enhancer. It powered up almost as soon as he fit the final piece into place and Trip felt his communicator vibrate again. Grinning madly, he stepped into the ring of technology. The transport began instantly.

It was like diving naked through burning ice, with the always uncomfortable sensation of both being in two places at once as well as being stretched like a rubber band that was on the very verge of
snapping. Time had no meaning even though he knew it was only a handful seconds at most. When he opened his eyes, Trip found himself staring at familiar walls.

The *T'Muna-Doth*.

She'd been repaired and heavily refit, under Soval's direction and paid for by Harris' division. Hardly any component was original and the newer equipment allowed for certain operational enhancements. Turning the meditation chamber into a functional two-person transporter was an especially inspired decision and Trip wondered if Starfleet would be pleased that SOG had allowed Vulcan technicians to gain access to the specs. He shrugged. That wasn't his problem.

T'Pol was seated at the pilot's console when he climbed up the ladder and entered the command deck. She gave him a quick look before returning her attention to the main display. Trip examined the readouts for a moment.

"All lifepods have launched," T'Pol said, answering the question he was just beginning to form in his head. "No lifesigns detected aboard the transport."

"Have they noticed us?"

"No," she raised an eyebrow. "Stealth systems fully functional." Trip eased a sigh of relief as he sank down in the other chair. New heat sinks had been installed throughout the ship, but especially within the three nacelles, that would absorb and disperse the heat generated by routine shipboard operations which had the benefit of providing a significantly lower sensor silhouette, thus making it more difficult to identify the starship. The hull itself had been coated with a darker, absorbent material (the specifics of which were classified, though Trip intended to poke around when he got the opportunity), and their running lights were completely gone. Even the impulse exhaust was concealed from view. Shy of an actual, functioning cloaking device, they were as invisible as they could be.

With a fierce flash, the main reactor of the Vulcan transport went critical, tearing the small vessel apart in an eyeblink. The ship had been too small for the explosion to threaten the lifeboats but T'Pol loitered long enough to verify that none had been damaged before accelerating away. There was already a *D'Kyr*-type combat cruiser conveniently within range that would be capable of rendering assistance within thirty minutes. An hour from now, Trip would be listed as missing and believed lost in a tragic accident, but Soval had assured him that the Vulcan government would not release this information publicly out of fear it would further incite human anger against them. They would not hide it, of course, so anyone intentionally looking for such data could find it, but neither would they advertise that shoddy maintenance on one of their transports had cost his life.

By this time tomorrow, a paper trail for T'Pol would also be in place which was why she had needed to depart ahead of him. Officially, she was recovering from an unspecified illness at Gol which, to Vulcan eyes likely mean the *Fullara* or an attempt at *kolinahr*, both of which were understandable given her publicly known relationship with an emotional human. For all intents and purposes, they were both dead or otherwise out of the picture. Only a handful of people – Harris, Soval, T'Les, Jon, Malcolm and Lizzie – knew otherwise and Trip trusted all but one of that select group to disseminate the truth to those who needed to know.

"At our current velocity," T'Pol said, "we have six hours and forty-three minutes until we can safely accelerate to warp six." Trip's eyes widened.

"Damn," he murmured. "They really did upgrade her, didn't they?" T'Pol gave him the wry almost-
smile of hers before bringing up star-charts.

"I estimate nineteen days until we reach Adigeon Prime," she said. "At that point, we may begin phase one."

"This wasn't phase one?" Trip frowned. "I just faked my own death."

"I apologize," T'Pol said wryly. "I may not have been paying adequate attention and might have missed that." Despite himself, Trip had to give her a soft smile. He opened his mouth to reply when the communications board in front of him beeped. Glancing down, he scanned the system-wide alert that was being transmitted on all bands and his stomach clenched. He felt T'Pol's immediate concern.

"The Salem One station has been destroyed," he said. T'Pol made no reply, though he could feel her thoughts racing and suspected she was thinking along the same lines as he was. It could only be the Romulans. Salem One had been intended to serve as a joint-species hub, a sort of unofficial location that would act as neutral ground for all Coalition races so they could hash out their differences without resorting to warfare, and now, it was so much debris. They were barely getting started and already, events threatened to outpace them. All of the estimates Trip had seen agreed that the Romulans were unlikely to move again for a year, maybe even more, yet here they were. The threat of war wasn't twenty months off, or twelve, or even six. It was here now.

Trip exhaled another tense breath and forced himself to relax. There wasn't anything they could do about that now. He looked at T'Pol and she looked at him.

And then, they went to work.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the story.

Before I'm deluged with requests/demands for a sequel, yes, I do have something in mind - a retelling of the Relaunch books in what is, I hope, a slightly less WTF? tone that has both TnT in deepcover, though I expect T'Pol will likely be doing more of the spy stuff than Trip, although he'd make a fantastic combat-capable Q for her Jane Bond, yeah? - but I do not have a timetable in mind or even if it will ever get written.

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