Darkness On The Edge Of Space

by Kotik

Summary

Sequel to: Tomorrow Never knows

War breaks out and Trip, T'Pol, Malcolm and Hoshi find themselves in the middle of it, while trying to hold on to their lives as good as possible. But a great darkness looms on the edge of space...

*** extended edition with extra scenes ***

Notes

From chapter 5 onwards, this story will have additional (usually mature) scenes in comparison to the version published at fanfiction.net
Maiden Voyage

Just two days remained until Buran would be back in subspace range and the daily video chat with Trip could recommence. Not only was recalling the day's events with Trip over a beer the next best thing to stand in for the badly missed evening dinners in the Tucker cabin. There was also the odd helpful hint that T'Pol chipped in with, which was very useful for a newly appointed captain, who found himself in charge of Starfleet's second most illustrious ship.

His life had always been that of a lone wolf. There never had been much feeling of family in his youth, mainly because his father radiated all the warmth of an alpine glacier. After the fallout over his refusal to join the Navy he couldn't get away from his father fast enough and ended up with Section 31, Harris's shady bunch, who were hunting for solitary souls like him, since the dubious life of a spy was lonesome by definition. Now, after experiencing something resembling a family with Hoshi and the Tuckers, he couldn't imagine ever to return to that business. Sure, the skills and instincts he had acquired would come in handy now that war loomed, but becoming a spy again, with the odd assassination here or there, was completely out of the question. He would never give up the life with Hoshi he had now.

The subject of his thoughts was sitting at the communications console treating him to a beautiful smile. Somehow she always knew when he was thinking about her. Normally she would be supposed to sit right next to him in the second center chair - a feature that all newly built NX's shared, but once in a while she liked to do her old job. Regulations be damned Malcolm thought, let her do it. Hoshi enjoyed running the comms and war was on the horizon, best to let her enjoy herself. He grinned inwardly, besides it put Hoshi in a good mood, which made their off shift time much more fun.

His mind wandered back to their honeymoon and Malcolm suppressed a laugh. There was a certain irony to having one's honeymoon organized by a Vulcan. Unfamiliar with human customs, T'Len, the newly minted Chief Engineer of Buran had asked Lorian for help and he obviously had recalled his parents' wedding. One day after leaving Salem One to deliver Admiral Gardner back to Earth, he and Hoshi found themselves in a Cargo Bay which had been transformed into a beach, a duplicate of Lorian's parents' own honeymoon in the Expanse. While he wasn't a big fan of beaches - after all they suggested water nearby - Hoshi had thoroughly enjoyed the idea and since this artificial beach came without the water, he enjoyed it as well. Hoshi, having discovered the joys of not wearing a uniform or any other clothing while on Vulcan, had merely adorned herself with a beautiful smile. That of course had kept his hormones beyond control and they had made glorious love for most of the three days.

His glance fell on the person, who had come up with the beachified cargo bay. When it came to being an atypical Vulcan, T'Len could easily give T'Pol a run for the money. As captain he had of course seen her service record and knew that at age forty-nine, she was a good deal younger than T'Pol. Not that it made much of a difference; aging did not seem to affect female Vulcans. Even though pushing seventy T'Pol looked better than most human females in their twenties and the same was true for T'Len. The unusual thing about T'Len was that she was fully bonded with her mate Sonos, who was Hoshi's second in command of the communications department; Malcolm had learned from T'Pol that most Vulcans got married in their sixties.

T'Len and Sonos had quickly established a rapport with the crew. When Hoshi had started to assemble an all-female basketball team, T'Len had joined it as if it was the most Vulcan thing in the universe. If Hoshi was looking fantastic in the skin-tight two piece uniform, T'Len was best described as spectacular. The weekly basketball tournament had been a huge success since day one.
with mainly male crew filling the make-shift bleachers. If she hadn't been married already, T'Len would have to fend the guys off with a stick. No moves on her were made, however. The cultural briefing that Hoshi had forwarded to all non-Vulcan crew members had apparently been well comprehended.

When her beauty wasn't driving the male human contingent crazy, T'Len studied the assembled engineering reports she had gotten from Trip as a going-away gift. While she was quite the brilliant Engineer herself, she didn't grow up with Trip's genius for improvisation. Thankfully Buran still had the new car feel to it, so she wasn't in need of improvised repairs yet, giving T'Len the time to get a feel for her.

Sonos, her mate occupied the communications console, Hoshi's intrusions notwithstanding. Unlike T'Len, he was a Vulcan of a more traditional variety, but he seemed to have no problems with T'Len's occasional departure from Vulcan customs.

Looking to the right Malcolm could see his replacement at the tactical console. During the first days of their journey and much to the amusement of the bridge crew he had automatically gone from the turbo lift straight to tactical instead of the big chair, even though it was hard to miss that the station had a new occupant, because his successor was bright blue.

Tholos, once a member of Shrans raiding party at P'Jem and one of the Kumari survivors who had followed Shran to Starfleet, had specifically asked for assignment to Buran. Not too many people had managed to outfox the experienced Andorian warrior, but Malcolm and his landing party at P'Jem had. Tholos had developed an honest respect for Malcolm as a result. Having that much experience behind the tactical console was even better for Malcolm's confidence, knowing he would have been tempted to second guess each decision of a less experienced officer which would have been disastrous in a battle situation.

Next on Malcolm's visual inspection was the portly figure at the helms console – the Tellarite Grev. Coming with a stellar recommendation and quite a few honorable insults, he was one of only two Tellarites to enter Starfleet service. Both Andorians and Vulcans now boasted double digit numbers of Starfleet officers. With only Grev on board justification for the construction of a mud bath had been difficult, but since Tellarite mud seemed to have a positive effect on the skin of other races, it was added as cosmetic therapy for the many females on board at least that was what the requisition Malcolm had signed, indicated. Surprisingly even some of the Vulcan females made use of the facility.

Somewhat impatiently Trip waited for the connection grinning when the screen finally lit up. Centered on the vid-screen was a rather sweaty Malcolm and Hoshi sitting side by side – he still in uniform, while Hoshi wore a silk robe, which looked exactly like the one T'Pol had.

"Do you actually wear clothes in your cabin once in a while, Hoshi?" Trip asked with a chuckle.

"I do, but we're still having some teething problems. Today the temperature controls for most of C deck packed in - again. It was the easiest solution to just shed excess clothing. Of course he's too much Captain to follow my example," she said with a teasing look at Malcolm,

Trip laughed.

"Actually, I'll leave you boys to your beer," she said, tossing the robe over a chair, walking away in nothing but skimpy panties.
"Looks like you've got no problems in the entertainment department, Mal," Trip said shaking his head with a smile.

"Certainly not," the Brit answered and raised his mug. "Cheers."

"So, how's your little melting pot coming along?" Trip asked.

"Bit tricky," Malcolm explained. "No problems between the species, but adapting to them is a technical nightmare. The Vulcans are freezing and the Andorians are complaining of being boiled alive. Between cooling down the cabins of the Andorians and heating up the cabins of the Vulcans the life-support system is badly strained. It's the third time this week that the temperature controls went haywire. Mind you, it treats me to the most beautiful picture in the world," he said with an admiring look at a topless Hoshi, who was somewhere out of viewer range. "But that is little consolation for my crew."

"I might have something to help you," Trip offered. "I hooked the life-support in our cabin to the bio-sensors. That creates a sort of temperature bubble around T'Pol. She had been introducing me to some advanced neuropressure techniques. Some of them take an hour or more, so she usually gets a bit cold towards the end, but if we crank the temperature up to her comfort level, I'll sweat like a pig and smell accordingly."

"I wonder, how you'd stay conscious at all," Malcolm snorted. "I once was in our meditation chamber and nearly passed out."

"Exactly; the modifications allow T'Pol to set the temperature to her liking and due to the hook up to the bio-sensors the bubble follows her around. That could work for the Andorians as well – at least in their quarters."

"And the energy requirements?" Malcolm asked doubtfully.

"About 30% increase over normal, but still massively less than cooling or heating the whole quarters."

"With only two Vulcans on your ship, I doubt that was a completely self-less decision," Malcolm said in a teasing tone.

"Busted!" Trip laughed again. "T'Pol dislikes the thermo-lining in her uniform with a passion, so I had to get her comfortable without sentencing myself to hours of sauna in my own cabin. That she's taken to occasional topless meditation since then is a positive side-effect. She says it's making it more relaxing for her, but I bet she does it just to get me going."

"Does she succeed?" Malcolm asked with a grin.

"Every single time," Trip said with a chuckle, before switching to shop talk. "Did you get your CMO by now?"

"Picked her up on Earth," Malcolm said. "You'll never guess who it is."

"Phlox's wife Feezal," Trip said casually between sips of beer.

"You knew?" Malcolm wondered.

"Forgotten who our CMO is?" Trip asked back. "He told me about it. He just didn't know when she would arrive. In fact, he said you should not wait long before having a serious talk with her. Denobulan marriages do not require sexual fidelity as I found out back at Dekendri III. Phlox has
already told her that married and engaged men are off-limits, but she'll have no qualms bedding unattached guys unless you specifically order her not to."

Malcolm laughed. "We've already had that particular talk, Trip. Frankly I couldn't care less as long as the guys are willing and she makes it clear to them that it isn't more than a friendly roll in the hay. In fact, I've already noticed a significant improvement in crew morale. She uses the rumor mill to update her list of eligible candidates."

Both of them had to laugh about that.

"So except for a quarter master you have a full crew then?"

"In fact I have a quarter master - Krolek, a Xindi."

"We've got Xindi in Starfleet?" Trip asked in surprise.

"No, he's a civilian. Worked in Gralik's kemocite operation. Looks like most Xindi are on some sort of guilt trip over the attack on Earth and want to make amends."

"That's one diverse gang you have there," Trip noticed with a chuckle.

"Tell me about it. I've thought about renaming myself 'Captain Doolittle' and traveling the corridors on a pogo stick."

Both men laughed and raised their mugs in salute.

"It's a good crew though," Malcolm said as he put the mug back down. With all the Vulcans and Andorians on board, we have more deep space experience than you lot."

"True," Trip agreed with a suddenly grim face. "And you're going to need it – have you read the latest recon reports?"

"Yep," Malcolm said, suddenly turning serious, too. "Together with what I wrangled out of Harris, I'd say we have two months maximum before things get serious. That's why we're going to test the vortex generator tomorrow."

"Vortex generator? As in Xindi vortex?"

"The very same," Malcolm acknowledged. "The Xindi had one vortex generator left from one of the salvaged Reptilian ships and when they heard that Hoshi and I would command this ship, they just installed it. Guess we've made a bit of a name for ourselves."

"I assumed this technology depended on the Sphere Builders' manipulations of space?" T'Pol joined in and took a seat next to Trip.

"Hi T'Pol," Malcolm greeted. "As we found out, all it takes is a vortex generator. Of course it wasn't meant to be invented for another 600 years and its energy requirements make frequent use prohibitive."

"This would contaminate the time line," T'Pol argued.

"Sure it will," Malcolm agreed. "But both Starfleet and the Xindi council have agreed not to study or replicate the device and it has an automatic destruction sequence should it be removed. Theory is that either the contamination of the timeline is minor enough not to alert Daniels or it was meant to happen in the first place. Frankly this temporal malarkey gives me a head ache."
"Indeed," T'Pol agreed.

Before they could continue, Trip and T'Pol witnessed a half naked Hoshi hopping through viewer range trying to don a uniform, while klaxons on both ships announced that they had gone to general quarters.

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"On screen!" Malcolm demanded as the alpha shift took their places on the battle bridge. Commodore Archer's grim face appeared on screen.

"The planet Betazed is under attack. They sent out a distress signal. Have you tested your vortex generator already?"

"No, we were planning...," Malcolm started, but was interrupted by Archer.

"Then you will do so now. Hold the fort. The Vulcans should be there within two hours, we need five. Until then, you're on your own."

"Aye, Sir," Malcolm replied grimly. "We'll keep them busy."

"See that you do," Archer replied. "Good luck."

"Shit just got serious," Tholos said, showing off his 'skills' in human slang.

"Reed to engineering" Malcolm barked, pressing a button on his Captain's chair.

"Engineering," came T'Len's calm reply.

"Make ready for the biggest energy drain in a while, we are going to test the vortex in combat conditions. We only have one attempt."

"Understood."

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This wasn't like anything he'd ever seen on an Andorian ship, Tholos realized. Only a short-lived species would be so reckless as to engage an untested device that could obliterate the ship any minute. The horrible whining noise the ship generated while traveling through the vortex was deafening. He had his hands full keeping up with plasma and energy flows as the massive energy drain repeatedly caused some of his weapons systems to go off-line. The only reassuring thing was, that T'Len herself was operating the damn thing.

Just a year ago he probably would have shot at her ship and now he found himself relying heavily on the expertise of the Vulcan female. The tactical exercises they had conducted on the way to Earth had shown that he and the Vulcan worked excellently together. Now this cooperation was going to be tested for real. Once through the Vortex, they'd find themselves in the middle of a battle with only the torpedo launchers available.

The ship exited the vortex with a shudder and several consoles emitted sparks. Taking a short look at the tactical display, he saw four large vessels surrounded by dozens of little signatures, which looked like ice bores surrounding a Thl'ank carcass.

"Triple..." he heard the captain say, but the trigger had already been pulled.

True to expectation T'Len had kept the Torpedo launchers powered and Tholos fired as soon as a
target presented itself.

"I see, we're on the same page, Tholos," he heard the Captain praise him, as the Romulan warbird, completely surprised by their sudden appearance, exploded after a direct hit to their exposed cloaking device.

Unfortunately the three remaining enemy ships immediately zeroed in on Buran carefully keeping their vulnerable hind-quarters out of the line of fire.

Hoshi nodded at Sonos in quiet understanding and he took the hand of the petite human. Both closed their eyes, hoping that their combined telepathic abilities would suffice to get the message through to at least one of the dozens of Betazoid ships. Betazoids were supposed to be strong telepaths according to the Vulcan database and it was their best chance at the moment.

Target the spikes in the warbird's stern, they thought in unison, but that was the only chance they got as a direct hit to the shield generators caused the comms console to explode. Both Hoshi and Sonos were violently thrown back ending up bleeding and unconscious on the floor.

Malcolm suppressed the urge to rush to his wife's side. Although she hadn't told him what the strange hand-holding with Sonos was meant to be, he had a good idea what they had tried to do and hoped it had been successful. He refocused his attention on the battle. Putting the Buran up against the three remaining Romulan warbirds was unrealistic and even if they could hold out the 90 minutes until the Vulcans arrived, their D'Kyr class vessels simply didn't have the fire power for much more than hit-and-run attacks. Grimly Malcolm decided that to survive this he had to destroy them on his own.

The question about the success of Hoshi's attempt was answered in dramatic fashion, when one of the diminutive Betazoid ships rammed into the closest Romulan vessel hitting it squarely in the vulnerable section, causing the warbird to explode in a massive fireball, unfortunately incapacitating five nearby Betazoid ships as well.

"Damn these guys are brave," Malcolm muttered.

"Grev, I need a bit of magic," Malcolm demanded. "Flip us upside down, and bring us under the warbird – Tholos, you have exactly one shot!"

"All I need," the Andorian replied calmly and Malcolm noticed that his antennae were aggressively pointing forward.

Without saying a word, the Tellarite simply delivered what was asked of him. In a risky maneuver, he slipped in between two Betazoid ships on a collision course, forcing the ship into a steep dive while flipping it upside down.

After Grev had brought the Buran into the ordered firing position, Tholos quickly emptied the three lower torpedo launchers. The nine mark three projectiles headed for the most vulnerable part of the warbird disintegrating it on impact.

"I cannot retain power for much longer, Captain," came T'Len's report from engineering and the very un-Vulcan pitch in her voice told Malcolm that she was aware of her mate's injury.

"Reduce life-support to minimum," Malcolm ordered. "Do what you can."
"Acknowledged."

Captain L'uana was torn. The arrival of the human ship had probably saved her planet from complete annihilation, but the attack by these unknown aggressors had cost too many lives. She was uncertain why her beloved mate had rammed the enemy ship, but his death had not been in vain. As many other ships did, she pounded away at the last remaining attacker, but their weapons were just too weak to penetrate the shielding.

Just as she decided to honor her mate by sacrificing herself, a huge unknown, copper-colored ship dropped out of warp. It delivered a mortal blow to the remaining enemy vessel, crippling it. The human ship quickly destroyed it by firing a salvo of torpedoes at point blank range. The battle was over.

Hailing the unknown ship she was greeted by an elderly man.

"I am Ambassador Soval of Vulcan. May we be of assistance?"

"God almighty," Trip exclaimed hustling off the turbo-lift and onto the bridge just as they reached the scene of the battle. Buran hung in space with considerable list, docked to a D'Kyr cruiser – the Gol. At least ten or more small ships of unknown, probably Betazoid origin floated nearby in space in varying degrees of devastation. It was a shocking sight.

"Are they ok?" he asked hoping that T'Pol would know anything about Malcolm or Hoshi, but uncharacteristically, T'Pol just shrugged. She was too unsettled herself to even notice her use of the human gesture.

"I'm going over," he said and headed towards the turbo-lift.

"Commander, my ready room," T'Pol ordered sternly. Trip followed her with a confused look on his face.

"I am as concerned about Buran as you are," T'Pol started without preamble, as soon as the door had closed. "But we are in a hostile situation and I must be able to rely on my officers doing their jobs here as opposed to running off on their own volition."

Trip stared at her.

"You undermined my authority," she continued her lecture. "You should have asked my permission. You know quite well that Starfleet's acceptance of our marriage is dependent on our ability to perform our duties without letting our personal relationship interfere.

"Sorry," Trip muttered.

"I understand your anxiety and if I could I would go over myself, but we must remain on Enterprise, the Gol is already docked. Our duty is to remain vigilant, there may be additional Romulan ships."

"Yes, Captain," he said and controlling his impulse to do an about-face and depart before being ordered.
"Dismissed," T'Pol said, raising an eyebrow when he had left.

Soval sat in the conference room of the T'Karath, waiting for the Captains T'Pol and Reed to arrive. Previous mind melds with Charles and T'Pol had revealed their high regard for Malcolm Reed, but seeing the aftermath of a battle in which the human had taken on the four Rihanssu ships made him realize how much he deserved their esteem. The sickbay of the T'Karath had been overflowing with Human, Vulcan and Betazoid casualties, but now that the other NX-ships had arrived, a true triage process had seen the less severe cases transferred to the human vessels.

Even after 50 years on Earth and the relatively new but enlightening experience of having a human clansman, Soval still struggled to believe in the concept of luck. It was easily explained – a chain of statistically improbable events would occur in a statistically even more improbable sequence to produce a most fortuitous, statistically near impossible result. But for the first time in his life, he had to admit that 'luck' had intervened. Logic simply failed to explain the timing of the disparate events that had allowed his ship to arrive at the battle in what was realistically the last moment to save the human and Betazoid ships. He examined the unlikely sequence of events. The mediation talks between the Xindi races were completed at the precise moment the T'Karath received orders to proceed to the newly reconstructed Salem One station, where he was supposed to establish the infrastructure for a deep space embassy of Vulcan and fill in the post as interim ambassador until an appointed envoy would arrive. Nor was the fact foreseeable that a Xindi aquatic ship, the first scientific vessel the Xindi sent out after returning to peaceful coexistence, had offered to open a vortex for them, which was the sole reason for the T'Karath arriving when she did. Had the Xindi ship not happened to be there, they would have been at least a week from Salem One and the Buran would not have survived the maiden voyage under Captain Reed.

Yes, he admitted to himself, whatever he tried to explain these events, he would always arrive at an abstract human concept, be it fate, destiny or luck, so in pragmatic fashion, Soval decided to accept luck as the best explanation, since this concept was the least alien to him.

It was not difficult for T'Pol to see just how worried Malcolm was. There was still no word about Hoshi and despite just having won an improbable battle, Malcolm was angry and worried.

"First things first, Ambassador," she heard Malcolm ask without preamble. "Is my wife on your ship?"

"She is, Captain Reed and to ease your concerns, her condition has improved; she is now in serious yet stable condition."

T'Pol heard a loud sigh escape Malcolm.

"You appear unsatisfied with our situation," T'Pol half stated, half asked.

"We won the battle, fine," Malcolm answered and his voice was thick with anger. "But the MACOs were a complete no-show."

"You are used to the experience of Sergeant Cole and her group, you cannot expect all MACOs to measure up to her standards without accumulating experience," she argued.

"All true," Malcolm agreed. "But I rely on them getting the basics right. They were too slow, didn't secure core areas of the ship and don't even get me started on their lack of discipline."
"Is the situation truly this bad?" T'Pol asked back, believing Malcolm's emotional recollection to be exaggerated.

"Remember the useless recon marines in 'Heartbreak Ridge'?" Malcolm spat. "That's my MACO platoon in a nutshell."

"Perhaps they would profit from similar treatment then?"

T'Pol saw Malcolm's bewildered look. "Are you trying to tell me I should emulate a movie character to whip them in shape?"

"While much of the film was exaggerated for dramatic reasons, some of the psychological methods employed by Gunnery Sergeant Highway were sound. He was successful in creating an *esprit de corps* among the men."

"I can't believe you're suggesting something as crazy as this!" she heard him say in exasperation.

"While I am in no position to understand what T'Pol is referring to," Soval intervened. "I have found her advice to be sound at most times in the past, even if it appeared most unusual at first. I suggest you entertain the idea of following it, Captain Reed."

"To hell with it," Malcolm said with a lopsided grin. "It's worth a try."
Repairs And Revelations

If it wasn't so sad, Malcolm would have laughed out loud. Not even a month had gone by since he had left Salem One to take Buran out on her maiden voyage and now he was back already with a ship that looked very second-hand. Granted, in between the two events he had killed about four hundred Romulans and saved about three times as many Betazoids, but no captain in the universe liked to see his ship in the state Buran was in. Thankfully Starfleet had recalled Enterprise to Salem One, too, so his ship would be repaired under the guidance of Charles Tucker III himself – one couldn't hope for more than that. He had no doubt in T'Len's expertise, but two brilliant minds on the job were better than one.

Following the battle in orbit of Betazed and due to latest reports from the V'Shar and Section 31 Starfleet had decided to assemble the whole first offensive fleet around Salem One and space surely got crowded. Stabilized and powered by two D'Kyr class vessels, each docked on either side of Buran's battered saucer section, the wounded ship weaved through a venerable sea of nine fully armed NX class ships, about twenty Andorian Kumari class cruisers, at least thirty D'Kyr frigates and an eclectic mix of Baikal, Marconi and Olympus Mons class frigates. This was the biggest fleet the alpha quadrant had seen in a while.

"None of your ships?" Tholos asked in Grev's direction, but before the Tellarite could deliver a riposte, Malcolm butted in.

"The Tellarite fleet has taken on the task of planetary defense of all coalition planets," he explained with a look that would make sure Tholos didn't have any 'questions' afterward. "If you call home, you'll find that Andoria is orbited by more Nork class cruisers than you would have been comfortable with a year ago."

"I apologize," Tholos said.

"No need to," Malcolm said with a smirk. "Grev fancies a good insult now and then. But you certainly need to update your tactical knowledge. I expect my tactical officer to know that Tellarite vessels are better used defensively than offensively. See that you get up-to-date. There'll be a quiz afterward."

Even a still bandaged Sonos, manning the communications console raised an amused eyebrow about Malcolm's ribbing of Tholos.

 As the big doors to the hospital wing of Salem One opened, the first Malcolm noticed was the eerie silence. Having spent five years in space now, he had come to associate sickbay with a cacophony of chirping, trilling and squeaking coming from a veritable zoo of alien animals. Both Phlox on Enterprise and his wife Feezal on Buran preferred natural therapies to chemical measures.

Unlike back home on Buran he didn't walk into a single large chamber full of biobeds. This was a huge chamber, the walls of which were lined with dozens of currently not activated monitors, above them a lineup of at least a hundred folding gurneys in their wall mounts, which could quickly be unfolded and used to carry in the wounded. Unfolding the legs underneath them would transform them into makeshift biobeds. This particular addition was a result of their rescue mission on Corridan Prime, where Trip's engineering crew had made dozens of makeshift biobeds from
Having been involved in the reconstruction planning after seizing the station from the Romulans he knew that this chamber would become the ER unit of the hospital. It would be here where the incoming wounded would be assessed and assigned for further treatment. He shuddered at the thought that this was a full blown hospital with 12 operating theaters, two independent intensive care units, three prosthetic workshops and biobeds for up to 750 patients. Three docked *Aesclepius* class hospital ships provided three additional operating theaters and further space for up to 210 patients.

Malcolm shuddered again. In a pinch this monstrous unit could house a thousand wounded and 15 surgeries could be performed simultaneously. What made him grim was, that from his time as a Section 31 operative, who had seen conflicts between races which Earth hadn't officially encountered yet, he knew that the day when this facility was forced to operate at over 100% capacity was already on the calendar.

This was what made those Romulans so menacing. Klingons, Cardassians, Gorn – he had seen a lot of warrior races that Earth officially didn't yet know about, but even the Section had not the faintest clue about what or who the Romulans were. He couldn't know that, of all people, his former Captain and now fleet commander had much more information about the Romulans than Harris's shady bunch.

"Dr. Lukas?" Malcolm called out in surprise as a stout man with a white lab coat walked into the chamber.

"Captain Reed," the doctor answered and walked towards him. "I've been waiting for you. If you would follow me?"

After a handshake Malcolm followed the Doctor along the long corridors until they arrived at one of the smaller examination rooms, where the Doctor called up two images on adjacent screens without much of a preamble. One of them was Hoshi’s Starfleet record. When he saw that no date of death had been registered yet, Malcolm relaxed slightly.

"According to her record, your wife was born on July 9th in 2129. Is that correct?" Dr. Lucas asked.

"Of course, Doctor," Malcolm said in a puzzled tone. "We had to register our birth certificates for our wedding license not too long ago. I've seen hers. How is Hoshi?"

"She is fine, but still unconscious, we'll talk about that soon. Now, what you see here," the Doctor said and pointed to the slowly rotating helix on the second read-out. "Is a genetic profile of your wife, taken by the Vulcans before she was delivered here. As the medics on Soval's ship did not have access to her Starfleet medical record, they made a complete genetic scan. According to the cellular decay rate, your wife was born on March 30th or April 1st in 2130. Peculiar, isn't it?"

Malcolm stared at the display, unable to say anything, but his brooding was interrupted by the metallic computer voice of the PA system.

"Two incoming emergencies. Two incoming emergencies. Human One, Vulcan One. Severity Two."

Malcolm observed the Doctor as he calmly called up the duty roster and the screen showed a selection of human, Andorian and Vulcan medics.
"Dr. Turis, Dr. Tral, report to the ER unit," Dr. Lukas ordered after keying the door com unit to the PA system.

A short time later Malcolm heard the swish of an opening door nearby and an Andorian and a Vulcan, clad in white lab coats, jogged past their door down the corridor. Who would have thought a year ago that a Vulcan and an Andorian would work together in a hospital unit that was led by a human chief physician.

"Where were we?" the Dr. asked Malcolm.

"You were trying to tell me that Hoshi's been celebrating her birthday on the wrong day for over 20 years," Malcolm snorted.

"Ah, yes. Well Captain, can you remember any unusual medical episodes of your wife or exposure to alien influences? It would make it easier than to read the complete medical history."

"There are so many," Malcolm said. "The radiation on the Akaali planet, the transporter incident, the L'oquezque virus, abducted by the telepathic alien and the Xindi-Reptilians, her unexplained resurrection after her death..."

"Resurrection?" Lucas asked with an astonished look.

"About 14 months ago she and Commander Tucker were infected by an alien virus. Both died, but somehow came back from the dead. Phlox and Feezal have been trying to find out about what happened, but they are still clueless," Malcolm explained.

"Fourteen months," the Dr. muttered and Malcolm saw a myriad of numbers flash over the screen on the wall until a metallic voice announced "record found."

Malcolm observed how the Doctor rushed through several on-screen menus, before the computer voice announced "calculating."

"Now, we just need to wait a moment," the doctor said idly.

"Calculation finished. Species human, female, approximate date of birth: Year twenty one twenty nine, month six, week two," the computer voice droned monotonously.

"Well that sounds a bit closer to what we've believed so far," Malcolm stated the obvious. "So what does that mean? Obviously a birth can only happen once. Could it be some of this time line malarkey?"

"That is what we need to find out, Captain Reed. Didn't you say Commander Tucker was affected as well?"

"Yes."

"Excellent," the doctor said. "Since he's currently watching over your wife, we can take a scan of him immediately. But first you'll be scanned. Please remove your uniform and make yourself comfortable in the imaging chamber."

"You have a strange idea of 'comfortable', Doctor," Malcolm said and started removing his flight suit.

"Commander Tucker, please join us in room E-15," the doctor announced over the PA system.
"Hands at your side, Captain," Dr. Lucas instructed before he shoved the platform with Malcolm on it into the chamber's inner tube and closed it. Malcolm closed his eyes, while the monotonous hum of the scan made him feel the exhaustion of the last few days.

Malcolm awoke and the first he saw was a white ceiling. He shook off the drowsiness and looked around. After a few moments he looked into the face of T'Pol, who was sitting next to his bio bed, with Hoshi positioned on the bed on her other side.

"Hey T'Pol," he muttered and swung his feet over the side of the bed. "What happened."

"You fell asleep in the chamber," she explained and pointed to the lower end of his bed, where a folded fresh uniform was.

After donning the fresh uniform – Trip or T'Pol must have brought it here – he went around the biobed, offering T'Pol a friendly handshake. To his utter surprise she gently drew him in and gave him a hug, which he returned somewhat stiffly.

"What was that all about?" he asked slowly gravitating toward Hoshi's bed.

"We were worried about the two of you," T'Pol admitted. "We all know how to read a tactical display. We were not convinced that we would arrive in time."

"Well thankfully Soval did," Malcolm said, sending her a small smile, while he took Hoshi's limp hand.

"Hoshi regained consciousness about three hours ago," T'Pol explained, coming up beside him and looked down at her sleeping friend. "Dr. Lucas administered a sedative to allow her to rest. The surgery and the artificial coma have cost her a great amount of energy."

"Could you talk to her?"

"Indirectly," T'Pol answered. "The doctor didn't want her to be awake for a long period before she hasn't rested properly and the swelling of her brain tissue has subsided properly. He allowed me to perform a mind-meld though. Her mind is intact and it was Hoshi, who asked me to embrace you in her stead."

"You surprised me," Malcolm said with a smile.

"I would have probably done so nonetheless," T'Pol explored dryly. "I understand it is not an inappropriate gesture among friends."

"It isn't," Malcolm agreed, still smiling. He felt that the sleep had invigorated him. "How long have I been out?"

"Twelve hours and 24 minutes," T'Pol said. "When you passed out in the imaging chamber, the doctor decided to administer a sedative to allow you uninterrupted sleep. You were severely exhausted."

"Well, I wasn't exactly on a pleasure cruise," Malcolm sighed and gently continued to caress Hoshi's hand.
Legatus Tavrus, who was once Major Talok walked the long corridors towards the Praetors chamber, where an emergency meeting was scheduled with him and Admiral Valdore. One would die today in dishonor, either Valdore or Fleet Admiral Verax, who had refused to remove the silly cloaking devices from their ships.

*We could just as well go into battle with the self-destruct sequence already counting down,* Tavrus thought grimly.

The defeat at Betazed was already the second in a short time and the Preator was not known to be a man of composure and patience. Initial satisfaction that the coalition vessel they encountered in battle was not the much hated, but also somewhat dreaded Enterprise, was soon supplanted by confusion that a coalition ship had been encountered in the first place. *Tal'Shiar* reconnaissance ships had not found any coalition ships within more than 2 hours range, which should have given them more than enough time to finish the laughable Betazoid runabouts that passed for ships on this planet of puny, hapless people.

What was more worrying was that a biosign scan had revealed that the ship was populated by six different species. All their efforts to divide the races in that quadrant had failed miserably. On the contrary – the *Terrhasu*, the most short-lived and weakest species of them all had managed to bind them into a coalition that presented the biggest obstacle the Empire had encountered in centuries of conquest. Of course admitting that publicly was a stupid and potentially lethal idea.

"FOUR! We lost four of our best ships!" Praetor D'Deridex hollered without preamble, once Tavrus had entered the chamber and taken a military stance next to the Admiral. "Valdore, I told you I don't accept any more failures."

"I'm afraid you are talking to the wrong man, Excellency," Legatus Tavrus interrupted. "Admiral Valdore wanted to follow my advice to remove the experimental cloaking devices, but Fleet Admiral Verax denied that request categorically."

"Why is this cloaking device to blame?" the Praetor demanded staring at him. "It has served us well in recent conflicts."

"It has served well against races, who haven't found out about its weakness," Valdore disagreed. "The *Terrhasu* know that we cannot keep it operational without connecting it directly to the warp core. The two officers that infiltrated our drone ship saw the installation. One direct hit in the holographic emitters and a whole warbird is destroyed instantly due to a warpcore breach. And the *Terrhasu* have freely shared that knowledge with other races."

"These hevam are beginning to annoy me!" the Praetor screamed and hammered his fists on his ancient desk. "Valdore, I want that device taken out of every ship, except the Tal'Shiar vessels. To Remus with the advantage! And bring me Verax – and a firing squad."

When Malcolm entered the gym on Salem One, he couldn't believe his eyes. The MACOs, who were supposed to be engaged in combat training, were sitting around in little groups, some playing cards, others chatting or just sleeping on the floor.

Several looked at him dismissively, but only a few made lazy attempts at getting on their feet. Most seemed to completely ignore the entrance of the ship's Captain. With a swift movement, he drew his pulse rifle, flicked the switch to stun and let go a salvo of shots, only narrowly missing the groups of people.
"What the fuck?!" one of the MACOs yelled, while taking cover behind one of the weight racks.

"That's what I want to know!" Malcolm growled back. "Get on your feet and in formation you bloody scumbags."

The soldiers scrambled and quickly were standing in front of him in formation.

"Does this look like combat training to you?" Malcolm asked angrily and looked at the lazy bunch in front of him. Several uniforms looked less than pristine. The late Major Hayes would have eaten this lot raw. For all the initial problems he had with the fallen MACO, he had learned to respect him as an excellent military leader.

"We were waiting for Staff Sergeant Willis, Sir," one of the MACOs, a Sergeant, answered lamely.

"And you will continue waiting, because he's on his way back to Earth into involuntary early retirement." Malcolm growled, walking up and down the front line of soldiers. Without prior warning he socked one of them, who wore a particularly untidy uniform, sending him crashing into a nearby bulkhead.

"I'm at least three inch shorter than you, Corporal. How can I attack you without you showing as much as a reaction?" he yelled after the soldier, who scrambled back to his feet. He faced the others again.

"You lot don't impress me. In case you've missed the signs, we're heading into a war. I'm not going to watch how good men and women get their arses shot off, because you didn't do your bloody job. Your new platoon leader will expect a group of people ready to kick arse and trust me, you will be ready, when Sergeant Cole is done with you. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Sir," the bewildered soldiers answered in unison.

"Strip off those jackets and get ready for combat practice. I'll be leading the training today."

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Trip came out of the bathroom to find T'Pol and Malcolm already seated in their quarters on Enterprise. After a very long day trying to patch up Malcolm's ship the shower had felt like a second birth, but all the invigorating effects of the shower would probably not keep him on his feet much longer than another two or three hours.

"Hey Mal," he greeted giving his friend a pat on the back.

"You look like hell," Malcolm said. "Any reason why I'm not allowed on my ship? I've been inundated with reports, but I'm not allowed to verify them?"

"Just," Trip said, gesturing him to wait a moment while he opened the door for the steward.

After the crewman had served the dishes and taken his leave Malcolm looked at Trip expectantly.

"It's just too crowded," Trip explained. "There are currently about 160 people running around on your ship. T'Len's crew, station personnel and two damage control teams from the Vulcans. You'd constantly be in the way of someone. And that doesn't even count for the risk of accidents. We had 8 injuries and that's just today."

"Is she so badly damaged," Malcolm asked back with a worried glance.
"Let's eat first," T'Pol suggested. "We can review the day's events after dinner."

Both men nodded their agreement and the meal proceeded in silence.

"So, how does it look?" Malcolm asked, once the steward had left with the dirty dishes and Trip had served them two beers and a tea for T'Pol.

"We're running three shifts round the clock," Trip explained. "Will take about a week and she's as good as new. And don't worry about the reports. They go all through me or T'Len. Trust me, before they reach you, we've checked them."

"I forgot to ask," Malcolm said looking at T'Pol after acknowledging Trips explanation with a nod. "What did the scans of the doctor bring about? Did he find out what's wrong with Hoshi?"

"It appears there is nothing wrong with Hoshi," she explained. "Since we don't know what happened, while Trip and Hoshi were infected, we can only speculate, but what the doctor found out is, that both Trip's and Hoshi's genetic makeup has been 'optimized'."

"I'm afraid you've lost me," Malcolm said and put the mug back on the table as if the beer was responsible for his state of confusion.

"Older scans of Trip have shown that he had a genetic predisposition for Alzheimer's disease. This genetic predisposition is no longer present in the scan Doctor Lucas performed today. Hoshi carried a genetic defect that exposed your future offspring to a 37.3% chance of being born with Down's syndrome. This defect is no longer present either."

"So whatever they were infected with sort of cleaned up their genetic makeup?" Malcolm asked for further clarification.

"It appears to be the case," T'Pol confirmed. "It also had an effect on their aging process, which explains the mismatch in their date of birth."

"My birthday was off my 7 months, too," Trip provided, seeing Malcolm's confused look.

"Trip's date of birth was seemingly miscalculated by the same number of days as Hoshi's," T'Pol continued. "I have calculated that their aging process has slowed down by 49.761%. In short – over the last fourteen months since the unexplained infection both Trip and Hoshi have aged by only 7 months."

Having finished her tea, T'Pol stood up and walked to her wardrobe.

"That means...," Malcolm stammered, but got stuck mid-sentence.

"Yep," Tripped quipped. "T'Pol is stuck with me for another hundred twenty to hundred forty years."

"And Hoshi, too?" Malcolm asked.

Trip nodded.

"I'm lost for words," Malcolm said in amazement. He left unexplained if that condition was caused by realizing that he would have a youthful wife for most of his life or the fact that T'Pol had quietly undressed and walked naked into the bathroom for a shower.

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"Mattes!" Trip hollered coming into Buran's battered engineering section the next day and the lanky German dropped out of a Jeffries tube. "Here!"

"How's the status?" he asked.

"The hull is patched up," Mattes explained. "But the EPS grid is a mess. They've taken a direct hit into junction J17. Whoever thought that placing a major EPS junction that close to the outer hull was a good idea, should be taken outside and shot."

"Didn't we correct that on Enterprise, when we installed the phase cannons?" Trip asked.

"We did," Mattes confirmed. "But it looks like they've sent the prototype data to the Aquarians. They've built the Buran exactly like Enterprise was when she shipped out for the first time."

"Damn, that means we have 4 years worth of upgrades to install," Trip groaned.

"Exactly, Chief; But don't worry, we're already on it. And while we're at it T'Len can learn about them first hand. Problem is, it'll delay us by at least a day."

"You have more than a day, so assemble a team and get cracking on it, but make sure to run your modifications past T'Len first," Trip said, poking away at a PADD. "This ship and its crew nuked four Rommies. I want it ready to add to that tally."

"How are they?" Mattes asked. "The Reeds, I mean."

"They're fine," Trip answered with a smile. "Worried about losing your customers?"

"Unsinn!" the German replied. "If it were for customers, we've got no shortage of those. Apparently the Andorians are growing fond of our beer. Our stash is running low with so many Kumari cruisers around. Maybe you didn't notice, but not only the human crews are quite impressed by what Captain Reed has done. He's a damn hero."

"I'm not gonna argue with that," Trip agreed. "If you wanna pay them a visit, go ahead. Hoshi's still in the hospital. I'm sure she will appreciate it. Oh... and before you give everything away to the Andorians, make sure our keg is replaced."

"Wouldn't hear of it, Chief," Mattes said with a laugh and crawled back into the Jeffries tube.

The monotonous whine of the treadmill in Enterprise's gym would have drowned out all thoughts for most people, but not those of a former Section 31 operative, who was trained not to lose concentration under any circumstances.

Having spent most of the day before out cold in the hospital, he felt quite refreshed. The fact that Hoshi had woken up in the morning had helped this a lot, too and for the first time since the battle he had had the chance to talk to her and reassure himself of her continued presence in his life.

Most of the day he had been torn. One half of him was hell-bent on leaving Starfleet and not to send Hoshi into harms way again, but his other half would not allow him to abandon his friends and colleagues in this time of battle. As a former operative, who still had good contacts to the section, thanks to T'Pol's taming of Harris, he was a vital asset to Starfleet. He simply couldn't take himself out of the line of fire.

Thinking about T'Pol kicking Harris' arse back in line led inevitably to thoughts about the Vulcan.
She had utterly surprised him twice. First by hugging him in the hospital and later by undressing for her shower as if it was the most normal thing in the world that he was still in the room at the time. Of course Trip had gotten another laugh about his obvious bafflement, but the longer he thought about it, the more he realized that it was indeed a normal thing. The only thing making it not normal was his own social awkwardness.

Both women had been tanning in the nude on Vulcan for most of the time and the only person discomforted by it was himself. On the other hand, Malcolm cackled mentally, two or three years ago he would have run screaming had Hoshi or T'Pol decided to jump out of their clothes.

Life without Hoshi and the Tuckers became increasingly unimaginable. Having severed almost all ties to his own family, Trip and his wife had become his family and more or less his only true friends. As an operative one did not have friends by necessity and his rotten social skills didn't make him an outgoing character either. Of course this closeness to other people that he felt for the first time in his life also meant that losing anyone of them to the horrors of the war would mean pain and grief that he had never felt before. That was the price for finding a family after such a long time as a lone wolf.

He forced himself to abandon that thought. It was just too painful to dwell on it.
Hammer Of War

Despite understanding Trip's explanation for his banishment from Buran Malcolm did the logical thing the next day and ignored the advice. Fighting his way through the crowded corridors of his ship he began to understand though, why Trip wasn't so keen on letting him see the fracas. Just about any panel that could be opened was actually open with either a human or Vulcan head stuck in it, surrounded by cables, pipes and engineering tools. It didn't really look as if his ship was meant to be flying again, let alone in one week.

Ducking away from a fountain of sparks caused by some welding work above him, he continued his way towards engineering, where he hoped to find either T'Len or Trip to get an idea why his ship was looking like a prototype still weeks from being finished. Inwardly he hoped it would be T'Len as Trip would probably not take well to his uninvited presence, but it was his ship and he wouldn't be kept in the dark. Never operate on second-hand information. This old adage was one of the many things that he had learned from his time in the Section.

Well, that certainly isn't Trip, Malcolm thought with relief, when he saw a very shapely derrière sticking out from one of the open access panels. Like many Vulcan females T'Len wore tight fitting catsuits with a thermal lining instead of the standard issue blue flight suits. He wondered if Vulcans were actually aware of how little these things left to the imagination of a species that didn't curb their thoughts and emotions.

"I will be with you momentarily, Captain," T'Len announced calmly, when she had noticed his arrival.

"No hurry, Lieutenant-Commander," Malcolm said and waited until T'Len crawled out of the tight space with cat-like grace.

"I take it your presence here is against Captain Tucker's wishes?" she asked dryly.

"Am I that predictable?"

"You are human," she explained dead-pan, but the chirp of Malcolm's communicator ended their conversation before it had really begun.

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T'Pol raised her eyebrow a little when a slightly out-of-breath Malcolm joined her in Rear Admiral Zhukov's ready room on Salem One. The station's commanding officer sat on his desk, juggling an impressive amount of PADDs full of repair reports, material requisitions, crew reports and whatever else comes up on a station that basically is a small town in deep space.

"Unless you want to incur the wrath of Commander Tucker for ignoring his request not to visit your ship, you should dust off your uniform before you let yourself be seen by him, Captain," she advised Malcolm calmly.

"Sorry," he muttered sheepishly before he noticed Admiral Gardner's face on a nearby view screen. "Admiral."

"Now that we're all here," Gardner said without answering her greeting. "There is a change in plans. Captain Reed, repairs on your ship will be finished under observation of your chief engineer T'Len."
Captain T'Pol you get ready to depart as soon as possible. You will rendezvous with Endurance at Rigel X and leg it back home on the double. I'm pulling both you and Lorian off the front lines."

"May I ask why?" T'Pol inquired.

"I was coming to that Captain."

According to the ship's logs this was the first congregation of the whole crew in cargo bay one since late in the Expanse mission and Terval found himself almost overwhelmed by the sheer volume of noise caused by 81 humans engaged in excited idle chatter. His keen hearing could make out that general hypothesis was that Enterprise was being 'pulled back' and whatever that meant, it obviously didn't meet with approval of the crew.

The Captain appeared behind the elevated guard rail and was obviously about to address the crew. Immediately the deafening noise died down and one could have heard 'a pin drop' as the human saying went.

"Starfleet Command has decided to recall Enterprise and Endurance to put them on a special mission," he heard his krei explain. Momentarily the idle chatter returned as humans obviously felt a need to immediately discuss any new information they were confronted with, but a stern look of krei Charles, who stood beside her quickly restored order.

"As a result of the recent battle at Betazed the Coalition Council has decided that we need a dedicated class of warship that can counter the Romulan warbirds. We have been assigned the task to build that warship. The project will be headed by Commander Tucker."

"If the chief builds it, the Rommies are toast!" he heard one ensign in engineering uniform shout and loud cheers could be heard.

"Does anyone have questions?" T'Pol asked and nodded into Terval's direction once he had indicated his desire to speak.

"Captain, does it not appear tactically unsound to remove two of Starfleets most advanced ships from the fight?"

"The positions of Enterprise and Endurance in the First Fleet will be filled with two Kumari class cruisers," his krei answered. "Additionally there is a shortage of ships at SOLCOM. Starfleet wants to have our two ships as an emergency response force near Earth should the Romulans manage to break through the front lines. At the time planetary defense is provided by Tellarite forces and Starfleet wants at least two ships with wartime experience as part of that force."

"Most logical," Terval conceded.

"Everybody return to his position, we are departing within the hour," T'Pol commanded and Terval brought up the rear as the humans left the cargo bay to carry out their captain's orders.

It was late evening and Trip had been preparing for bed. But now he sat in his quarters, looking at the faces of Admirals Gardner and Jeffries on the view screen. Much to his surprise Gardner laughed when he spotted the beer mug on Trip's desk.

"No need, Commander," Gardner said with a smirk when Trip tried to remove it discreetly from
viewer range. "Who do you think approved the installation of that little brewery of yours a few months ago. And we know we practically called you in the middle of the night. As long as you don't inebriate yourself we're fine with that and I doubt your Captain would let you get away with getting plastered."

"That she wouldn't, no," Trip answered with a grin.

"Have you taken a look at the plans we've sent you?" Admiral Jeffries asked.

"I was just doing so when you called and so far everything looks fine. For once the ship's hull doesn't look like it was designed by a baboon with crayons. With that shape we could build up a massive warp bubble and easily crack Warp 7. Too bad the Warp 7 project is still in its early stages."

"That's why we're calling. The Council session ended only now, so there is some information missing from the documents we sent earlier. We've come to the agreement that the new ship will be a coalition ship. That means, once the prototype has been tested, all four races will build and use it."

Trip heard the confused discussion between Gardner and Jeffries when he had removed himself from viewer range. Returning to the desk he put the refilled mug in front of himself.

"Now we're talking Gentlemen. Please, tell me everything about it," he quipped with a wide grin.

Gardner and Jeffries started laughing.

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Enterprise and Endurance were docked to each other and lazily orbited Rigel X as both ships waited for a Vulcan troop transporter, which was scheduled to arrive in 10 hours time. The Tar'Hana was to deliver a 60 man engineering detachment for the new project.

"You appear quite enthusiastic about this project," Lorian remarked once he had taken a seat in Trip and T'Pol's quarters.

"You have no idea, son," Trip enthused. "That thing is a game changer. Human nacelle design, Vulcan engine, Andorian phaser and torpedo technology, Tellarite alloys for the hull. Everybody contributes what they're best at."

"It does sound like a good prospect," Lorian agreed. "But even then we are probably still only matching the warbirds and be reminded that we first have to build it."

"All true," Trip conceded. "But look at what we have now. The only ships able to match them are Vulcan Surok class cruisers and there are only eight of those. So far we've gone up with sticks against spiked clubs, but this thing is a hammer of war."

"Maybe we should name them accordingly," Lorian remarked dryly cocking his eyebrow. "Aren't you selling ourselves short? We've won two of the recent battles even though at great cost."

"We've won them because they still had their ridiculous cloaking devices in the ships," Trip disagreed. "Do you really think they'll leave them in any longer and make the same mistake a third time? Maybe in a few reconnaissance ships, but for the fighting force, they'd be stark raving mad not to take them out."

"Probably not. Let's hope this new ship is as good as you make it sound."
"Trust me on that," Trip said enthusiastically.

"Have you thought about the consequences?" Lorian asked. "This ship will be your brainchild. If you would be in charge of Starfleet, who would you appoint Captain of the Prototype?"

"I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"Even though I'm only half-Vulcan, I sometimes suffer a moment of logic," Lorian explained deadpan. "You will most likely be promoted to Captain. You are overdue anyway. The logical choice for captaincy of the prototype is the man who designed and built it."

"I've talked my way out of commanding Enterprise," Trip reasoned.

"You can't run away forever," Lorian said. "As the man heading the project to build the ship, you'll have to take command of the building facility. You cannot do that as a Commander. And Starfleet won't have two Captains stationed on the same ship, which means you and mother will both end up commanding a ship – but not the same one."

"You're probably right," Trip sighed. "I hope Starfleet keeps us at least in the same fleet. I knew the day would come anyway. With our bond more or less mature now, not even the Vulcans can keep claiming that we need to be on the same ship. After all, others don't have that luxury either."

"Indeed."

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"Report!" Malcolm barked as he ran onto the battle bridge of Buran.

"Commodore Archer has ordered the fleet to Galorndon Core," Tholos reported and vacated the big chair. "It appears that a Romulan squadron has invaded the system."

"We are being hailed for fleet-wide announcement," Sonos announced calmly and put it on the screen after a nod from his Captain.

"To all fleet," Archer, whose face filled the view screen, announced. "Four hours ago forces of the Romulan Star Empire have invaded the Galorndon system and destroyed the xenoeocological science colony on Galorndon Core using fission weapons. All 130,000 inhabitants were killed instantly. The reconnaissance ship UES Sokrates, who sent us this information was lost with all hands."

"They are going to pay for this," Malcolm muttered and the determined faces around convinced him that most of his bridge crew thought the same.

"Thirty minutes ago, United Earth Government declared war on the Romulan Star Empire," Archer continued. "Vulcan, Andorian and Tellarite governments have also declared the state of war as per article 5 of the Coalition Charter. We are at war. Godspeed everybody."

"Lieutenant Tholos, have you familiarized yourself with the war time measures developed by Captain T'Pol and Commander Tucker?" Malcolm asked once the viewscreen had gone dark. "If so, give me the short version."

"All personnel working in outer hull regions are to wear EV suits with extended oxygen supply at all times," Tholos started to recite without even looking at his display. Obviously the seasoned warrior had done his homework. "All enlisted personnel and junior officers will bunk in two- or four man quarters. The quarters near the armory are to be vacated and turned into torpedo storage.
My second in command, Ensign Matura will be assigned Chief Weapons Officer."

"Good," Malcolm answered with an appreciative nod. "Have Matura implement these measures on the double. We'll be at Galorndon core in less than 12 hours. I want us to be ready to go in no more than eight hours."

"Aye, sir."

"Great, our job has just become a little more urgent," Trip sighed after hearing Archer's announcement. Since until their arrival in Earth orbit both ships were still assigned to First Fleet, they had gotten the same transmission as Buran, but with a slight subspace delay. He felt the rage build up inside him.

"It was inevitable," T'Pol said calmly and refrained from putting a soothing hand on his shoulder. As much as she wanted to do that; They were on the bridge and such a display would be unseemly in full view of their bridge crew.

"Permission to leave the bridge?" Trip requested with a fierce scowl.

"For what purpose?" T'Pol asked, even though she had a fairly clear idea what his reasons were.

"I just got an inspiration to get this ship built sooner rather than later," Trip said and pointed angrily at the view screen, which hand already gone black. "We can start the final planning here. No need to wait until we're back home."

"Granted," T'Pol acknowledged. "It would be prudent to include the Vulcan engineers in your planning from the start."

"That's what I had in mind," Trip said and briskly walked off the bridge.

"All measures have been implemented, Captain," Tholos relayed the incoming report from Ensign Matura. "They are currently running final diagnostics on the phase cannons."

"Excellent, Lieutenant," Malcolm answered and sat back in his chair. He reckoned that pacing around would make the bridge crew even more nervous than they already were. The tension was palpable the nearer they came to the Galorndon system. Long range scans had shown a veritable belt of debris around Galorndon core that could not be from the destroyed *Sokrates* alone. Something terrible had happened and if the reports about the use of fission weapons were true, it wasn't too difficult to work it out. These devilish things had been banned on Earth since the end of World War III for a reason.

"Reed to Doctor Phlox," Malcolm intoned calmly while pressing the com button on his captain's chair.

"Phlox here," came the reply and Malcolm had to overcome a moment of confusion. It would take some time of getting used to the fact that a call for Doctor Phlox was answered by a female voice – that of one of his wives.

"Doctor, I want you to prepare everything you need to deal with radiation victims. Request whatever it takes from the quartermaster or Engineering. You have full authority."
"As you wish Captain," she replied and although he couldn't see her, her voice told him everything he needed to know. The sheer distaste emanating from the com speaker was hard to miss. Apparently humanity wasn't the only race that had less than desirable experience with these diabolical devices.

They all stared at the view screen. A big hole scarred the outer hull of Jupiter Station's gigantic ring shaped structure. A salvage vessel was busy collecting bits of debris and the retching from Commodore Martino's direction reminded Lorian that the 'debris' were actually human bodies blown out when the bomb had caused the hull breach and subsequent explosive decompression. The emergency force fields, constructed after a design by Malcolm Reed had prevented a bigger disaster, but for 32 technicians all help came too late and an entire section was decompressed.

"Someone has bombed the station right under our noses," Admiral Gardner growled. "This is unacceptable. I want answers and I want them yesterday."

"We will launch an investigation, immediately," Admiral Roger Black answered.

Lorian had to force himself not to snort in disdain. This was the same Admiral, who had been lobbying for strict non-fraternization rules and was later divorced by his wife due to being caught in an extra-marital affair. Infidelity was the ultimate offense in Vulcan society and even if he was just half-Vulcan, the very thought was revolting.

"Well if you could tear yourself away from that mud-slinging match with your ex-wife, that would be a great idea," Gardner spat sarcastically. "You are in charge of Starfleet security. How the hell could that happen? Just two weeks ago you told us you've sidelined Harris and his shady bunch, because we don't need them anymore. Well, this does look like we need them quite a lot!"

Lorian's glance fell back on the battered station, following the direction of Gardner's angrily pointing finger. It was time to speak up.

"Gentlemen, I ask forgiveness for interrupting, but I believe there is only one option to correct this situation."

He felt all glances directed to him. Obviously, they were all willing to listen.

"Endurance needs to return to the 1st Fleet, while Captain Reed and Buran should take our place here. With all due respect to Admiral Black, but it is obvious that his personnel is out of their depths with the task at hand. As trying as accepting their methods might be, antagonizing Section 31 was a monumental mistake. There is one man, who can provide adequate security for the Molotok project – Captain Malcolm Reed."

"We can't take Reed off the front lines. It's the most advanced ship we have," Black protested. "No other ship has a vortex generator."

"Which is exactly why Captain Reed should return," Lorian disagreed, determined to pick apart Black's flawed logic. "If we were needed to reinforce the 1st fleet, it would take us days if not weeks to reach them. But with the vortex generator, Buran can reach every point in the quadrant in a matter of hours, so they can be stationed with SOLCOM without compromising their ability to reinforce the front lines if needed."

"Great idea," Gardner said and raised an appreciate thumb in Lorian's direction. "Captain, as soon as Buran is back, you'll head out to rendezvous with Archer's fleet. News from Galorndon aren't
encouraging, so we'll fill your ship to the gills with supplies."

"I still maintain that this is a mistake," Black insisted.

"And I maintain that you better keep quite now," Nathan Samuels, United Earth Gov's representative in the briefing interrupted. "You will be lucky if you keep your job after this, Admiral. You're not only embroiled in legal trouble due to your own infidelity, which is unbecoming a flag officer, your department quite obviously didn't do its job either and thirty-two people paid for that with their lives. Among them five Vulcans."

Although he seemed ready to hit back, Black actually remained quiet and Lorian agreed with the Minister's opinion that it was likely to be the better course of action in the current situation the Admiral found himself in.

"It's decided then," Gardner decreed. "Captain T'Pol, will you or soon-to-be Captain Tucker have any problem leaving security in Captain Reed's hands?"

"On the contrary. We trust nobody more than Captain Reed to provide adequate security," she answered for herself and her absent mate, who by all Lorian knew was currently busy inspecting the damage to the station.

"Excellent," Gardner replied. "Captain Lorian, prepare your ship. Make every space available to take on supplies. Store them in the mess hall if needed. By the way, what did you call the project? Molotok?"

"Aye, Sir. It is the Russian word for hammer. It was an idea of Commander Tucker."

"Sounds like we have a name," Gardner said with a tired smile. "Everybody is dismissed except Captain T'Pol."

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"Port cannon down," Tholos reported and gripped his console hard to avoid being thrown onto the floor. Buran was rocked hard as Romulan disruptor hits continued to grind the life out of their shields.

"Concentrate fire on Alpha," Malcolm Reed ordered angrily as two medics continued to dab at wounds on his left hand and right temple with disinfectant. Small hisses were the only signs of pain his dignity allowed him. He would not allow the medics to cart him off to sickbay, which was for the severe cases, like Sonos. The Vulcan, who had barely healed from the last time the comms console had exploded in his face, found himself in Fezzal's domain again after another power surge.

The only consolation for Malcolm was, that it wasn't Hoshi, who had manned the console. Although much improved, she was still in the hospital section of Salem One. Ensign Suron, a young Vulcan and 3IC of the communication department was now operating the smoking remains of the communications console. Malcolm made a mental note to ask Trip for a redesign of the bloody thing at the next possible opportunity.

"I've got their impulse engines disabled!" Tholos exclaimed in triumph. "They're down to thrusters."

"Continue," Malcolm ordered and sighed. "Trip was right. They've taken out the cloaking device and now those bastards are bloody hard to crack."
"Sir, they are spooling up their warp engines," Suron reported with a slightly un-Vulcan touch of urgency in his voice.

"But that would take them...," Malcom answered and stopped mid-sentence. "Bloody Hell! Ensign all fleet NOW!"

"Open," Suron reported.

"All fleet, emergency warp, get out of the bloody system!" Malcolm yelled into the open com channel.

Almost 70 remaining ships sped away into whatever direction their bow was pointing at the time and it was a minor miracle that no collisions were had.

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Gardner was just about to start his talk with an expectantly looking Captain T'Pol, when the frantic voice of his attendant interrupted him.

"Admiral, I have a transmission from first fleet!"

"Patch it through," Gardner said and routed the display from his monitor to the big screen on the wall.

"Admiral," came the court greeting of a pale looking captain Archer and years of working with the man told Gardner that this face could only mean that the Galorndon campaign had not gone well.

"Jon, you look like hell, I suppose you have bad news? What's the butchers bill?"

"Nine," Archer sighed. "Two D'Kyr, a Kumari, 4 destroyers and two frigates lost with all hands. All in all 1.540 killed, 212 wounded, 32 critical. They've all been transported to the Marconi.

"What's the status?" Gardner asked, trying not to show his shock.

"We are trying to reassemble. Everybody warped out of the system on whatever course they were at the time. The Romulans crashed their lead ship into the planet at warp speed. Galorndon core is lost and we are scattered over 6 square light years."

"Why the hell did they do that?" Gardner asked in shock.

"Same as Corridan," Archer answered grimly. "To destroy the dilithium deposits. If this goes on, we'll have to push our ships soon."

"Scorched Earth policy," Gardner growled.

"Literally," Archer replied, equally grim. "The whole planet's on fire and will be for some time."

"Assemble your fleet, Jon and regroup at Salem One. Send Reed and Buran back to Earth as soon as their ship is in a condition to do so."

"Any reason for that?"

"We have a bit of a situation here. Lorian and Endurance will take the place of Buran. We need Reed to sort out security at Jupiter Station. Keep that to yourself though. The last thing we need are problems with the moral in the fleet."
"Are Trip and T'Pol ok?" Archer asked with a serious look.

"They are," Gardner assured him. "We thought we had Terra Prime done in for good, but as it appears, some remaining followers have regrouped as an organization called 'Humanity First'. They bombed the station and left a note on our doorstep."

"Send the the briefing data for Malcolm Reed and I have him on his way. His ship came out of it quite well."

"That's good to hear John. The data are on their way. Report back when you have arrived. Gardner out."

If the news had unsettled her, she sure didn't give anything away, Gardner thought to himself after a look at Captain T'Pol. There was something to be said for all this Vulcan control.

"There will be a number of changes coming your way, Captain," he started to explain. Since we would have three Captains on Jupiter station, we've decided to re-introduce the rank of Fleet Captain for your husband to clean up the chain of command. You are his second in command, Reed will be third."

"Who will take over as chief engineer on Enterprise?" T'Pol asked.

"She's still got too few years under the belt, but we'll give the job to Anna Hess. She learned from the best we have and we can't afford to ride the numbers anymore."

"Understood. Admiral."

"Since we are short staffed as it is, you will have civilians working on the station. With that come unique challenges as military laws do not necessarily apply to them. As part of that the San Francisco Police Department will have a presence on the station and will handle the law and order part for the civilian workforce. I'll leave it to Reed to work out the details."

"Do we have any input on the contracting of civilian workers?"

"Limited," Gardner said. "Starfleet Security has the last word on every one of them. The last thing we need are terrorist sleepers on the station."

"Permission to speak freely, Sir," T'Pol requested.

"Been taking lessons from your better half?" Gardner asked with a lopsided grin. "Rant away Captain."

"I would suggest we wait until Captain Reed had time to assess the problems within Starfleet Security, before any civilian contractors are screened or hired. I would also wish to alert you that Admiral Black's position is not only compromised, he is also acting highly illogical lately."

"Care to elaborate?" the Admiral said.

"Admiral Black is currently involved in a very public legal conflict with his divorced wife. As such activity not only compromises his ability to perform his duties effectively, but also incurs substantial costs, it stands to reason that the Admiral might become vulnerable to attempted bribery. His latest actions are void of logic, too. If I was trying to weaken Starfleet Security, the first measure I would take was to disband Section 31, which Admiral Black is currently trying to achieve."
"I concur with most of what you say," Gardner acknowledged with a nod. "Although I'm a bit surprised that a Vulcan of all people would defend the Section."

"While the methods of Section 31 are questionable at best, their results and effective work even won the respect of the Vulcan Ministry of Security. As you said, we are not in a situation which allows us to be selective."

"As soon as Reed starts his work here, we'll have him sort this situation out. Black will be suspended until he has sorted out that bloody trial. I'll provisionally take on his responsibilities and will take your concerns into account. Whenever you have something that will help me, feel free to contact me any time."

"As you wish, Admiral."

"Report back here next week at the same time with a report of station repairs."

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"K section is still sealed," Trip explained after T'Pol had set foot aboard Jupiter station for the first time and had relayed the news from Admiral Gardner. "We'll need at least a week until we can repressurize. I hope Malcolm is here by then and I don't want to see you on the station until he has cleaned out this place."

By the way T'Pol took a deep breath, he could tell that a verbal riposte was being prepared, but he preempted her instinctive disagreement.

"Listen, lady," he said sternly. "Unless you forgot, who was appointed head of this station: hint – he looks a helluva lot like me. For the next twenty hours or so, you could try and pull rank on me, but you'd be overruled by Gardner, so spare yourself the hassle. All major interfaces have been re-routed to Enterprise, so you can work from there."

"What about the other station personnel?" she asked.

"I've gotten two old Intrepid class ships as temporary crew quarters - the Bozeman and the Whitehorse. They and Enterprise are docked in sections A and B, the only sections we've cleared and secured so far. The station has been evacuated and will stay evacuated until Malcolm and his people arrive."

"You knew that?"

"Admiral Jeffries called me immediately once Gardner had given the green light. Malcolm is picking up Hoshi at Salem One and we can keep an eye out for a big honkin' vortex. You know how he is, when security isn't water tight, especially if Hoshi or we are threatened."

"Do the perpetrators of this bombing know what awaits them?" T'Pol asked dryly.

"Doubt it, but they deserve everything they've got coming their way."
Tholos' antennae were planted firmly to the back of his head as the horrible whining sound of a ship crossing a vortex filled the bridge again. Only for the second time Captain Reed had ordered the maneuver to be performed and with a sense of satisfaction he noticed that this time all weapons systems stayed online. The long after-duty hours with Lieutenant-Commander T'Len and her second in command, Lieutenant Trak had paid off. The vortex generator still strained the ship's systems, but at least the number of blown EPS relays would be less catastrophic than last time.

The warrior inside him did not like the fact that they were recalled from the front lines, but the fact that they would become part of a project to build a ship like none of them had seen before was an equally honorable endeavor. The Captain was obviously upset about something. Taking the risk of vortex travel to get back to Earth that quickly was a sure sign of a problem.

All Captain Reed had spoken about was 'a security situation', but one didn't need to be a telepath to see that the situation in question was a serious one. Whenever the Captain became quiet, there was trouble brewing and the concerned glances that their finally returned first officer kept sending him confirmed the theory.

The mood of the Captain could only mean that the 'security situation' would have affected Commander Tucker and Captain T'Pol as well. The friendship between Captain Reed, his wife and the two Enterprise officers was well known. Among the Andorians on Buran they were simply known as 'the First Quad'. While neither humans, nor Vulcans shared Andorias biological trait of four-way marriages, the relationship between the two couples ran much deeper than that between most pairs of Andorian couples that formed the traditional quads.

"We are exiting the vortex," Grev, the Tellarite pilot reported.

"ETA to Jupiter station?" Malcolm asked.

"Ten minutes to the outskirts of Sol system, 63 minutes at half impulse to Jupiter station."

"Ok, you're with me to the ready room, Tholos. Hoshi, you have the con."

"Aye, Sir," Hoshi and Tholos answered in unison and the Andorian followed him off the bridge.

"There has been a bomb blast on Jupiter station," Malcolm started without preamble, as soon as the door had closed behind them. "A Terrorist group called 'Humanity First' has claimed responsibility."

"Do we know anything about them?" Tholos asked, seeing what the Captain's mood was about.

"They are regrouped Terra Prime supporters. It's only a minority group, but big enough to be able to plant a bomb on Jupiter station and kill thirty-two station workers. It's our job to bring them down and secure the station."

"I understand. I will assemble a search team."

"Not so fast, warrior," Malcolm said. "That will be my job. Yours is to provide security for both Buran and Enterprise. The search and destroy mission will be conducted by Enterprise forces."
"Do you deem our troops too inexperienced?" Tholos asked and Malcolm could hear the distinctly offended undertone in Tholos' voice.

"No, I don't," Malcolm said. "But our security team has four Vulcans and eight Andorians in it. Since part of the operation may perhaps take place on Earth, we'd stand out a bit, wouldn't you say?"

"Indeed. I apologize," Tholos answered.

"No need to apologize," Malcolm replied. "You defended your people and I expect nothing less from a good leader. You will have to do with your security team. Our MACO's are as useless as a one-legged man in an arse-kicking contest and will be replaced. But that takes a few days. I will take Enterprise's MACO's and security team with me, so your team will have to handle security on both ships. I'm counting on you."

"You can rely on us Captain," Tholos proclaimed proudly. "How far will the ships be docked from each other?"

"Not far," Malcolm said, satisfied that Tholos had immediately jumped into the mission by considering its logistics. "Enterprise is docked to the station and we will dock on their ship."

"Understood Captain. I will brief my team immediately."

"You do that," Malcolm agreed with a nod. "Dismissed and good luck, Lieutenant."

"Thank you Captain."

With a loud clunk Buran docked on Enterprise's starboard port and the airlock pressurized. As soon as the indicator went green, the door opened and a determined looking Malcolm stepped through.

"Hey Mal," Trip greeted him enthusiastically.

"Hi Trip. There's time for the pleasantries later, I need you, T'Pol, your MACO's and your security team in cargo bay one in fifteen," Malcolm said and walked off.

"Has he been like that for long?" Trip asked Hoshi, who had come in after Malcolm. He greeted her with a hug. "Good to see you."

"Can't say for sure," Hoshi sighed. "But he definitely was like that when he picked me up from the station. You would think he would have gotten the hint when I waited for him in our quarters naked as a jaybird after his shift was up, but he went straight to his desk and started playing with his strategy schematics."

"How was he supposed to know the difference," Trip cackled. "You don't wear anything in your quarters most of the time."

"Not true," Hoshi mock-protested under chuckles. "I normally wear panties."

"Makes all the difference, hon," Trip said with a grin and indicated her to follow him.

"Seriously though, he takes such things hard," Hoshi explained as they made their way to greet T'Pol. "He hasn't spoken to his own family in years. We are his family now. For him it's like someone tried to blow up his brother's house."
"Ask me how T'Pol and I felt about you guys being at the front line on the other end of the quadrant," Trip replied. "But he can't become obsessed with it. He'll end up like I almost did in the Expanse."

"Well, by the look of it, things aren't exactly safe here either," she reminded him.

"Not yet, but trust me, when Mal's done with the place you can keep your door unlocked and not a pencil gets stolen."

"Well, I will keep my door locked," Hoshi insisted with a mischievous grin.

"Wouldn't want someone to walk in on ya letting 'em catch some fresh air, hm?" he agreed with a chuckle.

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"Your stage, Mal," Trip, freshly-minted Fleet Captain, said after everyone had assembled. Malcolm had been so determined to get started that he had even missed the new pips on Trip's shoulder. Only after Trip, T'Pol and Hoshi had made it to cargo bay 1, he had noticed them and congratulated Trip.

"Ok, everybody," Malcolm explained. "I don't want to waste time on this, so let's get straight to the point. I want Jupiter station turned upside down. Every removable panel I want removed and checked. Master Sergeant Cole – your people will do that. You are to wear EV suites in case the terrorists have planted chemical or biological agents."

"Aye, Sir," Cole replied. "I request Crewman Tilman from Lieutenant Taylor's team. She's an expert on chemical warfare."

"Tilman, you're with the MACO's," Malcolm ordered curtly.

"Taylor, you split your team in two halves. Set up shop on Bozeman and Whitehorse. I want each and every station worker given the third degree. If there are terrorist sleepers among them I want them ratted out. If something sounds fishy or they refuse to answer threaten them with a mind-meld. That usually has them talking in a bloody hurry. Everybody with even mildly xenophobic views is to be reported."

"Aye, Sir," Taylor acknowledged and immediately started to assign people to teams.

"T'Pol, you and I will pay a visit to an old friend. Hoshi will do a number on your eyebrows and Krelik has fashioned a hijab for you. We're going down disguised as an Arab couple. I'll have Krelik nail a fake beard to my face. We'll meet in Feezal's office in thirty minutes for the skin tanning."

T'Pol acknowledged with a nod and left with Hoshi.

"And I'm here for what?" Trip asked.

"You will do what the pips on your shoulders say, mate," Malcolm said. "You'll be the captain of both ships and will coordinate the operation. Hoshi has setup an office on Buran with secure communication lines to all teams and Starfleet Headquarters. She'll support you on it. Trust me, you'll be busy enough."

Malcolm handed Trip a couple of PADDs with the operation details.
Malcolm and T'Pol were sitting in their underwear in the decon chamber as the radiation in cooperation with a white paste, the ingredients of which they had avoided to ask about, started to darken the tone of their skin to make them look more convincingly like people from the middle east region.

"Is something wrong, Malcolm?" T'Pol asked when she noticed Malcolm's disbelieving look.

"I didn't know you've taken to wearing a bikini for underwear," Malcolm stated with a chuckle.

"I usually do not," she admitted. "But I want to prepare a surprise for Trip. When Hoshi and I were acquiring a sun tan on Vulcan, we did so without clothing of course, but at the time Trip imagined me with what he calls tan lines in his sleep. I decided that this temporary change in skin tone will provide him with the opportunity to find out if he finds them agreeable on the live subject. This bikini provides a much more aesthetically agreeable pattern than my normal underwear."

With a raised eyebrow she watched Malcolm almost falling down in laughter.

"Who would've thought that two years ago," Malcolm said still cackling. "You decide to fulfill one of Trip's fantasies, which means at some point you'll surprise him in your birthday suit. And you talk about it as if it is the most Vulcan thing in the world."

"People change, Malcolm," she said. "Two years ago you wouldn't have spoken to me if duty didn't require it, much less about private matters and you certainly wouldn't have been comfortable with me in the decon chamber."

"That's true," Malcolm admitted, suddenly turning serious. "I must admit I can't understand how you and Hoshi can even think about such things at a time like this. I mean Hoshi waited for me stark naked in our quarters and you make plans for giving Trip a hot surprise. But as much as I wanted to enjoy my time with Hoshi that night, I couldn't put that before planning our work. Someone tried to kill you for Pete's sake."

"These may be trying times, but Trip and I refuse to lose our private life over it. It is the nature of war that every day may be our last. Before we found out that Trip's aging process has been altered, I had surrendered to the knowledge that I would survive my beloved by sixty years or more. I decided to use every day I have him by my side, rather than bemoaning those days when he will be gone. The fact that we now may have similar lifespans doesn't change that decision."

"Well, Hoshi does have that problem now," Malcolm said wistfully.

"Possibly," T'Pol agreed. "The more important it is, that you don't waste the days you have with her. As early as tomorrow our ships could fall victim to a Romulan attack and our lives could come to a premature end. There is no logic in reducing our life solely to duty while we still have it. It took me a long time to learn that."

"I never thought I'd hear such a pep talk from a Vulcan," Malcolm said with a smile. "But like always you make perfect sense. I just hope Hoshi likes men with beards."

"Will you keep it?" T'Pol asked.

"Only as long as our skin needs to revert back to its original tone, means a week or so," Malcolm explained. "If I took it off, I would have tan lines on my face and those don't look sexy. They look
The pair entered a dark alley. The recent rain had left the ground soaking wet and the few street lights reflected in the puddles. Steam emanated lazily from a manhole cover, making the surroundings look like the set of a third-rate spy flick.

"It appears the setting of human spy movies are not a cliché," she commented.

"They are a cliché," Malcolm said. "But Harris always had a penchant for kitsch."

"That's quite a harsh verdict, Malcolm," a voice from the dark said and Harris, clad in a black leather jacket emerged from behind a pillar. "Nice camouflage, Captains. I see you've lost none of your ingenuity, Malcolm. It appears for once it is I, who needs help."

"I'd say you need more than that, if a single Admiral could bring the Section down," Malcolm snorted.

"He hasn't brought us down, but the bloody bastard makes our work almost impossible. And for good reason," Harris spat. "As soon as he noticed that we were on to his little secret, he started undermining our contacts within Starfleet. Do you really believe that Captain Williams had a stroke? The healthiest man in Starfleet?"

"Are you trying to say that Black had him liquidated?" Malcolm asked in disbelief.

"It's all on this chip," Harris said and handed him a memory disk. "It's encrypted with a double layered cipher made up from both of your old security codes."

"How can you know my old V'Shar clearance?" T'Pol asked with her eyebrow creeping up below the hood of her hijab.

"You don't expect me to give away my trade secrets, do you, Captain?" Harris asked in mock offense.

"I may have underestimated the effectiveness of your organization," T'Pol admitted and rolled her eyes.

"Don't worry, Captain," Harris said. "We are in a situation of mutual dependency. You need me to get information and I need you to omit some details about my past, so you've got nothing to be afraid of. All I want is to get Black out of the way, and trust me after reading the info I've given you, you want him gone, too."

"Alright, Harris, this skin job won't last forever. We meet here again in four days," Malcolm decreed, took T'Pol by the arm and they walked off.

The next day T'Pol and Hoshi were sitting in the Reed quarters on Buran. Hoshi was carefully shaving the stubble of the regrowing up-swept part of T'Pol's eyebrows. Since the camouflage would be needed again in three days time, they had decided to keep the illusion of human style eyebrows intact, but it needed daily renewal. They met everyday after the shift anyway as T'Pol had decided to administer neuropressure therapy to alleviate the headaches Hoshi still suffered from as a result of her massive concussion courtesy of the Battle of Betazed. Since she was also determined to teach the art to Hoshi, both were still topless and the viewport shades were down to
avoid inquisitive looks from outside.

Although their husbands were well acquainted to the view of each others wives in less than complete attire, Hoshi had decreed that the guys were banished from the spectacle, as she suspected the boys could become a little too frisky at the view of two half-naked females giving each other backrubs.

Not that Trip and Malcolm minded much. It gave them time to catch up on 'blokey things' as Malcolm put it, without having eyebrows raised at them if they helped themselves to a third mug of beer.

"So, don't let me burst from curiosity. How did he react?" Hoshi demanded, dabbing away at the freshly removed half of T'Pol's right eyebrow.

"Enthusiastic would be an appropriate description," T'Pol answered and resisted the urge to raise the brow Hoshi was currently working on.

"I can imagine that," Hoshi said with a giggle. "Guess you'll have to keep the bikini on next time we go sun-tanning on Vulcan."

"I doubt that," T'Pol said. "The novelty value of the tan lines will wear off quickly and I doubt Trip prefers them over catching a view of me without the garment."

"They're so easy to please aren't they," Hoshi said, still giggling.

"Indeed," T'Pol said.

"Speaking of enthusiastic. I have no idea what got into Malcolm last night. He practically ripped the clothes off me and went to town."

"I doubt he had much to 'rip off,'" T'Pol replied deadpan.

"Guilty as charged," Hoshi admitted with a burst of laughter. "I've waited a long time for him to let his hair down. Could you perhaps have anything to do with it?"

"If you mean to insinuate that I have somehow aroused his desire, no. But we did have a conversation yesterday during which I impressed on him that he mustn't let duty and the war become the all-encompassing focus of his life. We don't know which day could be our last."

"Well thanks heavens," Hoshi said. "I've been trying for ages to make him understand that. Between the two of us we'll make real husbands out of them."

"So do we leave them in the belief that we wear little clothing in our homes for their enjoyment?" T'Pol asked drily.

"Exactly," Hoshi said with a laugh, while T'Pol raised a freshly remodeled eyebrow.

"What's on the disk?" Trip asked and put the two mugs before them.

"I'd say the equivalent of a mighty bomb," Malcolm answered. "Harris had three undercover agents in 'Humanity First'. One of them made it into the inner circle. Now all three agents are dead."

"And that means?"
"Admiral Roger Black is not only a member of 'Humanity First', he's number two in the hierarchy."

"Son of a bitch!" Trip swore. "And that bastard was in charge of Starfleet Security. Does Gardner know?"

"He does now," Malcolm said. "And I'm not going to repeat his reaction. It certainly wasn't fit to print."

"What are they planning to do now?"

"Nothing. I got carte blanche from Gardner. If it came out that a Starfleet Admiral was involved with Terra Prime and this new group, it would be a disaster for the war effort."

"I'm not going to like what you have in mind, don't I?"

"Neither do I, Trip, but there's no other chance and better I do it than someone, who can't cope with it afterward."

"But what would you achieve if you off the guy," Trip reasoned. "There are others, who can make the connection."

"There won't be," Malcolm said darkly. "Terra Prime and this new gang are or were highly secretive organizations. People only knew their direct superior. That means except for the head honcho and the third in the hierarchy nobody knew about Black's involvement."

"And I suppose all three will happen to have accidents very soon."

"Tragic, isn't it."

"Do you know who they are?"

"Mr. Big is Ernest Strongfellow jr.," Malcolm said.

"The CEO of Advanced Propulsion Inc.?" Trip asked in shock. "The guys who were contracted to develop the Warp 7 prototype?"

"Now you know why they made so little progress," Malcolm snorted and emptied his mug.

"And the third?"

"Yuri Tarassov, a cryptography expert from Russia," Malcolm replied. "He was responsible for infiltration of Starfleet communications."

"Well won't they have caught your transmission to Gardner?" Trip noted.

"Only if they have the standard ciphers of the Gorn Hegemony," Malcolm replied.

"What is the Gorn Hegemony?"

"Trust me Trip, you don't want to know," Malcolm said dryly and indicated for a refill.

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"I take it you have reviewed the information," Harris said when Malcolm and T'Pol met him three days later.
"Harris, how could you have been caught with your britches down like that?" Malcolm said with a disgusted tone. "Ten years ago that wouldn't have happened."

"Well, for a start they don't make 'em like you anymore, Malcolm. All the kids these days think of is becoming James Bond, cruising around in a glitzy hovercar and shagging everything in a skirt. But when it comes to the dirty work, they baulk on us. Last year half the lot failed the entrance exam. And Black had almost a year to undermine our contacts before we uncovered him and that only happened because Falkner did the job himself."

"You reactivated Falkner?"

"Hardly; but he owed me a favor and I cashed in," Harris replied innocently.

"Well, you better see that you find better recruits, because it is the last time I'm doing the dirty work for you, Harris. I'm no longer the guy I was ten years ago."

"Ah, the lovely Hoshi Sato. I would never have thought that a woman could tame you," Harris taunted and before he knew it, he was pinned to the wall with his collar in the firm grip of Malcolm.

"Listen scumbag," Malcolm growled. "I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it because people, who mean a lot to me are threatened. I thought I had left washing your dirty laundry behind me, but I'm returning to it one last time to protect those who are dear to me. I'll even help you getting your shady bunch back on track. But when this is over, you'll stay the bloody hell away from us or you'll curse the day your old man shagged your mother."

"You really have changed, Malcolm," Harris said with a hint of disappointment.

"Thanks for the data, but from here on, we'll handle it ourselves. You will know when to take over," Malcolm said and walked off with T'Pol.

"Was such a confrontational manner necessary," T'Pol asked as they walked through a park. At this time of the night it was almost deserted. Yet she had put her hand in the crook of his elbow, making them look like a couple taking a late-night walk.

"He needs to be put in his place," Malcolm insisted. "I bet you anything that he was already drawing up plans how to recruit me back into the section."

"But you endangered our source of information. I doubt that he will be willing to share information after you have threatened him." 

"When we have gotten him back into business, he'll owe us big time," Malcolm explained. "When it comes to cashing in favors or owing them Harris is even more anal about it than Shran. That's probably the only redeeming feature of the man."

"I have to trust your judgment," T'Pol conceded. "He can be a vital source in the future."

"He will be, don't worry," he assured her. "I need you to take cryptography lessons from Hoshi. When we are done with the distasteful part of the job, we need to break into a few computer systems."

"Will it not be easier to include Hoshi in the mission? She is aware of it regardless."
"T'Pol, Hoshi knowing that I go away to kill someone is one thing, seeing me actually do it is a different matter. Not all of them will die a nice death. You and I have experience with what undercover operations mean – Hoshi has not. I refuse to drag her into it, especially since it is the last time I'm doing it."

"Understood," T'Pol acceded. "Unless we complete the mission within the next two days, shouldn't we renew our disguise?"

"Nope," Malcolm said. "We'll have to change it. I don't want to take the chance that they are keeping tabs on Harris. If so they know our cover by now. And before you get ideas again, this time Trip will hate me for it," he added with a mischievous grin.

A raised eyebrow inquired for more data.

"You'll have to wear a wig, but for that to sit properly, you'll have to shave your head and I doubt Trip will like that."

"I suppose you will have to make a similar sacrifice," T'Pol remarked dryly.

"I already did," Malcolm cackled. "Hoshi can't wait until this beard comes off. She says she feels like a schoolgirl shagging the teacher."

"Interesting analogy," T'Pol replied and raised the 'brow of substantial amusement'.

"Do they just continue like that?" the com sounded.

"It looks like it," Roger Black. "We have to lay low for a while. Reed arrived a week ago and his people are giving the station an enema. Are you sure our people didn't leave any traces?"

"Seeing as they are no longer alive..."

"This group was supposed to be about saving Humanity, not decimating it," Black seethed.

"Would you rather be found out?" the cynical voice asked back. "It was either them or us. Or do you think your Starfleet would put us on trial if they found out. They can't afford the scandal. If you want a chance to fuck that secretary bitch of yours again, you better disappear for a while."

"What about Tarassov and the others?"

"Tarassov is in hiding for now. His contact to the group suffered a tragic mishap while climbing El Capitan. The rest of the group is in a training camp. We need people, who get the job done and we're teaching them how."

"Did you send me the data?" Black asked the voice.

"It's all on your PADD, usual encryption. Now see to it that you disappear for a while, but not too conspicuously."
Malcolm checked his disguise carefully. Two days ago the the fake beard had come off and his skin had its original tone back. He was now sporting a bushy mustache and a blue overall, the latest fad among the many latinos in the city.

Yesterday he had finally confessed to Trip that T'Pol would have to undergo a fairly radical change of hairdo, but to his surprise he wasn't angry about it. In fact he had declared it a chance to convince T'Pol to part with the Vulcan mop and go for a different look.

Well if Hoshi is somewhat punctual for a change, she will be looking mucho different in an hour, Señor, he thought to himself, mentally practicing his Spanish accent. It surely helped being married to Starfleet's brightest linguist. In a show of solidarity he had shaved his head as well, or more precisely, Hoshi did. With the cap drawn deep into his face, he peered into the engine bay of an old hover car and worked away aimlessly at the obsolete fusion engine.

"Excuse me, Sir," a male voice asked from behind. "I was wondering if you cold help me."

"What can I do for you, Señor?" Malcolm asked back without taking his head out of the engine bay.

"An old friend of mine used to take care of my old hover car, but he has quit his job and I need a new mechanic, now."

Slowly Malcolm crawled out of the engine bay and flashed a big smile.

"Great to see you again, Falks," he said had grabbed the offered hand.

"You don't look too shabby either, Limey," Falkner said. "I've heard Hoshi made an honest man of you. You're one lucky bastard."

"You know her?" Malcolm asked.

"Of course. I made more money in her gambling Empire at the Academy than I ever got from the scholarship. I can't believe that you of all people ended up marrying the most sought after catch of the whole academy. Nobody had a chance. Kept telling everybody, she's waiting for the 'right one'. Of course she was way too young for me anyway."

"Well, it's certainly not my social skills I have to thank for that. You'll probably think I'm crazy, but we were set up by Vulcan."

"The Hero of the Orpheus raid – Captain T'Pol of Vulcan, first Vulcan in history to marry a human and first Vulcan to officiate at a human wedding," Falkner rattled off the facts as he followed Malcolm into a small dwelling.

"You're still bloody good at your job, Falks," Malcolm said.
"Former job," he emphasized. "Harris cashed in his favor and that's it for me. I'm trying to find a job in the security business. I've heard you're retiring, too."

"Definitely," Malcolm said and offered Falkner a cold beer from the fridge. "I'll do one last job and bring the section back to its feet, then I'm out for good as well."

"Well, I may have something to help you with that. I bet my bottom credit you're planning a nice little accident for the venerable Admiral Black."

"How do you know?" Malcolm asked.

"I can add one and one and get something else than eleven. It was I who found out about his involvement with Terra Prime and Humanity First, remember."

"As I said, still bloody good at it," Malcolm appreciated. "So what do you have?"

"I've been keeping tabs on Black. I wanted to sell the scoop to Starfleet for nice lump of currency, when the timing's right, but since it's you, who's going after him, consider it a belated wedding gift."

Malcolm chuckled and they clinked bottles.

"I suppose you know where he is?" Malcolm speculated.

"He's trying to lay low," Falkner explained and handed him a data patch. "He has a forest cabin near Logan, West Virginia. Left three days ago in what looked like quite a hurry. Its' all on this one. Usual crypto."

"Bloody brilliant," Malcolm enthused.

"By the way," Falkner added. "Knowing you, you couldn't resist a computer terminal that hasn't been broken into yet. Those blockheads think they're so superior, but they're still using the old Navajo codes. Should be easy stuff for that brilliant wife of yours."

"Can't tell you how much that helps us. Maybe you want to give us a call on Jupiter station when this is over, we could really use a man with your experience."

"I told you, I'm out of this," Falkner insisted.

"I'm not talking about the section, man. I'm talking about working for the official side. Black has all but wrecked Starfleet Security. We could use a man, who we can trust. You made it to Captain before you walked out, didn't you?"

"Yup, second in seniority behind Harris," he acknowledged.

"I bet Gardner would make you Commodore and Head of Security on the spot."

"And you make that offer on what authority?" Falkner asked.

"Gardner's," Malcolm replied dryly. "He gave me carte blanche. Full authority, including finding a suitable candidate to rebuild Starfleet Security. You could also keep Harris's arse in line."

"It's a tempting offer, I'll let you know," Falkner said. "That was the real reason you arranged this meeting, wasn't it?"

"Partly," Malcolm admitted and held up the data patch. "Major reason was to pick your brain about
Black and I'd say that was quite successful. But I also hope that I can convince you to come back.
We've got a bloody war on our hands and the last thing we need is wonky security. You'd be the
perfect man for the job."

"I've left my private com code on the patch," Falkner said and stood up. "Give me a call, when
you're done with the job. I must think this over. Good hunt, man."

"Thanks," Malcolm answered and watched Falkner leave.

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"Well, if linguistics don't pay off anymore, I can always become a barber," Hoshi snorted as she
started shaving off T'Pol's hair. "You will look ridiculous. It looks quite good on Malcolm, but
you...?"

"Thankfully it is a temporary measure and it provides a good reason to change my hair. Trip has
long been dissatisfied with the traditional Vulcan style."

"I don't think he's that shallow," Hoshi protested lightly.

"I didn't mean to say that my appearance is overly important to him. But the more content he is
with my appearance, the easier it is to balance our bond. It is a daily challenge to balance it as
humans do not have the luxury of eradicating outside influences by mental techniques."

"Is that why you came up with the tan line idea?" Hoshi giggled.

"To a degree," T'Pol admitted. "The main reason was to make him happy. His pleasure feeds back
into the bond and we both profit from it. I also wish learn more about human sexual practices and
customs. After all, I cannot expect him to be content with what Vulcan considers sufficiently
effective reproductive activities."

"Are they that bland?" Hoshi asked.

"Hoshi, we are people, who need a recurring mental affliction to fornicate properly."

Hoshi stopped shaving, lest she cut her friend as she doubled over in laughter.

"There are of course 'more adventurous' Vulcan couples, especially those who have dealings with
other races," T'Pol explained further. "But for the majority, sexual relations are entirely restricted
to the time of the Pon Farr and there is nothing romantic to that particular time."

"Isn't it sort of pleasuring for Vulcans, too?" Hoshi asked, while recommencing the cleanup of
T'Pol's head.

"To fully experience the pleasurable effects of mating, one has to reduce the control of emotions. If
I don't allow myself to express the pleasure I experience, I would harm myself. Most Vulcans are
too afraid of that and therefore experience fear rather than a desire to mate."

"Hence the pon farr to force them to do it," Hoshi concluded. "I didn't realize it was that dangerous
for you. I would think Trip isn't exactly the celibate type."

"You would be surprised," T'Pol said with an elevated 'giggle-brow'. "More often than not the
impetus is given by me. I too thought once that he would be solely driven by carnal desires, but
Trip is much more complex than that. He has quite a talent for ... foreplay."
"Oooh," Hoshi whistled. "You think he could give lessons to Malcolm?"

"How do I remove that particular mental image?" T'Pol asked dead-pan.

"Ready," Hoshi proclaimed under giggles.

"Thank you," T'Pol said and felt her bald head with one hand.

Hoshi looked back as Malcolm walked into their quarters.

"Hey, didn't I tell you guys to play elsewhere, when we have our neuropressure session?" Hoshi asked in mock-protest.

"Keep your shirt... oh I forgot you aren't wearing any," Malcolm quipped. "Trust me love, the fact that you both look gorgeous is a bit secondary at the moment."

"Why thank you, kind Sir," Hoshi crooned.

"T'Pol, we're going ahead with the mission tonight. When you're ready, call me and we'll meet with Feezal to fit the wig."

"I will come with you now," T'Pol said, grabbing the cap she had brought. She donned the upper half of her underwear and her uniform and followed Malcolm out of the cabin.

"Wouldn't it be time to tell me your plans?" T'Pol whispered as they crawled through the undergrowth towards the small cabin.

"Not much to tell about it," Malcolm whispered back and continued crawling. "You'll see when it happens."

The old log cabin was dimly lit, but no sounds could be heard.

"You watch my back," Malcolm instructed. "If someone or something interrupts, shoot. But set it to stun."

T'Pol nodded as Malcolm continued crawling towards the cabin and raised a small mirror on a stick into the air to peer into the small window.

Slowly he stood up and confirmed his findings with his own eyeballs. All was like he had expected it. Black, not averse to stiff drink at any time had peered much too deep into the bottle. The pressure sure got to him and if the number of bottles scattered around were any indication, he had been plastered since he got here. The Admiral had passed out, his head resting on the table.

That's easier than I thought it would, Malcolm thought and put the miniature tranquilizer gun back in his leg pocket. He opened the door slowly and carefully. Obviously the target had no sense for his own security as it was unlocked. Carefully looking around, Malcolm donned his gloves to prevent any finger prints. When he searched Black's not yet unpacked duffel bag, he found several PADDs and took them with him. He inched closer to black and carefully removed the phase pistol from Black's holster and pocketed it.

"I don't think you'll be needing that, Sir" Malcolm whispered to an unresponsive Admiral.

He left the door open.
"Give me the flask from the backpack," Malcolm whispered as he returned to be hiding spot of T'Pol.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Synthetic pheromones to attract some wildlife," Malcolm said and skulked back to the open door. Carefully he started to pour a trail of the clear liquid to the ground ending it on the opposite side of the clearing.

"What now?" T'Pol whispered when he came back and stored away the flask.

"Now we wait for wild life."

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They had waited about 3 hours, when T'Pol's keen ear noticed cracking noises coming from the direction of Malcolm's pheromone trail and 5.31 minutes later a large bear appeared on the clearing. She stopped breathing lest she alert the beast. It didn't have the fangs of a sehlat, but it certainly had the size and strength.

Grunting and sniffing the aminal inched closer to the cabin and walked inside.

A short while later the toppling of a chair could be heard and surprised yells from a disorientated human.

"What the... get off me... Aaaaaah..."

The acoustic spectacle continued for at least 12.7 minutes as a mixture of screams, cries and growls from an aggressive beast could be heard. Finally the ruckus died down.

They had to wait another 30.4 minutes until the beast had plundered all deposits of food in the dwelling. Covered in blood, but with a full stomach the beast came back out, sniffed the air one last time and toddled off to where it had come from.

"I'll go in and make it look convincing."

She acknowledged his whisper and trained her night vision googles on the surroundings for the case that the beast would come back.

Several phaser blasts could be heard from inside and finally Malcolm came back after he had opened the the window and closed the door.

"Is he...?" T'Pol asked.

"Let's just say it'll take a while until they've cleaned up that mess. Let's go," Malcolm instructed and they crawled back to the camouflaged shuttle pod.

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*Starfleet flag officer dies in wild life accident*

*The Police department of Logan, West Virginia reports that a high ranking Admiral of United Earth Starfleet has been found dead and mutilated in a privately owned vacation lodge. An expert of the forestry office has identified the most likely attacker as an adult brown bear (ursus arctos). Experts suspect that the animal entered the shelter through an open window in search for food and was startled by the victim.*
Police officers found a starfleet issue phase pistol set to stun and several impact marks on the walls, concluding that the startled animal may have been injured and attacked the victim in self-defense. The district court of Logan ordered an autopsy of the remains and it was determined that the victim was highly intoxicated at the time of the attack.

Starfleet Chief of Operations, Admiral Samuel William Gardner, has expressed his shock and sadness at the tragic loss of Admiral Roger Black. He announced that Admiral Black will be interred at the Starfleet veteran cemetery on October 16th 2156.

Local residents of Logan, who were opposed to the reintroduction of bears and wolves into the area 30 years ago have renewed their protests and demand the culling of bears and wolves in the area.

"Nice work, Limey, nice work," Falkner whistled in appreciation and put the PADD with the morning issue of the San Francisco Chronicle aside. Obviously the man, whom he had once introduced to the basics of being an agent for the section had lost nothing of the ingenuity and determination, which had once made him the best in his class.

"Found anything?" Malcolm asked as he walked into the office the next day. Hoshi and Trip were working on the PADDs he and T'Pol had brought back from Black's cabin.

"We have the camp," Trip said and plugged the connector into the PADD. A satellite photo appeared on the view screen.

"Have that sent to Cole, tell her I want an attack plan by tomorrow evening," Malcolm ordered. "Has Gardner acknowledged the appointment with Strongfellow?"

"Came in an hour ago," Hoshi answered and handed him a PADD. "Jeffries and his aide meet with him in the factory tonight."

"Trip I need your help on that," Malcolm said and handed Trip a PADD after a short glance at the one he had just gotten from Hoshi. "I need you to read these specs. While Jeffries and I are in the factory with the bastard, I need you to do a number on his car. Preferably in a way that cannot be traced easily."

"He's driving a Stenson 2000HV? Hell, we just have to wait until that thing does the job on its own," Trip said shaking his head.

"I would prefer to speed up the process. Preferably about 2 minutes after the start-up."

"You got it, Mal," Trip said and walked out of the office.

"I'll transform myself into Commander Ordonez then," Malcolm said with a fake Spanish accent and walked out, too.

"You can tell me what you want, Mr. Strongfellow," Jeffries insisted. "You have a contract with Starfleet and several milestones have been missed by now. Your explanations are lame excuses at best."
"I told you we are working on it, Admiral," Strongfellow pleaded. "Now if you could give me someone like Tucker. Maybe we can get back on schedule."

"Tucker is busy building the ship that should have taken your engine. Now we are forced to buy from the Vulcans. And you will pay for that. I will inform Starfleet about the breach of contract first thing in the morning. You better look for something else to build in that plant of yours."

"Suit yourself," Strongfellow huffed and stormed off to his car.

He drove off angrily. About 90 seconds later a dull thud sounded from a distance.

"Wasn't that a Stenson he drove off in?" Jeffries asked.

"Indeed it was, Sir," Malcolm said as the plant's fire brigade headed out. "Tragic, this."

Stenson Vehicle Company under pressure

The board of directors of the Stenson Vehicle Company was called to an emergency meeting as another high-profile customer fell victim to technical problems on their latest luxury model 2000HV. The top range model of the company has come under critical scrutiny after several vehicles have burned to the ground as a result of poorly designed reactor controls. At least 3 of those incidents have ended deadly.

The latest incident is one of them. Ernest Richard Strongfellow jr, the CEO of Advanced Propulsion Inc. was burned to death last night after his car caught fire. Even though the fire brigade was at the scene of the accident in a matter of minutes, it was too late to save the driver, who had not managed to free himself from the burning wreckage.

Stenson's board of directors decided to recall all 2000HV immediately in order to redesign the reactor controls of their revolutionary, but obviously not well enough tested, new engine.

Questions also arise over the future of Advanced Propulsion Inc. as Strongfellow jr does not leave any legal heirs or a written will behind. According to the law, his majority shares in the company will now be transferred into possession of the government and a speaker for the president's office was quick to reassure the workforce that EarthGov has no plans to close the plants of the company.

Advanced Propulsion Inc is a major contractor of Starfleet and sources from within the defense ministry tell us that there are no plans to close any plants. Military expert Martin Donelly urged the government to keep the shares in their possession. This would enable them to extend the company's involvement in the war effort.

"I should be proud of you Mal," Falkner muttered and put the newspaper down. "Harris is right, they don't make 'em like that anymore."

That leaves Tarassov and the camp, Trip mentioned two days later as they congregated in the office to plan the next step.

"I already took care of him yesterday through some of my old contacts in Russia," Malcolm noted dryly. "There's an easy way to get rid of someone with a penchant for Samogon."
"What is Samogon?" T'Pol asked.

"Self-distilled Russian vodka," Trip explained and turned to Malcolm. "I take it you tinkered with the amount of methyl alcohol in the final product?"

A silent nod was the answer.

"Well," Trip said and shrugged unsympathetically. "Technically, he offed himself. And it's not like he didn't deserve it. I can't believe there are still people joining such groups."

"But I for once am happy that it's over," Malcolm sighed. "I've been doing Harris' dirty jobs long enough. It's time he looks for someone else."

"There's still the camp though," Trip reminded him.

"That's a more traditional job," Malcolm said. "Amanda Cole and her team should be flattening the thing as we speak. We had to speed things up a bit. Somehow Strongfellow must have managed to tell them to scatter in the 90 something seconds before he had his accident. So Cole moved in 3 hours ago before they could abandon camp. Gardner told me that the remaining scumbags will be summarily exiled in a colony. That'll give them enough time to feel superior."

"Speaking of the devil," Trip said as a communicator light flashed.

"Tucker," he identified himself.

"Cole here. The camp has closed its doors. Four targets killed and 123 taken into custody."

"Great work, Master Sergeant," Malcolm butted in.

"Thank you, Captain. We will make a stop at Starfleet Medical on our way back. We have two wounded."

"Understood."

"Well, congratulations to your retirement," Trip said and gave Malcolm a friendly pat on the back. "Care for a beer tonight?"

"You bet," Malcolm sighed in relief. "But first I've got two final calls to make."

"Activate all systems," Gardner said. "First of all, I want to thank you all for your involvement in bringing down 'Humanity First'. What could have become a nasty scandal has turned into PR gold for Starfleet. And on top of it we now own a majority share in the biggest engine company on the planet. Thanks to Strongfellow's will somehow getting 'miraculously deleted' without a trace."

"Well, that'll help with adapting the Vulcan engine," Trip said and Gardner saw that he wasn't the only one, who suspected that the miracle went by the name Malcolm Reed.

"Indeed it does," the admiral agreed. "Captain Reed, I understand you were burdened with the less tasteful details of the mission and if it was for me, I would decorate the bloody hell out of you, but for obvious reasons we need to keep things in the dark."

"It's not something I would want a medal for, Sir," Malcolm replied. "I'm just happy it's over."

"And I'm happy you are on our side. A former drill sergeant of yours told me it was a splendid
job."

"Falks took the job?" Malcolm asked.

"Indeed he did," Gardner replied with a grin. "Commodore Art Marinus Falkner will take over as head of Starfleet Security at the beginning of next week."

"Brilliant," Malcolm beamed. "At least we don't need to worry about that one anymore and can concentrate on what we're here for."

"What has your investigation brought up," Gardner said.

"Here's the final report," Malcolm said and passed him the PADD. "Short version is: We found no further explosives but a boot-load of listening devices. That thing was so wired up, you couldn't have released a wet fart without everybody noticing."

"Foreign?" Gardner asked.

"No, Earth designs. Civilian. No wonder they knew where and when to strike. We've also weeded out 5 station workers. None of them had any obvious involvement with 'Humanity First', but pronouncedly xenophobic tendencies. We have no use for those people on a station that houses four different races in close quarters."

"Speaking of which," Garner said, accepting Malcolm's report with a nod. "How long do you think will it take to get the station up and running again?"

"About ten days," Trip reported. "We've started patching up the hull breach. Once we can repressurize. I'd reckon another two or three days until we're back in business."

"That sounds quite optimistic," the Admiral noted. "What about the crew quarters?"

"I was coming to that," Trip said and added another one to the stack of PADDs on Gardner's desk. "I'd like to request three more of the mothballed Intrepid class ships to house crew quarters and some basic recreational facilities. I would suggest we contract some civilian companies to refurbish and prettify them, along with cooks, some waiters and someone to run a bar. People will work long months on the station and the last thing we need is people suffering from cabin fever. Basically I want to start a little city up there."

"Well you have experience with that," Gardner said with a grin, pointing to a picture of Salem One on the wall. "Anything else?"

"We also need an old Asclepius class hospital ship and a nurse or twelve. Injuries and accidents are not exactly rare in a shipyard. Phlox and his wife can run the shop, but they need the facilities and some people."

"Granted," Gardner said. "We were about to mothball the Robert Koch. Guess, she gets to serve a while longer. You have been very quiet, Captain T'Pol?"

"I did not have much to contribute as the reports of Captain Reed and Fleet Captain Tucker are sufficiently comprehensive."

"So I take it you have everything you need," Gardner asked for clarification.

"As the ship of Captain Reed and mine are assigned to the SOLCOM fleet we will keep normal readiness status. We are of course not averse to any torpedo deliveries you can spare."
"You can't have too much torpedoes," Gardner mused. "We are thinking about converting the Whitehorse plant of Advanced Propulsion to a torpedo plant. The Andorians are already having a look into it, so I would hazard a guess we will be able to accommodate you somewhere in the near future."

T'Pol answered with a nod.

"Ok, if there's nothing else, dismissed. Take the rest of the day off, you can use the break. Your 2IC's or 3IC's can hold the fort until tomorrow's shift starts."

"Huh?" Trip hummed in surprise as he entered their quarters on Enterprise. Of course he hadn't quite heeded the Admirals advice and had visited the engineering office on the station to get some damage control teams off to an early start.

Their domicile was well heated to say the least, the shades were down, the lights dimmed to create a rather cozy atmosphere, but there was a noticeable absence of his wife. The sound of the bathroom door sliding open yanked him out of his momentary confusion and he momentarily forgot to breathe. He had every reason to say something, but he momentarily lacked the ability.

"Sweet mother of god!" he whispered to himself once coherent thought returned. "That's what marching to the pearly gates must feel like."

"I take that as a sign of approval?" T'Pol asked with a raised eyebrow and a husky voice.

"Approval?" Trip said with a stunned laugh. "You are a goddess, darlin'!"

He looked up and down his wife's spectacular body and still couldn't believe his eyes. T'Pol had acquired a new wig with long hair that reached all the way down to the small of her back. Long white lace stockings hugged her shapely legs and were held up by a garter belt, and that was as far as her clothing selection went. No panties, bra or anything else to spoil the spectacular view of her naked body.

T'Pol looked expectantly at him and Trip had to think back a long time to remember seeing her with such a fiery desire in her eyes. Her nipples were already standing at full attention, which was a clear sign that his dear wife was already very horny. It wasn't exactly surprising, considering that duty had kept him from lavishing her with the proper attention for more than four days, which in regards to her libido was a year.

"I take it I've been somewhat remiss on my marital duties?" he quipped while shedding his uniform in a hurry. Thankfully he had already taken a shower and changed into a fresh uniform in the engineering office on the station. It would have totally ruined the moment to run off for a shower now.

"You were preoccupied," T'Pol said as she gently dragged him to a chair and gently pushed him down into it. "But now it is time to increase your diligence in domestic duties."

"Happy to oblige ma'am, happy to oblige."

"I have no doubt about that, but I consider it nonetheless necessary to administer a mild punishment for your negligence," she said in a husky voice. "I have decided that you will not be permitted to touch me before you have sated my desires satisfactorily."

Trip watched dumbfounded as she tied his wrists to the armrests of the chair. Once she was done,
she stood before him in a commanding pose and declared the rules of the evening.

“First you will observe, which unsuitable methods I was forced to employ to maintain my equilibrium during the time of your absence. As you know, my vision will be impaired once I have reached climax. Since I expect to be afforded at least two more climaxes after that, I might spend most of the encounter without vision. I expect that this fact is not abused to gain forbidden touch. Did I make myself clear, husband?”

“Yes, my wife,” he answered in abject bewilderment.

“Then observe what I had to satisfy myself with.”

Trip's mouth hung open as she sat on the bunk across from him and spread her legs wide. Without further ado, she stuck two fingers into her already wet opening and started stimulating her clitoris, the Vulcan equivalent of which was located internally, about a centimeter past the opening.

“Watch me husband,” she demanded. “Does it stimulate you to watch your wife masturbate?”

“I-if you can still see, have a look and you'll know,” he stuttered in disbelief and looked down at his painfully hard erection. His fully extended rod was swinging up and down to the rhythm of his frantic heartbeat.

“That pleases me, husband, than I shall continue to 'punish' you,” she said and continued to pleasure herself for him.

She used her second hand to spread the folds of her vagina open, revealing the dark, slightly olive-green flesh inside. She was rubbing her pleasure spot ferociously and Trip could tell she was too far gone to offer more smack talk as her communication skills had reduced to low guttural groans. A long whining groan announced a first quick orgasm and all the pent up desire broke free in a viscous climax.

She dropped onto her side and lay on the bed shivering uncontrollably groaning in a dark voice until the shock waves of the climax subsided. Breathing heavily, she slowly pushed herself upright again and started to explore her surroundings with her hands until she had found the edge of the bunk. Swinging her legs over, she started walking into his direction unsteadily, reaching out her hands to find him. Once she had done so, she felt around for the ties and freed him. Unwilling to ignore her 'orders' he sat still and waited for further instructions.

“Stand up and clasp your hands behind your back,” she instructed and he obeyed. Her hands roamed his body, including a few strokes of his rock-hard pole until she had found his wrists behind the back. With one of the ropes, she tied them together, surprisingly swiftly for someone who couldn't see a thing.

“To avoid premature ejaculation later, you will now empty yourself into my mouth,” she instructed calmly and knelt down in front of him. With careful small steps he scuttled forward until half of his length was resting on her tongue. She closed her mouth, engulfing his meat, but made no attempt at moving, so Trip gently started to push forward, careful not to lose his balance with his hands tied behind his back.

Embarrassingly, after days without sex and having witnessed the hottest show he could remember, it didn't even take 10 strokes before the sensation of her soft mouth around his tool made him explode down her throat with a strained groan.

She gulped it all down and gently cleaned him up with her tongue. Standing up, she grabbed his
semiflaccid rod after a short search and commanded him to guide her to the bunk. Upon having carried out the 'order' he was instructed to lie down on his back.

Without further explanation she checked his posture with her hands and upon finding his face, she knelt over it and lowered her still wet pussy into his mouth.

“Pleasure me husband,” she demanded.

Trip, bewitched from the intoxication smell of her juices and the excitement of seeing T'Pol in such a brazen and dominating mood, he started licking up and down the length of her labia a couple times. When she started to push her wet organ harder into his face, making it hard for him to breathe, he quickly snaked his tongue inside her opening and after a short search, it's tip had located the sweet spot. He quickly started to twirl the tip of his tongue around it to sate her burning desire.

Dutifully delivering the desired service, Trip looked up, seeing T'Pol knead her breasts and pinch her nipples in unbridled lust. The soundtrack was unmistakable – she was having one hell of a time. How had the once so cool Vulcan become such an animal in bed. It was a good question, but he didn't feel like the answer mattered. She was just incredible.

It didn't take too long – or he just hadn't noticed the passage of time – until the familiar siren sounded, announcing an incoming climax. Trip was gripped by a moment of panic as her legs cramped shut around his head and she uncontrollably shoved her gushing nether region into his face, nearly suffocating him. He could feel the shivers running through her body as she recovered from the second climax of the night – even more ferocious than the first.

After a minute of recovery her hand searched his meat and found it properly erect. Clumsily she staggered off the bed, her knees weakened from two massive orgasms, and stumbled across the room until her hands had found a nondescript tub on her desk. After opening it, she tottered back to the bed trying to find it with her outstretched hand.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” he whispered in disbelief when she started rubbing a slick substance all over his erection, before doing the same with the area between her buttocks. Holding his pulsing rod upright she positioned it at her rear-entrance. Groaning in struggle and pain, she sat down slowly to force the head of his organ past her sphincter.

Trip closed his eyes and groaned as his meat was swallowed by her tight muscles.

“Darlin, do your front, too. Offsets the pain,” he suggested amid groans, barely holding on to clear thought.

“Not necessary,” she grunted through clenched teeth as she forced more of his meat into her bowels. “Vulcan perineum... many nerve endings... no need for secondary stimulation.”

That were the last words she spoke before starting to slide up and down his length, impaling her rear end. It didn't take too long until she had buried the whole eight and a half inch of his not-so-little 'little engineer' in her backside. That in itself was an achievement, but Trip could see that she hadn't exaggerated. T'Pol was going completely off her rocker.

Her normal sound display was impressive by anyone's standard, but the symphony of ecstatic grunts and groans was unprecedented as she rammed his tool into herself with growing fervor. Her head was dangling back seemingly uncontrollably. It was hard to miss that she was somewhere else. Nasty slapping sounds could be heard whenever her butt slammed down on his hips and her big breasts where bouncing heavily.
It felt like an eternity until she started sounding her trademark siren. Falling backwards, but catching herself witch her hands, she shivered and twitched in the throes of the climax and Trip started to buck his hips pushing in and out of her a couple more times, before he hit critical mass, too. Crying out her name he unloaded into her bowels.

They were lying side-by-side, breathing heavily, especially T'Pol. Trip rolled over, and to keep the pleasure-shocks of her latest climax simmering a little longer, he gently twirled his tongue around her right nipple.

“I will untie you now, husband.”

He didn't know how long it had been since she had rolled off him, but by the way she untied his hands, he could gather that she had already regained vision.

“I have no words to say how amazin' that was, darlin',” he said and kissed her eagerly, finally allowed to wrap his hands around the soft tissue of her breasts.

“It was indeed a high point of our intimate life husband. I hope that it motivates you to fulfill your marital duties more regularly in the future.”

“Consider me motivated my dear wife - properly, properly motivated.
Legatus Tavrus, who once was Major Talok, felt a sense of deja-vu. Not too long ago he had walked the same corridors on his way to a meeting with the Praetor. Thankfully the news were better this time. What remained to be seen was if, considering the news he had were not the best, the Praetor could resist the urge to shoot the messenger.

After the disasters at Betazed and Salem One the Imperial Fleet had finally achieved a victory and the fission weapons, a ridiculously barbaric concept, had worked. But such victories proved somewhat hollow. What was the point in subjugating colonies and planets, if the weapons used in the process made the annexed planets uninhabitable for hundreds of thousands of years.

Four weeks had passed since the Praetor had installed him as the Imperial Fleet's supervisor of the Tal'Shiar and this time had done nothing to increase his appreciation of this organization. From what he had witnessed during his time on Vulcan, organizations like the Vulcan V'Shar were much more effective and skilled in the shady world of underground operations. The latest failure of their own operatives on Earth was testament to that fact. The Vulcans would never have failed like that.

The heavy doors opened and Tavrus performed the Imperial salute as soon as he had crossed the threshold. D'Deridex seemed to be in a good mood, Tavrus noticed. So there might be a way to survive this after all.

"Laegatus Tavrus," the Praetor acknowledged. "These are indeed good news I hear about the latest battle, but I do know that some have a penchant for exaggerating their deeds, while I have come to know you as a more reliable voice of reason. So let us know what the Tal'Shiar thinks of the latest developments."

"The Tal'Shiar agrees that it was a glorious victory Excellency, however it is our duty to look beyond the battle and not all is that good."

"Let us know then," Admiral Valdore demanded boldly. Tavrus had to force himself not to snort at the mans nerve. Not too long ago the Admiral was in acute danger of being taken outside by a firing squad, but a single victory seemed to have 'reinvigorated' his sense of superiority.

"Our last attempt at destabilizing the influence of the Terrhasu by re-organizing remaining members of "Terra Prime" has failed miserably. The Coalition has been finalized and is now beyond the point where undermining tactics would prove effective. We are fighting against three races at once." 

"Was the Coalition not made up of 4 species?" the Praetor asked. "I have received four declarations of war."

"Only Vulcan, Andoria and Terha are in the battle fleets. The Tellarites are stationed around all major Coalition planets and Colonies. Such is their advantage in numbers that they can afford to surround each planet with a near impenetrable fleet of heavily armed cruisers."

"What can we do to bolster our numbers?" the Praetor demanded. "Valdore, where are all our ships?"

"A majority of our forces are bound at the Klingon border," Valdore admitted. "The Klingons lack the courage to attack more than one opponent, so when this Coalition was formed, they chose to attack us instead."
"Or they were just not stupid enough," Tavrus remarked dryly.

"You think this is a stupid endeavor?" the Praetor asked with an offended look at Tavrus.

"With all due respect, Excellency, yes I think so."

"I hope you have something good to say for yourself," D'Deridex spoke in threatening voice. "You know how little effort it takes to summon a firing squad."

"You may have me shot and I will accept any judgment you deem fitting," Tavrus declared. "But may I remind you, Excellency, that we currently have only a fleet of 40 battleships against the Coalition, as all other forces are needed to save the Empire from the Klingon onslaught. Also, our first victory came at unacceptable cost. We annexed the Galorndon system, but in the process we rendered it uninhabitable for generations."

"Your words have merit," the Praetor conceded. "What is your suggestion?"

"Instead of heading out, looking for small victories, we need to concentrate all possible resources on building new ships and solving the Klingon problem first. We will not be able to fight at two fronts at once."

"Ridiculous," Valdore protested. "We would be rendered idle for almost a year."

"That is about the time we should have taken to prepare, instead of rushing headlong into an attack with too few forces at our disposal," Tavrus spat angrily. He was now past the point of caring. Some people needed to hear a few truths. "With all due respect of course. I'm starting to believe that I spent all those years on that forsaken desert planet for nothing. All the data and conclusions I have brought back from my time on Vulcan have been summarily ignored. We have become so used to being the dominant force in the quadrant that we have forgotten that there are worthy foes out there, which we can't just force into surrender with a handful of warbirds."

"Calm down, Legatus!" the Praetor demanded. "We hear your words. They certainly have more merit than Valdore's, even if they are dangerously close to insubordination."

"I beg forgiveness," Tavrus said.

"Granted," the Praetor decreed with a wave of the hand. "Valdore! You have nine months, not a day longer and I want to see a fleet that can rival coalition numbers. Until then we concentrate on the Klingon problem and will limit the Terrhasu campaign to hit-and-run attacks with a small fleet. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly, Excellency."

One look at Valdore told Tavrus that he was in dangerous territory. The dirty looks of the Admiral made it perfectly clear that he wasn't pleased by the bigger influence he had with the Praetor. Not too many would have gotten away with what had just happened.

Now if the *veruul* would just learn to concentrate his energy on the war effort instead of sucking up to the Praetor.

"John, it's good to hear from you," Gardner said when Archer's face appeared on the screen. "I take it you've collected your ships?"
"We did. We are back at Salem One and have started doing repairs."

"Good," the Admiral said. "Lorian will arrive in a few days, We've stuffed tons of supplies in his ship. Distribute them as you see fit."

"What are our further orders?"

"None so far," Gardner said. "The V'Shar have reported that the Romulans have other problems right now. Looks like the Klingons are trying to use the war to help themselves to some Romulan space."

"First good news in a while," Archer said dryly.

"The Vulcans and Andorians have ramped up production of Suurok and Kumari cruisers until Tucker has finished the Molotok prototype. The Tellarites have handed over two shipyards where we can pump out destroyers and frigates. As the ships arrive at Salem One assemble balanced fleets of 30 to 40 and send them out to patrol the sector, but keep at least a hundred ships around the station."

"You are not building any new NX classes?" Archer asked after acknowledging Gardner's info with a nod.

"It would be a waste of resources. Both Vulcan and Andoria are building battle cruisers, but no frigates or destroyers. We would end up with an unbalanced fleet and we can pump out 5 smaller ships in the time the others build a single cruiser."

"Understood Admiral."
"Who says we're coming for a visit, boy," Charles said. "Have you forgotten that I was already an engineer, when you were still in your diapers?"

"Yeah, I know," Trip said, while behind them the other newcomers were herded out by Malcolm's security officers. "But you went into early retirement after you had to leave Florida."

"When I read that the government had inherited the AP shares and was planning to have them work exclusively for Starfleet, we applied for a job with them. There's just no way that our son and daughter-in-law are out here fighting a damn war and we sit on our butts at home waiting for what's coming."

"But mom is definitely not an engineer," Trip said.

"But a trained cook, you goof," his mother interrupted. "Somebody has to feed all those people. They even sent me to the Vulcan and Andorian Embassies to learn their cuisine. I can tell you, the Andorians have some interesting meat selections."

"So I take it you will be running the mess hall, Ma'am?" Malcolm joined in. "Captain Malcolm Reed," he added and shook the hands of both Tucker parents.

"One of the mess halls, young man," she replied. "I was told there will be three."

"Alright, everybody," Trip said and indicated them to follow. "Time to greet the masses."

About 150 civilian workers were assembled in one of the big storage halls on the station. Trip stood on a crate in front of the crowd and waited for the idle chatter to die down.

"Alright, everybody," he spoke into his communicator, which was hooked up to a pair of loudspeakers on the ceiling. "My name is Fleet Captain Charles Tucker III. I'm the one running this joint, so welcome to Jupiter Station everybody."

A short applause interrupted his speech.

"You've all seen that the ship you arrived on looks a bit second hand and we have four more of them. The Bozeman and the Whitehorse are already being worked on by the permanent staff of the station, but Fairbanks, Galena and Anchorage will be your job. We won't interfere much with what you do with them, but keep in mind they will be your living place for many months, so don't be too miserly on the interior design."

Short laughter and a few 'suggestions' could be heard.

"For the first week you may decide whether you want to be shuttled back to earth every night or stay here, but after a week we expect that at least one ship is in a condition that allows you to stay here. From then on shuttle service will only be available on Friday evening and on Monday morning back here. Well then, let's go to work everybody."

Noisily the workers assembled around their assigned team leaders as those began to fill them in on the details.

"Your herd," Trip said to Malcolm and walked out of the hall.
"Come!" Trip said.

Charles Tucker jr arrived with a stack of PADDs and Trip started wondering, just how many of the damn things were out there. He had handed out and received so many of them lately, he was starting to wonder if he would soon start dreaming of them.

"Raided the library, Dad?" he joked with a nod at the devices.

"Funny, boy, really funny," Charles joked back and put them on Trip's desk. "Kimb... Galena and we've decided she'll become the 'entertainment ship', so to speak."

"Kimball's the civilian overseer, right?" Trip asked for clarification.

"That's him," his father confirmed. "We've got some ideas, but we'll have to knock out quite a few bulk heads."

"In section C is a storage area for scrap metal. We are reusing everything."

"Yeah, Kimball already told us. Wish they would have given us such comprehensive briefings in my time. It was always just 'do this. We don't care how'," Charles chuckled.

"So, if I read that correctly," Trip said, putting the PADD in a docking station that displayed the contents on the top of his table. "We have what looks like a bar, the mess hall... What's that?"

"So far only an open room, but Kimball said we need some meditation chamber for the Vulcans. But we don't know what to put in it. I thought, maybe T'Pol could help with that."

"We can do better," Trip said. "Malcolm's ship has a meditation chamber, so you can just look at that. Mal's office is just 3 doors down the corridor. You'll need to go through him anyway as civilians aren't allowed on the military ships without being escorted."

"Fine with me," Charles said. "What do we need for the Andorians or the other one's... what are they called, the piggies?"

"They are called Tellarites, dad," Trip said and rolled his eyes. "Ask Malcolm about it, too. His ship has all necessary facilities for Andorians, Vulcans and Tellarites."

"Maybe he can just have someone give me a tour of the facilities," Charles suggested.

"I was coming to that," Trip said, poking away at a PADD.

"This is an permit for a ship's tour," Trip explained and handed over one of the many hand-held devices. "I've listed all relevant areas. Just meet up with Malcolm. He'll sign it off and get someone to give you a tour."

"Sounds good."

"What's these?" Trip asked and pointed to several rooms of different sizes.

"Well this one's a gym," Charles explained, pointing to different rooms. "That's a swimming pool, basket ball court and that one's a private pool, bubble bath and sauna."

"Private for whom?" Trip asked, starting to feel like his dad was proposing plans for a 5-star hotel.
"You," Charles replied dryly. "Well not private as in for your use only, but you'll decide, who gets to use it and when. It's permanently locked by entrance code. You have more than a handful of married couples working aboard. It's only normal they might want some private time occasionally."

"And Starfleet signed off all of that?" Trip asked doubtfully.

"The big boss himself," Charles said and pointed at a signature that Trip immediately identified as Gardner's. "As I understood, he said, that hard workin' people should have some creature comforts."

"Well, they sure are going to get them," Trip said with a grin. Maybe a private bubble bath wasn't that bad an idea.

"Oooph," Hoshi groaned as she struggled to press her thumbs into the contact points on T'Pol's back. "One thing is going to happen soon. I either end up with huge arms or I'll brake my thumbs."

"Maybe you wish to practice your technique on Trip, once I have taught you the basics."

"T'Pol!" Hoshi said scandalized.

"I do not understand," T'Pol said. "We have all seen each other without clothing more than once and while I have complete trust in Trip not to get 'fancy ideas' as he puts it, our bond makes any sexual connotation impossible in any case. And you would not struggle as much as human muscles aren't as hard to stimulate as those of a Vulcan."

"Still sort of doesn't feel right," Hoshi said. "Not sure what Malcolm would think of that idea."

"It would happen under my supervision anyway," T'Pol alleviated her doubts. "Trip has become quite proficient, but you have not yet, so I would need to supervise the process in any case."

"Well that's a different matter," Hoshi answered with a smile. "I may have an idea for that."

"You have?"

"I was giving a ship's tour to Trip's father today and he told me about all the goodies they are going to install on the staff accommodation ships. Did you know that they'll install a private bubble bath and a sauna? And Trip has the key to it."

"I was not aware of that. But I fail to make the connection to your neuropressure training," T'Pol answered and laid down to allow Hoshi access to the neural nodes in the lower back.

"Well, you would never go to the public swimming pool and neither would I as I don't plan to wear a swim suit. I wouldn't have a problem with that, but others probably would. Going to the Onsen in a swimsuit – people at home would ridicule me forever."

"I take it an Onsen is part of Japanese culture?"

"It is. Japan has a lot of volcanic activity and there are thousands of hot springs all over the country. We have something called hadaka no tsukiai, meaning 'naked communication'. Groups of people go to an Onsen to get to know each other in a relaxed atmosphere and since everyone is naked there is no hierarchy, as everyone is the same – no clothing or symbols to categorize people."
"That explains your 'tendency to repel clothing', as Trip usually describes it."

"I literally grew up like that," Hoshi giggled. "My parents ran a little ryokan in the countryside and it had a hot spring. I spent hours every day in the bath until my skin became all shriveled. So I'm thinking about Trip reserving an hour or two for the three of us each day or every second day. And that will give me time to practice neuropressure on a softer target."

"Three?" T'Pol asked. "Would Malcolm not join us?"

"Malcolm and a bathtub?" Hoshi snorted. "He has a bad case of aquaphobia. Any body of water bigger than a filled-up sink would make him run screaming. And sometimes I think he even fears the sink."

"I too was afraid of big bodies of water before," T'Pol admitted. "But after Trip had taught me to swim I came to value it as a much invigorating experience, although like you I would prefer the absence of a swimsuit. I find the sensation of wet clothing on my skin extremely irritating."

"A rainy day must be bad for you then," Hoshi speculated.

"Indeed," T'Pol said. "When I worked for the Embassy before my posting on Enterprise, I once was surprised by an unexpected burst of heavy rain with out a protective cover. Getting back to the compound in soaked robes was supremely unpleasant."

"Sit up," Hoshi demanded and T'Pol complied, facing her.

"Let me check that wig," Hoshi continued and started to fumble with the artificial scalp. "Looks like your hair is growing back quite quickly. I think in a week you can ditch it. Does it itch?"

"A little," T'Pol explained while Hoshi applied fresh adhesive before reattaching the part of the wig she had just lifted. "Vulcans can suppress such small irritations by mental techniques though."

"Lucky you," Hoshi said and stood up to make tea, smiling mischievously. "By the way, you haven't told me how your experiment with the lingerie went."

"The result was most agreeable," T'Pol replied drily. "Both Trip and I agreed that it was the high point of our intimate life so far."

"Oooh", Hoshi whistled.

"Putting on the garment was a somewhat cumbersome process, but the effect on him justified the effort. I forwent the use of panties and brassiere, however, as both were not supposed to stay on for any considerable amount of time anyway."

Hoshi doubled over in laughter.

"I'm starting to wonder how Trip keeps up with you," she giggled.

"He tries his best," T'Pol replied dead-pan.

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"Hey mate, how are you doing?" Malcolm asked as he walked into Trip's office on Jupiter station. The engineers had only recently put the finishing touches on Trip's office and there was still a faint whiff of welding in the air.

"Sifting through reports," Trip explained. "Seriously, I'm starting to develop an PADD allergy, I'm
going through hundreds of the things each day."

"I know what you mean," Malcolm commiserated. "It's not so different for me. Which is why I brought some medicine."

"Let me guess: Made in Germany?" Trip speculated with a grin.

"Right on the money," Malcolm said and handed over a bottle from the container he'd brought. "I knew you'd be here while our dear wives have their 'topless girl talk session'."

Trip nearly ejected the beer through his nose. A chuckle and a swig of beer didn't mix well.

"Well, the earlier we get this project going..."

"I know," Malcolm agreed and slid a PADD across the table. "By the way, sorry to add to your allergy, but could you have a look at that?"

"Hm," Trip hummed, paging through Malcolm's writing. "continuously modulating shield frequency, not a bad idea. That could work quite well against disruptor fire, but the programming will be a job straight out of hell."

"But we both know someone with the patience to take on something like that," Malcolm hinted.

"Sure, give my wife something to do that will occupy her forever," Trip complained.

"Come one, if the pep talk she gave me in decon last week is anything to go by, she seems quite a veritable fountain of ideas how to make the time after her shift rather pleasant and yours, too for that matter."

"You have no idea, Mal," Trip chuckled. "Ever since they started their neuropressure sessions, T'Pol has come up with quite some surprises. I wonder what sort of ideas Hoshi is giving her this time."

"As far as I know, none," Malcolm said. "I quizzed Hoshi about that tan-line stunt and she assured me that while apparently our after-duty performance is a predominant topic of their chats, she's never planting any ideas. She does provide T'Pol with plenty of reading material though."

"Oh dear," Trip groaned in mock exasperation. "No wonder they've declared your quarters off-limits for us. I'd probably spend half the time with a purple face."

"Have you seen the plans of your Dad?" Malcolm asked and replaced the empty bottles with new ones. "When I saw that they're building a heatable bathtub, I knew in an instance where I'll find Hoshi in her free time. She's been complaining how she misses the hot springs back home for ages. When it comes to that, I need you to cover my arse."

"I'm afraid you've lost me," Trip said and opened the bottles.

"She'll try to talk me into going in with her and I hate water."

"Malcolm," Trip snorted. "It's a bloody whirlpool. I can understand that you're afraid of the ocean, but a bath tub?"

Malcolm grew very silent and took a frighteningly big swig from his beer.

"K, spill it Mal," Trip said. "There's a story behind that."
"Indeed there is," Malcolm answered with a disgusted face expression. "My 'dear' father used to push me under water as a punishment when I was a lad, just short of drowning. Where other fathers grabbed the belt and went to town, mine just filled the sink and dunked me repeatedly."

"He fucking did what?" Trip exclaimed in shock. "Never mind that spanking kids is fucked up to begin with, but that's just ridiculous."

"I know," Malcolm agreed, shivering slightly. "Ever since then I've been mortally afraid of any body of water big enough to contain my head. I've taken showers only all my life. The section never knew what sort of liability I was. They could torture me, beat the raw stuffing out of me, I said nothing. But had anyone of them gotten the idea to water-board me or just simply put me in a bath tub, I would have sung like a bloody bird."

"Hoshi doesn't know that, does she?" Trip asked warily and Malcolm shook his head.

"She knows I'm afraid of water. That much was clear when I wouldn't join her in the hot spring, when we visited her parents last year. But that's about it."

"Mal, you have to tell her. What if she tries to talk you into it and later learns why you have that problem. She couldn't live with herself."

"I know," Malcolm said.

"You better don't wait long," Trip said. "Knowing our girls, they probably can't wait until the thing is built and I must say, I'd like a good soak, too."

"I think, I'll try to broach the subject tonight," Malcolm sighed. "Man, I'm so fucked up."

"Stop it, Mal," Trip demanded.

"How's it going, momma," Charles Tucker jr quipped as he walked into what would once become the civilian mess hall on the Galena.

"Men," Cathy huffed and threw her arms in the air. "There is tons of work around here and the first thing they do is sending some Germans, who install a brewery. I don't even have a working stove, but they install a brewery!"

"Good stuff needs time," Charles said and put a soothing arm around her. "Once they install a stove, you can whip up a minor miracle within hours, but good beer takes days, so they need to start early."

"Why am I not surprised," she said in mock protest. "You of course would defend them."

"Hey, we're hard working people again. That calls for a nice evening brew," he answered.

"Have you seen the kids?" she asked. "I've been cooped up all day trying to get things stocked up in the stasis unit."

"Met with Trip during the day, but no T'Pol in sight," Charles said. "I get the impression they don't see much of each other during the day. But I met the wife of his British friend, that Malcolm fella. Pretty nice Japanese girl, called Hoshi. She gave me a tour of their ship."

"Typical," Cathy harrumphed theatrically. "I get to freeze fish and cheese and you get to flirt with
young girls."

Charles laughed out loud.

"You're happy as a clam that you're here, and you know it," he said. "You've always been happiest when you could show off your cooking skills and as an added bonus you get to be near the kids."

Cathy looked at him with a grin. She was indeed happy and Charles wouldn't have it any other way.
Captains Log, Fleet Captain Charles Anthony Tucker III, November 3rd, 2156

The complete overhaul of Jupiter station has been finished. By incorporating Tellarite metallurgic technology, an evolution design of the non-organic matter re-sequencer, developed during our rebuild of space station Salem One, and Vulcan welding techniques, we are looking at the most sophisticated shipyard in all of the Coalition. The Andorians and Tellarites are chomping at the bit to inspect our handiwork in a bid to upgrade their own facilities to the same standard.

The five old Intrepid class ships we have docked to house crew quarters and recreational facilities have been overhauled by civilian contractors and especially the Galena is a piece of art. It is safe to say that we are the only space station that features an Olympic size swimming pool, a mud bath, an Andorian ice garden and even a small Vulcan monastery of sorts. It's basically comprised of an atrium, a communal meditation chamber with several private meditation chambers. Now all that's missing to turn it into a miniature version of P'Jem are some relics and a few priests. I've scheduled a communication with First Minister T'Pau and I hope she can help with that. With a little over 200 Vulcans aboard, by far the biggest contingent of non-humans, I want to have the best possible facilities to cater for their needs.

Three Mess Halls are available. With so many Vulcans aboard, we have decided to have one mess hall dedicated to Vulcan and other vegetarian food, we have one specializing in meat based dishes and one mixed selection galley. Personally, I'm looking forward to trying the recently finished wellness section. After working flat-out for 6 weeks, I feel an urgent need for some downtime.

I'm not really the type to toot my own horn, but my long-time misgivings about the level of engineering competence of permanent staff at Jupiter station were sadly confirmed. Last year they sent us out with a badly jury-rigged EPS grid that nearly blew up the ship and put me into a coma for two days and upon reviewing old maintenance logs, I realized that such a sloppy work was a frequent occurrence around here. I think Admiral Jeffries is still recovering from the shock over my complaint to Starfleet Engineering. As a result the permanent staff of the station was heavily restructured and spent most of the last 6 weeks in intensive re-training courses under supervision of Lieutenant-Commander Anna Hess, Lieutenant-Commander T'Len and Professor Solan.

"Computer, stop recording."

"Greetings, Minister," Trip said with a nod, when T'Pau's face appeared on the screen.

"A formal address is not needed in a private conversation, krei Charles," she answered. "I understand it is human custom to offer congratulations for your recent promotion."

"Thanks, T'Pau," Trip replied and resisted the urge to grin.

"What is it you wanted to speak with me about?"

"Well, we could use a bit of help to make life more comfortable for the 200 Vulcans we have aboard," Trip explained. "We have constructed a small meditation retreat with a communal and several private meditation chambers, but I gathered we could provide better for the needs of our Vulcan workforce if we had a priest or two and maybe a few religious ornaments or relics to make the experience a bit more complete for them."
"A most interesting approach," T'Pau noticed with a raised eyebrow. "Even our biggest shipyards do not have more than a simple meditation chamber."

"Well, people on your shipyards aren't bombarded by alien emotions from humans, Andorians and Tellarites through working with them in close quarters. As the only human to be bonded to a Vulcan, I'm in a unique situation to know what the impact of foreign emotions feels like and I'm determined to make it as comfortable as possible for our Vulcan contingent to cope with these unique circumstances."

"A most thoughtful measure," T'Pau agreed and Trip thought he saw a fleeting smile on her face.

He reminded himself that despite filling the top spot in Vulcan's hierarchy, T'Pau's age of 34 years meant she was a young girl in her late teens by human standards, so her emotional control was not yet what would be expected of an adult Vulcan even though she looked like a grown woman. T'Pol had explained that the emotional control of T'Pau was exceptional for someone her age, but nowhere near fully developed.

"I do think, help can be arranged," T'Pau said after a moment of contemplation. "If the security arrangements and your schedule allow, I would wish to inspect this first jointly staffed facility as well."

"No problem from my point," Trip said. "We'd be glad to have you, but I would like to ask you to go through official channels. Soval can easily arrange a visit with Admiral Gardner. I bet some of the Starfleet higher-ups would like a meeting with you, too."

"Of course it will be arranged as an official visit. We would not wish to irritate our coalition partners by creating the impression of clandestine arrangements."

"That's settled then," Trip said. "Looking forward to meeting you. Live long and prosper, T'Pau."

"Peace and long life, Charles."

The screen went blank.

"Krei Charles, huh?" Hoshi chuckled and looked up at him from under his desk, where she was cowering between his legs.

"You know hon, if someone walked in right now, we'd have a rather strange looking situation to explain," Trip quipped.

"It's not my fault that a certain Fleet Captain tried to rig his own communications console," Hoshi snorted and pointed at the opened panel that allowed a view at a twisted set of wires. "You might be the best with warp engines, but when it comes to installing subspace electronics, you better leave the job to someone, who knows what she's doing. I nearly got electrocuted just trying to keep the connection alive."

"Sorry Hoshi," he groveled. "And thanks for helping me out."

"You can bow and scrape later," she said with a mischievous grin. "I've booked the spa for us tonight. Twenty-hundred – don't be late."

"Ah, yes," Trip remembered. "T'Pol sold me off as a guinea pig for your neuropressure training."

"Exactly," Hoshi said crawling up from under the desk. "But don't pretend you aren't eager to try out the hot bath and the sauna. Your dad told me that you checked on the building process every
single day."

"Busted," Trip admitted.

"And now get out," Hoshi ordered with a smile, pointing at the door. "I need about an hour to clean up the mess you've made of this console, so go out and pretend to be useful."

"Aye ma'am," he mock-saluted and left, still chuckling.

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"What do you say?" Malcolm asked as a wall of shimmering light divided the laboratory in two halves.

"You've invented the force field - again," Trip joked with a theatrical congratulatory gesture.

Suddenly he saw the artificial wall morph into a cube, hovering mid air.

"What do you say now?" Malcolm asked again – a bit more triumphantly this time.

"Ok, I'd say that's something else," Trip whistled. "Do you think we could seal cooling leaks with that?"

"Containing cooling leaks and EPS fires were two of the uses I had in mind with this one," Malcolm confirmed. "It's still a bit costly on energy requirements, but I gather that it is preferable to evacuating engineering if a pipe bursts."

"You bet," Trip said with a look at the schematics. "How strong is it?"

"Look at that," Malcolm said and pulled the phase pistol from its holster. Setting the weapon to kill he aimed at the cubic force field. The beam hit the outer surface, but was unable to penetrate it.

"I'd say that's strong enough. Not bad, Mal, not bad at all," Trip said admiringly.

"I must say, station life is growing on me," Malcolm admitted. "I finally have the time to work on some old research projects of mine. Starfleet even offered me a seat on the design committee for the new Mark IV torpedoes."

"Too bad you can't use the more fun parts of the facility," Trip said sincerely. "Hoshi booked the wellness section for us tonight and I think we could all use a breather."

"True," Malcolm agreed wistfully, but then started smiling. "But don't worry about me, mate. I'll get enough wellness tonight."

"Well I noticed Hoshi is in a good mood," Trip grinned knowingly. "Have you considered seeing a counselor about your aquaphobia?"

"Been there, done that," Malcolm said with a sigh. "I've tried acupuncture, hypnosis, counseling sessions – all to no avail."

"I was thinking about a Vulcan counselor," Trip said. "Your problem is deeply rooted and only a Vulcan could delve that deeply into your mind."

"Do you really think one of them would do that?" Malcolm asked. "As I understand, mind-melding is quite an intimate thing."
"It is," Trip said. "But so is getting naked, yet we do it at the doctors office if needed."

"I think I see what you mean," Malcolm said with a snicker. "Well, it cannot hurt to try, although I wouldn't know who to ask."

"If memory serves me right, T'Len was a counselor on her ship." Trip recalled.

"Vulcans need counselors?" Malcolm asked. "I cannot remember T'Pol ever seeing one."

"T'Pol has her bond-mate nearby," Trip explained. "Vulcan couples often serve on different ships though and a bond isn't a magical device that works over light years of distance. And even bonded couples sometimes need the help of a counselor to re-establish equilibrium."

"Sounds sort of difficult."

"It is, Mal," Trip agreed. "A Vulcan bond is constant work, but also the most satisfying thing I can imagine."

"Ah momma, that was a great meal," Charles said admiringly. "You're fantastic."

"Glad you liked it," Cathryn said, smiling happily. Now that the biggest wave of hungry workers was well fed, she could take some time to enjoy a meal with her husband. "Did you know that some of the Vulcans eat sea food?"

"Means they live near the Voroth Sea," Charles said. "T'Pol told me their diet can be quite diverse based on where they come from and what is traditional in their clans."

"Do you think we can find out what their traditional food is?" Cathryn asked. "I'd like to have a few more of them in here."

"Getting into a competition with V'Karan's galley?" Charles asked with a grin.

"Not really," Cathryn denied. "But I want people to mix more. Most of the Andorians hang out at the steak house and the Vulcans mostly keep to the vegetarian mess hall. I doubt this is what they had in mind with the Coalition."

"Trok said you're making a brilliant krill-beast steak," Charles said.

"They seem to like it," Cathryn agreed, smiling at the thought of Andorians complimenting on her cooking. "But I cannot make it every day or I'll get into trouble with Mr. Snyder for stealing his steak house business."

"Maybe the three of you should start coordinating your menus," Charles suggested. "For instance V'Karan has Pesto Cavatappi on the menu today and you have Spaghetti Carbonara. Snyder has a Mediterranean grilled rib-eye steak. Our people had been hoping for some Italian food for two weeks and now they couldn't decide which one to choose. Would be better to not serve the same type of food on the same day."

"Good idea," Cathryn agreed.

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Trip was lying face down on the floor, out cold.
"Did I do that?" Hoshi giggled, slightly unsure of what to make of the situation. Just moments before Trip's body had gone limp and he would have fallen hard had T'Pol not caught him. She seemingly had prepared for an occurrence just like that one.

"Indeed you did. The neural nodes you stimulated instructed his neural system to enter a regenerative sleep," T'Pol explained. "He has worked excessively and is in urgent need of rest."

"I'm not sure this was the best idea though," Hoshi noted with a smile. "We can hardly carry a naked Captain home once our time is up."

"I have extended the booking until tomorrow morning," T'Pol said. "We will sleep on the loungers in here tonight. The warm temperature will assist me in finding sleep as well. You are welcome to stay, too."

"No thanks," Hoshi declined. "I wouldn't want to leave Malcolm alone all night."

"I too find it difficult to sleep alone," T'Pol admitted.

"Sleep is not what I had in mind," Hoshi said with a giggle and watched T'Pol hoisting up Trip.

"I see," T'Pol acknowledged dryly as she put Trip down on a lounger and covered his naked form with a light blanket.

"By the way," Hoshi remembered as she slid into the hot water of the bathtub. "Malcolm told me that Trip suggested seeing a Vulcan counselor about his water problem. Do you think you could help with that?"

"I am not a trained counselor. Mind-melding for therapeutic reasons requires more experience with the art than I possess," T'Pol admitted and joined Hoshi in her artificial onsen. "However, T'Pau will soon visit the station. She has a lot of melding experience and could provide an initial assessment of Malcolm’s therapeutic needs."

"She's the First Minister, T'Pol," Hoshi said in astonishment.

"She is also a member of our clan and you and Malcolm are affiliated members through your status as En'ahr'at to Lorian. It would be an insult to her if we didn't ask her."

"It can't hurt to try," Hoshi said, lazily pedaling in the hot water. "He doesn't need to become a water rat, but maybe at least relaxed enough to come in here with me."

"That would indeed be a desirable outcome," T'Pol agreed, mimicking Hoshi’s foot pedaling. "Trip voiced his concern that in the long term Malcolm could feel left out, if we meet in here every second day without him."

"I don't think he would see it that way, but I want to get him to at least come in here," Hoshi declared with a mischievous grin. "I have some ideas for using that sauna that I need him for and Trip can definitely not help with those."

"Indeed," T'Pol noted drily and raised a knowing eyebrow.

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Vulcan, 2 weeks later...

"Take a seat, daughter of our Clan."
T'Pau fought the momentary danger to let her surprise show. It was exceedingly rare that the Eldest Mother addressed someone in the modern dialect of the Khomi region, once the home of all members of Clan Sh'hiran'lin'ijyliunh'rei'i'y'ukn'h'wen'lhia'ehr'm'n. Of course in modern society, where the Clans lived in peaceful coexistence, there was no need anymore to separate from other clans and Vulcans settled in locations all over the planet, regardless of their bloodline.

The young leader refocused on her host, expecting a rather personal conversation, as in any other case T'Para would have addressed her in High Golic, as was her habit when dealing with Clan matters.

"I have donated the requested spiritual items and relics as well as a supply of J'Kah stones from our Clan's inventory. V'Mar is on his way to serve as the Eldest of the facility. Clan dvinsu zul-os-yon will also dispatch one of their Elders to serve on the station."

"That is agreeable news. I am convinced that krei Charles will appreciate your help."

"It is me, who shall demonstrate gratitude," T'Para dismissed the sentiment, much to T'Pau's surprise. Vulcans usually dismissed sentiments like gratitude as unnecessary. To hear the Eldest Mother using the concept in conversation was most unexpected.

"I have been in frequent contact with Charles over the last two weeks. He wished to be educated most thoroughly about the spiritual needs of Vulcans under his command," the matriarch explained.

"That does not sound like a logical decision," T'Pau argued. "If I am informed correctly, he has over 200 Vulcans on the station. He could have consulted with them instead of using subspace resources and taking up an unnecessarily significant portion of your time."

"Do not presume that time spent with Charles is wasted," the Eldest rebuked her sternly. "He contacted me as he considered me the most logical choice to ask for information on spiritual and ritual matters. I saw no reason to defer his inquisitiveness to someone else. As you will learn, he is a most fascinating specimen and a source of enlightenment, especially as we Vulcans continue to explore, who we really are. I learned a lot about Humans by listening to his explanations and by extension I also gained new insight into our own society."

"I am unsure if I fully comprehend," T'Pau admitted.

"You are proving the truth of my assessment," T'Para dismissed the utterance. "For every other Vulcan of your age such lapse would be expected and an apology not even considered necessary. Nobody would expect a Vulcan to gain full emotional control before the age of 40. You did not learn to master your emotion, you were drilled to suppress them. I won't indulge in keeping a false
impression. You are not the ideal candidate for leading the reformation of Vulcan society, at least not yet. You lack fundamental experiences from your childhood. You never rebelled against the Elders to learn that petulance is detrimental to the equilibrium within the families bond. You were merely trained to be obedient and were threatened with consequences in case of insubordination."

T'Pau listened to the lecture of the Eldest Mother with rapt attention. As the leader of the High Command she had not yet experienced such bluntness. She observed how the Eldest mother retrieved a number of PADDs and some unknown device from an old rack.

"These are images created with a device humans call a camera. Its only use is to preserve a copy of what your eyes are seeing. What do you make of it?" T'Para asked and handed her the strange device.

"Most peculiar," T'Pau admitted and inspected the device from all sides. "It would mean it is little more than a primitive scanner that is limited to the spectrum of visual light."

"As are our eyes," the Eldest continued. "This device is not made to create a three-dimensional representation of your surroundings. It was created for purely emotional reasons. Its sole purpose is to capture a moment in history. Humans use these images to remember the deceased or as a stimulant to recapture emotional moments. See for yourself."

T'Pau took the images and started scrolling through the collection. She stopped at a picture that showed the Eldest mother in meditation. She slowly began to understand what the Humans intended with the activity. A simple bio-sensor sweep would gather all the data needed to create a life-sized statue of the Eldest Mother or any other type of visual representation, but that would be an idealized facsimile. It would not recreate the appearance of the matriarch at a defined point in time, nor would it capture the colors and ambiance of her home at the same time.

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T'Para observed her charge patiently. It was obvious that the young one was exposed to many new impressions. She considered it almost perverted, how little of the struggle manifested on the outside. T'Pau was not a young Vulcan female; she was a young Vulcan female trained to appear adult. That could not be undone unfortunately. T'Para rued the damage done by T'Pau's upbringing, but if there was a chance to reverse at least some of it, Charles and the En'ahr'at of Lorian were the likeliest to succeed, even if it would mean for the young one to be 'thrown in the deep end' as Charles had put it, when he had agreed to help with T'Pau's cultural education. If his ideas were to be believed, it would be a sentiment to be taken literally.

An audible gasp alerted the Eldest that T'Pau had found the two visual copies of drawings from the clan's history scrolls. She realized that for the first time in her life she was satisfied to see an open manifestation of emotion, realizing that if T'Pau had brushed aside this deliberate cultural shock with trained ease as well, it would have been a reason for concern.

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T'Pau stared at the images before her. In stunned disbelief she scrolled forth and back between them, unable to accept what she saw.

The first picture showed an obviously ancient drawing of Vulcans swimming in a large body of water. Since the practice of swimming for recreational purposes had been abandoned centuries ago, she deduced it must be ancient drawings, probably from the earliest history of the clan.

"You appear troubled," she heard the Eldest note casually.
"Are these from our clan's history?" T'Pau asked. "I was under the impression that our clan did not exist until at least 300 years after Surak's death."

"These are indeed from the earliest scrolls of our clan and your knowledge of our time line is obviously complete, too."

"They do not wear any clothes." T'Pau stated the obvious.

"Of course not," T'Para answered and raised an eyebrow to express her annoyance. "Swimming in robes would be patently impractical, not mentioning the danger of drowning by being dragged under the surface by the heavy, soaked garment."

"I do not understand," T'Pau answered in confusion. "It is most inappropriate to expose one's body to the view of others and has been since the time of awakening."

"That is what 3 governments under Rihanssu influence wanted us to believe," the matriarch explained. "You cannot begin to fathom the amount of damage that V'Las and his two predecessors have done to our society. When I was your age, it was the most logical measure to just dispose of the robe if the heat became too oppressive. With our anatomy being ill-equipped to regulate our body temperature, bathing was the logical countermeasure."

"I do not understand," the younger woman said, looking at the second picture that showed an artificial body of water, inside a building of some kind. Vulcans were seated around it with others being inside the water-holding basin. "It was common for individuals to be in the presence of others in a disrobed state?"

"Of course; would you rather have each family build their own bath and thus waste sizable amounts of water? Each clan had a communal bath at their spiritual retreat where clansmen congregated to fight the effects of the heat at the height of summer."

"But why is it then considered inappropriate?" T'Pau asked, sensing that there must be more to this particular fact of Vulcan history.

"One hundred and sixty-nine years ago, I was about your age, Administrator V'Ses rose to power," T'Para reminisced. "As we now know, he was the first to collaborate clandestinely with the Rihanssu. One of the first edicts of his rule declared mind-melding a deviant practice. As a result the practice soon died out or was practiced in hiding by untrained individuals. With melding abandoned, Vulcan marriages ended up being a mere toleration of each other as no bond could be established between mates by a priest, as had been tradition since the beginning."

"With no bond to draw mates together, many started to sate carnal desires with others, who were not their mate. Illicit children were born; the very fabric of our existence was threatened. Soon the Science Directory started to disseminate the false teaching that these illicit couplings were the result of young males being exposed to the view of unclothed females and the practice of bathing in a public location, even among clansmen, was declared deviant, too."

"How could a whole planet be fooled like that?" T'Pau asked, not even trying to hide her disbelief.

"Very simple: Even when such practices were still common and accepted, they stayed within the clan. We were never like other species, who advertise their amorous achievements or discuss their family matters in public. The government used this to their advantage. Since intimate matters were not spoken about, everybody assumed that everybody else adhered to the new teachings and nobody wished to be caught in deviant behavior. Soon very few practiced the old ways, but many of our clan members were among those who did."
"For instance Soval, who practiced mind-melding and helped mates establish a bond in secret," T'Pau provided.

"Correct. It soon came to the attention of the V'Las government that our clan had one of the lowest mortality rates even during the most disastrous summer heat waves and we were put under observation by the Ministry of Security. The reason for many of our clan surviving the disastrous heat waves 80 years ago was that most of our clan had not lost the ability to apply proper logic instead of blindly following what the High Command declared to be logical. While many others accepted death by heat-stroke, we just discarded the clothing that aggravated the effect of the heat and made use of the communal bath in our mountain retreat, away from inquisitive eyes and observation by the authorities."

"That way you did avoid discovery."

"We did not, unfortunately," T'Para explained. "We were denounced close to the time Earth sent out their Warp 5 vessel. Of course they could not cite our retaining of traditional practices and values as the reason for targeting us. It would have brought those practices back to the attention of the people again and could have caused their revival. That is why V'Las used T'Pol and her part in the human mission as a convenient excuse for persecuting our clan."

"Outrageous," T'Pau said and could hardly contain her confusion and anger.

"Go, make use of my meditation chamber, child. You have been exposed to much new and confusing information," the Eldest decreed, when she saw that T'Pau was close to an outburst.

In the privacy of solitude T'Para allowed her eyebrow to rise higher than would be publicly acceptable for a matriarch of her standing. T'Pau had now been in the meditation chamber for over four hours and she began questioning the wisdom of applying a strategy that Charles had referred to as 'knocking her over the head with it'. Maybe she had asked too much of the child?

Her thinking was interrupted by a calm looking T'Pau returning to the attic. A young one of her age should not be that collected after being exposed to such a cultural shock she thought for at least the fifth time that day.

"Have you re-established your balance, child?" she asked rhetorically.

"Indeed I have, but to my disappointment, I ended up with more questions than answers."

"That's what I have summoned you for. I shall answer your questions," the Eldest said and indicated that she should take a seat.

"I am unable to determine why you invested so much time in lecturing me about the subjects you chose. The question of bathing and the associated state of apparel will hardly present itself during my visit to Earth as the temperatures there are, if anything, cool enough to require additional clothing instead of discarding it."

"I chose this topic as it was likely to challenge one of your most firmly manifested preconceptions. No other topic would have been able to elicit such a strong response. And you are mistaken – the topic of bathing will certainly become one you need to face."

"I do not understand."

"On the station you will encounter the En'ahr'at of Lorian – Malcolm Reed and his mate Hoshi.
Malcolm is in need of help as he suffers a pathological fear of water as a result of traumatic experiences in his childhood. Only a highly skilled melder such as you would be able to initiate the first connection to his troubled mind and endure it without lasting effects."

"A Vulcan is perhaps not the foremost authority on how to deal with a fear of water," T'Pau noted.

"Which is why I wish that you become familiar with the element," the Eldest decreed calmly. "You can only deal with the issue if you have experience with it. Malcolm's mate Hoshi has agreed to teach you swimming techniques."

T'Pau looked at her in terror. T'Para however ignored the openly emotional display and continued her explanation.

"You do not need to fear. Most humans wear specially fashioned items of clothing when bathing in public and T'Pol will provide you with suitable attire."

"It appears then that Humans have developed the same inhibitions then as we have in recent history," T'Pau noted seemingly unmoved, not aware that T'Para could easily sense the relief she was experiencing.

"Humans are much more culturally diverse than us," the matriarch lectured. "Some cultures prohibit baring one's body even in a family setting, while others, like the culture of Hoshi, consider bathing with clothes a foolish idea. There are even remnants of isolated populations in remote regions on Earth that spend their whole life without ever wearing any attire. So while your own inhibition will be strictly respected, you might be confronted with the fact that Hoshi refuses to wear anything while teaching you. If that makes you uncomfortable, ask T'Pol to teach you. Hoshi will take no offense."

"These are challenging wishes, Eldest."

"Indeed they are. But the only alternative would be to let T'Pol attempt the meld as she associates positive experiences with the element. But you know of the neurological damage the mission to the Expanse has left her with. I cannot risk further detrimental experiences."

"I shall endeavor to respect your wishes," the young woman acquiesced. "It may turn out a vital learning experience. Is that why you asked me to extend my stay on the station?"

"I asked you to stay with them for more than one reason. You are young and burdened with a sizable responsibility. It would be conductive to your continued well-being if you engaged in recreational activities. You also need to gain more first-hand experience with other races, Humans in particular."

"Will you provide me with guidelines as to which activities are acceptable? You made it abundantly clear that I was brought up with an excessively restrictive regime."

"There is no need for guidelines," T'Para replied, inwardly satisfied that T'Pau had allowed a hint of sarcasm seep into her voice. "Your four hosts will offer you suitable activities. Decide yourself if you wish to partake in any of them. Refusal will not be considered an offense. Learn by observing the life on the station, interact when interaction is offered. You will not be required to report back what transpired during your visit, nor will anyone else contact me to report any of your activities."

"That is a rather unusual request," T'Pau noted.

"The whole experience is designed to be unusual, T'Pau-kan. Your whole life you have been
conditioned to follow rules and satisfy standards defined by others. You never learned to find out, who you are. I am sending you on an assignment with no guidance, no rules to rely on. You will need to find your own path to contentment.

"A most challenging assignment, indeed," T'Pau agreed.
First Minister T'Pau stood on the Bridge of the ambassadorial courier T'Klaas and watched the space on the view screen. Two brand new Suurok class battle cruisers had escorted the small transport to Earth where they transferred responsibility for the safety of the vehicle to SOLCOM before heading out to join the 1st offensive Fleet of Commodore Archer at Salem One.

She observed the blue orb in the center of the screen, the fascinating beauty of the water-rich planet only blemished by an ugly dark scar in the region that was once the home of krei Charles. She tried not to let the thought of seven million victims sink into her consciousness as she mentally prepared herself for the peculiar mission ahead, but the horror of so many deceased could not be dismissed. She realized that V'Las' refusal to help Starfleet on the Mission to the Expanse played a big part in fueling xenophobia on Earth, culminating in the attempt to create a cloned child of T'Pol and Charles with the sole purpose to die. She would have to consult with krei T'Pol to work out if there was any chance to remedy the damage done by Vulcan's abandoning Earth in time of dire need.

The meetings with Starfleet officials would be standard diplomatic work, especially as no diplomatic challenges presented themselves other than trying to smooth out relations with Starfleet some more. The Coalition was firmly established. The only small worry was the fact that the reports of Archer, describing their time in the Forge had allegedly created an unfavorable impression of her personality, one that she wished to correct, which prompted her decision to defer the official functions until after her stay aboard Jupiter station. The young Vulcan reasoned that after spending some time among humans, she would be better prepared to handle the diplomatic meetings in a way that would counter the preconceptions caused by Archer's reports.

The stay on the station however would surely be a unique experience. Raised in the remoteness of the Vulcan Forge, she had little experience with alien cultures. Captain Jonathan Archer had been the first alien she had ever met and now she was going to spend a full two weeks on a station in close quarters with Humans, Andorians and Tellarites. Thankfully her identity was not known among the alien races, much less her appearance. The Vulcans had been instructed to refrain from any marks of respect other than those they used routinely, so she could enjoy a degree of anonymity.

Several subspace consultations with Soval had prepared her for the challenges ahead. According to the clan's Elder, krei Charles was unusual in every way imaginable. Emotional at times, even by human standards, he had become very knowledgeable in matters of Vulcan culture through his affiliation with the clan, enough so that the Eldest mother trusted him to provide for her well-being.

Krei T'Pol was a most unusual Vulcan in many ways, but strangely T'Pau would always find a passage of the true Kir'Shara that provided at least a partially suitable explanation for every case of T'Pol's allegedly deviant behavior. Soval had even gone as far as to postulate that T'Pol might well be the one contemporary Vulcan who came closest to the spiritual idea of a Vulcan personality described in Surak's writings.

Captain Malcolm Reed, the godfather – as the humans translated the Vulcan word – of Lorian, the displaced-in-time son of Charles and T'Pol, was a former operative of a secretive faction of Earth's intelligence service that not even the V'Shar could provide much information about. According to the Eldest Mother he could - if necessary – apply a control to his emotions that would be worthy of a Vulcan. He was the one in need of her help to overcome his fear of water.
Hoshi Sato-Reed, the wife of Malcolm and godmother of Lorian, was the most elusive of her four hosts. The only information Soval had been able to provide was that she was Earth's most distinguished linguist, who spoke all contemporary Vulcan dialects and several ancient ones, a feat that only four or five native Vulcans were capable of.

When T'Pau refocused on her surroundings she was just in time to notice the report from the Captain that they had been cleared to approach Jupiter station.

"How do I look?" Trip asked for the third time and nestled with the collar of his dress uniform.

"Your attire is adequate for the occasion," T'Pol repeated and rolled her eyes.

"You didn't fuss that much about your look, when Soval came aboard," Hoshi needled him with a grin.

"Ha, ha," Trip mocked ironically. "Last time I checked Soval wasn't the leader of the whole damn planet and one that the Eldest Mother entrusted me with. I'd rather cross a battalion of Klingons than angering the Eldest."

"Aren't you exaggerating a bit?" Malcolm asked.

"If the Eldest is cross, my wife will be, too," Trip explained. "And that is something I want to avoid at all cost. She knows where my off-switch is."

Hoshi and Malcolm laughed out loud, both knowing about Hoshi's neuropressure-zapping of Trip, while T'Pol limited her reaction to a very pronounced giggle-brow.

Their banter was interrupted by the incessant beep of the airlock indicator – a sign that the T'Klaas had docked. The airlock opened and T'Pau stepped forward, leaving Vulcan territory for the first time in her young life.

"T'nar pak sorat y'ran," Trip intoned the formal greeting, surprising Hoshi with the complete absence of his usually atrocious accent.

"T'nar jaral," T'Pau replied and offered nods of acknowledgment to T'Pol, Malcolm and Hoshi before accepting the traditional greeting of kinship offered by Trip.

"Welcome aboard," he said after the elaborate gesture was completed.

"I'm honored," T'Pau answered in flawless Standard. "As per the Eldest wishes, my presence here is strictly informal, so formal titles or addresses will not be necessary. We all possess first names, the use of which is perfectly acceptable in Earth culture among clansmen, is it not?"

"Sure thing," Trip confirmed, slipping into 'informal mode' easily. "Why don't you follow Hoshi? She'll show you to your quarters. I'll drop by later to give you the grand tour of the station."

"Agreed," T'Pau said and walked off with Hoshi.

"Ok, Mal, Let your people give this place an enema. I know you run a tight ship with security, but we don't exactly have the mail man for dinner. If any of those idiots has gotten wind..."

"It's ok, Trip," the Brit interrupted him. "I know what you mean and we're on the same page."

Malcolm jogged off, leaving Trip and T'Pol behind.
And we darlin', we'll make up a plan on how we go about this.

"Agreed."

"I was informed that you will teach me swimming techniques before I try to assess your mate's problem," T'Pau said in an attempt to initiate 'small-talk', a practice that Soval had informed her about.

"That depends," the human woman replied. "There may be cultural barriers."

"I was made aware of that," T'Pau answered, hoping her guide would not notice the uneasy sensation she was experiencing. "I do intend to enter any challenge I might encounter without prejudice. I wish only to ask that you take no offense if I abort the lesson prematurely should I grow uncomfortable with the activity or any ... cultural barriers."

"No offense will be taken," the human promised with a smile that T'Pau found strangely encouraging. "You will be included in our everyday lives. We might leave you to yourself during the day if our tasks require it, but you will be offered to partake in many recreational activities we engage in, but please know that you can refuse or abort any participation at any time without causing offense. The purpose of your visit is to find your own bearings on life, not to force you into anything.

"I admit to a certain apprehension," T'Pau said. "The Eldest mother encouraged me to partake in any activity offered to me, but since I am not skilled in deciding whether an activity is unseemly by the strict standards I was raised with only or by Vulcan society in general, I could in the end offend the Vulcans already stationed here. The Kir'Shara promotes several concepts like individuality, but their description is vague at best and I'm usually quite isolated in the High Council."

"T'Pau, we would not encourage you to do anything that would be unacceptable. Whenever we present a suggestion, be sure that none of the other Vulcans would take offense, in fact we will not suggest any activity that isn't taken part in by other Vulcans, too."

"Does that include the use of bathing facilities?" T'Pau asked, her interest piqued.

"Most of them use the pool," Hoshi confirmed. "Lieutenant-Commander T'Len shattered the station record over 1.500m last week."

"Most intriguing," T'Pau said.

"You will soon learn that many of the Vulcans here are very liberal. They strictly adhere to their traditional values; they meditate, keep a tight emotional discipline, but they are also open-minded in regards to other cultures. Just last week five Vulcan engineers joined a group of Andorians on an excursion to Alaska. They came back thoroughly freezing, but with a dozen new admirers in blue."

"Fascinating."

T'Pau did something she had done many times before – she looked into a mirror. But this time she didn't look to check if all the ornaments of the heavy official robes were displayed properly and whether or not her sash was positioned at the right angle. On the nondescript grey catsuit that all civilian female Vulcan engineers wore there were no symbols or sashes to worry about.
But there was something other, which she very well noticed – the transformation the garment had caused to her silhouette. She suddenly appeared much more slender and the tight fitting attire defined the exact curvature of her body as opposed to the heavy governmental robes, which had given her a much more robust appearance. She fought down her annoyance at such irrelevant thoughts. It was all the fault of the Eldest. Since she had disclosed the ancient drawings of bared Vulcans, her own appearance had simmered as a constant background noise in her mind and no attempt at meditation was able to cast it out. It was all the fault of the Eldest.

The door chime interrupted her mental flogging of the matriarch and krei Charles entered the room once she had voiced her permission to enter.

"Ready for the grand tour?" he asked with a smile.

"I am," T'Pau answered and felt a moment of confusion as to why he didn't comment on her changed appearance. Surely if it was a stark enough difference to influence her ordered thought process, wouldn't a human be compelled to make an observation? The research from the Vulcan science academy indicated that outward appearance played a much bigger role for humans than it did for her people. Still shelving the confusion for later meditative processing, she followed her host.

"You need to rest. Your feet are hurting and as a result, so do mine," T'Pol's voice resonated in his mind. It was rare that she used direct communication using the 'bond telephone', so he knew that he was seriously disturbing her. Wasn't his fault that the station was so huge and T'Pau wanted to see everything? Obviously she didn't mind the endless walk. Trip thought images of the places they had visited in rapid succession to give T'Pol an idea why his feet were burning.

"Invite her for dinner," T'Pol instructed.

Trip sent her back an image of him and T'Pol in the shower. (join me?)

"Please choose a different image in the future," T'Pol nagged back. "It is not practical to arouse me while at work. You know how hard it is for me to suppress."

An image of a red rose was sent as an answer. (sorry)

"Apology accepted. But be prepared to do something about it in the evening. I cannot join you. SOLCOM has ordered us out on a sensor training run for Academy cadets near the Kuiper belt. We will be away for at least four hours."

Trip sent an image of the sauna, followed by the clock showing 2200.

"quarters, I have a different plan," came the heat-radiating reply.

Trip chuckled and refocused on his immediate surroundings. At some point he had obviously stopped just like that and he found himself in the corridor with TPau standing in front of him, an eyebrow raised inquisitively.

"You can communicate telepathically?" she asked.

"Sort of," Trip confirmed. "But I'm somewhat limited. Maybe you should ask T'Pol about it, she can probably explain it in a way that's more understandable for you."

"Agreed."
The chirp of his communicator interrupted their exchange. He flipped it opened and prompted the incoming transmission.

"I have booked a table at "Cathrine's," in an hour. Hoshi informed him. "Can you please drop by the Mission room beforehand? We need to go over some schematics for project EM."

"Be there in ten," Trip replied when he heard the code name they had agreed on, whenever discussions were necessary about the 'entertainment program' for their distinguished guest.

"Sorry 'bout that," he said to T'Pau while flipping his communicator shut.

"Apologies are not necessary," she replied, unaware of the coded message. "Your work has priority. I had not yet the chance to meditate today, so I shall take the opportunity to do so."

"Great," Trip said with relief. "I'll pick you up in an hour."

"Agreed," she said and walked off towards the monastery chambers.

"Mother of god," Trip sighed when he finally had a chance to sit down on a chair after arriving in Buran's mission room.

"Finally," a relieved voice droned in his mind. He answered with an image of his hand cupped behind his ear to tell her she should join in as she needed to hear what's going to be said.

"Hold on, Hoshi," he told his questioningly looking host. "I asked T'Pol to hook in, but she's currently on the bridge and has to hand over the ship first."

"Hi T'Pol," Hoshi greeted when T'Pol's face appeared on the view screen after a few minutes.

"What is the conversation about?" T'Pol asked calmly.

"I noticed something about T'Pau and I'm worried. She seems to have trouble of some kind. It must be pretty bad if she's radiating her emotions so hard that I can sense something."

T'Pol acknowledged Hoshi's suspicion with a nod. "She is most self-conscious. The information the Eldest Mother has given her has deeply unsettled her."

"I'm starting to think it wasn't my best idea to join in her little scheme. I thought she wanted to help her, not scare her witless," Trip ranted growing more and more irritated. "Wouldn't it have been enough to tell her we're going to teach her swimming? Was all that naked Vulcan clan baths malarkey really necessary? What the hell did she expect? That we peel her out of the jacket and make her a stripper in the mess hall? I'll give T'Mom a piece of my mind, you bet! She's probably scared the girl shitless."

"Calm down, Trip," T'Pol ordered sternly. "I admit the Eldest Mother's approach was fairly coarse, but it was the logical one. She is not scared of undressing, she begins to understand that her appearance matters - to others and to herself. That is troubling her mind."

"How can you miss your own appearance for over 30 years," Trip snorted sarcastically. "Wait till you see her in that catsuit. How could she have missed that she looks quite a deal better than other Vulcans?"

Hoshi opened her eyes wide. Had Trip really just complimented the looks of another woman in
"You have experience with such things," T'Pol replied calmly, not the least bit bothered by Trip's compliment for their guest. "Vulcans are usually ignorant of it. I never knew that my appearance made a difference until I faced the scenario of having to enter the decon chamber in my underwear with someone, who wasn't of my clan."

"After Rigel X?" Trip asked in disbelief.

"Yes."

"Why? You still had your two-piece on. I couldn't possibly see the sweet bits. What was different to all the 60 years before that?"

"Your quickened breath, your dilated pupils and that was even before you touched me," T'Pol analyzed calmly.

"Are you trying to tell me that no Vulcan ever nursed a semi from seeing you? Do they all fancy the bland types?" Trip asked, not noticing how Hoshi almost burst a blood vessel just trying not to laugh out loud about the hilarious exchange.

"Vulcans cannot get aroused by visual stimuli alone," T'Pol explained. "Arousal needs many different stimuli, most importantly a bond. And a Vulcan would never comment on another Vulcan's appearance. That's why Vulcans are mostly completely ignorant of their appearance."

"Well, that explains them catsuits," Trip said. "They're not really designed to help you out if you have weight problems, are they."

"The catsuits are not the problem," T'Pol said. "One of the strongest instincts in Vulcans is defense. You can lose all your family, all weapons and be in the Forge all by yourself – there is one last defense you will still have."

"Your clothes," Hoshi joined in. "It protects you from the sun, the dirt and the views of others."

"That's why you started realizing it even in underwear. You were losing most of your last defenses," Trip realized aloud.

"Indeed."

"Guess we better buy her a full-body neoprene suit for the swimming lessons then," Trip said.

"No we won't," T'Pol said. "She will need to learn how to relax her defenses among clansmen. And Hoshi will wear nothing, meaning that she is in Vulcan eyes completely defenseless, so T'Pau will not feel threatened."

"She could still ask you to teach her," Trip reminded her.

"She won't," T'Pol said with conviction. "T'Pau is immensely curious. She would not pass up a chance to find out if she can endure the unknown situation."

"You think she'll go the full mile?" Trip asked.

"No," T'Pol said with equal conviction. "Her fear threshold would be too high. But a start will have been made and she will have to learn to cope with the situation."

"Why?" Trip asked. "There are things like air conditioning now. The times of prancing around
"naked to cool off in the heat are over."

"The Eldest Mother will reinstate the tradition of the yearly communal baths at some point in time. Our clan always had 3 communal baths each year to make sure that first time participants learn to let go of their defenses among clansmen and second as a means to assemble the clan members for conversation where rank, status or wealth were inconsequential."

"Like our onsen," Hoshi added.

"And many houses on Vulcan do not have air conditioning, so the ability to function with the last defenses gone can still mean the difference between life and death for some."

"Jeez, you folks can be difficult sometimes," Trip groaned jokingly.

"I have an idea, how we can start helping her with her self-consciousness," Hoshi said.

Both Trip and T'Pol looked at her with interest.

"If she just now starts to recognize her appearance, she'll soon notice that she looks like she's been having her hair done with a machete. How about one of us goes to the hair-dresser with her?"

"Good idea, Hoshi," Trip enthused.

"Indeed," T'Pol agreed.

"And this, young Lady, is the swimming pool," Charles Tucker jr. explained.

After a copious pasta meal, which T'Pau had found most agreeable, Trip's father had volunteered to conclude T'Pau's tour of the station as only the Galena, the Stations 'entertainment ship', and the less interesting processing facilities were left. As one of the overseers of the rebuilding project he was the most qualified anyway.

T'Pau observed the busy goings-on in the large hall. A body of water, 50 standard meters in length, 16 meters in width and between 1.20m and 5.0m in depth was perused by at least 20 individuals, among them Humans, Andorians and Vulcans. None of the Vulcans seemed to have any problem with the element, strengthening her resolve to learn about the activity.

Like the human males, Vulcan and Andorian males wore simple pants which covered the lower body, but left the torso bare. Most Females of all three species wore a suit that covered the rump and left the legs and arms bare, while others, among them many Andorian women, wore a two-piece garment that only covered the breasts and the lower body region, leaving the rest of the body bare. She noticed that Andorian females were quite muscular in comparison to their human and Vulcan colleagues.

"Do you have a swimsuit?" Charles asked and started chuckling. "Most Vulcans were quite sceptical at first, but now you need to drag them out."

"I do not possess such a garment," T'Pau admitted. "But your wife volunteered to help me procure such an item."

"Make sure you buy a bathrobe, too," Charles warned. "We had Vulcans getting really cold just on the way back to the changing room."
"So what do you think?" Trip asked as he walked back to their respective offices with Hoshi.

"She's much calmer now, I didn't sense a thing."

"Just do me favour, don't try to convince her of anything when you teach her, ok?" Trip pleaded. "Let her make her own decisions."

"Don't worry," she reassured him with a grin. "I wouldn't want the Eldest Mother demanding your hide."

"Don't remind me," Trip grinned back. "Speaking of you sensing things. Have you thought about trying to sharpen your latent empathy with T'Pol or better yet, Soval?"

"Why?" Hoshi asked.

"Why not? It would be a waste to not try how far you can take it. I mean, my starting level was 'tree stump', you'd start already half-way there. Who knows what it could be good for in the future."

"Hm, maybe," Hoshi mused. "But for the moment I'm busy enough with the neuropressure training. When T'Pol is finished teaching me all the necessary postures I might start studying for an instructors license with a Vulcan healer, so I could practice it professionally."

"Thinking about quitting the day job?" Trip quipped.

"No, but you and me have to finance something like 60 or 70 years of retirement and with my work on the universal translator, I seem to have accidentally obsoleted my own job as a language teacher."

Trip laughed softly.

"T'Pau's eyebrow rose when she saw the elaborate arrangement. There were 3 bodies of water. One looked like a miniature version of the swimming pool, about a quarter of the size. Another one was richly ornamented with miniature trees, stones and other items, arranged in an aesthetically pleasing pattern and a third one was basically a large hole, 2 meters in diameter and 3 meters deep.

"What is the purpose of this arrangement?" she asked pointing at the wooden structure near the water hole.

"It's called a sauna," Charles explained. "Basically, you sit in it and then heat it up until you start sweating. For humans that helps cleaning the skin as the sweat washes contaminants out of it. You stay in there like 15 minutes and then go out and jump in that hole full of cold water. The heat'n and coolin' helps strengthening the immune system."

"So this is an installation strictly for human use then," she deduced.

"Hell no," Charles said. "T'Pol's in here every second day. Other Vulcans love it, too. They crank up the grav-platin' and turn up the heat to feel right at home."

"Why does it need so many storage facilities?"

"Gotta leave your clothes somewhere," Charles said, chuckling about the cluelessness of his guest.
"With all the steam in here they'd get soggy wet."

"The structure is perused without clothes?"

"Sure," Charles explained. "Would be kinda uncomfortable sweatin' like hell with a shirt on."

"But Vulcans do not sweat, usually." she noted.

"No, he said. "But Solan told me they dig the heat and then cooling off. Says it really cranks up their blood circulation. But must be some clan business. They only go in here alone or strictly separated by clan. It's always Clan A, then Clan B and so on. Sorry, if I'm not sayin' the names. Clan Suurok is the only one I can pronounce without droolin' all over myself."

"Fascinating," T'Pau said.

The Eldest Mother had not exaggerated when saying that the Vulcans on the station were more liberal and open to change than the average citizen on the home planet. Too unfortunate that all the flexible Vulcans seemed to be drawn to service with the humans, while all the unflexible ones stayed back on the home world – and she was one of them.

Then it hit her. Had the Eldest Mother not said that she was not the ideal candidate for First Minister, yet. Yes, her blunt approach had unsettled her, but she started to see T'Para's logic. Who would be better suited for the highest position in the planet's hierarchy than someone, who could lead by example? A flash of grim determination overcame her. The thought of letting go of her firmest beliefs and guidelines unsettled her and made her feel vulnerable, but she was determined to master the challenge and she would start by not only buying what Charles's father had called a 'swimsuit', but also one of the peculiar two-piece garments.

She calmly ate her salad and analyzed her situation. After the tour with kre'i Charles's father the day before she had retreated to one of the private meditation chambers to sort out the experiences of the day. Slowly the motives of the Eldest Mother became clear. Of course, she could have just explained her plans logically, but T'Pau began to see that the Eldest had expected that she would be much more inclined to face the challenges ahead, if she had come to the appropriate conclusions herself. She admired the wisdom of the clan's matriarch. She still rued the upset T'Para's blunt approach had caused, but she now felt stronger in the knowledge that she had overcome this challenging situation.

In the morning Charles's mother had accompanied her to Earth to buy the necessary clothing for bathing. Thankfully they had evaded any form of unsolicited attention except for a young female child, who had declared her ears aesthetically pleasing. She was now in possession of a bathing suit, a bathrobe and – as her guide had explained – a bikini. She could simply not make any sense of the garment. What was the logic behind covering the primary and secondary sex characteristics, the form and function of which every child knew after primary schooling, but leaving any other body part undefended and exposed? Any body deficiency would be in plain view. Maybe she should consult with kre'i T'Pol about the issue.

"Have you got the equipment?" she heard an Andorian say on an adjacent table. Several Andorian males were discussing rather loudly in the human language.

"Everything," the other said. "We can start tomorrow. It will be just like home on Andoria, Trok. The temperatures are like our winter, but more sun than we ever get in summer. These human have a wondrous planet."
"That will be the greatest excursion of them all. Thot's walk in Alaska will look like a march through the desert," a third one enthused.

T'Pau realized that the Andorians were planning a visit to one of Earths colder regions and in a spur of the moment she rose and walked over to the table of the Andorians.

"Excuse me warriors," she announced in flawless Andorian. "I was wondering if you would consent to my participation in your journey."

It was the first time she had tried her knowledge of the language of their former arch enemy on native speakers. She had started to learn the languages of all three other Coalition races after the first ever joint effort to stop the Rihanssu drone ship, knowing it would one day become an asset.

"Are you brave or are you foolish?" the Andorian named Trok asked and handed her a glass of Andorian Ale. She emptied the glass in one draught.

"I relish the challenge," she intoned the Andorian warrior motto, her voice hoarse from the burning sensation in her throat.

"You are a worthy companion," Trok hailed her antics in English. "Meet us at 0700 in the morning at airlock 7. We will bring your equipment, but make sure you have warm clothes. It will be an arduous challenge for a desert dweller!"

Packed in several layers of thick clothing, T'Pau marched through the desert that was made entirely of snow and ice, neither of which were known to any Vulcan except those who had ever been to Paan Mokar, Andoria or Earth.

Having told Charles and T'Pol about her plans to visit one of Earth's most hostile environments, both had made it clear that they questioned her judgment, but had not made any attempt at convincing her to back out of her plan. Instead Charles had insisted that she acquire enough protective clothing in several layers for added insulation. It appeared that he had overshot the goal as she started to feel body heat accumulate under the heavy coats. She quickly abandoned two jackets.

As they walked on, she noticed the flaw in her plan. The Andorians had planned a two day journey, following the path of a human explorer from 250 years ago, called Roald Amundsen, who was the first human to cross this hostile continent. But she had not thought about food. Andorians preferred meat and Trok, the leader of the expedition had killed several creatures called 'penguins' for sustenance. She would have to rely on a Vulcan's ability to go for days without food.

With a strange sense of achievement, she inspected her work. The primitive shelter called 'a tent' was easily assembled, if one was not required to wear thick gloves and several layers of clothing, which severely limited movement. Unfortunately she was required to wear both of those, but she had persisted. Seeing that the Andorians started to prepare the meat of the killed animals for consumption she retreated to her shelter.

Suddenly one of the Andorians crouched down before the still opened entrance of her tent and a flash of fear raced through her mind. Would he offer her some of the meat? How would he react to the inevitable refusal? Could she even afford to refuse?

To her utter astonishment the Andorian, Trok their leader, handed her a metallic bowl with salad
"Our menu is not to your liking," he said in human standard. "Eat fast before it freezes."

Unable to say a word due to the onslaught of grateful emotions running through her mind, T'Pau closed her eyes and gave him a grateful nod.

"You're one brave Vulcan," Trok said. "I'll call you when we are done with the meat. We serve Ale. It will give you warmth."

T'Pau woke up in a haze. Obviously the 15th ale must have been bad, the night before. Grabbing some of the snow and pressing it against her forehead, some of the throbbing pain subsided after a while. Since she could not remember going to bed, she deduced that she had either had managed the feat even without the use of her consciousness or her companions had carried her to safety.

Slightly unsteady she climbed out of the tent and was greeted by Trok with a visual manifestation of joy on his face.

"Good morning T'Pau," he said with a laugh. "I must admit you hold your drink well. Half my team is still out of it."

"You know my name?" she asked groggily.

"You told us and you also told us that you are THE T'Pau, but be assured, your secret is safe with us. We are honored that you chose to accompany us."

"Agreed," she groaned.

"Take this," Trok said and administered a hypospray that immediately alleviated the pain.

"Remind me not to drink Ale if my identity needs to be kept a secret," she declared dead-pan, which sent Trok into a hysterical fit of laughter.

It had taken three hours and many hypospray injections into blue individuals until the expedition team finally got away. Her instinctive reaction was to question the wisdom of inebriating oneself in a hostile environment, but since she had partaken in the folly, she had no moral ground to do so.

Walking on through the vast white nothingness the team was thrown into a state of alarm when Trok suddenly cried out loud.

The last thing T'Pau saw of the event was how Trok was swallowed by the ground.
Learning Experiences

Shaking off the first shock about Trok's disappearance T'Pau found herself in familiar territory – taking the lead. Having mistaken their intentions for a climbing tour on one of the continent's mountain ranges, a human Lieutenant Maywheather had given her a backpack with what he deemed necessary for the activity. Unwilling to spurn the gesture for diplomatic reasons she had taken the additional baggage with her. Now it would become a vital asset.

While she had never participated in such an activity, she had seen others on a specially built wall in the gym at the United Earth Embassy on Vulcan. Which meant there should be a harness used to tie oneself to the end of a rope, but before that she had to organize the situation.

"Stand back!" she ordered when some of the Andorians advanced on the opening in the ground that had swallowed Trok. "There may be more unstable ground."

She took out her communicator and hailed her contact at SOLCOM. "T'Pau to SOLCOM: medical emergency. I repeat: medical emergency!"

"SOLCOM, acknowledged. We have your coordinates. How many are injured."

"One," she reported calmly. "One crew member fell into a rift."

"We are dispatching a SR team. Stay where you are."

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"Grev, lay in course, half impulse," Hoshi ordered.

Hoshi felt bad for Trip. He was torn between trying to respect T'Para's wishes by granting T'Pau a maximum of freedom, but also had to make sure that nothing happened to her. And now she was taking out Buran to collect her and a group of Andorians from just about the most hostile environment Earth could offer.

T'Pol had told her about their time in the Forge an had described T'Pau as reckless and Hoshi began to see how she came to that conclusion. Walking off into the coldest climate on the whole planet was quite a strange idea. At least she didn't seem to be injured as, according to SOLCOM, it was her, who had summoned help.

Quite inappropriately for the situation, Hoshi felt an urge to giggle when she realized that she had been in command of ships more often than her Husband lately. Malcolm was caught up in organizing the security forces and with such a big station it was a monumental task. When he was not able to reach the ship in time, Hoshi had shoved off as acting captain.

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T'Pau checked the harness and the fastened rope one last time and got down to the ground. The bigger area of contact would relieve pressure on the potentially brittle snow covered ice. Slowly she began crawling forward towards the opening, while the Andorians kept the rope tightened, ready to yank her back if the ground gave way.

In mutual agreement the group had decided to start with the rescue effort. Even with an emergency shuttle start rescue forces would need at least 15 minutes to reach them at their remote position. As she neared the opening she could hear the groans of pain from the rift's bottom. That meant Trok
was both alive and conscious. Time was of essence.

Reaching the opening she saw that Trok was wedged in a depth of about 10 standard meters. His left arm was twisted in an unnatural position and a wound on his head released a small trickle of blood. Slowly she twisted over the edge of the rift until only the rope kept her from falling.

"Down, slowly!" she ordered and the Andorians complied, lowering her into the rift. She used her legs to direct herself towards the stricken companion. When she had reached him, she loudly ordered a stop.

"Can you feel and move your extremities?" she asked.

"Yes," he groaned, not quite able to give any more feedback.

"This will alleviate the pain," she said and administered a hypospray she had removed from one of his pockets, which had been unreachable for his uninjured arm. When the pained grimace faded from his face, she hoisted his arm around her neck and slung her left arm behind his legs to hoist him into a position in which he could cling to her.

"Up!"

She felt how she was slowly drawn up with the barely conscious Andorian, mainly stabilized by her left arm, close to her. She could hear the other Andorians groan under the strain of hoisting up two people, but she also heard human voices, deducing that rescue forces had meanwhile arrived. When her head appeared out of the opening, the Andorians let out whoops and cheers and T'Pau was rattled by a moment of panic as she feared the excitable Andorians could let go of the rope, but the four blue men and two women held the life-line firm in their hands. When she was out of the rift, she was lying on her back next to the opening and let Trok slowly roll to the side so he came to a stop next to her.

A team of Starfleet medics rushed to their side and a Denobulan Doctor started scanning the Andorian while the other Andorians enthusiastically celebrated the Vulcan.

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When the doors to sickbay opened, Feezal didn't even need to look. It was either one of the Andorians or the Vulcan woman, who had rescued him. With an impossibly wide grin she acknowledged that she had been right when a petite Vulcan lurked about the privacy screen.

"Come in, T'Pau," a groggy voice from behind it instructed and Feezal followed her.

"Just five minutes," she instructed. "Mr. Trok needs to rest."

Both patient and visitor acknowledged her instruction with a nod.

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"How are you?" T'Pau asked, worried by the fact that his arm was in a massive cast with screws that had actually been screwed into his arm.

"I've been better," Trok said, his antennae drooping back. "But I'll live. I owe you for the rest of my life. Whenever you need help..."

"With a whole planet taking orders from me, I do hope it will never come to that," T'Pau said softly. "But I do appreciate the sentiment."
"If only half the Vulcans are as brave as you, I'm glad we are not enemies anymore," Trok declared sincerely.

"Get well soon," she answered and took his offered uninjured hand. "If your tour here is finished, maybe you wish to consider a posting on Vulcan?"

"As much as I wished to, but your planet is too hot for me," the Andorian said. "As much as the Imperial Guard wished to make it look otherwise in the past. We are not even half as heat resistant as they made out. But I do appreciate the sentiment."

T'Pau raised an eyebrow to hide her amusement and stood to go.

"I will visit you again tomorrow," she said and left.

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Trip was lying on the floor face down, out cold.

At least that was, what T'Pol was considering a desirable situation while Hoshi worked her way through the instructed program of neuropressure ministrations.

"What the bloody hell was she thinking," Trip ranted. "Getting sloshed with a bunch of Andorians in the friggin' antarctic! They could have done god-knows-what to her?"

"Stop it!" T'Pol demanded, not missing the irony of being a Vulcan, who defends Andorians. "I know Mr. Trok. He would never allow something like that to happen. And there were two Andorian women with them. One of them didn't ingest any Ale. They would have defended her if needed."

"Still...," Trip started, but his rant ended in a wince when Hoshi pressed her thumbs forcefully into his back.

"Just shut up, Trip," she said, cutting off both him and T'Pol. Her annoyance was clearly showing. "It may not have been the smartest idea, but on that tour she did more to improve relations between Andoria and Vulcan than all diplomats put together. And now keep your irritating mouth shut and start breathing properly!"

"Hey!" Trip protested her blunt approach.

"Save it," Hoshi replied. "You're naked and I see no rank insignia. In here you are Trip and I have my thumbs on your off-switch. You decide. You either face plant the bench or you listen to T'Pol explaining the situation to you."

Trip was stunned into silence by the double-pronged berating.

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It had been an incredibly long day. Hungry and longing for some of his wife's marvelous cooking, Charles Tucker jr. shuffled into Cathryn's mess hall. His wife brought him the promised plate of pan fried catfish and placed two plates with pecan pie on his dinner plate. She tilted her head towards a table with a solitary person sitting at it. T'Pau sat at a remote table and looked like lazily stabbing away at a salad.

"May I?" he asked when he had walked over.
"Of course," T'Pau answered.

"Normally I shouldn't be able to see it, but for a Vulcan you look mighty troubled, honey," he said.

"I may have antagonized krei Charles," she confessed. "He was fairly disconsolate earlier today when he learned what had happened during our excursion."

"Well, getting' yourself wasted in an environment where you need all your senses wasn't exactly something you can challenge Einstein with," Charles noted.

"Indeed," she agreed morosely.

"But then, that's exactly how kids need to learn their lessons and Trip better get used to it, because I ain't got no time to wait 20 years on some pointy-eared grand kids."

"You wish him to learn to be indifferent if his future children engage in foolish activities?"

"If you prevent them from doing stupid things, they'll never learn. Did you learn something from drikin' the Ale?"

"Not much, except not to repeat the experience," T'Pau said.

"That's all, you need to know," Charles said. "Would you have learned the same if you didn't get drunk?"

"No," she admitted after thinking about it.

"I'm tellin' you something about your clansman," Charles continued. "As a kid Trip always loved to be at his grandparents house. They didn't make up so many rules as Cath and I. He loved tinkering with our hover cars, but we always forbade it, because these things can give you quite an electric shock. But he wouldn't listen and waited until he was at my folks."

T'Pau stared at him with rapt attention.

"His grandparents didn't have such problem with it. They allowed him to disassemble and reassemble the thing as much as he liked – until one day, when he was zapped so hard he peed his pants. Guess what, he never did that again and found himself something less electric to tinker with."

"I see the logic," T'Pau admitted. "Letting someone make the bad experience is more effective than just an unexplained prohibition."

"Now you got it," Charles said with a smile and handed her one of the plates with pecan pie.

"This looks like mostly sugar," she said.

"It's sweet," he agreed. "But T'Pol digs it a lot."

He grinned, observing how T'Pau carefully tried a first bite and soon let the second and a third follow.

"I am still concerned about krei Charles," T'Pau confessed.

"Don't worry, honey," Charles said with a chuckle. "Hoshi and T'Pol are setting him straight as we speak."
She raised an eyebrow at him and Charles started to wonder if T'Pol had a sister she never knew about. On T'Pol that particular eyebrow configuration meant, 'I'm asking your for clarification without actually asking you for clarification'.

"They meet every second evening in the spa, because Hoshi practices this neuropressure stuff on him. I'm sure there's a program for stress relief."

Charles nearly laughed when she dropped the spoon as if it was hot.

"T'Pol lets another female administer neuropressure to her mate?" T'Pau asked.

"Sure, she sits right next to them to make sure that Hoshi doesn't break her husband."

"This is unheard of. A Vulcan would never let another female touch her mate so intimately, much less one that wears as little clothing as is required for neuropressure."

"Th whole four of them are unheard of," Charles said with a chuckle. "I'm tellin' you; one day I'm gonna get a subspace message from Andoria sayin' that the four of them have married as a quad. The only reason that Malcolm isn't with them is because there's so much water in there."

"Why does T'Pol not practice with Hoshi herself and why not in the privacy of her quarters?" T'Pau asked, still visibly confused.

"She did at first, as far as I know, but her Vulcan muscles are too hard for a little thing like Hoshi, so T'Pol gave her a softer target."

"But the privacy of ones quarter would surely be safer?" T'Pau argued.

"Why?" Charles asked back. "The Spa is locked. Nobody can get in. And they're pragmatic people. They don't get much free time. So they combined their spa time with the neuropressure training."

*If a Vulcan's mind was mechanical, I'd be hearin' a lot of grinding noises from the gears turnin' right now,* Charles thought with a mental cackle. The poor confused girl before him was probably just realizing that Trip was in the Spa with two naked females.

Hoshi and Malcolm lay in their bunk, closely entangled, still basking in the bliss of a passionate bout of love-making.

"What's wrong love?" Malcolm asked. "You're awfully quite today."

"I had a bit of a spat with Trip," she admitted. "He got so hung up on not getting into trouble with the Eldest Mother that he became totally irrational over T'Pau's trip to the antarctic."

"You got to understand him," Malcolm argued. "T'Para left responsibility for the clan's most important member with him and T'Pau just trundled off to get wasted in an ice-desert. I'd have gotten anal about it, too. Only two things can instill the fear of god in me – a filled sink and the Eldest Mother."

Malcolm smiled when his statement got the response he had hoped for – a giggle.

"You're right," she said. "And he came around, but it still scared me. It was the second time that I realized what I would lose if this friendship broke."

"Second time?" he asked.
"The first time was, when he went ballistic on you during the trial on Vulcan."

"I didn't exactly make it easy for him, did I," Malcolm said, uneasily remembering that particular time. "But I think you shouldn't worry too much. I mean, you had a little dust-up, so what? You were both butt-naked in a spa together at the time, that should tell you something. I'd rather say it would be more unhealthy if there weren't any disagreements from time to time. I didn't have any real friends for most of my life, so I know the difference. There's not much that could damage this friendship."

He heard a sigh from Hoshi.

"I wish we wouldn't have to go back out in space," she said. "The thought of losing one of them is too much."

"I know, love," he said and soothingly caressed her face. "If it was for me, I wouldn't go out either, but we are the most experienced people Earth can muster. Trip and I had a talk lately. We both agreed that when this war is over, we call it quits."

"What will you do?" Hoshi asked.

"Depends on how good T'Pau is at counseling. I might become a swimming instructor," he quipped, basking in the sound of Hoshi's laughter.

"No seriously, you goof," she demanded with a playful pat on this chest.

"All four of us never had much chance to spend money, so whenever this war is over we all will have quite some of it squirreled away. Trip and I are thinking of setting up a business of some sort. Hell, if the last months are anything to go by, we're pretty good at setting up a space station."

"Hm, an own space station," Hoshi purred and slung her arm around his torso.

Soon both of them drifted off to sleep.

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T'Pau felt most uneasy. She had never worn anything but Vulcan robes and catsuits, so wearing as little as the bright red swimsuit she had procured with the help of krei Charles' mother was a strange sensation. She sat in the Spa, her feet dangling in the water of the small pool. The sensation of the unknown element was most interesting.

Earlier this morning Hoshi and Malcolm had provided her with the entrance code to the facility. Malcolm had not berated her for her excursion with the Andorians, but urged her to consider the standing of her krei with the Eldest Mother and not engage in any activities that could injure her.

Lazily she pedaled in the water, waiting for Hoshi – her swimming instructor.

When the door opened, Hoshi entered, wearing a bathrobe. Her own such garment hung from a hook on a nearby wall.

"Hi T'Pau," she heard her instructor greet informally. "How was the day?"

"Fairly uneventful," she replied. "I visited Trok in the infirmary and read the many reports that were relayed by the Vulcan Embassy. I also contacted krei Charles to express my apology for my behavior."
"No need to apologize," Hoshi said and T'Pau watched with interest when she removed the robe. The human woman wore absolutely nothing underneath. "It was a bit foolish, but in the end you've made a lot of new friends."

"Indeed," T'Pau said, slightly distracted. Obviously human females were little different from Vulcans. They lacked the visible spinal ridge and grew hair in at least one other body region than the top of the head. Apart from that – and the ears of course – there seemed to be no visible difference.

"Red looks good on you," Hoshi said in reference to her swimsuit and T'Pau felt a slight heat developing in her face. Having comments made on her appearance was still an unknown sensation.

She observed, how Hoshi made use of a wall mounted shower and jumped straight into the pool. The human female came to a stop in front of her.

"Are you ok?" Hoshi asked.

"I am," T'Pau acknowledged, waiting for further instructions.

"Then come in, it's only 1.20m. You can stand."

"Trip and Malcom were standing on the promenade deck, observing how a Vulcan runabout-crane lowered the last Tritanium support pillar in place. The internal skeleton for the Hammer Of War, the unofficial name for the first Molotok-class ship, was lowered into place.

"That's one bloody huge ship," Malcolm noted in appreciation.

"Crew of nearly 300," Trip supplied. "That'll teach them some lessons. If it was for me, we'd take this baby out only once to bust their asses and be done with it."

"You're preaching to the choir, Trip," Malcom said. "Hoshi's thoroughly sick of it and even I've had it, too. Would you have thought I'd ever get tired of shooting at things?"

"That reminds me," Trip mused. "I still need to apologize to Hoshi. Dang, she gave me a piece of her mind yesterday."

"She's quite a spunky one, isn't she?" Malcolm said with a grin.

"Hell, yeah," Trip agreed. "You guys coming round for dinner tonight?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

"We'll start to install the engine tomorrow," Trip noted pointing at the area where Engineering was going to be. "That thing's gonna run rings around everything we have."

"Doesn't look like a nimble design to me," Malcolm said. "Do you really think you can maneuver such a behemoth effectively?"

"You wait till you see her in action," Trip bragged. "That baby's gonna do a U-turn on a dime. T'Pol had a look into the navigation software they're coming up with. She said the maneuvering routines make Vulcan software look simplistic. This is the best of the best from four races. Those damn Rommies have no idea what they've gotten themselves into."

"Your word in god's ear," Malcolm said.
"Did your swimming lesson go well?" T'Pol asked.

"It was satisfactory," T'Pau said.

"Were you uncomfortable with the situation?"

"Only at first," T'Pau reported. "I have never been in the company of someone without clothing, much less a member of a different species, but the uneasiness subsided quite soon."

"How did you progress?"

"Hoshi seems to be convinced that I shall learn to swim most expeditiously. The necessary movements appeared somewhat chaotic and alien at first, but I believe that is because we never needed to develop methods of locomotion in water."

"Did you enjoy the activity?" T'Pol asked.

"I do not understand."

"There is no need to keep up false pretenses, T'Pau," T'Pol said. "Swimming elicits most agreeable emotions in me. Does it do the same for you?"

"It is an agreeable activity. It enhances the effect of Earth's lower gravity."

"Do you think you are prepared to attempt a mind meld with Malcolm?"

"I think I can perform an initial assessment. I would however prefer a private setting as I believe both Malcolm and myself will be affected in a way that should not necessarily be witnessed by outside parties."

"Specify," T'Pol demanded.

"We are dealing with a deep-seated fear. He will most likely express the associated emotions and I do believe that I will not be able to suppress the impact on me."

"In that case I would prefer to use Hoshi and Malcolm's quarters on Buran with Dr. Phlox on standby."

"Agreed," T'Pau said.

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She struggled, but it was in vain. The iron grip of the male had on her neck was too firm to escape it. With a helpless yelp she drew air into her lungs before her head was forcefully pushed into the water of the sink.

When the panic set in, she used her teeth to yank on the chain and pulled the plug, releasing the water. Her action earned her a nasty backhanded slap, before the sink was refilled and the procedure was repeated.

Fighting down the urge to kill her assailant, she forced herself to remember her swimming lesson with Hoshi and the associated positive emotions. After a long struggle she found herself in the Spa, slowly crossing the length of the small pool, changing direction as she reached the wall. The wet element engulfing her body felt surprisingly comfortable with only the disagreeable sensation of
wet cloth on her sensitive skin spoiling the experience to a degree.

She felt the iron grip closing around her neck again, but swam on, she would not allow him to dominate her again.

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Trip was charged as if he was going into battle. Never before had he seen his friend this helpless. Malcolm, deeply entrenched in a mind-meld with T'Pau was crying and screaming helplessly. Two rivers of tears ran down his face.

Hoshi, no longer able to endure the spectacle was crying as well and T'Pol tried to console her to the best of her abilities. He wasn't sure, but he was prepared to bet that all three of them questioned the wisdom of trying this procedure. Malcolm surely had some nasty emotions drawn out from wherever he had buried them.

T'Pau did not seem to fare much better. She was shaking badly. Trip had been alarmed when Soval performed a mind-meld on the comatose guard after the bombing of the Earth Embassy on Vulcan, but Soval's struggle back then was nothing in comparison to the havoc the mind-meld wreaked on the petite Vulcan the Eldest Mother had entrusted him with.

When the Vulcan started to release high-pitched yelps of terror, he was prepared to forcefully separate Malcolm and T'Pau, but the decision was taken off his hands when T'Pau ended the meld. Both she and Malcolm slumped to the ground.

Acting on instinct he rushed to the scene and enveloped T'Pau in a hug. Hoshi did the same with Malcolm. Only when he held a badly shaking T'Pau in his arms, Trip realized the situation, but the feeling of warmth resonating in the bond told him that T'Pol approved of his action.

"It's ok, you're safe with us," he said soothingly and noticed that T'Pau was actively clinging to him. He didn't dare try to imagine what she had just witnessed.

"I need to meditate," T'Pau struggled to say.

"I'll bring you to the meditation chamber," Trip declared and before allowing her to stand up, he hoisted her up in his arms and carried her out of the room.

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Trip entered the mission control room on Buran, looking for Hoshi. He had visited both Malcolm and T'Pau to make sure that none of them were adversely affected by the mind-meld. Both of them appeared well, but he wanted to make sure that Hoshi had overcome the situation, too.

"Hey, hon," he said. "How ya doing?"

"I'm fine, Trip," she said. "You won't believe, who just booked the Spa for 2 hours."

"Malcolm?" Trip asked in disbelief.

"He tried," Hoshi said with a giggle. "But T'Pau beat him to it."

Trip couldn't contain a chuckle. "What did you do?" he asked her.

"I gave the entrance code to both of them," Hoshi declared with a mischievous grin.

"You didn't, you little minx," Trip said, doubling over in laughter.
"Wanna bet?" Hoshi asked.

T'Pau lazily pedaled with her feet in the warm water of the richly ornamented bath tub. Krei T'Pol had indeed been right about the disagreeable effect of wet clothing on Vulcan skin. Entering the water without the garment was indeed a much more agreeable sensation and so was moving in free air without any clothing in general. While Vulcan had developed sonic showers to save water, she started to question the wisdom of completely eradicating the tradition of taking a bath. The experience was way too agreeable to be given up.

"I...I...I'm awfully sorry," a male voice stuttered and T'Pau looked up to spot a very confused Malcolm. "I thought the facility was unoccupied."

"It obviously isn't," T'Pau said, not feeling threatened by his presence. "Since your wife handles the booking of the facility, I doubt we were both cleared to use it by error."

"You mean to say, she set us up?" Malcolm asked.

"Obviously," T'Pau confirmed. "Both of us have issues to resolve in connection with this facility. It is only logical for her to try to motivate us to resolve them together."

"That little minx," Malcolm said.

"If you would disrobe, Malcolm," T'Pau said. "I doubt you would want to enter the bath in full uniform."

"No problem getting rid of the clothes," Malcolm said nervously shedding his uniform. "It's the 'entering the bath' part that terrifies me."

"That is what Hoshi wanted me to be here for," T'Pau analyzed and stood up to meet a very nervous and quite naked Malcolm at the stairs, which led into the bathtub.

"I take it your problem was shedding the swimsuit," Malcolm said, eying the water with suspicion.

"It still is," T'Pau confirmed. "But it is inconsequential in comparison to the leap of faith you have to take. Take my hand, Malcolm."

A badly shaking hand grabbed hers and Malcolm clutched to it like it was a life-line.

"Have faith Malcolm, I am with you," T'Pau declared and watched the human slowly lower himself into the water.
"Bloody Norah, it's just a bloody bathtub!" Malcolm berated himself mentally for his treacherous body, which gave away his terror by shaking and shivering. He realized that T'Pau had not let go of his hand, even though it was wet from ice-cold sweat rather than the hot water.

"We must look like quite the picture," he snorted, trying to hide his uneasiness behind British sarcasm. "Hoshi must be so pleased with herself. You couldn't have done it any better if you planned it."

"I believe she did," T'Pau said, slowly releasing his hand. "She correctly surmised that I would be curious and try the facility in private. You meanwhile are a fighter. After having been seen quite vulnerable during the mind-meld, she foresaw that you would try to face your fear in private, trying to battle it, rather than repeating the mind-meld."

"By setting us up in here together, she didn't exactly improve the privacy part, did she?" he said, satisfied that the shivering started to subside.

"I believe that to be part of her plan," T'Pau analyzed. "Realizing that bathing without any clothing is a most agreeable sensation is a finding that I could have made in private, yet I would have escaped the real issue – being in company of others while doing so. I doubt I would have taken this course of action if I had known that I would not be alone. And I would venture to say that you might have backed out of your intention to overcome your fear if it wasn't for my presence."

"She had us worked out quite well," Malcolm said with admiration.

"Indeed," she agreed. "In hindsight it is now clear why the facility was available for booking so shortly after the end of the day shift – a time which would logically see it in high demand.

"And incidentally just before their usual congregation," Malcolm added with a sly grin.

"Do you think she is trying to impart some sort of message on us?"

Malcolm threw his head back in laughter. "Why do people think that Vulcans don't have a sense of humor?"

"We rarely get the chance to demonstrate the talent," T'Pau explained dryly before fixing him with an inquisitive look. "How are you doing?"

"Better than I thought," Malcolm admitted. "Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea not to go in here alone. Once I am in the water, it's okay. The real test will be if I can get into it again."

"It can be easily tested." T'Pau said with a raised eyebrow.

"Righto…," Malcolm sighed and got out of the water.

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"Hostile contact on two-five-six mark three," the young Vulcan behind the tactical console reported calmly. "They are taking heavy fire."

"Bring us between them and the attacker," Lorian ordered with the calm of someone, who had commanded battles for almost a century. The distress call had reached them shortly after they
started their first patrol flight. With two Kumari class cruisers, the two NX-class vessels Soyuz and Endurance and four D'Kyr class frigates, Lorian had a well balanced squadron at hand to save the beleaguered ship from the Romulan sneak attack. The decision to attack with just two war birds seemed patently illogical.

"Fire at will," Lorian ordered without looking back at the tactical console. Despite his relative youth, Lieutenant Lorak did not need any reassurance by the captain. Without answering the captain's command, he released a full volley of nine torpedoes at full spread, garnished with several blasts from the phase cannons.

"That was way too easy," Lorian muttered when the warbird exploded in a huge fireball. "Direct fire at second hostile."

Lorak still did not see any necessity in verbally acknowledging the Captain's orders and just carried them out in a calm and calculated manner. Despite the same payload as in the first volley, the second warbird merely took damage as opposed to the first one.

"As we thought," Lorian analyzed calmly despite the ship being rocked by disruptor hits. "They have taken the cloaking device out of some of their ships. Concentrate on their propulsion systems Lieutenant."

"Their shields are down to twenty percent, our own holding at sixty," Lorak reported when a second volley of torpedoes impacted the Romulan vessel.

"What is the status of the ship in distress?" the captain asked.

"They are venting atmosphere. The Tar'hana has docked with them to provide help.

"Keep them shielded," Lorian instructed Karyn Archer, who expertly flew without the need of constant directions. For someone used to keeping an ailing ship out of weapons range of Kovalaan battle cruisers, creative evasive maneuvers were second nature.

"Hostile destroyed," Lorak reported when the second warbird self-destructed after a crippling hit from Endurance's phase cannons.

"Bloody hell," a shaking Malcolm swore as he lowered himself into the water for the fourth time. "How hard can it be to enter a bloody bath tub?"

"It is illogical to expect that you can overcome a life-long fear in just an hour," T'Pau said. "A promising start has been made however."

"Well, you seem to do quite well in comparison," Malcolm replied as the shaking subsided.

"A perk of being Vulcan," she explained dead-pan. "We are good at keeping up appearances. Just because you cannot see my uneasiness does not mean it doesn't exist."

"I can't really get my head around it," he confessed, trying to start a conversation to distract him from his fear. "What did the High Command gain from making Vulcans believe that taking off their clothes for a bath was deviant?"

"It was the most easily available false pretense to outlaw the ritual communal baths of Vulcan clans. I admit I did not make the connection until the Eldest Mother alerted me to it."
"And in which way were naked Vulcans taking a bath threatening the High Command exactly?" Malcolm asked with a perplexed look.

"It was not the activity that threatened them, it was the fact that the clan members met at all," T'Pau explained. "When wars among clans were eradicated after the time of awakening, it was no longer necessary for clan members to settle within the clan's territory. Vulcans of our time do settle where it is convenient. Over the centuries the communal baths at the height of summer became the last congregation of the whole clan in one place. By eliminating this ritual the High Command had a most powerful tool to diminish the influence and social cohesion of the clans."

"If it wasn't so dastardly, you could almost admire their cleverness," Malcolm said.

"Indeed," T'Pau agreed and an eyebrow rose when she saw three new entrants in the facility. Krei Charles, T'Pol and Hoshi stood near the pool. The humans wore most amused face expressions.

"I hope you've saved some hot water for us," Krei Charles stated, while he removed his bathrobe. The three joined them in the bath tub.

T'Pau saw Hoshi take the place next to Malcolm where she rewarded him with a kiss. "I'm so proud of you."

"Don't praise me. Thank the young lady over there. Without her I would probably have backed out."

"How fortuitous then that there has been a 'misunderstanding' with the bookings," T'Pau said dead-pan, much to the amusement of the three humans.

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*a week later...*

Trip sat in his office, pleased with the progress over the last week. The ship was progressing faster than expected. Especially the seemingly inexhaustible Vulcans were a real asset. They easily pulled 24 hour shifts without looking as much as mildly tired. If they could keep up this rate of progress, the ship could well be finished ahead of time, but 10 years in the engineering corps had taught him not to be too optimistic, something could always go wrong.

On the private front things seemed to progress nicely, too. With all the entertainment facilities on the Galena, life on Jupiter station made him almost forget that they were at war. He was really happy for Malcolm, who seemed to make good progress in his quest to overcome his fear of water. He and T'Pau had become 'training partners' in their joint quest to overcome their specific fears associated with using the bathing facilities, occasionally joined by Hoshi, who would have to take over 'Malcolm watch' once T'Pau returned to Vulcan. They would commandeer the facility an hour before the usual neuropressure training with Hoshi making sure to keep the spa free at the time and he and T'Pol would join later.

Progress for Malcolm was slow, but steady. He still had problems entering the bathtub without either T'Pau or Hoshi nearby and everything deeper than 1.20m was basically impossible. An attempt to jump into the 'water hole' after a sauna session had ended in a massive panic attack after his head had been submerged in the water. But at least he was now able to enter the spa without freaking out and given enough time, he was sure that one day Malcolm would prevail over the traumatic experiences of his childhood.

In T'Pau's case he was willing to bet a substantial sum that her problem didn't even exist anymore.
He was convinced that the petite leader of the High Council merely used 'getting used to it' and her status as the only companion beside Hoshi, whom Malcolm trusted enough to help him enter a bathtub, as an excuse to use the spa. Of course for someone supposed to out-Vulcan the rest of the planet it was somewhat difficult to admit to having taken a shining to skinny-dipping. The giveaway was T'Pau's all too eager acceptance of T'Pol's offer to use T'Les' former house – now their possession – for a light spot of private, naked sun-tanning. It was hardly an activity she could enjoy in the council chambers, although he wouldn't put anything past the spunky youngster. After all she wasn't supposed to go on a bender with a bunch of Andorians either.

She was also hardly the only Vulcan, who had discovered how much 'agreeable time' could be spent in a facility with several bodies of water. T'Len was a rocket in the big swimming pool, making the best Humans and Andorians look like lame ducks and she and Sonos were regular users of the Spa, as were Amanda and Terval and if rumors about unmistakable noises were any indication, the Eldest Mother need no longer wonder if the two regarded mating a part of their courtship. Not that he would have pegged Amanda for the celibate type anyway.

Of course Feezal and whoever happened to be her troubadour of the day were regular items on Hoshi's booking list, too. Trip started to wonder if he and T'Pol were the only ones, who hadn't done the nasty in the sauna yet. He could definitely scratch Malcolm and Hoshi off the list after the two of them had 'discreetly retired' to the sauna last night, completely forgetting that he and T'Pol were still there. Thankfully T'Pau had already left. He certainly wasn't going to complain about T'Pol's enthusiasm once they had reached their quarters, though.

Chuckling he directed his stray thoughts back on the documents before him, which mainly were engineering reports about the ship's production and several research projects dealing with improving Malcolm's newly evolved force-fields and the in-organic matter re-sequencer.

The beep of the communications console interrupted his thought process. Pushing the connection button, he was greeted by the face of Admiral Gardner.

"Admiral."

"Fleet Captain, you have your offspring incoming with a Kriosian ship in tow."

Trip felt a distinct uneasiness.

"They had a run-in with two Romulan warbirds and we want you to repair that ship. The Kriosians have so much Dilithium, it's coming out of their ears. We need to foster good relations with them, something I'm told you have a bit of a head start on."

"Why do they drag that thing here across half the galaxy," Trip asked. "We didn't exactly rebuild Salem One as a decoration."

"Tucker, First Monarch Kaitaama herself is on that ship," Gardner replied. "She was slated to arrive here a week ago for formal association talks between the Coalition and the Kriosian Empire. But that was before the Rommies decided to shoot at them. We can hardly park her on a remote outpost with someone as 'diplomatic' as Rear Admiral Zhukov."

"Archer's logs said that you had struck some cord with her. We need your help on this one. None of us knows their secret handshake," Gardner concluded bluntly.

"I'll do my best, Admiral," Trip sighed.

"See that you do. They'll arrive tomorrow," the Admiral said and terminated the connection.
"T'Pol's definitely gonna kill me," he groaned. "She's gonna kill me to death."

T'Pau walked into the spa and to her surprise she only found Hoshi in it. When she had hung up her discarded bathrobe, she used the shower and joined Hoshi in the hot water of the bathtub.

"Are the others not coming?" she asked.

"I don't think so," Hoshi answered and T'Pau wondered why she was amused about the absence of her friends. "Trip, T'Pol and Malcolm have a bit of an emergency session. During the second year of our mission Trip rescued a princess from two abductors – a very cute princess."

T'Pau raised her eyebrow in curiosity.

"Well, we never really got the truth out of him, but Malcolm said that when they found them, there was little doubt they had become very close for a time."

T'Pau thought about that for a moment. She had gotten to know Hoshi good enough to deduce that her innuendo meant that she was convinced that krei Charles had engaged in sexual relations with another female.

"And that female is now coming to Earth," she guessed.

"She is," Hoshi confirmed. "It all happened before Trip and T'Pol became close. There's no doubt about Trip. T'Pol trusts him enough to be my practice target for neuropressure. That's how devoted he is to her, but we don't know about Kaitaama. Rumor is that she really took a shining to him and they are thinking about ways to let her down gently without causing an inter-planetary incident."

"It appears Vulcans are not the only species, who are adept at keeping up false appearances," T'Pau remarked dryly. "Krei Charles obviously has a much more illustrious past than I thought. Malcolm is much less reserved than he usually appears and T'Pol is the most unusual Vulcan I have ever met. Only you seem to be one, who does not hide her true self, except perhaps your aversion to wearing clothes when not strictly necessary."

She was confused by Hoshi's silvery laughter. Obviously she was hiding an unexpected history, too.

"First of all," Hoshi said as she regained composure. "I'm pretty convinced you share that 'aversion', too. I think your problem to be in here without a swimsuit has been gone for days already."

T'Pau raised an amused eyebrow, but offered no comment.

"But you are wrong. I have quite an 'illustrious history' myself. Did Trip ever tell you that I was put on probation by Starfleet for breaking a superior officer's arm?"

"Certainly not," T'Pau said with interest. Listening to recollections of humans' past deeds had become a most interesting activity lately.

"Well, the official story that everyone except Malcolm, Trip and T'Pol believes in is that I ran a gambling scheme at the Academy. It wasn't strictly illegal, as gatherings were held only on weekends, but one of my superiors didn't like it and when we got into a fight I broke his arm."

T'Pau looked at the petite human female before her. Somehow it was hard to believe that the
always friendly Hoshi would run semi-legal gatherings for people to engage in games of chance for monetary gain. And despite her slender appearance she was supposed to be a vicious fighter, too.

"The notion 'official story' suggests that this recollection of events is not entirely true."

"It isn't," Hoshi said with a giggle. "The truth is, I kicked the raw stuffing out of my superior when he tried to feel up my behind while I was performing a striptease."

"What is a striptease?"

"It's a form of dance during which one undresses in a suggestive manner," Hoshi explained and T'Pau's eyebrows threatened to circumnavigate her head.

"You undressed in front of an audience?" she asked in disbelief and saw Hoshi nod with a grin.

"The truth is, I have an exhibitionist tendency. That's people, who like to be looked at. And I like being naked. It certainly was a popular feature at the gatherings. But, as I said – I like being looked at, not touched, when I'm naked. That particular superior did not understand that distinction."

T'Pau looked at Hoshi with curious interest.

"There you have it," Hoshi said with a smile. "My dark secret is revealed."

"It becomes obvious why you prefer the official version of events. Knowledge that you used to undress for an audience would severely damage your authority."

Hoshi nodded. "From today's point of view it sounds like a silly idea, but back then I had an absolute ball."

"Like going to the antarctic with a group of Andorians," T'Pau replied in dry amusement. Hoshi laughed.

"Are you really ok with this?" Trip asked, happy that T'Pol seemed less upset about the upcoming visit than he had feared. "What if she... I don't know... makes advances."

"That would be severely uncomfortable for you," T'Pol explained. "You know that our bond causes aversive reactions if one of us is approached by others with intimate intentions."

"Don't remind me," Trip groaned, replaying the incident with a young civilian engineer, who didn't know that he was taken. Her blatant flirting had upset him badly. Her attention had made him physically sick and it had been a major pain in the back-side to let her down gently. And now it was the same all over again only that this time the woman would be a queen and they couldn't really afford to upset her.

Sighing, Trip sank down on his chair. "Hell, guess I'll just have to ride it out. It's not like I'm completely blameless in this. But one thing is clear. If I'm forced to choose between upsetting her or upsetting you, she won't like my answer."

"Neither would she like mine, if that decision changes," T'Pol answered hotly and Malcolm jumped over and took her hand.

"Calm down, T'Pol," he said soothingly, thinking calming thoughts. Their touch-telepathic contact allowed him to influence her at least slightly.
"Thank you, Malcolm," she said after regaining her composure. "I apologize."

"Mal, as long as she's here I want to have either you, Hoshi or T'Pau to stay with T'Pol at all times," Trip said. "It'll be hard enough to turn her down without diplomatic consequences. I don't want T'Pol to kill someone on top of it."

"Discovered a sweet tooth?" a voice said and T'Pau took her concentration off the piece of pecan pie before her. On the opposite side of the table sat krei Charles' father.

"I admit, although unhealthy, it is a most agreeable dish," she said.

"So, have you enjoyed your time here?" he asked.

"It was a most enlightening experience. The thought of my stay ending is actually quite disagreeable."

"You're the head of government, you could always decree to have your stay extended," he noted.

"My fellow clansmen have already had taken too much of their time solely for accommodating me. I do not wish to further impose on their hospitality. I have mastered the Eldest's challenges. It is time to return to Vulcan."

"Have you really mastered all challenges?" he asked. "I'd say you missed the most important one."

"I do not understand," she said, putting the fork down. Krei Charles' father remained a mystery to her. He used a sort of accent that made him hard to understand and by what she had learned about humans, that particular accent was associated with stereotypes of lacking intelligence and social skills, but he seemed to be a most intelligent individual.

"Well, how do you feel about going back, honey?" he asked.

"I do not wish to," she admitted after thinking about it. "The Eldest Mother challenged me to find my own identity and learn about humans, but the more I respect her wishes, the less I feel that her intention is being met."

"You'd rather be drinking with some Andorians on a foolish tour rather than meeting Ambassadors and petitioners all day. You think it is more than enough to decide on the lunch menu rather than deciding where the fleet goes," he claimed.

Thinking about it, she realized that he was right.

"Indeed."

"Well, honey, have you ever considered that this is what the Eldest Mother wanted you to find out? That you're not quite ready yet to lead the whole damn planet?"

"The Eldest used a similar logic."

"You look quite a deal younger than T'Pol, honey. And T'Pol is a young woman by human standards. For all I know about Vulcans, you could still be a teenager."

"I am thirty-three," she admitted. Considering that the older Charles was a clansman, it was not unseemly to divulge that information. "By Vulcan standards I have still seven years left until I reach full maturity."
"And they pressure you into leadin' the whole damn planet," she heard him say and saw an expression of genuine concern on his face. "Wouldn't it be better to use those seven years to do all the things that will be considered taboo once you're an adult?"

"I do not know if this will be possible," she admitted. "I grew up in the desert, far from civilization. I never received formal schooling. I have not learned any profession. If I were to depart from the High Council I would not have any means to provide for myself."

"Leave the providing to the four love birds," he dismissed her sentiment. "They all like ya a lot, as do my wife and me. That's six people lookin' out for ya. Wouldn't you think it was somewhat more logical to ditch that job o' yours and catch up on that lack of schooling?"

"I admit it is a viable alternative," she said, looking at this aging human with growing respect. Her mind ached at the thought of never having had such a considerate parent.

"I don't know your Eldest Mother," he explained. "But Trip thinks the world of her. If she is half as wise as Trip makes her out to be, she didn't send you here to become a better leader. She sent you here to find out that you shouldn't be leadin' yet in the first place."

"I begin to understand that," T'Pau said and following an impulse, she took his hand.

The gray-haired human smiled at her.

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"So you have finally realized child," the Eldest Mother said and T'Pau looked at the view screen with interest. She was sitting in her guest quarters on the ship called Fairbanks.

"Will it not diminish the standing of our clan if I resign?" T'Pau asked.

"Do not concern yourself with the standing of our clan," the matriarch demanded. "This is no longer a matter of holding power. The only thing at stake is your well-being, T'Pau-kan. Soval is the preferred candidate to follow you and his application is backed by several clans. He is the Vulcan with most experience in inter-species cooperation. You child, need to find your own identity. You rightly said that making up leeway on missed education is important. Charles, his parents, T'Pol and Lorian's En'ahr'at will support you."

"I am not comfortable imposing on their hospitality," T'Pau.

"Have you ever made the effort to talk to them about it?" T'Para admonished her. "Charles and T'Pol have offered to undergo a human ritual called adoption, which would legally declare them your parents. They consider your well-being with the same priority as if you were their child."

"I did not know that," T'Pau admitted.

"I do not think a formal ritual is necessary. You are less than a decade away from maturity. I did however consent to their petition to become your En'ahr'at."

"A most agreeable development," T'Pau conceded. "I have developed a great respect for them and kre'i Charles' parents."

"Then use the opportunity you are given, child," the Eldest demanded. "One day you will be asked to assume the post of First Minister again. Use the time to prepare yourself for that day."

"As you wish, Eldest Mother."
Trip and T'Pol were hunched over the plans of the engine assembly, when the doors to his office opened. He looked back to see T'Pau enter. He turned around to greet her and to his surprise...

She hugged him.
"Someone had a talk with the Eldest Mother," Trip said to T'Pol looking at her for help. He saw T'Pol hinting him to return the hug and he gently slung his arms around T'Pau. They stood for several seconds before she stepped out of his embrace.

"I have decided to resign from my post. I have come to the conclusion that I am not yet ready for this responsibility... with a little help."

"Leave it to dad to make you see reason," Trip said with a satisfied grin.

"You knew?" she asked.

"No, but I suspected. From the day he met you he was convinced that you are way too young for what you're doing. It was only a matter of time that he would talk to you about it. My parents love you to bits, honey."

"I also have affection for them ... and you," she admitted.

"Aw, that's sweet honey," he said, taking her hand. "And before you start that 'imposing on our hospitality' talk again – you're not imposing, get it?"

She nodded with as much of a sheepish expression a Vulcan could muster – a raised eyebrow.

"Will you need to go back to Vulcan to hand over your job?" he asked.

"Yes, I will leave in five hours and return within the week."

"You may deposit your belongings in our home on Vulcan," T'Pol offered and gave her a small PADD with the access codes.

"There won't be much to deposit," T'Pau admitted. "I grew up in the desert."

"Don't worry, honey, we're gonna change that when you're back," Trip said with a grin and planted a small kiss on the tip of her nose. He nearly started laughing about the pronounced greenish blush that crept up her cheeks.

T'Pol's 'giggle-brow' went far north.

the next day...

Trip fidgeted. Standing in front of the airlock was hardly an activity worthy of being nervous, but this wasn't just some dignitary passing by. On the ship that was currently docking with the station was the queen of a whole Empire, a queen he had banged the brains out of in a swamp. It sounded so ridiculous, one couldn't make it up. And T'Pol suffered, so much was obvious.

He looked back at Malcolm and Hoshi, who flanked T'Pol. She hid it well, but he could see that T'Pol felt threatened and he could also see the barely hidden look of reproach on Malcolm's face. Hoshi tried to give him an encouraging smile, but he knew that she also was less than pleased with the emotional conundrum he had put T'Pol into.

While he could understand their misgivings, Trip also felt wrongly accused. It wasn't as if T'Pol
had given away any sign at the time that she was interested in him, in fact it would take another
two damn years until she finally would acknowledge that she loved him. And what was he
supposed to do? He had gone two years without at the time, his girlfriend had dumped him, heck
he had had all the right in the world to go to town when Kaitaama ditched the dress. Hoshi had
gotten laid way before that – on Risa.

But it didn't change the fact that the very same woman would soon meet them and his wife was
suffering. He hated life sometimes.

While Trip was still mentally ranting about the situation he had gotten them into, the airlock
pressurized and a slender figure in an elaborate dress darted out, clinging to him in a tight hug.

"I was so scared," she sobbed, completely lost in fear and self-pity. "If your people had not come to
our rescue..."

The rest was just a blur. He heard a growl from behind, clearly indicating that T'Pol was less than
appreciative of the intimate attention Kaitaama had afforded him. He pushed their guest away as
gently as he could in his panic and prepared to present himself as a target for T'Pol's wrath, rather
than letting her kill their royal visitor, but all he saw was T'Pol sinking to the ground – nerve-
pinched by a very fiercely scowling Malcolm.

He rushed over and caught T'Pol's body. Malcolm had been ready to do the same, but he beat him
to it. Without a word Trip ran off towards sickbay with the limp body of his wife in his arms.

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"She desires him, does she not?" Kaitaama stated the obvious as she saw her one-time lover run off
with the unconscious female clutched to his chest. Although the female had changed her
appearance, mainly the longer hair, she had immediately recognized her as the one, who had so
fiercely glared at her when they were found in the swamp.

"She's his wife," the clearly displeased human, who had incapacitated the female, replied.

Kaitaama sank to the ground, sliding down the wall. Her face was still tear-stained, but she also felt
a great relief. The humans were not her subjects, so she did not have to keep up appearances. If
anything, those creatures seemed to be her guardian angels.

"Are you ok?" the human female, who seemed to be attached to the scowling male, asked.

"I have spent the last four days thinking of a way to let him know that we can never be together,"
Kaitaama admitted. "I still love him dearly, but we can never..."

Her sentence was cut short by hysterical laughter from the two humans. Looking at them in
confusion for a moment, Kaitaama started laughing, too. It was good to be allowed this lapse in her
royal appearance. In a mix of tears and laughter she accepted the female's hand, which was offered
to help her stand up.

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the next day...

Trip rubbed his temple. His dear wife had woken up after Malcolm's nerve-pinched and instead of
retaliating against him, she had decided to go into a Vulcan style giggle fit. She was still mental-
laughing through their bond. As much as he liked to hear the sound in his mind, the fact that T'Pol
seemed unable to stop was making him slightly uncomfortable. Having been told by Hoshi and
Malcolm that both Trip and the newly minted queen of Krios Prime had been drawing up plans to let each other down gently had sent T'Pol into an almost delirious joy and amusement.

He sent her a mental image of a crashed shuttlepod, reminding her that he was trying to pilot a Mark-V without killing another planet's royalty in the process.

Forgive me Ashayam, she sent amid mental giggles. The relief of hearing the news is taxing my ability to control myself. I will make up for it."

Feeling frisky he sent her a picture of the sauna in the spa.

*Meet me there at the usual time,* came her clearly aroused bond-reply. *We are still to use the facility for an intimate encounter. This will change tonight, Ashayam.*

He sent back an image of a heart – his usual reply for 'I love you'.

*Talk to her,* T'Pol instructed. A serious undertone returned to her mental voice. *I cannot begin to imagine the hardship of giving you up, despite her obvious affection for you.*

He sent the mental image of a heart again. T'Pol's affection was resonating in his mind.

Somehow managing to keep enough concentration on the task while having a mental talk with T'Pol he set down the shuttlepod in a park in Japan that Hoshi had suggested. This being the middle of winter the air was chilly but fresh. The landscape was covered with snow.

He helped his passenger out of the hatch. She was clad in a thick coat, made of synthetic fur. She took his hand and stepped out.

He offered his arm and she put her gloved hand in the crook of his elbow.

"We're quite the couple," he said as they slowly started to walk. "So basically we've both been thinking up ways to let each other down with minimum hurt."

"I will not lie to you Trip," she said, putting her hands on his chest. "I still love you and I will cherish those few days with you for the remainder of my life. But I am first monarch now and I have to accept my people's will."

"Guess you weren't able to change all the rules then," he said, alluding to their parting words.

"I knew you would never come back," she said and he could hear the sadness in her voice. "And even if you had, Krios would never have accepted an off-worlder. And your wife – now I know why she looked at me so furiously when your people found us. She desired you."

"I never meant to hurt you," he said sincerely. "Had I known that you would..."

She silenced him by planting a kiss on his cheek.

"You have not hurt me. You have given me memories that I will cherish for life. I would not be here now, discussing an alliance with your people if it wasn't for you. You have saved me and you showed me a gentleness that is unknown in our world."

He looked at her, not realizing he had raised an eyebrow, T'Pol style.

"Kriosian men are... unimaginative," she said with a giggle. "My royal consort is still learning new things. Do you think they will let me access appropriate sections of your database?"
Trip started laughing.

"Don't worry. I'll prepare something for your royal consort," he forced out amid chuckles.

He stopped and put his hands on Kaitaama's shoulders. "So there won't be a diplomatic incident then?"

"No," she replied, slinging her arms around him. "Even if we cannot be together, I would wish very much that we could stay good friends."

"Sure thing," he said with a smile and hugged her tightly. They were standing for several moments, embracing each other, before she took his arm again. She directed them back toward the shuttle. She obviously wasn't very fond of snow.

"So, are you thinking about joining the coalition?" he asked.

"That would be too early," she said. "My people are slow to accept change. But I am trying to reach a compromise. Our deuterium and dilithium resources in exchange for protection. My people will see it as a simple trade."

"Well, you've seen what we're up against," he said. "Your people need to understand that the Romulans aren't muckin' about."

"Indeed," she said as they reached the shuttle.

"Let's show you a bit more of the planet and then get back to repair your ship," he said, holding out his hand to help her back into the shuttlepod. "I'm happy we could talk things out."

"Likewise," she said and planted a kiss on his cheek. "Show me some warmer places."

Trip took the shuttle in the air and laid in a course towards Florida. If she wanted to learn about Earth, she should as well see the scars the planet had taken and what it meant to be under attack. And it was definitely warmer than Japan in the winter.

"They didn't really remember we were coming too, did they?" Malcolm said as he climbed into the bathtub, his whole body shaking from fear. Fairly unmistakable noises could be heard from within the sauna. Who would have thought that T'Pol was so vocal?

"It's not like we paid much attention a few days ago," Hoshi giggled, holding on to the badly shaking hand of her husband, while mentally recollecting how she had seduced Malcolm in the sauna and taken him on the spot a few days ago.

Tell me husband! Is my derrière better than hers?

"Oh my god!" Hoshi whispered, barely able to hold her laugh. She did of course know that T'Pol had found out what an exhilarating experience anal sex was due to the Vulcan physiology, but she had not known that T'Pol was so vocal and blunt about it.

"Your ass is best darlin'"

"Then use it. Your performance is not at one-hundred percent, husband! Harder! Faster!"

"G-good to see this whole Kriosian thing pass without a major crisis though," Malcolm stuttered – his face beet red in abashment. He distracted himself from his shivering by gently kneading
"Hoshi's breasts.

"I'm feeling bad for her," Hoshi said, puffing out her chest to give him better access. "It's not hard to see that she still has it bad for him."

"She takes it quite well, though," he said gently massaging Hoshi's bust as the shaking subsided.

_Husband, my vision is still intact, you must strive to take me harder!

Both Malcolm and Hoshi couldn't hold their laughter back.

"You better be prepared to do something about making me horny, stud," Hoshi said in a husky voice once they had calmed down and rubbed her body along his. "I've always dreamed of doing it in an onsen.

Without much delay Malcolm gently entered her and the fireworks started.

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Trip observed the firing-up of the Kriosian engine, more than just a little pleased with himself and his crew. His team, made up of humans and Vulcans with a few Andorians thrown in for added flavor had worked a miracle. While Kaitaama was busy haggling with politicians, her ship started to look like new – well at least on the inside. She would have to renew the paint job at home.

He chuckled, recollecting the events of the day before. To say T'Pol was enthusiastic was an understatement. They might have been late to make love in the sauna, but they had more than made up for it. And to add to the hilarity of the moment they had found Hoshi and Malcolm wildly doing each other in the spa when they had finally come out of the sauna. Leave it to Hoshi to find ways of making Malcolm love the water.

"Hey boss, you have that goofy grin again," Anna taunted, wiping her oil stained hands on a cloth. "Care to tell me what this is all about?"

"You just keep guessing," he shot back and checked the output on his monitor.

"Time's up, boss," Anna said, looking at her watch. "You've been in here for twelve hours and before I have your wife threatening to kick my ass again,... Make yourself scarce."

"She didn't!" Trip protested, not very comforted by the thought of T'Pol going around threatening other officers.

"No she didn't," Anna said, putting her hand on his shoulder. "But she made it clear that she wants us to keep track of how long you enjoy doing your old job and none of us wants to find out what it means to make Commander T'Pol angry. Your shift's been over two hours ago, so get the hell out of here. If I remember your schedule right, you were supposed to meet Lieutenant-Commander Sato ten minutes ago."

"The things you do for the safety of your people," Trip sighed and threw his hands up in the air theatrically, but his grin gave him away.

He heard Anna's giggle as he left.

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Trip walked into Malcolm and Hoshi's quarters on Buran and nearly doubled over in laughter.
When Hoshi had asked back about her visitors identity after he pressed the door bell, he knew she was probably not fully clothed, but when he entered he found Hoshi lying on the bed, stark naked, reading a book.

"You're the dream wife, hon," he said cackling. "No endless shopping for clothes with you."

"C'mere," Hoshi ordered, putting the book aside.

He walked over. Hoshi grabbed his collar, dragged him down and planted a kiss on him.

"You've done well, buddy," she said releasing him.

"Do I get to know what exactly I'm praised for?" Trip said stumbling back while Hoshi sat up on the bed.

"Make yourself at home," Hoshi said and tilted her head towards the beer mugs on Malcolm's desk.

"Want one, too?" he asked and when Hoshi nodded, he filled two of them.

"K, hon," he said sitting down in one of their desk chairs having brought her a mug. "I don't think you called me here to show me how lucky Malcolm is to come home everyday to that gorgeous view," he ventured pointing his mug at her naked body. Only now he realized that she had shaved her most private part. She definitely had had some light fur down there the day before.

Hoshi giggled and he saw her blush slightly. For all her brazenness he had quickly realized that Hoshi loved being complimented on her looks and harvesting compliments with a body like that wasn't really hard. She could almost compete with T'Pol – almost.

"First of all, the kiss was for you handling Kaitaama without hurting her or T'Pol," Hoshi said and Trip had to suppress a chuckle about the 'foam beard' she was sporting after taking a swig from the mug. If the way she sat however was any indication, he couldn't quite decide if it was her face she wanted him to look at. He had gotten into a habit of enjoying stealing a few appreciative looks at her naked frame and the way she presented herself made him think that that was exactly what she had in mind. In absence of any averse bond reactions, he reasoned that she did it solely for being looked at.

"You must have missed the bit about Malcolm having to nerve-pinch her," Trip answered and his mood got a bit more serious.

"That was pre-arranged," Hoshi admitted. "We had discussed including Terval in the welcome party, but Malcolm was sure he could handle T'Pol in case the bond-reflexes kicked in."

"She knew this could happen?" he asked.

"She was actually pretty sure it would," Hoshi confirmed. "Starfleet insisted that as the second SOLCOM captain she must be there, so we made a backup plan."

"Shit," Trip swore. "I would've liked to spare her that."

"You can't fight nature," Hoshi said and started to grin mischievously. "By her heart she knew that nothing's gonna happen, but the Vulcan instinct is still there. I'd say you more than kissed and made up for it last night, even though by the sound of it, it took you too long to 'fuck her blind'."

"Says the one we found bent over the deck chair begging for more," Trip shot back, nearly laughing about Hoshi's massive blush when she realized that Trip and T'Pol knew about her
amorous adventure with Malcolm.

"Trip," she said after a while, quite somber after their mutual needling about each others intimate encounters. "Malcolm and I had a talk, I've talked to T'Pol about it, too. We all have squirreled away lots of money over the years. It only was a joke of Malcolm at first, but the more I think of it, the more sense it makes."

"Well currently you make none, honey" Trip said downing the rest of his beer. "What are you trying to tell me."

"When this war is over, we want to call it quits as far as active duty is concerned. And if anything happens to either of us..."

"We'll look out for each other, hon," he reassured her.

"We want to build our own space station," Hoshi stated bluntly. "And we want you to be the captain of it."

Trip, having refilled his mug fell down back on the chair heavily, looking at her.

"That's...err...well, unexpected," he stammered in surprise.

"First time I've seen you speechless and I thought these would do the trick," Hoshi answered with a grin jokingly lifting her breasts with her hands. The door hissed open in the background.

"That works jolly well on me, love, but he's having a different model in mind," Malcolm quipped entering their quarters, greeting Trip with a friendly pat on the back and Hoshi with a searing kiss.

"Is she always like that?" Trip asked, chuckling about Hoshi’s antics.

"Have you never wondered why, unlike you, I have no trouble ending my shift when it actually ends?" Malcolm replied drily, filling his mug from the wall-mounted keg.

"I get the idea." Trip conceded with a chuckle. "Should I leave you to whatever happens next?"

"Have you gotten an answer out of him yet, love?" Malcolm asked Hoshi, commandeering the second desk chair.

"Not yet," Hoshi admitted.

"You're serious about this station business, aren't you?" Trip asked, looking at Malcolm, ignoring Hoshi's playfulness for the moment.

"We've done it twice now mate," Malcolm reasoned in reference to their rebuilding of Salem One and Jupiter Station. "Next time we'd be doing it for our own good, preferably with no war going on."

"And enough space for Hoshi where clothing is optional," Trip quipped, laughing at her deep blush.

"I won't complain," Malcolm declared cackling, clinking mugs with him.

"Hell, I hope she rubs off on T'Pol," Trip shot back and they all started laughing.

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Charles Tucker jr. pushed the button once the connection was finally established. Their connection time would be very limited, but he had looked forward to speaking to the second Vulcan he had taken to his heart. Who would have thought that one day he would have two aliens in his family and both would be so dear to him.

"Hi there, honey, how yer doin'?" he drawled when the face of T'Pau appeared on his screen.

"I am well, grandfather," she said, trying the appropriate appellation for the first time. "I presume the same applies to my En'ahr'at?"

"They're all fine, hon, don' worry. How's the job transfer going?"

"As expected, Soval was elected to be my successor," she reported. "We have started the process of passing responsibilities."

"When are ye coming back, hon?"

"I shall leave Vulcan tomorrow."

"Means you're back by Friday," he said with a smile. "Cath will have a field day with 'at. She's come up with a mushroom risotto she wants you to try. We're takin' you home for the weekend but it's damn cold, so if you've got any jackets left from your tour with the Andorians..."

"I am sure Trok can advise me on preparing for the visit."

"Y'kow what honey?" he replied, barely able to contain his glee. "Why don't we invite your Trok along?"

"He is not my property," she replied hotly, eliciting a wide grin from the human.

"I'll let him know that he's spendin' the weekend on Earth," he said smiling.

T'Pau severed the connection, ashamed by her emotional reaction, but also strangely invigorated by the thought of Trok accompanying her on her second visit to Earth. It would be slightly more accommodating than the antarctic this time.

"It's not like she's new," Trip said. "But she's good to get you home."

"Do all humans refer to their ships as women?" Kaitaama asked.

"Only the pretty ones," he answered with a boyish grin. Kaitaama slung her arms around him.

"It is much harder to say goodbye this time," she said, her voice breaking.

"We'll stay in touch honey," he said, embracing her gently. "We're now the ones protecting your planet and we mean it. We will not let you down."

"Until then my royal consort has some learning to do," she quipped amid tears, tapping the PADD in her pocket that he had given her.

"He looks like a nice guy," Trip said, remembering the picture of the muscular Kriosian she had shown him. "He'll do his best."

"He will never be you," she whispered in tears and after planting a hot kiss on him she disappeared
through the airlock, leaving him behind.

He sank to the ground.

"Why am I hurting people like that?" he demanded of nobody in particular and broke down crying helplessly as emotions bottled up for many months broke through his weakened defenses.

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"It's worse than you thought, T'Pol. It looks like he's completely losing it," Malcolm whispered.

"Zap him and off to sickbay," Hoshi whispered back.

"I will carry him," T'Pol added her whispered demand.

"We both got a penchant for living another day T'Pol, we won't compete you on that," Malcolm whispered sarcastically before she darted out of their hiding place to render Trip unconscious with a nerve pinch.

"And we've all been adding to it," Hoshi said bitterly in a breaking voice as Trip slumped to the ground.
"T'Pol was looking at Phlox, digesting his diagnosis – acute exhaustion coupled to a case of post traumatic stress disorder of yet unknown severity. How was that possible? Yes, he had worked long hours, like he always did when his mind was in turmoil, but she had ordered Lieutenant-Commander Hess in no uncertain terms to make sure he did end his shift no longer than an hour or two later than expected - and it had worked. How could he still be so exhausted that he suffered an emotional breakdown? Currently the only chance to answer her question was whatever Malcolm was trying to find in the station's log. He had commandeered one of Phlox's consoles for the purpose.

"Well, doctor," she heard Malcolm say moments later, with no little amount of sarcasm. "I believe I have found our answer."

She looked at him expectantly, as did Phlox.

"I take it Trip's smart-arse quips that they can carry the furniture out of your quarters without you waking up is more than just a joke?" he asked her.

"I have a very deep REM sleep," she admitted.

"And since we are currently in a low stress environment, you sleep longer than usual in exchange for less necessity to meditate," he stated.

"Indeed," T'Pol answered and the likely answer to the mystery started to appear in her mind.

"Well," Malcolm said and pointed to the security log analysis. "They didn't carry out any of your belongings, but your dear husband was quite able to leave your quarters for a light spot of late-night working on more than one occasion. That explains why we are ahead of schedule despite the Kriosian interruption."

"And it explains why on several occasions he was awake before me, which is fairly uncommon. He served me breakfast in our quarters on those occasions, which I interpreted as just additional romantic effort to keep the equilibrium in our bond while our... royal guest was still aboard."

"He didn't go to sleep in the first place in those cases. How can a brilliant engineer still be that stupid?" Malcolm said and she could sense the anger bottle up inside him by the way he drove his right fist in the palm of his left hand before asking her the next question. " Couldn't you have noticed his fatigue?"

"Captain Tucker is very adept at hiding such things," Phlox contributed. "It is almost invisible from the outside. To find such information, T'Pol would have to perform quite a noticeable mental probing."

"One he would notice," she continued. "Such action would almost inevitably create distrust and disturbances in the bond and it is difficult enough to balance as it is."

"You have all gone without more than a day of shore leave since before Corridan, have you not?" Phlox asked.

"We had a few days on Vulcan after the Tolaris trial," Malcolm confirmed. "The crew takes turns for a few days off now and then, but for the line officers the opportunity never came up. Hoshi and I have been down to San Francisco twice for an evening."
'That means you have spent months in highly stressful operations. The horror on Corridan, rebuilding Salem One after cleaning out dozens of corpses, deadly fights with Romulans, the aftermath of the Jupiter station bombing. All within the space of a few months. For a space station we have most impressive recreational facilities, but none of them are designed to help you cope with the things you've seen. More than forty crew members sought therapeutic help after Corridan, but not a single line-officer except Lieutenant-Commander Sato," Phlox recounted.

"We weren't commissioned to be wussies," Malcolm snorted and for the first time in a long time T'Pol saw Phlox frown.

"With all due respect, Captain, but that is probably the stupidest thing I've heard in a long time. You were commissioned to be capable officers that might have to make live-and-death decisions, not some emotionless robots, who brush atrocities, like the ones you have seen, aside as mere details."

"He's right," Hoshi interrupted and now being alerted to it, T'Pol could hear the fatigue in Hoshi's voice. She was sitting next to Trip's biobed. "I could definitely use a few days off and a chance to talk about things somewhere where the air hasn't been recycled a few dozen times."

"Did you not say you are ahead of schedule?" Phlox asked.

"We are," Malcolm confirmed.

"In that case I would suggest the four of you leave the station for at least a week. Especially Captain Tucker will need a close friend to talk to, one who does not judge him for his mood swings, which will occur frequently during the next few days."

"Will be quite difficult to find a place that's quite enough at the height of snow season," Malcolm though aloud. "Maybe we should try the southern hemisphere then. You don't happen to own a remote tropical island somewhere, doctor?"

T'Pol began to see the wisdom of Phlox's suggestion. Hoshi sounded tired and Malcolm had expressed his biting sarcasm a lot more frequently lately. Trip's condition was obvious. But what surprised her most was the sudden unnaturally large grin on Phlox's face.

"I do not own such an island," he said. "But apparently Starfleet does, courtesy of the take-over of Advanced Propulsion Inc."

"That's a joke right?" Malcolm asked and his disbelief was obvious.

"It is not," Phlox said. "When the assets of the company and the personal wealth of the tragically deceased owner were transferred to Starfleet, it included a personally owned island in the – I believe the name is 'the Caribbean' – and two company owned island resorts in the Southern Hemisphere. A larger one, capable of hosting up to 300 hundred visitors and a small one for a single family are located in a region called Micronesia. Although the latter is reserved for flag officers and their families, I believe I can make a good case for you to be allowed to stay there for some time."

"Would you look at that!?" she heard Malcolm's surprised exclamation and joined him to look at the picture Phlox had called up on a PADD. What she saw was a small green Island with a broad beach of impeccably colored white sand. If there would be any environment where Trip could find peace, it was this. The sky was clear and blue and the ocean's water was so clean it was barely visible.
"It must cost a fortune to run three of those," Malcolm remarked.

"Little over a year ago Captain Archer needed help to overcome the strains put on him by commanding a ship. Captains Tucker and T'Pol have run into problems before. If our most experienced can't cope too well, how will it affect younger personnel, hm?" Phlox challenged him. "Starfleet is preparing for that. The larger island is currently being converted to a sanatorium. The existence of these retreats was only recently disclosed to all Starfleet medical personnel – and I think it was for a reason. The costs should not be the deciding factor here."

"We try not to think too often about what our job does to us, because we are thoroughly sick of it," T'Pol admitted so openly, she could see it affected Phlox. "I find the doctor's suggestion sound. We shall prepare for temporary transfer of command. Even if our stay on the island is not permitted, we shall find accommodation of our own. I don't give a damn about Surak's teachings at the moment. The need of the one – my Adun – is more important to me than the need of the many at this time."

"May I suggest that you let me escort you to the meditation chamber right now," Malcolm demanded calmly, but with a stern voice and T'Pol realized what a shameful and vulgar statement she had just delivered in the heat of the moment. Malcolm looked severely shocked. She hung her head in shame and nodded.

"Doctor, I'll take care of T'Pol. Would you please take care of the formalities? I think we all need a break," she heard Malcolm request while he directed her towards the exit.

"Excellent," Phlox reacted quite enthusiastically in her opinion. "I will send my request to Starfleet."

"Hoshi, will you stay with Trip?" T'Pol asked and after acknowledging the affirmative answer, she left with Malcolm who had grabbed her arm, not willing to let her go unattended.

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"Thirty years and he still hasn't learned his damn lesson."

Hoshi looked up to see Trip's father standing at the foot of the biobed. She looked at him questioningly.

"He's been like that since he was a lil' boy," he explained and Hoshi could see the pain in his eyes. "When his first girlfriend cheated on him, he worked himself to shreds. After a week our backyard looked as if we had paid a million bucks for it, all my tools were in perfect order and the old hover car that I had planned to sell for scrap was spit and polished and ran better than when it came out of the showroom."

Hoshi looked at him as he took a deep breath

"We found the boy unconscious in the shed when we came home from work. It's not the first time Cath and I work on a station together y'know. Back then we worked on Utopia Planitia station. We came back for the weekend and our boy was lyin' there out cold."

"He did the same in the Expanse," Hoshi said softly. "If it wasn't for T'Pol..."

"I wish I could hug her every time I see her, just for what she's done for him. You look a bit shaky yourself, honey," he said and put a callused hand on her shoulder.

"We all do," she admitted, remembering how T'Pol had blown a gasket two or maybe three hours
ago. She fought to keep out the exhaustion from her voice. "Phlox all but kicked us off the station for a week."

"Not the worst idea," he said. "Best is you go somewhere with a beach. Nothing can fix Trip better than lyin' on a beach and even T'Pol hid on our little beach when she was beaten up after Corridan. Put the two together and you might fix him in record time."

"Except for Malcolm we're all beach rats," she said with a tired smile.

"Well, I'll need to talk with T'Pol. There is another – freshly converted – beach rat that could use a lil' bit of consolation."

"T'Pau? What's wrong with her?" Hoshi asked.

"Love sickness," Charles said. "Remember the Andorians she went to the antarctic with?"

"She seemed quite smitten with one of them," Hoshi realized.

"Yeah, Trok," he confirmed. "Actually quite a nice guy and really wants to be friends with her, but he had noticed she, well, she was probably a bit deeper into it – T'Pau beein' so young and inexperienced and all."

"Ouch," Hoshi said and felt bad for the young one she had taught to swim.

"I got the impression that he wouldn't even be averse to there bein' more. He really likes the gal. But Andorians need four in a relationship and you know how Trip and T'Pol's bonding makes them react to intimate advances of a third person, let alone a fourth. You and Malcolm don't count - you just belong with them anyway."

"Poor girl," Hoshi said. "How does she take it?"

"She doesn't show it of course, but Cath knew something was up less than an hour after we had collected her at the space port yesterday."

"You both missed a calling as counselors," she said and afforded him a bright smile, even if it was a bit forced.

"We both had a lot of people to fix after the Xindi attack. It's not a talent we acquired by choice."

Hoshi saw him become pensive.

"Nonetheless, you're good at it."

"Well, guess I better get back home to my 'patient', before she takes on some bad habits, now that this goof is her godfather. Keep an eye on him, honey, will ya?"

"I'll let you know where we are and when you can send T'Pau. We'd love to have her for a few days."

She saw his thankful nod and watched him walk away.

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Romulus

"We need solutions, soldiers," the praetor demanded.
Legatus Tavrus, who once was Talok, thought that the praetor was in an almost benevolent mood, considering the first attempt at hit-and-run tactics was a miserable failure.

"Legatus, what is your assessment of the situation?"

He thought for a moment before answering the question.

“We are stuck until our shipyards are able to produce enough ships. Our fleet is one-sided. We have birds-of-pray and war birds with more fire power than anything this coalition has. A fleet of four can annihilate a colony, but colonies rarely shoot back. Our enemy has a balanced fleet. They have nimble and fast ships that are more maneuverable and are hard to hit by our ships. Our only chance is to overwhelm them in numbers and by fire power."

"Why do we not develop these nimble and fast ships ourselves?"

"Because we do not have the time," Tavrus explained, his patience with the proceedings severely challenged. "By the time we have the first prototype, this coalition will have built hundreds of them. All their shipyards are working on full capacity and we cannot reach them with the limited amount of ships we have. Their combined population numbers 40 billion individuals, more than twice our numbers. And they are not troubled by staffing ships and stations with members of different species. We will run out of personnel before they do."

"You sound like a coward, who wants to make us change our mind," he heard Valdore growl with false bravado.

"And you sound like the veruul, who allowed them to become that strong by underestimating them. With all due 'respect' of course," Tavrus shot back, properly tired of this man.

"Silence!" the praetor demanded. "Valdore, if you want to live to see the birth of your second child, I suggest you find ways to improve our chances. Legatus Travrus might be overly cautious, but your record as of late is nothing that showers you with honor. You have taken a great many civilian lives, but whenever the enemy's military got involved, you came home with nothing but defeats!"

Tavrus watched Valdore storm out of the room, followed by his aides. He enjoyed seeing the backs of them. They provided so much space to shoot into. The praetor left without another word, too. He smashed his fist on his desk. Why was he surrounded by idiots? Didn't they see that Romulus could end up colonized by the terhassu if they went on with this foolish endeavor? Why was the Tal'Shiar even trying to gather information when they were summarily ignored anyway?

Angrily he left his office. A hunting trip was in order to calm down and sate the killing rage he felt boiling inside.

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Trip stirred and Hoshi was wide awake with a start. She had been dozing off after Charles had left, but the stirring on the biobed had woke her up. She took his face in her hands as he tried to find out where he was. She could almost see how he was trying to put the pieces into the puzzle. She kissed him lightly to direct the little attention span he seemed to have, to herself.

"Hey there, buddy," she said. "How are you?"

"I'm in trouble, aren't I?" he whispered sleepily.

"Oh, you are," she confirmed. "I'm not sure who'll give you more of an earful – T'Pol or Malcolm."
"Damn it."

"Well, first of all we'll fix you stubborn mule, but trust me T'Pol will lay down some ground rules. I think she's not very fond of having to nerve-pinch you because you've done something stupid again."

"You sound like Malcolm," he mumbled and after she had continued stroking his hair in silence for a minute or two, he drifted back to sleep.

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Jon impatiently punched the connection button once the green light came on. The frowning face of Gardner appeared on the screen.

"Admiral."

"John, I want all of your medical staff to look out for PTSD among crew members," he demanded.

"We've had a few cases among the rookies, but the medical facilities at Salem One are top notch thanks to Trip," he said, not quite understanding what this was all about.

"That very same Trip came down with a case of it," Gardner said. "Falkner read me the riot act and made me realize, we never gave enough thought to what we put your original crew through."

"Shit," Jon swore. "How is he?"

"Tucker's not in good shape right now, but Phlox says it's thankfully not too severe. Reed, Sato and T'Pol seem to be quite shaky as well. I was told T'Pol cussed up a blue streak yesterday and Reed more or less dragged her off to the meditation chamber."

"With all due respect, Sir, I don't care about what they did. I want to know what's being done to help them," he demanded forcefully, his nostrils flailing.

"They get the best treatment we can offer, don't worry," Gardner said, trying to mollify Archer. "We've ignored the damn Coridian mission. We had half the crew filing into therapy, but all officers just soldiered on. It's my fault, Jon, I know that."

"Don't beat yourself up over it, Sam," John said. "Can you send all four of them at once to wherever you have planned?"

"Phlox said the same. Am I missing something?"

"Just the closest friendship you've ever seen," John said with a smile. "If you can call it that; I tend to think the Andorians call them 'First Quad' for a reason. They'll fix each other, just being away from it all and with each other for a while."

"Damn, they give me a headache," Gardner replied with an ironic chuckle.

"Learn to live with the headache, Sam. They are the best you have," Jon said emphatically.

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2 days later...

"Shut up, Malcolm," T'Pol swore halfway into his friend's lecture about how irresponsible it was to run himself down like that and Trip just wanted to fall asleep again. Hoshi's giggle about Malcolm
being put in his place should have amused him, but he just felt as if Malcolm was kicking him while he was on the ground. That, coupled to the feeling of being protectively cradled by T'Pol, which exaggerated his feeling of helplessness started the tears again. He felt useless. He wasn't supposed to cry this easily.

Hoshi's good mood died down fast.

"I...," Malcolm started whatever he wanted to say. Was it an apology? Trip had no idea and didn't quite care at the moment.

"Shut the hell up, now," he heard Hoshi hiss. "Bring this fucking shuttle down and don't say a thing!"

The feeling of fomenting dissent between his friends rocked him even harder. Soon he felt being passed on from T'Pol's embrace into Hoshi's arms. He could see that her eyes were moist.

"We'll help you buddy," he heard her whispered promise and although he could use all the consolation available himself, he hugged her close. Hoshi planted a quick kiss near his ear as he clutched her to his chest.

In the background he could hear T'Pol berating Malcolm for his rotten social skills in a whispered voice. It was obvious that they were all in bad shape.

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T'Pol climbed out of the shuttle and Trip's stiffening stance told her they had done right. In a heartbeat the dark emotions in the bond were washed over by wonder and disbelief. It would not make the fear, anxiety and sadness go away, but their absence, if only for a short time, was a welcome relief.

"Holy cow, this is beautiful," he said.

"It is indeed, Ashayam," she agreed and slung her arm around him.

"How long till she...?" he started to ask and for the first time in many days she felt a slight amusement resonating in their bond.

"I'm testing the water," a naked Hoshi announced, running past them.

"Scratch that question," Trip said dryly and zipped open his suit. In mere seconds he got rid of all clothing too, throwing them on the pile that Hoshi had left next to the shuttle. He ran after her, diving into the ocean enthusiastically.

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"I don't have to understand that, do I?" Malcolm asked looking at Hoshi and Trip splashing about in the clear water like children.

"Maybe you should seize trying to be more Vulcan than I," T'Pol replied deadpan, observing the spectacle, too. "Hoshi is most emotional and your sensibilities are lacking at times."

"Ya, about Trip...," he started sincerely, feeling bad about having put additional stress on Trip.

"Do not apologize to me," she said, shedding her uniform. "Talk to them."

Malcolm watched T'Pol walk towards the water a little more regally but no less naked than Trip
and Hoshi and picked up the pile of clothes his three friends had left right next to the shuttle pod.

"I don't think you'll be needed much the coming days," he announced to the pile of discarded clothes in his arms. "I might as well make myself useful. It's better than them asking me to join the 'fun'."

He walked off towards the house, the key dangling on the little finger of his right hand.

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Malcolm woke up to the feeling of Hoshi's body wrapped around him. When he opened his eyes he was looking straight into the almond orbs of hers. She kissed him and afforded him a bright smile while getting up.

"The supply shuttle will soon arrive," he said. "Maybe you should..."

"Unwillingly," Hoshi giggled and draped a bathrobe around herself. She took two more off the hooks. "I'll bring these to Trip and T'Pol."

"Where are they?" he asked, crawling out of the bed, too.

Hoshi put a finger to his cheek and turned his head toward the window. He saw T'Pol and Trip sleeping naked and entangled in a pile on a large towel on the beach.

"Good thing it's summer around here," he said and followed her out of the house, chuckling.

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"Just got a message," Charles Tucker jr. announced. "In three days you can meet them, honey."

"Is there a specific reason why I am referred to as a food item?" T'Pau asked in confusion and her confusion got even bigger when Cathryn started laughing.

"It's just a term of endearment," the laughing human woman explained. "Trip and his dad use that a lot. Come on dear let's head to the big city. I'll explain our men to you on the way to the mall."

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Malcolm ripped open the can of beer and looked into the distance. He was on an island that was entirely surrounded by water – that went with the definition of an island – and nonetheless he felt reasonably well rather than panicked. Of course everybody had abstained from asking him to actually go into the water, which was a big help. Trip and Hoshi surely loved it. They had gone for a swim several times over the day, trying to heal each other in between by endlessly talking to each other.

If those two would be paid by the kilometer, they surely would have earned their pay today, taking endless walks around the island while talking. Seeing Trip starting to cry unexpectedly was unsettling, but it seemed to be getting rarer and the episodes shorter. On at least two occasions it had been Hoshi, who had started to weep in Trip's arms and he cursed his past for the umpteenth time. He realized he was the wrong person to help his wife deal with past events as he had all the empathy of a piece of brick.

One wasn't a good asset in the section if too easily overcome by emotion or having empathy for those one tortured or killed. There had been only two cases of him crying in his adulthood – the funeral of Trip and T'Pol's baby daughter Elizabeth and after the bloody Tolaris trial, when he felt
like a piece of shit for ripping the wife of his best friend a new one publicly. For all the atrocities he had seen over the years it should have been more than twice! There was no other way to say it – he was fucked up and heaven knows what had made Hoshi fall in love with him.

He looked up when he felt someone taking his hands. He saw T'Pol directly across from him straddling the wooden bench in front of the house like he did. She just held his hands and looked at him silently. He looked away when he noticed that a single tear had escaped his attention and was running down his face. And he even couldn't wipe it away as his hands were currently trapped in T'Pol's gentle grip. But wasn't that just the reaction the absence of which he had mentally beat himself up over a minute ago? He added complete and utter confusion to his mental laundry list of what was wrong with him.

"Look at me," he said and looked back at T'Pol, once the treacherous drop of salty liquid had fallen of his cheek. "I need to learn to enter a bloody bathtub and I can't even cry properly. If it wasn't for my best friend, I wouldn't even know how to help my own wife."

"We are both former operatives," T'Pol said. "We were both conditioned to deal with unspeakable situations by suppressing or ignoring the emotional impact. It will take time to undo this conditioning. I have spent the last five years trying to master my emotions instead of automatically suppressing them and I feel like I am not even halfway into the journey."

Malcolm looked at her face and he began to understand what Trip had meant when he said that one can read Vulcans by looking into their eyes. He could see genuine concern in the hazel colored eyes before him. She wasn't smiling encouragingly, like Hoshi would have done in this situation, but somehow T'Pol's look paired with her gesture of just holding his hands had the same effect.

"Guess we are the emotionally challenged part of this self-help group," he said in an attempt to lighten the mood while hiding his own self-consciousness.

"And apparently the ones who actually brought any clothing," T'Pol shot back. "Well, some..."

Malcolm threw his head back in laughter. T'Pol was wearing a light summer skirt and presumably a pair of panties, but nothing more, and he wore a pair of Bermuda's. Trip and Hoshi, however, had not worn anything since getting out of the shuttle the day before. It was not difficult to riddle out that T'Pol had whipped out one of her rare jokes on purpose. But he also knew that whenever she did so, something definitely serious was about to follow.

"I have seen you in action once when we terminated Admiral Black," T'Pol said in a serious tone. "Why don't you tell me about your past? As far as you are allowed to, of course."

"I think he's starting to open up," Trip said, taking Hoshi's hand as they waded out of the ocean. In the distance they could see T'Pol and Malcolm sit face to face with Malcolm telling her something in an unusually animated manner.

"Says you," Hoshi said and yanked his arm to make him face her. "If you try to bullshit us again like that... Trip, we all care about you. Mal hasn't got many friends, but you are like a brother to him. Would you do that to your brother?"

"Sorry Hoshi," he said sincerely. They were both still waist-deep in the water facing each other. "It's just that some damn habits die hard.

"That habit of yours is self destructive, Trip and we will look over your shoulder a bit more in the
"I'm fine with that," he said and kissed her on the cheek.

"Come on, let's join the story-telling," he said pointing at Malcolm and T'Pol.

"We're not dressed for the occasion," Hoshi giggled as Trip led her out of the water.

"Don't worry, you look good in a bathrobe, honey."

T'Pol looked up into the sky. Now that the red sun started to dip below the horizon, she could do so without having to close her inner eyelid. Trip was resting next to her on the blanket that would serve them as a bed under the stars for a third night in a row.

Neither of them had spoken for the last hour and although his hand rested on her belly, he had not made the slightest attempt to slide it a few inches higher to touch her breasts, a temptation he could normally not withstand if she was anywhere near him in a topless or nude state, like now. Considering the current emotional state he was in, she reasoned, his libido was just dormant.

She could feel that the last two days had gone a long way to ease the turmoil in his mind, but still, something was completely wrong. His presence in her mind, which normally caressed her consciousness like a feather, felt like a blunt object. Gently she tried to probe his mind, something she would normally not do, but she noticed immediately that he was desperately shielding his mind with a force she had not expected to be possible.

Retracting back into her own consciousness, wary of hurting him by probing harder, she realized what the strange sensation was. Her Adun was fighting an onslaught of raw animalistic lust. It was not the same as his playful desire for her touch, the strong wish to feel her reaction as he pleasured her. It was a raw lust of possessing her, the unbridled urge to sate his carnal desire -- and he was consumed by guilt for these feelings.

It was not hard to determine what had led to this state of mind. He had not only suppressed his troubling emotions, but more often than not, his desire, too. And while Hoshi was able to help him cope with most emotions that troubled his mind -- the desire to mate was something she couldn't help with. More likely she had even exacerbated his predicament by her perpetual state of undress.

She gently took his hand and guided it down to touch her naked vagina in an effort to release his desire. It would not be their usual gentle routine of engaging in sexual relations -- his raw lust was too overpowering for that.

She could feel his organ become erect almost instantly and by soaking up some of his lust into her mind she caused her own nether region to become moist most expeditiously.

"Darlin', I... I need..."

"Shhh," she silenced him softly and spread her legs. "Take me, beloved."

In an instant she knew that she had broken through his defenses. Breathing heavily before any exertion had even begun, he positioned himself over her. His upper body rested on his outstretched arms, his hands pressed to the ground on either side of her. Forcefully he entered her in a single stroke.

T'Pol closed her eyes suppressing her reaction to the short pain when he forced himself into her.
Soon the discomfort gave way to a build-up of her own lust while her Adun pounded her flesh like a man possessed. She could not remember having seen him that out of control ever before.

Now that the initial discomfort had given way to her own lust, amplified by the raw emotions that leaked from his mind, she felt the same animalistic urge take possession of herself.

Possessively she wrapped her legs around his hips and growled her demands for harder treatment in her native language. Her vision was gone in an instant as the world faded away around her – all she could think of was the desire to be taken by him. She sensed his relief as he spilled his seed into her, shortly before she was overcome by her own fierce climax.

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"Erm, love, I think we should retire for the night," Malcolm stammered. The unmistakable sounds from the beach – now shrouded in darkness – left no doubt that Trip and T'Pol were not playing 'Scrabble' and if they did, they did so in Vulcan and rather loud.

"Their game sounds like fun," Hoshi said in a husky voice. "I wanna play too, hubby."

"Whatever you wish, my love," he replied theatrically. "Too bad I don't get to peel you out of your dress."

Malcolm wore a wide grin when a naked Hoshi dragged him inside.
On the Mend

*T'Pol basked in the sensation of her partner's hands, one of which gently kneaded her right breast, while the other one was busy caressing her nether region. She felt the two fingers of her lover in her opening, caressing her heated flesh. While the warm water of the shower washed the last remnants of soap off their entangled bodies, T'Pol groaned and eagerly returned Hoshi's kiss.*

She sat up with a start having suddenly woken up from another dream in which she had engaged in sexual relations with Hoshi, which was illogical as she harbored no sexual attraction to other females. And since there was no averse reaction in the bond, the thought could not have come from Trip. The dreams were also lacking the distinct alien sensation that was associated with thoughts that weren't her own.

Becoming aware that Trip was nowhere near, she shelved her thoughts for later contemplation and looked for her *Adun*. She soon spotted him, leaning against a palm tree about 50 meters from her and she could see that he was silently weeping. While that reaction had become a frequent sight lately, due to his emotional instability, she had a pretty good idea what his distress was all about.

Although she harbored some guilt of her own about having intimate dreams of sexual relations with Hoshi, the majority of guilt in her mind seeped in through the bond. Still unclothed she grabbed her discarded skirt and walked towards the palm tree. Receiving no acknowledgement of her arrival, she put the skirt on the ground and sat down on it, leaning against the opposite side of the same palm tree.

Patiently she waited for any word to be spoken, but for the next ten minutes neither of them said anything.

“Please forgive me darlin',” he finally said, his voice still strained from the long period of crying.

“I would not know what you need to ask forgiveness for,” she replied, trying to keep her voice soft.

“I treated you badly yesterday. You don't deserve to be roughed up like that.”

“By Vulcan standards our encounter was fairly sedate,” she stated matter-of-factly. “It was – from my point of view – a very satisfying encounter and in all honesty I would occasionally wish for more physical intensity in our sexual relations were it not for the fact that I know you feel uncomfortable with touching me in a rough manner.”

He came crawling around, looking at her in disbelief with bloodshot eyes.

“You enjoyed that?”

“Yes, I did and I can assure you, I do not say that to alleviate your discomfort. If anything, it is me, who has to ask forgiveness. I deliberately influenced your mind by feeding my own desire to you in an attempt to break through your defenses. Your lack of your normal inhibitions against forceful contact was a result of the intensity of my emotions.”

“Don't apologize,” he said, slinging his arms around her waist and resting his head against her shoulder. “I have no problem being a little more robust, as long as you let me know that you want it so and as long as it isn't every time.”

“I will improve my communications of my intentions,” she promised, gently stroking his hair. “I feel that your mind is much more at rest.”
"I'm much better, especially now that I know I didn't hurt you. Hoshi is one hell of a counselor. Just with my... urge, well, she couldn't really help with that."

"Why did you not tell me about it?" T'Pol asked. "You should know that I would never deny you intimacy if you need it."

He sighed.

"T'Pol, I don't know where it came from. That wasn't me wanting to make love. That was me wanting to fuck your brains out mindlessly. I would never do that to you. Hell, I was so damn horny I thought about sneaking away and sticking it in a hole in a tree somewhere, just to get rid of it."

"I doubt Doctor Phlox's research of interspecies breeding has progressed quite that far," she replied dryly.

For the first time since they came here, she felt his body start to shiver and suddenly he started to laugh uncontrollably. He was laughing so hard, his eyes filled with tears again and he started to cough as his breathing could not keep up."

She gently patted his back as he struggled in a mix of coughing and loud laughter. Looking back at the house she saw Malcolm and Hoshi grinning brightly as they heard the long-lost sound of Trip laughing. As he calmed down she sensed that for the first time in many weeks, his mind was truly at ease again. His contentment was still brittle, but she realized he was past the darkness that had clouded his consciousness.

Unseen by him, she returned Hoshi's smile for a second.

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"I didn't know Hoshi actually brought something to wear," Trip said with a chuckle as he and Malcolm drank their coffee the next morning. They were sitting on the bench in front of the house watching T'Pol and Hoshi walk along the beach in matching summer dresses. The remnants of breakfast were still on the table in front of them.

"I doubt she'd be wearing that if it wasn't for T'Pau's arrival today," came Malcolm's amused reply. "I think that's the most she's worn in off-duty time in weeks."

"I never heard you complaining," Trip needled him.

"And I never will," Malcolm said. "I could think of worse things than coming home after a long shift and finding out that the only outfit my wife could decide on is a pair of panties."

"That's T'Pol's official meditation dress ever since I did that temperature job on the biosensors," Trip said chuckling.

"Best idea you ever had by the way," Malcolm replied. "Life support on my ship has been working fine since you've sent the specs to T'Len. If any of our Andorians fall on their knees before you and start worshiping you, you know why."

Trip snorted and laughed about the image of an Andorian bowing before him.

"Good to hear you laugh again," Malcolm mentioned casually.

"Hoshi helped a lot," Trip admitted. "If she wasn't the best linguist we have, she could just as well
"work as a counselor."

"That seemed to be working both ways," Malcolm replied. "I don't think I could have helped her like you did."

"Mal, all we did was talking and listening to each other. Of course you can do that."

"It's good to know someone's believing in me, but frankly I need to learn even basic social skills," Malcolm replied and Trip could hear the frustration in his friend's voice. "All I ever learned was to function properly. First that scumbag father of mine and later the section. All they needed was someone, who functions, no matter what. Hell, I would never have married Hoshi if you and T'Pol had not played match-maker."

"Are you sure you're not exaggerating?" Trip asked. "You didn't seem to have any social skill problems at your wedding."

"It was all rehearsed, mate," he heard the frustrated reply. "Hoshi walked me through everything, even when to grin and when not. Do you really think I would've showered myself with that beer boot if it wasn't for Hoshi suggesting I should?"

"Shit, I never knew, buddy," Trip said sincerely.

"You and T'Pol probably thought I'm the shy type or something when you set up Hoshi and me," Malcolm admitted. "But I never asked her out because I never learned how to talk about my feelings. Hell, I was taught all my life not to admit that I even have them."

"There's your teacher," Trip replied deadpan, pointing his coffee mug in the direction of T'Pol. "If anyone knows how to learn that, it's T'Pol."

The shuttle landed near the beach and Trip didn't believe his eyes. In the co-pilot seat next to Travis on the pilot's seat sat his father and by the looks of things it was his old man doing the landing.

"What?" Charles asked, coming out of the hatch a few moments later. "Did you think your old man couldn't land one of them newfangled things? In comparison to our shuttles back then, these things are ridiculously easy to fly."

"I don't doubt that, dad," he said returning his father's hug. "But your license must have expired something like 20 years ago."

"He's got it back as of one minute ago, together with a passed PPC on a Mark V," Travis said flashing a wide grin, while signing the check ride protocol on a PADD. "May I introduce myself: Lieutenant Travis Maywheather, chief pilot, SOLCOM fleet."

"Is there more we've missed in the – uh – three days we've been away?" Trip asked with a grin, congratulating his father and Travis.

"No that's the only major news you've missed," Travis explained. "I got checked out as pilot instructor yesterday and they've put me right to the task doing check rides with some of the civilians on shuttles and runabouts."

"Not quite," Charles butted in and held out his hand to help T'Pau out of the shuttle. "You also missed that this young lady here will have her first day at school next week."
Trip went over and hugged her. "Welcome back, honey. Did all go OK on Vulcan?"

"Soval is now first minister and what little of my possessions did not fit in my bag have been deposited in your home. I became concerned when I heard there have been problems with your health."

"Don't worry, honey. I'm getting better," he said.

"And don't worry about her possessions either," Charles remarked dryly. "Cath and T'Pau hit the mall like a tornado."

"That's hard to miss," Trip said with a chuckle. The dress she was wearing was certainly not of Vulcan origin.

"Maybe you should have accompanied us," T'Pau said and turned to T'Pol pointing at his Hawaiian shirt. "I take it you were not involved in selecting this garment?"

"Obviously not," T'Pol replied deadpan and Trip could see Malcolm and Hoshi trying not to laugh. They were not very successful.

"Well son, I'll leave you to deal with the fashion police," Charles said and gave him a pat on the back. "Travis has to check out a few more people today."

The shuttle had just left when Malcolm released the laugh he had barely managed to hold back. T'Pau's dry assessment of Trip's fashion sense and his friend's indignant face expression were too hilarious. Hoshi couldn't hold back either. Even T'Pol was risking an eyebrow cramp.

"Everybody done laughing about me?" Trip asked.

"Not as long as you're wearing that," Malcolm cackled.

"Better now?" Trip asked throwing the discarded shirt away after he had pulled it over his head.

"You won't need it in the water anyway," Hoshi said and pulled her dress over her head. She crumpled it into a ball and threw it where Trip's shirt had landed. Then she ran off into the sea.

"Maybe you should go to the mall with your wife, too," T'Pau noted with a look at Malcolm. "Her supply of underwear seems to be exhausted."

Malcolm doubled over. He could see the satisfied look on T'Pau's face, realizing she had hoped to make them laugh.

"It's partly our fault, too," Hoshi admitted, lying on the beach next to T'Pau. She had accompanied the young Vulcan when she sampled swimming in Earth's ocean for the first time and she was now being quizzed by the former Vulcan leader about her godfather's health problems.

"I do not understand how you can be responsible for his psychological problems."

"We should have realized that he had never gotten the time to deal with his own problems. He constantly was solving those of other people. After Corridan, he helped T'Pol, and then he was responsible for rebuilding Salem One. As soon as that was done he was made responsible for the new class of star ships and on top of that he let himself be recruited by the Eldest Mother to care
for you. When Kaitaama showed up on top of it, it finally became too much to bear for him. We should have noticed earlier that he needs some fixing, too."

"Is he being 'fixed' now?" T'Pau asked and Hoshi could hear the demanding undertone of someone, who was used to take the lead.

"He's getting better," Hoshi assured her. "We all are actually. I've been listening and talking to him a lot. T'Pol and Malcolm are quite good at helping each other – both being former operatives and all."

"May I contribute to the cause in any way?" T'Pau asked.

"You already do," Hoshi said with a smile. "We all like you and it's great to have you here. And I don't need to bask in the sun alone anymore. The other's are wearing entirely too much clothing."

"Indeed," T'Pau said dryly with an eyebrow planted firmly north. Hoshi followed her look towards the wooden table in front of the house. Trip, Malcolm and T'Pol were sitting around it, engaged in a lively debate over something or other. Since she saw Trip wipe his eyes once in a while, they were most likely sifting through his issues together.

The men wore Bermuda shorts – very colorful ones in Trip's case. They drank their favorite beverage – beer. T'Pol meanwhile seemed compelled to adapt to the local dress code and wore a pair of what looked like yoga pants from the distance and no top. She had preferred orange juice.

Both women laid back again and continued to let the warmth of the sun caress their skin.

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It was a successful hunt and the brutal killing of the set'leth in a bare-handed fight had sated his rage. Only a veruul like Valdore could enrage him like that. Tavrus was tired of being enraged. His life as an operative on Vulcan had been a lot easier. Here on Romulus he was an outcast. His surgically skimmed brow ridges and the resulting smooth forehead were a badge of honor in political and military circles as it marked him as one of the brave few, who had served undercover in enemy territory, but for the rest of the population it was a disfigurement. This made him extremely unattractive for the females.

No military honor and no amount of influence on the Praetor could undo the indignity of having to use the services of prostitutes to satisfy his sexual desires and they could only provide relief for his arousal. The seed he released into their abused bodies would never result in an heir to his bloodline. For that he needed a loving mate, who would fill the void in his live, who would bring light and joy to the emptiness he returned to whenever he entered his luxurious home in the Capitol.

"It is me, Master Turius," he called out and an elderly Romulan, with the same 'disfigurement' dropped from a tree branch, wielding a long knife.

"It has been a long time, young Tavrus. I now see where you have been all those years."

"I have brought meat for a feast," Tavrus said and dropped the dead animal from his shoulder.

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Darkness had fallen over the island and the group was now gathered sitting around a camp fire. The decision had been made that the human contingent should try their hands at taking part in a meditation session. Only one was missing – Trip.
He came out of the house a while later carrying two pairs of pants and two robes. He threw one pair of pants to Hoshi and T'Pau each. They put them on, but Hoshi kept looking at him with a questioning face expression.

"I don't feel comfortable looking at the exposed privates of my goddaughter all evening. That meditation pose doesn't exactly lend itself to keeping up a minimum of modesty."

"I apologize," T'Pau said.

"No need to," he said. "If you feel like running around naked – fine – but if you're so close, I'd prefer at least a minimum of clothing to be worn. Besides, it'll get a lot cooler tonight than the last two nights." He handed both T'Pol and T'Pau a bathrobe.

"You're doing it again, Trip," Hoshi said softly and he looked at her.

"Doing what?"

"You think you must take care of everyone before yourself. I agree with the pants. That was thoughtless of us - but the bathrobes? Don't you think T'Pol and T'Pau can just stand up and go inside to fetch them themselves if they're cold?"

"You're right, Hoshi, sorry," he sighed.

"It may be something you could try to contemplate during meditation," T'Pau offered.

"I'll try, honey," he promised with a smile and assumed the necessary pose. He closed his eyes and let the crackle of the fire bring calm to his mind.

Tavrus observed the old man with interest. It was hard to imagine that this hero of so many battles, who had taught him the skills of a warrior, had been living the life of a hermit for over twenty years now. A fierce warrior in his prime, Master Turius had grown disillusioned with the Empire's endless violence after he had lost all five of his sons in battle.

Normally, doubting or even publicly denouncing the Empire's military doctrine was an instant death sentence, but not even the Praetor dared to order the execution of one of the most revered heroes of the Empire. Instead the predecessor of Praetor D'deridex had fabricated a cover story that Commander Turius sought a life in solitude and banished him to a small area in the Sen'lanark Mountains. They even declared it a military zone to prevent contact with civilians.

The skilled warrior had soon prepared the animal for roasting and Tavrus found himself under the scrutinizing glance of his former teacher.

"You are troubled, young Tavrus," the old man said.

"Indeed I am, Master," he admitted. "The Empire is rushing into a foolish war and even though I'm now the overseer of the Tal'Shiar, my voice is no longer heard as much as it should be. I have sacrificed my own contentment for the Empire, but that sacrifice looks more and more as if it was in vain."

"The females reject you, do they not?"

"They do," Tavrus admitted bitterly. "And not only they. I am stared at whenever I enter the civilian parts of the city. They consider me a... curiosity."
"One would have thought the Empire would spend some modest resources on finding ways to restore the appearance of their most revered heroes," the old man noted with no little amount of bitterness. "Those terrhassu would never do that to one of their own."

"You encountered them?" Tavrus asked.

"They already had an Embassy on Vulcan when their ships still needed half a year to travel from their home world to Vulcan," Turius recalled, slowly rotating the skinned animal over the fire. "I often visited it in my guise as 'assistant attaché V'Nur'. There once was an accident during the construction of the human Embassy – a dust explosion. One of the humans was disfigured in the accident. They spent months and dozens of surgeries to restore his appearance. The Empire can't even bring back two ridges."

Tavrus sat up. "Did you say your cover name was V'Nur?"

"Yes," the old man answered, sprinkling spices over the roasting meat. "One hundred years ago a foolishly curious young Vulcan called V'Nur died in a sand fire in the Vulcan Forge. The Empire had me surgically altered to resemble him, even though he was thirty years younger. I took his identity. Is it not ironic that they managed to remodel my whole facial features, but they never could reconstruct my ridges? Although it has to be said, they most likely were not willing although they could."

"Are you aware that you could be the father of one the Captains who handed defeat to the Empire?"

"Is my dear T'Pol a captain now?" the old man asked and Tavrus could see an errant tear in his Master's eye.

"She is the captain of the most famous Terran ship," Tavrus said. "She serves in the forces of the terrhassu and she is married to one of them."

"Once I had assumed the identity of the deceased Vulcan," Turius recollected. "I lived my life as a Vulcan for two decades, serving the Empire. They considered me unusual as my 'emotions were close to the surface'. When V'Nur's childhood betrothed T'Les became of child bearing age, we were married. I often miss her gentle touch. Nobody knew that I was already over ninety years old at the time. When our daughter was born, I started to wonder if the reunification of our people could not be achieved more swiftly if we adopted the Vulcan lifestyle instead of trying to conquer them. She was a most beautiful child and a true joy."

"She is still very beautiful," Tavrus said, failing to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. "I met her when the terrhassu toppled V'Las, our 'top operative' on Vulcan."

"Do you know if my beloved T'Les is still alive?"

Tavrus looked at his feet. "She is dead Master," he admitted with a lowered voice. "She was part of a movement that rejected the Government infiltrated by our operatives. V'Las' himself ordered the bombardment of their hideout. The area was blanket bombed with photonic torpedoes."

Tavrus looked away when his old mentor fled into his house. His distressed lamenting could be heard even over this distance. He felt like breathing was an almost impossible task when he realized that he once nearly killed his mentor's daughter, too.

"Bring me to Vulcan, Tavrus," his mentor demanded, returning to the fire. His determined voice could not hide the fact that his stance was that of a broken man. "I want to visit the grave of my
beloved and if life leaves me enough time I want to see the face of my beloved daughter again, even if she throws me into the brig."

"I would like to do that, I would even like to come with you, Master," Tavrus admitted. "But it would mean treason. We would leave the Empire open for conquest by the terrhassu."

"They will not conquer us, Tavrus," his mentor disagreed. "They are not conquerors like us. They only protect what is theirs. They will drive us back to our own territory and stop there. Whatever conflict the Praetor is preparing for, it will end in a stalemate that will claim the lives of hundreds of thousands of warriors."

"Let us feast," Tavrus proclaimed, ripping a chunk of meat off the roasted beast. "Let us feast before we embark on the most dangerous mission we have undertaken yet. You have my word that I will help you to meet your daughter. She is a fine warrior."

"I am indebted to you Tavrus. I will never forget your help," Turius/V'Nur answered and wrestled a haunch off the animal.
Trip was packing T'Pau's clothing, which allowed her to spend another half hour at the beach and in the water before the shuttle would arrive to collect her. He wondered why she had brought so much stuff, considering that he had to enforce 'paternal authority', requesting that she wore at least a bikini when out of the water. Practically everything she had brought for the three day stay on the island had been largely untouched.

"How are you doing?" Malcolm asked, entering the room.

"I'm fine," Trip started before stopping mid sentence. "Well, obviously not fine, but getting better every day. We've still got the weekend left. I think I should be good to go come Monday."

"I'm sure I don't have to tell you that T'Pol will watch over you like a mother hen for a while. Hoshi certainly will do too."

Trip sighed, stopping in the middle of the room with one of T'Pau's blouses in his hands. "Maybe it's a good thing," he admitted. "I'm obviously not very good at looking after myself."

"You're totally crap at it, to be brutally honest," Malcolm snorted. Trip saw him leaning against the wall in a relaxed pose.

"Was there something specific you wanted to talk about?" Trip asked, knowing that Malcolm wasn't the type to engage in casual small-talk a lot for no reason.

"Well, I wanted to ask you to talk to Hoshi after T'Pau has left. She wasn't best pleased with the dress code you introduced."

"Malcolm, T'Pau might be thirty-three, but compared to a human, she's sixteen, maybe seventeen. Imagine having a teenage goddaughter prancing around naked in front of you all day. How would you feel?"

"Point taken," Malcolm conceded.

"I don't think it's too much to ask that she wears a bikini or a swimsuit on a beach, is it. The alternative is that I feel like a weirdo all day."

Trip's little rant was stopped by two pairs of hands clapping slowly. He turned around and saw that Hoshi had joined Malcolm in slowly applauding his latest little outburst. She had probably overheard the whole conversation from the adjacent room.

"Congratulations," she said and kissed him on the cheek. "So you finally realized that you won't be shot if you ask others to make compromises for the sake of your well-being."

"Don't tell me you planned this," Trip half asked, half stated in disbelief.

"No, I didn't plan anything," Hoshi answered. "I actually didn't even expect you to have a problem with it. You never had a problem when I was naked."

"You are a big girl already," he said. "And besides, we've known each other for a long time and most importantly, you aren't an adolescent goddaughter of mine."

"Good," Hoshi said and flashed him a grin while picking at her swimsuit. "Because that thing is
coming off as soon as the shuttle has taken to the sky."

"It was never meant to apply to you," he said.

"I know, but a little show of female solidarity can't hurt," she replied with a giggle. "It made it easier for TPau to accept your restriction."

"I'm not so sure what the Eldest Mother has to say about that," Trip wondered aloud. "We were supposed to teach her swimming. Instead we've turned her into a compulsive nudist. I'm not so sure that she'll be happy with that."

"It's a transitory thing," Hoshi said. "When I got my ground car license, I drove around endlessly for days until the novelty factor had worn off. It's the same for her. Once she's done it often enough, she'll tone it down."

"I sure hope so," Trip said, and started to snicker. "And I hope it doesn't take her as long as you to get it out of her system."

"I am a compulsive nudist," Hoshi said with another giggle. "Now that my neuropressure training is finished, we'll go to the spa at different times than you and TPol. We'll take her in with us, so you won't be bothered by it. We'll need her to help Malcolm for a while longer anyway."

"Thanks," he said with a grateful smile and closed TPau's packed bag. "I'd half expected that the two of you would try to drag Malcolm into the water."

"Trip, I still need at least one of them nearby to cope with a small whirlpool, preferably by holding my hand," Malcolm snorted. "The whole bloody ocean would be a slightly premature step, wouldn't it. I consider it a minor miracle already that I can be on this island here without freaking out about all the water around us."

"I think the shuttle is approaching," Hoshi said and they walked outside, where TPau met them on her way back to the house.

"TPol has laid out a dress for you in the living room," Trip told her and with a nod TPau walked into the dwelling.

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Feb. 1st 2157, Romulan space near Algeron

The small cloaked courier vessel glided towards the edge of Romulan space at a steady warp four. Within the hour they were about to cross into enemy space, with another six days needed to travel to Vulcan space.

"I believe we are being followed," Turius remarked calmly and pointed at a seemingly normal piece of space on the display. Only the trained eye of an operative would notice the little subspace distortion.

"An operative sent by the Praetor to monitor our mission," Tavrus replied nonchalantly.

"I take it you were expecting him?"

"The Praetor is foolishly assuming that his private security code is really private," he answered with a satisfied grin. "When he gave me permission to recruit you for this mission a little too promptly, I decided that keeping an eye on his communication was a prudent idea."
"You are even cleverer than I thought Tavrus."

"Fortunately he is also very predictable," Tavrus continued with a smirk. "He sent exactly the man, who will open the door for us on Vulcan. There is only one man other than myself, who seems perfectly suited to work undercover on Vulcan."

"You already have a plan?"

"I don't need one," Tavrus gloated. "The man chasing us is known as Centurion Lerok, a V'Shar operative, who would have already been executed if the Praetor or any of his advisors could be bothered to read all the Tal'Shiar reports."

"You have finally found a way to reveal the Vulcan undercover operatives?" Turius asked with interest. "In my time most who had the necessary expertise in genetics were wasted as lowly foot soldiers on the front-lines instead of being provided with the necessary equipment to do genetic research."

"That has not changed," Tavrus replied, shaking his head. "But I have lived among Vulcans long enough to know if someone suppresses his emotions naturally or by force. When Lerok did slightly too well in the emotional suppression test, I became suspicious and took him on a hunting excursion."

"They can learn to kill just as well as we can," Turius suggested. "I would hardly call such a test conclusive."

"Lerok easily killed a seth'let, too easily in fact. Vulcans do not relish the smell of blood. They do not enjoy seeing the life leave the beast after a long barehanded fight. He killed it swiftly and painlessly. That's the one part of their nature that Vulcans simply can't overcome. They cannot administer needless pain."

"That we can do so is hardly a reason to be proud," Turius snorted in obvious disgust.

"I did not say this made me proud, Master," Tavrus apologized. "It is a part of our nature that we chose to accept when our ancestors left Vulcan. Our peoples are extremists. While we relish our emotions, the Vulcans seek to lose them. There must be a way of life in between those extremes."

"I see that your time on Vulcan has influenced you much in the same way as it influenced me," Turius remarked. Tavrus could not find any trace of reproach in it.

"It has," the younger man admitted. "I didn't know she was your daughter, when she cowered before the tip of my blade, but I knew that my life started to change when I could not kill her, even though I was ordered to do so."

"When did you last see T'Pol?" Turius asked and Tavrus could hear the pain in his mentors voice.

"Almost two years ago. We were ordered to terminate all remaining Syrranites to cover up our involvement in bombing the human embassy. She was traveling with the Vulcan leader and the captain of the human ship she served on, trying to bring their precious artifact to the capital city. During a fight the human captain and the Vulcan were able to flee with the relic, but T'Pol was separated from them. She was injured but unwavering in her will to resist. Maybe it was the unhidden rage I could see in her eyes that rendered me unable to kill her. I may have felt subconsciously that she was one of us."

"She is only half Romulan," the Elder corrected him. "I believe your hesitation had a different reason. Like me, you must have realized at some point that we have become conquerors for the
sake of conquering, killers for the sake of killing. We do not need these planets. We have much more territory than we need to exist. We are shedding the blood of our young in senseless battles."

Tavrus, who would soon be Talok again, thought about his mentor's words and realized the truth and wisdom behind them. The Klingon onslaught was sufficient to keep the imperial forces more than busy enough and the Praetor had rushed into a war on two fronts, hoping that glorious wins against the terhassu would silence the unrest about the horrific bloodshed at the Klingon border.

But those wins never came. The humans and their allies outnumbered them six-to-one, and even though they had no ships that could take on an imperial warbird, two or three of them together could do so, especially if they were using the small specialized destroyers and frigates that the coalition was building in growing numbers.

"Have you come to a decision, Tavrus?" his mentor asked. "It is not too late to return to the Empire in good standing."

"There is no good standing in the Empire for either of us," he answered bitterly. "We are both 'curiosities', gawked at and spurned by the females and our families. We would live out our lives in reclusion or be killed whenever the Praetor needs someone to take the blame for his defeats."

"Then it is decided," his old teacher proclaimed.

"It is decided, Master. Once we reach Vulcan space Lerok will contact his superiors and warn them of us. We will surrender ourselves to them and betray the Empire."

"That is a grave decision, Tavrus. Our own will be out to kill us. That is, if the Vulcans don't forestall them and terminate us first."

"It is a risk I'm willing to take," the younger man replied with grim determination. "The Vulcans will not kill us before they have all information we can provide. If that information shortens the war by just one year, it will save hundreds of thousands of our families from grieving for their sons and daughters. If it costs my life to achieve that, so be it. I'd rather die a merciful death at the hands of the Vulcans than wasting away on our home world as an outcast, presiding over needless massacres."

three days later...

First Minister Soval hid his hands in the wide sleeves of his ceremonial robe. The assembly of ministers and sub-ministers was currently waiting for General V'Daro, the head of the V'Shar. The organization's most senior operative had requested this meeting to present new information. If he went as far as requesting an immediate session of the High Council, it could only mean that he had information of the highest importance.

"Is it wise to invite the Humans to a session with the highest ranking representative of our intelligence service, Excellency?" Sub-minister Sulak asked.

Soval regarded the young man with a hard look. Sulak was a most effective overseer of their shipyard operations, but he was one of the Council members who still had to let go of some of their preconceptions.

"Sub-minister, we are involved in a war and are part of an alliance. Surely you understand the logic of involving our allies from Starfleet Intelligence, especially as our two species have been tasked with providing the majority of intelligence."
Chastised into silence, the young councilman acknowledged the rebuttal with a nod.

A soft notification sound from the console in front of him forestalled any further discussion and Soval pushed a button to establish the connection to the subordinate who had called him.

"The subspace connection to Earth has been established, Excellency," the sublieutenant reported.

"Forward it to the council chambers," he ordered, and the face of Commodore Falkner appeared on the view screen. From the little interaction he had with Earth's new head of Starfleet security, Soval knew that he spoke flawless Vulcan and was exceedingly more efficient to work with than the disagreeable individual who had occupied the post before.

"Councilmen, I introduce – Commodore Falkner, highest ranking officer of Starfleet security."

All attendees of the session acknowledged the Human's virtual presence with a nod that was wordlessly returned by their ally on Earth.

"As we are complete, I admit General V'Daro to the floor," Soval decreed.

"Excellency, Ministers, Commodore," the General opened his speech, and with satisfaction Soval noticed that the seasoned operative had included the human in his greeting. "We have received information from one of our operatives that two high-profile Romulan agents are currently on approach to Vulcan."

Soval raised his hand to silence the murmurs among the attendees. Interestingly, he noticed, the human showed less reaction than some of the younger individuals in the Council chamber.

"Proceed," he ordered once silence had been restored. "What do we know about these operatives?"

"One is called Tavrus," V'Daro explained and brought up an image of the man on a second view screen. "He spent several years as an operative on Vulcan using the name Talok. He rose to the rank of Major in the High Command forces and is believed to have been one of former Administrator V'Las's closest confidants. His last position in the Romulan hierarchy was that of overseer in the Tal'Shiar."

"The boss himself drops by," the human interrupted. "Now it gets really interesting."

"What is your assessment of the situation, Commodore?" Soval asked. Obviously the human had something to contribute.

"We've only got one operative left on Romulus, but she's an effective one," the alien explained. "Your information about Tavrus's position in the Tal'Shiar matches ours. On top of that we've found out that he's gotten himself into a rivalry with Admiral Valdore – their fleet commander. Apparently Valdore wants to attack at all costs, while Tavrus tried to delay and maybe even back out of the war altogether, because he realized that we vastly outnumber them."

"Most interesting information," general V'Daro noticed. "We might need to consider the option that Tavrus is a defector."

"That will depend on who his companion is," Falkner added. "We didn't know about Tavrus's approach to Vulcan, but what we do know is, that four days ago all records about Romulan operatives in coalition space were irreversibly destroyed. Whatever undercover agents they still have in our space, they have no way of contacting them anymore unless Tavrus has given that information to someone else."
"I advice caution, however," the human's Vulcan counterpart continued. "While the prospect of such a high-level defector would undoubtedly have a significant influence on the war, it could also be an attempt at misinformation."

"Speculation will not serve any purpose at this time," Soval interrupted and fixed his general with a direct glance. "What do we know about the second operative?"

"We know very little," V'Daro admitted. "His name is Turius. He retired from active service two decades ago and was apparently exiled by the Romulan authorities for his unwillingness to accept the regime's aggressive expansion at the time. We have no more information other than this image from the time he was forced into exile."

Soval gasped when the slightly blurred image replaced that of the first operative. Even though he quickly caught his momentary lapse in control, some of the higher ranked ministers had caught it. He felt that he was under intense scrutiny from Kuvak, his youngest brother's son.

The first minister turned his attention back to the image and shook his head slightly, unable to believe his eyes. The image was not of the best quality, but it clearly showed a Vulcan-looking man sitting near a fire, preparing some sort of killed animal for consumption.

"Are you unwell, Excellency?" Sulak asked. He had apparently noticed the struggle of the first minister.

"I am well," he replied, dismissing the sub-minister's concern. "This image, however, is deeply unsettling."

"Do you know that man, Excellency?" the general inquired.

"This man looks like my deceased brother V'Nur," Soval admitted.

"I apologize for the delay, Admiral," Trip apologized when the connection to Gardner was established. "Phlox literally intercepted me as soon as I set foot on the station and poked and prodded me for two hours."

"He better had," the Admiral replied curtly. "What's his verdict?"

"He wants to make Hoshi a counselor," Trip quipped, but his grin vanished as quickly as it had come, when he saw that Gardner didn't find it funny. "He has cleared me for duty and set up therapy sessions twice a week."

"I expect that his orders are followed to the letter. If you run yourself ragged again or miss just one of these sessions, I'm gonna kick your ass so hard you'll end up orbiting Jupiter, did I make myself clear?"

"Don't worry Sir, it won't come to that as my wife or Hoshi would beat you to the punch anyway."

"That's nothing to joke about, Tucker. You have no idea how close you came to being taken off the project."

"Sir, with all due respect, I wasn't cooped up in sickbay drooling all over myself," Trip protested. He thought the extent of his problem was vastly exaggerated.

"No, but you were so messed up, you couldn't go two hours without crying helplessly," Gardner
growled and Trip took the hint that any further jokes would probably not be appreciated.
"Sorry Admiral," he apologized, but stopped mid-sentence. "I didn't mean... Holy Shit!"

"What's wrong?" Gardner asked, looking alarmed.

"I'm either hallucinating or a whole piece of hull just materialized from thin air," Trip answered in stunned disbelief. "The last time I've seen something like that was at that automated repair station that tried to kill Travis."

"Surprise!" Gardner quipped and Trip saw that his look of alarm had given way to a satisfied grin. "I'm a pilot, not an engineer, so you'll have to ask Solan or Jeffries for details, but the short version is, they've developed a method to matter-transport the hull plates directly into place."

"I can see that," Trip muttered, still looking out the window of his office in amazement. "I only notice it now, they must have nailed on two months' worth of hull in just ten days!"

"Solan will give you the details tomorrow," Gardner said with an unmistakable emphasis on the timing of the meeting.

He acknowledged the Admiral's hint and the connection was severed. After the screen had gone blank, he called up the engineering logs, but as soon as he had entered his password, the screen went blank and a short error message appeared.

"Forget it, Buddy."

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"I believe I just lost a bet," Malcolm said and rolled his eyes when he saw the look of satisfaction and the raised eyebrow on T'Pol's face. "Logged on as soon as the Admiral hung up on him."

"I take it Hoshi had implemented the appropriate counter-measures?"

"Sure," he confirmed pensively. "She picked him up and went to the spa with him for some neuropressure while we caught up on the last ten days."

"Very well."

"T'Pol, I'm not too comfortable with nannying him like that. He's our superior officer and sooner or later it'll bite back if we keep watching his every step," Malcolm admitted.

"I do not like it any more than you do, but if we are not insistent that Trip learns to bring structure to his life, we will find ourselves in the same situation again and next time Starfleet will surely relieve him of duty."

"Let's hope he learns it before he gets thoroughly sick of us," he said with a sigh.

"Now you surely understand that it was important to demonstrate that we are serious. It would not have been of much help if we allowed him to go on like always, immediately after our return," she explained.

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Commodore Archer gripped his chair as a massive fountain of sparks exploded near the tactical console. He winced when he saw how two well coordinated medics carried the limp, bloodied body of his tactical officer away while his second in command took his place. They had quickly
become used to taking casualties – much too used to it.

"Helm, evasive maneuvers," Erika barked out and while the grav plating and the inertial dampers kept their internal organs where they were supposed to be, the view screen made it clear into what a steep bank the ship turned as it slipped through the chaos of the fight. There was something to be said for helmsmen, who had been trained using simulations of Travis Mayweather's idea of how nimble an NX class starship could be.

When Lorian's squadron returned from their short excursion to Jupiter station, they had stumbled upon a marauding group of six Romulan birds of prey and a huge warbird skulking around in the Yridia system; and with intelligence reports suggesting that the Rommies currently had no more than forty or fifty of these monsters available for the fight with coalition forces, losing seven of them would make a serious dent in their war effort.

Not wanting to be caught with his pants down, Jon had assembled a squadron of fifty ships led by the two NX classes *Atlantis* and *Endurance*, several *Kumari* class cruisers, the heavy cruiser *Sh'Raan* from the Vulcans and a whole host of frigates and destroyers. But even though they outnumbered the Romulans seven to one, they were kept busier than a one-armed paper hanger in a windstorm.

It had been a lot easier when the enemy were still using the cloaking device. Yes, they could sneak up and suddenly appear out of thin air, but at least they had a vulnerability back then. Without it, those tough bastards were a pain to grind down. It took countless hits just to wear down their shielding, let alone banging any dents into the heavily armored hulls of the behemoths. Their only weakness was that they were as nimble as a gazelle, or what was that gray animal with the trunk called, he thought with self-depreciation. God, how naive and idealistic he had been back in those days!

His short mental excursion was interrupted by Erika's string of instructions as Atlantis rejoined the fracas with a steep dive towards the squadron leader, a massive warbird. Six *D'Kyr* class frigates were buzzing around it like a swarm of mosquitoes, slowly but steadily wearing down the enemy's shielding, while two *Kumari* class cruisers drew its attention away from the vulnerable Vulcan ships.

"Let's see what a triple salvo of those new torpedoes looks like, Ensign," he heard Erika say and a satisfied grin appeared on the face of the young man who had taken over the battered console.

Jon didn't like the new torpedoes. They were the strongest yet, even dwarfing the Andorian ones, but they were so because Starfleet had adopted a deadly 'tit for tat' strategy after the nuclear devastation of the Galorndon system; Earth reacted to that brutality by deploying modified Mark IV torpedoes equipped with cluster warheads and fission charges. They didn't add anything in terms of destructive power, but in the case of a hull breach the 'dirty' warheads ensured maximum loss of life by blinding or incinerating the enemy crew, and whoever survived that was bound to succumb to the deadly radiation.

He saw the three torpedoes leave the tube in rapid succession, and coming near the warbird each of them released ten warheads. The Romulan lead ship, robbed of its shielding and already wounded by relentless fire from the Kumari and D'Kyr vessels, stood no chance when thirty nuclear warheads rained down death and destruction on it.

"Get us out of here," Erika ordered and the helmsman brought the ship about. The last Jon saw of the massive vessel was the orange glow as the deadly heat from the fission charges melted the innards of the ship and vaporized the corpses of its crew. Atlantis was rocked hard when it was hit by the shock-wave as the warp core of the Romulan ship exploded in a massive fireball.
For a moment Jon was lost for words, and then the old Oppenheimer quote came to his mind. "Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds," he muttered, and scowled.

Trip was sitting in his office, refreshed from a good night's sleep with T'Pol in his arms. He had lost count of how often he had woken up to the once-elusive feeling of her head on his chest, but he knew it would probably never get old.

Hoshi had removed the 'child lock' from his desk as promised, but not without giving him a berating for trying to access the logs, despite the clear agreement that he would not start to work before his first official shift, which had started thirty minutes ago. One thing was clear – Solan and Anna had not mucked around in his absence and had devised a rather brilliant scheme to speed up the construction process.

They had modified the cargo hold of an old warp 1 cargo barge into a huge transporter platform and developed transporter tags that could be applied to the four corners of where the hull plate was supposed to go. Instead of unloading the plates from the arriving cargo ships with a robot arm and cumbersomely putting them into place, they could now transport it to the converted cargo hold and from there directly on to the skeleton of the ship. Instead of twelve hours, emptying a fully laden cargo ship and putting the plates on the ship took now a mere ninety minutes. So, instead of the initially planned four months they would probably finish the hull in a record-breaking three weeks. Starfleet was already busy finding old cargo barges that hadn't been sold for scrap yet to convert more of them into flying transporter platforms for the other shipyards in Andorian, Tellarite and Vulcan space.

As great as these developments were, Trip couldn't feel too happy about it. While his people were busy coming up with brilliant ideas to speed up the ship building, their senior officers had been down on the surface cavorting around on the beach of a private tropical paradise for ten days. No matter how often his friends and his wife repeated their mantra of having needed that time of peace and quiet, he couldn't shake the nagging feeling of being a slacker.

Before he could come up with more names to call himself, the entrance of Malcolm interrupted his thoughts.

"Blimey, did you read the latest AAR's? Commodore Archer nuked seven Rommies yesterday," the Brit said with a satisfied smirk.

"Literally," Trip said with a look of disgust, knowing that by now the new 'dirty torpedoes' must have found their way to Jon's fleet. "What's the butcher's bill?"

"A D'Kyr and two frigates with all hands and ninety-two casualties on the surviving ships. Oh, and about one and a half thousand Romulans."

"You'd think they start getting the clue at some point," Trip said, pensively. "We must have butchered about three hundred thousand of them by now."

"Closer to four hundred to be precise," Malcolm corrected. "At thirty thousand casualties on our side it's looking quite good actually."

"How can that be good, Malcolm?" Trip asked, offended by his friend's nonchalance. "That's still thirty thousand families grieving for one of their own!"

"Trip, we are all as sick of this war as you are. But trust me, I've seen what happens to worlds that
have been granted the 'honor' of being annexed by the Romulan Star Empire. Don't pretend you are the only one affected by this." His look was bleak as memories came to him he had hoped were buried deep in his past.

"Sorry," Trip apologized before getting very angry. "I'm just so damned sick of it. I wanted to go out exploring and what do I end up doing? Once this ship is ready we'll go out and kill enough Romulans to make Hitler proud. That shit is not what I've signed up for."

"Sit," Malcolm said, deciding that 'ranks be hanged', and Trip obeyed.

"Take it from someone who's more used to killing than he feels comfortable with. Accept it as a necessary evil and we'll deal with the consequences later. I have ample experience with that and you have three people looking out for you. We'll catch you if you fall."

"You're getting good at this," Trip remarked with a slight grin. "For once I get the feeling you're better in touch with your emotions than I am."

"I have a good teacher," Malcolm replied, deadpan. "You have no idea how much T'Pol helped me the last two weeks and I know for a fact that Hoshi has become an expert in getting through to you. So stop whining and use the help that's offered to you. We need you back at your best."

"I'll do my best, Mal," he promised with a sigh.

"If your people go on like they have been doing, this ship will be ready in a month, maybe one and a half. Let Hoshi and Phlox help you, OK? I hate to be so blunt, but if T'Pol and I think you're not at your best, we won't let you take this thing out. You may hate us afterwards, but you'll take responsibility of more than two hundred lives. We won't let you do that if you haven't worked through your problems."

Trip stared at his friend, dumbfounded by the unmistakable threat. He knew that Malcolm was perfectly right, but it didn't feel too great to be told about it so directly.

"Twenty hundred in our quarters, Hoshi will be waiting for you. You need to talk about this and she'll listen."

"I'll be there, Mal."
Hoshi entered engineering and found Trip hunched over a console looking at its display intensely. He didn't seem to notice too much of the bustling activity around him as dozens of Engineers hurried to and fro trying to get various subsystems online, checked and realigned. She looked over his shoulder and saw that he was studying a transliteration of the Vulcan software.

She put her hand on the small of his back and he jumped a little before he realized who had touched him.

"You wanted to see me?" she asked once she had captured his attention.

"If I only wanted to see you, I'd drop by your quarters in the evening," he joked and she was happy to see him chuckle. "The view's much more entertaining then."

"You goof," she shot back with a smile and gave him a playful smack on his rear. "So what do you need me for if it isn't to admire my amazing naked body?"

"And your unrivaled humility," he added, shaking his head with a grin, before becoming serious again. "Actually, I'm reaching the end of my rope with this routine," he said and pointed at the screen. She bent over next to him to get a better look. "It's the control routine for the intermix ratio. I could be wrong, but I get the impression the thing is way too complex to work. During the last simulation the speed started fluctuating as soon as we hit six point two and I suspect that this piece of code can't keep up, causing the fluctuation."

"It's encrypted," Hoshi said and started tapping at the on-screen keyboard, before she remembered that she was poaching in his working zone. "May I?" she asked somewhat belatedly.

"That's what I asked you to come here for," he remarked, then smiled and grabbed a nearby chair for her.

"Thank you kind sir," she cooed and took a seat. "It's been a while since I had the chance to crack something. Too bad that it doesn't look like much of a challenge."

Her hands flew over the keyboard and soon the code appeared on the screen as a series of elegant Vulcan symbols.

"It's a Golic cipher," she analyzed. "No wonder this thing can't keep up. It's written in meta-instructions and encrypted on top of it. I bet T'Pol could manually control the intermix ratio quicker than this routine."

"Figures," he muttered.

"I thought this engine was straight out of a Suurok class?" she asked and looked up at him. "How come the Vulcans don't have any problems?"

"The ring nacelle design is much less prone to stability problems. They barely need to adjust the intermix ratio at all. That's the drawback of our twin nacelle design. We pack everything so tightly that we inevitably run into challenges at higher speeds. But on the upside our system is much less prone to enemy fire and plasma leaks."

"You know what, we'll just rewrite the whole thing in machine code," she offered. "All I need is the offset matrix for the correction and an op-code list if you have one."
"Have you ever written an ECU routine before?" he asked in surprise.

"No, but all the target correction routines of Buran's torpedo launchers are mine. Malcolm and I rewrote them all. They use the exact same principle and the interface to the rest of the ECU software is pretty clear cut. It's a simple set of RPC calls."

"You never cease to amaze me Hoshi. Never knew you were such a programming genius."

"It's just another language," she said and smilingly accepted his kiss on her cheek before watching him run off to get the matrix diagrams. It was good to see his enthusiasm return.

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"Now isn't that a cozy little scene?" Malcolm observed in a hushed voice as he and T'Pol came to stand near the entrance to engineering and saw Trip and Hoshi working on the Engine Control Unit. He had to swallow a chuckle when he imagined how he would have reacted to such a spectacle three or four years ago. His best friend and his wife – a fleet captain and a Lieutenant-Commander – were sitting side by side working on the engine software. Trip's arm rested on the backrest of her chair and in between discussing the particulars of their work they took little breaks to joke with each other. Even though he knew that Trip was not yet completely out of the woods, it was great to see that Hoshi managed to bring his brighter side to the fore again.

Back in the day when his rear end was still filled to the brim with a very rigid stick, he would have gone ballistic over the unprofessional familiarity on duty, but back then he didn't know what it meant to be with people who meant more to him than his own family. And back then he didn't have to force himself to go on doing a job he had lost the enthusiasm for.

Gone were the days when he would have thought that such behavior, especially if displayed by two senior officers, would lead to general sloppiness, if not even downright anarchy. It was obvious that the crews of Enterprise and Buran had put their 'First Quad' – the human contingent had adopted the Andorian nickname – under some peculiar form of 'puppy protection'. Nobody would even think about complaining to the higher-ups about the casual way they interacted with each other and nobody would take it as an invitation to drop their own professional conduct.

In fact, the opposite was the case. He had overheard talks in the mess halls that the relatively new crew of Buran took the closely knit friendship between the two couples as a sign of hope that being cooped up in close quarters for years could lead to much more amazing things than just cabin-fever and exhaustion.

In those thankfully distant days he also wouldn't even have dreamed about ever getting married, let alone to the most beautiful and enchanting creature in the world. His time-displaced alter ego certainly had never learned to get over his past and his messed up social skills. But then, that incarnation of Malcolm Reed had not had T'Pol as a close friend to help him with that.

"I guess the armory installation check can wait until tomorrow," he decided seeing that Trip was in the capable hands of Hoshi. "I could use a bit of supper. Care to tag along?"

He saw T'Pol's nod and they left toward the mess hall where Trip's mother ruled the roost.

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"Does it bother you that we've played a fair game of wife-swap lately?" Malcolm asked cutting
another piece off the best chicken cordon bleu he had ever tasted. "We've spent more time with each other than you and Trip the last two weeks; well except for the nights of course."

He could see that she had to think about this for a while.

"I do not think this question really presents itself for me. If there was anything to be concerned about, my bond reflexes would let us know about it. I would actually prefer he would spend even more time with Hoshi, because whenever he does so he is making progress in his recovery. I believe doctor Phlox's remark that she would be a most capable counselor was meant more seriously than he made it appear to be."

"I guess the Andorians have a point when they call us a quad," he said pensively, squashing a potato. "Seriously, if they were to order you and Trip away tomorrow, I'd go potty. It'd be like losing half my family."

"Trip and I were most distressed when we had to leave you behind at Salem One," she admitted and he could see that her mind was not really on her salad right now.

"I'd always thought I'd live out my sorry life alone," he said, savoring another bit of his meal before continuing. "Did you know that my counterpart on Lorian's ship died a lonely bachelor not long after Trip?"

"Trip mentioned it during the first dinner we had in our quarters."

"Right, the double date on movie night," he remembered fondly. "You have no idea how much the two of you changed my life when you played match-makers between Hoshi and me. I don't think I can ever thank you enough for that."

"No gratitude is required." She dismissed the sentiment. "It changed our lives in a positive way, too. I do not think Trip would have recovered as much as he has so far without Hoshi's and your friendship. He might appear gregarious, but he has few really close friends."

"Has he ever said anything about what he thinks of our idea of building our own space station when the war is over?" Malcolm asked acknowledging her previous statement with a nod.

"He finds it most compelling," T'Pol said. "But he has doubts that even the substantial monetary savings of all four of us would be sufficient to build anything more substantial than what he refers to as a 'floating shack'."

Malcolm chuckled at the mental image.

"Well, I've had an off-record talk with Commodore Falkner," he said. "We might be able to acquire substantial funding from Starfleet. Do you remember the first planet we visited? The one with the psychotropic pollen?"

"All too well," she said with a raised eyebrow. "You could say it was the first 'lover's quarrel' I had with Trip. Although we were not quite aware of being lovers yet."

Malcolm put his hand before his mouth to prevent spraying T'Pol with its contents as he struggled to fight the laugh long enough to swallow the half-chewed bite.

"I think you could make a fortune as a stand-up comedian," he managed between laughs and coughs.

She just looked at him with that raised brow. Nobody outside the 'First Quad' would know that it...
was her very personal form of giggling.

"Anyway." He returned to the original topic. "If we can find a way to eradicate whatever plants produce that pollen, Starfleet wants to use that planet as their very own version of Risa, sans the slags and criminals. They would probably be willing to help fund a space station in orbit around the planet if we manage to make it habitable without needing to inoculate people with Inaprovaline as it's only practicable for forty-eight hours."

"We would first need to find out what place the plants occupy in the planet's ecological system. I believe that genetically manipulating them to no longer produce Troposoline is preferably to eradicating them. I shall begin my research at an opportune time. Doctor Phlox would surely be amendable to helping me."

"So what do you think?" he asked. "Should we throw our hat into the ring?"

"Is it a competition?"

Malcolm had to chuckle. For all her time among humans, T'Pol still could be slightly naïve at times as far as human nature was concerned.

"T'Pol, Starfleet offers up to three billions of funding and a 200 square kilometer island on the surface as personal possession. Once the station is running you have to repay that, but at a zero interest rate and over a fifty year period. Everybody and his dog is jumping at a sweet deal like that."

"But which chances would the four of us have against big industrial conglomerates?"

"First of all – our standing with Starfleet," Malcolm explained. "With the way we kicked the Romulans' arses lately, the war will go on for four, perhaps five years before they get tired of being slaughtered. By that time we will have a ten year deep space service record. Two tours against the Xindi and the Romulans – presuming we are still alive, of course."

"Indeed."

"And on top of that we have already rebuilt and run two stations for them and in both cases we used significantly less monetary resources than what the bean-counters had estimated. That's a massive competitive advantage. The more they're spending, the more they love to save money."

"Your logic has merit. We shall apply for the contract. There is one question, however, that needs an answer. I doubt it is a coincidence that such an offer materializes just as we think about building a space station."

Malcolm smiled. She was good. No wonder she had worked as an operative.

"I might have pinched the idea... slightly," he replied dryly. "With a little help from Falks."

"Curious."

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Four days later...

The prisoner was led into the interrogation chamber. His haggard frame was clad in a gray prisoner's uniform, his hands shackled in front of his body. Soval fixed him with a steely glance. There was no doubt. He looked indeed like how his brother would most likely appear had he not
died in one of the many border skirmishes with Andorian forces. At least that had been the assumption for all those years.

Soval doubted that any medical procedure could have duplicated the prominent scar on his temple that her father had received when fighting a wild sehlat during an infant T'Pol's naming ceremony. There was no denying it. This was T'Pol's male parent – and he was a Romulan.

"It is good to see you again, Soval," the prisoner said in flawless, unaccented Vulcan. "I see you did not content yourself with the post of an Ambassador. First Minister – I always knew you would ascend high in the hierarchy."

"Who are you?" Soval asked, tightly controlling his emotions. "What happened to my brother?"

"I am the brother you knew most of your life. V'Nur, son of V'Kar and T'Mir died in his youth. Do you remember his journey into the forge? His Rite of Tal'oth?"

"I do," Soval said, still fixing the man with a hard glare.

"He did not survive it. I tracked him while he was in the Forge. He chose a cave that was too small and was killed by the sand fire. I brought his corpse out of the forge. On board a cloaked ship I was surgically altered to resemble him by some aliens that the Empire had enslaved. I don't even remember their species."

"And you took my brother's place," Soval deduced.

"It was and still is the preferred method of infiltrating Vulcan. You will find it interesting that killing a Vulcan is considered the same crime as killing a Romulan on our world. That's why we developed the method of taking over the identities of Vulcans who died in the Forge."

"V'Las did not appear to have any problems with killing Vulcans," Soval disagreed, without showing his disgust about what he had heard so far.

"He killed my dear mate T'Les," the prisoner agreed with a quivering voice, his glance directed away from his interrogator for a moment and Soval was taken aback when he saw genuine pain and grief in the Romulan's eyes. "If this human – this Captain Archer – wouldn't have done so already, I would now wish to kill that veruul with my bare hands. V'Las – or Moravius as he was known on our world – and Valdore killed more Vulcans than the whole imperial fleet since its inception."

Soval started pacing along the wall, something he had never done before. He should be outraged about the lie that a large part of his life had been. The grief for the man who, as he now knew, was not even his true brother, had lasted a long time. Yet something about V'Nur – or Turius as he called himself – stirred curiosity in him.

"Why have you returned?" he asked, outwardly calm. "You surely know that both activity as a foreign agent and espionage still carry the death penalty on Vulcan."

"Both Tavrus and I are aware of the possible consequences. Our lives are not worth much in the Empire, especially now. Romulus, or more precisely its current Praetor, does not care about its heroes. They don't even deem us worthy of restoring our appearance. Yet we both value our home world and its people and we cannot sit idle while the Empire sends its youth into senseless battles we cannot win."

"You wish to defect?" Soval asked, an eyebrow raised in interest.
"We wish to do more than that," the prisoner said. "We are both willing to answer every question you might have, although a mind-meld would probably be a much more effective method."

"You are betraying your people." Soval stated the obvious. He wished to learn the man's motives.

"Yes we are," the prisoner agreed. "And that betrayal will cost thousands upon thousands of lives, but it will cost fewer fewer lives than letting the current regime go on with their foolish policy. We are willing to carry that stigma for the rest of our existence, however short it may end up being."

"I find it hard to believe that you would decide such a course of action without expecting something in return," Soval speculated. "Rihanssu were not known for being unselfish.

"If you would find the information we can offer valuable enough to spare our lives, it would be all we wish to ask for. I, however, have an additional request," the prisoner said and it looked to Soval as if he was choosing his words most carefully.

"What would that request be?" he asked, waiting patiently for the prisoner to communicate his request.

"No matter if I meet my end shortly or by natural means, I would wish to visit my mate's burial site. And see my beloved daughter again." He paused, his gaze momentarily directed away from Soval. "If, of course, she agrees to it, which I suspect is far from certain."

"We might consider it," Soval answered curtly after a short time of contemplation. "But do not expect an answer in a short period of time." He pivoted and left the room without any further communication with the prisoner.

Trip entered his private code to visit Hoshi for the 'mandatory' report about his therapy session with Phlox. The two couples had exchanged private codes so they could enter each others quarters without having to ring the door chime. They were installed in a fashion that they would not work when the door was locked. That prevented them from walking in on activities that were not meant for an audience.

When he entered the home of his friends, he found Hoshi on the floor doing sit-ups. As always she wore a dress made of the finest 'nothing at all'. He cackled mentally at the thought that Malcolm would probably suspect something was very wrong if he ever came home to find her wearing as much as underwear.

"Hi buddy," she said and quickly jumped up to her feet when he entered. The slender woman hugged him, and kissed him on the cheek, like she always did when she hadn't seen him during the day. "Would you mind setting up the table while I take a quick shower? Dinner is on us today."

"No problem," Trip acknowledged as she disappeared into the bathroom. He chuckled silently. Before he even reached the desk on which the folded table cloth had already been placed, he heard the water start running. That was the practical thing about her nudist streak – showers were really quick.

"To what do we owe the honor of being invited?" he asked loud enough for Hoshi to hear him over the noise of the shower. Since she had left the door open, she obviously expected to continue their conversation.

"Malcolm has some new information," he heard her reply from the shower. "I guess it must be something big, because he was in such a good mood."
"Now you've made me really curious," Trip said with a grin, aligning the table cloth. "Malcolm in a good mood? Hell, maybe the war's over."

"If only," Hoshi sighed. "What did Phlox say? You didn't forget your appointment, did you?"

"No mom, I didn't forget it," he replied with an amused eye-roll. "He's quite satisfied and was waxing lyrical about your counseling skills. He gave me a clean bill of health, actually, so I'm afraid you won't have to mother me anymore every day."

"Too bad," she said and Trip could hear a hint of disappointment in her voice. "Help me with my back?"

He walked into the bathroom taking the sponge from her. She had positioned herself at the entrance of the stall so he could lather up her back without getting wet.

"Don't worry, honey," he said while soaping her shoulders. "I won't be a stranger. It was me not talking to anyone that caused the problem. I'm not planning to do that mistake again."

"You better don't," she giggled and took a step forward so the water could rinse off the soap. Once she was convinced that all soap was gone, she turned off the water and collected her long hair in a pile on top of her head.

Having had to render the same assistance to Lizzie in their childhood, he knew that a large towel was needed for what he used to call the 'long-haired girl bathroom turban' and he handed her one. Once she had wrapped the towel around her hair, he grabbed another one to towel her back.

She happily smiled back at him over her shoulder. “Someone once had a long haired girlfriend.”

“Not a girlfriend, my baby sister,” he corrected her.

He sat down on a chair, while Hoshi went through the contents of her chest of drawers and donned a pair of yoga pants and a shirt.

"You expecting someone?" he asked with a chuckle and saw her nod.

"T'Pau came to the station with your parents today. T'Pol and Malcolm have taken her to the spa and in about five minutes they'll be here."

"Let me guess," he speculated, grinning. "No naked dinners – Captain's orders from hubby."

He laughed out loud when she nodded in an exaggerated and mock schoolgirl pout.

"Don't let us burst from curiosity," Trip demanded impatiently. The dinner was done and Malcolm had started to serve beer for himself, Trip and Hoshi, while T'Pol and T'Pau preferred the orange juice the steward had brought them when collecting the dishes.

"After the design committee meeting, I had a little chat with Falks," Malcolm explained as he sat down. "We look good for the station plans. We definitely have the votes from Falks, Gardner and Zhukov."

Trip grinned at Hoshi. She looked as happy as a clam at high tide.

"What we need to do now is prepare a detailed proposal," Malcolm explained. "Trip, you'll be left out of it – you need to finish that ship, it's paramount to our plans that you finish it sooner rather
"Care to elaborate, Captain?" Trip shot back, assuming formality to emphasize his seriousness.

"This is not supposed to be known by anyone not currently in the room." Malcolm explained with an especially stern look at T'Pau. She answered with a nod. "Two Romulans seem to have defected to Vulcan. They are still being grilled, but if this is legit, the head of the Romulan secret service has switched sides."

"Holy shit!" Trip exclaimed.

"Holy shit, indeed," Malcolm continued. "They have supplied the V'Shar with the alleged coordinates of the Romulan shipyards. That's what you'll be testing your weapons on once you're done building that behemoth."

"I don't even have a crew," Trip said. "I'm not going to sail into Romulan space with a bunch of rookies."

"If you ask me," Malcolm commented. "Take Hoshi as your XO. She has driven Buran as ranking officer almost as often as I have done as a captain. Hess could be ChiefEng – she's every bit as good as you. I'll give you Tholos as a tactical officer. That guy could put a round in a flea's arse from a light year away. Plant Travis at the helm and Phlox in sickbay and you have the best bridge crew in the galaxy."

"I'll never get that past Starfleet," Trip said, shaking his head.

"Let that be my problem, mate," Malcolm said. "You just make sure that thing out there is able to nuke a few Romulan shipyards as soon as possible."

"And you think nuking the shipyards will end the war?" Trip asked.

"Not really," Malcolm said. "But it will make it a lot less bloody. The Romulans are down to about thirty-five ships available for this part of the sector. That's thirty-five huge and powerful ships, mind you, but it's something we can deal with for a while."

"A stalemate," T'Pau noted.

"Hopefully long enough for us to pump out four or five more of these," Malcolm confirmed, pointing over his shoulder at the huge hull of the Molotok.

"Do they really believe that the Romulans have only a handful of ships?" Trip said, shaking his head again in doubt. "They wouldn't be that stupid, would they?"

"No, they actually have close to two hundred of these bloody birds of prey and about forty more warbirds. Too bad for the bastards that the Klingons thought it was a good time to help themselves to some Romulan space."

"I never thought I'd be rooting for those ugly guys," Hoshi added and shoved her mug over to Malcolm for a refill.

"True," Malcolm said, refilling Hoshi's and Trip's mugs. "The Vulcans reckon the Rommies need about two to three years to deal with the Klingons. If we haven't got a whole fleet of Siuroks, Kumaris and Molotoks by then, we better start learning to speak Romulan."

"And before that we make sure they don't improve their odds," Trip said, realizing why they
wanted to attack the Romulan shipyards so quickly.

"Once their shipyards are gone, we'll probably have the most sedate war in history on our hands for a while," Malcolm continued as he returned to the table. "They can't afford to lose more ships until they've dealt with the Kingons. That means we won't see much Romulan metal in our space for quite a while. During that time you and your engineering crews will pump out ships, while T'Pol and I make sure we win that station contract."

"I will make sure that Vulcan argues in your favor," T'Pau added and Trip saw that she was confused when he and Malcolm started laughing.

"You've given her the details about the deal, haven't you?" he half stated, half asked.

"Yep; two hundred square kilometres of subtropical landmass with lots of water but without a dress code – hook, line, and sinker," Malcolm cackled, while both Hoshi and T'Pau blushed slightly.

Two months later, Salem One's conference room

Jon looked at the assembly of officers around him and noticed that he and Erika were the only humans in attendance. Lorian was half-human, but all others were aliens. Just three years ago such a meeting would have been close to unthinkable. The oldest of the other thirty-one attendees were four Vulcan captains (from the Sh'Ran, the Ni'Var, the Ti'Mur and the Kir'Shara – the newest addition to the fleet). Twenty-four Andorians, all but Shran commanding a Kumari class cruiser, Lorian, Erika and himself completed the meeting.

"The Coalition Command Center has sent the orders for Operation "Warrior's Prayer". The mission will be conducted under command of Fleet Captain Charles Anthony Tucker III, who will arrive in five days aboard the first jointly designed coalition war ship, the Molotok.

"What a ship!" one of the Andorian Captains said in obvious amazement after Jon had put up an image of the completed ship which would launch about in about two hours if he had calculated Earth time correctly.

"It is indeed an impressive design," Sopek agreed, much more calmly than his blue-skinned colleague. "What can you tell us about it, Commodore?"

"It's the best of all races," Jon explained. "Vulcan sensors, Tellarite alloys, Human nacelle design and Andorian weapons. Crew complement of just over two hundred, twenty-two phaser banks, twelve phaser cannons and thirty torpedo launchers – twenty forward, ten aft. This, ladies and gentlemen, is our ticket to winning this war."

"Indeed impressive," Sopek repeated. "But even such a powerful design will be needed in numbers."

"Tucker and his team built the thing in three and a half months instead of the six that were projected. Vulcan is currently re-tooling the T'Kuth shipyards to start building Molotok class ships, and if your mission is successful, it'll buy us at least a year; we could build ten if not more of them in that time."

"What is our mission?" one of the Andorians – Captain Akaani, if he remembered correctly – asked.

Jon called up the star chart on the view screen.
"The Romulans are currently trapped in a war on two fronts – against us and against the Klingons," he explained, indicating the approximate outline of the Romulan-Klingon border. Their shipyards are located here, in the Alpha Onias system. The Vulcans report that they are currently busy pushing out more warships and it's your task to make sure the poor guys don't work too hard."

Obvious amusement spread among the Andorians.

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Trip and Hoshi were standing in front of the shuttle. Each of them was holding their other half tightly in their arms. He could easily tell that T'Pol was apprehensive about letting him go, and Malcolm's nervous scowl made it clear that he wasn't doing much better in regards to Hoshi, but duty called, so there was nothing they could do. This was the downside of their predicament. All four of them would want to quit sooner rather than later, but they couldn't bring themselves to abandon their fellow Starfleet comrades in time of war.

"Keep an eye on Hoshi for me," Malcolm requested and Trip returned the unexpected hug from his friend. He could see T'Pol and Hoshi hug each other, too.

"We'll be back, as soon as the job's done," Trip promised and stepped out of Malcolm's embrace. He turned to take Hoshi's hand and helped her enter the shuttle.

He piloted the craft away from Buran towards the huge shape of Molotok. It was time to prove that his ship could deliver on its promises.
As the turbo-lift came to a stop Trip and Hoshi let go of each other's hand. They had used the short ride to reassure each other, but as soon as the door opened they had to leave their friendship behind – at least in the public eye. The crew needed two experienced leaders and that meant they had to hide their own insecurities and fears to be dealt with in the privacy of their cabins after duty hours.

As they stepped out of the lift they walked into a beehive. Engineers and bridge personnel were bustling to and fro immersed in last minute preparations and adjustments to the many consoles. Although the Molotok class had a rather spacious main bridge, Trip had decided not to waste time on that right now and conduct the entire mission from the battle bridge. The 'luxury bridge' was something they could use on a mission of exploration. For trying to sneak into enemy space to nuke a shipyard it was a rather useless commodity.

"Captain on deck!" Tholos called out and the frantic activity died down in a heartbeat.

"As you were," Trip answered in acknowledgment and immediately everybody resumed what he or she had been doing before Tholos' call.

"How about I try to collect some sitreps while you sift through the reports?" Hoshi suggested.

"Sounds like a plan, Commander," he replied semi-officially. "I'll be in my ready room. I bet there's a tower of PADDs already waiting for me."

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Soval stood with his hands hidden in the wide sleeves of his robe. When the two prisoners were brought in, he saw with satisfaction that the human Embassy's offer to take over responsibility for the nutrition of the inmates showed results. Both were in better shape than after the first two weeks of their stay. He harbored the suspicion that the two Romulans would be seen frequently in the dining facility of United Earth's embassy, where they could consume meat without much prejudice.

An almost imperceptible nod was enough to convey his wish that the two persons before him be freed of their shackles. The young Lieutenant fulfilled the First Minister's wish and Soval gave them a moment to relax their arms and wrists.

"The High Council has deliberated on your further faith and has come to the conclusion that your invaluable service in aiding us to shorten this war in connection with your detention warrants to abstain from further punitive action, provided that you do not attempt to engage in any further espionage nor try to contact your people."

"If our people learn of our further existence, they will try to correct that 'oversight'," the man who was not V'Nur replied with unhidden sarcasm. "As you can imagine, we have no reason to contact them."

"Leave your security in our hands," Soval replied evenly, not reacting to his false brother's emotionalism. "As you surely understand, we will not be as improvident as to leave you unobserved. But the agents who are charged with surveillance of your actions are also responsible for your safety."

"What are the restrictions on our freedom?" the younger Romulan asked.

"You are subject to the same restrictions that apply to every Vulcan civilian. In your case the
additional surveillance may bring occasional infractions of your privacy, but the forces are ordered to reduce those instances to the absolutely necessary minimum."

"I take it an appropriate cover story has been fabricated?" the older defector inquired.

"You are V'tosh'Ka'tur, who returned after being detained by the V'Las administration on a remote outpost. Your status as members of the sect will allow you to show emotions without raising suspicion. But be aware that while their lifestyle is largely tolerated, you may face censure from conservative elements of the population."

"This is something we can live with. We are not planning to be too visible to the wider public in any case."


"Has the High Command also decided on my personal request?" asked the man who once was thought to be V'Nur.

"Your request to visit T'Les's burial site has been granted," Soval replied, not showing the rage he still felt at the man before him. "As for a possible meeting with T'Pol, the High Council has deemed this time inopportune to confront her with the information about her ancestry."

"Understood," the Romulan acknowledged and Soval believed he saw a genuine flash of sadness on the Romulan's face, further confounding him. The man deserved all the rage he had troubles to suppress, but on the other hand he had an emotional makeup as if he really was V'Nur."

"You will be provided with shelter," Soval decreed, tabling resolution of his inner conflict for later meditation. "From then on you are free to live on your own."

With that he pivoted and left the chamber without affording the Romulans any further conversation. He deemed exposing himself to more inner turmoil supremely unwise at this point in time, especially since there was more to ponder. The Eldest mother had summoned him to an audience on short notice. He needed to meditate urgently, lest he would offend the clan's matriarch by not having calmed his mind satisfactorily before meeting her.

Malcolm stood in front of the view port, observing the umbilical cords as they fell away from the massive hull of the new ship one by one. T'Pol stood next to him, observing the scene with equal interest and – as he guessed from his own feelings – apprehension.

He thought about the two people whom the slowly moving ship was taking further and further away from him. It would be the first time since their wedding that Hoshi and he would be separated, but that was nothing compared to his two friends, who would have to suffer through the effects of a semi-severed mating bond for however long this mission was going to last.

T'Pol had explained that she and Trip would remain able to sense each other as a faint presence at the edge of each other's minds, but the inherent closeness of being in complete tune with their better half's emotional make-up would be gone due to the great distance. Knowing this, he didn't dare making any attempt to fathom the emptiness that Trip and T'Pol would be feeling very soon.

This would also be a test of strength for Hoshi. The nightmares about her abduction by the Reptilians and the images she saw on Corridan had haunted her a long time and only receded due to his holding her tightly every night. When she found herself alone in Salem One's field hospital after her injury at Betazed, they had returned in force. Returning to her routine of resting in his
protective embrace fought them back into remission, but now she would find herself separated again.

He had pondered just asking Trip to let her sleep in his quarters, but he knew what the reaction would be – Trip would be scandalized at the thought. He fought down an amused snort. In a way he could understand Trip, but the situation also didn't lack a certain irony. It wasn't exactly an uncommon occurrence to come home from the gym after a Suus Mahna sparring with T'Pol and find Trip and Hoshi engaged in a card game, sharing a beer or drinking tea, which to the outsider would of course have looked utterly strange due to Hoshi's categorical refusal to wear more than a pair of panties – if at all even those – inside their own four walls unless the ambient temperature forced her to.

Neither would any of the four of them think anything was wrong about him and T'Pol using the communal shower of the gym at the same time after their martial arts practice. Yet the thought of T'Pol asking him if she could sleep in his quarters was somehow too weird. Not that he understood why, considering that it wasn't any more intimate than being in the shower together even if the communal facility left enough space between them.

T'Pol certainly wasn't of the ugly persuasion; in fact she ran a very close second to Hoshi's gorgeous form and Trip probably thought the same, just with the roles of Hoshi and T'Pol reversed. But appreciating the gorgeous looks of their wives was one thing, swapping them for that was out of the question. The thought of hurting his best friend like that was anathema to him and he didn't doubt for a second that Trip thought the same. That's why he would win the bet with T'Pol, no doubt about that.

In her typical fashion T'Pol had surprised him by declaring that it was 'the logical course of action' that Trip keep Hoshi company if that's what was required for restful sleep. Of course – he realized– she approached the topic with the logic of a Vulcan as opposed to their pesky unexplainable human gut feelings. She knew that they were close but in absence of any averse bond reaction she saw no reason to be worried. In a way she operated on the maxim 'as long as the bond remains calm, everything is fine among the four of us'.

What the alternative looked like, well, poor Trip had learned about that a while ago, when some recently-hired young civilian female engineer, unaware of his being 'taken', had made less-than-subtle advances on the Station's commanding officer, leaving Trip and T'Pol almost physically sick when their bond's equilibrium was upset by the blatant intrusion.

He looked over at T'Pol after a prolonged silence watching the launch of Trip's ship. Of course he had seen the errant tear that had escaped her attempts to remain outwardly calm the moment the huge ship had started to move, but he pretended not to have seen it for her sake.

"Are you sure you're up to coping with all my paperwork on top of yours?" he quipped in an attempt to lighten the gloomy mood.

"As I understand it, it would be poor form to back out of a bet," T'Pol replied dryly, her voice showing no sign of her inner turmoil. "It is, however, not yet a given that your assumption will be proven true. You might be underestimating Hoshi's strength."

"I might," Malcolm agreed. "But I'm happy she's not alone out there. Trip will look after her."

"They will both help each other," T'Pol noted. "It is what we promised each other, is it not?"

"Indeed," Malcolm said with a small smile, happy about T'Pol's verbal assist in prying himself away from the view port. "That's why I'll help you with those botany studies now."
He chuckled at her eyebrow creeping very far north in surprise.

"Well, with you on the task there's no chance that we are not going to win that contract," he explained. "My talent to blow stuff up will be fairly useless in a few years. It's time to broaden my horizons."

Her eyebrow still was very high up her forehead, but she offered no comment as they walked away to the big table in T'Pol's station office.

"So has Phlox offered any help in genetically modifying these plants?" he continued his conversation with her eyebrow while she called up what looked to him like a genetic diagram.

"I have revisited the data that Crewmen Cutler and Novakovich collected before the compound started affecting us and I have come to a surprising result," T'Pol explained and called up a few more diagrams for comparison.

"The genome looks completely different than the others," Malcolm noted and pointed at a sequence that couldn't be found in any of the other diagrams.

"Indeed," she agreed. "This plant is not native to the planet. That explains why it has such a heavy defensive mechanism that serves no purpose in the absence of any herbivores big enough to consume its foliage."

"So it has been introduced?"

"Most likely inadvertently," she confirmed with a nod and called up some sort of meteorological simulation. "I extrapolated the likely distribution area of the plant."

"We suspected the pollen was blown down from the mountains," Malcolm recalled. "You didn't suffer any problems before the storm hit."

"Indeed. The plant must reside on the south side of this mountain range."

"Or half the planet by now, if there were more storms," he mused.

"That is rather unlikely," T'Pol disagreed. "Although the planet's insect population is diverse, none of the insects have evolved to care for this plant. It is dependent on being pollinated by chance, which severely hinders its procreation."

"So it should be relatively easy to exterminate."

"We need a live sample to determine a way to exterminate the plant without putting an unnecessary strain on the planet's eco system."

"I think we know someone who can help us with that..."

Soval entered the dwelling and pushed back the cloak that had protected him from the sun. It wasn't often that one was summoned for an unannounced audience with the clan's matriarch and he wondered what T'Para wanted to discuss. The release of the Romulan defectors was the likeliest topic.

"Live long and prosper," he intoned in contemporary Vulcan. "You wished to see me, pidkom."

"Peace and long life, son of our clan," the matriarch returned the greeting. "Have a seat and rest.
We have much to discuss.

Soval took the offered glass and slowly drank its contents. It would be unseemly to display any haste. It also gave him time to contemplate any possible reasons for the unexpected audience. Speculation did of course serve no purpose as the Eldest Mother would reveal the reason for her summoning him in due time, but it was one of the habits he had adopted during his time on Earth and it was a hard habit to lose.

"TPau has contacted me with a request for help, and upon reviewing her logic I found myself in favor of offering the requested assistance," the matriarch began without preamble, and her tone made it clear to him that she did not expect him to come to a different conclusion.

"If you would let me have the details behind this request?" he inquired dryly.

He listened intently as the Eldest Mother relayed details about how Charles, his wife and the En'ahr'at of Lorian planned to go up against several large industrial consortia in their bid to receive Starfleet's order to build a space station and make habitable a planet that had almost ended Enterprise's mission for some of the crew mere weeks after the launch.

He knew that Charles was overly ambitious at times and T'Pol could be prone to set herself unattainable goals, but this was an impossible target, even by their standards. What surprised him even more was the impression that the clan's matriarch seemed to share their misplaced optimism.

"I find myself surprised about your positive regard for this request," he ventured carefully, once the Eldest had concluded her narrative. "It appears to be overly ambitious even by Human standards – and would it not be better for Charles and T'Pol to return to Vulcan at some point in time?"

"Vulcan is no place to live for Charles. Prolonged exposure to our higher gravity would lead to long-term consequences for his health. It would also be no place for Malcolm or someone as fragile as Hoshi."

"I do not understand what Lorian's en'ahr'at have to do with this?" the First Minister asked.

"You have been kept busy by your duties, Soval. You have not yet seen the unique closeness and trust between the four of them. The Andorians under Charles's command affectionately refer to them as a 'quad' and TPau refers continually to having 'four En'ahr'at'. You have to delve deep into the ancient texts to find anything even remotely similar in our culture. Whilst friendship is not an alien concept on our world, such a close one is unheard-of. It is my conviction that where one pair of mates goes, the other one goes, too."

"Most intriguing." Soval confined himself to that observation; more would risk giving away his surprise in front of the Eldest Mother.

"It is of utmost importance that we render any assistance we can in their attempt to gain this contract. This is not only out of interest for the clan. Those consortia want to gain the contract for monetary gain, while the children want to build a home for themselves among the stars. Logic dictates that they are approaching the task with much more honorable intentions and the result will reflect that. And Charles and T'Pol in particular need a home where they can live peacefully without facing prejudice for their union. Neither Earth nor our world is such a place."

"They shall have any assistance I can offer," Soval acquiesced. One did not deny the Eldest Mother, especially when she spoke with what was an almost enthusiastic zeal and when the well-being of clansmen was at stake.
"In the early days of their mission, the human vessel encountered a planet in the 61 Ursae Majoris system."

"I have never heard of such a system," Soval replied, noticing too late that he had interrupted the matriarch.

She silently accepted his apologetic nod, and continued, "It is the human name of the system. Vulcans have never charted it despite its relative closeness to our own world. These are the data transmitted by T'Pau. They require live samples of a specific plant, orbital scans and geological data."

"I shall dispatch a science vessel," Soval promised as he took the data chip from the Eldest.

"Make sure the report is read in its entirety. The planet might look as lush as Earth, but it is dangerous. I also urge you to keep the reasons for this research strictly confidential."

"Of course, Eldest."

"Have you come to accept what you learned about your past?" the Eldest asked, swiftly changing the topic.

Soval closed his eyes and applied several breathing techniques to calm himself.

"I still find it hard to accept that the man I thought to be my brother was in fact an impostor."

"It is indeed hard to fathom," the matriarch agreed, and Soval had to fight his surprise at the uncharacteristically soft tone of her voice. "But in a way he is your brother, more than your biological sibling, who was hardly even a part of your life.

You have melded with him yourself. Did the man not regard you as a brother the same way you did? In a way he is as much a victim of the conflict as you are. He had to lead someone else's life, not his own. But he made it his own. And never forget, our people have inflicted similar damage on families of our lost brethren. His sacrifice spares many lives that in ancient times originated on this world, even if we are still forced to take the lives of Rihanssu to regain peace."

"I have much to contemplate, pidkom."

"Indeed you do, son of our clan. You may make use of my meditation chamber if you wish."

The urge to jump out of bed ran through his body like a lightning bolt. Only the return of the memories of last night prevented him from doing so – plus the worry about waking up the slender figure who was occupying the bed with him and clinging to his torso as if it was a life-belt and she was terrified of drowning.

According to his wishes Hoshi had kept the bathrobe on, but it was a mere token gesture as, only held together by a simple knot, the belt had opened due to her restless sleep, revealing her half-naked form through the opened robes. She was beautiful, but the absence of covering also revealed her fragility. It was hard to fathom that in this slender, almost skinny body resided such a strong mind and such a lively soul. However, the memory of waking up the night before to find her standing in his quarters, terrorized by what must have been a hideous nightmare, reminded him why he had agreed to let her share his bunk.

Of course it still felt wrong in any way imaginable to wake up with the topless wife of his best
friend resting beside him, but he could hardly have sent her away when she was clearly in distress. Hoshi was, after all, the closest friend he had beside Malcolm and she had given up almost all of her shore leave – time she could have spent with her husband – to help him overcome the effects of his mental breakdown. It was the least he could do, even if it made him uncomfortable.

Thankfully they were not too far away from Earth yet and he would have a chance to inform Malcolm about what happened. It would at least relieve part of his guilty conscience.

"Prepare yourself for some overtime in the office," Malcolm said smugly as they sat down in front of the terminal.

"I see no reason for you to be so sure you that have won your bet already," T'Pol replied deadpan. "It could be official business."

"Don't think so," he disagreed. "They've only been one day out. If it was official, the call would have come through Starfleet. Hoshi had nightmares and sought his help, and now he feels guilty. One hundred percent."

"We shall see," T'Pol said, but the way she appraised the stack of PADDs with his daily bureaucratic work told him that she had already come to realize that his observation was not quite as outlandish as it seemed.

When the screen lit up Malcolm looked into the worried face of Trip. Hoshi sat next to him and smiled back at her husband.

"Let me guess, Trip," Malcolm started with a grin. "Hoshi had nightmares, asked to sleep in your quarters and now you want to make sure that T'Pol and I are okay with that. I bet you even made her wear pyjamas."

He tried desperately not to laugh when the Southerner looked at them slack-jawed, while Hoshi's eyes nearly bugged out as she tried not to double over in a giggle fit.

"I suppose the bond only went mute on me then," Trip muttered with a surprised look at T'Pol.

T'Pol shook her head slightly and Malcolm knew that she was deliberately saying nothing in an attempt to not alert Trip to how miserable the separation made her.

"Actually, if anyone has anything to confess, it's me," Malcolm said. "I knew that Hoshi's nightmares returning when we are separated was a distinct possibility. I actually spoke to T'Pol about it to make sure it wasn't going to upset your bond."

"Why didn't you talk to me beforehand?" Trip asked, more annoyed than really angry in Malcolm's opinion. "I would at least have been prepared."

For the same reason why we're having this conversation," Malcolm said. "I knew you'd feel strange about it. Hell, I would, had T'Pol shown up in my quarters in the middle of the night, but the two of us are much more used to being alone than you and Hoshi."

He saw the trademark grin return to Trip's face as relief washed over his friend.

"In one aspect your crystal ball has lied to you, buddy. I didn't make her wear a pajama."

Malcolm raised an eyebrow – T'Pol style.
"She wore a pair of panties and a bathrobe."

The three humans started laughing and even T'Pol looked amused for a moment.

"Anyway, Trip. I'm just glad Hoshi's not alone out there. The easiest thing to do would have been to keep her here and send you out with Terval as XO. But that would have meant leaving you alone out there and we all promised to do our jobs until this war is won. And Hoshi is the best for the job."

"I'm just feelin' a bit guilty that she spent all her time helping me back on my feet again after breakdown when she could have used some help herself."

"None of us was has resolved all his or her problems just because we spent a week on a fancy island," Malcolm said, shaking his head. "We'll have to table that for the next years. There'll be time for that when we can settle somewhere. Until then we'll tough it out best we can."

"Aye, Doctor Freud," Trip said with a grin. "So what's that smug grin you're having all the time?"

"Because I shall do his 'paperwork' for a week," T'Pol replied dryly as Malcolm smugly shoved a stack of PADDs over to her. She heard Trip's surprised laugh.

"Darlin', you've let a Brit talk you into a bet?"

"He let me talk him into being my sparring partner to keep up my martial arts skills, it is a fair exchange," T'Pol replied.

"Sure," her mate replied smugly. "He just fancies the shower afterwards, so he can look at your 'awfully nice bum'."

"Says the guy who spent the night with my wife," Malcolm shot back, feeling the heat of his slight blush and not wanting the ribbing to be a one-sided affair. He could see that both Trip and Hoshi had started to relax visibly during their banter, which was exactly what he'd intended.

"This is some weird talk we're having," Hoshi said with a giggle. "But at least it took my mind off this damn mission for a while."

"Take care out there," Malcolm said with a knowing nod, and Hoshi threw him a kiss. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that Trip and T'Pol were less expressive, but this 'drowning in each other's loving glance' routine between them did seem to work even over vast distances.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said after the faces of Trip and Hoshi had been replaced by the Starfleet emblem on the screen.

"What are you apologizing for?" asked his companion, getting ready to start working on a double-load of bureaucratic chores.

"Well – Trip insinuated that I check you out in the shower." His tone betrayed that he wasn't quite as poised as he had intended.

"I have noticed that you occasionally appraise my physique. Trip does the same when he meets with Hoshi for their card games," she remarked casually, not looking up from her PADD, and Malcolm felt as if his face was burning up from a massive blush. He wanted to deliver a denial, but nothing more than an embarrassed cough resulted from his attempt.

"Do not worry, neither of us is offended. I could easily stop using the shower after practice at the
same time as you if it inconvenienced me, and Hoshi would not welcome Trip in the nude if she was uncomfortable with his occasional looks. As Hoshi once explained: it does not matter where you and Trip whet your appetite, it does matter that you both know whom to have dinner with."

"Excuse me while I crawl away somewhere to die of embarrassment," Malcolm muttered. "Lunch?"

"Twelve-thirty, my quarters," T'Pol replied calmly, continuing to sign off reports.

He didn't see her significantly raised brow of amusement when he fled from the room, his face still colored a nice shade of crimson.

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Ten days later, on approach to space station Salem One

Trip sat in his captain's chair, checking the latest test reports on the viewer that was integrated in the arm rest of the comfy piece of furniture. Even the battle bridge of this new ship was better equipped than what Enterprise had had to offer six years ago.

According to the data on his display, the engine was barely breaking a sweat even though they were cruising at a steady six-point-five. The same could not be said for Anna and her engineers. The chief had worked her crews very hard over the last few days to get all systems running in peak condition, and she had put Molotok through a rudimentary test program. At least they could now be sure that they would not be caught with their pants down by something catastrophic like a containment breach.

Unfortunately those 'must do' tests and some weapons tests were all they had had time for as in about two hours they would arrive at Salem One to pick up a sizable fleet of mainly Andorian and Vulcan ships. Tholos at least was perfectly happy with the weapons test – the Cervi system was missing an asteroid now – and since this was a seek-and-destroy mission, having a happy tactical officer was a good sign.

Trip looked over at the comms console, where Hoshi was already exchanging approach protocols with the station. Normal protocol would have called for a dedicated comms officer, but Trip saw no logic in separating T'Len and Sonos when they already had the Coalition's best linguist aboard as the First Officer. As an added bonus it gave Hoshi something to do other than sit idly next to him and wait to take over whenever he left the bridge.

"Hoshi?" he asked in the direction of his friend, when he saw her almost imperceptible sign that some sort of communication had arrived.

"We're cleared for approach," she reported. "They ask if we have any early orders for the fleet."

"Tell Shran to initiate command protocols. Challenger will be the backup command ship. All ships prepare. We launch 08:00. They should already be synchronized to Salem One station time. Have them do so if not."

He saw her acknowledging nod and went back to checking engineering read-outs on his armrest. Old habits die hard.

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His antennae flicked back and forth in excitement when the massive bulk of the of the first Coalition built ship dropped out of warp.
"What a ship," Shran said as the behemoth glided towards them on impulse power. He had seen the schematics during Archer's briefing, but seeing it in person, out here in space, was an entirely different matter. It had a huge arrow-shaped upper section that gave it a much more dynamic appearance than the perfectly round saucer of the NX class, and the nacelles extended not up, but down, which protected them better against enemy fire.

Slowly the nacelles started to move and he noticed that the pylons retracted until the nacelles came to a stop nestling next to the hull. In a fire-fight the enemy would be almost unable to hit them without bringing their own ship within point-blank weapons range. It was obvious that this ship had been designed for a single purpose – to rain death and destruction upon the enemies of the Coalition.

The Andorian stood up when the face of Fleet Captain Tucker appeared on the screen.

"I'm green with envy," he said in admiration. "You've built a fine ship, Fleet Captain."

"The first of many, but first we make sure the Romulans don't follow our example."

"Agreed."

"Meet me in two hours at our starboard docking port. I'll give you and Commodore Archer a tour of the ship. Bring some ale."

"That goes without saying," Shran acknowledged with a satisfied grin.
Pen Pals

Hoshi was sitting on the desk writing her letter and smiled as she heard a soft snoring from the bunk. As arranged before, she had fetched Trip from the captain's mess at precisely 23:30. By the looks of it, either Trip could hold his drink much better than Commodore Archer or their former captain had just drunk much more; Trip had been quite well buzzed and fairly wobbly on his feet, but not hopelessly drunk. His older friend, however — well, she could imagine that he would not feel all that fresh the next day, indeed it was unlikely he'd wake up at all until late in the afternoon. Shran, who'd seemed almost unaffected by the drink, had promised to get the completely wasted commander of the first fleet back to his own ship within the hour. For good measure she'd told Tholos to keep an eye on them, especially to make sure that Shran wouldn't get it into his head to pilot the shuttle home by himself.

Thankfully Trip was a well-behaved drunk. He'd been telling a load of baloney, making jokes that were, well, probably best kept to an adult audience, but he never overstepped any boundaries of propriety. Considering that she had more than once teased him with the odd wiggle of her bust or other coquetry during their card games back on the station, she wouldn't have been too surprised or even angry if he had (with his inhibitions loosened by the drink) tried to 'cop' a playful feel, but the gallant southerner never put a foot wrong. In a way she had perhaps hoped he would, but she quickly suppressed this forbidden thought.

What had amused her most was that Trip could really keep no secret to himself in his condition. He would probably be the galaxy's most useless operative. His tongue loosened by Shran's ale, he had given away a few secrets that would definitely be of interest for T'Pol as far as spicing up their love life went.

Still smiling, she continued to finish her return communication to T'Pol. They had agreed before this mission to exchange letters. It wasn't so much to keep tabs on each other's husband, more to reassure each other that all was okay.

Even though they were still in subspace range and Gardner was really giving them a lot of leash, they had agreed not to abuse that leniency and they already had used subspace resources for a purely private call, so written communication would have to do for now. Having finished her letter, she read it in one piece.

Hi T'Pol,

I'm sorry for taking three days to reply, but the last three days have been quite busy. I must say, I'm not envying you the task of keeping an eye on Trip's workload. He's been working himself hard. People back home didn't quite think about how much more organizational talent and resources are needed to keep a ship running that has more than three times the crew of an NX class. Thank god for Terval. He's really been a great help. When Trip and I shuffle home after a double shift, he just soldiers on organizing the masses. I doubt he has slept more than two or three times since we've been underway. That would explain Amanda's foul mood.

I can't believe you told Malcolm that we know about their secret eying of our bits. Knowing him, he will find some lame excuse for not going into the shower with you again. Just as I thought he's loosening up a bit. He's still so uptight sometimes. Don't take it so literally, but please try to get him to understand that we're really okay with it. Malcolm usually retracts back into his shell if he's embarrassed. But keep it to yourself that we're actually getting a kick out of their appreciative looks. There are some things that the two of them don't need to know. ;-}
We should really let the guys get sloshed one day. (Of course with us around to make sure they don't do anything stupid.) Trip is so funny when he's had a few too many. Don't worry, he's one of the best-behaved drunks I've ever seen and I've seen a lot back in the days at STC. You wouldn't believe the things you can learn about your hubby, when his tongue has been loosened – I spent most of the way hauling him back to his quarters giggling like a schoolgirl. But that's something I'm going to tell you when we're back. It's time for a girls' evening anyway. Not that I don't like playing cards with Trip or hanging out with T'Pau in the spa, but it's been a while since we had a whole evening to ourselves without the boys around to blush when we talk about the really interesting topics.

Your better half is already snoring peacefully on the bunk and once I've sent the letter, I'll call it a night, too. Thank you for your trust as far as the dress code goes, but I won't die from wearing a shirt for a few weeks. This isn't a pleasure cruise and Trip is more relaxed when I'm properly dressed under the sheets. It's a bit like he's had a complete personality transplant. Today with a couple of ales in his system he made the first joke since we shipped out. I can't say I like the serious Trip, but then that's what we need on this mission. I had honestly not thought he still has it in him. He never was so keen to command a ship in the first place. But it just shows me how right our decision is to call it quits when the war is over. Nice to know we can still do the job, but I prefer to be able to let my hair down (and/or the pants), and I definitely prefer Trip when he's funny and playful, not his serious self minding a tricky job.

I'll call it quits now, it's really late and we are launching in seven hours. Please give Malcolm a hug from me, but warn him beforehand or he'll freak out ;-)

We miss you both, love Hoshi.

She encrypted the file and put it in the send queue. The next comms main cycle in two hours was about to bulk transfer it to the next subspace buoy together with other communications with Starfleet or relatives of the crew.

Hoshi undressed and threw her clothes into the laundry chute. After putting on a fresh pair of blue Starfleet underpants from the locker and a plain gray t-shirt she crawled under the sheets and slung her arms around the waist of her friend. Reassured by his solid warmth, she soon drifted off to sleep.

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Trip checked the readiness report and the completion bar jumped to one hundred percent. Thirty-five ships had checked in to indicate their status as 'ready'. He stood up when Hoshi gave him the sign that fleet-wide connection had been established.

George Patton.

Picking up her silently mouthed hint he sent her a grateful smile that shortly after gave way to a more serious face expression again.

"This is fleet captain Charles Tucker III. I could launch into a pathetic motivational speech, but that would just bore the Vulcans out of their mind, so I'll keep it short and paraphrase the great George Patton: 'I don't care what species you are, as long as you go out there killing those Romulan sons of bitches. If you ever need me, you can find me on the lead ship at the business end of the battle'. Godspeed everybody."
Trip gave the Andorians a moment to finish their menacing war cry that Tholos excitedly joined in.

"Alright, war time cruising formation, warp six-oh on my mark," he ordered. "Now!"

A heavily armed fleet of human, Vulcan and Andorian ships zipped out after Molotok, heading toward Romulan space.

Malcolm was shaking, looking down at the dreaded element as it sloshed lazily back and forth after T'Pau had glided effortlessly into the bathtub. She had quickly turned around to face him, and his trembling fingers could barely meet with her own offered hand. She used both of hers to enclose his.

"You should not have let so much time pass since we last met here," she admonished him softly. "Your fear has had time to build up again due to your evading the water for an extended time. If you really want to overcome your fear you must not let that happen."

"I know," he sighed and his consternation turned to anger. "But I can't just take a bloody wellness bath when my wife and my best friend are out there on a deadly mission. I should be there to protect them, not dealing with a luxury problem for crying out loud."

"You know that isn't possible," T'Pau insisted, gently tugging his hand, and he took it as a sign to make the step down into the water. Agonizingly slowly he stepped down the stairs into the tub. He jumped down from the second to last step and a frightened shriek escaped from him. He had slipped upon landing and his head had momentarily dipped into the water. He felt his face heat up with a blush of embarrassment. T'Pau – bless her – did not comment at it.

"Doing your job here with T'Pol is equally as important," T'Pau said, while Malcolm continued to stare at the water. "Remember that winning this contract is crucial for your future."

"It will be quite useless if they don't come back," he ranted, still trying to glare the water into leaving him alone.

"Have you so little faith in your friend's command abilities?" she asked and he felt a little embarrassed about having given her the impression of thinking that Trip wasn't up to the job without having him there to cover for him.

"Trip is a fighter," he said, shaking his head. "He'll get the job done. I just hate being unable to do anything."

"You could restart fighting your fear," she suggested and he looked over at her. "Would it not be something that would give Hoshi much pleasure if you could invite her here upon your return without needing my presence for support?"

"Righto..., hand, please," he demanded, with renewed determination to get the job done. He suppressed a sigh as he got out of the tub. What was it with him getting pep talks from Vulcans lately?

T'Pau offered her hand again as he re-entered the tub, a lot quicker this time than during his first attempt.

"How's your head?" Hoshi asked, stepping into his ready room.
"I suppose better than Jon's," he said with a lopsided grin. "You're a peach, Hoshi. Thanks for that hypospray."

"You're welcome," she said, stepping out of his embrace, thankful for the short touch. Since transforming to his serious self, Trip had become a bit miserly with the simple, yet reassuring touches they normally exchanged during the day. "What did you ask me here for?"

"Letter for you came in on our private channel, so I guess it's from Mal. I'll be out on the bridge getting sitreps. Take your time. Best you answer it right away; we'll hit Rommie space tomorrow."

"Thanks, buddy," she said and kissed him on the cheek. He sent her a fleeting smile, before his face returned to its serious mien again. She watched him walk out, looking at him wistfully. She hoped this would be over soon, so she could see him more relaxed again.

Sitting down, she opened the letter that of course was from T'Pol. Malcolm wasn't the type to send longing love-letters, or any letter in fact. Knowing him he was probably looking for something to do to take his mind off their being apart.

T'Pol had really done a number on the encryption, Hoshi thought to herself as she cracked the cipher. There had to be a story in it if she made it even a bit challenging to get past the scramble algorithm.

Dear Hoshi,

Apologies for the delay of your answer are not necessary. It was logical to expect that your current mission would not afford you too much time to engage in private communication. Considering the circumstances I was pleasantly surprised about the length of your communication.

I concur with your assessment that the current command structure is too lean to effectively run a Molotok class ship and Malcolm and I will immediately start to devise a more suitable organizational structure for proposal to Starfleet. It will also give Malcolm something to do to distract him from the strain of being separated from you.

I feel myself compelled to ask your forgiveness for making him uncomfortable. He did indeed refuse to shower with me after the training at first. But it appears he has overcome his embarrassment fairly quickly. It would have been unfortunate if he had declined to continue being my training partner. He is a most adept fighter and able to challenge my skills quite significantly.

As for the consumption of beverages: Considering that we allowed ourselves to have 'one too many' during our last private evening, it would only be fair to afford the men the same privilege, albeit not too often, much less regularly. I am not averse to repeating our own tasting of sparkling wine as its impact on the Vulcan mind was most fascinating, but of course the experience would be strictly rooted in scientific interest. That goes without saying. (In absence of any textual representation, imagine a raised eyebrow here.)

Regarding Trip's 'personality transplant': I do of course know that he is capable of settling back into a wartime mindset. I concur with you in your finding experiencing this side of his character disagreeable. But, as you said, it is what the mission demands. Please lend him strength to perform adequately. I cannot tell you how great my gratitude is for all the support you have afforded him in the last weeks both here and now on the ship. It is a source of great relief to know that he is not alone on this assignment.

Other than that Malcolm asks me to convey that he was 'bloody relieved' that I have warned him before the embrace and he expresses his gratitude for the gesture. I look forward most impatiently
to your return as I am curious to learn what my beloved has revealed when his inhibitions were lowered. I could indeed use some help in bringing more variety to our intimate relations. Trip would of course never say anything, but I have sensed a fair amount of time ago that he would wish me to be more 'adventurous'.

In an attempt to evaluate the interests of the human crew I researched the anonymous access statistics of the station's entertainment system and watched the most popular movie, a product named 'Debbie does the Alpha Quadrant'. It is fair to say that despite its apparent popularity it would not be appropriate to be shown on movie night. While its rather volatile story did provide some suggestions of techniques that Trip and I have never attempted, I have lingering doubts about the presented scenes being representative of human nature. I believe it would be more prudent to rely on your counsel, which would make a 'sleep-over' indeed a most welcome opportunity to exchange ideas.

It was agreeable to read that Trip was well-behaved when inebriated, but I have learned long ago that his claims of 'being a perfect gentlemen' were more than empty ones. I often find myself humiliated by the fact that I once thought poorly of him in the early years of our mission. Please also embrace my mate in my stead and, if it does not make him too uncomfortable, please give him a kiss as I find myself unable to do so at the moment.

I too miss both of you, sincerely, T'Pol.

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The Suurok class cruisers hung back as backups while a large number of Kumari class ships criss-crossed all over space in a seemingly erratic pattern with the huge new ship diving into little spaces in between them to cover ships that simulated damage. It did so with fascinating accuracy, but also with an unsettling risk of collision. Whoever was operating the navigation console of the vessel was a true master at this task.

"A most impressive display," tactical office Torak summarized and Captain Sopek found himself in complete agreement with his officer's assessment.

"Fleet captain Tucker appears to foresee a large-scale battle with Rihanssu ships," the Vulcan added. "Is that your opinion, too, Subcommander?"

"Undoubtedly," the man behind the weapons console agreed. "The supremely maneuverable Andorian ships appear to emulate a swarm of insects, making them hard to target. The opponent will need to rely on hits by chance or will lose too much time trying to establish a weapons lock."

"Our part in the operation?" Sopek asked shortly and efficiently.

"The three Vulcan ships will guard the rear of the fleet, coming to the aid of beleaguered Andorian ships. We also act as backups for the three human NX class ships."

"Excellent, Subcommander. Find the ship in distress and move to protect it. Upon success, signal completion of the exercise to the lead ship."

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Hoshi sat back down in Trip's ready room to answer T'Pol's letter after Trip had summoned her to the bridge to command the ship during one last large-scale tactical exercise. From now on it was 'Next stop: Romulan space'.

Hi T'Pol,
I was about to have a bit of fun asking you which parts of that porn flick you found 'intriguing', but I just can't get into the mood for that right now. We have just finished the last tactical drill and are now making a beeline for the Unroth system at six-five. It starts to hit home what we are really going into. Six more hours and we’ll be in Romulan space and we are only 18 hours from probably the bloodiest battle yet.

If something happens to me or Trip, please don't forget the promise we all gave and take good care of each other. I wanted to get Trip to give me a few words for you or Malcolm, but he's refusing to think that we won't come back. In a way his determination is good for crew morale, so it's left to me to tell you both that we love you. I could tell you not to worry, but that would be silly as you will do so anyway. Don't try to keep up appearances; ask Mal for help if you need it.

Love you, Trip & Hoshi

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"Thirty minutes to Romulan space, Captain," Travis reported and Trip got out of his chair.

"Drop the package, Hoshi," he said and after a while her nod acknowledged that a large communications burst was on its way carrying last greetings and last wills of crew members, ready to be handed out to next of kin should their loved ones not come back. He forced himself not to speculate about how many of them he was going to order to their death.

He looked at her and the encouraging smile that he had almost come to expect did not materialize; their situation was too grave for that.

"Text only priority communication to all fleet, Commander: Last call for long range communication. All ships to battle stations. Initiate silent running protocol Reed-Alpha-Two. Permanent long range scans, passive only. Preload all weapon systems. Tucker out."

He watched her fingers fly over the touch screen of her console as she typed the text he had recited. Another nod and the communication went out, and only a few minutes later the bridge was shrouded in eerie silence as the constant exchange of telemetry between ships died down and the associated beeps and noises from various consoles disappeared. The quiet was deafening as the ship continued to glide towards Unroth IV – the presumed location of a huge Romulan ship building complex.

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Soval sat next to the clan's matriarch T'Para on the bench, as ramrod straight as their respective ages allowed them when the relayed signal from the United Earth Embassy came in. While on Vulcan one simply filtered pertinent information from the planetary public database, Humans apparently preferred to have their information read to them, adorned with schematics, images and diagrams.

A young female was waiting for the introductory sound to finish before addressing the audience.

*Good Evening Lady and Gentlemen, This is the United Earth Broadcasting Corporation with the latest news.*

*San Francisco: The press office of the United Coalition of Planets has announced that sixteen hours ago an attack force of Earth, Vulcan and Andorian forces under the command of Fleet Captain Charles Anthony Tucker III penetrated Romulan space on a mission to conduct a preemptive strike against a major military installation of the Romulan Star Empire.*
In an unusually frank statement, the Chief of Public Relations told the assembled media to prepare their audiences for substantial loss of life, but the Coalition is convinced that, however costly, the strike is necessary and justifiable. If it succeeds, the loss of the military resources will force the enemy to abandon all substantial offensive measures for at least two years, which would enable the Coalition to build up a fleet capable of mounting a decisive attack.

We now broadcast a public address of the acting Commander in Chief of the forces of the United Coalition Of Planets, Admiral Samuel William Gardner in all coalition languages.

When the menu came up, the Eldest Mother swiftly selected human standard as the language for the broadcast. Soval attempted not to be too obvious in his surprise.

"You have never been able to be subtle, Soval."

He bowed his head in acceptance of her reproach.

"There are fifty-three sons and daughters of our clan on those ships, Soval," she continued and the First Minister and male Elder of the clan could barely contain his surprise at the soft tone of the matriarch's voice. It was the second time in as many weeks he experienced this heretofore unheard-of lapse in the steely discipline of the clan's most established Koh'linar master.

"I will not listen to their gallantry being depreciated by the passionless sound of our own language. Many of the children will not return, Soval."

Following an impulse, caused by the powerful emotions her words stirred in him, his hand ever so lightly touched hers and the short touch-telepathic contact almost incapacitated him as his mind was torn by a debilitating torrent of pain and grief. Ready to be admonished for the unseemly contact he waited for her reply, but none came and the broadcast began. The male human was clearly struggling to reign in his emotions.

My fellow Andorians, humans, Tellarites, Vulcans, Denobulans and members of other species,

As I speak, a force of four thousand, three hundred and twenty-seven Andorians, humans, Vulcans, Tellarites and Denobulans is just hours away from the bloodiest battle our worlds have ever seen. Too many of those brave males, females, zhen, chen, thaan and chan will not come back to their loved ones. Each and every one of them will be one loss too many, but their gallantry shall be revered on all our worlds as their sacrifice will save billions of lives.

If you follow a religion, I beg you to pray for these brave children of our worlds. Whatever rituals your culture provides, I beg you to conduct them to allow as many of them to return home safely.

Godspeed, children.

Soval's nostrils were flaring as he was almost overcome by emotion. The human had barely managed to finish his speech before emotion won over his restraint and he found himself in the same predicament.

"We must meditate, Soval," the matriarch ordered and he followed her toward her ancient meditation chamber.

When they arrived the matriarch did not light only a single meditation candle as would have been sufficient for them. She also lined up four more on the ground and lit them.

"It is a human custom," she answered his unspoken question. "One for Charles, Hoshi, Lorian and Amanda each."
He wordlessly accepted her explanation and sat down to meditate.

"Two Romulan scout ships, lightly armed," Tolos reported. "Bearing two-niner-niner mark four."

Trip looked back and ran his thumb across his throat. Two torpedoes flew out of the launcher and vaporized the Romulan ships upon impact. Silently the ship glided through the debris field.

"They were sent to snuff us out. Active scans, maximum range, Lieutenant," he ordered.

"Twenty birds-of-prey, six warbirds coming in somewhat chaotically. They are forming a defensive block around the facility. I don't think they were expecting guests. Fifteen minutes until weapons range."

"Commander," Trip said, turning around to look at Hoshi. "Give me Shran and then Lorian in the ready room and join me when you're done. Tholos, you have the bridge."

"It doesn't look good, captain," Shran said, his antennae flattened on top of his head.

"I know." The pink-skin nodded shortly. "We'll distract the dogs, and you, Julia and Lorian redecorate the house. Sopek and Muroc will cover your asses. Send Amanda and her folks in to mine the damn thing. Keep me updated."

"Good hunting, pink-skin."

"Godspeed, Papa Smurf."

Hoshi came in just after she had routed both Shran and Lorian through – in that order. She observed the quiet but emotional exchange between father and son, trying not to get too emotional herself.

"Good luck to you, too, godmother Hoshi," Trip and T'Pol's time-displaced son said softly, and Hoshi barely managed to hold back her tears. For lack of words, she just put her fingers on the view screen and Lorian did the same.

"Keep Shran's ass in line," she said, trying to regain her composure.

When Lorian's face had disappeared she threw her arms around Trip's neck and kissed him hard – squarely on the mouth. Completely taken by surprise he returned the favor.

"Hoshi," she heard him mutter indistinctly.

"T'Pol asked me to give you one for her and I wanted to connect the two of you when it mattered most," she said breathlessly, still hugging him. "Love you buddy. Now let's get this job done."

They walked out of the ready room, just as Tholos reported approach to weapons range.

"Bridge, we are ready to launch," Amanda Cole reported as she spooled up the engine on Starfleet's newest toy – the Scorpion, a 12 seat, full-impulse shuttle for orbital insertions, featuring defensive
shielding and four turret canons. Their task was clear: Invade the complex, plant mines, download as much data as possible and get out. Every enemy was to be killed on sight. There was no space for prisoners.

As the doors of the launch bay opened she directed the vehicle out, trying to navigate the carnage outside as inconspicuously as possible.

"Dive in, Travis, find us a gap. Tholos, all tubes, all directions, full spread," Trip yelled, his hands cramped white-knuckled around the edges of his arm-rests. The ship was rocked hard by incoming enemy fire and impacts of debris – friend and enemy ships' alike – on the shielding around the hull. He held his breath as Travis directed the ship into an opening in between a group of birds-of-prey that looked barely big enough to swallow their vessel. Tholos and his team rained torpedoes, phaser blasts and cannon fire in all directions as Molotok dove in between the enemy ships like a shark into a swarm of fish.

Everybody held on to his or her console as the metal of the ship's hull started to whine and creak under the brutal strain.

"They are fierce warriors, yes they are," Captain Akaani said with appreciation in his peculiar norther accent. Blue blood ran down his temple. The whole bridge of the Amarith was a burning debris field. Most of his trusted officers lay on the ground, their bodies bloodied and lifeless. Only Thev, a junior weapons officer, was still able to function.

"Thev, target the next enemy," the Captain demanded. "And release the pod with our crew's blood vials. We will not return, under any circumstances"

Akaani smiled grimly, his antennae thrust forward aggressively.

"Find me a warbird, Thev," Akaani ordered. "Full impulse."

Spending its last energy reserves, the Amarith changed course and headed toward one of the three remaining huge Romulan warbirds.

"Scan for a vial-pod, Tholos," Trip said briefly, as the crippled Kumari cruiser crashed head-on into a Romulan warbird. The huge green vessel and the Andorian ship exploded in a combined, blinding fireball.

"Captain Veri'trlek T'huakaani Mh'karian," Tholos called out gravely as the small pod dematerialized in Molotok's matter transport beam.

It was at least the fourteenth Captain's name the Andorian had called out – fourteen Kumari cruisers lost with all hands. The escape pods with Andorian blood vials were piling up.

"Find me someone to kill," Trip growled in a desperate frenzy of pain and rage.

"Warbird on two o'clock," Travis called out and Tholos emitted a bloodcurdling cry of agonized hate as he emptied four torpedo tubes into the path of the attacker. Huge explosions rocked the enemy ship and even after it had started to break apart, Tholos kept pounding it with pulse cannon fire, still screaming his war cry.
Trip was knocked bodily out of his chair when the ship was rocked by enemy hits to their stern.

"L-four-hundred," he cried out, still lying on the ground, and the helmsman forced the ship into a looping roll, just as Enterprise had done with the Klingon attacker in the thermobaric cloud. Trip could barely believe that that had been three years ago. He couldn't even believe he was having such thoughts while fighting for their very survival.

"THOLOS!" he demanded in rage. Two torpedo salvos and a final goodbye from the pulse cannon later the Romulan ship exploded. "Leave that damned scrapheap and find me the NEXT!"

As the Andorian nodded, looking slightly abashed at having gotten carried away for a moment, Trip got himself back into the captain's chair. Blood from a nasty cut above his eyebrow dripped down on his uniform, but he just wiped it away; he had no time to deal with that now.

"Last warbird on one-seven-nine mark three," Tholos reported.

"Show me how well she handles, Travis," Trip ordered, and the helmsman forced the ship into a steep U-turn. Soon enough the last large battle cruiser of the Romulans came into view.

"All weapons?" the ship's captain demanded as the Romulan disruptor beams impacted on the weakened shields.

"Hull breach on K deck," Hoshi reported after a massive hit that rocked the ship violently. Her voice broke when she reported: "We've lost at least forty."

"THOLOS!" Trip snarled.

Weapons fire impacted with the approaching enemy ship and Molotok was hurled sideways when the attacker exploded in a massive fireball. The Romulans had tried to ram them, but they had hit them literally at the last second.

"Regroup the fleet. We're staging a massacre!" Trip called out savagely, and the remaining ships assembled around the battered lead ship. Only eight Romulan ships were left, the smaller birds-of-prey, although 'small' was pretty relative in regard to their ships.

A look at the tactical display told him that sixteen Kumari-class cruisers – out of initially forty – plus two Vulcan cruisers and Shran and Lorian's ships were left. Julia Fletcher and Columbia had been lost with all hands, along with a Vulcan Suurok class and twenty-four Andorian ships.

"No mercy!" Trip shouted into the ship-wide connection, and all ships descended on the remaining Romulan vessels. It took another thirty minutes to eliminate them and it cost another Vulcan ship and five more Kumari cruisers.

Trip heard Tholos howl in agony when the very last shot fired in the battle destroyed one of the five escape pods with Andorian blood vials from the lost ships.

Molotok swept around just as the Scorpion with the MACO forces left the station.

"The station is ready to blow up!" Shran shouted through his channel to the lead ship. Get out of..."

The Andorian's voice was lost as Hoshi turned around and interrupted him. "They've lost all systems. The station emitted some sort of energy surge and their shields went down."

"Shran, take the fleet outta here," Trip roared. "We'll get them!"
Soval lunged forward when a gust of wind – that could not possibly exist inside the Eldest's dwelling – threatened to extinguish one of the candles. Groaning with the strain that the violent movement put on his aging muscles, he threw himself on the ground and cupped his hands around the candle that the Eldest mother had designated to Amanda. Its flame flickered, but his action had saved it.

"Darkness lies ahead," he heard the clan's matriarch mutter in apparent pain. He had no reply as he sought to keep the flame from dying.

"Pink Skin! You can't survive the blast!" he heard Shran's shouts through the comms channel.

"Court martial me, Papa Smurf," Trip replied. "Travis, open the cargo door and scoop them up! Don't try to make it tidy."

Molotok swept past close to the huge Romulan installation as first explosions started to break up its hull. A horrible screeching sound attacked their ears as Travis tilted the ship downwards to slow the stricken Scorpion's impact when he scooped the shuttle up through the open cargo door that was rapidly closing afterwards.

"Get us..."

Trip didn't get to finish the sentence as the ship was hit brutally by an avalanche of debris when the whole Romulan shipyard exploded.

Hoshi shrieked at the top of her lungs when a central support beam and parts of the bridge ceiling collapsed, burying Trip below them.
He desperately tried to maintain his stiff upper lip as his life came crashing down around him. Swaying slightly, like a willow tree in a stiff breeze, he listened with barely half an ear to the explanation of healer Lorat. It was infuriatingly calm, clinical and void of emotion.

“I don't believe you,” he growled, beside himself with grief and rage. “There she is, completely uninjured except for the bump on the head when she slumped over. If this is some skulduggery here, rest assured, I'll find you, I'll hunt you, I'll make your life such a hell you'll be only too relieved to end it yourself. So get on with it, will you? Just fucking do something!”

Malcolm knew that accusing the Vulcan of deliberate wrong-doing was not entirely fair, but there was the detail that T'Pol had collapsed during their shower after a *Suus Mahna* training they had engaged in to take their minds off the fact that at the same time their loved ones were engaged in a deadly battle. Vulcans had a bit of a history of reacting irrationally if they were scandalized about one of their own. And T'Pol had scandalized her fellow Vulcans more than once. Taking a shower with a human or generally anyone who wasn't her mate certainly qualified.

“Threats of physical violence serve no purpose, Captain Reed,” the Vulcan replied and calmly loaded a hypospray injector with a new vial, while the Brit eyed him suspiciously. “Captain T'Pol suffers from a severed tel. Her medical record states quite clearly that you are informed about it.”

“So she'll just die and you stand by doing nothing?” he replied angrily.

“There is nothing I can do, Captain. In most cases a Vulcan, who loses a tel falls into a healing trance. Captain T'Pol, however, has had previous neurological injuries. She must have tried to hold on to her life quite hard as evidenced by her hyperstimulated neurological paths.”

“She fights for her life. What's so unusual about that?” Malcolm snorted sarcastically, not taking his eyes off the hypospray.

“The neuropaths in question are located in the pre-frontal cortex, not in the primary telepathic gyrus as would be expected. She did not fight to re-establish the tel, she fought with her intellect.”

“And that kills her?”

“Having failed in her fight – to use one of your metaphors – she has lost the will to live.”

“And there is nothing you can do?” Malcolm asked again, but anger gave way to despair. “Maybe we can give her a chance to fight again? I know for a fact that her intellect is not exactly weak.”

“She has at most two days to live,” the doctor replied, and a nauseating wave of agony washed through Malcolm's mind. “If another Vulcan was to attempt a healing meld to share his or her life's energy, her life might be prolonged – a week, perhaps two – but I do not see what purpose that would serve.”

*It was over.* The truth hit him and it hit him hard. Five years to build up a friendship so wonderful, he hadn't understood how utterly barren his life had been before it. But now he found himself facing the prospect of being thrust back into that former life as his two friends died or were dying. There was a glimmer of hope that Hoshi had survived, but realistically, if the ship was damaged badly enough for the captain to die, how good were the odds that someone else on the bridge survived? Maybe there wasn't even a ship any more.
The swaying returned as he teetered on the brink of consciousness, consumed by agony at the loss of his friends, at the horror of going back to being the shell of a man he’d been before. Out of the corner of his eyes, before they closed, he saw the enemy approach him with a hypospray... time had been when he’d have reacted, but he was alone and would soon be utterly friendless. What point was there in resisting?

The voice moaned through his brain, cold and calculating. He hadn’t heard it for so long, had never thought to hear it again, but he recognised and even welcomed the release from feeling it brought. Precious is down... I must bring her home... I'm alone... I have to finish this mission on my own... The enemy... The drug...

His eyes flew open, every fibre in his body ready to mount a defensive attack. The assailant stopped, stunned into freezing by his piercing glance. Emotions securely locked, he pivoted and left sickbay in a purposeful stride as he started to plan his next step.

Hadrian was back!

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She wanted nothing more than abandon her post, run back down to the devastated battle bridge and dig him out with her bare hands, but her rank made that impossible. Lieutenant-Commander Hoshi Sato-Reed stood on the barely finished main bridge, overseeing their return to Salem One.

Anna Hess’s domain - the engineering section under the ship's belly - and the battle bridge had been hit the hardest, and no less than fifteen engineers had lost their lives, but Trip's design had done its job. Engine and nacelles had survived the blast, and now Molotok was screaming back towards Coalition space at warp seven, overflowing with critically injured humans, Vulcans and Andorians from other ships. Every single one of them fought for his life and she wasn't going to lose this race.

Not a single one of them had left the carnage uninjured. Tholos was barely able to hold on to his console; his left antenna had to be amputated after it had been shredded by flying debris. Hoshi shivered as she remembered the agonized screams of the Andorian as he had the procedure done without anesthesia in a bid to remain at his post.

Travis was being treated aboard Challenger after his left arm had been severed by a falling ceiling panel. It had pained her to leave him behind, but the cynicism of war demanded that he make space for a critical case. At least he would live.

Trip... The picture of her fallen friend haunted her. It had taken seven Vulcan males to lift the heavy support beam that had crushed him. Nausea hit her as she remembered the awkwardly twisted body, blood dripping out of nose, mouth and ears. It had been all too obvious that the lower half of his body had sustained terrible injuries. And there was no word yet on the chances of his survival.

Not that Phlox would have time to send a status report...

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Soval helped the groaning matriarch into an armchair. He could plainly see that even the advanced Koh’linar techniques had almost failed to reestablish her equilibrium. As a pivotal node in a complex web of clan-wide parental bonds and tels the Eldest had been impacted with the full force of the disturbance in the clan. Dozens of mates and parents were now grieving for one of theirs.
Soval noticed that the human broadcast was still showing, and obeying the sign of the Eldest he raised the sound volume slightly.

The press office of the United Coalition of Planets has confirmed that the United Coalition heavy cruiser Molotok under command of acting Captain Lieutenant-Commander Hoshi Sato-Reed has reported the successful conclusion of operation “Warrior's Prayer”, the complete destruction of all Romulan warship building capacities.

Asked for news about the fate of mission commander Fleet Captain Charles Anthony Tucker III the office declined to provide details, describing his condition as 'extremely critical'. Information about the number of casualties is not yet available. We will keep you up-to-date as the news comes in.

“Charles,” he heard the Eldest whisper and Soval shivered slightly at the pain in her voice.

“Shall I summon a healer?” he asked, trying to lend her some of his relative calm, even though he was greatly worried about T'Pol.

“Call T'Pau-kan,” the matriarch ordered, still visibly still trying to regain her composure. “At this time she must be at the home of Charles's parents.”

T'Para's eyebrow twitched ever so slightly when the connection was established. T'Pau's eyes were discolored, surrounded by bizarre dark green rings. The fresh wipe marks all over her face made it obvious that she had been crying. There was not much positive to say about the current situation, but the fact that the young one had allowed herself to grieve in a way that befit her young age was a glimmer of hope during very dark times.

“T'Pol is dying,” T'Pau said in a voice full of sorrow, and without addressing the clan's matriarch as would ordinarily be befitting her position. The Eldest ignored this violation of protocol and only nodded gravely.

“T'Pol is unusual and the humans have not yet reported Charles’s death. There are discrepancies in the facts provided. Seek permission to meld with T'Pol. Find out what happened in her last conscious moments. Pay attention to how and when the tel was severed.”

He navigated the corridor with long, loping strides, scanning each and every potential hiding place with the trained, pitiless eye of a predator. But all he could see were pitifully crying crew members, who jumped out of his way if they were fortunate. A group of people approached; they were on the ship without permission, but he didn't care. They were just the people he needed for the next step in his plan.

Forcefully and without a word of explanation he grabbed the foremost female Vulcan by her arm and manhandled her in the direction he wanted – away from her companions and towards sickbay.
Fortunately the doors hissed open as they arrived; he’d have kicked them down without a second thought.

“Meld!” he ordered and pointed at T'Pol's lifeless body. He saw the terror in her eyes, and didn’t give a fuck. He was in control.

Before he could repeat his order he was spun around and his instinctive backhanded punch nearly flattened of one of the Vulcan's earlier companions – Cathryn Tucker. There were a couple of others behind him too, including Cathryn’s husband Charles. This was evidently some kind of a rescue party.

“I don't care that you're Trip's friend,” Charles growled in his face, clearly not understanding the mortal danger such an act placed him in. “If you touch that girl one more time, you won't like the answer. What the hell is wrong with you? Get a grip, boy, or get out.”

Every instinct urged him to halt the verbal attack by grabbing the man's throat to silence him forever, but something in him, a nagging doubt that could cost him in a tight situation, stopped him. It was infuriating that he was going soft with age. 'Caesar' would have been appalled to see him so indecisive.

“Be quiet and let her meld!” Hadrian said, his voice low and soft and threatening, and stared them all into oblivion, ignoring the fact that he had made the woman cry. At least it gave her man something to think about, and distracted him from further intervention.

He watched the Vulcan go about her job and gasp loudly twice in the process. Good – whatever it was, she had found something. He listened with indifference to the hitch of panic in her breathing.

“I must confer with the Eldest Mother,” he heard the Vulcan report as she broke off the meld, looking appropriately fearfully at him. He knew the look well: it was that of a being that had resigned itself to its fate. It was difficult to bring a Vulcan to that point. He would feel satisfied, but feelings were not in his creed. They just made things complicated.

“Go to your quarters, talk to her and report back. Within the hour,” he ordered curtly and watched the Vulcan leave in a hurry, her robes flapping.

“Now, just a moment, here,” the annoying old man started.

“You should retire to your quarters as well,” Hadrian interrupted him coldly. “And if you’d prefer to remain unharmed, I’d suggest you stay there.”

At last they saw reason and left.

He was left standing beside the bio-bed. Still. And waiting. If he’d looked into the mirror opposite him he would have seen eyes that had forgotten humanity, but he’d taught himself long ago never to look, never to see, never to care.

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“You appear disturbed, child.” The Eldest stated the obvious as T'Pau's face appeared on the screen.

“Her bond faded as you suspected. Without fluctuation, it faded over a time of approximately seven point three-five seconds.”

“It is then as I thought,” the Eldest said gravely. “His mind is damaged, but alive. There is but one
solution. We must bring T'Pol and myself to him. Only if I can connect the children, even if only shortly, she can be saved from the darkness.

“What else upsets you, child?” she asked, while flicking a finger which set Soval in motion to arrange transport.

“It's Malcolm,” T'Pau admitted. “I sense a complete absence of empathy. His look, it is unlike any I have ever seen...”

The image of T'Pau disappeared and the Eldest sat back ever so slightly as the image of Malcolm appeared on her screen.

“That will quite be enough,” she heard him say in a lifeless voice, staring at her with the dead eyes that had so unnerved T’Pau. “We will arrive in seventy-two hours. You could spare yourself quite some inconvenience if you made yourself available. You are to bring no more than one companion, to attend to your needs.”

His image went as fast as it had intruded. For the first time in one hundred and seventy-nine years, her hands shook.

“Tehvar mug'l'au...” she muttered in shock. “Dangerous darkness hath befallen thee.”

“I need to speak with Solan,” she ordered as Soval returned. “He is on their station.”

“I told you captain, I cannot allow you on a wild goose chase,” Gardner said, irritated, not quite understanding what Reed had in mind or why he was looking as if he was drugged. “And who the hell is 'Precious'?”

“She is down and if you don't get her back to the base, I will take her there.”

“Captain or 'Hadrian' or whatever you like to call yourself,” Gardner said and pressed a button under the table. “I don't know what you took or who you are. I have alerted Starfleet Security and you will surrender yourself to them at once.”

“You’ve made your decision. Hadrian out.”

The view screen went silent.

“I have a working theory and we shall be in no danger from him,” Solan addressed the little group. “But we must leave him in the belief that he is in complete control. Only the Eldest can save him.”

The little group was huddled together in a recycling depot, one of the very few places on Jupiter station without surveillance cameras.

“We don't even know what the hell he needs savin' from in the first place,” Charles Tucker snorted. “For all we know, he just went bat-shit crazy.”

“Captain Reed appears to be suffering from something called 'dangerous darkness','” the Vulcan professor explained, and T’Pau gasped audibly before hiding her mouth in shame at her lapse. “It appears that he is a victim of one of the most unspeakable crimes imaginable. He is a former operative for an organization that itself is shrouded in mystery is he not?”
He saw T'Pau nod. As the former First Minister she possessed a great deal of information that was not widely available. “Even the V'Shar has less than complete knowledge of them,” she said almost inaudibly. “They name themselves 'Section 31'.”

“The old V'Las administration was suspected of inducing the dangerous darkness to condition operatives. It appears that this organization has acquired this technique.”

“He’s been brainwashed?” Feezal asked, and Solan saw a look of genuine concern for her captain in the alien female's face.

“Brainwashing does not begin to describe the unspeakable atrocity that has been done to Captain Reed.”

“So what does it mean, fully?” the human woman demanded.

“He was given a second katra, a satanic soul, as humans would say. It is triggered by certain conditions and void of emotion.”

“How can you know all that?” the other female's mate asked.

“Mr. Tucker, Vulcans are a long-lived species. Before I became an engineer I had a long career with the V'Shar until I resigned in disgust at the methods that were developed under the V'Las administration.”

“Can you cure him?”

“I do not know, but I am willing to try if it becomes necessary.”

Hadrian walked up and down the line of people who had surrendered to him instead of obeying his command to abandon ship, like the rest of the crew. Normally such insubordination would call for drastic measures that none of the people before him were prepared for, but on second thoughts they could be useful. He could have flown the ship by himself, most of the functions were automatic, but having the option to offload some tasks gave him space to man the tactical console should fighting become necessary.

The Vulcans Solan and T'Len and the old father of Tucker could man engineering, although he would have to keep a close eye on them. He pointed at them and sent them on their way with the stern warning that the Andorian would die should they have any ideas of sabotaging the mission.

The Andorian, Trok, well not that he could run anywhere in any case. His leg was in a cast and the other Vulcan, T'Pau, had carried him here. Normally he wouldn't employ the services of a cripple, but he could pilot the ship, so it was a task he wouldn't have to do himself. The Vulcan sat down in the seat with some difficulty and Hadrian could see that the Andorian didn't dare touch anything without being ordered to do so.

“I've heard Vulcans can meld and share their energy?” he asked the young Vulcan. She nodded silently.

“Then do so.” Looking at the Denobulan, he added, “And you - mix something up that keeps us awake. The Vulcans manage three days without sleep. The rest of us need help. And make sure it doesn't have any unfortunate side-effects. It will be tested on the Andorian and the old woman first.”
The Denobulan nodded and left with the Vulcan. The young pointy-eared one did have quite a shaggable arse. Maybe she could make herself useful once Precious was back home on base. It was an option to keep in mind. It had been a while...

“And you, I believe, know where the galley is,” he addressed Tucker’s mother. “This lot need to kept fed. Get on with it.”

He watched her leave before sitting down in the central chair.

“Take us out Andorian, two-four-five mark eight. Once we've shot our way past the defensive perimeter, set course for Vulcan, warp five point five.”

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“He's good, isn't he?” Harris said, looking with grim pride at the surveillance console as the stolen ship neared the defensive perimeter near Pluto. “Only Hadrian would snuff out the only weak link in the thing.”

“You've destroyed him,” Falkner said in disgust, and pondered just stabbing the prick through his shabby leather jacket. “Malcolm was the best pupil I ever had. He would have been the best we had even without letting that slimeball Tarok scramble his brain. You made him fucking schizophrenic - if that’s the word for what he is!”

“He was a liability with his aquaphobia, you know that. He would have botched the mission on Cardassia with his fear of water.”

The contemptuous words snapped a leash. Falkner moved quickly and lifted Harris out of his chair, holding him to the wall by the collar, his feet a meter off the ground.

“Regretting that you let Soong do a number on my strength, Harris?” he taunted the helpless man. “I've met Malcolm a couple of times lately. He’s married. That's the furthest any of the men you let Tarok mind-rape ever recovered. All others died completely wrecked or just offed themselves.”

He released his grip, brushing his hands together as though he'd touched something dirty.

Harris tumbled ungracefully back to his feet, only just saving himself from falling.

“You will regret that,” the Section handler said once he was back in his chair, but Falkner just laughed.

“Harris, Harris, what do you plan to do? Send one of your new recruits to kill me? I was only ever beaten by one man – Malcolm. And that was before you let Tarok have his way with him. And that scumbag can't help you now. I vaguely remember that the asshole had a bit of an accident with a Meth'let.”

“The handle of which was in your hand,” Harris remarked sarcastically.

“Really tragic, that. Now, put the Pluto satellites in maintenance mode,” Falkner demanded, pointing the business end of a disruptor at Harris.

“Why should I do that?”

“Because that decides how you die. Be a nice asshole and take the satellites down and you may choose a nice painless method of suicide. The alternative is, that I poke you with this disruptor and I've killed people with it before. It made a Gorn weep in agony and those buggers make a Klingon
look like a pussy.”

He watched as Harris put the satellites in routine maintenance mode, deactivating them for the next hour.

“Now about this agreement,” the jerk started, obviously under the misapprehension that there was something left to discuss, but Falkner just pulled the trigger, watching Harris dissolve into vapor, screaming at the top of his lungs as the deadly fire ate him from the inside out in slow agony.

“Too bad I'm a lying prick,” Falkner said, disdain dripping from his voice. He sniffed the air after nothing more than a faint burn mark on the ground was left of the Section man.

“Mh, smells like burnt pork.”

They arrived in orbit around Vulcan and for some reason none of the ships there made any move to intercept them. It was time to increase his attention to detail. Things had gone way too smoothly for comfort. First the Pluto satellites shut down in just the right moment and now the Vulcans were unexpectedly reluctant to repel an unauthorized intruder.

He had learned the smell of a rat many years ago. And he was smelling one now.

The Pluto satellites could only be Harris's work. The idiot and his obsession with favours and repaying them were all too easy to exploit. Although he didn't know which favour it was that had to be repaid. He had done him so many...

Hadrian shook his head. This was not the time to dwell on details. He pushed up the transporter controls. Two figures materialized on the pad, so that meant the old bat had kept to the two person restriction. Silently the blade retracted back into its sheath in his sleeve, well hidden behind the transporter console.

The companion was none other than the Vulcan head honcho Soval himself. Well, that explained the inactivity of the Vulcan fleet. Getting the Vulcan First Minister as a hostage was just too good to be true and Hadrian's senses went on high alert. This was way too easy. There was going to be a catch, and when he found out what it was, a lot of people were going to die.

“Peace and long life, captain...”

“Hadrian. Just call me Hadrian.”

It happened in a fraction of a second, as soon as they drew level with the waiting human. As soon as Soval had raised his arm, a blade had appeared from Hadrian's sleeve and slashed across the ambassador's abdomen. The Eldest Mother rued her advanced age as she could not even move fast enough to catch Soval after, despite the grave pain of his wound, he had grappled with the human and managed to incapacitate him with a nerve pinch.

Fortuitously the human – his real katra consumed by the dangerous darkness - had fallen for Soval's ruse that she take over providing energy for T'Pol. They were near sickbay and a verbal call for help summoned a female Denobulan doctor, who managed to stabilize Soval.

T'Para had often admonished Soval for his carelessness in not keeping his aging body in better shape, but this time his portly build, otherwise a reason for criticism, had saved vital organs. No
doubt he would welcome this as a reason to ward off further advice on the matter.

Slowly she helped the Denobulan assist the barely conscious Soval onto a biobed, while the unconscious body of the captain was brought in effortlessly by Solan - for whom this presented no challenge, even though he was only forty years her junior. Unlike Soval however, the second oldest male in the clan kept up a strict – even brutal, as some younger krei claimed – regular training regime. In a battle of strength he would surely prevail over many younger males in the clan.

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T'Para entered the dark cave, slowly and steadily. In her mind she was not hindered by the frailty of her old body, which had now served her for over two centuries. Her katra was unaffected by the years.

He sat near a fire, his lifeless gray eyes taking in her presence with seemingly little interest. He slowly sharpened his blade against a stone, and showed no sign of feeling threatened by her arrival. Her keen eye, however, registered the minuscule flinching of one of his face muscles. He was presenting a façade.

She inspected her surroundings, which seemed specifically designed to induce fear. The ground was littered with skulls of various species. Humans, Vulcans, Gorn, Klingons – those were the ones she could identify without any further inspection. Some of them had most certainly not endured a merciful death, seeing as their hides in various stages of destruction were hanging on the wall.

“As you can see, it is not the smartest idea to cross me,” she heard him say and looked into the direction the tip of his blade was pointed. It indicated a particularly gruesomely mangled pile of remains.

“That was the last Vulcan who tried what you came here for,” he continued. His voice was void of emotion. He spoke as indifferently as if he was referring to a minor change in the weather patterns outside. “You shouldn’t have come here, old woman. Precious will not be best pleased by what I'll have to do to you. As you Vulcans don't seem to get the hint, I'll have to make my statement a mite less subtle than with Lokar.”

Again he pointed at the unspeakably mangled Vulcan remains, but she was unfazed by his posturing.

“You consume what is not yours to possess,” she stated firmly and weighed the lirpa in her hands, ready to strike.

He slowly stood, his long blade held firmly in his right hand. Slowly they started circling the fire, weighing each other.

“I did not ‘consume’ anything,” he said evenly. “I made use of what would otherwise be wasted. This body was given to a pitiful wimp, who amuses himself ogling a perfect Vulcan arse instead of shagging the daylight out of it.”

“That is why I shall not have to fight you long,” T'Para announced, spinning the lirpa in a provocative gesture of fearlessness. It was a deliberate opening in her defenses that he – as she had predicted – failed to take advantage of for a decisive first strike. “You are already defeated – by him.”

“Look around you, old bat,” he snorted derisively, showing a first glimpse of emotion. “Ask that Nausicaan or the Cardassian fellow over there how much of a chance they got to fight me. And you
are seriously trying to tell me I'll be beaten by a limp-dick, who can't even hand out punishment to a guy who ogles his naked wife while 'playing cards'? You must be joking!"

“You were made of his weaknesses,” the Eldest replied evenly. “I've seen both your katras. The Malcolm of the past had no use for women other than to sate his carnal desires. He was jealous, unable to make sense of his emotions and unable to form long-lasting relationships with other people. He was lonely, just as you are lonely.”

Her opponent merely snorted.

“He has overcome these weaknesses,” the matriarch continued ruthlessly. “He has most loyal friends, and his strength is preventing you from having your wish. You think you are in control, but he keeps you from going through with your most atrocious plans.”

“Well, fuck me sideways. Enough of the talk, Vulcan, fight!” He swung his blade at her, but it was a desperate lunge and she easily parried it. Instead of hitting her, he was carried forward by the momentum of his strike and fell. He hissed, having burned his arm in the fire, but rolled and got back to his feet with a swift, fluid movement.

“I am fighting you, Hadrian, and I might add, I seem to be winning. Precious is still alive, yet unable to mount a defense. Why did you not 'shag' her posterior, now she is helpless? You have desired her long enough. Instead you risk your life to bring her back to her fallen husband. Is it the absence of humiliation? Is it because she cannot beg for mercy as you abuse her body? Or is it because you can't overcome the respect and, yes, maybe even affection, Malcolm has developed for the wife of his friend?”

The control over his emotions was gone from her opponent. The katra of Malcolm had joined the fight. Hadrian was battling two opponents now; she could see the insane glitter in his eyes, and the movements of his head were those of one suffering some kind of seizure. He lunged forward again with little control and only managed to burn himself once again - this time in the leg - instead of hitting her.

“Why did you not stay where you were told to stay, and let the injuries end the life of the man who enjoyed the beauty of your wife's physique during recreational activities? Are you by any chance unable to overcome the trust Malcolm has in his chosen? Are you perhaps unable to overcome the friendship between the males and the inherent trust they have in each other not to overstep the boundaries of propriety?”

“F-fight, you crazy old witch,” he snarled, unsteady on his feet, and plainly mad with rage at his own ineffectual attempts to cut her down as easily he should have been able to.

“You concentrate on the intimate details, but you miss the largest wound in your mind,” she taunted him in a calm, measured voice. “The intimate details are a mere side-effect of the spear in your dark heart. Malcolm has overcome his loneliness, the very fabric of your existence, which made it increasingly harder for you to possess his mind. You are defeated. The Malcolm you once took possession of no longer exists, and he is overcoming your influence.”

“FIGHT, you pointy-eared gobshite!” her opponent screamed, but he suddenly started to sway. In the darkness of the cave, it seemed to her that his body divided itself, one half tearing itself from the other by naked will.

She had expected this. Hadrian, it seemed, had not.

She looked on as the representation of the battered dark katra was pushed from behind and fell
“Bugger off for good, you bloody tosser!” Malcolm swore, taking the lirpa from her. “You might want to retire now, Eldest. I have a hunch your sense of smell will be a serious inconvenience very soon.”

With an accepting nod, she retracted from his mind. The last thing she saw was a large cloud of pitch-black smoke as Malcolm used the lirpa to hold down the representation of the katra named 'Hadrian' as it was ablaze and burned to death amid screams of agony.

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Feezal didn't know where to start. The barely conscious Vulcan woman had fallen backwards after the mind-meld, while the still unconscious body of Captain Reed spasmed wildly on the biobed.

“We have the smallest crew in the galaxy,” the Denobulan groaned, her trademark smile having gone into recession. “But somehow half my biobeds are occupied.”

“Do not sedate him, under any circumstances!” she heard the other Vulcan's warning as she was loading up a hypospray.

Looking around she watched how the Vulcan put the old woman down on a biobed, but her attention was drawn away when the body of the captain went limp and stopped moving. The silence in the room was deafening as only the occasional beep from Soval's monitoring equipment pierced the complete absence of any sounds in the room.

“Not bad for a bloody old pointy-eared bat.”

T'Para's dry assessment, delivered in a perfect imitation of Captain Reed's accent, took everyone by surprise, and Feezal couldn't hold back her laughter anymore when an amused and completely politically incorrect snort sounded from behind the privacy screen around Minister Soval's biobed.
Rear Admiral Yurij Radionovitch Zhukov tried to look at the view screen without giving away the uneasiness he experienced in looking at Admiral Gardner. His superior looked back at him somewhat glassy-eyed and Zhukov started to wonder if the pressure of war had led some of the higher-ups into having a drug problem.

"Zhukov, Reed has gone rogue on us and stole Buran. They should show up on your doorstep at any time and I want the whole lot apprehended. They have five Vulcans, one Denobulan, three humans and an Andorian aboard. That should be no problem for a MACO team."

"Aye, Sir. Do we know what Reed's motives are?"

"T'Pol is kicking the bucket because of some of that Vulcan mental malarkey between her and Tucker and Reed has gotten it into his head that it would make a damn difference when he brings her to him. Tucker will croak anyway. It's a waste of time, but he has disobeyed my direct order and went anyway. It's better to let her die, too, so we can make fucking heroes out of both of them."

"With all due respect, Sir!" Zhukov gasped at the cynicism of the supreme commander. "It's not a given that Tucker will die. Doctors Phlox and Lucas have run themselves ragged performing one emergency surgery after the other and only this morning they've updated his status from 'extremely critical' to just 'critical'."

"I've read the reports, Zhukov. He's brain damaged, so even if he survives he'll end up a vegetable. We don't need cripples, we need heroes - human fucking heroes. Why was my order not followed to switch off the fucking machines?"

"We can't," Zhukov said. "We have Tucker's living will. The Sato-Reeds have been nominated to have the last word if he and T'Pol are unable to articulate themselves. And as you might know, Commander Sato-Reed isn't quite willing to become a hero for you. She's very much alive."

"Don't get sassy on me, Ivan," his superior growled, incensed by the sarcastic remark. "You know how hot Gutierrez is on making Commodore and taking your job. You'd better get back to executing my orders – to – the – letter. Did I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly clear, Sir," Zhukov said, threatened back into obedience.

"Apprehend that lot and make sure T'Pol accidentally falls out of an airlock. If she's orbiting the station, the Reeds will have no will to execute. Harris can deal with Tucker. And you better make sure nobody ever learns of this call. Harris hates snitches."

"No need to worry, Sir."

"Too late, scumbag," Hoshi growled under her breath as she stored the recording on her PADD. They should have known better than messing with the person who had installed most of the communication equipment when they rebuilt the station. She had grown suspicious after Zhukov had 'suggested' turning off the machinery that kept Trip alive. And now, shockingly, her premonition had proved true.

Fighting down the horror about Trip's devastating medical prognosis, she pushed the button to summon Phlox.
"I have no news about Captain Tucker, Hoshi," the doctor told her, pre-empting the question he'd had to answer several times over the last four days. She looked to the right to let him inspect the large cut across the left half of her head that had been stitched. Since large parts of her hair had had to be shaved off for that she had just made them remove the whole lot. Malcolm would freak at the loss of her long mane.

"Bring me to an empty examination room," she whispered when Phlox's head was near enough to hear her. Hearing the Denobulan take a breath to ask something in return, she cut him off.

"Don't ask questions, please, Phlox. Just bring me somewhere where we can talk alone!" she urged him in a whisper and in his native language. She saw the grin wiped off his face. Bless him, Phlox hadn't lost his ability to know when things were serious.

She heard the click of the biobed's brakes as he released them. Holding on to the sides of the bed, holding the blanket up with her teeth, she steadied herself as he pushed her along the corridor.

"Do you need assistance, doctor?" she heard one of the passing Vulcan medics ask, but Phlox deflected the offer easily by ordering the Vulcan to support Dr. Lucas in the ER unit. Go Phlox! she thought in grim amusement.

As soon as they entered the examination room, she awkwardly sat up, wincing at the pain the movement caused. The thin blanket fell off her bare body.

"Phlox, can you somehow wrap me in a bandage, so that this won't break open?" she asked, pointing at the incision site from the surgery that had left her without her damaged spleen and a single kidney. The other kidney was now – hopefully – doing its job in Trip's body.

"Hoshi, what are you doing?" he asked, and she nearly smiled as he took out the bandages anyway. "You're hardly out of surgery. You shouldn't even be getting out of bed yet."

"Starfleet has ordered Zhukov to kill T'Pol," she said in a disgusted voice, starting the replay.

"Stop it!" Phlox demanded half-way into the recording and Hoshi didn't remember ever having seen such a grotesque grimace of rage on the Denobulan's face. She stopped the replay.

"Whatever you plan to do, I will do it myself," he said in grim determination, and she had no doubt about his sincerity,

"No Phlox," the petite linguist said, gently cupping the doctor's face with her hands. "I'm grateful for your offer, but there are hundreds here fighting for their lives. They need you. Just patch me up so I can move without my skin ripping open. You don't know the communications systems anyway."

"Then let me at least get you some clothes first," Phlox said as he wrapped her midriff in a bandage. "You are completely unclothed."

"Trust me Phlox, I have experience being naked," she snorted, pointing at the ceiling. "Just patch me up and help me into the crawl space up there."

Having patched her up, Phlox removed a ceiling panel and jumped back off the biobed. After having taped the PADD to her thigh, Hoshi slung her arms around him and kissed him gently on the ridge that surrounded his right eye.

"Thank you Phlox," she whispered, releasing him from her embrace. She took his PADD and entered a number. "Contact Amanda and Terval on this frequency, tell them to meet me in the
sweet spot. Make sure Zhukov doesn't notice. And ask Amanda to bring a uniform for me."

She saw his accepting nod and stepped on his interlaced hands to be hoisted up into the opening.

"Heck," she groaned, as her attempts to crawl up into the cramped space caused pain in the damaged areas of her body. "Trip always joked that I'd streak the station one day."

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"I'm not going to do that!" Jon shouted back at the image of Rear Admiral Zhukov on the view screen. "I'd rather resign than execute this order. If T'Pol is in danger, she has to be brought to the hospital. That's what Trip and his people built it for, goddammit! I don't care how and why Buran came here."

"Gardner's orders were abundantly clear. First and foremost, the crew of Buran has to be apprehended. What happens with the Vulcan is subject to our decision when the rogue crew is in the brig. Follow your orders or face the consequences, Commodore. Zhukov out."

What was it, Trip once said?" Jon asked lieutenant Kusnezova. "I believe it was fuck off. He even could have done so in Russian."

The Russian lady at the comms console laughed grimly. But is was a laugh of sarcasm, not amusement.

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Amanda laughed in surprise when a heavily bandaged Hoshi glided up the tube towards the sweet spot. She had expected that Hoshi had discharged herself from hospital in her underwear or one of those open-at-the-back cape jobs people wore after surgery, but the petite Asian came gliding up to them stark naked. Poor Terval was almost spraining a neck muscle in his abashed determination to look away.

"It's okay Terval. It's not like I could compete with your woman," Hoshi groaned as she landed painfully on her butt. Amanda handed her the overall and then helped her remove the PADD she had taped to her thigh and don the garment in the zero G environment. It was visible that the commander was in pain. Bless him, Terval fought down his apprehension and started to help her, too, even if he barely dared to touch the slender woman, keeping any contact to a minimum as if Hoshi's body was made of hot molten lava.

"So what's this all about, Hoshi?" Amanda asked, pulling up the zip of Hoshi's uniform once they had restored modesty and Terval was able to relax.

Wordlessly Hoshi played the recording and Amanda's blood started to boil. Before the recording ended, she produced two phase pistols from the various pockets in her MACO suit, handing them out to Hoshi and her chosen before loading the pulse rifle she was carrying over her shoulder. "We'll take the station!"

Exchanging a look with Terval, each of them grabbed one of Hoshi's arms and pushed off the ceiling, gliding down through the reduced gravity environment, carrying the wounded commander between them

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Malcolm wanted nothing more than leave sickbay and get on with the mission, except that it was almost complete. While he had been out cold, recovering from killing his evil alter-ego, T'Len and
Solan had made hay and blasted through a Vortex and they were now twelve hours from Salem One at warp five. Something inside him, the feeling that something big was to happen, had kept him here – despite the fact that T'Para was severely interrupting his verbal self-castigation.

"Stop it, young man," the Eldest Mother admonished him impatiently. "You are not to blame for what has transpired. Which part of 'you were violated' is so hard to understand for you without additional guidance?"

"With all due respect madam, you have definitely spent too much time conversing with Trip," Malcolm sighed, letting his head sink back onto the biobed's pillow trying to hide his fear behind biting sarcasm. After all, the old woman had seen his inner thoughts.

"I am laboring under the assumption that it was time well invested," he heard her reply. Somehow it was surreal to lie on a hospital bed a mere half-metre from a woman who basically amounted to the Queen of a huge Vulcan clan, trading sarcastic barbs. He wished the wise old matriarch would just read him the Riot Act.

"Why are you trying so hard to incriminate yourself, young one?" she asked, and he saw her struggling to sit up.

He didn't even try to understand why she seemed to know what he thought. He swayed back and forth as a wave of nausea hit him when he also sat up. The sensation subsided quickly, however, and he found himself in a battle of stares with the matriarch.

"Because I hope someone will punish me for what I have destroyed," he pleaded in anguish. "There is no point in pretending. You've seen my mind, madam – or both minds until recently. You have seen what wonderful gift Trip and T'Pol have given me by offering me their friendship and what did I give in return? I ogled his wife while he was getting mutilated."

"And I thought Charles was illogical," the matriarch replied dryly. "Blaming yourself for what happened to Charles is patently illogical, young one. As a result you also have no reason to consider yourself guilty for what you did at the time. I have followed the life of all four of you since you first contacted me over a year ago. I have seen such closeness only once in my life time. Not even Soval knows about it."

"Except that he will soon," a deadpan reply from behind a privacy screen announced.

"No he won't," a female voice announced and Malcolm stifled a tired laugh as he heard Feezal wheel Soval's biobed out into the corridor. Even the matriarch seemed to be amused in her roundabout way.

"Why do you blame yourself for something that was not avoidable?" she asked, returning to full seriousness.

"Depends on what you deem unavoidable," Malcolm replied. "Me not being with them? Trip getting hurt while I stare at his wife's naked arse? Me developing – how do you say? - an 'affection' for her?"

"I understand your frustration, young one. You are in many ways as unexperienced in dealing with your emotions as T'Pol. The affection for T'Pol you are so displeased with has been with you long before now. You would not have accepted an unspeakable burden like you did at the Tolaris tribunal had it not been with you already. Denial is a powerful force. Believe me, Malcolm, Vulcans are experts in denial."
"Denial is a necessary force here, ma'am," he replied, shaking his head in disbelief about the pseudo-tolerance babble of the matriarch. "I have taken my marriage vows before Hoshi and the world. The moral absolutes we have sworn to uphold have been the very fabric of human society for ages. I can't believe you as a Vulcan would just disregard such things or try to encourage me to do so!"

"Do not assume to know what I am thinking, young man. You remember your wedding day most vividly, which gives me the privilege to know what you have sworn. You have vowed to 'love her, comfort her, to honor her and to keep her in sickness and in health, in prosperity and adversity as long as you both shall live'. Yet you did the same for T'Pol. You risked your own self-respect to enable the trial. You have risked your life for her more than once. You have accepted guaranteed incarceration for stealing the ship in a bid to save her life."

"That's what friends do ma'am." he declared dryly, but in truth he wasn't even sounding convincing to himself.

"Has Hoshi ever called in question your upholding of the vows?"

"No."

"Then why are you blaming yourself? And for what? Your devotion to Hoshi has not diminished in any way, no matter how much closeness has developed between you and T'Pol."

"That's the problem, ma'am. How short is the step from looking at her to touching her? And why do we have this weird conversation? Trip and T'Pol are dying for crying out loud. We shouldn't be here debating whether you want to talk me into disregarding my marriage vows. We should be trying to save them. That's what I risked everything for to begin with!"

Malcolm was getting angry. He had long felt guilty for having more than friendly feelings for his best friend's Vulcan wife. But so far he could rely on the fact that the bond between T'Pol and Trip would be a safeguard. It was the door that kept the predator in the cage. What would protect T'Pol from his forbidden thoughts now? The bond was broken. The door was unlocked. And he felt as if the Eldest mother was trying to poke the beast so it would leap out of the cage.

"This talk is necessary," the matriarch decreed sternly. "You will soon understand that it is the last opportunity to have it. I do not urge you to disregard your vows. You never have done so and you never will. But know this young man. Your vows did not forbid you to uphold the same regard for T'Pol. You would willingly give your life for both, yet you promised only Hoshi to do so. Not the vows you have taken make you the man you are – your actions do.

And as for your insinuation that we waste time instead of saving those that you cherish. I would not have started this conversation were I not convinced that it is needed in the process. All four of you have come to depend on the presence of each other. One part of that presence will be gone. Charles might survive, but he will not be the same as before. He will need all of you."

"It sounds as if you try to talk me into bigamy," Malcolm spat in distaste. "You try to talk me into getting closer to my friend's wife while he fights for his life! That is disgusting!"

"I cannot make you understand yet, young one. And I do not condemn you for holding on to what you believe to be the absolute truth. The four of you have so far done well to find your path in life and I have every hope that you will continue to do so."

"Then why this weird talk, ma'am?" he pleaded. "I'm eternally grateful for what you have done. You undid the damage that the Section did to me. But why do you try to encourage me to continue
what I already hate myself for."

"You hate yourself for caring more about T'Pol's well-being than can be expected of a friend?"

"But it's not that I do it – it's why I do it," he indicted himself, desperate that the Eldest played the forgiving part instead of just chewing him out for being a self-centric pig. His voice broke in utter disgust about his own feelings and not for the first time he hoped he could just reign them in like he used to be able to. "You are right! I will go to jail because I … because I love T'Pol. Damn it all, I love her just as much as Hoshi. There was nothing else I could have done!"

"I do regret to have caused you all this pain, young one. But there was no other possible course of action. Instead of incriminating yourself, you have shown to be a most worthy man by being able to cherish both of them. What the future brings is yours to shape. But do remember – they will need you both and both you and Hoshi will be needed to bring strength to T'Pol and her mate for they embark on a most challenging journey. If you do this as friends, if you do this as a unique union of four individuals is a decision that only the 'First Quad' can take."

"You knew?" he asked, before stopping himself when he saw the Vulcan's raised eyebrow. "Of course you knew... the mind-meld."

"I know this conversation will leave you in confusion for a long time, but one day you will make the right decision. Until then, I know you will continue to do all you can to care for those you cherish so much."

"Do you really think he will survive?" Malcolm asked in regard to Trip. He didn't know whether he was waiting for the answer in dread or hope. Even though he had been driven by her to exasperation and anger over the past minutes, he couldn't shake the feeling that he would remember this moment several times in the future and he would ever remember a wise old matriarch caring a lot more for a human than could be expected. And it was she, who had risked her life in a bid to rid him of whatever the Section had done to his mind.

"You might wonder why I am telling you all this, despite your objection," the Eldest began. "The truth is, young one, my time has come. I could probably survive a few more years in this... frail body that has served my katra for two hundred and four years, but that would mean the death of T'Pol. The ritual I am preparing to perform to reconvene the two children will almost inevitably lead to my death. That is why we had to speak now, even if you were not prepared for it."

"T'Para, no!" he said in a voice of pain and following an impulse he took her calloused hands in his.

He looked at her in shock when he realized what he had done. She looked back at him and he saw a softness in her eyes that he had always missed in the eyes of his own parents.

"It has been half a century since someone just took my hands without fearing me," the old woman said softly. "Which makes my decision to choose you to be entrusted with this information the right one."

The Englishman looked at her, still clutching her hands, and fought the urge to cry. It felt as if he spoke to his much beloved grandmother Gwyneth on her deathbed all over again. He had lost her way too early and was left to suffer through life with his unfeeling parents.

"I sense your pain, young one," she said, still with that unusual softness in her voice. "Do not mourn my demise. I have served my purpose in life and my katra will be preserved. You will now need all your strength to help Charles, T'Pol and Hoshi. Even if he survives, his life will not be
without great challenges and he will need the support of all three of you; and I am relying on you to keep an eye on T'Pau. The young one needs guidance still.”

"That's a tall order, madam," Malcolm struggled to say as tears threatened his composure.

"I know, young one, but you can master it. Would you now please bring me to your ship's meditation chamber?"

He nodded wordlessly and released the brakes on her biobed. As a few silent tears ran down his face, he pushed the biobed with the exhausted matriarch on it through the corridors of Buran.

"Fuck it, I'll resign," Jon growled, starting towards his ready room, but his communications officer stopped him.

"Commodore, we have an incoming communication, fleet-wide. Unauthorized, but definitely coming from Salem One."

Jon flicked his hand, pointing towards the view screen. The day couldn't get any weirder anyway. He gasped at the scene that unfolded before them. An unknown Vulcan and Amanda Cole pointed weapons at Rear Admiral Zhukov, who was gagged and bound. Next to him stood Hoshi, her face littered with bruises, her head shaven bald and dominated by an ugly, freshly stitched cut.

"This is Lieutenant-Commander Hoshi Sato-Reed speaking to First Fleet. As I am speaking, the UCS Buran is on approach to Salem One. Starfleet has ordered your fleet to apprehend them, but I think it is worthy of notice that you are also ordered to facilitate the murder of Captain T'Pol of Vulcan."

Jon watched in naked shock, not only at the badly battered state of Hoshi. Stunned into silence, he watched the recording of the talk between Gardner and Zhukov that Hoshi played to all ships.

'Why was my order not followed to switch off the fucking machines?... He's brain damaged, so even if he survives he'll end up a vegetable. We don't need cripples, we need heroes - human fucking heroes... make sure T'Pol accidentally falls out of an airlock. If she's orbiting the station, the Reeds will have no will to execute. Harris can deal with Tucker.'

Jon wanted to howl in rage and agony, but bit it down with all of his strength. A burning rage boiled inside him about Starfleet's betrayal.

"Incoming from the Vulcans..." his comms officer said, "and the Andorians, and our ships."

"Vulcans," Jon croaked, barely able to hold on to consciousness and coherent thought, blinded by rage, yet trying to keep up a controlled manner in front of his bridge crew.

"First Minister Soval, who happens to be aboard the ship Buran, has authorized us to render any assistance that Lieutenant-Commander Sato-Reed may request," Sopek reported calmly.

"Stand by," Jon said with a nod, before looking back at his comms officer. "Andorians?"

"The Andorian Imperial Guard stands by for your orders as long as they are against what we have just seen," a middle-aged Andorian captain reported. His antennae were plastered to his head in disgust. Jon nodded and asked the Andorian to also stand by.

"Starfleet ships?"
"Pink-skin! We are not letting them do that, are we?" Shran raged aboard Challenger.

"No we aren't," Jon said, his mind still numb from what he'd heard.

"Lieutenant, give me all fleet on channel one and the station on channel two."

The officer nodded.

"Lieutenant-Commander Sato-Reed," he declared towards the image of Hoshi, which took up the right half of the screen. "Prepare to surrender the station to First Fleet and free a docking port to receive Buran. Send Zhukov to the... presidential suite." He pronounced the latter with all disgust he could pour into his voice.

"The station surrenders unconditionally," Hoshi said and Jon basked in the joy of seeing her heartwarming smile again for the first time since he'd left Enterprise, even if it was tainted by the many bruises on her face. It eradicated at least some of the burning rage inside him.

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The Eldest turned away to afford them a minimum of privacy, indicating T'Pau to do so as well, while Malcolm and Hoshi had an emotional reunion.

The young Vulcan had spent a lot of energy sustaining T'Pol thus far, and it was imperative that the ritual would be conducted soon. To many other Vulcans it would have been scandalous that the young one leaned heavily onto Charles's father for support, allowing him to wrap his arm around her, but it gave T'Para the necessary calm to face her inevitable demise, knowing that the young one had affectionate clan members prepared to care for her well-being. That they were human was inconsequential. If anything it was perhaps fortunate.

She looked at the Denobulan doctor who came to explain the situation to them. That it was grave was not necessary to explain. His face clearly showed it. There was barely enough un-bandaged skin on Charles's head to initiate a mind meld in the first place and his whole lower body was covered in a myriad of casts and scaffolding. It was obvious that the medics had spent an inordinate amount of effort to keep the young Human's body intact without having to amputate any limbs.

"What's the prognosis, doctor?" she heard Malcolm ask. "The truth – please. The full truth."

"There is little I can say for sure," the Denobulan explained, and the Eldest noticed that the alien was struggling desperately not to show his emotions. They certainly weren't of a positive nature. "He has suffered multiple skull fractures, comminuted fractures in both legs and the hip, severe cerebral hemorrhages, spine injuries. I'm surprised he is still alive. He will unlikely to be able to... see ever again. The visual cortex has suffered severe damage. Even if we can save his legs, I doubt he will be able to use them. We are still working on restoring as many functions of his lower body as possible. We have induced an artificial coma, but with damage as widespread as that, it will take months before his brain regains consciousness and I can't even guarantee that he will be able to wake up at all, even though I am moderately optimistic. It will not be easy for him in any case."

By the time he had finished his report, the alien had nearly succumbed to tears. The Eldest turned around to see Hoshi start sobbing loudly, gently held by Malcolm. The challenges in Charles's life would be greater than anticipated. Her theory that Hoshi had developed an affection for Charles had proved true, as she could sense the unspeakable pain, but also the grim determination radiating off the human female. It was now a question of whether the children would be able to heal to their lives. Their unique union was going to be challenged by fate – the most fearsome opponent
possible. But unfortunately she had to leave them to fend for themselves, as it would take her life to make sure all four of them would survive in the first place.

Not waiting any further, T'Para, swaying unsteadily on her feet due to the exhaustion from the mind-meld with Malcolm, placed her fingers on the faces of Trip and T'Pol and closed her eyes.

T'Pol struggled to get on her feet, her body feeling weak and exhausted. As she stood up she took in the scenery around her and wondered why she had been left alive. The battle had been lost, all buildings around her reduced to smoking piles of rubble. An unnaturally colored sky bore witness to the devastation that had come to her world.

She staggered and stumbled through the debris, with no purpose and no aim, her face stained with blood and grime until she heard a voice, lamenting:

'He fight and he pray, he love and he bleed
To no satisfaction, was note as need,
And when he walks, stands tall as he can
For he's a man, yeah, he's a man

And when he crumbles, resolve to the ground
Like burnt bits of paper, life flutters round
All eyes turn away, no one wants to see
A man who has lost, in the fight to be free…'

Following the voice she found a diminutive female among the debris, kneeling unclothed, her body battered, full of bruises and scars on her torso and her bald head. She was lamenting a body lying before her, holding his bloodied hand. In horror T'Pol recoiled as she saw the body. It was Trip! His eyes were missing, blood trickling from the two empty holes in his head. He groaned in unspeakable agony, unable to articulate himself, yet the female held on to him in devotion. Sinking to her knees, T'Pol took his other hand, clutching it, mirroring what the other female did. It was Hoshi.

'In the back of his mind is a smiling face
The one who said, "You know, it's no race"
The one who said, "You got time to breathe"
'Cause child you're born, we're all born free

In the back of his mind is the back of a room
So dust enshrouded and no dust broom
Stands a chance to clear the cobwebs away
So live in the back, in the dark it'll stay…'

Malcolm lunged forward when the Eldest sank to the ground with a pain-filled groan. Cradling the old Vulcan in his arms, he shook her, unwilling to accept the inevitable.

"T'Para, no!" he pleaded. "No!"

"T'Pau," she demanded with a weak voice, and the young Vulcan raced to her side. Malcolm helped the old woman put her fingers on T'Pau's face.

"Vokau, T'Pau-kan, Vokau," the matriarch whispered, expending the last energy of her long life.
Malcolm started to cry helplessly as life left the body of the Eldest Mother, even as he held her in his arms.

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Sam Gardner woke up and groaned as the hideous headache he'd been nursing since last night was still there. He wasn't surprised that the other half of the bed was empty. For the first time in over twenty years he had forgotten their wedding anniversary. Women were not inclined to forgive such an offense, even if it happened for the first time in two decades.

He stumbled out of the bed and shuffled into the kitchen where Laura was peeling potatoes for lunch.

"Morning, darling," he groaned as he staggered towards the bathroom to make himself presentable and procrastinate a little longer before the apology.

As he prepared to shave, he ran the back of his fingers over the stubble in confusion. It looked like he hadn't shaved in two or three days, but he never forgot to shave. But then he had never forgotten their anniversary either. A jolt of panic gripped him. His father had died of Alzheimer's, as had his grandfather. Was it now his turn to descend slowly into dementia? Sure they could delay the decay these days, but even after more than a century, there was no cure for this horrible disease.

It was one of the questions one didn't want an answer for, but he was the acting Commander in Chief, so there was no way he could avoid a stop-over at Starfleet Medical – as if the day could get any worse.

He wiped the last remnants of shaving foam of his face, splashed it with aftershave and prepared to grovel.

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When he came into the living room he stopped as he saw an unexpected visitor. Commodore Falkner, the Chief of Starfleet Security, stood next to his wife and was pointing a pulse rifle directly at him.

"Ok, the day could get worse," Gardner sarcastically finished his earlier thoughts aloud. "Falkner, I take it you have a reason to come to my home and point a weapon at me?"

"Answer me one question, Sam. Why did you order Zhukov to kill Captain T'Pol?"

Gardner shook his head in disbelief and looked at his wife, hoping she'd get the unspoken message to get out of the house. Falkner had clearly lost his mind.

"Are you crazy, Art? I haven't spoken to Zhukov in weeks! Is that something Reed has told you?"

"What does Reed have to do with it?" Falkner asked and Gardner saw him transfer the weapon to the other hand, but still firmly pointing in his direction.

"Well he wanted to run off to Salem One and was completely out of it yesterday, calling himself Hadrian or something. You should know that, I alarmed your staff."

Gardner watched, confused, as Falkner put the weapon down.

"Sam, that was almost five days ago," the Dutchman said in visible shock.
Gardner carefully and slowly walked towards the couch, not taking his eyes off the Dutchman in case he would grab the weapon again.

"Okay," he ventured, slowly lowering himself onto the piece of furniture as to not present a threat to Falkner. "Either I am missing four days of my life or you are desperately in need of help, Art."

The Dutchman sat into one of the armchairs and Gardner relaxed as the weapon remained on the kitchen counter – out of reach for both of them.

"Laura, did you notice something weird about me in the last few days?" Sam asked his wife, feeling completely lost.

"Other than you sleeping in the office and coming home only one single time in five days to give me a hideously expensive anniversary gift?" she asked back dryly, showing him a box with a diamond ring in it.

"The headache...," Gardner said. "It must have something to do with it. If I stayed in the office all those days, why am I here now?"

"I brought you home and kept an eye on you," Falkner said. "The entire First Fleet mutinied yesterday after Hoshi Reed leaked a recording of you ordering T'Pol's and Tucker's murder. I thought if you'd been drugged it might not be gone yet, but the medics checked you and found nothing – well, except that your brain scan looked as if you'd slept with your fingers in the electrical socket."

"I- I d-did what?"

Samuel William Gardner was hyperventilating by the time the recording had ended. Laura was crying helplessly.

"Art, we must find out what happened to me!" he urged, putting on his uniform jacket.

"Leave the jacket here, Sam," Falkner said calmly. "We've both been discharged dishonorably without any fanfare. Last night, as a matter of fact."

"Well, my discharge I can understand after...this," Gardner said, letting the jacket drop to the floor and pointing at the view screen. "But you?"

"Needless to say they were calling for your head on a platter," Falkner recalled. "And I helped you run. They didn't like that much."

"And you took me HOME? That's the first place they're going to look for me."

"That's the last place they're going to look for you after both your and Laura's life-signs registered on a shuttle flight to Russia. They're currently turning the taiga upside down near Plesetsk. That'll keep them busy for a few days."

Gardner looked at his former security chief, dumbfounded. "How?"

"Ask Laura how she got a few live cells with your DNA out of you. I suppose it's a bit of a private affair," Falkner said dryly.

Gardner groaned in embarrassment, before he remembered a detail from the recording.
"What about Harris? I 'said' he'll deal with Tucker..."

"Mr. Harris appears to have gone missing," Falkner said, still ice-calm. "We need to find out what happened to you."

"Damn right," Gardner said, and fetched his private weapon from the safe.
Uncertain Path

Careful not to make any sound, Falkner pushed a branch aside, catching a glimpse of where Admiral Zagayev was going. Now why would the Commander in Chief of Starfleet, successor of the sacked Sam Gardner, visit a busy industrial estate during lunch-time a second day in a row?

When the Admiral disappeared into one of the offices, Falkner looked for a way to follow him. It was a bet with lousy odds that the scene he was going to witness would probably be the same sickening procedure as yesterday, only that today he had a bug and a hidden camera in place to record the event and didn't need to risk detection. Now it was just a case of downloading the data.

Crossing one hundred meters of tarmac unseen would be impossible, unless he managed to blend into the scenery, but he had spent enough time scoping out the place to know that a good solution was not far distant.

He jumped out as a forklift passed by, and in a swift movement the driver was incapacitated and tossed aside into the undergrowth. He saw the unconscious body disappear into the greenery as his accomplice Gardner dragged it further in to hide it from view. Normally he wouldn't work with amateurs, but Gardner was the only one he could rely upon, seeing that they were sacked from Starfleet.

The vehicle barely swerved as Falkner skillfully regained control of it and steered it to a ramp not far from the office that Zagayev had disappeared into. Fortunately there was a spare hi-vis jacket on the back of the truck's seat so he hurriedly shrugged it on in case anyone noticed he wasn't wearing one and came over to ask awkward questions. To maintain his cover, he started to transfer empty barrels between loading bays, keeping the door of the office shack in sight.

It didn't take more than ten minutes for Zagayev to come back out, and Falkner steered his forklift towards a darkened loading bay to avoid detection, careful not to speed up or give any sign that he was what he appeared to be – just an anonymous site worker, interested in nothing but the weary grind of moving barrels. Parking up inside, he pretended to be checking something on the vehicle's control panel, but out of the corner of his eye he kept an eye on the yard. The Admiral looked around often, but the camouflage of the hi-vis made a humble worker effectively invisible; Zagayev's gaze passed across him indifferently. Barely two minutes later, a Vulcan walked out of the office.

It was the same guy he had seen the day before, and a shiver ran down Falkner's spine. Not since Harris's pet mind-rapist Tarok had he seen a Vulcan with such a lunatic facial expression – one that had 'psychopath' written all over it.

Once Gardner had sent the agreed sequence of vibrations to his communicator, notifying him that both Zagayev and the Vulcan had left the premises, he drove his fork-lift over to the office, where he brought it to a halt and, with a last cautious glance around to make sure he was unobserved, started downloading the data from both surveillance devices.

Now it was a matter of getting the data to the rogue First Fleet. He remembered that there was an office vacant here. Slightly tainted by a burn mark on the carpet, of course, but with a non-registered subspace terminal. And it was easy to break in if one knew the secret codes.

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Admiral Valdore walked into the Praetor's office, knowing that his life had run its course. All he
could hope for was that his private spies on Earth would finish his plans. He had set the operation in motion to topple D'deridex and become Praetor himself, but at least it would now serve to save his family from sharing his own fate.

The dark face of the Praetor left no doubt about the purpose of the meeting. He wasted no time on superfluous preliminaries before launching the attack.

"Seven thousand, four hundred and twenty-six warriors and engineers died, Valdore." His voice began low, but rose to a scream. "Seven thousand, four hundred and twenty-six! We have no more shipyards and the Coalition now has a ship that can easily match a warbird. Since their shipyards are still intact, they will soon have more!"

"May I remind you, who told them where to find our shipyards? It was the same vang'radam you flattered as if he was your own son?" the Admiral growled back, unflinching. He was going to die anyway, so he might as well let the veruul behind the desk have a piece of his mind. So many things had burned and festered within him for all these months, what would it profit him to die with them unsaid? At least with the words uttered he could die in peace.

No-one had ever offered D'deridex such insolence. He almost swayed with the shock. "You will be silent, Valdore!"

"Know this, mighty Praetor," Valdore snarled, making the title an open insult. "Even as we speak, operatives that answer only to me and my family are on Terrha working on destroying this Coalition. I hired them to get you off your throne and take your place. Now they will be what safeguards my family and keeps you from losing power. The people have no admiration for failures, and you don't have many victories to proclaim."

"Take him out!" the Praetor demanded, seemingly almost on the verge of hysteria. With a mocking salute, Valdore walked outside, followed by the firing squad.

He screamed in agony as the disrupter fire started to dissolve his flesh. Fortunately, it seemed that at least some of the soldiers secretly sympathized with him. Not all of the weapons were set on minimum.

It was painful, but at least it was relatively swift.

"He's two hours overdue," Jonathan Archer said, sitting in the captain's chair of Molotok. The ship had been patched up hastily and was now en route to Earth with Buran, under the command of T'Len. Several Andorian and two Vulcan cruisers were also in the convoy, ready to engage Starfleet if it was necessary, but Jon preferred to save what was left of the coalition. The irrational orders from Starfleet had caused severe problems among the four species, and the fact that they had made a hard-line separatist like Admiral Zagayev the successor to Gardner certainly hadn't helped any.

"Falks may be late, sir, but he will get the information to us. He can't exactly walk into a post office to call us," a clearly irate Malcolm Reed shot back sarcastically.

Jon looked over at his former tactical officer. Time had been when that kind of disrespect would have earned Malcolm a sharp reprimand, but then time had been when it would be the last thing the Brit would have contemplated displaying. A lot of water had passed under the bridge since they'd all set out aboard Enterprise for the first time, and a lot of things had changed.
None of them for the better, in his opinion. And not a whole lot in Malcolm Reed's world either, it seemed.

He'd never thought he would see the Brit, who redefined the concept of 'stiff upper lip', cry, but when the matriarch of T'Pol's clan had died after her desperate attempt to save T'Pol, he had seen the battle-hardened man reduced to tears. It was a picture that still haunted him.

The news about Trip had hit them all hard. After two more seemingly endless surgeries, Phlox and Dr. Lucas were now convinced that Trip would have control over his bladder and digestive tract – provided he ever regained consciousness in the first place. This would spare him the cruel fate of having to wear diapers for the rest of his life, but considering that he would still have to live out his days blind and bound to a wheelchair, that was only a mild consolation.

A much bigger consolation was that T'Pol had regained consciousness and had taken the news with less distress than anyone had expected. The one hope that kept Jon going was that T'Pol would sure as hell now abandon her life-long fascination with micro-singularities and spend all her scientific prowess on researching ways to undo the damage that had been done to her mate. Somehow he took comfort in the feeling that one day Trip would walk or see again, perhaps even both. Such was the confidence he had in his former science officer. If she set her mind on something, she would get it done, no matter if it took months or years.

Hoshi and T'Pol had been left back at Salem One. Hoshi was required to stay there a little longer in any case as her short stint as an underground guerrilla had not done her healing wounds any favors; and there was no easy separating T'Pol from Trip anyway.

The beep on Malcolm's PADD told him that the long-awaited communication was coming in. Normally he would prefer to be kept in the loop, but he could hardly push Starfleet protocol on a rogue ship and he knew that by taking the message in the ready room, Malcolm was giving him plausible deniability in case the almost inevitable court-martial came.

"What the fuck did we just see?" Gardner raged after Falkner had sent the recording to Molotok.

"The same that made you forget almost a week of your life," Falkner explained. "You can call it a mind-rape. A Vulcan forcefully mind-melds with you and plants false memories and hidden commands in your brain."

Gardner thought about it for a moment. "That's why this industrial estate seemed familiar to me, isn't it? I too went there every day to have my brain messed up by that pointy-eared asshole."

He saw Falkner nod gravely.

"How can you know this?"

"Harris had a pet psychopath like that one. The section did the same to Malcolm Reed and a whole host of other good operatives."

"That's why he called himself Hadrian!" Gardner realized.

"Yes, somehow his forced schizophrenia was triggered. But though god knows how he did it, Malcolm seems to have overcome it. He was back to normal this morning. Talked about a Vulcan killing his 'dark katra'. A Vulcan gave it to him, so it stands to reason that only a Vulcan can cure it."
"I knew Harris was a despicable asshole," Gardner ranted. "But that he went as far as that!"

"He had lost connection to reality a long time ago. Why do you think Malcolm and I walked out on him?"

"You killed him didn't you?" Gardner said, pointing to the floor of Harris' former office. "And not with a Starfleet issue weapon either. I've seen these burn marks before. Each and every one of them meant a Rommie had offed himself on Salem One before we retook it."

Falkner nodded wordlessly.

"Good man," Gardner said dryly. "Now let's see if we can help Archer and Reed clean up this mess."

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Jon slowly gravitated towards the right side of his chair, away from Malcolm Reed who had come out of the ready room wearing what could only be described as a 'thousand yard stare'.

"If you would excuse me for an hour, sir," the Brit stated in a lifeless voice, "I need some time to wreck the gym."

Without waiting for his captain's answer, he walked off into the turbo lift. The whole bridge crew recoiled in horror as a blood-curdling scream of rage and agony could be heard through the doors, fading away as the lift descended into the bowels of the ship.

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Zagayev stared at his screen, watching in horrified incredulity as the Nork class Tellarite cruisers left orbit when Archer and his rogue fleet arrived in the solar system. They didn't attack the rogue ships – they joined them. The last ship still left was Enterprise, docked on Jupiter station, but no hails were answered. He was an Admiral without a fleet.

Left without options, he took out the phaser from the top drawer of his desk, put it to his temple and pulled the trigger.

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"Where exactly are we going, Malcolm, and what was that show about two days ago?" Jon demanded as Reed steered the shuttle down. Had he not forced his way aboard, the Brit would have gone on his own.

Wordlessly, the other man put a data chip into the computer and played a recording.

"Tolaris!" Jon gasped in horror, when he saw the mad-looking Vulcan putting his hands to Admiral Zagayev's face.

"Bring me Gardner," the Vulcan demanded, clearly deeply sunk in a mind-meld. "He resisted and wanted to kill my T'Pol instead of giving her to me. He has to die. I shall disembowel his treacherous body and devour his organs with the greatest pleasure after I have taken her. She will be mine! I shall take pleasure in her cries for help and mercy. She deserves punishment for refusing me. Now that her human is dead, I shall have her. Bring her to me. Bring Gardner and T'Pol to me! She is mine. You cannot refuse."

Jon covered his mouth with his hand and tried to swallow a surge of bile as the recording was
"What? The human is not dead? Why is she so far away? Who is the one who took her away from me? Tell me his name! 'Malcolm'? I shall consume him, too. He too must die. Clueless Rihanšsu. They freed me and thought I would work for them, Valdore will not be pleased."

There was a pause in which the Vulcan's face took on an irritated look. It seemed as if Zagayev was putting up a fight. Tolaris' features distorted into an ugly grimace of rage.

"Why do you want to know that? Stop resisting. Bring me my prize, bring her, nothing else is of consequence. BRING HER!"

Jon looked on in horror as the Vulcan used his telepathic abilities to inflict what must be unspeakable pain on Zagayev's brain, making the human groan and weep in agony. Finally Tolaris let go of the hapless admiral, and the human stumbled off with a completely lifeless look, void of emotions and conditioned to serve the Vulcan's bidding.

"I would... challenge you for the right to kill him," Jon said weakly, wiping the taste of bile from his mouth. "But I take it you have the experience to make it as painful and excruciating as possible?"

He saw Malcolm nod wordlessly. The gray eyes of the Brit were as hard and cold as slate in winter rain.

T'Pol and Hoshi sat at a remote table in Salem One's mess hall.

"How are you?" Hoshi asked. She hadn't seen T'Pol in two days as Phlox had made her return to the hospital zone.

"Considering your appearance, that is something that I should ask you," the Vulcan replied tiredly.

Hoshi shrugged a little bitterly, disregarding the discomfort the movement caused. "My wounds will heal."

She looked up in surprise when suddenly T'Pol took her hand.

"You love him, do you not?"

It was couched more as a statement than a question, but nevertheless she recoiled, startled and guilty. "I – I don't know what you mean!"

"Hoshi, I saw you when I was reconnected with Trip by the Eldest Mother. You would not have been there would not both of you love each other. You have been part of his last conscious thoughts."

She looked back at T'Pol and had a hard time fighting the tears. It was telling that the Vulcan was using the L-word instead of saying 'having an affection' or 'desire him'.

In the face of such naked courage and honesty, nothing other than equal honesty would serve.

"Yes, T'Pol, I love him. I tried not to but I do. I think of Trip and Malcolm and I want them both. I... It is so egocentric, but that's how it is. I don't know when it happened. But I promise, I will never get in the way of your marriage." Of the effect of these complications on her own marriage,
she tried not to think; time to face that when she must. Right now she had as much to cope with as she could bear.

"I do not blame you, Hoshi, and you will not become a danger to our marriage. He will need both of us. I wish only for one thing. Let us promise to each other that we will stop at nothing – nothing at all – to make his life worth living once he wakes up, no matter how damaged his body or mind are."

"Nothing, nothing at all," Hoshi promised in a whisper as tears ran down her still bruised face.

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"You wanted to know who took her away from you?" he called out into the great dim space of the hall. "It was me, Malcolm Reed. Come out and make good on your promise, scumbag! You wanted me brought to you. Now I'm here. Come on, if you think you're hard enough!"

The empty building that had once been a factory was dark and dirty, and the sound of his voice echoed from the walls. Just the right place for a psychopathic rapist to hide. If there was one redeeming thing about this madman, it was the fact that he had abandoned the mission given to him by the Romulans who had freed him from prison. But that was hardly for altruistic motives, but rather because his rejection by the lovely Vulcan all those years ago had festered in his warped brain and turned into an obsession for revenge into which every other desire was swallowed up. As long as he was alive there would be no safety for T'Pol, and Malcolm would rather serve time for cold-blooded murder than expose her to the risk. It would be just one more added to the many stains of blood on his hands anyway. What difference would it make?

"Malcolm." A menacing voice sounded from the shadows to his right and the Brit hastily adjusted his position to put a pillar behind his back. Somehow the Vulcan had managed to sneak up on him. He was not best pleased. The Section had trained him better than that. Must be getting careless; or maybe just getting old.

He wouldn't get to be much older if he fucked this up.

Suddenly the shadows disgorged the Vulcan he'd come to hunt down. Gone was the smoothness that had characterized him on board the Vakhlas. Now the insanity that had lain beneath the surface had boiled up through it and was clear for anyone to see. His face was distorted with hatred and his eyes blazed. There was foam at the corners of his mouth.

"You despicable creature," Tolaris snarled, lunging towards him. "You desire her! I sense it! She is mine!"

Bloody hell, he's quick! It was only the long years of training and a dozen dirty fights for his life that enabled Malcolm to dodge the strike, though even so the edge of the blade caught him.

"Close your eyes and you'll see what I've come to bring you," he replied, ignoring the sudden wash of blood from the gash across his temple. He struck back fast and low, and slashed the Vulcan's right arm with his knife.

His opponent recoiled in pain, but the grimace remained. Green blood was running down the arm that Malcolm had slashed open.

"You will never have her if you kill me," the Vulcan taunted him, wielding his blade with the uninjured arm. "Your Starfleet will not countenance a murderer. You will be locked away, and she will not even remember that you exist."
"I won't 'have her' in any case. She's the wife of my best friend," Reed said coldly. "But I will make sure that you'll never again pose a danger to her, even if it costs my own life."

"We could have her together, Malcolm. He is crippled and could not mount a defense. She would be ours. Think about the pleasure of hearing her beg for mercy as her helpless cripple cries in agony while we enjoy her."

"You sick bastard!" Before the Section, there might have been hot, honest rage in his soul as he rammed his knife into Tolaris' lower abdomen. Now there was only the bitter cold of the trained killer carrying out yet another job. Yet another victim looked back at him, eyes wide in horror and pain as he twisted the blade, deeply buried among the Vulcan's organs. A sickening squelching sound filled his ears as he jerked the blade back and forth for maximum effect, shredding the innards of the psychopath he'd come here to kill.

He let go of the knife's handle as the dead body of Tolaris sunk to the ground, green blood pooling on the ground around the corpse. He was no longer employed by the Section; this time there would be consequences. His face as cold and hard as polished marble, he walked away wordlessly to face them.

"Why did you resign?" T'Pol asked as she and Hoshi sat on either side of Trip's biobed. They both held one of his hands.

"I'm sick of it. We nearly lost him and any one of us could be next. I don't want to lose you or Malcolm, too. Trip has given the ultimate sacrifice, and we've all been through enough. We've given almost six years of our lives, constantly in danger of losing everything. For what? Starfleet will discharge Trip, honorably yes, but bereft of any pleasure. You heard Phlox. He won't walk, he'll be blind, he can't have sex. He'll be sentenced to a life in a body that doesn't obey him anymore. It could take decades, if it happens at all in our life-time, until medicine is ready to undo his injuries."

T'Pol shivered at Hoshi's anguished summary. The gravity of Trip's situation hit her hard all over again, and her eyes became moist, too, despite her continual struggle for emotional control.

"I want to dedicate my time to making life as independent as possible for him," she heard Hoshi say in grim, if still tearful determination. "I'll teach him Braille and I think I have learned enough about sensor technology and communications electronics that I can start working on a voice controlled wheelchair that can navigate places autonomously."

"We will both work on it. I too contemplated resigning my commission, but we will need to provide for ourselves. I shall request a planet-side posting. In my spare time I shall support your research."

"That means we'll have to find a place to live not far from each other," Hoshi said.

T'Pol took her companion's free hand and put it to her cheek, gently trying to soak up some of the sadness and despair she could sense in the young human's mind through the touch-telepathic contact. She at least could try dealing with it during meditation, a 'luxury' that Hoshi did not have.

"I wish for all four of us to reside in one domicile," she replied after a while. "T'Pau, most likely after consulting with the Eldest's katra, has theorized that our relationship has transcended the status of mere friends, and I am beginning to understand her logic. Trip will not regain his will to live if you are absent and I submit that neither would I have done were it not for your presence.
when the Eldest Mother gave her life to reconnect me and Trip. I am sure we can find a domicile that has two levels. One for you and Malcolm, and one for Trip and me."

Hoshi was crying silently and T'Pol fought hard not to follow her example.

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Malcolm was led into a chamber of the Vulcan embassy, where Soval and T'Pau were waiting for him.

The recognition confirmed his previous bleak assessment of his fate. If the head of the Vulcan government saw fit to make the journey to Earth it could only mean that someone had demanded his arse on a platter for the cold-blooded murder of one of their citizens, even if the citizen in question had been an out-of-his-mind wannabe rapist.

Somewhat to his surprise, however, the Vulcan guard removed the shackles from around his wrists.

"I apologize for the injustice you have been exposed to by your incarceration," Soval began, and Malcolm looked at him slack-jawed in surprise. He had expected to be read a death-sentence, not handed an apology. In the circumstances, he'd thought that he'd be summarily handed over to the Vulcans for trial and sentencing. For a moment, he could do little more than blink in confusion.

"I could replay the recording that Commodore Falkner has produced of your encounter with Tolaris, but I would prefer than neither of us is exposed to such an unspeakable experience again."

"It was still murder, sir," Malcolm replied evenly.

"The crime for which Tolaris was sentenced two years ago called for his execution already. Now, he had revealed his intention to commit a more unspeakable crime – the physical abuse of T'Pol. With that he had forfeited his right to live and it does not matter who performed the execution."

"I appreciate your wanting to absolve me from all culpability, sir, but..."

"You cannot be absolved from a guilt that does not exist," Soval interrupted him, his tone severe and final. "It is of far more importance that I now need your help in defusing this volatile situation. The coalition is on the brink of failing due to the meddling of the Romulans and Tolaris. And you have seen all the recorded events. Your testimony is vital to keep the coalition alive."

"I'm not sure how much help I can be, but I'm willing to try," Malcolm agreed, making the mental adjustment with some difficulty. "I would prefer a uniform over a prison garb though."

"T'Pau has obtained a uniform for you," Soval said.

Malcolm saw the raised eyebrow on the Vulcan's face when he just ditched the prison garment, stripping down to nothing more than his blue Starfleet issue underpants before taking the uniform.

"Nothing she hasn't seen before," he remarked dryly as he pulled up the zip. "Let's go."

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Two weeks later...

"Are you sure you don't want to reconsider, Captain?" Gardner asked with a look at the man before him. The rank insignia of Malcolm Reed lay before him on the table. Starfleet was about to lose both Sato-Reeds.
Captain Reed, in cooperation with Soval and Commodore Archer, had managed to convince the Coalition council that recent tensions had been the result of Romulan meddling. The Tolaris detail was swept under the rug to protect Captain T'Pol's privacy.

"We've done enough, Admiral, and one of us paid an awfully high price. You have the Romulans at your mercy for as long as it takes them to deal with the Klingons. You have lots of good men and women. You don't need Hoshi or me, but Trip does, as Starfleet seems to have seen fit to just sack him unceremoniously."

Malcolm saw that his disgust at Starfleet's decision had clearly been understood by the Admiral.

"That was a decision they took before I was given my job back. I don't like it any more than you do. But I'd prefer to change Starfleet from the inside with a few good men like you, rather than watching you walk out."

"That's too little too late, sir. We shipped out five years ago to go exploring. We came home broken and Starfleet didn't lift a finger to fix us. Just think about what Harris did to me and nobody did anything, and the arsehole would still be alive if Falks hadn't dealt with him. With all due respect, sir, we are no longer willing to give our lives for an organization that doesn't care about saving them. Trip fights for his life, I'm broken beyond imagination. The rest of us want to go out on our terms before you toss us aside like you did with Trip."

With that he pivoted and left Gardner's office. He did not afford anyone a further look as he left Starfleet Headquarters for the last time.

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"Ladies and Gentlemen, this is the United Earth Broadcasting Corporation with the latest news."

"In an unprecedented move, United Earth Starfleet has released details of a wide-scale insurgency that had threatened to break up the United Coalition of Planets."

"According to the dossier released by the Press Office of Starfleet Command, two high ranking members of the Admiralty had been influenced by a rogue Vulcan acting under orders of Romulan infiltrators. Upon being requested for clarification by our editorial office, Vulcan authorities described the methods of influencing the Starfleet officers as 'unspeakable violations' but declined to offer further details. One of the attacked officers, Admiral Zagayev, has committed suicide while the unnamed second officer has reportedly returned to his post after Vulcan medics have confirmed there will be no lasting effects of the attack.

"The Fleet Command also confirmed reports that the first fleet under command of Commodore Jonathan Archer had mutinied in protest at unusual orders given by both of these 'influenced' individuals. Admiral Samuel Gardner was quoted as saying that without Commodore Archer's brave decision to risk incarceration, the coalition might have broken down due to the Romulan infiltration. Commodore Art Marinus Falkner, head of Starfleet Security, has been named as another pivotal influence in diverting this attack.

"According to Vulcan intelligence sources, the enemy meanwhile has been thrown into disarray. Several high ranking members of the imperial fleet have reportedly been executed. With their ship building capacities destroyed, the enemy is currently unable to mount an attack. The Coalition council has, however, dismissed calls for an attack on Romulus, citing the fact that the coalition was formed to defend the four worlds that founded it, not as an attack force. Questions whether the coalition is using the weak position of the enemy to force peace talks have not been answered so far."
Hoshi sat next to T'Pol watching the news reel as Atlantis, under the command of Erika Hernandez, glided through space towards Earth. Since Hoshi was no longer a member of Starfleet, she had been assigned to one of the guest quarters and had spent most of the time with T'Pol, eagerly waiting for news from Malcolm or updates from Phlox about Trip's condition.

"Any news from Phlox?" she asked now.

"Trip's condition has been updated to 'stable'. However, the doctor believes that this will be the last change for months. He and Doctor Lucas have decided not to risk any more surgeries for the time being. Trip has been transferred to the hospital ship Marconi for transfer back to Earth. Phlox is traveling with him. Due to the limited speed of the Marconi class it will take almost six months for them to arrive on Earth."

"All things considered, that sounds pretty good," Hoshi mused. "Malcolm's written, too. He's found a house on Fuerteventura that fits all requirements. It should give us enough privacy."

"Will Malcolm be comfortable living on an island?"

"He feels comfortable enough. He was more concerned with Trip's comfort. It's easily navigable by wheelchair and not surrounded by too many other houses. Fuerteventura is half-deserted anyway."

"I thought it was a fairly popular holiday venue?" T'Pol asked.

"Not anymore. The last tourist hotel closed over twenty years ago. With the rise in mean temperature, it's basically a miniature version of Vulcan with lower gravity. North and Baltic sea are the big venues these days."

"What about Malcolm's plan for his company?"

"He has found an industrial estate in Bilbao. We could afford both it and the house, but our combined savings would almost be used up, so he didn't want to decide without hearing at least your opinion. Trip, well, he can't say anything..."

Hoshi stopped mid-sentence as tears overcame her again. She felt T'Pol's arm around her shoulders and leaned on the shoulder of her friend, letting the tears flow freely as had happened so often during the last two weeks.

T'Para inspected the vista with interest. Apparently T'Pau did not see fit to clear her mind of all distractions during meditation as normally there would be no vista to see. Instead the young one had recreated the image of the small island on Earth she had visited several weeks ago. The mental image that represented the young one’s mind was sitting unclothed on the white sand near the water in the meditation position. The influence of her time spent with Hoshi was hard to miss.

The matriarch knew that her own image was created by T'Pau's mind, but nonetheless she inspected herself to make sure that T'Pau's mind had equipped her with proper attire so that the young one was not exposed to the ungainly sight of a body that was more than two centuries old.

"You are still confused by what you saw in T'Pol's mind, are you not?" she said without preamble as she took a seat across from the young woman.

"Indeed I am. Her bond with Charles was still intact when she had visions of intimacy with Hoshi in the shower. This should not be possible."
"You cannot apply our views to them, young one. In my opinion they have no longer been 'only friends' for many months. Each of them would lose a part of his or her katra was any one of them to decease. But the children fight this reality."

"You mean to say they have become a true quad? As the Andorians do?"

T'Para could see the confusion on the young one's face. Granted, this was not an easy situation to understand for someone so young. Indeed, it had taken her some time and much mediation to come to grips with it herself.

"In their hearts they have been one for many months, but their intellect is fighting it as neither our world nor theirs provides guidance for such a situation. They cling to the letter of their marriage vows. But even if they deny it, their mutual affection will allow them to overcome the hardships that await them. Healing Charles will be an arduous challenge, one that will test them in ways no armed conflict ever has. But one day, when they finally accept the reality of their lives we will see Charles go on to achieve greatness. I sensed as much in my dying moments."

"Are you convinced that he will be healed?"

"Only time will tell," T'Para answered. "Human medicine progresses fast and they have now the experience of several species to draw upon, but even if the damage to his body cannot be repaired, his mind hopefully can. It appeared injured, but savable to me. The human brain has a remarkable ability to survive even substantial damage. And do not underestimate the force that are T'Pol and Hoshi if they combine their talents. Charles' future might not look as dire as all believe."

"How will T'Pol deal with the loss of the bond? Especially since it was remarkably strong?" T'Pau asked, but T'Para waved off her sentiment.

"Yes, it was a bond the likes of which we have not seen among Vulcans, but it was what a bond is – a crutch necessary due to our biology. Her devotion to Charles will not diminish because of the loss of a connection that his physiology should not have allowed to form to begin with. And you saw yourself that it was easily overruled by her affection for Malcolm and Hoshi. Their affection comes from inside their katras, not due to a connection that biology forced on them."

"I take it you wish to follow their path in life a while longer before your katra is retired to a katric arc on Mount Seleya?"

"That is your decision to make, young one. I have no right to impose on your mind any longer than strictly necessary."

It was visible that the young one needed a moment to think, but then her answer came with firm conviction.

"I would find your continued presence and counsel most agreeable."

T'Para's image nodded her approval. While the corporeal remains of her existence were soon to be stored for mummification in the catacombs of the clan's mountain retreat, her spiritual essence relished the chance to follow the life of the clan's most unusual family a little longer.

Author's Notes

Thus endeth another part of an epic journey. The ride continues in part 3 "Spirit In The Night".
A big shout-out goes to my beta reader Eireann who helped me immensely in the latter chapters as I ventured out of my normal angst-free comfort zone and added a few darker colors to my universe. You’ve been a great help ma’am and I can’t thank you enough for all the time you invested on sorting out my drafts.

Kotik aka The Fat Hippo...

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!