The Mair-rigolauya
by oboe_dawn

Summary

Can a person from Spock's past help captain and first officer become more than friends?

When the Enterprise's first officer recruits childhood acquaintance, Tralnor, as a partner in completing a dangerous covert task assigned by T'Pau, nothing is easy. Vulcan's shadowy past still has teeth, and the onus is on Spock to stop a piece of history from taking a bite out of the present.

Jim Kirk, convinced he's still got time to ask Spock to be his lover, starts to fray at the edges, nearly sinking their relationship, after he catches wind of a very special woman in Spock's life. What Kirk does not know is just how much Spock wants to stay at the captain's side as a friend plus a lot more.

Will Kirk and Spock overcome their inability to express their true feelings toward one another? Is it going to take meddling friends and crewmates to push them together? What is T'Pau so desperate to find? And, who or what exactly is Mollie?

This is the first entry in the series Celluloid Vokaya.

Notes

Greetings readers new and old. Slowly but surely, The Mair-rigolauya is going up over here as an additional backup to my own files in the wake of the K/S Archive's recent hardware malfunction. This is something I probably should have done a year ago, but better late than never, right?
As always, thank you for reading and coming along with me on this adventure.
Chapter 1

Author’s Notes: There is fairly frequent use of the Vulcan language throughout this novel where the translations are almost always given in context or within the text. The Vulcan Language Dictionary is where I pluck most of this vocabulary from, though I’ve also had to come up with words I’ve needed on my own. Any mistakes are entirely on me. I hope you all enjoy reading this as much as I’ve had a blast writing it. My most sincere thanks. —oboedawn

“I’m telling you, Avery, girls think Academy grads are studs and us ROTC guys are schlubs.” Lt. Vince Biltmore continued on from an earlier conversation.

“We’ve still got the same commissions.” Avery countered. “Think about how many Academy ring-bangers you and I beat out to be assigned to the Enterprise. That should tell you all you need to know.”

Biltmore shook his head. Leave it to Avery to come off sounding so practical. “You must have a hard time getting laid.”

“I do just fine, thank you.” He said.

Avery and Biltmore moved over to their right as a larger party approached in the corridor. Captain Kirk, Commander Spock, Dr. McCoy, and a fourth man passed by, engrossed in their own conversation. Avery stopped.

“What the hell?” Biltmore thudded into his friend. “It’s not like you to be star-struck. It’s just the Captain and part of his command team.”

Avery waved him back. “That’s strange.”

A middle-aged crewman walked past and barely contained an eye-roll at the two young officers.

“What?” Biltmore looked up and down the corridor.

“I swear, that I just saw my high school band teacher.” Avery turned around. “Or someone who looks just like him.”

“With the Captain?” “That can’t be him.”

“Then it’s not. Let’s go and hit the mess before all the good stuff is gone and we’re stuck with all the leftovers.” Biltmore made a move to continue on their original heading only to find himself chasing after Avery.

“Dr. Tralnor!” Avery called.

Biltmore ran into Avery again. Ready to chew his friend out and forcibly drag him to lunch, he felt his knees gelatinize as the foursome reversed course. Whoever Avery thought he’d seen, there was no possible way the second Vulcan in the group, also decked out in Science blues, was a high school teacher from central California.

“What the hell are you doing here—Sir?” Avery was, for lack of a better term, agog.

You are so screwed, amigo, Biltmore thought, and you’ve dragged me into this. Avery and the
Vulcan stood face-to-face, regarding each other in some manner Biltmore couldn’t identify, and only chirping crickets could have made the exchange more odd than it already was.

“Repenting for a youthful indiscretion.” The Vulcan replied as he held out his right hand.

Biltmore nearly screamed as Avery dared to touch this man. His brain shouted: Avery! You’re not supposed to do that! Dr. McCoy’s face echoed the young Lieutenant’s thoughts.

“Gentlemen,” the Vulcan said, “this is Alton Michele Avery, one of my former students: Three years All- State trombone, marching percussion, and a graduate of the mechanical engineering program at Cornell University.”

Avery gave a slight nod, his line of sight transfixed on his former instructor’s head. “Sarah David is on board too. She’s in medical microbiology and will be over the moon to know you’re here.”

The Vulcan looked up into his own hairline before saying, “Starfleet thinks we are all the same.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Incensed, Avery went on. “They should have given you a Cultural Practices Exemption for that part of the dress code. You’re T’Kehr Temple Ko-tek’tu Kaylara t’Lyr Saan, which unlike the strictly Suriakian clans, means you wear your hair long so that you have something of yourself to offer when you enter consecrated spaces.”

Commander Spock picked up the description as Kirk, McCoy, and Biltmore were mystified at Avery’s description. “Lt. Commander Tralnor, unceremoniously shorn by Starfleet barbers, must wait until his hair grows out and he is ritualistically reaccepted into the temple. Small amounts of hair are snipped and placed into the fire pot at the foot of the Memorial Wall. It signifies that one is willing to make a sacrifice for the salvation of the clan in the face of what once was never-ending war.”

“Must smell delightful.” McCoy quipped.

“Dr. Tralnor, how long are you here?” Avery finally broke his gaze.

“My orders are for six months. I shall catch up with you and Sarah later.”

Avery smiled, flattered and excited that his old teacher would deign to spend time with him. “Great. This is amazing.”

The command staff regrouped and went back on their way to whatever corner of the ship, leaving Biltmore and Avery taking up space in the corridor.

“Did we just step into an alternate universe? How is an emotionless, formerly long-haired, science officer your old band director? This doesn’t make sense. And how do you know so much about Vulcans?” Biltmore gave a slight shake to try and right his mind. “Avery?”

“I wonder what Dr. Tralnor meant by ‘youthful indiscretion’?”

“When Spock requested we bring you on, I didn’t ask any questions because I trust his decisions regarding personnel implicitly,” Kirk said.

They’d eventually landed in a small conference room that offered a view of the stars as the ship
streaked through on impulse power. Tralnor read between the lines of what the Captain was saying. “I honestly don’t know what I can possibly bring to Spock’s outstanding science department. I have a background in acoustical physics and how performance spaces compliment or hinder instrumental ensembles. I work with students from ninth grade to Ph.D. level.”

“I’m sure he’s got something figured out for you.” Kirk gave an appreciative glance toward his first officer.

Tralnor didn’t have to be a psion to interpret the not-so-subtle longing in the captain’s eyes. The involuntary empathic circuits in Tralnor’s brain sought out and absorbed the explosion of unrequited longing between the human captain and the Vulcan first officer. Kirk’s need was encompassing, warm, and wanted to draw Spock in, wrapping him in a blanket to protect against the cold, cruel universe. Spock, forever trapped in the hybrid’s dilemma of never being enough of any one thing to please those around him, wanted Kirk to want him on the grounds of merely being himself. These brilliant flashes of emotion and tumult abruptly terminated at McCoy’s interruption.

“I was reviewing your medical records, and your psionic abilities are practically off the charts.” McCoy was a cloud of bantering wit and medical fact buzzing and blending into neat flow charts of information frosted with trace amounts of sarcasm and genteel southern bedside manner.

“They are, yes.” Tralnor didn’t want to get into the specifics of his various mental oddities. Rather, he needed to figure out his quarters and get his luggage rounded up. The civilian transport line he’d taken for part of his trip to catch up with the Enterprise lost one of his cases. Starfleet supposedly tracked it down. He’d believe it when he saw all three cases lined up on his bunk.

“Now, I keep coming across this term, hyper-empath. This old country doctor doesn’t really know what that means in context.” The doctor projected good, old human curiosity, something Tralnor could identify with. McCoy let loose with a slight grin.

“Are you prepared for a history lesson on pre-Reform Vulcans, namely Clan Lyr Saan?” He hadn’t been aboard for two hours, and he was making the two humans in the room nervous. Tralnor, while outwardly exhibiting the stereotypical stoic behavior Vulcans are famed for, was different enough from their baseline to warrant a scattering of suspicion.

Two nodding heads prompted the story. Tralnor wanted to ask Spock if it was too late to bail on this assignment but started to speak. “The Lyr Saan were a slave race created by the Golic clans via a combination of genetic engineering and gene splicing. We were designed to be even-tempered and subservient. Our overdeveloped psionic abilities made us near-perfect spies.”

“And weapons.” Spock added.

“We were horrifying weapons, assassins, kae’at knal’lursu (mind-rapists), rum nem-torsu (dream stealers), duv’torsu (shadows), kae’at knal’lursu (telepathic eavesdroppers) . . .” Tralnor trailed off to let the descriptions set in. “We could indescriminantly destroy people’s minds, administering the eschak on our masters’ orders. Undoubtedly, the most valuable of all of us were the mair-rigolauya, hyper-empaths.”

Spock remained the only one of the three Enterprise men who did not want to flee. “Hyper-empaths cannot avoid experiencing the emotions of every entity around them, some to the point they can read the psychic residue left on objects. There is a saying that the mair-rigolauya are the mirrors of our souls. And as Vulcans, they bare the burden of controlling their own emotions and not crumbling under the weight of others’.”

“This is where things get, interesting, I suppose.” Tralnor saw the cogs grind in the humans’
brains. His speech patterns more closely mimicked those of the people he spent the majority of his time with: humans. That was, at this point, unnerving. “Warlords, generals, soldiers, criminals, those of the ilk most likely to succumb to catastrophic battle wounds discovered that as a last resort they could lock themselves in an isolated room with a hyper-empath who’s drugged up on ketro’nistin. With or without a healer’s aid, they’d forcefully meld with the compromised empath and shift the burden of their physical destruction to this other person. That is how most hyper-empaths died. Mair-rigolauya were hunted, stolen, and sold to save the lives of those who only wanted to drag out the wars.”

Unsure if he should be repulsed or fascinated, McCoy asked, “Are all Lyr Saan hyper-empaths?”

“No.” Tralnor said. “Just the really unlucky ones.”

“Now, as our resident hobgoblin delights in reminding me, there ain’t nothing logical about luck.” Jovial antagonism drifted off the doctor.

Captain Kirk remained in his seat in anticipation of another verbal spar between his friends. Apparently, the entertainment value was endless and far exceeded any of the canned programming on the computers.

“There was nothing logical about how the Lyr Saan were created.” Tralnor didn’t know how to say it any other way.

“You mentioned even-tempered and subservient, it’s my understanding that pre-Reform Vulcans were anything but.” Kirk shifted, and Tralnor watched how his shoulders moved, how he held his hands at the table, and the way he held his face. He believed he could already see what Spock found compelling about this man.

“It must have taken decades of selective breeding.” McCoy commented.

“All of the first and part of the second generations were built in labs. They didn’t have living parents. Their DNA was an amalgamation of dominant desired traits.” Tralnor was hesitant to say the next part and sent a questioning glance at the first officer.

“In order to secure the proper temperament,” Spock began, “additional DNA was sourced. That material did not come from Vulcan.”


McCoy’s jaw dropped. “That’s—I don’t want to say it’s not possible, but damn.”

Kirk, more deliberately thoughtful, paused to reflect on Tralnor’s declaration. “I think I can see how that makes sense. The human DNA was introduced to make you docile and adaptive while the exaggerated Vulcan traits made you dangerous.”

“Precisely, Captain.” Tralnor decided to continue the story. “Approximately five generations before the Reform, the Lyr Saan rebelled against their masters. They set out to become scholars as to teach people to break the cycles of vicious violence and war by thinking in a more rational and academic manner than succumbing to immediate emotional responses. We stress objectivity and the mastery of one’s emotions as a directional compass to aid in decision making. Our enemies saw to it that we were not allowed to become pacifists, that we spent a lot of our time and energy on defending our freedom and the existence we’d created for ourselves.”

“They have, over time, evolved from battlefield bogeymen to disdained intelligentsia too out of
touch with their Vulcan warrior roots, and while they have since adopted some of the Surakian philosophies, they are unique within modern society.”

“And by unique, Spock means we’re still thought of as freaks and typically treated as such behind closed doors. The Lyr Saan are one of Vulcan’s dirty little secrets. Our abilities are still incredibly useful, and people want you when you’re useful, any other time though, we’re just kafelar sutoriks (“synthetic” slaves), va’amaular t’ha-vel (mimics of living things), generally distrusted, and considered by many to simply be insane.”

Boggled, McCoy didn’t like the way that sounded and was also the veteran of some of Vulcan’s other dirty little secrets. The doctor didn’t need to be a telepath to throw out the word typical regarding the logicians of 40 Eridani A. “Seems prejudicial to me.”

Tralnor offered a short shrug. “It is what it is, Doctor.”

“I suppose that’s the attitude you’d have to take, dealing with these pointy-eared devils.”

“Etek nam-to hi e’shuaiar sha’ferikan.” Tralnor spoke slowly. “Clan Lyr Saan’s motto: We are but monsters of your own design.”

Unwilling to let the room devolve into an uncomfortable for humans silence, McCoy shook his head. “Scathing, if I do say so myself. Now, back to this hyper-empathy thing, is this something me or my medical staff are gonna have to worry about?”

“You shouldn’t.” Tralnor responded. He could never say for sure when and where those abilities might come into play and lead to a situation where he physically compromised himself in order to ensure someone else’s survival.

Used to definitive answers from Vulcans, even Kirk struggled fully comprehend just what in all of hell Tralnor might mean when he used the word shouldn’t. He looked at Spock, hoping that man had an explanation, only to find nothing. “So long as your psionic abilities don’t compromise your fitness for duty, Lt. Commander Tralnor.”

“They shouldn’t.” He used that open-to-interpretation word again.

McCoy slipped into a crusty/glowering part of his mind where he most of his thinking regarding hard and/or stubborn patients like Kirk and Spock. “Look here—Doctor Tralnor—I expect that you report to sickbay immediately if you experience any issues with that noggin of yours.”

Tralnor could not promise such a thing but was glad that the doctor dropped his rank and went with his academic honorific instead. A forced stint in Officer Candidate School did little to temper the slight rancor he felt every time someone looked at the braid and bits decorating his sleeves and called him Lt. Commander. “I will see what I can do.”

McCoy’s expression soured, dumping out a wave of, Fucking fantastic, I’ve got another one. Stubborn Vulcan bastards. “Well, Gentlemen, its time for supper. I’ll see you all in the mess, especially you, Spock. And don’t even think about delivering me some line of crap about how you don’t need food or sleep because of your superior Vulcan physiology.”

(He sounds like your mother, Spock.) Tralnor gave the slightest mental nudge on Spock’s shields before sending that statement into the first officer’s brain. Sometimes, being a full-blown telepath had its advantages.

Spock let Tralnor establish the temporary speech link so their sub-rosa communication could continue without initiating a genuine meld. (There are times when I think Doctor McCoy and Lady
Amanda corroborate in their constant efforts to “look after” my wellbeing.)

Need/desire/desperation lapped over into Tralnor’s mind. Spock mentally recoiled, oozing self-deprecating shame at his feelings toward his captain. When, unlike other Vulcans, Tralnor did not express disgust at the un-acted upon love, the intensity of Spock self-directed hate ratcheted down.

(Is that one of the other reasons you wanted me here, Spock?)

(Yes. . .) The first officer barely got the word to form on the tip of his mind.

“Come on, you two.” McCoy had Kirk waiting by the door. “Stand up, one foot in front of the other, to the mess hall. Consider those doctor’s orders.”
Chapter 2

The walk to the mess hall lacked any easy banter. Tralnor was attempting to gain his bearings as to make a working map of the ship in his head. Until nine days ago, he was slated to spend this six months as some overglorified desk jockey on Starbase 4. When Spock poached him for the Enterprise, Tralnor knew he was not ship-of-the-line material, not when the ink on his commission wasn’t dry yet. He didn’t know what to expect over the next half-year.

“I noticed your wedding ring.” McCoy, again desperate to relieve what he considered morose silence, pointed out. “What’s your missus think of you being out here?”

(Tralnor, do you want me to—)

(No, Spock. It’s fine.) Tralnor briefly examined his left hand. Unless someone got a close look, it was hard to tell he wore two rings on that finger. “My wife was murdered by isolationist human supremacists. They took umbrage over her union with me.”

“Jesus Christ.” McCoy was sorry he asked.

“Amelie Grace died a hero. Her transport from Earth back to Vulcan was highjacked. She exchanged herself for a group of Vulcan school children and their chaperones that were the terrorists’ original target. We’d been legally married for six days. She was coming home so we could have our bonding ceremony.” Tralnor had viewed transport ship’s security footage. Amelie Grace took her time winding up her captors, giving the children leave to use the escape pods and explained how she manifested all the traits of an alien-loving human turncoat. She knew she was going to die when she made the exchange. She still did it. She’d seen one of the cameras and mouthed “I love you, Tralnor” a split second before her neck was slashed with a jagged blade. “I continue to wear the rings a deterrent. If people believe I am married, they are less likely to hit on me. I get much less unwanted attention than I used to.”

The CMO felt like an asshole. “I apologize, I didn’t think. . .well, shit.”

“You could say I’ve been widowed twice and divorced once. Since Amelie Grace’s death, I’ve taken myself off the market.”

(However, that might be changing.) Spock said, a tiny sliver of something like envy crossed over.

(I must ask again, do you think it’s actually her?) Tralnor, surprised at his last-minute reassignment, was utterly broadsided when Spock suggested Enterprise’s head of bioarchaeological xenoanthropology might be Tralnor’s missing and presumed dead childhood bondmate.

(It is a distinct possibility. She is a Belonite, versed in the ways of Temple Ko-tek’ru Kaylara t’Lyr Saan, and she is the right age. I never met your bondmate, nor did I ever learn her name. I am speculating.) And he didn’t want to get Tralnor’s hopes up.

“So, if you’re single and not looking to mingle, how does that work when you’re dealing with another dirty little secret?” At that point, McCoy figured he went in for the inch and decided to take on the mile.

“It doesn’t, Doctor.” Tralnor was, as part of his clan’s philosophy of spreading knowledge, more open and willing to answer questions other Vulcans would internally balk at. “My refusal to select a partner meant I had one choice. I was locked away in an empty room where I was expected to employ specific powerful meditation techniques to overcome the plak-tow or die.”
The images and fierce emotions from the events at Spock’s failed wedding pelted Tralnor from three different directions. The intense reactions to something that happened two years ago made the lining of Tralnor’s nasal passages twinge, manifesting their shared and private pain/frustration/terror. If he didn’t tamp this barrage down, his eyes would start to water. Mercifully, they arrived at the officer’s mess, thus derailing the emotional wrecking ball of the kal’i’fee.

“What’s wrong, honey?” Another member of the bridge crew, Lt. Uhura, joined Tralnor’s group. “I know it’s not what mama used to make, but it’s not terrible.”

Tralnor examined the items on his plate. “I regard all cafeteria food as suspect.”

“That’s no way to live.” Uhura was music: bright, steady in tempo, taking accidentals and signature changes in stride. Her state of being rippled with harmonious undertones. It made sense that she was Kirk’s communications officer.

He cautiously speared a green bean with his fork and took a bite, smelling the sour freezer burn before placing the turgid vegetable in his mouth.

“See, that’s not so bad. We’re lucky to have the real thing sometimes.” She dug into her main entree, pleased to have something not from the synthesizers on her plate.

Already devising alternate means of meeting his nutritional needs, Tralnor forced down another bite. The only thing showing any promise was a cherry cheesecake-looking dessert. Knowing his lot in life, it didn’t contain any real sugar, and the fruit was as nasty as the green beans.

A squirrelly yeoman approached the table, battered violin case in hand. “Sir,” he addressed someone or no one, “this just arrived for a Lt. Commander T.A. MacCormack. We don’t have a MacCornack on our crew manifest.”

(Here it comes, Spock)

(Indeed.) The first officer responded.

“That’s me.” Tralnor said, eyeing new damage on the case. He’d paid a premium for the civilians to ensure his violin was treated well and kept in an atmosphere and climate controlled cargo area. Obviously, that hadn’t happened. He stood to accept his last piece of luggage so that he might check if the instrument was still in one piece.

All casual dinner chatter halted, most of the room in silence, attention unduly placed on the captain’s table. Squirrelly yeoman wasn’t buying that there was any link between the case and the man claiming it.

“MacCormack is my father’s name.” Tralnor said loud enough for the officers in attendance to hear. “I might be listed on the manifest under Tralnor Ad’ehlevna, Ad’ehlevna being my mother’s family name, thus the T.A. MacCormack listed on the luggage tag.”

“Give the man his bag.” Uhura told the yeoman.

Squirrelly turned loose of the violin and took an awkward step back. Some random officer a few tables away said, “Gross. I can’t believe there’s more than one of them.”

Disregarding the ugly comment, Tralnor started to address the room. “I’m going to say this once, and only once, so spread this message amongst your gossip networks accordingly.”
"Someone sure knows how humans operate." Was heard from the left.

“I am not Spock, and he is not me. We come from different backgrounds. We have different strengths and different weaknesses. Yes, we know each other. Our lives have crossed on several occasions. Yes, our families know each other. No, we did not go to school together. I am two years, one month, and nine days younger than he is. Yes, we are related, genetically, but not socially. No, I will not elaborate because as they say, it’s complicated. I have spent the majority of my professional career as a music educator at the secondary and university levels. I’m currently on sabbatical from my day job so I can serve aboard this fine vessel.” Now to end on a bit of humor, even if delivered in deadpan Vulcan style.

“Another thing to keep in mind, Commander Spock is the result of Vulcan and human scientists working for years to ensure viability and vigor. I am the result of a wild night up at Lake Tahoe. His parents, an ambassador an a linguist, met at a diplomatic gala. My parents, a computer scientist and a pharmaceutical biochemist, met at a starbase dive-bar.

“I was born at the same hospital as Spock. I have two daughters and a geriatric tabby cat named Snot. The cat came with the name and responds to nothing else we’ve tried to call it.” Tralnor engaged the audience in a firm yet friendly manner, feeding them choice bits to keep them entertained and knock out rabid speculation that would have developed. “I ask that you pardon my interruption and return to your meal.”

Tralnor returned to his seat, placed the case on his lap, and opened it to see only the bridge had popped out. The violin was mostly fine. “Is there anything else you desire to know captain, doctor?”

“Just one thing, which isn’t very clear on your records, why exactly were you ordered through OCS and placed on active duty?” McCoy wasn’t about to let this opportunity wither.

“I was the ring-leader/instigator on a Freshman Spirit Mission to take something interesting from the Academy campus in San Francisco.”

The captain’s eyebrows climbed. “Freshman Spirit Mission?”

“It was my first year as a student at the University of Southern California. As a member of the marching band, freshman participate in solidarity exercises that build a cohesive social bond within that particular cohort.”

“Hazing.” Kirk said.

“A mild form, yes.” Tralnor had questioned himself in recent months, had he known a night of stupidity when he was seventeen was going to set him up for an entirely unwanted stint in the military, would he and his friends still have gone through with his plan?

(Don’t worry, Cadet Spock has never been mentioned as harboring the enemy and aiding our escape regarding this incident.)

(Not that it matters now.) Spock asked the next question. “What exactly did you do?”

“Myself and two section-mates stole Zephram Cochran’s head.”

The mood around the table devolved into pandemonium as one of Starfleet Academy’s greatest mysteries was finally solved. A life-sized bronze statue of the celebrated warp core engineer was the centerpiece of the institution’s largest quad, a place all cadets became familiar with during their tenure. When Cochran was decapitated, it ushered in an era wherein Starfleet, the newest of the
Pacific Conference schools, finally felt like they were taken seriously as an athletic rival.

“When I was at SFA, we were absolutely certain Stanford had done the deed.” Uhura couldn’t look at Tralnor without laughing. “It never occurred to us that USC was behind it.”

“Gary and I put our money UC Berkley. Boy were we wrong.” Kirk’s eyes glittered as he reveled in the absurdity of this declaration.

“How’d you finally get caught?” McCoy, who’d never given a damn about what happened to a severed chunk of metal couldn’t hide his amusement.

“Last fall, one of my co-pranksters was selected to participate on stage with one of those stand-up comedians who are also hypnotists. He asked her to quack like a duck, then divulge a funny secret to the audience. To make a long story short, I took the fall for all three of us, and here I am.”

“What happened to the original head? By the time I was a cadet, they had a replacement.” The communications officer had recovered some of her professional bearing.

“I honestly can’t tell you.” Tralnor wished he did know just to satisfy his own curiosity. “I put it in a backpack, then gave the bag with the head still inside to my section leader. She kept it on her closet shelf for a couple of weeks before it spent some time as a mantle piece at the Horn House. After that, it was moved to a Marina Del Rey storage locker owned by some percussion alumni. From there, it may have gone to the active percussion section. The last confirmed sighting of it was seven years ago when it made the rounds before the homecoming game. I have no idea where it is now. It’s not like the Victory Bell, where its taken out for public inspection.”

“Nuts.” McCoy said. “Absolutely nuts.”

Spock escorted Tralnor into Rec Room 4 where his Belonite bioarchaeologist spent many of her evenings. He pointed the woman out as her back was turned, but he needn’t have bothered. Belonites have very distinctive dark red hair, and Tralnor recognized it immediately.

The first officer observed as the music teacher approached. Tralnor held a finger to his lips, telling the woman’s friends to be quiet and not foil the surprise. When he was close enough, he placed his hands over her eyes, then said her name. “Sha’leyen.”

His empathic skills multiple levels down the charts from Tralnor’s, and their conversational link from earlier closed out, Spock did not anticipate the tsunami of unbridled joy and salvation that pounded him. He was forced to take a seat, lest he fall over, inundated by others’ experience of something he so deeply sought in his own life.

“Gods have mercy.” Usually restrained in her emotional expression, she broke open. Tears deluged Sha’leyen’s green-tinged cheeks. She grappled with his hands, weaving their fingers. “Tralnor, it’s you!”

Without severing their physical connection, Tralnor turned her as to hold her against his chest, where she wept into him. He tucked a lock of her violent red mane behind her rounded ear. “I thought you were dead.”

“And I thought I’d killed you.” She sobbed.

They sank to their knees, foreheads touching, desperate to prolong a homecoming neither thought
they’d live to see.

That, Spock thought, I want that.
“I heard dinner was like feeding time at the insane asylum.”

God, Avery loved the sound of Sarah’s voice. He loved the way she smelled. He loved the way her hips and ass rocked as she walked, always wearing uniform trousers that clung to her figure. He’d loved her when they were in high school. Then and now, he’d never grown the balls to ask her out.

“Alton?” She reeled him back in from fantasy land. “You were there. What happened?”

“You know what Dr. Tralnor’s like.”

“Yeah.” She nodded at their shared experiences. Sarah, off duty, wore her curly black hair down her back, the way she did in school, where it complemented her dark eyes and olive complexion.

She doesn’t care if I didn’t go to the academy, he thought. “He was his honest, open self, just like always.”

“I suppose that’s all it would take.” She said. “He is a strange, strange man.”

Avery was glad they’d secured a private lounge so he and Sarah could talk openly. He re-told the whole statue misadventure. “He messaged me that he’d like us to join him tomorrow evening for ralash-t’mu-yor.”

“Night music.” She whispered, a fond smile warmed her features. Fingers to her right temple, she closed her eyes to take in cherished memories. After a couple of deep breaths, Sarah returned to the present conversation. “I will absolutely be there.”

“Rec Room 2 at 1910. It’s the one with the baby grand.” Avery let himself smile. “Hey, Sarah?”

“Hey, Alton?”

“You’re Science. Did you know he was coming?”

“Nope.” Even though she was medical microbiology, Sarah was friends with the medical laboratory science division’s administrator who seemed to know everything about everyone on board who wore blue shirts. “If anyone could have known, Jasper’s the guy. You’d think with a new Vulcan arriving, Jasper would be beside himself. His goal in this life is to finally bag one, so he can have, as he puts it, sweaty monkey sex with them.”

“Yuck.” He tried to put Chief Jasper out of his mind. “I don’t know how anyone could sleep with that man. I’d never be able to do it, he’s too fucking skeezy.”

Sarah wrinkled her nose at the thought. “You’ve talked to him, do you know why Dr. Tralnor is here?”

“No clue.”

“I bet something huge is going on that we’ll never learn the particulars to. It’s all too far above our pay grades. I’m not trying to be some conspiracy theorist, but that’s got to be the answer.”

“What makes you say that, Sarah?”

“A D.M.A in Music Ed and a Ph.D. in Acoustical Physics? Think about it.”
Avery wasn’t entirely sure what she meant. “So? Physics is science.”

“His disciplines are useless in space and have absolutely nothing to do with the functions of an exploratory vessel.” When she said it, it was obvious.

“Unless there’s some plan to turn one of the cargo bays into a recital hall. But that’s more ridiculous than your guess.” While Avery was pleased to catch up with a favorite teacher, the whole situation was weird.

“The rest of his academic background, while impressive, also means little out here. A double BA in Violin Performance and Film History.”

“Didn’t he get a minor in Sound Engineering?” That seemed useful. Starships employed a veritable army of engineers, even in the sciences.

“Sound Engineering isn’t what you’re thinking it is, Alton.”

“Oh. Now I feel stupid.” Alton dug through his brain, trying to come up with even a half-assed reason Dr. Tralnor should turn up on the Enterprise. “He’s got a Master’s in something, doesn’t he?”

“It’s an M.M. in Conducting.”

“Well, that’s that.” He said, disturbed by the conclusion he was forced to draw. “You’re right. There’s something hinky going on.”

Contemplative, Spock sat on the edge of his bunk, pondering topics meditation gave no insight. No amount of wishing, ignoring, or quashing the empty pit inside him away relieved him of this millstone, this turbulence, this painful burden that threatened to consume him.

Until the day James T. Kirk assumed command of the Enterprise, Spock thrived as a solitary, single man. Jim—just thinking the captain’s name made Spock involuntarily quake—was a supernova, something like a carelessly lobbed grenade, that destroyed the course of a well-planned life.

He no longer wanted to face this existence alone. His critics might extol this aching need as a defect from his mother’s supposedly inferior genetics, but he knew better. Vulcan brains, Vulcan souls, were conditioned to abhor vacuum, purposely honed for the telepathic bond that stitched two people together ad infinitum.

The choices were grim: implode a beautiful friendship on the basis he might just find the love and compassion he was looking for, possibly crippling the command structure of the entire mission, or remain behind his carefully crafted Vulcan facade and sully the relationship he and Jim enjoyed because he could not participate to fullness of his ability.

What was he going to do?

Jim Kirk accepted a measured glass of Dr. McCoy’s “medicinal” sipping whiskey. “Goddamn, Bones, I’ve needed this most of the day.”

“Yep.” McCoy left the decanter out on his desk. “Me too. Good thing today wasn’t some
diplomatic thing because I not only stepped in shit, I dragged it inside and smeared it all over the carpets.”

“He didn’t seem offended.” Kirk savored the oaky flavor and citrus notes the alcohol branded into his tongue. “And even if he was, I think he’s far too mellow to say anything.”

“*Mellow*?”

“For a Vulcan, I mean.”

McCoy gave some non-committal sound and bobbed his eyebrows. “After the communal meltdown at dinner, I came back here to take a better look at Dr. Tralnor’s medical records, specifically the file containing his sequenced genome.”

Kirk looked at the graphic McCoy put on his desk monitor, not understanding what he was seeing. The doctor then subdivided the screen, putting up a second set of results. “Go on Bones, blurt it out. Something on that screen has got you all excited.”

“It stuck in my craw when Dr. Tralnor said what he did about Lake Tahoe.”

“More people than we’d care to know are brought about by similar circumstances.”

McCoy shook his head in the negative. “Not Vulcan-human hybrids, Jim. It took the lab jockeys at the Science Academy years of failure before Spock was born. This Tralnor fella, he was naturally conceived.”

“Okay.”

“Do you know what you’re looking at?”

“You tell me.” Medicine was one of those closer-to-home frontiers that Kirk had no desire to explore.

“This is Spock. His human DNA is represented by the blue, Vulcan by red, and the stuff where you see the hash marks are the things turned off or not expressed.” The red outshone the blue, but not by much. “Whatever the hell was done to the Lyr Saan millennia ago doesn’t look like its loosened its grip.”

“That’s—Other than the Y chromosome and a few other flecks of blue, shouldn’t there be a more even distribution than that?”

“The little blue freckles I just highlighted are exactly the human traits those Golic bastards selected for. Any other blue is primarily linked to outward appearance, immune function, and reproduction, so their slaves could self-propagate.”

“What does it mean that there aren’t any pieces showing up with hash marks?” A juvenile part of Kirk's mind thought of cheesy movie monsters.

“They were overwritten, sublimated, and destroyed. Even though he’s listed in files as a Vulcan-human hybrid, half-and-half, he’s something else entirely.” McCoy shut down the viewer.

Kirk poured another drink from the decanter. “I need this one even more.”
The enlisted kid at the quartermaster’s office tried to perform some kind of magic feat with the computer. When Tralnor’s berthing initially came up on the screen, the kid bobbed his Adam’s apple and gawped before pounding the keys. “Uhmmmmmm. . .”

“What is it, crewman?” Tralnor prompted.

The kid was flustered, starting to break out in a nervous sweat that carried a sour odor, and bracing against the ass-chewing sure to erupt from this new Lt. Commander. “It’s your quarters, Sir.”

“And?” Tralnor’s brain felt like it was brimming with broken glass grinding into scarred-over psionic wounds reopened by his encounter with Sha’leyen. He wasn’t going to reprimand the kid for anything so long as he got some kind of assignment where he might stretch out for the night. A closet floor would work.

“They’re not ready.” He shrank down. “A pipe burst. It’s going to be a couple of days until maintenance gets done.”

“I understand there are matters outside of your control.”

“You do?” The kid’s eyes widened with a modicum of faith restored in the rest of the crew. “Oh, thank God.”

Tralnor waited for the quartermaster’s system to spit out a temporary assignment, relieved to know he had a place to hang his proverbial hat for a few nights.

“I’m sorry about all this, Sir. I have to put you down with some junior officers. That pipe flooded an entire section, so...” The kid swiped a chit through one of the smaller machines on the desk. “I’ll have one of the guys deliver the rest of your stuff in a little bit, now that we know where it’s going.”

He accepted the chit and saw deck, compartment, and room numbers, the door code, and the names and ranks of the people already berthed. He thanked the crewman and made for the nearest turbolift.

Tralnor only got lost once on his way to his shared accommodation. He filed that mistake away so he didn’t repeat it. Upon arrival at the proper place, he meant to announce himself and accept an invitation to enter instead of just barging in when the door slid open on its own accord.

“Come on in, mate.” A massive Afro-Carribean British man filled the entryway. “They just dropped off your stuff.”

Tralnor crossed the threshold and was immediately enveloped by the smells of his old college dorm: sweat, cheap cologne, and flatulence. A lower bunk to his right sported the bags containing his personal effects. He set the violin with them. “I’m Lt. Commander Tralnor MacCormack, though I would prefer you address me as Dr. Tralnor.”

“Funny.” Another cabin-mate appeared. Wispy build and skin the color of sour cream suggested this red-shirted lieutenant, while human, was from a low gravity world that didn’t get much natural light. His eyes swept over Tralnor, and a slight, feral grin let the Vulcan know instant attraction was there. “You don’t look all that Irish to me.”

“Scottish. My father’s lineage is from the Borders.”

“Really, now?”
“Stop flirting with him, O’Dell.” Man-mountain started going around the room, introducing the bunk-mates. “I’m William Atherton-Smyth VI. Call me Billy, everyone does.”

“Except the Krampus.” Another young man said. “He won’t acknowledge any of us have first names.”

“Horndog over there is Chris O’Dell.” Billy went on.

“The Krampus could do with some loosening up, but he’ll never let me.” O’Dell stared right at Tralnor. “Something tells me you’ve been down that road before.”

“Fuck’s sake, O’Dell. Just go rub one out and settle down for a while. I’m Rohit Gupta.” “That guy is,” Billy pointed to the one who’d brought up the Krampus, “Andy Pickett.” That ticked off all but one of the names listed on the chit.

“Awe, shit.” Gupta looked at his watch. “Look at the time.”

Pickett began humming a short ditty Tralnor recognized as the Flying Monkey theme from The Wizard of Oz.

“You could set an atomic clock to this dude’s schedule.” O’Dell scoffed.

“All right, mate.” Billy said to Tralnor. “Its time to meet the Krampus.”

Snarky comments and teasing dropped to the side when the final bunk-mate entered, contempt roiling off his person, dagger eyes fixated on Tralnor.

“What is that doing here?” The venomous tone sent ice through the humans’ veins. “It should not even be on the ship.”

Tralnor regarded Lt. Seltun. The younger Vulcan shimmered in a barely contained rage.

“Get it out of my living space.”

“Whoa there, Seltun.” Pickett tried to defuse the situation. “You can’t go around talking like this to superior officers. Do you want to be brought up on insubordination charges?”

“If you had any idea what this is, you would not be so keen to befriend it.”

“What the hell is wrong with you, man?” Gupta stepped in.

“Rum nem-torsu.” Seltun hissed. “Kae’at k’lasasu.”

Tralnor said nothing and made no defensive moves physically or psionically. Seltun took one step closer. “They should have killed you at birth.”
“You don’t have a concussion.” The nurse said as she set down her medical tricorder. She had difficulty looking at Tralnor’s face. Each time she let her brain synthesize his features, a muddled bleating of *Not Spock!/Why doesn’t he think I’m good enough?* rattled around her.

“Thank you.” He didn’t have the luxury of her name.

Mc Coy gunned his way into the diagnostic area. “I’ve got this, Christine.”

The nurse retreated, leaving the two men alone.

“What the hell did you say to set him off like that?” The doctor gave Tralnor’s head a visual once-over.

“I didn’t have to say anything.” The external blows and the bruises left in their wake decided to compete with the wreckage in his brain from earlier. He closed his eyes against the discomfort. “It’s enough that I exist.”

“Unreal.” McCoy uttered.

Footsteps grew closer, two sets, both men. Kirk. Spock.

“Doctor, I requested one of your staff go to the brig to administer a sedative to Lt. Seltun.” Spock exuded a placid demeanor.

“Are you sure you still want me here, Spock? I know Mollie calls me Captain Chaos, to you, behind my back. It’s not an unfit description.” Sizzling projectiles of curiosity launched from human brains.

McCoy was interested in the dropped name, who it belonged to, and how she was related a couple of Vulcans.

Kirk’s hackles raised. “Who’s Mollie?”

“On the human side of my family, I’m one of seven first cousins who were raised more or less together. I’m an only child, but Mollie is my older sister.” Tralnor didn’t much care if his family dynamic made sense to those in attendance. “Us kids, we split a lot of our time between the MacCormack family peach orchards and the Ad’elhevna holdings on Vulcan.”

“Crossing paths?”

“Crossing paths.” Tralnor reiterated. “My particular branch of the MacCormacks are human psions, part of a tradition that’s come down over the centuries. Right after my parents were married, the MacCormacks wanted to share their training methods and disciplines with the Lyr Saan and vice versa.”

“So, Mollie’s human?” Kirk asked, his subconscious trying to figure out if Spock could possibly have any interest in a relationship with a human.

“Is Mollie human?” Tralnor posed the question in a rhetorical sense before restating it in a practical manner. “Spock, is Mollie human?”

“In a legal sense, she is not.” Spock didn’t explain, couldn’t explain right then. “But, yes, she is
human.”

“Out of all the MacCormack kids, you’re closest to her, then I’d be next on the list.”

“That is correct.”

A fog of confusion emanated off the captain. On the one hand, he was happy that Spock may have actually had some part-time friends as a child. On the other, he was mildly hurt that this Mollie was close to Spock in any capacity.

“Captain Chaos? Most sisters call their little brothers boogerbrains or dogbreath.” McCoy picked up the conversation.

“She explained it to me like this: my entire life has been a series of dumpster fires. Once I get one put out, I look ahead, and there’s another dumpster fire blocking my progress. I get that one extinguished, take a step to the right and sidle up to a dumpster I didn’t know was there but it’s going up in flames anyway. I follow bedlam, or it follows me.” His face spasmed, an uncontrollable reaction to the various strains of pain wracking his head.

“Yet, you are here.” Spock said.

Direct calls to civilian lines were generally frowned upon for recreational visitation, but this could be construed as a research inquiry. After the fifth ring, Spock expected to leave a message. Instead, his screen connected and showed a blurry picture of the sole of a shoe receding. He heard a set of keys land on a wooden floor, followed by the inevitable flow of curse words.

“Dr. MacCormack?” He asked.

“Which one?” Shoulders moved as hands groped along the floor. “There’s like thirty of us, you’ll have to be more specific. If you give me a first name or area of expertise, I can probably connect you to the Dr. MacCormack you’re looking for.”

The figure stood, straightened clothing, and revolved to face the screen. That huge smile. “To what do I owe this call, Spock? Is something wrong? Because you don’t look like you want to talk about the statistics we’re running in our next paper.”

“Mollie.”

She removed a light jacket, tossed her keys on the console table he knew was next to the front door, and pulled the comfortable chair up to the screen.

“I have interrupted you.”

“Not really.”

“You were clearly dressed to leave the house. I will arrange to call you back at a later time.”

“Spock, it’s okay.” Her sunny features slackened, adopting an air of concern. “I didn’t want to go grocery shopping anyway. What’s up?”

Tongue-tied, he knew he could say anything to her but didn’t know how to articulate the writhing mass of tumult that threatened to consume him. He switched to a diversionary tactic. She’d see
through him, but allow it anyway. “It is your brother.”

“Wow. Not even on board for twenty-four hours and Tralnor’s already busting up the joint?” She chuckled and dropped her head before bring her smile back to the screen.

There were a scant number of humans whose laughter was pleasant to Spock’s ears, Lady Amanda, Mollie, and Jim Kirk. Jarred again by the effect of just thinking his name, Spock closed his eyes just long enough to recover his control.

“You’re not regretting this, are you? Tralnor will never do anything to harm anyone deliberately. He just seems to attract more than his fair share of discord. . . Spock?”

“The Belonite. It is her.”

Mollie’s face resonated more than her words. “Holy fucking balls. That’s monumental.”

“Their reaction the first time they touched, not seeing one another since they were fourteen, even with their bond completely destroyed by outside interference, it was. . .” Words failed him.

“This is one of those times where my heart breaks for you.” She touched the screen as she did to him when they were alone, in private. Through the screen, light years between them, there was no way to link their minds so they might explore their conversation without relying on speech and body language.

“I want to believe it would be like that with Jim.” His brain stumbled over the knot where his ideas on love, sex, and relationships weren’t at a differential stage. “How can I know he would want me, especially like that, when logic cannot guide me?”

Mollie was masterful at the art of Vulcan silence. She knew how to use the lulls of conversation to compose what she’d say next, giving thought to her approach on the topic at hand. He did not rush her.

“We can look at this a little like a flow chart. The first thing to find out is if he likes men in a sexual and romantic sense. If not, its time to cut bait and you’ve still got a great friend.”

“Jim almost exclusively has relations females. However, there are a small handful of exceptions.” That prized discovery, borne of an accidental run-in with one of Jim’s male liaisons, replayed in his mind a least once a day.

“First hurdle cleared.” She got up, grabbed the call screen, and walked with him into the kitchen. Once she had a reheated cup of coffee and a cheese danish in hand, they returned to the alcove designed back when land-line telephones were technological marvels. “This man, he gives you the fizz. I see it when you talk about him. And the only way to find out if its reciprocal is to take a chance and ask him, maybe even date fora bit, fuck around a little. Explore one another and compare notes. Who knows, the coals may not start, it could be a slow burn, or that first touch sets off a blazing inferno. One of you has to reach out first. Why not you?”

“Lack of practical experience in such matters.” He said.

“How? Look, I know you’re not a virgin.” The left corner of her mouth poked up. “Explain.”

“Jim has had innumerably more partners than I.”

“Okay. And you’ve had? God, it’s not like it matters.” She took a drink of her coffee, grimaced, and shoved the mug away. “So, there’s me.”
“Once, with Sohja.”

“And that’s still it, huh? I promise you’re worried over nothing. If Jim likes you, he’s not going to care if you’ve slept with two people or two hundred.”

“You are certain?” Spock, used to the reassurance of his expertise as a scholar and a Starfleet officer, was cast adrift in matters of the heart.

“When you join with him, physically, mentally, it’s going to be like nothing you’ve ever experienced.” He started to comment, but she cut him off.

“Different than when you and I have sex. We’re friends who approach this kind of intimacy from another direction. Even though part of our motivation has changed over the years, our lovemaking is in response to the solidarity of our friendship and a common desire to offer one another comfort.”

“Jim is my friend.”

“Not in the same way.” She countered.

“I am not sure I understand.” Sex, love, and confusion, those three things seemed to go together a lot recently.

“We established, before we punched each other’s v-cards, that we weren’t going to get married or engage in a romantic relationship with one another. I’ve always known that I didn’t want to be your girlfriend, and I didn’t want to be your wife. I still don’t want those things. Nor have you wanted that from me.”

Spock nodded, clearly recalling their first sexual encounter. They were sixteen, and his parents were gone that night. It was sweet, gentle, woven with kindness. . . He wanted all that with Jim, but with something more. At the same time, he did not want to hurt anyone.

“Not wanting to tie the knot doesn’t mean that we don’t love each other.” She held up her hand to stop him saying anything. “You wanting and finding passion with Jim doesn’t mean that we don’t love each other. I wake up tomorrow and elope with the gal who works behind the counter at the bakery doesn’t mean that we don’t love each other. Just remember, upon inspection, what you and I have is in a separate category, filed under: No, really, we’re just friends.”

“Should I explain you to Jim?”

“Yes, thousand times yes, Spock. If you can’t find the words to explain us, try this: We’re long-term friends and professional colleagues who just so happen to fuck sometimes. Tell him that nothing would please me more than for the both of you to be happy together.” Her smile lit up her face. “Now, before we return to our day, its time to baton down the hatches.”

Fingers steepled, eyes closed, they slowed their breathing before reciting a selection from the writings of Surak.

Mollie.

Kirk returned to his quarters directly from sickbay. The chronometer stated ship’s time at 0137. He flicked on his computer terminal, kicked his boots into some random location that would vex him later, and shucked his shirt, hurling it past the partition and into the darkened area of his stateroom.
Why was learning of this person like taking a pile of sand and pouring it into his eyes? He had to know more about her. **Who** was she? **What** was she? He entered her name into an academic database he used when brushing up on facts and files for diplomatic meet-and-greets and other assorted milk-runs. It took a little tweaking to his search terms, but when he found her, he was floored.

Dr. Mallia Ad’ehlevna MacCormack, Ph.D., MSc., MEng., was a mathematician, researcher, and software engineer who primarily worked in the field of psiophysiology with secondary interests in artificial intelligence and crowdmapping. A citizen of Vulcan, she was fluent in the language and customs of that harsh red world. A gifted musician, she was also the veteran of two shorter deep space missions sponsored by the VSA.

And, she was beautiful.

Her resemblance to Tralnor was uncanny, but her eyes weren’t the same green. She had thick, dark hair, a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose, and in other circumstances, Kirk would be in lust with this woman. Instead, he hated her.

Of course, Spock would **cross paths** with someone like that. And if you’re like Spock, from a particular social class with specific familial obligations to fulfill, who would you choose? Ramjet the Iowa farm boy or the educated woman who could trace her family back to Roman times? Starfleet’s macho, swaggering hero, or someone who can produce an heir?

Kirk closed down his terminal and spoke a few choice cuss words to the empty room.

Mollie.

“I have to put you on speaker.” Tralnor set his ‘phone,’ a civilian-model communicator, on his breakfast tray and started toward the serving line.

“—And that’s when I said, ‘That’s exactly what I was talking about!’ What a bunch of putzes.” Joseph Bergman laughed at all his own jokes.

“I was able to view part of the pan-and-scan before I left for the Enterprise.” He visually assessed the melancholic breakfast offerings. It all smelled bad. “Frames are missing in both Mr. Blue Sky and Sing, Sing, Sing.”

“It’s the film. It’s degraded.” Joe rustled around, probably digging for something to chew on. “Sohja wanted to do it the old-fashioned way, and here we are, years later, with old-fashioned problems. Our prints were destroyed in that fire, and the archivists did a shitty job of preserving the original. What you saw, is about how the whole rest of it plays out.”

Tralnor randomly grabbed a bunch of grapes, a bowl cottage cheese, and a plausible facsimile of an orange before clamping the handle of a spoon in his teeth so he’d have one hand free to fill his coffee cup. “If that’s the case, we’ll need to composite those frames and cut them in.”

“If we could just go with the digital,” Joe stopped himself. “Fuck it. Sohja wouldn’t stand for that, even one twenty-fourth of a second in the entire show.”

“That should keep you busy.” Fortunately for Tralnor, there was an empty table on the outskirts of the dining area. “What’s our turnaround looking like?”
“What? You either need to invest in a better phone or take the dick out of your mouth because I can barely understand you.”

Tralnor spit his spoon out onto the table as to settle the tray and his coffee. “No dicks. Just silverware.”

“That sounds way better. All depends on how fast we can process this stuff.” Joe’s fingers clacked around on his computer, the odd sound effect the machine fired off made him laugh. “How do you want to do this? Dailies or digest?”

“Dailies, when the subspace signal can reach us.” Tralnor made work of mixing his fruit into the cheese.

“And we won’t make any official changes on our side until we’ve heard from you. Man, this movie, I tell you.”

“That’s acceptable.”

“One more question before I take off. What do you call a herd of cows masturbating? Beef strokin’ off!” Hiccuping swales of laughter cut across space and time.

“Thanks, Joe. You’re such a professional.”

The connection terminated on the earth end. Without the ambient noise of Joe’s office and the low-throated hiss and crackle on the line itself, didn’t hear any other conversation. How nice, my co-producer is an ass, Tralnor thought, who treats life like a never-ending penis joke.

“Dr. Tralnor, come see me in my office when you are finished so we can discuss your duty assignment.”

“Yes, Sir.”

It wasn’t until Spock left the mess that voices started to pick up again.
Chapter 5

Tralnor entered the Science Officer’s lair just as Spock was signing off on a data padd. “I understand that part of your conditions for working at Starbase 4 was that you be allowed to undertake a certain number of tasks and activities you will otherwise miss in your civilian capacity.”

“Correct.” Tralnor was glad Spock had met Joe Bergman many years before and knew what a right little knob the guy was. “I apologize for disturbing another meal. I was attempting to make up a production meeting.”

“So I gathered. Joe has not changed.”

“And I can’t tell if that’s good or bad.”

“Starbase 4 arranged for you to have use of a space wherein you had access to your work contacts, a projector, a sound system, and fastest network connection possible.”

While he said he was on sabbatical, that was not entirely true. He’d insisted on keeping some specific responsibilities under his purview. The loss of that workspace was devastating, comparable to a chemist being deprived of her lab. “That was the plan.”

“I have reviewed your requisition as forwarded from Starbase 4.” A little lick of amusement, the kind of detail only a hyper-empath might pick up, came from Spock’s brain. “The Enterprise simply does not have the capacity to comply with the entirety of that request. You are therefore welcome to use Rec Room 2 for your needs, the caveat being our recreational facilities are open for all the crew to utilize.”

“It’s generous of you to do that for me. Thank you.” That burden lifted, Tralnor felt like he’d racked up his first win since stepping aboard. “Sohja, Joe, and I have secured the rights to Celluloid Vokaya and have started the process of restoring it.”

Spock said nothing about the film and drew his emotional barriers in tighter. “Because you have the experience necessary to complete the work, I am placing you in the media lab, alpha shift.”

That was an excellent place to hide someone like Tralnor. Media lab was essential to the so-called wet sciences’ basic function, but it kept him out of the way. This job might not smell as nice as being a paper pusher on Starbase 4, but it promised a bit more intellectual stimulation. “Now that we have that taken care of, I know you did not bring me aboard this ship because you have need for an extraneous autoclave operator.”

Spock opened a locked cabinet and reached in. “This arrived via diplomatic pouch seven weeks ago.”

A padded document folder, emblazoned with the High Council’s seal, was placed on the desk. Tralnor regarded it warily. “Paper?”

Spock’s silence on the matter confirmed the worst. A paper communiqué was a sign of impending trouble on the horizon. Only the most sensitive and paranoia-inducing information was relayed from ShiKahr in this manner. Tralnor engaged his fine empathic motor controls and let his fingertips graze the embossed cover. An imprint of needing help and fear of Vulcan’s ugly past ghosted through his neural connections.
“The High Council likes us when they need us.” Tralnor said, his comment encompassing him and the first officer. He lifted the cover back and braced against what was coming.

The letter had a different consciousness associated with it than the folder. He knew who wrote the document before examining the content and the closing signature. He wound up reading it three times for context, clarity, and verification. When he finished, he set the paper back in its official casement.

Spock said, “T’Pau believes I can find it and you can neutralize it. Do you share in that assessment?”

Tralnor could tell Spock was unsure. “Isn’t this one of those errands that typically gets covertly worked into a diplomatic mission? Negotiations, espionage, and a bit of hopefully unnoticed taking-without-consent.”

“Sarek and T’Lal have engaged in such activities in the past. Neither my father nor your mother is physically capable of handling this at present. Sarek required another open heart procedure this year.”

“And my mother’s illness is growing more severe.” Tralnor had vague early childhood recollections of his mother calling the house in California and cryptically conversing with his father. Her business trips, as those excursions came to be known, were sporadic and secretive. Sometimes she came home bearing evidence of physical injury and/or psychic exhaustion. As a university student, he learned the truth about what she and the ambassador got up to.

“T’Pau specified you for this, Spock, knowing full well it could damage you and your career. You don’t have the protection of diplomatic immunity or the use of Starfleet personnel or property to get this done. I’d understand if her communique showed up in my mailbox at the music department, but my name’s not in that letter.”

It simply said, Find the proper Lyr Saan individual to accompany you.

“You are my only choice.” Spock averted his gaze. “Had T’Pau named you. . .”

“It might signal an end to the acrimonious relationship between our families.” Tralnor popped his jaw. “And where’s the fun in that?”

He and Spock shared a wry glance with one another.

“T’Pau will never back down.”

“T’Lessa will always harbor resentment.” Tralnor said.

“As is within her rights. T’Pau’s nephew has tried to murder T’Lessa’s daughter on no fewer than three separate occasions.”

“Four.” Tralnor said. “My mother was poisoned twelve years ago. She barely survived.”

“I did not know.”

“Thus, I describe our being related as complicated.” Following the saga of the contemporary Clan Surak/Clan Lyr Saan rift was akin to watching a soap opera. T’Pau’s brother’s grandson was betrothed to T’Lessa, the idea being a union between the clans was beneficial in the modern day. Both sides agreed, the children were bonded, and as adults, they entered into married life. The marriage worked, for a while, until their second child was born.
Tralnor struggled to recall his grandfather’s name. He’d never heard it spoken and seen it written once in an old legal document before it was destroyed.

“His given name was Sepek.” Spock came around to Tralnor’s side of the desk, occupying the second visitor’s chair. “Sepek’s sahaisaya is so complete, the codified family history states T’Pau has one brother, Solkar.”

“Our side, if he comes up at all, he’s listed as klee’fah’tu.” A banished non-person, that’s what T’Lal’s amended birth record had listed under father.

Sepek may never have turned to his criminal ways if T’Lal didn’t manifest Lyr Saan psionic abilities to such an overwhelming degree. His flawed logic told him T’Lal was an embarrassment and a mortal threat to Clan Surak and the only way to protect his family was to kill the abomination he’d created. He made his first murder attempt when T’Lal was three and sealed his expulsion from Vulcan.

T’Pau wanted to disassociate from Sepek’s actions but could not bring herself to condemn her own brother to the gallows. He was sent away and erased, leaving T’Lessa terrified her child was still in danger and convinced that T’Pau was more concerned about protecting Clan Surak’s reputation than saving a life.

Thus, two men aboard a Federation starship, related but not, contemplated their near-futures.

“Back to the topic at hand, why do you want me for this?” Tralnor did not see Spock’s motivation. “There are more-qualified people within the ranks of Temple Ko-tek’ru Kaylara, academics who specialize in these things and know how to be discreet.”

“I want you because I know I can trust you.” Spock cocked his head a few degrees to the left and with a brow partially raised, he said, “And, you still owe me a favor.”

Tralnor caught a whiff of the media lab before he stepped off the turbolift. Gnarly odors of vaporizing sheep’s blood, bacterial blooms on agar plates, detergents, and reagents greeted him something like a joker’s version of a welcome home. Petri dishes, electrophoresis gels, biological growth media, mounted and stained microscope slides, the media lab prepared some of the most vital practical supplies to Enterprise’s research labs and dealt with the clean-up upon the conclusion of these supplies’ useful lives.

The lieutenant supervising the media lab was overenthusiastic when he shot up from his chair to stand at attention. “Lt. Commander, it’s a pleasure to have you working with us. Lt. Chavez, at your beck and call.”

Chavez proffered his hand and tried to act like he wasn’t disappointed when Tralnor refused to shake. A subordinate snickered and whispered that Chavez was a wanker. “Okay...This entire ship would come grinding to a screeching halt without the efforts of the mighty media lab. Everything you see, everything we, and now you, do here is the heartbeat of the Enterprise’s five-year mission.”

Listening to this was worse than a hammy actor “dramatically” reciting his canned Oscars speech. Chavez puffed out his gristy chest. He’d heard about the musician passing himself off as a scientist and resented being stuck with a useless man who outranked him at the same time. “I expect nothing but the best of my men, Tralnor. If you don’t think you have what it takes for media
lab, you will by the time your tour is up.”

A crewman sighed, and another uttered, “What a moron”.

“Tripoxiphene neurolsonate.” Tralnor said. “Methogabalinatic Acid.”

Chavez indulged a smug smile. “Medications?”

“My first real job as a teenager was with the research team developing those drugs. Through the blatant nepotism of my mother and my auntie,” Tralnor observed Chavez’s continued ego inflation because how else was a violinist going to work in a pharmaceutical lab if his mommy didn’t get him in the door? “I was hired as their dish bitch.”

A few people chuckled at the use of the slang term for media lab workers. Chavez momentarily sputtered and partially recovered to say, “Ensign Woodward will issue your safety equipment.”

“Mr. Spock?”

It wasn’t the words that registered, but the edge on them. The captain arrived on the bridge in a sour mood and snapped at the easy targets around him. Spock suspected he had not gotten back to sleep after their midnight summons to sickbay. “Captain?”

“I was asking about the breathability of the atmosphere on Melbek III.” Or didn't you hear me?

Any other time, to have one of Jim’s thoughts cross the room, readable and complete without the use of touch telepathy, might have brought Spock great contentment. Not hearing Jim, then hearing him, proved how distracted he was by the letter he’d shown Tralnor. “It is consistent with that of M-class planets humans are most comfortable on. The planet’s surface is forty-eight percent fresh water, forty percent land mass, and twelve percent unknown.”

“Uhura, the surveyors reported no advanced species, what has their observational satellite gathered for us in the time since the mapmakers drifted through the Melbek system?”

As Uhura replied to the captain, Spock’s thoughts immediately returned to T’Pau’s directive. On the surface, it looked like an easy enough task, retrieve a dangerous item and see out its destruction. He’d not entirely gotten beneath the euphemistic layers she used to describe what this thing was or why it needed to meet its end. At this point, he didn’t know what it looked like, and making any contact with T’Pau about it was strictly verboten.

“Spock?”

He flinched and found the captain’s hand on his shoulder.

“Do I need to send you down to Bones?” Those human fingers lingered just a millisecond too long.

He forced his heartbeat to remain steady and strangled his psionic abilities before possibly entertaining the temptation to let a tendril creep through that hand, up the arm, and into the captain’s epicenter ever crossed his mind. This was a ripe opportunity to learn Jim’s capacity to love Spock, and stop torturing himself about this once and for all. But that was not how these things worked, breaching the laws of telepathic privacy proved little, except that Spock was the barbarian his childhood bullies accused him of being.
The hand was gone.

“I do not require Dr. McCoy’s administrations.”

Kirk ordered the first officer to leave the bridge and take a break. It was a distraction that Spock was so lost in the clouds. Each time he stared off, or reverted into his thoughts, or whatever, the workflow and environment in this space derailed. He even advised the Vulcan to get a cup of coffee, “to perk yourself up or settle your nerves.” Spock was not amused and went off to collect himself.

He touched his palm, where it rested on the blue velour and wondered if that was the last time he’d touch Spock with such non-professional compulsion? “Mr. Sulu, you have the conn.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He too exited the bridge, took the turbolift to deck three, entered his quarters, and barely waited for the door to seal him off from the rest of the ship before punching the wall four times, each successive throw harder and more damaging than the one before.

“Fuck!”

He’d tried. Oh God, he’d tried, tried to shake the paralysis that laid waste to all the things he wanted to say, tried to tease out information, tried to exhibit conduct becoming an officer when what he wanted to do was take Spock aside and kiss him. Clumsy words and actions, miserably failed attempts at flirting, skin-to-skin contact would let Kirk communicate with this man who didn’t know he’d stolen his captain’s heart.

Kirk had lost his chance, some window he didn’t know existed between Spock’s shitstorm of a wedding and... Mollie. He thought he’d get until at least the end of their five-year mission to beat back the crippling apprehension and tell Spock how he felt. Blind to the situation, stupid, still recovering from McCoy’s artificial death, Kirk probably only had a few days, hours really, to announce his intentions. But, with Spock’s biological needs in the future to account for, even Kirk conceded Mollie was the logical choice.

Lt. Biltmore shoved his way into Sarah David’s quarters where she and Avery were seated and looking at a yearbook.

“Hey! What’s your problem?” One of Sarah’s bunkmates sniped. “Don’t ask or anything.”

“Come on in, Vince. We were just enjoying some time without you.” Avery indicated with a flick of his head that Biltmore needed to shove off.

“The Krampus flipped his fucking lid last night! We’re talking like Article 90 type shit.” Biltmore plopped onto the bunk directly across from Sarah’s. “Billy the Sixth says he’s never seen the like.”

“We all know the Krampus is crotchety and a little too high strung.” Sarah started to talk when Biltmore ran off with the conversation.

“I guess he started screaming and wailing on your teacher friend. It took four security guys to haul his ass to the brig.”

Avery looked skeptical. “Are you sure it’s the Krampus and not some lunatic-fringe Earth First
weirdo?”

“I asked Lindsay—Ensign Jamison—and she says he’s been down there all day and won’t talk to counsel.” Head shaking in disbelief, Biltmore said, “The Krampus thinks everyone on board is a naughty child. I guess he’s taking his namesake seriously.”

“Believe me, Vince, that’s not it.” Sarah got up and retrieved a guitar case from the bunk above hers. “We’ll fill you in a little on the way to Rec Room 2.”
Chapter 6

Lyr Saan slave traditions still in practice included the performance of ralash-t’mu-yor. For the slaves, by the slaves, Night Music was a communal expression of the art and beauty a non-autonomous people supposedly weren’t capable of. In the evenings, after a meal, was a short recital.

Sarah stopped short her approach. Her infinitesimally handsome teacher was. . . “Oh. My. God. Alton warned me, but he didn’t say they left you just about bald.”

“There are worse fates, Sarah.”

She lay the guitar case across a table Dr. Tralnor commandeered for the detritus associated with his regular occupations. “I’m glad you find some, I don’t know, humor in it, but it reminds me too much of old pictures I’ve seen where Nazis are laughing as they are cutting the hair off Orthodox Jews.”

“While ignorance is not an excuse for my date with the clippers, it was an error that will not happen again. Though it will take some time for the changes to be codified.”

“You’ve set them on the path of saven-tor, nah-tor, and ken-tor?” Sarah remembered those pillars of the Lyr Saan philosophy: education, contemplation, and understanding.

“That is the idea.” He pointed to her borrowed six-string. “You don’t happen to have your tenor or access to one?”

Sarah already liked where this question was heading. “I’ve got it. I’ve only got one set of civvies because I sacrificed that space for my saxophone. The other girls think I’m mad.”

“Dr. Vonna and I are beginning to plan the Summer Splendor concert. We can use some strong musicians on this side of the event.”

“Hell yeah, I’m your gal.” An effervescent giddiness filled her. “What’s first on tonight’s playlist?”

Spock slipped into Rec Room 2 as the first song, something from earth’s past he did not recognize, began. Ralash-t’mu-yor, while not something his family participated in, was one of the Vulcan cultural practices he liked best. He sat down to listen and wait for Tralnor.

Piano, guitar, basic percussion, Tralnor singing lead with young up-and-coming science officer Sarah David providing backing vocals, they sounded good for not having seen one another in six or seven years. “Piano man/Makes her stand/In the auditorium. . .”

“Thank you for bringing him here.” Sha’leyen seated herself next to Spock.

Like a man running his tongue over his teeth to see if they were all there after a fist fight, Spock touched the ashes of his bond, encountering only grit and bitterness.

He looked at her through the corner of his eye, and as always, was saddened by the visible scars on her face. Before her tenure in Starfleet, someone brutally beat this woman within an inch of her life
and left her to live or die without proper medical attention.

“I am glad I could reunite you with your loved one.” Spock didn’t know Sha’leyen well on a personal level even after serving with her for eight years. One of the handful of officers held over from Captain Pike’s command, she was exemplary at her job, and deep space suited her.

“My parents tried to get me away from Belon. They sent me into the protection of Tralnor’s family, away from the war hell-bent on overthrowing the monarchy. I was safe for about ten months when I was abducted from a transit terminal, captured as a war bride, and my bond with Tralnor violently severed.”

Not a member of the Federation, and just barely qualified to join if they could stop fighting amongst themselves long enough to apply for admission, Belon was a world populated by humanoids that were possibly descended from the same original stock as the Vulcans and were certainly colonized by pre-Reform Vulcans for a time. As such, they shared nearly identical anatomical and physiological characteristics. Plagued by war and conflict, Belon was an isolated, backwater planet of little strategic value.

“Had I known,” he said, “I would have made your reintroduction sooner. If Tralnor’s sister had not recently mentioned a missing girl, I never could have made the connection.”

“No regrets.” Sha’leyen replied. “Only the future.”

“Let’s try this again, Jim.” McCoy placed a cold layer of dermaplast over the captain’s mangled knuckles. The injury was swollen, discolored, and hours old. “This isn’t a slip-and-fall no matter how hard you lie to me about it.”

“I lost my footing and collided into a wall in my quarters.” Kirk’s words flowed with false neutrality.

McCoy scowled. “I’ve got two words for you, bull and shit.”

“Bones, I don’t want to talk about it.”

Not backing down, the doctor said, “Suppose I go and inspect your quarters right now, what am I going to see?”

“Nothing.”

“I’m starting to think I might just need to pull you in for a psych eval.” This wasn’t an idle threat. “Just because I’m originally a GP from Georgia doesn’t mean I don’t know how to see the complexities of your professional and private lives colliding.”

“It’s not up for discussion. End of subject.” Kirk wasn’t shaken by McCoy’s ploy to get him to open up. He got up, stiffly flexed the damaged hand, and sent a look that said, Don’t you think I’d tell you if I could?

“I hope you don’t think you’re going to crawl off to your office and spend all night working like that. You need to leave that hand alone for several hours so Christine and I can do a better job of fixing it tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Bones.” A hollow yearning gave his voice a haunted quality.
“G’night, Jim.”

As the captain disappeared from view, McCoy couldn’t help but wonder what he was going to do with that man.

Lid closed over the piano keys, Alton and Sarah gathered with Tralnor, making small talk about their lives. After her tour on Enterprise was up, Sarah was going to Starfleet's School of Medical Sciences in Bethesda, Maryland, to earn an MD before returning to biomedical research in deep space. Alton said he’d found his calling the second he set foot on this silver lady and could never take an assignment that put him on the ground or kept him in one place for too long.

“We’d both been on the ship for two months before we ran into one another on shore leave. I never expected to turn around while waiting in line to ride the Tornado Thunder rollercoaster and see Alton. We’re a lot closer now than we were in high school.” Sarah secured the guitar and slipped her picks into a pocket. “Dr. Tralnor, I noticed they made you take out your earrings too.”

“I removed them.” He had an intense urge to reach up and touch his naked lobes. “There’s no sense in wearing them if I can’t perform Temple duties or officiate ceremonies. It saves me another fight with the dress code administrators.”

“That means you can’t even offer Last Rites, doesn’t it?” Avery revisited his disgust from yesterday.

“No, I can’t.” He drew a deep breath and thought about how a part of his identity had been temporarily stripped away. “But, I can still teach.”

“So,” Avery made one of those twitches that humans get when they’re nervous about asking a question. “If me or Sarah were on the verge of death tomorrow and needed you to help us down the tevahk-yut?”

Tralnor briefly closed his eyes. The Path of Dying was something people their age shouldn’t have to worry about, but they worked and lived on a vessel that took them to some dangerous, deadly places. He always shared as much of his culture, of Vulcan’s broader culture, as he could with his students if only to introduce them to something beyond their terrestrial experience. These two, they’d paid close attention, obviously remembering that T’Kehr Temple Ko-tek’ru Kaylara t’Lyr Saan refused to deny anyone, regardless of their origins, a calm, dignified death. “I’m sorry. I can be with you at your side, but I can’t guide you.”

“It’s okay, we understand.” Sarah said.

“While Tralnor may not be available in that capacity, there is someone on board who is.” Spock entered the conversation.

“I don’t know about you, Sarah, but I’ll pass on ship’s chaplain. He’s a nice person, but it wouldn’t be the same.” Avery was crestfallen. “I think I’d rather go alone.”

Spock introduced the woman who’d accompanied him to the front of the room. “This is Sha’leyen, and she too is T’Kehr.”

“Now that I know there is a need for such assistance, we must meet and make some arrangements.” Sha’leyen shook their hands.
“Is it also possible to go farther working on breaking through to the s’thaupi?” Avery ventured.

Tralnor felt a mild flick to his left hand. (Yes, Spock?) “That is something I can work with you on while I’m here.”

(What exactly are you teaching your students?)

As Sha’leyen volunteered to take the pair on after Tralnor departed. He replied, (I show the basics of proper meditation and mood modulation to everyone as a way to overcome performance anxiety and boost concentration skills. It’s part of how I build competent musicians and young people who are resilient under pressure. There are occasionally those who want to know more.)

(Is it possible to get human psi-nulls into a deep enough trance to come close to the Beyond State, let alone actually into it?)

(It’s rare, but it can be done. For these two, the way to get there is through music.) Again, Tralnor shook hands with Avery. Sarah held back, claiming she needed to wash her hands after playing her friend’s sticky guitar.

(I need you to go through T’Pau’s letter again with me. Meet me in an hour.)

McCoy, his face fixed in a sort of half-grimace, could not get Jim’s, he didn’t know if it was a proper outburst, behavior out of his mind. The captain was, by his very nature, the kind of person who flew by the seat of his pants, reacting to situations and stimuli in an instinctual manner. That was not to say Jim didn’t have a brain, he was a smart guy, but whatever was going on, it was at a level that was less rational and more primal than his usual function.

An interior chain reaction of cutting emotion exploded somewhere today, and for that, a wall got its bell rung. What if next time it wasn’t a wall or even a stationary object? McCoy didn’t want to see whatever this was progress beyond this level.

He dragged his hand down his face, tired after another day of a job well done. One last fleeting thought before sleep hauled him away was that he’d ask Spock if Jim seemed off.

Information on Melbek III lay pushed aside. Kirk simply could not concentrate on anything to do with this assignment. Yes, he was curious to know what that twelve-percent unknown on the planet’s surface was, but it didn’t seem important, not when he had pages and pages of Spock and Mollie’s citations to pour over.

Dozens of papers, two books, various chapters, they started racking up publishing credits as teens. This was in addition to the things they put out alone or with other colleagues.

“She’s got you outgunned in every way, Jimmy.” He said to himself. “Why can’t you just be happy for Spock?”
“Right here, she’s referring to a vessel in the sense that it’s an item that contains another item.” Spock pointed out the line.

“. . .permanently ensconced . . .” Tralnor read ahead. “It’s hard to tell if she means what’s inside this thing can’t come out, or the item itself is hidden away.”

"Tiny Dancer" from the album Rocket Man · Copyright: Writer(s): Elton John, Bernie Taupin

They contemplated possible locations for this thing, creating a list of four candidates. They guessed the size was approximately that of a shoebox, or at least no bigger than one. Tralnor tapped on a word. “If we look at the archaic meaning of muhs, in the T’lingShar tradition, and use ‘distillation’ instead of the modern accepted ‘vapor,’ this vessel harbors concentrated ill-will. It’s not much of a description, but it’s something to start with.”

Spock was not wholly convinced. Tralnor was reaching. “‘Vapor,’ in this context may simply mean that. What if this is an ancient chemical weapon?”

“Shit, I don’t know.” Tralnor’s inflection, the way he looked center, right, then up, his physical bearing, all reminded Spock of Mollie. He wasn’t as animated, and her incredibly expressive facial displays only flickered deep below the surface, the resemblance was oddly comforting. “I wish we had access to Dehline. She’d set us straight, fast.”

An archaeologist working the remains of pre-Reform Old Lyr Saan City, Dehline was an accidental expert on what she called Artifacts of Malice. Spock wished they could contact her too.

“She’s my mother’s cousin, so it’s reasonable that I’d want to speak with her.” Tralnor said, giving Spock a measure of hope that an accurate interpretation would fast set them on their way. “Except, she’s working up on the western slopes of the Izhau-kulan Mountains. There’s still so much radioactive fallout up there that communication is nearly impossible. She’s not due back for two months, and when she gets home, she’s got to spend three weeks in decontamination.”

“Perhaps there are others whom you know that can be discreet? Should word get back to T’Pau and she finds I have enlisted aid from more than one ‘suitable individual,’ there will be repercussions.” Spock didn’t like being given a task and finding himself immediately hamstrung.

“I’m going to have to think on that. Trick is to find someone who’s willing to help but doesn’t get too interested as to why we’re seeking that information.”

“Your Uncle Sonreke?”

Tralnor shook his head. “No. The first thing he’ll do is talk to my mother. I don’t suppose there’s anything at all hidden away in Enterprise’s computer banks?”

“Negative.”

They stared at the letter until fifty-two seconds into that silent observation when Spock was paged down to the brig. Lt. Seltun had something to say.
The pile of miniature chocolate chip cookies on Billy the Sixth’s pull-out night stand grew as bets rolled in. O’Dell and Gupta faced off as the final hands standing. The last contributions hit the pot.

“Let’s see ‘em, fellas.” Billy said, reaching into the pot to munch one of the little sweeties.

“Get your fat paws out of my cookies.” O’Dell lay his cards down, revealing a pair of aces and a pair of tens.

“Shit.” Gupta drawled. He’d bluffed along on a pair of twos and lost. “I really wanted those. Another hand?”

“You wish.” O’Dell stuffed two of the treats in his mouth and crunched. “So good. Mmmm.”

“Hey, Dr. Tralnor. You could have beat us all with a random shit hand. Why didn’t you?” Billy barely moved fast enough to liberate one more cookie before O’Dell slapped his hand and swept them up.

“You people are the definition of poker face.” O’Dell sat back on his bunk to admire his hoard.

“Because those are shitty cookies.” Tralnor let them laugh. “I’d play to the end if they were fresh or made with one or two real ingredients. From what I can taste of them on the air, I’d rather eat a scented candle.”

O’Dell’s face retained its feline smile. “You’re just jealous.”

“Lt. Commander Tralnor, you are needed at the brig.” Ship’s intercom stopped the lighthearted exchange.

“I think the Krampus has had enough time to realize what a twat he’s been.”

“I believe you’re right, Billy.” Tralnor put his boots and uniform tunic back on. He opened the door to leave the cabin and hesitated. “To get to the brig, does the turbolift take you straight there or do I need to know the deck first?”

The guys laughed again, Rohit coming up for air first, said, “You must have slept through your training cruise.”

“This is my training cruise.”

Lt. Seltun bristled when Tralnor arrived. Spock was trying to help this promising young officer keep his career from derailing, but if this was the way he’d continue to behave, perhaps last night’s lashing out was the first step to an early discharge.

Seltun forced the tension from his shoulders, reclaiming his equilibrium. “Lt. Commander Tralnor, I wish to apologize for my actions. What I said and the actions I undertook were uncalled for.”

“If this were a civilian matter, I’d ask law enforcement to drop the charges.” Tralnor said.

Shifting in his seat, Seltun refused to look Tralnor in the eye. Spock, as the one used to being on
the receiving end of this brand of disdain, was for once considered part of the collective rather than the Other.

“The officers at your disciplinary hearing tomorrow will consider Tralnor’s opinion on this incident.” Spock, becoming familiar with outer margins of Tralnor’s telepathic aura, picked up the filaments of earlier conversation, and due to their physical proximity, did not need a skin-on-skin nudge to reinitialize speech. (Are you certain, Tralnor? Seltun is not sincere and merely wishes to look out for himself.)

(I know.)

(What is the reason you recommend leniency?)

(The only person Seltun is a threat to is Seltun. Watch him observe us. He knows we’re having a conversation, our hands folded on the table in front of us. He’s both repulsed and intrigued.)

Tralnor addressed the unnerved lieutenant. “In my tenure as a teacher, I see again and again that young people can and do make mistakes no matter how hard they strive to show their skills and maturity to those around them. A mistake is a learning experience and in most situations, rectifiable. It is my wish that you use this encounter with me as a stepping off point to becoming a more complete and tolerant individual.”

“Yes, Sir.” Seltun said.

(He wasn’t just attacking me last night. Seltun was lashing out at himself.) “I accept your apology, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Spock dismissed Tralnor and was left with this person, perplexed as to why Seltun reviled the Lyr Saan teacher and not the blatant half-breed first officer? Did Seltun indeed perceive Tralnor as a threat to life and limb? Was he merely a bigot? Spock’s family was one of prestige, did he believe an amenable working relationship with his divisional commander was a throughway to higher social standing? What possible explanation was there for such comportment?

The second ping registered in Kirk’s brain. He pulled his thoughts together and told whoever was at the door to come in, not bothering to check who it was first. This being his office rather than his private quarters, he was less picky about came to visit.

“I had expected to find you on deck three, captain.”

That voice filling the air made Kirk’s brain glow and butterflies in his gut convulse. “I’ve been boning up on Melbek.”

Spock’s keen eye went to the damaged hand. The Vulcan was too polite just to come out and ask, so Kirk decided to ignore it for the time being. “Is this business or pleasure?”

A brow elevated, questioning the phrase Kirk chose. The captain liked to think this was a little game the two of them played. He’d say some earth colloquialism, Spock, who may or may not know what it actually meant, feigned ignorance, and it gave them an excuse to break the ice and ease into the actual matters at hand.

“Did you just want to see me or is this work related?” Kirk indicated that he sit down and quit
hovering by the door. He wanted to look into his eyes, level, and indulge. Even though Spock belonged to Mollie, Kirk could be forgiven for a bit of visual indiscretion.

“It is both.”

While the physical space between them was less than a meter, the divide seemed never-ending. Those long, elegant fingers had on occasions before, met with the right locations on Kirk’s face, giving him a teasing taste of the true Spock. . .

“It is Lt. Seltun, Sir. He is a geothermal and tectonics expert who is part of my geology department.”

“He’s the one who put Dr. Tralnor in sick bay?”

“The same.”

Kirk listened to information on Seltun’s request to talk to Spock. Yeah, he agreed that the lieutenant was out to cover his own ass, but who wasn’t when that sort of shit went down? He was not surprised in the slightest that Tralnor would let the whole incident go. So far, there was nothing to suggest Spock needed Kirk’s input on the situation. The disciplinary panel was fair, and Seltun would likely get another night in the brig before he was cut loose and returned to Enterprise’s normal routine.

When the description of the emotional and intellectual motive of this meeting began, Kirk understood. Spock never quite got the hang of how people ticked, even if one of those people was a fellow Vulcan. “I think you’re right, Spock. He sees you as the so-called lesser of two evils. I also agree with Tralnor, Seltun doesn’t come off as a real threat. Keep a close watch on him, certainly, but I don’t feel like he’s a risk.”

Kirk blinked heavily, thinking about the implications of a life lived at the bottom of a midden made up of the harsh words and actions of dogmatic contemporaries, only to have that demerit against you dismissed because something supposedly more heinous was out there. How were you supposed to feel about that?

There was Kirk supposed, two responses. One came from the captain. The second, a message from a concerned friend. Both ultimately came to the same conclusions, treat Seltun as you would any other lower ranking officer, and refuse to engage him when he wanted to invoke any us vs. them attempts at social climbing.

And as far as Spock’s emotional response to this sudden inclusion? This was where Kirk wanted to speak out and stand up against those who’d exploit this beautiful man to their own ends. He’d go to ends of the universe, farther if he had to, so he might protect his friend.

*You have no idea how much I want to touch you, Spock, and make you a part of me. Oh, how I wish.* . .
Upon entry to his personal abode, Spock took up his place in front of the asenoi. He’d meditate until he got this phantom pain under control.

The Enterprise glided into the Melbek system as McCoy finished the reconstruction on Jim’s hand and the ship threw itself into the scientific side of its mission, graphing, charting, analyzing its way from the outermost planetoids up until taking orbit around Melbek III.

Christine tried to ask why the captain had an injury most commonly seen in bare-knuckle fighters, but the doctor was as short on details with her as Jim was with him. He closed the wound and cleared the field for her to take over and pull the drapes and machinery before moving Jim into recovery.

“Let me know when he comes around.” McCoy said before retreating to his office to start a dictation into Jim’s medical files.

“Yes, Dr. McCoy.”

As he cued up Jim’s records and initiated the part of the software that recorded his voice and transcribed it into text, he made a notation in a section of the file only he had means of accessing and typed in, Consultation with expert scheduled at 1330, re: patient’s recent mental health hx.

“Sensor sweep initiated, Sir.” Lt. Hadley said from Spock’s usual perch at the science station.

Spock had center stage this morning as the captain was undergoing a minor medical procedure. This meant he feigned a measure of executive disinterest when he wanted to see those first readings sweep over his screens and set off the gears in his analytical brain. That aspect of his job was never so important as he found himself mired in stifled feelings toward Jim, T’Pau’s errand—which he still could not intuit in a sensical manner—, and his interaction with Seltun.

Lt. Hadley started throwing numbers and readings out. Spock found her voice grating but filed everything she said away for use later, when he got the opportunity to view the raw data firsthand. Melbek III’s promise of geologic intrigue fell short when the previously unknown components of the planet’s crust were quickly revealed as sensor malfunctions on behalf of the survey team. That missing twelve percent was surface iron ore deposits.

The shift progressed uneventfully until he went down to sick bay. He arrived in time to witness Jim trying to swindle his way out of light duty restrictions. Light hair, bright eyes, little boy smile, Spock could bask in these qualities like another being might seek out the sun at the beach.

“Tell him, Spock. I can’t aggravate my owie if I’m just doing the boring administrative parts of my job.”

“Boring and administrative mean different things to the both of us, Jim. If you were anyone else, I’d probably let you finish out today, but I know you.”

“Bones, please.” Kirk’s charm offensive, while so successful in other arenas, fell flat with the doctor. “We’re hanging out around an out-of-the-way, uninhabited planet that’s not going to have me mediating between warring tribes, trying to destabilize an active volcano’s magma chamber, or
otherwise swinging from the chandeliers. What do you say?”

“Rest, Jim.” McCoy gave one of his stubborn smiles that said he wasn’t about to give an inch.

The captain refocused his playful, pleading expression on Spock. Imagine waking up to find that face? “I must agree with the doctor.”

“And there’s nothing I could tempt you with to you to change your mind?” Jim started backing down and winding in the charisma, reverting to his proper Starfleet form.

“Rest.” McCoy said. “You can read reports and follow along from the terminal in your quarters.

“Fine.” He relented. If he didn’t take what he could get right now, he’d find himself spending the next twenty-four hours in sick bay. He decided to make his escape.

“What is it you wanted to know, Doctor?”

“Does Jim seem off to you lately?”

Define what you’re asking, Spock thought. Humans, as a species, were “off.”

“Is this regarding his hand injury?”

“Sort of.” McCoy ground his jaw into the temporomandibular joints, causing muscles on the sides of his head to twitch. “Look, I’m going just come out and say what I’m thinking.”

“As you always do, Doctor.” Spock expected McCoy to bite back but didn’t get the classic contra-coup.

“I think the captain is in a jam and he can’t figure a way out.” McCoy silenced a page from physical therapy. “He’s in a bad relationship, Spock, I’m sure of it. But he refuses to say anything so far.”

Piqued, Spock questioned how McCoy came to the conclusion Jim was, a) seeing someone, and b) the union had gone sour. The evidence the suspicious yet excitable doctor presented started out to Spock as a random collection of hunches and suppositions, but the more McCoy talked it out, the more it made sense to someone who saw the world in such emotional terms. Jim was moody, withdrawn, and belligerent in ways that corresponded to previous bad breakups the doctor had seen him through.

“Captain Kirk is not seeing anyone at this time.” Spock said authoritatively. He’d know if there was anyone in the captain’s bed.

“So, what? He’s this heartsick over nothing?”

Spock had no way of knowing, though it concerned him greatly, why Jim was dealing with inner demons, without applying the same kind of friendly pressure McCoy tried and failed at. Whether employing the doctor’s buddy approach or a more rational excavation of details, until Jim was ready to divulge his secret, the situation remained at loggerheads.
Chapter 8

Thanks to the media lab sending him around the ship to pick up and drop off various orders and returns, Tralnor started to feel like his bunk-mates might stop teasing him about not knowing where anything was at. It took about a week before he could competently plot out the correct routes to take if called to general quarters.

Day five scouring the Melbek system, and the whole crew cocooned into a rare lull. Melbek III was not poisonous, the native flora and fauna didn’t have a freakish lust for human blood, no new elements bubbled up through tectonic seams.

Just finishing a run to the thermophile lab, Tralnor pushed his empty trolly back toward Chavez’s empire. When he returned, he’d join a group of crewmen in pouring another five-hundred gel slabs for Melbek III’s mountains of DNA analyses. He started thinking about a more efficient way to set up the pouring stations when someone he didn’t know popped his head out a doorway and caught his attention.

“Sha’leyen wants to give you a tour of her domain while Chavez has you off his leash.”

“Oh yes, I’ve been holding out for this.” Tralnor said.

“So long as you don’t ditch us with it when you go. That sucker reeks.”

Bioarchaeological Xenoanthropology, or bioarch as everyone called it, was yet another sleek, ultra-modern scientific facility. His former bondmate had done well.

“I’m glad to see you could get away.” Sha’leyen turned around from one of the dozen tables set up in the main area, leaving an assistant with the bleached skeleton of some quadrupedal animal. “We don’t always have humanoid remains to work with. On planets like Melbek III, bioarch offers a secondary report, and sometimes an entirely different interpretation of remains, for zoology, ecology, and molecular bio. This is our gross examination area. The biohazard doors to your left connect to our decomp rooms, which come in especially handy when we’re in the unfortunate position to examine mass murders or genocide.”

Tralnor didn’t think such a place existed, but there was one location on Enterprise that likely stank worse than the media lab, therefore he was not asking to see inside the spaces where decomposed bodies met scientific and legal inquiry.

“If you come this way,” Sha’leyen made no move like she wanted to take him beyond the biohazard signs. They went to an adjoining room, this one home to more traditional lab benches and microscopes. “And on the benches without the fume hoods, we do any ultra-fine screen shaking that’s impractical in the field. If there is other any cleaning needed, it’s done here as well before moving over to the more sophisticated set-ups.”

Down a short interior hall, three more spaces branched off. One hosted two officers carefully reconstructing a fragile-looking skull from a vaguely humanoid entity. She rattled off a quick description of the ongoing work on remains from last month’s stop at a planet called DoFerrin Olteq.

The next room off the hall housed a number of partitioned computer terminals where those not senior enough to merit their own office space did their report writing and database research. A third room wasn’t a room as such. It was a repository for specimen cabinets and machinery that was
used in the field. This space functioned mostly as an unofficial thruway to yet another module in Sha’leyen’s rabbit warren.

“There is a supposedly right way to traverse this department, which does nothing more than take you to the wrong place or deposit you firmly underfoot to interrupt someone else’s work. Engineering hates what we’ve done, but they understand. When this girl gets her refit, I already have the architectural plans drawn up for how I want this place organized.”

They stood in the curators’ realm, where every specimen got catalogued and preserved for posterity. This room had a natural history museum feel to it. Curation connected on to bioarch’s diagnostic imaging suite. “This way we don’t have to wait for time on sick bay’s machines or leave medicine without its vital tools.”

Yet another back corridor sent them past the storeroom where all the finished items from curation awaited their eventual off-loading. An equipment cache and a cluster of small offices passed to the wayside. The very last stop was Sha’leyen’s office.

“I painted the walls five years ago. Strictly against the regs, but I needed something more cheerful and less like the interior of my ex-husband’s house.” She offered Tralnor the choice of a chair or one end of a lumpy purple loveseat. He stayed on his feet.

The walls were a very pale lavender-blue, what he could see of them that wasn’t festooned with overflowing bookshelves, filing cabinets, or plaques extolling her selfless service to the ‘fleet. Like he did in most all rooms that contained real bound books, Tralnor read as many spines as he set eyes on.

“My officers say I’m quaint. I try telling them I come from a place where paper books were our data padds.” She sat on the edge of her desk. “All that matters is I find them useful.”

“I love books.” Tralnor paused his scan of the titles and moved to a cluster that caught his attention. He recognized an old pre-Reform dialect. “These are on some of the trickier parts of Vulcan’s past. How do you even have them? The High Council would suffer a collective heart attack if they knew books of this ilk existed off-planet and were on a Federation ship.”

“If they found out, I’d let them posture all they want. I’m not intimidated by their green-faced blustering. Those books are from my family’s private collection on Belon. They’re mine to do with as I please. I have them with me for the simple fact that you never know what you’re going to find out in the wilds of the stars.” She indicated to the locked filing cabinet closest to the desk. “I keep two more volumes from that particular set away from prying eyes. You need to come back if you want to read them.”

Being staked to a lawn by a logging chain wouldn’t keep him away. Yes, he’d like to find out what these books had to say, but what mattered was the invitation to spend more time with her. “It’s a date.”

The com on her desk didn’t give warning before words started flowing from somewhere within bioarch. “Lt. Commander Reynan, the media lab just called. Chavez wants his minion back.”

“Reynan?” Tralnor asked, delaying the inevitable.

“When I finally escaped Belon for good, I needed a surname, something to more easily fit in with the people I wished to hide amongst.”

“But you don’t seem to use it.”
“Not for much. The kid who just called, he’s a greenhorn, and I can’t break him of the habit.” She stood and reluctantly herded Tralnor back into the gross examination room via a hidden panel in that last hallway.

“What does it mean?” Tralnor reunited with his supply cart. “Your name?”

“I don’t know yet. One of these years, I’ll think of something.”

Lt. Chavez shook his head as Tralnor made his return. The uptight whirlwind of envious affectivity left what he was doing to intercept the Vulcan. Tralnor held up for whatever tongue-lashing or snide comment was coming. A consultation of the clock on the wall above Chavez’s head showed as Tralnor knew, he still had fifteen minutes before he’d needed to report back to the media lab.

“You know, Dr. Tralnor,” Chavez took great delight in not using Tralnor’s rank, “not all of us have the luxury of visiting our girlfriends over in bioarch while on duty.”

Chavez thought he was the smartest, toughest, and most attractive man in the room. I asked her out first! Me! Tralnor caught that bitter little pill and figured it best to nip this bud before it turned into a noxious weed.

“You’re right. I should have come directly back here when I was done with the people at thermophile lab.”

“Yes?” Chavez practically crowed. Could it be that this obliviously handsome Vulcan, who was making every head on the entire ship turn, might concede and stay the hell out of Chavez’s way to Sha’leyen?

“I was asked by Lt. Commander Sha’leyen to view the bioarchaeology department. I knew I had the time and complied with her request.”

“Oh. . .but that’s not an excuse.” Chavez added, finally ready to turn Tralnor loose.

“Lt. Chavez, you need to know this.”

“What is that, Dr. Tralnor?”

Tralnor had difficulty choosing the verb tense he wanted. “Lt. Commander Sha’leyen is my bondmate.”

The blustery media lab boss could not hide the disgust and utter confusion boiling up. “That’s not possible.”

“As is customary, our families arranged our betrothal, and we were bonded at the age of seven.” Tralnor was not going to elaborate. By telling a version of the truth, he’d save Sha’leyen from Chavez’s amorous pursuit.

“She’s not Vulcan.” Chavez looked around for someone to back him up. None of his alienated staff could be bothered. They were having too much fun watching the boss get what was coming to him. “Sha’leyen’s not Vulcan.”

“She’s from Belon.” Tralnor’s thoughts immediately went to her personal library. “It’s a pre-Reform colony world that’s never completely fallen out of touch with Vulcan. Belonites share our biology, a common language tree, a virtually identical pantheon of gods and spiritual customs, and they still operate the same ancient trade routes as established thousands of years ago.”
Chavez crossed his arms over his chest. “Don’t you have gel slabs to pour?”

Captain Kirk’s attitude toward his Vulcan first officer wasn’t strained per-say, but it had cooled, backsliding their relationship to something more in-line with when they’d finally gotten comfortable working with one another all those years ago. Kirk knew if he didn’t keep Spock at arm’s length, he’d fuck things up completely.

Yes, they could be friends. He vowed to be satisfied with a solid working relationship and buddies who play chess and put-put golf sort of friendship. He could do that.

The pictures and reports coming up on Melbek III made the place sound ideal for a vacation cabin. Woods and mountains pervaded on the interior of the planet’s two continents while the edges of the land meeting the ocean went from equatorial tropical beaches to rocky crags encrusted with hoar-frost closer to the poles.

He’d like to go down, camp for a few nights, alone, and mourn for this, whatever it was, that died in its pre-embryonic stage. His one-sided fight with the wall had him on the injured-reserve list. No landing parties this time around.

“Captain Kirk.”

Yes, my love? He said to himself. “What is it, Spock?”

“Dendrology is examining a forest on the northwestern shores of a freshwater lake located on the forty-fifth parallel, approximately 2,000 kilometers inland from the western ocean.”

“That’s one fancy tree.” Kirk said as an image filled the view screen.

“Captain.” One of the scientists waved to the camera then pointed to the gleaming thing behind her. “There’s more to the surveyor’s unknown twelve-percent than we thought.”

“Go on.” Kirk could not take his eyes off this...it had obelisk-like features but was obviously a natural geological phenomenon. Glacier blue, it appeared to glow when the clouds parted, and sunshine hit it.

“Some of what our sensors picked up as run-of-the-mill iron ore, Sir.” She didn’t pause for dramatic effect, she was experiencing raw disbelief. “It’s diamonds.”

“Diamonds?” Kirk’s gut heaved. “That thing behind you?”

“From what our tricorders are telling us, we’re only seeing part of it. It’s supposed to be the size of two train cars placed end-to-end and as big around as two train cars sitting side-by-side.”

Great, Kirk thought. Our perfect little planet has decided to lob a spanner in the works.

“Sir, we have at least two more of these stones within visual range.”

Kirk turned the foresters back over to Spock while he called up security to immediately establish a cordon and monitoring for Melbek III. With two days supposedly left on this particular assignment, Enterprise would be stuck babysitting this find until Starfleet could send out patrol ships.

Once word got out, Melbek III was going to be popular.
Since Rec Room 2 was the place where all the hepcats hung out in the evenings, Kirk suggested they take their chess game and see what all the hubbub was about.

Spock took a seat, still pondering the meaning of hepcat. He gleaned an idea from the context but was unsure if the comment had something to do with animals.

(Hello, Spock.) Tralnor said, back turned, from the piled table he’d claimed as his own on the other side of the room. (It feels like the captain is with you.)

(Yes, he is.) Spock throttled down his emotional output. Nothing showed on his face as was his custom. Even the most masterful Vulcans couldn’t read behind his eyes without a meld, and he didn’t have anything to prove to Tralnor.

(Don’t be ashamed, Spock.)

He’d forgotten what this was like, to not be judged for every thought or action. (Tralnor, I—)

(Jim Kirk doesn’t judge you either.)

“You’re quiet tonight.” Jim said, putting the finishing pieces on the chessboard.

“I was just thinking.”

“One of these days.” He briefly flashed that smile, the one that left Spock a little weak in the knees. “I’d like to hop in there and see what exactly is going on in that head of yours.”

Solo violin broke the din of chatter, plunging the room into respectful silence. Attention turned away from their chess match, Spock watched for the precise moment Tralnor’s brain hit the peculiar switching station that sent him into a full meditative trance. Something about the music pushed him there. It never lasted for long, but it was enough to smooth over any frayed edges resulting from stress during the day. Mollie could do the same thing. It was an odd MacCormack trait the family taught to their children as a way to ground themselves.

Song over, Tralnor opened his eyes and returned to the present before taking a short bow and inviting Alton Avery and Sarah David up to the performance area.

“That was really something.” Jim said. “He’s a hell of a musician, but part of me wonders why you’ve got this guy here?”

“I assure you, he is an instrumental and a vital part to one of my current projects.” Spock caught Jim’s eyes and decided they reminded him something of aspen leaves, green and gray, flickering in an autumnal sunset with the help of a light breeze, and then a bit of blue where the sky shone through the canopy above.

Jim met Spock’s gaze, and Spock read a sliver of the loss and grief the captain insisted on keeping to himself. Perhaps McCoy was right, Jim was despondent because of a rocky break-up. Spock didn’t know if he trusted that diagnosis.
Chapter 9

One of you has to reach out first. Why not you? Mollie’s words fed into a constant loop in Spock’s semiconsciousness. On the verge of sleep, the moment he nodded off, she was back, insisting that he take the initiative. He was unable to dislodge her from his head.

Sitting up in bed, he was certain time with the asenoi, focusing deep, working on even breathing, and structured thoughts about the principles of Vulcan logic would banish Mollie’s specter. He made for his closet as to don a meditation robe.

Why not you?

Two steps off from where he’d intended to go, he did an about face and emerged into the hallway. He let his feet lead the way. Jim’s quarters were not far from his own. That was good, the short distance gave him less time to think of backing out.

“What is it, Spock? Is Lt. Seltun acting up again?” Jim leaned against the doorframe and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

“No, I—” Spock’s ability to form cogent thoughts and send those words out seized. He was trying to address Jim but was only capable of communicating with Captain Kirk.

Jim gave no indication of taking his leave. Wistful thoughts crossed behind hazel eyes. “Come in. There’s not much sense in you standing out there in the hall.”

Jim! “Captain, Dr. McCoy has some concerns in regard to your well-being.”

A doleful fog settled around Jim. “So, Bones sent you on a fishing expedition, did he?”

“I fail to see what the act of catching fish has to do with your health.”

Jim’s shoulders slackened. That sort of retort usually sent a flash of a smile to the human’s face. “Nothing, Spock, absolutely nothing. . . Can I get you something to drink?”

Spock, don’t be an idiot, say yes! The idea of Mollie shouted inside his skull. “No thank you, Captain.”

Tumbler out on the desk, Jim poured himself a finger of a dark amber spirit. He swirled the liquor, releasing aromatic elements into the air, and knocked it back.

“Phew.” Jim rapidly blinked and wrinkled his nose. “It’s a good thing you said no. This stuff of Bones gave me last year is more like paint thinner than anything I’ve tasted this side Riverside High’s Secret Senior Kegger.”

“The injury to your hand was self-inflicted.”

“If all you’re going to do is stand there and parrot McCoy’s unfounded accusations, the door is right there.” He served himself some more alcohol and made a shooing motion.

Tralnor reread a passage for flow and clarity, scrolling up and down the screen to compare it with
the rest of the work it was from. He placed a note in the text asking the author to cite all of their sources. Adding up points scored for fluent response to the prompt, works cited, length, thesis statement, and conclusion, the author scored a seventy-two percent. He wrote a few comments he doubted this particular student would bother to read and entered the grade into his records.

(I’m just marking term papers for Critical Studies 411, Film, Television, and Cultural Studies, is the only film class I teach with any regularity, and this was the first time in five semesters I got to be at the helm.) Tralnor immediately started talking the moment Spock showed up on his radar. Yes, it was a distraction technique, but Spock needed something to unlock his mental jaws from a rising welt. (There’s no one else here besides me.)

At nearly one in the morning, Tralnor corrected himself, at nearly 0100, this place is dead, which is good because I’d never get anything done otherwise.

Not black, but blackened like something smothered in soot after a petroleum fire, Spock’s mood preceded him by some distance. (I made a grave misjudgment.)

Hailstones, each a separate self-admonishment, pinged and dented against Tralnor. Spock’s frenetic thoughts flew faster than the barely acknowledged emotion hanging in the air. (Sit down beside me so I can see you.)

Spock complied, taking the chair pushed up to the side of the desk brought in for Tralnor to use. (I am falling apart. My feelings are threatening to consume me whole, and that is entirely unacceptable.)

(Do you know why my family sent me to earth for my initial university studies?) Tralnor closed out of the online undergraduate course portal and focused his attention directly on Spock.

(Because Mollie was there to keep a sisterly eye on you?)

(That was a perk, but not the reason.)

(You did not need to seek people you hoped would accept you.)

(White noise.) Tralnor said. (Humans, groups of them, save for extraordinary circumstances, produce the empathetic equivalent of white noise. Yes, the odd one here or there comes in too clear, giving me something of a mouthful of soap, but unless I’m with a small gathering, interacting with individuals, or seeking out specific brains, humans are a dull roar in the background.)

(White noise?) Spock, lacking the burden of a mair-rigolauya, was extremely aware of humans’ outward emotional reactions to everything in their lives. A good cup of coffee might illicit the identical outburst as earning a coveted promotion or having a significant other accept a marriage proposal. Jostled and bumped along through the crowd, touch telepathy his strength, he psionically experienced human emotion as shivs, small weapons secreted away until ruthlessly stabbed into his vulnerable psyche. His complete adherence to the traditional Vulcan way of avoiding physical contact acted two-fold, as a defense mechanism and a cultural norm.

(I forced myself through a process of habituation, taking those four years and learning how to handle humans’ constant flow of almost entirely uncontrolled mental energy by grounding what’s sent my way. I can shake hands with people like Alton and Sarah, emerging entirely unscathed because I can defer and shield against the thoughts and feelings that cross over.) Tralnor drained the last sip of a long gone cold cup of coffee. (That nasty sensation you get when some random human grabs onto you?)
I know it well.

Pour kerosene on that then add TNT to the flames. That is what walking down the streets in ShiKhar is like for me. They wear their proper blank expressions when behind their eyes are the emotions they still experience and keep tucked away. They follow the rules, tracing Surak’s teachings, and adhere to the ways that allow our society to function. Your misgivings because you have a deep attachment to Jim Kirk aren’t the sign of weakness you think they are.

If we are so much alike in that regard, why do they despise me so? Spock’s question bubbled at the surface of his mind.

Tralnor responded as though Spock’s introspection was directed as an inquiry to a T’Kehr. (You’re better at this than the grand majority of the Vulcan public at large. For that, they perceive you as a threat.)

(I must point out how illogical that sentiment is.)

(To you, to others like them, unless there is a direct physical and mental connection, that bombarding affectivity I described is immediately imperceptible.) Tralnor opened a drawer, removed a tin, then pulled the lid off. Nestled in paper muffin cups, short stacks of pecan shortbreads greeted them. (They’re not as good as your mother’s. Coffee?)

(No, thank you. I have never developed a taste for coffee.) Spock took a biscuit and bit into a memory.

Tralnor wandered next door to the officer’s mess, refilled his empty mug, and selected the only tea he thought Spock might like. Back at his desk, he’d half expected to see he’d been left alone, but the other Vulcan remained. Steamy beverages set down, he said, (Someone I work with baked these for me as a going away present. Don’t let anyone know I’ve got them. I get the idea such confections are rare aboard Enterprise and worth fighting for.)

(Humans have a primordial need for sugar that I do not comprehend.) Spock took his tea and watched the steam rise.

(It’s a function of their brain stems. They’re not much evolved from their cave-dwelling ancestors and unknowingly spend their entire lives catering to basic survival instincts. Food, protection, sleep, reproduction. . .) Tralnor dunked a shortbread and waxed poetic to himself about the mingled flavors and textures. (Vulcans are not much farther down the line. Logic has become the primary way that we protect ourselves, and we all strive to better our controls for the collective good of the species.

(Ultimately, we all experience passion, sadness, pride, and self-doubt. Its what we choose to do with those feelings, how we express them, integrate them into our daily lives, or ignore them, that determines the level to which we are accepted by mainstream society.) Tralnor took a second shortbread, offered another to Spock, then hid the tin away.

(Unless you’re us.)

(Here’s to threats to the status quo.) Tralnor replied and raised his mug in a mock toast.

(Do you choose to spend most of your time living and working on earth because of this white noise phenomena?)

(No. Earth was simply where I got the better offer of employment. As a single parent, there were details I had to keep in mind that would not have weighed on my decision had I been single.) Now
that this exchange had worked itself back toward the opening topic and Spock was more or less comfortable speaking with him, Tralnor asked, (What do you consider a grave misjudgment?)

(I said some things that will drive him away.) Spock’s eyes focused on something in the past.

Tralnor found that claim hard to believe, not with the radiant love that poured off Kirk when Spock was near. Tralnor could come straight out and tell Spock about this, but the first officer was precisely the kind of honorable man who’d consider such information an unfair advantage. Unless asked directly, Tralnor chose to keep such details to himself. (Spock, you aren’t the kind of person who says or does anything that’s deliberately malicious. You never have been. Whatever you said, Kirk knows what kind of man you are, and he’s smart enough to realize you aren’t out to harm him or the relationship you’ve got.)

(You are too kind in your assessment, Tralnor.) Spock stood and grabbed his mug. (I have taken too much of your time. You need to get back to what you were doing.)

With that, Tralnor was alone once more.

The whole planet was impregnated with giant fucking diamonds. All the massive stones that the geology teams examined were of exquisite quality, internally flawless, ranging from colorless to fancy hues, and each one was of a carat weight that was off the scales.

Kirk worded his latest message about Melbek III’s bounty to Starfleet Command in urgent terms. He wanted to get away from this place as fast as Enterprise could warp off into the distance. That little voice that warned of death and danger refused to stop screaming. The more those internal cries reverberated around the inside of his skull, the more confident he was of trouble the longer his ship remained in orbit.

He stopped short of demanding patrol ships relieve Enterprise, but his insistence that the Federation get their asses out here and nail things down was evident. He’d already spent part of the morning working with his security guys on a contingency plan they could send back to San Francisco and save Headquarters from their own bureaucracy.

Someone was listening, sniffing around, sharpening their claws. Even the most encrypted communiques were intercepted and broken. Crew ran their mouths when they shouldn’t. A black cloud was rolling toward Melbek III.

Department heads gathered in the conference room so everyone was on the same page about this insane discovery on Melbek III. All landing parties were returning to Enterprise by 1500 and the ship would go to Yellow Alert. They were instructed to report anything untoward or suspicious.

“I don’t want any of you, or your subordinates, in a situation where your lives are on the line over a pile of sparkly rocks. Play it cool until our relief arrives.” Kirk reiterated.

Heads nodded, but that didn’t give the captain the comfort of being entirely sure they understood just how precarious their situation was. Sure, they were used to Klingons raising hell and Romulans trying to shoot their asses off for no reason, but this was greed they were going up against.
Lt. Uhura’s soothing voice came over the intercom and let Kirk know one of the talking heads at Starfleet Command was patched through to his office. Department heads dismissed, he went to take his call, but not before an odd thing happened.

People cleared out, leaving he and Spock the only remaining occupants of the conference room. Kirk assumed his first officer wanted to discuss ship’s business with him. “I’d love to stay and chat, but I’ve got a cranky commodore waiting to flail me in the next room.”

Spock didn’t block the exit as much as he left Kirk no choice but to squeeze past. *What the hell was up with this Vulcan of his?* Was this retribution for sniping at him last night? Yeah, he’d been rough on Spock, mean really, but Bones’ overreaching needed to stop somewhere.

Static electricity snapped against Kirk’s skin where he was forced to make contact with Spock. Tendrils of tingling nerves fed up his left arm and down into his back. Something just happened and there was no name to put to it.

“With all due respect, Captain, I think you’re overreacting to the situation. USS Dragon and USS Seren are about three days out.” Commodore Theodore Sloan, career office boy, shrugged and shook his head like Kirk was crazy.

“They’re three days out at Warp Two. They could be here a lot faster.”

“You don’t have anything to worry about. You’re in a quiet sector, and there’s no one around for lightyears. Put your feet up for a little while.” Commodore Sloan smiled. “You’ll thank me for the downtime when we speak again.”

Nothing Kirk said to this man would drive home the danger. He let the idiot commodore sign off, checked that the screen was completely powered down, then flipped the bird to the blank space where Sloan’s face used to be. “We don’t have three days.”
Two uneventful days passed, giving people a chance to write up all the site reports and accompanying narratives for the Melbek III discoveries. Samples organized, tests run, photos taken, the nitty-gritty work finishing up meant the crew ran the risk of going stir-crazy without something to do. Engineering had the Enterprise at her very best. About the only folks guaranteed something to occupy their time was security, and there wasn’t much going on.

The mood on the bridge was tense. Kirk was wound up because his ship, his crew, was sitting like a duck, waiting to be blown out of the water. Dragon and Seren, originally expected tomorrow, were out two additional days because Commodore Sloan wanted to dick Kirk around.

“Something is watching us.” Kirk said. “Run a scan for any unusual heat signatures or propulsion system ionization.”

Order acknowledged, he waited for results that told him Enterprise was alone out here. *I’m not paranoid*, he said to himself.

It took another three hours of repeated searches and scans, but an anomaly caught their attention. Kirk immediately knew it was a ship come to raise hell, but he wasn’t granted the clairvoyance to know who the prowling vessel belonged to.

“Captain, thirty degrees starboard.” Chekov said. “A merchant freighter is closing in fast.”

“Uhura, tell them the Melbek system is closed and if they want to take issue with that, they can get ahold of Starfleet Command.” Kirk ordered the main viewer to show the encroaching ship. “She’s packing a lot of extra firepower for a merchant ship.”

“Plasma cannons, three spare banks of photon torpedoes, forward and aft phasers, double reinforced shields, and retrofitted military-grade warp engines.” Sulu read off the sensor report. “Whoever this is, they mean business.”

“No legitimate merchant outfits themselves this way. We might be dealing with pirates.” Kirk hoped that wasn’t the truth. “Uhura, have they said anything yet?”

“No, Sir.” She ran through another sequence of buttons and toggles on her board.

“Mr. Spock, is this boat ringing any memories for you?”

“No, Captain, it does not.”

“Uhura, hail them.” Kirk collected his thoughts and addressed the interlopers. “Merchant vessel, this is Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise. This system has been declared off-limits to —”

The main screen flashed to life, showing a striking blond woman clothed in skin-tight black leather pants and a sleeveless purple shirt. “Save your breath, Starfleet.”

“You have me at a disadvantage, Captain.” Kirk, upon seeing this person roll her eyes at him, knew this was the black cloud he’d waited for.

Her piercing blue eyes missed nothing. She gazed upon Kirk like he was an annoying little bug she’d just have to come back and squash later. Sulu and Chekov didn’t interest her. Her eyes
lingered on Uhura, but her expression offered nothing of what she was thinking. The last person she set her gaze on must have meant something because her face went pale.

“Spock.” She said his name like it burned her tongue. “It’s been a long time. I had hoped that by now you’d have done me the courtesy of being dead.”

“Laura, your presence here is unwarranted.” Spock stood to face her.

She mockingly raised her brows and gave a little shake of her head. “Your mouth is moving, but I’m not hearing anything.”

“It is in your best interest to remove yourself from the Melbek system.” Spock had obviously dealt with this woman in some capacity in the past. “Leave now, and the Federation does not have to know this was your last known location.”

“Look at you, being all gallant.” She gave a mean giggle. “I’d heard you’d gotten tossed out on your ass years back and was forced to slum it with the rest of us humans. Never thought I’d experience seeing your ugly fucking face again. Honestly, what’s the universe coming to?”

Kirk, ready to jump in and say something to this Laura for her unwarranted abuse of his first officer was waved off by Spock.

“So, tell me this, Spock.” She pointed a long metallic blue-painted fingernail at him. “If you’re here, where’s that other odious creature? Where’s Mollie?”

“Her location is irrelevant to your leaving this system immediately.” Spock retorted.

“She’s not with you.” The words came out as a teasing sing-song. “How can you stand being away from her? Separated from the reason you exist? Cut off from your shadow? Maybe she finally came to her senses and had you excised from her brain. . . How has something as pathetic as you lived for as long as you have?”

“Merchant Captain, that’s enough.” Kirk refused to let his friend continue to take her abuse.

“Just so you know, I’m not going anywhere for now.” She crossed her arms over her chest and shouted at someone called Silvio to break the connection.

Tralnor occupied a computer station used for scanning quality control samples. He’d gotten into a good rhythm and made the most of the repetitive work. He was glad he’d been amongst the media lab staff long enough that the constant stream of questions about why he was wasting time as a dish bitch dropped off and he could focus on his assigned tasks.

Lt. Chavez came over to hover, mostly in a misguided attempt to annoy Tralnor. He’d spent the whole shift cooking up something obnoxious to say and was so proud of his antics that he got out about two words before he started to stutter. As the media lab people laughed at him, Tralnor ignored Chavez.

“Lt. Commander Tralnor report to the bridge.” The comm system paged ship-wide. “Lt. Commander Tralnor to the bridge.”

“Whoa.” Someone whispered.
“Excuse me, Lt. Chavez. It looks like I need to go.” Tralnor handed off his work to the crewman one station over.

“I’ve been on this ship for nearly two years, and I’ve never even seen the bridge.” Chavez sighed. “I’m tired of looking at you, Dr. Tralnor.”

Tralnor disliked like the idea that he was being summoned to the adults’ table. He preferred to keep to the so-called lower decks and stay out of everyone’s way. This did not bode well.

He didn’t expect the lift to open directly onto the bridge. When the doors drew back, he cautiously poked his head out and nearly didn’t leave the car until the captain told him it was okay. At least he knew all of the faces staring back at him. “Lt. Commander Tralnor, reporting.”

“There is a ship that has just entered this system.” Spock was mentally clammed up. Something had just handed him a drastic shock. “Fuck me. Laura Hillyard? As in The Laura Hillyard?”

“Would either of you care to let me in on the secret?” Kirk looked up to the science station where Tralnor congregated with Spock. “This must be something because you look like you just got run down by a train.”

“I’d rather fall on the third rail, then get plowed by a train, than deal with this woman.” Tralnor bunched his thoughts together. “Laura Hillyard is one of the most ruthless people I’ve had the displeasure of knowing. She’s a radical human isolationist whose racist writings have become the underpinnings of the extremist earth supremacists’ cause. She’s here because those diamonds down on Melbek III can fund the movement in perpetuity.”

“Is she truly dangerous? A lot of these guys are nothing but a bunch of hot air.” Kirk hoped for an out that wasn’t coming.

“She stabbed her husband seventy-three times while he was sleeping,” Tralnor said. “Never think she won’t try the same tactic on the Enterprise.”

“Captain. They’re hailing us.” Lt. Uhura turned to face Kirk.

“Put her through.” Kirk addressed the screen. “Captain Hillyard, if you don’t—”

She pretended like the captain wasn’t even on the bridge. Tralnor’s stomach turned in on itself at the very sight of her.

“Bubble, bubble, toil, and trouble!” She swatted at one of her crew for encroaching on her personal space. “What is this, Spock? Mollie’s not around, so you’re reduced to having to call in the B-team? Hello, Tralnor.”

“Laura.” He responded.

“Wow, you guys. This is like old home week, don’t you think?” She leaned back in her seat,
snapped her fingers, and sat up straight. “If you’re here, and Spock’s here, I’m missing out on a juicy piece of gossip from that molten fucking cinder you call home. Just because I despise Vulcan and its people doesn’t mean I don’t keep my ear to the ground.”

“Murder anyone lately, Laura?” Tralnor didn’t know if he could tell Lt. Uhura to shut Laura off, so he decided to force her to cut the line from her side.

“Are you volunteering, Tralnor? I’d love nothing more than to rid the world of you and your inferior genetics.”

“I was thinking of any new husbands or boyfriends unfortunate enough to have gotten stuck in your web.” Tralnor said.

“You think you’re being so damned clever. Never forget boys, I have your number.” She pointed to someone off-screen and gave a simple hand signal. “Spock won’t tell me, so I’ll try you, Tralnor. I’m just burning to know, where’s Mollie?”

“How should I know? I’m not her keeper.” Tralnor’s answer caught Laura off guard. She blinked heavily and recovered her bearings.

“Looks like Captain Sunshine is getting flustered. I’d better go so you can tell Comrade Hero all the nasty things about me.” She blew them a kiss, and the screen went black.

“Due to a situation we don’t have the time to discuss right now, my siblings and I completed most of our secondary education on Vulcan. We lived with my grandmother, T’Lessa, in ShiKhar and attended various schools there. In order to receive a high school diploma from the State of California, we all had to take four semesters of Terran History. One day a week, we’d spend the afternoon at the Consolidated Terran School, where all the children of human staff and faculty from the entire city attended. That’s where the MacCormacks initially encountered Laura.”

Tralnor’s shock was finally letting go. He could say her name without reactively swearing out loud or in his mind.

“Okay. That addresses your interactions with her.” The captain herded the two Vulcans into his office to answer for this insanity. “You never went to school with her, Spock.”

“I did not.” Spock said. “I encountered her through my association with Tralnor’s family.”

“Did you do something to her to,” Kirk struggled for the right words to define her odious behavior, “illicit this level of venom? She’s more or less stated she wants you both dead.”

“We’re aliens with one human parent. To her, we’re the epitome of what’s wrong with the universe, just your boilerplate human supremacist sentiment.” Tralnor said. “The one of us she’s really got it in for is my sister.”

“Mollie?” Kirk said her name, barely spitting it out. His immediate concern to the safety of the ship flickered out replaced by smoldering contempt.

Tralnor didn’t acknowledge the captain’s emotional swing and went on to describe Laura’s background. “Her mother is a renowned geneticist who took a prestigious post at the VSA. Laura’s parents divorced around that time, and she hated that she wasn’t allowed to stay on earth with her father. She despised every second of every day she spent on Vulcan and never failed to let anyone know it. The second she turned eighteen, she fled straight into the arms of Earth First. She didn’t last long with them. They were too soft for her tastes.

“Laura didn’t become violent until she fell in with the AnthroVision Defense League. She’s been
linked to bombings, been arrested for attacking people and using hate speech, and was even named a suspect in an assassination attempt on the Andorian ambassador to earth. Threats, posturing, it’s not bluster. She may look like a pretty little girl, but she’s rotten to the core.”

*I want to know where Mollie is too, Kirk thought. Maybe if I fed her to this Laura person, I could get two threats to me and mine out of the way. “What’s your advice on dealing with this woman?”*

“Blow her out of the sky, right now, while you’ve still got the chance.” Tralnor said. “She’s aggressive and sneaky, her every move dictated by her racist philosophy. The longer you sit here and play by the rules, the more time she’s got to slip a stiletto between your ribs.”

“That has got to be the most un-Vulcan response I’ve ever heard.” Kirk was finding it hard to comprehend what had Spock and Tralnor so rattled. Yes, this was a pain in the ass situation that had potential for danger, but it wasn’t like he and the Enterprise hadn’t faced tyrants, pirates, or criminals before. They’d just have to be careful about how they handled Hillyard. He wanted to keep her cool, and turn her over to the purview of Dragon and Seren when they arrived. “What is your opinion, Mr. Spock?”

“I concur with Dr. Tralnor.”

The merchant ship Laura Hillyard helmed was, after hours of careful mining through false transponder data for the answer, ironically called Sweetness. Registered out of Trego Delta, a hotbed of human supremacist activity, Sweetness was supposedly just a freighter that operated when and where extra haulage was needed. Flight plans and crew manifests never matched with where they were or who was on board.

Captain Kirk sat in the dark, scrolling through every bit of new information that came in. There were multiple bodies in Hillyard’s wake, though her husband was the only murder definitively linked to her. She’d walked away from her pre-trial accommodations and spent the next five years with a growing bounty on her head. Tough, vengeful, and willing shoot first without thinking, he started to understand the Vulcans’ sentiment.

Every picture of her, every AnthroVision campaign poster where she was put up as the perfect example of the human female, captured her breathtaking beauty. What disturbed Kirk the most was how each image exuded the evil contained within her.
Chapter 11

Spock/Mollie’s memory started at the Consolidated Terran School, all seven of the MacCormack kids herded into the building and told they had to stay until the dismissal bell rang for the day. Mollie joined the sophomores of section C for her weekly dose of hell.

She got out her assignments and waited with eleven other students for their perpetually late instructor to arrive. Spock found the details in this recollection startlingly clear, the creak of the furniture, idle conversation, Tommy Barrow’s overpowering cologne, wayward air currents from the heavy duty HVAC system...

“Ugh, it's here again.” Laura, not as late as the teacher, entered the room and instigated yet another confrontation with Mollie MacCormack. “Just like ringworm or jock itch, you think you’ve been mean enough to it to make it go away and poof! It's back.”

“You don’t genuinely believe I want to be here, do you, Laura? If the State of California didn’t say my ass had to be in this chair right now, isn’t it obvious I’ve got better things to be doing with people a hell of a lot smarter than you?” Mollie hunkered down to read further into next week’s lesson.

A couple of Laura’s friends laughed in Mollie’s general direction. This castigating talk was old hat between the girls.

“You can be pretty funny sometimes,” Laura pulled no punches today and went straight for what she thought was Mollie’s weakest point. “That is, for someone without a father.”

“Really, Laura? Is that the best you’ve got? Because if it is, I’m going to step outside and laugh until I cry.” It was moments like this where Mollie felt sorry for this looney girl, and Spock didn’t understand how people like Laura became what they were.

“My mom told me all about you, Mollie. All about you and your freaky side-show family and the unethical science that you specifically are involved in.” Laura leaned in. “When my mom said you didn’t have a father, I didn’t get it at first that you really don’t have a father.”

“And your point is? A lot of kids don’t have dads. Look at you. You don’t have one anymore.” Mollie refused to roll over and take yet another round of insults and wasn’t going to answer to any of the accusations Laura insinuated. “At least I was wanted by my mother and not the result of a broken condom.”

Students just following along with the argument broke into laughter.

“Stop it, you donkeys.” Laura sneered. “It’s because of Mollie that one of the greatest insults to the human race was created. Laugh all you want right now, morons. In the coming years, you’re not going to think its funny when we’re chattel, and our green-blooded overlords are giving all the orders.”

“Jesus Christ, Laura. Get off it.” A male classmate said. “If you thought about your homework half as hard as you did about all of this racist shit, you’d be on the honor roll.”

“Good afternoon, class.” Mrs. Robinson arrived on the scene not knowing the situation she’d defused. The rest of the lesson dragged along, Spock experiencing every bolt of boredom coursing through Mollie’s brain. It was about this time when his memories started merging into this collective knot of retrospection. When she made her escape from the Consolidated School, she met
up with Spock at the VSA’s neuroscience library, where they spent some time gathering citations for a study they’d started over the summer.

That evening, they’d decided to continue their work at his home. An automated aircab set them down within a block of the house. They talked about the alluring smell of Amanda’s roses mixed with the native flora that gave the immediate area the scent of spicy potpourri.

Behind closed doors, away from the prying eyes of the public, fingers entwined, foreheads touched, and the ugliness of their days amongst their student-peers ebbed out of their minds. They filed down one another’s rough edges, no words exchanged, until they knew they could open their eyes and emerge re-centered.

Moving from the window seat to the bed, they leaned into one another and picked up their earlier line of inquiry regarding the routing and rerouting of the psionic pathways responsible for making the jump from touch telepathy to mid-spectrum telepathic abilities. Red hues from another wicked Vulcan sunset cast the room in an ethereal light. Lost in conversation, minds interwoven, they thought they had at least an hour of intensive thought when they were cut short.

Lady Amanda knocked on the door. Eyes opened, minds separated, Spock got up to answer his mother’s summons where an average human teen would shout and hope they were heard.

“A friend of yours is here.” Amanda seemed pleased to simply say those words. “I put her in the drawing room so you kids can have some privacy.”

Spock and Mollie looked to one another, questioning who would show up on the doorstep that wasn’t one of the co-mingling of Ad’ehlevnas and MacCormacks. We’re not exactly popular people, one or both of them thought.

Downstairs, Amanda escorted them to the seldom-used space, and like a rattlesnake coiled in the cool shade of a low escarpment, Laura Hillyard was inside, ready to strike.

“Have a good time.” Spock’s grateful mother retreated to parts unknown.

“Laura, what are you doing here?” Mollie was the first to speak.

“You know, I’ve always wanted to see this part of the city, where the movers and shakers of the ShiKahr elite live.” She wasn’t immediately hostile, which was worrying.

“I think it for the best that you leave.” Spock visually scrutinized the human girl who looked so natural sat in one of the chairs his mother had brought to Vulcan from her grandparents’ home in Colorado.

“Nope, you’re not getting rid of me that easy. You two have invented ingenious ways of shaking me downtown, at the VSA, and over at T’Sira Municipal Gardens. I’ve got you on your own territory right now.” She let slide one of her predatory, spine-tingling smiles. “None of us is going anywhere, not until we have a good old-fashioned talk about compromised ethics in biomedical research.”

“Go home, Laura.” Mollie kept her fervor reeled in, not wanting to cause a scene in Sarek and Amanda’s house. “We can be right back at one another’s throats next week at Consolidated.”

“I’m going start,” Laura began an eeny-meenie-miney-mo pendulation of her hand. “Oh, screw it. You’re too interconnected to divide into neat categories of his and hers.”

Since it looked like Laura wasn’t leaving until she exhausted herself, Mollie sat on the royal blue
velour sofa Amanda inherited from an aunt. Spock took the next cushion over.

“You wouldn’t even exist without you.” Laura pointed from Spock to Mollie, before making the reverse gesture. “And you wouldn’t exist without you.”

She wasn’t telling them anything they didn’t already know. They were fully aware of the intricate legacy to which they were born.

“I can almost get my head around the deliberate creation of a total aberration in your case, Spock. But you, Mollie? There is no excuse worthy of you breathing my oxygen.” Her contempt kept on.

“On earth, your loathsome conceptions, from notes in margins of genetics journals to mitosis in your petri dishes, is illegal. Your mothers and their medical teams should be in prison for their blatant breaking of the Post-Eugenics Wars Laws. Both of you should have been terminated.”

“Are you about done, Laura? You’re keeping us from our research.” Mollie did a good job of keeping any contempt out of her voice.

“Your only saving grace is that you were both conceived, gestated, and birthed here. Spock should have dual citizenship and doesn’t. Mollie has a Vulcan passport.”

“Because she is a Vulcan citizen.” Spock confirmed.

“And that’s my point. You’re not eligible for the honor of holding an earth passport. Our laws don’t acknowledge that you’re even people. Do you understand what that means?”

“I’m sure you’ve got some tiring explanation.” Mollie lolled her head to the side and stared at her offensive classmate. “Just hurry up and leave us alone.”

“Nature says you shouldn’t be here, Spock. The blatant manipulation that created your DNA... The only things that made you viable came from Livia MacCormack’s ‘donation,’ and Mollie here was created from the leftovers. That should bother you just as much as it disturbs me.” Laura giggled and cleared her throat.

“Hemoglobin switch, bone marrow propagation control, and an autoimmune reroute, those three genes were patched into my DNA from Livia MacCormack’s eggs.” Spock was not bothered by the particulars of what was done to strengthen the human side of his genome. On earth, such replacements were commonly made postnatally under the guise of gene therapy for pre-existing conditions. It wasn’t that Amanda’s DNA was faulty in any way, there were certain tiny details that needed augmenting when combined with Sarek’s genes. Due to the structural friability of Amanda’s eggs, which again was normal for a human, Livia’s hollowed ova were injected with the primordial cocktail of life and implanted into Amanda’s womb.

On the flip side, scientists working on Sarek and Amanda’s case didn’t want to see the healthy nuclei of Livia’s gametes, sans the single needed gene removed from each one, flushed away or incinerated. Livia thought about donating them for research purposes but decided she wanted a daughter instead. That daughter was a painstaking recombination of the material from those eggs, parthenogenesis performed at a lab bench. Where Amanda’s ova could not take the stress the initial hybrid cell division, refilled with a diploid amalgamation of Livia’s DNA, Mollie was born.

“Assisted reproduction is what it’s called, Laura.” Mollie said. “Humans have been in on that since the twentieth century.”

“Call it what you want. Make it sound clean and clinical. That doesn’t hide the fact that both of your repulsive lives shouldn’t be possible.” Back to the gesturing, Laura compulsively talked with
her hands. Again, she pointed to Spock. “You should have died in utero, incompatible with life, or whatever they call unviable pregnancies.” Then to Mollie, she hissed, “And you should have been medical waste!”

From the hallway, Amanda’s favorite tea tray, laden with refreshments, crashed to the floor. Before the sounds of breaking dishes and clattering flatware cleared the air, Spock’s mother roared into the drawing room and growled at Laura.

“Get. Out. Of. My. House.” With the fury of a grizzly sow, Amanda snatched Laura by the hair and physically dragged the repugnant human girl out of the room.

Laura, in probably the first time in her life, was stunned into silence.

“—and if I ever see you here or anywhere near my son again—” Shouting echoed back into the house where Amanda didn’t close the front door. Spock and Mollie stood together in the main sitting room, listening to the angry mother roar. “—find out how you broke into confidential medical records, you’ll wish—”

Time lost some of its reference in this combined memory, but there came a point where Amanda had come back inside and hugged them close. “I’m so sorry you have to deal with people like that. Never forget that your parents love you. We loved the idea of you before you came into being and we wanted you more than we’ve ever wanted anything.”

“Mother, how much—”

“Nearly every vile word.” Amanda let them go to arm’s length and regarded their faces, tears stung her eyes. . .

Spock merged back into the present. He’d not thought of that day in years, not examined his own creation or non-social connection to Mollie in just as long.

Laura may have shown up in the Melbek system for the diamonds, but she’d get a lot more out of verbally torturing people she found inferior before going off on a great guns attempt at taking the Enterprise down. Adding a Federation starship to the notches on her belt would cement her status as a living legend amongst the ingrates and apartheid-fiends she surrounded herself with.

Beneath the drama of MV Sweetness and her vociferous captain, Spock had something else to dissect from earlier. Tralnor’s talk the night before about touching Vulcans and thoughts/emotions abruptly incising into the mind of the person being touched left Spock with the hypothesis that forcing Jim to touch him might offer some insight into the captain’s regard of his first officer.

While that brief exposure to Jim’s mental state wasn’t enough to answer any real questions, Spock could say the captain genuinely cared about him in some capacity. For the immediate moment, that was enough.

Someone who thought they were smarter than they actually were pushed a Send Message button from a well-hidden communications panel situated at an engineering junction where Jeffries Tubes intersected between decks four and five. This person hand built the diminutive station to look like the normal guts of a starship. Some of these most accomplished engineers and mechanics in the entire ‘fleet were on the Enterprise, and no one had found it yet.
The comm went out in text form, as did most of the messages lobbed into space from this panel. Hidden amongst junk data and extended file name attachments, the letter would wind its way to the intended recipient. This person didn’t have time or patience to operate through official channels, not when isolation or alerts shut down recreational calls home. This camouflaged little gem hadn’t failed them yet.

What this person didn’t do in their satisfaction at pulling one over on those in command was take into consideration just who or what out there might be listening in.
Sha’leyen’s Belonite accent reminded Tralnor of how some of his Lyr Saan relatives spoke with that same pre-Reform lilt. He’d forgotten how she sounded. The trauma of having her torn from his brain robbed him of endearing details like that. She talked about bioarch getting ready to run their grand inventory scheme to tally every single item within the walls of her kingdom. He described his latest run-in with Chavez and his unexpected call to the bridge.

“Have you been to the bridge?” He understood just how rare it was for a random member of the crew to receive an order like that.

“I take at least one extra shift a week on the Science station so I can keep my BOC current. San Francisco keeps telling me that they want me on the bridge of a research vessel within days of Enterprise going in for her refit. I get the feeling they want me to take over that station on our next five-year run. I like to dabble, and I enjoy the change of pace sometimes, but they can never keep me up there.” She had a warm laugh too. “Bioarch is my home.”

“Lifer.” He said, sopping up her bright disposition and contentment at a career well done.

“What about you? After this is up, where do I see you? You are not a starship man. Wanderlust does not fire your soul.” She closed her eyes and smelled the air around him, rebuilding a memory.

“I’m usually in California or on Vulcan.”

She was close to him and her body heat registered on his skin. “So you are easy to find? That is my hope.”

“Mine too.”

They touched for the first time since they reunited and were carried along on a current of acceptation, knowing in the fibers of their spirits that even though their parents arranged the long-dead bond that first united them, a nameless little ember still glowed.

Together, their minds traced the scar tissue where their bond once lived. Confronting those gnarled remainders, tucked into one another’s thoughts, the pain associated with those places was not so bad. Now they could luxuriate in the fact they were no longer alone.

Coming up for breath, Tralnor opened his mouth to speak, and the air above their heads quaked with the Red Alert klaxon.

Shit, shit, shit! Kirk ran toward the bridge, dragging a gold tunic over his head, not caring if water from his hair left mottled damp spots behind. The lift expelled him into his destination. “Mr. Frost, report.”

Beta shift’s security whiz kid swiveled to face the captain. “MV Sweetness has launched a trojan horse attack on our engineering and security computer systems, Sir. We’ve lost direct access to auxiliary life support, half of our external cameras are offline, and the phase generators for the aft shields are unresponsive.”

“Bridge to engineering.” Kirk always went to the big man when he could. “Mr. Scott, how badly
are we compromised and how did Hillyard do it?"

“I’ve not got all the particulars of which of my pies she’s got her fingers in, Sir. But we do know
how she got in.”

“Go ahead, Scotty.”

“She back-tracked a private letter that was sent out this afternoon. Not on official channels, of
course, and the way it was routed off the ship was just enough of a gap that she slipped right
through.” The chief engineer, both frustrated and disgusted at the situation, kept his usual charm.
“Sir, keep a close eye on this spider, and we’ll cut down her web.”

Spock and Uhura arrived on the next lift and immediately took over their respective stations.

“Uhura, get everything you can from Scotty and figure out who, how, and where someone on this
ship sent off a clandestine comm home during a Yellow Alert.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Spock, do whatever it is you need to do to get into our systems and get this bitch out. Work with
engineering or on your own. I don’t care how you do it.” Kirk brought MV Sweetness up on the
viewing screen.

“Sir, she’s moved into medical records.” Frost's confusion as to why that was important played
through his voice and across his face.

“She’s adding the crew’s private information into her organization’s harassment and hit lists.”
Spock said. “Starfleet and the Federation promote mutual cooperation across worlds and species.
Any of us with non-human DNA, psionic abilities, or histories of gene therapy treatments are going
into a database shared amongst her members, leaving us with targets on our heads.”

Kirk swallowed that latest kick to the gut. “Hurry, Spock.”

*I won’t see you hurt, Spock. I refuse to see you killed in the name of hate!*

Blessedly, the doors closed on the lift as Jim’s singularly directed thought speared Spock’s brain,
forcing a gasp from his throat and a caustic sting in his eyes. The car stopped before he could input
a command override and he pulled himself together enough for a human to think he was operating
at normal capacity.

(You called?) Tralnor stepped on, punched the close button, then deliberately stopped the car
between decks.

(I can’t—) How was it possible for one thought to level him? What was it about Jim that left him
tearing like tissue paper?

(Take a deep breath.) Tralnor said. When Spock complied, the mair-rigolauya employed a tactic
he’d read of but never witnessed. Tralnor’s hand went down the back of Spock’s shirt, where he
made a fist and placed it over the third thoracic vertebrae. This touch offered no slings or arrows,
just the skin of another living being. *(Breathe out.)*

Tralnor removed his hand shook his fingers. *(That was a microdistruption to the nerves and parts
of your endocrine system responding to and refracting Jim’s declaration. Sometimes a physical*
intervention is faster than forcing thought patterning and emotional controls. I can teach you how to do it on yourself.)

(That was very effective.) Surely such a simple intercession merited some form of inclusion in the modern Vulcan’s arsenal of mental controls.

Lift restarted, Tralnor let off one of his slight shrugs. (You know how people get about the Lyr Saan and our ‘strange’ practices.)

They rode in silence until the car placed them near Spock’s lab. Tralnor followed. (What are we doing, Spock? I’m not a computer guy.)

“Why, Captain Sunshine, you’re looking grumpy this evening.” Hillyard sneered. “You should have listened to the Dysfunctional Duo and tried to kill me while you had the chance.”

Kirk didn’t reward her with a response. MV Sweetness had hailed Enterprise, and he was ready to hang up if all she wanted was to hurl insults.

“That’s right, I know that’s what they told you to do. Even Vulcans understand you have to cut the head off a viper. But you decided what? They were too rash? I didn’t seem like a real threat to a glorious Constitution-class ship?” She reached for a toggle on her console and threw the switch.

“Forward phasers offline, Sir.” Frost said. “We can still—”

“Un-uh.” Hillyard shook her head. “Check again, little boy.”

Kirk glanced at his own console to see she’d locked him out of his own fucking torpedo bays. “Captain Hillyard, I take you and your capabilities very seriously.”

“Flattery gets you nowhere, Captain Sunshine. You can’t flirt your way out of this one. I’ve been reading up on you, Comrade Hero.” She flipped something else. “The kinds of people you consort with, fornicate with, I wouldn’t touch your pretty ass with a barge pole.”

She was right. He’d written her off as a kook with a bark worse than her bite, just another criminal scumbag to be tolerated until relief arrived. “Take the diamonds.”

“Don’t worry, I will.” She acted like she was placing careful thought into which of Enterprise’s systems she’d disable next. “When my little game here is through, and you’re completely neutralized, I’ll take what’s mine.”

(Tralnor, I need you to get me inside the computer.) Spock put a list of breaches and outages up on a display. (She’s locking us out of manual input methods.)

(And you want to bypass the consoles and enter into the network psionically?) This was not a safe idea.

(Your abilities are such that you can breach the system.)

Tralnor shook his head. (Yeah, as a party gimmick. I can do dumb little things like sidestep door
locks and imprint my memories into hard drives, but what you’re asking is so far out of my realm of experience and talent that you’d better hope you’re faster with a keyboard than Laura is.

(Your father taught you.)

(For what you’re proposing, my father is the only person who could help you.) Tralnor’s head tingled inside and out. (This is a meld with a machine you’re talking about. You’ve never done it, and I’m lousy at it. One false step and we fry our brains.)

(She’s sealed off the ceramics workshop and vented the atmosphere. Staff evacuated with minor casualties.) Overhead lights flickered and surged.

(We do this in sick bay.) Tralnor directed. (Someone has to keep an eye on us out in the real world.)

(This facility offers the best hub of the ship’s interconnected systems.)

(Sick bay.) Tralnor held firm. (If you flatline while you’re in there, which is a distinct possibility, you need someone in the immediate vicinity who can restart your heart. Let’s go.)

Dr. McCoy called to the bridge, begging the captain to do something about the power fluctuations that kept throwing his diagnostic equipment offline. The reply? Not right now, Bones!

What the hell kind of good was that going to do him when the big cases started rolling in? Even though this wasn’t a torpedoes and bombs kind of fight, it was the right atmosphere for severe misadventure. He decided to implement Trauma Protocol B, one of the most stringent triage rubrics Starfleet used. Better to be prepared to make the hard decisions, he said to himself.

“Dr. McCoy, Dr. Tralnor and I need to use an exam area that has its own computer terminal.” Spock and Tralnor barged in like they ran sick bay and made for the equipment they were after.

More concerned than incensed, McCoy followed after the Vulcans. When hand tools came out, and Spock started to pop an access panel off the wall where the terminal married into the rest of the ship, the physician spoke up. “Now, just a damn minute . . .”

“Doctor, can you put an external heart monitor on Spock, preferably one with an independent power supply.” Tralnor began to run his palm along the wall like he was searching for something. The deck plates rumbled beneath their feet followed by the sound of creaking, then crumpling metal. “What brand of insanity are you two following?”

“It’s a stupid human trick.” Tralnor’s voice had lost that ask me anything vibrancy, thus he sounded colder, more determined. “I’m taking Spock into the computer network, just a little something my dad showed me how to do.”

“When you say ‘into the network,’ what exactly does that mean?”

Tralnor tapped his right temple. “You shouldn’t have to worry about me. Keep a close watch on Spock, and for the love of all that is holy, don’t touch him unless you absolutely have to.”

McCoy started on a string of objections once he mostly figured out what the Vulcans were doing. Spock stuck the heart monitor to his skin and waited on Tralnor, who was up to his elbows in
computer entrails.

(Found it.) Tralnor pulled bundle into the light. He stripped insulation and protective coverings away from the wires and fiber optic strands. “For anyone who is watching, do not ever try to do this.”

Spock wasn’t linked with Tralnor when he pushed his mind into that other realm. Tralnor’s back arched and all his muscles contracted like he was suffering high voltage electrocution. Involuntary, unsettling moans emanated from the younger Vulcan.

“Spock?” McCoy tried to take in the outrageous scene. “Spock, stop this, right now.”

Tralnor’s backward contortion lost its grip, and he flopped forward, face smacking onto the worktop. Twitches, spasms, nonsensical vocalization, none of these affectations was the sign Spock was looking for. It took nearly half a minute for Tralnor’s mind to tap back into his body. Unfocused eyes sharpened their gaze in an upward trajectory.

(I made it through.) Static and distortion made Tralnor hard to hear. (You’ll have to touch my face and initiate the meld. Whatever you do, don’t back off. Force yourself in if you have to.)

McCoy shouted in the background while Spock’s fingertips found their proper placement. He thought he heard himself screaming as his mind caught a flaming vortex of energy and information.
(Stop looking for a consciousness, Spock. It’s not here to contact. This place isn’t alive. It only
does what we tell it to do and can’t actually respond the way you’re seeking.)

Tralnor’s words, like silvery leaves, swirled around and through Spock. The visual representation
his brain compiled from the foreign stimuli consisted of colors, mostly purple and green, pulses of
light, and wind forcing the packet flow of information, similar to the way blood cells traversed
capillaries.

(Don’t touch anything unless I say so. Don’t deviate from the path I clear.)

(Understood.)

(The stress you’re under in here, you’ll become bone-crushingly tired, exhausted to the point of
death. That’s when you’ll feel the siren’s call.) Tralnor made a movement, taking them about half
a meter to the right. (You’ll experience a wracking compulsion to stop what you’re doing and lose
yourself to the machine. Do not allow that to happen, it’s suicide.)

Spock considered his brilliant idea to beat Laura and now completely realized Tralnor’s earlier
apprehension. (Again, understood.)

(The Enterprise is a mostly closed system. The easiest way for me to take you where you need to
go and the most efficient way to handle this problem are opposing approaches. I’m sorry, but
we’ve got to go the long way.) Tralnor’s mind took a firmer hold of Spock, clearing some of the
calamitous optic clutter from his occipital lobe. (We’re just outside of sick bay and need to get to
your lab. I want you to give me the exact distances, to the millimeter, along the hard-wired system
to get there from here. I’m not good enough at this to jump along the wireless routers, so avoid
those because if you send us that way and we end up going through one, I can’t guarantee that I can
get us out alive.)

Spock started listing off distances, and Tralnor plowed on like an ice-breaking ship through the
Arctic. Off to their left, he guessed it was left, a brilliant ultramarine orb fluttered. It issued a
familiar, the word wasn’t song, but—he wished to examine it.

(That’s the Command Module. It’s infected with Laura’s virus. If we step straight into that, we’d
have better chances against a bear trap. Blinders on. What’s the next measurement?)

A gust of errant energy shoved against them, battering their mental collective, attempting to push
them off course. The telepathic equivalent of crawling on their bellies to the next junction brought
them to a sort of fork in the road. Spock rolled himself further into Tralnor’s mind. (Tralnor, do you
want to approach from the main access point or the back door in my system that only I know
about?)

(How fast can you relay the codes to get through the firewalls?)

Purple and green shadows lapped along the fringes of their minds, Spock starting to discern the
significance of the colors themselves. Purple was the Enterprise and green was the virus. That
brilliant blue as seen at the Command Module, that was what it looked like when Laura had
complete control of a system.

(Fast.) Spock answered.
(Then we go through the back. She’ll have been at the front, battering away for some time now.)

(Six-point-two centimeters forward.)

The atmosphere sizzled with Laura’s aggression. (Next?)

(Nineteen millimeters left.)

(Next?)

(Vector two-hundred-forty-seven degrees, four-point-nine centimeters.) This move took them to an incandescent ribbon of undulating filaments tightly woven into a barrier.

(Firewall.) Tralnor said. (Before we take this next step, we need to do something you’re probably not going to like. I’m taking over your visual cortex so you can see what I see while we’re in here. You will take control of my telekinetic abilities the second I get us through your security measures.)

(I am not a Teek, Tralnor.) Spock was weary, having mostly gone along for the ride at this point.

(You’re in luck because I’m not a strong one. I’m not asking you to blow doors off hinges or stop buildings from toppling. My firepower is limited to what it takes to levitate a soup spoon across a room.)

The roots of Tralnor's mind penetrated into geography in Spock’s brain no other person had touched before. (I know it’s instinctual, but try not to fight me.)

Spock’s vision went back before a new landscape developed in his mind’s eye to find he and Tralnor standing in a downpour on the pavement in front of the Turlock, California, public library. Lightning cleaved a nearby tree in two.

(She’s coming.) Tralnor moved them off the pedestrian walk and to the doors, where a 0-9 numbered security keypad kept them out.

(It’s missing letters and symbols.) Spock said and watched as keypad evolved to fit the need. Tralnor held a hand above the keys, ready to input the relevant information.

(Go.)

(774gtL-uRk9fb-213y8z-Q4a4xp)

(Layer one, down. Next?)

(090*442/236:872#339)

Abruptly aware of the cold and being soaked to the bone in this bizarre environment, Spock didn’t hear when Tralnor called for the next access code.

(Spock, you go on walkabout in here, I can’t save you. Next code.)

(100 1100-100 0011-100 0011-1-111-0-1: 101 0101-101 0011-101 0011-100 0101-100 1110-101 0100-100 0101-101 1010-101 000-101 1010-100 1001-101-1010-100 0101)

(Now it wants a simple password.)

(PaintedMoon2230) The year he was born and one of his mother’s favorite hybrid roses.
The lock released.

“Two fatalities in Environmental Engineering.” Frost made the grim announcement. “Blast doors —”

“Now is not the time for gory details, Mr. Frost.” Kirk said. “Uhura?”

“Distress comm sent, beacon activated and ready, if we can launch it.” She said.

“Get that thing out and squawking.” Kirk called engineering. “Sitrep, Mr. Scott.”

“She’s got us chasing our tails, Sir.”

“Is Spock down there with you?” He hadn’t heard from his first officer in a disconcerting period of time for a crisis situation.

“No, Sir. We’ve not seen him.”

Kirk took the rest of the update from engineering and paged Spock. The lack of response shot daggers of worry down his spine. He tried again.

“I’ve got him here with me, Jim.” Bones’ voice conveyed gravity. “It’s—it’s a situation, and that’s all I’ve got to say.”

“Bones?” Kirk did not like what he heard. What the fuck was a situation? He started to shout at the doctor and found nothing but the dead connection to sick bay.

Frost declared, “Captain, we have ten minutes before she powers down life-support.”

“MV Sweetness, hailing.”

Kirk reluctantly told Uhura to put Hillyard through.

Mock concern played on her face. “An absurd little bird is popping out to say coo-coo. Regretfully they tell us, but firmly they compel us, to say goodbye to you.”

“Put an end to the nonsense, Captain Hillyard.” Kirk crossed his arms over his chest.

She blinked, reset her face with a cold, predatory grin, and said, “I think I know how we can make a deal to spare your ship and your crew.”

I’m not going to like this, Kirk thought.

“Along with the diamonds, I want the following from the Enterprise: Three Vulcans, One Belonite, Four Human Deviants, Two Human Psions, One Andorian, and One Hoblian.” She sent the list of officers and crew. “I think it’s a mathematically significant exchange, twelve preternatural creatures for the lives of two-hundred-and-eleven humans.”

“Absolutely not.” Kirk refused to entertain Hillyard’s offer. “Don’t say I never gave you an out, Comrade Hero.”
In this land of oddity, the vast sprawl of the library proper did not match up with the outside structure.

(Each room is a Directory. Each shelving unit is a Subdirectory. Each book is a File Folder. Individual chapters are your Files.) Tralnor’s voice was there, but the man was not. (Look in the glass panel covering the fire alarm.)

Spock complied and caught a warped reflection. He did not see his own face. (You’re more or less wearing me like a glove.)

Spock looked at the hands he controlled and felt the callouses on the left fingers, trophies from decades of playing violin.

(Pull a book off the closest shelf, Spock.)

Fingers curled over a spine. He looked at the titles of the surrounding volumes. He was in a collection of paperwork related to his position as division head. When he removed the book and opened the cover, he was greeted with last quarter’s performance reviews.

(You’re the one in charge now.) Tralnor said. (Anything you need to alter, touch the page, think the changes, and move on as quickly as you can.)

Clad in the vestments of a T’Kehr Temple Ko-tek’ru Kaylara t’Lyr Saan, Sha’leyen stepped into the deliberately organized chaos of sick bay in full-swing. She moved along the edges of the action, eventually arriving at the area where Spock and Tralnor were segregated behind movable a screen.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes, Sha’leyen.” Dr. McCoy popped in behind her. “I’m out of my depth with whatever dangerous stunt these two are pulling.”

“You were right to call me.” She opened her soft-sided implement bag and set out what she believed were the most useful tools. “I’m not a Healer, but I have the experience and knowledge to help them through this situation.”

“My staff have things pretty much under control for right now. You need any help with….” He pointed at stuff he probably considered witchcraft instead of medicine.

“Your assistance is appreciated, but not necessary.” She took a strip of cloth and tied Spock and Tralnor’s free hands together. Next, she carefully removed Spock’s other hand from Tralnor’s face. Now she could put the first officer in a chair rather than leaving him slumped on the worktop.

With both men seated, she unrolled the ancient leather apron that protected the hand-carved crystal vials, bottles, and jars containing the ingredients for potent elixirs and curative brews. Mortar and pestle situated, she opened trinket box she’d picked up on one of Enterprise’s many stops and removed a fat, stubby, red candle.

Set on a flat surface, she held her thumb and middle finger pinched on the wick. Her hand moved, revealing a flame that left McCoy fumbling for words. Long braid pulled over her shoulder, she snipped a tiny bundle of hairs from the very bottom and dropped her offering into the candle.

“Get a crash cart in here on stand-by for Spock.” Sha’leyen advised. “It’s not showing up on the
monitor right now, but the likelihood of him coming out in full cardiac arrest is high.”

McCoy shouted her request around the screen then said to her, “They’re actually inside the ship’s computer? That’s really possible?”

“Tralnor’s father makes a living of psionically investigating AIs and spends about one hundred hours a month melded into networks and mainframes. He explained to me once that leaving your body is the easy part, moving through the computer, once you know what you are doing, becomes second nature because you and the machine are using an energy interface. It’s coming back, that’s hard. Your mind doesn’t want to be constrained by its physical home and acts out, sending jags of errant electricity that can cause seizures and stop your heart.”

“If it weren’t happening in front of my face, I’d say it was impossible.” The doctor hollered again for the crash cart.

Sha’leyen dug back into her bag for a self-contained audio player. “They went in without a tether.”

“What’s that?”

“His father likes to use a piece of music that he plays on repeat in the room where his physical self is.” She found a song that she’d downloaded years ago and never been able to listen to until now. “It keeps a part of your brain anchored in reality, as a reminder that you actually exist out here and what you are in there isn’t the real you.”

Nurse Chapel’s eyes bulged at what she pushed the crash cart into. *My god, all that’s missing is a headless chicken!*

Sha’leyen intercepted and walled off the nurse’s panic and concern at the sight of Spock. Chapel, on the verge of grabbing hold of the man, lurched a step closer. There was no place for outbursts of idiocy in a setting like this. “Doctor, get her out of here.”

The entire ship knew about the nurse’s infatuation with the first officer. She objected, but McCoy escorted her back into the main part of sick bay. “You know how Chris gets about Spock.”

Music played, and Sha’leyen compounded a psychoactive substance designed to make coming back into oneself less arduous. Mostly used when working with students on isolating the katra or those who were learning to read psychic imprints on places and things, this drug was a good choice for a couple of minds returning from a meld with a machine. When she developed a paste that released a robust, earthy scent into the air, she spread the concoction on their upper lips where the active molecules would enter the bloodstream via the mucous membranes of their eyes and noses.

No warning given, the overhead lights flicked out, leaving her to work by the dull yellow put out by the candle.

Fatigued, vision blurring, Spock tried to stop what he was doing and regain his focus. Tralnor urged him ahead, but they stumbled and fell, dropping an armload of edited books that were being moved from the stacks to an empty display shelf next to the circulation desk.

Back on his feet, they gathered the scattered items and trudged forward. Reordered, the books went onto the shelf, building up a protocol of defenses against Laura that when initialized would vomit her nefarious virus out of the Enterprise.
(What is that?) Tinny strains of music charged the air around them.

*I will try not to worry you. I have seen things that you will never see. Leave it to memory me. I shudder to breathe. I want you to remember. Oh, you will never see I need something to fly, something to fly Over my grave again, you will never see. . .*

(I used to sing this to Sha’leyen. For her, it was a representation of what it was like to grow up in a time of war.) Tralnor sent them back into the stacks, stressing for Spock to focus on the books while he threaded their collective minds into the music, wrapping them into the tune the way a rope ties to a belaying pin.

Moving to freestanding bookcase he’d not yet visited, Spock dug into his reserves and compelled forward progress. The books, once nearly weightless, came off the shelves feeling like granite slabs. Cover opened, chapter and verse sought, their fingers against the page, change made. Lethargy.

Brain fog on level with the enervation he felt, they had a hard time moving quickly. Each book took more careful consideration, more circuitous thought, arms and hands seizing up, the sudden appeal of flying along on a current of pure information. . .

(Spock!) Tralnor didn’t yell, he screamed, (Feet on the ground! Eyes forward! Next book!)

Next book. . .

“Emergency generators not responding!” Someone on the medical staff called out.

The guts of the ship groused and grumbled as the bulkheads shuddered. Enterprise was in her death throes. “Starting chest compressions!”

A different voice came through the dark. “Be ready with atropine.”

Handheld torches cast awkward streams of light throughout sick bay.

Sha’leyen poured boiling water over her next formulation, moving through her ministrations like there was all the time in the universe. “May the living soul of Ko-tek’ru Kaylara bless us all.”

End Notes:

*Songs: "So Long, Farewell" from The Sound of Music and "Try Not to Breathe" R.E.M. from the album Automatic for the People. (Obligatory Disclaimer: These songs are not mine and are being used for non-commercial purposes.)*
Chapter 14

So this is what it feels like to get kicked out of heaven, Kirk said to himself as he beat against his dead console, trying to smack one last favor out of the beautiful ship he’d made his life. Something exploded in the decks below, shockwaves vibrated through the soles of his boots. He was one breath away from telling the people on the bridge to say a prayer to the who or whatever of their choice and say goodbye.

“Sir, I’m getting a message.” Uhura, who’d been locked out of her station for nearly twenty minutes, perked up. “It’s from Mr. Spock!”

One final ray of light coursed through his heart. Spock. “Put it him on. . . Spock, where are you?”

His ears picked up an extraordinary combination of echoing music, eerie moaning static, pops, crackles, and the precisely overlapped voices of Spock and Dr. Tralnor.

“Tralnor and I are—I’m not doing anything, it’s all you, Spock—ready to initiate Laura’s expulsion.” The sound of thousands of birds flapping their wings batted away some of what he/they said. “—should come online immediately, ready to fire. Do not try to—”

“Repeat that Spock, it didn’t come through clearly.” Kirk felt the familiar twinge of anticipation that came with knowing he’d survive another close scrape with death. Spock/Tralnor gave their information again and signed off, leaving the bridge in the quiet eye of the storm. “You heard them. Be ready to act the second they shunt Hillyard, and we’ll hand her ass to her.”

Disasters averted in sick bay proper, McCoy ran toward the sound of Spock’s cardiac monitor. This erratic beat was already starting to decay. “Does this mean they’re coming out?”

“Not quite.” Sha’leyen removed a swab tipped with a wad of gauze from Spock’s mouth. “Some of what you do in there will always feedback to your body. He’s in distress in both places.”

McCoy acted by dialing up a dose of adrenaline and handed the hypospray off to Sha’leyen. She pressed it to the first officer’s neck. “Get his upper body stripped.”

The bioarchaeologist opted against the bandage scissors and pulled a camouflaged dagger from up her left sleeve. She knew the Vulcans’ meld was strongly established enough that she cut their hands apart then flayed Spock’s uniform, exposing the skin. McCoy didn’t have to tell her how to place the electrode pads.

“Stand clear.”

She stepped back, hands up, and the doctor administered the first shock.

Laura Hillyard had, over the last few years, grown to love her mobile mayhem palace. The Sweetness made spreading her message and keeping a leg up on the authorities a delightful mix of business and pleasure. She snuggled back into her throne and though she might like a snack to go with the finale of the Federation’s prized flagship.
She opened one of the drawers built into the bulky captain’s chair and mulled her choices: black licorice whips, candied orange slices, coconut haystacks... Her attention shifted when a message marked URGENT catapulted to the head of the queue displayed on her private screen. She hit the read message button, mind more focused on food than what some moron below decks had probably sent under the guise of a crisis of dumbfuckery.

“Morgana, shields to maximum!” Laura ordered. “Silvio, get us the fuck out of here, now!”

Those rat bastards! Those skank-choked fucking Vulcans! How in the great gaping maw of hell had they done it?

“Captain, I thought—”

“No, Silvio! Now!” She threw the closest thing at hand, barely missing his head. “We’ll come back later for what’s ours.”

As Sweetness roared, the message, something only that asshole Tralnor would throw in her face, was still up on her screen: No One Expects the Spanish Inquisition!

Oh, Spock, you could have died in there. When I said do whatever it is you need to do, I never imagined... Kirk stood at the foot of Spock’s bed over on the in-patient ward. It looked like he was sleeping, but Bones said Sha’leyen had placed him into a sort of medically induced coma cum healing trance. Look at you...

“He’s gonna be okay, Jim.” Bones joined the vigil. “It took four shocks all together, but we got him out of that damned machine, and he’s never stopped breathing on his own. The readings are good. I might have him back to you by tomorrow afternoon.”

“What about his partner in crime?” Kirk was torn, did he want to hug or sucker punch Dr. Tralnor for taking Spock into the computer? You could have died, Spock! But, the alternative was grimmer.

“I kept him and his girlfriend over in the spot where this whole crazy voodoo thing went down.” McCoy turned his head where he could see the captain’s face.

“Thank you, Bones, for saving him yet again.” He paused to clear his throat. “I don’t know if I could do what I do every day without him.”

Sweet fucking hell! That’s it. The doctor, staggered by his realization, felt the pieces snap together. He’s in love with someone alright. All of this glowing, the mood swings, his inability to talk about what was wrong, it all lead straight to this one stunning conclusion. Jim wasn’t in the throes of some shitty break-up, he was pounding his fists into walls over the frustration of wanting a relationship with someone who couldn’t possibly reciprocate his feelings.

“Come on, let’s let our favorite pointy-eared chum get some rest.” McCoy steered the captain away from the Vulcan and off to his private office where they didn’t risk being overheard by prying ears. If Christine got hold of this, she’d lose it. “How’s the ship, Jim?”

“That woman did a number on us.” He didn’t need to discuss the dead and wounded. The three
occupied morgue drawers and mountain of charts for all of the burns, broken bones, lacerations, concussions, and such spoke for the crew. “We’re battered, but we’re mostly whole. Scotty and his people will get us back to fighting fit in no time.”

“So, when are we getting away from these damned diamonds? It feels like they’re cursed.” The doctor administered doses of fine aged whiskey to the captain and himself.

“We’re still waiting on Dragon and Seren to arrive. Once they’re here, Scotty wants us to take it easy on his babies, and Enterprise should chug on out of Melbek at a leisurely Warp Two. Probably four days in-transit to get us to the facilities at Overton Holdings.” Jim considered his tumbler like the liquid within was life itself. “What’s going to take us the longest is making sure Hillyard hasn’t left behind any little presents.”

“Booby traps?” McCoy took a deep swallow and savored the burn that warmed his belly.

“Exactly.” Kirk said. “This meandering to Overton will give us the time to figure out who was asshole enough to give a terrorist access to our systems.”

“Are you saying someone did this on purpose?” McCoy quickly developed a desire to see whoever this person was being granted a good old-fashioned keel-hauling.

“No, it looks like some dumbass doesn’t like our protocols for sending messages to and from home and they took it upon themselves to make their own comm console and hid it in an out of the way spot in the Jeffries Tubes.”

“Some people’s children.” McCoy shook his head. “All this because a member of the crew wanted to call his mommy?”

“It looks that way.”

“Christ, Jim, what’s the world coming to?”

Kirk looked over his shoulder in the general direction of the first officer’s bed. “I don’t know, Bones.”

McCoy took another sip, one last dribble of reinforcement before asking about things he didn’t want to but had to. “What’s the reason you couldn’t tell me, Jim?”

“Huh?” The captain’s attention re-centered on McCoy. “Tell you what?”

“That you’re in love.”

No denials, no witty comebacks, nothing, Jim’s jaw muscles bulged, and his head drooped forward.

“Is it because this person’s a man?” The doctor was fairly certain that was a minor detail, but there was a reputation this ladykiller felt he had to live up to.

“No.” He couldn’t bring his eyes up to meet McCoy.

“Is it because he’s your first officer?”

Deflated, Jim’s head went into his hands.

As McCoy thought about the situation, he could see how it happened, how this skirt-chasing loverboy got caught up in the wake of a personality so unlike anything he’d been around before,
that the initial fascination that turned to friendship didn’t stand a chance of not turning into
something more. Man, woman, on the spectrum anywhere between, the packaging didn’t matter
because Jim loved Spock. “I don’t suppose you’ve told him this?”

Jim lifted his head, cheeks damp, and said, “What’s the point?”

“What do you mean, ‘what’s the point?’” McCoy didn’t want to have to give the captain a good
smack, but he would.

“He’s got Mollie. . . He doesn’t need me.”

Tralnor opened his gritty eyes relieved to see that he’d gotten himself and Spock out of the
computer. His cranium felt like it was full of oatmeal and his muscles stiff, but overall he was
okay. His status sorted, he looked for Spock, seeing nothing, but felt the presence of the other
Vulcan nearby.

“What you did, that was not wise.” Sha’leyen arrived at his bedside.

“I know.” His vocal chords, seemingly coated in sawdust, made it sound like he was choking.
“How is Spock?”

“I have him svi’ritevakh, for the next few hours. I just checked on him, and he will not suffer any
permanent damage.”

His ability to stay conscious doubtful, Tralnor started to drift off when Sha’leyen leaned into his
ear and softly said, “The Captain is coming.”

Had the bed not propped him up, Tralnor would only have felt a storm of emotion rather than being
forced to look it in the face. “Captain Kirk.”

I could beat you like a red-headed stepchild. The captain’s eyes bore the evidence of recent upset,
even with some of the doctor’s vaso-restrictive drops, redness remained. “Dr. Tralnor, I wanted to
thank you for what you did today. Bones and Lt. Commander Sha’leyen explained to me what they
could. I appreciate the danger you put yourself in to help Spock.”

Dr. McCoy started to take readings of Tralnor’s recovery. How did I miss it? How? I’m with these
two day after day after day. Of course, Jim’s in love with Spock. It’s only been right in front of my
face for years now. “You’re both pretty beat up. I’m keeping you and Spock in until tomorrow.”

“I have work I need to—” Tralnor tried to object. McCoy shut his protestation down.

“Don’t give me any guff, Professor.” McCoy made his point that though they were both doctors,
only one of them had a medical background or the ability to confine someone to sick bay for the
next week. “Or I’ll have Sha’leyen put you in a coma too.”

“Okay.” He relented.

“Is there anything we can get you that isn’t work-related?”

“I could eat a pound of chocolate and chase it down with a fifth of top-shelf vodka right now.”
Something to get his frazzled brain into a place to start producing the right amounts of specific
neurotransmitters. A healing trance wasn’t going to help. In his current condition, including help
from Sha’leyen, his mind was too goopy to get to such a place. “But I’ll settle for a strong coffee, real cream and sugar if you’ve got it.”

“We’ll see what we can do.” Kirk volunteered. Chocolate? Vodka?

“I like chocolate, junk food, booze, and sex.” Tralnor blinked heavily. “It’s been a long, long time since I’ve had those last two...” And Tralnor slept.

“He’s still your friend. Don’t kill that because you think he might have a girl in the wings.” Bones said once they’d hidden away from everyone again.

Kirk followed the list of repairs on his data padd. “She’s not a might, Bones.”

“How the hell do you know? Have you asked him?”

McCoy huffed when Kirk swiveled the doctor’s desktop terminal toward him and punched up Mollie’s information.

“Do you get it now?” Kirk tapped the screen and turned it back so the doctor could see.

Blue eyes read line-by-line, all about the amazing woman in Spock’s life. “She’s—I’m sorry, Jim.”

“Me too, Bones, me too.”
Chapter 15

Avery pinged Dr. Tralnor’s cabin. Billy the Sixth answered, looking worse for wear with eight sutures above his left brow.

“I’m allergic to Dermaplast, yeah.” Billy shrugged. “That’s okay because scars are sexy.”

“Sarah and I are going to head up to sick bay to see your roommate. We’d ask you to come along, but the two of us barely got permission. Any updates you want on him or vice-versa?” Avery, like a lot of the engineers, worked a full double watch. He needed to catch some rack time to be chipper for the morning but felt like he should see his teacher.

“Hey, lads.” Billy addressed the rest of the cabin. Even the Krampus was home, no thanks to the crew being kept out of the corridors as much as possible. “Any get-well sentiments for Dr. Tralnor? He’s got to spend the night at Dr. McCoy’s leisure.”

Avery caught something about cookies and poker. O’Dell said something explicit that was not, under any circumstances, repeatable. At least Avery wasn’t going to say that to someone he wasn’t sleeping with. “I’ll relay what I can.”

Setting off to meet up with Sarah, Avery heard someone following him.

“Lt. Avery.” The Krampus said.

“Lt. Seltun?” The Krampus had never spoken to Avery before, at least not by choice. Avery once made the mistake of asking the Vulcan a question about the vernacular use of the phrase th’i-oxalra, and if it meant the same thing in the same contexts as thank you, in Standard, did. Seltun sniped at him. Avery didn’t remember the exact wording anymore, but the gist of it was that ignorant hicks didn’t need to trouble themselves with a language they’d never understand the nuances of.

“If what I have heard is correct, Lt. Commander Tralnor and Commander Spock injected their consciousnesses into the Enterprise’s computer?”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Avery affirmed. “And they did a damned fine job purging Hillyard’s virus.”

The Krampus took a second to consider something. Rather than saying anything more or properly drawing their short exchange to an end, Avery watched as the Vulcan skulked back toward his cabin. Whatever, Avery thought. I’m just fine with you being weird somewhere else, Seltun.


“Captain Kirk, I understand how upsetting these sorts of things can be.” Sloan continued to spin straw into bullshit.

“Brendan Tartt, Hamish Bonderman, Alicia Klein. Say their names, Commodore.”

“The loss of a crewman is never easy.”
“Say their names, damnit.” Kirk exercised great restraint in not slamming his fist down on his desk. “Brendan Tartt, Hamish Bonderman, Alicia Klein.”

Sloan ran a finger beneath his collar and wriggled. “Look, this isn’t getting us anywhere. Why don’t you get some rest and we’ll pick this up in a few hours, eh?”

“They were people, Sloan, not bullet points on one of your stupid reports.” He’d just finished recording the messages and handwriting the paper letters of condolence that went out to loved ones left behind. “Those people are dead because you thought it would be amusing to hold back on our reinforcements. How many more corpses would be on your hands if my science officers hadn’t gone above and beyond to save this ship? Do thoughts like that ever enter your bean-counting head?”

Seeing he was getting nowhere in covering his ass, Sloan invented an emergency call on another line to shake the angry starship captain.

“Yeah, fuck you too, Sloan.”

The clock was pushing 2330. He was due to speak with Admiral Miranda Holt at 0620, where he planned to address his grievance with that moose-knuckle, Sloan. Interpol wanted a report on MV Sweetness and Laura Hillyard. Starfleet Security wanted the same report as Interpol, and since neither agency could stand the sight of one another long enough to share, he’d grant that identical request. An expanded meeting of Division and Department heads would gobble up a good ninety minutes before Dragon would be in contact and after he and Scotty got in another chinwag.

Well, the least I should do put my feet up and take off these boots. His plan to go to bed was waylaid by his subconscious. Walking into sick bay, he stopped in to see Spock. The Vulcan’s chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm that indicated he was in a deep sleep.

“I know you can’t hear me.” Kirk said at an almost-whisper. “And not that it matters... but, I love you.”

Fast, armed to the teeth, highly maneuverable, ships like the USS Dragon were designed to abate the likes of ram-raiding freighters such as MV Sweetness. Kirk swore he heard the Hallelujah chorus when the patrol ship made it into visual range.

“We’ve come across Hillyard before.” Dragon’s captain, Lyudmila Kuznetsov, had beamed over to see some of Enterprise’s war wounds in person. She scowled as she said the human supremacist’s name. “She is depraved. What else is there to call someone who kills not only in the name of racism but just for the sheer fun of it?”

“The word describes her well.”

“The word describes her well.”

“From what we can see—”

From what I can see, Kirk mused, I think you and I are going to have ourselves a bit of fun this evening. We can both forget about our messy lives for a couple of hours. And boy howdy, do I need to forget about some things.

—Hillyard has never been so bold as to take on a Starfleet ship. She hates us but leaves us be because there are other smaller, weaker prey to feast on. There’s something of interest on the
Enterprise, besides Melbek III, that made her launch that attack.”

“She and my first officer have a contentious history.” He wasn’t going to address any particulars.

“Your first officer is Vulcan, correct?”

“She wished Spock and another Vulcan officer of mine dead, and that was some of the milder stuff she had to say.”

“Then it makes a sick kind of sense that she’d try and punch so far above her weight.”

Not that far, apparently. He was still dealing with the ripples of bewilderment that Enterprise nearly went down without a shot being fired.

Captain Kuznetsov was three years older than Kirk, looked at least seven years younger than she actually was, and had one of those Slavic faces that kept many a man awake at night. Yes, they were talking business, but the dialogue left unsaid, the knowing glances, the charge in the air, they both had something the other wanted and didn’t need to cuddle or coo to make the exchange.

“If you and Seren had shown up when I asked, not when Commodore Sloan made you, would you and Seren fallen victim to Hillyard’s virus?” Why did he insist on torturing himself with the answers?

“Enterprise would have been far away from Melbeck by the time MV Sweetness arrived. Based on what we’ve seen of your reports, Hillyard couldn’t have gotten through to Dragon’s computer. This isn’t just because of your security breach, may the universe take mercy on that bastard’s soul when you find him. Research vessels have different priorities than our showy patrol boats. That illegal comm station could not exist on my ship.”

When no one was around to see, Kuznetsov gave Kirk an appreciative pat on the ass.

Tralnor woke this time, nearly twelve hours after he passed out in front of the captain, with McCoy’s nurse staring him down. “I don’t know as I’ve gotten your name, Nurse?”

“Chapel, but you can call me Christine if you like.”

After spending a lifetime being scrutinized like a rare zoo animal, Tralnor paid no mind to Chapel’s lingering eyes. He massaged his temples before giving his neck a pop and getting his head in the right spot.

“You seem very kind, Dr. Tralnor.”

Oh, shit. He sensed her displaced desire for Spock reconnoitering to focus on him. This is not what I need right now.

“You’re not harsh, not like other Vulcans. You treat people well, without them asking, without arrogance.” Chapel gave a closed-mouth smile and moved in a bit closer. “I know what it means when rings are worn like that. A widower at such a young age, you must miss the companionship a woman brings to your life.”

“I don’t miss ‘a woman,’ Nurse Chapel. I mourn the loss of a person who was murdered in cold blood, my friend, the mother of my youngest child.”
She didn’t want to hear what he said. She wasn’t thinking, just following the impulses of some internal drive to quench the sapping loneliness she lived with. “What about the other things, like physical love?”

“I’ve chosen to remain celibate in the wake of Amelie Grace’s death.” He wasn’t going to mention the possible rekindling of his relationship with Sha’leyen.

“Tushah nash—” She stumbled over the wrong words for what she was trying to say. *I grieve with thee.*

“*Don’t.*”

Her smile fled. “Please, Dr. Tralnor, I was only—”

“Leave me.” The fingers of his right hand grasped at the rings on his left. Gone almost ten years, Amelie Grace’s absence was still raw.

“Please, no.” Chapel pleaded.

“Get out, now.”

“Consider that an order, Nurse Chapel.” The real object of her affection had arrived on scene.

Finally, she retreated, leaving Tralnor alone with Spock. “That still happens to me more than I care to think.”

Spock, still clad in sick bay’s finest, stepped into the exam area. “And to myself as well.”

“It’s probably time to start wearing lily of the valley perfume again.” Tralnor mentioned an old tactic from his undergraduate days. “People don’t want to fuck someone who smells like their grandmother.”

“I can see how that may work.”

“It’s a horrid fragrance, but it does have its uses. I got the idea when a girl in my Russian literature class walked up to me, told me I smelled like pure sex, and proceeded to lick me. Lily of the valley cooled her down considerably.” Tralnor realized he had not included it with his dopp bag for this mission. He’d ask Sarah and Sha’leyen if they might find something similar. “You’re doing well after our adventure yesterday.”

“My heart stopped, twice.”

“It was a lot for your first foray. This is one of those disciplines that you’re supposed to start small and work your way up to larger and larger projects before ever being set loose in a live network under attack.”

Spock had dark lines beneath his eyes and ambulated in such a way that he couldn’t and didn’t try to disguise his continued fatigue. Another good night’s sleep would set him straight. “Despite your apprehension and inexperience, you made the right choice taking me under, Tralnor.”

Not the smart choice, unavoidable choice, or logical choice, the right one. “Such a compliment is not necessary, Spock. We did what we had to, and the Enterprise lives to see another day.”
Released from sick bay, tired but not under the weather, Spock wanted to catch up with the captain and learn the details that didn’t make it into the reports he’d read that afternoon. He’d gone to his quarters long enough for a shower and a change of clean clothes, deciding it was late enough that he might as well take those few steps down the hall and see if Jim was home, so to speak.

USS Dragon was here, and USS Seren was due to arrive by 2200. Enterprise would not linger for long after the second patrol ship made it to Melbek III. He was doing the calculations for both transit time and in-facility repairs when his ears picked up a host of sounds a human would never hear through the bulkheads.

Skin slapping against skin, grunts and heavy exhalations, and a woman’s voice demanding, “Fuck me, Jimmy! Fuck me like you mean it! Harder!”

And not for the first time, Spock turned around and walked away.

The door to the captain’s office slid shut, and the collective mood in the room dropped. “I just can’t believe it. One of the biggest opportunities in years and you left it.”

“For fuck’s sake, Silvio. Give it a rest.” Laura said. “I’m starting to get pretty disenchanted with the constant bitching.”

“The money—” He whined. Easy on the eyes, not half bad in bed, Silvio’s lack of confidence in her decisions was wearing thin. He was still irritated that she’d been put in charge of the Sweetness, when he’d been part of the crew out working the shipping lanes for years.

“We’re going back for the damned diamonds. They’ve never come off the list of priorities. AVDL is going to be so filthy fucking rich, we’ll just pay to take care of the degenerates and off-worlders and make Terra into the place it always should have been.” She scrolled through the final list of repairs and requests for Sweetness’ next port-of-call, noting that beyond a few minor scorches and a couple of snapped relay antennae, she’d gotten them away from the Enterprise before the much bigger ship did any real damage.

“When do we return?”

“Give it a few days. My sniffers intercepted some good stuff before we launched the trojan horse. Captain Sunshine warned all the alien-lovers at command that Melbek III was a plum. They didn’t believe him and aren’t inclined to. Once Enterprise is too far out to be of any assistance, it’s our badass boat against a couple of pea-shooting patrol ships.” She wished Silvio would piss off and let her get back to her plotting and planning.

“Shouldn’t we be worried about reinforcements?” Silvio tried to sit down, his ass barely grazing a cushion, when she whistled and told him to stay off the furniture.

“At the glacial speed it takes for decisions to come down from the top, we’ve got the time we need.” She went back to the repair list, unhappy to see that the condensation collectors on deck two were on the fritz again, but short of replacing the entirety of the de-humidifying system, there wasn’t much to do other than keep at that one weak spot every six months. The next item on the list was a simple fix that the crew could manage once the replacement part was ordered. Ready to read the next entry, a priority one message landed in her encrypted in-box. “Get out of here, Silvio.”
“Is that from the Big Boss?”

“I don’t know, and I can’t tell until you leave me alone so I can open it.”

Silvio shook his head. Daniel Shelley, chairman of the AnthroVision Defense League, wouldn’t want him in the room while talking to the Golden Girl. “See you later, Laura.”

She waited until he’d disappeared completely before switching over to her inbox. There, highlighted in green, was a message from one of her spies on the ground in ShiKahr. “Oh my, oh my, what do we have here?”
Chapter 16

“Can you still see me?” Tralnor made the switch from the desktop screen to the projector he’d received for Rec Room 2. His assistant director of strings, Dr. Bella Vonnegut, showed up, lifesize, on the wall screen. Assistant director of bands, Dr. Lola White, walked into view and was soon joined by drumline conductor Jamal Davis-Sanchez.

“Yep, we’ve got you. Not even much static on this end.” Dr. Vonna said. “You weren’t joking around when you said there would be times where you’d go incommunicado. We’ve been trying to get ahold of you for days.”

Tralnor liked that he could stand and walk around while taking care of business in this manner. He operated in a public space and didn’t have much thought either way if people saw what they already heard. And this way, he wasn’t trapped in a chair. “Out of my control.”

“You know what’s really out of control?” Dr. Lola pulled up a chair and scooted in close to Dr. Vonna. “Las Vegas Philharmonic has called every day this week wanting to get you to cover for Pierre Degas in September.”

“I gave them Odi’s information before I left for OCS.” Tralnor knew Vegas’ conductor was bullheaded, but this was too much.

“We’ve done the same.”

“Odi’s a great trumpet player, better than I am.” Tralnor’s friend and former section-mate from USC was an excellent musician.

“Well, they want you.” Vonna shook her head. “Jamal’s got all of the registrations made for district festival, including a larger room this year for warm-ups and storage.”

“Last year was a disaster I don’t want to repeat.” Lola referenced a list. “I’ve filled out all the purchase orders, Warren has the truck rental lined up, we’ve sent out uniform checklists, asked everyone to make sure they’ve got the right shoes, and busses are scheduled to meet us here at the music room by six in the morning.”

“Jamal, you’re taking care of the cameras, yes?” Tralnor didn’t much feel the need to have this faculty meeting, but they’d wanted to touch base before the competition in two days. He had the utmost confidence in their abilities to administer the program in his absence.

“Yes. They’ll ride up in the truck with me and Warren.” Lola nodded. “That brings us to parent-teacher conferences.”

Vonna sputtered with laughter. “Some of the moms were nearly in tears when they realized you weren’t here.”

“They just don’t think Dr. V and I are as handsome as you are.” Lola joined in laughing.

“Mrs. Tan is convinced you’re going get eaten by aliens. Charlotte Brody doesn’t know if her precious boy can be taught by someone who’s bought into the ‘philosophies of the military-industrial complex.’ Oh, Anna Rothstein has a, help me out Lola, niece or nephew she wants to introduce you to.”

“Um, nephew, Darren, age thirty-two, supposed to be a lantern-jawed Adonis, is a dentist up in
Menlo Park.” Lola held up a couture business card. “We tried to tell her you weren’t interested, but you know how she is.”

Yes, he did. Tralnor had taught all four of Anna Rothstein’s girls and spent all that time fending off the overly-concerned mother’s matchmaking attempts.

“Yes, he did. Tralnor had taught all four of Anna Rothstein’s girls and spent all that time fending off the overly-concerned mother’s matchmaking attempts.

“We tried to tell her you weren’t interested, but you know how she is.” Lola put Darren the Dentist’s card away.

“I’ve been working with T’Roah, or trying to.” Jamal’s face tensed up. “I don’t know what to do with her. Its like she thinks we’re trying to sabotage her when that’s the last thing any of us want.”

Tralnor made no comment on that situation. T’Roah was a graduate student in the Conducting program. She had a brilliant understanding of the mathematics of music, knew the components of creating many types of compositions, she had a disconnect where a good conductor could offer clear non-verbal communication to an ensemble as to draw out the best performance. She was one of the three grad students who was directing Tralnor’s high school bands and orchestras at district festival as a practical exam in her own coursework. “We’ll just have to see how things go.”

“Okay, before we wrap this up, Summer Splendor?” Vonna had this year’s venue locked in, rehearsal space rented, and rosters started. “Once we get a playlist, we can figure out what holes we need filled and where to find those people.”

“I have Sarah David on tenor and Alton Avery on percussion. Sarah sings, and the Chief of Communications has a stunning voice. Lt. Uhura is happy to volunteer for our musical experiment.” Tralnor ran through his own mental tallies. “There are some fantastic musicians on this ship. We don’t have a lot of limits on pieces.”

“Okay. Wow, if you’ve got Sarah, then we’re doing Scenes from an Italian Restaurant...” Vonna went off, listing far more than could ever fit in one show. “And featuring just you on the piano?”

“I haven’t made up my mind yet. Once we get an approximate run time of everything else, I’ll decide. As for instrumental, I want to build from I Want it All, Heart of Courage, and Nothing But You.”

He called the meeting to an end and turned to find he had an audience. Maybe they just enjoyed the novelty of something entirely different going on that they could observe that wasn’t going to try to blow them up or kill them? They seemed content, and he wouldn’t chase them off if they found being a fly on the wall at a high school faculty meeting soothing in some way.

The next call might make them laugh, and that too was a good thing after being held hostage by Laura Hillyard and losing three crewmates to her malicious meddling.

“How the fuck have you been, MacCormack!” Joe Bergman hollered. “I was starting to wonder if you’d fallen into a black hole or some other fucked up space-thing that only exists to piss in your cornflakes because you look like you went ten rounds with a life-size boxing nun.”

“An astute observation.” Tralnor said, still bearing the remains of his graceless face-plant into the worktop.

“Question for you.” Joe always had a look on his face like he was going to run up and yank your pants down.

“It’s not about cows is it?”
“Haha, funny.” He leaned in to look at the camera like he was proud of something. “A little birdie told me you’re finally hanging up your monk’s habit.”

“Sounds like the band alumni gossip mill’s been working overtime.” Tralnor tried to avoid this topic so they might discuss Celluloid Vokaya’s restoration.

“This would be what, the first time you’ve gotten laid in like ten years, and you don’t want to celebrate?”

“Film, Joe?”

“Snarfle wouldn’t want to see you like this, man. You know that, we all know that.” Joe used the nickname Amelie Grace was given at her initiation into the trombone section her freshman year. He’d never been able to address his former squad leader by her given name after she died, since to him that made her death real, final.

Twice in one day, Tralnor was forced to revisit that old, open wound. “No comment.”

“Ah, shit, Tralnor.” Joe rarely dropped his blustery persona, but this was one of those moments where caught up in memories of his friend, he backed off. “I’m sorry.”

Kirk tried to hold on as Kuznetsov pulled herself up out of bed. He just wanted the presence of another person, to hear a heartbeat, feel breaths that were not his own. She thanked him for a good time, got dressed, and wished him well.

Alone, without her to distract him, he was left with just his thoughts. He wanted to find Spock and merely be in his first officer’s orbit. But, he wouldn’t seek the Vulcan out tonight. Even after a hot shower, Spock could smell the sex on him, and it wasn’t that his friend disapproved of dalliances of this variety, but it brought up subjects Kirk wasn’t comfortable with right now.

Spock wasn’t disappointed in Jim, he was unhappy with himself for letting the man he loved rack up another one-night-stand in the absence of genuine intimacy. He didn’t care about the sex. He understood where and how it acted as a stress-relief valve for some people and social act for others.

From his own experience, he was aware of how good the physical sensations of intercourse felt, but there was a part of him that recognized he couldn’t enjoy it unless he was with someone who knew him and valued him as a person. The one time he’d engaged in what could be termed casual sex, Sohja was someone he’d been familiar with since he was a child and was not, in fact, a stranger or someone he’d met only briefly before sleeping with them.

He’d found, before the onset of the pon farr, the prospect of consummating his marriage to T’Pring was off-putting in a lot of ways, starting with the fact that she never allowed him to get to know her. Any attempts at becoming close were rebuffed. She regarded him as unworthy of his birthright to Clan Surak. The very idea of sex with her was frankly terrifying, especially in contrast to the tender way Mollie treated him in bed. In reality, he’d been glad the madness would take him through his wedding night, so he didn’t have to be cognizant of mating with someone who despised him.
Spock wondered if Jim was lonely in the arms of temporary companions?

Day one of four in transit to Overton Holdings, and Lt. Chavez was floundering about what to do with his damned violinist. There was no dreaded or disgusting task the Vulcan wouldn’t take on. The grosser and nastier a job, the more that man seemed to take it in stride.

Once he’d hoped that making Dr. Tralnor request a transfer to another department would be an easy task. Make the occupation foul enough, anyone with any sense fled, that’s how Chavez ran off people in the past he didn’t want around. This one? He wasn’t that lucky.

*I’m not stupid. I know what all these jack-wagons in here think of me. And here you come breezing in, beautiful but useless, only to upset my apple cart, take my woman, and do some whiz-bang parlor trick that labels you a hero and gets you recommended for commendation.* “How is it going in there?”

Dr. Tralnor and Ensign Woodward were power-washing and sterilizing the two 10,000 liter holding tanks that acted as the reservoirs for the Type 1 and Type 2 laboratory grade water that the media lab used to prepare goods.

Woodward crawled out of the tank they were working on. “Just finishing up in here before we run the final steam cycle.”

Chavez found he desperately wanted to slam shut the access hatch and leave the pesky doctor in there to cook like a lobster. “Very good. After you’re done—”

“Is Dr. Tralnor in here with you, Kate?” Ensign Orlovsky didn’t see the boss and nearly yelped when he walked right into Chavez. “Excuse me, pardon, Lt. Chavez.”

*More hero worship?* Chavez griped, “What do you need him for? It’s not like he’s actually a scientist or anything practical like that.”

“I don’t need him, Sir.” Orlovsky said.

“I do, Mr. Chavez.” Commander Spock stepped into the tank room.

Sha’leyen’s desk was cleared of everything but a large drawing pad, ink pens, and the Vulcan histories she’s brought from Belon. “Where did that toad have him hidden?”

“Inside the Type 2 holding tank.” Spock said as he and Tralnor entered her office.

“May I see this letter? Tralnor described it to me, but I won’t get the full effect of what T’Pau has requested without analyzing the writing.” She used a biometric scan of three fingers, two on the left and one on the right, to unlock the top drawer of a filing cabinet. Two more books joined the stack.

When he first read the message this morning that Tralnor had discussed this with Sha’leyen, Spock was irritated, but quickly came to the conclusion that she was a real resource because she might have an insightful interpretation owing to her Belonite background. She read it, scrutinized T’Pau’s precise script, and began transcribing the description of the sought-after artifact into ancient Golic Calligraphy.
“Now, if I translate this into Second Univocal Belonectic, you get this.” Her steady hand was such that if she wanted a second career after Starfleet, she could set up shop in ShiKahr and take commissions producing custom calligraphy and have a wait-list that was years long. Spock studied the words, seeing familiar forms, but unable to actually read the translation.

Tralnor nodded. “I see where you’re going.”

“I understand how you came to the conclusion you might have a chemical weapon or a concentration of something, that’s a good interpretation, but you need to read deeper between lines.” She circled five of the embellishments on the Belonectic that were not used in Golic Vulcan. “You recognize these?”

“I do.” Tralnor said an air of uneasiness settled around him. “Spock?”

“Please explain.” This was one of those moments where T’Pau’s advice on working with the Lyr Saan was invaluable.

“From the Second Univocal Belonectic, I make another transcription of just the words with these embellishments into Old Lyr Saan.” A third calligraphic variation, similar in form, appeared on the page. “Now the words we have are still nebulous but are starting to make more sense in context with the letter.”

Again, not knowing this dialect left Spock at a disadvantage. As someone who was born and raised in the most dominant culture on Vulcan, he’d never been in a place where he’d needed to learn something like modern Lyr Saan let alone an ancient localist tongue.

“In modern Lyr Saan, it looks like this.”

The embellishments were gone, replaced by the Golic system, some of it still gibberish to Spock.

“And the direct translation back into modern Golic, dropping the calligraphy,” Sha’leyen’s writing was more stylized than T’Pau’s, “gives us a similar paragraph with a much different meaning.”

She turned the drawing pad around so Spock could read the full presentation.
“—Ensign, you can’t just—” The muffled voice of Petty Officer Stella Handler echoed up the narrow corridor leading to Sha’leyen’s office. “Don’t do that!”

“Lt. Commander Reynan, why aren’t you at the—” Ensign Nate Shore stumbled over his own feet at the sight of the Division head. The young man couldn’t back out of the room fast enough. “Ma’am, I was sent by Lt. Jefferson to check on your delay.”

“Tell Rashida to access her inbox, Nate.” Sha’leyen said. Maybe if the head of cultural xenoanthropology did that once or twice a day, it would cut down on needless interruptions like this one. “I sent Etienne Bertin to fill-in for me.”

“I’m—I apologize, Lt. Commander. Uh, sorry?”

“Remember this rule, Nate.” Sha’leyen pointed at the door which prompted Handler to explain.

“Bioarch operates under the Vulcan adage that a closed door is a locked door.” Handler got a hand on his arm and steered him away from his blunder.

“Ensign Shore is a good kid, but Lt. Jefferson is teaching him some bad habits.” Office door now closed, and actually locked this time, she’d save them from further disruption.

She let Spock and Tralnor read her final translation as well as examine the process she used to get there. As they studied, she pulled the second book from the top of her stack. This was one of the volumes she kept locked up as an extra precaution.

Other than the two people in this room with her, no one else on the Enterprise could read these books without putting in considerable effort and access to a far more in-depth Vulcan linguistics database than the ship’s library offered. She carefully turned the pages, paying close attention to the hand-written annotations in the margins other people had left over the generations.

“T’Pau’s description was vaguely familiar to me.” Sha’leyen said as she continued searching for the right entries. “It reminded me of something my teacher, Zakhira Tay, once told me about. In her village, they called these Demon Cubes.”

She stopped on the page she needed, pointed to the illustration, and turned the book so the men could see an artist’s rendition of what they were looking for. To the uninitiated, it appeared like an intricately hand-carved chest of the kind one kept jewelry or other such trinkets in. Similar in size to a shoebox or small archival box, it wouldn’t seem out of place on top of a bureau or displayed on a mantle. “Of course, there are no such things as demons, but demons would be preferable to what these artifacts actually contain. Other parts of Belon use terms like Black Shadows or Incomplete Death to describe these.”

“That’s not a promising sign.” Tralnor’s psionic defenses bristled. His subconscious reaction registered to Sha’leyen as a coppery taste in the back of her mouth.

“I think the best term for one of these is va’au tavalik duv-tor.” Copy of a deadly shadow. “These boxes are essentially weapons that contain replicas of the personalities of some of the most devastatingly amoral and violent people to have ever existed. They are occasionally still found on Belon and are very dangerous.”

She’d gone her entire life without coming across one, and now she was drawn into an active search.
What Tralnor called “not promising,” she called a baneful psionic landmine.

“I have never heard of such weapons.” Spock was fortunate not to have grown up in the shattered remains of a pre-Reform world. He knew there were insidious reminders of the past, extant, hiding, still ready to maim and kill, but this was the first they’d touched his life. “Would I be remiss to say this reminds me of a Katric Ark?”

“Similar, yes, but the spirit contained within this box is only a partial replicant of the original. It lacks the living element of the katra, but manifests the psyche.”

“What makes it jeopardous?” Tralnor’s weariness came from various encounters with artifacts of malice, and what he’d come across was mild in comparison to this deleterious casket. “I’m certain I will not like the answer.”

“As one of the mair-rigolauya, you won’t like the answer, no.” Sha’leyen opened up the third book from the stack and referred to passage she’d marked years ago. “Once activated, a tavalik duv-tor syncs to the brainwaves of the person, usually holding the box, but in the case of more than one person being nearby, it goes to the one who’s the most mentally compatible. It infests that mind, as forcefully as possible, merging into that individual as the dominant personality, resulting in a grotesque rebirth of—"

She had to stop and think of a description. The best way she had to convey what happened was in modern Belonectic. Though accurate, didn’t translate well into Vulcan or Standard. “The final result is a person who manifests the tavalik duv-tor’s temperament and carries the mission of war and destruction forward.

“The Vohr,” she used the word for meld as the best representation for what this blend of living and dead was, “has the same objectives as the tavalik duv-tor did as a corporeal being. Psionic abilities are heightened to a level not seen in the modern Vulcan population, outside of certain small groups.” She looked at Tralnor, emphasizing the likes of the Lyr Saan. “The Vorh is an indiscriminate mind rapist, brainwasher, a nearly uncontrollable force. Other people follow because they are irresistibly compelled to fight for the Vorh’s cause. It’s a scorched earth campaign. . . Words fail me for just how detrimental these creations are.”

“So, potentially, we could have the pre-Reform wars reignite? Is that what you are trying to get across?” Tralnor’s thoughts jangled, not wanting to visit that terrible outcome.

She closed her eyes and nodded. “Yes.”

Tralnor asked, “And what happens to the person the deadly shadow takes over?”

“Like the mair-rigolauya who are involuntarily compelled to assume the fatal trauma of others, the unwilling host of a tavalik duv-tor does not survive becoming the Vorh.”

Spock thought about the implications of one of these tavalik duv-tor and chided his ancestors for creating such a horrible thing. It finally made sense to him why T’Pau was so secretive about what she was seeking and why she was so vehement to see destroyed. It couldn’t fall into the hands of the wrong people, nor should it ever touch the sands of Vulcan again. “Is the box stable enough to move without releasing the spirit inside?”

“That, I can’t tell you. Each one of them is slightly different because the boxes themselves are one-offs. I also don’t know if there is any way to effectively shield against one if it gets out.” Sha’leyen moved back into this mysterious set of books and looked for any helpful information. “What this does say is the Vorh is exceptionally difficult to kill, and a lot of that is it’s nearly impossible to get
close enough to one to kill it. Of course, I don’t know how that changes if you’re going after it with a cruise missile or other remotely operated weapon.”

“We’ll have to destroy it before it gets out.” Tralnor said. “Does your history say anything about how to do that?”

“No. There’s nothing.”

“Is the box safe around non-Vulcans?” How was this vessel going to be moved, stored, or obliterated? The four locations he and Tralnor had come up with for where the tavalik duv-tor might be were places with high human populations.

“Vulcanids,” she said, including races like Belonites, “are psionically compatible enough with humans that I don’t think it matters if one of us or one of them activates it, especially if it came into contact with a complementary personality. Should someone like this Laura Hillyard stumble across a tavalik duv-tor, we must be very frightened indeed.”

Unsettled, Spock returned to his computer lab. He was still going through his systems to make sure Laura hadn’t left him any parting shots.

He also made a mental note to speak to Lt. Jefferson about the way she handled her staff. She was a good anthropologist but was too lax in how she worked within Starfleet’s regulations. She’d argued against the weekly meetings of the anthro sub-fields and the sharing of approximately half the total anthropology staff. Jefferson wanted cultural completely separate from linguistics, which shared staff and resources with communications, and especially wanted the more astutely scientific archaeology and bioarchaeology (physical anthropology) off in their own corner, with their own people. Spock was, after years of dealing with Lt. Jefferson, ready to reorganize anthro, but not in a way she’d like. He wanted Sha’leyen as the overall head of anthropology, while still keeping her post as department head in bioarch.

His mind would not let go of Sha’leyen’s comment about Laura and compatible personalities. One of the hiding places for the tavalik duv-tor was in the Trego system, location of MV Sweetness’ home port. While the chances of these two particular evils meeting and melding were exceedingly rare, he could not deny the trickle of fear, rational fear, that accompanied these thoughts.

The desk comm chirruped. “Spock, here.”

“Ah, Mr. Spock, just the man I was looking for. Would you mind coming on down to engineering for a wee moment? I do believe we’ve found a snare your friend left behind.”

“Laura Hillyard is not my friend, Mr. Scott.” He said, a bit too forcefully, knowing the second officer was only trying to inject some humor into the situation. “I will be there shortly.”

“Dare I ask?” Captain Kirk wasn’t quite sure what the hell he was looking at.

“That, Captain, is the equivalent of a cherry bomb flushed down a toilet.” Lt. Biltmore said. “It was hidden so far in the depths of the computer banks we’re lucky we found it as soon as we did.”

Kirk tucked the data padd under his arm and continued to follow Biltmore to the closet-sized room where Spock and Scotty were trying to physically remove the specific server nodule Hillyard’s surprise had taken roost in, addressing the problem like a surgeon might excise a tumor.
“If we’re not careful and it notices we’ve cut the power supply, we’re up shit creek without paddles, if you’ll pardon my French, Captain.” Scotty looked like he was trying not to breathe too hard in case that was enough to set it off.

“Not to worry, Mr. Scott.” Kirk replied. He edged in as close as he dared and wondered if it might not be more practical to go the route of whipping the tablecloth off a formal banquet set for ten guests. Sure, glasses and forks would wind up all over the floor, but the majority of goods placed on the tabletop stay up there. Did yanking the node mean only minor irritation and disturbance? He probably didn’t want to find out.

He was satisfied with the practical approach they were taking when his heart jumped and cock twinged at the sight of Spock on all fours, ass in the air. The rest of him, hidden from view, was using those long fingers to detach this bit of the computer. Kirk looked away as fast as he could and immediately started thinking about tedious subjects, expense reports, wiring diagrams, anything to distract from the naughty fantasies playing out in his head.

The lust component of his love for this man took him unawares much of the time. He and Spock could be working on the most mundane tasks when the urge to rip the Vulcan’s clothes off and ravage him was both instant and overwhelming. I’m going to need a cold shower tonight if I have any chance of getting to sleep. “What happens if this, whatever it is, goes off?”

Spock removed himself from the access panel and gave Kirk a curious glance. “The engines are rendered useless, and the Enterprise is stranded until rescue tugs can get us the rest of the way to Overton Holdings.”

Fuck! Kirk thought. He can smell that I’m so horny I’m ready to literally explode. “That could take two weeks. Let’s avoid that if we can.”

“Aye, Sir.” Scotty grabbed something that looked like a dental pick and went back to extricating the node. “We’ll keep you up to date on the details. Of course, if we come to a full stop, you’ll know what happened. Let’s pray it’s only my beautiful engines that go offline and not the inertial dampeners too. I’d rather the crew not come to harm.”

“I’d rather they didn’t either. Keep up the good work. You know where to find me.” Kirk retreated from engineering and bundled himself off to his quarters.

His mind could not let go of that image, Spock bent over, almost like he was calling for some attention. Boots off, trousers stripped, Kirk freed his now fully engorged penis from his shorts and stroked himself. What would it be like to have those hands, feeling fever-stricken, wrapped around his shaft, parting lips, tongue stimulating the head as his foreskin was retracted. . .

He cried out Spock’s name, his desperate wish that someday he might receive a reply.
Chapter 18

Tralnor was of the mind that he didn’t care if he spent all six months of his tour crashing with the junior officers. He’d grown to like their company. The quartermasters’ office was on the verge of delirium in their upset over not having his private quarters sorted by now. The burst pipe and cleanup efforts had revealed further problems in that area of the ship and now extensive mold abatement needed to start.

He lay in bed, reading a stupid old novel about a bunch of idiots from Florida, who confused a stolen Soviet nuclear warhead with a garbage disposal, and the ensuing insanity. This was exactly the kind of, well, it wasn’t high-brow entertainment, but it was a distraction, and he needed that.

He’d just gotten to a scene where a burly cop and a corrupt construction company exec wound up handcuffed to a massive metal entertainment center in the wake of a couple of hapless New Jersey hitmen shooting out the television instead of their target. The rest of the protagonists had fled the scene for the airport to chase down the warhead.

“Is it really true that you haven’t had sex in ten years?” Chris O’Dell walked in the door, fresh from fucking someone in the last hour or so. “How can you stand it? I can’t go ten days.”

Data padd powered down, Tralnor addressed Chris and the others. “Yes, it’s true.”

“A guy like you must be up to his eyeballs in ass. I see the way people look at you. I see the way I look at you.” Chris continued. “And don’t deny you hit for both teams.”

“I have never refuted that I am bisexual.” Tralnor finally confirmed, ending ship-wide speculation on the matter. He thought his orientation was blatantly obvious to anyone who paid attention, but humans liked having definitive labels on everyone and everything. So, there it was. “I have had sexual encounters with males and females and do not have a specific preference for one over the other.”

Seltun, who was loathe to engage with this group, suddenly showed interest in what was going on. Where Tralnor thought he’d find Seltun’s disgust at his disclosure, there was curiosity instead.

Chris went on, “So, it’s not like you’re dealing with a dearth of opportunity. People throw themselves at you. And I can’t imagine you as one of those who doesn’t like sex.”

“I like it a lot.” Tralnor said.

“What gives?” Andy Pickett joined in. “I don’t care where you like to stick it, a decade is a long time.”

He gave them a condensed version of his love life. He described himself as divorced once and widowed twice. All indications were that Sha’leyen died in grisly circumstances when they were teenagers. His second wife, Anya Willis, had wanted Tralnor’s cousin Martin, and the MacCormack family name/money/social connections, but tried to settle for the Vulcan and couldn’t. They were married less than a year, and she refused to grant him an annulment on the grounds that she thought she was entitled to an extravagant amount of spousal support. A judge ruled he didn’t have to pay her any alimony and he’d not seen her since that day at the Stanislaus County Courthouse. Then, Amelie Grace came back into his life. . .

And as for his college days, he was no stranger to the walk of shame. Guys, girls, sometimes both at the same time, he’d had fun. He’d met Amelie Grace in college where they’d become friends and
non-exclusive fuck buddies. Damn, he missed her.

“After Amelie Grace died, I’d simply had enough trauma of that kind in my life. I was a widower twice-over by the time I was twenty-six. I had two girls to raise, jobs, grad school, I wasn’t in a place for a relationship, and casual sex had lost any appeal. Those ten years went fast.”

Seltun’s mind gasped while his face remained straight. The implications of the choice to stay alone struck hard, leaving the younger Vulcan in awe that Tralnor was still alive.

“Are you and Lt. Commander Sha’leyen going to get married?” Billy the Sixth popped into the conversation.

“I don’t know.” Right now, Tralnor just liked being in her presence, the way she seemed to pour cool water on his parched soul. She’d turned out an exceptional person despite her own suffering and torture at the hands of the Belonite warlord who’d claimed her as his prize.

Tralnor would very much like to marry her, but it wasn’t as easy as picking up where they left off as children. All he felt like he could do at this juncture was spend time with her and allow whatever was still between them to evolve naturally.

“She’s gorgeous.” Billy said.

“I think so too.” Tralnor agreed.

Sha’leyen was the only person in bioarch so late at night and did not expect anyone to disturb her studies. She’d been taking notes from the Vulcan histories, trying to glean as much information about tavalik duv-tor as possible. Ink and paper. Something about writing it out longhand made the facts stick in her mind better than if she was scanning passages into a data padd.

She switched volumes, going back to the one with the illustration of the box. She thought she’d seen mention of the context in which one of these horrid spirits was released. That detail could narrow down where precisely to look for it, a city as opposed to a star system?

“Sha’leyen, I was wondering if I might have a word?” Lt. Chavez walked straight into her office and planted himself on the purple love seat.

“Make it quick.” She shuffled all six books into a pile, spines facing away from him, dropped them and her notes in the open cabinet drawer, and locked it all away. Chavez was up to no good, and she needed to make a break for it or chase him off before he got too carried away.

He tried to offer a smile but grimaced instead. “Who is Dr. Tralnor to you? He told me you were betrothed as children and I keep trying to tell him that you’re not a Vulcan. He’s not making any sense.”

“We were bonded at age seven.” She slid two fingers down into a cracked drawer on her desk.

“But, you’re a human.” He stated, desperation clotted his tone and the aura he projected around himself. “You’re not like him.”

“No, Mr. Chavez, I am not human.” She’d never minded much when people made that mistake. They’d say things like they thought she looked greenish because she was ill to find out she always had a green cast to her skin rather than a pink one.
“You don’t look like one of them. I’ve seen you laugh and smile, so you don’t act like them. You touch other people.” He looked like he wanted to reach out and touch her. “Not like one of them at all.”

“This is my natural hair color.” She said of the long cranberry-red curls on her head. “My blood is copper-based and my life-span longer than yours. I have psionic abilities that include touch telepathy. My eyes have nictitating membranes. My internal anatomy is not like yours.”

He shook his head. “How can you say that? Are you that ashamed of what you are that delusion seems better than reality? Sha’leyen, I can help you.”

Clutched in her fingers and placed on her lap was a small double-bladed knife that was as easy to throw as to jab by hand. “I fail to see why I would need help for my natural condition. Perhaps it is best that we both go back to our own quarters. It’s another long day tomorrow.”

“Please, I can help you.” He pleaded. “Let me help you.”

“Go away, Mr. Chavez.” She’d spurned his advances in the past, and he never learned from rejection. He simply came back for continued dismissal. His infatuation with her ran deep and she’d not once given him any reason to think she was interested in him in a romantic sense whatsoever. “I don’t want anything to do with you outside of a professional capacity.”

Blood rushed his face, leaving him a blazing red, yet he refused to listen. “No, don’t say that. Please, don’t say that. Let me take you to dinner, and I can show you what a great guy I am. You won’t be disappointed, I promise.”

“I am losing my patience with you and your advances. My answer was no the first time, and it’s still no.”

“But, Sha’leyen, I love you.” He warbled.

Her stern answer, “Take your leave before I make you go.”

Chavez, flustered now, unleashed his disdain. “You can’t possibly see anything of value in that pretty-boy cocksucker. How can you stand to be with a man who allows himself to be fucked by other men? Sucked by other men? On that alone, he doesn’t deserve you.”

She expected Chavez to say any number of nasty things, but a homophobic rant was not one of them. “Leave before security comes and removes you.”

“You can’t expect a pillow-biting violinist to be faithful—”

Sha’leyen stood where he could see her weapon. “Get the fuck out of my department.”

Kirk wanted to put it down to a combination of Dr. Tralnor “Captain Chaos” MacCormack and an underlying case of space madness, but what he’d gleaned told him that Lt. John Chavez was a massive prick who earned every drop of angst and disrespect sent his way.

Lt. Commander Sha’leyen, someone whom Kirk had nothing but high regard for, was not a crazy, knife-wielding manic that jumped out of dark corners and attacked for no reason. When the overnight reports hit his desk, he’d not expected a stabbing to cross the blotter.
Chavez’s wound was through the meaty part of his hand, breaking the second and third carpals on the right side. She’d also severed a tendon, but the most egregious injury, according to the media lab boss, was the bruise to his pride. Well, that’s too fucking bad, Kirk thought. He’d take fifty Sha’leyens over one Chavez.

“Captain, you wished to see me?” Spock arrived, right on time, showered and changed after spending the entire night in engineering. Laura’s booby trap was proving harder to cut loose than planned.

“Seems like your Division has seen more than its fair share of excitement recently.” I wish you knew how good you smelled right now. He tried not to grin.

“I have spoken to Sha’leyen. She gave me her side of the story.” Spock’s eyes lingered on Kirk, not an unpleasant sensation.

“She stuck him because she was afraid he was going to attack her?” Kirk scrolled through the security report again. That’s right, keep staring at me. Tell me you like what you see, Spock. “Is that right?”

“Affirmative, Captain. He charged at her, and she stopped him.” Spock took his classic stance, clasping his hands behind his back, squaring his shoulders, and unknowingly accentuated his physique. “Lt. Chavez has made amorous overtures toward Sha’leyen since he came aboard twenty-three months ago. She made it clear to him from the outset that she did not want anything to do with him on a personal level.”

“Chavez hasn’t exactly taken well to Dr. Tralnor, who he thinks is competition for a contest he’s not even in. What’s this about slurs?” Kirk would choose Tralnor over Chavez any day of the week. He didn’t fault Sha’leyen for avoiding this guy.

“He has taken offense at Dr. Tralnor’s sexuality.”

Kirk’s brow wrinkled. “In this day in age? Who still thinks like that? Why would Chavez care?”

Maybe that’s why this hasn’t happened between us? Is that it? Am I afraid of scum like Chavez, afraid that who I love will tarnish my career, upset my family, drive away friends, what?

“He thinks that people like—” Spock looked like he was making an abrupt life-or-death decision. “He thinks that people like us are not worthy of love or companionship.”

“Who’s not worthy, Vulcans or bisexuals?”

Those dark brown eyes regarded Kirk.

“Both.” Spock said, stricken by something that robbed the color from his face.

The air almost had a static charge as Kirk got up and walked over to the one person he knew he wanted to spend forever with. Scant centimeters separated them as he moved in closer than he normally would. Feeling Spock’s warmth, hearing his breath, the way it hitched and up-ticked. Now, Kirk grinned as he cocked his head slightly to the left so he might proffer this first kiss as a sign of his enduring love.

Heat radiated on Kirk’s lips and his eyes closed. . . The entire world hurled to the floor.

Goddamnit! Why the hell does shit like this always have to happen? Kirk picked himself up and jabbed at the desk comm. “Scotty, status report!”
Crashing and clanging echoed throughout the ship, including some industrial strength noise coming over the connection from engineering. “She got us, Sir. I don’t quite know how, yet, but when I figure it out, I’m going to tan that woman’s greasy hide.”

“Spock, you better get down there.” Kirk said, their intimate moment shattered. “Great, look at this, she’s left me a message.”

The desk terminal spooled up the pre-recorded missive on auto-play. “Oh, Captain Sunshine, you naughty boy. Pick yourself up off the floor and try to understand when I tell you that this particular little souvenir isn’t personal. It’s merely a failsafe that I added into the mix to make sure you won’t stop me from getting my hands on those diamonds. You can’t double back and support whatever friends you called out from Command, simple as that. Enjoy your now extremely leisurely trip to wherever.”

She let loose with that blood-chilling smile. “Also, while I’m thinking about it, would you mind telling Tralnor that I wish I was the one who killed his wife. I didn’t plan that mission, I wasn’t near earth at the time, or I might have been lucky enough to participate. Some in the AVDL were pissed that our people made the trade of those kids for Mrs. MacCormack. I’m not. All traitors to their species earn a blade across their throats.

“Ta-ta, Comrade Hero.” She waved like a little girl might send her daddy off to work in the morning. “Until we meet again.”
Chapter 19

By evening, all the crap was up off the floors in sick bay, and cabinets were in the process of reorganization as seen to by the swing shift. Dr. McCoy retired to his office to complete the last of his chart notes before slinking off to his quarters where the process of clean-up had yet to start.

That fucking Hillyard had turned every person and movable object on the ship not bolted down into flying projectiles. Sprained wrists, concussions, broken noses, long-bone fractures, various blunt force injuries, and some penetrating trauma kept medical busy all day.

Frazzled, McCoy must have spent ten minutes on dictations when his ears picked up a slight drip pit-patting into the carpet tiles. His nose clocked the odor. “Son-of-a-bitch.”

A reluctant peek into it’s hiding spot, and his eyes registered what his other senses knew. His beautiful bottle of Tennessee whiskey lay in pieces with only millimeters of the oak cask-aged liquid remaining in the jagged glass still capable of containing fluid. It was all he could do to get up and walk away. The angels got more than their share today.

“It did not matter what approach we took, Mr. Scott. Laura’s trap was rigged to spring regardless of our efforts.” Spock spent ten hours cooped up with the irate engineer. Now that Enterprise was stable, they could flee to indulge in stress-reducing activities of their choosing.

“Aye, you say that.” Scott shook his head, unable to shed the rage and impotence wracking him. He was too emotionally involved, took this assault too personally.

Spock stepped away, left engineering, and ascended to deck three. Evidence of Enterprise’s abrupt halt and momentary failure of inertial dampeners littered the corridors, dented and smeared the bulkheads, and left nearly everything he owned strewn about his quarters. The idea of disengaging from chaos flashed and burned as his door swept shut behind him.

Earlier, Spock overheard a crewman describing her amazement at the sheer amount of “shit” left lying around on a starship. Pens, coffee mugs, half-eaten breakfast, crates, nearly everything on board shifted in a coup/contra-coup pattern. The initial stop threw them forward, like a vehicle hitting a wall, and that same energy reverberated back toward the stern, giving the ship a hard shake before technology stepped in and halted further damage.

Unable to function in squalor, he set about tidying up his living space, focused on using this action as a way to set part of his mind at ease. Bed made, toppled items uprighted, he opened the closet. The presentation case for his commendations finished sliding off the shelf and sailed to the floor. He let it be, instead drawn to a piece of paper that settled on the shoulders of his hanging tunics and robes. He recognized his mother’s writing:

Glenapp Castle, Ballantrae, South Ayrshire (Carrick), Scotland. 11 November 2234.

Flipping the paper over, he was greeted by a photo he did not realize was in his possession. A grouping of fifteen young children, six of whom were Vulcan, stood outside in the rain, lined up on the steps leading down to a Victorian garden. Glenapp Castle loomed in the background. Cold, wet, miserable, every expression in that picture despondent, it was a reminder of his very first visit to earth. He stood on the lowest step, between Mollie and her older brother John. The little girl clung to Spock, both seeking the warmth of one another’s bodies in the face of the bone-invading
damp and chill.

Aged four-and-a-half years, that trip also acted as Spock’s initial foray into his diplomat father’s world. He’d been there, with Sarek and Amanda, to witness an historic event, a socio-cultural merger of Clan MacCormack and Clan Lyr Saan. To this day, the smell of haggis made him sick to his stomach.

The desk comm in the other part of his quarters let out a distinctive chime, meaning only one person could be calling him.

“I’d ask what the hell is going wrong out there, but you probably can’t talk about it.” Mollie was relieved to finally have gotten ahold of her friend. She didn’t expect to hear from him every day, but given the circumstances, she thought they’d have spoken a lot sooner than this. Spock’s face tightened, and his eyes went dark, but the changes in his face were so subtle most people didn’t realize his mood morphed from pleased to see you to you’re not going to fucking like this.

“Okay, so we won’t go there.” She said. “I’ve got the final draft of our article for *Psiopsychology Quarterly* finished. I’m hitting send right now so you can give it one last glance.”

“You are most expedient, Mollie.”

“That’s not the reason I called, Spock.” She’d never bothered trying to modulate her facial expressions around him, so he expected her mischievous smile. “I want a progress report.”

He was obviously tired and not one who played dumb, but he wasn’t following.

“You and Jim?” She took a sip of her coffee, fresh this time, and while she didn’t think he and his captain had eloped in New Las Vegas since the last time they’d talked, she’d hoped for some headway. “You’ve at least talked to him, right?”

Spock looked straight ahead, silent.

“*Right*?”

Nothing.

“Oh, Spock. What am I going to do with you?”

“This morning, I attempted to tell him of my—dah-guv’es—but I could not actually say it.” He still struggled to come to terms with the homoerotic elements of his sexuality. For him, it was another log on the bonfire of ways he was not like everyone else, an additional shameful trait out of his control.

Mollie spent years trying to convince him that he wasn’t abnormal in his attractions. “It’s an essential part of you, Spock.”

“It is not logical to want. . .”

Their last conversation made it seem like he was doing well in this regard. Was it moving from that sort-of fantasy stage to the practical side that dredged this negativity back up? It killed her to see him this way, so conflicted about something he could never change.
“Give me reasons.” She’d have to argue him down from his position. He wasn’t thinking about the happiness or completion he’d find with Jim.

“The disgrace to my family. I do not think they would understand my choice of partner.”

They’d had this debate several times before, but always in the theoretical sense, the T’Pring is your future so don’t fall prey to misgivings sense. “You know they worry about you being alone the same way we worry about Tralnor. You made it through your first Time without taking a mate, but that’s not a guarantee you’ll get through it twice.”

Panic quaked in his eyes.

“No, don’t you go there.” She headed off a misunderstanding of terrifying proportions. “I will always be here for you, and taking you through the Fever is an unconditional part of that. What if there’s a repeat of the last time?”

He wasn’t quite sure what she was talking about. Why would there be a command performance of the hell he’d endured if she’d be the one helping him through it?

“I guess she never told you.” Mollie didn’t want to be the one to dump this detail on him. “When she found out you were coming home, T’Pau got in touch with me.”

An unforeseen shove off a cliff could not have drawn such a display of surprise from this man. “I know nothing of this.”

“She knew T’Pring was going to reject you and stepped past her squabble with the Lyr Saan. She never imagined events would play out like they did.” Mollie felt unsolicited tears leave hot streaks on the sides of her face. “I was on board the VSA ship, RV Tekeh, in the absolute ass-end of nowhere, with a research team. We were eleven days away from you at maximum warp, and that was only if Enterprise was going balls-out to meet us in the middle. Short of violating the laws of physics, I never could have gotten to you in time. We never wanted you to go through what you did. I am so sorry.”

“Do not cry, Mollie. You are not at fault.”

She sniffled and wiped at her face. “The likelihood of finding you a new, mentally compatible mate in such dire circumstances was impossible. T’Pau understood that ours would not be the traditional tel-tor of marriage and wanted us to proceed regardless. She told me your parents lobbied for me as your childhood bondmate. She vetoed me, chose T’Pring, in light of my being one of the Lyr Saan, and actually said that she regretted having done so. Do you know what that tells me?”

Still absorbing what she’d said, he shook his head no.

“I am a psionic human side-show freak who’s also a T’Kehr Temple Ko-tek’ru Kaylara t’Lyr Saan. If I am deemed an acceptable match for the heir-apparent of Clan Surak, Jim Kirk will be endorsed without issue.”

“That still does not address the fact that Jim is a man. What of children?” He acted like he didn’t know what she would say.

“You know the answer. I made you a promise the very first time we had this conversation.”

“You were fifteen when you gave me that pledge.” He said, as though their youth at the time negated that verbal agreement. “You would still do that for me?”
“I stand by my word.” *You were what gave me life, and I would return the favor to you,* she thought. “When, if, you and Jim decide it’s time for a baby, let me know. Just because I won’t be your wife doesn’t mean I won’t birth your children.”

“You are a good person, Mollie MacCormack.”

Able to smile after her mini-meltdown she thanked him. “Well, we’ve got your family and kids knocked off the list of reasons you think Jim is a no-go. And honestly, with him being right there with you, I think that makes him a perfect choice, especially once you add in all the little details you’ve given me over the last eighteen months. It sounds, to me anyway, like he’s got a special affinity for you that goes beyond normal friendship.”

“I do not want to harm his career trajectory.” He didn’t react as Mollie laughed at the statement. “He’s very young and very talented. I will not impede that progress.”

“Starfleet officers are married to one another every day and still get promotions and billets together. Next.” She could see his apprehension lifting.

“What if we are not sexually compatible?”

“That’s a valid concern, but nothing to sink a relationship over before you ever sleep with the guy. Be forward, find out what he likes or doesn’t, cross-check that with your own preferences, make a Venn diagram. The point is, you don’t know until you try one another out if you’re simpatico in bed.” That he could even talk about this individual matter with her was a promising sign. “You may even teach each other some new tricks.”

“What about you, Mollie?”

“What about me?”

“You are willing to make sacrifices for me that almost no one else would or could. I do not want you to be lonely because I am with Jim.” He was still afraid of hurting her even as she pushed for him to spread his wings and seek the love he deserved.

“Friends forever, you and me, which means I’ll never be alone.” She said. “I know we would have a successful, stable marriage, but to do that right, we’d be forced to eschew what makes our friendship work for the false mantle of a kind of love we simply do not feel. And that might very well destroy us.”

“If it does not work out with Jim and I still need you?” It galled him that nature played so dirty that such arrangements had to be made.

“We can plan ahead this time, and I’ll be wherever you are.”

He closed his eyes and ordered his thoughts before saying, “You are one of the only places I can call home, one of the few who accepts me unconditionally. Thank you.”

*I wish it wasn’t that way, Spock.* “You are welcome, forever.”

Rampant doubt and self-disgust slowly lifted like a San Francisco fog burning off by the afternoon. The palpable fear from the moment where he thought she’d told him the pon farr was a devil on his back she would not help him slay died back too. Undulating emotions more or less reined in, he
had something she needed to know.

“Mollie, there are details I cannot discuss, but Enterprise is currently suffering the after-effects of an encounter with the MV Sweetness. She’s captained by Laura Hillyard.”

She wrapped her arms around her stomach. “Holy shit, Spock.”

He made the decision to tell her more than he should according to Starfleet regulations. This wasn’t a ‘fleet/civilian casual conversation. Lives were at stake when Laura was involved. “She launched an attack on the ship’s computer, locking everyone out. I had Tralnor take me into the system.”

“You what?” Her spine sagged. “I know you don’t believe in luck, but you’re both so motherfucking lucky you got out of there alive. . . What did we do to have that cuntfaced bitch back in our lives? Please tell me Enterprise blasted her ass off. . . You’re not saying anything, Spock.”

Her eyes pleaded at him for the news that this carbuncle dead or at least being held in a maximum-security prison block. “Spock?”

“She got away before we had the chance to shoot her down.” He held back on the whole truth, but Mollie knew Laura’s modus operandi and filled in the blanks.

“Where is she now?”

“If I knew, that information is classified.” He didn’t want to shut her out, but there was only so much he could reveal.

“Watch your back out there, Spock.”
Chapter 20

This was Tralnor’s first time alone with Captain Kirk. He’d get a feeling for this man as a single entity, not playing off his foils, Spock and McCoy. “You requested my presence, Captain?”

“Come in. Take a seat, Dr. Tralnor.” Don’t make me order you like I do Spock. You don’t want to be standing for what I have to show you.

Tralnor followed that unspoken directive. For a non-telepath, Jim Kirk had a remarkable ability for projecting his thoughts. This was not a once-in-a-while stress-reaction projection that all humans were capable of. It was a semi-conscious process wherein the captain was capable of directing individual statements at specific people.

What is that nasty fucking smell? Kirk cleared his throat and reminded himself where Tralnor worked.

“I came directly from the media lab, Sir. I apologize for my condition. You said this couldn’t wait.”

“You need to see something.” Reluctance welled out of the captain. “I was asked to relay some information to you, but I think its better if you get this news firsthand.”

Laura Hillyard’s frozen image popped up on a screen. By the end of the video, Tralnor’s fingers dug into his palms to the point of bruising. “This is the first lead in Amelie Grace’s case in eight years.”

Incredulity washed over from the captain. “Lead? The xenophobic fucks who killed your wife are still out there?”

“Her murder remains on the books as an open-unsolved homicide.” Tralnor had to close his eyes for a second, dizzy at the news her killers were another millimeter closer to facing justice. “No one knew it was AnthroVision until now. Police suspected that a supremacist cell, not directly connected with mainstream groups, had done it but never proved anything.”

Kirk shuddered internally. Though he didn’t know Tralnor well, he was angry for him, with him, that Amelie Grace went to her grave and her perpetrators went free. “Forensics? Video evidence?”

“The highjackers went in fully Dipped. Biological trace evidence from them was all fake, and the biometrics from the security footage was useless.” He still got that helpless feeling when he talked about the law enforcement angle. Police did everything right and worked relentlessly only to come up empty.

“How do you fake that?” And what the fuck is Dipping? Sounds like some sort of kinky sexual thing.

“Dipping is the vernacular term for a method criminals use to hide in plain sight. If you were to go through this process, you’d start by taking a massive dose of chimera nanobes.”

Kirk tried to figure out what Tralnor said but didn’t have the background. “Chimera what?”

“Illegal for use in anything except for research purposes, chimera nanobes temporarily give chordates an extra genome that lets scientists run all manner of experiments. For the criminal element, they use it because that new DNA sheds in your blood, saliva, urine, and mucus
membranes. That’s part one of Dipping.” Tralnor wished he didn’t know these details of the depths
deviancy. “Part two, you’d have every single hair on your body removed at the root followed by
an equally extensive dermal abrasion. Following a skin polishing, your body is literally dipped in a
breathable biological sealant. From there, you’re taken into an ordinary spray-tan booth and blasted
with a coating of lab-grown skin cells like the ones used on burn victims. Hairpieces, makeup to
alter the structure of your face, shoe lifts, prosthetics, you head out to wreak havoc as something
nearly impossible to catch. The only thing you can’t change in a Dip is semen, and Amelie Grace,
thankfully, was not raped.”

“You know, I get hit with a lot of new or unusual concepts as a part of my daily life, and I like to
think I’m good at taking what comes my way. It’s not often I’m left disgusted.” A principled man,
Kirk could not identify with the kinds of people who’d highjack a ship to commit murderous hate
cries.

“It wasn’t just my wife this specific team murdered.”

“They fucked those kids up pretty bad. I don’t care that they were Vulcan. Young people who
witness brutality and persecution of that kind—” Kirk cut himself off vocally, but his mind
struggled to turn back a riptide of death/pain/fear and the horrors of a holocaust he’d barely
survived. “Let’s just say I know from personal experience.”

*I can tell from the look on your face. . . I forgot you’re an empath. I’m sorry you had to feel that.*

Tralnor wanted to tell him not to feel sorry but didn’t think it prudent to respond to what Kirk
“said” nonverbally. “At the starbase, my wife ran into an old friend of hers from school. All three
of us had been in the marching band together. On the security footage, it looked like she and Jock
were having a great time catching up with one another. She went to catch her flight, and two of the
AVDL stayed behind and followed Jock.

“Jock Balloch was a Starfleet officer, an ROTC guy, who was on his way to see his family before
he shipped out for his new assignment as the second officer aboard—”

“Farragut.” Kirk said. “He never showed. We were supposed to collect him at Shelby Orbital. We
waited for three days only to be told he’d been found dead. I never did learn the details.”

“He didn’t make it out of earth orbit. He was found beaten to death in a seldom-used maintenance
hub two days after he disappeared.”

“Goddamn. No forensics?”

“None.”

“You know, I never met the guy, so it wasn’t like I lost a friend, but I still felt his loss. I was going
to be working with him every day. It took a while to get my mind to accept that he was gone.”

“I think you would have liked him. He had a great sense of adventure and rarely met a stranger.
You remind me a little of Jock, you’ve got the same cocky smile.”

*Do I have a cocky smile? I guess I do.*

“Can I turn over the part of Laura’s message where she’s talking about the murder?”

According to the rules, Kirk should say no. “Only if you can find a way to send it anonymously.
My higher-ups would shit themselves otherwise.”
Sha’leyen had spent her day confined to quarters and, once she’d remediated the destruction from the ship’s stall, split her time three ways: meditation, study, and cross-stitch. The first two items were so deeply ingrained in her daily routine that she found herself off-balance if she didn’t do them. The third was pure indulgence.

Her first bunkmate aboard the USS Yuri Gagarin introduced her to the colorful, exacting craft. It held appeal because it was so far removed from what Sha’leyen did as a professional, she found it relaxing and satisfying in that she got to work with her hands. Weddings, birthdays, just because, she gave the finished ones out to everyone.

She’d given her statement to Mr. Spock this morning. He knew enough about her background to comprehend her startling reaction to Chavez rushing her. The security chief cleared her of any disciplinary violations as she’d acted in self-defense. Exile to her quarters was a formality until security ticked all the right boxes and filed all the paperwork.

Another twenty minutes of creating a picture of a peacock with needle and thread, an idea arrived on the scene. Stitchery set to the side, she squatted down to open a drawer, then pulled it off the runners. Hand scrounging around the dark hole, she hit on what she was looking for.

The paper envelope was hardly worse for wear than when she’d placed it in there eight-and-a-half years ago. Unwinding the string closure, she opened it up and poured three finger-sized stoppered vials onto her bed. Contained within were two herbal-based psiopsych drugs, in their most stable, powdered or crystallized forms. The third . . .

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The Vulcans called the first one torabrayek because it could be used in sporadic cases to force a mind into a state of equilibrium. The second powder, a putrid sulfury yellow, was limein, the mask, and this drug made one’s mental shields nearly impenetrable. Combine torabrayek and limein, and a user’s psionic talents multiplied, augmented exponentially. In an untrained/unbalanced mind, such a compound turned someone into the telepathic equivalent of Godzilla rampaging Tokyo.

Light blue granules, about the size of table salt, ketro’nistin looked harmless in the third vial. She hesitated to handle it, knowing how many thousands of lives were destroyed by this chemical. Ketro’nistin had no therapeutic merit, a weapon of sinister creation, it existed to turn mair-rigolauya into receptacles of death.

What if she could convert it to an aerosol form and used it against the Vohr?

“I didn’t think you people liked alcohol. At least that’s what the pointy-eared one keeps telling me.” Dr. McCoy arrived at Kirk’s office just as Tralnor was getting ready to go.

Tralnor let Scotty’s moonshine roll around on his tongue. How the engineer managed to make a smooth spirit of such high quality in the belly of a starship, Tralnor did not know. “It’s a CNS depressant, and Vulcans are not fond of anything that might compromise their control. That said, the amount of hard liquor it takes to get me drunk, or even tipsy, is in the liter-plus range.”

“Why bother drinking that then?” McCoy pointed to the glass in Tralnor’s possession. “If it’s not going to do anything for you.”
“The ritual of social activity.” He started. “Plus, the flavor is interesting, and it clears my sinuses.”

Kirk was amused. “Your sinuses, Dr. Tralnor?”

“Its like paint thinner, strips out the congestion.” He said. “I also drink a lot of coffee for the same reason. I’ve got a human face and a Vulcan upper respiratory tract. The two don’t always coexist harmoniously.”

“Well,” McCoy felt like he’d fallen into a parallel-parallel universe, “good to know a few of our human vices are helpful to you in some way.”

The conversation meandered until the doctor let the captain know Lt. Chavez’s stab wound was repaired. “That boy, he doesn’t like you, even a little bit, Dr. Tralnor. As he was coming out of the sedatives, he made sure all of sick bay knew. Dumb little bastard actually thinks he’s got a chance with Sha’leyen.”

The captain said, “That reminds me, Dr. Tralnor, I’m curious about something.” I need to figure out if what I heard this morning was real or wishful thinking. “And you don’t have to answer if you don’t want. How much of the Vulcan population is like you in terms of sexuality?”

“Again, modesty and embarrassment keep those numbers from being released. Where the World Health Organization compiles those stats and publicly shows them when they’re relevant to epidemiological data, Vulcan clamps down.”

“Because of course they do.” The doctor grumbled.

“Within the Lyr Saan, prevalence is likely around three-to-five percent that someone is not exclusively heterosexual. I cannot speculate if that holds true to the rest of the planet because I don’t know if Lyr Saan genetics are at play.”

The captain and the doctor, who’d started out looking hopeful as Tralnor deigned to answer, were disappointed.

“What I can tell you about non-heteronormative people on Vulcan is that we’re not discriminated against. A few families may have some initial disappointment that their child won’t follow in the path to the most commonly seen example of marriage, but kids aren’t disowned, parents don’t try to force queer kids to become straight. Vulcan culture as a whole is very accepting in this regard, even if they won’t publish any numbers.”

They’d worried that infamous hardass, Sarek, would react badly to any hint that Spock might have an attraction to men. The doctor dared to relax a little at that knowledge that Spock and Jim getting together was not going to cause another rift between father and son.

Kirk wasn’t yet convinced. That answer may suffice for any other person but this was about Spock. “But wouldn’t you say that at its most basic level that a homosexual relationship is fundamentally illogical?”

“Is it?” Tralnor queried.

Kirk shrugged as he spoke, trying to hide how much he wasn’t looking forward to hearing any more on this subject. “What about children? Is that not one of the primary purposes behind marriage? For Vulcans, anyway?”

“Even dating to pre-Reform times, homosexual relationships are not viewed differently than heterosexual ones. Marriage is separate from reproduction. Marriage is a social contract, a way to
merge families and interests, to redistribute wealth. It’s also used to cheat our unfortunate biological quirks. Practiced in such a way that ensures no one is alone during their Time, marriage preserves lives. Sexuality and gender are not used as part of the criteria to determine if someone can get married or have children.” At this point, Tralnor couldn’t tell if he’d granted the captain any relief.

“When Sha’leyen was chosen for me, it was because she was compatible in personality and psionic abilities. Our families were amenable to one another. She wasn’t picked just because she was a girl.” Tralnor could not speak to Spock’s experience or why it had gone so terribly wrong. “If there’d been a more suitable male candidate, I would have been bonded to him instead. And before you ask, my parents and the matchmaker knew of my future preferences well ahead of when the search for a suitable partner began.”

“Then how is reproduction viewed as separate?” While human norms didn’t require marriage as a prerequisite for having children, there was a general consensus that life followed a rubric and that children and marriage went hand-in-hand.

“Let’s say Dr. McCoy and I got married. We are not expected nor required to have children. No one is. If we do want them, there are various means by which we can have them. No one way of propagating the next generation is seen as superior to another.”

“Okay.” That doesn’t really answer my question.

“Single people do have kids. Others, for one reason or another, have children, but not with their spouses. I wasn’t married to the mothers of either of my girls when they were born.” Tralnor found it hard to tell if what he said made sense. “And, there is no such thing as an illegitimate child.”

Later, when Kirk and Bones were by themselves, the doctor turned and said, “Hey, this could be very good news for you.”

“Probably not, Bones.” My lips were so close to his, I could nearly taste him. . . “Probably not.”
“It’s you. What is it this time that could not possibly wait until an appropriate moment?”

“Why are you answering this line?” Mollie, suspicious that Sajak was screening Sarek’s personal calls, wanted to know.

“The ambassador has a right to do his duties unencumbered by human trivialities.” The long-time aide was never comfortable with the interpersonal relationships his boss had with the people of the planet he was the ambassador to. “He never should have given you this number.”

“That’s one man’s opinion, Sajak. I would appreciate it if you’d get the ambassador for me. Otherwise, I’ll have to take the consulate shuttle up to San Francisco and have this discussion with him in person.” She glanced at her schedule for the rest of the day and started formulating cancellation notices for her classes and a reminder to call the concertmaster at the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra to tell her she’d miss tonight’s rehearsal. Not that losing an English horn player was a tragedy, she thought.

“No, stay in Los Angeles. Don’t come here. I’ll retrieve him.” Sajak skulked away from the screen.

Mollie looked around her office until her eyes landed on the picture collage posted to the wall near the door. A testament to her student days, she kept it around because it almost always put a smile on her face, even when dealing with a numb-nuts like Sajak.

“Greetings, Mollie.” Sarek’s somber face filled the empty screen.

“Good afternoon, Sir.” She’d reached out to him on this line many times over the years, almost every instance serious in some nature, but she’d never had to contact him over impending death and violence. “I shouldn’t be telling you this, but it’s important.”

“Confidential?”

“Absolutely.” Mollie’s mind choked on the words as they fed to her vocal cords. “Laura Hillyard has come out of hiding.”

Heads whipped around as Tralnor passed through the halls from his quarters to Rec Room 2. No one on the Enterprise, save for Spock and Sha’leyen, had ever seen him in anything but his Starfleet uniform, and now he was clad in a hand-tailored vintage-style suit with a cardinal and gold striped bowtie and braces.

Today, he’d avoid the rigamarole of the media lab and participate as well as he could in his students’ music festival. Laura’s havoc meant what should have been a mostly empty room was nearly full with people who, with permission of their superiors, got to be an audience due to sheer lack of anything to do.

“I would like to warn everyone now. you’ll probably hear some yelling and cussing when I go live.” Tralnor typed in another code, turned on the cameras, and waited for his staff to answer his summons. Dr. Lola waved hello, and the shrieking began.

“—holyfuckingshit—”
“At least they didn’t cut his head off.”

“Oh no!”

“Those rotten bastards, they’ve defaced a national monument.”

Such was the flowing commentary from some of the hundred-twenty-five-plus high school students congregating around his image. The chatter only stopped when he held his right hand in the air and made a fist. “T’nar pak sorat y’rani.”

They replied, in unison, “T’nar jaral.”

That formal greeting signaled the beginning of the warm-up session.

“Thank you, and good morning.” He said. “While it’s unfortunate that I cannot be with you today in person, know that I’ve got all of you on my mind.”

He’d managed to get Sarah David as his aide for the day, and she brought him the festival itinerary. As was usual for these events, the large ensembles performed first before people broke off into their solo and small ensemble entries. The unique situation his program was in today would see all of his large groups playing back-to-back in the same space. Philharmonic orchestra, chamber orchestra, symphonic winds, concert band, big band, and jazz band had about three hours. It was a damned good thing he’d trained his students to be efficient. Now, if the adjudicators could keep up.

“I want to speak to the seniors, then we’ll officially begin our warm-ups.” The group separated, leaving him with thirty-two students. “You need to know that it has been an honor working with you over these last four years. I’ve witnessed as each of you has grown and matured as musicians and as people. Come May, when you set out on the next phase of your lives, it will be with the understanding that you are capable, contemplative, and extensible.”

They nodded along, several faces showing traces of melancholy regarding their inevitable transition to adulthood. He wished them well in this competition. Just as he readied to dismiss them and regroup everyone, Amy Rothstein approached.

“Did you get our gift, Dr. Tralnor?”

He had the small box, still wrapped, on his desk. The card had told him to wait until festival to open it. Sarah retrieved it for him, and he held it to his ear and gave it a quick shake. Nothing was broken.

“We hope you like it.”

The paper, worn at the corners, tore away. He was the proud owner of a coffee mug bearing the inscription: *Instant Humanoid, Just Add Coffee!* “Very fitting.”

“You won’t get the other part until you come home.” Ryan Saito said. “We signed you up for one of those clubs where they send you a half-kilo of frou-frou whole beans each month. And, we got you a new coffee machine.”

“That one in your office had to go.”

“Thank you very much.” Tralnor was already looking forward to the stockpile of coffee.
Stretching, breathing exercises, and a short recitation to clear their minds, the high schoolers left for the gymnasium where the large ensembles performed. This left four people behind, two conducting grad students, and two composition undergrads. Tralnor gave them a brief rundown of what he expected to see from them. Three of them were fine with his requirements, having known from the beginning of the term what elements went into this practical exam. His problem child, T’Roah, made her case for the eleventh time in twelve weeks that she be allowed to conduct from an electronic score.

“At USC, we use paper scores and sheet music.” He stated, again. “Lt. David, why is that?”

Sarah entered the view of the camera. “It’s an essential element to the art form of conducting and orchestral performance. Printed media is more apt to be retained by the brain in terms of cognitive load, persuasiveness, and attention span.”

T’Roah attempted to argue that may well be true for human brains, but Vulcans were different. Tralnor shut her down with four recent citations from science publications Wel-ek’tal and Shi’nahp Sakihtek stating the same thing as Sarah.

Discussion over, the connection to earth placed on hold, Sarah said, “Wow, she’s really nervous.”

And unprepared, Tralnor thought.

Lt. Uhura, after slogging through thousands of line-items and banks of ghost data in the queue waiting to be written over, found a tasty nugget regarding the illegal letter that let Laura Hillyard infiltrate the Enterprise. Whoever sent it, thought they’d cleaned up after themselves by deleting the original, not counting on each file on the entire ship being unique. There were minute details that set the letter apart from others of its size and type.

Following the document itself back to the terminal it was composed on, Uhura located the place it once occupied before tracing it to a unique set of login information. Evaluation of that login showed only one person used it and it always entered into the same handful of terminals.

“Gotcha.” She allowed herself the tiniest feral grin. “Captain Kirk. The letter writer has been found.”

People filled the bleachers at Patterson High as Tralnor’s staff ran their camera check. He recognized other band and orchestra directors, his students’ parents, and kids from other schools who all wanted to see what his groups were up to this year.

Philharmonic was seated, and Dr. Vonna ran them through their scales and pitches, tuning the ensemble with itself and as much to the room as possible. She turned on the podium to face the audience. “Hello, I’m Dr. Bella Vonnegut, Assistant Director of Orchestras for Turlock High School. I can tell by the looks on everyone’s faces that you’re wondering why you’re seeing me instead of Dr. Tralnor MacCormack.”

A low buzz of conversation hung around the bleachers, including someone loudly asking if Tralnor
was single, but Dr. Vonna kept on. “I know you were all looking forward to one of his short lectures about physics and this performance space, but you’ll have to do with a few words from the stars.”

“Today, I’m coming to you from the USS Enterprise, where I’m at the beginning of a six-month assignment.” Tralnor liked how Jamal and Warren set up the split screens so he could see the audience/adjudicators, conductor, and the students in the orchestra. “I’d like to speak briefly on the subject of trigonometry before I turn everything over to my staff.”

The people on his side of the connection, officers and crew alike, were interested in this mention of math. What was this crazy Vulcan getting at? The audience in Peterson, California, started grumbling. What was this crazy Vulcan getting at?

“Tuning a piano, an orchestra, or two piccolos—” He let them laugh at the joke. Everyone knew tuning piccolos was damned near impossible. “—is all dependent on harmonics. The individual notes an instrument puts out are made up of sine waves of varying length and amplitude depending on the hertz frequency at which its played.”

“Well, Mr. Spock, this is some letter.” Kirk felt the blush spread up his neck and into his face and ears

“Yes, Mr. Spock. You are embarrassed by the contents, Captain?”

“Um, no.” Kirk was so glad Spock remained aloof in the review of a five-thousand-word pornographic fantasy. The captain considered himself worldly in delights of the flesh, but this was enough to make a bronze statue hot under the collar. “Just very aware that I usually don’t read this sort of thing at work.”

I’m thankful you insisted that we leave the bridge to look at this. “Spock, I think you and I should pay our creative writer a visit, then escort them to the brig.”

Both orchestras and symphonic band done, Tralnor scrawled some quick notes on Warren Lindiwe’s turn on the podium. His first graduate student passed with ease. The undergrads had done well too.

Concert band seated, Dr. Lola warmed and tuned them. As he’d done for the last three groups, Tralnor introduced them and said a little something.

“I’ve had other educators ask over the years why THS plays so many obscure pieces by unknown, long-dead composers. I have an affinity for old films, especially the music that scores them. During the First Epoch of Motion Pictures, generally considered between 1924 and the eve of World War III in 2026, some of the most riveting and innovative classical music ever written was composed specifically for use in film. Designed to convey emotion, setting, and pace, film scores tap directly into the human condition and as such deserve to be preserved.

“This is music that’s no longer performed, so it’s no longer heard. Some of it collects dust in archives, some is reverse transcribed from extant films. Most of it is simply gone, lost to war, time, poor preservation techniques, and apathy. The classical music community, however, is finally
starting to understand just how important this part of our history is, and is striving to save what’s
left of that legacy.

“I arranged the following piece for concert band last summer so it could be evaluated and approved
by the California Music Educator’s Association in time for the district festival. Turlock High
School presents music from the motion picture Quigley Down Under, composed by Basil
Poledouris. The track is simply called Main Title, as it is the piece that opens the film. Take it
away, Dr. Lola.”

Two locations checked, and no one knew where the letter writer had sneaked off to. Subordinates
tried to find them. Security looked in the usual haunts. No joy.

“There is one more place we can try, Captain.” Spock said.

“Do tell.”

“Rec Room 2.”

Captain and first officer stood in the back of a full house. Kirk admitted he didn’t know a lot about
music and the only instrument he played well was the radio, but he was hard-pressed to believe that
he was listening to a high school band. He’d heard so-called professionals that didn’t sound this
polished.

He scanned the faces of the people enjoying the show on this side of the simultaneous video feeds,
looking for the one person who left them limping along on one-quarter impulse power until the
tugs met them tomorrow to more safely drag the Enterprise back to port.

“To our left, near Dr. Tralnor’s desk, second row.” Spock said in a light tone that Kirk’s human
ears almost couldn’t pick apart from the band.

T’Roah ascended the podium, and Tralnor turned to a new page in his notebook before pulling her
score to the top of the pile he’d consulted against for the other three. Russian Christmas Music, by
Alfred Reed, one of the few pieces ever reverse transcribed from an original band composition into
an arrangement for orchestra, was released in 1944. This was a standard for high school and
college bands which was one of the reasons he’d chosen it for T’Roah. Thousands of audio and
video recordings of this piece were out there. He knew the second she raised her baton, she’d not
taken advantage of those resources.

She didn’t look at her musicians, staying buried in the score, anticipating the page turns. Tralnor’s
high schoolers held it together, well-rehearsed enough to not follow T’Roah off her bridge. At four
minutes and twelve seconds in, she leaned over to preemptively grab a corner to make the next flip.

“Oh my god.” Sarah said, loud enough for most people in the rec room, but not enough that it went
out over the microphones. She saw T’Roah’s initial mistakes and recognized before the grad
student did when the situation was irredeemable. Her hands clamped over her mouth in a moment
of horror. When her hands went down, she said, “She just failed.”

Score dumped on the floor, T’Roah had no choice but to try to finish out the piece, but couldn’t remember all the time, key, and dynamic changes. Not that she’d have done a good job of communicating those with her musicians anyway. The final chord ended, and she should have held a fermata that kept their instruments up for a few seconds before a cut-off, but she walked off instead, Dr. Vonna chasing after her as she left the gymnasium. Audiences on both sides of the galaxy sat in stunned silence.

Tralnor put his link on hold.

“What’s this about, Sirs?” A blue-clad lieutenant did her best to stay poised in front of the ship’s top dogs.

“Lt. Rashida Jefferson, you are under arrest.” Spock faced down the cultural anthropologist.

“Are you crazy? What for?” She looked around, waiting for someone in the crowded room to come to her defense. When no one spoke up as the charges were listed, initial alarm turned to agitation. “I never pegged you for a lunatic, Commander Spock, but I suppose you’d have to be one to spend all these years working out here.”

Red shirts surrounded Kirk, Spock, and Lt. Jefferson and she began to cry like a child caught in a lie about stealing candy from the corner store.
Chapter 22

“I want you to ponder a couple of things over next few seconds. One, how did you think you could possibly beat me? Two, your colleague, Captain Kuznetsov, exercised discretion and intelligence in scrambling the fuck out of here. Why did you not follow her example when she called the retreat?”

Laura’s skin, after years of life on Sweetness, suffered the onslaught of Melbek III’s natural sun almost immediately. The rare instances she’d made planetfall in the time she’d been on the run, were exclusively at night.

She walked along the front of the captured contingent of officers and enlisted from the USS Seren. The sensible amongst them were smart enough to show their fear, and she had respect for that. It was the macho shitheads, the ones who even as they stood in neat rows, hands behind their heads, held hostage by ten people with plasma rifles set to high-dispersal, who thought they could take her down, that she had absolutely no tolerance for.

“But you, Captain Franklin, you decided to gamble.” She stood in front of the man who’d placed all fifty-one of his crew in peril. Franklin, used to throwing his hulking size around, fumed that this tiny woman had him by the short-hairs.

The sound of earth moving equipment started nearby. Fortunately, Sweetness was hauling a load of hard rock mining machinery. The company Laura and her crew were contracted to would just have to wait for their big toys to arrive.

“Do you hear that?” She pointed toward the racket. “That noise is your destiny.”

One of her crewmen arrived and opened a polished hardwood case that looked something like the flat, rectangular box an elegant silver service was kept in. He lifted the lid, and she pretended like she was counting something on her fingers, giving the impression that deep down, she was just tits and a gash, nothing to really worry about. She smelled the fear sweat decreasing. Another person approached, presenting a plate of pastries. She made a show of taking three dainty bites of a cherry turnover, then she reached into the not-silverware box.

Again, the intelligent ones knew what she had, knew to be scared. Morons, and there were more in this crew than she thought possible given Starfleet’s lovey-dovey approach to recruitment and training, thought she was joking around with them. “Ladies and gentlemen, what I’ve got in my hand is a gorgeous little piece of human history.”

She held it up for all to see, letting their eyes gaze upon it, and brains mull it over. Some didn’t recognize it as a threat. “This is the Walther-P38. Isn’t it beautiful?”

A space-jockey in a gold shirt gave a horse-laugh. He didn’t think it funny when the butt-stock of a plasma rifle crashed down on his head.

“Faces forward!” Laura shouted. “The P38 was the close-combat weapon of choice for a legendary army that dared to stand up for humanity in the shadows of those who’d rather see the planet fall into the hands of the dictatorial edicts of forced diversity. The P38 is small, simple, effective.”

None of Seren’s crew recognized the pop for what it was, until a woman in red pitched forward, blood and brain tissue bursting from the new crater in the back of her cranium. “Now, we march.”

The first ten of Seren’s crew were lined up on the edge of a trench Laura had her guys dig real quick rather than immediately turning their attention to dislodging behemoth diamonds from the
ground. Never afraid to get her hands dirty, she randomly targeted the seven bullets remaining in this magazine at the bases of their skulls. The bodies that didn’t fall into the hole, she kicked in. The three arbitrary survivors were taken by additional rifle-bearers and locked in a cargo container that some smaller mining equipment came down in.

Magazine ejected, fresh one slotted, the ritual repeated itself four more times. The shots echoed in her head. Her face and hands, flecked with the blow-back gore of white matter, bone shards, and red mist, remained spattered as she felt no pressing need to wash up. The twelve survivors were brought out to cover the bodies of their brethren with soil.

Captain Franklin had the gal to cry for them, dragging the Commander insignia on his sleeves across his weepy eyes. It was his fault they were dead, disobeying Kuznetsov like he did. He stared at his first officer’s nearly headless corpse, whispering her name like she’d jump from the trough and comfort him.

“Unless you want to try on a 9mm bullet for size, Franklin, I advise you to start moving some earth.” Laura didn’t need to sound cross. The threat of her antique was enough to get the fallen leader into a groove.

“Liam, get Doc Hoskins to come down here with a hypospray full of methaqualone and chlorpromazine.” Laura stopped one of her people as he drifted past. He thought she was a total ghoul, and he liked it.

“He’ll want a reason why he should leave the ship.” Liam said.

“Tell him I’ve found us a new plaything.” She pointed the muzzle of her pistol at the only blue shirt scraping dirt back into the hole.

“I see. He’ll be delighted.”

“Look up to the sky, Franklin. See what else you’ve wrought.” The big man didn’t respond, kept his face to the floor, and hands shoveling. Not until she got the toe of her boot under his chin and physically wrested his head toward the heavens was his humiliation complete.

Coming down through the atmosphere, multiple streaks of light were the last remnants the USS Seren.

Lt. Jefferson refused to talk to anyone, even her appointed legal counsel. Short of beating a confession out of her, she’d keep her mouth shut until forced to enter a plea at her court-martial.

Kirk asked Spock and Uhura pick up on their search through Jefferson’s onboard life the next morning. Tired, frustrated, he wanted to throttle the shit out of this idiot anthropologist who’d decided getting her rocks off was more important than the lives and safety of two hundred other people.

Now the captain had a decision to make, spend the evening alone in his quarters where all he’d do was fume, or grab a sandwich in the officer’s mess and pop into Rec Room 2 and see what fun and games were going on there. The only reason being social won out, he walked past the entrance to Rec Room 2 before picking out his food and saw Spock and Bones watching the show.

Ham and Swiss on wheat, not his favorite, sounded infinitely better than peanut butter and jelly or
siracha tofu with bean sprouts. The doctor and first officer had saved a seat for him. He had to admit, it felt nice to be wanted.

“She say anything, Jim?” McCoy looked like he wanted to throttle the shit out of an idiot anthropologist too.

“Not a word.” Damn, the ham was synthesized. It felt weird in his teeth, more like reconstituted ham salad than an actual piece of meat.

“Well, I suppose I wouldn’t be too gabby either if I was looking at triple homicide charges. I don’t know her all that well, so I can’t comment as to the extraordinary entitlement it takes to do something like she did.” Bones shook his head, bewildered. “Makes me wonder how she was thinking.”

“She wasn’t exactly using her brain, Bones.” The food was a lost cause. “If she were a man, you would say she was thinking with her dick.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Jim.” McCoy swiveled to look Spock in the face. “He’s just yanking my chain, right?”

“She was writing to a boyfriend in Austin, Texas, and was rather graphic about what she wanted to do with him.” Spock said.

Feeling some of the blush return, Kirk said, “Think of every lie about sex you ever told your buddies as a teenager, but knock it up a few notches.”

McCoy’s upper lip curled. “It’s days like this when I fucking hate people.”

. . . and that’s when I smell you, your spicy masculinity making me wet before I even touch you. . . Kirk’s brain recited remembered lines of Lt. Jefferson’s letter.

. . . hands wrapped tight around your searing hot flesh before enrobing you with my mouth, feeling you bobbing at the back of my throat as I swallow you whole. . .

Was it suddenly hot in that room? People had been in and out all day and the combined body heat? No, that was a stupid idea. The captain wiped his brow and tried to listen to the flute choir coming in live from California.

. . . your lips laying claim to my body. . .

. . . the exquisite torture of your cock slowly sinking into me. . .

. . . torrid streams of come flooding my slick passage. . .

“Captain, are you unwell?” The last, or maybe the only person Kirk wanted to see him like this, brought him back to reality.

“Spock, I, uh, need to, forgot about something. Be back later.”

“What the hell was that all about?” McCoy watched as Jim almost ran from the room.

Spock was as obviously confused as the doctor. “I do not know.”
The doctor didn’t want to meddle in the love lives of his captain and first officer, but at this point, he almost felt like it was his duty to intercede. The situation at the top of Enterprise’s hierarchy was teetering on the precipice of dysfunction.

“It’s not a break-up that’s got Jim down in the dumps.” McCoy said.

“I told you the captain was not seeing anyone at this time.” Spock just had to get in a dig about being right.

“Nope. You’re a smartass, Spock, and the real kicker is that you know you are. “Jim is ass over teakettle in love. He’d shout it from the rooftops if he could. I’ve never seen him this hung-up on someone before. This person is smart, sexy, and everything he’s ever wanted.”

The Vulcan, who was rarely anything but poised and bull-headed, seemed to pale and shrink down like a kid who just witnessed his dog get hit by a car. “What makes you certain?”

“I got it straight from the horse’s mouth.” McCoy smiled.

Spock didn’t stutter or stumble like Jim. He simply got up and walked away, leaving McCoy to wonder if Laura Hillyard might not have planted something in the water.

The only way to make the shower run any colder was to fill the cubicle with ice. Kirk didn’t care that he was risking hypothermia. He didn’t even feel the cold anymore. Too nonplussed to remain standing, he slid down the wall and planted his ass on the floor. Here, the freezing jet covered more of his skin’s surface area.

“He’s not mine to desire, not mine to hold, not mine. . .”

“Captain Kirk, incoming transmission, Priority One.” The damnable comm system spouted off, taking him away from his self-constructed glacial getaway. “Repeat, Captain Kirk, incoming transmission, Priority One.”

Barely shoveled into a uniform top, towel still around his waist, Kirk sat down and turned on his terminal, opening the connection. “Admiral Holt, good evening.”

Miranda Holt was in her mid-fifties, at least that’s what her public biography stated, and presented herself as someone half that age. Rumors of extensive cosmetic procedures made the rounds, but no one knew for sure. “I wish it were a good evening, Captain, I really do. I have to ask, have you smoked out that rat-fink who let this Hillyard character disable your ship?”

“Yes, Ma’am. We found her this afternoon, and she’s now in custody.” Kirk intended for that news to go out with the next morning’s bulletins and reports.

“Dragon and Seren got into a firefight against MV Sweetness in the Melbek system earlier today. Captain Kuznetsov didn’t want to get into a pissing contest with a ship that’s a fortress of firepower. Commander Franklin thought he had MV Sweetness on the ropes. USS Seren was destroyed.”

“How many?” Kirk tried to square this news with his recent memories of interacting with Franklin. The guy in Seren’s center seat was a bit of a chest thumper, but Kirk’s impression of the man was that he had a few more brain cells than to single-handedly take on a ship like the Sweetness.
“Fifty-two in all.” A pained expression played across her face.

“I’ve got Lt. Jefferson in the brig. What about Commodore Sloan?”

“Legal is drawing up a warrant.”


Naked, unworthy of their uniforms, Seren’s remnant population was ordered out of the shipping container. Hands bound behind their backs, they were not allowed any modesty either. Bare feet smacked against deck plates in a barren cargo bay.

Laura stepped into the space. Freshly washed and primped, smelling of the light citrus perfume she favored, she’d reverted into the AVDL recruitment poster. “I want to start off by telling you just how lucky you are to have happened across me and not one of the other ships in the AVDL Fleet. On MV Woebegone, Captain Mbele likes to set alien lovers on fire before the ship’s systems take over and suck them out of an airlock. Aboard MV Summerwind, that rowdy crew has a knack for fucking race traitors to death. MV Crystal Skies, is a roving dump, where Captain Jorgenson would lock you all in a tiny room to cannibalize one another.”

She visually assessed the leftovers, making snap decisions about who was worth selling, who was worth keeping, and who was going to make the best entertainment. The girl with one green and one blue eye was a keeper for engineering. Obviously, Franklin had the highest entertainment potential of the eleven tainted humans standing in front of her.

“Where’s Veddah?” The other female in the group dared to ask. “You drugged him and took him. Where is he?”

“We’re awfully bold this evening.” Laura said. “Don’t worry, darling. Your Vulcan is being taken care of.”
That didn’t go as planned. McCoy tried to think of what exactly set those two off and meeting up where they could screw each other senseless was not the answer. Dr. Tralnor, from his perch at the front of the room, turned and looked at him like he’d done something wrong.

Music on hold, Dr. Tralnor beached the doctor out into the hall. “What just happened?”

“What do you mean?” Hell, I don’t know, the doctor thought.

Jacket off, cufflinks removed, sleeves rolled up, Tralnor appeared every bit the stereotypical disappointed father. “It felt like I got hit by a bomb, closely followed by a wrecking ball in there.”

“Well, Dr. Tralnor, I can’t discuss—”

Tralnor lowered his voice and leaned in. “You can’t do this to him. It’s cruel.”

“Now, you hold on a second, Mister.” McCoy objected. What was it about these pointy-eared bastards that twisted him in knots?

“Tell him or don’t. You can’t string him along and expect him to intuit the answer like this is some trashy romance novel.” Tralnor uttered. “He doesn’t understand.”

“I don’t see you broaching this subject with him.”

“It is not my place, Doctor. You may think I’m pussying out, but unless he poses direct questions to me, I have to keep my mouth shut.”

Snide, McCoy rolled his eyes and said, “Isn’t that convenient?”

(Most of what I know about Kirk and Spock’s unrequited love for one another comes directly from the empathic abilities that I cannot shut down.)

It took the doctor a second or two to realize Tralnor’s mouth hadn’t moved. Jaw slack, he blinked and stared at the not-so-innocuous music teacher.

“Should I volunteer this information of my own volition, not only is it in extremely bad taste, he will view it as defraudment. I know you don’t think very highly of Vulcan cultural norms, Dr. McCoy, but I am required to show basic decorum to this virtuous man.”

“Dr. Tralnor.” Lt. David leaned into the corridor. “They’re waiting for you.”

“I’m on my way, Sarah.” Tralnor pulled back.

Left alone in the hallway, McCoy was unsure of where to go or what to do.

At the midpoint of Alpha Shift, Enterprise observed a minute’s silence in honor of those lost aboard the USS Seren. After those sixty-seconds were up, the crew eased back into what they’d been doing. Sha’leyen closed out her meeting with the newly consolidated xenoanthropology section.
Most people seated around the long table were still in shock that their friend and colleague, Rashida Jefferson, nearly got them all killed. No one seemed to have objections to Sha’leyen’s sudden ascent to a position that didn’t exist until late last night. She cut everyone loose and began her own trek back to bioarch.

None of them had seen it coming. Rashida, of all people! Sha’leyen never warmed to Lt. Jefferson as a person, but their professional relationship was adequate. About the only thing Sha’leyen had been sure of about that girl was that she’d resign her commission the second Enterprise turned in for her refit. Rashida wanted back into the safe, coddling arms of tenured academia.

Once in her office, she got into her locked drawer, pulled the books and notebook, and set the three drug vials on her desk. Spock and Tralnor were late. She wondered what Chavez was doing this time.

A veritable flotilla of tugboats arrived to help the stricken Enterprise on her way. Two of the six were civilian ships, and those captains barely stopped themselves from drooling all over the place as Kirk escorted the whole lot of them down to engineering.

One of the Starfleet tug captains, Etta Horsecapture, had a particularly reverent look on her face as they met up with Mr. Scott. She went over to an intermix console and laid a hand on it. “It’s good to be back, old girl.”

Nearing forced retirement, Horsecapture’s longing and melancholy hit Kirk particularly hard. He wasn’t wrong to think he was looking at himself right then. “You’ve been aboard the Enterprise before?”

She smiled. “Oh, yes. When I was much, much younger, I served under Bob April.” Horsecapture gave the console a good pat. “You never forget your first love. Miss Enterprise was mine.”

The old captain’s words were a dagger grinding into Kirk’s guts. If he didn’t get his shit together, he’d spend his final moments slobbering all over himself in a nursing home, with only the framed photo of a starship to see him off into the ether.

“He’s not here, Commander Spock.” Lt. Chavez thought bullshitting his commanding officer might just get his pansy-ass violinist in a little hot water with the big boss. It would serve the magnificent creep right. “I sent him out on a delivery run ninety-minutes ago, and he has yet to return. He’s probably off schtupping his girlfriend.”

Not amused, pissed off, didn’t give a shit, who the fuck knew what these green-blooded odd-balls were thinking? Chavez wouldn’t venture to guess what Spock’s placid facial expression meant.

“Lt. Commander Tralnor is doing no such thing.” Spock said.

“I wouldn’t be so sure, Commander. Dr. Tralnor is a wiley one.” Chavez nearly laughed. Of course, these people were going to stick up for one another.

“He is right behind you, still wearing a hazmat suit, and stepping out of the decontamination chamber.”
Chavez gave a cursory look and a shrug. *Damn that prettyboy Vulcan anyway.* “So he is! I must not have seen him come back before he started on his next job. Now that we’ve found him, I’ll hand him over to you.”

Even Spock was leery of the chemical compounds Sha’leyen had laid out. “How is it that you are in possession of these items?”

“Nine years ago, I was deliberately sought out by Zakhira Tay. She gave them to me because she hoped that I could somehow exploit their abhorrent natures to do some good.” She stared at the vials. “I think I can synthesize the limein. It probably can help us defend against the tavalik duv-tor, possibly the Vohr as well.”

The first officer knew she was right but didn’t like it. These drugs were what nightmares were made from. Spock hadn’t known such substances, like the tavalik duv-tor, still existed in his lifetime. “Tralnor, do you agree with Sha’leyen?”

Tralnor’s eyes were closed, his breathing labored. Inches away from enough ketro’nistin to kill him sixty times over, he struggled against the fight or flight imprint from the collective historical trauma of the mair-rigolauya. He didn’t respond to Spock’s question.

“Sha’leyen, lock those up so we do not have to look at them.” For the first time in all their years of knowing one another, Spock saw Tralnor genuinely taken off-guard. He’d long envied the younger man’s smooth affect, less brittle emotional controls, and ability to incorporate the raving illogic of human behavior into what it meant to be alive. Here, he got to view a ramification of being seen as a repository for pain and death and knew there was little to covet.

“Looks like he’s made us, Captain.” Doc Hoskins snorted.

“Good. He’ll be awake enough to start answering some questions.” Laura put her hands on Hoskins’ shoulders and moved him back. Some people had no concept of personal space. If he weren’t such a fantastic field surgeon, she’d have chucked his ass off her boat ages ago.

“But what of our fun?” Doc Hoskins eyed the screen, longing for the touch of an unwilling other. He ran his lizard-like tongue between his lips.

“I’ll let you know when you can have your turn.” She shoved him again, so there was room to skirt around him. “Go back to your lab, or wherever you get up to your mad science, and leave me the hell alone.”

“Yes, Captain, of course.” He gave an exaggerated bow then scarpered off.

She went to the prisoner’s door and braced herself for the inevitable stench of an adult male Vulcan. It was hard to explain to people who’d never suffered the odor before, and she wished she didn’t know what it was. Stepping into the room, she coughed and reactively covered her nose.

“I’ve been told that your name is Veddah.”

Shackled and chained, as naked as his compatriots, he’d hunkered down into the fetal position to
save body heat. The cold metal of the walls and floors didn’t do him any favors. His face remained neutral.

“Here’s the deal.” She stood over him, sorely tempted to get in a good swift kick just because. “You furnish me with the information I need, I’ll think about getting you some bedding.”

No response. She wasn’t expecting any, not this early into his captivity.

“Stay on my good side, and you’ll be treated okay. Land on my shit-list, and I’ll let Hoskins at you. Fair warning, he doesn’t believe in lube, and he’s hung like a bull elephant. I will hold you down for him.”

Still nothing.

Laura bent over and deliberately grasped his left forearm. He made an uncomfortable sound and tried to backpedal while she brought mental images of Hoskins and some of his other unenthusiastic lovers to mind. He looked like he might be sick at the prospect of forced sex.

She let him go and stood. From that contact, she’d gained a few insights of her own. “You poor, sweet thing, Veddah. As of last night, I was sure you were fucking that helmsman, Loretta. She’s very concerned about your well-being.”

He finally glanced up at the mention of his crewmate.

“You want to remain a virgin for your bride. How stupidly quaint of you.” Hands on her hips, she said, “Just make sure you stay useful to me. I’ll think about getting you some warm bedding and make sure you don’t wind up with a busted asshole. Is that agreeable to you?”

He leaned his face against his knees and shuddered.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” She squatted and grabbed his hair, yanking his head up where they looked one another in the eye. “You are going to help me find something, Veddah. It’s very old and very dangerous, the sort of antiquity that even makes me glad that your insipid people embraced logic.

“According to one of my spies on T’Pau’s staff—look at that, got a reaction out of you there—she is on the frantic hunt for this.”

Laura snaked her other hand into the waistband of her pants where she’d tucked her data padd. She pulled up the photo of a handwritten letter and showed it to her new friend.

After he left Scotty and the tug captains to figure out the intricacies of getting Enterprise to port, Kirk wandered the halls under the guise of keeping his face known below decks. What he was really doing was trying to come to terms with the constant desperate loneliness that wracked his life. He had two loves: his ship and Spock, neither of which were in a place to recompense his emotion.

“There you are, Jim. I’ve been looking for you.” Bones swooped in like a carrion bird come to pick him over.

“Not now, Bones.” I just don’t have it in me to choke down another one of your pep talks. “We’ve got twelve days until we’re done being dragged into Overton Holdings. Pick one and try to build me up then.”
“Damnit, Jim. You’re coming with me, CMO’s orders.”

Kirk was less than entertained by the doctor’s interfering ways. “Fine, let’s go do whatever it is you need to do.”

“Try not to be so damned happy.”

They didn’t go to the sick bay as Kirk thought, rather they steered into a quiet conference room off the beaten path. “Okay, Bones, you’ve got me.”

The captain was regaled with McCoy’s confrontation with Dr. Tralnor last night. *Tell him or don’t.*

*It’s cruel.*

*Cruel.*

“You have got to tell him, Jim.”

*You’re holding back on something, Bones. What aren’t you telling me?*

“Out of the question.” *I can read your face, doctor. He said something else to you.*

“Why can’t you just be reasonable about this?”

*It goes both ways, Jim!* McCoy wanted to scream these words at his friend. *He loves you, and you love him!*

But there was something about the gravitas in which Dr. Tralnor gave that revelation that made the ship’s physician hesitate in divulging such news. Dr. Tralnor was right, he thought Vulcan culture was built on a pile of hypocritical horseshit, earning all the derision this one human doctor could throw at it.

*Basic decorum for a virtuous man.*

Spock and Jim had to figure this out on their own.

“Jim, please. You can’t give up.”
Kirk could not have concentrated on a chess match if his life depended on it. His brain was out to pasture, and he’d known of hyperactive children who paid attention better than he did right then. The fourth time Spock pointed out that it was his move, Kirk decided to call the game. “I’d still like to spend some time with you while we’re not on the clock, Spock. Do you have any suggestions?”

“We could join Tralnor for ralash-t’mu-yor.” Spock tucked the game pieces away, so they didn’t become flying projectiles the next time the ship stopped dead. “I have standing plans to meet him there.”

“So why not show up early?” Kirk feigned a grin and tried to show some enthusiasm that his dearest friend actually had other friends.

“You might find the activity planned for later tonight interesting. Tralnor and some of his colleagues from earth are recording the first part of a behind-the-scenes commentary for a film that they are in the process of restoring.”

“Is there any particular reason you need to be there? I’ve never gotten the idea that you’re into movies, at all.” He didn’t want to come off sounding jealous, but when he heard himself, the edge in his voice was not considerate.

Brows raised a fraction, Spock said, “You will find it worth your time.”

Officer’s mess was not crowded when Kirk strode in. People were more interested in jockeying for spots next door. He was ready to internally grumble about being desperate for novel entertainment when he saw what was on the menu. Those folks must have seen the offerings and fled. “Meat” loaf, which was bell peppers, more bell peppers, stale bread, chopped onions, tomato sauce, and some brown spongy material that may or may not have been technically alive at some point, was the shining star compared to the vegetarian concoction du jour. That might have been a “casserole” of bell peppers, more bell peppers, broccoli, and some kind of groats swimming in a tomato sauce, but Kirk couldn’t tell and wasn’t willing to try any to find out.

“Clearing out the cupboards, are we?” Bones was shoving his plate away as the captain approached. He poked at his dinner. “I understand wanting to get through the stores before they go bad, but sometimes things are bad to begin with.”

“Not good?” Kirk sat and used the side of his fork to cut a bite-sized chunk off the mystery loaf.

“You don’t know the half of it, Jim. Two bites and I’m going to spend the rest of the night with the kind of acid reflux that sears the hairs out of your nostrils.”

“May I join you?”

Kirk didn’t have a reason to turn Dr. Tralnor away and indicated to one of the empty chairs. “Help yourself.”

The Vulcan had a steaming cup of coffee in his Instant Humanoid mug and four wedges of toasted bread with peanut butter and jam. Kirk immediately wanted what Tralnor was having.
How screwed up is my life that I’m envious of another man’s toast? Kirk brought a forkful toward his face and couldn’t open his mouth.

Tralnor stabilized the video connection, and the image of a man on an overstuffed sofa set in a school gymnasium came into clear focus. There were seventeen minutes to go before this session officially began. “Buster, wave for the camera.”

The man on the sofa waved noncommittally. He was a bit peaked. “Hey, Tralnor. How’s Starfleet life treating you?”

“I’m doing well.” He said, when a cutaway in the lower right corner of the screen showed another man. “Are you settled, Joe?”

This time, Bergman laughed before telling any of his stupid jokes. “You’re gonna love this. So this guy walks into a bar—”

“Ouch!” Tralnor and Buster shouted.

“God, you guys are assholes. You’re trumpets, so fuck you anyway.” Joe hooted.

Buster chuckled. “This is going to be a good show.”

“Is that Sohja?” Joe sat up and smoothed down his shirt.

“False alarm.” Tralnor said as he rechecked his cues and made sure all excerpts were ready to play at the touch of a button. “It’s my sister.”

A din of low conversation went up behind Tralnor as people got a good look at Mollie. She was dressed in what he thought of as Temple Kotekru Kaylara business attire, light blue wide-legged pants, a sleeveless, olive green/grey wrap-around top, and an eggplant purple part-robe, part-jacket, that displayed the classic three-symbol Golic script as well as a horizontal stripe of Clan MacCormack’s tartan that ran across the front of the left shoulder.

Joe yelled from his living room in the Hollywood Hills, “Same shoes!”

Mollie stuck her tongue out at the camera and unclipped her diplomatic ID card from her chest and tucked it into a hidden pocket. “I’m sorry I’m running late. I had to hitch with a delegation of aides and admins when the doofuses running the security checkpoint at LAX worked themselves into a lather about my passport. I suddenly felt like I was twenty again, and not in a good way.”

Buster shook his head. “I thought that shit got figured out years ago when you were made some sort of auxiliary staff to the ambassador and got your diplomatic passport.”

“Doesn’t make much difference when everyone at the screening line thinks you’re trying to travel on fake ID. Who fakes a Vulcan passport, let alone one with a diplomatic brand on it? And you love my shoes, Joe.” Mollie sat next to Buster. “I got a call from Arnold’s wife saying he won’t make it today.”

“Did he try to accidentally drown himself again?” Buster asked.

“Don’t know. She didn’t say.” Mollie snickered.
“Arnold’s wife is a saint for putting up with him. Smart guy, but he’s a dingbat.” Buster started to speak when the gym’s door opened again.

“That’s Sohja.” Joe crooned. “And she’s gonna come sauntering in here, dressed to the nines in one of those 1940s suits, peep toes, perfect makeup, pouty lips, not a black hair on her head out of place, and if she’s wearing those seamed stockings, I might just lose my shit.”

Where Mollie’s two-decade-old, multiply-reshod Vulcan city shoes made a thump when the heels came down on the wooden floor, Sohja’s pumps put out a clock-clock-clock sound.

Once in view, where people could see her and compare Sohja with Mollie, the atmosphere of curiosity made Tralnor’s head buzz. Sohja stopped long enough to make a slight adjustment to a stocking and gave the universe a quick glimpse of a garter clip.

“Sohja, Baby!” Joe’s desperate enthusiasm for her knew no bounds.

Sohja stood, looked at the camera, and said, “I am not your baby.”

“Come on, Soazh. Be nice, just this once.”

“My name is Sohja.” She took the other end of the sofa.

No one in Rec Room 2 seemed to know quite what to think. Mollie, laughing at the ongoing exchange, was human and dressed like a Vulcan. Statuesque, Sohja was Vulcan and dressed like a bombshell. Tralnor found nothing odd about this only because he’d known them both for so long.

“You know how to make my heart sing.” Joe held his hands over his sternum and smiled.

“Fuck off, Joe.” Sohja’s tone and expression remained neutral.

“Goddamn, Sohja, I love it when you’re angry!” The producer hollered from California.

“Fuck off, Joe.” Mollie repeated. “Go be a creep somewhere that’s not around us.”

“Yeah, fuck off, Joe.” Buster said.

“Majority rules.” Tralnor hadn’t much wanted Joe in on the commentaries because he was not known for his decorum. “Fuck off, Joe.”

“She’s just going to say something vicious.” Mollie referred to Sohja. “And this whole project was her idea in the first place.”

As the on-screen banter went on in the lead up to the cameras recording for posterity, McCoy was fiercely drawn to this wicked-looking woman. Something fired in his brain, and he was thrown back into what it felt like as a teenager discovering sex for the first time. It didn’t take him long at all to understand why this Joe character was so hung up on her.

“Bones, stop drooling.”

“Huh?” She is stunning! The doctor knew what he’d dream about tonight.

“Dr. McCoy, I doubt you would survive a single night in Sohja’s bed.” Leave it to Spock to be a
“What makes you say a thing like that?” *It can’t be jealousy, not if you’re nailing a gorgeous gal like Mollie*, the doctor mused.

“Because I barely did.”

Jim choked and started on a coughing jag while McCoy felt his eyes involuntarily bulge at that revelation.

“Excuse me, *what*?”

“You heard correctly.”

“No shit?” Jim gasped. “You and her?”

Laura let Veddah have a full day to shiver alone and contemplate her offer, well, not offer, but demand from yesterday. When she went in this time, he looked at her knees rather than gazing off into nothingness. That was an improvement already.

“Two months and eleven days.” She said as Silvio brought in a chair and clamped it into the sliding tracks on the floor. This room used to be a bean-counter’s office. Now it was explicitly reserved for valuable prisoners. Silvio asked if she needed anything else. When she said no, he entered deeper into the room to spit on the manacled creature.

Veddah hugged his knees tighter to his chest, the wad of snot and saliva oozed down his arm.

“Two months and eleven days, Veddah.” Laura repeated. “From now, what is the significance of that date?” His eyes drifted away from her and back into wherever.

“How do I know? Is that what you’re wondering?” Laura’s data padd was out again. She showed him another photo and let the image of a young woman hang in front of his face. “I’ve got eyes and ears all over the place, my dear.”

She pulled the hand-held machine back. “Let’s see, your T’Danna is from a backwater town at the base of the Llangalon Mountains. Her parents are physicians. She’s currently in school to become a physiotherapist. She lives alone in a flat near the campus of Regnar Health Sciences University and has a steady, predictable routine. I’d hate if something happened to your fiancee because you’re not cooperating with me.”

Laura looked at the picture and didn’t see the attraction and tried for the infinitesimal time to comprehend why so many human men fetishized Vulcan women. “Two months and eleven days?”

He took a breath, making like he was going to speak, only to sigh heavily and pitch to his left. If he were human, he’d have been a sobbing mess. He tried to retreat into himself, but Laura wasn’t about to allow that. She scooted her chair in closer and leaned over. “Open your eyes and look at me, Veddah. *Look. At. Me.*”

An open-handed slap brought him back to her. “That’s my boy. That’s better.”

He recovered enough to sit upright again. She asked him about the date, and he finally acquiesced. “I am getting married to T’Danna.”
She liked how he hadn’t added in a “supposed to be” or “should be” to his statement. It showed he had a little spunk in there somewhere. “That very well may be possible, you know. How intact you’ll be for the ceremony is entirely up to how helpful you are.”

His face twitched at the connotation for intact. He was far more committed to her cause today than before. He could come to terms, maybe, with being fucked by someone who’d leave him physically disabled for the rest of his life. Throwing the girlfriend on the bonfire was that perfect little extra. Laura had his full attention now.

“What do you say we start looking at that letter again?”

“That is agreeable.”

“That’s what I hoped you were going to say.”

“Good evening, and welcome to the behind the scenes and making of the film, Celluloid Vokaya.” Tralnor was a natural in front of a crowd. “We’re coming to you from two locations. I’m aboard the USS Enterprise, where I’m assigned to the biological sciences section.”

Buster howled at that declaration. “Just wait until everyone hears this. Biology. I swear, Tralnor, if I didn’t know you better, I’d think you were talking out of your—Are we allowed to swear on this thing or is it strictly a Family Show?”

Tralnor gave a short biography, not making mention of why he was on a ship while the rest of them were on a hastily secured “set” on Vulcan. “The other three commentators are convened at the Consolidated Terran School in ShiKahr.”

Mollie introduced herself, briefly discussed how she was born and half-raised on Vulcan, without getting into her conception or legal standing. Nor, did she go into detail about her current occupations. She did mention though that she went to USC partially out of family tradition and because she’d wanted to be in California to support a friend.

“I’m Buster Malone, engineer, inventor, and all-round goofball, originally from the colony on Solana IV. I’d never really had friends until I came to USC and joined the band, and if you’d asked me twenty years ago if I’d be doing something like this right here, I’d have said you were nuts.”

“I am Sohja, of the Clan Surak sub-family t’Gef-zehl. I am a Business Ethicist specializing in corporate mergers and acquisitions. I have a strategy for my appearance: It distracts people, and as I almost exclusively work with human men, my appearance keeps them from being too intimidated by the Vulcan in the room. I dropped out of Stanford two-thirds of the way through my first semester because the school was not a good fit. Academically, it is outstanding. Socially, it was not what you might call welcoming to a person of my background.”

“Let’s face it. Los Angeles is an odd place for odd people.” Mollie said.

Tralnor hit a button that opened the camera’s view on his side. “This is our audience made up of the officers and crewmen here on board the Enterprise. They have not seen the film and at this point do not know what it’s about or who’s in it.”

Now that Mollie could see Spock in the background she gave him a short wave and had a look on her face that Tralnor only saw when she was around him. That’s when Tralnor turned around to see
who else was there. All of his roommates were accounted for, sitting in a row. Even Seltun was
with them. Sha’leyen was with a cluster of her bioarch staff. Nurse Chapel was in a corner,
generally uncomfortable with the scene. And, the Grand Troika was in the same place they’d
occupied previously.

McCoy, in heady lust with Sohja, wasn’t paying much attention to what was going on. He just
stared at the screen. Kirk was trying to go with the flow, but his eyes were fixed on Mollie and his
mind trying to answer the intricacies that made her so captivating to his first officer.

(Well, Spock, you’ve got a choice.) Tralnor returned to face the screen.

(Which I have made, Tralnor.)
Chapter 25

“The idea for Celluloid Vokaya came to me when I was taking a film class that I still argue I did not need to take.” Sohja spoke of the genesis of the project.

“You know why you were in that class, Sohja. And it’s not just because Tralnor was the TA and you like the way his ass looks in a pair of jeans.” Mollie shook her head. “Core Classes are part of a liberal arts-style education.”

Buster smacked his forehead with his palm. “Seriously? We’re having this discussion, again? Nearly two decades of the same bickering. You’re both right, and you’re both wrong, shut up about it.”

Sohja chose to ignore Buster’s criticism. “I found that of all the films I viewed, I thought the Hollywood Regency era musicals were the least off-putting.”

“Hee-hee.” Buster leaned back to catch Sohja’s attention. “And that, dear audience, is high praise from the creator, co-producer, and co-director of this movie.”

That got a chuckle from the Enterprise. So far, this was going better than Tralnor had any right to believe. He wasn’t worried about the potty mouths on his friends, just that the microcosm he and they were a part of would overwhelm and alienate the good folks with him in Rec Room 2.

“Let’s start with the title.” Mollie prompted.

“The very first motion pictures were shot on film, a plastic strip layered on one side with a chemical emulsion that creates an image when exposed to light. The oldest type of this media was made from a material called celluloid.” Tralnor started. “Vokaya is a common Vulcan word for memory. The alternate meaning, intergenerational transmission of cultural remembrance, is what this film tries to represent.”

“You can be stories, legends, and parables that are not written down. Unlike a lot of species’ oral history traditions, Vokaya pass via mind-to-mind contact.” Sohja added, then left the next bit to Mollie.

“So, this movie is going to be different from a lot of things you’ve seen. There is zero spoken dialogue, and while there are musicals out there that have what would be spoken lines delivered in song, that’s not present here either. I’d say about half of the music was performed and recorded by those of us on the cast and crew while the rest was carefully re-engineered for better sound. Music is the de facto narrator.”

“The story,” Sohja continued, “is fairly simple. Celluloid Vokaya is a retelling of a pre-Reform legend where a queen and king are arranging their daughter’s marriage to ensure their lands and the people they protect are ceded to their child and that she has the support she needs to keep up their good works.”

Mollie took over again. “What Sohja is trying to say is that it’s two interwoven love stories, the parents’ continued love for one another and the daughter’s newfound.”

Trotted out from their cargo container, Laura inspected the rest of her prisoners. They’d done all
they could to earn the derision of their night guards. What was the point of breaking out when they’d never get into the ship proper? They’d all been told that tampering with any of Sweetness’ systems meant the bay doors would open and they’d all die from exposure.

“You all need to learn how to behave like your pal, Veddah. Well-mannered and cooperative, he’s a model captive.”

These ones were dumb enough to still show open hostility. Even Horse-laugh, with his violent contusions, was acting surly. Captain Franklin, recovering a bit of grit, tried to stand up for one of his crew.

“You’ve done something to my science officer. He’d never cooperate with the likes of you. I should kick your ass, lady.” His nostrils flared and shoulders tensed up. He was thinking of lunging at her.

“Where was your bravado yesterday? Or is this all a show so these ten fine Starfleet luvvies will come to your defense when you’re looking down a long prison sentence? You’re a coward, Franklin.”

“That’s it.” Franklin launched all two meters of his burly frame at her, hands still bound behind his back.

Laura, having vast experience with dunces like Franklin, reacted swiftly, kneeing him in the gut, then used her finely manicured talons to grab hold of his testicles. *Squeeze and twist.* Too winded to scream, he made a nauseous squeak. A rapid yank overloaded his pain threshold. She shoved the unconscious captain off her and listened as his body slapped against the floor like a side of cold beef.

“Any other takers?” She challenged. They shrank back, no longer staring her down. “We’ll see what you come up with next time now that you know I’m not a helpless little bitch without my Walther.”

She started to leave, then issued the guards an order. Since there was a lot of excess energy and pent-up aggression in this group, they could spend the day running around the cargo bay. Ten hours of that would slow them down.

After washing Franklin’s sweaty crotch off her hand, Laura stopped at the galley to arrange meals for Sweetness’ guests. That bunch in the cargo bay got to feast on the rancid leftovers from the back of the fridge.

“What about the Vulcan, Miss?” The cook, Signe, a sweet but ignorant older woman asked. “I think they only eat vegetables.”

“With the exception of only one that I know of, they can eat whatever the hell they want. They’re just picky motherfuckers is all.” Her mind went to Tralnor, who due to some weird mismatch in his parents’ chromosomes, had a nasty issue where his body didn’t make the enzymes that let his gut digest muscle fibrin.

“So, I give him what? No vegetables then?”

Laura tried not to get irritated. “Just make him up a plate like you would for any of the rest of us, Signe.”

The cook smiled. The captain had called her by name! That would make her happy for the next week to know the person in charge of the entire ship singled her out individually. She hummed as
she waddled from station to station, getting the prisoner’s food.

Hot dinner in hand, she was on her way to Veddah’s cell. Silvio intercepted her and sniffed the air.

“Signe’s as dumb as a sack of wet hair, but damn that woman’s a good cook. This chicken with cream sauce has got to be my favorite.”

“Thank you, Mr. Restaurant Critic. What’s my latest diamond report?”

“Stacked like cordwood, cheek to jowl, in cargo bays one, three, and four.”

That meant if her guys kept at it for another night, should Starfleet show up and Sweetness had to bolt, at least four of her bays would be bursting with precious gems. With such a good update, she smiled as she entered the prisoner’s room.

She took a chance and gave Veddah the plate. “Chicken, steamed green beans, seasoned rice, and one of the cook’s signature homemade rolls. A well-fed crew is a happy crew. Well-fed captives remain useful for longer.”

He regarded the food like all of it was laced with poison.

“You can eat while we talk about T’Pau’s search. Also, if you’re deciding that you’re not going to finish every bite of your delicious dinner, I’ll see if you feel the same when we try feeding you again in five days.” She took her seat. “Look, Veddah, if I wanted you dead, you’d be in that hole dirtside. . . Use your fingers for fuck’s sake.”

Spock’s decision meant the audience stayed seated and the overhead lights dimmed. Introductions over, Tralnor gave a warning that the clip first on the list was not in the best repair, but they’d get the point. The screen lit up with the moving image of Sohja, dressed in a contemporary style, walking a modern, yet deserted Paris street, the Tricolor decorating buildings and hanging from standards. After turning down an alleyway, making sure she’d not been followed, she checks against a folded note written on cotton bond, Golic caligraphy of the message contrasting the earth manufacturer’s seal. She approached a plain black door and let herself in.

And stepped through time into a heaving swing club, circa 1944. Her clothes and hair matched her surroundings. The live musicians finished their tune as she made her way down a short set of stairs and onto the slightly sunken dance floor. She’s supposed to meet her potential husband. Before she can study the room and find him, the big band strikes up Sing, Sing, Sing.

The princess sees her parents and watches as they get caught up in the choreographed frenzy. Some thirty couples are out on the floor, three of them focused on briefly before the camera moves in on the Ko-te’k’ru and Sa-te’k’ru dancing the lindy hop like its what they were born to do.

Shouts, gasps, applause, the Enterprise audience erupted. Their straight-laced first officer, dressed like an RAF lieutenant, was a damned fine dancer who lifted, spun, and whirled Mollie about the floor.

The camera goes for a series of wide shots then moves in on specific couples again. The picture cuts to Tralnor, playing the princess’ love interest. He catches Sohja’s eye from across the room. They try to meet in the middle of the floor only to be whisked away as partners by other dancers.

By the end of the number, most of those watching in Rec Room 2 bounced their feet or moved
their shoulders to the beat, eyes wide when the princess, watching the fun, closes her eyes and opens them to find herself standing in the same room, only its dirty, dilapidated, and cast in shadow, the vitality gone.

The excerpt done, lights up, every face in Rec Room 2 was turned to Spock.

“My disposition toward your people doesn’t come from some misguided understanding or conspiracy theories on Vulcans. My current favorite going around right now is about how your scientists have supposedly figured out a drug, that when injected into humans, turns us into Vulcans. How fucking stupid is that?

“Now, there are a lot of people in this organization who are nothing more than followers. Stuffed shirts say you pointy-eared head-cases are the bogeyman, followers express the same opinion. I am not a follower, Veddah. I lived on your hellhole planet for nearly eight years. I’ve seen the hypocrisy of your civilization in action. I speak the language. I’ve witnessed ceremonies, rituals, and traditions. I’m not some provincial simpleton.”

He hesitantly picked up and took a bite of chicken, and did an admiral job of hiding his disgust.

“I’m going to outline where this object is and what I think that letter is after. When I’m done with my explanations, tell me where I’ve gone wrong. . . And no, I’m not going to punish you for correcting me on this. Every once in a while, your species’ compulsion to be right about everything comes in handy.

“I’d like to begin by saying there is one other person besides Spock who’s in on this hunt. No, that’s wrong. He can’t do something like this without his Reason for Existing. It’s you and me versus Spock and his fellow freaks Tralnor Ah’delevna MacCormack and his sister, Mollie Ah’delevna MacCormack.”

Veddah nodded so Laura knew he’d heard and understood her.

“Two Vulcan-human hybrids and an abomination of science are what we are up against. Sounds like a cakewalk, doesn’t it? Don’t think beating them will be easy. They’re smart, creative, and the Lyr Saan angle makes them entirely unorthodox.

“When Sweetness is done with collecting the current cargo, we’re off to check the first place T’Pau wants them to look. The first is a mining system called Vitell’s Star.”

“Agreed.”

“Number two, Sweetness’ home port, Trego Delta.”

“Agreed.”

“Number three, Pezig’s Gate.”

“Agreed.”

“Number four, I believe I’ve come up with an educated guess. It’s a pity that old bat, T’Pau, thought she had to write this up like some archaic game-night riddle. It was intercepted anyway. Okay, number four, the fourth planet of the Haliday system, the one that’s famous for the ski resorts.”
Disinclined to speak against her opinion, Veddah clammed up.

“Where do you think it is?” This question gave him explicit permission to offer his answer.

“Two light-years away in the Carnelian System.”

“Okay. We might just have to check them both.”

He nodded and went back to his food.

“This is the tough part.” She said. “I’ve read this letter six ways from Sunday. My interpretation? We’re going after something called a watosh-kov. Now, what the fuck is an Ugly Stone? I don’t know, and honestly, it doesn’t really matter that much right now. What we’ve got to focus on is making sure we get our hands on it first.”

Another hard to swallow mouthful of chicken went down. “I thought T’Pau was referring to ek’rasahkos-sudef.”

“Evil Womb?” Laura shrugged. “Works for me. She doesn’t say what this thing is capable of. Any speculation?”

“I—I do not know.”

“That’s fine, Veddah.” She wanted to come off as understanding and save her impatience for later when it would come in more useful. For the immediate time, going slow had to do. “I’m going to give you overnight to think about it some more.”

Laura waited for him to finish eating. She took the plate back to Signe and meandered down to Sweetness’ infirmary. There, she invaded the linens stores. There was no way she’d sacrifice any of her personal bedding for that smelly piece of misery in the VIP cell, and she’d hardly expect her crew to do so either.

Upon her reentry, Veddah saw the sheets and blankets. He’d pined for a modicum of warmth, and probably assumed she’d never provide the promised covers. She knew how to read Vulcan expressions, to see the things few others picked up, observed his hungry longing for what she held, and caught the skepticism telling him she’d only brought the bedding with her to tease him.

“One thing you’re going to find as you work with me, Veddah, is that I follow through. I never make promises I don’t intend to keep.” She came close enough to lean over and make like she was going to stroke his cheek. Veddah braced for the invasion of an unwanted touch that didn’t come. “I can feel from here that your temperature has dropped.”

Hypothermia in Vulcans was devastating. Their capillaries collapsed or burst if they got too cold, and the resulting inability to re-oxygenate their blood made them hypoxic. If she let Veddah continue on like this, there was a real chance he’d wind up brain-damaged or dead. She arranged the blankets around his shoulders and set the sheets in his lap to do with as he pleased.

“Stay warm, Veddah.”
Tralnor had made it Spock’s call as to the inclusion of the ship’s crew in the audience. The first officer thought it best to get this experience out into the public now before the film was finished and sent out on the festival circuit. Addressing speculation immediately, an action Tralnor frequently deployed, was easier than responding to future rumors.

Mollie had contacted Spock in the early stages of *Celluloid Vokaya*’s development and asked if he’d be her dance partner. He wouldn’t have to smile or fake emotions the way actors did. He liked the premise of sharing something with humans that allowed them to understand that Vulcans weren’t automatons. He said yes to her because she asked for so little from him. He owed her that much. She’d walked out on the beginnings of a successful secondary education and professional life on Vulcan, moving to California so they could remain close, so he had the support he needed to succeed. And, it was nice to have an excuse to escape the scathing world of Academy life, even for a few days.

He didn’t explain all of that to the denizens of Rec Room 2, but they got that he’d been helping out a friend. Mollie discussed what it was like to learn and rehearse a lot of the material up in San Francisco on the weekends and marry their private studio work into the large and sometimes elaborate full dance sequences.

Beside him, Dr. McCoy remained infatuated. Spock’s warning regarding Sohja was not intended as an insult or to berate the human for finding her attractive. Sex with her was intense, awe-inducing, psionically and physically. It left him with a hangover and a supernova migraine that lasted for days, robbed him of sleep, and singed the fibers within his brain that allowed for meditation. He didn’t recover fully for over a week. Sohja wasn’t thoughtless as to her partners, on the contrary, her satisfaction was tied to how she made the person she’d bedded feel. It was like having a Roman candle explode inside your soul.

Jim scowled heavily each time Mollie spoke, particular fury moving across his brow when she mentioned Spock. This was something the first officer had seen in his observations of human behavior, people exhibiting resentment when their friends/partners had other friends. Jim, it seemed, was jealous of Mollie.

“All of the large-scale stuff, like *Sing, Sing, Sing*, that was shot over spring break and the days immediately following. The smaller numbers were more piecemeal.” Tralnor said, continuing the conversation on filming locations. “Sohja and I did *Riptide* at the Santa Monica Pier on a Tuesday afternoon in February. I shot *Rainy Night* on a hand-held cam while Mollie and Spock cut a rug at San Francisco’s only country and western bar at the time. *Boat Loan* was shot guerrilla-style, also in San Francisco, the day before we did the big Union Square routines.”

“We really wanted to do some of it on Vulcan, as it’s a story from our history, but with the issues I was having then with clearing customs on the human side of things, we subbed in Death Valley instead. By that point in my collegiate career, I’d been detained on eleven separate occasions, including before a domestic flight from Los Angeles to Chicago. Again, who the hell fakes a Vulcan passport? Anyway, if we wanted to get done with the film in time for submission to the competitions it was entering, I couldn’t get locked up for a week after officials at Nouveau Toulouse decided they weren’t going to let me continue on in transit to catch a connecting flight. I’d been through that twice the previous year. The second time, Ambassador Sarek sent his highest ranking San Francisco aide to retrieve me.”

(Sajak must have loved that, I’m sure. Nothing bends his nose out of shape quite like Mollie.)
Tralnor commented.

(The same appears to ring true for Jim Kirk.) Spock wanted to think his captain was above such petty reactions.

Tralnor agreed. (He doesn’t like her, at all.)

(Jim does not know Mollie. A reasonable—)

(He’s having an emotional response, Spock. You and I would come into a situation like this knowing that until we fully comprehended who and what Mollie is to you, that we can’t form an opinion on her. He doesn’t care that there’s missing information and probably doesn’t want to know what it is. His mind is racing ahead and filling in the blanks with what his life experiences guess is the truth instead of solving for $x$.)

(Illogical behavior, but it does make sense in this context.) *I cannot cut Mollie out of my life, Jim.*

“Can we take questions right now, or are we waiting until the very end?” Mollie pointed to an audience member who had his hand up.

“Ask your question, Ensign.” Tralnor directed.

“Um, I don’t know if this has anything to do with the film or not. But, um, Mollie, when you said, ‘our history,’ does that mean you’re one of those people who’s Vulcan because you want to be?”

“If you want to respond, Mollie, go for it. If not, we’ll move on.” Tralnor tapped a command into his console.

“No, I’m not d’Vel’nahr. I am Vulcan because I *don’t* have a choice.” She looked to her brother then to Spock. Neither of them stopped her from going on.

“Very long story short, fresh from medical school, my mother, Livia, and auntie, Theresa, went to Vulcan to undertake medical residencies. While they were studying Healing, they were recruited as part of the team that brought Spock into the world. The same people made me in the same lab. I was born thirty-seven days after him in the same hospital, delivered by the same doctor. Earth’s laws say that I can’t exist, so I don’t. I was born into the Ah’delevna family, Clan Lyr Saan, and did not officially become a MacCormack until almost five years later.”

Rec Room 2 descended into pin-drop silence. So many human minds began to think of Enterprise’s tangle with the SS Botany Bay, Spock felt the memory in the air. Mollie had heard about the encounter with Khan, and her eyes communicated that she’d accept it if the people he served with thought she was a manifestation of evil.

“I’m not some super-soldier, augmented, experimental monster. . .” She said. “I’m not a clone. I’m not an afterthought. I’m just a pain in the ass to get through customs.”

The way they looked at one another, Kirk thought he might actually get sick. While he wasn’t overtly emotional toward her, Spock’s comfort and familiarity with Mollie shone in how well the first officer interacted with her. Up until this point, she was academic articles, photos, and accolades as seen on the computer, more nebulous, less a real person than a caricature.

Watching that dance scene, the way they moved together, it was beyond well-practiced. They were
like a single entity, so deeply intertwined that neither had to think about the moves they made. And Spock, Kirk knew just what to look for, how to crack the code to see what happened behind the stone facade, was having fun.

“I wanted to show you some still photos.”

Kirk sort-of heard Dr. Tralnor talk about photography, but there was no explanation needed for the images projected on the screen. College kids having a blast. Sohja establishing a shot. Tralnor and some girl. A group of about sixty doing a dance called The Hustle. Spock and Mollie.

He burned the image into his mind. Bodies facing in, heads turned to look at the camera, she held his hand on her shoulder. More photos passed in a blur. Then, his Spock, holding that woman tight against him. It didn’t take a genius to see that it was far more than friendship between them. Bile rose in the captain’s throat.

Kirk didn’t know why, but he’d always imagined, probably because his friend led such a solitary existence aboard the Enterprise, that Spock was virginal. Now it was apparent he’d been fucking Mollie for years, far longer than the captain guessed possible. His Vulcan wasn’t so innocent after all, and that bothered him.

People around him laughed at a joke, but it felt like they were laughing at him for being a chump. Giggling and snorting at their captain because he was a fucking moron, yowling that the legendary pussy-hound had finally found the one being in the universe who didn’t want him. They laughed.

Was that a prom photo? He’d taken Mollie to the fucking prom!

“. . . from our childhoods as part of the backstory for the characters we’re playing . . .”

There they were again, small children dressed in formal robes as they stood in front of a roaring fireplace at some Scottish castle.

Mollie MacCormack, Kirk thought. Stay the hell away from me.

Tralnor set things up so Celluloid Vokaya’s behind the scenes bits were completed in a series of two-hour sessions over the six months he’d be on Enterprise. Buster, Mollie, and Sohja wished everyone a good night. The crowd started to file away, with Captain Kirk being one of the first people out the door.

(Tralnor, Jim is quite upset.)

(Go after him. Try to explain Mollie. Don’t be surprised if he screams and yells and sounds like he’s going mad. Let him work it out of his system, then try again. Inure him to her. He doesn’t ever have to like her. He’s just got to accept that she’s there.)

(And if he throws me out of his quarters again?)

(Go back and keep explaining. Refuse to let him turn you away.) Tralnor stopped collecting the papers he’d spread around and faced Spock. (Sometimes, the only way to approach a person who’s reacting this way is to keep prodding at them. It’s like keeping a wound open, so it doesn’t fester.)

(I do not think I fully comprehend this advice.)
(You don’t have to, Spock. While you’re talking about Mollie, mix that in with how much you value Jim’s friendship, until he sort-of gets that he’s not being replaced or ignored.)

“Hello, Spock.” Jim didn’t look happy to see him.

“Captain, we need to have a discussion. May I come in?” Spock, not one who easily read people’s auras, could not avoid Jim’s, and it reminded him of the scent of burning plastic. Something toxic was brewing in Kirk’s head.

There was no offer of a drink this time. Neither of them sat. “Let’s get this over with, Spock. Say what you’ve got to say.”

“You are one of my closest friends, Jim.” Spock began. “There is nothing and no one that can change such immutable fact.”

The captain flinched at the use of his nickname. “Is that so?”

“It is.” Words, why did this have to take place through words? Touching Jim would. . . “When you are not near, I find that I look for you. I find that I am in need of you.”

Sardonic anger welled in the captain’s face. “How many times have you said to me that Vulcans don’t lie? You need me? Now, that’s a fucking farce.”

“You are jealous of Mollie.”

A thin, bitter laugh issued from Jim’s throat. “I’ve never known you to be hilarious. You think I’m jealous of your girlfriend?”

“Jim, Mollie is not my girlfriend.” Spock tried to remind himself that he was responding to nonsensical thinking. “She is simply a friend.”

“Oh right, just a friend? Just a friend my ass.” Jim’s eyes darted around, and he ran his fingers through the hair on the sides of his head. “You’re sleeping with her!”

“Which has no bearing on our friendship, Jim.” Spock wondered if Jim had some fantastic new lover as McCoy described, why he was so angry about Mollie?

“It means everything, Spock.”

“I do not follow.”

“Of course you don’t. You choke off your human side, leaving it to wither and die, so you remove yourself from participating in life. Except when you’re dancing, dating, and fucking a human woman. I’m the one who’s not following.”

Spock’s head was spinning as he tried to keep up with Jim’s unfounded claims. “If your sexual conquests do not interfere with our friendship, why should mine?”

“Spock, you’re not supposed to have sexual conquests.” He said, voice lightening with something Spock could not identify. “You’re supposed to be untouched. You’re Vulcan.”

“I do not understand your disappointment that I am not a virgin. I was sixteen the first time I had
intercourse. I have always been under the impression that human males take pity on other males who have never had sex.” He paused, trying to group his thoughts and make some kind of map as to where this strange conversation was headed. “Vulcans have sex, Jim. We are just not as blatant about it as humans are.”

“Let me guess.” Jim’s eyes had a mean gleam to them. “The amazing Mollie MacCormack was your first? You don’t have to answer that. I know she’s the one.”

“Samantha Harrold was yours.” Spock said, recalling a conversation years ago when a maudlin Kirk started describing his many bed partners and how unfulfilled they left him. “You were at the local lover’s lane after the homecoming dance your junior year of high school.”

Jim took two steps forward and stared hard at Spock. Distracted by the fiery tumult in Kirk’s eyes, Spock found himself shoved up against a bulkhead, devoured by a mouth he’d long wanted to kiss, one of the human’s hands pushing down the front of his uniform trousers.

_I’ll show you sex, sex like you’ve never had, sex like you can’t have with that whore. When we’re done, I promise you won’t ever want to fuck her again._ Jim’s enraged thoughts and emotions cut Spock down in seconds. Any notion that this craziness might lead into a breaking down of walls and a declaration of love was long gone. This maniacal jealousy manifested in such a fashion, that the man Spock knew, the man he loved, was locked away beneath a mountain of pain and razor wire. This wasn’t really Jim Kirk.

“Jim, stop.” Spock uttered, his nervous system overwhelmed, unable to process the onslaught.

“You’ll want this.” Kirk ground his erection into Spock’s thigh.

“I do not.” Spock got his hands on Jim’s shoulders and pushed him off. The captain landed on his rear and let out another eerie laugh.

Kirk, asleep in an isolated biobed, would remain that way until the neurochemical balance in his brain returned to normal. Dr. McCoy would have to keep him on mild psych meds for a while to swing him out of the stress and depression induced cloud he’d been living in.

“How is Spock?” The doctor asked as Sha’leyen approached.

“He’ll be fine.” She said. “He is very understanding about the captain’s current condition.”

“You know, if you ever feel like you need to change career paths, I could use you on my staff, if only to handle my cranky Vulcan patients.” McCoy said.

“Call me when you need me, Dr. McCoy. Otherwise, you can find me in bioarch.”
“Captain, Dr. McCoy says you are doing very well.”

Kirk looked away, the shame burning within leaving him nauseous. He’d been under Bones’ direct care for nearly two days and had turned Spock away several times. This time, his first officer didn’t ask, didn’t announce himself, he just showed up.

“I don’t know what to say or what to do to make things better between us, Spock.”

“You do not need to do anything except focus on regaining your health.” And by all outward appearances, what Spock said was true.

I’m sorry so fucking sorry. Kirk couldn’t bring himself to look at Spock. While it was true that he’d felt like he was along for the ride two nights ago, watching himself act repugnant toward his best friend, that wasn’t an excuse for his terrible behavior. “I’m a jealous asshole, Spock. What I said, what I did, was entirely out of line. I suppose all I can do is apologize and pray that you can, in time, forgive me.”

Spock didn’t say anything for a moment. “All is forgiven, Jim.”

Kirk closed his eyes and savored those words he didn’t think he deserved. He called me Jim!

Franklin was still pissing blood, but he’d settled down, choosing to do as he was told and actively keeping his people under control. Even Horse-laugh was mellowing. Under Liam’s watch, they went around Sweetness, linked together like a chain gang, where they scrubbed and polished every surface and miserly crevasse in-between.

Glad to have that duty delegated away, Laura inspected her diamonds. When all the cargo holds met her requirements, she ordered Morgana to lay in a course to Trego Delta with a layover at Vittel’s Star along the way. She left the bridge to Silvio, who was happy as a pig in shit to have the center seat. It was time to go home for a few days.

She was on her way to pick Veddah’s brain when she caught Hoskins trying to enter the Vulcan’s cell. The doctor punched in another code and swore when the door didn’t abide by his order and open.

“I didn’t ask for you to meet me here.” Laura’s voice made him freeze.

“I—I thought—” Hoskins started to stutter and turned around. The grotesque bulge at his crotch said all she needed to know.

“And you wonder why I can’t trust you with the keys to the store? Go make someone else’s life miserable with that thing.”

“But I don’t want one of the other captives.” He gave himself a vigorous rub. “I want this one. You said I could.”

“When I’m through with him, that’s the agreement.” How many times had she said this now? Hoskins was like dealing with a needy toddler. “It’s going to be a while.”
“Oh, all right.” Hoskins huffed and rolled his eyes. “I can see you’re fond of this one.”

“That’s not funny.”

“It’s not supposed to be.” He shook his left leg in an attempt to get his gargantuan member to settle in a half-comfortable manner. “If this is how it’s going to be, you and I need to make a bit of a trade.”

“I’m listening, but that doesn’t mean I’ll bite.” Whatever it was, she hoped it didn’t involve having to look at Hoskins’ massive dick.

“I want a show.” Lizard tongue flicked at the air. “And I want you to lay down the scratch so I can get laid at Miss Barclay’s when we get home.”

“And?” She said, waiting for whatever rider he wanted to tack on at the end because there would be something. She started calculating the outrageous expense for the brothel. Miss Barclay wanted any fees up front, mostly as a damage deposit.

“Tell Miss Barclay to make sure he’s young.” Hoskins smiled.

“Fine. But if I catch you sniffing around here again with that beast locked and loaded, I’ll cut it off and feed it to you.”

“I want my show before we hit Trego, or I might just have to bust this door down.” He turned to face away and squeezed past her. “Actually, if you do that much now, I won’t even think about touching your precious Vulcan.”

“It’s a deal.”

“I’m looking forward to your next call, Captain.”

Mollie spent her day digging through media archives, looking for any and all mentions of Laura Hillyard. What was such a big deal that she’d come out of the shadows and revealed herself to Spock of all people? Getting nowhere, having seen at least three-hundred accounts of Arik Collier’s brutal stabbing and Laura’s subsequent disappearance, Mollie needed a break from seeing that vile woman’s face.

She ascended to the mezzanine level of the Diplomatic Corps building. She’d given thought to crossing over the enclosed footbridge to the next structure in the government complex but decided to get a small meal here instead.

Quiet and sunny, the food court was a welcome change from the blathering of newscasters over headphones and reading articles in dim light. As she took her tray to find a place to sit, she got some odd looks from a table of humans wearing visitor badges. A couple of them even made faces at her in an attempt to get a reaction. She found it hard to crack a smile around strangers and kept her face passive, much to their disappointment.

She was maybe three bites into a stir-fry that needed more seasoning when someone approached and asked if he could take a seat. While she didn’t recognize the individual, she knew what his uniform meant.

“Dr. MacCormack, I am Sovis.” Young, lithe, rich-voiced, he came off as a standard-issue Golic
“Call me Mollie.” She said. “What can I do for a member of T’Pau’s staff?”

Sovis’ gaze lingered a bit too long on the Golic script displayed on her clothes. He tried to hide his reaction to learning she was Lyr Saan, but she caught it, and he knew it. He lowered his eyes.

“There has been a mole amongst the staff, and she’s actively operating. She specifically wants you to know that the mole has likely read the letter.”

“I know who she’s talking about.” Sovis asked.

“Do all humans behave in such a way?” Sovis asked.

“No.” She said. “That bunch is not representative of the species as a whole.”

It was a kilometer-plus walk to Sovis’ office within T’Pau’s administration. Mollie was glad when they were finally at a place where they could shut themselves away.

“T’Pau believes she has a mole amongst her staff and that person is actively operating. She specifically wants you to know that the mole has likely read the letter.”

“The mole has read the letter. That doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“She said you will inform the right people and that they need to be careful lest they get caught out.”

Mollie knew better than to ask for clarification. Sovis wouldn’t know what his boss meant. Not that she had to comprehend the meaning to pass the message along. “I know who she’s talking about.”
about. I’ll contact them as soon as I can.”

Sovis could not wrest his scrutiny of her Clan. Nor could he level her with the obnoxious crowd from the food court. She represented a puzzle he thought he might not figure out.

Reversal hypospray administered, Veddah started waking up from the surprise dose of sedatives Laura pounded into his system. He was fine at first if a little groggy until he realized he’d been removed from his cell. The chain that he’d become accustomed to was gone, replaced by bindings on all four extremities. He looked down at himself, still naked, tied spread-eagle to a bed in an unfamiliar room. He didn’t panic, but such a state was not far off.

“There you are.” Laura said. “I was starting to wonder if you were ever going to join me.”

He couldn’t see her. He pulled against his bonds and looked for her, finding nothing. She stepped out of her darkened bathroom and into the low light of her quarters. He stopped struggling. She dialed in a dose on a second hypospray and blasted it into his thigh. “This last one is a nasal spray. If you hold still, I won’t have to touch you to give it to you.”

Those two drugs on board, she’d give him ninety-seconds or so for them to start kicking in. She bolted back into her bathroom for a quick change of clothes and left the door open as to keep an eye on Veddah. His breathing got faster, and a fearful moan tinged the room. He had a pretty good idea at this point what was going to happen.

She approached the bed and turned on a table lamp, less so Veddah could see her, more that this gave her a few moments to whisper to him while those watching on the lo-lite camera feeds couldn’t see their faces because of the brightness. She sat on the bed and leaned over so her face was directly in his. He’d started to tremble, especially as he saw more of the light blue lace and voile babydoll nightie she wore.

“I am saving you from Hoskins. If I let him in here, you’ll be wearing a colostomy bag by tonight. I think you’d rather wake up tomorrow deflowered by me than mutilated by him.”

He leaned his head back into the pillows. The first tear broke free and burned a trail along his temple.

“It’s okay to cry, Veddah. In fact, with this crowd watching us, it’s better that you do.” She gave him a very slight smile before cupping the side of his face. He startled, a strange revelation overtook him. “I gave you something specifically to numb your psi abilities.”

She crawled over the top of him to lie along his right side. “The other thing I injected you with is to make sure you can perform.”

A little wiry for her tastes, Veddah was a good looking man, Laura could not begrudge him that. Too bad he wasn’t human. She wrapped a hand around his hardening penis, stroking him with caressing fingers rather than the traction an experienced lover might appreciate. She placed a line of kisses from his collarbone to the tip of his ear before pressing her lips to his.

He didn’t seem to understand that he should open his mouth for her. She wouldn’t force him to.

“I’m not going to pretend that what I’m doing to you is anything other than what it is. Some sick people create moral bargains with themselves that lets them think that they were granting you a favor or giving you a gift by doing this. That’s not how it works. I am here because I traded places
with Hoskins in order to save you from severe and violent physical trauma. I am completely conscious of the fact that I am committing a premeditated crime against you.”

He shrank into the pillows, fear and desperation actively formed the features on his face. “. . .k’la’sa . . .”

“Yes, k’la’sa.” She confirmed.

He attempted to nullify his expression, to simply accept what was happening, but couldn’t override the emotion.

“Your body is going to betray your mind, Veddah.” She snaked her right leg across his thighs and pulled herself into a straddle. “It’s going to find pleasure while your conscious self sees only violation.”

He stopped fighting the tears. She kissed them away as she turned out the lamp. “This isn’t your fault, Veddah. Let your body comfort you, there is no shame in that.”

There was no begging or pleading or physical attempts to shake her off. She repeated, several times, that he should not shoulder the blame for what she was doing. Drugged, restrained, he could not defend himself. She applied a copious amount of lubricant to him then sheathed him deep inside her. He cried out like a broken child.

“It’s not your fault.” She whispered, again and again and again.
Chapter 28

With three days to go before Enterprise finally arrived at Overton Holdings, Captain Kirk was allowed off light-duty and back to work. Bones’ forced downtime had mostly involved he and the doctor sitting in Kirk’s quarters and talking. The CMO wasn’t a full-blown psychiatrist, but beneath the Southern charm, in coexistence with the man’s extraordinary abilities with a scalpel, and medical ingenuity in the field, McCoy was quite adept at mapping out what ailed the human mind.

Kirk was feeling better on the medications. He remembered taking at least one of them before as part of the intensive treatment he’d undergone post-Tarsus IV. Having been so young and so traumatized, his brain’s ability to hold onto a proper chemical equilibrium was permanently damaged. Throughout his Starfleet career, that biochemical offset was minor, something chronic to be worked around and monitored. It manifested as a slight case of obsession that turned out to make him an excellent student, if a little impulsive, mixed in with a bit of melancholy. His condition was so mild, he didn’t think it even had a name. It was never anything that left him unfit for duty. If that was the case, he’d have washed out long before being turned loose in the Federation’s flagship.

Bones made it sound like the years of stress had caught up to Kirk, and he’d entered whatever middle-life crisis mode was. It made his brain flip a switch, and over the course of a few weeks, he’d morphed from the usual Jimmy-the-very-slightly-depressed-space-cowboy to a raving lunatic bastard.

“It’s not something you were even conscious of, Jim.” Bones told him at least three times a day. “Hell, when I threatened to run you through that psych eval after you hit that wall, I should have followed through, and this wouldn’t have happened.”

“You didn’t have to see how he looked at me, Bones.”

“Spock’s not blaming you for anything.”

“You didn’t see his eyes.”

“Jim—”

“I cut him to the quick. I hurt him. My touch, my thoughts, caused him real, acute pain.”

“Jim—”

“I could have told him that I loved him. Instead, he knows just how much I hate the woman he’s going to marry . . .”

The captain left the mental playback of that conversation behind as he stepped back onto the bridge. He put on his game-face and embraced the ten-foot-tall-and-bullet-proof persona expected of him. One look around was like a homecoming until his gaze came upon the science station.

Black trousers, blue tunic, and a cascade of cranberry-colored hair, Lt. Commander Sha’leyen was in Spock’s place. “Good morning, Captain.”

“To you too, Lt. Commander.” He said as he took his seat and logged in to his station.

“All systems green. Tug captains report the same with an ETA of approximately thirty-four hours
to port.” Sha’leyen reported as the ranking officer turning over control to Kirk.

Kirk was reminded that Command wanted paperwork on Sha’leyen and that he was supposed to get her some more time in the center seat. While he was languishing on light-duty, he’d been put on notice that his favorite bioarchaeologist was now slotted to take over as the first officer, not the science officer, aboard the USS Sally Ride, while Enterprise was out of commission. She’d shun the switch to a gold tunic, choosing, like his own first officer, to remain in science blues even as an officer of the line. She hadn’t seemed pleased about her reassignment when he’d broken the news to her yesterday. She’d put him on the spot, making Kirk promise to take her back when the silver lady returned to the stars, refusing to accept the new position and the promotion that came with it otherwise. He made a note to himself to discuss Sha’leyen’s schedule with Spock and tried not to think about how quickly this five years was winding down.

*Are you here to keep an eye on me, or does Spock just want to avoid me?* Kirk sent the message to the science station.

*Keeping an eye on you, James Kirk. CMO’s orders. Spock’s not avoiding you. Your first officer has only switched places with me for today and tomorrow.*

He heard her depress the send button. *That damned doctor sometimes. Thank you for keeping my recent health issues confidential, Sha’leyen.*

*Of course, Captain. May Ko-te’kru Kaylara keep close watch on you.*

Mollie finished her calls to the departments she taught in at USC, advising them she didn’t know when she’d make it back to earth. Her passport had gotten red-flagged as a fraud in all human jurisdictions’ immigration databases, and no amount of back-and-forth between the Vulcan Embassy and customs was alleviating the issue. There were worse things than being stuck in ShiKahr, waiting to hear if she could leave on the next flight. Six days in Nouveau Toulouse’s holding cells still weighed fresh in her mind.

Her grandmother, T’Lessa, let Mollie stay with her and they’d enjoyed their evenings together. However, during the day, T’Lessa was Lyr Saan’s head representative on the High Council, meaning Mollie had a lot of downtime on her own. The past few days, she’d gone into the city center and trolled libraries and archives, or visited with her Auntie Theresa in her lab at the VSA.

While she was out and about, she’d constantly seen Sovis drifting around, trying to be aloof and out of her line of sight. He wanted something utterly unrelated to his line of work and was gathering up the gumption to ask. If he’d been human, she might have worried about a stalker, but whatever it was with Sovis, she didn’t have to be afraid.

She consulted her list to see if she needed to get in touch with anyone else on a professional level. Satisfied that was taken care of, her mind started to wander toward the USS Enterprise. She tried to think of a time when she’d ever seen Spock so shaken, so taken aback by the human capacity to destroy those they were closest to. She’d spent hours trying to talk him through Jim’s reaction to her. Still, at a complete loss, Spock finally asked, why could more humans not behave like her? She didn’t have an answer.

The door chimes sounded. She didn’t need to consult the viewer to know Sovis was on the other side.
“T’Pau asked me to fetch you. She desires an audience.” He said.

Maybe she can get this whole passport issue resolved, Mollie thought as she followed Sovis to the car.

The ride was quiet, Mollie watching the scenery fly by, and Sovis nervously trying to broach some subject with her. About halfway through the journey, he started to speak.

“I have learned a lot about you, Mollie Ah’dlevna. For example, you are native-born Lyr Saan rather than adopted or married into the Clan.”

“I am.” She buttressed herself for the same jeers and digs about the Lyr Saan she’d heard her entire life. She’d taken a thousand times more shit about being a dream-stealing, mind-raping, shadow-walking slave than anything beginning to relate to her human DNA. In a cruel twist of irony, as children, when Spock was tortured about being human, Mollie was instead viscously berated about being Lyr Saan. Talk about illogical!

“Your professional accomplishments are outstanding. Your hobbies and extra-curricular interests are fascinating.” Sovis clenched his hands, white-knuckling through the butterflies. “I am, however, drawn specifically to one detail in your biography.”

“What is that?” She didn’t like how he buttered her up. This conversation was headed for some flavor of doom.

“You are not married.”

Bollocking shit, she thought. Anything but this. A quick assessment put Sovis at the right age to start freaking out about being unbonded. On the opposite side of that, she was old enough that being unmarried meant he may assume that she did not have a bondmate either.

“No, I’m not married.”

“How did she address this tactfully? “I am pledged to someone, Sovis.”

Incredulous, for a Vulcan, he said. “But, you are not bonded.”

“He’s a very close friend of mine.” She didn’t want to get into names and hoped Sovis left it there.

“This man, he is human?” If she were engaged to a human, he could be let off for some of this embarrassment. “The Lyr Saan have not made the announcement of your betrothal.”

“He’s Vulcan.” With the idea that he lands his Jim first! She thought. But if I tell you I’m a placeholder, you’ll never leave me alone about this. “We have chosen to keep the news to ourselves.”

“I—” He’d not wanted to come off a desperate, nor had he expected to be rebuffed. He thought he’d be turned down, but only after the equivalent of a date or two.

“If you’re interested in meeting someone who is Lyr Saan.” She said, throwing him a gracious out. “I have a cousin who is recently divorced. He too works in ShiKahr as part of the High Council staff. He’s a statistician, who in his off-time is a volunteer botanical technician for the Horticulture Society.”
“You would be willing to make the introduction after my grievous indecorum?”

What I’d really like to do is find your family and give them a good dressing down for leaving you to solve this on your own for so fucking long. This late in the game, you’ve struck out, they should have found someone for you, she thought. “When T’Pau is through with me, we’ll go find Novir.”

Not wanting to risk a conversation overheard by clandestine listening devices, T’Pau insisted on meeting Mollie outdoors in the rooftop gardens at the Commission for Vital Statistics. While the dowager may have had some concern over eavesdropping, Mollie was just as sure she didn’t want to get caught being too friendly with the Lyr Saan, especially the granddaughter of the woman she was at loggerheads with.

The high matriarch of Clan Surak, not administering ritual or tradition, dropped her formal diction. “Have Spock and Tralnor explained what I am having them do?”

“I am privy to very little in that regard. If you set them a task and told them not to speak of it, they are following your directive.” Mollie put on the sunglasses she always carried with her on Vulcan, not caring if T’Pau found it a sign of weakness, but the old woman didn’t seem to have the inclination today to pick on human or Lyr Saan idiosyncrasies.

“Occasionally, I get word of insidious pre-Reform antiquities that are not fit to be seen or handled by anyone outside of a minute circle of experts. I send said experts to retrieve these items, which are then destroyed or locked away.”

Mollie followed so far.

“The most recent antiquity brought to my attention is what Dehline would refer to as an artifact of malice in the truest definition of the term. Now that I am aware of security breaches within my own staff, it is of utmost importance this item is found and immolated before it falls into the wrong hands. The intelligence leak, combined with the reemergence of Laura Hillyard, means Spock and Tralnor’s search must pick up. The AVDL will have heard from their spies that I am looking for something.”

“The AVDL has spies, on Vulcan?” Bewildered, Mollie tried to reconcile that idea to what she knew about the racist group and the hot red planet of her birth.

“They have been active for some time.” T’Pau stared into Mollie. “I shall not speak of those who betray us.”

That Mollie was included under the heading of the word us was an exquisite development in familial relations. The Lyr Saan were typically excluded from such umbrella terms in a cultural sense. Thus, this was a kind of inclusivity never expected from the Golic clans.

“My nephew and your brother need help in this endeavor. In order to explain what they seek, I must enter your thoughts.”

Mollie removed her sunglasses, so T’Pau had access to the proper psi points on her face, and closed her eyes. Unlike her nephew, she absolutely needed physical contact for telepathy. The papery fingertips on her skin initiated an orderly transfer of information. Some things, the old woman explained, others needed no captioning. When T’Pau withdrew, Mollie felt heavy like she’d been weighed down and thrown into the deep end of a swimming pool.
“It’s horrific.” Mollie said.

“Completely annihiliatory should it ever return to this place.” T’Pau stood, ready to return to her compromised workplace. “Destroy it before it destroys our world.”

Captain Kuznetsov was as beaten down as any Starfleet officer Kirk had ever seen. Dirt-streaked, hair falling out of its formerly immaculate bun, she was exhausted to the molecules of her soul. Her soft Russian accent was more apparent than before.

“Chertovski suka!” That fucking bitch, Kuznetsov swore. “They were shot with an antique 9mm handgun. The spent rounds are littered about. Rather than disturb more than one or two of the bodies in what is a crime scene, we’ve counted the spent ordinance instead. Forty bullets.”

Kirk and the rest of the bridge officers on Enterprise recoiled at the description of the scene. He had Uhura get Sha’leyen in direct contact with Dragon’s security personnel on how to approach a mass grave and what to do if Command could not get a proper forensic bioarchaeology team out to Melbek III in a timely manner. Unfortunately, it was a good thing the Lt. Commander was immediately on-hand.

“That means there are twelve members of Seren’s crew that made it off this planet alive.” Kuznetsov said.

“Begging the Captain’s pardon?” Kirk thought she was being awfully optimistic to think a dozen people were still breathing when the rest were rotting in a hole. “How do we know there’s not another grave or death scene out there? Melbek III is a big planet.”

“AVDL likes to take captives. They demand ransoms, sell them to slavers, kill them as entertainment, keep them as cheap labor. . . Twelve of them left here.” Kuznetsov was adamant and Kirk relented.

“Now we’re looking for a mass murderer, with a ship full-to-bursting with diamonds, who’s holding a dozen Starfleet crew and officers as prisoners.” Kirk assessed the situation aloud.

Kuznetsov sighed. “I will keep you apprised of the details. USS Dragon, out.”
Chapter 29

Captain and crew alike were in a celebratory mood when the tugs finally released the Enterprise, and she moored at Overton’s space-dock. While he didn’t clap, whistle, or shout, Kirk was desperately happy this part of the Laura Hillyard nightmare was over.

“Captain Kirk to Enterprise.” He addressed the whole ship via the PA. “Welcome to Overton Holdings. According to Mr. Scott, our layover here is projected at four-days-six-hours. Therefore a shore leave rota has been put in place. Go and stretch your legs for a bit. When you come back, we’re going hunt MV Sweetness down and turn it into a trophy.”

The bridge crew was elated, well, save for Spock, but he never really took shore leave anyway. As the officers and enlisted who kept the nerve center of the ship going cleared out, Kirk addressed his second-in-command. “I don’t suppose you’ve got a few minutes to spare?”

They opted for the conference room, where they had plenty of furniture between them and didn’t have much chance to accidentally touch.

“I understand if you hate me or never want to interact outside of our jobs again. Just—please don’t transfer and leave me to finish out this five years alone. I need you to be here.” Kirk had hope that the previous lack of animosity on Spock’s behalf was still there.

“I have no intention of putting in for a transfer. Such an action was never my intention.”

“Oh, thank god.” His biggest worry was no more.

Spock dropped the stone facade, as he was wont to do for Kirk sometimes, and said, “I do not, could not hate you, Jim.”

Kirk let himself smile for the first time in days. “You have no idea how much it means to hear you say that.”

Concern/need showed in Spock’s eyes.

“I know I’ve said it, but I need to say it again. I’m sorry, Spock. I’m sorry I said those things to you. I’m sorry that I manhandled you. I’m sorry I hurt you.”

“Jim—” The Vulcan was going to tell him to quit with the apologies, but Kirk had to say it, even if it was only for his own selfish needs.

“You know what, Spock?” It stung to get these next words out, but he knew he spoke the truth. “I’m glad you’ve got someone and that she treats you a hell of a lot fucking better than I’m capable of. She’s good for you, she’s good to you, I can see it. You deserve so much better than what I could give.”

“You do not understand Mollie’s place in my life.”

“She’s the one you should have been with all along. Fuck that T’Pring business.” Kirk said. “Honestly, Spock, I’d just be honored if you’d still be my friend.”
“Yes, Jim.” His first officer said. “I am still your friend.”

The commercial transport hub at Proxima Rusalka was an overcrowded madhouse.

“Well, what did he say?” Mollie strained to listen for the final boarding call for her connecting flight. She’d been forced onto a public comm terminal when the battery in her personal unit died, and this was one call she needed to follow through. “He didn’t reject you. . . That’s not a rejection. What exactly did he say?”

“Hey, are you about done? Some of us have important business calls to make. Your sniveling brat can wait until later.” The snooty executive-type directly behind her started in.

“Can you say that again, Spock?” The cheap connection meant the video portion of the call didn’t come through. “The noise in here is maddening.”

“Move your ass, lady.”

“Hold on.” Mollie positioned to face blustering human.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” He barked, then got an eyeful of her clothes and a good read on the new ID badge clipped to her chest. She gave him the coldest stare she was capable of.

“Find another phone.” She said.

“Screw you and the Vulcan High Council.” He snorted before tromping away.

“Spock?” She listened as her friend relayed the conversation he’d had with his captain. “No, that’s not it at all. Jim’s trying to say that he hopes you think he’s worthy of even the slightest chance at an intimate relationship.”

A garbled voice didn’t quite penetrate the zoo atmosphere of the terminal, so if that was her final call, Mollie couldn’t tell. At this point, it didn’t particularly matter. With the writ T’Pau had set her up with, Mollie could walk on any commercial flight in the Federation, and no one could stop her. Too bad it was only good for as long as it took to find the tavalik duv-tor.

“I know, humans never quite say what they really mean, and this was far more reading between the lines than you’re used to.” This time, the bleating from above did announce that her liner was leaving. “I’m glad. . . We’ll talk shop tonight.”

Mollie ran for her gate.

Daniel Shelley smirked as he closed out the video on the other screen in his office. Laura thought he might break into applause.

“You are something else, Laura.” He said from his plush hideaway on Trego Delta.

“What’s that supposed to mean, Dan?” She opened a desk drawer and looked for a salty snack.

“You raped a Vulcan and made him cry!” He shook his head. “I’m in awe of you. I’ve watched it
half a dozen times today and just can’t get over it.”

“I’d say it’s pretty straightforward.” She said. The video of what she’d done to Veddah was going viral in the human supremacist realm.

“He’s crying—it’s hilarious. Absolutely fucking hilarious, terrible pun intended.” AVDL’s leader worked his lower jaw and chuckled.

*If it’s so damned funny, how come I’m not laughing?* She kept the thought to herself.

“I didn’t think they could get all worked up like that. So, tell me, Golden Girl, was that your first time fucking a Vulcan? It was obviously his with anyone, only he was too busy blubbering to appreciate the perfect woman riding him home. *Lucky bastard.*”

“Can we find another subject?”

It took longer than she wanted to get the Big Boss off the comm. He thought he needed all the pervy details about Veddah. Glad to be free of Daniel Shelley, she finished writing her monthly editorial for the AVDL news magazine, then undertook a tour of the ship.

Damned if those Starfleet bums couldn’t make the place shine. Sweetness probably hadn’t left the manufacturer’s yards in such pristine condition. Laura spoke to every one of her crew she came across, inspected equipment, and saw that video replaying on more tiny screens than she could count. Good thing she wasn’t the type who embarrassed easily.

At long last, she let herself into Veddah’s cell. He’d sort-of recovered enough that he stopped breaking down in tears every time he saw her.

“I just came to check in on you.” She proffered a piece of fruit. When he didn’t take it, she skipped her chair and sat next to him on the floor. “I don’t know if you’ve ever had a pomegranate, but they’re pretty good. You don’t eat the skin, just the seeds inside.”

He turned his head so he didn’t have to see her.

She placed the fruit on his lap, careful not to touch him. “How long is it supposed to take for this semen plug of yours to loosen up and fall out of me?”

His breath caught, and he adjusted position where she could view him in profile. More disturbed than Laura thought possible, he said, “You did that to me while in your fertile phase?”

“What?”

“A plug cannot form unless a female is at a specific point in her cycle. It is an enzymatic reaction to the hormones.” Dread carried in his voice. “If you are with my child—”

“Absolutely impossible.” She corrected him. “Even taking the whole different species thing into consideration, I can’t get pregnant. I tried. I tried for fifteen years. I’ve been seen by doctors of every specialty, shot myself full of hormones, donor eggs, donor sperm, embryo transfers, surgeries, fertility drugs of every kind, nothing worked. I can’t get pregnant enough to miscarry. I’ve never even had what they call a chemical pregnancy. I’m as barren as a slab of granite.”

“I see.” He replied, less terrified than before.

“I only asked because it stinks to high heaven and I can’t seem to scrape it out. I used a mirror to look, and I can’t even see my cervix. I don’t think that’s normal.”
“It will dissolve on its own.”

“Is there any way to hurry it along?” The very concept of a Vulcan semen plug was so incredibly disgusting it made her light-headed. Having one adhered to her internal anatomy gave her mental dry-heaves.

“This many days post-coitus, another semen deposit should weaken its hold.” He hid his face again.

“Would it have to be from you?” *Please say I can go fuck Silvio and this thing inside me will go away.*

“I do not know.”

“Veddah?”

He didn’t so much a twitch at the use of his name.

“Keeping promises, that’s why I did this to you. It’s not an excuse. It’s simply an explanation. I told Hoskins he could have you when you were no longer useful to me. He’s impatient to a fault.” The Vulcan likely wasn’t listening. “However, he gets off almost as much by watching as he does maiming people with his ridiculously massive cock. I don’t know if you give a shit at this point, but with what he told me yesterday about Vulcan abdominal structures, if Hoskins didn’t leave you bleeding to death from a perforated bowel, he’d have burst or bruised other vital organs.”

Silence.

“For what it’s worth, Veddah. . .” She lowered her voice to a range where any surveillance would have a hard time picking it up. “There is a scant collection of things I’ve said and done in my life that I do regret. I wish I hadn’t had to hurt you like that.”

It was the middle of the afternoon and Tralnor, free from the tyranny of the media lab, was in Rec Room 2 catching up on dailies. Enterprise was blissfully quiet and depopulated, a short-lived feature he planned to take full advantage of.

*Celluloid Vokaya* played on a small screen. Headphones on, he took root at his desk, where he could continue with the nit-picky task of flagging frames for replacement. He made his notes on paper, left questions to himself and Joe/Sohja in the margins, and figured he’d get in a good six-to-eight hours of solid work, not counting breaks for dinner and ralash-t’mu-yor.

He tapped a pen to the beat of the music and let his mind get lost in the task. The empathic part of his brain shook him loose, telling him Spock was near. Tralnor should have figured that man wouldn’t have taken advantage of shore leave either. Satisfied the first officer was merely seeing if there was anything edible in the officers’ mess, Tralnor decided to review his notes until the distraction passed.

Spock wasn’t on his way through the area. He was bringing Tralnor a cup of coffee. *So be it, Tralnor thought, if I’m supposed to spend the day guiding and instructing those around me, then that is what I’ll do. Such is the lot of the T’Kehr t’Kaylara.*

(Thank you, Spock.)
Spock momentarily fixed on the terminal display, a freeze-frame of Sohja and Mollie dancing as though mirror images of one another, then he sat in the closest chair to the desk.

(You know, Spock, we might have to introduce Dr. McCoy to our old friend, Sohja. He’s been pestering me about her.) Tralnor killed the power to the display.

(He has asked me about her as well.)

(She’ll turn his brains into scrambled eggs. I should think once would be enough, then we’ll never have to hear him go on about her again.) Tralnor gratefully sipped the fresh coffee.

(You are the only person I know who has slept with her more than once. You are either foolhardy or impervious to her—) Primitive words could not broach what Sohja was capable of.

Hot mug set back on the desk, Tralnor said, (Definitely the first one. She leaves me weak-kneed and seeing double. . . Damn, it's been a long time.)

(Joe is right, Tralnor. Amelie Grace would not wish to see you alone. Sha’leyen will be a good partner for you.) He pointed at Tralnor’s rings. (She would want you to let go and find new love.)

As he said that, Tralnor felt Spock’s new morass of loss. Walking knee-deep in a lake of molasses, the first officer was trying to chase down Jim Kirk, and if he did catch up to the captain, it was to play a game where Spock didn’t understand the rules, couldn’t anticipate the moves, and left himself open to emotional turmoil.

(Mollie called me not long after she got on the ship from Proxima Rusalka to Nouveau Toulouse. We compared notes on you, Spock, as it were. Now that Jim’s had this colossal fuck-up, you’re going to have work your ass off to convince him that he’s worthy of you. The strategy still stands, you’re the one who’s got to keep running at him.) Tralnor watched the thoughts roll behind Spock’s eyes. (And if he throws you out his door, go back.)

(He has made it clear that he only sees me as a friend, Tralnor.)

(Then Mollie and I are going to help you put together one hell of a sales pitch.)

His cabin-mates and extraneous associated junior officers sounded like a pack of hyenas from where Tralnor perused the “adult” shop’s wares. He heard Billy the Sixth exclaim, “Dr. T said he was staying on-ship to work, not coming down-station to find stuff to work his wrist!”

“You’re all puerile.” Tralnor wanted to start by finding the right lube. By this point, Chris O’Dell had stopped laughing, but only to oggle. Tralnor was in jeans and a USC alumni band t-shirt.

He approached the gaggle of ensigns and lieutenants. “I’m not finding my old favorite. Chris, if you were going to bend me over the sales counter and fuck me right now, which lube would you use?”

Faces paled and the howls quietened. Chris, usually so quick with an innuendo, coughed and stared.

“Come on, lads. Let’s let Doc finish his shopping alone.” Billy the Sixth started to herd the group down the concourse. “We can tease him about it later.”
Chris stayed behind for a second. “What’s yours?”

Tralnor listed the brand name.

“No wonder you can’t find it. They quit making that stuff like five years ago.” Mostly recovered from the shock of Tralnor’s question, Chris scanned the shelves until he came across the bottle he was looking for. “This is really similar, just a little thicker.”

A quick read of the ingredients showed nothing a Vulcan would be allergic to. “I appreciate the recommendation.”

“You know, Dr. Tralnor, I don’t get how you put up with us and keep a straight face. We’re a bunch of assholes.”

“That’s part of your charm.”

Finally left to his own devices, Tralnor put considerable thought into the items he placed in his basket. Spock needed the right things in his nightstand if he could get Jim Kirk to join him in bed.
We want, wanted, each other, at least in a sexual sense. How was I to know? Spock smothered the flame in the asenoi and went to the closet to hang up his robe when the doorbell sounded. Still, in his uniform trousers and Starfleet issue undershirt, he answered the door.

“It’s no wonder shore leave is synonymous with Mardi Gras-level depravity.” Tralnor entered, cardinal colored t-shirt tight across his chest, and a box marked CABBAGE SOUP MIX, tucked under his arm. “Even people who don’t think they’re stir-crazy get goofy when the gangplank goes down.”

“Hence my avoidance of shore leave and the associated activities.”

“Where should I set this?”

Spock was unsure. He’d never needed provisions like this for the kind of sex he was used to having. Mollie favored an unscented d’lechu lotion if they got a little dry, but Tralnor was insisting that wouldn’t be enough.

“On the desk, for now.” Tralnor said as he opened the flaps. “This is what you’ll need for anal intercourse.”

Two bottles of Super Slipstream! Anal Dream Lube!, that’s what the label called it, were placed beside the computer terminal. Next was a multipack condom assortment. What was he getting himself into?

“You’re looking a bit faint.” Tralnor reached into the box again. “Sit.”

He complied and watched with more than a little trepidation as the not-cabbage-soup-mix settled on his desktop.

“I will explain all of this to you.” Tralnor brought another chair to the desk. “These things are so you can have a happy and healthy sex life with Jim.”

“I am—overwhelmed.”

“That’s okay. You’ve got people you can trust to help walk you through it.” He placed the empty box on the floor. “The reason I got you this is because d’lechu lotion stimulates the vaginal walls to provide more lubrication and while that’s great, it’s not the best for what you’ll be doing. Even with d’lechu’s help, the anus can’t produce enough lube to make sex comfortable. Use this liberally, on you and him, and when you think you’ve got enough, use a little more. And these are luer lock syringes to help you get it exactly where it needs to go.”

Spock had a question, one he hesitated to ask because he was sure he’d not like the answer. “Tell me, Tralnor, does pain always have to be a part of this act?”

“Pain? No, no pain.” Tralnor let unease at that question manifest as confusion in his features. “Spock, why would you think that?”

“The way my classmates at the Academy spoke about the receptive partners in male/male couplings makes this sound unpleasant at best. Accidentally overheard conversations and comments about making men ‘squeal like bitches,’ from the pain. My limited consumption of pornography has lead me to the same conclusion as well. One partner tolerates pain and discomfort
so the other may have some pleasure” This was the one thing he’d dreaded addressing should he and Jim have gotten together before now. This was the sexual incompatibility issue that wracked his brain.

“That’s what happens when you get all your information on a subject from locker room talk and porno.” Spock immediately recognized Mollie’s kindness and concern in Tralnor’s eyes, and he took some solace that he did have individuals in his life who genuinely cared and could offer assistance when the going got embarrassing. “We’re going to help you learn enough, so your first time with him isn’t painful or frightening.”

“Then I am glad I asked you to do some shopping for me. I would not have known what to get.” Bright colors, tacky packaging, on one small box a woman with humongous fake breasts touted ‘The Quadrant’s Best Butt Plugs: Made by Sofftec!’

“From talking to Mollie, I know you’ve got Refraction Syndrome. So, I understand your worry about going through with this.” Tralnor steered the conversation back toward the previous uncomfortable topic and how to address it, where Spock was ready to breeze by.

“Another defective feature of my weak hybrid body.” That just might make intimacy with Jim impossible, he thought.

“It’s not a defect.” Tralnor insisted, but Spock was not convinced.

“When I broke Mollie’s hymen, it should have been a minor annoyance to her, but when it cast back on me, the pain was severe. I did not know what was going on. I thought I had grievously wounded her. She was bleeding...” He’d been terrified at the time. “Somehow, she knew what was happening to me. She held me close, soothed me, until the refraction passed, and by then, she was used to me inside her, and we were able to make love... I do not want to go through that again.”

Tralnor nodded. “Refraction Syndrome isn’t doomng your sex life before it starts. I’m sure it doesn’t surprise you to know that I’ve got it. Sohja has it too. It’s rare, Lyr Saan physicians believe less than six percent of the total population has it, but it’s not a defect. It’s an evolutionary reproductive strategy that keeps us from maiming or killing our mates during the Fever. It also means we’ve got to be very conscientious of what we’re doing outside of the pon farr.”

“I assumed it manifested because of my mixed heritage.” When he thought about it, Tralnor’s explanation did make sense. He added this new fact to the gaping hole in his knowledge of sex and relationships. After all, he came from a Clan where such things were hidden away and only spoken of in whispers.

“The best way to avoid a refraction episode is to make sure that you or your partner are well prepared for penetration. I don’t know if, outside the Fever, you’ll be the receptive partner at all?”

He’d not thought of that. It was never much of a topic for discussion with Mollie because until now, he’d been unwilling to try. On a couple of occasions, she’d wanted to use her fingers on him or have him anally penetrate her, but the prospect of refraction pain stopped him. Telepathically linked in sex, what he felt, Mollie felt, and vise versa. He did not want that blowback.

“Let’s say yes, you will. Please, try it at least once in your life.” Tralnor tried to find a decent description. “It’s a rush to have someone inside of you, touching you like that...”

“You find it pleasurable?” Spock tried to reconcile what he thought he’d known with what he was learning and still found room for doubt.
“Very much so.” He gave a slight, knowing grin. “And if you’re doing it right, you won’t suffer refraction.”

Spock got a crash course on how to have good sex with a male partner. Dilation, lubrication, fingers, toys, hygiene, positions, communication, relaxation techniques never taught in the Surakian disciplines, proper research methods, don’t hesitate to ask questions, take it slow. Tralnor talked about every item in the box, what it was used for, how it was used correctly.

“And Spock, while this information is priceless, you’ll also need to put in some practice time to get comfortable with yourself.”

“Practice?”

“Masturbation. I know it’s not something Vulcans do much of since we tend to get laid, or not. But, for you right now, it’s all about learning to make this wonderful.” He stood and set the empty box on the seat of his chair. “Remember to have fun.”

Laura was not having fun.

“Oh, Christ! I can feel it.” Silvio withdrew his fingers. “The smell, it’s repugnant. Who knew rancid Vulcan choad reeks like hot garbage?”

“Are you going to fuck me or not? If the answer is no, I’ll have to find someone else.” She wanted to get this over with.

“I can try.” He stroked himself, trying to stay erect. “It's like you’ve got some kind of disease. Are you sure a shot of antibiotics won’t take care of this?”

“I’m sure.” She’d already tried that.

Bent over, so she didn’t have to look at him, Silvio rammed into her.

“Ouch, Goddamnit! Pay attention to what you’re doing. I’m not one of your little fuck dolls.” Three more bone-shaking thrusts and mercifully his cock twitched, and his warmth started to pool inside her. “That hurt.”

“I had to pretend it wasn’t you because I had to come fast. I couldn’t have done it otherwise.” He wiped his dick and started to put his clothes on.

“I’m going to take a shower, then I’ll be up to take us into Vitell’s.” She lay down and tilted her pelvis like she’d done all those times when she’d tried for a baby, keeping Silvio in place and hopefully mucking Veddah out.

Screaming children and pounding on the bulkheads were the first sounds from Mollie’s connection. The cacophony of commercial travel was unmistakable. Even in a sleeper compartment, the masses never relented. “Sorry about that. I’ve got a family of eight on one side and a cranky suit on the other. They don’t seem to realize I’m between them. I might ask the porters if they’ll chuck me down with the freight.”
“That’s what I’d be doing.” Sha’leyen winced as piercing shrieks reverberated into her office. Spock and Tralnor didn’t react physically, but the bioarchaeologist sensed their minds shifting to compensate for the stabbing noise.

“Shut the fuck up!” Suit bellowed.

“Gotta love public transportation,” Mollie said. “The four of us are—”

Knocks on doors interrupted, leaving the three Starfleet officers waiting fifteen minutes for the passenger ship’s security to calm the aggrieved and clear out the troublemakers. When a reasonable calm was established, Mollie came back to the comm.

“T’Pau contacted you directly, and you’re on your way back to earth for what exactly?” Sha’leyen thought the human homeworld was out of the way from the places they needed to search for the tavalik duv-tor.

“I’ve got to talk to an ambassador who can get me in to see the Federation president. She has me running around and doing some pre-emptive rat killing. That way, little things like you three going AWOL, won’t mean that you’re actually going AWOL.”

“And she is not doing this herself so you can start searching at Vitell’s Star?” Sha’leyen felt like she was missing some inside joke. Mollie laughed, and the men regarded one another with eyebrows slightly raised.

“You do not know T’Pau.” Spock said. “She is not the ‘rat killing’ type.”

“Even if she was, AVDL is so far up the Council’s ass that she can’t walk down the hallway without them knowing.” Mollie started taking her hair down, reminding Sha’leyen a lot of how Tralnor looked when they met as teens.

“Its good to have you on our team. We’ve needed someone, not on this ship.” Tralnor showed Mollie a copy of the tavalik duv-tor’s sketch. “Do we all agree that this is what we’re after?”

“Yes.” Mollie nodded.

“Did T’Pau give any information on how to approach it?” Spock needed more than look for box, locate box, destroy box.

“Not really. She said that while I was on earth that I should contact T’Lal and Sarek. And I was going to do that anyway. Until yesterday, I had no idea the crazy shenanigans they got up to. It’s fucking insane. I always wondered why T’Lal had this bizarre side-gig doing some kind of fighter pilot shit, and could not for the life of me make the connection between her tramp freighter days and why the High Council sent her to Miramar when we were kids.” Mollie shrugged in disbelief. “I never knew diplomacy could be so dangerous.”

“They hide it well.” Tralnor commented. “We don’t have to worry about T’Lal or Sarek saying anything about what we’re doing.”

“I will be as discreet as I possibly can.” Mollie let her nervousness twist her features. “When you wanted Tralnor on the Enterprise, this was not what I had in mind for the reason. Also, I know T’Pau dumped me on you with no notice. Let me know if I get in your way.”

“That she has involved you at all speaks of desperate urgency.” Spock said. “A concerning development.”
“This is a good thing. We are Kae’talse. On Belon, four is the number of fortune. We, like some pre-Reform Vulcans, had consecrated squads of four tasked with seeking out the bad that hurt people, almost like detectives. The Kae’talse were revered for their good work.” Sha’leyen, for the first time since she was brought in on this overwhelming task, felt that it wasn’t insurmountable. “It would be said as Kehkuh-talsu t’i’vish, in modern Golic.”

“Kennuk-Talse’te in Old Lyr Saan.” Tralnor said. “Three primaries and, I suppose the best Standard word for it is, a spare. Kennuk teams operated much the same as Kae’talse on Belon.”

“I hope that means we’re lucky.” Mollie said, distinctly uncomfortable at Tralnor’s mention of the Kennuk.
Chapter 31

No sooner was the Enterprise declared fit for duty, she was speeding back to Melbek III. Captain Kirk, disparaged to learn that his ship was the only one in the vicinity with a fully certified forensic bioarchaeology team, argued against returning. He tried to get Admiral Holt to comprehend that his crew had taken an emotional and physical beating out there and that Seren’s dead might be better served by experts who were not coming in with a bias.

The atmosphere aboard was terse. Every time Kirk got an update from Sha’leyen, he wanted to tell Command to what they could go and do with themselves. The bioarchaeologist’s requisition list was extensive. In part, she wanted security, all of the xenoanthropology staff, two geologists, two dendrologists, an entomologist, Dr. McCoy, a full biohazard setup, at least one medical lab tech, and a handful of people to just put labels on things and keep stuff organized. The more he scrolled, the more he wanted to turn around.

He knew a thing or two about mass graves, the unnatural marks they left on the landscape, the overpowering stench that wasn’t so much an odor as a cloying physical barrier that attempted to smother you, sightless eyes seeing nothing and everything, macabre smiles of skulls, white bone where familiar faces used to be... I can’t go down there, he thought. If I do, I can’t be objective. I’m just going to see the corpses of the neighbors who starved to death, my teacher who was murdered in a food riot, the little girl three classes below me, dangling from a meat hook, blood draining from her skeletal body, desperate cannibals slicing into her flesh... 

MV Sweetness, with its eight cargo bays, each with a 2,500 cubic meter footprint, could haul close to 800 tons. Where was AVDL going to fence that many diamonds? Kirk didn’t think Hillyard had enough time to fill her ship to the brim, but she’d gotten enough. “Mr. Spock, set up a protocol to search for fluctuations in the diamond market. They’re not dumb enough to flood it at once, but let’s keep an eye on it just the same.”

“Yes, Captain.” Spock replied. “I will also seek out any changes in the quality of the stones coming to market.”

“Good idea.” Thank you for sticking this out with me, Spock.

Sha’leyen started the recovery process by going over satellite images of the murder scene to set up a grid. An initial investigation backed-up Captain Kuznetsov’s assertion that one person was killed at a secondary sub-scene while the other thirty-nine happened in the central part of the gridded area.

Dirt was carefully brushed off the topmost bodies. Said dirt went on its own tarp where it could be moved and intricately screened for evidence. The position of each body recorded, photographed, videoed, the first three were taken to the portable morgue where Dr. McCoy did only the most rudimentary workups. He got what he could glean from a quick visual inspection. Mostly, the ship’s physician was on hand to give each body an official case number, get the reams of paperwork started, and declare them legally dead. It would not be until autopsies were performed that the conclusive identifying information began to come in.

Lt. Helen Stryker, one of the geologists, had to return to the ship. It was all too much for her to take. She’d joined the service to explore space and do research, not deal with the aftermath of a
massacre. Lt. Seltun returned in her place. He tried to pretend that he was entirely unflappable. “Lt. Commander, my analysis of the soil indicates that the microbial biomass within three meters of the grave has not risen to detectable levels.”

“They haven’t been in the ground long enough to add to the ecosystem. They aren’t even in the nitrogen cycle yet, except in a very superficial manner.” Sha’leyen replied. “Collect samples of the fill, and core the wall of the grave at each level of bodies.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Go to my command tent and find a pair of trench shoes. Our standard issue duty boots are unfit for this kind of work.” She sent the geologist on his way for the smooth-soled shoes delicate fieldwork of this nature required, braced her torso, and leaned into the hole where she continued to use a paintbrush to move soil. A loose wedding ring came out of the folds of a gold tunic. The engraving read: *Trevor and Alice Forever*, and supposition by the size of the ring, Trevor was in the ground on Melbek III.

They found bullets, or pieces of bullets, the soft lead marked and molded by the barrel of the gun and the things they struck. Faces were unrecognizable, and the process of decomposition was advanced enough that it was hard to determine sex, gender, or species in some cases. The medical DNA lab had a lot of work.

“It’s a patrol ship, Ensign Shore. They all have to wear trousers and a tunic.” Sha’leyen heard Petty Officer Handler dealing with the resident greenhorn. Someone else couldn’t take anymore and was throwing up in the bushes.

“Not in my crime scene!” Sha’leyen sprang up from her prone position and shouted. “If you think you need to be sick, take it outside the perimeter. Do not contaminate the scene.”

“Lt. Commander, take a look at this.” Lt. Etienne Bertin called her over to one of the bodies.

She did not want to believe the information her eyes sent to her brain. Others stopped what they were doing and approached, some recoiled, and others stared ahead, sadness and anger filling their heads.

“It’s called a coffin birth. The vast pressure of gasses and putrefaction that builds in the abdominal cavity forces the uterus to expel the fetus.” Sha’leyen’s academic demeanor is all that kept a few of the crew from falling apart. “We must get back to the task at hand.”

Dr. McCoy came up beside her as people returned to their assignments. “Seeing as you’re in charge down here, do you want me to issue the—” He wanted to say baby, but it hadn’t gotten the chance to be one. “Is the fetus its own case or is it combined with its mother’s?”

“Tribunal law says the products of conception are included under the heading of the gestational party. The latest annotations from Paris, specific to The Uniform Federation Code say it’s my call based on the circumstances of fetal demise and how ‘pre-viable’ it was at the time of death. Following their guidelines and given my crude estimate of gestational age, early second trimester, I should not assign it individual characteristics.”

“Okay.” He said, turning to go back to the mobile morgue. “I’ll keep them together.”

“Leonard?” She’d never called him by his first name before.

“Yes?” He faced her.
“I don’t know how exactly the timing works in humans, but in a Vulcanid pregnancy at this stage of development, there is already the amalgamation and adhesion of the katra.”

The doctor’s blue eyes gave away that he didn’t know what she was talking about before he asked.

“I think you would call it the formation of the soul.”

“The soul?”

“Issue two case numbers.”

Twelve hours later, they were still working under the glare of portable light standards. Body twenty-nine, just lifted from the trench, went on a stretcher. Sha’leyen took over as one of the litter-bearers, Lt. Seltun on the other end, moving the corpse to the morgue.

On approach, she and Lt. Seltun heard the incongruous chortle of laughter, which didn’t stop even as she entered. Perhaps it was because at this point, they didn’t register who she was, as she’d moved from a regular duty uniform to what Starfleet Xenoanth colloquially referred to as shovel-bum attire. The first nine hours of excavation and scene management rendered her uniform a dirt-caked biohazard that got bagged up like the rest of the evidence. She’d made everyone working in the grave-proper change clothes as well.

Hair hidden under a bandana, heather grey t-shirt from a forensic science training course she’d done with Scotland Yard, an old pair of Academy pt stretch pants, and well-worn athletic shoes, she could have been any of the women working down in that hole.

She guided Seltun to the open cot at the end of the third row and helped him transfer the body.

“Whoooooooot!” One of three laughing security personnel clapped his buddy on the back.

“That’s the kind of salute I want to send into the afterlife. Fuck the world and everyone in it. Whoopsie-daisy.”

“Oh, hey, look at me!” The female of the trio giggled followed by the sound of a limb dropping back on a cot made a squishy thud.

“Look at the size of this thing!” Number three hooted and poked at a body. “He’d have had to ride the turbolifts by himself.”

Sha’leyen snuck up on the group. What the first two found so humorous? One of corpse seventeen’s hands was frozen with the middle finger up. The third one was marveling over the distended, putricine gas-swelled genitalia on corpse fifteen.

“Get out!” She shouted, pointing to the entry. “Desecration of the Honored Dead is a reprehensible act.”

She fairly chased them to the artificially lit turf central to the tents and prefabs they were using for preliminary laboratory and administrative space.

“On the line!” She ordered. The three security people played like they didn’t know why she was upset with them.

“What’s all this?” Dr. McCoy, who’d stepped away from the morgue was coming from the
direction of the command tent.

“Starfleet has no room within its ranks for those who behave as you have here tonight. I expect and tolerate a certain amount of what is called morgue humor, it’s how the human psyche saves itself from succumbing to the horror we are dealing with.” Work around the site came to a stop. This was a talk everyone needed to hear. “However, there is a broad line between morgue humor and the contemptible behavior Lt. Seltun and I have witnessed on your behalf.

“Not only were you verbally disrespectful to the murdered crew of one of our sisters, but you also defiled their bodies as well.”

One of the red-shirted men tried to object, calling her accusations unfounded.

Sha’leyen held out her open palm to the one doing the talking. “You will not be allowed to resign. Your dishonorable discharge papers will list the following: conduct unbecoming, dereliction of duty, tampering with evidence, abuse of a corpse, and grave-robbing.”

“Whatever it is, I’d give it to her before your chief gets ahold of you.” McCoy suggested, barely reining in his contempt.

The first man hesitated, while the woman offered up a ruby ring stolen from the right hand of corpse sixteen. The second man turned over an antique watch.

“I order you to relinquish what you took from corpse seventeen.”

He tried to get smart with her. “With all due respect, Lt. Commander, you’re not in my chain of command.”

“This is my crime scene. You are on secondment to my team. I may wear blue, but I am in charge.”

He set part of a human finger in her upturned hand.

This wasn’t sex, it was a search for obliteration. Kuznetsov writhed beneath Kirk, trying like mad to find that same place. She bit his shoulder, teeth leaving indentations, coming close to breaking the skin, each time he slammed into her. Her nails dug deep red furrows down his back. His hands, rough and ill-mannered, left a patchwork of bruises on her pale body.

They wanted the pain, needed the pain, it was the only thing reminding them they were still alive.

Never had Mollie gotten through immigration and customs in such a timely manner. The screeners, some of whom recognized her from previous run-ins, weren’t happy about waving her through, but there wasn’t a damned thing they could do about it.

From LAX, she had the option of crossing to one of the domestic terminals and immediately catching a puddle jumper to San Francisco, or waiting for the afternoon consulate shuttle. Upon grabbing her cases off the baggage carousel, she opted for the shuttle, so she had time to go home and clean up.
She took a cab to the Fairfax District, where she lived in an old Art Deco service station that long, long ago was converted into a house. There must have been a dozen restaurant menus wedged in her screen door. Key in the lock, one of her neighbors and his dog came bounding up her walk.

“You sure have been popular lately, Miss Mollie.” Roger Dupree, in his late sixties, was something of a one-man neighborhood watch. “About once or twice a day for the last week, this couple keeps coming around, looking for you. Real persistent.”

He projected what his mind remembered them looking like. If his recollection was half-accurate, she didn’t know who they were. “If I was a betting man, which I’m not as you know, I’d say they were hired to find you.”

“I appreciate the warning, Roger.” A flock of ring-neck parakeets took to the trees in her side yard, meeping and bleeping for a few seconds before scattering like a handful of acid green confetti.

“Yep.” He and the dog weren’t making to leave. “Oh, ah, Miss Mollie?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been practicing.” He raised his hand in the ta’al. In the three years he’d been her neighbor, he’d never once been able to make his fingers hold the salute, until today.

“How about that?” She could smile around Roger.

“And you know what else I reckon?”

“What’s that?” She turned the key in the lock and on the very edge of her general field of psionic reception, she felt them, two minds so twisted by hate that they didn’t generate their own thoughts.

“You, Miss Mollie, are a gem. Earth’s refusal to accept one of its own is Vulcan’s gain.”
Chapter 32

The peaches were still in bloom as Mollie left Old Highway 99 and turned on the road heading out to the MacCormack’s California home base. She’d always loved the Big House where multiple generations of the family lived and gathered.

“Grandmother said you were coming.” A young girl’s voice sounded from the first-story deck.

“Is she inside?” Mollie’s shoes plonked up the wooden steps. She had to stop two before the end and do a double-take. No matter how prepared she thought she was, Mollie started whenever she clapped eyes on Tralnor’s younger daughter. It’s good to see you again, Amelie Grace, she thought. Save the pointed ears and slanted eyebrows, the girl was a dead ringer for her mother.

“She is here. Also, the man who is not her cousin arrived recently as well.”

“Kayva, etiquette?” Mollie said, reminding her eleven-year-old niece of proper protocol.

“Ambassador Sarek was dropped off by his driver thirteen-point-nine minutes ago.”

Mollie grinned. “Smartass.”

Kayva, aware of the status of their guest, did what might be expected of her in a formal situation. She kept her expression blank and tone neutral. “It takes one to know one.”

In through the sliding glass door, Mollie followed the din of familiar voices, finding the people she was looking for drinking tea in the music room. Sarek was looking good for a man who’d be needing a heart transplant sooner rather than later. T’Lal’s skin tone was that of a porcelain bisque doll. Tralnor’s mother was fighting a heretofore unknown form of anemia that came and went. Tralnor’s father, Justin was opening the curtains to let the light in.

“There’s nothing.” Justin said. “It’s just us and the peaches.”

Her uncle must have been psionically linked into some system, checking for AVDL activity. “Are you sure you don’t want me to stay? Kayva and I don’t need to go back into town.”

“It is best that she not overhear what is going on with her father before we can properly explain.” T’Lal’s ever so slightly mischievous bearing was tangible even in her weakened state. “We are not incapable of defending ourselves should something happen.”

“I can’t help it if I worry.” He drifted over and kissed his wife on the crown of her head. She grasped his hand, and their exchange went through the bond that had made them one soul living in two bodies. When Justin left, part of him was still in the room.


“I do. We all do.”

“T’Lal and I have surreptitiously searched for a tavalik duv-tor for over forty years and not come across one. While we have encountered other terrible objects and ensured their destruction, we have no firsthand advice pertaining to this specific item.” Sarek was not a diplomat today. He was a concerned father. “Neither you, nor my son, have experience in dealing with exhibits of this nature. While Tralnor has exposure, his psionic disposition could be manipulated against him.”
The time Mollie spent in Lyr Saan City was to engage in study at the Temple or to visit with family. She rarely visited the ruins of Old Lyr Saan, and she’d never been good at psionically reading inanimate objects. She sensed when she got close to a powerful, negatively charged artifact or place. It felt like her head filled up with swarming hornets and her primitive brain functions made her want to run away. “We admit the task is daunting.”

“It is deadly.” Sarek said. “T’Pau has overstepped by involving—” He swallowed hard to stave a corporeal show of emotion. “—our children.”

“Right now, we’re still flailing around in the dark. We need to know more.” Mollie said, finally sitting. “Sha’leyen has the most tangible resources we’ve got, but she’s tapped for information.”

“Thol-ro-kan Sha’leyen still lives?” Had T’Lal’s face not been paled by illness, any trace of green would have drained away.

*Girl of Noble Birth?* Mollie could ask questions later. “She’s a bioarchaeologist on the Enterprise.”

“Tralnor’s bondmate?” Sarek queried.

“The youngest of thirteen children of the deposed Third Regents of Belon. She was raised within Temple Ko-tek’ru Kaylara.” T’Lal shared a glance with Sarek. “Belon is still riddled with pre-Reform booby traps.”

Mollie could sort-of feel the rhythm of the telepathic conversation she was not part of. Mere seconds of silence, then voices returned.

“Sha’leyen will have been trained on some methods of how to behave with artifacts of malice.” T’Lal poured herself another cup of tea. “If she will allow it, a meld transfer of her knowledge is the quickest way to buoy your fundamental shortcomings. The rest will have to be theoretical rather than practical instruction.”

“T’Lal and I have had decades in which to refine our methods, to learn skills that are outside the scope of our daily lives and careers.” Another hesitation. “In my work with her, I have been forced to the absolute perimeter of my psionic abilities. My son’s human lineage is not rife with telepaths or those with other psychic gifts. He is at a disadvantage, as that is where his greatest weakness as a Vulcan lies.”

That was a burn Mollie wasn’t going to put up with. While father and son were recently back on speaking terms, Sarek did not truly know his child. “Spock is an excellent telepath.”

“As a child, he was tested and placed in the eleventh percentile, almost classified a psi-null.” Sarek thought what he said was final, the law.

“No.” Mollie returned. “Your son is anything but a psi-null.”

Sarek didn’t like to be challenged. He slipped into diplomat gear, reason on his side, determined to prove he was correct. “There are many who have low-to-no telepathic powers who lead almost normal lives.”

T’Lal preemptively raised a hand. “Sa-pi-maat, what she says is the truth.”

Mollie blinked rapidly and gave her head a short shake while memories catapulted about. Reluctant to get into the intricacies of the incredible effort Spock put in throughout his childhood and teen years to open those sleepy psionic pathways in his mind, how he learned to handle burgeoning new abilities, Mollie was not apprehensive about what she said next, a coup, “He has Refraction
Syndrome.”

Sarek’s side of the argument fell dead, an accusatory fire flashed across his thoughts.

“Which, as you know, only seems to occur in the most psionically astute individuals, around the ninety-third percentile and up. Nobody even told him that Refraction Syndrome existed because you don’t have to tell a psi-null that my hymen tearing would make it feel like his guts were being ripped out.”

Sarek looked away from the conversation, reordering his thoughts and adding to the universe of information he didn’t know about his own child.

“He is, as I said, an excellent telepath, and with people he’s psionically intimate with, he doesn’t need the touch to communicate.” But you wouldn’t know that because you never bothered to meld with him. You thought it would be a waste of time. “He’s a high functioning empath for a non-Lyr Saan. He followed Tralnor into the Enterprise’s computer while it was under attack, went through a full assumption meld, and telekinetically built a new security protocol to protect the ship.”

Too much like T’Pau, Sarek would not explicitly say he was wrong.

“Mollie, you have made your point.” T’Lal called her off.

“Yes, Ma’am.” Mollie deferred to her elder. (It’s that kind of thinking that drove Spock away in the first place.)

(He knows, Mollie. He carries his inadequacies as a parent like an open sore packed with rock salt.) “I am stepping out to retrieve some items from my car.”

“Let me help you, T’Lal.” Mollie needed to get out of that room for a few minutes.

“You will stay.” T’Lal put a sweatshirt on over her thermal henley and stepped away.

Mollie had, throughout the years, gone the rounds with Sarek. She respected him deeply and thought of him as a sort-of uncle. He and Lady Amanda were a couple of Livia’s closest friends and had always been a presence in Mollie’s life.

Usually, they’d have their squabbles and get over it, but the one topic they never spoke about was his son. He’d tried once or twice in the early years of that feud, but Mollie refused to get involved, even though she’d clearly been on Spock’s side and would defend her friend to the ends of the earth.

“How did he do it?” Was this the father, scientist, or Clan Elder who wanted to know?

She weighed telling him, arriving at the conclusion that he should know because it was a learning objective that could potentially improve the lives of others. “It started in earnest when my siblings and I left California and went to stay with T’Lessa. Spock was always so worried about disappointing you. He thought he needed to prove he was worthy and surmised that by working on what Golic society thinks of as weakness, that you might eventually believe him an actual Vulcan.

“At about the same time, I decided I wanted to join the ranks of the T’Kerh at Temple Kotekru Kaylara when I got older. In order to do that, you’ve got to be a touch telepath, which I was not.”

Sarek connected the proverbial dots. “That was when the both of you began on the neuro-psi research you are still working on today.”
She nodded. “We started out on neural pathway pattern imprinting to lay the groundwork to induce touch telepathy in me and simultaneously started coaxing the latent parts of Spock’s psi into waking up. The infrastructure was always there, just nobody bothered to see if it worked.”

“Who were the healers and teachers that would engage in this kind of work with minors?” He likely thought she’d implicate members of her family or the Lyr Saan at large who’d been cajoled by a couple of kids into helping them commit major psychic manipulation without the consent of guardians.

“We were.”

He squared his shoulders and let the implications of their actions tick by in his mind. “You could have gotten yourselves killed.”

“Books, interviews with experts, painstaking research on methods, building on what we knew from our own psionic instruction we’d had up to that point, we took all of that and used ourselves as our first test subjects.”

“What you did was astonishingly dangerous.” His reach as a father into this part of his son’s life was coming too little too late.

“He didn’t think he had a choice. You didn’t want a psi-null not-quite-Vulcan as a son.” Yes, they’d been imprudent, but with the weight of Clan Surak crushing him, Spock believed the undertaking was worth the risk.

Sarek said nothing for several seconds, and they let the grandfather clock in the corner make the only sound. “Spock is Vulcan, raised in the Vulcan way.”

“Then why was the admissions committee so reluctant to allow a half-human into the student body at the VSA? He’d blown through the entrance exams like they were nothing, even the part where they tested his psi abilities.”

“Regardless, the committee did come to the logical conclusion when they made their choice to admit him.”

Of course, you’re going to make excuses for the status quo, she thought. “That’s the same committee that chose to admit me, without question. Why were they worried about Spock and not me? Where is the logic in that? I’m the one who should have been told don’t let the door hit you in the ass.”

“The Lyr Saan, as much as they are regarded with an air of caution, have the reputation of instilling the most intense psionic discipline and order in all of Vulcan.” It was strange to hear such opinion, even from Sarek, who’d never, as far as Mollie knew, been disparaging to the Lyr Saan. “That is why the methods of the MacCormack family have meshed so well into that system. You also possess the same intelligence that has set the MacCormacks apart on this world.”

“But the Lyr Saan are also seen as overly-emotional telepathic criminals. How is that more favorable than someone who’s followed the valued Golic paradigm, and only has half the human DNA that I do?” She hated the conclusion this was heading to. “Is it truly just a matter of semantics? Does it boil down to the paperwork that says I’m Vulcan and he’s only half?”

No comment, Sarek waited on Mollie to continue.

“Everyone knows the Lyr Saan are strange, their genetics were spliced and diced with humans thousands of years ago, that’s just how they are, you can’t change it. And what, I’m just a fraction
more irregular than the typical model, so that’s okay? Stop me if I hit on something.” Her lifetime of frustration in the disparity of how Spock was treated by his own people was on display. “The descendants of Surak are unadulterated, except for Spock, and are the most Vulcan of all Vulcans, revered and emulated.”

“Hyperbole, Mollie?” Sarek finally interrupted her, not wanting to hear any more.

“In mainstream Vulcan society, you are perceived as powerful, Mallia Ah’delvna.” T’Lal walked in, pulling a run-of-the-mill black suitcase behind her. “By the time you were seventeen, you’d mastered the highest levels of the Lyr Saan General Disciplines and had started into the specialties. Even during your interludes on earth, you kept up with those Vulcan ways. You studied, you trained, you did what we expected of you and excelled. You continue to do so.

“In error, Spock is viewed as weak. Regardless of how well he fulfills the ideal set by Surak, he has not lived up to the expectations people have set for him. They are promised a person composed of complementary halves, but he does not display as such. They prod and goad, looking for those same elements that they find disquieting about the Lyr Saan and are disturbed at what they discover: in every way that counts, Spock is a full Gol. Therefore, they think he lacks tempering and flexibility, and is expected to shatter.”

“Speculation.” Sarek said.

“Believe what you choose, Sa-pi-maat.” T’Lal opened the case. “And now that you know how Spock refined his psionic talents, you will agree that he has the capacity to be a part of a Kennuk.”

Hidden inside the generic piece of luggage was an arsenal of tools to use in the hunt for and fight against artifacts of malice.
Arriving fifteen minutes early for his shift at the media lab, Tralnor sat down and logged into his station, feeling the need to get a start on the massive pending list for the coming horde of forensics testing. The idea was to have something going before Chavez walked in and started antagonizing everyone. He accepted a task that didn’t require anyone’s help and began loading up the war wagon for its first round of lab visits.

“Dr. Tralnor.” The quiet was too good to last.

“Yes, Lt. Chavez?”

“The, uh, Captain is here, for you.” Chavez scuttled away, having finally met the one person on board he didn’t think he could bully.

Tralnor closed and latched the incubator hatch on the front end of the cart. “Good morning, Captain.”

Kirk stepped into the stock room. “You won’t think so after you hear my request. Can I shut this door?”

“That’s fine.” He set down the data padd containing the orders.

“Can you go down to the surface and see what you can see? Like slides from a lecture about surviving the worst depravity hell had to offer, images from Kirk’s life under the reign of Kodos the Executioner surged into the forefront of his mind. “There’s an especially disturbing—”

“Don't give me any details. I need to go in with as clean perception as I can.”

“This isn’t an order. You can say no.” Kirk didn’t want to inflict the kinds of experiences he’d suffered on anyone else. “We just want to have as much as we can to put the screws to Laura Hillyard and that fucking AVDL. Spock said that you can ‘read’ the scene.”

“Yes. I can do that.”

“He also said it'll be—” Staggered by his experiences, the captain’s mind blanked, skipped a track, and settled back into his original line of thought. “Traumatic.”

“I expect it will.” Tralnor said. “When do you want me down there?”

_You don’t have to do this!_ Kirk was not comfortable with this plan. “I’ll give you until 0900 to meet me in Transporter Room Two.”

Immediately after Kirk vacated the stock room, Chavez squeezed back in. “What kind of super-special pet-project are you off on now, at a time when I can actually use you? I can’t afford to be a man down, not when we’re going to be slammed with forty postmortems and other ancillary tests.”

“I’m dispatching to the surface to empathically analyze the mass murder and reconstruct the act as it happened.” He started on a soft meditation exercise to level off his own anxiety at what he’d be doing.

The smug-factor collapsed and folded out of the way, and Chavez looked and sounded genuinely humane for the first time since Tralnor joined the media lab. “They’re making you re-live each of
those deaths in your head?”

“I volunteered.”

*That almost makes it worse.* “Dr. Tralnor, go do what you need to do to get ready. We’ll handle the rest of this just fine without you.”

With all of his cabin-mates at their various work assignments, Tralnor had the room to himself. He’d not brought the tools of the T’Kehr’s trade with his inability to practice those rites, not thinking that he might need some of those items for the call of duty.

*I will simply have to make-do,* he thought. The most important aspect of this upcoming challenge was priming his mind to process the overwhelming shock and horror of the scene.

He sat on the edge of his bed and drew his consciousness into a meditative trance, establishing a foundation of order and symmetry through which to channel the obliteration of forty human souls.

True to his word, Captain Kirk met Tralnor in Transporter Room Two. He was trying to keep a facade of calm for the crew operating the equipment. “Ah, Dr. Tralnor, right on time.”

“Like Vulcans are ever late for anything, am I right?” The younger of the guys in red said. He tried to smile, not finding an audience for his light-hearted jab. In a serious tone, “Party of two, Captain?”

“Three, Ensign. We’re waiting on Mr. Spock.” And like Kirk had pronounced an incantation, the first officer stepped into the transporter room.

“I have taken the liberty of putting this together for you.” Spock pulled the shoulder strap of a small courier-type bag over his head, handing it off to Tralnor. “And I brought you this.”

Draped over Spock’s right arm was a black robe, trimmed with his family name and clan. Tralnor held off taking the garment as presented.

“You would honor Clan Surak by representing us whilst engaged in this undertaking. Will you accept this mantle?”

“I shall.” Tralnor said.

He stood for a moment and let the sunshine warm his face while a delicate breeze picked up the ends of his hair where it was starting to grow out. Eyes closed, he zeroed in on the lingering strains of putrified corpses that tinged the air. Eyes open, he followed Kirk and Spock into the command tent.

Captain Lyudmilla Kuznetsov and her first officer, Commander Donell Cosgriff, were talking with Sha’leyen and Dr. McCoy.

McCoy’s brow rose into his hairline. “Dare I even ask?”

Tralnor set his bag on a table stacked with boxes of disposable gloves and masks and put on his
borrowed robe. Then he looked to see what Spock collected for him. Stick incense, a lighter, a pohshayek-tilek, the removable bayonet from an ancient Golic disrupter-style rifle, and a strip of old parchment upon which Spock had written one of the tenets of Surak: Nufau au sochya - yi dungi ma tu sochya. Offer them peace, then you shall have peace.

He joined the grouping of officers where they stood around a map table. “Thank you, Spock.”

(You are welcome, Tralnor, though I must apologize for having suggested you for this.)

(What’s the use of having a mair-rigolauya around if they can’t be run through their paces?) Tralnor spread the sarcasm thick.

“Dr. Tralnor has been with us for not quite a month.” Kirk was explaining just what this music teacher from California was doing.

(I’m going to block you out now, Spock. You don’t need to shadow me on this.) He armored up his mental shields and controls focusing on the route Spock took into his brain for their simple conversations and cauterized the link.

Like fingers slammed in a door, Spock was cut off. He knew Tralnor’s reasons for doing this had merit, but it still smarted and made him feel like he was trapped in his own head. So many years of limited psionic contact with anyone, then a few weeks of completely open telepathic communication, Spock hungered for the touch of another mind the instant that link was gone.

Captain Kirk’s description of Tralnor’s task over, Sha’leyen led everyone from the command tent to the location of the now-empty mass grave. She kept McCoy and both command teams on the margins and let Tralnor move forward on his own.

Uncertain what a temporarily unconsecrated Lyr Saan T’Kehr would do, Spock looked on with a combination of curiosity and dread.

“Spock, what’s this poor bastard been put up to?” McCoy muttered next to him. “Jim almost sounded like you in there the way he described things.”

“It is the burden of a mair-rigolauya.” Spock replied, knowing McCoy would find his non-explanation annoying, but there was no better way of putting it.

“Right.” McCoy rolled his eyes. “I forget that no one is supposed to even see the insides of Vulcan mysticism let alone understand how it works. How tacky of me.”

Tralnor stood on the edge of the grave, air currents sending Spock’s robe on a billowy dance. Incense lit, Tralnor waved it beneath his nose, taking in the weak psychotropic elements of the stringy smoke. It burned rapidly as it was meant to.

Extinguished stub placed back into the bag, Tralnor held his arms close to his body with the palms up, acting as if he was there to catch the rays of the sun. Three more deep breaths, he dissolved his shields.

With the swift brutality of a guillotine, a gasp of air issued from Tralnor’s lungs, all of his senses
flared like a calcium phosphide fusee. Limbs moved, but not of his accord, hands reached not connecting, face contorted, mind scouring the layers of human psychic imprint, his voice relayed the last thoughts and words of the dead. . .

“What about my daughter? Who’s going to tell my daughter? Amy!”

Eyes blink, a ragged breath, “Why didn’t we leave? Anyone with any fucking sense would have done just what this crazy blond bitch said we should have. Fuck you, Franklin. Fuck you so hard you gag on it.”

Fingers laced behind his head, eyes not seeing the present, Tralnor curled the toes of his boots over the lip of the hole, and they were gone.

“I didn’t call my mom. I didn’t call my mom. I didn’t call my mom.” Face up toward the sky. “I didn’t—”

“. . . hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Tears and resignation.

“Jeremy! She shot Jeremy! Mom!”

Wordless screams of terror and anguish.

“Spock.” McCoy snarled. “Enough! Stop this madness.”

“Even if I could, Doctor.” Was there any use in fighting the horror seeping into his own voice? “I would not know how.”

“Doctor, you cannot go to him.” Sha’leyen forced the ship’s physician into line.

“He’s a member of my crew and he’s in a bad way,” McCoy made another step off and was summarily restrained by Kirk and Spock. “He needs medical attention.”


Kuznetsov and Cosgriff cried unabashedly. They knew everyone who’d served and died from the Seren. They were overheard whispering names of those whose final thoughts they recognized. Loose hairs adhered to the wet patches on Kuznetsov’s face.

Tralnor grabbed at the sides of his head, fingers digging into the scalp right above his ears and screamed, his pain, his hell, his fear, for a smattering of seconds before he was carried back into the massacre. He walked a firing line, pulling the trigger. “You danced with the devil and lost, Captain Franklin! Starfleet can’t save you, not where you’re going—And you, Lt. Commander, you don’t want me to hurt your baby? Don’t grovel to me. Address your concerns to the man who put you here. He did this!”

He mimed Laura placing one shot to the back of the pregnant officer’s head.

Thirty-seven-point-two minutes into the one-man show, the time when bullet number forty snuffed out the top-most body in the grave, Tralnor doubled over, clutching at his right side, as his body rejected the contents of his stomach.
Wailing and retching, he staggered about a meter-and-a-half, where he went to his knees.

He initiated something deep within, gradually returning his conscious self to the realm of the living. Chest heaving, Tralnor wept as he reached for the strip of parchment and the bayonet.

The spectacle gathered a crowd as it had unfolded and one of the watchers shouted, “Oh my god! He’s got a knife!”

McCoy sprang forth as the honed blade glinted in the sun. Sha’leyen jackrabbited after, tackling the doctor to the turf.

The weapon flicked.

A fine line of green showed on Tralnor’s palm. Bayonet stabbed into the ground, parchment over the bleed, he hobbled on his knees to the grave’s ledge. “Etwel la’tusa du-ek.” *We mourn for you.* He dropped Spock’s note into the hole and fell backward onto the trampled grass.

“How could you even think of doing that to someone?” McCoy sequestered the command teams and Sha’leyen off into the command tent once he’d seen that Tralnor was physically stable. When the Vulcan had started grabbing at his heart, the doctor was sure he was witnessing a cardiac arrest.

“Spock said it would be traumatic.” Jim said, not trying to hide his own guilt.

“*Traumatic*?” McCoy’s blood pressure spiked with his temper. “What all of us here today saw, how we felt watching, that’s traumatic. What Dr. Tralnor went through was ghastly and completely unjustified.”

“So, you are not familiar with the concept of necessary evil?” Kuznetsov challenged. “Those are my friends in your morgue.”

“It seems like he’s going to be okay.” Cosgriff’s red hair and freckles clashed with his red tunic. “And it’s not like this was any treat for us.”

The doctor’s brows crawled up into his hairline. “Do you hear yourselves?”

“Doctor, perhaps if I were to explain—” Spock started.

“Spock, so help me, if you say the word logic, I’ll—”

Sha’leyen put two fingers in her mouth to make a sharp whistle, then shouted, “*Mura koish’a’siq!*” The use of a language only one of the five of them could understand made just enough confusion it destabilized the emotional aggression to make all four humans stop what they were doing.

McCoy scowled in the bioarchaeologist’s general direction. “Spock, do we get a translation?”

“She told us to drop the argument.”

McCoy caved temporarily. “Perhaps if you were to explain what, Spock?”

“Lt. Commander Sha’leyen’s preliminary reports, as a continuation of what the officers aboard the USS Dragon have told us, indicate that there is potentially zero physical evidence that Laura Hillyard was here on the surface of Melbek III. If we are unsuccessful at retrieving the twelve
survivors of this massacre, we may not have evidence that she was here at all.”

Sometimes, McCoy could catch a smidgen of a thaw in the first officer’s glacial presentation, but what was coming through right now had a bite to it, anger and maybe even hate. He kind of got the notion that if given the chance, Spock would like, as in get great personal satisfaction, from taking out Hillyard himself.

“On my world, a reading by a thoroughly-trained and vetted empath, such as the one Dr. Tralnor performed today, is a legal process that culminates in an evidentiary document that is admissible in trials and other court proceedings.” Spock reeled himself back in. “Yes, he has suffered here today, and that is deeply regrettable, but he was not bribed, ordered, or coerced into coming down.”

“You know I’d never wish something like this on my worst enemy.” Jim said. “But its concrete proof, Bones. We’ve got her.”

Sarah David, finally able to step away from her temporary lab bench down on Melbek III, went to the barracks tent where Dr. Tralnor was recovering. Her eyes still burned from the despair of seeing what her mentor had endured.

An impromptu partition of privacy screens and a sheet draped over the gap to provide a door of sorts, gave some dignity. She knew Dr. Tralnor was blatantly, unapologetically emotional for a Vulcan because of his heritage, but what went on today. . .

I doubt he’s conscious yet, but I feel like I need to be here for him. She pulled back the sheet and was hit first with a wave of warmth from a space heater, then by the presence of The Krampus.

“He did not have to do what he did.” Lt. Seltun crouched on a low folding-stool. His hands were knotted together, and he used them to block her view of his face, failing to completely mask the dismay and anguish he couldn’t yet shake. “Given time, evidence against Hillyard—”

“What you’re saying, that sounds like hope. You hope we’ll find strong enough evidence on Hillyard, not just the crew of the Sweetness.” Sarah heard Tralnor’s deep, constant breathing as permission to turn her attention to Seltun.

The last twenty-four hours had been the most wrenching and emotionaly brutal Sarah had endured, and she didn’t have to speculate that for Seltun, the same was true. She knelt as to gaze directly into the younger Vulcan’s slate grey eyes. Maybe if she gave him something to focus on he could wrangle his controls back into place. While the rest of the crew could allow themselves a silent cry, Seltun was not afforded that respite. “Fna’vokaya ha’kiv naumautau mugel-t’tevik.”


“Fna’shaula tra’starpa’shaya.”

“Through self-control, there is clarity.”

“Fna’mair-kun-it, etek kah-ru s’zakaran.”

“Through great adversity, we learn from sacrifice.”

Sarah watched Seltun’s mind start to pull itself together. “Ek’wak, rompotau krusa, fa-wak ri’vesht.”
“And forever, we carry the reminders that our future must not become our past.”

“Per viam memorias, aeterna vita, quam mortis tenebrae. Compos animi, ratio est. Ab angustiis, ex sacrificium discimus. Semper habemus iteratus, futura nostro praeterita non fiet.” Sha’leyen offered a recitation. “I learned the Latin version first as a child.”

Sarah didn’t realize she and Seltun were being watched, nor for how long Lt. Commander Sha’leyen and Commander Spock had been there.

“As written by General Gaius Quintus Mu’gel-tam t’Lyr Saan.” Spock said.

“Ma’am, Sir.” Seltun tried to get up without letting Sarah move first. His hand grazed her face, which sent him back down to the stool.

How can you be—? His proclamation whispered through to Sarah’s mind.

“Spock and I have come to take Tralnor back to the ship. As you are both here, we ask for your assistance.” Sarah immediately said yes. Seltun may only have complied because she did.
Sha’leyen hadn’t stopped at her quarters on her way up from Melbek III, opting to shower in the medical staff’s changing room before slipping on a borrowed set of surgical scrubs and joining McCoy, and Dragon’s CMO, Dr. Abbott, in performing the autopsies.

Toweling off, she walked up to the scrub cupboard and opened the drawer where she would find a pair of disposable underpants.

“How the hell is this person allowed to perform an autopsy on a Christmas turkey, let alone a human being? I understand needing all hands, but honestly, this woman is no better than a witch. You should have seen what she did to Mr. Spock and Dr. Tralnor.”

“Chrissy, really? She can’t be a complete charlatan. She does run an entire department. I’m friends with Petty Officer Handler, and she’s never come close to saying anything like this about the Lt. Commander.” Another nurse, Joan Patel said.

“Candles, little glass vials full of newt’s eye and dragon claw, grinding things up and mixing them into this stuff. It’s just so, primitive. I guess she’s some kind of voodoo priestess from a civilization the Vulcans left behind.”

“Just let her do her work, which is what we should be doing. Come on.” Joan cajoled.

“I don’t trust her, Joan.” Chapel opened a locker and rummaged for something.

“Why now after being on the same boat for four years? This is the first you’ve ever said to me about this person.”

“The way she touched them. . .”

Exasperated, Joan sighed. “Do not go off on Vulcans right now. Spock barely knows you’re alive and you insulted Dr. Tralnor to the point that he threw you out. Give it up, Chrissy, and move on with your life.”

Locker closed, the two moved in on Sha’leyen’s location. Chapel went on some more. “There’s something going on, Joan. Spock respects her, McCoy is practically in love with her, and its like they can’t see that she’s nothing but a massive con. Tell me, what exactly are her credentials?”

“I don’t know, Chrissy, but I suppose you could ask.” Joan pointed at the topic of their conversation.

“BSci, medical microbiology and pharmacology from Sura’Kahr Institute of Technology; MSci and Ph.D., bioarchaeological and forensic anthropology from University College London; Postgraduate Certifications in forensic pathology, crime scene management, and analytical pharmacology from the Home Office, Hendon Police College, and Kings College in that order. I also spent two years whilst working on my Ph.D. as a Special Constable attached to a Major Crimes team with the Met.” Sha’leyen rarely spoke of her educational background, having found that it intimidated people, and she was intimidating enough without help. “I had intended on making my career in London, but I happened into a Starfleet recruiter at a forensics symposium, and six weeks after I was hooded, I was in San Francisco for the swearing-in at Officer Candidate School.”

“Holy shit, she’s an ex-cop.” Joan said to Chapel before addressing Sha’leyen. “Handler said you
were cool.”

“I was raised in the way of the Lyr Saan, of whom the principal philosophy is following the way of seven-tor, nah-tor, and ken-tor: education, contemplation, and understanding. As a T’Kehr of the Temple of Queen Kaylara, I chose to dedicate my life to sharing and applying knowledge, even if that application comes in the form of ancient methods and formulae for mind-saving, life-saving, psychoactive compounds.”

Chapel looked like she wanted to crawl off into a cave and never come out again.

“I do not criticize your cultural background.” Sha’leyen was calm, non-accusatory. “I do not belittle your education. I do not question your competence in your profession. As a courtesy, I ask that you extend such niceties to all members of the crew.”

Tralnor woke up not in sick bay, and for that he was glad. After his foray on Melbek III, he couldn’t have handled another encounter with McCoy’s charge nurse. He’d been returned to the Enterprise, just not sure where, as it was almost warm enough to be comfortable.

“Spock?” Tralnor grabbed the bedclothes and held on tight as a whirl of vertigo upended his internal gyroscopes. “Are you here?”

A dim light went on allowing Tralnor to gauge his surroundings.

“We decided to bring you to my quarters to keep you out of close proximity to Seren’s dead while you recovered.” Spock appeared at the cross-through between the sleeping and work areas.

He let the pillow cradle his head. “Very kind of you, but I don’t want to intrude.”

“You presence is not an intrusion.” Spock took up residence on a chair wedged in by the head of the bed.

A cautious tendril of psionic energy brushed on the tattered edges of Tralnor’s mind, something of a confirmation that he’d actually survived his ordeal. “I didn’t want to shut you out like I did. I had to, for your own sake.”

“Forgive my trespass, Tralnor. I did not mean any disrespect.”

“Nothing to forgive my friend.” He canted his head to better see his host. “It is in our innate nature to seek out the compatible minds of friends, family, and intimate partners. . . You do not want to be in here with me right now. Let me create the rough draft of my report, then you can come calling.”

A single, curt nod. “That is most generous, Tralnor, but you do not have to cater to my debility.”

Tralnor reached out and clapped his hand over Spock’s. Do not beg pardon for being yourself.

Rural France was a blur as the train propelled itself toward Paris. Mollie caught her reflection in the window, that person looking back at her wondered if she had it in her to survive the tavalik duv-tor.
“We are being watched.” Sarek occupied the seat next to her.

“They had to have found us when we checked in at the consulate in London.” The idea was to fly from San Francisco to London, acting like that was their final destination. When they completed their trivial official task, they went off into the city, changed clothes, and melted into the millions of people who called London home, shaking any tail they may have brought from North America.

“That seems likely.”

“The rot goes far deeper than just the Council.” The stark reality of what that meant hit hard. Other than T’Pau and T’Lessa, there was no one in the government they could trust, and T’Pau was hamstrung by her own staff.

“Stariben t’kup, Mallia.” Speak to me.

Mollie nodded, took her left hand out of her pocket, and placed it on the seat between them. He grasped her over the back of her palm, and she let him in.

(We must assume that San Francisco is compromised as well. You cannot contact me there, lest a member of my staff is corrupted.)

Part of what was discussed back at the Big House in Turlock was calling home for guidance should their fledgling Kennuk need help as they prepared to face this ancient evil. And they were going to need help. Once they left the Enterprise, fast and secure communication would be a struggle. The direct line to Sarek was thought safer and quicker than T’Lal and Justin’s civilian connection.

(Going through the universities will be just as fraught.) She said. (These people have been staking out my house. Laura jumped the gun on thinking I’d be involved in this, but she turned out not to be wrong.)

(That one has always been very perceptive. It is unfortunate that such intelligence is wasted on hate and violence.) Sarek allowed Mollie to feel his genuine disgust at Laura. (I know her mother. Tatyana Golovkin could not be more different than her daughter. Laura could have followed in her mother’s example and become—a person rather than a specter of enmity.)

“Monsieur, Mademoiselle, puis-je offrir un rafraîchissement?” An attendant with a drinks trolley working the aisle stopped to inquire. On autopilot, he said, “Peut-être un verre de vin?”

Oh merde, un Vulcain! The young man’s brain shouted just as loud as the pained expression on his face. “Nous—nous avons une belle sélection de thé et d’eau pétillante—I mean, we have a nice selection of tea and sparkling water.”

“Quels sont vos vins rouges?” Sarek asked.

“Nos vins rouges—” He had to stop and think about something that was usually so rote. “Nos vins rouges sont un Bourgogne de Laroche et Chateau Picard. . . Nous avons un choix plus vaste au bar.”

“Le Bourgogne va bien.” The Vulcan replied.

“Je vais avoir la même chose, merci.” Mollie said, thinking a glass of Burgundy would do her a world of good right then.

Sarek accepted his drink. “Pourquoi voyager en France si vous n’allez pas boire le vin?”
Who travels to France and doesn’t drink the wine? That got a grin out of Mollie, which let the attendant feel he could give a cagey smile, thus defusing the whole stressful situation.

“A toast? Skil abru’ri-fainusu-pthak.” She raised her glass.

“Victory over xenophobia.” They completed the short ceremony and sipped.

(You know who we can rely on to relay our messages?) It wouldn’t be terribly efficient, but she thought it would work. (Joe Bergman and Sohja.)

(I do not know this Joe Bergman, but Sohja, her mother and I collaborated on some experiments early in our astrophysics careers. Am I correct that these two people are members of your music ensemble alumni network?)

(They are, and I trust them implicitly.)

(I see.) He said. (Why them, and how will this arrangement work?)

(Joe, Sohja, and Tralnor are currently working on getting a feature film we did as undergrads cleaned up and officially released. The three of them are in constant contact with one another right now for reasons entirely unrelated to AVDL activity or the search for the tavalik duv-tor. In turn, they are also in touch with other players in the project, including me and your son.)

(My son?)

(I’ll explain that later.) There wasn’t time to fall down that rabbit hole. (If all we’re talking about is the film itself, or the Kennuk’s work coded in film terms, anyone who intercepts these messages won’t find anything useful. Joe is a producer who lives in LA and is a pretty big hitter in the Industry. He could potentially be working on a new project, like a documentary on Vulcans who live here on earth, and have legitimate access to you and T’Lal in person if need be. He and Sohja would do anything for us on this quest.)

Still not convinced, Sarek needed more before considering this idea.

(Sohja was close friends with Amelie Grace and Jock Balloch. Joe, to this day, can’t say my sister-in-law’s name because he’s still in mourning. They’ve wanted justice for those murders, and if they can help get it by aiding and abetting in our affair, they will stop at nothing.)

Somewhat rested, Tralnor settled at Spock’s desk and started to type, building a searchable database about the mass killing as he put together the report. Converting each death into narrative gave further order to the gnashing chaos of their words and emotions.

There was honor in granting dignity to the dead.

Paris greeted them with a deluge of rain. Not being on official business, Mollie and Sarek had to wade their way through the taxi queue, so by the time they got a car, they were soaked through. The weather made for slow traffic in the air and on the ground. Their driver complained about losing tourist fares and cranked up the air conditioner to defog the windows. Forty minutes later
and practically blue from the cold, they arrived at the members-only club where Sarek arranged for
he and Mollie to meet Ambassador Lianna of Delta IV.

The maître d’ thought they looked like a couple of drowned rats and refused admittance until Sarek
placed his credentials on the podium.

“Ambassador! So very sorry to have delayed you and your—” The maître d’ waggled an eyebrow
at Mollie.

“She is my aide.”

“Of course, Sir.” He made a disapproving noise. “Please follow me.”

“Guillaume, enough harassing my guests.” Lianna was a tiny woman with a commanding presence.
She wore a flapper-style headband that only made her gleaming cranium more beautiful. “He likes
to think he’s protecting me. You know how easily confused and threatened humans can get.”

Once the introductions were made, Mollie found she liked Lianna. The Deltan was warm and witty
and took great delight in sending sarcastic faces at those who thought it within their right to stare at
her or the people at her table.

“I recommend everything on the menu except the gratin dauphinois. Chef slices the potatoes too
thick then bakes them at too high a temperature for not enough time. Very disappointing.” She
grew through the entire meal talking about topics of negligible importance, not sounding like a
diplomat at all, much to the disappointment of people around them hoping to land on some juicy
tidbit to sell to the society pages and tabloids.

After nearly ninety minutes, Mollie and Sarek followed Lianna through the kitchens and out into a
side street where they climbed into an estate car so bland people who owned vehicles like it
spontaneously dropped dead from boredom. From there, Mollie thought they’d start off for
Federation Headquarters. Instead, they headed out into the suburbs until they entered a garage at a
house just as plain as the car.

Reassurances there was only one person in the house didn’t entirely quell the far-flung thought that
Lianna was setting them up with an assassin. Mollie let her mind take a sniff around to search out
any blatant dangers and didn’t find anything.

The Deltan took them into the house to the sitting room. “Jennifer, we are here.”

From another corner of the building, Federation President Jennifer Cullen emerged. Wearing
ordinary street clothes, she looked like a normal person. She and Lianna met in the middle of the
room and embraced before giving one another a peck on the lips.

“The message I got from T’Pau suggested we meet in as unobtrusive place as possible to discuss
some ‘interesting archaeology’ and there’s nowhere like mine and Lianna’s little love nest.”

Lianna giggled. “It looks like a normal home, but it’s completely analog, and the walls and
surfaces are all impregnated with wyantium. No one can hear us, see us, or sense us within our
plain little abode.”

“Which is, unfortunately, imperative when you’ve got to keep secrets.” The President let her
fingers graze her lover’s face.

“But T’Pau knows about you.” Mollie stated rather than asking.
Another laugh from Lianna, “T’Pau introduced us to one another seventeen years ago when we were both on assignment on Vulcan. She thought we’d be good together, and working in the diplomatic world, we kept things very much out of the public eye. Then Jennifer’s career took off. We’ve kept our relationship underground.”

“Public opinion would sink us both. Headlines would scream: *Deltan Sex Scandal-President Seduced!; Who’s In Charge? Delta IV Pulling President Cullen’s Strings.*”

The President moved her and Lianna to the smaller of the sofas. “Make yourselves comfortable.”

Sarek chose a wingback chair and Mollie took the corner of the empty couch.

“Young communique from T’Pau may have been intercepted by AVDL spies,” Sarek said. “They are very active within the Council and have seen many privileged messages.”

“No need to worry, Ambassador.” The President said. “I was on Vulcan two weeks ago. T’Pau and I met in person at Clan Surak’s Tat’sahr retreat. Nothing was spoken out loud.”
“I sure hope you know how to hold still.” Hoskins leered at Veddah.

“And this is the new model, that’s made on Trego and not one of those cheap fakes that pop up all over the place?” Laura held a diminutive remote control that fit into the palm of her hand.

“Got it straight from the source. It’s authentic.” The doctor waved her off, picked up the insertion module, and threaded the long, large-gauge, flexible needle between Vedda’s scalp and skull. He forced the needle to crawl, looking worm-like, from the junction of the coronal and sagittal skull sutures to a specific location in the Vulcan’s temple. Hoskins depressed the plunger and deposited the Sentinel. “I’ve never gotten used to this color, blood should have hemoglobin in it, not whatever this shit is.”

While Hoskins removed the needle and healed the entry wound, Laura explained the foreign body settled right over that relatively weak part of his skull. “You’re coming with me to Vitell’s. You’ve also just had a Sentinel slave beacon installed, and I’ve got the buttons. Try anything, and I can hit this little thing right here, and you’ll be immobilized. Get too determined to escape or maim me while we’re down there, this button right here, it releases a fast-acting poison that will leave you dead before you hit the floor. Think you can just flat-out kill me? This is also a dead man’s switch, poison, and you’re gone.”

“All yours, Captain.”

“Very good.” Alone in the cell with Veddah, Laura gave a quick visual inspection of her prisoner and was satisfied that his outward appearance did not follow in the pattern of the mental torture of his rape and incarceration. “You and I are going to pretend like we’re married.”

That drew a look. “We’re a happy couple, and we just love collecting antiques. I’m going to bring you something to wear, and we’ll be off in short order.”

Captain Kirk had to stop reading Tralnor’s preliminary report. The experience of watching the hyper-empath in action was still too raw for him to actually digest. The postmortems were coming in as well. He could skim those, with their straight medical and scientific jargon, they were more impersonal, far less painful than what was actually in their heads when they were destroyed.

The one section of Tralnor’s he could read, did read several times, was the chunk of prose dealing with the products of Laura’s mind. Touching hate. He imparted that Hillyard remained perfectly clear-headed throughout the entire battle with Seren, the off-loading of the Starfleet ship and its destruction, and the individual murders. She’d experienced, as Tralnor termed it, child-like awe, that she got to put her Walther-P38 to use in exactly the same style as the monsters who’d taken to Eastern Europe during World War II. There was not an iota of remorse. The death of Lt. Commander Kathryn Avilla was particularly satisfying. The pregnant officer had something Laura, as hard as she’d tried, could never have: a baby on the way. She saw Captain Franklin as a spineless waste of space and delighted that she could grind his nose into the proverbial carpet.

As for the diamonds and their use, Tralnor barely got anything, Laura was so focused on her killing spree. He had no idea where the big rocks were going beyond Sweetness’ cargo holds.
Forty-one lives gone in under an hour.

“Captain, if we are to make it to the ceremony on time, we should leave now.” Spock said.

Kirk turned the bridge over to a junior officer and followed Spock onto the turbolift. And the awkward silence. . .

Cargo Bay 6 was the smallest on the ship and was the ideal place for a makeshift morgue. The significantly lowered temperature helped preserve the bodies, where even though they were done being autopsied, they were all still physical evidence, and as such could not be buried at “sea” or shipped home.

Kuznetsov and Cosgriff huddled in a corner. The Irishman asked Kirk his opinion of Tralnor’s report and commented, “That poor son of a bitch, I can’t imagine living someone else’s murder in my mind, let alone what he did.”

“It’s a powerful piece of writing.” Kirk said, skirting the issue.

Dr. McCoy and Dr. Abbott arrived. “Now, Jim, I was just telling my good man Abbot here about the time that Dremendian countess thought she’d won you in an auction. . .”

“Doctor, I would suggest that now is not the appropriate time nor place for comedic stories.” Spock said.

McCoy shut up and looked out on the forest of cots bearing the remains of the dead.

“What exactly are we doing here, Captain Kirk?” Commander Cosgriff wanted to know.

“It’s a little something our Lt. Commander Sha’leyen does in extreme situations like this.” Kirk could see that Abbott and Cosgriff weren’t sure what to think. “A ceremony to anoint and sanctify the departed.”

Sha’leyen arrived within the minute in full regalia. Seeing her dressed that way made Kirk uneasy because in his mind, her fancy, formal robes were forever connected to events like this. The one time he knew of that she went all out that didn’t involve looking after the dead was when Spock’s parents came aboard for their trip to Babel.

Coming in behind the bioarchaeologist, Sarah David, wearing one of Sha’leyen’s more casual robes. Sarah was followed by engineer, Alton Avery, also wearing something borrowed from the Lt. Commander. The last of her helpers entered the bay. Lt. Seltun was clad in a dark grey meditation robe that brought out the color of his eyes.

“What the ever-loving fuck is this shit?” Dr. Abbott grumbled.

“Jason, don’t start.” Kuznetsov warned.

“I smell coffee.” Cosgriff didn’t understand how that was possible.

“Pudor-tor teviklar.” Sha’leyen’s voice conveyed solemnity. “Aifa paki-ha’kivlar, etwel kakhartau bi’tevahe-yut.”

“The Honored Dead.” Lt. Avery recited. “These Lost Lives, we shepherd along the Path of Dying.”

The three lieutenants each carried a stainless steel soup tureen from the ship’s kitchens. One held whole coffee beans from earth. The second had demerara sugar from Solana IV. Number three
contained a millet-like grain native to the Oberon System.

Dr. Abbott squirmed like he might pop off and say something rude again until a harsh glare from Kuznetsov settled him down. Kirk half-half- watched Spock as Sha’leyen performed the simple rites. His Vulcan wasn’t easy to read today, utterly separate from Enterprise’s human captain.

Sha’leyen and her acolytes stopped at each of the bodies where she said something respectful about that individual person as they had been in life, having tapped into the detailed information Tralnor put out. Then the four of them would say, in Vulcan, *We mourn for you*. Words done, Sha’leyen placed a small handful of that person’s home planet on their chests, giving them a “burial” as it were.

When they got to Lt. Commander Avilla, before she set down the coffee, Sha’leyen pulled something metal from a pocket hidden in the voluminous folds of her robes. Kirk didn’t recognize the object at first until she shook it. Mr. Scott had taken it upon himself to create a heartfelt gift for someone who hadn’t gotten a chance to be. The rattle went on Avilla’s abdomen and the earth over her heart.

When each person was consecrated, the ceremony ended with the four officiants standing at the front of the room for a final *We mourn for you*.

“Amen.” McCoy said softly.

Vitell’s Star was home to an asteroid belt made up of the remains of two planets that collided into one another millions of years ago. It had become a place that was known for rare materials mining. The one population center and transport hub was a hulking space station that was home to 1.2 million people. While the system itself wasn’t glamorous, mining paid well, and Vitell’s had something of a chi-chi reputation.

“Captain, C and C Sub-Unit Three is hailing.” Morgana said from her seat at the helm.

“Go ahead.” Laura said, situating herself. She hated it when the tower called, wanting to talk, instead of just issuing docking instructions. At least Vitell’s was a civilian/corporate entity that made Starfleet and other governments feel unwelcome.

“Merchant Vessel Abaculus II, Captained by Raisa Pichushkin, welcome to Vitell’s Star. Are you here on business or is this a leisure visit?” The thirty-something man was going through a script.

“Thank you, C and C. While my crew will be staying aboard, my husband and I are disembarking so we can indulge in a little retail therapy. We’ve heard some of the best items come through the antiques markets here.” She was a good actor, never coming off as fake or trying too hard.

“We welcome you, Captain Pichushkin.” Call over, docking instructions issued, Laura told Silvio to hold down the fort. She warned the bridge that if anyone got in trouble while she was gone, there would be hell to pay.

“Don’t forget that I have the buttons.” Laura said to Veddah when they stepped off the shuttle from Sweetness’ berth at Sub-Station Four. “Let’s go check in at our hotel before we start working our way through the shops and vendors.”

“Hotel?” The first word out of Veddah’s mouth in hours.
“Unless we find this thing today, which I doubt, we’re still going to have to do some big-time schmoozing to get our hands on it if it’s here. We’re staying for a few days. I don’t want to commute back and forth from the ship. Besides, if we’re going to have the money to splash around on near-priceless antiquities, we need to act like it.” She’d dressed them both in lavish clothes, done her hair and makeup in an elaborate manner, and put on the kinds of gaudy jewelry that made her gag inside. Arik showered her in precious metals and jewels, trying to buy her off instead of having a relationship with her.

She looked at the wedding set he’d gotten for her, eight carats of diamonds set in platinum, when all she’d wanted was a plain silver band. Arik’s ring, now on Veddah’s finger, also platinum, had four carats of diamonds set in two channels. So fucking ugly, just like her husband.

Their luggage arrived ahead of them, so they went straight to their suite once they got the key. Laura flung open the door and made a running start for the bed, which she leapt into, sending pillows and individually wrapped chocolates flying. “Oh yeah, this beats the hell out of any built-in on a starship.”

Veddah stayed back while she bounced and laughed like a kid. After performing a quilt-top snow angel, Laura sat up and leaned against the headboard. “Veddah, which side do you prefer?”

*Side of what?* He blinked at her.

“Of the bed?” She let out another little laugh. “You can’t sleep on the couch or on the floor. People have to believe we are in good with one another. It’s all part of the act.”

Possibly afraid she might zap him if he failed to answer, he opted for the left.

“Ugh, that ring. What an eyesore.” She pointed at his hand. “I probably should have had it chucked in Arik’s casket, but something told me to hold onto it. May that piece of shit roast in hell for all eternity.”

This was one of those times she liked that Veddah was a Vulcan. A human would have started peppering her with intrusive questions, wanting to figure out why she turned her husband into stew meat. Veddah didn’t want to know and didn’t care.

“Let’s go spend some money.”

Emerging after two days of sequestration from the crew to allow for his head to settle left Tralnor feeling out of touch with his new Starfleet life. He’d spent those forty-eight hours sleeping, meditating, and writing. Writing was the most helpful of those activities in letting the dead find peace in his mind.

The more Seren’s crew were reduced down into data: age, sex, gender, date of birth, date of death, interval from penetrating head trauma to death, and so on, the more the numbers assuaged his trauma. His brain craved the order mathematics gave to mass murder.

He found his way to Rec Room 2 without thinking. He’d meant for his destination to be sick bay, so Dr. McCoy could clear him to go back to work. Tralnor let his subconscious dictate his movements and very quickly found the rosin for his bow.

Music, a combination of math and physics, fractions and trigonometry, simple counting and
numerical intervals, patterns, sequences, logic. Plucking and working the fine tuners on the frog, he utilized sine to adjust the wavelengths of sound, so they were in tune with one another. He drew his bow across the strings. Music, pure escapism, manipulative, catalyst for movement and ideas, expression of that which words cannot convey, salvation for the weary soul, emotion.

He closed his eyes and played.

Laura recognized the disdainful looks she got from some people. How dare such a prime specimen of human beauty associate with, let alone marry, a Vulcan. One shop, she and Veddah were chased out by the proprietor who didn’t want aliens of any sort patronizing his business.

When they wandered into Supernova Antiques and Curiosities, Ltd., the place was little more than piles of clutter haphazardly plopped on tables and shoveled into overcrowded displays. Laura went through their schpiel when the owner came to see if she could be of service.

“It sounds like you and your husband have a unique taste.” She pulled a cardigan off the back of a chair and put it on. “I rarely get anything from Vulcan, probably only five or six pieces in the twenty years I’ve been doing this. Let’s go see what I’ve got.”

“Yes, let’s.” Laura took Veddah by the hand and plunged headlong into the dumping ground.

She insisted on touching him, continuing her devastating violation of everything he was. Veddah knew on a higher level that these glances and blows were only part of an overall presentation, the veneer of a man and wife. Each puncture her consciousness made into his thoughts, the more complete picture he built of her.

He’d made a mistake, thinking her just a passion-driven human, entirely subject to the whims of her feelings. Laura Hillyard’s mind, her thoughts, her whole philosophy on life, her xenophobic beliefs, it was all meticulously organized and supported by an intelligence that was merely a waste when used this way.

Over the last few days, he’d asked himself if he wanted to survive this imprisonment? The answer vacillated. While suicide was illogical, in the immediate aftermath of the rape, shock and shame claimed to prefer death. As he’d regained some of his controls, his thoughts contained more reason and additional insight into the situation, and he decided he was not setting off on the Path of Dying, not yet.

“Husband, look, isn’t that just delightful?” Another pat on the hand. Another reminder that she had no compunction in killing him right here, right now. What happened when he truly was no longer of any use to her? He’d probably meet his fate in Dr. Hoskins’ bed, her holding him down as promised.

What could he do to ensure his perseverance? Physical aggression was out. That thing placed up against his sphenoid put an end to that. Short of holding out for a miracle rescue by the Federation, he could continue to ingratiate himself further, perhaps trigger some kind of reverse-Stockholm Syndrome? However, that scenario was unlikely at best.

Laura smiled at him. If she’d been a member of Seren’s crew, he might have surmised genuine joy or amusement on her behalf. He looked at her face and the falsehoods it spread at that moment.

A solution began to form in Veddah’s mind.
Chapter 36

The captains of Enterprise and Dragon decided to travel to Starbase 21 in tandem. It was faster for both ships to make the journey than wait for the 3rd Mortuary Company to make a wide loop out to the Melbek System. Plus, as Lt. Commander Sha’leyen pointed out, using the 3rd Mortuary meant adding another link in the chain of evidence, a detail a team of defense attorneys bankrolled by a bottomless treasure trove of diamonds could turn into the one fact that creates a mistrial at best or an acquittal at worst.

“Where do you think she is?” Kirk said into Kuznetsov’s hair. She’d placed her head on his chest. He looked down, appreciating her curves, inwardly wincing at the blotches and bruises he’d put on her.

“Hiding out, sharpening her knives.” Kuznetsov let her fingers seek out first the nipple she wasn’t covering with her cheek, and following a gentle tweak, she sent her hand downward.

“Mmmmm.” His cock answered her ministrations. “Tell me something, Captain?”

“Anything, Captain.”

“Who am I when it's tame and tender and we’re not mercilessly fucking our anger and loneliness away?” Kuznetsov mounted him and started on a gentle undulation of her hips. “For me, you are the man I loved and lost, my dearly departed husband, Andrei.”

Arching into her, he said, “Commander Spock.”

After visiting the first dozen or so shops and stalls out of nearly two hundred of the damned things, Laura was irritated. The clerks and proprietors who’d been circumspect, like they might actually have something worth looking at, only wanted to steer their attention to entirely unrelated rubbish that just so happened to have a handsome markup.

Pre-Reform Vulcan antiquities were not the same as gauche Hoblian swirl-pottery that was vintage at its oldest, if not just a couple of years old that someone threw away because they were sick of it. After the third asshole said, “I know it’s not quite what you had in mind, but isn’t it beautiful,” she needed a break.

At a bar called Romeo’s, she ordered a Tom Collins. Veddah got laughed at for requesting herbal tea. Laura had the waitress bring him some non-alcoholic sparkling cider.

“What are you interested in for dinner?” She thought they needed to talk about something, keep bolstering the charade. “They’ve got damned near everything here. All I ask is that you don’t say sushi because where the fuck are you going to find fresh fish out here?”

“I do not eat fish.” He said.

“So I don’t have to worry about that.” Her drink arrived and she tried it. “This seltzer is from the well, so it tastes like everything else that runs through the gun, including mold and cockroaches. I specifically requested bottled seltzer and will pay for a whole two-liters, at hyper-inflated retail price, if it means I can have a single drink that doesn’t have the flavor profile of a warehouse floor after a rave.”
The waitress huffed, snatched back the glass, and stomped off.

“Don’t let me catch you or the bar-back spitting in it. You won’t like what I can do to you.” She barked after the little twit. Romeo’s was owned by a member of the AVDL, and would not take kindly to one of the organization’s royalty being maltreated. “Now, my husband, where to eat?”

“I saw that there is a Moretian establishment down one story.” Veddah sounded and looked natural to someone who didn’t know better. Vitell’s didn’t see many Vulcans, so he seemed pretty normal for their expectations.

“Vegetarian.” She said.

“Yes, but I understand if you want to veto my suggestion.” He was broken, and she’d done it to him.

“My mom used to take me to a Moretian cafe near the main VSA campus.” And as much as she hated it at the time, she had some fondness of those evenings with her mother, splitting an order of fire-roasted peppers stuffed with something similar to kasha. “I’d meet her there. She’d come straight from her genetics lab, and we’d always get the spiced rum cake for dessert.”

She’d not seen or spoken to her mother since the morning of the day she fled Vulcan. Laura figured Tatyana was getting on just fine without her. It must have been ten years ago now that she’d seen Dear Old Mom’s wedding announcement. Laura’s stepfather, Sovon, whom she’d never met, was a biochemist or something of that ilk.

“I know the place of which you speak. The rum cake is very good.” A timid sip of cider left him wrinkling his nose from the bubbles.

“Okay, it’s decided. Moretian it is.” She smiled as a gesture of goodwill, and she saw just how much he didn’t trust her. That was for the best she supposed.

“Your drink.” A fresh Tom Collins, and the new bottle of seltzer it was mixed with arrived at the table. Laura never so much as took a sip.

Candles and fresh-cut flowers on the tables, real linens, live string quartet, wine steward, this was Veddah’s first experience with fine dining. He followed Laura’s cues since this sort of establishment was familiar to her. She was pleasant to the staff, loquacious with the wine steward, but not flirty. She was someone who’d earned her status on the merits of her own hard work, not by using sex in-kind like so many humans Veddah had been exposed to.

He watched how the people around them responded to her. They wanted to please her, ingratiated themselves, tried to draw her attention. What was so compelling about her? Her crew did more than obey her because she was the captain. What was there that engendered such empathy with a person who possessed so little of her own?

“The spring pickles sound good.” She said over the top of her menu. “Do you want to share that as an appetizer?”

“Yes, I would have chosen the spring pickles as well.” She appeared so average in accordance to his experiences with the people he’d served with. Laura lacked the impulsivity, the mercurial swings in mood, the unreasonable adherence to beliefs “just because” he was used to. Yet, she
retained a form of emotional expression that made her seem far more stereotypical than she was.

Her hand sought out his, and he let her have him, thankful for a warning to prepare himself. Shields up as well as he could brace them in his deteriorated mental state, he focused on the feeling of her soft, cool skin, rather than the fastidious organization of her mind.

“Don’t look now, but there’s a loudmouth and his date who’ve taken huge offense at you and I being here together.” She said. “They’re going to try to find excuses to come over here and say nasty things under their breath. Those are exactly the kind of people I don’t allow into my organization. If you can’t behave in public, how can I trust you to act honorably in any way?”

He shook loose of her grasp and offered her his index and middle fingers. She sent a side-long glance at the scornful couple and let a sly smile draw the corners of her mouth. “Oh, you naughty boy.”

They kissed. . . And that’s where he found it, buried deep, her esteem for another person, so rarely granted, was like a bright white light of uplifting praise that set off a cascade of endorphins. He closed his eyes against the surge of pleasure and so Laura didn’t have to see his befuddlement that she seemed to like him as a person.

“Wow.” Laura pulled her fingers back. “What was that?”

He looked at his hand not entirely sure what had happened between them, this being his first experience with the ozh’esta. “I do not know.”

“Heav you decided?” The waiter broke the spell of the moment. “Ma’am?”

“We’re going to start with the spring pickles, then I’d like the pre tarmeeli, but can you have chef serve it over a bed of cream noodles instead of the hot yellow chili rice?”

“As it is supposed to be served.” The waiter said, knowingly. “People here like to think they’re sophisticated when in all honesty, they are just rich hicks. You’re the first human I’ve encountered who both understands that pre tarmeeli is a Vulcan specialty and that it’s not supposed to taste like an Indian curry. It should be spicy, cream noodles taking the edge off, not leaving your nose and eyes running from the heat.”

“Well, I’m happy to have made your evening.” She laughed. “And as the side, is it possible to trade out the steamed vegetable for—”

“It’s not on the menu, but chef will be quite pleased to whip up the herbed legumes with sash-savas vinaigrette.” So satisfied as to have customers who knew what they were doing, the waiter smiled back at her. “And for you, sir?”

“The crispy pan-fried farsoafi.” Veddah remembered that Moretian dish being good at the cafe Laura talked about earlier. “I too would like the bean salad as the side.”

“Oh, absolutely.”

Alone again, Laura said, “Before you ask, I always liked the food on Vulcan. It never tried to lord it’s supposedly superior intellect over me or chew me out because I laughed at something. Imagine, pre tarmeeli with super-spicy rice, and naan bread. There are more pillocks on this station than I thought.”
Round robin, reports were presented to a group consisting of the command teams, CMOs, security chiefs, Dr. Tralnor, and Lt. Commander Sha’leyen. They showed what they hoped were their own final reports to one another and listened to what geology, dendrology, legal, metallurgy, and others had to say before all of this was combined into a massive omnibus volume bound for the brass back in San Francisco.

Lt. Commander Sha’leyen would have final say on the compilation as shown to Command. As the resident expert on mass graves, she was the logical choice to sign off on the whole thing. She’d have the entire report put together before they made port at Starbase 21.

“Legal, what is your advice in dealing with our grave robbers?” Kirk asked. He wanted them off his ship as fast as fucking possible. They were not only bad for morale, if they stuck around much longer, a lynch mob might break out, and that was just amongst his crew. Kuznetsov’s people wanted to keel haul them, but only after making them run the gauntlet.

Commander Serj Blaedel and his deputy, Lieutenant Carolina Dresden, turned to one another and engaged in a round of archetypal lawyer-whispering. Blaedel came up for air first. “We’re having them transferred to the criminal lock-down facility on Starbase 21. I’ve had Dresden draft the charges. On your okay, Captain Kirk, we can have the indictment sent ahead, and the courts will be ready to process Crewman Cash, Crewman Hawkins, and Ensign Radovitch before we even arrive.”

“Does that meet the Captain’s approval?” Kirk asked Kuznetsov.

“Affirmative.” She said. “Commander Spock, Commander Cosgriff?”

“Works for me.” The Irishman nodded.

“Myself as well.” Spock agreed.

Kirk consulted the agenda he’d created for this long, involved meeting. “Security Chiefs?”

“Throw the fucking book at them.” Dragon’s Chief Carter said.

“I still can’t believe they were mine. . .” Enterprise’s man stared down at his hands. “Last words from anyone?” Kirk asked the group. “No? You’re all dismissed.”

Most of those in attendance flocked to the back of the room where catering had set out coffee and other refreshments. Kirk thought he might escape to his office when Bones zeroed in on him.

“Does this mean after we’re done off-loading those ghouls that we’ve got to stick around Starbase 21 for an eternity? Are they going to expect us to sit while someone else rounds this bitch up and drags her back for a trial?” McCoy was itching to find Hillyard.

“We’ll only be around for the expedited court-martial. You, Sha’leyen, and Lt. Seltun have to testify, but that shouldn’t take long.” Kirk promised his crew they’d nail MV Sweetness to the wall. He’d be loathed to take that chance away from them.

The doctor lowered his voice. “Is your girlfriend coming with us?”

Spock, on approach from a quick conversation with Dr. Abbott, stopped when he heard McCoy. Kirk looked at his first officer an implored him not to leave. “Bones?”

“You know, that hot little Russian number who just so happens to be of the same rank and not part of your chain of command? The same one who seems to spend an awful lot of time in your quarters
at night?”

“No, now isn’t the best time.” Was all the captain could say, but by then, Spock had walked off.

The mood in Sha’leyen’s office was funereal. Mollie almost didn’t want to speak. She got a quick recap of the Enterprise’s last few days and had to sit down. If she didn’t know Laura like she did, she’d say it wasn’t possible, but she knew better.

“Where are you, Mollie?” Spock asked.

She was using the secure comm channel via the link on the vanity in Lianna’s guest room. “I’m in Paris, getting ready for some fancy formal gala-thing that President Cullen is going to be at.”

Wearing an evening gown of obvious Deltan design, something Mollie would never have chosen, would have him wondering what the hell she was up to. “Ambassador Lianna has loaned me—”

“I never understand this about Vulcans. Why do you have such a compulsion to be ‘on-time’ for everything?” The Ambassador mowed into the room. “Me? I like to be fashionably late! Much more fun. Stand, my dear.”

Mollie complied, and Lianna started to paint a design, in shimmering gold, that went from the sternoclavicular notch out to her shoulder as a balance to the off-the-shoulder dress.

“So, I tell Sarek that it takes time to make us pretty and that he needs to chill his feet, as the humans say.” She grinned and laughed. “I do not think he appreciates how much easier it is for boys to clean up nice. What, they drag a comb through their hair, if they have any, and put on a suit, simple.”

Lianna brushed a horizontal stripe across Mollie’s right cheek. “Mollie knows this, your pretty Starfleet friend,” Lianna waved to the Enterprise crew, “she knows this. If you are to surround yourself with beauty, you must be patient.”

The final touch, Mollie was presented with an opulent headband that nearly didn’t stretch over her up-do. “There you are, my dear. Now I leave you to say goodbye to your friends and boyfriend.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” Mollie didn’t even finish the sentence before the laughter had Lianna practically doubled over.

“She says this.” Lianna addressed them. “When ten years from now you are married to him with,” the Deltan placed her hand on Mollie’s abdomen, “your third child on the way. Goodnight friends. Goodnight not-boyfriend. Mollie, I’ll see you downstairs.”

“Only three?” Her brother teased. “You and Spock are good for five, at least.”

“Shut up, Trahnor.” Mollie shook her head. She didn’t want to think about what she knew of Deltan clairvoyance and hoped beyond hope that Lianna was simply getting a rise out of her. “Don’t be such a fungus.”

“Tonight, this is when you get your meeting with the President? Lianna has put this together?” Sha’leyen asked.

“Before Ambassador Hurricane came blowing in here, I was going to tell you that we’ve already
had our meeting. Our Kennuk is go.” She was ready to sign off. “We also need to set up a meeting with Sohja and Joe. They’re going to have to be our point of contact with Sarek and T’Lal once we leave the ship.”

“Shit.” Tralnor said. “I’ll get on the horn to them when we’re done here.”

“They’ll come through for us.” Mollie reassured.

Tralnor paused before saying, “That’s not what I’m worried about.”
Chapter 37

Two off-duty cops who’d come to the Moretian restaurant for their wedding anniversary had to drag off the aggressive xenophobe couple. The woman threw a glass of red wine in Laura’s face while calling her an alien-fucking whore, while the man shouted across the dining room about how people like her were going to burn at the stake but only after being forced to watch as her husband was raped and murdered for daring to touch her.

Rum cake and her clothes ruined, the manager arrived to start sucking up to Captain Pichushkin and her husband. Meal comped, profuse apologies, and a personal escort to an haute couture boutique for a new outfit, it took almost an hour before she could send a message to Silvio: 
\textit{Attacked at dinner by a couple of racist pricks. Booked at central precinct. Take care of them}

She approached the racks of clothes like Arik would have and chose only the most pretentious labels and styles. The restaurant manager offered to get the things she’d come in wearing sent off to the cleaners. Laura vetoed that. There was a certain satisfaction that came with watching an outfit that cost more than the average person made in a month going down the incinerator chute. She hated crap like this and the people who insisted on wearing it.

Manager finally satisfied that neither of the characters she and Veddah played was going to sue over this incident, the couple was left to their own devices.

“Let’s walk back to the hotel.” Laura put her arm through Veddah’s, and they went off down the concourse of glitzy storefronts.

\textit{Look-look-look!}” Like the burst of enthusiasm for jumping on the bed, Laura took off for a window display that captured her imagination. “They’re making truffles.”

The thick scent of the confectionery clouded Veddah’s senses as she hauled him into the shop. Sweets of more kinds than he could ever identify filled jars, domes, and display cases. She bounded from delight to delight, in no way acting a part.

“Oh, I don’t know what I want.” She pointed at a tray of something called a mulled honey truffle, then to a slab of pink peppermint fudge. “It all looks so amazing.”

“What is your favorite?” He had no way of helping her make a choice.
“‘It’s hard to say. Whatever I pick right now, ask the same question in the morning, I’ll probably have a different answer.” Bonbons, coconut patties, chocolate dipped tree nuts, she vacillated. “What about you? What’s yours?”

“I do not have one.” He tried to stay in character, but she knew what he’d really said: \textit{I have never eaten chocolate before.}

Some of the zeal fell from her expression, replaced with a thoughtful seriousness. “Then we’ve got to make this special.”

“Special?” She took his hand and the way their fingers touched, her brightness came to him, bearing wordless intentions of indemnity. . .

Laura made an assorted selection of candies. By the time she paid and they set off once more for their room, the deeper connotations of ‘make this special’ came to Veddah. What he’d previously assumed was lip-service designed to make him come round faster from the torment of rape, what she said she wished she hadn’t had to do, the sentiment she expressed, that wasn’t made up.
To borrow a phrase from his crewmates, what the fuck was going on?

Neutral territory, that’s where they’d chosen to meet. Spock arrived first, as he expected he would. Engineering’s Auxiliary Meeting Room was isolated and a place neither of them had spent any significant amount of time. Mostly, the space was a hideaway for spare parts and engineers looking for a little rack time when putting in grueling double and triple shifts.

“This is off the beaten path.” Jim said when he stepped into the neglected room.

Spock indicated they should sit down. Of the two chairs parked at the canted table, he managed to choose the one where only three of the four feet touched the ground at the same time. Jim, almost timid in his movements, wanting to make absolutely certain he didn’t screw things up again, claimed the other chair, but kept his eyes tightly focused on some point between the table and the floor.

“I kind of feel like we need a password or a secret handshake or something. This place is like a tree fort.” The captain might not have been addressing his first officer right then. He was in a liminal state, not sure if he was in or out of Spock’s life.

“Prior to you, Jim, I only had one friend who served with me here, on the Enterprise. Ensign Paulette Gordon has been dead for fifteen years.”

“Paulette?” Another girlfriend, Spock? That thought, lobbed like a shot-put, stung.

“I met her while filming Celluloid Vokaya. She was an ROTC cadet at the University of Southern California. As junior officers, we shared lab space and did some combined research. She once told me that she thought she could be attracted to me if only I were female.”

Kirk was buoyed at learning Paulette was gay and therefore not a notch on Spock’s proverbial bedpost. Now, the human raised his visual horizon.

“Ambushed by pirates, Captain Pike called general quarters. Paulette’s assignment was close to the hull, where the histopathology lab used to be. The attackers fired modified torpedoes packed with shrapnel. Our shields phased and a torpedo exploded, hurling grape-shot and broken glass through the hole it punched into the ship’s skin. If a high-velocity shard of glass had not ruptured her aorta, she would have survived.

“Her death, more so than any other aspect of living and working with humans, made me hesitant to form friendships with others I served with. I did not want to get close with anyone. Then you came, Jim.” He wanted those hazel eyes to regard him with affection again, willed the captain to engage him.

“You sure weren’t looking for a friend then either.” Kirk grumbled.

“I was not.”

“So, what changed?”

“My perception of you, of friendship.” Now was the right time to take Jim by the hand and show him that transition, but the human kept his hands firmly planted in his lap, table between them. “I have had some fortune in life, finding a handful of friends who are not concerned about my genetics or lack of emotionality. You are one of those rare individuals.”
“I see.”

“You are loyal, strong, thoughtful, the kind of friend everyone deserves but rarely finds.” Spock’s intention for this meeting was drawing Jim out of his self-imposed exile. It hadn’t worked, yet. “You hacked your way through my defenses and showed me that I do not have to be alone here. I do not want to be alone.”

No good at the art of dropping subtle hints, Spock didn’t know how to keep Jim involved in this conversation.

“But you’re not alone, Spock, not really, not the way you’re talking.” The human returned to staring at his hands. “You’ve got Mollie, right there, in your head, all the time. That’s not alone.”

“Jim?”

“Look, Spock, I think I get what you’re trying to say, and I’m touched, I am.” He refused to look up. “I think it might be a good idea to only hang out with one another in public venues with other people around. Better for both of us.”

“I am not bonded to Mollie. She and I are not getting married. We are not romantically involved.” You are the one I want in that way, Jim, but only if you want me.

Jim gave a sad smile. “You don’t have to hide her from me, Spock. I’m a big boy, I can take it, I promise.”

“Mollie and I are long-time friends and professional colleagues who just so happen to fuck sometimes.”

“What did you say?” Eye-contact!

“Her words, not mine.” Spock said. “But, they are the truth.”

“Then you’re shortchanging yourselves.” He was not listening! “You’re a beautiful couple and highly compatible. Reducing that down to just being fuck-buddies is harsh and wasteful. Admit it, you’re in love with one another. Go get hitched, and never worry about your seven-year-itch again.”

“We do love one another, but not in the manner you imply.” Could he explain? “The colloquialism, fuck-buddies, is too vulgar, and describing Mollie and I as lovers ascribes qualities to our relationship that are not there.”

“So, you have sex because?” Jim’s lack of comprehension was a quagmire.

“It started as teenage curiosity. We wanted to experience intercourse, and in one another, we found safe partners.” He didn’t want to get into how they also used their lovemaking sessions back then as a gateway to deepening the melds they used to broaden their psionic abilities. “She and I have stayed safe partners, carrying this component of our relationship forward. Curiosity has long since given way to condoling and allaying life’s stressors, acceding comfort and solace.”

“Only you, Spock.” Jim was bewildered, not comprehending what he’d been told. “Only you could have a sexual relationship with someone, describe them as safe, then talk about sex itself as granting solace.”

“It is an accurate remark.”
Jim got up. “I appreciate you trying to explain things. My—”

“James Tiberius Kirk, I am in lov—”

“No, Spock.” The captain shook his head. “You’re confusing friendship with me for what you and Mollie actually have.”

“Please, Jim, do not go.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, on the bridge.” The door opened, and the captain was gone.

“You’re a fucking idiot!” Dr. McCoy thought about hurling the hi-ball glass at Kirk rather than pouring a drink into it. “An absolute dumbass!”

“Don’t you think its better this way?” Jim said, an almost artificial calm coated his voice.

“No, no I don’t. A person doesn’t spend all that time going into detail about how they are not passionate with someone if they don’t want you to appreciate what that means. He and Mollie are very close friends, nothing more.”

The captain was going to make the doctor claw his own eyes out. “It’s just sex, Jim. That’s all.”

“It doesn’t seem right that anything for him is just sex.” Kirk finally deemed it okay to give the whiskey a good sniff before sucking half of it down. Overton hadn’t had a great selection, but this would do.

McCoy smacked his palm to his forehead. “Kuznetsov, just sex?”

“Bones, don’t.”

“Valerie Kramer?”

“Enough.”

“Nial Dumfries?”

“Fuck off, Bones.” Kirk shuddered.

“So what if Spock gets laid every once in a while? He’s allowed! Who gives a rat’s ass that he’s still banging the chick he took to prom? Why do you give a shit? Why are you projecting this ridiculous madonna/whore complex onto him? Do you know how fucking hypocritical that is coming from you?” McCoy pointed at Kirk and just about got growled at. “He’s just come out and said that he’s in love with you.”

“No, he didn’t.” The captain countered.

“You didn’t let him get all the words out you dumb bastard.” Vexed, the doctor swiveled his chair, so he didn’t have to keep looking at his boneheaded friend. “Stupid, stupid, stupid. . .”

Joe’s aloha shirt for the day was an eye-watering orange with dashboard hula girls and conch
shells. “Serious Vulcan is serious. What’s up, Shirley?”

“I am serious, and don’t call me Shirley.” Tralnor replied, getting a chuckle from Joe.

“No, really, you look like you just came from sitting shiva. Is something wrong out there?” Joe’s concern was disturbing. If Joe, of all the selfish dicks on earth, could see how stressed Tralnor still was, the Vulcan wasn’t fit for public consumption.

“That’s part of what we need to talk about. I need your help with something.”

“Let me switch on my handy-dandy signal modulator. I know things are encrypted on your end, but something tells me we can’t be too safe. Let’s hear it.”

“Have you ever heard of the AnthroVision Defense League?”

Joe’s eyes grew wide. “Hold on for a sec. I think I might need a martini before we start talking about those repugnant pukes.”

“Have one for me too.”

Laura handed the candies off to Veddah so she could make another running high-jump for the bed. Gleeful, that’s how she appeared and sounded with each bounce. One of those sent her springing up and once on her feet, she started stripping off the new clothes, stuffing them in a room-service laundry bag.

Veddah moved, his back hitting a wall.

“What is—Oh, I’m just getting my jammies on. I suggest you do the same. I packed some for you in the brown suitcase.” She unhooked her bra, and he screwed his eyes shut. “I’m not a modest person, so if you want to look, I don’t care.”

He took his whole case into the bathroom. Nothing in it was anything he’d choose to wear on his own accord. It was all costuming. Just like sharing a bed with her tonight was for show. He put on the sleepwear and did not want to leave the illusion of safety this space away from Laura offered. When he willed himself out, seeing her wearing something similar to what he had on was a relief.

Hair down, makeup removed, she stood in front of a dresser where she arranged the chocolates on a tray taken from somewhere in the sprawling accommodation. “Follow me over to the sofa.”

He did as told, where she put him against the arm, and she took the middle, wedging him into place. They’d been alone together all day, and she’d not done anything construed as sexual to him. He was still nervous.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Veddah.” She picked up a chocolate and took a bite. “Oh, yes. . . Pure bliss.”

He smelled a citrus component in with the sugar and what he figured was the distinctive odor of cacao.

“Creamy, bitter, smooth, sweet, orange, those are the bare basics of what this tastes like. Have you ever so much as wanted to try chocolate?” She popped the other part of the candy in her mouth.
“No. I had no desire to.”

“I think you’ll find that you like it.” She picked up an identical piece to what she’d eaten. “Open your mouth.”

It hit his tongue and immediately started to melt, coating his mouth and his senses. The five words she’d used in her meagre description did little to prepare him for this silken emulsion. Primal parts of his brain lit up. When his teeth broke through to the center and the acidic fruit component mixed in, an involuntary sound of approval escaped his throat.

“Good?” She smiled at him, and it was an expression that he could take at face value. Laura was happy to share this experience with him.

He swallowed. “Very much so.”

“This is an almond toffee, dipped in chocolate, then coated with finely chopped almonds.” She bit the oblong piece in half and fed him the other side. This one was crunchy, more savory, just as amazing, but in a different way.

She adjusted how she was sitting and unconsciously took his hand. He accepted the rush of her approval and used it as an access route to probe a little deeper into her mind. While he was subject to her empathy, her xenophobic ideals clouded her judgement. She may like him as an individual, apart from the rest of his species, but the vitriol she reserved specifically for Vulcans kept her from being at ease with her decision regarding Veddah as a person.

Laura ran a thumb over his knuckles, setting off a reaction in him he’d not thought possible. His breath hitched as once again his body betrayed his mind. His autonomic desire fed back to her, and she gasped.

“Veddah?” She let go, stood up, and reclaimed said hand. “Only if its what you want.”

Yes! He wanted it. His body wanted the pleasure of release, and his higher brain thought he could use this encounter to further his chances of survival. “I want this.”

She guided him toward the bed where they sat on the edge. “This time, Veddah, I promise it will be beautiful.”
Mollie did not go back to her house when she returned from Paris. Sarek thought it safer for her to check into one of the high-rise hotels downtown. Like the concerned dad he was, he refused to let her out of his sight until she was set up in her room.

“I have asked the chief of security to look in on you periodically.”

“That’s a bit overly cautious, don’t you think?” She tossed her bags on the bed and sat down. The look she got from that man could have cut through steel.

“Are you forgetting that we are up against the same people who murdered your friends?”

“Not for a second.” She didn’t want to bicker with the Ambassador right now.

He accepted her answer. “I must step out. I will return for our meeting with Joe Bergman.”

“You be safe too, Sarek.”

Alone for the first time in days, the silence made her ears hiss. Thirty-seven stories above the City of Angels, she wished to hear the song of urban life, but the windows blocked the noise, plus they didn’t open. She watched as the last rays of sun dropped over the Pacific.

The whole of planet earth was still alien to her even though her ancestors crawled out of its oceans. She felt like a tourist on a world that was supposed to be her home. Just passing through... Every moment spent here, she was treading water, waiting to go back to her red desert.

“Why do I stay here?” She posed the question to Los Angeles. “Is it the memories of the good times, because I’m used to it here? My mom is here? I can’t say it’s the weather. You’re damp and cold and crowded, L.A.”

Forehead against the glass, she stared down to the shopping plaza at ground level. “I love you as a place to visit. You were great for school. But, I need to go home. Let me go home.”

The city twinkled in the twilight.

Her “phone” started ringing, drawing her out of her state of contemplation. She answered without looking at who’d called. “Dr. Mallia Ah’dalevna MacCormack, speaking.”

Gasps and stifled sobs filled her ears and sank her heart. He could barely speak. “I tried. . . I tried, and he would not listen to me.”

If given the choice of a single word to describe his state of mind, Jim Kirk would say he was gutted, and the only person to blame was the one who stared back at him in the mirror in the morning. He kept telling himself he’d done what was right, smothering embers before they caught fire. Spock deserved the best and nothing less. “Loving me is a one-way trip to an irreparably broken heart.”
Tralnor and Sha’leyen leaned into one another as they occupied the lumpy purple love seat. His head fit ever so well on her shoulder. He was thinking about how people mistook her for human. Her affect, skin tone, body temperature was different, she didn’t move like a human either. It wasn’t fair to dog those who didn’t peg her as a Belonite. Other than Vulcan, no one seemed to care that her planet and people existed. But not having pointed ears didn’t automatically prove she was from earth stock.

“Is Joe willing to act as our intermediary?” She nuzzled against his head.

“I had to persuade him not to come charging out here to try and help us in person. Sohja will be even harder to convince.”

“Because Vulcans are so stubborn?”

“You know it.” He could fall asleep like this and let his and Sha’leyen’s subconscious selves mingle with one another.

Her desk comm went off. “I should probably get that.”

“Neither of us are on duty right now.” He didn’t want to give up his pillow.

“Whoever it is knows I’m here.” She got over there and flipped the switch. “Lt. Commander Sha’leyen.”

“It’s Mollie, and we’re having something of an emergency.” She sounded shaken. “I’m not sure of the exact details of what set this off, but you need to find Spock, now.”

“We’ll get to him.” Tralnor moved in beside Sha’leyen. “Is this about what I think it is?”

“If I ever meet Jim Kirk, it will take all the strength I have not to throttle that man! Who the fuck does he think he is, treating my best friend like that? Does he even comprehend what it took for Spock to flay his feelings open like he did? No, I won’t just throttle him, I’ll knock his fat head right off his fucking shoulders.” Mollie grabbed onto the edges of the desk she was at and started drawing measured breaths, reciting something in her mind to rein herself in. “And this coming on the heels of all the crap you’ve been dealing with for the last week or so, everyone on Enterprise is fragile right now.”

“You don’t think he’s going to hurt himself, do you?” Tralnor had to ask. If that were the case, they’d be forced to get Dr. McCoy involved.

“I don’t think he’d ever consider self-harming. It’s too nonsensical. What he does need though is people on-hand to offer some support after your captain—Just go.” Mollie hated that she wasn’t there for Spock, that she was just a voice at the other end of the galaxy.

“You wouldn’t happen to know where he is? This is a big ship with nooks and crannies galore.”

Tralnor hated seeing Mollie so pained and helpless.

“It looked like he was in his quarters.” His sister rubbed her eyes with the meaty parts of her palms. “And remind him that it’s not his fault the object of his affections is a complete butt.”

Sha’leyen said, “We need to stop by my quarters on the way. I have to get my ‘doctor’ bag.”

They made one additional detour, to the pharmacology lab where Sha’leyen did some side-research, before arriving at Spock’s cabin. Tralnor hit the buzzer. No answer. Two more times,
nothing.

(Spock?) Tralnor hit on a volatile mind on the verge of collapse. He left the pathway open to receive a response.

(Go away!) Shame at being so hopeful that someone like Jim Kirk might feel the same way... (Leave me.)

(Not until Sha’leyen and I come in and see that you’re okay.)

Self-reflected disgust at the emotions he’d allowed himself to experience for this person, to show this person. (You heard me, Tralnor.)

Tralnor put his hand over the part of the doorframe where the locking mechanism was housed. He’d have thought Starfleet might use something more sophisticated than this particular cheap industrial model. This was one of the series that his father had taught him to pop. The only thing that took it up to Starfleet security approval was how it interacted with the ship’s software. He slipped a tentacle of his mind in where the lock hardware physically connected to the computer network. He traced the network hardwire up about a third of a meter and psionically injected an open command.

“Lights, twenty percent.” Sha’leyen brought about just enough light for them to see.

“Mollie called us.” Tralnor slid down the wall to join Spock on the floor.

“I cause her a constant stream of needless grief.” Spock’s voice was hoarse. “She should not have to spend so much of her life looking after me. I am an abyss of need and emotion. I am greedy. I do nothing but take from her... The situation with Jim—”

Tralnor offered his hand, a crackle of static electricity discharged when they touched. Before reestablishing their communication link, he projected calm into Spock, somewhat disarming the science officer’s all-encompassing torment. (Show me, Spock.)

It came at Tralnor as a jumble of images and sensations. (Okay, let’s break things down into chronological order.)

For ten minutes, they went over the meeting in engineering, going through it six times, tearing it apart and reassembling it as an outline. (Again, only this time, we’re examining each heading and sub-heading where you’re going to add the label of what emotion you felt at each point.)

Spock’s mind threw up a barrier there. His Surakian training didn’t do things this way. Action and emotion were separated, said feelings were only to be referenced as examples of how not to react in similar situations in the future. Lyr Saan techniques understood action and emotion were interrelated, analyzed those feelings, and used them as reference markers for later decision making. Ultimately, in both disciplines, eventual repeats of actions and the feelings they solicited, the resultant emotions were supposed to be kept to oneself.

(You experienced frustration/anger/panic when you realized Jim was not listening to you. Is that how you feel when someone else isn’t listening or is it just him? Is that how you’re going to feel the next time you see him? If so, within what context are those emotions coming from, close physical proximity, or proximity and anxiety about discussing personal matters with him in the future? Is this set of emotions instead aimed at yourself because you don’t think you did a good enough job explaining your situation to him? Why were you feeling this way? What can you learn from it? How do you lessen the pain next time if there is a next time?) Tralnor wasn’t trying to
push his ways on Spock, he just wanted to offer an alternate view, one that might keep him from stewing in such toxic headspace.

(I cannot do this.) Spock said.

(This is what I’ve been focusing on to get through the mass murder. Forty-one lives reduced to data and reports, the math of which undoubtedly kept me from a mental breakdown, but, I can’t leave things there. I have to tear apart my emotions dealing with the incident, or they will come back to haunt and hobble me. I’m learning exactly how I felt when and why. When I face a task like this again, I’ll know what to expect and can start tailoring my reactions immediately.)

(I do not have the strength for such introspection, Tralnor.)

“Rub this on your gums.” Sha’leyen handed Spock a small square of marble with a glossy orange substance on it. “You have TMJ from years of clenching your jaw to survive life amongst humans. This will help with the discomfort.”

(If Mollie thought you were greedy, she would never have gotten in touch with us. She thinks the world of you, Spock.) Tralnor decided to go after the traces of good to come out of Spock’s day.

(Without Jim, she is going to sacrifice herself to me. That is my greed at its worst, so insatiable that it will consume us both.)

(Spock, that’s nature. She understands the Fever. To her, going to you isn’t a sacrifice, its what you do for a friend.)

“This will take the edge off the pain. It pours out of you right now.” Sha’leyen exchanged the marble for a shot glass. “It’s what I gave Tralnor before we put him to sleep here in your quarters.”

(Why will he not hear what I say?) Spock tipped back the potion. (Why?)

“You will show me what to do?” This needed to go right if his plan had any chance of succeeding.

She reached out and let the backs of her fingers graze his cheek. “I will.”

He let her sexual attraction fuel his own, and the tightness in his underpants became increasingly uncomfortable. She put her other hand on the back of his neck, tilted his head down, and pulled him into a human kiss. She tasted like chocolate.

How can I do this without hurting him or setting off a PTSD bomb? He doesn’t know enough to take the lead. “Tell me if you don’t want me to do something.”

“I will.” A shiver of something he didn’t recognize tingled through his body. She ran her hands over his upper half, then slipped them beneath his shirt and repeated the pattern. He moaned, but not like last time.

Another kiss, mouths locked, her hands went to the sides of Veddah’s face. She wanted him to enjoy this. Be careful, she reminded herself. Don’t go too fast.

He let her thoughts trickle into his, they stoked one another’s desire. Foothold in her mind, Veddah started to let his guard down. He touched her of his own acquiescence, following the example she set, exploring her upper body, giving in to new sensations.
She shed her shirt and helped him out of his, skin on skin, a trail of kisses down his neck. “Let’s get you out of these.”

She hooked her fingers in his waistband. *I didn’t actually see it last time.* “Can I touch it?”

He involuntarily tensed up and decided the way to do this was by placing her hand there, making it his move. In the suite’s good lighting, he saw everything she did, so there was no guessing that she might physically harm him in the dark. Her pinkish hand, gently stroking him from base to glans, was a stark contrast to the heavy green of his erection.

*Good, he likes that.* She gazed into his eyes. . . seeking his approval.

The hand not occupied went to his right ear, creating a trail of, he didn’t have words for it. More kisses, tongues mingling, she set off a scintillating blaze in his nervous system, a delicious warmth that spread from center mass to the very tips of his ears.

She let go of him to free her lower body of the rest of her clothing, then she crawled up into the bed, head on a pillow. “Come up beside me, on your left side, looking at me.”

He looked down the hills and planes of her body, her right arm reached around, holding him against her. “I know you’re in here with me. Tell me what this feels like.”

Her left hand moved down her body slowly, revisiting the way he’d touched her until she centered her fingers between her legs. Veddah unwittingly threw his head back, almost biting his lip. Barely capable of speaking, “It feels like thorsh-yel.”

“A star gone nova? We’re not there yet, Veddah.” Laura lead his free hand down so his fingers might graze erectile tissue analogous to a male’s. She was slick with arousal, it was easy to move against the nerve-rich nub, and she rocked her hips to up the intensity, leaving him in a state where he thought he might scream.

“You feel like, not like last time.” She sent him to seek her deeper warmth. “You were—”

“Dry and not physically stimulated enough for sex.” *It wasn’t good for either of us. I fucked your head up, probably forever in some ways. The way I had to force you inside me, I tore and bruised, and that’s why I loaded you up on psi-inhibitors. I know how sex works with touch telepaths. You didn’t need to feel my body’s pain too.* “Not a problem this time. . . If you still want to see this through?”

“Please.” He replied. “I need this. . .”

She arranged him, so he was on top of her, the tip of his penis against her vulva. “I’m going to help guide you in.”

Kisses, her legs wrapped around his lower back, her hands on the sides of his face, he started slow, a little awkward, but built to a rhythm that contented them both. He let his brain go on its own mission, a subdivided part of his consciousness attending to greater matters than the primordial gyrations of his body pressing into hers.

He thought nothing of the little words and sighs she whispered, deeming them a byproduct, a reaction to this kind of intimacy. “Rom-olau’ni, Veddah. Aitlun du. . .” *It feels so good, Veddah. I want you. . .*

“Dungau-ma ek’wak.” *You shall have me forever.* His thrusts, now spastic, gave little warning of what lay ahead. He combusted.
“Thorsh-yel!” She cried, her orgasm washed over them.
Chapter 39

Sha’leyen stayed with Spock and Tralnor went down a few doors. The captain’s pensive state leached out into the hall. Tralnor planted his finger on the buzzer and wouldn’t let up until Kirk let him in or security came to take him away.

The man who answered was far from the golden stud who’d met him at the shuttle bay a month ago. Captain Kirk looked like a beaten dog who still sought love from an abusive master. And you think you’re only punishing yourself, Captain. Tralnor thought.

The captain didn’t say a word, just stepped out of the way and let the Vulcan enter. Tralnor helped himself to a chair, not even interested in gleaning the titles on the captain’s bookshelf.

“I know, I know, I’m a gormless piece of shit who doesn’t have the balls to just come out and say how I feel.” Kirk flopped onto the closest piece of furniture. “I’m a coward.”

Tralnor stayed quiet, waiting for the pity parade to pass.

“Have you ever loved someone so much it became physically painful? I felt that ache before I knew what it was. And once I figured it out, I felt trapped, like I could never let this thing in me out because—What does he see in me? How can these feelings be mutual?” Kirk’s jaw undulated like he was trying out explanations before saying them out loud. “Fuck.”

The human stood and milled about the room, using movement as a stalling tactic. “He’s smart, selfless, and undeserving of my chaos. And then there’s Mollie. . .”

Kirk shed a layer of animosity at the thought of Mollie, making room for a slightly different spin, where his self-flagellation made her the straw man. If she weren’t a factor, none of this would be happening. He wanted Spock all to himself.

“He’ll marry her and live happily ever after.” Kirk’s laugh was acidic. “Dr. Tralnor, are you going to say anything or just stare at me like a disapproving parent who caught their kid out after curfew?”

“I have known Spock my entire life, and I say that not as an embellishment. The first time we met, I was three hours old. I have always looked up to him as an epitome of strength, intelligence, and resilience.”

Tralnor comprehended the intensity of Spock’s frustration. He felt Kirk’s brain as the captain cherry-picked statements for what he wanted to hear and built the responses.

“Like an older brother?” Kirk was sure.

“Not quite.” No sense in explaining, not to a man who fought and lived another day based on instinct and supposition. That wasn’t to say the captain didn’t have the academics for his job, he was an intellectual. Where Jim Kirk had the edge on others is he understood human nature at an almost molecular level, giving him the upper hand in reading encounters with people who operated at a similar emotional quotient. Working with, going against, humans, Klingons, Romulans, he could get a jump on them all.

Spock and Mollie were not human, not in the way that Kirk would classify as such. Yet, he held them to the same standards and conjecture that he would for any of the rest of his human friends and family. He approached the Vulcans something like a book of Mad Libs and following the
human paradigm, love, sex, marriage, children, all those were blanks he filled in without consulting anyone else.

“James Kirk, I shouldn’t be breathing a word to you about any of this, but the truth of it is, you are tearing that man apart.”

What woke her up first, the smell or the headache? Maybe it was that she had to pee so bad her right leg was twitching. She wanted to tell the asshole who’d pulled the drapes back to turn out the sun when the awareness of her surroundings gelatinized. Still on a backwater space station, still with my prisoner. . .

They’d passed out with the lights on. Halos and auras clouded her vision as she did the cross-legged hop to the bathroom.

“Don’t know about you, but I had a pretty good time.” She said to her reflection. Most intense sex ever. . .

Hands washed and toweled, she returned to the bedroom and stood over the sleeping Vulcan. She’d been told time and again that they didn’t dream, but she was certain they did and chose to keep their mouths shut about it. Veddah, asleep, eyes moving beneath closed lids, yes, they dreamed.

She climbed back in bed after turning out the lights. The clocks all said it was nearing four in the morning. Even in the dark, the aurora illumination continued. Her hands out in front of her seemed a fuzzy muted blue, and he came across in lavender and moss agate. That was the headache, she decided. Blankets drawn up around her shoulders, she moved in closer to the living blast furnace next to her.

“Why do you have to be Vulcan?”

Nothing in the darkened room responded. Veddah had a fox-crazy streak. She’d turned him into dust, and yet he plotted and planned to take her down, his mind churning through the possibilities. He took her abuse, her battery, her harassment, and instead of distilling that into directionless fear or hate to be hurled out at anyone, he tucked that information away to use against her later in whatever bloodless stratagem he sprang on her.

Most of her prisoners were like Franklin and Horse-laugh, all swagger with no lasting follow-through.

Veddah, if she weren’t careful, would get her good. She had to respect him for that tenacity.

“If you were human, I do believe we’d have a lot of fun together.” He was also meek and sweet and would have been a wonderful husband for the girl he left at home. She’d ruined him for that. “Instead, we have this.”

She ignored the mingling effluvium of semen, sweat, and chocolate, going back to sleep.

“You can’t make him choose between his past and you.” Tralnor didn’t know what might get through to Kirk. “You have to be the one to compromise this time.”
“This time? What do you mean, this time?” Quizzical, Kirk thought Tralnor was talking out his ass.

“Spock bares his soul to you, lets you see him at his most raw, acknowledges to you that he has emotions and what they come to bear. That is a concession that he grants to you, so when he says he is in love with you, that’s not a frivolous claim.”

The smirk, the captain was trying to read Tralnor and not doing too well. Self-assured, Kirk said, “What do I have to compromise about?”

“Mollie.”

What might have become a grin turned to gritted teeth and a sneer. “Mollie?”

“He will not, cannot, cut her out of his life.”

“If he loved me the way he says—” Tralnor’s harsh gaze dried Kirk’s words up before he finished the sentence.

“It’s not up for debate, James. When Laura Hillyard called Mollie his Reason for Existing, she meant it in a literal sense. Spock and Mollie’s coming into being is so deeply intertwined, they are closer than friends.”

“By closer, you mean lovers?” The leaps Kirk made were simply maddening. The way he said “lovers” revealed the septic jealousy he had toward Mollie or anyone else he saw as a threat to Spock.

“No. This isn’t about sex.” He didn’t go into much detail, but the captain got the gist of what went on in the lab where Spock and Mollie were created. “In that way, they are together, forever, joined by something no two other people can completely comprehend.”

Disparaging remark on the tip of his tongue, Kirk choked that back and said, “If they’re that enmeshed, why aren’t they already married? Why wait until now and torture me with the whole spectacle?”

“Some people are better as friends.” Tralnor wanted that statement to sink into the human’s brain. “In their case, it’s with the understanding that while they will always be there for one another, no matter the situation, they don’t want to marry each other. They never have.”

“But they could, in case of—?” The captain couldn’t bring up the Fever.

“As a desperate act of last resort.” Tralnor could see very little of this was getting through. Kirk had decided, the second he heard her name those weeks ago in sick bay, that Mollie was his nemesis. And as the competition, he didn’t want to allow her any ingress to the man he aggressively loved and lusted after.

Kirk’s all-or-nothing mentality vexed Tralnor. “There is a Vulcan word, kadiith. Have you heard of it?”

“I have.”

“Spock and Mollie are kadiith. Their relationship is what it is. You can’t change that. I’m not saying that you ever have to like her and you certainly don’t have to love her but don’t use her as an excuse to punish Spock for your own misgivings.”
Naked, warm, and sharing a bed with Laura Hillyard, Veddah awoke relieved to discover he was still alive. His nerves still rattled with the electric pulses that made the physical aspects of what they’d done an activity worth revisiting. There was understanding now for his crewmates who blathered on about the wonders of sex.

She didn’t look as hard in her sleep. Her features softened, making her seem almost peaceful. He knew she was a landmine, easily triggered. He reached over and grazed his fingertips across her cheek.

Landmine activated.

Her eyes sprang open, and she grabbed him around the wrist at a speed he didn’t know humans were capable of. She glowered at him. “What did you do to me?”

“I don’t want to share. I shouldn’t have to share, not with someone I didn’t know existed until a month ago! Why does he do this to me? T’Pring, Mollie, who else is out there? At least he didn’t fuck T’Pring. Oh, shit. I think you can hear me.”

Tralnor didn’t acknowledge the thoughts Kirk launched like a volley of cannon fire. He believed the captain’s alpha disposition was of great worry. There was no doubt that Kirk loved Spock with everything that he was. Protectiveness toward one’s mate was not a bad thing unless it twisted into a combination of isolationism and malice.

“Mollie is on your side, James.”

“Veddah?” She yanked on his arm, leveling his face to hers.

“You gave me the idea.” He said.

“Idea?” “I shouldn’t be able to see you in the dark! “Is this some kind of sick joke?”

“Dead man’s switch.” His hand began to go numb as her strangling grip cut off circulation. “You left me no choice.”

“What exactly did you do?”

“You cannot set off this device in my head without killing yourself.” He stared into her. “Last night, during intercourse, I initiated tel-tor.”

So shocked by his revelation, she let go of his hand so she could lean over the side of the bed and vomit into the wastebasket.

“What does that mean, she’s on my side?” Another of Kirk’s survival instincts engaged: suspicion.
He could never trust that Mollie was not on the sidelines secretly gunning for his man.

“Mollie has always wanted Spock to seek his one true romantic love. He’s found that in you, James, and you love him back. She is your greatest supporter, so long as you treat him in the exemplary manner he deserves.” At this juncture, Tralnor was hesitant to stand in Kirk’s court. Until the captain could get a firm grip on certain aspects of his behavior and the coordinating emotions, Tralnor didn’t know if he could entrust Kirk to not continue down this road of emotional hijacking and jealousy. Spock would not survive that hostile environment for long.

“She—why?”

“She thinks Spock has earned some happiness in this life.”

Sitting, table lamp on, she twisted around and caught him by the throat. He croaked in surprise, and she felt his shock that she might still kill him, committing suicide at the same time, just for spite.

“You weren’t bonded?”

“I was, as a child, she was killed in an accident when we were fifteen.” His words hissed out of him as she continued to constrict his neck. “T’Danna and I decided to wait until our wedding because of my obligations to Starfleet.”

When he said his fiancee’s name, a bloom of his sadness and regret at the loss of what might have been washed through to her mind. She let go, and he coughed, rubbing at the indentations her fingers left behind.

“And being a virgin, you hadn’t been through the pon farr either, so it makes some sense that you weren’t bonded. Oh, now you’re embarrassed? I lived amongst you for years. I know about the Fever.” She got into a more comfortable position. “How do we break this bond? Can you do it?”

His emotions over-boiled and collided into her, taking her breath and shaking her brain. The light show rippled and shimmered. She screwed her eyes shut and pressed her fingers into her temples, but she couldn’t block him out.

“Let’s find a Healer.” She said. “We break the bond, and I promise I will not kill you. Then, I will let you go once we’ve found T’Pau’s scary antiquity.”

(I know I can trust that you will honor that promise.) He lay the words in her mind.

“. . .touching and never touched. . . That line in the vows finally makes sense to me.” She let go of her head and looked toward him again. “What’s the catch, Veddah?”

“We will need to find someone much more specialized than a Healer.” The swelling in the internal structures of his neck made it hard to speak. (I had to save myself. This was the only recourse I had.)

He leaned away as her signature icy grin spread across her face. “Well-played, Veddah. Well-played.”

The better part of an hour passed, Laura contemplating and synthesizing Veddah’s surprise when
she said, “I had nothing to hide. I’m not ignorant either. I know exactly what goes on during sex with a touch telepath, that your minds reach out in a way that very few of you can control. The only reason so many people hate and fear psions is that they don’t want their secrets to come out. I am a rapist, a murderer, a thief, and I don’t pretend to be anyone or anything that I’m not.”

Quiet, pensive, Veddah worked on shoring up the cracks and fissures in his mental stability.

“And it’s not like I haven’t tucked other prisoners when the mood’s struck me.” Something felt like her ears popped. It was his subconscious kicking up a traumatic reaction to their first sexual encounter. “But, I’ve never violated anyone the way I did to you.”

(Nor have I, until last night.)

She laughed at him, her amusement and his confusion snarled in a ball. “You are taking what you did to me to a level far too severe, Veddah.”

(I too have committed a reprehensible criminal act.)

“You may have pulled one over on me, you crafty bastard, but if you think you’ve perpetrated kae'at k’lasa, you’re wrong.”

(You would absolve me of my misconduct?)

“I let you enter into my body and my mind. I consented, Veddah. You were neither coercive nor violent. You weren’t out for vengeance. I was fully aware of the repercussions of what could happen without dosing you with a psi-inhibitor. I chose to get sexually intimate with you anyway. You could go through the Verification, but there is nothing they would find that they could charge you with. You can’t be punished for acting in self-defense.” He didn’t want to believe her. “Am I pissed that you’ve fused our minds together? Yeah, I’m angry, mostly at myself for not taking proper precautions because I was horny and thinking with my crotch. Did you mentally rape me? No, you absolutely did not.”

(I still defend that I am in the wrong.) He insisted. Veddah was too honorable to see what he’d done as anything but the worst crime a Vulcan could commit against another person.

Laura, anticipating her next move, was ready to exploit this situation to her benefit. This was a unique opportunity to learn more about her sworn enemies from behind their own eyes. What better way to solve the mysteries of what made these people tick? “Look at it this way, Veddah. When we go back out to the markets today, we don’t have to pretend like we’re married.”

“Because we are married.” He uttered.
“Downtown Los Angeles reads you loud and clear.” Joe Bergman sat next to Mollie in a generic conference room of some hotel.

“ShiKahr is live.” Buster said, sharing the sofa with three other people and a couple of interesting props.

“Rec Room 2 aboard the USS Enterprise sees all and hears all.” Tralnor said. “Welcome to session two of the behind the scenes commentary for Celluloid Vokaya.”

The group at Consolidated Terran School waved, much to the amusement of Enterprise’s audience. Then Joe said, as he dissolved into a fit of laughter, “Oh fuck, they brought Lynda.”

“Lynda says hi.” Buster said.

“Hi, Lynda!” The entire panel, save Spock, shouted back. At least the blond bimbo blow-up doll was dressed. . . in a raincoat.

“Tell Lynda if she flashes us, I’ll leave her on the cutting room floor.” Tralnor told the goofballs on the couch.

“You better behave yourself, Lynda.” One of the new faces on the panel said.

“Let’s go around and introduces ourselves again, this time using our Names.” Tralnor indicated that he’d start. “Greetings everyone, I’m your talented host and cat herder, Mr. Peanut Butter, and I’m here with the man, the myth, the legend, Mr. Lucky Drawers.”

Enterprise’s audience, not in on the joke yet, watched as certain members of the movie crew howled and fell all over one another. Sohja started the rest of it. “I am Tinkerbell.”

“My mama called me Shauna, but my Name is Nola.” The dreadlocked woman seated next to Sohja said. Her smile was permanently carved into her face. “I played trumpet with Tralnor, Buster, and this guy right here.”

The man to Nola’s right looked to be reading a book. She whacked him in the side. “Arnold!”

His head popped up. Slanted eyebrows were barely visible beneath his overgrown fringe. He closed his book, tucked his shaggy hair behind his pointed ears, took a second to get his bearings, and said, “What?”

“Everyone, this is Arnold.” Nola said. She followed in a sarcastic tone with, “We don’t trust Arnold because you can’t trust anyone who thinks clowns are funny.”

“Clowns, Arnold!” Buster, Nola, and Joe yelled.

“It is not necessarily that clowns are ‘funny’ as you term it, but the sacred fool holds a specific placement within the societies—” Arnold started on a dry, academic lecture on his chosen area of expertise.

“Shut up!” Nola swatted him again.

Fingers stuck in ears, Buster said, “La-la-la-la-la.”
Joe looked at Tralnor, like he could do something. “Oh sweet merciful Satan, make it stop!”

“—humor need not feed into the function of—” Arnold droned on.

A certain Leonard McCoy thought this exchange was funnier than hell. “So, I’m not the only one who has this particular problem.”

“For fuck’s sake, Arnold.” Nola rolled her head back. “Give it a rest.”

“Nam’uh ralash-fam, Voset.” Sohja, calling Arnold by his given name, told him to shut his yap. “Il dungau-tukh-tor ash’ai svi’tu ru’lut.”

That’s when Mollie lost it, folding over in hysterics. Tralnor had to shade his eyes, so she didn’t set him off, when Sha’leyen’s laugh was that last little shove he needed. He sprouted a smile. “Thanks, Sohja. Would you care to give our fair audience a translation?”

“I told him to shut up before I crammed a sock in his mouth. It is most unfortunate that our language has not picked up specific earth words.” She turned to Arnold. “Or, I would have told him to choke on a squirrel.”

Tralnor had to put the connection on hold for ten minutes while all sides regrouped.

(Arnold is still Arnold.) Spock said.

(Head in the clouds, nose in a book. If he didn’t have the ivory tower to save him, he’d be hopeless. As Buster said, he’s a smart guy, but what a dingbat.)

(It is difficult to fathom that he is Vulcan.)

(I’ve always thought he studied sacred fools because he knows he is one.) Tralnor took another long draw from his coffee.

(I believe you may be right.) Spock’s energy still sang with the hilarity of what they’d just seen.

“Now that we’ve returned from our short recess, we’re going to move right along to our old friend, Buster.” Tralnor dove back into the process.

“My Name is Buster.”

“Hymen.” Nola said. “Gotta say the whole thing, Frances.”

Buster shot Nola the finger and started over. “My birth certificate says I’m called Frances. My Band Name is Buster, which I amended my senior year when we’re allowed to, but yes, I started out as Buster Hymen.”

“Because that’s all he talked about was how bad he wanted to get laid for like the first semester of school.” Nola patted him on the back. “You earned it.”

“I guess I did. You’re Nola because you’re born and raised in New Orleans.” Buster said.

“I am Arnold Palmer. I received the moniker because the first time I consumed that drink, it was too much sugar for my system, and I threw up.”
Sohja looked into the camera. “I am named for the character, Tinkerbell, from the motion picture, Peter Pan. Tinkerbell is a cold-hearted bitch, as am I.”

“Joe Bergman, and my Band Name? Penny. I showed up to my very first day at band camp in a pair of penny loafers. By the end of the day, my feet were like stew meat.”

Mollie said, “Someone actually did their research when they came up with mine. It’s not funny or embarrassing like some of these others. My Name is Nomie. They spelled it wrong, but it’s the concept of the “all” from the IDIC. I think they just didn’t know what to call me.”

“I’m Mr. Peanut Butter because peanut butter and jam sandwiches were all anyone saw me eat for that first week of freshman year.”

“It’s all anyone sees you eat now.” Billy the Sixth called out from the back row. The lads guffawed in unison.

Tralnor stood and faced the audience. “As you can see, this ensemble is a subculture unto itself. New members face trials and ceremony on the road to full-standing within the group. I can’t say that it’s just a human thing, because this is a convergence witnessed time and again, as you yourselves are familiar with in your explorations of space.

“This transition from outsider to member is what allows a group composed of individuals from disparate backgrounds to become a united front, just as we’ve experienced in evolving from civilians into Starfleet personnel.

“We want to share some of this with you, so as a participating audience, sans the ability to watch the film as a contiguous whole, we don’t lose you because you feel left out.”

The audience, almost unchanged from the last session, was bright-eyed and ready to launch themselves into a world of make-believe. They desperately needed to forget about life for a couple of hours.

“Joe, what is tonight’s clip?”

“Okay, so it’s not entirely cleaned up visually, but I’ve gotten the music synced back up perfectly. I thought since you wanted to discuss Names that I’d get a sequence together that shows how one of us got our Name.” Joe opened a file on a desktop screen. “This is toward the very beginning of the film where we show the young lives of the Queen and King, done in chronological order, over the course of about twenty minutes. It’s viewable without any references to the rest of the movie and could actually be a short film unto itself.”

“For this section, much of what we’re watching are genuine memories, not recreated scenes for the film’s sake. The producers thank our participants for volunteering to share their real lives with us.” Tralnor lowered the lights as a grand orchestral score overtook the room.

Jim Kirk, determined to watch without acting like a complete jerk, settled back in the dark and braced himself for what he’d see. That meant taking his eyes off Spock’s back, where the Vulcans sat in front. I will behave, he told himself. I have to prove I can behave, or that amazing man just won’t have me.

Two children, nursery school age, barefoot, stand on the damp sand of the seashore, Santa Monica,
California. The lip of a wave swirls over their toes. Mollie runs from the water, screaming bloody murder. Spock stays behind to investigate. A change of angle shows two women, one of whom is obviously Amanda Grayson, trying to calm Mollie. A cut to Spock holding out his hand, Mollie goes to him, and they let the ocean splash against their legs.

A lavish ceremony at a grand Scottish castle. The same children watch from the edges of a ballroom as T’Lal and Justin MacCormack dance like something out of Cinderella.

Split screen, slightly older, they’re off to school, harassed and picked on, one for being too human, the other not being enough. Mollie makes a show of psionically creating an illusion of light and snow, sending her fellow Vulcan students ducking under furniture and attempting to flee in fear. Spock, badgered to breaking point, hits back at the unruly student who clobbered him first. Exasperated, Amanda picks them up from their respective headmasters’ offices. In the back seat of the air car, the children share the slightest knowing grin.

Age seven, sent off into the unforgiving desert to live or die. For Spock, a lesson in relieving the suffering of a beloved pet. Mollie, long hair cut down to the scalp with a wicked-looking knife, enters the bush. He comes home, he’s made his choice: he is Vulcan. She comes home, there is no choice, she receives the First Marks of the Lyr Saan slave tattoo. He contemplates the meaning of a Good Death. Biting on a rag to stifle the pain, held down by two adults, the hand of an elder firmly planted on her face, the psychoactive properties in the ink prime her brain to accept Dvatai and Vesht-var of the Clan, snippets of the Lyr Saan Tenets and History flashed on the screen: peace/war, freedom/enslavement, education/ignorance.

She goes to earth, attends the Greater Los Angeles Vulcan School, but spends Fridays at Sunshine Elementary, then Murdock Middle School. He continues his studies, learns to ignore his bullies. They get to talk over subspace one night a week. They are bitterly lonely but surviving.

Turlock High School, she’s decided to go north, splits her time two days amongst humans, three with her Vulcan age-mates at the embassy sponsored school in San Francisco. She excels in her studies. He’s moved fast too, left his naysayers far behind.

The images are almost still, edges blurry, panic, smoke, and blood. Three men have intruded on a county-wide honors student assembly hosted by Pittman High. Over two-hundred hostages. Terror, Bad Death, armed police crashing through windows, doors implode. Cordite and lead. Mollie, spattered in the blood of the dead classmate she tried to help.

They are together again. Time devoted to their combined research and discoveries. ShiKahr doesn’t embrace them, but they make do with what they have.

A poster advertising the prom. She wants to go, but none of the students at Consolidated want to be her date. The night of, she sits in her room, the door opens. Three women enter: T’Lal, Livia, and Lady Amanda. One of them carries a garment bag. Floor-length and sleeveless, the light icy blue makes her look like a real-life version of the princess she portrays in the film. Her tattoo, visible for all, has been added to over the years, ancient calligraphy like spokes on a hub. The doorbell rings. Mollie opens it to find Spock, borrowed tuxedo, and a rose corsage from Amanda’s garden to match the one on his lapel.

Pictures, a limo to the dance, the looks when they walked through the door. Laura Hillyard making faces and drawing her finger across her throat. After the event, on a stone overlook that granted a breathtaking view of the city, they lay on a blanket, shoes off, his bowtie and first button undone, and stare up at the stars.

The music changes. Still instrumental, it's more intense, more in-tune with one’s base emotions.
The next scene starts as a reflection in a mirror, Spock and Mollie digging through closets and drawers as fast as they can move, filling a soft-sided piece of luggage. The sense of urgency is what got to Kirk. A letter on Starfleet Academy stationery shoved in last, bag zipped. Bedroom window opened, Spock jumps to the ground, Mollie hurling the bag after. Door opened by a powerful hand, she’s facing Sarek. Her lips move in this memory, and she says something Spock’s father does not want to hear before she sits on the sill and purposely falls backward. Sarek’s pained expression as he watches them climb the outer wall and flee.

A man in a crisp gold Starfleet dress uniform taps at his wrist. He’s standing at the gate to a commercial flight from Vulcan to earth. The ship should have disembarked ten minutes ago.

In the back of a private shuttle, Lady Amanda, eyes haunted, stares at the blank signature line on a piece of legal paperwork. The shuttle docks. As Livia and T’Lal exit the craft, she relents and elegantly signs her name.

Spock and Mollie run from one side of the commercial sector of Vulcan Space Central to the other. Gate C-15 is deserted except for three women and one man. The officer says something, calls Spock and Mollie over and asks a question they don’t seem to know the answer to. T’Lal stands, accepts the officer’s data padd and stylus, and signs on the line that says Spock, a minor at age seventeen, has received her approval as his legal guardian so he may enter into Starfleet.

T’Lal sheds her cloak, revealing a uniform that says she’s attached to Starfleet Command’s Aerospace Research Division. Gold tunic, sleeves give her rank as Lt. Commander, and the insignia on her chest tells Kirk she’s both a Special Reservist and a test pilot. She takes over for the impatient officer and swears Spock in.

Tears stream down Amanda’s face. She doesn’t know if she’s done the right thing. Mollie offers Spock the ta’al right before he turns to leave. He returns with USC’s V for Victory. Spock, T’Lal, and the officer disappear down the boarding ramp. Mollie, Livia, and Amanda stand at the giant windows so they might get in a final wave. From inside the passenger ship, Spock and T’Lal wave back.

New music, this piece offers more hope and less force than the previous. Mollie, in her room, opens a box and lifts out the top of the black uniform worn by students at the Vulcan Science Academy. She examines the details, touches the metal script embellishments and lays it back in the box. In the immediate next scene, she’s submitting her withdrawal request to the VSA Dean of Admissions, who is stunned by her actions. She’s seen boarding a passenger liner via Space Central Gate C-15.


The first weekend Cadets are allowed off-campus, he takes off for LA. She’s handed the keys to her lab space and rushes into the facility. Bouncing from station to station, she’s ecstatic. Door left open in her drive to get in, she turns to find a familiar face at the threshold. Joy. He’s brought a list of the things he’s been allotted for his research at the Academy. They compare facilities, both pleased, lip-reading, Kirk thinks Spock says to her, “We have made it.”

Football games, academia, settling in socially, being smarter than the instructors, growing tolerance from and of others. Busses from Los Angeles to the Bay Area. Marching band gigs around San Francisco, finding that elegant face watching her from the periphery.
She wakes up with a start in the bottom bunk of an Academy dorm room. Tossing things around, she can’t find all of her clothes. Bra, shirt, and socks wadded in her arms, she’s stolen one of Spock’s black meditation robes, and runs from the building, headlong into some random Cadet. Spock, who happened to be there, gets her up, gathers her things, and listens as she explains something. Her cab rolls up to get her back to the band’s hotel because she’s already late. She’s last seen mouthing the words *lucky drawers*.

Five days later, marching band rehearsal is interrupted by a package courier. Mollie, heckled as she signs, is goaded into opening the padded envelope in front of two-hundred-thirty staff and students. Face scarlet, smile triumphant, she whips out her lucky game-day underpants for all to see. Putting them on over her clothes, she’s forced to take a lap around the track surrounding the practice field.

Kirk tried to find the humor in what he’d just seen, like the people around him yukking it up, but he was hit by sadness, maybe embarrassment of his own, that now the entire crew knew that Spock was fucking Mollie. *Enough of that, Mister, he thought. If you stand any chance at all, it can’t matter that she went there first.*
Chapter 41

Spock recalled the teasing he’d endured from classmates over the half-naked girl rocketing out of his room and how she’d pleaded, in public, for him to find her lost underpants. At least after that, he’d no longer had to listen to people try to bait and hector him for supposedly being a virgin.

He’d found her silky cardinal-colored panties wedged between the bed and the wall. Some people thought she’d humiliated him out there on the quad, but that was not true. She’d become his lily of the valley perfume. Seldom seen, she was the “SC girlfriend.” Letting those around him believe that he was in a relationship kept all but the most ardent from pursuing him. Then, because they were still geographically close enough, he could bring her to a function here and there to chase off the Christine Chapels of the world.

The film continued, another split screen shows them moving on in their undergraduate studies as teaching assistants, taking graduate seminars, earning awards, pressing forward in their scholarship, always coming back to one another.

Anyone who did not know this was where things transitioned from real to make-believe would think they were viewing a contiguous story. He receives a visit from her parents, Tralnor’s mother and father playing the part. He’s advised to propose before he graduates to active duty. He follows the Queen and King’s guidance and drops to one knee in Golden Gate Park.

Solo piano and a complete change of scenery. The story returns to Glenapp Castle. A formal wedding. He stands at the front of the room, two friends, Jock Balloch and Arnold Palmer at his side.

The first real words in the entire sequence, recorded lyrics, Mollie’s voice:

For you, there'll be no more crying
For you, the sun will be shining

She appears, a stunning vision in white. Guests stand as the bride is walked up the aisle by her father. Sequins and pearls, red stain on her lips, dark hair holding her tiara and veils.

And I feel that when I'm with you
It's alright, I know it's right

He looks at her, and where the audience there in Rec Room 2 could not see any emotion on his face, he recalled how he’d half-wished it was real, that she’d save him from T’Pring. He’d touched at his bond and felt less than nothing.

To you, I'll give the world
To you, I'll never be cold

The Queen, the King, Spock and his men, several of those who made up the guests at the wedding wore a fictional version of a military dress uniform. And as she came near, even the bride in her white dress wore a sash that bore stylized, whited-out versions of medals.

’Cause I feel that when I'm with you
It's alright, I know it's right

He and Mollie stood, face-to-face, her parents behind her. He lifted the veil and knew at that moment, he’d never have such a thing in real life. The ‘vicar’ was Livia, done up in prosthetic makeup, so she looked Vulcan. Wearing T’Lal’s formal robes, slight alterations to the embellishments, she called for the ceremony to begin.

And the songbirds are singing
Like they know the score
Dressed as humans, the vows and actions by the wedding party were those of a Vulcan nuptial. They recited the traditional words, in Old Lyr Saan, even though the dialogue was never recorded. Eyes locked, hands on one another’s faces, they pretended to create the tel-tor. Fingers dropped and touched, the kiss real.

*And I love you, I love you, I love you Like never before*

They walk down the aisle hand-in-hand, waving to their guests. A very human reception line without the shaking of hands. Castle employees and locals had not gotten the memo that the wedding was staged. There were a lot of genuine well-wishes for their new life together. Bride and groom climb into an elegant Mark II Jaguar cabriolet. As the driver takes them away, the final lyrics.

*And I wish you all the love in the world But most of all, I wish it from myself*

House lights up, the large screen returned to the feed of the panelists. The only noise came from an upset Nurse Chapel, who was attempting to flee the room. No one tried to stop her.

“Damn.” Buster was the first to speak. “It’s been twenty years since I’ve seen this and I’d forgotten how beautiful that was. And like Tralnor said, thank you so much for letting all of us into your lives like that. It’s an honor.”

“Beautiful?” Chapel hadn’t made it out the door yet. She was still squeezing in and around people when she stopped. “I knew you were a cruel race, but I never thought you’d stoop so low as to systematically abuse your children. You’re horrible!”

“Whoa, Lady.” Joe jumped in. “I’ve easily seen this two-hundred times in the last few weeks. There’s nothing there that constitutes abuse.”

“What do you call sending second-graders out into the desert on their own? Forcing a little girl into getting a disfiguring tattoo? That is abuse.” She’d become indignant.

“It is a rite of passage called the kahs'wan.” Sha’leyen stood and addressed the room. “It may be arduous, as my experience with it was, but it’s hardly cruel. We are not simply turned out into the wilderness to become food for the beasts. In the year leading up to the ordeal, we are taught self-sufficiency, survival skills, and about the terrain we’re entering. It is one of the essential building blocks for the foundation of our adult lives.”

Something unsaid went between the Lt. Commander and Nurse Chapel. “That doesn’t make it right.”

“Not your call.” Sha’leyen said. “And Mollie’s tattoo, like mine, like Tralnor’s, is part of being Clan Lyr Saan. We all wear the ulidar t'kafeh as a potent reminder of where we come from. The Lyr Saan were a slave race. We appropriated that mark of ownership and turned it into a symbol of freedom. It is the opposite of cruelty.”

“The way you act, I can’t help but wonder if Vulcans love their children at all?”

Joe waded further into the fray and pointed. “That man right there is one of the most exceptional people I know, and let me tell you something: Tralnor loves his girls, to suggest otherwise betrays your ignorance. The panel, we witnessed that love firsthand. We were right there for his older
daughter’s milestones from age four to eight. And love, you want to talk about love? Tralnor’s parents stepped in as the primary caretakers for their granddaughter so he could focus on getting an education, so he would be able to support her in the future.

“We were there for her kahs’wan, and we even hosted her bonding ceremony in the backyard at the house we all lived in near campus. Never once did we see anything approaching cruelty or abuse. Not to the very young like Tralnor’s daughter and not to older kids like we were as college students.”

Chapel didn’t stand down and didn’t address Joe. She placed her focus on Sha’leyen, Tralnor, and Spock. “You don’t let your children laugh. . . You truncate their emotions and savagely curtail their psychological development.”

“You want to know savage?” Sha’leyen pre-empted anyone else from talking. “Come to my homeworld. Spend a week on Belon. There, you will see what it is to be savage. Not all of Belon followed in the Reform. My world is a place of bloody conflict and constant strife fed by untamed, guttural emotion.

“As such, it means there are swathes of Belonites who think they are justified in their abhorrent behavior. I was a victim of that mentality. I was stolen from Tralnor when we were fourteen, taken as a war prize. Tralnor was ruthlessly carved out of my head so a forty-seven-year-old warlord could force marriage on a child. The scars on my face come from his intaglio ring digging into my flesh. He raped me, every chance he got, and passed me around to his friends for fun.

“Aged sixteen, I was six months pregnant when he decided he didn’t want to be a father again. He kicked my unborn child to death, then left me to hemorrhage and deliver my deceased daughter alone. The next day, assuming I was dead too, he dumped the corpse of my nine-month-old son on the ground beside me. And that is just some of what he did to me. While it sounds like a domestic violence situation gone beyond the pale, my former husband’s way of being, like so many Belonites’ was almost entirely dictated by near-feral emotional imperatives. Take that one person, multiply him by the thousands, set them up with a band of just as twisted subordinates, those groups hellbent to destroy all others as gruesomely as possible, for each of these uncontrolled, undisciplined people, kidnapping, marrying, raping, impregnating, and attempting to murder a child bride is such a common occurrence as to be mundane.

“Belon is a backwater with a small population, barely surviving. Now, imagine the terror and violence I’ve just described on a grand scale, reaching beyond the red sands of T’Khasi, out into the stars, and you’ve got pre-Reform Vulcan.

“Conflict begets conflict. Blood only brings more blood. To stop the cycle repeating, you have to start when people are young. If our methods seem harsh, try to comprehend that it is not without reason.”

“That is not a state we want to revert to.” Sohja fixed her icy gaze on the nurse. “And, you should not want us to devolve in such a way, if only for your own sake.”

Chapel, at that point, didn’t care who she stepped on or bumped into. She finished making her escape.

“Remind me to never visit this Belon place.” Joe attempted to defuse the mood. “Vulcans, I think you’re beautiful just the way you are now.

“Doing the historical research for this project, I came across things that give me bad dreams, to this very day. Sohja, Tralnor, and I, as the producers, decided in terms of story elements, to insert
World War II Europe as the stand-in for pre-Reform Vulcan. I’m not saying this to be a morbid wiseass, but World War II was more... dignified, and for lack of better description, humane. And that’s coming from someone descended from Nazi Holocaust survivors.”

“Do we have any questions or comments about tonight’s viewing?” Tralnor queried the room, but the spirit seemed to have left when Nurse Chapel trotted out her opinions. “Panel?”

Equally discouraged, they didn’t have much oomph left either.

Ready to call the evening a wash, Tralnor decided to try and reschedule this session for a later date. The sequence shown wasn’t the complete run of the characters’ early lives. He thanked the audience and the panel for their time and wished them a good night.

The slightly depressed atmosphere of the junior officers’ quarters made it an uncomfortable space. Rohit was the one who finally spoke. “Dr. Tralnor, can we see your tattoo?”

He’d not gone out of the way to show it off or let anyone know he had it. There wasn’t much harm in letting these guys take a look. He stripped off his thermal undershirt that he was rarely without and turned, so his back right shoulder was visible in the light.

It was big, the center about the size of a dinner plate over his scapula. Some elements lapped over the front of the shoulder and down his bicep, others down his back to the bottom of his ribcage.

“How does this work? Is it a narrative that you read in clockwise order?” Billy the Sixth was entranced by the delicate calligraphy.

“No, you start with the Ordinals, the compass rose that makes up the First Marks.” Tralnor’s mind went back to his kahs’wan. His time in the desert was less grueling than having the initial lines of ink deposited into his skin.

Seltun moved to see better. The human collective tensed up with concern that the Krampus might go crazy again. The lads’ objections turned verbal when the younger Vulcan benevolently traced the words most recently inked on Tralnor’s back. Tralnor held up a hand to keep them from grabbing Seltun and throwing him out of their collective space.

“Ashau ri tevik.” Seltun read the line and lifted his finger from Tralnor’s body. “T’Kehr, ri ken-tor. Ra-tvia?” I don’t understand, Teacher. What does it mean?

“Love never dies.” Tralnor turned around to face the room.

“Is it for your wife?” Goodhearted, Billy liked the idea of a permanent ode to romantic love.

“It could be construed that way.” Tralnor’s body heat dissipated. He pulled the thermal undershirt back over his head. “Ashau ri tevik is a reminder that the Laura Hillyards of the universe cannot win. We won’t let them win.”

“Good Golly, Miss Mollie, what the fuck was that all about?” Joe closed up the hotel’s “Executive A/V Suite” and handed her the key. “I thought these Starfleet types were supposed to be open-minded and shit like that. I’m a professional asshole, and that gal managed to out-asshole me.”
Joe, not adept at the art of the Vulcan silence, filled the dead air when Mollie didn’t comment right away. “Did you see the way she was staring you down as we were watching? She wanted to skin you alive, but only after gouging your eyes out first.”

“She has a massive crush on Spock. About a year-and-a-half ago, VSA Research Vessel Tekkah and the USS Enterprise were docked at Starbase 12. He and I had planned our get-together for months, knowing our ships would overlap there. We don’t get to see one another in person very often anymore and wanted to take advantage. Tekkah came in a day before Enterprise, so I went to meet Spock as he disembarked.

“Nurse Whoever had me on her radar the second Spock and I greeted one another. She followed us just about everywhere we went, giving me the stink-eye the entire time. She just about died when we went to my hotel. I asked him about her, and he told me she wasn’t worth worrying about, wouldn’t even give me her name.”

“She’s obviously never been around Vulcans in any profound way and doesn’t understand you as individuals or as a people. And I get the idea that she doesn’t want to either. That would stand in the way of the pre-fabricated fantasy she’s got in her head. Maybe she thinks she’s going to save Spock from the Big Bad Logic and show him what it is to Feel.” Joe held the door for Mollie as they entered the restaurant on the third floor. “As if.”

“And if she’s freaked out about me, what she going to do when Spock and Captain Kirk come out as a couple?”

“If it’s not too personal, Dr. Tralnor…” Chris, typically the most forward of the cabinmates, was uncharacteristically reticent. “Doing the math and following what the aloha shirt guy said, um, you were—”

“Let’s say I learned a hard lesson about leaving one’s drink unattended at a party.” Tralnor said. Five sets of eyes regarded him, brains grinding on what that and the age range between him and his daughter meant.

Once Seltun figured it out, he had to sit down. “K’la’sa?”

He nodded at Seltun. “I was a very young high school freshman and attended a gathering out on the irrigation canals after a Friday night football game. Bonfire, music, it was the usual teenage party. Some of the kids from the other high school in town showed up too. One was a girl who had an unhealthy interest in me.”

“Like Nurse Chapel and Commander Spock?” Andy asked as he too sat on one of the bunks.

“Similar, yes. I set my drink down so I could take a leak. I came back and grabbed my cup. It turns out methaqualone, which is terrifyingly effective on Vulcans, can’t be smelled or tasted when well mixed in a rum and coke. I don’t remember what happened after that. Blasted out of my brain on that drug, she must have convinced me to take a walk, and we wandered off into the almond orchard. A farmer found me the next day, propped up against a tree. I was comatose, naked from the waist down, my limbs bound with monofilament.

“The girl fled the planet before the police could catch up with her. It was almost a year later, I was with Sha’leyen at Shelby Orbital when we were awoken by a meowing noise at our door. We found my daughter, less than an hour old, wadded up in a pile of bloody linens, her placenta still
attached.

“Law enforcement caught up to that girl when she was taken to hospital for complications from giving birth. She went to prison for rape and attempted first-degree murder and will never see the light of day again.”

The lads said nothing, just let the story sink in.

“I was twelve when she was conceived, thirteen when she was born, and while she was created in an act of unforgivable violence and violation, I love her...”

Tralnor opened a drawer and pulled out his wallet. He removed a small photo and passed it around. The candid shot, thanks to Jock Balloch and his near-magical ability to capture private tender moments, showed father and daughter before the first football game of Tralnor’s USC career. Almost kneeling, uniform a bold statement in cardinal and gold, one hand holding his trumpet and the other around his little girl, they are smiling.

“Songbird,” lyrics by Christine McVie. From the Fleetwood Mac album Rumours
“Bones, you’d better have a word with Chapel.” Kirk and McCoy had stepped into the first available small lounge they happened upon in the exodus from Rec Room 2. “I’d hoped she was getting better about her hang-ups, but obviously not.”

“I’ll see what I can do. She’s a superior nurse, I’d hate to lose her because she can’t get her personal life sorted.” McCoy stretched out and crossed his feet.

“Are you talking about me or Chapel?”

McCoy thought about it. “Both of you, I suppose.”

“Yeah.” Kirk looked off into a place only he knew, then came back, and for the first time in weeks sounded like he might actually have started to get his shit together. “Barring the disruption at the end, that was probably one of the most rectifying and clarifying hours of my life.”

The doctor regarded his friend, one eyebrow raised, “I think you’d better explain.”

“It’s all about context, isn’t it, Bones? Especially for a dim human lummox like me.” The corners of his mouth lifted the tiniest bit. “Spock’s right, Tralnor’s right, you’re right. He and Mollie are deeply in love in their own peculiar way, but it’s not Love, not like I’ve got for him, not like he tried to declare to me.”

McCoy started clapping. “What finally made it sink into your thick head?”

“I had to actually see it, the way they interact with one another. There’s affection but no amour, devotion but no eroticism. He tried to explain it as safety and solace...” Kirk’s expression darkened. “...and then my dumb ass had to belittle his truth.”

The captain tossed and flopped around in his bed for an hour when he decided that sleep wasn’t happening and that he absolutely had to find Spock. Dressed, he nearly didn’t leave his quarters, that old crippling sensation cutting him off at the knees. What if I can’t say it? What if he tells me to fuck off? And if anyone needs to be told to fuck off right now, it’s me.

Come on, Jimmy. Let’s cowboy up and do this, dammit. He forced himself down the corridor, depressed the buzzer, and whispered under his breath, “Spock, I love you too.”

Jim, I know it is you. Spock was seated at the head of his bed, knees drawn. You are pain, you are a gullet of razor wire that I am incapable of swallowing. To that end, I must shut you away until I can recover from the agony you have given me.

Another ring ignored, then Jim’s knuckles rapped on the door. “I am sorry, Jim.”

By lunch, Laura felt like she’d been laid to waste by an anti-aircraft gun. All this time she’d thought the hidden world of Vulcan emotion was something akin to being an actor where your own low-intensity thoughts and feelings are still going on in the background while your outer self plays
the part. Instead, she learned even mild reactions were so far off the human scale, that Veddah’s slight apprehension at entering a gallery where he sensed something was off, made the pulp in her teeth hurt.

They took their seats at a dark booth in the corner of an uncrowded restaurant. She took one look at the menu screen that popped up on the edge of the table and turned away, the light from the device and the maddening auras that hadn’t gone away seared her retinas.

“How is an adult marriage bond supposed to work? Is this open lines all the time, can we block one another out, and what the hell is wrong with my eyes?”

He hit her with a wall of reproach. Here she was, a mass-murdering human supremacist, and he was worried about what he’d done to her? He was wearing a fucking scarf right now because she’d thought nothing of choking him out! His concern on her behalf was ridiculous. Her response, more laughter.

Face placid, that of a picture-perfect Vulcan, the roiling self-ridicule that seared from his mind into her left tears in her eyes. (We need to spend time engaged in a proper meld so I can... I need to get to know your mind better, and when I do, then I can give you the instruction you need to shield against me.)

“That sounds fair.” Pity the fool who gets to go trolling through my gutter of a brain. “But we’re going to have to make it an accelerated course. My crew won’t stand for a Vulcan digging around in my head right in front of them. Silvio, specifically, be very wary of that man. He can act like an insubordinate little prick at times, but if he thinks you’re the slightest threat to me, you’ll wish he’d just come right out and killed you instead of making you linger in his chamber of the damned.”

A server arrived to take their order. After asking about the specials, Laura realized they’d not chosen wisely in their rush to get in somewhere and sit down. After a run of questions where the server grew increasingly frustrated, she wound up having to order two cheeseburgers, hold the burger, and iced tea. She tried to explain that the restaurant’s fries weren’t vegetarian because they were cooked in tallow. She’d spoken to smarter bulkheads.

(I have no explanation for your change in vision. I will have to explore your brain’s visual cortex.)

“Fine. But we’ve only got tonight and tomorrow night to make some inroads. After that, it’s going to be a while before we’re able to be truly alone again.” She didn’t know what she felt at that moment, but he was scared.

He’d secured something of a future for himself, but at what cost? It’s only your soul, she thought. “Back on the ship, the only way we’ll be able to touch long enough to accomplish anything is to keep doing what got us here in the first place. At least no one will question my continued molestation of you.”

He shivered and looked down at the table, struggling to hold back the trauma. She felt the bindings cut into his wrists, the pressure of her weight against him, and terror of a nature she’d never known.

“Not like that, Veddah.” She leaned over and lifted his chin. “It won’t ever be like that again.”

Starbase 21’s court system asked for two days to give counsel time with the defendants to build
their cases. But just because she wasn’t yet delivering testimony didn’t mean Sha’leyen wasn’t busy. She was working with Enterprise’s legal team, Captain Kirk, and Starfleet Command to establish Starbase 21 as the jurisdiction for all of the incidents at Melbek III, not just the grave-robbing case.

Technically, the inadequate Starfleet post at Overton Holdings was the proper jurisdiction, but Overton was a small operation on a private conglomerate station. They’d not taken Lt. Jefferson because they’d simply not had room in their three-berth brig, and she was still locked up on the ship unless Enterprise swung back to Overton to drop her off when they could find room for her.

So, the rubber-stamp soiree began, and at the speed of bureaucracy, Enterprise and Dragon could be looking at as many as ten days idle time waiting on the paperwork to come through, those days in addition to however long the planned court-martial took.

Commander Blaedel, Lt. Dresden, and all four of their clerks generated the requests as quickly as possible. Kirk signed what he could between calls to Commodore Holt and Captain Castaic, Starbase 21’s executive officer. Sha’leyen proofed all the crime prose and data that had to be tailored to each department/branch/officer the requests were sent out to. She was also present because Blaedel and Dresden wanted to finish deposing her on the grave-robbing case.

“Have you updated your CV to reflect your most recent commendations, Lt. Commander?” Dresden asked. “We want to submit that along with your official Starfleet personnel record.”

Sha’leyen picked up that Dresden was apprehensive. “Is something the matter?”

“Um, no.”

“What’s going on?” Sha’leyen latched on to Dresden’s weak attempt to wave her off. “Put it to me now, so I’m not tripped up while I’m on the stand.”

“There will be questions about your ability and expertise in commanding security personnel.”

“Blue Shirt Bias.” Sha’leyen said. “We’re scientists, so we supposedly don’t know the workings of Operations, and apparently we’re not cut out for Command. That makes us even larger liabilities and/or more ineffectve when you set up landing parties where those from Ops or Command are on secondment to, rather than dispatched with, the group the ranking officer is leading.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way.” Dresden wasn’t expecting such a frank response.

“You should. Alluding to the issue instead of directly describing it convolutes it further.” She set down her stylus and folded her hands. “And my entire Metropolitan Police Service file is included in my Starfleet record, both my civilian work as a C-SOCS and my official police work as a Special Constable and beyond.”

“Sea Socks?” Dresden was lost.

“Civilian Scene of Crime Scientist.” Captain Kirk said. He’d caught the conversation between conference calls. “The defense can pick at her professional record all they want, but it won’t get them anywhere. As for her choice to take crew in addition to her team on secondment, she’s smart to do it that way, because it means that she’s definitively in-charge of everyone. Blue Shirt Bias is a very real issue, Lt. Dresden. If you’d like confirmation, Commander Spock can tell you more.”

“If that’s the best case they’ve got, they think I’m an overreactive idiot because I’m Science, they know they’re grasping at straws.” It also means the whole ordeal will be dragged out as long as possible so they can nit-pick at make-believe weaknesses in my duty jackets. Those three should
avoid the grief and plead guilty. I have a tavalik dâv-tor to find, which can’t be done if I’m tangled up in this waste of time.

Occupying the center seat, Spock was in the middle of the whispered conversations about last night’s abortive gathering in Rec Room 2. While he’d not previously given Joe Bergman much credit, the blustery producer with a limitless catalogue of penis jokes had impressed Spock with the genuine depth of affection and respect he had for his Vulcan friends. That, plus Joe had a real comprehension of the horrors of pre-Reform Vulcan, raised the Hawaiian shirt aficionado’s stock.

He’d not liked the idea of using Joe as a communication intermediary. Spock thought the human too boisterous to appreciate the delicacy and importance of T’Pau’s directive. It was plain now why Mollie chose to involve him also and not just Sohja.

(Tralnor, if I am not interrupting, may I ask you something?) Having this mind-link active again brought a layer of blessed normality back into Spock’s overall being.

(Ask whatever you want. I can label petri dishes and talk to you at the same time.)

(Joe is sympathetic in a manner I have rarely encountered even in humans who have spent extended time around our people. He was forceful enough with Nurse Chapel that I wanted to know more about his solidarity.) What if there was something Joe could offer other humans, other Christines, that might help them comprehend Vulcan ways while reserving ethnocentric judgement?

(He’s well-versed about the discrimination and hatred his people have encountered through the ages and as such is acutely aware of the same mentalities and behaviors inflicted against us. He told me once, when we first got to know one another, that he figured the only reason Jews still existed in our time is that Vulcans took their place as objects of blame and detestation.)

That was not the kind of answer Spock expected. He’d thought that Joe perhaps had something of a Vulcan fetish that manifested differently than Nurse Chapel’s. Joe was not attempting to become d’Vel'nahr because of a fixation on Vulcan culture and the underlying idea that he was too good for humanity. Stars above, humans of that vein got under Spock’s skin like no other, even Leonard McCoy. (His perception is not one I have explored before.)

(Its what the likes of Earth First and the AVDL were founded on: anti-Semitism reinvented for the interstellar age. Since I first heard his theory twenty years ago, I’ve thought about it a lot, and I believe it has more merit than is comfortable to admit.)

Business on the bridge picked up for about half an hour with the administrative work it took to keep a ship like the Enterprise running smoothly. While he reviewed and signed requisitions for re-supply from Starbase 21, another part of his brain continued to pick at last night’s confrontation. Chapel’s accusations of disfigurement and cruelty would not let up. And yes, Vulcans loved their children.

(Did you hesitate to send your daughters on the kahs-wan?) Parents who refused to participate in the tradition found a dearth of eligible bondmates for their children because other parents did not want their sons and daughters joined to partners who’d not acquired the discipline the year-long kahs-wan training imparted.

(No. They were ready.) Quick bits of Tralnor’s memories crossed over their link, in turn, he
watched as each of his children set out into the perilous Forge. (And they came back.)

(I have no experience with the ulidar t’kafeh.) *Mark of Slavery* was the direct translation. (Mollie described it to me as an ordeal in two parts. There is the physical discomfort of the procedure and a secondary component wherein the ink itself is a psychotropic that allows for the T’Kehr leading the ceremony to impart Lyr Saan vokayalar without encountering any walls.)

(That’s the First Marks. With each addition to the design, the T’Kehr guides you on an intensive self-examination. During the completion of the Ordinals, there is a specific rubric that’s followed. When the Family Name is inked, you’re the recipient of information particular to your family, and you explore your place within the family. All additions after that are for personal reasons: commemorations, contemplations on freedom, inspiration, whatever you want because its meaningful to you, but there’s something of a catch. For example, you know that Mollie and I have the phrase *Fight On!* in ours.)

(Yes, for your time at USC. It is the school’s motto.) Spock remembered seeing it in Mollie’s right after she got it. (Puk-tor fa’rak.)

(Having one of these put into your skin isn’t like the way humans do it, from the process of needling the ink to the arbitrary and whimsical nature that so many humans fall into when deciding on a tattoo. You have to have a long consultation, sometimes over the span of a year or more, with the T’Kehr about the words you’ve chosen, what they mean now, what they may mean in the future, and if they’re appropriate within the Lyr Saan ulidar t’kafeh tradition. If the T’Kehr decides they’re willing to guide you, the arrangements are made for the calligrapher and other people involved in the installation of the words.)

(This is more involved than I thought it would be.)

(While Mollie and I have the same saying, originating from the same place, our journey to and receiving those Marks was different. When I was guided through Puk-tor Fa’rak, I had to scrutinize my motivation to try to fulfill my parents’ wish that I not abandon the rest of my youth because I was raped. I had to dissect my life at university as both a regular student and what it was like to be a seventeen-year-old father who desperately missed his child. You get the idea.)

(Sha’leyen’s comment about ulidar t’kafeh as the opposite of cruelty makes more sense. It appears that this process can be rather therapeutic.)

(Precisely. You’ve seen Joe’s tattoo?) Tralnor sent a mental image of the inside of Bergman’s left forearm. It was six characters, the letter A followed by a series of five numbers. (It’s a replica of his ancestor’s Auschwitz concentration camp tattoo. It’s also a Lyr Saan Mark. He and his T’Kehr spent close to four years getting him ready. For him, the experience was so profound, he says it saved his life.)

(He got it after Amelie Grace and Jock Balloch were murdered?)

(He did. . . Don’t fret, Joe will come through for us.)

That was one human on Spock’s mind that day he didn’t have to worry about betraying him. What of the other? What of the man with the eyes like quaking aspens whose undulating favor and rejection undermined his Vulcan controls? Mentally disemboweled by James Kirk, he was not certain how much longer he could exist in such a state.
Chapter 43

She did not close her eyes as the friction skin of his fingers met and pressed into the psi-points on her face. *I have no secrets, Veddah.*

Laura’s full mind, open to his discretion, was neat and compartmentalized. He’d never undergone a complete meld with a human before, but the times when he’d been casually handled by humans, and he’d tasted their thoughts, even the calmest appearing people were typhoons of chaos. To have the self-discipline to impose this kind of order on oneself was something Veddah did not have. He’d needed his teachers, his culture, his peoples’ expectations to mold his mind into something functional.

He peeked into her mental corrals, like opening the door to a room and taking a quick glance, just as an exercise in learning her brain. She could have been exquisite if not for her defective logic justifying hatred. He wanted to ask why she’d attended the Consolidated Terran School when by what little he’d seen, she could have easily kept up with Vulcans in her age cohort. Maybe she’d come to his world preprogrammed with xenophobic ideas and had wanted to stay with her own kind as much as possible.

*You want to see it, Veddah? The birth of my why?* She projected her memory at him with a kind of control he was still working to attain. Laura was ten when she and her mother moved to ShiKahr. She took the city-wide entrance exams for native schools, expecting a placement. She’d scored into the top tier and waited for the news on where she’d been accepted. Only, she never got in. At first, there was no explanation, just the letter from the school system saying no and the referral to Consolidated.

School was the one thing she’d looked forward to on Vulcan. She wanted the challenge and needed to get away from the human curriculums that only seemed to cater to the lowest common denominator. Once that was taken away, her misery on the red planet was complete. It took her mother two years to get someone to slip-up and say why Laura was rejected. Mother and daughter figured it was because they didn’t want humans. The real answer, the academically gifted human girl was not a psion.

When all seven MacCormacks came to town, only to haunt the halls of Consolidated one afternoon a week, Laura was incensed. How did they simply waltz right into the same system that chased her away? What made them so fucking special as to get the dispensation she’d not received? Six of the seven of them happened to be true rarities, fully-functional human telepaths.

In the same grade, Mollie MacCormack, from all outward appearances seemed human, seemed like she could be a friend. The more Laura got to know about her, the more she grew to dislike her because the innocuous Mollie wasn’t human at all. She was Mallia Ad’ehevna t’Lyraan, a Vulcan freak fabricated at a lab bench, an artificial life-form! A fake person.

Not only was Laura kept from realizing her full potential, but she’d also been kicked to the curb so someone who shouldn’t exist, someone who wasn’t even real, could take her place. As more time passed, she let her bitterness compound. She wanted to take out her frustrations. First, she targeted Mollie and her brood of psionically blessed siblings. Then, Mollie inadvertently introduced her to another fake person, her partner in crime and Reason for Existing, Ambassador Sarek’s son. Spock was long-rumored to be a non-telepath. What made it okay for a psi-null Vulcan to go to school and not Laura? She was just as intelligent, just as capable of the academic work, just as psionically dead, but didn’t have a famous father from an old Golic family to pull strings for her.
At age fifteen, Laura tried again to flee the hell of Consolidated. Her mother wouldn’t let her go back to earth, and the Vulcans cited the same reason for refusing to admit her to their secondary schools. So, she found another way to escape, searched online for others who harbored resentment at Vulcans, and entered a world of xenophobia that gave her succor and sensibility where the planet she lived on offered none.

*All I wanted was an opportunity to play them at their own game. If I failed, that was on me, and I’d join the rest of the dumbshits at Consolidated. They never even gave me a chance, Veddah.*

No shore leave. Captain Kirk decided that sequestering the crew away from the court-martial was in the prosecution’s favor lest something happen to taint the opinion of Enterprise’s personnel as a whole. Of course, that meant more idle time, the devil’s playthings, and such. Kirk got Recreation to organize a Three-on-Three basketball tournament, had the kitchens focus on serving real food prepped to the directions of authentic recipes, and decided to offer a small prize to the person who got the highest score at the shooting range as motivation to get everyone who needed to re-certify done without having to chase them down.

He checked his mirror and held up a ruler to one of the artifacts on his dress uniform, making sure it was in the correct place. *Can’t have the defense thinking sloppiness at the top is to blame for people thinking it’s okay to desecrate the dead.*

Kirk called up to the bridge, spoke to Mr. Scott and Lt. Uhura, and set off toward the transporter room. He walked in to find Commander Blaedel, Lt. Dresden, and the clerks dematerializing from the platform. He’d be going over with Lt. Commander Sha’leyen, Dr. McCoy, Lt. Seltun, the Chief of Security, and Mr. Spock, or that’s what he’d thought.

“Avoid seeing me,” Kirk thought as he blocked out the bioarchaeologist’s explanation. McCoy shot him a fed-up look as he stepped up on his favorite piece of starship technology.

“Damnit, let’s get this over with, so me and most of my molecules have time to recuperate before I get a lawyer in my face trying to trip me up about what I actually saw down there.” McCoy’s molars ground.

“What’s that, Sha’leyen?” Kirk pointed to the rounded black thing she’d tucked under one arm.

It turned out to be a hat. She set it on her head, the checkered band matching the blue in her uniform, the emblem on the front was a silver starburst with a crown at the top, *V II R* in the center. The border between the rays and the center said: *Metropolitan Police.* “Commander Blaedel got in touch with the Quartermaster General. For events such as courts-martial, diplomatic escorts, and the like, I’ve previously been allowed to include my Met ribbon bar, and beneath that, you can see the small pins that are my chevrons and my collar number.”

Yes, Kirk had seen those before. They sat above the collection of Starfleet fruit salad she’d accrued over the years.

“My bowler, I’ve only worn it once with this uniform, when I was called before the Federation Council nine years ago. It was reserved for only the most formal of occasions. However, Blaedel feels it ads impact to the strength of the prosecution’s case, and I’ve been granted approval to include it indefinitely.” She removed it, took out the gloves she’d hidden inside and put them all
“If you weren’t still on the Met’s Space Reserve Operations Team?”

“I would only be allowed the medal bar and an additional pin that indicates that I once served in SO314.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing I grudgingly share you with Scotland Yard when they ask every once in a while.” The captain liked this line of conversation. It was legitimate enough to not sound like he was wasting time and worked as a good stalling tactic to catch Spock, whom he’d not spoken to in two days.

The Vulcan was circumventing Kirk like he was trying to outrun a plague. All the captain wanted was to be in the same room with him, breathe the same air for a little while, in a place that wasn’t so crowded and sterile as a courtroom.

“Jim, are we gonna go?” Bones did not want to delay the inevitable.

“Yeah.” Kirk reluctantly joined his party. “We’d better get over there.”

(Do you think it’s a legitimate sighting?) Tralnor was spooling through a wad of surveillance footage from Vittel’s Star. Sha’leyen had called in a favor from an old friend of hers who was pretty high up in the station’s police hierarchy. She’d merely wanted to see if anything unusual was going on out there in an “archaeology” sense as she’d put it.

Deputy Chief Constable Michael “Mick” Howard replied in the affirmative. A wealthy couple had just departed, and they’d spent four days trolling the antique sellers and galleries looking for anything Vulcan they could find. The only reason they stuck out in his mind was that the couple was mixed, not something Vittel’s saw often, and they’d been attacked at a restaurant.

(I do not believe it is a coincidence.) Spock had joined him behind Sha’leyen’s desk to view a few minutes before leaving to Starbase 21 for the day. (Did Sha’leyen tell you what Deputy Chief Howard meant when he described the antique hunters as mixed?)

(No. No time, if she was told.) The images went by quickly when Tralnor hit the pause button.

(There. Is that her?)

Two people, a man and a woman, walking hand-in-hand, were leaving a junk shop called The Real Ali-Baba Cave. He isolated them as a single image separate from their surroundings and cropped in on their faces. Like a stake through the heart, he’d know the woman’s face anywhere. Now for the head-shaking confusion. What the hell was Laura Hillyard doing in such close contact with a Vulcan? (Who is that?)

(I believe it is USS Seren’s junior science officer, Lt. Veddah.) Spock had Tralnor close in on the very young man’s face. (By their expressions, they appear to be speaking mind-to-mind.)

(Something is very wrong.) The scene set off a deep-seated alarm within Tralnor.

(I will have you excused from your duties in the media lab today. Learning more about this is of more significant concern.)

(I’ll try to put together some sort of narrative. And while I’m at it, I’d like to get back in touch with
Deputy Chief Howard and see if I can’t get some more specific questions by him without raising his hackles.) Tralnor jotted a quick line into his notebook.

Spock held his hand out for the pen, turned the book toward him, and wrote down his Priority comm code. (I must go now before I am late for the proceedings.)

He did not know why, but the group he’d supposed to be beaming out with was still in the transporter room, even after he’d told Sha’leyen to give the go-ahead to leave. Spock decided not to inquire as to their collective tardiness and joined them.

“Nice of you to show up, Spock.” McCoy needled, his anxiety regarding this method of locomotion evident.

There was a gleam of accomplishment in Jim’s eyes like he’d just outsmarted a particularly witty enemy. He looked at Spock and smiled.

Returned to Sweetness’ center seat, Laura was glad to see the back of Vittel’s Star. Now, to Trego, where she could offload her precious cargo and pawn off two of her prisoners. Horse-laugh had a broken femur after a poorly executed attempt at taking out Liam. He’d go straight to the slave markets, to hell with him. Helmsman Loretta would spend some time with the AVDL brass where they’d bring her round to the cause. MV Summerwind needed a competent navigator, and they didn’t come much better trained than out of Starfleet. The rest of Seren’s leftovers, she decided to keep around for a bit longer.

“Hey Boss, you know you can take off that butt ugly ring now.” Silvio told her that her left hand looked like a jewelry shop had thrown up on it. He also knew how much she utterly fucking hated Arik Collier.

“I guess I forgot I was even wearing it.” Why was she hesitant to remove it? It wasn’t like she could announce to the ship that she’d gotten married and wanted to keep it on as an advertisement of what had happened. She owned other rings, ones that she actually liked, that no one would ask questions about. She’d switch to one of those and keep it’s meaning to herself.

She dug through her new messages and reached into her snack drawer to find— “Silvio, you’d better refill this right fucking now, or you’ll be joining our friends in the cargo hold for dinner.”

A couple of hoots and cajoles from the others left Silvio red-faced. “Yes, Ma’am.”

That brief burst of irritation rippled out of her brain and across the bond to Veddah. She felt him immediately want to know if something was wrong. Her vision, which had finally returned to normal yesterday afternoon, filled with the light show because of his subconscious protective response.

Well, isn’t this fucking wonderful? She looked from person to person as they went about their tasks, their auras seemed to align with their personalities. Serious Morgana had a smooth dark green. Dobbs, the engineer, was surrounded by a frenetic orangey layer of hedgehog spikes. Silvio returned, armload of junk food, featuring an aura of craggy violet.
That’s what you get when you ask Clayton to do the simplest little shit tasks for you. Lazy bastard can’t even put candy and cream cakes in the drawer.

“What did you say, Silvio?” She’d not seen his face since he’d bent down to dump her goodies in their spot.

“Nothing.” He said, shutting the drawer.

“I could have sworn you said something about Clayton being lazy.”

Silvio’s reaction was a disturbing cross of fear and wonder. “Nope.”

“Hmmmm.” She reached for a packet of peanut clusters, salvaging the situation. “Low blood sugar makes your mind do some crazy things.”

Tralnor placed a call to Lt. Commander Bryce, Dragon’s chief science officer. Not having access to personnel files, this was the best way he could think of to get a little more information about Lt. Veddah. At this point, having viewed hours of video, it was plain to Tralnor that the young Vulcan was in crisis.

“There’s not a whole lot I can offer you, Doc. You folks aren’t exactly known for being personable.” Bryce grinned at himself. “I mean, you don’t really open up much, do you?”

“How about just giving me what you do know?” As mentally compromised as he was, Veddah might be just what the tavalik duv-tor needed to unleash unbridled misery.

“Graduated from the Academy two years ago when he was twenty, got his degree in xenobiology. Quiet, considerate, never heard Felton say a bad thing about him.”

He was young, too young to be away from home yet if Tralnor was honest. An ugly explanation for Veddah’s cagey behavior formed. “Is he married?”

“Search me, Doc. He wasn’t one of mine, and he doesn’t—didn’t—join in on the monthly poker games Felton and I hosted.”

“You don’t happen to know his family name or Clan?” Seren’s records and manifests were locked away as evidence until further notice. Any more competent officers he could ask were at the court-martial, and getting in touch with Vulcan would only suffice to put this kid in more peril.

Are you stupid? Was what Bryce’s face said. “Shit, I didn’t even know your lot had family names.”

“Thank you for your time.”

Bryce got up and didn’t sign off. “Every time you turn around, there’s another one of them green fuckers, that’s why I left the research vessels. Sick of finding ‘em around every corner, noses in the air. . .”

Tralnor killed the connection.
Deputy Chief Mick Howard was one of Sha’leyen’s former Scotland Yard instructors. The hardware on his epaulettes reflected in the bad light. “I knew I hadn’t seen the last of her when she joined Starfleet. She’s on to something. . . Once a copper, always a copper.”

Tralnor nodded, then explained the reason for his call.

“And of course she has to drop something interesting into my lap. Vulcan antiquities?” The Deputy Chief was intensely curious. “I would venture there is a market for such things, there’s a market for everything, but not so much here. What do you suppose this couple was looking for?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

A file containing the couple’s financial transactions, ship information, and the IDs they used popped up in Tralnor’s inbox. “Did they leave anything behind?”

“Nowt, as they say in Yorkshire.” Mick Howard wasn’t going to give Tralnor anything. “You know, it’s the timing that’s got me intrigued. Sha’leyen’s call, our visitors, looking for the same rare category of item, what am I to make of that?”
Chapter 44

The prosecution’s opening statement was a boilerplate recitation of the burden of their case and the proof that supported their version, Sha’leyen’s version, of the grave-robbing episode on Melbek III. The defense immediately plowed into borderline theatrics about “good kids” and “honest mistakes” taken out of context by a science officer who was in above her head in terms of leadership, unfamiliar with how to handle Security personnel, and also reacting badly to trauma induced by excavating forty murder victims.

So this is how it’s going to be? I’m the one on trial? From behind, the defense team looked like it cost a bundle. Ensign Radovitch came from money, and the Rado-lite Ionic Converter empire was covering the tab for the white-shoe law firm.

“Thinoi t’wak.” She whispered under her breath. Waste of time.

Spock, sitting immediately to her right used their position in the back of the room, behind four other rows of seating, to touch the back of her hand long enough to indicate he was open to a telepathic conversation with her.

(Maybe this way we might get some work done yet today?) She said. (We talk and accomplish something while the circus plays out around us.)

(Your desire to make inquiries at Vittel’s Star has given us something.)

(What is that?) One of the defense attorneys turned to look back at the prosecution’s witness lineup, stopped to stare at her, and took on the appearance of a startled fish.

(Laura Hillyard was there. She was seen with a young man, presumed to be Lt. Veddah, from the Seren. As part of their cover story, they presented themselves as a married couple.)

(I’m getting bewilderment from you, though not quite as much as from the overpriced idiot squad at the front of the room.) I wish I were allowed my epaulettes, so I had a place to stash my gloves. She tried not to think about the gold brocade making her neck itch.

(Lt. Veddah is Vulcan.) Which didn’t rectify with Spock's experiences with Hillyard. (They were observed engaged in skin-to-skin psionic contact. Such behavior is most unusual.)

(Indeed. Like you, I avoid touching others when I can, especially people who have proven to be capricious. To so much as catch a glancing blow from such a malefactor? I would rather take to the Forge in the height of summer than clasp that person’s hand.)

Spock and Sha’leyen watched as the defendants dared turn around and cast their eyes to the gallery. Radovitch’s arrogance was unchanged from Melbek III. The two crewmen were watching their lives flash before their eyes.

(Ensign Radovitch does not recognize you, Sha’leyen.)

(No, he knows exactly who I am.) The more of her appearance the Ensign synthesized into his brain, the more self-assuredness faltered. (He never counted on me being anything more than an academic in a blue uniform.)
Deputy Chief Howard did grant Tralnor one interesting bit of information. The people who’d confronted Laura and Veddah at the restaurant were found dead of cyanide poisoning two days later. “Looks like an honest double-suicide. No note. No indication they were thinking of offing themselves, but they were found in bed, holding on to one another.”

“Before they died, were they part of any human supremacist organizations?” Maybe, Tralnor thought, I can sneak this one by.

“Look, Lt. Commander Tralnor.” Howard squared his shoulders. “I’m going to be honest. I don’t know you. I’m sure you’re a good bloke, Sha’leyen wouldn’t have you working for her otherwise. If she has more questions, tell her to ring me back. I’ll give you my direct line to forward to her.”

“Thank you for your time, Deputy Chief Howard.” Tralnor understood where this guy was coming from.

Looking side-to-side then settling back on the screen, Howard said, “Tell her I’m available at any time, night or day.”

“I will do so.”

Howard was fine until Tralnor brought up human supremacists. That reaction was not from someone who’d not had run-ins with those types before. Sha’leyen will shake the knowledge from your tree, Deputy Chief.

He’d found drawing pencils and big sketch pad on a shelf and started recreating Laura and Veddah’s facial expressions on paper. He drew what he saw, gave each variation an alphanumerical designation, and labeled them with the timestamp from the footage each drawing was modeled on.

He finished with Veddah’s, amassing a collection of fourteen images. The subtle variations told Tralnor this boy was in trouble. Scared, conflicted, there was a trauma-induced loss of his emotional controls. In need of acute psiopsychiatric care, the last place he should be was in Laura Hillyard’s mind.

There were more variations to Laura’s face. That first day and evening, very little was unfamiliar to Tralnor. Her resentment, her air of superiority, her breakthrough moments when slivers of amusement or appreciation slipped out, he’d seen all of that before. It was the way she looked at Veddah sometimes, empathy and sadness exuded for him, about him, that took Tralnor unawares. He’d seen her pity those she found pathetic, but this was not pity . . .

“She’s remorseful. It’s something she did.” He pulled up the candy shop footage again. “She’s not guilty, guilt cuts out the other parties. Guilt doesn’t go far enough. Laura Hillyard is ashamed.”

Mollie was thinking about the package that arrived at her office three mornings ago. Someone sent her a decapitated cat with a note pinned to it that said: Race Traitor!

That incident put her on indefinite leave from her teaching and research position at the university and left her with a permanent escort wherever she went. Joe Bergman drew mornings. T’Lal got her in the afternoon as to impart more knowledge on artifacts of malice. Joe popped back over between when he signed off for the day at his regular job and when Livia arrived at the hotel to stay the
night. Sarek and Justin were always hovering out on the edges.

“Joe, it’s okay to go home.” Livia had just messaged to tell Mollie she’d been called in on an emergency surgical consult. As one of only three full-time Neuro-psi Healers in the city, Livia’s hours were hectic at times.

“And risk Bruce Banner getting mad at me if something happens to you? I don’t think so, Mollie.” Joe collected the playing cards he’d strung around the table.

“Who’s Bruce Banner?”

“Ambassador Scary Uncle. He’s all calm and unassuming right now, but one fuck-up from me and he’ll go full Incredible Hulk on my ass.” He got up and crossed to the window. “And I can think of ten different ways of dying right this second that are far preferable to being torn limb from limb by a Vulcan.”

She didn’t get the cultural reference, something cinema-related no doubt, but Scary Uncle? Sarek was not someone you wanted angry at you.

“This is the point in the conversation where the girl usually tells her boyfriend that her mean old daddy is just a teddy bear on the inside.”

“But?”

“I can’t lie to your face like that, Joe.”

He curled himself up in the drapes until only his beat up penny loafers showed. “I’m not leaving you alone until your mom gets here.”

“Then you’ve got another six hours, at least.”

“Fine.” The lump in the curtains said.

“Can I ask you a favor?”

“Um—yeah, sure.”

“Can you take me out to the police station in Hollywood?”

He peeled his face free to stare at her like she was skipping gears. “I don’t think that’s a very good idea.”

“Then I’ll have the concierge call me a cab.” She grabbed her jacket.

“Damnit, Mollie.”

Captains Kirk and Kuznetsov gave their testimony on the lead-up to the incident, setting the mood. Kirk, who didn’t see the scene in situ wasn’t crossed but was reserved for recall. The defense asked Kuznetsov for the disgusting details of the massacre, trying to goad her into an emotional outburst about the horrors visited upon Melbek III. Kuznetsov wouldn’t give them the satisfaction and remained entirely professional. When they finally accepted that she wasn’t going to put on a show and dance for their organ grinder, court was recessed for lunch.
Spock and Sha’leyen spent their break talking to Tralnor, catching up on his discoveries. “I’ll talk to Mick when we get back tonight. He’s a suspicious old copper, but he’ll tell me everything I want to know.”

Sha’leyen could not stop thinking about Laura’s Vulcan prisoner and how much he reminded her of Tralnor when they were first united as teens. The semblance was spooky. “I think she raped him.”

The conversation stopped.

“He has the same haunted qualities that I saw in you, Tralnor, the same distance in his eyes. The mannerisms, movements, exaggerated responses to her when she acts a certain way toward him, that was you, Tal-kam t’nash-vey.” My Beloved, even you are still in the process of healing, as am I. Such violation is never completely sublimated. That is why we can so readily recognize it others. You’d have drawn the same conclusion in the soon. “Laura stepped over her own line and broke one of the few scruples she has. We’re missing something though, what made them turn to one another by the time they disembarked on MV Sweetness?”

“Sha’leyen, you do not think she is simply regretful of intimacy with a non-human? I am not certain Laura is capable of feeling shame.” Spock spoke from experience.

“She knows better, was not raised in the context of the AVDL. There’s just enough residual humanity left inside her to set off the proper reaction as instilled during her formative years.” The men were doubtful of her explanation. “In my youth, I encountered those we called Vau-nay.”

“The Hesitant?” Spock asked for clarity on the Vulcan-based word. She nodded. “Those who were impressed into the military body of a warlord’s troops after the age of ten or twelve, the ones stolen from post-Reform communities, they tend to retain the Tago t’Sochya.”

The Rule of Peace, the Lyr Saan moral code, was taught from birth. “Vau-nay, just as vicious as those they serve, are different in that they know what they are doing is wrong. Sometimes they can get back in touch with the teachings and extricate themselves. Others are known to show mercy. That does not mean I think Laura is redeemable in any way, just that she still has the capacity for shame.”

Court back in session, the prosecution called Sha’leyen to the stand. The Belonite’s purposeful stride set the tone that she was not some simpering lab jockey like Lt. Chavez. Jacket and trousers, Jim Kirk had never seen the bioarchaeologist don the so-called “female” uniform. She refused to play humanity’s gender discrimination game. He applauded her for that, wishing more women in the Fleet followed her example.

Sitting as third and fourth chair, Blaedel and Dresden exuded confidence the defense could not touch the Lt. Commander. Name, rank, serial number, Starfleet commendations and medals followed by the recitation of her educational background.

“Would you please explain the non-traditional elements included with your dress uniform, Lt. Commander?” Lead prosecutor Commander Levy had chosen to let Sha’leyen, rather than the stupid court computer, discuss her law-enforcement background.

“Yes, Sir.” She removed her bowler and placed it, crown-up, in her lap, silver crest facing out where the room could still see. That ribbon bar? She wore the Queen’s Police Medal, Queen’s
Commendation for Brave Conduct, Metropolitan Police Commissioner’s Commendation, Chief Constable’s Commendation, Distinguished Scene of Crime Investigation Award, and two additional commendations, the Nevis VI Police Star and Proxima Rusalka’s Medal for Life Saving.

*That’s right, Sha’leyen. Show those hoity-toity New York City sleaze bag lawyers.* Finally, something to give Kirk a taste of satisfaction after one of the most turbulent months of his life.

She told of her six years in the employ of London’s Metropolitan Police Service while she was a post-graduate student at University College London. While a lot of the brass back at Command didn’t think much of officers who came to Starfleet as their second careers via OCS, Kirk found them invaluable members of his crew. Some of the best and brightest people he’d commanded and served with/under, were like Sha’leyen. They brought knowledge and abilities from outside the Fleet’s somewhat insular world. Plus, an Academy ring wasn’t a guarantee of competency or intelligence.

“My original intentions were to stay with the Met after the conference of my Ph.D. I’d been granted a new assignment, fast-tracked to Detective Sergeant, and placed within the Criminal Investigative Division of Major Crimes Team East, one of five such divisions. As a DS, I supervised Detective Constables and uniformed officers assigned to my investigations. I was in that placement full-time for the six months leading up to University College London’s commencement.”

Kirk shared a sidelong glance with his first officer. They were both pleased with how this was going. The more details she gave to her duties and training, the more the defense squirmed and that little shit, Radovitch, looked like he wanted to turn-tail and run.

“How is it that you are here, rather than working as a Detective Chief Inspector for Scotland Yard, Lt. Commander?”

“What I did not count on was a chance meeting with a Starfleet recruiter at a conference I was presenting a paper at in Seattle. After some soul searching, I came to the conclusion that my particular skill set would serve more people in need through Starfleet than if I remained in London.”

“You resigned from the Metropolitan Police?”

“I did not.”

“Lt. Commander, elaborate.”

“I was reassigned from CID to the Special Branch’s SO314, the Space Reserve Operations Team.”

Commander Levy paused to let that sink in. *“Space Reserve Operations Team. Correct me if I’m wrong, Lt. Commander Sha’leyen. SO314 was established as an extra-solar investigative and apprehension unit, wherein Met Reserve Officers scattered throughout the Alpha Quadrant can be activated and dispatched to aid in cases where expediency is a must.”*

“Yes, Sir.”

“How does that process work, specifically regarding you?”

“The Met contacts Starfleet Command with their request. If they and my shipboard commanding officers deem that I am not instrumentally vital to the ship’s current mission, I am placed on immediate leave from Starfleet and sent out as a Detective Sergeant.” She didn’t give the defense the luxury of a glance in their direction, which made them sweat even more.
“In the eleven years you’ve been a Starfleet officer, how many times have you had calls to police duty?”

“Thirteen.”

Levy tried not to smile. “So, about once a year. In order to stay in SO314, are you required to undertake any continuing education or training?”

“I am. Several of Starfleet’s mandatory recertifications, such as life-saving, weapons training, physical fitness testing, are directly transferrable to my Met CE qualifications. Other courses, such as investigative techniques, forensic science methods, and interrogation methods, I can and have sat in with Starfleet Security for their trainings. Some I’ve done with Starfleet Judge Advocate, others with Starfleet Criminal Investigation Service. For Met specific CEs, some are delivered via computer, I’ve gone back to London for three of them, and the rest are scheduled in various locations throughout the Federation.”

“How many hours of continuing education are you required to have each year?”

“One-hundred-and-sixty.”

Ensign Radovitch, the man who’d stolen part of a fellow officer’s dead body, was now the color of a corpse, He pitched his face down. His arrogance, his name, his father’s money, none of that was going to save him.
Mollie got a message from Tralnor as she and Joe waited in traffic. Her brother wondered if she could possibly learn more about Laura’s early life and see if Hillyard had any sort of criminal record on earth. He wanted to help build a forensic profile of her to seek out any exploitable weaknesses. They needed any advantage over her.

Funny you should be asking about criminal records and the like. I’m on my way to the Hollywood Station Detective Bureau. And Tralnor, don’t say it... She waited the minutes it took for messages like this to wind their way through space. Caught in rush hour, she had the time.

“Look, Mollie, I know some cops you can talk to. These are the guys I use as consultants on my projects. One of them, Stacia Villalobos, she’s a Lieutenant at Robbery-Homicide, and can get you anything you need to know.” Joe honked at someone who tried to cut him off.

“Don’t worry so much, Joe.” She read Tralnor’s reply: Good luck, and don’t take any shit.

“You’re my friend. It’s my job to worry.”

When they finally parked in the station’s visitor lot, she told Joe to wait in the car. He refused and followed her in as far as the desk sergeant let him go. She told him to behave and that she’d be back down as quickly as she could.

The station hadn’t changed since the last time she’d been in, even the people looked the same. Several waved or said hello, calling her by name. Arriving at the detective bureau, she took a deep breath to wipe her anxiety and settle her emotions before she stepped through the door.

“Hey, Dr. Mollie. Haven’t seen you in ages. How are you?” A middle-aged man caught her just as he was leaving the break room. “Get you a coffee?”

“That’s okay, Zack.” She wasn’t up to revisiting old times, there was work to be done. “And I’m doing pretty good. I try to stay occupied.”

“Well, you look great.” Zack never stopped trying to flatter her. “I need to speak to your partner if she’s available.”

He wiggled his brow in an are you sure about that? When she held her ground, he indicated with his head toward the collection of cubicles in the big room. “She’s in her usual spot.”

“Thank you, Zack.”

“Sure is good to see you.”

Mollie made it halfway to her destination when the person she’d come to see jumped up and ran to her. Arms engulfed her, happiness/lust/relief/loneliness barraged Mollie’s mind, a hand migrated downward and grabbed her ass, soft lips met hers... Mollie did not respond.

“Baby, what are you doing here?” The detective smiled and settled her open palm on the side of Mollie’s face. “I never thought I’d see you again, and here you are, and I’m touching you, close to chewing your clothes off and fucking you. Please tell me you’ve finally come to your senses and you’re coming home.”

Mollie recited the case number for the dead cat incident, completely ignoring any advances. “I
need to call in some favors, Zadie.”

Zadie let go and took a step back. “Of course. How could I be dumb enough to think that you wanted to see me?”

The detective’s workspace, like the station, had not changed in the two years since Mollie had seen it last. LAPD bulletins and satirical cartoons were tacked to the walls. Zadie’s desk still had a framed photo of the two of them arm-in-arm on the one vacation they’d taken together in Hawaii.

Detective Zadie Pambakian was Mollie’s Captain James T. Kirk.

“You know, I heard about your surprise package and wondered how long it would take before you came crying to me.” Zadie reeked of I told you so. “I knew by the end of the week, you’d be in my arms again, Mollie. I’ve been waiting for you, Baby.”

“AnthroVision Defense League, that’s who sent the cat. They’re also watching my house, staking out my office on campus, and have got my family scared out of their minds that something is going to happen to me.”

Interestingly, Zadie didn’t roll her eyes or make a rude comment about Mollie’s family. Instead, she sat down and logged in to her terminal, pulling the case up on the screen. She read through it and reviewed the photos of the note. “We’ll never catch them for this. This is small-time henchman shit. What else have you got?”

“I need information on a woman named Laura Hillyard. Born 18 May 2230, here in Los Angeles. She’s in the top of the AVDL hierarchy.” Mollie refused to sit down when offered the chair at the side of the desk.

“Will you sit the fuck down already?” Zadie pointed to the chair. “You know it makes me crazy when you just stand there, thinking, hands all behind your back and all that Vulcan shit.”

What the hell did I ever see in you? Mollie asked herself that question on a regular basis. She’d first met Zadie when installing and showing the detectives how to use a software package she’d been commissioned to create by the LAPD. It used behavior algorithms to predict crowd disruption and pick out individuals who were acting in a suspicious manner. Hollywood Station was the guinea pig. Mollie spent a lot of time administering the beta testing and bug-killing. The first time she and Detective Pambakian clapped eyes on one another, sparks flew.

It was great at first. Mollie, who’d never been in a romantic/sexual relationship with a human before, didn’t have any experience to fall back on when the rot started to show. Previous long-term relationships, both with Vulcans, could not possibly have prepared her for what Zadie was going to unleash. T’Venna, bound by her bond to a man she wanted nothing to do with, still went ahead with the marriage to please her family. That relationship ended cordially, and Mollie was friends with her to this day. Neither Sovin’s family, nor his friends, could accept that he was involved with mind-raping dream-stealer, so he and Mollie called it. She’d not stayed in touch with him, hoped he was doing well and would have bet that he wound up married to the first non-Lyr Saan woman his Clan could find.

“How do you spell this girl’s last name?” Zadie’s shoulders hiked as her irritation at Mollie built.

She spelled it out and gave her Laura’s middle name as well.

“Damn. This bitch is crazy. How are you involved in this besides the fact that you probably offended some dick-faced bigot by wearing your weird clothes?” Zadie never liked how Mollie
dressed, insisting her wardrobe was too Vulcan. “And bam, poor puss is in your mailbox.”

“I went to school with Laura.”

“Wait a second, you know her?” Zadie swiveled around. “I can’t imagine you associating with a terrorist. And a murderer, she’s a cold-blooded killer.”

“We were students at the Consolidated Terran School in ShiKahr. She was bad then, but wasn’t quite like she is now.”

“Okay, I guess. So, now that I’m in here and digging through shit that you shouldn’t be seeing, do you want this as a hard copy or digital?”

Mollie pulled a set of brand new data chits from an inside pocket and handed them over.

“She is scary. Shot and wounded a police officer while making her escape from the pre-trial holding facility after stabbing her hubby.” Zadie inserted the first one and began the download. “This is going to take a while because the city still refuses to upgrade our IT stuff. You’re lucky you work in the private sector, Baby.”

Mollie would stand for the next two hours if that’s what it took to get what she needed. While she had wanted to see progress made on the cat issue, thinking that Zadie would have gone to great lengths to impress “the one that got away,” she’d take all the AVDL dirt on tap. The detective was ready to do anything to get Mollie to take her back.

“Tell me, how are you?” Zadie’s voice and eyes warmed as she carefully looked Mollie over. “I’ve been so miserable without you. There’s a crater in my heart where you used to be, and I can’t fill it.”

“I stay busy.”

“And single?” That sexy smile used to work on Mollie. She’d found seduction was more pleasurable than conflict.

“I stay busy.”

Zadie huffed and whirled back around to read the screen as it dragged up more on Laura. She let loose with a sarcastic laugh. “Oh, I get it now.”

“Starfleet has censor blocks on the newest stuff, but you knew that coming in here.” Zadie pulled her head and neck straight. “I should have fucking known.”

Zadie stood as to look Mollie in the face. An inferno stoked behind the detective’s eyes. “I should have known from the start that this was for Side Piece.”

Mollie kept watch on the computer, waiting for the download to finish, so she could snatch the chit and run out of there like she’d been set on fire.

“Is he a better lay than I am, is that what it was? A gentle lover who thinks only of you? No risk, no variety?” She made a face. “I made you scream with pleasure, left you quivering and begging for more, and you still went back to him.”

“You’re the one who insisted on having an open relationship, Zadie.” Mollie kept calm. “You
wanted shag all the girlies at the club and still come home to the old ball and chain. You wanted me there, bells on, legs spread, so when you stumbled through the door in the wee hours half-drunk and reeking of pussy, you could finish getting off, no thanks to those of us you’d used that night.”

“Baby, it’s so cheap when you say it that way.”

“And when you said open relationship, I didn’t know it, what you actually meant was open for you. Your main girl, she’d better keep to herself and have dinner on the table after you’ve spent a long day chasing down bad guys. You were the one allowed to go out and wantonly fuck anything that moved. I have an encounter with someone you know about, someone I’ve explained my connection to? Hell hath no fury like a hypocrite scorned.” Mollie did sleep with Spock eighteen months ago when they met up on Starbase 12. Zadie had encouraged her to. She remembered that last call from RV Tekkah to earth, Zadie talking about how hot it was to think about Mollie having sex with this man, how she wanted Mollie to tell her all the steamy details later.

“You know what, Mollie? I’ve been waiting to say this for years.” Zadie put her hands on her hips and scowled. “Side Piece must be amazing in bed. That’s the only thing I can think of that would make you do what you did. I always figured you were fucking the dad too. Tell me, who’s the better lover? The soldier or the elder statesman?”

Forget it, Mollie thought and started to walk away. She’d made it to the doorway of the break room when Zack cut her off.

“I found some tea bags, so I made you some tea.” He held up a mug filled to the top with scalding swamp water. “I remembered that you liked it.”

“Zack—”

“Mallia!” Zadie closed in, red-faced, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. “Mallia, I’m so fucking sorry. Just don’t go, not like this. I’ll get you anything I can.”

And Zadie would get her anything.

You need this, Mollie. Suffer through for the sake of the billions in danger if the tavalik duv-tor makes it into Laura’s hands.

“I’ll keep my mouth shut about your boyfriend.” Zadie turned on her heel and made for her cubicle.

“So, you’re not getting back together?” Zack sounded genuinely saddened by the lack of reconciliation.

“Not now, not ever.” Mollie finally accepted the cup he kept shoving at her.

“You were the best thing to ever happen to you, you know.” He wanted to plead with her to take Zadie back. “When you were together, she was even pleasant to work with. These days, she’s gotten, I hate to say it, bitter. She’s bitter.”

Let her be bitter. “I can’t have people like that as fixtures in my life.”

“What’s this about a boyfriend?” Zack was the biggest hen at the station when it came to gossip.

“There is no boyfriend, Zack.”
Mollie borrowed a swivel chair from an unoccupied desk and positioned herself so she sat behind and to the right of the detective, completely out of her line of sight.

“What I said, about the dad, that was pretty shitty of me.” Zadie had switched over into suck-up mode. Mollie recognized it now. Years ago, naive about human relationship dynamics, she’d not understood that Zadie was psychologically abusive, a manipulator who’d do anything to get what she wanted to fulfill her own pleasure objectives. Even being a telepath didn’t offer Mollie any advantages because when Zadie said she was sorry, she meant it, at that moment, at least until the next time she went off and started a fight. Psionics, it turned out, was no match for mental illness.

“Sarek, and his wife, Amanda, were in the delivery room with my mother when I was born. To imply that I would do something like that to two of the most important people in my life? You are seriously lacking in morals and decorum.” Mollie saw Zadie pulling and adding everything she could find about AVDL and its members to the download queue.

“Mallia, my Bitter Sea?”

“That’s the Hebrew meaning of a name that transliterates the same as mine does in Standard.”

Zadie’s shoulders sagged and she shook her head. “Fucking unreal. So what does your name mean in Pointy-Eared Land?”

“In Old Lyr Saan, it means like the snow.”

“Snow? On Vulcan?”

“Mount Ah’delevna, where my family took their name from, has snow on the top of the peak year-round.”

The detective typed another search term into the criminal database. “I didn’t even know your first name wasn’t human. I guess I shouldn’t be shocked, right?”

“I wouldn’t think so.” When Mollie and Zadie first started seeing one another, the cop seemed to revel in the ways the professor was different from the average person. That began to change when Zadie realized it wasn’t an act on Mollie’s part. She wasn’t a wannabe mimicking another culture just to make other people uncomfortable. She was born into it, lived it, breathed it, and it became a thorn of resentment in the detective’s side.

Zadie huffed like a pre-teen told to do the dishes. “Have you ever thought about how much easier life would be if you’d act like the human that you actually are?”

“I’m not human, Zadie. You’ve said so yourself.”

“ Took you fucking long enough up there.” Joe was up and ready to leave immediately. “Ambassador Scary Uncle called me three times to see where you were. He went to the hotel, you weren’t there, and he’s been riding my ass since.”

“Did you tell him where I was?” She followed him out into the chilly evening air coming in off the ocean. Why it hadn’t occurred to her to bring a jacket, she didn’t know.
“If he asked, I would tell him if you were in the bathroom tweezing your nose hairs. When he asked if you’d gone to see Zadie, he—*That man was not pleased.*” He popped the locks on the car.

“Sarek has never had a high opinion of Zadie. He tried to warn me off her, but I was too inexperienced to understand his advice.” She was in and buckled before he walked around to his side.

“That woman is a fucking wood chipper. I’ve met some barracudas in my time, but damn.” Joe took a right onto Wilcox and a left on Sunset.

“Where are we going?” Mollie wanted to hide away for a while and recuperate.

“We’ve been invited to dinner at Hayal-Masutra.”

“Only if we make a stop at your house so you can put on a suit.” She’d pass in her Lyr Saan business clothes.

“A suit? Mollie, do I look the kind of guy who owns a suit?” He chuckled. “Aloha shirt, blue jeans, penny loafers. I wore this to the Oscars last year.”

“The next charity shop you see, pull in. If you think Scary Uncle is bad, Disapproving Uncle is far, far worse.”
Unable to use her impeccable professional record against her, the defense tried to pick on her ethnic background. They wanted to get Sha’leyen to lash out emotionally since they seemed to think that all Belonites behaved like wild animals. Commander Levy objected to nearly every question or comment that came out of the lead defense attorney’s mouth. Inflammatory, accusatory, speculative, Levy threw those words out like confetti.

One last stab, the defense tried, “Lt. Commander, from the bits and pieces that are admissible to the official records, you describe yourself and your people of origin as Vulcanid, correct?”

“Yes, counselor.” Sha’leyen confirmed.

“Your Honors, relevance?” Levy interrupted.

“Keep your questions focused Mr. Garth.” Commodore Schumann directed.

“And that means that Belonites were influenced by pre-Reform Vulcan culture?”

“It means we are genetically identical, with the exception of a few stray bits of code that have mutated over the last two millennia. And yes, Belonite cultures were heavily influenced by the homeworld.”

“If the court doesn’t mind me pointing out the obvious, Lt. Commander, you don’t exactly look Vulcan.”

“Belonite appearance is merely phenotypical variation within the possible expression of the Vulcan genome. Belon is colder, wetter, and has a heavier atmosphere than Vulcan. It also has a sun with the same intensity and wavelengths as 40 Eridani, which is why it’s believed Vulcan colonists came to Belon in the first place. Send a group of Belonites back to Vulcan, given two or three generations, appearances will start to change back.”

Garth nodded. “That’s a fair enough explanation. How does this phenotypical variation relate to one’s emotional state?”

Many a blue-uniformed spectator in the gallery broke out into laughter at that question. Commodore Schumann called the room back to order. Sha’leyen said, “Absolutely nothing, counselor. Phenotypes are the manifestation of physical appearance within the constraint of one’s genetic code in response to the environment.”

She knew what he was trying to do. Nothing else had worked so far, why not paint her as a deranged Vulcan? That had all of the hysteria Garth was looking for, plus a scandal for the most uptight people in the Federation.

“Let me rephrase that, Lt. Commander. Your everyday behavior is not entirely in accordance to the Vulcan norm. Can you explain that?”

“Objection! Speculation.”

“I’d like to answer this one.” Sha’leyen said, looking up to the tribunal.

“Go ahead. We will decide after you’ve given your statement if it will stay on the record.”
“Like Earth, Vulcan, and as a subset of that, Belon, has multiple cultures, languages, and traditions. I was raised in accordance with the expectations of my Clan. My Clan is Vulcan, we followed the Reform, but we did so in a slightly different way than the majority Golic Vulcans whom you are most familiar with. To my Clan, to the homeworld, I am well within the accepted spectrum of ‘normal’ as you put it.”

After four hours on the stand, Sha’leyen was finally dismissed after a short redirect. Court was done for the day.

Sha’leyen was talking to Spock, planning for a meeting before beaming back over to Starbase 21 in the morning, when Captain Kirk approached. He tried to say something to Spock that didn’t have anything to do with work and the first officer simply walked away.

“Good job up there today, Lt. Commander.” Kirk said, regrouping to save face.

“Thank you, Captain.” She followed just like he’d wanted. “I’ll see you in the morning.” (Spock?) Sha’leyen felt the Vulcan had not gone far. (How long are you going to ignore him?) (As long as it takes.)

The lads’ cabin was crammed with bodies playing for a pot of chocolate buttons, jelly frogs, and individually wrapped soft caramels. Alton and Sarah were sitting on Tralnor’s bed when he arrived from Sha’leyen’s office.

“Rohit just folded.” Sarah said. “So now its Chris and Vince playing for the whole pile.”

O’Dell winked and blew Tralnor a kiss. Biltmore rolled his eyes at Chris. “Read ‘em and weep Communications.”

“Engineers are cocky by nature.” Chris laid his cards out. “And you’re no exception, Vince.”

The room broke into howls of delight at Chris’ win. “Straight flush beats a full house every time.”

“Poker seems to be the only thing you Academy boys are better than us at.” Biltmore sniggered. That brought down a round of shaking heads and snarky replies.

Andy started humming the Flying Monkey theme. The door opened, right on time, revealing Lt. Seltun, still wearing his dress uniform. He looked at the throng of people, and just wanted to get the hell out of his itchy jacket.

“Part the seas so the Krampus can get through.” Andy said.

The younger Vulcan looked at Sarah as people shuffled to clear a path. She wasn’t paying attention as she was engaged in conversation with Alton. Seltun changed quickly and tried to leave just as fast. Tralnor caught up to him a few meters down the hall.

“Lt. Commander?”

“Let’s you and I find a lounge where we can talk.” Seltun briefly considered what Tralnor said.

“Yes, Sir.”
Hayal-Masutra, Vulcan for Pacific Ocean, was a popular, high-end establishment that attracted a diverse cross-sample of Los Angeles. Mollie and Joe approached Sarek and T’Lal, when Joe excused himself, making a beeline for a table of loud Hollywood types.

“Hey, Lenny!” Joe, now wearing charcoal twill trousers, a pink button-down shirt, and an obscenely bright multi-colored tie, capped off his ensemble with a teal ladies’ three-quarter sleeve kimono-style bathrobe sans the belt. It was technically within the dress code.

Once seated, Mollie took out one of the data chits. “I know neither of you likes the thought of me even being in the same room with Zadie Pambakian again, but she got me everything she could out of ViCAP and Interpol. This copy is for you two.”

“Have I got a fucking gorgeous picture for you to look at!” Joe thundered three tables away. “It’s not new, but it’s never seen the light of day because it got caught up in the Magnum Star distribution shit show. Went through the student festival circuit, won a lot of prizes, and me and my co-producers finally got our hands back on it in January. Check this out.” He slipped a handful of screeners containing Celluloid Vokaya to the men at the table.

T’Lal took the chit. She and Sarek would view the contents on equipment Justin cleared as safe for them to use.

Joe flitted to another table, hugging and kissing the cheek of some generic starlet. “Allora, you know I don’t make the casting decisions at that level. I get what the casting directors give me.”

“Joey, come on, you could be the one to give me my big break.” She pouted at him.

“Kill it in the audition, make it to the final round, call me then.” He drifted to yet a third table.

“Joey!” Allora lost him and returned to her meal.

“He’s going to hide us in all of that banter and bravado.” Mollie spoke softly.

“Tie and jacket is all they said, boys!” Joe smacked the table causing the silverware to jump. “I think I look as sexy as I feel.”

The movie exec at the table took a feel of Joe’s robe. “I think you look like the dick that you are, Bergman.”

“Kinder words were never spoken, Steve.” Another chorus of barking laughter filled the air. “Got a couple of new projects in the pipe. This one I’m gonna give you is about six months out. Let me know what you think.”

“Seeing him in action, not as he actually is around you, Sarek, and myself, I believe our intentions will remain well hidden.” T’Lal was amused by Joe.

“Sorry about that.” Joe was back at their assigned table and taking his seat. “But, I’ve got to be that asshole.” He leaned in, so he wasn’t seen by the people he’d been schmoozing with. “Oliver Fromm, second guy at the first table, he’s the owner of ShuttleDirect, besides being a high-flying studio exec. I stay in good with him because he does well by my projects and he’ll loan me one of his birds, no questions asked, for a box of Cubans and a nice word around town. On Oliver’s right, his husband, Fang Xian, is a defense sub-contractor for the Boeing-Grumman Consortium. I don’t think I need to say any more about that right now.
“Second table, I wasn’t there to say hello to Allora. She’s here with her agent, Tiffani Spear. Now that Tiffani knows I’m here, she’ll be over in about half an hour to see if we can’t have a talk, out in the car park, about one of her clients. That client, no names, has a rumored and rather ingenious way that they supposedly do business with the proscribed ToVan worlds. They go and come back at their leisure, no flags or holds in Federation Customs. I’ll see if I can figure that out for our Kennuk to use.

“Table number three, Stepan Ludovic, does some distribution work for a couple of the big-name studios, always on the lookout for the next little indie hit, holds the keys to the most extensive extant collection of props, costumes, and sets in Hollywood. I figure should we need to dress up our borrowed ride, find things like functional EVA suits used only as props, anything, it never hurts to have a Steve in your pocket.” Joe slid back down into his chair. “Thank you for inviting me to share in your family time, Ambassador. I wish I didn’t have to be so loud or disruptive.”

Mollie cleared her throat, but Joe didn’t follow.

“I was sure you were brother and sister.” Joe said to T’Lal and Sarek. “No? Cousins? You’re obviously related. I can see it in your faces.”

When no one said anything for several long seconds, Joe made an open mouth, insert foot face.

“Well, here’s me shutting the hell up so we can have a nice dinner.”

Closed away from the rest of the ship, Tralnor and Seltun settled into the well-padded furniture the lounge provided. “You’ve been seeking something since we left Melbek III. What is it that you need to know, Seltun?”

“As I child, I was told about all of the terrible qualities the Lyr Saan embodied and how a Mairrigolauya was the personification of the murderous, amoral, dark times before Surak. You and your Clan were less than Vulcan, but tolerated as living reminders of what we could go back to being.”

“Those are some of the more popular opinions.” Tralnor said.

“Everything I thought knew about you was a lie.” Seltun was still so very young, unaware of the beastly machinations of reality. “A person does not do what you did on Melbek III unless you embody what it is to serve our people in the true manner Surak suggests everyone should. Few do so, yet they are perpetuating the dishonesty that taints your Clan Name.”

“Some people are not good at living by example.”

“You are very forgiving, Lt. Commander.” Seltun, rocked to his core by his new comprehension of Vulcan society, was still trying to find the logic, if any, in the stories he’d been fed as a kid.

“It’s okay if you call me Tralnor, I’d prefer if you did.”

“I have not earned that right.” He thought back to the night in the brig where he’d been so disrespectful. “Nor do I deserve the leniency you’ve granted.”

“And your question?” Tralnor was glad to see Seltun was indeed learning and evolving as a person in light of his second chance.

“I seek understanding, T’Kehr. Encountering you and learning more about Lt. Commander Sha’leyen, what are the differences that supposedly make the Lyr Saan so worthy of fear and
Tralnor thought on the query. “If there’s an answer to that, I shall have to let you into my mind to see if you can find it.”

The smiles, glances, attempts at being warm, Spock shunned them all. Unless their interactions were to do with the current trial or the care and feeding of the Enterprise and her crew, he didn’t allow himself to engage the captain.

He’d found the coarse, bloodied remains of his psyche, and started on a careful rebuild. Sealing the fissures and cracks, polishing out the pits and scratches, it would take time, but eventually, it would be like James T. Kirk was never there.

Then, and only then, could he ask the question: Was love worth trying again?

The liquor stayed in the drawer tonight. “You think we’re looking at another day over there Jim, or will Garth come to his senses and get those ghouls to plead out?”

“No, we’ll be over there, forced to listen as that overpaid asswipe keeps clawing around for some kind of hold.” Jim simply looked sad, mind not totally focused on the court-martial. “When you’re up there, play it cool, just like Sha’leyen. Don’t give Garth any of your charming wit or we’ll be stuck here for another week while he tries to argue you in circles about the meaning of some Southern colloquialism that he’ll never understand.”

“Would I do that to us, Jim? We’re not doing the universe a lick of good stagnating here.”

“Thank you, Bones.”

“No problem.”

Jim tried to fake a smile or some other approximation of a contented expression. “I blew it, didn’t I?”

McCoy wanted to be a good friend and offer a word of encouragement, but what was the use? It didn’t take a psychiatrist who specialized in relationship discord to see the writing on the wall. “Yeah, Jim, you blew it.”

Kirk nodded, indulged in a sigh, and made like he and his little kid grin were going to take the ship by storm. He nearly made it to the doctor’s door before turning around, tears rolling freely down his cheeks.

Tralnor let Seltun initiate the meld, knowing the young Vulcan did not have the experience or stamina to maintain it for very long. The Lieutenant would come out of it with an appreciation of what mental processes the Lyr Saan instilled and a taste of what it was like to live as a Mair-rigolauya.

Seltun moved through Tralnor's mind like one might navigate a natural history museum, each hall of exhibition a category neatly subdivided by cladistics. Family, mundane daily life, the teachings of Kotekru Kaylara, the Lyr Saan method of decision making, he touched on several topics almost
at random when he found the doorway to the seat of Tralnor’s hyper-empathy.

(You may enter, Seltun. I will shield you from the brunt of it.)

He stepped through into a strong yet familiar stream of emotion. (This is me?)

(Yes, you’re the person I’m physically closest to at the moment.)

(I did not know I was so lacking—)

(The Mair-rigolauya knows this current from all Vulcans. I cannot block it out, and I cannot shut these abilities down. Every person from our world comes to me in this way when they’re within range.)

(I am not abnormal?) Seltun touched on the happy/calm coming from the two human women on the other side of the bulkhead.

(You have nothing to worry about, Seltun.)

(T’Kehr, can I show you something?) He moved away, retreating into the other parts of Tralnor’s mind. Seltun located and projected something so tightly wrapped in suppressive meditation that it lurched out the only time it could, when he was asleep. Melbek III, from climbing in the pit with the bodies, seeing Ensign Radovitch stealing part of a corpse, to witnessing his greatest fear, most Vulcans’ greatest fear, k’oh-nar, the complete obliteration of emotional control, he was at a loss for effectively dealing with those experiences.

(I can teach you another coping technique that may prove more useful.) Tralnor sensed Seltun’s psionic fatigue and let him withdraw.

“That was. . . Thank you, T’Kehr.” Seltun allowed a few moments to synthesize some of this encounter. “The answer to your question, Seltun?”“We are not afraid of you, but what you show us about ourselves.”
“Vitell’s Star is overrun with human supremacists, but they’re mostly of a homegrown variety. Mick doesn’t know why the AVDL would be at his station, especially looking for Vulcan antiquities. He’s stumped. Of course, MV Sweetness filed false everything and could be anywhere by now. I did ask him if our married couple left anything behind in their room, nada.” Sha’leyen, behind her desk in uniform trousers and an undershirt, looked like she’d do anything to avoid another long day in her dress jacket.

“I spent some time with Lt. Seltun last night.” Tralnor offered what new he’d learned. “He was a year ahead of Veddah at the academy, but they did share a few elective classes. It sounds like Veddah has a very gentle demeanor. Apparently, he had incredible rapport with San Francisco’s urban wildlife, and even got a wild mustang to let him touch her when he was out on maneuvers over in Nevada.”

“Laura will have smelled that on him like chum in the water.” Spock said.

Daniel Shelley continued to heap praise on Laura. “You know you’ve made it big time when the Vee-Core are after you.”

“V’Kor.” She corrected.

“Whatever the fuck they call themselves, Santa’s Workshop Police Department wants your ass. They’ve sent warrants to Interpol, the whole fucking shebang.” He laughed and rolled his eyes at the audacity of the Vulcan authorities to think they had a chance of pinning her down. “Apparently they don’t find your feature film debut very scintillating.”

“Well, they wouldn’t, Dan.” This was one of the times where she wanted to know how someone so stupid made it to the top of the AVDL food chain.

“What would Vulcan pornography look like? Wiring diagrams, number matrices, stock market reports? No, stock reports are too unpredictable, too exciting.”

_I have seen precisely two images of what might be considered Vulcan pornography, and they remain two of the most beautiful things I have ever laid my eyes on, pictures that would be so wasted on you, Dan._ When Laura was about twelve, she’d made a wrong turn into Lady T’Sel’s bedroom at a gathering of VSA’s genetics faculty. She didn’t know how long she’d stared at them, but T’Sel had come to find her and said, “So you know how wonderful it may be,” as they left, door shut firmly behind them.

“I’ve got you off-loading your main cargo at TD-Orbital Three. I’ll be there to oversee things in person and make sure no one is helping themselves to the merchandise. From there, I want you to swing over to SubOrb Nine.”

“I don’t have any business there.” She needed to find a way to get dirtside with Veddah. Sweetness was due for a C-Check. While there wasn’t enough time for such detailed maintenance work, the old girl needed more than Laura and the crew could give her out in the lanes. That should offer a long enough gap to find T’Pau’s object if it was on Trego Delta.
“You don’t, no. That pretty little Vulcan of yours, that’s another story.”

Laura shook her head to the negative. “I don’t think so.”

“I’ve already got things lined up.” He squared his shoulders, thinking he was ready for whatever argument she brought.

“You’re not going to turn him into a porno queen.”

“And you’re missing the point, Golden Girl. The people have spoken, and they want more! They want to see that virgin ass plowed until he screams and begs for the mercy of death. They want blood, and we’re going to give it to them.” This wasn’t funny now.

“Too fucking bad, Dan. He’s mine.” She rolled a sleeve back where he could see the Sentinel fob strung up on a watch bracelet. “You don’t actually know them, haven’t lived amongst them, but if there is one thing I will not let you do, it’s taking away my personal satisfaction at slowly, methodically, and completely destroying one of them. I earned this, Dan. You and your studio vultures on SubOrb Nine can go fuck yourselves for all I care.”

Defeat took hold of Shelley’s features. “A Sentinel, really?”

“I knew you’d try something like this.” She’d had a host of reasons for installing the implant beyond worries that Veddah might try to run at Vitell’s Star. “That Vulcan is my prize. I captured the USS Seren and am entitled to my share of the spoils. Therefore, I’m within my rights to protect my claim.”

“How long is it going to take you to torture him to death?”

Her turn to smile, she loved it when Dan recoiled from her. “Oh, I don’t know. I’m thinking something like one year for each that those fucking Vulcans screwed me over.”

Mollie and Sarek were reading through the crime computer information, Justin having provided data padds he’d disabled from contacting information networks. The contents of the chit were the only thing he’d downloaded onto them. While this was T’Lal’s usual babysitting time, she’d needed to run some errands. That left Mollie with Ambassador Scary Uncle.

“Mallia?”

Mollie looked up. “Yes, Sir?”

“I know that my wife has said this, though as yet, I have not.” He set the data padd on the table where he was seated. “You are good to my son, and have always been. His mother and I were relieved when we learned that T’Pring would not be his first. . . Now that he is no longer obligated to the one chosen for him by T’Pau, it is my wish that he might choose you.”

How do I tell you this, Sarek? Should I explain? Tell a version of the truth . . .

“Should he ask. . .” Only if he absolutely has to, if there’s no other choice, but I stand by what I say next, “I would be honored to join with him.”

Granted deliverance from the fear that his child might die because of Vulcan biology’s mean streak, Sarek took on a layer of calm she’d not seen in him before.
Merciful Stars Above! Mollie thought. There is no way this ends well for any of us.

He knew when she approached, and she could feel his anticipation as she keyed the code to his cell. She bypassed her chair as to sit next to him on the mattress that was now part of his sleeping area. He didn’t flinch or shrink away.

“Are these warm enough for you?” She’d found him some long underwear that was supposed to be good to negative twenty degrees, but that was for humans.

Still layered in blankets over the top, only his arms and shoulders out where she could see them, he said, “They are preferable to nudity.”

“You have no idea how close you were to starring in your own gang rape video. Daniel Shelley was going to film it for all the universe to see.” Our mutual pact of annihilation saved you. Stay with me, Veddah. Don’t go into that abyss.

She could shove thoughts to the front of her mind, against the bond where he couldn’t ignore them. It wasn’t quite telepathy, it was too crude, but it worked. It wasn’t the only thing, remember what I said about my promises.

(It will never be like that again.) He was desperate to believe her. Through their link, his innate aching need for his mate’s reassurance shimmered like reflected heat on the horizon of a sweltering summer day. The nature of the bond, the things it was designed to set off in his body and mind, it was all he could do not to touch her.

We’re under constant observation here. Give me an hour to take care of a few things, and I’ll send for you to be brought to my quarters.

His hands clenched in anticipation. (I cannot help it. This is more intimate than my childhood bond. It compels me to seek out your skin, your mind.)

We’re not exactly following the twelve-day honeymoon tradition where that’s all we’d be doing is settling into the bond. She got to her feet. An hour.

McCoy didn’t get flustered, didn’t show the tiniest hint of his signature irritation with the universe at large, even when asked some frank questions on what he thought of Vulcans and their capacity to serve in Starfleet. He drilled home Sha’leyen’s professionalism and constant willingness to put others ahead of herself.

Kirk wanted to stand and beg the tribunal to skip to the sentencing phase. Radovitch’s moneybags father was in attendance today, and even Jerry “Rado-lite” Radovich knew his kid was guilty as hell, that the longer this dragged out, the more of an embarrassment it became. Kirk would have told him to stay in Manhattan.

Case in point, the captain thought. Ensign Radovitch is all the proof you need that Starfleet Academy is not the end-all, be-all.

When the Krampus took the stand, Kirk got to see how the kid got his rather interesting nickname.
Seltun was so Vulcan, he lacked any of Spock’s hard-won tact and socialization skills. The young Lieutenant was scathing. Kirk’s imagination ran wild with the image of Seltun whipping and tossing Garth in a burlap sack then dragging the lawyer off to hell. What these proceedings lacked in sense, they made up for in entertainment.

Spock, as Sha’leyen’s immediate supervisor, was the prosecution’s last witness. Kirk checked out mentally. All he could focus on was the angular face that from now would only visit in dreams as an apparition. Please, just look at me, Spock. Let me know that I still exist to you.

“We are going to be stuck here until Belon declares a cease-fire. The defense has fifteen witnesses. I think they managed to find his Year One teacher and dragged her all the way out here just so she can tell us how Radovitch didn’t eat as much glue as the other pupils in the class.” Sha’leyen felt trapped. “I know Trego Delta is the least likely place for the tavalik duv-tor to show up, but I think it’s the best chance we have of catching up to Laura.”

“Of the locations we have discussed, Trego Delta was only a nine-point-one percent likelihood of hosting the artifact.” Spock was also growing frustrated with the court-martial.

“Your friend, Mick Howard, sent a media file that came to his attention right after you two headed out this morning.” Tralnor said from Sha’leyen’s office. “It’s disturbing, and it proves you were right about Veddah’s behavior. And now the V’Kor are rattling their sabres.”

“We do not need that.” She logged into her inbox and clicked on the thumbnail image for Mick’s video file, cringing at what the still revealed. “They will only get in our way.”

“And they do not know how to handle Laura.” Spock said. “Nothing can prepare them for her. All the more reason we must find her first. As of this conversation, it would not be speculative to say Laura Hillyard is more dangerous than the tavalik duv-tor, where it remains hidden and deactivated.”

Spock sent Tralnor back to the media lab for the rest of the shift. As he propelled the war wagon round the ship, Tralnor’s mind would not stop replaying the video that was apparently taking the human supremacist world by storm. There were some strange details that, besides depicting the rape of an innocent young man, made it less than arousing. The picture and sound quality were lousy, but his Vulcan hearing could tell Laura was speaking throughout nearly the entire encounter. Even the advantage of excellent hearing didn’t make him privy to what she was saying.

When he’d first come aboard, Tralnor talked to Enterprise’s A/V people and found one of the only areas, save the kitchens, where the ship faltered. They didn’t really have the training, and certainly didn’t have the equipment, to take a piece of footage like this and clean it up well. Joe Bergman did.

She was probably berating her victim, doing to him with words what she couldn’t accomplish by desecrating his body. However, there was an outside chance, given Laura’s narration skills, that she might be giving away useful information.

Not for the first time, Tralnor was thankful he didn’t have any memory of what happened to him in that almond orchard.

Joe was on the verge of teetering out of his chair. “That’s—It’s making me nauseous just thinking about it.”
Pulled from her trance by Joe’s curdling emotional response to something, Mollie looked from her friend to Sarek, who’d decided to stay around. To the Ambassador, she mouthed, “Aisha t’flakosh?” The cause of his disturbance?

“Ri-fainu.” Sarek didn’t know, having not paid attention to the first part of the conversation. He folded over Joe’s copy of Variety and listened.

“If I didn’t think this was important, I would never ask this of you or anyone.” Tralnor said. “Don’t you think I’d do it myself if that was a viable option?”

“No, you wouldn’t.” Joe shook his head and expelled a heavy breath. “Because I wouldn’t let you. Lo-lite camera?”

“Yeah.”

“Fixed or moving?” Joe wrapped an arm around his gut.

“Fixed.”

“Thank fuck for that. At least I won’t have to deal with some criminal’s idea of creative cinematography. Multiple points?”

“Four total for picture, just the single microphone pick-up.” Tralnor, unseen from Mollie’s position in the room, sounded stressed. “And someone has already done a hack job of editing this together. Amateur at best.”

“Ugh.” Now that arm was rubbing his belly, trying to settle his stomach. “By the time I’m done with this thing, you’ll be able to read the titles on the bookshelves and hear a mouse fart in that room. Gimmie what you got.”

“I owe you one, a case of one for that matter. Grey Goose or Zel’e Vedmuy?”

“Better make it the Zel. I’m going to need to be drunk for this, real drunk.” Touching his temples, Joe said, “Tralnor, don’t worry about me, and take care of yourself, damnit.”

“Thank you is not enough.”

“Hey, I knew there’d be some strange shit when I agreed to come on board for this odd project. Found footage isn’t my forte, but it will be.”

For someone human to set off Mollie’s nascent empathic abilities like Joe just did, meant massive turmoil in the immediate vicinity. “What happened?”

“Are you staying until Livia gets here, Ambassador?” Joe used the back of the chair to hold himself up on his rubbery knees.

“I am in the position to do so.” Sarek replied.

The mini-bar, which Mollie hadn’t touched, offered up three tiny bottles of so-so brand-name vodka. Joe grabbed all three, tucked two in the pocket of his toucan and hyacinth macaw aloha shirt, and immediately downed the one in his hand.

“I’m going downstairs, calling a cab to take me to my house, and I’ll be in my editing suite. I don’t think I’ll be here in the morning.” He dropped the empty in the wastebasket. “I’ll let you know when I’m done.”
“Mr. Bergman?” Sarek, used to erratic human behavior, wasn’t sure what he was witnessing.

“I can’t talk right now, Sir. If I do, I’ll think about it, and I might lose my nerve.” Joe rushed from the room.

“Perhaps we should call your brother.”

She nodded. “Agreed.”

Veddah lay beside her, eyes closed, head on her shoulder. She was aware that he was working to smooth out the ragged edges of the bond, including where he’d intruded into her visual cortex. Having been in the perilous place of throwing the proverbial kitchen sink at her brain to save his life, he’d pushed deeper than a planned, professionally-guided marriage went.

While he worked, she read a book detailing the origins of the Soviet cosmonaut program and the race to beat the Americans into outer space. She’d grown up with her mother’s framed poster of Valentina Tereshkova, the first human woman sent into space, on the living room wall.

“She’s training him, Silvio’s coming.” She sensed her second in command traipsing up the corridor to her quarters. Not a hunch, not a guess, no, she felt his energy in the vicinity and it grew more concentrated the closer he got.

He buzzed and she let him in. Silvio made a sour face at Veddah. “I gotta say, I don’t get it. A sex slave that you’ve got to do all the breaking in?”

“Unlike some people, he’s trainable. He listens to what I want and actually does it.” That zing was meant for Silvio. “What brings you to my book nook sex palace on this fine afternoon?”

Still distracted, “You fucked him to the point of exhaustion?”

“Why are you here?”

“I figured out how to get you and your pet to a refinery just outside of Campbell City. My brother Damian works there and will intercept the crate we ship you down in. He’ll take you anywhere you want in Campbell.” Silvio was proud, arms crossed, shoulders back. “You and your fuck bunny go look for this treasure. Sweetness finally gets those damned condensation collectors taken care of. . . What exactly are you looking for anyway?”

“We’ll know when we find it.” She returned her full attention to her book. Silvio got the hint and departed.
Chapter 48

Between the ineptitude of Garth and his witness parade and the mental pleading and begging coming off Captain Kirk, Spock wanted to hide out for a week in his labs, far away from people, only to come out late at night every once in a while to graze the offerings at the officers’ mess.

I’ll make it better. I’ll make it right. I’ll be the man you need me to be, just don’t shut me away.
The captain, two seats away, flayed himself open, not knowing Spock could hear him.

Commander Sue Olsen, called out from Starfleet Academy, struggled to answer Garth’s specific questions about Radovitch. She was an instructor who prepared students for the rigors of landing parties from a psychological perspective. Clearly, she had not retained a memory of the accused.

“Commander, would you please read the highlighted section of Ensign Radovitch’s record?” Garth graciously handed Olsen a data padd.

“It is my recommendation Cadet Radovitch be given priority consideration for a ship of the line posting, as he has demonstrated an outstanding ability to think and act rationally in antagonistic and unconventional situations as based on his superior performance in both the Corvis II and Grayling’s World simulations.” Olsen’s demeanor darkened.

Beside Spock, Lt. Seltun was suddenly interested in the proceedings.

“Please finish, Commander.” Garth prodded.

“Furthermore, I am submitting Cadet Radovitch as my nomination for this year’s Cochran Medal, for which he is most deserving.” She practically spit the last words.

“That sounds to me like a resounding endorsement for my client, not at all representative of the actions of which he stands accused.” Smug, Garth was on the cusp of smiling. He wouldn’t have to rely as heavily on his hired-gun expert witnesses that filled out the rest of the roster if he could make this course evaluation take some traction.

“Yes, it is an endorsement.” Olsen agreed. “But I’ve never written such a document in regard to Mr. Radovitch.”

“Is that so, Commander?” Garth thought she was a moron.

“Because I wrote that letter of recommendation for this young man over here.” She pointed into the gallery. “Cochran Medalist, officer of the Federation’s Flag Ship, Lt. Seltun.”

The afternoon session ended with three contempt citations, two arrests, one of them, Jerry Radovitch dragged off in cuffs for lunging over the bar and wailing on his son for being a “lying coward and completely useless piece of shit.” Plus, a petty officer was hauled out on a stretcher when the data padd Garth hurled into the gallery in a rage hit her in the center of her forehead. It was as colorful a conclusion to a trial as any courtroom drama dreamed up for the movies.

“I did not see that coming.” Sha’leyen said, as her group arrived on board Enterprise. “Please don’t let them declare a mistrial.”
“Might not have a choice.” McCoy peeled out of his jacket before stepping off the platform. “They get a conviction now, it’ll be overturned due to ineffective counsel.”

“Dr. McCoy is correct.” Spock agreed.

“See, would you look at that?” McCoy pointed after the Vulcan. “I’d usually gloat about being right, but what’s the use?”

“Unbelievable.” She opened her collar. “I’d say it was a total waste, but the look on Radovitch’s face when Olsen caught him out? Practically worth the price of admission.”

“As soon as I know, I’ll pass the word on, being that we’re all still retained.” Kirk said.

Last to leave the transporter, Seltun said, “Ensign Radovitch was not a classmate of mine under Commander Olsen’s instruction. He was in a different section, under Lt. Commander Longview.”

“If Sonny Boy wasn’t done in ‘Fleet before today, the Fat Lady just sang him an encore.” McCoy wished everyone a good evening and wandered off.

“The Fat Lady?” Seltun asked.

Sha’leyen shrugged. “I think it is something to do with human Opera music, if my understanding is correct, or Twentieth-century cartoons about rabbits. I don’t really know.”

Seltun and Sha’leyen left together, discussing the colorful language humans used to elaborate on what might otherwise be straightforward communication.

“I will see you tomorrow, Captain.” Spock might just as well have addressed a light standard.

Kirk sent the transporter techs on their way and dispatched a message to Lyudmila Kuznetsov. My place or yours?

McCoy, back in his duty uniform, could not leave well enough alone. He had to see how his department survived without him for two days. The cynical part of him always expected to return from stuff like this to the aftermath of a riot. Sick bay was tip-top.

As much of an administrator as a practitioner, he wanted to get a start on all of the box-ticking he’d missed while going to the circus. He launched the medical records program and settled in for the evening. Not twenty minutes in, Nurses Chapel and Patel were done with their shift exchange, and he couldn’t help but hear what the women were talking about.

“Sarah David!” Christine damn-near shrieked.

“That’s what everyone is saying. They seemed to have hit it off down on Melbek III.” Joan was both consoling and fed-up.

“Joan, what is wrong with me?”

“Nothing, Chrissy, you just need to open yourself up to the possibility that maybe you should stick to human men?”

“You’re sure he’s seeing Sarah? Med Micro Sarah?”
“I don’t know if they’re going out, but he seems pretty interested in her, and she’s kinda liking him back.”

*I can’t afford to lose her,* McCoy thought. If Chapel flew the coop or he had to let her go, he’d wind up with a square peg for the round hole that was this five-year mission. Staring down the final stretch, he didn’t want to deal with a new charge nurse.

“Excuse me, Dr. McCoy?”

“Sha’leyen, how are you?” He shut off his monitor and dropped his stylus in the top drawer.

“I think that I am ready for the next series of corrective procedures.” She sat down. “And if possible, I’d prefer that you be the one to operate.”

“Of course.” He reviewed what he remembered of her medical history. “I might still bring a specialist or two on board to consult.”

“That is fine.”

“I don’t suppose I need to ask why you’ve changed your mind. You and Dr. Tralnor are only going to get closer.” He smiled at the prospect of the bioarchaeologist being comfortable enough to even think about a future with sexual intimacy a part of it. That monster she’d been married to did so much damage, her reproductive tract was a snarl of scar tissue, leaving her physically incapable of having intercourse. McCoy offered her the surgeries when he signed on as CMO, and about twice a year since then, after her physicals because Starfleet guidelines said he had to.

“If you could work up a treatment plan that shows how far apart the procedures need to be scheduled and when I should come in for any additional blood donations, I’d appreciate that.”

“Of course.” He’d switched the monitor back on, pulled up her file, and made some notes. “I’ll have that ready for you by morning.”

She’d told him once, not long after they first became acquainted, that no one knew about that internal mutilation but him, and only because he was CMO and had to know. As a sixteen-year-old refugee on Vulcan, they’d repaired her enough that she regained continence functions, but she’d chosen to stop there.

“I’m going to have to brief my surgical team.” And right then, that still included Christine Chapel.

“Thank you, Leonard.” She said, getting up to leave. “I would not trust this task to a stranger.”

He glanced at the time and made an executive decision. The moment Sha’leyen was gone, he paged Chapel and had her report back to sick bay. When the nurse arrived, she appeared level-headed and professional.

“You and I need to go over a set of records and put together a surgical consult for Lt. Commander Sha’leyen.”

Whether the concern on her face was real or faked, he didn’t care. “What is it for?”

“We’re fixing a complicated case of savagery.” His emphasis on the word left Christine confused until he brought up the photos of what they were up against.

Her hands went over her mouth. “Oh my god.”
“That slimy son-of-a-bitch.” O’Dell balked. “He stole Olsen’s letter from your file and passed it off as his for the last three years? Incredible.”

The full complement of lads, including Biltmore, Avery, and Sarah David, sat in rapt attention as the Krampus described the way the afternoon session crashed and burned.

“I had Olsen, semester before you did. Even if he’d been one of her students, he’d never have left an impression on her except as being exactly the type of shit stain you absolutely do not want on a Flagship.” Chris’ overly pale face was practically yellow with disdain. “I ran into Radovitch at some off-campus stuff, trying to buy friends and influence with his family’s money. He’d snort cocaine off a hooker’s ass if he thought it might impress someone.”

“Makes you wonder how much he doctored his transcript and how the bloody hell he got away with it for so long?” Billy the Sixth turned to Tralnor. “You know how these computer systems work from the instructor’s side of things, Dr. T. Could Radovitch have conned one of the faculty into stacking the deck in his favor or is it a hack job?”

“There’s either a corrupt Dean at the Academy, or someone higher than that, or he paid someone to do it. I’m friends with some of the profs up there and they use the same system we do at ‘SC. I can change anything I want, for my students in my classes, but I’d have to do some creative breaking and entering to alter anything else.”

“When he was abusing that corpse, he had an expression on his face that almost spoke of—I would call it guv-sanosh.” Seltun’s still processing emotional reactions to Melbek III included what to possibly make of Radovitch’s deviance.

Sarah made a face like she might be sick. “Disgusting.”

“Fucking awful.” Alton agreed.

The rest of the guys weren’t sure they wanted to know, but Andy asked anyway. “What’s that?”

“He was getting off on desecrating a dead body.” Sarah translated.

Chris gagged, barely keeping his guts together. “I don’t want to be a part of this species anymore.”

Ensign Kevin Radovitch’s jaw was broken, so he’d been sent to the lockdown unit of Starbase 21’s medical center. At least he was comforted knowing that he wasn’t facing a conviction tomorrow. Garth was good for that much. How the fuck had those caviar-fed legal elites come to the decision not to take Lt. Commander Sha’leyen’s background seriously? Radovitch didn’t know she was a goddamned cop until court was called to session.

He recalled prepping to beam down to Melbek III, read the orders, and thought it out of the ordinary that red shirts were on secondment. He’d asked the Chief about it and was told that was just how she liked to do things, don’t worry about it. He should have picked it up in the way she ran her crime scene that she’d spent time in law enforcement, that she wasn’t another faceless blue shirt he could bully or otherwise manipulate.
“How is your pain level now?” His homely, flat-chested nurse asked. He made a noncommittal sound, and she pushed a hypospray of something that numbed his whole face instead of leaving him feeling his head was splitting in two. Unable to speak, he struggled to get Nurse Fugly to use her shrunken brain to see he was miming that he wanted to write something down.

*Lawyer.* He scrawled. *Ollie Schultz, now.*

“Um, maybe I should get Doctor in here to talk?” She blinked at him.

Ollie was Garth’s second chair, and Radovitch’s only chance at dispatching a message to an important contact without risking Starfleet interception. *Bring me my fucking lawyer! Right now!*

She teetered out of the room and called for the physician on duty.

“I’d say this is one for the loss column, Jimmy.” Kuznetsov cradled Kirk, smoothed down his hair, and pressed her cheek against the crown of his head. “Bad timing, stress, maybe it was just not meant to be.”

“I can’t live without him. I know that now.” Bitter regret coursed throughout him. “I could have handled this better and chose not to.”

“Give Spock some time and distance and do the same for you. May you both heal and eventually meet at a crossroads where you can salvage your friendship.” She kissed his hair.

“I miss him so much when he’s not around. It’s that much harder when we’re in the same room together and I’m reduced to an entity known only as Commanding Officer.” He appreciated the way her body heat radiated through her uniform tunic. “I feel like I’m dead to him.”

“How long until your mission is up?”

“A little over ten months.”

“This will all be over soon.” She said. “And you both use Enterprise’s refit to recuperate. There is hope for you as yet.”

He wanted to believe her.

Mistrial.

Kirk’s orders from Admiral Holt were to stay put at Starbase 21 and wait for the tribunal to issue some edicts on how the case would move forward. At least now he could cut the crew some slack and let them indulge in some more leisure to take their minds off mass murders, Laura Hillyard, and Ensign Radovitch.

Finger over the button to send everyone off on leave, Uhura stepped into his office. “Captain, I just received a message from Starbase Corrections.”

If she was telling him in person instead of relaying the contents via the comm system, this was not news he wanted to hear. “Go ahead, Lieutenant.”
“Crewman Ella Cash was found at 0432, hanging from a shower curtain rod. She died at 0640 while undergoing surgery to repair her broken neck.”

_There’s another body for Commodore Sloan’s butcher bill, Kirk thought._
Amphetamines and vodka kept Joe both distracted and focused enough that he was still working eighteen hours later when Mollie and Sarek walked in through the sliding glass door of his cantilevered home on Mulholland Drive. He didn’t look at his guests, keeping his bloodshot eyes fixed on the bank of screens.

“Henny-Penny, go take a shower and get some sleep.” Mollie placed a hand on the back of his chair and started to turn him from the console. “Tralnor will more than understand if you take a break.”

“Almost done.” He turned back, jogged the main screen forward a couple of frames, isolated the nightstand, and started running a depix and layering program to draw out the details.

“Joe, please.”

“It’s so messed up. . .” The image gained focus and clarity. “Left in lo-lite format, it could be just about any amateur porno you’ve ever seen. Filter and correct for color and granularity, it’s way different than what those barbaric supremacist fucks think it is. Sync in the cleaned up audio track, and this thing gets even stranger.”

“Mr. Bergman, get some rest.” Sarek said. “It will still be here when you wake up.”

“I’m so close. Let me finish, and then I’ll go scrub myself raw for a couple of hours, I promise.” He saved the single enhanced frame as its own file and added it to a folder of similar images. Then he reached for a bottle of eye drops and leaned his head back. As he blinked the artificial moisture down his cheeks, he ran his right index finger over his tattoo.

Tralnor and Spock followed Joe’s advice to start with the still frames of the details of Laura Hillyard’s personal space. No photos of family or reminders of home and none of the AVDL’s propaganda where she was the face of the movement adorned her walls. She had a small metal sculpture of Sputnik on her desk, a generic travel poster for Amsterdam, and a print of an abstract watercolor from an art gallery on Epsilon Beta IV. Where things got interesting was on the bookshelves that lined most of her cabin. Laura was a lot of things, but stupid was not one of them.

Business, psychology, law, warp mechanics, computer science, astrophysics, programming languages, technical manuals, server building, various histories, neuro-psi, computer core maintenance, case studies on hacking, Starfleet bulletins and directives, criminology, forensic science, survival guides, her library was extensive and revealed a lot about her beyond just liking hard copies over electronic for information retention reasons.

“She has both of the books you and Mollie wrote. Do you suppose she’s interested in what’s in them or they’re just another part of her unhealthy obsession with you?” Tralnor knew to remain leery of this woman.

“That is hard to tell.” Spock stared at the next frame and pointed out a locked slipcase that held a very familiar set of books.

“Right under their noses too.” Tralnor zoomed in. The lock and the slipcase were of obvious
Vulcan manufacture to those who paid attention. For the idiots she was forced to live and work with, they had no idea. She’d gotten her hands on something that was given to all Vulcan children upon the completion of the khas-wan, something that was never intended for outworlders’ consumption. The series of five small volumes discussed, in detail, the workings of Vulcan psionic abilities, how they typically manifested and why, and at what ages youth should meet certain milestones. “She’s more well-versed on Vulcans than any human who’s not married-in should be.”

“Curiously, she has chosen to keep those details about us to herself. We would know if the human supremacist realm had a grasp on the intimate making of our minds.” Spock zoomed the focus out again. “One would think that she would want to share. Unleashing certain information would play directly into the AVDL’s message that we are the devils they claim us to be.”

“This means she knows about the Fever and hasn’t embarrassed our world with that knowledge. Look, next shelf down, hand-lettered spines, dust jackets made from kraft paper.” Another close-up. “Golic Vulcan, transliterated into Cyrillic characters. Even people staring right at them would think its plain old Russian. Laura is fluent. I’ve heard her speak to her mother and the handful of other Russian kids attending Consolidated with us. Those dust jackets are a sharp way of avoiding suspicion.”

“Klavin’s *Thought and Form*, T’Corva’s *Advanced Meditations for the Preparation of Subdividing Mental Processes*, *Standard Logic*, these are the texts of our youth.” They found nearly two dozen such titles randomly tucked into her collection. “Laura does not do anything by half-measures. She has taken the concept of studying one’s enemy to an elite level.”

“I’ve never seen any of those books outside of a Vulcan home. Mine are locked in a hutch away from prying eyes. My girls both got cedar chests from Great-grandma Nora for their success at the khas-wan, and I’ve made them store those books in their chests. I don’t want to know how Laura got any of these.”

“Perhaps they are stolen.” Spock offered the most likely answer. “She either took them on her own or had them delivered through the AVDL spy network.”

“They’re not for show either. She’s studied them, the jackets are worn, fuzzy around the edges. She understands us better than some of us understand ourselves.” Tralnor’s fight reaction to this woman flared. He wanted to swear at and about her but kept the name-calling in his head.

“A distressing revelation.”

Tralnor readied the video. “Now for the hard part.”

After viewing it twice, Tralnor shook his head. “She’s not doing this because she wants to. I’d have thought she’d go into that room, vitriol pumping, ready to inflict physical and mental torture on her prisoner. Instead, she’s a lesser horror to whoever this Hoskins is? Doping Veddah up on psi-inhibitors is not the action of someone who’s trying to be malicious.”

“She is in a considerable amount of pain once she’s forced him to penetrate her. I believe the psi-inhibitor is an act of mercy. She also chooses not to cause him any physical injuries and treats him with a restraint I have never seen in my dealings with her.”

“*Capable of shame.* . . .”
Laura inspected the shipping crate she and Veddah were going down in. It was nicer than some shuttles, and she signed off on it. Soon, the diamonds would be gone in exchange for relief. She’d decided, since so much of Sweetness’ crew was from Trego Delta, to let everyone who wanted off the boat for a few days go and have some R and R. She joked that she was taking her sex slave for a covert weekend of fucking under a blue sky.

She’d done well at billing Veddah to the crew as both a source of valuable information and as her erotic plaything. To them, the sex angle was her way of continuing to demean and dominate him, which they approved of. As a captive, Federation law said Veddah could not legally consent, meaning each time she took him to her bed was another count of rape against her. It was fun for everyone to see that tally go up.

“That thing is going to be like that dumb party game where they lock you in a closet with someone and you’re supposed to feel each other up in the dark.” Silvio was particularly proud of his creation. “I’d tell you to clean up the cum stains when you’re done, but soon as Damian sends this back, I’m stuffing Horse-laugh in it and dragging him over to the Market.”

“Can’t say as I’ve ever had ‘fuck someone while locked with them in a shipping crate’ as a goal, but I might make room for it in my schedule, just this once.” She and Silvio laughed. “That reminds me, I should go check in on our friends. I need to have a little chat with the dethroned Captain Franklin.”

“Have fun, Boss. See you at 1330.”

She left Silvio’s workshop and popped into the space she called her garden shed. On the bench sat her most recent creation. The disc-shaped object was bulky at half a centimeter thick, which couldn’t be helped given the materials she’d had to work with. Powered by the same ancient technology that gave humans self-winding watches, the disc broadcast a false biological signature to most security scanners and sensors. Without a battery, the device itself wouldn’t set off a scan either. Placed on a chain, hung around a person’s neck, it was a very plain necklace. She hoped Veddah wouldn’t need it, but she’d stick it on him as a precaution anyway.

Disc pocketed, she moved down the hall until she arrived at Seren’s cargo hold. “Didn’t your mothers ever teach you that it’s rude to stare?”

Ten sets of eyes averted and she walked up and caught Franklin by the hair from where he sat on the deck plates. He stumbled as his greasy skin streaked the floor. He’d thought going on some kind of hygiene strike would gross his jailers out enough they’d lessen their abuse. He tried to object to something she was doing and took the back of her hand across his nose.

“Try that again, and I’ll have the boys string you up like piñata and take turns attempting to break you open.” Franklin nodded. “I’m here to convey a little information is all. I’m molding your science officer into quite the astute lover.”

“You what?” Franklin thought his ears deceived him.

“I’m teaching him how to fuck.” She said, sewing more discord into Franklin’s impotence as a commanding officer. Then, turning over her left wrist, she showed him the Sentinel fob. “And should he think he’s not up to the occasion, I know just how to change his mind.”

“You fucking cunt!” He wasn’t trying to put on his tough-guy persona. “Lt. Veddah is just a boy, an inexperienced, nice boy. He was saving himself.”

“Nothing left to be saved now.” She teased.
Franklin looked like he smelled something rotten that wasn’t his own putrid body. “Why? Why would you defile someone like him? What could you possibly get out of it?”

“Why? Because I can.” She cocked her head and half-grinned. “Not being able to protect that kind young man from a beast like me, it reminds you of your failures as a leader and as a human being. I must thank you though, Franklin. You dumping your science officer in my lap has been a boon.”

He scowled. “I wish you’d crawl off and die.”

“That’s no way to talk to your gracious host.” The full smile revealed itself, and he scooted back about half a meter. “I have someone to keep me warm at night and I can, for the first time in years, have an intelligent conversation with a person who doesn’t find words with more than three syllables a threat. In fact, it was just yesterday that Veddah and I were discussing the Dvatai t’Kal-i-farr.”

Franklin didn’t know what she meant. Typical of these Starfleet rocket ramblers. Earth’s biggest ally and he didn’t know when he heard the language.

“Never learned Golic Vulcan did you? They all learn Standard, so why bother? That’s your philosophy, right?”

“I guess.”

“It’s a very useful language, the grammar is pretty straightforward, and their vocabulary is about a tenth of what ours is with the ability to communicate much more than Standard is capable of. If we’d have been smarter, less ethnocentrically stubborn about things, and adopted Golic as the lingua franca of the Federation, there’d be so much less animosity caused by morons who can’t convey what they want.” She laughed at a memory. “And, you can call them out when they think they’re getting away with talking shit about you. When you think you’re being complimented, and they tell you that you’re rivin-komihn or’nai’ga, that sounds pretty, maybe even honorable, right?”

“I guess.”

“You’ve just been called a twat, to your face.” She kept chuckling. “Well, technically, the straight translation is immature human annoyance, but anyone who says that to you, they mean twat.”

Franklin’s brain seized on some past encounter. “Oh...”

“Some diplomatic staffer tried to butter you up with that line, huh?” She shined with her delight at imagining Franklin puffing out his chest at thinking he’d been singled out for some fancy term of respect. “Next time, inform them they’re a kuhku-kad sakal-sa’haf. Tell someone they’re a pustule riddled scrotum, they’ll never call you a twat again.”

He decided, after being reminded of more professional humiliation, he was done with her for the time being. Not wanting him to feel like he’d gotten a victory over her by ignoring her away, she said, “And you’ve got the gall to believe that I’m the ignorant one.”

Situated in the crate, waiting for Silvio to seal them in, Veddah had to hide his hands behind his back to keep from touching Laura. He and T’Danna, in the videoconferenced sessions with the Healer overseeing their bond, were told how it would be done and what to expect as it solidified. Veddah was warned he’d need more time than most to adjust, as the psionic part of his brain was
larger than average and had additional re-wiring to do in order to accommodate his mate. Touching her mattered. His chafed mind needed more than the few hours she could scrape up for him at a time.

_Sit tight, Veddah. We’ll have a good four hours of complete privacy on our way down._

Four wasn’t enough, he wanted to say.

“Silvio, what’s taking so long?”

The sound of a panel sliding into place and snapping home was Silvio on one side of the crate, putting something together. “Just making the last adjustments to the envro controls. It wouldn’t look too good if the Golden Girl wound up with double pneumonia because she got too cold and damp while locked in a box I made.”

“Good call.” She said.

So close his senses were full of her, it was agony holding back. He needed to exist within her, mentally and physically. He shivered in his desperation to make contact. (Adun’a. . .)

“Can someone get me a couple of blankets for Mr. Freezing-His-Ass-Off? I don’t want to have to put up with teeth chattering in my ear for the rest of the day. It will drive me mad.” Laura leaned out to make sure someone answered her request. “Now, damnit!”

She started singing nursery rhymes to keep Veddah distracted while Silvio had some other panel torn off until a crewman arrived with some hospital blankets.

Tucked in, the covers arranged in a way that left him feeling more separated from her, he decided the best thing was to try to retreat into meditation. Then, beneath the blankets, he felt cool fingers seeking out his.

*What they can’t see won’t hurt them, Adun.* And she visited upon him her dazzling white light.

Deputy Chief Howard caught up to Sha’leyen as she worked through the night to catch up on the tedious administrative parts of her job. “Mick, always nice to hear from you.”

“I’m finding I can’t stop thinking about this case of yours, Sarge. Don’t get much excitement here, mostly bar fights, domestics, and petty crimes. So, I’ve been following up on your marks.”

“You are bored, Mick.” She felt like Howard needed to get back to a bigger pond or he was going to wither away.

“According to the dealers, and I’ve spoken to every one of the bastards we saw them visit, she’s the talkative one. We knew that, of course.” So delighted to be working on something he deemed worthwhile, he looked like he did when she’d first encountered him when she was a trainee.

“Right.”

“It sounds like they were trying to find, and this is what I heard the most, a box you could use for jewelry or other small stuff.” He shrugged. “I don’t get it. Stash boxes are commonplace items. Why would anyone need one that’s thousands of years old and Vulcan?”
“Sorry Mick, I can’t tell you.”

“And I don’t know if this means anything to you, but one of the business owners insisted this was strange behavior. One of the last places they visited, the proprietor saw them kissing.”

That was. . . “Kissing? How?”

“This old gent who was telling me said he’d spent his younger years inspecting freight over in the Danube system. It was a popular weigh-station with Vulcan haulage firms, and he got to know some of the crews on the regular runs. He said they’ll do that finger-touch thing in public, which yours did, but that none he knew would dare give an open-mouthed kiss where anyone could possibly see them.”

“Strange indeed.” She replied, her mind chasing down what might make them do such a thing.
“Why is San Francisco dragging their feet on this, Admiral Holt?” Kirk was sick to death of standing around with his thumb up his ass. “If we’re not out there looking for this woman and no one else is either, she’s going to evaporate for another five years, twelve living Starfleet personnel in tow.”

“I understand that, Captain.” She pointed at herself. “You seem to forget that while I know what it’s like to ride that center seat, nine out of every ten of those bay-gazers there at Ops are career office boys. And that ten percent who’ve been out here with us? So few of them have commanded a starship as to be statistically insignificant. This is new territory for a lot of them and because it’s not about alien hostiles. They are spinning in the mud trying to figure out all of the intricacies of hunting down a civilian vessel full of humans.

“I’d say this should be straightforward, but after last year’s bullshit with USS Sevastapol and that hijacked Pan Am liner, Starfleet doesn’t want another business entity suing their asses off. And AVDL’s merchant fleet is officially registered with UFP Companies House as Trego Delta Haulage and Charters.” Miranda Holt was visibly frustrated. “If it were up to me, I’d tell you to mount Laura Hillyard’s head to a glossy mahogany plaque and send it to me so I can hang it on my office wall. My hands are tied.”

“What are we supposed to do? Sitting here at Starbase 21, idle, is eating away at morale. JAG contacted me earlier this morning to tell me that charges are re-filed on the remaining grave-robbers, but it’s weeks out until they need us back as witnesses. Lt. Johnson plead guilty to all charges yesterday, so we don’t need to be here for that either.” What was the point of having a ship like Enterprise if all she was going to do was collect dust while moored at a station?

“I’ll see what I can do. No promises, Kirk.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

When Admiral Holt signed off, Kirk hesitated before punching the button that patched him into the PA on the bridge. “Commander Spock, report to my office.”

Kirk made himself ignore the vacuous distance in his first officer’s eyes. There was no friendship, no affection, no acknowledgement that they may have ever known one another outside the strict confines of their professional environment. “Our orders are that we have no orders.”

Usually, one or the both of them might have said something a little sarcastic, but the air between them remained cold and silent.

“I want to find this she-devil miscreant, Spock. The legal team steering Starfleet Ops doesn’t want us looking for her because they’re clutching at their pearls, worried that AVDL might file a lawsuit if we scratch MV Sweetness’ paint job.” He tried to look Spock in the face but couldn’t get the man to engage. *Spock, for fuck’s sake! Throw me a line, please.*

“How is it that you intend to accomplish such a goal while the Enterprise remains static?”

“You know her, Spock. Tralnor knows her. The two of you should have enough to *intuit* something about where she’s lurking.” *I’m desperate, give me something to go on. “The diamond markets?”

“No changes as of yet, Captain.”
What happened to Jim?

“Keep on that. We know what kind of ship Laura’s got. See if you can get hold of any service records for MV Sweetness, or comparable records for ships in the same class. Might be there are recalls, specialized yard maintenance, we figure out where all of these ships go, and maybe we can follow her that way?”

I’d give anything to hear you call me Jim.

Spock’s face remained as though cast from concrete. “I will see what I can find.”

“That’s great, just great.” Kirk nodded and looked at his computer screen. “Spock?”

“Yes, Captain.”

Sorry isn’t going to cut it, Jimmy. “Dinner tonight? My quarters, 1900? We need to talk about things...”

The Vulcan said nothing and left the room.

“I’ll take that as a no.” Kirk said to the empty space.

Kirk didn’t know what was on his tray, just that he wasn’t interested in eating it. He’d come to the officers' mess to get out of his office for a while. An attempt at getting Admiral Komack to persuade the numpties back on earth to let Enterprise out of her kennel ended with Kirk on the verge of receiving a disciplinary action.

Heavens forbid I ever get stuck working at Starfleet Command, he thought. But if I did, you’d better bet your ass that I wouldn’t stand for this garbage. He stabbed his fork into something. And I’d see to it that the chow was fit for human consumption.

“What’s giving you bloat today, Jim?” The good doctor took a seat.

“Everything.” He scanned the room, knowing Spock wasn’t there, still wanting to lay eyes on him.

“Any idea when we’re pulling anchor and warping out of here?” McCoy’s growing concern about the crew’s mental health was another memo on Kirk’s blotter.

“About the time hell freezes over.”

ShuttleDirect vehicle, No. 742, landed in a field next to the Big House before it was hovered into the tractor shed. T’Lal was calling in favors from her old friends in the shipping industry to outfit the shuttle, so it was less the Gulfstream luxury box it was and more capable of protecting its occupants rather than coddling them.

As that retrofit progressed, T’Lal, a certified flight instructor, had Mollie and Joe at the controls of a Gulfstream S2090ER simulator. They’d entered what looked like a plain El Segundo warehouse near all the LAX rental car agencies to find a trove of realistic sims for many of the freighters and exec shuttles currently in service.
“You have killed us again, Mr. Bergman.” T’Lal said from the co-pilot’s seat.

“You’re overthinking it, Joe.” Mollie was sitting behind them, far enough back to evaluate the moves he made, when she didn’t have her nose buried in flight manuals and tried to offer some encouragement. “It needs to be more intuitive on your part.”

“This is why I always get a real pilot. I’m more than happy to pay someone to do this stuff.” He unbuckled the five-point restraints. “I don’t get why I need to know how to do this? Mollie’s taking 742 and meeting up with Enterprise.”

“There is a possibility you will be required on scene after the tavalik duv-tor is found. If Sarek and I are unavailable, flying commercial and/or hiring a pilot are not options you will have. ShuttleDirect will match you with another S2090ER, and you will have to fly it.” T’Lal indicated it was Mollie’s turn in the hot seat.

“At least until you can get to Sohja. She’s got an under-ten passenger rating and about five-hundred hours on little birds like this, but I doubt she’ll make it back to earth before you’d have to leave.” Mollie switched with him. He didn’t think he was up to this task despite everything else he’d pulled off so far.

“I’ve never wanted to do the actual flying. I just like looking out the windows.” He shuffled toward the rear.

“Be glad we’re not having to go for any ratings, Joe, that all we’ve got to do is get the bare minimum for a private license so we can get ourselves where we need to go.” Mollie was so grateful that she’d turn this chore over to the other three when she got to the Enterprise. She settled in her seat, buckled in, powered the Gulfstream up, and entered the destination T’Lal gave into the computer. “N-742SD to Tower. . .”

The academic angle of hunting down artifacts of malice was over. After a day of crashing shuttles in the simulator, T’Lal took Mollie and Joe to a genuine warehouse in City of Industry. The massive space was lit, one end done up as an impromptu firing range. Toward the entry, Sarek stood near a table covered in weapons that looked something out of a fantasy film.

“This evening, we are showing you how to take someone out in close quarters.” T’Lal pointed to gear. “Blades are especially useful on spacecraft.”

“Oh, I don’t like this.” Joe stopped.

“You will when it saves your life, Mr. Bergman.” Sarek said.

The human regarded the table like he might just run for it. “What about. . . I mean, you’re not supposed to be, I don’t know, violent?”

Mollie, like all Vulcan youth, was given thorough instruction in self-defense as part of training her mind and body to act as one. As university students, she and Sohja learned D’Alik’tal, the equivalent of rapier-dagger fighting. She was competent in some other larger weapons, but nothing like this. Jabbing, stabbing, throwing, slicing at a person on you and trying to kill you, that was new.

“What the fuck is that?” Joe pointed to a wicked little hatchet.
“In human parlance, it is a tomahawk.” T’Lal said. “It is designed to be thrown end-over-end and is very effective in dropping an enemy combatant.”

“*Enemy combatant?*” Pale, Joe swallowed hard. “I can tell you’re talking from experience. You’ve both killed people, haven’t you?”

“Yes, Mr. Bergman.” Sarek, in the context of the mission they were preparing for, had no reason to deny causing death. “In situations where we were left with no choice.”

“Okay.” Joe said. “Thanks for being honest. . . I guess if it’s a me or them kind of thing, I’d better know how to save my own ass.”

“How does this impact what we’re doing?” Tralnor schlepped the war wagon while Spock walked alongside.

“Being an unofficial order, it should not affect us.” People approached, sending the conversation over to telepathy. (He is growing restless, as is the rest of the crew.)

(Do we send him on a wild goose chase?) Tralnor didn’t think that a decent strategy. Kirk wasn’t in the best place mentally and to have Spock block him out on a personal level and mess with him on a professional level to protect a sub-rosa extracurricular project might push the captain over the edge completely.

(It is not my intent to deceive him, but we cannot let him become involved in the Kennuk’s work. He will endeavor to help us any way he can and harm himself in the process. His life, his career, those are not worth wasting on this.) Spock granted himself the mental equivalent of a sigh. (We might satisfy him by giving him Laura’s trail at Vitell’s Star. He would be a couple steps behind us, but not underfoot, and not feeling like he has been lied to.)

(And we don’t have to give him anything on the tavalik duv-tor, because he’s after Laura and MV Sweetness. That’s a good compromise.)

(It should satisfy him for the time being.) Spock switched tracks. (This morning, he invited me to dinner, the two of us, his quarters.)

(What did you say?)

(Nothing. I did not acknowledge the request.)

Tralnor put the handbrake on the cart, opened the refrigerator compartment, and pulled some pre-mixed reagents for a scheduled drop-off. (That won’t have set well.)

(It does not have to.)

The molecular analysis of ketro’nistin let Sha’leyen understand its mechanism of action. On a non-psion, it would leave a person groggy and uncoordinated. It wasn’t terribly dangerous to a regular telepath either, knocking them into a temporary catatonic state most likely, but nothing deadly. The drug was designed to attack the empathic centers of a Mair-rigolauya’s mind, creating a kind of Chinese finger trap where the injured party and the empath were tied into one another, the link
only breaking when the aggrieved was cured or the empath died.

The ancient Golic scientists tailored the drug specifically to the genetics and mental processes of the Mair-rigolauya. Sha’leyen could not account for the Vohr’s genetics if the creature came into being, but its hyper-stimulated psionic abilities had to include some variation of empathy, or at least use that part of the brain.

Aerosolizing it was not difficult. The mode of administration was something else. How could they protect Tralnor from it and still use it? There was not an antidote that she knew of and she was unable to formulate one due to lack of research trial capabilities. She couldn’t exactly go over to Starbase 21 and put in an order for twenty empathic white rats and run tests on them.

She needed to find Zakhira Tay. Sha’leyen felt her T’Kehr knew more about this drug than she let on.

Finally dispatched from Orbital Three to the surface of Trego Delta, Laura allowed Veddah to touch her how he needed. Her stress levels dropped perceptively the longer his hot skin was in contact with her. His mind slipped back into hers, now starting to feel like it was always meant to be there.

No longer stumbling blind, she perceived the place in her brain where he existed, knew its boundaries, and differentiated his energy from her own. Where at first the bond, on her side, seemed almost entirely one-way, him feeding into her, she inferred the permeability of the psychic membrane between them. Visualization let her see herself standing in front of a mirror made of an organic substance she would be able to push her body through before much longer.

Their minds were slowly knitting together like a broken bone healing over. She’d not appreciated the time or effort involved in making a marriage bond work. Betrothals at age seven were tiny shadows of what was coming. To leave this thing dangling, unfinished and raw, would still act as the dead man’s switch, with the danger of leaving him in worse condition than when he started on this rash quest.

Something private, something he wasn’t directly telling her, seeped across. Had the choice been mine, I would not have rejected you from the educational system. If they had touched your mind, they would have seen your potential beyond the academic.

What does that mean, beyond the academic? She had to know, even if she came off as an eavesdropper.

(You heard that?)

She felt her eyes sting, a defiant tear slipped down her cheek. (You would have admitted me?)

(Say that again.) His features, slack from surprise, gave her a spot of worry. Was something going wrong?

(Say what?)

He pulled her close, wrapping himself around her, and set his forehead against hers. (You speak, Adun’a.)
Chapter 51

Tralnor and Spock parted at the entrance to the media lab. The first officer walked off into the guts of the ship, no particular destination in mind, needing to move to burn off some restless energy. He knew he’d made a mistake when going past sick bay and McCoy nabbed him.

“Don’t you argue with me right now, Spock. Get in there and sit your ass down and stay down.” The doctor pointed toward his office.

What was the saying, no rest for the wicked? Spock obliged McCoy. To avoid a spluttering public confrontation, where the doctor screeched and flapped about, and Spock came off, yet again, as a cold bastard who cared more for the ship than the people aboard, was the Vulcan’s immediate objective.

“You need to ease up on Jim, Spock.” Level, worried, McCoy’s voice lacked the borderline histrionics Spock expected. “He knows he fucked up. He knows you’re mad at him and have good cause. All he wants is for the two of you to finish this five years out on good terms.”

“I am not ‘mad’ at the Captain.”

A touch of hope visited relief on the doctor’s features. “Now, I’m not saying you’ve got to give him another chance in the romance department, but don’t you think it might be nice for the both of you to—”

“I do not think anything in that regard, Dr. McCoy. If this is the only subject you want to address, it is not open for your speculation or value as entertainment.” Spock started to stand.

“I thought I told you to sit your ass down, Mister.”

Spock rose to his full height and made toward the exit.

“CMO’s orders.”

_I do not want a confrontation with you_, Spock thought as he turned around.

“And I’ll let you up and out of here when I’m good and ready.” Arms crossed over his scrubs, McCoy was not teasing, not engaged in antagonistic banter for the fun of getting a rise out of Spock.

Seated, Spock said, “Yes, Doctor?”

“The best damned command team in Starfleet can’t function when one or the both of you is checked out. That is a fact. Unless you can start playing nice with one another again, you’re going to keep drifting until the Enterprise becomes every other ship in the fleet. We, the crew, the ship, work because the two of you work.”

“Are you attempting to guilt trip me, Doctor?” _There are no apologies left for the Captain to say. Sorry has lost its lustre. He needs to figure out if he wants me or not. He needs to let me recuperate. That is all._

“If I thought it would work, I’d give it a shot.” He shrugged. “No sense in trying that out on you, is there?”
“No, there is not.”

“Here’s the thing, Spock, when it was looking like you and Jim were in love, and a relationship might happen, I was over the fucking moon. He’s always needed someone stable, someone who wasn’t going to hold his career against him, someone who understood him on a deeper level than others were willing to go. I’ve known him a long time, seen him struggle through an endless string of shitty relationships, and contrary to all of the urban legends, he wants to settle down with someone. You are that perfect someone.”

_Obviously, I am not, or you and I would not be locked in your office right now, _Spock_ nearly said aloud.

“And I’ve spent the last two years losing sleep over you, you copper-blooded crazy man.” Hands back on the desk, McCoy wore his concern on his face. “After that shambolic wedding stunt on Vulcan, you better bet your last dollar that I did some research and got my hands on everything I could. I spent six weeks harassing _Sha’leyen_, day-in, day-out, to get her to tell me anything. There I was, only knowing that staying single could very well kill you.”

“What did you learn from the Lt. Commander?” _Sha’leyen_ was the first person he sought out when he realized what was happening to him. He’d brimmed with an irrational hope that there was some obscure Belonite medicinal compound she knew of to stop the Fever or at least slow it down. When she told him there was nothing. . . He’d tried to touch her, his hormone-addled body overriding the logical part of his brain. _I cannot help you that way either,_ she said. His immediate response was that no one would have a grossly offensive half-breed like him if they could help it. That’s when she delivered a psionic hit where he felt the ripples and bulges and snarls of scar-tissue, the adhesions, the constant pain, the nerve damage and malfunction in her lower abdomen.

“Before you think about reading her the riot act about disclosing Vulcan’s dirty laundry, I asked her some very pointed questions when you were going down with the _pon farr_. All she’d say was that we needed to take you home because the arrangements were made. That’s it.”

_You are worthy of me in this way, Spock S’chn T’gai. It is I who is broken._ Those words seared and he’d fled, humiliated and horrified that his acute condition put her in such a situation.

“I will not admonish her for aiding you with the crew’s welfare.” _Not when she has never spoken of my temerarious attempt at propositioning her._

“She’s told me that it’s going to be hard to find the right person for you and that one of the reasons they pair you up when you’re kids is that your bondmate grows up with you and that you should have adapted to and been used to one another by the time you get married. Love matches can be fraught with all kinds of pitfalls if minds don’t line up the way bodies do. You may be compatible in every way with someone, but can’t get the psionic part to take, and while that’s not really an issue outside of the Fever, you need the telepathic element in the _plak-tow._”

“She is correct.”

“But you and Jim, there’s no question of your mental compatibility. He’s not a psion, and that doesn’t matter since you’ve proven multiple times that when you’ve melded, you fit together like you were bespoke for one another. Surely that’s got to mean a lot?” Blue eyes begged _Spock_ to reconsider his blockade of _Kirk_’s affections. Not getting a reply, _McCoy_ didn’t become animated, he started to show signs of defeat instead. “So, what are you going to do when your _Time_ comes?”

_I shall be rapacious and destroy someone else’s life so Jim Kirk cannot destroy mine._ “I have a contingency plan. Get some sleep, Doctor.”
If whinging about boredom were an Olympic sport, Lt. Chavez stood a fair shot at being crowned squad captain. He nervously faffed around the lab impinging on those who were doing any real work. His deprecating staff only loathed him more.

Squirrelly Yeoman made an appearance right as Tralnor got the war wagon squared away. “Dr. Tralnor, a package arrived for you over at the Starbase.”

Chavez was up in Squirrelly’s personal space, trying to glimpse any details from the small wooden crate. “Are you sure this is for the Doctor?”

“Someone’s jealous his mummy didn’t send him a care package.” A crewman said just loud enough to hear.

“Mail, from Scotland?” Chavez looked ready to gag. “Some people have all the—”

When Tralnor saw the last name attached to the return address, he started, hesitant to accept the delivery. Squirrelly handed off the crate, red in the face, reliving the embarrassment of the violin incident, and escaped.

“What? You look like he just gave you a coffin.” Chavez was drooling for a distraction. “Open it.”

He took it to his station where he could at least sit down. Guy and Cressida Balloch weren’t going to send Tralnor anything that wasn’t a heartrending reminder of their son. Their turbulent emotions, etched into the crate, crept into his nerves and provoked an empathic reaction. They still couldn’t come to grips with their boy being murdered for who he chose to love and associate with.

“At least read the packing slip.” Chavez demanded.

Sent to Tralnor, care of Officer Location Services, an included note said they were going through some old things and found the crate with instructions tacked to it that if anything should happen, Jock wanted Tralnor to have the contents. Guy and Cressida didn’t open it and forwarded it along, undisturbed.

It took a pair of pliers to turn the seized buckles. Lid set to the side, Tralnor was greeted by a strip of tiny images from an old-fashioned photo booth. He and Jock, maybe twenty, probably twenty-one, were making faces in all but the last frame. In that final little square, they weren’t looking at the camera because they were facing one another, engaged in a kiss.

Heart pounding in his ears, he lifted the yellowed piece of paper that said: Start Here. A stack of postcard size prints tied with a tartan ribbon, Tralnor felt his departed friend’s warmth. Each photo contained a split-second of a memory. He didn’t know who saw as they stared over his shoulder. Seven snapshots in, he had to set them to the side, and left a frozen moment of Jock Balloch, Amelie Grace, and Paulette Gordon, smiling as they posed in front of a departures board at LAX, as the top of the stack.

Random trinkets: the 5-ball from a rough biker bar in Butte, Montana, a cloisonné Tournament of Roses lapel pin, a cheap plastic snow-globe from their crazy junior class trip to Seattle for the University of Washington game, a capped test tube held a desiccated clump of turf from Notre Dame stadium ‘SC 34 irish 6’ written on one side, ‘Fuck the irish!’ on the other, a pair of spats signed by various famous musicians the marching band performed with, and a little white horse figurine painted to look like Traveler, one of the university’s mascots. This was the top quarter of
whatever this time capsule contained.

Another sheet of paper said: *I regret my silence/It cost me dearly/You deserve the love/Of someone who can actually say it.* Beneath it was a padded envelope that contained a smaller box.

The crumbling remains of a thistle were tied around the box which was wrapped in a sheet of expensive pink paper. Both the plant and the paper were held by a disintegrating length of twine. The back side of this sheet of stationery and the grinding anguish coming from the thing it covered left Tralnor wishing he could teleport away from this crowd and lick his wounds in private.

A set of matching men’s wedding bands, an intricate Celtic knot design engraved on the outside, the announcement of Amelie Grace’s pregnancy with Kayva on the pink paper, and Jock’s annotation: *I’m sorry, Tralnor. I never had the balls to ask you, and I love you both too much to intervene in this.*

“At least I know why I never saw him again before he died.” The year Kayva was conceived had been a roller coaster of turmoil and grief, and the layers continued to grow. Not only had Jock abruptly disappeared from his life, but Tralnor’s brother John, his wife, and their two sons also died in an accident that January. Their brother Jason, overwhelmed by the loss, committed suicide in March. Anya Willis, Tralnor’s wife at the time, desperate to try to save their marriage, still refused to enter into a bonding, but decided they should have a child. Sterile, Anya came across a photo of Amelie Grace, thought her husband’s friend looked enough like her to be a surrogate, and his younger daughter was created via IVF. He and Anya were divorced by August. Amelie Grace was still having his baby, and they decided to do it together, an endeavor between friends. Kayva was over a year old when Tralnor married her mother.

“And they’re both dead because of me.” He said before getting up and walking away from his station.

Spock, who’d shown up to steal Tralnor so they could commiserate with Sha’leyen, witnessed the unboxing and caught the musician before he escaped. “Their murders are not your fault. Jock Balloch and Amelie Grace were good people caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. The AVDL was going to slaughter anyone that day they felt like.”

“If they hadn’t known me. . .”

“They were my friends as well.” Spock said as he went to the workstation and repacked the crate to take with them. He paused to look at the snapshot on the top of the tartan ribbon stack. Paulette’s voice echoed in his mind with the phrase she’d met him with every morning, *Who loves you, bay-bee? That’s right, I do!*

Even in the depths of soul-impinging exhaustion, Mollie knew kissing wasn’t behavior normally displayed for public consumption. “I hope it’s just part of whatever act they’re putting on.”

“In that disgusting video, it’s obvious he doesn’t know how to kiss.” Omnipresent, Joe offered his observations. “How does he go from that to sucking face with the devil in an antique store?”
“It means something sinister.” Tralnor said. “If she’s terrorized Veddah to the point where he’d comply with something like that, he’s in more danger than we thought.”

“Ambassador Scary Uncle said this kid might be looking at something called hishal-vimevilau riyehht-kashik. And that if we don’t find him soon, the damage could be permanent.” Joe said. “I didn’t know Vulcans could suffer nervous breakdowns.”

“We’ve figured out who Veddah is. Sarek did some discrete prodding, and I’ll include that info with the encrypted law enforcement files I’m sending you.” Mollie propped her head on her hand, trying not to fall into a dead sleep. “Laura’s record is the kind of reading that makes you think novelists aren’t trying hard enough to come up with story and character ideas.”

“She’s knocked off banks, built mail bombs, extorted people, murdered others, trafficked in slaves, and raped this poor kid, how does all of this exist within one person?” The dark circles beneath Joe’s eyes gave him a sunken appearance. “If I didn’t have such reliable sources, I’d say Laura Hillyard was the product of an inexperienced screenwriter’s imagination. Mollie says she’s also terrifyingly smart.”

“She did not graduate from high school, yet she wrote the sniffer that found Enterprise’s obscure security leak, the follow-up attack virus that nearly killed us all, and the trojan horse that resulted in the destruction of the interfaces between the computers and our warp engines.” Spock was one of the few people who knew not to confuse Laura’s dearth of formal education with a lack of intelligence. “Under different circumstances, she might have become a leading light in warp systems engineering.”

“Mollie, can we forward the police files to Captain Kirk?” Sha’leyen asked.

“You’re letting him in on what we’re doing?” That was an unsound idea, involving someone who proved the reality that Vulcans could indeed have nervous breakdowns.

“A distraction technique to keep him away from what the Kennuk is engaging in.” The bioarchaeologist replied.

“Send them along.”
Chapter 52

He thought he’d try his luck with one more of the gurus at Starfleet Command. Whatever Komack said or did the day before, Nogura upped the ante, giving Kirk heart palpitations.

“It’s easy for you to exist out there in your little bubble of starship command, Captain Kirk, only ever having to worry about Enterprise. I know you think all we do here in San Francisco is play shuffleboard and drink Mai Thais.” Nogura had a bulgy vein on the left side of his forehead that twitched and swelled the more irritated he got. Right now, it looked like a cobra drawing back to attack. “We are monitoring the entire Melbek III situation and the related minutiae very closely.”

“You can monitor until your lips turn blue, Sir, but standing by and taking your sweet time is how my ship ended up dead in the water and put USS Seren’s crew in place to be slaughtered. You have to send us back out there so we can capture the monster who did this before she strikes again.” The instant the words flew off his tongue, Kirk knew he’d gone past the point where Nogura might brush him off as a noisy space-cowboy.

Not amused, Nogura stiffened. “Are you presuming to tell me how to do my job, Captain?”

“No, Sir.” Kirk’s fingernails dug into his knees. He was glad the Admiral couldn’t see what he was doing with his hands.

“Enterprise is on stand-by. Not to your liking? That’s too bad, Mr. Kirk. Honestly, I’m tired of hearing about your devil-may-care approach to command and how you repeatedly swoop in to save the day at the very last second. Polish your boots, host a bowling tournament, I don’t care what you do so long as it involves following Command’s orders to the letter.” The cobra vein branched, assuming a more lightning-like shape. “This is the real world, Captain, where your swashbuckling antics will not be rewarded. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Sir.” He had to choke back the fight burning in his mind.

“You don’t know just how easy you’ve got it out there, Kirk. A man and his boat is sweet simplicity, straightforward like knots and crosses. Starfleet Ops is where the big kids play the hard games and crunch the devil’s algebra. There’s no sneaking in the night before and reprogramming the computers to act in your favor.” Nogura was satisfied with this admonishment. His smarmy Buddha-esque face only added weight to the millstone around Kirk’s neck.

You were the holdout. He came to an ugly realization. You were the one who wanted to expel me from the Academy since you didn’t appreciate my unique approach to solving the Kobayashi Maru. You were outvoted and have been gunning for me ever since.

“The buck stops here, Son. You will await your orders. Nogura, out.”

Miranda Holt was fit to be tied. “Any chance I had at helping you just went down the toilet. Nogura? Of all the people you could have contacted at Command? What in all that is holy were you thinking?”

“I was—” His brain grasped for the words.

“He’s always believed you to be an insolent man-child who commands by the sheer will of a cult
of personality. You have shit the bed on this, Captain.” She nearly cut the connection. “And this close to the end of your five years...”

“So I challenged him a little. Who cares?” Kirk shrugged and grinned a bit. “I’m only acting on behalf of my crew and trying to make it as good as I can for them.”

“What were your plans during and after the refit?”

Were? That was not a happy portent. “I’ve been in talks to go on a speaking tour. I’ve got nine months of leave I’ve been accruing for years now and thought I’d go tell people about the Final Frontier. Then, I’m overseeing my girl as she’s getting her facelift. Once that’s done, its back to the stars.”

“My advice is that you’d better start looking for a long-term rental home in San Francisco, maybe even think about buying.”

Slightly amused at the comment, he said, “What makes you say that?”

“Mark my words: Nogura’s going to ground you the second you make it into earth orbit.”

This couldn’t be a serious prediction. Kirk felt sure Holt was just trying to say, in a more psychologically jarring way than she might usually, that he needed to shape up and follow the status quo for a while longer. “He wouldn’t... Starfleet needs me out here.”

“That might be true, Kirk. You might not be allergic to bees either, but kicking a hornet nest can still get you stung so many times you become overwhelmed, and you die.”

What could he say to that? “I appreciate you sticking your neck out for me like you have, Ma’am.”

“Whatever you do, sit tight at 21.” Her tone and expression were sober. “Laura Hillyard can blow up a nursing home and start selling babies as dog food from the next berth over beginning tonight. If you so much as think about taking her down without direct permission from Command, Nogura will rake you over the coals so fast you’ll be on the next shuttle home to the family farm in Nebraska before you realize you’ve caught fire.”

“Iowa.” He uttered.

Miranda Holt was off-balanced by Kirk’s reaching out to Nogura. He’d never seen her like this, even during an ugly incident on his Cadet cruise when she was captain of the USS Meritorious. He was on a landing party with her when a guard shack at a Frentian royal compound exploded. She had a meter-long chunk of re-bar impaled through her right lung and was less worried then than she was now.

“Sometimes, we just have to bend over and take it.” She’d followed the trajectory of his career and advocated on his behalf over the years. Why was she so worried about Nogura?

He nodded. “And my crew?”

“Work on drills, cross-training, and gaining new credentials. Grant some leave to non-essentials. Make everyone go through the PTSD recognition protocol, again. I hear some of your science officers are musicians and film-makers, ask them to put on some entertainment.”

He nodded along.

“Hang in there, Captain.”
The instant Kirk signed off, the room started to spin as the implications of what Holt said, if her prediction was accurate, starved his brain of oxygen and stunned his lungs into not inflating. A crushing tightness took over his chest and radiated down his arms. Fever sweat pooled in uncomfortable places and stars danced in his field of vision.

He slid from his chair to his knees, as sweaty palms refused to make purchase on the slick surfaces of the furniture. His last thought as his head impacted the edge of his desk was how it would kill him to see his silver lady warping away without him in the center seat.

Alone in his office, Spock was collating data from the collective AVDL police reports, focusing on MV Sweetness and her known crew. Ex-captain, Corliss Fish, was serving fifteen years on racketeering and tax evasion. First officer, Silvio Mazzi, mostly a hired thug, had at one time been a fine arts student at the University of Chicago before his racist antics caught up to him and he was advised to drop out. He’d done some jail time for various assaults but kept a relatively low profile for an AVDL member so close to those at the top.

Spock searched out one other specific individual, knowing he needed to make a meeting in half an hour. When he found Dr. Manfred Hoskins, DVM, the criminal record on that guy was going to take a lot longer to read than the twenty minutes he had. He breezed through the cover page to see Hoskins’ veterinary medicine license was permanently revoked because of an extensive history of rape and molestation charges. Spock dared to open the first case that had resulted in a conviction and was met with an array of revolting evidentiary photos. Veddah would not have survived such an attack.

The thought made Spock feel physically ill, but it formed in his brain nonetheless. Laura saved Veddah’s life.

He exited the files and completed a couple of breathing exercises because throwing up wasn’t going to help anything. As he regulated his pulse to a normal rate, a burst of pain knifed horizontally through his forehead. Momentarily dazed, Spock blinked while trying to gain his bearings. His vision flickered twice, where he saw for only a fraction of a second, not the room he was in, but one nearly as familiar.

His hand fell to the desk com. “Sick bay, this is Chapel.” “Nurse, may I speak to Dr. McCoy?”

“Are you in your quarters? I can be there right away.”

Damn that woman, he thought. “Tell him to meet me in Captain Kirk’s office.” Silence for a few seconds, then, “Um?”

“Now, Nurse Chapel.”

Penlights shining in his eyes, fingers waving, questions about the date, his name, where he was at, all Kirk's physical self wanted was to go to sleep. Fingers snapped in his ear.

“Wake up, Jim.”

Mind detached from his body, the captain looked down from the light fixtures and watched McCoy
fuss over him. “Extremely elevated stress hormone levels, low blood sugar, dehydration, lack of sleep, he’s lucky he just wanged his head. Spock, help me get him up on the sofa.”

His beautiful Vulcan entered the scene and left McCoy with the heavy end. Spock picked up the captain’s feet and ankles, so hands and fingers had layers of socks, trousers, and boot leather between them and Kirk’s skin.

“I think it’s for the best if I treat him here rather than us dragging him through the ship. Keep watch until I get back with some supplies.” The doctor disappeared.

Talk to me, Spock. I’m here. I promise to listen. Kirk felt himself start to descend from the ceiling. His body’s systems were shaking off the shock, reeling him back into the corporeal realm. Once down to a height where he ‘looked’ his first officer in the eye, he thought, Oh! To reach out and touch you. . .

Invisible fingers traced the outline of Spock’s jaw, thumbs ran over his lips, and Kirk imagined the delicious warmth radiating from his skin. Sometimes, I wish that you could see you the way I see you, that I could wipe the pain of inadequacy from your heart. I want to show you who and what you really are, not the recurring failure your father sees, not the lab bench monster Laura Hillyard sees, not the heartless commander so much of the crew sees.

Chocolate brown eyes did not register Kirk’s presence, so he got closer. I would kiss you, let you feel my love for you as our minds touch. I’d give you my admiration for your kindness and accommodation. Touched his neck and drew a petal-soft line from his clavicle to the tip of his ear. I’d transfer to you the concept of unconditional love in the hope that one day you may also love yourself.

Lips brushed against lips that couldn’t experience the sensation.

“You can’t let them take her away from me.” Kirk’s words slurred and his pupils were sluggish, but McCoy was confident Jim hadn’t done any real damage. IV hydration, glucose tablets, the captain was coming around.

“What is he on about, Spock?” The doctor took another reading. Blood pressure steady, that was good.

“I do not know. He has repeated the same statement six times since regaining consciousness. He has not said anything else.”

“Jim, according to my readings, it looks like you had a panic attack. That’s what made you smack your head.” A shot of B vitamins would help too.

The captain tried to rearrange his body so he could sprawl out on the sofa. “Tired, Bones.”

“Nope.” McCoy moved him back to his previously upright position. “You’ve got to play by my rules right now, or we’re hauling you off to sick bay. You’re going to stay awake and interact with us.”

“Because of rules. . .” Kirk touched his forehead and winced like he was discovering the injury for the first time. “Bones, you can’t let them take her away from me.”

“Follow my fingers.”
Kirk’s eyes tracked better than they were focusing.

“The leading causes of death amongst Starfleet vessel command staff, mind these are the private numbers us CMOs hoard and San Francisco won’t let us share, are these broad categories: stress, industrial accidents, acute illnesses of initially unknown etiology, transit accidents, hold-my-beer-misadventures, and suicide. Stress puts more of you into forced retirement every year than getting passed over for promotion, limbs lost to machinery, and disciplinary issues combined. You hear what I’m saying, Jim?”

“Heard, Doctor.” The captain replied.

“Good. Later, when you can ambulate and not sway around like you just got your bell rung, Kuznetsov is going to collect you, and you’re spending two days over on the starbase. She’s a trained medic, and former Medical Corpsman, and will keep me up to date without me being there in person breathing down your neck.” McCoy added a few more vitamin and mineral supplements to Jim’s chart. “Doctor’s drug of choice for your current condition: vacation.”

“Can’t do that. I’m waiting on orders.”

“Enterprise has been contacted by Command. We are officially on standby, as is the Dragon.” Spock reported.

“It’s him.” Jim said. “Nogura. He’s going to convince them to take her away from me.”

It was like the flapping of butterfly wings, Spock concluded. And the butterflies carried with them a zephyr of unadulterated human emotion. Free from the interference of jealousy, lust, and insecurity, love touched him.

There was no physical sensation, not in the way a humanoid nervous system could process it, but he had perception of his own electromagnetism, and a familiar presence had visited him there in the captain’s office. The unconscious mind, in Spock’s psionic experiences, was vastly less inhibited than when a person was aware of themselves, like the way alcohol shows many people for who they actually are.

Love.

In this form, it wasn’t staked to sex or romance, friendship or family ties, it simply was. And it would always be.

Now, he knew with complete certitude. James Tiberius Kirk loves me.

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