Everything Was Beautiful; Nothing Hurt... or Even More Kin and Even Less Kind

by katiemariie

Summary

Settling a new colony implies a kind of “settling” down after years in Starfleet, but weird stuff tends to make its way to the colony, like an amnesiac robot from the future, a teenage boy who would rewrite history to have a family, and a Romulan who for some reason looks a lot like your father. Contains Minor character death, non-graphic description of rape, sexual assault, non-female lactation, attempted suicide, drug and alcohol use, cissexism, binarism, ableism.
Sulu could remember a time when going over to the Captain’s quarters to have a drink meant something other than navigating one’s way through a minefield of baby toys to sit on a cereal covered couch and suck on a juice box. That was back before Spock had to leave the bridge to pump whenever his milk came in, before Dr. McCoy was the one thing tethering the galaxy’s most gifted telepath to this realm, and before Uhura stopped relaxing her hair. Good times, good times. Although, he had to say, Uhura’s new hair did look fetching.

Kirk sucked the last drops out of his juice box and placed it on the coffee table. He steepled his hands thoughtfully under his chin, and looked like he was going to say something before he caught a glimpse at his hands, which caused an almost rueful expression to cross his face. He blinked several times and began to speak. “As you may already know, several members of our crew will be departing very soon, leaving me... with no first officer. Considering how well you and I get along and your desire for command experience and Scotty’s aversion to leaving to the engine room, I’d like to offer you the job.”

“Oh, man I thought you knew. I thought you were the one who recommended me.” This was awkward. “Jim, bro, um, I’m getting the Excelsior. Our mission starts in two months...” He added quietly, “I’m taking Chekov.”

Jim sighed and forced a smile. “Congratulations on further demolishing our family.”

“Should I?” Sulu gestured toward the door behind him.

“Yeah, ya should.”

Sulu was going to pretend it was normal ship rumblings he heard as the door to the Ccaptain’s quarters closed behind him, and not the sound of a giant Lego nearly missing his head.

“Who could forget?”

“Certainly not Ensign Keenser.”

“Say we end up on a planet in some far flung corner of the galaxy, how hard do you think Jim will take it?”

“I foresee an emotional outburst that will cause acute discomfort for at least half of the Enterprise’s
“How bad we talking? Tears?”

“At least one.”

“Jesus.”

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Kirk was sure he was getting a bum deal out of this. “Can we renegotiate some of these?”

T’Pring glanced at her chronometer, but Sulu smiled openly. Smug bastard. “Which ones?”

“Uhhh...” He looked over his PADD. “Riley.”

T’Pring shook her head. “I will not give up Riley. I require an aide with his experience, and he desires diplomatic experience.”

“Okay.” Kirk leaned into the table. “But don’t you think it’s a little suspect to ask Kevin Riley of all people to move to a new colony? He doesn’t have the best personal history with them.”

“I gotta agree,” Sulu said. “I mean, you could be negotiating like a peace treaty or something and he could start having a Tarsus flashback and go all Rambo.”

“Fine,” T’Pring said. “The two of you may fight over Lieutenant Riley like two carrion birds circling a festering corpse.”

Before the last word was out of her mouth, the two men were shouting, “Dibs!”


“I want Riley for my chief communications officer.”

“He’s better as a navigator.”

“But he wants to get into communications.”

“Well, he can’t go and change like that. You can’t just sign up for five years of navigating and friendship and leave half way through to go form a new...” Jim realized just how embarrassingly off topic he was getting. “...chain of command.” Kirk looked down at his hands. “You can have Riley, but I need Zahra.”

“Cool. Are we all done?”

Yes, they were all very nearly done.

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The room quieted as T’Pring entered, noticing the food covered table. “I see you started without me.”

“The food was getting cold,” Uhura explained, pulling out the chair next to her at the crowded table. “And, besides,” Uhura teased, “you’re late.”

“The Captain seemed content to drag out the conference for as long as possible,” T’Pring said, taking
her place at the head of the table, careful to brush her fingers against Nyota’s in what she called a “kiss hello.” Such a strange Human custom. “You will be interested to know that Kevin Riley will be joining Sulu on the Excelsior as chief communications officer.”

“Good for him. He’s a good kid,” McCoy said. “Guess you’ll be needing to find another aide.”

“That is, unless Nyota is willing to continue,” Spock added.

“No, thank you. I’m done playing telephone operator. I think I’m getting an infection from my earpiece.”

“Any news on the planet front?” Sybok asked.

“None that is good.”

“My parents said Old Spock might have a lead,” M’Benga said. “But coming from them that could mean any—ow!” He scowled in mock agitation at Valeris, who was grabbing his bottom lip with the impossible strength of a Klingon-Vulcan infant. “What are you doing? Give that back.”

Valeris let go and gurgled something akin to “ubba bubba.”

Spock cocked his head to the side. “I believe Valeris may have spoken her first word.”

“That wasn’t even close to being a real word,” Sybok stated.

“‘Urba bubba’ is the Ferengi word for ‘small, oblong stone.’”

“So,” McCoy laughed, “not only does your five-month-old speak, she speaks Ferengi.”

“The timeline for developmental milestones in Klingon-Vulcan hybrids has never been charted. As far as we know, Valeris could feasibly begin talking at any time.”

“But talking Ferengi? Has she ever heard Ferengi?”

Spock thought for a moment. “I believe the little animated Betazoid girl with the backpack may occasionally speak in Ferengi.”

“You really don’t know when she should start walking and talking?” Uhura asked.

“No,” M’Benga answered, putting Valeris back in her highchair. “The developmental rates for Vulcans and Klingons are completely different. Klingons grow up rather quickly, while it takes Vulcans decades longer to mature.”

“What does that mean for...” Uhura struggled to find a euphemism that would be appropriate to use in front of two babies. “...That-Which-Must-Not-Be-Named.”

M’Benga blushed. “We don’t know. It could happen anytime between eight and seventy.”

“Eight?” McCoy echoed incredulously.

“Eight is the age when Klingons enter puberty,” Spock explained. “We are considering just allowing her to kill someone.”

Sybok shifted in his seat. While he personally wasn’t uncomfortable talking about pon farr, his siblings had a way of making any conversation about it awkward. He had to admit thinking about his two nieces in Klingon and Romulan flavored pon farrs made even him uneasy. A change in topic
was desperately needed. What was it they said in those Terran films? “How are the sports?”

“The sports are good,” Uhura answered slowly.

“Good. Do you play?”

“The sports?”

“Yes.”

“Not often. I’ve always been more of a dancer. Do you?”

“No... I surf, but I haven’t had a chance to do so in awhile. M’Benga?”

“What?” M’Benga said around a bite of food.

“Do you do the sports often?”

He swallowed. “No. I don’t know how to play many sports. When I was growing up, my parents were against most competitive activities.”

“How did you get cardiovascular exercise?” T’Pring asked.

“We’d frolic mostly.” At the confused looks that received, M’Benga continued, “A couple times a week my dad would wake us up around dawn and we’d go outside and just run about. Skip occasionally. Commune with nature. That sort of thing.”

“This was considered normal where you grew up,” Uhura said skeptically. “You weren’t teased about it at school.”

“I was unschooled, so there wasn’t anyone to tease me.”

“Jesus,” McCoy cursed. “Is this the kind of stuff you’re gonna subject your kids to?”

Spock and M’Benga shared a fraught look over the heads of their two daughters. “That is still up for debate,” Spock answered. “We do not know to which extent such Human methods of child rearing will benefit Vulcan hybrid children. For example, co-sleeping has proved beneficial in Humans by reducing the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. In telepathic species, it is largely redundant; the familial bond works to synchronize the breathing of parent and child. In addition, skin-to-skin contact during sleep may result in shared dreams.”

“Which, depending on the dream” M’Benga added, “could be terrifying or wildly inappropriate.”

“Or both,” Sybok said. “If your subconscious is into that kind of thing.”

Uhura jumped in her seat. “My comm’s on vibrate.” She took her comm device out of her waistband. “Uhura.” She listed for a moment then put the comm on the table. “That was Old Spock. The Diogenes system is out.”

A chorus of “what’s” and “why’s” was heard round the table.

“The Klingons have mining rights there.”

“Damn,” McCoy grumbled. “In this galaxy, there’s a mathematical probability of three million earth-type planets... and in all the universe, three million million galaxies like this one. And in all of that, and perhaps more, we can’t find one lousy planet to squat on.”
“Captain, we’re being hailed by an unidentified vessel.”

God, he was gonna miss the way she said. She always seemed so shocked that she was receiving messages. “Put them on.”

A familiar, if wrinkled, Vulcan face appeared on the view screen. “Jim.”

“Hey! To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“My vessel was in the neighborhood, as you might say, and I need to confer to with several members of your crew. Additionally, my companions greatly desire to meet their grandchildren. May we beam aboard?”

“Sure, we’re gonna be starsitting here for a while.” When the view screen flickered back to the stars, Kirk swiveled his chair to face Uhura. “Call up you and Mr. Spock’s replacements. I--”

“Keptin, I vould be happy to stand in for Mr. Spock.”

“Fine. Call up you and Mr. Chekov’s replacements. I imagine this is about you.”

“Are you sure they don’t need you at the meeting?” M’Benga’s father asked, following Geoff and Spock into the ship’s day care center.

“Yeah. McCoy can tell me all about it later. And one Spock’s already there.” He greeted the early childhood researcher, who led them to the playpen where Saavik and Valeris were lying. “Hey, baby,” Geoff cooed to Saavik as he lifted her out of her pen and placed her into his father’s arms. “This is Saavik.”

Spock did the same, hesitantly passing Valeris to Geoff’s mother, Eva. “She is called Valeris.”

M’Benga’s parents began chattering at their grandchildren in Spanish peppered with terms Spock assumed had originated from the obscure Earth dialect the Captain was so fond of using with his offspring.

“When we get to the new planet, I’m going to spoil you rotten,” Eva sing-song’d. “Oh, yes I will.”

“You will be joining us on the new colony?” Spock asked.

“Of course,” Eva answered. “Our Spock—” Geoff visibly flinched at the use of the possessive “—is excited to live amongst Vulcans again. We couldn’t deny him that.”

“And,” Apple Pie Motorbike—or whatever stage name Geoffrey’s father was using this week—said in a voice apparently designed to appeal to infantile ears, “we couldn’t let these two sweethearts grow up without sus tres abuelos.”

If Spock were fully Human, he could fool himself into believing that Apple Pie had merely miscalculated or misspoke, but, as things stood, Spock could not deny that Geoffrey’s parents believed their son-in-law’s older (alcoholic) counterpart from a different timeline should have full privileges as grandfather. Spock’s mother had a word for times this: egads.
“To borrow a popular Terran framing device,” the elder Spock said, addressing McCoy, Sybok, T’Pring, and Uhura in a small conference room, “I have both good and bad news. In the interest of positivity, I will relay the good news first. My companions and I have located a planet that meets all of T’Pring’s qualifications. It has a diverse ecosystem that can support a wide variety of sentient life. It is entirely devoid of fauna, including any beings that could place a claim on the planet. It has bountiful natural resources, but none that would draw the interest of any of the major powers. The planet is lit and heated by bioluminescent plants that naturally dim during the evening hours. The planet is in a defensively powerful position in the galaxy. None of the—”

“We get it,” McCoy interrupted. “It’s perfect. Now tell us what’s wrong with it.”

“The only negative aspect of the planet is your past experience with it,” Spock said, bringing up a photo of the planet on the bulkhead.

“You’re fucking with me, right?” Sybok asked, his voice rising about an octave.

“I am not.”

“How could you even consider—”

“We have run out of options.”

“That planet tried to kill me!” Sybok stood up from his chair, knocking it over. “And going off of what I’m getting from you right now, it did kill me!”

“From what T’Pring has told me, it was not the planet itself that attempted to kill you; it was the energy creature trapped—”

“You knew?” Sybok howled at T’Pring. “How could you even let him entertain—”

“Sybok,” T’Pring said sternly. “Sit.” Sybok pouted for a moment before righting his chair and settling down into it. “Good. As Elder Spock as has stated, we have run out of options. And while you may have the time to wait for another planet to be located, the T’Pelih do not. I would not subject you to this planet again if it were not our last resort.”

“I know your people are suffering, but this planet ain’t normal,” McCoy said. “Last time we were there, there was no life on that rock. No flora, no fauna. Hell, there wasn’t even water. Now, you’re saying it’s some ecological paradise. If this is some normal planet, how the devil did that happen?”

“I do not yet know for certain,” Spock answered, “but my best conjecture is that the energy creature residing in the planet’s core devoured all of its nutrients. Since the creature died, the planet has been allowed to flourish.”

“Flourish is one thing. Become the perfect planet is another. This rock has everything we need down to the letter. I don’t believe in coincidences that big.”

“Are you suggesting that the planet is conspiring against us?”

“I’m suggesting, you insufferable pointy-eared toad, that whatever we thought we killed there might be trying to lure us back for a little revenge. Or it might try to steal our vessel and go apeshit on half the galaxy.”

“That is why we will take all the necessary precautions when we further investigate the planet. I have assembled a highly skilled team including one of the Federation’s up-and-coming molecular biologists, a Klingon expert in exogeology, Dr. Christine Chapel, and an incredibly gifted telepath.”
“Poor sucker,” Sybok muttered. At Old Spock’s raised eyebrow, he said, “I’m that poor sucker, aren’t I?”

“Yes.”

“I’m always that poor sucker.”

“No,” McCoy said furiously. “That’s not happening. Last time he got close to that thing, it damn near liquefied his brain. You can send somebody else. Hell, you’re a telepath, you could do it your damn self.”

“I know you,” Uhura said to McCoy, “and you’re not going to trust the judgment of any other telepath but Sybok. If we send Spock or T’Pring or Elder Spock, and they come back with good results, you’ll say it doesn’t mean anything because they’re not as sensitive as Sybok.”

“She has a point,” Sybok conceded. “I would still be apprehensive to move there even with Spock or T’Pring’s go ahead.”

“Fine, but if you’re going, I’m going.”

“No.” Sybok shook his head. “If that thing attacks me again, I need you far enough away so that the pain can’t bleed through our bond.”

“I’m not letting you go alone. Even if that energy creature is dead, knowing you, you’ll probably fall in a hole down there.”

“He will not be alone,” Spock said. “I will be there, along with three others.”

“But besides you, none of them have field experience in dealing with angry energy gods.”

“I’ll go,” Uhura offered. “I’ll make sure he’s all right.”

“Thank you.”

“When do we leave?” Sybok asked.

“As soon as possible,” Spock responded. “My team is waiting on a planet just outside the Great Barrier.”

—

After hearing the stories Geoff told, Uhura was a little wary when she found out his parents would be piloting the transport vessel to the Great Barrier. “Do you have much experience flying?” Uhura asked, strapping herself into her seat. As soon as they beamed aboard, Sybok had locked himself in the bathroom either to throw up or hot box—Uhura wasn’t sure which.

“Oh, yes,” Eva said, turning away from her console. “When Geoffrey was a baby, we worked as curators at the Nairobi National Museum. We would fly all over the Federation picking up work and soliciting exhibitions.”

“That was, of course,” Geoff’s dad (Uhura, great lover of the arts she was, still refused to call him Apple Pie) added, “before we grew disillusioned with the artistic industrial complex and started the commune.”

“I should warn you,” Elder Spock said, sitting down next to Uhura. “This vessel has been modified according to the energy creature’s specifications. We will be traveling much faster than you are used
“I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“I have no doubt. However, the counselor—”

“Eva,” M’Benga’s dad said. “Sensors are picking up smoke in the commode.”

Uhura rolled her eyes. “He’ll be okay.”

Eva turned around. “Tell Counselor Sybok next time no pre-flight ritual if he doesn’t have enough to share with the rest of the crew.”

“Plotting a course to the Great Barrier. Heading 000-mark-0 at maximum speed.”

“Engage.”

If Uhura hadn’t spent the past decade saving Earth, traveling through time, and defying the laws of physics, she surely would have puked all over Old Spock. Which, considering what she knew about his relationship with his timeline’s T’Pring, wouldn’t have necessarily been a bad thing. In fact, it could be quite amusing.

It wasn’t that she hated Elder Spock. She didn’t think she could hate any Spock, except for the one with the goatee. Uhura merely had high expectations for what an older, wiser Spock should be. Mainly, older and wiser. Despite the name, Old Spock seemed almost adolescent. Going off of what she’d heard from Kirk and Sybok, the old man achingly desired to go flying around the galaxy having adventures with his two best bros. And from what Elder Spock revealed about his timeline, everyone there seemed content to stay in deep-space commitment-free until they got a bridge dropped on them. (Uhura wasn’t quite sure what the significance of the bridge was, but Elder Spock was always issuing dire warnings to Kirk about them.) None of them sounded like they were married or had children, which was strange because half of the people she knew on the Enterprise were married with kids, or at least a dog. What had happened that made the people in this timeline much more willing to settle down? The Kelvin’s destruction? The loss of Vulcan? The whales?

The vessel fell out of warp and Uhura’s stomach settled back into its proper place. Sybok stumbled out of the latrine, smoke unfurling after him. Uhura wrinkled her nose. “You smell like a pet store.”

“But I feel like awesome.”

“Nudibranch to Chapel. Chapel come in,” M’Benga’s dad spoke into his comm.

“Is ‘Nudibranch’ his name or the ship’s?” Sybok whispered to Uhura.

“The ship’s,” she chuckled.

“Prepare for beam up.”

Uhura could hear the telltale sound of the transporter, and a few moments later they were joined by Elder Spock’s team of experts: a Klingon male, a familiar looking blonde Human, and a very pregnant Christine Chapel.

“Oh my god,” Sybok said, pointing at Christine’s belly. “Is that a person in there?”

“No, I’m just retaining water in anticipation of a long journey,” Chapel responded dryly.

“It’s good to see you.” Uhura gave Chapel a one-armed hug.
“You too.” She smiled.

“Lieutenant Uhura, Counselor Sybok,” Elder Spock said, gesturing toward the Klingon “this is Dr. Maltz. He will be assessing the geological structures of the planet. And this,” he looked at the blonde Human, “is Dr. Carol Marcus. She will attend to the organic lifeforms on the planets. And, you, of course, know Dr. Christine Chapel.” He turned back at his team. “Lieutenant Nyota Uhura has years of field experience in the exploration of strange planets. Counselor Sybok is a very talented telepath.”

“Have we met?” Uhura asked Carol.

“I think we might have hung out after one of my brother’s shows. Did you go to the University of Ghana?”

“Yeah. You’re Daniel’s sister.”

“Not by choice.”

“Hey, Sybok.” Uhura pulled on his sleeve. “This is Cupcake’s sister.”

“What a crazy, random happenstance,” Sybok said, glaring at Elder Spock.

—

Sybok cornered Old Spock in the transporter room while the ship was taken through the Great Barrier to the planet’s orbit. “Hey.” He grabbed Spock’s arm. “What are you doing?”

“Many things. Could you be more specific?”

“Why is Carol Marcus helping us?”

“Out of an interest in abnormal molecular biology, I suppose.”

“You are just like him except him ten times more glib and annoying.”

“I am told some things improve with age.”

“God, you’re... Just tell me why you chose Carol. Does it have to do with David and protomatter?”

“Are you reading my thoughts?”

“No, if I was reading your thoughts, I wouldn’t be asking you questions.”

“Then how do you know about David Marcus’ connection to protomatter?”

“He told me.”

“He is an infant.”

“No, your David told me. When I was quasi-dead, I met him—or I think it was him—and he told me to warn this timeline’s David about protomatter.”

“And have you?”

“I gave Kirk and Cupcake a set of microtapes to play when he’s sleeping. To make him smarter. Underneath all the classical music is me saying, ‘Protomatter is stupid. Protomatter is highly overrated.’”
Elder Spock grinned. “That is an ingenuous plan, but you could have simply told his parents to caution him.”

“I thought about that, but I was a kid once, and if Sarek told me not to do something, I would do it just to piss him off.”

“A wise decision. It is not difficult for me to imagine my David Marcus employing protomatter to spite his mother. I am also taking measures to ensure this David does not meet such a terrible fate. Carol Marcus’ life work indirectly caused that David’s death and the deaths of many others. By recruiting Dr. Marcus for this project, I am hoping to steer her career in a direction where she is less likely to create a device capable of near instantaneous genocide.”

“What about the others? Maltz and Chapel?”

“Mere coincidences. Dr. Chapel volunteered, and Maltz was my neighbor on Ferenginar.”

“It’s a small world after all.” Sybok looked Elder Spock up and down. “You’re not...” He mimed drinking from a bottle and breaking off and eating a piece of chocolate.

“No.”

Sybok slapped him on the shoulder. “Then, as long you’re not killing anyone, I guess I don’t have any major objections to you playing god with the time stream.”

–

“Is this really necessary?” Sybok asked, standing alone on the transporter pad.

“You said it yourself. You would have to fully open your telepathic sense to determine whether or not there was a malevolent presence on the planet,” Uhura answered. “And if we were with you when you did that, you would be able to completely read our minds. None of us want that.”

“But I’m scared.”

“Are you a man or not?” Maltz scoffed.

“I am, but in my culture that means being quietly fearful and listening to whatever women say.”

“So, listen to what I’m saying,” Carol demanded, running out of patience. “Go down there, do your voodoo, and comm us with the results.”

“I do not do voodoo,” Sybok grumbled as the transporter beam disintegrated him. When he was all back in one piece on the planet’s surface, he could feel… nothing. Nothing but the ground beneath his feet and the warmth emanating from nearby foliage. Cool. No evil energy creature masquerading as a deity so far. Now for the hard part. Sybok hadn’t ever gone completely unshielded before. Even as an infant, he had the shielding provided by the bond with his father. There had always been some mental or physical barrier preventing him from seeing how far a net his telepathy cast. It would be interesting, and ego-boosting, to know how powerful he was. Geronimo!

Waking up with his face buried in the sand who knows how much later, Sybok realized that, yes, he was very powerful, but also that power was stupid.

“Nudibranch to Sybok. Sybok come in.”

Sybok lifted his face out the sand, and dug his comm out of his pocket. “Sybok—” He spit out a
mouthful of sand. “Sybok here.”

“What happened?” Elder Spock asked. “Twenty-four minutes have passed since you beamed down.”

“I saw the universe,” Sybok said feebly. “Or a part of it.” He crawled into a sitting position. “The planet’s clean. There’s nothing down here but me.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it possible you missed—”

“You once forced a mind meld on Valeris.”

Spock was quiet for a moment. “I see. We will beam down shortly.”

—

“This place isn’t too bad,” Uhura said, watching as Sybok flushed the sand out of his mouth with a bottle of water she brought. “Besides the sand.”

“I like the sand. I just don’t like it when it’s in my mouth.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to go back up to the Nudibranch? The others won’t be done for hours.”

“No. I’m feeling rather claustrophobic right now. You can go if you want.”

“No, I don’t feel like braving M’Benga’s parents alone. Yesterday, his dad asked me to donate urine for his next project.”

Sybok reclined on the sand, staring up at the blue miasma that swirled around the planet. “What do you think that stuff is?”

“Xenon ions in the upper atmosphere. Maybe some argon ions.”

“It’s pretty... Did you say something?”

“No.”

“I could have sworn...” Sybok held up his index finger. “You don’t hear that?”

“No.”

Sybok stuck his ear to the ground. “It sounds like there’s a clone of you buried under the sand.” He started to dig. “It’s getting louder. It’s definitely getting louder.”

“Wait, I can hear it.” Uhura dropped to her knees and began digging alongside Sybok.

“I hit something!” Sybok dusted off a piece of metal embedded in the sand. “Listen.”

“—S Enterprise. This is your last chance to surrender. I repeat: your last chance to surrender...” emanated from a speaker on the upside of the metal object.

“That’s the Last Chance Protocol recording.”
“The what?” Sybok asked.

“It’s Starfleet regulation for planetary attacks to be preceded by one last chance for surrender. Usually this is done through subspace communication to a head of state, but in cases where there is no possible formal line of communication, the drone itself issues it. This has to be T’Pring’s drone—the one we sent down to kill the energy creature.”

Sybok slithered away from her, making an inVulcan yipping sound.

“What?”

“The drone crashed onto the creature’s energy source!”

“Which disabled it, so there’s nothing to be skittish about.”

“Me? Not skittish. Cautious.”

“Stop being such a tribble. I need your help digging this out.”

“Why? Why can’t it just rest there for all eternity?”

Uhura rolled her eyes. “We need to bring it back to the Enterprise for analysis. Who knows what it could tell us about this planet? So, c’mon and help me. You’ll be fine.”

“Yeah,” Sybok said, slowly crawling back to the drone. “Famous last—”

He was cut off by what he could only describe as a giant fucking robot arm erupting from the sand and dragging Uhura and the drone beneath the earth.

“Shit!”

Driven purely by instinct and his own lack of self-preservation, Sybok dived toward the hole left in the robot’s wake, readying to fight for Uhura’s life or (more likely) die alongside her—two goals he would not realize that day, for sand is tricky. Millions of teeny tiny particles working in concert to fulfill gravity’s sacred duty to go down. Yea, the hole was quickly filled in, leaving Sybok with no recourse except (a) digging another hole by hand or (b) calling for help. Having the dubious honor of being the least intelligent member of his clan and still being a little baked, Sybok opted for plan a.

After five minutes of back breaking work, the shock wore off and Sybok’s senses returned to him. How foolish of him to think he could dig such a hole by hand; as a powerful telepath, he could manipulate the psionic field to move objects on the physical plane. He could simply blast away with his mind the layers of the planet until he found Uhura.

Fortunately for everyone on the planet, Old Spock comm’d him before he could do any real damage.

“Elder Spock to Sybok.”

“Oh, god. Spock.”

“Is Lieutenant Uhura with you? Her comm is malfun—”

“No, no! She... fell in a hole. No, no. She was kidnapped by a robot!”

“Did you ingest any of the native fungi?”

“I need your help! Or a sand badger.”

Christine blocked him out. “While he’s not technically sober, there’s no trace of hallucinogens in his system,” she reported to Spock. “I’d say he’s in shock.”

“Thank you.” Spock went back to Carol and Maltz, who were scanning the area for any signs of Uhura or movement underground.

Sybok kept rocking. “I know what I saw. I know—”

Christine placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I believe you.”

Sybok reached up and placed his hand on her belly. Christine wasn’t surprised when the baby began kicking like there was no tomorrow. He removed his hand, and she stopped. “Girl,” Sybok smiled. “They kick the hardest.”

“You’re telling me.” With some difficulty, Christine managed to sit down next to Sybok. “I ate one cheeseburger. She punished me for hours. And, of course, I couldn’t ask Sarek to calm her down because then he’d know I’d eaten meat and he’d go off on a twenty minute lecture on the Vulcan way and spend the rest of the night pouting in the corner.”

Sybok smiled at the thought. “I ate meat once.”

“Really, Mr. Hippie-Free Love-Peace Man?”

“It was right after I was booted from Vulcan. I was mad and willing to do anything I thought would piss off Surak. I spent the next twelve hours puking, shitting, and crying.”

“What did you eat?”

“Bacon.”

“Oooh, after I drop this, I am going to eat all the bacon.”

“When are you due?”

“Five weeks.”

“You volunteered for a landing party eight months pregnant?”

“Please spare me your thoughts on my recklessness. I get enough of that from your father.”

“I don’t think it’s reckless; it’s pretty bad ass.”

“I’m one bad ass mama, running away from trouble.”

“What do you mean? Are you and Sarek—”

“We’re fine. We’re happy. We’re having a baby. It would be perfect if it weren’t for the rocks getting thrown through our windows every night like clockwork. Good old Vulcan consistency,” she said bitterly.

“Is the Council doing anything about it?”

“Beyond encouraging it, no.”
“How can they get away with that? T’Pau would have their ridges, if she was still alive.”

“But she’s not. Ding dong, the matriarchy’s dead. Long live the—” Chapel was interrupted by a booming pneumatic sound behind them. “What the hell is that?”

The robotic arm emerged once again from beneath the sands, carrying an unconscious Uhura. It deposited her almost tenderly on the ground before snaking its way back underground.

“Jesus! Help me up,” Chapel said. Sybok got her to her feet, and they rushed to Uhura’s side. Chapel whipped out her medical tricorder.

“Is she alive?”

“Yes, but her bioreadings are unlike anything I’ve ever seen before.”

“I hate it when you people say that!”

“Here.” She tossed Sybok a hypospray. “Inject her with that. It should help her regain consciousness.”

“I don’t know how to do that. Why don’t you do it?”

“By the time I get down there, she’ll be needing a gerontologist. Just put it to her neck and press the button.”

Sybok did just that, and, true to Chapel’s word, Uhura did wake up. Unfortunately, and foreseen by no one, she also grabbed Sybok by the throat and threw him farther than the strongest Human ever could. Feeling for her phaser, Chapel was armed and ready to put down the new, evil Uhura before Nyota sat up, saw how far Sybok had gone, and yelled, “Oh my god, I’m so sorry!” Uhura scrambled to her feet and ran to Sybok, who was lying on the ground in a daze. “Are you okay? Did I break anything? I didn’t know it was you. I’m so sorry.”

“What?” Sybok rasped.

—

Maltz did not know why the Humans had not shot her as soon she reappeared. Then he shot her and the stun blast ricocheted off her arm into a million directions and perhaps it would be best to talk this out.

“I am not your enemy,” Uhura growled.

“What have you done with Lieutenant Uhura?” Elder Spock asked.

“I am Lieutenant Uhura.”

“She’s telling the truth,” Sybok said, limping over to Spock. “I could feel her when she touched me.”

Maltz lowered his phaser. “What granted you such strength?”

“I don’t know. I was unconscious during whatever happened down there.”

Chapel was still waving her tricorder around. “Going off of my years of medical experience and a childhood spent reading too much science fiction, I’d say you’ve been converted into a cyborg.”

Maltz saw a look of pure fear cross Elder Spock’s face, like he was seeing his own murder. “Can
you remove the cybernetic implants?” Elder Spock asked.

“No, not without killing her. Her nervous system has completely adapted to control the cybernetic implants. If we remove them, she would go into organ failure.”

“I am sorry, Lieutenant.” Elder Spock turned to the other Vulcan. “You were right; we should not have come here. I have placed us all in grave danger.” Spock took out his phaser, turning it to kill and pointing it at Uhura. “I am so sorry.” He closed his eyes and...

Some unseen force knocked the phaser from the old man’s hand. The Vulcan—the weird one who smelled like mint—charged at Spock. “What the hell was that?”

“A failed attempt at mercy.”

“What is wrong with you?”

“Lieutenant Uhura is as good as dead. Would you leave her to be dissected by the Federation and used as a weapon to kill millions? In my universe, a century from now the galaxy was not prepared for cyborg technology. Entire species were scattered in the wind or granted a fate worse than death. And before we knew of that horror, trials were held to determine whether cybernetic beings were sentient or merely supplies to be picked apart to craft an army of slaves. If she is found, not only will she die, but whole planets will go with her.”

“So we hide her!”

“Have you forgotten her commitment to Starfleet? She cannot abandon her post without an official inquest.”

“Oh, look, everyone,” Chapel deadpanned. “Uhura has a multiphasic prion infection. I better keep her under strict quarantine.”

“See?” Sybok said. “Problem solved.”

“Where you will hide—”

“Anywhere we—”

“Guys, you really don’t have to worry about me,” Uhura said, strangely calm.

“Nyota,” Sybok said, “you’re my family. I’ll do whatever—”

“You really, really don’t have to worry about me.”

And, then, out of nowhere, a tree.

–

Uhura felt good. Probably much better than she should have felt just having heard that her very existence put the entire galaxy in peril, but good nonetheless. The sudden terror of having an unstable Vulcan point a phaser at you made certain things click. It was akin to language immersion programs. Nothing made your brain more willing to learn the lingua franca than the danger of being lost in a strange city where no one spoke Standard. It didn’t matter how long she had studied, if Nyota needed to find her way home or go to the bathroom, she could recall the right words.

That was her superpower. One of them anyway.
“You just,” Sybok stammered, “a tree!”

“What the actual fuck?” Carol yelled.

“Don’t be too impressed,” Uhura said, smiling.

“How?” Maltz asked.

“A tree!” Sybok yelled.

“I believe Lieutenant Uhura is now capable of controlling the physical features of the planet,” Elder Spock explained.

“Got it in one.”

“And, I conjecture that prior to the destruction of the energy creature’s power source, it played Uhura’s role. However, as an incorporeal prisoner, it had very little interest in growing life. After the energy creature dissipated, the planet’s computer latched onto the nearest sign of sentient life—the recording of Uhura’s voice played by the drone. The planet scanned through subspace for future instruction from its new master and heard Uhura transmit the specifications for our future planet. Once the lieutenant arrived on the planet, the computer matched her voice to the recordings and took her to the planet’s core to outfit her with a neural link that would allow her to make adjustments to the planet directly.”

“That sounds about right.”

“So, according to you,” Carol started, “this planet has been stalking Uhura for several years, and when it meets her, it kidnaps her, knocks her unconscious, and inserts things into her body.”

“Correct.”

Carol turned and addressed the others. “Am I the only one who finds this explanation completely ridiculous?”

“Just because something’s ridiculous doesn’t mean it’s not happening,” Uhura responded.

“This is hardly the strangest thing that has happened in deep-space,” Chapel said. “I got drunk on water once.”

“Yeah,” Sybok said, “I’ve been to the afterlife.”

“And I have risen from the dead,” Elder Spock said.

“Maltz,” Carol said, “you’re a geologist. Tell them this is impossible.”

“Theoretically, it’s entirely possible. If the planet is a powerful computer with enough energy in its core, it could replicate a surface that mimics that of a normal planet. Everything on this planet—the rocks, the trees, the water—has been created from the computer’s energy and transported to the surface in a way that mimics natural growth. Even weather phenomena could be manipulated through a sophisticated, large scale climate control center.”

“That would take a ridiculous amount of energy,” Carol scoffed. “Who would design a computer planet with enough energy to obey the whims of a Humanoid controller? Call me a cynic, but I don’t think there’s scads of altruistic god-like aliens looking out for us. Humans don’t do nice things for Humans without expecting something in return. Why would anyone else?”
“What if the energy creature wasn’t controlling the planet before?” Chapel asked. “Maybe Spock was wrong.”

“I love hearing those words,” Sybok said.

“That’s why you’re married to McCoy,” Uhura replied.

Chapel continued, “We know that the planet was used as a prison for the energy creature. But what if it wasn’t an energy creature?”

“It’s always an energy creature,” Sybok said.

“It died when the drone destroyed its power source,” Uhura said.

“You assumed it was its power source; we never found out exactly how it worked,” Chapel said.

“There is no compelling evidence to suggest it was not the creature’s power source,” Elder Spock remarked.

“Okay,” Chapel said to Elder Spock. “According to your theory, the prisoner held Uhura’s power; it could use the planet’s replicator to create the environment and anything else it wanted.”

“Yes,” Elder Spock said. “That is true.”

“Then why did it need the Enterprise? Couldn’t it replicate its own starship?”

Elder Spock looked like he sucked on a lemon. “Your logic is sound, but we do not know if the planet is capable of producing synthetic materials, like those used in a starship.”

Uhura held up her hand, closing her eyes. After roughly a minute, she opened her eyes and dug something out of the sand. “Transparent aluminum,” she said, holding up a sheet of see though material. “Give me a few years in solitary confinement, and I could make a starship.”

“That still does not explain why the prisoner wasn’t an energy creature,” Maltz said. “Or how that relates to the amount of energy required by the planet.”

“Okay.” Chapel started pacing. “This planet was created to be a prison for a very dangerous, mindreading creature with delusions of godhood. Let’s assume that this creature did have godlike powers.”

“It felt like he believed he was a god,” Sybok added.

“Right. And he had an affinity for Christianity. Carol, your family is Catholic, what does God look like?”

“I was never into church,” Carol said, “but in most of the iconography, the Holy Trinity is shown as an old man, a young man, and a dove.”

“God can take several forms.”

“And the creature identified with Him because what?” Sybok asked. “It was a shapeshifter or something?”

“Exactly. The prisoner could transform into any form of life it wanted, including one that would allow him to escape. What you thought was a power source was really a containment field that kept the creature in a weaker form that couldn’t escape without a physical vessel.”
“Like a starship,” Uhura said.

“Right.”

“But why did it die when the containment field was destroyed?” Sybok asked.

“It is possible the aliens who imprisoned the creature here created a failsafe,” said Elder Spock. “If the creature tampered with or destroyed the containment field, it would destroy him.”

“Uhura is not replacing the creature; she’s replacing the containment field,” Maltz said.

Sybok raised his hand. “You lost me there.”

“In scans conducted by the Enterprise, the machinery for the containment was the only electronic equipment on the planet’s surface,” Maltz explained. “From what we have seen today, the only other electronic items are belowground: the arm that grabbed Uhura, the machinery necessary to turn her into a cyborg, the replicator. All underground. This leads me to believe the containment field was a temporary feature, installed by the alien creatures to tell the planet what form to take and to funnel energy into containing the prisoner.”

“That’s where all the energy comes from,” Chapel added. “The designers equipped the planet with enough energy to imprison a god.”

“Correct,” Maltz said. “Now all of that energy is available to replicate physical features that make this a desirable planet.”

“How is Uhura replacing the containment field?” Sybok asked. “She’s not containing anything.”

“I thought Vulcans were intelligent,” Carol sighed.

“Fuck you! I can move things with my mind!”

“Are you familiar with basic computer programming?” Elder Spock asked.

“Yes, I did pass the third form.”

“The planet itself is hardware. Lieutenant Uhura and the containment field are software. They determine how the planet will operate. When the drone crashed into it, the containment field was uninstalled. Upon hearing Lieutenant Uhura’s voice on the drone, the planet began to install her. It continued by listening to her subspace communications and modifying the planet to fit her descriptions. Once she arrived and it recognized her, Lieutenant Uhura was taken underground where the installation process was completed.

“Ooh! Ooh!” Sybok started to jump up and down. “And she had to be modified because the hardware wasn’t equipped to run organic matter, and the psionic overflow would rupture her organs and eventually turn her bones and muscles into gelatin.” Sybok was very proud of himself, but Uhura was horrified.

“Gelatin?” She looked at Chapel, panicked. “Gelatin?”

Chapel ran her tricorder over Uhura again. “No gelatin. Your bones and muscles have been replaced with cybernetic implants. Your organs are hardwired to the neural implant. That’s keeping them from liquefying.” Chapel smiled. “You’ve got nothing to worry about. From my readings, it looks like these implants will prolong your life by at least fifty years. The only problem is you’ll appear to age slower because your epidermis and connective tissue is hyper-resilient. People might wonder why
you look forty when you turn eighty.”

“I will shoulder that burden with honor,” Uhura said, elbowing Maltz in his side.

–

Their bon voyage party was a somber affair. McCoy knew a few tears were bound to be shed, but he couldn’t help but think that everyone would have more fun if Uhura was there. That was too bad about that multiphasic prion infection. But, hell, maybe if he had been treating her, she would have been better by the then. (What the hell was Christine doing stealing his patients, anyway? Wasn’t she busy enough with that new baby of hers?) T’Pring seemed to coping with Uhura’s illness rather well. She’d been a wreck at first, but after visiting her on the new planet, she looked a lot better. Maybe Uhura was doing well; Sybok was quick to tell anyone who would listen that she was going to be okay. Still, the rest of them were worried, putting a damper on the party.

At least the beer was good, even if Jim seemed to be drinking all of it.

“I’m going to miss you so much, Bones,” Jim said, wrapping him in another awkward hug. (The first five weren’t awkward. The following twelve were.)

“I’m gonna go order another round,” McCoy said, peeling Jim off of him.

McCoy snaked his way through the crowded dive to the bar. “Another round,” he said to the barmaid.

She smiled. “You’re the most important person in the galaxy,” she said in a raspy voice.

“Thanks.” The woman was attractive enough. For someone with no eyebrows. “But I’m married.”


“Thanks.”

The next morning, in addition to a killer headache and a bad case of dry mouth, McCoy found he’d acquired some time the night before a single playing card—an ace of spades with, “Tell her Guinan sent you,” written in smudged ink—and no idea how he’d gotten it.

See, this is why he didn’t like to get drunk with Jim.

When Uhura looked back on it, coming out as bi was a lot easier than coming out as a cyborg. Not to play the Oppression Olympics or anything, but telling your parents over dinner you’re the same sexuality as the vast majority of the planet pales in comparison to telling your colony’s inner circle that you’re a biomechanoid life-form that can control the weather and grow plants and mountains with the wink of an eye.

So, as the colony elites assembled in her temporary housing the day before the other colonists arrived, Uhura was sweating, which had the result of making the planet noticeably more humid. During her two month “quarantine,” Uhura had learned to separate her emotional state from the planet’s physical state, but she still had difficulty in times of extreme emotion. (When T’Pring visited her, Maltz counted five tidal waves that night. Uhura wasn’t the only one with a talented tongue.)

She waited for everyone to settle into their seats and for the babies to quiet (god, so many babies), and then began. As she told what ended up sounding like a superhero origin story, Uhura carefully watched the responses of her audience. Sybok, Chapel, and M’Benga’s parents gazed up at her encouragingly, while Maltz and Carol were both zoning out, bored to hear the story again. Elder Spock alternated looking guilty, sad, and hopeful, but that was nothing new. And T’Pring stood beside Uhura, looking just as fierce as usual.

As for the other, the ones who didn’t know before that night... Spock and M’Benga exchanged a series of looks that said, “If we didn’t like her, she would make an excellent specimen for dissection.” Sarek was impassive and more concerned with burping his baby than listening to Uhura. And McCoy had his “that ain’t logical”/“damn it, Jim, we have to do something” face on.

“Any questions?” Uhura asked when she got to the end of the story.

“Are you high?” McCoy asked. “Honestly, were you all baked when you beamed down here?”

Uhura decided to ignore him in favor of M’Benga, who had his hand raised. “Geoff?”

“Yeah, uh, how much of you is—what parts—physiologically, do you have—what systems—”

Spock interrupted him. “What I believe Geoffrey is trying to ask, do you have a robotic vagina?”

Uhura blinked slowly. “No. I do not robotic vagina. All of my skin tissue is Human. It’s only my muscles and my bones that have been fully replaced.”

Sybok raised his hand with a confused expression on his face. “Then wouldn’t your lady muscles be robotic?”

“Yes,” Uhura said between gritted teeth.

All the men in the room took a moment to consider how powerfully pleasurable her Kegel muscles could be. To quash their fantasies, Uhura picked up a plastic cup and crushed it with her bare hand, causing the men to instinctively gird their loins. Some of them even whimpered.

“I have a non-vagina related question,” Carol said.

“Shoot.”

“How does having the power to control a planet make you less vulnerable? It seems like it should be
the other way around. The Federation and the other major powers have an even greater incentive to vivisect you and conquer the planet.”

“May I?” Elder Spock asked. Uhura nodded. “Lt. Uhura has learned to manipulate the planet’s atmosphere so that it performs as a defense screen. Nothing can pass through the defense screen or be beamed onto the planet without Uhura’s permission.”


“That is precisely why this information shall never leave this room,” T’Pring said crossly.

In a flash, Maltz had drawn his phaser and was waving it around the room, pointing it at each Vulcan. “You will not erase my memories! I will kill all of you if I have to!”

“Whoa!” Sybok held his hands over his head. “No one is erasing anyone’s memories.”

This didn’t seem to comfort Maltz. “You dare to threaten a Klingon with death? You may be content to die for this secret, but I am not!”

“Who said anything about dying?” M’Benga asked, standing between Maltz and his children.

“You.” He pointed the phased at T’Pring. “She said—”

Carol sighed, putting her hand on Maltz’s arm. “It’s an expression. She meant that none of us will ever tell anyone who is not in this room right now about Uhura and the planet.”

“Oh.” Maltz holstered his weapon and sat down. “Why did you not simply say that?”

As everyone’s hearts slowed down, Sybok grumbled to Spock, “You know, at least when we don’t get Human idioms, it’s kind of cute and endearing.”

Former Bekk Worf did not like this place. He did not like these people. And he most certainly did not like his current assignment. Had he not been moments away from slicing his throat open with his bat’leth when he was offered this position, he most certainly would not have taken it. The offer itself was most deceptive: “Interim Head of State requires personal assistant for diplomatic affairs. Previous experience in advocacy and multilingualism required. Room and board will be provided.”

Ha! It was only in his state of desperation that he did not question the merits of the job offer. In his darkest hour, it seemed like manna from Sto-Vo-Kor. How foolish was he.

The “Interim Head of State” turned out to be a woman. Who had heard of such nonsense? And not only was she a female, she was a Vulcan. Imagine a son of the House of Mogh serving a Vulcan woman. Perhaps in a hundred years his grandson would join Starfleet. Such foolishness.

The “room and board” they spoke of? Temporary, prefabricated housing shipped in from Terra that he had to share with two scientists: another disgraced Klingon and a Human woman with yellow hair.

And on his first day, Worf’s participation in “diplomatic affairs” was limited to sitting at a table and providing the newly arrived settlers with name tags.

Yet, despite his complaining, Worf knew he had no one to blame but himself. If he had just looked
up from his PADD, he would have seen the turbolift was not there, he would not have attempted to enter it, he would not have fallen to the bottom of the turboshaft, he would not have broken his spine, he would not have partial paralysis, he would be able to climb the stairs to his office everyday, he would still be a warrior in the courtroom. To fall into such weakness, such uselessness was a great dishonor to Klingons, but to fall so literally... His only recourse was Hegh bat, and he was so near it when that woman came offering a new world filled with “ramps” and “handrails” and “reasonable accommodations” and “physical therapy.” So it seemed that Worf may never again technically stand to face his enemies in battle, but he would go on to fight another another day.

He soon realized it would be the fight of his life.

When his precursor—the mate of T’Pring—described the colony’s settlers as a “diverse, multicultural group of subaltern peoples,” Worf spent the next three hours reviewing his Klingon-Federation Standard dictionary and still had very little understanding of what most of those words meant. On his first day, he had the misfortune of finding out.

These people—the settlers were so strange, bordering on nonsensical. All of them had no concept of honor, as if they all knew what the conventions of their societies were and purposefully behaved counter to them. There were Ferengi Marxist Feminists, Romulan pacifists, Andorian cripples (although Worf could not blame them for their parents not killing them when they were born crippled; he could blame them for that sickening look of kinship they gave him), Humans who could not hear yet refused surgery, and Vulcans descended from slaves.

Worse yet was all the race-mixing. It seemed that every other Vulcan he met was either married to a Human, two Humans, or an Andorian. Worf considered himself to be a modern Klingon; what two (or three) sentient beings did in the confines of their own bedrooms was none of his business, but many of them had children. What role in the galaxy could a Vulcan-Andorian hybrid have? Or a Human-Vulcan hybrid? (The answer to that appeared to be raising more mixed race children with your Human mate.)

It was a testament to the indomitable spirit of the Klingon warrior that Worf survived that first day where he was inundated with half the oddities of the universe. Yet the battle was not yet won. That evening there was to be a “town hall meeting” where several matters would be voted upon. As T’Pring’s aide, he would not only have to listen to what these people said, he would have to write it down.

The first order of business was establishing a common language. Everyone was in favor of their language being chosen, with the exception of the Vulcans, who agreed that their language was far too complex for the general public to learn. The stalemate was eventually broken by the Ferengi Womyn’s Collective, who presented a language of their own creation that promised to “rectify the kyriarchal nature of all known languages” and “dismantle linguistic hegemony.”

By the end of the night (which was also the beginning of the next morning), it was decided that the colony should have no formal alignment with any of the major powers in the galaxy, every citizen should have a specific community responsibility (for example, street sweeping), and resources would be pooled to purchase and assemble structures the colony needed, including a space dock. The Ferengi communist caucus had triumphed once again; the colony would have no formal currency and all decisions would be made through townhall meetings (the settlers were obviously masochists).

At long last, Worf was allowed to leave this strange people behind, roll up the ramp to his domicile, lift himself out of his chair-with-wheels, and into his bed. As he boldly thrust himself into sleep (Klingons did not “drift off” anywhere), Worf pondered how much longer he would have to deal with such dishonorable people. If he was sixteen years old that day, and he lived a normal lifespan
(which the woman doctor assured him he would), he most only endure approximately 130 more years on this planet. He supposed over a century of torture was more honorable than suicide.

There were several things, McCoy believed, that a man should not face before his first cup of coffee. A Klingon knocking at his front door was one of them. “What?” he croaked, opening the door.

“Census,” Worf (or was it Maltz? No, definitely Worf. W as in Worf as in Wheelchair. Or was it W as in Worf as in White? And M as in Maltz as in Muscle Atrophy?) said, handing him a PADD.

“What the hell do we need a census for?” Jesus, they had only established their government last night. Could they hold off on the more annoying responsibilities of citizenship? Tomorrow, was he gonna get selected for jury duty?

“In order for citizens of Sha-Ka-Ree—” McCoy still can’t believe they chose such a sappy name. “—to obtain visas for other planets, Sha-Ka-Ree must be recognized as a sovereign planet. The first step to formal recognition is the completion of a planet-wide census provided by the Federation.” The Klingon explained this like he would rather be anywhere else in the galaxy. “As the people’s appointed ambassador, T’Pring requests you submit your household’s completed census to her office by the end of the day.” The Klingon nodded and left.

McCoy closed the door and stumbled back into the kitchen, where Sybok was brewing a pot of tea. “What did he want?” Sybok yawned. McCoy swore that man slept twice as much as any other Vulcan he’d met. “Hey, telekinesis takes a lot out of a person.”

“Don’t listen to my thoughts this early.”

“Don’t think so loud this early.” Sybok rifled through the cabinets. “Where did you put the—”

“Under the sink.” McCoy sat down at the table, resting his head in his arms.

“Thanks.” Sybok took out the sehlat food and poured some into Celie’s bowl. The sehlat eagerly chomped away at her kibble as the kettle whistled. Sybok brought it over to the table and sat down. “Tea?”

“As long as it’s none of your Vulcan junk.”

Sybok rolled his eyes and poured them both a cup. “What’s that?” He point to the census PADD in McCoy’s hand.

“Census. T’Pring wants it done by tonight.”

“I’ll do it. You go get something to eat.”

McCoy would normally feel guilty about foisting an undesirable chore like that on Sybok (for god’s sake, the man did do all of the cooking, and clothes mending, and sometimes he even made candles), but he knew Sybok wouldn’t have much to do until he acquired a client base or somebody died. (Sybok’s official community participation duty was “grief counseling,” which to those in the know meant he helped the deceased move on to the afterlife. Sybok would have preferred to be titled as “katric deliveryman,” but he knew most people wouldn’t buy that and would see him as getting one over on everyone else who were fulfilling their obligations to the community through actual work.)

McCoy got up from his chair, and gathered his breakfast: some yogurt from the fridge, a banana, a little bit of granola, and, of course, coffee. “You want anything?”
Sybok shook his head, absorbed by filling out the census.

McCoy got back in his and tucked into his breakfast, watching Sybok work that Vulcan he rarely saw outside of the bedroom.

“What’s a ‘caw-cass-ian?’” Sybok asked, looking up from his PADD.

“Caucasian? It means white Human.”

“Are you one of those?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s so strange. Humans have only one category of white people and so many for everyone else.”

“I guess that stems from anthropology. After Linnaeus, Europeans got a little obsessed with classifying the natural world—plants and animals, which included anyone who wasn’t white. I suppose that need to classify and study lives on in the census.”

“Your species is horrible.”

“What? You’re telling me Vulcans don’t have a million categories.”

“No. We just have the T’Pelih Vulcans and...” He trailed off.

“The normal Vulcans?” Gotcha.

Sybok’s cheeks flushed, and he went back to the census. McCoy chewed happily on his granola, glad to have shaken the smug off of one Vulcan today. And it was only breakfast. Sybok wrinkled his nose and set the PADD down. “You done?”

“I’m stuck.”

“On what?”

“Religion.”

“I’m agnostic. Culturally Southern Baptist.”

“I know. It wouldn’t let me put that down.”

“What? Let me see.” McCoy grabbed the PADD and looked it over. It had a long list of religions and one small fill in the blank for “other.” He tried picking agnostic and other, but it wouldn’t let him choose more than one. “The hell.”

“Told you. It wouldn’t let me enter mine in either. There wasn’t enough room in the ‘other’ box.”

“What were you gonna write?” For Vulcan’s most famous heretic, Sybok wasn’t particularly religious.

“‘After an experience with a powerful alien entity, I believe that there is no god or gods but rather several species of very powerful aliens. I know for a fact that when we die, we go to—’”

“Just put down ‘atheist.’”

“But I’m not an atheist. I believe in an afterlife; I’ve been there several times.” Sybok shook his head.
“I’m going to complain about this.”

–

When Elder Spock awoke, Eva and Apple Pie still hadn’t gone to sleep and were focusing intently on a PADD. “Good morning.” He kissed Apple Pie on the mouth and Eva on her fingers. “What has captured your intention?”

“This fucking census,” Eva said in Spanish. “It’s terribly confusing.”

“Of course it is,” Apple Pie scoffed. “It was designed by the fascist bureaucrats at the Federation. It’s all black and white; no shades of meaning or identity.”

“Literally. It keeps telling me I’m white.”

“May I?” Spock plucked the PADD from their fingers, confident that the problem was merely a technological one. As artists, Eva and Apple Pie had very little understanding of such matters. They had once confessed to him that before he moved in, they would have to comm their son to reprogram their house’s climate control settings. Spock quickly looked over the census, finding that the fault lay solely in its designers. “This form is irredeemably fucked.” Spock set the PADD down. “It seems unduly preoccupied with whether or not either of you are ‘Hispanic/Latino.’”

“Yes,” Eva said. “And when I say that I am, it tells me I’m white.”

“At least you know how to answer the question,” Apple Pie grumbled. “What even qualifies as Latino? Is it language, ethnicity, colonial history? Or is it a category describing ethno-racial political identity? I am an African, who speaks Spanish because his homeland was colonized by Spain. Politically, my people and I have historically aligned ourselves with Africans rather than Latinos. What does this make me? These are complex, expansive questions that cannot be answered on a fucking census!” He continued his rant. “And on top of all of this, they will not allow me to claim you both as my spouses.”

Spock had noticed, but did not want to mention it in fear that Eva and Apple Pie would find no fault in it. He wrapped the anger he felt through their bond like a blanket, knowing that their inability to claim him was part of its cause.

–

Spock enjoyed nursing his children for not only the rush of euphoric neurotransmitters and vibrations along on the familial bond, but for what it allowed him to do. There had always been a hidden something in Spock that refused to show itself. He could remember being young, in that time before he was to put away childhood and take up logic, and learning at his father’s feet and being held tight by his mother. While he cherished those memories equally, when he turned seven, he knew which set he was supposed to value. He was a Vulcan male, not a Human female. As an adult, Spock only showed what he received from his mother to a select few: his siblings, his bondmate, and his children. Yet, the necessity of nursing his children in public forced Spock to widen that exclusive circle. Spock would do anything for Saavik and Valeris. They emboldened him.

(Spock was certain they knew—that they had always known, from the day they came aboard the Enterprise, crying for their mother-bond and latching onto his chest.)

This bliss of a morning feeding (which Spock could mentally separate from the dubious bliss of being awoken after a less than optimal night’s sleep) was soured by his other activity. Truly capable of multitasking, Spock found no reason why he shouldn’t fill out the census while nursing Saavik.
Then he reached the first two questions for his portion: sex and species. Male or Female? Vulcan or Human?

Male or Female?

Vulcan or Human?

For the first time since he took the Kobayashi Maru, Spock did not know the correct answer.

—

Nyota cursed a blue streak in Swahili, slamming her PADD on the table.

T’Pring lifted an eyebrow. “That is uncharacteristically inarticulate of you.”

“The damn thing is broken.”

T’Pring picked up the PADD, inspecting it briefly before handing it back to Nyota. “It is in perfect working order.”

Nyota tapped on the screen. “It’s not responding to me.” She kept tapping harder and harder until her finger went through the PADD. “Fuck.” She pulled her finger back out. There was no blood.

“You don’t bleed.”

“Chapel says my hands have a reinforced biomechanoid interior.”

“That may be why the PADD does not function for you. It is designed to respond to Humanoid touch.”

Uhura laughed aloud. “I knew censuses could be racist, but not like that.”

—

What hurt was that Christine wouldn’t have know about it if she hadn’t needed something to read while eating her cereal. She grabbed the nearest PADD, hoping it would have something interesting on it and not one of Sarek’s mystery novels. (The motive in Vulcan murder mysteries was always the same: the murderer had rejected Surak.) It was telling of how badly she needed to read while eating cereal that she kept reading the PADD after she found out it was a census form—one that Sarek had already filled out.

When she got to Ainsley's portion, she was put off her cereal.

Species: Vulcan. Just Vulcan, like she didn’t even exist.

—

At the second town hall meeting in as many days, Worf thought he might have been wrong about the colonists. There were still as odd as before, but their righteous fury was unlike any he had seen on Qo’nos.

“What the fuck is this shit?” Uhura interpreted for a Deaf Human. While Uhura spoke evenly, the Deaf man’s gestures made it clear how he felt. “We don’t read Standard. Why the fuck would you give us a census in Standard?”

This righteous fury was unfortunately directed at Worf, whose first official duty was coordinating the
census. “The PADD was equipped with assistive technologies.”

The Human waited for the translation, then went off again. “Fucking speakers and a screen reader. How is that helpful to me?”

“Your inability to hear is none of my concern.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, how are you not getting this? What if someone took away...” Uhura looked hesitant, as if she didn’t want to translate further. “...your wheelchair? What would you do then?”

Worf answered honestly. “Hegh bat.”

The Deaf Humans looked horrified as Uhura explained what that entailed. The man sat down. Mission accomplished.

“Are there any more complaints?”

The crowd was silent, seemingly fearing that Worf would kill himself then and there if they spoke.

T’Pring stood up. “I apologize for this grievous error, which also affected me. There was no section asking the ethnicity of Vulcans. As it is true for many of you, being T’Pelih is an important facet of my identity that should be counted in the census. Please submit any complaints and concerns you may have, and Worf and I will work to craft a census form that will accurately reflect the diversity of our population.”

After the meeting was dismissed and T’Pring relieved Worf, he was cornered by her brother—the strange one. “Hi. Are Wednesdays at four good for you?”

“Good for what?”

“You just talked about committing ritual suicide in front of the entire planet. That earns you a few counseling sessions.”

“With you?”

“Yeah.”

Every day fresh new horrors.
As your elected ambassador, it is with great pride that I officially open Sha-Ka-Ree for visitation and commerce. It was a mere three months ago that we settled on this planet. Now, due to the perseverance and ingenuity of our citizenry, we have obtained a space dock that will allow us to securely receive larger numbers of visitors at one time.” T’Pring reached under the lectern, brandishing a pair of scissors. “With this oversized cutting implement, I will bisect this red ribbon. What this symbolizes, I am not certain, but I was told this was of great import.” T’Pring cut the ribbon and walked off the stage with little fanfare.

After ten hand-wringing minutes, the daycare worker finally managed to convince Spock and Geoff that their children wouldn’t be forever traumatized by them leaving for work. “It used to be so much easier,” Geoff sighed, walking out of the daycare center.

“At the very least,” Spock said, “their separation anxiety gives us more information on Valeris’ developmental rate. She appears to be developing as a full Vulcan would.”

“If that means she’ll cry that every time we leave for the next five years, I’d prefer she develop like a Klingon.”

They continued along the newly paved sidewalk to the hospital and research labs. “I am debating whether visiting Saavik and Valeris during my lunch hour would be a comfort to them or further upset them when I must return to—”

“Jesus! Fuck.” Geoff stopped walking and wiped his face with his shirt sleeve.

“What is the matter?”

“That girl just spit on me,” Geoff explained, looking back at a young Vulcan woman who had passed them on the sidewalk.

“Ko-kan,” Spock called to the woman, advancing toward her. He knew she was a visitor because there were no white Vulcan colonists outside of his family. “Did you purposefully expectorate on this man?”

The girl, who looked no more than sixteen, stared up at Spock defiantly. “Yes.”

“Judging by your youth, I assume you are ignorant concerning Terran history and unaware of the implications of spitting on a Black Human in the street.”

“Your assumption is false; I have an M8 certification in Terran history.”

“Then you are fully cognizant that you have just performed a hate crime, which is a punishable offense under our law.”

“I challenge that claim; as a full-blooded Vulcan, I do not experience hate. Perhaps you could explain it to me, Commander Spock.”

“You are aware of who I am, and yet you still commit violence against my bondmate? You are a foolish child.”
“I disagree. I expectorated on that man precisely because I recognized him as the disgraced Dr. M’Benga, the Butcher of the Ancients.” She looked over at Geoff. “If given the opportunity, I would repeat my actions.”

Spock leaned in, so this his face was a few inches from the girl’s. “You are fortunate your mother deemed your father worth copulating when she had. If you were born any earlier, I would teach you a valuable lesson on interspecies etiquette.” Spock took a step back, raising his hand in the Vulcan salute. “Live long and prosper.” Spock returned to Geoff’s side, running two fingers over his face. They shuffled down the sidewalk, away from that girl.

//How are you?//

//It’s not the first time I’ve been spit on in the street. That’s why I left Ek’tra.//

//And why I left Vulcan.//

//I had never pegged Vulcans to be the type that would spit on people.//

//Expectorating on someone is considered to be one of the greatest insults a Vulcan can deliver.//

//Isn’t that illogical?//

//Precisely. As a gesture, it says that a person is so dishonorable that another would waste saliva to tell them such. It is especially meaningful considering how much of Vulcan was desert.//

“I get it,” Geoff said, stopping in front of the hospital doors. “Vulcans really hate me.”

“And me.”

“Do you think Vulcans will spit on Saavik and Valeris?”

“On Ek’tra, most definitely. Here, I am more optimistic.”

Geoff brushed his thumb over Spock’s eyebrow. “See you at lunch?”

“Of course.” Spock nodded and walked toward the research labs.

—

“I checked over your translations,” Uhura said, entering T’Pring’s office. “There were a few minor err —Hello.” Perched on Worf’s desk was the most beautiful woman Nyota had ever seen. Besides her wife. Yes, T’Pring was very, very... not as gorgeous as this woman. “Who is this?” she asked Worf.

Worf craned his head around the woman’s fabulous bod. “Miss Magda Kovacs. She requested to see my label maker.”

Magda ran her fingers sensually across the label maker.

“Huh di buh.” Nyota spoke dozens of languages. In none of those were the noises she just made words. She coughed. “I should... Bye.” Nyota turned tail and left, forgetting all about Worf’s translations.

—

“Good god, look at her,” McCoy whispered to M’Benga “Talk about a blonde bombshell.”
“What do you think she’s doing here?” Geoff asked.

“I don’t know, but I’d like to give her a physical.”

Christine glared at them. “Pigs,” she mumbled, exiting the hospital break room in a huff.

“Or her annual pelvic,” McCoy chuckled.

M’Benga laughed along for a moment before he realized how wrong it was. “Len, we’re married.”

McCoy seemed to sober up as well. “More than that, we’re doctors.” He put down his cup of coffee.

“Let’s get back to work.”

M’Benga exited the break room and went to the urgent care ward. “You have anything for me?” he asked Suvin, the receptionist.

“A patient came in a few minutes ago, asking for a Dr. Abiliana. I told her we had no doctor by that name, but she insisted,” Suvin said, antennae twitching in irritation. “I sent her back to exam two just to shut her up.”

“I’ll take a look at her.” As he walked back to exam two, Geoff was glad he was on Sha-Ka-Ree. If a woman came in asking around for a Dr. Abiliana at a hospital on Ek’tra, Geoff was sure he would be found out. He didn’t want to think about what the High Council would have done if they knew.

He wasn’t surprised they had followed him. He’d placed the right clues with the right people on Ek’tra. In fact, he’d been expecting a deluge of Vulcan women coming to see Dr. Abiliana once the space dock was complete. He had assumed they’d be smart enough to go through the proper channels, not to his hospital.

He took the chart off of the door. T’Ki. God, he hoped that was a fake name.

“Miss T’Ki,” Geoff said, opening the exam room. “What can I—” It was her. Sitting on the exam table—that girl who spat on him. “—do for you?”

The girl recoiled. “I do not wish to see you. I requested Dr. Abiliana.”

“And here he is.”

“No. I was told Dr. Abiliana was a woman and...” The girl seemed to search for a word that Vulcan didn’t have. “She does not look like you.”

He ignored the sting. “You do realize Dr. Abiliana isn’t real?”

“No. The friend who recommended her to me said she was a female.”

“When did your friend visit Dr. Abiliana?”

“Last year.”

This was bad. This was very bad. Someone who wasn’t him was operating as Dr. Abiliana. Best case scenario: some noble do-gooder Vulcan doctor picked up his handle. Worst case scenario: some noble do-gooder Vulcan with a wire hanger picked up his handle. Even worse case scenario: a spy for the Vulcan government was running a sting operation using his handle. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

Geoff looked down at the girl’s chart. “Are you really twenty?”
“No.”

Right. “How far along?”

“Ten weeks, five days.”

“How long will you be on Sha-Ka-Ree?”

“Just today.”

Drugs were out then. If something went wrong, she needed to be able to receive treatment. “I’ll need to get a few things.”

Just before he reached the door, the girl asked, “You would help me after I expectorated on you?”

“You would want this kind of help after what you spat on me for?”

Worf didn’t know what he was doing wrong. At long last, he had found a woman worthy of being his mate. She was beautiful and.... She was beautiful. He had done all he could to woo her: he’d taken her to his place of work, shown her his label maker which she failed to hurl at him, read her some love poetry; he’d even begun to duck preemptively in the hopes that she would take a hint. But she failed to do so. Miss Magda Kovacs did nothing to indicate interest or that she even realized he was trying to win her favor. Still, Worf persevered. After all, she had not rejected him. Yet, she hadn’t roared or clawed at him either.

He was beginning to suspect she was a lesbian. Not due to her lack of interest, but the way she behaved. She was well-versed in the ways of winning a female. She read poetry in a mellifluous voice. She was gentle and courteous. If Worf had not informed her to the contrary, he would believe she thought he was the female of the species and was trying to woo him.

Magda was the first woman to express interest in him since the accident. She was also apparently a butch lesbian.

Spock had expected productivity to fall once the lab opened up for touring groups, but not so drastically. From his console, he could see that Maltz had imputed half the data he was supposed to, and Carol Marcus had returned only one out of five samples to the incubator. Spock was hesitant to discipline them despite his position as the director of scientific research. Both Maltz and Carol had just as much experience and renown as he did, and Spock was cognizant of the talk throughout the colony about nepotism. From the outside, it must have appeared that there was a de facto royal family; everyone related to Spock by blood, bond, or marriage held a position of authority in Sha-Ka-Ree society, with the exception of Sybok, who for all the power he possessed could never be said to hold authority over anyone. After watching productivity fall increasingly rapidly, Spock determined it was time to gently remind Maltz and Carol to return to work.

As Spock left his office and entered the main lab, he saw the source of their distraction. Lying on one of the lab tables, in a slinky green dress with a cut-out that revealed the underside of one her breasts, was a highly aesthetically pleasing woman who would easily tear apart Spock’s life if he let her. Spock knew that his Vulcan upbringing at times complicated his relationship with Geoffrey, but for once he was grateful for the restraint it granted him.

“Would you care to introduce your latest test subject?” Spock asked Maltz and Carol, who were
staring at the woman, seemingly entranced.

Dumbfounded by her beauty, Maltz and Carol made no move to answer him. The woman smiled up at Spock. “Ruth Bonaventure.” She outstretched her hand, palm down, inviting Spock to kiss it. Miss Bonaventure apparently knew nothing about Vulcan customs.

“Miss Bonaventure, please relocate your person to a more suitable piece of furniture.”

She rolled off of the table like a cat and sat upon a stool.

“Please excuse me and my colleagues.” Spock herded Carol and Maltz into his office. Deprived of the woman’s presence, they regained the ability to speak.

“What do you want?” Carol asked, anxious to return to the main lab and Miss Bonaventure.

“What I want is immaterial. What I require is a secure environment in which to unravel the many curiosities of this planet. It is one thing to allow guests a carefully crafted glimpse into our work via guided tours; it is another to let said guests recline on our work. I need not remind you this is a matter of planetary security.” To make himself perfectly clear to his stupefied colleagues, Spock said, “Remove her from the premises and do not invite her to return.”

Maltz looked ready to protest, but Carol cut him off. “Fine. We were about to take her out to lunch anyway.”

Spock watched them leave along with Miss Bonaventure, before locking up the lab and walking to Geoffrey’s parents’ house for lunch.

When he arrived, Geoff was already at the kitchen table, picking at a rice dish prepared by his mother, who was sitting across from him. “Eva.” Spock nodded at her, and then pressed a kiss to Geoffrey’s temple. “You are distressed,” Spock said taking a seat next to him. Eva passed him a plate, and he began to pile food on it.

“I think I’m in trouble,” Geoff mumbled.

Eva’s face pinched in concern. “The last time you told me that you were brought before the Vulcan High Council for malpractice.”

“This time I doubt I’ll be so lucky,” he sighed. He turned to Spock. “Someone’s been performing abortions as Dr. Abiliana.”

If Spock’s heart was located in his chest cavity, he was certain it would have figuratively dropped into his stomach. “Do you know who?”

“No.” Geoff shook his head.

“Geoffrey,” Eva said. “What did you do?”

Geoff looked down at his food. “I’ve been performing abortions on Vulcan women.”

“Why would you be in trouble for that? It’s part of your job.”

“So was following the last wishes of my patients,” Geoff muttered bitterly.

“After Ek’tra was established, the Vulcan High Council reviewed several of Vulcan’s laws to see if they were still applicable,” Spock explained. “As members of a matriarchal culture, Vulcan women have long had access to abortion on demand. However, after the loss of so many lives during
Vulcan’s destruction, the High Council was moved to support policies that would ensure the repopulation of the species. Former laws regarding abortion were repealed and a review board was created to determine whether abortion was necessary on a case-by-case basis.”

“The review board almost always denied women’s requests, unless her health was endangered by the pregnancy,” Geoff added.

“The High Council also ruled that women below the age of majority required the consent of their guardians and their clan matriarch to petition the review board for an abortion.”

“After the eugenics laws were passed, women had easier access to abortion if they were seen as having bad genes or the fetus was diagnosed with a disability. But before that it was almost impossible to get an abortion. I knew what was going to start happening, so I started doing abortions under the table as Dr. Abiliana.”

“After your great-great-great-great-grandmother Abiliana,” Eva surmised.

Spock was unaware that Geoffrey's alias was crafted in honor of a distant ancestor. He wondered why Geoff chose that woman in particular. Becoming ever more of the fluctuations in their bond, Geoff's sensed Spock's curiosity and explained, “Abiliana is sort of a family legend on my mom's side.”

“She is not a legend,” Eva said. “The Eugenics War museum in Habana has her papers on display.”

“What did she that was so notable that it warranted a museum display?” Spock asked.

“Do you want to tell the story, or should I?” Eva asked Geoff.

“You tell it better,” Geoff replied.

Eva leaned in, wrapping her hands her mug of tea. “At the end of the 20th century, before the Eugenics Wars began, an Augment named Ragnar Thorwald took control of Central and South America. His pet project was breeding out the indigenous blood from Latin America. For the most part, he did this through arranged marriages between lighter skinned mestizas and sterilizing people who looked more indigenous. He considered the Caribbean a lost cause because of the number of former African slaves who settled there. He turned the Caribbean islands back into slave states and used the women as incubators for his genetically modified offspring. Half of Cuba was forced to carry his children. Women had little they could do prevent this; Thorwald was in control of all the medical facilities, and abortions were outlawed, except in the case of inferior genetics. Very much like the law on Ek'tra.

“Geoffrey's great-great-great-great-grandmother Abiliana acted as an informal doctor for her work camp. People would come to her when they were sick or injured and she would heal them and give them different types of medicine. Eventually the women came to Abiliana for drugs that would induce abortions or make them less fertile. As a result, her work camp had the lowest birth rate out of all of Thorwald’s projects.”

“And the camp guards did not realize what Abiliana was doing?” Spock asked.

“No,” Eva smiled. “That's the beautiful part. The guards didn't think anyone in the camp was smart enough to smuggle or synthesize those drugs. They thought Abiliana was just some voodoo medicine woman, gathering different herbs for her witch’s brew. Of course, they didn't know she was a chemistry student before Thorwald invaded, and that she was distilling the active ingredients from herbs that her grandmothers had used for generations. The camp supervisors and Ragnar
Thorwald convinced themselves that there was something wrong with the water in the area that caused the women to have so many miscarriages. They would rather make up a problem than admit an Afro-Cuban woman could beat their science.”

“She did the right thing,” Eva said, reaching across the table, placing her hand on Geoffrey’s. “And so did you.”

Geoff shook his head. “I fucked up. I didn’t cover my tracks, and now someone knows what I was doing and is pretending to be me.”

“Why does that have to be such a bad thing?” Eva asked. “At least women on Ek’tra can still get abortions.”

“I don’t know who is performing them, though. It could be some hack who doesn’t know what he’s doing, or a V’Shar agent undercover working to take me down, along with as many Vulcans as he can. Just the fact that someone else knows puts and my family in danger. If the same people who firebombed T’Pau’s apartment and ran Sarek off the planet found out... they’ll go after me, Spock, the girls...”

“T’hy’la, we are safe here,” Spock said. “You need not feel guilty for endangering us; extremists on Ek’tra have enough reasons to murder us all without knowing you moonlighted as an abortionist.”

These words did not seem to comfort Geoffrey.

—

T’Pring had been confined in her office all day, dealing with the aftermath of opening up Sha-Ka-Ree for trade and visitation. She received complaints from neighborhoods surrounding the planet’s main market—mostly people griping about tourists walking across their lawns and upsetting their flowerbeds. The Ferengi Bolshevik caucus was particularly vocal in their premonitions of what tragedy would befall the planet if this capitalist reign of terror continued.

“If you do not put an end to free trade with outworlders—”

T’Pring interrupted the Ferengi woman on her vidscreen. “As elected diplomat, my role is limited to communicating the will of the people. The people voted in favor of commerce with—”

“It is insentient to allow the buying and selling of people within this planet’s orbit.”

T’Pring pinched the bridge of her nose. (She wasn’t overcome with frustration or a migraine; she simply found that the more emotional species responded well to these visual cues.) “However violent your reaction to capitalism may be, you need not resort to hyperbole to—”

“I am not exaggerating! Some hew-man came to our village and tried to sell my son a bride.”

“Have you contacted the police?”

“Yes, and they told me that there was no law against what he was doing. So I called you.”

“Thank you. I will investigate this matter personally.” T’Pring turned off her vidscreen, and walked into the main office, where Worf’s desk was. Typically, it did not have a stunning aesthetically ideal woman on it. Focusing her mind on the matter at hand, T’Pring did not allow the woman’s beauty to affect her. “Worf, we have an urgent situation.”

“Of what nature?” Worf asked, barely looking away from the Human woman.
“I have just received a report of an outworlder attempting to sell women as brides. I require your assistance in running a full investigation out of this office. In addition, I require an emergency townhall meeting to determine the legality of sex trafficking within Sha-Ka-Ree’s orbit.”

“Sex trafficking?” the woman squeaked in a delightfully feminine voice.

“Yes.” Perhaps she didn’t know what those words meant. “The movement of bodies by a coercive agent for the purpose of selling said bodies with the guarantee or promise of sexual activities, such as those expected from a wife.”

The woman’s face went red. “You make it sound like the women have no choice. Maybe the women want to find husbands... even they are Ferengi. Did you ever think of that?”

“I do not believe I said anything regarding the women marrying Ferengi,” T’Pring said accusingly. In those Terran films Sybok was so fond of, the guilt was often revealed through a character mentioning a detail they should not have known. “For what reason are you visiting Sha-Ka-Ree?”

The Human woman looked caught between a rock and a hard place. (Figuratively, of course. In reality, she was caught between a coffee mug and Worf’s label maker.) “Please don’t throw me in jail.”

“I will not, if you answer my questions.” T’Pring conveniently omitted that the woman was not breaking any law, and even if she was, Sha-Ka-Ree did not yet have a jail. (Mandatory counseling sessions with Sybok and therapeutic art lessons with Apple Pie Motorbike were threat enough to deter crime.)

“Okay.” The woman nodded.

–

“What I don’t understand,” McCoy said, “is how he got off that planet.”

Being the only ones besides his “cargo” who knew what he looked like, Spock, Uhura, and McCoy were tasked with searching for Harry Mudd. They had originally planned to search separately to cover more ground, but Spock soon realized that McCoy and Uhura would be largely useless if Mudd deployed one of his beauties to distract. He decided it would be best for him to supervise the others.

“I know,” Uhura agreed. “Last time we saw him he was trapped on a planet by hundreds of android copies of his wife with no mode of transportation.”

Spock considered this for a moment while scanning through the crowd. “Perhaps he somehow managed to disassemble the androids and used their parts to construct a rudimentary vessel.”

Uhura shivered. To her, that was like that serial killer who made lampshades out of women’s earlobes.

“Excuse me.” McCoy stopped a Romulan woman passing by. “Have you seen this man?” He held what was supposed to be a sketch artist’s rendering of Mudd’s face, but they didn’t have the software for that yet or a sketch artist, so they had to ask M’Benga’s mom to give it her best shot. Realism, apparently, wasn’t her favorite genre.

The Romulan peered at the sketch, turning her head to the side. “Is that a nipple?”

McCoy shoved the sketch in his pocket. “A white Human male around six feet tall, a little on the
heavy side. Brown hair, ridiculous moustache. Calls himself Mudd, or Leo Walsh. This ringing any bells?"

“Oh, him,” the Romulan replied. “He tried to sell a Human woman to my bondmate. If I wasn’t a pacifist...”

“Do you know where he is now?”

“The last time I saw him he was in Little Aventine, selling crystals door-to-door.”

“Thanks.” The Romulan woman walked off, and McCoy waved Uhura and Spock over. “She said he might be in the Romulan village.”

—

“Look who I found,” Sybok said, entering the exam room where Chapel was looking over Mudd’s women. He stepped aside, revealing a blonde Human. “Miss Eve McHuron, the third and final woman.”

“Could you please get on the med bed?” Chapel asked Eve. “Thank you.” She turned to Sybok. “How did you find her?”

“She was hanging around outside the hospital. I guess she wanted to land a doctor.”

“How did you know she was...”

“You can’t tell by looking at her? She’s the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen. After Leonard. Not that he’s a woman. But if he was a woman, he’d be the most beautiful woman in the galaxy. I’d imagine. Just going off of how he looks when we dress up. He doesn’t really like that. But if I have to do it...”

“You’re blathering. I thought these women couldn’t affect Vulcans.”

“Not if we don’t want them to. And I don’t. I’m just a little impaired right now.”

“You’re high?” Chapel whispered angrily. “You’re supposed to help me assess them!”

“No, no.” Sybok waved his hands. “I’m not high. I, um, I bought a deep fryer today—don’t tell Len—and I made deep fried Twinkies with powdered sugar.”

“So, you’re good to help me?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

Behind them, the biofunction monitors began to beep wildly. Chapel and Sybok rushed over to the women.

“Are you in pain?” Chapel asked.

“No, I’m fine,” Ruth replied, even though she curling into a fetal position on the med bed. The other women nodded as they grimaced.

Chapel ran her medical tricorder over the women, but the readings didn’t tell her much. “I can’t help you unless you tell me what’s wrong. Where does—”

All three shrieked in pain, cowering. Sybok gasped.
“What?” Chapel asked. “Are you picking up on something?”

“No. Don’t see it?” he asked.

“No.”

“They’re—they’re not beautiful anymore. They changed.”

“They look exactly the same.”

“No,” Magda cried. “We’re ugly! Hideous!”

“No,” Sybok said in a calming voice. “You’re very—” He tried to lie, but his Vulcan training reared it’s honest head. “You’re not ugly; you’re homely.” He tried to imbue that word with positivity, but it merely caused Magda to sob louder.

“If it means anything,” Chapel said over the women’s crying, “you look the same to me.”

“So,” Magda asked, wiping the tears from her eyes, “you would still marry me?”

“If I was attracted to women, yes.”

Magda buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

“Wait,” Sybok said. “You’re straight?”

“Yes,” Chapel answered.

“Completely, one hundred percent, zero on on the Kinsey scale heterosexual?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that there were any of you left. They should stuff you and put you in a museum somewhere. That’s probably why their mystical feminine wiles don’t work on you.”

“It’s not mystical,” Eve said, sitting up. “Harry has been giving us beauty supplements. I didn’t want to take them, but once I tried it I found out they really work. They just wear off after a while.”

“Do you know what’s in these supplements?” Chapel asked.

Eve shook her head. “I know it’s foolish taking a mysterious pill to be beautiful, but we all wanted to get married so badly. Harry said the pills would get us ten proposals a day. It sounds vain, but none of had a chance of getting married until Harry found us.”

“What did you think your future spouse would do when you ran out of supplements?”

“The same thing any man does when his wife gets older or lets herself go.”

“Find a mistress,” Sybok said.

“No,” Eve said sternly. “See past that because he loves her. The supplements are a trick—a dirty trick, but doesn’t everyone put on a show to find someone? Who can really say that their husband or wife is the same person they met all those years ago?”

If there was a formula for a civil town hall meeting, calling people out of their homes and places of
work shortly before dinner time to an emergency meeting was not one of the components. While every citizen was informed of the meeting (as per the law), T’Pring and Worf hadn’t managed to get the entirety of the planet’s population to appear, but they had a sufficient number of people to debate and vote according to the planet’s bylaws.

“By criminalizing sex trafficking,” an Andorian thaan argued, “we risk stigmatizing all sex workers.”

“It limits bodily autonomy,” their zh’yi added. “If a person wishes to have sex for money, that should be their own decision.” Several people murmured their agreement.

“But a lot of the time it isn’t ‘their own decision,’” a Ferengi youth interjected. “Trafficking is different from other types of sex work, where some of the time people have enough options to choose sex work rather than being forced into it.”

“From what I hear,” the thaan said, “these women chose join Mudd. They wanted to find—”

Worf hissed, having the effect of a judge swinging a gavel. “This meeting was called to vote on sex trafficking, not to try Harry Mudd. Stay on topic.”

“While I respect a woman’s right to choose what she does with her own body,” a Ferengi woman—the one who had vidcalled T’Pring—said, “I know that circumstances can take away that right. Sex trafficking is one of them. Though I’ve never heard of it, women could be moved from planet to planet for sex work by a kind of head hunter. That, despite its ties to capitalism, should not be outlawed. It is when people are coerced or forced into sex work by someone else or extenuating circumstances that the state should intervene.”

“But what counts as coercion?” the thaan asked. “Who decides that?”

“Juries, the same with other crimes,” the Ferengi woman replied.

“If the trafficked person has been coerced,” Stonn said, “they should not face criminal charges.”

“Agreed,” the thaan said. “Only the procurer and the johns should be charged.”

“Are we ready to take a vote?” Worf asked. No one objected. “All those in favor of making sex trafficking a class F offense with severity of punishment determined by a jury, say aye.” Worf waited for the votes to register on his PADD. “All those opposed, say nay.” He waited once more. “The ayes have it. Meeting adjourned.”

—

When they found him, Harry Mudd was pitching his wares to little old Romulan man, who looked grateful to have the nuisance dragged off his porch.

“Excuse me,” Mudd said, “but I believe you’ve got the wrong person. I’ve been reformed. I’m out of the game. Gone straight.”

“Then what’s with the crystals?” McCoy asked, gesturing to Mudd’s suitcase.

“Those? Well, those are spiritual crystals for religious ceremonies. I’m a missionary, you see? A man of the cloth, going ‘round spreading the good news. Say, did you know that Landru died for your sins?” Spock tightened his grip on Mudd’s arm. “Okay, okay! Those are love potion crystals.” Spock squeezed tighter. “Imitation love potion crystals. I lost me last batch to a bunch of gangsters in a game of fizzbin.”
Uhura’s comm chirped. “Uhura... Thank you.” She placed her comm back in her belt and smiled at Mudd. “The police will be here to pick you up soon.”

“For what? I didn’t do nothing but try to ply me trade. Is that a crime?”

“No, but as of five minutes ago, sex trafficking is.”

“Are you feeling any better?” Chapel asked.

Ruth shook her head. “I feel worse.”

“Here.” Chapel filled a hypospray. “This should help.”

“What is it?”

“A beauty supplement,” Chapel snarked, injecting it into her arm.

Across the room, Sybok’s eyes widened. “What did you do? She looks—She’s gorgeous again.”

“The supplement must have worked,” Ruth said brightly.

“I was being sarcastic,” Chapel said. “That was just a vitamin.”

“Oh.”

Before Sybok’s eyes, Ruth’s beauty faded. “It’s a—The beauty supplement is—it’s...”

“What?” Chapel asked.

“I can’t think of the word. It starts with an ‘r,’ or a ‘t,’ or an ‘s.’ I don’t know. Um, it was a band. And old Terran band.”

“The Beatles?” Chapel offered.

“No. It’s not a beetle. It’s—Okay, you give someone something that looks like the thing that they think they’re getting, and they act like it’s that thing?”

“A placebo?”

“Yes! No. Yes.”

“I’m telling McCoy about the deep-fryer.”

After her partner whispered something in her ear, the detective smiled at Mudd. “You’re rather smart for someone who’s been caught five times.”

“I’ve picked up a few things here and there,” Harry responded.

“You knew that if you gave the women the Venus drug, you’d be painted by the prosecution as a pimp getting his whores hooked on drugs. Or as the supplier of a date rape drug that made people powerless to lust. But you needed your women to be irresistibly beautiful, so you just told them they were getting the Venus drug. When really it was a placebo that inspired the kind of self-confidence that makes people beautiful.” The detective lowered her voice. “It was a smart move, but we’ll nail
you to the wall even if the pills are fake.”

“Fake?” Mudd yelped indignantly. “I paid good money for those!”

Sybok and Chapel had just convinced the women that they didn’t need the pills because they were placebos and that true beauty comes from within, when M’Benga came through the door. “The pills aren’t placebos.”

Ruth and Magda slumped back into their homely state, while Eve shook her head. “I don’t care. Don’t you see, girls, we don’t need pills to trick men into marrying us; we can do that all on our own.” Ruth and Magda flourished once again.

“Somehow,” Sybok said under his breath, “I don’t think that was the lesson they were supposed to learn.”

“What are the pills, if they’re not placebos?” Chapel asked.

“What substance do you know that makes people more self-confident and think they’re irresistible?” Geoff asked rhetorically.

“Alcohol,” Chapel answered, just as Sybok said, “Chocolate.”

“You’re both wrong,” Geoff said. “An old Terran substance derived from the coca plant—cocaaine.”

“That would explain why they were in so much pain,” Chapel said. “They were in withdrawal.”

“They seem better now,” Sybok said.

“The power of suggestion,” Chapel surmised. “Along with the neural stabilizers in the vitamin hypo I gave them.”

After discovering that Mudd had been feeding them a highly addictive stimulant since the day they met, the women didn’t hesitate to press charges. Considering how ready to kick his ass Ruth was, Mudd got off lightly. The woman agreed to stay on Sha-Ka-Ree for as long as it took to get, in the words of Magda, “that creep locked up for good.” Knowing Mudd’s slippery nature, very few people were confident that would ever happen.

Assured that Sybok would set the women up with the adequate housing, M’Benga and Chapel returned to their regular duties at the hospital.

“Thank Uzaveh you’re here,” Suvin said from behind the front desk. “I was just about the comm you. Dr. McCoy is having trouble with a Vulcan patient.”

“Where?” Chapel asked.

“Exam four.”

The doctors nodded, and rushed to the exam room. When the door opened, they saw a young Vulcan woman—a girl, really—curled up on the med bed, and a red faced McCoy arguing with an adolescent Vulcan male. Both Vulcans were white, meaning they were outworlders.

“—the only doctor we have on call. We’ve got two others on the way and neither of them are called
Abiliana. If you don’t convince her to let me treat her, she’ll bleed out.”

Chapel went to the the young woman, talking softly to her in Vulcan, while Geoff walked over to McCoy and the boy. “What’s the situation?”

“You’re barking up the wrong tree,” McCoy snapped. “She’s refusing treatment—won’t even let me run a tricorder over her, but I can see she’s got a sustained vaginal bleed. And neither of them won’t tell me a damn thing, except that they want to see Dr. Abiliana.”

“They’re in luck,” Chapel said, looking over at the men. “The doctor’s in.”

“You know?” Geoff gaped. “How? How do you know that—”

“It’s the biggest open secret on Ek’tra.” Oh, god.

“Do you mind telling me what the hell you’re talking about?” demanded McCoy.

“On Ek’tra, after abortion was effectively banned, some caped crusader Scarlet Pimpernel abortionist by the name of Dr. Abiliana started performing under the table abortions,” Chapel explained. “He was pretty good, apparently; like he was an actual doctor. But he disappeared—some say he was caught and executed, or he just got scared and ran—and for about a year there was no place for Vulcan women to get abortions. When I got there, I took up the mantle.”

“You?” Geoff asked. “You’re the white woman who’s been practicing as Abiliana?”

She nodded. “You can’t tell anyone, especially my husband.”

“Oh, god.” Geoff clutched his heart and sighed. “I thought I was cooked. I’m glad it was you and not some crackpot or spy that took my place.”

“You’re Dr. Abiliana?” Chapel balked. “The original?”

“Yeah.”

“High five!” The two Dr. Abilianas slapped hands.

“The Dread Pirate Roberts reunion is nice and all,” McCoy said, “but we’ve got a teenage girl bleeding out over there.”

“Right,” Chapel said, tucking her hair behind her ears.

“We’re both Dr. Abiliana,” M’Benga said to the Vulcans. “Why do you need to see us?”

“I am pregnant,” the girl said. “I did not want to have to carry a fetus to term, so I searched for Dr. Abiliana.”

“We could not find him,” the boy said. “We heard rumors that the doctor had moved to Sha-Ka-Ree, but we feared that her condition would be discovered before the planet opened for visitors.”

“I thought we could do it ourselves. We both have class M9 certifications in chemistry.”

“We synthesized the abortifacient easily, but we must have made an error.”

“Do you have any more of the pills?” Chapel asked.

“Yes.” The boy pulled a tiny container from his pocket, and handed it to Chapel.
She opened the container and ran her tricorder over the pills. “They’re pure.”

“In some cases of medical abortion,” Geoff explained, “the medication doesn’t fully terminate the pregnancy and causes bleeding. When did you take the pills?”

“Fifteen days, four hours, and thirteen minutes ago,” the girl answered.

“Jesus,” McCoy gasped. “You’ve been bleeding since then?”

“Yes.”

“You’re lucky,” Chapel said. “If you were Human, you’d be dead.”

“One of us needs to examine you. Do you have a preference?” M’Benga asked.

“I would prefer an examination from you, as you have the most experience.”

Chapel and McCoy left M’Benga to it, telling him to comm them if he needed assistance. Out in the corridor, McCoy asked, “Is it really that bad on Ek’tra?”

Christine nodded. “I wouldn’t be surprised we got a couple cases like this a month.”

McCoy cursed. “Next time we get a Vulcan in for a routine surgical abortion, can I observe? I know it’s gotta be at least a little different than Humans.”

“Yeah, of course.”

—

After three days of therapy and art lessons, Mudd begged to placed on a penal colony. “Or Rura Penthe, I’m not choosy.”

After much debate, Sha-Ka-Ree handed Mudd over to the Federation, which had legal jurisdiction over the planets and space station where Mudd first drugged and procured the women. Despite the jury being unable to determine whether Mudd was criminally insane or criminally incompetent, Harry was sentenced to a long vacation at the Elba II asylum.

Life on Sha-Ka-Ree settled down after the planet’s first day of commerce and open visitation. Those who fell for the women’s charms did their best to forget about it, even though the women remained beautiful. For most, it was the guilt of almost buying a trafficked person that kept them from acknowledging it, but for Worf it was the embarrassment of courting a Human.

Eve and Ruth took the first commercial vessel to Terra, while Magda, as a scientist, was offered a position as Elder Spock’s assistant as he outfitted the planet with its very own starship, the Squid.

Chapel kept her word and told McCoy about Sybok’s deep-fryer. McCoy’s Southern upbringing won out over his medical training, so he didn’t rant and rave about it. Well, not too badly.
Like a Dog

The weekend was one of the many Human customs Spock initially did not understand but eventually
grew to appreciate. Vulcan had no such concept, and when he was in Starfleet, Spock used his days
off to conduct experiments. This all changed after he and Geoffrey were bonded. His bondmate
insisted that they “spend time together.” While he could never consider a moment with Geoffrey a
moment wasted, he never truly understood the appeal of weekends until they had children. No matter
how fascinating his work, Spock could not help but thinking that his time would be better served at
home with Saavik and Valeris. He knew Geoffrey felt the same. If their work was not badly needed
by the colony, Geoffrey and Spock would be content to be “stay-at-home parents.”

He understood why Sarek had elected to discontinue working until Ainsley was older. (Illogically,
this filled Spock with something akin to jealousy. Sarek hadn’t stopped working when he was born.
Spock knew very well that Sarek’s decision to stay at home was necessitated as much by his lack of
employment prospects as it was by Ainsley’s birth, but that didn’t diffuse his jealousy.) In one of the
few strained conversations Spock had with his father, Sarek admitted that at times he grew bored
with watching Ainsley. Spock could not relate, but he imagined Sarek must experience the kind of
frustration that drove Geoffrey to leave the girls with his parents for an hour so he and Spock could
copulate without fear of interruption. (Spock rather enjoyed the fear of interruption, especially in
Geoffrey’s office during their lunch hour.)

The weekend of the Terran Medical Genetics Symposium, Spock planned a variety of activities
designed to keep Saavik and Valeris (and Spock himself, if he admitted it) from missing Geoffrey
while he was away. If was the first time since they had adopted the girls that either of them spent the
night away from home. The girls were taking it well. They had cried as Geoffrey left and as they felt
their familial bond stretch all the way to Earth. Spock was able to assure them telepathically that their
father would return to them soon. To distract them, Spock took the girls, Cecilia, and Julius to their
favorite park.

As they sat on the ground eating lunch, Julius was approached by another Romulan Miniature Goat
(they were very popular in Little Aventine). The goats sniffed one another and engaged in a bit of
gentle play. Cecilia blocked the strange new animal’s access to Valeris, whose curiosity
overwhelmed her appetite for dry cereal. Saavik listened to the goings-on as she nursed.

Life was acceptable.

Seven minutes and forty-eight seconds passed when a Romulan male came running toward them.
“Titus,” he called to the goat. “Come here!” The goat obeyed, and his owner scooped him up into his
arms. The man continued over to Spock. “I’m sorry if he bothered you. He must have crawled under
the fence.”

“He was no bother,” Spock responded. “He and Julius appeared to enjoy each other’s company.”

The man was too transfixed by Spock’s breastfeeding to give an intelligent reply. Somehow he
managed to tear his eyes away. “Right. Farewell.” The man walked away, and if Spock were not
half-Vulcan, he wouldn’t have heard him mutter, “Pervert.” By the turning of their heads, Spock
could tell his daughters had heard him as well.

Spock instinctively held Saavik closer to his chest, murmuring multiplication tables—the Vulcan
equivalent of lullabies. Despite the welcoming atmosphere of Sha-Ka-Ree, such comments were not
uncommon. Indeed, their frequency was intensifying as the girls aged. For reasons unknown to
Spock, there was an intense stigma toward breastfeeding in Romulan culture, especially when the
nursing child was nearing their first birthday, as Saavik was. It was difficult, then, for Spock to
determine whether the Romulan’s utterance was in reference to breastfeeding in general, or to a man
breastfeeding, which was the source of most of the disparaging comments.

Saavik finished feeding and pointed at the pile of toys on their picnic blanket.

“Ne’?” Spock asked.

Saavik nodded, and Spock placed her next to Valeris and their toys. Although both of them were
crawling by that time, Spock needn’t worry that Saavik or Valeris might go off somewhere; Cecilia
took it upon herself to prevent either of the girls from crawling off the blanket, gently nudging them
with her nose if they ever got too close to the edge.

Spock’s comm chirped somewhere in his giant diaper bag. He rifled through it, digging through
several inches of diapers and receiving blankets to pull out the comm. “Spock here.”

“Hey, it’s me again.”

“Greetings, Geoffrey.”

“How are the kids?”

“In approximately the same condition they were when you commed twenty-eight minutes ago.”

“Sorry. How’s the park?”

“Pleasant enough. A Romulan felt himself qualified to comment on my parenting.”

“He’s lucky I wasn’t there.”

“I highly doubt you could defeat a Romulan in combat.”

“But I could watch the kids while you did.”

“How is the symposium?”

“Good. I’ve gotten a lot of compliments on my talk. I wish they hadn’t scheduled me so early, I’m
tempted to blow off the rest of the conference and come home.”

“You should stay; you have been looking forward to this for months.”

“Yeah. I know. I just miss you guys so much.”

“We miss you as well.”

“Can you hold the comm up to their heads?”

“Of course.” Spock turned up the comm’s volume and placed it between Saavik and Valeris. “Your
father wishes to speak with you.”

“Hey, babies,” Geoffrey said through the comm. “Papi misses you. I love you so much. I’ll be home
soon.”

Spock lowered its volume, and held the comm back up to his face. “They appeared to recognize your
voice.”
“That’s good. I’ve got to go. I’ll comm you in a few hours.”

“If you can wait that long.”

“Yeah. I love you.”

“And I love you.”

“Bye.”

“Spock out.”

–

Three hours passed, and Geoffrey still hadn’t comm’d home. Spock was impressed by his resolve, until Geoffrey walked into the kitchen. “You are back early.”

“I couldn’t stay away,” Geoffrey replied. His face was sweaty, and his eyes darted around the room like he was looking for something.

“The girls are taking a nap,” Spock explained.

“Good.”

When Geoffrey did not take off for the nursery, Spock knew something was wrong. The way Geoff was looking at him... it was like he hadn’t seen him in years. “Are you feeling well?” Spock concentrated on his bond to Geoffrey. Marital bonds were not as strong as those between parent and child, so Spock could not feel the bond stretch like the girls' could; however, with adequate concentration, he could approximate Geoffrey’s location. He was not here.

“I’m fine,” this not-Geoffrey answered.

Spock reached behind his back for a kitchen knife. He had spent enough time on the Enterprise to know that this creature wearing Geoffrey’s face could possess strength far greater than a Vulcan’s.

The man’s eyes flicked to Spock’s face. He smiled. “You’ll do.” He reached into his pocket, and dropped a small, transparent sphere onto the kitchen floor.

Spock charged at the man, but the smoke that was quickly filling the room caused him to collapse—right into the man’s arms.

–

When Spock regained consciousness, he found himself chained spread eagle to the deck of a small vessel. He heard the thrum of a warp core below him; he could be anywhere. He had no weapons, but he assumed that if that man outmatched him physically, he would have used brute force or a hypospray to sedate him rather than a grenade. Spock pulled experimentally on the chains.

“You won’t be able to break free from those,” the man said. Spock looked, but could not see him. “They’ve been field-tested... repeatedly.” The man stepped out from behind a bulkhead, carrying Valeris.

Spock struggled against his chains. If he had an adrenal gland, he was certain the fear for his daughter’s life would have granted him the strength to break free. Unfortunately, that was one of the areas where he was completely Vulcan.
The man stroked Valeris’ forehead. “A seamless integration of Klingon and Vulcan genes. Using the
gametes of a Klingon who carries the Augment virus gene was an especially nice touch. No ridges.
The perfect stealth warrior. A spy’s pedigree.” He stepped back behind the bulkhead, and returned
moments later without Valeris.

“What did you do to her?” Spock asked.

“Nothing. I just put her back in her box. Don’t worry. It has air holes. I had to improvise. I don’t
have a crib,” he explained. “He took the crib. He took everything. You, our baby, everything. All
because—I told you. Don’t lay a hand on McCoy. No matter what. But you did. God, how could
you throw it all away like that? He wasn’t even the right McCoy; he would have been gone in a half
hour anyway.”

From the man’s incoherent ramblings, Spock gathered that this was not one half of Geoffrey’s
personality, or an alien inhabiting his body. This was Geoffrey’s counterpart from the mirror
universe. Spock and his children were in grave danger.

“Where is Saavik?”

“Saavik?” Geoffrey asked. “The Romulan half breed? She has her own box.”

“Did you harm her?”

“No. I would never harm them. They’re priceless specimens.”

“What do you want?”

Geoffrey reached out and stroked Spock’s eyebrow. “I want my life back.”

After Spock failed to pick up his comm a third time, Geoff tried not to panic. Spock and the girls
were fine. Vulcan fundamentalists weren’t attacking their house. Uhura hadn’t accidentally aimed a
tornado at their living room. Spock wasn’t choking to death on a tofu dog.

There was no harm in checking.

Geoff dialed in his father’s frequency.

“Apple Pie here.”

“Hey. It’s Geoff. Spock’s not answering his comm. Can you go over there and see if he and the kids
are all right?”

“I thought they were with you.”

It was times like these that his parents’ frequent pot smoking was annoying. “No. I went to the
symposium alone. Can you just get Spock on the comm, please?”

“Geoff, he’s not here. You took him and the girls to Pacifica for dinner.”

“No, I didn’t. I’m still on Earth.”

“That’s impossible. I saw you less than an hour ago.”

Geoff’s comm clattered to the floor.
Judging by how he was positioned and the way Geoffrey was touching his face, Spock was 86.7% certain what the deranged, grieving man’s next move would be. Then, as he watched Geoffrey pull a scalpel from his shoe, Spock thought he might be wrong. His fears were confirmed when Geoffrey used the scalpel to cut a clean line down Spock’s tunic, then made two quick cuts along Spock’s pant legs before ripping them off.

Had he not read Jim’s very detailed report of what occurred in the mirror universe, Spock would have hoped that this Geoffrey would be disgusted by what he wore under his trousers. However, Spock knew that his counterpart had similar taste in undergarments, which his Geoffrey found alluring. Looking up at Geoffrey, Spock braced himself for a predatory leer. What he saw was a study in anger and confusion.

“Why are you wearing those?” Geoffrey asked, his voice a low rumble.

Earlier, Spock had resolved to interact with his captor as little as possible, hoping to lure Geoffrey into a false sense of security and draw him near enough for Spock to grab the keys from his pocket. Spock was also focusing his energies on contacting Sybok through their sibling bond, but his brother was unresponsive. However, in this instance, Spock was silent for an entirely different reason. Even when asked to by a madman with a scalpel, Spock could not articulate why he preferred to wear women’s undergarments.

Geoffrey took Spock silence for guilt. “Are you cheating on me? Is what this is? I go away for the weekend and you bend over for—” He started hyperventilating. “Is it Sybok?” And now he was crying. “Did he ask you to wear those?”

Witnessing Humans cry was always an uncomfortable experience for Spock, but watching his kidnapper sob in a manner that would embarrass a Vulcan infant bordered on overwhelming. Spock couldn’t concentrate on his escape plan when this man was vomiting his hurt feelings about the vessel. “I am not engaged in an adulterous affair with my brother. Nor with anyone else. I am intimate with Geoffrey alone, and I accept no substitutes,” Spock said pointedly.

Spock’s reassurance halted the Human’s attempt to evacuate all of his body’s water and salt through his eyeballs. However, he appeared to be somewhat skeptical. “Then why are you wearing panties if I’m not home to see them?”

Spock recalled something he once heard Nyota say. “When I dress myself each morning, I do not pick out my clothing on the basis of how I assume they will stimulate the male gaze.”

There was the leer Spock had been expecting. “It makes you hot.” That was a vast oversimplification—one that even Spock himself was prone to using. “I can work with that.” Geoffrey unzipped his pants, and Spock’s heart rate increased by 6%.

Perhaps if Geoffrey tried to kiss him, Spock could head butt him unconscious. But what use would that be if he couldn’t get the keys? Geoffrey would try again and again. And no one knew where he was. “While you might be able to take my body,” Spock said, “you will never have my katra.”

Geoffrey pulled his pants down, but didn’t remove any of his clothes. Instead, he removed a hypospray from a holster on his left thigh. He pulled up his pants, and knelt down next to Spock’s head. “I will. You’ll be begging me to take it.” He jabbed the hypo into Spock’s neck. “In roughly two hours.”
“With what did you inject me?”

“A concoction of my own design.” He leaned in (but not close enough for Spock to head butt him) and whispered, “An odd green potion guaranteed to cause pon farr.”

—

“Are we sure they’re not still on planet?” McCoy asked. The entire family except for M’Benga was gathered in T’Pring’s office.

“Yes,” T’Pring replied. “I cannot feel him near.”

“Nor can I,” Sarek added. “I feel he is very far from here.”

“Can you pinpoint his location?” Uhura asked.

“No,” Sarek said. “Only a Vulcan Master could do such a thing.”

“Fine,” McCoy said. “Sybok’ll do it.” Everyone waited expectantly for a moment, before looking around the room. “He’s not here. He’s not here! How did we not notice he wasn’t here?”

“I don’t know,” Chapel said, picking up on McCoy’s panic. “He usually falls asleep when we do this sort of thing.”

“Comm him,” McCoy barked at Uhura. “Did you comm him?”

“I did. I am. I comm’d him. He didn’t pick up. I thought he was with you.”

“That son of a bitch took him, too!”

“No,” T’Pring said. “He is near, but I do not know where on the planet.”

“Uhura, can’t you feel where he is?” McCoy asked.

She closed her eyes for a moment. “No. That means he’s indoors or standing on a man-made structure.”

“If he’s here, why the hell isn’t he picking up?”

“Perhaps,” Elder Spock suggested, “he is visiting the afterlife.”

“No,” McCoy shook his head. “He warns us before he does that. Even he didn’t, we would’ve felt him die.”

“Do you hear that noise?” T’Pring asked.

“No,” Eva replied. “What—”

“Quiet,” Sarek said.

After listening for a few second, T’Pring said, “It is a the sound a communication’s device makes when being hailed.” She turned to Uhura. “Stop comming Sybok.” The noise stopped. “Now comm again.” The noise repeated. “It is coming from behind Apple Pie.”

M’Benga’s father turned around. “I hear it now. It’s coming from in there.” He stepped a few feet forward, and opened the supply closet.
Out tumbled Sybok, completely unconscious.

“Jesus,” McCoy swore, rushing to Sybok’s side tricorder at the ready. “He’s been dosed with a long term neural paralyzer, but none I’d ever seen before.”

“When will he regain consciousness?” Elder Spock asked.

“I don’t know,” McCoy said. “Not in time to help Spock.”

—

Twenty-eight minutes and forty-one seconds after the injection, Spock’s body was not responding. Geoffrey had not been monitoring him; he was too busy constructing a makeshift playpen for Saavik and Valeris. He said he was anxious to see how their divergent heritages affected their behavior. Geoffrey had told Spock that he would enter pon farr within ten minutes, and plak tow within two hours. Yet, Spock felt nothing and discerned no bodily reaction to the injection.

Spock did not know why the drug was not taking effect, but he had three solid conjectures: (1) the formula was defective, (2) Spock’s hybrid physiology rendered him immune, and (3) the lactation hormones counteracted the drug. Spock knew Vulcan women could not enter pon farr while pregnant or lactating; this was why so many Vulcan couples had surrogates. While normally, after their first cycle, Vulcan bondmates had their pon farr simultaneously, pregnancy and lactation upset this cycle. If the man burned during that time, and he was of the right racial and social class, he used a surrogate. When the woman’s Time came, she would also have to use a surrogate. For this reason, many couples never burned together.

Watching his children mistake their kidnapper for their father, Spock decided to manipulate his autonomic functions to mimic pon farr in the hopes that Geoffrey would untie him to have intercourse and he would be able to overpower him.

This gambit involved a significant risk: if Geoffrey’s concoction was not faulty and eventually took effect, Spock’s illusory pon far could make the drug work faster. However, if Spock did not show symptoms of it working, Geoffrey might inject him again, which could trigger an actual pon farr.

It was best to be proactive.

—

Geoff vaguely recalled what brought him here. He remembered running out of the hotel, wandering aimlessly for a moment before comming the commercial Terran space dock for immediate beam up. The journey on the Nudibranch took an excruciatingly long time, even at maximum warp. At Sha-Ka-Ree’s space dock, he took time to berate anyone who’d listen for not noticing the vessel Spock’s kidnapper landed on the planet wasn’t the vessel Geoff left in. The security chief feebly argued that the pilot having DNA identical to Geoff’s was proof enough for entry and departure. Geoff might have punched him in the throat.

Then to the planet, where the rest of the extended family filled him in. Uhura was trying to trace the kidnapper’s vessel through the usual channels, but it was clear Sybok was their best chance of finding Spock and their children. It was around then that M’Benga excused himself, walked to Sybok’s hospital room, and proceeded to slap the ever-loving shit out of him.

“Wake up! Wake up!”

Someone must have heard Geoff shout, because in a few minutes his dad and McCoy were there, dragging him into the hallway.
“He is not in a healing trance!” McCoy hissed.

“Wake him up! Give him some cordrazine.”

“I can’t. I told you, there’s no known record of what the drug is or what it interacts with. We have to leech it out of him.”

“That could take hours or days. We don’t have that long. They could be...”

Apple Pie engulfed his son in a hug. “We’ll find them. I promise you, we’ll find them.”

Geoff sobbed into his father’s neck. “He has my kids, Dad. He has Spock.”

Spock faced an unforeseen difficulty in mimicking the physical symptoms of pon farr. The playpen Geoffrey assembled out of miscellaneous items found in the vessel was in the same room as Spock. Meaning Saavik and Valeris could see him. It was said a true Vulcan male could achieve and maintain an erection with no stimulation under the most dire of circumstances. In this case, Spock was struggling to be a true Vulcan male. (This was nothing new.)

Careful to maintain the outward appearance of plak tow (he moaned, he begged, he rubbed his posterior on the deck), Spock shifted his thoughts to sending lubricant and blood to his penis, and also to the kind of thoughts that typically triggered such a reaction. Nyota’s legs. Mr. Sulu’s abdominal muscles. Admiral Pike’s fingers callused from his wheelchair.

Spock looked down. Success. Spock’s time sense told him that two hours, three minutes, and seventeen seconds had elapsed since the injection. While Dr. McCoy assured him he had “one hell of a poker face,” Spock was anxious to see how well he could bluff.

“Geoffrey,” he gasped. “I need... for you to come close enough that I might steal the keys from your pocket and escape.

“Is it that time already?” Geoffrey looked at the chronometer on the bulkhead. “Guess so.” He stood up from the floor, stepped over the walls of the playpen, where he was poking and prodding at two very confused toddlers. Father-bond was stretched, yet here he was. He took a tricorder off of an upended box and scanned Spock. He smiled.


“What do you need, baby?” Geoffrey crooned, crouching down next to Spock.

“My t’hy’la...” to pinpoint my location and dispatch a rescue vessel.

“Do you need me to unchain you?” A test perhaps.

“No,” Spock panted. Reverse psychology worked wonderfully on Humans. “Need skin touch bond.” The other Geoffrey—his Geoffrey—told him that he muttered jumbled words like that during the blood fever. However, according to Geoff, Spock said, “Need potato hot lemon.” They later discovered that the stress of pon farr was depleting his body’s vitamin C levels.

“Okay.” Geoffrey crawled to Spock’s right hand and sucked on his index finger. When he was done, and had left a sufficient amount of saliva in his wake, Geoffrey took a key from pants pocket. Spock watched as he brought to the lock under Spock’s hand, inserted it and began to turn. He felt it click into place, and then—
Valeris started to cry. Through the particular sounds she made as well as through their telepathic bond, Spock knew this was the hungry cry. His body reacted accordingly.

Geoffrey gaped at his chest. “You—you’re...” Realization dawned on his face. “You lied to me!” His hands scrambled to the lock, but it was too late. Spock had wrenched his hand from the chains, and smacked Geoffrey across the room. His other hand was still tied, but he found that with the combined strength of his hands, he could pull the chain free from the bulkhead. Geoffrey cowered. “You fucking pervert,” he whimpered. Spock made quick work of the chain tying his legs, and lunged at Geoffrey. The man scrambled to get away. Spock wrapped the chain hanging from his left around Geoffrey’s neck and—

They were watching. Saavik and Valeris were watching, and they were confused and Spock didn’t know if they would remember this or how damaging watching their mother kill a man who looked like their father. Green blood—Vulcan blood—pounded in Spock’s ears. He wanted this man dead, gone forever for kidnapping him and his children, for drugging him, for trying to force a bond from him, for trying to rape him... If Spock were fully Vulcan, he might have done it. As it stood, he was part Human and could settle that primal part of him. He neck pinched the man—more than he deserved—and tied him with the very chains he had forced Spock to wear.

Spock took a moment to settle himself—rein in the pre-Surakian Vulcan within him—then went to the ship’s replicator. He wanted badly to nurse Valeris, to offer her (and himself) the earliest of comforts, but he did not want the pon farr drug to be transferred to her through his milk. He replicated some baby foods that the girls could safely eat by hand, and set them into the girls’ playpen. He ran his hands through their hair, mentally assuring them they would be home soon and their real father would be there.

He found the conn of the small ship behind the bulkhead where the man had kept the girls before. He dialed in the coordinates for Sha-Ka-Ree, and set the ship to warp seven. The last thing he wanted was the ship to fall apart from the stress of maximum warp.

—

After Uhura shooed him away for being too distracting, Geoff retreated to his lab to run tests on Sybok’s blood. He figured that if anyone could find out what Sybok was dosed with, it would be him. After all, a version of Geoff was the one who poisoned him. When he was running his first control group, his comm chirped.

“M’Benga here. Have you found—”

“Geoffrey.”

“Spock! Where are you? Are you okay? How are the girls?”

“I am on a small vessel ten parsecs from Sha-Ka-Ree. I should be home shortly. I am fine. Saavik and Valeris are unharmed but very confused.”

“Who took you? How did you get away?”

“I would prefer to share the details in person, rather than on an open channel.”

“Right. Where are you coming in? I want to meet you there.”

“I will be bringing the vessel into space dock, so that security may examine it. I require you to bring me clothing. My state of dress is not one in which I desire to be seen by security.”
Geoff’s breath caught in his chest. He wanted to ask Spock what had happened to his clothes, wanted Spock to confirm that what he suspected the kidnapper did wasn’t true. But he knew Spock didn’t want to reveal anything that personal when those with enough know how could be listening in. “I’ll be there. I’ll get you your clothes before anyone else sees you.”

“Thank you. Please bring the diaper bag; the girls both need a change.”

“Sure.”

“I will see you shortly.”

–

True to his word, Geoffrey managed to convince security to allow him onto the vessel before they declared it a crime scene. He handed Spock a bag of clothes, but did not move to embrace him as Spock anticipated. Instead, he walked over to the playpen and changed the girls’ diapers. Spock dressed quickly, then went to Geoffrey’s side to aid him. After the girls were ready, Spock and Geoffrey left the vessel, sparing a moment to stare at the bound and gagged kidnapper.

“He looks just like me,” Geoffrey said quietly.

“But he is not you.”

As soon as they stepped out of the ship’s doors, security officers flooded in, and Spock and the girls were accosted by a detective and a medical examiner. Geoffrey protested, “I can examine them myself.” He added quickly, “If that’s what Spock wants.”

The detective shook her head and said, “The exam needs to be performed by an objective third party. Due to the identities of both the victims and the perpetrator, you are in no way objective.”

“The children and I will be fine,” Spock said.

Geoffrey reluctantly handed Valeris over to the medical examiner. As Spock was led to the examination room, he heard the detective tell Geoff, “My partner will need to ask you a few questions.”

–

In the interrogation room, an Andorian detective scanned the back of Geoff’s neck. Satisfied with the result, zha put down the tricorder and took a seat across the table from Geoff. “I had to check.”

Geoff rubbed his neck. “How long until I can have the chip removed?”

The detective folded zha hands. “Until the other you dies.” Noting his grimace, zha added, “It’s merely a safety precaution.”

It was comforting, Geoff thought bitterly, that no matter how far he travelled from Earth, he could always find someone willing to put a Black man in his place, whether it was running him off the planet, spitting in his face, or microchipping him like a dog.

–

Once security released them, Spock, Geoffrey, and the children beamed down to the hospital for further medical treatment. Spock was reluctant to see and be seen by others, but their home was now cordoned off as a crime scene. They went to the large exam room, where Sybok was recovering.
Spock approached his brother’s bed as Geoffrey placed the girls in two med cribs.

“Hey,” Sybok said hoarsely. His face was a pale green color, and several different machines were pumping fluid from and into his body.

“How are you?” Spock asked, careful not think about he just experienced. Experiencing another being’s traumatic memories was harmful enough to Sybok when he wasn’t convalescing.

“I’m fine. He must’ve drugged me before he kidnapped you, so I wouldn’t know what he was doing.”

Dr. McCoy bustled into the room. “What in the hell do you think you’re doing standing up?” he asked Spock. “Get you behind on that med bed, now.” Spock complied, quirking an eyebrow at the doctor. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Am I the only one who remembers this is a hospital? M’Benga, Get that,” he pointed at a machine beside Spock’s med bed, “set up to suck out whatever bilge water that yahoo injected him with. I want a full analysis when it’s done. I know that ME took a sample, but by gum if I don’t trust that greenhorn.”

“You realize none of us are fluent in cracker, right?” Sybok asked, smirking up at McCoy.

“Zip it,” McCoy ordered. “No talking; you’re in recovery.” He stormed back out or the room, muttering minced oaths all the while.

“He was worried,” Sybok explained. “He gets like that.”

Geoffrey began hooking Spock up to the machine. “I am well aware that Dr. McCoy prescribes to particular sect of mysticism that dictates illness can be warded off with the application of irrational emotion.”

“You know,” Sybok whispered quietly—so quietly that only another Vulcan could hear him, “it only hurts when people are repressing their worst memories. You can talk to me about anything.”

“That will not be necessary,” Spock said. There was so much he could not tell Sybok—so much he could not put into words.

“The offer stands.”

The doors swished open. T’Pring, Nyota, and Dr. Chapel entered.

“So-kai,” T’Pring murmured breathlessly. “You are well?”

“Yes, I am now.”

“The children?”

“There are also well.”

T’Pring approached the med beds and knelt down between, laying her hands on those of her brothers. “Neither of you are ever to come to harm again. Nor are you allowed to die.”

Nyota smiled widely at this, but her lips soon pursed as her shoulders shook.

“What is the matter?” Spock asked.

Nyota’s hand covered her eyes. “Nothing.” Her sobs betrayed her. “This is all my fault. None of this would have happened if I hadn’t let his ship through the defense screen. I’m supposed to keep you
safe. I have to protect everyone.” Nyota ceased forming words, emanating a sound similar to an ancient Terran locomotive while all manner of liquids dripped from every orifice on her face. T’Pring left her brothers’ sides to embrace her wife. “I can’t do this. I can’t be a planet.”

“You are not culpable for today’s events,” Spock said. “It is the job of the security crew to determine the relative safety of a vessel and deliver a recommendation to you. If they had properly assessed the kidnapper’s ship, you would not have allowed it through the defense screen.”

T’Pring let go of Nyota, and faced Spock. “Had I recruited a better security staff, you would not—”

“Oh, god.” Chapel stepped forward, putting her arms around T’Pring and Nyota. “Even when we’re not the victim, we take the blame.”

Spock was envious of their embrace, but not the blame that was foisted upon them. If he could pick and choose as he liked...

“Where’s Sarek?” Geoffrey asked.

“He’s at home with Ainsley,” Chapel answered. “He told me give you this.” She took a small holoprojecter out of her and placed it on the nightstand between Spock and Sybok. “He said it was for both you.”

“We should allow you to rest,” T’Pring said. “Do you require us to bring you anything?”

“No,” Geoffrey replied. “My parents are bringing over out stuff for tonight.”

Once the women said their farewells, McCoy came back in the room and shoved a plate of food under Spock’s nose. “Eat. That’s an order.”

“You do realize you no longer the chief medical officer, and neither of us are aboard the Enterprise?” Spock asked. “You have no authority over my health decisions.” Spock brought a forkful of food to his mouth anyway.

McCoy grumbled something about “smartass Vulcans” as he settled himself on the edge of Sybok’s bed. Instead of handing Sybok his plate of food, he held onto it and lifted a spoonful to Sybok’s lips.

“I can feed myself,” Sybok protested.

“You can barely raise an arm.”

“I don’t need my arms to lift things.” He demonstrated by shaking the gelatin on his plate.

“None of that,” McCoy admonished, shoving the spoon in Sybok’s mouth. “There’s no point in you resting if you keep expending psionic energy.” He glanced at Sarek’s gift. “What’s that?”

“A holoprojector,” Spock answered.

“I know that, but what is it?”

Feeling more and more himself, Spock pretended to not know what the good doctor meant. “A device for projecting three dimensional renderings—”

McCoy cursed under his breath, reaching over to turn on the holoprojector. Spock was legitimately surprised by the two dimensional image that appeared between the two beds.

“That’s rather sentimental for him,” Sybok said. “I didn’t know he could.”
“Nor did I,” Spock said.

“What is it?” McCoy asked.

“A late 18th century oil painting by Angelica Kauffman,” Geoffrey answered. He walked up to the hologram. “That’s Cornelia, supposedly the ideal mother. According to legend, she dressed plainly for a rich ancient Roman. One day, a visitor asks her where her jewels were. She points to her two sons, and says, ‘These are my jewels.’”

“It was a gift from Sarek,” Sybok explained, “For both of us.”

“Oh.”

“Indeed,” Spock said.

–

Geoff didn’t understand how Spock could stand to be in the same room with him after what his mirror universe counterpart did to him. He didn’t want to rush Spock back into anything. He had treated rape and kidnapping survivors before, so he knew how being touched could be triggering. It had to be even more so when your bondmate looked identical to your kidnapper. Geoff had avoided touching Spock, giving him space without making him ask for it.

When it came time to sleep, Geoff was glad that Sybok brought up sleeping arrangements so that he wouldn’t have to.

“When I woke up to a dull pain in my lower back. It might be the 23rd century, but a cot was still a cot. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a figure sitting in a chair next to the door, watching Spock and Sybok. Alarmed, Geoff sat up in his cot. The figure noticed the movement, stood and left. Geoff quickly climbed out of his cot, and ran to the door. In his sleepy imagination, the figure was the kidnapper escaped from jail, but in the light of the hospital corridor, the only person he saw was Sarek, walking briskly toward the closest exit.

–

The next morning, Spock and Sybok were finally awarded a moment alone “to talk... alone,” as Sybok said. McCoy was reluctant to leave Sybok alone, but Geoffrey seemed almost eager to take the girls to his parents’ house for breakfast.

“Are you scared?” Sybok asked, taking a break from his yogurt. He was well enough now to feed himself.

Spock considered giving the standard reply: “Fear is an emotion. I am Vulcan,” but there was little use in concealing his feelings from Sybok. “Yes.”

“Me, too.”

“I fear more of his kind will enter our universe. If he has discovered a way to enter parallel universe,
“Don’t worry about that,” Sybok said. “I don’t think it’s possible for any of us to pick another universe from a list and pop over there. If there was, Old Spock would have figured it out by now.”

“How did he—” they never mentioned the kidnapper by name “—come to our universe?”

“Black hole. Same way Old Spock and Nero did.”

“You sound certain.”

“I’ve seen the universe.”

“I do not doubt that you have seen the universe; you having understood it is unlikely.”

“Fine.” Sybok put his plate on the nightstand. “When he snuck up on me with that hypospray, before I passed out, I saw some of his memories.”

Spock set aside his breakfast, sat up, and stepped over to Sybok’s bed, mindful of the tubes pumping the pon farr drug from his system. “Show me.”

“No,” Sybok balked. “I’m not going to put you inside the mind of the man that just kidnapped you.”

“I have the right to know. To understand is to free from fear.”

“If you think quoting Surak at me will change my mind, you don’t know me at all.”

“I will permit you to perform a healing meld afterward.” Spock never allowed Sybok to do that, preferring to heal his own mind. It was, as Terran saying goes, an offer Sybok could not refuse.

“Fine. Don’t tell McCoy. He said he’d tan my hid if I tried to do anything like this. I don’t know what that means, but I’m not eager to find out.” Sybok raised a shaky hand to Spock’s psi points.

“Mind to your mind, my thoughts to your thoughts...”

He was in sickbay, impatiently tapping a scalpel on a med bed, waiting for Spock to return with the tribble. A sudden sharp pain in his chest and then a feeling of absence. It was nothing he had experienced before, but he could guess what it meant.

In the genetics lab, he could hear a baby cry. T’Lara. That confirmed it.

Spock was dead.

He was in McCoy’s cabin, clutching Spock’s body to his chest, smelling his hair. He heard the doors behind him swish open.

“Sorry you had to find him like this,” Sybok said, resting his hand on Geoff’s shoulder. “I would have sent someone to clean this up earlier, but things have been hectic with us entertaining visitors from another dimension.”

“Why?” he choked out.

“You can read that in my report. I’ll have a yeoman send it to you. Do you mind clearing out of here? Dr. McCoy needs his rest.”

He was in the genetics lab, rocking T’Lara’s cradle as he read Sybok’s report. “Your father was an idiot.” He put down the PADD and picked up T’Lara. “What do you think I should do? Should I
make Sybok pay? Yeah? Well, I can’t. It’s too strong.” T’Lare burbled something. “That’s a good point. I think Papi’s due for a promotion, too.” He placed the quarter Vulcan back in her crib, pressing a kiss on her curly, black hair.

He was in an air duct, firing a phaser at McCoy. He missed, of course, he missed.

He was in the shuttlebay, being prepped for his final mission.

“You’re a brave man,” Sybok said, as if Geoff had volunteered for this. “You may never return, but take comfort in knowing T’Lara will always been taken care of.” Over Sybok’s shoulder, he could see McCoy bouncing T’Lara on his knee.

He was on the Mbini, flying into the black hole that swallowed Vulcan. Sybok spared him the indignity of pushing him into the black hole with a tractor beam, at least, allowing him the illusion of free will. Geoff knew, however, that the Enterprise’s main phaser array was locked onto his craft, ready to fire if he tried to make a run for it.

Here goes nothing.

Spock pulled back into himself.

“Are you okay?” Sybok asked.

“Yes.” He sat on the edge of his bed, steadying his breath. “We need to outfit the planet with artificial gravity chambers that can counteract the spaghettifying effect of black holes.”

“You don’t think we’ll be attacked again.”

“Anything is possible. We must prepare for every eventuality. If Vulcan was outfitted with such bunkers, millions would still be alive.”

“They’d be in another universe.”

“Yes, but they would be alive.” Spock lay down in his bed, careful not to unhook himself from the machines purifying his blood.

“Are you still afraid?”

“No. Although I know that anything could come through that black hole, I know we are ready to face it. I fear for the rest of the galaxy; they are not as knowledgeable as us.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing. If Starfleet knew that black holes led to other dimensions, not just to other points in time…”

“They would be obligated to investigate.”

“Boldly go fuck up other universes.”

“Does this possibility frighten you?”

“No. I think we can keep this from them for as long as we need to.”

“Then what are afraid of?”

“Spock, you just saw me throw a man into a black hole. And before that I killed you.”
“That was your mirror universe counterpart. I can no more blame you for his actions than I can Geoffrey for the kidnapper’s.”

“I know, but out of the three Syboks we know about, only one hasn’t committed horrific crimes against sentient life. How long is that going to be true?”

–

By that evening, the crime scene investigators had completed their sweep, and Geoff and his family were allowed to return to their home. They found that the kidnapper left the nursery in a state of disarray, knocking over and damaging the girls’ cribs. Geoff offered to fix everything and let Spock rest, but Spock said to leave it until tomorrow. The girls could sleep in their bed tonight. Spock had never suggested that before due to the risk of dream transference, but he didn’t look like he wanted to be separated from the girls.

Soon, Spock, Saavik, Valeris, and even Cecilia and Julius were curled up on the bed, playing with toys and watching a holovid. Geoff took a sleeping bag from the closet, unrolling on the floor next to his side of the bed.

“What are you doing?” Spock asked.

“I thought I’d give you guys some space.”

Spock paused the holovid. “Is there a reason why you have not touched me since I returned?”

“Yeah. After everything you’ve been through...”

“Do you think less of me now?”

“No, of course not. If anything, I think more of you.”

“Then why are you on the floor?”

“I thought this is what you wanted.”

“Why would I want you away from my side?”

“He looks just like me, Spock. Me touching you has to be just a little traumatic for you right now.”

“You forget I am Vulcan.”

“And you forget I’m a Vulcan doctor; I know this is affecting you.”

“You misunderstand me. You forget I am Vulcan and therefore a touch telepath. To touch you, to have you near me, is to know that you are not him. It would be best if you slept on the bed, not only for that reason, but to offer the comfort a Vulcan can only receive from t’hy’la.”

“I’m sorry,” Geoff said, rearranging the toys and toddlers and pets on the bed. “I should have asked you needed.”

“Kaidth,” Spock said.

Geoff crawled onto the bed, and hesitantly wrapped his arm around Spock’s shoulders. “Better?”

“Yes.”
At the foot of the bed, Valeris stopped playing with Cecilia’s tail and began to cry. If Saavik were Human, she likely would have started up, too, but as a Vulcan-Romulan hybrid she just looked up at Spock and said, “M’aih.”

“Oh my god,” Geoff said. “Saavik just said her first word.”

“Yes, I heard,” Spock said, picking up Valeris. “Is it safe for me to breastfeed now?”

“Yeah, your last milk sample came back normal.” Geoff grinned widely. “She just called you mami.”

Spock allowed the corners of his lips to upturn slightly, as he unbuttoned his nightshirt.

Geoff grabbed Saavik, tickling her chest. “Yes, that is your m’aih. And I’m your papá. Pa-pa. Can you say papá?”

“M’aih,” Saavik said.

Geoff kissed her forehead before grabbing the remote away from Spock. He switched the holoprojector to split-screen, and brought up an image of each of the girls’ birth parents. They weren’t particularly good images, just the identification picture their respective home-worlds had of them. Better images would be coming soon, once Starfleet decontaminated and sorted out everything left on Hellguard. Saavik and Valeris were due to inherit all their parents’ possessions, which were bound to include some images and recording. Until then, Geoff could only share these with the girls.


Spock hissed, looking down at Valeris. “And our other baby has her front teeth.”

“How long are you going breastfeed?” Geoff rubbed small circles on Valeris’ neck. Sybok said physical contact during nursing would aid in forming their familial bond.

“Most Vulcan women nurse until the child is two years of age. Do you think I should stop now?”

“No,” Geoff said. “You should do it for as long as you decide. It’s your body; they’re your kids. Don’t listen to what other people have to say about it.”

“Including your mother?”

Geoff sighed. “Including my mother. But she does have a point.”

“Geoffrey, I am not going to ‘breastfeed until they can read.’”

“She did with me and I came out fine,” Geoff grumbled. “Do you think we could milk Julius?”

“He is a male.”

“So are you.”

Spock looked away. “I am beginning to suspect it is a lot more complicated than that.”

“Whatever you are,” Geoff said, laying his hand over Spock’s, “I love you.”

“And I love you.”
Life was good.
Nyota thought that leaving Starfleet and settling down planetside would lessen her workload. She’d have a cushy job, translating runes or perfecting the universal translator—the kind of in-depth work life on a starship didn’t allow. In the evenings, she’d stroll through town, eat out, see a play...

She hadn’t counted on having to keep the planet spinning—both literally and figuratively. (The literally part was a bit of a stretch. Nyota didn’t have to rotate the planet; she could mimic the same effects with climate control. But people were oddly comforted by standing on a giant rotating rock—even if said rock was actually a computer. Besides, a stationary planet was a tad suspicious.) Nyota had to proofread all of Worf’s translations, perfect the logic of the planet’s auxiliary language with the Ferengi Womyn’s Collective, teach language lessons, convince the Vulcan population that Terran Sign Lanuage wasn’t some form of strip tease, and be on call to translate at the hospital and the space dock. It was only in between the demands of an entire planet that she was able work on her own project: charting the linguistic drift between Vulcan and Romulan.

That’s what she should have been doing today, but Sybok had called her in to help bridge a cultural divide between him and one of his patients.

“I’ve been trying to explain this to him for months. I’ve tried hand puppets, journaling, scrapbooking, role playing, dodgeball. Nothing worked.”

“Maybe if you tried methods found outside of summer camps.”

“I spent years studying rec therapy—it’s been proven effective. And, contrary to what some other clinicians on this planet may say, it is not just an excuse to play with toys all day.” He smiled. “I have Apple to Apples now. If things get heavy, I can always break that out.” The door chimed. “Come.”

Worf rolled in, pulling his wheelchair over beside the couch where Nyota was sitting. She knew Klingons matured much faster than Humans, but Worf wore the same snotty, insolent look of a Human his age. “How long will this take?”

“Appointments are an hour long,” Sybok answered. “Same as last week and the week before that time immemorial.” Sybok glanced at his chronometer—he didn’t seem to have the time sense Vulcans were famous for. Maybe because he wasn’t as tied to reality as the rest of his species. “Seeing as you are late, once again, we won’t have as much time together.”

“I accidentally ran over a citizen’s foot with my chair-with-wheels. I was honor bound—”

“—to take them to the hospital and ensure their health.” If you want shorter appointments, you can just ask me. You don’t have to keep running over people’s feet.”

“I apologize if my mobility device inconveniences the able-bodied.”

“I know this isn’t an accident. The only time it happens is right before an appointment. And half the time you do it to Maltz. You hate Maltz.”

Worf’s hand curled into a fist. “Maltz...”

“So, next Wednesday. Eleven thirty. Good?”

“Yes.”
“Cool. So, today, as we talked about last week, we’re going to push aside some of the other things we usually talk about and focus on the comment you made about hegh’bat at the townhall meeting. Ms. Uhura will help me translate some of the very Federation-centric language into Klingon. Is all of this okay with you?”

“Yes.”

“If I fail to explain something adequately, just look over at Uhura and she’ll hopefully do a better job of it. Okay?”

“Yes.”

“All right. As you know, when we formed this colony, all of us agreed that we would accept each other’s cultural practices, even if we didn’t agree with them, as long as they don’t harm anyone else. So nobody has any objections to you completing hegh’bat, beyond personal feelings about you dying. But no one is trying to take away your right to complete hegh’bat. Our medical and legal institutions won’t pathologize you for wanting to commit hegh’bat. We’ll only give you help if ask for it.”

“Then why I am here? I did not ask for this.”

“What you said could be seen as a cry for help.”

“A Klingon does not cry for help!”

“I get that. You don’t want help. But what you said was still highly problematic.”

“How?” Worf challenged.

“Well, okay.” Sybok scratched his eyebrow. “You know that Sha-Ka-Ree has a large population of Andorians with disabilities and Deaf Humans. In fact, you were addressing a Deaf Human. And you know that in Andorian culture, it’s common for infants that are born disabled to be murdered either by their parents or their doctor. Terra has a history of similar phenomena. In both of those cultures, there’s a belief that people are better dead than disabled. Meaning that many of the people in the room that night have experienced social pressure to not exist.”

“How is this my problem?”

“You said you would kill yourself—in a Klingonly-acceptable way—if you became more disabled through the loss of your wheelchair.”

“And?”

“You might have triggered many of the people listening to you.”

Worf leaned in toward Sybok. “Are you suggesting some of our citizens are equipping themselves with bombs?”

“No. I’m saying that your words might have dredged up memories and feelings that could cause emotional and physical pain. Even to the point where someone might hurt themself.”

“Through the power of words, I might kill someone?” Worf laughed—the first time Nyota had seen him do this. “If that is all it takes, perhaps they deserve to die.”

Sybok looked at her. “You mind explaining this?”
“No.” She thought for a moment, then addressed Worf in Klingon. “You believe yourself to be a Klingon warrior.”

“Yes,” Worf answered.

“Where is your phaser? Your bat’leth? Your battlefield?”

“My battlefield is the courtroom!”

“And what weapons do you use?”

“The law, the judicious application of the justice system.”

“And how do you deploy your weapons?”

Worf inhaled deeply through his nose. “Through words.”

“And is it not dishonorable to attack a person when they are not prepared for battle?”

“Yes, but I attacked no one.”

“You used your weapon of choice—words.”

“If I had allowed them to prepare for battle, I could say the same words and retain my honor?”

“Yes.”

“But how do I know which words are weapons? Any person could claim I attacked them at any time.”

“Does a Klingon go into battle without learning his opponent’s weaknesses?”

“None who hope to survive.”

“Then you shall study to determine what words work as weapons on what people.”

“I understand. I shall work to retain my honor.”

Sybok smiled and crossed his arms. “And, that is why you need to include trigger warnings.”

“May I leave early?” Worf asked Sybok. “I have much to study.”

“Sure. See you next week. Eleven thirty. Though you might want to get here earlier. Risk should be delivered by then.”

Worf nodded and left Sybok’s office.

“Thank you,” Sybok said, standing up from his desk chair.

“It’s no big deal. I’m glad I could help.” Nyota stood and walked toward the door, which opened as she approached.

Sybok followed, resting himself on the door frame. “It is a big deal. It’s the Carta Magna.”

“Magna Carta?”

“I’ve heard it both ways.”
Looking into Sybok’s waiting room, Nyota saw a boy she’d never seen before. Young, in his late teens, white Human, sitting there expectantly. “New patient?” she asked, cocking her head toward the boy.

“No,” Sybok laughed. “Charlie and I are going to lunch. You know that new place that opened up? The one in the T’Pelih borough? Have you been there? I’ve heard great things. Of course, that could be because we only have three restaurants on-planet. I won’t go to the one next to the Ferengi co-op. The food there is so...”

As Sybok prattled on, as he tended to do, Nyota mentally went through all the people she let through the defense screen that day. None of them were named Charlie or Charles or Charlemagne. In fact, she couldn’t remember letting anyone through with a name like that. It was something she tended to remember; it wasn’t often that they had Human visitors—a name like Charlie would have stuck out like a sore thumb. Maybe Charlie was just a nickname or his middle name. A small but persistent voice inside Nyota said, *Maybe Charlie is here to kidnap, murder, and rape your entire family.*

“...know they don’t have a word for ‘crisp,’ but would it kill them—”

Nyota held up a hand. “Who’s Charlie?”

Sybok furrowed his brow, then laughed. “Are you serious?”

Nyota nodded her head, nervously eyeing the boy, who was now staring right at her.

Sybok placed a hand on her forearm. “Charlie’s my son.”

—

“Any other symptoms?” Chapel asked, shining a light in Nyota’s eye. “Dizziness? Headache?”

“No. I’m fine.”

Chapel lowered her flashlight. “You forgot an entire person.”

“I remember now,” Nyota lied.

“I still want to take a look at your neural implant. Forgetting something that big even for a moment could be a sign of trouble.”

“Okay,” she nodded. “Just to be safe.”

Chapel’s tests all came back negative. Nyota’s brain was fine; it was everything else that was wrong.

By doctor’s orders, Nyota went home to rest. So far, she knew that Charlie, whoever he was and wherever he came from, was known by at least Chapel and Sybok. That meant she couldn’t rely on them for help—she couldn’t rely on anyone unless she knew for certain this Charlie thing hadn’t gotten to them. At best, they would lock her up for psychological testing. At worst... She didn’t know how much control Charlie had over them. If he could brainwash them into thinking they knew him, who knew what else he could make them do?

She had a full name now—Chapel had given her that much. Charles Evans. Probably not its real name, but it was something.

She picked up her comm.

“Space dock.”
“Uhura here. I need the arrival and departure log for Charles Evans.”

“One moment... No logged arrivals or departures through space dock.” There. Someone—some system that wasn’t affected. “But we do have a record of him arriving pre-space dock on the day before the colony officially opened.” Shit. “He arrived with both his parents and the rest of his extended family.”

“Thank you.” The colony. Charlie had the entire planet fooled. Nyota set her comm to the Enterprise’s frequency. “This is former Lieutenant Nyota Uhura requesting immediate contact with Lieutenant Daniel Marcus.”

“Patching you through now,” the operator said.

“Cupcake here.”

“It’s Nyota.”

“Hey, what’s up?”

“I have a question.” She couldn’t just ask him if he knew Charlie; that would draw suspicion. “Do you know Charlie’s favorite color?”

“Which Charlie? Sybok’s kid?”

Shit shit shit shit. “Yes.”

“No. Maybe blue. Why?”

“I’m getting a head start on Christmas shopping. I need to know what colors he likes.”

“Oh. Sorry. Can’t help you there.”

“Thanks. Um.” Her throat was dry. “I have to go. I’ll comm you later.”

“Alrighty. Love you.”

“Love you, too. Bye.”

“Bye.”

If Charlie had the Enterprise... Nyota knew logically that—she had to confirm it, hoping she was wrong.

“Hello?” a hoarse voice emanated from her comm.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Nyota, it’s three in the morning here.”

“Sorry. I forgot.”

“What’s the matter? Are you okay? Is T’Pring—”

“We’re fine. Everything’s... Do you remember Charlie? Charlie Evans?”

“Of course.” Nyota could almost hear her mom rolling her eyes. “Penda hasn’t stopped talking about him since the wedding.” There went Earth. “Why?”
Nyota bit the inside of her cheek to keep herself from crying. “No reason. Just checking for dementia.”

“I’m not that old.”

“I gotta go, okay? I talk to you later. I love you.” Nyota turned off her comm, and pulled herself together.

Wedding. He was at her wedding. Nyota went to the bookshelf, and pulled out a PADD, scrolling through her wedding pictures. There Charlie was—edited into her wedding album, edited into her life. This was more than mental. This was... Photoshop. It had to be. He must have... She checked the date the pictures were last modified. The day of the wedding.

It was one thing to brainwash people—hell, Sybok could do that if he wanted—it was another to change the universe.

There. That was her in. She couldn’t go around asking people, “Who is Charlie?” But, “Who was Charlie?” wouldn’t be half as conspicuous.

—

Nyota stood outside his cell, feeling like that woman in that film Sybok recommended. What was it? Quiet Sheep? “Dr. M’Benga, my name is Nyota Uhura. May I speak with you?”

“I know who you are,” he said, looking up from his PADD. “Your hair is different.” She ran a hand over her braids self-consciously. They were still growing out. “What do you want?”

“I need you to tell me about your universe’s Charlie Evans.”

M’Benga put down his PADD, sitting up on his cot. “What do I get in return?”

“The satisfaction of helping another Human being,” she deadpanned.

“You still with the boss lady?”

“Yes.”

“I want you to get my sentence commuted.”

“That’s never going to happen.”

“Then I’m not going to help you.”

“Fine. I’ll bring it up at the next town hall meeting.”

“You promise?”

“Cross my heart, hope you die.” There was not a chance in Gre’thor that this M’Benga was getting out of his life sentence. The planet’s two largest political majorities were made up of feminists and a race of people that had been raped by their oppressors every seven years for centuries. Not going to happen, no matter what Nyota recommended.

“Two days after Sybok took control of the Enterprise, we took an unscheduled detour to Thasus. The planet was completely devoid of sentient life, except for one Human. Sybok had a landing party retrieve him and bring him aboard the Enterprise. As soon as Charlie beamed aboard, Sybok killed him. With his mind.” M’Benga relished the shocked look on Uhura’s face. “That’s all I know. I’d
imagine that if Sybok wanted him dead that badly, Charlie had to be a real threat to him. Had to be very powerful. Maybe even more powerful than Sybok.”

“I heard you were not feeling well,” Elder Spock said, pouring Nyota a cup of tea.

“Yes. Christine thinks it was just a momentary misfire of the neural implant. I’m feeling much better now.”

“I am gratified to hear that.” He gave her one of his sad, rueful smiles. “Although, I am puzzled as to why you came to my studio. In the past, you have not indicated any interest in becoming more acquainted.”

“I never had the time before.” Also, you’re strange, wistful to the point of being obnoxious, and you tried to rape your version of my wife. Oh, and you once tried to kill me. ‘I’ve been so busy with learning how to control the planet and all my work for the colony. This is my first day off in a long time.’

“I see. What was it you wished to discuss?”

“I was wondering if you could tell me more about your life before. Before you came here.”

“You wish to know about your counterpart?”

“No. I want to know about you and your life. You know so much about all of us, but we hardly know anything about you.”

“There is very little I can tell you without violating the temporal prime directive.”

Nyota pointed to a series of sketches hanging on the wall. “And you’re not doing that already? Those schematics aren’t for any type of ship I’ve ever seen.”

Elder Spock gave a slight grin. “What is it that you want to you know?”

Nyota’s eyes flicked to the chronometer on the wall. There wasn’t enough time to do this delicately. “What was your Charlie like?” At Spock’s frown, she doubled back. “It’s just... Today, when I finally remembered him, it got me thinking. Your Sybok had a completely different life than ours. Did he still raise Charlie?”

“Fortunately for my universe, he did not. My Sybok never met Charles Evans. I hesitate to think what damage they could have wrought together. Although,” Elder Spock’s lips quirked into a smile, “if they had met, it is possible Sybok’s search for God would have ended much earlier.” He pulled on the hem of his tunic. “I have found it best not to dwell on what could have been.”

“Did you know Charles Evans in your universe?”

“Yes. He came aboard the Enterprise during my first five year mission with Captain Kirk. He was not as he is here. I suppose his temperament has been changed through being raised by Sybok, much in the same way as Sybok’s was shaped by Amanda.” He looked down at his tea cup. “It was unfortunate what the Thasians did to him. I question whether it was better to let him die as a child, or to give him such power that he could never safely live amongst his own kind. Charles Evans lived on Thasus until he was seventeen years old, when he was discovered by Starfleet. He did not adjust well to Human society. He used the powers granted to him by the Thasians to destroy a Starfleet cargo vessel, impress women, and turn Yeoman Rand into an iguana.”
“An iguana?”

He nodded. “I always wondered how he knew what an iguana was... Fortunately, once the Thasians realized Charlie had left, they reverted most of the damage he caused and took him back to Thasus. They could not, however, bring back the Antares, the vessel Charlie destroyed.”

“Huh.”

“Charlie is one of the changes to the timeline that I find positive. This Charlie would never use his powers on such a grand scale.”

Want to bet on that?

Once Worf and T’Pring had cleared out of their offices, Nyota snuck in and hacked into the planet’s records system. “Sorry, baby,” Nyota said, pulling up Charlie’s file on T’Pring’s console. “Charles Evans, born 21st of September 2249,” she read under he breath. “Crashed on Thasus circa 2252... discovered by a commerce vessel in 2254... returned to Terra on commercial long-range transport vessel...”

Sybok stared at the plastic cup determinedly. If he could master the erotic arts of Angel I, surely he could make this stupid thing float. But maybe he was wrong. Maybe objects on the corporal plane could not be manipulated via the psionic field. Maybe he was reaching. Maybe the preternatural control Vulcans have over their body is purely biological.

But that wouldn’t explain the priestesses at Mount Seleya being able to levitate—

There. Finally. It was off the tray table. By less than a centimeter, but still progress was progress. If he could just—

The ship’s PA system whined, and the cup dropped to the table. “Is there a doctor on the ship?” a flight attendant asked through the PA.

“Ooh, yes.” Sybok hit the speaker button on his compartment’s bulkhead. “That’s me. I’m a doctor. I have a—”

The flight attendant cut him off. “Please come to compartment 1A immediately. We have an emergency. Bring whatever supplies you have.”

Sybok grabbed his carry-on and headed down the aisle toward the front of the economy deck. Most of the compartments he passed were empty or just had one person in them like his. For some reason, the vessel was largely vacant. Weird, but he wasn’t complaining. If it was full, he wouldn’t be able to afford a private compartment.

“What seems to be the problem?” Sybok asked the anxious flight attendant standing outside of 1A. Although the door was closed shut, he could hear strange noises coming from inside.

“I don’t know,” the flight attendant answered. She was trembling slightly. “I think he’s having a seizure or something. His eyes keep rolling back in his head.”

“It sounds like you should call for a healer.”

“You said you were a doctor.”
“Yes.” She opened the door a crack and shoved him inside. “My degree is in—” The door locked from the outside. “—recreational therapy.” He sighed and turned to face whoever was making that ungodly noise. “Oh. Hello.” The noise stopped. “You’re rather small. Are you dying?”

The Human child—a boy maybe four or five—shook his head. “I’m bored.”

“Me, too.” Sybok sat on the seat next to him. “Do you want to make a bracelet or something?”

“Okay... What’s a bracelet?”

Sybok pulled down the tray table, and dumped the contents of his bag on it. “It’s a type of jewelry that is worn around the wrist.” He found the container holding his beading supplies. “You put these things—” He pointed to a bead through the clear plastic. “—on a string and put in over your hand.”

“Why?”

“It’s soothing. Hobbies provide solace—good feelings.”

“Oh.” The boy’s eyes rolled up into his head, and a bracelet appeared on his wrist. “It didn’t work. No good feelings.”

“How’d you do that?” Sybok asked incredulously.

“Do what?”

“Do that. That eye thing.”

“I dunno. I just do.”

“Are you Human?”

“I’m Charlie.” The kid fiddled with his bracelet. The one that appeared out of thin fucking air. “Why are your ears like that?”

“I’m a Vulcan.”

“What’s that?”

“A type of people. How do you not know what a Vulcan is? What are your parents teaching you?”

“I don’t have parents. They’re dead.”

“I’m sorry... My mother is dead. She died when I was born. And my father probably wishes I was dead, so... Where are you going?”

“Earth. My bug lives there.”

“Your bug?”

“Yeah. The little black kind. They live in a hill.”

“Your ant? Your aunt.”

“Yes. I’m gonna go live with her. She has a dog.”

“That’s exciting. Can your aunt do the eye thing?”
“No.” Charlie shook his head. “I think I’m the only one.” His face scrunched up into a frown. “Everyone else is stupid.”

“Even me?” Sybok looked down at a glass bead on the tray table, levitating it about an inch high.

“That’s easy,” Charlie said, sending the bead across the compartment.

“Okay... You are thinking about turning that bead into an ant.”

“How’d you do that?” Charlie asked, smiling.

“I’m a—” There wasn’t actually a word in Vulcan—or possibly any language—for what he was, so he went with what the kids at school used to call him “—freak.”

“A freak?” Charlie cocked his head to the side. “I think I’m one of those, too.”

“Yeah,” Sybok laughed. “We can be freaks together.” Charlie grinned, reaching out to grab Sybok’s face. Sybok flinched away like he being burned. “What—What did you do?” He got up out his seat, and squished himself into the opposite corner of the compartment.

“You said we could be together,” the kid said innocently.

“I meant for the rest of the flight, not for forever!” Sybok grabbed at his heart—it was pounding out of his belly. He had always been so careful about this sort of thing—used birth control, always practiced safe-melding. But somehow he ended up with a kid. “Oh, god.” He was only thirty. “I just became a statistic.”

“What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong? Do you know what you just did? You bonded our souls together. Against my will. You can’t use your powers like that, you hear me? You are never to do that again.” He’d been a father for all of thirty seconds and already he sounded like Sarek.

“Why are you angry?” Charlie looked about to cry.

“I’m not angry; I’m disappointed.” And now he was talking like Amanda. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“You don’t want to be a freak with me?” Okay, saying it like that made everything seem ten times creepier.

“I...” Of course, owing to millennia of Vulcan evolution, Sybok now very much wanted to be a freak with Charlie. (Seriously, they needed to come up with a better way of phrasing that fast.) “I can’t keep you.” Ow. That hurt to say. Damned proto-Vulcans and their propensity to eat their own young. “You’re supposed to live with your aunt.”

“I don’t wanna live with her. I wanna live with you.”

“I can’t.” Sybok pushed the tray table aside, and knelt down next to Charlie. “You don’t want me anyway. Your aunt has a house and a dog, and I bet she’s even got a swimming pool.” Charlie nodded. “I’ll be living in a cramped studio apartment in Varanasi that doesn’t allow pets. And Vulcans don’t use swimming pools. You’ll be a lot happier with your aunt. I promise.”

“Okay.”

Sybok felt Charlie recede from his katra. It wasn’t as painful as losing his bonds with Sarek and
Spock, but it still stung.

The flight attendant cracked the door open. “Is everything okay in here?”

“Yeah. We’re fine. Charlie’s fine.” The flight attendant slammed the door, once again locking it from the outside. “What did you do to scare her so badly?” Sybok asked Charlie.

“I turned her hair into a snake.”

“Charlie!”

“I changed it back.”

“I can see that. Why did you do it in the first place?”

“I was bored.”

“The three most dangerous words in Standard.”

“Will you stay with me until we get to Earth?”

“Sure.” Sybok pulled himself up onto the seat next to Charlie. “How about I show you how to make a bracelet? The hard way.”

“...adopted by Sybok in the same year...”

“Hello?” Sybok croaked into his comm.

“Hello?” a frantic woman's voice asked. “Is this Sigh-bawk?”

“Yeah.” Sybok swung his legs over the side of the bed. “Who's this?”

“Marsha Evans. Are you—Charlie! Stop it! Please, god—I need your help. I need you to take him.”

“Take who?” Sybok asked groggily.

“Charlie. The boy. I can't... He... Something happened to him on that planet. He wasn't like this the last time I saw him... He was such a happy baby.”

“What's going on?”

“He's destroying my house. He's making things appear and disappear. I don't know how... I can't make him stop.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Take him! I can't... He won't listen to me.”

“It's only been a week. He's just testing your limits; he'll settle down soon.”

“I can't wait that long. I don't think I'll survive that long.”

“Put Charlie on the comm.”

“Charlie!”

Sybok heard Charlie's aunt fumble with the comm. “Hi, Sybok!”
“Hey, Charlie. I hear you’re giving your aunt a hard time.”

“I’m not. We’re just playing dinosaur.”

Sybok heard a roar in the background, followed a woman's shriek. “With real dinosaurs?”

“Uh huh. How else would you play?”

“You can’t do things like that. You have to act like everyone else.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I know, but you have to.”

“Why?”

Sybok sighed. “If people find out how what you can do, they’ll hurt you.”

“That’s no fair!”

“I know, but life isn't fair.”

“No!” Charlie threw the comm to the ground.

“Hello? Hello? Charlie?”

“See?” Charlie's aunt said, picking up the comm. “He's out of control.”

“I'll be there as soon as I can. Send me your address.”

“Thank you. Please, hurry.”

After begging off from class and a two hour flight, Sybok made it to Ms. Evan’s house. He could tell because it was the one with a pterodactyl in the yard. As soon he stepped out of the cab, Charlie burst through front door, barreling down the lawn and into Sybok's arms. That's when he knew was done for. He was going to take the kid. He didn't know how he was going to take care of him, but Charlie was going to be his. It wasn't katric, at least not in the bond sense. To watch this little boy—this strangely powerful little boy with dead parents and a family that's afraid of him and no idea who he was or how to control himself—be five minutes away from getting locked up by the authorities. How could Sybok say no to him?

“...moved to San Francisco shortly thereafter...” Nyota pulled up Sybok’s file. “...adopted Charles Evans... joined Starfleet...”

Watching Charlie sleep on the single bed in his tiny flat, Sybok couldn't stop worrying about the future. They were going to take Charlie away. (Who “they” were was a mystery. Just some vaguely defined, authoritative they.) Maybe not today or tomorrow.

The adoption was private, so social services didn’t have him on their radar. Charlie knew now not to use his powers in public. (“Why not?” Charlie wasn’t someone you could lie to. “Because they’ll take you away.”) So, unless he forgot or there was an emergency, it was unlikely the Federation would find out about Charlie.

But Sybok still worried. Eventually, someone was going to find out that he had a child and wonder how he was raising him on his meager university stipend. True, with Charlie’s powers, Sybok never needed to buy food or really anything ever again. But they couldn’t know that. And what about
school? How was he going to afford to send Charlie to school? He wasn't a citizen; he would have to pay for Charlie's schooling. What was going to happen when Sybok's Federation visa ran out? Where would they live then?

Oh, no. Sybok's stomach clenched. He was having an epically bad idea. He needed Federation citizenship and a guaranteed career to support Charlie. Bad idea. Very bad idea. There was only one place he get both of those things fast. And he really didn't want to go there. He whimpered. As if they'd even let him in. Stupid idea. Impossible.

Still, two days later he found himself in San Francisco being grilled (maybe not grilled so much as gently probed) by a Starfleet recruitment officer.

“Mr. Sybok,” Captain Pike said, reclining in his office chair, “you understand how much is standing in your way. You're stateless, you're frankly despised by one the Federation's strongest members, and you specialize in rec therapy. What do you think you have to offer to Starfleet?”

“Well, I have several degrees in psychology and social work. I can speak many different languages. I've had experience treating Humans, Betazoids, Angelines, Tellarites, and Andorians. I know how to decou—”

Pike held up his hand. “Let me stop you there. Starfleet is an elite institution. Your resumé is impressive, but that doesn't guarantee—”

“Think of a number. Any number.”

“Excuse me?”

“This guy is a nutjob. How can I get rid of him? I should be in Riverside with her. How is he doing that?”

Pike smirked. “You're good. I didn't know Vulcans could do that without touch.”

“Most can't. At least, not as well as I can. I'd say about half of all Vulcans could hear your thoughts from where I'm sitting. But doing it repeatedly or for prolonged periods would drive them insane. The overflow of emotions would be too much for them.”

“But not for you?”

“No.”

“And you're willing to use this talent in the service of Starfleet?”

“I'm willing to do whatever it takes to provide a better life for my son.” God save them both.

“...fall semester 2254... Interspecies Ethics... professor: Staff...”

After anxiously dropping off Charlie at kindergarten, making him promise to not use his powers for any reason, Sybok rushed to his first class at the Academy. “Hey,” he said to the woman in the seat next to him, “do you know who's supposed to be teaching this class?”

“No.” The woman shook her head. “I think some student teacher.”

“Thanks.” Sybok took his notePADD out his satchel, as a hush fell over the lecture hall. When he looked up, a Vulcan man was standing at the head of the class behind a lectern. He looked somewhat familiar.
“Greetings, I am Lieutenant Spock.” It couldn’t be. Spock always wanted to go to the VSA. Maybe it was some other Spock. “I will be acting as your instructor for this course. As there are several students on the wait list, I will call roll for the first week of classes to determine who is to remain in this course.”

As the instructor called out names, Sybok considered the possibility of this man being his Spock, his brother. Spock would be—what?—twenty-four Terran years old. Old enough to join Starfleet and work his way through the ranks. But why? Sarek had Spock’s life laid out in front of him before he was born, and Spock was always so willing to take that path.

“Sybok?” Spock called, a question in his eyes.

“Present.”

If that Vulcan master hadn’t severed their familial bond before Sybok was exiled, both of them could feel whether or not they were in the same room as a sibling. As it stood, the only clue Sybok received was a slight quirking of Spock’s lips. In any other Vulcan, this could have been a reaction to Sybok’s infamy, but for Spock this was his tell. He was amused.

“Please see me after class.”

Sybok geared himself up for an awkward family reunion, but Spock had few words for him. “I must drop you from this course, as our former relationship constitutes a conflict of interest.” And then Spock left.

A day later they were reunited once again in Pike’s office.

“Although I am Vulcan and therefore capable of perfect objectivity—”

Sybok snorted.

“—it is unethical for an instructor to determine the grade of a family member. No matter how estranged.”

“I understand your hesitance,” Pike said. “Luckily, this is easy to fix.” He turned to Sybok. “You can transfer into one of the other sections of the class. I’ll make sure you get in.”

Sybok shook his head. “I can’t. None of those other sections will work for me and I have to take this class now to get into my upper division requirements next semester.”

“You are no doubt adverse to waking before noon,” Spock said. “However, if you are to succeed in Starfleet, sacrifices must be made.”

“Is there any way you can rearrange your schedule?” Pike asked.

“No,” Sybok said sharply, glaring at Spock. “My entire day is arranged around my kid’s school. I have to be there to drop him off and pick him up from kindergarten.”

“Could you not transfer him to an educational program that better fits your new class schedule?” Spock asked.

Sybok knew he was trying to be helpful, but it still pissed him off. “No, he has special needs,” to use a Human euphemism, “I can’t just uproot him from a school that we looked for and decided on together.”
“Do you include your five-year-old child in all decision making conversations?” Spock asked.

“Okay, take it easy,” Pike said. “Now, I know you’re reluctant to encourage the appearance of favoritism, but we have to be sensitive to the needs of student parents. As a student teacher, you’re not technically issuing the grades for this course. Your faculty advisor supervises all grading decisions. You also have a course reader. I think there’s enough separating you from grading decisions to dismiss claims of bias. Either in favor of or against Sybok.”

Sybok wasn’t alone with Spock again until he went to office hours toward the end of the semester. He had nearly avoided having to go due to as much to his tense relationship with his brother as his need to pick up Charlie from school. Spock’s office hours were at an extremely inconvenient time—right when Charlie’s school got out. So, Sybok had to rush over to Charlie’s kindergarten, grab him, head back to the Academy, talk to Spock for the last remaining minutes of his office hours while somehow managing to keep Charlie entertained, and then finally ride home on BART.

As Spock explained the peculiar mating habits of the horta, his eyes kept drifting over to Charlie, who was in the corner of Spock’s cramped office playing with a box of Legos that somehow found its way into his tiny backpack.

“Is the child fully Human?” Spock asked.

“Yeah.” That was the easy answer. Sybok didn’t know to what extent the Thasians altered Charlie’s DNA.

“Then you are not his biological father?”

“No. Charlie’s adopted.”

“I see... Why would you adopt a child when you live an itinerant lifestyle wholly unsuited for parenting?”

“That’s why I’m here. ” This might have been him being optimistic, but Sybok swore he could have seen a flicker of respect in Spock’s eyes.

“...Narada Incident... stationed on Terran Base 4...”

Through the dense crowd of cadets, Sybok caught McCoy's eye, beckoning him over.


“I wish I got yours.”

“You nervous about flying?”

“Always am.”

Sybok reached out and stroked McCoy's palm. “Try hard not to die.”

“You, too.”

“...civil marriage to Dr. Leonard H. McCoy...”

After the loss of Vulcan and the attack on Earth, the remaining members of Starfleet walked around San Francisco in a daze. Sybok was keeping Charlie home from school for a while, afraid that he would do something drastic in the Federation's collective grief. He could feel Charlie’s guilt coming off in waves, bouncing off of his own. They both were thinking, I should have done something/more.
Leonard was restless, going about Sybok's apartment fixing things, breaking them in the process, and fixing them again. One morning, Sybok came into the kitchen to find all of his cabinet doors on the floor beside Leonard and a can of spray lubricant. "Damn doors were squeakin'."

"Right," Sybok said, stepping over the mess to the stove to put the kettle on. "Are you nesting?"

"I wish." He put down the spray can. "Jim's getting the Enterprise."

"Jim? 'Nine-year-olds love motorcycles' Jim? 'You can't get a hangover from Jell-o shots because your body digests them as food' Jim?"

"The one and only."

"That figures."

"What?"

"Well, you know, out of all the bridge officers who helped save Earth, Starfleet goes with the one white, able-bodied, American, Human male."

"You don't think he deserves it?"

"That's beside the point. I just don't think it's a coincidence."

Leonard snorted. "You're not gonna like what I tell you next."

"What?"

"I'm on Starfleet command's shortlist for Chief Medical Officer. They're gonna let Jim pick from outta that."

"So." Sybok swallowed. "It's a done deal then."

"Yeah. Pretty much."

"Would you accept the position?"

"I dunno." McCoy rubbed the back of his neck. "Professionally, it's the opportunity of a lifetime, but... I like havin' my two feet on terra firma. Being here on Earth with you and Charlie."

"Would it change your mind if I said I was going to be the Enterprise's ship's counselor?"

"What? Command offered you the job?"

"Not so much offer as demand."

"Can they do that? You have a commission."

"You know how the day after..." He didn't have to say after what; everyone was arranging time around the destruction of Vulcan. "...the Federation Council passed a bunch of laws? About terrorism and planetary security? One of them was about Starfleet being able to employ targeted stealth weapons without government approval during times of heightened planetary or galactic security risk."

"Yeah. What's that have to do with you?"
Sybok pointed at his head. “Targeted stealth weapon.”

“You?” McCoy laughed. “God help us.”

It was funny to Len, but he wasn’t there when Sybok was packing up his and Charlie’s essential items, readying them to run to Hellguard where the Federation couldn’t extradite him and Charlie could hide, free from the twenty-four hour Starfleet surveillance of the Enterprise. Charlie had eventually talked him down—pathetic, being counseled by a fourth grader—assuring him that if he was caught on one of the ship’s security cameras using his powers, he could just alter the footage. (This was actually a site of contention within their household. Charlie had a habit of changing the endings to movies if he didn’t like them the first time. This had mixed results. For instance, the extended “gotta dance” sequence of Singing in the Rain now featured more zombies. On the other hand, Leonard’s copy of Gone with the Wind became the story of how Mammy survived slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. If he could, Sybok would give Hattie McDaniel another Oscar for her work under Charlie’s direction.)

“How’s Charlie taking it?” McCoy asked.

“Good. Better than I am. Actually, um, I needed to talk to you about him. If something happens to me during the mission, I was wondering if you could take care of Charlie.”

“Of course,” McCoy said, standing up from the floor. “You know I love Charlie.”

“I don’t think you know what I’m asking of you. Charlie is special.”

“I know that.”

“No, he’s really special. Very unique.”

“I know, all kids are to their parents.”

“No. Um. You know the copy of Gone with the Wind you loaned us?”

“Yeah, the glitchy one that’s stuck on the deleted scenes.”

“Those aren’t deleted scenes. In fact, I don’t think movies that old have deleted scenes. They probably just burned the film for the war effort or something...”

“How’d they get on film chip then?”

“Charlie put them there.”

“Like with film editing software?”

“Like with his mind.”

“I don’t know what you’re going on about.”

“Charlie!” Sybok called. “Come in here real quick.”

A very cranky Charlie stumbled out of his bedroom and into kitchen. “What?” he asked with a yawn.

“Make Len a bracelet...” Wait, better rephrase that. “Make a bracelet for Len.”

“Seriously?”
“Yeah.”

“Okay.” Charlie looked up and there was a shiny black beaded bracelet on McCoy’s wrist. “Can I go back to bed?”

“Sure. Thank you.”

“What the hell just happened?” McCoy demanded, having at least the decorum to wait until Charlie was out of earshot.

In one breath Sybok said, “Charlie just demonstrated to you one of the many gifts given to him by the Thasians when he was marooned on their planet as a baby that enabled him to survive alone on Thasus.”

“All this time he’s been some kind of...”

“Freak? That’s the preferred term.”

“We’ve been together for two years; why didn’t you tell me?”

“You didn’t need to know until now. This isn’t something I go around sharing with people. The only other people who know are his aunt and a very traumatized flight attendant.”

“My god!” McCoy collapsed into a kitchen chair. “Do you know what Starfleet would do to him if they found out?”

“Cut him open, take him away, kill him, make him kill... I've thought about it. A lot.”

“Jesus. We gotta get him outta here. You can't take that position on the Enterprise.”

“Charlie and I've decided to hide in plain sight.”

“They'll kill him!”

“If we leave, it will only draw suspicion. Aliens with Human children can't just disappear. They'll come after us. As long as Charlie doesn't do anything stupid, we'll be fine.”

“He's a kid; of course, he's gonna do something stupid.”

“And when he does we'll deal with it. If we need to run, we'll run. But until then he'll lead a normal life.”

McCoy was quiet for a moment, just breathing. “I don't like this...”

Sybok kneeled down in front of him, his knees resting on the cabinet doors. “I know.” He held McCoy's hands in his own. “I can take it away, if you want.”


“For Charlie, yes. I'd do anything for him. If you're not willing to do the same thing, you can't be trusted with this secret.”

“That's not fair,” McCoy said, jerking his hands away. “You could have asked me before you told me.”
“I did. I asked if you would take care of Charlie.”

“You didn’t as if I wanted to know—if I was willing to get my hard drive wiped if I didn't like what I heard.”

“And if you said no then, I would still have to remove that memory.”

“I can’t—” McCoy stood up, walking around the cabinet doors to the kitchen's back door. “I just can’t be around you right now. I'll take care of Charlie the best I can, but I don't know if I can deal with this side of you.”

“Okay,” Sybok said weakly, watching McCoy walk out.

By dusk, Sybok was standing outside of McCoy's dorm willing him to open the door but not daring to knock. After ten minutes Sybok's impatience won out over his fear of rejection, and he rang the door chime. When the door opened, McCoy was standing there in his Ol' Miss tee shirt and a pair of boxer shorts. He had a bottle in his hand.

“Hey,” Sybok said. “Can I?”

McCoy said nothing, turning around and plopping down on his bed.

Sybok followed, kneeling down beside the head of the bed. “I'm sorry.” He brushed Leonard's bangs out his eyes. “I shouldn't have offered to alter your memory... I'm sorry.” He rubbed his thumb along the bridge of Leonard's nose. “I can't lose you. You're my true north.” He looked down at Len's shirt. “True south.”

“That's not how compasses work.”

Sybok ducked his head. “Still love me?”

“Against my better judgment.” He scooted over to the far side of the bed. Sybok climbed in beside him.

“You make me better. You and Charlie. I don't know where I'd be without you two.” Although McCoy didn't say anything, their skin-to-skin contact let Sybok know that he felt very much the same.

“I can't lose you,” McCoy said gruffly. “Either of you.” The words “not again” hung in the air.

“You know,” Sybok said, taking a risk, “you don't have to wait for me to die to adopt Charlie.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You can adopt me, too. I'm very well behaved. Almost completely house broken.”

McCoy raised an eyebrow in Sybok's direction. “Did you just propose marriage by comparing yourself to a puppy?”

Sybok's face went a little green. “Maybe... You interested?”

“I don't know. Would you wear a collar?”

Sybok rolled on top of Leonard. “And a harness.”

“In that case...”
After that, everything was essentially the same as what Nyota remembered, except with Charlie and Sybok on the Enterprise at the beginning of their first mission. Their presence didn’t have much of an impact on the first half of the mission; Sybok was gone most of the time, on official business on the Ek’tra—Uhura imagined removing the katras of dead loved ones from various Vulcans. Once T’Pring and M’Benga came aboard, the Enterprise’s published record was identical to before Charlie came in and fucked with everything.

Going through Charlie’s fabricated history gave Nyota enough to fake her way through knowing him, but she still didn’t have the kind of intel she needed to bring him down. (Of course, she had to wonder if there was anything in existence that could help her defeat an eighteen-year-old demigod. Some magic words? Open sesame? Rumpelstiltskin?) Keeping in mind that, if Charlie caught wind of what she was doing or even figured out that he was lying, he could turn blink her out of existence or turn her into a bloody iguana. There had to be something. Something she had missed.

“Ashaya,” T’Pring said from the doorway, causing Nyota to jump slightly in her chair. “What are you doing here so late? Dr. Chapel indicated bed rest.”

Nyota closed planet’s records database, securely logging out without a trace of her ever having been there. “I wasn’t feeling tired. I thought I’d go over some of Worf’s translations. Those always put me right to sleep.”

“I see. Why was it necessary to use my desk for this task?”

“Worf’s desk doesn’t have a chair.”

T’Pring raised an eyebrow, apparently skeptical of that answer. But she let it rest. “I must insist that you retire now. You require rest.”

Nyota would have protested had T’Pring not used the tone reserved for heated vidcalls with the Federation president. “Yes, Madam Ambassador.”

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Nyota didn’t sleep that night, merely lied in bed next to T’Pring, her mind racing through what she knew about Charlie. He had to have a weakness. If not something Nyota could use to destroy or disable him, at least something she could use to prove he wasn’t who he was pretending to be. What did she know about him? He had all the powers of the Thasians, meaning he could manipulate memories, read minds, create and modify matter... He could fake almost anything. There had to be something the Thasians couldn’t have taught him that he couldn’t have learned from reading their minds. Something that would prove he didn’t grow up with Sybok...

Oh. She was good. She was very good... And if she wasn’t that good, she had one hell of a back up plan.

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Every couple of weeks, T’Pring and her siblings, and their spouses, and, now, their children would have breakfast over at Sybok’s. He would make fakon and eggs, pancakes, grits, biscuits and vegetarian gravy—in short, all the delightfully unhealthy things that reminded McCoy of home. As luck would have it, Day 2 of Charlie’s invasion fell on a breakfast day. Everyone who mattered were already assembled in one room for Nyota’s big reveal. (As much as she loved Christine and was growing to love M’Benga’s parents, Nyota mentally excluded the elder portions of the family because Sarek was an ass and Elder Spock was an attempted rapist/murderer.)
Everyone was already seated by the time Nyota and T’Pring came in. (Matriarchs were always the Vulcan equivalent of fashionable late—thirty-five seconds after they were expected.) Charlie was holding Valeris on his lap, tickling her ears. The sight gave Nyota the shivers. As she sat down, primed to be the boy’s undoing, she realized this would be the first time she ever spoke to Charlie. And hopefully the last.

“So,” Nyota started, scooted her chair in, “Charlie, I know.”

“Know what?” Charlie asked.

“Everything.”

“Okay.”

“Are you feeling alright?” McCoy asked.

“I feel fine. I feel like the only sane woman on the entire planet, but I feel fine. Everyone in this room, on this planet, this galaxy, probably this entire universe has been duped. By Charlie.”

“Charlie,” Sybok asked, “what did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything. I swear.”

“You brainwashed everyone,” Nyota said. She look over at Sybok and McCoy. “He’s not your son. You didn’t raise him. You don’t even know him. He just got here yesterday.”

T’Pring place a hand on Nyota’s arm. “Perhaps we should go to the hospital.”

“I’m not crazy!” Nyota snapped. “I can prove it.” She pulled a PADD from her purse, and slid it across the table to Charlie. “Read that. Nobody else look at it.”

“This is stupid,” Charlie said.

“Read it.”

“Fine. ‘Tonality in the Vulcan language.’” That wasn’t what it said. Charlie couldn’t read, and he couldn’t read Nyota’s mind. Just as she suspected. “Happy?” He passed the the PADD back over to here.

“Ecstatic.” She handed the PADD to Sybok. “See? He can’t read; he was making it up.”

“What am I supposed to be looking at?” Sybok asked, his brow furrowed.

“It doesn’t say what he read.”

“It does though.”

McCoy looked over his shoulder at the PADD, and nodded. “‘Tonality in the Vulcan language.’”

“No.” She grabbed the PADD away from them. It was still Brave New World. “He’s tricking you; he’s making you think it’s what he read.”

“Why would Charlie do that?” Spock asked.

“Because he can’t read. The Thasians never taught him, because they’re incorporeal. They don’t have material culture or a written language.”
“That’s true,” McCoy said, “but he went to school. He knows how to read.”

“No, he didn’t. He doesn’t. He had been living on Thasus up until yesterday. I don’t know how or why, but he came here and made you think you knew him, that you raised him, that you loved him.”

“You’re nuts,” Charlie said.

“Uhura,” M’Benga said, “I think you need to go see Chapel.”

“No.” She stood up from her chair. “I’m not crazy.” This wasn’t working. Why wasn’t this working? It had seemed like such a good idea at four in the morning. “He’s...” She sighed. Time for plan B. “I’m sorry,” she said to Sybok and McCoy. “I had to do this.” And with that she let them in.

Suddenly, Charlie was immobilized by a great white light. He began to panic. “No! Oh, no, please, don’t let them take me.”

“What the hell’s going on?” McCoy said, jumping to his feet.

“What did you do?” Sybok roared.

“I can’t live with them anymore. You’re my family. You said you were my family, remember? When I was on the transport to Earth!” Charlie pleaded to Sybok.

“I let the Thasians through the defense screen,” Nyota answered. “I imagine they’ve been waiting outside since last night.”

“Please, I want to stay here,” Charlie cried. “Let me stay here.”

“Let him go!” McCoy yelled to no one at all.

In the corner of the room, a large green glowing head appeared. “I have taken my form from centuries ago, so that I may communicate with you. We did not realise until too late that the boy had gone, and we are saddened that his escape has altered your universe. We have removed the memories he implanted. Everything is as it was.”

As if snapped out of a trance, T’Pring scooted her chair away from the table and Charlie. M’Benga and Spock quickly grabbed their children from the highchairs at Charlie’s side. Sybok and McCoy did nothing.

“What the hell are you talking about?” McCoy demanded. “He didn’t alter anyone’s memories!”

“Except for that one time,” Sybok added.

“Except for that one time,” McCoy repeated.

The green head turned to Nyota. “It appears we are unable to restore their memories. A primitive bond is preventing the removal of the memories Charlie created.”

A katric bond. A familial bond. They were going to hate her forever. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Perhaps illustrating the impossibility of the implanted memories will restore their previous memories.”

Right. “Leonard, Sybok. Look at me.” They looked, but they were pissed. “In all the time since you met Charlie, do you ever remember reading anything?”
“Of course!” McCoy yelled.

“No,” Sybok said quietly.

McCoy shook his head. “This is impossible.”

“What did you do?” Sybok growled at Charlie. “You are never to use your powers like that. I told you...”

“I won't do it again. Please, I'll be good. I won't ever do it again,” Charlie pleaded. “I'm sorry about their memories. I'm sorry! When I met you! Please, I want to stay with you. Help me!”

“You can’t let them take him,” McCoy said, grabbing Sybok’s shoulder. “The boy belongs with his own kind.”

“That would be impossible,” said the head.

“He’s your son. Don’t you remember?”

“I remember everything,” Sybok said. “I’ve got two sets of memories, and the only thing that’s clear is that he’s to blame.”

“He’s just a kid.”

“He fucked with your brain. I swore I’d never let anyone do that again.”

“I can’t lose another kid, Sybok.”

“Oh, please, don't let them take me,” Charlie begged. “I can't even touch them! Dad, they can't feel. Not like you! They don't love! Please, I want to stay.”

“Sybok,” Spock said, stepping toward his brother, “you cannot allow them to take him. They’re incorporeal, they have never touched him.”

“You cannot return him to that kind of abuse,” T’Pring added.

“Wait,” Nyota said, “according to you two, not touching children is child abuse.”

“Vulcans are touch telepaths,” Spock explained somewhat impatiently. “Parents who do not hold or touch their children can be prosecuted for neglect.”

“You really want this?” Sybok asked McCoy.

He nodded. “Don’t you?”

Sybok sighed, and gave the Thasian head his most intimidating glare. (Which, comparatively, wasn’t all that intimidating.) “I’m keeping Charlie. You can try to take him from me, but I swear—”

“Okay,” the head said, releasing Charlie. “We will just be...” The head disappeared.

“That was easy,” Sybok smiled.

“Charlie,” McCoy said sternly. “Go to your room.”

Charlie got up and head toward the hallway, before stopping. “I don’t have a room anymore. Should I make one?”
“No!” Sybok and McCoy snapped.
Over the past month, Charlie had acclimated to life on the colony much better than McCoy had expected. Besides a few temper tantrums (which, by the way, did not result in anyone dying or being turned into a lizard), Charlie was behaving like he grew up surrounded by other people. And, according to him, he did. Like McCoy and Sybok, Charlie had two sets of memories and a hard time telling the difference between the two, even though he was the one who put them there. He was still largely silent regarding how that actually happened. Whenever he was asked, Charlie would either become very upset or claim that he didn’t know how he did it; he just wanted a family and then suddenly he had one. The same as with anything else he wanted.

To commemorate a month without any major abuse of Charlie’s powers, Sybok decided they should camp out at the beach and he would teach Charlie to surf. The second part of the plan was put on hold once they realized Charlie couldn’t swim.

“I don’t see why we can’t do this in town,” McCoy grumbled, swinging his backpack over his shoulder.

“I thought you liked camping,” Sybok said.

“I do. I just don’t think it’s safe to teach Charlie to swim in the ocean.”

“He’s not going to get swept away.”

“He could get dragged underwater, get caught in seaweed.”

“And if he does he can get himself free, or I can float him over to the shore. He’ll be fine.”

“Wouldn’t it just be easier to do this in the public pool?”

“Len.” Sybok looked up from the food he was stuffing into a picnic basket. “Vulcans don’t do swimming pools.”

“You’re telling me Vulcans never use swimming pools? Never?”

“Never. That’s why we don’t compete in the swimming events in the Summer Olympics. It’s standing water. Unhygienic. Like swimming in a toilet bowl.”

“They treat the water.”

“Great. Let’s have Charlie dive head first into a big pit filled with noxious chemicals.”

“You’re really bothered by this.”

“Yes. It’s illogical.”

“Over two millennia of Surakian tradition and that’s what you take away.”

“You guys ready?” Charlie asked, poking his head in the front door.

“Yeah,” McCoy responded. “We’re just working through some of your father’s cultural neuroses.”

“Hey,” Sybok said, floating the picnic basket ahead of him as he walked toward the door. “You people are the minority here. It’s your cultural neuroses now.”
“Captain Thomas Lester,” the Human said, holding out his right hand. “Garbologist.”

“Elder Spock,” he said, raising an eyebrow at the name. “Vulcan.”

Lester withdrew his hand. “Right.” He glanced around the workshop. “I was told you were the man to see for a souped up warp core.”

“Perhaps. If I was that man, I assure you I would only render my services to people I trust with that technology.”

“I'm very trustworthy. I can give you references.”

“I see. For what were you awarded the IDIC?” He tapped the button on Lester's lapel with a screwdriver.

“It was a gift.”

“Of course. I cannot in good faith grant hyperwarp technology to a pirate.”

“Garbologist,” Lester corrected.

“Garbologist,” Elder Spock conceded. “While you are no doubt a principled businessman,” he said, tongue firmly in cheek, “I cannot say the same for your customers. I have no guarantee that you will not market my modifications to those who would use them unscrupulously.”

“You misunderstand me—I don't want to sell your modifications; I want to use them.”

“Pardon me if I do not trust your assertion.”

“Come on, that's illogical,” Lester said, straightening the IDIC on his chest. “If I sold the patent for your modifications, then everyone would have one.”

“And you would be unable to outmaneuver the authorities.”

“Exactly.”

“The patent could make you incredibly wealthy.”

“There is no greater wealth than freedom.”

“What do you have to offer me in exchange?”

“Right now, I don't have much in working order, but how about I let your science teams take a look at my stock and pull whatever they want?”

“Hardly a fair trade.”

“You haven't seen my stock.”

As fitting her station, T'Pring was given the first go around in Lester's cargo bay. There was not much there, except the stench of rotting garbage.

“Biofuel,” Lester explained. “What's your fancy?”
“Hmm?”

“What are you interested in?”

“Defense screens, engineering,” and, as an afterthought, “cybernetics.”

“Ah!” Lester headed down a tunnel formed through two massive piles of garbage. “Have I got just the thing for you!” he called. “I call him Pinocchio.” Lester came back, lugging a large trunk behind him. “He doesn't turn on as of yet, but I'm sure you can figure something out.” He opened the lid of the trunk, revealing a jaundiced looking Human figure nestled inside. It looked almost childlike. “I'm no cyberneticist, but I dabble enough to know that this is no normal android. From my scans, it looks like he may have a positronic brain.”

“A positronic brain?” Such a thing had never been done.

“Yeah. It's completely fried of course, but it's there.”

“How did you procure this android?”

Lester scratched the back of his neck. “I found him circling the black hole that Nero created. I figure he might have come through. Maybe even from the future.”

Sold.

“I feel like I'm on a field trip,” Carol said, climbing up into the cargo bay of Lester's ship.

“We are not in a field,” Spock said, following behind her.

“Don't be cute.”

Lester stepped out from behind a giant heap of rubbish. “Hello. Welcome to the SS Intruder.”

Carol pinched her nose close with her fingers. “It smells like Staten Island.”

“Just the natural process of decomposition.”

“How are you handling this?” Carol asked Spock. “Your sense of smell is twice as strong as mine.”

“I am able to suppress my olfactory sense.”

“Lucky you.” Carol smacked Lester on the shoulder. “Can we hurry this up?”

“Sure, sure,” Lester said. “I've got something I think you'll enjoy.” He led them through a seemingly endless garbage dump to the aft bulkhead of the cargo bay, where a tall bit of rock covered with runes stood. “Mined this out of a cave on Camus II.”

“What is its function?” Spock asked.

“The runes depict something called a 'life-energy transfer.' Apparently a ritual custom amongst the Camusians.”

“Fascinating. Can it be moved?”

“Yeah.”
“So,” Carol said. “That’s it? We’re taking the first thing we see?”

“If you see anything with more potential, do inform me,” Spock said.

Carol’s eyes scanned the mounds of refuse stacked up higher than her head. “Fine.”

“It’s so life-like,” Uhura marveled, carding her hand through the android’s hair.

“I thought you would find him pleasing,” T’Pring said.

“Him?”

“He is anatomically correct.”

“Oh,” Uhura pulled her hand away. “Is he...” she searched for the word, “…fully functional?”

“Currently, he is not functioning in any capacity, but his phallus has erectile capabilities. Although, I do not think he was designed solely for sexual gratification.”

“Yes, I doubt anyone would bother placing such an advanced brain in a walking marital aid.”

“That begs the question: for what was he designed?”

Uhura pulled on the android’s jumpsuit. “Is this what Lester found him wearing?”

T’Pring nodded. “Captain Lester attempted to make me pay for it.”

“Maybe there’s a tag.” Uhura flipped the android onto his stomach, and pulled down the back of his collar, craning her neck to read the writing printed on it. “Tactical. Masculine style. Large. Starfleet issue 2360.” She cursed in Swahili.

“This might be an extended propulsion, but, if he was in Starfleet in the 24th century, perhaps Elder Spock knew him, or at least knew of him. He is a rather exceptional specimen; there would have been great scientific inquiry into his physiology.”

“He said something, right after he tried to kill me.” A low growl emanated from T’Pring’s chest. “Something about vivisection of cybernetic beings a hundred years from now. The Federation wanted to make an army of slaves.”

“Perhaps that is the android’s reason for being. He was designed to be a soldier.”

“Does he have any weapon systems?”

“No. Nothing besides his own brute strength.” T’Pring blinked slowly. “As deplorable an option it may be, I believe our best source of information is Elder Spock.”

“I’ll comm him over.”

“Send for Dr. Chapel, as well. Her knowledge of your cybernetic implants may prove useful.”

“What do you think Lester meant by ‘life-energy transfer’?” Carol asked, stepping onto base of the Camusian artifact to get a closer look at the runes.
“I am not certain.” Spock picked up a digital magnifying glass from the lab table, and handed it to Carol.

“Thanks.”

Spock nodded. “My best conjecture is that the machine is a type of anti-aging apparatus, transferring the youth and vitality of one person into the body of another.”

“That could explain why the Camusians died off. They cannibalized their young until there weren’t enough people to sustain the population.”

“I had considered that scenario myself. There could be an element of addiction as well. Once the Camusians felt the intoxicating effects of the life-energy transfer they must have wanted to experience it repeatedly.”

“Wait,” Carol said, turning around to face Spock, “you knew this thing could have potentially destroyed an entire planet’s population, and you still brought it down here?”

“That is precisely I selected this artifact. It is better that it resides in responsible hands than in those of one of Captain Lester’s unscrupulous customers.”

Carol smirked. “For a Vulcan, you sure are an optimist.”

“Half-Vulcan,” Spock corrected, which was strange because Carol had not once heard Spock—this one, at least—refer himself that way. It was always, “I am Vulcan,” or “my Human heritage...”

“I don’t think any of us are half as responsible as you think we are. You say the life-energy transfer could be like a drug. Well, your brother is willing to pack his bong with whatever he finds. He’d smoke fiber glass if I gave it to him. And the other you is an alcoholic. Which means you probably have the propensity to be one, too.”

Spock scowled minutely at the comparison. He seemed to think of having a future version of himself hanging around was a burden rather than a cosmological miracle. “That is why we must learn how the artifact functions so that we may disable it permanently.”

“Or we could just blast out of existence with a phaser.”

“And risk the machine reflecting back the antimatter or detonating. I think not.”

“Whatever you say. You’re the boss. I don’t why you are, but you’re the boss.” Carol turned back to the Camusian artifact, turning on the digital magnifying glass.

“Be careful with that instrument; it is Maltz’s only prototype.”

“I know.” She flicked the magnifying to its highest setting. The runes began to glow and almost hum. She tried to step off of the machine, but it was like some force was keeping her there. Great. And there Spock was, rushing to her side without a plan—clearly, he’d spent too much time with Kirk. And then Spock wasn’t moving anymore, just stuck there like she was. And then...

She was looking at herself. She was looking at herself. She must have been having one of those out of body experiences people in comas have. Except Carol wasn’t so much floating above herself, as she was looking down at herself. Down and to the left. Where Spock was standing. No. She lifted a hand to her face. No. Those were much to big to be hers. And the nails were too well taken care of. No. She wasn’t having an out of body experience; she was having an in Spock experience.
Elder Spock stopped just short of the threshold of T’Pring and Uhura’s living room, gaping at the android on the floor.

“You look like you’ve just seen a ghost,” Chapel said, walking around him.

Frankly, Elder Spock often looked he’d just seen a ghost. That’s the expression a person tended to take on when hanging around younger versions of all their dead friends and relatives.

“Do you know this android?” T’Pring asked.

“Yes,” Elder Spock said. “But he should not exist in this time. His inventor has yet to be born.”

“Captain Lester believes he come through the Ah’rak black hole.”

“Alone? Without a vessel?”

“Yes. He has an anti-spaghettification compensator.”

“Fascinating.”

“Does he have a name?” Uhura asked from the couch.

“Data. His name was Data.” Elder Spock thought for a moment. “Although it is possible... His inventor, Dr. Noonan Soong, made two other androids identical in appearance to Data. Although their temperaments and processing capabilities were quite different. Judging by his uniform, I would say this is Data.” He paused. “Although his brother Lore had once impersonated him... That matter could quite easily be settled by ascertaining whether the android has the capacity for emotion... Of course, Data acquired an emotion chip later in life. His aging programming merely could have been reset in the black hole.” Elder Spock looked like he was done, but started up again. “He could very well be Data’s other brother B-4 wearing Data’s uniform. There’s also the possibility—”

Chapel cut in. “Does it really matter which android he is?”

“Yes. Lore was a genocidal malcontent, and B-4 was an unwitting spy for the Romulan praetor.”

“I thought our family was messed up,” Chapel muttered.

“Is there any way to determine which android this is?” T’Pring asked.

“Yes. There are certain positronic pathways that are unique to Data. They enable his capacity to learn.”

“Would you be able to identify them?”

“Yes. The man with whom I designed my ship was a close friend of Data’s. He allowed me to study Data’s schematics after his destruction. I believe Mr. La Forge hoped I would be able to help him reconstruct his lost friend.”

“I don’t know how recognizable his brain will be,” Chapel said. “Even though it’s positronic, his brain was still warped by the singularity. Take a look.” Chapel attached an electrode to the android’s temple, which seconds later projected a holographic image of the android’s brain. “See that? I saw the same pattern when I operated on the M’Benga from the Mirror universe, and when Geoff showed me the scans of your brain before he operated on you. That’s probably why he won’t turn on.”
“Can it be fixed?” T’Pring asked.

“I’ve never down brain surgery on a robot before, but I can try.”

Elder Spock peered closely at the holograph. “That is most definitely Mr. Data.”

“Are you sure?” Uhura asked.

“Yes. Even with the distortion caused by the singularity, Data’s neural pathways are unmistakable. Of course, this does not mean that he is the Data that I knew... Or that he is Data at all. He could be —”

Uhura shushed him.

—

Spock knew something was wrong the moment he regained consciousness. He could not feel Geoffrey in his mind. In his katra, yes, forever, but not in his mind. It was as if he were stripped of his telepathy. When he oped his eyes, he found that he was looking up at himself. His body. He groaned internally. That was exactly what Spock needed: another version of himself.

He tried to sit up, but he felt so weak. He looked down at his abdominal muscles, willing them to function properly. That was when Spock saw. Breasts. He had breasts. (Although, he supposes, he always had breasts, but not particularly ample ones.)

“What—” His hands gripped his throat. His voice was higher. He was a woman. (Although, again he supposes somewhere deep inside, he was always a woman.)

“Spock?” his body asked. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” he answered. “Who are you?”

“Carol. That stupid fucking machine switched our bodies or something.”

It was somewhat disconcerting to watch his body speak in that fashion. Although, in no way more disconcerting that watching his future self fondle his parents-in-law. “How?” Spock asked, struggling into a sitting position.

“I don’t know. I think Maltz’s prototype must have turned it on.”

“That is easy enough to fix. Merely calibrate it to the same settings and we can return to our own bodies.”

“That’s not going to work.”

“Why not?”

Carol-in-his-body (hereby known as Carol) nodded toward the Camusian artifact. On top of it lied Maltz’s prototype. In approximately twenty different pieces.

“You dropped it?” Spock asked incredulously.

“Technically, you dropped it.”

“Maltz spent months constructing that. We need to return to our bodies today.” Rather, they needed to return to their bodies before Carol found out what type of underwear Spock put on that morning.
“Christ,” Carol groaned. “I’m not going to tell anyone that you like to wear panties.”

“What have you been looking at my body?” Spock accused.

“No!”

“Then how did you know that... my undergarment preferences?”

Carol molded Spock’s face into an expression that could best be described by the Human expression “duh.” “You just told me.”

“I did not.”

“Yes, you did. I heard you.”

“Did my lips move?”

“Of course, your lips... Fuck. You’re a telepath. You’re a telepath who breast feeds! I want my body back.”

“As do I.”

“Maybe if we stand on it, it will turn us back.”

“It is worth an attempt.” Spock crawled over the machine on his hands and knees, as Carol walked over to it with ease. “Are you unusually weak for a Human?”

“No.”

Perhaps she was just very heavy.

“Shut up.”

Spock lifted himself onto his feet, and awaited for the machine to take notice. Nothing happened. They stood there stubbornly (for there were no two people on the planet as stubborn as Spock and Carol Marcus) for ten minutes. Still nothing happened.

“Fuck. We need help.”

“I will comm captain Lester.” Spock stepped off the machine.

“Yeah, and he can give us more dangerous alien technology that smells like rotting fruit. God, how can you stand that smell?”

“My olfactory senses are now half as receptive as yours.”

“How do you turn them off?”

“First, you sit down in the lotus position, light incense, and then you spend the next ten years of your life learning how to do so.”

“It is very strange wanting to punch yourself in the face. But I guess you’d know all about that... I can’t be you. I don’t even really like you. We need help.”

There was only one being on this planet who could help them. (Barring Sybok, who could transfer their katras. Spock ruled that out as a possibility due to the significant memory loss it caused and his
suspicion that Carol would murder anyone who got that close to her katra.) He did not want to call upon his counterpart for help, but whatever strange situation Spock found himself in, it was almost guaranteed that Elder Spock had been in it, too, in a slightly modified (and more politically incorrect) fashion.

–

Christine stepped out into the waiting room, peeling the gloves off of her hands. (She really didn’t need to wear the gloves. There wasn’t much of a chance that the android would develop an infection, but protocol was protocol.) Elder Spock was right on her heels, and T’Pring and Uhura stood up as soon as they entered the room, looking very much like concerned parents awaiting the news of their child’s tonsillectomy. “The surgery was successful.”

Uhura sighed. “Is he awake?”

“No. We thought we should talk to you first. You might want to sit.”

Pointedly, neither of them sat. “Is something wrong?” T’Pring asked.

“While we were able to heal most of the damage,” Elder Spock started, “and stop any degeneration, he will not operate at the same level as before. He will not be the same android.”

“We don’t care,” Uhura said. “We didn’t know him before, so it doesn’t matter.”

“The only person it would make a difference to is you,” T’Pring said. “And, frankly, we do not care about you.”

“I think Data would prefer to be conscious but different than nothing.”

“If he has difficulty adapting, there are several people with acquired brain injuries on planet who could counsel him.”

“That’s the other thing,” Chapel said. “We had to reset him to complete the operation. He won’t remember his life before.”

“Like amnesia?” Uhura asked.

“More like being reborn. When Data gets turned on again, he’ll have to regain sentience.”

“In addition to Data’s schematics, Mr. La Forge provided me with his medical records. A Starfleet counselor noted that Data reported experiencing suicidal urges when he first gained sentience.”

“Is the experience painful?” T’Pring asked.

Elder Spock shook his head. “Merely difficult.”

“Then we should do it,” Uhura said.

“You’ll have to observe him closely,” Christine said.

“That’s fine. Where should—”

Elder Spock’s comm whistled. “Excuse me.” He spoke into the comm, “Elder Spock here.”

Spock the younger’s voice, tinny and frantic, came out of the comm loud enough for the entire room to hear. Apparently, even half Vulcans weren’t immune to hearing loss as they aged. “Thank god.
You’ve got to get the lab right the fuck now.”

“Pardon?”

“That thing Lester gave us made me and Spock switch bodies.”

“To whom am I speaking?”

“Carol Marcus.”

“I will be there shortly.” Elder Spock placed his comm back into his pocket. “If you will excuse me, I have a matter that requires my urgent attention.”

“Are they going to be okay?” Uhura asked.

“If the cause of this situation is what I believe it is, then their condition is only temporary.”

“So...” Carol tapped her fingers on the table.

“I believe a few ground rules are in order. Regarding our conduct while within each other’s bodies.”

“Right... No permanent modification: tattoos, piercings, that sort of thing. Don’t show my naked body to anyone—that includes M’Benga.”

“Agreed. No...” Spock searched for useful euphemism. “No hanky panky of any kind.” Obviously this Human brain was getting to him.

“Of course... What about self hanky panky?”

“Self...?” Oh. “I have no objections, if you have no objections.”

“No. It would be good for science.”

“In the name of science, yes.”
Carol hopped from foot to foot. “Is there anything else?”

“Yes. I have certain dietary restrictions: no meat, chocolate, alcohol, spicy foods, or catmint. When you eat, please use utensils and wear gloves when handling food with your hands. Also, if you must consume dairy products, you will need to take an enzyme supplement.”

“Cool.” By this point, Carol was almost dancing.

“At some point, you will need to use a breast pump. If you have trouble, I will be able to assist you.”

“Right.”

“You appear distressed.”

“I have to pee.”

“By all means, take your leave.” Spock pointed the commode.

“I tried.”

“Tried?”

“I couldn’t figure out how to get your dick out.”

“I see.” Spock felt his cheeks flush.

“How do you...?” Carol’s eyes bulged.

Spock swallowed. “When I was undergoing training to learn how to use the toilet, my father once told me to visualize a snake coming out of a hole.”

“Right. Snake.” Carol sprinted into the bathroom. A few moments later she called, “Spock! Can you give me a hand?”

Spock permitted himself a sigh as he headed to the bathroom. It was going to be a long day.

–

T’Pring and Uhura sat on the floor of their spare room, Data lying between them. They’d decided it would be best to turn Data on in a quiet, dark room—not for any medical or scientific purpose, but because that’s where they let Kihika out of his cage after a visit to the vet’s office.

“Are you adequately prepared?” T’Pring asked. There was just enough light in the room for her to see Uhura nod and placed her hands on Data’s shoulders. “Activation in three, two, one...” T’Pring pressed the switch on the small of the android’s back. He jerked to life, thrashing his limbs about. After a moment, he stilled, but resumed his panic quickly thereafter. His left hand felt along his back, as if searching... //He is attempting to deactivate himself.// T’Pring said to Nyota through their marital bond.

Ever quick to respond, Nyota grabbed Data’s hands and held them above of his head. Data tried to wriggle away, much like a child attempting to avoid bedtime.

//How may I be of assistance?//

//You can’t. You’re not strong enough.// Being the physically weaker partner in their marriage was still new (and, if she was being honest with herself, efeminating) to T’Pring. Nyota felt a bit of shame
and inadequacy slip through their bond, and quickly backtracked. //You could sing. Maybe that
would calm him down.//

//What would I sing?//

//Whatever your mother sang to calm you.//

T’Pring thought for a moment and then began to recite, “Zero squared is zero. One squared is one.
Two squared is four. Three squared is nine...” Not exactly what Uhura was expecting, but it seemed
to relax Data. “Four squared is sixteen. Five squared is twenty-five. Six squared—”

“—is thirty-six,” Data said quietly. “Seven squared is forty-nine. Eight squared is sixty-four.” His
voice grew louder as his confidence increased. “Nine squared is eighty-one. Ten squared is one
hundred. Eleven squared is one hundred twenty-one. Twelve squared is one hundred forty-four...”

—

“Thank you for meeting with me on such short notice,” Elder Spock said, motioning for Captain
Lester to sit.

Lester, instead, chose to lean up against the arm of Spock’s couch. “No problem. What did you need
to talk about?”

“Janice Lester.”

Lester scowled. “That’s not important.”

“It is very important, if you wish for my technicians to continue to work on your ship.”

Lester pushed himself off the couch, and paced. “You know, I was told this was a fairly progressive
planet. I had my worries concerning the feminist majority—they don’t have the best track record with
this. But I figured I trust what I heard. I come here, let your friends take whatever they want from my
cargo, and you decide to hold my ship ransom because you clocked me!” Lester advanced toward
Elder Spock, snarling at him. “What do you want? A reward for your Vulcan powers of perception?
Or do you just wanna fuck me?”

“I assure you do not want either of those things. I just wish to know your relation to Janice Lester.”

“Why? What does it matter to you?”

“I assume you are familiar with the Narada incident, and how that vessel came to be in our universe.”

“Of course, I do.”

“There were records brought through aboard the Narada.” Notice how he does not technically lie.
“According to intel retrieved from the wreckage, a Dr. Janice Lester existed in Nero’s timeline. She
committed several crimes, most of them concerning the Camusian artifact being studied by this
planet’s scientific researchers. Seeing as you share the same surname and both of you possessed the
artifact, I thought there might a connection between Dr. Janice Lester and you. I needed to know if
the Janice Lester of this universe has gone done the same path.”

“Trust me, she didn’t.”

“You know Janice. Is she a relative?”

Lester shook his head. “Janice was my name before I transitioned.”
I see. And you have never murdered anyone via radiation poisoning?"

“No,” Lester said slowly. “I’ve never murdered anyone via anything.”

“If I am understanding you correctly, you are not a serial killer.”

“Right. And if I was, and my modus operandi was radiation poisoning, I’d have to be one cocky son of a bitch to try to trade on a planet where the First Lady is one of the galaxy’s strongest advocates for innovation in treatment options.”

“Of course.” Elder Spock folded his hands. “You can trust that I will not share what you have revealed to me with anyone.”

“Thank you.”

“And your ship will be taken care of.”

“Thanks. Can I?” Lester looked toward the door.

“Of course.” He watched the captain leave, but before he reached the door, Elder Spock had to ask, “Are you happy?”

“Yeah.”

Spock stood in front of the full length mirror in his bedroom. Naked. His attempts at “self hanky panky” had been unsuccessful due to as much his discomfort as his general lack of knowledge about pleasing women sexually. (Before he and Geoffrey were bonded, Spock took for granted that his first sexual encounter with a woman would be pathetic and embarrassing; he didn’t foresee that he would be the woman in question.) He still, however, wished to explore being in a Human woman’s body.

Minus the lack of telepathy and physical strength, it was largely the same as being a half-Vulcan man’s body. Lower to the ground, perhaps. Warmer. He thought it would feel better. He thought he would feel better.

After admitting to his bondmate (and himself) his disidentification with the ad hoc category of “male,” Geoffrey had provided Spock with the medical literature about gender identity disorder, which he studied closely. There, it seemed, his path was laid in front of him—and well worn. Despite the existence of species like the Andorians, the Federation acknowledged the idea of two sexes—male and female—as universal constants. If Spock was not fully male, and did not feel he could become so, he had one option and it was in the literature Geoffrey provided.

Become a woman, change his name, have surgery.

There were symptoms was Spock was supposed to have. He knew from the diagnostic criteria that he was supposed to feel uncomfortable in his body and desire to bring it in line with female norms. That ran contrary to his experience. Spock was neither comfortable nor uncomfortable in his body. While he didn’t dislike it, he couldn’t say that he liked it either. That was not to say that at certain times in his life, Spock did not wish that particular parts of his body were more Vulcån or more Human, bigger or longer, darker or lighter. But his feelings about his body as a whole were similar to thoughts about shoes; Spock was grateful to have shoes, because walking along rough ground would be painful without them, but his shoes did not occupy much of his mental or temporal capacity.
Spock thought that, perhaps, after his body was reclassified as woman, he would feel something—rightness, belonging, succor—rather than the absence he felt in his current body.

Now, he was in Carol’s body—a Human woman’s body—and he felt nothing.

It was unsettling.

—

“...is one thousand, three hundred, sixty-nine.” Data sat up slowly. “Have I been activated?”

“Yes,” T’Pring answered.

“You activated me?”

“We both did,” Uhura said.

Data glanced at both the women. “Are you my mothers?”

Getting over her initial urge to run out of the room, hop a starship, and take off for the far edges of the galaxy, Uhura looked over at T’Pring, who merely shrugged. “Do you want us to be?” Uhura asked.

“I have not yet determined if this would be the most beneficial outcome. More data is needed. A query: if I designate you as my adopted Humanoid parents, would you provide me with shelter and the information I need to process my surroundings?”

“We’d try.”

“Yes. I find you to be suitable mothers.”

“Okay. That’s settled. We’re... your mothers.” Half of Nyota wanted to put her head between her knees and pray for Armageddon, while the other half wanted to pinch Data’s yellow, robotic cheek.

“Are you going to name me?”

“You are Data,” T’Pring said, foreclosing any opportunity of them naming him something that would drive Elder Spock batty.

“I am Data?”

“Yes.”

He pointed to the window. “That is a window?”

“Yes.”

“That is a lamp?”

“Yes.”

“That is a banana?”

“No.”

“That is not a banana. Is it a plantain?”
“No. That is your foot.”

“I have two of them. Is one a spare?”

“No. You require both of them to walk.”

“Why?”

“Traditionally, walking entails placing one foot in front of the other.”

“Why would I walk? I can see everything from here.”

“You can?” Uhura asked, not sure if Data had X-ray vision or something.

“Yes. Window, lamp, foot, foot, mother, mother, Data,” he listed, pointing to each item in the room.

“There are other things.” Nyota tried not to laugh.

“Where?” Data looked around the room. “Are they hidden?”

“No, they’re just outside of this room.”

“Outside of this room,” Data repeated. “There are things outside of this room?”

“There is an entire universe outside of this room,” T’Pring said.

“What are the dimensions of this universe?”

“Large. Vaster than you can imagine,” Uhura explained, expecting this to excite Data, as it did most members of Starfleet. Instead, he looked up and down his body—at his hands, his arms, his trunk, his legs, his two feet—and then curled into the fetal position. “What’s wrong?”

“I am insignificant within the scope of the universe. My existence is meaningless. I am just one of many small particles in the cosmos.”

“That’s why you don’t live in the cosmos. You live in this room.” Nyota knew she was condescending to a being with a far superior intellect than her, but it felt like the right thing to do.

“And in this room, you’re pretty big.”

“Specificity gives meaning. My placement within a larger social context grants me greater importance.”

“Exactly.”

—

Carol sighed in frustration. She’d been trying for the last half hour to jerk off, but to no avail. Every time she got close, she would overhear someone thinking about what they wanted for dinner or something—and it was like being splashed with a bucket of ice. (The cruel irony being that she lasted longer than most men she slept with.)

Being Spock had quickly lost its novelty. At first, she’d gone around listening in on people’s thoughts and lifting heavy objects. Then her tits started aching like a zit ready to pop and she had to pump. Luckily, she was able to figure that out without Spock’s help. After that she pretty hungry, but she couldn’t have meat, chocolate, or alcohol—pretty much the three staple foods of any ‘fleet brat. She managed to choke down a salad by promising herself an orgasm afterward. And that didn’t turn
out as she expected. Carol was just about to “put the snake back in the hole,” when she was overcome by a strange sensation, like she was drifting out of herself. At first she thought that might be what a Vulcan orgasm felt like, but then it was like she in a room somewhere looking at herself—her real self. This was what Elder Spock described to them—the transfer of their life-energies back into their real bodies. He told them to fight their way to their bodies. If this was what being Spock was like, you better believe Carol put up one hell of a fight.

After three uninterrupted days at the beach, Charlie was proud to say that he could swim, and even paddle a bit on his surf board. It was nice being alone with his parents not having to worry about reading lessons or the looks other people gave him. The Thasians completely erased their memories of him, so it was like he dropped out of the sky the day they let him stay on Sh-Ka-Ree. Charlie was a stranger, even to members of his family, like Geoff and Spock. In some ways, he didn’t want to go back home. He’d rather stay on the beach with the two people who knew and loved him. (Uhura knew him and how he came to the planet, but she certainly didn’t love him.) But staying in a tent with one’s parents didn’t really lend it to itself to masturbation, which was quickly becoming one of Charlie’s favorite activities. He was anxious to get home to rub one out in the shower, but Leonard insisted they stop by T’Pring and Uhura’s to return their cooler before they forgot.

The door was opened by a robot who looked like he was in the death throes of hepatitis. “Hello. I am Data. I am an android. It is pleasing to make your—”

Sybok let out a blood curdling shriek, grabbed Charlie and Leonard by the wrist, and dragged them running down the street all the way into their living. It was only after he had made sure all the windows and doors were closed, and the blinds drawn that Sybok stopped screaming.

“Jesus Christ, what’s gotten into you?” Leonard asked, still holding Uhura’s cooler.

“That thing,” Sybok gasped.

“So T’Pring and Uhura bought themselves an android. Big deal.”

“It has katra.”

“The android?”

Sybok nodded.

“You’re losing it. The thing’s a coffee maker. An electric toothbrush.”

“It has a katra. I could sense it.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Hence the running away screaming.”

“For some who’s going to be cited in all the major anthropology and metaphysics journals for the next century, you don’t look too triumphant.” Captain Lester grinned. “Mind if I sit?” he asked, gesturing to spot next Spock on the park bench.
Spock shook his head, and put down his PADD.

“Why so glum?”

“I found the results of my experiment to challenge far too many of my previously held beliefs.”

“About science or about you?”

“You are uniquely perceptive, Captain Lester.”

“It comes with the trade. A garbologist has to know what one man’s trash is to find his treasure.”

“And what is my trash?”

“I’d start with that shit you’re reading.” Lester nodded his head toward Spock’s PADD. “The Federation Diagnostic and Statistic Manual doesn’t have a clue. Especially when it comes to what you’re reading about.”

“And you are an expert in that field?”

“Not an expert. But I have some experience. I had... a friend whose insurance wouldn’t cover surgery because he was attracted to men.”

“That isn’t in the FDSM.”

“Tell that to my friend’s psychiatrist.”

“What happened to your friend?”

“He ditched his managed care plan, found an off-planet doctor who would treat him, and took to the stars to make enough money to pay for everything.”

“And did he?”

“Yeah. And he’s never looked back.”

“After surgery, did your friend feel better?”

“That makes it sound like he had a cold or something... He did feel better. I guess that’s right word. The body dysphoria went away.”

“I have a friend,” Spock started slowly, “who does not experience body dysphoria, but believes he might be transsexual.”

“That’s normal. There are plenty of trans folk who never have body dysphoria before they transition.”

“How do they transition then? It is one of the diagnostic criteria.”

“Some people never get diagnosed or have surgery. Other people fake their way through it or work their way around it like I did.”

“And those who did not have surgery, people accepted them as women?”

“Or men, or neither, or both.”

“Both?”
“There’s a lot more out there than man or woman.”

“Even amongst civilized species?”

“You really drank the Federation Kool-Aid, didn’t you? The idea that in so-called ‘savage’ races there’s a greater degree of sexual and gender ambiguity is old colonizing trick borrowed from the Europeans. But at the same time Europeans were going abroad to measure the genitals of Africans, there were Europeans at home who were actually trans and intersex. The idea went away for a while after a lot of work by trans activists, but after first contact, Earth culture felt like it needed to cling to something... And now most people in the Federation have no idea that someone could be a man and a woman, somewhere in between, or completely outside that whole spectrum... I’m sorry to go off on you like that. Considering your friend...”

“It is fine. I found what you said to be quite illuminating. I will pass it on to my friend.”

“It was good talking to you. I have to head over to Elder Spock’s workshop. My ship should be ready. But, here.” Lester pulled a small piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Spock. “Take my card. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

Once Captain Lester had walked away, Spock glanced down at the card. It wasn’t like any business care he had ever seen—not that he had seen too many. It was a playing card—the ace of spades, to be exact—with Lester’s comm frequency and the words, “Tell her Captain Lester sent you,” written on the front. Overall, a business card befitting a garbologist.
Vulcan Festivus

Data had never seen Mother Nyota in such a state of agitation until her father came to visit. In the days preceding his arrival, Nyota was prone to making lists, rearranging furniture, and obsessing over the seating arrangement for the family dinner to be held in Grandfather’s honor.

“Charlie has to be between Sybok and McCoy, obviously,” Nyota said. Mother T’Pring explained this was a Human peculiarity called “thinking aloud.”

“Obviously,” Data repeated.

“I don’t know where the hell I’m supposed place Elder Spock.”

“Perhaps between Mrs. M’Benga and Mr. Motorbike.”

“Right. Buffering. Put problematic people between more benign people who can stand them...” Nyota rearranged the place cards on the floor: Charlie between his parents, Elder Spock between his bondmates, and Data between his mothers.

“Am I a problematic person?”

“No, no. Of course not,” Nyota said quickly. She stood up from the floor, gathering up all of the place cards. “You have to sit between us, because you favor your left hand.” Nyota placed T’Pring’s placard at the end of the table, Data’s at T’Pring’s right hand side, and her own at Data’s right. “Everyone else is right handed. If you sat anywhere else, you would bump elbows with the person next to you. See?”

“Yes. Could I sit next to Grandfather?” Data knew that Nyota would have reservations about seating him next to someone he did not know, due to the prejudice faced by cybernetic beings, but Dr. Chapel had told him he was at a developmental stage where people would have a difficult time refusing his requests.

“Sure.” She moved her placard one seat to the right and placed her father’s place card between Data and herself. “Now, where should I put Sarek?”

—

“Why aren’t you dressed?” Christine asked, coming out of the master bathroom wrapped in a bath towel. They had to leave in half an hour, and Sarek was still sitting on their bed in his house robes.

“I will not be attending tonight’s festivities.”

“Why not? Are you not feeling well?” She pressed her lips to Sarek’s forehead. Still inhumanly warm, but no fever.

“I am not ill. I can tell when my presence will not be appreciated.”

“If they didn’t want you to be there, they wouldn’t have invited you.”

“They desired you and Ainsley to attend, and were obligated to invite me along with you out of politeness.”

“Hey.” Christine cupped Sarek’s cheek. “When have you ever known anyone in our family to be polite?”
He looked down at her hand. “I can tell you are being mendacious.”

She patted his cheek, and then walked over to their closet, pulled out her black cocktail dress—an outfit she picked out specifically to go with the meal gloves common at Vulcan dinner parties. “It’s too late to back out now.” She let he towel drop to the floor, and stepped into her dress. “Your matriarch is expecting you.”

“My matriarch is a child.”

“Sacrilege. Zip me up?” Sarek stepped behind Christine to run the cool zipper up her back. Even after two years of marriage and one child, it still made Christine shiver. “If you don’t go, it will look like you think you’re too good for them.”

“And if I do attend, I will somehow ingratiate myself to them as a paragon of humility?”

She turned and wrapped her arms around Sarek’s neck. “The first step in parenting is showing up.”

—

Everyone except for Data, who was still preparing his room for “Grandfather” to sleep in, was at the table for at least ten minutes by the time Uhura’s father arrived. “Sorry I’m late. There was some interesting spectral phenomena in the yard next door. What do you want me to do with these?” he asked Uhura.

“Here.” She took his bags and ushered him over to the table. “Take a seat.”

“Here?”


“Excuse me,” Sybok said. “Is it Doog or Dauge?”

“It’s Doug,” he responded. He looked at the empty chair to his left. “This isn’t a seder, is it?”

“No,” Uhura answered, shaking her head. “We’re not Jewish.”

“That seat is for our android, Data,” T’Pring explained.

“Data!” Uhura called. “Come to the table.”

“I will be there momentarily,” he yelled from his bedroom.

“What is he doing in there?” T’Pring asked.

Charlie mimed jerking off an invisible phallus. McCoy cuffed the back of his head. “Not in front of company.”

Charlie pouted. “You didn’t say I couldn’t pretend to do it in front of other people.”

“I apologize for my tardiness,” Data said, stepping out of his bedroom into the hallway. Once he was in the light of the dining room, the shock at his appearance was palpable. A pin drop could be heard—that is, after McCoy recovered from nearly choking to death on his water. “Is something wrong?”
Data sat down between Doug and T’Pring. “Are we playing the quiet game?” Data leaned across the table and told M’Benga, “Nod your head if we are.”

“Data,” Uhura said, panic rising in her voice, “What are you wearing?”

“The clothing you laid out for me.”

“No. On your skin.”

“I put on some makeup for the occasion.”

“Where did you get the makeup?”

“From your purse. Did I do something wrong?”

“You’re in blackface!” M’Benga said incredulously.

“Dude, even I know that’s messed up,” said Charlie.

“See,” Apple Pie said to his wife, “this is why people of color shouldn’t adopt white babies.”

“Excuse me?” Geoff said, glaring daggers at his father.

“Adopted?” Doug asked.

“What is ‘blackface’?” Data asked T’Pring.

“Blackface is the act of a white person wearing a darker shade of foundation or face paint to imitate stereotypes about Black people and thus reinforce the racial hierarchy. Give me your face.” T’Pring dipped her napkin in water, and began to wipe off Data’s makeup.

“I understand... Query: How can I be white? I am an android.”

“It is complicated.”

Data rubbed a streak of makeup off his hand and peered at the exterior revealed. “If anything, I am yellow.”

“He’s never done anything like this before, I swear.” Nyota said. “Data, say you’re sorry.”

“I apologize for inadvertently reinforcing the racial hierarchy through an accidental performance of blackface. If I had known how inappropriate this was, I would have found a lighter shade of foundation.”

Every white face in the room turned to either Doug or the M’Benga family expectantly, as if they were representatives of the entirety of the African diaspora. “I accept your apology,” Geoff mumbled. “Don’t do it again.”

The room was quiet for a moment, before McCoy coughed. “Maybe we should eat.”

“Yes,” Sybok said. “Food.”

Everyone reached to remove the thermal lids on the dishes closest to them, bumping elbows and issuing apologies along the way. Once all the dishes were unveiled, Uhura said, “You can all dig in. Everything is vegan.”
“Mine has milk and eggs in it,” Sybok said, pointing to his quiche. About half of the table reached into their pockets for an enzyme supplement.

Everyone piled food onto their plates, passed dishes, and reached for condiments.

“This is good,” Chapel said after taking a bite of Sybok’s quiche. “The plomeek tastes like bacon.”

“That was a method of preparation developed by Amanda while she was pregnant with Spock,” Sarek remarked.

“You told me you invented that,” McCoy said to Sybok.

“I did.”

Sarek swallowed. “This dish is clearly based on Amanda’s recipe.”

“I never ate Amanda’s recipe.”

Spock shook his head. “We had the dish quite often as children.”

“If we did, I don’t remember it.”

“And that,” McCoy said to Charlie, “is why drugs are bad.”

Doug poked at an unidentifiable tuber on his plate. “Are you all vegetarians?”

“Vulcans are unable to digest animal flesh,” Spock explained.

“And the rest of you?”

“We only eat what we grow,” said Eva.

“You tend have negative associations with meat, when you have to slaughter your own food,” Geoff said. “When you’re five.”

“He does all the cooking,” McCoy said, tilting his head toward Sybok.

“I can’t eat meat while I’m breastfeeding, or Ainsley will get sick. By the time she’s weaned, I’ll have lost my ability to digest meat,” Chapel said. “I guess I’m de facto vegetarian.”

“I do not have to eat to live,” Data said. Nearly all of his makeup had been removed by then. “I do so to experience a variety of textures.”

“He likes textures,” Uhura explained.

“Spock, perhaps you might like more spinach,” Elder Spock said. “You may find in the next few years that you are prone to iron deficiency.”

“Elder,” Spock responded sharply, “if I am indeed prone to iron deficiency, I will find out when that problem arises and not a moment sooner.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” McCoy asked Doug, “why haven’t you had your eyesight corrected?”

“Pardon?” Doug asked.

“Your glasses.”
“Oh. These,” Doug took off his black, plastic rimmed glasses. “They’re not prescription. They’re for __”

“Dad,” Uhura interrupted. “I don’t think you need to go into that now.”

“Do you wear them solely for aesthetic purposes?” Spock asked.

“No, no. They’re for work. They allow me to see postmortal bodies.”

“Postmortal...?”

“Ghosts.”

“Your spectacles enable you to see ghosts?”

“Yes. Not on this setting. See.” He turned his glasses to the side. “I just press this button and the ectoplasmic filter drops down.”

“And then you can see ghosts?” Charlie asked, barely containing his laughter.

“Yes. They’re not sensitive to enough to pick up all spectral phenomena. That’s why I have my other instruments.”

“Are there any ghosts here right now?”

“Charlie,” McCoy admonished.

“Dad,” Uhura said, “you don’t have to—”

“Let’s see.” Doug put on his glasses, and pressed the button the left arm. He looked about the room. “Strange. Very strange. You,” he pointed to Elder Spock, “are emitting a small quantity of ecto. But I am getting a very strong reading from you.” He pointed at Sybok and took off the glasses. “Have either you had a near death experience? A twin who died in utero?”

“I have died twice,” Elder Spock said. “Although, the first time I still remained technically alive, but I was erased from history. And, in the second occasion, my katra was stored in another being until I was resurrected.”

“You’ve been to the other side?” Doug asked with great interest.

“Only briefly. My time there pales in comparison to Sybok’s.”

“I usher souls into the afterlife,” Sybok explained.

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s not that big of a deal. I don’t have to do it that often now that I’ve left Starfleet.”

“That’s amazing. Have you ever considered going into the ghost-hunting business? There is a great affirmative action training program for aliens in my—”

“Dad,” Uhura said sharply. “No on wants to hear about your job.”

“I do,” Data said. “I wish to learn more about ghosts. I think I may have one in my bedroom.”

“See, what you’re doing? Now he thinks ghosts are real. You can’t talk about this shit in front of
“Shit,” Data whispered, trying out the word for the first time.

“This shit,” Doug said, “is my job.”

“Shit, shit, shit,” Data muttered.

“Ghost-hunting isn’t a job. It’s a fantasy.”

“It was a job when it was paying for your school, your dance lessons, your—”

“Thank you.” Uhura smiled sarcastically. “Thank you for paying for all my lessons and never showing up to a single recital. Thank you.”

“Shit,” Data said, summing up the entire exchange quite well. “Mr. Motorbike, are you and grandfather Doug related?”

“Oh my god,” McCoy grumbled. “Did you have to pick the racist model for your houseboy?”

“He is not our houseboy,” T’Pring said.

“No, Doug and I are not related,” Apple Pie answered. “Why did you ask?”

“You are both from Africa.”

“Jesus,” McCoy cursed. “Keep digging, Tin Man.”

“We’re from opposite sides of the continent.”

“Like how you are on opposite sides of the table?”

“Yes. Except Africa is much bigger than this table.”

“How big is Africa? Is it bigger than this room?”

“Data has difficulty with scale,” T’Pring explained. “He cannot conceive of how large something is unless he can compare it to a physical space he has visited. His ignorance regarding the geography and demographics of Africa is understandable given how little he has traveled.”

“I am not allowed to cross the street by myself.”

Uhura smiled. “That’s because you like to stop in the middle of the road and lick the pavement.”

“It has an interesting texture.”

From her highchair, Saavik grabbed at Spock’s sleeve. “Ma’ih.”

“What?” Spock asked. Saavik pointed to Spock’s soup. “No. You cannot have any. You are a baby.”

“When are you gonna stop having her call you ‘mama’?” McCoy asked.

“I was never planning on stopping her.”

“Don’t you think it might be a little confusing?”
“More confusing than telling her refer to me by another name just as she is learning to speak?”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Chapel started, “but I think Len was trying to say that referring to you as ‘mama’ might give Saavik and Valeris conflicting messages about gender.”

“That’s what I was talking about. You being ‘mama’ to them and still being a man—”

“I am not a man no—”

“Jesus, I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have said anything, if I... I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m sorry.”

The table’s responses to this revelation came at such a break neck speed that Spock couldn’t finish what he had been trying to say.

Uhura: How long have you known?

T’Pring: When are you going to transition?

Eva: Why can’t you just be a very feminine man?

Sybok: I will totally lie and say you’ve been in counseling with me, so you can get surgery faster.

Geoff stared at Spock sympathetically, reaching for his hand under the table. //Do you want me to shut them up?//

//I will manage.// “Quiet,” Spock yelled, in the voice reserved for shouting orders on the bridge. A hush fell over the room. “As I was saying, I am not a man nor am I a woman. I am androgynous. To answer your questions, I have always known, but have not had the proper vocabulary to articulate my identity until very recently. If by transition, you mean begin hormonal treatment, have surgery, and change my name, I will not be transitioning. I could be construed a very feminine man, if you accept the putative definition of ‘man’ as person with genitalia deemed male by their individual culture.”

The room was silent until Sarek turned to Sybok. “I assume you had something to do with this.”

“What? How could I have—”

“He was not like this before. You must have done something to foster this delusion.”


“Maybe you should stop breastfeeding,” Chapel suggested.

“Don’t you think it is appropriative for you to pick and choose what feminine characteristics you want without taking on the subaltern identity of woman?” Eva asked. “Real women can’t do that.”

“Real women?” Apple Pie snorted. “How can you say that with a straight face? There is no unitary subject. Pick up a PADD once in a while.”

“I’ve read all the PADDs you have. I’m the one who recommended them to you. I’ve also read about strategic essentialism. How can we organize as women to fulfill our needs, if men are co-opting our struggle?”

“What’s the point in strategic essentialism if you’re going to use it to police someone’s identity? You know how the category of woman has been used to reinforce kyriarchy through exclusion. As a Black woman, you should—”
“Now, you’re telling me how to be a Black woman. Thank you.”

“Thylera,” Elder Spock said softly. “Perhaps your paradigms of identity are not universally applicable. Enforcing either of them on a non-Human body, like Spock’s, could be an act of cultural imperialism.”

“If I am understanding you correctly,” Data said to Spock, “your gender identity is somewhere in between the binary poles of man and woman, and you may have behaviors or choose to take part in activities that are typically gendered as either male or female.”

“Yes.”

“What are your preferred pronouns?”

“Male pronouns in Standard. Female pronouns in Vulcan. I have yet to decided for other languages.”

“Thank you. I fail to see why this is so difficult for many of you to understand.”

“So says the guy who gets stuck in corners,” McCoy said.

“Dr. McCoy, do you have some unstated grievance with Data?” T’Pring asked. “This is the third time this evening you have made a disparaging comment about him.”

“I don’t have a problem with Data. No more than I have a problem with our replicator.”

“Stop comparing him to appliances,” Uhura said. “He’s sentient. He has thoughts and feelings.”

“I do not have feelings. I am an android,” Data replied.

“Yes, you do.”

“Data,” Sybok said, putting on his therapist voice, “if you could have anything in the universe, what would it be?”

“I would choose to be Human.”

“And when Nyota and T’Pring go to work, do you miss them?”

“Yes, my neural pathways have become accustomed to their presence.”

“See, Len. He has feelings: longing, sadness.”

“Are you so invested in emotionalism that you would prescribe feelings to an android?” Sarek asked.

“I have feelings...” Data said. “I feel. I feel... chair.”

“Feelings are not the deciding factor in what’s life. If they were, your father would be inorganic.”

“Thank you, Dr. McCoy.”

“It’s not just feelings,” Sybok protested. “I told you. Data has katra.”

“Data has katra?” T’Pring asked.

“That is impossible; no android has katra,” Sarek pronounced.

“How could he have obtained katra?” Spock wondered.
“What’s ‘katra’?” Doug asked.

“Katra is the Vulcan equivalent of the soul,” Elder Spock clarified.

“How can you be sure Data has a soul? Is he a blues musician?” Doug held his right hand up expectantly. “Huh? Blues... No?”

Uhura shook her head. “No.”

“I can recognize katra when I see them,” Sybok answered. “It’s my job. Just like a furniture mover would be able to tell you that,” he pointed, “is a chaise longue.”

“Is that what that is?” Uhura said.

“I thought it was pronounced chaise lounge,” Chapel said.

“Americans,” Geoff snickered.

“So, according to you,” McCoy said to Sybok, “our souls are furniture.”

“Pretty much.”

Chapel snorted. “Remind me not to die on your watch.”

Sybok shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Well.”

“What?”

“Have you ever heard the phrase everything happens in threes?”

“Sybok!” Uhura hissed.

“Good god, man,” McCoy barked.

“What? It’s not like we weren’t all thinking it.”

“There is a noticeable pattern,” said T’Pring.

“Geoffrey and I agreed that would we would be willing to raise Ainsley after you pass,” Spock said earnestly.

“I’m not going to die!” Chapel protested. “Not soon anyway.”

“I can’t believe we’re even talking about this,” said Uhura.

“It’s something that needs to be addressed,” Sybok argued. “She deserves to know.”

“I know that Sarek is a widower.”

“Do you know his first wife—”

“Charlie,” McCoy started loudly, forcefully moving the topic of conversation, “why don’t you show everyone a magic trick?”

“Okay.” Charlie pulled a deck of cards from his pants pocket. Whether they had been there all night or had just appeared was anyone’s guess. He fanned out the cards, and held them in front of Apple Pie. “Pick a card. Any card. Don’t let me see it.” Apple Pie took a card, glanced at it, and then
placed it back in the deck, which Charlie began to shuffle. “Is this—j” Charlie closed his eyes for a moment, and pulled a card from the deck, “—your card?”

“Yes, it is.”

Everyone at the table clapped politely, except Geoff who glared at Charlie. “You’re perverting the sanctity of magic.”

“How?”

“By using magic!”

“What are you talking about?” Doug asked.

“Nothing,” everyone quickly answered.

“Charlie’s a... bastard,” Sybok explained feebly. “And Geoff has very strong feelings about illegitimacy. Especially with regard to magicians.”

“Right,” Geoff said. “I’m very traditional.”

Doug raised his left eyebrow, looking between Geoff and Spock, who didn’t help their case by choosing that moment to nurse Valeris.

“He really is though,” Apple Pie said. “Despite our best efforts.”

“He still has a hard time accepting polyamorous relationships,” Eva said.

“No.” Geoff shook his head. “I have a hard time accepting your polyamorous relationship. Given who it involves, this shouldn’t surprise you.”

“Don’t punish Spock for your sexual hang ups.”

“I’m not punishing Spock. When have I ever done anything to him?”

“You don’t treat him like he’s a valid member of our family. You never let him hold the girls, or watch them for us. He’s their grandfather for Christ’s sake.”

“Maybe in this universe,” Sybok mumbled.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Apple Pie asked.

Sybok glanced at Doug. “Say, hypothetically, that there were universes other than this one and there were versions of us in all of them. Elder Spock seems like the kind of guy, who might have done something very bad, maybe even one of the worst things a Vulcan can do, to Valeris in one of those hypothetical universes.”

“Maybe, hypothetically,” Elder Spock said, “Valeris was an assassin in that universe, who would have caused the deaths of countless people had the hypothetical version of myself not acted.”

“Maybe, hypothetically, you were just really mad that she framed your best friends and had them sent to Rura Penthe to suffer a fate worse than death.”

“Maybe, hypothetically, I had no other choice.”

“Maybe, hypothetically, you watched her cry while you did it.”
“Maybe, hypothetically,” Uhura snapped, “you two could save this conversation for another time.”

“Do not mind Sybok’s antics,” Sarek said. “He has a habit of bringing discord with him wherever he travels, due to a distinctly anti-social affect.”

“Anti...” Sybok laughed. “At least, I have friends. The only person you ever hang out with is old Spock and that’s only because he has some sick, interdimensional need for your approval.”

“I wager I would have more company, had you not spoiled Spock’s mind against me.”

“Oh, that’s bullshit. Your problems with Spock started longer before—”

“So, it is mere coincidence that he ceased communicating with me—”

“I ceased communicating with you,” Spock interrupted, “because I realized how your ‘child of two worlds’ paradigm plays into the trope of binary thinking endemic to modernity that has caused me no end of grief and confusion due to my racial and gender identity.”

“Again, I question this realization coinciding with Sybok’s appointment to the Enterprise.”

“I must admit my decision to sever contact with you was not unaffected by the reforging of the familial bond between Sybok and myself. It was only then that I realized what I had lost when you allowed Sybok to be banished.”

“I did not allow—”

“No,” Sybok spat. “You voted for it!”

“The High Council already had the majority necessary to banish you. My dissent would have accomplished nothing but my immediate dismissal.”

“Oh, and we couldn’t have that could we. You have always been so ready to sacrifice your family for your stupid legacy. Me for the council. Amanda for the katric ark. What the hell were you thinking? ‘Hey, honey. Vulcan’s being attacked. We better go to the one place on the planet where we can’t be beamed out of.’ God, you might as well have pushed her off that cliff yourself.”

“Sybok,” T’Pring warned. “Stand down.”

“Amanda’s death was an accident,” Sarek said.

“Yeah. Just like my mother’s.” He turned to Chapel. “That’s why your days are numbered, because he’ll either let you die or kill you himself.”

“Sarek,” Chapel asked quietly, “what is he talking about?”

“He didn’t tell you? How could he. ‘I promise to love, honor, and obey, and, by the way, I raped my first wife to death. Now, lay on your back, I’ve got the seven year itch.’”


“You wanna go, old man. Let’s go.” Sybok got up, and walked out. Sarek quickly followed.

“What just happened?” Doug asked.

“Sarek challenged Sybok to physical combat,” T’Pring answered.
“Oh, hell.” McCoy rushed out the door.

—

“You’re gonna lose,” Leonard said, taking Sybok’s robe.

“Thank you, honey.”

“Do you realize how ridiculous this is? You’re about wrestle your father on Uhura’s front lawn. Naked.”

“I know, but it’s tradition. That make it okay.” Sybok stepped out of his boxers. Uhura groaned, covering Data’s eyes. The rest of the dinner part had come outside soon after Leonard to watch the fight, or, as they claimed, “to make sure no one got hurt.” “I have never been more glad that my genitals are internal.”

“Try not to embarrass yourself too badly.”

As he walked over to Sarek, Sybok could hear Charlie say, “He’s going to get his ass kicked, isn’t he?” Sybok shook it off. He might not be as physically fit or experienced in vo’ek-pukan as Sarek, but he had spent a lot more naked in front of crowds of people. Hopefully, that would give him the edge.


“Sarek. Rules?”

“The standard rules should suffice. That is, unless you do not remember them.”

“I remember everything I do naked with other men.”

“I hear you have developed telekinetic powers; do not use them, no matter how badly you are being defeated.”

“I won’t need them.”

Sarek crouched low to the ground. Sybok mirrored his position. Together, they counted, “Rehkuh, dahkuh, veh!” and charged. When their bodies collided, something very strange happened. Having experienced it before, Sybok tried to pull away, but even he couldn’t stop the natural tide of the katra.

He is standing outside of the cave impatiently. It should not be taking this long. With modern technology, Vulcan births only last a few hours. Or so he had read. Perhaps something had gone wrong. He had asked to accompany T’Rea to her pre-natal appointments, but she had refused. What if she did so, because there was something wrong with the child?

At long last, the healer and her assistant come through the cave’s entrance.

“Is the child well?” he asks. He knows it is impertinent to speak before spoken to, but he cannot fully suppress his anxiety.

“He is healthy,” the healer says. A boy. He has a son. “The mother has died.”

Behind them, a priestess of Gol leaves the cave, carrying the katric ark. He realizes then why she had been called; they knew T’Rea was dying.
“How?”

The healer and her assistant share a meaningful look, before she speaks. “She suffered fatal blood loss from vaginal fistula exacerbated by the contractions. She was already weakened due to an infection. We estimate she obtained the injury six months ago, during your latest mating cycle. We grieve with thee.”

Reah, help him. Let what they say happens to Vulcans who kill their bondmates be true, and if it is not so, let him die anyway. Take his life, and bring back T’Rea’s. As if answering his prayer, Sarek’s heart begins to seize in his abdomen. A minor myocardial infarction, well within his training to suppress, but he welcomes death like an old friend.

“Kroykah,” his mother calls, her voice reverberating strangely off of the cave entrance. “If you will not live for yourself, live for your son.” T’Pau steps out from the cave, and places the baby in Sarek’s shaking arms.

A boy. He has a son.

He is sitting in the chair next to Sybok’s bed, having just finished reading an instructional volume on aphids to calm the boy’s mind for sleep. What he is about to say next, he fears, might undo all of that work. “Child.”

“Yes, Father.”

“I have met a woman, who I believe would make a competent mother and bondmate. We are to be wed soon.” Before his Time occurs. Fortunately, he has devised a way of satisfying his mating urge without harming his partner. None of this, of course, is suitable to express to a five-year-old.

“Is this woman Lady Amanda?”

No other child on the planet would have the gall to suggest that his father would wed a Human. But no other child is as special, unique, perceptive, talented, intelligent, or ambidextrous as his. Sarek estimates that Sybok is at least fifty-four percent better than any other Vulcan child born since the time of Surak.

“Yes, child. I will be marrying Lady Amanda. Do you approve?”

“Yes. Very much. Lady Amanda is my favorite teacher.” Sybok scrunches up his face. “Will she still be allowed to be my teacher once you are wed?”

“Yes, and she will be able to teach you many things at home, as well.”

He is standing in the parlor, feeding Spock a vegetable compote in his highchair, listening to Amanda struggle to teach Sybok how to play the piano. It seems that music is one of the few subjects in which Sybok does not excel. Along with science, mathematics, composition, and calligraphy. (Indeed, when Spock was three days old, Sarek turned to Amanda and whispered, “I believe this child is more intelligent than the other.”)

“I think my aptitude is decreasing the more we practice,” Sybok says.

Amanda smiles. “You’re doing very well for your age.”

“T’Ni has a V4 rating in the kolchak, and she is three weeks younger than I.”

“But that’s a Vulcan instrument. Those are designed to be learned by children. Human instruments
are much more difficult.”

“Verily?”

“Verily. Let’s try again before Spock falls asleep. From the second verse.”

“We will build model boats off in Massachusetts,” Sybok sings, hitting a piano key on every syllable. The tempo depends largely on how long it took him to remember the next note. “There in Massachusetts by the bay. Put... them... together and wait... until... the... glue... sets...” Sybok’s shoulders slump. “I do not remember the rest.” Amanda rubbed a calming hand over his back.

Sarek puts down Spock’s food, and walks across the room toward the piano. “While we wait, we’ll polka for the folk along the parapets,” he reminds. Knowing that Sybok needs more help than the next line of lyrics, Sarek stand behind the boy, presses his hands on top of his, and guides his fingers. “Off,” he sings.

“To Massachusetts,” Sybok continues.

“Yes, we’re off.”

“To where the shops are sweet.” He is gaining confidence now, moving almost without his father’s direction.

“We will play minuets off in Massachusetts,” they sing together. “Boston, Massachusetts, Beacon Street.”

“Very good,” Amanda praises.

“Can we play in that manner all the time?” Sybok asks.

“Until you are competent.” Leave it to Sybok to turn any activity into an opportunity for finger hugs.

He is standing outside of Sybok’s bedroom. He had heard crying and followed the noise, expecting to find an injured Spock. The sound led him to Sybok’s doorway. Inside, the boy is sobbing into his pillow, probably about an incident that occurred in school earlier that day. He had been publicly reprimanded for falsely inflating his accuracy rating by only selecting topics in which he excelled when answering questions in the learning bowls. Apparently, the boy had tried to explain that he was not trying to cheat; he merely preferred those topics. The headmaster then questioned his commitment to the Surakian way for expressing a preference in anything.

Spock must have heard Sybok crying before his father had, for he is sitting on Sybok’s bed, staring quizzically at his brother.

“I am all alone,” Sybok mumbles into his pillow.

“Why?” Spock asks, using his favorite word.

“My mother is dead.”

Sarek’s heart ceases functioning for a lik’rt; he has to remind himself to keep it beating. Sybok rarely mentions his mother. Why would he believe a woman he has never met would provide him with better companionship than the two parents he does have? Sometimes Sarek does not understand the way Sybok thinks.

“Why?”
“She had a brain aneurysm.”

A lie. The only one Sarek has ever told. For fear of losing his son, Sarek has vowed never to tell him, but, at the precocious rate Sybok’s psionic abilities are maturing, he may not have to.

“Why?”

“Because the world is unfair.”

He is sitting at the dining room table with his family, watching Sybok eagerly eat his dinner—a plomeek dish Amanda claims tastes like “bacon.” This will be the last dinner they will eat together for over a year.

“Sybok,” he starts, “the Council has determined how to best nurture your unique abilities.” This is putting it lightly. More truthfully, the Council finally came to an agreement on what to do with a boy child who is failing half of his courses, but has long surpassed his instructors in the mind arts.

“Yes?”

“We have decided that the best course of action would be to send you to Gol to undergo kolinahr.”

Amanda drops her fork.

“This is a great honor. I will not disappoint the clan.”

“You are the youngest Vulcan to ever undergo kolinahr.”

“When I am fifteen,” Spock says, “I shall undergo kolinahr, so that I might be the youngest.”

Amanda runs from the table. They can hear her crying in the bathroom.

He is standing over is Sybok’s bed, where, once again, the boy has fallen asleep writing. Ever since his return from the hospital, he has seemed frailer, almost sickly by Vulcan standards, possessing a greater appetite and requiring more rest than a healthy Vulcan of his age. This is to be suspected, Sarek supposes, in a boy who has recently spent over a month in the desert without food or water. No one, least of all Sybok, knows how he survived.

Sarek takes the PADD from Sybok’s hand, and glances over it, curious to know what he has spent so much time writing. What he reads forces him to shake the boy awake.

“What?” Sybok asks, covering his eyes.

“You must cease writing this,” Sarek orders.


“It is not our way.”

“Maybe it’s my way.”

“You do not know what you are saying. You are sick. The desert heat warped your mind.”

“Being locked in a cell next to a guy who was trying to break down a wall to fuck me warped my mind.”
“That was an unfortunate accident. Kāïidth. Do not dwell upon it.”

“It was pon farr! That man died because we’re too proud to admit we have to be close to someone every seven years. That we have emotions. Proud, strong, beautiful emotions.”

“Do not speak of such things. You must never speak of such things.”

“Why?”

“They will take you away.”

*He is standing, awaiting the return of the priestess. He stares at Sybok intently, memorizing every kr’lar of his body, how he moves, the sound of his voice as he says goodbye to Spock. This may be the last time he ever sees his oldest son.*

Returning to himself and the present, Sybok jerked away Sarek. He could feel the father bond tingling in his mind. The brain, after all, was the window to the katra.

“What did you do?” Sarek asked, gripping the side of his head.

“I didn’t do anything. Believe me, that was not intentional.” Feeling very naked all of a sudden, Sybok headed back to Leonard to retrieve his clothes.

Sarek, of course, followed. “I demand to know how you implanted false memories in my mind.”

“One, those are aren’t false memories.” He took his boxers from Leonard. “Thank you.” He put them back on. “Two, they aren’t in your mind, they’re in your katra.” He wrapped himself in his robe. “Three, I am going home. Uhura,” he called, “I’ll pick up my casserole dish later. Goodbye, everyone.”

And Sybok walked home, leaving Sarek naked and very confused.

–

“Did I ruin dinner?” Data asked, turning on the dishwasher. Between the three of them, the kitchen and dining room were almost restored to pre-dinner-party-from-hell condition.

“No, of course not,” Nyota answered. “I think the two grown men wrestling naked on our lawn ruined dinner.”

“Why would you think you ruined dinner?” T’Pring asked.

“I wore blackface.”

“You did not know it was wrong. You cannot be expected to know every detail of Human history when you have only been activated for three months.”

“I know, but I still process myself as culpable. When I walked into the room, Grandfather, Dr. and Mrs. M’Benga, and Mr. Motorbike flinched, as if I had hurt them. I made them feel bad, and that made made me feel... chair.”

“That’s normal,” Nyota said. “It’s called guilt. It comes from compassion.”

“I did not intend to hurt anyone. I merely wanted to appear more Human, so Grandfather would like me. Did I make him leave?”
“No. I think he checked out when Elder Spock and Sybok began speaking in hypotheticals.”

“You do not have to be Human for people to like you,” T’Pring said curtly. “I am going to sleep.” She headed off to the bedroom without giving Data a goodnight el’ru’esta.

“Did I do something wrong again?”

“No, I think hearing that you wanted to be Human might have hurt her feelings.”

“Why?”

“I think she feels like you rejected her.”

“I understand.”

The next morning, when T’Pring came out to eat breakfast, Data was wearing pointy silicone ears.

—

“You are very different than I was at your age,” Elder Spock said, apropos of nothing.

Spock straightened his shirt. “I came here to assess the viability of your thruster design, not to be shanghaied into reminiscing about a life that is not my own.”

“No, you have never expressed curiosity about my life. I cannot say that, if I were in your position, I would feel the same.”

“No, I suspect you wouldn’t. Is there some purpose to this discussion?”

Elder Spock smiled. “I thought you would want to know that when I was your age, I had my fair share of confusion regarding my gender identity. I was never able to articulate a coherent gender for myself, as you have, but my presentation was in some ways more androgynous than your own.”

“In what manner?”

“For the first half of my Starfleet career, I wore makeup, specifically blush and eyeshadow.”

“Starfleet allowed this? It is against dress code regulations for men to wear makeup.”

“I was never reprimanded. I believe my superiors thought it was a Vulcan custom.”

“Then why did you stop wearing it?”

“I underwent kolinahr, and the desire desisted. Finding a ‘cure’ from my perceived dysfunction was one of my main motivations for undergoing the ritual.”

“And now?”

“I remain the same. What I had once sought to eradicate is now irretrievable to me.”

“I grieve with thee.”

“Kaiidth.”

“I...” Spock hesitated. “I do not begrudge you for using every skill at your disposal to preserve life. I have done the same in the past.”
“When?”

“Aboard the Narada. It was necessary for me to discover the layout of the vessel... The man was unconscious.”

“Only that one instance?”

“I did not have occasion to do so, and, after I learned what occurred to Dr. McCoy in the mirror universe, I resolved to never do it again.”

“As had I after my Sybok brainwashed my crewmates in pursuit of Sha-Ka-Ree. Like myself, you may find that dire situations weaken your resolve.”

“Then I pray that those situations do not arise.” Spock picked up from Elder Spock’s workbench the PADD containing the thruster design. “I will look over your specifications in my office.” Spock walked toward the door, saying, “I will also talk to Geoffrey about granting you greater access to our children.”

–

The vidcall came in around noon the day after the dinner party—two weeks before Nyota had expected it. “Hi, Dad.”

“Hey, honey. Listen, I’m sorry I cut out early last night... There was a lot more nudity than I was prepared for.”

“It’s okay. I honestly didn’t think you would stay the whole week anyway.”

“I wanted to.”

“I know.”

“I know I haven’t always been the greatest father. I wasn’t around much when you were growing up, and when I was around I probably just embarrassed you. I want you to know that, even if it didn’t look like it, I did the best I could. You might have hated me for it, but I really thought working to make enough money to get you the best of everything was the most I could do as a father.”

“I know, Dad, but whenever you say that, it makes me feel like it was my fault that you and Mom got a divorce.”

“That’s not why at all. You and Penda were the only things that kept us together for so long. I loved your mother—I still do—but some people shouldn’t get married. Especially in my line of work. Ghost hunting can be a very dangerous profession. The rate of spirit possession is fifty percent higher among friends and family members of paranormal investigators. Fifty percent. Hold on. I have to go. My flight is being called. I’ll comm you next week. Say hi to T’Pring and Data for me. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

–

When Sybok finished his last appointment of the day, Sarek was waiting for him outside of his office. Sarek was sitting in one of the waiting chairs with Ainsley strapped to his chest in a baby bjorn.

“You’ve become quite the Mr. Mom. I didn’t know you had it in you.”
“Who do you think cared for you as a baby?”

“T’Pau.”

“Your grandmother could not keep a house plant alive, much less a child.”

“You seemed to make it through infancy mostly intact.”

“Fortunately, T’Pau was away brokering the Romulan peace treaty for most of my childhood.”

“Why’d you come out here?”

“I need to know what happened last night.”

“Right. Of course you do. When two Vulcans experience particularly intense emotion toward one another and have skin-to-skin contact, their katras can bond themselves together. It’s called katric drift. Strong emotion opens the katra to others, and touch forms bonds. It’s one of the reasons why Vulcans were so quick to adopt Surak’s message.”

“You knew this could happen, yet you accepted my challenge.”

“I was guarding myself against it. I learned to do that instinctively when I first became sexually active. If I hadn’t, I would have a couple dozen bondmates by now.”

“Then how did it occur?”

“I don’t know. I’m guessing it had something to do with our broken familial bond. That’s where the memories came from. When a bond is broken, the part of the katra holding memories of that person is lost, and can only be returned through reestablishing the bond.”

“This is why you could not remember Amanda’s plomeek dish, correct?”

“Yeah.”

“How did you learn all of this?”

“You shuffle a couple hundred of Vulcan’s greatest thinkers to the afterlife, you pick up a few things.”

Sarek frowned. “It was you, then, who stole the katric ark.”

“Yeah. I was also the one to destroy it.”

“You realize now that Amanda died for nothing.”

“Father, everyone dies for nothing.”

“You referred to me as your father.”

“Oops.”

“What are you doing to him?” Nyota asked, coming into their living room.

“Nothing. He began growling and trembling a few minutes ago, but I cannot ascertain what is causing him distress.”

“Are you sure you didn’t do anything to scare him?”

“I am certain. I would never harm Kihika.”

This was bad. The only other time Nyota had seen their sehlat like this was right before T’Pring went into you-know-what. But it was way too soon for that to happen again. Right? She picked up her comm just to be safe. “Hey, Geoff. Uhura here. I need you, Spock, McCoy, and Sybok to come over right away. It’s about that thing. Yes, that thing.”

“You’re all clean,” M’Benga pronounced, tucking his medical tricorder back in his pocket. “Completely asymptomatic.”

“It’s too soon, anyway,” Sybok said. “I think my dick would fall out, if it happened more than every seven years.”

“Actually, seven years is just an average. For instance, when Vulcans hit their mid one hundreds, their Times become less frequent but last longer.”

“How’d you know all that?” McCoy asked. “It's not in any of your medical textbooks.”

“Geoffrey’s parents tell their son everything,” Spock explained.

“Everything,” Geoff echoed.

“If it’s not pon farr, then what is it?” McCoy asked.

“Maybe there’s going to a terrible storm,” Sybok suggested.

Uhura shook her head. “None in the forecast.”

“Sehlats have a low-level telepathic field linking them to their litter-mates,” T’Pring said. “Perhaps they are merely reacting to a sensation projected by Kirk and Cupcake’s sehlat.”

“I don’t know,” Sybok said. “Even when you started to go into pon farr and Kihika was freaking out, none of the other sehlets were distressed. Now all three of ours are running around like the world’s about to end. For all of them to react this strongly, whatever is happening on the Enterprise would have to be pretty bad.”

“Jim,” Spock and McCoy said in unison.

“I’ll comm him,” Uhura said, taking out her comm.
“Put it on speaker,” ordered McCoy.

“This is former Lieutenant Nyota Uhura requesting immediate contact with Captain James T. Kirk.”

“Patching you through now,” the operator said.

“Kirk here.”

“Jim,” McCoy asked, “are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. We ran into some trouble an hour ago. Lost nine crewmen, everyone’s still a bit shaken up.”

“How’s Ray?”

“He wasn’t injured, but he’s pretty upset. One of the crewmen who died would always give him scraps off her dinner plate.”


“They’re all fine. Hey, is Sybok around?”

“Yeah,” Sybok said. “I’m right here.”

“Cool. What do you know about esper ratings?”

“They’re a measurement of psionic potential in sentient life. You know, whether a person has the capacity to develop telepathy, telekinesis, precognition. That sort of thing.”

“What could make an esper develop those abilities?”

“There’s no written accounts of this ever happening, but there are rumors that especially traumatic events or dire emergencies can cause full blown ESP. Why’d you ask?”

“We went through the galactic barrier an hour ago. My first officer was knocked out, and now he’s displaying heightened ESP. I checked his personnel file, and he has an unusually high esper rating.”

“Jim,” Sybok said gravely serious, “I need you to do exactly as I say. Find all of the espers on board, lock them in my old room, make sure you seal all of the possible exits, and get to Sha-Ka-Ree as fast as you can. You understand me?”

“Yeah. Are we in that—”

“Do it. Go. Now!”

“Kirk out.”

Sybok collapsed onto the sofa, and stuck his head between his knees. “Oh, god,” he moaned. “This is very bad.”

“What’s the matter?” McCoy asked. “You look like you’re about to have a baby.”

Sybok sat up, pulling on his hair. “Kirk’s first officer is Gary Mitchell. Elder Spock almost had an aneurysm when he heard Mitchell was replacing Spock. I thought it was just jealousy, but now... There’s a reason why Terra has never been able to maintain a significant population of psi-positives.”
“So, you plan to bring them here?” T’Pring said slowly. “Where our children are?”

“It was either that or let them have the Enterprise and Kirk.”

—

“So.” Sybok clasped his hands together. “Team meeting. Hi. Thank you for coming. The sandwiches are for everyone. They’re cucumber and cream cheese. All I could whip up on short—”

“Why are you talking?” Carol yelled.

“I get to be in charge. T’Pring said so.”

Everyone filling up his and McCoy’s living room groaned, except for the Vulcans and Data, who tried to approximate a groan as best he could. It sounded more like a car starting than anything else.

“I’m competent. I’m very competent. I have a plan.”

“Your plans have a habit of not working,” Chapel said. “Your plan to contact Kirk while he was fighting the Gorn through a telepathic daisy chain sent Spock and T’Pring into second puberty. Your plan to arrest Anton Karidian for genocide ended up killing him. Then there was your miniature golf course idea...”

“Okay, one, no one would have gotten hurt if they hadn’t gotten so close to that windmill. Two, is anyone really going to begrudge me for inadvertently causing the death of Kodos the Executioner?”

“What’s your plan?” Worf asked.

“Step one: we build a cell made out of psionic shielding. Step two: the Enterprise beams down all of its personnel with high esper ratings into the cell. Step three: we wait.”

“What’s step four?” asked Apple Pie.

“We continue waiting.”

“How long do we wait?” Maltz asked.

“For as long as it takes.”

“For as long as what takes?”

“That is a good question.”

Elder Spock stood up. “If I may suggest an alternative plan...”

“Yes, please,” Carol groaned.

“I know from experience that Gary Mitchell’s contact with the galactic barrier will cause his psionic abilities to grow at such a rate that, in a day’s time, he will consider himself a god. The only way to prevent Mitchell from crushing all sentient life like the insects he will believe we are, is to preemptively kill him and any other espers aboard the Enterprise.”

“Those are our two choices?” Eva asked. “Murder and waiting?”

“Killing them is our only choice.”
“Wait a minute,” McCoy said. “We’re going off of your timeline. If you haven’t noticed, things are going a bit differently here. Who’s to say Mitchell and the others will turn evil?”

“Dr. McCoy, do you truly believe that someone can obtain such power—the ability to read minds, move objects through will alone, create matter, indeed life itself—without becoming an evil megalomaniac?”

“We’re right here,” Charlie said, pointing between himself, Sybok, and Uhura. “We can hear you.”

“The child has a point,” Sarek said. “You claim that in your timeline Sybok and Charles Evans were powerful, manipulative men who would stop at nothing to achieve their goals, but here that is not so.”

“To be fair,” Geoff said, “that might be because neither of them have any goals.”

“You also tried to shoot me because you thought the Federation would use my cybernetic implants to raise an army,” Uhura said. “Not all of your predictions have come true.”

“Are we ready to vote on the best course of action?” T’Pring asked. “All those in favor of Elder Spock’s plan.” Elder Spock and Worf raised their hands. “Sybok’s plan will go forth. Begin preparations immediately.”

“Those two it?” McCoy asked, holding his comm up to his face.

“Yep,” Jim said over the comm. “All of the other espers died when we hit the barrier.”

“Prisoners secured. You can beam down now if—” Before he could finish, McCoy was ensconced in a very enthusiastic bear hug. “Jim... are you smelling my neck?”

“Maybe.” He pulled away and slapped McCoy on the shoulder. “Good to see you, Bones.”

“You too, kid.”

“Is that him?” Jim nodded his head toward Charlie, who was standing in front of the psionic cell, making faces at the prisoners.

“That’s him.”

“I can’t believe you adopted a kid.”

“To be honest, it was more like he adopted us.”

“Is Spock around?”

“Which one?”

“Our Spock.”

“He’s probably in his lab. I’d walk you over, but I gotta keep a watch on these two.”

“I can figure it out. I’ll swing back around later.”
“Nyota.”

“Cupcake.” Nyota smiled and launched herself into Cupcake’s arms.

“Oof. God, you weigh a ton. Are you wearing lead panties or something?”

“Or something.”

—

“Spock.” Jim grinned, leaning up against the door frame.

“Jim.”

“Are you wearing eyeshadow?”

“Yes.”

“It looks good on you.”

“Thank you.”

“I missed you.”

“And I, you.”

--

“Next,” Sybok called. “Scotty.”

“Counselor.” Scotty sat down on Sybok’s therapy couch. “What’s all this business I hear about esper ratings? Should I be worryin’ myself about that?”

“That’s what you’re here to find out. As a fully mature telepath, you technically don’t have an esper rating. The test wasn’t designed for people like you. I’m doing some tests of my own to see if you and any of the other telepaths in the crew experienced a jump in power. Have you noticed any difference in your telepathy since the Enterprise penetrated the galactic barrier?”

“No. But most of the time, I don’t notice my telepathy at all. If ye hadn’t told me, I wouldn’t even know it was there.”

//Can you hear me right now?//

“Aye.”

//In your head, if you can.//

//I’ll try.//

//Good. Can you hear me now?//

//Did you say somethin’?//

//How about now?// Sybok waited a moment. “I think we’re done. You’re good to go.”

“Thanks.”
“Hour ten,” Charlie said into his PADD. “Subjects still haven’t found a way to escape. New abilities: matter creation. Subject Elizabeth Dehner continues to mature at a slower rate than Subject Gary Mitchell. Subject Mitchell’s hair is completely grey now.” Charlie put down the PADD. “How long do we have to watch them?”

“For as long as it takes,” McCoy answered.

Charlie sighed. “Me and Worf have a raid at eleven.”

“You’d rather play video games than protect your old man from two hypertelepaths?”

“I’m nineteen. I’d rather play video games than anything else. Why can’t Dad do this?”

“He has to test the other telepaths. Plus, these two seem to freak him out.”

“Yeah, T’Pring didn’t seem too fond of them either.”

“I’m beginning to think we should’ve gone with Elder Spock’s plan. I won’t be able to sedate them if they escape now.”

“Don’t worry about it. If they get out, I’ll put ‘em down like a dog.”

“I don’t want you to have to kill.”

“I could just turn them into iguanas.”

“Hour thirteen. Subjects still haven’t escaped. New abilities: none, but both subjects are glowing blue.”

“Hour seventeen.” Charlie yawned. “Subjects haven’t escaped. New abilities: none. Subjects have joined hands and are—Woah.” He dropped the PADD. “Pop.” He shook McCoy awake.

“What? I was just resting my eyes.”

“Run. Get out of here.”

“I’m not leaving you. What the hell’s going—Shit. Are they still inside?”

“Yeah. I think so. I can’t see anything; the light’s too bright.” On the floor, Charlie's PADD began to beep.

“What’s that?”

“The psionic shielding is cracking. You have to get out now.”

“I’m not leaving you!”

“What are you gonna do? Cuss them into submission?”

“It’s always worked before.”
“Don’t make me.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Charlie rolled his eyes, pushing McCoy out of building and locking the doors behind him. “I’m getting my door removed for that.” He stepped closer to the cell, which was now visibly cracked. “Olly, olly oxen free. Come out and play. Charlie needs an excuse to use his powers.” The blue light within the cell shined ever brighter, almost blindingly so. “Don’t taunt the bad guy.” Charlie created a pair of sunglasses, and put them on. “Bright lights. Big deal.”

The light bashed up against the psionic shielding like a battering ram, smashing it into dust.

“Fuck.” Charlie covered his nose and mouth, and banished the dust from the room. Once it cleared, the light dulled to reveal Dehner and Mitchell, who luminesced like the plants that lit the planet. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Dehner and Mitchell said as one.

“You’re blue.”

“Yes.”

“I could kill you if I wanted to. So, don’t do anything stupid.”

“We have no intention of doing anything stupid. We come in peace.”

“That’s usually what the aliens say before they blow up the White House.”

Dehner and Mitchell cocked their heads to the side. “Would you like a sun?”

“No. I’m a little young to start having kids. My pop said he would kill me if I made him a grandpa before he hit fifty.”

“You misinterpret. We mean a star to light your planet.”

“I don’t know. Wouldn’t that mess up the gravity?”

“There are ways around that.”

“So,” McCoy said, staring up at the sky, which was now much brighter, “they just flew up there?”

Charlie nodded. “Well, first they said something about being bound by their physical bodies and being unable to ascend to a higher plane of existence, and then they talked about how much they appreciated sentient life but couldn’t be around us for too long without wanting to kills all of us. Then they flew up there. It was kinda weird.”

“I’d imagine,” Uhura laughed.

“Is this gonna mess up the planet at all?”

“No. The weather won’t be affected. They’re not generating any heat, just light. All I’ll have to do is dim the bioluminescence.”

“How can they breath up there?” McCoy asked. “They should be frozen to death.”
“They can create anything they want out of nothing,” Uhura said. “I’d imagine they could create their own atmosphere.”

“I miss the days when suns were giant balls of gas.”

–

“Does this type of shit happen a lot here?” Kirk asked, awaiting beam up. “I don’t what the hell I’m gonna put in their personnel files.”

A thundering voice from above spoke, “Dr. Elizabeth Dehner and Lt. Cmdr. Gary Mitchell hereby resign their commissions to pursue other career opportunities.”

“Great,” McCoy said. “Now they’re watching us.”

“I am surprised it took you so long to ascertain their true motivation for becoming a solar body,” Spock said.

“Not all of us are as cynical as you, Spock.”

“Are you guys happy here? Staying in one place all the time?” Kirk asked.

“Our position may be stationary, but it is far from boring.”

“We don’t have go nowhere. All the horrors of the universe come to us.”

“If you ever change your mind, there’s always a place for you on the Enterprise.”

“The offer is reciprocal.”

Jim shook his head, smiling. “Naw. Me and Cupcake are ‘fleet men through and through.”

After Jim had gone back to the Enterprise, Spock turned to McCoy. “We can never tell him the truth.”

“I know.”

“Does it bother you that he can never know how Charlie came to be your son?”

“A bit, but I’d imagine Uhura’s got it worse. At least we can leave the planet.”

–

“You should come visit when the mission ends,” Cupcake said, pulling away from a goodbye hug. “We bought this great place in the East Bay. Tons of land for David to run around on. Jim’s talking about putting in a stable.”

“That sounds great. I’ll see if T’Pring can carve some time out of her schedule. It’s always so busy around here.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Alright. Say goodbye to T’Pring and Data for me... I can’t believe you have a robot.”

“He’s an android. And he’s very personable.”
“Right. Love you.”

“Love you, too. Bye.”

“Bye.”

–

“Dr. McCoy.”

“Oh, my God! Jesus Christ on a cross! Look, number one rule in the morgue: never sneak up on the living. You never know who might have an embalming hypo or a skull laser in their hand.”

“I apologize. I merely wish to commend you on your conduct yesterday.”

“I didn’t do anything. It was all Charlie and Sybok.”

“You had no small part in making them the kind of men who would behave as they did. In my timeline, Charlie and—”

“Can you spare me the part where you tell me what monsters all my loved ones were in your universe?”

“Of course. However, allow me to say that your counterpart was not present when the Enterprise pierced the galactic barrier. If he had been, I imagine he would have handled himself as admirably as you had.”

“Thanks. I guess.”

“Doctor, you are far more important than you believe.”

McCoy snorted. “If I’m so important, why do I have morgue duty?”

“I find it fitting. Death is your family business.”
Charlie collapsed onto the sofa next to Worf, who was typing away on his PADD. “Thanks for letting me use your room.”

“Did you change the sheets?”

“Didn’t need to. Vulcan.” Charlie tapped the side of his head.

“Where is the female?”

“I think she climbed out the window. Vulcans don’t do the walk of shame.”

“I still don’t understand why you can’t recreate in your own home.”

“What if my parents come home for lunch? What if they come home for sex? I can’t do my thing if my parents are doing theirs in the next room.”

“You still haven’t told them you are sexually active.”

“No. And you better not either. I don’t think I could stand the embarrassment.”

“If you are not man enough to talk about sex, you aren’t man enough to be having it.”

“Lucky for you, you don’t have to do either.”

“I have a female.”

“Right. Just because T’Pring made you her bitch doesn’t mean she’s your female.”

Worf scoffed, “I would never please myself with a Vulcan, not even recreationally.”

“That’s because you’re a prude.”

“Just because I don’t share the same fascination with race-mixing as the rest of this planet, does not make me a prude.”

“No, it makes you a bigot.”

“I don’t wish to explain basic Klingon customs to every nixar I bed. Not all of us have the convenience of having our culture transmitted across the quadrant.”

“Whatever. How can you claim to have a female, when the only Klingon girl on planet is half-Vulcan and, like, two years old?”

“I met her online.”

Charlie laughed. “That doesn’t count. She’s probably a middle aged Tellarite.”

“She sent me a picture.” He swiped three fingers along his PADD, and handed it to Charlie.

“Holy... she’s really attractive... right?”

“By Klingon standards, yes.”
“There’s no way that’s her. She probably lifted the picture online.”

“Human vision,” Worf grumbled, pinching the PADD’s screen with his thumb and index finger, zooming in on the picture. “See.”

“Oh my god, is that...? She tattooed your name on her thigh?”

Worf pulled down the collar of his shirt, revealing a similar tattoo. “It is a sign of devotion amongst Klingon youth.”

“You’re really amp for her. When are you guys gonna meet?”

Worf straightened his shirt. “We have not settled on a definitive date.”

“Does she know you’re...?”

“Of course. A Klingon does not lie to a future mate.”

“Oooh.” Charlie narrowly dodged a pillow thrown at his head. Not so much “dodged” as redirect the air current in the room so that the pillow missed him. “Are you guys planning on waiting until you’re married? Do Klingons do that?”

“A Klingon does not wait. He manipulates events through inaction.”

“She’s not giving it up, then.”

“Ha! The Klingon female has twice the sexual appetite of the male.” Worf slid a single finger across the PADD. “Read that.”

“‘I want to ride you like a wild sark trying to buck off its first master.’ Holy shit. ‘...run my tongue along your...’ I don’t know what that word is. ‘...rub your stumps with chakron oil...’ Your stumps?”

Worf snatched the PADD away. “I have to return to work.”

“Oh my god!” Charlie clasped his hands over his mouth. “She’s one of those people that gets turned on by amputees! She’s a—a—what do they call it—a devotee. And she thinks you don’t have any legs. Where did you find her? One of those creepy message boards?”

Worf easily lifted himself off the couch and into his wheelchair. “It was the only place I could find a Klingon woman who would consider a disabled mate.”

“That sucks. I’m sorry. What are you gonna do? I mean, you have legs.”

“I have considered—”

“Dude, no. You’re not cutting off your legs for some naybe’wI’ you’ve never met.”

“Valkrell is no naybe’wI’!”

“Fine. Sorry.”

“It’s not like I’m using them.”

“If she really loves you, shouldn’t she accept you the way you are, legs and all?”

“You don’t understand; you’re still a boy.”
“I’m two years older than you.”

“In Human years. To a Klingon, you look to be a child of eight.”

Worf had almost made it out the front door when Carol stormed in, quickly followed by Maltz. “My love for you is artificial,” Maltz recited. “Fabricated much like this epistle. My love, my—”

“Shut up!” Carol groaned, hurling a PADD at his head before stomping off to the kitchen.

“She wants me.”

—

It was approximately three minutes and forty-eight seconds after Nyota had left from walking T’Pring back to her office after lunch that she returned. “I just got the strangest call from space dock. Turn on your vidscreen.”

T’Pring flipped on the screen, and a very disheveled Pavel Chekov appeared. “Hello? This is Lieutenant Commander Pavel Chekov of the USS Excelsior.”

“We know who you are,” T’Pring said.

“Of course. I am requesting immediate assistance from your planetary security. Keptin Hikaru Sulu has hijacked the Excelsior.”

“How can he hijack his own command?” Nyota asked.

“It is very complicated. I do not have time to explain. The keftin is emotionally compromised, and not responding—”

The screen flickered, and Chekov’s face was replaced that of a young woman, who looked very much like the Cleopatra of Terran history. “I am Elaan, Dohlman of Elas, requesting sanctuary on your planet as a trafficked woman.”

“Your Glory—” But before T’Pring could say anything else, Chekov had reappeared.

“I apologize. That woman, the Dohlman interrupted my signal.”

“She is aboard your vessel?”

“Yes, our mission was to transport her to Troyius for her wedding, but she drugged Keptin Sulu with her tears.”

“With her tears?” T’Pring repeated.

“Da. According to a Troyian ambassador on board, Elasian tears have a bevitching effect on men. That is how she tricked Keptin Sulu into bringing the Excelsior to this planet. Please, you must help us.”

“Why don’t you remove Sulu from duty?” Nyota asked. “You said he was emotionally compromised.”

“Yes, vell.” Chekov blushed. “None of the other officers believe he has been compromised. And I cannot find any evidence that would sway them.”

“If there is no evidence,” T’Pring asked, “why do you believe he has been compromised?”
“Usually, Hikaru sits like this.” Chekov slouched slightly in his chair. “But, now, he sits like this.” He pushed his chest forward. “See?”

“Mr. Chekov, I will meet with my constituents, and then inform you of our decision.”

“This is an emergency. The Klingon Empire—”

T’Pring held up her hand, silencing him. “Do not ask a direct democracy for help, if you are not prepared to wait.”

—

“Don’t you think it’s reductive to compare a princess being ferried between two planets to sex trafficking?” Thala, the Andorian and former space hippie, asked.

“No,” Magda answered simply.

“If you look at the law,” a Ferengi woman said, “this case constitutes sex trafficking. Elaan is being moved from one planet to another for the purpose of marriage, which is an unstated contract for sexual congress, especially so in a royal marriage where the production of heirs is expected. She was obviously coerced if her first actions once she got off Elas were to run for our help.”

“Her first actions were to drug a Starfleet officer,” Stonn argued. “If we grant her sanctuary, we are essentially harboring a criminal.”

Another Ferengi woman stood up. “How can we maintain a hard line stance against rape, when Elaan effectively deployed a date rape drug against Captain Sulu?”

“The only way we can help Sulu is if we can get him and Elaan down here and find a cure for those damn tears,” said McCoy.

“Dr. McCoy is correct,” Sarek agreed. “The only way we can hope to maintain a neutral stance in this situation is to grant the Dohlman of Elas and Captain Sulu temporary access to our planet.”

—

“Your Glory.”

“Matriarch.”

“Please sit.”

“This is your government building?”

“Yes.”

“It only has two rooms. On Elas, the royal palace has twenty-four bedrooms, three kitchens, and an arena for martial combat.”

“Impressive. On Sha-Ka-Ree, we cherish a more ascetic lifestyle. However, we don’t broker treaties on the backs of our daughters.”

“Not on my back, on my cunt... As if I would ever allow some Troyian pig to sweat all over me.”

“If it is any consolation, I imagine any encounter would be a brief affair.”
“I like you. I knew you would make a powerful ally.”

“How did you come to know my name?”

“Even in Elas, the sound of T’Pau falling could be heard. She was always one of my greatest teachers.”

“You knew T’Pau?”

“No. I learned about her in school. How she really was—none of that watered down, Surak bullshit the Federation puts in all their textbooks. I followed her career, and, after she died, I followed yours.”

“I am flattered.”

“I was surprised that you would lower yourself to menial labor even after your ascension.”

“We all have our hobbies. Tell me, Your Glory, why did you choose to come to Sha-Ka-Ree?”

“I told you, I knew who you were and what position you took after that man came here selling brides. You announced that Sha-Ka-Ree would grant citizenship to victims of sex trafficking. So I came.”

“And you believe you qualify as such?”

“That ship up there is moving me so some pig can fuck me.”

“Fair enough. You will no longer be Dohlman, or even Elasian, if you refuse to marry the Troyian ruler. You will be cast out from your own people and stripped of your title. You will be stateless without a possession to your name.”

“I know this. I am not a child.”

“Under these circumstances, I can grant you citizenship, however, I cannot guarantee that I will be able to keep you out of prison.”

“Prison! What is my crime?”

“We have reports that you drugged Captain Sulu with your tears.”

“Your reports are wrong. It was an accident.”

“Captain Sulu will be interviewed to determine the veracity of your story. For the time being, you may reside within my household. Do not cry on anyone.”

—

“Sulu, how you feelin’?”

“Great, doc. Where’s Elaan?”

“She’s having a talk with T’Pring. I need you to answer a few questions for me.”

“Sure. What's this about?”

“Chekov noticed some changes in your behavior. I just need to make sure you're all right. Within the past seventy-two hours, have you come in direct physical contact with Elasian tears?”
“You really get to the point, don't you, McCoy?”

“I've never been one to beat around the bush. You gonna answer my question?”

“Yeah. Yesterday, I got some of Elaan's tears on my hand.”

“How'd this happen?”

“I was giving her a tour of the botany bay. She had a bad allergic reaction to one of the plants, and her eyes starting tearing up real bad. So, I handed her my hanky.”

“You carry a hanky? What are you? Seventy? You know how many germs collect on those things...? Sorry. So, you handed her your hanky. What then?”

“She wiped her eyes and gave it back to me.”

“And that was when her tears got on you?”

“Yeah.”

“How did you feel? Could you tell the difference right away?”

“I didn't feel any different, but, when I looked up at Elaan, it was like I was seeing her for the first time.”

“How long after that did you divert the ship to Sha-Ka-Ree?”

“It was about two hours later.”

“What did you do during that time?”

Sulu smiled. “A gentleman never tells.”

“Okay. What made you change the ship's course?”

“Well, after we... Elaan told me how much she didn't want to didn't want to marry the king of Troyius, and how she felt like those women Harry Mudd was selling. That was when we came up with idea to bring her here, where she would be safe.”

“Alright, I’m gonna need to run a few scans and take some samples, then I’ll send you over to T'Pring to write out an affidavit.”

“When can I see Elaan?”

“I don’t know. We might have to keep you two separated for awhile... What’s the matter?”

“We’ve never been apart for this long.”

“Jesus.”

—

The accommodations provided to her by the Matriarch were sparse and tiny—her bathroom at home was twice as spacious. Still, to its credit, the room was free of the ridiculous female trappings found in the sets of the Federation telenovelas Elaan’s second aunt loved so much. The room was decorated in a style similar to the spartan aesthetic favored on Elas; the only things hanging on the walls were a
series of maps with words “not actual size” scribbled on each one, and a poster of a Terran feline captioned “hang in there!” There was a desk, a dresser, and a small bed. Elaan would have been insulted had there not been a tick tock manservant resting on the bed, eyes closed, and plugged into the wall.

Objectively speaking, the robot was not terrible to look at, solid, but in no way muscular. If he was equipped with pleasure functions, he would have to do. Elaan crawled on top of him, straddling his thighs. “Awaken.”

The manservant’s eyes popped. “Hello. My name is Data. I am an android. Who are you?”

“Do not speak unless you have been spoken to. Are you programmed to give pleasure?”

“Yes.”

“Demonstrate.”

“What form of pleasure would you like me to demonstrate? I know a variety of songs and knock-knock jokes.”

“Are you versed in sexual pleasure?”

“Yes, but I am not allowed to access those subroutines while there are other people in the room.”

Elaan sighed, rolling off of this Data android. “What are you good for then?”

“My mother says I have intrinsic worth as a sentient being.”

“How can you have a mother? You’re metal.” She knocked on Data’s chest.

“I am adopted. Mother T’Pring found me on a pirate ship and brought me home with her. I’m from the future.”

Elaan parsed through the nonsense the tick tock man was spewing; obviously, he had a few cogs missing. “The Matriarch is your mother?”

“Yes. So is her bondmate, Mother Nyota.”

“You are not my personal manservant?”

“No, but I could pretend to be.” The android’s eyebrows perked up. “Or, if you wanted to play pretend, I could be Sherlock Holmes and you could be Dr. John Watson.” Elaan scowled. “Or Professor Moriarty.”

“I have no interest in your childhood games. What kind of robot are you?”

“I am a late model Soong-type android with a positronic brain, powered by power cells. My exterior-”

“Enough. You bore me with your incessant prattling.”

“I am sorry.” Data unplugged himself from the wall, stood up on the bed, and stepped over Elaan onto the floor. “I’m going to paint now. You may join me, if you wish. I have a smock that you can wear.”

Insolent contraption.
Once Charlie got out of his algebra tutorial, he headed over to Uhura’s house to check on Data, as he usually did. Data didn’t get himself into as much trouble as he used to, especially now that he had object permanence. For the first month of his existence, Data would have a minor power surge every time someone left the room. The issue of him cutting stuck in corners was resolved by Uhura writing in small print “WALK BACKWARDS” on every corner in their house. Nowadays, the worst he got up to was comming strangers long distance to enquire about their health.

“Data,” Charlie called, opening the door. No one on the planet ever locked their front doors. “It’s Charlie.”

“I am in my bedroom.”

Charlie made his way back to Data’s bedroom, where the android was behind his easel, staring intently at a scantily clad woman on his bed. “Lift your chin. Thank you.”

“Hey.”

“Hello, Charlie.”

“Who’s that?”

“Elaan, Dohlman of Elas. She is modeling for my first royal portrait.” Data tapped the left corner of the canvas. “I will paint myself here as I am now in reference to Velázquez.”

“Cool. Do T’Pring and Uhura know she’s here?”

“Yes. Mother T’Pring invited the Dohlman to stay with us. She is a refugee, because the Elasian high council turned her out like a two credit whore for their stupid peace treaty. I am paraphrasing.”

“I gathered that.” Charlie smiled at Elaan. “Hi. I’m Charlie, T’Pring and Uhura’s nephew.”

Without moving the rest of her body, Elaan’s eyes flicked up and down Charlie’s body curiously. “How is that possible? You’re a pale, pink little Human.”

“I’m adopted. It’s a long story. What’s a Dohlman?”

“You have not heard of me?”

“Nope.”

“Are you some kind of cognitive invalid?”

“No. I guess I don’t keep up on foreign affairs.”

“I suppose that is for the best. An informed citizenry is the bulwark of democracy.”

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want one of those, would we?”

Elaan sat up in the bed. “How dare you aim sarcasm at the Dohlman!” She picked up the closest object on the nightstand—one of Data’s first clay sculptures—and hurled it at Charlie’s head. He reflexively slowed the projectile, setting it down safe and sound on the carpet.

“Thank you, Charlie.” Data picked up the sculpture, and placed it on his desk far from Elaan.
“You!” Elaan pointed at Charlie. “You’re—you’re a witch!”

“I’m not a witch. I’m normal. It’s everyone else who sucks.” Technically, he shouldn’t have done that in front of her. He wondered if she was a threat to him. “Data, is she cool?”

“Cool? Cool—unlikely to alert authorities to illegal or controversial acts. Yes, she is cool. Mother T’Pring said the Dohlman will not be able to leave this planet without fear of assassination, and is therefore beholden to our family.”

Elaan exhaled out of her nose like a bull ready to charge. “This galaxy is bullshit.”


“I want to go home. No one likes me here, and they don’t even have the decency to be afraid of me. I miss my garu.”

Charlie focused on those two words—“my garu”—and the meaning she put behind them, and closed his eyes. When he opened them, a large, fluffy hyena-like creature was lying in Elaan’s lap.

“Filishka?” Elaan inspected the animal, then threw it over her shoulder. “This is my Filishka. How did you bring her here?”

Charlie shrugged. “I dunno.”

“You have my gratitude as Dohlman of Elas. The next battle you wage, I will stand beside you.”

“Uh... You’re welcome.”

–

After presenting Elaan and Sulu’s testimony at another hastily assembled town hall meeting, T’Pring spoke once again with Chekov over her vidscreen. “The planet has agreed to shelter the Dohlman as a trafficked woman, and will not be bringing forth charges against her for drugging Captain Sulu. In addition, Dr. McCoy has ruled that Sulu’s judgment has been compromised by the Elasian tears. If Starfleet will accept the diagnosis of a third party physician, you will surely be granted command of the Excelsior.”

“What good is command when you heff the Dohlman? Our current mission is entirely compromised by your decision to shelter this insane woman. As acting keptin of a Federation wessel, I demand you return her to our custody where she vill be tried for exposing a Starfleet officer to an unknown substance.”

“You demand?”

“Yes... I demand. Please.”

“Am I correct to assume that all charges against the Dohlman will be dropped if she agrees to marry the king of Troyius?”

“The thought had crossed my mind, yes.”

“As a policy, Sha-Ka-Ree does not extradite alleged criminals, who will surely face cruel and unusual punishment.”

“Cruel and unusual punishment? That is a stretch, Ambassador.”
“Acting Captain Chekov, suffice it to say that, try as you might, you are never getting the Dohlman.”

“I... I’m going to tell Admiral Pike! You vill not make my first mission as keptin a failure.”

“Goodbye, Chekov.”

—

“Don’t text at the dinner table,” McCoy scolded, taking the communicator out of Charlie’s hands. “It’s rude.”

“What?” Charlie asked with a mouthful of food. “It’s not like we have people over.”

“Your parents aren’t people all of a sudden?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Guys, stop being so...” Sybok shook his hands in the air. “It puts me off my food.”

“So,” McCoy started, shifting the topic of conversation to a more neutral one, “d’you hear about Sulu and the Elasian girl?”

“Yeah, she was over at Uhura’s house when I went to check on Data. I guess she’s staying there or something. She’s pretty cool.”

“Pretty cool? She hijacked the Excelsior.”

“Yeah. Isn’t that badass?”

“Since when has crying to get what you want badass?”

“I dunno. I think it’s kind of poignant or whatever. Like, her strength is her vulnerability.”

Sybok nodded in understanding. “Like Batman.”

“How is this remotely—” McCoy started. “Stop comparing everything to Batman. That girl is a menace.”

“People said the same thing about Batman,” Sybok muttered into his food.

“She has temper tantrums, she’s blinded by base emotions. She can’t see past the immediate present to look at the bigger picture. She doesn’t seem to realize that no matter how satisfying her actions are now, they have consequences.”

“So,” Charlie smirked “you two should get along great.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She’s just like you!”

“No, no. I would never compromise the safety of two planets—hell, the way she’s at it, the whole damn galaxy—because I found the personal cost too high.”

“Yeah, you would.”

“Len,” Sybok said, “how many times have you said, ‘Damnit, Jim! We can’t let this man die just because of x, y, z, the prime directive?’”
“I would never drug someone to—”

“Oh, come on! How did you get Jim aboard the Enterprise the first time?”

“Shut up,” McCoy grumbled, suddenly very interested in examining his pureed plomeek.


“Even if we are alike, that doesn’t mean I have to like her. Spock’s got his own clone, and he bugs the piss out of him.”

“You should get to know her,” Charlie suggested. “Underneath all the makeup, she’s pretty okay. I mean, she sat for hours today so that Data could paint her. Even I won’t do that.”

Sybok grinned. “You really like her.”

“Yeah. She’s different than other girls. She hates everything. Not even Vulcan girls hate everything.”

“Well,” McCoy said, “I don’t want you messin’ around with her the way you do with Vulcan girls.”

“I don’t mess around Vulcan girls. I don’t mess around with any girls.”

“Charlie, honey,” Sybok said, “we know. We live on a planet with less than five hundred people, and, besides that, I’m the most powerful telepath since ever. You can’t keep secrets from us.”

McCoy coughed. “As much as we may want you to.”

“Seriously, don’t let an Andorian put sha antenna there. At the very least, don’t tell anyone about it.”

“If I could turn myself into an iguana,” Charlie said, cheeks flushed, “I would do it now.”

“I’m serious about you and that Elasian girl. I don’t want you getting too close to her,” McCoy said.

“Why not?”

“Yeah,” Sybok said. “I don’t see a reason why he shouldn’t pursue her... other than that it make him an enemy of the Troyian crown.”

“See, he doesn’t have a problem with it.”

McCoy sighed in frustration. “You: the most powerful teenage boy in the galaxy. Her: girl who can control men with her tears. Am I the only one seeing the issue here?”

“So, I won’t let her cry on me.”

“Jesus, kid. She just ran away from an arranged marriage. She doesn’t need some omnipotent horndog sniffing around.”

Charlie slumped in his chair. “Whatever. Can I have my comm back?”

As promised, Chekov alerted Starfleet Command. Admiral Pike was on Sha-Ka-Ree by the next morning. “With all due respect, Ambassador, you fail to appreciate the gravity of this situation. The consequences of sheltering the Dohlman will be felt throughout the galaxy. This is bigger than Elas and Troyius; the survival of the Federation tips in the balance.”
“I understand the Federation’s investment in the dilithium stores on both planets. Brokering peace will assure unfettered access to their dilithium markets. I find it curious that the Federation—an organization that has moved man through time and space—cannot find a more equitable method for peace.”

“You may find our method suspect—”

“Yes, as a woman who broke free of an arranged marriage, I imagine I would.”

“—what the Klingon Empire plans is worse than you can imagine.” Pike spared a careful sidelong glance at Worf, who was taking notes.

“Try me.”

“The Klingons are just as invested in the dilithium on those planets as the Federation, but they have no concern for the Elasians or the Troyians. They plan to inflame the conflict between the planets to the point that they attack each other with nuclear missiles, depopulating the planets, but keeping the dilithium intact. Then the Klingon Empire can come in, blow off the surface of the planets, and mine all of the dilithium. I don’t think I need to tell you how dangerous the Klingons could be with a cache of dilithium crystals. Their penetration of galaxy would be nearly unlimited. They would be able—”

“To explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life-forms and new civilizations; to boldly go where no one has gone before?” Worf offered.

“I understand the dire diplomatic and environmental crisis faced by the Tellun System,” T’Pring said. “For that reason, I have assembled a crack diplomatic team to negotiate a peace treaty.”

“Who exactly makes up this team?” Pike asked.

“Ambassador Sarek, Elder Spock, and former Bekk Worf.”

“Far be it for me to question your judgment, but wasn’t Ambassador Sarek stripped of his position and run off his own planet? And, as far as my records show, this Elder Spock person appeared out of thin air in a hippie commune in central Africa four years ago. And, despite however competent an assistant he may be, Worf still uses a wheelchair. Obviously, I don’t hold that against him, but I can’t say the same for the Klingon ambassadors who will no doubt make their presence known at any peace talks in the Tellun system.”

“I acknowledge your critique and choose to disregard it. My team will travel to the Tellun system for the peace talks.”

“This is a mistake.”

“The Matriarch does not make mistakes,” Worf said. “Reality fails to live up to her expectations.”

“Thank you, Worf. Admiral, I think you will be pleased to know that Dr. McCoy has today begun research for developing a vaccine for Elasian tears, in addition to the cure being crafted by our medical and scientific research facilities in conjunction with the science department of the Excelsior. Captain Sulu has been placed under observation in our medical unit. I am certain he would appreciate a visit.”

When Charlie swung by to check on Data the next day, he found the android camped out in the
living room, reading from a PADD. “Hey.”

“Hello.”

“You recharging out here now?” Data’s power cells were damaged badly somewhere between whatever universe he sprang forth from and Captain Lester’s cargo hold. Now, he had to plug himself into the wall every day for the power cells to recharge.

“For the time being. The Dohlman is occupying my room.” While Data wasn’t particularly skilled at emoting, the subtle alteration in his speech made it sound like Elaan was “occupying” like a foreign army rather than a house guest.

“Is she here?”

“Yes.”

“I’m gonna go back and say hi, then.”

“Very well.” Data returned to his reading.

Charlie walked down the hall, and knocked on the door to Data’s room. “It’s Charlie.” The door slid open. “Hey.” Elaan was on the bed, curled up with her garu-thing. “How’s your... animal?”

“Filishka does not like that sehlat creature. He would not play with her. He cowered under the furniture whenever she came near.”

“Kihika’s kind of a wimpy sehlat. He’s scared of things that are different. I’m sure they’ll get along better when Kihika gets used to her.”

“This planet bores me. I have approached at least thirty strangers, and none of them would agree to a kivitlra match.”

“Kivitlra? Is that like kickboxing?”

“Yes, but with knives. Would you like to—”

“No, no. I’m not into that kind of stuff.”

“I could tell; you have the arms of a milkmaid.”

“Hey, milkmaids have to be pretty strong. They have to carry that pole thing on their shoulders all the time.”

“I give you too much credit then. You do not have the physique to be a milkmaid, much less a warrior.”

“I am a warrior. I just don’t wage war in the physical world.”

“Then where? In your misshapen head?”

“No, online. Me and my friends play this old Terran computer game, World of Warcraft. It’s kind of stupid—”

Elaan sat up straight. “You have access to a world dedicated to warcraft?”

“Yeah, on my console.”
“Take me.” Elaan grabbed Charlie’s forearm. “I want to go to there.”

—

“This is quite a ship,” Pike said. “Sleek, fast, accessible.”

“It was designed with those qualities in mind,” Elder Spock said, keeping a careful watch on the conn.

“It’s the only ship that was, then.”

“Yes. However, I cannot take credit for this innovation. Around the time I was designing the interior passageways of the ship, an investigative reporter exposed the reasoning behind the promotion of a recently disabled Starfleet captain.”

“One Step Forward, Two Steps Back’?”

“Yes. I recall a particularly salient passage: ‘While Starfleet engineering cadets are tested on their ability to reassemble a warp core blindfolded, apparently, there was not enough room in the syllabus to cover the complex architectural concept of the ramp.’ The article left me curious as to why the unnamed Starfleet officer had not resigned his commission following his promotion and subsequent grounding.”

“I wondered the same thing.” Pike tapped his fingers absentmindedly on his wheelchair’s armrests. “Have we met?”

“Prior to this morning, no.”

Sarek entered the bridge, straightening his robes, passing Worf without a word to reach the conn. “I fail to understand why you recommended me for this venture. The Klingon Empire is outside of my expertise, and it will take much longer than this flight for me to even approach competency.”

Elder Spock grinned, knowingly. “I think you will find that Klingon diplomacy comes quite naturally to you.”

“If you have not realized, Elder, I take as little stock in your predictions as anyone else.”

“Then it would behoove you to continue studying.”

Sarek turned on his heel, and retreated to the back of the ship.

Pike smirked. “How are you and the ambassador related?”

Elder Spock paused for a moment. “We are not.” The corners of him mouth turned up slightly. “Not all Vulcans are related.”

Admiral Pike made the look of a man accustomed to authority who had just found himself, as Charles Evans might say, “pwned.” “I didn’t mean to imply... I thought because you knew each other and you have the same name as his son. I thought maybe it was a family name.”

“The concept of a ‘family name’ is not present in Vulcan culture. We are disinclined to name our children after things that have died.”

“Right. I apologize. I’d never met two Vulcans with same name before.”

“It is rare, but it has been known to happen. To answer your question more fully, I was not born into
the Sarek’s family; I married into his extended family by way of his son-in-law’s parents. I suppose you could say I am his son’s stepfather-in-law.”

“That’s quite a coincidence. You marrying into a family that already has someone with your name in it.”

“Indeed.”

—

“Where’s my Elaan?” Sulu shouted, pounding on the transparent aluminum window in his observation room. “You can’t keep her from me. What have you done with her?”

“Thank god he’s not Vulcan,” Geoff said. “He would have broken out of there hours ago.”

Sulu’s face reddened and began to shake. “Elaaaaaaan!”

“I gotta get back to that vaccine,” McCoy said.

—

Sybok poked his head in Charlie’s room. “Hey. How’s your computer-ing?” Neither Charlie nor Elaan looked away from their consoles. “Are you winning?” Again, nothing. “Are you going to introduce me to your friend?”

Charlie kept on staring at the screen, while mumbling, “Dizziz Elaan.”

“Hi, Elaan. I’m Charlie’s dad. You can call me Sybok.”

“Ngh,” Elaan responded.

“Okay. Nice to meet you... If I bring you guys snacks, will you promise to blink at least once a minute?”

—

“The Elasian Council of Nobles has reneged their agreement to the Tribunal’s terms regarding the marriage of the Dohlman. They clearly have no interest in diplomacy,” Ambassador Petri said, going orange in the face. “And, if the Dohlman’s fickleness is indicative of the capricious nature of the Elasian race, then we will have no treaty with their kind.”

“The Dohlman has abandoned her post,” Noblewoman Lael said. “She is no Elasian.”

“If it smells like an Elasian...” Petri shot back.

General Korrd, the Klingon representative, spat on the floor. “The female has dishonored the Troyian people by rejecting their sovereign. If the Elasian female does not think the Troyians are worthy of her offspring, then the Elasians are not worthy of peace.”

“We have other females,” Lael protested. “We have sent the king of Troyius pictures of dozens of women in the royal family who would be proud to bear his young.”

“We are not angered by the loss of a queen,” Petri said. “It is the symbolism of her rejection that we find despicable. We will not have an Elasian on the throne.”

“Then you will not know peace.”
“There are other roads to peace,” Elder Spock said. “I believe together we can find one that is mutually agreeable.”

“We have tried to make peace with these savages for millennia,” Petri snapped. “There is no other way.”

“You talk of peace as if there was no other way,” Korrd quoted Surak with a snarl. “You forget peace is not the way of all people.”

“You are right,” Worf said. “Above all, honor is the way of our people. Yet, there is no honor in, to borrow a Human phrase, ‘starting shit’ between two distant planets. You act as if you are the ally of the Troyian people today, but it was not five days past that the Klingon Special Envoy was on Elas, defaming the Troyian Ruler to the royal family.” Worf looked over at the Elasian and Troyian representatives. “This man is ally to no one. He is nothing but a disgraced commando. To invest meaning in his words would be the height of foolishness.”

“And the Federation cripple you brought here is any better.”

“Mind your manners, Korrd,” Pike said.

“It is true that the Federation has as much to gain from the Tellun system as the Klingon Empire,” Sarek said. “For that reason alone, you should not listen to either of them.”

“To whom should we listen?” Petri asked snidely. “You?”

“In a word, yes. Unlike Admiral Pike or General Korrd, my colleagues and I were sent to this conference to preserve life on your planets, not to guarantee access to dilithium crystals. We believe this conflict can be settled in an equitable fashion that is respectful to the cultures of both planets.”

“In our estimation,” Elder Spock began, “a lasting peace between your two planets can only flourish if an effort is made toward shared cultural understanding. For this reason, we propose a student exchange program, wherein highly successful students spend a school term on their neighboring planet.”

“You want us to trade our children?” an indignant Leal asked.

“Only temporarily. We hope that through this program, your youth will gain better training and more advanced skills, in addition to the overall benefit to your planets, which is two-pronged. As we have stated, the student exchange program will create a better understanding and appreciation of the neighboring culture. This will aid peace in the long term. In the short term, we should hope that neither of your planets would deploy doomsday devices on a planet where a significant portion of your population’s children are residing.”

“You are a cynic,” Petri said.

“No, Ambassador, I am a Vulcan.”

——

“Captain Sulu,” Dr. McCoy said as he entered the observation room, “I come bearing good news.”

“Is it my Elaan? Can I see her?”

“Hold your horses. Yes, it’s about Elaan. And, yes, you can see her after we talk. Jesus, a man comes with good news, all you want is the girl.”
“That’s all I’ll ever want.”

McCoy knew he shouldn’t roll his eyes at his patient, but, let’s face it, his bedside manner left something to be desired. “T’Pring just got word from the peace talks on Nimbus III. The Troyians and the Elasians agreed to a provisional peace treaty. God knows if they’ll follow it...”

“So, Elaan doesn’t have to marry the Troyian ruler?”

“Right. She’s not completely out of the woods. There are still people on Elas and Troyius who want her dead. If she stays here, she’ll be safe.”

“Oh... I... I guess I’ll have to leave Starfleet.”

“Woah. Keep your pants on. I’ve got a cure for Elasian tears. Don’t make any rash decisions until I’ve injected you with it.”

“McCoy, you can’t cure love.”

“Listen to yourself. You sound like a greeting card.”

“You’re just jealous, because you can never have what Elaan and I have. Our love transcends time and space and... Western medicine!”

“If you’re so sure about that, you won’t mind if I give you this shot.” McCoy brandished a hypospray.

“You can’t!”

“Why not? You afraid you won’t be Mr. Dohlman anymore?”

“It’s more than that!”

“What is it then?”

“I can’t tell you.”

Now McCoy was getting concerned. “Sulu, whatever it is, I won’t tell anyone else. You have doctor-patient confidentiality.”

“You won’t tell Starfleet?”

“Cross my heart, hope to die.”

“All right. I’ll tell you, but only if you black out the observation window and make sure we’re not being recorded.”

“You got it.” McCoy punched a code into a security pad by the door. “No one can hear us or see us.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“You positive?”

“I’m positive. Now, why can’t I give you the cure?”
“I’m faking it.”

“What?”

“I’m faking it. I’ve been faking it the entire time.”

“You mean to tell me you let Elaan steal your ship?”

“Not steal. Borrow.”

“Are you out of your mind? Starfleet will have your captain’s stripes for this!”

“What Starfleet doesn’t know won’t hurt them.”

“Why would you do this? Why would you put your career at risk?”

Sulu stared at the wall, looking far graver than McCoy had ever seen him. “I love Starfleet. I would do anything for Starfleet, but... I won’t be their pimp.”

“I get it... You’ve got balls, Sulu. Even Jim wouldn’t have pulled a stunt like this.”

Sulu smiled ruefully. “I’m guessing Jim’s female ancestors were working in shipyards during World War II, not being moved around by the Japanese military for sex slavery... There were women on my dad’s side of the family—maybe on my mom’s, too, but no one ever talks about it—they were put into camps and forced to have sex with soldiers. I didn’t want to be one of those guys who stood by and didn’t do anything. It’s not the same. I know it’s not the same. One person versus hundreds of thousands, and she would never have to go through what they did. But I figured that, if I couldn’t stop something as small as this from happening, how could I something as big as that from happening again?”

“None of this is small to Elaan.”

“

After seeing Sulu off and making sure he was reinstated as captain, McCoy went home to see Charlie. The kid was curled up in bed, no doubt sleeping off of those damn energy drinks he chugged down whenever his friends came over to stare at their consoles for hours. McCoy tiptoed over to Charlie’s bed, wiped the hair out of his eyes, and jabbed him in the neck with a hypo.

“Ow!” Charlie said, grabbing at his neck. “What the hell was that?”

“The vaccine for Elasian tears.”

“For real?”

“Yeah. Now, get out of here. Go pitch some woo.”

“You serious? I can?”

“As long as you’re not a creep about it, and you don’t have sex in Data’s bed.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you,” Charlie chanted as he hopped out of bed, pulled on some shoes, and ran out of the house.

From the bedroom window, McCoy watched as Charlie rushed down the street. In the reflection in the window pane, McCoy could see Sybok approach him and wrap his arms around his chest. “Ah,
autumn. The season of love.”

McCoy snorted. “That’s spring, dear.”

“I thought it was autumn. You know, the children return to school and meet new people to fall in love with.”

“How do you not know this stuff? Didn’t you live on Earth for years?”

“Yeah, in a part of the planet that only had two seasons.”

“Excuses, excuses...”

“What made you change your mind about Elaan?”

“I don’t know. I guess being around Sulu so much let me see her out of his eyes.”

“Should Charlie and I be worried?”

“God, no,” he chuckled. “She’s just a kid, like Charlie.”
Nyota was excited, as much by being off planet for the first time she became the planetary body politic as by watching Data fly for the first time. After putting up with Data coming over to his shop every afternoon to ask, “What does this part do?” every five seconds, Elder Spock had offered to teach Data how to fly the Squid, Sha-Ka-Ree’s diplomatic vessel. Nyota and T’Pring talked it over with Data and agreed it would be a good opportunity for him to learn some responsibility. (There was only so much he could learn from taking care of Kihika.) After studying the ship’s function and acing simulations, Data was deemed ready to take the Squid for a test run.

This was actually their second attempt at Data’s first real flight. In the first instance, T’Pring went up along with Data and Elder Spock. The Squid wasn’t two meters out of space dock when Data apparently “hesitated” (to do what, Nyota wasn’t sure) and T’Pring declared the entire venture too dangerous, demanding that Elder Spock “turn this vessel around immediately.”

It was agreed then that Nyota would go along the next time. On the off chance that they were approached by an aggressive vessel while circling the planet, the Squid was more than able to outrun them or, if need be, disable the vessel. For such a small ship, the Squid was Air Force One and the accompanying fighter jets all rolled into one. The Matriarch wouldn’t travel in anything less.

“You sure this is a good idea?” Admiral Pike asked. He had somehow managed to sweet talk his way onto the ship for this short ride. Everyone was feeling a touch guilty that he had decided to take a month’s leave on Sha-Ka-Ree when there wasn’t much of anything to do there. Coming up with ways to entertain Pike became somewhat of a pastime in their family. “Last time we had a computer controlling a vessel—”

“Data’s not a computer,” Nyota said. “And he knows the difference between war games and war. He doesn’t have access to the weapons system anyway.”

“Okay, if you’re sure,” Pike said, amusement etched on his face.

“What?”

“Nothing. I never pegged you as the type to mother hen.”

“Neither did I,” she murmured.

“Leaving space dock in three, two, one,” Data counted. “We are in open space.”

“Good work,” Elder Spock praised. “Now, input the coordinates.”

“Coordinates inputted. Engage.”

“Good. The ship is entirely under your control; we are outside of the range of the space dock’s tractor beam.”

Nyota was so caught up in watching Data that she jumped in her seat when Pike said, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She smiled. “It’s very easy to underestimate him.”

“Right.” Pike crossed his legs and fussed with his pant leg. “I’m not paralyzed; you don’t have to gawp like that. You’re not witnessing a miracle.”

Driving School
“Sorry. I...” Nyota averted her eyes. She’d assumed Pike was paraplegic, like Worf.

“Don’t be.”

She felt something cool and metallic up against her neck; as she turned to see what it was, she heard a phaser fire. But not at her. Pike was holding a phaser to her neck, and had another aimed at the conn, where Data was slumped over his console. “Data! What did you do?”


“You... You have no idea what you just did. He could be dead.”

“He’s an android.”

“She is right,” Elder Spock said, his hands in the air. “Your stunning blast may have reset Data, effectively killing him.”

“I swear to god, Pike. I swear to god...”

“Allow me to reactivate him. It is the only way we can ascertain if you have killed him.”

“Fine,” Pike said. “Get him out the chair first. Put him over here.”

While Elder Spock dragged Data across the bridge like a rag doll, Nyota stared daggers at Pike. “Why are you doing this?”

“I need the ship.”

“Why?”

“I need to get somewhere. I’ll make sure it gets back to you.”

“We will not let you take this vessel,” Elder Spock said, flipping Data onto his stomach. He pulled up his shirt, and pressed Data’s activation switch.

Data’s eyes blinked open, looking between Elder Spock and Nyota. “Why am I lying on the floor in this undignified position with the two of you standing over me, displaying expressions of concern?” Out of the corner of his eye, he registered Pike. “I see. Is this a simulation to test my courage under fire as a captain?”

“No,” Elder Spock said, helping Data onto his feet. “Admiral Pike is attempting to steal the Squid.”

“Only temporarily,” Pike said

“Why would you need to steal this vessel?” Data asked. “As a Starfleet admiral, you have hundreds of ships from which you could obtain safe passage by legal means.”

“I can’t take a Starfleet vessel where I’m going.”

“Where are you going?”

“Talos IV.”

“Visiting Talos IV is forbidden to any Starfleet officer. The punishment is death.”

“Then it’s a good thing I resigned my commission.”
“Starfleet Command will never let you back in after this,” Elder Spock said.

“I know. That’s why I need you three to get on the shuttle; I won’t ruin your chances of joining back up.”

“I’m never returning to Starfleet,” Nyota said. “So you can get that phaser out of my face.”

“I am afraid I much too old to consider a change in career,” Elder Spock said. “Data, are you willing to preclude the possibility of a Starfleet career?”

“I am an android. The probability of today’s Starfleet admitting me is minuscule.

“I believe the matter is settled. We shall take you to Talos IV.”

“You have no idea what you’re getting yourselves into,” Pike warned.

“May I fly?” Data asked.

–

Data had yet to master the warp drive or Elder Spock’s souped version of it, so he would spend the remainder of the journey in the ship’s conference room with Nyota. At his mother’s insistence, he rested on one of the couches with his head on her lap.

“My condition is optimal; I do not require coddling,” Data protested.

“You love to be coddled.”

“I like,” he said with some difficulty, “to know that people hold affection for me. It renders me less insignificant. However, I have been activated for nine Terran months. I should not require this level of affection.”

Nyota smiled. “Are you saying you don’t want me to give you a kiss when I drop you off at school?”

“I do not attend school.”

“Right. Sorry. It was a reference to a phase Human adolescents go through.”

Data looked eager at being compared to a Human. “Explain, please.”

“At that age, Humans try to assert their independence by pushing away from their parents. Although most of the time, they only act distant from their parents, so they look cool in front of their friends. They usually get over this phase around the time they head off to university and start to do their own laundry.”

“I do not intend to ‘push you away.’”

“I know. I didn’t either. Looking back on my teenage years, I know things would have been a lot easier if I would have let my mom coddle me once in a while.”

“If that is so, then I do not object to this coddling. Far be it for me to reject the advice of my elders.”

Nyota stroked Data’s hair silently for a moment. “You could have died. I thought you were dead.”

“I am not.”
“I don’t know what I would have done if you had been reset.”

“Hopefully, activate me once again.”

“It would still be like losing you. You wouldn’t have any of your memories, you wouldn’t know who I was... I think I know how Elder Spock feels now.”

Elder Spock observed Admiral Pike out of the corner of his eye as he manned the conn. Recognizable events continued to occur in a strikingly dissimilar fashion. (What was it Mr. Sulu always said? “Dèjá vu all over again.”) Christopher Pike was sitting here beside him, willingly heading to Talos IV. He did not overlook the irony that he was one being kidnapped this time. Pike had so much more to live for now. Although the pain and spasticity in his legs necessitated the use of a wheelchair, Pike could move, speak, act. He had a life in the corporeal world. Why would he risk returning to Talos IV? Elder Spock knew that Pike was dissatisfied with his position in Starfleet and the architectural barriers that prevented him from being a captain, but surely that was not enough to drive a man away from society. There had to be some other reason, some physical deficit wrought by his injuries that made life less meaningful.

“Admiral Pike, is your desire to visit Talos IV predicated by a... loss of sexual functioning?”

Pike smirked. “In a manner of speaking.”

“I see... There is more to life than having lovers.”

“Is that why you have two?”

“I am merely making up for lost time, as the Human expression goes. I spent the majority of my life unbonded, and I found it very satisfying.”

“Why did you become bonded then?”

“One morning, I awake in a pool of my own vomit, surrounded by chocolate wrappers and far too many sehlats, and I realized that perhaps I could not make it in this universe alone.”

“That’s how I feel.”

“You need not journey to Talos IV to find a partner. There are numerous men and women on Terra who would be interested in a relationship with you.”

Pike sighed. “Everything I want in the universe is on Talos IV, and that’s the only place I can get it.”

Elder Spock wondered, perhaps, if Pike was given more time to consider, he would not choose to return to Talo IV. By not granting him this time, Elder Spock was enabling Pike to make an irreversible decision that cut him off from the rest of the universe. All those years ago, Elder Spock knew he was making the right decision by kidnapping Pike, but now, when Pike going willingly, he wasn’t so certain. The admiral needed time, but was unlikely to take it, and Elder Spock could not live with any more guilt. He reached over, as if he was stretching, and pinched Pike’s neck, planning to bring him back to Sha-Ka-Ree to consider his options more fully.

“Are you trying to neck pinch me?” Pike asked incredulously.

“Yes, but it does not appear to be taking effect.”
“I have nerve damage in my shoulders.”

“I see. I have never met a Human who was immune before.”

“Do you nerve pinch Humans often?”

“Not as often as in my youth.”

A special sensor Elder Spock routed for an occasion like this went off. As expected, the Talosians had taken control of the vessel.

“Won’t be long now.”

–

“Where are you?” T’Pring asked over Nyota’s comm. “I have been attempting to comm you for hours.”

“I’m sorry. The Squid’s warp core has been tampering with our comm signal. Both of us are fine. We’re on a side trip. I’ll tell you everything when we get home.” It was best, Nyota had learned, to not throw a Vulcan into a blood rage when there was nothing they could do to save their loved ones or, at least, settle the score. If she told T’Pring what Pike did now, she would have worked herself into such a state by the time they returned that she would shoot laser beams out of her eyes at Pike.

“Let me speak to Data.”

“Here.” She passed off the comm.

“Hello, Mother.”

“Data, are you well?”

“Yes, my condition is optimal.”

“How are the levels of your power cells?”

“Sub-optimal, but I will remain functional until we return, unless we spend too much time on the planet.”

“What planet are you visiting?”

“Ta—” Fortunately, Data was cut off by the Talosians transporting all four of the ship’s occupants onto the planet’s surface. “How peculiar.” The planet’s surface was covered in sand and large rock formations that jutted up from the ground. Data reached to touch one of them. Nyota’s hand shot out to stop him.

“Don’t move. We don’t know why this planet is forbidden. Anything could be dangerous.”

“None of this will harm him,” Elder Spock said. “The planet’s inhabitants are another matter entirely.”

“Keeper!” Pike shouted, advancing toward a rock face up ahead. “Show yourself!”

The rock face slid open, and a small, wrinkly Humanoid alien walked out of it. Nyota was never one to be crude or cultural insensitive, but she couldn’t deny that the alien’s head looked like a butt crack.
“The Talosians are a telepathic species,” Elder Spock explained.

“Really,” Nyota said. “I couldn’t tell.”

//You have brought more specimens. They are most unique: the android with a soul from another universe; the Human-Vulcan hybrid also from another universe—the one that begot this one—he has the same DNA as the half-Vulcan your brought last time; and the cyborg woman in control of the prison planet at the center of galaxy. It is a pity that we cannot study them... You did not know their true identities, Christopher?//

“No, I didn’t, and right now I don’t care. I want Vina.”

//Very well.//

A beautiful blonde Human walked out the rock face. “Christopher?” She glanced nervously between Nyota, Elder Spock, and Data. “What are you doing here? What happened? Why are you in a wheelchair?”

“I’m fine. I was injured in the line of duty.”

“You’re not telling me everything.”

“I was tortured by a Romulan from the future. I can’t walk much now. Come here. I need to talk to you.”

Vina looked back at the Talosian before walking to Pike’s side. “Who are your friends?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Why are you here?”

“I came back for you.”

“Chris.” She ran a hand through his hair. “You can’t stay here. You’d die in captivity, remember?”

“I’m not staying... I’m asking you to come with me. Back to the real world.”

Vina flinched away. “I can’t. You know I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. I should have never left you here. Back then, I thought, ‘I’d rather be dead than disabled.’ I thought, if I was in your place, I would do the same. Now I am, and I would choose life, pain, people acting like fools around me over this any day.”

“It’s not the same,” Vina said, tears filling her eyes. “You’re not a woman. People don’t expect you to be beautiful all the time. I won’t be pitied for the rest of my life.”

“You don’t think I’m pitied? There are places you can go where people aren’t like that. There’s a planet at the center of galaxy, where’s there’s a whole city made up of people like us. They call it Criptown.”

“Actually,” Data interrupted, “only the residents call it by that name. The rest of us refer to it as Handicapabletown.”

Pike side-eyed Data something fierce before he went on. “I bought a house there, and I would be
honored if you lived with me in it.”

“Chris, I don’t know.”

“If you don’t like it, we can bring you back here. Just try it. After a while, if you stay, I’ll get my own ship again, and we can see the universe together. I can show you so much more than they can.”

“Okay.” Vina bent over and, as she kissed Pike, her body shifted into an older, scarred, and hunchbacked form.

“My Vina,” Pike murmured, playing with her hair.

—

“Data, I thought I told you to get my comm,” Nyota said.

“It is in the conference room,” Data replied, as if this explained everything.

“So? Go get it.”

“I cannot go in the conference room.”

“Yes, you can. We were just in the conference room a half hour ago. Go get it.”

“I cannot go in the conference room now.”

“Why not?”

“I am not allowed to.”

“According to who?”

“According to you.”

“I never said you couldn’t go in the conference room.”

“You said I could not enter a room when its occupants were having special adult time together.”

“Who’s...” Nyota looked around the bridge. Vina and Pike were missing. “Ew.”

“Do you have a problem with disabled people having sex?” Elder Spock asked.

“No. I have a problem with people having sex where Data can hear them. Data, don’t listen in on them.”

“I cannot help it. My hearing is very keen.”

“Sing something.”

“Row, row, row your boat—”

“Anything but that.”
Ooh, Grandma. You Nasty.

While certainly deromulanizing, by not looking up from her PADD, the immigration officer was a refreshing change in pace from the gawping masses of Palatine. “Full name.”

“Spurius Colius Keras.”

“Place of birth.”

“Romulan Star Empire Space Station Four.”

“Current citizenship.”

“Do you honestly think I would come here if I held citizenship anywhere else?”

The immigration official cast a withering look over her PADD—an expression that soon turned into shock and confusion. “Excuse me.” She picked up the comm on her desk. “T’Ngu here. Is Ambassador Sarek currently on planet? Thank you.” She put the comm away, and held up two fingers in the air. Before Keras knew it, two security officers were standing behind him. “Please take this man to interrogation room one. He is a possible code two-ten.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Keras asked, as the security officers led him away. “Why am I being detained? What is a code two-ten?”

“Fascinating,” Sarek murmured.

“I thought you would like to see it for yourself, sir,” Detective zh’Vreni said.

“Thank you.”

“We’ll also need to microchip you now, sir.”

“Excuse me?”

“Only temporarily, sir. If he consents to a DNA test, or we find some other tangible way of telling you apart, you can have the chip removed.”

“I am a citizen of this planet, you cannot—”

“It’s standard procedure, sir.”

“I am well aware. I was on the emergency policy committee that wrote the procedure.”

“Irony’s a bitch, sir.”

“He looks exactly like you?” Sybok asked.

“Yes. His hair is darker.”

“Jesus,” McCoy cursed.
“Do you have any idea how he got here?” Uhura asked.

“No. Planetary security has launched a full investigation.”

“It is possible, then,” Spock said, “that he has come through the Ah’rak black hole.”

“It is entirely possible.”

“We need to prepare ourselves for the possibility of further incursions from the mirror universe,” T’Pring said.

“Hell, any universe!” McCoy exclaimed. “We don’t know how many other there are, or how many of them can come through that damn black hole.”

“We’re sitting ducks,” M’Benga said grimly.

“Who’s to say that everything that comes through that black hole is necessarily evil?” Christine asked. “That’s how we think Data got here.”

“Yeah,” Sybok said brightly. “Maybe someone from a really nice universe will come through. Or a trampoline.”

“I have told you repeatedly, I am Spurius Colius Keras, former Romulan military Commander. I have never heard of this Sarek of Vulcan.”

The Andorian detective stared at him intently. “What universe are you from?”

“What universe? Are you mad? There’s only one universe. That’s why it’s called the universe.”

“Do you consent to a DNA test?”

“I’ll consent to anything if it will get me out of this room.”

The Romulan military personnel manager guffawed for two-point-eight minutes when T’Pring asked him to look up their prisoner. It was disconcerting to see a Vulcanoid face that was not Sybok’s fall into hysterics. “Has my question triggered some involuntary laughter reflex in your species?”

Wiping the tears from his eyes, the Romulan regained composure. “That man, Keras, he’s the bastard son of the praetor. He was banished for showing cowardice in the line of duty. The only reason he’s not dead is that held favor with his father. I can send over military records if you’d like a good laugh.”

If Geoff had been holding something, he would have dropped it. Sarek and Keras’ DNA samples were not identical, but their mitochondrial DNA matched. Geoff sloughed it off as a shared maternal ancestor before the Vulcan-Romulan split, but after comparing Keras’ sample to T’Pau’s DNA (she was an originator of an immortal cell line Geoff used often in his research), Geoff could say with 99.99% certainty that Sarek and Keras shared a mother. They were half-brothers.
“You’re free to beam down to the planet, if you wish,” the detective said. “Ambassador T’Pring apologizes for the delay in processing you.”

As a doctor contracted by planetary security, Geoff couldn’t share the results of his tests with anyone except the officers completing the investigation and Keras. Technically, he shouldn’t have performed the second test on Keras’ sample, but professional curiosity got the best of him. It was a good thing it did, because otherwise he wouldn’t have tested Keras’ sample for the Bendii gene, and, in a hundred years, his brain would have deteriorated to half its size.

Geoff was obligated to tell Keras about this development and offer him treatment. If Keras asked the right questions that allowed Geoff to unload this giant burden, that would be secondary.

Geoff pressed the chime outside Keras’ hostel room. The door slid open. “Who are you?” Keras asked suspiciously.

“I’m Dr. Geoffrey M’Benga. I performed your DNA test today.”

Keras snorted. “Come to get more blood?”

“No, I’m not here as a medical examiner. I’m here as a physician. May I come in?”

“By all means.” Keras ushered him in. The room was small and sparsely decorated: a chair, a bed, a table, a dresser. “Sit.”

“Yes.”

“What is this about?”

“Your DNA test revealed that you’re at a heightened risk of developing Bendii syndrome later in life.”

“Bendii? I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s a degenerative neurological condition found in elderly Vulcans.”

“Is there record of this condition occurring amongst Romulans?”

“No. My research shows that the gene for Bendii developed due to a virus that swept Vulcan after the Romulan exodus.”

“I must make a very valuable specimen, then. The first Romulan with Bendii.”

“You don’t have Bendii yet, just the allele that codes for it, but I can treat that... And, strictly speaking, you’re not a Romulan.”

Keras grimaced. “Yes. No longer. Not after the praetor,” he spat the word, “revoked my citizenship.”

“I don’t mean civilly.”

“What do you mean?”

Yes, a question. “Genetically, you are half-Vulcan on your mother’s side.”

“My mother’s...? My mother was an Aventinian whore, not some Vulcan woman.” Geoff had heard
T'Pau called many things—an “Aventinian whore” was never one of them. “You must be mistaken. Or mad.”

“I’m not mistaken.” The jury was out on the latter claim. “I’m the pre-eminent Vulcan geneticist.”

“If you’re as skilled as you claim, why aren’t you on the colony?”

Geoff gulped. “The Vulcan Medical Board and I had some disagreements about end of life care.”

Keras leaned in closer to Geoff, squinting his eyes like there was small print written on Geoff’s forehead. “You’re him. I’ve heard about you.” Keras leaned back, smiling. “You’re—what did the Federation press call you? You’re Dr. Kevulcian! The poor bastard who got kicked off the planet for euthanizing all those old Vulcans. I’m going to like you.”

“I wasn’t kicked off... They asked me to leave.”

“You’re a smarter man than I. I wouldn’t leave until I had the butt of a phaser rifle to my back.”

Keras opened a dresser drawer, and pulled out a bottle of blue liquid. “Join me in a drink?”

“No, thank you. I’m supposed to stay home with the kids tonight.”

“You have children?”

“Yeah, two.” He took his hospital ident chip from his pocket, and showed the holos projected from the backside to Keras. “They’re adopted... The one on the left, Saavik, she’s a Vulcan-Romulan hybrid, too.”

“The difference is imperceptible.”

“It’s not something you can see unless you’re looking at the molecular level, and, even then, you have to be trying to find it.”

“Still, you think I would have noticed. I’m not a telepath... My sash was very expensive, I’ll have you know.”

Geoff grinned. “I didn’t say anything about your sash.”

“I thought I heard you.”

“Does that happen often?”

“Not terribly often.”

“I bet you never got the Terothka virus, not even when everyone else around you had it.”

“No, not once.”

“Hybrids are immune to viruses that target a single aspect of their heritage, in the same way many animal viruses cannot affect sentient life. That’s how my daughters survived the attack on Hellguard. The virus was crafted to affect Romulans, Vulcans, and Klingons, but not Romulan-Vulcan or Klingon-Vulcan hybrids.”

Keras took a slug of ale. “Fascinating story, brother. But what good does being Vulcan do me? The Vulcan colony won’t naturalize me, not that I would stoop so low. And the likelihood of having any living Vulcan kin is incredibly small.”
“Actually...”

Keras was more than a little drunk when he decided to pay his dear brother a visit. The doctor had warned him not to rush into anything with these people; the family, apparently, had just recently regained the ability to assemble in one room without martial combat. His presence might upset that delicate balance. Keras took this advice to heart, but once the doctor returned home and Keras’ bottle was empty, waiting for the right moment became unbearable. So he stumbled his way across the small city to the downtown area, where the colony’s elite lived. It was unlike any downtown on Romulus. There were large yards, open space, prefabricated housing sitting beside construction sites for more permanent homes. Sarek’s home, he was told, was one of the last in the neighborhood to begin construction, and wasn’t expected to be completed for a few months. Apparently, Sarek had his doubts about Sha-Ka-Ree. (Such a name.)

As he ambled to the front door, Keras marveled at this once great man—if the doctor was to be believed—reduced to living in the modern equivalent of a double-wide, to use the Terran term. He pressed the doorbell, and within moments he was looking at a slightly-older mirror image. He grabbed Sarek by the shoulders. “Brother.”

“Unhand me, if you intend on retaining all of your phalanges.”

“That’s no way to speak to family.”

“I understand your naturalization was delayed due to our resemblance, but there is no need to harass me at my own home.”

“I’m not harassing you; I’m embracing you.” To make his point, Keras wrapped his arms around Sarek and rested his head on his shoulder. “This is how it should be: family, closeness, hugging.”

“You seem to be under the mistaken impression that we are somehow related.”

“I’m not mistaken.” He let go of Sarek, stepping away. “The pre-eminent Vulcan geneticist told me we shared a mother. We’re half-brothers.” He pulled a miniPADD from his pocket, and shoved it into Sarek’s hands. “It’s all on there.”

Sarek looked over the PADD, scowling in the manner common to his—their—species, before giving it back. “I require a second opinion. I will perform the test myself.” He plucked a hair from Keras’ head. “This shall suffice. I will contact you with the results.” Sarek stared at him expectantly. “Go on then. Return to your home.”

The next morning, Sarek was at Keras’ hostel door. “It appears we are related. May I enter?”

“Of course.” Keras reclined on his futon. “Take a seat.”

“I would prefer to stand.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Do you know how T’Pau came to be your mother?”

“I assume by having sex with my father.”
“Praetor Colius?”

“Yes. Although, he wasn't praetor at the time.”

“When do you estimate the date of conception?”

Keras did some mental math. “2169.8.”

“T'Pau was representing the Federation at the Romulan accords during that time.”

“Colius represented Romulus there.”

“They would have been in close contact.”

“Very close contact, it seems.”

“T'Pau returned to Vulcan on 2171.6. You would have been one-point-four years old.”

“That explains why I have no memory of her.”

“The time you spent with her as an infant should have been sufficient to develop a maternal bond, if she nursed you.”

Keras looked mildly disgusted. “I doubt my father would have allowed that.”

“I had forgotten the peculiar Romulan distaste for breast feeding.”

“It is not our tradition. And I can say with certainty that the Romulan accords would not have been a success, if the Federation representative went around breast feeding a babe.”

“Then you would not have developed a maternal bond with T'Pau, and your telepathy would remain an infantile state.”

“Telepathy is passed through mother's milk?” Keras snarked.

“The maternal bond forged through nursing grounds the chaotic telepathy of the neonate in the logic of interpersonal relationships. This is why Vulcan society reveres the mother. Without her, we would be isolated, anarchic beings. In a word: Romulans.”

“Oh!” Keras grabbed at his abdomen, faking a swoon. “You wound me with your carefully pointed words.” He grinned at Sarek openly. “Come now. Let us not swipe at one another like a couple of set’leth. I didn’t come to you looking for an enemy. I have enough of those as it is.”

“For what reason, then, did you come to me?”

“I want in.”

“Into what?”

“This family arrangement you have. It’s something I’ve never been party to, but the whole business sounds... fascinating.”

“You have conception of what you are asking. Individually, these people are deeply trying. Together, they are impossible.”

“I’ve never been one to turn down a challenge.”
Citing their last disastrous family gathering, Sarek suggested meeting with his newfound extended family in small groups to reduce the risk of conflict. First up were Sarek’s oldest children and their sister. (Keras was not entirely sure how that arrangement worked out.) If the encounter went well, he could meet their children, spouses, and robots.

They convened at the house of Sarek’s eldest son, who quickly led him down to the basement to see the others: the half-Human androgyne and the diplomat.

“Come, sit.” Sybok plopped down onto what looked like a roughly spherical sack of dry goods. The other two were each sitting on one of those objects, as well.

“Here?” Keras gestured to the fourth sack.

“Yes.”

Keras awkwardly settled onto the sack. “Are these common chairs in Vulcan culture?”

“No, they’re a Human invention. They have beans inside. Not real beans. Not edible beans. You can’t eat them. You won’t get sick, but people will laugh at you.”

“Even Julius knows not to eat the furniture,” Spock said.

“Julius is Spock’s pet goat,” T’Pring explained.

“I see.”

“I am curious to know how you did not realize you were half-Vulcan sooner.”

Spock nodded. “There are certain physiological occurrences unmistakable for Vulcan.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are hormonal…” Spock looked down at his feet.

“The reproductive cycle,” T’Pring started, “is…” Her face froze, her eyes unblinking.

“Do you get an uncontrollable urge to fuck roughly every seven years?” Sybok asked.

Keras smirked. “More often than that.”

“How often?” Spock asked, his head snapping up to face Keras. “When did you first experience this urge? What were the symptoms?”

“Do you seriously want me to elaborate on my sex life?”

“If it will give me insight into when my daughter will have her Time, then yes.”

“Time for what?”

“Time is a euphemism for the mating urge experience by all Vulcans about every seven years,” Sybok said. “It’s called pon farr. Spock wants to know if you ever experienced it to see if Vulcan-Romulans do.”

Keras thought for a moment. “I do seem to take a new lover every five years.”
“When did this cycle begin?” Spock asked.

“Probably when I was around forty.”

“Forty,” Spock repeated, relaxing into his bean chair. “Forty is acceptable.”

“Do not speak of this to anyone else,” T’Pring instructed. “It is not something we discuss.”

“Why not?” asked Keras.

“It is... embarrassing.”

Keras would have pushed the issue further, but, perhaps through osmosis, the topic was beginning to embarrass him. He didn’t know much else he should talk about. What was there to say to your long lost brother’s grown children? Sarek’s other child—the baby girl—was much easier to converse with. Surely, Keras couldn’t pretend to steal Spock’s nose. The others were similarly at a loss of words—or maybe Vulcan family gatherings consisted on sitting in the same room and not saying a word. That would not surprise Keras.

After one minutes and twenty-two seconds—Keras was always excellent at telling time without a chronometer—the eldest son spoke up, grinning mischievously, “I have a very bad idea.”

“You speak as if you have any other kind,” Spock said, but his tone was light, almost teasing.

“The girls are completely weaned, right?”

“Yes.”

“That’s what I’ve been waiting to hear.” Sybok crawled out his bean chair over to a trunk in the corner of the room. He stared at it for a moment, and the padlock looked to just drop open. He rummaged through the trunk until he found his prize, which he held up for all to see: a small glass sculpture and a transparent bag of dried spice Keras had never seen before.

“You keep that in your home?” T’Pring asked. “Charlie could find it.”

“And do what with it? Make friends with the neighbor’s cat?” Sybok crawled back over to his chair, placing the sculpture and the spices between the four of them. “And, besides, if Charlie wants to experiment with drugs, he can make his own.” His eyes flicked over at Keras nervously. “Get his own. From his friends. Or off the street... People leave drugs in the street.”

“I will have to watch where I step then,” Keras said.

Sybok fiddled with the sculpture, filling it with water and the spice. “Light.” The spices in one of the receptacles on the sculpture ignited. “Self-lighting. I got it on Ferenginar. Any takers?”

Lightning quick, Spock snatched up the sculpture, and covered the top with his mouth, causing a curious bubbling sound. After a pause, he passed it over to T’Pring, exhaling a puff of smoke. “Satisfactory. Entirely too much time has elapsed since I last indulged.”

T’Pring stared at the object—Keras gathered it was some kind of pipe for smoking drugs—in her hands dubiously. “I should not.”

“It’s not illegal,” Sybok said.

“Even still, I am an elected official.”
“I hear it doesn’t count if you don’t inhale.”

“Very well.”

—

While on his daily walk with Ainsley, Sarek spied Keras standing on Sybok’s porch—or, veranda, as Dr. McCoy insisted it be called—talking with Spock, Sybok, and T’Pring. They were all perfectly relaxed, laughing, smiling, hugging one another. Spock appeared more at ease in that moment than Sarek had ever seen him. The only variable: Keras. If Sarek were less evolved, he would have been jealous.

Which he most definitely was not.

—

The preliminary meeting a success, Keras was permitted to move onto the next generation of the family: his grandnieces, grandnephew, and grandandroid. (Grandroid?) Counter to his expectations, the siblings determined that the baby grandnieces would cope with meeting a strange man who resembled their grandfather. As such, he was to meet them first.

Under Spock and Dr. M’Benga’s careful supervision, Keras sat down beside the girls in their playroom. “Hello.” The children barely looked up from their blocks. “I am Keras. May I join you?”

“Yes,” the half-Romulan said, but the other one launched a building block at his forehead, causing Saavik to dissolve into a fit of giggles.

“Valeris,” Spock scolded, “we do not throw hard objects at other beings. Apologize to Keras.”

Valeris harrumphed, before climbing onto Keras’ lap. She pressed two fingers onto the spot where the block collided with his head. “Sorry.”

“I forgive you.”

“You can play. The red blocks are mine.”

“Thank you.”

The rest of their “playdate” went well.

—

“So, you’re like Sarek’s long lost identical half-brother?” the Human boy asked.

“Approximately.”

“Cool.” Charlie looked up at Sybok’s spouse, who was hovering around them in the kitchen. “Can I go now?”

Dr. McCoy cursed. “Would it kill you to act like a Human being? Show some manners for god’s sake.”


“Charlie!”
“It’s a valid question!”

“It’s all right,” Keras said. “I am not ashamed of what I did.”

“What’d you do?”

“I refused to partake in a covert mission that would destroy several Federation outposts. The Enterprise was patrolling the sector during that time; the mission would mean certain death to me, my crew, and every being on the outposts. Not to mention the possibility that wandering into Federation territory could spark a war between our two empires.”

“They threw you off the planet for that?”

“Yes. I was fortunate really. Any other man would have been put to death.”

“That’s fucked up. D’you ever play RuneScape?”

The boy was just as easy to win over as the girls; just feign interest in their completely pointless game.

–

The android seemed to like Keras instantly, as much as a machine could like anything. He wasn’t certain if Data was programmed to like everyone he met, or, if Keras had pressed a button or something. T’Pring’s Human wife was more cautious—polite and friendly, but cautious. She was leaning on the archway between the living room and kitchen, watching Data carefully.

“Although you look almost identical, you are much more agreeable than Sarek,” Data observed.

“Do you not like Sarek?”

“Unknown. It is difficult to make a meaningful judgment regarding compatibility when the vast majority of our social interactions involve the ambassador informing me that I am devolving through my pursuit of Human emotion or telling me to remove my person from his lawn.”

“My brother is a man very much set in his ways. I have not known him long, but I can tell that much.”

“Are you not ‘set in your ways’?”

“I do not believe I yet know what my ways are.”

“Self-actualization is a lifelong pursuit.”

“You might be right.”

“I would not say anything that I did not estimate to have a high probability of being true.”

“Androids don’t lie.”

“Nor do Vulcans... Do Romulans lie?”

“Sparingly, and only when it is to our advantage.”

“Is that why Praetor Colius misled you concerning the identity of your mother?”
“It would seem so. I imagine he did not want his affair with a Vulcan revealed to the public. He couldn’t have his illegitimate son running off to Vulcan to visit mommy... As if T’Pau would have even acknowledged me. I think they agreed it was the best for their careers that my parentage remain a secret.”

“Does knowing that give you hurt feelings?”

“No. I’ve long been numb to the effects of the praetor’s rejections and machinations. I have learned not to expect much from him.”

“What about Matriarch T’Pau? Do you feel nothing about her abandonment of you?” While Data spoke these probing questions with an even, polite tone, Keras got the distinct impression his answers were being incorporated into a vast network of appropriate emotional responses collected by Data in an almost scientific fashion.

“If I feel anything about T’Pau, it is regret for not knowing her. Had I known before she died, I would have liked to meet her at least once to determine her character.”

“You can ask others about Matriarch T’Pau. There are several people on planet who knew her quite well. While their responses will in no way be objective, they could still be helpful in discovering T’Pau’s character.”

It was disconcerting that out of the three meetings Keras held with the youngest generation of the family, the only person to truly engage with him as a sentient individual was the android.

–

Having made his way through the entire extended family, Keras decided to take Data’s advice and interview others about his mother.

“How did you know Matriarch T’Pau?” he asked repeatedly.

T’Pring blinked slowly, before answering. “We were lovers for two years, but I ended our relationship after she tried to give me to her son.”

Dr. M’Benga scratched the back of his neck. “She charged me with serial murder, and told people to spit on me in the street.”

Sybok sighed. “She had me thrown off the planet.”

“I do not think she was terribly fond of me,” Spock said. “She once told me I took after my mother’s side of the family—the ugly side.”

“T’Pau...” Elder Spock stared off into the distance. “She was unafraid of using her clout to her advantage.”

“When we met for the first time,” Sarek’s wife said, “she glared at me and said, ‘Another Human?’”

“I was never close to my mother,” Sarek said. “She was off planet on business for most of my childhood. Once I reached majority, I was sent to England to study linguistics and diplomacy. I did not see her again until Sybok was born.”

–

After a month, Keras felt a bit more at home on Sha-Ka-Ree. He had moved out of the hostel into an
apartment in Little Aventine, where he was welcomed with open arms by the pacifist Romulan population. The family seemed more comfortable with him, but he was no expert in comfort or families. He was even invited to partake in something called “football” by Spock—a Terran sport that had gained quite a following amongst Vulcans and across the galaxy.

The rules, as Spock explained them, were simple enough, but the android had some objections. “It is hardly fair that I, as the goalie, should be allowed to touch the ball with my hands when others cannot. Why not permit all the players to hold the ball in their hands?”

“Then,” Spock explained, “it would not be called football.”

“I see. It still does not strike me as an equitable distribution of abilities within the game. I intend to write my representative about this injustice.”

“Will you still play?”

“Yes. Although I am generally opposed to upholding any hierarchy of privileges, I forswore that I would assist you in this capacity.” Data toddled off to his goalpost.

“We would not use him, if we did not require a goalie who could keep up with Vulcan athletes.”

“Why not recruit another Vulcan?” Keras asked.

“The increased hand sensitivity in Vulcans makes sports that involve catching projectiles in one’s hand particularly painful.”

“Hence why football is such a popular sport amongst Vulcans.”

“Correct. How do Romulans compensate for their dextral sensitivity in athletics?”

“We do not. Pain is part of the game.”

“I believe that philosophy is in keeping with the Terran culture surrounding football.” Spock nodded at one of the other players. “Take your position now.”

–

Sarek did not often join the colony on one of their “field days,” but Ainsley had grown bored with the interior of their home and the familiar path they tread on their walks. So, it was off to the central park for them, where all manner of athletic events and games were being played: football, wheelchair basketball, Vulcan sport. Having become a fan of the sport during his time at Oxford, Sarek made his way to the football field to watch the match. He set Ainsley down in one of those microbe infested sandboxes beside the field, and joined the crowd watching from the sidelines, careful to keep an eye on his daughter.

By pure happenstance, he ended up standing next to T’Pring and Uhura, who were cheering for Data. (“Wooo! Go Data!” “Catch the ball in your hands. Do not permit it to enter the goal, lest you desire the other team to achieve victory.”) Dr. M’Benga was on the other side of him, having just placed Valeris and Saavik in the sandbox. He watched Spock with a confused intensity, as if he was observing a primitive ritual performed by the natives of a distant planet.

Looking away from the bystanders and onto the field, Sarek saw Keras playing, passing the ball, working with Spock as a pair. Sarek wondered why he had not been invited to join the game with them. What made Keras a more desirable teammate? Sarek was Spock's father; surely their familial bond would grant Sarek greater insight into Spock's strategy than Keras ever could as a half-uncle he
had just met.

“Uhura, did Spock talk to you about the project he's working on?” Dr. M’Benga asked, speaking around Sarek as if he did not exist.

“No, we've both been a little busy with Keras.”

Sarek had almost blocked it entirely from his memory; Keras was being tutored individually on various aspects of Vulcan culture: language from Uhura, logic from T’Pring, music from Spock, and telepathy from Sybok. While the thought of the children (that is what Sarek saw them as, no matter how old or unrelated they were) sharing intellectual intimacy with Keras was trying, the mental image of Sybok and Keras mind melding was almost unbearable. That was his child, not Keras’. And, although he never made occasion to meld with either Sybok or Spock, the absence was not indicative of a lack of want. Perhaps, going as far as need. Melding with his sons was something Sarek had always put off for a later time. He could not meld with Sybok until he mastered his emotions concerning T’Rea’s death, lest the boy find out how his mother truly died. Now that Sybok knew and had seen the depth of his father's love for him, Sarek felt exposed, cut open like a fish being cleaned prior to consumption. He could not approach Sybok in this vulnerable state and let him see into his mind without Sarek crumbling down in front of him. He was to wait. As for Spock, Sarek could not meld with him during his childhood with having to do the same with Sybok. Once Sybok was exiled, Sarek was so accustomed to guarding himself from Spock that melding was unthinkable.

Now, his self-restraint was being rewarded. He was to bear witness to the man who had stolen his mother away for many years take Sarek's children from him as well.

Once the match had ended (Data had somehow become lost in the woods in his journey from the goal to the sidelines), Sarek took Ainsley home to perform their evening mind meld. My child, my child. How I love thee...

—

After Data was found and dried off (his GPS navigation system apparently told him to walk into a lake), Nyota swung by Spock and Geoff's place to hear more about this project.

“The cargo containers arrived last week,” Spock said, opening one of the massive trunks. “We had only just begun to sort through them when we found their personal records.”

“We didn't have time to listen to all of them,” Geoff said.

“It would take approximately two weeks without breaks for sleeping and eating to accomplish that feat.”

“But we figured we might as well start playing them for the girls.” Geoff removed a holoprojector from the trunk, and placed it on the floor, where it projected a three dimensional image of a Klingon woman.

“That's Valeris' mother?” Nyota asked.

“Yeah. Take a listen.” Geoff swiped his hand through the image, and it began to move and speak.

Listening carefully—linguists always listened carefully—Nyota heard words with which she was not familiar. Something about a virus and genetic mutation—topics only Spock and Geoff would think interesting to a two-year-old. “I might need Worf's help with this one. It's pretty esoteric.”
“That's what we figured.” Geoff placed another chip in the holoprojector, and out came the images of a Vulcan woman and a Romulan man, Saavik's parents. “Spock was hoping for a second opinion on this one.”

Nyota watched the holo, and by the end, for one of the few times in her life, she was speechless.

“We assume this research is the basis for their banishment from Romulus and Vulcan respectively,” Spock said.

Nyota found her voice, albeit in a raspier form. “Has Starfleet viewed this?”

Spock shook his head. “They were only permitted to decontaminate and identify the inheritors of the objects. I doubt the enlisted personnel assigned with that duty speak Low Romulan.”

“If this information becomes public...”

“The Romulan accords could crumble to pieces. That is why we must verify their research, lest we spark a war with false information.”

“Better to start a war with real information,” Geoff muttered.

—

“What you have to remember about telepathy—don’t fidget. Jesus, Spock. Do you want me to fit these pants or not?”

“I apologize,” Spock said. “I will endeavor to breathe less.”

Sybok rolled his eyes, and looked back over at Keras. “Right. Telepathy. What was I saying?”

“Something I had to remember about telepathy,” Keras said.

“Okay. Telepathy has to be used responsibly, or you will become evil and die. The main goal of any telepath is to not be captured and experimented on. With great power comes great responsibility.” He glanced up at Spock. “How do they feel?”

“The pants fit well.”

“Good. You sure you don’t want a skirt?”

“Skirts are hardly functional. I still do not understand why these pants do not have pockets.”

“They’re Terran women’s dress pants; they don’t come with pockets.”

“Do Terran women not carry small objects with them?”

“They have those bag things. I’ll make you a purse, if you want.”

“Thank you.”

“I can teach you to sew.”

“That will not be necessary.”

“God, you and Leonard. Completely helpless. How could you live on your own for so long without learning how to cook or sew?”
“I understood that food and clothing, like many other goods and services, could be obtained through the exchange of currency.”

“Well, not all of us had Mother wiring credits to our accounts. You can take those off now.”

Spock stepped behind a partition to change. “I have recent information that might prove interesting to both of you.”

“Oh?” Keras said.

“Drawing from preliminary research performed by Saavik’s parents, Geoffrey and I have discovered that the sequence of genes that code for telepathy in the Vulcan species also translate to lower fertility.”

“Spock,” Sybok sighed. “Why would you ever think I would be interested in any of your research?”

“This research may come to reflect poorly on Vulcan society. Anything that functions in that capacity should be of interest to you.”

“How could the Vulcan genome cause negative judgment of the race?” Keras asked. “Wouldn’t that fracture the Federation’s carefully crafted species-blind ideology?”

“It is not the genes in and of themselves that could result in backlash. They support a new theory of how and why the Vulcan-Romulan split occurred that would not show Vulcan society in a positive manner.” Spock walked out from behind the partition, fully dressed in his usual street clothes. “The gene sequence for telepathy is largely absent in Romulans, resulting in higher fertility rates. This is, perhaps, why expansionism is so vital to Romulan culture.”

“They need more room to house their higher population,” Sybok said.

“Exactly.”

“I’m usually very competent at finding any flaw in Vulcan culture, but I don’t see it here.”

“We have reason to believe the lack of telepathy in the Romulan species is the result of a long term selective breeding project that took place before the Vulcan-Romulan split. Or, rather, the project was the beginning of the Vulcan-Romulan split.”

“Why would Vulcan scientists do that? Telepathy is one of the most prized aspects of our culture.”

“You are assuming the intended result was loss of telepathy rather than heightened fertility.”

“That still doesn’t make sense, though. Surely someone had to realize the two were tied. What would science want with a bunch of hyper-fertile psi nulls? I mean, in a few generations, you’d have a large number of powerless Vulcans.”

“That was the plan, we assume.”

“Why, though?”

“Why else have sentient species created giant surplus populations made up of largely powerless individuals?”

Sybok paled. “Shit.”

“Would you care to clue me in to this revelation?” Keras asked.
Sybok swallowed. “Before they left Vulcan, the Romulans were Vul—our slaves.”

“No.” Keras shook his head. “A Romulan would sooner die than be enslaved.”

“Perhaps this is why,” Spock suggested.

---

Not content to lose any status he gained within this family to the usurping half-Romulan, Sarek was determined to further ingratiate himself to his kin. Mirroring Keras’ tactics, he began with the younger generation, the android specifically, his logic being that befriending Data would win favor with T’Pring, who led the whole clan, as well as the planet.

A sedate discussion regarding Data’s career goals somehow led to Data putting on a strange hat and taking Sarek along to investigate the disappearance of the neighbor’s garden hose. After two hours and twelve utterances of “Indubitably, my dear Sarek,” the hose was found in the neighbor’s garage right where she had left it.

“A most unsatisfactory conclusion to this case,” Data said, removing his cap. “Hardly a case worthy of Sherlock Holmes.”

“Holmes was an amateur.”

“Sherlock Holmes is the greatest detective of all time.”

“In the Terran canon, yes. However, when Vulcan literature is taken into account, Holmes cannot compare to the logic of men-hilsu T’Pein.”

“I have not read any mysteries featuring T’Pein.”

“I will send you an anthology of her stories. After you have read it, you may report to me whether Holmes is the genius you once perceived him to be.”

---

The boy child was not as easy to engage. His parents no doubt filled his mind with biased assessments of Sarek’s character.

“What?” Charles asked, opening the front door.

“May I enter?”

“Sure. Whatever.” He retreated to the living room couch and the arms of his female companion.

Sarek lowered himself onto an arm of the couch. “Charles—”

“Charlie.”

“Charlie. You are technically my grandchild.”

“You are just now discovering this?” the Elasian scoffed.

“I realize that I have not allotted the appropriate amount of time to ensuring your proper development. I seek to rectify this.”

“You want to hang out?” Charlie asked.
“Yes.”
“I’m kinda busy.”

Sarek inclined his head toward the infomercial playing on the holoprojector. “Verily?”
“I’ve got stuff.”
“In what manner of ‘stuff’ do you engage?”
“School, work, WoW.”
“Wow?”
“It’s a computer game.”

Ah, an academic enrichment activity. “What type of work do you do?”
“I’m a PA. I work for this guy with, like, Ferengi cerebral palsy. I help him get in the fresher and stuff. If his other PA is off, I clean his house and cook for him. Sometimes I help him and his girlfriend oo-mox. We go to the movies a lot. He wants to be, like, a film theorist or something.”

“Fascinating.” This was a lie. “Do you find fulfillment in your work?”

“Yeah, I guess. He’s a pretty cool guy. I don’t know if I want to do it forever, but it’s okay while I’m still going to school.”

“Have you given any thought to your future career path?” Sarek grimaced internally. Apparently, his strategy for becoming a beloved grandfather was to act as the children’s guidance counselor.

“I read at an eighth grade level; I don’t have to worry about that stuff for a while.”

“I see, but is it not customary for Human children to desire a certain career at as young as five years of age? A firefighter, for example.”

“If I wanted to be a fireman when I was five, I would have turned myself into a fireman.”

“You are capable of that?”

Charlie shrugged. “I can do pretty much anything I want.” Sarek had temporarily forgotten that he was speaking with a god. “Like, I can make a girl come just by looking at her. I don’t even actually have to look at her.”

“It’s true.” Elaan nodded. “He’s very talented.”

“Thanks, babe.” Charlie pecked Elaan on the lips, and their kissing soon took on the style indigenous to France. Sarek quietly let himself out.

–

The small ones responded to his overtures positively. Sarek had always been particularly skilled in dealing with young children. Saavik and Valeris were no exception.

“Take this carton of liquid nourishment,” Sarek instructed, handing out juice boxes to his two granddaughters and Ainsley. When he was finished, he sat beside the three toddlers in their playpen. “I am gratified that the libation I provided is palatable.” He ran his hand over the back of Saavik’s
head, careful to not tangle his fingers in her curly hair. So strange to find such a texture of hair in a “white” Vulcan. “Both your satisfaction and nutrition are important to me. No matter what your parents may say about me, the fact remains that I hold a great deal affection for you, as my first grandchildren. It is not the same as emotional sensations I experience regarding my own children, but it is still very powerful. My social health would greatly benefit from a closer relationship with you and your... mother.”

It should be noted, for the record, that Sarek did not jump or blush when he finally heard Dr. M’Benga breathing as he stood in the doorway. How long had the doctor been present?

--

Nyota set aside her PADD, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Do you require a rest period?” Spock asked, looking up from his work.

“No. I... It’s not fatigue. I am becoming concerned about the path our research is taking.”

“Do you find error in our methodology?”

“No.”

“Yet you are still concerned.”

“Yes... I’m afraid what we’ll uncover if we keep digging.”

“The path forged through knowledge is the quickest route away from fear.”

“I know. If I don’t finish this project, I’ll spend the rest of my life imagining what might have happened.”

“The Human imagination can craft horrors unseen in history.”

“Are you willing to put credits on that?”

--

“We are not a righteous people,” T’Pring declared, still reeling from the information Spock and Nyota presented to the family.

“I’ve been saying that for twenty years,” Sybok muttered.

“We created the people who would one day destroy us,” Sarek said solemnly.

“I thought you would be the first in line to deny this.”

“The research is sound. If you recall correctly, I am not a member of the recent Vulcan faction that abandons logic for nationalism.”

“You said that Vulcans bred the telepathy of the proto-Romulans to make them better slaves,” McCoy said. “Then why don’t T’Pelih have decreased telepathic powers and heightened fertility. They were slaves, too.”

“Vulcans residing in the tropic regions were not enslaved until after the Romulan exodus,” Spock explained. “Vulcan elites in the poles found it more logical to enslave people near them, as they would be better acclimated to the climate and less expensive to move. Enslaving the T’Pelih was
merely a last resort after the Romulans fled. The tropics provided an almost endless supply of slaves, so there was no need to... breed fertility within the newly enslaved peoples.”

“This didn’t happen all at once, of course,” Nyota said. “The migration of proto-Romulans to Romulus took place gradually over the course of several decades. There was an intricate network of slaves and their allies that snuck them off the planet.”

“An underground railroad,” Chapel said.

“Essentially.”

“So,” Charlie asked, drawing from his modest knowledge of Terran history, “does that make Romulus Canada?”

“I think ‘maroon colony’ would be a more apt description,” Spock answered.

“Jesus Christ,” McCoy murmured.

“Did you know about this?” Apple Pie asked Elder Spock.

He shook his head. “I did not. There is a high probability that Saavik’s parents did not publish or even undertake this research in my timeline.”

“This is why Romulans are so opposed to breastfeeding, no?” Eva asked.

“Yes,” Nyota said. “The research suggests that proto-Romulans were prohibited from nursing their own children. Most of the time they didn’t even have the opportunity; infants were taken from their mother’s arms shortly after birth.”

“This functioned, we believe, to break down the family unit within the enslaved to prevent insurrection, and to further damage their telepathy,” Spock added.

“We are terrible people,” Sybok exclaimed.

“It gets worse,” Nyota said. “The Romulan opposition to breastfeeding doesn’t stem solely from being unable to nurse their own children.”

McCoy guessed, “They had to play Mammy for the slaveowners’ kids.”

“No. Wet nursing has never been a significant part of Vulcan culture,” Geoff said. “Nursing is the time to establish bonds between mother and child, and to anchor the child’s telepathy. Outside of some pretty dire circumstances, no Vulcan woman would give that responsibility to someone else.”

“Indeed,” Spock said. “Fertility rates were so low amongst the slaveholders that they did not entrust their slaves to mind their precious few offspring, let alone nurse them.”

“How could the Vulcan slaveholding class sustain itself, if they had so few children?” Data asked.

“They supplemented their biological offspring with adopted children.”

“Where would they... I understand.”

“We stole their children,” Elder Spock stated.

“And we nursed them right in front of their biological mothers,” Spock continued.
McCoy shook his head in disgust. “That’s enough to turn you off breastfeeding permanently.”

“I feel ill,” Sybok said.

“This cannot become public knowledge,” Keras said, breaking the silence he maintained throughout the entire meeting. “If it did, the Romulan Star Empire would be obligated to seek its revenge against the Vulcan race.”

“So, what you’re saying is,” Charlie said, “the Empire would strike back? Ow!” He rubbed his elbow where McCoy had pinched him.

“We cannot limit academic discourse based on the hypothetical violence it might cause,” Sarek protested.

“The Romulan people have a right to know their own history,” Geoff said. “And I think Saavik’s parents would want their research to be published. This isn’t just about us. This is their legacy.”

“People will die,” asserted Keras. “The praetor will be furious.”

“Would he not be more angry if it is revealed that we chose to keep this information a secret?” Spock questioned.

“If it is revealed. There is no certainty that such a thing will occur.”

“I imagine T’Pau and Praetor Colius deployed similar rationale in choosing to keep your parentage a secret,” Elder Spock said. “Nothing can remain buried forever. You are living proof of that.”

“If war comes...”

“Then we will be safe here,” T’Pring said. “The rest of the galaxy is not our concern.”

War didn’t come, at least not then. The research, published in Sha-Ka-Ree’s own scholarly journal, was disavowed by both the Romulan Star Empire and the Vulcan High Council. The Romulans did not want to be perceived as the descendants of slaves, while the Vulcan people had their reputation amongst the Federation to consider.

This is not to say the period immediately following the journal’s publication was free of conflict between Vulcan and Romulan. The war—in a manner of speaking—occurred at a much smaller scale, and only one combatant knew he was fighting.

Yes, Keras went about his day, happy, congenial to one and all, *smiling*, while Sarek glared at him from afar, cursing the day T’Pau had reproductive intercourse with the current praetor. Sarek thought it a private little war evident to only Keras and himself, until Elder Spock interrupted his daily glaring session.

“May I offer you some advice?” The old man smiled, sitting down beside Sarek on his park bench.

“No.”

“Then you leave me no choice but to foist my advice upon you.”

“Please vacate the area. I am presently occupied.”

“Spying on my counterpart, I presume.”
“I am not spying; I am observing.” And Spock was only a secondary object of study, necessary to observe only to determine how he and Keras could remain on good terms—even playing on the same pick-up football team in the park—despite their recent arguments concerning the publication. Sarek could have one argument with Spock and that would set their relationship back months.

“If you desire a closer relationship with your children,” Elder Spock said quietly, leaning in toward Sarek, “I suggest you mind meld with each of them.”

“With whom I mind meld is none of your concern.”

“I only want you to be happy.” He stood. “That is all I have ever wanted for any of you.”

As much as he detested taking another’s advice, Sarek found logic in Elder Spock’s suggestion. The only way Spock or Sybok could know him (love him) was to share with them his mind. After much deliberation, he determined that he would offer his mind to Sybok first, mainly due to the convenience of being able to schedule an appointment with him.

“So.” Sybok reclined in his desk chair. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I do not wish to talk. In order to facilitate a more meaningful relationship between us, I request that you perform a mind meld on me.”

“Are you fucking with me?”

“I am not.”

“This is sudden.”

“Certain emerging social formations have made my diminishing importance in your lives evident.”

“What are you talking about? Is this about the book club? Because Christine said you didn’t want to be in it.”

“I am not referring to the book club.”

“Then what... Keras? You’re jealous of Keras?”

“I am not jealous. I do not experience jealousy.”

“Okay.” Sybok smirked. “Did I tell you Keras and I are going on a desert retreat this weekend?”

“No.” The Romulan must be destroyed.

“You sound like a Klingon.”

“Are you enjoying this?”

“A little bit. Daddy has feelings,” he singsonged.

“If you knew what it is like to be jealous of a sibling, to have a brother who excels where you cannot, you would not mock my emotionalism.”

“You think I don’t know what that’s like? Spock is good at everything.”
“Spock is not ‘good at everything.’ That is an impossible achievement.”

“Okay. Name one thing Spock has tried that he isn’t good, if not the best, at.”

Sarek searched through his memory to find one instance where Spock did not excel at a given pursuit, but he was unsuccessful.

“See? Spock’s great at everything. I’m only good at one thing.” A lecherous grin appeared on his face. “Well, two things.”

“At the very least, people like you.”

“People like you.”

“Who?”

“Christine, Ainsley, Old Spock... the guy downtown who does the balloon animals. He always speaks highly of you.”

“Do you... like me?”

“You're my father; I love you. I have to.”

“You did not answer my question.”

“It's hard to like someone who disapproves of the way I live my life. And, honestly, I think Spock feels the same way.”

“I will endeavor to be more accepting. I do not believe either of you understand that when you reject the Vulcan way, you reject me.”

“When do you think taught us to do that? Flouting the Vulcan way is practically a family tradition. First with T’Pau and the Syrranites, and then with you marrying a Human. You condemning us for going against the grain of Vulcan society is like me giving Charlie the anti-drugs speech...” Sybok smiled impishly. “I have a very bad idea... How far are you willing to go to close to me and Spock?”

“I feel very peculiar.” The walls of Sybok’s basement seemed to be vibrating. “Is the room buzzing?”

“This is the greatest moment of my entire life,” Sybok chuckled happily, taking the water pipe away from Sarek.

“I am pleased to have caused such jubi-juju-juilib... happiness.”

Spock eyed his father suspiciously as he rolled on the ground. “What did you intend this to accomplish?”


“I'm thinking about incorporating catnip into my couple's therapy, like they did on Terra with MDMA.”

Spock let out a steady stream of smoke. “Amusing as this might be, I doubt the probability of your intended result.” As the last word left his mouth, Sarek's head landed in Spock's lap. “Fascinating.”

“My daughter,” Sarek murmured in Vulcan, stroking Spock's eyebrow with his thumb. “Was that
“Yes,” Spock said, his throat suddenly tight.

“I thought I had made an error. I have never been as skilled as either of you in performing mind melds. I had yet to meld with a fetus before.” He looked at Sybok sadly. “T’Rea would not permit me. Amanda said yes. She wanted to know your gender, so we would not buy you the wrong clothes and furnishings. The doctor had told us your sex, but she wanted to be certain, so that we would not harm you. I performed the mind meld, and I could not tell. I thought my technique was ineffectual, but it was you. My dichotomous child: Human son, Vulcan daughter.” Sarek took hold of Spock’s left hand, placing it on the psi points on his face. “Please.”

Spock looked over at Sybok. “I will, if Sybok does.”

Sybok gingerly placed his hand on the psi points on the other side of Sarek’s face. “On one condition.”

“Yes?” Sarek asked.

“I want a familial bond with Ainsley.”

“I desire that, as well,” Spock said.

“She’s our sister, but we barely spend any time with her.”

“I agree to your terms,” Sarek said. “However, Christine must also consent to the bond. But I foresee no objections.”

Spock and Sybok shared a meaningful glance before reciting, “My mind to your mind, my thoughts to your thoughts.”

All in.
“Go along, son.”

They thought he couldn’t hear them, even when they whispered, “Quiet! Do you want to wake him?” He sunk to the floor, running this new body along the mirror.

“Something must be done.”

“It is not our place.”

He covered his ears with his fists.

“The timeline has been irreparably damaged. We cannot allow lower beings to craft universes at their will.”

“They did not choose to alter the timeline; it was a mistake.”

“So we must correct it.”

“To do so would upset the delicate balance—”

“The balance is already upset. Corporeality—worse, Humanity—has never soared higher. They’ve killed one of our kind, taken control of one of our prisons. If we do not do something to limit their progress, who will?”

“You know who.”

“You know as well as I do that we cannot depend on that.”

“Given time—”

“We cannot afford to wait!”

“The Listeners are maneuvering themselves to guide—”

“Since when do we rely on the Listeners to course correct—”

“We are not to meddle in the affairs of mortals. You sound like him.”

“I am nothing like him. I don’t do this for my own amusement. I only want to protect them from themselves.”

The shouting stopped then, but he could feel them through the mirror, building entire universes of slow-burning resentment.

—

“Why does Saavik get a party and presents, and I do not?” Valeris pouted, standing on Sarek’s lap.

“Under Human tradition, one receives presents at a party on the anniversary of the day of one’s birth. Today is Saavik’s birthday. Your birthday will come in a month’s time.”

“That’s not fair. Why do I have to wait a month?”
“Life is not fair. I do not doubt that Saavik will ask me at your birthday party why she should wait eleven months for her birthday.”

Across Geoff and Spock’s living room, Charlie reasoned with his parents. “If you won’t let me make Valkrell think Worf doesn’t have any legs, would you at least let me fix his paralysis?”

“No,” McCoy said. “Absolutely not.”

“Why? What’s the point in me having all these bitchin’ powers if I can’t help anyone?”

“They’ll take you away,” Sybok said harshly.

“No one’s going to take me—”

“Fine. You want to give your friends miracle cures? Go ahead. Just remember what happened to the last Human who went around healing people with his magical powers. He got arrested and was put up on giant wooden T until he died. And then little bunnies and baby chickens picked at his corpse.”

McCoy shook his head incredulously. “Jesus wasn’t eaten by bunny rabbits.”

“Then how did the Easter Bunny get his powers?”

“The Easter Bunny isn’t real!”

Data looked up from the coloring book he was sharing with Ainsley, his eyes round like Bambi’s. “The Easter Bunny is not real?”

“How old are you supposed to be?”

“The Easter Bunny isn’t going to hunt me down if I help out Worf,” Charlie protested. “I’ll be fine. Stop worrying so much.” And with that Charlie disappeared.

Data blinked. “Where did he go?”

“I did not know Charlie could teleport himself,” Sarek said.

“Neither did I,” McCoy said. “What’s wrong?”

Sybok’s breath caught in his chest. “I can’t feel him. I can’t feel Charlie’s mind at all. He’s still alive, but I can’t feel him.”

“Nyota!” T’Pring yelled, careening out of the kitchen. “Where is she?”

“She went into the bathroom approximately two minutes ago,” Data answered.

T’Pring ran across the living room to the bathroom door, where she deftly hacked the lock open. There was no one inside. “She is gone. How could she have gotten out of my telepathic range so quickly?”

“Charlie just teleported out. Maybe he took her with him,” McCoy said.

“Charlie wouldn’t teleport,” Sybok said. “He’s just as afraid of transporters as you are.”

Perhaps they have been rendered invisible,” Data offered. “Mother, if you can hear me, flicker the light switch.”
To everyone's surprise, the lights dimmed. Then Geoff came out of the kitchen, carrying a cake with three candles. His parents and both Spocks followed close behind, singing, “Happy birthday to you, happy birthday...”

“What's wrong?” Geoff asked. “Why isn't anyone singing?”

From her birthday throne—really, just a normal table chair with balloons and streamers—Saavik pronounced, “Charlie and Aunt Nyota went poof.”

“Poof?” Spock repeated.

“Affirmative. Poof.”

Spock's comm chimed. “Spock here. I see. Spock out.” He placed his communicator back on his belt loop. “Citizens in the Western hemispheric settlements are reporting a solar eclipse.”

“That is impossible,” Sarek said. “The planet does not have any satellites.”

“It would seem then that Gary Mitchell and Elizabeth Dehner went 'poof,' as well.”

“They kidnapped them!” McCoy exclaimed. “Those two blue balls of light kidnapped Charlie and Uhura!”

—

One moment she was helping Worf calm his nerves through a friendly wheelchair kivitlra match, and the next she was standing beside Charlie in an old Terran dining hall. She fixed her posture into a more strategic position, guarding Charlie with her dagger. “How did we come here?”

“I dunno, but it wasn't me... I don't think.”

“It was not our doing, either,” a strange, echoing voice said.

Elaan spun toward the sound, slashing her blade through the air. “Who speaks?”

“They Who Speak as One.” Two grey-haired figures—a man and a woman—stepped out from the shadows. “We have dulled our inner light so that we do not hurt you.” It was just the sun, then. Menials.

Uhura dropped down from the ceiling, sending the candelabra swinging. “Whatever brought us here has terrible aim.”

“We're going to miss cake,” Charlie sighed.

—

Sybok stuck his head between his knees, releasing a stuttering breath. “Charlie...”

“Why would they take him?” McCoy asked, biting his thumbnail. “Where did they take him?”

“I am not entirely convinced Dehner and Mitchell kidnapped Charles and Uhura,” Elder Spock said, setting down a cup of tea in front of T'Pring, whose hands were shaking furiously.

“You said they were not to be trusted,” T’Pring responded.

“They were. I have no reason to believe they are not trustworthy presently. And, if they retain much
of their characteristics from my timeline, Gary Mitchell would never take such drastic action without an audience. Like any god, he lived to be worshipped and feared.”

“If he's got such a God complex,” McCoy started, “maybe he's out to get rid of the competition.”

“Then why I am still here?” Sybok asked, his voice muffled.

“Your hypothesis does not explain the Dohlman's disappearance either,” Elder Spock said.

Data walked out the kitchen, looking as forlorn as his limited facial expressions allowed. “She is not in the cupboards.”

“Sutorsu-kan,” T'Pring said, “come sit.” Data shuffled over to T'Pring and sat on the floor next to her chair, resting his head on her lap. “Data needs his mother.”

Sybok lifted his head. “I'll do what I can.” He gripped McCoy's wrist. “If I pass out, don't have a fit.”

“Why would you—” Sybok eyes closed as he slumped into McCoy. “Jesus. What the hell is he doing?”

“Glimpsing the universe,” Elder Spock said.

Sybok's shoulders began to shake violently, as if he was having a seizure, and his mouth foamed. After a moment, he stilled.

“Sybok.” McCoy cupped his cheek.

“m fine.” He sat up, wiping his mouth. “He's not there. He's not anywhere.”

“Perhaps they were taken to another universe,” Data suggested.

Elder Spock shook his head. “Inter-dimensional travel produces the same sensation as the death of a bonded one. That is, if my experience arriving in this timeline can be extrapolated to similar situations.”

“The afterlife is just another dimension,” Sybok said. “Katric separation is what produces the pain. As long as the katra remains in the same dimension...”

“Then no pain,” McCoy finished.

“That would explain why my mother did not report any pain upon my death,” Elder Spock said. “My katra remained in that dimension, albeit within Dr. McCoy.”

“If that is true,” T'Pring said, “they could all be dead. Their murderers could have stored their katras in this universe.”

“That couldn't have happened. I'm the only one who can move katra like that,” Sybok said.

“Are you certain?”

“I just looked at the entire universe in all its glory, and there's no one else who could've done it. So, unless there's another me running around...”

“They're alive,” McCoy said.

“But I just can't see them. Data's right; they are invisible.”
“Where the hell are we?” Charlie muttered, warming his hand over a fireplace... that didn't give off any heat.

“Gothos.” A short Human dressed like Liberace appeared next to the fireplace. “I apologize for leaving you waiting.” He played with the lace on the cuffs of his shirt. “You must believe me, I am not usually so inhospitable to guests. I would have had my valet greet you, but just today I had to relieve Mr. Woolf of his duties. It is so difficult to find good help these days. Least of all on Gothos. Take a seat, why don't you.” He smiled.

“Who the fuck are you?” Elaan spat.

“Ah, yes, of course. How rude of me. General Trelane, retired.” He bowed with a flourish.

“In what military did you serve?”

He frowned, but quickly recovered. “Let us not speak of such grave matters. Do not think of me as a general, but as a simple squire of Gothos.”

For some reason, Charlie felt a curl of satisfaction when Trelane said those three words.

“Squire,” Uhura said patiently, “why did you bring us to fair Gothos?”

Trelane smiled nervously. “For dinner, of course. Come, sit. The first course is exquisite, I promise you.” The five captives-cum-dinner guests were suddenly seated at a large banquet table. “Very good.” Trelane sat at the head of the table.

“Will there be cake?” Charlie asked.

–

Geoff stood in front of a dry erase board, tapping a marker on his forehead.

“We should begin with which parties have negative relationships with Sha-Ka-Ree,” Spock suggested.

“Right.” He wrote “enemies” on the board. “Who would want to hurt us?”

“The Romulan Star Empire,” Keras said.

“Ek'tra, the rest of the Vulcan diaspora,” Spock said.

“The Klingon Empire,” Worf said.

“The Organians, Starfleet, the Elasians, the Troyians, the species of the planet's original inhabitant, the entirety of the Mirror universe.”

“The Ferengi, the Andorians, Social Darwinists, eugenicists, people who support the social construction of Deafness as a disability.”

“The cochlear implant lobby... the Platonians.”

Unable to keep up, Geoff stopped writing and turned toward Spock, Worf, and Keras. “Maybe we should focus on who could have done this.”
“The Organians,” Spock said. “They have both means and motive.”

“But not opportunity,” Worf said. “Uhura said they would have been unable to take Charlie if she hadn't let them through the defense screen.”

“They could have developed the means to penetrate the defense screen,” Keras suggested.

“That line of thinking is entirely unhelpful in narrowing down suspects. Feasibly, anyone could have developed that technology.”

“I don't think so,” M'Benga said. “If a god couldn't crack this planet's defense system, then who could?”

“Another god,” Keras said.

—

“There has to be something here,” T'Pring muttered, strewing Elaan's things all across her room.

“What do you think you're going to find?” McCoy said, leaning on the door frame, biting his nails. “A note saying, 'If I ever disappear out of thin air, it was Professor Plum with the candlestick in the study.'”

“You are truly an inferior species, if you would allow yourselves to be kidnapped by an academic with a candlestick.”

“I was being sarcastic.”

“Sarcasm is the last refuge of the powerless.”

“That's where I'm standing, then.”

T'Pring stopped her one-Vulcan tornado through Elaan's bedroom. “How peculiar.”

“You find something?”

She held up a single playing card. An ace of spades. “Tell her Sulu sent you,” she read. “I received a card similar to this from Lieutenant Keenser when I left the Enterprise. Perhaps this is a Starfleet trend I have not heard of.”

“No. I've... I know that card!” McCoy spun on his heel, and ran out of the room. T'Pring follow him out of her house, down the street, and into McCoy's living room. “It's here somewhere.” He rushed to the bookcase in the corner, and began to pull out Sybok's scrapbooks, checking the front of each one. “Here.” He decided on a book, then flipped through the pages. “Look.” He held up the scrapbook for T'Pring to see. Another ace of spades was glue to the page. “This is from our going away party on the Tresselian space station. Some bartender...” He ripped out the card, and read the back. “Some bartender named Guinan gave this to me. Said I was the most important person in the universe.”

“Guinan was obviously intoxicated.”

“I get a card, you get a card, Elaan gets a card. Don't you think this is a little suspicious?”

“Are you implying that Keenser, Hikaru Sulu, and a bartender named Guinan are conspiring in a plot against us?”
“Yes!”

“I believe I preferred your Professor Plum theory.”

“This food tastes like sawdust,” Elaan said, spitting a mouthful of cornish hen onto the floor.

*There goes diplomacy*, Uhura thought. Trying the direct route with impish, flamboyant aliens always worked so well. “Squire, please excuse Elaan. She's very tired. I think it would be best if we all went home.”

“No!” Trelane banged his fists on the table. “I'm not done with you yet.”

“Done doing what, exactly?”

Trelane threw his napkin on the table, and walked over to the mirror, staring into his own reflection. “I don't want to. If I had any choice in the matter, I would vote against it. The present situation has become uncomfortable. There is little else I can do.” He turned around, grinning. “That doesn't mean we cannot have a raucous good time beforehand.”

“Before...?”

“Before you die.”

“Fuck this. We're leaving.” Charlie rolled his eyes up into his head until there was almost nothing but white showing. “Ow.” His eyelids fluttered closed, and he massaged them gently. “I guess I can't teleport.”

Dehner and Mitchell joined hands, glowed bright blue for a while, then nothing.

“Your talents won't work on Gothos. I took the liberty of placing anti-witchcraft wards around the planet. You're fortunate that I am more tolerant than Mr. Matthew Hopkins.”

“So, you're not going to murder us?” Charlie asked.

“Murder is such an ugly word.”

“I hate you,” Elaan snarled. “You are a despicable little man.”

“For that, you will die first... Who's up for a round of reversis?”

With everyone reassembled in Spock and Geoff’s living room, McCoy put his (and T'Pring’s and Elaan's and Spock's) cards on the table for all to see. “Does this mean anything to you?” he asked Elder Spock, who shook his head.

“I have never seen playing cards used in this fashion in this or any universe. The name Guinan, however, is somewhat familiar. She was a bartender, you say?”

“Yeah. Average height, medium build, black, long dreadlocks... no eyebrows.”

“Human?”

“Looked like one.”
“Appearances can be deceiving.”

“Why do you have to say shit like that?”

“Have any of you tried contacting Sulu, Keenser, or Lester?” Geoff asked.

“No,” T’Pring said. “We should not attempt to make contact until we have enough information to gain the upper hand.”

“A Klingon does not rush into battle without studying his opponent,” Worf said.


In stepped a woman—average height, medium build, black, long dreadlocks... no eyebrows. “Hi. I heard you could use some—” She glared down at Worf, who'd managed to put a bat'leth to her throat in roughly five seconds. Not his best time, but still impressive. “Put that away. You'll poke someone's eye out with that thing.”

“That was the plan,” Worf growled.

She looked over at T’Pring. “Could you please call him off?”

“Under normal circumstances, I would,” T'Pring said sharply. “How did you come to this planet's surface? Security stopped all incoming vessels and transports an hour ago.” Without Uhura on planet, there was no way to calibrate the defense screen to allow passage from the outside.

“I was on the last shuttlecraft in.” She smirked at Worf. “Sat next to a lovely Klingon girl. She wouldn't stop talking about meeting a boy she met online.”

“I am not a boy!”

“That's not the only thing you're not.”

“Who are you and what have you done with my son?” McCoy demanded.

“Me? I'm Guinan. I tend bar. As for your son, I didn't have any part in his disappearance.”

“Do you know who did?”

“No.”

“Then why the fuck are you here?” Sybok shouted.

“I'm here to help.”

“Why? We don't even know you.”

“Yes,” Elder Spock said, “but she knows us. Why did you give Dr. McCoy a playing card with your name on it?”

“I told him.” Guinan grinned enigmatically. “He's the most important person in the universe.”

“Bullshit.”

“Dr. McCoy is hardly the most important person in this room,” Sarek protested. “He is not a head of state, he has never brokered any major peace treaties or cured any fatal diseases. He has not saved a
Federation planet from annihilation. He has no supernatural talents to speak of, and, from what I gather from Sybok, he can barely feed himself.”

“Thanks, Dad,” McCoy snarled.

“That's precisely why Dr. McCoy is so important; he's an average, unimportant person who just happened to be in the right place at the right time and ended up altering the course of history,” Guinan said.

“I am not Forrest Gump!”

“Really? Who snuck Jim Kirk aboard the Enterprise? If you hadn't done that, Earth would've been destroyed and everyone in this room, except for me and Worf, would be dead.”

“That was one time.”

“Okay. If you hadn't insisted that someone go along with Sybok to investigate this planet, Uhura never would have received her current power and the planet wouldn't have been colonized. And if that never happened, Worf would be dead, Elaan would be some Troyian's child bride, and the T'Pelih would still be living in isolated poverty on Ek'tra. And even if Uhura would have gone without your influence, Dr. Chapel wouldn't have been there to treat Uhura and prevent Elder Spock from killing her if you hadn't driven Chapel to quit. Going even further back, you encouraging Uhura to pursue T'Pring set this entire chain of events in motion. And I think everyone in this room would agree that, if it weren't for your influence, Sybok would have gone mad years ago. The same with Charlie. And because of that, Elizabeth Dehner and Gary Mitchell are still alive and haven't murdered anyone.

“You're important, Dr. McCoy. Whether you like it or not.”

“How do you know all that? Half of those things aren't public record. Hell, some of them I don't remember.”

“I come from a race of listeners.”

“For a listener,” T'Pring said, “you are prone to monologues.”

“We're active listeners.”

Having grown bored with reversis (and finding that none of his guests knew how to play), Trelane herded everyone outside for a bowls match. “You see, you roll the ball like so, trying to get it as close to the jack as possible. Monsieur Mitchell and Mademoiselle Dehner, you will play on my team. As my guest, Monsieur Evans may go first.”

“Thanks,” Charlie mumbled, stepping up to the mat.

On the sidelines, Elaan edged closer to Uhura. “How might we escape from this creature?” she whispered.

“I don't know,” Uhura responded. “But I'm working on it.”

“Should I kill him?” Elaan palmed the dagger in her pocket.

“Not yet. He might be our only shot at getting home.”
“You are unable to contact the Matriarch telepathically.”

“No. I can't even feel her. Charlie might have better luck with Sybok.”

Elaan shook her head. “If Sybok could reach this place telepathically, then he would be here by now. There must be some sort of field around the planet.”

“We're on our own, then.”

“Do you still have access to your powers?”

“Yeah, I can manipulate Sha-Ka-Ree from here, but I don't know what good that will do us.”

“Perhaps you could send security on Sha-Ka-Ree a message. Write something in flora that would help them discover where we are.”

“That's actually a brilliant idea.” Uhura closed her eyes and began to write...

“No!” Trelane cried, throwing his bowl to the ground. “You can't escape. I won't let you.” He waved his hand, and Uhura felt her control over the flora snap. “There. Now you have to stay and play.”

“Tallied ho.”

“I've received a transmission from planetary security,” Spock said, returning his comm to his belt. “A small outgrowth of trees have appeared in a pattern that suggest Uhura is attempting to send us a message.”

“What is written?” T'Pring asked.

“'Hip hip hoorah.' And I believe it's pronounced 'tally ho.'”

“She must be under the effects of some kind of hallucinogen.”

“No,” Elder Spock said. “I remember those words. In my timeline, there was an alien named Trelane. He sent a transmission to the Enterprise with those exact words. He would have the power to abduct Lieutenant Uhura, Charles, Dehner, and Mitchell.”

“Do you remember where we could find Trelane?” McCoy asked.

“Yes. He lived on a planet named Gothos.”

“Good,” Sybok said. “Let's go to Gothos.”

“That will not be so simple. I recall the general area in which we found Gothos, but Trelane can move Gothos through space as if it were a starship. The planet could be anywhere.”

“Thanks, Spock,” McCoy grumbled. “We're about as close to finding them now as were were five minutes ago.”

“Hold on,” Guinan said. “This Trelane, do you know what species he was?”

Elder Spock shook his head. “He was not life as we know it. He was one of many god-like aliens we met on the five-year mission, but, unlike the rest, my Kirk was unable to defeat him.”

“What do you mean by god-like? What type of powers did he have?”
“He could build planets, conjure matter, transport matter, grant knowledge. He was able to observe Terra from Gothos, but only images from the distant past.”

Guinan furrowed her brow. “How old was he?”

“He had the appearance of a Human in his mid-thirties, but Captain Kirk believed he was a child.”

“On Gothos, was there some reflective object that he seemed drawn to? A mirror, maybe.”

“Yes, he had a mirror.”

“Shit,” Guinan muttered.

“What?” McCoy asked.

“This Trelane sounds like he's a young member of the Q Continuum.” At everyone's blank faces, she went on. “They're the closest thing the universe has to a pantheon. They're gods, and what's worse they know it. My people have had dealings with them in the past, and it wasn't pretty.”

“So, we're fucked then?” Sybok asked.

“Not entirely. My species and theirs co-evolved, so we're able to sense their presence. If Elder Spock can bring us close enough to Gothos, I should be able to pinpoint its location.”

“And then what?” McCoy asked. “How do we kill a god?”

Guinan stared meaningfully at Sybok. “We don't. I can hold Trelane off long enough for everyone to escape.”

“You would then be stuck with Trelane on Gothos,” Sarek said.

“Hopefully, I should be able to convince him to send me back home. Members of the Continuum and my kind can't stand to be in the same room for too long.”

“What would stop him from simply killing you?” Worf asked.

“Our peoples can't kill each other. We're stuck sharing the universe for the rest of eternity.”

–

“My people have a game like this,” Elaan said, picking up her croquet mallet. “Except we use these to hit each other over the head instead of those obnoxious balls.”

“I wish I could hit him over the head,” Charlie mumbled.

–

Despite his best attempts to avoid her, Valkrell found Worf gathering up his weapons at the dojo. “Worf.”

“Valkrell. I did not expect to see you. If I had, I would not have worn my prostheses.”

“I understand. I heard two of your comrades have been kidnapped.”

“Yes. By my honor, I must rescue them. I will not be able to keep our date.”

“That's fine. I will fight at your side. A comrade of yours is a comrade of mine.”
“Data is not accompanying us,” T'Pring said sternly. “I will not allow it. This mission is far too dangerous.”

“That is precisely why he needs to come with us,” Elder Spock said. “If I die or become incapacitated, there must be someone on board who can pilot the Squid.”

“Magda Kovac knows how to pilot the vessel. Why not take her?”

Elder Spock frowned. “You have not spoken to Spock about what he and Dr. M'Benga plan to do while we are away.”

“No. I assumed they would be watching the children, including Data.”

“I think it is best that you speak to him directly about this matter.”

—

Spock straightened his blouse. “If Nyota dies—”

“She will not die,” T'Pring said.

“The possibility of her demise exists and if it comes to fruition, the planet will choose another being to fulfill Nyota's role. Geoffrey and I have determined that the likelihood of the person selected surviving the process is greatest when that person is as physiologically similar to Nyota when she was turned into a cyborg. As the only Human females near Nyota's age and physical condition, Carol Marcus and Magda Kovac must stay on planet, near the site where the planet abducted Nyota, in case the worst happens.”

“Why do you need two?”

“In case the first one dies in the process.”

“What about Dr. Chapel? Why can she not stay and Magda Kovac come on the Squid?”

“Dr. Chapel is Nyota's physician. If Nyota is injured, she is the only person with sufficient knowledge about cybernetics to heal her.”

T'Pring steadied her breathing. “I will not lose them both on the same day. Data may accompany us, but I would sooner die than let harm befall him.”

—

Sybok gazed out the Squid's starboard window. “Is it wrong that I love Charlie more than I love you?”

“No,” McCoy said. “That's normal.”

“Good.”

“If it came down to it, I'd let you die to save Charlie.”

“Me, too.”

—
Fortunately, the default state of the shields surrounding Sha-Ka-Ree allowed vessels out but not in. The reasoning behind this was much like that of emergency exit only doors in public buildings. They didn't want anyone getting trapped on-planet if some bad shit went down. The Squid was able to leave the planet and head on its not-so-merry way to where Elder Spock remembered Gothos to be. A few minutes after take-off, the ship was hailed by a small, but remarkably fast, vessel.

"Should I raise our shields?" Data asked Elder Spock.

"No," Guinan said. "That's our back-up." Three figures in Starfleet uniform beamed onto the middle of the bridge. "I believe you all know Captain Sulu and Lieutenant Keenser."

Sulu waved with his katana. "Hey."

"This," Guinan pointed to the pale woman in command yellow, "is Number One. She's the one who came up with playing card idea."

"I thought you would be less likely to discard our contact information if it were written on a playing card rather than a piece of paper," Number One said.

"I realize maintain an aura of mystery is important to your self-image," T'Pring said, "but would you be too terribly inconvenienced by informing us who you are, what you want, and why you contacted us?"

Guinan smirked. "Are you sure you want to know? It's a very long and complicated story."

"We have time."

Guinan rested her elbows on her knees. "In the late 20th century of the Terran calendar, a new universe was created."

"Whales?" Sybok asked.

"Whales."

"If a new universe was created by my incursion in to 1983, why did we return to an unchanged 22nd century?" Elder Spock asked.

"You've heard of the grandfather paradox? You can't go back in time and kill your grandfather, because you would have never been born. If you have never been born, you couldn't go back in time to kill your grandfather. That's not strictly true. You can kill your grandfather in the past, but it has extreme consequences. Time compensates by creating a universe splintered off from the moment you killed your grandfather. You can stay in that new universe, while your home universe continues on. That's what happened when you and your friends kidnapped those whales. You went back to your home universe, which was entirely unaffected by your incursion into the past. And when your vessel and the Narada came through that black hole, you weren't just transported into the past. You were transported into the past in a different universe."

"And that caused another splinter universe?" Chapel asked.

"No; because the Spock and Nero that arrived in this universe are not our Spock and Nero, no paradox was created and no universe splintered off to compensate. Every act of time travel, no matter how devastating, does not automatically cause a new timeline. Time travel is a normal part of existence. You people only find it so strange because you've only recently been able to do it."

McCoy sighed. "What does this have to do—"
“I'm getting there. I told you this was a long story. El-Aurian can sense the splintering off of universes. That's why they call us Listeners—we can hear when species like the Q meddle with the timeline. It's one hell of a shock to the nervous system. When he ran off with those whales, it threw me into labor.” Guinan smile fondly at Number One. “That's where she got the name. She was the first El-Aurian born in the new universe.”

Chapel looked between Guinan and Number One. “Your species didn't have external surrogacy at that time?”

“We did, but my husband at the time and I were able to conceive naturally.”

“You're her mother?” Sybok asked slowly.

“Yes.”

“How white was her father?”

Number One stared at Sybok beleagueredly. “Skin pigment is not transmitted in the same way across all species.”

“It's like when a blue flower and yellow flower cross-pollinate,” Guinan explained “Depending on the species of the flowers, their offspring can end up being green, blue and yellow, or either blue or yellow. We're the last type of flower.”

“So your people don't have races?” McCoy asked.

“We do,” Number One answered, “but they are based arbitrarily on the size of our kidneys rather than the pigmentation of our skin.”

“The more you know.”

“Our people have entrusted Number One with the well-being of this new timeline,” Guinan said carefully.

“Where have I heard that before?” McCoy snarked, glaring at Elder Spock.

“You're not getting this. We don't want things to be as they were. We want things to be as they should.”

“What gives you the right to decide what's best?”

“We are not deciding what's best,” Number One protested. “We're helping people be their best.”

“You sound like him,” Worf snorted, pointing at Sybok.

“This isn't pop psychology. This is what our people are born to do.”

“An entire species of Syboks. How do you function?”

“All right,” Guinan said. “Imagine you're playing chess. Your opponent has only made one move, but you can see hundreds of ways the game can turn out. To get the fastest victory, to lose the fewest pieces, you have to play the game so that the other player makes the moves you need. That's what it's like to live as El-Aurian. That's what we have to do.”

“So, in your minds,” Chapel said, “we're all pawns.”
“No!” Guinan sighed. “We're trying to make you fulfilled. Happy. Reach your full potential.”

“What if our full potential isn't good?” Sybok asked quietly.

“Then it's not your full potential.”

“Sulu,” McCoy asked, “how the hell did you get mixed up with these people?”

“Number One was working under Pike when he recruited me,” Sulu explained. “She said I could do more good than just by only working for Starfleet.”

“I can't believe it! This whole time you've been reporting to those weasels.”

“Those weasels,” Guinan interjected, “are are trying to help you get your child back.”

“I didn't come here to get yelled at,” Keenser said, scuffing hir boot on the deck. “If you don't want my help, I'll stay on Lester's ship.”

“How could you help us?” Valkrell asked. “You are the size of a large gourd.”

“Height is not as important as resilience.”

“Resilience?”

Keenser walked over to Valkrell and lifted up hir tunic. “Hit me.”

Ever the Klingon, Valkrell didn't need to be told twice. She punched Keenser's abdomen as hard as she could, but her fist bounced right off of hir skin, sending her arm backward into the back of her seat. “'atlhqam!” she hissed.

“It's the same up here.” Keenser tapped hir temple. “We can't be brainwashed; our brains just bounce right back.”

“Keenser's species is impervious to mind control,” Number One added.

“Then how did the Platonians control hir?” Sybok asked dubiously.

“That wasn't mind control,” McCoy said. “They were just moving our parts around like we were puppets. That was the worst part of it. We could still think, but we—”

Number One shushed him. “I can feel the Q.”

“So do I,” Guinan said. “He's that way.” She pointed vaguely to the left.

“Thirty-six mark fifty-eight,” Number One clarified.

“Setting a course now,” Elder Spock said. “Engage.”

Uhura was ready to shove a shuttlecock down Trelane's throat, when the Squid set down on the squire's manicured lawn. “Oh, thank god.” She threw down her racquet.

Trelane glared at the vessel imperiously. “You were not invited.” A woman with no eyebrows and another in command gold stepped out of the ship, their hands held in front of them like claws. “No! No, no, no!” Trelane dropped to the ground, kicking his legs in the air. “I didn't say you could play!”
He looked almost like Valeris this morning when she realized she wasn't going to get any presents.

"Get in the ship," the older woman ordered.

Trelane's prisoners-cum-playmates trudged off toward the ship. Not content to let them go, Trelane grabbed hold of Charlie's arm. "Don't leave. Not before I kill you. I can do it, I swear." Trelane scrunched up his face, and Charlie was engulfed in a yellow light.

"Charlie!" Sybok rushed headlong out of the Squid. His eyes narrowed as they focused on Trelane. And, suddenly, there was no Trelane and Sybok was lying in a heap on the ground.

—

Amanda stared at him reproachfully as Trelane whimpered. "He's just a boy, Sybok."

"He tried to kill my son."

"I wouldn't've, I swear," Trelane cried. "I wouldn't've. I wanna go home."

Joanna stepped out from the mist. "Send him back. It's not his time."

"He tried to kill my son."

"This isn't a gift you should use for revenge."

"What would Leonard think?" Amanda added.

Sybok resigned himself. "Fine." When he came back to his body, there were two very distressed clouds pulsating over his head.

"What did you do to our son?" the female blob demanded.

"Only what comes naturally," Guinan answered.

"Listeners," the blob hissed.

"It's good to see you, too. The vapor look works for you."

"Trelane," the male blob scolded, "why are these people here?"

"I only wanted to play," Trelane said. "Honest."

"Bullshit!" Charlie yelled. "He said he was going to kill us."

"Is that true?" the male blob asked.


"Why would you do such a thing? These beings have spirit; they're superior."

"They're trouble! Mom said so."

The male blob sighed. "See? This is what happens when you—"

"Don't blame me," the female blob said. "I'm not the one—"

"—patronize higher—"
“—play the great peacekeeper—” The blobs' sniping turned into a cacophony that filled Gothos' atmosphere, threatening to burst the eardrums of every corporeal being on planet.

“See!” Trelane shouted, stamping his foot. “This is why I did it! They're bad; they make you fight all the time.”

The noise quelled. “We didn't think you could hear us,” the male blob said.

“Please.” Uhura rolled her eyes. “The kids can always hear their parents fighting. It doesn't matter if they're in Nairobi or Gothos.”

“Why would you guys fight about us?” Charlie asked. “We never even met you.”

The female blob struggled to put this delicately. “There is some controversy within the Continuum as to whether people with physical bodies should have the power that you and They Who Speak as One do. As for Nyota Uhura, our kind is mostly aggravated by the fact that you killed a Q and took control of the planet we designed as his prison. We find it humiliating.”

“What about me?” Elaan asked. “I don't have any of these silly powers, but your son still kidnapped me.”

The blobs turned an embarrassed shade of fuschia. “That's not something we discuss,” the male blob said. “We find it distasteful.”

The female blob shuddered. “What you people choose to do with and grow inside your own corporeal bodies is your own business.”

“Aw, hell no!” McCoy stormed out of the Squid and over to Charlie, whom he grabbed by the ear. “I told you I'm too young for this!”

“Too young for what?” Charlie squeaked.

“Elaan, when was your last menstrual period?”

Elaan looked slightly offended. “My people do not menstruate.”

“No,” Sybok protested, catching up with McCoy. “You didn't! We told you to use protection.”

“I did!” Charlie said. “I do!”

“Every time?” McCoy asked.

“Yeah... you know, except when we do it in the swimming pool.”

“Wait,” Uhura said. “You have sex in my swimming pool?”

“Damn it, Charlie!” McCoy snapped. “Women can still get pregnant when you do it in water.”

“I know, but Dad told me the chemicals in the swimming pool make you sterile and burn up all your new cells. I thought that meant the pool's, like, spermicide or something.”

“I only told you that so you wouldn't go in pools,” Sybok said, “not so you would go in and fuck your girlfriend!”

The male blob coughed. “Could you please take this conversation back to your own planet? This isn't the kind of discussion we want Trelane overhearing.”
“We'll go,” Guinan said, “if you cut the link between Sha-Ka-Ree and the Continuum. That's the only way we can be sure your son won't kidnap any more people off of the planet.”

“Fine,” the female blog said. “The link is severed. The Continuum will no longer hold any influence on your planet.”

“Thank you. Let's go home.”

–

After everyone had piled into the Squid, Charlie sat down next to Elaan, awkwardly drumming his fingers on his knees. “So, I guess you're, like, pregnant or something? Are you gonna keep it? Like, I mean, I support you either way. But, it's like your decision, you know.”

“I know.” Elaan stretched in her chair. “I'm going to keep it.”

“Really? You haven't had that much time to think about it. Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I require an heir.”

“Cool.”

“The child will be like you.”

“Yeah, I guess that's why Trelane wanted to off you.”

“I did not think it was possible, but the next Dohlman may be even more powerful than me.”

–

McCoy and Sybok managed to stuff themselves into the Squid's commode. “God, I think I'm going to be sick.”

“Over our future grandchild, or the child you almost killed?”

“A bit of both... I don't know what came over me.”

“You were only following your instincts,” Guinan shouted, her voice muffled by the bathroom door.

“Jesus.” McCoy jumped. “Are you listening in on us?”

“Sorry. It's a habit. Can I speak to Sybok?”

Sybok sighed and shimmied out of the bathroom and into the corridor. “What?”

“When you were at Gol, did they tell you anything about the history of the Vulcan Masters?”

“No, they were a bit busy locking me in a cell for a hundred days.”

“Fine, I'll give the Cliff's Notes version. The god-like aliens of the universe—your Apollo, the Thasians, the Q Continuum—exercised total control over all the other sentient species (except for my people, of course), until, one day, a group of telepaths decided they had enough. They rounded up all their undertakers—the people who helped dying pass on—and had them meditate until they could banish the gods to the afterlife just as they did with their dying friends. Ever since then a delicate balance has been struck between corporeal and incorporeal worlds. But when Vulcan was destroyed and the Vulcan Masters died with her, the balance was upset. But now...”
“I’m the last Vulcan Master. My legacy is killing people.”

“Basically.”

Sybok leaned against the bulkhead. “That’s why the Thasians let Charlie go so easily. They knew I could kill them.”

“Yes.”

“And why Charlie listens to me.”

“Yes.”

“And why Dehner and Mitchell haven’t gone on any egomaniacal killing sprees.”

“Partially. I think half of it is that their powers progressed so far that they have a unified consciousness with all of existence and therefore experience empathy for every living thing... but that's just my guess.”

“How do I get rid of it?”

“You don't. You can't run from this.”

Sybok locked himself in the bathroom and buried his head in McCoy's shoulder.

—

“You are not permitted to be in danger. Either of you.”

Uhura cuddled in closer to T'Pring. “I don’t think I was in any real danger today, besides being bored to tears. Trelane would never have killed us. He just wanted his parents’ attention.”

Data cocked his head to the side. “Is threatening homicide an acceptable method for gaining parental attention?”

“What does your conscience tell you?”

“No, it is not, because it could cause the loved ones of the person threatened to experience undue stress... Is that an emotion?”

“Stress? Yeah.”

“I can do five emotions now and most of them are for you.”

“Thank you, Data.”

—

Valkrell kneeled down in front of Worf. “You performed admirably today. Like a true Klingon.”

“I stayed in the ship the entire time.”

“Not charging into battle is the most difficult skill a Klingon must master.” She reached for his thighs, but Worf backed away. “You don't want me.”

“I do, but you will be disappointed. I am a...”
“I am, as well.”

“You are?”

“Yes, I have been saving myself for a Klingon worthy of me. And now I’ve found him.”

“Valkrell, I am not...”

“A virgin?”

“I am, but I... am not an amputee. I have legs.”

“Nobody's perfect,” she roared.
Elaan had assembled, perhaps, the strangest birthing team in the known universe. There were, of course, the people you would expect to be there: Charlie; the midwife, a Romulan woman; and the doula, an Andorian zhen. By Elasian tradition, Worf, as the parents' closest comrade, was invited to present the baby with a dagger forged by blind virgins—in this case, a five-year-old Ferengi using a replicator. Typically, the Empress of Elas was present at the birth of the next Dohlman and given the placenta to fertilize the royal garden. In this case, T'Pring would have to do. Given the unprecedented nature of this birth—an Elasian had never procreated with a Human before, let alone one with inheritable god-like powers—McCoy and Sybok were allowed in the room as doctor and Vulcan Master, respectively. With that many people, there was hardly enough space for the birthing pool.

“Oh my god, this is disgusting,” Sybok gagged. The midwife shot him the stink-eye. “Not the natural birth part. The standing water.”

“This is unclean,” T’Pring whispered.

“I know. I told her caves were better, but she wouldn't go for it.”

“I don’t know what's wrong with a hospital,” McCoy said quietly.

“That's because you're an American... Oh, god. He's going to get in there with her... That's wrong.”

“That's how they got into this mess in the first place.”

T'Pring shivered. “Do they know the sex?”

“No,” McCoy said. “It's too soon to tell. Elasians don't develop primary sex characteristics until puberty. Before then, they just have a urethral opening.”

“What about chromosomal differences? Those surely would have appeared on the genetic tests you performed.”

“Chromosomally, all Elasians are neutrois. Hormones in their food and environment determine what sex characteristics they'll develop.”

“That is highly inefficient.”

“Silence!” Elaan yowled. “I am trying to concentrate.” A moment later, a distinctive splooshing sound came from the tub. Elaan lifted a small, pink infant from the water. Once the midwife clear the baby's nose and mouth, ey screamed like a banshee passing a kidney stone. Elaan wiped a tear from her face, rubbing it on the baby's forehead. She shushed and the crying stopped. “This why we use our tears, not so we can fuck your men.”

“You are so badass,” Charlie said, utterly in awe.

—

“Hey, Grandpa, how's the baby?” Chapel asked as McCoy passed her office.

“Seven pounds, five ounces. Not evil.”

“That's the best we can hope for. Suvin said you got a priority communique from Delta Vega.”
“Delta Vega? Who do I know on Delta Vega?”

—

“I should've known.”

“Someone has to watch what comes through the Ah'rak black hole,” Number One said, her face pixelated on McCoy's vidscreen. “Data would never have come to Sha-Ka-Ree otherwise.”

“How much of my life has been a set-up by you people?”

“Not much of yours, Dr. McCoy. You have the preternatural ability to be in the right place at the right time.”

“Just like how Starfleet just happened to give you Scotty's old job?”

“That wasn't as difficult to arrange as you might imagine. I was the only officer who volunteered for the position.”

“And now you're standing guard over that black hole.”

“Essentially.”

“Then, tell me, how the hell did that psycho kidnapper make it to our planet? Or did you arrange that, too?”

“My powers are limited. If you recall anything Scotty or Keenser have told you about this posting, I am stuck here until Starfleet or Thomas Lester come and get me.”

“You're telling me there wasn't anything you could do?”

“No, not then. Now, however, is a different situation. Two hours ago, a small vessel exited the black hole and landed on Delta Vega, apparently out of fuel. Its passengers claim to be Captain James T. Kirk and Lieutenant Daniel Marcus of the Imperial Starfleet.”

“They're from the Mirror Universe?”

“Yes... I don't know why you people call it that. There are countless parallel universes. It's incredibly arrogant to encounter a universe you deem evil and claim to be its opposite.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I don't know. It's something that has bothered me.”

“Not the name. Why are you telling me about Kirk and Cupcake? Shouldn't you take this sort of thing to high command?”

“We both know that Starfleet cannot be trusted with this information. Even if they do not rush head first into the black hole, Kirk and Marcus will likely be picked apart by the Federation's best scientists. Sha-Ka-Ree is the safest place for them.”

“Why talk to me? Why not T'Pring?”

“Our people have chosen to liaise with you. Try to have someone here to pick them up by 1800 fleet time. I was planning on washing my hair.”
This Kirk was more foreign to Elder Spock than any Kirk he had met before. And he had met many. This Kirk looked like a wounded animal, curled defensively into the side of the only Human to ever show him kindness. (T'hy'la in one universe, it seemed, were t'hy'la in all universes. Spock tried to stem the tide of jealousy that realization provoked.) Marcus was less good-humored than Cupcake. He could not imagine this man allowing himself to be called a baked good. Unless it was a particularly ferocious baked good.

“Who’s the gimp?” Marcus asked once they had boarded the Squid.

Worf hissed, brandishing his phaser rifle.

“He is, to use a Human expression, my muscle. Worf is to assure that neither of you act on your baser instincts during our short trip.”

“Hey.” Marcus spun Elder Spock's command chair so that their faces mere inches apart. “I don't appreciate being threatened. Especially by a crippled klink and a half-breed geezer.”

“Young man, this klink has more honor and courage in his left heart than you have in your entire circulatory system. And, as for myself, I have traveled to Talos IV three times, died twice, and killed more gods than there are on Mount Olympus. I created the very universe we stand in, ensured the death of Adolf Hitler, and saved the whales. I don't appreciate being threatened.” Elder Spock turned his chair back to the conn. “Sit down.”

—

M’Benga peeled off his gloves. “Surgery went fine. I've reversed any damage the black hole did to their brains.”

“Good.”

He wouldn’t meet Elder Spock’s eyes as he scrubbed out in the surgery sink. “If the next Kirk that comes out of the black hole is yours, what will you do?”

“Introduce him to my bondmates. I am quite satisfied here, and, as Sybok so kindly reminded me, I am not Jim Kirk's t'hy'la.”

—

Sybok swiveled side to side in his office chair. “So...” He tapped his fingernails on his armrests. “Why'd you come to this universe?”

“There was nowhere left for us to run. The other you sicced the entire fleet on us.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. How did that make you feel?”

“Like we were being hunted down by some sadistic freak with pointy ears.”

“I see. Is my appearance triggering at all for you?” Sybok looked down at Mirror Kirk, who was cowering behind Mirror Cupcake’s legs.


“Good. That's... Do you actually eat people?”
“I don’t see any reason to deny them asylum,” Sybok told T’Pring. “All they’re looking for is a safe place to live.”

“Hey, Keenser,” Scotty smiled. “You took a long lunch. You and Lieutenant Dish have a little afternoon delight?”

“No, I got a vidcall.”

“Who from?”

“My cousin.” Number One told me Kirk and Cupcake from the Mirror ’verse are on Sha-Ka-Ree. Did I leave the iron on?

“Did ye say somethin’?” Scotty rubbed the back of his head. It hurt something nasty all of a sudden.

“I said, ‘My cousin.’ Sie vidcalled me.”

“Oh. Back to work then.” He was thinking he would have to go up to sickbay. There was no reason why his head should hurt so bad and now it was like his vision was fading. “Keenser, you mind the store. I’m gonna——”

Two weeks later...

The drugs the guards were pumping into his system made it hard to remember how long he had been down there. The whole timeline of events preceding that had gone screwy, too. The longer he was down there the harder it was to remember why he was down there. Sometimes he couldn't even remember his own name.

He knew David. And cupcakes. And he was pretty sure there was a woman involved. A her.

Jim. His name was Jim. He had a son and a partner and they were going to get married in Iowa. (It seemed like he'd been saying that last part for a long time.) But where were they?

“Where's my son?” His shouts echoed cruelly in his cell.

Someone had taken him. A friend who didn't act like a friend, who didn't sound like a friend. Strange. It doesn't work on you here either. Scotty, but not Scottish.

The cell door opened, and Jim braced himself for another round of injections.

“Jim?” A man—tall, lumbering, familiar—stumbled toward him.

“Are you real?”

“Yeah. I'm gonna get you out of here, okay?”

“Okay.” Jim gave the man—Cupcake, Daniel, t'hy'la—the thumbs up.

He was soon hefted over Cupcake's shoulder in a firemen's carry. (Whoever was keeping him here never chained him up. The drugs were enough to keep him plastered to the floor.) “You're safe now.
I gotcha.” Cupcake carried him out of the cell into the bright light of the corridor. Working his damnedest against gravity, Jim looked up. There was a yellow man and a woman with a baby.

“David?”

The yellow man stuck him with a hypospray. Why would Cupcake let him do that? The fuzziness that coated his mind began to dissipate.

Jim. His name was Jim. He was captain of the USS Enterprise and he'd been in worse scrapes than this.

“Baby, put me down.” Cupcake set him down onto his feet and kissed him hard. “How long has it been?”

“The Enterprise arrived fifteen planetary days ago,” the yellow man—wait, was that Uhura's robot?—said. “You were imprisoned here shortly thereafter.”

“Who are you?” he asked the woman. “And why do you have a baby?”

“I am Elaan of Sha-Ka-Ree, Dohlman of Elas in exile. My people do not let others mind our children. Perhaps if your people did the same, you would still have your son.”

“Woman, if you weren't holding a baby...”

“We do not have much time,” the robot said, “and we must still rescue the others.”

“What others?”

Elaan smirked. “You'll see.”

“Holy shit,” Jim muttered. “Did I get split in two again?”

“No,” the Other Cupcake said, stepping out of his cell. He was carrying the Other Jim like a baby. “I'd swallow arsenic if I came from this bitch ass universe.”

“They are from the Mirror Universe,” the robot explained.

“We're still here. How did they...?”

“Black hole,” Elaan said.

The robot nodded. “It is more common than you would think.”

“Come on. We need to get back to base.”

Elaan led them into an underground bunker of some sort. “What the hell is this place? A fall out shelter?” Cupcake asked.

“Approximately, yes,” the robot, Data answered. “This is an anti-spaghettification shelter. If Sha-Ka-Ree is ever attacked in the same manner as Vulcan, the population can take shelter in structures like this and survive being ripped into another universe. It is also a completely man-made structure with psionic shielding. We cannot be detected here.”
“Detected by who?”

“Whom.”

“What?”

“Detected by whom?” is grammatically correct. To answer your question, we cannot be detected by Mr. Scott, any of the telepaths on-planet, Charles Evans, or Mother Nyota.”

“Motherwhat?”

“Data,” said a woman stepping into the room from one of the many adjoining tunnels. “Go plug in.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Data toddled off. (Jim didn't think robots could toddle.)

The woman smiled. “I'm Guinan.” A small group of Humans came out of the tunnel after her. “This is Kyle, Wyatt, Erin, and Jennifer. They're Deaf.” She signed as she spoke. “When they're in the room, please use FSL as well as Standard.”

“I don't know sign language,” Jim said. “Can they read lips?”

Guinan translated this and waited for their response. “No, you oralist douchebag.”

“Sorry.”

“Who are you people?” Other Cupcake asked.

“We're the resistance.”

—

After figuring out the naming issue (Other Cupcake was Marcus, Cupcake was Cupcake, Other Kirk was Kirk, and Jim was Jim) and Elaan had went off to nurse, Guinan sat them down for hot cocoa. “We're the only people on-planet he hasn't been able to brainwash.”

“And the Enterprise?” Jim asked. “Has he gotten to the entire crew?”

“Yes. For some reason he's keeping the Enterprise in our orbit.”

“Why did he come here? He could have the entire quadrant by now.”

“There are things here that he can't get anywhere else.”

“Have you tried alerting Starfleet Command?”

“Starfleet Command can't help us. The only thing they can do is send more ships, and he'll do the same thing to them as he did to the Enterprise.”

“I can't believe... This is Scotty we're talking about.”

“That's not what he's calling himself now. According to him, he's Sybok, commander and prophet of the Galactic Army of Light.”

Kirk's head snapped up. “No...”

“That's impossible!” Marcus yelled.
“He said he would find me,” Kirk said, shakily. “Wherever I went, he said he would find me!”

“Kid, calm down,” Guinan said. “Who are you talking about?”

“The Sybok from our universe,” Marcus explained. “He called the Enterprise his Galactic Army of Light.”

“That's probably where Scotty got it from,” Cupcake said. “He heard Sybok say that while he was in the Mirror 'verse. I mean, what's the alternative?”

“Your Scotty is possessed by our Sybok.”


“I've been around the universe enough times to know that nothing is impossible,” Guinan said. “Scotty has been possessed by Sybok from the Mirror Universe. That's the only reasonable explanation for why he's calling himself Sybok, leading his army, brainwashing people, and speaking without a Scottish accent.”

That was when Jim remembered. When Scotty took control of the bridge, he didn't have an accent. If he did have an accent, then who the hell was he? “Jesus Christ, they're right. That's not Scotty.”

“He could be putting on an accent,” Cupcake said.

“Scotty would never do that. He said his accent was the only thing keeping the British Crown from taking back Scotland. You remember when we did that Nativity play last Christmas. He wouldn't even drop the accent to play one of the three wise men.”

“Fuck. Evil Sybok has David.”

“Shit. Evil Sybok has David.”

“Who's David?” Marcus asked.

“He's our son,” Kirk said.

“Who's the mother?”

“Your sister.”

“I thought our universe fucked up.”

“It's not—”

A Human woman came in from one of the exterior tunnels, dragging Sarek behind her. She signed something to Guinan.

“Where did you find him?” Guinan said while signing.

“I am in the room,” Sarek said also signing. “You don't have to talk over me.”


“No shit,” Guinan said.

“Sybok must have possessed him, too!”
“I am not possessed.” Not Sarek pulled himself from the woman's grasp. “Whatever that means. I'm Keras, Sarek's identical half-brother.”

“Identical what? When did this happen? I can't keep up with all these new relatives.”

“Don't worry,” Guinan said, placing her hand on Jim's arm. “We have a chart.”

The woman signed. Keras rolled his eyes and translated, “I found him in a spider hole near town hall, hiding like a coward.”

“Thanks, April,” Guinan signed-said. “Can you go bring out the others? They're in pod three.”

April left, and Keras sat on the floor next to Guinan. “I'm guessing those four aren't two sets of identical half-brothers.”

“No, the mean one and the squirrelly one are from another universe. The same one as the man who attacked Spock.”

“Spock was attacked?” Jim asked.

“M'Benga from their universe came through and kidnapped Spock and his kids. It's a long story.”

“What the hell has been going on here?”

Elaan and baby, Data, and the Deaf Humans trudged out of a tunnel. “Everybody take a seat.” Once everyone was settled, Guinan continued. “If we're going to get this planet back, we need to figure out why all of us are immune to Scott—Syb—Scottbok's brainwashing. He showed me my worst memory, tried to absolve me of my pain, and it didn't work. I'm guessing because my people are immune. Elaan?”

“He tried it on me and it worked, but then Iesycr cried and I was normal again.”

“Maybe primal emotions can undue the brainwashing,” Marcus suggested. “If we put people's children in danger, they'll snap out of it.”

“I don't think that is what happened. We were also transported out of our house and into this bunker... My baby is magical.”

Okay.

“He did not even attempt to heal my pain,” Data said, looking almost forlorn. “I do not think he believed I had any.”

“He tried to do me, but he used the wrong memory,” Keras said. “The destruction of Vulcan. That doesn't mean anything to me.”

“That's cold, brother,” Cupcake said.

“He must have tried to brainwash you at the same time as all the other Vulcans,” Guinan guessed. “The only reason he was able to conquer the planet so quickly is his ability to brainwash groups of people with the same worst memory. It doesn't help that much of the planet's population consists of minority groups that were persecuted for centuries on their home planets.”

“We were sitting waterfowl,” Elaan said bitterly.

“And what about you guys?” Guinan said, looking at the Deaf Humans.
“Maybe Scottbok doesn’t know sign language,” Jim suggested, “and he couldn't pick through their memories to find the worst one.”

Data interpreted for a middle-aged Deaf man, Kyle, “Other Deaf people were brainwashed.”

“And I can hear and speak Standard,” Jennifer said.

“Why don't you talk then?” Marcus asked.

“I'm Deaf.”

“But you can hear.”

“But I was raised Deaf.”

“What? Did your parents plug your ears?”

“No, I'm Deaf.” She traced a capital D in the air.

“Oh, Deaf.”

“So,” Guinan said, “it's not linguistic. Is there anything else? Are you related in any way?”

“No,” Data interpreted for Wyatt, “but our families all lived in Martha's Vineyard before the tourists took over.”

Data asked, “How long did your families live there?”

Data interpreted, “I do not know. For as long as any of us could remember.”

“Fascinating,” Data said. “Even though you are not related, you could all be in some way genetically similar due to the close community of Martha's Vineyard prior to the 20th century.”

Data interpreted for Erin, “Yes, that is why Martha's Vineyard had so many people born Deaf back then. We could be descended those people with hereditary deafness—the people who came up with the language FSL is based on.”

The Deaf Humans exchanged high fives.

“So,” Guinan said, “it could be genetic.”

“You said the entire planet's brainwashed except for us,” Cupcake said. “My sister lives here.”

“Maybe we're immune because we're t'hy'la,” Jim suggested.

“Sukir and Tuvo are t'hy'la and they were brainwashed,” Elaan said.

“Then maybe I have the genes that make me immune and I give Cupcake some kind of immunity.”

“I think we can agree our best guess is its genetic,” Guinan said. “Now, we just need to make a cure using some of your DNA.”

“How do we do that?” Elaan asked.

“I don't know. I'm a bartender. Does anybody...? No.”

“M'Benga from our universe had a vaccine,” Kirk said quietly. “That's how he wasn't brainwashed.”
“We need to stage a prison break, then.”

Two days later, Jim was sharing breakfast with his best friend's kidnapper and attempted rapist.

“How should I help you?”

“He took my son.”

“He takes a lot of people's children.”

“This is your only shot for revenge.”

“Now you're speaking my language.”

—

Sybok reclined lazily in his chair. He took great pleasure imagining it was his father's chair. To take over a man's house was one thing. To steal his favorite chair was another. He spared a glance for Sarek, who was, of course, cowering in the corner right where Sybok left him to relive his worst memories. It's good to be the king.

Worf came to his side. “Commander, should we prepare the Enterprise for your evangelical tour?”

“Not yet. I have business here. You may go back to work.” Sybok returned his chair to the upright position. He could see them better this way: his menagerie of supernatural creatures sitting on Sarek's living room carpet like a bunch of primary schoolers. He had to admit it was unsettling to look at a (dopier, useless, unambitious, eunuch) different version of himself, but, as long as the man was under his control, it didn't concern him. “My children, officers in the Galactic Army of Light, I have a special project for you.” He'd come here to retrieve Kirk and that gorilla of his, but he cast those two aside when he realized what plenty this planet offered. “Using the powers granted to you by the light unifies all of existence, I want you to bring my mother, the Madonna, the holy mother of this movement back to life.”

The two Humans masquerading as a star had the good sense to hide their shock, unlike the others. “How?” Charlie, the boy, asked.

“I don't know!” Sybok snapped. “Figure it out amongst yourselves. Pillage Sarek's memories if you have to. Go on, you're dismissed.”

—

“Here it is,” M'Benga said, holding up a vial. “Your cure. Inject with a hypo and they're cured.”

“That will take forever,” Cupcake said. “Can't we just pump it into the air?”

“Uhura controls the weather,” Guinan said. “It would be neutralized in ten minutes.”

“Uhura controls the...? What is she? The great and powerful Oz?”

“Actually,” Data said, “Mother Nyota is a cyborg who controls the planet, which is a giant computer used to imprison members of the Q Continuum, a race of omnipotent aliens.”

“What the fuck is going on on this planet?”
With only one vial of antidote and several days before the next batch would be finished, the resistance decided their best option would be to cure one of the people with superpowers (“How many are there?” Cupcake gasped.) and hope they could bring down Scottbok and reverse the brainwashing. Sybok was their first choice, given his skill set and how much easier he would be to kidnap than anyone else. True to their prediction, when Elaan and Cupcake broke into his house to grab him, Sybok was passed out on the floor and didn't wake up until he was back at their base and M'Benga jabbed him with a hypo.

He seemed to struggle internally, his face contorting, grimacing, but then his eyes popped open and he smiled. “Have you heard the good news? The Galactic Army of Light is recruiting new—”

“Why didn't that work?” Elaan demanded, sticking her finger in M'Benga's face.

“I don't know. It works on Vulcans. He could be resisting it.”

“Sybok is the most powerful Vulcan alive,” Data said “and, due to his ability to see other people's worst memories, he has more reason than anyone to remain brainwashed.”

Marcus cursed. “We're fucked! Scottbok is going to come looking for him.”

“He's right,” Guinan said. “Our timeline's been cut in half. We can't afford to be gentle with Scotty's body anymore.”

“I told you from the start that we should kill him,” Elaan said.

“Maybe you were right.”

“Wait,” Jim said. “We can't kill him. He's Scotty. This isn't his fault.”

“We don't have—”

“I won't let you kill a member of my crew!”

“Jim, up until this point, Scottbok has made a point not to kill any of us. But when he hears we kidnapped Sybok? We'll be dead. Or worse. So, if you ever want to see your son again, you'll have to make a few sacrifices.”

“Fine,” he said quietly.

“How do we do it?” Keras asked. “Uhura's defense screen makes phasers inoperable on-planet.”

“I feel like Robin Hood,” Cupcake grumbled.

As it turned out, Erin was an avid archery hobbyist. Also, as it turned out, Scottbok retained Sybok's telekinesis and was able to redirect all of the arrows toward Christine Chapel, who was knocked out of the way by Sarek.

“What happened?” Guinan asked.

“We accidentally shot Spock's dad,” Jim asked.
“Grandfather?” Data said sadly.

“We're fucked,” Keras interpreted for Erin. “Those were our only arrows.”

“We're all going to die,” Kirk muttered. “He's going to hunt us down like a dog. Hang, draw, and quarter us. Make a suit out of our skin. Use our bones as golf clubs.”

“Have you heard the good news?” Sybok said brightly. “The Galactic Army of Light is recruiting new—”

“Shut up!” Keras roared. “I did not come all the way to this shit hole of a planet to die!” He flipped a switch on the wall, and the live stream from a security camera they set up outside Sarek’s house appeared on the wall. “See that! Inside, your bondmate, your son, your father!” He crouched next to Sybok on the floor, grabbing his face so that he had to look at the footage. The image of Sarek's bleeding body reflected in Sybok’s eyes.

As he was wont to do in times of stress, Data began to sing. This time a song Sarek taught him. “If you say, 'Come with me off to Massachusetts,' then to Massachusetts we will go. We will buy dishes there, maybe even two—”

Data was interrupted by the sound of Keras' body slamming into the couch. Sybok stood up, clutching his head and no longer smiling. “Why would you do that?” He backed into the corner of the room. “I was happy. Everyone was happy.”

“Psychological trigger,” Guinan explained.

“We need you to help us,” Jim said. “He has our son. He has your son... who I gather is a witch or something.”

“I had my mother.” Tears ran freely down Sybok's face. “I had her katra right in my hands, but you took me away. We were going to bring her back.”

“Tough shit,” Marcus spat. “Your mom's dead. Boo-fucking-hoo. Your father's bleeding to death and you're the only one who can save him.”

“You think it'll be that easy? I just walk in there and...”

“It's your destiny,” Guinan said.

“Fuck you. I'm not your goddamn martyr. I'm not your Vulcan Jesus. I don't have to sacrifice everything that I am for you people.”

“We're not asking you to die.”

“No, you're asking me to kill. I can deal with dying. I've been dead. But I can't live with what you're asking me to do.”

“You killed Trelane.”

“He got better. And I didn't know what I was doing. You know what? I can play Jim Kirk. I can kill all the gods you want, but I cannot kill Scotty.”

“He's not Scotty anymore!” Cupcake snapped. “We smashed the katric ark, because you said it was torture to be kept between this world and the next. What do you think is happening Scotty's katra right now?”
“Don't make this into some errand of mercy.”

Elaan advanced on Sybok, holding her baby out toward him. “Look at Iescyr. Look at your grandbaby. If you don't kill Scottbok, you are killing em.”

Sybok reached out and caressed the baby's forehead. “Ey looks just like my baby.” Sybok turned and walked determinedly toward the exterior tunnel.

“Where are you going?” Guinan called.

“To see Scottbok.”

“One does not simply walk into Sarek's living room,” Keras protested.

“One isn't. You guys are coming with me.”

The surface looked eerily normal. Public transit was still running. Frisbees were being thrown about. Businesses were open. Besides the absence of the sun, there was little indication that an engineer possessed by a Vulcan from another universe had taken over the entire planet. It wasn't long though before Scottbok's mooks caught sight of them and escorted them to Sarek's living room.

“Sybok, you're home.” He smiled. “And you've brought company.”

On the floor was Sybok's father, barely breathing, and his mother, breathing but not alive. Charlie, Uhura, and They Who Speak as One were working over them like Santa's elves right before Arbor Day. (On Arbor Day, the elves delivered Kiebler cookies to the children who reduced their carbon footprint that year.)

“I'm sorry, Scotty.” And Sybok did what came naturally.

He was expecting Joanna to yell at him again, but she just smiled. “Took you long enough.”

“I was detained... What's wrong with him?” Whoever he brought through didn't look like Scotty or Sybok on the other side. He looked like... Scottbok.

“That shouldn't have happened.” Joanna touched Scottbok's shoulder and he split into Scotty and... Sybok's arm?

“What in the name o' god happened tae me?” Scotty yelped. “Am I dead?”

“Kind of. You'll get better.”

“Is that an arm? Do people's arms get cut off in heaven?”

“That,” Joanna kicked at the arm, “is the part of the Mirror Sybok's katra he placed in yours when he took you aside in his universe. A safety precaution or something. Hearing about Mirror Kirk must have activated it.”

“Who cuts off a piece o' their soul and puts it inside somebody else?”

“Voldemort.” Joanna picked up the arm. “I don't know what I'm supposed to do with this.”

“Can I take Scotty back?” Sybok asked.
“Oh, yeah. Sure. Go right ahead.”

When Scotty and Sybok got back to Sarek's living room, things were already looking better. Parents were holding their children, Sarek was getting patched up, his mother was gone, and Mirror M'Benga was back in handcuffs. “See?” Sybok said. “No harm done.”

Jim's face turned grim and he set David down on the floor. “The Enterprise had one casualty.”

“No,” Scotty murmured. “I wouldn't have...”

“Why would he kill anyone?” Sybok asked. “That's not how he works. He brainwashes; he doesn't kill people.”

“This person couldn't be brainwashed,” Guinan said.

Sybok felt his heart stop. Of all the people...

“Who was it?” Scotty demanded, frantic. “Who was it? Tell me!”

“I'm sorry. I'm so sorry,” she said.

“Security found hir body in engineering a week ago,” Jim said, solemnly. “Hir neck had been snapped.”


“Keenser? No. No!” Scotty hyperventilated. “I wouldn't have...”

“Scotty,” Uhura grabbed his face. “Listen to me, this is not your fault. This is not your fault.”

“It is. Sie's dead. And I did it with my bare, bloody hands.”

A conversation Sybok had years ago replayed in his mind.

“It is far better to have delusions of grandeur than of mediocrity. You are the most powerful Vulcan since the Enlightenment, but you waste your talent on parlor tricks and tantric sex.”

“Have you been watching me?”

“Yes. I've watched as you've done nothing to aid Mr. Scott. You are the only person on that ship who can ease his pain, but you choose not to.”

“I'm not you. I can't go around brainwashing people. I don't have that—”

“You are the last Vulcan Master. The training of the next generation of telepaths falls on your shoulders. Stop playing assimilationist and take your rightful place.”

“It's not your fault, Scotty,” Sybok said. “It's mine. If I had trained you, if I'd looked at you for more than five minutes—god, I had you in my office! I tested your telepathy! If I had done what I was supposed to do, I might have seen what he had put there, or taught you how to protect yourself, none of this would have happened. I'm so sorry. I can make it to you. I swear, I can make it up to you.”

Jim and Cupcake stepped toward Scotty, uneasy smiles on their faces. “Scotty, we can help you, okay?” Jim said.

“This is just protocol,” Cupcake added. “You won't be in the brig for long. It probably won't ever go
“We'll have the boys in blue run some tests. We can fix this. It'll just take time.”

“What are you talking about?” Uhura asked, indignantly. “You're not throwing him in the brig. You're not going to run some tests.”

“I don't like this any more than you do,” Jim said, “but he killed a crew member and hijacked the Enterprise.”

“It wasn't him!”

“I know, but things have to go through the proper channels. We need evidence before we can declare him innocent.”

“Scotty, stand behind me.”

“What?” Scotty asked, still crying.

“If you don't want to go to jail or have Starfleet experiment on you for the rest of your life, stand behind me.”

Scotty stepped behind Uhura. Charlie, Sybok, and They Who Speak as One fell in line with her, forming a living barrier between Starfleet and Scotty.

“Jim, I think it would be best if you left now,” Spock said.

“Guys, this is ridiculous,” Jim said, exasperated. “I'm not the enemy here. We're your friends. We're your best friends. We were in your wedding. Bones, tell 'em. Tell 'em they don't have to be afraid of me.”

“Kid,” McCoy said, gruffly, “that's the problem, they aren't afraid of you.”

–

*Several months later...*

“COME ON, MY LITTLE PADAWANS,” SYBOK SAID TO HIS FOUR O'Clock CLASS. “EVERYBODY WHO TRIES THEIR HARDEST GETS CANDY!”

“I want candy!” Trelane shouted.

Valeris shushed him. “I am trying to concentrate.”

“Sorry.”

Keras, visibly humiliated, caught Scotty's eye. “How can you take this? We're grown men.”

Scotty shrugged, letting his pencil fall to the the ground. “Even grown men like candy.”

–

McCoy watched as Charlie imagined the new subdivision. Twenty new houses all done in El-Aurian style. He grinned at Guinan. “And I suppose y'all just happened to think this was a good place to stay after you spent so much time here?”
Guinan gave one of her enigmatic smiles, her ridiculous hat shading half her face. “So, our motives for helping you weren't completely selfless.”

—

“Victory!” Worf roared.

Pike threw down his racquet. “Calm down, it's just squash.”

“Says the man who lost.”

“What's with you today? You're unusually perky for a Klingon.”

“Valkrell is carrying my son.”

“Congratulations.”

“We will name him Mogh after the most explosive volcano on Qo’noS.” Worf took a long drink from water bottle. “Ahh... May Vina bear you many offspring, as well.”

Pike chuckled. “We're both a little past the age to start having kids.”

“I forget you Humans have such short lifespans. Perhaps that is why your culture has never accomplished anything of worth.”

—

“This really sucks,” Jim said, his brow furrowing on Elder Spock’s vidscreen. “Nobody's talking to me. It's like the band broke up.”

“Something similar happened in my timeline. We went our separate ways, but we came back together and things were even better than before.”

“Really?”

“Not at first, of course. In the beginning, everything we did took much longer than necessary. There were these young people in the way... After they died, things improved. Then I died. But when I came back, that was the best time we ever had together.”

“So, you're saying if I'm patient, everything will work itself out.”

“Yes, I suppose that is what I'm saying.”

—

“As I have told you seventeen times already, Sha-Ka-Ree will not allow Federation scientists... You will not revoke our visas, Mister President, and you will not threaten deprive us our security detail while visiting... My family will be in Paris tomorrow evening. We will settle these matters then. Goodbye.” T’Pring hung up her comm and headed back to her seat.

“See that?” Uhura said, pointing out the window. “That's Africa.”

“It is very big,” Data said, awestruck.

“It's a big universe.”
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