A Vulcan man, Syrok, and a human woman, Holly, begin their romantic relationship at Starfleet Academy. They navigate what it means to be in an inter-species relationship, and contend with the looming reality of Syrok's first pon farr.

This story took me approximately two years to construct, from start to finish, although I had the basic idea for what I wanted right from its inception. I wanted to write a story about a Vulcan man and a human woman coming together, culminating in pon farr.

Part of my interest comes from a fascination with Sarek and Amanda. What might have motivated people from two separate species to come together? Yet I didn't want to attempt their story, nor write this as Kirk and Spock. I wanted to create something of my own. And thus, this is my first story with original characters (OCs). Both Holly and Syrok are OCs, although this is still a Star Trek universe, and with cameos by Sarek, and mentions of the existence of Spock.

Part of my interest, of course, comes from a fascination with Vulcans as a whole. I wanted to write a fic that explored their culture with a lot more detail than I'm used to seeing. And part of that process means that I made a bunch of things up entirely, and other times stole ideas shamelessly from other writers.

Another thing that I wanted to begin to tackle with this story was a Dominant/submissive relationship that seemed at least in some way reasonable to me, and accurate to reality. It's way easier to write hot porn than it is to depict healthy power exchange, but I thought I'd have a go.

In the end, I only wish that I'd written it better, but I thought that writing it at all might be
more important than endlessly dedicating my time in search for perfection that will never come.
Chapter 1

Syrok moved toward the door to exit the classroom with the rest of his classmates. He had exactly 14 minutes and 3 seconds to get to his next class, a class that would take him 15 minutes to walk to at his normal rate. Today, obviously he would need to walk more quickly. If a Vulcan could be annoyed, he could certainly be described as such. But Vulcans did not get annoyed, so of course he was not. It was just that these things didn't tend to happen on his home planet; if a class was meant to end at a certain time, it did so. This was one of many things he'd had to adjust to during his time on Earth. He simply observed that the instructor had gone over his allotted time, and that now he would have to walk more quickly, or else be late. Being late was... unacceptable. Only now a female human was standing in his way. Intentionally.

“Hello.” Holly said, trying to give the Vulcan her most disarming smile. It was a practiced expression on her part to get her through most social interactions. One might think that interacting with a Vulcan, a culture known for its stoicism might make things a little easier, but no. If anything, she were only more nervous. The Vulcan, for his part, didn't smile in response, but neither did he glare. He simply stared. Holly wondered whether she'd annoyed him, but then chastised herself. Vulcans had unfailing control over their emotions. He couldn't be annoyed; she was simply thinking in too much of a human way. She would have to school her own emotions if she were to gain his respect.

“What is it that you want?” he asked flatly. Syrok wanted to ascertain her purpose, deal with it, and move on to his next class. His internal clock counted the seconds the engagement was taking and the speed at which he'd now have to walk. That speed was steadily, if infinitesimally, increasing.

Holly stood straight and looked him in the eye, shoving her awareness of her nerves aside. “It's my understanding that you're doing really well in this class.” Doing well was an understatement, of course. The instructor had posted a plot of the grades to the most recent test. There had been a single data point that spiked at 100%. All eyes in the class had been on the Vulcan. Everyone knew it had been his grade. Holly hadn't been so lucky. Her own grade lay in a small lump nearer to the failure end of the scale. While the others quietly seethed at the Vulcan's success, Holly had felt a longing pang of jealousy and desperation. She was sinking quickly and failure was not an option. She would need to take action. “I'm having significant difficulty in understanding the material. I believe it can be beneficial in such situations for one to seek out a tutor. I'd like to ask you for your help -- if you'll tutor me in this class in your spare time. I'd be really grateful and willing to discuss some terms of repayment if required, and I won't take it personally if you decline.”

Holly's heart sped but she kept her countenance calm. Straightforward. She had rehearsed the speech throughout much of the class -- thus losing even more of the class material, of course. She admired Vulcans superior intellects, superior logic and countenance... almost to the point where it hurt. While the others in her class had a certain discomfort and distaste for this Vulcan, the odd man out, she had only admiration. Approaching him was like approaching a rock star. Surely he would decline her offer, and yet she hoped with desperation that he would indulge her. She needed to pass. Failure was simply not an option. She also quietly worried about her offer of repayment. She'd debated with herself whether to even offer, but she was terrified that if she didn't he would certainly not help her. She didn't have any money, though. It was why she didn't already have a tutor. Holly's hope was that she could make it up to him in some other way -- perhaps doing his laundry or cleaning his dorm. Certainly she couldn't exchange tutoring for another class. Vulcans were perfect.

Syrok stared at the girl for a few seconds. A tutor. He was familiar with the concept. He didn't
know who this girl was, although he'd seen her and knew where she customarily sat. He had never been approached by one of his classmates before. He found the situation to be disorienting, and somewhat exhilarating. While he could not comprehend how the girl could be doing poorly in such a trivial class, he was intrigued at the potential to interact more closely with a human. Syrok's seconds ticked down to his next class. “Very well. I agree to meet you to discuss the class material. You must excuse me now. I must get to my next class. How should I contact you?” He didn't want to waste time jotting down his information for her and he doubted she would memorize it if he spoke it. It was better for him to contact her. She surprised him though by efficiently handing him a piece of paper containing the relevant details.

“Thank you.” her shoulders sagged slightly with relief. “I've taken the liberty of writing down my contact info for you. I'll try to remain easily available so that we can discuss an appropriate place and time for the meeting.” Holly kept her hands clasped gently in front of her, reminding herself do not touch him, do not offer a hand or any such thing. She stepped to the side gracefully and gave him a nod. She wouldn't keep him any longer.

Syrok returned the nod, assuming it was polite, and strode past the girl, already walking at the exact pace required of him to reach his next class on time. He glanced at the paper. Her name was Holly. What a curious human. The interaction had been surprisingly tolerable.
They would meet in a public place. Of course. Holly had been worried that Syrok would want to meet in her dorm. What would her roommate think? What would the Vulcan think? But of course the idea was absurd. Such a setting would be much too personal and considered improper. While it was almost a relief, Holly also felt a rising tension about meeting in the lounge of one of the on campus buildings and trying to maintain her emotions and her focus in such a busy and public setting. They would meet at 8:00 that evening. Of course Syrok had called that 20:00, but Holly had never gotten used to military time, even if it was a more logical system. She found herself having to do the calculation anew every time. It was one of her many deficiencies.

Syrok wondered what would be expected of him as a tutor. It wasn't really a concept that he'd dealt with on Vulcan. As he understood it, a tutor was like a second teacher, utilized by those students who were struggling with the material. It wasn't necessarily that Vulcans never struggled with new concepts, he supposed (although he couldn't recall any specific instances of this phenomenon personally), but it was more that they simply worked longer or thought harder about the topic that they were stuck on. There wasn't this phenomenon of falling behind. There were teachers for teaching. What was the logic in utilizing another? And there was much self-directed learning, during which time keeping up with some universal pace was not a concern. But on Earth, as always, things were done differently. And this Holly had requested him as a tutor.

He'd spent some of his free time that day reading up on the topic. It wouldn't do for him to simply repeat the same words and problems that the instructor had done. He would have to study his tutee and the inner workings of her reasoning to discover the flaw in her logic, and correct that core flaw. It was a fascinating prospect. He hadn't considered it before. Perhaps tutors weren't common on Vulcan also because Vulcans didn't tend to have flawed reasoning, at the core of it. Humans' logic, however, was often appallingly flawed, but apparently in different subtle ways. Syrok was intrigued by this puzzle, but still somewhat at a loss for how to go about it. Luckily there were many strategies available to him online. He would begin by inspecting her most recent test. Surely when he saw her attempted equations the flaw would easily present itself to him.

Holly arrived at the appointed time. Syrok was pleased. Humans, he'd noticed, often had a propensity for tardiness. Holly was apparently not one such human. She was surprisingly tolerable thus far. Holly sat herself near to Syrok at the small round table -- not across from him -- so that she would be able to easily see and share work. She was careful not to touch him or to sit in any way that would cause accidental touch to occur.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me.” Holly said politely.

“IT is not a problem.” Syrok said. It really was not a problem. He often found himself with extra time on his hands. He could afford this diversion to satisfy his own curiosity. “Let us proceed. I believe it is customary that we should begin by reviewing your most recent exam for flaws.”

Holly tensed slightly. Syrok wondered if he had done or said something wrong. Humans were such unpredictable beings, with many illogical layers of accepted social form. Yet he was sure that what he had said was true. It was customary to review the exam for flaws.

Nevertheless, she said “That is reasonable.” and seemingly with great reluctance, she produced the exam, sliding it to him and turning her gaze away. Syrok noted that her cheeks had colored slightly. Then his eyes went to the exam and he had to try very, very hard not to blink. How had she
possibly scored so low? He knew that several of the students had scored bafflingly low when he had seen the grade distribution at the beginning of class. Still, he could not totally comprehend how. The subject matter was trivial. Syrok did not let his alarm show as he paged through her exam, reading it in its entirety.

The flaws in her logic were numerous and inconsistent. Syrok wasn't sure where to even begin. The biggest flaw in her logic, as far as he could tell, was that she persisted in a class that was clearly beyond her capacity. Syrok wondered how to correct her reasoning skills and almost felt deficient himself, then felt his determination take hold. This puzzle would take more effort to solve than he had anticipated. He was surely up to the challenge.

Syrok didn't comment on Holly's deficiencies, much to her relief. She'd been prepared for it and determined not to take it personally, but she was grateful he hadn't mentioned it outright. They simply went through the exam problem by problem as she attempted to do the math under his gaze, as Syrok would stop her when she took a wrong turn and they'd discuss it at length, often going on tangents about the many points where she'd been totally lost. She took many notes and asked many questions. While Holly was greatly relieved to finally have someone showing her the way, the knot of anxiety in her stomach was still tight. It would be a long way out of the woods, and she still felt confused and humiliated about a great many things. In addition to the anxiety, there was also the hunger.

Holly's tummy rumbled noisily and she tensed with embarrassment and tried to ignore it. Syrok stopped talking and looked at her. “I believe you're showing signs of hunger.”

“It's no big deal.” Holly said with some unease. They had been working for an hour and a half now. It was getting somewhat late for a weeknight and nights were the worst.

Syrok felt his own hunger gnawing at his insides. He would be able to ignore it until he were back in his dorm, until his roommate was asleep and he could stuff himself with peanut butter... but could the girl wait so long? And why would she have to? Humans, he understood, didn't require the same high caloric intake of Vulcans. As they'd met well past supper, surely she shouldn't be experiencing hunger so soon. “Perhaps you did not consume enough calories during your evening meal.” Syrok continued.

Holly squirmed with discomfort and embarrassment. “Perhaps.” she answered simply, hoping to return to the task at hand.

“It is my understanding that humans' focus is not as clear when their caloric needs are not met. Therefore I suggest we set aside our work on mathematics for the moment and proceed to the cafe for nourishment.” Syrok was being bold, he knew, but he also knew that his reasoning was sound. It would also give him an excuse to eat. He saw many humans, both alone and in groups, at the cafe on the other end of the lounge. Syrok had seen them purchase “snacks” at all hours and for all social situations. Surely his suggestion was not out of line for her culture. She hesitated and he felt his stomach plummet. He must have been out of line for her culture. Was it the invitation itself, or did he seem uncharacteristically gluttonous?

Holly was actually taken a bit aback by his suggestion. Firstly, she hadn't known Vulcans to be so forward. But of course, his argument was sound. The real reason that she'd reacted with a bit of shock was that she simply didn't have the money for that kind of thing. Ever. She flooded with embarrassment but rushed to cover it. “I... seem to have left my credit chip in my dorm room.”

Ah, Syrok thought with relief. The reason for her hesitation was embarrassment at being so thoughtless with her belongings. It was her problem, not his. “Do not consider it.” he said easily, trying to dispel her tension. “We shall say that this first purchase is, as humans put it, 'on me', and

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you will surely make it up to me in the future.”

Holly's first response was relief: she wouldn't have to speak further about her funding and she would get some free food out of the deal, though she was a bit anxious about how she would make it up to him. She followed closely as Syrok was already on the move and was disappointed when Syrok indicated she should order first. She wasn't in the habit of spending someone else's money. Should she scope out the cheapest item on the menu? And what about the fact that he was Vulcan, foreign? Everything that the cafe sold was technically finger food, and she'd learned enough in her cultural studies to know that Vulcans did not do finger food.

Scanning the baked treats and thinking quickly, she chose a particularly decadent looking peanut butter muffin. She needed calories, she knew, and it wasn't that expensive or unusual of a purchase. She had been eying the chocolate one enviously but was determined to not have chocolate in the presence of a Vulcan. She knew that for them, it was an intoxicant, and so reasoned it might be rude somehow, or uncomfortable. Peanut butter was still pretty rich, though, and it would do.

Syrok watched the girl order a single item. It was what he'd expected would happen, and he was reassured that he understood the social custom well. He ordered the same. Social mimicry was usually a good strategy. And peanut butter was one of Syrok's favorites.

They returned to the table and for a while the two were silent, savoring their treat. Holly smirked at Syrok, watching him eat his muffin with plastic-ware rather than his hands. She knew that it was considered inappropriate in his culture to eat with ones hands -- one learned such basic facts in even an introductory level cultural studies course. And she knew it had something to do with his sensitive fingers and contact telepathy. She wondered whether it was an inherent discomfort, or if the rumors were true that it was akin to masturbation. She itched to ask but couldn't quite bring herself to. She asked something else instead. “I know in your culture it isn't normal to eat with your hands. Does it bother you when I do?”

“It would be illogical for it to bother me. You do not have the same custom.”

“Oh.” Holly blinked. She would have been willing to change her behavior if it had bothered him, but she had forgotten that things did not typically “bother” Vulcans. “Why exactly is it your custom to not eat with your hands?” she asked curiously.

Syrok stared at her for too long. “I assume you are trying to ask delicately whether the rumors are true about it being akin to performing a sexual act.” he said in his usual flat tone. Holly wondered if his tone was more flat than usual and frowned worriedly. “Just because Vulcans do not deal in rumors does not mean that we are unaware of them.” he stated, perhaps a bit coldly. He'd been through this kind of conversation before, unfortunately. “I assure you it is no more than that: a rumor. It is simply an uncomfortable thing to do for a contact telepath.”

“I see.” Holly's face flushed with humiliation and shame for asking. Because she had been thinking what he'd implied. “Thank you for the clarification. I apologize if I was out of line for asking.”

“There is no need to apologize. In some ways it is rather refreshing for someone to ask about my culture rather than to assume.”

“Oh.” Holly looked from her empty muffin paper to the math materials sprawled across the table. It was a Tuesday, and she hadn't yet begun Thursday's homework. Their time had been spent going over the exam, and now it was getting rather late. She had class early in the morning.

Syrok must have read her concerns, or had his own. “Perhaps we should adjourn for the evening.”
he suggested. “If you like, we could meet here again tomorrow to discuss the homework assignment.” he offered. He thought it would be considered polite. Also, he had no confidence that his tutee could accomplish the homework on her own, after what he'd seen tonight. Since he'd offered to help her, Syrok felt some personal responsibility.

Holly looked up to him with overwhelming gratitude. “Thank you, that would be great. I really appreciate this.” she said. She wanted to say more, but she felt she'd already come off as awkwardly emotional. She withheld herself from saying more.

“It is not a problem.” Syrok said, gathering his own things. Holly rushed to gather her own, being careful to not make any physical contact. “Shall we meet at the same hour?”

“That works for me.” She stood and slung her bag over her shoulder. She looked to the door. “I live in the north campus dorms. You?”

“West campus.” he answered. Holly knew the ones. So, Syrok was wealthier. She couldn't say that she was surprised.

“I guess I'll see you tomorrow, then.” she nodded and made a quick retreat, feeling awkward, but relieved. Perhaps she wouldn't fail after all.
Chapter 3

Holly milled around trying to blend in. She was already 5 minutes late for her Vulcan language class, but she'd come across some social function and there was pizza. She meandered over and grabbed a plate, stacking two slices.

“I can't believe how dry these functions are. The pizza is all that keeps me going. Did you hear Professor Karmac earlier?” some girl spoke to her, grabbing her own slices.

“I know what you mean.” Holly said emphatically, rolling her eyes. Before she could get pulled into a conversation she couldn't escape from, she moved toward the edge of the crowd.

“You're taking off already?” some guy she didn't know asked.

Holly looked slightly panicked. “Yeah... I have a thing. If Karmac notices, just say I went to the lavatory.”

The man grinned. “Sure thing.”

She knew the man wouldn't say anything, because he didn't know who Holly was, because she didn't know who he was, because she had no business being at this function. She wondered vaguely who Professor Karmac was, and what he taught.

She made her way toward the door, and once safely out of the building she made a bee-line to her Vulcan class. She stuffed her face as she walked quickly and had barely finished eating when she finally slunk into her seat. Professor Hindley glowered at her but didn't interrupt his own class to acknowledge her. This wasn't the first time she'd been late. Nor would it be the last. This class was close to lunch time, and Holly had to be inventive. Not to mention, this class was painfully easy. Holly followed along and took notes while hiding her math homework and focusing on it instead. She wanted to have something to show for herself by the time she met with Syrok that night.

“Holly, perhaps you would like to participate?” her annoyed professor asked her in Vulcan. She looked up.

“Of course, Professor.”

“What is the conjugation of the verb...?” Holly sighed inwardly and easily conjugated back to her professor, much to his consternation. She'd gone over these lessons weeks ago when she'd become bored with the pace of the class. And since she immersed herself with every Vulcan vid she could find in her spare time, she was rapidly outpacing her peers. This class would keep her GPA up. This class, hopefully, would help her keep her scholarship. She would not keep it, however, if her mathematics kept getting interrupted. When Professor Hindley's eyes finally slid away from her, she flipped through her pages of notes she'd made with Syrok and began her problem again.

Holly made her way through the same event she'd gotten the pizza from, booking it there as soon as her Vulcan class had ended. To her delight, there was still food, and a few people milling about. This was a good luck day, which was extra good because she couldn't afford to get to the free meal at the temple across town tonight while still making it back to her tutoring session in time. She loaded a plate with bits of fruit, salad, and cookies that remained. To her left she heard a girl gushing as she shook a man's hand.
“Professor Karmac, I love your work on proto-Indo-European history. Your conjectures and supporting evidence are revolutionary.”

Holly rolled her eyes as she filled her plate and didn't listen for his response. Suddenly, he turned to her.

“I'm sorry, I don't know if I remember you.” he began, looking at Holly.

“Holly,” she put out her hand to shake his, giving her warmest smile. “I sit near the back and don't say much. I'm afraid I don't have anything unique to say but to echo what my peer has already stated: your work on proto-Indo-European history is revolutionary.” she gushed, staring up at him with her most disarming smile.

“Oh, well, thank you ladies.” he nodded to both Holly and the previous girl, who now looked a bit put out at being ignored.

Before Professor Karmac could further ruminate on Holly's origins, she made her escape. “I'm sorry if I'm being rude, Professor, but I'm afraid I have another engagement to get to.” she looked at her watch for emphasis.

“Oh yes, of course, by all means.” he said and she scurried away -- back to her dorm to store the food and do some more work before her last class of the day. She had a good hour and a half to kill.

Syrok went to the designated place at the designated time. He had no expectations for the evening. No, that was not true -- he had expectations. He expected that Holly would not have begun the homework, because he expected she was utterly lost. Syrok himself had completed the work in minutes. He hadn't bothered to bring anything to the meeting this time. He knew that Holly would bring what was needed.

“Sorry for being late.” Holly said as she threw her things down and was quickly seated. Interesting, he mused. Holly was indeed late, by two minutes. In Syrok's experience, most humans would not have accepted a two minute tardiness as being late. It was an incongruity that he had found exceedingly illogical. It nearly annoyed him. But Holly hadn't attempted to disguise or dismiss her tardiness. She was, once again, surprisingly tolerable.

“I lost track of time as I was working on the assignment.” she pulled it out of her bag and slid it toward Syrok, being careful to keep her hand to herself. Syrok lifted the paper and begin to review it without comment. He hadn't expected her to attempt the assignment. He was again pleasantly surprised.

“Much of your work is incorrect.” he stated simply.

Holly wasn't exactly disappointed to hear it. She'd expected as much. “Please help me to correct it.” was all that she said.

Syrok gave her a long look. She wondered what it meant, but he didn't bother to explain it. He lowered his gaze to her work again and begin to pick it apart slowly as she gave what answers she could to his questions, and made corrections to her calculations. She was determined to absorb every bit of information from him that she possibly could. Syrok, likewise, was interested to weed out the flaws in her logic and correct them, feeling immensely pleased with himself whenever she made some improvement. Holly certainly made this class more interesting. He'd been terribly bored before.
“You have improved since our last meeting.” Syrok said. They'd been meeting with some regularity for the past month now. “I can see now why you did not drop the class.”

“Of course I didn't drop the class.” Holly felt slightly insulted while at the same time she quietly gushed from the praise. She'd improved, and he'd noticed.

“I had initially thought it illogical for you to continue while doing so poorly. I see now the value tutoring may provide humans.”

A part of Holly bristled at the statement. He was essentially insulting her entire species, implying that his was superior. But then, Vulcans were superior, she supposed. They certainly did n't seem to need tutors. “We have many deficiencies.” she admitted humbly.

“That is true.” Syrok agreed easily enough. “However, I find that humans have many positive attributes as well. For example, your own determination to persevere in spite of your lack of immediate aptitude for mathematics.”

Holly raised her eyes to him in surprise and felt a sudden great warmth at the comment. As far as she knew, it was n't customary for Vulcans to give out compliments. Of course he must not be giving a compliment, just an honest assessment of the situation as he saw it. That almost made his words feel more valuable. “Thank you for that observation.”

“There is no need for thanks. But might I ask a personal question?”

Syrok was full of surprises tonight. Holly did her best to hide her surprise. “Of course.”

“What was the motivation behind your belief that you could, in fact, learn this material? What was the basis for such an illogical determination?”

Holly opened her mouth in surprise and was unsure how to answer. Syrok wondered why she hesitated. Was she simply deficient in this capacity as well? Humans, with their lack of meditative practices, often didn't seem to be aware of their own motivations. Then again, perhaps he had committed some social faux pas in asking. “Was it rude for me to ask you such a thing?” he inquired with growing concern. She had given him permission to ask, after all. “I want to assure you that my intentions are not to pry into private details that are inappropriate for discussion. But rather, I find that I do not understand much of the illogical way humans have of thinking, and I thought to perhaps try and understand you better.”

Oh, so that was why he was so forward tonight. It was perfectly logical, of course, Holly decided. Just as she'd hoped to learn more about Vulcans through Syrok, he'd clearly been hoping to use her as an example by which to judge her species. “Oh, it's perfectly alright. The question was just so out of left field.” Holly tried to recover herself, running her fingers back to tangle in her bushy hair.

“Left field?”

“It is a sports related idiom.” she winced inwardly. She was usually so careful with her language -- both in general, and particularly around Syrok. What with her field of study being in communications, languages, diplomacy, she was determined to make herself clearly understood. “What I mean is the question was unexpected.”
“Ah.”

“I suppose I hadn't given it serious consideration until now. I hadn't reflected on it.”

*Ah,* he thought. So her motivation was simply illogical, he thought dismissively. It was in keeping with what he understood of humans, a species motivated more by their passions than their reasoning.

“I suppose I could give you a somewhat logical reason.” Holly continued, oblivious to the judgment. “For example, I do well in my other classes, and so I have a general sense of confidence in my ability to learn, and confidence in my general intelligence. I have taken the prerequisite classes for this class, and I've done well enough.”

Syrok wondered what she meant by the vague term “well enough”. He knew that she had received a score of C or better as per the requirements to enter the class.

“However,” she continued, “I think that my main motivation is an my determination that failure is not an option.”

“Failure is certainly an option.”

Holly looked carefully at her hands which were laid flat on the table before her. She found herself battling a number of emotions as she discussed this topic, then chastised herself for being so easily overcome. “Failure would have... profound and unpleasant consequences that would likely effect the rest of the course of my life.”

“I see.” Syrok did not really see, though. He understood what she had told him, so it was not a lie, but he felt certain that there was more to it.

“I feel I'm giving you a poor explanation, Syrok.” Holly offered apologetically. “I'm illogically emotional about this topic.”

“Please, do not concern yourself with it. We will speak of it no further.”

“I'm not upset that you asked me.” she corrected him. “And I am willing to discuss the matter further. I simply have uncomfortable emotions surrounding the topic.”

_Fascinating_, Syrok thought. She was uncomfortable but willing to press forward. As far as he knew, this was incongruous behavior. When a human was made _uncomfortable_, that meant that a subject should be dropped. He'd learned as much in an introductory level cultural studies course. But as expected, such a low level education couldn't even begin to touch on the nuances of an entire people. He refocused his attention on this strange human more closely, and did not interrupt.

“I'm at Starfleet Academy by way of scholarship.” Holly began, hands flat to keep them from trembling, or from tangling in her hair as nervous habit. The plastic beneath her palms was solid and grounding. She hoped that her voice wouldn't waver. “I don't have any family to speak of, or any support system, or really any money. I've had what might be considered a difficult time of it so far.” She did n't meet Syrok's gaze as she spoke. “My only ambition, my only _hope_, my _dream_... is to join Starfleet. If I could only join Starfleet... then hopefully I’ll be able to feel proud of myself, to feel accomplished, to feel as if I’ve risen up from the depths, up to greatness. I want to do something important, and to me this feels important, and _worthy_. My _only_ focus for so long has been school. I needed to be the top of my class in order to get the required scholarship. Now there are minimum standards I need to meet each year in order to keep that scholarship. If I were to fail this class, or drop the class to try and take it later, I would no longer meet those requirements.
Without the scholarship, I would be forced to leave Starfleet. The probability of me recovering gracefully from such a situation is low.”

Syrok was surprised. Those scholarships did not come easily, and he hadn't realized the extent of her intelligence. For the past three weeks, they'd spoken of little at these meetings other than mathematics. Neither one had attempted small talk, nor had they spoken of other topics. Syrok had had no basis for his assumption of her below average intelligence, he realized. He knew abstractly that humans were often not as well rounded as Vulcans, and could struggle in one area while excelling in another. This must be the case with Holly. He also now realized the gravity of her situation and her dedication to her lessons. “I had underestimated you.” he admitted. “I admire your dedication.”

Holly positively beamed with happiness and pride. “Thank you.” she said gratefully.

“It is understandable that one would experience emotional difficulty with a matter concerning such serious consequences.”

“It's surprising to hear a Vulcan say so.” she laughed slightly.

“We have emotions, Holly. We simply control them.”

Holly was flooded with relief and admiration. For years she'd continued to struggle with her own emotional control, and had idolized his people for their dedication to that path. For him to assure her that they had the same struggles, if even in a small way, was a relief of sorts. An inspiration of something to strive toward, an ideal that was just a bit more attainable. She would learn from this Vulcan, she vowed to herself. She would learn more than mathematics. She would learn greater control, if she could. She was determined not to fail -- not in schooling, and not in this. “Of course.” was all she replied.

“Do you feel you are prepared for the test tomorrow?” Syrok asked, turning the topic back to the reason for their meeting.

“I think so.” Holly couldn't quite refrain from biting her lip nervously as she looked at the papers spread before her.

“I believe so as well.”

Holly beamed, and Syrok was gratified. He was solving this puzzle. They would accomplish this task.
Chapter 5

Holly's heart was going to beat out of her chest, surely, as she waited while the professor handed back the exams. Her eyes lit up when hers finally hit her desk. A-. She'd done it. She looked up toward the front of the room where she could see the back of Syrok's head. Of course he would have gotten a 100%. She willed him to look back to her, and as if by magic, he turned his head slightly to look over his shoulder in her direction. She held up her paper so that he could see. Subtly, he seemed to smile with his eyes, and gave her a nod, before turning around. Holly could have swooned. Carefully, she sought to reign her emotions in, so that she wouldn't miss the rest of the class.

Syrok, too, was pleased. Together, they had accomplished the task. Holly would maintain her scholarship, and Syrok had proved himself to be an effective tutor. Syrok wondered whether it was still necessary for him to tutor Holly, and found with some small surprise that he did n't wish to stop meeting with her. The illogic of this desire concerned him, but he acknowledged that he enjoyed her company, and could still learn a great deal about human culture from her. Unless she indicated otherwise, he would continue to meet with her regularly.

Holly sat down at their usual table. “Did you want to go over the test?” she asked. She had done well, but she knew that Syrok liked to nit-pick.

Still, there was hardly need to do math tonight. It was the last night most students would be on campus before the winter holiday -- a month long vacation before the start of the next semester. Truthfully, she really just wanted to see Syrok again and was willing to use mathematics as an excuse. Holly hadn't managed to make any friends because she was so focused on work and food acquisition, that she really rarely had time for conversation with anyone other than Syrok. Also, she found him faultlessly attractive, both physically and mentally. She pushed those feelings to the back of her mind when she could. Certainly they were not reciprocated.

“I do not think that will be necessary.” he answered her. “As it is the last night before the winter break, and as the latest exam was a success, I believe it is customary that we take part in some celebratory activity. Perhaps in the form of baked goods.”

“Oh, um....” Holly was surprised and certainly pleased by this turn of events -- the Vulcan was really letting his hair down tonight. And then she remembered. The last time they'd eaten together, he had paid, and it was her turn to reciprocate. She searched her mind for some out -- she’d left her credit chip at home again, she wasn't hungry, she was confused about class and would prefer to stay on topic....

“I have already speculated that you do not have sufficient funding to provide the food. As I do, however, have access to ample credits deposited into my account by my family, it would make the most sense for me to pay for both of us.”

Holly found herself smiling. “That would be lovely.”

“Good.” Syrok turned and held his hand forward in a beckoning manner to allow Holly to lead the way to the cafe across the lounge. He was pleased with how well this was going. Since the revelation of her inherent intelligence during their first significant conversation, Syrok had been determined to get to know Holly better. His own understanding of humans was clearly deficient, and he would rectify that deficiency. This evening presented a perfect opportunity to do so.
They ordered the same peanut butter muffins they had before. Syrok was pleased to see Holly so unabashedly cheerful about the situation. His decision had clearly been a good one.

“So, what would you like to talk about?” Holly ventured, still delightfully surprised at the turn of events.

“If you do not mind, I would like to know more about you. I find my understanding of humans to be deficient.”

“Do you want to know more about humans or about me?”

“You are a human.”

“I am not representative of my entire species, Syrok.”

“I find I do not have specific questions about human culture. If I did, I would be able to research the answers for myself. I am aware of my deficiency only due to your ability to surprise me, and so I hope to know more about you in order to discover my own misunderstandings.”

Holly mulled it over. It wasn't that different from what she was hoping to learn from him. Her cultural studies courses only seemed to get her so far, even with her focus being on Vulcan. “That’s reasonable. And maybe you'll tell me a bit about yourself as well, so I might understand your culture better.” she smiled disarmingly.

“That would be amenable.”

“What would you like to know?”

“I am curious as to your area of specialty. I assume it is not mathematics based, due to your difficulty with the subject matter, combined with the fact that you must have a very high GPA in order to maintain your scholarship.”

“Your assumptions are correct.” she nodded. “I'm specializing my studies in intergalactic culture and diplomacy, with actually a minor on Vulcan language and culture.”

“You are specializing in my own language and culture and yet you had not mentioned it before now.”

“It didn't seem to be relevant.”

“Logical.”

“What about you?”

“I will not bore you with the details, but simply put, astrophysics and aerospace engineering.”

“Interesting.”

“You have an interest in such topics?” he asked, somewhat surprised.

“I do. I go to lectures and read papers on the simpler topics that are designed more for the general population, as I don't have much of a knack for the technical details. But I do find the subject matter to be interesting. But then, how could I not be interested in the stars, yet want to join Starfleet?” she smiled.

“There are a number of ways in which that could be the case.”
“I suppose you're right, but what I mean to say is that part of my interest in Starfleet is due to my own fascination with the stars -- with space.”

“I see.”

A short silence ensued and Holly jumped in with a topic of her own. “What will you be doing over winter holiday?” she asked.

“I will remain on campus.”

“Really?” she did not hide her surprise. “I thought for sure you'd go home to your family.”

“As the standard flight takes between ten and twenty days, there is no time.” Holly flushed with a bit of embarrassment at not having known that. She'd never had the money to go off-world, not even to the moon or Mars, so she'd certainly not calculated how far out Vulcan was. She hadn't realized it was so far out. “And in any event,” Syrok continued, “this time holds no special significance on Vulcan, and my parents are busy with their own work. They would not be available to visit.”

“Oh. I'm sorry.”

“There is no need to apologize. I am not concerned. In fact, my situation is quite common.”

“I see.”

“Might I inquire as to your own plans for the coming holiday?”

“I'll be spending my time moving between various cafes to sleep, and trying to grab food mostly from various religious functions.”

“Why would you sleep at a cafe when you have a dorm room? That seems illogical.”

“The low income housing, like most of the buildings on campus, is closed over the holiday.” she explained.

“That seems an illogical thing for the school to do. Certainly those with the least money would most require access to housing. I was unaware of this situation.”

“To use your own quote: 'I am not concerned'. Really, I had to deal with this last year.” Then Holly's eyes lit up. “But if you're around, we could hang out.” she grinned. “We can do math if you want, or we could, you know... do other things. Like friends.”

Friends? Syrok felt a sliver of discomfort and concern. This was a new and startling development, and he was unsure how to respond.

Holly seemed to catch herself and looked embarrassed. “Oh, I didn't mean it like Vulcan friendship. I know the word has more serious connotations for you. Perhaps a better description would be acquaintances?”

Ah. Human friendship. A vague term that could mean a great number of things, he recalled. It was one of many terms and concepts which he believed had been translated poorly. Syrok was not fond of it. “'Hanging out'... would be acceptable. What sorts of things do you propose we do?”

“We could talk, watch movies, take walks, play games... those sorts of things.”

“That is agreeable.”
Holly grinned. “This will be so much better than last winter break!”

“Indeed. I found last year's break to be quite... tiresome.”

“You were bored.” she grinned.

“I am easily bored. It is one of my own failures, I am sure. I try to use my spare time to meditate, prepare more for my classes, and I do much reading on a variety of topics that catch my attention. Still, I find I am often... bored, as you say... for stretches of time.”

“You must be bored out of your mind in our math class.”

“I assure you, my mental faculties remain entirely intact. I do, however, find the subject material to be exceedingly easy.”

Holly's laughter tinkled out before she could stop herself, fully aware that she wasn't practicing the lauded emotional reservation she'd learned in her classes on Vulcan culture and diplomacy. But she was starting to question the veracity of much of the information she'd been taught, because Syrok didn't seem at all put out by any of her small displays. Perhaps such stoicism was more important in political settings, she mused.

“Why are you even taking this class?” she asked curiously. “You seem like you either knew this stuff going in or figured it out pretty fast. Couldn't you test out?”

It was a fair question, and one that caused Syrok no small amount of annoyance that he would never admit to. “Indeed I've tested out of a number of Starfleet's classes. However, there is an upper bound on what can be tested out of by any one student while still officially maintaining Starfleet status. I was informed in no uncertain terms that if I continued to attempt to test out of everything instead of following the program, it would be wiser for me to simply sign on as a consultant much in the same way that my parents now do. As I intend to fully join Starfleet, I must resign myself occasionally to a slower paced class.”

“That's stupid.” Holly stated bluntly, and while Syrok couldn't help but agree with her inwardly, he didn't allow himself to say so aloud. “I think I kind of know how you feel with the boredom.”

Holly offered when it was clear that Syrok was holding his tongue on the ills of bureaucracy. “I often feel the same in my Vulcan language class.” She looked up suddenly with interest. “You know, if you ever want to speak in your own tongue, I wouldn't mind the experience at all. I'm sure it could only help me to improve my own ability.”

Syrok was intrigued by the idea. “Perhaps sometimes we will do that.”

“Do you have any Vulcan friends... or acquaintances here?”

“I do not.” Syrok was silent for a moment. “In fact, you are currently my only acquaintance on campus.”

Holly felt inordinately pleased and privileged. She felt humbled by the revelation. “You are my only acquaintance as well.” she confided.

Syrok was somewhat surprised by that news. In his own case, he had no reason to seek out the company of others. He focused on his studies. He also found that others did not tend to approach him. He rarely saw other Vulcans on campus, because it was not the norm for a Vulcan to want to join Starfleet. But even those he came into contact with thought in very much the same terms that he did: they were here to study, and that was that. He knew from observation that humans, however, found any excuse to collect in groups and spend time with one another. No humans had
really approached him though, he suspected because his lack of emotional display was somewhat off-putting to them. He had never been concerned by it, just cognizant of it. Holly, on the other hand, seemed to exhibit many of the behaviors that humans were fond of. She showed her emotion freely and often, and seemed to generally be in a “good mood”. She was courteous and culturally sensitive. He was unsure why Holly would have no other acquaintances.

“I am surprised by that.” he said honestly.

Holly had to try very hard to remind herself that that was not a compliment. Still, she felt herself blushing slightly. “I often find I don't have much in common with my peers. For starters, I have no interest in intoxicating myself.” Her decision not to drink wasn't something Holly shared often with others. It only lead to uncomfortable conversations. Why not? Had she tried it? Perhaps she could try just a little. Or if she abstained, why not at least come to a party? Never mind that drunk classmates weren't nearly as entertaining as they imagined themselves to be. But she knew that Vulcans at least prided themselves on clarity of thought, and tended to avoid intoxication. She wasn't really sure whether they indulged in anything at all -- another one of those details that was vague in her cultural studies, but she felt confident at least that she wouldn't be harassed by sharing this fact about herself now.

“That is a reasonable course of action.” Syrok knew that one of the main pastimes of his fellow students was to regularly intoxicate themselves with alcohol. He personally couldn't see the sense in it, especially since it caused them to behave even less sensibly than was normal. Syrok himself avoided chocolate fastidiously. He had no interest in making a such fool of himself.

“Might I ask you why you are so interested in my people?” Syrok asked suddenly. “It is just that many of your peers seem to feel quite differently.”

Syrok had put it as delicately as possible, she knew, but what he meant was clear. Prejudice. He was keenly aware of the cultural divide, that his kind were referred to as asexual, as computers, as hard and uncaring, as empty. Holly was disgusted by such attitudes and felt almost ashamed of them, as if she herself were part of the problem. She knew it wasn't logical to think such a thing, but it still made her distinctly uncomfortable. She certainly didn't have such notions about Vulcans. If anything, she had perhaps a bit of naive hero worship.

“What first drew me to your culture were the ideas of logic, truth, and emotional control. These are paradigms that I also highly value. In fact, my own attempts at meditation and emotional control are largely responsible for my own success in life. As I'd mentioned before ... I had sort of a difficult past.” She didn't explain that she'd had to deal with constantly alternating bouts of rage and fear. She didn't talk about being pushed through the system from one home to the next, which alternated between neglect and abuse, or the isolation of orphanages and group homes.

“I am glad my culture could offer you something of value.” Syrok felt pleased. He was not used to hearing anything about Vulcan described in positive terms by his fellow students. At even the best of times, they seemed indifferent. And he'd heard many whispered, and some loud, conversations about his people -- things that were glaringly untrue.

“I hope my own culture can offer you something of value as well.”

“It offers Starfleet.”

“Many cultures are involved in Starfleet.”

“And yet Starfleet Academy is on Earth, and the largest demographic of Starfleet officers are humans.”
“True.” she smiled.
Holly grinned at Syrok as he opened the door to his dormitory to let her in. He glanced around the hallway in paranoia and didn't see anyone else. Holly giggled.

They had discussed at length online the idea of meeting to watch a movie. Holly had been careful to bring several of her own with her before she'd been kicked out of her dorm, because she doubted that Syrok would have any. While Syrok had agreed to the idea initially, he had not been thinking far enough ahead. It was clear now that they would have to use his dorm room for the viewing. The conservative Vulcan was surely scandalized, and it amused Holly greatly.

“Syrok I am sure no one will mind that I'm here. We are allowed to have people of the opposite sex in our rooms.”

“My concern is not one of breaking any official rules.”

“Not everyone who visits is sleeping together.” she rolled her eyes.

“Of course not.” He knew that sleeping, in this case, was a euphemism for more intimate relations. Now he did sound scandalized. Holly snickered again.

Holly carefully removed her shoes upon entering the dorm. She idly wondered whether his roommate gave the same courtesy. As far as she could tell it was standard across Syrok's entire planet, but the customs and practices on Earth around shoes were varied.

It was deliciously warm in his room. Holly recalled that Vulcans were from a desert plant. It made sense that he would prefer it hot, and as he was in the more expensive housing he had access to the temperature controls for his room, whereas her own dorms were set out of her control. She peeled off the thick cream colored sweater she regularly wore to stave off the cool damp air of San Francisco, and saw that Syrok also removed his zip-up shirt. He still wore long sleeves, she noted, but this shirt was thinner and less rigid. He seemed more relaxed in the warmth. She liked seeing some of his ever present tension ease, and it was as she observed this difference that she wondered what it must be like to see Vulcans on their home planet. Were they all as stiff as they appeared on Earth? Or were they at ease in their element? If only she had the credits and time for the trip, she longed to find out.

Holly noticed that Syrok had already moved his roommate's chair in front of his desk in addition to his own so that they could sit very properly while watching the movie. She ignored the chair and flopped onto the bed.

Syrok staved off annoyance. “I have taken the liberty of moving my roommate's chair to the desk. I have a reasonable certainty that he will not mind.” he said in flat tones, eying her on the bed. Syrok noted her t-shirt and was at least glad she wasn't dressed more scandalously, as many of the girls on campus regularly were.

“I'm sure you're right. However, the bed will be far more comfortable and give a better view. As a human, I find this to be more casual.” she declared, gently crossing her arms over her chest in defiance, but giving an amused smirk. She knew that she would win if she used the human cultural argument. Syrok didn't complain, but looked distinctly uncomfortable. She tossed him her memory stick. “I saved several of my movies off my main hard drive before I left my room. I assumed you wouldn't have anything that wasn't explicitly educational.”
“That was a reasonable assumption.” Syrok answered, calling up the device on his computer.

“I would recommend that we watch an old Earth classic. It's called The Rocky Horror Picture show.”

“What an odd name.” he commented.

“It's an odd movie. It's one of my favorites.” she grinned.

“Very well.” Syrok began the film and moved to sit alongside of Holly on the bed. She carefully moved near her own edge and folded her hands in her lap in front of her, giving him ample space so that they wouldn't accidentally touch. He scowled a bit but supposed it would be acceptable.

Syrok was confused throughout the movie and inundated Holly with cultural questions, all of which she was thrilled to answer. He was also scandalized, of course. And he was also fascinated. Human sexuality was not something he knew much about, and Holly did her best to explain how and why this movie was considered deviant for its time, and even now, so long after. He could understand why.

Holly would have liked to have been cuddling during the movie. She'd spent nearly every day of break with Syrok and it was their last week alone together before school would start up full force once more. It had been an incredible three weeks. They'd played all manner of games in a variety of local cafes. Most of the games Syrok had never played, and he'd even taught her how to play chess, although she lost horribly every time. She didn't mind though. She was just happy to have someone to play with. He'd frequently purchased food for her and so she had no trouble finding enough to eat like she'd had the previous winter break. And they'd spoken in Vulcan as well off and on. Syrok had even seemed to be impressed with her ability. She wasn't perfect, of course, and he corrected her mistakes, but she could tell that he was impressed.

She was desperately attracted to him and wanted to say or do something about it, but wasn't sure how to make a move, or what the correct move would be with a Vulcan.

“Are there sexual deviants on Vulcan?” she asked curiously. Syrok flushed green and didn't answer at first.

“I am sure there must be deviants in every culture.”

“That is such a non-answer.” she teased. “Are you a deviant, Syrok?” Holly grinned.

He looked at her. “I am going to assume based on your tone and affect that you are teasing me, and that it is not necessary that I answer such a personal and inappropriate question.”

Holly wilted. “I'm sorry. I didn't intend to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“Apology accepted.” he turned his gaze back to the credits.

“It's just that I'm terribly attracted to you, Syrok. I've been wanting to say something about it, but I wasn't sure how, and so I attempted to tease to dispel tension.”

Syrok was silent for a long time. Holly wanted to kick herself. She'd obviously made him uncomfortable again. “Have I said something wrong? I haven't been able to learn about Vulcan romance or courtship rituals in any of my cultural studies classes. I wanted to approach the topic delicately....” she started to ramble on in a panic.

“Please do not be distraught.” Syrok interrupted her. “As always, I appreciate your
straightforwardness in this matter. I am similarly at a loss when it comes to human customs in this matter. However, my reaction was not one of offense. It is just that I have a bondmate already, back on Vulcan.”

Holly was absolutely humiliated and regretful. “You're... that's like marriage, right? You're married? It's just that... well you never mentioned her, and you're quite young.”

“It is not exactly the same as a marriage. We are not... romantically involved. We were bonded when we were seven. We may one day become married.”

Holly was at a loss. Seven? Was it like an arranged marriage, then? It sounded similar to her, but she didn't want to insult him further by asking. One thing she did understand, though, was that Vulcans were fiercely monogamous. Romance or no, Syrok was not going to entertain romantic or sexual feelings for another. “I'm so sorry, Syrok. It was completely inappropriate of me.”

“I assure you, nothing inappropriate has occurred.”

“Of course.” Holly sat tensely for a moment longer. “Perhaps I should go.” she offered.

Syrok felt distinctly uncomfortable. He wondered if he had somehow led Holly to believe he was romantically interested or available. The thought that she would be attracted to him had not even occurred to him. He hadn't mentioned T'Rena because there had never been reason to. Now he felt as if he'd made some horrible faux pas. Holly seemed uncomfortable and wanted to go. It would be wrong of him to keep her. He quickly retrieved her memory stick for her and handed it to her. In her haste and discomfort, her fingers accidentally brushed against his for just a second as she took the stick. He wasn't even sure she'd been aware of the mistake -- she was usually so careful. But she was upset now, and distracted. And now Syrok knew exactly how upset and distracted.

The humiliation, shame, and self loathing washed through him. In the background was lust and desire, admiration. And then also fear, self directed anger, and a desperate need to leave. Syrok tensed for a second as he felt all of this. All of that had come from her? He had caused all of that? Syrok once again felt that his understanding of humans must be deficient. Holly had not noticed the touch, and was already on the other side of the room throwing on her shoes in a hurry, her bag slung over a shoulder. Syrok felt terrible and did n't know how to correct the situation.

“Thanks for the company.” she said hurriedly. “I'll let myself out.” she reached for the door with a shaky hand and was quickly gone.

Syrok would need to meditate on this.
Chapter 7

Syrok hadn't heard from Holly for the rest of the week. Before the incident, they'd been together almost every day. After... he waited for three days before trying to contact her by email, asking if she wanted to get together to play chess. She had not responded. Concerned, Syrok had walked to several of the cafes he'd met her in before, but didn't find her. He knew her spring schedule as they'd shared them with one another, however, and he knew that she would be taking the next mathematics course, as would he. They were currently scheduled for separate time slots, different instructors, but they had agreed to continue to meet anyway. Now Syrok was not so certain of their meetings. He rearranged his schedule so that he would be in the same time slot. He knew he was being illogical, but he had come to admire Holly and enjoy her company. In a sea of constant social uncertainty, Holly had been a safe harbor of sorts. It would be a shame if one social misstep could end their acquaintanceship.

Syrok was pleased when he saw her on the first day of class, and pleased at the look of surprise she gave him. He nodded cordially, but she didn't respond. Class was beginning. He would wait. When class ended, Syrok stood in front of Holly on her way out, blocking her way intentionally as she had done to him in the previous semester. “Holly. Would you like to meet later to discuss class?”

Holly looked at him for a long time before answering. She wanted to meet more than anything, and that worried her. She wondered whether this was a bad idea. “Fine.” she answered. “Good.”

“You'll have to excuse me. I need to get to my next class.” she said, stepping around him and hurrying on her way. Syrok knew that she did not have another class for an hour.

Holly met Syrok at the appointed time and place, as usual. “You changed your schedule.” she said, cutting right to the chase. “Indeed.”

“It's a little bit stalker-y, Syrok.”

Syrok looked to her with alarm. Was she teasing? He couldn't tell. “I assure you my intention was not to stalk you.”

“Might I ask why you chose to rearrange your schedule?” she leaned back in her seat, folding her hands in her lap, ready for an explanation. She couldn't decide whether she should be completely freaked out or amused. If a male human had done it... she might be swayed a bit more toward caution. But as it was, Syrok wasn't human, he was Vulcan, and she'd learned time and again that the differences in their cultures could lead to tremendous misunderstandings. And not only was he Vulcan, but he was Syrok, and he'd given her little reason to believe he had anything but the best of intentions.

“I found this arrangement to be more acceptable.” Syrok answered stiffly. Of course his first arrangement had been more efficient. However, this arrangement would allow him to see Holly. He wondered whether it was slightly stalker-y. Regardless, he had not lied. The new arrangement was
more acceptable.

“Uh-huh.” Holly answered. Syrok suspected she saw through his words. “Stalker-y.” she repeated. Syrok was about to try and defend himself once more when he saw her smirk. She must be teasing. He was slightly relieved.

Holly slid her homework toward him. She'd already completed it. Syrok scanned the equations. There was only one small error. He pointed it out to her. The rest was perfect. He began to have a sinking feeling in his gut. Perhaps she no longer required his assistance.

“This class isn’t as hard as the last.” she said.

“I am sure it is more difficult, or else the previous course would not be a prerequisite to this one. However, as you now have a strong foundation upon which to build, you are not experiencing the same level of personal difficulty as you had previously.”

“A logical argument.” she replied, and stared at her hands quietly.

“Holly, I believe our relationship has become strained since our last meeting. You have indicated that light-hearted teasing would dispel tension, but as I do not know how to tease, I can only make you aware that I greatly desire to dispel the tension. If I have committed some human social faux pas, I apologize.”

Holly smiled slightly and felt her gut wrench. This beautiful being was apologizing to her after she'd made a fool of herself. And now he was trying to clear the air. Holly felt an overwhelming urge to hug him, which was of course entirely inappropriate, for so many reasons. “There's nothing to apologize for. Humans are illogical and overly emotional, you know.”

“I am aware of this fact.” Syrok was silent for a moment. “It occurs to me that my assistance to you as a mathematics tutor may no longer be required. However, I would still like to maintain our acquaintanceship.”

“I would like that too.” she said and felt some of her tension evaporate. She smiled. “You are, after all, my favorite acquaintance.”

Syrok raised a single brow. “As you have indicated to me in the past that I am your only acquaintance, logic would dictate that I am also your least favorite.”

“Touché, Syrok. Your logic, as always, is infallible.” Syrok felt a warm rush flow through him at her words. Of course his logic was fallible, he thought, as it was for all sentient beings. Holly must know this, and yet she said such a thing anyway. He suddenly comprehended the power of a compliment, illogical as one might be. He wondered whether he could manage to compliment Holly one day while still being honest. It would require a great deal of mental deliberation. Syrok was excited by the prospect.

“Since we're clearly not going to work on coursework tonight, would you like to come to my room and play a game or something?” Holly asked with a smile. Syrok looked alarmed. That is, if anyone else had seen the Vulcan, they would have seen him looking the same as a Vulcan always looked. But Holly had become accustomed to his subtleties and saw a slight change in his eyes, saw the tension in his face and body increase infinitesimally. She sighed. “I've already been to your room. There's no reason why you can't come to mine. We can even use chairs.”


Syrok knew where Holly lived, because he knew what the map of campus looked like, and he had
her contact information. He knew, but he hadn't been there. The lower income dormitories were more utilitarian than his own. Surak had preached against unnecessary indulgence, and Syrok had been uncomfortable with the more expensive housing at first, but his parents had insisted. He supposed it made sense, though, knowing that Holly's dorm closed over the holiday. That must have been the reason for the upgrade.

Holly's roommate was in the room when they entered. Syrok wasn't sure whether that made him more apprehensive of the visit or less so. At least there would be a witness to verify his character. However, now he had to watch his behavior and language even more closely than usual. He didn't wish to say or do the wrong thing and inadvertently cause discomfort for Holly, and his understanding of human culture was terribly deficient.

Geri glanced to the door as Holly entered but went back to what she was doing, which seemed to be a lot. She wore a set of thick headphones but quick heavy music escaped into the room. She was busy with something on her computer but seemed to switch applications frantically, and on the desk in front of her all manner of books and papers were spread out, as well as a bowl of noodles that she ate from with chopsticks. "Hey." she nodded to Holly and Syrok in acknowledgment.

“Good evening.” Syrok said with a nod, wondering if Geri could hear him over the cacophony of music.

“So this is your Vulcan?” she said, seeming unimpressed, then ignored Holly as if not caring for her answer. Syrok wondered if Geri was being terribly rude but Holly didn't seem to notice. Yes, his understanding of humans was deficient.

He understood from Holly's previous conversations that she got along amicably with Geri, but at first glance he thought the two did not seem to have much in common. Holly's side of the room was neat and tidy while Geri's was a slovenly mess. Holly had shoulder length naturally sandy colored hair with a bit of volume and frizz to it, but it was well kept and tucked under a modest knit cap most of the time. Geri's hair was cut in a mismatched angular fashion and dyed several unnatural colors, with all manner of decorative pins in it. Where Holly wore no make-up, or only a natural look, Geri's own make-up was ostentatious. Where Holly wore faded brown pants and an oversized cream sweater, Geri wore the scandalous fashion that seemed more common among girls of that age. And where Geri was loud, Holly was pleasantly quiet. Syrok much preferred Holly.

Holly kicked her shoes off at the door and Syrok followed suit, noting that much like his own roommate, Holly's roommate wore shoes indoors. He observed with some concern that the promised extra chair was already in use, but Holly sat herself at the foot of her bed and nodded at the nearby chair for Syrok. He took it gratefully. Not only had their previous time in a bed seemed overly intimate, it had been the setting for an intensely uncomfortable fallout. Syrok had no desire to repeat the experience.

Holly was determined to push the discomfort of her attraction aside, and focused herself steadfastly on friendship. Once she began, she found it was almost easy. They played various card games and word games just as they had over break, and slowly her tension and reservations dissolved. Syrok put her at ease. She knew just what to expect from him. The few times he pointed out her shortcomings, he did it so delicately and waited with such expectancy, that she was certain he was experimenting with teasing. She couldn't keep herself from smiling and teasing him back. It was a good evening.
Chapter 8

Syrok looked at the blinking light of his console indicating an incoming transmission. He glanced at the origin. Vulcan. No calls were scheduled. Slight concern flashed through him as he answered the call.

“Mother.” he said with some satisfaction and some concern.

“Syrok.” she said calmly with a nod.

“I was not expecting a call for another month yet.”

She nodded. “Indeed, my plans have changed. Your father and I have a short stay now on Vulcan and then we must be away once more. The call I would make next month must take place now.”

Syrok nodded. He knew very little about what his parents did aboard the Celeste, but he knew that it was important work and that their time was not their own. “Is father well?”

“He is well.” she answered in cool tones. Syrok did not anticipate seeing his father during the call. His words with his mother would be sufficient. “How go your studies, Syrok?”

“They are going well. My interest in the classes varies based on subject matter and challenge, but I suffer no difficulty in maintaining my studies.”

“This is good to hear. If you continue your trajectory, surely you will have no difficulty in passing the Starfleet flight-level exams in two years time.”

“I anticipate that as well.”

His mother waited a moment before going on. Syrok thought she appeared almost pensive. “I have an inquiry.”

“Yes?”

“I have noticed that the amount of credits you spend on food has increased significantly and steadily over the past several months. My first concern is that the balance statement indicates most of these credits are spent at public cafes, and that you may be seen as eating superfluous amounts in public. My other concern is that when added, the calories appear to be well above what is needed to maintain your health. Please explain.”

Syrok knew that his mother would eventually notice the anomalies. She hadn't mentioned any concern over the amount spent, as he had expected. The credits were trivial. Her interest was partially honest confusion, and partially concern about his public displays of eating. “Over these past months I have made a human acquaintance. Her name is Holly and she has shared two mathematics courses with me -- one the previous semester and one this semester. She had initially approached me that I might correct flaws in her logic concerning our shared class. Since then, our relationship has progressed to one of casual acquaintanceship.”

“Casual acquaintanceship?” his mother asked with some confusion. The terminology was vague.

“Indeed. We spend time in one another's company in order to better understand each other's respective cultures. The nature of our activities together is varied and unimportant, as we find the key factor in our discoveries is amount of time spent together.”
“Logical. I have also learned much about human culture during my time on the Celeste. It can be at the most unpredictable times that their culture will surprise and intrigue me.” she nodded.

“Indeed. I find my own understanding of humans to be deficient, and have come to greatly appreciate my time spent with Holly. She in turn seems to appreciate her time spent with me, which is logical considering that she is specializing in Vulcan language and culture, with hopes of pursuing communications and diplomacy.”

“Indeed?” his mother said with slight inflection. Vulcan studies were an unusual pursuit for a human.

“Holly has an academic scholarship to Starfleet University which she maintains by similar academic rigor to that of a Vulcan -- or as close as I have seen in a human being yet. She is surprisingly tolerable in that regard. However, she comes from a background of no family nor money, and her scholarship does not include meal credits. As I have an ample supply of money and we spend much time together, I have taken it upon myself to supply her frequently with food.”

“Has she not other ways to procure food?” his mother asked. “Certainly she must have had some system in place prior to your acquaintanceship.”

“I have not inquired along this line in any depth. However, my understanding of human culture seemed to indicate that this may be the ... friendly... thing to do.” he put both awkwardly and delicately. The word friendly chafed him to say, but he was not sure of a better description.

“Humans offer share food with one another as a means of social bonding.” his mother confirmed. Relief flooded through Syrok. He was afraid that she would chastise him for going too far, that he had misunderstood, or perhaps that she would be the one to not understand. However, clearly all was well with his decision. “Are you sure that you are not consuming food too often in public?” she asked with real concern.

“I have been careful in that regard.”

“Very well. You have addressed my concerns sufficiently.”

They discussed a few other minor points, but the conversation was effectively over. Syrok contemplated his mother's concerns. He was sure he was correct that he had been careful about his public eating habits. Still, if someone should notice.... He had been negligent. He vowed to be more careful on days when he knew he would see Holly, to only eat in her presence and to resume his secretive nightly eating habits. He would need to buy some more peanut butter.

“You want some noodles?” Geri asked over her blaring headphones and simultaneous news report over her main speakers. She stuffed more into her open mouth.

“I would but I'm about to meet Syrok. Let's see if he feeds me first.” Holly pulled on one of her boots and began lacing it.

Geri grinned. “You spend an awful lot of time with him. And he pays for your meals too?” she said suggestively.

“He's already bonded to someone.” Holly said with a flustered huff.

“Bonded? What the hell does that mean?” Geri asked with a scowl. She knew little of Vulcan culture. Geri knew little of any culture. She was not very cultured, in general, Holly supposed. But
she was determined, brilliant, and a good person.

“Mm... I asked him the same thing and he was kind of vague. It sounds to me like some sort of Vulcan arranged marriage, but he said it's different from marriage. They were joined, or whatever, at the age of seven.” she gave an irritated shrug.

“How... archaic.” Geri said with a distasteful twist of her mouth. She filled her mouth with more noodles. Arranged marriages on Earth had been nearly completely dead for decades now. It was only in possibly the most remote corners of the planet that such things still occurred.

Holly sighed. She thought Geri was being a bit rude but well... she kind of agreed. She'd tried to find information on Vulcan bonding but could only find the barest mentions of it in any literature. There was so much about their culture that they kept quiet. The mystery of it all was part of what drew her to its study. She headed to the door.

“Have a good time.” Geri called after her as she made her way out.

It was a warm spring day, the warmest in ages. Holly was glad to be wearing her tight tank top instead of her baggier clothes. Syrok was waiting outside of her dorm for her as they'd discussed. She grinned as she saw Syrok's barely concealed scowl. She'd known he would be scandalized, but as predicted he didn't say anything.

“Great weather we're having.” she said with a smile.

“Indeed it is much warmer and less damp today, compared to the usual weather of the area.” Holly almost wondered if he wanted to make a smart-aleck comment about her tank top, but if he did, he held himself in check. “The weather lends itself well to a pleasant walk.” Syrok was willing to admit that the walk, and the weather, was relatively pleasant. The constant damp of San Francisco was a bane of his existence. Even now he felt the moisture in the air, and a bit of a chill, but it was a significant improvement relative to the norm.

“And where shall we walk to?” Holly asked with a warm smile.

“That is an excellent suggestion. However, I should insist that we make it take-out, because it's your turn to host our evening at your dorm and you have, in fact, been avoiding it.”

Syrok tensed infinitesimally. He wanted to say something to deny his avoidance, but he knew very well he'd been avoiding it -- as humans would say, like the plague. It was now April, and he'd managed to keep them away from it since their last meeting of winter break in January. They'd spent their time at various cafes and lounges, and of course in Holly's room. But he had carefully kept her away from his dorm. He knew it was highly illogical, but he could n't help but feel as if it now had some bad luck or curse to it. It had been months since the unpleasant event, and Syrok was no closer to understanding what his specific misstep had been. Now he worried somewhat irrationally that his room had been the catalyst. He did his best to quell these thoughts as he answered dryly, “Very well. We shall acquire take-out and proceed to my room.”

When they arrived to order, Holly eyed the chicken items on the menu and heaved an internal sigh. She'd decided from the start not let herself eat meat around her Vulcan. She knew it was irrational, on her part, but she did have some reasons. First and foremost, Vulcan vegetarianism was drilled into them in her Vulcan studies classes. And while meeting with Syrok was hardly a diplomatic
endeavor, she was trying to practice with him. She wanted to get used to Vulcan diets and mannerisms, in anticipation of visiting their planet, and she also wanted to put Syrok at ease. She knew of course, that Syrok was always at ease, and that her food choice wouldn't really effect him. He was Vulcan, and beyond such trivial matters. Still she ordered a tofu dish instead of the chicken. Her avoidance of meat was possibly lost on Syrok, she guessed, because many humans happened to enjoy tofu. However, she wondered if he thought it strange or reassuring when she'd begun to try and eat a muffin with a fork. He'd never commented in any way.

Syrok eyed the chairs and beds of his dorm room with some slight concern when they entered. Should he borrow his roommate's chair? Should he sit in his own chair with Holly on the bed, echoing the arrangement they'd used in her own dorm, or would he be expected to sit on the bed now while she were on the chair? Or would she try to seat them both on the bed once more? He did not want that. Holly, however, seemed not to notice his deliberation and after removing her boots she flopped herself unceremoniously on the foot of his bed, facing his chair. Well, that settled that.

As Holly ate (neat and careful not to drop anything on Syrok's immaculate bed), Syrok set up a chess board on the bed between them. They ate and talked and played leisurely. And even though Holly's logic was painfully deficient when it came to chess, Syrok found that he was at ease. Holly's easy demeanor and charming smile were beginning to effect him in much the same way he'd observed she effected other humans. And though Syrok's face remained impassive, Holly speculated that his slightly relaxed shoulders indicated a smile.

“You are bruised.” Syrok said with slight concern as he observed the various marks on her pale flesh. Holly rarely had exposed flesh, and so he'd never noticed bruises previously.


Syrok was aware she was taking classes in the basics of combat, as was required of all members of Starfleet. His own martial arts experience on Vulcan had meant that he'd trivially passed an exam allowing him to forgo the class, allowing him to take courses more useful to his studies. Still, when he'd had training back home it had only been with other men, and he was unaccustomed to seeing an injured woman. Also, due to his Vulcan physiology allowing for quick healing, Syrok had rarely had bruises for more than a few hours after a session. If his injuries were superficial, they faded very quickly. Seeing such painful-looking marks on Holly was somehow... disturbing.

“I see. I did not realize the training was quite so intense.”

“You haven't taken it?”

“My skills learned on Vulcan were sufficient for me to forgo that course.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

“Are you not very good, that you have such a quantity of marks?”

Holly scowled slightly and Syrok wondered whether he had asked an impertinent question. “I'm not the best in the class, but I'm not bad.” she said with some annoyance. “I suppose you're better?” she questioned.

Better than what? Better than Holly? Syrok assumed so. His strength was most certainly greater than her own, and as he'd already passed the class but she was still in it, he assumed he certainly had a greater skill-set than her own. He was about to answer affirmatively when he saw a golden opportunity. “I would prefer not to speculate.” he answered.
Holly opened her mouth slightly in surprise of his answer. She knew as well as he that she would not hold up in a fight against him. She'd expected him to flatly say so in his oh-so-Vulcan-like way. He preferred not to speculate? Holly shut her mouth and bloomed into a smile, even flushing slightly. “Syrok I do believe you have given me a compliment.” she teased. It was her way of thanking him, he realized.

“Indeed.” he answered coolly. Syrok was greatly pleased.

Holly reached out across the bed, balancing precariously in order to tip her food cartons into the trash can.

“Your actions are highly illogical.” Syrok said. “You could much more easily stand up and move a few feet in order to accomplish that task, and with a much greater probability of success, and lower probability of injury or mess. Further, you could simply ask me to do it, as I am closer.” He raised a brow at her efforts but did not move to help or stop her.

“But I can make it!” she strained, finally accomplishing the task. She fell back to the mattress dramatically to recover from the exertion, but in so doing tipped her small pile of claimed chess pieces to scatter on the floor. She let out a frustrated huff.

“I believe I mentioned 'mess' as one of the potential outcomes of your actions.” Syrok continued. He was pointing out her flaws in a manner that was not altogether abrasive or impassive. He was successfully teasing. A compliment and teasing in the same evening. It was truly a great evening. He felt the corners of his mouth prick up slightly with stifled amusement and mirth. Holly, meanwhile, had flipped herself indecently upside down over the bed, bracing her hands on the floor as she looked for the scattered pieces. The sight was so absurd that Syrok did not even fully process the indecency of the act.

Holly flipped herself to look under the bed and grabbed the pieces one by one. She glanced under the dark recesses to see if there were any more and saw something both startling and puzzling -- jar upon jar of peanut butter. Holly had seen under men's beds before, and was fully prepared to see trash, pornography, spent tissues, school work, old food, and any number of other things. She was not prepared for a very large private stash of peanut butter. How unnervingly eccentric for the straight-forward Vulcan.

“Syrok?” she asked curiously as she was upside down.

“Holly?” he responded.

“What's with all the peanut butter.?” she asked curiously before she could stop herself to wonder if it was improper to ask. Syrok had gone dead still. She righted herself on the bed, feeling a slight rush of dizziness and setting the chess pieces down. She looked to him as her vision sharpened. He was stiff and his eyes had a 'deer in the headlights' look to them. “What?” she asked, getting a chill herself. Had she intruded upon something deeply personal? Weirdly kinky? “Is this... should I not have asked?” she tried to back pedal. Holly wondered whether her visits to his room were doomed to be bad luck.

“I... it is a personal matter.” Syrok said. His ears had flushed slightly green and he looked... what? Ashamed? Holly had a sinking feeling in her gut.

“And I thought Rocky Horror Picture Show was deviant.” she teased, desperately wanting to dispel tension. She tried to give him a disarming smile.
Rocky Horror Picture Show? Deviancy? Syrok tried to process what she was saying. Did she... did she think that this had something to do with his sexual habits? Syrok was even more horrified and alarmed than he had been. He sat up even straighter, looking startled.

Holly noticed the startled look and was startled herself. “Is that not it?” she asked. Her mind whirled as she tried to think of why he could possibly have so many jars of the stuff and why he’d be so secretive and weird about it.

“No. That is not it.” he said in clipped tones of annoyance, possibly even anger, and the ever present humiliation. A tinge of green hinted at his cheeks now. “We -- that is -- Vulcans, as you know, are much denser than human beings, and require more heat. We're stronger, we require less sleep, our heart beats more quickly and we have a faster metabolism.... These physical characteristics require us to consume certain base levels of calories. It is not something we speak of.”

“Oh!” realization washed through Holly. “Well that makes sense! So you plan to just... eat all of this?” It was really a lot of food, but she realized that it was very highly caloric.

“Yes.” Syrok did not meet her eyes. He was nearly squirming with discomfort.

“That's perfectly logical. I don't understand why it's such a big secret.”

“It is not widely known how many calories we actually require for our survival. If this knowledge became public, and an enemy were to target the flow of food on Vulcan, the results would be ... catastrophic. Aside from the more pertinent reasons I have just listed, it is also simply a ... delicate matter.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Holly interrupted. “You mean to tell me this is what, some kind of state secret?” she asked incredulously.

“Affirmative.” he answered seriously.

“But that... that's ridiculous!” she burst out. There was simply no other word to describe it. “There have to be what, hundreds, thousands or even more Vulcans that are spread out across the universe. You can't possibly keep information about how much food you eat a secret even if you wanted to!”

“Apparently not.” he clipped, wondering if he had single-handedly disrupted the political balance of his world. He'd been prepped on the various state secrets of Vulcan like all citizens leaving the planet, as part of his qualifying for a travel permit, and it hadn't seemed special or difficult to maintain. It was simply one of many things that his world had decided not to reveal. And yet some fallen chess pieces had somehow led to him having to explain himself. He had miscalculated, he realized, but he wasn't certain how he could have explained himself sufficiently at any rate. Vaguely, he toyed with the idea of attempting to remove the memory from her mind but he knew that mind-tampering was a crime of horrific proportions. He dismissed the idea immediately.

“I see.” Holly answered with a worried frown, picking up on the gravity of the situation even as it seemed absolutely ludicrous. She didn't really understand anything about what he was saying, but she got the impression that this wasn't a minor secret to Syrok. “It's really not so strange, though, Syrok. Of course you would require more calories. And of course a disruption of food to your world would be catastrophic, as it would be on any world.”

Syrok let out a frustrated breath. “It would not be as simple a thing as starvation for a human, for example. When a Vulcan is deprived of enough food... it is difficult for us to meditate. Sometimes impossible. We become... unstable.” Syrok said this last word with great reluctance, still not
meeting her gaze. It was one of many things that could destabilize his people, and anything with such a result was considered to be classified. “As you are my closest acquaintance,” Holly did not correct him to say that she was his only acquaintance, “I will assume that you have the decency to keep this information to yourself.” He waited tensely, wondering to himself whether her word would be enough, or whether he would have to inform some authority.

“Of course.” Holly almost gushed, desperate to comfort him. “I wouldn't dream of saying anything to anyone about it, Syrok.” She looked at him earnestly as some of his tension seemed to drop at her reassurance. He raised his eyes to hers, hoping that what he saw there was sincerity. He wished that human emotions did not appear so foreign and difficult to read, while also wondering what his mother would think of him telling a human such a private detail.

“Are you hungry now?” she asked curiously, teasingly.

Syrok wanted desperately to say 'no' flatly and end the conversation, but it would be a lie. “I will eat later.” he said with some annoyance.

Holly grinned. He hadn't said no. She felt like she was in on a wonderful secret but held back her laughter as she saw he was still sulking, still tense. “Syrok you do believe me, don't you? I don't think it's weird and I won't tell anyone.” But she could see that he didn't entirely believe her, and that this wasn't something he was going to just let go off.

There was, however, one way that she knew to reassure him. She'd learned enough of Vulcan court procedures to know that their touch telepathy could be used in a myriad of capacities to verify the truth of a story. She held out a hand toward him, palm facing upwards, but didn't move to touch.

“I'm willing to... you know, let you make sure, if you're really that uncomfortable.”

Make sure? Of what? Syrok looked at her palm and up to her eyes, startled, as he realized what she were offering. One's intent could to a large degree be verified telepathically, but this was no court of law. It was a very personal matter to share private emotions with another being.

“Holly,” he said quietly, “this is hardly a court room.” But inwardly, he wondered about how serious his breech of secrecy might be. If he did verify that Holly didn't intend to tell anyone, was there really any harm done? She must realize that he had no other way to truly put his mind at ease -- he no real skill in reading her intentions. Still, did she not mind him rifling through her private space like that? He looked at her questioningly, but she held out her hand passively if he would like to take it.

“It's okay.” she said with a simple shrug. “I trust you.”

He wanted to say no, but found himself reaching out anyway. His anxiety wouldn't allow for any other course of action. While this wasn't perhaps the full meld of a court room, the skin to skin contact of palms should be more than enough to verify Holly's intentions. A frisson of curiosity and expectation ran under his skin as he recalled their only accidental brush, and the tremendous amount of emotions he'd discovered within her.

Gently, delicately, he fit their palms together, lining up the finger tips, and lowered his shields with care so that he would n't be bombarded as he had been those months ago. Holly still seemed oblivious to the event, so Syrok hadn't mentioned it. This time, however, was different. He opened himself to her emotions and felt strength, reassurance, calm, resolve, respect, warmth, concern, acceptance .... Syrok's eyes widened and went to Holly's. It amazed him that she could contain so much. He knew she was earnest about her promise and his concern faded away, and he realized with surprise she was honest about not finding him strange, and some of his embarrassment faded as well.
Holly felt the warm hand against her own. He was so soft, so delicate, and so much cooler than herself. She’d wondered what his skin would feel like on her own, and now.... Syrok looked at her curiously and saw her flush and divert her eyes, *lust, embarrassment....* Syrok dropped his hand from her own and she moved her palm back to her lap, clearing her throat self consciously.

“Thank you.” was all he could think to say.

“No problem.” she said, and focused herself back on the chess board. “I believe it's your move.” she said, diverting focus away from the awkward moment and back to the game.

“Indeed.” he said, and moved one of the pieces. “I believe I will win in three more moves.” he said with a smirk. “You are really not very good at this game.”

“It is one of my many deficiencies.” she said with a smirk.

The tension was gone. His room, after all, was not cursed. It was a very good evening.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

In the last chapter, I introduced the idea of Vulcans eating a lot of calories, Vulcans eating a lot of peanut butter, and Vulcans keeping all of this a secret. This is one of many things I've stolen the idea from another fic, because as soon as I read it I was in love with it. I thought I'd take a moment to look up where it came from and give a shout out. The author's name is StarTrekFanWriter, and I read her works about Spock and Uhura first on FFnet, although I see she is in the process of transferring her work to AO3. It is her work, Descartes Error that I *think* I got the peanut butter thing from, though I didn't have time to make sure, since it's a really long story. Her work is what also what got me into the Star Trek fandom, just before I started leaning more toward K/S specifically, so that's worth checking out.

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In this chapter of my fic, we finally start to get somewhere as far as Holly and Syrok's relationship is concerned.

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“I have noted that Monday begins the week referred to as 'spring break’” Syrok said as they sat in easy silence on a bench watching the wharf after sun set, listening to the gulls, watching the people walk by. They'd taken a long walk and were now enjoying the quiet evening. The air was chill and Holly was once again bundled into her oversized cream sweater. Syrok wore his usual attire, that did not seem to change regardless of weather, she thought. Even when she found it warm enough outside to go in her tank top, he seemed to have his zipped affair on, only occasionally with the zipper down. She'd only seen him take it off the one time in his overly hot room.

“Indeed it is.”

“Is it safe to assume that you have no plans?” Syrok was looking forward to spending the week with Holly. It was a Friday now and they had both finished rounds of exams. Until now, he hadn't seen her for two straight weeks because they'd both been so busy.

“Oh, I don't know, Syrok. I was considering following the human tradition of going to a beach, taking all of my clothes of, consuming copious amounts of alcohol, displaying my body to strangers, and sleeping with as many will have me.”

“You are lucky that I have become fluent in the language of teasing, Holly, or you could have seriously lowered my estimation of you.”

Holly smiled. “I'm guessing, based on your inquiry, that you also have no plans?”

“That is correct. Perhaps we could spend much of our time together. I will of course still have some duties to attend to --”

“Of course. I have a ton of studying to do. But without classes in the way, I'll have loads of time to hang out.” she grinned.
“That is good to hear. Then we are of one mind on this.”

“Indeed.” she said with her best mock-Vulcan inflection. Syrok raised a brow her way and she giggled.

Syrok was happy -- or at the very least supremely content. He and his favorite (if only) acquaintance were sitting in his room and watching an astrophysics talk in Vulcan. Syrok hadn't held much hope for sharing an interest of astrophysics with his peers, and certainly did not hold out hope for sharing lectures by Vulcans with a human. Holly was outstanding in that regard. She had seen his paused vid when she'd entered his room and had made herself comfortable on the bed, encouraging him to continue it. He had suggested that she may not understand the subject matter in any great depth, but she persisted. He had pointed out that humans seemed to often find Vulcan professors to be agonizingly boring, but she had persisted. He had been about to argue that her understanding of his language might not be good enough, but realized that she would only argue that the video would help her to understand. Syrok was pleased. He had un-paused the video.

Syrok was alone for break. He was often alone when Holly came over, regardless of break. She'd once questioned him on his absent roommate and he'd explained that Dennis seemed to enjoy parties, bars, and the company of women very much. She hadn't asked again.

It was finally comfortably warm out. Holly was in her scandalous tank top with her hair pulled away from her face, rather than worn down and with a cap as it had been in the winter. Her collar bones and neck were shamefully on display, but he knew that he was being prudish according to human custom and tried not to let it bother him. She was, after all, still more clothed than her peers.

Holly had smirked when she saw his open jar of peanut butter. on the desk with a spoon sticking out of it. Syrok had taken certain liberties over break and hadn't been careful about hiding his habit since he knew that Dennis wasn't going to be there. He moved to hide the evidence but Holly stopped him. “Don't let me interrupt you.” she'd said with her easy smile. “I'm watching the video, after all. And it is vacation -- you deserve a break like everyone else.” And so Syrok had taken a deserved break. He sat on his chair with his favorite acquaintance on his bed. He ate peanut butter from the jar and watched a Vulcan talk on astrophysics. He was happy.

Holly had asked Syrok a question in Vulcan. A question about the vid. She couldn't remember the question any more.

He'd set his peanut butter and spoon aside, and had begun to answer. He hadn't answered yet but he'd said something, she was sure -- some introductory phrase like “You see ...” and then he'd gripped the back of his chair with his right hand and his desk with his left. Holly was at once alert. His eyes had glazed and he had gasped. Loudly. Holly remembered thinking Vulcans don't' gasp as
alarm bells sounded in her mind.

And then he was falling. He'd been in a perfectly steady position at his desk chair, she knew. He'd been in a perfectly supportable position. And yet he'd fallen to the ground, awkwardly, slowly. It had all moved so slowly. There seemed to be a rushing sound in Holly's ears as she was filled with horror and distress. *Something is wrong. Something is WRONG.* She knew that in reality only seconds had passed. She saw his white knuckles, his pale face, his scrabbling hands that struggled to catch him as he hit the floor.

Holly's legs were mired in quicksand, her whole body mired in quicksand. She had been at the head of the bed, leaning against Syrok's pillow, against the wall. She flung herself forward to her hands and knees and dove across the bed, leaning over the end of the bed to see Syrok. She heard her voice call his name once in alarm. "Syrok!"

And then he gasped again more loudly, a voiced, pained gasp. *Something is wrong.* Holly leaned over the bed to see what was happening. She needed to know what was happening. She heard her own voice as if from the bottom of a well. "What's wrong?"

And then he screamed. *And screamed... oh God.* Holly covered her mouth in horror. What was wrong? Her heart threatened to beat out of her chest. There was something utterly horrific about a Vulcan screaming. It was something she knew should never be. But there he lay, curled into a fetal position, his eyes squeezed tightly shut, his fists clenched and knuckles white, as his screaming lapsed into an high keening noise of a wounded animal. He was crying, she realized, but crying without tears. Vulcans did not have tear ducts. It was unnerving to see.

"Syrok!" she screamed at him but got no response. She grabbed his arm by the sleeve -- no skin to skin, she told herself, no skin to skin. Her mind spun in every direction but she forced it to focus. "Are you okay?" she screamed at him frantically but he was gone. She flung herself at his console and flicked the code for emergency aid. Her hands shook desperately.

A pleasant face flickered before her. "What is the emergency?" the woman asked to Holly's horrified face. She saw the woman's face flicker with deep concern at the wailing from nearby.

Holly leapt into action, her voice shaking. "I need help. There's something wrong with my friend Syrok S'un T'nei. We're in Pallak Hall at Starfleet Academy, room 214. He's Vulcan. I don't know what's wrong. Please hurry." The words tumbled out of Holly's mouth in a rush. She could hear now that Syrok was sobbing, heart wrenching sobs where he could not seem to get enough air. He had not uncoiled on the floor, his body a tense ball. Holly was aware of the woman saying something affirmative, something meant to reassure her. She nodded. She closed her eyes and nodded. They were coming. Someone would come.

Everything seemed to move in such slow motion for those bare handful of minutes, and then time seemed to jump forward in a rush. There was a long static, and then a rush of voices, feet coming to the room. Holly sat still on Syrok's bed and turned her head to the faces rushing into the room. She felt out of her body as she saw a tall Vulcan woman glide into the room and look where Syrok lay keening on the floor. Holly had tried to get a response, but he was unresponsive. She sat shaking, watching with a distant silent horror. She looked at the Vulcan woman as if to ask: *What do I do?*

The woman glided to her and placed her hand on the side of Holly's face. She felt warm suddenly, and some of her shaking subsided. The room came into slightly clearer focus. "This is not thy mate?" the woman asked. Holly shook her head. "You must to take your things and leave now. I will be with him." Holly nodded slowly. Her things. She would take her things. She struggled shakily into her shoes. She was aware that someone else was helping to steady her, helping her to
get them on. She took her bag and left. She needed to go.

Syrok had been having a good day. A very satisfactory day. Holly had just asked him a question pertaining to the vid. Syrok very much enjoyed answering Holly's questions. He'd set his food aside and had begun to answer. He had just been about to give a full answer, when the world seemed to slide and move. He felt a tremendous lurch as the ground beneath him gave way and he struggled to hold on. Holly had said something but all he could concentrate was his desire to hold on. He felt alarm and surprise. He felt panic. It was not his own panic. T'Rena he realized with horror. *Something was happening with T'Rena*.

Syrok! He felt his name screamed from somewhere distant but it was as if T'Rena were right beside him, screaming to him, grasping for him in horror and pain. Pain bloomed into him overwhelmingly. *Something was not right*. He had to get to T'Rena. *Why would the ground not stop lurching?* He fought to focus, felt a panic rising up and threatening to choke him. T'Rena's presence was always a low buzz in the back of his mind, but they rarely communicated. Now her presence was a deafening scream. And then it was silent. The presence was *gone*.

Syrok felt as if his entire soul had been ripped to ribbons. He felt surely his mind had been utterly raped, his body physically ravaged. He could not process the *pain* of the bond, raw and angry as T'Rena was ripped from him, violently ripped away. Dimly he was aware of logical thought. She was dead, he realized. If he could not feel his bond, she was dead. He'd felt her in some sort of accident. While his conscious mind knew this, he felt as if he could not *move*. He could not *feel*. He could not *think*. He could not *be*. This was more horrific than anything he could have even imagined experiencing. His bondmate, half of his soul, was dead.

He seemed to float in some black abyss for an eternity. In the distance someone was screaming. Someone was crying. He could not make sense of who it could be. It couldn't be T'Rena. She was dead.

And then there was a warmth on his psi points. It was the first he was made aware of his *own* body. His body. He still had a body. *He* was not dead. Someone was leading him out of the abyss, he knew. Someone was lessening the pain. The pain. *It hurt*. The gentle keening sound, he now realized, was himself. Syrok hadn't cried out since he was a child. He'd almost forgotten that he could. The floor was cool and firm beneath him. Someone was touching his psi points. He carefully opened his eyes to see a Vulcan woman hovering above him. She was crouched on the floor. He could hear no one. They must be alone. Syrok struggled to make sense of it. To make sense of the time, the place, the person. He felt like he was grasping for something elusive. His mind would not *work*. He felt a wave of frustration.

The woman spoke to him in his own tongue. “*Your bondmate has died.*” she said first, and waited for a reaction, waited for him to process the information. He nodded after a moment. He understood. “*A female human called emergency support. I am a Healer. I have repaired any residual damage from the bond, and have tried to ease your pain. It will be a difficult time now, but it is time that I go.*” She didn't remove her hands from him until he nodded his understanding again. Her warm presence then retreated as she released him. He was now utterly alone inside of himself. Alone. He hadn't been alone since he was seven years old. The sensation was foreign and unnerving. And painful. *T'Rena* ....

“*I grieve with thee.*” the woman said in customary condolence to him. He wanted to thank her but his voice eluded him. He wanted to sit up but his body did not yet want to obey him. She seemed to understand, though, and she let herself out. Her words seemed hollow to Syrok. She did not grieve.
It was the insistent buzzing of his console that finally roused him. He forced his shaky, unfeeling limbs to obey. He saw that the source of the call was his mother. His mother. He realized now he had felt her bond through the upheaval as well. A dim impression of a bond. She'd been at the accident. The accident... an earthquake, he realized now. He wondered which emotions had been T'Rena's and which had been his mother's, with a strange detachment. He switched on the console to allow the call through. His haunted eyes looked into the worried eyes of his mother.

"Syrok." she said in a near whisper, completely aghast.

She must have felt some of his pain, he realized. She knew that something was wrong. Through him, she knew that something was wrong with T'Rena.

"T'Rena is dead," he said simply.

His mother covered her mouth with one hand in horror as if she were about to lose her composure right then. "I grieve with thee, Syrok." she said in pained tones. Syrok could feel that indeed, she did.

"Was it... an earthquake?" he heard himself ask distantly.

"It was a very large earthquake, Syrok." she said distantly. "I believe that we will hear of many injuries."

"Yourself... and father?"

"We were inside at the time. The house bore it well. We are fine."

Syrok nodded his understanding and small relief. His relief was overshadowed by a numbness that was steadily overcoming what had been pain.

"I... I must go meditate on this." Syrok said after a few moments of shared silence.

"You must see a Healer." his mother cautioned him.

"The Healer has already come."

"So quickly?" his mother said with a slight surprise to her voice.

"Holly..." Syrok could not explain further. He was overwhelmed with humiliation that she had seen him like that. He hollowly wondered what exactly she had seen. He could not yet make coherent sense of the events that had transpired.

His mother merely nodded. "I will leave you to your grieving." his mother said, looking as if her own heart might break for him. She covered her face as if in a horrific realization. "Oh Syrok... and with only a year left. I will need to move quickly."

A year left? What was a year away? Syrok could n't make sense of the statement in light of what had happened. And then it dawned him. He would reach his age of majority in approximately one year. It was very possible, likely even, that he would experience his first pon farr. Somewhere in his numb detachment he felt a sort of horror and dread. What could his mother be saying? She meant to replace T'Rena. His bondmate was minutes dead, and his mother spoke of replacing her. He felt fury and disbelief surge through him as he looked at his mother with a confused disgust. But what was she supposed to do, his logical mind wondered. If he did not have a bondmate in a
year’s time, it was her own son who might die. The logic of her reasoning did not comfort him. Without any closing remarks, he turned the console off. He crawled onto his bed and wanted only to sleep.
Chapter 10

Holly had wandered. She'd wandered for some time -- around campus, around town. She felt like she didn't know where to go. She kept checking her PADD for word from Syrok. She'd sent him a quick email as soon as she'd had the sense to do so.

_Syrok, are you alright? Please respond._

_Holly_

She couldn't get access to his building with her own ID. She found herself pacing the grounds near his building, looking up at his window, hoping that someone else would come by and let her in. She needed to know if he was okay. She couldn't forget the horror of what she'd seen and couldn't imagine what could have possibly caused him to behave like that. Was he dying? Was he even in the building? Or had they taken him away?

Holly found a bench on the sidewalk nearby. She would sleep there.

And then it was Thursday. Again Holly paced the grounds with growing frustration. She kept checking her PADD. Was he inside or not? Why would he not respond? Why would no one walk by? As the hours dragged by Holly had to abandon her post, for food, water, and bathroom breaks. She cursed herself every time she had to go elsewhere, fearing that she would lose some chance. She ate the food at the temple with no real enthusiasm. She thought how much Syrok would like the food. It was vegetarian. She felt her eyes watering with worry. What would Syrok say, she scolded herself. She needed to keep herself clear headed and under control.

It was Friday when she finally saw someone leaving the building. “Waitwaitwait!” she ran toward the man. “Let me in, would ya? I want to surprise a friend.” she gave a disarming smile. The man hesitated, but as usual capitulated under her cheerful look. He slid his card through the reader at the door and she scurried in with a squeaked “Thank you!” and practically ran up the stairs. Her heart raced. Would Syrok even be in his room? Or had they taken him somewhere? And was he alright?

She felt a desperation and pushed it down as she stood outside of his door. She tried the handle. Locked. She knocked, and waited. Knocked again.

Reluctantly, Syrok opened the door, seeing Holly and hardly processing her. He hadn't bothered to check his email. He had barely bothered to eat or sleep. He'd been meditating. And meditating. And meditating. He was tired. Holly thought his eyes seemed hollow. He looked gaunt, defeated. Seeing that she was not going to go away, he stepped aside and let her in.

Holly stood inside the room, watching Syrok shut the door. She didn't make herself at home. “Syrok... are you alright?” she asked barely audibly.

Syrok hung his head and leaned against the door he'd closed. He didn't meet her gaze. Was he alright? What did that mean? Why were humans so infuriatingly vague? “It was quick thinking for you to call a Healer.” he said. “Thank you.”

“But are you alright?” she asked more loudly this time, her voice quavering. He looked up to her and saw that she was distraught. Her eyes were damp but her fists were clenched defiantly at her sides as she warred with herself to stay in control. It surprised him to see such a display from the
girl. While Holly was free with smiles, she didn't tend to express herself this overtly.

“There was a large-scale earthquake on Vulcan.” he said. Did she know? Had she seen the reports? She looked confused, surprised. She hadn't seen the reports. Syrok knew that there would be reports by now, although he hadn't checked. He hadn't wanted to read them. “My bondmate... T'Rena....” He stopped and had to draw breath. Why was it so difficult to say? It was a fact. He only needed to state a fact.

“Is she alright?” Syrok wondered how Holly could seem so concerned right now for someone she did not know. He realized that she was not concerned for T'Rena. She was concerned for himself, and therefore by extension his bondmate.

“She is dead.” The words had been easier to say than he had anticipated.

Holly felt her heart breaking. That was what would cause a Vulcan to scream, to lie on the floor crying in the fetal position, to be incoherent. She didn't know much about bonding, but from what she understood, it was like a marriage of souls. Holly felt some of her own tears leak out as she gazed upon the stoic Vulcan in front of her. He stood so easily, met her gaze now so easily, his hands loose at his sides, his back straight. She wondered how he was holding himself together, and had a desperate urge to hug him, but knew it wouldn't do to hug a Vulcan, especially one so emotionally distraught. She searched her mind for the thing to say, and it came to her. She had learned this one. This one she knew. Using her best possible accent she said to him in his tongue “I grieve with thee.” as tears fell down her own cheeks.

Syrok nearly thought he would be undone himself as he saw the tender display of emotion before him. He didn't have a bond with Holly as he did with his mother, but he knew her words weren't hollow. He didn't know why Holly would grieve with him, but he knew that she was sincere. He realized with some surprise that Holly was no longer his acquaintance. She was his friend. It was rare for a Vulcan to call someone friend. But after what had happened, how could he not offer such a title to her? His chest heaved with unexpressed emotion.

“What do you need, Syrok?” she asked him earnestly. She would give him anything he needed. She continued in his tongue now because it felt right. It felt right to be there for him, that in this time he should be the focus.

Syrok stared at her for a long moment, thinking. What did he need? What did he want? “Would you like to meditate with me?” he asked finally.

“Oh course.”

And they sat on his bed, because that was where Syrok would usually meditate when his roommate was asleep. Holly was careful to keep her hands to herself as she arranged herself and closed her eyes while Syrok lit some incense, and she felt the warm breeze from the cracked window. They sat for some time. For a long time. It didn't seem to matter to either how long they sat. Syrok was just glad to have someone near him. Holly was just desperate to do something to help.

“It is very lonely.” Syrok said into the silence. Holly opened her eyes, but Syrok carefully looked away, so she closed her eyes again, relaxing into her posture. She didn't want to spook him, but wanted to give him space to continue. Syrok drew a breath, not sure to ask for what he wanted. “I am not used to being alone in my own mind, you see. I have been bonded for a very long time.”

“Since you were seven.” she answered.

“Yes.” More silence. “I was wondering if you would just let me... if you could just help me to be
less alone.” Syrok’s words were halted and strained.

Holly opened her eyes to him curiously. Was she not helping him to be less alone? And then she realized what he must mean. In his own mind, he wanted to be less alone. For so many years now, he’d had his bondmate as a companion of some sort. “Of course, Syrok.” she answered without hesitation, but she still wondered exactly what he had in mind. “What do you need?”

Relief and gratitude flowed through Syrok. She was so selfless. “I just want to touch your hand, just as before. I just want to... be aware of what you feel. I do not even want to focus on it. I just want to feel you there.” he said. It was embarrassing to request, and he felt some shame for wanting it, for asking for it. It was the sort of thing a child would request of a parent or guardian, or even a childhood peer. Some connection to help his mind, almost in the way he noticed his human counterparts would watch a video or listen to music in order to concentrate on their work. Something louder than the tentative bonds he shared with family and Clan. He was a bit ashamed of his need. Certainly his father would never need or ask for such a thing if his mother were to die. But the silence in his mind was driving him up the wall. He could n't meditate effectively in such deafening silence.

Holly shifted so she was sitting directly side by side with Syrok and laid her hand on the bed between them, palm up, and closed her eyes. Syrok placed his warm palm on top of hers and closed his own eyes. He felt her warm energy through his fingertips. Reassurance. Sadness. Freely giving. Reassurance. He did n't focus on the emotions he felt flit through. He almost tried to block them out. He could meditate now. He could try to heal. He simply wanted to know that someone else was there.
Chapter 11

Holly woke up to the sound of the dorm door opening.

“Dude! Alright!” Dennis said as he saw Holly on the bed and gave Syrok a thumbs up. Holly groggily saw Syrok frown from where he sat at his desk. From her rumpled clothes and the neat sheets below her, she knew that she’d fallen asleep during meditation. She doubted Syrok had slept at all. Firstly, he was a gentleman, and secondly, he could get by for some time on meditation alone. He was Vulcan. She roused herself and wiped the sleep from her eyes, stretching her arms.

“Good morning. You must be Dennis.”

“I assure you nothing untoward has taken place.” Syrok said in clipped tones. “Holly is a friend and had no place to sleep last night.” He was annoyed.

“Sure. Whatever man.” Dennis gave Holly a lewd wink as she rolled her eyes in return.

“I should be getting back to my dorm.” she looked to Syrok who gave her an understanding nod. She slipped her boots on and grabbed her bag off the floor and gave Dennis a bit of a slap in the stomach on the way out. “Don’t be a dick.” she said to him, hoping that he wouldn't give Syrok too hard a time.

“My God, did you see the reports?” Geri asked as Holly wandered into her room. She began to strip. She desperately wanted a shower.

“What reports?”

“On Vulcan! There was some earthquake and there were all sorts of casualties and injuries.” Geri scrolled through her PADD with a grotesque sense of horror. She turned suddenly to Holly. “What about your Vulcan? Did he know anyone?”

Holly hesitated, then finally said very quietly. “He lost someone. I don't think it's my place to say more.”

“Oh, no.” Geri's face fell into a sympathetic frown. “Well should we send him a fruit basket or something?”

“I don't think he'd like any attention called to it. You know how stoic Vulcans are.” Holly said as she wrapped a towel around herself and grabbed her shower basket and shoes. “I'll keep an eye on him, though.”

“You do that. Man, that sucks!” Geri said, turning her attention back to her PADD.

Holly did check the reports when she got back and felt herself go a bit cold reading the nameless numbers. She didn't want to read any more.

Apparently Syrok hadn't been the only Vulcan affected either. Similar accounts to what had happened to him floated around on the web. A letter was sent out from the university allowing all Vulcans a period of respite from their studies, should they choose to take it. Holly doubted a single
one would. It simply wasn't their way to waste productive time on grieving, nor to publicly display emotion at all. Not to mention the fact that she now knew just how long the shuttle to their planet would take. No one would likely feel justified in taking such a large amount of time off to go home.

The weekend brought students busily back, and brought Holly’s attention back to her studies. She wanted to check in with Syrok to see how he was doing, but wasn't sure how to best handle Vulcan grief. They were not a culture to talk about emotions. As school picked up again, she found herself swamped with work, and no time for casual encounters. Syrok didn't reach out to her and so she assumed he was either busy or didn't want company. And yet she worried. She contented herself with emailing him interesting articles and videos she found every few days. He would respond... one sentence here and there. She knew he was there. It would have to be enough.

Two weeks had gone by. It was a Saturday. Holly looked at the piles of books and papers surrounding her on her bed and sighed. She would normally not allow herself to be distracted at a time like this, when work was getting intense and so much relied upon her success. And yet she couldn't keep her thoughts from straying to Syrok. She sent him a message.

**Syrok**

*Will you be at the vigil tonight?*

*-Holly*

There would be a candlelight vigil that night, she knew, to honor those Vulcans who had died in the earthquake. It was a small event, because as tragic as the earthquake had been, there were far more tragic events throughout the universe every day. She knew that the vigil was simply a polite gesture. Vaguely, Holly wondered who had organized it -- whether or not it was a Vulcan. She somehow doubted it. The public display in light of something so personal did not seem their style. Still, she did not want to assume. The reply was almost immediate.

*I will not.*

*-Syrok*

Hm. She had assumed as much. She hesitated a moment before sending another message.

**Syrok**

*Would you like meet me tonight to meditate?*

*-Holly*
This time Syrok did not respond right away. Interesting. Surely he was at his computer now if he’d responded to the first message so promptly. So, he was hesitating. Holly waited impatiently, trying to focus on her work but glancing to her email every few minutes. Finally a response came.

Very well. What time and place would be amenable?

-Syrok

Her reply was instantaneous.

Syrok-

21:00

North campus dining hall.

-Holly

Holly waited at the appropriate time and place for Syrok. It was late and the dining hall was closed. She spotted Syrok and walked to meet him.

“This is an unusual meeting place.” he commented as he glanced around. Holly grinned. She loved to see him curious. “It does not seem like a customary place of meditation.” he continued.

“Come on. I have a surprise.” She fought the urge to grab him by the hand as she would a human, to urge him along. There was no need, of course. He followed her at whatever pace she set. They moved around to the back of the dining hall, to the dumpsters. Syrok continued to look as if he wanted to say something, but he kept his frustration in check and waited for Holly to give her own explanation.

Syrok’s patience had been very thin lately. He had been busy with school, and busy with his grief. He had been trying to meditate with only moderate success. He’d been trying to eat enough when he inexplicably did not feel like eating, and his need to do so in private, when he could otherwise be trying to meditate was... irritating. That Holly wanted to spend time with him was somehow illogically irritating and welcome at once. And that they’d come to such an inappropriate place for meditation was both irritating and intriguing at once. Syrok felt as if his mind were, as humans would say, coming apart at the seams. He was not his normal self.

Holly moved behind the dumpsters and crouched down, grabbing a metal panel from the side of the building and inching it aside. She pulled a flash-light from her bag and without hesitation she crawled through the opening in the metal down a short passage, then jumped down a ledge onto new ground. She called back. “Come on. Close the panel behind you so no one disturbs us.”

“Are you quite certain this is... legal?” Syrok asked sceptically.

“It isn't marked as trespassing and we're on public property.” Holly said in an impatient tone.

“And it is safe?” Syrok asked, his mouth twisting with displeasure. He also wanted to complain
that it was filthy. He peered down the short tunnel where Holly's head peered back at him from the lower platform. Holly didn't bother to dignify his question with an answer. She simply raised a brow to him. He huffed a short breath that could almost be construed as a sigh, and moved himself into the tight space, shifting the panel shut behind him. Holly was already moving on, the light of her flash-light dwindling in the distance as she expected him to comply. He moved along with growing curiosity -- and of course, annoyance.

He could see now that they were in a small crawl space, perhaps, that due to the other bits of building made it feel like a small room. Holly was busy lighting candles at various strategic points around the enclosure. At the far end there was a large vent where a fan turned and warm air wafted through. It was pleasantly warm in this space, Syrok had to admit. The outside evening air was cool and damp, but here it was warm and dry.

On the floor were a scattering of rugs, torn, old, and beaten, but maintained. He saw a broom to the side of the wall and noted that some attempt had been made to clean the place. It was dirty, but not as filthy as he'd expected.

“Explain.” Syrok prompted, but his voice now was filled with curiosity and wonder.

“I found the entrance when a panel was missing.” She didn't explain how she'd been searching the dumpsters for the sealed bags of day old bread she sometimes found there. “They've since repaired it, but I've removed the screws....”

Syrok shot her a disapproving look.

“I know, I know!” Holly said with annoyance. “But what's done is done. The rugs and the candles are things people had thrown out when moving. Same with the broom. I did my best to fix it up.... I like to come here sometimes to be somewhere... away. Somewhere quiet.”

“It is... an intriguing place.” Syrok said carefully. He didn't want to give her too much credit, because he was still concerned that they might be breaking some regulation, and the place was still dirty... but he appreciated it as well. It was small, dim, out of the way, quiet. The steady thrum of the fan drowned out background noise and would just as effectively drown out their voices. In the midst of a busy campus in a busy city, they were alone.

Holly moved to the rugs and seated herself, leaving her shoes on the concrete. Syrok decided to relent and join her.

Holly was silent for a few moments, just enjoying the space, and enjoying his company. “Are you doing alright?” she finally asked.

Syrok felt uncomfortable at her question. He knew her implication. “I am well enough. I must simply reacquaint myself with the silence of no bondmate. It will not last long. Within the year, I anticipate another.”

Holly raised her eyes to his in surprise. “You'll have another... arranged for you? Like the last? And so soon?” She couldn't hide her shock at the news, and slight disgust that he wouldn't be allowed time to properly grieve, that he would be so casually assigned a life partner.

“It is our way.” Syrok said simply.

Holly felt frustration and anger twisting about in her mind. “But is it what you want?” she struggled to comprehend the situation. “To just have someone ... assigned to you. So coldly.”

“I require a bondmate. I could choose my own or one may be assigned. The result is the same.”
He required one? Holly wondered whether there was some physiological or psychological reason for this, or if it were simply part of his baffling culture. She’d always revered Vulcan culture but now she could n’t keep herself from feeling a tremendous irritation at it. “You can choose....” she said. “Wouldn’t you prefer it? Forgive me if my questions are rude or intrusive. I simply don’t understand how you could be content to be assigned a romantic partner like that when you have the freedom to choose your own. You are n’t seven any more, Syrok. Certainly you must have some opinion in the matter.”

Syrok twitched with annoyance at her use of the term ‘romantic partner’. He had explained before that a bondmate need not be romantic. However, as humans did not have an equivalent system of any sort he decided to let it go. “You are not being rude or intrusive.” he reassured her. He chose not to comment on the rest, and a silence hung between them. Syrok pondered what she had said, that he was no longer a child, and that he should relish his freedom to choose. He did n’t feel as if he had much choice, but that was because his only focus was on the fact that he required a bondmate, for his own survival. He had n’t given much thought to it. His mother had already asserted that she would find someone for him, as was common custom. After all, Syrok was unlikely to meet a suitable partner and complete all manner of courtship rituals prior to his p on f arr. His mother’s line of reasoning was rational and efficient. And yet... it did annoy him. He would need to meditate on this.

Holly watched the silent Vulcan and realized he was not going to address her points. She gave a small sigh of frustration. Well, it couldn’t be helped. Vulcans were stubbornly quiet, she knew. Rather than goad him, she arranged herself neatly in a cross-legged position and closed her eyes. One palm she lay on her knee as she was accustomed to, and the other she left face up on the ground beside herself as an offering.

Syrok watched the girl arrange herself and slowly calmed his own mind. They had come to this sanctuary to meditate, and he was glad to do so. He allowed himself to sink deeper in to himself as he listened to the insistent thrumming of the fan. He glanced down to the offered palm at his side and hesitated. He hadn’t hoped to do such a personal thing ever again. He’d been weak before, he knew, to have even considered it, and felt ashamed for having asked. But now he didn’t need to ask. Holly had offered freely. Syrok gazed upon the hand longingly. It was so quiet in here... and he was so tired. The soft trickle of background thoughts and emotions would surely speed up his recovery, would surely allow him the respite he needed in order to focus on more important matters. It was the logical thing to do. He placed his palm on hers.

A variety of surface emotions played across her skin. Pleased . She was pleased he’d touched her? Stubborn . Syrok realized she’d directed it at him. She thought him stubborn. But mostly she was calm , and Syrok could only feel the faintest of impressions from her as she sank into her meditation. He was impressed that she could quiet herself so well, impressed that a human had the focus of mind to do so. Syrok focused his own mind as her own whispers fell into a background hum. It felt good to recenter himself.

Holly was not a master at meditation though, Syrok learned, as about an hour later she was slumped forward where she sat and her breathing had slowed to something more resembling sleep than trance. Her fingers curled into his own to hold his hand as her arm came against his own and her head leaned against his shoulder. Syrok felt a jolt of his own alarm at the bold and inappropriate advances but stilled himself, realizing that it was an unconscious decision on her part as she drifted further to sleep. Comfort came through and then spun away as she drifted into a dreamless, calming phase of sleep.

Syrok was unsure what was the best course of action, and so for the next half hour he simply let her there, leaning against him. He decided that the physical contact, while unwelcome, was not
altogether unpleasant. Foreign yes, unnerving yes, but not unpleasant. He felt somewhat privileged, thinking that perhaps her easy surrender was due in part to a certain trust she could place in him. He then chastised himself for thinking so highly of himself -- surely it was only her own deficiency with meditation that led her human body to slip into unconsciousness against her will. His presence had nothing to do with it either way. Still, it was nice to speculate on.

Holly sat up all of a sudden, giving a small gasp as she roused from sleep. She seemed to be startled by the fact that she’d dozed off. Interesting. Syrok wondered what had roused her to begin with. He had n't moved and she had n't given any indication of a bad dream. Holly seemed to realize how much contact she'd been making and hastily pulled her hand back to herself, straightening herself carefully away from Syrok. Before she'd pulled away, Syrok had felt surprise, embarrassment, and something like fear, although fear seemed to be too primitive an emotion to describe it. It was something subtle and foreign to Syrok. He spoke before she could.

“Do not concern yourself, Holly. If you had been disturbing me, I could have removed you from my person at any time.”

She blinked a bit in surprise but then her alarm seemed to fade slightly. Of course, she realized. It would have been trivial for him to move them apart if he'd minded. Still, she felt embarrassed both for having fallen asleep and for having intruded on the Vulcan's personal space, especially considering his grief. She felt a wave of guilt wash through her and pressed it away. It was illogical to feel guilty for something that had been unconscious, and that Syrok had not reprimanded her for.

“Shall I walk you back to your dormitory?” Syrok offered.

Holly glanced at her watch and supposed it was getting a bit late. She'd stayed up later before but... well, it had been a very hectic week. And she still had work waiting for her in the morning. She admitted to herself reluctantly that she was exhausted.

“I'd appreciate it.” she answered with some reluctance. She pulled her shoes on, and turning her flash-light back on she systematically put out each of the candles. Syrok assisted and before long they were emerging from the short tunnel and sliding the metal panel back in place. The evening was cooler than predicted and Holly shivered a bit as they walked, clutching her arms around herself. She was still in her tank top from earlier in the day, and hadn't thought to bring additional clothing.

She was surprised when Syrok was suddenly handing her his own spare shirt. She'd been so lost in her own thoughts she hadn't even noticed him taking it off. She looked at him questioningly.

“You are clearly cold.” he stated simply. “I do not require this covering as much as you. Please take it.”

“But surely you'll be cold, yourself, Syrok. Vulcan is a desert planet.”

“The cool air can be uncomfortable, but I am able to raise my internal temperature sufficiently now that I have my equilibrium back. It simply requires additional energy and concentration to do so. Not to mention the fact that Vulcan, like many of your Earth deserts, typically becomes quite chilly at night. I am used to the dichotomy.” Logical.

“Of course.” Holly admonished herself. “I suppose the details had slipped my mind.” Syrok gave a gentle, polite nod as she shrugged the shirt onto her shivering frame. “Thank you.”

“It is of no consequence.” They walked on until they came to her dorm. It was Syrok who broke the silence. “I would like to thank you for our time tonight. Although unusual, I found it to be...
enjoyable.” He seemed to search for the appropriate description. “A welcome retreat.”

Holly's face lit up brightly and Syrok felt warm to see such open emotion in her. “I'm so glad you liked it.” Syrok watched the play of emotions on her face, listened to the tone of her voice. He could detect subtle layers and ambiguities beyond happiness but was frustrated that he was not well versed enough in human emotional displays to discern more. His hand itched to touch her own, to be able to understand. These moments of contact with the human had explained to him so much more than he had been able to learn by simple observation. And yet he knew that such intimate contact was entirely inappropriate. ...wasn't it? Syrok's mind went blank for a moment as the realization hit him full force: he no longer had a bond mate. He knew this. He'd been grieving this. It would still take him time to get over the shock of it, and the lasting sting.... And yet the full implication of it had not been processed until now. All of this rushed through his hyperactive brain in mere seconds. He suddenly saw Holly in a different light, and it gave him an unsettled feeling in his stomach that he wasn't sure he yet understood.

“Feel free to use the space as often as you like.” Holly had continued. “After all, it's not like I have a monopoly on it, and I wanted to share it with you. It can be nice sometimes to just... get away.”

Syrok nodded. “Thank you, Holly. I may indeed do this in the future. You are... a good friend.” He nodded once more politely. “I bid you good evening.” And with that, he turned himself toward home.

Holly stood frozen, looking after Syrok. A good friend? Her heart beat faster and she felt that she'd momentarily stopped breathing. So, she'd moved up significantly in the Vulcan's estimation. For a moment she wondered why, but as soon as the thought occurred to her she of course answered herself. It had to have been the sharing of such a deeply personal situation. She knew she shouldn't make too much of it. She'd determinedly quelled her romantic interest in the man months ago. But now a small flame of desire flickered anew. She turned to enter her building, struggling to shove the emotion down, and realized with some wonder that she was still wearing Syrok's shirt. She hadn't remembered to hand it back to him at the door, and he hadn't asked. Her slender fingers clutched at the too-long sleeves against her palms and she reveled in the feel of the fabric against her skin. She bit her lip, and could hear a Vulcan-like voice intone in her mind: Holly, this is highly inappropriate. Nevertheless... maybe she wouldn't remove the shirt right away.
Chapter 12

“Where did you get that?” Geri asked one day. They were in their room, both swamped with work - Geri at her desk, and Holly on her bed. Holly didn't look up from her work as she answered.

“What?”

“That jacket. I never saw you wearing it before.” Geri said, indicating the thin zipping shirt that Holly had been casually wearing the past few evenings, and even a few days when it had been cool and rained.

“Oh. It's Syrok's. He lent it to me.” Holly answered ambivalently.

“He lent it to you?” Geri's voice positively dripped with innuendo and unvoiced implications. She teased like a young girl.

Holly’s face flushed slightly but she made an irritated huff. “Yes. I was cold and he wasn't. It was a perfectly innocuous transaction.”

“If he lent it to you why have you kept it so long?”

“I haven't seen him. I've been swamped.”

“Mm.”

“What?”

“Nothing!”

“I really don't think it means what you think it means.” Holly said with irritation.

“Oh, maybe it doesn't mean anything to the Vulcan.” Geri said evenly. “I really never can tell what Vulcans are thinking. But if it doesn't mean anything to you then why have you been snuggling with it for days?”

“I'm not snuggling!” Holly said heatedly, but her gaze darted away from Geri's when Geri tried to meet her eyes, and Holly felt herself flushing more obviously now. Geri only snickered but blissedly left the issue drop, turning back to her own work.

Holly knew that Geri had a point. If there had been no special attachment to the jacket, then why had she chosen it repeatedly over her own perfectly suitable clothes? This is not a good idea, Holly ... some voice within her warned. She pushed the voice down defiantly, her mind warring back: there is nothing of consequence happening so there can be no argument against it. But there was something of consequence, of course. The shirt smelled of Syrok. And the knowledge that it was his calmed her.

She'd been overwhelmed for the next several weeks since her last meeting with Syrok. She hated that the semester only increased in difficulty as it moved forward. The professors seemed to have no regard for the fact that the students were in multiple classes, all of which were demanding. Holly had tried to calculate how much time it would take to sufficiently study for upcoming tests, complete all of her assignments, eat sufficiently, and sleep sufficiently... and she had realized with some annoyance that there was physically not enough time in a day to complete it all. Something would have to give, and those sacrifices were always a strategic balancing act for every student.
Well, maybe not for a Vulcan... but certainly for Holly.

She'd actually groaned aloud the day before when she'd received an email from Syrok inviting her to dinner. She'd really wanted the food, and even more than that, she'd really wanted his company. But with great reluctance she'd declined, explaining her difficulty in keeping up with her studies. She'd sacrificed some time for their last encounter, but she was determined not to make a habit of it. She longed to make a habit of it... but she knew too much was at stake. Holly chastised herself for her lack of mental discipline, that this should even be a difficult decision to make.

She'd worried that Syrok would feel rebuffed, that he wouldn't believe her and would think she was simply avoiding him. Of course she realized almost immediately how ridiculous a thought it was. Syrok had no reason to disbelieve her and was not familiar with the nuanced petty games of her kind. This line of reasoning only brought her to a new possibility: what if Syrok was really reaching out to her in a significant way? Humans were not the only race with nuanced emotional interactions. She had felt a bit concerned and a bit guilty. Guilty first for not being available to her friend, and guilty second at making such an assumption that he would need her so greatly. Surely she was only projecting her own desires. Desires which she should be more diligent in pushing away.

And so she wore the shirt. As often as she could, she wore the shirt. Because she didn't have time to actually be with him. Because she didn't have the emotional stability to allow herself to actually be with him. Because she was overwhelmed, and wanted to be reminded of him. Holly clutched at the ends of the long sleeves and renewed her focus on her work. Surely there was a problem growing here that she would have to deal with. Later. She didn't have time to divert her focus now. She would deal with Syrok... later.

Later came toward the end of May. Holly realized with a slight panic that in another week and a half, the semester would be at an end. She'd seen so little of Syrok and now she ached to see him before the summer. She needed to know his plans. She needed to make her own plans. Syrok hadn't contacted her since she'd initially mentioned her lack of free time. She assumed he was trying to be respectful, but wondered how to reach out. Biting the bullet, she wrote the email. Would he care to do supper that Friday evening?

Syrok had felt much better since his last meeting with Holly. He had finally regained some of his equilibrium. He hadn't returned to her hidden alcove. He hadn't needed to. He wondered greatly whether it was the isolated atmosphere of the place, or Holly's touch, or simply enough time that had finally been the key to his new balance. He couldn't pinpoint the cause of his newfound equilibrium, but it didn't matter. Now he could focus again. And focus he did... on finding a bondmate.

Holly's suggestion that he find his own had sent his mind spinning in a million directions. Should he pursue this course of action, or should he wait for his mother to arrange something? He was highly eligible. He came from a respected family. Surely it would n't be a problem. And yet... could he hope for more? He remembered with sharp annoyance how his mother's mind had gone straight to a replacement for T'Rena, only moments after her demise. It pricked at him in a way that was most illogical and unsatisfactory, but it pricked nonetheless. He had never given any serious thought to the idea of courtship. It had simply not been necessary before. Was it necessary now? Was it at least optional?

It was a large campus, and certainly there were other Vulcans. Should he try to meet them? No, it
wouldn't do. He wasn't going to spend his time searching for the potential one odd female who was also unbonded. It would be the same as having no choice at all, more effort but with the same result as waiting for his mother to act. But certainly there were other species with whom Vulcans had been showed to successfully bond. Other species such as humans... the campus was positively swarming with humans. Humans like Holly.

Syrok's mind kept flitting back to her admission, all those months ago, of her attraction to him. Certainly that had been an invitation to courtship. And he already knew Holly. He was already friends with her. From what he'd read of humans, he figured he must already be halfway to a romantic engagement. And yet he had rebuffed her at the time. Syrok had a sinking feeling that it would be entirely inappropriate to pursue her now. And yet his mind would not let the spark of an idea rest. He thought of what his mother would think if he were to enter into a romantic engagement with a human. Instead of bonding. To be romantic before bonding. Syrok knew it was done, he knew it was in line with human culture, he knew that other Vulcans had gone before. And yet the idea still was uncomfortably scandalous. Pleasingly scandalous. Syrok wondered where such ideas had come from so suddenly. He meditated on it often.

Holly hadn't reached out to him since their last meeting. Syrok had become nearly... frustrated by the fact. He was accustomed to her making most of the arrangements for their meetings, as he had n't been sure what would be considered appropriate. He'd always let her take the lead in that regard. But now he became more bold. They were friends now, he reasoned. And it had been more than their customary amount of time apart. Surely he would not be remiss in contacting her first. And so he had. And she 'd declined. Syrok had become nearly frustrated. But her reasons were sound. It would n't do to dwell on it, as he knew the tremendous pressure the girl felt to maintain her precious scholarship. He could simply make no logical argument to that.

Syrok hadn't contacted Holly after that, but was delighted when her email finally came.

Syrok-

Would you like to meet Friday evening for dinner?

-Holly

Syrok felt himself almost smile. A pleasant warmth and a slight wash of guilt swept through him. Her timing was impeccable.

That would be more than acceptable. In fact, my mother is currently visiting and does not leave until Sunday. I believe it is customary in both our cultures to introduce family and friends. Would you be amenable to her joining us for the proposed meal?

-Syrok

Holly blinked in surprise at the email. His mother was in town? Of course his reasoning had been perfectly logical. One introduced friends and family with ease. Why then did she feel so... uneasy? But of course she was being ridiculous, she chastised herself. This would be a wonderful opportunity to meet another Vulcan and could only help in honing her skills.
Syrok had informed his mother of the meeting. He felt from his thin bond with her a surface reaction of surprise and curiosity, but no more. With a bondmate, he could have felt the full depth of thoughts and emotions, should their shields allow them to pass through. With the bond of a mother, one could only feel the most basic surface emotions, and only when walls were purposely lowered, or thoughts and emotions deliberately projected. Syrok had a bond with his father as well, but that was so weak and tenuous so as to be virtually non-existent, unless they were in close physical proximity and trying purposely to utilize the bond. Syrok couldn't recall such an interaction since he'd been a small child, still learning to control his psychic abilities. He understood that one had a bond with ones siblings as well, but he was an only child. Syrok was glad, nonetheless, that his mother's immediate reaction had not seemed at all negative. He hoped she'd like Holly.

Holly gazed around at the dim interior of the restaurant. She flicked her wrist to check her watch and knew she was on time. Her eyes slid uneasily around the décor and the sounds and movements of people milling about. “Holly.” Syrok stepped toward her from a low bench in the waiting area. Her eyes flicked to him and she smiled, feeling slightly more at ease. To Syrok's right and slightly behind was a regal looking Vulcan woman. Syrok's mother.

Syrok was pleased to see Holly in suitably modest pants and a baggy t-shirt. She had forgone the tank top for this meeting. Her hair was still pulled back exposing her delicate neck, much to Syrok's pleasure as well, although her choice of shirt did prevent him from seeing her equally pleasing collarbone.

“Syrok.” Holly smiled.

“Mother, this is the friend I had mentioned, Holly Winters. Holly, my mother: T'Dinnae S'un T'nei.”

Holly nodded her head politely, her hands gently clasped in front of her, schooling them not to make an instinctive twitch to shake hands. “Ms. S'un T'nei.”

“Holly. Please call me T'Dinnae.” the woman said, returning the polite nod.

Holly welcomed the ushering of Syrok as they moved toward a reserved table. She'd never eaten at such a place before. She and Syrok had always stuck to small cafes or diners. Holly had to use every last reserve of her emotional control to keep her hands from shaking with nerves at being in such an establishment. She felt woefully under-dressed for the occasion, although many of the other patrons were wearing clothes similar to her own. She knew that she was being illogical, and that this place was certainly not at the highest end of restaurants: simply higher than she'd ever been before. Holly reminded herself that she was a communications and cultural studies major with her sights set on interplanetary diplomacy. She latched onto that determination. She would not be
thwarted by a simple restaurant experience!

Holly's mind raced through potential topics as they were seated. She carefully scanned the menu in front of her, for foods she understood, foods she liked, foods that were not likely to offend Vulcan sensibilities, foods that were cheapest. The waiter asked what they'd like to drink, and she waited for the others to order before asking simply for water: the same as her company.

“Holly, it is my understanding that your own focus of study is on interplanetary culture, with special interest in the Vulcan language and culture.”

“Yes, that's correct.”

“I find that to be quite unusual for a human. Is your interest in our kind what prompted you to seek out the company of Syrok?”

Holly blinked slightly at what seemed like such an antagonistic question. She looked to Syrok for a fraction of a second. If he had noticed, he wasn't letting on. He studied his menu with careful attention.

“I don't think so.” she answered as neutrally as she could manage. “At the time, I was aware of Syrok's success in our shared class and I asked him to help me, as I was having difficulty.”

“And yet you have become... close... in spite of no longer utilizing his capacity as a tutor.”

Syrok wondered what his mother was up to. He was slightly... annoyed... at her line of questioning. After all, he'd explained the nature of his relationship with Holly before.

“That's right.” Holly said simply, turning her eyes back to her menu. “Ms. S'un T'nei....”

“T'Dinnae.”

“T'Dinnae. Are you questioning the sincerity of my motives when it comes to your son?” she asked bluntly.

“A mother always questions such things.” T'Dinnae answered tersely but without inflection.

Syrok watched as miraculously, some of the tension left Holly's shoulders. She took a deep breath and tried to smile. “Of course. Syrok is lucky to have you to look out for his interests.”

His mother flinched almost imperceptibly, and Syrok felt a hint of surprise flit through the bond.

It was at that point that Syrok stepped in to the conversation and asked his mother benign questions about her work. He knew that she couldn't discuss it in any detail, but for the sake of Holly he tried to draw his mother's attention away from the girl. She gave him what he interpreted to be an appreciative look, and she seemed quite pleased to learn that T'Dinnae was involved with Starfleet herself. Holly entertained all manner of small questions as she ate. Syrok was pleased with their rapport. The meal was going better than expected.

Until Holly asked him about his summer plans.

He had planned to stay at the university, of course. He'd secured a summer internship with one of the aerospace engineering professors. Holly seemed pleased for him and then he asked her whether she would remain on campus. She hesitated in her response and he immediately wanted to reclaim his question.
“I'll be on campus.” was all that she said.

T'Dinnae spoke. “Have you secured a summer project as well then? For whom shall you be working, and on what project?” she asked with interest.

“I haven't managed to secure any summer engagements.” Holly said, staring at her food. “There was much... competition.”

“I see.” T'Dinnae answered. Syrok felt his mothers shields go up and he threw up his own as well. He knew she must be thinking negatively about Holly and he felt a wave of fierce protectiveness and ire wash through him. It wouldn't do to let his mother observe it.

“But you will be staying on campus?” she persisted in asking.

“I have nowhere else to be.” Holly said simply.

“The dormitories --” Syrok began before he could reproach himself for it. He'd just realized that her end of campus, the lower income housing, may once again close in the new season.

“My dorm will be closed.” Holly answered the unasked question. Her tone was even and her face placid. And yet Syrok knew her well now. He knew that thick embarrassment lay just under the surface. Syrok scowled. It irritated him that the academy wouldn't do something to assist those in need. That his mother said nothing spoke volumes. He realized now for certain that she had known about the disparity and that that was the reason for his better housing. While her actions were logical, and while the academy's dictates were entirely out of his control, he found himself to be quite irrationally riled. He recklessly wanted to invite Holly to his own dormitory, and wanted to invite her now, in front of his mother. He bit his tongue and sought to even his temperament.

“I see.” was all T'Dinnae said simply. Holly flushed but didn't respond, and an uneasy silence seemed to settle upon the party for a few long minutes. Thankfully, it was about time for them all to go. T'Dinnae paid the bill, and they all stood to part.

Holly had seemed to recover from whatever discomfort she'd been feeling and politely spoke to T'Dinnae. “Ms. S'un T'nei... T'Dinnae.” she remedied herself at the nearly invisible twitch from the woman. “Thank you for a lovely evening. It was a pleasure to meet someone so important in Syrok's life.”

“Likewise, Holly. And might I also thank you for the way you handled... well, the incident involving Syrok some time ago. I appreciate your ability to overlook a Vulcan behaving in such an... illogical manner.”

Syrok could sense only good intentions from his mother, however disastrously her words were phrased, however uncomfortable it made Syrok himself feel. But Holly had gone completely still. The incident? Was that what she called Syrok losing his life partner? Is that how she characterized the gut wrenching agony she'd seen him in? Her mind seemed unable, for a moment, to even comprehend her choice of words. She felt her face once again heat with anger, with outrage. She said in cool clipped tones “I believe, under the circumstances, that Syrok behaved in the only way that could be considered logical. The cause was sufficient.” she quoted Surak for good measure. “Good evening, Ms. S'un T'nei. Syrok.” She gave two polite nods, turned, and strode away. Syrok and his mother stood stock still for a moment, processing. Syrok felt from his mother's bond a sense of shock, outrage, and even a hint of shame, before her shields were up.

Syrok blinked slowly to regain his equilibrium. He was unsure what to say or what to do.
“So. She is the friend you have spoken of.” his mother said at last, in even tones.

“She is.” Syrok said simply, unsure of his mother's intentions in her statement.

“She is a fierce ally.” her mother said, gazing in the direction Holly had gone, but no longer seeing her.

Syrok felt very warm and content at his mother's words. She approved. “She is,” he said again.

“Well.” She said brusquely. “I should be heading back to my hotel. I shall see you tomorrow, Syrok. Take care.” T'Dinnae hurried on her way.

Syrok was a little surprised by his mother's hasty retreat, and found himself standing alone. Alone... with the ability to pursue Holly. She had seemed... upset.

Syrok had already calculated all the various speeds at which he could walk to catch her and how long it was likely to take based on the speed she had walked away. He was dismayed that he did not yet see her. She had either gone somewhere he had not anticipated... or she had run.

Syrok paused to search his mind. Where would she go? Her rooms? No. The hole.
Chapter 13

Holly looked up from her place on the rug when she heard Syrok enter. She didn't move, but they watched each other as he approached. She sat so placidly, but he could tell by her breathing that she had in fact run. He could tell by the streaks on her face, by the pink tinge to the edges of her eyes, that she had cried. She'd cried? But why? His own motions slowed to a halt as he stared at her from across the small, dim space. Why would she cry?

Holly finally lowered her gaze from him and turned her head slightly to the side, as if... as if in shame. Syrok knew the motion well. His gut wrenched to see it.

“I apologize if I was overly... terse... with your mother, Syrok.”

“There is no need to apologize.” he said sincerely. He meant it deeply. Not only had her words of defiance sung to him, hit him with warmth deep in his core... even aside from that pertinent fact, there was simply no need to apologize.

Holly looked up to him with a sort of pained desperation. But what did she want? He couldn't fathom what she would want from him, but he felt a desperate urge to give it to her if it would make her less sad.

With slow deliberation he removed his shoes, and sat on the rug beside Holly. It was all he knew to do. For a time they were both silent, each in their customary position for meditation, though neither one was able to concentrate. They didn't touch, but simply sat listening to the thrum of the fan, watching the flickering of the candles.

“I'm afraid your mother may not like me very much.” Holly said after a time.

“She likes you.”

“How --” Holly began to ask in protest. How could she? Or how could he know? The question didn't matter.

“I am certain she approves. I was able to feel as much. But it is of no consequence either way.”

Holly said nothing but looked to him curiously. She had calmed and had dried her tears. Her breath was even now, but her eyes still tinged pink.

“I approve of you, Holly, regardless of her opinion.” Syrok said boldly. He felt absurd saying such a heavily intimate thing, but her eyes shone so wonderfully at his words that it bolstered him and made him feel he'd made the right decision in saying so. He felt a delicious warmth in his stomach at that look. He wanted more. Recklessly, he pushed on. “Dennis will be away for the summer, and I have not been informed of a new roommate. I believe at this juncture it is safe to assume that I will not have one for the duration of the summer. As you are without a place to stay, and as I happen to have one, it would please me if you would share my room for the duration of summer break.”

Holly's look shifted now. It still held that... that certain something that he couldn't define, that something that made him feel warm... but it also held clear surprise. “Wouldn't that be... against regulations?” she asked, then bit her bottom lip nervously, as if she had regretted asking.

“It is not against regulations for me to keep the company of a woman in my room. I do not believe regulations specify which bed you should use, either, if an extra one should happen to be free, or
how many belongings you are allowed to keep on your person. Further, there is a private bathroom with shower that other female guests have used, that you yourself have used a few times over winter break without incident.”

Holly couldn't argue with that, but she still had to ask. She wanted to kick herself for asking, but she couldn't help herself. “But wouldn't you find it... inappropriate?”

“I have come to the conclusion that what others think is often-times not worth my consideration. However, if you are concerned that the arrangement would sully your reputation, I would quite understand.”

“No!” she interrupted him quickly. “No. I'm not worried about that, about what others might think we're doing....” Holly's face flushed and she felt awkward to be having such a frank discussion, and with a Vulcan no less! “I thought you cared about such things.”

“I do have some concern about how such rumors can harm ones reputation. However, as you have stated that you are not concerned, then that only leaves my end of the equation. And I find myself now, unbonded.” The word sent an inexplicably delicious thrill up Holly's spine, as if there were thick innuendo. But of course there couldn't be. Her pulse quickened and her eyes shot to his in surprise, in question. “It would not cause any tarnish to my honor at this juncture if people thought... such things.” He carefully did not say which 'such things'. “Because it would no longer be inappropriate for me to engage in them, regardless.”

Holly realized her mouth was hanging slightly agape and she shut it deliberately with a click. She wanted to squirm out of her skin, she was feeling so uncomfortable under his sharp, calculating gaze. Her skin was slightly flushed, and her heart was fluttering out of her careful control. She chastised herself. Holly he is a widow and he has already rejected your advances and your physiological reactions right now are highly inappropriate. Get yourself under control, get those thoughts under control. She closed her eyes to the silent mantra and drew breath.

Syrok watched Holly's reactions with a predatory gaze. He had not anticipated the power of his words over her physiology. It was enthralling. However, his own face was flushed faintly green from discussing such deliciously crude topics, and he now clamped down his mental controls to reign himself in. It was exquisite to watch Holly doing the same as she closed her eyes and drew breath. He wanted to touch her, to even graze her hand so that he could feel the tumultuous emotions that surely played across her skin. He itched to know. He bit his tongue. Stop right there, Syrok. You have spoken that she might understand the intentions behind your offer. It would be inappropriate to continue the conversation in this vein.

“So.” He startled Holly out of her thoughts as her eyes flashed back to his. “Would you like a place to stay?”

Holly felt as if she couldn't breathe but she managed to say in a calm, level voice “I would appreciate that very much. Thank you.”

He nodded politely in response.

They were quiet for a moment, both reviewing the evening’s events. Holly's eyes suddenly widened. “What am I going to do all summer, Syrok?”

He could tell she was in the midst of some emotion, but.... “Pardon?”

“My main concerns were the same as last year: survival. When I couldn't secure work again I'd assumed I'd be stuck finding food and shelter as my main focus, but now.... I could do anything.”
Ah, excitement. Syrok was pleased that he could be a part in bringing forth such a positive emotion. “I need to think, I need to plan! I need to spend my time productively. Syrok, I could hug you!” she grinned in her excitement.

Syrok's eyes widened slightly. The girl was so animated that he half feared, half hoped that she would hug him. She, of course, did no such thing.

“You'll have to help me.” she continued as her mind raced. “To think of something.”

“Excuse me?” Syrok wished desperately he had something less inane to say, but he was simply not following her wild train of thought.

“I've never had this opportunity before, Syrok. You have your internship. I need to think of something that will... you know, increase my skill set, further my career, make me look good. You know.”

“I suppose I see what you mean. There are of course any number of personal projects you could pursue in your wide field of study....”

“I know that.” she interrupted with some annoyance. “I just... I have no idea where to start. Promise you'll help me?” she asked sweetly, giving him a hesitant but beguiling smile.

Syrok didn't want to promise any such thing, as he didn't have sufficient data as to the parameters of this request, how much of his own effort it would entail, and so forth, and yet... he did want to make her happy again. “I will assist you.” he said with some reservation hinting in his voice.

Holly reached out gently and gave his hand a quick squeeze. He hadn't been prepared for it. Holly had never before knowingly initiated contact between them. He felt a quick but overwhelming pulse of happiness, gratitude, excitement, relief. He twitched in response but her hand was already gone and she was looking shyly away.

“I'm sorry. I'm sure that was inappropriate.” Holly seemed distressed with herself.

“It was inappropriate.” he conceded. “But I will not... hold it against you.” he borrowed the human turn of phrase. Holly flicked her eyes up and saw that Syrok was nearly smiling. This night was full of surprises! Her head whirled with all of the new events. Her whole world was slowly turning upside down.

Holly itched to touch him again, to feel his cool, alien skin against her own. She itched to throw herself at him and hug him with excitement and relief. It felt as if the ball of tension that had been ever increasing inside of her for the past month had suddenly released. Her studies were under control now. And though she'd failed to secure work again... Syrok had provided her with housing. He would provide her with food. He would provide her with direction. Holly was overwhelmed and at a loss for words. No one before... no one... had provided.

“I should get back to my room.” she said. She couldn't bear the awkward and overwhelming emotions swirling around her head. “I have some work to do.” she lied.

“Very well. Shall I escort you?” Holly nodded. They doused the candles and walked in silence. Only when Holly was inside again, alone (Geri was blessedly absent) did she notice Syrok's shirt was still on her bed. He hadn't asked her to return it yet, although she imagined that surely his Vulcan mind must remember. She clutched it to her as she lay on her bed, her mind whirling with possibility and confusion. She had only to get through final exams, and she would be living with him. Oh, lord, Holly, please keep your wits about you.
“Where would you keep these things if not here?” Syrok asked with a hint of tight confusion in his voice. Tight, Holly knew, because he was irritated. But, a Vulcan could never be irritated.

She set her bag down on the bed with her blankets and Syrok placed the last box of her books on the floor. Her end of the room was a mess of piled things. Her eyes twinkled as she tried to hide her amusement. “Some of them I’d keep with me, some I’d put in the hole, and most of it I’d store in the dorm basement until they opened the building again in August.”

“Is that safe?”

Holly shrugged. “People routinely store larger items there: personal furniture, or large rugs. Last year I just piled my boxes with everything else and no one touched them. Anything of personal value I keep on my person -- like my clothes, toiletries, PADD, spare hard drive, and some sentimental things.”

“I was not aware you had sentimental things.”

Holly gave him an unreadable look. “Of course I do. Doesn’t everybody?”

Syrok thought for a minute. Did he? He supposed, against all logic, that some of his material items had sentimental connotations. Did everybody have such things? “I would not know.” he answered.

“I’ll show you.” she offered.

Syrok felt distinctly uncomfortable, as if he were intruding on something intensely personal, but Holly was already on the move. She had, in fact, not asked.

“This is my older journal, and this is my current one.” she pulled out two small books, one well worn. “And this....” She pulled out a tattered book: The Teachings of Surak in Simple Standard. Syrok picked up the book and flipped through the pages, his eyes widened slightly. The translation was indeed simplistic, but it was accurate. Although he knew from her already that his people had been a source of inspiration for her, he still found it strange and moving to see such a book counted among her precious possessions. He felt himself understood for a moment, more deeply than he usually felt around humans.

Holly pulled out a creased paper. “My official acceptance letter from the Academy.” She laid it out reverently on the bed with her other things and rummaged in her bag some more, tossing pens and other loose items aside. She produced some more sheets of paper, worn and creased and handed them to Syrok in exchange for her book. “It's a poem.” was all the explanation she gave.

A poem. One that for some reason, held sentimental value to Holly. Syrok read the title: Pioneers! O Pioneers! by Walt Whitman. He couldn't decide whether the name of the poet was familiar. The poem was not. He read through it with interest. Poetry had not been a topic he had indulged much effort in previously. “I can see why you appreciate this.” he said evenly, and noticed how Holly's face bloomed into a shy smile, pleased but feeling private. He wouldn't ask the poem's significance. He handed it back to her.

“Thank you for sharing these things with me.” He wanted to say more, he felt like he should, but he didn't know what else there was to say. Nevertheless, Holly seemed content as she filed her things back into her bag. Before she could replace the words of Surak, Syrok picked the book up once more, flipping through the pages with interest.
“Surely you have it memorized by now.” Holly half-joked to him.

“It is curious. I have never seen a full copy Surak's teachings written in Standard, and what little I have seen I've not found translated so succinctly. It is a good translation.”

“I thought so too. Since I've been studying Vulcan, I've been able to read it as it was originally written, and I've tried to compare. I've read a few analyses of the translations that are out there.”

“But what is all of this scribbled in the margins and on blank pages?” Syrok asked, seeing Holly's own writing.

On one page, there was Surak's word:

*Cast out fear. There is no room for anything else until you cast out fear.*

On the next, in Holly's writing:

*I must not fear.*  
*Fear is the mind-killer.*  
*Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.*  
*I will face my fear.*  
*I will permit it to pass over me and through me.*  
*And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path.*  
*Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.*  
*Only I will remain.*

Holly peeked at the page and then gave a snort of laughter. “Oh those. They're just bits of things I've picked up from Earth literature through the years, things that felt similar in message.”

“But whose words are they?” Syrok asked with wonder. He'd studied many of Earth's philosophies. He knew that some of them indeed had similar teachings but he'd not seen anything like this.

Holly's laughter tinkled into his austere silence. “It is from a science fiction book, Syrok. That's all.”

“This is from fiction? I shall have to re-evaluate my relationship toward fiction.”

“I am glad you like it.” she neatly plucked the book out of Syrok's hands and tucked it back with her other things. Syrok once more felt entirely awkward and as if he'd intruded on something too personal. And also as if he'd revealed something too personal about himself. He left Holly to her unpacking and busied himself at his desk in silence.

It had been awkward the first night. They'd spent so much time together, simply because it didn't seem right not to. Now would be the juncture of the night when they'd typically part. Now would be the juncture, Holly thought, when she'd go back to her dorm and try to meditate her sexual angst
away, when she'd try to get the butterflies swimming in her stomach under control. But no such release could come. She thought about meditating, but how could she in front of him? Yes, they'd done it together before, but then they'd been touching and the idea now felt highly charged.

Syrok too, was on edge as the night wound down. Dennis would customarily be asleep by now, if he were to return to the rooms at all. Syrok would normally wait until the man was sleeping soundly to begin his meditation, or to eat. He knew that Holly knew he ate, and yet he found himself reluctant to do it in front of her. He was hungry and frustrated and felt no privacy. And then she'd decided to shower. This in itself, he knew, was a perfectly logical thing for one to do before sleeping, but he hadn't realized she was going to undress in his room. All logic flew from his mind as he realized what was happening. He wanted to shout out to her that this was highly inappropriate, but he bit the inside of his cheek instead and focused his eyes squarely on his computer, not deviating a millimeter. He felt the tips of his ears flush green and struggled to maintain his control. Perhaps it was he who was behaving inappropriately. He had no context for such a relationship. Clad now in nothing but her towel, shower basket in hand, Holly left. Syrok took a slow breath. This would take some getting used to. He was not sure whether they should discuss this.

Awkwardly, Holly dressed in her pajamas, standing well out of Syrok's line of sight. She flicked off the light and got into her bed across from him. “Well... goodnight.” she said.

“Goodnight, Holly.” Syrok returned, feeling uncomfortable himself, but relieved that she would soon sleep. He would soon get his peace. He waited tensely, monitoring her breathing, to know when she would finally be asleep. He somehow doubted that even then he would feel his customary sense of privacy. He found it ironic that while previously he'd felt his most at ease around Holly, he now felt completely out of his comfort zone.

Holly stared at the wall in the darkness, the room lit only slightly by the glow of Syrok's computer. The blinds were shut tightly on Syrok's side of the room to keep out the night. The room felt strange. She'd slept in front of Syrok before. She'd slept in this very room before. But now she wanted space away, space to slow down her fluttering heart. She wanted to put on Syrok's shirt that she'd been wearing at night, the shirt that she now had buried deep within her bags for fear that he'd remember it and ask for it back. Her cheeks burned with shame and embarrassment for behaving so illogically. It's creepy, Holly, she reprimanded herself. She lay still and listened quietly to Syrok's small movements at his computer. She wondered when he would retire. She wondered how much sleep he did in fact need. She wondered if he'd eat, or meditate. It was a long time until she found sleep.

It was 1.78 hours until Holly found sleep, Syrok noted with irritation. Finally he could tell that she had succumbed to her fatigue. He allowed himself to look over to her silent form, noting her steady breathing in the dim room. It was surreal to have her here. Syrok reviewed the regulations once again in his mind, searching for any reason she should not be allowed to stay. While it did not seem right, he could find no actual rule against it -- or rather, he could find many ways of easily justifying her stay, based on the existing framework. He thought again of why she was here in the first place, and felt a hot wave of anger and frustration thrill through him before he quelled it. Her situation was not fair, but neither was his. What is, is. Tomorrow would begin anew.
Chapter 15

Holly moved the small square device to pan around the room.

“What are you doing?” Syrok asked, not looking away from his computer.

“I told you. I'm working on a vlog called The True Life of Vulcans. Ideally I will interview others in time but you'll have to do for a start. You hear that, viewers? This is Syrok: a True Vulcan.”

“I am hardly a representative sample of my entire people.” he said dryly, still not acknowledging the camera.

“This is Syrok's room: room of a True Vulcan.”

“Do you care to explain what a false Vulcan is?”

“No. And this is Syrok's favorite blanket upon his bed.”

“I do not have a favorite blanket. It is the blanket which I own.”

“But it is in your favorite color.”

“It would be illogical to prefer one color to another. When color serves a functional purpose in design, logic dictates the best color. When it is irrelevant to design, it can safely be ignored.”

“Are you denying it is your favorite color then?”

“It is gray.”

“You like gray.” Holly insisted. “You have three pairs of gray pants and two gray notebooks.”

Syrok nearly sighed. “Very well. I admit to finding the color unobtrusive.”

“There you have it viewers. Interview with a True Vulcan!” Holly shut her camera off.

“Is this what you are going to do all summer?” he asked dryly as she loaded the file onto her PADD.

Holly became tensely quiet and he regretted asking. It had been only a week now since she'd moved in, and he'd had a great start to his internship. It was Saturday now and while they had relaxed to each others presence to some degree, Syrok hadn't forgotten his promise to help Holly find a direction. He felt a stab of guilt wash through him. He should have directed more attention to the problem. He would remedy that tonight once Holly was asleep.

It wasn't as if she hadn't tried to find her own direction. This “vlog” of hers was an original idea. One that nearly annoyed Syrok. He would n't give her the satisfaction of forbidding her to use his image for her project though. It would seem very un-Vulcan-like to care so much. He simply did his best to maintain dignity in the face of her incessant videos. When he was able to sufficiently quell his annoyance, he almost found it endearing. She'd said her intention was to dispel some of the prejudices and false notions that humans carried about Vulcans. He only hoped that her endeavor would be successful. Inter-species relations, after all, was her focus, not his.

“When is your birthday, Syrok?” Holly asked as she fussed with her computer.
“For what purpose do you wish to know the date of my birth?”

“To celebrate, of course!” she smiled.

“That is most unnecessary.”

“Well when is it anyway?”

“The next anniversary of my birth is on May thirteenth by your calendar.”

“What does that make you, a Gemini? I can't remember the cut-offs....” she muttered.

“If you are referring to the human mythology of astrology,” he said drily, “then I find you are far less logical than I had thought.”

“It's just for fun, Syrok.” she chided.

“I can find no amusement in something so... illogical.”

By illogical, he meant distasteful, Holly knew. She simply snickered and marked the date in her calender. “You let me miss your last birthday. How old will you be next May?”

“Nineteen.” he estimated as he did the quick conversion between months.

“Oh! I'll be 20 in October. The second.” She added the date because she knew he would never ask it.

Syrok wondered whether he was expected to provide her with some sort of... gift. The idea irritated him, partially because he felt illogically compelled to do so, if only to see her smile because of it. He would put the matter out of his mind for now. October was some way off.

Telling Holly his date of birth had brought to mind other problems. May. He had until May, maybe longer. His Time would come within the year. Beginning around May, pon farr would be a ticking time bomb. Or perhaps he would be one of the rare ones, whose Time did not come so soon. It was unlikely. Syrok let his gaze slide to Holly once more. She wasn't looking up now as she worked. His eyes lingered on her neck, her shoulders, her collar bones, exposed and tempting in her tight tank top. He felt his tongue graze his teeth slightly at the image of nipping, just lightly, just there....

With frustration and some difficulty, he reigned his thoughts in. He had not yet decided how to approach Holly about romance. She had brought up the topic before and he had firmly denied her. His stated reason had been T'Rena, but now T'Rena was gone. He wished to pursue Holly now, he'd decided, but he did n't know how, and he did n't know whether such a thing was proper after rejection. He'd tried to research such answers but the human culture remained opaque and elusive as ever. Why did they not have clear-cut social norms for such things? Syrok felt his time running away and was daunted by the prospect of successfully wooing her enough to date, providing sufficient romantic incentive, convincing her to bond, and hopefully gaining some physical ... familiarity with her before his Time. His mind raced with these thoughts and he found himself tapping his fingers on the desk. He calmed them.

It was time to act now. He had done all the research he was able to do. Syrok strengthened his will. “Holly.”

“Mm?” she did not look up.

“Would you like to accompany me to some sort of entertaining event?”
She looked up now, her nose wrinkled in ... what? Confusion? Laughter? “An entertaining event? Like what?”

“I believe what is customary is a movie.”

“A movie? With a Vulcan?”

“As I have little interest in such amusements, you would of course have full reign over the choice of movie.”

She gave a small laugh. A part of Syrok's gut clenched instinctively. He was often the target of human laughter, and it rarely carried positive connotations. However, he recognized this particular laugh from Holly, and knew that it wasn't malicious. He forced himself to relax slightly and waited for her response.

“You said it was customary. What custom are we seeking to emulate?”

Syrok hadn't been anticipating this question. He immediately regretted his choice of vocabulary, and sought to find an answer he could give her that was misleading but true. He was never very creative when it came to truth. He found no alternative. “It is customary for one who is seeking to win the affection of a human female, as far as my research indicates.” He did not meet her gaze as he said it, nor afterward. He was certain the tips of his ears were green.

Holly stopped what she was doing on her PADD and looked at him now. What had he said? She wasn't smiling any more. For some span of time, everything seemed to just stop. Syrok's eyes flicked to her. She'd taken a long time in answering, and he'd wanted to see her face for some indication -- and now he found himself frozen as well. Tense. What did that gaze mean? He felt frustratingly inadequate, and slightly panicked.

“I thought...” Holly was unable to vocalize what she'd thought. She'd thought that he wasn't interested. Because of T'Rena. T'Rena was dead... but so recently. She felt somehow uncomfortable with this advance.

“Please inform me if you are not amenable to this course of action. I would not waste your time.”

Syrok's voice was smaller now, less sure. Holly had been staring at nothing. She refocused her gaze on him, and saw his eyes dart away from hers in fear.

“What... what does this mean?” she asked, flabbergasted.

“I believe I have just explained my intentions, Holly.” His voice actually sounded nervous now. Certainly this could not be real. Holly's mind spun.

Don't fuck this up, Holly! Something in the back of her mind screamed. “Yes. Yes!” She came back to her senses. “I am definitely interested in this course of action!”

“You... you are.” Syrok said with some surprise and some relief. His eyebrows rose and he wondered what thoughts and emotions had tumbled through Holly in those moments. “Good.”

“Good.” repeated Holly, still trying to recover from her daze. She then looked to him and gave him one of her most charming smiles. Syrok felt a warmth spread through him. This was good. He'd succeeded in the first steps of his plan. Why then did he feel nearly more panicked than he'd felt to begin with? He would need to meditate tonight indeed.
“You said I should pick the movie.”

“The premise of this movie seems highly illogical. Unless I am mistaken, there are no such creatures as these, and if there were, I fail to see how any basic weapon and knowledge would fail to defeat them.”

“It’s a horror, Syrok. It’s meant to be scary, not realistic.”

“I doubt very much that it will illicit its intended response in me.”

“The idea is for it to scare me, not you.”

He raised a brow at her sceptically. “Explain.”

“Because, Syrok, if I’m afraid you can... comfort me.” she smiled shyly.

“I see.” Syrok was somewhat more satisfied with her choice of movie.

His eyes roamed the theater and the bustle of people as they walked in. He did not like it. He fought for his own space, careful to avoid people who were willing to brush against him inappropriately. Syrok determinedly maintained his shields. This “date” was not as pleasant as he had hoped. He looked with disgust upon the “foods” supplied in the vending area, and then glanced with some worry toward Holly. “Do you... require... this?” he fought to keep his disdain from showing, lest she actually require it to complete her experience.

Holly's eyes only sparkled up at him with poorly contained mirth. “No, I don't.”

Syrok relaxed slightly. She was a most acceptable human.

Holly kept looking at his hand and itched to hold it, but she knew that Syrok would be absolutely scandalized by such an overt display of affection in public. She knew without having to ask. But all bets were off when the lights were out. She could barely contain herself.

Syrok purchased the tickets and was going to hand Holly hers, but she made no indication that he should. So, he would handle the tickets. She followed beside him but slightly behind. It seemed that in this scenario, he would lead. He was unused to navigating such an atmosphere and was not entirely comfortable in doing so, although the arrangements were easy enough to understand through observation. But in spite of that discomfort, a part of him was illogically pleased. Syrok remembered clearly when he and T'Rena had discussed their futures, their plans once finishing their Vulcan education. He'd been surprised to realize she had no shared interests with him, and no intentions on following him in any way through his life. She, similarly, had seemed surprised to realize he'd felt the same. They'd vaguely wondered how they would handle his Time when it came, how they would possibly handle children in the future, should they choose to have some... but it had seemed immaterial. Of course they would separate. They were entirely egalitarian and both had the right to choose one's life.

And though Syrok held dear those lessons of equality which had been espoused to him throughout his life, he felt a warm glow at seeing how eagerly Holly had wanted to follow. He thought again to when she'd requested his help that night in the hole, her feeling of relief that had trickled through when he'd agreed to assist her. He should not relish this feeling of power, he knew, but it was tempting to do so. He handed the ticket master their tickets and proceeded to lead Holly into the theater. He surveyed the seats, calculating the position that would give the best view.
“We should sit toward the back.” Holly whispered to him, but she didn't immediately move in that direction. She seemed like a coiled spring, itching to move, but waiting for his consent. Syrok opened his mouth intending to explain how the back seats were not in fact the best seats. He was almost certain there was a better vantage point somewhere near the middle of the slope. Nevertheless, he saw her excitement and relented, leading them in fact to the very back row.

Holly's gaze darted to Syrok until she saw him finally settled comfortably in place, his gaze steady on the screen. Carefully she snuck her hand to his on their shared armrest and twined her fingers in his. His skin was cool against hers and a bit uncomfortable. She perpetually felt as if she should warm him up. The texture had an alluring thickened, almost rough texture, while still being silky, not calloused. Syrok jerked at the touch and shot her a wide eyed stare, gazing around the theater as if someone might see them. She only tightened her grip slightly and kept her gaze forward, holding in a laugh and slumping down in her chair a little. So, Syrok realized, this was how it was to be. This was... both distressing and pleasing at once. He felt the excitement pouring through the contact, and the intense desire for him to not pull away. Very well. He focused his gaze once more on the screen, relaxing his hand to hers, glad that they had chosen the back seats.

The movie was tedious, as Syrok had expected, but Holly's reaction to it was fascinating. Where before he'd only felt her emotions in the background of his meditations, he now focused on them, fascinated to see how she could get swept up in such a nonsensical plot. And ever in the background buzzed excitement, and hints of desire. Now and then would trickle through a fuzzy sort of fear, not true fear, but tingling in her psyche nonetheless, or there would be a sharp burst of adrenaline as something unexpected (to her) happened on screen. It was most amusing.

Syrok remembered her warning to... comfort her. He saw the other couples scattered throughout the theater, some clutching each other, some doing decidedly more. Neither of these things was an option. It was simply... beyond his capacity to endure. However, he noted with some interest, he had never let her feel his own emotions, nor had he experimented with projection. He waited expectantly until the next burst of fear came, and sent a trickle of warmth, comfort, enfolding.... Holly jumped from him now, rather than from the movie, and glanced at him. She'd given a small gasp. Her eyes shined up at him and he felt surprise, delight, excitement, desire, expectation. So, she'd approved. Syrok was pleased with this arrangement.

Syrok could tell she was waiting for it again, almost twitching for it, not watching the movie. He would not give in to her restless pressure, though, and she soon caught the hint and went back to her movie. He waited again for a good long time until the excitement picked up again. He could feel her heart rate increasing, her breath subtly change, could see and feel her growing tension, her unwavering gaze at the screen and -- there it was, the trickle of fear he'd been waiting for. He sent a projection of the same warmth, comfort, enfolding and pushed it to her. She closed her eyes and made a small sound of complaint in her throat when the sensations were withdrawn. Hopeful desire? He felt her waiting and resisted. More insistent desire? No. He waited stubbornly. And then he felt her push and it was he who was startled. He glanced to her, but her eyes were closed. He felt her clumsily push and tug at some invisible shield. It was trivial to hold her at bay, of course. She was no telepath. Still, he was surprised to see that she could do so much. There was so little he knew about humans. Finally he felt her resignation and her attention moved back to the screen.

They settled into a rhythm of play. Holly would become afraid, and Syrok would send comfort. She had given up on coaxing more and seemed content with what she got. It was a good movie. But all too abruptly it had ended, and Holly had felt Syrok untangle his hand from hers and pull away. She wondered whether he'd felt the traces of disappointment before he'd fully broken contact, and hoped she hadn't made him uncomfortable. They filed out with the other patrons in silence, and walked back toward the dorms. Holly itched to take his hand, and knew she shouldn't.
They were silent on their walk back. Syrok wondered whether he should attempt small-talk about the movie, but was relieved to see that Holly maintained an easy smile, seemingly lost in her own thoughts. He felt relaxed and pleased with the evening. As soon as their dorm room door was shut, however, he was startled to have Holly grabbing at his hands in excitement.

“Do it again, do it again! Please, please, please, please,” she grinned and managed to snatch his hands before he could prevent her.

Syrok *threw* his mental shields up as he was bombarded by *excitement, happiness, curiosity, desire*. “I will not!” he said with some haughtiness. He did not attempt to remove his hands from hers, battling with his desire to continue touching her and his irritation at her actions. “My telepathy is not a commodity for your amusement.”

He almost regretted saying so when he saw her face fall, and *shame, disappointment, self-reproach, guilt, embarrassment*. How could someone flit through so many emotions so quickly? She released her grip on him but he did not release his grip on her and he felt her confusion. “I'm sorry. It's not what I meant.” she searched his eyes for understanding. “It's just so... *amazing*. I want to *feel you*, Syrok. Is that... inappropriate? I don't know the boundaries any more if we're dating... are we dating? I mean, you asked me on a date....” she was rambling now. “But we didn't discuss if we're in a *relationship* and I don't want to assume, but you were being so... so friendly in the theater. But if there's a certain way I need to act, you'll have to let me know and I promise I'll respect it.”

“Shshshshh....” Syrok intoned the sound he knew was meant to be soothing. “Stop.” he said gently. He took a breath. She'd said so many things that would need addressing. “I would like to be in a relationship with you. That was my intent. Is that agreeable?” Holly nodded emphatically but didn't speak, preferring to give him room to talk. He could feel her own relief mixing with his own through their touch. “Good. I agree that we should discuss... boundaries. I find that I do not know much when it comes to human courtship ritual, and from what I have attempted to research it seems that each relationship may vary greatly. It is... frustrating.” He did not like to admit so. “I am willing to try to, as they say, meet you half way on this. We have different needs and different customs and so I am fully prepared to compromise on many items.”

“What items?” *Curiosity, something akin to hope* ....

Syrok looked to the side and would not meet her gaze, his face flushing with a hint of green. Holly laughed giddily at the sight of it and he felt a delightful tickle across his skin. So, this was the feeling of laughter... it was most pleasant. He must have made some reaction because she said “You can feel everything I'm feeling right now?”

“I can. It is not difficult when we touch hands.”

“What about whole thoughts?”

“I could detect some of those as well if I tried. It hadn't seemed proper to pry.”

“And I don't get to feel anything? That hardly seems fair.” A hint of teasing there, but a hint of truth.

Syrok nearly sighed. “Very well.” With some considerable force of will, he lowered his mental shield a bit.

Holly's eyes opened with wonder. *Embarrassment, trepidation*. 
She pushed back *love, wonder, excitement*.  

Syrok's eyes widened. There she had *pushed* again. *Surprise.*  

“What surprises you?” she wrinkled her nose in that way that was inexplicably attractive.  

“I was not aware that humans could intentionally project.”  

“Oh. Is that what I'm doing? Like this?” *Love, adoration, love, want.*  

It came all at once and Syrok *did* gasp, his eyes closing to the wonderful swirl of emotions. It was a heady feeling. He felt a swell of his own *arousal* and clamped down his shields immediately.  

Holly blinked in surprise and slight distress as she felt her connection to Syrok cut off. “Did I do something wrong?” she asked, her voice and her emotions laced with *worry*. She bit her lower lip.  

“No! No.” Syrok hurried to reassure her, recalling the cascade of negative emotions he'd felt before. “It was...” he licked his lip nervously. “It was very pleasant. I am simply... unused to such sensations.”  

Happiness bloomed once more through the touch and in her smile. She *pushed* again... not as hard as last time, not as overwhelmingly... *adoration*.  

Syrok smiled slightly and lowered his shield again to let her feel what he honestly felt, no projection... just *contentment*. He felt the honest echo of the emotion through Holly. He leaned down to press his forehead against hers instinctively and just let the happy, content emotions wash through them in a loop for some time.  

“Is this a very Vulcan thing to do?” Curiosity tickled out of Holly and through their link.  

“It is.” she felt him smile internally, betraying the farce of his passive exterior. “It is, I believe, an equivalent to kissing.”  

“You don't kiss?”  

“I have never kissed, but I assume you mean Vulcans on the whole. And to that end: not typically.”  

“So this is kissing?” she smiled a bit and blushed. Holly found her mind wandering, unfortunately, to T'Rena, wondering if Syrok had Vulcan-kissed her. He'd said they hadn't been romantically involved, and yet.... She simply couldn't understand the nature of the relationship. And he'd been so recently widowed, she'd seen his pain, but now he was moving to Holly so quickly. The word *rebound* flashed through her mind and she pulled reluctantly away.  

Syrok could sense some sort of conflict and disappointment but hadn't been able to discern more before she'd pulled away. “What is it?” he asked in confusion.  

Holly looked frustrated and wasn't sure how to bring up such a topic. She felt bad for even thinking about it, for doubting his intentions. “It's nothing.” her eyes darted to the floor at their side.  

“How?” Syrok reached to take her hands again, wanting to know, wanting to understand. She blushed but did not pull away, still not meeting his gaze, but he could only sense the jumble of emotions, not their source. “What is wrong?” he asked. She heard such sweet concern in his voice. She even felt the confusion and concern swirling through the link now, genuine.
“It's just... isn't it strange to date so soon after...?” she couldn't bring herself to speak of such a delicate topic.

“Why would it be strange?”

_Revulsion, anger_. “Didn't... I mean she meant something to you didn't she? I saw how upset you were.”

Syrok blinked in surprise and confusion. “Of course she meant something to me. She was my bondmate.”

“I don't... _understand_.” Holly said with increasing frustration. How could she explain why his actions made no sense to her? How could she put words to her own nebulous concerns? She felt her own frustrations and confusion echoed from Syrok.

Syrok dropped Holly's hands and pressed his fingers to her temples. “Please... let me understand?” he asked her. She recognized what he wanted to do, if not exactly how it would work, and gave an uncertain nod.

Holly's mind was filled with a sudden awareness of _another_. She'd never felt anything like it but was certain that she could sense Syrok's presence in her thoughts. She tried to call forth her questions, her concerns, all of it a tremendous jumble of fragments of thought. Syrok saw it all. T'Rena, romance, arranged marriages, mourning time, a desire to be cherished, the human concept of _rebound_, his own episode of grief through Holly's eyes, her own insecurities and feelings of inadequacy, her _ache_ for love, her fear of being cast aside. _Who is T'Rena? Did you love her? Do you love me? Did you not mourn for her? Would you mourn for me? Did you 'kiss' her as you 'kissed' me? What are your intentions? Why so soon? I've had such affection for you. I tried to push it away. You rejected me. I feel so guilty for feeling any of this._

Syrok _understood_. Finally. How did humans communicate anything at all without telepathy? This was not even a proper, full-fledged mind meld and he'd already discerned so much, all of her feelings having clear origins. All of her questions having answers he could provide. He called to his mind T'Rena and showed it to Holly. She saw bits and pieces, not a full picture and history, but enough. An image of T'Rena at seven, Syrok doing as he was told for the bonding. The familiar buzz in the back of his mind. The contentment that came with not being alone. The shared courtesy and affection, but no _passion_. The differing goals, a sense of distance. Holly got a sense that Syrok cared for T'Rena akin to how one would care for an estranged sibling, in a way... he felt no closeness, but appreciated her and wanted to protect her. All of this with the understanding that he _would_ be physical with her, a sort of emotionless fact that they'd both accepted. Neither positive nor negative emotions surrounded it.

Syrok shifted his thoughts off his former bondmate and concentrated on his thoughts and feelings for Holly, that she might see and understand. She saw herself somewhat, through his eyes. A slow, steadily growing affection. A sense of protectiveness, similar to what he'd had for T'Rena. The feeling of _cherishing_. The fact that he saw her as intelligent and as fascinating. His own guilt at having rejected her and then vying for her affection. A desire to move forward without making some mistake, but a sort of desperate frustration at not understanding the path. _Oh_. She understood. He felt her understanding and they stood there for a moment in a swirl of relief and clarity.

Syrok leaned his forehead to Holly's once more. He was content. This could work. This could work. Finally, Holly pulled away.

“It's getting late. I should shower....”
A hint of a smile and Syrok gracefully moved to his desk, to sit at his computer. “Very well.”

Holly watched him for a moment. He looked so relaxed. She’d hardly noticed that he had ever seemed tense, until she saw him relax. She enjoyed the sight. She deliberately tore her gaze away and went about her business. It was late, after all.

After her nightly rituals were complete, and she’d checked her PADD for several minutes, she switched off the light and snuggled into her sheets. “Good night.”

“Sleep well.” Syrok replied affectionately. He turned his gaze back to his computer. He had a problem to solve.
Chapter 16

Holly scrolled through the comments on her latest video of Syrok -- the one with his favorite blanket. A handful of Vulcans seemed to find the video distasteful and undignified. The human commenters, who were the majority, seemed to range from being entertained to poking fun. It wasn't unexpected. Holly smiled when she saw, finally, one positive comment by a Vulcan.

*T'Sala: I thank thee for thy accurate depiction of my kind.*

Holly beamed. She clicked on the profile of T'Sala and saw that she, like most of the commenters, was a fellow student at Starfleet Academy. Holly sent her a quick message asking to meet, asking whether she would star in one of the videos. She was thrilled with excitement.

“Holly.” Syrok said from across the room, watching her own distraction with interest.

“Hm?” she did not look up.

“I have been giving some thought to my promise of guiding your studies this summer.”

Now she looked up. Her face was unreadable. That frustrated him slightly but he continued on, as she did not speak.

“I have put some effort into finding out what those in your field seem to be studying -- what papers have been written, what projects have been completed. As you cannot make any voyages to Vulcan yourself, it seems that your best course of action would lie in translations. There is no dearth of information to translate, but the most common work to be translated, as I am sure you are aware, are the words of Surak.”

“But it's been done to death.” Holly protested. “Translated from Vulcan into Standard and back again several times, with or without commentary, directed at human and Vulcan audiences alike. There's been meta-analysis of the translations based on our cultural inclinations, comparisons to our own Earth cultures.... What can there possibly be to say about it?”

“I had made the same observations and reached similar conclusions. However, I think that your own notes that you showed me several days ago are the direction you should take.” Holly looked at him with confusion and he spoke on to clarify. “I believe you should, as you have already begun doing, compare the words of Surak to those found in works of Earth fiction and poetry, and perhaps other sources considered to be art more than philosophy. It is an area that I have not seen studied in any great way before.”

“What possible benefit could that have?” she asked incredulously. “Our art and fiction is inspired by our own culture. It would offer no new insight.”

“If directed at Terrans, perhaps not. I believe you should consider your audience, rather, to be Vulcan.”

Holly opened her mouth in surprise, was unsure of what to say, and closed her mouth again, considering. At long last she said “I thought that Vulcans didn't have a very strong interest in the arts.”
“As a rule, it is not our focus. That does not mean that we have no interest in it. I admit to having neglected such studies myself in the past. However, I found the words you'd gathered to be quite... fascinating. I believe it is unlikely that I am singular in this opinion.”

Holly's PADD rang with an incoming message and her attention was distracted once more. Syrok found it quite frustrating at times. While he could multitask with ease, he found that humans often insisted they could as well while utterly failing to do so.

Holly grinned to see that T'Sala had invited them to meet in the dining hall for lunch. She looked up to Syrok with excitement. “It's a great idea, Syrok. Let's see if T'Sala agrees. Then I'll have a larger sample size. Can we meet her at the dining hall for lunch? I want to say yes but you'd have to spend meal points on me and I don't want to presume....” She was rambling again.

“Who is T'Sala?”

“Oh. She saw my vlog and would like to meet.”

Syrok almost sighed. “Very well. We will meet her for lunch.”

Holly grinned again and quickly typed a reply.

Syrok looked at the strange female Vulcan who sat across the table from himself and Holly. She looked almost cheerful. It was disconcerting. By human standards, Syrok knew, T'Sala would still seem quite stoic, quite Vulcan. But by a Vulcan's standards, he was incredulous at how free she was in expressing emotion. Holly was surprised as well, her own perception honed from her time with Syrok.

Holly rolled her camera taking in both Syrok and T'Sala and their lunch trays. “Welcome to another episode of The True Lives of Vulcans! Guest starring today: the lovely T'Sala.”

T'Sala gave a courteous nod to the camera. Syrok thought the twitch of her cheek indicated amusement. He kept his own face more schooled.

“As we can see from a simple tray comparison, both Syrok and T'Sala have elected to eat bread with peanut butter. as part of lunch. The obvious deduction is that peanut butter. is a treat for both humans and Vulcans alike, but perhaps Vulcans in particular.”

“I doubt that two is an accurate sample size for the enjoyment of peanut butter.” Syrok said dryly. “I am not certain that you understand how deductive reasoning works.”

“But isn't it curious, Syrok?” T'Sala asked in measured tones. “I find that I do rather enjoy this particular Terran food.”

Syrok raised an eyebrow at her as if to ask: A Vulcan, enjoy?

She seemed to catch his meaning and responded curtly. “It is highly nutritious and not displeasing to the palate.”

“Indeed.”

“True Vulcans! Avid fans of peanut butter!” Holly exclaimed, and finally shut off her camera and set it aside.
“Are you quite finished now?” Syrok raised one brow at her. Holly gave him a quietly adoring smile.

“I'm finished.” Holly said with a small smile, and began with her food.

“You do not approve of the videos?” T'Sala asked him. “But you consent to be in them?”

“I did not say that I do not approve. I simply find them tiresome.”

“Really? I think they are quite clever.”

“You do not have to live with her.”

T'Sala's eyes widened slightly as she glanced between the pair. “You are living together?”

“It is a temporary arrangement.”

T'Sala was even more confused now than before. This must be something of a human custom of which she was not aware. “It is rude of me to make assumptions. Might I simply inquire as to the nature of your relationship?”

“We're dating.” Holly said simply.

T'Sala blinked.

“It is a human courtship ritual.” Syrok explained as he ate.

T'Sala still looked surprised by this news. Holly couldn't fathom why. Dating was quite common and quite innocuous. “So you are seeking to become her bondmate? And this is facilitated by cohabitation, prior to bonding?”

Holly almost choked. “Bondmate? That's moving quite quickly.” she said with incredulity.

Syrok closed his eyes, feeling a headache coming on.

“To cohabitate prior to bonding is not... moving quickly, as you say?” T'Sala asked with her own incredulity.

Holly simply looked at her a long moment, and then both women looked to Syrok for an explanation.

Syrok blanched. “Let us turn to a more fortuitous topic.” he said, bluntly ignoring their stares. “I have encouraged Holly to pursue a personal project of hers more aggressively and with a more focused goal in mind.” Syrok reached for the small book Holly had on her tray and pushed it toward T'Sala. “She has been comparing the words of Surak to various Terran works of fiction, art, and poetry.”

“Poetry?” T'Sala said with some interest, opening the book and paging through.

On one page was printed the words of Surak:

*What is, is. Kaiidth.*
“Whatever does the wind have to do with kaiidh?” T’Sala asked with some incredulity.

“It is a Haiku, T’Sala. They follow a certain meter and the idea is that they express the world around them in the simplest possible terms. They are the poetic epitome of kaiidh. A simple, plain description of what is.”

“Indeed?” T’Sala said with some interest, paging again through the book. She did not say so, but although she found the idea of winds having rage to be illogical and nonsensical, the haunting imagery it evoked spoke to her. She thought of the pre-Surakan rage that had filled her world with fury; the same rage that she had had to master meditation to quell.

“I have indicated to Holly my own interest in such a project.” Syrok continued. “And I have suggested that she make a more focused effort toward this project, with her target audience being Vulcans rather than humans. She, however, has remained unconvinced of the project’s merit, and has suggested that we ask you for your opinion in such a matter.”

“Was it not you who just recently suggested that a sample size of two was hardly representative of our entire race?” T’Sala asked without looking up from the book. Holly snickered as Syrok tried not to scowl. “Nevertheless, I must agree with you in this, Holly, you are quite a rare sort of human. I am fascinated by your efforts to bridge the divide between our cultures -- first with your clever video project, and now possibly with this artistic endeavor. I would be most interested to see what you would write. My own knowledge of Terran art and fiction is quite deficient, and I was unaware that such stark parallels could be drawn between your art and metaphor and the words of Surak. Indeed, it would help me to understand better poetic turns of phrase.”

“That's a very logical argument in favor of my project. Thank you for that, T’Sala.” Holly blushed slightly as she smiled. She couldn't believe that anyone would be interested in her idle scribbling. She silently retrieved her book from T’Sala and tucked it into her bag.

“I am now aware of your studies, Holly, but not of your own, Syrok.” T’Sala said, attempting to move the conversation along.

“I am studying as my focus astrophysics and aerospace engineering.”

“Do you intend to fly then?”

He nodded. “Indeed. I have not yet chosen whether to try for the science track or the engineering. They both hold equal interest to me and have their own merit. But what of your own ambitions?”

“I am pursuing the engineering track, with my focus on computing rather than hardware or ship design.”
“An ambitious pursuit.”

Holly listened to the two of them prattle on about the more technical subjects for some time, feeling somewhat left out. She felt a strange jealousy of T'Sala, that she could speak on such even terms with Syrok about shared interests, and was likewise jealous of both of them in their pursuit of topics she found overwhelmingly complex. Holly was sure she was taking the “easy” track: communications. With interplanetary diplomacy on the line she knew that the job was not an unimportant one, and yet she felt like a child playing at Starfleet while the “adults” did the important work. And yet just moments ago these same two Vulcans had complimented something she'd done as an idle project over the years, almost without thought. She let the others chatter on, thinking how ironic it was for the Vulcans at the table to be the talkative ones, and let herself drift away, her mind now on her project. Syrok had given her a direction; she would now follow it.

“You are being uncharacteristically quiet, ashayam.” Syrok said quietly toward the end of the meal, and stroked one of Holly's fingers with one of his own, sending her a small hint of warmth as he tried to get a read on her mood. The intimate gesture and bond-name were not lost on T'Sala, who chose not to observe or comment.

“I'm just lost in my own thoughts, that's all.” she said with a small appreciative smile. It was somewhat true. She didn't need to explain the catalyst for the event.

“I need to go in to the lab for a bit.” Syrok explained as they all prepared to leave.

“On a Sunday?” Holly asked, somewhat surprised, somewhat saddened, and somewhat irritated.

“It won't become habit and it won't take long.” Syrok reassured her. “You have your key?”

She nodded and gave a resigned sigh. “I'll see you later.” Holly turned to T'Sala. “It was so nice to meet you T'Sala. Maybe we can meet again sometime.”

T'Sala inclined her head, giving a small nod. “That would be agreeable. It was good to have met both of you.” Syrok gave her a very Vulcan nod in return.

And with that, the three parted ways. Holly went back to Syrok's room and decided she had a lot of work to do today. She now had a project to work on.
Chapter 17

“How was work?” Holly had her arms around Syrok before he'd even closed the door. He bent his head to meet her kiss, a human style kiss. He was unfamiliar with the action but had been more than willing to practice... for Holly's sake of course. It was fortunate that it was not at all a displeasing activity. His eyes sparkled with an internal smile as Holly beamed up at him. Quickly, feeling exposed, he shut the door to hide them, his eyes flicking to the open windows across the room.

“It was an acceptable, if predictable day.” he answered. “I find that morning and evening tend to be the highlights. I suppose I should ask after your day as well, ashaya.”

“I'm making progress. I might even have a rough draft finished by the end of summer if I keep at it. I mostly read today.”

“I am sure you will accomplish your goals.”

Holly smiled shyly. “You always think so much of me.”

“I assure you, my confidence is based purely on logic. I am not certain I can say the same for your own confidence in me.”

“Ashaya, you know you're perfect.” Holly insisted. Syrok was ready to argue with her illogical assessment, but decided not to as he felt the warmth and admiration flow through their skin to skin contact.

Holly reached one hand up and gently caressed the ridge of one pointed ear. She'd found these past weeks that it never failed to illicit a slight shiver from Syrok, and she was not disappointed now. Her heart thrilled to see what she could do to him. Wondrous enough that she could cause a Vulcan to react in such a way, but even more wondrous that it was her Vulcan. She pressed a kiss between his neck and shoulder and felt a gentle purring sensation deep in Syrok's chest.

He struggled to stifle it, knowing that she found it alluring but struggling to maintain control of his body's responses. His lack of control was shameful. Deep within him he felt that dark urge welling up, something fierce that whispered to him: mine, mine, mine. Somewhat breathlessly, he took Holly by the shoulders and moved her a pace away, slamming down his emotional shields lest Holly notice what was inside of him. “We should go out and acquire sustenance, ashaya.”

“Why do you do that?” Holly pouted. They'd hardly done anything physical this past month. Oh, they'd kissed, and they'd given Vulcan-style finger-kisses enough, and had even indulged in cuddling, but any time Holly tried to step one toe over some invisible line, Syrok had pulled away, or pushed her away as the case may be. She felt with frustration that she wasn't some slut trying to move too fast, but he certainly sometimes made her feel that way. Holly knew that Vulcans were somewhat conservative, but she hadn't realized that they were that conservative. She was inexperienced herself and had been looking forward to the idea of being chased, somewhat. Now she worried she'd forever be the one doing the chasing.

“Do what?”

“Push me away.”

Syrok struggled not to sigh in frustration, feeling cornered. “Now is not the time for such things.”
“We are alone in your bedroom and we've been dating for a month.” she complained. Syrok could sense her irritation even without skin to skin, now.

“Ashaya....” he said placatingly.

“Do you not find me attractive?” she asked, her voice a combination of hurt and angry.

Syrok's mind nearly blanked at the accusation. Not find Holly attractive? Was it even conceivable? “No! No... Holly. I....” Syrok searched the room with his eyes, desperate for an escape of this situation, however illogical he knew that such a thought was. His gaze rested on Holly and her desperately insecure eyes. “I find you very attractive.” he did his best to reassure her.

“Then what is the problem? We're dating , Syrok. You're supposed to want me. If there is something I'm missing, something Vulcan that I don't understand, you have to explain.” She sounded angry again, and her voice had a quaver to it. Was she going to cry? Syrok's mind raced for a way to remedy the situation.

“I was simply... overwhelmed.”

“Overwhelmed?”

“Yes.”

Holly regarded her Vulcan for a long moment, thinking. Finally she smiled hesitantly. “Overwhelmed I can work with.” Now it was her hands on his shoulders as she stalked him across the room, toward his bed.

Syrok wondered at her motives, his mind racing with dozens of possible outcomes. “Holly.” He began, trying to sound firm. He was not sure what he planned to say after her name.

“Yes?” she asked teasingly... no, seductively . Syrok could not help but notice a glint in her eyes, a sway to her hips as they moved. He bumped against the edge of his bed and she leaned in, kissing that place again between his neck and shoulder, kissing it harder this time, sucking. Syrok's eyes closed of their own volition as a sub-vocal purr rumbled deep in his chest, a sort of vibration that Holly found entirely intoxicating. Her hands were at the hem of his shirt, her palms seeking contact with his stomach, his sides, his lower back. Then Syrok felt it. Holly gave that place a quick playful nip . The purr deepened and for a second Syrok's emotional shields shattered as that dark, hungry emotion rushed through him, Mine, Mine, MINE!

Holly gasped and pulled her head back to look at him, her palms still touching his flesh, but hesitantly. Oh, no . Syrok realized she'd felt it. His shields slammed back into place and he felt a cold horror wash through him as he looked into her surprised eyes, felt the shock through their link. “What was that?” she asked in hushed tones. Holly's mind reeled as she struggled to process the alien emotion, so different from anything she'd ever felt. What did it mean? She couldn't tell, precisely, but she found it wonderfully addictive, and wonderfully sexy.

Syrok bit back his own panic as he noticed she didn't feel afraid. He couldn't understand why. He himself was somewhat horrified by this deeply possessive urge. But Holly felt only curious, if somewhat unbalanced by the experience. Syrok was silent for too many breaths. Finally he said in a flat voice, his face calm “I was overwhelmed.”

“ That is you feeling overwhelmed ?” Holly asked incredulously. Syrok broke her gaze and his face flushed slightly green, the mossy color. rising even to the tips of his ears. Holly let out an excited giggle, startling his gaze back to her. “Why did you shut me out?” she teased. “Syrok, it's
wonderful!

“I do not think you understand.” he said uncomfortably, his gaze darting to the floor. He wanted to put some distance between them but he was pinned between his bed and Holly and he did not wish to sit down, nor to touch her to push her away. “It is.... That is, I want....” Syrok sighed in frustration. It was not often that he audibly sighed. 

“What is it you want?” Holly asked. She tried to meet his gaze, and her mirth was now gone. “Please, Syrok, you can tell me.” Syrok gazed at her and felt only warmth and openness through her palms that still, infuriatingly, grazed his bare flesh.

“I want to... mark you.” he said it almost inaudibly, and Holly saw his skin suffuse with even darker green, his eyes darting away as if in shame. Poor Syrok. Pity, of all things, washed through the link. Holly thought he looked like nothing so much as a caged animal. She pulled back slightly, placing her fingertips to his. She wanted to give him space, but wanted to keep contact. She'd learned this past month how much it seemed to help their communication when Syrok could at least somewhat feel her intent.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked warily.

“I wish to bite you.” he said in flat terms. So, he thought, she pitied him. It served him right for having such disgusting urges. “It is most inappropriate, I know. Perhaps we may go acquire supper and leave this discussion until a later time. I will meditate on these urges and attempt to control them more carefully.”

“How hard?”

“What?”

“And where?”

Syrok looked at her dumbfounded. She was completely ignoring his attempts to escape this discussion. “I can see no reason to pursue this topic.” he said with some irritation.

“You wouldn't hurt me, right?” Syrok felt his own dread when he felt Holly's frantic concern. Of course he would not hurt her; why else would he be struggling so to push these urges aside? She continued. “I mean, it would hurt, but you wouldn't damage me. Not really. Where do you want to bite me?”

“Holly.” Syrok said with frustration, but again could not seem to make himself voice a complete thought. He really needed to start planning his sentences more carefully. If only the human would keep her own thoughts in a more logical order, he would not be overcome so easily.

Holly's eyes lit with understanding. “Here?” she traced the place where she had nipped him. Syrok was mortified. He did n't need to respond audibly as he shivered at her touch. “But you wouldn't damage me, right?” she pressed.

“Of course I would never damage you, ashaya. Never.” he insisted. Why did she keep asking? Was it not obvious?

“Okay.” Holly took a deep breath, as if preparing for something. “Okay.” she said again. She felt determined. Syrok then felt a flicker of fear. “Just... try not to make me bleed, okay?”

“Bleed? What --” Holly moved forward and pressed another kiss into that place. “Holly!” Syrok admonished her, but what he'd meant to sound angry came out as almost a moaned plea. He was
sitting now, on the bed. When had he sat down? Syrok felt heat wash through him and an overwhelming litany of love, love, love through Holly's palms, one against his flesh again... when had she moved to his flesh? One hand was twined in his own, so that he could feel clearly the rush of emotion and desire through their contact. Kissing, licking, sucking, that place. Ashaya! Syrok was purring, his hand tightened on her own, and then she nipped. Syrok hesitated as he felt the surge of possessive MINE course through him and he was about to shove her away, to make her get away, but he felt her urging through the link as she fumbled to project: it's okay, permission, go ahead, it's okay sentiments toward him. Syrok ached and kissed her back at that tender joint between neck and shoulder, gently at first, licking, sucking, mirroring her own motions, then nipping a bit and feeling the spark of pain through Holly which he carefully licked away. He lowered his shields and heard her moan and whimper helplessly against him now, seeming to melt into that wonderfully rich, dark, possessive sensation, as he bit. Syrok let out an overwhelmingly satisfying growl as Holly gasped and whimpered, her hand tightening in his own. MINE!

Syrok pulled away and they both just held each other for a moment, small tremors echoing through their flesh as they dizzily sought equilibrium once more. Both seemed to need to catch their breath as the air and dark emotion cleared. Syrok's awareness of his circumstance came back to him and his vision snapped to the mark he'd left on Holly's tender white flesh, the bruise clearly outlining the mark of teeth. He simultaneously felt his soul sink and soar at the sight, not sure whether to rejoice in it or die of shame.

“Wow.” Holly breathed in almost a whisper.

“Ashaya...” Syrok did not know what he could say. He hung his head slightly.

“Do you feel better?” she asked gently, giving him her sweetest smile.

Syrok looked to her incredulously. She was not angry or disgusted? “I... yes.” he admitted, and knew it was true. For now, at least, a desperate itch had been scratched, his inner monster seemed sated.

“Good.” Syrok could scarcely believe she was back to herself, full of energy and life and happiness. “Let's go eat.”

“Like that?” Syrok felt a sudden panic. “You must cover yourself.”

“Is that why Vulcans always wear such conservative robes?” she asked curiously. Syrok's lack of answer was answer enough to suit her. She laughed giddily. “Can you imagine what T'Sala must be covering? I've scarcely seen an inch of exposed skin on her!” She laughed again.

Syrok scowled. He did not want to think about T'Sala in such a manner, nor did he want Holly to do so. “T'Sala's mate is not even on Earth. I highly doubt she is covering his marks.”

Holly noticed that Syrok had n't budged from his place on the bed, though she was now near the door. Oh. Perhaps she was making light of something serious, she thought with some unease. “Do I have to cover it, Syrok? I rather like it, and you did mark me so that everyone would know I was yours, right?” Syrok felt the heat flash through him again, shamefully excited by Holly's words. He did indeed want everyone to know she was his. The mark was simply... indecent. Private. “It's nearly a hundred degrees out there, love. What am I to cover it with? I'm already wearing long pants because you nearly had a panic attack when I tried to go out in a skirt.”

Syrok didn't respond. He simply scowled and looked away from Holly, searching his mind for a logical argument to her protests. She sighed, her hands on her hips. “Fine. Stop sulking.”
“Vulcans do not sulk.”

“You sulk.” She was rummaging through her closet, and produced a long silk scarf he’d seen her wear last fall. She wrapped it around her neck and tried to get it to drape to mostly conceal the mark, checking how the fabric fell in her mirror. “It's too hot for this, you know. If I die of heat exhaustion, it's your fault.”

“I shall endeavor to keep you from dying of heat exhaustion.” he vowed solemnly.

“How about first keeping me from dying of starvation?” she made her way once more to the door. Syrok rose to follow her out. “Very well.”

Holly smiled and waved when she saw T'Sala across the cafeteria. They'd been seeing a lot of her lately, mostly at meal times, but one time the three of them had even attended an astrophysics lecture together. Holly was more than happy to have another friend, and her jealousy of T'Sala had been somewhat lessened ever since she'd found out that T'Sala herself had a mate since childhood, just as Syrok had. Only unlike Syrok, T'Sala had had the good fortune to develop a romantic relationship with her bondmate, although she rarely spoke of such intimate topics.

T'Sala inclined her head to nod at Holly and Syrok as they approached to join her. “The weather is most fortuitous this week.” T'Sala said to Syrok.

As usual, his eyes widened slightly at how dangerously close T'Sala skirted emotions in her speech. “Indeed.” He was forced to agree. It had been nearly a hundred degrees Fahrenheit this past week -- uncomfortably hot for Holly, but relaxingly comfortable to the Vulcans.

“It's hot as hell.” Holly said with half-hearted irritation.

“I was not aware this was the temperature of said famed mythology.” Syrok said dryly. “Would then Vulcan be quote 'hotter than hell’?”

Holly snorted at Syrok's clever use of an idiom. She could tell he'd been practicing. T'Sala seemed to get the joke as well, as her eyes sparkled with mirth, although she made no other indication of enjoyment. Holly could tell she liked it, but she was simply too Vulcan to admit to an appreciation of humor.

“Indeed.” Holly replied as dryly as she could in return.

They spoke for a while on the usual topics. Syrok's and T'Sala's internships, Holly's own project; they spoke half-heartedly about the most recent news articles which as usual amounted to little more than gossip; they spoke of the “fortuitous” weather and how long Holly thought it might last. T'Sala was nearly giddy about Holly's most recent video of Syrok in which she demanded he outline his “hobbies”. He had insisted that Vulcans did not entertain leisure activities, but when pressed he managed to speak of the various intellectual topics he pursued during his personal time. Syrok squirmed anew as the topic was discussed and Holly positively beamed.

Holly wiped her sweaty face with the edge of her scarf and sighed uncomfortably. The Vulcans looked 'cool as cucumbers', she thought, but she was positively miserable in the heat. The mark Syrok had left was sweaty and pricked and stung and itched with irritation. She rubbed it through the fabric casually and sighed.

“Shall I bring you some more water, ashaya?” Syrok asked dotingly. He was normally a brick wall
when it came to showing emotions in public, but was surprisingly relaxed around T'Sala. Holly supposed it had to be T'Sala's own open displays of emotion (for a Vulcan) that allowed him to let his guard down a fraction. “I would not wish thee to die of heat exhaustion.” he teased.

Holly smiled to him. She would never become used to how devoted he was to her. She nearly blushed under his gaze. “Okay.” she said quietly as he rose to get some things for himself, regardless.

While he was gone, Holly continued to rub and fuss with her scarf, giving a small hiss and rearranging it. It had slipped for a fraction of a second, and based on T'Sala's near choking, she'd seen. Holly's eyes darted to hers, waiting to see the reaction. T'Sala almost wanted to act as if she hadn't seen anything, but now Holly knew she had seen, and her curiosity got the better of her. T'Sala's eyes were wide and darted around to make sure they were alone before she whispered “Are thee bonded?” she asked with some excitement.

“Bonded?” Holly asked with some amusement. This was not the first time T'Sala had asked the question. They had irreconcilable views about what was proper to do first: to bond (Holly read this as marry) or to live together, to kiss, to do any manner of romantic or emotional or physical things together. Holly gave a small laugh. “No.”

If anything, T'Sala's eyes only got wider and she stiffened slightly. Holly was glad that T'Sala's conservative values didn't seem to be shared as stringently by Syrok. “Is this a normal thing to do with a bondmate?” Holly asked, her voice low. T'Sala gave a short strangled sound as if overcome by the impropriety of the question. “T'Sala!” Holly admonished. “It's not like I have anyone else to ask.”

T'Sala colored a deep green and she said quietly and stiffly, “It is not an uncommon act between bondmates.”

“Oh.” Holly smiled. “Well, good. I wonder why Syrok seemed so spooked by it then.”

“I do not want to know these things!” T'Sala admonished her as harshly as she could without raising her voice above a whisper. T'Sala looked almost flustered when Syrok returned with a glass of water for Holly and a bowl of fruits and a fork for himself.

He looked between the two ladies. “Did I interrupt something?” he said uneasily.

“No!” both ladies snapped at once.

Syrok decided that he did not wish to know. “I find that unlikely.” he couldn't resist commenting.

“We were just talking about our periods.” Holly said casually.

Syrok gave her a look of utter disgust and set his fork aside, his fruit completely untouched. “How utterly distasteful.” he said, knowing that it was almost a complete impossibility that T'Sala would speak of such a thing. T'Sala's face contorted between horrified disgust and humor., and she choked out something akin to a short laugh as she saw Syrok's own disgust, then promptly got herself under control. Holly looked smugly amused and snatched one of Syrok's berries with her bare fingers and popped it into her mouth. “You are determined to ruin my appetite.” Syrok said and pushed the fruits toward her, annoyed at her use of bare hands. Holly chuckled.

“My hands are clean!” she insisted.

“I cannot take you anywhere.” he sulked.
Holly was already layering napkins and dumping the fruit onto them, carefully tying the bundle up for later.

“You know that I can purchase more fruit if you become hungry at a later time.” he said.

“But we have fruit right here. What an illogical thing to suggest.” Holly retorted.

Syrok gave up trying to argue and T'Sala seemed to nearly jitter with the excitement of the humorous exchanges.

Holly downed most of her glass of water quickly. “Are you ready to go, love?” she asked.

“Indeed.” Syrok said in a somewhat resigned voice, seeing the bundle of napkins that used to be his fruit.

“We'll see you later, T'Sala.” Holly called with a smile and moved to take care of her tray, the Vulcans nodding politely to each other as Syrok followed after.

As soon as they were back in the room Holly threw the oppressive scarf off. She was not certain how long she could bear wearing it every time she had to go in public. She vaguely wondered how Syrok would handle it when she walked to the guest shower down the hall in only her towel, now with the bite showing. He was already aghast at the impropriety of towel-as-clothing, in spite of the fact that Holly was not singular in her actions. She'd simply told him to “stop being weird” and had gone ahead with her routine, but she still secretly worried that Syrok might simply die of mortification.

“Let's have the fruit!” she announced with excitement.

“If you wished to eat the fruit, why did you not do it 5.3 minutes ago when we were still in the dining hall?” Syrok asked with irritation. Humans were insufferably illogical at times.

Holly was already dumping her mess of napkins into one of Syrok's spare bowls, and seating herself in his bed. He hated it when she ate in his bed. “Because...” she whined. “Now we don't have to use forks!” she said cheerily.

“I have no desire to take part in your animalistic rituals, nor do I have a desire to see fruit stains on my sheets.”

“Come onnnnn.” she whined again, pouting. “Please?”

“Your attempts at emotional manipulation will not be successful on a Vulcan, Holly. Really, are you certain that you are studying my species?”

“You said once that eating with your hands wasn't erotic, just unpleasant.”

“Indeed.” he said, raising a brow. Where was she going with this?

“Well... what if I ate from your hand and you ate from mine?” she smiled sweetly.

“I... That would be unhygienic.”

“You've kissed my mouth. If you're concerned about hygiene it may be a little late.” Holly picked up a raspberry, inserting one finger into the hollow and slowly licking the fruit without taking her eyes off of Syrok. Syrok found her illogical and absurd behavior to be somehow... indecent. He
found that he could not look away. Holly was feeling bolstered by her great success before supper and was determined to feel more of the possessive darkness that roiled inside her Vulcan. She nipped and sucked at the berry before enveloping it with her lips and pulling it off into her mouth to savor and swallow, over-acting her pleasure and licking her finger clean. Syrok's eyes were riveted to her own, and she swore she heard a low purr from across the room. And so, like a cat, Syrok stalked over to his prey and took up his place on the bed beside her, as she offered a bit of melon to him.

With some embarrassment, Syrok allowed himself to be fed, feeling Holly's flashes of excitement and desire as her fingers brushed his lips. The tip of his rough, slightly pointed tongue darted out to retrieve any residual juice and he savored the fruit as he hadn't before. Holly met his gaze and the moment dragged on, when he finally raised a bit of sticky melon to her own mouth. As he felt her warm lips pulling along his sensitive skin, her soft tongue bathing the pads of his fingers, Syrok was sure that if he'd been standing his knees would have given way. Holly reveled in the arousal that trickled through every time she met with his fingers. She delighted in knowing she could cause such feelings, and the echo of them only ignited her own.

They took their time with the fruit, one bite at a time, savoring, exploring, Syrok in particular reveling in the sensations Holly had given to him. He thought back to her early questions about the myth of eroticism tied to finger foods and knew he would never live this moment down. Somehow, he could not currently manage to care. Holly had the last bite, and by such a time the two were cuddled closely, Syrok's head resting on Holly's shoulder as he gave small kisses and licks to the delightful bite mark he saw there as Holly continued to kiss, lick, and suck his fingers. Holly both heard and felt his contented purr and emotional waves of affection and possession that seemed to roll between the two of them, echoing each other and playing in a loop. They were languid in their motions, content to stay here it seemed for eternity.

Holly stopped her ministrations, content to simply hold Syrok's hand, and he did not seem to notice the difference. “I love you.” she whispered to him, dizzy with arousal and a sense of warm protection.

Syrok was positively swimming in their shared emotions and physiology. It took him a moment to process what she'd said. Love? She loved him? He purred anew, unsure whether he had ever stopped. Vaguely he was aware of the need to reciprocate the words to her, but he felt them stuck in his throat. It was not an easy sentence for a Vulcan to say. He languidly raised a hand to one of her psi points and projected all his tenderness and cherishing into her. Holly moaned at the sensation and felt as if she might simply die happily where she lay propped against pillows, Syrok continuing his sweet licking and sucking of her love bite, further reddening her flesh. Slowly, slowly they came down from their high, seeming to need to catch their breath as they lay in each others arms.

“Is this what it's like to make out with a Vulcan?” Holly asked dazedly as she came back to her surroundings.

“I do not know.” Syrok answered, sitting himself up at long last. “I had not engaged in such activities previously.”

They sat quietly for a moment, and Holly finally suggested they watch a movie, as neither seemed willing to get off of the bed. Syrok selected one of Holly's collection at random but it did n't matter. They only half watched it, both reveling in the feel of one another. Holly thought it might be pathetic for her to act so giddily just for the opportunity to cuddle , at her age. She knew that many of her peers had crossed that base years ago. She would have felt pathetic, if not for the knowledge that her Vulcan was just as chaste and just as content as she.
Finally, at long last the movie ended, and Holly was half asleep already, leaning against Syrok in the oppressive summer heat that hadn't seemed to flag even as the night wore on. She sighed. “I’m going to go take a shower and turn in.” she mumbled. Syrok surprisingly didn’t give her grief about being seen in the halls with her new mark. No one saw her anyway -- as usual the halls were pretty vacant in the summer.

Syrok ignored Holly's shuffling as he usually did when she returned to dress, his gaze shifting to her only once she was in her bed and the light was out, ready to briefly admire her resting form. But tonight, she was wholly indecent. “G'night Syrok.” she mumbled into her pillow.

Holly lay on her stomach, sprawled on the bed, on top of her sheets, Syrok noted. This was a first. And also, startlingly, arousingly, she was not wearing pants. He gazed upon the taught cotton fabric that just barely seemed to cover the human's posterior, her legs splayed slightly in her exhaustion. Her hair was not dried well tonight. It clung in damp clusters on the tops of her shoulders, his mark peeking through even in the dim light. Syrok had very good eyesight. She wore that infuriating tank top, now with no bra. He knew from experience just how much of her form he could make out through the sheer cloth when she was not laying on her front as she was now, and he saw that she hadn't dried herself well at all -- the thin cloth clung to a wet splotch on her back, making the fabric appear even more translucent than it already was.

“You are going to wear that?” he asked in clipped tones. He had tried to remain neutral on her sleepwear, had tried to remain silent about her scandalous. trips down the hall in nothing but terry-cloth. But this ... this was indecent. Did she have no respect for the propriety he struggled to maintain?

“Syrok, really?” she mumbled into the pillow in irritation. She huffed and turned her head to face toward him, barely seeing him in the dark. “It's like a hundred degrees in here.” she whined. “I'm hot.”

Syrok was aware that the moment was ripe for innuendo, but he chose not to stoop so low. He struggled with Holly's suggestion that her lack of clothing was necessary due to her physiology. It was not logical. “You were just wearing pants for a number of hours in addition to being pressed against my body. The additional heat did not seem to have detrimental effects on your physiology, yet now you use your physiology as an excuse to dress indecently. I cannot imagine your motivation.”

“I didn't have some nefarious motivation, Syrok. I'm hot and I was going to sleep. You're really not helping to keep me cool by reminding me about being pressed against your body.”

Syrok felt himself flush and was grateful that the lights were off and that Holly's eyesight was not very good in the dark. He repressed a frustrated sigh. “Very well.” he said in clipped tones and turned back to his computer, carefully not looking at Holly. There was silence in the room and he almost thought she'd tried again to go to sleep.

“You never said goodnight.” she said in a quiet wounded voice, melting Syrok's heart.

He struggled again not to sigh, this time with defeat. “Good night, Holly.”

“Good night, ashaya.” she said quietly, already drifting away.

Syrok waited 31.4 minutes until turning to look at her again as she slept, his eyes combing over her barely clad form, memorizing every inch. He would need to meditate tonight, and meditation would take a long time to come, he already knew. His only consolation was that turned toward him as she was like this, his mark was clearly visible from across the room. Syrok was surprised how
much comfort came to him upon seeing it. He would need to meditate on that as well.
It was a Friday night. It was the fourth night that Holly had gone to bed without pants. Syrok stared at her in the dark room from where he sat at his desk. Holly's head was turned toward her wall, away from him. He’d meditated the three previous nights on his fixation on her physical form. He'd meditated to try and maintain his strict control over his body. He’d meditated on this mysterious new dark urge to place marks on his mate... no, not mate. Girlfriend. Syrok found the whole situation to be unsettling. He'd certainly never had such urges with T'Rena, but he supposed there could be several reasons for that. Firstly, he hadn't entertained a romantic or physical relationship with her as he had Holly. He’d been on good terms with T'Rena, and he'd felt the occasional flash of jealousy, which T'Rena had relieved by her consistent and fastidiously proper demeanor. But he'd never felt this overwhelming possessiveness. He was concerned that it may not be healthy.

Another reason for the new urge that had occurred to him was simply put: puberty. While Syrok had been sexually mature for a number of years now, he knew that he'd be considered a minor at least until his first pon farr, or possibly his thirty-fifth Vulcan year if that should come first. Therefore, perhaps this new urge was tied in some way to his coming of age, he hypothesized. Such things were never discussed, and so it was for him to puzzle out on his own. If, however, the urge were somehow related to his Time, that was very concerning indeed. Syrok was acutely aware of the passage of time, and wondered how he could possibly progress his relationship far enough to even get to the point of explaining his Time to Holly. He nearly shuddered at the thought. To make matters worse, every time T'Sala had mentioned bonding, Holly had seemed most displeased by the suggestion. Syrok was deeply troubled by such a reaction but was not willing yet to broach the uncomfortable subject.

“Syrok,” Holly mumbled into a pillow. He hadn't realized she was still awake. “I know you're staring at my ass.”

How could she possibly know such a thing? Syrok wanted to dispute it, but could think of no honest way to attempt to do so. He flushed green in the darkness but did not respond.

“If you're not careful, I shall be forced to don pants.” she said sleepily, turning to face him in the darkness, still laying on her front.

“It was my understanding that it is simply too hot to both sleep and wear pants.” Syrok said dryly, recounting her previous argument.

“Well I can't very well sleep when I'm being ogled by a sneaky Vulcan all night, can I?”

“I was not... ogling.” Syrok said in affronted tones.

“Oh you were so.” Holly mumbled, with no heat to her accusation. “It's not fair you know.”

“What is not fair?”

“I never get to see you in your underclothes. The past few days I've only finally gotten to see you in a t-shirt, and don't think I don't approve.” she chided. “But it's only fair that if you get to see me in my underclothes I should get to see you in yours.”

“I was not the one who decided to flaunt myself indecently.” Syrok retorted.

“Do you even wear underpants?” Holly continued.
“I most certainly do!” Syrok clipped.

“What kind?” Holly was grinning now, and she'd propped herself up on her side a bit. Syrok could clearly see her breasts through the thin fabric of her tank top. It was most indecent, as was the topic of conversation.

“I cannot see the logic in this conversation.” Syrok attempted.

“What is it with you?” Holly asked in some annoyance.

“That question is decidedly vague.” Syrok replied, wondering what Holly could possibly wish to know.

“You've admitted you find me attractive, you check me out every time you think I'm not looking. But then when I try to do the same, you back away like a scared rabbit.”

Syrok fought the urge to correct her choice of words. He did not check her out like he would a library book, nor did he feel that he resembled a docile Terran creature.

“Is this about the whole bonding thing?” she pressed.

“The whole... bonding thing?” Syrok's voice rose a bit at the casualness with which she said those words. “Bonding is a sacred ritual that binds mates for a lifetime.” he said with some irritation.

“Yeah, okay. It's marriage. I get it. You're as touchy as T'Sala tonight.” Holly's own irritation was rising. She knew that T'Sala was practically Puritan, but Syrok hadn't really given any indication he hadn't really given any indication he agreed with such draconian laws. “Are we not to look at or touch one another until we're bonded, then?”

Syrok could tell by Holly's tone that she preferred him to say no. However, it was not the answer that he felt would be most productive to the conversation. “Traditionally, physical forms of affection are largely withheld until after bonding.” Syrok said simply.

“Well you said you'd make compromises!”

“I am making compromises.” he answered tightly. Holly had never heard Syrok raise his voice. Even now as they argued, he didn't need to. He could convey quite enough with only a subtle change in tone or phrase.

“Well so am I!” This was infuriating. Holly flopped onto her back and stared at the ceiling. It seemed they had reached some sort of stalemate. Holly searched her mind for a solution to the maddening cultural differences set before her. “Okay.” she calmed herself. “You said traditionally physical affection is left until after bonding. But we've already done some physical things. You haven't said what you're willing to do and according to what time-line. Please explain.”

Syrok sat in silence for long minutes as he contemplated Holly's question. He wanted to be certain that he answered her honestly. As painful as such a discussion was, he was overwhelmingly grateful that they could simply discuss the matter calmly. “I am not certain whether or not I can participate in sexual intercourse without bonding. However, I am willing to... attempt ... all other forms of physical expression prior to bonding.”

Holly nearly choked. “Sexual intercourse! Someone is ambitious.”

“I... is that not the inevitable conclusion to... forming a romantic partnership?” Syrok felt a wave of panic rising. What had they been doing all this time? Where were they heading? Was there some
grave misunderstanding?

“Well I mean... yeah! Well actually I guess not always, necessarily, but...” Holly took a deep breath to recenter herself. This was getting off track. “I'm just going to say it, Syrok. I'm a virgin, and I haven't really... This is all very new to me, and I don't want to rush.” Holly was certain her face was scarlet and was grateful they were in the dark. She was grateful that they were for once, not touching during an argument, so that Syrok would n't be able to spy on the intense and complex emotions coursing through her at that moment.

Syrok felt enormous relief. “I was not aware. I too have not engaged in such activities with my previous bondmate. I am willing to... not rush.” he said with some difficulty. What was rushing? How much time did they have? He did not want to pressure Holly into something so deeply personal, but he was... concerned.

“Okay.” Holly said almost to herself. “Okay. Good.” She was silent a moment, still mulling over their discussion. “Does it bother you to do these things before bonding?”

“It is... uncomfortable at times, but it is a compromise I am willing to make. Holly, may I ask why bonding is so... distasteful to you?” He was concerned what her answer might be, but even more concerned at not having a clear answer.

“It's not that it's distasteful, Syrok. It's just that humans don't marry lightly. We want to be sure of who we'll spend the rest of our lives with.”

“I see. I understand what you are saying, but I must remind you that bonding is not the same as marriage.”

“Well what's the difference?”

“Marriage is a social agreement. Bonding is an intimate, permanent joining of two minds.”

“Like mind-melding? That's the thing you did before, right? When you touched my face?” Holly asked curiously. She, like most humans, had heard of the term, but had little understanding of it. Vulcans were very quiet about their telepathic abilities, and although she'd combed any literature she could get her hands on, little was said about bonding, just as little as was said about their physiology, unfortunately.

“Mind melding is not the same as bonding,” Syrok said flatly. “Nor have we even as of yet shared a full meld.”

“Well if you don't explain these things to me, how am I supposed to know?” she asked in exasperation.

Reluctantly, Syrok knew that Holly was correct. He prepared himself as best he could to make things clear. “Vulcans are touch telepaths.” he began. “When we make skin to skin contact with another sentient being, a link of sorts is formed. Through it, we can sense emotions and intentions, and vague surface level thoughts. We may also project thoughts and feelings through this link. Hands are very sensitive and convey more information. Touching psi points conveys the most information, and so with concentration and some effort, a link may deepen and more information may be shared. Shaking hands or bumping or brushing someone casually can also transfer information. To be accosted by the thoughts and feelings of one we're not... close to... is quite unpleasant. I do not know how to describe it any other way.

“A mind-meld is done via contact at the psi points. It takes intense concentration and effort to
perform, and it does not convey superficial information. Through it, one can relive whole scenes from another's life. The most deep, intimate, and detailed thoughts can be transferred via such an interaction. It is a very intimate thing to do, and is rarely used outside of family, and even then it is not done terribly often except perhaps between bondmates.

“Bonds are a permanent psychic link that requires no touch to exchange information, although touch and physical proximity can aid in the strength or ease of transfer. I have a bond with my mother. Through it I can sense strong emotions, and vice versa, if we attempt to communicate. I have a weaker bond with my father. Him, I rarely sense. It is common to have bonds with ones siblings as well, though I am an only child. Bondmates have the strongest link of all, and can exchange full thoughts and emotions with ease. Through it, bondmates can sense each others direction and physical proximity from one another as well, can sense the health of the other, and so on.

“All of my people learn from an early age how to shield our thoughts and school our emotions, so there is no unwanted breach of privacy. However... distant... you may think us to be, we are a very social species. One with no bonds at all for too long may simply wish to die. So you see why we may seem... fixated... on the idea of procuring a bondmate. It gives us a mechanism by which to express our deepest of thoughts, and a way to gauge the contentment of our partner. It keeps us from being... alone.”

“I... had no idea, Syrok.” Holly said quietly. “There's so much to it.”

“Indeed. I will also point out that my explanation is woefully deficient and simplified. I thought it would be most appropriate for the moment.”

“I think I can begin to understand.” Holly said pensively. “I knew Vulcans are touch telepaths, of course, and I know how it impacts some various nuances of your culture. But I'd never internalized how central it is to... your very being.” She turned to him then. “Are you lonely, Syrok?”

“I still have my familial bonds.” he assured her.

“That's not what I asked.” she said gently. Holly got up from her bed and padded across the dim room, curling up in a cross-legged position at the foot of Syrok's bed, taking his hand from where he sat at his desk. Syrok drank in the warmth of the link the second it was established. “You don't have to be lonely, Syrok.”

For a long moment Syrok simply did not know what to say. Quietly then, he spoke. “Thank you.”

“I propose a compromise.”

“What is the compromise?”

“You take off everything but your underwear so we're even, and I'll share your bed with you so that you can link whenever you like.”

“Those actions are both very physical, ashaya.” Syrok teased. “Are you certain this can be considered a compromise, and you are not just manipulating me?” He almost smiled, and this close to him and the light of his computer, Holly could see it.

“Well,” she shrugged, “if you don't want a half naked girl cuddled up next to you, I certainly can't force you....” She made as if to leave.

“I believe I can... make do... with your suggestion.” Syrok said haltingly.
Holly moved back to sit near the head of the bed, and waited expectantly. Syrok stood, but watched her for a long moment, not budging. Syrok knew that it was only fair that his girlfriend should see him undress, he knew that this was the woman he hoped to secure as his future bondmate, he knew that he'd just agreed to this very action. And yet he felt an illogical apprehension about undressing in front of her, even in the dark.

“Do you want me to close my eyes?” Holly asked dryly, but he could tell she was teasing.

“No,” he said in a resigned voice. “That will not be necessary.” Syrok pulled his t-shirt over his head and let it drop to the ground, for once not bothering to put his things perfectly in order. It just seemed unnecessary, given the circumstances.

Holly's eyes were riveted to his form. She let out a barely audible gasp as she saw his naked torso for the first time. She'd felt it before. She had already plainly seen the lean musculature of his arms, and now she could see that his tight abdomen and chest followed suit. He didn't have the body of a gym rat; no, his was the body of a dancer or a martial artist: taut, firm, but not bulky, and only emphasized by his thin, tall form. She didn't see an ounce of hair on him, and wondered whether it was a trait of him specifically, or his species (did Vulcans vary as widely as humans?). It didn't matter. He was gorgeous. She ached to touch him, to run her palm against his ivory flesh.

Steeling himself, and doing one last quick check to make sure he had full control over his body, Syrok shucked his pants and stepped from them, moving with a catlike grace toward the bed where he could at least retreat to the sheets. Holly felt a thrill of excitement and anxiety as Syrok stripped to only a pair of tight black briefs. She'd wondered what sort of underwear he wore, and now she knew. His legs, she noted, were also muscular, and had fine black hair on them that matched his head. One thing about him, however, perplexed her. She'd seen men at the pool before and at the beach and had expected more of a protrusion of sorts in such tight briefs, but she didn't have long to contemplate it as Syrok took refuge in his sheets.

Holly smiled up at him as she curled herself against his body, allowing her palm to smooth across his chest. Her heart beat frantically with the newness and scandal of it all. Suddenly, Holly felt a nervous energy shoot through her as she realized exactly how close they were and precisely how little clothing they wore, and the fact that it was the first time she'd ever been in such a situation, and the knowledge of what such situations led to. Syrok caught it in an instant. How could he not, with her palm flat against his chest and so much skin against skin? He kissed her forehead brusquely. “Go to sleep, ashaya.” he said in a near whisper. “There is no need for concern.” Syrok gently laid a hand on her temple as he smoothed her hair away, sending as much warmth and reassurance as he could. He vaguely worried about all the various Vulcan taboos they were breaking at the moment and promptly put the matter out of his focus. Holly was nervous, and he needed to calm her, and so he projected calm. Surely there could be no lack of ethics in something so selfless as that. Slowly, he felt her heart-rate and breathing return to normal as she drifted off to sleep against him. Syrok would get little sleep that night, but the impressions he felt flitting through that psychic link off and on were well worth it.
“This is most interesting work, Holly.” T'Sala said as she skimmed through pages of Holly's meandering first draft. She'd been reviewing it for the past hour and a half and making notations where appropriate. They shared Holly's bed while Holly continued to read and make her own notations on the sprawling papers and books before her.

“Thank you.” she said cheerily.

“I look forward to reading the final draft. Do you have an estimate on the time frame for it?”

Holly let out a frustrated sigh. “I'd hoped to finish by the end of summer, but now I'm thinking it might not be done until mid semester. I guess it depends on how busy I get with everything else... and how much my work sucks of course.”

“I assure you your work is not... that deficient.” T'Sala could not bring herself to use such colorful language as Holly. Holly merely snickered.

“Well, thank you for your vote of confidence, and for your input. I intend to credit you and Syrok in the acknowledgments of course. You're instrumental to the project's completion. Not that it'll garner any real attention, but I wouldn't leave your contributions uncredited.”

“It is good to know that you will follow proper decorum.”

“Mm.” Holly paged through her piles, looking for a particular page, but her mind was on something else. “T'Sala can I ask you a question of a personal nature?”

T'Sala regarded the human warily. She was most uncomfortable when Holly tried to route their conversations into intimate territory, but the human was incorrigible and she knew that Holly would not take no for an answer. She'd simply sulk. “Very well.” she said in a resigned voice.

“How do Vulcans have sex?” she asked casually.

T'Sala turned positively verdant. “I...” She fought for emotional control and for the proper response. “That question is most inappropriate!”

“I said it was of a personal nature.” Holly whined.

“You should not ask me such things. Go read a xenobiology book. Go search the web for its unfortunately perverted websites. Go ask your... your boyfriend.” she spat the word as if it were a curse, still bristling at the impropriety of the relationship.

Now it was Holly who flushed scarlet. “I have tried to look up the pertinent information but there is nothing specific in the medical texts and wildly varied reports on the less... credible portions of the web. And I don't want to ask Syrok.”

“He would be the logical party to ask.” T'Sala insisted testily.

“Have you... I mean you have had sex, haven't you T'Sala?” Holly asked suddenly. The question hadn't occurred to her before. “Oh, jeeze, I'm sorry. You Vulcans are all so conservative, I'd just assumed since you're so close to your bondmate but... never mind. I apologize.”

T'Sala opened her mouth and made a strangled, affronted noise. She positively scoffed. “I... I have
indeed ... consummated my relationship.” she said primly. “Not that it is any of your business.”

“Oh.” Holly said simply, dropping the topic for a time. T'Sala used the reprieve to collect herself once more, knowing that Holly's assault was far from complete. “Sooo....” Holly said, sounding anything but casual. “Do male Vulcans have dicks?”

“Holly!” T'Sala snapped, her calm evaporating.

“If it'll make you feel any better, I'm not trying to have sex with Syrok.”

“Knowledge of your sexual intentions and habits will in no way cause a positive change in my demeanor.” she said icily.

“See, we've been sleeping together, but not sleeping together, if you know what I mean....”

T'Sala did think she knew what Holly meant, much to her eternal shame, but she was not going to admit so aloud.

“But he seems rather... well... smooth down there, and I just wanted to know.... Not that I've seen him naked. I mean, not that I'm trying to see him naked, but it would answer some questions.... It's just... I know you guys do it somehow .... But the mechanics, are they basically the same as for humans? Because I'm concerned our biology might not be entirely... compatible. I mean I know there are some human-Vulcan bondmates, but maybe they're just celibate.”

T'Sala was positively pine-colored now, sitting stiffly and seeming to look for an escape. Holly almost wondered if the poor girl would simply run out of the room. “I am not familiar with human copulation habits nor do I wish to know.” T'Sala said at length. “Therefore I do not wish to speculate as to the compatibility of the mechanics. Vulcan males do indeed have... the appropriate appendage. Do not ask me any more of these questions. I do not wish to discuss this. Perhaps you should discuss the matter with your intended, as you no doubt discuss all manner of inappropriate topics.” T'Sala said her last sentence with a small amount of disgust, but Holly knew she meant nothing personal by it.

“Thank you, T'Sala.” Holly said warmly. “You're a good friend. Or, if the word is too strong, a good acquaintance.”

T'Sala gave a short huff and regained some of her composure. “You are an acceptable human being, Holly Winters.” Holly was sure that was as close to genuine warmth as she could ever get with this Vulcan. She was grateful for the friend.

“So I guess we won't discuss whether or not you have periods.”

“Holly!”
Syrok was having a good day. He knew logically that one day was no better or worse than any other. What was, was. However, this day was decidedly a very good day.

He'd awoken early, as he normally did. However, unlike the last several days, he was actually able to reach the deepest levels of meditation and was not overwhelmed by the chore of keeping his arousal in check. It was a most fortuitous grace period in what had been a strained fortnight of sharing his bed with Holly. Sharing his bed with Holly, of course, was another reason that it was a good day.

He'd gone to work, as was his norm. Professor Selkar (a Vulcan like himself) was most pleased with his work. They were well ahead of schedule, and had been making more progress than anticipated on their particular studies. Syrok allowed himself to feel excitement about the progress of the project, although he masked it as curiosity as was proper. Professor Selkar had seemed equally... curious about the latest data. The professor had even ordered in for lunch so that they could eat (delicious vegetarian take out) while working.

Syrok enjoyed his walk back to his dorm. His dorm room where Holly would be waiting, as she normally would be waiting. The day was hot, as Holly would say, very hot indeed. It was most pleasant. It also meant that he and Holly would continue to dress most inappropriately as they slept. Syrok was certain it would be as good a night as it was a good day. Not to mention, Holly's project had been going well. T'Sala had become a valued acquaintance of both of them. Holly's videos had been gaining slow but steady popularity. Syrok could only see so many things that were so good lately, so very fortuitous.

He would kiss Holly, when he arrived, he decided. They would kiss human style, and then eat dinner. And perhaps then they would, as Holly put it, Vulcan-kiss. Syrok nearly had to suppress a contented purr just thinking about it. The bite he'd left on Holly's shoulder was fading but still apparent. Perhaps when it faded she would allow him to bite her again. Perhaps she would mark him.

Syrok's comm-link buzzed again. It was the third such time today. Holly didn't normally poke her nose into Syrok's business, but then he normally did n't have someone so desperately trying to contact him. She pattered over to his desk, jar of peanut butter in hand and spoon in mouth, and flopped down to see who the call was supposedly coming from. Her brow creased with concern as she saw that it was apparently an incoming call from Syrok's mother. An unscheduled call. What if something were wrong? Holly glanced at the time; Syrok would n't return home for several hours yet. Perhaps T'Din n ae did n't realize that. But then... if there were an emergency, and Syrok were not home.... Holly flicked the switch to receive the incoming call.

“T'Din n ae.” Holly said, spoon in hand, giving a nod and a smile to the woman on screen. Holly had n't even thought to try and cover her mark or put on something more decent than her usual tank-top attire. She was used to T'Sala's acceptance. Holly saw T'Dinnae's eyes widen at the sight of her but did n't fully process all of the implications. “I expect you're looking for Syrok. He won't be home for another few hours, but you kept calling and I didn't know if there was some emergency....” Holly looked to the woman with some concern, waiting for an explanation.

“I wish to speak with my son concerning a personal matter.” T'Din n ae said in icy tones. I knew she hated me, Holly thought sulkily.
“I see. Shall I tell Syrok to call you, or do you need me to go find him? I think I know which lab he's normally in....” Holly offered.

“That will not be necessary.” T'Dinnae clipped. “Please inform Syrok that I have found him a potential bondmate. I would discuss the bonding when the time is agreeable.”

Holly felt her entire body go cold and numb. She nearly dropped her spoon. “Of course. I will give him the message.”

“See that you do.” The screen went blank.

Holly felt absolutely hollow inside.

When Syrok strode through his door, he was nearly smiling, it had been such a good day. Now Holly would greet him, as she normally did. Now Holly would greet him, and he would continue to practice kissing, and.... Syrok froze. Holly sat on her bed, against the headboard, her arms wrapped around her knees. She looked... desolate. Syrok felt his stomach drop. Something was utterly wrong. The day was no longer fortuitous. Slowly, he closed the door behind him, his eyes not leaving Holly, her eyes not leaving him.

“Holly, what is wrong?” he asked with a wary concern. He'd never seen her look so... cold. So distant, so empty.

“Your mother called today.”

“My mother?” Syrok asked with some surprise.

“I answered because she called three times, unscheduled, and I thought there may be an emergency.”

Syrok felt the first tickles of anxiety. He sought his bond with his mother, seeking for some anxiety or pain but felt none. Was there an emergency?

“She....” Holly, closed her eyes for a moment as if in pain, swallowing around the lump that had lodged itself in her throat. “She said that she's found you a new bondmate, and she would like to discuss the bonding with you at your convenience.”

Syrok felt his stomach drop. Oh no. Oh no, no, no. “So soon....” he heard himself say.

“Soon?” Holly asked quietly. Then she shouted. “SOON?” She threw her pillow at him with all her strength. “You son of a bitch! How long were you going to string me along?” she demanded as angry tears began to fill her eyes. Holly felt used, utterly used.

“I.... Holly! It is not as it seems.” Syrok said desperately.

“What, that you've been leading me to believe we're in a relationship while your parents set you up with another arranged marriage to replace me with? No wonder T'Sala was scandalized by all the shit we've been doing together.” she said with disgust.

“It is not my intent to accept my parents' suggested bondmate.” Syrok said placatingly. “I will simply call my mother and remedy the situation. I will inform her of my intent to bond with you instead so that there is no impropriety....”
“You'll what?” Now Holly was outraged. “We've barely been dating two months and now you want to marry me? I won't be coerced into... into bonding with you for the rest of my life when you've just not two weeks ago indicated that we would take our time. No.” she shook her head. “No way.”

Syrok felt his heart sink. He felt horribly cold all over. Holly would not bond with him? But why? Why, why, why was this such an issue? He felt an uncontrollable anger, desperation, panic, and remorse. He'd never felt so many infuriating emotions overwhelm him so quickly and he fought to seek his equilibrium once more. Why could Holly not see that they were perfect for one another? Why did she demand time and more time and more time? There was no time! He wanted to shake her, to tell her, to force her to understand, but he could not. He would not coerce her as she'd just accused him. Syrok had the irrational fear that he would somehow drown here in this room with no water. He felt as if he could not breathe. “Holly.” He went to her, reached for her hand, reached to bridge the gap in their emotions. To make her see, to enable himself to understand.

“Don't touch me.” Holly said coldly, flinching away. “I won't have you meddling with my mind when I'm pissed off.”

Syrok felt as if he'd been cut. Holly flinched as she saw the look in his eyes, as if he were a wounded animal. It hurt her soul to see it but she was too angry to care. “I would not... meddle, ashaya.” Syrok said quietly, clenching his fists with restraint.

Holly was out of her bed now. She wanted to shove him for good measure, but didn't want to give him the courtesy of touching her skin. She grabbed her bag and began to throw things into it: PADD, a set of clothes, toothbrush and toothpaste....

“Where are you going, Holly?” Syrok watched her with a rising sense of panic. He fought his urge to keep her here, to barricade the door. He knew that he could easily overpower her. He felt as if he were coming apart at the seams, his whole life unraveling before him.

“It's none of your concern.”

“It is my concern.” he insisted. “Where will you sleep? How will you eat? When will you return? Holly, please talk to me. I will right this wrong.”

“I don't want to talk about it!” Holly yelled frantically, blinking back tears. She slipped on her sandals and flew out the door, slamming it behind her.

Syrok stared at the door, feeling rather ill. He found he was no longer hungry, and didn't have the energy to contact his mother. He found that the warm day was no longer warm, and crawled into his bed, wrapping himself with his winter quilt and shivering slightly. Meditation would not come, nor would sleep, so he would sit. He would sit and wait for Holly.

Holly sat outside the door to T'Sala's room. Someone had let her in the building but T'Sala wasn't home yet. Holly figured she was eating right now. They'd normally all be eating together right now. Holly was, fortunately, not hungry.

Finally, at along last, T'Sala came down the hall, seeing the human from some distance as she crouched on the floor by her door. She'd just seen Holly earlier that day and Holly had been in good spirits, but now T'Sala saw the red rimming her eyes and the wet streaks on her cheeks. Holly's voice quavered slightly when she spoke. “T'Sala, can I spend the night with you?”

T'Sala unlocked the door to her small, single unit. “Of course.” she answered. “Might I ask what
has occurred?"

“I would rather not talk about it.”

“Are you hungry? Have you eaten?”

“I'm not hungry.” Holly followed her in, throwing her shoes and bag against the wall, and making herself small on the edge of T'Sala's bed as T'Sala took her chair. T'Sala had little experience with humans and was not sure what she was meant to do in such an emotional situation. She wondered what could have possibly occurred between Holly and Syrok. The two seemed destined to bond, however infuriatingly scandalous. their behavior was. T'Sala almost felt a sadness, seeing her acquaintance so... upset.

Holly pulled out her PADD and tried to make herself unobtrusive, and T'Sala had no difficulty in entertaining herself as well. The two sat like that for several hours, neither speaking. T'Sala was content that it would continue so until Holly finally would go to bed. Holly surprised her though, by speaking briefly about that which she'd said she did not wish to speak. “His mother called.” she said to the silent room, all of the sudden. “She... she wants Syrok to bond with someone.”

T'Sala's heart hurt to hear it, and to hear it in such forlorn tones. It was not uncommon for parents to choose one's bondmate, even at Syrok's age. He was still technically a minor. T'Sala was not sure what was the appropriate thing to say. “Does Syrok not wish to bond with thee?” she asked gently.

“He... he tried to press the issue, but he'd said we had time, T'Sala. And he didn't say his mother was looking to set him up with someone this whole time.” she added bitterly.

“I do not know what to say, Holly.” T'Sala admitted, and it was the truth. The silence descended once more, and the topic seemed to have been dropped. Something that Holly had said had caught T'Sala's interest, though. Time. T'Sala's curiosity got the better of her and she looked up Syrok’s school profile, searching for his date of birth. Her stomach tightened a bit as she saw the date. Oh Syrok. Oh Holly, she thought. There is no time. T'Sala silently wondered how this difficult time would end.

Holly fell asleep after some time, late in the night, propped in T'Sala's bed. T'Sala tucked Holly's PADD away and tried to arrange the human more comfortably. They hadn't spoken, and Holly had had bouts of stifled tears a few times, but she'd finally worn herself out. It was well past midnight when T'Sala got a message on her PADD from Syrok.

Have you seen Holly? We had a disagreement, and I have not been able to locate her at her usual locations.

-Syrok.

Syrok had spent a long time simply waiting for Holly to return, and had reluctantly left the dorm to check the hole, the only place he could imagine Holly would go. She was not there, and there was no evidence that anyone had been there for quite some time. As the night wore on, he began to worry, and felt himself grow chilled and sick. T'Sala's room was the only possible place he could think yet to check. If Holly wasn't there, she could be at any number of countless cafes or park benches in the city. Syrok waited in anticipation to see whether T'Sala would respond. Perhaps she was not even awake. He almost jumped as he saw the response come so quickly.
She is here as she has been for this evening. Be at peace, Syrok. Thy intended is safe.

Holly sleeps now. She was quite... distressed. Her emotions run rampant this night.

It is not my place, Syrok, but Holly has indicated the nature of the disagreement, in few words. You have wounded her honor and her heart with your actions, or inactions. I have seen thy date of birth in the school’s records. I have made my hypothesis as to the root of your predicament. I make no presumption of the best decision, nor how to handle human affairs, but I urge you to correct this error for both your sakes.

-T’Sala

Syrok read and re-read T’Sala's words. She was usually a woman of few words, who held largely to the traditions in which she was raised. She was never one to speak of personal or intimate topics at any length whatsoever, yet here she’d written a great deal. Syrok could only imagine the depth of T’Sala's concern for her to risk saying so much, and so frankly. He closed his eyes with relief and shame. Holly was safe, at least, but he had to do something to correct this. He had to make a place that Holly would come back to. Holly had to come back to him. He felt a wave of panic surge again. Steeling himself, he called his mother.

Syrok watched as his mother finally flickered onto the screen of his comm.

“My son. It is an unusual hour to hear from you.” she said, alert but dressed in a sleep robe, indicating that he'd woken her from her sleep. He could not bring himself to care.

“Indeed. Your own calls today were at an unexpected and unscheduled time.”

“Indeed they were. May I assume you have received my message?”

“Holly has delivered your message concerning a new bondmate. I have called to inform you that I have no interest in such a mate. I have found my own intended and am seeking to court her in accordance with her own cultural traditions.”

T'Dinnae's mouth drew into a very tight line. “I expect this has something to do with the human you keep in your quarters while you are not present. The one who bears unseemly marks on her flesh.” T'Dinnae clipped in icy tones. Syrok could not feel her through her shields, but he didn't need to. His mother was furious.

He steeled himself. “Who I choose to keep company with in my quarters is none of your concern.”

“Who you choose to spend money on for her every meal, from mine own credit, Son?”

“We have discussed the issue previously. I see no need to discuss it again. If you have changed your position concerning my expenditures, I shall be sure to use my personal account in the future. I do have summer employment, Mother, and I will use my own funds if need be.”

“My son, you cannot possibly be serious about your intent to bond with that human. I accepted her as a peer of yours, even a friend, but I cannot accept that she would bond with you. Her interest in our kind is that of one who collects some novelty. I cannot stop you from your indecent... experimentation. However, you are still my son, you are still not of age, and you require a
bondmate that can help you through your Time. This is a serious matter and I intend to address it as such. It is not to be taken lightly, in the manner of an ignorant child. I will send you the information on T'Chailu's House and credentials for your review, and I expect to have an answer from you by the end of the week -- an answer that contains logical concerns, if there are any.”

“You may send what you will, but my answer will be the same. My complaint is logical. I would bond with Holly and have already made advances toward this goal. I would not dishonor her by casting her aside for one that I do not even know, let alone like.” T'Din n ae opened her mouth again as if to complain once more, but Syrok interrupted her. “Thank you for your concern, Mother, but no thank you for your offer. Good night.” Syrok flicked the comm. switch off and stared at the blank screen, trying to maintain control. Some of the cold dread that had overcome him had lessened, but only slightly. He still shivered in spite of the heat. What if Holly did n't forgive him? What if Holly would never consent to bond? Kaidth . Syrok told himself again. What is, is .
Chapter 21

Holly had the mother of all headaches. She sat up reluctantly and held her head in her hands, elbows braced on knees while the world swam and stifled a low moan.

“Are you ill, Holly?” T'Sala asked.

“Don't you have work?” Holly asked in some confusion.

“I did not wish to leave you alone. I am permitted several... I believe they are called 'sick days', which may be taken with a moment's notice. As I had not previously taken any, I had decided to do so today. It is my understanding that a personal crisis of some sort is also a justifiable reason to utilize such an absence.”

“You're a good friend, T'Sala. And I'm not sick; I just have a headache. You wouldn't have any painkillers would you?”

“I would not.”

“I didn't think so.” Holly mumbled. Of course a Vulcan wouldn't have painkillers. Holly doubted one would ever have a headache to begin with, but if one did, they'd simply meditate it away. She sighed and grabbed her toothbrush and toothpaste out of her bag, padding to the bathroom to make herself at least slightly less disgusting. She hadn't showered or changed, but she was ready to drag herself back to Syrok's anyway and sleep through most of the day if this headache persisted.

When Holly returned to T'Sala's room, T'Sala was sitting primly at her desk, looking alert as always. “Did you sleep at all last night?” Holly questioned.

“I do not require as many hours of sleep as a human, Holly. Surely you know this.”

“Yeah, yeah, you Vulcans meditate all of your problems away.”

“That is not technically correct.”

“Whatever.” Holly said with a sigh. Her headache pounded. She didn't have the strength to argue with a Vulcan right now. She just wanted to crawl home, crawl back into Syrok's arms and... To be honest, she kind of wanted to punch him in the face, but infuriatingly, she also ached for him to hold her and soothe her pain away. The pain he'd caused. *Goddamned Vulcan asshole!* “Thanks for letting me stay here, T'Sala. I really appreciate it.” Holly slipped on her shoes and grabbed her bag. “I'm going to get back to the dorm though and get cleaned up, maybe get some food and sleep off this headache.”

“You are no longer concerned about your... dilemma?”

“I'll figure something out.” Holly resigned herself. “Besides, Syrok should be at work for the rest of the day so I have time to figure out my next move.”

“Very well. It is my wish that this issue becomes resolved, Holly.” T'Sala said sincerely.

Holly gave her a small smile. “Thanks.”
The first thing Holly did when she got back to her room was throw her things on the ground and lay pathetically on her bed for a few moments. The second thing she did was take the longest shower she had in ages, reveling in the feel of the hot water on her skin, hot water in spite of the ambient heat. It felt soothing somehow. Clean but not entirely refreshed, she dragged herself back to the room, threw on a clean outfit, and checked the mini-ridge for something to eat. It was bare. She sighed. Of course it was bare. Syrok rarely allowed her to swipe food from the cafeteria (finding the act to be distasteful), insisting instead that she accompany him to the dining hall or a cafe for something fresh. When he was at work she'd become accustomed to peanut butter sandwiches crafted from his endless supply of peanut butter. from under the bed and a loaf of bread he'd purchased her for this purpose. She remembered now that she'd finished the bread two days ago which was why she'd been eating peanut butter. out of the jar when T'Dinnae had called.

She could at least make tea. Syrok always had tea on hand. She microwaved some water and let the jasmine tea-bag steep. While she waited, Holly threw herself on the bed despondently, feeling hungry, tired, and crabby. She fought the urge to cry again, thinking it would surely split her pounding head.

Syrok sat in Professor Selkar's lab, running data as he normally did. He shivered. He had not slept the previous night. He had not eaten since the previous day's mid-day meal. Logically, he knew that he required nourishment and calories in order to function properly. Logically he knew that he required a certain amount of rest. He had hardly achieved the first level of meditation for an hour near daybreak. It was not sufficient. And yet he was not tired or hungry. He was simply cold.

It was not logical for him to be cold, he knew. He was perfectly aware of the ambient temperature and it was more than sufficient for his t-shirt alone. He wore his t-shirt now. He'd tried wearing one of his long sleeved shirts when he dressed that morning, but it had made him infuriatingly both hot and cold at once, and so he'd worn his t-shirt. He wished for his zip-up shirt, but he had not had possession of it for several months now, not since lending it to Holly. He wondered if there had been a miscommunication about the shirt. He wanted it back, but it seemed improper to ask for it back now. Especially now that they'd fought, but even before the fight it had seemed improper... and irrelevant. Now it seemed relevant. Where had Holly hidden his shirt? Had she lost it? It was his shirt. She'd left him and she'd stolen his shirt. What if he never got it back? What if he never got her back?

Syrok blinked at the data in front of him. He was having difficulty concentrating, and that was a new development for him. Perhaps he was becoming ill. He did a quick internal scan of himself and could find no illness. Yet he felt cold, and distracted, and irritated.

“Syrok.”

“Yes, Professor Selkar?”

“That is the thirteenth time I've seen you shiver in the last three hours, and I have not been watching. Are you ill?”

“I do not believe so, Sir. I shall endeavor to control my physiology more carefully.”

“That will not be necessary.”

“Sir?”

“There is sick leave for a reason. Consider yourself relieved and return when you are recovered.”
“I assure you, Professor, I am not ill, and my mental capabilities are not compromised.”

“I must disagree. You are 23% less efficient than you usually are, based on the observations I have made.

“I --” Syrok was humiliated that his aptitude had been called into question.

“Go home.” the professor intoned sternly.

“Yes, Professor.” Syrok said and dragged himself out of the lab, suppressing a shiver.

The first thing Syrok saw when he opened his door, of course, was Holly. His heart leapt. She had returned! But she was laying on the bed, propped against her pillows, fiddling with her PADD and looking miserable. Holly's eyes went to Syrok as he entered. It was only 10:45. Part of her was greatly relieved. Now she could lay against Syrok and cry about her headache and her hunger and she could beg him not to leave her. Part of her wanted nothing more than to shrink away until she became invisible so that she wouldn’t need to confront someone who would play with her heart. Of course he didn't want her, she knew. No one ever had.

“Holly.” Syrok said with some small sense of relief. She had returned to his room, but had she returned to him? “Are you ill?” It was all he could think to ask. She looked rather miserable.

“My head hurts.” she said in a small voice. She couldn't think of what else she could say.

“Oh, ashaya.” Syrok said gently and scooted himself onto her bed beside her. He was afraid she would flinch away as she had before, that she would demand he not touch her, not meddle with her mind. But she only set the PADD aside and made room for him, allowing him to put his arms around her as she leaned against his shoulder. A part of Holly's mind warned her not to do this again, but the greater part of her had run out of fight. Syrok felt a delicious warmth breaking through the ice inside him. For a while, he just held her there, and she seemed content to let him do so. He was careful to keep up his shields. He didn't want to invade her privacy, not after the accusation she'd made before.

Holly desperately wanted to feel Syrok again, to feel him inside her mind, inside her soul as she had before, to feel the unique frisson of a Vulcan-kiss. She thought of her cold words yesterday to him and felt a hot pang of shame. She had studied his culture fastidiously and she knew that privacy was sacrosanct to his people, that to meddle with someone's mind, as she'd accused him, was nearly a crime against humanity. It had been a low blow, and now she felt she had no right to share that part of him again. She wondered if he could sense her now, or if he were shielded. She wished there was some way to tell. Clumsily, she twined her fingers in his, stifling a sob that threatened to crack through her own defenses. Love me, love me! a part of her mind thought desperately. But of course she couldn't expect him to. He'd push her away, just as she'd always been pushed.

“I'm sorry.” she whispered. “Please, Syrok, see how sorry I am. Please?”

It did n't matter that she spoke so softly. Syrok's hearing was better than that of a human, and he heard every word, but he struggled to put the words together. What specifically was Holly apologizing for? Should it not be he who was sorry? But of course he could see that she seemed sorry. She all but cowered into him, she was barely suppressing her desire to cry out, her hands gripping his own.... Her meaning hit him at once, as he connected her words with her desperately clutching fingers. He was startled that she, who'd made such a violent accusation, would invite him in. Tentatively, he lowered his shields, ready to throw them up once more if he were wrong. He felt
her desperation all at once, her desperate need to make amends, her desperate need to not be abandoned, her soul screaming out for love and forgiveness, screaming out that she was unworthy of both. Syrok was stunned by the intensity of the emotions and the overwhelming despair within them.

He placed small frantic kisses to her fingers and back of her hand as he held it. “Shh, Holly. I see you, I see you.” He lowered his shields completely, allowing her intense emotions to wash through him painfully so that he could show to her his own desperation and devotion. “It is okay, Holly, ashaya. It will be okay.”

Holly basked in the feelings of bright sunshine lighting her mind and soul, flowing through her and blotting out the dim pain of rejection and abandonment, if only for a moment. She felt tears on her cheeks now but was barely aware of her physical form any longer, her mind totally focused inward on the feeling that was Syrok. For this moment, she wasn't alone. She wanted to allow that sunshine into every corner of her being, surrendering gladly to make a place for him within her, content to just feel for these moments. She was n't sure how long it went on, but when the tsunami finally retreated and she opened her eyes, her head did n't hurt any longer.

Syrok felt calmed. He no longer had the chills. He instead had Holly. “I spoke with my mother last night.” he said at length and felt the tensing of Holly's body, felt the tendrils of panic spring anew through their link. Syrok kept himself 'open' and kept his reassurance steady. “I have informed her that you are my intended, and that I have no interest in another. I do mean that, Holly. I do not understand your apprehension when I tell you so, but I know that the average length of time that humans court before making a more permanent commitment is two years, so I see that time is sometimes a factor. Perhaps it is necessary for forming sufficient emotional ties.” Syrok didn't hide the apprehension that washed through him, but he did not explain it either.

“Syrok,” Holly said soothingly, “you can't put love on a time table. It happens when it happens, at a different rate for everyone.”

“Last night... I feared you did not want me, at all ,” Holly cringed to hear the pain in Syrok's voice, to feel the desperation flitter through their link as he remembered, and marveled that he'd admit to an emotion, and such a strong one fear . “I thought perhaps there had been a catastrophic miscommunication about my intentions, or of my understanding of yours.”

“What... what are your intentions?” Holly asked carefully. She wanted to be absolutely clear.

“I am Vulcan, Holly. I wish to bond with thee. I do not take romantic partnerships lightly.” He took a steadying breath. “However, I understand that you are human, and that you may not share this viewpoint.”

“I don't take romantic partnerships lightly .” Holly said. “I just don't know if I'm willing to leap into lifelong commitment at nineteen. If I commit to someone that seriously, I want to be sure about it. That's hardly taking romance lightly.”

“I see. I am gratified to know you do not think of this as merely some... dalliance.”

“Of course not.” Holly reassured him. “Syrok, I love you. I wouldn't play around like that. I know how serious Vulcans are about commitment, how serious you are about commitment.”

Syrok was content with that understanding. He would have to remain content. He would not allow himself to... coerce.

“Why are you home?” Holly asked after a time. “I thought you had work.”
“Indeed, Professor Selkar sent me home. He noted my... preoccupation.” Syrok said with some reluctance.

“You were... preoccupied about me?” Holly asked with a small smile.

“I was.” Syrok said with warm reluctance.

“That's sweet, and kind of sad.” Holly pressed a kiss to his temple. Syrok closed his eyes and relished the feeling of such intimacy in such a receptive area. Her hands were both still twined within his as well. Syrok sent out a strong projection of protect, cherish, desire through the link and Holly gasped dizzily at the sensation. Syrok's lips twitched, threatening to smile as he felt her clumsily try to return the same, with all the aptitude of a child. He mind - kissed her again and delighted in the soft moan she gave. Holly felt herself quickly becoming aroused and damp, feeling flustered and overwhelmed by the sensations. A distant part of her mind thought of how funny it was that hand-holding, of all things, could unbalance her so easily. “Not that I don't love this,” Holly gasped, “But could we get something to eat before we get too distracted?” Her tummy gave a rumble of agreement.

Holly felt the tickle of amusement from Syrok as he said levelly “Very well. I assume you have not eaten since yesterday.” Holly nodded in affirmation. “Neither have I. We are shamefully neglectful of ourselves, it seems.” Syrok focused internally on the time. “The dining hall is not open at this particular hour. Could I interest you in take-out? Perhaps Indian?” Holly's eyes lit up as he expected they would. Indian food was her favorite.

“Okay.” she smiled with excitement. “You're too good to me, Syrok.”

“I see. I will endeavor to be more stern in the future, then.” Holly fell into a fit of giggles, while simultaneously she could not get the image out of her mind at what Syrok might look or act like while attempting to be... stern. She was glad they were n't touching at that moment as he had moved to his desk to order the food. She didn't want to have to explain this one.
Chapter 22

Holly was sitting on her bed again, Syrok in his chair. Holly had her small recorder running as Syrok did his best to ignore her. “Come on, surely you played with something.” she goaded. Syrok fought the urge to sigh in annoyance. Holly was once again starring him in one of her videos, this time demanding to know his favorite childhood toys of all things. He had just explained to her that Vulcans did not own objects whose sole purpose was recreation and amusement. “Or did you just sit and stare at a wall all day?” she goaded again.

“I assure you I did not sit and stare at a wall all day.” he snipped at her. “Indeed I had access to various learning aids, common to all children.”

“Such as?”

“Various puzzles, miniature science kits, books on all manner of topics... I am sure you have these same items on Earth, Holly. I have observed them in various Terran shopping outlets.”

“Okay, so you had the typical Vulcan toys.” she smiled. “Which one was your favorite?”

“It would be illogical to choose a favorite. They all served their respective purposes.”

“Was there a particular... learning aid ... that you spent more time with than any other?”

Syrok twitched. Holly was becoming irritatingly good at cornering him into the type of answer he knew she sought. “Indeed I had a propensity toward the Vulcan lyre, although I assure you that is not an uncommon pastime.”

“I didn't know you played an instrument.” Holly said with genuine interest, although her camera was still rolling.

“Indeed. What of yourself, Holly?” he asked, turning to face Holly and the camera now.

Holly flushed. She was not used to having the tables turned on her, especially by a Vulcan, especially on camera. “What about me?”

“Do you play an instrument? And did you have a favorite toy? It is only fair that you reciprocate in answering.” His face was blank and unreadable. Now it was Holly that itched with frustration at the gap between them, the lack of ability to feel his feelings.

“I don't play anything.” she said. “I never had the chance to learn.”

“That is most unfortunate. It is an agreeable pastime. Perhaps it accounts for your deficiency in mathematics. Studies have linked the learning of music with mathematical abilities in human brains.”

“I didn't know that.” Holly said, having genuine interest in the study but trying to also ignore the sting of Syrok's calling attention to her 'deficiencies'. She knew she had them, but she didn't like to look at them.

“You still have not answered my second question.” Syrok pressed. Damn. Holly's mind raced. She'd never had toys of any sort. That wasn't entirely true. She’d had access to toys: possibly at her birth home, she couldn't remember; at the first group home she'd been sent to; at Irene and Frank's abusive household that she remembered at the age of four; at the second group home; at old lady
Marlene's vacant and neglectful household from the ages of 6 to 8, and the elementary school she'd attended as well. There had been toys at the psychiatric facility she'd been forced to go to for her 'social problems'; at the group home again after Marlene had been found unfit and neglectful, and incapable of handling Holly's 'fits'; then the private school for unruly children she'd been sent to somewhere between the ages of 10 and 12. There had been no toys at the juvenile detention center somewhere between twelve and thirteen. Jack and Amanda had supplied some books and things appropriate for her age when she'd come to them just before her 14th birthday. There had been no toys at the psychiatric institute she'd been thrown into when she neared fifteen, after her attempted suicide. It was at the institute's small library, though, that she'd found the teachings of Surak, had found some equilibrium and hope for her future. She'd never had a toy she'd liked. But she'd liked the little book of Surak's teachings she'd filched from the institute's library.

“I guess I just liked books.” Holly said hastily.

“An admirable pastime.” Syrok said, and concluded his questioning, turning back to his computer, seeming to having no idea what had just passed through Holly's mind.

Holly stopped her recording and set about uploading it to her PADD for editing and posting. She wondered for a moment whether or not to leave in Syrok's own questions, and her answers. She could cut that bit out. No, Syrok had been uncharacteristically talkative today. She would leave it in. It was only fair.

“Holly.” T'Sala said as the three of them ate their usual evening meal together in the dining hall.

“Mm?” Holly didn't look up from her tray at first as she ate. When T'Sala did not continue, she finally raised her head to see T'Sala's face looking distinctly more blank than usual. Syrok had also noticed the subtle shift and waited with interest.

T'Sala took a breath steadying herself. “I would ask of you a favor.” She was not certain whether or not it was appropriate to do so. It was quite a personal thing to ask. But then, Holly had asked T'Sala for the favor of staying in her room some weeks ago, and so she decided that Holly's behavior indicated that this was an appropriate level of acquaintanceship by human standards to ask for favors. Vulcans did not have acquaintanceships in this way. They had their Clan, and Clan was family. One could ask ones Clan members for everything, and would give their own life to another willingly. Human families, by contrast, were small and informal, and without the ritualistic loyalty. Humans were complex and confusing. Nevertheless, T'Sala did not have her Clan here. But she had Holly.

Holly's awkward tension dropped. “Oh, is that all, T'Sala? Here I thought it was something serious. Go ahead, what do you need?” Holly went back to eating her food.

T'Sala was slightly annoyed that Holly was not taking this dire situation more seriously. “Doctor Chan is requesting all of the interns in the computer science department assemble for a gathering of a social nature. I have been asked to attend and it has been indicated to me that it is customary to bring a guest or guests, a romantic partner or... friends.”

Holly snickered. “What did you call it? A gathering of a social nature? Do you mean a party, T'Sala?”

“I believe it has been called such.”

Holly snickered again. She couldn't help herself. “Why are you so uptight about it?”
T'Sala made a small affronted tone in the back of her throat that was almost imperceptible except that Holly knew her so well. “It will be an event containing many Terran customs of which I am unfamiliar. My thinking was that it would be beneficial to have you accompany me. But if you persist in your insults --”

“Calm down, T'Sala. Of course I'll come. Syrok will come too.” she offered with a smile, looking to her boyfriend. “We won't abandon you.”

Syrok's face remained placid, too placid. Holly would have to investigate the meaning of that later. Was he freaked out too? Vulcans.

“Thank you. I have conducted preliminary research into the event. I have been made aware that various intoxicative substances will be provided, as well as unpleasantly loud noises. While these are both cause enough for concern, Doctor Chan believes such things will be conducive to... fun. I am particularly concerned that such fun may lead already tactile beings to become even less concerned with the dictates of personal space than is usual, as has been my observation of numerous...parties... I have observed around campus.”

“Okay. We'll sit around in a corner and I'll try not to let anyone touch you.” Holly said casually. “I'm not really a big partier myself, you know. Not all Terrans are obnoxious.”

“I am aware of that fact, as you are a particularly tolerable human being.” T'Sala admitted. Holly saw T'Sala's lips press into a tight line as she looked pensive once more. Finally she spoke of her concern. “I must admit I cannot see the purpose of this gathering.”

Holly took a deep breath. How to explain? Syrok perked up as well, even more interested in the conversation than he had been, Holly noticed. Great. Now it was up to her to explain parties to Vulcans. “Humans... we like to develop a sort of camaraderie with our peers, generally. We like to make friends and acquaintances, and we tend to do so more readily if more casually than Vulcans seem to from what I understand.” she began tentatively. “These relationships are... encouraged by engaging in social activities. Like small talk about each others lives, or eating together, or throwing a party.”

“I do not see why it is necessary for me to befriend my co-workers in the lab, or particularly to do so with those that I do not even communicate with outside of this event.” T'Sala said testily. “Yes. Well. It is kind of annoying. Not everyone is into it, T'Sala. It's kind of an extrovert thing.”

“I am familiar with your designations of extrovert and introvert.” Syrok offered. “However, if a party is to encourage extroverts, would this not leave approximately half of your population untended?”

“It isn't a perfect system.” Holly admitted.

“I do not believe I am capable of forming close personal relationships with these individuals over the course one evening, nor do I wish to attempt it. Particularly if they are to be intoxicated and engaging in offensive behaviors.” T'Sala said tightly.

“No one's expecting you to form a close personal relationship.” Holly tried to soothe T'Sala. “Look, just try to be friendly. If you want to work on a starship you're going to have to get used to the idea of casual friendliness.”

“Please explain.” Syrok requested.

“Well... if someone tries to make small talk with you, try to do so in return. You might find it...
annoying, but you're both smart. I'm sure you can figure out something to say that will follow the
social conventions. It might not make you like them any better, but it might at least offer you some
insight, and they might like you more. And you want people to like you.” Holly insisted. “You'll
never get more effort than from someone who's loyal.”

T'Sala looked baffled.

“Oh come on, surely you understand the motivation of loyalty. Even you guys have a certain
amount of loyalty, to your planet, to Starfleet, to Surak's precepts. I'm sure you're more likely to try
even harder to help someone if they have some of those things in common. Humans are the same.
We look for ways to relate to each other and it motivates us.”

“It would be illogical to value one life form more than another based solely upon ideological
standing.” T'Sala said hesitantly.

“Maybe.” Holly said, suspecting T'Sala might be wrong about that but not wanting to argue. “But
humans aren't logical, and we're everywhere. So go to the party and try to relax. You might learn
something.” Holly grinned.

Syrok shut the door behind him as they entered his room. He rounded on Holly. “You had no right
to volunteer me to such an event.” Syrok said icily.

Holly whirled to face him, shocked at the sudden change. Holy shit, is Syrok pissed?
she wondered. How long had he been holding that in? Aside from the slight flicker of something at the
start, he'd seemed normal for the rest of the meal and for the whole walk home. Holly felt a cold
sweat break out as she looked to him. “Chill out.” she said in annoyance.

“I will not 'chill out'.” Syrok said coldly, his eyes boring into hers. Holly felt her heart speed with
fear and exhilaration, knowing that the latter was totally inappropriate for the situation. But she'd
never seen this side of Syrok before, and in a distant part of her mind, it was exciting. She dropped
her gaze guiltily, unable to meet his eyes now.

“I... I'm sorry.” she choked out quietly. “You don't have to come, of course. I'll just go with T'Sala
myself.”

“I will go, because I now have implicitly committed myself to doing so, but I will go because
T'Sala wishes it, not because of your callous coercion.”

“Callous coercion?” Holly snapped, raising her gaze to his again. He was moving across the room
to his desk now, having seemingly dismissed the conversation, but she was suddenly not finished.
She felt her own anger bubble up. “Don't be a dick! Nobody twisted your arm.”

Syrok's eyes narrowed as he took in her words. He did not appreciate the comparison to genitalia,
although he was well aware of what she meant. The second phrase was no doubt an idiom, one
which he could guess the meaning of. Or perhaps it was meant literally. It was not relevant.

He could feel the heat of his ancient Vulcan blood boiling over and struggled to suppress it. Holly
was just like all the others who had sought to control his actions throughout his life. His absent
parents always on board some ship or other, shunting him off to nannies at every convenience, his
schoolmasters who had greatly discouraged his path to Starfleet and his parents again who had
pressed him to do it regardless, neither parties asking to know what path he would choose for
himself and why. Then there was Dennis who coerced him into his first and only college social,
one which had not gone well. And there was T'Rena who'd refused to attend to his wishes in any manner, and now his mother once more trying to control him by choosing his bondmate. That his intended would fall into this malicious pattern as well was simply unacceptable.

“My actions are not yours to command.” Syrok said quietly, biting back a harsher reply.

Holly saw his struggle to control himself and couldn't for the life of her figure out what the big deal was. They did everything together, and they were dating. It would be normal for them to go together, and it was just a party. But then, for a Vulcan, there was no 'just a party', was there? Holly sighed and softened, moving toward him to sit on the bed. Syrok pointedly didn't look at her as he fiddled with his computer, trying to look busy. Holly knew better. She laid a hand gently on his shoulder and felt a small flinch. “Hey. You're really shaken up about this party, aren't you?” she asked softly.

Syrok acknowledged inwardly that he had some hesitancy about attending yet another of those unpalatable affairs but he knew he would tolerate it. It was Holly's own actions that were unacceptable, but how to explain that in a way that wouldn't enrage her, as he'd enraged T'Rena when discussing their mutual futures? He felt the trickle of genuine concern coming from Holly's touch, even through the layer of clothing, and felt himself relax somewhat, his rage withering to a dull annoyance in the back of his mind. “I am sure it will be fine.” he said. It was not relevant, but it was not a lie. He didn't want to continue down that road with Holly, not right now, not when she was so... sweet to him.

Holly wrapped her arms around him from behind and pressed a kiss to his temple and he felt himself melt into her touch. Ashaya. Syrok's hands came up to twine with her own. His whole being seemed to hum pleasantly for a long moment and he could tell by Holly's now steady breathing as she laid her head on his shoulder, that she was lost in the same heady sensation of good feelings moving between them.
Chapter 23

It was raining the night of the party. Rainy and cool. Holly was almost miserable by transitivity. A wet Vulcan was almost sulkier than a wet cat. Syrok had badgered her for half an hour before they'd left about where his zip-up shirt had gone and she'd finally given in and thrown it at him, refusing to explain herself. Thankfully, he had been content to have his precious shirt back and hadn't questioned her at any length about the topic.

The three of them sat huddled at a corner table in the large auditorium as loud music blared and people mingled, alcoholic beverages and food making their rounds. Thus far, none of the three had felt brave enough to breach the crowd surrounding the buffet table to find anything to snack on. They simply sat out of the way, umbrellas sopping wet under the table on the tile floor, T'Sala on the left sitting straight in her traditional robes, Holly in the middle wearing her own pants but one of Syrok's long-sleeved shirts (she'd demanded one to replace the zip-up shirt as if she'd deserved it; thankfully Syrok hadn't wanted to argue), and Syrok in his black zip shirt and black pants. They looked awkward as anything.

“Am I partying yet?” T'Sala asked dryly and Holly fell into a fit of giggles. This was the closest T'Sala had ever come to a joke, surely.

“I hope so.” Holly confided. “I'm not sure I could stomach anything more.” She looked worriedly at the milling mass of people throughout the room, some talking in groups, some laughing raucously, some eating and drinking, some dancing. She sighed and reached over to squeeze Syrok's hand quickly and released it before anyone else would notice. Syrok's eyes widened slightly at the scandal but he wisely made no comment or move that would only highlight the act.

“Do you want me to get you guys something to eat or drink?”

“That would be amenable.” Syrok answered.

Holly steeled herself and made the charge into the throng to acquire food.

“I would thank thee for thy accompaniment.” T'Sala said to Syrok.

“Think nothing of it.” he said with quiet exasperation. “Indeed this event thus far is significantly improved from the last I'd been to.”

“You've been to such events in the past?” T'Sala asked with surprise.

“My roommate had... encouraged” (coerced) “me to go to such an event. I believe the Earth saying is 'it seemed like a good idea at the time'. ” he said dryly.

“I cannot help but feel I am failing at my objective. No one has yet approached me for small talk and I had researched several appropriate topics and responses for the evening. I do not wish to be held responsible for decreasing human morale.” T'Sala pursed her lips. “Perhaps I should endeavor to converse with someone.” She scanned the crowds, spotting Doctor Chan who was laughing animatedly at something one of her colleagues had said.

“I am afraid I cannot advise you appropriately on such a matter.” Syrok replied, hesitating. “Would you require my presence?”

“I would not ask that of you. You have already been quite gracious.” she answered quietly, to
Syrok's immense relief. He watched Holly from across the room as she brushed countless shoulders, backs, chests, legs, the list went on and on as she squeezed through the crowd. It made him want to fidget. His eyes narrowed as he saw one of the male students grin at her and say something he could not discern, seeing Holly pause to drop one of her charming smiles and reply. Holly laughed, then so did the man. Syrok was overcome with a dark urge to do violence, or at the very least to mark her again, as his previous mark had healed and vanished completely. He suppressed a carnal growl and struggled to get his emotions under control. These urges unnerved him with their newness and dark tint. T'Sala seemed to catch on to his fixation across the room.

“I am sure Holly will keep thy honor and her own.” T'Sala offered.

“Indeed.” Syrok said levelly, trying to tear his gaze away from the distant scene, but unable to do so completely. The man was touching Holly's arm now and Holly gave his hand a quick squeeze before turning back to the table. She laughed again. What could possibly be so amusing? His ire was only dampened by the fact that Holly was wearing one of his own shirts. He'd finally gotten his zip shirt back from her that night after much cajoling. Whatever annoyance he'd been feeling about her possible theft had vanished when he scented the cloth and could detect her all through it. She'd obviously worn the shirt often when she'd had privacy and the thought filled him with a warm, sated sense of possession.

Holly had demanded another shirt in return and he'd been more than happy to appease her, even more-so when she selected a shirt that was in need of a wash. The fact that it was not one hundred percent clean was perhaps lost to most humans, but it pleased Syrok greatly that his own scent was once more surrounding his intended, as if in warning for others to stay away. She was Claimed.

T'Sala watched Syrok with growing unease. She'd seen that look before in Selek, her own bondmate, and knew it led to no good. “I will leave thee now and attempt dialogue with my professor.” T'Sala said evenly and gave Syrok a polite nod before mapping out the clearest path to Doctor Chan and throwing up her mental shields with determination.

“Hey.” Holly grinned, sliding in next to Syrok with a plate of fruit and some forks. “Where'd T'Sala go?”

“I believe she is attempting fun.” Syrok said dryly.

Holly glanced around the room, spotting her beside a group of professors, standing rigidly still and looking silent and determined. “Good for her.”

“Who was that man?” Syrok asked, not to be deterred by Holly's obvious evasion.

“Hm?” Holly turned her attention back to Syrok, popping a strawberry into her mouth. “What man?” she asked blankly.

“The one in the crimson t-shirt and overly snug jeans.” Syrok answered tightly.

Holly's nose wrinkled in amused confusion as she looked around. “What? Oh, him. I don't know, just some guy.”

“You do not know him?”

“No. Why?” she began to bite into another strawberry, but only bit off a small portion as her motions slowed and Syrok's demeanor began to sink in. “What are you... jealous?” she asked incredulously.

Syrok looked stonily at the table and refused to respond.
“Ashaya.” Holly said entreatingly. “This is a social function. I was being social.”

“Indeed.” he answered stiffly, appalled that she could... could give hand kisses to a stranger in public while he waited for her, mere feet away.

Holly sighed. “Syrok please stop brooding.” Syrok opened his mouth to make a protest but she snatched up his hand (most inappropriately) and clasped it in hers, pressing a kiss to the back of it. Syrok's face immediately heated with embarrassment at the overt intimacy of the act. He was almost too overwhelmed to take notice when she focused on him. “Am I lying?” she pressed genuinely. “Do I care at all for him? Or do I care for you?” Syrok searched through the link and found only love and adoration for himself, and not a single infidelitous thought from his sweet girl. “Mm?” she questioned and saw the tension easy out of Syrok's shoulders as he gave her an almost sheepish glance. She (thankfully) released his hand and resumed her focus on the fruit, passing Syrok a fork so that he could join. Grateful to her on many accounts, he did so.

T’Sala glanced toward the table where she'd left Syrok and Holly. She saw them talking amicably and sharing fruit. Holly! T'Sala thought desperately. The crowd seemed to crush in around her and she was desperately mired in some ludicrously painful conversation about sitcoms of all things, something she had no knowledge of and no desire to have knowledge of. And yet every time she attempted to extract herself from the conversation or every time she simply went silent to observe, someone would undoubtedly draw her out and require her to make some comment. She itched to retreat but she could not even find a clear opening in the pattern of the crowd now which seemed to undulate and shift before her. She could not help but think this would never happen at a social gathering on Vulcan. Never indeed. And the more time that ticked by and the more intoxicated her peers became the more unbearable they seemed to become.

Selek. She called desperately, nearly giving herself a headache with the strain of distance. Are you there?

T'Sala. Do you have any idea what time it is here?

I am perfectly aware of the time. I am not an imbecile.

Indeed, you are far from it. Selek answered affectionately. T'Sala felt a pang of guilt for “calling” her bondmate so late in the night and she could feel his fatigue already, plus the fatigue of communicating so clearly from so great a distance.

You are at the social gathering you spoke of. Selek observed as he seemed to further wake.

Yes. I have never seen nor felt so many intoxicated individuals so close to my person nor heard quite so much insipid dribble.

Where is the human girl?

Holly. She is across the room. I cannot seem to get her attention. T'Sala twitched in frustration, her eyes boring into the back of Holly's head from across the room. Turnaroundturnaroundturnaround. Holly didn't seem to notice or care. She'd done this to herself, she knew, by leaving the sanctuary of the corner table.

So instead you call me.

*She* is not telepathic. You are. T'Sala was rewarded with an affectionate burst of warmth from her distant mate. Reassurance pulsed through her bond, cutting through some of her annoyance and
anxiety. Suddenly, Holly seemed to look about the room to find out the status of T'Sala. Their eyes caught each other and Holly seemed to miraculously discern the situation and rose to glide gracefully through the sea of human bodies, managing to drag Syrok along with her and blocking him bodily from most contact with polite mutterings of “Excuse us”. *I stand corrected! She appears to have telepathically derived my predicament and has launched a rescue party.*

*You have become enamored with hyperbole since moving to that planet.* Selek observed with some amusement.

*I cherish thee, ashaya. Thank you for listening to me.*

*I cherish thee too, T'Sala. Goodnight.*

The connection winked back into a dull hum as Holly swooped in to save her.

Holly gave one of her most charming smiles to the group around her and insinuated herself subtly between them and T'Sala, quickly picking up on the mundane and tedious topic of conversation and laughing animatedly, chipping in with her own bits of meaningless trivia. Syrok watched in fascination. He hadn't realized that Holly was interested in such insipid nonsense, yet here she was participating as if she could think of nothing she would rather be doing. It struck him that she might be just *that good* at lying, and the thought disturbed him slightly. Were all humans so opaque in their motives? Syrok itched to have a bond with her just then, to know the inner workings of her mind regarding the baffling situation before him.

He did not have long to ponder the scene, however, when T'Sala fell in line beside him, and they slowly picked a conversation between themselves on more palatable topics -- ones relating to their studies and not related to their immediate surroundings, personal lives, or social media. Syrok could sense T'Sala's relief at their arrival. It had been Holly's hyperbolic suggestion that they “rescue” her, and her decision to navigate them across the crowded room to do so. Hearing now what T'Sala had been contending with he did not doubt that Holly was correct in her decision, and he felt a warm appreciation for his intended at her fearsome yet subtle defense of the Vulcans' personal space.

Finally. Finally. Finally they could leave. Holly was wound tight as a spring from the incessant need to be *on*, to crank out the charm. To place her hand on another obnoxious drunk as he draped his sweaty arm around her shoulders as if she were his property. To smile beguilingly at the stench of alcohol that permeated the air and the increasingly loud students around her. The party was thinning out, and the trio had come to a sort of unspoken agreement to leave as they worked their way closer toward the door, umbrellas in hand. Holly was exhausted, and quite frankly, at the end of her rope. She'd had to work triple duty tonight in order to protect her friends from the brunt of the event. Now she simply wanted to go home and curl up into the smallest ball possible, wrapped in the arms of *her* Vulcan.

There was only one final barrier. The man in the red shirt.

“Come on, baby, I can show you a better place than this dump.” he grinned, his arm tightening around her shoulders.

“Thank you, no. I should be heading home.” Holly said with a generous smile, grasping the sweaty arm and attempting to gently remove it, easing herself sideways.
“Aw, come on.” the man grinned, his friends chuckling as they half watched the drunken display. “Don't be such a bad sport.” His grip tightened.

Holly was beginning to get annoyed, but not as annoyed as Syrok. He'd had enough. He stepped forward from where he'd been waiting as patiently as he could manage beside T'Sala. T'Sala stayed back, almost feeling the dark energy crackling in the air. “Remove yourself.” He said dangerously to the man, who seemed to only now acknowledge Syrok's existence for the first time.

Holly gave Syrok a thankful but withering look. She'd hoped to get them all out of this place gracefully, but her fortitude was wearing thin and she was privately relieved for the intervention. She only hoped it wouldn't lead to a brawl; not that there would be a contest as to who would win, of course.

“Or what?” the man asked with a small laugh. “You don't own her.”

Syrok took another deliberate step forward, insinuating himself in the man's personal space. “I do not own her, as you so crudely point out, but she is nonetheless mine.” Syrok's eyes flashed with tightly controlled fury.

The man's arm slowly dropped from Holly as his mouth hung in some shock as the situation began to sink into his intoxicated brain. “Oh my God.” he said with some hint of disgust as he fixated on Holly. “You're bangin' the green blood?” he said with incredulity and horror.

Holly's last reserves of decorum abandoned her and her hands balled tightly into fists as she gaped at the slur. “You bigoted son of a bitch!” she shrieked, her voice growing from a whisper to a thunderous roar all within the span of one sentence. Holly's own outrage had been the last thing Syrok had been expecting to deal with this night and he was only glad at his ability to assess the situation and process it so quickly as he deduced by her infinitesimal shift in stance that she was indeed meaning to physically assault the man. Syrok's hand reached out to Holly's shoulder to gently but firmly hold her in place, to try and draw her toward him and direct her toward the door and away from the onlookers. His own fury was only under control now at his pragmatic need to not break any laws and to protect Holly likewise took over.

“Sick!” the man shouted as Holly was hauled away, apparently not comprehending her body language's implied threat and his friends erupted into snickers once more.

When Syrok touched Holly, he was in shock from what he glimpsed. Although he'd not touched her skin, the force of her emotions was enough to bleed through the thin fabric of a shirt. Flashes of thought surged through him, seeing what she imagined: her fists launching into the man's face, ribs, stomach, reigning down blows on him. He could even feel the muscle memory in Holly of her torso contorting to draw back and lunge forward with effort, saw flashes of memory of her doing violence repeatedly throughout her life, beginning as a child. The images swirled through his mind, transferring at once in a brief moment before he could pull her away and she seemed to grapple for control of herself, shutting the visions down. He didn't comment; he didn't know how to begin to. He was appalled and horrified to see such anger and violence in his ashayam and couldn't fathom what had driven her to it.

Social propriety be damned, Syrok kept his hand twined in Holly's as the three friends set out across campus and back to the dorms, largely silent until they dropped T'Sala off at her own building. T'Sala gave polite thanks to them both for accompanying her that evening, but sensed that both of her friends were on edge emotionally and wisely left them as quickly as she could manage.

“You were so angry back there, ashaya.” Syrok commented quietly as they walked the remaining distance home.
Holly shrugged uncomfortably and tightened her grip on his hand, holding to it as if it were a lifeline, grounding her from the tumultuous emotions that threatened to breach her control at any moment. Syrok marveled at the battle he felt taking place just beneath Holly's calm surface, so much like his own struggles for control. “He had no right to call you that.” Holly said emphatically.

Syrok raised his brows slightly. She was that angry due to the slur, not the crude sexual accusations? “My blood is green, Holly.” Syrok attempted levity. “Perhaps you choose the wrong part of his statement to fixate on.”

Holly blinked for a second, startled out of her gloom for a moment. “Why would I be upset at the rest?” she asked. “We're not having sex yet but we are dating, and I wouldn't be ashamed of sleeping with you.”

Syrok felt himself become suddenly warmer in spite of the rain that fell around them, umbrella nearly useless at keeping it off. They hadn't yet spoken directly about the possibility of sex. It was one of many factors that Syrok had worried over. He hadn't wanted to press the issue... to ... to coerce. Now he was delighted to hear Holly speak of it with such casual assurance. Yet. She'd said yet. She had implied that they would eventually mate, and her hand was twined so tightly in his own. Syrok suppressed a purr.

“You're feeling frisky.” Holly said with a grin as Syrok's emotions slipped through the link unintentionally due to his shift in focus. Syrok was not familiar with the term “frisky” but he thought he could deduce its meaning based on Holly's own echoed pleasure and hint of desire. “What were you going to do back there?” Holly queried. “Beat him up?”

“I was prepared for a physical altercation.”

“You wouldn't let me get into a physical altercation.”

“I was prepared to remove that man bodily from your person.” Syrok clipped in icy tones. “I was not prepared to allow yourself to become expelled or worse based on your anger at a verbal provocation.”

“Oh.” Holly said, feeling her face heat slightly with shame. Still, it was a bit sexy that Syrok was prepared to defend her, she thought, pushing any of her other negative thoughts aside. They entered the building and walked to their room, hands clasped tightly all the way until their room door was closed behind them. Syrok whirled on her and pressed her against the wall, letting his suppressed growl rise to the surface as he lightly nipped at her neck.

Holly gasped in surprise at the sudden affectionate attack from her typically reserved partner. She was certainly not going to complain as she felt excitement and a heady euphoria shoot to her brain with the release of endorphins as he nipped and kissed her, pinning her hands to the wall behind her head as his fingers twined possessively in her own. “Syrok!” she giggled dizzily, her legs wanting to give way but the wall and her partner supporting her.

“Holly.” Syrok dryly returned, as if to ask is there something I can do for you? One of his hands moved to the hem of the shirt she wore as he began to pull it off of her. Holly's heart sped. Whoa. This was new. With a vague excitement and fear she wondered where this was going. They'd never undressed one another before.

“Wh-what are you doing?” she asked with a nervous but excited laugh. Syrok felt her mix of emotions flood through the link but he paid them no real heed.
“You smell of him.” he said in a darkly husky voice. “That is... unacceptable.” Syrok pulled the shirt off fluidly and Holly's knees buckled as Syrok flooded her mind with his feelings of dark, needy possession. that threatened to overwhelm her. Her eyes closed and she heard herself distantly whimper as the alien emotion took her whole focus for a moment. She wanted to drown herself in it. Whatever this was, it had laid dormant for some weeks now, and now that she could taste it again, she couldn't seem to get enough. Distantly she was aware of Syrok's hot form pressed close to hers, sensing the rumbling of a feral growl from deep within his chest as he nipped at the joint between her neck and shoulder, on the opposite side from the mark he'd left before, though that mark had faded entirely by now. Her mind scrambled for purchase; would he mark her again?

Syrok's growl turned into a deeply pleased purr as he felt Holly's trepidations falling away like autumn leaves, one after another, fading as if they’d never been. She was so receptive to his advances it was thrilling. Her body sagged against the wall and against himself, but that was only a fraction of the pleasure. Her mind... she was so deliciously passive, so trusting, so willing, even though she was no longer sure of his intent, of where this would lead. He nipped along her neck and down to her collarbone, kissing, sucking, licking as he moved, delighting in Holly's heavy and irregular breathing, delighting in holding her still. He hadn't determined where he'd mark her yet, but he'd determined that he would indeed mark her before the night was at an end. That others did not recognize her immediately as his was unacceptable. “T'nash-veh,” he hissed in a harsh whisper. “Mine, ashaya, mine.” Holly responded with a keening whimper as his tenderness and possession poured into her. She echoed back love, submission, love, submission, love until the two of them were almost incoherent with the delicious feedback loop of emotions.

Syrok pressed his mouth to the bare flesh of the top of her breast, just above the edge of her bra and began to suck a satisfying red mark there. Holly's breath caught with surprise at the eroticism of the act and she scrambled to put her thoughts in order. “Syrok.” she gasped again.

“You're wasting your time with him, hunny. Everyone knows they're asexual.” Syrok once more returned, his mouth still pressed against her, a hint of amusement transferring through their link.

“Maybe.” Holly licked her lips and tried to catch her breath again. “Maybe we should slow down.” Syrok kissed languidly up to her neck. “I shall attempt to move... slowly.” he said seductively.

“That's not -” gasp, deep breath, close eyes, focus, “That's not what I meant.” Her protests were cut off as Syrok sucked pleasantly on that place between shoulder and neck and Holly released another desperate whimper, her resolve fading into oblivion once more, to Syrok's delight. Bodies pressed tightly together, distantly Holly was made aware of a distinct hardness between them, and she comprehended what it was all at once. Oh! The back of her mind perked at the thought. So much for thinking he's asexual. A swirl of confusion about the seeming absence of said member flashed through her mind as she acknowledged its definite presence now.

But Syrok caught that thought. Asexual indeed. He went cold and released her wrists, pulling back a step immediately. His mind flicked immediately back to the first time he'd heard the insulting and surprisingly common rumor. That detestable social event that Dennis had coerced him into attending, a scantily clad blonde woman practically hanging off him in spite of his protests that she refrain from physical contact, one of the male humans snickering as he approached claiming Don't waste you're time with him, hunny. Everyone knows they're asexual. The raucous laughter that had ensued, freeing him from the offending touch but humiliating him instead.

“Wh--” Holly began to ask in confusion at the sudden cessation of Syrok's affections. Suddenly it dawned on her what she'd been thinking, and the fact that of course Syrok had read her. Her face fell. “Syrok I --"
“Do not.” Syrok turned his back to her taking a few steps toward his desk. Should he sit down? How to handle such a situation? He struggled to reign in his desires and anger and place each conflicting emotion back in its proper place.

“Damnit, Syrok.” Holly floundered with frustration. “You can't... you can't just hold my every idle thought against me. It's not fair.” She crossed her arms, clutching herself and trying to draw into a tighter, more defensive position instinctively. She felt raw. Her energy had already been so sapped from the party, then from the near-fight. It had been a welcome release of her tight control when Syrok had possessed her with such control and need and now... now she didn't have the energy to justify herself, to apologize for a thought a goddamned thought over which she'd had no control. She felt anger and helplessness battle within her.

“You really thought....” Syrok began and stopped himself, full of disgust and unable to complete his sentence.

“Not really, really, Syrok.” Holly insisted. What could she possibly mean by repeating both words with a varied inflection? “I mean, I knew that Vulcans had to procreate somehow, but I couldn't find anything online about it and T'Sala wasn't very forthcoming with answers....” Holly rambled.

Syrok whirled to face her, his normally impassive face showing distinctly something between anger and disgust, perhaps outrage. It was so unusual for him to display any emotions that Holly was unable to form a basis for interpretation now. “You consulted text and a ... a stranger before you would consult with me on the matter? Inexcusable.” he pronounced.

“Inexcusable?” Holly asked heatedly. What a condescending prick. “Well fuck you too! I didn't see you offering any information yourself. Until your little attack tonight I've practically had to chase you down.”

How dare she imply... she'd implied a great many things in that tirade. None of them were acceptable. Syrok felt his ire rise at how humans seemed to leap from topic to topic, thus rendering meaningful discussion impossible. “I was attempting not to coerce you into a bond.” he said icily. “I believe that was your word of choice.”

“That's your problem? How long were you going to harbor that grudge before saying something?” Holly was aware that she was shouting and that Syrok was not. She didn't care. He was shouting for a Vulcan, she decided. He was cold.

Syrok looked at her, stunned for a moment as slight guilt trickled into him. How had she turned the tables so quickly? It was he who had been insulted and Holly who had been at fault. Once again he was disconcerted at how humans could leap from topic to topic. He must stay on topic. “It is difficult to make my intentions known when you alternatingly insult me for doing too much and doing too little, even within the same breath.”

“Fuck.” It wasn't eloquent but it was all Holly could think to say. She allowed herself to slide her back down the door until she sat on the floor, knees pulled in to her chest, elbows on knees and face buried in her hands as her fingers raked her hair uselessly. She was too exhausted for this. Her emotions roiled around inside her, each fighting for control as some distant part of her realized that no amount of meditation would settle her tonight. She loathed being human at that moment and felt a jealous pang for the comparatively collected Vulcan across the room.

Holly had moved to the ground and appeared to be in pain. This was also a surprise. “Holly.” Syrok said with some concern, his irritation temporarily staved by his desire to protect his mate. No, not mate, he thought ruefully. Intended. He moved across the room to kneel by her and placed a hand gently to her shoulder, seeking to assess what was wrong. Holly jerked away as if scalded.
“Don't touch me.” she grumbled. “You'll no doubt just be insulted again when you see the messy muck that is human emotion. So just don't. Just don't.”

“I am aware that human beings are emotional creatures, Holly. Until I'd sensed your rage earlier tonight I perhaps had underestimated just how much so, but I assure you it did not insult me.”

Her rage earlier tonight? Holly took a moment to parse his meaning. “What, at the party?” she shrieked. “God! Are you always spying on me every time we touch?”

“I assure you I do not.” Syrok clipped, barely keeping his outrage from escaping its tightly controlled shell. Holly picked up on it regardless.

“I don't know if I can do this.” she felt her voice threatening to crack with a sob but defiantly held tears at bay.

Syrok was not sure what exactly her complaint was in such a vague statement, but he felt the urge to respond in kind. “Nor do I.”

“What?” she looked at him suddenly, feeling a bit stunned, a bit numb. Her own sentence had escaped in a moment of weakness, but what of his? Were they ending it inadvertently? Just because of some misplaced words, misplaced emotions? The idea was almost too horrific to contemplate.

“I have no context for your emotional outbursts.” Syrok began. Holly opened her mouth to argue again but he stopped her with a raised hand and continued. “You are human. I am Vulcan. The gap between our relative cultures, psychologies, and physiologies at times seems impassable. Yet when I seek to reconcile this divide by using my only crutch to assess your emotional state, you complain I am meddling. You insult me, you insult my teachings, and you insult my people with such a callous supposition. I touch you because you are human and require touch. I touch you because you're my intended and it is natural for us to touch. I touched you tonight to prevent you from taking action that could upset your entire career and you accuse me of spying. I will not stand for such slanderous accusations.”

Holly swallowed around the lump in her throat. She felt as if she couldn't breathe. She'd done all that? She realized with dread that she had. Her mind raced. How to fix it? How to possibly fix it? What to say? “What...” she licked her lips. “What now?” Are we finished? Don't say we're finished.

“I do not wish to leave you.” Syrok said steadily and Holly felt relief and hope creeping past the numb cloud that had enveloped her. “However. If we are to persist in this relationship, there will be terms that need to be met.” Syrok held her gaze steadily. She would hear him, he'd determined. This had been enough. She would not run off to T'Sala this time. She would hear him or he would end this. Holly suppressed a shudder at that penetrating gaze but could not bring herself to look away. She nodded slightly for him to continue, not trusting her voice. Her mouth felt dry. “You will desist from all accusatory language with regards to my telepathy. You either trust me or do not. If you cannot or will not trust me, then leave. If you trust me, then your actions and words must align with that intent.”

“Okay.” Holly heard herself whispering an agreement. Consistency of actions. Trust. No more slander. Got it. She could do that. Could she do that? She hoped like hell that she could.

“Furthermore,” Syrok had not finished, “You will not attempt to stop my touch telepathy. You will not attempt to hide your emotions, your thoughts, your mind from me. If I cannot communicate with you effectively, we have no future. It has become increasingly clear to me that without access to your mind, we do not communicate effectively.”
Holly felt a chill run down her spine as his final demand sunk in. She would have no privacy of thought or emotion. Ever. Ever again. Could she do this? Would it be wise to even consider doing this for him, for anyone? But if she allowed him access, at all times... he would see. He would see the ugly parts of her. They could stay together for months yet before he saw, if she were lucky. Months, years... but one day he would see. And then surely he, like the rest, would leave. Her heart raced in her chest and she felt slightly disembodied as she answered. “Okay.” she said shakily. “But... I have conditions too.”

Syrok quirked a brow warily. It was only fair that he hear her out. “Continue.”

“I want to meld. Tonight. Before I agree to your terms.”

Syrok made the same small affronted sound that Holly had only ever heard from T'Sala, and he looked away. “Really, Holly. A meld is a deeply intimate and rarely performed act, reserved almost entirely for between bondmates, which I've explained before if you had been listening.” Syrok was not amused. “It is not a commodity for trade nor is it a novelty to be enjoyed at your leisure.”

“I know that!” Holly said hotly. “I did listen to you. You said with a meld you could... you could see. In detail.”

“I am not going to entertain a conversation that again trivializes my ability.” Syrok began to rise. That she would have the audacity to request such an intimate act. She claimed to have listened, but she obviously had understood nothing of what he'd said. There could be no meaningful communication between them. His stomach felt like lead. Holly grabbed his hand frantically, both attempting to prevent his escape and to prove her willingness to comply with his request, and to desperately project her sincerity. In the mass of emotions that assailed him, Syrok could detect only a vague frantic need that he could not comprehend. It startled him into listening. Why was she so fixated on this intimate act? Syrok worriedly recalled his mother's assertion that he was some novel obsession to this human, and he suppressed the thought immediately. It would not do to speculate.

“Please.” Holly said in desperate frustration. “Please, just....” She closed her eyes and opened them again, staring at him earnestly with her hands twined around one of his. “If you meld with me... how do you know which memory to see?”

“If you would focus on it, it would come to the forefront. I would be able to tap into it with ease. You would not need to worry that I would see something you wished to keep deeply buried; interrogation techniques are far advanced from my own abilities and knowledge.” Holly felt a slight horror at the revelation that telepathy could, and was used for interrogation, but she knew it made a sort of sense. She suppressed her fear of that topic and focused her mind on the topic at hand. “But what if... what if I want you to see something I also don't want you to see.”

“Explain.” Syrok tilted his head ever so slightly, now curious.

“If you would focus on it, it would come to the forefront. I would be able to tap into it with ease. You would not need to worry that I would see something you wished to keep deeply buried; interrogation techniques are far advanced from my own abilities and knowledge.” Holly felt a slight horror at the revelation that telepathy could, and was used for interrogation, but she knew it made a sort of sense. She suppressed her fear of that topic and focused her mind on the topic at hand. “But what if... what if I want you to see something I also don't want you to see.”

“And then I want to know if you still want to stick around.”

“I cannot imagine that there are parts of you so ugly that I would not wish to bond with you, Holly.” Syrok said in a slightly gentler tone.

“Yeah? Say that again after you see.”

Syrok was silent for a moment, processing her request and thinking about the mechanics of it. “If you can manage to call to mind these memories, even a little, I will attempt to view them. I am not
certain about your request that I see 'all the ugly parts of you' as you put it. Without a bond, there is no way that I can see all of you, ashaya. But perhaps tonight I can see enough to satisfy you, to allay your fears. Is there some part of me you would wish to see in return?"

Holly shook her head. "No. Someday I want to know everything about you, but it's not important now. I just need to see if you'll stay once you see me. I need to be able to trust that if... if I'm going to give up all my privacy."

"What I ask is not that you give up all your privacy, ashaya. I want to know your thoughts and emotions, yes, but I would not pry into the parts of your mind that you have clearly sealed off. I would not intrude on your deeper thinking. That you don't trust this fact is part of the problem we have now."

Holly declined to answer, looking away and still struggling to keep tears at bay.

Syrok didn't answer her request right away. It was a serious request. Then again, so was his. While he was serious about not taking all of her privacy, as she'd put it, he knew that what he was asking her was a very serious breach of privacy by Vulcan standards. Nevertheless he was certain that his request was based upon sound logic, that there could be no meaningful relationship between them without this aid in communication. If he was certain that his request was necessary, he reasoned that perhaps Holly felt the same. She certainly seemed serious, from what he could discern from the maelstrom of emotions she was transmitting. And she was sincere. Her interest in a meld was not one of novelty. That at least reassured him. Very well. This would simply be one more thing they did out of turn, before bonding.

"I accept your conditions." he said at long last. Holly's relief at that moment was palpable, only marred slightly by the tinge of worry in the back of her mind at what would happen when it was complete.

"Okay." she said with shaky determination. "What do we do?"

Syrok arranged himself more comfortably on the floor, cross-legged before her, and Holly followed suit. He could not help but think this would be better if he'd had time to meditate, if their minds were already at equilibrium, if they hadn't had such a tumultuous night, if they had time to do this gently, incrementally. Nevertheless, he felt the weight of this conversation, and decided it was worth the risk. If the meld should go sour, he would carefully retreat and perhaps try later. Gently, he placed both his hands on her meld points, as tradition dictated he do. He had only initiated a meld himself twice before, both times with a licensed Healer who was teaching him the mind ways. He'd been supervised and in ideal circumstances. He wanted to do this right. Never before had he felt so young as he did now. "You may wish to relax."

Holly took a deep and steadying breath. It was the best she could manage. Syrok closed his eyes and was distracted by Holly's abrupt question. "Do I need to mirror you?" she asked.

Vague amusement broke through Syrok's serious intent but he tried to remain focused. "That will not be necessary."

"Oh. Okay." Holly went silent again.

Syrok closed his eyes and began to speak softly. "My mind to your mind, my thoughts to your thoughts...."

"Do I need to say anything?"
Syrok barely repressed a sigh. “No. Please focus, Holly.”

“Sorry. Continue.” Holly closed her own eyes now and focused on the warm pressure against her face and temples, the soft words rolling into the room from Syrok's voice. *I wonder what it will be like...* she thought vaguely.

Syrok surveyed Holly's mental landscape. It was warm and inviting and he was surprised and pleased at how effortlessly he'd slipped in. He wasn't certain what this would be like -- with a non-Healer, with a human, with Holly. He'd honestly expected more friction.

Holly.

*Hm? Oh! Is it happening?* Holly became excited and vaguely aware that she was not in her body any longer, that she was speaking without voice, and that Syrok was here. The realization surprised and delighted her.

*It is.*

Holly tried to look around but could not see herself or Syrok, could only sense a vast darkness around her -- not frightening, just sort of warm and indistinct.

*There are ways to change the scenery.* Syrok assured her. *But we will leave that to another time. Let us focus on what you wished me to see.*

Syrok felt at once that Holly’s defensive shields flew up and felt a sense of panic wash through her that she fought down, trying to focus. This was why they were here, she reminded herself. This was why. She almost didn't know where to start. What shamed her the most? There were so many things. She focused on the root of it all. The anger. Holly focused on the anger.

It was just as the moment of the near-altercation for Syrok. Impressions of rage, impressions of fists reigning down -- Holly's fists, on a variety of individuals over time. Ferocious anger. He had never melded with a human before and was slightly overwhelmed by the disorganization of thoughts, all competing for attention. He would need to use his own discretion. He snagged one of the flitting memories and pursued it.

Holly was just a girl, barely pubescent from what he could gather. It was hard to say as he could not look at her. It was her memory; he was her, but in a detached sort of way. He was in a courthouse he realized with surprise. Was it he who was on trial? What were the others saying? Their voices were a distant buzz to him but he could see the evidence projected on the screen -- an image of a boy Holly's age with a mass of contusions on his face. Syrok could feel the hollow in the pit of his stomach and was not sure whether the sensation was Holly's at the time of the memory or his own as he watched. The trial was routine. Syrok attempted to skip ahead. What else was there to see?

A prison. Syrok stilled his disgust. A child had been sent to prison. Such a thing was unheard of on Vulcan. It wasn't filled with hardened criminals. It was a facility for children, he could tell, but it was a facility nonetheless. There was nothing to see here either. Monotony. Soul crushing monotony as Holly stared out a secured window and ate tasteless food that she did not bother to look at, did not even seem to register. This was her memory. Syrok was aghast at the empty hopelessness of it all. He did not want to remain here. He stepped forward again and the mental landscape shifted around him and changed once more.

He was in a bathtub. Syrok had never had a bath and marveled at the feel of the water around him, feeling somewhat sheepish to see what he could see of Holly's nude form. They were older now, he
realized. A teen. They were feeling sleepy now, so sleepy. There was a sense of peace, of coming peace, so tantalizingly close. Why was this memory here if it was so pleasant? Syrok glanced back to the tub and saw the red pools deepening around him with horror. His focus shifted to the slit wrists, the razor on the edge of the tub, the bleeding wrists in the hot water. He could feel the pain now, at once sharp and dull, and fading into numbness. So sleepy. *Oh no, Holly.* Syrok ached to see the scene fade. Before he could bring himself to move forward, memory roared back to blinding lights and sounds of voices, beeps, rolling. He was on a table. White, white walls and ceiling. White coats. A hospital then. Blackness.

Holly/Syrok would leave today, he knew. A psychiatric facility, he recognized. How long had they been here? The time felt long, but he felt more peaceful now. Reassured. In his hands was Holly's little book of Surak's precepts. It dawned on him now that this is where she'd attained it. It was so new here, not worn. He felt Holly's rising sense of panic as she stuffed it into her pack. The orderly came to her room to escort her out. Was she ready to go? She was. Guilt rocketed through her. She was stealing a holy book. It somehow seemed so wrong. She felt dirty. But she felt even more panicked at the idea of leaving it behind. Syrok felt with clarity that nothing else in her bag had meaning. The clothes had no memories attached to them. The toothbrush. The necessary items. They'd never had any associations whatsoever. He was Vulcan and not accustomed to ascribing meaning to material possessions, but he knew through Holly's mind that the idea behind it felt wrong to her, felt achingly empty. The emptiness was sated slightly by the book.

Was there more? Syrok wondered. He surveyed the landscape, surveyed Holly's frenzied focus, thoughts jumping around seemingly at random as associations triggered new memories. There was so much more, he could see. There was not time enough to see every single memory that gave her pain. There was simply not time enough to remain here. He ached to think of how hurt she'd been, how lost. He could only imagine what pain he would feel were he to bond with her, and yet he wanted nothing so desperately as to bond and take her pain as his own.

What time is it now? How long have I stayed? Nearly two hours. It has been long enough. Gently then, he pulled them out of the meld.

The world crashed in on Holly with almost violent harshness. The fluorescent lights above them were achingly bright. The quiet room seemed somehow loud. The tile floor harder than the hardest rock. A sob tore through her before she could even process her emotion and she doubled over with the pain of it, struggling to breathe and cry at once, the soul-rending ache seeming to have no end.

The transition could be disorienting, Syrok knew. But he had experience and control. He could regulate himself where Holly could not. And so he moved beside her and held her to him as she continued to sob, as she continued to come back to her world and away from the warm blackness that had surrounded her. Syrok projected as much care and reassurance as he could but he dared not interfere directly with her mental responses as she gathered the pieces and stowed them back in their place.

As the disparate emotions finally ebbed and settled, Syrok was aware of the sole pervading thought: a desperate need for acceptance, a sense of unworthiness, a staunch effort to prepare oneself for rejection.

“*Ashaya.*” he whispered and kissed the top of Holly's head as he held her. “I will not leave thee.” Uncertainty, disbelief, hope.... Syrok had tried to project love to her but it did not seem to be enough to thwart her fears. How to make her understand? He would never abandon her as the others had, he was certain. He would never allow someone to make her feel such hopelessness and loathing again. Because she was his.
Mine.

The answer was simple. The dark, uniquely Vulcan feeling surged through Syrok once more with abandon and he was prepared now for it, prepared for the neediness of it, the utterly devastating possessiveness. It had startled him when he'd first encountered it, but now it was a wonderful, joyful, all encompassing force of nature that he allowed to rocket through his core and through their link. *MINE*. He projected to her and Holly gasped with the force of the command. It shook her to the deepest recesses of her mind and she let it fill her, wrapped herself in it like a warm blanket, drowned herself in it, breathed it in deeply.

*Yours.* She echoed blissfully, her worries sailing away, leaving her awash with relief and belonging. She could fall now, she could fall and he'd catch her. She was *so tired*, bone weary from her struggle to hold herself together. She didn't have to hold herself together in this moment because Syrok would hold her, because she was *his*.

Syrok felt a deep rumble from within his chest, halfway between a satisfied purr and a possessive growl as he drank in the delicious, utter submission he held within his arms. He was startled and pleased to feel both her mind and body go completely lax. This was more than acceptable. He could only imagine the great potential of a successful *pon farr* with this mate. The purring growl rumbled up again and he moved forward instinctively, his teeth settling at the back of Holly's neck near the base and biting down *hard*.

Holly gave a sharp sound of instinctive protest, somewhere between a moan and a grunt as she registered the pain, but she made no move to escape it. Her mind was a dizzying whirl of possessive clouds, swirling, swirling…. She took deep, heady breaths as she was lost in the torrent, vaguely aware of her own distant arousal creeping in. It didn't matter. This was neither sexual nor chaste; it was something beyond, something other. It was something essential.

When Syrok had left a mark that would last, and before he would puncture skin enough to cause her to bleed, he released his hold and began to lick ever so gently. Languid feline strokes of the tongue matched his contented purr. His mind raked over hers with gentle caresses taking the place of his needy grasp. Holly leaned against Syrok's ever warm body limply, soaking in his heat and feeling as if every bone and muscle in her body had gone slack. She basked in the peace and her fuzzy mind called up an image of a completely still pond to match the calm that had descended upon them.

“You draw the strangest analogies, *ashaya.*” Syrok commented in quiet amusement. Holly couldn't rouse herself enough to respond and so sighed instead, sounding neither frustrated nor accepting. “I suppose it is an appropriate image.” Syrok admitted. Though his face remained placid, through their link Holly could feel him seem to smile.

Slowly, Syrok affixed his shields in place once more, retreating from Holly's defenseless mind. He would need to be careful of his control, he admonished himself. He'd never taken possession. of another mind forcefully as he had tonight, wrapping himself so effortlessly around a yielding partner. It was a heady experience but one that he knew could result in psychic disaster. He was sure of the ethics involved in this night, but knew now that he could trivially take advantage of Holly. She was vulnerable and pliant. He would guard her fiercely, both from the world and from himself.

As Holly felt Syrok's final retreat, she came back to center, still feeling disoriented and shaky from the exhausting night. “I'm gonna go take a shower and get ready for bed.” she said unsteadily as she stood and began to shakily undress and grab her shower supplies. After making a hasty retreat, she stood a long while in the hot water of the shower, trying to make sense of what had happened.
The back of her neck stung as the water hit it and she felt herself bliss out again, obliterating the concerns that had startled to scratch at the edges of her consciousness.

Holly snuggled into her pajama bottoms and dug through Syrok's laundry until she found one of his used t-shirts. He made no comment as she took it and put it on, then snuggled herself into his bed. He was not yet tired but he shut off the light and his computer screen, crawling into bed with her and pulling her into a protective embrace. She was asleep within moments.
Chapter 24

Holly slept late that Saturday. She awoke late in the morning. She could tell immediately it had to be between ten and eleven by the sunlight streaming through the window. The bed at her side was empty of Syrok. A small wave of disappointment came over her. Why had she slept so late? Oh. Last night. The party. The meld. Holly took a deeper breath to clear her mind of its fogginess and sat up.

Syrok turned from where he sat at his desk. He smiled without smiling. Holly gave a more animated smile in return.

“You are awake.” he stated the obvious. She knew he meant that he was glad she was awake, or something to that effect.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“11:17.” He gestured to a plate on the edge of his desk. “I had anticipated your need for additional sleep and have procured breakfast. I have already eaten. Please, help yourself.”

Holly surveyed the food: grapes, oranges, bagels, the ever present peanut butter. There was a fresh glass of water too. She felt warm all over that Syrok would be so thoughtful. Holly inched on her knees to the edge of the bed nearer Syrok and helped herself. Syrok surreptitiously stroked her temple with his fingertips and she nuzzled her head affectionately against his caress. It occurred to her that he was already enjoying his new-found liberty with her mind, but she couldn't bring herself to care. She adored the physical affection. Satisfied with whatever he found, he pulled away.

“How did you know I'd sleep so late? I'm kind of surprised at the time, myself. I never sleep so long.” She rubbed the sleep from her eyes in emphasis.

“Firstly, you were already quite fatigued from the events of the party last evening. Second, a mind meld is both physically and emotionally exhausting, especially, as I understand it, for psi-null individuals such as yourself. Thirdly, I ascertained your status upon my own waking.”

He ascertained her status? Oh. He mind-peeked as she slept. Holly ate slowly, wondering whether that disturbed her. “What... what do thoughts look like when I'm asleep?” she asked cautiously.

“I believe I could do so if I chose to. I did not choose to look for such a thing. I also doubt very much that you were dreaming when I checked on you. You were not in the appropriate phase of your sleep cycle.”

“Er... yes, actually. Was I dreaming? Can you... can you see dreams?”

“I believe I could do so if I chose to. I did not choose to look for such a thing. I also doubt very much that you were dreaming when I checked on you. You were not in the appropriate phase of your sleep cycle.”

“Oh.”

“Does the idea of me seeing your dreams disturb you?”

Holly was silent for some time as she ate. “I don't know.” she answered honestly, at some length.

“I will keep your reluctance in mind.”
Holly was aware he hadn't said he'd try to avoid looking. He would keep it “in mind”. She was onto his Vulcan word games, but said nothing.

Holly ate slowly, quietly, mulling over the events from the previous night. Sensing her pensiveness, Syrok turned away and back to his computer.

“Syrok...” Holly asked at length.

“Yes?” Syrok did not turn.

“Last night...”

Syrok now turned. Last night had been tumultuous. He brushed the back of Holly's knuckles with his own and searched her face and mind for meaning. “What of last night, ashayam?”

Holly struggled with what it was she wanted to say. There was a particular event that hadn't yet been cleared up. “I... that is to say...” she took a breath and began again. “Can I see you naked?” After all, that had seemed to be the direction they'd been heading, at the start of it all.

Syrok's eyes widened slightly and he whisked back his hand as if startled. “Of course.” he answered after a flustered pause. “When would you like this to take place?”

Holly tried and failed to hide an amused smile. She loved that she'd flustered her Vulcan. She hadn't had a set time in mind, but there was no time like the present. Especially when Syrok was already all wound up. “How about now?” she asked cheerily, her eyes sparkling as she met his own.

Syrok paused another beat. All at once, he stood and moved to shut the blinds and double checked the lock on the door. Without further pretense, he efficiently began to shed his clothes, folding each item and setting it neatly on his chair.

Holly watched with rapt interest. She couldn't get enough of seeing Syrok undress. She'd already seen him down to his briefs, but there was that one niggling piece of anatomy that she was determined to understand, despite her own racing heart and sweating palms. What a stupid physiological reaction, she thought frustratedly. I have no reason to be nervous. None. Stop it, body. Nevertheless, she was nervous.

Without an ounce hesitation, Syrok's briefs went down.

Holly stared. She opened her mouth to say something, but she had no idea what. She closed her mouth again, and blinked in confusion. What was it that she was seeing? What was she not seeing? She was not seeing a limp penis like she knows she ought to be seeing, were Syrok a human male. Not that she'd seen many naked men, but she's certainly seen images somewhere, she had the general idea. And this was not it. But then, Syrok was not human.

It was all rather smooth. Not only was there no discernible penis, but there were no discernible balls. The idea of a doll flashed through Holly's mind and she shamefully shoved it aside. She focused instead on the slight mound where she believed the cock should be, the curious wrinkling of skin there. She noticed too that Syrok's near hairless physique continued into this region.

Syrok watched Holly for some moments. He could guess at her confusion, but he gave her time to process on her own before slowly moving to sit beside her on the bed, a respectful distance away. He noticed that she seemed nervous and couldn't completely understand it. After all, their current actions were logical on many accounts. Nevertheless, he knew that Holly was hesitant about sexual advances, and so he waited patiently for her to move or speak.
“How does it work?” Holly asked, not tearing her gaze from his crotch, her voice tightly controlled. She bit her lower lip and betrayed her nervousness. She never was any good at mimicking Vulcan stoicism.

“It?” Syrok nearly smirked. Holly's eyes flicked up to his and she knew he was teasing her. She blushed slightly but he'd effectively broken some of her tension.

“Last night... I felt... you were hard, like a man, that is, like a human man. Where... how does it work?”

Syrok's eyes smiled in amusement at her hesitant and innocent questions. “My penis is sheathed within me while dormant. As I am not currently aroused, it remains quiescent inside of my body.”

“Oh.” Holly still did not stop looking. She wanted to see it happen. But she knew he couldn't just arouse himself on command. Could he? Maybe he could; Vulcans had excellent control over their physiology. Holly's mind whirled with possibilities. She almost wanted to touch him, but the thought was so scandalous. She suddenly felt much warmer and felt goosebumps break out on her arms.

“What about balls?” she asked next.

“The Vulcan equivalent of testicles are also internal. They are larger, and contained here.” Syrok took one of Holly's hands in his own and pressed it -- not to his crotch as she'd been expecting -- but to his lower back. She felt a small firm mound of sorts under her palm and blinked with surprise. “One lies on each side of the spine. They are called chenesi.”

“Oh.” Holly said again, not certain what else there was to say. Gently, she ghosted her fingers over the mound, tracing over it and around its shape. She scooted herself behind Syrok to look more closely, to touch each area with a hand. She somehow hadn't noticed before, but then she'd never really inspected Syrok's back. Now that she knew what she was looking for, it was unmistakeable.

Syrok sighed pleasantly at the touch. “Do you like that?” Holly asked with a slight smile. As chaste as it felt to her to be touching Syrok's back, she marveled at the idea that she was doing something very dirty right now. She felt her confidence perk up slightly at the thought of it.

“It is not unpleasant.” Syrok admitted.

Not unpleasant, indeed. Holly snickered. She peeked around his side to his front to see if her ministrations had changed anything.

“Are you expecting something?” Syrok teased, raising a brow.

“I am employing science.” Holly answered primly.

“Indeed?”

Holly flushed and felt her throat close in embarrassment. In frustration she offered a sharp pinch to an exposed part of Syrok's ass. He flinched slightly and opened his eyes infinitesimally wider in surprise. Even knowing she hadn't caused him pain (Vulcans being as tough as they were) Holly still felt smug. That'll teach you.

With regret, Syrok felt Holly's fragile confidence was shaken slightly by his questioning. And here they'd been making such strides. He snatched up one of her hands and pressed a kiss to the back of it, sending calm and reassurance through their link. Holly relaxed into the sensation and leaned her head against his shoulder, taking a deep breath.
She was determined to see Syrok aroused, but she was not yet brave enough to touch him there. However, she realized, she knew how to arouse Syrok. She was certain of it. Straddling him from behind, comfortably, she reached around to flatten his palms on her knees which were now jutting against his thighs. Taking the hint, he remained still, curious to see where this would go. Gathering courage, Holly leaned forward to kiss Syrok just at the joint of neck and shoulder, just where she knew he liked it best. Her palms, meanwhile, rubbed slowly, sensuously, firmly against the backs of Syrok's own hands.

Sucking gently in that place now, she also pressed her fingers in between Syrok's own, splaying his hands, tightening each of her digits against his own as she continued to rub... back and forth, back and forth. Sucking, nipping, licking to soothe the sting at his neck. She heard his breath hitch and she pressed her thumbs under Syrok's hands, to the center of each palm and rubbed in sensual circles. A delicious shiver shot through the hard back that was pressed to her front. She spared a glance downward over Syrok's shoulder and saw the strange skin unfurling, stretching, to reveal the first few inches of his member, which lengthened and hardened as she continued her ministrations. It was almost enough to distract her from her task, so she tore her eyes away to concentrate.

She turned Syrok's hands to lay palm up now and slowly, firmly ran her own palms against him, fingers moving along fingers, pressing against the sensitive pads of his fingers with agonizing finesse. She ghosted her nails to just barely scrape the sensitive appendages and was rewarded with another shiver, and a hint of a pleased purr, so quiet she could only feel it and not hear it. Her hands continued their careful, deliberate motions as she nipped playfully at Syrok's shoulder, right where it was most tender. Syrok tensed slightly and his head turned to expose his neck further. Holly grinned.

"Do you like that, Syrok?" she asked in a low voice. She nipped again.

Syrok's breath hitched. "You know that I do." he answered just as quietly.

"Hmm...." she gave it a gentle lick. "But maybe I'm being too gentle on you." she mused aloud. "After all, you never are so gentle with me." she nipped again.

Now she heard a definite purr. Between Holly's love bites and her hands, her wondrous hands... Syrok was lost in a sea of delight. It was her threat that really shot through him though. Holly had never bitten him. Would she? Surely not. ...would she?

Holly bit down a bit harder. It was a real bite, but not enough to leave any mark. Just enough to really properly tease Syrok with the possibility. A startlingly deep purr rumbled from within Syrok's chest. At the same time, she felt through the link that dark, possessive emotion that always thrilled her. Her own breath caught at the sudden influx of emotion. Until now, Syrok had been keeping his own shields firmly in place. Holly was almost distracted from her mission by her desire to melt into that emotion utterly. Damnit, Syrok, she thought with a mental laugh, you are thwarting my attempts at taking charge, here. Nevertheless, she refocused and bit down just a tad harder, and the glorious darkness rolled through her once more, their hands now clutching one another tightly. Without further hesitation she bit down hard, eliciting the first real moan she'd ever heard from Syrok.

The mark made, a wave seemed to crest, and hands were relaxed as Holly pulled back to catch her breath slightly, fighting for a sense of equilibrium. She was somewhat shocked and disturbed to see the mark of her teeth on Syrok's flesh, deep green divots that would last for days, but thankfully no blood. She wasn't certain she could ever bring herself to go that far with him. The only thing that stopped her from being totally distressed by what she'd done was Syrok's contented rumble and
how he practically swooned into her now, his body totally relaxed and a sort of drunken hint of
smile touching his face. Her concern was replaced by warm affection that she couldn't tell whether
was her own or his, as they formed a gentle feedback loop within the link for a moment, while
Holly leaned over to take a new peek.

And there it was. Syrok was gloriously erect for her viewing pleasure. She was a bit intimidated to
note that it was both longer and thicker than what she'd understood to be average for a human
male, but was at least reassured that for the most part it resembled a human penis in form. As it had
been sheathed within him, it now took the look of a circumcised human cock -- a foreskin serving
no practical purpose in this design. There were double ridges around its head, and the member was
flushed pale green with arousal. Alien yes, but beautiful, and erotic. Holly's breath hitched slightly
the moment she viewed it, and Syrok could sense her wonderment and appreciation through her
hands. He'd been slightly concerned at what her reaction would be. After all, they were separate
species and Holly seemed to understand very little of his physiology. He was gratified by her
seeming approval.

Holly realized with some embarrassment that she hadn't really planned past this point. Where had
she been heading with this? Where would they go next? She faltered and wondered if Syrok would
take direction now -- desperately hoped that he would. Would he ask to see her next?

“I am not adverse to the idea, ashayam.”

Shit! She'd forgotten about telepathy.

“I do not expect anything of you. If you would like me to dress now and continue my day, that is
fine. If you would like to do more, that is fine. If you would have me see you, that would be fine as
well.”

“It hardly seems fair to... to just call an end to it so abruptly.” Holly said worriedly. The term cock-
tease flashed violently through her mind, along with its meaning.

“There is no need to concern yourself with my arousal, Holly.” Syrok gently admonished her. “I
can will it away, as I have in the past.”

“Will it away?” she asked curiously.

“You are aware that I have tight control over most of my physiological responses.” Syrok said. It
was not really a question, but Holly's curiosity confused him.

“Yes but I guess... most guys masturbate to relieve the situation.”

“Vulcans do not masturbate.” he said simply.

“Oh.” A pause. “Why not?”

“It is not an effective solution to the problem.” Syrok said in his typically evasive language.

“What do you mean?”

“It would not result in... relief.”

Holly perked up in surprise. “You mean you wouldn't cum?”

“Affirmative.” Syrok's cheeks tinged with green in spite of his efforts to remain neutral. Not only
was sex not something really discussed by his people, but he was aware of the physiological
differences between his kind and humans and was unsure how Holly would interpret these differences. It was... uncomfortable. He knew it should not be. Holly had a right to this knowledge.

Surprisingly, he felt a surge of... (what? pity? sadness?) through their link.

“This distresses you?” he inquired.

“Well it just seems sort of... unfortunate.”

“In order to gain sexual satisfaction, a Vulcan must have access to his mate, both in body and mind. There must be the nuanced unpredictability of a mate's physiological responses, as well as the completion of the mental connection. I do not find it unfortunate that I cannot attain release from manual stimulation. It is simply a fact that I live with. The idea of release without those connections is somewhat... distressing. I cannot imagine it would be a fulfilling experience, were it possible.”

“Oh.” Holly really had no idea how to respond to that. She would just have to accept these biological differences. At least when Syrok spoke of actual sex, it sounded rather romantic. Hopefully, when that day came, there wouldn't be any substantial bumps in the road.

“Is masturbation something that you engage in?” he queried.

Holly was snapped out of her own musings and straight back to reality, with alarm. “What?” she jumped. Through the link, Syrok could only sense vague surprise and embarrassment, neither of which he could interpret as an answer. “That is a very personal question to ask a girl, Syrok.” Holly dodged.

“Why should your gender dictate which questions I should ask?” Syrok asked in bewilderment.

“My question was perfectly in line with the topic at hand.”

“Well I don't want to answer.” Holly said, totally flustered. She had tried to masturbate, a few times in the past. Not really. The idea was so scandalous. She'd rubbed herself in frustration, over underwear, and hadn't ever had an orgasm from it, hadn't pursued it or tried it often. She'd usually been able to just ignore her arousal when she no longer wanted it. She did not want to explain her awkward attempts at self-pleasure to Syrok. She wasn't sure whether she was more embarrassed to have tried, to have tried and failed, or to not really have tried at all. It was none of his business. She itched to pull her hands away from his but remembered their agreement, and hoped that she was locking down her thoughts on the topic tightly enough that they wouldn't come through the tentative link.

Syrok could only sense a whirl of indistinct emotions surrounding the topic and decided not to push. “Very well.” He would drop the topic. Those words alone caused a surge of relief through his Holly.

A thought occurred to Holly. “Have you ever orgasmed?”

“No.”

The whole idea of it in a man was staggering to Holly. Syrok was a virgin, rare enough at this age, and he'd never cum. She suddenly very much wanted to be involved in his first experience. Beside him now, not behind, she very cautiously reached out a hand to brush his turgid member ever so lightly with the tips of her fingers. It twitched at the contact as Syrok felt like an electric current of lust rocketed through his body. This was certainly new. This was very acceptable.

Bolstered by his reaction of pleasure (and by the fact that she remained fully clothed), Holly gently
grasped the firm cock and started a slow, sensual stroking, just ghosting over the skin, feeling the warm velvety texture in her palm with the solid steel beneath. It was pleasant, and less intimidating than she'd expected. Like the rest of his skin, it was strangely cool, a counterpart the desert planet from whence he came. The skin had that same alien texture -- soft as if from a sheltered life, yet a subtle roughness, as if it could become quite tough were they to transport back into time to the time of his ancestors; skin that was meant to withstand harsh desert sands, but was no longer asked to do so.

And the wrinkled skin around the base, this more delicate sheath, was also growing quite wet, another surprise to her. She was familiar with pre-cum conceptually, but was certain this was more than was usual human amount. It pooled into her palm and slicked down his shaft. Well, she thought- lubrication will certainly never become an issue. It was incongruent to feel the dampened skin in her hand. Syrok did not even return damp from the showers. He was fastidiously dry. And she knew as well that Vulcans rarely sweat. Perhaps never. She was unclear on that detail, but she'd certainly never observed sweat on Syrok. Desert planet, she thought. They must conserve their water. But not this, apparently. Sex must be essential.

Holly's free hand remained twined with one of Syrok's as he leaned himself back with his free arm, seeming to need support as his mind and body melted under this first erotic touch. Syrok found it a dizzying experience, and had to consciously loose his tight controls, allowing himself for the first time in his life to respond in this way. It was incredible. He wondered distantly how many others of his kind had done this thing, these gentle touches outside of pon farr, with no coarse mating drive compelling them. He couldn't make sense of the notion. But now that he had tasted this, he had no wish to relinquish it.

Holly took her time, mapping out his responses. Firmer grasp, lighter grasp, touching the head, touching the double ridges, here then there. It fascinated her, and she was pleased that her most basic, rudimentary understanding of this act should be enough to effect her partner in such a profound way. Syrok was not overly emotive; no Vulcan was. But she'd long ago learned to look for the signs, and she could read him in this. The slight hitch of breath, a new tension, a new release... the slight tremors he did not allow himself to suppress -- whether for her benefit or his own she remained unsure. She was certain though, to the core of her being, that he enjoyed this touch. She felt a warmth pooling in her stomach at the realization. Of it, the enormity of it. She'd been almost certain she'd be woefully inadequate and felt immense relief and gratitude toward Syrok that he seemed to find her suitable. It was unreal to be here. She thought with a sort of detached wonder: My god, I'm pleasuring a Vulcan.

Holly firmed her grip and picked up her pace, leaning to gently lick and suck on the mark she'd left on her love's fair skin, worshiping it as if in apology for causing any pain. It was not difficult to project her intent; she adored Syrok and wanted to do this for him, wanted more than anything to make him feel good, as good as possible. “I want to make you cum.” she whispered in his ear and she heard an almost imperceptible whine issue from him, saw that the hand he leaned on was clutching tightly to the sheets and that his eyes had narrowed to mere slits. “Tell me how I can push you over the edge.” she whispered and continued her ministrations.

Just the knowledge of what she intended, combined with her persistence threatened to send Syrok there. He had no experience to draw from to know what precisely the final straw should be but he did know that Holly's left hand was no longer enough. He released it and reached for the side of her face, for the meld points at her temple and cheek and dropped all his shields, letting his sensations flow to her uninhibited as he in turn sought her out. Just as before, Holly was wide open to him, so delightfully free for the taking and he sank himself all around her psyche. Bright lights engulfed him as he allowed the customary disorientation of synesthesia take root: sunlight, ocean waves, the scent of roses, a rough textured fabric like a wool blanket or a thick rug, the scent of
books -- all of this, somehow tied into what felt to him like Holly. He was lost to it and wanted to fall further. This. His body and his mind called out at once to him. He drank deeply. This intoxicating vibrant spirit that leaps effortlessly, impetuously forward into the void.

Holly could barely continue her task as she felt that tantalizing possession well up around her, engulfing her and sending her into her own maddening whirl of arousal. Darkness all around but warm and safe, the sense of a quiet night and stars, a desert heat on hard rock, the scent of exotic spice and tea, strength towering like redwoods, lifting, lifting.... Holly blinked through the dizzying whirl of impressions. This is how a Vulcan makes love. She felt it with a startled certainty amidst the jumble of impressions that defined Syrok. Everything screamed from within her take, take, take as she fell into the inferno of feeling, without hesitation. She wanted to pull his desert heat into her core, to warm the implacable ice in the far corners of her soul.

Holly always marveled that her stoic Vulcan could feel so intensely, his passion burning feverishly through her own body and mind. She wasn't even certain if she'd been moving her hand any longer. Bodies seemed secondary. She couldn't tell which one of them gave an erotic shout (perhaps both?) as Syrok finally tensed and came, buckets of thick liquid pooling over her fist and onto the tile floor. There was so much of it, she was dimly aware, and it was thick, and smelled enticingly musky. Decidedly (and unexpectedly) pleasant.

All motion stopped and she felt Syrok retreat carefully, hesitantly from her mind until he was just a dull hum, holding her left hand once more as her right hand held his twitching member, the two bodies gasping for air as tremors of arousal sought to settle and fade. Holly finally released Syrok completely and moved to the foot of the bed to grab some tissues off the desk, but before wiping her hand of completely, without even really thinking about it, she stuck her tongue out to taste a bit of the viscous fluid. It was an oddly spiced flavor, with a hint of something vaguely acidic, and she thought no more of it as she cleaned herself up.

Syrok, however, had watched the unconscious motions and had to consciously cause his quieting member not to stiffen again. It was one of the most arousing things he'd seen Holly do to date. His seed, his essence, had coated her skin, and she would now undoubtedly smell of him for the remainder of the day. No human would notice the subtle scent once she'd cleaned, certainly, but he would notice. Any Vulcan could not help but do so. As he watched Holly from behind he saw the previous night's mark on the back of her neck peeking through her hair as well and was very pleased. Holly was marked as his own. He had marked her. And she wore his shirt. And now she'd willingly taken his essence into her person. Syrok felt that familiar rumble in his chest as he was awash in this feral sort of pleasure. He knew that this sound (which Holly irritatingly referred to as purring) was not appropriate to display to anyone save Holly herself, and he was a bit distressed how often she caused him to want to make it. But now was an acceptable time. He was immensely pleased.

“Was it good?” Holly gave him a hopeful smile as she knelt gracefully to the floor to clean the mess. Kneeling. At his feet. He purred again.

“It was... exquisite.” Holly flushed to hear Syrok use his deep, sexy Vulcan voice. He would of course deny having varying tonality, but right now he was using his sexy, husky growl.

“I'm glad you liked it.” Holly admitted. She could tell, of course, that he'd more than liked it -- both by the physical evidence, and by the mind-gasm they'd shared. But it was still nice to hear. Reassuring, in a particular way.

Syrok could smell Holly's own arousal. He'd scented it before at varying times -- sometimes when he could find cause and other times for no discernible reason. He'd always politely ignored it. But
now he wondered if it would be appropriate to reciprocate.

“Holly.”

“Yes?” she glanced over as she smoothly rose to throw away the spent tissues.

“I wish to see you naked.”

Holly froze in place, not daring to turn to face him. Her heart rate decidedly increased while her oxygen intake decidedly decreased. “Okay.” she found herself answering. Was it okay? She should really have thought about this, she scolded herself. Nevertheless, back turned to Syrok, she felt her hands shakily lifting the hem of the shirt to drop it to the floor. Maybe she could still back out. She could explain why. What would she say? She couldn't decide for herself why she was so nervous. Her hands were already inching down her pajama pants over her hips. She hooked her thumbs into her panties as well and gave a determined shove, bending at the waist to press the fabric to her ankles, stepping out of it.

Slowly, Holly rose and straightened, back still toward Syrok, and shivered. Or did she shudder? Syrok did not know. He did know that what he could see of her, her smooth pink skin, her pear-shaped bottom, was gorgeous, yet he wanted to see more. When Holly did not turn, he knew something was wrong. He rose and gently walked the two steps forward to meet her, placing his hands on her shoulders. Her arms were wrapped around her chest modestly and her head slightly bowed. “Ashaya...” he breathed. “What is wrong?”

“N-nothing.” she lied. She winced as she said it.

“Let me see you.” Syrok asked in the most encouraging tone he could muster. “Please.” He tried to project calm to her but he could feel fumbling shields flicker in and out of existence. Holly clearly did not know she was doing so out of instinct, so he could not fault her for it.

Holly took a deep breath, and mustering all of her bravado she turned at once and dropped her arms to her sides. She stood rigidly, stifling all emotion but doing a poor job as her face flushed, revealing her embarrassment. Still, she made a valiant effort. Syrok's eyes smiled and his features softened -- a Vulcan smile. He took half a step back to really admire his human. He was familiar with female human anatomy -- indeed, as much difficulty that Holly had had in finding out about Syrok's kind, Syrok had equal difficulty in avoiding consumption of information on those like Holly. Earth was fixated on every aspect of human sexuality and anatomy it seemed, even more-so when it came to the nature of their women. It was a cultural obsession that he spent a good deal of time ignoring. Now, however, he did not want to avoid. He wanted to adore.

Pert breasts of just the right size, with rosy nipples, aroused no doubt -- Syrok kept the room far too warm for that reaction to be caused by lack of heat. Not to mention he could smell her addictive aroma from whatever folds lay within the furry mound between her legs. Shapely hips, trim waist. Her body was pale but pink, fit yet soft and yielding. “E'tum.” he breathed. Beautiful.

Holly positively radiated at the Vulcan praise. It somehow meant more to her that he'd said it in his own tongue -- as if her beauty had rendered him near speechless. She lowered her eyes shyly at the complement. Was it a complement? Vulcans only spoke what they knew to be true. Her toes curled a bit at the thought.

“Syrok...” Holly meant to chastise him for embarrassing her with flattery, but she couldn't seem to bring herself to say more.

“Ashaya.” He ran the backs of his fingers along her smooth stomach, then traced the tips of his
fingers around her waist and down over the bones of her left hip. Whatever insistent arousal she'd felt before, it was significantly dimmed now, he could sense. His touch told him that it was from a nervousness that he was uncertain how to quell. Where his own nerves had fled entirely once Holly had engaged him physically, Holly seemed to be having quite the opposite reaction once she was the center of his own attentions.

“I would like to reciprocate your attentions, ashaya.” Syrok entreated quietly. Gently he ran the back of two fingers along her temple, and down over her jaw.

“Th-that's okay.” Holly's voice quavered. She felt herself press instinctively against the hand on her face, but simultaneously, her arms once again sought to cover her exposed flesh. Torn between two desires, she settled for clutching at her elbows, arms crossed awkwardly across her stomach, her eyes flicking down and to the left, not daring to meet Syrok's intense gaze.

“You do not wish me to give you pleasure?”

“You already please me, Syrok.” she evaded with a hesitant smile.

Syrok pressed one hand against the side of Holly's face, as if in affection, as he searched her mind with determination. “Holly.” he said to buy time, stepping just an inch closer into her personal space. Should he press her on this? Should he reach out to caress her, sexually? No, he realized with growing frustration and helplessness. Her initial arousal was fast dissolving, and it seemed every avenue would lead to a dead end. With a sigh he dropped his hand and stepped back. “Very well. You may dress yourself. We will continue this later.”

Holly shivered at Syrok's words. It was not a suggestion or an entreaty. We will continue this later. For a moment her withering arousal spiked up again as she hurriedly moved to dress herself for the day and stow her pajamas on her bed, grateful at least to not be the center of Syrok's current focus. She also took this reprieve as an excuse to escape to the bathroom to prepare for her day. When she finally arrived back in the room, the blinds were open again and Syrok was back at his computer. Holly allowed herself to sit once more on the edge of the bed and resumed eating the treats Syrok had retrieved for her breakfast, though it was now nearly lunch.

“Holly, you need not pick at stale bread and wilted fruit when we can simply adjourn to the dining hall at this time.” Syrok said dryly.

“It's still good.” Holly said, picking at her bagel, using her hands unashamedly and dipping a bit of the bread directly into Syrok's jar of peanut butter. She sucked on a sticky finger. Syrok was already moving to lace his boots and gave her a look as if to say Are you coming? She rolled her eyes but smiled warmly. “Just don't throw it away. It's still good.”

“We are not without funds, ashaya. You need not want for food.”

We. Holly felt a warm glow and said nothing, hurrying to put on her own shoes and grab her bag. She wouldn't dream of keeping her sweetheart waiting for her, even for a second.

T'Sala spotted the duo from across the room. She hadn't seen them since the party the previous night, an event that she was already ineffectually attempting to press out of her memory, although she was still awash in gratitude for her two... friends. Friends now seemed to be possibly an appropriate term to describe them. They had been loyal to her. She found she was content to see them, and her eyes flicked up to catch their attention, subtly. She was determined not behave as the humans. She would not stand, nor gesture, nor raise her voice. She assumed Syrok would see her,
and she was not mistaken. Like all Vulcans, he was intensely aware of his surroundings. Their eyes met for a fraction of a second and it was understood that the trio would dine together.

Holly was not normally as spatially aware as Syrok. T'Sala didn't think Holly would have spotted her on her own, or at least not so quickly, but she was surprised to see that as soon as Syrok's attention was diverted elsewhere, Holly's attention followed implicitly, nodding to T'Sala in acknowledgment. Not for the first time, T'Sala thought that the two were ideal bondmates, and couldn't fathom why they hadn't bonded yet. In many ways, it was as if they were already as one. Holly followed Syrok a pace behind with an easy grace, content to follow. *Does she know that she does this?* T'Sala wondered. *Has she made some conscious choice to Attend? Does it come so naturally to her?* T'Sala had not seen enough human couples to make any hypothesis on the matter.

The duo, having obtained their food, moved to join T'Sala. Syrok sat across from her, but to the side so that Holly would take the place directly across from their friend. T'Sala knew that he did this because it was proper, as if Selek were seated beside her, though Syrok has never met Selek. He would not Challenge her mate in word or deed, even when Selek was afar. T'Sala appreciated this polite adherence to tradition, and wondered whether Holly was aware of these small details. Of course T'Sala knew that Holly studied her people, but also knew that Vulcans remained silent on so many customs. *Would she have encountered such information in some texts? Would Syrok have told her?* T'Sala believed Holly simply followed his lead on such matters, oblivious to their meaning.

“Hey, T'Sala.” Holly smiled. She'd kind of wanted a sandwich but she didn't want to scandalize both Syrok and her friend by eating finger foods, so she'd opted for other dishes that were more comfortable to eat with utensils.

T'Sala regarded her companions. She'd already spotted the new mark Holly sported on the back of her neck as it peeked from her shirt collar, her hair tied up and doing nothing to hide it. This was not the first time she'd seen such on Holly and she was prepared now to disregard the impropriety without so much as a flinch. However, her eyes did indeed widen slightly when she caught the row of human-teeth-shaped-divots peeking out from Syrok's own shirt collar. In two seconds she'd recovered her composure. She would not allow herself to gawk.

Holly went on to say some inane things about the party by way of greeting, and T'Sala was about to open her mouth to respond with something equally inane and cordial (really, human conversations were so formulaic, at least when they began) -- when she caught his scent.

She didn't know how it had taken her this many seconds to become aware of it. She supposed it was because she was simply not looking for it. Surely they were bonded now! That telling musk was practically embedded in Holly's flesh. This was something new and significant, and T'Sala was ready to congratulate them on their new bond when Syrok saw the seeming recognition in T'Sala's face and he flicked his eyes at her. Just once, sharply. *A warning. No.* And T'Sala shut her mouth, turning her focus back to Holly in a fraction of a second. No bond. Her mind whirled at the indecency of it. She really did not want to know these things. This couple would surely be the death of her.
“You go ahead, *ashaya.*” Syrok said as Holly rose from her meal. “I intend to go instead to the library and conduct some research.”

“Oh.” Holly blinked in surprise. That was unusual. They usually spent the weekend together. They usually spent *all* of their free time together. But Syrok hadn't invited her. Oh well. He must be doing something for his work, she reasoned reluctantly. “‘Alright. I guess I have enough to keep me occupied.” she offered her ever-charming smile. Syrok extended two fingers to her and she felt her brittle smile actually warm into a more sincere smile as she reached out to touch her fingers to his. There was something quite endearing about these chaste Vulcan signs of affection. Holly felt privileged that he'd share them with her in public, knowing that such gestures were just skirting the edge of public decency. She resigned herself to try and be content while Syrok was out.

Syrok made a stealthy retreat from Holly as quickly as he could manage. He didn't want to risk questions, or she would realize what it was he wanted to research. As soon as he was in the library he brought up on one of the public terminals everything he couldpossibly find about human sexuality. He'd had the general idea, of course, but Holly's trepidation concerned and frustrated him. He needed a strategy. He needed to understand, he needed things he could try.

But when he started to really delve into the subject matter he was staggered by the infinity of ways in which human sexuality could express itself. Some of the practices even startled or disgusted him, which was a major concern. What if Holly were into these things? He tucked that worry away and noted the trend that many human virgins, particularly women, seemed to experience a similar trepidation about their first experiences. All related advice seemed obnoxiously useless: go slow, be reassuring, do not pressure. He knew these things. He'd done these things. He was doing them still. But what was the deciding factor? None of the texts could answer his query. Useless. There was no rigor here.

It was nearing supper time when Syrok finally pulled himself away from his research. He'd absorbed much about the subject matter, more than could reasonably be expected of a human male in a similar situation to himself, he knew. There seemed to be no answers hidden within these facts, but he would wait. It was time to eat now, so he needed to return to Holly. Now he would begin the real study: the study of his intended. With time and patience, surely he could unravel the riddle. Already he had a mental catalog of everything that they'd done that had seemed to elicit a sexual response from her, and all the things that had not. He would build this list and test his observations. He would watch her person and he would watch her thoughts as well, whenever he had the chance. Holly had taken the first steps toward meeting him in this. He *would* find a way to take those next steps.

It had been nine days. Syrok had been counting. Nine days since he'd tried, and failed, to arouse Holly to the point of taking further steps. He had not yet had success.

The first night, he'd tried nothing further.

The second, he'd suggested they sleep nude. That had not gone well. Holly had seemed panicked but determined again, and he'd aborted the effort. They'd not slept nude.
On the third night he'd attempted to “feel her up”, he believed was the term. That is to say, he'd attempted to caress one of her breasts over her night shirt (which was, by the way, one of his shirts -- a most acceptable arrangement). She'd allowed the touch, but she'd gone stiff as a board, her heart hammering away. After trying long enough to ascertain that the situation was not, in fact, going to improve, he'd aborted that effort as well. He'd wrapped his arm around her middle and feigned sleep. The relief had rolled off of her in waves. Syrok kept his own consternation tightly suppressed.

On the fourth night, he'd given his efforts a rest. He did not want to overwhelm her with pressure.

On the fifth night, Holly had surprised him while they cuddled, prepared for sleep. She'd unabashedly caressed and rubbed his genital mound and had steadily coaxed him to arousal. He was delighted to scent her own tentative arousal as well. He hadn't uttered a word of complaint as she'd inched his underclothes down over his hips (still concealing both of them safely under the sheet) and with deft strokes and neck kisses she'd brought him to a second thrilling orgasm. He could make no complaint of this -- it was more than generous. But after the mess was cleaned and the underwear were returned, Holly had caught him in the fiercest cuddle, effectively preventing him from making attempts at reciprocation. He could feel a slight dampness from her underwear, her crotch snug against his hip. He could scent her physical arousal. But her mind, her emotions, remained far away. How could he engage her in this? It was most vexing.

On the sixth night, he'd gone for a sensual approach. He'd given her gentle kisses, over her cheeks, her nose, her closed eyes, her gently parted lips... down her neck, down her arms, over palms and fingers. Everywhere he could reach, really, that was not overtly sexual for a human. He'd given caresses and rubs. But when he'd finally reached, just an inch away from the thigh he'd been stationed at to touch the soft cotton of her underpants, she'd jumped in surprise and had twisted slightly away, even in spite of her own frustrated whimper. He thought of reassuring her verbally, but he knew there was no use in it. He could feel through their mental link that she was not denying him based on any rational thought. There was simply some puzzle piece missing, something she either would not or could not say. Perhaps she, herself, was uncertain of its nature as well. He could feel the guilt rocketing through her now, as soon as she'd denied him. And so he'd held her and hadn't tried more.

Nor had he tried anything new on the seventh night. It had seemed too soon.

On the eighth night he'd made the mistake of asking her blunt questions, outright. He'd found out she was a virgin. He'd found out she had not, in fact orgasmed before. When he was determined, he had found she could not evade. He'd tried quizzing her on what aroused her but she'd tried valiantly to evade that question. Finally she'd admitted somewhat reluctantly on enjoying arousing him, on feeling needed or wanted by him. But that information was both vague, and something he'd already garnered. The discussion had come to an unsatisfying close.

But now it was the ninth night, a Sunday night, and it was very late. Holly must have lost track of the time, for she was not in Syrok's bed waiting for him. She was not yet asleep. Syrok was rarely tired when he joined her anyway so he wasn't upset about the change in schedule, but he was curious. Holly was, in fact, curled up in her own bed, in her underwear and one of Syrok's shirts, reading her PADD, when he smelled very distinctly... her arousal. He did not let on that he'd noticed for 11 minutes 17 seconds. But the scent had grown slightly more pronounced, and he saw that Holly was completely engrossed in whatever she was reading or viewing on her screen, practically squirming with anticipation of whatever would come next. Her breathing and heart rate had increased slightly and her cheeks and lips had just so subtly flushed. She would normally be aware of his inspection from across the room, but she was not aware now. This was interesting. Very interesting.
“Holly.” he got her attention.

She seemed to jump as startled, then clutched her PADD. Her eyes had gone wide for a second before she did a poor job of concealing herself. “Hm? What?” she asked too abruptly.

“What are you reading?”

“Wh -- uhm... just a story. Why?”

“I would like to see it.”

*Shit*. Holly thought. *He knows.* “Uhm... no thank you. It's private.” Yes, say it's private. Vulcans *love* privacy laws.

“Holly.” Syrok's face was a blank slate. Holly suppressed a shiver at that.

“Mm?”

“I can tell that you are aroused.” His voice, his tone, portrayed nothing.

*Shit. Shit! Of course he'd noticed.* Sneaky Vulcan. *I shouldn't have read this while he was home.* “Oh.”

“I would know *why.*”

Holly positively squirmed where she sat at the subtle inflection of the last word. She knew logically she could deny him, but there was *something* that pulled at the core of her being when he *looked* like that, when he *spoke* like that. Her eyes darted around for escape -- not a physical one, of course, but as if some idea would manifest itself in her room. She felt like prey. Syrok saw her defenses cracking and *knew* that this time he had her. Slowly, deliberately, he rose himself from his chair and crossed the room toward her, one pace at a time. Calmly, slowly, he extended his hand, palm up, as if to receive the PADD. Flushing deeply and closing her eyes as if in utter humiliation, Holly handed her PADD over, and Syrok began to read.

Fiction. Text. That much was obvious. Syrok skimmed the words for meaning, impatient to understand. His eyes flicked over the text for key words such as penis, cock, vagina, pussy, anything sexual, but he saw none of them. Forcing himself to patience, he read more slowly, and his eyes widened at what he saw. The female in this story enduring pain, humiliation, subservience, to some being she referred to only as Master. Fascinating. When he'd researched, Syrok had encountered the fact that *some* humans had entangled pleasure and pain, and while for the most part the concept had not disturbed him, he had also not dwelled on it. It was one of dozens of esoteric behaviors he'd dismissed in his search for knowledge. It was distinctly in the “low probability” column of his mind, and so his own knowledge was lacking. But this... *this* could be the key, he thought with excitement. Even now, he thrilled to note Holly's continued increased heart-rate, complemented by a steady (not diminishing!) state of arousal. He traced his own actions and saw immediately his perceived *demand* for her PADD. As she'd been reading this fictional tale, no doubt she'd subconsciously transformed his request to be similar to this “Master” of her story.

“Tch, tch, tch....” Syrok made an admonishing click of tongue to teeth. “Holly.” he said gently.

“Mm?” she could not hide her nerves.

“When were you going to tell me of *this*?” he gestured lazily to the PADD, not needing to further elaborate.
“I...” she flushed again and closed her eyes once more. Holly was certain she'd die of mortification. She was already too fucked up to enjoy her boyfriend the way she was supposed to. How the hell was she supposed to explain her perverted fantasies to a Vulcan? It wasn't even widely accepted by humans, let alone a fastidiously logical race. “It's nothing.” she said so quietly it was almost a whisper. Holly willed herself to die, but found no relief forthcoming. She peeked up to see he was continuing to scroll through the story. Her mind raced to try and recall what all had been in it. She hadn't finished reading this one but the first bit was already filled with such raunch. Syrok had a good idea now of how he wished to proceed. His eyes skimmed the room. Ah. There.

“Mm.” Syrok made a non-committal sound, obviously unconvinced. “Which aspects of the story arouse you?”

“I don't....” her eyes darted around and her fingers curled around her toes, body going tense. “I don't know. It's just fantasy, Syrok. It doesn't mean anything.”

“If you anticipate that I will react negatively to your sexual interests Holly, I can assure you there is a very low likelihood of such a thing occurring.”

Her eyes flicked up curiously, but unconvinced. Her face was beet red from embarrassment. Holly had never really been a very sexual girl. She simply hadn't been interested in the whole affair. Frankly, for some time she'd questioned her sexuality extensively when she'd failed to become aroused in the same manner of her peers. It wasn't until she'd discovered some of the more creative erotica that she'd sort of mellowed out about the whole thing, reassured that she did in fact have a sexuality, and hadn't analyzed the matter further. Perhaps because she was distinctly uncomfortable looking too closely at those stories which actually effected her.

“Listen, Syrok... you know how humans are. We're just illogical and I know it doesn't make much sense --”

“On the contrary --” he interrupted, “The fixation on dominant and submissive exchanges is of great interest to me.”

Holly met his eyes and saw them black and flinty, sparking dangerously. She swallowed thickly. “...oh?”

“Indeed.” Syrok paused, simply observing his petite mate as she sat so passively, like prey. It was enticing. “My people have a long and violent history of acquiring kafeh from rival Clans in battle. Even now, the matriarchal governmental body is curbed by the tradition that the female in a heterosexual partnership should attend to her mate.”

Holly's eyes widened slightly. “Really? We didn't learn this in any class. And you never mentioned that....” she said a bit worriedly. What notions did Syrok harbor about how their relationship dynamic should progress? And how comfortable was she with the idea of compliance? When she flushed warm from head to toe at the thought of it, she began to suspect her answer.

“It is not a strict requirement...” Syrok said carefully, “particularly with modern arrangements. But it is our tradition, and carries more import in certain contextual situations.” (...like pon farr). He was determined to hedge that particular topic for as long as was possible.

“Therefore, Holly, I would like to know what it is about this text,” he glanced down at the PADD once more, “you find arousing. Is it the power dynamic? Or is it the application of pain, perhaps?”

“I'm not-- I'm not really sure.” she struggled to answer while maintaining as much dignity as she could. “I've never done anything like it, and honestly I hadn't really thought about trying to. It's not
exactly... conventional. And I don't even have experience doing normal things.”

“It is my observation over the past several days that some of the more traditional routes of sexual gratification may not be as effective for us. If you would like to experiment, I am certainly willing.”

“Wh-what did you have in mind?” she bit her lip in anticipation.

“That depends.” he said slowly, eyes glinting, “on what sorts of things you're interested in trying. Your text here,” he waved the PADD for emphasis, “includes aspects of authority, orders being given. It also includes mention of some sort of punishment, this 'Master' striking his 'submissive's' bottom. What precisely do you find arousing about the idea?”

Holly cleared her throat carefully, her entire face red. “…all of it.” she mumbled, eyes darting away.

“Fascinating.” Syrok tilted his head to the side, observing Holly with new eyes. The scrutiny which would normally have caused her to clam up seemed only to arouse her further at this moment.

With slow deliberation he walked to his desk, taking Holly's PADD with him and setting it down. She didn't miss that he did not hand it back to her, and she watched with a sort of curious dread to see what was going to happen next. He scanned the room, then moved to the blinds and inspected the plastic twist rod that would tilt them closed, and carefully unhooked it from its home. What...? Oh. Shit. Holly's eyes widened as Syrok swiped the rod swiftly through the air and onto his upturned forearm, avoiding his delicate palm. Swoosh THWACK. Holly's stomach clenched into a tight knot of fear but her nether region.... gushed. The scent was not lost on Syrok.

Excellent.

“I am curious to know your response to pain, similar to that which is depicted in your story.”

Holly made a quiet squeak, her eyes riveted to the makeshift cane. She cleared her throat. “I guess we can try that.” She suddenly looked nervous. “But... don't do it too hard?” she half warned, half requested.

“Holly,” his countenance softened for a moment, reassuring her. “I would not damage my mate.”

“Should we establish like... a safe word or something?”

Syrok was familiar with the term. He'd encountered the concept of BDSM during his research of human sexuality. “Unnecessary.” he said pointedly, his eyes riveted to hers. “You forget, Holly -- I am a touch telepath. So long as I touch you, there can be no confusion about reaction or consent.”

That was something Holly hadn't considered. She really hadn't considered the idea of exploring these fantasies with Syrok at all, because she'd closed them strictly to the realm of fantasy -- something to occasionally read about, but not participate in. Now her typically reticent Vulcan was encouraging exploration. With a makeshift cane. And no safe words. “Okay.” she heard herself agree.

Syrok continued to hold the cane delicately with both hands, grasped with one and laying softly in the fingers of the other. He considered his prey, and assumed a role. “You have been intentionally opaque about this interest, Holly. I find this omission to be unacceptable.” He let the weight of his words sink in. “And for this transgression, I believe it is only fair that you be punished.” Now was the real test, he thought. He hoped he hadn't gone too far, that his understanding of the situation was not in error. He watched with rapt attention as Holly's eyes finally traveled away from the toy and up to his own eyes where he saw wanton fear and arousal. Finally. She swallowed but made
no comment to negate or deny him.

“Stand to face me and remove your clothes.” He said the words slowly. This delicate dance could not be rushed. As she moved immediately, (if stiffly) to comply, Syrok felt his own surge of excitement. This was beyond the night at the movies when Holly had allowed him to lead. This was power he'd only known from his own non-fiction books -- historical accounts of a time before Surak. Oh yes, some part of his Vulcan blood approved of this. Holly met his eyes as she stood naked before him, then slowly, deliberately, lowered her gaze to the floor. More than acceptable.

Syrok tapped the cane against his forearm slowly, deliberately. Thwack. Thwack. Holly was mesmerized by the sight and the sound, working to his advantage. He concentrated on its sting, needed to know and process every nuance of the item in his hand. His eidetic memory took in the move of it, the weight of it. He was hyper-aware of the fact that he was playing a dangerous game right now. He wanted to get a feel for this implement, its impact, its sting. He wished that he had something built for the task at hand, and likewise ample time for practice -- practice on something other than his sweet one's delicate flesh. He wished he'd had time to study these kinks of Holly's in greater detail, had time to question her at length. But he had already begun down this road, and so precarious as it was, he would navigate it.

“Walk to my bed. Lean forward over it, bent at the waist, and place your forearms and palms on the mattress.” he instructed. Holly wanted to swoon as arousal surged through her and her mind felt as if it had somehow detached. It was all too surreal for her to contemplate. Her feet moved her to comply without conscious thought.

Gently, Syrok caressed the soft nude skin of Holly's exposed ass. Her knees buckled slightly to the touch and her breath hitched, her head hanging limply as her body threatened to melt under his touch, but she held firm with determination. Finally, Syrok thought, he could touch her and get a read on her emotional state, and he felt his own body respond erotically to what he found there. Holly's mind... a distant hum from this vantage point but suffused with the essence of his Holly nonetheless. Desire was present, yes, but it was more than that. Her thoughts, emotions, seemed to be flying away in fragments. He'd never felt anything like it from her and could only liken it to a very subtle version of a domineering meld -- a scattering of thought that would result were he to force himself in. And yet, here, no meld was present. Was this state something entirely human -- entirely alien to him? He did not know.

Slowly, gently he let his fingertips explore her body -- over her exposed ass and thighs, then reaching higher and over her back, down along her arms that quivered more from his touch than from her weight. And now he stroked her hair and she leaned docily into his touch. When he touched this skin he could feel the surface of her emotions, a vague impression of desire and submission, but no more. When he was able to finally reach her mind through her psi points, however, he was fascinated by what he saw there. Her thoughts were fragmented and light, breaking off and spinning into a void -- he sensed from her the sensation of falling, and a simultaneous desire to fall more freely, a need to relinquish control and be caught. “You do not have to worry now, pi'veh.” he soothed her. “Because you are not in control any more.” Holly made a helpless keening noise in response and he felt another thought break and spin away, followed by a bright flash of bliss. The knowledge that he could create that in her was heady indeed.

Through his touch he perceived a desperately cobbled together thought that she pressed at him... Yours? she questioned. Heat rushed through Syrok. A Call to be Claimed. “Ha, pi'veh.” Yes, small one, he answered with pleasure. “T'nash-veh.” Mine. His dark possessive force welled up inside of him and he let it through his mental shields freely, rewarded with Holly's audible gasp and delightful tremor, accompanied by an overwhelming feeling of trust and a needy ache.
It was time. Syrok took his place behind Holly and pressed the cane to her, then tapping slowly, deliberately, to get a feel for its movement and his aim. His free hand pressed to Holly's lower back -- for the added stability, but mostly for clearer access to her response. She flinched slightly at the first gentle stroke, but realizing that it was not overly painful, she relaxed again. He believed he had the feel of it. Time now to see.

*THWACK.* The first hard stroke, centered directly across both cheeks.

Holly's whole body went temporarily rigid. *Pain.* She forgot for a moment to breathe and both parties stood as if suspended. Her eyes closed tight and her mouth slightly parted, fingers tensed to close around sheets but she held them straight.

A breath. Then glorious endorphins. *Oh yes.*

A gentle caress of her back to calm her and a dizzy disconnection from her world once more. Body relaxed and ready.

*THWACK. THWACK. THWACK.* Three more strokes, barley a pause in between them, and on the third a halted moan or groan, the first sound of distress or pleasure, perhaps of both. A deliberate breath and then a definite moan as her toes curled but shoulders and neck tensed to try and absorb and process the pain. The intoxicating scent of arousal -- only some of it her own.

Time for variety. *Taptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptap....* Syrok went for lighter but maddeningly consistent strokes. Holly's toes curled and she seemed to hold her breath again, areas of tension shifting throughout her body as she struggled to absorb the pleasure/pain that threatened to overwhelm her, topple what was left of her awareness. Through touch Syrok could only sense an overwhelming sensation of *YES.* He was only too happy to provide. Her breath returned very suddenly and in shallow gasps, then a keening whimper and Syrok almost felt his reciprocal desire overwhelm him as a tremendous wave crashed through her and the last vestiges of logical thought washed away.

One more solid hit. Make it two. There was no resistance. None. One last solid hit, and a glorious whimper. He moved to caress her head and felt her mind was *gone, gone... drifting in a pleasant space, a safe space, a sexy space.* Syrok pulled back and ran his hand over the pink flesh, setting his implement aside. Little sparks of pain tingled throughout the area but Holly could not bring herself to mind. This was *delicious.* This was fulfilling beyond anything she'd dared to dream of. How could she have known it would be like this? After all she had read and fantasized... how could she have *known?* These thoughts were ill defined. She couldn't put them in proper order here. She could only stay where Syrok had put her. She could only do her best to obey. Here, it was no longer necessary to think, to plan, to understand. It was safe just to *be.*

Syrok reached boldly around Holly's hip to caress the soft mat of curls just there... just where he expected her to tense as she had before, but no tension came. Just a relaxed compliance and no signs of distress. More boldly now he sought out her clitoris and was rewarded with a soft gasp as he grazed it. He reached a bit further to find the pool of liquid issuing from her virgin slit, and wet his fingertips with it, dragging the moisture upward to stroke languidly, gently, firmly at that oh-so-sensitive place. Telepathy was at his advantage -- every subtle shift of his fingers on her flesh portrayed the relevant information to him -- *do this, don't do that, a little to the left, yes.* A definite moan now and a buckling of knees as her whole torso pressed into the bed to try and remain somewhat on her feet, to give him access. *Desire* rolled through her, desire for something unspecified. He increased the pace of his frottage and felt the excited tension increase, something inside her winding tighter and tighter as if it would soon burst and ---

*There!* “Ohhhh...” Holly moaned aloud and her whole body tensed with a shudder as her first ever orgasm rocketed through her frame. It was incomprehensible. She had no context for such an
onslaught of pleasure, and her mind was so deliriously dizzy that she could only accept it, not think on it at all.

As the aftershocks twitched through her Syrok moved his hand lower, more confidently now, and pressed one single digit forward, forward into that slick, warm tightness, a place where nothing had been before. Another gasp in surprise perhaps, but no objection physically, mentally, or emotionally -- for Syrok checked all three. Indeed, he almost gasped himself at the eroticism of the act. His fingers, those most sensitive appendages, were there, in the most sensitive epicenter of her being. With careful deliberation he moved slowly in and out, pressing, seeking, rubbing. Where was the place... Ah! Holly made a sort of suppressed whimper as he found the place he sought. He pulled back and pressed two fingers forward now, aiming for that place he'd read of, determined to gain all knowledge of her pleasure.

Sparks of white light exploded from behind Holly's eyelids as a new pleasure rolled through her frame. Oh God.... She couldn't think, couldn't breathe... she clutched the sheets desperately in her fists as he pressed and pressed and pressed. Dimly she was aware of the high keening whimper that had issued from her throat but it was all too good for her to be self conscious any longer. Skin tightened, breath quickened, toes curled and another shudder rocketed through her as she clenched wildly around those elegant digits, the wave cresting and crashing around her.

Finally, all motion came to a halt as the duo basked in the afterglow -- Holly nearly incoherent with pleasure and release, Syrok's own arousal wound tight as a spring but still he drank in the afterglow through Holly. If her own pleasure felt so glorious through the link, he could only fathom how wondrous it would be for them both when they inevitably climaxed as one. Taking care of this sweet creature now took precedent and he gathered her in his arms as if she weighed nothing at all, soothing her to lay lengthwise on the bed as he spooned in behind her, enveloping her in his arms. She was only too happy to burrow into the embrace, as well as pleased at the overly warm temperature Syrok tended to keep their place. She was suddenly chilled and basked in what would normally be a stifling heat, made pleasant by the contrast of the cool Vulcan pressed against her form.

Syrok couldn't help but feel he should be saying something now, something to reassure in some way. Humans were such emotional beings, and this experience was well apart from anything he had experience in handling. What could possibly be the right thing to say or do after such an extreme and profound event? With deliberate effort (for it always took a concerted effort), Syrok once more lowered his own emotional shields and allowed Holly to feel what absolute reverence he felt for her in that moment, let it wash over her as he in turn absorbed her own stream of love, bliss, and contentment. He twined his fingers in hers and sent the subtle psionic vibrations of Vulcan-kisses to her, basking in their mutual pleasure. Almost as an afterthought, he lazily pressed warm human-style kisses against her bare neck and was rewarded with more happy thoughts sent his way.

As Holly's attention slowly gathered back into the room she became aware of Syrok's own arousal, trapped inside his pants and pressed against her ass and small of her back. “I should help you....” She started to move, feeling as if she'd been selfish.

“Shh.” Syrok stopped her and held her firmly. “Not tonight. It is of no consequence.”

She seemed a bit unsure of that, but took no coaxing to settle into whatever position he wanted her. She was so malleable right now, he thought, so vulnerable. A fierce wave of protectiveness assaulted him. He would need to be very careful with this information and this power he held over her. Syrok watched her for a while, watched her eyes close and flutter as her breathing evened. She was soon asleep. Only when he was certain she would not wake did he extract himself from her
side and prepare himself and the room for their slumber. As he replaced the rod for the blinds, Syrok thought that he did not believe in luck, but nevertheless he considered himself somehow lucky... to have found such a mate.

Chapter End Notes

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A note about the BDSM in this chapter. First of all, if you're going to try kink out yourself, you should probably have extensive negotiation and discussion with your partner prior to playing, so that you both understand what is okay and not okay. While I try to write the characters in my story as acting fairly responsibly, they are not a how-to book. I think that a lot of people, when they first try out these activities, do so with even less discussion than Syrok and Holly had, because people are young and excited. Also, I do like to think that with Syrok utilizing his touch telepathy, he is able to tell the moment that the play becomes *not okay* for Holly in any way, and would stop immediately. As humans do not have touch telepathy, remember to play responsibly and use your words! :)
“Holly?”
“Mm?” Holly blinked groggily. It was early, and Syrok was leaning over where she lay on the bed.
“It is time that I leave for work.” he informed her.
Holly tried to order her thoughts into something that would make sense. What time was it? Why
was he telling her this? Wait.. why was she naked? *Last night... oh.*
“It is my understanding that when humans share sexual relations, it is bad form for one participant
to leave the other while they sleep. However, it is the appointed time for me to leave, and so I
thought I should wake you....” he trailed off with some uncertainty. Had he made the right
decision?
Holly smiled warmly and sought out his hand to close her fingers in his, sending a clear message of
her love and warmth through the link to him. Syrok's tension and concern evaporated as he
reciprocated.
“Thank you.” she said sleepily. “I hereby release you of your gentlemanly duty. And also... have a
good day, Syrok. I love you.”
The words seemed overly emotional for an ordinary work day, but Syrok could not help but feel
affection for her. He knew some reciprocation was expected of him, and he could deny her
nothing. “I cherish thee, *ashaya.*” he said, a subtle warmth coloring his usual monotone. One last
squeeze of the hand and he went on his way, feeling light. Holly snuggled back into the sheets and
drifted back to sleep.

Holly touched her PADD hesitantly that morning, from where it lay on Syrok's desk. The story
she'd been reading was still on display, untouched. She stared at it blankly for a few moments
before closing it. Her mind reviewed the events from the previous night again. She was different
now, forever changed. It hadn't been sex, but it had been penetration. It had been orgasm. It had
been new, and more than she'd ever done before. Was she still considered a virgin now, she
wondered?
And what of their little scene? What had it been to Syrok? Was it an erotic fantasy of his, as it had
been one of hers? Had he thought these things before? Somehow she doubted it. There could be no
reason for such a logical being to indulge in such illogical behavior. Certainly he'd only indulged to
please her. He'd spent the past week doing nothing but try to please her, and in seeing that erotica
he'd found an opening in her defenses. So that was all it was, Holly told herself. It was a bit of play,
a diversion. There was no need for her to drive herself crazy over it. ... then why did she feel as if
her whole world had changed?

“You do not have to worry now, *pi'veh,* because you are not in control any more.” His words had
branded themselves across her heart.
Holly felt like she couldn't breathe and suddenly needed to stifle a sob. *Oh God, Syrok, why
couldn't you have meant that as more than play?* Taking slow even breaths, Holly forced herself to
control her emotions. When had she last meditated? She knew that Syrok always found time to do it
in the early hours of the morning, as he rose well before her and required much less sleep. For him,
as a Vulcan, regular meditation was imperative to his survival. Holly knew that in her own case, however, meditation was no less important. She’d seen her life crumble many times and in many ways, and she’d built it all back up brick by brick with careful discipline. She would call upon that discipline now.

Shoving aside her untouched breakfast, she settled herself into her meditative posture on the bed. Little work would get done today, she thought, but it was of no consequence. If she didn't get these roiling emotions under control she'd wreck this good relationship all due to some misplaced fantasy. It wouldn't do at all. She began with a simple exercise to get herself settled for the long haul.

When Syrok stepped into his room after work that day, the first thing he saw, always the first thing he saw, was his chosen. Today she was on their bed in comfortable clothes with her legs crossed, palms on knees, as if she'd been meditating. Her eyes opened almost sleepily to regard him. She seemed calm, centered. It flooded him with warmth and affection to see her so.

“Holly.” he said, stepping forward with two fingers outstretched.

She smiled and reciprocated the gesture, fingers to fingers in a very Vulcan greeting of affection. Surface emotions gently flickered through the touch before it was released.

“You are well.” he commented.

“I took some time to clear my head.” she said simply. She could have explained that she was driving herself crazy, but it didn't seem relevant now. That, and it was utterly embarrassing to expose just how volatile her human emotions could become.

“Good. I am gratified to know it, for there is something I need to discuss with you.”

A tingling concern flickered in the back of Holly's mind but she kept herself grounded to hear him out. “Oh? What is it?”

Syrok seated himself in his chair. “You are aware that my work with Professor Selkar has been going well. We've been working on a new technology to detect and transfer sub-space communications.” Holly nodded. While she didn’t understand the science and engineering behind it all, she was aware of the basic premise of Syrok's work. He'd spoken of it often enough to both her and to T'Sala over meals. “The work is going better than expected. In fact, we have a unique opportunity to test some of our designs in the field.”

Holly's face bloomed into a smile. “Oh! That's wonderful, Syrok.” And in that moment, she did feel genuinely happy for him. His work was important, he was making a difference, this would help his career and his self esteem (though he'd never admit to the latter). She was pleased.

“Indeed.” Syrok continued, glad that this was thus far going well. “Therefore next Monday, for the remaining two weeks prior to classes beginning, Professor Selkar has entreated me to join him on this expedition.”

Holly's brain seemed to have stopped working for a second as she took in the news. “Oh.... What? Expedition.... You're leaving?” she struggled to put it together.

“Yes.” he confirmed. Sometimes humans required that information be relayed to them a number of times. Holly's seeming distraction indicated that perhaps this was one such time. “I will leave next Monday, and should be gone for two weeks.”
Holly felt absolutely bereft. *Gone?* But... she didn't want Syrok to be gone. She felt an entire day's work of meditation start to unravel. She would be alone. Alone without Syrok. But she needed Syrok, like she needed air to breathe. She couldn't breathe!

“There is no cause to worry.” Syrok said. Something in Holly's expression was... displeased. He had reached out a hand to hers and definitely felt concern. No, worry. No... panic? But that was illogical. “You will still be welcome to use my quarters and I will be sure to provide you with enough food for the duration of my voyage.”

“But --” Holly shoved down her urge to cry or panic and felt like she were gripping frantically at pieces of her soul as they pulled away and scattered to the wind. *Get a grip, Holly!* she admonished herself angrily. Why was she falling apart just because her boyfriend was going off for two weeks? It was only two goddamned weeks! He'd be back. She thought perhaps she was developing a real problem here, some sort of sick addiction or co-dependence. Her heart and mind raced, warring: *this isn't healthy; I need him; this isn't healthy; I need him.*

“Holly....” Syrok said more tenderly, holding one of her hands in both of his own. He'd caught more of the frantic thoughts that escaped through the link. She would *miss* him, he gathered. It was so sweet, so endearing. “Would it help you for me to contact you while I am abroad? I am certain I shall be able to manage at least once or twice a week.”

Relief started to break through the static panic. “Yes.” she smiled hopelessly, helplessly up at him. “That would help a lot. I'm sorry I'm so emotional about this. I *am* happy for you. I just... love you so much.” She'd thought she'd calmed down, but at that last admission she felt herself choking back a sob once more, her eyes glassy with unshed tears.

“*Ashayam.*” Syrok near-whispered to her, moving himself to the bed to enfold her in his arms, pulling her to lean against his frame. He was overwhelmed by the emotions flooding through her now. He'd never before felt so... *needed.* It satisfied his *katra* in a way that nothing else ever had before. He was reminded of his childhood when he'd found a lost baby sehlat by the side of a rural road. It had been too young and defenseless to be able to take care of itself. Of course T'Meht, his nanny, hadn't let him keep the animal. Too much work, she'd said, too much responsibility for a young boy who needed to learn to focus on his studies. He'd resented that. He'd still been young enough and had had fragile enough emotional controls to feel such illogical resentment. But at least T'Meht had humored him enough to nurse it to better health, and had helped him find an adoptive family for the poor creature. Now, holding Holly, he felt this genuine neediness from her, and had the overwhelming urge to fulfill her every need, to fill her up so that she might never need for anything ever again. She was truly a gift to him, that he might be privileged enough to see this vulnerable side of her, that he might have the opportunity to nurture her and make her whole.

Holly tried to reassure herself that it would only be two weeks, and that they would communicate with one another. She needed to be rational about this. But a lead weight had sunk into her gut at the thought of how their comfortable existence was about to be upended. She would wake alone. Syrok's most personal things would be strikingly missing from the room. They would not go to the dining hall to share meals with T'Sala. She would dine alone in her room. She would spend her days working on her project as she had been... but without the prospect of Syrok walking back in to greet her and call an end to the studies. There would be no cuddling, no watching of vids, nor hours of spontaneous conversation, nor comfortable shared silence. There would be no sexual frisson nor arms to hold her at night.

But what was she expecting? It couldn't last forever, she realized. She hadn't thought about it but now she saw: the summer would come to an end. Soon it would come time for her to move out and away from Syrok, back to her own dormitory, to her room with Geri, while Syrok lived with
Dennis. They would both have their studies to attend to all day and she'd be back to having a meal with him maybe twice a week when time allowed.

Nausea rushed up at the thought of that. Such distance was something she couldn't bring herself to rightly imagine. It was too painful, too ugly. Now she did cry, tears silently streaking down her cheeks as her grip around Syrok tightened.

His beloved was crying. What to do, what to do? She was terribly, painfully upset. Had he upset her? Was it because of his trip? Should he find a way to call off the trip? Syrok's mind raced. It would not be good for his internship, not get him any sort of recommendations, would not be good for his career but... Holly was upset. “Holly, please explain.” he entreated her, his own panic rising up steadily. He needed to know what to do, how to fix this, how to fix her. She was broken and distressed and it might be his fault!

“I just... I hadn't thought about it before. All of it's going to end soon. It's all so perfect now, and now you're going away, and after that I'm going away.”

Holly was going away? What? That was unacceptable.

“Dennis will be back and classes will start and I don't know when I'll even see you, let alone sleep with you, eat with you, spend every waking hour with you. Maybe it's not healthy. I don't know. I've never been in a serious relationship before. I do know it's not normal but damnit I want it!”

Oh. Holly was not leaving but... he now saw her point. He felt his own stomach plummet a little as he considered the repercussions of the semester beginning anew. He'd known that Holly would retreat back to her old quarters, he'd known that classes would likely take them away from one another again. But he hadn't processed fully what it would be like, what it would do to him. When they'd begun this cohabitatiation they hadn't even been dating yet. Now he felt as if he were all but bonded and the idea of living apart from his chosen filled him with a sort of ache that he'd never felt with T'Rena. He wondered at that. Was it due to his affection for Holly? Would it be easier if they were actually bonded instead of just near to it? How ever did T'Sala manage to have her lover worlds away?

“Perhaps.... Perhaps I could compare our schedules. We could find ways to meet frequently to eat, to see one another between classes, to study....” He offered.

Holly's face lit up and he felt a warmth transfer from herself to him. “You'd do that? That's great!” She was already extracting herself from his grasp and scrambling to call up her schedule on her PADD. She rambled on. “Here it is.” she handed it to him. “I know we haven't discussed it much but I'm really not married to this schedule either, so if you want me to change anything around....”

What was she saying? Married to a schedule? Idioms. Was she giving him permission to... to dictate her life to her in such a direct way? Syrok was stunned. He froze and looked to her.

“...what?” she stopped her rambling when she saw his face.

“Holly... you would have me change your course-load?”

She blinked. “Well... yeah. I mean, if you wanted to.” She looked hesitant now. “Is that... bad?”

“It is acceptable.” he assured her and directed his attention back to the PADD, looking at the times involved, the locations on campus, while recalling his own plans from memory. In a new window he brought up the scheduling interface to look at available openings at other times and locations.

“My file's unlocked.” Holly went on, craning her neck to see what he was looking at. “You can see
what all I've taken if you want, and what sorts of credits I need to graduate. I'm really not set on anything, Syrok. Whatever you want...."

She seemed positively excited about giving this power to him, he noted. It was incomprehensible. And exhilarating. How different she was to T'Rena who'd simply informed him of her plans when asked and not before, and without any implication of willingness to change them, nor interest on her part in his own life goals. Holly was throwing her whole destiny into his grasp, giving, giving, always giving. He worried briefly that this type of behavior would leave Holly open to abuse, but as he reviewed everything he knew about her he could not see evidence that she'd behaved in such a way toward anyone but him. It occurred to him that perhaps the play from the previous night had been more than play to her, and his mind flashed back to her desperate insistence that he help her plan a summer project, and then flashing again back to her desperation at wanting him as a tutor -- how they'd met.

"That'll time out if you leave it open too long." Holly commented as he skimmed through the courses she'd taken thus far, creating a mental map of the various configurations of credits they could be used to fulfill. "Let me give you my password." she offered.

Syrok raised a brow at her. "If you freely give your password, your account is hardly secure."

Holly snorted a laugh. "Well I'm not in the habit of giving it away, Syrok. Only to you." Only you. Syrok liked the sound of those words. She went on to recite a series of random digits to him.

He looked at her curiously. "I am surprised it is not something more mnemonic. Is that not human tendency?"

"Ah, well... it's the default they gave me when they opened my account. They said I could change it to something easier to remember, but I couldn't figure a way to make it easier to remember while still being as secure, so I just memorized it. After all, it's no more difficult than memorizing Vulcan grammar." she grinned.

"I will have to take your word for it. I must admit I am somewhat impressed. Dennis's passwords are all simply password." he said wryly.

Holly gave a short laugh. "How do you know Dennis's passwords?"

"He bragged as much to a group of his peers."

Holly could sense the disdain dripping from Syrok's voice and couldn't blame him. She did her best to stifle her own laughter and caught a glint of shared humor. from Syrok's eyes, in spite of his annoyance toward Dennis.

"I shall review all of this tonight, Holly." Syrok said seriously, setting the PADD aside. "You shall not be alone or without direction in this."

"You do not have to worry now, pi'veh, because you are not in control any more. Holly looked up at him adoringly, overcome with worshipful feelings toward this man who would lift this burden from her. All of her life she'd shouldered it alone -- life was heavy, so heavy, crushing her with its relentless brutality. And Syrok had come to her and shouldered her burdens as if they weighed no more than a feather.

"I love you." she said wistfully, and before she knew it lips met lips and hands met hands as the hybrid kiss took her breath away. They both felt so hungry for one another, determined to be always touching, never parted, in spite of the world that kept moving around them. They drank
from one another, panting, hands and fingers sliding, thrusting in time with tongues as they could not seem to get enough of one another. Finally they only broke to catch their breath and neither one could decide whether to stop or continue toward something more.

“We should eat.” Syrok suggested pragmatically, his eyes still deep pools of black that she wanted to fall into.

“Yes.” she agreed, her body unwilling to move from the bed in that moment.

The dark possession of pre-reform Vulcan roared to life just as Holly nearly swooned with submission, falling into him, pulling at his mind to join hers. He was only too happy to comply as his hands reached for psi points and his mind crashed into hers, filling them both with dearly needed life, wholeness, completion. Forehead to forehead, his hands on her temples and her hands over his fingers, they stayed in that moment for minutes more. Syrok vaguely wondered if he were becoming addicted to this mind. Each touch becoming more than a caress, dangerously close to a meld. A part of him cautioned that if he were not mindful he could unintentionally form a semi-permanent link, but that knowledge was not enough to deter him from this. He was certain he could never get enough of it, and was reluctant to finally pull away, back into himself. They really did need to go eat.

But today, in spite of the indecency of it, they would clasp hands in broad daylight for the duration of the walk. And when they joined T'Sala to eat, they would sit a bit too close, and hands and arms would inadvertently brush one another throughout the meal. T'Sala would have been scandalized if it hadn't been so heart-warmingly adorable. Not that she would ever admit it, of course. She did not need to see these things!
As soon as they returned to their room, Syrok began his investigation. Holly curled into Syrok's bed and made a half-hearted attempt to read while he worked.

“Why have you not taken more astronomy courses?”

“I dunno.” she answered blandly. Syrok found it most irritating.

“Surely you must have had some reasoning behind your class selections.” he persisted.

“Well sure I had reasons.” Holly practically rolled her eyes.

“Please explain. There is no discernible pattern to your scheduling.”

Holly huffed in annoyance. “Okay, fine. Look, I took the minimum required mathematics.”

“In fact you took a half grade difficulty higher than is strictly required for your track.” he interrupted.

“That's so I could take Intro. to Seismology.”

“For what purpose did you take Seismology?”

“It counts as a science credit.”

“Holly, astronomy also counts as a science credit, and is more useful in the field. Not to mention that you have spent countless hours watching astronomy videos from the Vulcan Science Academy which leads me to believe you have an innate interest in astronomy.”

“Well yeah, I like it well enough, but I just watch the vids to help me learn Vulcan. Besides, I already know all the introductory astronomy stuff by now from the vids, so it would be pointless to start taking the introductory courses now. I didn't know anything about seismology though. Now I do.”

Syrok closed his eyes for one second against the insanity of human logic. This human was his ashayam -- he would have to endure.

“Your track is Communications.” he stated.

“Yes.”

“With a focus on language and diplomacy.”

“Yes. And Vulcan studies.”

“That is very specific, Holly. Would it not make more sense to take a variety of language courses?”

“I already took like half of the generalized xeno-linguistics courses offered.” she said defensively. Syrok noted that this was true, and actually somewhat impressive. “I didn't want to focus on learning too many specific languages because I want to be able to communicate with new races as we encounter them. I want to fly, you know.”

“I am aware of that fact. Your explanation on this matter is sufficient.” He continued to page
through Holly's history, comparing it to the requirements for graduation and the options available to her. Holly gave herself a short nod of satisfaction that Syrok was finally seeing reason when it came to her course-load.

“Last semester you took Introduction to Andorian Architecture.” he said dryly.

“Yeah?”

“For what possible reason would you do such a thing?” he sounded almost pained.

“I was taking Introductory Xeno-Biology that semester.” she said by way of explanation.

Syrok blinked. “Pardon?”

“Introductory Xeno-Biology is a required course.”

“How does this relate to architecture?”

“Oh, I thought you could tell by my grades. Xeno-biology was fucking hard and I needed to maintain my GPA to keep my scholarship, so I knew I needed to take something easy to offset it. So I took the class on Andorian Architecture. You can see I got a C in bio and an A in architecture, so it all kind of worked out in the end. Plus the architecture class fulfilled a mandatory arts credit.”

“If you're trying to focus on Vulcan why didn't you take one of the Vulcan arts courses?” he asked somewhat testily.

“The musicology credit requires previous musical experience for even the most introductory class, textiles was full at the time, and I didn't have enough language credits to take Ancient Texts.”

“Really? Ancient Texts should be elementary. Even if you did not have the required credits, surely a professor would be willing to overlook the fact if they would simply meet with you on the matter.”

Holly made a sound of frustration and agreement. “Mm. It's taught by Hindley. He doesn't like me.”

“I hardly think it is a professor's place to like or dislike his students.”

“I had him for Vulcan language the same semester I was in that god-awful math class with you.” Her tone indicated that this explained something. Syrok's silence indicated that he did not understand. Holly sighed. “I wasn't exactly paying attention to him most of the time. He was annoyed that I kept doing math during lecture.”

Syrok turned to give her a stern look. “It is hardly appropriate for you to be focusing on the material for one class during the allotted time of another, Holly.”

“Math was hard. Vulcan was mind-numbingly easy.”

“Then why did you not test out of it?”

“I don't know.” she whined. “I guess I was counting on an easy A”

“I am beginning to sense a pattern.” Syrok did not sound amused. Holly's intelligence was being wasted on frivolous classes that were well beneath her talents all because of her financial strain. It did not seem right somehow but Syrok knew that the universe was far from fair. If she kept investing her time in such mindless drivel she would not graduate with the type of impressive
resume she was capable of. She would not get the opportunities in Starfleet that he was likely to get with his own experience. She would simply not have access to the same type of future as himself.

He knew that Starfleet was by no means to blame for this. After all, without the scholarship program to begin with, Holly would have no future worth speaking of at all. Where would she enroll, what jobs would she resign herself to in order to just get by in life? She had no family, no friends, no support network, nor had she ever had such a thing. Her scholarship was an outstretched hand that she had leapt to grasp and now struggled to hold to.

Perhaps if Syrok were in her situation he could have done better, could have studied harder, done more, maintained his GPA and taken harder classes. But Holly was human. She required food and rest and social contact. She had no eidetic memory to draw from and required mnemonic aids and creativity. Syrok knew humans were not lesser than Vulcans, they were just differently skilled, but he could not but be moved by her weakness in all of this.

Only now, with her future in his hands, did he begin to grasp the weight of the mantle she carried. Not for the first time, he was struck by the image of Holly as she must have been when she'd first arrived: alone in this place with only a few belongings, all that she owned, and most of it no doubt stolen (an act he knew affected her conscience more than she'd admit aloud)... strategising on ways to maintain her toehold here, while combing the streets for opportunities for food, seeking shelter over the holidays of all times, when the University cast her out. It was a striking image for one whose life had been mostly handed to him, outlined for him in the strictest terms from his youngest age and more or less taken care of, whether he wanted it to be so or not. Holly, by contrast, had forged her own life out of base materials.

He was irritated that someone had not stepped in. Was she not supposed to have an academic adviser for these purposes? Syrok himself had never utilized his own adviser, nor did many of the other students, he knew, but Holly surely should have consulted someone for help. Well, she was consulting him now, and he had his own ideas.

“You are capable of so much more than this, Holly.” he said seriously, and was met by silence. Holly simply gazed at him, not willing to refute him, but not willing to believe him either. “I would like to completely overhaul your schedule, and by extension, your career path.”

Holly's heart beat quickly and she swallowed. She no longer even pretended to try and focus on her book while he worked. What Syrok was asking was a big step. But then, that's why she'd gone to him with this.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

“Yes.” The response came immediately, with no hesitation or ambiguity of inflection. Holly trusted him implicitly.

“You will test out of the next two levels of Vulcan. Of this I have no doubt.” Syrok continued to click through Holly's account, dropping and adding courses with skill, his eyes flicking to the course diagram and mapping future semesters in his mind. He drafted the necessary request forms for testing out of a class. “I'm dropping this ridiculous twentieth century Terran history course. Honestly, Holly... as well as Dance Aerobics. What could possibly move you to waste your time on dance aerobics?”

“Fitness credit.”

“I will teach you basic Vulcan combat and you can test out of that too.” he said dismissively. Holly would not be gyrating in front of strangers and making a fool of herself (or worse, attracting the
wrong sort of attention), nor would strangers be leaving their bruises on her flesh in one of the standard combat courses if he had anything to say about it. Unacceptable.

“And I am signing you up for Astronomy II. You have indicated you believe you could test out of Astronomy I and I would not be surprised to find this is so, judging by the amount of videos you've managed to follow in my presence alone. Nevertheless, you will be busy these coming weeks while I am away, preparing for your heavier course-load.”

Holly felt a rush of excitement for the new challenge, warmth at Syrok's confidence in her, and trepidation at the daunting task in front of her. She’d never been one to leap ahead of a schedule. No one had ever encouraged such behavior in her before, and she felt a cautious reluctance to stand out. Not only that, but she had a real concern about what such a course-load would do to her GPA, and by extension, her scholarship. Without even touching her, Syrok seemed to read her mind.

“Please do not concern yourself with the accelerated difficulty. If you experience any difficulty in keeping up, I would like you to come to me.”

“O-okay.” Holly stuttered, completely overwhelmed by Syrok's care. It was slowly dawning on her how much power she'd handed him and she found herself wondering once more whether there was something wrong with her, whether this kind of behavior was healthy. But then Syrok was there, apparently watching the play of emotions across her face as she had become lost in her thoughts, and now he sat himself down beside her in the bed, brushing hair out of her face as his fingers ghosted over her psi points and he projected that all encompassing calm and warmth so that she felt as if he held her very soul. And suddenly she didn't care any longer whether it was healthy or whether something was wrong with her... because nothing could possibly ever be even remotely wrong with what she was feeling right now. She nuzzled into his touch, welcoming it and what it meant, freely.

Syrok had only wanted to ascertain Holly's emotional status as he'd picked up on some of her unease and now he found he could not help but be swept away by her overpowering adoration toward him. Her mind was absolutely intoxicating, like a drug he could not get enough of, lifting him higher and higher. He was vaguely concerned that perhaps it was unwise to unshield himself so very often and to breech her own privacy so thoroughly but he could not fully bring himself to care about the propriety of the act when it felt so achingly good. He could not help but imagine what it would feel like to bond with her, to feel her presence at all times. It was a dizzying thought, and an urge he would have to keep a careful control over for now.

Holly felt her own lust rising as she lost herself in that feeling that was Syrok and forcefully pulled herself away from the touch, breaking the connection as the world swam up to meet her. She gasped for a steadying breath and Syrok looked at her with what could only be interpreted as a sort of confused hurt coupled with annoyance. “Sorry, Syrok.” she said breathlessly with a grin. “I just think... if we do too much more of that I'm gonna want to make things physical in additional to the mental thing, if you know what I mean, and I'm perfectly willing to do that but maybe I ought to go do the whole bed-time routine first lest I never leave the bed again....” she rambled. Syrok found it endearing, and relieving to know that she did not shy from his mind-touch as he'd feared.

“It is only approaching eight o'clock.” he said straight-faced but with a dry humor. that Holly alone seemed to recognize.

“Are you objecting to going to bed early?” she asked with a flirtatious light in her eyes.

“You know I am powerless to object to anything that you desire, ashaya.” he answered warmly. “I, too, shall prepare myself, and will be waiting for you here.”
That night, for the first time, there was no hesitance in either of their touches, as they carefully explored each inch of one another's skin under the cool sheets. It was well that they'd laid down so early as it was nearly three hours before the two of them were gasping together in their first simultaneous orgasm -- hand on cock, fingers in cunt, hand tangled in hair, lips on lips, fingers to psi-points ... all a jumble of limbs and touch and sensation with emotions running rampant and interleaving between the two minds until they could not discern which touch came from whom nor the origin of each thought.
Chapter 28

Less than one week remained with Holly before his trip. Something had changed these past days, and the week was atypical. Syrok could not say that he disapproved of the shift -- only that he at times questioned his sanity and his Control.

Breakfast was a solitary affair. Holly remained oblivious in her slumber. He liked to watch her sometimes while she slept. Muscles relaxed, this he knew logically, but somehow logic could not account for the notable effect this slackening would have on her appearance. She seemed so fragile there, so peaceful and vulnerable. It evoked a sort of tender response in him. He would at times simply observe the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed, or listen to the steady thrum of her so slow human heart.

At times he would feel compelled to touch her against her knowledge -- to gently ghost his fingers along her cheek, or to brush stray hair from her face. Sometimes Holly would remain unaware, and sometimes even in her deepest sleep she'd seem to stir. Her breath would catch, or she'd fidget toward or away from the touch. His fingers would ghost over her psi points and he would get the barest impressions of dream, but remembering her hesitancy toward sharing that part of herself, he was careful to never pry.

He was curious though. Vulcans almost never dreamed, but he was aware that humans did so several times every night as part of their sleep cycle. He knew the dreams served a practical purpose -- a way for their disorganized minds to sift through events and emotions and re-establish some semblance of equilibrium. Syrok would find this equilibrium through strict adherence to meditation and the Mind Rules. He knew as well that a humans dreams were almost entirely nonsensical, yet he could not help but wish to see one first-hand. What images would a dynamic mind like Holly's conjure?

Syrok didn't require as much sleep as his chosen. He awoke early at precisely the time he intended, and spent two hours in meditation. He would then proceed to the bathroom which was almost certainly empty at such an hour of the morning. He'd never adjusted to the rampant exhibitionism and voyeurism of this planet and he preferred to maintain as much of his privacy as possible. He would not travel the corridor clad in terry-cloth as Holly. He would proceed to the shower stall, undress behind the protection of the thin curtain, and then cleanse himself.

When he stepped into the hall, Syrok was at once assaulted by harsh fluorescent light. It was glaringly bright, and seemed to flicker. The tone was harsh and white, not the deep yellows and reds of the lights of his home-world. The lights as well emitted a high frequency whine that irritated his sensitive ears. He braced his physiology to make an allowance for it, to contend with this lighting for the rest of the day. When he had left Vulcan, the difficulties he had anticipated had not included contention with electrical lighting. After two years now, he was still sometimes made aware of the perpetual low grade headache the lighting was able to induce if he allowed himself to remain exposed to it too long.

The showers were uniformly water showers. This too was an adjustment he'd had to make upon moving to Earth. On Vulcan, all modern showers were sonics. On a desert planet, water was a precious commodity, and not wasted on something so frivolous as bathing when a sonic would perform the function just as well. Logic aside, he found that his familiarity with sonics, combined possibly with something of his innate physiology perhaps, made him detest the sensation of becoming *damp*. It was not something he had experienced prior to Earth, and now he experienced it frequently. It was necessary, but it was not preferred. He had known he would have to make
adjustments upon living next to an alien culture, but he had not quite accounted for how numerous
and subtle these adjustments would be.

He would turn the water setting to as hot as he could manage. The last thing he wanted was to add
to his nearly perpetual chill. Syrok was no stranger to the cold. The desert of his home-world
became absolutely frigid at night, and contrary to popular belief Vulcan had seasons as well. He
had a fairly high fortitude when it came to contending with extreme temperatures at both ends of
the spectrum. However, an ability to withstand was not the same as true tolerance. He was used to
hot Vulcan days to offset the cold nights, and here on Earth he never quite felt fully warm.

Bracing himself against the spray (which was still uncomfortably cool) he would clean himself
thoroughly and efficiently and would finish with the whole affair as quickly as was possible. A
water shower was typically an unpleasant necessity that he endured, but this week at least, and last,
it was made slightly more tolerable, slightly sweeter when the sting of the water hit the bite mark
on his neck. The warmth that shot through his stomach at the memory was almost enough to stave
off some of the chill from the water and cool air.

With sonics, he had had no need of these cleansing products such as various soaps for skin and
hair. Back home, there was a sort of powder occasionally used for either skin or hair, and special
oils for skin and hair that had become too dry. Water showers necessitated an entirely different
system of soaps and shampoos. It had taken considerable study of each box and bottle's scent in the
store until he had been able to select something tolerable. He had known logically that a human's
sense of smell was not as keen as that of a Vulcan, but he had not accounted for the cultural
obsession with covering oneself in all manner of obnoxious perfumes. The scents that assaulted
him on a daily basis could sometimes be overwhelming. He preferred the relatively sterile
environment of the lab -- even with the constant bone-deep chill of the lab's “climate control”.

Thoroughly cleansed (for a Vulcan was ever fastidious about such rituals), he would put an end to
the deluge and then begin to methodically dry every centimeter of his body. Even with his Vulcan
efficiency, this was no mean task. However, it was a necessary one. His distaste for water aside,
logically he knew he must do his best in this cool climate to preserve what body heat he could.
When finally divested of the last evidence of the shower, he would comb his hair, dress in the extra
set of clothes he'd brought with him, and would proceed to the sink to complete oral cleaning as
well, then would proceed back to his room where he could begin to warm again.

Even with his specially purchased thermals he was often chilled, and the only thing that kept him
from becoming emotional about the topic was the assurance that he had now and would always
maintain some form of control over his personal room's climate. Now it was set to eighty- two
degrees Fahrenheit -- just at the bottom end of comfortable for himself, but just beginning to reach
discomfort for Holly. As it was summer, the heating unit rarely kicked on -- the ambient
temperature out of doors being sufficient warmth. At night, however, or on days when it rained (an
unpleasantly common phenomenon in this region) the climate controls would assure at least a
minimal level of comfort. When Dennis returned, Syrok knew that a constant passive-aggressive
battle would ensue. When Dennis was in the room (a blessedly rare occurrence) the temperature
would dip precipitously, and when Syrok had the room entirely to himself he would crank the heat
up to its upper cap of 91.3, though he had tried setting it to a desired 101.4.

Having meditated and cleansed himself, Syrok would break his fast. In the past he had gone to the
dining hall to do so, preferring the variety of foodstuffs. Now, however, he found himself more and
more often sufficing himself with his stores of peanut butter or (more guiltily) with the stores of
food Holly had brought back to the room in napkins that he had so constantly chastised her about.
He would never openly admit to approving of her actions, but he knew that she was aware of his
pilfering her stores anyway and noted (and appreciated) her poignant silence on the matter. His
reason for staying in his room as of late was, of course, to be near his mate. She lay on the bed in all her glorious nudity, bits of skin displayed uncaringly while she tangled haphazardly in the sheets.

Having eaten and perused his PADD, the time to leave would arrive and Syrok would lean down to caress Holly one last time before parting. His time in the lab was reassuringly typical. This was a place where he understood what was expected of him. This was a place where, at least, it differed little from his experience on Vulcan. The climate was uncomfortable but the work was familiar, and he was almost grateful that his professor was himself a Vulcan as well. There was no confounding emotionalism such as that T'Sala sometimes expressed concern over when speaking of her own interactions with Dr. Chan. There was only the familiar interaction between two Vulcans, however far they were from their home, however long Professor Selkar had lived among humans.

His professor had not even commented last week when he'd arrived with his own mate-mark peaking above his collar, green tinged and human shaped. Surely it was noticed, and surely Professor Selkar could even hypothesize the race of the one who had produced it. Yet true to the ways of his people, he'd made no comment nor given any physical reaction to it that could be noticed, and for that Syrok was grateful.

A benefit of working with one of his own kind were the lunches they shared -- always vegetarian and often with foodstuffs from his home-world. They would order in or go out to share meals in companionable silence. Speaking during mealtimes, small talk, was a curiously human behavior. Syrok relished the easy silence as well as the ability to eat richly. They would begin their meals with the sharing of water, a tradition dating back to a time before Surak, a shared intention of hospitality to those living in such a harsh desert.

The coming school year would bring a return to small meals in crowded cafeterias and hurried secret snacks between classes in a desperate attempt to fulfill his caloric intake while trying to blend in. Cafeterias would remain crowded with bustling bodies that bumped and brushed unconsciously, that grated on his emotional shields -- a bustle of people whose collective psi-null emotionalism would fill the air with a psionic crackle all its own such that touch was sometimes not even necessary and flashes of emotion would leak in unbidden. The room would smell thickly of meats and the few vegetarian dishes would be foreign to him. He'd be forever on guard of chocolate and cinnamon, the latter of which could be found in a surprising number of dishes, especially those of Indian descent that Holly preferred so greatly.

Work this week was uncharacteristically busy in preparation for the coming field trip, but Syrok was not put off by the increase in his duties. Indeed, he had allowed himself to feel a tinge of excitement about the coming project. He was most curious to see the results of his labor, and even the professor seemed to have a slight glint in his eyes at times.

Perhaps the reassuring demands of his internship prefaced an up-tick in the difficulty of this coming season. He didn't not allow himself to believe in superstitious signs, nor did he allow himself the illogical notion of hope. Still, it would be refreshing were his coming studies to match the difficulty of this past summer. It was reminiscent of home. It had been startling to him how easy the work load had been since coming to Earth. All through his childhood he'd prepared himself for the rigors of adulthood. Now that he was here, he found that he was often bored. A failing of his own mind, no doubt. Earth demanded a great degree of intrinsic motivation. He found himself with long stretches of unoccupied time. Weekends, for example were an unheard of concept on Vulcan, as were holidays. He didn't understand the notions, but he respected the human needs for rest, diversion, and celebration. And besides, these new stretches of idle time afforded him more contact with Holly. There could be no sufficient argument against so crucial a fact.
When Syrok returned home he was at once greeted by Holly. He felt his heart flutter in his side as it always did when greeted with the sight of this human. Distantly he wondered when this elation began. Certainly not at first. A year ago he didn't even know her. How could he have come to be so entangled with her in so short a period of time? It was a wonder. Like every day this summer, Holly was there to greet him. But this week was better, for some new longing had now been sparked into existence with their approaching parting. Holly would leap toward him and their hands would clasp desperately as their eyes met and his shields dropped.

Holly. All around him whirled the surface emotions of Holly, skipping across his skin like ripples across a pond -- an apt metaphor he thought distantly, for one who was raised on a water planet, and especially as he felt himself drink her in, absorbing what he could. Was this addiction? Holly herself seemed to swoon into him, against him, as he unleashed his tightly held emotions into her. Was it healthy to feel so often? Should he be concerned? He was still fairly certain he could Control this whenever he needed to. There was no evidence to the contrary. He simply wished to forgo Suppression. What need for every Discipline when one would suffice? He would allow himself this.

Desire emanated from both of them and he couldn't say who moved first to meet lips with lips. His right hand moved to Holly's face to land on her psi points. No meld, not a meld. Do not establish a link, he cautioned himself. But he reveled in the intensity of her echoed thoughts as he hovered so closely to them. That she should desire him as well, and so greatly, was bliss. He swooned against the wall and let her pin him there with her kisses on his neck and didn't attempt to suppress the delighted rumble through his chest. He was aware that his features had slackened into calm, no, into almost displaying happiness... but they were in private. What did it matter if he failed to Guard? He belonged to Holly. Hers. She could have this.

Holly's bed was like a living desk. There was a small Holly-shaped space where she'd been sitting, and the rest of the area was covered with books and papers. She'd been working, really working these past days. She was determined to finish her summer project prior to Syrok's leave so that she could devote her entire attention to the variety of tests she'd need to pass in order to accommodate her new course-load. Her actions had seemed to take on a new meaning, a new purpose. She was driving toward something larger than she could have even imagined a year ago. Driving there under the direction of someone she could finally, wholeheartedly trust.

Evenings were pleasant. Holly would sit on his bed (although hers was perfectly serviceable) and would read her PADD. Syrok would sit at his desk and read from there. While in the past he had preferred solitude to company, he could not regret her presence. In fact, he found it oddly soothing, a meditation in itself just to have her near. And while he knew that humans such as Holly enjoyed frequent physical contact, Holly never made him feel guilty for the distance between them. No, the evenings were peaceful, and both parties at ease. Syrok enjoyed the relative warmth around him, the scent of Holly's sweat in response to it, the sight of her with an indecent amount of clothing on to compensate for the heat. He could not find it within himself to complain about such an event within the privacy of their own quarters. He would read and feel free to eat peanut butter in front of her, no longer illogically ashamed of his body's need of high caloric intake.

There would come a point around 22:15, on average, when Holly would retire to the bathroom to prepare herself for rest. During her shower, Syrok would brush his own teeth and finish with his
reading. They would retire at approximately 22:35. No, they would lie in the bed at 22:35. They
would not rest until approximately 23:15. The intermediate time was used effectively in an erotic
clash of bodies and minds, hands, lips, genitals, smooth skin sliding on skin as they panted for
breath and release, a symphony of moans, whimpers, and muttered nonsense as rational thought
fled. One time Syrok was even able to achieve orgasm without stimulation to his penis at all, with
two of his fingers bringing Holly to her own climax and two fingers from the other hand being
sucked on by her beautiful mouth -- the combined stimulation was so overpowering he had
shuddered to completion without any further action required.

And whereas before, physical intimacy had come in stutters and stops, now it was every night.
Syrok could not get enough of Holly, in either body or mind. One would think he were about to be
separated from his bondmate for all of eternity, not a paltry two weeks. He almost questioned
himself at one point whether he had launched somehow into premature pon farr, but no, he knew it
would be a thousand times a thousand whatever this was. His mind staggered with the knowledge
of what such desire could feel like. He had not known. How could he have known?

When Syrok had shared the room at night with Dennis, Dennis would not retire until approximately
12:23, on average. Syrok would await at least one hour to be assured of Dennis' slumber. 1:23.
Then he could trust himself to meditate in peace, during Dennis' deeper slumber. 3:23 would see
him coming out of his meditative trance. By then he would be utterly famished, feeling his stomach
gnaw at itself. That would be when he could eat his peanut butter. By approximately 4:00 his
hunger would be sated. He would typically choose that hour to shower and prepare himself for rest.
He would rest from approximately 4:20 until 7:00-- less than three hours of sleep before he would
rise and begin his studies. Even for a Vulcan, it had been challenging. But it had been necessary in
order to both maintain his privacy and adhere to the rigors of his schedule.

With Holly, all of that had changed. By 23:15 he had already eaten and had no concern that hunger
would strike before his breakfast. By 23:15 he'd already had his fill of Holly and his tension, a
tension he hadn't even realized he'd been harboring, had all but dissolved entirely. With Dennis in
his room, he had never experienced such complete relaxation. He had no cause to wonder why
T'Sala's family had paid extra so that she could keep a room to herself.

Syrok would rise at 4:00. Nearly five hours of sleep to his previous three. He would take a hurried
shower and meditate for two hours. He would break his fast and check his computer and allow
himself to feel affection for Holly. What was, was, and he could not allow himself to feel too
displeased with difficulties or grateful for pleasantries. He could, however, allow himself to
observe the marked change in his life since Holly had come into it. In this week, he could see a
potential future that was brighter than any he had allowed himself to imagine before. This week, as
brief as it was, had fit... something had fit neatly into place in his katra, as a well worn boot would
fit perfectly onto its owner's foot. If he hadn't been determined before to keep Holly, now it was
imperative. With ritualistic determination, he deleted yet another in a long line of correspondences
sent by his mother regarding T'Chailu.
Chapter 29

It was the last night before Syrok's departure, and the knowledge of that hung heavily in the air between them as Syrok crawled under the sheet to join Holly. It was a Sunday night. He would need to leave the dorm by 6:45 tomorrow morning in order to reach the launch pad in time for his departure, he'd told her. So she would most likely still be asleep when he left. When left to her own devices, Holly was a late riser. It was something she'd always struggled with. She wondered now whether tomorrow might be an exception. She didn't see how sleep would be possible when her heart hurt and she felt the first tendrils of panic creeping in.

“Ashayam....” Syrok soothed gently, stroking hair away from her face as they lay on their sides facing one another.

“I know I'm not being rational.” she said quietly, chagrined.

“Perhaps the cause is sufficient.” he offered.

Holly nuzzled into his touch. That was a bold declaration for a Vulcan, she thought. Then again, she wasn't Vulcan. She would take his word for it. Holly sighed contentedly at his touch and began to explore his ribs with the tips of her fingers. She trailed down over the sweep of his hip, then curled around to his lower back and delicately over one chenesi, as Syrok gave a delighted shiver.

Holly moved her arm up to card her fingers through his soft, silky hair. “I love your hair.” she admitted shyly. Syrok was unaccustomed to such admiration. Certainly he'd never known anyone before to comment on, or seem to notice his hair. He was certain he hadn't reacted outwardly to the small embarrassment he felt at Holly's admission, but she smiled as though she'd seen through him regardless. “It's so soft.” she continued, petting him gently. She trailed her finger along the outer ridge of his ear, then idly stroked the tip. Syrok's eyes closed themselves and he felt a delighted rumble emit from his chest. “Why do you keep it so short?”

For a moment it was difficult to maintain the thread of the conversation. What was short? Were his ears short? The hand stilled. Holly, resume! he pleaded mentally, and she resumed her stroking as if she'd heard him. His hair, yes. “It is traditional for men to keep their hair at this length. I admit to not having given it much thought.”

“Economical.”

“Mm.”

“T'Sala's hair is long. Vulcans sometimes keep their hair long.”

“It is traditional for men to keep their hair at this length. I admit to not having given it much thought.” It is not the first time he has questioned the ways of his people since meeting Holly. For a race that prided themselves on their mastery of logic, Syrok was realizing just how many things were adhered to strictly for no logical reason whatsoever.

“Why don't you grow it?” Because they were in contact, Syrok was able to discern that Holly was not asking him to list reasons why he had not grown it, but rather was suggesting that he do so.

He hesitated. He had not lied when he'd said he hadn't given it much thought. However, now that he applied his mind to the topic he knew that one potential reason that long hair on a man was shied away from was because those few who followed the path of Illogic seemed to grow their hair out as a means of differentiating themselves. The warriors from a time before Surak had kept their hair long, he knew from both art and historic accounts. He assumed that modern day followers of
Illogic grew their hair as a sort of association. Still, there was no reason he should not grow his hair. Hair was hair. “If it will please you, I will refrain from cutting it.”

Holly smiled, and he was certain that any adjustment required to accommodate a new hair length would be worth that reward. He reached his hand to trace the curve of her waist, then rested his hand on the jutting bone of her hip. Her skin was softer than his own, alien and tender, flushed pink with her foreign blood. Red, the color. of fire, in her blood. Fascinating. He'd always associated his own green blood with the tinge water could take when left in the wild, no doubt colored with algae.

Holly's fingers trailed down to where Syrok sported half an erection. She no longer shied away from the flesh there, as she stroked and probed the folds that stretched and disappeared as he became fully erect. She watched with an open curiosity and ease that pleased him. She stroked him idly and without aim. Syrok could sense that she did not wish him to return the gestures just now. She was pensive and curious, delighting in her opportunity to simply explore him, and he was more than happy to accommodate.

Holly was fascinated by the texture of Syrok's skin, and even more-so by the silk-over-steel of his cock. Within moments it was slick with pre-cum. She was certain now it was something which set him apart from human males. She'd done her research now -- this was something uniquely Vulcan. She slicked the fluid down and around the shaft, allowing it to coat her palm and move between her fingers. Syrok gave an almost voiceless sigh and his body relaxed infinitesimally more into the mattress at her touch. She was unhurried, and she sensed that Syrok was content with that arrangement.

Her fingers tickled what she'd decided was Syrok's perineum, in spite of the lack of testes to designate the area officially. She applied some pressure and rubbed at that delicate skin between the base of his cock and his anus and he unconsciously shifted to give her better access, his breathing deepening slightly at the touch. She'd asked and he'd confirmed that Vulcans did have some equivalent to a prostate inside and beyond that patch of skin. She moved her fingers back up and searched... somewhere about an inch from the very base of his cock was.... ah! There! Syrok's breath hitched as she located a particularly tender spot of his. She delighted in her ability to get such a reaction out of this normally stoic being. Now she moved up to circle round the double ridged head, and after another small gasp and an impatient thrust, she closed her fingers mercifully around the whole shaft and resumed her earlier stroking.

She gazed into Syrok's eyes. They stared into her, black as night and totally alien, revealing nothing. But in the crease around them, in the cant of his jaw or the tightness in his cheeks she could see his emotions. Vulcans allegedly displayed no emotion. Holly knew this was untrue. She'd seen great emotion from Syrok. But even when he tried to hide, when he was under full Guard, she could still see the indications. She wondered at how before even she had believed Guard - klasahu to be a complete discipline. Now she saw the subtle signs that surely other Vulcans could see in one another. Overt displays were guarded against. But they were not computers.

“Holly....” Syrok prompted.

Holly startled slightly. It was unlike Syrok to speak first.

“Yes?”

His breath hitched again at her gentle strokes. She stilled her hand mercifully, allowing him to gather his wits slightly. “Are you... content with our arrangement?” Syrok's hand shifted from Holly's hip to her head, the better to sense the meaning of her response. Confusion swirled up to greet him.
“Yes?” she half answered, half questioned. “What do you mean?”

“Our first... that is to say, do you require... pain?”

“Oh.” Holly's eyes widened as she realized the meaning behind his words. “Our scene.”

“Yes.” He recognized the word. Yes, scene. He’d read that word in that context.

“You haven't been hurting me lately.” her voice lilted with amusement.

“No.” That was part of his concern.

“Syrok you must have noticed you've been... successful nonetheless. In fact I think your achievements in that department even prompted your own climax on one occasion.” she laughed softly.

Syrok's fingers flexed in a Vulcan shrug and his lips pressed slightly closer together in a sort of embarrassed silence.

“I don't require pain, Syrok. But I do like it sometimes.” she met his eyes once more. They'd both looked away from the discomfort of the topic. Holly released her prey, dried her hand on the sheets and stroked Syrok's face affectionately.

“I am gratified.” he said simply.

Holly shifted restlessly. “I guess... I just like... no, need to not be in control of the whole ordeal.”

“I was not aware my attentions were an ordeal, ashaya.” Syrok teased.

Holly's lips quirked into a smile but she gave him a gentle kick. “You know what I mean.”

His hand was still on her psi points, and he did indeed know what she meant. “I do.”

“Does it bother you?”

“I find it does not.” his eyes glinted. “As you may have observed.”

Holly grinned. “Are all Vulcans this pushy and territorial?” she teased him.

Syrok rolled on top of her, his hands sliding to grasp her wrists and pin them helplessly to the sides of her head and he began nipping playfully along her neck and collarbone. He paused as she gasped. “I prefer not to speak for others of my race, Holly.” He nipped again and she wriggled ineffectually in his grasp. A territorial growl escaped his throat and his eyes glinted predatorily as he stared down at his prey.

“Syrok.” Holly gasped.

“Holly.”

“Let me touch you.” she wriggled again. It was like wriggling against stone.

“You are indeed touching me, Holly.” He bent then and began to suck a delightful bruise on the side of her neck. It had not been a conscious decision, but he felt something dark uncoiling in the pit of his stomach. Yes, a red bruise, just so. It was more than acceptable. Another growl escaped him as he sucked the tender skin, feeling the rapid pulse beneath and hearing Holly's breath hitch. His hands on her wrists, he could feel the swirl of Holly's emotions -- a frantic desire and a flutter
of aborted thought. She was at his mercy.

He relinquished his hold on the neck and trailed licks, kisses, and gentle scrapes of his teeth down along her collarbone, to take one rosy nipple into his mouth, lathing it gently with his tongue. Holly whimpered and squirmed beneath him. He briefly toyed with the idea of leaving a bruise on the tender flesh of her breast, but dismissed the thought as he became distracted and repeated the motions on her other breast, then moved up her other collar bone, and to the opposite side of her neck.

“I want...” she gasped.

“You want?”

“I want to touch you. Syrok.” she gasped. “Please.” she turned her eyes up to seek out his. “I want....” Holly searched for the words to explain her desire. She'd been thinking on it for some time. “That is, can you....” Why was this so embarrassing? Certainly Syrok was not helping matters of communication by his distracting gentle licking of her neck with that unnaturally rough tongue of his. She shivered to her toes.

“Something new you would like to try, ashayam?”

“If I make you cum manually... can you make me cum by emotional transference?”

Syrok stilled all movement and stared at her with an unreadable expression. Had she said something wrong?

Syrok stared at his intended. How was it they had not bonded yet? He could not fathom it. Where had she learned of this act? Had T'Sala said something? But no, of course not. “This is something which is done.” he admitted aloud. He omitted between bondmates.

“Is it?” Holly's eyes lit with excitement and he felt delight, desire, pleading flicker through their link.

Syrok resumed kissing Holly, this time on her mouth rather than her neck. She was more than pliant as his tongue demanded entry. As his mouth explored hers, he released one wrist and moved his hand to her psi-points. She got the message and her hand reached between them to grasp his member once more. Firm strokes now, encouraged by Syrok's frustrated grinding against her stomach at times -- frustrated as he was so close to that tempting penetration but was forced to hold back. A thumb swirled around the double ridges, Holly bit his lip challengingly and it brought him to the edge then. He relinquished her mouth as she gasped for fresh air and the darkness leapt up and uncoiled as he bit down on her exposed shoulder, uncaring of where but needing to mark her as he roared with his climax, hot liquid covering their torsos and Holly's free hand between them.

His fingers dug into her psi-points as his body went rigid with pleasure and Holly gasped and moaned with the transference, the wave sweeping her away from herself and into Syrok's pleasure all at once. She'd tried to imagine what it would be like but nothing could have prepared her, as her own body responded and shuddered with orgasmic contractions all its own. He hadn't even had to touch her really, and her mind reeled distantly with that knowledge and all its alluring implications. Syrok forced himself to release his teeth from his beloved as the fragments of his mind linked themselves into thinking once more. The reality of what he'd done to her brought a heady surge of power, and his mind spun with it as he rolled to the side, careful not to crush his delicate pi'veh with his dense mass.

Next to him he registered a light chuckling as his dazed mate groped for tissues, making a valiant
but futile effort to gather some of the mess away. His eyes met her own that sparkled at him, causing his katra to sing and a purr to issue forth contentedly. “Vulcans must do a lot of laundry.” she commented with some amusement.

“Indeed.” was his only possible response.

Tissues abandoned on the floor and his mate still sticky with his seed, he pulled her in tightly against him, spooning her from behind and wrapping a protective arm around her. Only now did Holly begin to register the deep sting of the bite on her shoulder, digging into the sheets below. She didn't regret it. Syrok would leave tomorrow, she recalled suddenly, and her heart stuttered a beat anxiously as she pressed herself into him more tightly. She took comfort in his tight, sheltering embrace and let herself feel at ease for at least one more night. Or perhaps, she'd think later, perhaps Syrok had lulled her to sleep psychically that night, wanting to give his mate one last reprieve. She never asked. It was fine if that were so.
Syrok managed to extricate himself from the bed effectively without waking Holly. He needed only a few minutes today to shower, dress, eat, check his PADD, and grab his things before leaving. He hadn't needed so much sleep, but he had allowed himself this. He hadn't required meditation when last night's coupling had been so effective at restoring his equilibrium, and he found he didn't wish to relinquish Holly any sooner than was necessary.

He had managed to extricate himself from the bed without disturbing her, but somehow by the time he returned to the room after his morning bathroom ritual, Holly was nonetheless groggily awake and sitting with the sheet pulled clumsily around her naked form.

“Morning,” she croaked sleepily, her eyes bleary with sleep and struggling to stay open at this early hour, her hair disheveled, he voice thick with sleep. She sniffled adorably and wiped the heel of her palm across her eyes ineffectively, squinting at the light from his PADD as the morning sun had yet to rise.

“Holly.” he scolded warmly. “You need not rise on my account.”

“I wasn't. I rose on my account.” she retorted sleepily.

Syrok didn't roll his eyes in response, but even with her half closed eyes he knew that Holly caught the aborted gesture, and heard the non-sigh. His heart warmed to see her gorgeous smile, muted as it was so early. Covered in flaking cum, bruised on one side of her neck and viciously bitten on the opposing shoulder, Syrok could not have imagined her more beautiful. He would surely need to kill anyone else who beheld her thus, but for his own eyes this raw vulnerability was a gift. Suddenly breakfast had lost its allure, and he moved to hold Holly instead.

She leaned against him, drinking in the strength and comfort of his embrace, and Syrok waited as the minutes ticked by until it would be time to leave. Holly's body had gone slack against him and her breathing was steady. This was a meditation all itself for him, just to hold her so. By the time it was time to go, he had been convinced she must have fallen back into slumber and was going to ease her back to the mattress and tuck her in, but she surprised him once more and stirred.

“I love you.” she muttered against his neck and pressed a kiss there above his collar, just so.

The response stuck thickly in his throat, as it always did. “And I cherish thee.” he gave a more customary response for his people, as intimate and tender as he could possibly ever manage. For Holly, it seemed enough, and he was grateful. He made one more attempt to pull her away when she clutched determinedly to his shirt, delaying him just one more moment... just one... and with determination and some raw desperation she bit down hard on his exposed flesh, causing him to hiss at the sting of it and unfurling some delirious delight that fluttered his heart and spun his mind. She gave a few tender licks to soothe the sting of what she'd wrought, and finally released him, lowering herself to the bed and snuggling back to sleep with a content smile of her own playing on her face.

Control, Syrok warned himself, and it took all of his Control to gather his wits, gather his suitcase, and leave his intended on the bed behind him. The stinging mark on his neck, though scandalous, soothed some raw ache in his katra as he left.
“Syrok.” his professor greeted him with the ta'al. He did not give the formal greeting, opting on Earth for a hybridization of casual speech with formal sign.

Syrok mirrored the ta'al. “Professor.”

They awaited their shuttlecraft on the transit pad in silence, but what was usually a comfortable silence between the two of them was now unaccountably tense. Syrok wondered whether he were leaning toward colorful human imaginings by way of bad influence via Holly, when Professor Selkar spoke.

“I had not inquired previously, because personal inquiries are not my nature. However I would ask you, Syrok, are you bonded?” Syrok startled slightly at the intrusive question. No doubt it was due to the bite mark displayed improprietously above the collar, a mark he could not hope to conceal. Before he could formulate an adequate response, Selkar continued. “I do not ask to pry and decorum requires my observations go unexpressed. I only ask because it is Starfleet policy to not require bondmates to separate for more than three standard Terran days. I would have expected you to raise any concerns with me were there a problem, but it occurs to me that it is prudent to simply ask.”

“I... see.” Syrok answered slowly. It was as if his professor had written him an entire tome on things which should never be spoken of (a considerably long list for a Vulcan) and he was not immediately certain how to proceed, especially with a superior. After all, Professor Selkar was hardly T'Sala, and he did not want to experience the righteous outrage of his mother in a professor and superior officer. “I appreciate your candor, Professor. I am not currently bonded.” It took much discipline to not flush slightly at the admission. What must his professor think of him now?

“However, I am intending to bond with a human female at her earliest persuasion.” He remained silent for a beat, then added, “While I am aware that my relationship is not customary, it is nevertheless one which I consider very serious.”

Syrok waited while his professor was silent. At length he gave the required reply. “I see.” If he had remained on Vulcan, this reply would have been sufficient. The professor had asked for data, and data had been given. The exchange was complete, the request fulfilled and acknowledged. There was no reason to say more, and certainly no reason to exchange more uncomfortable personal opinions, skirting dangerously close to emotions on the subject, a subject that was already far too private for such discussion. Syrok knew these things, and knew nevertheless that a part of him had changed. He needed to know what his professor's stance was on this topic.

Would Professor Selkar let his potentially negative stance get in the way of professionalism and academia? Syrok doubted this logically. The professor had always showed himself to be reserved, straight-forward, and untroubled by such petty concerns. And yet Syrok felt an illogical urge to hear something from him now, something which indicated that this knowledge would not be a problem. More than that, he wanted an ally in this, and he had not realized until just then that what he was trying to do, indeed what he was already in the process of doing, was difficult. He had not anticipated the difficulty in this.

Syrok was aware that his own people taught of IDIC, and ought to celebrate diversity in all of its forms. Earth was Vulcan's closest ally, and Syrok could see no reason to count humans as inferior or unsuitable as bondmates. Indeed, there had been couplings prior to his with Holly, and far more significant. Years ago, in fact, the Vulcan ambassador to Earth, S'chn T'gai Sarek, had cast the issue into the public eye by marrying Amanda Grayson. There had been speculation that this marriage was political only, in nature, but Syrok did not believe so. Surely no Vulcan would bond to one without suitable credentials, at the very least. His people were not prone to rash action simply for the sake of political statement.
That humans were uncomfortable with these joinings as well was of no consequence to him. It was regrettable, but it was also only one more prejudice for him to experience in a long line of prejudices which had been heaped upon him since moving to Earth. He'd visited his parents several times in his youth on board the Celeste, and the mostly human crew had been nothing but accommodating to him as a young child. He'd heard of human prejudice but he'd discounted the notion as overblown. The last two years had proved him regretfully wrong on that account.

No, what really got to him was the discomfort and at times outright hostility from his own people when it came to the one life he wished most to protect above all others. That his mother would oppose him so strongly in this (and tacitly his father would oppose him by association and silence), was nearly intolerable. Even T'Sala, an amiable companion to them both, was quietly mortified by what they were doing. And so here and now, in the midst of this uncomfortable conversation with his professor, he wished perhaps illogically, for an ally in this. For one long moment he even imagined that Professor Selkar was about to say something more -- a slight twitch of his shoulders as if he would turn to face Syrok once more -- but the motion was aborted and the conversation was done. Syrok suppressed a sigh and focused his mind on more productive topics.

Sunlight filtered in to greet Holly as she lay alone in Syrok's bed, but instead of the panic she had expected to feel she felt only determination. She glanced across the room at the bed she'd been using as a desk and saw the neatly ordered piles of papers that represented a summer's worth of hard work. Her research was finished, her insights neatly cataloged in digital form. She'd published her paper on the web two days ago, for better or for worse. Syrok had read it, T'Sala had read it and had even forwarded it to her bondmate Selek. Holly wondered whether it would gain any traction or not. She announced the completion of her project to her small video audience as well -- had announced it in a posting that actually showed her own face on camera for the first time. She'd announced it as well in her first and only video so far where the Vulcan language was spoken -- and spoken by herself alone. She hoped she'd gotten the accent right and that her smattering of Vulcan followers would not be put off by her poorly contained smile.

Now the bed held her PADD, complete with sample tests and digital books for the three classes Syrok had requisitioned for her to test out of. She had just shy of two weeks to figure this out, and she felt unexpectedly sure of herself. Confidence had never been a strong suit of hers but now that the materials had been placed in her hands, she felt prepared and competent. With a stretch, she roused herself from the mess of Vulcan-scented sheets and pattered to the bathroom with a towel and shower basket to try and make herself at least halfway presentable.

Holly pulled her hair back into a messy top bun and threw on a tank top. She'd go out later and the marks would show, but she couldn't bring herself to care. No, she did care -- she liked it. It wasn't her intent to make others uncomfortable, nor to call undue attention to herself. She was no exhibitionist. But there was something reassuring about leaving them unashamedly on display. It felt as if Syrok walked beside her. After all, she knew what the marks were. They were a clear warning from him to all others of his kind, and all others of any kind who were able to interpret the message: she is mine, she is Claimed. Holly smiled to herself. This was love, she was certain. A possessive love, an alien love, a Vulcan love.

She curled herself up on her bed and opened the first lesson. Today would be a reading day. It would take concentration to do that and nothing else, but she'd had a summer of research to prepare her for this and was ready to apply herself to this problem wholeheartedly. She checked the chronometer: a few hours until she'd allow herself to break for lunch. T'Sala had agreed to meet her in the dining hall when she took her own lunch break, and Syrok had transferred some of his own funds to Holly's ID card. It felt like a big deal to her, and she hadn't been sure how to react when
he’d informed her that he’d done so.

“You... you didn't have to.” she’d said.

“Illogical. You require sustenance and this is the most efficient means.”

Holly had smiled. “I don't know about that. Have you done the equations?” she'd teased. “You could let me hoard food in the dorm, or I could just fend for myself, after all....”

Syrok had seemed to read her illogical emotionalism correctly that time, without even use of touch. “I will provide, ashaya.” he'd said quietly. Holly's face had flushed with the embarrassment of one not used to being cared for, but she hadn't argued further.

“T’Sala.” Holly flashed a grin and a quick ta'al to her friend as she joined her at the dining hall table for lunch.

“Holly.” T’Sala returned with a polite nod, eying Holly's scarf suspiciously. It was draped carelessly across Holly's shoulders and wrapped awkwardly around her neck slightly. Holly was not prone to bouts of fashion, nor did she typically wear scarves in summer, nor was this in any manner 'fashionable' from what T’Sala understood of the term, were Holly suddenly trying to emulate typical Terran styles. There could be only one reason for the extra fabric. Ah. There. A bit of a bruise on Holly's neck slipped free from the poor attempt at concealment. “You need not wear such things on my account.” she said blandly. “I am certain that by now whatever damage you are capable of doing to my psyche has already been done.”

“Oh, good.” Holly said with a sigh of relief. The sparkle in her eyes and her slight smile made it impossible for T’Sala to know whether she were being entirely sincere, but the nuance of human emotions eluded her. She would simply continue to take Holly at her word. “This thing itches anyway.” Holly hastily removed the fabric, tossing it carelessly onto the table next to her and exposing the angry bite on her shoulder. T’Sala blinked once, wondering whether she stood corrected.

“Don't look at me like that.” Holly warned. T’Sala continued only to stare blankly. “It's not my fault.” she added defensively. What precisely was “not her fault” was not elucidated on. T’Sala turned her attention back to her salad and resumed eating. Holly seemed content to fulfill her nutritional requirements in amicable silence for some moments, a rare treat when in the presence of a human, she supposed. Still, T’Sala was rather partial to this human's chatter. While some of her kind could be insufferable, her partiality to them on the whole was part of what had driven T’Sala to Earth to begin with. She waited patiently and was not disappointed. Holly could only remain silent for a matter of moments.

“I got him back this time, you know.” T’Sala did not know. “The marks.” Holly added, as if that explained everything.

“I assure you I do not, as you have stated, know, nor am I certain that I wish to know.”

“I got him good before he left.” Holly explained with a triumphant smirk. “I mean I know I got him once before, but that was half-hidden. This one's one hundred percent above the collar. Now we're even.”

“I am uncertain as to whether it is appropriate to treat this behavior as a competition.” T’Sala was certain it was not appropriate, but nor was this conversation. Holly was a force of nature, however,
and would certainly speak of all manner of improper topics given time. She was a test of T'Sala's forbearance. *Kaiidth*.

Holly laughed at T'Sala's assertion, causing her to wonder whether she'd inadvertently joked. “I know it's not a competition, T'Sala. Don't worry. I'm not *that* clueless. It's more of a... a warning. Not that I expect Syrok to be inundated by eligible mates while he's gone these two weeks but....” Holly shrugged. “You know... he'll be *gone*... for *two weeks*.”

Holly's inflection on certain key words indicated that all should be understood now, and surprisingly for once T'Sala believed she did indeed understand. Perhaps Holly was more Vulcan than she knew. Or perhaps this urge to mark and keep was inherent in several different races. T'Sala would ponder these things on her own time. She would not speak of them.

“I have corresponded with Selek.” Time for a change of topic, before Holly began to describe her other territorial activities.

“Oh! Did he like it?” Holly didn't need to explain what she meant by 'it'. Surely they were speaking about her work: *The Tenets of Surak in Terran Prose and Fiction* or, in its intended Vulcan: *Dvatailar t'Surak K'svi Terrasu A'rip'an Eh Glekokitau-tanaf*. It was really a mouthful.

“He avowed that it held his attention effectively.”

Holly beamed. For a Vulcan, that was glowing praise. “That's great, T'Sala! I'm glad he didn't find it tedious, at the least. I wish... I wish I could understand a Vulcan reaction in terms of 'It was good.' or 'It was bad.' but I know that you're all more nuanced than that -- probably for the better. I know it's illogical on my part. I just wish I had a sense of whether it was worthwhile or not, whether it was being received generally... positively for lack of a better word, or negatively.”

“Work well done is worthwhile, Holly.” T'Sala intoned. “There need not be emotional overtones ascribed to the work for it to have merit, to teach, to compel, to inspire, or confound. Certainly when a larger contingency of my people become acquainted with the work, they will have varied and thoughtful responses to sate you.”

“I guess....” Holly did not sound nor look convinced. Illogical. She picked at her food idly, pensively. “But certainly Vulcans are not immune to an emotional reaction. Or even not necessarily *emotional*.... For example, someone might argue that it's... rude. Rude isn't quite the right word... but... they might think I'm trivializing something essential by comparing it to fiction. Or they might think it's simply not a worthwhile read -- that there's nothing of consequence to be gained. Dismissive. I would say those would be pretty negative reactions, and the kind of thing I'd like to avoid.”

T'Sala frowned slightly. It was something she allowed herself, these small emotional displays. She had always had difficulty with *klashau*. Control over the emotions themselves came easily. Refraining from displaying those few that did in fact occur was more tiresome. Vulcan, therefore, had been a difficulty for her at times. As much as Earth unnerved her, it did have some benefits. “The merit of your work will reveal itself in time, Holly. It is illogical to form an emotional attachment to the outcome. *Kaiidth*.”

Holly smiled slightly and it seemed genuine. She seemed mollified. “I guess you're right.” Holly took another few bites of food. “So how's your... simulation thing going?” Holly asked vaguely. She really did try to understand what exactly it was that T'Sala did with her internship, but she really had no concept of programming whatsoever.

T'Sala's eyes sparkled with unvoiced amusement. “My project has advanced well. I anticipate a
satisfying conclusion to the work by the completion of the summer term. I would tell thee more, but I am sure it would be an exercise in futility.”

Holly's own eyes sparkled in returned amusement, as T'Sala expected they would. Holly's lips quirked into a small smile. "I expect you are correct.” she conceded. T'Sala was glad for a human companion who admitted her own deficiencies.

“Have you begun your preparation for your exams?”

“Mm.” Holly nodded with a mouthful of some sort of dumpling. “Today is mostly a reading day. Maybe tomorrow too. Then I'll start in on the practice exams.”

T'Sala nodded. It was a logical course of action, and the conversation now seemed bland and tedious. She wondered whether small talk would be required of her, and searched her mind for potential topics of discussion. Although Vulcans were usually relatively silent at mealtimes, it had ironically been Syrok that had managed to keep the dialogue animated between the three of them as he quizzed T'Sala on her various technical projects, yet always seemed to draw Holly in as well, instinctively finding ways to include her. The ladies now sat in a silence that was not restive as they felt his absence. Though T'Sala admitted she was not the most emotionally aware being, she could sense Holly's unspoken unease. She softened.

“You are unaccustomed to his absence.” she said softly. She didn't need to specify the name.

Holly startled a little at the abrupt change in topic, and at the emotionalism behind the observation, but didn't deny it. She glanced away uncomfortably, not sure how to proceed without alienating her companion.

T'Sala knew that shuttered look. “You will become accustomed to it.” she soothed.

Holly's eyes flicked up sharply as if alarmed. “I don't want to become accustomed to it.” she said with a hint of panic.

Interesting. Was this human emotionalism, or something more? T'Sala wished that her companions would bond already so that she could inquire as to the nature of the bond. There were dozens of types, all with differing and specific connotations. From what she understood, Syrok's bond with T'Rena had been that of ozhika, a logic-bond. It was a sterile thing and quite common. Mates were arranged as children as tradition dictated, and while the connection was typically amiable, it never grew to true camaraderie, and certainly not passion. It was somewhat sterile and born of necessity. Certainly there was nothing wrong with an ozhika bond, but it was not what T'Sala had with her own mate.

No, T'Sala and Selek shared a somewhat less common (though by no means rare) connection of the ashaya bond. It was a love-bond, the members of which were lovers, not simply one who shared a burden. They had begun as ozhika, and had traveled together as besu-ozhika (companions in logic), then t'dahsu-besu-ozhika (twin companions, something akin to best friends), and finally ashaya-ozhika. There were many, many bonds: for those who did not like one another's company, bonds of friendship, bonds of shield-brothers and many others. T'Sala had assumed until now that Holly and Syrok would share the pudvel-tor-ashaya bond -- a love bond chosen out of love, rather than a love that is grown into such as T'Sala and Selek's. She'd heard Syrok refer to Holly as his ashaya at times, after all.

But even ashaya, as close as they were, could withstand time and distance when required. Their hearts remained close but their minds could cope with necessity. T'Sala intended to join with Selek more permanently regardless once she'd finished her schooling and could find a suitable ground
position that would satisfy Selek's qualifications as well. Or, they'd also discussed the potential for her invoking bondmate law with Starfleet if she made it onto a ship, and Selek could find some way to live aboard as a consultant. He was, after all, making his own headway at the VSA.

But here was Holly, showing much emotional display at the very idea of becoming comfortable with distance from her intended. What did it mean, if indeed anything? T'Sala did her best not to read too much into it. Perhaps it was simply human emotionalism and nothing more.

“Very well.” she said obligingly, and Holly seemed to calm and drop the topic.

Holly was distant for the remainder of the meal, and T'Sala disinclined to speak when not required to. She was slightly concerned that the silence was not as restive for her human companion, but could see no easy solution, and she had to get back to her work.

“Will I see you at dinner?” she inquired as she rose from her seat.

“Yeah, I guess.” Holly said distractedly, then gave her a half-hearted smile. “I appreciate the company.” she said more warmly.

T'Sala nodded. “It is no inconvenience.”

Holly was glad for her work to distract her the rest of the day, but began to grow restless as the dinner hour approached. Syrok hadn't come back to the dorm. Of course he wouldn't; Holly knew where he was. But the change in routine was noted. She shoved the uncomfortable thoughts and emotions aside and went to dinner with her friend. Conversation was once again stilted as T'Sala sought to avoid the one topic that was on Holly's mind (and clearly off limits) and Holly failed to keep the small talk going, aware that as the human present the responsibility fell to her. Still, she was grateful for T'Sala's effort and tried to relay that sentiment without overwhelming T'Sala with her uncomfortable emotionalism.

Back in her dorm, Holly showered and prepared for bed early. She dressed in her pajama bottoms and one of Syrok's dirty shirts. She curled herself up in his bed and surrounded herself in the scent of him, the memory of his skin on these sheets. Her fingers ghosted across a small stain and she smiled slightly at the memory of its origin. She tried to study but was tired and distracted. She tried to read for pleasure, to watch some vids, to peruse various social sites on her PADD, but all she was aware of was the growing gnawing ache in her center as she longed for Syrok. Defeated, she turned out the light and wrapped herself into a tight ball under the sheet, craving her mate and trying to block out that need with sleep that would not come. It was a long night.

Alone in his bunk aboard the small science vessel Kandy, Syrok stared at a blank wall in the direction of the only available comm unit on ship. He wondered how long would be an appropriate period to wait before seeking permission for its use. Certainly one day was not appropriate. He was a student and this was a valuable opportunity. He knew very well he had no room to make superfluous requests. He'd thought to ask twice during his two week absence, and given his easy rapport with Professor Selkar he'd had no reservations about such a plan.

Now he was uncharacteristically... concerned that such a request might be somehow a breach of protocol. He questioned his superior's regard and how it might effect his future. He was Vulcan. Professor Selkar was Vulcan. These were not Vulcan considerations. And yet, neither of them was living on Vulcan, nor were they among their own kind. The rules had somehow subtly shifted, and
Syrok no longer knew his place in this world.

And so he stared unseeingly toward the wall of his darkened cabin and wondered when he would have opportunity to speak to Holly, and how he should approach the subject, and where his uncertain future would lead.
Tuesday was more of the same for Holly. Wednesday as well, the same. Oh, her reading changed, her clothing changed, she dug into her practice exams, and she continued to meet T'Sala in the dining hall. By Thursday, her patience was wearing thin.

She paused at the buffet too long, staring blankly at a stir fry containing chicken. Chicken. It had been such a long time since she'd had chicken. She was tempted. She'd liked chicken before. It had been one of her favorites, in fact. Holly had grown up in a rather remote area, and had rather simple tastes. But she'd majored in diplomacy, and with diplomacy came the necessity of eating an endless variety of new foods -- both Earth foods that were foreign to her, as well as all of the unpronounceable items from out-worlds she'd sampled when given the chance. Someone who didn't know her would have thought her an adventurous eater. She was not adventurous. She struggled through with stubborn determination.

But here was chicken, and no Syrok. She could eat it now, she supposed. Her mind twisted in confusion as the thought skittered across the surface of the deep well of her musings. She hadn't had to stop eating meat for Syrok. She'd just... wanted to. His look of disgust when he encountered the stuff had been enough. Had he looked disgusted? She could see him in her minds eye, but his face was bland as always. What was it that convinced her she was right about this?

“Holly.” T'Sala interjected. “If you intend to stare at the food rather than eating it, might I suggest you stare at it from one of the tables instead?” T'Sala delicately added a roll to her tray in an attempt to remain inconspicuous.

“Hm?” Holly roused herself from her fog. “Yeah.” she answered distractedly and kept her tray moving along the metal shelf surrounding the buffet. She looked at something purple that resembled... what, a dumpling? -- and scanned the symbols on the accompanying plaque long enough to determine it was vegetarian and suitable for human physiology. She ignored the chicken.

T'Sala kept an eye on Holly until they seated themselves across from one another at one of the tables. Holly had been acting increasingly strangely since Syrok's absence, and although T'Sala only saw her companion at meal times, she was aware of the changes.

“Have you communicated with Syrok?” she asked bluntly.

Holly, once again, jolted out of her reverie. “Oh. No, he hasn't called yet.” She pushed her food around half-heartedly with her fork. T'Sala watched with a le matya's eyes as she ate her own food. A long silence passed as T'Sala ate and Holly made a listless attempt, pushing around as much as she consumed. Her diet and her attention had been flagging. T'Sala had noticed first Tuesday night. Wednesday's lunch and dinner confirmed to her a pattern, and it was now Thursday's lunch. Not bonded, indeed.

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“Have you made any progress on your studying?” she tried again.

“Oh. Yeah.” Holly perked up slightly. “I'm really not worried about the Vulcan tests. I definitely know the vocabulary. I'm waiting until next week to brush up on the grammar last minute. Mostly I've been studying for Astronomy. Syrok's right -- I know most of this stuff already. I don't want to be over confident but I should have it down by Saturday.”

This, T'Sala was pleased to hear. So, Holly was still able to concentrate. She had not deteriorated...
too greatly. And even if she continued downhill, she'd studied the more difficult subject matter up front, while her faculties were still intact. With any luck, Syrok would check in with her at least once before the actual examination. Then again, perhaps Holly's focus was only kept in check when in the right environment.... As if in cue, Holly spoke of that.

“Listen... I'm really not that hungry and I feel so tired. Maybe I should just take some snacks back to the room for dinner....”

Fatigue. Lack of appetite. Attachment to articles related to Syrok. Was that Syrok's shirt? Her keen sense of scent told her that it was, and that it had not been laundered.

“Would you like me to stop by after I have eaten?” T'Sala offered. Her keen gaze did not leave Holly as she continued to push around her food, her eyes averted. She did not miss the quick tension in Holly's shoulders.

“Oh, no. No. That's okay, T'Sala. Thank you though.” she raised her eyes to T'Sala's finally, and gave a smile that might have fooled her when she'd first come to Earth, but did not fool her now. Holly was not allowing anyone into her little den, to touch her or touch his things. And they were not bonded? Incredible.

Several things could cause this type of disharmony. A damaged bond. Or a simple separation of bondmates for too much time and too much distance, if their bond was one of several rare types. An incomplete bond. But no, Holly did not seem properly disoriented for that... this was subtle. A link then, not a bond. It must be an inadvertent link, then, she surmised -- incomplete, or ill-formed, or simply stressed beyond capacity. It was no wonder one had formed, with all of the things those two did together. T'Sala very intentionally moved her mind away from those things. Her lips pressed into a thin line in irritation at the two fools she called her friends. This whole affair was maddening. She wondered whether Syrok knew what he had done. Surely he would not keep this from Holly, and Holly did not seem to know. No, he must not have realized his carelessness. That left the question of what she should do. Should she inform Holly? The impropriety of speaking of such things horrified T'Sala, but then nothing about Syrok and Holly's relationship was normal or acceptable by conventional metrics. Still, she shied away from having such a conversation that was Syrok's duty. Could she contact Syrok? She raked her mind for a reasonable way to get in contact with him, but short of an actual emergency she doubted she could track him down. Holly was already doing the best thing that she could -- staying near his things, staying near his scent, holing herself away in a place she felt safe. T'Sala couldn't force her to eat or help her to sleep. She did not need to ask to know that Holly's sleep had been disrupted -- the signs were there.

“If you do not eat an adequate amount of calories, your test preparations will suffer.” T'Sala said stoically. “I believe Syrok would be displeased by such actions.”

Holly blinked at T'Sala's sudden interest in her eating habits, and the mention of Syrok. Somewhat guiltily, she raised another dumpling (was it a dumpling if it was purple and sour?) to her mouth and chewed slowly. She could just imagine Syrok's stern chastisement now.

“I would be gratified if you would join me for the evening meal today, Holly. If you are not able to do so due to fatigue, I will bring food to your room.” She wondered whether she was coming off as too forward. She wondered whether she could accomplish her threat without the guarantee of someone to give her building access should she need it. But she let the “threat” hang in the air -- she would insinuate herself in Holly's personal haven if Holly would not come out to meet her.

The gambit appeared to work. Holly frowned slightly and ate one more laborious bite before she responded, her shoulders slumping forward defensively. Her hand trailed up to the fading bruise on
her neck unconsciously. “I guess I can meet you. Syrok did give me all these food credits. I don't want him to come back and wonder why there are so many left.” she smiled wryly, prodding the bruise with the tips of her fingers just for the sensation of it.

T'Sala let herself acknowledge her relief. She also sequestered some tightly reigned irritation that she vowed to unleash upon Syrok at some opportune time in the future. These reckless fools would surely test every mind discipline she had learned.

Syrok was a tightly wound spring. He felt restless, but restlessness was not appropriate for a Vulcan, and it was certainly not appropriate for a Starfleet cadet on a scientific vessel having dinner with his professor. And so he clamped down more tightly on his emotional controls, and subsequently felt more restless. He wanted to speak to Holly, but he hadn't decided yet upon how to ask permission for use of the ship's comm. His promise to Holly demanded that he at least make the attempt, but the power structure at play combined with the confusion he felt concerning Professor Selkar demanded otherwise.

As per Vulcan standards, they ate in quiet contemplation and with due appreciation for their food. It was pleasing to find that the synthesizers were programmed with several Vulcan standards. It was rare that he got a taste of his home world. And although he knew it was an illogical sentimentality, he could not keep himself from feeling grateful when he had such an opportunity, and slightly regretful when he did not. The vegetarian options available commonly in the dining halls on campus were certainly plentiful, but they were also most certainly foreign. That, combined with the constant reek of meat permeating the environment, was enough to sometimes put off his appetite altogether -- something that was a real danger to a Vulcan already struggling to consume enough calories on a planet that did not consume often, or heavily, and whose foodstuffs were not nearly as calorie and nutrient dense as the foods from his own planet.

Syrok waited in silence for his superior to propose the topic of conversation as was custom. At times it would be something to do with their work. At times they would speak sparingly but intelligently about some other scientific topic. When they didn't speak, Syrok tried not to let it bother him, and focused his mind on the meal. It was strange that this behavior he'd grown with his whole life felt somewhat foreign to him now. He'd grown accustomed over this past summer to the constant chatter between himself, Holly, and T'Sala at meal times. He found himself missing them more than was perhaps logical. And with that thought, came the return of his restlessness.

He needed to speak to Holly. He needed to touch Holly. The sensitive pads of his fingers itched and tingled in anticipation of her flesh, and more-so in anticipation of her psi-points -- access to her mind. The black tendrils of need curled in his abdomen at this most opportune time, a time when Holly was not present to relieve this urge to mark and posses.It was unacceptable. No, this foolishness was unacceptable. Syrok set his fork on the table just a fraction too suddenly, laid his palm flat to still a faint tremor for just a fraction of a second, blinking slowly to bring himself back under klashau. But it was too late, Selkar had seen.

Selkar stared at his student contemplatively. He stared at the faint green bruise on his neck. He considered the increasing tension he'd observed throughout the week, the restrained temper, the concealed tremor, the dangerous glint in the eye before it was once again perfectly masked. Selkar was not young, and he was no fool. This human was not his student's bondmate. Well. He would not dwell on the increasingly foolish and dangerous possible origins for Syrok's obvious affliction. Children were universally foolish. This was a constant.

“Syrok.”
“Yes, Professor?”

“Call thy intended mate this night. The communications station will be vacant. You will not be disturbed. This is neither permission nor suggestion.” He raised his eyes authoritatively.

Syrok swallowed, no doubt bewildered. Selkar suppressed a sigh at the foolishness of youth. “Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.” Syrok said obediently.

Well. That at least would even out such distractingly erratic behavior. Selkar turned his mind back to his meal as was appropriate.

Holly lay in the dark room in her underwear and one of Syrok's shirts. She'd been wearing it day and night since Tuesday night, and while she acknowledged distantly that such behavior was not healthy and probably not entirely sane, she couldn't bring herself to care. The sheet was a twisted mess and fell halfway onto the floor. The room was hot and sticky -- it was cool outside, but Holly kept the environmental controls where they would be were she sharing the room with Syrok. She'd turned the temperature back to a more standard level her first night alone and had immediately regretted it -- pushing it back up after narrowly avoiding a full blown panic attack.

Her PADD lay beside her with notes on the screen, but she'd abandoned any attempts at reading them an hour ago at least. Now she stared blankly at the wall, curled onto her side. She was tired, but felt no compulsion to sleep and it was still early. She couldn't seem to keep her thoughts organized enough to read or even watch videos. So she laid there, thinking of Syrok. The soft chime of his comm unit startled her into action. She scrambled to the end of the bed, thrusting the screen of her PADD onto the unit to use as an interface and flipped the receive switch, her face lighting to life as she saw the one person she'd wanted to see most.

“Syrok!” she grinned.

“Holly.” Syrok felt the tension that had been plaguing him these past days finally ease slightly as he saw her face and heard her voice, convincing him on some deeper level that all was well.

“I missed you.” She was aware she was grinning like an idiot, but she couldn't seem to call anything more complex to mind.

Syrok studied his mate intently, noting the tension behind the pleasure, noting the disarray of the darkened room behind her, noting the tight lines around her eyes that suggested lack of sleep. “I missed you as well, ashaya. Are you well?”

“I'm okay.” She glanced down. Her right hand came up to scratch self-consciously along her left forearm as she lifted her eyes again. She didn't want to look away. “Just tired.... Is everything okay up there?”

“I'm okay.” She glanceded down. Her right hand came up to scratch self-consciously along her left forearm as she lifted her eyes again. She didn't want to look away. “Just tired.... Is everything okay up there?”

“Indeed. I must apologize for not calling sooner. I admit my behavior has been illogical the past few days. I was unsure as to how to make such a personal request to my professor -- and unsure whether such a request was appropriate.”

“'s'okay....” Holly dismissed shyly. “I'm just glad you called.” She stared at the screen in silence another moment, entranced, and reached to touch her PADD unthinkingly, wishing she could touch him. “Just over one more week... I can't wait.” her eyes glittered in anticipation.

Syrok felt a low feral growl rumble in his chest and was glad that it was soft enough so as to not be detected. His controls were shamefully inadequate this week. He felt the possessive coil in his gut
tighten at Holly's suggestion. "I too anticipate our reunion, k'diwa." He held her gaze for a moment longer, stubbornly pulling himself back to focus. "You appear quite tired, ashaya. Are you certain all is well? What of your studies? And are you eating properly?"

Holly snorted a half laugh. "You're as bad as T'Sala. She's been practically force feeding me. I think I should be okay with the tests. I'm worried about the details, though. I know a lot of words in Vuhlkansu but I worry about the grammar; I know the theories in Astronomy inside and out, but I'm struggling to keep all the equations straight. The math itself isn't actually that advanced -- it's just that they don't tend to allow cheat sheets on test-outs like they would in a regular class, so I have to memorize a bunch of crap."

Syrok, like all Vulcans, had an eidetic memory, and so had never had difficulty in memorizing in his life. He had to take Holly's word that this was indeed an issue for her, and did his best to be sympathetic to it. "I am sure you will find a way, ashaya, as you have done before. Also, I hardly think that the equations which allow us to not collide with black holes can be considered 'crap', as you so elegantly put it." Humor flickered in his eyes.

Holly smiled. "No, I guess not." She reached up to bite a nail self-consciously again. Syrok's eyes missed none of her fidgeting.

"Am I keeping you from sleep?" he questioned. "I did not believe you would yet have retired at this hour, but I see that the room is dark and you are... that is, your attire is... enticing, inappropriate, hypnotic, "customary for sleep. Not to mention you seem fatigued."

"No..." she hedged. "I wasn't going to sleep yet, but I did get ready for bed. I don't... I don't like to leave the room lately." Holly didn't want to look away from the vision of her love on the screen, but she also felt she didn't want to hold his gaze. It was as if she were confessing to something she'd done wrong. It certainly felt wrong. She was losing her mind. "It's stupid, I know." She swept a hand through her hair in frustration. "God, I feel like I'm losing my mind lately. I can't sleep, I'm not hungry... is this normal? I mean, they say love makes you crazy and I've never been in love before you, but I didn't know this is what they had in mind."

Syrok felt a flicker of worry at the description Holly gave her symptoms. Perhaps it was human emotionalism. Did “they” (who were they?) say that love was like this? (He allowed himself to feel pleased at Holly's admission that she hadn't loved before. She was his. His, his, his.) Suddenly, though, his own distraction the past days took on a new light. It was as if they were experiencing the symptoms of tel't'his-tor, the strain of a bond being stretched to its limit, of close bondmates being kept apart for too long. But they were not bonded, so it could not be. Unless.... Had they inadvertently linked? He hadn't been able to meditate since coming aboard the Kandy, and he hadn't felt the need to meditate to the deepest levels for quite some time since he'd been with Holly. He wouldn't have necessarily noticed the link's presence before now.

Syrok wondered whether he should alert Holly to his hypothesis, but worried it would alarm her, and possibly without cause. No, he would meditate later to verify the link's existence, and if it were found, he'd deal with that issue in person when he returned. He shied from thinking how Holly might react to having gained a bond-like mental tie to him without her permission.

"I understand, ashaya. I have been distracted myself as of late. I have grown accustomed to your presence." This was all truth. He would stick to the truth. His words seemed to ease some of her tension. "You must be careful to take care of yourself until I return, pi'veh." he admonished warmly. "If needed, I will call T'Sala and encourage this force-feeding you have mentioned." he teased.

Holly laughed as he'd anticipated, the bright tinkle of it giving him goose-flesh even when not
heard in person. “Okay. I'll try to keep it together long enough to take those tests at least. But we're gonna have to work something out this next semester.”

“I promise I will give it some thought.” he assured her. “Indeed, I anticipate sharing meals with you regularly, as you apparently cannot be trusted to eat without supervision. Not to mention I have already promised to teach you suus mahna.”

“Ah, yes, self defense. Are you sure you don't just want to throw me around and pin me a bunch?”

“I believe those are referred to as extracurricular activities.” he teased, issuing another bout of giggles from Holly, as intended. Syrok was quite pleased with himself, and pleased as well with the image Holly had placed in his mind. Throwing and pinning indeed.

Just then Holly stifled a yawn. Instead of the tense exhaustion that had plagued her the past days, she felt a genuine bone-deep sleepiness settling over her now as she finally relaxed in the presence of her partner.

“You should rest, ashaya.”

“No, no.” Holly insisted, trying to shake her head awake. “I don't want to go yet. I want to see you, listen to you. How long do you have the comm. for? You haven't even told me about all of your experiments.”

“You would not understand my experiments if I explained them, ashaya, and you would be bored to sleep if I tried.” His voice held no reprimand. To an outsider, perhaps it was flat, but to Holly it was distinctly warm. “You are tired; you should rest.”

“Will you just...” Holly carded a hand through her hair shyly. “Will you just tell me anyway? That is, if you have the comm. for a while.... You could maybe hang up when I'm asleep?” She flushed furiously as she made the request, feeling vulnerable and small. She was not a child. She did not need a bedtime story.

Syrok's throat constricted with emotion to see his mate so small and vulnerable before him. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and envelope her in a protective shield. “Of course, Holly. You need only ask. I have use of the comm. for the duration of the night. Now, make yourself comfortable please.” He watched as she straightened the wrecked sheets and curled up with the pillow, awkwardly at the foot of the bed so that she could be nearer the comm. When she was settled he began his driest recitation of his technical experiments over the past days, watching with contentment as her breathing evened and her eyelids eventually began the erratic flickering of sleep.

“Goodnight, k'diwa.” he whispered to the comm., and switched it off. The tension and nervous distraction was all but drained from him entirely now, as he made his way the short distance back to his room. Syrok settled himself into an easy cross-legged position on the floor and began to take himself through the familiar motions of meditation, now that his mind was settled enough to allow it. It was an hour and thirty-two minutes later that he had reached a deep enough level of concentration to search for a fledgling link, and there it was in the back of his mind.

Nestled in that place reserved for bonding, next to the shield he'd erected around T'Rena's dead bond, was the essence of Holly. The link was weak and stretched, muted and flickering dimly. If he hadn't been specifically looking for it, surely he wouldn't have noticed it was there. A part of him knew he should feel concern for it, and for the conversation he would inevitably have to have with Holly about it. He was uncertain how she would react, and admitted that it might not be entirely positive. However, right now as he saw her faint light all he could feel was warmth and happiness
as he curled himself around the familiar, if distant, presence. Syrok decided then he did not wish
sleep this night. Meditation would suffice, as he curled himself around this tenuous and delicate
connection, guarding protectively through the night.
Chapter 32

Holly woke up feeling warm, and it wasn't just because it was late summer in San Francisco, and it wasn't just because she kept the dorm room's climate controls set halfway between human and Vulcan standard. She smiled and stretched, at once disoriented with her head at the foot of the bed, and then pleased as she remembered how she had drifted off. The comm. hissed with the quiet static of a broken connection and she stretched to shut it off. Syrok. Last night she'd spoken with Syrok.

The irritation of the past days wasn't entirely eliminated, but it was easily halved. She pressed herself up to a sitting position and pulled her PADD to her, bringing up her notes once more. It was Friday. If she could finish her preliminary studying by the end of the day, perhaps T'Sala would help quiz her over the weekend. She would ask her over lunch today. She twisted her hair back into a messy bun with renewed focus and determination.

T'Sala gazed at Holly with a critical eye. Holly had transformed overnight. She was alert and focused. Her hygiene had improved significantly -- she was wearing her own clothing now, not the unwashed laundry of her mate. “You have spoken to Syrok?” she queried. It was not really a question.

Holly's face lit with a smile. “Yeah, last night. How'd you know?”

“Your general demeanor is much improved.”
“What, you're saying I'm not always this gorgeous?” she grinned. T'Sala blinked. “Anyway, I am feeling better. I was also kind of wondering if you'd come over tomorrow and help me study. I mean, if you're not too busy....”

T'Sala was not particularly busy. She was, however, greatly surprised by the invitation. She was to be allowed into Holly's room, now? Holly must be greatly improved indeed. “I am available. What time is convenient?”

“Syrok!” Holly launched herself off the bed. It was 00:46 on the last Friday night of summer break. Although it was late, she couldn't sleep. Not when Syrok was returning to her.

Syrok's eyes went straight to his mate, and her heart thumped in her chest as she held his intense gaze. For a moment, her plans to launch herself at him and fling herself into his arms were arrested by that fathomless black gaze. The world hung, and then she pushed through and rushed him to press his body back against the wall. Syrok was only too happy to allow the motion. He could have stopped her easily, but he had no desire to, soaking in the warmth and happiness that bled from her and into his whole body as she pressed them together as tightly as she could. The tidal wave of pleasure swept through even clothing, sending a pleasant hum through his skin. A low rumble purred through his chest in delight.

Without need for conscious action, his hands slid up to her face and his fingers sought her psi-points with practiced accuracy and in moments he'd slipped inside. Holly. Surrounded by Holly. Holly lightlightlight-warmth-human thishuman myhuman mineminemine...
Holly giggled with delight and surprise as she felt the hands seek her face and felt the wash of Syrok's thoughts tinkle through her mind. She was a bit disoriented and she couldn't put things in their proper place. This was new, she was vaguely aware. He usually only sought out her own mind, controlling and shielding his own from her but apparently he was too overwhelmed to do so tonight. Well that was just fine. More-so than the thoughts skittering about, though, Holly was aware of her body. An electric static frisson rushed across the skin on her arms, setting her hairs on end and giving her goose-flesh, and somewhere in the back of her skull she felt a curious tickle, like the flutter of butterfly wings.

Syrok's chest rumbled in a possessive growl combined with a contented purr.

Holly laughed again. “I love you too, sweetheart.” She pressed forward to give him human style kisses, which Syrok returned with slight distraction, his eyes closed as he drank in her mind, regaining his equilibrium.

Syrok listened to the whispers of Holly's thoughts, mere whispers to his own poorly controlled torrent. Loveyou love you love you, sweetheart, Syrok. Missed you. happy happy you're-so-cute. Tickles. Butterfly wings. What is that? Love you. Syrok. How could the human be so in control of her emotions now? Syrok reeled slightly at the differences between species, the human and Vulcan handling of emotions. And even now with him overwhelming her slightly she simply floated on his litany, allowing it to roll through her without toppling her. Another delighted purr rumbled through him at the realization. that this human could indeed handle his psychic needs.

“What is what, ashaya?” he managed to bring himself under enough control to draw back slightly, strengthening his shields and focusing on the annoying necessity of speech. “Butterflies?”

“I don’t know.” she smiled. “I feel all... staticky and like something is fluttering, here.” she reached behind herself to indicate the rear crown of her head. “Is that you?”

“You can feel that?” he asked curiously. He focused in on the nascent link and sent a humming warmth through it, a mental caress.

Holly's breath caught slightly and her fingers curled into his shirt, her face pressing closer against his hands unconsciously as if to drink in more of the sensation. “Mm.” she gave a slight whimper or moan, then breathlessly “That's you? What is that?”

Another press of Syrok filtered through as his shields faltered. Delight, delight delight delight. She is mine. She can feel me. Feel me feel me mememe, minemineminemine. Hello! Mine! My heart-ashaya-Holly. Reluctantly and with effort he reigned himself in and pulled his hands away from the meld points, dropping his forehead to hers for a brief moment and taking a deep centering breath.

He met her gaze, taking her hands in his own. Holly felt a thrill of concerned worry shoot through her, a slight sense of foreboding at the shift in atmosphere. “Please attempt to remain calm, Holly. Due to our frequent contact... our sexual relations... and our mental exchanges, we have developed a psychic link. A very slight, tenuous link.”

“A link.”

“Yes.”

“What... what does that mean, exactly?” she asked worriedly. “I thought when we touched you said we were linked. Like that? Haven’t we been --”

“No.” Syrok stopped her in frustration. “There is not appropriate language to discuss psychic
matters with a psi-null species. This is more akin to a bond.” He watched as Holly's eyes instantly grew large and round in panic. “It is not a bond. However, it is the reason for our mutual... distress, during my leave of absence.”

“Mutual distr- ... wait, you were sick too?”

“We were not... sick, Holly. There were some physical manifestations of psychic strain due to the new and fragile link being stretched to capacity.”

Holly dropped her hands from his in frustration. “And you didn't tell me? How long have you known about this? I thought I was going crazy like a love-sick child! And you didn't say anything about having the same thing.” Her arms crossed over her chest defensively, her eyes skittering down and to the left, no longer meeting his own.

“I did not know.” He fought the urge to touch his mate. He fought the urge to reach for the link, to try to soothe her mind. “Until you described your own symptoms to me during our first communication, I did not even suspect, but it brought clarity to my own... discomfort. I meditated that night in an attempt to verify my suspicions, and have confirmed that we share a psychic link.”

“Link. You keep saying that, but you haven't explained anything. You said it's like a bond? Are we bonded?” Her voice had reached a high note of intense concern, almost panic. Something sick twisted in Syrok's gut at the sound of it.

“We are not.” he snapped icily. “Is it really that offensive to you that I should share some small part of your mind? If it is that big of an issue I can remove it.” The knot in his stomach tightened.

“You can remove it?” Holly asked warily.

“I can.” I do not want to.

“Oh....” Now she looked uncertain, her tension lessening. “So... what... you're there, all the time? I mean like.... you're... you're in my head?”

“We share a connection. I can sense that you are there, nothing more, and only if I seek it out. With focus, I can exchange certain... physical and psychic sensations that you appear to be able to receive without difficulty. But only if we are in close physical proximity.”

“What about risks? We both got sick. What are the risks?” She chewed her lower lip worriedly now, pacing.

“As I have said before, neither of us was ill. Prolonged physical separation can lead to physical and psychic manifestations such as difficulty in sleeping, loss of appetite, fatigue, emotional outbursts and agitation, reclusive urges, nervousness, headache... the list goes on. It effects any individual differently. There are actions that can be taken to minimize the discomfort, such as our communications, or your instinctive urges to surround yourself with my scent.”

“Your scent?” she wrinkled her nose at the strange phrasing. It sounded weird and dirty.

“I observed you during our comm. calls. You were rather attached to my dirty laundry, and I've observed similar behavior from you in the past, ashaya.” Holly hunched awkwardly, feeling like a specimen under a microscope. “There is no need to feel self conscious about it.” He assured her warmly. “I find it... pleasing. It is a rather Vulcan instinct. I find it anything but distasteful.”

“Oh. Okay.” she said awkwardly. She turned and paced the room slowly, seemingly lost in her own thoughts. “Okay.” she said again. “It can stay.”
Syrok’s relief was palpable. “Are you certain, ashaya?” He came to wrap his arms around her, pressing his front to her back.

She sighed and said with somewhat more warmth and less tension, “Yeah. I mean, really, what would we do? Get rid of it just to have it come back? That hardly seems logical.” she teased lightly with a small smile. “You said it's because we spend time together, do sexual things, and share minds. Well, I'm not about to stop any of that. Besides, I can tell you like it. You were practically purring with happiness.” She turned in his arms, wrapping her own arms around his torso and pressing her cheek to his chest. “And I like it too. I like whatever it was you did to it.”

At that admission, Syrok could not help himself from sending another gentle caress to the link between them, resulting in a deep sigh of contentment from Holly as she settled almost bonelessly against his frame. She stifled a yawn.

“You are tired, ashaya. We should sleep.”

“I'm okay. I don't want to sleep. It's our last night together for a while. I have to move back tomorrow and Dennis will want his half of the room back....

Syrok tightened his arms possessively. “It is an unfortunate reality. However, we will still see much of one another.”

“Mm.” Holly made an unhappy but acquiescent sound and pulled away to sit on the bed while Syrok began to unpack his things.

“So how was it up there?”

“What makes you believe I was above you?” he teased in his usual deadpan, eliciting a pleasing snicker from Holly.

“Did all your doohickies and thingamabobs work?”

“I was under the impression that language was your specialization. But yes, to answer your question, the preliminary results of our tests are positive. It is a process. I have only been involved in one small step, and the project is hardly at its end. This is simply the close of one phase and the start of another.”

Holly smiled. “It's kind of exciting, isn't it? I mean, I didn't go for science -- it's not my strong suit or my passion, but it must be neat to be a part of something like that. Something long term, that lifts up society.”

“Your own work does just as much to 'lift society', ashaya.” Syrok said warmly, coming to sit next to her on the bed now that his things were mostly stowed away once more.

“Mm... maybe. I dunno. It just doesn't feel quite as big, as glamorous, as important. You're changing things. I wrote a book about poetry.” she made a face.

“Words can change things. You will change things. You must simply be patient and diligent, as you have been thus far. You have not yet allowed yourself to aspire to your true potential.”

Holly snorted a short laugh. “My true potential? I just want to get on a ship. I'll be a yeoman if I have to.”

“That is my point, Holly. You should not have to. Perhaps once, when you had no support, but no longer.”
“What do you mean? Are you talking about the changes you made to my course schedule? Syrok I hardly think it's going to be a life changing shift in my destiny or anything. I'm still the same person. So I'll have some astro, courses and some higher language creds. I mean, it can't hurt, and I'm looking forward to it and I'm grateful but --”

“You are terrible at chess, Holly.”

“... what?”

“You are terrible at it. Even for a human, you are terrible at it. You are not a strategist -- not at chess, not at Star Fleet, and not with your life. Tactics, yes. You can find a meal, you can triage your work to get the grades to scrape by. You'd make an excellent soldier but not a general. These decisions will add up, ashaya. You are resilient in ways that I cannot fully conceive, and I admire that. Your resiliency will help you through. But you simply do not seem to know enough of the universe to be a good strategist. But do not fear, k'diwa,” he pressed a kiss to her temple, “I am very good at chess.”

Holly smiled and nuzzled against his neck, pressing a kiss to the pulse point, one kiss leading to a pleasant sucking and a soft keening noise from her Vulcan as a slight bruise was formed. Feeling a bit mischievous and a bit smug, Holly pulled his wrist to her mouth next and sucked sweetly on the pulse point on its underside. If Syrok had been aroused before, now his closed eyes went white with bliss as he gasped a breath.

She smirked, feeling smug. “Did you miss me, my Vulcan?” she teased.

Syrok let out another gasp for breath. He felt like a starving man, and Holly was his banquet. He wanted to drink her into his skin, to take and take. He found himself pressed to lay on the bed and he found himself boneless, willing only to comply with this desires of his mate. The shirt was off and the kisses were roaming. Sweet kisses, warm lips. This was something his people did not do, as far as he was aware. Biting, yes. Sucking marks into flesh in a sort of animalistic passion, yes. But not these sweet presses of lips. He would have never imagined the act before. Now he could not imagine going without. Reverent presses of lips to flesh. Soothing. An infinitesimal spark of arousal transmitted skin to skin with every press. Enticing.

He reached up to pull Holly's own shirt off. No, his shirt, but on Holly. Their scents already mingling. Acceptable. Yes. She was already in her night clothes, wearing only the shirt and her underpants. He gazed on her frame and she smiled self consciously as she caught his gaze, her own eyes darting away. Even now she was skittish and shy. Illogical. He wondered if it would always be so.

Holly felt Syrok's fingers trail along her ribs. Wherever he touched a static trail was left behind, trails of arousal transmitting through her skin. Exotic. Erotic. Alien. She bent down to remove his shoes and socks and he allowed it. So strong... she knew that Vulcans were inhumanly strong. Inhuman. They were other. Fiercely strong -- and yet he lay here, allowing her. Heat rose to her cheeks. More Vulcan kisses grazing her cheekbones, her temples, her jaw, her neck, and around to the back of her skull.

She was not psychic, but she could feel him there now, inside with her somehow. Syrok, all around, holding her, caressing her. She let out a small moan and hurried to divest him of pants, briefs. Yes, there it was. Tangible proof of his arousal, proof of his desire for her. For me. He wants me. He loves me.

“Yes.” he breathed.
“Are you listening in?” Holly asked with a smile. Syrok did not have to see her face to sense that her chiding question had not been negative or accusatory. He did not bother to answer her, but rather gasped gratefully as she placed her hand around his aching organ. How had he lived so long without this? It suddenly made sense to him, all the ridiculously illogical things beings had presumably done for love and sex. His own logic felt frayed and distant at the moment. He carded his hands through Holly's hair as she straddled his thighs, her hand moving with determination, although she was tired, her thoughts skittering along. So sexy. Want to make you totally lose it. Debauched. Just-look-at-you. Wanton. Comeforme. Tired though. Howlongdoesittake? Menhavestrongarms. Vulcan arms. Bathedoesn'masturbate... Alien. How to turn on an alien. Chenesi, but he is laying on his back... Hands, but he is using those.

Holly nuzzled into his hands as they pet her head, her face. Syrok found her thoughts distracting but amusing, and pleasing in their own way. She was trying so hard to please him, and as he recognized that effort he felt another swell of arousal. He moaned. He would solve this.

Syrok pressed deeper into her thoughts, searching for erotic centers. Yes. Here, and here. He found the points with laser precision and all at once caressed. Holly's whole body went rigid for a moment, held in suspense, and then a loud moan issued forth. She felt aflame, fire licking every nerve of her body, but deliciously. Tendrils of arousal snaking around and taking hold... up her legs, between her toes, through her crotch, her chest, even her ribs ached with it. The darting electricity up her spine, between her shoulder blades, in the back of her skull. It was as if every erogenous zone that could exist had been stroked, something deep within her mind twisting around the thing that was Syrok. The phantom pressed again, more strongly, and she heard a high, almost pained sound come from her as she twisted slightly, pressing into his hand, then gasping to catch her breath. Sweat had broken out across her skin.

Her hand had long since forgotten about the phallus it still vaguely gripped, but Syrok didn't care. This control of her mind was far more fascinating. This control of her everything. With each pulse of that control he learned something, adjusted. He gave one more great strum to that mental instrument and saw bright colors as Holly gave a great orgasmic shudder. She had not even fully undressed, he'd hardly touched her, and now he felt a smug satisfaction as shivers wracked her small frame. Yes, yes, THIS! HOLLY! The magnitude of the wave staggered him and he let himself be swept with her, cumming wetly over Holly's still hand and his own stomach. They swirled together there for a moment, suspended in the silent colors, until he slowly and carefully untangled his mind from Holly's and removed his hand. Holly laid herself out against his form and panted and twitched with the last vestiges of the ordeal, and Syrok took the moment to recenter himself. His katra sang with the event, and meditation this night would be entirely unnecessary. For the first time in these two weeks he felt totally grounded once more, at peace.

“Holy shit.” Holly finally said aloud, breathlessly.

“I take it you approve.”

“Yuh-huh.” she mumbled affirmatively, dazedly. Then, “You good?”

“I am satiated.”

“Mm. I thought so.” she smirked, drawing one wet finger through more of his cum. Syrok reached over her to the windowsill where he now kept a box of tissues and began to cursorily clean them both up. Tissues. He had never had use for such things before now. If Holly had not had the occasional allergy, he might not have had any on hand before, and what would he have done to maintain proper hygiene? In all his years he had never given thought to how messy an affair sex was. Holly lazily pulled off her now thoroughly wet underclothes and tossed them
unceremoniously onto the ground, much to Syrok's chagrin as he made his own more fastidious attempts at cleanliness. He winced as she scrubbed off her hand on the edge of the sheet before wrapping herself up in it and pressing her back along his side, expectantly waiting to spoon. He did not sigh, gazing at her with affectionate annoyance, and rose himself for long enough to turn out the lights and discard of his mess.

“L'v y'mm” Holly mumbled into the pillow as he wrapped himself around her small frame.

“As I cherish you, k'diwa.” he whispered before joining her in sleep.
Syrok started awake instantly when he heard the distinctive sound of an old fashioned key scrabbling and twisting in an old fashioned lock. Holly was only moments behind him as she heard an instinctive, predatory growl issue forth from her lover as his grip tightened protectively around her. Syrok whipped to face the door as Dennis let himself in, while forcing Holly to not raise herself to look as she was trying to do, instead pinning the sheet tightly over her shoulders as he maintained some dignity over his own lower body at least. Dennis' eyes lit with surprise as he took in the scene.


“Leave.” Syrok glared at him with tightly controlled rage, fighting to control the flush of embarrassment that threatened to overwhelm him, fighting to control the predatory growl that fought to escape. Not to mention the urge to simply kill Dennis as he had seen quite enough for one lifetime now.

Dennis only laughed, feeling not threatened in the least. “Alright, man, alright. Calm down. What do you need, ten minutes? Fifteen?” At the look of death Syrok was projecting toward him he sobered slightly. “I'm just gonna take a walk then. I'll... I'll just let myself out.” The confused roommate left the two suitcases he'd been dragging with him in the middle of the floor and saw himself out. No doubt he had other bags as well somewhere, but it was not Syrok's concern.

In the silence of the newly vacated room, Syrok became aware of a curious vibration under his tense hands. His gaze flashed to Holly who was struggling and failing to entirely suppress her laughter, shaking her whole body against the sheet-restraints. He sheepishly released his prisoner and efficiently set about making himself presentable. The sheets were filthy. He needed to bathe but felt there was no time. The room reeked with their sex and he was mortified. Dressed, he threw open the windows (made difficult by the fact that Holly was taking her own sweet time getting dressed, so he had to leave the blinds down), and just generally felt overwhelmed by his task.

“Good morning!” Holly said brightly, having only made it into a bra and panties. She stopped his frantic motions by wrapping her arms around him from behind and pressing a kiss to the side of his neck. He stilled slightly in spite of himself.

“I contest that phraseology.” he chided, filling the air with Holly's laughter.

“You would.” she kissed him again and released him, returning to her clothes as Syrok made a frantic effort to straighten the bedclothes, hiding the stains.

Holly had packed most of her things already and set about shoving the last of her belongings uncereemoniously into her overnight bag, discarded panties and several of Syrok's shirts included. He eyed the shirts shrewdly but chose not to comment, feeling illogically pleased by the theft.

“Think Dennis is ever going to let you live this one down?” she smirked.

“It is illogical to hope and yet I find I cannot refrain from hoping against logic that he will develop short term amnesia.” he said dryly.

Holly grinned. “Wanna bite me?” Her eyes sparkled challengingly. “It always makes you feel better when you leave marks. Afraid Dennis might challenge you for your mate?”

His first instinct was to ignore her banter, but he could not entirely suppress the appeal the
suggestion held for him. After all, it was *logical* to protect ones mate, to guard her from theft and to mark her as Claimed. But no, he would Control. He ignored her entirely. “Are you sufficiently prepared for the move now, Holly?” he queried.

She smirked at his non-reaction and hauled a heavy strap over her left shoulder, a box braced against her right hip. “Aye-aye, Cap'n!”

Syrok gave her a withering look as he took two of the heavy boxes of books in his own arms. “Addressing me by rank which I have not earned is bad habit, Holly.”

“*Ha, Trensu!*” *Yes, Master,* she amended in Vulcan, nearly causing him to stumble as they exited the room. The implication was not lost on Syrok. *Trensu,* a rank which she believed he'd earned.
Chapter 34

The weeks to come were unlike any previous semester that Holly or Syrok had experienced. This required finding a balance that was even more difficult than when they had first arrived -- yet it was a wholly more enjoyable experience.

Holly's new life was a whirlwind.

She'd passed her exams as Syrok had suspected she would, and her tentative schedule was now officially sanctioned. She'd been nervous for the first two weeks until the results of the exams had come back and her professors signed off on her being officially added to class rosters, having now met the prerequisites. Astronomy in particular was challenging and exciting to her in a way that none of her previous courses had been. She'd been on a liberal arts track -- communications, language, diplomacy, politics -- and while she'd taken required sciences and maths just to be in Starfleet, they hadn't been very advanced or interesting. She was only required to take certain more general courses, and to meet a number of credits in certain areas. Syrok had been right to nourish her natural interest in astronomy. While the class was difficult, she felt invigorated and validated in a way she hadn't before.

Stor Vuhlkansu, or Advanced Vulcan, was even better. The best part? Her class was taught by a Vulcan. She had the best luck! It wasn't until three weeks into the class that she came to find out from Syrok that her Professor Selkar was the very same that had been Syrok's boss over the summer. She was never quite certain what to make of that, but it did make her flush all the more self consciously on days when a stray mark showed above her collar. Regardless, she was finally free of the “tyrannical reign of the idiot Professor Hindley” (Syrok thought she was being entirely too dramatic). No longer did Holly arrive late to class only to work on other coursework; she now arrived early, front row, and took notes with rapt attention. In spite of the new challenge, even here everything seemed to be going amazingly well. Professor Selkar even seemed to like her. The idea of a recommendation of some sort in the future was staggering. Although Holly had gotten top marks in many classes over the years, both in high school and college, she'd always been invisible to the faculty, and jealous of the various “teacher's pets” who seemed to get the adult help they needed when they needed it down the road. She was cautiously optimistic that she could develop such a useful professional relationship for herself.

When she wasn't in class, though, she spent nearly all of her time with Syrok. It wasn't easy or convenient. She'd meet him for lunch at the dining hall, as well as for supper when T'Sala was present. She'd meet him between classes and evenings and weekends -- 70% of that time easily devoted to work. They worked in his room or hers, on campus or in public parks. Anywhere they could find convenient space. Sometimes it was in companionable silence as they both had things to do. Sometimes Holly required an impromptu tutoring session in any number of classes she was involved in. Syrok was always ready to help, a steadfast bastion of support to her and she was overwhelmingly grateful to him for it.

Holly wasn't the only one who found themselves unexpectedly busy. Thus far, Syrok had been slightly underwhelmed by the caliber of Starfleet Academy, if he were honest with himself. Now and again he questioned his decision to join. Even his parents who were both members of the Fleet had actually studied at the VSA and had transferred in later under some sort of consulting contract. It was quite a new and untried thing for Vulcans to actually attend the Academy, he knew.

However, as he entered his third year he found himself in a whole new caliber of class. By now, those students who were going to fail and drop out would have likely done so. He was an upper-
classman now. Such distinctions were totally foreign to him, and while he'd heard about the significance of this year, he hadn't put any heed into it until now. His classes were more challenging. He was expected now to specialize, and all of the preliminary groundwork had been taken care of.

On top of his new course-load, he had Holly to be concerned about. She was positively thriving under her new schedule, as he'd hoped, but she needed help. He'd been prepared for this when he'd made such a significant change to her trajectory, and so he felt a keen responsibility to her. She was as ever the girl he'd fallen for, a keen learner and seeking knowledge vivaciously. She was immensely rewarding to teach. And so he did not begrudge her her need for assistance at times, not even a little, but it was not without its toll. In addition to his own work, he had to learn very quickly the basics of her own studies, enough to help her with difficult concepts along the way.

At least her two most advanced courses he was already well qualified to advise her in: Astronomy and Vulcan, the latter being the most pleasant to teach. Holly was now getting into such a level of detail and nuance that he was willing to consider her fluent in his tongue, which was not a title any Vulcan would bestow lightly. They had almost half of their conversations in his own tongue. He knew it was illogical to prefer one language over another; the important thing was communication, and there was no reason to prefer his mother-tongue to Standard. But logic aside, he found a certain relief in being able to speak his native tongue with more regularity. When he, Holly, and T'Sala dined together and spoke Vuhlkansu for the duration, he knew that the humans around them gave them xenophobic looks, but in spite of it he felt more relaxed than he had in ages. He felt as if he were finding his place, at last.

When Holly wasn't working with Syrok, she was adoring Syrok. Her gratitude toward him only magnified her submissive urges, and she went out of her way to please him subtly whenever she could. Her attentions were not unnoticed nor unwelcome, as Syrok found himself becoming more and more enamored with her, and with his new-found power. She was attentive, never more than a step behind him when following him somewhere. She was deferential -- something he'd never had before.

For example, one Saturday he took Holly out to eat at a sit-down restaurant for a special treat and change of pace. They hadn't, after all, been on any sort of official “date” since their first at the movie theater, and he had decided it was time. He'd thought the experience would be similar to the time when he'd gone out with both Holly and his mother when his mother has visited campus. He could not have been more wrong.

She followed him a pace behind, and waited for him to seat himself. That in itself was not so unusual for them. But when presented with a menu, Holly idly scanned it, and then lifted her eyes beseechingly.

“Yes?” he queried her unspoken question.

“Can you order for me?” she smiled shyly.

His eyebrows rose slightly. He was baffled. “Why would I do such a thing?”

She colored in some sort of embarrassment. “Honestly, I don't know what half of this stuff is. I'm sure I'll like whatever you get for me.”

“Will it not seem... unusual, for me to do such a thing?”
She shifted and cleared her throat. “It's not *common* any more, these days. It's sort of old-fashioned. But I don't think you'll get any funny looks for it, if that's what you're worried about.”

“I see.” He contemplated the request silently.

“I mean... do you want to? I'll just pick something if you don't want to.” Holly quickly attempted to back-peddle. By now, Syrok knew it as a sign of her nerves.

“I find the idea... curiously appealing.” He shared a gaze with her, and saw the absolute *lust* shoot through her eyes and through her core. She quickly dropped her gaze back to the table. Her skin was flushed and her heart rate slightly accelerated, her breathing a bit more shallow.

“Okay.” she said in a voice that would be barely audible for a human, but was quite loud enough for him to discern.

And so it went that in small ways, at all times, Holly seemed to defer to him. If a question were addressed to them jointly, she looked to him to speak first or to indicate she should go ahead. If a decision was to be made, he was the one to make it 97.54% of the time. What was curious was that he did not simply tolerate this new existence. If he were honest with himself, he *liked* it. The more Holly spoiled him in this, the more he *craved* from her. And so it came as more of an irritation when all at once, the deferential attention came to a halt.

It was 16:11 hours. Syrok stood alongside Hannity Hall. At 16:11 hours on a Tuesday such as today, Holly tended to walk past this corner of Hannity Hall on route to her 16:30 Astronomy class. He knew this, because he'd passed her here nearly every Tuesday and Thursday for the last month. It was here that they would pause in their hectic day to exchange the *ozh'esta* in passing -- a public display of affection that Syrok had willingly consented to. Syrok was not disappointed in his wait, as he spotted his intended mate as she looked fairly frantic on her way to class.

“Holly.” he stated neither loudly nor quietly as he stepped out to intercept her, noting that she had not seemed to notice him.

Holly blinked as she came to a halt, seeming to see him for the first time. She did not extend her fingers. “Oh, hi Syrok.” She glanced down at her wrist to check her chronometer, as if worried she'd be late. Syrok knew that she would not be late.

“I did not see you at lunch. I became concerned.”

“Oh, sorry.” she chewed her lip worriedly, raising her eyes to him with a supplicating look. “I got caught up trying to finish that paper for my Diplomacy class and I didn't have time to eat and then I meant to text you or something to let you know that I wouldn't be there but I guess I didn't notice the time and by that time lunch was over and I had to haul ass to my Vulcan lesson, *which*, by the way, I was fucking *late* for.... Can you believe it? Ugh! But anyway I'm sorry I missed seeing you and you're not mad are you?” She paused for breath.

“I am content to know that you are well. You should not have missed a mealtime, though, *ashaya*. Humans require regular consumption of calories in order to keep blood glucose levels stable. Indeed, you seem quite frazzled now and it is most assuredly at least somewhat attributed to your lack of food.”

Holly simply regarded him with a look of frustration. “Fine.” she acquiesced, although Syrok was
not certain what “fine” was in reference to. “Look, I have to get to class. I don't have time to argue
about this.” she pulled away to move toward the building with another worried glance at the time.

“Will I see you for dinner?” Syrok asked after her. He was not certain what prompted him to ask. Holly had given an explanation for why she'd been late to lunch, but had given no indication that further disruption to their schedule was in order. Yet he felt compelled to get verbal confirmation that they would now continue with their routine.

“I don't know, maybe!” she called over her shoulder as she disappeared into the building with the last swell of students in migration to their destinations. Syrok stood for a moment staring after her. Throughout their meeting, they had not once touched.

Syrok did not see Holly at dinner either. He did, though, see T'Sala.

“I note Holly's absence.” she said directly.

“Indeed.” he tried not to sigh or fidget. He idly flicked his finger over the touch screen of his PADD, checking for some message from Holly but not seeing one, and trying to seem as if he weren't concerned.

“Has she a prior engagement?” T'Sala pressed. For her to continue to press the issue after she'd so obviously been dismissed was the height of Vulcan indecency, she knew, but she was far past such rules of decorum where these two were concerned. She'd crossed that line once and for all when she'd cornered Syrok sometime after his return from his internship (not easy, considering how the two of them were “joined at the hip”, so to speak) and had bitched him out for the unintentional mind link he had forged, and his negligence toward the emotional welfare of his intended. He had been thoroughly chastised and from that point forward, T'Sala had treated him more akin to a younger brother than a cohort.

“I am not certain.” he admitted. “She was absent for lunch as well. When I pressed her to explain this, she cited having been uncommonly busy with her work, and when I spoke to her briefly she seemed...” Syrok paused, at a loss. “Emotional.” he contented himself with this explanation. T'Sala herself gave a nod, as if to say that were explanation enough. It mattered not whether he were able to identify the specific feelings involved. “I speculate that she is again busy with her work.”

“It is unlike her to distance herself from you for any reason.”

“On Tuesday nights we are scheduled to meet in the south gymnasium to practice suus mahna at 20:00 hours. Perhaps I will find answers then.”

“Ah. Indeed.” T'Sala sipped her tea contemplatively. She did wonder at Holly's sudden absence, not that she was one to meddle. But then, perhaps there was no logical explanation, and it could all be chalked up to incomprehensible human emotionalism. She put the thought away. “What is it like to teach suus mahna to a human?” she queried. “Does Holly have an aptitude for it?”

“I am confident that the skills she acquires will be sufficient to count as a necessary hand to hand combat credit. However, it is difficult to compare what she is actually capable of to what a Vulcan is capable of. Her physiology is fundamentally different in some ways, as is the way her mind processes information. The lessons are a welcome challenge for both of us, as I learn ways to impart some of my knowledge to her, and we work together to adapt the art to her strengths.”

“That is fascinating. I assume she would not do well against a Vulcan with similar training, but I
wonder at how her skills would stack against a human trained in some other style.”

“I too have wondered the same.” Syrok passed the rest of his meal in polite conversation with T'Sala. But his mind was elsewhere.

Holly was 16 minutes late for her suus mahna training with Syrok. He crouched in the gymnasium away from the smattering of other beings and checked his PADD again. A new message appeared.

*Can’t make it tonight. Group project.*

-Holly

He read the message again. He read and re-read it more times than was logical, then picked up his belongings, changed in the locker room, and walked outside. His mind was conflicted. Holly's message, short and innocuous as it was, had sparked several emotions in himself. He was startled at such a thing happening to him, and had to pause a moment to assess what he... felt.

The first and most overpowering feeling was that of annoyance/anger/frustration. That Holly should spurn him several times in this way was unacceptable. He was startled to realize he could feel such anger toward her. Was it misplaced? Had he become too comfortable with their arrangement? After all, he would never have expected such deference from T'Rena. Yet that too, had caused considerable frustration, if he were honest with himself. He wondered then whether this were some intrinsic flaw within his being, that he should be so unreasonably controlling of his mate.

He set his anger and frustration aside. He set aside his self doubt. He next felt hurt that Holly would draw away from him. He felt within himself for the mind-link, sensing Holly's presence within himself. She was there. As ever, the link was tenuous and weak. He'd been as careful as was possible to not increase its strength, given Holly's reluctance toward bonding. But even such a fragile link was reassuring to him. The dependence he'd developed on her physical presence disturbed him slightly. He had gone not even one day with their meetings disrupted, and already he was on edge. Syrok was well aware that this was not normal behavior for bondmates, let alone whatever he and Holly were.

And finally, perhaps most importantly, he felt concern for Holly. Had her workload suddenly spiked without his notice? He latched on to this emotion, this concern for his mate. This, he would cultivate, not suppress. It was logical to protect one's mate above all else.

It was while he was lost within these thoughts that he found his feet had taken him not home toward his own dorm room, but toward Holly's instead. She would not be at home, of course, as she would be working with some group of other students on a project. He vaguely recalled her having mentioned an upcoming debate. Perhaps it was that. So no, she would not be in her room, but he had made his decision now to wait for her. Whatever the reasoning behind her decisions, it was unacceptable that this become habit. He was worth more consideration than he'd been given this day, and he would rectify the situation.

It was a cacophony of sound that assaulted him as he knocked on Holly's door. Geri opened her
door a crack to regard him, as he regarded her in turn. She was not quite the chaotic being that he'd first met, but with the din of noise in the background, the effect was the same. Where Geri's hair had been of various lengths and colors, it was now mostly brown and the shorter bits were on their way to growing out. Her makeup was as ever ostentatious, but her gutter-punk slut-wear had been replaced by plain fatigues, though the glitter on her belt was certainly not regulation. A rhythmic noise that Syrok knew was sometimes characterized as music flooded the air.

“Holly's not here.” she said flatly, leaning on the door frame.

“I am aware. Is it permissible that I await her inside? If not, I shall remove myself to the entrance area of the building.”

Geri regarded the Vulcan for a few moments, then widened the opening of her door and stepped aside with a jerk of her chin. Syrok walked stiffly in and sat quietly at Holly's desk. Having nothing better to do with his time, he studied his PADD and ignored the roommate as best he could.

“What's your deal?” Geri asked after some time had passed. He was well aware that she'd been inspecting him from across the room as she ostensibly worked.

“I do not understand the nature of your question.”

“You're a Vulcan.”

“Your observational talents are astounding.”

“Dating a human.”

“Indeed.” So that's where this was going. Prejudice against inter-species relations.

“Vulcans don't date.” she stated bluntly.

Or perhaps, that was not where this was going. “Evidently you are incorrect.”

“Bullshit.”

Syrok simply raised a brow in response.

Geri continued, changing tactics. “What's the deal with the bruises?” Syrok was aware of the bruises Geri referred to. There were the ones he'd sucked or bitten to the side of Holly's neck. There were bruises from where he'd gripped her wrists. And as Holly had spent the night in his dorm room for one full weekend thus far in the semester while Dennis was away, they'd experimented with the blind rod once more and he was aware of the marks on her posterior.

“I beg your pardon?” Syrok carefully controlled the flush of embarrassment that threatened to show.

“You can beg all you want, sweetie.” she quipped with a grin.

Syrok was not amused. He scowled briefly and turned his attention back to his PADD.

“I've seen her naked, you know. We're roommates for god's sake, she's got to take showers and change clothes. If you weren't a Vulcan I'd be concerned that she's up to some abusive shit. But ya'll are pacifists supposedly. So that means either my assumption is wrong and you are an abusive fuck, or you're kinky as hell.”

Syrok twitched but did not raise his eyes from his work or respond to her accusations.
Something about his demeanor must have given him away because Geri drew her own conclusions. She barked a sudden laugh. “I’ll be damned.” she said wonderingly.

Based on her lack of anger, Syrok deduced she’d gone with her assumption that he was “kinky”. From what he understood of the Terran definition of the word, he allowed that perhaps the designation was accurate. But given the intimate and very personal nature of Geri’s line of questioning, he was disinclined to say more.

Thankfully, either Geri was content to leave things at that or perhaps she had more important work to focus on, because she left Syrok once more in silence. He had long since completed any work he’d had available on his PADD and had degenerated into merely passing the time by reading odds and ends that piqued his interest. Geri, for her part, had relocated to her bed in her pajamas and had silenced all music and other noise finally as she read from some thick textbook.

It was blessedly quiet at 22:03 when Holly finally came through the door. For a moment, a fraction of a second before she saw him, Syrok saw the utter exhaustion etched in her face and physique. Then her eyes landed on him and her expression became flat and unreadable. Syrok had no idea how to interpret it.

“What are you doing here?” she asked with a curious lilt to her voice, but Syrok knew that something was off. There was a nuance to human tone of voice, and knowing Holly as well as he did, he knew that she was not simply curious.

“I have been unable to contact you throughout the day. I became concerned for your well-being and decided to wait for you here until your return.”

“Not the first time you're a liiittle bit stalker-y, Syrok.” Holly's lips twisted in a slight smirk. Even she wasn't certain if she meant the joke sincerely, or whether she commented only to annoy. She was annoyed herself. She threw her heavy bag down but didn't toe off her boots or sit. Syrok had opened his mouth to contest her accusation of stalking but she interrupted before he got a chance. “You really wanna do this here, or do you want to take a walk?”

Syrok’s eyes flicked across the room to Geri who was doing a poor job of concealing her interest in the ensuing quarrel. His Vulcan desire for privacy won out and he stood, making his way to the door and following Holly out. The walk would be public, but it would still be more private than directly in front of Holly's roommate. When they were far enough away from any wandering people, Syrok spoke up.

“Your treatment of me this day has been unacceptable.” He began. Best to be clear and direct. Holly whirled around to regard him, incredulous. “Well fuck you too!” she snapped.

“I see no need for vulgarities.”

“Yeah? Well you wouldn't. I'm pissed. How dare you? What, is it because I didn't have time to eat with you for one single goddamned day? So I missed suus mahna. I'll do double next week if you press the issue but goddamn, Syrok, you can be a bitch about these things. And don't you start -- you know very well what I mean by the term and it has nothing to do with female canines.” she reacted testily before he could even consider the retort.

“Overly emotional? Fuck you!” With all her patience for the day worn to fraying, Holly snapped
and shoved him as hard as she could. It had little effect on him -- of course that would be the case -- and it made her feel even more helpless. Holly didn't know whether she wanted to scream or cry. “Just fuck you.” she repeated herself. *fuckfuckfuckfuck- say something more eloquent, Holly, he's a Vulcan for gods sake. He'll think you're mentally retarded.* Her voice wavered as she spoke again. “I've had six or less hours of sleep every goddamned night this week and I've done every single fucking thing you've asked me to and it's still not fucking good enough. Well screw it! You did this.” she accused. “You. It was your brilliant idea to screw up my schedule and register me in all these hard as shit classes with not a snowball's chance in hell for me to maintain my GPA. And maybe I could if I were Vulcan but I'm fucking not Vulcan! I'm an inefficient, weak, stupid, *emotional* human being. Feel free to hate it as much as I do, but do not ignore it. If I hear one more goddamned criticism....” Holly's hands shook and she took a moment to take a deep breath, trying to stay focused. “I'm not quitting. I'm going to fix this clusterfuck you've created if it kills me. But so help me, Syrok, if I lose this scholarship, I will find a way to make you regret it.”

Syrok stood feeling alternatingly dumbfounded, guilt-ridden, and angry. He was uncertain which element of the conversation to address first. Why did humans insist on proceeding in such an illogical fashion? Working backwards, he was struck first by her implied threat. /*make you regret it.*/ While the threat was unspecified and fueled by anger, Syrok could not help but feel disconcerted that she would direct any threat whatsoever his way, and he could not keep his mind from reviewing the many various altercations he knew Holly to have been involved in in the past. There was violence within her; he had read this feeling himself. And while it could not possibly rival the violent passions of his own people, Holly's skill with meditative practices was insufficient. He was disturbed.

The second key element that struck Syrok was Holly's concern for losing her scholarship. Illogical, for two reasons. Firstly, Syrok truly believed that Holly had every chance in succeeding with her grades. He had made the estimates himself, and with his help she would be doubly prepared. Secondly, even were she to lose her scholarship, did she not realize that she need only bond with him and she would receive the same stipend as himself from his Clan? Perhaps she had honestly not thought of this, or perhaps this was again (again, again, again) her resistance toward bonding that he did not understand. He quickly controlled the slight panic that suffused him every time he allowed himself to dwell overly on the topic. His Time was nearing and he had not made provisions. Though, he begrudgingly acknowledged that his mother persisted with her own choice of bondmate for him. He pushed the entire issue aside.

Lack of sleep and overwork were apparent. How had he not seen this? Fine lines of worry on her face, a tension in her shoulders. How had this come so suddenly? They had been in one another’s presence so often. He had touched her more than was proper by far and had not read the signs. The abrupt shift in emotional state was unsettling, and he placed this as the source of his guilt. He had guided her as per their agreement and he had in some capacity failed.

Beneath it all, anger simmered. How dare his partner address him so? Not even someone was independently willed as T'Rena would not even consider such action. He toyed with whether to address his own indignation that she should treat him so, and dismissed the idea at once. He knew biology as well as any other. She was not capable of logic when her mind was flooded with stress hormones. She was in no state to listen. He would need to address his own concerns later.

All of this he assimilated in just moments. Three breaths, he stared at her as she stared wildly back.

“Meld with me.” he said evenly. It was not a command. It was an offer, an asking of permission.

Holly blinked. Of all the reactions she'd expected, this had certainly not been one of them. Where was his righteous anger? Where was his logical defense? Where was the argument that had been
simmering beneath her skin and could not be contained? And apart from that, Syrok had only melded with her once before. He'd told her this was not a common action, even between bondmates. It was intimate and draining. They were in a public place, a grassy stretch of land with benches and trees -- a mini-park amid the buildings and sidewalks. And though it was late, the buzz of the city never truly died. Where would they go? “… what?” she asked dumbly.

“Let us proceed to your place of meditation.” He set off at a steady pace, not needing to turn, expecting Holly to follow. She did not disappoint him. In spite of her anger, her utter exhaustion, she felt compelled.

Down into the cramped, dirty hole, where Syrok proceeded to light candles from his eidetic memory of where the items were located. They had not prepared with a flashlight, but he did not require one. The hole had gone unused for many months and was stale scented now and in need of care, but it was of no consequence. In just moments, the couple found themselves seated on the dusty rug, facing one another in silence. There was no need for further question, as Holly's face was turned toward him, chin jutting slightly forward and eyes closed as she anticipated his touch. Settling his fingers to her meld points, he slipped in to the familiar territory, and with the muttered ritual phrase, joined them more completely in a shared space.

The first thing that came to Syrok was fear. It slammed into him like a sandstorm from the deserts of T'Khasi. Fear? Why would Holly feel such a thing? His confusion swam around them. Explain? he directed, and he felt her memory shift into light.

Her toothpaste tube was empty. He felt her frustration well up as she tried to squeeze some last bit of paste from the tube, but to no avail. She cursed under her breath. She'd meant all week to tend to it, but had become distracted. There was much to distract her. He knew now, from this joining, that she'd acquired her previous supplies from a shelter downtown. She didn't have bus money, and the walk to and from would take two hours out of her day. She'd had no time to make such a journey, and she silently blamed Syrok for her increased work load and disruption to her schedule. Now, she made her way to a local shop and much to his astonishment, stole herself new toothpaste from the shelf without notice. His displeasure of her act was offset slightly by the evidence of her guilt. Regardless, he must not dwell. There was more.

The toothpaste had set off a cascade of events throughout her day, each one disrupting her carefully laid plans further, and increasing her general level of anxiety. This was the source of the fear he'd noticed immediately. Fear of everything. Fear of a life spiraling suddenly out of her control.

She was sleep deprived, he now knew. He'd been aware of her lower energy, her fatigue, but he'd thought he'd done his best to send her back to her dormitory with ample time for rest. In this shared space he found the array of things that took up her time. Her laundry had needed attention, but the facilities required funds. While Syrok's laundry usually ran while he worked, Holly had been washing her clothes by hand at the bathroom sink, or in a shower stall at odd hours. She didn't want to risk the embarrassment of public exposure, but had no other means of completing the task. She had no laundry soap either -- but used her personal soap instead, which she'd gotten from the same shelter as the toothpaste. He simply hadn't known, hadn't even thought to question. Over the summer, he'd taken over the task, and when she'd moved back to her room, it had been out of his mind.

Her problems were not solely monetary. He saw her one night, painstakingly retyping the notes she'd taken on her PADD for several classes. Her initial notes were chaotic and disorganized snippets of information, not conducive to study or retention. She'd needed to process them and
reorganize them for clarity. Syrok's own notes had never suffered from such chaos. He'd never once needed to rewrite something which he'd already written. He'd failed to account for the non-linear thinking of the human mind, and slowly felt himself coloring with guilt. His pi'veh was suffering, and he'd been partially to blame.

“Trensu...”, Holly spoke to him in her mind. “*That is not a fair assessment.*” Her heart ached to feel the hurt her mate was feeling, and she regretted now her flare of anger toward him, and her callous words.

Silently, Syrok replayed his own day to her -- the first such exchange of his own mind to hers. She absorbed it in wonder, fascinated by his perspective, and by the wide array of suppressed emotions he experienced in relation to her. “*All of this... because of me?*”

“You make me illogical.” He smiled at her fondly, and she returned a sense of warmth. For a moment, they simply existed, drinking in the feedback loop of warmth and affection between them. The day had been long and disconnected, and Holly was weary in body and mind. While a meld was undoubtedly exhausting, here she could replenish her link and regain emotional equilibrium. She expressed some wordless surprise toward him as she recognized the results. “*This is one of many functions of a bond, should we have one.*” He explained. They stayed a moment more of silent stillness, and finally he pulled himself away. It would not do for Holly to fall asleep on him.

“We will fix this, pi'veh.” he said softly. “I have made errors concerning your health and well-being. I am grieved by this.” Apologies were illogical, but the truth was often logical to share.

“I know.” she answered quietly. She'd felt it herself.

He extended two fingers to trace tingling kisses over her meld points and across her cheeks. She passively leaned into the touch, smiling gently. “We will discuss this in greater detail, and I will help you to form a sustainable plan. Your health is of utmost importance to me. I find it necessary also to address some of your earlier concerns.”

“Syrok.” she interrupted, her face coloring with embarrassment. “I'm sorry about all of that. I was being illogical.”

“The emotional overtones are of no consequence. However, you specifically expressed concern over the prospect of losing your scholarship. I find it unlikely you will do so, but if you do....” he paused and drew breath. “Do not misconstrue this, Holly, it is not meant to be undue pressure -- but *if* you were to bond with me, you would be welcome to the same sort of financial stipend I receive from my Clan. It would easily provide for you as well as it does for myself. Furthermore, even if you were to fail out of Starfleet by some statistical anomaly, you would be welcome on the same ship as me, regardless.”

“What?” she asked in confusion at that last bit.

“Starfleet may not require separation of bondmates for greater than three days time. You would be assigned to my ship in some capacity. Beyond that fact, I do not know how it would be handled, as this is a highly hypothetical situation. I simply state it to alleviate your concern. I have vowed to care for you as my mate, and if you allow it, I intend to do so.”

Holly simply blinked in stunned silence for a moment. Never in her life had she had such stability
offered to her so unconditionally. She'd struggled from home to temporary home, with no safety net, nothing to catch her should she fall. The tension coiling within her was not only from one bad day, or a semester of heavier course-load -- it was built on for years now, with her mind focused with laser precision on her goal, and a narrow path that would allow no mistakes. Every inch had been a calculated struggle. Now Syrok would offer her... everything. As the magnitude of his selflessness truly set in, tears came to her eyes. Where she'd seen a “perfect” Vulcan, demanding and unmindful of human weakness, she now saw the truth of his mind: his careful calculation and observations, with intention only of improving and nurturing her life.

And all of this needless drama was intrinsically linked to bonding, this step she was hard-headedly avoidant of. Now she began to reconsider the whole notion of it. No longer was it something which would potentially bind her and hold her back -- no, it was something which would hold her and lift her up. And more importantly, it was something so valuable and sacred to Syrok, the heart of her heart, and she'd been callously rejecting him, to the point where even now in his support he was hesitant to bring it up.

“I'll....” she started quietly, her throat thick and her whole body terrified to continue. “Of course I'll allow it....” she ventured timidly, but bravely.

Syrok eyed her shrewdly. She would allow him... to care for her as a mate. But did that specifically mean.... “Are you implying that... you would, indeed, bond with me?” Internally he cringed at his own question, almost unwilling to hear her response. He did not wish to begin their quarrel anew. Outwardly, he maintained strict klashau. Holly closed her eyes and took a steadying breath, and gave a slight, sharp nod. “N-not right this s-second.” she hurried to clarify. “B-but I do intend... I-” she swallowed “in the future --”

Syrok felt his katra suffuse with warmth. “There is no need for it to happen this moment, pi'veh.” he said gently. When she dared to raise her eyes to him, his own smiled to her. “I am gratified to know your intent.”

Unwilling to be separated from her mate any longer, Holly laced her fingers of her left hand with those of Syrok's right. She reveled in the small static tingle that traveled through her fingers upon first contact, and even just in the very human need for basic touch. For a while, they were both content to sit in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. On Holly's part, she wondered to herself whether she were truly being fair to Syrok -- both his attentions toward her, and his alien needs. Why did he put up with so much of her brokenness? What good did he see in her, that he could give his own efforts so freely? And was she giving him in return what he truly needed from a relationship?

On Syrok's part, he thought only of the problem at hand -- a situation in need of solving. How was he to help Holly sufficiently? How could he be the emotional anchor she seemed to need? How could he make sufficient observations of her schedule and habits, so as to aid her in completing relevant tasks? He indeed felt responsible for her struggle, for before his intervention, she'd proved she could handle things in her old manner on her own.

And what of her financial difficulties? He hadn't considered toothpaste and soap. He hadn't considered her laundry routine. He hadn't considered how one stumble could lead to a domino effect on her day. If it had been himself in the same situation, perhaps he would have controlled the tumult more efficiently -- but Holly, as she had demonstrated, was not Vulcan, she was human. And he could not allow himself to judge her on an unfair standard.

He could not add her to his credit line, as it was controlled by his Clan and Holly was not his telsu. And his mother was already perturbed with his increased expenditures on Holly's account. He was
reluctant to inflame her further, as he was still engaged actively in rejecting her marriage arrangements.

“We should be getting back....” Holly said into the silence. “It's getting late.”

“Yes.” he agreed simply, but did not move.

“I don't want to.” she admitted, a desperate lilt to her voice.

“Nor do I.” he allowed himself to say. It was illogical, but the cause was sufficient.

Holly pulled her hand away from his, and pushed her hair out of her face in frustration with both hands. She huffed and stared at the ceiling. “This is ridiculous.” she insisted. “I've never been this clingy. It's not... it's not normal. I should be able to get through a day without seeing you twenty times.”

“We meet an average of four times per day, not twenty, Holly.” Syrok corrected unnecessarily, hoping to lighten the mood. He seemed to have failed.

“I know that, Syrok, but my point still stands.” she insisted stubbornly. “Aren't you worried about this? That I'm sort of... emotionally fucked up or something?” She waved her hand around in the air as if for emphasis. “That maybe you're fucked up? I mean, you went out of your way to wait in my dorm room for me.”

His brows furrowed slightly as he analyzed her concern. “Admittedly, I am not well versed in human psychology or cultural norms. Therefore, for the sake of this discussion, I must take your word that our interaction is somewhat of an aberration as compared to the norm. By Vulcan standards as well, what we are doing does not follow the path of what is common. However, our need to be within each others presence with regularity is anything but aberrant from my perspective. It is simply an effect of tel'this-tor.”

“But that happened when we had a new link, and you went away for a week straight. This is crazy. This is like half a day. You didn't even live on the same planet as T'Rena.”

Syrok shifted uncomfortably. “There are significant differences between our relationship and that I had with T'Rena.”

Holly felt a stab of guilt for bringing up his dead mate. She knew it wasn't exactly fair play, emotionally-speaking, but Syrok was Vulcan, and it was logical to acknowledge the difference. “What differences?”

“Firstly, it is unusual for us to link without completing our bond. While it does happen both accidentally and on purposes for various reasons, a tenuous link such as our own will cause us to naturally seek frequent affirmation of its validity. It is inherently an unstable system.”

“... which is why you keep wanting to bond.” Holly admitted reluctantly.

Syrok nodded. “That is but one reason, yes.”

“Are there more differences?”

Here, Syrok uncharacteristically hesitated again. “Perhaps.” he finally admitted. “There are different kinds of bonds between mates. Those formed from an arranged marriage, and those formed from love. There are bonds where mates are lovers, or friends, or largely indifferent to one another. Ones which mimic closely the ancient dictates of a male lead with female follower, ones
which are same-gendered, or where genders reverse classical roles, or more modern egalitarian 
bonds. Bonds differ as well depending on whether they are consummated or unconsummated, 
where the couple has had children, whether they've bonded before. There are so many elements...” 
He was almost overwhelmed with how to explain such an enormous topic succinctly to an 
outworlder. How could he make Holly understand?

“But I digress. Simply put, I believe the very nature of our bond, should we establish one, would be 
significantly different from the bond which I shared with T'Rena. Our minds share an unusual 
affinity, and we frequently experience a wholly organic kril'es... a sort of harmony. Our need for 
frequent physical contact and general proximity, our need for the sharing of surface thoughts...
could be possibly explained entirely by our shallow link, but may possibly point to one of several 
more rare bond-types we would obtain if fully mated.”

“So... what... it might be permanent?”

“Perhaps.”

“But this is... what... normal? Or is it not normal? You said it's kind of rare....”

“While the bond would potentially be of a less common type, it would also serve to validate our 
manner of interactions. The rarity of the bond would in effect be sufficient cause for our behaviors 
to be considered 'normal', by Vulcan standards. These very considerations are the reason behind 
Starfleet's rules regarding bondmates. My people would never consent to split bondmates 
unnecessarily. The effects of tel'this-tor... while they were uncomfortable for you and I... that was 
but a small sample of what could result from the separation of mates, dependent upon the type of 
bond they share, the distance they travel, and the length of time of their separation.”

“A small sampling? I felt like I was losing my mind!” Holly recalled vividly her sudden 
compulsive urge to not leave the room, her inability to sleep, lack of appetite, and unsettling desire 
to wear Syrok's dirty clothes, that still embarrassed her though she still, to some degree, retained 
that urge.

“Indeed. In some respects, you were.” His dark eyes were entirely sober. This was a matter of great 
import, she could tell. “In some severe cases, tel'this-tor may lead to mental insanity and 
consequently even greater physical breakdown.”

“Oh.” Holly said awkwardly, folding her arms as if to protect herself from the image he'd 
portrayed. “That sounds... awful.” And that could have been them? Could still be them, when they 
bonded in the future? It didn't dissuade her, but it certainly daunted her.

“Yes. And it is the reason for many laws on my home planet, and within the Federation -- insisted 
upon by T'Pau, the matriarch of Vulcan herself. Even now there are endless debates carried out by 
our ambassadors so that our needs are not confused with wants, so that my people may have equal 
standing in the Federation. I am not overly interested in politics, yet even I cannot help but keep 
some small attention to these discussions, for their results will impact my life profoundly. The 
trivialities, we can, and do, ignore -- such things as bright lights, water showers, and colder climate. 
But our bondmates rights are sacrosanct.”

It was as much of a speech as she'd ever gotten out of the reticent Vulcan. Holly worked to take it 
all in. Apparently, bonding, even more-so than marriage, was Serious Business. With her major 
focusing on Vulcan studies, she did her own cursory perusal of the political news regarding the 
planet, and while she'd heard things such as bondmates rights being discussed, she'd mostly 
dismissed it as a triviality. After all, marriage rights laws were constantly under reconsideration 
here on Earth, and while it made the news, it wasn't exactly news worthy. Now she saw the topic in
a new light, as one of the hallmarks of Vulcan society, important to their very sanity and physical well-being. More and more she acknowledged that where telepathy was concerned, Terran mores could not be applied.

Another tidbit she'd noticed from his speech was his brief mention of trivial discomforts -- differences in light and temperature preference, differences in showers. How much was Syrok contending with? She felt wholly out of her element in San Francisco. It was nothing at all like rural Montana. How different must it be for one such as Syrok, not only from a desert planet, but with a wholly alien physiology?

“Syrok... do you get what you need from me?” she asked out of the blue.

The question caught Syrok off guard. He took a moment to consider, and answered carefully. “I believe at present all of my needs which you are able to fulfill are being met. I will endeavor to inform you if the case should change.”

“Good.” she answered emphatically. “Because I don't spend enough time recognizing that you're alien, Syrok. Or at least, you are to me -- you're not human. I didn't think about the lights or the showers. I didn't know about the types of bonds, and about the strain of separation. And if we're going to work, you need to tell me. I want to do this, for us, and for you. I want to be good for you. I don't want you to just have to tolerate me, to work non-stop trying to keep my life together. I need to be here for you, emotionally, to know that I'm making your life better.”

“You significantly improve the quality of my life, ashaya.” he smiled fondly -- just the slightest softening of his gaze.

Holly smiled back and was about to retort when a jaw-cracking yawn escaped her mouth.

“You are fatigued, ashaya. I should return you to your dorm.”

“Stay with me?” she asked hopefully. It was something Syrok hadn't done to date. He'd been uncomfortable with the idea of a sleepover when one of their roommates was present.

But after such an emotionally exhausting night, he felt only the overwhelming urge to reconnect with his mate. There could be nothing so stabilizing to his psyche at this moment than sleeping with Holly in his arms, their auras mingling and re-confirming their link. “Very well.” he relented, and was pleased to see Holly beam, even through her fatigue.

Together, they struggled out of their fort and into the quiet night of campus, back toward Holly's dorm. Public decency was forgone as Syrok willingly wrapped an arm around Holly's exhausted, stumbling form. Her sleep deprivation, emotional turmoil, and the mind-meld had done her in. When they returned to the dorm, Geri was already asleep in a darkened room. The couple simply kicked off shoes and fumbled into the bedding, clothes on and teeth unbrushed, slipping easily into a deep, restorative sleep.
Unfortunately, there was no easy solution. Syrok was well aware of his own intelligence, and he had never felt quite the level of consternation he felt when he tried to come up with an elegant solution to his problems with Holly. How could he care for her properly, and with the least backlash?

The first thought that came to mind was instinctive. He would bond with her. As the days passed, the desire to increase their link to a full bond built steadily, and nagged at him like an itch under the skin. The link was inherently unstable, especially with the amount of time they spent with one another. And mindful of the instability of the link, they dare not decrease their time together either, without risking dangerous effects. The resultant situation was one of increasing need for physical proximity in order to reaffirm and strengthen their link, and he knew that the situation could not be resolved until either they bonded, or severed their link and association entirely. The latter was too horrific to contemplate for any significant amount of time.

Knowing that Holly would not bond until she had determined herself ready, he was determined to maintain a physical presence as much as possible. They were in each others company quite often -- perhaps more often than was customary in a relationship for either of their peoples. Yet it had its limits. The classes were not the biggest problem, as far as Syrok was concerned. The difficulties were with nights, and with chores.

The nights were a problem because sleeping together would be an ideal way to allow the link to reach equilibrium, yet it was inappropriate for them to spend nights with one another when they both needed to be respectful and mindful of the space they shared with a roommate -- a roommate who had paid legitimately to stay in that particular space. Not only that, but it would be a terrible inconvenience when all of their belongings remained in their respective rooms. They required hygiene, clothes, books, and all manner of other things which they owned for a reason. With school to contend with, it was an unsustainable notion that they could spend nights with one another and still accomplish the basic necessities, even had the roommates been willing to bend.

Time. They did not have the time for nights, and they did not have their time for chores. Clothes needed to be washed, and they could not be with one another while doing so. Their combined leisure time was finite. To assist one another with each task would double the amount of work. And to Syrok's mind, Holly's workload was already effectively double his own in some ways, because she did not have sufficient funds to accomplish her tasks, and required more complex plans of action to accomplish each thing. Where he could simply do his laundry on a whim, Holly had to scrounge money, or hand-wash, or effectively “hot-wire” the machines (a fact that Syrok desperately wanted to un-know). Where Syrok could purchase soap largely on a whim if he were running low, Holly had to choreograph trips to a far-off aid organization that took time to get to and was only open at certain hours.

He considered many times simply taking care of his mate as was his instinct, but he restrained himself because he knew that his mother could curtail his spending drastically if she decided that his purchases were illogical.

And so they pressed on as best they could, no elegant solution in sight. They were mindful to meet often, to communicate effectively, and to plan their days down to a fine level of detail. Syrok was challenged to put his natural efficiency to a real test as he balanced his responsibilities to his mate and her needs with his own challenging course-load and continuing part-time labwork with Professor Selkar.
And it was in that very lab with said teacher that he was uncharacteristically swept away in his own musings about his ongoing problem with Holly as yet another email from his mother appeared in his inbox. He heaved a very un-Vulcan sigh, which is to say that it was short and quiet, but surprising that it had occurred at all. He blinked once slowly, and attempted to refocus his thoughts on the task at hand.

Selkar raised a brow and looked askance at his student. “Is there something of concern?” he asked levelly.

Syrok's first instinct was to dismiss his outburst with the customary response: *It is of no consequence*. Yet he hesitated. Here was a Vulcan who had spent so much time on Earth, a rarity among his people. Here was an elder who could possibly advise him, or at least who might understand some fraction of what he was going through. “Perhaps.” he said with hesitation. “It is of a personal nature.”

Selkar was silent himself for a moment, considering whether to give Syrok the go-ahead or not. It was not customary to divulge such private matters with one who was not family, yet they were on Earth and family and Clan were distant. And Selkar had to admit to himself that he had a liking for this student. Syrok reminded him so much of his own son back on Vulcan. “You may speak freely, Syrok. All will be held in silence.” he reassured.

“It is about Holly, my intended.” Syrok steeled himself for the discussion. “We share a link but not a bond. I am compelled to care for her as my mate, yet to do so would invite disharmony.”

“How so?”

“My mother does not approve of my choice. She persists in her recommendation of what she considers a more suitable mate. I, in turn, am not content with her choice and would choose Holly for myself.”

“And your father in this?”

“He has chosen to remain uninvolved.” *Because he is no fool*, Syrok did not need to explain.

“What is it you would do for Holly that you cannot?” Selkar changed directions.

“She has little money and experiences great difficulty in meeting her needs. I have the ability to meet those needs with the stipend I receive from my Clan. But as you know, I am a minor, and my mother may choose to control and direct my funds if she disapproves of my spending habits. She is already less than pleased with my regular purchasing of Holly’s meals, and I dare not do more. Yet my *katra* compels me to care for my mate.”

“It is only natural.” Selkar agreed. “To do so is instinctive.”

“Yes. Additionally, our mind-link is inherently unstable. Holly is not yet prepared to bond with me, nor is she willing to relinquish our relationship. She has confirmed her intent to bond when she feels emotionally prepared. As I am not human, I must defer to her in this decision. I cannot understand her hesitation, yet it is not necessary that I understand it, only that I respect her difficulty. She is human. I cannot ask her to be else. *Kaiidth*.”

“Nevertheless, due to the psychic instability, I require much of her physical presence.” Here, he hesitated, as the discussion was becoming dangerously inappropriate. Yet it was also illogical to feel shame for what was. “I have spoken to an acquaintance of mine about this topic to some small degree, and she believes that sharing our time together during sleep would be most effective in
stabilizing the link. Having done so before, I concur. Yet it is currently not within our powers to do so with any regularity."

There. He'd said it all. Syrok held himself in silence and blinked slowly once again to stabilize his emotions. Calling attention to his situation with Holly was certainly doing nothing for his nerves. Within his mind he was subconsciously seeking out their tenuous link, poking at it, prodding it, compulsively reassuring himself that it was there. It was not healthy behavior, but it was not something he found that he could entirely control.

Selkar was silent for some time as well as he reviewed all that Syrok had told him. It was really a fascinating case. Selkar himself was bonded to his lovely wife T'Prea who lived with him there in San Francisco. He had had no real interest in inter-species pairings previously. And yet he was aware of the growing phenomenon. The topic had only gained increasing amounts of public discourse throughout his own life. It began when he was younger, when Ambassador Sarek had married that human woman, and again was a topic of much discussion with the birth of Spock, and Spock's later entry into Starfleet. Those had been largely isolated incidents, but Spock of Vulcan had opened the floodgates, so to speak. It was because of him that Selkar had considered the offer of a professorship at Starfleet Academy. It was because of the young Vulcan that many others like him had rushed to join the Fleet in subsequent years. And it was because of Spock's parents and his own notoriety that pairings such as Syrok and his Holly were becoming once more a topic of discussion and concern. So while Selkar himself had no personal interest in the matter of inter-species unions, it was not a topic that he could easily ignore.

From an academic standpoint, Selkar hadn't really cared one way or another whether his people mixed with other races. He was aware that culturally there was a push for Vulcan purity, but he'd always found the notion to be somewhat absurd and inconsequential. What mattered to him were such things as intellect, usefulness, and ethics. Superficial differences such as race and gender were unimportant. And to some extent, that was all the further he'd thought about the matter. He could not fathom what the difficulty would be that would make such discussions so alluring to news feeds.

Now, however, his thinking was different. Now he saw Syrok, a student of his, and Syrok's own difficulties. Syrok, approaching 21, unbonded and nearing his Time. Syrok, not yet of Vulcan age of majority, but living on Earth, enlisted in Starfleet, and of the accepted Earth age of majority. Did he have a right to choose his mate or did he not? Selkar did not know.

And here was Syrok, young and reckless, establishing a psychic link. Selkar's first instinct was to disapprove, as he knew full well what activities might lead to said unstable link. And so he might pass some judgment on Syrok, as Syrok was Vulcan. But was it fair? Syrok himself had said it best: Holly was human, and Syrok would not make her into something she was not. Frankly, he was at a loss to some degree on how to advise the young student.

“You have me somewhat at a loss.” he admitted. “I am Vulcan. My wife, T’Prea is Vulcan. I have not had to navigate an inter-species relationship. I have not lost a bondmate. I have not gone through the Starfleet educational experience, though I teach here. In these ways especially, our lives are very different.

“However, I am Vulcan, as are you. Holly is your intended, and you share a link. Kaiidth. The consequence is your need to protect your mate, care for her, provide for her. Your need for a stable bond also is Vulcan. I cannot account for your mate or her human needs. If she were Vulcan I would advise you both to establish the betrothal bond, or to break the link. If your parents wishes were not a component of this decision, I would tell you to cohabitate. And as an adult I will tell you one way or another, you must prepare yourself sufficiently for your Time.”
Syrok winced ever so slightly, and Selkar pressed on. “Syrok, have you spoken to your intended of your Time?” he asked somberly. This was not a topic often discussed, and ordinarily it would not be his place, he knew. However, the boy was clearly not communicating well with his family if he would turn to Selkar for such personal advise. Syrok was young and he was Vulcan. It was the ethical thing to do for Selkar to bring it up.

Syrok averted his gaze from his professor and took a breath. “I have not.” A pause. “We do not speak of it to outworlders. I have thought of it often, but am uncertain of the ethics of the situation. If I tell Holly too early, and she does not want to bond, then I will have told an outworlder without cause. If I tell Holly and it causes her to not want to bond....” He trailed off. He would not think of it. “But if I wait until after our bonding to tell her, and she regrets our bonding, it would harm us both. Therefore I must tell her at a time where I am sufficiently convinced she will bond with me, but before the actual bonding, and ... hope” he cringed inwardly at the emotional term, “that all goes well.”

Selkar nodded. He did not know what would occur if Holly, an unbonded human, went away with knowledge of pon farr. He could not properly advise Syrok on the ethics involved, and the realization startled him. Pon farr was not a topic for outworlders. When and how should an outworlder be expect to understand? “Logical.” he said with a dry rasp to his throat.

The two men sat awkwardly as the air conditioning continued its steady hum above them, chilling the air just enough to maintain the integrity of the electronics, but not enough so as to induce that permanent chill to the bones that most human computer labs resulted in. They sat in the darkened room, illuminated primarily by computer monitors, as the fluorescent overhead lights caused them a headache, from both the quality of light and the high pitched sound that humans seemed unable to discern. They sat together: two Vulcans.

“It is likely,” Selkar said, “that pon farr is the reason your mother persists in her choice of mate.”

Syrok felt a wave of anger sweep through him and tried to remain rational in front of his professor, and his elder. “Yes.”

“Syrok, if Holly should refuse the bond.... She is human, and may not understand. You must remain prepared.”

Syrok stiffened and his eyes flashed indignant anger before he could contain himself.

“Do not misunderstand.” Selkar warned him. “I have no personal biases against inter-species arrangements. But it is logical, Syrok, to maintain a contingency plan.”

“How can I be expected to consider a contingency mate? I already share a link! If I were unattached, I would be open to my mothers choice. As long as our minds shared the most cursory compatibility, I would be content. But I am not unattached. I am as devoted to Holly as any of my kin are to their mates. How can I seek to maintain a relationship with her if I split my attention to others? I would not only betray Holly in doing so, but I would betray my self.”

And as Selkar heard the words, he knew they were true. As heart-wrenching as the truth was to hear. The logical thing to do would be for Syrok to maintain a contingency plan. Pon farr could not be survived alone, and Holly, being human, was unpredictable. Yet it was instinctive to the very core for a Vulcan to have laser-sharp interest in only his mate. Such instinct was not of Surak, but pon farr pre-dated Surak as well, and his people had never fully conquered illogic when it came to their mates. Syrok's parents must know this as well, and Selkar saw it all with the clarity of a parent. It was likely not so simple a matter as them disrespecting his choice for himself. It was a matter of their son's survival. It was a matter of having a contingency plan in place for him,
because he could not maintain one himself. Selkar did not envy the future of his people as they diversified and continued to navigate these new difficulties.

For his own part, Syrok was simultaneously indignant with anger at the suggestion that he betray Holly, and somewhat ashamed of his display of emotionalism before his professor. He was surprised when Selkar then relented on his stance.

“You are correct.” he admitted with a flexing of his open hand, palm down -- the Vulcan equivalent of a shrug an a sigh. “Your position is not an enviable one, Syrok. As your professor, as an elder Vulcan here on Earth, I feel compelled to advise you. But in what capacity? As a Vulcan, you should secure a bondmate. But with Holly being human? I cannot say. As an under aged Vulcan, you should obey your parents. As a resident of Earth and Starfleet, you should choose for yourself. As a student with financial obligations you cannot cohabitate with your intended, yet as one with an unstable link, I would advise you to share living space.

“I had suspected from our voyage on the Kandy that you had formed a link with your intended mate. All that has truly been gained from our discussion is a confirmation of my suspicions and further clarity on Ms. Winters’ array of marks.”

Syrok's eyes widened. He had not mentioned Holly's last name, but apparently his professor had deduced who his Holly was. After all, she was one of only a few students in his advanced Vulcan language course, she was now published, and they were the characteristic marks of a possessive mate. He colored slightly in green blush.

“Nevertheless, I appreciate your indulgence, Professor. My personal life is beyond your duty. Yet as you have indicated, you are an elder on a planet far from home. It is reassuring in a way that I am able to confide in you if needed, and to know that you do not share the biases of some of our people.”

“Xenophobia has never struck me as logical.” Selek said stoically. “If we appreciate the human race enough to work with them, ally with them, then we ought to, broadly speaking, appreciate them enough to mate with them as well. It would not be my personal choice to do so, but I can see no logic in decrying those who do.”

His tone held a note of finality, and as Syrok gave a final nod to indicate their mutual understanding, they resumed their tasks as if the conversation had not taken place. Nothing had been resolved, but Syrok felt slightly more settled. There was at least one person to whom he could turn if needed. It was also affirming in a way to hear from an elder that his behavior was not in fact aberrant, that what he felt compelled to do was because it was instinctive to any Vulcan.
Chapter 36

Geri opened the door to her room and leaned against the frame, one eyebrow quirked as she regarded the stoic Vulcan before her. “Holly's not here.” she said flatly.

“I am aware of this fact. She has class at the moment.”

“Okay.... Why are you here?” She liked Syrok well enough, but damn Vulcans were difficult to talk to. He drove her up the wall sometimes. She wasn't sure how Holly could stand it.

Syrok actually shifted his stance a little in discomfort. “This Friday marks the start of the twentieth year of Holly's life. It is my understanding that it is customary on Earth to celebrate such an occasion in some manner.”


“As I said. However, I am uncertain as to what is expected of me. As Holly's romantic partner, I feel it is my responsibility to ensure that her birthday is an enjoyable experience. I wondered whether you would be amenable to advising me in what would be an appropriate course of action.”

“You're really fucking weird, you know that?” Geri said wonderingly, but pushed herself away from the frame of the door and stepped aside, gesturing for Syrok to step inside. “Come on. You may as well make yourself comfortable.”

It was 4:00 pm on a Friday when Holly bustled back into her room. She intended to throw down her books and make her away to West campus to meet Syrok for some much needed leisure time before they joined T'Sala for supper. It was their usual routine, but it was also her birthday, and she still harbored a little excited hope that Syrok might get her something small. She'd hinted at it some time ago but she didn't know whether Syrok had really grasped the concept of birthdays or what she'd like. He was Vulcan, and she understood that. She'd already resolved that if he didn't make some move by supper she'd suggest they go out for ice cream to celebrate afterward.

And so she wasn't at all expecting what she saw when she opened her door. There before her, a grinning Geri screaming “Surprise!”, with Syrok standing stoically by her desk wearing a ridiculous pointed paper party hat. Seated at the desk beside him was T'Sala in her own hat. Geri's hat was conspicuously absent, though she was surely to blame for the state of both Vulcans in her room. After her shout at Holly, T'Sala blew a party blower at her with an excited look in her eyes as Syrok winced at the noise.

Holly stood in shock for a moment, taking in the sad red streamers taped saggingly to the walls, and small cake sitting on the desk. She blinked and then grinned, laughing hysterically. “Are you serious!?” she asked gleefully.

“Happy birthday, Holly.” Syrok said formally.

“Well? Do you like it?” Geri asked, shutting the door behind Holly and pressing play on some music list she had queued up on her PADD for ambiance.

“I love it! You guys....” Holly grinned. “Whose idea was it?” she queried Geri, suspecting her roommate.
“Don't look at me. Your pointy boyfriend over there came asking about birthdays days ago.”

T’Sala's eyes widened at the slur as she glanced from person to person, wondering whether she were missing something. Syrok glared slightly and Holly seemed not to care. She simply beamed at Syrok and gave him a fierce hug.

“Aww. You didn't have to do anything.” she mumbled into his chest.

Blushing verdantly at the display, he nevertheless encircled her with his arms. “You are mine, and you are human. I wished to please you in a way that is traditional. Also, there is cake.”

Holly giggled, sensing the humor behind his statement even if he hid it well. Her eyes slid to the cake that Geri was already divvying up on to plastic disposable plates. It was plain white cake with white icing, but it was perfect, complete with large tacky colored icing flowers all along the edge.

Before Syrok’s very eyes she pulled one of the flowers off her piece with fingers and put it straight into her mouth, closing her eyes with a soft moan. “Mmm.”

“Holly!” Syrok chided her outrageous behavior. Geri seemed not to notice and T’Sala seemed to continue with her wide-eyed, fascinated stare. She had never witnessed a Terran birthday party before, and was delighted to be a part of the proceedings. When given her own slice of cake, and when no one was paying her attention, she used her fork to scrape off one of the flowers and placed it directly into her own mouth in guilty pleasure. For her own part, she was excited to experience the slight, almost drunken state she would achieve from the copious amounts of processed sugar. For Syrok’s part, he carefully scraped his excess icing to the side and enjoyed the cake plain. It was already sugary enough.

As they ate, Holly and Geri sat on their respective beds while Syrok snagged Geri’s free chair and the group spoke animatedly, with Geri at the center of much of the focus. It was nice, Holly realized, to include another human in the mix for a change, especially one as un-Vulcan as Geri. She was so used to the three of them that she almost hadn't realized how close she'd become with her roommate over time.

“What is it that you study?” T’Sala asked with interest.

“Security. I'm working my way toward Secret Intelligence.”

Syrok quirked a brow. “I was unaware your ambition extended so far.”

“You mean you're surprised I'm not a dumbass with a bright red target.” she snorted. Before Syrok could correct her, she continued. “No thanks. While I don't mind a fair fight, I'll do brains over brawn if I can help it. Better odds of survival. Besides, there's a lot more to security than a phaser. I've got to know enough physics to rig up basic security feeds, I've got to be able to hack records, pick locks, disable force-fields. I know how to trail someone in person or how to research the shit out of their buried past. I've got a course on how to maintain a false identity and a command level course on how to survive interrogation techniques. Next semester I'm even taking basic shielding for psi-null species, so if you want any free reads you'd better touch me now.” she smirked.

“You do realize that is against the Vulcan code of ethics.” T’Sala quizzed her, alarmed at the suggestion.

“She knows.” Holly rolled her eyes. “She's just being difficult.”

“I am curious to know what takes place in this shielding course.” Syrok confessed, turning to Holly. “It may be worthwhile for you to take such a course.” For in the future, when we bond, he
Geri shook her head. “M-m. She doesn't meet the prerequisites. I had to get special permission myself. It's usually just for command level.”

“If Holly is mind-linked with a telepathic being, I believe that should constitute special enough circumstances for her own prerequisites to be waived —” he began to argue.

“Why do I need to take it to begin with?” Holly complained. “If you want me to learn to shield why don't you just teach me?”

“I am not psi-null.”

“Well if I'm linked to a telepath, then I'm not psi-null.”

“That is not how that works.”

“Are you certain, Syrok?” T'Sala interrupted. “There is not much precedent for human-Vulcan bondings.” She glanced at Holly's scowl. “Or links.” she amended. These two were utterly ridiculous with their refusal to bond. “I am uncertain how her mind will process the bond. Shielding may become entirely unnecessary on her part depending upon how a link expresses itself. Or, she may develop her telepathic center sufficiently for juvenile Vulcan techniques to be effective. The bond itself may be enough of a point of reference. Have you found any studies on such an effect?”

“I have made inquiries but have not been able to find such information.”

This was news to Holly. Her eyes widened as she continued eating her cake. So, Syrok was researching this?

He continued. “While there are small amounts of estimated numbers of human-Vulcan mates, there is only one such pairing wherein the names were cited in press, which is of course the Ambassador Sarek and his wife Amanda.”

T'Sala nodded. “Yes, of course. If no one else was of sufficiently high social standing their few names would not be noted publicly.”

“Correct. And apparently, even the ambassador has his limits when it comes to his privacy. I could find nothing of use.”

“Who is this ambassador?” Geri asked. Holly rolled her eyes.

“Seriously?”

“What?”

“Do you live under a rock? Why do you think Syrok and T'Sala are in Starfleet?”

“Uhm... because they like Starfleet? I don't know.”

“Spock.”

“Enterprise Spock?” she asked in confusion. She was vaguely familiar with the semi-celebrity from the news feeds.

“Yes Enterprise Spock.” Holly said with frustration. “He's the first Vulcan to join Starfleet ever,
and he's half human.”

Geri's eyes widened slightly. “I didn't know that. They make such a big damned deal about him being Vulcan on the news. Nobody ever mentions he's half human.”

“Everybody knows he's half human. Or at least everyone older does. Sarek is the Vulcan ambassador to Earth, and back in the day he married a human and it was a big fucking deal.”

“Bonded.” Syrok corrected.

“Hm?” Geri queried.

“He bonded with a human. It is different.”

Holly waved the comment away. “Bonded, married, whatever. The point is, a lot of people didn't like it, on Earth or on Vulcan. They didn't like inter-species mixing to begin with, they didn't like someone important doing it, and later on they didn't like Spock's birth, or Spock's eventual decision to join Starfleet.”

“How did I miss all of this?” Geri asked no one in particular.

“You live under a rock.” Holly answered flatly.

T'Sala surreptitiously used her fork to remove another icing flower from some of the remaining cake, and placed it delicately in her mouth. Holly shot her a look that expressed I saw that, and T'Sala widened her eyes, glancing between the other two who remained oblivious.

“So why not ask this ambassador about he and his wife?” Geri pressed.

Syrok simply looked affronted.

“What? He's on Earth right.”

“He might even be in the city.” Holly said musingly. “The Vulcan embassy is in San Francisco.”

“Okay. So go to the embassy and ask Sarek about bonding with a human or whatever. Or write him a letter maybe.” she shrugged.

“One does not simply contact Sarek of Vulcan on a whim.” Syrok insisted icily.

“Why not? He's your ambassador. Isn't he supposed to help with Vulcan-human relations?”

“It is not so simple.” T'Sala attempted to explain. She was already very relaxed from her processed sugar intake and her emotions were slipping through off and on, her gestures more free and less restrained. “There is class, social standing, ones Clan and the order of that Clan and one's Clan status. Layers upon layers....” she trailed off.

“That's bullshit.” Geri insisted, and T'Sala couldn't control the startled hiccup of a giggle that slipped out of her throat for just a second.

“Geri you can't just go see the president on a whim.” Holly tried to correct her.

That shut her up for a second as she frowned and thought about it. “I mean, I guess. But he's not like... a president. He's an ambassador.”

“He's House Surak.”
“... okay?”

“He’s like... the president’s son. T’Pau is the matriarch of Vulcan, and Sarek is her son.”

Geri blinked in sudden comprehension of how important he really was. “Oh.”

The conversation carried on, but Syrok was silent. A part of his mind could not completely relinquish the seed that Geri had so innocently planted. Sarek of Vulcan had married a human. If anyone would know what to do, he would. Perhaps there was nothing to speak to him about at present. However, if he and Holly should bond -- correction, when he and Holly bonded (for she had made her intentions clear), they would be faced with the inevitability of pon farr. Could a human handle it? Would the bond function properly? Could Holly, specifically, act submissively enough to avoid violence? He had been warned about the potential violence that could result when his logic would abandon him, when he would act upon an animalistic instinct from his peoples violent past. And aside from the possible psychological difficulties, could Holly’s body actually handle the physical demands? Sarek would know. And he was Syrok’s ambassador on Earth.

The party continued on into supper, as the four friends shared their meal together. Syrok made some comment about finding it illogical to have eaten cake before consuming nutrients. Holly and Geri seemed quite excited to do so regardless of illogic. And T’Sala had eaten too many icing flowers and was slightly buzzed. She was in good spirits when she’d invited Geri to join them for the meal, insisting that she would pay for it as a repayment for her organization of Holly’s social gathering. It was at the end of the meal that Geri gave her parting words to Holly.

“Well, it's about time for my gift to you.” she spoke up.

Holly blinked in surprise. She knew that Geri didn't have any more money than she did, and hadn't been expecting to receive anything. After all, Geri had already contributed significantly to the event. “What's that?” she asked curiously.

She hefted her full backpack to her shoulder as T’Sala stood to leave as well. “I'm spending the weekend at T'Sala's place. I'm teaching her what a 'slumber party' is.” she grinned and winked.

T'Sala practically vibrated with excitement. “I have procured a 'sleeping bag' in preparation for the event. I am now prepared to receive overnight guests.”

Holly laughed. “Awesome.” Her eyes sparkled as she glanced to Syrok.

“I have already dropped off my things.” he admitted to her and her grin widened. A whole weekend to themselves! Finally!

They were quiet on their way back to the room. There was no need to talk. Holly simply allowed herself to relax and bask in the feeling of Syrok swirling around her as they slightly invaded one another's personal space. It was the link, she knew. Over the past days it had been shifting and increasing as they spent more time with one another. It had become a bit of a problem. Whenever they were apart, she felt an added strain, a certain level of stress and agitation that underpinned everything she did. When she was with Syrok, something inside her seemed to relax and still. It made being around him addictive, and the more she was around him, the more their link mutated and tried to stabilize itself. Syrok had already explained to her that their options were limited to a)
betrothal bond, b) severing the link, or c) simply sticking it out and continuing on as they were.

And until lately she'd been content to simply stick it out.

Yes, it was annoying. Yes, it made her already hectic and difficult schedule a little more strenuous. But lately they'd fallen into a good rhythm, and she was surprised and delighted with how well each of their lives was going. They were doing it, she realized. They were holding it all together.

Even Syrok was strained to his personal limit between trying to uphold his own increased workload while guiding her through hers, but they were doing it. The disaster she'd been convinced of early on was not in fact imminent. It felt strange for her to succeed at something so ambitious. Before, it had seemed as if her successes were desperate acts of scraping by. Now she felt her confidence increasing as she was actually going somewhere.

And in that vein, she knew that the direction she wanted to head included Syrok, always. While it was her birthday, she had prepared a surprise for him as well. She waited until they were settled on her bed, propped up with pillows as they cuddled and Syrok stroked gentle Vulcan kisses over her fingers, hand, and wrist with two fingers of his own. She sighed and leaned against him, savoring the sparks of pleasure the danced across her skin and along their mind-link.

“Syrok.” she murmured.

“Yes, Holly?” he continued petting her.

“If you want to... I want the betrothal bond.” she said awkwardly. Syrok felt the wash of awkward embarrassment and hope, excitement, and trepidation shift through Holly's skin. He stilled his touches and turned to seek her gaze.

“You are serious?” he asked, quite stunned. His heart raced in his side and he felt a surge of intense possessiveness course through him.

Holly nodded affirmatively, then forced herself to speak. “Yes. I think it's time.”

Syrok's eyes dilated to black glittering pools that stared at her with predatory intensity. Mesmerized by her, he stroked two fingers along her temple and down her jaw, then along her neck, feeling her pulse as he skimmed her delicate skin. His mate. She was about to become his mate.

The thought boggled the mind. He did not attempt to control the verdant flush that rose to his skin, nor did he control the sudden surge of arousal in his groin, though he ignored it as secondary to what truly captivated him -- Holly's mind.

"I would have thee." The words came out in Vulcan without his conscious intent, as his fingers ghosted over her meld points, as if requesting one final permission.

So much for letting things develop organically, and bringing up the bonding casually, Holly thought. The air was thick with sexual intensity, and the look Syrok was giving her made her toes want to curl. She felt her breath and heart speed up in spite of her attempt at calm. There would be no calm. She'd known that this would please Syrok, but she hadn't realized that for him it was a Big Fucking Deal. She swallowed thickly and nodded her consent.

Within a fraction of a second, Syrok's fingers snapped into proper position as he pushed into her welcoming mindscape. For a moment, time hung in this place of blackness, and both seemed to just breathe in deeply, taking in one another as if taking in air, simply basking in the feeling of each other.

'Syrok!' Holly thought delightedly, followed by a general impression of Hi!Hello.Loveyou.Syrok!Hi!
A warm, possessive affection surrounded Holly like a blanket. 'Holly. It is always pleasing to join you.' The dark, alien emotion that usually was accompanied by bites whirled around them both. 'Soon, we will no longer need to part.'

Slight confusion and curiosity. 'Will it be like this all the time?'

Amusement, as if toward a small child that one found endearing. 'Negative.' A mental smile. 'You will always sense my presence, unless one of us shields. We will also be able to sense each others emotional state, and general physical direction and distance. However, mental communication such as we are engaging in presently will not come until fully bonded.'

Holly really took it in. She'd thought it through before. She'd known it was permanent. But right at this moment a final wave of apprehension washed through her as she internalized the permanence of what was about to happen to her.

Syrok, in understanding, sent a wave of calm reassurance to her. 'Please don't be afraid, ashayam. I will care for you.'

'I know.' she returned steadily, completely trusting in this man.

Outside of the meld, Syrok began to murmur the ritual words aloud in their traditional Vulcan, as his mind echoed them within the meld as well. 'Parted from me and never parted. Never and always, touching and touched.'

Something shifted and Holly began to see, for the first time, a steady litany of images that described the key points of Syrok's life and personality. She felt desert heat and smelled baked sand; instead of feeling harsh it felt warm and comforting, a warmth that sunk into his bones that were forever chilled on Earth. The dry, thin air allowing him to breathe, the heavy feeling in his limbs grounding him, the red light of the suns easier on his eyes.

She saw a series of faces unfamiliar to her: his family, Clan members, his classmates through the years, T'Rena at their bonding at the age of seven. She felt the closeness and comfort he had felt for her and understood it more deeply. It was comforting in a way to note the difference in how he'd loved T'Rena compared to how he loved Holly.

Some trial he'd faced in the desert as a child. Holly wished to know more, but Syrok pressed forward with his flickering thoughts.

There were flashes of his home, flashes of various ships and starbases he'd visited his parents on, flashes of his school, so different from her own. There was the taste of plomeek as Syrok tasted it, and various other foodstuffs she'd never learned a name for. It triggered her own cascade of memories to him.

The taste of chocolate chip cookies. Thanksgiving dinner, a favorite meal even though it always seemed to be with a different broken home. Syrok pushed past the dark images of the difficult parts of her history. He'd already seen them, and it would only sadden them both to review those memories again now.

There was the scent of the woods after rain, and rain falling upon a tin roof. A worn book in Holly's hands as she lay on crunchy grass baked by the sun. The stars at night and a field alight with fireflies. Flashes of schools so different to his own. The chipped tile floors, the rusty lockers.

His own home of cool stone contrasted with the plush orange carpet of one of Holly's various residences. He found the color, jarring, and felt Holly's laughter as she agreed.
Between them both a shared need to go somewhere, to see what there was to see, to do more, do something other than what was laid out for them. A shared sense of ambition without arrogance. An enjoyment of one another, their homes, their cultures. Holly learned of Syrok's curiosity to see snow, and her own mind leapt to show him harsh winters in the mountains. Snow piled higher than she was tall, a swirling blizzard, making snowballs, and the coldest day she could recall. He was staggered by the impressions of it and was only more excited. Holly herself tried to visualize Vulcan with vague images of sand and mountains, what she'd gleaned from popular media. Syrok showed her what it was like to scale Mount Seleya, the summer heat at mid day when even a Vulcan took cover, the sandstorms that wore away at the rocky spires rising to the reddened sky. It was breathtaking.

As each image passed between them, Holly felt a little closer to Syrok, to the core of who he was. And she felt all the small, empty, worried parts of herself becoming filled, soothed, cherished. Overwhelmed, she tried desperately to press back as much love and understanding as she could, clumsily through their growing bond. Could Syrok sense what she wanted him to feel? He sent her a sense of confirmation. He knew.

Love, closeness, understanding, compassion, possession..., fragments of thought and feeling, broken Vulcan words on Syrok's part and a simple desperate projection of emotion on Holly's as she still struggled to find words within a meld.

And before she knew it, Holly was opening her eyes as Syrok's fingers left her face. She had no idea how much time had passed, and both parties simply stared at one another for a long moment, almost breathless. Holly was aware for the first time that her face was wet from tears and she reached for a tissue to clean herself up, buying herself time to process what had just happened. Even Syrok required a moment to collect himself, closing his eyes and opening them again slowly. Before him was his mate. The bond was alive and vibrant within him. Every ounce of tension he'd gathered since T'Rena's death had left him now as balance was finally restored.

For Holly's part, she felt strangely tingly from the tips of her toes to the tips of her fingers, all over her skin. It was like finger kisses but buzzing all over. She rubbed her fingers of one hand together and stared at her hand in fascination. “What is that?” she asked curiously.

“It is residual psionic energy from the establishment of our bond. It will dissipate.”

“Hm.” She closed her eyes and concentrated. She wasn't certain what to look for, but knew it instantly when she noticed it. Syrok! Somehow, just there, in the back of her mind. It was like recalling the memory of the meld in a way, and when her focus went to it she instantly knew it to be him, vibrant and present within her. Her eyes flew open and she grinned, as Syrok pulsed recognition back through their bond. “That's the bond?” she gasped breathlessly.

“Yes.” he confirmed, and he could feel her delight. It warmed him to the core. His mate was pleased. His mate was pleased with him. His human mate was pleased with a Vulcan bond. Surely nothing could be so perfect.

“You're... happy.” she realized. “I can feel it. We don't even have to touch.” she said wonderingly.

“It is not compulsory that we do so. However....”

Holly did not need him to finish his sentence, as the powerful wave of arousal pulsed through the bonded and explained itself. She burst into a fit of giggles as Syrok pressed her to the bed, moving over her and beginning to kiss her neck in the human way, a hand slipping beneath her shirt to contact the skin. He slipped her shirt over her head and off her arms, tossing it carelessly to the floor. Holly giggled again, breathlessly as he kissed the sensitive flesh between her neck and
“Not that I'm not loving this,” she said, “but you do know that I'm on my period, right?”

“Affirmative.”

“Isn't that ...” she gasped as he nipped her collarbone lightly, “isn't that going to be a problem?”

“Hm.... Our customary manual stimulation would certainly cause a mess.” He seemed to be weighing whether or not “mess” equated to “problem”. Holly blushed at the thought of it. She was certain that if he were anyone else, there wouldn't even be a question of it. Syrok, however, merely continued kissing down her ribs and across her stomach, nipping at the edge of her bellybutton and causing her to tense her abs. She swore she felt him smirk through the bond as he continued downward, easing her pants off as he went but bypassing her nether regions and leaving the underwear in place. Down, down he moved, until he grasped one bare foot in his hands, sitting and inspecting it rather closely.

“Syrok?” Holly asked, sitting up on her elbows slightly to see what on Earth he was doing.

With a mischievous glint in his eyes, he used the long fingers of his left hand to ever so delicately trace along the arch of her foot, while his right hand held her ankle in an iron grip. Holly fell back with a thud and muffled laughter as she desperately tried to struggle away, to no avail. Her right, free foot scrabbled for purchase on the bedding but it did not help. “Syrok!” she gasped, “That,” another gasp at the sensation, more laughter, “that tickles! Stop!”

He paused. “Do you truly wish me to stop?” he queried.

And there it was. Holly was faced with the fact that if she truly wished it he would cease immediately. While it was reassuring, it was also difficult to answer. She didn't want him to torture her, but neither did she want him to stop. She met his eyes and bit her lip, pleading with him silently. He must have felt it.

“Very well.” he responded to whatever message he'd received, and began the delicate touches anew as Holly struggled to breathe through her now constant stream of laughter and gasps. This was pleasant, he decided. Yes, very enjoyable indeed.

When Holly was a quivering mass and had laughed so hard she'd cried, he ceased the fluttering touches and pressed his thumbs firmly against the arch, causing her to moan at the sensation. Finally free from the tickle torture, Holly relaxed into the sensation of the foot massage. She'd never had anything like it. She wasn't certain anyone had ever tickled her feet either. She half wondered whether Syrok had a foot fetish, but suspected he was just inquisitive as always. Not to let her other foot go neglected, after some time Syrok switched feet and continued the rub, flexing the ankle just so, pulling each toe gently from base to tip.

Holly sighed and melted further into the bed, which is why her eyes were closed when he began his next experiment. Her eyes flew open when she felt moist lips suck gently at the outer joint between big toe and foot. What could have possibly moved Syrok to try that? It was a strange sensation, and she wasn't sure what to make of it. Syrok gauged her reaction, and when he was convinced he'd get no stronger reaction, he gave a small nip. Ah, there was a definite small spark associated with that action. Holly herself was surprised at her reaction. What the hell? Did she have a foot fetish?

He tentatively allowed the toe in his mouth only for a moment as he sensed an immediate negative reaction. Toe sucking was out, then. Holly had an adverse reaction to the sensation of too much saliva, it seemed. Curiously specific, but that was his mate and he cherished her eccentricities. He
moved instead to her inner ankle and sucked slightly at the softest part of the skin, then just barely scraped his teeth over it. Holly shivered as the sparks of pleasure crawled up her leg. Around the back of the heel his mouth traveled, and over to the outer ankle. Small sucks and nips as he judged Holly's reaction to the various sensations. It was a curious game to play. Her own arousal was at a dull simmer, as she was more curious and intrigued by the new sensations. And his own lust, which had initially been overpowering, was slightly distracted now by a novel experiment.

When Syrok had finished thoroughly exploring both feet, he gently turned Holly onto her stomach, and proceeded up her calves, pausing in the hollows of her knees, another place he'd read may be an erogenous zone in humans. His hypothesis was confirmed when Holly tried to violently thrash her legs from an overstimulating combination of tickling and arousal. He held her in place trivially, and it was with that exertion of physical power on her frame that he felt her arousal truly spike. Fascinating. With one final maneuver, he moved up to bite the base of her neck firmly, exerting just enough pressure to leave a mark. Holly practically melted at the sensation and idea of it. She put up no resistance, causing Syrok to purr with contentment deep within his chest.

When she'd collected herself somewhat, she pounced on him in return, quickly divesting him of his clothes. For a moment she simply straddled his hips, her hands skimming over the delicate skin of his chest and stomach, admiring him. “E'tun.” she said quietly, meeting his smoldering gaze. She leaned to kiss his own neck and sucked a gentle mark at the joint between neck and shoulder, feeling every bit of arousal that surged within her mate. It was fascinating, and addictive.

Bit by bit she kissed down his torso and he allowed it, until she came finally to his genital pouch. It was always fascinating for her to see. There was now a definite mound where it was sometimes flat -- partial arousal then. The slit from which he would unsheathe was slightly parted and she could see a bit of the firming member contained within the folds. Holly bent and with gentle care, for the first time ever, she licked just so, across the slit. The reaction in Syrok was immediate as he actually gasped aloud at the sensation, head falling back to his pillow, hips slightly thrusting, and his erection pulsing once in response, as if seeking more of the delicious pressure.

From his own vantage point, Syrok was overcome with sensation and emotion. Where was his logic? His control? The cause was surely sufficient. His mate, his bondmate (he could scarcely believe it) was touching him in such an intimate manner. His essence was upon her. She was ingesting his secretion. It was beyond comprehension. He felt the illogical desire to cover her in his scent, to ensure it would never again escape her pores, that all would know immediately she was Claimed by him. Their bonding was supposed to alleviate some of his irrational need to mark and claim but in the immediate aftermath of their betrothal bond all he could think of was to reaffirm even more concretely that she was indeed his. His-his-his ... a litany of dark, controlling emotion was consuming him and he was only distantly aware that he was erecting fully and unsheathing from his genital pouch.

As if to underscore what he was distracted from, his attention was diverted back to Holly's ministrations the second that he felt his member actually becoming engulfed in the wet warmth of her mouth and he was certain that he swore crudely in his own tongue against his own volition. His hands were tangling in the sheets as his feet scrabbled for purchase, anything to ground him, anything real and solid to use as a meditative focus, but his logic was failing him and he was coming apart, he was surely coming apart this time --

An orgasm shuddered through his frame more violently than any previous release Holly had provided him and he fell into a gasping heap as she swallowed his emission and licked off the remains. Syrok was at a loss for words. His mind was empty. Dizzily, he lifted his head from the pillow to gaze down at his mate, who looked up uncertainly. He could feel her uncertainty across the bond. Illogical bondmate. Dazedly he pulled his arm up to card his fingers through her alien
hair affectionately and she leaned into the touch. “Vravshau t’nash-veh ozhika.” My logic has failed me. “Ashayam, you honor me.” He told her in his tongue. “Allow me to do this for you.” he offered, and though she was uncertain what would come next he felt her consent.

Shifting his hand to her meld points he sought out the physiological points he required and deliberately stimulated several of her pleasure centers. at once.

Where Holly had felt uncertainty and trepidation at her new sexual activity with Syrok, now all anxiety was thrust violently aside as a tidal wave of pleasure wracked her body. From her toes to her crown, through her spine and fingertips, every bit of her seemed to light up with a pleasure she couldn't control or comprehend. Distantly she heard a keening noise that couldn't possibly have come from her own voice as she collapsed against her bondmate, toes and fingers curling and body twitching slightly as she tried to contain the full body orgasm that ripped through her. That Syrok touched nothing but her face was incomprehensible. The she should feel this was incomprehensible. For a moment she seemed to simply hang there, suspended in time and seeing white, and then she crashed back to reality with a loud gasp.

The psionic energy from the newly established bond was still sparking across her skin and humming through her mind. Everything was more crisp right now, more vibrant. “Holy shit.” she managed to gasp out in-eloquently.

She felt rather than saw Syrok's amusement as it presented through the bond. His shields were in tatters and would take some time to repair, but he did not concern himself. “Indeed.” he had to agree with her assessment of their activities, illogical as it was. “What possessed you to...” Syrok faltered. “... orally stimulate me?” He finished awkwardly.

Holly giggled into his stomach where her head now rested, his fingers resuming their place in her thick hair. “Did you read that in a text book?”

“Irrelevant.”

Her laughter tinkled through the room again. “I don't know.” she shrugged. “I had been considering it for some time. I wanted to do more... give more. I feel so close to you, as if we've been together ages.” She laced her fingers with those of his free hand, causing him to shiver slightly. “Did you like it?” she asked somewhat self consciously.

“Holly,” Syrok said gently, at a loss. How could she be in doubt after what they'd just shared? How could she doubt even when she could sense his emotions through the bond? Illogical human, so frail and insecure. “I--” How could he tell her what it meant to him? And how to even discuss sexual gratification after something so profound as a bonding had taken place? “It was very pleasing to me.” He tried to reassure. The words sounded dead and awkward even to himself. He was not well versed in emotional speech.

And for the first time, Holly felt a bit of what Syrok meant when he spoke so dryly. She could sense something very akin to her own love being reflected back at her through the bond. She'd always thought it curious that the correct translation of “I love you” in Vulcan was more like “I cherish thee”. Cherished. That was the feeling coming through strongly from her mate. She felt wholly cherished, and it assuaged her fears. Because Holly was insecure, and she was young, and she knew that she was inexperienced and naive. Sharing herself so deeply meant something to her and on some level she was terrified that if she dared share herself with another it would be taken for granted -- always taken for granted and discarded. She knew it was emotional baggage from her past and yet it didn't make the sensation any less real. But now, feeling the sense of cherishedness coming from Syrok deep within her soul, she felt a bit of the anxiety that seemed permanent in her chest release for the first time perhaps ever. She felt that her decision to give so much so freely was
the right one, and she had the sneaking suspicion that this might go down in history as the best birthday of her life.
The cuddling was nice. At first, it was post-coital bliss cuddling, and Holly appreciated that. After some time it evolved into simple cuddling for pleasure. It was also somewhat sleepy cuddling. It had been a long several weeks, and the psychic activity involved in establishing their betrothal bond had drained them both additionally. Holly was pleased with the sleepy cuddling as the psionic energy finally began to fizzle away from her skin and her heart rate seemed to resume a normal pace, her head clearing. It was as her head cleared that the cuddling took a turn for the worse, as it began to evolve into a sort of comfort cuddling, necessary as the first flickers of concern shifted through her head.

She'd felt Syrok's mental presence many times. Through touch. Through their two melds. Through something between a touch and a meld that Syrok called a link and couldn't elaborate on because she was not Vulcan. She was certainly used to sensing his presence by now in a variety of ways. And she liked having him in her head. And she was pleased with her decision to bond. She'd thought it through very much. But then he did not leave her head. Ever. And it began to slowly sink in what that really meant, and what it felt like. And to a psi-null human, it was beginning to feel very disconcerting. And for this psi-null human, the burden of the new psychic load began to overwhelm and panic her, causing a chain reaction which led her to question her entire decision making process altogether.

Oh god! Had she made the worst mistake of her life? Now she was stuck with this thing forever! She'd surely ruined both of their lives by her recklessness and illogic. She could not take it back. Syrok would never forgive her, and she'd never forgive herself. If it ended now, it would end forever. Could she leave Syrok? That only made her panic further. She had no wish to leave Syrok. She was desperately in love with him! How would she survive without him? Visions of her entire life unraveling flashed before her.

“Holly.” Syrok attempted to interrupt.

Did she have to get married now? She'd never wanted to get married. But now she was moving toward it. She wanted to throw up. Thoughts swirled in Holly's mind as she questioned all the decisions that had led her to this point, and she found herself questioning her very identity. She didn't believe in close familial relationships. She didn't trust the prospect of marriage. Had Syrok changed her? On what principles did she stand? She'd thought her interest in all things Vulcan had been a pillar of strength, but had she in fact become obsessed with it? Fixated on it? Was she dooming herself to a lifelong hell?

“Holly. You think rather loudly.” Syrok interjected. “And you appear to be panicking.” He attempted to send soothing emotions across the bond, something that had helped her relax in the past. But this time it backfired.

Holly became hyper-aware of the bond and instinctively tried to throw up a clumsy shield, but she had no basis for mental shielding. It was like a wild flailing of a small child and Syrok winced at the attempt. He worked to rebuild his own shields but he was exhausted and they were not coming easily -- certainly not with his bondmate panicking. It hadn't been like this with T'Rena. They'd been bonded by a Healer as they were both only youths. And while Syrok was pretty sure he'd done the deed correctly this time on his own, it had depleted his mental energies and he was beginning to question if he'd made some grave error. And even if he had not, was Holly's human physiology reacting negatively to the bond? Perhaps he should have tried to research this further. But there had been no research for him to review when he'd attempted previously.
Holly was not aware of the hasty shields Syrok was attempting to erect between them but the newly settling bond did not react well within her to the attempt. An innate, instinctive panic welled up between them at the attempt to separate what was just now settling in as one.

“Holly, please cease.” Syrok winced. If only his mate would utilize some of her most basic meditation techniques, perhaps then they could maintain a balance and gain equilibrium.

But Holly was not listening at all at this point. She was breathing rapidly and flung herself away from Syrok to begin shakily dressing herself.

“Where are you going?”

“I think I’m going to be sick.” she asserted with a wavering voice.

“Holly please attempt to remain calm.”

“I don't like this.” she asserted, meaning the sense of the bond. “I don't like it. I don't like it.” she repeated herself.

Syrok questioned first whether she was actually losing her sanity, a prospect which shook him to his core. He also felt cut deeply at the thought that perhaps her initial approval of their bond was in error. Her panic began to seep into his own thinking in resonance. He'd been a fool to attempt to bond with a human. Now his human was dependent upon him for her own well-being due to the lifestyle he'd orchestrated for them, and he would likely die when it was his Time. Bath'pa! His Time! Now betrothed, he would inevitably have to explain pon farr to Holly. But if she would not accept the betrothal bond, she would certainly never agree to serve him in his need. He felt rather ill himself. He should have accepted his mother's selection for him. He did not wish to die.

“Holly, do not leave me.” He said with his own shaking voice.

Holly had dressed herself in all but her shoes and was now bent over a trash can as if contemplating vomiting, but not quite able to do so. Her breathing was ragged.

“I beg you.” he pleaded. “I do not wish to die.”

“You'll die now? If I leave you? Oh god!” she wailed, not really comprehending his meaning but disturbed nonetheless. And seeing his mate thus disturbed further disturbed Syrok.

The bond was unsettled and new, established by an unskilled youth with a psi-null being. The panic between them had created a resonant feedback loop between them that had to be addressed. And on some level, a small portion of Syrok's immense brain recognized that. He drew a ragged but centering breath and walked himself through rudimentary meditative techniques to establish Control. It did not stem the panic, but he was able at least to recognize that the emotions he was feeling were irrational and unnatural. He'd been bonded before, and it was not meant to feel like this. He'd done something wrong and he fought the urge to chastise himself for it in favor of thinking of an actionable plan.

Shakily, he dressed himself as well. “Holly, please put on your shoes.” he urged, pulling her away from the trash can and pressing shoes into her shaking hands. Her eyes were clouded with a sort of mad incomprehension but she seemed to understand enough to finish dressing herself when urged. He had to think. Did he seek out a Healer at Starfleet Medical Center? Perhaps a Healer was most well versed in bonding but they would likely not have experience with a human. Should he seek an elder? If he were at home with his Clan he would immediately seek an elder. His father? His father was light years away right now and could not be contacted. Professor Selkar then? The Vulcan
Embassy, in hopes that Ambassador Sarek was present? His mind swam with options and for once he did not feel as adult as he proclaimed himself to be. He was acutely aware that he was under the requisite 35 years denoting adulthood for his race. He was a youth and he had acted recklessly, endangering himself and a being very dear to him. What to do?

With shaking hands he commed T'Sala. Her comm. chimed repeatedly but there was no answer. It was uncharacteristic for her to not answer, but Syrok was also not thinking clearly. He recalled the amount of processed sugar she'd consumed and her intoxicated state. He recalled that she was spending the night with Geri, one of the most illogical and animated humans he'd had the acquaintance of. He shut his comm. unit and tried not to further panic as he acknowledged he could not count on T'Sala's advice at this time. Even if he would seek out her person, she was intoxicated and unable to be of sound judgment., and further, she did not have a human bondmate of her own.

Selkar, a Healer, or the Ambassador. His mind whirled. He almost commed Selkar, but he stopped himself. The idea of his professor seeing him thus, and seeing Holly in this state as well... it was incomprehensible. Professor Selkar held such professional sway in both their lives. He could not possibly expose both himself and his bondmate to his observation. And what use would he be in any case? He'd admitted himself that he had no practical experience in dealing with inter-species issues. No. Contacting his professor was out of the question. And he did not feel any more inclined to take Holly to a nameless Healer who would also impact her professional record at Starfleet. His mind made up, he set them out for the Embassy, as terrified as he was of the prospect.

“Holly.” He said in his most authoritative manner.

She looked at him in a wild panic.

“We will be going now.” His back was straight and he was able to control about 80% of his emotional displays, but his voice shook, as did his hands. “Attend.” he commanded sternly.

Miracle upon miracles, Holly seemed to respond to his assertive energy. She had always been meek, and he cherished that quality now as he led her out of the room. He locked her door behind them, making sure they had IDs and comm. devices with them. He knew the route to the Embassy as did all Vulcans at the Academy, in case of emergency. It was a walk, two bus rides, and another short walk. The second bus required payment, but he had his credit chip with him. Throwing decorum to the wind, he interlaced his fingers with those of his mate and led her assuredly toward their destination.

She was quiet for the walk. She was blessedly quiet for the first bus ride, although they both got curious stares as she occasionally began to hyperventilate, and he was handsy for a Vulcan, and they both had a wild look in their eyes and a generally disheveled appearance. Syrok did not like the stares others gave his mate, and though he knew his response was overly emotional, he was grateful for what Holly termed his “death glare” as it deterred most of the unwanted attention effectively. He murmured assurances to Holly in Vulcan, hopeful that she maintained her understanding of the language in her compromised state, as he did not wish for others to overhear their conversation were he to use Standard.

By the second bus, Holly was crying and could no longer tolerate his touch. While his Vulcan sensibilities were grateful, part of him was horrified that his mate could not countenance his touch upon her person, though he knew it was because in this case it intensified the resonance of the malfunctioning bond. The dilemma was only worsened by the fact that he could not reassure her mentally as would be his instinct because that was the facet that was most broken at the moment. And so he collected himself as much as he could and focused on child-like meditative techniques,
trying to hold everything together for both their sakes. He was so ashamed but there was no time for that now.

When at long last they reached the Embassy, it was a sight to behold -- an imposing building stretching up to the sky and made of solid stone, fitted so closely together it seemed of one piece. It was redolent of Vulcan and just the sight of it alone soothed some small part of Syrok's psyche. Here there would be help.

Holly as well gazed at the structure with some awe. Unlike Syrok, she hadn't seen it in person before and she hadn't seen the buildings of Vulcan. She wasn't from a city herself and she would have found the building to be quite breathtaking if she'd been in a more stable frame of mind. But in this moment, she simply felt as if it were all crumbling to the ground, as if her very sanity was leaving her. She'd heard and processed Syrok's assurances that these were not her thoughts, that something had gone wrong but would be fixed. She had understood his plan to seek refuge at the Embassy. But she was not nearly as clear-headed as him, and was grateful at least to simply follow.

And so following him in the traditional manner, behind and slightly to his left, their strides matching instinctively, they did not face much difficulty with entrance to the building. Their IDs were valid, and as a citizen, Syrok had a right to be there, and had vouched for her reputation. It was at the front desk that they met their first real hurdle.

“How may I serve?” the Vulcan woman inquired monotonously in her native tongue as they approached the desk. She didn't bat an eye at their frazzled appearance.

“I request to see Ambassador S'chn T'gai Sarek if he is available.”

The woman stared. “The ambassador has no meeting scheduled with you. It is not our custom to disturb those of high status with problems of low precedent. May I inquire as to your difficulty?”

Syrok knew that this would not go well. He flushed furiously, unable to control his emotional response. “Please, is the ambassador present? I am uncertain where else to direct my query.” He did not wish to discuss this very personal issue aloud in public.

But decorum was logically unimportant to the desk clerk as she gazed at the two youths before her, one of which she suspected should not even be allowed on the premises. “What is the nature of your difficulty?” She repeated. She was under no obligation to divulge the ambassador's whereabouts to this youth.

“I have attempted to establish a betrothal bond and it is not settled properly.” Sensing her mate's frustration was doing nothing to soothe Holly's already frazzled nerves. Her breathing was becoming erratic again and her eyes seemed not to want to stay on any one place. She crossed her arms as if cold and curled in toward herself. “I do not know where else to turn.”

In a maddeningly level voice she responded to him, “Matters pertaining to health, psychic or physical, should be directed to a Healer. If you require assistance in contacting one, I can direct you to the nearest medical facility.”

“But they will not know the physiology of my bondmate!” he snapped, his Control stretched to its limit. “She is human.” he asserted, perhaps unnecessarily.

And though it was obvious who Holly was to him, at the public declaration the clerk's eyes still widened fractionally as they flicked to the erratic human before her, standing beside the equally
erratic youth. She did not approve of Syrok's wildly inappropriate behavior, and she did not approve of inter-species mixing either, but Syrok's frazzled plea gave her a moment of pause. For a fraction of a second she saw not an illogical youth who was wasting her time, but instead saw a frantic bondmate.

Time stood still as she stared down the youth in front of her, and between the three of them no words were spoken. Nearby, three separate guards were willing to step in immediately if needed, as the raised voices and unnatural behavior of their guests had made everyone ill at ease. But the clerk considered her next move. She did in fact know the whereabouts of the ambassador. He was at this time coincidentally on Earth, in the Embassy, on the second floor in his office, and had concluded his meetings for the day an hour ago. He'd be working on paperwork right now, unlikely to be holding audience of any sort. As his wife Amanda was on Vulcan at present, he would not be expected in his residence at any usual time, and so often worked nights. She could in all honesty trouble him to see whether he desired any interaction with these youths.

“Please, T'sai.” Syrok said as respectfully and neutrally as he could, barely holding his frazzled nerves together. Distantly in his mind he wondered whether coming here was his most logical decision but it was too late now. 

Kaiidth. He bowed his head and waited for the clerk's ruling.

With one last stoic look at the frantic youth before her, she finally responded. “One moment.” She typed her query into her computer and waited for a response from the ambassador one way or another. After a long silence, her computer chimed with response as Syrok waited with frayed nerves. To her surprise, the ambassador had consented to see them. Perhaps he was bored, she speculated. “Sorehk shall escort you.” she informed them brusquely with a quick flick of her eyes to one of the stationed attendants.

If Sorehk was surprised by the course of events he gave no indication, as was expected of his position. He gave no further instructions to the youths but simply began to walk toward the ambassador's office, the couple following after.

Sarek of Vulcan had had a trying day. Not that he would admit to it having been trying, because such language was emotional. Objectively speaking, however, it had been both one of his busier days, as well as one of his least productive. Ambassadorial negotiations were not quick work, and some days were slow and unrewarding as today. 

Kaiidth. He was perhaps overly tired, and he was understandably missing the company of his bondmate. While Amanda would normally accompany him off planet, she had resumed her teaching responsibilities at the VSA and had reasonably declined to accompany him for this trip. While their actions were logical, they were not always preferred. And due to the time differential, he would be unable to contact his mate via long range communications until four in the morning Earth time, interrupting his period of rest and meditation that would normally prepare him for his day.

Sarek was therefore not at his best when the message arrived at his computer from the front desk. However, the sheer absurdity of the message caused him to slowly blink in incredulity.

Ambassador --

There are at present two youths requesting an audience with you. A Vulcan male has attempted to establish a betrothal bond with a human female and is reporting difficulty. I attempted to send
them to a medical facility, but the Vulcan youth has expressed reluctance due to his mate's physiology. Your orders, Osu?

He stared at the message blinking on his screen for a moment and read it again. His first instinct was to dismiss them. It was an utter waste of his time to deal with reckless youths, and additionally he was no Healer himself. However, after a day of unproductive monotony, he experienced a certain curiosity about the unprecedented request. Added to that was his knowledge that on Vulcan, any citizen of any rank had license to approach any elder of any rank when seeking aid. There was, in fact, no law against the request. He would humor it.

*Have them sent to my office.*

He typed his quick reply, and waited.

Holly fought vertigo as she kept up with the rapid pace of her escort. She now had ample physical symptoms accompanying her psychological ones, and her mate was fully aware of her misery. Aside from vertigo, nausea, and dizziness, she was also developing a splitting headache -- something that did not bode well for the bond. It sent additional flickers of panic across their shared space as Syrok continued to worry for his mate's safety, even as his own mind was assaulted with illogical fears and confusion. In her own mind, Holly was in turmoil. Flashes of past panic attacks raced through her heart and mind, her thinking illogical and non-linear in nature, even as she was distantly aware that her thoughts made no coherent sense. Amid the panic was a distant echo of her past suicide attempt and a sort of allure in the idea of escape from the madness, but she did her best to keep that particular notion at bay.

She felt jumbled and off center, and her mind too full of someone else. She recalled a sort of hangover effect from past melds and decided that this was far, far worse. Perhaps a psi-null being was not necessarily meant to hold so much psychic activity within them. And yet, how had the ambassador and his wife survived? She hadn't questioned Syrok's decision to take her here, although she did question whether they'd be seen, how others would react to them, and wondered desperately what was proper conduct. While she'd covered a lot in her studies, she felt ill prepared for this.

As their guide left them standing in front of the ambassador's desk, Holly knew that she should meet Syrok now in the ozh'esta, but she was certain that the additional psychic feedback would cause her to vomit, and that would make a terrible impression. So she did her best to walk in tandem and slightly behind her mate as he preceded her.

Sarek was a stoically regal figure in his dark robes behind his desk. Somehow, Syrok had pictured him younger, and perhaps more approachable. It was illogical, of course. He knew that Sarek had an adult son in Starfleet, which would make him at least as old as his parents. Now, he wondered whether Sarek might be even older. The prospect of facing one of such rank and distance from himself now seemed daunting and ill advised.

“*Kevet-dutar.*” he murmured, inclining his head, as he heard Holly do the same.
And whatever expectation Sarek had had when he'd read the word “youths”, this certainly was not it. These beings were children. He controlled his incredulity for propriety’s sake.

“Ambassador,” Syrok continued in his own tongue, “My name is S’un T’nei Syrok, and this is my bondmate Holly Winters.”

It was not lost on Sarek that Syrok had refrained from giving his full credentials. What Clan was he? For that matter, what House? The boy was nervous, and for good reason.

“What is thy age, child?” he asked with cold suspicion, a suspicion that was only confirmed with Syrok infinitesimally stiffened.

“I am eighteen Terran years of age.”

That would make him thirty-four, Sarek thought. And with a brand new human bondmate. A bond that had been established without aid of a Healer. Where were this boy's parents? Reckless. And so close to his thirty-fifth year. If his Time came.... Syrok's eyes glinted darkly in response. “And your bondmate?” his eyes slid to the girl.

Holly spoke up for herself, establishing for the first that she was fluent in Vulkhansu. “I am twenty Earth years of age, Osu.” she bowed her head respectfully.

“A child. Both of you, children.”

“Please, Ambassador.” Syrok pleaded. “I have attempted to establish --”

“I am well aware why you are here.” Sarek interrupted with a tone that would brook no nonsense. “Step forward, both, and give me your thoughts.”

Holly cast a worried glance at Syrok but Syrok did not turn to reassure her. He complied with the demand of his elder unquestioningly, stepping close to the desk within arm's reach of Sarek, and Holly found herself following reluctantly. Of course, Sarek hardly needed Holly's thoughts by way of meld as she broadcast her panic wildly and indiscriminately as humans were wont to do. Nevertheless, a cursory inspection of their disastrous bond was in order immediately. Placing one hand to each face, the trio were swept into a whirl of impressions for a fraction of a second before he withdrew. He'd seen enough. The couple blinked as some of the madness had abated, as Sarek had erected for them a rudimentary shield between them for the time being.

“Reckless.” he proclaimed coldly, causing the blood to drain from Syrok's face. “You are but a child. What possessed you to establish such a link yourself?”

“It was by mutual agreement, Osu --” Syrok began to defend himself.

“I should hope so.” Sarek interrupted coldly. If it had been non-consensual, it would have been one of the highest crimes of their people.

“The timing seemed right, and I was familiar with the procedure, and familiar with the mind of my mate --”

“Your mate. You've been betrothed for hours at most. The bond is a disaster. This girl is psi-null and her psi center is over stimulated. This mockery of a bond cannot even begin to settle. Why did you not seek a Healer, or an elder? What Clan are you? What House? Where is your family?”

“I have the right to choose my mate for myself.” Syrok defended, for he knew where this line of questioning was leading. He squared his shoulders for the conflict. “We are on Earth, and by
“And thee are now on Vulcan soil.” the ambassador interrupted coldly. “I shall request my personal Healer, child, but I would not be surprised if he recommends an immediate dissolution of the bond.”

“You cannot!” Syrok protested, outraged.

“Osu, please.” Holly finally spoke up with a shaking voice, diverting Sarek's attention. So, the human was more than an attractive diversion. She was able to initiate conversation. “The bond is wanted.” I think. “To sever our link...” she shuddered at the thought of it, and did not need to finish her sentence.

“You've shared a previous link?” Sarek asked sceptically.

“Yes, Osu.” Syrok rushed to affirm. “For nearly three Terran months now.”

“And how many Terran months until thy date of birth?” Sarek demanded shrewdly, unimpressed.

Holly turned a confused head to gaze between the two of them. What relevance did his birthday have? Was the ambassador simply pointing out again how under age Syrok was by Vulcan standards?

Syrok looked absolutely mortified by the question. “Seven months, Osu.” he said at barely a whisper. The demeanor of both youths told Sarek more than he honestly had wanted to know. It was clear that this child's intended knew nothing of what she was signing up for. She had not been properly prepared in any manner.

For a long span of time the silence hung thick within the room. It was all Holly could do not to twitch and fidget with restless energy and frazzled nerves as the two Vulcans stared one another down. Quietly, Sarek instructed her, “Leave us. Await in the hall. Close the door behind you.”

“Osu, she is my mate.” Syrok began to protest.

“This conversation is not for outworlders.” he directed to them both, and waited with iron clad patience for Holly to comply. Swallowing thickly, she made her way into the hall, wondering whether the ambassador was about to rip Syrok a new asshole.

“You are a fool.” Sarek said coldly to him as soon as the door was securely shut, ensconcing them in soundproofed privacy. Syrok opened his mouth to protest but Syrok would not allow it. “What you've done is reckless. She is a child, and even more-so, you are. I would know thy Clan.”

Syrok opened his mouth to protest only briefly and Sarek interrupted again with a look that could freeze stone.

“Your Clan, child.”

“Xkth'ratch'qta.”

“House?”

“House Stivek.”
“Where are thy parents or guardians?”

“I am enlisted in Starfleet, Osu. My parents are Starfleet contractors themselves and are aboard their ship. My mate and I attend the academy.”

“Starfleet.” Sarek said with some disapproval, which Syrok could not comprehend. Was not Sarek’s own child a member? “Which explains why your elders were not present to stop this farce. You cannot mean to suggest that your parents are in accordance with your decision to mate this girl.”

“They are not.” Syrok met his eyes defiantly. “But neither was your own Clan when you took a human wife. Of all beings, I had believed that you would understand --”

“How dare you compare your mockery of a bond to that of myself and my mate?”

Syrok withered under the cold stare of his elder.

“I was no child when I wed Amanda. Nor was I in the grips of so-resh.”

“I am not in so-resh!”

“You are seven Terran months from your first Time. You've been entering so-resh for the last four to eight months.” Sarek stated bluntly.

That long? Syrok goggled. The madness would come so early, and last so long? No one had told him. He had seen no signs. With the death of his mate, and Holly at the ready.... How much of his attraction was biological imperative?

“When did you lose your previous mate?” Sarek asked in a somewhat (though not much) gentler voice.

“Last winter.” His tongue felt thick in his mouth at the admission.

The story was becoming clear for Sarek, as far as he was concerned. Faced with the loss of his mate, the child had imprinted on the nearest available prospect. Imprinting had led to an unstable link, a mind-link was raised to a betrothal bond, all driven by a biological madness compelling the boy to claim a mate and preserve his life.

“Am I incorrect in my understanding that this girl knows not of your coming Time?”

“Your understanding is correct, Osu.” Syrok said obediently. His head was swimming with repercussions.

“And when did you plan to tell her?”

“I did plan to tell her. It is not... we do not speak of it.” he stumbled. “I had to be certain she would remain with me. I would tell her now that we are betrothed, but before establishing a full mating bond. We had only attempted betrothal tonight, Osu, there was no time --”

“So you would tell her some time in the next seven months.”

“Yes, Osu.”

“And then what?”

“Osu?”
"What if she had no interest in serial rape?"

Syrok's face paled as his eyes widened. Not only was pon farr not discussed, it was certainly not discussed in such graphic terms. Not ever.

"Osu." he said in hushed tones.

"She is human. Do you think she could possibly understand our time of need in any other terms? Let us not mince words, child. If she rejected you, had you even formulated a plan? Or was it your intent to take her regardless?"

Syrok opened his mouth in disgust and outrage at the suggestion. "I would not force myself upon an unwilling mate!"

"Is your mate willing if she cannot even understand that which she consents to?" Sarek challenged coldly. "What was your plan?"

To his shame, Syrok admitted, "My mother has selected a mate she favors. I've rejected her choice...." he trailed off, unable to voice his shame aloud.

"So you would reject this woman but take her if your intended rejected you." Sarek clarified bluntly.

"I do not wish to die." Syrok asserted challengingly.

"At least then there is some sense within you."

Humiliated, Syrok averted his gaze from Sarek. "Osu, my choice of mate is not only my own. Holly has made her intentions clear. Is it not logical that I choose a mate most mentally compatible?"

"You are telling me that this woman on the verge of breakdown from your mind-link is mentally compatible with you?" Sarek challenged.

"Yes." Syrok affirmed, vehemently. He may not know why the bond had not settled properly, but he'd touched Holly's mind many times, and the affinity they shared was beyond any he'd experienced with another. "I am certain of it. Additionally, she has displayed a natural tendency toward following where I lead, a yielding personality, and easy attunement. With these innate qualities and some additional instruction, it was my hope that we have a successful Time. Holly possesses many qualities desired in a mate and is fluent in my language, and invested in studying my culture. My choice was not made without logic."

Sarek considered the boy's words. "You have given your Time some consideration?" he asked, not hiding his surprise.

"Yes, Osu." Syrok asserted once more, raising his gaze to meet that of the ambassador.

"I will hear thy plan."

Syrok hesitated. Not only was it unheard of to speak of such things with another, if he were honest with himself, he hadn't totally worked out his plan yet. Still, now was a rare opportunity to receive feedback on his thoughts from one of the only beings in the universe who was qualified to pass judgment. He would be a fool not to take the moment to heart. "I had planned to discuss my Time with Holly after betrothal and before mating." he began. "As I have stated, I have observed many worthy qualities in her as a mate. I would need to explain to her my Time and what would be required of her." he paused, flushing verdantly. "We have a mutual friend, T'Sala. I had hoped to
enlist her assistance in giving such explanation on preparation. It is a woman's place to do so, and T'Sala has been through The Time with her mate.

“Already, before tonight's betrothal, I had been considering how Holly and I may cohabitate. If my Time comes in my thirty-fifth year, I would need to secure seclusion for us by next semester. I had therefore planned to find an apartment for us by then. Not only would it aid in the stabilization of our bond, it would solve many logistical difficulties we already experience in our lives. It would allow me to care for my mate. And when... when my Time comes... I am led to understand a certain sense of home will be of aid. The scents and familiarity...” This was not spoken of. “And the relative seclusion...” He could almost feel his skin crawling with discomfort.

“You would spend your Time in an Earth apartment?” Sarek blinked in astonishment.

“... that was my intention, Osu.” Syrok was beginning to get the impression that he'd given the wrong answer.

“Are you mad? This is not Vulcan. There is no soundproofing to the walls here. When your neighbors heard, do you think they would do nothing? There would be no privacy as you would obtain on T'Khasi. There would be no comprehension of passers by if they heard certain sounds, nor sense of pheromones to ward them away. But please, continue.” he demanded, his justifiable outrage simmering as the “plans” of this youth were laid out.

“Osu?” Syrok questioned.


“We would prepare food and drink, of course.” he blinked surprise. “And basic medical supplies.”

“Did you intend to use restraints?”

Syrok's eyes widened. “Restraints?”

“On yourself. If so, they would likely prove inadequate and dangerous for your health. Or perhaps drugs?”

Syrok was struck dumb by the audacious suggestions. Restraints? Drugs? He knew the Time was one of violence and madness, but there were strategies to cope. There were way s things were done. Holly would obey flawlessly and surely she would come through with only minor injuries. “I had not believed such extreme measures to be necessary.”

“And they would not. Ordinarily. With a Vulcan woman. Your mate is human. She is fragile and does not know our ways. Even if trained, they do not come instinctively to her. She cannot sense fluctuations in pheromone level. She has no instinct for surrender in such a Time. She would be working against her instinct. When you take her, you will be many times her strength. If she tires or requires aid, she cannot administer a neck pinch or control the bond in order to defend herself.”

“Such measures should not be needed, surely, in most cases?” Syrok argued. “Such was not what I had been led to believe.”

“You were prepared to mate with a Vulcan woman!” Sarek snapped. “Not human. And if you had any sense of self preservation, or the preservation of the life of this Terran woman whom you favor, you would seriously consider relinquishing this bond and mating with she whom your Clan has chosen for you.”

“I should have the right to choose!” Syrok maintained with conviction.
“Really. After so much time, you would hold to such childish ways?”

“You chose yourself. To tell me to do otherwise would be hypocritical.”

“Perhaps I did choose my mate. But I did not choose my biology, nor its consequences, any more than you will be able to choose your own. Every seven years for the duration of Holly’s life, neither of you will have a choice. When she becomes old before your eyes, she will see that you have comparably hardly aged. When she becomes too old to withstand a pon farr, assuming you can even survive the first, what then? And when she likely dies while you are young?”

“I have already lost a bondmate. I am prepared to face loss again.”

“And is thy mate prepared for these inevitabilities?”

Syrok hung his head and blinked once, slowly, breathing in and out so as to control the frayed emotions that were threatening to overcome him. “I do not know.” He bowed his head in deference. “Please, Elder, I am in need of guidance.”

In spite of himself, as Sarek gazed upon the recalcitrant youth before him asking so humbly for assistance, most of his righteous indignation evaporated. He suppressed the urge to sigh aloud. Although this was a mere child before him, and although he had not been quite so foolish himself with his Amanda, he could not help but draw a parallel between how he’d felt initially and how this boy must be feeling. The potential difficulties of an inter-species marriage were at times overwhelming.

“I would advise you in spite of my better judgment.” Sarek said to him. “Because I am your Elder, and you have asked for my guidance. It is our way. However, you are not of my Family, nor my Clan, nor even my House. You are not yet of age. I must contact your family.”

Syrok’s breath caught in his chest and he found it difficult to breathe. “Osu —” he pleaded, his voice thick with emotion.

“My station does not grant me license to do as I please, child. I will attempt to secure a connection to your parents first, and if I am unsuccessful, I will need to inform some adult with power over thee. The decision is not in my hands any more than it is in yours.”

Syrok looked up frantically. “And Holly? What will become of her? She is unwell.”

“You are both unwell, and my rudimentary shield is insufficient. As I have said, I will contact my personal Healer Stol’tor, who has dealt with both myself and my wife. I am not a Healer, and thus what happens to you, your mate, and your shared bond will be within the hands of Stol’tor. It is no more within my control than it is within yours. Until the medical matter is settled, you are both welcome to stay here, as we have spare rooms for visiting guests.”

“You have my gratitude.” Syrok inclined his head slightly in a respectful manner, in spite of his nerves and displeasure. The ambassador had been more than accommodating to him and his mate.

Sarek did not respond, having nothing more to say, but simply jerked his chin briefly to indicate Syrok should follow, and exited the room. There on the floor against the wall was Holly, arms wrapped around her knees and head pressed back with her eyes closed as if in pain. She looked quite unwell, but then, she was human, and was frail. “You will accompany me.” he said to her in Standard, in spite of her having proved she was fluent in his tongue.

Holly simply gave the slightest of nods and rose to follow Sarek and her mate down the winding halls of the Embassy. They stopped at a juncture when Sarek spotted one of his many aids and
gave soft words of instruction. Holly and Syrok continued on then with the aid to an unadorned guest room, utilitarian in nature. There was a firm but adequate double bed in the center of the room, a solitary dresser, and a meditation mat in one corner with a low alter containing incense, an oil lamp, and matches. An adjoining bathroom contained a small sink with a single glass on the counter, a sonic shower, and a single hand towel. In the time it took for Syrok to take in his new accommodations, the aide was gone.

“What are we doing?” Holly asked quietly, her voice strained from her splitting headache. She winced and sat herself gingerly on the spartan bed.

“The ambassador is sending for his personal Healer. We are to wait here until then.”

Holly looked up to him, truly looked into his eyes for the first time since all of this had happened, and the pain he saw there went straight through his heart. “Syrok,” she said gently, “What the hell happened?”

Syrok averted his gaze in shame. “Holly... I am sorry. I do not know. I should not have attempted the bond myself. I thought --”

“It's okay.” she said gently.

“It is not!” he looked back to her, astounded at her words. “It is unconscionable that I should harm thee in this manner. Whatever I had presumed myself capable of is clearly not the case. It is my sincerest hope only that I have not done irreparable damage.”

Holly blanched in fear at his words. Though she’d known something was grievously wrong, she hadn’t for a minute considered that there would be lasting damage. Her previous assessment of her partner came suddenly into question. But Syrok... Syrok was the one who cared for her. He was the only being she’d ever truly trusted, and felt safe with. Her mind whirled with confusion over the situation she found herself in. Could she trust him to have so much power over her life if this was the result? Lost in her own mind over the issue, she fell into an exhausted and fitful sleep, as Syrok sat by, keeping watch.
A gentle knock came at the door. It was well into the evening now as Syrok rose from his vigil over Holly to answer it. A Vulcan male in white robes raised his hand in the ta'al at Syrok. “Peace and long life.” he offered by way of greeting. “I am Stol'tor. Ambassador Sarek has sent me.”

Syrok merely stepped aside to allow entry. “Would you like me to wake Holly?”

“I will begin by inspecting your end of the bond. When I am prepared to evaluate Holly, you may wake her yourself if you prefer.”

Leaving the girl where she lay on the bed, Stol'tor simply moved to the far end of the room and knelt in the meditation area, where Syrok followed suit. He lifted his face slightly toward Stol'tor in a gesture of consent, and further words were unnecessary. The Healer's fingers settled gently on the youth's face as he delved into Syrok's mind to inspect what had been done.

“The bond is strong.” Stol'tor communicated psychically.

A sense of surprise, pride, and possessiveness leapt from Syrok.

“You must not allow yourself to become attached to it.” Stol'tor warned, impassively.

“She is my mate. It is natural.”

“What is natural is not always appropriate.”

Syrok communicated a general acquiescence as he tried to control his tattered emotions.

“You will require a period of meditation.”

“Yes.”

“I will now see the girl.”

And with that, Stol'tor had apparently seen whatever it was he'd wanted to see. He could not do more until he'd seen the girl, whom he was to understand was the primary difficulty in the equation. It was unsurprising. She was human.

“Holly.” Syrok traced two fingers along Holly's psi-points gently.

“Mm.” she made a faint noise and cracked open her tired eyes. As she shuddered slightly from Syrok's touch, he pulled away. The shield was not effective, it seemed, when there was skin to skin contact.

“The Healer will see you, ashaya.” Syrok said gently, and she pulled herself into a sitting position, inspecting the older Vulcan male who stood expressionless before her.

“I am Stol'tor.” he said by way of greeting as he sat himself on the edge of the bed near the girl. “If you consent, I would have thy thoughts now.”
Uneasily, Holly nodded.

When Syrok had entered her mind in the past, it had been warm and safe and pleasant. When Sarek had briefly touched her mind earlier that night, she'd already been in such a state of pain and panic that she'd hardly processed the intrusion before sensing the welcome relief the mental shield offered.

Now, with Stol'tor, she had her third mental touch to experience and compare, and her first official touch with a Healer. Luckily for her sake, Stol'tor was quite familiar with the mind of one particular human, Amanda Grayson, and so he had at least a cursory knowledge of what it was like to link minds with a psi-null being, even if his sample size was merely one. With Holly Winters, he easily found similarities, and with the most delicate of touches as he'd use toward a child, he began to inspect her mind.

To Holly, Stol'tor felt curiously sterile. She sensed he was there, but could draw no conclusions about his personality or thought processes. It seemed fitting in a Healer, she supposed, as it was the same sterile distance maintained by many doctors toward their patients. Still, it was disconcerting to experience it within her own mind. Aside from the sterility, she noticed secondly the simple command of his presence. Whatever he was looking at, he was doing so methodically and efficiently. At times it even felt slightly invasive and she inwardly flinched, but he paid her discomfort no mind. Though he said nothing within or outside of the bond, she was struck by a sense of “Hm.”, just as infuriating as a sense as it was a word, and then he withdrew.

“There are options.” he pronounced in cool monotone, seemingly apathetic toward which option the couple should choose.

“The bond can be severed with no lasting damage to either party. However, it may also be mended. When you attempted to establish a betrothal bond, Syrok, it appears as if you have tried to replicate that which you shared with your former bondmate.” Syrok nodded uncertainly. “However, this girl is human. Not Vulcan. In addition to her being overly emotional by virtue of her Terran heritage, this particular human is emotionally unstable.”

Syrok bristled at such accusations being leveled at his mate, but Holly simply flushed with embarrassment. As far as she was concerned, the Healer's assessment was accurate. She'd battled depression and anxiety, panic attacks and suicidal thoughts for years. She was well aware that by even human standards, she was “broken”.

“Therefore,” Stol'tor continued, “Any bond which you share with her should not be equal. I would recommend that you maintain full control of the bond, but certainly not less than 90% of its control.”

Syrok's eyes widened in response to that news, and he felt no need to disguise his emotional response. Such inequality in a bond in this day and age was unheard of. “So much?” he questioned in surprise. It would not have even occurred to him to design such an unequal link between them.

“Indeed.” Stol'tor said levelly, uninterested in whatever emotional response the couple had to the news. The facts were the facts. The human was emotionally unstable. The bond could be severed, or it could be mended in such a manner.

Syrok looked to Holly who looked back in worry. “I... I don't know.” she said honestly. “You know more about bonds than I do.” she said uncertainly. She didn't want to break up with Syrok, but she didn't want a permanent disability of some sort, neither for herself nor for Syrok. He seemed uneasy with the Healer's suggestion, and it made her uneasy to see it.
“Can such a bond be healthy?” Syrok asked.

“Indeed, in your own case, it is the only way I believe your bond could be healthy.”

Syrok's mind reeled with this new information. This, combined with Sarek's chastisement earlier in the evening gave him pause. How much was he willing to take from this girl?

Holly noticed his hesitation and questioned him quietly. “Syrok?”

“Will you leave us a moment?” he directed at Stol'tor.

The Healer simply nodded and removed himself to the hall.

When they were alone, Holly turned a questioning gaze toward him. “What's wrong?”

“Holly.” he said seriously, and with great reluctance. “There is something of great importance that we must discuss.”

“Right now?” she asked incredulously.

“Yes.”

“Oh... okay.” her eyes darted with confusion.

Syrok averted his gaze. He simply could not look upon her. “What I am about to tell you is not shared with outworlders. You must never repeat it to another. This is... monumental, Holly. I cannot stress enough... If you leaked this information, something would become of you.”

Holly's eyes widened at this but she kept herself in check. “Okay.” she agreed with a dry mouth. No pressure. Just don't mention this or a foreign government will kill you. Got it.

Syrok dared glance at her once to affirm to himself she truly understood, then once again averted his gaze. “Every seven years, an adult male Vulcan will pass through a time called *pon farr*. It is the time of mating.” he began quietly. “This is not something you will find in any book from your research of my kind, although it is perhaps ironic as it underpins nearly every facet of our society. It is not spoken of to outworlders, and it is not discussed among ourselves, if we can help it.

“During this Time, the man who suffers will lose all of his logic, Holly. This is not simply emotionalism. He will lose his mind. Without our logic... our passions cannot be controlled. We are a violent race. Our violence once destroyed us all. And every seventh year there is the threat we may be destroyed again.” he shuddered, but pressed on. “When faced with *pon farr*, a man must mate or die. From what I understand the sex must be penetrative, he must control, dominate his partner, and he must establish a full mating bond at that time if one is not already present. It is a full claiming of body and mind. It cannot be controlled or prevented by medication. For every Vulcan man the choice is clear: to mate, or to die. There is no other option. And in the fever of the *plak tow*, that is, in the heat of the most violent madness, no man has the sense of mind to choose. It is instinctive. If presented with a body, a man will mate. Do you understand my meaning, Holly?” He risked a glance her way.

Holly was fairly certain she knew what he meant by his last statement. Rape. Slowly, dazedly, she nodded. She tried to wet her dry lips with her tongue, but the moisture seemed to have totally left her. “Is this... have you been through *pon farr*?” she asked uncomfortably.

“I have not.” Syrok answered. His voice sounded strained even to himself. “A first *pon farr* will occur at puberty. For the majority of Vulcans men it will come in their nineteenth year.”
Her eyes widened. “So you'll --”

“Most likely, yes.”

Holly opened her mouth in outrage, and closed it again. She didn't even know what to say. What the hell was this relationship then? What was she to him? Her mind spun as she struggled to make sense of it. Her whole concept of the Vulcan race was turned on its head. A society of pacifists who delighted in logic and meditation -- except every seven years when the men went crazy and raped their wives?

“The ambassador....”

“That's what he spoke to you of?”

“Yes. He was less than pleased with my actions. Holly, by the standards of my people I am not considered truly to be adult until age 35. And by the cycle of pon farr, I have not yet passed puberty. While I had perceived my thoughts and actions to be logical and mature, I now question my own judgment.

“My mother's insistence that I mate with a Vulcan, you must understand, is not entirely speciesist. A human may not survive pon farr at all.”

Holly's head snapped up at that. “You were going to risk my death?!”

“I did not perceive it in such blunt terms.” he answered in shame. “But yes, I had planned that we may take the risk together. But do not deceive yourself, Holly. By considering you as a mate, I would put my own life at risk as well.

“I did plan to tell you of this, Holly. But it is not for outworlders to know. I had thought that once we were betrothed, but before solidifying a mating bond we would discuss it. Not under duress and in such awkward circumstances.

“But I've already put you at risk this night. I will not blame you for any reluctance on your part to maintain a bond after such reckless actions on my part, nor indeed after hearing what I have told you now.”

“So, what, you'd just... dump me? After all we've been through?” Holly's voice was starting to rise in pitch with slight hysteria. Her breathing was uneven and she felt panic once again beginning to rise -- though on top of anything else, she wondered whether it even mattered any more whether she felt rational or sane.

“It is not my intent -- Holly, you must know that I care for you. I want you.” he declared fiercely.

“For pon farr .”

“Yes. For the most debilitating and trying time I am likely to face in my adult life. Yes.”

Well, when he put it like that.... She was finding this all to be very confusing, and somewhat frightening.

“I had thought you to be a suitable mate.” Syrok continued. “You are yielding and passive toward me, much more so than T'Rena. Where T'Rena had the benefit of instinct, biology, and a lifetime of culture to prepare her for her role, I had hoped to rely upon your innate nature, and I’d hoped to prepare you with strategies, with what I know of how a mate should act. I'd hoped to speak with T'Sala, to gain her advice.”
He took a deep breath and flicked his eyes to the ceiling in an uncharacteristic display. “But the ambassador has informed me that I’ve been foolish. Naive. I do not know how to prepare you any more than I know how to prepare myself. Less so. And T'Sala will not necessarily know either. You are human. The ambassador brought to me considerations I had not prepared for at all. Privacy, soundproofing, medical aid, food, water, possibly restraints....”

“Restraints?!”

“Yes. The affliction lasts anywhere between three and ten days.”

“Jesus Christ....” she muttered, carding a hand through her hair. She suddenly felt the need to pace. No, she was thirsty. She paced herself over to the small adjoining bathroom and filled the single glass from the sink, sipping her water as she tried to think.

“So what, if I don't stick around you'll die?”

“Negative. My mother has secured a potential bondmate for me, as you are aware.”

“Whom you rejected.”

Syrok met her gaze. “Holly, do you really think that my rejection means much to my mother when my life is at stake?”

Holly blinked once. “Okay, yeah, I see your point.” she conceded, and bit her lip in worry as she tried to weigh her options. Suddenly, Syrok's past fixation on bonding became frighteningly clear. If she were to reject him, or even if she were to wait too long, he would be backed into a corner by virtue of his own biology. “Did you ever actually love me?” she asked him suddenly.

Syrok blinked at her in surprise and confusion. “Love you? Holly, I cherish thee. Why would you doubt this?”

“But do you love me? Or do you just sort of... value me, as someone who could get you through pon farr?”

“A mate is not... a convenience.” he said with clear affront. “A mate is the one being above all others to cherish. To be able to trust someone with my very life.... Such regard cannot be manufactured or undervalued.”

Holly did her best to consider this a long moment. She knew from experience that Syrok's own emotions were different from her own. There were similarities, yes, but he'd felt things she hadn't been able to name or place precisely. Perhaps he felt the sort of love she did, and perhaps not. But he was not human, and she could not fairly hold him to human standards. He'd claimed he cherished her, valued her above all others, and she could not dismiss the regard he had for her.

Syrok interrupted her line of thinking with more considerations. “If you are concerned about any difficulties I have introduced into your life as a result of our acquaintanceship, please be assured that regardless of your decision regarding our bonding, I shall endeavor to uphold my word and support you as a friend.”

“What about this 90/10 business?” Holly interrupted suddenly.

“You speak of the control of the bond?”

“Y-yeah. The stuff the Healer was saying.” she crossed her arms over her chest. “What was that? Why did it make you nervous?”
“I was not... precisely... nervous.” Syrok considered slowly. “Surprised, yes. Concerned.”

“Why?”

“A healthy bond, to my understanding, is one between equals. I assume that you have now surmised why we traditionally bond as children. The match-making is a nuanced and tiresome process, though the child is aware of little of it. Not only must metrics such as class, Clan, House and other social standings be well-matched, but the minds of the children must be compatible. This compatibility is analyzed in a general sense, and also in terms of psychic strength, and personality traits such as natural aggression or passivity. The ideal match is one between equals. It was my understanding, therefore, that an equal match was what is healthy.”

“But Stol'tor wants us to be unequal.”

“Correct. And by a startling degree.”

“Would it mean anything though? I'm human.”

“There is not an abundance of human-Vulcan pairings, Holly.” Syrok said softly. “I doubt there is any relevant sample size. I cannot predict how you would experience the bond in any manner. Perhaps Stol'tor would have some greater idea, as he has worked with the Lady Amanda, but even were we to ask him, he would certainly not breech her privacy to do so.”

“Oh.” she said softly. It seemed there was difficulty at every turn. “So you don't know anyone who has a bond like that?”

“Personally, no. There are historical incidents...”

“Such as?”

“If a man takes an unknown mate by force in his Time, an unequal bond may result.” Holly flinched. “Or in the time before Surak, warriors bands would claim kafeh....”

“Slaves?”

“Yes.” Holly's eyes flashed up to his and he knew without the bond what she was thinking. He said softly to her, “What we've done is merely a Terran game.”

“I know it's not the same as historical slavery, Syrok, but can you say that your control of me is a game?”

“I believe the term is that you have a 'kink'. “ he contested. “One which I also find arousing.”

“What about the class schedule?” Syrok gave her an incredulous look, and she continued. “Ordering my food. Hell, showing up in my room when you didn't see me for a day.”

“The last was almost certainly due to a strained link --” he began to protest.

“And the rest?”

He pressed his lips into a thin line silently. “Would you have me control even more than I do? Holly, you cannot devalue your own life so. You should not squander it away.”

“Would you squander it away?”

The answer stuck in his throat as he gazed at her, his heart beating slightly more rapidly. “You
“So you're saying I could trust you with it. With my life.”

“Holly, I do not know.”

“And you want to trust me with yours? In pon farr?”

“It is an oversimplification.”

“Perhaps. But I'm human. I need to simplify things at times in order to understand them, in order to make decisions.”

“And you have made such a decision?”

As Holly gazed into his eyes, she wondered how she could choose anything else. There simply was no choice. She recognized that she might be making a colossal mistake. She knew that perhaps it was not wise, and she was all the more jittery due to the imbalance still accosting her mind. But the idea of leaving him, of continuing a life without this man, tore at her heart in a way that she would not tolerate. “Yes.”

He knew the decision she'd made without asking. It was written in her features that he'd come to be able to read. “It may not be wise.”

“I know.”

“And we would have so little time, to try and prepare for so much.”

“I'll work hard. I cherish you, Syrok.”

His heart swelled to hear it from her. He was of value to her. She would try. For him. “And if I should harm you?” he gave her a pained look. His biology was not something he could control. No Vulcan could do so. He may harm his mate.

“Kaiidth.”

To hear it from her, his own beliefs from her human mouth, it all became simple. He nodded. “Kaiidth.” What is, is. It was a sort of pact now between them. “I will retrieve the Healer.”

She nodded her assent as he moved to the door. And as he opened it, there before him in the hall were both Stol'tor and Ambassador Sarek. They turned to regard him as they finished whatever communication had been between them. “We are ready to receive you, Hakausu.” he said to Stol'tor. “We have made our decision. We would prefer the bond, in a 90/10 capacity if you are willing and able to assist us.”

“I come to serve.” Stol'tor returned coolly. “However, the situation has developed.”

Before Syrok could voice his query, the ambassador spoke. “I have been in contact with your mother, Syrok. She does not consent to this bonding.”

Syrok used all of his control to clamp down on the panic that threatened to rise. He glanced between the ambassador and the Healer. “You cannot sever our link.” he stated plainly. “We do not consent, and therefore it would be a crime.”

“That is correct.” Stol'tor agreed. “The law is clear on that account.”
“Then will you heal us?” he pressed. “Surely you would not leave us untreated.”

Stol'tor gazed with some slight interest between Syrok and Sarek. “Curious.” he stated. “An ethical dilemma. If thou go' est against thy family's wishes and refuse a severed bond, I, as thy Healer, am left with two choices. I can heal thy bond against thy family's wishes, thus following the most medically sound course. Alternately, I can refuse thee treatment in accordance with thy family's wishes.”

Syrok did not need to confirm the choice. It was clear to all. Now he could only wait to hear what Stol'tor would do, and whether the ambassador would prevent further action.

As if recognizing the same possibility, Sarek spoke. “Even if Stol'tor would treat this bond, I could disallow him to treat you. It is within my power to do so.”

“It is.” Syrok confirmed.

“And yet the two of you are still determined to go through with this mockery of a bond. Stol'tor has discussed with me your options. To treat her as an invalid or kafeh --” he said with distaste.

“It is our choice.” Syrok intoned with a startlingly steady voice. As he made his decision abundantly clear, Holly came to stand beside her mate in solidarity.

“A choice to which she cannot possibly consent, as she cannot possibly comprehend.” Sarek countered.

She spoke for herself this time. “With all respect, Ambassador, Syrok has divulged the entirety of his dilemma with me while we were in privacy. As much as is possible for a human, I understand what I am agreeing to. Possibly death -- both mine or his. It is not a comfortable decision to make.” she took a steadying breath as her voice began to shake. “To be honest, it is possibly the most frightening decision I've ever made in my life. But it is my choice.”

Sarek was almost impressed, almost, with their show of solidarity and the maturity of their countenance. Yet he could not help the sinking feeling in his heart. “You are but children.” he said quietly.

Syrok bowed his head to the truth of his words, and spoke once more in his own tongue. “We are but children, Osu. Yet my biology claims me nonetheless. We are faced with a decision nonetheless. And though it may be unwise, it is our decision to make. If thee would allow us to proceed, we humbly would submit ourselves to your guidance. We do not wish disaster to befall this union.”

“It is not my place to interfere where your family objects.” Sarek said with regret. “I am not of your family, House, or Clan. For me to actively advise you on such a union would cause outrage. However, I am willing at this moment in time to not stand in thy way. In spite, perhaps, of my better judgment.. In spite of my knowledge of your family's wishes. I find myself unwilling to deprive you of needed medical treatment.”

“You have our gratitude, Osu.” Syrok murmured, and the ambassador turned away. From this point forward, the situation would be out of his hands. He'd already done perhaps more than was proper.

That left only the trio, and at long last, Stol'tor stepped back into the room and closed the door. “If you would proceed to the bed. I expect that Ms...”

“Winters.” Holly supplied.
“I suspect that Ms. Winters may appreciate the comfort of a bed and pillows to lean on by the end of the meld.”

They situated themselves a bit awkwardly in the small area. Holly propped against the headboard with pillows behind her back, Syrok and Stol'tor completing an equilateral triangle with her, their legs folded beneath them as they sat atop the covers. Gently, Stol'tor touched the psi-points of both individuals and murmured the ritual incantation. He slipped easily into a shared space with both persons, and carefully removed the shield Sarek had erected, unleashing the poorly contained chaos of the bond.

While the couple were in turmoil of unbridled panic and confusion, Stol'tor remained placid and calm, methodically adjusting the weight of their bond toward its natural equilibrium. It was a strange sensation to them, like that of a teeter-totter re-balancing and settling. For Holly in particular, it was as if a great weight had lifted from her, a burden shifted away and she could suddenly breathe again. For Syrok the experience was very much like regaining control of something fundamental. Whereas before he could not control either his own erratic thoughts or Holly's, now he was able to put both into perspective easily, brushing them aside and offering a calm base to the couple. They both sighed audibly with the relief of it.

His task complete, Stol'tor carefully extricated himself from the couple's thoughts. He was unsurprised that when the meld had ended, Holly was fast asleep against the pillows behind her. Syrok himself was barely keeping himself awake after the strain of the ordeal.

“You are welcome to stay at the Embassy for as long as you require.” Stol'tor intoned, moving himself toward the door.

“You have our gratitude, Healer.” Syrok said reverently.

Stol'tor merely nodded in acknowledgment. “Live long and prosper, young one.” he gave as farewell, his hand splayed in the ta'al.

“Peace and long life, Healer.”

As the door clicked behind Stol'tor's departure, Syrok stared groggily at the peacefully sleeping form of his mate on the bed before him. His mate. Now, the bond finally settled in its proper place, he could feel the peace radiate from her. It had begun this way, he reminded himself, still perhaps illogically concerned that Holly's status would revert to chaos. But no, this was wholly different. Stol'tor had of course been correct in his assessment of their bond. Syrok could breathe easily now as he effortlessly controlled his psychic emanations as he had always been able. There was no roiling chaos beneath the surface here. Only peace and union.

As tired as he was, none of their things were in this place, and he was uncomfortable being too close to the constructs of home. The medical disaster had been dealt with, but he could have no really ally in the ambassador -- not when his family disapproved of this bonding. He knew that he and Holly's difficulties were only beginning. And so with infinite care, he scooped up his bondmate and held her close to his chest, utilizing the bond to steady her slumber, and made his way down halls and stairs to the entry room. It was there he called for an aircar to pick them up and damn the expense of it. What was done was done. He'd already caused tensions and this offense. would be minor in comparison.

With infinite care he eased Holly into the car with himself and they made their way home to Holly's room. While it was not overly late in the night, it was late enough for exhaustion to have
claimed them. Once Holly was settled in the bed, Syrok made his way to the bathroom for his nightly ablutions and finally crawled tiredly next to his mate. Her breathing was even and deep as he curled around her protectively and followed her to sleep.
Chapter 39

It was 11:34 when Holly finally woke the next morning. She blinked lazily and looked around the room, orienting herself. The first thing she noticed was Syrok sitting at her desk, diligently working on something or other on his PADD. She smiled warmly at the sight of him, and slowly the night's long activities flashed back to her mind. She could still feel a greater sense of Syrok within her, muted but present. It was nice, like a pleasant white noise in the background of her thoughts.

As if noticing the direction of her thoughts and noting her wakefulness, Syrok turned to regard her, his eyes warm. “Holly.”

“Hey.” she smiled gently up at him, stretching but not hurrying to get up.

“You have not broken fast.”

“Neither have you.” she pointed out. “And you eat more.”

“Nevertheless --”

“Yes, I know. And we're meeting T'Sala and Geri for lunch. We can tell them the good news.” She noticed that Syrok flinched at her words. No, he didn't flinch, she realized. It was an internal flinch, and she now had access to his emotional state, muted and controlled as it was. “We don't have to tell them everything.” she said gently.

“I would prefer that we did not.” he said uncomfortably, and Holly sensed a slight tinge of shame.

“Syrok.” she sat up and reached out a comforting hand to touch his own. “It's not your fault. And we're going to have to tell something to T'Sala at least at some point if we want her help.”

“It is perhaps not logical to have an emotional response toward what has already passed. Nonetheless, I cannot help but wish my first attempt had been successful.”

“It doesn't make our bond any less strong or valid.” she pointed out.

“You are, of course, correct.” he acquiesced.

“I'm stealing your logic.” she teased cheekily and felt a hint of mental chastisement from him, though his expression did not appreciably change. With reluctance but an empty belly as motivation, she roused herself from the bed and grabbed her shower kit, heading to the bathroom.

T'Sala glanced up from where she sat next to Geri. Syrok and Holly were approaching, and she was momentarily distracted by something Geri was trying to explain to her, when Syrok caught her eye. She realized then, it was not only Syrok who had focused intently on herself, but Holly as well. What...? With slow deliberation, Syrok extended two of his fingers to Holly in the ozh'esta, which she reciprocated in kind. This was no casual touch, and Holly smiled an exhausted smile at T'Sala as she completed the gesture. T'Sala's eyes went wide, but she'd been wrong so many times before. They had performed the ozh'esta before, she reminded herself carefully.

“I would like to announce our betrothal.” Syrok said with simple elegance as he seated himself across from Geri, setting down his tray and beginning his lunch with casual nonchalance. Geri stopped whatever she'd been yammering on about and looked to Holly with shock.
“Your what?!”

“It is well.” T'Sala said sincerely, as a tension she hadn't realized she'd carried was released. No longer was the relationship improper and confusing. They were betrothed, as they should have been for some time.

Holly smirked smugly and began eating her food. “You heard him.” she laughed slightly at Geri's face. “We bonded last night.”

“Wait, fucking what?” she repeated herself, now with more vulgarity. “Bonded? Like crazy mind shit?”

“Geri.” T'Sala remarked somewhat testily at the vulgar reference to telepathy.

“It's like an engagement.” Holly elaborated. “For Vulcans. I get to level up whenever we actually marry or whatever.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Geri mumbled, shaking her head incredulously. “Congratulations.” she said somewhat belatedly, but nevertheless sincerely.

Holly merely snickered as she continued to eat.

“The bond is well?” T'Sala inquired. She nearly smiled. “What is its nature, if it is not improprietous to ask? Pudvel-tor-ashaya?” she guessed -- a bond of love with one's chosen. Not unheard of but terribly romantic, insomuch as Vulcans held to such notions. She'd spent some time imagining the various types of bonds her friends might eventually share. But much to her surprise, Syrok stopped eating and went perfectly still, his emotions concealed.

“It is well.” he said simply, and did not immediately elaborate. “There was a problem.” he continued in his own tongue.

“Hey, no fair.” Geri interrupted. “No Vulcan at the table.”

Syrok continued as if Geri hadn't spoken. Geri may be Holly's friend, but she was certainly not family. T'Sala was not officially kin either, but she was perhaps one of the closest approximations he had on Terra. “A Healer was sought.”

T'Sala looked somewhat distressed, glancing between them. “But it is well?” she reiterated.

“All is well now. I am uncertain as to how to describe the bond.”

T'Sala's brows wrinkled slightly in confusion. How could he be uncertain of that which he held so close?

“Kafeh.” Holly said a single word, and both Syrok and T'Sala tensed. Syrok nearly closed his eyes, while T'Sala's widened.

“Holly --”

“Helloooo?” Geri continued. “What's the big secret?”

“Nothing.” Holly said with a shrug. “Just Vulcan shit.”

Syrok and T'Sala shared one last enigmatic look between one another and dropped the topic as they continued to socialize once more as a group.
They made their way back to the room for the rest of their birthday weekend, which had morphed, Holly supposed, into a type of engagement-honeymoon. Was that a thing? Regardless, she helped herself to some cake as she sat herself on the bed, and Syrok presented a PADD to her.

“You must sign this.”

“What is it?”

“It is a change in personal status form. I have already filled mine out. You must also submit one. I have filled yours out for you. It requires only your signature.”

She made a cursory glance at the form but her eyes glazed over slightly at the legal jargon. She trusted Syrok, and quickly signed it out of the way.

“I have also organized a meeting with the on-campus Healer for us.”

“You what?” Holly snapped, and Syrok felt her irritation and nervousness ripple across the bond.

“After last night's disaster you can hardly blame me for wishing to take necessary medical precautions.”

“How is this in any way a precaution? Didn't you take me to the Embassy because you didn't trust a Healer with a human mind?”

Syrok shielded his own nerves from Holly's observation as he answered, but she knew better.

“While that is true, we do not have access to Stol'tor on any regular basis. You have already established a primary care physician on campus for your physical health, as is required. It is both sensible and also strongly encouraged that one seek out a primary Healer as well.”

“Do you have a primary Healer on campus?” she demanded stubbornly.

“It had seemed unnecessary at the time.” he hedged.

“You big faker.” she tossed a pillow at him. “If it's such an important thing to have you'd already have one.”

“I did not formerly have a human mate. I did not have an unequal bond. I did not --” he was flustered now “-- I did not damage one's mind. It is only logical that we establish a Healer now, while it is not needed, so that in case of an emergency, we have somewhere to turn.”

“What if he fucks something up in there?” Holly countered.

“It is unlikely he or she would cause any harm. However, it is reasonable that we should establish whether the campus Healer is able to deal with your physiology now, so that if we find they are unable to do so, we may look elsewhere until we find a suitable match.”

Holly glared but had no logical response. Syrok had reasonable points. She just hated doctors. Apparently her distrust of medical professionals drifted easily through their shared bond while her mind was on it.

Syrok's countenance immediately softened, and he lowered his mental shields as he pressed affection toward his distressed mate. “I know, ashaya. I will be present throughout the visitation.”

“Alright.” she mumbled. “When is it?”
“Tuesday at 15:00 hours.”

“I'll have to miss Vulkhansu.” she pouted.

“Which brings me to my next topic. I have contacted Professor Selkar for a private meeting between the three of us.”

“Why?” Holly let out an irritated dismayed whine. “Come on, Syrok, seriously?”

“You will need to begin receiving additional instructions on my culture.”

“Can't we just ask T'Sala?”

“I intend to contact her as well. Professor Selkar, however, is both an instructor and an elder to us and thus is more suitable as a teacher on a wide variety of topics. T'Sala will more appropriately serve as your family when it comes to more delicate topics.”

Holly let out an in-eloquent huff of air, blowing strands of hair out of her face and deflating slightly with acquiescence.

“As I have contacted him first thing this morning, he has already responded and agreed to meet at his domicile this evening.”

“You don't waste any time, do you?”

“To do so would be inefficient.”

“Right....”

Before they could get any further along, the communications software on Syrok’s PADD chimed. He blanched and Holly felt a slight frisson of distress come through the bond.

“Who is it?”

“It is my mother.”

Syrok paused uncharacteristically to gather himself. Carefully, he set the PADD on its stand on the desk and pressed the receive button just as Holly came to sit beside him in Geri's free chair.

“Mother.” he answered.

T'Dinnae's scowl (which she'd deny revealing) took in Holly immediately. "My son.” she answered in Vulcan.

Well, this is starting really well, Holly thought sarcastically to herself. It was never a good sign when Vulcans switched spontaneously to their mother tongue. It meant they were ornery.

“Greetings, T'Dinnae.” Holly offered, not missing a stride.

“It is illogical to conduct this interview in Vulkhansu if you are attempting to exclude Holly, Mother, as you are well aware of her fluency in the language.”

T'Dinnae did not respond to his blatant accusation of illogic but merely continued in Standard as if it had been her intention all along.

“I was contacted by the Vulcan Embassy on Terra last night. It is my understanding you attempted
to establish a betrothal bond with Ms. Winters.”

“That is correct.” He did not budge an inch. He would not offer more.

“And thy bond was found deficient.” she continued, waiting for Syrok to explain. Holly suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. Vulcans. They could be very obstinate when they wanted to.

“We experienced some initial difficulty. However, I was able to find a suitable Healer and have had the difficulty corrected.”

His mother's face hardened further, if that were possible. “I forbid this.” she stated plainly.

“Mother --”

“Know thy place, my son.” she continued in Vulcan. “You are but a child and your decision of mate falls to the family.”

“What has father to say of it?” Syrok interrupted.

As if by magic, Syrok's father pulled a chair into view of the screen. It was Holly's first look at the man, and she was startled by how similar the man was to Syrok. His face was stern and blank as ever, but there seemed to be a sympathetic light to his eyes.

“It is not the logical choice, Syrok.” he said in controlled tones. “Explain the root of this rebellion.”

Syrok positively bristled over the bond, but managed to keep the agitation from showing outwardly. “It is no rebellion. I have found Holly to be a most suitable and logical choice in mate. I have no illusions that our union will be easy, but I desire her and have chosen her, as she has chosen me. Our union is non-negotiable. The tel is already established and is healthy.”

Syrok's father, Soren, furrowed his brow ever so slightly as if in deep though, just as Syrok himself often did. “Explain the difficulty you had in the bond and its resolution.”

Syrok was absolutely mortified, but he dared not refuse his father's request. “Last evening, Holly and I agreed mutually to establish a betrothal bond between us.” Soren nodded for him to continue. “I attempted to establish the bond on my own, without the aid of a Healer. After some time had passed, Holly and myself experienced increasing levels of... discomfort and distress. It became clear to me that the bond was not settled properly, and I sought assistance at the Embassy.”

“Why did you not consult the nearest Healer? The Embassy is for matters of grave importance.”

Syrok nodded his agreement. “I was concerned that the bond was unsettled due to Holly's human physiology, and equally concerned that a typical Healer would be unfamiliar with how to resolve such a situation. Knowing that Ambassador Sarek shares his bond with a human --”

“Ah, I see.” Soren interrupted, nodding thoughtfully. T'Dinnae shot him a look that could kill but maintained her silence, and he seemed coolly unaware of her discontent with this little interview.

“The bond I had established was of equally weighted orientation. It is now weighted more heavily toward my end, and the distress has ceased.”

“Is it her physiology then that was at fault?”

“Unknown. I am not familiar with the nature of other Vulcan-human pairings. In the case of Holly
and myself specifically, the healthy orientation is one wherein I maintain a greater degree of control.”

“How much control?” T'Dinnae asked shrewdly, hearing what Syrok was carefully not saying. She was instantly suspicious of his verbal side-steps.

“90/10.”

Syrok's mother hissed in a breath in apparent shock. Even Soren's eyes widened slightly at the admission. “That is certainly unconventional.” he said circumspectly.

“Unconventional? It is an abomination of a bond.” T'Dinnae snapped. “I will not see my son wed to a weakling who cannot be relied upon to sustain psychic contact.”

“We are in constant contact now.” Syrok pointed out. “It is simply that I control the majority of its nature. I am not left bereft or injured.”

Soren appeared genuinely interested. “A Healer has verified that this orientation is healthy?”

Syrok nodded once, sharply. “It was he who suggested this course of action and performed the task.”

Soren appeared to reflect upon what Syrok had told him, not saying anything. T'Dinnae looked at him in surprise. “You cannot possibly be entertaining this --” she began, but was cut off sharply by her husband.

“My wife, attend.” he said with stern control, and much to Holly's surprise, the force of nature that was Syrok's mother became still and silent at once, seeming thoroughly chastised. “We cannot take immediate leave of our ship.” Soren continued to Syrok. “I will meet with you and your mate to discuss the situation in greater detail at our earliest convenience.”

“Yes, Father.”

“I shall contact you when we have established an itinerary.” He then raised his hand in the ta'al.

“Live long and prosper.” he said in the general direction of the camera.

Holly followed Syrok in the return gesture with a hasty repetition of “Peace and long life.” as the connection was cut.

“Well.” she said into the silence. “That went better than expected.”

“Indeed.” Syrok agreed.

“So what now? I learn better table manners over the next few weeks with Professor Selkar, and win over your father's support?”

“Your ability to simplify circumstances to the point of misrepresentation never ceases to astound me.”

Holly smirked snarkily but bit back any reply. She simply resumed the eating of her birthday cake and allowed Syrok to continue to pore over her schedule, rattling off customs and skill-sets she would need to master and in what time frame. And in spite of the innumerable obstacles that lay before her, Holly realized that she was happy.
Chapter 40

It was Selkar's wife, T'Prea, who answered the door. She stood in stony regard of the duo before her, communicating in silence with her mate that his guests had arrived. Syrok formed the ta'al to greet her. “Greetings. I have an engagement with Professor Selkar.”

“I am aware.” she stepped aside to bid them entry. Syrok swiftly made his way into the domicile, Holly in tow. “I am T'Prea.” she said simply.

“I am Syrok.”

“Holly.”

Hasty introductions out of the way, T'Prea led the couple into her sitting room. Holly glanced around with open curiosity. The home itself was very Terran, but the furnishings were a mix of Terra and Vulcan, and the general aesthetic pure Vulcan. The floors, she noticed, were hardwood, something Holly knew would never be seen on Vulcan, a desert world, but standard enough on Earth. She understood that there were rarely couches, as such, on Vulcan. Where would such plush stuffing come from? And what purpose would they serve? Nevertheless, a couch was present here, as it was a common Earth furniture, and more traditional pieces would be hard to come by. As a sort of compromise, this couch appeared firm and unyielding in nature. It was a place to be seated, nothing more. It was here that Holly and Syrok seated themselves as indicated by T'Prea.

“I will obtain refreshments.” she said simply. “My husband will join you shortly.”

Holly continued her casual perusal of the room.

On the walls hung some sort of embroidered tapestries with Golic script upon them. As it was entirely unnecessary for her to learn, she hadn't yet obtained even cursory knowledge of how it worked, and hadn't the faintest idea of what it said, or what the fabric displays were for. She saw no evidence of a meditation area in the sitting room, but then she wouldn't necessarily, as meditation was often a private affair. She reasoned it must be somewhere else in the house.

The room was sparse and pragmatic. There weren't many nick-knacks lying about. However, there were two small animalistic stone statues sitting on a shelf on either side of some sort of urn. A few antiquated weapons hung on the far wall. A lone table by the doorway held a stray PADD and an empty glass. These small touches put Holly more at ease, as they were evidence that as alien as Vulcans sometimes seemed, they were sentient beings just as she was, and the home was well lived in, not simply a cold location to exist.

In fact, as spartan as the décor may be, cold could not be used to describe it. Though there was little to color., the palate was always one of rich desert hues of red, orange, and brown. The temperature was quite warm and Holly felt comfortable removing her thick sweater that had become her constant companion during the cool autumn season. Even Syrok's constantly tense countenance eased slightly in the heat as he removed his thick jacket, though he still wore long sleeves. Just as they settled in, T'Prea returned bearing a tray which she sat on the low table before them. She seated herself across from them in a close chair and began to pour the tea slowly and almost ritualistically. “I have brought kreyla and spice tea.”

At the mention of kreyla, Holly felt her bondmate's mood warm with a nostalgic pang, something she'd never witnessed in him before. She knew intellectually that he missed his home and that Earth was not always comfortable for him, but he'd always seemed so aloof that something like
nostalgia seemed beyond him. Now she knew better. As the pungent scent of spice tea wafted toward him and the overly hot cup warmed his chilled hands, Holly felt palpable relief and comfort from her mate, and found herself relaxing in response.

She’d heard of kreyla, a type of bread resembling a scone, but it was so difficult to come by offworld foods. And she’d heard of spice tea of course, but Syrok had always preferred to make due with Terran teas himself as they were cheaper and easier to procure. With undisguised curiosity, she tasted the fare for the first time, and was pleasantly surprised with the result. Perhaps the bread was mild and simplistic, but it was homey and had a subtle flavor all its own. The tea was pungent and heavily spiced to compliment the plain bread, and both its heat and flavoring spoke to the fact that it was not meant to be drunk quickly, but rather sipped and savored. In this way, the bitterness did not become overwhelming, but rather tasted more novel and interesting when taken in such small doses. She was certain that humans who complained about Vulcan cuisine, on the whole, were not doing it right.

It was as they ate in traditional silence that Selkar joined them. Apart from raising his hand in the form of greeting, he made no comment and simply made himself comfortable (insomuch as Vulcans ever looked comfortable in public), and ate and drank with his wife and guests. After long, meditative minutes, when the kreyla was depleted and the tea finished, T’Prea gathered the dishes and made her way to the kitchen, leaving Selkar with his guests.

“I welcome you to my home.” he said somewhat formally, but warmly.

“We thank you for your hospitality.” Syrok responded as Holly nodded her agreement.

“It is my understanding from your message that you had something of a personal nature to discuss.” Selkar had his own hypotheses about what Syrok might have to say. Obviously it had something to do with this girl he wished as mate, as they’d spoken of his difficulties once already. He felt a somewhat familial connection to this child in spite of him being from a different Clan. Syrok had no family here, and Selkar’s own family, aside from his wife, were also quite far away. It was only logical that he should aid one of his own kind when it was within his capacity to do so.

“Yes.” Syrok paused with awkwardness, but pressed forward. “Holly and I have established a betrothal bond.” he stated plainly.

Selkar showed no physical reaction, although he was slightly surprised it had finally occurred. He’d had no substantive speculations about the eventual status of this relationship, and so to a degree, any news would have been surprising to him. “Then I offer my well wishes.”

Syrok nodded. “The bond is strong.” he said with some note of pride. “However, my family is still not in favor of the match. Additionally, it has come to my attention that... when certain matters must be attended to, I have formulated no plan.”

Selkar caught his meaning and immediately felt uncomfortable. He was admittedly somewhat surprised to find that Syrok had apparently already divulged pon farr to Holly. Well, at least she was willing to stay through that. “Such details --” he began.

Syrok spared him. “We will need a secure location.” he interrupted, and Selkar was glad for the explicit, pragmatic questions that he could have any hope of answering. “The humans may overhear. They would not understand.”

“Traditionally one would return to Vulcan during The Time.” Selkar divulged.

Syrok’s eyes widened. How did the professor know what others would do? Had he gone himself?
Did he know of other students? This was precisely the reason he'd approached Selkar. From the first, Selkar had seemed informed about Starfleet's standing on Vulcan customs. And though Syrok had read all the regulations officially on the books, they had been left intentionally vague, and he had no real sample size to question on such personal matters. “Is that so? What is Starfleet's policy regarding the absence?”

“Our Healers verify an unspecified fever suffered by our kind which must be treated on our planet. As it is a health risk, the absence is allowed under such a directive.”

“Holly is human,” he said with some concern. “She cannot claim such a fever afflicts her.”

Selkar flexed his hand in the Vulcan equivalent of a shrug. “She is thy bondmate, and as I've stated earlier, she cannot be kept apart from you for more than three days time. Although the situation is irregular, there are certainly avenues to explore.”

“That is reassuring news. Although it comes with its own set of complications. If we are to travel to T’Khasi, I shall require my family's approval even more-so. This brings me to my second reason for contacting you. I had hoped that you could assist me in tutoring my bondmate in the ways of our culture.”

Selkar raised a brow at this and regarded Holly who was content to sit silently, allowing Syrok to speak for her. How different she was with him, compared to how outspoken she was in his class. “Ms. Winters is at the top of her class. Although we focus mainly on language, we cover a considerable amount of cultural information.”

“I have no qualms with the standards of her class. However,” Syrok hesitated, not wanting to cause offense., “the level of cultural assimilation that will be required of Holly as my mate far exceeds even what may be necessary for a diplomat.” he finished softly.

Selkar's rigid countenance seemed to twitch slightly into something more friendly. “Thy mate is human, Syrok.”

“My family is Vulcan. And there are many ways to cause offense.”

“They want us to break our bond.” Holly finally spoke up, drawing the attention of the others. Her voice and countenance were earnest and emotive, though her voice remained soft. “Professor... please. I'll do anything to keep it. Just tell me what to do. How to eat, how to sit, how to dress, even, I don't know. That's the point. I don't know, and Syrok can only think of so much. There are so many things that are part of a culture that go unnoticed until someone acts differently and stands out. I can't afford to embarrass my mate.”

Syrok's own speech was less emotional than Holly's. “As you are a professor, and as we have already spoken of personal matters in the past, it seemed only logical that I should approach you and seek your advice in this. You have a history of teaching, which I do not, and you are an elder, which I am not. I will instruct Holly in all that I can, and I hope to enlist a mutual female acquaintance to handle more delicate subjects. However, I am not yet even considered an adult by the standards of our people, and I humbly ask for assistance.”

“When one asks for assistance it is only logical to give it.” Selkar responded evenly. “I shall give the matter meditation in order to formulate a logical curriculum.”

“You have my appreciation.”

Selkar nodded.
Syrok hesitated to ask his next query. He could leave now, as the meeting had reached a logical conclusion but....

Selkar noticed perhaps a slight twitch or sideways cast of Syrok's eyes. He was prevaricating. “Is there something else?”

“Holly and I do not yet cohabitateate.” Syrok said evenly, but Holly felt through the bond the wave of awkwardness.

“Ah.” Selkar said simply, conveying his understanding of the problem. That indeed was difficult. “I cannot readily think of a way in which you might use Starfleet's regulations in order to rectify the situation. Should I think of a solution, I will be sure to tell you.”

Syrok nodded his appreciation.

“If that is all?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Then I will bid you good evening.” Selkar rose and escorted them to the front door.

Holly had always thought that Vulcan abruptness would lead to awkward moments in conversation, but as both Selkar and Syrok had expected the conversation to end so succinctly, she realized that they showed no such discomfort with the proceedings. There was a casual calm that accompanied their actions and scant words, and a certain comfort that came with ritual.

With more raised hands and “live long and prosper”’s out of the way, Holly and Syrok proceeded home.

“You're crabby.” Holly said simply.

Syrok wanted to comment on her choice of phrase, or to deny such emotionalism, but he knew it would be futile. “I am discontent with our living arrangements.”

“We did talk about this, though.” Holly said. “I thought the bond would make it more comfortable for us to be apart for periods of time.”

“We are unlikely to experience the psychological and physiological symptoms that accompanied my off-world trip.”

“Buuuut...?”

“However, as you are my mate, I find myself unwilling to sacrifice my time with you. It is both personal, as I prefer your presence, and also... instinctive.” he said with slight discomfort at the admission. “You are my mate.” he added unnecessarily.

“T'Rena was your mate and she was on Vulcan.”

“She was not --” he stopped himself from saying it aloud.

“Kafeh.” Holly finished for him.

“You are not kafeh !” he snapped.
“Why are you in denial?!” she demanded hotly. And then she felt it, a hot wave of shame that engulfed him when confronted with the reality of what they had, and even more than that -- he liked what they had, and this caused him only more shame. “Syrok....” she said gently. “It's okay.”

“It is not 'okay'. I am not my ancestors.”

“No, I know you're not.” she said evenly.

“Yet I am here.” he said as if it explained everything. Holly prompted him with a nudge of confusion. He closed his eyes and spoke very softly. “I am on Earth, not on Vulcan, in Starfleet, not the VSA. My hair is long like that of my ancestors, and I am dressed now in these Terran clothes. The air is wet and cold at all times. My meditation is a shadow of what it once was. I eat in secrecy, and foods which I am unaccustomed to. My mate is human, against all convention. My emotional control is weak as my feelings are displayed so readily to all. I speak Standard more often than Vulkhansu . I bathe in water with scented products. The lights are harsh and white, as is the sun that fails to heat the day. I have no Clan here. I have no... no context. And now? My bondmate is being questioned, and you are to me as a slave of my violent ancestors. And yet I want you still. But how can I make a place for you in my world? We have no place, Holly. And I fear I am losing who I am.”

It was a surprisingly in-eloquent moment for Syrok, whose thoughts were usually so well ordered and explained. Now his mind was filled with chaos, with competing concerns that were related yet separate, but he'd done his best to explain himself to his mate. Holly's heart constricted with sympathy as she began to understand his turmoil. “I'll do everything I can.” she promised in a sombre whisper. “I'll learn to be as Vulcan as I'm able if it will help your people to accept you, to accept us. I will do everything I'm able to assure you you're not losing yourself, k'diwa.”

“Pi’veh .” he said tenderly. “You are human. I cannot ask you to be otherwise.”

“And you are Vulcan.” she said simply.

Those simple words made all the difference. He was Vulcan, and his recent actions did not make him less so. His mate did not make him less Vulcan. The nature of their bond was still Vulcan. Being on Terra did not make him un-Vulcan. His mate's logic was commendable, and he sent a wave of warm affection toward her in gratitude.
Chapter 41

Holly and Syrok sat atop T'Sala's bed as T'Sala took her chair by the desk, facing the couple. Syrok was more than a little uncomfortable about being in a bonded Vulcan woman's private room, but as T'Sala had pointed out, it was the most logical choice of meeting place as it gave them the most reliable privacy. He was even less comfortable sitting atop her bedspread as he knew it would leave a scent signature, even if T'Sala's mate was not present to observe it, but he dutifully took his seat beside his mate and kept his mouth shut.

For a moment, the three were simply silent, uncertain of how to broach the subject. It was the first Monday after the birthday weekend and Syrok had asked T'Sala for this meeting during their shared supper.

“Am I to assume this concerns your recent bonding?” T'Sala asked straightforwardly.

“Indeed.” Syrok admitted.

“Is it truly kafeh?” T'Sala glanced between them with some curiosity.

Syrok stiffened even further, if that were possible. “It is perhaps an oversimplification.”

“We had some difficulty in bonding.” Holly offered.

T'Sala nodded patiently. “So you had indicated.”

Holly glanced to Syrok but realized he wasn't forthcoming with information, and rolled her eyes. “So Syrok bonded us.” she began her tale. “And it was kind of nice at first. Okay, it was really nice --” she began, catching a spike of annoyance from her bondmate. She smirked. “But then I started going crazy or something, and I got this massive headache from hell, and then Syrok started going crazy too, which is really not a good sign if a Vulcan is losing his shit.”

T'Sala's eyes widened at the colloquialism until she caught Syrok's minute shake of the head, indicating it was some sort of illogical human speech.

“So we went to the embassy,” Holly continued. T'Sala blinked at this and Holly realized her question before she had to ask. “I guess because I'm human Syrok thought that a normal Healer wouldn't get it right, although he's making me go to one tomorrow anyway for some reason --” she grumbled. “So then the ambassador was all mad at us or something, but he sent us a good Healer, and Syrok picked that moment to tell me about pon farr.” At this point T'Sala allowed herself to look openly alarmed. While she was gratified that Syrok had finally done his duty in handling this conversation, it was certainly not her conversation to be a part of!

“Oh don't look so offended.” Holly interrupted. “That's half the reason we're here.”

“Perhaps I should explain.” Syrok interjected.

“Please do!” T'Sala all but shouted, thoroughly overwhelmed by Holly's rambling tale.

“The ambassador was less than pleased with my lack of planning for my Time. Holly lacks the instincts of our kind, though she has her own instinctive passivity from which I'd hoped to draw. However, in addition to her requiring extensive instruction from a Clan-member she does not have, she also has human considerations to attend to. She will require more food and more water, perhaps more rest. She will be unable to defend herself, and is both weaker and more delicate. To the first
point, I had hoped to seek you out for your instruction. Although you are not our kin, Holly has no kin of her own and my own family is physically distant and disapproving. I can do my best to prepare her, but I am not a woman. It is not my place. You are her closest Vulcan relation aside from myself. Although it is unconventional, I would ask this of you.” he ended quietly.

“You ask much.” T'Sala said after a long pause. She was not trying to be difficult, but these matters were simply not discussed, and certainly not outside of family. And though she was fond of both Syrok and Holly, they were not her kin. It was not her place. Yet she could appreciate the logic of Syrok's request. They had need, and she was most available to fulfill it.

“Please, T'Sala.” Holly said more somberly. “I have to get this right.” she said in earnest.

It was that final emotional plea that sealed it for T'Sala. One might think Vulcans emotionless beings, but T'Sala saw before her one simply concerned for the life and welfare of her bondmate. Perhaps Holly could not fully grasp the depth of what was pon farr, but she clearly grasped enough. “Very well. I will help.”

Holly sighed audibly with relief, and a murmured “Thank you.” Even Syrok's rigid stance eased slightly at the agreement.

“I am curious to know how there exists a bond of kafeh.” T’Sala stated plainly, internally dying to know how something so unprecedented had occurred.

“As Holly had stated,” Syrok began before Holly could further mangle the story, “the bond was unstable and a Healer was sought. I had established our bond according to the pattern of my previous bond with T'Rena. The Healer informed me that for our own bond to be healthy and stable, there would need to be an innate inequality, on the order of 90/10 or even 100% controlled by my end. After some discussion we agreed we still desired the bond, and requested that he establish the 90/10 scenario if possible.

“While I had my own reservations about our mutual experience of such an arrangement, I can now say that the Healer was indeed correct. It presents itself as balanced in its current state, not unbalanced as one might imagine.”

“So in this arrangement, Holly is thy kafeh?”

“I prefer not to think of her as such.” Syrok said stiffly.

“It is not inaccurate.” Holly retorted.

“I see.” T'Sala said, and she did see. She'd seen Holly following Syrok's lead from the beginning.

Syrok hesitated. “T'Sala... although I trust your discretion, I would ask explicitly that the status of our bond not spread.”

“Of course.” she nodded somberly. Not only would the humans certainly not understand what it meant to be kafeh, (and T'Sala could only imagine the outfall such a revelation would bring), but even Vulcans were likely to have a problem with the ancient bond. Since the time of Surak, things had become only increasingly more egalitarian within their society. No, she supposed that was not entirely an accurate depiction of what Vulcans had. There was a balance, a harmony of the power balance between the men and women of her planet. The Clans were often headed by women, while the women were by law, actually, property of their bondmates. The humans hadn't really caught on to the depth of what it meant, because they didn't know of pon farr, and because Vulcan women did not in any way appear to be subjugated. It was passed off as a weird quirk of an alien culture,
and her people preferred it remain seen as such, though to them it was one of the fundamentals of their society. Without the women, the men would almost certainly die in their Time. Procreation would come to a halt. The chaos and madness of the *plak tow* would throw their violent species back to pre-Surakan times. And so a balance was established. But with Holly as *kafeh*, that balance was disrupted. Syrok would be seen as having perhaps an illogical control within the relationship. So yes, T'Sala very well understood the need for discretion.

“Syrok's Time is in May.” Holly spoke up. “When should I start... er, learning things?”

T'Sala blinked at Holly's blunt efficiency. “When would you like to begin?”

“I have the evening free.” she shrugged. “Now?”

Syrok twitched -- no, not true, Holly realized. He stayed perfectly still and inscrutable as always, but the bond twitched with discomfort. “I will then excuse myself.” he said neutrally and made a hasty retreat. To Holly it was clear that he was running away. Illogical Vulcans and their weirdness about sex and girl things and whatever.

For a moment, T'Sala and Holly simply stared at one another, and then Holly raised a brow with a glint of humor in her eyes, and T'Sala allowed herself to audibly sigh, causing Holly to burst out in a fit of giggles.

“This is a serious matter.” T'Sala practically whined, though she tried to keep her voice neutral.

“I know!” Holly insisted through stilted giggles. “So what's the deal? Syrok goes crazy, loses his logic, and has to have sex with me or die, right?”

“You humans do have a way with words.”

“So I've been told.”

“It is not as simple as that.” T'Sala admonished. “I cannot believe I am broaching the topic willingly but we shall use your menstruation cycle as a basis for comparison.”

“Oh my god, T'Sala.” Holly said with wide, jubilant eyes. “We're actually talking periods together!”

T'Sala closed her eyes very briefly.

“So do you have one?”

“That is not --”

“Oh come on, we're talking about --”

“We are discussing male Vulcan biological cycles.” T'Sala interjected firmly. “Much as your own cycle of menstruation is a cycle, so is *pon farr*. You could say that your “period” has “started” when you begin to bleed, and there will come a point at which Syrok will be considered officially to have entered into *pon farr*. It is marked by certain physiological and psychological differences that will become apparent. However, The Time is not purely biological markers that start and stop. The beginning and ending of ones cycle can be measured by several varying metrics.”

Now, finally, T'Sala could see she'd gained the human's attention. Holly had sombered and was actually paying acute attention to everything T'Sala was saying. “Okay. Like what?”
T'Sala seemed to consider her words carefully, trying to figure out the best way to explain this cycle to an outworlder, or for that matter, to anyone. She was still young by Vulcan standards, and had only been through one cycle with Selek. “Some time in the middle of the height of pon farr, a Vulcan male will enter what is called the plak tow, the blood fever.” she began slowly, quietly. “In his madness, he will not understand reason. He will not respond verbally, nor will he understand verbal communications. He may not be capable of communication at all.” She gazed down at her hands, recalling her own somewhat frightening time. “This will be the height of the urge to mate -- the most violent and vigorous mating, without cessation.”

Holly licked dry lips and asked nervous. “How long does the plak tow last?”

“Perhaps an hour, perhaps a day.” T'Sala said with a Vulcan hand-shrug.

“Is it like... is it like one session of sex? Or like, does he come, and then keep going? Or are there pauses, like ten minutes, an hour....”

T'Sala finally met Holly's eyes, and wished to reassure her, but could not. “It can vary greatly.” she said honestly.

“Oh.” Holly said, taking a deep breath. Now was not a time to panic. It was a time to take in information and prepare herself. Syrok had even less control than she did in this. So she'd suck it up and do what had to be done. “Okay.” she nodded more firmly, and T'Sala was impressed to see the human control her own fears so effectively. “Please continue.”

“The pon farr is said to last from 3 days to 10 days. It varies widely, and is not discussed often. And as explained before, the exact start to the Time is difficult to pinpoint. It can be measured in a technically precise manner medically, by hormone levels and other such biological indicators. But its onset is not sudden.

“During the pon farr, there will be mating. There will be affection. The sharing of minds. It is... intimate. Intense. It is a solidifying of a mating bond for life.”

“It sounds kind of nice.” Holly admitted.

“There are parts that are not unpleasant.” T'Sala said with a hint of a smile. “The three to ten day window will require your subservience to your mate. You must not challenge him.”

“Why would I challenge him?” Holly asked incredulously.

“Because it is your nature. What if you are tired, and you have become sore?” T'Sala pressed. “What if you tense when your mate moves to take you once again?”

Holly looked truly baffled. “I mean... It's his Time. I'm not going to jeopardize his life by stopping him --”

“You must not tense in anticipation.” T'Sala said bluntly.

Holly blinked in mild shock. “But that's...”

“Instinctive. I know. You must learn to overcome this instinct for his Time, lest he become violent. If he senses any resistance, no matter how microscopic or unconscious, he will view it as a challenge, and will seek to reinforce his Claim perhaps violently. It is simple animalistic nature -- beyond his control. Where he has no control over his unconscious response during this time, you must have utmost control over your own. Even the most commanding of Vulcan women learn how to cultivate this passivity when it is required of them.
“It is not simply spreading your legs and enduring,” she said crudely. “It is a lack of tension in the body and the mind. It is a seamless harmony of psyches. It is in the smallest ways you lower your eyes instead of meeting his gaze head on....”

“So I can't even look at him?” Holly asked with growing concern. She was seriously worried she wouldn't be able to pull this off.

“You will learn the proper way to look at him during his Time.”

Holly bit her lip uncertainly. “Okay....”

“Before the three to ten day window of *pon farr*, there will be earlier indicators. Perhaps a Terran month leading up to the Time. This is yet another frame of time that might be considered the start to one's Time. As a Vulcan, I will know that his Time is approaching. Already his hormones and pheromones will change, and others of his kind will be able to scent the difference, though you will be at a disadvantage in this regard.

“When a male Vulcan is nearing his Time, our people know to treat him differently -- to give him a wider berth. Unbonded women will avoid him if they do not wish to be considered as a potential mate. Bonded women may avoid him as they do not wish to incite a Challenge between him and their own mate. And men will avoid him because any action between other men can be misconstrued as Challenge.

“Syrok will become...moody. Already his logic will become more tenuous. He will require more frequent meditation. He will forgo food more often. Ordinary tasks and events may irritate him. On Vulcan... ideally, you would be able to seek relative seclusion at this time. With Starfleet training as an obstacle, I do not know how or when you will be able to seclude yourselves.”

“We're working on that.” Holly divulged. “Professor Selkar indicated that when the time comes, maybe we could go back to Vulcan. The Healers would confirm it's some sort of fever that Syrok would need to have treated on Vulcan, and since I'm his bondmate I could go with him....”

T'Sala nodded. “Sensible. For my own part, I was called away due to a 'family emergency' for the duration of Selek's Time.”

“So did you get to stay with him for the month prior?” Holly couldn’t contain her curiosity. This was the first T'Sala had divulged any such personal information.

“Indeed. And as I had indicated before, the Time is not entirely unpleasant. When in seclusion, ones mate becomes somewhat more affectionate. He will wish to spend much time near you. Indeed he will not wish for you to be long out of his sight or scent range. He will become more... tactile. From a more negative standpoint, he will not tolerate the scent of others, particularly other men -- not in his home, and certainly not on his mate.”

“He can smell that way?” Holly asked skeptically.

“I assure you, he can. I can scent Syrok on you even now.” Holly blushed deeply upon hearing this. “It is a simple fact. Our telepathy is perhaps the primary reason we do not touch one another casually on *T'Khasi*, but it is certainly not the only reason. Mates smell of their mates. Men smell of their Time. Clans smell of one another, of all of those they come into casual contact with. It is a marker of some intimacy or closeness. It is broadcast to all, and so casual touch is not shared among strangers.”

“....right.” Holly said with a sigh. “So don't touch like, *anyone*, for a month leading up.”
“Essentially, yes.”

“That's going to be...” impossible? “... a challenge.” she finished lamely. But how was she supposed to avoid the press of human bodies that would crush around her in the halls during class change? On a crowded bus? In an elevator? Humans simply did not think about casual touch. What if someone bumped against her? Tapped her shoulder to get her attention? Shook hands?

T'Sala held her gaze for perhaps a moment too long. “Now you see what it is like to be a Vulcan among humans.” she said pointedly. And Holly knew she'd made her point. Every day she was with Syrok she learned just a little bit more clearly how alien he really was -- how different from herself. How could he even stand it here? She wondered. The lights bothered him, the cold bothered him, the press of people.... And she wondered how she would do on Vulcan, if indeed they did transport there for his Time.

“Those are some of the things you will need to be concerned with approximately one month before Syrok's Time. But even now, he could be considered to be entering a cycle, of sorts.”

“What do you mean?” Holly's nose wrinkled in confusion. For Syrok wasn't any different than he'd always been, as far as she could tell, for as long a they'd been dating.

“For at least a year leading up to his Time, a Vulcan man will instinctively seek out a mate. It is a biological imperative that he have one. While he was bonded to T'Rena, the point was moot. He had a mate, and the betrothal bond offered stability. Without this bond, he would be in a state of flux and upheaval. It is instinctive that a man so close to his Time secure a mate at all costs.” T'Sala explained patiently, as if what she were saying weren't earth shattering.

“Wait, what?” Holly exploded, eyes wide. “You mean the whole time we've been together it's been because he's in some sort of... existential crisis?”

T'Sala cocked her head to the side curiously, not comprehending the problem. “I would hardly refer to this as a crisis, though his continued existence does depend upon a bond, so perhaps the term existential at the very least --”

“T'Sala.” Holly interrupted bluntly. “Hold up a minute. Did Syrok only bond with me because he's like, freaking out about dying subconsciously? I mean, does he even like me and want me? Is he in his right mind?”

T'Sala widened her eyes and shook her head in bewilderment. “The term “right mind” implies there is something incorrect about his state of mind due to the Time. It is fallacious to presume so. His mind is as it should be for a male nearing his Time. He sought a mate and determined that you were acceptable.” T'Sala really wasn't getting what the problem was here.

“Yeah but....” Holly floundered. “Like say, hypothetically, Syrok's time was more like three years out from now. Do you think he'd still want to bond with me?”

T'Sala looked at Holly like she was completely out of her mind. “I fail to see the point in performing hypothetical scenarios which we cannot possibly know the result of. You are betrothed to Syrok. You have come here to learn how to prepare for his Time. I fail to see what exactly you are fixated on.”

“I just... I want him to like me.” Holly said somewhat sadly. “Not just need someone to suit his needs.”

“He must, as you put it, like you, Holly, or he would not have chosen you as a suitable bondmate to
see him through his Time, especially considering all of the difficulties this choice will present him.”

This was true, and they had essentially been over this fact. It was a Big Deal for Syrok to trust her in this. It was all just so hard to reconcile. It was alien to her -- a totally foreign way of thinking and doing and being. She loved him, for sure, and she wanted to be with him. But in some ways he was a total mystery to her, and perhaps always would be.

“Fine.” Holly acquiesced. She would have to think about this later -- there was no point in circling around the topic endlessly with T'Sala now. “So in some ways Syrok's already in pon farr. Is he ever not going to be in pon farr?” she asked with some mirthful irritation.

Even T'Sala's mouth twitched in a controlled not-smile. “Indeed. You will have several Vulcan years in which he is not in his Time.”

“Wait, Vulcan years?” Holly smacked herself in the forehead with a flat palm. “Shit! I hadn't even been thinking about that. This thing is on a Vulcan seven year cycle?”

“Affirmative.” T'Sala answered, her eyes clouded with some confusion.

“So that's what, like every three earth years?”

“Between three and four years, yes --”

“That's actually pretty often, if you're saying this whole thing starts up for a Terran year ahead of time.”

T'Sala became somewhat stiffly defensive. “Does your menstruation cycle ever end?” she countered. “There is a week of bleeding, there is a week of pre-menstrual symptoms in some Terrans, there is ovulation at the midway point between cycles --”

“Alright, alright, I get it.” Holly waved her off dismissively, realizing that T'Sala could easily go on, and on.

“Given this information, would you find it more useful to address the earliest stages of pon farr, as they will be most relevant first, or would you prefer to focus on the most dire circumstances of the plak tow?” T'Sala queried.

“Let's start with the plak tow.” Holly said with a resigned sigh. “I think I'm most freaked out about that.”

T'Sala wasn't certain that freaked-out-ed-ness was the most logical criteria for selecting a topic, but regardless, the topic needed to be covered. And so T'Sala began, launching into a dry but detailed recitation of the information she knew about the biology behind the plak tow, historical contexts, and all manner of information that had been imparted to her before she had aided Selek in his first Time. And though Holly wasn't certain that all of this information was entirely necessary or helpful, she sat through it and tried her damnedest to pay attention and absorb it, telling herself one could never been too sure what fact could become relevant at some point.

“blahblahblah bond creates a sympathetic resonance...blahblah...”

“Wait, hold up.” Holly stopped her. T'Sala blinked and paused in her recitation of facts. “Does that mean if he's horny I'll be horny?”

“That is... one facet...” T'Sala stumbled, “If perhaps an oversimplification...”
“Oh thank god.” Holly said and flopped back on T'Sala's bed dramatically.

“Arousal concerns you? Based upon scent signature, I was given to understand that you and your mate have already engaged in intimate relations.”

Holly colored bright red. “That scent thing has got to be the kinkiest well kept secret.” she muttered. T'Sala opened her mouth, probably to contest something about kink or scent or secrets, but Holly waved her off. “I'm just saying I'm glad that the bond should arouse me or whatever. I was kind of worried about not being in the mood, and well, not being wet... especially with what you said earlier, about tensing or flinching or whatever.”

“Mm.” T'Sala said vaguely. “It is my understanding that human arousal is not always in accord with ones mate.”

“So you mean to say that because of the bond, you're always aroused at the same time as Selek and vice versa?”

“As far as I am aware, yes.” T'Sala admitted. “The bond certainly plays a major part in that fact, but for pon farr, so does my biology. I am uncertain what your experience will be like.” she hedged, then thought better and said bluntly. “I am uncertain about your, as you say, wetness.” she wrinkled her nose distastefully. “When Selek entered his Time, his fluctuation of hormones and pheromones was detected by my own physiology, setting off a chain reaction of hormonal flux within my own body, preparing itself for a time of prolonged coitus.”

“Coitus? Really, T'Sala, could you make it sound any more clinical?” T'Sala stared unblinkingly in incomprehension. “Okay so what, you never were aroused beforehand?”

“Negative.”

Holly blinked in surprise. “Really? Not ever?”

“Not that I can recall, no. The pon farr is the major marker of sexual maturity and adulthood in a Vulcan male.” she explained. “And due to bonding and all it entails, a bondmate's pon farr typically triggers sexual maturity in a woman as well, though there are other markers that can be observed in homosexual female pairings.”

“I thought adulthood wasn't reached until the age of 35.” Holly wrinkled her nose in confusion. “That's why Syrok can't choose his own mate or whatever.”

“He is nearly thirty five.” she said flatly.

Holly giggled. “He's almost nineteen.”

“In Terran years.” T'Sala corrected.

Holly blinked slowly, as for the second time during their conversation she'd realized her error in failing to account for Vulcan and Terran calendars accurately. She'd never really thought about it. It was kind of weird to think of herself as dating a 35 year old man. But then again, Syrok was nearly the same age as herself. It was just a difference in counting time. Weird. “So you mean all of this bullshit about adulthood is just the difference between pre-pon farr and post-pon farr?”

“Yes.”

“But he's an adult!” Holly said exasperatedly. “Even by sexual maturity standards. We've... done stuff.” she said circuitously, not wanting to divulge too much of Syrok's personal details, for his
“As I said, the pon farr does not begin or end at a precise moment.” T'Sala explained patiently.

Holly huffed in exasperation. “Right. The pre-pon farr year thing.”

“It is only logical that a couple might be driven to experiment sexually prior to the complete loss of one's conscious control and intent.

“Yeah.” Holly ran a hand through her hair. “Yeah that makes sense. So you're saying we should definitely have full on sex before May.”

T'Sala flinched inwardly upon knowing that they hadn't had sex, because she did not want to know whether or not they'd had sex, or done any number of private things together. “It may prove beneficial to do so.”

But human timelines didn't work like Vulcan timelines. There was no biological imperative pressing Holly to mate, and she didn't respond well to external pressure to have sex. In fact, quite the opposite -- pressure of any sort was sort of a total mood kill, and gave her nerves and put her on edge. Yes, Syrok was her intended life-mate, but still, losing one's virginity was not something to just be done at the drop of a hat. Or perhaps it was, for many people, but not for Holly, who had always been cautious and slow in the exploration of her sexuality. How exactly was she supposed to psych herself up to do this in time, without making it clinical and awkward?

Then again, they had the betrothal bond now. T'Sala had said that arousal should be more easily transferred due to it. And certainly there had been arousal on the night of the bonding. Holly flushed recalling it.

“I'll keep it in mind.” she brushed the topic away for now, and T'Sala of course was more than content to let such a topic drop.

The remainder of their talk that night focused on the subtleties of Vulcan eye contact. Holly would have been bored cross-eyed if it weren't for the seriousness of the situation. The whole thing struck her as ludicrously illogical, until T'Sala pointed out the many ways she'd observed human non-verbal communication was perceived. By being “curt”, she'd been misconstrued as aggressive. What might only be good posture to her could be read as arrogance. These body motions, eye motions, general speech patterns... were all instinctive, and nuanced. Holly hadn't had to give them much thought, and now it began to sink in how vastly different cultural and biological norms could be.

What for her might be a toothy grin of happiness would be more akin to a baring of teeth, an aggressive gesture. And while she might instinctively turn her body to face whomever she were speaking to, she learned now that she should not turn herself distinctly away from her bondmate if he were present. The best analogy T'Sala had come up with was that it were like she were deliberately, unabashedly flirting with another man in front of Syrok -- though Vulcans did not really have a concept for flirting, and T'Sala described it first using terms such as “challenge” and “claiming”.

Some of her human gestures of course were perfectly “safe”, at least in terms of inciting a pon farr crazed Vulcan's bitchy side. A human style shrug of the shoulders meant nothing, except perhaps that one's shoulders were uncomfortable and in need of flexing. And a yawn or a sneeze, and other such bodily functions were pretty universal. Holly was a bit relieved that not every single thing she took for granted would get her into hot water, but T'Sala had to ruin it for her slightly when she reminded Holly that while Syrok could recognize these human gestures easily enough, and though
they did not cause offense, if Holly were to meet Syrok's Clan Mother on Vulcan, she was unlikely
to understand their meaning.

And after all of that, Holly was starting to get a headache, and thought it was time she headed back
to her dorm. And she was on her way, actually, fully intent upon a good night's rest and a fresh
start in the morning, until she felt a sort of aching pull from the bond. It was new and weird and
difficult to describe, but in a slight fog from fatigue and strain, she abandoned her walk to her own
place and instead showed up at Syrok's. He met her outside of his building with an uncanny
accuracy.

“How did you know I was coming here?” she quizzed, the tension in her mind and body already
easing as she met his fingers in the ozh'esta.

“The bond.” they said simultaneously -- Syrok as he explained, and Holly as the answer became
immediately obvious to her.

“We can't keep doing this.” Holly said, gazing up into his eyes with warmth that negated the
admonishing tone.

“It is illogical that we do not share a dwelling. We are a bonded pair.”

“You and T'Rena didn't live together.” Holly pointed out. Again. This was not the first such
conversation they'd had on the topic.

“As I have explained already,” he began with infinite patience, “We were not yet of age when we
established our betrothal link, and then I lived offworld while she remained. However, you and I
are living in close proximity but not together, and as I near the Time....”

“Is this some weird challengy thing?” Holly queried, and she sensed immediate confusion and
amusement from her mate. “T'Sala lectured me on how pretty much every thing I do has the
potential to make you feel like you're under some challenge to keep your mate or whatever.
Vulcans are weird, by the way.”

Syrok mulled the thought over. “The notion does have some merit.” Without discussing it, they
began to walk in tandem across campus. Holly wasn't sure really where they were headed. She
wasn't certain whether Syrok had a destination in mind or not, but for now she was content to
simply follow along as they talked. “I have given thought to ways in which we might
cohabitateate.”

“I'm listening.” she prompted.

“For a moderate increase in tuition, I could petition for a solitary domicile, as T'Sala has done. You
could then join me at your leisure.”

“Would they give you one? It's randomly in the middle of the semester. They might not have
rooms available. Plus, what would be your argument? You've been sharing a room for so long....”

“Indeed. However, I am Vulcan.” he said simply. “Starfleet is hesitant to cause inter-species
tensions. Therefore, I believe they would grant me this.”

Holly mulled the thought over, not certain how she felt about Syrok taking advantage of Starfleet
regulations like that. She hummed noncommittally, and felt that Syrok, too, was on the fence about
such a scenario.

“However,” he continued, “Even in such a case, I would need to secure more funds from my Clan.
To do so, I would either need the backing of my parents, whom I have not yet heard from regarding a future communiqué regarding our bond, or I would need to go directly to my Clan Mother and secure her backing.” Holly could sense the nervous tension at such a prospect crackling between them. Syrok wasn't close to his Clan Mother, either by family lines or by acquaintanceship. He knew her, of course, but as one knows a distant cousin, or the head of some company their father worked for. Neither Syrok nor Holly relished the thought of trying to explain this entire situation to her just so that they might share a room.

“Okay....” Holly said slowly, “So maybe that is tentatively ruled out. What are the other options?”

Syrok nodded and continued. “We could marry.” he said bluntly. “I believe Starfleet regulations would permit us joint housing, but even then it might not. Unlike with Vulcan bonding, human marriage laws are... muddled, and unclear.” And if even a Vulcan wasn't sure what the law stated, that was saying something.

Holly gave a derisive short. “Right. And I'm sure that would go over well.” she added sarcastically, just imagining what a marriage would do for their bonding argument with Syrok's family. “What else have you got?”

“I could secure off campus housing.”

“Buuut...?”

“The cost would be comparable.” he continued almost defensively.

“Oh huh.”

“But my parents would not approve of the decision.” he admitted uncomfortably.

“What are the real world consequences of pissing them off even more?”

“I am uncertain. I have never done it before. I suppose they could cut off funds entirely.”

“Would they do that?”

“... I am uncertain. There is simply no precedent.”

“Are those the only options?”

“Other than continually sharing our dorm rooms, yes.”

Holly bit on her lip and gazed up at her mate. His skin was flushed emerald on cheekbones and nose in the autumn chill and he was buried in a coat too thick for the weather by human standards, and she'd never found him so attractive. Vulnerable, uncertain eyes gazed back at her. What would they do? “Let's just do it.” she said wistfully, throwing caution to the wind. “Let's get an apartment. Do you think we could find a cheap one by Thanksgiving?”

“You are aware that I do not consume turkey.” he said with an amused, affectionate glint in his eyes.

“Fine, we'll get a Tofurkey or something. At least try pumpkin pie.” she grinned excitedly.

“I have heard that pumpkin is similar to plomeek.” he mused with interest. Holly's excitement hitched up a notch.

“Are we really doing it then?” she asked breathlessly.
Steeling his resolve, Syrok nodded. “Affirmative.” He shook his head in semi-bewilderment.

“Against, perhaps, my better judgment.”

“You have great judgment.” she insisted, resisting the urge to kiss him right there, settling for another simple touching of their first two fingers.

“So where to, tonight?” she asked as they resumed their walk, realizing they were nearing her own dorm.

“To our own rooms. I will see you often enough tomorrow, including our trip to see a Healer.”

Holly did a poor job of quashing her disappointment. “Do you have to be so reasonable?”

“Affirmative.”

She sighed. With one last lingering look and touch they parted ways, as Holly entered her room again to the noise and vibrancy of Geri, spurring her through her fatigue enough to finish her homework and clean herself before collapsing into a heap until morning.
By now you may have noticed the past few days I'm adding chapters like a crazy person. It is because there is a section that takes place around Christmas, so I worked out when to upload everything so that they coincide. I just feel like it would be special that way. :) 

Holly picked at her sweater in the waiting room. Fidgeting.

“If you continue to disassemble your garment in such a manner, it will cease being.” Syrok admonished dryly.

“I'm not disassembling it.” Holly defended, continuing to pick.

Syrok boldly placed one of his hands on her forearm, halting her actions. “Cease.” he said gently. “There is no cause for your nerves.”

“I know. I just don't like doctors.”

“Then it is well that Sterran is a Healer.”

Holly huffed and rolled her eyes, knowing that Syrok was ignoring her point, and knowing as well that her point was illogical.

Finally, a plain-looking Vulcan stepped into the waiting area and looked unblinkingly at the couple. “Are you Syrok and Holly?” he asked without inflection.

“Indeed.” Syrok answered just as dryly, and Holly for her part was both relieved to get this over with and anxious about what was to come. She knew it was illogical. She'd melded before, both with Syrok and with the Healer at the Embassy. But it was different then, because she had kind of been losing her mind, and also she hadn't been at a medical facility. The sterile scent alone was enough to put her on edge here. It reminded her of her time she'd tried to kill herself.

The room they were led to was small and bare. Two chairs side by side faced one. Sterran took the lone chair, and Holly carefully observed Syrok to sit beside him just a moment after he sat, also being careful of her body placement and eye movement. She was attempting to put into practice the cultural norms T'Sala was teaching her, because she knew the best way to learn and retain was by doing, and it wouldn't hurt to try now. Thus far, if Syrok had noticed, he hadn't said anything. She wasn't very good at it, and the difference was subtle, so she assumed he hadn't noticed. Sterran, for his part, seemed not to react to anything at all.

He lifted a PADD from a nearby small table that was pressed against a wall. “I understand that you share a betrothal bond.” His voice barely wavered in inflection. It was half a question and half a statement. Perhaps he found it unusual. It was certainly unusual.

“Yes.” Syrok stated simply. “While another Healer has already seen to its integrity, I thought it prudent that we should secure a Healer on campus in case of emergency.”
“Logical. May I examine the bond now?”

Holly saw Syrok nod, and realizing she too had to give consent, nodded as well, swallowing thickly. One of Sterran's cool hands came to rest on her own face, and one on Syrok's and soon she felt that familiar sensation of a sort of pressure and unreality, followed by a sharp sense of vertigo. Mental hands reached out to steady her and she sensed the secure hold of her mate in this mind space.

“Apolo—” came the distant detached voice of Sterran. “This is my first meld with a human.”

Holly was aware of the possessive, protective flash of emotions from her mate, but Sterran continued, undeterred. “Illogical. You, yourself, had no interaction with a human prior to Ms. Winters, is that not so?”

“You are correct.” Syrok admitted stoically, and Holly could feel the thick cloud of protection thinning to allow for clear inspection.

Whatever the Healer was looking for, he found it, and whatever inspection took place, it must have been cursory, because within moments Holly felt her eyes opening once more and the world swimming with disorientation. Syrok's hand was on her arm to steady her, and he was watching her carefully, as was Sterran.

“Are you experiencing any ill effects from the meld?” he inquired dispassionately.

“Uhm....” Holly answered ineloquently. Melds always left her feeling... weird. Even the ones with Syrok. They were simply overwhelming. Taxing in a way that she had nothing to compare it to, because she was human, and had no context for this.

“She will recover sufficiently.” Syrok answered for her after a pause, as Holly closed her eyes and focused on her breathing. “It is typical that she has difficulty with intense psychic contact.”

“Even with her mate?” Sterran asked with unchecked surprise. Concern, even?

Syrok mulled the question over before answering. “She has not reacted negatively to what melds we've shared. However, they are overly taxing.”

“Hm.” Sterran said noncommittally.

“Hm? What do you mean 'hm’?” Holly asked somewhat snappishly. “Is this going to be a problem?”

“I do not see why it should be.” Sterran said dismissively, clicking something on his PADD, presumably the results of his mental inspection of their bond.

“What about during Syrok's Time?” she pressed.

Sterran's eyes flew up from his PADD as if startled, and he darted his gaze to Syrok who met it, nonplussed. “I have not yet been through my first Time. It is a legitimate question.” he prompted.

“‘Yes, of course.” Sterran answered, obviously thrown off by having to talk about this topic with a foreigner. “During the time of mating, a full mating bond will become established. It should come naturally and instinctively, and will be the result of prolonged melds and lesser mind contact. It is expected that even under the best of circumstances, the rigors of The Time can be quite taxing on both parties. As for whether Ms. Winters' psychic deficiency will prove hazardous to either of you, it is unknown. She is your mate. You will sense her state, and to some degree can share your
strength. Further, I have observed that your bond is unequal in nature. Perhaps your greater control will alleviate some of her distress. I cannot say.”

“I see.” Said Syrok dryly, but Holly could feel through their bond that the news was less than encouraging. She was beginning to worry about this whole thing all over again. How could this *pon farr* be such a crisis, yet come ever three or four Terran years, and be experienced by all adult Vulcan males? It was ridiculous. Absurd. But she didn't have time to wallow in self pity because Syrok was continuing with his line of questioning.

“When my Time comes, I am told it is standard procedure to return to T’Khasi, and that a Healer can verify that I suffer from an unspecified fever that requires treatment at home.”

Sterran nodded calmly. “I have done so for some few individuals. There are not many Vulcans associated with Starfleet. When is your Time?” he inquired, clicking through his PADD likely to confirm the date or make some notation.

“Ailat.”

Hm..., Holly mused, a Vulcan month. While she'd technically learned the names of the months for a quiz in her first year, she'd never paid heed to them, never compared them to Terran months, or really thought about how their planets were orbiting different suns, at different rates. While Syrok's date of birth would be in May of this year, in the spring of this part of the Earth, it would be some other month on Vulcan, and probably some other season depending on where on the planet Syrok was from. Did Vulcan even have spring? And for that matter, was *Ailat* even a month, exactly? No, she was certain it had something to do with seasons, or maybe some other planetary thing... she couldn't quite remember. But Terran months had to do with the rotation of their moon, and Vulcan had no moon.

Holly was pulled back from her ruminations as Syrok was escorting her to leave, now. She really was tired if she'd missed the end of their conversation.

“Perhaps you should rest.” Syrok suggested with some amount of concern. “You appear fatigued.”

“No.” she said stubbornly. “I've already had to miss my *Vulkhansu* lesson today because of this. I'm not going to miss anything else. And besides, I wouldn't have the health center’s sanction for missing another class, and I don't think Starfleet instructors would be very impressed.

Syrok wanted to argue, but he knew that Holly was correct. Not only did she have to go to class herself, but he had his own classes to attend to, and similarly he did not have any legitimate excuse to miss them. And so, reluctantly, they parted ways, knowing they'd meet later in the day for mealtime and homework and *suus mahna* practice. Holly was careful to let Syrok turn away fractionally first, following suit, and though Syrok didn't comment, he *did* notice, and felt both awkward and pleased with how hard Holly was trying to fit into a culture not her own. He felt somewhat guilty about that, for Holly was human, and he loved her alien nature, and would not change it. But his Time would make certain demands of both of them, and his family and his people would make other demands of Holly as they struggled to retain their bond with minimal social outfall.

It was Wednesday after dinner and the birthday cake was finally gone. It had been been mere days since the bonding, and Holly was exhausted with the changes she'd had to make to her already full schedule. Tonight welcomed another one of those changes, as she was once again at the private residence of one of her professors, Professor Selkar. It was weird being here, because she'd never
done well with feeling comfortable around authority figures, and because previously she'd only wanted to make a good professional impression with him. But now he'd become a sort of weird extended family and he knew about her personal business, and it was, in fact, for personal reasons that he'd agreed to meet with her for these private lessons. And there again, he was half friend, half professor, in that capacity. So it was weird. But it wasn't terrible.

Holly had come alone this time, because Syrok had no logical reason to be there to learn things he already knew. The only reason Syrok wasn't teaching her about Vulcan culture was well, because Syrok was just a youth and it was hard to recognize all the differences in culture until perhaps one of them became a sticking point, and they would rather avoid a catastrophe.

T'Prea, Selkar's wife, was also distinctly missing this evening, and Holly didn't ask where she was, because she wasn't certain that she and the professor had that kind of a relationship. And while Vulcans might at first glance seem blunt and to lack tact, Holly knew better by now, and knew that there were a whole host of things one simply did not speak of socially, in different contexts. So while she was curious, and thought it might be polite to notice T'Prea's absence in a human setting, she didn't want to risk mentioning it just then.

They were in the warm and comfortable (if sparse) sitting room again, Holly on the small couch and Selkar on a plain chair, sharing spice tea and *kreyla*. They'd just gone over in great, dry detail why Vulcans made an exception to eat *kreyla* with their hands, but wouldn't touch a Terran muffin without a fork. It was historical and convoluted and Holly was slightly interested but really didn't care about as much detail as Selkar wanted to give her on the topic. The more she learned about Vulcans, the more she learned that “logic” had variable meanings, and they had just as much weird stuff going on as humans did, though they'd almost certainly contest it. She was working on the finer points of how to drink her tea, and though Selkar had told her much before they'd begun, the food was mostly taken in silence, in deference to Vulcan custom.

She did like the tea and bread, she admitted to herself once again. When she'd first come here, she'd been a bundle of nerves. How should she act? How would this go? What should she say? Do? But a big part of what it meant to be Vulcan was following simple rituals and customs. And one of those customs was to share refreshment with the guest in one's home before anything else significant should take place. And at first, she'd been worried about that too. Eating with others usually meant making small talk, and trying to enjoy or pretend to enjoy the food, and pacing oneself to eat with the others pace, and not making a mess, etc. etc. But Vulcans took their food in silence, and were meant to focus on the simple experience of the food. The various tastes. The textures. The warmth of the mug of tea. The nuanced and intriguing scents. It was a sort of meditation. She'd known before that Vulcans were big on meditation, but she was quickly learning that many every day activities served to center oneself as well. And she was grateful for the opportunity to do so herself.

Holly was used to awkward silences, if she were eating with her own kind and conversation dwindled. But surprisingly, there was nothing awkward here. It was simply calm, soothing in a way. It reminded her of times she'd gone to the temple during off hours, sitting on the dusty wooden floor in a beam of sun, meditating on the idols. It was peaceful and quiet there in a way that was similar to here, and Selkar's home, similarly, was faintly scented of incense. She inhaled the spicy aroma of her tea as well, letting the warmth of the hot liquid and the warm room seep into her tense frame and relax her.

When the last of the snacks were finished, Selkar continued his lesson in a food theme, and the atmosphere was relaxed and easy between them, even though there was an unacknowledged weirdness in the circumstances. “So, refreshments at every event.” Holly said with a bright smile. “I could get used to that.”
“Indeed. There is a certain appetite that seems to accompany young people of all ages.” he almost joked and Holly almost choked hearing it. Apparently Syrok wasn't the only Vulcan to develop a sense of humor after too much time around humans.

She snorted and smirked. “I'm on to you guys. This is just because you're always hungry what with the fast metabolism or whatever.”

“You are aware that is classified information.” he said wryly, hiding his amusement.

“I think we're a little bit past classified information at this point.” Holly said pointedly, alluding to pon farr.

“Perhaps. And you are not altogether incorrect. As a desert planet, Vulcan is not predisposed to copious amounts of food as is Terra. To account for some of the discrepancy in our biological needs is the fact that most Vulcan foods are much more nutrient dense. And while meals are often smaller on Vulcan, we eat more frequently. The word “meal” itself is a somewhat misleading concept.” he elaborated. “Vulcans consume two, what would be viewed as traditional style meals per day -- one akin to breakfast, and one late dinner. At these events, multiple dishes are prepared, families often sit with one another at a specified eating location, and nutrients are consumed for fuel. However, I believe that we eat an average of seven small meals per day. It is just that these smaller events are not always scheduled, not always shared, and are often for reasons other than expressly due to hunger.

“For example, one might take a highly nutritious tea or broth before breakfast, either before or after meditation, or an early morning walk, or some early chore. Breakfast will then take place later in the morning and will have more substantive foodstuffs such as a type of porridge, fruit, and breads. The breakfast meal is considered to be the first meal of the day, but most Vulcans will indeed have taken in nutrients beforehand.”

“Hmm. Like morning coffee.” Holly mused. “Except actually nutritious.”

“Indeed. One would not consider a cup of coffee to be a meal in most cases, nor would a Vulcan likely express an early morning tea or broth as a meal.

“Over the course of the day, school children often have a mid-morning snack of some sort, while adults may break for sustenance at their leisure at their places of work or at home. Business meetings are begun with refreshments. Those that tend their home may make visitations, which would be accompanied again by some food. The circumstances vary greatly, but nevertheless, some small meal is eaten again. There is no lunch, as such, but there is afternoon tea, much like your country of England has long observed, though it is closer in time of day perhaps to lunch. Upon the closing of the work day or school day, some small meal is often observed prior to the evening meal as well. Not to mention late evening refreshments that are often shared by family during their quiet hours.”

“If I went to Vulcan to visit Syrok's family, would I be expected to eat constantly? If the food's more dense, I might not actually want all of it. But would that be rude or weird?”

“There is no offense where none is taken, and it would be illogical to take offense.”

“That doesn't really answer my question.” Holly countered shrewdly.

“It is difficult to say.” Selkar admitted reluctantly. “If you were to visit me, I would not expect you to eat if you were not, indeed, hungry. But then, I am well versed in Terran cultural norms. The understanding of Terran customs varies widely among Vulcans, just as the understanding of
Vulcan customs varies greatly among Terrans.”

“It must have been weird when you first came here,” Holly mused, “To have even such minor things as meal times mixed up.”

“It was an adjustment, one among many. However, all Vulcans are briefed fully on Terran food consumption habits before disembarking to this planet.”

Holly couldn't help but roll her eyes, professor or no. “The whole hiding-how-much-you-eat thing is completely absurd.” she said. “Isn't it just a bit illogical?” She had tried this route with Syrok before, and had never gotten T'Sala sufficiently cornered in privacy while remembering to bring it up. She couldn't help but wonder whether she'd get different results with Selkar.

No luck. Selkar continued in his best professorial voice “Vulcan is a desert planet with very little by way of food. That makes a food shortage one of Vulcan's most prominent weaknesses. In pre-Surakan times, food was one of many major points of contention between Clans, and sparked many confrontations. Though I have been privileged enough not to witness it, a Vulcan without sufficient nutrients, like all animals, can become unhinged. If a mouse is starving it can only cause so much destruction. If an inherently violent and strong being such as a Vulcan, or in the case of hypothetical military action, a group of Vulcans became unstable, the results would be catastrophic.”

“Yes, Professor.” she said with resignation. Not only was it not worth the argument, but she wasn't fully comfortable arguing with her professor, nor in general with any Vulcan who had deemed the topic of conversation to be Serious Business.

In spite of the serious topic, Selkar was somewhat amused by this human. He'd never had reason to have such personal discourse with a student. But then, why would he? There was a certain novelty to it, and he had a certain curiosity about the type of human young Syrok would take as a mate. Until now, Holly had been only a student in his language class -- an exemplary student, to be sure, but still just one of many he'd seen through the years. By doing a cursory search on her name he'd come to know about her paper comparing Surak with Earth fiction and found it intriguing, though not terribly interesting. He knew it was causing a stir among some of his people but he'd never been someone who was easy to shake up.

The food theme continued as Selkar instructed Holly on some nonsense about tea ceremonies, most of which she already knew from her classes as it could actually fall under the purview of diplomacy, but she listened and diligently took notes nonetheless. Who knew? Maybe she'd have to brew T'Dinnae some tea one of these days. The thought of it made her smirk but she kept the image to herself, almost worried it would come true. Because honestly, she was entering into a lifetime bond with Syrok, and there theoretically existed a future in which she would be forced to interact with his mother once again, and even possibly in a domestic capacity.

She'd actually been sort of zoning out with the dryness of the material, and was looking over a document Selkar had just sent to her PADD, a vocabulary list of Vulcan foods. Well, she thought, this should be easy enough to learn, and prepared to take more notes. However, Selkar actually paused here, and she looked up at him in confusion, wondering what the sudden hold-up was in the lesson.

“I have procured for you a list of certain Vulcan foods.” he began gently.

“Okay?” she asked, totally at a loss for why the conversation had turned weird.

“They are a mix of common foods, foods likely to meet the needs of a Terran diet, and which have
at least some evidence of being palatable to human taste, foods that preserve well, can be eaten quickly, are nutrient dense but do not cause over-fullness.” he explained. “In short, I have attempted to provide you with a list of items you might stockpile for your mate's Time.

“During The Time, due to hormonal shifts and our biological ability to do so, most Vulcans, both male and female, are unable or unwilling to eat. A Terran cannot go for such a length of time without sustenance and still be in good health, let alone maintain the energy required for such an ordeal. You will require knowledge of which foods to purchase or request when you travel to T'Khasi. Like Earth, Vulcan has seemingly innumerable choices, all of which will be foreign to you. I thought to provide you with a list that is most relevant and pragmatic, considering your circumstances.”

Holly felt a swell of tenderness wash over her -- it was a feeling she was unaccustomed to. For one of the first times in her life, she had someone acting toward her like a worried parent, actually caring about her well-being and trying to prepare her for the world. “Thank you.” she said quietly, looking at the list with new eyes.

Selkar, like all Vulcans, was uncertain how to handle thanks. He may have been on Earth for some time, but he'd had little occasion to garner thanks. “It was only logical.” he stated plainly, because it was essentially what he believed. “You and Syrok have solicited me for my aid. This will likely be of use.”

Holly nodded, grateful that the thick emotion had quickly cleared out of the air. It was perhaps the quality she most revered Vulcan culture for -- a steady countenance, and an emotional control that rather than feeling sterile or confining, to her simply felt safe, dependable, and sort of grounded. While she knew that many humans found Vulcans in general to be a bit off-putting, they typically comforted her in the way they went about their unruffled day. No yelling or histrionics.

And just like that, with Holly's nod, the lesson continued for some short time more as they covered the list of food, and then departed for the night. Holly felt a sudden warmth toward the end of whatever Selkar was saying and her eyes lit up as she gave a small gasp and turned toward the door. Whenever she really felt the bond in effect, it was still novel and wonderful. Selkar's eyes followed hers just as there was a knock at the door. Ah. Syrok must have arrived. Holly was bounding up to gather her belongings even as Selkar exchanged greetings with Syrok who had come to collect his mate. It was unnecessary, but he had no other current engagements, and this shared walk would afford them more time together.

“What do you think?” Syrok asked at the door, glancing toward Holly as she gathered up her PADD, her bag, and jacket.

“Negative.”

Holly butted in with an exuberant smile and a quick flash of the ta'al. “Thank you for your time, Professor.” Never before had she been so grateful for perfunctory Vulcan greetings and farewells. If there was nothing left to say or do, why belabor the fact?

“You are excited.” Syrok stated as they walked.

“I'm always excited to see you.” she answered cheerily. Syrok raised a brow at that, suffused in the warmth of the sincerity of his mate's claim, but also knowing that she was being somewhat deliberately circumspect about what was likely the most exciting facet of their meeting.
“Ah.” He could play at this game. “In that case, I am pleased to see you as well.”

“Syroook!” Holly whined, falling into giggles. Syrok was always pleased to see her display her happiness so easily, so freely. “Did you see the place?” she prompted. Because Syrok had said he'd already found a potential apartment to look at, somehow. It was beyond her how he'd done it. Well, she kind of knew how he'd done it. He was Vulcan, and he was diligent in his search and efficient and ruthless when it came to answering ads and following up on communications. But still, apartments were never easy to come by in San Francisco, let alone near enough campus to be convenient, low enough in price, and during this off peak season.

“I did.” he answered simply, still holding out.

“Aaaand? Was it great? Are we moving?” Holly was practically “bursting at the seams”, he thought wryly. Her excitement was palpable. He enjoyed the frisson of it very much. However, he had taken the lead in this endeavor for many reasons, one of which was her unbridled enthusiasm that could easily lead her to take any opportunity, even if it were not ideal.

“It is still a contender.”

Holly tisked and rolled her eyes. “A contender? You think you'll find anything else?”

“It has only been two days.”

“And we have pretty limiting criteria. Anyway, what are the positives and negatives? At least give me something to get excited about.”

“I hardly think you need encouragement in that arena. Nevertheless, I shall indulge you. There is a yellow line stop one block from it,” (read, free bus line, not the expensive bus systems which were coded by other colors), “And the building the apartment is located in appears to be in good repair. The apartment is what is referred to as a “studio” here. One room essentially contains the bedroom, living area, and kitchen, while a small offshoot contains the bathroom.”

“I know what a studio is.” Holly interjected with some exasperation.

Syrok ignored her and continued. “This unit comes unfurnished, which is not ideal for our circumstances. We would need to procure some sort of bed, and ideally a dresser at the very least. There, unsurprisingly, is no sonic shower unit, only a water unit. There is a rudimentary refrigerator, freezer, and stove/oven unit, which I understand is standard here.” Holly nodded, vaguely wondering what would be a standard apartment on Vulcan. “Objectively, it will meet our needs. Before making a decision, however, I would like to see more.”

Holly suspected there was more to it than that, but had a hunch this was all she was going to get out of her tight-lipped mate. Holly could only imagine how hard it must be for him. The more she learned about Vulcan, the more she learned how much of an alien world he was contending with. Even the air here must feel “wrong”. She carefully dampened her enthusiasm to give him room to breathe; she'd be patient.
Chapter 43

Holly's patience paid off. Approximately two weeks later, on a Sunday evening in the third week of October, Syrok secured them an apartment, and Holly could hardly believe it was happening. Everything was moving so fast since the betrothal bond. It had been the best decision she'd ever made. For the first time in her life, she had family, she had a future, she was doing and learning and going. She was swept up in the excitement of it all. She hadn't even thought something like this would be possible, but Syrok had filled out all of the required forms with Starfleet to move off campus and had filled out all the necessary paperwork to secure a lease in his name, as he directed his Clan's stipend to pay for it instead of on campus housing. It actually ended up being slightly cheaper for him over all, as he bowed out of the campus meal plans, utilized free bus services, and purchased their own food now.

Geri was grumbling as she parked the moving van outside Syrok's dorm, having already helped load Holly's things into it. “This is the thanks I get for being an awesome friend.” she complained sarcastically. “Making me move a damned house.”

“They don't even have moving vans on Vulcan.” Holly reiterated. “And I don't have a drivers license.”

“How you don't have a drivers license at your age is beyond me.” Geri scolded. “Jesus Christ, Holly, what the hell has that Vulcan been making you do with your spare time? Drop this martial arts shit and get a license.”

“There aren't cars in space.” she countered, and Geri simply rolled her eyes. “Thanks.” Holly said more warmly.

“You'd better have a house party or something.”

“Aww, you're gonna miss me.” Holly teased.

“Hardly. Now I get the damned room to myself.”

“You'll miss me.” Holly insisted smugly, hopping out of the van as Syrok and T'Sala strode up to the van with armfuls of Syrok's belongings. He'd rented the van for the evening as it would be terribly inconvenient to make multiple bus trips with all of their things.

Syrok had already moved his things down to the ground outside so it only took a few minutes to get everything, and everyone situated in the van. Syrok sat himself in the passenger seat beside Geri in order to dictate directions, and Holly climbed in cheerily beside T'Sala. “Thanks for helping us move.” Holly said.

“You are welcome.” T'Sala tried out the uncommon phrase, certain it would always sound alien to her.

“Are you excited?” Holly grinned.

“I am not moving.” T'Sala deadpanned.

“I know, but you could be excited for me. For us.” she amended, her glance indicating Syrok. “You'll have to come visit us.” she continued, not waiting for T'Sala to respond. “We won't be able to eat meals with you much anymore, she added a bit sadly.
“I am aware. However, I am still instructing you in Vulcan custom, and we are still... acquainted. It would be illogical to cease our interactions.”

“Love you too, T'Sala.” Holly grinned, as T'Sala pointedly did-not-glare. Holly gasped suddenly, struck by a great idea. “You’ll have to come over and cook Vulcan food with us!” T'Sala's eyes widened at the unrestrained exuberance. She would never fully adjust to Holly's mood swings, but they were exciting to behold. Holly gripped T'Sala's forearm, throwing Vulcan propriety to the wind. “This is a great idea, T'Sala. And I can make tea!” she continued with excitement.

“Professor Selkar has been teaching me.”

“Tea?” T'Sala queried, still not entirely following.

“Spice tea. With the ceremony and everything.”

And for a moment, T'Sala was actually somewhat impressed. She'd known that Holly's Vulcan professor was also giving her some cultural instruction, but she only knew the rudiments of what they discussed. Apparently Selkar was going “all out”, as humans would say. And the thought of spice tea on a cold day like today made T'Sala briefly wistful and nostalgic for her home. “Do you even own spice tea?” T'Sala queried, somehow doubting it.

“Well noooo, but the professor always has some. He must get it somewhere. I'll bet he could tell me the cheapest place to find it around here. He's lived here for years, after all.”

“Your idea has merit.” T'Sala said with a curt nod, her mind already flitting through the dishes they could all produce and consume together. A family meal. When was the last time T'Sala had had fully Vulcan food? A tea ceremony? Perhaps even the professor and his wife could be included in such a meal. Would that be improper? T'Sala wasn't certain, but she knew that the professor and Syrok had some sort of non-professional relationship. Logical or no, T'Sala was certainly taken by the idea of having a meal shared by those of her own kind. Even Geri would be welcome, if she could stand being around so many aliens for a night. But of course she would stand it. T'Sala still remembered fondly their shared “slumber party”. Geri, like Holly, was a rare and welcoming being.

When they finally arrived at the old building, worn but in good condition, it was the first look anyone but Syrok had had of the place. Holly could barely contain her excitement. She'd had the place described to her of course, and she'd seen a scant two photos of the interior when she and Syrok had discussed a list of three options.

The first option, the studio, had actually been a sort of middle-of-the-road option. And though Syrok wouldn't say so, Holly got the impression that he just didn't find it to be cozy, whatever that description meant to a Vulcan. After the studio, the other two apartments were in more of a compartmental configuration, with multiple rooms containing doors to separate them. Apparently, Syrok was not a fan of the open floor plan of a studio apartment, as he immediately gravitated more toward the next two options.

The second apartment they did not take was certainly the most luxurious. It was part of a complex, included Syrok's longed for sonic shower, a small food synthesizer in the kitchen, a small stasis chamber in addition to the fridge. In other words, it was modern. Holly rolled her eyes at it. She'd grown up in the middle of nowhere, and in a wide variety of households, but none of which were rich, by any means. Luxury was something she had no care for. She'd never had it, so why should she miss it? What would she do with a synthesizer anyway? She knew how to cook, and knew it was cheaper and better tasting. She'd made these arguments, as she saw them as inherently logical, but Syrok had refused to comment on them. She never could get a straight answer as to whether most Vulcan households had such things, or if only Syrok's house had, or if maybe he just wanted...
It.... Her reticent Vulcan was sometimes a totally baffling mystery.

Luckily for Holly, or perhaps unluckily for Syrok, apartment #2 was a bit more on the expensive side, not the least because it came with things like a front desk service, and on site amenities, and so forth. Plus, they'd have to take one of the pay-to-ride bus systems.

Apartment #3, the one they'd finally settled on, was perfect. Holly gazed around it for the first time now as they bustled to and from the van with armfuls of belongings, and she immediately loved it. It was older but in good shape, actually sort of homely, she smiled. It had all wood floors, well worn but freshly polished. The trim was thick with too many coats of white gloss, and the counters of some sort of stone or concrete were a bit chipped and in an older fashion, but they were a neutral gray., something inoffensive to both human and Vulcan eyes. And while apartment 2 would have come fully furnished with new things, they'd worked out a deal with the previous owners of apartment 3, and it came with a bed, a dresser, a small wooden kitchen table, two wooden chairs, and an old battered red couch. It was perfect to Holly, though she knew the cleanliness of the bed and couch were suspect to Syrok's standards. They'd compromised on a bottle of spray disinfectant, a new set of sheets for the large bed, and a plastic mattress cover, and called it good enough. After all, the dorm beds had also been previously used, and no one had seemed to catch any diseases from them, Syrok was forced to admit.

The kitchen was quaint, and had an oven/stove unit and a fridge/freezer. The bathroom didn't have sonics after all, but a rather antiquated shower/bath combo that Syrok would probably shiver in, but Holly vowed to make it up to him with warm towels and warm hugs. The heating system was modern, though, and the climate control was already kicked up to halfway between comfortable and stifling, as they continued to negotiate what was a reasonable temperature, though to be honest, Holly gave in most of the time because she couldn't stand to see her mate all tense from cold, though he'd deny any such thing as discomfort.

Holly snapped out of her inspection of the place to a new flurry of activity as boxes and bags were dumped unceremoniously in the common area, and before she knew it the whirlwind was over, Geri and T'Sala leaving to return the van and most probably return to their dorms. It was about eight o'clock in the evening now, and the sun had set long ago, as fall climbed toward winter. Wordlessly, seamlessly, Holly and Syrok turned to unpack some of their items, putting away things in order of obviousness, leaving things like boxes of books for later, until they could find some sort of shelf for them.

She was grateful they'd had one last meal earlier that evening, in the mess hall, as she realized with a snort that all they had in the kitchen was a truckload of peanut butter, and some cheap tea. In the bedroom, Holly could hear Syrok tackling the bed with sanitizer and a plastic cover and she shook her head in affectionate exasperation, moving on to the bathroom. It was weird, setting up their things together. They'd slept together in the same bed numerous times, but they'd never shared a bathroom before. Everything had been squirreled away in a shower basket and they'd taken their things to far ends of the hall to do their business. Holly had never really given much thought to Syrok's bathroom routine. All she knew was that he preferred sonics.

She rifled through Syrok's bag, finding his bathroom caddy easily. Toothbrush, check. She set it out on the sink beside her own -- something pretty standard, that she guessed he'd bought from a Terran store. Vaguely she wondered about toothbrush design across the universe. But toothpaste? Not check. Though she did find a little tin of weird powder. She smelled the stuff curiously and it was vaguely spicy but gave no hints, and she couldn't read the unnecessary Golic script on the tin. “Syrok,” she called curiously toward the bedroom, “What's this?”

After a moment of shuffling, he poked his head in. “What is what?”
“This tin.” she held it up for his inspection.

“Tooth powder.” he answered succinctly, and his head disappeared from the doorway once more as he moved back to wrestle with the ever illogical “fitted sheet”. They did not have such nonsense on Vulcan.

“Wait, wait!” Holly said with a burst of giggles, only exacerbated when Syrok’s head once again popped in.

“Yes?” he asked, almost without inflection.

“What the hell is tooth powder? You don't have toothpaste on Vulcan?” she asked curiously.

“Negative. The powder is derived from various minerals and spices. It works as effectively as Terran toothpaste, from what I understand. Indeed, powder forms a sort of paste when adhered to a dampened brush.”

“But you have a Terran brush.”

“Yes.”

“Why not Terran toothpaste?” she teased. Syrok stared at her, refusing to answer, and Holly laughed again. “So you don't like it? You're allowed to have opinions, you know, even as a Vulcan.”

“I am... accustomed...” Syrok began, but his argument was too thin for him to stand by, and he practically squirmed with discomfort. He knew it was illogical to have a preference for hygiene products, and he would be unlikely to find Vulcan tooth powder when he was stationed on a starship. He’d already spent an illogical amount of time (read: non-zero) thinking of this very problem, and whether it would be justifiable or not to bring an extra tin or two with him when he inevitably disembarked.

Holly warmed to him in sympathy, catching the gist of his discomfort across their bond. “You don’t have to cut off everything from home.” she soothed. “You can have tooth powder.” she tried to say encouragingly, setting the tin reverently on the sink beside her own toothpaste tube. “Maybe I'll try it sometime.” she offered with a bright smile. “It's probably all kinds of logical.”

Syrok was aware he was in some way being teased, but his eyes lit with an affectionate warmth toward his mate who was trying so hard to make him feel comfortable on her planet. He had not realized how uncomfortable he truly was until she'd tried to improve things for him. It had been a revelation. He came to stand behind her, his arms wrapping easily around her trim waist.

“What other differences are there in Terran products?” she asked curiously.

“Everything is scented here.” he said right away, and Holly was surprised he hadn't had to stop and think about it as was customary when he usually gave a response. Apparently he'd spent some time thinking about this topic.

“Really?” she mused. “There are unscented soaps.”

“The unscented soaps have a strong “soapy” scent.” he countered.

“And not on Vulcan?”

“Negative.”
“I thought you guys used sonics anyway.”

Holly felt Syrok’s laughter over the bond. He was amused by her. “Vulcan has not always had sonic showers, Holly.”

“I guess.” she answered with a chagrined smile. “So then did you have water showers? Baths?”

“One would bathe using a small basin, or a sink. Vulcan is a desert planet. The idea of submerging oneself in water is...” he shook his head in a loss for words.

“Huh. I never really thought about it.” she shrugged, still thinking about the whole scent thing. She was beginning to realize that scent was very important to Vulcans, after some of T'Sala's talks. They could scent one's mate, scent sex, scent hormonal changes... it was no wonder they didn't want to cover all of that up with perfumes, and with such sensitive sense of smell, all of the perfumes were probably overwhelming. Though counter to that, Holly found Vulcan incense to be pretty overwhelming at times.

She dislodged herself from Syrok's arms, as nice as they were, and pulled out his soap, and shampoo/conditioner combo as she set it beside her own items in the shower stall, on the small built-in shelf. She took a moment to smell whatever Syrok had deemed sufficient, and noticed it was vaguely spicy. No real surprise there. If he had to smell like something, of course it would smell close to the tea and incense types of smells he was most used to.

“I do not believe we ever had such things as shampoo or conditioner.” he said as he watched her work, illogically pleased to see his mate doing such domestic things, touching his belongings as if they were her own.

“Really? How did you wash your hair?”

“Sometimes soap was used. It was sufficient for both skin and hair. Additionally, there are modern powders and oils of various sorts.”

“I guess...” Holly mused, “but isn't soap supposed to be too harsh on hair or something?”

“I would not know.”

“Hmm. Maybe it's a species thing. You guys don't need deodorant either, do you?”

“Negative.”

“Neither do Asians.” Holly mumbled, still rifling through the bag, pulling out towels that were unfortunately, still damp. Oh well. In this million degree heat Syrok had going, they'd dry. “Something about different kinds of sweat glands or something.”

“Fascinating.”

When Holly had finished in the kitchen and bathroom, she joined Syrok in the bedroom to see he'd finished the bed and filled a dresser and closet with most of their clothing. She almost choked up, as she'd never lived in a place with only her things before. Well, Syrok's things were here too, of course, but none of her foster families had ever felt like families, and none of the things they'd provided her with felt like her own belongings. The various group situations she'd been in had been even worse in terms of a sense of permanency. But here... this was home. Even if it was temporary.
“I would like to purchase or send for my shrine and meditation mat, if you are amenable.” Syrok announced as Holly sat herself on the bed, looking around. “We could place it in the corner of the bedroom, for privacy.”

“Sure.” Holly smiled. “That sounds nice. This is all nice.” She met his offered fingers easily with her own, and he joined her on the bed, pressing her to her back and beginning to pepper her face and neck with slow, human style kisses. “Want to make the mattress smell like us?” she asked cheekily, and Syrok did not deign to answer verbally, adhering to the adage that “actions speak louder than words”. And at the moment, he did indeed wish to make the room smell like them, and furthermore, he was eager to repeat his experience of having orgasmed simply by having his fingers sheathed within Holly. He could easily imagine one hand in her soft vaginal folds, the other in her sweet mouth. He dipped his first two fingers into her mouth then and she took them so submissively, moaning around them as he fucked them in and out against her tongue in an explicitly suggestive manner. Tonight, and all nights, would be enjoyable indeed.
Chapter 44

Holly was going cross-eyed looking at online catalogs of Vulcan clothing with T'Sala. Apparently, across the universe, different types of clothing were appropriate for different occasions. And though the Vulcans seemed mostly to don various types of robes, and to Holly they all mostly looked the same, she'd learned now that they were not the same. Jeans were not sweatpants, which in turn were not khakis, which were not uniform pants of varying types, nor counter-culture style pants, nor dress pants, and so on. Holly knew all of these things on her own world, and really never thought much about the subtleties of it all. It was simply something she'd internalized by living around it her entire life. Now she faced the arduous task of learning what different styles of robe meant and what was expected for various occasions.

She let out another frustrated huff as she misidentified a robe T'Sala had pointed to. “I don't see what the point of all this is.” Holly complained. “I don’t even have robes. And if I ever need some, Syrok will have to buy them for me anyway, and wouldn't he know what I should wear?”

“One can never be certain when knowledge may prove beneficial.” T'Sala countered easily, calling up another image.

Holly bit her lip, glancing at T'Sala's poker face. “Business casual?”

T'Sala gave her a flat look that said 'you know very well there is no such Vulcan concept as business casual', but aloud she said “Close enough.” It was the type of robe T'Sala would wear perhaps to a gathering of Clan members. It was not day to day wear, nor was it in any of the more ornate styles associated with various rituals. It was not a night robe or meditation robe, nor something for desert wear. She contented herself that she'd gotten the basic gist through to Holly, and tried not to dwell overly on the inaccurate understanding of the details. Perhaps they would come in time.

As Holly continued to flick through the online catalog, she mused aloud to T'Sala, “Do Vulcans wear underwear?” as she failed to see any section of the catalog dedicated to such a thing, at least as far as she could tell. But then maybe she was looking in the wrong area?

“Underwear has variable meanings.” T'Sala said smoothly. “I assume you are referring to what I believe are called 'panties'?”

Holly snorted in amusement. “That's one word.” she stifled a grin. “For men, boxers, briefs, boxer-briefs... there are panties, thongs, underwear... there are really a lot of words and styles and cuts.”

“We do not have such a thing.” T'Sala said without inflection, as if too distracted to even be having the conversation.

“Wait, really?” Holly stopped what she was doing to see whether T'Sala was attempting a joke. “Syrok wears some normally.”

“I really have no need of knowledge about your mate's clothing choices.” she admonished. “It is part of standard Terran wear. It is not surprising that Syrok would wear them, considering that the rest of his clothing is Terran.”

Holly eyed up T'Sala's own traditional robe. “Soooo does that mean...”

T'Sala met Holly's gaze with a flat look, just daring her to continue her line of questioning.
Holly wrinkled her nose. “Doesn't it ever get icky?”

“Icky?”

“I mean, the main reason I think we wear underwear is because of stray urine, or you know, wetness....”

“Wetness?”

“You know. If you're aroused, or sometimes just randomly....”

“That is not a problem I have often encountered.” T'Sala answered, giving Holly a strange look. “This is something which human females contend with?”

“Well, yeah. It's kind of normal.” she shrugged. “Wait so you guys don't get periods?”

T'Sala allowed herself a sigh. “If you are asking whether we bleed, we do not. Our reproductive cycles are tied hormonally and pheremonally to our mate's pon farr, largely, though in cases where one has no male mate, it is my understanding that the body will go through some periodic purge of its own volition, anywhere between perhaps 5 Terran years apart and 10 Terran years. I am not a biologist. Even during a purge, however, the detritus is absorbed back into the body. This is the case for many animals.”

“Huh. Weird.”

“That is very Terracentric.” T'Sala bristled.

“Sorry.” Holly said sheepishly. “I don't mean like, Vulcans are weird or anything. Just, the more I know, the more it stands out how different we are. It's surprising, that's all.” Then she smiled teasingly. “So does that mean you're not wearing undies right now?”

“I do not see the point.” T'Sala countered huffily.

“So scandalous, T'Sala! Anyway, what about just general protection?” Holly really wasn't letting this go. “What if dirt got up there?”

Reluctantly, T'Sala explained further. “I believe, and historical accounts are very dim on this topic, that the custom of wearing robes with no form of pants nor under pants, has origins in --” and here she colored sage in discomfort “I believe the term is “easy access”, relating to a mate's Time.”

“Jeeze, does everything on Vulcan relate to pon farr?” Holly questioned. “Why am I even taking Starfleet sponsored Vulcan cultural classes if the basis underpinning everything is a secret?”

Apparently T'Sala had no comment on that, essentially conceding the point, as she took her PADD back from Holly, effectively calling an end to their lesson.

Holly glanced at the time and ran a hand through her hair in frustration and exhaustion. “Shit. I should be catching a bus, it's getting late. I guess I'll see you next weekend at the latest?”

T'Sala nodded sagely. “That is most likely. Your schedule is dauntingly full.”

Holly huffed humorlessly. “When a Vulcan finds a schedule to be daunting, that's saying something.” And she knew it was true, and she secretly agreed. She was getting a slight headache, and had been so tired lately. Syrok had been worried, of course, but what was he supposed to do? He did all he could to keep things running smoothly in both their lives, but they both had rather
ambitious goals and obligations. *Kaiïdth.*

It was around supper time that Sunday evening when Holly came home from her lesson with T'Sala, and Syrok had managed to cook some rudimentary meal. Apparently all Vulcans learned how to cook, but that did not mean he knew how to cook well. It meant he knew how to sustain himself. That lack of knowledge and experience combined with foreign foods and foreign cooking tools made all of his attempts *completely adorable* as far as Holly was concerned, though she'd learned not to condescend to him and call it such. She simply worked on hiding her smile as she gratefully accepted the food. Tonight it was some sort of vegetable stir fry with little squares of tofu in it.

They ate in silence, partially because Vulcans were accustomed to it, and partially because Holly was just plain exhausted. Syrok watched her carefully as she ate, though. It was unlike Holly to be so silent for so long. He did not have anything worth conversing about at present, but he felt a strange discomfort with the silence, as it was against their norm. Across the bond he could feel Holly's exhaustion. It had been building for some time. He was doing his best for her. They were both doing their best. But their lives were busy and difficult right now.

Normally Holly would clear up the dishes if Syrok cooked, but he stopped her before she could begin. “I will clean.” he said simply. “You should bathe. I know you derive a certain pleasure from submersing yourself in water.” Holly smiled slightly and moved to wrap her arms around him, nuzzling against his neck and simply smelling him. She wasn't even Vulcan, but she was starting to think she had some weird scent kink. Maybe it was the bond. Yeah, she'd tell herself that.

“I love you.” she muttered against his neck, swelling with affection.

Syrok graced her with a quick kiss to the top of her head, then sent her off with an insistent “Go.”

Holly didn't need to be told twice. Well, maybe she did. Just then. She dragged herself to the bathroom and began to draw a tub full of hot water. It was such a luxury. It wasn't even a good tub. It was an antiquated shower/bath combo, and the water at its fullest wouldn't cover her knees at all, squished up in an awkward position. And the safety drain would slowly lower what water she had to irritatingly low levels. It wasn't a great bath. But it was a bath. She couldn't remember the last time time before this apartment she'd actually *had* a bath, to be honest. The hospital and the group home had had showers. And the homes with baths were either not clean enough or not cozy enough to warrant attempting such a thing, except of course for the one she'd indulged in when trying to kill herself. Even then, she'd craved the unique warmth of hot water.

Now Holly sank down, the heat sinking into to her skin and bones, the steam easing into her lungs. Syrok *hated* baths. He wasn't too impressed with the water shower either. She'd thought she could coax him to enjoy them if shared with her, and she smiled wryly remembering her first attempt at sexy shower times. Holly had thought she liked hot water, but what Syrok wanted wasn't even on the scale, apparently. And he didn't like humid air at all, his lungs urging him to cough but his Vulcan determination preventing such an annoyance. When the water had finally been dialed down to something Holly could tolerate, her Vulcan was shivering (and trying not to), scowling, and not really breathing right. If it hadn't been for the bond, she might not have known the depth of his discomfort, but as it was, she knew she wasn't going to get any fun out of him this way. Oh well. *Kaiïdth.*

As it was *now*, Holly *loved* her bath. She sank gratefully into the hot water and felt a bit of her tension drain away. It was a Sunday for fuck's sake. She wanted to spend the weekend lounging around. But with Starfleet homework, there was no lounging. And with her extracurricular lessons, there extra-special was no lounging. Plus, the apartment was sort of a mixed bag. On the one hand,
she didn't have to hear noisy students, and she got to be with Syrok, so her time at the apartment was probably more relaxing than it had been in the dorms. On the other hand, now she had to take a bus, and she hated taking the bus. It was noisy and crowded and took up even more of her time. Holly held her breath and attempted to slip under the water line, coming up more from the awkwardness of the position than for need of air.

She coughed a little and sniffled in the steam, the moist air loosening the strain on her lungs. She'd been feeling under the weather lately. It was half due to the time of year and half due to her workload. She thought vaguely of the things she and Syrok would normally do before bed -- homework, discussion, maybe fool around, maybe just relax and watch a vid... but none of it sounded particularly appealing. No, tonight she would sleep. Just sleep. Maybe she'd feel better in the morning.
Chapter 45

Holly woke up to the piercing alarm with a wince. She felt awful. Her head was crammed with wool, her eyes didn't want to open, she couldn't breathe, and her throat hurt. She tried to cough up something that was stuck, but that just made her wince more at the raw feeling in her throat. She tried to lift her heavy body up from the mattress, and it was not pleased with her attempts to do so. A wave of dizziness swept through her. Nonetheless, she sat on the edge of the mattress breathing and scrubbing dust from her eyes. She could do this.

Or maybe not. Just then, Syrok swept into the room, pulling away from his morning routine, all Vulcan not-frowns. “You are ill.” he stated plainly.

“It's just a cold.” she whispered hoarsely, sputtering into coughing after that. She reached to the bedside table and began to blow her nose in earnest. She'd feel better after some breakfast.

Syrok was irritated at the limitations of a betrothal bond. If he were fully bonded, in such close proximity he could probably know the temperature of his mate, and know whether she had a fever. Was this really a cold? He was aware of colds. They were not an ailment he knew of on Vulcan, but he’d heard of them since coming to Earth. He knew they were standard, knew some of the basic symptoms of them, as they were suffered by those around him. Coughing, sneezing, general fatigue, and so forth. But he’d had no idea a cold felt like this. What he could discern through their bond did not please him at all.

“You will either proceed to the medical center or you will proceed to go back to sleep, and I will email your professors about your absence, which a later trip to the med. center will confirm to them.” he said sternly.

Holly sighed. “Syrok --” she whined.

“Kroykah.” he said with finality, and Holly knew not to mess with that tone or that word. She flinched slightly, but inwardly felt somewhat grateful to have someone looking after her. She’d never really had it before. It was weird. But nice.

“I may as well go now.” she said with resignation, shuffling to pull on something comfortable. It was not lost on her that Syrok watched her every step. And as she was making some progress on their evening meditations, she could somewhat discern that he was monitoring her through their bond as well. She leaned against the bathroom sink as she brushed her teeth without enthusiasm. Not that she was usually enthusiastic about brushing her teeth, but today she could be particularly pathetic. Syrok continued to hover.

“I'm gonna miss class.” she mumbled through her toothpaste.

“You are doing well in all of your classes. You can therefore afford to miss one. Or several. I am not overly familiar with this malady.”

Holly spit and began to wrestle her hair into some sort of tangled ponytail so at least it'd be out of the way. “I can probably get away with a day off, maybe two. But human professors know human colds, Syrok. They're not going to be overly sympathetic. Don't Vulcans ever get sick? Surely you guys just meditate through the discomfort of it.”

“To do so would be illogical.” he countered, his brows raising slightly, though he'd seen many symptomatic students in classes over time. It had always somewhat baffled him. To know that such
detrimental behavior was encouraged by the faculty was unsettling. “When a Vulcan is sick, they will take rest until they are well. It is illogical to divert energy away from healing.”

“Great.” Holly said dully, padding into the kitchen to fix herself some cereal. “But humans don't have healing trances. A cold just sort of has to run its course.”

“Illogical.” Syrok muttered.

Holly gave him a you-might-be-the-logical-one sort of look and continued to munch on her breakfast.

Halfway through her cereal, though, she pushed the bowl away and laid her head down on her arms, breathing heavily but not at all, through thick congestion. God she was tired. The thought of the bus ride and then walk to the med center was daunting. And it was cold outside. At least it was warm in here. So warm. Then warm fingers stroked through her hair and she wanted to nuzzle into the touch but was just too tired.

“I will accompany you to the medical center.”

“You have stuff to do. You're not sick. And also, that's weird. It's just a cold. You know they don't even treat those, right?” Her voice was muffled as she spoke into her arms, toward the table.

“My morning contains some continued labwork with Professor Selkar. I shall notify him of my absence, and as it pertains to the health and well-being of my mate, I doubt he will reprimand me.”

Holly huffed but didn't have the energy to argue him. And really, she didn't like doctors, and it would be nice to have Syrok there. It would be extra nice to have him on the bus, and walking beside her. It was early, and it was cold, and she didn't feel well.

She smiled tiredly as Syrok insisted on bundling her into her winter coat, even though it was still fall and in San Francisco. It wasn't that cold out. Holly felt like a child whose over-protective parent was hovering about them -- or at least she thought this must be what it felt like. She'd never had it, but she'd seen it enough in various forms in the media. It was nice. She didn't fight the coat.

“I have a cold.” Holly said to the receptionist in the waiting area. The woman looked at her skeptically.

“There is little that we can do for a cold --” she began to say, giving Holly a look that said 'Are you kidding me? This is a waste of time.'.

Holly sighed, and was about to reply “I know --”, but Syrok interjected.

“Holly requires a physician's permission to miss classes so that she may recuperate.”

The woman looked even more annoyed at Syrok's insistence, and had a look like 'Who the hell is he?', but she grudgingly gave Holly a number and told her to wait.

Only one other girl was ahead of her, for what, Holly had no idea. But she didn't have long to wait. A petite woman in nurse's scrubs stood at the door and called her number expectantly. When Holly stood to follow her, the nurse already rattling off something about taking some vitals, as was general procedure, Syrok followed as well. The nurse stopped after two steps. She looked at both Syrok and Holly questioningly.
"Can I help you?" she asked him pointedly, giving him the look of 'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

"I will accompany Ms. Winters." Syrok said simply. When the woman continued to stare at him like he was crazy, he elaborated, "She is my mate.", as if that should explain everything. On Vulcan, it would be enough. It would be normal for him to accompany his mate to anything and everything, if he so chose, and particularly in a medical setting. To the nurse, it didn't explain anything. Holly was too tired to say anything. She wondered if she should be explaining something to the nurse, or to Syrok, or what.

"Sir," the nurse said in a faux-patient voice, "You can wait for your girlfriend in the waiting room. She won't be long."

Syrok positively glowered at her. "Negative." he snapped shortly.

Holly sighed. "It's a Vulcan thing." She really hoped that would be saying enough.

The nurse apparently didn't have time for an argument so she decided to take the path of least resistance and ignore Syrok entirely, which was really a feat, considering how closely he now followed Holly, not seeming to trust his mate to this stranger at all.

The nurse took Holly's temperature and heart rate and some other vitals with a scanner in no time at all, making some sort of notations about what she found. When a physician finally walked in, he was already scrolling through said vitals on a PADD and he barely looked up when he said "Looks like nothing but a common cold. Nothing to be concerned about." Then his eyes flickered up and he took in Syrok.

"Can I help you?" he asked pointedly. "I don't believe you're the patient."

"She is my mate." Syrok said just as flatly.

"I told you it was weird...." Holly muttered at Syrok but both men ignored her.

"Boyfriend or not," the doctor continued, and Syrok's hackles rose at the change in wording from 'mate' to 'boyfriend', 'The patient's health is confidential, and and unless you two are married--'"

"We share a betrothal bond." Syrok said pointedly.

"So you're engaged."

Syrok's brows knit together. That was not what he had said.

Holly sighed loudly. “Can you just sign off on me missing class for a day or two?” she interjected tiredly.

"First," the doctor said, rounding on her, "I want to know what the hell you've been eating."

Holly looked up in confusion. "Food?" she tried.

"You're deficient in a number of nutrients." the doctor continued, flicking through his PADD, though Holly couldn't imagine there was enough data there for him to be so completely absorbed with it. "Most notably iron."

"We maintain a vegetarian lifestyle." Syrok said easily. The doctor was not pleased that he was answering for the patient.
“Oh do you?” he asked pointedly. “And how long has that been going on?” He directed the question at Holly, ignoring Syrok, even though he'd been the one to answer.

“I don't know... a few months?” Holly said in confusion. “Ever since Syrok and I started dating, I guess, so like this past summer.”

“And whose idea was this diet?”

Syrok interjected again. “A vegetarian diet is perfectly capable of meeting all of one's nutritional needs. While it is not necessarily the average diet for a human, I am aware of several cultures that practice --”

“Really.” the doctor asked, but his inflection did not imply he wanted an answer. “And since when are you an expert on human nutrition? Are you forcing this diet on her? You know what, don't answer that.” He turned back to Holly. “Whose idea was this diet?”

Holly opened her mouth to answer but wasn't sure what to say. It had been her idea, she supposed, but she'd done it because she'd known that Syrok didn't like the smell of meat or the idea of eating it. And now that Syrok bought their food and Syrok cooked many of their meals, she didn't really think about what she ate. He made the decisions. He led, and she was happy to follow. But she knew that wasn't normal, and she wasn't sure what was appropriate to say. “Mine?” she tried hopefully.

“What I recommend is you drop it for at least the duration of the cold.” the doctor said coldly, seemingly not believing Holly for a second that the diet was her idea. His scowl encompassed the both of them. “Chicken soup is what you need. Tried and true.”

Syrok's brows knit in disbelief. “Is that a medical prognosis?” he asked skeptically.

“Why? Do you intend to keep soup from the patient?” the doctor asked callously.

“Indeed not.” Syrok said with affront. “If it is your medical opinion that my mate requires animal flesh in the form of a soup to facilitate her recovery, then I would like to be informed so that I may procure this item.”

This caught the doctor off guard. He grunted, unsure what else to say, hands flicking over the PADD.

“Are there any other foodstuffs or products that you can recommend?” Syrok asked with a quiet sincerity.

The doctor might have been confused as hell, but he was finally starting to get the idea that Syrok might not be an asshole, though he was still uncertain whether Holly was under the influence of some sort of coercion. She kept making loving doe-eyes at her boyfriend, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. Still, if this Vulcan wanted to know what would heal his human girlfriend, he'd tell him. “Actually, yes. Keep her hydrated. Water, tea is good, soup -- especially chicken soup, and orange juice has been shown to be particularly helpful too. Keep her warm and comfortable and with plenty of rest. Something cold like ice cream or popsicles might help with the throat -- though I'd avoid dairy because it won't help with phlegm. If you want to be real nice you'll buy her some cough drops and three boxes of tissues.”

Syrok nodded sagely, taking the medical advice very seriously. Holly snickered tiredly from the corner. As crappy as she felt, it was just a cold, for God's sake, it was hilariously endearing to see Syrok acting as if she had some terminal illness or something. She really did love him.
“Can I miss class now?” she asked hoarsely.

“Yeah, yeah.” the doctor clicked some things on his PADD once more. “No doubt your Vulcan will keep you in bed full time now.” he grumbled, as if nothing could please him. “I'm signing off on today and tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” Syrok said formally as the doctor rolled his eyes.

Finished with the exam and lecture, Syrok escorted Holly out, pausing at the door to the facility to dutifully button her coat up again before allowing her to enter the chill air. She smiled and endured it. Perhaps endured wasn't the right word -- she kind of loved it.

When they arrived home, Syrok closed the blinds and helped Holly into some pajamas, making sure that the bedside tissue box was full, a small trash can was on the floor next to the bed, and a full glass of water was at the ready. He kissed Holly softly on the forehead, and by the time he was gone from the room on his way to his next class, she was already asleep.

Holly didn't sleep all day. She kept waking herself up coughing and sniffling. So most of the time she just curled up in bed with her PADD, watching videos mindlessly. She had her blankets and her pj's and occasionally she even crawled her way out to the kitchen to make tea or get a snack. She was hungry, it was just that she couldn’t really taste anything. At some point she even took another hot bath, just for way the heat seeped into her sore frame. Afterward, though, she kind of regretted it, chilly with wet hair, and bundled back in her pajamas and blanket nest. As much as she couldn't smell or taste any more, she knew that she herself smelled bad. She had that distinct smell of disease and she wondered how Syrok didn't seem to find her repulsive.

Lost in these glum thoughts and half zoning out, Holly perked up when she heard the apartment door opening. She pulled herself out of her nest and pattered to the kitchen to greet Syrok, who was home in time for supper.

“I have obtained soup.” he said regally, placing a warm paper bowl with lid down on the table. “Yours contains parts of a dead bird, as per the doctor's instructions.” Holly had to hold back a snicker at that. “My own selection is thankfully, vegetarian.”

“You are a god.” Holly said reverently, seating herself at the tiny wooden table and reaching for her bowl and plastic spoon. It smelled amazing, and it was hot, and it was soup. She swallowed a spoonful and closed her eyes in bliss. “Does the smell bother you?” she asked with a slight hint of worry.

“It is of no consequence. In fact, I have been in text communication with Doctor Reimer throughout today.”

“Oh?” Holly asked in confusion.

“Indeed. I wished to understand human dietary needs so that I would be better informed of our options. You should have informed me that the food I was buying was insufficient.”

“I didn't know.” she said around her spoon with a shrug. She removed the soup spoon with a loud smack. “I never went vegetarian before. I just always sort of picked the dishes in the mess at random, anyway. I was trying to get used to weird food.”
“You do not seem enthusiastic about said 'weird food'. What was the point of your endeavor?”

“Diplomacy.” she said with her mouth full again. *Mm. Soup.*

“It is illogical that you should continue to eat food not to your liking, or not to your health benefit as long as I am capable of purchasing something more appropriate.” He scolded. “If you enjoy eating animal products, aside from the days leading up directly to my Time, I can see no reason why you should not indulge.”

“Really?”

“It would be illogical for me to say what I do not mean.”

Holly smiled, and they continued to eat in silence for some time.

“Of course, I may require assistance in learning to prepare animal flesh.” Syrok said after some time. “I intend to research the topic, but if you are familiar with the practice, your knowledge would prove useful.”

“I can make some stuff. Don't worry. I only really like chicken and fish anyway, and those are easier than red meat.”

“I will take your word for it.” Then, “Tomorrow I intend to prepare something with much spice. Doctor Reimer has informed me that such an act may help you to breathe more easily, and also that your sense of taste is diminished right now and that heavy use of spice may prove uncharacteristically palatable.”

“You are so adorable trying to learn about colds.” she said with a slight smile.

“I believe you are teasing me, but I will accept the compliment nonetheless. I have also procured orange juice, and caffeinated tea, as the caffeine may help to remedy what the doctor referred to as 'brain fog', though he refused to elucidate on the term.”

She was too tired and too congested to laugh, but the laughter carried through the bond regardless. “Best. Mate. Ever.” Her eyes glinted with affectionate teasing, but also the sincerity of her declaration. She'd never been *pampered* before.

Syrok was content to sit in silence and soak up the warmth of his mate's affection. He'd spent the day chastising himself for overlooking this facet of Holly's health, and had gone out of his way to converse with this doctor about it, to educate himself and prepare himself for the responsibility of having a human mate. Not only had he neglected her dietary needs, but he was certain that he'd pushed Holly too far for her immune system's capabilities. It was unacceptable, and he was prepared to atone. Knowing that Holly did not hold any of it against him, and in fact knowing that she was *pleased* with him as he tried to care for her, went a long way toward soothing his nerves. He would try harder. He would do better.

Holly did rest without additional coaxing, and was somewhat reluctant actually to start back on her heavy schedule come Wednesday. But the doctor, understandably, had only excused her from two days of classes, so she knew she had catching up to do. Thanksgiving was right around the corner, and after that short break, a slew of final projects and final exams before the Christmas vacation. Or... what was it that Starfleet was calling it these days? Holly thought she'd seen it written somewhere generically as “winter break”. But everyone knew it was mostly for Christmas. A Christmas she was actually going to get to *celebrate* for once. As if that wasn't excitement enough,
she had Thanksgiving before that, and she'd been making plans.
Syrok stood beside her in the grocery store, looking dubiously at the oversized bird carcases. “This is a turkey?” he questioned. It was larger than a chicken. He was passingly familiar with chickens, but honestly he hadn't researched Terran animals or foodstuffs in any great detail.

“Come onnnnn.” Holly coaxed. “It's traditional. And you said we'd have more meat. And Geri's coming. And we can freeze the leftovers.”

“We will have to procure a pan specifically for cooking this.” he pointed out.

“Yeah. They're over there.” Holly nodded across the aisle and started to wrestle the frozen meat into their cart. Syrok dutifully went to retrieve one of the baking pans. This shopping trip would prove to be expensive, but Holly had made a point about freezing the excess meat. Surely it would last them for quite some time. And it would be easy for him to add some of the frozen meat to an otherwise vegetarian stir fry for Holly's portion. They would purchase a turkey.

“Very well. I consent to the turkey.”

“Great. We have a zillion other things to buy.”

“That is not a number. Also, we have plenty of food. Also, nothing you are putting into the cart is Vulcan.”

“You can go ahead and get something appropriately Vulcan if you want.” Holly said. She'd seized the cart and was leading them down a baking aisle. “But this is Thanksgiving. You guys are like foreign exchange students and I have to show you America.”

“We are Vulcans.” he corrected.

“Exactly. And you're in America right now and we're celebrating Thanksgiving. That means a feast, and it means a specific kind of feast.” She put a tin of pumpkin puree into the cart, along with some sort of milk product in a can. Syrok eyed it dubiously, and picked it up to inspect the ingredients. How did this differ from regular milk? “Put that back.” Holly chided and gave him a look. Syrok looked back unblinkingly, but he did replace the item to the cart.

“You should make kreyla and spice tea. Everybody likes that.” she said encouragingly.

“That is hardly a feast.” he said wryly. “Vulcan is not known for feasts.”

“Which is why we're making a Terran feast. But you should make something too.” she pushed affection through their bond. “The kreyla and spice tea is nice, seriously. And there will be more Vulcans than humans anyway. We can eat it as an appetizer, or as a sort of dessert. You could make plomeek soup, too, if you want. It's close to pumpkin and sweet potato and butternut squash. They all make good holiday soups.”

“I will take your word for it.”

“Good.”

“Why are we purchasing canned pumpkin?”

“Pie.”
“Ah.” Syrok had had pie once, though admittedly it was not made of pumpkin. Pie, like muffins and cakes and cookies, was one of many Terran foods that typically contained too much sugar. He eyed the contents of their cart as Holly continued to lead this trip. Carrots and celery were acceptable. They were not particularly nutrient dense, but he was familiar with the vegetables, and tended to approve of any vegetable purchase. They were easy enough to work with. But the sugar, cinnamon, and even small box of chocolates made him nervous. He was going to be high as a kite for this “feast”, it seemed, unless he was very careful. He eyed the cart dubiously.

“You don't get to eat those.” Holly said, glancing at the chocolates.

“Indeed?”

“You don't like to get drunk anyway.”

“Nor do you.”

“Right. So I'm not buying any alcohol. But I can eat chocolates and feel fine.”

“If you were truly concerned about my state of being, I am curious as to whether you'd still feed me such levels of sugar and cinnamon.”

“Wait, chocolate makes you weird, sugar makes you drunk, what's the cinnamon do?” she asked, totally baffled. Vulcans. They couldn't eat anything normal.

“Nothing of concern.” he hedged dryly, knowing it would drive Holly crazy.

“We've had Indian food like five million times.” Holly continued. “A lot of it has cinnamon in it. How was I not aware before now you can't have cinnamon?”

“I did not say I cannot have it. Nor did I say I will not have it.”

Holly looked at him suspiciously. “I'm on to you.” she warned. Syrok doubted she was “on to” anything.

At long last, however, their shopping spree had come to a conclusion. After paying for the items, they made their way clumsily home, Holly with a turkey stuffed into her backpack and Syrok laden with various bags. He assumed they looked absurd, but no one seemed to take note. He supposed it was because of the obvious ingredients they held so clumsily.

He was aware of the local holiday, of course. They had off school for the Thursday of the event and the following Friday. He'd become used to strange holidays on Earth by this point, even if he did find them to be generally illogical. Vulcan had one official holiday, and it was not a time of celebration. However, humans were what they were, and they liked to celebrate. He knew it was called Thanksgiving, and that it had something to do with food, and presumably thanks, but that was all. And in the time he'd known Holly, he hadn't even realized that she'd celebrated. Of course, after bonding, he knew quite well. This was one of her favorite holidays. It seemed his mate had several that she quite favored. Illogical, perhaps, but he was always intrigued by his mate's interests.

Thus was born the plan to have an authentic Thanksgiving feast, and to invite “all of their friends”, as Holly had put it, though Syrok wasn't certain he'd frame their relationships in such a way. Aside from Holly and himself, there would be Professor Selkar and his wife T'Prea, T'Sala, and Geri. Of those, he supposed that perhaps T'Sala was their friend. But Selkar was a professional colleague, T'Prea was not related to them at all, and Geri was Holly's former roommate. Then again, Vulcans didn't tend to have the notion of “friendship” in the Terran sense, so he deferred to Holly's
definition on this. Selkar and T'Sala had been receptive to their invitation and were keen to learn
something of the Terran holiday first hand. T'Prea would come, for good or ill, and Geri had
actually been enthusiastic. Though Vulcans were indeed in the majority, the notion of Holly and
Geri's duel excitement concerned him. Perhaps he would try the chocolate.

It was Thanksgiving Day. They had no classes, and yet, his mate was awake and bustling around
the apartment at 08:00 hours. It was unprecedented for her. Typically, if she were not required to
leave the bed, she would stay stubbornly within her cocoon of blankets until closer to 10:00 -- even,
he noticed, if she were awake. She would simply stubbornly close her eyes and try to sleep longer.
Illogical. Today, however, she was awake, and wearing the apron he had gifted her. It was a
frivolous gift, but he knew that such garments were typical and seemed in keeping with the
nostalgia Holly had for old fashioned ways of being. She had rewarded him for his gift by wearing
it now -- and nothing else. It was most indecent, but she had assured him she would dress in “real
clothes” before the guests arrived that afternoon. This was acceptable.

Although the holiday in question was Thanksgiving, Holly had already managed to find a Terran
music station featuring Christmas carols and had switched it on, claiming it to be “festive”. On
another channel, she had a running commentary on some parade that was to begin later. On Syrok's
own PADD was the history of the parade so that he could understand at least some of what was
going on. And while he patiently peeled a plomeek, reading said history, Holly diligently prepared
a pie, stuffing, and of course, the turkey. It and its stuffing were just going into the oven now.
Apparently it took many hours to cook such a monstrous thing. Syrok could not say that he was
surprised. And indeed, the act of cooking for so long in and of itself held a certain fascination for
him. There were older dishes that were known to take quite a long time to prepare on Vulcan as
well. Food on Vulcan was almost sacred, and though he was dubious about the excesses of a feast,
he appreciated the reverence with which the food was treated.

Holly hummed along to the carol streaming in. It might be early for Christmas music, but screw it.
This was by far the best holiday she'd had yet. Hell, even Halloween hadn't been bad. She thought
back to it. She'd been still sick with her cold, still “taking it easy” as per Syrok's new instructions.
Their joint meditations had become relaxing only, all actual work set aside. She'd still met with
T'Sala and Selkar, but suus mahna lessons had dragged to a halt, and at home study time had
mostly devolved into cuddling while flicking through flash cards. She'd pathetically coughed and
whined about not being able to carve pumpkins, and having no costume, and no candy, which had
led to an exhaustive discussion of Halloween with Syrok. He'd thought she, and all humans, were a
bit crazy, of course, but he'd later come home with a single packet of candy corn the day after the
missed Halloween celebration. He was the best.

Now, not only were they actually celebrating something properly, but it was with her favorite
foods, and her favorite people. She'd never even really liked people much, and now she had herself
a makeshift family. She'd wished T'Sala's mate Selek could have come but she knew it would have
been all kinds of inconvenient. Still, she hoped to meet him someday, since T'Sala was so much a
part of her family now.

She eyed the spoon coated in pumpkin, evaporated milk, egg, sugar, and spice. Ehh... safe enough.
Spoon in her mouth, wincing a bit at the weird uncooked flavor, she quizzed Syrok with a mumble
“Do you eat eggs?” She pulled the spoon from her mouth with a loud smack, still uncertain whether
the taste was acceptable raw, and put the pie in the oven. “It's kind of a main ingredient.”

“I am not adverse to eggs.” Syrok said stoically. “The eggs typically sold in this age on this planet
are unfertilized, and from animals kept in pleasant conditions. I see no reason to avoid them.
However,” he plucked the spoon from her hand, placing it gingerly in the sink, “I believe we should institute a new rule wherein you do not consume eggs in their uncooked state.”

Holly smirked mischievously. “But eating baked goods raw is half the fun!”

“Then you may eat raw kreyla dough, as it does not contain egg.”

Holly made a face, sticking out her tongue in disgust. Raw bread dough -- ick. Looking around, she saw everything was in order, and stifled a yawn. She'd stayed up late and woken up early and was still sleepy, though it was now 9:00.

“Shall I prepare us some tea?” Syrok asked as Holly sat herself down with a box of cereal, picking it out of the box dry.

“That would be awesome. Something with caffeine?” she asked hopefully.

“Very well, as it is a holiday.” he said solicitously, and pulled the Earl Grey from the cupboard for Holly, and something simply labeled “soothing” for himself, as it was a mix of acceptable herbs.

She continued to hum along to snatches of music as they played, watching as Syrok prepared tea, took the dry cereal out of her hands to prepare her a proper bowl of breakfast, and began washing the dishes she'd dirtied. She was pretty sure he was perfect.

As their bond developed and settled, Syrok became increasingly familiar with Holly’s thoughts and moods. Apparently he'd caught the drift of her last thought, because he said “It is my privilege to care for you, pi'veh. It is my duty as your mate.”

“Vulcans are surprisingly romantic.” Holly mused as she ate her cereal and Syrok joined her at the table with tea.

“Romance is a human notion.” he dismissed. “It is only logical to care for one's mate, as we are psychically connected to one another. And in the case of a male, it is most logical that I should care for my mate as you will in turn ensure my own survival.”

“You can make it sound like a business arrangement all you want, but I know you're being romantic.” She tapped the side of her head knowingly, referring to her insight through the bond. A constant stream of affection and caring was hardly present just to ensure “survival”.

They drank their tea in silence, Holly alternating her PADD audio between the upcoming parade's commentary and the early Christmas music. She hadn't noticed the weather until she'd checked the weather app, then abruptly looked out the tiny kitchen window above the sink, with an excited gasp. “Look, look, look!” she squealed excitedly. “Flurries!” She grinned.

Syrok did, indeed look. As Starfleet was located in San Francisco, he had not yet had an opportunity to see snow. Even now, it was not “really” snowing, as he understood the term. It was snow mixed with cold rain, and would not settle on the warm ground. He had already been aware of the weather prediction for the day. The phenomenon was brought on by the uncharacteristically cold weather this year, but even so was not expected to last long or make any significant impact.

He was gratified that at least he would be able to remain inside for the day, not having to subject himself to the frigid air and the wet environment. He did not envy his guests.

Holly, on her part, looked enchanted by the event. Coming to stand by the sink with her he gazed at the precipitation and supposed there was a novelty to it. “I miss snow.” she breathed. “It really doesn't around here, you know? But back where I grew up it snowed tons. I'd love to show it to you.”
“I have similar feelings about showing you Vulcan.” he confided. “Perhaps we will make a trip to Montana one day in order to experience the snow. I will, of course, need to purchase extensive amounts of protective gear.” His eyes glinted with the humor of the thought, in spite of the seriousness of his words. He would have to purchase a lot of gear to deal with the temperatures he’d read about.

“That would be adorable. And anyway, you probably can't avoid real snow forever. Surely we'll end up on a planet with it some time or other.”

“That is a distinct possibility. There exists a wide range of habitable climates.”

“Speaking of which, do you still have to get your swimming cert?”

Syrok inwardly cringed at the question. Indeed, he had not taken the required test as of yet. Holly had done hers in her spare time, as she already knew how to swim, apparently. He supposed it made sense that on a water planet, one might learn such a skill as a child. Syrok, however, was from a desert, and the idea of submerging himself in cold, deep water in which he might drown, and figuring out how to survive in those conditions, was daunting. “I had considered that perhaps I might waive the requirement on culture grounds.”

Holly tisked and said his name with exasperation. “Syrok....” she sighed and shook her head. “Illogical.” she muttered. “I can teach you how to swim if you want. It's not hard.”

“Perhaps.” he said noncommittally, but wrapped his arms around her waist as he stood behind her, the two simply gazing at the falling flakes and thinking.

“Do you think it'll snow more this winter?”

“It is doubtful.”

Holly sighed, and Syrok kissed the top of her head.

“Would you like to help me make kreyla now?” he prompted her, and she brightened considerably. It wouldn't be fresh when the guests arrived, which was less than optimal, but kreyla was certainly not always served fresh, and it would serve as a welcome distraction to brighten Holly's mood once more. She awaited eagerly for his instruction, and he began to pull out the required ingredients.

A rapid cacophony of thudding was heard at the front door, followed by a muffled voice “Yo! Holly!” Syrok could hear the more sedate voice of T'Sala inquiring “Is it really necessary to cause such a commotion?”

He stepped to the door and opened it, as Holly was preoccupied with the turkey. There before him were all of the guests at once, damp, but present. They must have coordinated their trip.

“Greetings.” he said formally, and Geri shot past him as she made herself at home.

“Hey, Syrok.” she said, her voice already fading as she headed into the kitchen. He could sense her hugging his mate, and heard her claiming “It smells awesome in here. Is that the bird? Let me taste it!”

T'Sala, Selkar, and T'Prea were more Vulcan about their entrance. Selkar stepped forward, lifting his hand into the ta'al. “Greetings Syrok. And may I wish you a Happy Thanksgiving.”
Syrok raised his own hand in greeting. “Selkar. T'Prea. T'Sala.” he nodded in turn. “Please come in. May I take your coats?” The trio made their way into the home and were eager to rid themselves of the damp garments and soak in some of the welcome heat of the apartment. T'Sala's nose wrinkled at the smell of meat.

“It is a rather pungent scent.” she remarked, not wanting to criticize.

“Holly informs me that it is traditional. She and Geri will no doubt enjoy it. I assure you, however, that there are a number of vegetarian options available.” He lowered his voice, “Though I warn you that the pie, in addition to sugar, contains cinnamon.”

T'Sala blinked as if startled and her eyes darted to Selkar and T'Prea, the “adults” in the room (though they were technically all adult here), but they seemed nonplussed.

“I am sure it will be satisfactory.” T'Prea said.

“Would you care for some tea?” he led them into what was a small sitting room connected to the kitchen, where they would enjoy their meal. Here was the worn couch which could seat three: Selkar, T'Prea, and T'Sala took seats next to one another. Syrok had purchased a cheap card table that could be folded and moved away but which was low enough and large enough to hold their plates. The tiny kitchen table could only seat two. Now its two chairs had been moved into the living room, as well as a third table that Holly had retrieved from the curb, and which Syrok did not approve of, but he could not argue with the price. Even in such a small apartment, there would be room for everyone.

Soon the six of them were settled around the table enjoying spice tea and kreyla. Holly had her PADD set up and it was currently streaming the parade, much to T'Sala's fascination. Syrok had been quite fascinated himself, but he'd had all morning to prepare for the event and research it thoroughly. Although the two students had been on Earth for a good three years now, they had largely ignored the holiday until now. Selkar and T'Prea, for their own part, had been on Earth considerably longer, and were well aware of all the major holidays.

“Thanksgiving is a fascinating holiday.” T'Prea said tonelessly. Of all the Vulcans in the room, she was probably the most Vulcan. She turned her attention toward Holly and Geri. “Although I am familiar with its origins, having researched it thoroughly, could you share what your personal interest is in the day?”

Geri spoke up first. “Oh, well that's easy. Food.” she said with a grin. “We never really had much money growing up,” she continued. “But come Thanksgiving? The whole family showed up, and we ate like kings. It's a good excuse for excess and for family.”

“If you were poor, would it not be illogical to eat in excess?”

Geri opened her mouth and closed it, completely unable to formulate an answer to such a stoic alien. She glanced at T'Sala as if she should do something, and T'Sala only widened her eyes in response.

Holly did her best to jump in. “It's always nice to have a day where one feels...” she searched, “worthy of excess. To always scrimp and save at every moment can create a stressful environment. Today we indulge, and feel thankful for the ability to indulge. And we focus on family, and having the ritual of it all, the certain foods, the parade, certain types of decorations and so on, gives the moment greater meaning.” She knew she had them at ritual; Vulcans were into rituals in a big way. “It's a sort of meditation exercise for those who don't meditate. Everyone tries to think purposefully about what they're thankful for.”
“Or they just eat a lot.” Geri added, stuffing her face with the *kreyyla* and sniffing her spice tea dubiously.

“Fascinating.” T'Prea admitted, sipping her own tea thoughtfully. “For myself, I believe that I am grateful for the opportunity to experience a Terran holiday in this manner. I have had little opportunity for dedicated cultural exchange. And though I have been on Earth for several years now, I find it striking how little I have acclimated -- certainly far less than my mate.” she added with a warm look at Selkar.

T'Sala nodded in agreement. “I had expected change, and was familiar with many facts about Earth. Yet even with my meditation, it can be taxing at times to contend with so many challenges.”

“And yet you have chosen to join Starfleet.” T'Prea said interestedly. Until now, she'd not met T'Sala, and was fast becoming interested in the young woman. “Will you travel? And what of thy mate?”

“I have hope of a ground posting somewhere that will hold my interest, and where Selek is able to join me for his own pursuits.”

“And why indeed then join Starfleet?”

And here, T'Sala struggled. It was one thing to confide in Holly and Syrok, and another to admit her defects aloud to an elder Vulcan. She did not conceal her discomfort well, which was part of the problem to begin with. “My emotional control has never been quite what it should. I was therefore interested to observe more emotional beings. Starfleet offers a unique experience within the Federation wherein I can still pursue my interests to a high academic level, while also having this chance to live apart from Vulcan, with humans who particularly interested me.”

“It is logical to believe you may be more accepted among more emotional beings,” T'Prea conceded. “However, it is not necessarily in one's best interests to indulge in such emotionalism.”

T'Sala had been afraid of that response. As she had nothing to say, she said nothing, and staunchly refused to appear uncomfortable.

Holly, picking up on the dig at T'Sala, quickly changed the topic to T'Prea and her work, and the conversation moved more smoothly from there.

It wasn't long until the turkey was ready, the parade was over, and the food was being consumed. Even T'Prea, the most staunchly Vulcan of the bunch, allowed for casual conversation during the meal in deference to tradition. To Holly's delight, all present consented to her filming the event for her video channel. It had been ages since she'd done a Vulcan culture related vid, and now she had priceless footage of them enjoying Thanksgiving of all things. She'd have to make a montage or something and set it to music.

There was turkey and stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy. There was corn, and fresh bread, and some weird dumpling things Syrok had prepared with his *plomeek*. There was a fruit salad as well, and pie for dessert. Geri's praise for the meal in particular was effusive. She hadn't had real Thanksgiving food the entire time she'd been at Starfleet. The break was too short to justify heading home; she'd see her family over Christmas, but had to miss out on this meal. And of course she never had enough money to recreate the meal for herself, and the “Thanksgiving-themed” foods in the cafeteria were *not* the same. She was more than happy to spend some time with her former roomie, whom she'd missed more than she'd realized she would, and was more than happy
to tease T'Sala with bits of turkey that caused her to wrinkle her nose in distaste, earning disapproving looks from T'Prea. Geri snickered. Vulcans were hilarious. She could see why Holly had gotten in with them.

Finally, it was time for the pie. Holly scarcely had room for it, but was cheered by Geri's enthusiasm. And besides, it had been a slow meal full of breaks and conversation. After the pie, the group would likely disperse and head home. In spite of Syrok's mysterious warning of cinnamon (and Holly had tried to look it up on her PADD but had found nothing), everyone but T'Sala asked for a slice. Holly was instantly alert for any changes in her guests. She knew that excess sugar could create a drugged, drunken effect. She'd seen it with T'Sala and the birthday cake. And while the pie did contain a good amount of sugar, she suspected that each piece was small enough that there would only be a mild effect if any, and that the Vulcans were more than equipped to hide any effects. The birthday cake had been almost entirely sugar, and T'Sala had been sneaking icing flowers.

Chocolate she knew had some similar drugged or drunken effect, but that one she'd not been able to catch Syrok in as of yet, and her sources only mentioned a “drugged effect”, without noting details. Apparently that was enough to deter most Vulcans. She'd have to coax Syrok for more information at a later time.

But cinnamon?

At first the conversation simply continued where it had left off. Holly and Geri had mostly checked out by this point, as it had gotten quite technical and quite dry for their tastes. They'd occasionally talk among themselves, but the turkey was beginning to have its somnolent effect on the two humans who had consumed it. They were content to simply listen.

But then Holly noticed Syrok's foot. Under the table, his foot bumped her foot. And then again, and then the toe drew along her foot and a bit of her calf. She glanced at him in surprise and confusion, and he seemed to mostly ignore her while placing his hand closer to her own on the table. She glanced toward Selkar and T'Prea and was startled to note they were actually touching shoulder to shoulder on the couch. Selkar's shoulders were a little less stiff than usual as if he were relaxed. What the hell? Geri, for her part, was oblivious. And T'Sala, for her own part, was uncomfortable. She excused herself from the couch to visit the restroom.

It was then that Syrok's pinky brushed hers and she felt the world warp or tilt weirdly. Whoa. She usually got a spark of frisson or some flare up of their bond when they made contact, but this was weird. Glancing again at Syrok, his eyes were beginning to dilate, and the conversation was stuttering off to a halt.

“Perhaps we should adjourn this meeting.” Selkar suggested. His voice was its usual monotone, but his gaze was weirdly intense.

“Yes.” T'Sala agreed, emerging from the bathroom. “I have had an enriching experience.” she said cordially to Holly, and nodded to Syrok, seeming careful not to meet his gaze. “Geri, perhaps you could escort me back to the dormitories?” she inquired, as Geri seemed oblivious to the abrupt ending.

“Uhm... yeah. I guess?” she said, finally catching on to the abrupt ending. Holly, for her part, was trying to keep one eye on her Vulcan for signs of what was going on.

After a bit of bustling and a box of leftovers for Geri, everyone was on their way, and Holly was left facing Syrok curiously. He simply sat himself on the comfortable couch and closed his eyes with an actual audible sigh.
“So? What's the deal?” she asked curiously.

“Deal?” he responded.

“Don't give me that. Are you tripping balls right now or something?” Holly sat down beside him.

“I am not familiar with the expression.”

Holly let out an exasperated huff and reached out her hand to skim against his, eager to feel the weird *something* that she'd sensed when they had touched before. Again, she was swallowed up in... well, *something*. She really had no context for it, but she felt like she was drowning in the wave of it, although not unpleasantly. “What...” she struggled to find her breath and her focus, “what is this? And why the hell did you and Selkar and T'Prea all eat the pie if you knew it would cause it?” she laughed slightly. Whatever it was, it felt good. Not only that, but amorous feelings of affection were slipping across their bond effortlessly.

She felt more than saw him smile. “The cinnamon mimics a well known drug on Vulcan.” he explained. “It causes a temporary psychic enhancement, as well as lowers inhibitions and mental shields. Before coming to Earth, I had no first-hand experience of these effects. While the drug was used quite extensively in the past for recreational purposes, it is much more frowned upon today, although still used for certain rituals.”

Holly smiled wryly. “So you're basically being a rebel by indulging now?”

Syrok hedged. “The pie is indeed part of the Terran ritual. Rituals, as I have said, are an acceptable venue for this drug.”

“Hang on, though. Indian food has all kinds of cinnamon in it, and you've had that with me a bunch of times.”

“Ah.” She felt a flush of embarrassment for a second. “I was of course informed of the ubiquity of cinnamon in Terran cuisine and its effects before leaving Vulcan. However, I was given to understand that it was found primarily in baked goods. When I first discovered it in the Indian cuisine, I was....” He trailed off. It was clear to Holly it had been a disconcerting experience for him to say the least. “When I had come back to myself, I researched the ingredients of the dishes thoroughly. I have been careful not to consume it since that point. Though I have noticed a tendency for you to gravitate right toward those dishes.” he added with a teasing smirk.

“Well if you would have *told* me, I could have been more considerate.” Holly said with an exasperated smile.

“Unnecessary.”

“So how long does this last? And will the professor and his wife be alright getting home?”

“They should be fine. With proper use of their Vulcan training, probably no Terrans will even notice a change in their demeanor. You are simply more perceptive than is typical, having spent time with Vulcans more closely. As to how long it will last... perhaps an hour.”

“What do you want to do for the next hour?” she asked, trailing her fingers along his in Vulcan kisses.

“Meld with me?” he asked earnestly, turning his intense gaze in her direction.
Holly swallowed thickly. It was usual that Syrok should request a full meld. She was aware that it was a deeply intimate experience for him, as well as a taxing experience for her. And under watch of his darkened eyes, she always felt a bit like trapped prey... in a delicious way. She nodded her consent and was glad they were on the soft surface of the couch as she was swept away at his first touch of her psi points.

Every meld Holly had participated in had been different. In this, there was no sharing of memories as in her first meld with him; there was no shared history as when they'd bonded. In a way, it was more like the clinical melds she'd had with Healers -- just a sense of Syrok all around and within, without any specific thoughts or memories. But this was anything but clinical. It was intimate and it was hot. It was similar to when Syrok had stimulated her pleasure centers, but this was a wholly mental affair. Waves of pleasure buoyed them together, sometimes soft, and sometimes overwhelming, as they became simply lost within one another, within their bond, blending into one consciousness and gently ebbing to separate. She had no sense of time, nor sense of her body here. It was awesome.

When they finally, finally disentangled later, Holly blinked at Syrok languidly, where they'd somehow come to lay side by side on the couch, pressed close to one another, facing each other. She felt the same sort of sleepy bliss that typically accompanied an orgasm, but had no idea whether she'd had one in the physical world. “That was cool.” she said with a dopey smile at him.

“Indeed.” he said with a satisfied breath of his own.

“What was that? And how long have we been out?”

“Approximately one hour.” he confessed. Enough time for the effects of the cinnamon to wear off. “I did not wish to have the experience alone. It is typically a shared affair.”

“Is it like mind sex or something? It felt like sex.”

Syrok actually made a small choking snort of a laugh. “It is... that is to say, perhaps what we did just then... that is not an inaccurate description.” He rushed to explain himself. “However, what I mean to say is that in rituals where the drug is permitted, a sharing of minds is common, and it need not necessarily be with one's bondmate. I am uncertain whether all would be compelled to share a meld of this nature, but with my mate, it seemed appropriate.”

“I'm not complaining.” her eyes sparkled softly. “I'd do it again.”

“The effects would not be exactly the same without the drug.” he warned her.

“I don't mind. With or without. I'd try something like it again.”

“I am gratified.”

“So did you have a happy Thanksgiving?” she prompted

“I suppose that I did.” he allowed. But they were both still drained from the early rise, the busy day, the turkey (on Holly's part), the shared meld... And so there on the couch, in their awkward position, Holly felt her eyes close and allowed herself to drift off happily for the traditional Thanksgiving nap. And Syrok, for his own part, was reluctant to move himself or disturb Holly, so he allowed himself this nap as well, though he did not strictly require rest at this time. In the tradition of the holiday, he would indulge.
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

Tomorrow there will be a special amazing Christmas chapter where important things happen. I always want something to do on Christmas, so I don't know if people are busy with their families and lives, but if anyone has the problem of needing some fanfic, there will be one!

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Holly sat with her eyes closed, her legs crossed, and her palms on her knees, breathing slowly. She'd had a long day, but Syrok continued to push for meditation practice. After all, meditation was relaxing. Or something. For Holly, though, it could be its own exercise in stress.

She'd already worked through relaxing herself and going through the basic meditative process she was familiar with, and she was wholly grateful that she'd been into this practice well before her bond. While she might be slow at it, and only reach a certain level, at least she had that. At least she had a base. Syrok sat beside her off in his own mineescape, and apparently monitoring her progress through their bond. He'd been silent up until now, but apparently he'd decided she'd reached the required level of relaxation and concentration.

"Alright, k'diwa," he spoke softly, "as we have practiced, please try to initiate a shield now."

Holly hated shielding but she knew that it was important, allegedly for their shared psychic health, but also for the impression she wanted to make on the Vulcan people -- especially Syrok's family. On Vulcan, one's thoughts were held sacred, and they took care to shield them so as to not bombard one another with psychic noise. Here on Earth, humans broadcast thoughts and emotions randomly, being totally unaware of what they were doing, and totally unable to control it. Typically, only empaths with a certain esper rating were able to learn to shield properly, and so it was up to visiting Vulcans to shield their own minds from outside bombardment. Holly, however, as a mate to a Vulcan, now had gained the ability to perceive her psychic centers., at least rudimentarily, through her bond with Syrok. And with this new knowledge, according to Syrok, came new responsibility, to at least try to learn to shield properly.

But it was difficult. And she did not like it.

She focused on the vague sense of self, where she ended and everything else began. It was... fuzzy, and not altogether clear to her. Psychic sense was literally another sense, like smell or sight, and it was one that she had no prior context for, so she found all of their lessons to be a bit confusing. Still, she had grasped the self, and now she began to erect a wall about it. Syrok might be able to do this in a purer form, but on Holly's part, she was like the youngest Vulcan child, having to rely upon crude visual imagery to get the job done. She pictured a wall, she pictured things like the feeling of thickened air, the concept of not letting things in, and so forth. Eventually she was aware she was succeeding in her efforts as there was a sort of close feeling, like hiding in a small space -- and just as when hiding somewhere, the sounds of the outside world were dampened, here within her shield the everything else felt a bit more removed, perhaps quieter.

"Very good, k'diwa." Syrok effused, and she felt herself fill with his warmth and approval. For a moment, her irritation waned and she felt a bit proud of her efforts. "Now, please try to place your
shield between us.” he instructed, as he always did.

This was the part Holly dreaded. When she'd first learned how to shield, she'd instinctively included Syrok within it. The bond was so strong and essential, she honestly hadn't even noticed what she was doing. He felt like a part of her self. Initially, Syrok had been equal parts pleased and concerned with this revelation. She'd argued that since they were bonded and both happy to be with one another, there was no point in shielding him out. And besides, he could always shield from her if he so desired. However, Syrok had a lifetime of training urging him caution in this -- while one might not often shield from one's mate, it was an essential skill to have in case of some unforeseen event.

So delicately now, Holly searched for the warm beacon of her mate... and gently, tried to ease a fog-thin wall between the two of them. It pinched. She winced internally. Every fiber of her being shouted at her that this action was wrong. It was not at all like when the ambassador had placed a shield between them -- it had been an outside entity, and the situation had already been horrendous, and the bond had been an absolute mess. Now that things were warm and comfortable and settled... she did not want to shut her mate out.

Syrok seemed to frown in confusion and concern, as he always did. This should not be so painful for his mate, he reasoned. To shield was normal and innocuous. Perhaps she was doing it wrong? He'd already tested and been able to shield her himself. It hadn't been for a long enough time for him to notice anything particularly unusual, but Holly had complained of irrational feelings of anxiety creeping up immediately. And when she attempted the shield herself, she really did experience distress. He wished to soothe her, but he could not if she were shielding from him, which was the whole exercise. His sense of her distress muted as the tenuous shield was erected and wavered, before falling abruptly.

Holly seemed exhausted and distressed. Immediately he enveloped her in warm feelings, wanting to wrap around her core being so tightly that all she could feel was love. She was his, and she should not be made to feel these unpleasant things. “I am sorry, pi’veh.” he whispered to her, and she felt his hand touch her own, bringing her back to their room, instead of where she'd been focused within. She blinked a bit in disorientation, and then scooted toward him on the floor to close the distance and curl up in his arms. She wanted him around her physically as well as mentally.

“I don't like that.” she said, aware she sounded petulant, and not particularly remorseful about it.

“I am aware.” he said, kissing her forehead and holding her against him as she wished, and if he were honest with himself, as he wished as well. “Perhaps we will put this particular lesson on hold until a point in which we may obtain further data.”

“Like what?” she asked curiously, while immediately feeling incredible relief that they might not have to go through this again.

“I am uncertain who I might ask about such difficulties. Perhaps a Healer would be in order, although that seems somewhat impersonal. Ideally I might ask my father, though I am uncertain whether our unconventional bond, or your human physiology might play a part. It is too personal a topic to mention to someone such as T’Sala or Professor Selkar.”

“Maybe once your dad likes me he'll know what the problem is.” she said with sleepy optimism.

“Perhaps.” he gave her a small smile. She seemed so convinced that everything would resolve well. Syrok was more certain of their schoolwork, and their future at Starfleet. He knew he had much control over these events, and was comforted by that fact. Holly seemed to experience no end of
stress related to it, however, and he suspected she might suffer from low self esteem. But for matters such as whether or not his family would come to truly accept his choice in mate, Syrok remained uncertain and somewhat concerned, whereas Holly was a fountain of hope and optimism (when she wasn't being neurotic). He found this human ability to be fascinating, especially since this optimistic outlook was based on no data, and could exist simultaneously with doubt. Strange. And bolstering to his own spirits, in spite of the illogic in it.

After the bond had resettled and Holly had calmed, Syrok roused her from where she was already dozing off against him. “Come. It is illogical to fall asleep on me when we have a perfectly serviceable bed.”

Groggily, Holly got to her feet with help, and smiled at him. “Perfectly serviceable, eh? I thought you didn’t like that bed.”

“It has, I believe the phrase is ‘grown on me’.”

Holly snorted, knowing full well why he was developing a liking for it. The sex was only the half of it. Syrok was a total cuddle slut.

They proceeded to the bathroom where Holly began a hot shower and Syrok brushed his teeth and changed into a sleeping robe -- something he had not dared to wear in the dormitories for fear of judgment. He had not wanted to call attention to himself. However, here with Holly, the garment was acceptable. It was warm and soft and comfortable, and reminded him of home. He was grateful that Holly, in spite of her cultural differences, was willing to embrace his own culture so openly. He was able to let his guard down and be himself. Before Holly, he had not acknowledged how difficult it had become to fit in among humans. He had always simply dealt with it as best he could, and presumed it would become somewhat easier when he was assigned to a starship and had more private quarters. He could not have foreseen the need for this private apartment with Holly.

His beautiful mate emerged from the steaming shower, soaked and grabbing for a towel. He took a moment to unabashedly admire her as she shot him a knowing look, and wrapping the towel snugly around her form, began to attend to her own teeth. Everything had come so easily into a routine for them. He wondered briefly if it were like this for all couples or not, whether the bond had helped or not. For whatever reason, they were in sync. Syrok used the toilet while she brushed, and prepared the bed while she used the toilet. The necessities taken care of, all that was left was to hold Holly until she slept, and follow suit. He would clean himself and meditate in the morning, but for now he chose to follow her to sleep.

Holly emerged from the locker room flushed, exhausted, and victorious. She’d showered quickly and changed, and from the look of Syrok from his annoyed expression to his damp hair, he’d done the same. He was never pleased with being damp in cold weather, and although they were in San Francisco, it was still early December and it was nippy outside, and downright cold to a Vulcan. Holly smiled as she imagined showing him Montana. Poor Syrok would hardly survive it. Then again, how would she handle the heat of Vulcan? Best not to think of that now. She’d just been victorious after all. She grinned.

“Did you talk to the professor?” she asked eagerly.

“Indeed.” he answered impassively. Her excitement only spiked.

“Annnnd?”
She was just too adorable. He caved. “Our demonstration was sufficient. You have received full credit for your independent study of *suus mahna* and it will count toward a required fitness credit.” His eyes smiled for him.

“Woop!” she made an exultant, nonsensical noise while shoving a fist into the air. Syrok found it endearing.

“I am glad you are in good spirits.” Syrok said.

“Why? Do you have bad news or something?”

“I should hope not. However, I have received a communication from my father. My parents intend to visit Earth at some point over the winter break.”

Instantly, Holly felt nervous, surprised, anxious, and excited. She was nervous, definitely, because they didn't approve of this bond, and she didn't want to lose Syrok, and she didn't want to fight with her in-laws. But this was what she'd been preparing for, she reminded herself. This was why she'd spent long hours with Syrok, T'Sala, and Professor Selkar learning every nuance of Vulcan culture so that she could make a good impression, and prove that she was a sufficient mate for Syrok. “Okay.” she nodded with determination. “Okay, we can do this.”

“Are you attempting to convince me, or yourself?” Syrok inquired with some amusement.

“Both.” she confessed. “I just don’t know why your mom hates me.” she muttered.

“She does not hate you. Indeed, prior to our bonding she seemed well pleased to count you among my acquaintances. I believe her concerns are largely pragmatic, and if we show her the logic in this arrangement, surely she can have no complaint.”

“Syrok, I love you, but you of all people cannot convince me that Vulcans don't get illogical. I really hope you're right, but if a mother doesn't like her son's choice in partner, that's like a force of nature. At least it's that way for humans, and I can't believe Vulcans are so different after seeing a fraction of the communications you've had with your mother.”

“Indeed, she is a force to be reckoned with. However, my father is far more placid.”

“Indeed?” Syrok had not been overly close to either his father or mother, as they'd traveled with various space-faring vessels throughout his childhood, winding up consulting with Starfleet. But he'd had a strong mental bond to them, and he'd liked them well enough. He'd even visited them aboard ships at times. Still, he had never before had someone remark that he in any way resembled his father, and the feeling was weirdly... nice. There was something very essential about Clan dynamics that a son always wished to follow in some way in the footsteps of his father. He was Soren's son. He would inherit his wealth as well as his responsibility one day. It was comforting to know that Holly, at least, saw him as deserving of that position.

They walked in tandem to the little study area where they'd first met all that time ago for math tutoring, to eat a late packed lunch before Holly had to go for her last class of the week. They each pulled out their lunches, things which they'd decided worked well cold. The notion of a packed lunch was new to Syrok. On Vulcan, one would typically eat warm food for a meal. They would leave school or work to do so. Perhaps going home, perhaps eating out, or in a few circumstances, eating at a cafeteria provided by the establishment. But Holly had diligently explained how they could save money and time by packing these goods and as it was logical, he had easily agreed.
Besides, it was a unique challenge for him to imagine dishes which would serve well cold, and
which would not mind a bit of jostling in his bag. He usually opted for salad, as he did today.

Holly, on her part, was still picking through bits of turkey they'd chilled. She had a turkey
sandwich, cold stuffing, and even a piece of pie. He eyed it up, half wanting to indulge again, but
knowing that this was not the time and place. Holly's meal was not the most balanced in the world,
but she was eating the items that he would not (not the stuffing as it was cooked inside the bird), so
he was content. He would serve her something vegetarian for dinner.

“You have your group presentation today.” Syrok said conversationally. When had he developed
the habit of speaking unnecessarily between meals?

“Mmhmm.” Holly said with her mouth full, eating all of her meal with her hands. Syrok was
perhaps a bit distracted in watching her. “Thank god. I like working in groups, don't get me wrong,
but after a while it can get pretty tedious.”

“You are aware that a starship is full of people.” Syrok said teasingly.

She rolled her eyes and snorted. “At least it's not all full of communications majors. Only so many
people for me to butt heads with. Anyway, I'm also glad this project's over because we have what,
two weeks until finals and I really don't have time to split my attention.”

“I believe my own final examinations will be most satisfying this semester.” Syrok said. He knew
that such an opinion was not common among humans, and the first time he'd expressed satisfaction
with a difficult course to Holly she had experienced a confusing array of negative emotions. Now,
however, she simply snorted a small laugh and shook her head.

“Vulcans.” she said with a roll of her eyes, but he could feel her affection through their bond.

“Is it not logical to wish to be challenged?” Syrok questioned, not for the first time. “If the classes
were easy, I would not be learning as much. In fact, I would likely be bored.”

“Easy for you to say. I don't want to get kicked out of the 'fleet.”

“You will not get thrown out of Starfleet. You have studied your material. You know it, and
therefore you will test well.”

“Just because you know the material doesn't mean you'll test well.”

“Illogical.”

“Well, that's humans in a nutshell.” Syrok quirked his brow. Humans did not reside in nut shells.
“There are all kinds of reasons I could score poorly. I guess I've made it this far, though.”

He nodded. “The statistics are in your favor.”

“You're such a charmer.”

“Indeed?”
Christmas was fast approaching, and as Syrok and Holly were now both upperclassmen, the Yule Ball was approaching as well. For Holly, it was a source of some excitement. While she was not fond parties in the general sense, this was hardly the sort of drunken revelry that typically passed for party among her peers. This was sophisticated, and official. This party brought dress uniforms into their possession for the first time. It felt validating somehow -- she now had rank. Oh sure, officially she was the rank of “Cadet” since the day she had been accepted to Starfleet Academy. But the dropout rate for underclassmen was fairly high, and for one with so little experience rank was as good as ignored. Underclassmen for all intents and purposes may well be civilians that Starfleet simply tolerated. Now, however, she would wear her uniform, she would wear her rank insignia, her Starfleet pin. She'd actually be required to shine the sturdy boots she'd been supplied with two and a half years ago. Not that she enjoyed shining boots, per se, but it lent a sense of legitimacy. The ball would be held in a great room filled with Cadets such as herself, but all the way up to the odd Admiral making rounds. It would be sophisticated and important.

Syrok, on the other hand, was baffled by the whole affair at best, and would be downright annoyed were he to allow himself to give in to such trivial emotionalism. Why were they required to wear dress uniforms to this? There was no official business to take place. There was no press conference. As far as he could tell, there was no benefit to the event at all. Why his peers put so much emphasis on gathering simply for its own sake, he could not fathom. He'd had to go to large functions on Vulcan, of course. He'd had to wear his dress robes. He'd mingled with both elders and peers. But on Vulcan, such events always had a definite purpose -- a thing that must be accomplished. They certainly did not gather for general revelry, or to celebrate. Indeed, what were they even celebrating? He'd read the background on many of the winter holidays and found the whole affair to be ridiculous.

“Stop being such a gloomy Gus.” Holly chided with a smile.

Syrok gave her the look that said: You are being so nonsensical that I am not even certain I should dignify your words by asking what they could possibly mean.

She caught his meaning in his slight scowl and simply laughed, offering no explanation of the idiom.

“It's Christmas! It's a time to be of good cheer and all that.”

“It is the celebration of the birth of a mythical being from an all but dead religion that has no basis in fact. That is, if you are referring specifically to Christmas. A number of the other holidays
during this time appear to have suspiciously similar origin stories.”

Holly laughed. “I guess, but not really. Maybe it was once about religion, Syrok, but only the fringe care anymore. It’s about presents and family and cookies and other happy things.”

“I was not aware you even celebrated Christmas, Holly. We spent last winter break together and I will note that neither on the day itself nor on any of the days surrounding it did you mention the holiday nor make any special preparations regarding it nor did you seem to observe any specific rituals. I fail to see the logic in your sudden interest in this day.”

“Well I --” she stopped, flustered. “I mean I sort of celebrated, growing up. Everybody does.” He scowled. “Okay, not everybody, but most humans on Earth celebrate something around that time. I didn't bring it up last year because you certainly don't celebrate, and what was I supposed to do on my own? And without money to buy presents or people to buy them for, without a tree to decorate or places to go? I just wanted to be with you. I still want to be with you.” she smiled warmly. “But now I also want to go to the Yule Ball.”

There was no arguing with her illogic, and besides, he was required to go to the ball regardless. Kaidith.

And so their apartment was now streaming Christmas music that Holly had begun at Thanksgiving (which really should have been Syrok's first hint). There was a holo-tree being projected on the wall of their bedroom by the meditation mat and small shrine he'd had mailed here from home. They could not afford a real tree and all of its decorations, but Holly assured him that the sparkling lights of the holo-tree gave the same effect. The characteristic pine scent was missing, so they'd purchased a pine scented candle for the shrine. And Syrok wouldn't admit it aloud, but he found it to be a sort of charming blend of their cultures.

It was a Friday evening and they'd just finished the last of their final exams for the semester. The holiday was technically next week, but since the dorms were closing for winter break, the Yule Ball was held tonight before the students would scatter back to their homes to celebrate. For Syrok's part, he did not mind his dress uniform. It was distinctly Terran, but he'd grown more or less accustomed to the style of dress by now. He'd heard others complain that the cloth was itchy, or that the cut of the suit was constricting, but he did not find it to be any more uncomfortable than regular Terran clothing. Robes were certainly more comfortable, but this was by no means the torture device other students had compared it to.

Until now, however, he hadn't seen Holly in her own uniform. He finished dressing himself in the bedroom and went to the bathroom to see if Holly had finished preparing herself. She'd claimed a need for a mirror to “do” her hair, though he had no idea what she would do with it other than the usual. The sight that greeted him now, however, was shocking. It was... short. He blinked.

“Do you like it?” Holly smiled and gave him a spin, excited by her new uniform. She looked back at herself in the small mirror over the sink. She wished she could see all of it, but this was enough. She looked so official.

She looked so... naked, in Syrok's opinion. He tried not to frown. He was unsuccessful.

“You don't like it?” Holly's big eyes bored into him, looking like a wounded animal.

“It is... short.” he said awkwardly.
Holly blinked. “Well yeah, that's kind of how they make them.”

“I had assumed you would request the pants option.”

Holly wrinkled her nose. “Syrok, no one gets the pants option.”

“That is incorrect. If there is a pants option, it is because some people request it.”

“Gender variants and fuddy duddies request it.” she rolled her eyes.

“Fuddy duddies?” he lifted a brow.

Holly burst out laughing. “Oh my god. Say that again.” her eyes lit teasingly.

“Negative.” Syrok wondered whether it was within the parameters of their relationship to order her to request the pants option. A Vulcan would request the pants option. Syrok was Vulcan, and Holly was his mate. He did not like his mate to be seen in such a state. However, his mate was human, and she did not subscribe to the same cultural norms as he did, and though she was very compliant with his wishes, he did not wish to abuse the power she allowed him. He was conflicted.

Holly sighed as she looked at him. “Is this going to be a problem in the future? If it's going to be a problem, you have to tell me. I have to wear a uniform for the next like ten years or something, Syrok.”

“I am... uncertain.” he confessed. “You are human, and most of the members of Starfleet are humans. The dress is the most standard uniform....”

She framed his face with her hands and pulled him down for a gentle kiss. The kiss was enjoyable, but paled in comparison to her fingertips resting on his temples. The bond hummed contentedly.

“Listen, I have to wear it tonight at the least, so if it bothers you a lot tonight, then maybe I'll ask for the pants instead. Is that fair?”

“Affirmative. Logical.”

Holly continued to give him small kisses while touching him just so, and he didn't think that she realized what something so simple as the placement of her fingers could do to him. Without conscious thought, Syrok's chest gave a contented rumble of low purr, something that Holly seemed to delight in when she could cause it to come forth. His hands fell to her trim waist, and he was aware of how close they were to the bottom of the skirt. He knew exactly what lay beneath it. It was his, Holly was his, and he felt that familiar dark urge welling up within him again. It was totally illogical. He was bonded to Holly now. Why should he feel this need?

Holly caught the drift of his feelings and let out a small laughing breath. “Just do it.” she encouraged. “It's okay.”

“It would be improprietous.” he said, but that bit of logic did not negate the urge.

“It's just a party. Go on.” she tilted her neck just so, baring it to him. A sharp spike of arousal shot through him at the act.

He placed gentle kisses on her neck where it joined with her shoulder. Her hair was tightly up and out of the way, giving her a particularly professional look, and exposing her pale neck further. He did not wish to hurt her. He gave little kisses. Lingering kisses. Sucking kisses. He nipped lightly. He should not mark her. He should learn to control this. It was ridiculous. He could not very well mark her every day she wore this uniform. She could not be seen with bites on her neck in
professional settings. But this was only a party, as she had said. A party where everyone would see
her and want her. Syrok, almost inaudibly, moaned. Holly's own breath was coming deeper with
the attention to what he knew to be an erogenous zone on her. Her fists clung to his own dress
jacket.

And what of his parents? They would come to visit soon. What if she still had marks on her neck
when they showed up? What message would that send about their son's judgment. and ability to
control his impulses? But thinking of his parents had been the wrong move. His parents did not
approve of Holly. They wished to separate them. This only made the urge to mark her surge more
strongly, such a large swell that he felt he was drowning in it, drowning in the need, and before he
could debate the matter further, he'd bitten down with satisfaction, just enough to leave a mark, and
felt the overwhelming pressure within him release.

Now he was back in the moment and was gently licking the wound he'd again inflicted on his mate.
What would Holly's physician say? He flushed slightly in embarrassment.

“I love you.” Holly offered, sensing his embarrassment over what he'd done.

“As I cherish thee.” he returned softly. Holly pulled away from him to clean the saliva he'd placed
on her neck and he inwardly winced. He'd ruined her professional appearance.

“Would you stop?” she chastised lightly. “We're going to a Christmas party.” she smiled at him,
her eyes excited again. “So be happy.”

“I will endeavor to do so.” he turned to exit the bathroom, Holly diligently in tow just slightly
behind him. It was odd and wonderful. He knew that this was what it was like to be a functional
pair within his society. But he'd never been in a strictly husband and wife type scenario with
T'Rena. It had been something he'd vaguely looked forward to, and to some degree, taken for
granted. When the time came for them to move their relationship to its next logical level, T'Rena
would have done as their culture had expected, and would have no doubt served as a fine
bondmate. But the reality was that he had not yet had that with T'Rena. They'd been bonded as
children, and had not yet experienced life as adults. And now T'Rena was gone, and he had in her
place this wonderful human whom he cherished. And somehow, even as a human, she was the
perfect Vulcan mate. Whatever adulthood Holly had felt by donning her Starfleet uniform, Syrok
felt with Holly following his lead.

The Yule Ball was everything Syrok had thought it would be. He hadn't honestly given it much
thought, because that would be a waste of brain power, but he'd thought it would be crowded, and
it was. Oceans of Cadets milled around with professors and higher ranking officials of all sorts,
every one of them in dress uniform. He strengthened his shields and prepared himself for the
coming onslaught. There was no way to completely avoid bumping into people, nor was there a
way to entirely ignore the sorts of excited psychic emanations that humans were wont to thrust into
the air around them. It was not the worst experience, but it was always a slight shock to the system.
Even Holly, a psi-null, seemed to be taken aback by the scene temporarily, the loud din of talk and
music swirling around them as they entered the hall. But then Holly's eyes lit on the large
Christmas tree in the back of the room, and the twinkling lights, electric candles, ribbons, and
evergreen sprinkled throughout the room, and he felt the swell of hushed enchantment that came
over his mate. It was worth the chaos.

Holly, who usually didn't like parties, was completely taken by the festive scene. Traditional
Christmas music done in classical instrumentals tinkled over the sound system, interspersed with
music from other Federation worlds in a token attempt at being cross cultural she supposed. But
everyone knew that this was for Christmas, and no one seemed to be holding it against them. The decorations were absolutely magical. Holly had had a few decent Christmases, but none of them had ever come close to this. The scene was like something out of an old film, and it being combined with Starfleet, the culmination of her hard work and dreams, was overwhelming. Here she was, someone who mattered, weaving around other people who mattered. It was unbelievable. It was all she had dreamed of for years now. And not only was her professional life amazing, but she was here with Syrok, someone she'd come to love, the best part of her life and something she'd never even considered.

She broke her stance of a half step behind her mate and took the lead, as it was clear he would not, and with a slight smirk at his extra-Vulcan mask, she steered them toward sweeping tables of refreshments along the walls. Both Holly and Syrok alike were staggered by the number of unfamiliar foodstuffs available to them. Luckily, little cards had been placed with all of the foods just as were normally in the cafeteria, indicating what species could safely eat them, and important facts such as whether or not they contained meat.

Holly grabbed a bunch of safe things nearly at random, figuring she'd find out when she ate them whether she liked them, content that she could always throw things out and get new if needed, while Syrok diligently used his pocket PADD, trying to type the names of the dishes into a search program to find out more about what he was eating. So while he was engrossed in making his selections, Holly was stuffing her face and scanning the room. She was surprised when her eyes alighted on T'Sala, also standing out of the crowded areas, seemingly speaking to some professor at the wall adjacent to where Holly stood. She wasn't surprised to see that T'Sala had opted for the pants uniform. She was just thinking that when Syrok finished choosing his food, perhaps they could brave the crowd and join her, when she spotted the Vulcan beside T'Sala.

“Who is that?” she asked curiously.

“Who is who?” Syrok asked distractedly, placing another item on his plate that he'd deemed as safe. All of the items were “finger foods” for the event, and he was dubious about the arrangement, but glad to see that little toothpicks had been provided so that he might at least attempt to be civilized.

“Over there, with T'Sala.” Holly nodded her chin and continued to watch. They were standing awfully close, she frowned as she noticed it. And then her face lit with excitement. “Holy shit, is that Selek?” she asked excitedly.

Syrok finally stopped focusing on his food long enough to follow Holly's gaze, and observed the same casual closeness that she had. “Indeed.” he said speculatively. “That would be the most logical assumption. I was unaware that he had already arrived.”

“I thought he wasn't getting here for like another week!” she was getting excited now. Because as much as she knew that T'Sala had a bondmate of her very own, neither Holly nor Syrok had ever met or heard from the man in any way, as until now he'd been on Vulcan. T'Sala had been quite excited lately at the news that Selek had been able to arrange a prolonged vacation corresponding to her own winter break this year and would finally visit her here on Earth. It was to be his first time seeing the planet in person, and Holly could tell T'Sala was dying to show him around, and for that matter, to see him again, in person. Vulcan logic aside, they were still capable of missing their bondmates.

“Let's go meet him!” Holly practically bounced on her toes, waiting for Syrok to follow before she made a move.

“Very well.” his eyes smiled at her enthusiasm. He eyed the table of food again and considered it a
lost cause. He had enough to make do for now. Belatedly, he realized that T'Sala and her mate were standing near to the desserts, and knew that Holly's nutrition would also soon become a lost cause. *Kaidith.*

“T'Sala!” Holly shouted over the din as she bounded up to her friend. Luckily, by now the professor had wandered away.

“Greetings, Holly.” T'Sala said placidly, but Holly could see the excitement in her eyes. She took in Syrok as well. “Allow me to make introductions. Selek, these are my acquaintances I have told you about: Syrok, and his mate Holly.” She nodded to the man next to her, “And this, is my bondmate Selek.”

Holly excitedly flashed up a *ta'al.* “It's great to finally meet you.”

Selek maintained his Vulcan composure but his eyes flicked toward Syrok at her forwardness. Syrok, for his part, only looked slightly bemused, and extended his mental shields to encompass some of the wild excitement projecting from his mate. “Indeed.” Selek answered simply.

“I didn't realize you'd make it to the ball.”

“It is my understanding that it is traditional for one to be accompanied by their mate.” he said levelly. “Therefore, it is my duty to accompany T'Sala.”

“When did you get here?” Holly continued curiously. “What do you think of Earth?”

“Holly.” Syrok admonished, slightly embarrassed that his mate was asking such personal questions.

“What? He doesn't have to answer if he doesn't want to.”

Selek, for his own part, seemed amused. “There is no offense where none is taken.” he said smoothly. “I arrived earlier today, in fact. I have not had much opportunity to take in the sights of Earth, though I must admit that Starfleet's Yule Ball offers an array of sights and sounds all its own.”

Holly snorted. “A bit noisy.”

“Indeed.”

“Might I assure you that it is not always this flamboyant.” Syrok offered wryly, as Holly was already eying up the desserts behind them.

T'Sala sidled up beside Holly and spoke in a low voice. “You opted for the dress.” It was said as a flat statement, but Holly could read between the lines and heard surprise, and perhaps an admonishment of sorts.

“Not you too.” she sighed. “Why wouldn't I? It's the normal attire.”

“For a human perhaps.”

“I am human, in case you hadn't noticed.”

“And your mate is Vulcan. Really, Holly, after all of our discussions on proper attire, possessiveness --”
Holly cut her off. “Are applicable when I'm trying to fit in on Vulcan, or with Syrok's parents. Which, I will. But we're also going to be on a Starfleet vessel for the next however many years, not a Vulcan ship.”

T'Sala mulled over the conundrum of the clothing and said nothing, watching as Holly added more and more sweet snacks to her plate, sampling some as she went. For her own part, she avoided the sweets. She did suppose Holly had a point. Holly was human. Starfleet was largely human. And Syrok had chosen a human as a mate. However... it was difficult to imagine any Vulcan man not being bothered by such scant clothing on his mate. She almost winced in sympathy for Syrok as she saw how very little Holly's skirt covered. Funny, T'Sala of course knew that the clothing was revealing -- it was why she had selected the pants option for herself, but she'd never before really noticed, so keenly, how naked the human females around her were. She'd become largely inured to Terran fashion, which was often revealing in nature, and had learned to ignore it. After all, it was largely of no consequence, and her mind was focused on more important endeavors than attire. But seeing a Vulcan's mate in such clothing was altogether different. Regardless, she sensed that she'd already said too much for Holly's liking, and as the topic was personal and really none of her business, she decided that the conversation was closed.

“Aren't you going to eat anything?” Holly asked distractedly, her mouth already half full of some sort of cookie.

“Perhaps not the desserts. However, if we could all move toward the more substantive food table, that would be beneficial.” Holly shrugged and catching Syrok's eye, started to move toward where they'd come from, the men in tow, much to T'Sala's amusement. Well, she supposed that it was nice that things were different on Earth, sometimes.

After much discussion, between the Vulcans and much eye rolling on Holly's part, everyone finally had foods they considered safe and appropriate for consumption. They loitered around, unable to escape people no matter where they stood, and continued to eat and talk. Holly continued to forgo the toothpicks, using her fingers like a “normal person” and gorging herself on the sweets that were typically absent from their apartment. It was improper and illogical -- and to Syrok, Holly had never been more beautiful. Her eyes retained a constant sparkle as she dove into the holiday sweets. She seemed to know nearly every song being played on the sound system as he caught her humming along. And she constantly surveyed the garish decorations with obvious approval and childlike awe.

As much as he did not understand Christmas, he thought he was perhaps beginning to. Since his initial misunderstanding with Holly about the holiday he'd delved into his research. He really should have expected her to want to celebrate, given her attention to Thanksgiving. But then, she'd largely ignored some of the other holidays, so how was he to know? Still, now he was familiar with the underlying concepts of the Christmas season that appealed to so many Terrans -- such things as family, good will toward fellow man, a spirit of giving, and other wholesome ideals. Much like Thanksgiving, he considered it to be a sort of human meditation on gratitude and abundance, seemingly a recurring theme.

Now he wanted to gift more of that abundance and family feeling to his mate. Though he had not told her, he had procured a gift for her, as he understood was customary for the holiday. His intent was to wait until Wednesday of the next week, Christmas Day, to give her the item, but once again he found himself toying with the idea of giving it to her early, to see the joy in her eyes. It had not been cheap, but he'd purchased it with money he'd made for himself from his summer internship. His Clan could not question him on it. And it was practical. It was, in fact, a lovely Vulcan robe, cut just to Holly's dimensions, in a deep brown. His Clan colors were dark brown and indigo, and he thought that by choosing just one of the two it would be a nice gesture, yet still appropriate for
Holly to wear in front of his disapproving parents. It was neither casual wear nor ritual-level ornate, but somewhere in the middle. Plain, perhaps, but with small embellishments in how the seams were done, how the clasps functioned, that elevated it from common wear. And modest, unlike her Starfleet dress. Somehow, the thought of Holly in traditional Vulcan garb was even more arousing than the reality of her in such a short skirt.

This party, to Syrok's relief, was far superior to those he'd had the misfortune of attending before. Even though there was some alcohol, the professional nature of the event seemed to go far toward keeping his peers mostly sober, (or at least masking their intoxication sufficiently). The music, while largely foreign to him, was tasteful, again something he could not necessarily say for the music which he had assumed typified such events. To his pleasure there was actually one song of Vulcan lyre and bells among the otherwise mostly holiday themed selection. The foods, while more challenging at first than what had been available in the cafeteria, were palatable enough. And while there was at least one Official Dance he had to participate in, he muddled through well enough with Holly's welcome touch.

A long winded and entirely unnecessary (though seemingly inspirational to the humans) speech was given toward the end of the evening, culminating at midnight with an unexpected and entirely unnecessary burst of confetti over the crowd. The steadily increasing din of voices rose to a jubilant cheer at the event and finally, finally the student body began to disperse. Syrok, for his part, was exhausted from a long night of psychic shielding, foreign culture, and needless formality. But Holly, however, was exhausted differently, and it was enough to lessen his stress just to observe her. She was sleepy and affectionate in spite of his protests, and in high spirits without even an ounce of alcohol to put her there.

They walked home, though it was somewhat of a longer walk, because the buses were full of rowdy students, and because Holly had wanted to view the holiday decorations people had put upon their homes and places of business. It was a cold night, and late, but they had no responsibilities the next day, and so Syrok did not mind. He even granted the hand-holding and Holly's slight lean against his right hand side, because there was no one to see, and if they did, they didn't know he was Vulcan under his knit cap and in the darkness. It was nice.

And contrary to popular belief, Syrok did not in fact hate the cold. Desert nights on Vulcan were quite cold themselves, and there were cooler climbs at the tops of the highest mountains as well. As a Vulcan, he was well equipped to handle a large variance in temperatures when required, so this walk would not, of course, kill him. The problem he had in general with Earth was the unremitting chill of it, that there never seemed to be the relief that came with the heat of a desert day. But with his apartment now, whose heat was cranked high, he did not mind his forays into the world nearly so much.

“This is the best Christmas I've ever had.” Holly said after long blocks walked in silence.

Syrok wasn't sure to say to that. His hope was that he was a part of her best Christmas, but he did not know for certain how much of a role he played. He was glad that her Christmas holiday now was of the best quality so far, but he knew that her past was very negative and that this could simply be faint praise. So, he said nothing.

Holly didn't mind. “I got you something, you know.” she smiled.

Syrok looked to her in surprise, surprise that she felt shift across their bond. She smiled in response. “Where did you procure the money for it?” he asked wonderingly.
“I sold back a few books.” she explained. “Normally I'd need the money again for just getting by, but since you're paying for everything anyway, I figured I could use some to surprise you.”

“You are very resourceful.” he remarked wonderingly. It would possibly never cease to amaze him how Holly was able to get by with so little. Then his mind shifted back to the more pertinent information. “What did you get me?”

Holly's voice tinkled with laughter. “I can't tell you, Syrok. It's a Christmas present. You have to open it on Christmas, or Christmas Eve if you're impatient.”

“Ah.” he answered, chagrined. Still, curiosity tickled at his mind. It was illogical to speculate, as he would come to the answer in due course, but he itched to know what Holly would acquire for him. Two could play at this game of anticipation. “Then you will be pleased to know that I have also procured for you a gift.”

“Really?” she asked with excitement. “I mean, you didn't have to. I didn't expect you to. You already do so much.”

“Nonetheless, I have done so.”

They walked on in silence as Holly mused about what the gift might be. “Is it larger than a breadbox?” she quizzed teasingly. Syrok raised a brow at her, having no idea what a breadbox might be, nor why she would wish to know the relative size of the gift. Her tittering laughter indicated it was some sort of joke he was missing out on, and he let the comment slide.

Holly's breath came out with a slight fog as she walked. It had to have been nearing one in the morning, what with the slow emptying of the party, and the long-ish walk back to their apartment. There was no snow, of course, because it was San Francisco, and there wasn't even a hint of frost, really, but it was cold, and it was enough. It gave the night an exciting edge as the air felt extra sharp and cleared her head which had been filled with a low buzz of excitement from the evening's activities. The apartment now, was nearing, less than a block away. “Any word on when exactly your parents are coming?” she questioned, trying to push her nervousness aside.

“Negative. They indicated only that it would be over our winter break. Please do not concern yourself unnecessarily. We will address it in due time.” And with that final reassurance, they were home, climbing the stairs of a very quiet apartment complex. Apparently the other inhabitants of the building were either asleep by now, or had gone elsewhere for the holiday. Holly suspected the latter; she'd even thought she'd spotted some of the tenants with packed bags earlier.

It was nice having the additional silence. The city would always be a city, and she hadn't exactly signed up for the most secluded of careers, but she had a fondness for the more remote areas she'd lived in and visited. She could only imagine how nice it would be to visit Vulcan, as she knew of the race's tendency toward privacy and silence, and had heard firsthand from Syrok about his family home, having even seen glimpses of it when they'd formed their initial bond. She yawned deeply and scrubbed at her eyes.

“You are fatigued.”

“Just a little.”

“Come, we will get you to bed.”

“I'll shower in the morning.”

“Very well.”
Groggily, Holly made her way through brushing her teeth, using the toilet, and stripping for bed. It was warm here, and the blankets were warmer. Sometimes she would wear some semblance of night clothes, and others not. Syrok, seeing her preference this night, left off his own sleeping robe as well. For a while, Holly simply sat on the bed in the dark room, staring at the twinkling projection of a tree.

“Would you like to receive your gift early?” Syrok asked.

“Really?” she asked in hushed excitement, and weighed the pros and cons of ruining her surprise.

“It may prove beneficial to you.” he offered, handing her a soft packaged wrapped in plain brown paper. Where he'd retrieved it from, she had no idea.

It was clearly cloth of some sort, she decided, feeling the softness and weight of it. Gently, curiously, she peeled back the tape fastening the paper closed and carefully pulled away the edges of the paper. A soft gasp was the only sound in the room as she beheld the luxurious garment before her. It was gorgeous, and it couldn't have been cheap. A Vulcan robe. She tore her eyes from it, feeling the soft cloth, and met Syrok's gaze. Her throat was choked with emotion and for a moment, she wasn't sure what to say. No one had ever gotten her something so nice, and so personal. “Thank you.” she said softly.

“You are welcome, k'diwa. I thought perhaps it would be appropriate for the coming meeting that so unnerves you.”

“It's perfect, Syrok. Of course I'll wear it.” she gazed at the cloth again, calling to mind all of the long lessons she'd had with T'Sala. It was brown, but not plain, as she could see from the small embellishments here and there. Dress clothes, of a sort. “Brown.” she smiled slightly.

“You are not officially of my Clan as of yet, so I dared not add the blue, but it will suffice.”

“I love you.”

These sudden declarations would forever catch him off-guard, and Holly felt a sort of awkward but powerful affection returned through their bond.

“Let me get you yours.” she said, meaning the present she'd purchased for him, moving to the side of the room to rummage in her bag.

“You may save it for Christmas day, if you wish.”

“No, no, you should have it now.” she assured him, handing him just a small brown box with a loose lid on top.

Curiously, he lifted the small lid and blinked once with surprise at what he saw inside. Saffir, something like a Vulcan cake -- perhaps more bread-like than cake-like, by Terran standards, and tougher so it would keep -- much, he supposed, like the quintessential fruitcake of this Terran holiday season. “Where did you come by this?” he asked with some astonishment.

“Same general area where I got the spice tea.” she confided. “Professor Selkar knows all the good secret places to get foreign foods.”

“Indeed.” he smiled slightly. “It is a... pleasant surprise. Perhaps we may share some tomorrow.” He replaced the lid and set the box aside, scooping up his gift to Holly as well, to remove it from the bed. “But for now, we should sleep. You are tired, and I admit that I too, and somewhat fatigued from shielding.”
“Mm.” she made a vaguely affirmative sound, following his lead to nestle under the covers and tangle her body in his. She may have agreed to rest, but she couldn't stop herself from kissing him softly, languidly. And he did not ask her to stop, but kissed back. There would always be this desire for closeness. His bondmate's touch was always welcome.

Holly's left hand came around Syrok's lower back as they faced one another, fingers expertly seeking his *chenesi*. What once may have been alien to her was now just the way Syrok was, and she was rewarded with an intake of breath as her fingers skimmed the very slight bumps that indicated the alien testes. Syrok's own fingers were apt to roam -- first at her breasts, but later her side, her arms, her ribs, down to her pubic mound, over her thighs -- always traveling. And the touch as always, eliciting the otherworldly sparks of the bond flaring to life.

Holly's right hand, trapped between herself and the bed, came boldly up against his genital pouch. It had intimidated her at first, those months ago. It had at first seemed asexual, his underwear so flush to his skin, and then seemed weirdly feminine, with its own slit and lubrication, the penis hidden away. But now, Holly saw him as wholly, arousingly *male*. And where she'd once been timid about exploring sexuality, some of her shyness had eased over time. Here beneath her hand she felt warm skin, dampness leaking out a bit with an intoxicating scent, and *not* a smooth featureless expanse, but a firming and growing bulge, a stiffening member peeking out to say hello. Cautiously her fingertips skimmed just inside the edges of the delicate membranes, something it had taken her a while to be bold enough to do. Syrok's hips jerked at the sensation, his thickening cock jutting forth all the more quickly with the new coaxing sensations. He was pleased and fuzzy-headed as Holly's small hand came around him to stroke, thumb rubbing expertly just by the double ridged head. His own fingers wasted no time in delving into the damp folds of her own flesh, her legs spreading willingly to welcome him.

And he'd really thought, that like so many times, they would continue this way, finish this way. But Holly pulled her mouth away from his for long enough to whisper breathily, nervously, “Syrok. I want....”

“What is it you want, *t'hy'la*?” Perhaps if he were more clear headed he would have found the term *t'hy'la* to be overly sentimental, to be perhaps, *too much*, but not now.

Holly shivered with what had become uncharacteristic nerves, and took a shuddering breath, giving a moan as Syrok's fingers continued their internal exploration. He crooked them *just so*, and *yes, there*.... But she mustn't become too distracted. “I'm ready.” she said in a breathy whisper.

Syrok's mind, usually so astute, struggled to find her meaning through the haze of arousal. But Holly pulled him closer, pulling him over, rolling to her back, and as her eyes sought his own, the full meaning of her statement hit him in the gut. He positively pulsed with new need.

“Holly.” He said in hushed tones. Was she certain? Why now?

“It's okay.” she encouraged him. “And... and I've spoken with a Healer... he says I don't need to worry about contraception, that it's virtually impossible between us without medical intervention, so if that's why you're worried --” she rambled nervously.

“I am not worried.” he hushed her with a finger against her lips. “I am honored.” And he posed above her as she lay beneath, legs spread to him, vulnerable and trusting. He aligned himself and used every ounce of his Vulcan control to pause just a moment longer. “You do realize,” his voice was harsh and rasping now, “there is a chance that this may cement our bond.”

“I know.” Holly's own breath was deeper, her pupils blown wide as she gazed up. “I want to.”
That was it for his control. It crumbled around him as he thrust forward. He'd meant to go slowly, he'd wanted to go slowly, but beneath him was his *mate*, and he needed to *claim*. Holly for her part was swept away in a sea of sensation, not at all disappointed by the abrupt penetration. It was so *full*, and blissful. Fingers, already, had brought her to such heights but it was a pale imitation of this. Suddenly all of her fears, all of her nervousness she'd harbored over this act for so long was gone, replaced by a rock-solid sense of rightness and wholeness. A second thrust and it hit something, somewhere deep inside that was pure magic in a way that the fingers never had compared. Syrok found her moans to be as intoxicating as the tight heat surrounding him.

And he knew that he was meant to savor his first time, but he could not care now. The motions, the sounds, the sensations all became a blur of frantic motion, his internal clock completely shot. His hand came upon her psi points of its own volition and her own held it close, telling him he'd better not dare back away now as they were both sucked into a shared mindscape of simply a sense of one another.

Whereas previous melds had left Holly largely unaware of what was happening to her physically, now it was as if every brush of every cell of her body was amplified a hundred fold and her mind was shorting out, she couldn't *take* such pleasure, surely, and she sensed distantly that Syrok was right there with her, drowning in the newness and wonder of the experience. The climax was mind shattering and simultaneous -- the bond having worked in a wondrous way to build their mutual pleasures to the same heights, totally in sync. Syrok positively thrilled as he felt Holly's nails rake down his back deeply enough to leave marks as she arched beneath him in climax.

And if they had been exhausted before, they were certainly exhausted now. Dimly, Syrok was aware of a shift in their bond, a new level of cementation that hadn't been there before, a new weight. His mind reeled at it, unable to totally process the magnitude of what had just taken place. But now, all was silent and glowing with love. He pulled Holly into a close “spooning” position, as she called it, and it could only have been a minute or two before they both crashed into sleep, the feedback loop of shared pleasure still swirling gently through the bond between them.
Chapter 49

Syrok was awakened at a perfectly reasonable hour the next morning by a sharp rapping on his apartment door. He winced with fatigue and illogical annoyance. He should not be annoyed. It was eight o'clock, and he estimated that he'd retired around two, which meant he'd had six hours of sleep, which should have been more than sufficient. Furthermore, eight was a perfectly reasonable hour (to a Vulcan), and why should he be annoyed if someone wished admittance? Holly stirred as well, he noticed, and felt even more irritated. Six hours was not enough rest for Holly, and now someone had awoken her.

“Wassat?” she mumbled, trying to rouse herself, looking around with sleep caked eyes.

“It is nothing. Go back to sleep.” he murmured with a kiss against her temple, and thankfully she acquiesced and snuggled back down into the pile of blankets while he, on the other hand, extricated himself from his warm bed and warm mate. Suppressing his emotional response, he threw one of his few meditation robes here on Earth over himself so he'd be at least halfway decent, and proceeded to open the door. What greeted him there was somewhat of a shock, even if it should not have been. His parents.

T'Dinnae's eyes shot open widely as she regarded her son. She'd already been annoyed ever since she'd become aware that her son had taken it upon himself to relocate away from the dormitories and to this dwelling without parental or Clan permission. Now that she saw his state of being, she was all the more indignant at his decision. The situation was clearly completely out of control. Even Soren seemed less than pleased, a minute frown upon his face. His son had clearly not bathed this day, and the distinct scents of copulation were upon him. It was most improprietous.

“My son.” he said stoically.

“Sa-mekh. Ko-mekh.” he greeted them with a respectful nod, and winced internally at the state they regarded him in. It was less than ideal, and he was not prepared to deal with such a situation. Inwardly he wondered what to do. Jolting his mind out of its frozen state, he stepped aside to permit them entry. “You must forgive me, I have only just arisen.”

“She is here.” his mother stated plainly. He was uncertain whether it was a question.

“Of course.” he answered levelly. “Last night we attended a Starfleet function and did not return until a late hour. She therefore is still resting.” he spoke softly, hoping that their voices wouldn't disturb Holly.

T'Dinnae gave him a flat look, indicating she had her own ideas about why they had retired so late. The evidence was upon him. Syrok knew what his mother was not saying, and refused to flinch from her gaze. Holly was his bondmate. To lie with her was his right.

“I was not expecting you now, as you did not indicate a day or hour of arrival.” he continued, giving his mother his own flat look. “Perhaps you could help yourself to some tea while I cleanse myself and dress in something more appropriate for a visitation.”

Whatever his mother might have wanted to say, his father stepped in to the silent battle raging between them. “That is logical.” he said, already stepping toward the kitchen in search of tea, expecting his wife to follow.
Syrok wandered back a short hall with as much dignity as he could muster, and T'Dinnae whirled on her implacable husband who was peeking into cupboards until he found some cheap Terran tea. One brow raised, he decided it would suffice, and set a kettle to boiling on the stove, then proceeding to find mugs. “This situation is totally unacceptable.” T'Dinnae said icily. “I will not have my son recklessly rebelling in such a manner only to cavort with some... s'cavat.”

Soren stiffened at the horrendous term. A sort of pleasure slave from the Old Era. He'd never heard his wife say something so ugly. “My wife.” he said waringly. He was not pleased himself but he would not have her become another source of his displeasure. As far as Soren was concerned, this entire debacle was his fault. As Syrok's father it was his responsibility to guide him through life, through his coming adulthood, and to ensure he was prepared for his Time. Clearly he had been negligent, or they would not be here. They would not be discussing whether or not he should have moved out of his dormitory. They would not be discussing whether a human, of all species, was a suitable mate. They would not have T'Chailu awaiting them at the Embassy after Syrok had slighted her time and time again. They would not have been informed by said Embassy itself about their son's mangled attempt at a bond, one which he understood to be almost entirely one sided. Soren was usually fairly even-keeled, even for a Vulcan, but he could not deny his displeasure with this entire event. He and his wife had had to take leave of their starship in an entirely unprofessional manner, at an inconvenient time and place, just to come to Earth and deal with this issue in person. The situation, to be sure, was less than ideal.

In the background, Soren could hear a shower running. He knew from his financial statements that this apartment was actually cheaper than the dormitories, and he knew now why it was so. It was an older model, though he noted it was in good repair, and kept clean, at the least. His eyes were sharp as he took in these details. Pouring the hot water into mugs with the tea, he allowed it to steep and settled himself at the small wooden table to wait. This seat was his son's, and the other, the human's. Their scents were easy to pick up in the apartment in general, and in areas where they habitually sat in one place by themselves it was not difficult for him to discern such a thing. His wife did not choose to sit, and he did not force her.

Yes, the apartment itself was cheaper, but the food bill was not, though that had been a problem before Syrok had moved. For quite some time now he'd been paying for Ms. Winters' food. He had not liked it, but he'd understood that this girl was some acquaintance of his son, and she was without means to provide for herself. And so Soren had tolerated the added expense, especially since T'Dinnae had met Ms. Winters herself and had approved of the girl at that time, though she'd been skeptical at first. Whatever approval Ms. Winters had gained from T'Dinnae, however, had been lost when she'd bonded with their son. Soren took a contemplative sip of the hot liquid in front of him. Chamomile. It was soothing and its taste was not disagreeable. T'Dinnae ignored her own tea, choosing instead to stare out the small window above the sink.

Finally, Syrok emerged dressed in his only appropriate robe for this situation. He had not packed many robes when he'd come to Earth, because there was not an occasion to wear them. But he had one slightly formal robe, on par with what he'd purchased for Holly, two meditation robes, and one sleeping robe. Now he was clean and sufficiently dressed to meet his parents, and he was debating whether or not he should awaken Holly and have her prepare as well. This was not ideal. This was not how they were supposed to meet. They'd been practicing for so long, and he'd bought the robe. He fought his mind to calm. It would not help his situation for his mind to cloud with panic.

“My son.” Soren stood, setting his tea aside. “We have come to escort you to the Embassy. There are numerous indiscretions that you've committed in our absence, and against our will, each of which must be thoroughly addressed during our stay. However, we will address the most pressing issues first. I have arranged a meeting with we three, the Ambassador Sarek, and his Healer which treated you and the human girl. I would hear from your elders their own version of events, with you
in attendance. Furthermore, T'Chailu has agreed to meet us here on Earth. As you have refused repeatedly to respond to her correspondences, you will do so in person today.”

Syrok’s head whirled. What? He did not want to meet with the ambassador again, under such circumstances. And what of Holly? “I will retrieve my mate.” he said hastily, moving toward the bedroom. She would be tired but they would deal with it.

“Unnecessary.” Soren’s voice was firm, and stopped Syrok in his tracks. He could feel the warning across his parental bond and he struggled not to respond to it with a shiver. “You may inform your human of your whereabouts out of courtesy but this matter concerns family and will be addressed as family. Furthermore, Ms. Winters has not been accepted as your mate by your parents nor your Clan. She has no rights to the Embassy as she is not a citizen, and I, your father, do not wish her presence to cloud your reasoning at this time. My son, you will attend.”

“Yes, father.” Syrok all but whispered, his head slightly bowed. He did not dare turn around and show his emotional face to his father, so he walked quickly to his bedroom to at least inform Holly of the turn of events.

“Holly.” he said softly but urgently, shaking her shoulder a bit.

“Mm?” she opened her eyes groggily, looking up at him. “Was someone at the door?” she asked sleepily. She vaguely recalled hearing knocking.

“Affirmative. It is my parents.” At those words Holly immediately became more awake and struggled to sit up.

“Shit.” she muttered.

“Do not bother.” he halted her with a hand on her wrist. “They are requesting that I accompany them to the Embassy for some sort of meeting, and have forbid me to bring you.” Holly's indignant look and flare of anger were not lost to him and he winced in conflict over what to do. “I will handle the situation.” he assured her. “They will not separate us. Just... please. Allow me to address this.” he asked desperately. If Holly were to fight him on this, he very well might have an emotional episode in front of everyone at this moment, and that would certainly not speak well of his judgment.

“The Embassy.” she said flatly.

“Yes.”

“When will you be back? What will you be doing there?”

Syrok let out a breath. “I do not know.” He felt the sharp tug of warning over his bond with his father and knew that he was impatient to leave. He did not wish his father to barge in here and see his naked mate in their bed, to smell the scents of intimacy. No. “Holly, please, I must go.”

Holly had no idea what to say to that. She saw and felt a desperately unhappy Vulcan leaving her here high and dry and had no idea what she was supposed to do about it. Impotent frustration railed through her. She’d prepared for this meeting, damn it! Why wouldn't they just talk to her? She closed her eyes and tried to quell her rising panic, taking a breath. Syrok was already gone from the bedroom, and she now heard their apartment door closing. Damn it all to hell. And after last night as well.
Holly threw the blankets off of herself and moved towards the bathroom with a purpose when a wave of vertigo assailed her. She grasped the door-frame with a gasp and felt a headache slam into her. This was just what she needed on top of everything. Hazily she remembered the meld. Right. She wasn't great with those. And had they bonded last night, fully? She wasn't certain. It would be just wonderful if they'd screwed that up too and needed medical assistance. Ignoring her spotty, swimming vision and killer headache, she took a shower and brushed her teeth with determination. She donned the gorgeous robe Syrok had gifted her and pulled her hair into something practical, the love bite on her neck from last night still fully visible above her collar. Kaiidth. If the Vulcans had a problem with it, they could just shove it up their --

She sat herself on the bed before she fell over as another wave of vertigo made her absolutely nauseous. She should probably eat breakfast, but she was too tired, and stressed, and horrible feeling. She concentrated on what she was doing as she looked up instructions on how to get to the Embassy from her apartment, what buses to take. The free bus that went outside her apartment would get her part of the way, but she'd need to transfer to one of the paying buses, and she didn't have any spare credits in her account. What little she'd gained from selling her books she'd lost again in paying for Syrok's Christmas present. Which wouldn't have been a problem normally, as he paid for everything she needed, but now he was gone, and she couldn't use his credit chip as she wasn't authorized to do so and it had a DNA lock. She resisted the urge to curse into the empty room, and changed the map program to calculate the walking time from the transfer point to the Embassy. She winced at the result.

Even if she were to get to the Embassy, what then? Would she storm in and demand to speak to Syrok? To his family? Damn straight, she would. He was her mate. She was certain it was her right. Wasn't it? She suddenly wasn't certain what her legal standing was. As much work as she put into studying Vulcan's laws both professionally and in her spare time, she didn't know what her rights were as a bondmate to someone who hadn't obtained Clan permission or parental consent. In the eyes of Vulcan, Syrok was a minor, and she was afraid she might still be a foreigner. A sudden helpless panic began to creep over her. She fumbled for a minute with her PADD's comm. program and had it call T'Sala. The line rang. And rang. And rang. Where the hell was she?

Finally, T'Sala's face was on the other end, in a strange room.

“Where the hell are you?” Holly asked.

T'Sala was less than pleased with the vulgar demands on her when she was trying to spend time with her bondmate whom she had not seen in literally years. It was morning and it was winter break and she did not know why she must be subjected to this. Her face said it all for her. “I am in a hotel.” she said pointedly, as Selek shifted into the frame with a raised brow and a bare chest. “My bondmate is predisposed.” he informed Holly, and reached to shut off the connection.

“My bondmate is predisposed.” he informed Holly, and reached to shut off the connection.

“Wait!” Holly said in a panic. She was flushed from embarrassment at what she'd obviously interrupted, but she really needed help. “Please. T'Sala.” she allowed the raw desperation to tinge her voice and T'Sala batted Selek's hand away, as he actually glaring at her on camera. “Syrok's parents came.” Holly rushed to explain. “I didn't get to meet them but they whisked him off to the Embassy and I don't know what the hell they're planning but they didn't want me to come along and I can't take the bus because I don't have any credits. And even if I get there I don't know if they'd let me in because I don't know whether or not I'm a citizen and Syrok's a minor.” she rambled in one breath.

“Bath'pa!” T'Sala spat and Holly's eyes widened at actually hearing a curse word from her, or really any Vulcan. For T'Sala's part, she was annoyed that of course her only friends would have
such a crisis right when she had Selek where she wanted him. Perhaps she should not have picked up. No, that was a horrible thought, she admitted guiltily. It was clear, however, that there was no avoiding her involvement now. She actually sighed aloud. “We will obtain a flitter and meet you at your quarters.” she said hastily and cut the connection.

Holly practically sagged with relief, allowing herself to breathe. T'Sala and Selek would help her. They were Vulcan. Surely they could do some good. They'd march her into the Embassy, and she would demand her mate.... At the thought of her mate, Holly shuddered violently. She felt raw inside, and a sort of raw desperation to be with him now. She tried her hardest to be objective about her symptoms. Was she in fact going crazy again as a result of last night's activities? She closed her eyes meditatively and attempted to use Syrok's techniques to take stock of her emotional state. No, she didn't think it was at all the same. She still felt mostly in control of herself. It was more... it was more akin to when Syrok had taken his trip on the Kandy at the end of summer.

Alright, so maybe last night had done... something. She wasn't sure what. She'd have to ask T'Sala. Or a Healer. Or Syrok. God, she just wanted Syrok. Why did she feel kind of like crying? No, vomiting. She gathered her wits about her and made sure her bag was packed with anything she would need, her shoes were on, her coat was ready, the lights were out. It took an eternity for T'Sala to comm. her that she'd arrived, and Holly was halfway out the door before she'd finished her sentence.

Holly squeezed into the back of the taxi with T'Sala in the middle, and took a steadying breath as Selek requested the next destination to the driver.

“You do not appear well.” T'Sala remarked detachedly, observing that Holly was more pale than usual, and seemed... queasy, by the faces and motions she was making.

“No shit. I feel like I just got run over by a starship.” she answered dryly, hanging her head into her hands.

T'Sala frowned in response.

Holly took a deep breath and knew she was about to piss T'Sala off, but she charged forward anyway. “So Syrok and I had sex last night.” she said conversationally.

T'Sala gave a hiss of affront. “Holly!”

“Just shut up a second, would you?” Holly snapped back. “I think something's wrong. It was our first time.”

When T'Sala had recovered enough of her wits to understand the implications of what Holly was telling her, her embarrassment was replaced with concern. She shared a look with her mate who knew exactly what she meant. Should T'Sala meld with her? No, they would wait until they could see a Healer. The rest of the ride was taken in silence.
Chapter 50

Syrok sat affronted in a small room with Ambassador Sarek, Healer Stol'tor, and his parents, while the adults discussed him as if he were a recalcitrant youth. He had opened his mouth to defend himself or correct the nuances attached to the facts several times, but his parents had both shot him glares daring him to speak. When finally he actually had spoken, his temper having gotten the better of him, his father had shouted to him “Kroykah!” in such a way that made his blood run cold. He was in deep trouble, it seemed. For his relationship with Holly. For the bond. For his trip to the Embassy to waste everyone's time, which this visit itself was also blamed upon his actions. Sarek had just finished explaining the extent to which Syrok had not seemed to plan for his Time, as well. Never mind that he'd spent countless hours now planning for just that. Never mind the lessons with T'Sala and Professor Selkar and the meeting with the Starfleet Healer. He was not allowed to explain these things. They were not yet deemed relevant.

“In your opinion, what is the strength of this bond?” T'Dinnae asked the Healer.

“When last I examined it, it was relatively strong.” he admitted placidly. After all, he had no personal preference for what was done about the union.

“But could it safely be broken?” she persisted. Syrok bristled.

“Negative!” he interjected.

“My son, we will discuss --” Soren spoke to Syrok warningly.

“We will not. There will be no breaking of my bond.” he said with mild panic.

“Might I remind you that you are not of age.” his father said coldly. “We have always supported your decisions, Syrok, including your preference to travel to Earth, to join Starfleet. We ourselves work closely with the Fleet, and I could see the logic in such a career choice, even if it were unconventional. I can see now that perhaps I was in error. You have lost the basic tenants of our culture. You have lost respect for your elders. I question now every allowance I have made.”

Syrok felt dizzy. What was he saying? What could he possibly be saying? Would they send him back to Vulcan? They could not. They could not! Could they? He was still months away from his first pon farr. If he had it on time. There was still a small percentage chance that it would come late for him, as it did for some men. The possibility of being a statistical anomaly was now horrifying in its repercussions. But still -- even if his pon farr were timely, that left his parents with enough time to ruin what he'd begun. They could withdraw him from Starfleet and send him away. What would he do then? Would they force him to join the VSA? Would the VSA even take him now? He doubted it. The chill of panic was again upon his skin. He wished for Holly and her calming presence. He should never have agreed to leave without her.

“Please, Healer, forgive my son.” Soren continued. “I would hear your opinion in this matter.”

Stol'tor nodded placidly. “There is no offense where none is taken.” he recited. “As for the dissolution of the bond, I expect it could be done. I would of course need to examine him again, as well as the girl, to be more certain. However, the bond is new, and he is young. The young lady is psi-null, and your son already controls the bond. I do not see how its dissolution should be terribly burdensome, particularly if he were to bond with another immediately afterward.”
The idea of bonding with another made Syrok's gut twist in a sickly manner. He would not. He could not.

“I will not consent.” he said with a panicky quaver to his voice.

Stol'tor raised an eyebrow curiously at him.

“My son --” Soren began exasperatedly.

“No.” Syrok said more solidly. “Even as a minor, it is my right. I do not consent to this.”

“Curious.” Sarek finally spoke up. “I believe then that this is, in chess terms, a stalemate.”

T'Dinnae sent the ambassador a murderous look for his casual interest in what was to her a very serious situation. On Sarek's part, he couldn't care less what the woman thought of him. This boy seemed to have grown considerably since last he'd seen him, and he was most fascinated by the show of rebellion he saw before himself now.

“I am sure we are keeping you from your duties, Ambassador.” T'Dinnae said politely. “If it is agreeable, could the rest of us continue to use this conference room while we are joined by T'Chailu, Syrok's prospective mate?”

Sarek quirked a brow at her sly dismissal of an elder from his own conference room, but in truth he did have actual work to do. “Indeed. Contact my staff should you require anything.” he said, silently ushering himself out of the room. He'd seen enough drama anyway. He got enough of it with his career in politics.

T'Dinnae excused herself as well to go and fetch T'Chailu, and Syrok was left alone with his father and the Healer. He ignored the Healer.

“Sa-mekh, I have not been given the opportunity to explain many pertinent facts regarding this union.” he did his best to sound respectful.

Soren eyed his son. On the one hand, he wished to be apprised of all relevant facts before making any decisions. On the other hand, he was not particularly inclined to hear said “facts” from his son at this very moment. The sheer level of disrespect from his son today was staggering. He knew that the topic under discussion was sensitive, but he was among elders, and should know his place. He would be given a chance to speak before a decision was made, but Soren was certain he needed to gain the upper hand of authority here. He had allowed this to proceed to far already. “I will hear your facts when I choose.” he said coolly.

“Ha, Sa-mekh.” Syrok answered deferentially, inwardly seething. He did his best to mute the bond between himself and his father so that he would not know.

It was not long before he was then faced with his mother once again, and some woman whom he did not know at all, but had deduced was T'Chailu. She eyed him skeptically.

“This is the one who will not return my correspondences?”

Syrok bristled at being talked about, but felt no compulsion to interact with her. She was not Holly. He had no business with this woman.

“Indeed.” Soren answered for him. “This is my son. Your grandmother has indicated that you are still amenable to a bond in spite of this.”
“Indeed.” she nodded coolly, gazing at Syrok thoughtfully. “I do not see your logic in choosing a human.” she said bluntly. “I am a logical choice for seeing you through your Time. I would not interfere with your career in Starfleet, should you choose to continue it. We are of similar ages, and it is rare for such a circumstance as unbonded youths as ourselves. One would think you would count yourself as fortunate in having the opportunity. I do not understand why you should fixate on this human girl. We are of the same House. Our Clans are similar in status.”

Syrok stared at her considering whether or not to respond. “I mean you no disrespect,” he said finally, “but I am bonded already. Therefore it is illogical that we continue this discussion.”

T'Dinnae closed her eyes once and reopened them. She was at a loss. Never before had a situation gotten this out of control.

“He is bonded to this girl?” T'Chailu asked in confusion.

“The bond likely may be severed with little trouble.” Soren explained patiently.

“Ah.” she nodded, as if they were discussing the weather.

Syrok was incensed. “There will be no breaking of the bond.” he said, daring to raise his voice as he stood abruptly. His hand clenched around the back of his wooden chair and he struggled not to allow the wood to crack.

“You are not dismissed.” Soren said icily. “We will discuss your options rationally and logically. Seat yourself.”

“Negative.” he said belligerently, his eyes taking on a glittering blackness as he began to see all in this room as a real threat to his mate. As much as they might see the human union as some sort of aberration, he did not. He was Vulcan, and Holly was his mate. He would most certainly kill to defend her if it were required. Soren knew the look he saw in his son's eyes, but he was loathe to heed the warning. For Soren was also Vulcan, and he would not have his son threaten his authority here.

“Give me your thoughts.” he demanded of his son at last, and Syrok stared at his father with caution and shock for a moment. He had not melded with his father since his kahs-wan. Still, it was not unheard of, and if they melded, his father would see what Holly was to him, would see all of the work they'd done, all the desperation to be there for one another. He had not been allowed to speak, but he could force his father to see. Slowly, he lowered himself back to his chair, and leaned forward slightly for his father to touch his psi points.
Holly stumbled a bit as she exited the car, and T'Sala's concern shot through her bond with Selek. They did not even need to share a glance this time as T'Sala hovered beside Holly, ready to grab her should she fall. “Are you able to stand and walk?” she inquired with some worry tinged her voice.

Holly let out a soft moan. “God, I feel like my head is splitting in two.” she said.

“We will see your mate presently.” Selek assured, leading the women into the Embassy with confidence. He spoke immediately to the woman at the front desk in his own tongue. “Excuse me. It is my understanding that the family S'un T'nei is currently at this location. We request to be immediately directed to them.”

“You are not expected.” the woman said placidly, and continued to stare at him indicating he would need to do better than that.

“I do not suppose that we are. However, S'un T'nei Syrok's bondmate is unwell, and it is her right to request her mate.”

The woman laced her fingers together on the desk in front of her, looking at him in a way that said she was no fool. “I am aware of who S'un T'nei Syrok is, as well as who this young lady is. And while it is improprieto discuss any of these private matters, I will have you know that I am aware that the young man in question is not of age, and that his family are discussing his bond status as we speak. She is neither of his Clan, nor of Vulcan, nor of age. Her bond is not recognized under Vulcan law, and from what I understand is that of a common s'cavat.”

Selek hissed at the use of the word, and Holly turned to T'Sala questioningly. T'Sala refused to explain the meaning, and positively bristled with affront.

Holly eyed up the guards and the stairway, seriously considering making a run for it. She could feel Syrok now, she was sure of it. Her gaze swept in the direction of her mate, fixated on an object no one else could see.

“I do not care whether or not she is considered Vulcan.” Selek continued icily. He had had about enough of this woman and her illogical prejudices. “I am Vulcan, and I request to be brought to Syrok's location immediately, with my family in tow.” There was no question in how he growled the words that the term “family” was meant to encompass both women.

“She is not of your Clan.” the woman said stubbornly. She did not know for certain, but she suspected this was all nonsense.

“She is.” he insisted belligerently. “I am of age and it is my right. She is sister to my mate and therefore my sister.”

The woman tisked at the nonsense. “That rite is archaic.”

“Your prejudice is archaic.”

“I think I'm going to throw up.” Holly said quietly to T'Sala, who looked around with worry.

“Please do not.” she said fretfully.
Holly cast her eyes around for a bench or something but Vulcans were damned stubborn and she didn't see anything to actually sit on, so she sank to the floor against the wall, barely hearing Selek's continued argument with the front desk woman. She was almost certain they were going to be thrown out, and her head pounded, and she was too dizzy to stand.

“Permit me to assist you.” T'Sala said gently, and Holly nodded.

She felt the most delicate touch upon her face.

“What are they doing?” the front desk woman asked as she caught the meld beginning in her hall. This was most indecent a thing to do in public. Where had this Terran woman found so many Vulcans to speak for her?

“My mate is aiding her sister, whom I have already indicated is not well. Her bond is new and still raw. She requires her bondmate.” he said stubbornly.

T'Sala on her part touched Holly's mind ever so shallowly, delicately, sending the thinnest tendril of ease and comfort to her, uncertain how to interact with a human mind. She could sense the new bond, cemented now fully, and she ached empathetically for Holly and her predicament. She was no Healer but she was fairly certain there was nothing wrong, they'd just strained their bond with sudden distance and stress.

Soren pulled away from his son, speechless. He did not know where to begin. He was uncertain even of his own stance now. His wife of course felt the sudden shift in his emotions and thought processes but he could not explain to her now. Not now. Not when he himself was so uncertain. He'd seen glimpses of what the girl meant to his son, of the work they'd put in, of the uncomfortable but necessary conversations they'd had. He'd felt a very adult, very primal need to defend one's mate. He'd seen the bond between them as well, freshly cemented. Not even Syrok had been sure of the shift. He had not had time to examine it. Last night then. The scent he had found in the apartment was wholly new. It did not make the situation any better or worse. He simply understood more.

Syrok took a shuddering breath, feeling raw. “I believe my mate is downstairs.” he said simply.

“Indeed?”

“She is in distress, Sa-mekh.”

“We will go to her.” Soren said and stood. Syrok looked at him in shock for a moment, then readily got to his feet and followed him out, T'Dinnae and T'Chailu gaping behind them, full of questions and having no chance to ask. Soren felt the bombardment of questions from his mate through their bond, and he shielded from them. He was handling this situation appropriately. He did not require approval.

Soren's attention was instantly on the wildly emotional Vulcan male arguing with the front desk woman, when they descended the stairs. Behind him, he saw a Vulcan woman crouched beside the young woman he'd once seen on a screen with his son. “Is there a problem?” he asked loudly
enough to be heard over the argument, and stepped up to the desk where he could be properly seen, Syrok in tow.

Selek snapped “Affirmative.” just as the front desk woman snapped “Negative.” with a glare in Selek's general direction. Syrok, for his part, glanced at his father for half a second for permission before walking quickly to where Holly knelt. His hands gripped her temples as his forehead came to rest against hers, both of them breathing a sigh of relief instantly as they reconnected.

“It seems we have cemented our bond, k'diwa.” he whispered to her.

“Syrok.” she said affectionately, and simply laced her fingers into his hands, reluctant to relinquish any of his touch. “I'm sorry, I know you said to stay at the apartment and that you'd handle it--”

“It was foolish of me to do so. The bond was not yet settled, and you are my mate. You should be by my side. Not to mention the stress we were both under for fear of our separation. It is unnatural and unhealthy.” he murmured, then finally released her and helped her to stand. He took in T'Sala. “I suppose I have you and your mate to thank for taking care of her.” he said with a slight bit of chagrin.

“You are no end of trouble.” T'Sala admonished.

Selek and Soren had joined the party now, and whatever had been said had ended the argument.

Soren eyed the girl in front of him. She was petite, but not more-so than T'Sala, who was Vulcan. She was human, of course, and therefore physically weak. She did not have much psychic fortitude, which he'd known since finding out that his son controlled the majority of their bond. Weak. That was he and his wife's biggest concern, in a practical sense. But the eyes that gazed back to him were anything but weak. She did not touch Syrok now, but instead watched Soren curiously, her eyes defiant but her posture submissively a fraction behind Syrok. Soren was intrigued, in spite of himself.

He held his hand up in the ta'al. “Greetings, Ms. Winters, mate of my son.”

Syrok startled at the affirmation from his father that Holly was his mate.

Holly dutifully returned the sign and nodded deferentially. “Greetings S’un T’nei Soren, father of my mate.”

He was already impressed.

“As you are now here, it would be logical for you to join us in our discussion. My son's future concerns you.”

“Indeed it does, Osu.” she said levelly, and followed his lead.

T'Dinnae eyed the new party questioningly. The room was becoming ridiculously full and cramped. Syrok's parents, Syrok and his mate, T'Sala and her mate, the Healer, and T'Chailu. Seven Vulcans and one human made for quite the party, and tensions were high. T'Dinnae knew who Holly was, of course, but she had no explanation for the other two.

“Who are these?” she questioned her husband as if Selek and T'Sala weren't there.

“Apparently, they are Holly's Clan.” he said levelly, and her eyebrows rose, as her gaze raked over
all of them skeptically. Selek did not flinch, though T'Sala may have.

“I have seen my son's mind.” Soren announced to T'Dinnae. “And I believe we had not been apprised of all relevant facts. It is only logical that we conduct our interview with Ms. Winters herself as she is the point of contention at the heart of this matter.”

“Very well.” T'Dinnae rose to the challenge, and eyed up her not-daughter-in-law, who was removing her winter coat to reveal a lovely brown robe. She sat herself quietly at Syrok's left, a fraction of a second after he seated himself. “I will not mince words. I do not believe you to be an acceptable mate for my son.”

“That much is evident.” Holly shot back without inflection, but she knew she was being snarky. Syrok sent a warning pulse across their bond.

“I have no doubt of your regard for my son, nor his regard for you.” she continued. “However, there are certain facets of Vulcan culture that only a Vulcan can understand, can be prepared for. You are human, and therefore are unlikely to understand.”

“I understand very well what pon farr is, T'Dinnae.” she said levelly, and T'Dinnae's eyes widened fractionally at her bluntness. “Not only have I discussed it at length with my mate, but I've been instructed on handling it by T'Sala,” she nodded at the other female Vulcan in the room, “as well as have spoken with a Healer. I can assure you we are doing everything in our power to prepare for this eventuality, but it would certainly be less difficult if we had familial support.” she added pointedly.

“You have been instructed?” T'Dinnae asked skeptically, turning her attention toward T'Sala.

It was T'Sala who answered. “Indeed, I have done so.” she admitted readily. “As I was instructed by my own Clan, so I have done for Holly to the best of my ability. We have also spent time reviewing Vulcan's culture and history, in addition to our focus on pon farr. And while she is not Vulcan, she is Vulcan-by-choice. She has displayed only a serious desire to see Syrok through his Time, that they might both live. You appear to assume they are taking the situation too lightly, but I have seen no evidence of this.”

“But that is just it.” she said. “This is about the survival of my son. You are human. You are weaker than he. You are psi-null. You control a mere 10 percent of the bond between you. It is not logical that I should trust such circumstances.”

“Our bond is unequal but not weak.” Holly insisted. “I am as kafeh.” She swore every Vulcan in the room flinched at the declaration. “I am not ashamed of my position. I am honored to serve, and it is my conviction that the inequality in our bond will only serve to ease our Time. To be blunt, I am unlikely to cause him to think that I am Challenging him.”

“You may succumb to his madness.” T'Chailu spoke up for the first time, and Holly eyed her warily.

“You're the other woman.” she concluded from the signals she was receiving from her mate. “You won't have my mate.”

T'Chailu was not the only Vulcan who blinked in surprise. Here was a human with the tenacity of a Vulcan.

“Holly.” Syrok admonished gently, and the crackling tension in the air immediately dissipated. She drew herself together and shielded as best she could from the rest of the room. She wouldn't cause
a scene, because it would dishonor Syrok, but she was firm in her determination that they would not be separated.

“If it is agreeable,” Soren stated to Stol'tor, “I would have you examine the bond between my son and his mate. It seems that quite recently it has been consummated into a full bond.”

“Indeed?” T'Dinnae said with surprise. So the scent that had permeated the apartment upon their arrival had been new, and explained much of the tension in her son. She felt immediately more uncomfortable. A full bond was even more difficult to break, and more serious of a matter. Any parental control she’d had over her son's future well-being was slipping away.

Holly did not answer but immediately looked to Syrok for his response. He nodded to the Healer. “We consent.”

Soren watched with interest to see that Holly did not question Syrok speaking for her for a second. He'd heard humans could be strong willed and obstinate, as much if not more-so than Vulcans. He certainly worked with his fair share. He'd seen couples come and go over his years on a Federation ship and he had to admit he had never seen a human interact like this, so submissively. He was not altogether certain what to think about it.

Syrok, for his part, was relieved to have access to Stol'tor once again. He had a “good feeling” about this Healer, knowing that he'd dealt with the Ambassador's own human wife. And after last night's events with Holly, and today's atypical stressors, he wanted to ensure that his mate was well. With careful ease, Stol'tor dove back into the minds of both of them simultaneously, one hand on each, observing once more their bond. He was somewhat surprised at what he saw -- a bond of considerable strength. It would serve them well. While he was not overly familiar with such asymmetric bonds, he now felt thoroughly confident that they could not only be acceptable, but beneficial. In fact, the couple's psychic connection seemed to be thriving. Already he could see changes in the young woman's mind structure as well. She'd clearly been learning the rudiments of mind techniques from her mate. He was satisfied, and withdrew.

Everyone in the room seemed to look at him expectantly, and he noted the strangeness of how this private affair had come to include so many. It was certainly not standard procedure, but then he had no reason to care how they carried out their affairs. “The bond is both healthy and strong.” he said neutrally.

T'Dinnae did not appreciate the vague response. “But could it be broken?”

“It is likely that any bond could be broken.” he answered smoothly.

“Negative.” Syrok insisted, shooting a glare at his mother, who ignored him.

“My wife.” Soren admonished as well. “Our son is approaching his age of majority. While the issues we are facing are far from resolved, might I suggest that if we wish him to grow into a responsible adult, we treat him as such. I would know more of his chosen.”

She blinked at her husband in genuine surprise. Whatever had taken place during that meld had completely changed his opinion, and she felt her own concerns dissipating with the confidence she felt from him through their bond, though confusion in this shift threatened to overwhelm her. She was unbalanced, and gazed again at the young human woman with the fierce spirit. Perhaps she was not so weak.

“Am I then dismissed?” T'Chailu asked impassively. At this point, she'd decided, she really did not care whether or not the Vulcan man Syrok wanted her or not. She was unlikely to experience a pon
and therefore could wait for a bonding until whatever time it was most logical to do so. If he had no desire to bond with her, then he should have simply stated so before she’d gone to the trouble to come all the way to Earth. Well, never mind. Her grandmother had sent her here, and she’d come as was her duty, to meet with the man’s parents. If no one had any investment in this arrangement now, she saw no reason to linger.

“Affirmative.” Soren nodded, and she took her leave. There was no reason for further unnecessary interactions between them, as far as all were concerned.

Soren turned then to face Selek. “Now. I would like to know all of this about Holly joining your Clan.”

“Certainly.” he answered smoothly, though T'Sala herself colored slightly with embarrassment over the whole debacle. She'd questioned him silently over his having made such a rash decision, and he’d only affirmed that he stood by it. “It was important that Holly have access to her mate, whom I understood to be within the Embassy. We were informed at the front desk that she was not a citizen of Vulcan as her union with Syrok has not been formally recognized by family and Clan, nor was Syrok able to vouch for her presence as he is considered under age. I am a citizen of Vulcan, and I am of age. Therefore, it was logical that I claim Holly as my Clan.”

“It is logical to claim a virtual stranger as one's own family?” Soren quirked a brow. This, he really had to hear.

“Eminently logical.” Selek insisted. “I am aware of my mate's closeness with Holly. T'Sala has instructed her on the deepest intimacies of our culture as a surrogate for family and Clan, as she has none on Vulcan. As your own Clan was unwilling to help, it is my understanding of events that it fell to her. While I am not personally acquainted with Ms. Winters, the sister of my mate is my sister.”

And that... was the most Vulcan thing that anyone had said this entire day, perhaps. Selek was impeccably calm, and impeccably logical.

“And now that you have accessed my son?”

“I stand by my word. It would be illogical to give it otherwise. I am no liar.”

“And you have the authority to make this declaration?”

Selek raised a brow in response. Had he not just said he was no liar? He would not have made a declaration he had no authority to make. True, he might have a good deal of discussion with his Clan over this unconventional decision, but he was now on his own Clan council. He did have authority.

“Very well. Our Clans will need to communicate further on this if we are to formalize a union between us.”

“Logical.”

“I will contact you.” he said as a final dismissal, and Selek lead the way out, T'Sala in tow, though she gave a last worried glance at Holly. Holly's own anxiety was coming and going in waves as she worked to master it. She still felt like she was on uneven footing, and Syrok reached out with two fingers for her to join. At the contact, she immediately calmed.

Syrok continued to sit further forward in his chair than her, his stance that of one who was protecting his mate, and Soren was surprised to see this in his son. It was not something he’d seen
between Syrok and T'Rena, but then it wouldn't have been. His son was now growing into
adulthood.

“Your winter break lasts approximately one month.” Soren stated.

“Yes.” Syrok confirmed, uncertain whether he was supposed to.

“And I believe Christmas is this week.” Syrok still looked at his father, wondering what these
statements implied. “After a new bond, it is traditional to leave the couple in seclusion for at least a
full week that the bond might settle appropriately.” he explained. Syrok had been vaguely aware of
the time of seclusion but he hadn't known much about it. Mating bonds sometimes corresponded
with pon farr and sometimes did not. Was the week of seclusion to do with the length of pon farr?
Was it always traditional? Was it merely ritual? Apparently now was the time for him to learn it
helped settle his new bond, much as he'd required some proximity to Holly for the betrothal as
well. Soren continued. “During such a time, prolonged physical touch is often of benefit in
cementing said bond.” he explained, and Syrok was left speechless at what his father was
suggesting. “And although you are not in your Time, there are some expectations that either of
your actions may be less than fully logical as your focus is on securing a mate. If all the facts had
been known, it would not have been appropriate for us to call on you today, much less cause
unneeded stress. I trust you have enough credits in your account to secure a taxi home, and you will
contact us in one to two weeks time?” he raised a brow.

“Affirmative.” Syrok said, his mind whirling at the abrupt change in circumstances. Even for a
Vulcan, it was too much to fully process.

“Live long and prosper.” his father raised a cursory ta’al, as did his mother, and he and Holly
murmured their response and took hasty leave.

Holly was numb as she was ushered back to their apartment, trying to process what the hell had
happened today. It wasn’t even lunch yet, and she was exhausted.

Syrok, for his part, was keyed up. Today had wound him tighter and tighter as he tried to secure his
mate, and now he was like a caged animal, waiting for a release. And Holly could sense his pacing.
But where she may have expected some sort of affection when they returned home, or perhaps
some of his biting fetish, she was not really prepared for him to slam her against the wall as soon as
the door was shut. He pushed himself as flush as he could to her, his body all tense and corded
muscle, and she felt a deep, dark growl emanate from his chest as he breathed in her scent, his face
buried behind her ear.

“H-hey.” she said breathlessly. “You okay?”

“Rai.” he rasped. No. And she felt him rut his hips against her. Her eyes widened as she realized he
was fully erect. When the hell had that happened? He never allowed himself such indecency while
in public, and she was pretty sure she would have noticed a tenting in those robes, so it must have
happened within seconds of arriving home. Holy shit.

Syrok was kissing her neck now, or at least trying to, as it was a very human gesture, and his
instincts were urging him toward bites and licks, so the result was a sort of stuttering mix of
sensations that left Holly’s head whirling with both arousal and surprise at the abrupt situation she
found herself in. Well before she was ready, his hand was inching up the hem of her robe, bit by bit
from the floor to her thigh until he could reach under.
“I’m not --” she gasped. “Syrok, slow down.” she murmured into his mouth which had come to cover her own. His right arm had come across her collar bone to pin her to the wall while his left hand was busy with her right in sloppy finger kisses sending sparks of pleasure dancing along her skin.

Syrok purred with delight to realize she’d worn the robes just as she’d been told was traditional -- without undergarments to get in his way. He forced a knee between her thighs and eased his right hand to her temple sending a knee-buckling wave of arousal through her mind and pleasure centers. Suddenly she didn't know why she'd ever been concerned about being ready -- it seemed Syrok could manufacture that state whenever was necessary. Obviously, Holly thought fuzzily, the whole notion that Vulcans were essentially asexual was ludicrous-- they were sex gods.

Before she could think twice about the fact that they were both technically still fully dressed, by Vulcan standards, Syrok's own robe was inched out of the way and he was slamming into her. It may have been only her second time, she may have had almost no foreplay at all, but regardless, Holly's vision whited out in blissful sensation at the onslaught. And an onslaught it was. The most she could do was curl her fists ineffectually against his shoulders and his robe to try and hang on, to survive the desperate thrusting of a Vulcan who had been pushed too far, who needed to reaffirm his claim over his mate.

Internally, Syrok was a storm of emotion. All his frustration and anger and desperation and fear from the past few hours, and even from the past few months, came boiling to the surface. Holly was his. She would remain his. His mate. He did not last long this way, but he at least had enough presence of mind to sync with Holly enough to send her off with him, both screaming out in shaking pleasure at their climax.

Afterward, Holly was useless to hold herself up and was grateful for Syrok on one side and the wall on the other. She doubted her legs would support her. And though she'd done little else than hang on, she still gasped in recovery. Syrok, for his part, began thinking slightly more clearly and gingerly extracted himself, straightening their disheveled robes that would now need laundering, and helped Holly to the bedroom without a word, where he settled in next to her. His face was green with embarrassment.

“I apologize.” he murmured

“Apologize?” Holly huffed a tired laugh and rolled to cling to him. “I’m not angry, Syrok. Just... is this going to be a thing? Will this happen often?”

“I hope not.” he admitted silently, closing his eyes, and he felt Holly's humor across the bond. “Our coupling is never unpleasant,” he hastened to explain, “however, I believe such a level of... vigor, is unsustainable. I would also prefer not to be so far removed from my faculties.”

“Mm.” she agreed languidly, the exhaustion of the day really beginning to sink in. She was sleepy, but he sensed she did care. Through the eyes of their new connection she could see more clearly than ever how he felt. It was like her own puberty but times a thousand. He really had no concept of these new urges and felt very out of control over his own body and mind. It was unnerving in the worst way, and he knew it would get worse. Pon farr was a terrifying, inevitable black cloud looming in their future, and he was not equipped to stop it or deal with it.

“It'll be okay.” she said gently, struggling out of her dirty robe and urging him mentally to do the same. Within moments they were finally snuggled back into their warm nest -- the one she'd never wanted to leave in the first place. They hadn't eaten, and it wasn't far off from lunch, and she didn't care. And Syrok, for his part, was content to simply sleep again with his mate. It did not matter whether his amount of sleep was technically sufficient or not. He had no wish to leave, and rest
held a curious appeal just now.
A honeymoon. This was a honeymoon, Holly had decided. It had made her feel freaked out for a moment, comparing the bond they now shared with human marriage. Because honestly, she was typically considered to be way too young to be married, and she'd never considered herself the marrying type and all of that. But the reality was that this was her and Syrok, and the bond was amazing and she wanted to be mentally bound to him forever, so she may as well enjoy her Vulcan honeymoon.

As terribly as Saturday had begun, it had finished spectacularly. Now that they'd had sex once, it was as if a dam had broken and they seemed to marathon it, pausing only for other pleasures: food, bathing, sleeping, and Christmas holovids. Up through Christmas they did very little but indulge in hedonism. By the following Saturday, Holly was finally persuaded into joint meditation, exploring more fully their completed bond. It had certainly settled. That was how the Vulcans had described the process and she found it to be an apt description. It was like a comfortable weight, grounding her. And having clear, direct access to Syrok's thoughts and feelings was amazing. It was like having a holovid running in the background at all times -- she could listen in or not, turn the volume up and down. And not only could she pick up on stray thoughts of his, but she was learning very quickly to actually communicate with him in this way. The thrill of that alone was what had persuaded her to dedicate herself a bit more rigorously to the meditation. Plus, she could feel within the bond her Vulcan mate's very real need to meditate and desire for company. How could she deny him anything?

Eventually, by Monday morning Holly was willing to reluctantly do a load of laundry, leaving the Vulcan robes to Syrok (as she was terrified of messing them up somehow), and they managed to crawl out of the apartment and into actual fresh air and sunlight to gather more food for the apartment. Holly was insistent that they do it before Tuesday night/Wednesday, which were New Years Eve and the first day of the New Year. Syrok had questioned her on this a bit skeptically. After all, he'd witnessed two new years come and go already on Earth and while he was aware that parties took place in various urban centers, campus had been very quiet. Holly, however, knew better. She did not want to be trying to get groceries when hoards of people would be throwing parties, looking for alcohol, and just generally being rowdy and in the way. She was insistent that they stay in for this coming holiday, and Syrok did not have to be asked twice. He had no desire to test Holly's hypothesis and potentially expose himself to the crowds.

“So,” Holly said later that day as they sat at their small table having afternoon tea. “I guess we have to meet with your parents sometime soon.”

“I have already agreed to do so.”

“What do you think, New Years day, afternoon?” she chewed her lip thoughtfully.

“Would that not impede your celebrations?” he asked curiously.

“Nah. It's in keeping with the spirit of the holiday anyway -- starting the year off right. We may as well get this over with. Which, by the way, what the hell will this meeting be?” She did not try to hide her nervous confusion. “They were all but ready to forcibly break our bond --”

“They would do no such thing --”

“And then suddenly they sent us off to honeymoon? I mean, that's a bit schizophrenic even for a human, let alone a Vulcan.”
“My parents are not suffering from schizophrenia.” Holly stared at him. She knew he was prevaricating. “They have come to accept you are my mate because it is the logical course of action. As I have explained before, when I shared my thoughts with my father I believe we came to an understanding of a sort.”

“You said that, but it doesn't mean I get it.”

“I expect that at our coming meeting, we will make plans for my Time. Plan to formalize our bond with Vulcan. Perhaps formalize your relationship with Selek's Clan.”

“Yeah, about that....” she trailed off uncomfortably.

“It need not be formalized if the idea of it makes you uncomfortable, ashaya.”

“Wouldn't it be rude though? I mean, I do like T'Sala, but I don't really know Selek, and I don't know anything about their people. Plus aren't I just going to join your Clan once our bond is formalized?”

“Indeed. However, this decision, as with any, contains many pros and cons for one to consider and balance.”

Holly sighed. “I know. I wish I didn't know, but this Clan stuff is actually something we've covered at length in my diplomacy classes. Yay me, for once I'm actually prepared to deal with Vulcan culture.”

“I am certain that whatever decision you make it will be a logical one.”

“No pressure, huh?”

“Ashayam. Do you wish to join Selek's Clan or not?”

“You and I both know it's not as simple as what I want. On the one hand, T'Sala has been teaching me stuff like a family member. So maybe that would be a little less weird if I were officially part of her Clan now, or whatever. Or it would formalize something that's already happened, and I know how much Vulcans like formality.

“On the other hand, while T'Sala is part of Selek's Clan now, I really have no relation to his people other than her. It was nice of him to stand up for me, but it's not necessary if your family's totally going to accept me now.

“Which brings up the point that on the one hand, a blending of Clans is a pretty good thing to do, in general. But on the other hand, it would put Selek in a weird place with his other Clan members to try and explain all of this, and the blending might feel a little weird and forced since it'd be through me, and I'm human and really have almost nothing to do with them.”

“Yes, that is indeed a summary of the facts.” he said with a bemused almost-smirk.

Holly stuck out her tongue. “Reviewing the facts helps me think. Call it human style meditation.”

“Of course.”

“Still not sure what I'm gonna do. Do you think Selek would be weird if I turned him down?”

“I am uncertain as to whether Selek has ever or will ever consider himself to be 'weird.'”

“Cheeky Vulcan.”
“Shall I compose a message to my parents after tea?” he helped himself to another forkful of fruit. It was nice having an apartment with Holly and being able to finally eat in a more regular manner. He was still uncertain how he planned to manage his nutritional needs aboard a starship. Perhaps he would inquire as to his parents' habits in that regard.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Holly flicked idly through her own PADD. She'd finally caught up on her emails, in addition to the laundry and groceries. Her final grades had all come in and her scholarship was once again, intact. She recalled when she'd really doubted Syrok's plan for her, and now she couldn't imagine any other way. She hadn't even thought about it when she'd asked him to schedule her spring semester for her. She'd only really perused the schedule today, though it had been set up for her nearly a month ago. They'd figure it out. She knew that she'd have an absence to contend with, too, in the spring, but she'd accepted that there was only so far they could plan.

“So... swimming?” she prodded Syrok on the topic again, now that some time had passed. His irritation was palpable.

“I would really prefer not --”

“I know, Syrok.” she interrupted. “And maybe you could get Starfleet to waive it on some cultural grounds, I really don't know. But I'd prefer you didn't. There will be water planets out there and it's not safe for you not to know how to swim.” Ha! She'd made the safety argument.

As predicted, Syrok deflated somewhat. As his mate, she was right to be concerned for his safety. And he, of course, wanted only to reassure her. “Very well. As I have instructed you in suus mahna, it is fitting that you shall instruct me in swimming.”

“Yes!” she rasped in an excited whisper, eyes sparkling. She'd won this round. And really, she was looking forward to it. It wasn't often that she had something she could teach to a Vulcan. “You'll have to get swim trunks.” she said with her eyes alight with mischief. Syrok could tell through the bond that she was ominously excited about this, and snatched her PADD from her to immediately search the term.

This was standard swim attire? Surely not. He changed tactics and searched Starfleet's own approved clothing store, Holly watching all the while with unrestrained amusement as he furrowed his brow. “Negative.” he stated plainly. “I will apply for a waiver on cultural grounds if I must.” He continued to search through various Terran swimwear options, starting to panic slightly at what he was finding. There was no way he was entering a public space in such a state of undress. “Ah ha,” he said at long last. “I will obtain this... wet suit.”

Holly burst into a fit of giggles. “That is not what people wear to swim, Syrok. It's for like surfing or diving. Just get some long-ish swim trunks. You'll be fine.”

“That is inappropriate attire for a public setting.” he tried to argue.

“Not for humans. No one's going to think anything of it, seriously. But if you wear a wetsuit they sure as hell will look at you funny.”

“I am your mate. I fail to understand how you can remain so aloof about sharing and exposing me in this way.”

“Wait 'til you see the female swimwear options.”

Syrok stared at her for one second before quickly entering his new search criteria, his eyes
widening. “Negative!” he said, completely stunned that even the so-called “conservative” options were cut higher at the bottom than some undergarments he’d observed.

Holly stifled a laugh. “Is this going to be an issue?” she tried to ask compassionately.

Syrok did not answer. He was clearly sulking.

Holly reached a hand out to squeeze one of his gently. “Seriously, is it?”

“I am uncertain.” he said, still not prying his eyes off the PADD as his fingers flicked through more photos and information.

“Is this a bad time to bring up the Starfleet uniform again?”

Syrok closed his eyes and took a centering breath. He had almost entirely forgotten about the issue of the short skirt with everything else that had happened in the meantime. It did bother him, but he did not want it to. He wished to force Holly to dress more conservatively, but at the same time he thought it terribly unfair for him to ask this of her. Unfortunately for him, with the new solidified bond, Holly could follow the thread of his thoughts.

She was dismayed at the idea of having the more attractive clothing options taken away from her, but she was even more dismayed at the idea of Syrok struggling with this. Deep down in her gut she wanted to just have the decision taken out of her hands. They danced around the inequality of the bond and the inequality she preferred in the bedroom. Not just in the bedroom either. Syrok choosing her classes for her was more in line with the relationship she wanted. They both wanted. It was just always awkward to say it.

“Syrok.” she said gently. And he knew what she was thinking about as well.

“It is... it is not accepted, Holly, and for valid reasons.”

“Who says? People have consensually unequal power balances all the time.”

His cheeks tinted green in slight shame at what he knew they had, and what he continued to want. It was not what he had been taught.

Holly simply pushed a wave of understanding toward him and let it at that, for now. She gave a wry grin. “How about I request the pants uniform and you buy me some sexy non-regulation lingerie to wear under it?”

“You will wear no such thing while on duty.” he admonished.

“And off duty?” she’d heard what he hadn’t said there. The wave of arousal across their bond was answer enough.
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

Just FYI, my computer is acting super duper weird lately, and I think it is some sort of hardware failure. I'm still in the testing things and figuring out stage. I don't yet think this should really interfere with my posting, but if I should totally disappear in the near future, it's probably related to that.

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Holly shifted uncomfortably on the wooden bench, then stilled at Syrok's mental admonishment. She did know better than to fidget like a child, but she was so nervous. On this day of the new year, she sat in the communal eating space of the Vulcan Embassy with Syrok, T'Dinnae, and Soren. T'Dinnae was seated directly across from her, Syrok on her right. At least she had the “edge” seat, and wasn't trapped against the wall. Not that she had any real hope of escape, of course.

It was predictably busy outside on the holiday, and as Vulcans didn't celebrate, the Embassy cafe was predictably subdued. Dim, reddish lighting and privacy screens assured a warm, intimate feel to their seats. Any others who were present to take their meals here did so in silence, as was the Vulcan custom, and this table was not a complete exception to the rule. After greetings had been exchanged and food and drink ordered, very little was said during the wait, and very little had been said thus far during the meal. Holly wasn't certain whether they'd discuss their business quietly in the cafe, or relocate. Either way, she was uncomfortable.

But at least she had a moment to show off her skills. She'd had countless meals with Professor Selkar by now and knew the proper way to eat all of the foods, and the names of many more foods than she'd learned from regular classes alone. She knew how to sit and how to basically be a lady (or the Vulcan equivalent, so far as she could tell) from her lessons with T'Sala. All in all she hoped she was making a decent impression with her in-laws, displaying that she did care about their culture, and was really making an effort here.

She blushed outright when Syrok seamlessly transferred one of his dumplings from his own plate to hers, and neither of his parents batted an eye. She knew it was acceptable behavior between bondmates, but it seemed so forward, so overtly romantic to her human understanding. But of course Syrok had explained the logic for being concerned with the well-being of one's bondmate, and he had noticed easily through both outward observation and through their bond that she'd liked that item best. And so, like an old Jewish grandmother, he was coaxing her to eat her fill. She did her best to stifle her smile as she ate.

As Holly had half expected, when the meal was completed they returned to their temporary quarters elsewhere in the sprawling building, and sat on rather traditional mats on the floor to have tea.

It was Soren who spoke first. “Your mother and I have accepted your choice of mate.” he said without preamble.

Syrok just nodded as if it had been expected, and Holly's eyes widened slightly as she snapped to
sharp attention, already sweating slightly, and not from the increased heat.

“Arrangements will need to be made.” Soren continued solemnly.

“I was given to understand that medical leave should be sufficient for my own return to Vulcan at the Time. As Holly is my mate, and as she has now secured your approval, I believe her official status should allow her to accompany me, as per Starfleet's regulations regarding bondmates.”

Soren nodded, and Holly for the first time since the beginning of this meeting felt the weight and seriousness of the topic more than her own nerves in the matter. The topic was essentially Syrok's life. “You have planned for this.” he said with tones of approval, in as much as a Vulcan would express such a sentiment.

“As best I could.” Syrok answered carefully.

“You will, of course, take our family's house. The staff will be informed ahead of time, and you will have privacy there. It will be as it has for generations.”

Holly felt Syrok's relief flow palpably through their bond. He'd wanted to use the family home, of course, but before he'd secured his family's cooperation in this, he'd been afraid they'd end up at some facility, for those in their Time with nowhere else to go. It was so much less than ideal, and he suppressed a shudder at the thought of one.

“I have concerns.” he stated simply.

“Name them.” Soren prompted.

“Holly's health.” he said immediately.

This time it was T'Dinnae who took a deep breath before speaking. “Every mate is prepared to sustain injury.” she said bluntly, and her own husband seemed to flinch, though it wasn't an accusation. “This said, Holly -- you are human. You are weak --”

“I have heard quite a bit about my weakness.” she interjected sharply, self consciously.

T'Dinnae's countenance hardened. “I do not say it to insult. Vulcan is hot.” she said flatly. “It is hotter than Earth, for certain, and in his Time, my son will likely seek the environment he is accustomed to. You will need to guard against heat stroke.

“Our home, like most on Vulcan, comes equipped with its own well, so you should have no want for water. But you must prepare yourself. You will not likely have time to seek supplies. You must stock your room beforehand. I do not know what else can be done to address the temperature.”

“Vulcan's oxygen content is lower than that of Earth.” she continued.

Syrok nodded. “Our Healer tentatively suggested the use of tri-ox compounds, though it is my understanding they can be detrimental to humans if used too often. Yet we were reluctant to consult her human physician on the matter, lest he ask too many questions of why we should be on Vulcan, what our activities would consist of....”

“It would be better if she could have time to adapt to the climate ahead of time.” Soren said gravely. “But unless you both sacrifice your entire semester, I do not see this as an available option. And as I do have a careful understanding of Starfleet's attitudes and policies, I know how negatively they would likely perceive such an action.”
Syrok nodded reluctantly. He'd had the same thoughts.

“Tri-ox or not, you shall simply have to weigh your options carefully and decide.” Soren dismissed the matter.

“My professor has provided us with a list of suggested foods.” Syrok continued.

“What professor is this?” T'Dinnae questioned skeptically. Was everyone in on this relationship?

“Selkar.” Syrok answered. “As I've mentioned, Holly has received lessons from him in an effort to prepare herself for our future. He and his mate have invited us into their home, and vice versa, and they are aware of our unique difficulties. As I understand it, I will have little appetite in my Time, and food would normally not be of much concern to any Vulcan. But Holly will require ready nutrition -- food compatible with her biology, which needs no preparation, that will keep well in heat if we cannot make it all the way to the kitchen --” he trailed off and blushed verdantly, in spite of his efforts to control, utterly mortified by the idea of what was to come.

Holly continued for him. “We have a list of easy to find Vulcan foods that should be adequate for my nutritional needs. We will of course keep water and first aid near to the bed. I've been assured by our Healer that I cannot become pregnant during this Time. Is this consistent with your understanding?”

T'Dinnae nodded sharply. “Vulcan-human hybrids, thus far, have only been possible with medical intervention. Even with the added fertility of pon farr, this fact will still hold true.”

Holly nodded back, reassured. “Do you believe that my period will effect Syrok's attitude?” she asked next, and her mother in law's eyes widened in speculation.

“I have no context for such a question.” she mused, for Vulcan biology was very different in this regard. “What is the current reaction?” she asked plainly, and while Syrok willed himself to vanish from the room, Holly answered as if it were nothing.

“No particular concern.” she said with a human shrug.

“Then I see no reason to consider it.” she looked to her husband for confirmation, who very stoically ignored everyone in the room as stonily as his son.

“What should we do if Holly becomes injured?” Syrok pressed, still focused on overt dangers.

“She will have access to a communications unit.” Soren assured them. “The hospitals know how to respond to such occurrences. We should arrange to have a xeno-biologist on hand, but it should not be a problem.”

Many thoughts flitted through Holly's head -- how Syrok might injure her, how badly she'd have to be injured to seek out medical attention, what his reaction might be should she attempt to use a comm. unit, how he would react if she abandoned him, whether he should survive if she needed a physician. But this, she understood, was the way for all of Syrok's people. It would be illogical to continue to speculate on disaster scenarios. After all, everyone else had handled it for immemorial time. She would not dwell on her cultural and biological disadvantages.

“What else?” Soren prompted them with calm patience. His son and and son's mate were no doubt daunted by the prospect of a first pon farr. He could see the pensive looks on both of them, and while he was grateful that they appreciated the gravity of the topic which they discussed, he realized that the time had come, however improbable the circumstances, to instruct his son on this most important of rites. He would do his best to prepare the couple for what was to come.
"Hesitantly, Syrok asked, “When my Time comes... how should I be certain that it approaches? How will I know when it is time to take leave? To assure we arrive on Vulcan before the plak tow? If my faculties cannot be trusted...” he trailed off, the difficulty obvious.

“You know the signs to watch for. You know the approximate date it will arrive. And your mate should also have been instructed.” Holly nodded confirmation. She knew what she was supposed to look for. And she knew she wasn't alone. There was always T'Sala. There was always Professor Selkar.

“Have you given thought to the bonding ceremony?” T'Dinnae interrupted.

That was another thing Holly had only now been made aware of. She'd heard from Syrok that should Holly be accepted as a citizen, of course only paperwork would be required officially to gain her citizenship and official listing as mate. And much like Earth, a ceremony would be involved to satisfy his Clan. But of course, that was an ill-fitting comparison. It was more than a meet and greet and time for desserts. If Syrok should forgo a ceremony entirely, he'd rub a lot of people the wrong way, apparently. Even so, she thought his reluctance to discuss the matter had been trivial. Alright, so they'd have a ceremony. What was the big deal?

The big deal was that they could have a ceremony after the pon farr, when Syrok was in his right mind. Or, they could adhere strictly to tradition, and unite on the sands of Vulcan, there to be joined in front of their Clan, both mentally and physically. Holly had had a bit of a shock at that. Not only was it ridiculously inappropriate by human standards, but it seemed dangerous as well. Syrok would be almost animalistic and not in his right frame of mind. Holly, as a fragile human, would be naked in the heat of the Vulcan sun. So much could go wrong.

So he'd reassured her that they could move the ceremony to afterward. A short affair involving a joining of minds, and nothing carnal or dangerous. It had been done before for various reasons. It could be done again. It was logical, even.

But Holly could feel the truth of what Syrok wanted. He wanted the Vulcan way. This was more than just a ceremony. She'd had a glimpse of what these rituals meant to him when she'd seen hints of his kahs-wan in the shared memories of their bonding. And even that small taste told her that this was something fundamental and essential to his cultural identity. It was something he'd always hoped to share with a mate. Something he was almost physically driven to do, it had been part of his people for so long.

“We have.” Syrok answered his mother. His fingers met Holly's unconsciously in the ozh'esta for support. “We have decided to go the traditional route.”

T'Dinnae's eyes widened with surprise, but Soren did not move a muscle. He'd almost expected as much. His son, he was learning, was a very stubborn man, no longer a boy, and had a will to take on seemingly any challenge. The fact that his mate was human, he was learning, had no bearing on that determination. She strengthened him as any mate would.

T'Dinnae struggled with how to inquire delicately. “Are there any special... concerns... you have, about attempting such a thing?” She glanced from one to the other, eying up Holly's delicate human skin, and musing over what she knew of human sensibilities, uncertain what conclusions to draw about this girl.

Holly snorted out a laugh in spite of the serious atmosphere. She couldn't help herself. Syrok's scolding look only made her stifle more giggles, hand coming to cover her mouth as she looked up mirthfully at her mother in law. “Lots of sunscreen and try not to look at anybody was going to be my strategy.” she confided.
In spite of herself, T'Dinnae's lips twitched slightly with amusement. Perhaps she had indeed underestimated this woman's merit.

“What of Selek's Clan?” Soren prompted them. Would they be present at the ceremony? Would there be a union of Clans? Would Holly take up Selek on his offer.

Here, there was an unexpected tension and hesitation in both Syrok and Holly. It was Holly who spoke at length. “I have given the matter a good deal of my attention.” she began hesitantly. Clearly, Soren thought, the girl was nervous that she'd disappoint in some way. He supposed it was logical given their rocky beginnings, but he wished she would be at ease. “I believe that joining with Selek might prove... awkward for both Clans, if we go by tradition, and the letter of some ancient laws which technically remain today.”

Soren's brow furrowed in confusion, and his son would not meet his eyes.

“I am kafeh.” Holly said quietly but resolutely to clarify. “By all technical definitions of the term. This would mean that your Clan were taking a citizen of Selek's Clan as a slave, and would have all sorts of awkward implications that would effect the balance of power in both Clans.” she explained. She'd spent a long time reading ancient laws Syrok had gained her access to. They'd pored over the texts and had debated long into the night. What a way to spend a New Years Eve.

Soren did not look any more enlightened. “I am aware that your bond is weighted unequally, but that alone does not constitute --”

Holly politely cleared her throat. “Our bond is not the only unequal aspect of our relationship, Sa-mekh.”

Soren felt a strange numbness coming over his thoughts as he and his mate turned as one to gaze at their son for explanation.

Holly struggled to keep them from any untoward conclusions. “Our arrangement is consensual, but nonetheless, it is an arrangement where Syrok leads and I follow.”

“But kafeh implies a certain finality of all decisions,” Soren argued, his mind reeling with this new information. He eyed his son's warrior-length hair with new fascination and suspicion. There was nothing illegal in what the couple was attempting, but it flew in the face of modern modes of being. And they were right, of course, about the laws. Ancient law ruled much of Vulcan, and though it was rarely invoked (or even necessary), it was still followed when applicable. If what they said was true, and Holly fit the definitions given for the ancient term, perhaps it was unwise to involve another Clan.

“There is a certain finality to my decisions.” Syrok spoke at last. He'd meditated long on this truth in advance of this meeting. There was no sense in denying c'thia.

T'Dinnae's apt mind was flitting through possibilities rapidly. “Assuming this is of real concern,” she interjected, “What is to stop anyone from deciding that Holly is still kafeh, but from her human Clan?”

Holly let out a robust laugh at the absurdity of it. “No offense,” she struggled to suppress her mirth, “But I really don't have a Clan. You'll remember I don't really have anyone by way of family. I filed for emancipation ages ago, and at this point I'm a legal adult. Things just aren't the same here on Earth anyway. We don't really have Clans, as such.”

“Nonetheless,” T'Dinnae pressed, “While the Lady Amanda Grayson may have been the first
publicly acknowledged human bondmate on Vulcan, Ms. Winters has the potential to be of almost equal import, as the first Terran slave taken by a Vulcan. If word of this got out --”

Holly threw up her hands. “Why would word get out? Who is this word getting out to? In the first scenario we were talking about two very Vulcan Clans that would know about this kind of thing, and who would be close enough family to me to figure out the nature of our bond sooner or later. But no one on Earth needs to know about it, and I don't know why your Clan would be hell bent on exposing it.”

Soren, for his part, closed his eyes as if pained by the whole debacle. “Why is it that you continue to create circumstances which necessitate the use of our Embassy?” he questioned. “Holly we cannot allow this matter to be overlooked.” Holly threw up her hands in defeat, managing to look very much as if everyone around her had lost their mind. “I will contact Selek and some appropriate member of the Embassy to consult with on this and will get back to you.”

“So I might still be getting adopted by Selek's Clan?” Holly clarified.

“Indeed, k’diwa.” Syrok said fondly, sending her exasperated mind a surge of affection.

With nothing further to discuss, it was only some minutes after that the conversation had died out to its conclusion and Syrok and Holly departed for their home.
Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

My computer problems might be my hard drive failing. Anyway, it hasn't failed yet!
Also I have my writing backed up on a different hard drive.

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Syrok grimaced. He was already flushed green from embarrassment, though it could very well be from temperature. “It is cold.” he stated stoically. If he were honest, it was a complaint. But Holly could not prove that. It was a fact. An observation.

Holly rolled her eyes. “Get in the water.” she scolded him.

She was already in the water, of course, in her ridiculously tight and revealing one-piece bathing suit. She'd even consented to getting an expensive one with little shorts on it, so that it would cover more of her crotch, but she'd insisted that Syrok wear regular swim trunks. They'd both compromised, and he knew he could not hope for much better. But he still found both their suits scandalous. And the lifeguard on duty could see them plainly. Though they'd gone to the pool in the latest hour it was open, and though no one else was currently using it, Syrok was not reassured about the level of privacy. Anyone could come. And the lifeguard was right there.

Holly huffed in annoyance. “Doesn't it get below freezing on Vulcan at night?” she chastised him, and he reluctantly lowered himself fully into the pool. While it was true that Vulcan did get that cold, and Vulcans did have a good deal of control over their physiology, Syrok found that even moderately cool water to be a uniquely chilling experience. And this was certainly as wet as he'd ever been. This was far worse than rain, worse than a shower. He stood in the shallow end with the water around his waist looking as neutral as he found possible, given the circumstances.

Apparently this was hilarious as Holly's mirthful laughter filled the room, echoing against the tiled floors. “It'll be easier for you if you just dunk yourself.” she assured him, her own hair already plastered against her head. “Just take a deep breath in, then breathe out through your nose when you go under.”

“I believe I am capable of controlling whether I suffocate on a liquid.” he snapped irritably, but did as she said. It was disconcerting to say the least, and he was glad for her advice when his instincts bade him to panic, quite illogically. Vulcan was a desert planet, and he was simply not made for this.

Nevertheless, swimming was a valuable skill, and he would learn it.

As adorable as a her grumpy Vulcan was at first, Holly did feel sorry for him by the end of their hour-long session that night. He was cold. He was wet. He was heavy, as Vulcans were more dense than humans, and so his body wanted to sink. And though his physiology looked human enough to her, muscles and ligaments were slightly different. Just as she'd struggled to learn suus mahna, and Syrok had had to modify his techniques to suit her, so too did she have to think creatively to keep her mate afloat.
Their bond would have told her exactly how miserable he was with the situation. And she'd had an inkling at the start. But what really gave him away was when he muted their bond as much as was possible without ill effects, as he closed off his emotions from her, hiding them behind his Vulcan wall. That was never a good sign. And indeed, Syrok was quiet the whole bus ride home, and went straight to his meditation mat when they arrived.

Holly prepared a late supper and ate voraciously -- for her own part, even though she'd done very little actual swimming, she was ravenous after the workout. But Syrok had to be coaxed out of the bedroom to join her, and he was sullen throughout the meal.

“I'm sure it'll get better.” she prompted him, nudging affection in his direction.

He sighed, and eased away the wall between them, immediately relaxing Holly's nerves. “You must have very little patience left for me, k'diwa.”

Holly tried to hide her smirk but it was useless. “I'm sure you're not the worst student.”

“Insolent slave.” he chided, to which she responded with a very human stuck out tongue.

“Do you know what happens to kafeh who display such insolence?” he narrowed his eyes at her, but she could feel the bond sparkling with mischief.

Holly widened her eyes and shook her head negatively, and Syrok was already stalking out of his seat and towering over her as she leaned back to gaze up at him. “They are taught their place.” he proclaimed, swooping down to haul her over a shoulder effortlessly, as he began walking toward their room.

And so the first swim lesson hadn't gone ideally, but at least it had ended well.
Chapter Notes

Meta story: I've purchased a new hard drive, and will be installing it today or tomorrow. Hopefully that fixes things.

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The spring semester was even more seamless than the fall had been. Their lives were intertwined now, and with their consummated bond, they'd become even more in tune with one another's moods and motions. Holly always knew when Syrok thought of her, or where he was in physical relation to her. When they shared the apartment, she could catch snatches of amorphous thought, such as what he was considering for dinner, or a way they could pass the time. Syrok had even suggested that given time, they could be one of the rare couples able to communicate in full sentences telepathically, assuming Holly's mind would allow for it. She continued to astound him with how adaptive she was, and she continued to commit herself fully to their meditative sessions, excited at the prospect of such intimate communication.

Holly had found her new rhythm in meeting with T'Sala, Selkar, and Geri (for lessons in the case of the Vulcans) and for social calls with all three. And even the dreaded swimming lessons were moving along -- what Syrok lacked in grace and natural talent, he made up for in raw strength, and had succeeded in beating the water into submission. It wasn't pretty, and wouldn't win any competitions, but it would likely pass a swim test.

Everything was going so well that she hadn't noticed the changes at first. It was early April when Syrok began wanting to accompany Holly to all her engagements. But they'd been spending so much time together that Syrok felt like the other half of her soul; it was only natural that he'd walk her here, or ride with her there. She didn't mind whether he would sometimes stay throughout, or if he'd come meet her to pick her up at the close. Geri perhaps found it a little odd to have a conclusive ending time to “hanging out”, but Holly just shrugged it off as a Vulcan quirk. Syrok had always been like that, whether he were picking her up or simply waiting for her to come home.

And then one night Syrok snapped at her. “You are late.” he said in clipped tones.

Holly looked at him in confusion, and back to T'Sala, whose own brows had risen in surprise at the display of emotionalism. They were two minutes late, according to the parameters of their pre-arranged meeting, and while perhaps a Vulcan would be on time, T'Sala was given to understand that Terrans typically allowed for such minor discrepancies. Holly had been flexible with her schedule in the past, leaving as many as thirteen minutes early before, or as late as seven minutes after their scheduled time. Syrok had never expressed any problem with this arrangement before.

“Where were you?” he asked in stern tones, and Holly could feel very sincere worry coming from him. They hadn't been at T'Sala's dorm as they normally would have been.

“We just went to the cafe on the corner for some tea.” she said, no less perplexed. “Is something wrong?”
“When my mate tells me she will be in a place, I expect to find her there. When you are to meet me at a certain time, I wish to find you here at that time.” he lectured her. Holly almost wanted to chide him for being so snippy with her, but she felt a wall of fierce emotion radiating from their bond. He was serious.

She blinked slowly and slightly deflated. “I apologize.” she said meekly. *Fuck.* Apparently she'd really upset him with this. Holly made a mental note to adjust to the new rule set. It was weird, for sure, and she wasn't sure she liked stern Syrok, but in a way it was pleasing for him to put his foot down. It reaffirmed their dynamic, the type of relationship she felt so fulfilled in. For all of the help she got from Syrok controlling her life, caring for her so completely, she almost felt undeserving at times when he asked for so little in return. She was *more* than happy to conform to his wish for promptness, and for clarity of communication.

T'Sala, for her own part, continued to puzzle over the abrupt change in countenance. It was not beyond her people to be so literal and strict, but it was out of character for Syrok. And she knew the date very well. She vowed to keep an eye on this, and bring it up to Holly at the earliest convenience.

It was at dinner a few nights later that Syrok got all weird on her again. The usual strategy when they ate these days was for Syrok to make some dish, often a stir-fry, or some stew or soup, and to add pre-cooked meat to Holly's portion at the last possible moment. It was the easiest way to manage her iron and protein levels, and he'd come to tolerate the scent of meat and the scent it left upon her skin, as it was best for her personal health. But tonight, Syrok grimaced as he smelled the offending ingredient.

“Something wrong?” Holly asked curiously from the table where she sat doing her homework.

“I believe this meat has gone rancid.” he proclaimed, holding it at arms length and continuing to grimace.

“Really?” Holly asked curiously, rising from her seat. “We just got that chicken a week ago and it's been in the freezer. I don't know why it would go bad.” She took the tupperware from Syrok's hands as he gratefully relinquished it to her, and she gave it a sniff. “I don't smell anything wrong with it. Are you sure?”

Syrok looked at her in shock and disgust. “You cannot smell that?” he asked incredulously.

“Er... no?” she questioned him. “I've been eating meat my whole life; I'm pretty sure I could tell if it's gone off.”

“It has.” he snapped at her, and took the container from her hands, snapping the lid firmly back in place and tossing the entire thing into the trash, container and all.

Holly made an abortive motion toward the container of meat and a stifled protest. That was good meat! And a good container! She looked at him and silently demanded an explanation.

“I will not have you eating it.” he insisted and Holly simply sighed and threw her hands in the air. If her Vulcan wanted to be weird about scent, who was she to argue? Syrok *did* have a superior sense of smell. Maybe there *was* some weird contaminant on it.

And that would have been the end of it, except that by the next day's evening meal, Holly had discovered their house to be completely barren of all meat products.
“What the hell?” she demanded, arms crossing over her chest.

“The contaminant must have spread.” he said in response, and the both of them knew that was a very thin argument. Holly looked at him skeptically and began to wonder whether he was losing his mind. Thoughts of pon farr tickled the back of her mind, and she did remember warnings about the importance of scent. She knew she'd have to give up meat during his Time, but that wasn't for at least another month yet, right? In any case, Holly was finally on alert, and would be waiting to see how things progressed from this point forward.

The scent thing did not get better with the eradication of animal products in their household. First it had been the food that needed to be overhauled, but soon after, Holly's toiletries were the next victim. This she had not been prepared for, and looked at her trashed items dejectedly, pouting at him. In place of her soap was a single cake of some oatmeal scented crap that a grandmother might use, but she supposed that was acceptable. The shampoo and conditioner: gone. The bar of soap her only hope. And with their continued swimming lessons, Holly knew that her hair would suffer for it. No proper supplies to combat the chlorine was going to wreak havoc.

And shaving cream? Syrok hadn't found an acceptable replacement for that either, and so she decided to just swear off shaving for now. At any rate, Syrok had often complained to her of the illogic in such an action, and of the unpleasantness of stubble. Well, she'd just grow it out. She wouldn't be the first to do so.

But the deodorant. Holly sighed. No deodorant was going to make for a very smelly few weeks or months. Vulcans didn't sweat, or at least not in the same way humans did, and therefore didn't require such an item. Syrok was not very sympathetic. Perhaps, Holly mused, he liked her scent a little too much anyway, what with the primal thing going on. Oh well. At least it wasn't mid-summer, she consoled herself. She wasn't likely to be dripping with sweat any time soon. It was still quite cool out in early spring.

“You smell of chlorine.” he complained as they spooned in their bed one Monday night -- the night of swim lessons.

“Maybe I wouldn't smell like chlorine if I had shampoo.” she mumbled tiredly into her pillow. It was sleep time now. She didn't want to argue about this. And besides, if she smelled of chlorine, so did Syrok. Illogical.

Syrok winced at his mate's scent. He could not smell her through this pungent overtone. It was disconcerting. He tightened his hold on her body. He buried his nose in her hair, focused his mind inwardly on their bond. She smelled of chlorine. “I am in need of meditation.” he said abruptly, and excused himself from the bed. Holly sighed deeply, but was honestly too tired to argue with him at this point.

But tired as she was, that didn't prevent her from groggily watching him sit stiffly across the room as long minutes ticked by. Holly knew that this fit of illogic was part of Syrok's coming Time, and knew it had to get worse before it could get better. There were a number of markers she'd been told to look for before they'd have to retreat to Vulcan, and this was only the beginning. But already, Syrok himself knew that he was being illogical. He, too, suspected that if the scent of Holly's toiletries had not annoyed him so severely in the past, that perhaps this was a symptom. But it did not feel like a symptom, and that was most disconcerting of all. He could not reconcile his present experiences with those of his past. What once was simply detectable, present, was now
overpowering and irksome. How had he been so sanguine about it before? It was intolerable.

Holly could sense from across the room where she laid that Syrok was having, for all intents and purposes, a panic attack. She'd had enough of them herself over time to be familiar with the feelings of it, and knew there was nothing to do but ride it out, and yet... it was weird, and a little bit frightening, to feel such emotions emanating from her ever cool and logical mate. Syrok had always been the strength for both of them, she thought. And now he was terrified in the face of his biology. Groggily, she padded across the room and sat behind him, wrapping herself around his back, arms and legs framing him in a close embrace. She leaned her tired head against his back and gave him a gentle kiss.

“It'll be okay, k'diwa. It's late. You should come to bed.”

“I am not in need of sleep at this time.” he answered stiffly, voice tight.

Holly sighed and slumped defeatedly. “Do you want me to shower again? Would it help if you cranked the heat up and I sweat? What do you need?”

Syrok closed his eyes. He did not know what he needed, what would make this feel better. He felt unsteady and drew a shuddering breath. Looking inward, he asked himself that question. What did he need? And suddenly, he knew. Every fiber of his being led him to turn around and take his mate in his arms, as he began carding his fingers through her hair, licking a stripe along her neck.

Holly blinked in surprised at his sudden... affection? At first she thought they’d end up having sex, and while she was tired and not entirely in the mood, she had no doubts that Syrok could get her in the mood if it became a problem. So she wasn't really against the notion. But what she felt from him through their bond was not really arousal. Passively, she simply allowed him to do whatever it was he seemed so driven to do, peppering her body with kisses, licks, hickeys, and bites, driven to assert his Claim on her, to cover his mate in his scent and marks. In one particularly overpowering swell of emotion, he simply clamped his teeth to that tender skin between neck and shoulder he was so fond of, and latched on, feeling the desperate need wash through him, all other thoughts obliterated. Even Holly, who had been mostly sleepy and slightly bemused by the whole thing, got caught up in the tidal wave of feeling crashing through her mate and felt laid bare by it. If it weren't for the fact that he was not even really aroused, Syrok wouldn't have believed that the experience hadn't been orgasmic, it was that intense. At length, he released her, licking the delicate skin as if in apology. There would be a nasty bruise come morning, and sharp indents from his teeth. He shuddered, as if the mark were an omen for what was to come.
Things are getting pretty serious with the impending/currently happening pon farr, which is exciting.

In my personal life, I've not yet been able to implement my new hard drive. It will take an estimated rest of my life to download the new version of opensuse, which is step one. The good news is that the failing hard drive hasn't yet failed, so I think I have time.

Holly yawned for the millionth time that night at Selkar's home. She felt as if she could barely keep her eyes open. After nearly no sleep and a long day of classes, she was absolutely exhausted.

This semester, Selkar had outright refused to allow her into another Vulcan language course, insisting that she was fluent enough to test out of any further classes if she so chose, and insisting as well that testing out of said classes would be a waste of her time, as far as credentials were concerned. He did, however, agree to take her on in an “independent study” capacity, as they continued to unpack the largely secret portion of Vulcan culture. His official report to Starfleet would be rather vague, and “cultural studies” was honestly enough information as far as the higher-ups were concerned.

And so she sat now, reading quietly and picking apart text on power structure and gender in Vulcan society with a new set of eyes, considering the time of year and her current preoccupation. As Selkar worked silently on his grading papers beside her, his brow rose as he observed another stifled yawn, as Holly scrubbed her hand across her eyes. “You appear to be fatigued.” He did not mention the glaringly obvious bruise on her neck.

“Mm. Didn't get much sleep.” she muttered. “Syrok thought I smelled like chlorine.”

“And my apology?” he prompted: Vulcan for 'what the hell does that mean?'

Holly sighed. “Yeah. I think in the end he felt bad enough about it that it's the only reason I'm here alone tonight. I should warn you, if we're like two seconds late he'll probably have a seizure or something.” she rolled her eyes.

“How many milestones has he hit?” Selkar said gently but firmly. “This is no joking matter.”

“I know, I know.” she admitted with annoyance and defeat. “And I'm watching him.”

“How many milestones has he hit?” Selkar had become oddly... close, to these two. He would normally not inquire about such personal information outside of his own Clan, but these young ones were like family.

T'Sala had asked her the same thing at lunch in hushed tones when Syrok had excused himself for two seconds to get a drink. Milestones. Pon farr, it turned out, was different for everyone who experienced it, at least in the specific way it manifested. And it could be different in each cycle as
well. What the Vulcans utilized (aside from actual medical tests and hormone measurements) to monitor their mate's condition were core milestones.

1. Scent. This one Holly now recognized they'd encountered, and she now questioned any little thing having to do with it that Syrok mentioned.

2. Possessiveness. This one she wasn't so sure of. Was the new obsession with timeliness possessiveness? What about her new array of bite marks? He'd always done stuff like that, to a degree. So while the milestones had sounded straight-forward when she'd first learned them, she now found them to be subtle and difficult to distinguish.

3. Irritation. This one made her roll her eyes. Syrok was Vulcan. Weren't they always sort of irritable? And what about his unease with his oncoming pon farr? Did that count as irritation? Or did this milestone have to be separate from general irritation about his Time?

4. Control. This one made Holly laugh to herself every time she thought of it. They were essentially living as Master and slave. Their relationship had always been about his control. But thus far, she hadn't noticed anything that stood out to her, exactly. Except maybe the time thing? Or was that one irritation?

5. Increased Affection. Syrok had always been fairly affectionate, she supposed, but the level of it was said to increase leading up to pon farr. She hadn't noticed anything particularly out of the norm thus far.

6. Sexual Withdrawal. Now, this one was weird. And at first it had even seemed counter-intuitive. Why would Syrok become less sexual leading up to his time of mating? The explanation that T'Sala had given her was that basically, Syrok would be storing up “reproductive substances” in his chenesi for days leading up to the big event, and really, that was almost too much information as far as Holly was concerned. And a Vulcan, with such an analytical brain and eidetic memory, might be able to note the exact inflection point at which their mate began to withdraw sexually based on past performance data. But for Holly, it felt a bit more hazy. As far as she could remember, during their peaks, and correcting for weird epic-sex-a-thon days, they would sometimes have sex as much as once per day. But during lulls, she was pretty sure they'd gone without for at least two weeks. She'd never thought to keep a calender, because that would be weird, but perhaps that had been her mistake. She was somewhat relying on Syrok to take note of this one if he had the mental capacity to do so. Otherwise, her best bet was looking for physical evidence -- the characteristic swelling of the chenesi during pon farr. And so far, she hadn't seen any of that, so she guessed this milestone hadn't happened yet.

7. Aggression. Holly knew that pon farr was violent, and she knew that there was a very real possibility of injury. She also knew that she'd been studying with Selkar and T'Sala for so long so that she would know how to keep from pissing Syrok off when his emotions became volatile. But that did not keep her from hoping against all hope to avoid the aggression milestone, or at the very least, to keep it from being directed toward her. After all, men in pon farr often became aggressive toward anyone they perceived as a threat to their mate. But she did hope that he wouldn't become violent with her. After all, wasn't that why she'd studied so hard and so long for this eventuality?

8. Seclusion. At some point, Syrok would become reluctant to leave his space. Which, Holly thought, should make traveling to Vulcan interesting. But as it was now, he was continuing to go to class with regularity.

9. Emotionalism. One of the most obvious signs of the pon farr by far was the absence of logic in a
Vulcan's mind, the erratic and unbridled emotions that would sway them manically in one direction and another, guided more by primal instinct than rational thought.

10. Lack of Psychic Control. In the end, a Vulcan's shields would falter, and he wouldn't be able to shut out the outside world properly any longer. And what control there usually was within the bond would become an uncontrolled, desperate, all consuming contact. And with Syrok already controlling 90% of the weight of their bond, Holly had no idea what the implications would be when that time came.


Selkar frowned at her answer. This was the best answer she could give? “Holly you really must take this seriously.” he admonished.

“I am!” she whined. “It's just... possessiveness? He's always been possessive. And irritation? I think most Vulcans come off as irritable, emotional control or not.” she shrugged helplessly. “And the sex thing is more of a statistical comparison than anything, so I can't totally say for sure --”

“I would prefer not to know the details of your sex life.” he closed his eyes against the unwelcome information.

“You're the one who asked about his 'milestones'.” she grumped.

“I believe we should cease meeting until after the event.” he announced abruptly, not even bothering to argue the point.

“Wait, what? It's not that soon. Is it?” she asked with sudden alarm. It was still a month or two off, from what she understood. The plan was that she'd keep up with her studies as well as was possible until the time came, because she'd miss enough schoolwork as it was.

“It is soon enough. I do not wish to threaten his Claim, nor have you carry our scent on your person. It would be illogical to do so. Holly, if I may say so, I would cease traveling from him completely at this time.”

“She wiped her sweaty palms on her pants and looked away, chewing her lip. “Maybe I should go home.” she said quietly.

Selkar nodded. “That would be wise.”

“I'll... I'll comm. Syrok and let him know I'm ready to go early. He doesn't like me being random places lately.”

Selkar's eyes could have bored holes through her at that statement, and she knew with a sinking
feeling that that must qualify as one of the milestones, even if she wasn't sure which one. She blushed at her ineptitude at recognizing it at the time, and hastily texted her mate the relevant information, while sending him a mental nudge to get his attention through their bond. Syrok nudged back and a moment later she received a text: I will meet you there.

“He's coming.” she announced and began to file her work back into her bag and gathered her coat. Selkar was largely silent during their wait, and Holly shot a quick text off to T'Sala as well.

Selkar thinks we shouldn't meet anymore. I'm calling off all social engagements. See you in a few months, I guess! Wish me luck!

Okay, so she was being a bit blase about the whole thing, but it was her defense mechanism. T'Sala immediately pinged her back.

Has his Time come? When are you leaving?

No idea. Not for a while yet, I think. 3/10?

Holly guessed on the approximate number of milestones that might have been met. But whatever else T'Sala had to say, she either couldn't find a sufficiently vague enough way to relay the information in text, or perhaps she had nothing helpful to add at all, because there was no reply. And when Syrok finally showed up to pick her up a few minutes later, there was a strange sense of finality about it, and a foreboding. She was on her own now. She'd thought, somehow, that at least these earlier stages would be easier because she'd have the support of her Vulcan companions. But even now she was walking into the proverbial lions den with no protection but that which she'd already learned. This was her final test.

Syrok was cold when he came to the door, and eyed Selkar with intensity.

“Hi, hon.” Holly smiled brilliantly at him, and slipped past her professor to stand beside her mate. Syrok never broke eye contact with the other male.

Selkar spoke. “I have discontinued all lessons with thy mate at this time. We shall reconvene after.”

“Acceptable.” he responded stiffly, his body shifting subtly in front of Holly, as if shielding her from some threat.

“Live long and prosper.” Selkar wished him sincerely, his fingers spread.

Syrok returned the gesture but could not bring himself to return the sentiment, his thoughts in turmoil. Just the scent of another Vulcan man was causing a distressing itch under his skin, an itch to get Holly away from here, or to participate in some violent act, or to mark his mate again. Something, some action needed to take place. As he turned to lead Holly away and felt a growl stirring in his chest and clamped down on the urge. Such a thing was not appropriate for public, and the notion that he'd almost given way to such a base instinct was concerning.
It was with palpable relief that Holly followed him closely, just inches away from his person, just slightly behind, where he could defend her, where she could follow his lead. Her footfalls matched his perfectly, reaffirming their syncopation. He reached out with two fingers and was joined without hesitation, fluidly, faultlessly. A welcome warmth spread through him at the touch and as he processed the openness, the vulnerability of his mate's mind to his own, no shielding to keep him out -- he relaxed slightly. He was able to breathe, and his mind wrapped greedily around and through Holly's, as if to reassure himself she was there, to feel what she was like, to gorge himself on her presence. He was almost unaware of the passing terrain around them, but soon enough they arrived at the bus stop, and the bus was not long in coming. And as of late, he dreaded his time on the bus.

Errant thoughts and smells crowded around him. On Vulcan, physical touch was such an intimate affair, unlike here on Earth, and this effected every facet of day to day living, it seemed, including public transportation. On Vulcan, a bus would never be so crowded that people would squeeze in and against one another. It had been disconcerting when Syrok had first been exposed to it, but he'd learned quickly to simply reinforce his mental shields and move on with his day. But today he was tired, and he simply wanted to be with Holly, alone somewhere, and he was struggling to shut everything out. The alien smells, often chemical, but also biological, crowding in and threatening to mark him and his Holly. The psychic emanations from both contact and uncontrolled projecting of strong thoughts and emotions. The high pitched sound of squeaking breaks or a beeping horn. Terran cities were always bustling with activity and noise. It was not like Shikahr.

By the time they got home, Syrok was frantic to undress them and to share a shower, yes even a detestable water shower, to rid them of the scents to which they'd been exposed. And on some level, he knew that he was being illogical, but he was simply driven to do these things, he could not help himself. As much as a part of him urged him to control these impulses, so too another more desperate part urged him on to simply do this one thing, to take a shower, to put on clean clothes. Was that really so much trouble that it had to be controlled?

And Holly, blessedly, met his outlandish requests with equanimity, not saying a word about his logic or his control. Simply soothing him with her calm tones and easy motions, her quick agreement to his requests. And after the shower, he looked desperately at the laundry basket, still ripe with scents, still full of their winter coats that he'd insisted also had to be cleaned now. And he wanted to wash the clothes, but the thought of leaving their apartment to go to the basement laundry unit filled his stomach with a sort of dread. Holly simply slipped into fresh sweatpants and a t-shirt and took his hands gently in her own as he stood naked and dripping in their room, looking lost.

“'I'll go wash them now, hm? Do you think you can get dressed while I'm gone?'” she encouraged. He closed his eyes and took a steadying breath, nodding. He could get dressed. This was something he could do.

But he was reluctant to release her hands when she pulled away, gently at first, then more firmly, and he used his control to keep his feet planted firmly on the ground, rather than follow her as she took their laundry supplies to the basement alone.

It took Holly a while to get through the laundry, longer than it would usually take. Through each iteration, when she had to go to the basement, there was a tension in the air about her leaving Syrok's presence, and a tension that came along with the subtle new scents accumulating on her since she'd gone out. And honestly, she was a little worried that Syrok would reject the detergent outright at this point as well. She wasn't entirely certain what they'd do for clothes if it came to...
that, and they still had to get to Vulcan at some point. Well, best to deal with that when it came to it. Best to deal with the laundry situation right now.

And at very long last when the washing was finally finished and in the apartment, it was with a sigh of relief that she realized Syrok wasn't rejecting the laundry's new clean scent or the subtle smells it might have accumulated in transit. All was well. Finally, she bagged up her current clothes and tossed the closed bag in the corner, bathed again thoroughly and donned yet another outfit, then settled in bed beside her mate who had managed to hold himself together enough to make them tea while she cleaned.

It was a late night, and she was exhausted, but she'd already decided she wasn't going to class the next day. The prospect of it made her nervous, to be sure. She wasn't one to “play hookey”, and she had an innate concern for her grades, her scholarship, her plans, her future... but she realized that now was Syrok's Time, and everything else could be dealt with after. They sat in silence for some time, simply enjoying tea and warmth and closeness, and she felt Syrok's tension slowly winding down in the reassuring atmosphere.

“I think we should stay in tomorrow.” she said gently.

Syrok flinched but nodded. It would be illogical to deny what was happening to him, though he could not bring himself to voice it aloud.

“I'll contact Healer Sterran in the morning and let him know to make our excuses.” she reassured him, gently stroking the back of his hand. He wouldn't need to do anything. Others would take care of the situation. He nodded his head again, grateful to have some of this burden lifted from him.

Holly moved her fingers to card through his hair. “I'd like to call T'Sala tomorrow as well.” she prompted.

“Negative.” he stiffened. When Holly interacted with T'Sala, Holly often went away, and he could not allow that. Holly's place was here.

“Just a comm.” she said gently. “I'd like to get some outside perspective on our progress.”

Syrok glared at the wall, at war with himself. He wanted to forbid it, but he knew he was being illogical. He did not like Holly pressing him on this. If he could not control his mate, what could he control? Nothing. He had nothing within his control. Not his mind. Not his physiology. And he did not have Holly. Not if she would do as she pleased. He had lost now the thread of the conversation. Desperately he grasped at the threads he'd just been thinking about moments before. What had Holly wanted to do? T'Sala. Yes. To discuss him. He did not like it. His business was his own. This was a private matter, and not one for gossip, and at the thought of Holly, of all people, speaking about him so... he felt a pang of betrayed hurt in his side.

Syrok's thoughts were almost too erratic and quick for Holly to follow them, however much they'd practiced with their bond these last months. Jesus, what was she supposed to do? “Shh, shh, shh.” she soothed him, pulling him into her embrace and setting his tea on the side table, out of harms way. “It's okay, k'diwa. I won't call her tomorrow if you don't want me to. We don't have to deal with that right now. Okay? We'll just stay at home and it'll be okay.” she pressed a kiss to the top of his head. He seemed to settle a bit at her reassurances, but she frantically wondered about how she'd contact the appropriate channels when it was time. She wondered how much time they actually had, this whole thing seeming suddenly more real than any prior discussion could have prepared her for. And she felt like the entire weight of the world rested on her shoulders. She had to make the right decisions now, as both their futures were up to her.
Oh man, I seriously spent all day copying my old data to my new hard drive. The hard drive was crumbling around me. Everything had errors. Linux had converted my life to read only so that I couldn't mess it up more. It was ridiculous.

Anyway, I'm on the new hard drive now, in my new openSuSE install, and it's just awful. Everything is the wrong colour. Things aren't formatted how I like. Certain things aren't installed yet. This is my life now. /end drama/

Holly awoke to a heavy Vulcan body glomped onto her small frame, and though it was slightly uncomfortable, she squirmed up against him and further into his embrace. Heaven. Slowly her thoughts began to clear as she noticed the sun streaming through the cracks in the curtains, indicating it was mid-morning by now, not as early as they'd usually rise. Weekend? Her foggy brain sought to remember the day before, to place her in time. But even then, Syrok would typically be awake by now, having meditated and begun preparing breakfast. Vulcans, as far as she understood, just didn't really “sleep in”.

With clarity, the events of the previous evening, and for that matter, past few days, came crashing back in, and she sighed. She'd have to retrieve her PADD and get a notice off to the Healer as soon as possible. But apparently, that wasn't going to be now, as Syrok only tightened his hold on her when she hesitantly moved a bit away. Contentedly, he buried his nose in her hair and inhaled her unique and comforting scent. Felt their curves pressing closely together, though both were dressed at this time, and he rather felt the clothing was entirely unnecessary. Skin to skin contact would enhance his experience of his mate and both her physical and mental state, which was desirable. He would remedy the situation immediately were he not so comfortable holding her.

“What time is it?” she asked curiously from within their warm nest.

Syrok searched his mind for the answer, and was disturbed that it was not immediately forthcoming. He tightly closed his eyes to the reality of what was happening to him. That he should be conscious of losing his mind was agonizing. “Approximately 10:00 hours.” he answered quietly, but his voice was tight, and a tension ran through his frame now that hadn't been there.

Holly idly played with his sensitive fingers which she had easy access to, running her own along and through, feeling the sparks of pleasure pass between them. She brought one up to her mouth to suck the tip of gently, and felt Syrok both relax and shudder with a new sort of tension before she finally released him.

“I should contact the Healer.” she said into the room, taking advantage of his seeming lucidity.

“Yes.” he answered with determination, bodily willing himself to release his mate.

She slowly and deliberately sat herself up and reached for her PADD where it rested on the beside table, still next to their unfinished tea. She passed him his computer as well in case he wanted to check on anything for himself while he was able. Steeling himself, he set his mind to reading his
emails and browsing his news feed as was his usual habit, and he found it distressingly difficult to focus, but at least not impossible.

Holly clicked and clacked away on her own keys, and his eyes continued to flick over toward her, both wanting and not wanting to see what she had written. On Holly's part, she now estimated they'd hit between three and seven of the milestones, and she was distressed to realize what a stark difference there was between 30 and 70%. She chewed her lip and sent her email off to the Healer with said estimates, and then looked up at her mate, who was watching her like a hawk. A very worried hawk.

“We might want to arrange for transportation.” Holly hazarded, lowering her eyes submissively to take the edge off her words.

“No insult me.” he snapped, and her eyes flew up to meet his, startled. How had she -- Holly opened her mouth and he interrupted. “One sensitivity to scent is hardly enough to justify such drastic action.” He was blushing, and he knew it, because he was humiliated. And perhaps he was also avoidant and defensive, but he would not think on that now. He did not wish to. He was in control. Had he not just read his emails? Syrok swung his legs over the edge of the bed and prepared himself to stand up, his eyes alighting on the dresser full of clothes Holly had washed, clothes that did not yet carry his scent. He winced at his illogical fixation on such a thing, but with determination he emphasized that again the issue was one of scent, nothing else.

“What have you been telling the Healer?” he asked, reaching out to take her PADD from her, which she pulled away from his reaching hand. His eyes immediately dilated to glittering black pools of danger, and Holly froze.

“Syrok,” she said as gently as possible, and licked her bottom lip nervously. She caught herself showing nerves and intentionally relaxed her posture. “Perhaps it would be most logical that I make my assessment as planned.”

“Do not patronize me.” he snapped, and unconsciously switched to Vulcan. “I am not a child and will not be treated as such. You will know your place, my mate.” He snatched the PADD away from her as she bowed her head meekly before him, and he quickly called up her sent message, scanning over the words.

“Yes, Sir.” Holly murmured placidly as she waited for the coming argument, and wondered what tactic she'd have to take. Of course, if she seemed deceitful or manipulative, that would also backfire, as he'd sense it through their bond. She kept herself relaxed and receptive, open and sincere in her wish to simply care for him.

“Three to seven?” he demanded, gesticulating with the PADD. He towered over her as he stood before her and she continued to sit on the bed before him, but she managed not to flinch away, not to encourage the aggression by showing fear. “Explain.”

“Ashayam, you are not yourself.” she said gently. “There is no hostility here.” She carefully reached out and placed one of her hands against his arm, knowing that he could feel the sincerity of her statement, the love.

“I am perfectly in control of myself.” he insisted and tossed the PADD down on the bed, forgotten, and stalked away to the kitchen with his own. He would work. He would prove himself today because he would complete all of his classwork from home. Then Holly would have no cause for concern, and could contact the Healer once more with her new report. One milestone. Only one. His current irritation could not be considered one of the milestones as the cause was sufficient. He could be permitted this emotion at this time of conflict with his mate.
Holly breathed a sigh of relief when Syrok had exited the bedroom. He was so touchy as of late and it made her feel unsteady. He was a *Vulcan*. He'd always been so level.

She was just debating sending another message off, perhaps to her contact on Vulcan (some cousin or other of Syrok's) who would make arrangements for them when it was time, perhaps to T'Sala to get advice and perspective, when Healer Sterran pinged her back. She blinked. Well, *that* was prompt.

* I send my regards concerning your mate's recent illness. Be assured that I have contacted professors on behalf of both yourself and your mate and you will be excused from your duties until such a time as the illness has been taken care of.

* Your message regarding the progression of S'un T'nei Syrok's illness leaves much information to be desired. If it is permissible, I am willing to visit your personal residence in order to make a more accurate assessment. If this is acceptable, is 14:00 hours an acceptable time? Please respond with your preferences regarding time and place.

- Sterran

Well, that answered that. It was with palpable relief that Holly sent a quick affirmative message off to Sterran, checking the time. It was already 10:34. She had plenty time to get some food in both of them and hopefully situate Syrok comfortably before the visit. It was then she chewed her lip a bit nervously. Hopefully he wouldn't freak out about this. She knew it was the responsible thing to do, to allow the Healer to make an assessment, but Syrok was determined right now to prove that nothing was really wrong. She'd put an end to that special bit of illogic by allowing him to prove it with a hormonal reading.

Holly joined her mate in the kitchen after her morning ablutions, but like Syrok, still wore her pajamas, partly out of solidarity, and partly because they *were* more comfortable. She set some tea out for both of them, as well as some approximation of *kreyla* she'd cobbled together with Terran ingredients, which had become staple in their home. Syrok accepted the tea but refused to eat. He was simply not hungry, and besides, his attention was focused on his studies. Where it should be focused. The fact that the act of focusing took him altogether too much effort was irrelevant. He was Vulcan. He would control this.

“Who was that?” he asked flatly, not looking up from his computer.

“What was what?” Holly asked curiously, sipping her tea.

“Before you came out here, someone contacted you on your PADD.” he stated simply. It was a fact. “I heard the auditory indicator of such.”
Holly stared at her tea, trying to think of how to phrase this to least piss him off. And also? He'd heard that minutes ago and had held onto it? How had he even noticed that with how scatterbrained he was? She could feel his disarray clearly, and yet he'd latched onto that, of all things.

“That was Healer Sterran.” she said in what she hoped was a conversational tone, and not nervous affect.

“You are nervous.” he said, laying aside his work. Shit. That's what she'd been hoping to avoid.

“What are you hiding from me?” he narrowed his eyes.

Holly sighed in resignation. “I'm not hiding anything. It was the Healer. For your information, he was discontent with my analysis of the situation, and indicated he'd like to make a call of his own. To that end, he's suggested he come by today, and I agreed.”

“You what? You had no right!” He said hotly.

She did have every right, and she knew it. Holly pressed her lips together and tried not to feed into the madness. “Look, if you think there's nothing to worry about, then what is your concern? The Healer will take some readings and be on his way. It is logical to monitor the situation, and if I'm making too much of this then he'll tell me as much and I'll know to adjust accordingly.”

“I am not interested to hear your assessment.” he snapped coldly, his eyes going black once more, tension radiating from him. Holly felt all the hairs on her body stand on end, seeing her mate so. He'd never been aggressive toward her, and it was completely incongruous with what she knew of her mate. “If the subject under discussion is myself then it is up to me to be a part of that discussion. Is that understood?” he asked dangerously.

And all too late Holly realized she'd been holding eye contact, completely entranced by the scene before her. She dropped her eyes subserviently. “Yes, Sir.” she murmured quietly but clearly.

“Give me your PADD.” he demanded lowly.

Holly looked up again in confusion but at the sharp tug at their bond she pushed aside her instinctive hesitation and simply retrieved the device where she'd left it in their room, returning to the kitchen to hand it over.

“You have lost the privilege of using this unsupervised since you clearly cannot be trusted to do so without duplicity. If you wish to make contact with someone, you will ask permission and do so with my supervision. If someone should attempt to contact you, I will read the message first. And I will read and approve all outgoing messages you intend to send as well. You may occupy yourself otherwise.” he said with finality and set the device aside.

Holly itched to have it again. Nearly everything she could do in the apartment revolved around it, after all. Her school work. The news feeds. Videos. Games. She sighed and centered herself as she'd practiced for so long. The PADD was the least of her problems. She would let it go. She finished her tea slowly and consciously, as well as her kreyla, as she'd been taught, and the ritual calmed her. Her mind returned to every such meal she'd shared with Selkar in his home, and to the lessons she'd learned therein. She'd prepared for this. Such a small thing as her PADD was of no consequence.

Breakfast completed, she meticulously cleaned the dishes and excused herself to their room and her pile of books. They were all ones she'd read before, but she had a decently sized collection, and so she chose a favorite and sat down to read. An hour of reading brought her to noon. An hour of meditation to 1 P.M., and then she broke for a small lunch, which thankfully Syrok shared with her.
this time. He was still eating after all, it seemed. She had no indication otherwise as to how he was
holding up mentally. Through their bond, she sensed some slight disarray and cold control, and had
no idea whether he'd actually been making progress on his work or if he'd simply been struggling
with the same things ineffectually for two hours, but it didn't matter. One more hour... just one
more hour and she'd know for sure where things stood.

It was after they'd taken their meal in silence and while she was once again sorting the dishes that
he came up behind her and simply wrapped his arms around her, holding her closely, gently.
“K’diwa.” he murmured. “I apologize if my earlier tone was overly harsh.” he pressed a kiss to her
hair and basked in her scent, her grounding feel. “I do not wish to be at odds with you, but you must
simply learn your place.”

The 'learn your place' comment was a little suspect, but she brushed it away, melting into the good
vibes she felt coming across the bond so suddenly. It was a welcome shift from the earlier agitation
and she'd take what she could get. “Mm.” she agreed vaguely. “I love you.” she looked up behind
her at him adoringly for a second and dropped her eyes subserviently. This simple action resulted in
waves more of tenderness and affection rolling into her. Along her back where his chest pressed
against her, she felt a gentle rumble of purring contentment.

This was what she lived for. And when
he walked them back toward the bedroom and Syrok began to strip them both, she raised a brow in
curiosity as to where this would lead.

But no, again no sex. Just as much skin to skin contact as Syrok could orchestrate, their limbs
entwined and Holly pressed close to him, their scents and emotions mingling. He'd struggled for an
eternity it seemed to work on something productive, and while he had made some progress, the rate
of progress was deplorable. Add to that being at odds with Holly, and the entire situation was
unacceptable. He simply... wanted. This physical closeness was comforting like no attempt at
meditation was. He stroked the bite mark on Holly's neck with gentle fingers and smiled when she
flinched from it. It was not that he wanted to cause her pain, never true pain, but he was pleased
that he'd left something of himself with her that she could feel, that she could experience. She
would not forget to whom she belonged, and no one else would mistake her for free, not with such
a blatant Claim.

He was just starting to feel himself relax when there was a buzz at the door. He tightened his grip
on Holly but she still stiffened as if to answer it. He did not wish to answer the door, and he
certainly did not like his mate forgetting her place. A low, dangerous growl emanated from his
chest and she stilled.

“K’diwa,” she tried affectionately, “That will be the Healer. It would be logical to dress ourselves
and answer the door.”

“I do not believe that I invited any Healer to our residence.”

Holly sighed. “Be that as it may, he is here now, and it would be rude to leave him waiting.
Perhaps you should answer him if only to send him away.” she suggested.

And like clockwork, the door buzzed again.

If only to quell his irritation, he roused himself from his little nest. He would give the Healer a
very logical piece of his mind, as the Terrans would say. It seemed that the Healer was not easily
dissuaded as the door buzzed again, so Syrok set himself about donning a casual robe appropriate
for company, and made his way to the door. He resented having to dress at all. He resented not
being able to wear his sleepwear that carried their scent -- but it would have been wholly
inappropriate. So he'd put on something as easy and tolerable as was possible, given the
circumstances.
As Holly began to grab for her own clothes he shot her a dark look. “Do not.” he said fiercely. “You will remain here. Unclothed. In the bed. Awaiting my return.”

Holly's mind raced through whether that was wise or not, but figured the situation was in Sterran's hands now, and she'd rather just not fight about this all things considered. She dropped her underpants back on the ground and crawled under the covers obediently. Syrok gave her one more calculating look before shutting the bedroom door and going to answer the front of the apartment.

Syrok opened the door and stood impassively, taking in the reality of the Healer at his personal home. He was reluctant to invite him in, and he did not want to address the reason behind that.

Sterran stared impassively back, and was willing to be as patient as was needed. This was not his first experience with one's pon farr, after all. He was, however, curious as to Syrok's hesitation. Which motivation was behind it? In other words, which milestone could he tick off his mental list immediately? “S’un T’nei Syrok.” he stated in monotone, his hand forming the ta'al. “Live long and prosper.”

“Peace and long life, Healer Sterran.” he replied, falling back on the familiarity of the tradition. “I invite you to my home.” And almost reluctantly, he forced his feet to move aside to permit the Healer entrance. Sterran stepped inside as if nothing at all were out of the ordinary, and that adherence to logic and emotional impassivity was a relief to Syrok. At least no comment was made on his actions.

“I have communicated with your mate regarding a medical assessment. I assume you were informed.”

Syrok inclined his head. “Indeed. She had relayed such a message to me.” A message he did not agree with in the least.

“Perhaps it would be logical that we adjourn to your sitting area, unless you have some preference as to where the assessment take place.”

“I would prefer the assessment not take place. As I have indicated to my mate, it is entirely unnecessary at this time. She has overstepped her bounds in contacting you, and I assure you we will seek out the advice of a medical professional when it becomes necessary.”

“As I am already present, it would be illogical to waste the opportunity.” Sterran answered impassively, already making his way to the sitting room, with or without Syrok. Control: check.

Syrok sat himself down beside the Healer reluctantly, but kept his face and body schooled to neutrality.

Sterran pulled out a PADD and brought up Syrok's file, going through the motions with practiced ease. “When was your last meditation?” Sterran asked, cutting right to the chase. On Vulcan, there was no logic in 'small talk'.

“Last evening I made the attempt, but was not successful in reaching the deeper levels.” Or any levels.

“Have you noticed any problems with maintaining proper shielding?”

“Negative.” He had not consciously thought about proper shielding as of late, so he had not noticed whether or not his shields were adequate.
“When was your last meal and what did it consist of?”

Syrok smugly recounted his lunch. There. He'd eaten, and he'd eaten normally. Sterran, however, did not seem to care one way or another as he made a notation.

“How would you describe your level of focus of late?”

“Adequate.” he said tightly. It was adequate in that he was still able to perform tasks. But it was certainly atypical.

“How would you describe your level of focus of late?”

“Negative.”

“Have you had any difficulties with your mate?”

What an odd question. Holly was not the one undergoing pon farr. So what difficulties should he have with his mate? Syrok furrowed his brow. However, now that Sterran had brought it up, he had had some issues with Holly lately. Her behavior had not been as exemplary as it had used to be. Perhaps, he reasoned, it had something to do with their bond. “Possibly.” he said with much hesitation and reluctance.

“Please expound.”

“She has not been as obedient as I believe is typical for her. At every turn, I believe there is friction and challenge.”

“And where is your mate now?”

“She is in the bedroom.” he answered unhesitatingly, and with some pride. He had left her there, and she had stayed.

“I see.” Sterran answered, moving on as if it were of no consequence. And he did see, of course. Control, possessiveness, probably irritation, possibly even erratic emotional control, though Syrok seemed controlled enough this moment. “To what degree has she required correction?”

“Explain.” Syrok furrowed his brows again.

“I assume she awaits you in your room as a corrective measure against her challenge.”

“Affirmative.”

“Has physical action been required? Or lengthy verbal direction?”

“Negative.”

At that, Sterran was satisfied that perhaps aggression had not been fully manifested as of yet, and spared a moment to be grateful for Holly's sake. It was always clear that one's thoughts were in terrible disarray when he could provoke answers so easily by misdirection such as this. It never failed to extract the information needed when one went into pon farr.

So, scent he knew of from Ms. Winters' email. Scent, control, irritation, possessiveness, seclusion. No indication of level of affection or sexual activity. He pulled a scanner out of his bag and calibrated it to take a reading of Syrok's pheromonal levels, so that a blood test would not be required to measure hormones. It was not as accurate, but it was more feasible. After making a notation, he asked “Please remove the upper portion of your robe and turn around.”
Syrok let his robe fall to his waist and turned his back to the healer, knowing what was coming as Sterran visually inspected and gently touched his chenesi to observe the level of swelling, and the hardness thereof. Syrok shuddered with the discomfort of the intimate touch, but Sterran was cool and businesslike, and within a moment Syrok was allowed to dress again. Making a final notation, Sterran had made his analysis. As far as actual physical progression, there was still a ways to go. So though they were halfway through the milestones, there was still ample time before the couple would need to arrange for transport to Vulcan.

“You are correct in your opinion that the affliction has not progressed significantly as of yet.” he said without giving any details that would only serve to upset him. Syrok nodded, a sense of self-satisfaction filling him at the news. “I propose that I return in two days time to make a new assessment, and put the mind of your human mate at ease.” There. The justification was for Holly's sake, whether Syrok thought it necessary or not.

Begrudgingly, Syrok found himself agreeing. “Very well.” he rose to see Sterran out. “Live long and prosper.” he said formally, spreading his fingers accordingly.

“Peace and long life.” he returned before making his exit. His return in two days time would give him a better idea of the rate of progression. But for now, like all couples in the end, this one would be on their own.

Syrok stalked back to his room like a le matya returning to its den. He could sense Holly inside, awaiting him, and there she was, spread out before him, tangled in the sheets in all her glory. The medical assessment had gone better than expected, and his mate was so passive and obedient. Shedding his robe and crawling on hand and knee across the mattress, he stalked his delectable prey, playfully pinning her beneath him, then wrapping himself around her, feeling the rumble of contentment in his chest as he was once again reunited with her.

Holly had been nervous about how the meeting would go, and was curious as to what the verdict was, for sure, but for now she simply basked in Syrok's happiness. If this was pon farr, she'd take it any day. Lovingly, her hands came up to caress up and down her lover's back, eliciting more of those delicious purrs. Her fingers ghosted over the chenesi in the lower back and she was surprised to notice for the first time that they had, indeed, changed in size and consistency from their normal state. She knew that they would continue to do so; she'd gotten her requisite lessons on the biology of the situation.

And from the response she was getting through their bond, she sensed their enhanced sensitivity right this moment, such that any attention she gave to them felt both exquisite but almost too much, just on the edge between discomfort and bliss. Ever so gently she continued to ghost over and around the swollen nodules, nails sometimes scraping delicately over the skin as Syrok's tension drained entirely from him. It was not a sexual reaction exactly, as his libido was out of whack as it stored up for the big event, but it was definitely a pleasurable sensation. He melted into a puddle where he lay and basked in Holly's attentions.

Holly knew as well from her lessons in biology that this area of the lower back would become a point of great tension and even pain as the affliction progressed. That massage could both alleviate discomfort, and in these early stages, could help to gently advance the physiological processes involved. It was explained to her and encouraged, though she was still slightly skeptical about it. After all, a human male's testes were a point of great delicacy and tenderness, and she was concerned about the assurances that during the event of pon farr itself, the chenesi would be swollen large, and hard as rocks, that digging fingers in quite hard and violently was expected, no,
desired, in order to effect release and relief in her mate. She had to remind herself sternly that her mate was Vulcan, not human, and his needs were uniquely his own -- not what she'd grown up accustomed to.

Yet he seemed so sensitive and tender now, even as he relaxed into her, chest rumbling and head drooping against her neck. Ever so gently and hesitantly, she pressed more firmly with her fingers to gauge the reaction, and was surprised when Syrok let out a moan of relief and comfort at the new, more intense sensation. Well, that was a good sign. Emboldened, she pressed more firmly as her hands continued to move, now in a gentle massage, and was utterly content when her mate simply accepted the touch and blissed out for the time being. He was lethargic and loathe to move, and his disordered thoughts were distant and did not disturb him here in their warm and perfect nest. She had no idea how much time passed in this manner before she too, lulled by their bond, drifted into slumber with her mate.

Holly awoke sometime later, overheated, sweaty, and somewhat struggling to breathe with many pounds of heavy Vulcan lying atop her. She shifted and wriggled her way out from under him as he stirred to a languid wakefulness himself, a rumbling growl of disapproval issuing forth. Holly did her best to use the moment as a practice opportunity and projected as clearly as possible a desire for the toilet, for water, for food. She allowed herself to lay placidly, looking at her mate forlornly and projecting her need until she finally got a reluctant huff and a nudge of approval, at which point she scurried out of the bed, leaving Syrok behind to continue to rest.

It was strange seeing him this lethargic. Vulcans typically needed less rest than humans, but Holly knew that his body was both expending energy with all of the changes it was going through, as well as storing as many resources as possible for the big event. His appetite would dwindle and his metabolism would slow to a crawl as all available resources were stowed away, as if in hibernation. He would need them later. And were she Vulcan, her body would key into his hormonal shift and do something very similar. But she was not, and she knew she would have to find breaks in his frenzy to consume much needed nutrients. Seeing him sleeping so often like this made her imagine what it might be like very soon, and she had to fight very hard for control over her rising anxiety. It wouldn't do to stress herself out when Syrok already had so little control over his own emotions. She would have to be an anchor for the both of them. Suddenly, she was grateful for the months of intensive meditative practice she'd gone through. It would serve them well.

After the bathroom and in the kitchen, Holly puttered around and found herself something to eat, sensing no desire for food from her mate who continued to lounge in a sort of half slumber, thoughts drifting. She glanced at her black-screened PADD on the table where Syrok had left it and was sorely tempted to check it for messages, or really, to use it at all. She was bored, and she also wanted to know what Healer Sterran had determined during his visitation. Should she take further actions now? For that matter, had the Healer contacted anyone on Vulcan? He had their contact’s number as well, of course. And would he be returning? She sighed, knowing that she had to find a way to get the answers out of Syrok. If she touched the PADD, he'd know, and something even that small could spark a conflagration.

What was important now, was food, she determined. And it would become even more important in the coming days as Syrok continued to fall apart. In that spirit, she began cooking a large amount of a hearty vegetable stew that she could reheat easily for days if needed. Hopefully Syrok would relax long enough for her to finish the task, and then she'd have nutritious food that was more easily accessible for quite some time. She loaded it with beans for the protein, and tore in all the rest of their spinach as it would only wilt anyway. She was glad for having a number of ingredients to make the food stretch as she had no idea when a grocery trip would be in order. In a way, it
reminded her of growing up so far outside of a city. She could remember one of her foster families doing something very similar before a big storm would come, as it could down power lines and throw trees over the road. And so they’d cook something up ahead of time just in case, racing the clock as the storm clouds gathered. Holly's storm clouds gathered as well, down the hall.

It was the scent of the soup that finally drew Syrok out of the bedroom after all. Holly was a bit surprised to see that he still had an appetite, but was pleased about it. At least not everything was coming at them all at once. He ate with decent interest and in silence, still nude and groggy-looking, his hair sticking out every which way, and made all the more disheveled by the length he'd now grown it to, down to his shoulders. Holly couldn't help but smirk at him in amusement, her meticulous Vulcan looking like something the cat dragged in.

Syrok sent a vague grumpy note her direction and was about to stalk away when she boldly reached out to clasp his wrist. For a split second there was fire in his eyes as he registered the action but a second later he saw her clearly projected intent and warm thoughts, and allowed himself to be led to their ratty old couch as Holly fetched his brush and seated herself comfortably behind him. He allowed his head to droop comfortably as his mate softly carded the brush through his long hair and against his scalp, and it was warm and comfortable to be groomed and fussed over. He felt exhauste today and his back was hurting him again, and all he wanted was this, to sit in Holly's arms and be taken care of.

When Holly had well finished and went to set the brush aside, Syrok gave an uncharacteristic whine of pure neediness, and it melted her heart. “What do you need, sweetheart?” she asked gently, pressing a kiss to the back of his neck where she'd pushed the hair aside. “Hm?” she prompted again. But he wasn't speaking, and his thoughts weren't coherent. He simply just did not wish to be alone. And while the sentiment was endearing and her heart went out to him, she was painfully bored after hours of this sort of thing all day. She'd done almost nothing with her time other than a bit of cooking. She thought about coaxing him to allow for a movie, but she didn't think he had the attention span to handle it and she didn't want to bring up the computer argument again after they'd reached such a pleasant equilibrium.

So she led him to the bedroom where he was happy to follow, seeming to prefer their bed above all other locations of late, and she settled him comfortably against her as she took up a book and began to softly read to him. It wasn't the most entertaining way to pass the time, certainly, but it gave her mind something to do, and allowed Syrok to be close and to drift on the sound of her voice. She could tell he wasn't really listening, but was content with her idea of a compromise for the evening. And after a time, the activity made her sleepy as well, and they proceeded to the bathroom to finish their nightly rituals.

Holly skipped the shower this time around and was content to simply brush her teeth, but Syrok was not content to let her use her strange smelling paste, apparently, and in irritation demanded through a stern look and a mental prod that she use the same tooth powder to which he was accustomed instead. She was not pleased with the development and had to sigh through new irritation of her own. After they'd just spent such a nice time together cuddling, she had to use that stuff? She'd tried it once already, and it was bitter and awkward to use as far as she was concerned, and left a weird aftertaste in her mouth.

But she told herself again that it wasn't the biggest deal in the world, and so she set aside her feelings about it and simply did what she had to do before finally retiring to bed, a long day complete. Syrok curled around her possessively, and she sunk contentedly into his hazy thoughts drifting across their bond and fell to sleep.
Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

My wonderful partner (who knows computers) fixed nearly everything today. :) Things are looking up! Oh, and also here is some fanfic.

Syrok woke disoriented and feeling oddly disconnected from his body. He was drifting, drifting without context, and it made him afraid. The fear ripped through him like the claws of a le matya and he reached out blindly to find some anchor, something to make sense of his surroundings. A small squeak met his ears as he found the warm flesh of something, someone he should know. Holly! It was Holly, his mate. Yes, this could be his anchor. The thoughts in his own mind refused to coalesce and through their hazy bond he was aware only of Holly's light, her existence within him, and he drew to it like a moth to a flame. The world was fracturing out of control, but at least he was not alone.

His back hurt him terribly, he realized. And his skin felt oddly... tight. He shivered and decided he was also chilled. Holly was warm, but the air was somehow chilled. The surface beneath him was soft and smelled of Holly and of home, and that was good, it was something safe, something he could trust in. Fractionally, his anxiety eased down as he cataloged these markers of safety amid the chaos.

The warm body in his arm twitched with discomfort from him holding it too tightly, but he didn't understand. He needed this, and this was leaving him. With a desperate, feral growl he grabbed it all the more tightly, wrapping arms and legs, hands and fingers about it. No! It would not leave him, would not be taken. Why could he not think? Why was it cold? And why did his back hurt him? A sob of frustration welled up inside him and what escaped was a sad, keening sound of a wounded animal. He realized he was not breathing properly, too quickly due to his anxiety, and he fought to calm his breaths.

Holly fought to get him to calm his breaths, guiding him, shushing him, talking gently and bearing the awkward, frantic clutching of her small frame that might even leave bruises in places. He followed the sweet sussurations of her voice though not the words she said, and as the minutes dragged on he found himself breathing more steadily at her guidance. There was a rhythm he could follow, a careful rhythm she provided to him, and when the breathing was controlled he found small increments of the rest falling into place.

He blinked open his eyes slowly, sleepily, and saw a blurry world tinted gray. Holly looked back at him and jumped a little, startled to see for the first time that his second eyelids had fallen, a membrane that would protect him from sandstorms and harsh light, she understood, but which she'd never actually seen before. Another blink, and just as quickly as they’d come, they were gone, Syrok glancing placidly around the room.

Holly lay on her back and Syrok mostly on his stomach, but partially on his side such that he could wrap himself around her fiercely. As his iron grip began to ease, Holly finally was able to push herself up to a sitting position. So, this was the way this day was going to go. She gave him a final reassurance as she quickly slipped from the bed before he could stop her and felt intense panic
slam through their bond as he keened again and reached out for her, struggling to sit himself up and wincing. Yes, she knew, she'd gotten the message, his back hurt him. And he was cold, which was why she'd gotten herself up and had now moved to the thermostat, kicking the heat up a notch, though she was plenty warm already. Well, it would give her time to acclimatize herself for the coming trip to Vulcan.

She debated briefly getting him some tea, but doubted he'd drink it, and also doubted he'd be able to handle that much time apart from her, so she padded back across the room and sat herself atop him, sitting on his buttocks and straddling him comfortably as her hands came up to gently rub across his aching back, beginning at his shoulders and moving down to the real source of the pain, the chenesi.

Syrok flinched at the sudden attention, elated to have his mate back with him, grateful for her warmth, but uncertain whether the touch was welcome on his overly sensitive flesh. A shudder wracked his frame as she grazed over the swelling glands near the base of his spine and he didn't know whether to force her to stop or to continue. But Holly had had ample instruction in Syrok's physiology from Healer Sterran beforehand and simply pressed more firmly on her next stroke, and so on, and soon Syrok's indecision turned into him melting into a puddle on the bed just as the day before.

And though his flesh was usually cooler than her own and the source of constant cold feet touching her skin in the night, now he felt fairly warm to her touch, and she knew he'd only grow much, much warmer as the fever slowly overtook him in the coming days. Her nimble fingers pushed and pulled, allowing his skin to expand and toughen as Syrok's body prepared ridiculous amounts of ejaculate for the coming time of mating. It would be a slow and painful process, occurring over many days, because when one's species only mated in one prolonged spectacular event every several years, it necessarily had to be a big event. Were she Vulcan, Holly's body, too, would be undergoing all sorts of changes at this time, but she was not, and so she'd been spared much of that discussion, as it logically did not pertain to her.

As she finished, she knew her pitiful mate still ached, but it was manageable now, and she pulled the covers up around him as she left him to use the restroom and prepare some tea for the both of them, and breakfast for herself. She could tell already he wouldn't eat, and hoped she could at least coax him to drink, if for no other reason than the hot liquid would warm him.

Unfortunately for Holly, she'd overestimated the equilibrium of Syrok's mind, and was bowled over by a wave of panic just as she'd filled the teapot, not even having begun making the tea let alone having eaten anything. She gasped aloud and struggled to hold herself upright against the counter, her vision even going spotty with the force of Syrok's mind within hers. She'd never felt such disorienting mental control, and for a moment she couldn't fully separate his emotions from her own, simply feeling panicked and confused in the kitchen, and a desperate need to find her mate. She staggered back toward the bedroom as she'd heard a crash and barely registered the overturned bedside table, Syrok's frantic eyes searching uncomprehendingly as he supported himself against a wall, again wracked with pain in his back, again feeling cold now that he'd lost his blankets, and his breathing was not helping him to focus whatsoever.

His eyes landed on Holly and with great determination he caught her wrist and pulled her to him, pulled them both to the safety of the bed where the world was not heaving and spinning and senseless. The place of softness and safety and warmth and familiar scents. There he held her close again and keened desperately, shivering either with cold or nerves and struggling to calm down. Holly gripped him with equal desperation, seeking an anchor in the chaos, and only after a time noticing Syrok's gentle stroking of her hair, holding her tenderly and attempting to soothe them both with the action.
Gradually, Holly's mind cleared and she became aware once more of her own self, Syrok's disordered but separate thoughts, the room around them. Her stomach gave a distinct growl and she really did need to get something to eat. She started to really worry about what it would be like during the actual event if it was so hard to get a meal already. At any rate, she staunchly made a second attempt at retrieving food, this time wrapping Syrok in one of their blankets and coaxing him along to join her in the kitchen. He was reluctant to leave but eventually came around, following behind Holly meek as a kitten, and sat himself down in the corner of the kitchen on the floor, blanket wrapped tightly about himself and knees pulled in to his chest as he watched her move about, feeding herself and finally making the tea. As expected, he didn't drink, but she got him to hold the mug properly and she supposed at least that was something.

After breakfast, she let the dishes sit, and focused her attention on her mate who was still looking rather lost and pathetic on the floor. The cold mug of tea had been abandoned and his vision alternated between lost and distant, and sharply focused on her. Thus far, Syrok hadn't made any attempts at all toward verbal communication, and it concerned her. She went over the check list again and still wasn't sure where she came out, and again wished desperately she knew what Sterran's final analysis had been the day before. She should have pressed Syrok when she'd had the chance, she realized, because now there was no getting anything meaningful out of him.

Her eyes slid to her computer on the kitchen table and back to Syrok, who didn't seem to register much at all, and she made her decision, boldly opening her PADD and turning the screen on, setting to her emails immediately, her eyes continually flicking to her mate to see whether he'd remember his prior ban on the device or not. So far, so good, and she saw Sterran's email right away. Quickly she scanned through the pertinent information, glad that while Vulcans could be wordy, they at least cut to the chase. That Syrok's pheremonal levels were still relatively low was certainly a surprise, considering how much he seemed to have fallen apart, but it was reassuring at least to know she didn't need to take any immediate actions. And Sterran would be back again tomorrow, which filled her with immense relief.

Jotting down what she could bring to mind as pertinent, she fired him a quick message, and grabbing both of their computers she led Syrok back to their bed to his palpable relief. Carefully she righted the bedside table, darted to the bathroom as quickly as possible to use the facilities one more time while she had the chance and to get some water, and then snuggled in comfortably with a concerned mate who didn't at all appreciate her hurried departure, but who was glad to have her back.

Carefully, Holly set Syrok up with his own computer as Holly sat with hers and put on a video to occupy her mind for the day. It would be a long and grueling day if she didn't have some distraction. Lying in bed and cuddling might suit Syrok well enough right now but he seemed to be higher than a kite as his hormones rocketed out of control. At least he didn't seem to remember his earlier ban, and he settled in comfortably beside her, fussing with his PADD as well. For now, Holly was satisfied.

It was an hour into her movie when she heard a furious click-clacking of Syrok's keyboard and she glanced over with a brow raised to see what it was he was up to. He had a document open and was writing... something... frantically, as if on the cusp of some great inspiration. He'd already written a considerable amount before Holly had finally turned her attention to him to see what he could possibly be doing. The words were in Vulkansu she realized, and so she had to switch modes to decipher it, but even once she had, it didn't make any sense. Utter nonsense, she was pretty certain, though he seemed hell-bent on completing it. She considered for a moment disabling his web connection so that he couldn't actually send it to anyone and humiliate himself, but she realized
with disappointment that he had about ten tabs open, ranging from gespar juice to string theory. She sighed and turned her attention back to her video. Syrok's planet had dealt with this before, and would continue to do so into the future. If he sent this gibberish off to someone who mattered, he could dig his own self out of that hole.


“Mm?” she questioned, turning her attention to him fully, surprised he'd spoken at all.

“It is almost noon.” He lectured her in Vulcan. “And yet you have not begun cooking.” He gestured his hand around to encompass the room. “Our apartment is a mess, and I am aware of the dishes in the sink. You have not bathed and here you sit, watching entertainment rather than attending to your studies, with, I might add, a device I’d not given you permission to use.”

Holly's eyes widened with his sudden and sharp lucidity. She swallowed and shut off the device, placing it neatly on the bedside table.

“Trensu, I was only trying to spend time with you, as you seemed to have indicated --” she began in a gentle, hesitant tone.

“Enough!” he snapped sharply. “I have no interest in your excuses. I will not have my mate lazing about and using my affliction as some excuse. Is this what I am to expect from you when I am not in my right mind?” he questioned darkly. “That you will take advantage of the rules I set forth?” he gestured at the PADD. “And what of when Healer Sterran makes his appearance tomorrow? Should he be led to believe that I have an unacceptable bondmate who would neglect her appearance, the tending of the house, the tending of her bondmate in his Time?” Syrok seemed to be working himself up to a fury.

“R-rai.” she stammered, no, already scrambling out of the bed and grabbing their pajamas from where they laid on the floor, folding them neatly as was Syrok's preference and setting them atop the dresser.

“You believe you can atone for this simply by leaping into action at this time?” he questioned in an incredulous tone.

She was dealing with a crazy person. A full on crazy person. But of course, she'd known that was coming. If only there was a gentle way to remind him that he was crazy right now, but no. Holly shuddered with a very real sense of foreboding coming over her. She shook her head negatively and waited passively for his judgment, her eyes lowered.

“Address these issues.” he instructed her. “Your personal appearance. The cleaning. Our lunch. After we have eaten and have had our tea, I will administer the obviously required physical discipline, after which point you may meditate on your transgressions for the following two point five hours, at which point I will make a new assessment as to your attitude.”

Physical discipline? Well, it had been a while since they'd played that game, and the idea would usually get Holly a bit hot, but she knew that this time, it was no game. This was pre-reform Vulcan speaking, and she knew by heart what had been for centuries proper modes to control one's spouse, such that one might assume a proper attitude. She'd covered this, had known it was a possibility, but the reality of it was both chilling and hurtful. She hadn't expected to feel such real, visceral guilt about a transgression she hadn't even really known she'd been committing. But she felt his very real disapproval, and wanted nothing more than to be pleasing to him, to be his
cherished pi'veh.

And while she felt a sort of vindication in having left the house as it was, she had used her PADD against his express wishes, out of a sense of boredom in these past hours. She could forgive herself easily for checking messages from their Healer, but she kicked herself for not simply acquiring a book or meditating, as Vulcans were so fond of suggesting.

"Ha, Osu." she murmured affirmatively and moved off to address his concerns, working efficiently but carefully, having learned an eye for detail.

Lunch was painfully awkward for her. The meal, as per Vulcan custom, was eaten entirely in silence, and with this 'punishment' looming over her. She almost had lost her appetite, but if Syrok was going to actually eat this time, she certainly was too, and a proper Vulcan meal was neither rushed nor drawn out unnecessarily. She ate with patient rhythm and focused her thoughts on enjoying every bite, as she'd been instructed so many months ago, as she'd tried to practice, and embrace the meditation of it.

When the food was finished, they had their tea. And she knew, without a precise exchange of thoughts, but with exchange enough, that when he'd said tea, he'd meant the full ceremony at this time. It was a long and meticulous process, and took all of her attention to perform it. Adding the tea just so, stirring just so. For a people who were usually so blunt and straight-forward, they had a penchant for complex rites and rituals. It almost fully occupied her mind to attend to it properly, and she was grateful in a detached sort of way for the distraction it provided. For the comfort of the routine.

By the time they'd actually finished their tea, Holly's nerves had mostly settled, and she had resigned herself to whatever would come. And Syrok had never punished her before; their games had always been more of sensation than pain, so she didn't really think any harm would come of this experience.

It was the bed where the event was to take place. Syrok sat with Holly draped over his knees, which was curious. He'd never used his hands before in their games, due to their sensitivity, but how he stroked her bare bottom gently and had no other tools at hand, so apparently he would make an exception today. "Know that your pain is my pain, and my discipline is yours. I perform this task to guide you pi'veh so that you do not stray." he intoned with a sense of ritual about it. Holly wondered whether perhaps there was -- so much of Syrok's culture was steeped in mystery. But she did not have long to ponder, as just then a sharp smack descended on her upturned cheeks. She gasped aloud at the shock of it, no warm up, and certainly not kind to Syrok's own flesh. She felt the echo of his pain within her, and felt he felt her own as well. A steady rain of blows fell upon her and she had no time to process it, no time to catch her breath or get her bearings. These swats were made to induce pain, not arousal or play or simple routine, and driving this all was an iron clad sense of necessity, that this pain shared between them now would drive them together toward a proper manner of being, mutual respect and good behavior.

Holly sobbed out desperately, and was crying in earnest in short time. But her tears did not stop the lesson. This was not about eliciting an emotional response. To cry or not to cry, to call out or remain silent, that was her choice to make and he did not judge her for it. Her tears were acceptable, but they were not necessary. Syrok had some other metric to judge when he felt the lesson was complete. And after a time, Holly couldn't distinguish whether she cried for the pain of it or in simple remorse for being less than perfect, less than the mate Syrok deserved in his Time, and for always. She would do better for him. She would do better.
Syrok's heart ached for the pain he caused his mate. He felt the pain himself in his sensitive palms and fingers, he felt her pain redoubled through their bond and did nothing to shield himself from it. Their pain was one pain, both physical and emotional. He was gratified when he sensed the shift in Holly's thinking; her decision to improve was an important one. But his momentary lucidity drove him on, to continue this lesson for all he was worth, because he knew that his mind would leave him again, and he needed to impress upon her the importance of her role in this, the importance not to slip and let things fall apart, the importance not to disobey him lest something unforgivable occur. She needed to remember this lesson for all times, for both their sakes.

Her bottom was vibrant red when it ended, and Syrok's hand tingled and was flushed with green. Her sobbing had settled down in the end as she'd simply endured, and there was a peace that came between them in that time, an acceptance of this moment and of shared regard. When he finished, he helped her sit up as she winced, and he handed her the tissues and helped her clean herself up a bit and regulate her breathing as she stuttered with her dying sobs. Gently, he carded his hand through her hair and let her simply be next to him in the quiet room. Nothing needed to be said between them now.

And when she'd calmed, he simply looked at her, and turned his gaze to the woven meditation mat in the corner, a plain corner with the small shrine and nothing to distract her attentions as she would meditate as he'd instructed for the next two and a half hours. Sullenly, she padded over to the mat and winced again as she sat on the rough surface. Her tender flesh was bare and the mat was not known for its softness. The floor beneath it, solid wood. And while her bottom was brightly reddened at present, Syrok knew it would obtain some light bruising in the days to come. Nothing requiring medical attention, nothing debilitating, but enough that she'd remember this time. Enough to hopefully center her thinking.

It was not necessary, and he thought it was not appropriate, that he should stay for this. Holly's meditation would be her own. And so he left her there in the dimly lit room, free of distractions, as he continued his own work on the couch in their living area. He would return when it was time.

Holly wasn't sure what to think about for a time as she sat alone. For the first while, she simply sat in a haze of discomfort, her mind disordered, her emotions poignant and conflicted. But after a time, she assumed the meditative techniques she'd practiced so many years, and the newer, deeper lessons she'd worked on for so long with Syrok. She found an equilibrium there in the silence. And oddly enough, she found a great comfort at what had just occurred. When she'd been left alone to handle the situation, seemingly on her own, she'd been quite overwhelmed with the burden, with the responsibility. It simply wasn't the way things were between them. It had felt daunting, a heavy load to bear.

But she wasn't alone in this. She'd been instructed by both others and by Syrok himself for months now, and she had a framework with which to deal with this crisis. And some of it relied on trusting in her mate, even with -- no, especially with the affliction he was undergoing. She'd known this but it hadn't really clicked until now. Her loyalty had to be unflinching and all consuming. Where Syrok led, she would unfailingly follow, even into the madness that was to come. This was the Vulcan way. This was the path she'd chosen.

Two and a half hours was a long time for Holly to sit. To sit at all, with no distractions. To sit in silence. To sit in discomfort. And yet she knew that by Vulcan standards a two and a half hour stint in meditation was a minimum daily occurrence, and that he'd gone easy on her with this 'discipline', because she was human. And she was grateful for at least that. But it was with this swath of time before her with nothing else to do that she realized she could do this. If Syrok wanted to do nothing
for a full day, for several full days, but lay in bed with no distractions, she could do so, and would do so when required. It had simply been some time since she'd last had such intensive discipline of the mind -- with with her studies and the rushing of day to day, she'd forgotten about this, that she had this capability in her. And as much as she'd hated some of those early days of meditation, post-bond, she was now grateful for the rigorous demands Syrok had put upon her.

So when he finally entered the room, not two and a half, but a full three hours later, she simply blinked up at him from where she sat, and waited for his pronouncement.

“*My back is hurting.*” he told her quietly. “*Attend me.*” Tiredly, he dragged himself onto the bed on his front, both sighing and wincing as it twinged again.

The *chenesi*, every time Holly saw them, were more swollen, but not as full as she'd been told they'd become. The skin around them slightly tougher instead of soft and yielding as they normally would be, and now for the first time she noticed a faint green blush across them, which she knew would be an angry, deep, forest green in the end. Not there yet. And not a comfortable transformation for her mate to undergo.

As she had before, so again her touch was gentle at first, and more firm in the end, more firm this time than ever before as her fingers dug in at the seeming knots and seemed to bring her mate relief; even as he shuddered with discomfort he urged her to do it again. And when she finished, she peppered his back with tender kisses, then moved on to press kisses to every inch of his right hand which he'd used upon her, soothing the hurt they'd both had to endure.

And when she'd finished in that as well, he turned her to lay on her stomach now, and inspected the tender flesh that had had time to begin to bruise lightly, exacerbated somewhat by the fibers of the rough mat. As his hands ghosted over his markings he felt her twinge slightly but lay passively and a pleased smile spread on his face, emotional control forgotten. He was pleased to see his marks on her flesh, and pleased that the echo of the experience would continue to resound between them. Finger kisses here, instead of human ones, which soothed and provoked in equal measure, but all the time he sent her love.

His back was aching still, though Holly had only just finished, and he felt himself shiver a bit, though he knew the heat was already turned all the way up -- he'd checked earlier. He knew, therefore, it must be the fever coming, and that with another bout of shivering he was due to probably lose lucidity again. And with his mate no longer deep in meditation, his anchor was adrift. He considered briefly ordering her back to the mat once more, but knew that it was futile to battle that which was inevitable. The madness would come for him. That much was certain.

And so he pulled the covers over himself, leaving his sweating mate bare, and snuggled himself against her as he hoped to lose himself in sleep. It was only four in the evening, not even yet time for the evening meal, but he did not wish to be conscious when miserable, nor when he would not be himself. And he was so tired, he realized now. So, so exhausted as his body inched through these demanding changes increment by increment. And Holly, for her part, was emotionally exhausted from the ordeal she'd gone through, and more than happy to lie on her side to rest her sore bottom for now. Together they drifted into an uneasy sleep.

When Holly awoke, her tummy was growling. She nudged Syrok mentally and physically to rouse him enough to indicate a need for food, not daring to leave the bed without his permission, but not wanting to forgo her supper, nor their routine, after the thorough chastisement earlier that day. At length, she got a foggy acknowledgment and she quickly left the bed to prepare food for them and do the dishes that were still left from lunch and tea, needing for both their sakes to stay on top of these every day chores.
When food was ready, Syrok didn't eat, but he did stalk out to the kitchen to sit heavily upon the chair, almost sleeping where he sat. But Holly was content to adhere to their routine as much as possible, and took her time eating, though the hard wood smarted on her sore flesh, and she took care to clean the dishes and kitchen thoroughly after the meal was complete.

When Syrok indicated a desire to retire to the bedroom yet again, Holly suggested that she have her routine evening shower, and was surprised when he consented not only for her to go, but to join her in the hot spray, hoping it would relieve some of the tension in his back. It was unusual that Syrok would attempt to tolerate water for any reason, but Holly took advantage of the situation, cranked the heat of the water up to as high as she'd come to be able to tolerate it, and stroked his sore muscles as he leaned against the shower wall, letting the water pelt down upon him. Though it wasn't particularly hot to him, the rhythm was pleasing. And though the damp air was irritating to breathe, the company of his mate was welcome.

But even Earth's most benign of soaps, he'd learned, had an irritating, chemical scent to them. And even the oatmeal soap he'd permitted Holly in the end was displeasing to him in this moment. Just as he'd wanted her to cleanse herself earlier, now he found that state intolerable. And to Holly's utter shock as she was pinned to the wall and kissed and licked on her bite mark, she began to feel a second hot stream against her body. As she couldn't see it, she almost didn't process what it was in her distraction. But when she realized, her mind stuttered to a halt. Syrok had pissed on her? What the actual fuck?!

“Syrok!” she squealed, half chastising and half laughing with incredulity. “This is not... this isn't sanitary.” she argued, and tried to push him away from her but he was an immovable mass. Holly was against the wall and pinned by his frame as he continued to lick gently at the still tender bite mark he'd left on her before, her sore ass was pressing against the tile wall, and the spray was mostly falling on Syrok's lower back, where he wanted it. He wasn't planning on moving anywhere, and he certainly was disinclined cease marking his mate with his scent. Holly could tell through their mental link that her hastily uttered words in Standard were lost to him in the moment, and she huffed and repeated herself in Vulcan in frustration.

“It is sterile.” he smiled wryly against her skin. And besides, due to the awkward angle it had only hit a bit of her hip and her legs and feet. It wasn't as if she were drenched in urine, and the shower spray had washed most of it away. She was clean, as far as he was concerned. He did not want her, for example, dripping his piss all over their bed. But his scent was sure to remain in her skin for days, as far as his people were concerned. And this was more than acceptable -- it was desirable. He was proud to call her his, to display his Claim so openly.

Holly caught the gist of his thoughts and simply huffed in frustration, trying to angle herself to get more of the shower spray on her. She'd never feel clean again, she felt certain. She longed to reach out and use the soap, but Syrok had already forbidden it this time around, and so she acquiesced and submissively let the issue drop. This simple mental capitulation was enough to earn her a pleased rumble and she was happy she'd given in when Syrok left a shower of all things in a pleasant mood. They dried efficiently, teeth were hastily brushed, the toilet used, and Holly was eager to crawl into their soft nest again after the relaxing heat and steam of the shower. Not to mention she had no desire to sit right about now. She’d rather lie down.

She laid down facing him for a time as his lids dropped and his breathing evened, and she let her fingers comb through his hair, pushing it away from his sleeping face. He was so vulnerable like this, not only in his sleep, but also in general at this time -- his body and mind failing him, his skin fever hot and slightly flushed. Someone with a less discerning eye might miss it, but she saw the subtle green cast to it because she knew him so well.
In the quietude of the evening she reviewed the list of milestones in her mind once more, and decided, with a sense of calm she hadn't expected, that they'd met all of them now. Perhaps not as violently as was possible, but they'd come to pass in some manner or other, which meant it was soon time for them to make their journey. It had all happened so much faster than she'd expected, and sooner than she'd scheduled ahead on a calendar. But biology was like that. It was unique to each individual, and didn't adhere to a strict schedule for convenience. All that was needed was Sterran's sanction which would hopefully come tomorrow, and then the transport would be arranged, and goodness, the bonding ceremony, and then the *pon farr* itself. A thrill of anxiety threatened at the thought of it and Holly quelled it before it could overtake her, calming her breathing and focusing on the present.

Syrok reached out in his sleep, grasping for her, so she turned onto her other side and snuggled up against him as his arm came around her waist and he settled in with a relieved sigh. It was very early to retire to bed, but she had a suspicion that she'd soon need her energy.
When the new day began, Holly awoke to Syrok pacing the apartment like a *le matya*, on edge but with no outlet for his tension. He could not concentrate enough to work on anything, and he could not settle enough to be content sitting quietly or in meditation. He had to *move*. And he simultaneously was lucid but could not focus his mind. It was maddening.

Holly finished preparing herself for the day calmly, and made herself some breakfast which she offered to Syrok, knowing that he'd refuse. He was neither hungry nor thirsty, and the thought of consuming anything made him feel slightly nauseous. His skin was overheated and his back hurt but he did not wish right now to be touched. And this day, knowing that the Healer would come but not knowing when, he'd donned his meditation robe and felt the usually silky fabric chafing his sensitized skin.

With eyes like brooding sandstorms, he snapped at Holly to dress herself as well in her own only robe. As much as he preferred her skin to be readily available to him, he was more concerned at present with keeping her decent in front of company. And as the tension rose around them in the apartment to the point where Holly thought Syrok might simply snap in two, she availed herself to the meditation mat once again, boring or no, sore ass or not, in hopes that if at least one of them were centered the effect could be shared between them. She wasn't certain how successful she'd be in meditation with Syrok pacing, but she had to at least make the attempt.

It was raining, she noticed as she sat and the sounds trickled in from outside. All of their blinds had remained closed these past days so that no one could observe their nudity, so she hadn't even paid any attention to the weather. But now she realized it was raining, coming down in buckets. It seemed somehow incongruous with the sweltering heat of their apartment. But why shouldn't it be raining? It was springtime in San Francisco. It was always raining here, and even more-so in the spring. The sound of the pattering drops on the windowpane centered her in a way as she struggled to reach any proper level of inward focus.

As they'd woke around 9, it was now a bit past 10 in the morning when Holly heard the soft buzzing at their apartment door, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Healer Sterran had come relatively early today. And as she hadn't been relegated to the bedroom explicitly this time, she rose and joined Syrok in the living room just as he'd opened the door to offer Sterran admittance. Sterran himself was quite dry, and laid a large umbrella against the wall just inside the door.

Syrok raised his hand in the *ta'al* and gave the traditional greeting, and Sterran immediately noticed the slight green tinge to the palm, as if it were slightly bruised, and made his own guesses as to why that might be when a male Vulcan was in his Time. His gaze flicked to Holly, pleased to see her up and presumably well enough, as he'd not been able to directly ascertain her well-being on his last visit. Well, at least the human seemed able to handle the situation thus far. Sterran himself generally attempted to withhold his judgment of the inter-species relationship, finding it irrelevant to his life or his job. It simply was what it was. But he'd been admittedly at least somewhat skeptical about the possibility of this human handling the situation with any amount of grace, however receptive she'd been to his physiology lessons. He admitted now that perhaps he'd underestimated her. Perhaps there was a reason the Vulcan had consented to bond with her in the first place.

"*Greetings, Sterran.*" Syrok stepped aside to allow entrance. So, he was speaking only in Vulcan now, Sterran noted. It was not unusual for those with a second language to revert to their mother tongue in their Time, if indeed they were capable of verbal communication at all. He easily
responded in kind.

“Syrok.” he inclined his head.

Holly came to stand beside her mate and without either of them looking directly at one another, their first fingers met in the customary linking of mates. They were in tune, and this spoke well of the health of their bond. Sterran otherwise ignored Holly and turned his attention toward the couch.

“Shall we begin?”

Syrok moved forward to seat himself as before and Holly at his far side, a safe distance from the Healer and within his reach. Sterran noticed the dark bruise on her neck, and the flinch she gave as she seated herself gingerly. He made a mental note of it without calling any attention to his observation.

The healer began as before. “When was your last meditation?” he inquired without looking up from his PADD.

“Not since the last time indicated.” he answered as neutrally as possible, but Holly could hear the tightness in his voice. Sterran likely could as well, but he was not concerned with how Syrok felt about his state of mind. What was, was. He hadn't meditated as of late. He made a notation of it and moved on.

“Have you noticed any problems with maintaining proper shielding?”

“Negative.” Syrok answered as he had before. He hadn't really been in a situation that had required shielding, so technically he hadn't noticed any problems with his ability to shield, or not shield. However, while he'd been sufficiently self contained Sterran's last visit, Sterran was able to catch small flickers of emotion from the Vulcan sitting beside him when he lowered his own shields, and they weren't even touching. It was clear to Sterran that Syrok's shielding had suffered. He made his notation.

“When was your last meal and what did it consist of?”

Syrok searched his mind. Answering was much more difficult than it should have been, the days blurring together. And for a moment, he wasn't entirely certain, and for a moment, he began to panic, until he felt Holly's mind trickling in to his own thoughts, nudging him toward the correct memory. Relief flooded through him as he answered. “Yesterday I consumed a midday meal of vegetarian stew, a Terran creation.”

He was honestly a bit surprised that Syrok was still eating if his shields were failing. “And how would you describe your focus as of late?”

“Inadequate.” he said simply, and did not expound. It was not lost on Sterran that two days ago, Syrok had described his focus as “adequate”, even with the obvious problems.

“Any changes in body temperature, or preferential room temperature? Fever, chills, sweating?”

“Fever and chills, no sweating. As you have observed, the room is at its maximum setting, quite warm by Terran standards.”

And indeed it was much warmer than Sterran was accustomed to in this cool, wet city of San Francisco. Not obscene by the standards of his home world, but likely not comfortable for Holly, though she bore it well, only sweating slightly. It was an interesting scent, this human sweat, but even it could not mask the scent of Syrok's waste upon her, lingering subtly around her if one was observant, which Sterran was paid to be. And while it was certainly an uncouth practice in polite
society, he'd seen much worse behavior from men in their Time and he paid it no particular mind. After all, he'd already established 'possessiveness' was present during his last visit.

“*And have you had any difficulties with your mate?”*

“*Affirmative.*” Syrok answered easily this time. He'd been expecting the question the second time around, and he most certainly had had to correct Holly, perhaps as Sterran had predicted all along. The human in question flushed bright pink in what Sterran understood to be the human expression of embarrassment or shame.

“*Is this the cause of the bruising upon your palm?”* Sterran asked without inflection, as if the answer were simply an answer and said nothing more or less about the situation.

“*Affirmative.*”

“*And your mate is well physically?*”

“*She is undamaged.*”

“*Has the situation been corrected?*”

“*Thus far, yes.*”

Holly paid careful attention to the quick exchange of information, narrowing her eyes slightly. While Syrok might be half out of his mind at present, she was quick enough to realize the circuitous route Sterran was taking to establish her well being and the state of Syrok's mind, and she had to admit it was quite clever, and also felt a bit of gratitude that he'd ask after her health in a way that wouldn't simply provoke Syrok.

“*And when was your last sexual activity?*” he probed this time for the first. His checklist was rapidly filling, and he could guess at the answers, but had to be certain.

Syrok's brow furrowed, and he found that he... he couldn't remember. The last meal he'd taken had been difficult to recall but the last sexual activity? His mind raced and he felt panic creeping in, and this time he felt only static from Holly as she obviously could not recall the exact date either. “*It has been some time.*” he said non-specifically, hating himself for the vague answer, chastising himself inwardly. He closed his eyes and opened them again in a slow blink, in an attempt to reign his emotions back under control.

Sterran turned his attention to Holly. “*And how would you characterize the level of affection between you?*”

Holly smiled with genuine pleasure as she drank in the sight of her mate. “*Above average.*” she said, and Syrok could feel that she was pleased with this development. He wasn't certain, himself, whether he'd been more affectionate with her or not. He could recall no specific decision to do so, but he supposed that was why the Healer had quizzed Holly instead of himself. Apparently, his affection toward her had been above average, and she was pleased. He felt himself fill with a warmth and resisted the urge to touch her now.

Sterran saw Syrok's focus shift to Holly and linger there, much longer than was appropriate. It said enough on its own, and he'd completed his list.

“*Disrobe and turn.*” he instructed in polite, detached tones, as his inspection of the *chenesi* repeated as before. This time when Sterran's fingers ghosted over the swollen flesh, Syrok actually released a small audible grunt of discomfort. His control most certainly was slipping. The *chenesi*
were not nearly finished with their transformation. They had changed much, but there was certainly
more to go, and it would not be pleasant for Syrok, as it was not a pleasant experience for any male.

As Syrok righted his robe, Sterran pulled out his scanner and took a final reading of the pheremonal
levels in the air about him, and was satisfied with the number he received.

“*It is my judgment that at this time you should proceed to your location on Vulcan.*” he intoned
coolly, and Holly felt nerves crawling up her skin, leaving gooseflesh as she tried to quell her
anxiety. It was happening.

“*Shall we arrange for transportation, then?*” she queried out of turn, to Syrok's warning look and
energy, but she kept her eyes focused on Sterran, needing to know what to do, needing to know
whether this was her responsibility to handle.

“*Negative. I am doing so right now.*” he said, fingers flicking over the screen of his computer as he
sent off a quick message to their Vulcan contact, and then checked the times of the soonest
departures. “*I will have a cab collect you in approximately five standard minutes. A transport is
leaving in the next fourteen minutes.*”

Holly's mind froze. Five minutes? They had five minutes before they left to Vulcan? Her heart
sped in her chest.

“*Very well.***” Syrok said stoically, though his body radiated with tension, with a desire to not leave
his nest. Every ounce of him wished nothing more than to go back to the bed where it was warm
and soft and safe, to lie with his mate and allow her to ease his discomfort. The last thing he
wanted was interplanetary travel at this time, to a room that would not smell like them, would not
be as familiar, even if it was his childhood home. It would simply not be the same. He closed his
eyes again in attempt to quell his nerves.

Sterran watched on, prepared to nerve pinch the Vulcan if necessary in order to get him on his
way.

“*Trensu,*” Holly spoke, barely above a whisper, her eyes cast demurely to the floor. “*Shall I ready
our belongings?***” She made no indication she had any wish to remove herself from the couch,
 Sterran noted with interest, simply waited patiently, breathing much more evenly than her mate.

At long last, Syrok spoke. “*Go.***”

And with that, the human girl was off, grabbing the pre-prepared bags that held most of their
needed items, stowing a few toiletries in there as well. She also gathered their meditation mat,
some of their lightly used clothes, and the fitted sheet to their mattress which carried their scent and
folded all these things neatly into their meager traveling cases.

From where Sterran sat, he could hear the bustle but not see what was being done, and could see
that Syrok was not intending on helping nor moving from this spot until strictly required to. He was
barely keeping himself from falling apart altogether, and Sterran had to admit that the girl had
handled the situation admirably thus far. It was delicate work to interact with one in *pon farr*,
frayed nerves and hormones clouding ones judgment into a cocktail of aggression and primal fear
for one's mate. But she'd managed to proceed with their plan so far without Sterran having to
intervene.

Holly used the toilet and packed their PADDs and travel papers in her handbag, then moved about
the house turning off all lights and extraneous devices, as they'd be gone for quite some time. The
work didn't even entirely fill her available five minutes by the time she was finished, being careful
not to rush too quickly and throw Syrok into a real panic. She could feel the urge radiating from him, and did her best to center her own mind, to passively lend her support to him. She set the travel cases and her handbag beside the front door, and retrieved their shoes, putting on her own at first, then kneeling to do this task for her mate, whose hands were shaking slightly and who probably did not have the patience to handle laces at present.

With a tremendous amount of effort, Syrok rose himself from where he sat and easily lifted both cases, leaving Holly with just the purse, and as one the three of them moved toward the door, Sterran exiting first, then Syrok, then Holly obediently behind him, locking up.

“Live long and prosper.” Syrok intoned, lifting his hand and indicating that Sterran’s presence was no longer required.

“Peace and long life.” he returned ritualistically, and he meant every word of it. The situation was out of his hands now. Another healer would be available to them once they’d finally reached Vulcan.

When the taxi arrived, Holly was careful not to speak out of turn again. Syrok’s mind had been flickering toward the event ever since it had occurred only minutes ago, and she was determined that this transition go smoothly for them. She focused instead inward, and on the grounding pain in her bottom when she sat on the taxi’s cool plastic seat. There was a ringing silence at first as Syrok gathered his thoughts enough to name the transport terminal required, and nothing else. He could not recall Standard at this time, and he would not have Holly speaking for him. The taxi driver seemed indifferent to whatever weird tension lay between them, however, and was blessedly content to simply do his job, and not make small talk with a Vulcan or his human companion in the strange garb.

Syrok led them through the terminal, his focus hazy but his mind sharp enough to pick out the correct signage. For a moment, however, he had to moan in discomfort and close his eyes tightly against the sudden barrage of others’ thoughts and emotions, a constant background noise that pummeled his already destroyed shields. There was simply no way to shut it out, and it assaulted him. On Vulcan, even if his shields were down he’d never feel something like this, because his own people each shielded individually, and there was no ambient projection. But humans, being psi-null, often projected errant loud emotions or thoughts at random, directionlessly without knowledge of what they were doing at all, much as a deaf man could still scream, but even more insidious, because at least the deaf man could feel the vibration of his vocal chords.

To add to this mental assault was the physical one, as humans crowded and bustled around, unheeding of brushing arms and shoulders, each bump increasing his psychic awareness of that being for a split second, as well as jostling his sore, overstimulated frame. The handles of their suitcases were light in his hands, but his body felt oddly numb and detached in the growing panic around him. Holly waited patiently enough at his side, and he knew she was there, but he could not think like this, could not function like this.

Carefully, ever so carefully, Holly made her decision and stood before him for a moment, instead of behind, laying her hands to either side of his head against his psi points, pulling his forehead to rest upon hers. For a moment they simply stood there together as Syrok drank in the presence of his mate’s mind, her cool skin, her shared breath in his space. “Shall I guide us to our transport, Trensu?” she queried gently, and projected an unjudging sincerity as clearly as she could. She was equally willing to stand back and allow him to stand in the crowded hall indefinitely, should he order it. With a shuddering breath and a single nod, she dropped her hands from their inappropriate
display, and carefully took one case in her left hand, her right coming to link her first two fingers with his own, as she tugged him in the appropriate direction.

It was odd, how she did it. With only the slight guidance of nudging fingers and accompanying mental prod, Holly was able to lead him while remaining a half pace behind, so that for an unobservant bystander it would appear that Syrok was at all times in the lead, however hazy his own gaze. In the end, it felt to Syrok as if he'd just climbed a mountain by the time they'd arrived at the proper shuttle, and he couldn't make any sense at all of the words that were being spoken to him, asking for identification, giving instructions as to boarding and estimated departure and arrival times. It was a blur of nonsensical sounds, and he was ready to snap. The unfortunate human who was trying to interact with him could clearly see his tightly controlled tension and Holly did her best to apologize with her eyes as she handed over the necessary IDs and credit transfers to secure them passage.

Holly breathed a sigh of relief, however, when she saw that the small shuttle was filled entirely with Vulcans, other than herself. It made sense, she supposed that on a normal basis, almost no one would want to go to the hot planet aside from its natural inhabitants. Vulcan, after all, was not known for its tourist attractions. And once they'd entered the relative calm of the small shuttle, on a brief trip to the larger transport ship, with seats spaced sufficiently apart, and the psychic noise turned off, Syrok visibly sagged with relief. He took the seat nearest a window and tried not to look at or interact with anybody. And the passengers, Holly noted, gave them an extra wide berth. They must know, from scent indicators, psychic emanations, and Syrok's general behavior, what was happening here. And perhaps they were curious about the human girl who accompanied him, but no one said a word, of course. No one gave any obvious indication they'd noticed anything out of the ordinary at all.

The shuttle trip was over quickly and they were situated in their cabin, unpacking a bit to settle in in no time at all. It was her first time in space, but Holly hardly had time to notice it and really appreciate the experience. Not with Syrok's nerves making her own nerves so brittle. Not with the occasional low rumble of warning in his chest whenever someone would walk too close, his fingers clutching with desperate possession at her same first two. And though the whole process was smooth enough, the shuttle seats had been stiff and utilitarian, and Holly felt her mate's back screaming with silent discomfort, with nowhere for him to go and nothing for him to do to alleviate it. His skin was flushed hot while he shivered with the occasional chills in spite of the shuttle being kept above Terran norm in deference to the preference of the majority of passengers.

Here now in their cabin, Holly checked the itinerary for when she'd be served a meal, noting that no one would be by for another five hours. She sighed deeply, gazing at her mate who was curled up on his side on the small cot, clothes still on, lying on top of the blankets. She had a lot of time to kill. Resolutely she took off Syrok's shoes and her own and settled him under the covers, content to lie in his arms for now and nap until the next meal.
There were windows outside of their cabin, Holly knew. There were halls where even the ever-patient Vulcan passengers would stretch their legs, staunchly denying cabin fever and citing the logic in exercise or something to that effect. Holly could hear them easily enough from within her own cabin, the occasional footsteps echoing in the hall. She knew from a small pamphlet she'd been handed upon arrival, the layout of the small ship. There were even small communal areas where one could sit in a comfortable chair, at a small table, and converse with others, or simply look out the small windows to view the vastness of space. And she really would have liked to have seen it, but it wasn't in the cards.

For the next eight days, she was to be a prisoner of her room. Not only was Syrok incapable of relinquishing her, but she could tell by the skittish mannerisms of the food-trolly lady that the Vulcans piloting this thing knew very well what was going on in this room and wanted nothing to do with it. It was for safety, she knew, but it was irksome that they were basically being shunned. And for a regular Vulcan in his Time on a transport ship, he probably would have been left alone for the duration to spend his time in solitude (or the company of a mate). But in this case, Holly actually wanted and needed the provided meals, and the ship's workers were nervous enough about delivering them.

When the knock would come on their cabin door, Holly would have to extricate herself from Syrok's octopus arms and legs, which would provoke some very grumbly feelings from him and often something akin to a growl. If he were lucid, he'd relinquish her with regret. If he were in his ever increasingly frequent hazes, there would be a bit more of an ordeal as Holly struggled to project both passivity and need for nourishment to a mind that couldn't really grasp the problem. Eventually though, she'd manage to free herself long enough to answer the door.

There were normally a few options available for guests to choose from -- two to three meal options. But Holly's time was short and she'd simply needed the nutrients, so even that choice had been effectively taken from her. She worked out a deal with the attendant to simply select an option for her ahead of time so that there would be no wait, and Holly could simply secure the food and secure her door once more. The attendant was more than happy to accommodate, as she clearly had no wish to be around the ticking time bomb housed within.

Meal in hand, Holly would eat with a determination to simply get as much food in her as possible in the shortest amount of time. This would also be a good time to use the tiny attached bathroom and refill her water bottle, as Syrok didn't like to be alone in the bed for very long. Nevermind that the entire cabin, bathroom included, was the size of a large closet. If they weren't in physical contact, he wasn't content.

A large portion of the time, Syrok slept -- or at least drifted in a sort of restful daze. Holly was able to pass the time reading her PADD, grateful that she had a good bit of reading material stored there as it was nearly impossible to get any sort of connection with the outside world at such speeds. Her boredom was typically only broken by Syrok's pitiful need for back massages and cuddles.

The chenesi, Holly noted, were becoming more painful for him by the day. Now she sat astride him again as her fingers dug expertly into his sore frame, trying to relieve some of the unrelenting pressure. They were an angry green, and had grown tough and large. She almost felt guilty digging her thumbs into the distressed flesh there, her instincts wanting to soothe with gentle kisses instead, but the grateful echo through their bondspace told her that he was desperate for the deeper
massage, that it *did* give him some sort of relief, as much as could be had.

The *chenesi* weren't the only physiological change anymore either. Syrok was still more affectionate than sexual in their interactions, and his penis still quiescent within its sheath. But the genital pouch itself had grown swollen and tender, flushed faintly green itself as the Time loomed closer. This, Holly alleviated with the most tender of strokes of her palm. It would have felt obscenely sexual at any other time, but now it was the best she could do to soothe his overheated and overtaxed body. And between the legs in the perineum area the prostate too had become a discomfort, one that Holly would treat by rocking the heel of her hand against in firm, even motions as she'd been instructed to do. At this, Syrok would rock back against her ministrations, grunting at times until he heaved a great shudder and the swelling would temporarily go down, as more of the fluids were diverted into the *chenesi* and the Vulcan prostate had a moment's relief before the process began anew. And again, it was hard to find any of the situation to be overly sexual, when Syrok looked so abjectly miserable, and his biology took its toll.

And though they spent over a full week in that tiny cabin, Holly would remember it in much the same way Syrok's fevered brain would: as a blurred together haze where nothing had happened. A clock ticking down, and nothing more.
Chapter 61

The disembarkation of their shuttle at Vulcan was efficient and unhurried but could never feel entirely free of the chaos of travel, and at first Holly could barely process that they were finally there, as she sought out their luggage, kept track of Syrok, kept track of the crowd, and tried to parse the instructions in Vulkansu over the loudspeakers and figure out where they were meant to go. Syrok was holding himself together, but certainly wasn't leading anymore, as the entirety of his mental energy was focused inwardly on not having some sort of nervous breakdown here in public. So it was left to Holly once again to subtly direct their motions as she sought out the appropriate waiting area, her eyes scanning the crowd for their contact.

And there he was -- some distant cousin of Syrok's named Sherreht who she'd seen a holo of and knew nothing else about. He was waiting patiently for them in the designated area, and moved toward them once spotted. It wasn't hard, after all, to pick Holly out of a crowd, as the only human. Sherreht raised his hand and greeted them, to which Syrok responded only with a dazed look and a blink, and Holly did not dare respond verbally at all, stepping a fraction of an inch closer to him in support of his struggle. She held one of the travel cases now as his pain distracted him, said pain etched on his face in a very un-Vulcan display.

"Shall I assist you with your luggage?" Sherreht offered, and Syrok must have comprehended the offer at least as he responded only with a low growl and slightly narrowed eyes. Sherreht ignored the display and ignored the luggage indifferently, leading them to the aircar he had reserved for them.

The inside of the transport station was climate controlled, and while it was still hot, it was not overly so, and due to the potential coming and going of other species, the oxygen level and gravity were adjusted somewhere between Vulcan and Terran norms, if Holly had to guess. So it was uncomfortable, but she'd been distracted, and so she'd hardly noticed.

But the second she set foot on her first alien world, she was staggered by the difference. A wave of dizziness assailed her and she felt the increased gravity pressing down on her, restricting her every movement slightly and making her feel heavy, so heavy. The air was hot, hot in a way she'd never experienced before. And dry, which made the heat all the more striking. The lack of humidity in the air alone made her lungs feel like they couldn't properly receive air. And in a way, they could not, not with the lower oxygen of this world. It was all well within limits that a human could withstand, but she'd never been exposed before, and the difference was stark and difficult to properly process. Her breathing almost immediately became more labored and sweat began to stream under her thin robe, her only garment. A slight breeze blew dust-like sand around them, and it was a hot breeze, one that left her uncertain whether it was helping or making the situation worse.

She cast her eyes about and was awed. The sun was large and reddish in the sky, the light having a different cast to it than back home. The air smelled of dust more than anything, like a dusty back road in the heat of summer, but even more-so, something she had no context for which to compare it. And the mountains rose huge and rocky about them, always in the background scenery, the land lifeless and barren but for the structures she could make out by their clusters more than their materials. As many structures were built directly into the mountainsides as possible, and those that stood alone seemed to be made of rock themselves, or some sort of adobe brick perhaps, or maybe just something meant to look "natural" in this modern world.

She shuffled into the car seat beside her mate and glued her eyes to the window as they were on their way, seeing only glimpses of the urban center as they drove further and further away from
society, the mountains looming more largely before her. It was intense and it was captivating. And on Syrok's part, his own eyes scanned the landscape around him from his own window, and he felt a sudden rush of some emotion which said _home_ to him, from the second he felt the altered gravity and smelled the desert earth. As reluctant as he'd been to leave his apartment, his personal space, another primal part of him called him to this place, where the light and sound and feel of everything spoke of the safety of home.

Holly watched with fascination as they pulled up at last to Syrok's childhood home. She'd seen glimpses of it in his mind, of course, when they'd bonded. But she knew almost nothing about it, about who he'd been as a child. Syrok wasn't one to dwell on the past overly, and she found herself curious. Like most of the structures they'd passed, it was made of natural materials -- stone, stucco, adobe types of textures blending it in to the same reds and ochers of the desert surroundings. Some angles rounded as if weathered with time, others sharp and jutting as the rocks of the mountain into which the structure was built, the back end of it disappearing entirely into the rock face itself. And as for the yard -- there was no yard. There was no logic in keeping one. Plains of graying dust spread out into the distance, the sun already setting and setting the gray world ablaze with deep red tones. Though it was only mid-afternoon back in San Francisco, it was past evening meal here. The staggering heat she'd felt less than an hour ago when she'd entered the air car was already cooling to a tolerable chill, and she knew it would drop below freezing in the dead of night. A moonless night, for Vulcan had no moon, and so the dark would emphasize the desert cold. Holly's meager robe felt insufficient against the night chill.

In silence, Sherreht escorted them to the front door and offered the key to Syrok, who took it distractedly, his eyes already sweeping over the familiar contours of his home, his tension still present but gradually easing.

“The housekeeper has been sent away and the supplies are prepared as discussed. The comm. units are all pre-programmed with Healer T'Pell's contact information if you should require her assistance. If nothing further is required of me, I will take my leave.”

And when Syrok simply walked past the man and into the house, ignoring him, Holly gave a quick grateful smile as Sherreht saw himself out, the door closing behind him. Inside, the house was cool and vacant, dim in the setting sun, especially as the sun was behind the mountain as it set, so the front facing windows received little light, and the back of the house held no windows at all. Syrok absently touched various wall panels lighting dim, red tinged lights here and there as he walked, case in hand, Holly trailing behind, trying to take stock of the new home around her and still feeling entirely too sluggish in the new atmosphere. She shivered and noticed Syrok do the same as he easily adjusted the thermostat in what appeared to be a living area, by memory. He'd been here for so many years that though his mind was clouded, these actions were second nature to him, and another ounce of tension drained from his shoulders as he led them through the stone corridor and into the darkness of his own room.

Holly looked around curiously, not certain what she'd expected to see, both surprised and unsurprised in turn.

The room was as she understood many rooms to be on Vulcan, from her studies. It was in a deeper part of the house with no windows, a cozy den in the depths of a cave. The floor was stone, but not at all cave-like, it was polished and worn in places, clean and not overly cold. The same could be said for the walls, and their slight ochre tinge to the gray lent them a degree of hospitality. A woven rug, similar to their meditation mat, sprawled over part of the floor, highlighting the space in natural, sombre colors, but colors nonetheless. The bed frame was made of sturdy metal -- so very little wood was used on Vulcan, where wood was such a rarity. And unlike a moveable Terran bed, this one seemed molded into both floor and wall, a permanent fixture in the room. A fixture,
Holly realized, that would not move or break no matter how violent the mating became over the coming days.

There was no door to this room, she realized. As private as Vulcans were, they rarely used internal doors. Much like some Terran public restrooms Holly had seen, the halls simply twisted about in such a manner that one could not see into any of the private rooms. Public spaces were open and easily accessed, and private spaces were marked apart by the difficulty in seeing into them. It was simply understood that one did not enter into another's private space without permission. Holly wondered briefly about how sound might carry, and how scandalous some sounds might be, but then, if it were a normal night she supposed they could be quiet, or simply be unashamed of what they did. And during one's *pon farr*, the entire house was vacant but the couple.

The mattress of course was of a different dimension from their bed at home, but Holly dutifully unfolded the packed fitted sheet they'd brought with them, full of familiar scent, and made it stretch and make due for now. It would likely fall off later, or be cast aside, or even torn, but for now it would lend some sense of familiarity. The mattress here was thinner and harder, and the dimensions slightly different on each side, but it would do. The rest of the bedding was neatly folded on the clean floor to one side, and Holly set to it as Syrok unfolded their meditation mat and placed it in the corner with an old-looking firepot.

There was no dresser, Holly realized, for what would early Vulcans have built such a thing out of? Instead there was a metal panel in the wall that slid open to reveal a closet with hangers full of robes already, and room for more clothes, which she carefully unpacked. A small shelf seemed to hold socks, and Holly added to it some undergarments she wasn't sure why she'd packed at all. She wouldn't really have need of them here. Their shoes came off and she stowed them in the bottom of the closet.

The room was fairly spartan, utilitarian in nature, but not completely without personal effects. The firepot was clearly an heirloom of sorts. An earthen shelf held an assortment of books on one wall, and a lyre sat on the floor in the corner under the books. A metal standing desk jutted out of the wall beside the book shelf and Holly saw Syrok lay their PADDs there and pause for a moment, as if remembering something from his past, some echo of familiarity in the motions. Leave it to Vulcans to see no need for a chair.

Distinct in the room were the provisions lined on the floor along the wall by the doorway -- various foodstuffs that would keep without refrigeration, bottles of water and juice. And medical supplies. And even, Holly flushed to note, some lubricant. As well as a simple comm. unit, audio only.

Holly picked up the toiletries and looked to Syrok, who seemed very tired, and pensive. “Could you show me to the bathroom?” she prompted quietly, then repeated herself in Vulcan when she realized his lack of response or comprehension. Giving a vacant sort of nod, Syrok gathered his wits together and led Holly through the blessedly silent and dim household, just a few feet down the hall and on the opposite wall, and into what passed for a bathroom on Vulcan.

It had the same winding entrance as a private room, Holly noted, but with a sort of decorative tiling above the entrance that must delineate it in some way from the rest of the bedrooms. It wasn't something she'd read about in her studies, but she had the impression it was simply one of those cultural things that had become common but not explicit. Inside, the lights flickered on by motion sensors as soon as they entered the space.

There was a sonic unit in a very small cubicle in the corner, Holly noted, and a more dated bathing sink along the wall. It was not simply for hand washing, here, but in days past would have been
used for the entirety of bathing -- filling the small basin with water and using a cloth to carefully clean oneself bit by bit, in a time when sonics did not yet exist and water was still scarce and precious. Even today, many older homes favored this bathing method, and even in Syrok's own household he, and his family would alternate arbitrarily between one cleansing method and the other, depending upon time constraints or preference.

The toilet was somewhere between what Holly was accustomed to and a squat toilet -- a bowl to sit on, but so low to the floor so as to require her to squat to sit. She eyed it suspiciously, curious to try it later and in privacy. At least the toilet paper appeared to be standard.

And by the sink was a convenient shelf with tins of tooth powder and new brushes set out for them, in case they'd forgotten to pack their own. They were so much like Terran brushes that Holly was almost startled at the lack of difference. Well, apparently not everything in the universe was so different.

Cloths were available, but no towels, because what would be the point of them? And no soap of any sort, because it wouldn't be needed for sonics, the sink method used water alone, and Vulcans traditionally tended to their hair merely with their brushes. Though there were, Holly noted, some scented oils on a small shelf in the sonics chamber. And with a species that rarely if ever sweated, no deodorant was available or necessary. No wonder poor Syrok had seemed so inundated by the scents of their hygiene products, she realized.

She'd known, intellectually, and yet it all felt so foreign. And it hit her in a very real way how her mate must feel all the time. She set out their brushes and the tooth powder, but left any of her other toiletries in the bag and set it under the sink. It was time for her to do things the Vulcan way. And squatting over the strange toilet to relieve herself, she found a new use for their robes and lack of underclothes. They were a practical race.

Syrok had left the bathroom before her, and when she re-entered the bedroom, following the pull of their bond, she found him standing in the middle of the room, looking lost. It was too much. This was all simply too much.

Gently, Holly reached out to lay a hand on his shoulder, and as he shuddered at the touch she carefully wrapped her arms around his frame, holding him to her as Syrok felt like he was falling apart, simply crumbling under the confusion in his mind and the discomfort of his body. He wanted to rip something apart, to destroy something, as if it would make this all more tolerable. His body, against his own will, was readying him for a fight to the death if necessary, to defend his mate in his time of need. To take his mate and satisfy his body's demands. And his precious logic was not required for such a primal directive. It was being laid to waste.

Desperately, he gripped at Holly's small frame, and felt himself shudder again. Too many clothes. There were too many clothes, he thought, but couldn't remove them. Couldn't make sense of it in this moment. Or rather, his thinking was not even so clear as “clothes”, but was a panicked abstract concept of “barrier” and “not want”. Holly divested herself of her robe in one easy overhead pull, and then quickly helped Syrok from his, leading him to their bed with a gentle tug of his hand. He followed blindly and curled around her frame, under the covers, fever hot and shivering.

Holly winced under the intense grip of Syrok's hands. She'd considered maybe giving him a back rub, trying to relax him, to ease his pain, but he was clamped around her and made of solid muscle. His gripping hand on her arm was tight and nearly bruising, his skin uncomfortably hot against her. In fact, with the thermostat up and the blankets atop them, the entire room was uncomfortably hot. And with the thin air and heavy feeling she felt even more weak than she normally was against
him. Small and frail and unable to deny Syrok anything he required of her. And soon she felt him nipping, licking, and sucking marks onto her shoulder, her neck, her back where he could reach, as if reassuring himself in some way, and from the static she got over their bond she doubted whether he was even consciously aware of the self-soothing instincts. Through one particularly uncomfortable shudder he simply bit down on her shoulder and held fast until it passed, as she hissed in slight pain but didn't try to stop him.

It was evening on Vulcan, though Holly hadn't even had her supper yet, and wouldn't normally for several hours. She wasn't tired, but knew that there was nothing else to do with Syrok in this condition. And for the first time since his time had come, she felt a familiar hard, slick rod moving against her lower back and against her ass as he rocked gently. Her eyes widened in surprise. Pon farr, she knew, could take weeks to manifest fully, or mere days. In Syrok's case, it had seemed to her to progress at a startling rate, and now she wondered if it had fully begun. Tomorrow was to be their bonding ceremony. Would the main act have already started by then? Would it be too late to uphold the tradition as Syrok had wished? Or just in time?

But he wasn't attempting to penetrate her yet, she noticed. Was simply mindlessly rocking, still gathering energy, still undergoing the final, horrendous cramping that would come before the storm. Syrok's hand came around then to her psi-points, and without conscious decision to do so, fell into the meld with desperate relief, as Holly was swept into their shared mental landscape until morning, Syrok clinging to the only thing that made sense to him now, both mentally and physically: his mate.

It was chaos when Holly awoke some time the next day. How she'd slept so much baffled her until she remembered the madness of the meld and could easily see how she'd lost all sense of time in that maelstrom. As she struggled to consciousness she was aware of a snarling beast pinning her, growling possessively, as someone spoke in Vulcan calmly but determinedly while her mind struggled to mode shift and parse the words.

It was time for them to prepare themselves, someone was saying. Holly forced her mind to calm, against the raging indignance of her mate, hard and grinding against her with desperate need. She did her best to make soothing sounds to him and murmured nonsense all the while projecting calm. She had to prepare her mate for the ceremony. They had to make it that far, at least. Syrok struggled incomprehendingly against those who would take his mate from him, who had entered his room. Against the madness that assailed him. His grip was tight and bruising and he let out a keening whine of frustration as Holly tried to sit him up, and he allowed her to. His mate's touch was so cool on his fevered skin. Cool and soothing, a refuge.

Sherreht, satisfied that the human woman was awake and working on controlling the situation, finally left to allow her to do so, and Holly gently framed Syrok's face with her hands, forehead to forehead as she tried to center them both. Gradually, Syrok's frantic grip eased and his breathing slowed to a more reasonable pace. She turned him then to see his back, to see the source of so much pain she felt radiating from him, and gasped. The chenesi were just as she'd been told they would be, large as mangoes and an angry green, raised and hardened against his back. Her fingers ghosted over them and she heard a great moan and growl of need, a wash of lust, anger, need, pain, heat, NEEDNEEDNEED coming from Syrok at just that simple touch. She winced, knowing that any relief she attempted now would lead down a path they did not have time to complete this second. His aching cock was similarly flushed and unflagging, but hid well beneath the ceremonial robes she arranged on him as he did not seem capable of dressing himself. Hastily donning her own robe that had been laid out for her, and the soft boots as well, she finally knelt and prepared Syrok's boots for him, and they were ready to go.
One quick stop at the restroom, some hastily guzzled water, and snatching something like a spring roll from the stash of ready to eat food, she was hustled into the air car as she was staggered by the heat of the day. It was late morning by what she could judge from the position of the sun -- they'd slept that long -- and the heat of the sun was beating down in a way that stole her breath.

She continued to bustle even in the aircar, struggling to get sunscreen over every inch of her skin, having to shift her robes around in a most undignified manner. Sherreht, to his credit, didn't say a word, and Syrok was simply clenching his hands into his robes desperately and staring unseeing out the window. Holly had to admit that she wasn't seeing much either, dizzy with anticipation, with thin air, and with Syrok's emotions bleeding across the bond, swamping her own. In the past, they may have walked to the appointed place, or been carried by sedan. But this was not then and Holly was human and could hardly be expected to walk so far in such heat, and Syrok was too far gone to risk it at any rate. They could be forgiven this one lapse in tradition, this once.

When they did arrive, Holly saw a sea of bodies, of faces, and heard the rhythmic drumming and tinkling of bells. The lust and desperation was pouring off Syrok uncontrollably as the last vestiges of his sanity knew that finally, finally it was time. Finally, he'd held on long enough, he'd held on as long as he could and he could hear the ceremonial gong and his fingers itched to touch his mate, his mind calling out to stop the madness swirling around him. Had he not been patient enough? Did he not deserve this? His right -- his right to assert his Claim before his people and sate himself.

In the end, Holly had in fact joined Sel ek's Clan, in order to keep the entirety of their bond a part of Vulcan, not Earth, and she knew that some of her new people must be in the crowd, perhaps even Sel ek himself. And what of Syrok's Clan? How close were these relatives? Were, indeed, his parents present? Or would that be uncouth? But by the tradition of pon farr, she was not to know beforehand who would or would not be present this day, nor would it ever be discussed afterward. She may or may not recognize a face here, but whether she did or not, no one would ever mention the Time again.

A woman, the matriarch of Syrok's Clan was speaking now, and Holly heard more drums, more tinkling of bells, a gong. The Vulcan words were swirling about her and it was all she could do to remember to kneel when it was time for them to kneel, as she felt the matriarch's fingers slide against her temple and felt her distant presence as Syrok's mind surged into her own, slamming her with lust and want beyond all comprehension. She ached for him. She burned.

The ground was searingly hot beneath her and the dust clouded around her as Syrok pounced like a le matya, pinning her unmovingly beneath him S he did n't struggle, why would she even move an inch? Her eyes closed instinctively against the glare of the bright sun beating down, her neck bared for his teeth which she welcomed and she'd never been more grateful for the ease of access afforded by the robes. Syrok slid into her without pretense and she realized how unbearably wet she'd become, how empty and needy and yes, god Syrok fuck!

Syrok keened into his mate at the cool slickness that engulfed him, finally, finally giving him some relief. But it wasn't enough, never enough, and he drove into her frantically, unendingly as the fever took him completely, his hands gripping into her wrists and his pelvis snapping bruisingly against her, grunting with every thrust, rutting for long minutes as if he could go on like this forever, and a part of him wanted to.

And Holly knew, somehow she knew, and her hands slid from where they gripped his shoulders and down to his chenesi and she grabbed as hard as she could, desperately, fingers digging viciously at the hard mass for purchase and Syrok's moan filled the ceremonial grounds as he finally, blessedly released. So much cum filled her that it dripped onto the ground around them, soiled their robes and the desert sands, and all the faceless bodies witnessed, observed this sacred
rite as it had been through time immemorial.

Only after the first round was complete did some of the crowd begin to disperse, while some would remain, filtering out as they felt moved, as they felt they had witnessed enough. Holly had no room for self consciousness in her mind though, she was barely aware of her own existence in the swirl of lust and madness that engulfed her. For Syrok had always controlled their bond almost completely, and now as no exception. She felt what he felt, and she moved instinctively in any way that he found most pleasing, which for the most part was to remain passive, receptive to his needs.

The y lay there gasping for a few minutes, still entangled, before Holly felt his hips begin to thrust again, as robes were harshly shredded and ripped away - barrier -- not want. They would be collected at some point, by someone, and preserved for them to keep somewhere in a box, as a memory. A torn, stained robe was hardly a wedding dress, but this was the Vulcan way.

Bruises encircled Holly's wrists, and she felt one of her ribs bending uncomfortably out of its place. He was so heavy, so heavy, crushing out what thin air she could get, and driving into her again with desperation, his thoughts delving deeper into hers until they were one mind, one needful, writhing being on the sands.

What consciousness Holly retained, what sense of identity she still had, thought Syrok felt huge inside of her, impossibly large, and his thrusts impossibly forceful. But it was never enough, never quite enough, as he threw her legs over his shoulders so that he could sink more deeply, as deeply as he could, bruising her inside with an effort to feel all of her, claim all of her, and at last, feeling a second gush of release.

They pulled apart then as Syrok's mind cleared enough, enough to know they had to go, they had to go now lest they be here for too long, though he had no comprehension how long it had been. He'd only come twice, so it could not be that long, surely, but he was disoriented to notice the sun seemed to have moved in that short time, in that blink of an eye.

The crowd had thinned to nearly nothing, and Sherreht awaited to escort them back to the waiting aircar, back to their home. In actuality, nearly two hours had passed. It was just beginning. And Holly's lower half was covered in cum, dripping down her legs and out over her as she overflowed. She had not the strength to stand on her own and so Syrok easily lifted and carried her to lie in his lap on the back seats of the car. She curled into him instinctively and simply breathed in his scent, her mind awash in his warmth and still struggling to put together how long they'd been coupling, and what was next. Already her back was scraped with sand, her front lightly burned in places from the sun, and bruises were forming across her pale skin, new bite marks he hadn't remembered giving her standing out vividly in his minutes of lucidity.

Neither one had any memory of how they'd gotten back to their room. Either out of the car, or through the house, but Holly realized when they were on the bed, Syrok rutting into her desperately once again. This time he'd thrown her to her hands and knees, mounting her from behind as she struggled to support herself on her forearms, falling forward with the impact of the thrusts and animal grunts. Her thighs quivered and she felt herself orgasming uncontrollably, rolling wave after wave of pleasure assaulting her, both from the physical onslaught and the effects of their bond. She was mad with it, certain she'd lose her own mind as surely as Syrok had lost his.

Syrok liked seeing her struggle beneath him to stay upright, liked it even more when she finally collapsed and he pressed his body against hers, grinding her into the mattress when he finally came, and lying still, buried in his overflowing mate, content.

That's when Holly got to experience another quirk of Vulcan biology she'd been warned about. The knot.
Vulcans, when having regular sex, were much like humans. She had plenty of first hand experience to back that up. But in the heat of the *plak tow*, some of their more ancient physiological drives kicked in, and quite simply, they knotted, much like a Terran canine, as they continued to come for as few as two and up to thirty minutes, until the knot would shrink enough for the penis to be released. Now she felt it swelling inside her, larger and larger, a growing pressure that she almost panicked over, uncertain she could handle it. And with that pressure came a deep ache, at once uncomfortable and satisfying.

But Syrok for his part gave a growling purr of extreme contentment as he felt himself swell inside his mate and curled around her even further, pulling them onto their sides as he nudged his pelvis forward, loving the little grunt Holly gave as the fist-sized knot rocked slightly within her. Gently, carefully, he rocked forward again to elicit the same grunt, then stilled, feeling another rolling orgasm sweep him and the delicious relief that came to his lower back with each release.

As the storm seemed to have calmed for now, Holly felt herself drowsing off again. In the haze of the *plak tow*, she tried to rest while she could, her body sluggish and oddly pliant. As she cramped slightly with the copious amounts of ejaculate being expelled inside her, sealed in by the first-sized knot, she dozed.
Holly awoke to Syrok slipping free of her and turning her onto her back and she gasped with slight
disgust as she instinctively bore down and a torrent of ejaculate sluiced out of her. It was really not
the way to get her aroused, yet she couldn’t help herself feeling aching and needy the second Syrok
had pulled back from her. With a sigh of relief, she felt him slip back in and soon she was adjusted
to his liking. In a detached way, she realized it must be the bond causing this, a reflection of
Syrok’s need to be in her manifesting as her own need to have him. Because she did feel sore, both
slightly chafed and with a growing ache inside from the rough thrusts she’d endured earlier, and
from the massive knot she’d had to contend with. She still hadn’t mentally processed how that
could have even happened without splitting her in two.

But Syrok’s thrusts were languid now, aiming for depth more than force or speed, and she sighed
contentedly as her legs came up to frame him, slotting in, she noticed with surprise, right atop the
chenesi which prevented them from sliding off his lower back entirely, while her legs, in turn,
pressed down against him with delicious pressure. Experimentally, she pulled him in against her
with her legs and he groaned with pleasure as he ground his hips as deeply against her as their
anatomy would allow, Holly’s head falling back as sparks of pleasure arced across her skin from
head to toes.

They continued like that for at least an hour, rocking gently, pulling, pushing. Holly lost all sense
of time, and Syrok had never had such a sense to begin with, lost entirely in his lustful daze. The
movement was instinctive, felt good and right and needed, and even as he largely rested, moving so
slowly within her, he continued to rock them together as Holly’s thighs quivered from her own
depleted energy. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered, as long as she would lie there for him, her
usually warm skin seeming so cool him now that he was burning hot. Holly was slick with sweat
and cum, and even Syrok’s back shimmered with sweat as well, something that Vulcans did so
rarely, only when they were incredibly ill or in their Time. But he didn’t notice the sweat, he only
noted it in some distant way, of their scent.

After a time, so much long and passing time, Syrok felt that itch again, that need, and increased his
pace and ferocity, driving Holly into the bed with bruising force. She yelped with the pleasure/pain
of it and her hands scrambled for purchase on his slick back, her trembling legs squeezing as her
nails dug in with the thrusts caused a twinge and all of this felt so primal and raw and wanted to
Syrok that it only urged him on, urged him toward greater enthusiasm and effort until at last, at
long last the dam burst again and he collapsed atop her, crushing her with his solid mass as she
struggled to breathe beneath him, still trembling from her own climax as that familiar swelling
began inside her again. She closed her eyes against the familiar ache and tried to focus on her
breathing. She was so hot, and the air so thin. She was so weak and tired and sore now, and
desperately thirsty, not to mention she had to pee. But there was no moving Syrok even if she’d had
the strength. He was adhered to her now once more and she winced as the knot expanded
fractionally as if to remind her just how stuck she was.

The knot shifted against her g-spot, and again. The pressure of a heavy Vulcan atop her, unable to
reposition now that they were adhered, bore down upon her full bladder, and Holly found herself
pleading mentally with Syrok to not shift, lest she wet herself. She had to go so badly right now
that it was enough to clear some of the fog from her mind, enough for her to realize how dire the
situation was becoming. If he’d please just lie there for the next handful of minutes, utterly still,
and then detangle from one another, and allow her to go to the restroom....

But Syrok wasn’t home, mentally, and there seemed to be no amount of mental pleading that could
get him to focus enough to be still. A Vulcan wouldn't have to use the restroom during this time at all, because their metabolism and internal systems would have shifted to accommodate the time of mating. And that slight shifting of his hips as he ground his cock and accompanying knot within her was both instinctive and pleasant for him, so as he rested he did it again every so often, gently rocking enough to cause yet another burst of ejaculate to issue forth.

The relief Syrok felt, as always, was almost palpable, so Holly couldn't fault him for his motions. She squinched her eyes tightly shut and bit her bottom lip as she tried to endure it. In a vain hope, she brought her hands up to the chenesi and rubbed gently but firmly, as Syrok settled in against her in even more of a languid puddle. Good, she thought, maybe this will keep him from moving about. And for a while, to her relief, it did seem to work. Syrok groaned contentedly as Holly's ministrations coaxed his biological functions to continue fluidly, without stress and strain.

But the feeling of the massage was intoxicating, and though it first relaxed him, it built to an uncontrollable itch and Syrok thrust, just an inch because of how they were joined, but just so against her g-spot and bladder as he ground his considerable weight into her, and that was all it took. Holly let out a yelp from the pressure and her fingers dug into the chenesi as an orgasm ripped through her helplessly, at the same time releasing the tensed muscles that had kept her urine firmly inside. A few hot tears of shame pricked her eyes as she lay in her own puddle, the bed now soaking wet and no way to efficiently dry it, not under these conditions. Not to mention the humiliation of it.

Syrok, of course, seemed not to notice. Or if he noticed, he didn't care. After all, hadn't he just proved the other day that urine was not currently one of his aversions?

Another two minutes perhaps went by as Holly lay in her discomfort, simply enduring the situation for what it was, until he finally softened and she was able to ease him off. She estimated based on previous performances that Syrok would settle for at least a few minutes to rest before wanting her again, and though she was tired she was also desperately thirsty. And she had no idea how long it had been since she'd eaten.

With determination, she pushed herself into a sitting position and tried to steady her legs on the floor, but when she tried to stand she promptly collapsed, thighs shaking uncontrollably from dehydration, low blood sugar, and pure exertion of the last many hours, as well as the added gravity on Vulcan and lower oxygen in her system. Holly winced as she thudded to the floor and simply focused determinedly on her goal.

She crawled this time to the edge of the room and got herself a bottle of water, taking a small sip at first and trying to resist the desperate urge to guzzle it. She was alternately worried she wouldn't have enough time to get a proper drink, and worried that if she drank too much at once it would all come up. She took another sip and grabbed one of the spring-roll-type-things to nibble on, though without water she was hardly hungry. Her tummy gave an uncomfortable cramp and she knew she had to eat.

She took another sip of her water as she heard Syrok stir on the bed, shifting around and giving a low, disappointed sound as he reached for a mate that wasn't there. Shit. She tried to screw the top back onto the bottle and realized as she did so that her hands shook slightly from lack of food. She needed food, water, maybe even one of the tri-ox hypos they'd packed, and a decent rest. She wanted more than anything to have a hot shower (though she'd be getting none of that on Vulcan, pon farr or not), and a dry mattress.

She could have cried for the unfairness of it all, suddenly overwhelming her. She was soiled with piss and cum and desperately uncomfortable and pathetic here on the hard stone floor.
But Syrok, meanwhile, had sat up to look for Holly, feeling fear and adrenaline course through his veins at the thought of someone having taken her, some challenger who would steal his mate, his lifeline. His primitive instincts prepared him for battle, but when he finally spotted Holly, on the floor and near the door, he nearly saw blood green. His mate was trying to leave.

With primal rage he scrambled off the end of the bed and to her, growling harshly as words eluded him, his ability to chastise her, to demand what she was thinking, what she was doing, eluded him. Holly's eyes went wide as the sudden onslaught of real anger assaulted her. What the hell had she done wrong? And why couldn't she just be left alone long enough to drink?

But whatever rest Syrok would have taken was a distant memory as his adrenaline demanded release. He could not rest without Holly because he could not live without Holly and now that he had her, he had to take her, to Claim her, to prove to both her and to himself that he was worthy and that she was his. Painfully erect once again he pinned his mate to the stone floor, hands clamping tightly on wrists he held above her head as he drove into her already sore and exhausted frame. Holly tried in vain to scrabble away, and she knew she wasn't supposed to, she knew that that was exactly the wrong thing to have done. She'd been instructed for months on this. She'd had it drilled into her mind, and she was kafeh for god's sake, she should have known better, acted better, but something primal in her reacted to Syrok in that moment with real fear. He'd never come at her quite like that before, like an animal.

Hands tightened and pulled her where she was wanted, as his eyes narrowed in affront and he gave a scolding grunt. Holly winced as her skin scraped over the harsh surface. She'd have brush burns now too to add to her bruises and she fought desperately to still her body, still her frantic gasping for breath, her thudding heartbeat, her panicked mind. She noticed dimly the pool around her. The bottle had spilled, precious water in a desert. Not that she could really become any more uncomfortable, she thought, already damp from cum, sweat, and urine.

Holly was glad only that her hole was still so wet, still so lubricated, though she couldn't say she was particularly aroused. Not now that Syrok wasn't, and she couldn't be swept along with him within their bond. It wasn't that he was unaroused, of course, but this desperation was driven by something else, a gut-wrenching terror that he'd be without her and that he mustn't, under any circumstances, allow her to go, to disappear from him. If Vulcans could cry, she was certain she'd see real tears on his tortured visage right now, and as it was she let out a desperate sob of her own as everything felt like it was simply coming apart. She didn't know how she would survive this ordeal, and all her careful training seemed so distant and pointless, totally unhelpful against the reality of it.

So pathetically, she allowed herself to simply lie there and once again, endure. On the wet stone growing clammy against her skin, she endured, though she had to wince at the forcefulness of every thrust, of every clench of his tight fingers on her frail wrists. She gazed up at him through teary eyes and it was only when she finally, finally saw a part of Syrok in those eyes that he let himself go enough to finish, collapsing atop her at first and then rolling off, only to pull her in to spoon and cling to her, his body still shaking slightly with the fear that she would somehow go away.

Pathetically, she grasped out for one of the bottles of water or juice, or for her dropped spring roll, trying at the same time not to move her actual frame at all, lest Syrok flip shit again. But god she was thirsty, and she didn't want to die like this. She was supposed to be drinking more water here in the desert, not less, and she didn't know for how many days this would go on. Her fingers landed on a sash-savas fruit and she was flooded with relief that she had something, inching it to roll toward her until she could finally pick it up and bite down into the sweet, tangy citrus. It wasn't that she had any particular love for the fruit, but right now it was everything. It contained much
needed fluids and calories alike. And Holly was more than happy to rest in Syrok's possessive embrace on the stone beneath them as she carefully nursed the fruit until she'd eaten most of it, sucked out most of the moisture, and had fallen asleep in pure exhaustion.
Chapter 63

Holly awoke to a harsh grunting sound, and blearily cast her eyes about to figure out what it was, and in that case where she was. The legs of the bed to her right, the wall lined with foodstuffs and drinks to the left, and Syrok angled somehow by her feet, clutching ineffectually at one of the bed’s legs, grunting every so often as he thrust against the harsh stone floor, cock rigid and green, almost painful looking in how taut and swollen it had become. Tired and sore as she was, Holly felt her heart pang for the poor creature, as Syrok’s eyes were shut tight, his face a grimace of pain and the bond echoing with discomfort and confusion. He grunted again at the pain/relief of the friction and then stilled and shuddered.

With determination, Holly pushed herself to her hands and knees and crawled the short distance to her mate and began to urge him onto his back. He resisted at first, uncomprehendingly, and gave a keening whine of disagreement, but she persisted in shoving his hips until he at least lay on his side, cock jutting out away from the floor now and into the air. Awkwardly, because of the angle, she lowered herself down to lick a gentle stripe on the chafed flesh and Syrok was so keen to that course of action that he bucked his hips violently to thrust into the soft, wet orifice, his free hand coming down to fist into her hair, but she was quick and pulled back, placing a hand on his hips in an effort to still him, to soothe him, rubbing gentle circles with her thumb. The other hand came to gently stroke him as he thrust in and out of her palm, breath deepening until a low, guttural moan escaped. His head fell back against the floor blissfully as he relaxed into the touch. Only then did she lower herself again to delicately lick and suckle the weeping flesh.

It was risky, she knew, to take him orally like this. It could become physically dangerous for her in a heartbeat, but Syrok seemed quite docile at the moment, and she was sore, so she took the opportunity presented. Over the head, around the double ridges, and down against the silky flesh. Where it would usually have some spongy give to it even in its hardness, now it was stiff as rock and unyielding. One hand came back around his lower back and felt the same painful tension there as well, and she simply rubbed soothingly against it as Syrok shuddered helplessly against the dual stimulation.

It was with a full body shudder and a simple, quiet gasp that Syrok came, this time. So unlike the violent thrusts of before, and no knot for her to inspect up close, as if his body could tell it was not positioned in such a way for a knot to be of use to it. As with previous times, there was a ludicrous amount of ejaculate, and Holly didn’t even attempt to swallow the bulk of it, simply allowing it to dribble on the floor, over her hand, over Syrok’s body. She normally had no problem in swallowing, and she did take some of it even now, but the sheer volume was simply too much. Her lips twitched into a wry smile, however, when she noted that it was some of the only protein she’d had in hours, maybe over a day. She had no idea how long they’d been at this, in and out of consciousness, and there were no windows to give her a sign. She couldn’t even consider trying to make her way across the room to retrieve a computer.

She lounged against Syrok’s body as he simply lay in a heap on the stone floor and she nursed a bottle of water she managed to get her hands on. And for a moment, she was able to simply take stock. She was alive, and so was Syrok. She was sore, but as far as she could tell, undamaged. Nothing was bleeding, nothing horrendously painful, though she twinged uncomfortably in more than one place. And she was desperately thirsty, and dizzy, and seemed not to have adjusted to the thin atmosphere or heavy gravity as of yet. She closed her eyes as she leaned back against Syrok’s limp frame and took another sip of water, grabbing a nearby box of energy bars and tearing into
She still had to pee, she realized, or perhaps had to pee again, though how she still had any water in her with her profuse sweating and lack of intake was a mystery to her. And she wanted to try one of the tri-ox hypos she'd packed away. It was risky to take too many of them over a period of time -- hard on the heart. But it was safe to take one now and then. She'd really hoped to have adjusted naturally but now she simply wanted relief. And after all those tasks were complete, she thought rather blissfully of trying to change out the bedding, maybe throw down an extra blanket or two if the mattress was still wet in this dry heat.

But one thing at a time. There was no telling when Syrok would strike again, and she had to be methodical about this. For now, food and water. If she had to, she'd simply piss on the floor.

A nibble of food. A sip of water. Back and forth, Holly worked methodically, but slowly. She’d been cautioned in this -- along with dozens of other things. She knew that if she ate or drank too fast she might vomit, and her health could quickly deteriorate from there. She leaned against her mate while she sat and ate and kept a careful eye on Syrok as he dozed lightly. It had to have only been ten or fifteen minutes of silence until she felt him thrusting against her hip again, and heard the low rumble of a predatory growl. She closed her eyes and sighed. She'd have really liked to have had time to address the rest of her issues, but there was nothing for it.

But she'd be damned if she'd be fucked again on the rough stone floor if she could help it. She was covered in small scrapes already. With a huff of frustration she made her decision, snatching the blanket off the end of the bed and forcing herself to piss on it. It was surprisingly difficult to do so - years of social conditioning had taught her not to urinate in such an inappropriate way. But Syrok was stirring, and he was going to have her, and she did not have time to get to a restroom. And Holly had decided -- she would not piss herself helplessly again. At least soaking the blanket on the floor would control the mess and keep it away from the food.

Even as she finished and Syrok became more disoriented and insistent, she grabbed his hand while he was still semi-incoherent, and tugged him toward the bed. Sensing that his mate was leading him, wanting him, he blessedly followed suit, and Holly didn't press her luck as once on the mattress she fell back languidly, spread docily before him, waiting for him to arrange her as wanted. It was with a tremendous relief she also noted that the bed, which had been thoroughly soaked earlier, had mostly dried and was barely damp now, though it spoke of how truly hot the desert was if it could dry out such a puddle even within the thick stone walls.

The growling purr and the primal emotions sent Holly's way through the bond let her know that Syrok was pleased with this arrangement as well, and for a moment he simply surveyed his mate, though his eyes were glazed over and she wondered how much he really saw.

Syrok leaned down to breathe in the smell of her, his face buried in her neck and hair, his teeth moving to nip lightly at the delicate skin, then sucking in a bruise, marking her. More nips and licks as he moved southward, but he became distracted from his pursuit of scent and marks as his full, heavy cock grazed her thigh. Yes, he decided, that was good, and thrust again. It only took two more thrusts until his aim hit a more pleasant target and he thrust home.

Holly closed her eyes and let out a deep breath as she felt herself filled yet again. There was something intoxicating about it, something deeply satisfying. Her legs fell fractionally more open and she felt the echo of pleasure across the bond. Sighing happily she let her mind drift toward it and bring Syrok's pleasure more into focus. Why hadn't she done this more before? It was wonderful to share this with him. And she realized she wanted to. She didn't want to simply endure it. She wanted to give this to him, be here for him fully. Holly opened her eyes and stared adoringly.
up at her mate, who gave a harsh thrust at her forward behavior. With a chastised smirk she closed them again and relaxed into the bed as Syrok slowly built up an uneven rhythm, simply pleasuring himself with no hurry.

At a particularly harsh thrust, Holly gave a keening whine of discomfort. She was sore there, and Syrok was impossibly big. But she didn't tense up, and it made all the difference. Mercifully, Syrok's fingers sought out her psi-points for greater clarity in this effort, and as he swept into her mind Holly felt her body come alight with new arousal. Her skin was on fire with it, and she felt herself positively gush with lubricant, just as something seemed to relax internally, easing more room for him. Her breath caught in wonder at it and she moaned aloud as he thrust more fully home, flush against her with ease. There was still a sort of ache, but now the impacts seemed to ease it rather than exacerbate it. Holly's thighs quivered helplessly against Syrok's hips as the first orgasm ripped through her, and he grunted in satisfaction at the rippling movement of her body around him.

Satisfied with the participation of his mate, Syrok began to move in earnest, and the pleasure only continued to sweep through Holly. She brought her hands down to his chenesi and she found herself gripping him helplessly as she was swept away. For Syrok, that desperate clutching was bliss and it set off his own orgasm as he pounded into her, breeding his mate as she was pinned beneath him. With an animal grunt he thrust home and clamped his eyes shut, his face frozen in a picture of bliss as his knot once again started to form. He shifted, grinding in as he hiked Holly's thighs just a fraction higher, wider, so he could seat himself impossibly deeply within her. Each additional millimeter was primally satisfying to his fevered mind.

Holly was ready for the intense, strange sensation of it now. She didn't know if she'd become accustomed to the size, exactly, because it was still impossibly huge, but she was ready for it, and relaxed into a submissive, post orgasmic puddle. She sighed and passively allowed Syrok to arrange her for his own comfort, moaning gently as he shifted inside her and firmed. As the knot solidified and expanded another centimeter, she felt the characteristic sensation of more ejaculate shooting deep inside her and it was magical. Once the fever had run out, she knew, it would be years until she could share this special quirk of biology with Syrok again.

Her hands came up to frame his head, stroking his hair and shoulders until he relaxed atop her -- no longer straining to hold himself up on his arms. He buried his face in her neck and the remaining pillow and sighed with contentment, no fear of slipping free of his mate now that they were secured. Even as his back relaxed and his pelvis shifted a bit, the knot jerked against her and refused to budge. Holly gave a small grunt of discomfort at it and in response Syrok lazily smiled. His hips rocked gently into her, instinct driving him as always more than any conscious decision.

It was like an intense internal massage, Holly realized. And if she allowed herself to stop panicking about the sheer size and strain of it, she felt her vaginal walls flutter around the knot with a sort of excitement. Taking slow breaths, it wasn't long until she felt another wave of pleasure course through her, and they rode the waves together, one orgasm setting off the other in tandem. Gently, her hands came up to cup the hardened chenesi, and then firmly rubbed her fingers into the swollen flesh with intent to relieve the impossible strain and pressure the bond told her was there. She was rewarded with the most delicious sounds of pleasure coming from her mate, and with more rolling of hips and shifting of the massive knot within her, more impossible volume of ejaculate filling her to the point where she wondered if her tummy had expanded a bit to accommodate it.

It was in this intoxicating, blissed out state that both Holly and Syrok finally succumbed to their exhaustion and fell to sleep.
When Holly awoke, she felt achy all over, but much better rested. She tried to take a deep breath but was still being slightly crushed by her heavy mate. For that matter, her mate was what had woken her. The knot had long since dissipated, and she was aware the majority of the ejaculate had exited her body, as evidenced by feeling a squishy puddle of it on the bed beneath her, all around her pelvic area, and dripping steadily down her ass crack. It wasn't exactly pleasant, but it was eased by the gentle thrusting within her overworked hole. Syrok would never fully soften during his Time, but she could feel that now he wasn't as iron hard as before, now he was only partially erect, and there was some easy give to the typically unforgiving member. That, combined with his lazy, half-unconscious thrusts made it a pleasant sensation, soothing to her aches. She sighed and shifted marginally for better comfort.

Holly let her hands drift from the bed to Syrok's back to stroke all along it, carding through his long silky hair, and drifting down to massage him slowly, firmly, gently. He sighed and stayed in his half awake, half dreaming state for long minutes as he continued the slow roll of his hips and Holly continued her languid massage. With a purr of deep contentment he latched his teeth onto the flesh of Holly's shoulders where his head rested, and he bit down solidly but not enough to really hurt and simply stayed there for a long time in a blissful haze.

Holly had almost dozed off again by the time Syrok finally roused himself and rolled off of her, pulling out. She winced a bit at the slight sting of it, and at the ache both within her and throughout her body. She'd been put through her paces, but she knew that she was getting off relatively easy. *Pon farr* could be brutal, even to those Vulcans with far greater strength and endurance than her. As Syrok stretched himself onto his back, she used the opportunity to slip off the bed. The blanket on the floor was the official designated toilet now, and she emptied both her bladder and an unfortunate amount of cum from herself. She was only grateful that she hadn't eaten enough to need to defecate. Hurriedly, still only seconds off the bed, she grabbed bottles of water, fruit, and energy bars and carted her supply to the bed.

Syrok, as expected, was already becoming distressed at her absence, not understanding why she'd leave even for an instant. But she'd figured this one out in a flash of brilliance. Setting her food and drink on the mattress at the edge of the bed, she spooned up against him, her back to his front, and inched her top knee up invitingly. Syrok purred in approval and thrust his firming member back into its seemingly permanent home.

It was amazingly awkward to eat and drink while being fucked. But Holly was more than a bit proud of herself for pulling it off. She *did* feel as if she were ruining it a bit, and as if it were a bit more like *enduring* again as she struggled to focus on her body's demands for nutrients and water, but she also was rewarded with the rush of energy that came from taking in the energy bars, from re-hydrating her parched flesh. By round two, she'd finished what she considered to be a full, if unconventional meal, and feeling almost restored, she was able to simply lie down and drift -- which was really an accomplishment in and of itself, for whatever languor Syrok had been content with earlier had been replaced with desperate aggressive need and brutal, jack-hammering thrusts.

But Holly was so tired again already, and foggy in the heat and thin air, that she drifted nonetheless, in spite of the bruising grip of Syrok's hands on her flesh, and the pounding strokes and harsh, animalistic grunts. She simply drifted into the bond, so easy and attainable with Syrok's shields in shreds, and let herself ride it out in a fuzzy, half conscious state. There was little to no pain in this place, only warmth and affection and desire and love. Only *mine* and *need* and *cherish*. And if for round three she was turned onto her front with her knees pulled under and her rump raised high, that was fine too. The cramped position was easy to forget in the haze, especially as she sensed Syrok's immense pleasure and satisfaction as he bred her like a beast.

When she came to, she hadn't realized she'd even fallen into a true sleep, and couldn't place when it
had happened or when and how she'd been moved into a more comfortable position. What woke her was Syrok sucking on one of her sensitive nipples while playing idly with the other. They were both sore from attention, and she wondered at the ability of physical exhaustion to overwhelm every other sensation. She also wondered idly whether he were more coherent now, if he were paying actual attention her sexually rather than simply rutting like an animal. She squirmed with a sort of aroused discomfort -- it was arousing, certainly, but in another way she was almost overstimulated these days.

It was then she realized that for a change, Syrok wasn't sheathed within her any longer. And it should please her. But she felt weirdly empty, and needy, and alone at the thought. And that made her think she must be going crazy, but she told herself this was all part of the madness, surely. Madness or not, Syrok's incessant playing with her body did cause a fresh gush of her own lubricant (though who could tell with so much cum?) and it did cause her to squirm with want. She turned toward Syrok and kissed him gently on the mouth.

He gave her a curious look, and didn't immediately respond. However much experience they'd had kissing this way thus far, it was a very human gesture, and it took him a moment to catch up with the direction she was moving, but to her delight he did eventually respond in kind. Gentle sighs, kisses, and caresses busied them for some time, and Holly let her hand drift down to stroke his overworked erection carefully but firmly. As there was no immediate burning need, Syrok simply sighed and enjoyed it, as he enjoyed it as well when she shifted another hand to wrap around to his nearest chenesi to rub that too. They were aching and tired but they were making it through this ordeal. And there was still pleasure in it, so much pleasure.

Syrok pressed his mate down at her shoulders until she shifted down on the bed, getting the hint as he pulled her head in to his crotch. Willingly, she opened her mouth to him and he sighed at the gentle wet environment that surrounded him. One hand of his carded through her hair encouragingly while the other grasped one of her hands and brought it up to his mouth to suck indecently on her first two fingers. Knowing what such a gesture must be to a Vulcan was enough for Holly as she shivered at his behavior. So filthy. She smiled around the cock in her mouth and pressed it carefully into her throat to reward him. It was only something she could pull off sometimes, when Syrok was slow and pliant, and when she herself was very relaxed.

One hand tucked beneath Syrok's waist, the other wrapped around the top as he lay on his side, she massaged her fingers into the chenesi continually as she moved slowly up and down, taking him deep and swallowing around his length. Syrok abandoned all motion of his own, content to ride out the pleasure and recuperate some of his energy in a foggy euphoria. It was with a sudden heavy shudder, just as last time, that he finally came this way. And as Holly had him fully seated in her throat this time she simply bore down on his chenesi and continued to swallow around his length as her tummy was filled with plentiful fluids and nutrients in their barren desert. Before she'd wasted some of the cum, thinking there'd just been too much, but now she cherished it and what it represented to her -- the basic components that would help keep her alive. And so if it kept coming as she massaged her fingers into his back? She simply continued to swallow, even as she bobbed up for a quick breath of air.

At long last when it all subsided, Holly lay panting for breath beside her mate, and was rewarded when he pulled her atop him to rest and finally sheathed his semi-erect cock in her aching hole. Ever since she'd awoken that empty, alone feeling had throbbed within her, and with the return of her mate it eased and faded. She was so full of him now.

“Are you in there?” she murmured in Vulkhansu, but received no response. Holly wasn't surprised. This thing could last anywhere from three to ten days, and while she knew it had to have been at least three based on hunger patterns, she figured there might still be a long way to go. If only there
were some way to tell how long it had been. But the PADDs were across the room, and they'd really only be a distraction anyway. This was their time. There was no room for such distraction. Holly sighed contentedly as Syrok's hands ghosted over her back and through her hair. Her hips ached where they fell outside of Syrok's own, but she was too comfortable otherwise to shift positions. And from atop him she could breathe so much easier than when he lay atop her. She realized with some wonder that she was adjusting to the thinner air. It was still uncomfortable, but not the struggle it had been. And she hadn't used one hypo.
They developed a rhythm of bouts of sex and bouts of rest. Brutal fucking or languid sharing --
emotional engagement on Holly's part, or a determined shoving of food and water into her mouth,
hanging off the side of the bed to urinate when she had to. She was still overly hot but had mostly
adjusted to the temperature, and seemed to be getting enough fluids as she tried to monitor herself
for signs of danger. She was definitely somewhat dehydrated, but not overly so, it seemed, and she
contented herself to be thankful for small favors. The heat at least also mostly dried out the sexual
fluids on the bed around her. It was filthy, crusty, and often damp. She'd shift and smear into
something. But she hardly noticed any more.

She had bruises on her bruises, and aches in her aches. And she was mildly disturbed when she
realized that Syrok was using their bond to dull out some of her pain. She felt as if she really ought
to have access to that pain -- what if a Healer were required? But if a Healer were required, they'd
have big issues for Syrok's survival of his pon farr as well, and that was bad news for both of them.
She tried to content herself that if something were seriously wrong, she'd have enough symptoms to
be able to recognize it, and allowed herself to be grateful for the miracle of her mental bond. If not
for that, surely she'd be sore beyond all reason by now. Even the pleasure slaves on Risa didn't do
this much at once.

Holly recalled some of the more indelicate conversations she'd had with the Healer in preparation.
Tearing could be healed, if there were tearing. Bruising could be healed as well. And the stretch
from the knot, and from the constant action? She'd been assured that it should all return to normal
some time after the pon farr had ended. Yes, even though she were human. Their Healer had taken
the liberty of researching such things thoroughly for her benefit. And as indelicate as pon farr was
for all involved, he hadn't flinched in describing these eventualities to her.

She reached a hand between her legs during one of their bouts of loose cuddling, one of the times
when she wasn't being penetrated at all, and inspected some of the fluid she pulled up. No pink to it
-- no signs of blood. No twinges to indicate tears, though that might be the bond to some degree.
Still, it was an alien landscape down there -- her own body unnerving her. The vulva were swollen
like never before, and she thought it were as if she were also being effected biologically by pon
farr. And where she'd dipped in a finger to check, she'd found herself gaping gently open and
lubricated with both their secretions. Their mental connection, it turned out, had ensured a low
level arousal in her at all times. No doubt that also played a part in the swollen lips, and the dull
internal ache she'd developed. Even her nipples remained swollen and tender as a consequence, and
her clitoris throbbed with need when she allowed herself to notice it. She wanted him at all times,
and it was exhausting.

Syrok's hand came up to thumb at one of Holly's red, slightly puffy lips, still swollen from him
gently thrusting into her mouth some time ago. His hand ghosted over numerous bite marks and
bruises, over a plump breast, tweaking an over-sensitized nipple and receiving a pleasing yelp in
response. He smiled lazily as his fingers drifted downward to dip into his mate, thrusting into the
puffy, gaping hole while his thumb swirled around the red, hardened clit. Holly shuddered at the
sensations and struggled to remain passive, and felt Syrok's pleasure at how she appeared to him.
For a time of mating, a time all about virility and sex and viability of producing offspring -- Holly
looked ideal. And so looking, even though she'd just recently finished sucking him off, he was
soon mounting her again.
It was several time cycles since he'd knotted at all, Holly thought groggily as he thrust lazily into her from behind. It was with a strange regret she noted that perhaps that phase was over, not to return for another few years. But that did mean that the cycle was progressing onward, which she knew was good. Her eyes drifted shut on that thought as Syrok continued to do as he needed.

Syrok was staring at her while she sat up in bed and drank, she realized. Simply lying there, watching her placidly. He didn't speak, and there wasn't exactly recognition in his eyes, but he didn't approach her in any way until she'd finished with her drink and laid back down beside him again. Then he went to her as if he'd been waiting patiently. It was the first sign of his mind returning, she thought through her exhaustion. She tried to analyze him through their bond, but was quickly swept away into the one being that was HollyAndSyrok.

It toned down gradually, and Holly didn't even notice at first. The bouts of sex became slowly less aggressive, though they were still interspersed with impressively aggressive one-offs. The recovery time in between became longer as they both recuperated, and as Syrok had less sexual frustration to expend. The long pseudo-sex of simply thrusting and grinding became prolonged as well, instead of the earlier, steadier ejaculations.

The first words Holly heard in days were a grunted, strained “be... still...” when she'd shifted to pull off of what she'd assumed to be a sleeping mate behind her. Apparently though Syrok was still fully aware of being sheathed inside his mate, even if he were uncharacteristically quiet himself, simply laying in stillness instead of that constant rocking she'd become so accustomed to.

“Are you awake then?” she questioned back at him, but he was silent once more, giving no indication he'd understood her words at all. Still, it was a sign that he was coming out of it. She laid her head back down on the pillow and laid still, as requested.

She had no idea it was the last one when it was happening. It was a round of sex like any other -- Holly on her back, and Syrok thrusting between her legs. Neither fast nor slow, but determined. This one was not idle, but productive. And when Syrok collapsed from his release and exertion, Holly wrapped her arms around him to cuddle him and stroke his hair as she sometimes did, feeling affectionate. What surprised her was the return of the knot, after all this time. She was certain it hadn't made any appearance in days. But that must mean.... Was it over? She blinked groggily, having lost all sense of time.

Her hands ghosted down her pliant lover to rest over the familiar chenesi, which she noted were significantly less raised and hardened than before. As Syrok groaned his knot firmed, stretching her tortured, swollen and bruised flesh one last time. She groaned with him. And as he rocked gently into her, she massaged her fingers into the chenesi as she'd learned to do, so expertly, and she felt his final emissions begin. Slow and strong, languid and filling, they took their time. It had to have been half an hour -- no, maybe a full hour of this impossible fullness that only expanded, the pressing of the swollen glands until they seemed to become slowly pliant, and then almost inverted, once again tender indentations in the flesh instead of the painful nodules of his Time.

Even as Syrok gave a keening whine of relief Holly's fingers continued their insistent ministrations. As long as the knot remained, she knew there to be more. She felt a bit bad for her exhausted, aching lover, as he ground his hips in frustration and continued to tiredly shudder as he expelled his last cum into her. Even after the rocking stopped and Syrok seemed to have drifted into a hazy
sleep, her fingers worked with gentle determination, and every so often another shudder accosted him even in his rest. And Holly herself, after a time, was lulled to sleep, feeling physically filled and emotionally sated like she never had before.
Chapter 65

Syrok awoke first. Holly was lying atop of him, though he realized that he'd actually softened and come out of her, copious amounts of cum sluicing around them. He was foggy, and couldn't remember anything of the past... however many days, with any coherency. It was a blur of images and sensations and emotions that he couldn't even begin to unpack. His shields were a tattered wreck and he felt Holly everywhere on him and within his mind. It wasn't unpleasant, exactly, but nor was it totally normal.

Around him the room was dim, but he could still make out how disheveled the bed was. These sheets would likely never come clean, he thought idly, and would need to be replaced. Then a surge of panic shot through him of the idea of them being replaced -- or even cleaned. He wanted their scent, their mess upon them. And he knew that that was illogical. Hormones, he told himself. Possession. He closed his eyes and took a steadying breath. His mind was still highly disordered, but he knew from his ability to recognize that, that his condition was over. There were things he needed to do. That they needed to do.

He took mental stock of his body. It was difficult to do, with his foggy head and lack of concentration. His hands shook -- hormones, perhaps, although also likely due to his lack of food and drink for so many days. His reserves had run out. Aches in places he'd never had aches before. His thighs, his arms, his back, his hips. And he knew how he'd exerted himself enough to wear those muscles out, and it made him wince with shame. Time for that later. His lower back in particular, his chenesi, felt ... weird, for lack of a better descriptor. Sore, but not in the same way as when they'd swelled in preparation for his Time. An overworked sort of feeling, perhaps. A tenderness.

Satisfied with his own well-being, he turned his mind finally to his mate, who still lay atop him, enfolded in his arms. The first thing he noticed was that he'd been instinctively dulling her pain receptors through their bond. How had he not noticed before now? He felt a spike of alarm. How much pain was she in? How was his tattered mind even able to provide this for her? Holly moaned slightly and roused in his arms at his anxiety and he forced himself to calm down, to even his breathing and she settled back in with a sigh.

Various pain points all over her body... everywhere. Though none of them felt excruciating from what he could judge. And she was breathing well. He forced calm upon himself, and gripped to it tightly. He'd been warned she'd be injured, he told himself. They'd known that would happen, and it would be alright. He had to contact the Healers now, as he'd been instructed.

Gently shifting Holly off of him inch by inch, he laid her on the soft bed and slipped himself off the mattress, only to have his legs nearly buckle beneath him and pain shoot through thighs and back. He gripped the bed and winced, holding himself stiffly until he felt able to shuffle across the room and grab his PADD. He sunk to the floor with it, leaning against the wall and already exhausted from his effort. His head swam and his vision darkened for a moment. It was another long minute before he was able to recall clearly enough how to contact the Healers with the pre-programmed number. Until he was able to bring his shaking fingers under enough physical control to be able to press the buttons competently.

When the hospital staff worker answered his call and calmly inquired how she could be of assistance, Syrok's mind took too long to parse language and he panicked a bit.

“Greetings. This is D'lechu regional hospital. How may I be of assistance?”
“...”

“Hello? If there is another party on the end of this line, please state your request.”

“... I need..” Syrok stumbled through language, it coming out harsh and fractured.

“Sir? What is it that you require? How may I serve?”

“... I must contact our Healer...” he wracked his brain to recall the name, and was horrified when he could not.

“What is your Healer's name?”

“...”

“Sir, are you still there?” the voice inquired tonelessly, calmly.

Syrok looked up as he heard a shuffling, and saw with alarm that his mate was trying to get up off of the bed.

“Do not!” he warned her with alarm.

Holly huffed. “Syrok, you're not making any sense to the woman on the end of the line.” she calmly explained, and as she tried to sit up she winced as all sorts of things pulled and smarted. When she tried to stand for two seconds, she realized right away that her legs would no longer support her. Her thighs quivered but were simply too overworked from being held up or open for long periods of time. She thought she might even have pulled something.

Across the room Holly heard the soft hellos from the PADD, as the confused Vulcan on the other end of the line tried to make some sense of what was going on.

Syrok was already trying to scrabble across the floor toward his mate to stop her from hurting herself, and almost put the PADD down in his effort to do so.

“Bring that here.” Holly said calmly and gestured out with her hand for Syrok to hand it over. After some more awkward half-crawling across the floor, Holly took up the device and interrupted the confused and clearly quite annoyed woman on the other end of the line.

“Greetings.” Holly said crisply, if tiredly. “I’m seeking Healer T’Pell. My mate has just completed his Time and we are in need of assistance.” It was an efficient exchange of information after that, once the woman actually understood who was calling and why, and why the first party hadn’t made any sense. An address. Relevant names of parties involved, and the understanding of why T’Pell specifically had been requested -- as Holly was human, and T’Pell was the regional specialist in xenobiology. Questions posed rapidly about the status of both parties and an assessment of how dire the situation was, even as a medical vehicle was dispatched and sent their way. Holly calmly answered every one, exhausted as she was. She was grateful things weren't any worse, all things considered. It was just beginning to sink in: they had made it.

As she finally set the PADD down on the bed beside her, she noticed her hands shook. She looked around the room and was overwhelmed by what she saw there, even as Syrok pulled her in beside him, now back on the bed, and held her possessively, protectively.

The fitted sheet they'd brought from home, that had never really fit the Vulcan mattress, had long since found its way to the floor somewhere. It couldn't be seen. The sheet beneath was so thickly encrusted with bodily fluids that Holly couldn't even make out its original color. Patches of it were
still slimy and damp. Some of said slime was oozing from her even now, down onto the sheets. She wondered whether the mattress itself would even survive.

The pillows hadn't long stayed on the bed. They were some distance away on the floor, and had been for days. And the single top sheet and blanket where pooled on the floor soaked in still drying piss. It was pungent, but nothing compared to the overpowering scent of sex around them. Holly couldn't even imagine how bad it must really smell to those who would come in from outside. They'd certainly been acclimated to it, and it still was ripe. And she and her mate were utterly filthy.

Littering the floor directly next to the bed were piles of empty water bottles, food wrappers, fruit skins and rinds, empty packing containers. She took stock of the piles along the wall, and saw that she'd had plenty of extra food and water if needed, and wasn't sure whether that meant she'd been under-eating, or if they'd simply stocked carefully. She was both hungry and thirsty, though. Well, soon enough she'd be taken care of.

“You're blocking my pain through the bond, aren't you?” she questioned her mate.

Syrok didn't bother trying to verbalize a response. Not now when his mind was in such disorder. A single nod confirmed it.

“You'll have to stop soon.” she warned him.

He nodded again. Then laced their fingers together tightly. He didn't wish to be separated from his mate. Belatedly, he realized they were still naked, and looked around for something to wear. He couldn't seem to recall where anything would be.

Holly caught the direction of his thoughts and gave him a quick kiss, and a mental nudge of chastisement. “They'll provide for us.” she told him. She'd been instructed in how all of this would go ahead of time, and knew that Syrok had been told the same. It was strange to see him still so confused, and to feel how clear her own head still was, even after everything.

When the medical staff arrived, they came into the bedroom with hover stretchers and encouraged both of them to lie down, helping them with the most dignity possible. Holly had never been more grateful for the Vulcan ability to mask all emotions or judgments, because she knew what they looked like, what their room looked like. Knowing that this was the natural way of things here didn't help much for her embarrassment.

She was still so tired, and was glad to pull a sheet up around her and turn onto her side, dozing off in the medical vehicle even as she was examined by whirring remote devices and physical inspection alike. By the time they arrived at the hospital, Holly had managed to fall back to sleep.

Syrok was struggling to keep himself under control the entire ride there. Though he was but inches away from Holly on his own stretcher, he didn't want to relinquish touch of her, nor did he wish to be around so many other people. A low growl rumbled in his chest in spite of his best attempts to stop it as he watched Holly being touched and inspected for injury, as he was being looked over as well. His complaints were noticed but dismissed.

Vulcans were efficient. By the time they arrived at the hospital, all the data had been collected and readings taken. Their files were sent digitally ahead and the couple was situated comfortably in a private room where they could share a bed. A meld was next -- performed by T'Pell quickly and efficiently on both parties. Seeing everything intact, she withdrew and sent the couple away from
their room to a private bath down the hall. With Holly still asleep in Syrok's arms, she gave Syrok detailed instructions on douching and how to clean Holly out thoroughly. He growled and narrowed his eyes at the very idea of removing his essence from his mate, but it was patiently explained to him that she had a vaginal infection along with the host of other problems afflicting her. The mild tearing made the infection more dangerous, and the acidic pH of Vulcan ejaculate only exacerbated the environment. His logical mind understood where his emotional mind would not. He would clean her. He simply would not like it.

Holly stirred as she and Syrok were wheeled to the room with the sunken tub and bench seats. She roused completely when the attendants dismissed themselves and Syrok began to carefully lower his mate into the hot water -- that is, deliciously hot for Holly, and tolerable for Syrok. So much water in a desert -- a rare occurrence. And while Vulcans rarely took any joy in bathing in a water bath, it was the most efficient way to accomplish cleansing of this scale. A medical necessity. As if to highlight the medical nature of the event, various tools to aid them were arranged neatly on the floor beside the tub. There was no ambiance that might make such a tub romantic to certain other species -- only a sterile scent and the sharp lines of a hospital.

“Mmm.” Holly sighed and relaxed into the wet heat, her eyes coming open to stare at her mate as he held her.

“We must bathe, pi'veh.” Syrok managed, a bit proud of the fact that his language processing was returning to him.

Holly reached out for a nearby cloth and cake of soap but he shushed her and gently pushed her wrist away, taking up the task for himself. Here in the bright light and clear water, he could see the litany of bruises and bite marks across her skin, and felt guilt pooling in his belly. He'd done this to her. He would care for her now. With infinite tenderness he began the laborious task of wiping a week's worth of filth from Holly's skin. One week, he'd found out. A full seven days of brutality that she'd had to endure.

“'m tired.” Holly muttered in Standard, and belatedly wondered whether Syrok could parse Standard yet. But he understood nonetheless, because he could feel her exhaustion, made all the more poignant by the warm bath. It might be medical necessity to Syrok, but he understood that it was actually rather relaxing for Holly.

When he'd finally finished with Holly's skin, he found the bulb left for them and with a mental nudge of apology he began the task of cleaning Holly out, sometimes sluicing water gently into her, other times working a single digit gently within to... inelegantly, dislodge a bit of gunk. Even with his tender care, Holly hissed a little in displeasure. And Syrok, for his part, blanched a bit to realize how tender every bit of flesh was that he encountered. Flashes of what had happened flitted randomly through his mind, and he felt oddly guilty that he didn't feel more guilty.

“"You're still muting the pain, aren't you?" Holly asked knowingly, and he nodded. “You'll have to stop soon.” she caressed his cheek. He nodded again. It wasn't healthy to interfere in such a way for a long duration -- not mentally healthy for either party, and not really physically healthy either. It may have been a necessity before, but it was time for Holly to heal the good old fashioned way. That meant having an accurate pain assessment, and meant she should stop having psychic interference in the functions of her own mind. He knew this, and he would stop soon. Just... after the bath.

Clean enough within, he moved to her hair. It was lank with sweat and thick with grime as well. No part of either of them seemed to have been left unmarred. Now he took his time, gently massaging her scalp, working the dirt free of her thick hair, so unlike his own. He was pleased and
in awe of how trusting Holly was, how receptive to his every touch. After a week of... he looked at
the bruises across her skin... a week of that, and she still wanted him. Judging by the adoration and
deep yearning in their bond, she wanted him more than ever. It almost boggled the mind. Except
that he felt the same way. They'd shared in something profound.

Leaning her back into the water he supported her as he rinsed her hair, and Holly was content to
float and look up at him. When he finished, she simply turned him him. “Your turn.”

Syrok felt as if he should be doing everything for them now, everything to care for and protect his
mate. But once she'd begun, he was all to pleased to lean back on the bench and allow Holly to
worship his own overtaxed frame. He was not as damaged, but he was thoroughly spent. His level
of physical activity over the last week was incredible, and the demands upon his body, to mate and
mate and mate, with no breaking for food, drink, or rest, had taken their toll.

His legs, like Holly's barely wanted to function. His hands, like hers, shook from overexertion,
from lack of sugar, and in his case from hormonal shift. His skin was as filthy as hers was, and his
cock, now limp and fully retracted inside of his genital pouch was chafed and sore from use. Holly
seemed uncertain of how to clean his alien biology, but with a careful finger of his own, he was
able to take care of it while she watched on with fascination. That they should become so intimate
and still not know certain things about one another made him smirk with gentle amusement.

His back was a knot of tension the whole way through, but nothing was so tender as his chenesi,
now once again appearing as the delicate, barely discernible mounds Holly had first known when
she'd met him -- almost inverted when her fingers ghosted over them.

“Does it hurt?” she asked with concern, leaning in to kiss his neck.

“Yes.” he answered truthfully. “But I was warned it would.” he sighed. “I've also been told, as
have you, that massage will help, not harm.”

“But they seem so tender....” Holly argued, loathe to cause more discomfort to her lover, after all
he'd already been through.

“You know as well as I that if any emission is left in them, it can lead to infection if not expelled.
The Healer will not be shy when she inspects them, and if emission remains she will also not be shy
to drain it. I would prefer it be you.”

“Here? Now?” she asked, pressing her thumbs deeply next to his shoulder blades, slowly
loosening the knot there.

“Here. Now.” he confirmed.

With a reluctant sigh, Holly arranged them on the bench so that Syrok could rest against the floor,
head propped on his arms as she kneaded into the knots of his back. She would move her hands
down... eventually. But first she would relax him, bring him pleasure. And sure enough, after some
long minutes his hard back was loosening and easing to her insistent prods. With practiced ease she
pressed her thumbs along the chenesi, to the center and moving outward. He groaned and grunted
in combined relief and discomfort. She wasn't certain exactly what she was looking for, how to
determine precisely when he was as emptied as required. But she knew just as Syrok had said
about possible infections. Pon farr was a trial for everyone involved.

Syrok felt himself shudder as a final weak emission, then another, pooled out of his limp organ and
into the water. It wasn't pleasant, exactly, but it was a sort of relief. He sighed and relaxed
fractionally, Holly's touch now less painful and more soothing.
“Better?” she questioned

“Mm.” he grunted affirmatively.

There was no need for him to move as Holly started in on washing his hair, carding soothingly through it just as he’d done for her. Only when it was time to rinse did he shift his tired body enough to do so.

The water which had been clear upon entry was now murky. As tired as they were, they were ready to leave the mess behind. Outside the tub, utilitarian, somewhat scratchy towels awaited them. Holly was reminded keenly that this was no honeymoon resort. She smiled in amusement as she considered that there probably wasn’t a plush towel anywhere on the entire planet of Vulcan. They just simply wouldn’t see the point.

Across the room the sink beckoned. Toothbrushes had been set out for them, and small tins of powder. They staggered on unsteady legs there, and were more than pleased for the opportunity to cleanse their mouths for the first time in so many days. Holly was perhaps the most grateful, as she’d still been trying to eat off and on that entire time. She was displeased to see a bit of blood in her spit, but not surprised. The bacteria that had gotten in her gums was clear now, and her mouth, like everything else, would heal.

The most luxurious of all was the strange half-squat toilet characteristic of Vulcan that she availed herself to. The bathroom, just across the hall from her the whole week, had been too far to travel with a crazed Vulcan preventing her. Still only pee, she noted, and only a little. She was probably constipated from dehydration. That wouldn't be fun when it finally came. And as Syrok began to relinquish his shielding of her pain centers., as he'd promised, she was aware first and foremost of the slight burn when she urinated, and the insistence that she go again. A UTI. The glory of using a toilet had been ruined.

Holly whimpered a bit as sharp pains and dull made themselves known across her body. And within it. The most poignant ache was that within her sex, deep inside. She'd sustained some bruising no doubt, and she could feel the entire region was still swollen and tender. Syrok handed her a robe with a look of regret and understanding, and they dressed themselves in scratchy, undecorated hospital grays. He helped her back into her hover chair, and seating himself in his, he pressed the wall button to ring for the attendants.

It was only after they were taken back to their room and arranged comfortably next to one another in bed that T'Pell finally returned to recount the litany of damage. First to Holly.

Bruises and bite marks were the most prolific. One bite, or rather a series of overlapping ones at the joint of her neck and shoulder on the left side had become mildly infected but was easily treated with an ointment. Said ointment was actually being applied by one aid, as another affixed an IV to her right arm. She winced at the needle and buried her face against her partner to her left, resulting in a sharp chastisement from T'Pell as it impeded the treatment of the bite mark.

She had a bacterial infection in her vagina and mild tearing there that would heal on its own, as well as bruising and swelling that again, would heal on its own. The infection, as well as the UTI were being treated with antibiotics mixed in to the fluids she was receiving intravenously. She was dehydrated after all, and under nourished, though the IV also contained basic nutrients and real food was being prepared for them and would be brought shortly, and at regular intervals during their stay.

She had damaged her ribs on her right hand side -- they'd torn away from the cartilage a bit at some point and now shifted around disconcertingly at times. Holly was told that since there was nothing
wrong with the actual bones, there was no treatment prescribed, and they would simply heal themselves over the course of the next month.

Exhaustion. Constipation. And a litany of smaller things that she hadn't even noticed or didn't understand. The bottom line was that she'd be fine, and had come out of the Time better than even many Vulcan women. It was with happy relief that she smiled and leaned back against her pillows finally. It was over. She'd made it, and they were safe, and she could barely believe it.

Syrok, for his part, was mildly dehydrated and undernourished as well, but was expected to recover naturally once presented with food and drink. His aches and pains would recede with proper rest. More pressing was his disordered mind, and he was cautioned that he must begin meditation attempts immediately and rebuild his shields. It was an arduous task, but a necessary one. His hormonal fluctuations and his uncharacteristic possessiveness he was reassured would dissipate over the next week. His chenesi were thoroughly inspected, much to his humiliation, but thankfully Holly had been successful in the bath in evacuating the remaining retained fluids. The rest of his genitals had already been thoroughly poked and prodded on the ride to the hospital, just as had Holly's.

Syrok asked about contacting his cousin, Sherreht, but was informed it had already been done. He was listed as the familial contact and was assuredly already at the home, cleaning all evidence of the Time from their quarters. The couple would remain in the hospital for the next day or two while their condition was monitored, but as soon as Holly was no longer in need of IV assistance, they were free to leave and recover on their own.

Holly had slept nearly twelve hours. She'd realized when she'd been on her way to the hospital that by the light level, it was in the small hours of the morning -- pre-dawn. She'd lost all track of time during the pon farr, and now with her strange sleep schedule she woke up again in the evening, just in time for the evening meal. She stirred and blinked up at Syrok who was sitting up in bed, eyes closed and legs crossed in meditation. He blinked his own eyes open and turned them to regard her.

“Are you well rested?” he asked gently in Standard, and Holly beamed. He was back.

“Mm. You seem recovered.” She shifted to sit herself up against her pillows, still achy all over but feeling much restored. She was also pleased to note that the dreadful IV had been removed from her.

“I am adequate. I believe it will be several days until I am able to reach a sufficient level of meditation, and certainly several days for both of us until we are physically improved.”

Just then one of the orderlies came into the room, wheeling a cart ahead of him and to the side of the bed. One bowl for each of them, and tea for each as well.

Holly nearly laughed when she saw what was in the bowl clearly intended for her. Chicken noodle soup. They'd obviously gone out of their way to procure such a product specifically for her visit, because no Vulcan would be caught eating meat, and certainly not preparing something so stereotypically Terran. She even suspected she recognized the brand. Most probably she was anemic in addition to all her other ailments. It wouldn't surprise her. She was only grateful she didn't have her period as well on top of all her other problems. The Time had come suspiciously close to her ovulation -- when she would be at her most fertile, even though she could not possibly be in sync with a Vulcan hormonal cycle, and couldn't become pregnant by one. Strange.
In Syrok's bowl was only a plain vegetable broth for him to sip. His body wasn't quite ready to go on solid foods as of yet, but it was in need of nutrients. He'd already had two such meals while Holly had remained blissfully asleep, taking her own nutrients and fluids intravenously.

And the tea? Classic Vulcan spice -- overly sharp, and overly hot, just as they both preferred it. It was a comfort of home after all that had happened. They took their time with it, sipping it well after the rest of the meal had been consumed.

Holly was almost too comfortable to leave the bed. It was plush, and clean, and contained her mate. Her bruises hurt less here as she settled in and didn't move much. But the bathroom beckoned so she stood unsteadily and made her way across the room to the small attached room containing only a low toilet and a sink. Already peeing was more comfortable, she noticed. Whatever drugs she'd been given must be doing their work, which was a relief.

“Should we contact T'Sala?” she questioned from the toilet, door hanging open so that she could continue to converse with her mate.

“Negative. I assume she is already aware we've finished.”

Holly popped back out looking curious. “Really? How so?”

“As soon as we made contact with the hospital, word was sent to our family contact, Sherreht so that he could begin cleanup procedures and inform our respective Clans of our well-being. As you technically have some relation to Selek's people, they would have been informed --”

“And therefore Selek himself, and then T'Sala....” Holly finished, and gave a huff. “For something that's such a secret, word sure travels fast among Vulcans.”

“We are a telepathic species.” he answered smoothly. “Most of the information would not even need to be uttered aloud.”

“Hm. I guess.” Holly answered skeptically. Of course Syrok was correct about the telepathy -- but she still thought that this *pon farr* thing wasn't nearly as big a secret as everybody seemed to want to pretend. Hell, she was aware now that there were even special facilities on Vulcan for those going through their Time who had no private refuge to utilize. It was something they'd discussed as a potential last resort for themselves, though she was glad they'd not had go anywhere so impersonal.


“I am well.” he answered very quietly, feeling somber. “We did well.” He gave his mate a gentle squeeze.

“We survived it.” she smiled a bit.

“Yes.”

“Was it as horrible as you'd been expecting?”

Syrok was distant for a moment, trying to think how to even begin answering such a question. “In some ways, it was as I'd imagined, as I'd been told. In others, I could not have possibly comprehended without the first hand experience. And still my memories of it are disordered and patchy. I understand that for humans, most memories appear as such. But my memory is eidetic. The disorientation around the event is disconcerting, and some parts may never fully return.
Though order has come slowly as I’ve been able to meditate.”

“If you'd like, you can see my own memories.” Holly offered. “It's a different perspective, and I'm sure I don't remember it all either, but maybe....”

Syrok was silent, and Holly could feel he was unsure.

“What's wrong?” she probed.

“It means a great deal that you'd offer.” he answered quietly, interlacing their fingers and staring at their hands. It was overly affectionate and probably indecent even in this private room, as a hospital was still very public, but he was still recovering and thought perhaps it could be forgiven. “But I will admit that I am... afraid... that I will see a side of myself I will not like.”

Holly's free hand came up to the side of his face, and she looked at him earnestly. “Syrok, no.” she soothed. “Some of it was rough, but none of it was brutal. And some of it was beautiful. We shared something special. Surely you remember at least a little of that.”

He gave a hesitant smile. “Some of it, yes. But I was not in my right mind. I was like some animal.” he said with distaste.

“I know.” she reassured. “And I prefer you when you can think and speak and be yourself. But I promise it wasn't all bad. I could still feel that you loved me.”

And that was an important revelation. Important for him to hear, to internalize. It meant a lot to him to know that even when he was so absent from himself, so out of control of his actions, a part of him must have remained, a part of him that knew Holly and cherished her and wanted to care for her, a part of him that still loved her. Love was not a very Vulcan concept, not exactly in the way humans meant it. To cherish someone was the ultimate endearment -- to love, something else, more romanticized and with less weight to it for his people. But he knew what love was to Holly, and he knew he felt it for her, and it was utterly important that she receive this love from him in order to thrive and flourish. Even now as he heard her words he felt his heart swell with the gentle emotion, and he allowed it. “K’diwa.” he said affectionately, and bent to share a human kiss.

A kiss was shared, and then a long look. Something wordless and nebulous exchanged through the bond, and then Syrok's hand was coming up to touch her face and begin the meld. Such intimate sharing was common after a pon farr, he knew, though he had been uncertain whether he was ready to see the memories Holly was so willing to share. He trusted her now, and allowed himself to be open to them, taking in every one as if it were precious, both the good and the bad. Some of it he'd already recalled on his own, but there were some missing fragments here, as well as insights to how Holly had felt throughout. But all through the patchy stretch of time was that thread of caring, and it reassured him now to know.

Like all Vulcans from time immemorial, he would survive this, and heal, and do it again many times. He felt so much older now to have come through this rite, and had a new appreciation for just why one's pon farr was seen as a marker of adulthood. It was life altering. Like his kahs-wan, or like the first time one knew the death of a pet or family. Like his loss of T'Rena, when everything had changed.

When he emerged from the meld, he was unsurprised to see Holly immediately begin to nod off against his chest. She still had much healing to do, was already so tired and would tire from a meld even in the best of circumstances. He would meditate once more before he, too, slept through the night. Perhaps in the morning they could both return to his home to continue to recover in privacy and peace.
Chapter 66

Holly stood on the front stoop of Syrok's family home and stared out at the desert. It was gorgeous. It was still mid-morning and the sun was bright and hot overhead, though it wasn't a white yellow light like on Earth -- even so early in the day the red overtones were brilliant and blazing. The desert sands baked hot and dusty, ruddy brown below. And in the distance, Holly could make out mountains. Some even looked close enough to reach by foot. She wondered whether the distance was deceiving, whether Syrok would take her there, allow her to be out in the elements for that long. Was it dangerous? Were there some of the animals she'd learned about?

“Pi-veh.” Syrok came to stand behind her, looping his arms loosely around her waist to pull her against him. She sagged tiredly. “You should be resting.”

“I am resting.” she argued back. They'd only arrived at his home two hours ago. They'd had a light breakfast in the hospital, and then Sherreht had shown up with an aircar to drive them home, then leave again. Just as expected, all evidence of their Time had been erased from the house. Holly still found the bedroom a bit eerie, and hadn't wanted to spend any time in it. She wasn't sure how she'd feel about it when it was time to sleep that night.

She did know that Syrok wanted her to sleep now. And she probably could -- she was sleepy. But not in that room. Not only with the memories she hadn't yet fully processed, but also the lack of windows -- typical on Vulcan, but not on Earth. She'd been cooped up ever since she'd arrived on this planet, and hadn't had any time to really take in the fact that she was on a foreign world. Now she knew her time here was so short. She had to recover physically and emotionally, and begin making up her school work again soon. It didn't seem real. Starfleet was a hazy unreality that had nothing to do with being a Vulcan's wife.

For now though -- there was the view. There was the heavy pull of gravity on her bones, grounding her even as it made her sluggish. There was the heat, at once overpowering and welcome to her tired flesh. The alien scents and sights to drink in. This was Syrok's home. She wanted to memorized it, wrap it up inside her. She wanted to see every corner of it before she had to leave. And the thin air -- more breathable now that she'd become somewhat acclimated, but still obvious when she exerted herself even slightly. She was frail here, but didn't mind for a second.

“When do we get to go somewhere?” she asked excitedly, still staring out. “Or meet people? I want to meet more of your family, your Clan.”

Syrok's face lightened almost imperceptibly, but she knew it was a Vulcan smile. Not as obvious now that he was regaining his control over himself, but still obvious to her, had she been looking. He pressed a kiss to her temple. “Later. When I am certain you will not exhaust yourself. Now come.” He tugged on her arm, directing her back into the house. “I will make us tea. Then we will meditate together. If you are bored of that before lunch, there are many books in the sitting room. You've barely looked at the house.”

And that was true. There really hadn't been time. But now that Syrok mentioned it, she wanted to see everything there was to see inside as well. She wanted to open kitchen cupboards and drawers, to see what kinds of utensils and bowls she'd find there. She wanted to look at every book, or pillow, or decoration in the entire house, and to soak in what it meant to be Vulcan, and what it meant to be Syrok's family. Excitedly she followed him with a grin into the kitchen, feeling delightfully pampered to have him make the tea for them this time. Syrok was insistent that he do most of the work for them while Holly rested, and insisted that she sit down at the table while he worked. She tried to point out that she couldn't very well explore the house from a seated position,
but she let him win this round.

Syrok grounded himself in the ritual of tea. His hands knew every motion, and it was made better by being once again in his childhood home. Every cup and spoon was where he remembered it, even years later. It was soothing. And if he had something to do, something ritualistic to focus on, he was better able to control his mind. Not that he particularly wanted to control himself -- not here in the privacy of his own home. His hormones were still in flux as his body returned to its normal state, and he found himself feeling overly affectionate and possessive of Holly -- all normal after effects of pon farr. It was part of why they would have privacy and closeness during their recovery. All the same, he had to exercise control once more, get himself back into an appropriate habit. And the tea would help.

They sipped in silence and closeness, and Syrok's eyes flickered with fond amusement as Holly watched every door he opened with keen interest. And when at long last it was over, he retreated to his room, now clean and neat as ever, to meditate.

The last thing Holly wanted to do was meditate, really. One of the things that had brought them together was that she did have a meditative background. It was immeasurably useful to her, and pleasant in its own way. But Vulcan meditation was a whole new level, and was hard work. It was arduous, though she knew it too was important for the maintenance of their shared bond, and of their shields. To add to that, she knew that she'd have to confront the maelstrom of the last week when she finally settled down, and she was reluctant to begin the process. While it hadn't been traumatic, it had been... big. It was a lot to reconcile. And on top of all else, Syrok wanted them to meditate here, in the same room it had happened.

"Do we have to do it here?" she complained. "It's so beautiful and sunny out. Let's move the mat and the fire pot to the sitting room.

"If your aim is to admire the view, then admire the view. If your aim is to meditate, then sit." he argued back, and Holly knew his tone would brook no argument. His statement was not an invitation for her to go off and admire a view. She huffed and sat herself down in the gloomy room, now hauntingly sterile, and allowed him to prepare the flame as a point of focus.

Two hours. Approximately two hours until lunch time. Maybe she could manage to meditate for a good hour of it, then find a book in the sitting room and soak in the sun. That was the plan when she let herself drift into the flickering flame, let herself begin to explore her memories of the previous days, her overpowering emotions that surfaced when she thought of it. Irrational thoughts, too, like wishing that the soiled sheets hadn't gone missing. She knew Syrok had struggled with the same thought, and wondered whether she'd gotten it from him. Aroused flooded her one moment, a sort of strange regret the next, when she realized it would be years until they shared some of those acts again. A cacophony of thoughts and feelings to sort through.

But it only took half an hour until she was yawning and nodding off where she sat. Her overworked legs were cramping and her nether region in its entirety felt sore. She'd just... she looked around for something to lean on, and groggily thought of moving to the sitting room and lying on the rug in the sun. But before she could do any of these things, her mate was leading her to the bed -- the same bed she wasn't sure she'd ever feel normal about sleeping in, and tucking a sheet around her as she drifted off. One of her last thoughts was that it was pretty pathetic that she'd been awake only a few hours before needing to rest again. But then she thought she'd kind of earned the right.

When it was time for lunch, Holly awoke and wandered into the kitchen of her own accord. The smell had perked her up as much as the nap had restored her. She wrinkled her nose when she saw
the pills and hypos being assembled. She was certain the drugs had something to do with her sleeping so much, and they made her feel a little sick. Of course, that's why she was to have them with a meal -- the food would help to offset it. Antibiotics for various infections, anti-fungals to counter the likely yeast infection once the antibiotics had taken effect. Pain medications. Iron supplements -- she'd gone anemic again. She sighed and allowed Syrok to administer hypos without complaint -- then two tablets with a quick swallow of water. Then she pattered around the kitchen while Syrok cooked, getting in the way and into everything she hadn't been allowed to inspect during morning tea. She smiled when she realized Syrok didn't even try to stop her.

They ate most of the meal in silence, a custom which Holly was both becoming quite used to at this point, as well as the fact that she was too tired and distracted to know what to speak of. Little half formed thoughts from Syrok also flitted through her mind, subtle and confused enough that she almost missed it was happening at first. She turned a questioning eye toward him. “Is that you?”

“Hm?” he looked up from his own food as if broken out of his own silent contemplation. “Ah. I apologize. It seems my shields are still not sufficient.” he said simply.

“So those are your thoughts?” she asked curiously.

“How much of them could you make out?” Syrok now turned his full attention to Holly, a bit surprised that she'd noticed anything at all. After all, she was psi-null and he wasn't projecting, though he supposed that by now he ought to be more used to how readily Holly had adapted to their bond at every stage thus far.

“I don't know.” she toyed with her food, brow furrowing in concentration. “None of it, I guess. I can't seem to remember, or to have picked anything specific out. I'm not even sure of the topic or your mood, but I had this weird sense that you were thinking about something. I guess it's sort of like hearing voices from a different room in a house.” She brightened, looking up at him with a smile. “Weird. Healer Sterran said he wasn't sure whether I'd get anything at all. Do you think it'll be like a full Vulcan mind link?” she asked, barely restraining her excitement.

Syrok couldn't stem his own illogical hopes in the face of such exuberance. “Perhaps.” he said simply. “Though we should not expect it.”

“But we can work on it.”

“We can try.” he acquiesced easily, anticipating a time in the near future when his mind would be ordered enough to make a concentrated effort. To share whole thoughts, whole conversations with Holly, and across considerable distance... it would be more than he'd hoped for. Yet now he had considerable doubt about any “knowledge” the Healers had about inter-species relationships. It seemed to him to be almost impossible to know what to expect.

As Holly waited impatiently for Syrok to finish his suitably paced meal, she fidgeted in her seat. “So what should we do after lunch?” she asked a bit too eagerly, her eyes still trained on the desert outside the window.

“K'diwa.” Syrok sighed affectionately. “I am still much in need of meditation, and you in need of rest. We've only just returned from the hospital. You've been through an ordeal and should be resting.”

“I just finished resting!” she complained.

“Then perhaps --”
“I know what you're going to --”

“meditation would be in order.”

“say. I don't want to meditate right now.” she whined, and was fully aware she was acting much like a child -- a human child of course. No Vulcan child would ever make such a fuss about a basic necessity. “Not now.” she begged plaintively. “ Aren't you tired yourself? You've been at it all morning.”

“Negative.” he answered smoothly. “I find it is...” Syrok searched for the best word to describe it, and landed on “needed.” He couldn't possibly describe just how needed this meditative reprieve was after the chaos of the past days, but Holly at least seemed to understand enough of him and his people by now that she relented with a sigh. “You may also benefit.” he continued. “And at some point we must meditate jointly to see to the health of our bond.”

“I know, I know.... I'm just...”

“Tired?” he asked knowingly.

Holly stuck her tongue out and made an altogether illogical face, but Syrok was used to her nonsense by now and didn't waste time in questioning it. “I don't suppose you'll let me wander the desert on my own for a while?”

Syrok didn't even have to dignify that question with an answer, his stare was so entirely expressionless.

“Alright. Books then, you said? In the sitting room?” She was already levering herself up from the table and padding far too carefully into the other room. Perhaps a walk wouldn't be wise anyway. She could feel a sharp sort of pain between her legs when she shifted wrong, and her ribs felt unnervingly like they were crunching around inside of her somehow. With resignation, she settled herself onto a sort of bench that was the closest she'd get to a Vulcan couch and curled up with the first book she'd found not in Golic script. It would do for now. Perhaps tomorrow she'd see a bit more of this alien world, or at least have a bit of company.

Preparing for bed that first night was weird -- nothing at all like the endless twilight of pon farr, and nothing like the haze that was her time in the hospital. No, this was her first proper night on Vulcan, and there was a lot to take in. The sitting room and attached kitchen had windows leading out to the front of the house (the back of the house being built into solid rock), and the house was largely shut up during the day. While it was still a bit hot for Holly's experience, the climate control did hum away softly all through the day to keep the place cool while allowing bright sunlight to stream in through the front rooms, and of course the rock surrounding them helped out with that.

At night, the temperature in the desert would drop precipitously, especially this far out away from the city. And for several hours around dusk and early night, the climate control system would power itself down as the windows opened to animal-proofed slats automatically -- modern forcefields keeping out even small flying insects that could be a nuisance. The cool dusty air of the desert couldn't even compare to the cool air of the woods in some of Holly's rural past. She found herself standing at the windows just to breathe it in and feel the chill on her bare skin, raising goosebumps.

Outside it was impossibly dark. Not only were there few neighbors, but this region and the planet
in general had laws in place preventing the sort of light pollution so ever present on Earth. All was
dark, but not silent. When she listened, Holly could hear the slow wind whistling through the rock
formations, blowing sand, and thudding against the mountains around them. And in the distance,
various scuttlings or the occasional bird-like call -- animals that could have been anything to her,
because though she'd covered some basic flora and fauna for the planet in her classes, there was far
too much over far too wide an area for them to go into any detail, and they'd certainly never even
tried to delve into sounds. She sensed from Syrok though that he knew every sound out there, even
more intimately than she could name the sounds of her own homes through the years. He'd lived
here his whole life, after all, and he'd survived his kahs-wan.

When a final sitting of tea was long over and the kitchen spotless, it was time for sleep, and while
Holly was still a bit nervous about Syrok's room and the memories it held, her morning nap had
dispelled some of her fears. Everything was so calm now, so normal, and she found herself looking
forward to seeing what any normal night was like for him.

First there was the shower to contend with, of course. Holly had her choice of taking an awkward
sort of bird bath in the old fashioned stone sink as done in ancient times, or using the more modern
sonics that Syrok had always preferred. For Holly, the sonics were the obvious choice, because
they were the most common on Starfleet's ships. It was also her first experience with the things,
and it was as novel as it was strange and awkward. She never fully had the tactile experience of
feeling clean from it all, but with a little help from Syrok she managed to get through the
experience and even somewhat clean her hair. The whole thing really was more than simply
standing still and letting the shower do its work, she found, and it hadn't been entirely what she'd
expected.

For starters, there were the oils. While they weren't necessary, she learned that many Vulcans
coated themselves in a thin sheen of oil -- sometimes scented (scented similarly to their incense and
tea, regardless of Syrok's scent rants), often not -- before they began their shower. It served as a
sort of lotion that was welcome against the desert dryness in modern days. Once this step was
complete, the sonic did most of the work, but there was strategic turning about and lifting hair or
arms out of the way so that the body was cleaned evenly, she found. Syrok did all of this
instinctively at this point in his life, but Holly had all the awkward grace of a child and Syrok was
highly amused watching her fumble through it.

And finally there was hair care. Holly was astonished to learn that first a layer of powder was
added to the hair, as a sort of dry shampoo. This was combed through, cleaned through with the
sonic vibrations of the shower, and then a layer of oil was added as a sort of conditioner, and the
“rinse” was repeated. All of it used a very minimal amount of product that was almost entirely
unscented, and she was baffled at the fact that it did seem to somehow wash out with these
vibrations alone. She brushed her hair more than was perhaps necessary out of a sort of paranoia
that it couldn't possibly all come out without water, but she supposed a whole planet (and a whole
star fleet) couldn't be entirely wrong.

Then of course was the oral care, largely the same as it would be at home but with the strange
tooth powder in lieu of paste, made pasty only by the addition of water from the sink. The herbed,
spicy taste of it and the chalkiness of the clay always left an aftertaste that again made her question
instinctively the cleanliness of it when she was used to a sort of artificial mint flavoring in all her
Earth products, but who was she to judge? It would do.

And as always, the strange half-squat, low bowled toilets that she'd gotten the knack of by now but
found nevertheless strange.

One final round of hypos administered by Syrok, and she was ready for her rest, relieved that Syrok
had laid out sleeping robes for the both of them. She wasn't certain how she'd handle nudity now when feeling so physically out of sorts, not to mention the lingering emotional weirdness from it all, but Syrok seemed to have no intimate intentions this night at least, and she was grateful. As far as he'd indicated, honestly, she'd not have to worry about anything until she was one hundred percent recovered from the ordeal, and she wasn't even certain he could bring himself to want sex after all of that anyway.

This room, tucked away from the night breeze and desert sounds had a certain cosiness about it late in the night, she realized, and the pitch blackness that accompanied being away from the windows was sort of nice. During the pon farr she hadn't really experienced that either, as some lights had been left strategically on so that she'd always be able to see around her, if dimly. Now it was cool and serene, quiet and dark, and her robe was soft against her skin, her mate wrapped protectively around her body. The sheets were crisp and new and the room smelled of incense, and Holly had barely laid her head down when she fell fast asleep.
When Holly awoke, it was to the smell of food, the sound of someone moving about elsewhere in the house, and a dim light filtering in to the dark room from the hall. She stretched and looked around for a clock, remembering groggily that of course she wouldn't find one easily on Vulcan. Damned internal time sense. She had no clue what time it was without a window to at least give her some hint.

When she wandered into the kitchen still in her sleeping robe she was greeted by the sight of Syrok, fully dressed and alert sipping tea while scrolling through his PADD. She'd barely reached for her own cup in the cabinets when he chastised her and got her safely into a seat while he fetched tea and breakfast for her, as well as her necessary but unwanted regimen of medications. The plentiful sun streaming in from the sitting room told her it was only mid-morning. She'd slept in but not enough to ruin her sleep schedule.

“What are you working on there?” she asked curiously, indicating the computer while she reached for her tea and some kreyla.

“Correspondence.” he said simply.

“With?”

“If I were feeling hyperbolic, I would be tempted to say everyone.” he answered dryly. “Sherreht of course was the first on my list, as he is our emergency contact. I felt it prudent to give him a final update on our status and officially release him from his duties, as well as thank him for what he's done.

“Then there was the matter of my mother and father, my clan mother, Selek, Selek's clan mother, and someone who near as I can tell is Selek's sister -- all of whom are inquiring as to our health and some of whom are requesting an audience during our stay. In deference to your healing I've suggested they meet us here rather than us going abroad.”

Holly pouted. “Am I going to see anything other than your house?” She really had been excited to see a variety of Vulcan homes, not to mention she'd spent so much time learning the required protocols for visiting. Now she was feeling almost claustrophobic here, just itching to go somewhere, and there was really nowhere for her to go immediately outside Syrok's family home other than the desert, and she wasn't sure she'd get to do that at all before they headed back to Earth, with how protective Syrok was being toward her. Nonetheless, in spite of her pout she was still intrigued by the prospect of visitations.

“You have already seen several places that are not this house.” Syrok said simply.

“When are they coming?” she asked curiously, hurrying a bit more through her breakfast, much to Syrok's annoyance.

“I anticipate they'll begin to arrive around midday today and throughout the afternoon. Close family first, and as word travels that we're up for visitations other visitors will come throughout the coming days.” he set his PADD aside.

Holly's eyes flicked toward it and she worried her bottom lip in her teeth. “Have you contacted Starfleet yet? Or really anyone back home?”

“Yes.” His eyes held a bit of amusement and the bond held the faint notion that Holly really ought
to leave the computer alone. “T'Sala sent her regards, and as I'd already expected, already knew our basic status. I sent her a short missive and I'm sure she'll pass along news of our good health to Geri in vague terms. And I was somewhat surprised to note that Professor Selkar as well has inquired after our health and sent his own well wishes. I've responded to him as well. I was also copied to an email from the hospital to Healer Sterran, so there's no need for us to contact Starfleet as of yet. I anticipate we can take at least another week to recuperate before we even think of heading back.”

“But won't we be behind in everything?” Holly asked with a desperate sort of worry bubbling up inside of her now that the crisis was over. In the past if she'd even missed a single day of classes she'd felt impossibly behind. She couldn't even imagine what this would do to her workload. How would she ever catch up?

“Ashaya.” Syrok said with equal parts affection and warning. “For now, we heal. We recuperate. There will be time enough for our studies. There is medical leave for a reason.”

“I guess.” she said, seeming somewhat unconvinced. Then she gave a little smile. “Just so you know, I recuperate best when allowed to take walks outside.”

“I am certain that we can arrange some sort of exploration of the land before returning to Earth.” his eyes smiled.

Syrok’s mother and father, it turned out, weren't able to visit them at all. As far as Holly could tell, there had been much unspoken Vulcan angst over the topic, as they'd wished to be available at least during some portion of their only son's first pon farr, to ensure his safety or at least reaffirm it afterward. But Starfleet being what it was and after all the leaves of absence they'd already had in the past year, it simply wasn't in the cards. The Celeste was now somewhere else entirely, and their duties kept them from anything but text correspondence, and one patchy long ranged call that almost hadn't been worth the effort. Still, they had seemed pleased for the visual confirmation that their son and his mate had both survived the ordeal, and appeared to be in working order.

The next closest family was T'Lara, Syrok's Clan Mother who'd presided over their bonding. Holly was equal parts excited and anxious to meet her officially. She remembered very little of that day, but she remembered enough to know that she'd had sex with Syrok in the middle of the desert with a sizable audience. And even if that was the way it always was with Vulcans, it didn't necessarily make it any easier for Holly, who was human, to process the event. She was only glad that at the time she'd been out of her right mind as her mind link with Syrok had taken over and allowed her the luxury of only needing to surrender and respond. If she'd had to do it again fully cognizant of her surroundings, she wasn't quite certain whether she could manage it. And as it was meeting T'Lara now, Holly wasn't entirely certain how to act around someone who'd seen her in such an intimate setting.

“Clan Mother.” she greeted in Vulkhansu, as T'Lara didn't speak a word of Standard. She began to rise from her seat on the pillowed bench in the sitting room but T'Lara only took her own seat and waved Holly to remain where she was.

“Sit, sit.” she said informally. “You must require rest after your ordeal.”


Syrok hid his smirk and made his own way from the sitting room to the kitchen to get them all some refreshing fruits and the ever-present tea. It was early afternoon, and Holly was beginning to
adjust to the never-ending series of snacks that constituted most of the meals on Vulcan.

“So. You have survived.” T'Lara stared at Holly critically, causing her to fidget where she sat. “I had my doubts.” she said bluntly.

Holly's eyes widened, and she was uncertain what to say in response to that. Her mouth opened and closed without a sound. Then she straightened herself to her best posture and meet T'Lara's eyes head on. Because she had survived it, damn it. “Yes. We survived.” she said levelly, and didn't allow herself to fidget or blink.

As if she'd passed some sort of unvoiced test, T'Lara nodded to herself.

“So you intend to pursue this career in Starfleet with Syrok. Like his parents.”

“Yes...” Holly answered hesitantly, not sure where T'Lara was going with this.

She grunted in a non-committal way and maintained her silence just long enough again to make Holly distinctly uncomfortable. And where was Syrok? Holly began to try and feel along her bond for him, but was distracted when T'Lara suddenly spoke again. “And what of progeny? What of the children you cannot naturally bear for your mate? Will you go the route of the Ambassador's wife? Create in some laboratory a half-breed atrocity? Or perhaps you'll adopt some unfortunate Vulcan child, try to bring it up without the proper context of its culture? Without a proper familial bond?” she challenged.

“We... we haven't really talked about children.” Holly faltered. She wasn't even certain she wanted kids in her lifetime. She certainly didn't right now, or in the foreseeable future. And she knew that Syrok felt the same about at least that much -- after all, they were both enlisted in the 'Fleet, seeking to go as deep into space on as exploratory of missions as possible. That was hardly the place to try and raise children.

T'Lara grunted again, and Holly was beginning to feel like she was failing this unnamed test. “I suppose,” she mused, “with your short lifetime, perhaps Syrok may seek progeny with his next wife, if he should survive so long.”

Holly paled and swallowed thickly. Because this got at the heart of a matter she'd been trying desperately not to think about. If pon farr had been this difficult and physically demanding while she was young and in the prime of her health, what would it be like when she were old and fragile, on her own death bed? Because of the difference in how they would age, Syrok would likely still be middle aged.

“Pid-kom....” she implored in a hushed, pleading tone.

“This is the life you two have chosen for yourselves.” she continued ruthlessly. “What has been done cannot be undone. Kaiidth.”

Holly stared at the ground in front of her, at once infuriated by T'Lara and terrified of what kind of future she might have consigned Syrok to.

She was startled out of her spinning thoughts by a tray being set upon the coffee table with more force than was necessary, as an immovable mass of Vulcan stood between them. “Clan Mother, with all due respect, if you are here simply to antagonize my mate perhaps you could stop by again when she is at the very least physically recovered from her ordeal.” he said in icy tones.

“My son,” she spoke diminuatively, “my concerns are valid. You are one of my Clan, and so your welfare is partially my responsibility.” she said rigidly.
Holly straightened indignantly as well, getting her metaphorical feet back under her as her mate came to her rescue. “You have said yourself that what is done cannot be undone. What can you possibly hope to gain in saying all of this? If there is something I should do to prepare for our future, tell me. Do you think I want us both to die in some botched pon farr in my old age?” she asked indignantly. And much to her utter mortification, she realized that her eyes were tearing up. Not now... the last thing she needed was some overt display of emotions in front of her Clan Mother of all people. She'd already had an outburst that she was fairly certain was inappropriate even given T'Lara's own hostility. Holly closed her eyes for just a moment, taking a deep breath to calm herself and try to prevent actual tears from falling. She'd been excited and cheerful through her earlier comm. call with Syrok's parents, but now she felt utterly exhausted.

T'Lara eyed them both shrewdly, but Syrok gave her no chance to respond. His own glare was vicious but he said nothing further, secretly grateful that his emotional human had said things that he'd never dare to say, in a tone he could not quite bring himself to use. “If you will excuse me, Clan Mother, my bondmate is fatigued.” he murmured with a deferential bow of the head, though he felt no such deference, and he quietly ushered Holly out of the room, making his own welcome escape as well. As he led Holly to their bedroom their retreat was obvious but propriety prevented T'Lara from calling out further and causing even more distress.

Holly scrubbed angrily at her damp eyes as soon as they were out of sight, but it was no use. As soon as they entered the bedroom she burst into tears. Syrok simply held her against him for a moment while she let it out and composed herself, hiccuping a bit as she tried to regulate her breathing and stop crying. “Shit.” she muttered. “I'm sorry, Syrok. Did I totally fuck that up?” she asked with a quavering voice, glancing in the direction of the sitting room.

“Negative.” he said with a sigh. “Her words to you were inappropriate. She is only bold enough to say such a thing because her age and position allow it.”

“But she's not entirely wrong, is she?”

“Pi'veh.” he admonished affectionately, pulling Holly in to his embrace.

She held him for a moment, but then pushed him gently away as she sat herself on the edge of the bed. She really was exhausted. “I'm serious. What happens when I'm eighty? Ninety? And you're still in your prime? Still fertile, still undergoing pon farr?”

“We will deal with it as we come to it.”

“That's not an answer and you know it.”

Syrok sighed in frustration and sat himself beside his mate. “There are drugs that I could take to stem the hormonal fluctuations --”

“Those drugs are experimental at best. There's a reason we didn't even consider using them.” she interrupted.

“At present, yes. Perhaps after several decades medical science will advance to a point where they are more viable. And all of the same considerations we had this round will apply. Restraints. Attempts to involve a third party. Not to mention the fact that perhaps my Time will ease with repetition, as we come to know one another all the more intimately.”

“Is that typical?” Holly asked hopefully.
As far as I understand there is no such thing as a typical pon farr -- at least not so far as such a minute detail. There are some things we cannot predict or fully plan for, Holly. That is life. But be assured at the very least that our status as an inter-species couple is not entirely unique. There are others who have gone before us and who will come after, and we will all find ways to cope.”

“Like the Ambassador and his wife.” she worried her lip between her teeth.

“Yes.”

“What about....”

“What is it, pi'veh?”

“Children.” she said at length.

Syrok huffed in frustration. “Of all the things she said to you out there, that has you worried?”

“We haven't really talked about it.”

“Is there anything to discuss?” he asked, truly baffled. “My understanding was that we had no immediate plans for children. We declared as much when you first brought up the notion of contraception, inquiring whether it was necessary in an inter-species relationship.”

“Yes but what about later? T'Lara seemed to indicate it was sort of, well, important.”

“Of course it is important. The continuation of a species is always important. Progeny is important. Legacy. These things are important to a great many people. But having children is not the only way to leave a legacy. Whether we raise children or not is not even a consideration at present, so why dwell on it?”

“Because!” she shrieked. How could he be taking this so lightly? Had he really given it no thought at all? “What if you want children some day? What if we disagree? I'm not certain I'll ever want them, and even if I did, I'm not sure I could ever go through with the Lady Amanda went through to bear Commander Spock. And don't give me another lecture about advancing medical science. What if it is still as invasive and difficult in the future? And what about all my supposed deficiencies as a potential mother to a Vulcan child? God, just the thought of being a mother freaks me out.” she pushed her hair back and held it in one hand in a large frizzy clump while Syrok could feel her anxiety spiking.

“Holly.” he grabbed both her hands in his own, forcing her to release her strangle-hold on her innocent hair. “It truly does not matter to me at present whether we have children or not. Ever. And if we discuss it again in the future, it will be a discussion, one in which we may disagree and will find a way to live harmoniously regardless. And for what it is worth, I am certain you would be as wonderful a mother as you are a mate.”

Holly warmed somewhat to that compliment, abstract as the notion of motherhood was. “But it seriously doesn't bother you? That I can't just have kids?”

“It does not.”

“I could sense that you wanted to, though, during.... You had some pretty strong thoughts in that direction sometimes, when fractions of thought could come through. There were others, of course... possession being one of them, but the urge to procreate was clear.”

“Yes. I am certain that it was, as pon farr is aptly named the Time of Mating.” he teased her with a
slight smirk. “Thoroughly doused in hormones and out of my right mind, I not only wished to impregnate you, but was convinced that I was doing so, even across species.” His eyes danced with amusement.

Holly snorted. “I guess I shouldn't take your thoughts during that time too seriously, huh?” she asked with a small smile, her tension easing considerably.

“That may be for the best.”

Holly sighed and stared at the door. “So what now? Think she's still out there?”

“It is likely.”

“I'm not really sure what the correct protocol is for yelling at one's Clan Mother, and then storming off in a fit of tears.”

“As I had mentioned, you are exhausted and require rest. I suggest you stay in the room for some time. Have a nap, meditate, stare at the wall.... I will see to T'Lara and return when she has left the premises.”

“Did you seriously just suggest that I stare at a wall?” Holly smirked. Syrok gave her a flat look in response. “Thanks.” she said more warmly. “I don't know how you'll deal with her after the things she said. And after what we've been through... all of it.” Holly's face, and their bond, heated with her anger. She recalled snatches of their time on the sands, to their time in the bed, and on the floor... and now, finally recovering. If this final act didn't at last qualify Holly as Vulcan, she didn't know what could.

“This is why we have rituals. Tea. Food. We will eat in silence, and perhaps then she will go.” he said with resignation, his fingers straightening Holly's tortured hair. He leaned into give her head a quick kiss, then rose to move to the door, and deal with his relative.

With the evening meal came their next visitor, and luckily Holly had quite recovered herself after Syrok had gotten rid of his meddlesome, cantankerous old Clan Mother. Now, a much more reserved and polite guest arrived: Sherreht. When Holly answered the door in the cool twilight to see his welcome face, she smile sincerely and felt at ease -- if a little self conscious.

“Greetings, Holly.” Sherreht offered casually, flashing the *ta'al.*

“Sherreht.” Holly nodded, stepping aside to allow him entrance. Syrok stepped into the sitting room from where he'd been working in the kitchen to see who was there, and gave his own nod toward the kitchen where the others joined him.

“It is good to see you, cousin.” Syrok said amicably. “You'll join us for the evening meal.”

It wasn't phrased as a question, but nevertheless, Sherreht answered with “Yes.”

Sherreht settled himself at the table with Holly, and though Holly had tried to fetch him a glass of water, Syrok had shooed her back into her own seat. He could sense that she was still healing and was exhausted and sore enough trying to navigate the house. While he was still recovering himself, he could not bring himself to allow his bondmate to exert herself any further. He would care for her, and he would mind the guest.

“I must thank you personally for your assistance during my Time.” Syrok offered formally. They
would never discuss the particulars, but it seemed prudent to offer his gratitude, as Sherreht had been a key player throughout -- from readying the house, to getting them to and from the bonding ceremony, to clearing up the mess afterward. It was one of the most valuable tasks one could perform for their Clan-member.

“Unnecessary. I was pleased to be of use.” Sherreht easily dismissed. “I must express my own satisfaction at seeing you both in good health.” he offered, and Holly immediately loved him. He was everything she loved about Vulcans, really. Polite, reserved, and quite the opposite of The Great Bitch.

And as they settled in with Sherreht for the evening meal, Syrok made easy conversation with his cousin as he cooked.

When the wholly Vulcan dishes were served, the meal was eaten in easy silence in the coolness of the desert evening, and Holly felt as if she'd finally really made it in life. She was here on Vulcan, a place she'd dreamed of and idealized for years. She could never have imagined that she'd become involved with them in quite this way, and she couldn't regret a minute of it. Here, in this stone house, everything was perfect.
They recovered for a week. Holly met up with Selek, had lunch with Selek's sister T'Moril, and even got a quick tour of some of the buildings that had been important to Syrok's childhood. His school, stores, government centers, were all pointed out to her in the city. The end of their tour (which had carefully taken place mostly by car) finished with a final stop at Sherreht's home, as Syrok made good on his promise to show Holly at least one other Vulcan household during their stay.

Time was short, and they wanted to take advantage of it while they could, to make the best of the time they had left in this strange pseudo-honeymoon that was as much a prolonged nap-time as proper vacation.

On the final day before the arranged transport, Syrok even allowed Holly to travel with him in the early morning to the top of the nearest mountain, to take in the desert vistas and get a better sense of what Vulcan was to him, the sights and smells, the flora and fauna that had made up so much of his childhood, that had featured in his kahs-wan. She was enchanted with the whole thing, so taken in with the experience that she neglected to take photos or videos of the whole thing. And every moment that drew them closer to their departure made Starfleet seem all the more real again, this time all the more fleeting. It was like a great dream that she couldn't believe she'd actually experienced, in spite of the numerous shared melds and joint meditations she'd sat through by the end of it. In spite of the still healing bruises, and the final hospital trip required to clear her health status and confirm she was now free of all infections or other serious injuries.

Finally, the day came and travel began anew. Packing and locking up the house, the aircar trip (this time by taxi) to the shuttle, the shuttle to the ship, and they settled in for their longer ten day trip back to Earth to finish out their semester. In the tiny cabin this time their experience was totally different from the first, as it was spent entirely on making up work they'd fallen behind in. They'd already talked to Starfleet and as there were only two weeks left in the semester, they would have an additional two weeks into the summer to make up for everything they'd missed and to take make-up exams and late finals.

Holly had breathed a sigh of relief as she'd found out that the medical leave had come through for both of them, as their Healer had written it off as something vague having to do with their shared bond. But her initial relief was replaced quickly by near panic at the sheer amount of work she had to learn basically on her own. She was willing now to take full advantage of Syrok's doting attitude. If he wanted to make up for his Time, he would need to basically do enough work for the both of him. Luckily, he was Vulcan, and was fully capable of the heavy academic demands. And luckily, he was enamored of Holly and willing to do anything he could to care for his precious pi'veh; it was no hardship.

T'Sala, Geri, and Selkar were all there to greet them soon after they'd returned, and though it had seemed like nothing would ever be the same after pon farr, Holly found that she soon got back into the swing of things. It was weird how easily it had all come back to her, and it finally started to sink in that everyone on Vulcan had gone through this. It really was just another part of life. What
As the last of their work was turned in, the last of the late exams finished in the early days of summer, Holly was in good spirits and ready to celebrate. A month of abstinence had been quite enough time to recover and have a period in the interim. The wait had been long enough. If she'd thought it might be weird to be intimate again, she'd been just as wrong about that as with the rest of her life. It came as easily as if it had never paused.

The summer was full of promise of another great adventure for them, even more productive than the last. Their final year of schooling was approaching, and then... into the black. Syrok was at ease in a way he'd never been before, fully grown in a way he could not have comprehended even months ago. He had his apartment, his mate, his career, and the future. It was more than enough.

Chapter End Notes

I've posted the two chapters today because this is the very end. The story is now complete. I wanted it to be a story mainly about pon farr, and how Syrok and Holly would navigate it. From them being strangers to friends, the unfolding of the big secret, preparation, the event itself, and a bit of tying up at the end.

I really do hope everyone has enjoyed it. I've been really surprised and pleased at the good reception of it in the comments.

Regarding sequels and the like: I don't have anything planned, and I do have quite a number of other stories lined up that I'm working on that aren't related to this at all. That said, it's not impossible that I'd ever write more. I have thought a bit about them finishing school and moving on to their ship assignment, but I'm really not sure where I'd go with it. Pon farr is such an easy target for me to write toward and end on, so a sequel would be difficult to do. Unless, I suppose, if I skipped well ahead to the next pon farr? I don't know.

Anyway, thank you for your viewership and encouragement. :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!