No Winter Lasts Forever

by TomFooleryPrime

Summary

Voris never intended to take a human mate any more than Dagny Skjeggestad was looking for a Vulcan husband. Thrown together in the wake of tragedy, they discover fate has a funny way of redeeming fractured souls. Begins with the Battle of Vulcan. Human/Vulcan OC romance. NOW COMPLETE.

Notes

This is intended to be a full-length, slow burn romance between an original Vulcan male character and an original human female character. Apart from the romance, I will explore the existence of people beyond the central Federation in a way that may seem non-canonical at first glance. There are many canonical discrepancies about when and how the Federation did away with money and poverty and it's no secret that the exact nature of the Federation economy is difficult to characterize.

It is widely accepted that poverty on Earth was eliminated at some point well before the 24th
century, but this doesn't appear to be universally true throughout the Federation, particularly in remote colony worlds or outposts. Earth might have been a utopia, but there were still incidences of famine on places like Tarsus IV and Cygnia Minor and the Starfleet officers on Deep Space Nine seemed to use some form of currency to interact with the various species on the remote space station. A big thank you to catstop and RemusJ for their advice and encouragement.
Part I: Lost

"Everyone can master a grief but he that has it."
–William Shakespeare, Much Ado About Nothing

Stardate 2258.42

Dagny bounced the squirming toddler on her hip but her feeble effort did little to quell his agitation. Henrik continued to whine and reach for the odd assortment of medical supplies in the worn plastic container and she continued to keep them just out of his reach while struggling to keep the inventory straight in her head. Her little brother's frustrated grunts threatened to boil over into irrational wailing, but she was almost done.

Suddenly the cart lurched, sending the container's contents skittering across the floor. She gritted her teeth and wheeled around to face the culprit. Make that culprits.

"Sigurd! Sigrid! How many times have I told you to stop running in the clinic?" she snapped. "This is not a play area!"

Sigurd cowered but Sigrid, his twin sister, made a desperate dash for the door to avoid punishment. Henrik started shrieking and Dagny was certain she was going to lose her mind. "Ingrid!"

Her fifteen year-old sister's head popped around the clinic's dividing screen. She made eye contact with Dagny and sighed. Without uttering a word, Ingrid shooed their little brother out of the clinic's back room and chased down the dark corridor after Sigrid.

Dagny sunk to her knees and started collecting the scattered supplies from the dingy floor. Henrik's cries reached a fever pitch and she adjusted the little boy on her hip and tried to calm him. A piercing communications test crackled over the ship's intercom, sending shivers down her spine and rendering her little brother completely inconsolable.

"Give him here," said a steady voice behind her.

"Gladly," Dagny muttered, hoisting herself to a standing position to pass off the screaming toddler. Her eyes lingered on her mother's bulging stomach. "Why did you have to have so many kids?"

She meant it as a joke, but the words came out sour and scornful. Sofie Skjeggestad was working on baby number fourteen and Dagny was exhausted from playing surrogate mother to her growing litter of brothers and sisters.

"There's not much else to do on these long, deep space routes." Her mother smiled. Dagny did not. She made a face and returned to her hands and knees to collect the hypospray canisters and tricorder assemblies. She wasn't even eighteen years old but felt like she was fast approaching fifty.

Being third of thirteen children—soon to be fourteen—on an intergenerational salvage ship was a full time job. Now that she was working seven days a week in the clinic, she was amazed she ever found time for sleep.

"Do you have the list of supplies for your father?" her mother asked. "We're due to enter standard orbit in eight hours and you know he doesn't like last minute surprises."
"I was trying to put it together but it's hard to stay focused." She tossed the plastic container back on the cart and picked up the PADD to make several notes. The corner of the glass screen was chipped, but she was used to broken things—a natural result of too many children and not enough money.

They were due to arrive in orbit of Vulcan in less than a day and the clinic was in desperate need of resupply. She already knew how the exchange would go. She would submit her supply list to the ship's captain, her father Emil, and he would reject it, telling her to be realistic. They would argue back and forth, eventually coming to a compromise that left neither of them happy.

It wasn't as though Dagny was wasteful or lacked improvisational skills. During an ion storm two months ago, she'd been forced to turn ladders into makeshift stretchers when several of the plasma conduits had overloaded and sent a quarter of the engineering crew on duty to her patchwork clinic. Unless her father wanted her to care for the 141 people aboard the Albret with witchcraft and watery chicken noodle soup, he would have to agree to at least some of her requisition request.

"Oh, and when you get a spare minute, could you give Hedda's hair a quick trim? It's falling over her eyes again."

Dagny smirked. She couldn't remember the last time she'd really had a spare minute or exactly how and when she'd been designated Skjeggestad family barber, but truth be told, she could give a pretty fair haircut. "If you can make her sit still, I can probably find time tonight."

"Thank you. Oh, and it seems to me you have a birthday coming up in about a week," her mother said casually.

Dagny was well aware. In exactly eight days she would be eighteen—the legal age of majority. The age she could legally take off from the Albret and no one could do anything about it. Legally.

"Anything special you want for your birthday dinner?"

"Whatever you make will be fine."

Her mother rested her hand on her forearm and smiled. "I don't know what we would do without you."

There was the usual slow trickle of guilt that came from someone reminding her of how essential she was, which had a unique way of throwing cold water on her goals. Dagny was constantly overwhelmed but so was everyone else. There was so much to do and so little with which to do it; never enough help but somehow also too many mouths to feed. She wasn't afraid of hard work, but she wanted a different life.

She was jealous of her older brothers, Aksel and Benjamin, because they spent their days working down on the engineering decks with Arvid and never had to deal with tantrums or runny noses or fighting with Johan and Olav to do their lessons. Why couldn't her younger brothers understand how important education was?

Dagny would have given anything to go to a proper school, but education aboard the Albret wasn't exactly a priority. Lessons revolved around life on a salvage ship, so the Skjeggestad children learned exactly everything they needed to know and nothing they didn't. By the time she was twelve, Dagny could recite various Federation docking and shipping regulations by heart or calculate the net profit on fifty tons of duranium scrap metal in her head, but she knew almost nothing about history, philosophy, government or any of the things "cultured" people seemed to know about.

Her life had changed two years ago when her Aunt Birgitte—who wasn't really her aunt but might as
well have been because she'd helped deliver Dagny and all of her siblings—died in an asteroid impact during a rescue operation on a remote planetoid in the Bolarian sector. Birgitte had been the only person aboard the Albret with formal medical training and her death had left an opening in the ship's clinic. Since Dagny had spent countless hours in the clinic with her Aunt Birgitte, hiding from her vast and needy family, she became the ship's de facto medical provider.

Her father had even sent her to attend a year-long paramedic course at Deneva Station and it was there Dagny learned she loved medicine. Caring for others was in her nature, even if it sometimes felt like a tiresome chore. It was why her siblings, all the children on the ship, really, always came to her with their bruises and skinned knees and why her mother relied on her to help watch over the chaotic Skjeggestad brood.

Her sisters Ingrid and Frida weren't much younger than herself, but neither of them possessed the same quiet, caring instinct of her elder sister. Ingrid always had her mind lost in one of her fantasy stories and Frida was usually off with the Karlsen sisters on the upper decks. Dagny had no idea what they did all day and didn't care, but she fought with Frida more than any of her other siblings because she wished she would be more responsible. She had never even seen Frida change a diaper.

Dagny turned to the small computer station in the corner of the room to transfer the data from the PADD. The duotronic monitor flickered to life, displaying the image of the human heart she'd been studying right before Ingrid had stopped by to unburden herself of Henrik. Her eyes rested on the Terran medical school entrance exam study guide. She felt the corners of her mouth drift into a sad frown as she switched to the ship's logistical programs.

Dagny wanted an education, and not just any education. She wanted to go to medical school. She'd never told a soul because what good would it do? Her mother could barely handle her brothers and sisters and leaving would destroy her father.

"Nothing matters more than family," he would say. He was always saying that.

Even if she could convince him he had plenty of other children who could carry on the family salvage business, he'd spent all that money to send her to Deneva so she could come back to the Albret and work in the ship's clinic. She at least owed him for that. She owed everyone.

Aside from the transient crew members who came and went on different contracts, there were fifteen generational families aboard the ship and they'd all chipped in to send her to paramedic training. They were counting on her, and taking years off to go to an expensive medical school seemed like a selfish pipe dream. She hadn't given up on becoming a doctor, but she had resigned herself to taking a slower, more indirect approach. She was trying to get Ingrid, Frida, or Hedda interested in medicine. She wanted an apprentice in the hopes that someday one of them might take up the torch so she could finally leave the Albret and have a life of her own, but Ingrid only cared about books, Frida only cared about herself, and Hedda was only five.

"Bridge to clinic," rasped her father's voice through the communicator mounted to the doorway. Intership communications seemed to be working again. For now.

She took care to pinch the toggle just right—it was loose and wouldn't work otherwise—and replied, "Yes, dad?"

"I need your requisition within the hour. Bridge out."

As she dictated her list of supplies to the ship's computer, she tried shifting her mood. Like her father always said, "Negativity never accomplished anything."
She was excited to visit Vulcan. She heard it was a hot planet where the temperature was around forty degrees Celsius. Dagny wouldn't even describe the Albret as warm—environmental controls were normally kept to ten degrees to avoid putting excess strain on the ship's systems. Coats, hats, scarves, and gloves were cheap and readily abundant; energy was not.

She'd read about Vulcans and their strange religion and was fascinated by the fact that they had no emotions. They also supposedly looked a lot like humans but had pointed ears and hemocyanic blood. They had green blood.

She'd encountered more species in the last year than most humans met in their entire lives, but she'd never met a Vulcan. She'd never met many humans outside the ship she called home. The Albret rarely got deep into Federation space since most salvage operations took place on the frontier or in remote sectors.

Dagny and about two thirds of the crew were from Earth, originally from somewhere called Norway, but she'd never actually stepped foot on the planet of her ancestors. Her own parents hadn't been there since they were kids. The Skjeggestads had been salvagers since the earliest days of interstellar travel, going back six generations. People came and went over the decades, sometimes as individuals and sometimes as whole families, but the Skjeggestads were a constant fixture on the Albret.

She finished her requisition request, sent it to the captain, and then slumped down on the short stool at the end of the decrepit biobed. Daniel had found a way to seal the bed's cracked glass with liquid tape and so far, the repair seemed to be holding. She wheeled herself back to the computer and resumed her studies on the human heart, teasing apart the differences of the atrioventricular and semilunar valves and memorizing the layers of the heart wall. Even if she never made it to medical school, no one could ever fault her for expanding her knowledge base.

Twenty minutes later she received a strongly worded message from her father about the ship not being made of money and she cracked her knuckles, preparing to defend every single item on her requisition request. She wasn't asking for her own private moon, she just wanted some basic pain relievers and burn salve. And maybe a new chemical synthesizer. And would it kill the ship to invest in biobed that didn't have origins in the 21st century?

She finished composing her counter offer and sent it off for a second rejection when a blond head poked its way through the door and startled her. "Mother says dinner's almost ready," Johan announced. "We're having fläskpannkaka."

"My mouth is already watering," she grinned. "Let's go."

She followed her ten year-old brother down the cramped walkways of the lower decks to their family's quarters. Beta shift had just ended and the corridors were full of people on their way to work or just leaving it. She narrowly avoided bumping into one of the fire-haired Larsen brothers and averted her eyes so he wouldn't see her blush when he shot her a wink and a smile.

The Larsens were definitely a good-looking lot but the last thing she wanted was to end up like her mother—thirteen children and one on the way. Her mother had been her age when she'd had her oldest brother Aksel, which was a strange thought. Dagny loved children, but she never seriously thought about becoming a mother. She had too much to do and babies were experts at slowing people down.

Dagny turned the corner and nearly tripped over three-year-old Alf Karlsen, who was sobbing and lying prostrate on the walkway. Alf had been the first baby Dagny had ever delivered under her Aunt Birgitte's watchful eye; she'd delivered nine babies since. Her future brother or sister would make it ten. A strange wave of pride swept over her as she smirked and knelt down on one knee.
"What's wrong, Alf?"

"Lars took my ball," he whimpered, sitting up to face her.

She shrugged. "Go take it back."

His face scrunched into deep thought as he considered her advice. "I can do that?"

"Why not?" she asked. "Let's get you up."

She stood and hauled him to his feet by his tiny wrists, and soon he was scampering after his thieving older brother. His innocence made her smile. Life on the Albret was as simple as it was complicated. It wasn't what she wanted, but it was what she knew.

"Husband." Voris could not deny the sound of his wife's voice pleased him.

"T'Sala."

"What is the purpose of your communication?"

"I will be returning to Vulcan much sooner than anticipated."

"Explain."

"I was informed yesterday that because I have failed to utilize eighty days of what humans call 'vacation time,' I am eligible to receive it at the end of my fellowship. I shall arrive on Vulcan in four days."

T'Sala's eyes seemed to shine through the holographic screen. "I await you. Have you spoken with your father?"

"He has not yet arrived, but is due to arrive in thirty minutes."

"I see. Will you-" The signal flickered and her expression changed.

"Is something the matter?"

"I do not know," she admitted. "There was a moment of mild seismic activity."

"Peculiar," Voris replied.

"I should investi-" Her words were cut short and half a second later, the entire signal was terminated.

There was no logic in worrying. Seismic activity was uncommon in Gol, but not entirely unheard of.

He would be reunited with her in four days' time and until then, he would occupy himself with packing his belongings and preparing to leave the planet. Rather than do either of those things, he elected to light a pair of meditation candles and mentally brace himself for his father's visit.

Voris' eyes trailed along the wall of his small apartment, noting the unusual texture concealed by the globs of uneven mauve paint. Humans had strange ornamental preferences, but humans were a strange species. He'd once expressed this sentiment to Dr. Kayala, his closest human mentor, who had agreed with him. Voris had lived among them for five years, fourteen days, measured in their years. He lowered himself to his knees and closed his eyes, but a short time later the door buzzed and his eyes flicked open. Silek was four minutes early.
Voris rose from the meditative kneeling position and extinguished the candles. He opened the door, nodded to his guest, formed his right hand into the ta'al and said, "Live long and prosper, father."

"Live long and prosper," Silek replied in the customary greeting.

"Hello, Vernon!" called a feeble voice from behind his guest. Silek turned, allowing Voris a glimpse of his landlady's mildly senile mother, who was waving at him from across the hall with a dust rag. "Is this a friend of yours from the service?"

Though he had told Mrs. DePaulo his name on numerous occasions, she remained convinced his name was Vernon and that he'd fought in the Xindi wars. She didn't even seem to recognize he was an alien, or perhaps didn't care.

"Good morning, Mrs. DePaulo," Voris responded. "This is my father, Silek. Father, this is-"

"Oh, that's very nice," Mrs. DePaulo interrupted, retreating into her apartment and slamming the door.

His father glanced at him, obviously seeking an explanation for her bizarre behavior. Voris had learned from her daughter Cynthia that she suffered from a slow, degenerative mental disease brought on by a botched attempt at cellular regeneration during the early days of human anti-aging therapies.

Many of his neighbors mocked her, but Voris could not understand why. He'd never heard her speak ill of anyone, aside from the Xindi or the Klingons. During the winter months, she offered him cakes stuffed with dried fruit for an antiquated Earth holiday called Christmas. Despite her eccentricities, the elderly woman was among the kindest humans Voris knew, though truthfully, he didn't know many humans particularly well outside the handful of doctors and nurses he interacted with at the hospital.

"She is my landlady's mother. She is ill," Voris explained, standing aside to allow his father to enter the tiny dwelling. The apartment was sufficient to meet his needs, but was quite different from the elegant estate of his upbringing. The subtle narrowing of his father's eyes indicated he disapproved of the sparsely furnished single room with the peculiar color scheme.

"Your own mother sends her greetings," Silek said, turning to face his son.

"I spoke with her yesterday," Voris replied. He conversed with his mother every fourteen days to relay the status of his well-being and transmit any relevant news. He often sought his mother's guidance—T'Para was one of Vulcan's most honored healers and Voris had chosen to follow her path and pursue medicine. His father had never voiced his disappointment in Voris' chosen career, but it was an easy deduction to make.

His family had been active in diplomatic affairs for centuries and he knew Silek would have preferred his only son to continue the tradition, just as Skon, his father, had done before him. Unfortunately, Voris had never possessed any interest or aptitude for diplomacy and believed medicine was much more suited to his interests.

"I received your message about your early return to Vulcan," his father remarked. "Have you secured a posting?"

"I have been offered a number of positions," Voris confessed. "I have yet to accept an offer, but I am considering a position at the hospital on Vega Colony."
"An Earth colony."

It was logical to presume the statement was intended as a challenge more than a matter of fact. "I have spent five years on Earth pursuing a fellowship in interspecies medicine. It is logical to select a position that would enhance my professional experience."

"Logical, yes, if one intends to practice medicine."

Voris knew his father had assumed, or perhaps hoped, that Voris would follow the example of his Uncle Sarek, who had a number of degrees in scientific fields but still ultimately assumed the family mantle of diplomacy. Yet Voris had spent twenty-eight years in his quest to become a healer and did not intend to squander his education. He possessed advanced degrees in applied chemistry and genetics from the Institute of Gol, a medical degree with a specialty in emergency medicine from the Vulcan Science Academy, and now a second specialty in interspecies medicine.

"I do intend to practice medicine," he explained. "Vulcan requires healers as much as it requires diplomats."

"Vulcan has many talented healers."

"And many talented diplomats," Voris replied. "I do not count myself among them."

Silek's eyes narrowed as he considered his son. His father was a skilled advocate and had spent the past three decades in service to their home world, filling a number of positions from legal attaché to the Vulcan consulate on Andoria to serving as arbiter of countless interplanetary negotiations. He was currently on Earth to help settle a dispute between the Federation and Coridan trade partners.

Voris believed his father's disapproval of his son's chosen profession was illogical. Voris's sisters, T'Liri and L'Nai, had bowed to Silek's wishes to study law and had taken positions in diplomacy and public service respectively, and thus the family tradition had been maintained. Furthermore, most of his mother's relations were healers, and therefore Voris was continuing a family tradition.

"I urge you to reconsider," Silek said at long last.

"As I said, I have yet to confirm any commitments and must discuss it with my mate."

His father nodded. "As you have no children to consider, I fail to understand what there is to discuss."

Voris felt a momentary sensation of mild irritation and immediately suppressed it. T'Sala was unable to bear children but she was still his mate, the very mate his father had chosen for him at age seven. They had been bonded according to the Vulcan custom but unlike so many others, their bond had persevered.

Though they'd only seen each other on four separate occasions in the past five years, they remained quite devoted to one another, and this caused his father further disappointment. Silek had antiquated ideas on a female's duty to provide her mate with progeny and when it became evident they would never have children even with medical intervention, he'd pressed Voris to have the marriage annulled, and Voris' refusal had deepened the divide between them.

"I have not accepted a position, yet I would be remiss if I did not make it explicit that I do not intend to follow a diplomatic path," Voris replied.

Silek's lips pursed slightly as he gazed at his son. "My brother Sarek has need of a private healer who would be able to accompany him on interplanetary diplomatic missions. He is willing to extend an
offer to you."

Voris tucked his hands behind his back and deliberated his father's thinly veiled attempt to sway his judgment. Silek's mention of his estranged brother was a curious turn in his argument. Sarek and Silek had not spoken for many years, but it was logical to conclude that was no longer the case if Silek knew his elder brother was seeking a private healer.

"My Uncle Sarek is a highly respected diplomat who could easily obtain the services of a more experienced healer than myself."

"I do not imagine there are many with your particular qualifications."

"To which qualifications do you refer?"

"Your expertise in interspecies medicine."

His father was certainly referring to his peculiar Aunt Amanda, whom Voris had never met. He could not understand why a distinguished Vulcan ambassador would elect to take a human mate, but his uncle's personal life was none of his concern.

"I have no inclination to travel frequently," Voris replied. "Kindly inform your brother I am unable to accept his offer."

"I can see that we have nothing further to discuss."

Voris bowed his head slightly and began to walk his father to the door when his PADD chirped five times, indicating an emergency message. The PADD tucked into Silek's coat echoed a similar tune moments later. They exchanged glances and reached for their respective devices.

Voris read the message from the Vulcan consulate on Earth and immediately began to consider the grave implications. The Federation was on high alert. Vulcan was under attack and a planet-wide evacuation of their home world had just been put into effect.

"I must go to the consulate," Silek announced. "Excuse me."

"I shall come with you," Voris replied, grabbing his cloak from the entry closet.

Rather than protest, Silek nodded. The two men strode from the small apartment and down the stairs to the ground floor without another word. Voris initiated a broadcast link to his mate at their home in Gol, but communications to Vulcan did not appear to be getting through. Voris tucked his PADD into his wide breast pocket and lengthened his stride.

Speculation was illogical, but he had a sense that life as he knew it was in the process of being irrevocably altered.
Stardate 2258.42

Dagny jerked upright at the screaming, flashing siren above her head. Sleep still clouded her eyes but she was awake enough to jump from the top bunk and land gracefully on the hard floor.

"What's going on?" Ingrid yelped, rolling from the bottom bed.

"I don't know," Dagny replied. "Round up the little ones and have them ready to go to the escape pods."

"Escape pods?"

Her eyes darted to the pulsing red light on the wall. The Albret was on high alert. She couldn't remember the last time the ship had been placed on high alert. "Yes. Escape pods. But only if the bridge gives the order."

She grabbed her coat and rushed from the tiny room she shared with Ingrid, Frida, and Hedda. She was scared out of her wits but refused to show it. The corridors were pure chaos as people raced to man their stations. She prayed she wouldn't find many casualties when she got to the clinic.

As she ripped open the clinic's battered door, she was shocked to find it empty. What was going on? Why had no one issued an emergency broadcast?

Then she remembered they'd had issues with the ship's internal communications the day before. She wheeled around and raced toward the bridge. There was so much pandemonium everywhere she looked.

She burst through the wide double doors of the Albret's command center and found her father barking orders to the various stations. "Engineering, I need warp four, now. All transporters, standby!"

"Dad?"

"Get to the clinic, Dagny," he growled.

"What's going on?"

"Vulcan has issued a general distress call and has ordered an evacuation."

Surely she'd misheard him. How could a whole planet send a distress call? Why would a whole planet send a distress call?

"What?" she cried. "I don't understand, how-"

"Get to the clinic!" he roared, pointing her toward the door.

She stumbled backward and asked, "What are we going to do?"

Without turning to acknowledge her he replied, "Save as many as we can."

Her numbness and confusion morphed into shaky purpose. The bridge crew continued yelling orders and status updates, but this wasn't her place. Her father was right: she had to get back to the clinic.
But what was she going to do with a medical staff of one? The *Albret* had a crew of ninety-eight plus forty-three family members aboard, but theoretically had a maximum passenger capacity of 5,000 if the cargo holds were emptied.

A sudden shock knocked her off her feet, sending her headfirst into a nearby bulkhead. Brilliant stars flashed through her field of vision and warm blood trickled down her forehead. She scrambled to her feet but hesitated as she passed a tiny, aluminum glass portal.

Dagny hadn't bothered to actively look out at the blackness of space for many years, but the space outside the *Albret* was far from empty. They were in the middle of a battle. It was nothing but debris and the flashing lights of energy weapons and torpedoes as far as the eye could see.

Her stomach sank. Were they all going to die?

As she staggered to the clinic, the ship jolted again and her knees knocked together from trembling. She'd lived her entire life in space and was well acquainted with the uncertainty that came with it. She'd seen bodies after depressurization accidents and corpses made unrecognizable by plasma burns, but somehow those had always seemed like things that happened to other people. She didn't work in engineering or run salvage operations—she worked in the tiny clinic on Deck 3.

"Dagny, we need you down in the cargo holds!" cried a voice far from behind her.

Behind her, Anders Eriksen was propping up an unusually tall man with jet-black hair rendered reddish gray from dust. She paused and stared at him with wonder. The left half of the man's face was slathered in green liquid. Green **blood**. He was Vulcan.

She didn't know anything about Vulcan medicine or physiology, other than that they had copper-based blood. Her yearlong paramedic course at Deneva Station had included two weeks of training in alien emergency medicine and almost all of that had been practice in using the tricorder database to determine a course of treatment. So she could point a tricorder at a Vulcan, run a quick scan, and get some vital signs. The tricorder could then tell her whether things like blood pressure and heart rate were normal and if they weren't, it would offer standard methods for correcting the problem. It was an awful system, but even the most experienced interspecies doctors were forced to rely on it at times because ultimately, no one individual could know everything there was to know about treating the hundreds of known sentient species throughout the galaxy.

Dagny had never had to treat any alien species; everyone aboard the *Albret* was human. The ship's corridors were fast becoming overrun with the lanky aliens with the severe haircuts and she sensed that was about to change. Time seemed to slow.

Many of the *Albret's* children swarmed the corridors, directing their new passengers into the cargo holds. Apparently the captain, her father, had dumped their cargo to make room for as many evacuees as possible. That cargo was their livelihood, but even as she wondered how they would find a way to eat for the next six months, her heart swelled with pride.

When she arrived at the clinic, she found Frida and Johan ransacking her sparse supplies. She didn't stop to question them but threw everything that remained—every bandage, every half-functioning dermal regenerator, every shoddy hypospray—into a plastic bag and headed for the belly of the ship with her younger brother and sister in tow, pushing through throngs of Vulcan evacuees.

She arrived to a sea of oddly subdued pandemonium. There had to be close to two hundred people in Cargo Bay 2 alone and more kept flooding in behind her. Most of the Vulcans were coated in a thin layer of reddish dirt. Many were injured, some seriously, but everywhere she looked, they were claiming small spaces for themselves and injured companions in a manner that seemed unnaturally
orderly under the circumstances.

She didn't even know where to begin. She was only certain of one thing—there had never been enough medical supplies on the Albret in its 189-year history to handle the devastation lying before her. What now?

"Dagny, do something!" Johan shouted. "Help them!"

She took a labored breath and tried to remember her training. Triage. She needed to sort people by the severity of their injuries, but even still, she was only one person with no supplies. Then it suddenly occurred to her that given that the ship's swelling population, she couldn't be the only person aboard with medical training.

She twisted around and grabbed Frida's arm. "I need you to start stripping the sheets off every bed in this ship. Get anyone you can to help you. We need bandages and anything that could work as a bandage or a tourniquet. Johan, go with her."

Dagny could count on one hand the number of times her younger sister had followed an order without question or complaint, but Frida's pale eyes were wide with shock as she nodded and fled from the cargo hold. Dagny turned and reached for the intercom to address the burgeoning crowd, wondering exactly what she should say, when the ship trembled again and the overhead lighting dimmed.

There were a few muffled screams but no real panic. How could these people be so calm? Her fingers groped at the comm's toggle switch and she discovered intership communications were still offline. Her eyes drifted out of focus as she gazed at a man with a crushed leg and observed a woman struggling to tie a belt around his upper thigh to stop the bleeding. People were dying and she was watching it happen. She wanted to cry but somehow found a way to channel her terror into vehemence.

"Please listen!" she shouted. The din faded in her immediate vicinity and people turned to face her. "Everyone, please!"

The noise grew quieter still. That would have to do. "I need anyone with a medical background, doctors, nurses, medics, anyone, to please identify yourselves. We're- we're working on getting supplies. I- I have some here, but our resources are very limited. If I could get everyone who isn't seriously injured to please move to the back of the room. Please."

Miraculously, people started to obey. She nodded to herself and rushed over to the man with the shattered leg but realized he was already dead. She'd seen death before and had the feeling she was going to see a lot more of it before this day was over, if she even survived at all.

"Excuse me," murmured a monotone voice behind her in crisp Federation Standard. She whirled around to find an older Vulcan man with his hands folded behind his back. "Are you the ship's medical officer?"

"More or less."

"I am Sevek, the chief thoracic surgeon in Gol's third district hospital. I am willing to provide assistance."

"Great," she breathed, reaching for the plastic bags she'd brought from the clinic. She upended one and started sifting through its contents. She only had one working tricorder.

"Excuse me," Sevek insisted. "Does your ship have emergency action procedures?"
"Not for anything like this," she admitted, grabbing a broken tricorder and waving it at the masses of people littering the cargo hold.

"I have already begun triaging patients. Will you permit me to continue according to my hospital's protocols?"

Was he really asking for her permission? "That would be… great. Thank you, sir."

"We require medical supplies. Is this all you have?"

"Yes. We were coming to Vulcan to get resupplied," she explained.

Suddenly Johan returned with an enormous pile of dingy, white linens. "Start tearing them up!" she barked at her younger brother. "Long, wide strips."

Sevek cocked an eyebrow at the odd assortment bed sheets and Dagny suddenly felt angry and uncomfortable. "This is all there is! We're going to have to make it work!"

Two Vulcan woman stepped forward and set to work cutting the sheets into the long strips Dagny asked for and she felt a huge wave of gratitude.

"Have you any diagnostic equipment?" Sevek continued, eyeing the tricorder in Dagny's left hand.

"I don't know. Do you have anyone handy with fixing tricorders?"

A woman stepped forward and replied, "I am a robotics engineer."

"Great, now you're a medical tricorder repair technician," she said, tossing her the broken device.

She dug through one of the bags Frida had brought from the clinic, found her lone working tricorder, and handed it to Sevek. "I'm in way over my head here, Dr. Sevek. I'm just a paramedic. I can handle lacerations and simple fractures, but I can't do the major stuff. I need your help. Please."

He accepted the tricorder and nodded deferentially. "I do not suppose you have any surgical equipment?"

She reached back into the bag and quickly located Birgitte's laser scalpel and gave it to him. "Other than that, surgical supplies are whatever you can beg, borrow, or improvise. I'm serious; take whatever you can find."

Dr. Sevek quickly disappeared into the crowd. She spun around to find Frida with another stack of sheets in her arms. Dagny pointed her to the door and said, "Follow me to Cargo Bay 1."

She found twice as many evacuees in the enormous cargo hold on the starboard side of the ship. She began a new quest to organize physicians and supplies and enlist the help of anyone with skills even remotely relevant to the task of accommodating thousands of people in a space built to hold shipping containers.

She assumed Vulcan was suffering from some kind of catastrophic natural disaster or full-scale attack based on the injuries she was seeing and the powdery red dirt covering everything, but even the Vulcans didn't seem to know what was going on. No one knew anything.

The ship continued to creak and shudder but Dagny tried to push the thought of imminent death from her mind. What good would it do?

She asked Arvid for an update when the ship's chief engineer came through the lower decks to
recruit computer, mechanical, and warp field engineers, but he admitted he only knew the status of the Albret's ancient warp drive. Apparently the heart of the ship was on life support.

While the crew and a fresh batch of Vulcan volunteers fought to hold the ship together, the crew’s family members, many of them children, found their way down to the cargo holds to offer any kind of help they could. Dagny gave orders to the newly minted army of young Skjeggestads, Eriksens, Karlsens, Nygårds, Svendsens, Jørgensens, Brekkes, and Hellands, and soon they were stripping away the interior of the ship to produce makeshift stretchers and locate food, tools, and clothing.

At Dr. Sevek's advice, they began moving the most critical patients into the smaller forward cargo holds. She saw her mother waddling through the huge group of people, offering water, coats, and a few threadbare blankets to the Vulcan children. Just as the chaos of the lower decks slowly became organized, the ship started to lurch and the lights went out.

A few of the smaller children screamed. Dagny wanted to join them but clapped her hand over her mouth and braced herself on a nearby steel ladder. The ship started rocking violently and she got the sense it was being torn apart. When the quaking stopped a minute later, the only sounds came from crying infants and the shallow breathing of several thousand people packed into close quarters. Why wasn't there more panic?

Suddenly, a piercing note sputtered over the loudspeaker and she heard her father clear his throat.

"Attention all crew and passengers..." His voice cracked and Dagny froze. The stoic tension in the cargo bay was suddenly amplified in the darkness. "Vulcan- Vulcan has... been destroyed."

Dagny's breath caught in her throat and her head began to buzz. She expected to hear reactionary screaming, but the silence only grew more persistent. Even the babies had stopped crying.

"I don't know who or why or how. I'm trying to reach anyone in the Federation, but the residual radiation is making subspace communication difficult."

His voice faltered but the communication link remained open. The bridge was normally a lively place full of bawdy jokes and irritable commands, but Dagny could hear nothing but the sound of her father's labored breathing. "I'm sorry," he croaked. "I'm so sorry."

The lights flickered and Dagny looked around at the sea of faces. Their eyes were dead. Her father's words had made her numb, but the Vulcans' universal stunned reaction immediately sent tears down her cheeks.

"Our focus now is to get our warp drive operational and set a course for Andoria," her father continued. "We're low on supplies and tight on space. We appreciate your cooperation and understanding. We're doing our best. Skjeggestad out."

Dagny cupped her hands over her face and massaged her forehead. How could a whole planet be destroyed? How many people lived on Vulcan? She didn't know. Probably billions.

The next hours became a blur of setting broken limbs, patching lacerations, hundreds of questions, and trying to stay one step ahead of death at every turn. Information and rumors trickled in but Dagny no longer felt interested in hearing it because none of it was good.

Apparently Romulans had destroyed Vulcan, Earth was now facing a similar threat, and people kept dying. A number of smaller ships from nearby sectors started to rendezvous with the Albret to offer supplies and assistance and take on non-injured passengers to alleviate the burden. Not all of them were Federation members.
A Nausicaan freighter offered all the biobeds in its sickbay. An Orion captain wanted for piracy gave up half his medical supplies and emergency rations. Three hours after her father made the announcement, a team of Andorian surgeons brandishing sophisticated equipment arrived and it seemed like the death toll would finally stop climbing.

As the hours ticked on, needs began to shift and become more mundane but nonetheless important. People needed bathrooms, diapers, food, and bedding. The need for fresh bandages never ceased.

Dagny was exhausted but so was everyone else. She stopped for a moment to lean against one of the bulkheads and her eyelids started to flutter. As appealing as sleep sounded, she didn't look forward to the dreams that were sure to come.

A few seconds later, she sensed someone was watching her and forced her eyes open to find Daniel. She smiled at her sixteen year-old brother but immediately knew something was wrong. His eyes were red and his face was contorted in a look of sad confusion.

"Have you seen mama?" he asked. His voice was cold and disconnected.

"Not recently," she admitted. "What's going on?"

His chin started to quiver and he bit his lip.

"Daniel?" she probed.

"Aksel and Benjamin," he muttered. "They're dead."

Her jaw fell slack. How could they be dead? Her two oldest brothers couldn't be dead. That didn't make sense. Dagny's chest started to constrict and she felt herself going weak at the knees and sliding down the wall to sit on the floor.

She stared straight ahead, dimly aware an elderly Vulcan man was watching her. She'd been confused by the Vulcans' dazed reactions upon learning that their planet, their homes, their friends and loved ones were all gone. Now a small part of her understood.

Voris could no longer feel his bondmate's mind linked to his, but he rarely consciously thought about it. When was the last time he'd taken a moment to sense T'Sala's consciousness? Was it hours ago during their holoconference? Days? It didn't matter—she was no longer with him. As he considered the implications, he knew the most logical conclusion was that she was either unconscious or dead.

He sat upright in the small chair in the lobby of the Vulcan consulate next to his father, eyes trained on the holographic projector cube in the center of the room. They were lost in the midst of nearly a hundred other Vulcans.

Starfleet security protocols didn't allow for live broadcast coverage, so much of the news was speculation and irrelevant facts. The limited information they were receiving was more than four hours old now, but none of it was good.

Just ten minutes earlier, Federation officials had finally identified the aggressors as Romulan. Twenty minutes before that, Starfleet had admitted it had lost contact with the fleet of ships it had sent to defend his home world. Though the Romulan Star Empire had yet to claim credit for the attacks, it seemed likely the Federation was on the brink of war.

Voris glanced at his father, noting the unusually empty expression in his eyes. Silek turned his head to regard his son and though neither of them spoke, they shared an understanding. Something was
Suddenly the room fell silent and Voris was aware the human news anchor had stopped speaking. The man's hand was visibly shaking and pressed to the device in his ear, his mouth forming silent syllables of confusion. "We have some breaking news. The ships sent to answer Vulcan's distress call... Starfleet Command has- what?"

The man's features locked into an expression of bewilderment as he turned his head to the left and mouthed something to someone standing off screen. His hand returned to his earpiece and he stared ahead lifelessly. Silent seconds ticked by as the crowd packed into the lobby of the Vulcan consulate awaited an answer from the pale-faced reporter.

The sliding of the pneumatic double doors leading back to the consular offices interrupted the stillness. The Vulcan ambassador to Earth was currently on Vulcan and his deputy was engaged in an emergency meeting with the Federation Council. The secretary to the Vulcan ambassador appeared and started speaking, and though denial of truth was illogical, Voris wasn't certain he was hearing the news correctly.

Vulcan was gone. Destroyed. The precise method of its destruction was unknown, but sensors at nearby relay stations weren't even recording the presence of debris. It was simply gone. There were currently no reports of any survivors.

The remainder of Starfleet's force was engaged in the Laurentian system and the Romulans had obliterated the small contingent that had answered Vulcan's distress call, leaving nearby Federation member planets virtually defenseless. The Terran government had yet to issue any guidance, but the consular secretary was urging all Vulcan citizens to evacuate Earth.

People started speaking in hushed voices but Voris could find no words. He stared listlessly at the holographic projector, watching the anchor with the increasingly pale complexion. "Starfleet Command is asking concerned citizens to please refrain from contacting headquarters until further information becomes available. Again, the names of the missing vessels are Antares, Armstrong, Enterprise, Hood, Mayflower, Newton..."

"We must go," Silek said, his voice barely rising above a whisper.

"Where?" Voris replied. Though he struggled to comprehend the enormity of the news, he recognized there was nowhere to go. Their home was gone. His mate was gone. His mother, his sisters, his friends and colleagues... gone.

Voris noticed his father's chin quiver slightly. Voris understood. The ability of the Vulcan mind to repress emotion had its limits and everywhere Voris looked, those limits were being tested. The pain was so profound it became physical. His heart thundered erratically and his hands trembled.

"It is logical-" His father's voice cracked and he clamped his mouth shut. People started filing from the lobby and Silek stood. "It is logical to leave Earth."

"And go where?" Voris repeated, feeling a surge of shameful and perplexing anger. He took a slow breath to collect himself.

"I do not know," his father admitted. "Yet I believe it is prudent to attempt to secure passage away from this planet while there is still time."

Voris blinked. "No."

"Now is not the time for disgraceful and illogical defiance," Silek replied, his tone growing firm.
"It is not defiance; it is acceptance," Voris countered. "Vulcan is destroyed. Earth has been my home for the past five years and it is the closest thing to a home remaining to me."

"Voris, I urge you to reconsider."

His father's unusual use of his given name did little to sway his decision. Silek had asked him to reconsider nearly every decision of his adult life and rarely had Voris ever complied. He rose to his feet, formed his right hand into the ta'al and said, "Live long and prosper, father."

Silek's lips thinned and his eyes narrowed but he nodded and replied, "May you have peace and long life, Voris."

He watched Silek disappear into the crowd of Vulcans filing from the lobby and Voris returned to his seat. As far as he knew, his father was the only kin he had left and he wondered how severely his regrettable, irrepressible emotions were clouding his judgment. He could not know. Was it logical to leave Earth? Should he join his father before it was too late?

Voris stared at the central holographic screen, observing the news as it scrolled by on a ticker at the top. They still had not reported on Vulcan's demise so it seemed logical to conclude the consular secretary had access to information not given to the media outlets. If the consulate recommended evacuation, it was also logical to conclude they had reason to believe Earth was no longer safe. Earth was the home of Starfleet and Federation offices; it would be a worthy target for a belligerent enemy.

Yet if Vulcan had been destroyed and Earth were no longer safe, what place was safe? Trickles of emotion dripped through his consciousness, winding their way into the darkest depths of his soul. His anger dueled with his despair, threatening to topple his rational mind. He required extensive meditation and a private area to grieve.

He felt as if he were operating on instinct. He made his way to the door and stepped into the late morning. The summer air was cool—many of his colleagues at Sarah April Memorial Hospital would call it a "scorcher"—and a light breeze rolled in through the bay. Vehicle and pedestrian traffic was thick and he was unable to hail a taxi. Were his logical faculties properly functioning, he would have recalled it was the hour many humans took a midday meal, but it was all Voris could do to subdue his frustration.

He turned left at the sidewalk and trudged toward his apartment building. It was more than thirty blocks away, but time and distance felt irrelevant. He wasn't long into his trek home when a young woman gently grabbed his arm and said, "I'm so sorry about your home." He recoiled at the stranger's touch but managed to maintain his fragile outward composure.

He wanted to tell the woman that unless she had been involved in the destruction of his home world, she had nothing for which to say sorry, but humans had a curious way of apologizing for things as a way of expressing sympathy even when they were not culpable. Empathy was logical; sympathy was not. Empathy was an attempt to understand the plight of another, whereas sympathy implied a person wished to actually feel another's sorrow, pity, or hardships.

Voris could think of nothing to say so he simply nodded to the woman and continued on his way. He received more sympathetic glances and gestures as he walked. The humans' well-intentioned but illogical reactions to his presence only gave him cause to reflect on his grief. His psyche started to crack as he recalled memories of his life on Vulcan and he finally began to acknowledge the sum of what he'd lost.

T'Sala was dead. His mother and sisters and secondary relatives were gone. He would never return to the family estate. He would never again observe the season of T'Khut in Vulcan's Forge. His
emotional pain began to manifest into physical symptoms. Voris realized he was trembling and having difficulty breathing. He needed to find a place to be alone, but he was still so far from home. Home. Where was that?

Home was no longer a Minshara-class planet sixteen light years from Earth, but a cramped apartment slathered in purple paint on 17th Street. His breathing grew more erratic and walking became an enormous effort. He stared at the ground, attempting to conceal his regrettalble condition. When he looked up to reference his location, he noticed two women pointing at something in the sky. His shaking grew violent but after a fraction of a second, he realized the ground was the source of the disturbance. An earthquake?

He spun around and observed the presence of an enormous object reminiscent of an antiquated space elevator linking the ocean to the upper atmosphere. The sidewalk continued to tremble and people screamed and ran for shelter. Voris remained frozen in place, gazing at the mysterious, serpentine object that had descended from the sky.

He couldn't see its precise point of entry, but he got the sense it was a large-scale mining drill. He swallowed hard. Voris wasn't a geologist, but he knew what would be coming if his assumption were correct about the object's purpose. San Francisco was situated along a continental transform fault that extended for more than a thousand kilometers. Drilling through the planet's crust at this fragile location would almost certainly result in devastating seismic activity and subsequent damaging waves of water.

He watched the drill, momentarily mesmerized by the swell of steam and water pulsing up from the bay. He was shrouded in a powerful sense of calm. He didn't know who was drilling into the planet or why—speculation was illogical, after all—but San Francisco was likely on the verge of epic catastrophe. He would probably die today and he found this revelation was surprisingly easy to accept.

The sound of screeching metal interrupted his trance. He turned his head to locate the source and reflexively dove behind a nearby tree, narrowly avoiding being struck a spinning vehicle. The ground was shaking harder and several of the taller buildings were beginning to sway.

"Somebody help me!" screamed a male voice.

Voris scrambled to his feet and saw a man clawing at the door of private hovercar. The passenger side was wedged against the tree and the driver's side was deformed, presumably from a collision with the transport shuttle sitting idly in the middle of the road. The front of the hovercar was on fire.

Voris rushed around the front of the vehicle and saw an unconscious woman in the driver's seat. It was evident from the odd angle of her head that her neck was broken and she was dead. The man wasn't trying to save her though; he was focused on the occupant in the back seat, a small girl with the same dark skin as the dead woman in the front. Her eyes were wide and her tiny hands clutched the restraints on her chest.

"Move," Voris ordered, shoving the man aside.

The glass had shattered but the narrow dimensions of the rear windows prevented him from extracting the child and by now, the front of the vehicle was now fully engulfed in flames. He wedged his fingers between the buckled door and the vehicle's frame and pulled. It creaked and groaned but refused to give. The heat wafting from the engine fire was becoming unbearable and he started to choke.

His lips curled away from his teeth and he pulled harder. The girl screamed. Voris' fingers ached. He
could feel the tendons in his hands, arms, and shoulders straining from his efforts. He couldn’t breathe and his ears rung with the piercing cries of the child and the shouts of hundreds of people running for their lives.

Then the door flew open and he stumbled backwards, but he caught himself and quickly lurched forward into the hovercar's backseat. The girl was nodding in and out of consciousness as he fumbled with the buckles of the harness tethering her to the vehicle. He wriggled her out of the web of the restraints and she threw her weak arms around his neck. He grabbed her around the midsection and pulled, extracting her from the burning vehicle.

She turned her head in the direction of the woman in the front seat and started to bleat, "Mommy!" Voris looked for the man who'd originally come to her aid but he was nowhere to be seen amid the bedlam erupting on the streets of San Francisco.

He clutched the girl tightly to his chest and staggered forward when the ground suddenly bucked ferociously and they were consumed in a wash of dust and deafening thunder.
"I grieve with thee," a raspy voice said.

Dagny opened her eyes and stared at the man as hot, quiet tears continued to slide down her face. She suddenly felt ashamed to be openly crying in a room full of such reserved people who all had their own grief to contend with.

"I only lost two brothers," Dagny choked, trying to clear the knot from her throat. "You lost... everything."

Her voice started to crack and she inhaled a gasping breath. She fingered the hypospray in the front pocket of her smock and fought the urge to give herself a sedative and sleep until next week.

"Loss is loss," the man replied. "But grief is not a thing which is easily quantified."

"I disagree," she countered. "One planet, billions of people, two brothers. Those are all numbers. All quantifiable."

The man's left eyebrow flicked upward and he responded, "Do you believe your emotional pain would be halved if you had only lost one brother, or doubled if you had lost four?"

She grimaced and felt more moisture pulse down her cheeks. "No, probably not."

"Precisely. Grief and loss are not interchangeable."

Dagny frowned, wondering what the man knew about grief if Vulcans truly didn't have emotions. Just hours ago, they sat huddled in the belly of the dark ship, listening to the news of their planet's destruction as if they were receiving a weather report. She had never met any Vulcans before today and even she had been reduced to tears at so much devastation.

"Do you disagree?" the man asked, studying her reaction.

"Um, no, I agree that grief and loss are different things. That makes sense. I just…"

"Speak your mind."

She inhaled a staggering breath. "I don't mean to be rude, but if Vulcans don't have emotions, how can you know what grief is?"

"You are misinformed," the man replied. "Vulcans possess emotions just as you do. We are taught from an early age to repress them and seek the serenity of logic."

"How does logic help a situation like this?" she asked, waving her hand around the overpopulated cargo bay.

"Logic is logic; it is not a solution to difficulty," he explained. "Rather, it is a means of transcending the difficulty."

"You're very... wise," Dagny sighed, feeling too worn to wrap her mind around his statement. "But wisdom won't bring my brothers or your planet back."
"No, they are gone," he agreed. "But logic allows a person to transform fear into prudence, pain into purpose, mistakes into initiation, and desire into duty."

She gritted her teeth and hated the grief that continued to trickle down her face. She didn't care about prudence or duty. "All I want is to be able to tell them how much I loved them."

"Regret is illogical," he said. "We are only in possession of the present and what has gone by shall never be ours again."

"Yeah, no kidding." Dagny shuddered and tried to keep from sobbing. She started to feel angry with him, so peaceful and calm and talking about death in an abstract and useless way.

"I'm- I'm sorry," she grumbled after a few minutes, rubbing the tears from her cheeks and feeling ashamed at her earlier rudeness.

"An apology is unnecessary. Your grief must be acknowledged."

"How though?" Dagny countered. "If regret is illogical and grief is… I forgot what grief is."

"Grief is an opportunity, a reminder to approach each action as though it were your last and dismiss idle thought, emotional recoil, admiration of self, and discontentment with your circumstances," he explained. "Many Vulcans prefer to grieve in private, but you are not Vulcan. You must be as you are."

She sighed. She felt entirely too tired to keep debating philosophy with a man who looked like he was on the wrong side of nine hundred years old. She climbed to her feet and suddenly felt light-headed. Moments later, her stomach began a loud series of groaning complaints. When was the last time she'd eaten? It had probably been the Kjøttkakesaus her mother had made last night. Or was it the night before last? She had no idea.

"Have you had anything to eat?" she asked her elderly Vulcan companion.

"No."

She looked him over, noticing his thin robes and delicate slippers. Like many of the others, he looked as though he'd fled his home in the middle of the night. Unlike the others, however, he was sitting by himself, partly secluded by the support pylon.

"Excuse me," she said, turning on her heel.

She made her way to the back of the cargo bay, stopping several times to check dressings or answer questions. Many of the Vulcans were asleep or sitting with their eyes closed, muttering quiet prayers and meditations. They didn't seem very grief-stricken, but the man had said Vulcans preferred to grieve in private. Unfortunately, with this many people, there was no such thing as privacy.

At the back of the cargo hold she found a pile of Orion emergency ration packs and a stack of threadbare blankets on a low table. She spied Sigurd, Sigrid, and Hedda fast asleep under the stand, sharing her grandmother's wide quilt and curled into a tight formation like kittens in a nest. She tucked the quilt around them more securely and brushed one of Hedda's red coils of hair away from her face.

She wondered how much of this they understood. Hedda was five and the twins had only just turned four. Even amidst the despair and disorder, they looked so content. She longed for a return to that kind of innocence; life seemed to weigh heavier with each passing year.
She straightened herself and collected two meal packs and the thickest blanket she could find and returned to the man. He was leaning against the pylon, reading a small book no larger than her hand with strange, loopy text on the cover.

"I thought you might want something to eat," she announced, trying to sound cheerful.

He lowered the book and his eyes flicked in her direction. She presented the blanket and the food and tried to smile, though the skin on her face still felt sticky from salty tears.

She sniffed and added, "I'm Dagny. I never did catch your name."

The man formed his right hand into a V-shape. "Live long and prosper. I am Tolik."

He accepted her offering and examined the unusual script scrawled across the packaging. She took a seat next to him and pulled at the edges of the durable plastic wrapping to reveal a clear container of a gray pudding-like mixture and two hard, greenish bars of something that looked roughly analogous to dried fruit.

Tolik was gazing at the food in his hands as though he were trying to see through it. The empty look in his eyes was exactly how Dagny felt, but she wasn't eager to wallow in her misery so she opted for small talk.

"What were you reading?"

"The Teachings of Surak."

"What's it about?"

He cocked an eyebrow and replied, "The writings of the philosopher Surak, the father of modern Vulcan civilization."

"Oh," Dagny blushed, sensing that was something she should probably know. "You know we usually don't travel this far into Federation space so I've never met any Vulcans until today. Sorry if my question was stupid."

"One often does not know what one does not know," he admitted. "Furthermore, I have never left my home world, so I have not encountered many humans."

"I'm sorry we had to meet this way." Dagny gave him a pained smile.

"An illogical apology." His words were quick and severe, and since she didn't know how to reply, she turned her attentions to her meal.

She took a bite of one of the bars and recoiled: it was like chewing on duranium. She wondered if Orion rations were specifically designed to break teeth or if these were just particularly old. She set the fruit bar down and opened the bowl of gelatinous gray goop. She sniffed it and was pleasantly surprised—it smelled of honey and rich starch.

She found a tiny plastic spoon mixed in with the packaging and tried a small bite. The consistency was unusual, but it proved to be reasonably palatable.

"It's not half bad," she said, turning to her Vulcan companion. "I wouldn't say delicious, but it's definitely edible."

"I shall defer to your judgment," Tolik replied, setting the food down on the floor and spreading the
blanket over his legs.

Dagny spooned the rations into her mouth quickly in an effort to ignore the disgusting texture. Silence crept in again, dangerous and insidious. It allowed her mind to turn to sadder things, and that was the last thing she wanted.

She snuck a look at Tolik; his eyes were closed and his lips forming inaudible words. His chin started to quiver and Dagny sensed he was on the verge of tears. The sight of his stoic face twisting into slow agony threatened to cause her own raw emotions to boil over once again.

"Tolik, are you ok?" she blurted, her voice shaky and slow.

His eyes cracked open but he didn't immediately reply. She felt compelled to touch his arm or embrace him but she'd learned from treating scores of injured Vulcans that his people didn't prefer casual touch, even as a means of comfort.

"Your question is imprecise," he finally said. "I am alive. I have suffered no physical injuries."

"I'm worried about you though."

The muscles in his face twitched; her admission seemed to catch him off-guard. "Your concern is appreciated but unnecessary."

"I don't know. You said a lot of really good things about grief and logic and loss, but I almost wonder if you were trying to convince yourself as much as you were trying to convince me."

She finished the last bite of her gray goo, set the empty container and spoon with the other trash, and peered carefully at the old man. They made eye contact for the first time and Dagny felt a haunting chill as she gazed into his distant, dark eyes.

"I grieve with thee, but I prefer to be alone for a time," he finally said.

She nodded and shuffled to her feet, collecting the remnants of the rations. "I'll come check on you in a bit."

"If you must."

"Thanks for your wisdom," she mumbled, trying to keep her emotions in check as her thoughts inevitably turned back to her brothers.

"There is no other wisdom, no other hope for us but that we grow wise."

The words seemed practiced, like one of her father's many sayings. She was about to ask after its origins when their eyes locked again and he said, "May you have peace and long life, Dagny."

There was a strange finality in his tone that made her pause. She didn't really want to leave him alone, but his eyes were already closed and his mouth had returned to forming the noiseless prayers. She headed for the matter reclaimator to dispose of the ration packaging and on her way there, Erik Larsen intercepted her.

"Your brother was looking for you," he said. His face was dirty and his hands were covered in minor plasma burns.

"Which one?" she sighed. "I have eight brothers."

The words had barely left her tongue when the first tear cascaded down her cheek. She didn't have
eight brothers anymore; she had six.

"Listen, I'm so sorry about Aksel and Benjamin," he said.

She opened her mouth to thank him but all that came out was a squeak. He pulled her into a tight hug and his warm and comforting embrace made her feel like it was finally safe to let her guard down a little. She cried for nearly a minute and when she was done, she tried to wipe her face with the sleeve of her smock.

"Thank- thank you," she sniffled, trying to catch her breath.

"It sounds like your mother isn't taking it well. Daniel and Ingrid are with her in one of the forward storage lockers."

"Thank you, Erik," she sniffed.

He gave her a cautious smile. "You got my name right."

"What? I've always known your name."

"But you didn't think I was Karl."

She studied his face and offered a shrug. The Larsens were nearly as prolific as the Skjeggestads, only not as diverse. They had nine children, one daughter and eight sons. Of their eight boys, there was a set of identical triplets—Erik, Karl, and Hans.

It was possible to differentiate Hans from his brothers thanks to an unfortunate engineering accident three years ago that left scar tissue on the left side of his face and neck. Erik and Karl remained virtually indistinguishable though, even opting for the same close-cropped hair and broad, crooked smiles.

She started to walk past him but he trailed behind. "Want some company?"

"If you like," she said, forcing a weak smile.

"What a day," Erik mused, looking down at his heavy work boots.

"Worst day of my life," she agreed, weaving through small groups of people milling around in the corridor. "I think it's easily the worst day of just about everyone's life."

She could hear low wailing in the distance and knew right away the grief belonged to her mother. It was agony, clean and pure. Her heart started to race; she wasn't prepared to deal with this. Dagny didn't know how long it would take her to come to terms with her brothers' deaths, but she wasn't sure whether her mother would ever recover. She crossed her arms and surged forward.

"I have to go back to engineering, mama," she could hear Daniel pleading.

"No!"

Dagny entered the small storage locker and saw her mother perched on a stool, red-faced and struggling to catch her breath. Ingrid knelt on the floor and held their mother's hand. Her eyes were red from crying and she looked a million kilometers away.

"Mother?" Dangy whispered.

"See, mama? Dagny is here. Ingrid is with you. It's going to be fine."
Her mother started to shriek and yell about how her sons, her boys were dead and gone. Involuntary tears slid down Dagny's face as she confronted the pain of a mother, her mother, who'd lost her children.

"I don't know what to do," Daniel stammered, looking to Dagny for help.

"We'll take care of her," she whispered to her brother. "Go with Erik back to engineering."

She inched forward and reached for her mother's tightly balled fist. She pulled Dagny into a monstrous hug and rocked back and forth. She moaned and hiccupped and muttered a lot of things about not being able to protect them, and all Dagny could do was listen and cry along with her. When she didn't get better after about ten minutes, Dagny started to worry. She recalled the new hypospray the Andorian surgeons had given her and debated giving her mother a sedative to help her sleep. It was a temporary fix, but it was better than letting her continue to suffer like this.

She reached into her front pocket and felt a wave of panic, which was quickly replaced by confusion. The hypospray was gone, replaced by something slim and rectangular. She extracted a small red item from her pocket and instantly recognized it as Tolik's philosophy book. Strange. It took her brain several seconds to process this unexpected development, but as she traced her thumb across the book's hard binding, something clicked.

"Ingrid, stay with mama!"

She fled from the storage locker and sprinted down the corridor, nearly knocking over a group of small Vulcan children. She found Tolik where she'd left him, but something was off. His posture was strange and his head was slumped against his left shoulder. She stumbled forward and groped at his neck. His skin was warm but his head and limbs were slack and non-responsive. He didn't have a pulse.

She started to call out for help when she heard the tink of metal on metal. The small, silver hypospray had fallen out of his hands. She grabbed it and gasped. He'd taken nearly 200 ccs of ambizine—twenty times the recommended dose of the sedative.

She grabbed his hands and dragged him away from the pylon, begging someone to find Dr. Sevek. Dagny knew very little of pharmacology and had no idea what to do for this kind of overdose. She squeezed his hand and felt nothing.

Fat tears fell from her eyes once again and landed on his elegant, silky robes. After his convoluted speech about loss and grief and prudence and whatever else, why? Why had he done this? A shadow fell across his body and she twisted at the waist to see Dr. Sevek.

"He took- he took my hypospray," she gasped. "Ambizine. At least 200 ccs. Not more than fifteen minutes ago."

Sevek nodded solemnly. "Come away, Dagny."

She clambered to her feet to allow him room to maneuver. Sevek bent forward and ran one of the Andorian tricorders over Tolik's lifeless body and shook his head.

"Do something," Dagny hissed.

"There is nothing to be done," Sevek replied, straightening his back. "He has been deceased for approximately eight minutes."

Dagny had heard stories of people being clinically dead far longer than that and being revived. "But
isn't there- can't you- can you just try? Please?"

"Your appeals will not alter reality," he insisted. "Furthermore, it is evident that any attempt to revive him would go against his wishes."

Dagny sneered at the Vulcan surgeon. "How can you know that?"

Sevek tilted his chin in her direction and uttered a small sigh. "Did you inject him with the ambizine?"

She wanted to throttle him. "Of course not! I realize that he did this to himself, but he—everyone, really—has just been through a terrible loss. Surely he didn't mean—"

"His is the twenty-third suspected suicide in the past fourteen hours," Sevek interrupted. "I believe there will be more in the days to come."

"I thought you people worshipped logic," she rebutted, raising her voice higher than she intended. "How can suicide be logical?"

Dr. Sevek looked away and inhaled a deep breath. "In most circumstances, it isn't. Yet these are not most circumstances."

The pain in his arm and back was sobering. It was dark under the rubble and he didn't know how long he'd been unconscious. There was a massive object on his back pinning him to the ground. Voris could feel the girl writhing beneath him and he was worried she was suffocating under his weight.

He braced his legs on a solid surface and pushed but faltered when pain ripped through his body. Trails of dust fell from above and he twisted his face to avoid getting the fine particulate in his eyes. He had been too slow; he blinked furiously to clear the agitating debris.

He pushed harder with his legs. The girl whimpered and called for her mother again. Voris found the strength to push even harder and the heavy object on his back started to give a few centimeters, but he couldn't continue through the pain. Somewhere overhead he heard muted voices.

"Help!" he called. The girl started crying. Voris was uncertain how to comfort a human child.

The voices grew louder and he heard a woman say, "Get a debris jack. Scans show we've got two under here. Human female and a Vulcan male."

Voris took a slow breath and tried to re-center himself. Assistance was coming; it would be illogical to injure himself further by continuing to struggle. He glanced down at the girl to try and assess her condition, but all he could see was the top half of her face.

"Mommy?"

It was logical to conclude from the resemblance and the girl's reaction when he extracted her from the hovercar that the driver had been her mother. Her mother was dead, probably from the initial collision and certainly from the subsequent fire, but he wasn't sure if the child could understand death.

Voris had no training in pediatrics outside of his residency, but he estimated the girl to be between three and four years old. He knew a good deal about Vulcan growth and development, but his knowledge of human development was far less extensive. Could a child her age understand such an
abstract concept as death? Even if she could, was it his place to inform her that her mother was dead?

His five-year fellowship in interspecies medicine had given him casual exposure to human parent-child interactions, and he knew that unlike Vulcans, many humans preferred to shield their children from uncomfortable truths.

"What is your name?" he asked her.

The girl continued to cry. How did human parents soothe their children? He'd seen parents at the hospital bribe their offspring with sweets, but he had nothing like that on his person and even if he did, he wouldn't be able to reach it. He couldn't move. "Excuse me?"

After several minutes, her cries faded into sniffing and hiccupping. He could hear people moving overhead again and a loud screeching sound of metal on metal. The girl screamed and started to tremble from the loud and unanticipated noise.

"Please do not cry," Voris urged.

The girl buried her face in his chest and continued to shake.

"What is your name?" he repeated.

She said something that he couldn't understand because his shirt muffled her voice. "Will you repeat yourself?"

No response. "I am Voris," he tried. "What is your name?"

"Nyala," she mumbled, her tiny voice barely audible over the growing din overhead.

"Hello, Nyala." He was unsure what to say next. Vulcans did not engage in the human social custom of small talk, and furthermore, he was uncertain how to relate to a tiny, human child.

The weight on his back shifted and the girl started crying and shaking again. He felt a warm wetness trickle down his abdomen and was fairly certain Nyala had relieved herself, either from necessity or fear or both. He wasn't angry or disgusted; even Vulcan children were not always toilet trained by her age and he'd seen far more repulsive things during his medical career.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" called a woman's voice.

"Yes!" Voris shouted.

"We're going to get you out, but we have to wait for a heavy excavator. Stay with me!"

What an illogical statement, as if either he or Nyala weren't trapped under hundreds of thousands of kilograms of debris and might wander away. It occurred to him the woman was probably speaking euphemistically and attempting to comfort them—he'd heard human doctors utter the exact same reassurance numerous times to nervous patients over years—but he didn't need her human niceties, and the girl was sobbing too loudly to give them any consideration.

"It's going to be alright, honey," the woman continued to shout. "Don't cry. We're going to get you out of there."

Voris fought to maintain his composure amid his growing agitation. Of course someone would get them out eventually, but he wasn't certain whether or not they would be alive. Then again, the woman hadn't promised their survival, so perhaps he was the one being illogical. Profound sadness
and emptiness nibbled at the edges of his consciousness, but he found his emotions were easily subdued by focusing on his present predicament.

It was not considered good practice to avoid one's emotional struggles with distraction, but Voris didn't currently feel capable of more traditional methods of logical discipline, given almost everyone he shared an intimate telepathic connection with was dead and he was buried under the remains of a city building and pinned against a small child who had urinated on him.

The crushing weight lurched again and his arm and back erupted into dazzling pain. He faded from consciousness as voices screamed for people to brace for an aftershock.

He awoke the second time to muffled cheering, wailing, and intense, stinging light. He inhaled deeply and steeled himself against his body's physical response to his injuries. He was choking. Just as he worked up the concentration and energy to move his neck and survey the scene, someone encased his head in a heavy foam collar—standard protocols for suspected head and spinal injuries.

He nearly fainted again from the shock and agony of being strapped into the hoist and lifted from the wreckage of the former skyscraper, but soon his arms burned with analgesic injections and the pain fell into muted memory.

He wanted to examine his injured left arm but his head was sluggish and his eyelids were heavy—not to mention his head was tightly secured to a backboard. The medics were pumping him full of painkillers, anti-coagulants, and sedatives, and he wondered if they knew how to adjust the dosage for his physiology. He made an attempt to wiggle his fingers and toes to check for sensation, but everything felt deliciously numb.

He stared straight ahead while the stretcher started to tilt horizontally. He caught sight of the tiny girl, her dark skin made a hideous shade of gray by pulverized concrete. Frightening black veins trailed from her eyes where her tears had washed the dust from her cheeks. She clung to a man's hip, but screamed and stretched her arms in Voris's direction.

He tried to lift his arms to take hold of her, but they were strapped down. How strange that he would have forgotten.

"Is she injured?" he asked no one in particular, or at least, that's what he'd intended to ask. The words seemed to fall out in a long, monosyllabic slur.

"You're a hero!" a woman screamed in his ear.

He didn't feel very heroic, but he was once again on the verge of not feeling anything at all. Perhaps they'd given him an excessive dose of the sedatives or painkillers; perhaps he was dying. The last thing he recalled thinking was he didn't really mind not living anymore, if all there was to dying was slipping away into the sensation of sleep. He giggled as the world faded to black.

Some time later, he learned that he had not been dying in the middle of 16th Street, but had been the victim of a pair of overzealous paramedics ill acquainted with Vulcan physiology who had given him twice as much ambizine as was necessary. He awoke on a stretcher in the corridor of Sarah April Memorial Hospital with his left arm encased in a surgical bone knitting unit and a cool breeze running over his face. The scene was devastating chaos. Medical staff flew by, pushing stretchers of critically injured patients and yelling various status updates.

He sat up slowly, noting the sensation of a deep ache reverberating through his ribs. His breathing was clear, his head was pounding, and on initial inspection, he appeared to be very much alive. He reached for the chart dangling from the foot of the biostretcher, wincing as his newly patched bones
and musculature creaked into motion.

He noticed the woman on the stretcher in front of him was sealed behind a silvery wall of energy. A biopreservation field. She was waiting to be taken to the morgue. Stretchers lined both sides of the hall and held patients of all emergency indexes—from non-urgent to dead. He snatched the PADD and attempted to piece together the past few hours of his life.

The paramedics' report was short and only said, "Vulcan male of unknown age. Critical. Suspected spinal injury/crush injury. Administered 50 ccs ambizine and 600 mg potassium chloride." On scene emergency personnel were rarely known for being thorough, but given the state of the city, he understood the brevity. The hospital's information wasn't much more detailed.

He'd been brought in at 1442 hours and immediately triaged as level 2, which meant his condition was initially classified as emergent and likely to result in deterioration. After generalized scans determined nothing more than a compound fracture of his left arm, minor internal bleeding, a bruised left kidney, and hairline fractures to his skull and lower ribs, they'd given him more sedatives, connected him to the central hospital computer via cardio/cortical monitors, and placed his arm in a bone knitter.

He palpated his ribs; they ached but he could breathe without difficulty, so he presumed the built-in osteogregenerators in the biobed had been set to mend the minor fractures. There was no note of it, but there were almost no annotations in his chart, other than a recommendation to monitor kidney function.

"I need more beds!" a male voice shouted. "We have fifty more criticals inbound from the embassy district! And why the hell are we still getting burn patients? I told the city dispatch to reroute them to Parker General in Oakland! Dammit!"

The voice was unmistakable—Dr. Timothy Kelley, a man who took pride in being unpleasant and thrived during periods of high stress. Voris worked closely with him during his fellowship and respected his medical expertise, even if he didn't prefer his manners.

Voris flung his legs over the side of the stretcher and stood. His legs were unsteady, like a newly born animal desperate to take its first steps. He took a deep breath and stretched, sensing the drugs still weighing heavily on his muscles.

"Help," a voice coughed from behind him.

Voris turned to see an elderly man clutching his chest, noting the cortical monitor on the side of his neck was flashing amber. He shuffled to the stretcher on the opposite side of the corridor, scooped up the man's chart, and studied it. The man—James Easton, age 81—had generalized chest trauma and had yet to receive a bioscan. He glanced down the row of stretchers on the left side of the hall and saw nurses at the far end ferrying patients to the diagnostic labs. The people on this side of the hall hadn't even been triaged yet.

Voris dove into an ocean of pneumothorax, hemothorax, shock, traumatic amputations, concussions, fractures, myocardial contusions and so much more. As he repositioned the autotourniquet on a woman's leg—it had been placed too low and she was still oozing a small amount of blood—he heard someone shout, "What the hell are you doing?"

Dr. Kelley had returned.

"These people are dying," Voris replied, giving an illogical answer to an illogical question.
"Yeah, welcome to the party," Kelley spat. "You came in here with a fractured skull; you're in no condition to be treating patients."

Voris appreciated the truth of the doctor's claim, at least in regards to the more critical patients. He wouldn't trust himself to perform surgery right now, but he was certainly well enough to handle the more minor lacerations and fractures. "With all due respect, doctor-"

"Oh, shut up." Dr. Kelley groped at the cardio/cortical monitor near the base of his skull and clicked his tongue. "Vulcan superhealing strikes again. Listen, if you want to make yourself useful, we really need another physician in the morgue."

Voris blinked and glanced around. He saw at least five bodies lying on stretchers in plain view in the corridor, and he knew their presence was limiting access to living patients. Furthermore, he knew in an emotionally charged species like humans, visible corpses often heightened distress and panic in emergency settings.

The morgue was not where he preferred to be, but it was what the situation required of him. "Very well."

He turned to make his way downstairs when Dr. Kelley stopped him and pointed over his shoulder at the double doors in the distance. "Not on level 1. Outside. And take one of these with you and have someone bring back my stretcher. I need it. Oh, and sorry about your planet. Welcome to hell."

Voris stared at the exit forty meters down the lengthy corridor and nodded. He exchanged his anger and despair for absolute numbness. How many people had died here today? He pushed the stretcher bearing the young woman who had laid next to him down the busy hallway and through the sliding doors into parking area, which had been transformed into a sea of tents by mobilized emergency crews.

The temporary on-site morgue was on the left in a series of thirty black tents, with non-critical patients being treated in numerous rows of yellow tents on the right. The pain in his chest returned when he entered the first tent with the body of the woman and was immediately turned away due to lack of space. It wasn't until he reached the twelfth tent that he'd delivered her—Jiao Zhang, age 33, dead of a penetrating chest trauma—for processing where she became decedent 12-068.

When he looked back on that day in his later life, he couldn't comprehend how he'd managed to maintain enough logic to function in a scene of complete devastation and loss. He was secretly impressed by the neutral expressions on the faces of many of his human counterparts. One woman, whom he learned was a first-year cadet from Starfleet Academy sent to help with recovery efforts, described the condition as "autopilot." He later found her sobbing over the body of a little boy—apparently autopilot had its limits.

As the afternoon turned into dusk and then twilight and eventually into night, the tents filled to capacity and they resorted to stacking the dead outside. The weather was warm and clear, and though they experienced a handful of small aftershocks, none were severe enough to halt operations. He worked to keep from thinking and though rumors about the Romulans and war and Vulcan and speculation about the final death toll ran rampant, Voris never stopped to listen.

Denial of the truth wasn't logical, but little about the day's events fit into a logical mold. Though he tried not to think about it, the sad nature of the work refused to be ignored. He signed off on one fatality tracking card after another, but at a rate of one every minute, he and the hospital's coroner were falling far behind. The math wasn't difficult; each tent held a hundred bodies and there were thirty tents filled to capacity in addition to approximately a thousand more lined up outside waiting to
be processed. And more trickling in each hour.

Voris wandered out of Tent 12 just in time to see the sun rise, showering the ugliness with brilliant orange and purple hues. He'd always thought the sunrises and sunsets of Earth were more captivating than those of Vulcan, but this morning's was particularly beautiful. He inhaled slowly, realizing he would never see alam'ak rise over the L'langon Mountains again. He'd never thought to miss the plainer sunrises of Vulcan until now.

"Coffee?" asked a high-pitched voice.

Voris turned to see a cadet with untidy, straw-colored hair offering a cup of steaming liquid. He disliked the vile drink but appreciated the gesture, knowing humans often shared hot beverages as a sign of kinship, particularly in difficult times.

"No, thank you."

"I'm really sorry about what happened to your planet," she mumbled, pulling the cup back toward her chest.

"What has happened to yours is also regrettable," he replied, pushing back against the anguish pooling in his soul.

"Yeah," she sniffed.

"I must return to my duties," he explained, walking the short distance to Tent 13. He clenched his jaw and sucked in air through his nose, stuffing the heavy emotions down as far as he could manage.

He swiped his finger across the PADD in his hand and stooped to examine decedent 13-001 and frowned slightly. Cynthia DePaulo, human, female, age 45. His landlady.

His next breath came out slow and ragged and a second later, a warm tear fell from his left eye onto his cheek. He instantly wiped the shameful wetness away, set the PADD down by her feet, and wandered from the tent and away from Sarah April Memorial Hospital, back to his sad purple apartment on 17th Street.
By the Numbers

Stardate 2258.43

Dagny gazed out over the emptiness of Cargo Bay 1, wondering how it had held more than a thousand people just two hours ago. The Vulcans had been very tidy and gracious guests and picked up every bandage, every ration wrapper, and practically every strand of hair they’d shed before disembarking the *Albret*. The blankets and clothing the *Albret* had lent them were neatly folded and placed in immaculate rows, like little formations of soldiers marking the places where people had been.

They were gone now, down to the surface of Andoria for refugee processing and most of the ship's crew and family members had gone with them. The *Albret*'s systems had been badly damaged in the fighting in Vulcan's orbit and the vessel was in serious need of repair. Life support was hanging by a thread, the warp core was held together by electrical tape and hope—at least according to Arvid, the ship's chief engineer—and several sections of the hull were being reinforced with energy shielding.

Because the *Albret* was no longer structurally safe, Andoria was to be their home for the next several weeks, a prospect both intriguing and terrifying. Aside from her year-long paramedic course at Deneva Station, she'd never spent more than three days on the surface of a planet, and she didn't exactly count Deneva Station, since it was a massive underground colony. Even though the surface had been terraformed by the turn of the century, Dagny had only ever gone up there twice—when arriving at and leaving from the planet.

She had no idea what was going to happen now. The damage to the *Albret* was severe and she didn't want to think about how much it would cost to make it operational again. Not only that, they’d jettisoned their entire cargo to make room for their Vulcan passengers. It was all gone—two million kilograms of duranium, tritanium, neutronium and countless other commodity metals and components they’d salvaged over a span of eight months from wrecked vessels near the Briar Patch. They had the shell of a ship and no obvious way to afford any repairs to it.

She heard a metallic ping and then a series of subsequent repetitions, not loud, but real and unexpected enough to startle her.

"Hello?" she called.

"Ingrid?" a voice replied. *Her father.*

"No, it's Dagny."

She wandered through a narrow doorway but didn't see him. She turned full circle and said, "Papa?"

"In here. In the vent."

Only then did she notice one of the panels was off the wall and resting on the floor. She walked over cautiously and stooped to see her father sitting inside the cramped vent, his posture contorted by the conduit's circular shape. Emil Skjeggestad wasn't a large man, but he looked like a giant curled up in there.

"What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" his lethargic voice replied.
"I'm doing one last sweep of the ship to make sure no one left anything behind. What about you?"
"I'm the captain," he murmured. "The captain always disembarks last."

She scoffed. "You've never stood on that much ceremony."

"For whatever reason, I think ceremony matters today." His head rolled along the curved wall to look at her. His eyes were bloodshot; it almost looked as if he'd been crying. Dagny felt compelled to look away. She'd never even thought about the possibility that her father could cry, and seeing that kind of vulnerability started to make her feel like crying again too. She shook her head, crawled inside the hot and horribly uncomfortable vent, and took a seat next to him.

"So, why are we in here?" she asked, staring straight ahead at the shiny duranium wall.

"Did you know the Federation government is going to cover the entire cost of refitting and resupplying the ship?" he replied.

"No. Wait… what?"

"Yes, for our 'exceptionally meritorious service for coming to the aid of Vulcan.' I just found out ten minutes ago."

Dagny didn't know what to think about that. No one gave away anything for free, especially not a whole refitted ship. "Well, that's good news, yes?"

"We were one of the only ships who responded to the distress call. There were dozens of others in orbit, but the moment the Romulans showed up, they started going to warp."

She inhaled deeply and held her breath, wondering what she was supposed to say. "Well, I'm glad we-"

"I could have stayed longer, you know," he interrupted. "I could have gotten a few more, but we were about to lose impulse engines and that giant Romulan ship was coming about and I thought they were about to fire on us so I turned and left too."

"You did what you had to do," Dagny tried to reassure him. "We saved thousands of people."

He grabbed her hand and squeezed it, then pulled it to his chest and closed his eyes. They sat that way for what seemed like an eternity before she said, "Maybe we should get out of here. I'm sure mama is wondering where-"

"This is where they died, Dagny," he said, his voice caught in a whisper.

"Who?" It was a stupid question. She knew exactly who.

His chin trembled as he drew in a sharp breath through his teeth. "I killed them. I killed my own boys."

The first tear hit his cheek and Dagny felt herself losing control. "What are you talking about, papa?"

She hadn't called him "papa" since she was about five years old, but that was exactly how she felt in that moment, tucked away in a cramped plasma vent with her father. She was a helpless little child.

He gasped and nodded to himself. The silence was a heavy burden and just as she started to stammer another plea for him to come away from the plasma vent, he said, "One of the primary starboard plasma ejection ports failed, and Benjamin went to manually override the system. We still didn't have
warp and we couldn't risk losing the impulse engines too. The deuterium was starting to overheat and the impulse reaction chamber was about to ignite. The whole thing was going to go, you see? Benjamin couldn't release the port by himself so Arvid sent Aksel to help him and they got the port cleared, but we couldn't wait. The pressure buildup had already fried the driver coils and the reaction chambers were seconds away from a meltdown. I was about to lose my impulse engines and the entire engineering crew. So I gave Arvid the order to vent the plasma."

His words ended in a shaking sob. She was dumbstruck. She wanted to be angry with him, to scream and yell and tell him she would never forgive him, but on a deeper level she understood. He'd been facing an impossible choice—the lives of his two sons versus the lives of seventy people down in engineering, which included two of his other sons, plus cousins and nieces and nephews and lifelong friends.

"I'm so sorry, papa," she breathed, wrapping her arms around his neck. He returned her embrace and they sat there soaking in their mutual sorrow and disbelief for what felt like an eternity.

"Does mama know?" she eventually asked. "That you- you had to do that?"

"Not yet, at least, I don't think so. How did she take the news that they were gone?"

"About like you would expect," Dagny sniffed, recalling the hour of hysterical wailing before Dagny had finally sedated her.

"She's never going to forgive me."

He was probably right but there was no point in saying so. She leaned her head on his shoulder and sighed. It seemed appropriate to cry, but she didn't have any tears left; she'd spent them all too soon.

"She was never quite right for this life, you know," he muttered.

"Who, mother?"

"Yes. She's a lot like Frida: she loves people and things and seeing new places. She wanted to get off this ship the day she turned eighteen."

"So, what happened?"

"Well, Aksel happened," he sighed. "We still had plans to move to Utopia Colony after he was born, but then your grandfather died and your Uncle Knut needed help running the ship. It was only supposed to be for six months, but then Benjamin came along, and then you, and then Daniel and Ingrid and Frida and you know the rest of the story. There was never a right time to leave."

Dagny frowned. She'd never thought about her parents being young and having dreams about a life away from the Albret and salvaging and raising a cohort of messy babies.

"I know you want to get away from this ship," he added.

"I- I don't know," she stammered. "This is my home. I don't know what I would do."

"No one really knows what they would do until they're doing it," he replied, looking at her. "I want you to do what you want to do, Dagny. I don't even care what it is, as long as it's honest and it makes you happy."

She sat up and gazed at him. "I don't know how I could ever leave. I'm the closest thing to a doctor this ship has."
"Do you know how many times I heard your name today? People admire you, Dagny. You saved a lot of lives and earned a lot of respect in these last hours."

"So did you," she insisted.

"The point is, if you want to go to medical school, we'll find a way to get you there. It might not be tomorrow or even next year, but we'll find a way."

"How did you know I wanted to go to medical school?" she mumbled, trying to fight back a new variety of tears.

"Out of all my kids, you've always been the hardest one to figure out. You grew up faster than you should have, always taking care of everyone else and never complaining. And you're also really bad about clearing the search history on the clinic computer. I know you've been researching how to apply to medical school ever since you came back from Deneva."

"You were snooping through my things?" she scoffed, trying to sound offended.

"Not on purpose, but it happens. Not a whole lot of secrets-"

"...on a ship," Dagny finished, twisting her lips into a thin smile. "I do want to go to medical school, but there's-"

"I wondered what we would do when Birgitte died, but then you came along and took over the clinic," he interrupted. "That's the thing; it's easy to feel obligated because you don't know how everyone would get on without you, but people are more resilient and resourceful than you think. You're almost eighteen, Dagny. You only get one chance at life."

He glanced down the dark vent toward the port far in the distance. She thought of Aksel and Benjamin and wondered if they'd ever had dreams that went beyond the confines of the Albret. It didn't really matter much now.

"We need to get out of this vent before it drives us both crazy," she groaned.

"You go," he replied. "I just want to be with them for a few more minutes."

She winced, grabbed his hand again and squeezed it, and then left the vent. She stood in the hallway watching him for a few seconds when he added, "I'll be along, I promise. Just leave me be."

She roamed the corridor on autopilot, making her way to the transporter room several decks above without even thinking about where she was going. She thought about grabbing some things for the stay on Andoria, but the children had ransacked all the rooms looking for supplies. There was no telling where anything was, so she decided to leave in the most dramatic way possible—with nothing but the clothes on her back.

She could hear voices coming from the transporter room and wandered through the door to find Dr. Sevek speaking with Oliva Nygård, the Albret's primary transporter technician.

"There she is," Olivia said, nodding in Dagny's direction before crawling back underneath a console on the floor.

"What can I do for you, Dr. Sevek?"

"I have the final data for your records," he declared, extending a large PADD to her.
She took it and looked over the loopy, scrawling numbers. "I- I don't understand."

Sevek pushed a button at the top right corner and the text converted into Standard characters. Her heart sank. It was a careful accounting of life and death, all neatly tucked into dispassionate rows and columns.

In total, the Albret had transported a total of 3,353 Vulcans from the planet's surface, but of course not all of them arrived safely on Andoria. 457 had died en route, many from injuries sustained on Vulcan or down in engineering and some from "unspecified causes." Dagny thought of Tolik and took that to be a euphemism for suicide. Eleven had died in transporter malfunctions; they'd been able to rescue so many using the industrial salvage transporters, which weren't rated to transport living organisms but could do in a pinch. Line after line told a story and held damning implications.

3,353 Vulcans rescued, 2,896 still alive. Of the survivors, 191 were listed as critical, 305 we remained in fair condition.

1,557 males. 1,339 females. They ranged in age from 1.1 months to… 191 years? What was the average lifespan of a Vulcan, anyway? 616 were twelve years of age or younger. Her heart felt heavier with each number she read.

"Miss Skjeggestad?"

"Yes?" she mumbled. "I'm- I'm sorry. 2,896 people sounds like a lot, but it really isn't, is it?"

"It is a number that exceeds zero," he responded. "I have already extended my thanks to several members of this crew, but I wished to thank you personally, and to return this." He pulled the laser scalpel from his pocket and offered it to her.

"I left the remainder of the supplies in Cargo Bay 7," he continued. "Though I could not complete a proper accounting without an initial inventory for reference."

"Thank you so much, Dr. Sevek," she sighed, not taking her eyes from the data on the PADD in her left hand. "And don't worry about the supplies. A lot more of these people would be dead if it weren't for you."

"It is illogical to speculate upon what might have been," he replied. "Yet it is undeniable we would all be dead were it not for the actions of this ship and its crew."

She nibbled on her bottom lip and nodded. "What will you do now?"

"I do not know. The Federation is already searching for a suitable planet to establish a colony for the survivors. What it will come to be is impossible to determine."

Dagny powered down the PADD and tucked the laser scalpel into her front pocket, but her hand brushed Tolik's book.

"Here," she said, pulling it out and offering it to him. "Um, this belonged to Tolik; he's the man who took my hypospray. I think he put it in my pocket to weigh it down so I wouldn't notice the hypo was gone. You should probably take it."

"Perhaps," Sevek said, eyeing the book. "But I believe he might have had another purpose in bequeathing it to you. I cannot accept it."

"He said it was a philosophy book, one that's very important to Vulcans. I'm sure it's in all kinds of databases, but I imagine books like these are going to be a bit harder to come by from here on out."
Besides, I don't even know how to read your language."

"The work in your hands is titled, **The Teachings of Surak**. You are correct—it is a very important
text to my people and it is in numerous Federation databases, but most Vulcans maintain a physical
copy. There is a tradition of passing Surak's teachings to a favored relative upon one's death and
when Tolik gave it to you, it was likely because he presumed he had no remaining family to give it
to."

Dagny set the book on top of the PADD and sighed mightily. Sevek stepped aboard the passenger
transporter pad just as Olivia stood and dusted off her slacks. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Dagny answered, joining Sevek on the pad.

"Have you seen your dad?" Olivia asked.

"He's…" She faltered. "He'll uh, he'll be along shortly."

Olivia transported them to an expansive, well-lit building that had been set up as a reception area for
the Vulcan refugees. Dagny was dazzled by the size of the room and the bright, white, reflective
surfaces. The high glass wall to the left was the most impressive feature. The Andorian landscape
was stained white, gray, and blue with a soft purple sky and towering mountains in the distance.
Snow fell from the sky, slow and steady. Dagny had seen rain a few times on Aldebaran and Capella
IV, but never snow.

She didn't know how long she stood there with her mouth open and staring at the beautiful weather
phenomenon, but Sevek interrupted her childlike wonder by saying, "I believe it is time to bid you
goodbye."

She started to extend her right hand to shake Sevek's hand and wish him good luck, but he formed
his hand into the same V-shape that Tolik had made and said, "Live long and prosper, Dagny
Skjeggestad."

She stared at his hand. "I'm so sorry, I'm not really sure how to…"

"It is often customary to return the gesture," Sevek explained patiently. "When one anticipates a short
parting, it is typical to reply with 'live long and prosper.' When the separation is expected to be long
or permanent, it is more appropriate to respond with 'peace and long life.'"

She frowned. **Peace and long life**? Hadn't that been what Tolik had said? If she'd have known that,
maybe she could have done something to prevent his suicide. She swallowed hard.

She slid her middle and ring fingers apart and extended her thumb quite easily and considered what
to say. "I guess I probably should say the second one, because I'm not sure when or how we'll ever
cross paths again. But I really do hope you live long and prosper, Dr. Sevek."

He nodded and then he was gone. Dagny turned her attention back to the snow but Sevek's
departure had stolen much of its magic.

"We're processing humans over here," called a singsong voice.

Dagny whirled around to see a slender, elegant Andorian woman staring at her in a mildly suspect
way. Her wispy white hair was parted artfully around her antennae and her white dress didn't sport a
single wrinkle. Meanwhile, Dagny was wearing a dingy medical smock covered with green
bloodstains and crumpled pajamas underneath. She suddenly felt very self-conscious.
Beyond the woman was a second glass wall, cutting off a separate room that looked like the main entrance to the building. It was full of people, clamoring and shouting words she couldn't hear amid flashing lights and frantic pushing.

"The media," the woman mused, the corners of her mouth turning into a tiny frown. "They've been told to keep their distance, but… they do like to get their story."

"The media?"

"Oh yes," the woman replied. "Your little ship's rescue of three thousand Vulcans is the one tiny bright spot in a sea of terrible news. Everyone wants to hear about it."

"2,896," Dagny corrected her. "Not three thousand."

The woman's handsome face fell into a more serious expression. "Of course. Can you come with me? We just want to make sure everyone has the necessary vaccinations and checkup; there's been a terrible outbreak of Andorian shingles this summer, and your species is particularly vulnerable."

Summer? Dagny glanced back at the snow falling outside and wondered what an Andorian winter looked like, but she followed the woman into a side room off to the right without complaint and found everyone from the Albret sitting in long rows of overstuffed gray chairs.

Half the children were sleeping and the other half were terrorizing those in the waking world. Most of the adults looked dazed, depressed, and exhausted, and Dagny was sure she didn't look much different.

She saw her family at the far end of the room. Her mother was asleep with her hands on her belly and sitting between Daniel and Ingrid, and Frida, Martin and Johan were trying to entertain Olav, Hedda, Sigurd, Sigird, and Henrik. So many brothers and sisters, but not as many as there once were. It suddenly occurred to her that she was the oldest now.

A man at a desk in the corner scanned her retinas and gave her a small, rectangular device printed with the number 106. He offered her a voucher for food from the replicator and told her to come get him if she needed anything or had any questions.

She wandered through the crowd of familiar faces, nodding and waving to a few people as she passed before slumping onto a wide bench facing a holographic projector. She figured it would be appropriate to sit with her family, but she knew the second Hedda or the twins caught sight of her, they would squeal and probably wake her mother and she wasn't ready to face Sofie Skjeggestad's grief at the moment, particularly knowing what her father had had to do to save the lives of the engineering crew.

She'd seen holographic projectors before but none of this quality. The picture was huge, at least three meters tall and a meter deep. The colors were so vivid and the sound was so clear that she almost felt like she was standing in the middle of the action.

The news came from San Francisco, or what was left of San Francisco. Half the city lay in ruins, devastated by… she didn't know. She eventually figured it out, even though it took her half an hour to piece together the whole story from the reporters talking and the text scrolling by at the top of the screen.

A rogue Romulan ship had obliterated Vulcan and then headed to Earth but had been stopped by a lone Starfleet vessel. Though the ship called Enterprise had kept the Romulans from destroying Earth the same way they'd destroyed Vulcan, Earth hadn't gotten away unscathed. Somehow the
Romulans had caused a series of earthquakes along the west coast of the North American continent and the devastation was ongoing.

The Federation capital of San Francisco got the worst of it when the initial earthquake that measured a 9.2—whatever that meant—hit the city center. Eighteen million people lived in San Francisco and the surrounding cities, and current estimates suggested about 750,000 of them were dead or missing. More major earthquakes had occurred near places she'd never heard of—Cualican, Monterey, Astoria, Juneau—and resulted in approximately 400,000 more deaths from things like landslides, tsunamis, and fires.

Arvid had once told her a lot of people were scared of traveling into space because they were afraid of decompression in the cold, dark vacuum, but from everything she was seeing on the holographic projectors, people should have been more terrified of living on a planet where the ground could just crack open and shake at any minute.

The death toll also included the crew of eight Starfleet vessels sent to defend Vulcan—the Antares, Armstrong, Farragut, Hood, Mayflower, Newton, Truman, and Walcott. The presumed Starfleet casualty count was 2,912, an afterthought really, all things considered. It felt strange to think the Albret had waded through the battle largely untouched; perhaps the Romulans hadn't considered them a threat. They hadn't been.

"Mind if I have a seat?"

She turned her head to see Erik Larsen standing just off her left shoulder, hands in the pockets of his coveralls. She offered him a sad smile and a shrug and moved the PADD and Vulcan philosophy book for him to sit next to her.

"They say we might be going to war with the Romulans," he said, staring at the holo image ahead.

"Isn't six billion dead people enough, give or take a few million?" Dagny spat.

"I'm thinking of joining Starfleet," Erik admitted. "It sounds like they're a little short-handed."

"Have you lost your mind?" she sneered. "Your mother would kill you."

"I'm nineteen: she can't stop me."

She gave him a pleading, bewildered look. "After everything we've lost today, I don't want to lose you too."

His eyebrow flicked upward and a half smile spread across his face. "You really mean that?"

"Of course I do," she snapped.

"Then come with me," he urged.

She blinked several times, trying to absorb his odd statement. "You mean you want me… to join… Starfleet?" It seemed inappropriate to laugh, but she couldn't help it.

"You wouldn't have to join if you didn't want to, I guess. But you could come with me."

She felt a tickle on her hand and looked down to see his pinky finger gently tracing along the meaty part of her hand. Her stomach twisted into a ball of nervous energy and she couldn't help the awkward smile that emerged. She didn't dare look down at the innocent flirtation, but she did find the ability to say, "You have lost your mind, Erik Larsen."
Voris crept along the rubble, trying to avoid the safety sweep teams that had stopped him at Guerrero Street. They told him the area wasn't safe and survivors were supposed to be making their way to Union Square for evacuation from the Bay Area.

He tried explaining he needed to get back to his apartment six blocks over, but they'd refused to let him through. He agreed with their assessment: the area certainly wasn't safe, but he was willing to take the risk. Even though he'd explained his purpose for returning home, they assured him he was wasting his time.

His apartment was further down on 17th Street, away from the worst of the damage. He could see in the distance that some of the taller buildings in his neighborhood had collapsed and a major fire had claimed the historic Catholic Church temple on the corner, but it certainly seemed possible his apartment building could still be standing.

The sun glinted overhead, casting small shadows as he walked. He stopped a few more times to avoid the safety inspectors,ducking into dark doorways or hiding behind cars. The further he walked, the clearer the roads became.

Despite several cracks running up the western wall, the apartment building seemed structurally sound. Still, he took the stairs carefully until he reached the second-floor landing. He stared at his door, knowing full well sentimental attachment to inanimate objects was illogical, but then he decided he didn't care.

He pushed through the front door, intending only to collect the meditation candle T'Sala had given him, but he quickly realized he might as well don clean clothing while he was here. He stripped away his dusty clothes that were covered in the blood and bodily fluids of at least eight different species, including the urine of a human child, and put on a fresh black shirt and a pair of black trousers. He put on the silvery tunic vest his mother had given him when he'd departed Vulcan for Earth, tucked T'Sala's candle into the wider, inner breast pocket, and left the rest behind.

He walked across the breezeway, glancing over his shoulder for any safety patrols, and rang the buzzer on Mrs. DePaulo's door. No answer. He tried several more times and then resorted to knocking and calling her name. He knew when she didn't stick to her strict medication schedule she often got confused and wandered off—it had already happened twice this year—and since her daughter Cynthia hadn't come home the night before, Voris suspected it might have happened again.

He was just starting to wonder how far she might have gotten on foot and considered the possibility that she'd been evacuated when he heard a soft, gravelly voice utter, "Vernon?"

He glanced around but couldn't see her. "Mrs. DePaulo?"

He saw rustling in the rose bushes at the base of the stairs and found her sitting in a heap of pink flowers she'd cut from the shrubs. She was wearing what looked like sleeping attire and had her hair bound in a net-like device. Stranger still, she wore badly applied red paint on her lips—an affectation human females called makeup—and a string of white beads around her neck.

"What are you doing down here, Mrs. DePaulo?"

"I was going to go out dancing," she explained, picking up one of the wilting flowers from the pile. "But then I thought, a girl's got to have a nice corsage if she wants the boys to look at her. Will you help me?"

Voris wasn't sure what a corsage was, but judging from the flowers she continued to present to him,
he presumed it was some kind of floral ornamentation.

"Mrs. DePaulo, you require your medication. Will you allow me entry into your apartment so I may administer it?"

"Oh, Cynthia gives me my medicine."

"Mrs. DePaulo, your daughter Cynthia has been killed."

"No, I don't think so," she smiled. "I just saw her. Say, what happened to your friend from the service? He was so nice."

Voris uttered a small sigh, marveling at the complexity of the human mind. She couldn't understand that it wasn't the year 2168 or even remember that his name was Voris, but somehow she remembered a very brief encounter with his father from the morning before.

"Will you show me where your daughter keeps your medication?" he insisted.

"No, I need to make a corsage. No one will help me."

Voris steadied his frustration as best he could. He was exhausted and his ability to repress his emotions was waning. How could he reason with someone who had such a distorted view of reality?

He took a deep breath and replied, "I shall help you make a corsage if you show me where your medication is located."

Her face lit up and she struggled to her feet. Voris stabilized her, noting a lingering pain in his left arm, and helped his elderly neighbor up the stairs. He knew Cynthia DePaulo was an organized individual, but the interior of the home looked like it had been ransacked. He had wondered how Mrs. DePaulo had coped by herself in the apartment all night; the scene before him gave him a rough indication.

Her auto-injectable hypospray pack happened to be sitting on the entryway table and Voris picked it up and read the prescription. She required thirty ccs of varazine and an additional ten ccs of serotonin. He fed the metered dose into the hypospray and looked around, but she'd disappeared.

He walked down the narrow hallway, stepping over women's undergarments and dry cereal and found her sitting on a perfectly made bed. She clutched a rectangular object in her hands, and as he approached, she asked, "Isn't he handsome?"

"Who?"

"Jason, of course." She held out the rectangular object in her hands, revealing a photographic portrait of a young human couple standing in front of a shuttlecraft. The man was tall and stocky with white teeth and curly, black hair, dressed in the one-piece suit of a laborer or maintenance worker. The woman wore a yellow dress and tall, impractical shoes. She had dark hair, dark eyes, bright red lips, and a necklace of white beads around her neck. They both looked familiar in a subtle way.

Voris glanced at Mrs. DePaulo, realizing the image had been taken of her in her youth. Based on the black curly hair and the thin lips, he supposed the man was Cynthia's father, and therefore likely to be Mrs. DePaulo's deceased mate.

Her entire face stretched into a broad smile. "He's going to take me dancing, you know. You can't be here because he's coming to pick me up. He might get jealous."

"I am going to administer your medication now," Voris explained, holding up the hypospray.
She took the dose without complaint as she continued to gently stroke the photograph. The varazine helped her cognitive functions and the serotonin balanced her mood, but nothing more could be done to improve her memory processing. From what he knew of her condition, she had difficulty forming new memories and making sense of recently learned information. When her daughter had accidentally introduced him to her as Vernon, she'd been unable to correct the mistake in her memory and he'd been Vernon to her ever since.

Even with medication, at times she believed she was reliving a moment from her past, and did so with vivid clarity. When she went too long without her medication, she made up things in her head and those things tended to get committed to memory even though there was no basis for them in reality, thus leading to further confusion even in her more lucid moments. He supposed if she were alive in ten years and ever encountered his father again, she would call him "Vernon's friend from the service."

She was only eighty-nine years old. Anti-aging therapies and medical advancements had extended the average human lifespan to 120 years and many medical professionals theorized it might go as high as 140 years in another generation, but those therapies had come too late for Mrs. DePaulo. She'd undergone cellular regeneration at age fifty against medical advice, and the result was a physically healthy body and a slowly deteriorating mind.

He waited twenty minutes to see if the medication would help settle her before asking, "Mrs. DePaulo, will you come with me?"

"Where do you want to go, Vernon?"

"To Union Square."

"I really should wait for Cynthia. She'll be home at 1800 hours."

Voris glanced at the clock on the wall. "Do you remember me telling you about Cynthia?"

"No."

She seemed to be regaining some of her mental faculties, so Voris took a chance. "Mrs. DePaulo, there was a severe earthquake and Cynthia has died. We need to go to Union Square so they can evacuate us to a safer location."

He could see the whites around her dark eyes. "I don't want to leave. I have to wait for Cynthia."

He suppressed a hint of irritation. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get her to accept that her daughter wasn't coming back to their apartment. Eventually he resorted to less ethical tactics and coerced her into dressing into more suitable clothing, packing a small bag, and going with him to Union Square to meet Cynthia. Lying was rarely logical, but it seemed the best course of action under the circumstances.

Voris grabbed the photograph of her late husband and her medication on their way out the door, but Mrs. DePaulo wouldn't follow him. "We have to take Harold," she declared. "And Maude."

He knew Harold was her cat, but he had no idea who or what Maude was. He had no desire to leave an animal trapped in a vacant apartment where it would certainly die, but he didn't see how they could travel with a cat. She refused to leave without him though and it took Voris half an hour to locate a small animal carrier in the disheveled apartment and another ten minutes to find Harold.

He managed to corner the skinny, striped feline with the milky eye in the kitchen amid an angry series of growls and hisses, and for the price of a few shallow scratches on his hands and wrists,
managed to trap him in the small plastic crate. Maude turned out to be a small, orange colored fish. Also, Maude was dead.

Mrs. DePaulo had stuffed the creature into a plastic bag with insufficient water while he had been tending to Harold. She presented Maude proudly to him, and despite his protestations over carrying around an animal corpse, Voris left his apartment building with an entourage that consisted of an eighty-nine-year-old human woman suffering from a rare form of dementia, a cat that continued to howl indignantly over his captivity, and a dead fish in a bag.

They didn't walk far before they were collected by a team of safety patrols and chastised for not leaving during the evacuation order the night before. Voris explained the situation, which was painfully evident the moment Mrs. DePaulo opened her mouth, and they were taken without further incident to Union Square.

He waited patiently with her for several hours while they tried to locate any of her relatives. She insisted she had none and wanted to know where Cynthia was, and finally by 1900 hours, they determined they would send her to a facility for aging adults with special medical needs in Phoenix. In a rare moment of lucidity, she cried and begged Voris not to send her away, but legally, he had no say in the matter.

They wouldn't allow her to take Harold, so Voris promised her he would, as she put it, "take good care of the sweet kitty." As he bid her goodbye, she wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug and thanked him. When he asked her the source of her gratitude, she'd already forgotten.

He then found the processing center for off-world Federation citizens and checked-in. The Tellarite woman working the computer didn't even look at him as she accepted his identity card. She scanned it, entered some information, and began a series of questions.

"How long have you been on Earth?"

"Five years, fifteen days," he replied.

"Do you claim Earth as your permanent home of residence?"

"No."

"Do you wish to seek temporary relocation on Earth or on your home plan-" She managed to stop just before uttering the final syllable. She glanced in his direction and in a very uncharacteristic move for a Tellarite, began blustering through a series of apologies before Voris interrupted her to say, "Accommodations on this planet will be adequate, thank you."

He took a seat in a long row of chairs and set Harold in the empty seat next to him. He would need to feed the animal soon, but he knew nothing about caring for a Terran feline. He would have researched the matter on his PADD, but it had gone missing following the initial earthquake.

He considered inquiring at the information desk about his father to see if he had come through this processing center, but a long line stretched around the room. Silek was either alive or he was not, and Voris' logical discipline was all but gone. He wasn't sure he possessed the patience to wait in a line full of highly emotional people, so he decided news of his father's ultimate fate could wait.

He turned his attention to the large screen on his left, which ran news feeds from several Federation planets. There was no accompanying audio—the noise in the lobby was far too loud to hear it anyway—but one story in particular caught his eye.

The title at the bottom read, "Hero scrappers save 3,000 from Vulcan." The feed switched from a
human reporter to a young human female with odd, blood-spattered clothing and reddish hair standing in the middle of an open room speaking with an Andorian woman. The girl's eyes shifted and for a brief moment, she looked right into the camera. It seemed like she was looking directly at him and the effect, however illogical, was mildly haunting.

Harold meowed angrily from his tiny plastic prison, breaking Voris' concentration. He fit his fingers through the wire front of the cage to soothe the animal and was bitten for his trouble. He had never felt more alone in his life.
Stardate 2260.50

Dagny looked up from her weekly report at the sound of the loud clanging. Erik Larsen was tapping the metal casing of the door control panel with a small wrench.

"Somehow, I don't think beating on it will make it work better," she sighed.

He huffed and turned around to reveal a wide, playful grin. "If you want this intercom fixed, leave it to the experts."

"My four-year-old brother has that level of expertise," she retorted, returning his smile.

"Yes, but I'm cuter," he winked. Something about his self-deprecating humor never failed to lighten her mood.

The dynamics of their relationship had changed a lot during the past two years. They'd grown closer, stealing kisses and exploring one another in rare moments of privacy, but she'd fought to keep him at a distance, choosing to prioritize her work and studying for medical school entrance exams. But he didn't make it easy.

She hesitated to call Erik her partner, but on a ship where everyone knew everyone, such distinctions were usually an afterthought. Erik was good-looking, and funny, and charming, and always knew just the right thing to say to cheer her up when she was down. He was also smart and good at fixing things, not that many things needed fixing after the Andorians overhauled the ship two years ago following the destruction of Vulcan.

Dagny glanced around her clinic. Even after so much time, she never stopped marveling at the incredible technology at her disposal. She had four operational biobeds, four new tricorders, and a decompression chamber. Karl Larsen and Kristian Brekke owed their lives to that decompression chamber after they'd been trapped in one of the forward cargo bays last year following a small hull breach.

She also had equipment she wasn't formally trained to operate, but it hadn't stopped her from spending many hours trying to learn by reading technical manuals. It had taken months to figure out how the chemical synthesizer worked and she still wasn't confident enough in her abilities to make anything more complex than aspirin—she didn't have any formal biochemistry education, after all—but she hadn't given up trying to figure it out. The more she learned, the better position she would be in to save lives and maybe one day make it to medical school.

A loud sigh escaped Erik's lips, followed by a mild expletive. "So… would you like the good news or the bad news?"

"Surprise me," she replied, not bothering to look up from her weekly inventory.

"Well, I didn't get the intercom fixed."

"What's the good news?"
"That was the good news," he sighed. "The bad news is I've fried the positronic circuit and now the door controls don't work."

"You got us locked in the clinic?" Dagny gasped, shooting him a dirty look.

"Give me a few minutes and I'll have it working again."

"That's what you said about the intercom, and now not only is the intercom still broken, but so is the door!"

"Do you have somewhere important you have to be?"

Her fierce look turned uglier. "This is the ship's clinic. If there's an emergency, people need to be able to come and go!"

"They can still get in through the outside panel," he argued. "We just can't get out through the inside panel."

"Why didn't you say that, then? I'll just send a message to Ingrid and have her come let us out."

"Don't call anyone just yet," he grumbled. "I can reroute the circuits in just a few minutes."

"What's a 'few' minutes? Two? Ten? A thousand?"

"It would go faster if you'd come over here and hold the light for me while I work."

She rolled her eyes and joined him at the panel by the door. "You have five minutes."

"You're hard to please," he teased. "Do you have somewhere else you have to be?"

"Yes," she scowled. "It's my birthday and my mother's making fyrstekake."

"Oh, that's right. I did seem to remember something about that." He handed her the tiny pen light in his hand and reached into his back pocket, extracting a small purple cloth bag. "Happy birthday, Dagny."

"What is this?" She gazed down at the small cloth bag, feeling her cheeks growing hot.

"Most people would guess it's a birthday present."

Dagny pulled at the drawstrings of the cloth pouch and poured a small silver chain with a light blue pendant into her hand. She twirled the jewelry around her finger, realizing it was a necklace. "You're giving this to me?"

"That was kind of the idea," he laughed nervously. "It was my mother's. The stone is aquamarine. I thought it would look nice with your eyes."

She stared at the necklace in stunned silence. She'd never worn jewelry, not because she didn't like it, but simply because she didn't own any.

"This is… this is one of the nicest things anyone's done for me in a long time," Dagny breathed. "But if it was your mother's- are you sure you want to give it to me?"

"She's been gone for four years, Dagny," he muttered. "She left this to my sister, but she left it behind when she stayed on Andoria. I asked my father and he agrees: it's beautiful and deserves to be worn by a beautiful woman."
Dagny's face flushed hotter as she gently fingered the delicate chain. "It feels like too much."

"To me it doesn't feel like enough," he replied. "Do you want me to put it on you?"

She gave him the chain and turned, lifting her hair for him to secure it around her neck. Her fingers played at the beautiful blue stone; she couldn't believe she was its owner.

"Thank you so much, Erik," she stammered, wondering if the blush in her cheeks would ever go away.

"I love you, Dagny."

She couldn't help the awkward laugh that emerged from deep within her belly; as much as she wanted to look at his face and see if he was serious, the tone of his voice didn't suggest he was joking. He'd never spoken such words before.

"Oh, come on," he continued. "I've loved you since we were kids."

"What are you talking about?" she laughed, still unable to look him in the face. "You used to chase me all around the ship, threatening to put spit in my ear."

"Yeah, I was nine. I was an idiot. But even then, you were the prettiest girl on the ship."

She shot him a pointed look. "Apparently you've never seen Julie Karlsen or my sister Frida."

"No," he shrugged. "I was always too busy looking at you."

Dagny leaned forward and kissed him, and the longer they stayed locked together, the more frantic they became. His hands grabbed her hips and then moved up to her ribs and eventually settled on her breasts. A smidgen of sense returned the moment he grabbed at the hem of her shirt and started pulling it over her head.

"What are you doing?" she gasped, using her arms to cover her brassiere.

"I thought it was obvious."

"We can't- you know- not here," she said, waving her arms around at the clinic.

"I'd kind of thought you'd figured out by now there's no such thing as privacy on this ship," he said, cupping her cheeks and kissing her again.

She tried to protest but her heart wasn't really in arguing. He was handsome and she was curious, not to mention feeling desperately beholden to some deep, internal longing she'd been fighting to keep at bay for months any time they were alone together.

Dagny had never given much thought to what her first time would be like, but she hadn't imagined it would include scrabbling around on one of the biobeds, terrified someone would walk in at any moment. It was quick and awkward, mildly uncomfortable and extremely thrilling. When they were done, she pushed him away and began laughing hysterically. A look of terror and confusion spread across his face as he pulled his trousers up from around his ankles. "I didn't think it was funny…"

"It's not," she gasped, fumbling with the clasp on her bra. "I just- I can't believe we just did that. That's the wildest thing I've ever done."

"Oh yeah?" he challenged.
"You've done something more impulsive than this?" she hissed, ripping her shirt back over her head.

"I'm about to," he grinned, chewing on his bottom lip. "Marry me."

"Have you been drinking?" She put her hands on her hips and stared at him, making an earnest effort not to grin like a fool.

"That wasn't exactly the answer I was hoping for," he mumbled, scratching the back of his head.

"Wait, I didn't say 'no,' I just-- I never know if you're being serious or not," she replied, her voice shrill and stilted.

"Of course I'm serious, Dagny." His hazel eyes almost looked afraid.

"Well, I- I guess."

"You guess?"

"Yes."

"Yeah?"

"Yes." She slapped her hand over her mouth to keep the terrified laugh from escaping her lips.

He pulled her into a tight and prolonged hug, giving her the opportunity to come to grips with what was happening.

"There's an open room in my family's quarters," he finally said. "You could move in tonight, if you want. I have a double shift tomorrow, but we could get married the day after."

She pulled away from the embrace, suddenly feeling like the weight of the ship was bearing down on her. Weddings on the Albret were fairly informal and spontaneous affairs, usually consisting of the captain, her father, presiding over a short ceremony, followed by a small gathering in one of the cargo holds.

"You don't think this is all moving a little fast?" she protested.

"If you want to take a few days to put things together and tell people, I understand."

"I mean, didn't you want to wait a while and get to know one another first?"

"I've known you your whole life," he laughed. "I know everything there is to know about you."

"What if I don't want to move into your family's quarters?" Dagny argued, thinking of Erik's rambunctious older brothers. "Besides, my mother still needs help with the little ones, and--"

"I'll be head of maintenance when Tor gives it up. We can have our own quarters then."

"Tor Jørgensen would have to die before he gave up being maintenance chief," Dagny sighed. "And he's only forty."

"So, we might be waiting a while," Erik shrugged, offering an apologetic grin.

Another sobering thought crushed Dagny. The population of the Albret wasn't completely stagnant—people did come and go. After the events at Vulcan, the Svendsens had given up salvaging and left to try life on the Cestus III colony, and their replacements were all single human men on short-
term contracts trying to scrape together a living. It wasn't that the ship hadn't tried to recruit families, but it was a hard life for people not accustomed to it, and the Albreť hadn't had any new permanent families in more than nine years. The family life of the ship was crumbling away but Dagny had never imagined it would last forever.

A lot of the younger people talked about building lives beyond the confines of the Albreť, and though some of them got by with only dreaming, some of them actually made good on their plans. Ingrid was nearly eighteen and had hopes of attending acting school in some place called Australia after her friend Julie Karlsen had left the ship the year before to study there. Her brother Daniel had been accepted to Starfleet Academy a few months ago and would be leaving in less than three weeks, a fact that had reduced her mother to tears every night since.

Dagny had assumed Erik didn't plan to spend the rest of his days scrapping metals and minerals from the far reaches of the quadrant. He'd been so determined to leave for Starfleet two years ago, but that had never come to pass, and Dagny had never bothered to ask why. Perhaps now was the time to inquire.

"What happened to joining Starfleet?" Dagny prodded.

"That was a wild fantasy," he laughed. "Besides, you told me not to, so I didn't."

"You really changed your mind because of what I said?"

"That wasn't the only reason why," he shrugged. "But I guess it was part of it. Why are you asking this now?"

"Because…" She gently closed her mouth and stared at the floor. "Because you make it seem like you want to stay on the Albreť."

"You make it sound like you don't want to."

"This is my home and it's where my family is, but I don't want to spend the rest of my life here."

His face darkened and she wondered if she'd said something hurtful. She'd never actually admitted her ambitions to anyone besides her father, but now that she'd spoken the words, she felt guilty.

"And where do you want to go?" he asked, his voice barely rising above a whisper.

"Well, I thought I'd go to medical school," she said, balling her sweaty hands into loose fists. "I- I've always wanted to study medicine…"

"And you went to paramedic school," he finished.

"I want to do more," she explained, trying to offer a reassuring smile.

"How would you ever pay for it?"

"Medical school, all school, is actually free on a lot of Federation planets, if you can get accepted."

"No one gives away anything for free and besides, you're the only medical person we have on the ship."

"I'm not the only one in the quadrant," she retorted. "People come and go. I'm not irreplaceable."

"Sure, we could find someone else," he shrugged. "Maybe someone who doesn't think they're too good for us."
"What are you talking about?" she mumbled, wondering if she'd heard him correctly.

"Admit it," he snapped. "You want to be better than everyone here."

"I never said that," she shot back. The pace of her heart quickened.

"You didn't have to." He stormed over to the control panel, stuck his hand in the wall, and began fumbling with the damaged circuits.

"Erik? I don't understand-"

"They didn't accept me, ok?" he seethed, refusing to turn and look at her. "I didn't do well enough on the entrance exam."

"What?"

"Starfleet. My scores were too low."

"But why not study and try again?"

"I don't have time to study," he sighed. "I work sixteen hour days most days."

"I could help you," she offered, trying to be positive. "We could study together if-"

"No offense, Dagny, but what do you know about warp theory?"

"Nothing, but I'm willing to learn."

"Forget it. I used to want to leave the ship, but that's over now. I'm happy with what I have: why can't you be?"

She wasn’t sure if she was angry, hurt, or embarrassed. Before she could think of something to say, her jumbled thoughts were interrupted by the cry of an alarm. The ship was at high alert.

The tip of his tail flicked back and forth like a metronome. Voris gently scratched the soft patch of fur between Harold's ears with his index finger, contemplating his pending meeting with Velik and T'Rya. Harold's low purrs grew louder and more persistent as he repositioned his head to allow Voris to scratch it in a manner he deemed more appropriate.

He hadn't intended to keep Mrs. DePaulo's irritable cat, but he'd been unable to give the animal to anyone who would guarantee his safety and comfort in the days following the devastation to the North American coast by Romulan attackers. After two years together, Voris and Harold had settled into a symbiotic relationship of tolerance—Voris provided Harold with shelter and an occasional drink of water and Harold kept the indoor lizard population to an appropriate minimum. There were many lizard species on New Vulcan, far more than had existed on its predecessor.

Though the planet selected for their resettlement was similar to his former home world in many ways, it bore notable differences. There was slightly more extrasolar radiation from a nearby nebula that humans had illogically dubbed "the Briar Patch" during the previous century. Though it wasn't the most remote Federation colony, it was located on the fringes of Federation space near the Klingon border and within striking distance of the Gorn Hegemony, a fact that had been a logical source of apprehension for many of the planet's new residents.

The planet was larger, had only eighty-five percent of Vulcan's gravity, and was five degrees cooler on average. It even had a rainy season, albeit a short one, during the current winter months, though
winter was relative. The citizens of New Vulcan had completely abandoned the traditional Vulcan four season almanac for the Federation Standard calendar, as the planet's rotational period around its local star was 97.44 days longer than Vulcan's had been.

Voris didn't spend much time acknowledging the calendar. It had been 759 Standard days since he'd lost everything, and in that time, he'd been living from one inadvertent milestone to the next, never bothering to plan for his future. He worked on-call shifts at the Va'ashiv district hospital and served as the interim diplomatic ministry's chief physician, often traveling abroad with Ambassador Spock, but for the past two months, the whole of his existence had centered on the upcoming elections.

In forty-two days, New Vulcan would hold its first formal elections. The last of the Federation relief agencies would officially leave, the transition charter would expire, and the emergency High Council that had been hastily assembled two years earlier would disband in favor of newly elected officials, leaving the planet to govern and sustain itself autonomously for the first time since Vulcan's destruction.

His Uncle Sarek was campaigning for the office of First Minister and his father Silek for Minister of State. Had elections taken place immediately after the colony had been established, both men would have handily won, but much had changed in two years.

The planet's destruction initially unified the Vulcans to a degree never before seen in the history of his people, forging them together in a spirit of collective pain, loss, and purpose. Nearly all citizens living off world joined the survivors in settling the new planet, bringing the initial population total—which was regrettably small enough to be exact and not an estimate—to 33,145 Vulcanoid citizens.

The early months revolved around building infrastructure—first came dwellings, administrative buildings, roads, communications networks, and water and sewer distribution systems, followed by schools, two hospitals, a library, four temples, and a central civic center. It was an enormous undertaking, but they had considerable assistance.

More than 20,000 Federation civil engineers, architects, environmental scientists, logisticians, laborers, biologists, geologists, physicians, and general bureaucrats had aided in expediting the development of three small communities nestled in a semi-arid desert between two small mountain ranges. The last citizens moved out of the temporary lodgings and into permanent homes three months ago, leading the Federation High Council to declare resettlement of the Vulcan people a success. The buildings were finished, but the reconstruction of society was only just beginning.

At first, most embraced logic to an almost unyielding degree, an understandable effect of coping with the extraordinary circumstances. The senior surviving Vulcan officials assumed authority of the fledgling colony and most welcomed their leadership experience, but as the days turned into weeks, small schisms emerged.

Though all of Vulcan's most vital texts existed in a number of Federation databases, the original Teachings of Surak no longer existed, nor did his katra, nor did any of the sacred relics or temples or monuments. The loss of so much tangible culture and history required them to revise four millennia of tradition. If katras could no longer be stored at Mount Seleya, where should they be stored? Were certain rituals like the kalifee and kahs-wan still acceptable cultural practices, given the limited population? Finding resolutions to these questions proved difficult.

A strong conservative base rapidly evolved, seeking to adopt the strictest interpretation of Surak's teachings to "adequately honor and preserve the memory of Vulcan," despite the fact that very few had lived by these orthodox tenets on their former home world. As the weeks wore on, their demands only grew more exacting.
They soon began advocating for a return to Traditional Golic Vulcan, the language of Surak, even though few modern Vulcans were fluent in the ancient tongue. They declared every tenth day to be a day of silence and solemn reflection as Surak had instructed, an action which had been prudent immediately following the loss of Vulcan, but was becoming less necessary as more and more Vulcans managed to suppress their emotions of that fateful event.

Eventually they became known as the Ba'taklar and would go on to champion restrictions on immigration, emigration, interspecies marriage, and performing business on Gad-Lekuh, the tenth day. They praised the expansion of families and those who sought the way of Kolinahr while endorsing strict punishments for blasphemy, excessive public emotional outbursts, and extra-familial mind melding in nearly all circumstances.

As the Ba'taklar grew more fanatical, opposition soon arose which urged a more reformist approach to restoring normalcy to the survivors. The progressive Storilayar preferred to allow individuals to seek personal interpretations of Surak's teachings and observe them as they saw fit within the bounds of an egalitarian legal code. Unlike the Ba'taklar, who favored isolationism, the Storilayar preferred to strengthen New Vulcan's partnership with the Federation, not only due to their precarious frontier location, but also as a sign of gratitude for the Federation's assistance in rebuilding efforts.

As the colony began to evolve, the need for a more organized system of governance became evident. The post-reform Vulcan charter that established the bureaucracy was no longer practical for such a diminished population, and when a convention met to amend the document for the new settlement, the growing social schism rapidly fractured into several political factions.

Though the Storilayar held a large majority over the Ba'taklar, divisions began to eat away their margin. A sizeable minority of the Storilayar began referring to themselves as the Vinem-lar—the assimilationists. They believed Vulcans should open the planet to new immigrants who were willing to develop the land and there was no shortage of willing human, Tellarite, and Denobulan colonists eager to immigrate to New Vulcan.

Though all Federation member planets boasted egalitarian societies that were generally free of civil conflict, poverty, and crime, extra-planetary colonization remained an attractive option for many due to economic stagnation, limited resources, and growing populations on their respective home worlds. The discovery of habitable planets was always newsworthy, as every new planet presented a unique opportunity for development, research, adventure, and economic growth for species throughout the Federation. New Vulcan was no different.

Starfleet had charted New Vulcan's star system in 2205 and fully surveyed it in 2241, noting the fourth and only M-class planet's abundance of semi-precious metals and rare elements, particularly nitrium and trilithium. The Federation zoned it for settlement and mining, but conflicts with the Klingons and territorial disputes with the Laurentians made establishing colonies and mines impractical and politically treacherous for more than a decade.

After diplomacy and military posturing had established a fragile peace with the Klingons in 2251 and the Laurentians formally withdrew their claims to the planet in 2255, private investors and planetary governments began planning four separate colonies. A Terran multiplanetary corporation made extensive investments, intending to send 20,000 employees and colonists to the southern continent to mine the rich deposits of trilithium.

A second group of Terrans descended from nomads of the Eurasian Steppe laid claim to New Vulcan's grassy northern continent for the purpose of reestablishing their cultural heritage, several thousand Tellarites planned to found an agricultural community on the western side of the northern continent, and a large group of Denobulan dissidents who opposed their home world's practice of
plural marriage intended to start a colony on the Southern continent. A complicated court battle arose in 2256 when the Terran corporation sued the Denobulans over their land claim, which halted the establishment of all colonies while Federation courts settled the lawsuit. Then Vulcan had been destroyed.

The Federation Charter gave Vulcan refugees priority over private enterprise and planetary colonies, and by executive order of the Federation president with unanimous consent of the Federation Council, the Vulcans were awarded control of the planet and its two moons less than a month after Vulcan's destruction, permanently ending any possibility of non-Vulcan settlements without the consent of the Vulcan government. While the Ba'taklar insisted on withholding citizenship from non-Vulcans and the Storilayar intended to place moderate restrictions on immigration, the Vinem-lar rejected both these ideas.

The Vinem-lar wanted to allow the establishment of the Terran, Denobulan, and Tellarite colonies and grant citizenship to those of good character who agreed to live by Vulcan's laws, pay taxes, and stay to develop the land. The Vinem-lar's proposal was purely economic—Vulcan's destruction had greatly skewed their population demographics, leaving enormous holes in the Vulcan labor market.

Only eleven percent of surviving Vulcans had been rescued from the planet; the remaining eighty-nine percent had been living off world at the time of its destruction, primarily engaged in the fields of research, education, medicine, law, and diplomacy. The end result was the population of New Vulcan possessed an excess of professionals and an extremely small working class.

Severe shortages in the construction, agriculture, retail, service, sanitation, and manufacturing industries threatened to cripple the already fragile New Vulcan economy and sentence it to an existence of subsistence economics and dependence on the Federation. The Vinem-lar theorized that by recruiting non-Vulcan colonists to participate in the economy, Vulcan would be capable of resuming its former place as a central socioeconomic power in the Federation within six generations.

It was logical from an economic standpoint, but there were other relevant issues to consider. Both the Ba'taklar and Storilayar rejected the Vinem-lar's proposal, citing concerns over cultural dilution and the erosion of political influence, given that initial estimates put the number of potential non-Vulcanoid colonists at around two hundred thousand individuals, a figure which obviously dwarfed the current Vulcan population. Yet while the Storilayar were willing to negotiate a compromise, the Ba'taklar refused to accept any non-Vulcan colonists on New Vulcan, a decision that further alienated them from mainstream society because there were already non-Vulcan individuals residing on New Vulcan—the Komihn k'tur.

The Komihn k'tur were a group of non-Vulcanoid Federation citizens lobbying for Vulcan citizenship. Most were human and had arrived on New Vulcan to assist with the colonization efforts and simply never left. Others eventually joined them and though their numbers were still small—approximately one thousand people—they were beginning to represent a moderate political force.

It seemed odd to Voris that so many humans would suddenly attempt to embrace logic as Vulcans did. A human physician he'd worked with at the temporary hospital during the previous year often mocked the Komihn k'tur, calling them a disingenuous cult of groupies, but Voris believed some of their claims had validity.

The Komihn k'tur argued that being Vulcan was a philosophy, not a mere result of biology. As the planet's only practicing interspecies healer, he'd encountered many of them, and each followed Surak's teachings with a hungry fervor that rivaled the conservative Ba'taklar. Though he doubted their ability to master their emotions as completely as Vulcans, he found it difficult to doubt their devotion.
In stark contrast to the Komihn k'tur were the V'tosh ka'tur, the Vulcans without logic. The V'tosh ka'tur had existed since the early twentieth century, a fringe movement formed in response to the previously oppressive pre-Federation Vulcan High Command. The discovery of the Kir'Shara in the mid-22nd century had led to a sweeping series of reforms and irrevocably crippled the movement, but a few V'tosh ka'tur had persisted, electing for a nomadic existence as expatriates for more than a century.

A small vessel of V'tosh ka'tur arrived three months after the last settlers and their teachings immediately found a captive audience, particularly among the younger generations. They respected logic but rejected emotional mastery and many disillusioned Vulcans readily began to follow their philosophy. As the V'tosh ka'tur gained political clout, the Ba'taklar insisted on sanctioning them for blasphemy, which only served to underscore the need for a formal constitutional convention to enumerate rights that had never been previously defined in the original Vulcan Bill of Rights. The convention took a month of intense debate and inquiry and resulted in a temporary eighteen-month charter and plans for an election following the formal completion of the critical settlement infrastructure. That had been nearly seventeen months ago.

In forty-two days, the planet would hold elections and then the newly elected officials would have sixty days to draft a permanent government charter. Though all elections were important to a free people, this particular election carried a larger degree of significance, as its outcome would dictate the future of New Vulcan for generations to come and settle the question of whether Vulcans preferred an isolationist, traditionalist society or a diverse society of immigrants and interplanetary cooperation.

As the social, political, and economic stakes continued to rise, public sentiment became more difficult to assess. At the outset, most Vulcans had favored a progressive government closely modeled off of the former one, but the most recent data was inconclusive. No party held a simple majority—yesterday’s poll indicated that thirty-two percent of Vulcans intended to vote for Sarek and the moderate Storilayar, twenty-nine percent favored T’Nas and the fundamentalist Ba’taklar, and twenty-seven percent supported Velik and the reformist Vinem-lar. The other thirteen percent vowed to vote for V'tosh ka'tur candidates or remained undecided. With so much uncertainty, political maneuvering had become routine.

The Storilayar had far more in common fundamentally with the Vinem-lar than they did with the Ba’taklar, and for the past three months, both parties had tried to establish discreet partnerships in an effort to curb the rise of the Ba’atakler's radical fundamentalism.

The Vinem-lar candidate for Minister of State had dropped out of the race, leaving a clear path to victory for his father Silek, but this left his Uncle Sarek in a precarious position. For their concession, the Vinem-lar had expected Sarek to drop out of the race and ensure the election of their candidate, Velik, to the office of First Minister. Velik was bright, moderate, and an exceptional orator, but he only forty-eight years of age and had no experience in politics. He had been a low-level economist and had never even traveled off world prior to Vulcan's demise.

Though many within the Vinem-lar agreed Sarek was a more qualified candidate than Velik, they were understandably hesitant to allow brothers from an opposing faction to claim two crucial positions of power at this formative stage of government. Prior to the abolition of the Vulcan High Command in 2154, familial dynasties had dominated Vulcan politics for centuries, making it virtually impossible for outsiders to gain influence.

Yet the S'chn T'gai family's ability to expand its power was extremely limited, as it only had six members and two of them were half human and theoretically the same person, though not technically, due to an unusual accident of time travel. Neither incarnation of Spock posed a long-term threat to Vinem-lar influence however, as Ambassador Spock was 157 years old and in declining
health due to his hybrid physiology and his younger counterpart, Commander Spock, had elected to remain in Starfleet. Since Voris was a physician and had no intention of entering politics and Sarek's firstborn son Sybok had chosen not to immigrate to New Vulcan, at present, the S'chn T'gai family's political dynasty included exactly two people: Sarek and Silek.

The Vinem-lar remained hesitant despite the Storilayar's reassurances, but several days earlier, they had made a quiet proposal to broker a compromise. If Sarek would consent to mentor Velik and support his candidacy for First Minister in ten years, Velik would agree to withdraw from the race. Sarek had readily agreed, but Velik had added a personal caveat.

Velik wanted to forge a more permanent alliance between their families as a sign of good faith, and the most practical way to do this was through marriage. Like most other Vulcans, Velik had little family to speak of, but he did have a surviving sister, T'Rya. His initial proposal was for her to marry Sarek, but neither Sarek nor T'Rya favored this idea, since T'Rya was quite young—only thirty-four years old—and had no interest in being the wife of Vulcan's First Minister.

Velik then suggested T'Rya could marry Sarek's younger son Spock, not only because they were much nearer in age, but also because Spock was half human. As both the Storilayar and Vinem-lar strongly opposed the Ba'taklar's intention to prohibit interspecies marriage, the union of T'Rya and Spock would serve as a symbolic gesture of both factions' commitment to Kol-ut-shan, or Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations.

Yet Sarek declined this suggestion as well, refusing to even mention the match to his son, whom he claimed already had a mate. That left Voris as the only logical choice of husband for Velik's sister, and though Sarek also refused to ask of his nephew what he would not ask of his own son, that hadn't prevented Silek from reminding Voris of his duty to his family.

Velik and T'Rya were due to arrive at any moment. Voris glanced at the mantle above the hearth, allowing his eyes to linger on T'Sala's candle. It was all he had left of his former mate.

He would have preferred to remain unbonded for the remainder of his life, but the unique consequences of Vulcan biology made that impossible. He was already eating and sleeping less. Soon he would begin experiencing subtle lapses in his memory and increased difficulty in regulating his emotions. In approximately three months, pon farr would be upon him, and it was for this reason he'd informed his uncle he would marry T'Rya if she were willing to accept him.

Vulcans hadn't been a species that routinely indulged in romantic fancy since Surak's Reformation. Nearly all Vulcans were betrothed in childhood, and though some bonds dissolved due to severe incompatibility, most eventually resulted in successful marriages. Choosing mates for oneself was rarely done logically, but accepting mates that had been chosen by one's parents generally was—so long as both participants were followers of logic and shared reasonably similar personal and professional ambitions. His bond with T'Sala had been particularly strong, but that had been the old way.

The new way was still yet to be determined. The deaths of six billion Vulcans had already had profound effects on the structure of Vulcan families and marriages. In addition to imbalances in the labor force, Vulcan's destruction had left disparities between the genders. Fewer females than males had opted to reside off world prior to Vulcan's destruction and as a result, the population of New Vulcan was 56.3 percent male, which left approximately three thousand males without mates when adjusted for individuals who were not attracted to the opposite sex, females who did not wish to take mates, and those not of reproductive age.

Due to pon farr, Vulcan males could not remain celibate indefinitely, which had yielded some dire and peculiar results during the past two years. For the first year, there had been a small but
statistically significant uptick in suicides. Ninety-three percent had been male and many had screened positive for elevated levels of yamareen—the pon farr hormone—during their autopsies.

As a response, Vulcan physicians had met with community leaders and discussed strategies for eroding some of the long-held social taboos relating to reproduction. Ultimately, the healers had agreed to discreetly screen their at-risk male patients and tactfully recommend alternatives to suicide or succumbing to pon farr. It had been very difficult for Voris to do at first, as he would never prefer to discuss his own very private situation with anyone but his bonded mate, but New Vulcan was on the verge of a public health crisis and it eventually became easier to address the issue with his male patients.

The results had been mixed. Suicide rates remained elevated but were declining and Vulcans still found it extremely distasteful to speak openly of pon farr, but taking mates of other species, common law plural marriages, and extra marital sex were becoming somewhat more common, as evidenced through secondary effects. His hospital was seeing an increase in interspecies pregnancies and three months earlier, healers in the Kanunsh'es district had been forced to respond to a small but troublesome outbreak of a rare parasitic infection typically spread through sexual contact.

The door buzzed, drawing him from his quiet reflection. Velik and T'Rya had arrived for the interview. By the old custom, it was traditional for parents to escort their daughters to the homes of would-be mates to allow them to grow acquainted during the course of an afternoon. If the children appeared to be suited to one another, the parents would proceed with negotiations for a betrothal ceremony.

T'Rya's parents were dead and neither she nor Voris were children, but Velik had suggested the meeting occur at Voris' residence to allow T'Rya the opportunity to investigate her potential future home. Voris had never met her, but knew she was a botanist dedicated to collecting and preserving Vulcan's plant species that had survived extinction in off world nurseries, arboretums, and public and private gardens.

He opened the door to discover a tall woman with pointed features and a willowy build on his step. Her sharp eyes scanned his person and when they came to rest on his face, she gently cocked her head to the left.

"Live long and prosper," Voris declared, raising his right hand in the ta'al. "You have come alone."

"I did not think it necessary to involve my brother," she replied, returning his gesture and adding the appropriate Vulcan salutation.

Voris stepped back to allow her to enter. She stepped across the threshold casually and waited for the door to close behind her before announcing, "I accept your offer."

"Perhaps you would prefer to discuss it first," he responded. "After all, I have not formally declared koon-ut-so'lik."

T'Rya glanced around the interior of Voris' apartment. It was the standard size dwelling that most Vulcans occupied, sparsely decorated, fully furnished, and impeccably tidy.

"We are both followers of logic," she countered. "My brother wishes to ally our families for the betterment of the Vulcan people, and as your family possesses no female relations to marry into ours, he has asked me to marry into yours. Of all your relations, you are the most suitable candidate."

"And what is your opinion?"
"You possess an acceptable occupation and appear generally healthy."

"Worthy qualities in any mate," Voris replied, marveling at her candor and making a similar
determination of her. "Yet far from a comprehensive inventory."

"Will you permit me a personal query?" she asked.

"Certainly."

"Why do you remain unbonded?"

Voris could offer a number of explanations, but none perfectly described the reason for his current bachelor status. There were few unattached Vulcan females and he stayed occupied with his duties at the hospital and attending Ambassador Spock during diplomatic missions, but in truth, he missed T'Sala. It was illogical, particularly after so much time, but it would be equally illogical to deny it.

"Your silence suggests you either do not know or do not wish to tell me," she murmured.

"I lost my mate of sixteen years."

"I grieve with thee," she replied. "Did you have children?"

"No."

"By choice or design?"

"Design."

"Do you wish to have children with me?"

"I believe that is a question better posed by me to you," Voris replied.

"If I may speak frankly," she began, as though she hadn't been for the entirety of their brief conversation, "I am currently pregnant."

Voris repressed a slight sensation of shock. "Would you not prefer to make a match with your child's father?"

"That is not possible, for reasons I do not wish to discuss and you should be able to deduce."

Voris understood. She had likely become pregnant assisting another male through pon farr and the father was either her brother's political rival or some other unsuitable mate.

"Does Velik know of your condition?"

"Yes."

He sensed from her fading voice that it would be grossly indelicate to continue his line of questioning. Whether or not Velik knew the identity of the father, it was likely he wished to help her secure a mate to raise her child and avoid a minor scandal with more conservative voters.

Voris had never given much thought to children once he'd learned T'Sala was infertile. If his mate could not have children, he could not become a father, and it was illogical to continue to reflect on what could never be. Yet here was a mate who was obviously capable of bearing children, and though this child would not be biologically his, he would share in the responsibility for providing for it.
"I am aware it is not an ideal situation," she continued. "I would not require you to claim the child as yours, should you choose to proceed-"

"How much longer will your gestational period be?" he interrupted.

She seemed startled by his question for a fraction of a second before admitting, "Approximately eight months."

"Will you permit me a personal query?" he asked.

She nodded in assent. "Do you care for the child's father?"

She thought to herself for a few moments. "Not in the way mates ought to care for each other."

"Do you believe you will care for me in such a way?"

"I do not know," she replied. He nodded, believing it was a fair response.

"You have been forthcoming with me, so I feel compelled to reciprocate," he explained, deciding to follow his own advice to his patients and broach the subject of pon farr. "I shall soon require… assistance. With a private matter."

She lowered her eyes and gave a subtle nod. "How long will it be until your private matter must be resolved?"

"I anticipate no more than three months," he explained. "Given your extenuating circumstances, do you wish to rescind your acceptance of the offer?"

"It is my turn to state that that is a question better posed by me to you," T'Rya countered, meeting his eye.

"I have no other prospective options for alleviating my… condition. And I am running out of time," he admitted. "My proposal stands if your acceptance of it does also."

"You are certain?"

"It would be illogical to speak casually," he replied.

"When do you wish to hold the ceremony?"

"I am due to depart for Aldebaran this evening and do not anticipate returning for several weeks," he explained. He was accompanying Ambassador Spock to meet with representatives from the proposed non-Vulcan colonies in a neutral setting to discuss contingency plans following the results of the Vulcan elections.

"When you return then," she murmured. "I would prefer to do it soon-"

"I agree," Voris interrupted. "And I understand. I am also willing to accept your child, should you ask."

"I am grateful to you," she said, her voice growing duskier.

"And I am grateful to you," he replied.

She gave a single nod of her head. They agreed to discuss the finer details of their bonding ceremony when he returned. She left his apartment and Voris set to work packing the necessary belongings for
his journey to Aldebaran with Ambassador Spock.

Their's would be a marriage of convenience generated by mutual need, but given the lack of alternatives, it would have to be sufficient. He would respect and provide for T'Rya and her child and perhaps affection would develop between them. Perhaps they would have their own children.

As he left the apartment, Voris glanced at T'Sala's candle on the mantle once more and grimaced. Due to its tenacious and enduring qualities, there were few emotions as difficult to repress as guilt.
Stardate 2260.50

"All mission-essential personnel report to your stations. All family members report to Cargo Bay 3. This is not a drill." Her father's voice blasted through the speakers above her head.

"Get the door open, Erik," she growled, racing to her computer console. "Clinic to the bridge."

Her hands shook as she disengaged the intercom. Her left hand slipped into the front pocket of her medical smock, idly brushing over the little book Tolik had bequeathed her. It was silly because she couldn't read the weird, loopy text, but she'd come to view it as something of a good luck charm.

"Dammit!" Erik roared, fumbling with the door's internal locking mechanism.

"Erik, please hurry!" she called over her shoulder.

"All mission-essential personnel report to your stations. All family members report to Cargo Bay 3. This is not a drill."

"Yeah, I know!" Erik cried.

Dagny's foot began to shake nervously. She tried to reach the bridge again and on her third attempt, Michael Hernandez, the new navigator they'd picked up on Aldebaran last year, answered her call.

"Dagny, we need you down in engineering to inoculate the everyone on board against lambda radiolytic isotopes."

She blinked. Lambda radiolytic isotopes?

The only phenomenon she knew that produced that kind of radiation was a neutronic storm, and those were rare in general and virtually unheard of in this sector. Furthermore, the ship's hull was designed to shield the crew from the ambient radiation present in the vacuum of space and could provide effective protection against Class 5 and below neutronic storms. If non-essential personnel were being told to get to the interior-most part of the ship and she was being told to get ready to inoculate everyone, they must be facing one hell of a storm.

She was also facing one hell of a problem. She didn't have a single dose of trialgenine available because it was incredibly unstable and difficult to synthesize, and with a shelf life of six days, it was impractical to keep it in permanent stock. Unfortunately, it was also the only known compound that could provide organic tissues any reasonable protection against lambda radiolytic isotopes.

"Dagny, respond," Hernandez barked.

She glanced at her chemical synthesizer and shuddered. She didn't have the training or the education for this. She hit the button to active the comm link and choked, "How long do I have?"

"In about twelve minutes, we'll be running into a Class 9 neutronic storm."

She heard Erik freeze behind her and held her breath. Class 9? Surely, she'd misheard him? "S-s-say again."

"Class 9 Neutronic storm. ETA in twelve minutes. Report to Cargo Bay 3 with the vaccines. Class 9.
She made eye contact with Erik and noticed his face was whiter than the wall behind him. She staggered to the chemical synthesizer and stammered, "Computer, display the compound trialgenine."

A bulky molecule with elaborate aromatic rings and complicated side chains appeared on the screen before her. There was a pull in her gut and a faint ringing beginning in her ears. She had never synthesized anything half as complicated as this.

She reviewed the dosage instructions and uttered a horrified gasp. She couldn't do the exact math in her head, but a quick guesstimate told her that even running the chemical synthesizer at maximum capacity for the next twelve minutes, she would only have enough trialgenine to inoculate about a third of the crew. Every second she wasted was a potential dose that wasn't being made, which translated into another dead friend or loved one.

"He said Class 9… Class 9," Erik babbled. "How did they not see this storm on sensors? It's going to tear the ship apart."

Dagny ignored him and studied the molecule, paralyzed by panic. Trialgenine had thirty-eight different stereocenters—thirty-eight!—and inverting any one of them would make the compound useless. Failing to properly adjust the pH during synthesis could also lead to an ionized form of the compound, making it extremely toxic.

Tears formed in her eyes, making the atoms of the molecule on the screen blur together in an amorphous blob. She'd taught herself almost everything she knew about chemistry, but her mind was fraying. Why hadn't she tried harder to learn how to operate the chemical synthesizer? She leaned over the counter and took in a ragged breath. Lots of people were going to die today no matter what she did.

She heard a loud metallic grinding noise and moments later, a pair of strong hands gripped her shoulders. "You need to get down to Cargo Bay 3 and I need to get to engineering!"

"I have to make trialgenine," she shouted over the alarm, wheeling around to face Erik and noticing he'd managed to open the door.

"There's no time for that," he insisted, pulling her toward him. "In a few minutes, we're-"

"Nothing else matters if I can't get this made," she barked. "Even in the insulated cargo bays, that kind of radiation will probably kill us in minutes without the proper inoculation."

She turned back to the synthesizer and began hyperventilating. Her fingers trembled as they struck the keys to start the synthesis, knowing one wrong entry would mean certain death for everyone aboard the Albret.

"Please," Erik cried. "Please hurry."

"I'm trying," she replied through gritted teeth. "It's a very complicated process."

She scanned through the synthesis steps again, reading the words but feeling too anxious to fully comprehend them. What was reductive amination again?

"We need to go, Dagny," he yelled.

"You go," she pleaded. "I'm sure Arvid needs you, but I'm needed here."
"I love you."

She was in too much shock to register his words. All she wanted to do was cry.

"Dagny?"

So many people were going to die no matter what she did. Maybe Erik. Maybe her brothers and sisters. Maybe *herself*. Nausea bubbled in her stomach. She turned around to tell Erik again that she loved him too but he was gone.

She kept working, struggling to avoid being overcome by fear and frustration. It took her five more minutes to begin the synthesis, and once the first droplets of solution formed in the hypospray canister, she was nearly overcome by powerful elation.

*Drip, drip, drip.* One dose, then two, then three. She could sacrifice a dose and run it through the chemical analyzer to ensure it really was pure trialgenine, but there didn't seem much point. If the compound she made wasn't actually trialgenine, they were all dead anyway because she wouldn't have time to readjust the synthesizer, but if it *was*, then she would be wasting a precious dose.

That was when reality set in. How much time did she have left? Three minutes? Five? The timer on the synthesizer told her she would have thirty-seven doses after five more minutes and there were currently 136 people aboard the ship.

She probably had *less* than five minutes, given it would take her five minutes to get to Cargo Bay 3 if she ran at a full sprint and took the ladders instead of the slower turbolifts. She had no idea how much radiation would get produced by a Class 9 neutronic storm, but it was safe to assume that once the wave front caught up to them, they wouldn't have a lot of time before devastating radiation sickness set in.

There were just too many variables. Children under twelve needed a smaller dose—she could save more lives if she inoculated the little ones first. How many kids under twelve were there? She raced back to the clinic's main computer to pull up the personnel logs with shaking hands when the alarm fell silent and the loudspeaker cracked to life once again.

"*All personnel report to Cargo Bay 3. I repeat—all personnel report to Cargo Bay 3.*" The fear in her father's voice shattered any vestiges of hope that remained.

She toggled the comm switch and cried, "Clinic to bridge."

Her father immediately responded. "*Do you have the vaccines, Dagny?*

"They're very complicated to make," she explained. "I'm only going to have about thirty doses, maybe forty, if I preferentially inoculate the smaller children."

He didn't yell at her about not keeping any vaccines on hand and she didn't justify why keeping them on hand was impossible. She didn't demand to know why the bridge hadn't detected the storm sooner and he didn't offer an explanation. Instead he replied, "*We have about a minute until this wave front hits us. Bring whatever you have down to Cargo Bay 3 and we'll just have to figure it out. Skjeggestad out.*"

The next moments passed in a daze as she wandered back to the synthesizer. Her father was going to die—there was no question. Not only would it not be right for the captain of a ship to save himself before anyone else, her father wasn't the kind of man who put himself before his family. Who was going to decide who lived and who died?
Her eyes were fixed on the chemical synthesizer. Twenty-seven doses. Then twenty-eight. How far could she push it? One more dose? Two more? She needed to get ready to face reality. She uttered a low moan and made her way to the supply drawer to extract a hypospray, but just as she reached the tall cabinet, the ship shook violently.

Her head smashed into the corner of the cabinet and her existence faded to black.

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Voris scanned his tricorder over the elderly Vulcan, noting no anomalous readings. "You appear to be in good health, Ambassador Spock."

"I have been following your recommendations."

"Are you still experiencing difficulty regulating your temperature?"

"The medication you administered has provided some relief."

Voris returned to his computer terminal to make several notes. Ambassador Spock's precise biological age was difficult to measure. Using a linear timeline, he was technically only thirty Federation Standard years of age, but that was obviously incorrect. He'd been born on stardate 2230.06, but on stardate 2387.81, he'd been sent back to stardate 2258.39. As it was now 2260.50, it was more correct to say he was 159 Standard years old.

For a typical Vulcan, he was caught between middle age and old age, but Ambassador Spock wasn't a typical Vulcan. The average Vulcan male had a life expectancy of 194 Standard years, but that was a figure with a wide degree of variance. It was not uncommon for full-blooded Vulcans to live beyond 200 years with a healthful lifestyle and adequate medical intervention, but the ambassador's human lineage was wreaking havoc on his physiology. The amount of deterioration in his tissues on a molecular level was the kind of damage seen in the tissues of a 207 year-old Vulcan.

He was theoretically at a stage in his life when most Vulcans would elect to retire and embrace their final years with quiet dignity, but Ambassador Spock refused, preferring instead to devote the remainder of his life to building the New Vulcan colony. There was insufficient data to accurately estimate the average lifespan of a human-Vulcan hybrid, but that would change in the coming centuries. Prior to the destruction of Vulcan, there had been only forty-one human-Vulcan hybrids known to all of medical literature, and nearly all of them had died on Vulcan. But in the two short years since their home world had been obliterated, there had already been forty-seven such hybrids born, as well as numerous hybrids between Vulcans and other species.

But for now all Voris had to go upon was the molecular scans and vital signs of his patient, and given the evidence, he estimated the ambassador would not live beyond five more Standard years, a figure that was probably generous considering the demanding schedule he kept.

"Are you still maintaining six hours of sleep per standard day?" Voris queried.

"When I am able, but I have not been as diligent in recent months."

"I must recommend that be increased to eight hours, though that is only my recommendation. I cannot compel your compliance."

"I shall attempt to meet those requirements, though I do not anticipate that will be feasible in the coming weeks."

The ambassador was probably correct. They were traveling to Aldebaran to continue negotiations with Blue Horizon, the Terran mining company whose future rested in the hands of Vulcan voters.
Should Vulcans elect the isolationist Ba'taklar party to key positions within the government, Blue Horizon would likely face bankruptcy because it had invested so heavily in future mining operations on New Vulcan. Now that the moderate Storilayar and progressive Vinem-lar parties had agreed to work together, a Ba'taklar majority was unlikely, which was welcome news for the Blue Horizon Corporation.

The initial purpose of Ambassador Spock's visit had been to discuss Blue Horizon's timetable for beginning trilithium mining operations, but the Laurentians, who had ceded New Vulcan to the Federation in 2255 with the guarantee that they would be entitled to twenty percent of the mineral rights, were now asking for a larger share. Then when the leadership of the potential Terran, Denobulan, and Tellarite colonies heard of the meeting, they also insisted on being present. A simple consultation had devolved into a difficult situation very rapidly, but the specific details of the Aldebaran visit were of little concern to Voris. He was only along for the journey to attend to the ambassador's health, as well as the health of the nineteen other Vulcans aboard the small transport ship.

He activated the chemical synthesizer and prepared to generate a dose of desmogine, a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory compound for treating age-related neuropathy in Vulcans. When he removed the canister from the machine, he noticed his hands were shaking.

He inhaled deeply to center himself, recognizing it was just an unfortunate early symptom of his looming pon farr. It would still be months before the plak tow and in the meantime, he would simply have to increase his meditative efforts to conceal these minor disturbances.

Voris gripped the hypospray tightly, administered the dose into Spock's neck, and stepped back. The ambassador's eyes caught sight of Voris' trembling hands.

"Are you well, Dr. Voris?"

"I shall be," he replied, turning away.

"My father tells me you intend to marry T'Rya, sister of the Vinem-lar leader."

"Yes." A one-word answer seemed sufficient. Voris did not prefer to discuss private matters with the ambassador because their relationship had always been that of a doctor and a patient. Spock was his cousin, but they had little in common. He'd never met the younger incarnation of Spock, who was half human and twenty years his junior, and though he currently served as physician to the elder version of Spock, he was still half human, more than a hundred years his senior, and for most intents and purposes, a stranger.

"I presume the union is political in nature," Ambassador Spock continued.

"Largely, yes."

"When do you intend to marry?"

"Shortly after our return from this diplomatic mission."

"I can find a way to manage, should you need to return to New Vulcan prematurely."

He experienced a flicker of embarrassment and immediately quelled it. Was Voris' impending pon farr really so easy to deduce? He began considering the circumstances and decided it probably was, even based on the limited circumstantial evidence the ambassador had. He encouraged his patients to do more to reduce the stigma of the regrettable condition, but he was unable to comply with his own advice. It was simply too uncomfortable to discuss.
"If you have no other concerns, ambassador, I would prefer to spend an hour meditating before end meal."

"Certainly." Spock stood to leave, but before he could take a step, a piercing alarm rang over the internal communications broadcast network and red lights began flashing on the walls.

"Attention crew and passengers—Starfleet has issued a general warning for an approaching neutronic wave front. Please report to the bridge for further instructions. Sevel out."

The Sekla was a small transport with an internally located bridge and it took less than a minute for Voris and Ambassador Spock to arrive. The transport's eleven crewmembers and the ambassador's staff of seven were already present.

"Report," the ambassador ordered.

Sevel, the elderly captain of the Sekla replied, "Starfleet has issued a priority warning for this sector following reports of a Class 9 neutronic storm."

Spock cocked an eyebrow. "Are we able to escape the wave front?"

"Unknown, ambassador. There is nothing on sensors to indicate the presence of any neutronic storm within two light years of our position, but I believe radiolytic anomalies could explain the error in the sensors."

"Indeed," Spock replied. "Kappa and lambda radiolytic isotopes could mask the signature in long-range scans. What does Starfleet report?"

"Four vessels have sent distress signals within the past hour and thus far, none have responded to subsequent hails from Starbase 2," Sevel replied. "Using the last known locations of the three ships and extrapolating it to the average velocity of a typical Class 9 neutronic storm, we should encounter the wave front in 19.4 minutes. The Sekla is serving at your pleasure, ambassador, but it is my recommendation that we disengage the warp engine to prevent damage to the plasma injectors and generate an inverse warp field to lock the ship in place for the duration of the storm."

"Can we attempt to outmaneuver the wave front?" Spock asked.

Sevel stood to the side, revealing a star chart. "According to estimates, we could attempt to do so with a thirty-four percent chance of success, but without adequate data to precisely predict the speed and direction of the storm, I would not advise it."

"I concur," Spock replied. "What is the composition of the hull?"

"It is reinforced duranium," Sevel explained. "If we polarize the hull plating and draw power away from non-essential systems to reinforce the shields, it will provide adequate protection from most of the storm's effects, though the crew will need to be inoculated against kappa and lambda radiation."

Both men glanced at Voris and without a word, he nodded, left the bridge, and breezed down the corridor to the Sekla's small medical facility. 19.4 minutes was not much time to produce twenty doses of trialgenine, but he had a secondary concern. Several forms of radiation were known to accelerate pon farr cycles, but because of the enormous taboo against discussing the condition, very little research existed describing the types or dosage of radiation necessary to induce a negative effect.

He began the synthesis of the vaccine, knowing it was illogical to concern himself with matters beyond his control. He could inoculate himself against radiolytic isotopes, but there was nothing he
could do if he entered pon farr. When the vaccine synthesis was complete, he tested the product for safety and loaded the canister into a hypospray and returned to the bridge. As he walked, he fought an irrational fear that began nibbling at the edge of his thoughts.

An alarm sang somewhere in the distance. It sounded so pretty, so insistent. Dagny's head rolled on the ground and she opened her eyes. A stabbing pain hit her stomach and she turned her head to vomit. The watery mess that spread across the floor contained a fair amount of blood.

She put her hand down and tried to stand but her body didn't seem to be working. The alarm continued. What was going on? Her brain pounded angrily against her skull and she closed her eyes. She was so tired and everything ached.

"Warning, radiation detected," called the ship's automatic alarm before resuming its distant tone.

Radiation? Her mind was foggy but she had a vague recollection of synthesizing a compound. Her throbbing head rolled to the right and she noticed a hypospray tucked underneath her hand. The gnawing pain in her gut continued but she didn't have the energy to sit up. She'd never felt so exhausted in her life.

Then it hit her: the radiation. She wasn't tired… she was dying. The neutronic storm. Erik. The vaccines. The garbled memories didn't make much sense, but she knew she needed get vaccines down to cargo bay 1. Or was it Cargo Bay 3?

Her hands began to slap weakly at the floor as she tried to get to her feet. Another blast of nausea resulted in more bloody vomit. It took all the energy she had to get herself onto her hands and knees and even then, she felt too weak to maintain the position for long. She clutched the hypospray in her hand and tried to crawl, slipping several times in the stomach contents covering the floor.

"Warning, radiation detected."

"I know," she said, her speech slurring.

She made it to the bench with the chemical synthesizer and tilted her head back. It was so high; she would never be able to reach it. She tried several times to stand and eventually resorted to half-standing, half-climbing up one of the bench's legs to reach the synthesizer. Her awkward fingers probed at the hypospray canister in the machine, but with her reduced dexterity, it took multiple tries before she was able to extract it and insert it into the hypospray.

"Warning, radiation detected."

She collapsed back onto the ground and closed her eyes. All she wanted was sleep. She tightened her grip around the hypospray and feebly slammed it into her neck. As the cool liquid flowed through her veins, Dagny's world once again went dark.

Voris sat quietly on a stool near the back of the bridge with the ambassador and the rest of his staff while the crew of the Sekla monitored the neutronic storm outside. They'd experienced significant turbulence when they'd collided with the wave front, but now that they were inside the storm, it was impossible to tell anything was out of the ordinary, aside from hampered communications and fatal levels of radiation sweeping through the ship. Voris had inoculated everyone and continued to closely monitor their health, but the trialgenine appeared to be functioning.

No one was showing any immediate signs of radiation sickness—nausea, vomiting, disorientation, dizziness, fever, weakness, fatigue, or hair loss. Cellular scans also showed no discernable levels of
They seemed to have averted radiation sickness, but even Voris couldn’t deny his growing level of agitation. It was taking more effort to subdue his emotions and the most logical explanation was that despite the trialgenine inoculation, the radiolytic isotopes were still interfering with his neural tissues. He would enter pon farr sooner than he anticipated, but how much sooner was impossible to determine.

He closed his eyes and resumed his meditative efforts, but was almost immediately disturbed when the navigator announced, "I am receiving an automated distress signal from the Albret."

Everyone in the small operations room shifted their attention to him. The Albret was well known to Vulcans. 8.7 percent of all Vulcans currently alive owed their existence to the Terran salvage ship.

"Hail them," Sevel ordered.

"There is no response and I am only detecting one weak human life sign. The Albret will come within transporter range in four minutes, seventeen seconds."

"Bring the survivor aboard. Initiate a site-to-site transport to the medical bay," Sevel replied, glancing at Voris.

"Understood," the navigator replied.

Voris didn't need to be told what to do. The Sekla's small clinic wasn't as well insulated as the bridge, but he lacked the resources to treat this person anywhere else. When he arrived in the clinic, he sterilized his hands in a gentle UV bath and immediately programmed the chemical synthesizer to produce trialgenine and arithrazine, the standard protocol for treating radiation sickness in humans.

"Captain Sevel to Dr. Voris," called a voice through the intercom.

He pressed the button and replied. "I am here."

"Prepare to receive the survivor in thirty seconds."

"Acknowledged."

He waited patiently by the biobed and half a minute later, his patient appeared. She was a young woman in a white smock covered with bloody vomit. Blood from a deep wound near her temple caked her reddish hair. Streams of blood also poured from her nostrils and mouth and bloody stool soaked the legs of her trousers. He didn't need his tricorder to understand her condition was critical.

He immediately administered the trialgenine and arithrazine, took a quick set of vitals, and set to work cutting away her soiled and contaminated clothing. Though the levels of kappa and lambda radiolytic isotopes were already quite elevated inside the Sekla, she was emitting three times the amount of radiation present on board the ship, therefore, removing her clothing was the simplest and most immediate way to begin the decontamination process.

How she had managed to survive those levels of radiation in the first place was nothing short of remarkable. She either had to have been inoculated or confined to an area of the ship with substantial shielding. As he pulled her clothes away and prepared to incinerate them, a small book fell from the pocket of the white smock.

The Teachings of Surak. Fascinating.
He picked up the small text and rather than destroy it along with the rest of her contaminated possessions, he sealed it in a small inorganic decontamination chamber along the side wall. When he turned back to her, he noticed a bright blue pendant on a silver chain hanging around her neck. It would also need to be removed before he could initiate the biobed's decontamination protocols, but he hesitated.

He knew from his years of working with human patients that they tended to place considerable value on inanimate objects like jewelry. He thought of T'Sala's candle that he'd removed from his apartment in San Francisco and experienced a twinge of irritating anguish. Rather than pull on the delicate chain and break it to quickly remove it, he took the extra three seconds to gently unclasp it and placed it in the inorganic decontamination unit with her volume of the *Teachings of Surak*.

"Captain Sevel to Dr. Voris."

He stretched his arm to reach the panel on the wall by the door and replied, "I have received the patient. A human female in critical condition. I shall send a more thorough report once I have completed emergency interventions."

"Understood."

He closed the hood of the biobed, initiated the decontamination cycle, and programmed the chemical synthesizer to produce three doses of hydronalin. The arthrazine would stop the effects of the radiation, but it would do little to correct the damage that had already been done. As he waited for the hydronalin synthesis to complete, he turned back to his patient and took another set of vitals. Her blood pressure was falling and her heart rate was increasing, but he'd anticipated this.

Sixty seconds later, the decontamination cycle was complete and the levels of radiation on her surface tissues matched the levels present in the ship's environment. Then he set to work assessing the internal damage. He scanned his medical tricorder over her abdomen, noting her pale skin was already reddening in places, signaling the development of radiation burns.

She was thin and possibly suffering from minor nutritional deficiencies, which he understood were common among individuals who lived transient lives aboard salvage and transport ships. He made a note to administer a dose of supplemental nutrients and continued his scans.

Fresh blood continued to flow from her nose and he wondered why the synthesizer was taking so long to produce the necessary hydronalin to counteract the neurovascular and hematopoietic effects of her radiation poisoning. He began to feel aggravated and realized that by treating her, he was exposing himself to greater levels of radiation, which was probably having a negative effect on his neurochemistry as well.

The machine chimed, informing him the hydronalin was ready to be administered. He inhaled a deep breath and noted his hands were shaking worse than before. It was unfortunate, but it couldn't be helped. Within seconds of giving her all three doses of the hydronalin, her eyes flicked open and she gasped.

Her irises were the lightest shade of blue he'd observed in many years. Several blood vessels had burst in her left eye, staining the white part a brilliant red color. She choked, sending bloody spittle down her chin. She looked at him, her eyes full of terror, and began to moan. The woman was almost certainly in excruciating pain, but she tried to sit up.

"Please remain still," he encouraged her.

She struggled and made a second attempt to sit up. Large clumps of her roan-colored hair remained
"You have been exposed to high levels of radiolytic isotopes," he explained. "I am going to administer a sedative. It will ease some of your discomfort."

She shook her head, uttered a raspy scream, and tried pulling herself into a sitting position a third time. The woman's mental state was clearly altered as a result of the radiation poisoning and quite possibly from her head injury, and though he greatly disliked what he had to do, he recognized it was the only logical option available.

While it was both logical and ethical to comply with a patient's wishes during a routine procedure, the protocols of emergencies were quite different. He could treat her without her consent to control an emergency that posed an imminent threat to her life or the lives of others, and if he could not continue to treat the effects of the radiation on her body, she would die.

He extracted the pre-programmed hypospray from his front pocket and gave her a fast-acting sedative. She quickly drifted back into unconsciousness and Voris felt a twinge of dread as he studied her face. She was the lone survivor of a ship that probably had a crew of several hundred. Voris understood the devastation and isolation that came from surviving when so many others did not. When it was safe for her to regain consciousness, she would have to be told the truth.

It took another hour of treatment protocols to reverse the most serious internal damage. Even after stimulating her bone marrow to produce more blood cells, her immune system would take months to recover and she would need to be on a restricted diet while the lining of her gastrointestinal tract regenerated. She would make a full recovery, but it would take time.

When he finally got her stabilized, he sent his report on her condition to Captain Sevel and ran a scan on himself. He was still physically unaffected by the radiation, but his mood was quite altered. It was requiring more effort to keep his emotions under control and at the rate he was deteriorating, he suspected pon farr would be upon him in approximately one to two weeks.

He balled his hands into fists, took several slow breaths, drank a glass of water from the replicator, and began treating his patient's less critical problems. She had a deep laceration to her left temple and upon further investigation, he discovered a hairline fracture of her sphenoid bone. He prepared the bone knitter and dermal regenerator and when he brushed her hair out of the way to expose the wound, a large clump came loose in his hands.

His treatment protocols had already averted the worst of the blistering and ulceration to her skin, but hair follicles were particularly sensitive to radiation and hers would have been killed almost immediately upon exposure to the radiolytic isotopes. Over the course of the next few hours, she would probably lose all the hair from her body, but hair was a minor cosmetic concern and was easily regenerated.

When he verified she had no other injuries, he replicated a set of thermal clothing, dressed her, and adjusted the temperature of the biobed to prevent overheating. He was in the process of setting up a nutrient drip when her eyes opened once again. Her lids were sluggish but she turned her head to look at him.

"Where?" she breathed.

"I am Dr. Voris. You have sustained severe radiation poisoning, but you are being treated aboard the Sekla, a Vulcan diplomatic vessel. What is your name?"

She blinked slowly several times and mumbled, "Dagny."
He glanced at her vitals, noting they were still weak but stable. "I am going to perform an examination and ask you a series of questions. Do you understand?"

She muttered her lethargic consent. He pulled his tricorder from his pocket and said, "I am going to check your pupils. You will see a bright light."

"I know," she whispered.

He gently lifted her left lid with his thumb and pressed the button near the end of his tricorder to activate the flashlight. She winced at the light, but her pupillary response was normal. He performed the same test with her right eye and received a similar result.

"Are you in pain?"

"Uh… hum…"

He considered the possibility of giving her another sedative, but he needed to finish his screening in a timely manner to determine if he needed to adjust her course of treatment. "Please describe the pain."

"My stomach… hurts…" She gasped.

"That is a common symptom of radiation sickness," he replied, measuring a dose norvaline in his pre-programmed hypospray to lessen her pain.

"Everything itches," she moaned.

"Dermal irritation is a typical side effect of the decontamination reagents, but I can administer an analgesic that should alleviate most of your discomfort. Do you consent?"

"Please," she begged. "It hurts."

He gave her the norvaline and waited several minutes for it to take effect before he resumed his assessment of her mental state. "Can you tell me the date?"

Her head rolled along the headrest of the biobed. Her eyes lingered on the white tunic he'd dressed her in.

"Can you tell me the date?" he pressed.

He felt a tingling sensation on his hand and realized she'd taken hold of it. Voris felt a peculiar emotional surge and gasped, pulling his hand back immediately. She was completely indifferent to what had just happened, but that was hardly surprising. She was not only mildly delirious, but she was also human and likely unaware of the Vulcan taboo against touching a stranger's hands.

It would have been easier to ignore if he were he in complete control of his mental faculties, but due to his rapidly approaching pon farr, her very intimate touch been extremely unsettling. He took a series of deep breaths, reminded himself that she was his patient, and asked her the date again. Under normal circumstances, it would be inappropriate for a male in his condition to treat female patients, but the circumstances were not normal. Her condition was still serious and he was the only physician available to care for her, so he would simply have to take greater care to distance himself from her physically.

She muttered something he couldn't understand, so he cautiously leaned forward and asked her to repeat herself.
"Where are the others?" she asked, her speech slurring slightly.

Voris stood up straight and gazed at the thin woman, her body ravaged by radiation sickness. Her pale eyes stared back at him, soft and serious.

"They died, didn't they?" she mumbled.

He took a slow breath and replied, "Yours was the only lifesign detected aboard the *Albret.*"

Her initial response came in the form of a silent tear descending her left cheek. She was quiet, her eyes locked on him. He felt the warm tingling sensation return to his hand and realized that their hands were once again touching, except that this time, he had been the one to reach out to her. His unconscious and very *human* response to her pain was baffling.

Then Dagny began to howl. It was a primal, angry, woeful sound that reverberated to the core of his soul. It transcended the wide gaps in their genders, cultures, and species. It was the universal sound of pain and loss, one confused heart reaching out to another to find some sense of understanding. He gripped her hand tighter and looked away, ashamed of the emotions brewing within him that he could not control.
Stardate 2260.50

She'd been emotionally numb before, but this was emptiness on a scale she didn't know was possible. It was funny how the Vulcan doctor's simple confession could completely anesthetize her whole existence. Or maybe it was the sedative he'd given her.

Her memory was still hazy and she was still in crippling physical pain but she distantly recalled screaming. The skin on her cheeks felt taut, itchy, and swollen, but she wasn't sure if that was from crying or the residual effects of the radiation or both.

She tried to sit up despite the intense cramps in her gut. She gasped through the agony and managed to swing her legs over the side of the biobed and recoiled at the sight of her legs. Her clothing was gone and had been replaced by a fitted white shirt and shorts, but the skin on her legs and arms was mottled with shiny white and rough red scaly patches. She brushed her fingertips over one of the burns and though she felt an instant itching sensation, she didn't immediately recognize it as originating in her body.

She felt like she was in someone else's body, in someone else's life. They couldn't all be gone, could they?

"Please lie down," urged a quiet voice behind her.

"How did this happen?"

"Specify." Dr. Voris came around the edge of the biobed and stood in front of her.

"How did this happen?" she repeated, her words sounding jumbled.

His eyes ticked back and forth several times and he replied, "There was a Class 9 neutronic storm."

"I know," she spat, feeling her teeth wiggle around in her gums. "I was trying to make trialgenine, but…"

"You are a physician?"

"No. A paramedic."

"It is remarkable you have survived."

She blinked at him listlessly. Her friends and family were dead. Everyone was dead. Why was she still alive?

She closed her eyes and vaguely remembered rolling around on the floor of the Albret's clinic. How had that happened? She'd hit her head. Her hand instinctively went to her temple and faltered the moment it made contact. Her hair was gone.

She traced her fingertips over her scalp, feeling the strange bald curves. It was one thing to understand radiation killed hair follicles, and another to realize it had happened to her. Her hand fell back into her lap. What did it matter?

"Will you please lie down?" Dr. Voris asked, taking a step forward. "Your life is no longer in danger
but you still require extensive treatment."

Dagny impassively complied, wincing as her body moved and twisted into position on the firm medical bed. He performed a quick tricorder scan and noted some things on a PADD. Dagny closed her eyes and let him work, wondering if she would wake up and discover this had been the worst nightmare of her life. The twisting of her stomach, the itching of her skin, and the dull ache in her head seemed too real to be a dream though.

She was extremely tired and even began to drift into a state of semi-sleep, but a sudden, violent twist in her gut made her gasp. "Lavatory? Where?"

"Yes," he replied, sliding his hand under her back to help her sit up.

Her legs fell over the side of the bed and she tried to stand but her body felt too exhausted to propel her forward. Dr. Voris seemed to sense the problem because he wrapped his free arm under her buckling knees and carried her to a side room with a small toilet and sink.

She barely shut the door before her bowels forcefully contracted, releasing streams of watery blood. It was misery, feeling as though the inside of her body was sloughing away. What began as a whimper quickly progressed into outright shrieks. She was dimly aware of the lavatory door sliding open and Dr. Voris kneeling down, giving her an injection in her neck, and explaining that this was normal because the radiation had killed the cells that lined her gastrointestinal tract.

She vomited down the front of his gray coat and fell into a fit of uncontrollable sobbing once again. She must have fallen asleep that way, because the next thing she knew she was staring at a sloped, smooth ceiling. There was a loud hum but she could just make out two voices speaking in the distance.

She smacked her chapped lips. She was incredibly thirsty. She was hot and her skin itched so badly it felt like it was on fire, but as she tried to sit up and scratch herself, she realized her wrists were in restraints and there was a glass dome encircling the biobed. Then she panicked.

She screamed and writhed against the tethers holding her in place and soon, the face of Dr. Voris appeared above her. "Remain calm, you are nearing the end of a cellular regeneration cycle."

She continued to hyperventilate and begged him to let her out in between ragged breaths and after an eternity, the restraints folded back into the bed and the glass dome retracted, sending a rush of cool air into her lungs. The panic and itching sensation faded but continued to linger.

Dr. Voris set to work with his tricorder again and Dagny realized most of her pain was gone. Her skin was still irritated and she had a dull headache, but she was physically feeling much better than she had earlier.

"Can I have some water?" she asked, her voice coming out as a squeaky rasp.

"Yes," he replied, making a final notation on his PADD and moving toward a compartment on the wall.

She looked down at her arms, taking stock of the layers of dead, peeling skin. She picked at one of the light scabs with her thumbnail out of curiosity and it flaked away to reveal a soft patch of smooth, pinkish-white flesh beneath. She held her arm up to study it closer and saw tiny rows of short, feathery blonde hairs. Her hair.

She ran her hand over her head, exploring the short locks that had sprouted during the cellular regeneration cycle. It was maybe about three or four centimeters long already. How long had she
been unconscious?

Dr. Voris returned with a white cup full of room temperature water that she consumed in several gulps. Her throat was sore and her teeth and jaw hurt, but she didn't care. The tiny bit of liquid he'd given her seemed to serve only as a reminder of just how thirsty she was.

"More? Can I have more?"

He refilled her glass and took a seat on a small stool by the biobed. She swallowed the water and nestled the cup between her palms, twirling it slightly. Several moments of silence passed before they spoke at the same time.

"Are you sure they-" she blurted.

"How are you-" he began.

They stopped mid-sentence and Dagny capitalized on the pause to repeat her question. "Are you sure they're all dead?"

"I cannot be certain, but it is highly unlikely anyone else from the Albret survived."

"But how do you know? Is anyone looking for them? You rescued me, you know? If I made it, maybe they-" Her words stalled as visions of synthesizing the trialgenine, crawling to the bench, and injecting herself flashed through her mind.

"The current storm has made search and rescue operations impossible. You were only rescued because the wreckage of your ship came within transporter range of the Sekla. No organic tissues can withstand the high levels of radiolytic isotopes produced by this storm for more than a few minutes," he insisted. "I cannot explain why you are alive."

"I gave myself the trialgenine. All of it. I didn't have enough for everyone. There wasn't time. You can't store trialgenine; it doesn't last. I didn't have enough." Her chin quivered.

"I am aware trialgenine is highly unstable," he replied. "Can you recall how much you administered to yourself?"

"I think I made thirty doses? Maybe more? I hit my head and when I woke up I just put the canister in the hypospray and injected myself with all thirty milliliters without looking."

All those people she could have saved and she'd only saved herself. But if she'd taken the entire contents of the canister, why wasn't she dead of a trialgenine overdose?

"Do you mean to say you took approximately thirty milliliters of trialgenine or thirty milliliters of one percent trialgenine solution?" he asked.

"Wait, no, thirty microliters of one percent solution of…" She felt a sudden chill go through her body.

"For a patient of your body mass, thirty microliters is only-"

"One third of a dose," she finished, trying to understand what had happened. Had it been thirty milliliters or thirty microliters? Hadn't the database said microliters? Hot tears pricked her eyes as she struggled to remember.

"Thirty percent of one dose," he corrected, echoing what she was slowly coming to realize. "If you
received a thirty percent dose, it would explain how you were severely impacted by the radiolytic isotopes but managed to survive."

She noticed a faint ringing beginning in her ears. She hadn't even synthesized enough trialgenine for one person; she wouldn't have been able to save anyone. And yet she was still alive. The tears crested the rims of her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

"There wasn't enough time," she breathed, clutching the cup more tightly in her hands. "I don't know how they didn't see the storm on sensors…"

"The Sekla's captain has informed me that the particular composition of this storm would have made long- and mid-range detection exceedingly difficult. We were only forewarned by Starbase 2 following confirmed reports and subsequent distress calls from vessels caught in the storm."

She squeezed the cup harder and closed her eyes. The Albret and her crew had been doomed from the beginning.

"Are you in pain right now?" Dr. Voris asked.

"My family is gone," she muttered, turning to look at him. "Everyone is dead."

"I understand your grief; I grieve with thee."

"How can you possibly understand what this is like?"

The words came out before she could really mull them over and several tense seconds of silence passed between them before she remembered she was talking to a Vulcan. He probably understood exactly what it was like.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I lost everything. I don't know what to do—I'm sorry."

"There is nothing to forgive," he replied.

She wept bitterly for a time and eventually laid back down on the biobed and curled into a ball. Everything itched and ached, which only added to her despair. Her father used to say today's tears could be tomorrow's laughs if only she would let them. He was always saying weird things like that, but he would never utter one of his silly little expressions ever again. She thought of her mother, of Erik, of her eleven brothers and sisters. How could she be all that was left of the Albret?

She was quickly reduced to a snotty, hiccupping mess and was on the cusp of falling asleep when she heard Dr. Voris ask, "Are you hungry?"

"Hmmm?" she mumbled.

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

"A diminished appetite is common for a time following radiation sickness, but you must eat."

She rolled over onto her right side and saw him standing beside the bed, holding a bowl. She stared at it disinterestedly.

"I'm not hungry."

"It was not a request."
There was a flicker of anger. Who was *he* to tell her what to do? It wasn't like he was her father… Intense sadness overrode her irritation.

She sat up, sniffed away a new batch of tears, and stared at the bowl in his hands. Spirals of steam emanated from its contents. She sighed and accepted his offering, surprised by how heavy it seemed and how fatigued she was just holding it.

She picked up the spoon and took a small sip. It was warm, watery, and bland, and after several spoonsful, she couldn't bring herself to eat any more.

"You will need to be on a restricted diet for the next fourteen days while you recover," Dr. Voris said, obviously noting her brief dining experience was drawing to a close.

Dagny nodded and let him take the bowl from her hands. Their fingers touched briefly and she noticed he was shaking. When he returned from depositing the unwanted soup in the matter reclaimator, she allowed herself to study his features for the first time.

He was average in every way. He had wiry black hair cropped in the usual Vulcan style, a slender stature, and dark brown eyes. They were *kind* eyes, for a Vulcan, but they were still cold and unaffected.

"I also intend to prescribe you a fourteen-day course of hemalexin to stimulate hematopoiesis and rebuild your immune system and erythrocytes," he added. "You may experience fatigue.-"

"What comes after that?" she interrupted.

"Clarify."

"Fourteen days of continuing treatment and then what? What am I supposed to do? Where do I go? Everyone I knew was on the Albret."

"We were en route to Aldebaran prior to the storm," he replied. "I am sure the Federation social services office there can assist you with reestablishing yourself."

"Reestablishing myself? Like I'm just supposed to forget this happened and get on with my life?"

He blinked. "No."

She glared at him. His eyes were kind but remarkably sad. The expression reminded her of Tolik. Tolik, who preferred to end his life rather than face it alone.

"Why did you save me?" she whispered, peering into his dark eyes.

"It was my duty as a medical professional."

"What if I don't want to live?"

His shoulders rolled back slightly. "It is not for me to tell you should want."

"Another Vulcan doctor once told me suicide was illogical but there were exceptions in extreme circumstances."

Voris took a seat on the stool and glanced at the ground. "If you are contemplating terminating your life, I urge you to reconsider."

Dagny wasn't sure what she was contemplating. She remembered the pain of losing Aksel and
Benjamin—her mother had been virtually bedridden for weeks after they died—but life went on because it had to. Her mother had given birth to Tilde and finally agreed that her family needed her and so the family had found a way to get by… together.

She was struck by the thought of little Tilde, who was not yet two years old, slowly succumbing to radiation sickness. She would have cried in pain. They all would have. New emotional effusions wound down her face. She began to sob hysterically and wailed, "They're gone. They're all gone!"

He stood there and watched her cry, which only made her feel more angry and vulnerable. She pulled her knees to her chest and continued to suffocate herself in grief until and choke out agonizing confessions. "They're- gone. I couldn't- I couldn't save them. I have- no one- left."

Dr. Voris took a step forward and said, "Life is not an event; it is a process. Rarely will any one individual share your life with you from birth to death. Many of your losses are irreplaceable, but that does not mean you can never regain comfort."

She wasn’t sure why, but she released her grip on her knees, leaned forward, and pulled him into a tight embrace. He froze but waited patiently as she continued to cry into his medical coat for several minutes. Hugging a Vulcan proved strangely soothing.

As she managed to get a tentative hold on her emotions once again, she considered everything Dr. Voris had done for her and began to feel overwhelmed at his kindness. He'd saved her life and cared for her when she was at her most vulnerable and she was telling him she wanted to die. What must he be thinking?

She pulled away and observed him through blurry tears. The look of intense pain in his eyes shocked her. It was so uncharacteristically Vulcan. It was beautiful, almost. She felt her cheeks growing hot and supposed she'd probably just made things even more awkward.

"I'm- I'm sorry," she mumbled, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

He didn't reply. He continued to stare at her and after several seconds had passed, she started to get the sense he was locked in some sort of deep internal conflict. She studied his dark eyes, wondering why he looked so torn, but before she could ask if he was ok, he did something that caught her completely off-guard.

He grabbed the sides of her face, sliding his thumbs along her cheekbones. She jumped slightly at the unexpected touch but instantly experienced a level of euphoria that she would have previously believed impossible, all things considered. Her grief had been overwhelming, but whatever this was threatened to devour her. Her sadness briefly melted away.

What was he doing? She looked into his eyes and shuddered. Dr. Voris no longer looked conflicted: he looked terrified.

Her light blue eyes were shifting side to side and he could feel intense confusion radiating from her. He sensed she felt the same way he did: she wanted him to release his grip but also didn't want him to let her go.
Then something even more unexpected happened. Her eyes drifted closed and she leaned forward and gently kissed him. The cool press of her mouth rattled him and he nearly managed to free his hands from her face, but soon the sensation of her lips became irresistible. It was only then when he realized was he was doing. What he had done.

He was attempting to initiate a telepathic mating bond. He was trying to bond with her. He couldn't do this. She hadn't consented. She was his patient. She was emotionally unstable. She was human. Why had he done this?

It took everything he had to tear his hands away from her cheeks and when he did, a sharp gasp erupted from his mouth. It physically hurt to be parted from her. He couldn't breathe.

"I- I- I'm s-s-sorry," Dagny whispered. "I don't know why I did that. That was- I- that was very- it was so inappropriate. I'm so sorry."

She was apologizing to him? "It is I who must ask forgiveness," he blurted, unable to regulate the tone of his speech.

"What just happened?" She tilted her chin to gaze into his eyes.

Her eyes were so light blue they were very nearly clear. The urge to bond with her raced through his mind again, causing him to take several steps back.

"I am not myself," he choked. "Will you please excuse me?"

She blinked several times but didn't respond. The innocent and confused expression on her pale face was intolerable. He had just violated her in a terrible way and she didn't understand. He didn't understand.

His condition had deteriorated rapidly in these last hours. He wasn't certain if it was the radiolytic isotopes or some other variable that was accelerating his pon farr, but he was certain plak tow would be upon him within a week, maybe less. He turned on his left heel and stumbled toward the clinic door.

"I'm sorry." Her voice was a mere whisper.

He stiffened at her apology, wondering if she'd spoken the words aloud or if he'd sensed them through a newly formed mating bond. No, that was highly improbable. Though psionic telepathic contact was typical among bonded Vulcan couples, non-psionic telepathic contact was a rare phenomenon generally associated with the transfer of a katra and Dagny was human. He knew humans and Vulcans could mate—his cousins Ambassador and Commander Spock were obvious proof—but he was less certain to what extent a meaningful telepathic mating bond could be formed between a Vulcan and a member of another species.

"I'm sorry," she said again. This time he was certain she'd used her voice.

"I am sorry," he insisted, pausing by the door but unable to bring himself to look at her. "I must check the rest of the crew and shall return momentarily. Please excuse me."

He shuffled out of the clinic and as the door closed behind him, he took several ragged breaths and tried to regain his composure. What he had just done was unethical. Unforgiveable. Probably criminal.

Voris had all but begged Ambassador Spock to send someone else to care for her when he'd stopped by the clinic an hour earlier to report a status update. It was highly irregular for a male physician to
provide personal nursing care to a female patient, but there was no one else. All twenty Vulcans aboard were male and Voris was the only one with any medical training. Without the complication of pon farr he could have easily accepted this unusual duty as the most logical course of action, but now his logic was failing.

He slumped against the wall and pulled at the collar of his shirt. His hands were quaking and his skin was clammy.

"Dr. Voris," called a resonant voice from the other end of the corridor.

Voris stood straightly and acknowledged the senior diplomat. "Ambassador Spock."

"Is anything the matter?"

Voris reflected upon his question but could not think of a decently appropriate response. "Is there any news about the storm?"

"Communication is still intermittent, but our most recent update from Starbase 2 informs us the wave front is beginning to dissipate," Spock replied, moving in his direction. "We should be able to resume course for Aldebaran in approximately four hours."

Four hours? They had been nearly thirteen hours from Aldebaran when they'd gotten caught in the storm and had been forced to stop the engines and initiate an inverse warp field. Four more hours of bombardment with radiolytic isotopes and then another thirteen hours until he would be free of the ship. "I see."

"Has your patient spoken since she regained consciousness?" Spock asked.

"She has," Voris explained. The ambassador had been present when she awoke during her third cellular regeneration cycle an hour before. "She has many questions that I am poorly equipped to answer. What will become of her when we reach Aldebaran?"

"Starbase 2 is aware of her rescue and assured me they have contacted the Federation Office of Health and Social Services there. They have asked that you forward your records so the hospital staff on Aldebaran can prepare to receive her."

"Certainly." His chart carefully detailed every moment since she'd been beamed aboard the Sekla seventeen hours ago. Even by Vulcan standards, he was a meticulous record-keeper, but he had almost no administrative information for her, aside from her gender, species, and name. And it was only a single name: he wasn't certain whether it was her given name or family name.

"I understand this task has been difficult for you," declared Ambassador Spock, folding his hands behind his back and taking several steps forward.

Voris wanted to claim he was managing the situation, but he wasn't. Images of her curious bright blue eyes staring at him as he held his hands tightly to her face trickled through his thoughts. "I have little experience with treating human psychological trauma."

"I can only ask you to make an attempt," Spock replied. "I shall arrange for your return transportation to New Vulcan when we arrive."

"Your concern is appreciated, ambassador, but I can make my own arrangements," Voris replied, disconcerted that the ambassador could clearly detect his diminished control. "I must check on the crew and your staff."
"Certainly," said Spock, standing aside. "Is she capable of speaking with me? Starbase 2 has asked for information to assist in notifying her surviving family."

Voris hesitated and held his breath. "Yes, she is conscious, though she is in a highly emotional state."

"Humans are a very emotional species," Spock agreed. "But these are very exceptional circumstances."

Voris had lived among humans for five years during his fellowship and had faced the entire spectrum of their emotional outbursts—anger, grief, joy, fear, embarrassment. He was familiar with humanity, but the ambassador was accustomed to it. His mother had been human after all, and he'd lived among them for decades during his service in Starfleet.

Voris nodded and proceeded to the small central bridge, where he scanned his fellow Vulcans for signs of radiation sickness. He'd performed scans on himself and the ambassador during the ambassador's visit to the clinic an hour before and they had both been healthy. His trialgenine inoculations appeared to be functioning well. He had no reason to believe the crew or the ambassador's staff would have become ill during that time, but it was still necessary to monitor their health. It was also a convenient excuse for removing himself from Dagny's presence.

It took him less than ten minutes to perform a scan of the eighteen people on the bridge, and when he finished, he dreaded the idea of returning to the clinic. In the absence of a mate, he required intensive meditation. But he had a mate. He thought of T'Rya but pictured Dagny's face in his mind.

He stopped halfway down the corridor, so startled by the idea of Dagny as his mate that he dropped his tricorder and shattered the glass screen. Dagny wasn't his mate: she was his patient. His human patient. He doubled back to his earlier musings. What kind of bond could be formed with a human?

He'd never given it serious consideration.

It had always seemed peculiar that his Uncle Sarek had taken a human wife, but he'd never stopped to contemplate the nature of their mating bond. It would be inappropriate to speculate about the private lives of his relatives in that manner. Perhaps he should. Or perhaps he shouldn't.

Her wrung his hands and turned in a circle. He should return to his quarters to meditate. He sped along the corridor and nearly turned the corner into the small row of sleeping compartments when he heard Ambassador Spock call his name.

"Dr. Voris, Miss Skjeggestad has asked to speak with you."

Who? Probably Dagny. No, certainly Dagny. He was angry at his inability to perform elementary deduction. There was only one female aboard the Sekla and Ambassador Spock had just been speaking with her. Of course he was referring to Dagny.

"Of course." His words were little more than a strained garble.

He collected his damaged tricorder, turned and composed himself as best he could, and proceeded in the direction of the clinic. He nearly passed the ambassador without speaking a word, but when they were within a meter of each other, Spock asked, "Dr. Voris, are you capable of performing your duties until we arrive at Aldebaran?"

Voris clenched his jaw. "I do not know."

Had she told Ambassador Spock what he'd done to her? Should he tell the ambassador what he'd done? Even with his failing logical faculties, he knew lying about such a thing, even if by omission,
was illogical and unethical.

"Ambassador, I-

"She continues to require extensive medical care, and you are the only one on board qualified to provide it," Spock interrupted.

"I fear that if I continue to treat her, I may cause her further harm," Voris argued, looking down at the floor in shame.

He was not referring to physical injury—even in the throes of plak tow, it would be nearly impossible to deliberately hurt one's mate. Voris swallowed hard, closed his eyes, and corrected himself. Dagny was not his mate.

"She informs me she is tired," Spock replied. "Perhaps it would be prudent to allow her to rest for a time. Perhaps you should do the same."

Voris nodded. He was fairly certain he was beyond sleep. He would probably eat or sleep little until his pon far could be resolved, but he was in desperate need of meditation. Yet his patient's needs had to come first. Dagny needed to be monitored continuously for signs of infection or spontaneous cellular degradation following regeneration therapy.

"I shall follow your recommendation," Voris said, taking a deep breath and meeting the ambassador's eye.

"And I shall keep you informed of any relevant changes to our status," the ambassador replied.

They parted ways and Voris watched Spock turn into the bridge before he headed in the direction of the clinic. He took nearly a full minute to scrape together an outward appearance of composure, and when he entered, he found Dagny curled in the fetal position on the biobed.

She sat up when she heard the rush of the door. She'd clearly been crying. She'd cried quite a bit since her rescue, but now the presence of tears in her eyes elicited a novel physical response in Voris. There was a pull in his gut and a rush of anxiety that he could barely control.

"I'm so sorry for earlier," she mumbled, looking at his knees and chewing her lip. "I don't know what I was thinking. I wasn't thinking."

Her physical appearance had changed drastically in these last hours. She'd come to him on the fringes of death, covered in burns and soiled clothing. Then much of her skin had peeled away and she'd lost her hair and several of her teeth, but after exhaustive efforts to reverse the effects of the radiation damage, she almost looked healthy.

He'd easily been able to regrow her lost teeth while she was sedated using stem cell therapy and the three rounds of cellular regeneration had repaired her skin and stimulated the regrowth of her hair follicles. Her new hair was nearly six centimeters long already and would continue to grow at an accelerated rate for several weeks. It was now more golden than chestnut and did not appear to be as thick as it had been, but she was still quite beautiful.

"Please say something," she begged.

"You need not apologize to me," Voris replied. "I should not have- touching you in such a way- it was… wrong. It was highly inappropriate and I hope you have not suffered as a result."

"It might sound strange, but for those few seconds, I actually felt better," she said. "Like I forgot
about everything else."

Voris blinked several times and looked away. She evidently had no concept of what he had done and if she was not offended by it, he couldn't see the logic in explaining it to her, which would likely only traumatize her further.

"Anyway, thank you for saving my life," she mumbled.

"You are welcome."

"Can I ask- what happened to my clothes?"

"They contained high levels of kappa and lambda radiolytic isotopes. I incinerated them."

"Oh," she squeaked. "Well, I was wearing a necklace, and-"

"I retained your amulet," he interrupted, moving toward the inorganic decontamination unit. "You also had in your possession a copy of The Teachings of Surak, which I also preserved."

When he returned the items to her, he noticed water forming in her eyes again. "Thank you," she whispered, gently tracing her thumb over the blue stone.

He fought a strange compulsion to touch their fingers together and soothe her by means of a finger embrace. That would be unacceptable. She was not his mate.

"This is all I have left," she added, staring up at him.

He glanced at the book in her hand and replied, "I find Surak's teachings are a useful guide in times such as these."

"Oh, I've never read it: I can't read your language. Ever since I got this book, I thought it would be interesting to learn, but there was never time." She sighed heavily and turned the book over in her hands. "I guess there will be time now."

Tears flowed down her face and Voris looked at the broken tricorder in his hands. He should perform a molecular scan on her, but he would need to repair his equipment first. He turned to locate a replacement screen but faltered when she asked, "Will you please stay? I know what I did earlier was stupid but I don't want to be alone."

He shuddered at the thought of remaining in close proximity to her but it was not an excessively unreasonable request. At least from her point of view.

"I must make repairs to my tricorder," he explained, holding up the device with the cracked screen.

"Oh, yeah, sure..." She nodded, turning her attention back to the book and necklace in her hands.

Voris located a replacement screen and spent the next several minutes installing it. When he turned back to Dagny, he saw she had laid back down facing the wall and was flipping through the book's pages.

They didn't speak a word to each other as he ran a quick scan of her vital signs and noted it in her chart. Many of the readings remained abnormal, but she was continuing to improve. Her eyelids were beginning to droop and her hands had stopped flipping the pages of the book. She was on the cusp of sleep and though he wanted to retreat to his quarters and enter a period of focused meditation, he thought of her request to remain by her side.
She was nearly asleep. Surely he could manage to sit in her presence for several minutes until she made a complete transition into sleep. He took a seat on the stool and watched the slow rise and fall of her chest.

"Dr. Voris?" she mumbled.

He jerked at her sound of her voice. "Yes?"

"Thank you. For everything."

Voris swallowed his guilt and replied the only way he knew how. "You are welcome."

He watched her sleep for the next several hours, observing her twitches and snores and moans. He wanted to leave, for her sake and for his, but he was utterly beholden to her.

_What had he done?_
New Wounds

Stardate 2260.54

Dagny opened her eyes to the buzzing of the door. She had no idea what time it was and didn't particularly care. It had been three days since the Sekla had rescued her from the wreckage of the Albret. Or had it been four?

She rolled back onto her left side and closed her eyes. The door buzzed again and she muttered a soft growl. She wanted to think it was Dr. Voris—he'd been so kind to her—but she somehow knew the person standing on the other side of the door and insistently pushing the alert button wasn't the gentle Vulcan doctor. How could she have kissed him like that?

The intercom hissed to life and a voice said, "Miss Skjeggestad, it's Peter Jamieson from the Terran embassy? It's 0900 hours."

She clenched her jaw and muttered to herself, "My name is not Skeh-jeg-eh-stad."

She'd met a lot of people over the past few days—hospital staff, social workers, low-level bureaucrats, reporters, well-wishers and more—and not a single one had managed the correct pronunciation. The ones with better people skills would see her name in print and cheerfully ask if they could call her "Dagny."

She missed being surrounded by people who didn't view the name Skjeggestad as a form of advanced lingual acrobatics. She missed her family. She missed her friends. She even missed Dr. Voris.

She sighed and heaved herself into a sitting position. They'd let her out of the hospital on Valder Station last night—or had it been this morning?—and given her a room in the diplomatic lodgings adjacent to the hospital. She'd been given a huge bag of prescription autoinjectors and a PADD with access to local databases and networks. One of the nurses, a woman named something like Laura or Laurie, had given her a bag of gently used clothes that were all too big. Or maybe Dagny was too small.

The buzzer persisted; Dagny rubbed her eyes, struggled to her feet, and hobbled to the door of the tiny room, passing the built-in lavatory on the way. She hated the mirror because the reflection staring back at her was a stranger. She'd lost her long, thick red hair and what had grown back was a shade much closer to blond. It was now long enough to tuck behind her ears, but she'd never worn her hair so short.

The color bothered her most. There were still reddish patches near her temples and at the base of her neck, but she'd lost the hair her mother had given her, the same hair she'd shared with Ingrid, Johan, Olav, Hedda, and Henrik. The storm had literally taken everything from her aside from Erik's necklace and Tolik's book. She touched the stone at her throat and sighed.

She hit the door release and was greeted by a portly man with a red face flipping through screens on his PADD. "Oh, Miss Skjeggestad, I was worried something had happened. I was just calling the hotel staff to open the door."

"It's pronounced Sheh-geh-stadt," she corrected him.

"Oh, pardon me then," he said, turning his PADD off and facing her. "I was hoping you would let
"Then call me Peter. May I come in?"

Dagny glanced over her shoulder at the compartmental room behind her. The bed looked more like a nest with sheets, pillows, and blankets heaped in disarray at the edges of the mattress. The bag of all the medications she was supposed to take had fallen out of the hard, plastic chair and autoinjectors covered the floor. It was strange that she didn't care—she usually preferred spotless order. A family of fourteen could quickly make large family quarters look like a garbage heap without constant attention to cleanliness and organization. But she was no longer part of a family of fourteen.

"I have twin toddlers; no need to worry about a little disorder," Peter said, looking around the disheveled room.

She stepped aside and let him in. She was so tired and all she wanted to do was sleep. "Why are you here?"

"I had thought Beatrice from Health and Social Services told you I would be stopping by today."

"Who are you again?" she asked. "And what day is it?"

"I'm Peter Jamieson from the Terran Embassy on Aldebaran. It's Stardate 2260.54. Ambassador Curtis has asked me to extend his deepest condolences on the loss of the Albret."

Dagny gazed at him dispassionately. It would be polite to ask him to sit, but there was no clean space to take a seat. Also, she didn't care. She'd had enough of everyone's condolences. Why couldn't people just let her sleep?

"Have they found the wreckage?"

"Ah, uh, no. I'm very sorry. This storm has really put a wrench in things and Starfleet says the ship has most likely been totally destroyed. I'm so very sorry."

Dagny closed her eyes and forced herself to take a breath. "Stop saying you're sorry. None of this is your fault."

"Well, still, uhm, can I get you anything? Have you eaten today? Are you feeling well?"

Dagny blinked several times and sighed. "No, I mean, yes, No, I don't need anything and yes, I'm-" She couldn't bring herself to say she was feeling well. "I'm alive."

She had a persistent twinge of pain in her temples and her entire body pulsed with a low-grade ache. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten and she was probably overdue to take her medication. She would get around to it eventually.

"Well, Beatrice tells me that you weren't able to give her the names of any contacts for people back on Earth, but I wanted to let you know that the embassy has taken up the search for relatives and-"

"I don't have any relatives on Earth," she snapped. "At least none that know me well enough to care. The ones who did all died."

"Now surely someone-"

"No," Dagny insisted.
Her Uncle Knut, her father's brother, had left the ship a more than a decade ago, but he'd left because of a drinking problem and no one had heard from him since. Dagny wasn't exactly eager to rekindle her relationship with him, especially under the present circumstances.

After the events at Vulcan, a number of people had left the ship. The Svendsen family had moved to the colony on Cestus III, and Ann Svendsen was her father's second cousin. She knew the Svendsens about as well as she knew any other family on the Albret, but that didn't mean she wanted to become a burden to them. Erik's only sister, Asta, had stayed behind on Andoria, but her dead fiancé's sister wasn't exactly family and she wasn't sure she could face her.

"I'm sure Beatrice will work with you on getting settled somewhere. The embassy has taken an express interest in your case and wants to help you as best as we can."

"Why does the embassy care?"

"The Albret was well-known throughout the Federation, after what happened at Vulcan. There's been a huge outpouring of support for you. People want to help you. They want to know about you."

"I lose everything I have and I become famous?" she whispered.

Peter's facial features shifted uncomfortably. "Maybe that's not the best word. There's a lot of sympathy."

She felt angry enough to cry, but she was all out of tears.

"The point is, there are a lot of people who want to help you back home, if you just-"

"I've never been to Earth," Dagny interjected. "Earth is not my home. The Albret was my home."

"Is there somewhere else you would prefer to go?" Peter asked, his tone softening.

Aside from her paramedic training on Deneva and her brief stay on Andoria during the overhaul to the Albret, she'd never even stayed on a planet for more than a few days. She thought of Cestus III again. She thought of Asta Larsen on Andoria, but there was no way to know if she was still there. She thought of her sister's friend, Julie Karlsen, who had moved to a place on Earth called Australia to go to acting school. She closed her eyes, but all she could see were the pale-lit corridors of the Albret and the dented walls of her clinic. That was home.

"I don't know."

"Well, there's no rush to make a decision. The Terran embassy is willing to accommodate you here for as long as you need. But are you sure there isn't anyone at all you want me to contact? For any reason?"

She opened her mouth to tell him "no" once again, but paused. "Yes, the Vulcan ship that brought me here… is there a way to contact them?"

"Certainly," he said, clearly relieved she'd finally come up with a task for him to perform. "I'm sure they're still docked in orbit. The Federation Transportation Authority halted all travel through this sector of space for the next ten days while they investigate the causes of this unusual storm. It's been a bit of a nightmare, really."

"No kidding," Dagny retorted numbly.
His face turned a peculiar shade of gray and he busied himself by scrolling through several programs on his PADD looking for information. "Did you wish to address to one person specifically or the crew in general?"

"Oh, uh-" She sighed. "I guess I'm not really sure."

Only she was sure. She wanted to talk to Dr. Voris, to thank him, to apologize for that ridiculous kiss, to see him.

"I would be more than happy to forward along any kind of message you wanted to send," Peter said. "Or I'd be happy to draft one for you, if you don't feel up to it. Just a simple note of thanks."

"Uh, yeah, I uh- whatever you think is best."

The door buzzed again and a voice called through the intercom, "Dagny, it's Laura from the hospital. I'm coming by to check on you."

She exchanged glances with Peter, who took several shuffling steps back toward the door.

"I'll leave you to it," Peter said, smiling through an obvious grimace. "My contact information should be programmed into the PADD Beatrice gave you. If you need anything or think of anyone you want my office to get in touch with, let me know. Or let Beatrice know. And I'll work on drafting that statement of thanks to the ambassador and crew of the Sekla on your behalf."

He engaged the door release and ran into Laura Frost, the nurse who'd spent much of the past several days caring for her. Laura was a kind person and if she was being honest, so was Peter, but she didn't feel up to their personal brand of kindness right now. She felt like an infant that had to be handled or cared for.

"How are you this morning, Miss Dagny?" the nurse beamed, striding through the doorway just as Peter stepped out.

"Not much has changed since you were last here," Dagny sighed. "Whenever that was."

Laura didn't even attempt a fake smile; she nodded and gently stroked Dagny's hair. "You gotta take it one day at a time."

"I think that's probably true for anyone," she mumbled.

"But the point is, we all have good times and bad times."

"Have you ever had times as bad as these? What I'm going through?"

Laura frowned and shook her head. "No. I honestly can't even imagine."

There were tears brimming in the woman's eyes and Dagny almost felt guilty, but she was too irritated for all that. She didn't want pity, or sympathy, or banal well wishes. She wanted her family. She wanted her home.

Laura sniffed and looked around the messy room. "I take it you haven't done much of anything but sleep?"

"Something like that."

"Have you had anything to eat since you left the hospital?"
"No."

"You're going to have to do better than that," Laura sighed, stooping to pick up the autoinjectors from the floor.

"I'm just not very hungry."

"Have you had a shower?"

"No."

Laura finished counting the autoinjector canisters as she put them back in the bag and said, "It doesn't look like you had your morning medication either."

"I guess not."

"Dagny, part of the condition of you getting released from the hospital was that you would keep up with these things. I'm very worried about you."

Dagny crossed her arms and looked at the floor. "I don't want to go back to the hospital."

The hospital was loud and brightly lit, full of an army of nameless strangers marching every which way and poking and prodding her with questions and hyposprays. Several reporters had tried getting into her room on the day she'd arrived, but Laura had valiantly fought them off. She'd never been allowed to sleep for more than a few hours at a time, and no one seemed to care how tired she was.

"I know you've been asked this a few times, but is there any chance you're thinking of hurting yourself?"

"No!" Dagny snapped. "I don't want to die, I don't want to eat, I don't want to shower. I just want to sleep and be left alone."

"I think it's best if we readmit you," Laura sighed. "I don't want you here by yourself."

"No, please, I'm sorry," Dagny protested. "I didn't mean to yell, I just- I'm so tired."

Laura nodded and pulled her into a hug. Dagny's chin began to tremble at the tenderness of this young nurse. She didn't envy Laura for the job she had, trying to console a person who'd lost everything and everyone. She spilled a few tears on Laura's smock and pulled away, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

"How about you get in the shower and I'll tidy up around here?"

Dagny took longer than she intended in the sonic shower, letting the pulses massage away the sweat and dander that had built up after two days without showering. When she emerged half an hour later, she found Laura sitting in the chair by her bedside, tapping one of the single dose autoinjectors against her leg.

"You're overdue for your medication," Laura said, holding up the red autoinjector.

"I know," Dagny sighed. "Let me get dressed and I'll take it."

She pulled on a pair of loose-fitting black pants and a white top from the bag of clothes in the corner Laura had given her. She fingered the soft fabric of the shirt, thinking Laura was probably the kindest person she'd ever met. Aside from her mother, of course.
She stayed and ensured Dagny took her morning medication and ate a bowl of watery beet soup with supplemental nutritional powder. Because of the damage the radiation had wrought on her body, she was stuck on a restricted diet while her system reset itself. It took nearly an hour to choke down the disgusting liquid but she managed it eventually and Laura congratulated her on being a "trooper."

Laura eventually left, citing her duties at the hospital, but she promised to come by and check on Dagny tomorrow morning before her shift. Dagny promised she would take her evening medication and eat dinner, and agreed that if she didn't, she would allow herself to be readmitted to the hospital. By the time Laura left, Dagny was having a difficult time keeping her eyes open.

She fell onto the bed but had a difficult time falling asleep despite her physical and emotional exhaustion. Her mind was just too full, her soul, too heavy. Every time she closed her eyes she'd see the faces of her friends and family and would wonder how long it would be before she'd start to forget what they looked like.

When sleep finally did come, it was full of nightmares that were occasionally interrupted by Dr. Voris saying, "Remain calm: you are nearing the end of a cellular regeneration cycle." She woke up every hour, feeling more restless and frustrated each time.

She would always manage to fall back asleep though and Dr. Voris slowly became a dominant presence in her dreams. She longed for him, for his patience and comforting companionship, for the touch of his hands on her face. Every time she would relive that moment, she would wake before his palms could slide over her cheeks and would find herself alone, twisted up in her sheets, sweaty and agitated.

At 2214 hours, she awoke from another unfulfilled dream about the Vulcan doctor and rolled out of bed. She was so tired but productive sleep simply seemed out of reach. She stormed over to the chair with the bag of autoinjectors, primed one, and slammed it into her thigh with unnecessary force. She lost her grip on the slender injector and let it fall to the floor, sinking to her knees beside it and wondering why she wanted to laugh, cry, and scream all at the same time.

The nurse had told her to call into the hospital if she was experiencing and unusual symptoms and she began to wonder if hovering on the cusp of mania counted. What was happening to her?

The buzz of the door made her jump but rather than shrink away in annoyance, she leapt to her feet with energy she hadn't experienced in days and slammed the door release with the meat of her fist.

And there he was: Dr. Voris had come. She took several tentative steps forward and noticed his eyes were glassy and distant.

"Dr. Voris?" she whispered, her voice rough and strained.

His eyes snapped back into focus and he blinked rapidly. "Dagny?"

"Please come in," she begged, desperate to be alone with him.

He blinked several more times and looked around the room in confusion before finally making eye contact with her. "Why are you here?"

"This is my room," she told him, wondering why he would ask such an obvious question.

"Yes." She saw the muscles of his throat struggle to swallow.

"How did you know where to find me?"
He looked away as his mouth formed several silent words. "I... do not know."

"Will you please come in?" she insisted, reaching for his hand.

Her fingertips glanced the knuckle of his right hand, sending a primal emotion coursing through her body. He grabbed her hand so tightly it strained the bones and made her wince, but she didn't care. She took a full step toward him, nearly pressing her body into his and he started to reciprocate but froze mid-motion.

She could see the whites of his eyes: they looked panicked and confused. He released her hand and recoiled. He was shaking and panting. All she wanted was be near him.

"I must go," he spluttered, whipping around on his heel and nearly running down the hallway. "I apologize for intruding."

"Voris, please don't leave," she wailed, chasing after him.

"I cannot stay," he called over his shoulder, increasing his speed to a run.

She slumped to her knees in the middle of the hotel hallway, wondering what she'd done to drive him away. She couldn't even understand what had just happened. She started to cry and crawled back to her room. She didn't even bother getting in bed, but chose to curl up in a ball on the floor and sob until she felt lightheaded.

She lay on the hard carpeting for what felt like an eternity, tossing and turning and wondering what was wrong with her. When she got to the point where she felt like she was going to jump out of her skin, she staggered to her feet and made her way to the door, almost as if on instinct. She clawed at the door release button and stumbled into the hall, unsure of where she was going but certain she desperately needed to get there.

Voris paced frantically in the main room of his diplomatic lodgings. He'd spent the past three days alone in intensive meditation and it wasn't working.

He hadn't been able to return to New Vulcan and T'Rya due to the Federation Transportation Authority shutting down interstellar travel across five sectors while they researched the cause of the largest neutronic storm in Federation space in recorded history. The storm had come on so quickly and without warning and due to the unique radiation signatures, had been virtually invisible to modern scanning technology.

Voris had done everything he could to secure passage home but had been refused at every turn due to the possibility of another storm forming at any moment. Voris was willing to risk it because remaining on Aldebaran without a mate meant certain death, but ship captains had proven far less inclined to take the chance.

But he had a mate. He knew that now, somewhere in the far reaches of his consciousness. His memory, judgment, and reasoning skills had nearly dissolved, but he still understood that he'd wandered to Dagny's room without prior knowledge of where her room was. He hadn't even consciously known for certain she was on Valder Station, but he'd found her all the same, drawn to her on instinct through a telepathic mating bond.

He needed her. He burned for her. But he could not have her. She wasn't his to have. He clawed at his face and darted back across the sitting room, taking long strides and deep breaths. What had he done?
He needed to seek an alternative mate, yet he also dimly understood that if humans and Vulcans could form genuine telepathic mating bonds—and it certainly seemed as though they could—Dagny's life was also in jeopardy. When Vulcan males entered pon farr, their bonded mates eventually began showing symptoms in the later stages too, experiencing a cascade of neurochemical imbalances until the pon farr could be resolved through a prolonged period of telepathic contact and intermittent mating. Dagny's behavior had been just as erratic as his. What had he done?

If they did not mate, they would both die. How could he ask such a thing of her? How could he not ask?

Bitter self-loathing snuck into his consciousness and he growled audibly, sensing the last vestiges of his ethics were losing the battle to physical need. The plak tow would be upon him soon. Would it be hours? Minutes? He didn't know. He'd never had to face this alone.

He thought of T'Sala and screamed. Why had she died and left him alone? He would hate her if he didn't miss her so much.

In his hysterical wanderings around the sitting room, he tripped over the low table near the couch and roared with rage. He picked up the flimsy piece of furniture and slammed it against the wall, watching it crack into several pieces. He grabbed a vase of flowers on the end table and hurled it against the door, watching the porcelain fracture into hundreds of pieces.

He took several ragged breaths and then shuddered, horrified at the prospect of losing all control. He fell to his knees and uttered a low whimper as he slid into a prostrate position on the floor. His body was shaking and his mind was racing and he couldn't bear to do this anymore. He fell onto his left side, allowing his skin to absorb the coolness of the tile beneath him. He wanted to end this torment.

He opened his eyes and saw a large shard of porcelain from the shattered vase within arm's reach. He grabbed it before the idea had even fully formed in his mind.

He could end it. If he died, perhaps Dagny would no longer continue to be affected by his pon farr. She might recover. But he didn't actually know. He suddenly hated his people for their senseless taboos and refusal to discuss or research this critical condition.

He glared at the dull piece of porcelain in his hand and gripped it tightly, watching a trickle of bright green blood flow down his wrist. He was beyond pain or caring. Was suicide logical? He tried to arrange the facts in his mind but his logic had completely eroded away. He squeezed tighter and the blood continued to flow.

An insistent pounding on his door broke his trance. "Voris?"

He felt a wave of elation amidst the anguish. How had she located him? He should go to her. He shook his head violently and clasped the shard harder. "Go away!"

"Please let me in," she begged. "I need you."

Seconds later he was on his feet and opening the door, wondering why he'd done it. She shouldn't be here. She hadn't asked for this.

But he needed her, and from the frenzied look in her eyes, she needed him too. She wandered into the room and he felt his nerve endings firing in rapid succession. He dropped the large piece of porcelain, ignoring the sound as it crashed to the floor and broke in half. It took nearly everything he had to take a step back and turn away from her.

"Voris?"
"Go away," he breathed.

"I can't. I want to, but I can't." She took several more steps forward, walking through the remnants of the vase with her bare feet.

"Please," he wailed. The word came out as little more than a terrified squeak.

After three more steps, she was less than an arm's length away and he latched onto her face, experiencing almost instant relief. He could sense her thoughts through his fingertips and probed at the pliability and innocence of her mind. She leaned into his body and kissed him once again, but unlike before, he was wholly lost to her.

He returned her affections hungrily, tasting the salt of her lips and the warmth of her tongue. The physical telepathic contact was beginning to settle his mind, but it was doing nothing to quell his physical need for her. Her hands started to fumble with his belt and he moaned, breaking away from their kiss.

"I need you," she whispered.

He stared at her, cupping his hands tightly around her jaw, afraid to let go and break the necessary physical bond between them. Rivers of tears were cutting a path through the green blood he'd inadvertently smeared on her cheek. She was shaking. He renewed their kiss and was startled to realize she wasn't the only one crying.

They began an awkward procession to the back bedroom, shedding their clothes as they moved in tandem. She fell backward onto the bed and pulled him on top of her, and that was the last thing he could remember.
Her skin was cool to the touch; a consequence of her slower human metabolic activity. She was snuggled into his right side, resting her head just below his clavicle. She was so small.

Voris had wanted to be gentle with her but it had been difficult that first time. Now that his head was clearer, he realized he hadn't really wanted to do this at all, not with anyone other than T'Sala, but especially not with the slender and fragile human woman currently lying next to him. Dagny. His former patient who had been just minutes from death several days earlier, a woman only several years removed from childhood, a woman who had lost everything just days earlier.

Voris carefully rolled her onto her left side and slid his arm from underneath the pillow. She uttered a soft snore but didn't stir. He needed to wake her but he was hesitant. She needed medical care, but how would she react? How much would she remember about what had happened? Would she understand?

In the faint light, he could see some contusions on her waist and buttocks and stared down at his hands in shame, knowing his firm grip had given her those bruises during one of their initial matings when the plak tow had completely engulfed his consciousness. He logically understood the severity of the markings was made worse by her radiation-induced anemia, but that did little to subdue his guilt. The sheets were also covered with blood, most of which appeared to be his.

Voris sat up. Pain tore through his left shoulder and right hand. He dimly recalled clenching a broken piece of porcelain during his suicidal contemplations in the moments before her arrival. The injury to his shoulder was a series of small punctures in a circular pattern: she had bitten him hard enough to draw blood.

He found himself grappling with several difficult emotions. He inhaled a sharp breath through his teeth and contemplated his next actions. The plak tow had dissipated but his pon farr was not completely resolved. Mating and mind melding corrected the imbalance of yamareen but it often took days of intensive meditation to completely regain logical control following the conclusion of a pon farr cycle.

Dagny uttered a soft moan and drew up her legs slightly. Without his body next to her to draw heat from, it was reasonable to conclude she was growing cold. He gently pulled the twisted sheets up from the foot of the bed and covered her up to her chin. He watched her for several minutes, struggling with his patchy memories of the previous night and the harsh reality that lay before him.

She looked peaceful. He'd spent hours mind melding with her between matings, drifting through a mind that was lonely and profoundly sad. He understood her broken heart, but there was much more to her than grief. She sensed she was elegantly kind, patient, compassionate, and hopeful beneath those layers of loss.

Voris knew could not observe her forever. He needed to consider his course of action logically, but the lingering effects of pon farr were making it difficult to settle his mind. He needed to get Dagny back to the hospital because she'd missed several doses of her medication. He needed to turn himself into the local authorities for what he'd done to her. He needed to inform T'Rya of the situation so she could consider if she wanted to proceed with their match. He needed to explain to Dagny what had happened and why. He needed to begin the process of severing the unintentional bond he'd created with her before he did any more damage to her psychological state.

Resolution

Stardate 2260.55

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The thought of terminating their bond induced a powerful emotion and he repressed the urge to grasp her cheek and meet their minds together again. He needed to get away from her. She wasn't his mate. She hadn't consented. She hadn't consented to any of it.

He got out of bed, noting soreness in his hips and back, and searched for his clothing. He still wasn't sure where to begin with his larger set of problems, but it seemed logical to begin by getting dressed. He followed the trail of his clothes into the front room, but as he lifted his long outer cloak from its place on the floor, a small, yellow, cylindrical object fell out. It was difficult to see in the darkness, but he knew it was T'Sala's candle.

He swallowed hard as he stooped to pick it up. It had been irrational to bring it with him, but seeing it on the mantle prior to his departure from New Vulcan had stirred emotions within him he'd spent years repressing. At the time, he'd believed it was a consequence of his impending pon farr, but rather than attempt to suffer through it during his travels, he'd brought the candle along for comfort, even though attachment to a material object was illogical.

He finished dressing and made his way to a small end table by the couch, stepping around the broken coffee table he'd smashed against the wall the previous evening. He set the candle down on the smooth wooden surface, took a seat on the floor, and lit it for the first time since T'Sala's death.

The tiny flame swayed under the soft current of the environmental control vent on the wall. The flickering light was full of nostalgia and loss, but not in the way he'd anticipated. He missed T'Sala, but much of the heaviness he'd carried in his heart during the past two years had been replaced by anguish over Dagny. It seemed the candle's flame had a curious ability to shine light on the feelings he preferred to keep repressed and tucked away into the darkest crevices of his mind.

T'Sala. T'Rya. Dagny. How had it come to this?

It was the pain in her feet that woke her, or at least that was the first thing she noticed when she drifted back into the waking world. Her feet throbbed and itched and she was reminded of the radiation sickness all over again. Other things ached too—her back, her arms, her abdominal muscles. Everything, really.

Dagny turned from her side onto her back and felt the tickle of soft sheets on her skin. Her eyes shot open. The lights were dim but she quickly realized she wasn't wearing clothes. Stranger still, the light blue sheets were spattered with drying red blood and other deep orange-brown stains.

She closed her eyes and then the memories came racing back. Everything was jumbled in her mind, but she had a vague sense of some of it. She'd found her way to Voris' hotel room, beat on the door until he opened it, and then they had…

She inhaled a sharp breath and sat up. Images of his hands groping her face and breasts flashed through her head. Her muscles tensed involuntarily as she remembered the warmth of his breath across her cheek and the feel of his sinewy back muscles under her hands. She opened her eyes, embarrassed at the idea of becoming aroused. She pulled the thick sheet up high under her armpits and drew her knees to her chest, acutely aware of the pain ripping through the soles of her feet.

This couldn't be happening: it had to be a dream. She couldn't have slept with Dr. Voris. But the memories were too vivid and the physical evidence too damning to remain in denial for more than a few seconds. She was naked in a strange room and twisted up in bloody sheets. She examined the dark greenish, orange-brown stains, allowing her eyes to linger on one in the shape of a large right handprint on the adjacent pillow. She swallowed hard. The events of two years earlier at the Battle of Vulcan had forever etched into her mind what Vulcan blood looked like.
She ducked her head under the sheet, startled to find dark bruises on her hips and waist. The insides of her thighs were damp and sticky and there were several deep cuts and pieces of glass or porcelain buried into the balls and arches of her feet. She'd walked through the remains of a broken piece of pottery and hadn't even cared. She'd wandered to the room of the Vulcan physician who'd saved her life, crawled into bed with him, and was left with nothing but minor injuries and disconnected memories. How could this have happened? She scrabbled for explanations.

She'd sustained serious head trauma several days earlier, so perhaps that could explain some of the partial memory loss. Then again, there were parts of the storm and her rescue that were still hazy, but her memory of the past few days was intact. The impulsive behavior was also strange but maybe it was a side effect of the medication or a lingering symptom of the radiation sickness. Or maybe it was all purely psychological and she'd had some kind of mental breakdown.

The medical staff had wanted her to speak with a mental health professional but the hospital's resident psychiatrist had been off world at the time of the storm and because of the temporary no-travel order, there hadn't been anyone available for her to talk to. Her mouth twisted into a frown at the thought of her family but couldn't linger there long under the present circumstances.

It took nearly a minute for her to calm down enough to put together a sequence of events in her mind. Laura had come over to check up on her and then she hadn't been able to sleep. Dr. Voris had come to her door but left before they could talk and then some time later, she'd found him somehow. He'd look so frightened when he'd come to the door. She remembered a low, cracked table upended on a couch and dull pain in her feet. She'd told him she needed him and he begged her to go away, but she had refused to listen. It just didn't make any sense. She'd never exactly been confident around the opposite sex—but to force herself on someone else? Or had he forced himself on her? Both seemed plausible, but the more she mulled it over, the less either explanation seemed to fit.

He had grabbed her face. He'd done the same thing aboard the Sekla and had apologized for it repeatedly. After he grabbed her face last night, she remembered feeling profoundly calm and then they'd shared a mutual kiss. They had been crying. His hand had been bleeding, but she didn't know why. Then they'd had sex.

How many times? Five? Six? She blushed furiously as she recalled graphic images of the previous night's romantic encounters. He'd flipped and tossed her around like she weighed nothing and they had transformed into little more than a tangle of hungry exploring, thrusting, and fumbling. Not everything had been so frenzied though. There had been occasional episodes of sleep and long periods where he'd cradled her cheeks and caressed her fingers. His body had been so warm.

Gooseflesh pricked her arms. She almost smiled before deciding it was too weird to smile about. Dr. Voris was a kind man and he'd saved her life, but she didn't think of him that way. Did she? She slammed her eyes shut again and shook her head. No, of course not. He had been her doctor, nothing more. Until now.

Where was he?

Her eyes darted around the room and spied her black pants in a heap on the floor by the bed. The door leading to the main room was closed. She pulled the sheet up higher on her body, high enough to expose her legs. After several false starts and moments of surprising agony, she managed to extract the broken pieces of porcelain from her feet. She removed the covers from the pillows and improvised tight bandages, wrapped the sheet around her body, and then swung her legs over the side of the bed and tried to stand.

It hurt, but it was still nothing compared to the pain of radiation sickness. Still, she was forced to
hobble on her left heel and right toes to make her way to the loose black trousers Laura had given her, and she was dismayed to see the shirt was nowhere in sight. It was probably out in the main room.

She waited by the door for a long time. She tried to control her breathing and set her mind at ease but the emotions winding through her made it impossible. Just yesterday she'd thought nothing could take away her sadness and though that was probably still true, so much of her grief was currently masked by embarrassment and confusion.

She found the bedroom door release and gently depressed it, holding her breath while her anxiety swelled. The front room was dark except for a flickering candle in the corner on a low table and by its faint light she could see Dr. Voris sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of it. His body was tense and unmoving next to the dancing flame. She wanted to call out to him, but the moment demanded silence.

She gripped the sheet tighter and limped forward, feeling the heat rising in her cheeks as she wondered what the hell they were supposed to do now. The manic need to be near him had dissipated, but he still seemed in desperate need of comfort. She noticed the white shirt and soft cotton bra in the middle of the small carpet by the sofa. She inched nearer and just as she bent to pick her clothes up, he turned his head slightly to observe her.

His expression was mottled with pain. Dagny straightened her back and adjusted her grip on the top of the thick sheet. She stumbled forward and slumped next to him on the floor. He never took his eyes off her and she never dared to look directly at him.

"I'm sorry." Their voices spoke in muted unison.

She inhaled through her nose and closed her eyes. A subtle scent hung in the air, conjuring images of exotic spices and some nameless faraway place.

"Miss Skjeggestad-

"Call me Dagny," she interrupted. "Please. If you want."

Rather than acknowledge her request, he turned his focus back to the burning candle. The warm light cast eerie shadows along the walls and floor. She turned her gaze down to her lap. From the corner of her eye she could see his hand and observed a deep gash that spanned his palm.

Maybe it was her medical training, her nurturing instinct, or some other thing that compelled her, but she reached down and gently cradled the back of his hand. He flinched and craned his neck to look at her.

"Do you have a medical kit?" she asked.

"I do."

"Care to tell me where it is?"

He relaxed and studied her face. Their eyes locked and she was startled by an emotional swell that started in her belly and radiated outward. They sat that way for an eternity, staring at one another, patient, searching, and unyielding.

"Why are we here?" she finally whispered.

He blinked and looked away.
"Dr. Voris?"

"We have much to discuss, but you require medical attention."

"So do you," she reminded him, looking down at his hand.

Another silence formed between them and Dagny felt herself growing distressed. Why wasn't he saying anything?

"Lights." He rose to his feet and extinguishing the candle with his thumb and forefinger as the overhead illumination bathed the room in bright white light. "I shall give you privacy to dress yourself."

"I don't understand what happened," she blurted. "I mean, I know what we did, obviously, but I- I don't act that way. Not usually. I think losing my family and the Albret made me-"

"There is an explanation for your behavior," he interrupted quietly. "And for mine. It is not an excuse; it is merely an explanation. I intend to turn myself into the authorities once I have ensured you have obtained the necessary medical care."

Her mouth fell open in disbelief. "Authorities? Like the police? What are you talking about?"

"I have-" He visibly swallowed but didn't look away. "I have violated you. I bonded with you without your consent."

Bonded? What an odd turn of phrase. She guessed it was a Vulcan euphemism for sex and started to feel guilty. She was the one who had hunted him down in his hotel room and refused to leave when he'd begged her to.

"I- I shouldn't have come over," she stammered. "I shouldn't have bothered you and I shouldn't have pushed you to... well, you know."

"You were not in control of yourself but I am to blame for that."

"What do you mean? I don't understand what you're getting at."

He closed his eyes and took a slow breath. "You are human. What has transpired between us is a failing of Vulcan biology."

She furrowed her brow. "You're not making any sense."

"It is difficult for me to discuss-"

"It was difficult for me to wake up this way," she sighed, cutting him off. "It's difficult for me to sit here with you now wondering what I- what we've done. I'm so sorry for everything. For everything from kissing you on the Sekla to right now."

"It is I who must apologize."

"Why do you keep saying that?"

He flinched and opened his eyes. "Because you are owed an apology, even if you do not understand why."

"Help me understand," she pleaded.
"I shall explain everything once you have dressed."

Dagny let go of his hand, shifted around on the floor, and attempted to stand, which was difficult with the injuries to her feet. He seemed to sense this and rose to his feet to help support her weight while she shuffled to the sofa.

She glanced at the broken table propped up at the other end and looked at him. "Did you do that?"

"Yes," he replied, turning in the direction of the bedroom before she could ask more questions.

He returned with her black pants and underwear and excused himself while she dressed. She was stiff and sore; it hurt just pulling the shirt over her head. She had her shirt slightly pulled up and was studying the bruises on her waist when he returned with a small medical kit and offered it to her. He lifted the table from the other end of the sofa, set it on the floor, and took a seat.

She opened the case and studied the equipment, thinking it was much nicer and more advanced than anything she'd ever had. She extracted the dermal regenerator, powered it on, and scanned through the settings.

"Can I see your hand?" He stared at her, making her cheeks flush. "I'm not a doctor like you but I've used a dermal regenerator plenty of times."

"I brought you the medical kit to attend to your own injuries."

She was about to argue but decided it wasn't worth it. She twisted her right leg over her left and pulled the makeshift pillowcase bandage back to get a better view of the bottom of her foot, wincing as her sore thigh muscles protested against the strain. The swelling and angry red halos around the cuts meant only one thing.

"Your wounds have become infected," Dr. Voris announced. "You must go back to the hospital."

"I'm not going back there."

"Your immune system remains compromised and-"

"I said I'm not going back there," she spat.

He cocked his head. "You are being illogical."

"Yeah, maybe. I just won't go back there. I can't."

"You told me you were a paramedic. You must be aware of the risks of an untreated infection-"

"I didn't say I didn't want treatment," she interrupted. "I just said I don't want to go to the hospital."

He opened his mouth and closed it again without comment. Dagny held the dermal regenerator about three centimeters from her skin and got to work, shuddering as the warm energy stimulated the degradation and subsequent rapid regrowth of the damaged tissue.

"Are you familiar with Aldebaran infectious microorganisms?" he asked.

"No. Are you?"

"No. Which is why it is logical to seek treatment by medical professionals who possess that knowledge."
"Please, Dr. Voris. I don't want to go back there. They won't let me leave if I go back there. The people there are so friendly, too friendly, and I'm not ready to deal with that."

"There is another reason you should go to the hospital," he said, his voice lowering by several decibels.

"If you're about to say I should seek psychological help, the only psychiatrist on Valder Station was back on Earth attending a conference when this whole storm business happened and he's not coming back any time soon."

"I was referring to collecting specimens as evidence, should you intend to file charges against me."

"File charges? For what?"

"For sexual assault."

"What? No! I mean, what happened last night doesn't make any sense, but you didn't- I mean- I'm the one- I showed up here and you asked me to go away but I didn't and then…"

Her voice faltered and her eyes watered. Her hand slipped and she touched the surface of the dermal regenerator to the bottom of her foot and shrieked as the optical nanofibers made contact with her skin. It was like a massive electrical shock to her entire leg. "Dammit!"

She wanted to hurl the device across the room but powered it off and dropped it on the sofa instead. Dr. Voris glanced from the dermal regenerator to the bottoms of her feet. He looked so uncertain and his hesitation only made her anger grow. She was about to yell at him but he picked up the device, slid closer to her, and began tracing it along the cuts in her foot.

"Maybe you took advantage- I don't know," she breathed, looking away. "But I don't think you raped me. I think it was all just a mistake."

"I had promised I would explain my behavior," he replied. "And the truth may alter your opinion."

A chill ran through her. She twisted around to look at him. His face was so calm and collected. So Vulcan. But his eyes were difficult to read.

"Every seven years of my adult life, I experience a condition known as pon farr. It is not a condition that is discussed with off-worlders and it is only discussed among Vulcans in very unique circumstances."

"So… you're not allowed to talk about it?"

"There is no law prohibiting it, rather, it is an ancient social code that dictates the secrecy surrounding pon farr."

"So then why are you telling me?"

"Because I have involved you in it."

"In what? This pon farr disease? I don't even know what it is."

"Every seven years, adult males of my species lose the ability to repress their emotions. The body's neurochemistry begins to fail as dangerous hormones accumulate in the bloodstream. If the condition is not resolved in a timely manner, death is inevitable."

"And you have this- this condition? This pon farr?"
"I did, and I am still experiencing lingering effects, but you assisted me in resolving it."

"But how did I do that? I don't even understand the condition, let alone how to treat or cure it."

The tips of his ears flushed a dark greenish color and his hands shook slightly as he continued his work with the dermal regenerator. "There are several means of resolution, but the only guaranteed method of surviving the pon farr is to take a mate."

Surely he was joking, but he didn't seem like the joking type. "When you say taking a mate, do you mean, like, having sex?"

"Resolving pon farr with the assistance of a mate extends beyond the simple act of copulation. It also requires the minds of both individuals to be intimately joined for sustained periods to correct the neurochemical imbalances."

"And you did this with me?"

"Yes."

"And you would have died if I hadn't come over? If we hadn't… you know…"

"Yes, as would you have."

"Wait, huh? But I thought you said pon farr was a Vulcan disease."

"It is, and one that only naturally occurs within males of my species, yet females can suffer from its effects under certain conditions, most typically when their mates enter pon farr."

She repeated the phrase several times in her mind before blurting out the obvious. "But we're not mates. I mean, assuming my definition of the word is the same as yours. You know, we're not romantically involved. And I'm also still not Vulcan."

He turned the dermal regenerator off and placed it in his lap. "When most other species marry or take mates, the bond is simply a legal one. There is often underlying emotional attachment, shared interest and ambitions, the desire for companionship, and the practicality of joining resources to provide for offspring, but nothing more. Vulcan psionic telepathic abilities make forging deeper connections with a mate possible."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"It is logical to conclude I have created such a bond with you. Vulcan telepathic mating bonds are not well understood, but it is known that the thick midbrain is essential to the function of bonding. I was not certain it was possible to bond with a human—there have been marriages and successful matings between humans and Vulcans, yet the profound neurobiological differences between our species led me to hypothesize a telepathic mating bond would be difficult if not impossible to establish."

"But how can you know that's what happened?" she argued. "You make it sound like love at first sight or something, and that only exists in fairy stories. I think you're really nice and I owe my life to you, but I don't—and please don't take this the wrong way—I don't think I'm attracted to you like that. I think last night was just- just a mistake."

"Do you recall how you came to my quarters?" he asked.

"I came and knocked on the door and… well, you were there. You know how the story ends."
"How did you know where to find me?"

"I- I must have followed you. Or maybe someone told me." Her mouth started to feel dry as she swallowed her denial.

"Similarly, I found my way to your room without prior knowledge of your location. Memory loss, aggression, irrational and impulsive behavior, insomnia, loss of appetite—they are all symptoms of pon farr."

"But there could be other explanations for those things. I mean, I just got exposed to a lot of radiation and..." She trailed off before she could mention the Albret and her current emotional state.

"Yes, but mine is the only explanation that satisfies all conditions and makes sense within the context of the situation."

"So you're saying we have some kind of mental link? A bond? How does that even happen? How-"

"We spent considerable time in close proximity aboard the Sekla," he interrupted.

"So? Just two years ago, I spent twenty-four hours with a few thousand Vulcans aboard the Albret, and I'm pretty sure I didn't form any sort of psychic link with anyone."

"A telepathic link," he corrected. "And a telepathic mating bond only forms under very specific circumstances. I believe one was formed when I touched your face after you embraced me. I was not acting rationally."

His stunning confession knocked the wind out of her. "You did this to me?"

"I was not in control of myself." He looked away. "As I explained, pon farr causes a number of alterations to an individual's mental status, particularly memory processing and behavioral regulation."

"So if you were sick and unable to control yourself, why..." Her words stalled in her throat. There was no point in asking why he'd been placed in charge of caring for her because she already knew the answer, which he quickly confirmed.

"There was no one else aboard the Sekla with the expertise to provide you with the medical care necessary to preserve your life."

"I don't know how to process this," she breathed, trying to control the shaking in her hands. "I mean-what- how- what do we do now?"

"I have already informed you how I intend to proceed. I also wish to renew my recommendation that you seek medical treatment."

"You're going to turn yourself into the police?"

"It is the only morally correct solution for the crime I have committed."

"But you said you're cured now. Do you really think you're going to do this again?"

"No, but it does not alter the fact that I am still guilty of bonding with you without your consent, violating both the law and my ethics as a physician, and I must answer for it."

"But answer to who? If you're not a danger to society, it sounds like the only person you have to answer to is me, and maybe yourself."
"What would you have me do?"

"What? I don't know," she replied. "I'm still trying to wrap my mind around it. It's a bad situation. I would have died if you hadn't been on the Sekla, and it sort of sounds like you would have died if I hadn't been here last night."

"Regardless of the circumstances or outcome, I remain morally and ethically obliged to accept the consequences of my actions."

"You keep saying that." She took a deep breath and held it. This was a bigger mess than she could have ever imagined. She saw him fidget in his seat and looked at his hand again. "How did that happen?"

His eyes darted toward the broken vase lying by the door and she instinctively sensed the answer was darker and sadder than she wanted to know. "You were going to hurt yourself, weren't you?"

His mouth opened and formed several silent words but she cut him off before he could actually speak. "Everyone has followed me around for days thinking I was going to try to kill myself. The thought did enter my mind a few times, but I could never think seriously about it because it just felt wrong. I feel like I'm alive for a reason, and so are you. We're alive now for a reason."

"We are alive due to a unique and improbable series of circumstances."

She picked up the dermal regenerator and held out her hand. "Let me see it."

His eyes shifted from the porcelain debris on the floor to his injured hand. He studied it for several seconds before complying with her demand.

"Look, I see what you're saying and I understand where you're coming from," she said as she got to work repairing the laceration. "But I don't feel like you deliberately preyed on me. It just doesn't feel that way. If anything, I'm the one who showed up here and threw myself at you after you told me to go away. I feel a little bit guilty too."

"Which you would not have done if I had not bonded with you."

"But I believe you when you say you didn't do it intentionally. I know you didn't. I was there, Dr. Voris, I remember. You looked confused. You looked scared. So you can turn yourself into the police if you want, but I'm not going to tell them you hurt me if they ask."

"Yet you are injured," he argued, looking down at her left foot, which was still wrapped in a pillowcase.

"I've obviously survived worse."

He extracted the tricorder from the open medical kit on the floor with his free left hand and scanned it over her head and chest. "Your temperature is slightly elevated—a likely consequence of the developing infection in your wounds. Your immune system is not functioning optimally and you have missed several doses of the hemalexin I prescribed you by now."

"I already told you—I'm not going back to the hospital. Can't you just give me a general antimicrobial?" She glanced down at the stocks of hypospray cylinders lining the top half of the case and glared at him.

"Without knowing more about the precise organism causing the infection, I cannot guarantee any medication I administer will be effective."
"You really think they have exotic superbacteria on Aldebaran?" she sighed. "Some sort of aggressive space fungus, maybe?"

He tilted his head to the right to look into her eyes. He almost looked annoyed, but the muscles of his face didn't flinch. It took ten minutes for her to finish repairing his hand and for him to treat the cuts on her left foot and administer a dose of antibiotics.

They sat quietly for a short time before he said, "I still encourage you to return to the hospital, but it is evident you have no intention of doing so. You should return to your quarters and take the hemalexin I prescribed. You should also attempt to consume a meal."

"Yeah, I know, but what about you? Where do you go from here?"

"I do not know. You have given me much to consider."

"Please don't turn yourself into the police," she begged. "I just don't know what good would come from that. Let's just blame it on a bad situation and get on with our lives."

"Which exposes another regrettable fact," he replied. "The bond between us will persist unless we take active steps to sever it. Some bonds are easier to dissolve than others, but there is a possibility that we shall be unable to achieve this."

She glared at him. "So we- we're stuck together? Like, Vulcan married or something?"

"Newly formed bonds are often fragile and easily broken with little effort, but there is a remote possibility it could endure."

Dagny took a shaky breath. "So how do we go about breaking this off between us?"

"We should avoid future contact. Additionally, it is recommended we purge our minds of thoughts regarding one another through meditation."

"I don't know how to meditate," she muttered, scratching her forehead. "But I guess have plenty of other things to keep my mind busy."

She rested her elbows on her knees and suddenly felt overwhelmingly sad. She was going to miss him, which was strange because he was a stranger. They slowly turned to look at each other, but the door buzzed, visibly startling them both.

After several seconds, the intercom activated and a quiet voice announced, "Dr. Voris, it is Ambassador Spock. I am sorry to disturb you, especially during this time, but Miss Skjeggestad is missing and the authorities on Valder Station have asked for our assistance in locating her."

Dagny felt the blood run out of her face. What time was it? She smoothed her hair and jumped to her feet, which were still a bit tender from her recent injuries. "Please don't say anything."

"I cannot ignore him," Dr. Voris insisted.

"I'm not asking you to. Just don't say anything about what happened last night."

"He will see that you are here and will be able to logically deduce what has transpired." Voris took several steps toward the door but she grabbed his arm.

"Can't we just say I came over because I wasn't feeling well and didn't want to bother anyone at the hospital? You know, and maybe I fell asleep on your sofa?"
"It is not the truth and Ambassador Spock will know."

"Please, Dr. Voris," she begged. "If you don't want to lie, I'll do it."

The door buzzed again and they both began the awkward march to answer it, sidestepping around the broken vase. When he hit the door release, the elderly Vulcan gentleman she'd spoken to briefly aboard the Sekla greeted them.

"Miss Skjeggestad," he said carefully, glancing at her before allowing his gaze to settle on Dr. Voris.

"I was just leaving," she blurted. "I came over to thank Dr. Voris for saving my life and we talked for a while and I fell asleep on his sofa. I lost track of time."

Both Voris and the ambassador turned to stare at her. She hated lying to his man, but she wasn't in the mood to discuss last night's awkward situation with anyone, particularly not a Vulcan ambassador.

"I see," Ambassador Spock finally replied. "There is a Nurse Frost at the constable's office filing a missing person's report as we speak. Perhaps we should go settle the matter."

"I can go," Dagny insisted, taking a step forward in an attempt to push past him and leave the room. "There's no need for you to bother with something like this."

"I do not recommend unnecessary outdoor travel in your current immunocompromised state," Dr. Voris replied.

"Then I shall contact the constable and inform them the matter is resolved and Dr. Voris has ordered you to return to your private room."

Dagny nodded and fought the urge to run down the hallway. Instead she thanked him, lifted her right hand in the ta'al, and said, "Live long and prosper, ambassador."

He canted his head and returned the gesture and she sped down the corridor, certain life couldn't possibly get much worse. Once back in her room, she gave herself the two doses of hemalexin she'd missed, flopped down on the bed, and let the tears flow freely.

She was alone once again and hated it. When she realized she already missed him, her quiet tears evolved into frantic sobs. How could she miss someone she barely knew?

"I cannot offer a valid excuse," Voris finally said, struggling to suppress the guilt and shame the elderly man's presence elicited in him.

Ambassador Spock surveyed the broken vase and the damaged table by the sofa. It did not require exceptional logic for him to deduce what had occurred.

"It is not for me to involve myself in your personal situation," the ambassador replied. "Yet I also cannot ignore the possibility that a member of my staff may have acted in an inappropriate and potentially criminal manner."

Voris bowed his head. Dagny did not want him to surrender himself to the authorities, but he remained conflicted about what he should do.

"I offered to turn myself in to Aldebaran law enforcement officials but she has requested that I do not."
"What do you intend to do?"

"I do not know." Voris was not intimately acquainted with his elderly cousin and had never sought his advice before, but he also understood the lingering effects of pon farr could be clouding his judgment and there was no one else with whom he could speak. "I would- I would appreciate your guidance."

The ambassador arched an eyebrow but nodded. "Permit me one moment to settle matters with the constable."

Ambassador Spock extracted a PADD from his breast pocket to contact the police and inform them Dagny was safe while Voris located a sweeper to clear away the porcelain shards. When they finished, Voris set the coffee table back on its three remaining legs and took a seat on the couch and Ambassador Spock occupied a chair in the corner.

Spock cleared his throat and said, "Perhaps you should begin at the most logical place. The beginning."
A Development

Stardate 2260.55

Voris gazed straight ahead. Recounting the events from Dagny's rescue to the present had been extremely uncomfortable, but his elderly cousin had listened patiently without any indication of reproach.

"She wishes to forget the incident?" Ambassador Spock asked.

"She instructed me to 'blame it on a bad situation and get on with our lives.' She seems to believe she is as guilty as I am," Voris explained. "I tried to help her understand, but she would not listen to reason."

"Perhaps she is more logical than you give her credit for."

"She would not have come here if I had not bonded with her," Voris argued, trying to subdue his irritation at having to explain this concept again. "I am the one who is guilty. Without my thoughtless actions, none of this would have happened."

"I understand the facts as you have presented them to me and they are unfortunate, but if she wants to forget about what transpired last night, I urge you to honor her wishes."

"How can there be logic in pretending as though this never happened?"

"This is an illogical situation," the ambassador remarked. "Yet she is correct. She would have perished had you not treated her aboard the Sekla, you did not bond with her intentionally, and I believe the likelihood you will reoffend in the future is extremely low."

Voris said nothing. The scent of T'Sala's candle lingered in the air. He observed the geometric patterns of the rug in the center of the room and attempted to organize a better argument. He felt annoyed the lingering pon farr hormones in his body continued to interfere his logical faculties. It would take days of intensive meditation to correct the problem but he needed a solution now, and he would prefer one that included some form of punishment for what he'd done.

Ambassador Spock seemed to sense his thoughts, because he added, "What do you believe will happen if you relinquish yourself to the Aldebaran police?"

Voris took a slow breath. He understood the point Ambassador Spock was attempting to make. Voris was not a lawyer, but the logistics of turning himself in were complicated. If he turned himself into the Aldebaran police, they would question him. He would be forced to explain how and why he established a mating bond with Dagny without her consent. He would be forced to explain the function of a mating bond.

His face grew warm and made a conscious effort to subdue his embarrassment. It was distasteful enough to speak about pon farr with a Vulcan audience—the Aldebaran authorities likely wouldn't understand, just as Dagny had not understood. Perhaps Aldebaran didn't even have statutes concerning non-consensual telepathic contact. Many planets didn't.

He briefly considered the possibility of turning himself into the authorities on New Vulcan. The police on his home world would have a far better understanding of his crime, but the result would remain the same. If Dagny didn't wish to press charges against him, there was nothing the New Vulcan police could do.
"I do not believe I have adequately explained the situation to Miss Skjeggestad. If she could be made to understand—if I could help her understand the gravity of what I have done…"

"She is human and does not follow logic, therefore she will never truly appreciate the burden it imposes. But you are Vulcan and I do not believe you will ever appreciate the burden of a lifetime of constant emotion quite as she does."

"I do not understand what you intend to imply," Voris responded.

"You seem to believe if you could explain your perspective in a certain manner, that she would share your opinion and agree that you have committed a crime and deserve punishment for what you have done."

"I have committed a crime."

"By Vulcan law, yes, but she does not perceive it that way. You would have her perceive the situation as you would, as a Vulcan would, but she is not Vulcan. Perhaps you should consider how a human would judge the situation."

"I- I do not know. I cannot say. I am not human."

"My mother was human and I have spent much of my life in the company of humans. I would expect the human response to a situation such as this to be highly variable. Miss Skjeggestad’s reaction is not surprising. Many humans would prefer to deny an unpleasant event rather than confront it, and given the tremendous loss she has recently suffered, perhaps it is how she chooses to cope. Whatever your sentiments are, you must respect her right to perceive the situation how she chooses to."

Voris thought back to his five-year fellowship on Earth. Ambassador Spock was correct: the human response to psychological trauma was highly unpredictable. During his first month at Sarah April Memorial Hospital, Dr. Kelley had made him inform a patient’s family that their loved one had died on the operating table. It hadn't gone well.

The patient had been a fifteen-year-old human female who had been badly injured in a shuttle crash. He remembered the mother screaming and the father repeatedly muttering slightly varied versions of, "No, this can't be happening." The girl's elder sister had said and done nothing at all, opting to stare at the wall.

Vulcans understood the necessity of grieving, but there was still order to Vulcan grief. Human emotional pain was chaotic and often changed with time. It could even change minute to minute. A person might be in denial initially, but could later become angry or sad or even violent.

He recalled Dagny's anguished wailing when he'd told her of the Albret's fate. In between bouts of tears and sleep, she had taken to dispassionately staring at the wall or flipping through the pages of The Teachings of Surak, a book she had admitted she could not read. Her human response to grief was predictable in that it was unpredictable, but her response to what he'd done to her was baffling. She was dismissive, but perhaps that would change.

"It is possible she may change her mind after she has more fully considered the situation," Voris finally said.

"That is a possibility," Ambassador Spock agreed. "But for now, she evidently prefers privacy and discretion and you would be wise to acknowledge that going to the police and inviting questions would likely only increase her psychological distress."

"It is not logical that I should do nothing."
"No, but this unusual situation requires you to consider the wishes of an illogical individual and given the circumstances, I believe her wishes supersede yours. Should she change her mind in the future, I have no doubt you will accept responsibility for what has happened. I myself feel partially responsible."

"Why should you be responsible?"

"I believe you attempted to explain the gravity of your personal situation several times while aboard the Sekla and I dismissed your concerns. You were the only trained physician available to treat her, but I see now it was illogical to leave you alone with her. I should have assigned someone to supervise you."

Voris felt his face grow hot once again and worked to stifle his embarrassment. "It is illogical to dwell on what should have been."

"Agreed," replied the ambassador. "I should leave you now. I have matters to attend to and I am sure you require your privacy."

"Yes, thank you."

They stood and Voris walked him to the door, but before he opened it, Spock turned and said, "I did not specify, but our conversation was in strict confidence. I do not intend to share anything we discussed with anyone else."

Voris nodded, thinking of his father and uncle. "I am grateful for your discretion. And your advice."

"I am willing to listen, should you ever find yourself in need of advice again. We are not well acquainted, but we are family."

"Thank you," Voris replied, forming his hand in the ta'al. "Live long and prosper, cousin."

"You also, cousin," Spock responded.

He left without another word and Voris resumed his seat on the sofa, attempting to consider the broader situation. Unless Dagny changed her mind and wanted to involve the police, there was no need to inform his father or anyone else. Except T'Rya. She deserved to know.

He closed his eyes and tried to think of the woman he'd promised to marry, but all he could think of was his mate.

"I was at the police station, Dagny," Laura said flatly. "Do you have any idea how terrified I was?"

Dagny was shaking and on the verge of tears. She hadn't realized Laura cared so much. "I'm really sorry."

"You look like you've been crying."

Dagny wiped the residual tears from her face and shrugged. "I had really hard night."

"What happened to you? The man at the police station said you were with the Vulcan ambassador?"

"Not exactly," Dagny sniffed. "I mean, I was, at the time, but last night I felt lonely-"

"Then why didn't you call me? I told you it's no good being cooped up in this room by yourself."
Dagny took a deep breath and tried to redirect the conversation. "I didn't want to bother you. I just wanted to tell Dr. Voris—the Vulcan doctor from the _Sekla_—that I was thankful he saved my life. I went to his room, we talked, and I fell asleep."

"If he's a doctor, surely he understands how serious your condition is. I want to talk to him. _Honestly_, letting you wander the halls of the hotel in your immunocompromised state—"

"It's not that serious. He kept a pretty close watch on me the entire night." Dagny bit her lip. It wasn't technically _untrue_.

"Did you take your medication?"

"Yes," Dagny answered. She hadn't taken it on time, but she _had_ taken it.

Laura clicked her tongue on the roof of her mouth and pulled a tricorder from her bag. She scanned it over Dagny's chest and practically growled. "You have a temperature."

"Is that an observation or an accusation?"

"Dagny, your white blood cell count is still in the toilet. An infection could kill you."

"I know. I'm a paramedic. I knew that before you told me and you've told me at least five times every time you've seen me."

"I want you back in the hospital."

"How high is my temperature?" Dagny asked, taking a step forward to see the reading on the tricorder. "37.5°C? That hardly qualifies as a fever."

"It's still three-tenths of a degree higher than any previous reading, and an infection at this stage in your recovery can easily get out of control."

"Dr. Voris gave me antimicrobials. I'll be _fine_."

"What did he give you? Did he even run a microbial scan?"

Dagny gritted her teeth and tried to remain calm. "Why do you care so much? You don't even know me."

Laura made a face. "Because I know what it's like to not care. I'm caring for you until you can start to care for yourself again."

Her words hit like a punch. She'd never thought about it before, but she'd done the same thing for her mother after Aksel and Benjamin had died.

"You're a good person, Nurse Frost."

Laura sighed and hugged her. "Now pack your things: we're going to the hospital."

Dagny's blood ran cold. "I told you, I don't want to go to the hospital."

"I don't care," Laura replied. "I didn't think it was a good idea releasing you in the first place, but Dr. Iverson said we needed to free up resources. Now look what's happened."

Going back to the hospital meant dressing in hospital issue thermal undergarments and gowns. It meant more people prodding into her life. Dagny thought of the dark marks on her waist, hips, and
thighs. Voris had left bruises on her waist in the shape of large handprints—there would be no lying or deflecting her way out of explaining *that*, and she didn't feel like explaining what had happened. She couldn't even explain what had happened to herself.

"I'm not going back to the hospital. You can't force me to seek medical treatment against my will."

Laura puffed her chest. "I'm not leaving you here alone."

Dagny wanted to tell Laura she had no damn right to invite herself into her life, but the woman had been so kind to her. Dagny's frustrated confidence started to falter. Laura had brought her meals, checked up on her, and had even given her the clothes she was currently wearing.

"I just can't go back to the hospital," Dagny muttered, feeling hot tears welling in her eyes. "Please. Anywhere but there."

Laura sighed. "I talked to Paul last night. My husband. Would you be interested in coming to stay with us for a short time, at least until you find more permanent arrangements? We have a spare room."

Dagny gawked at her. Her kindness was truly overwhelming. They argued for another fifteen minutes, but an hour later, Dagny slumped onto the small, firm bed in Laura's spare bedroom. She was so tired.

A week went by, and then another, but she never stopped being tired or lonely, despite sleeping most of the day and despite her hosts' incredibly hospitality. Laura's husband Paul was a chef and prepared all their meals from raw ingredients, which was a novel experience for Dagny.

The *Albret* had had a galley and her family's quarters had been equipped with a kitchen, but most of her meals had come from a replicator. Preserving quantities of food capable of feeding hundreds of people wasn't practical on deep space missions. They would occasionally pick up fresh food from ports or trade with other vessels for supplies, but by and large, most cooking on the *Albret* had revolved around programming replicators. Paul had been kind enough to attempt to make some of Dagny's favorite dishes—his Kjøttkakesaus was decent enough—but that only reminded her of the home and family she'd lost.

As the days wore on, Dagny began to feel more and more restless. She couldn't keep imposing on Paul and Laura forever and Beatrice from Health and Social Services kept urging her to explore options for her future. She'd mentioned medical schools back on Earth and Dagny had skimmed through several digital brochures, but the thought of going to medical school was painful.

How many times aboard the *Albret* had she wished she had a different life? How many times had she wished she didn't come from a giant family of salvagers? How many times had she wished her parents hadn't had so many kids? She'd spent so much time resenting her life and now she would give anything to have even a small piece of it back.

She cried a lot and she slept a lot and though her health slowly improved, she never got any less lonely, nor could she find a way to get the Vulcan doctor out of her mind.

**Stardate 2260.71**

Hesitation was illogical, but he estimated his pace was approximately ten percent slower than was typical. This would not be a pleasant errand, with or without the serenity of logic.

Voris was once again in control of his emotions. *Mostly*. There was some residual guilt that refused
to go away.

It had taken many hours of meditation during the past sixteen days to purge the remaining effects of pon farr from his mind and body. Regaining his logical faculties had been difficult, but severing his bond from Dagny Skjeggestad was proving far more challenging.

He had not seen her since her hasty departure from his quarters following their coupling, but she'd invaded his subconscious. She lurked in his dreams and wandered into his thoughts when he allowed his mind to idle. It was nearly impossible to avoid thinking about her for any substantial length of time.

He had returned to New Vulcan with Ambassador Spock and the rest of his staff the evening before. The ambassador's discussions with Blue Horizon had gone well and now all that remained was to hope for a positive outcome to the election.

The election was in twenty-one days and that was officially why he was here, standing outside of Velik and T'Rya's home. He had been back on New Vulcan for less than an hour when his father had contacted him and urged him to formalize his agreement with T'Rya. Their marriage would go a long way toward uniting the Storilayar and Vinem-lar parties against the more conservative Ba'taklar, and unity was desperately needed at this juncture.

The looming election was the primary reason he'd agreed to marry the sister of his uncle's political ally. His secondary reason was no longer relevant and he did not look forward to confessing what had happened aboard the Sekla and later in his hotel room on Aldebaran.

He wasn't sure how long he stood in front of her door, waiting to engage the buzzer. In the end, she spared him the trouble by opening the door without a prompt. "Hello, Dr. Voris. Live long and prosper."

He lifted his hand and returned her greeting.

"Will you come in?"

He stepped across the threshold and asked, "Is Velik at home?"

"He is not."

"I see. I must speak with you."

"Will you permit me to speak first?" she asked.

He gave a slight nod.

"I cannot bond with you," she announced.

Voris blinked. "Explain."

"I believe you would make an adequate mate and your offer to accept my child as your own is commendable, but I cannot bond with you. I am willing to assist you in seeking an alternative mate. I have several friends and acquaintances who are searching for suitable partners, and I would be willing to speak with them on your behalf."

"That is not necessary."

"Is it not? When last we spoke-"
"I must make a confession," he interrupted. "As I'm sure you are aware, during my journey to Aldebaran, my vessel was caught in a neutronic storm. My condition was accelerated and I was forced to seek an alternative means of resolution."

T'Rya pursed her lips and nodded. "I understand."

"Will you permit me to inquire why you have withdrawn your acceptance?" Voris asked. "Our match was largely intended to be political in nature and those circumstances have not changed."

"My brother will not approve of my decision, but it is not his decision to make."

"No," Voris agreed. "Yet your decision also affects my family."

"I must apologize for any hardship it causes you and your relations," she said. "My decision is… personal in nature."

Voris glanced at her belly. Her eyes followed his and added, "When you asked if I would not prefer to make a match with my child's father, I told you that was not possible. It is possible, but it is not preferable, at least not to my brother."

"Will you permit me another query?"

She looked away and responded, "You require a more detailed explanation?"

"I do not require anything; I merely wish to understand."

"You deserve an explanation, but it is a private matter."

"I shall protect your privacy," he replied. "I shall find a way to communicate your decision to my family without divulging the details, should you choose to take me into your confidence."

She bobbed her head slowly. "My child's father unintentionally created a bond between us that has proven extremely difficult to sever."

"Did he bond with you without your consent?"

A raw emotion flashed through T'Rya's dark eyes but she quickly tamped it.

"I apologize. I am aware my query is very indelicate, but I have experienced a similar situation. I simply wish to understand."

Another emotion, a softer one, rippled across her pointed features and disappeared. "The loss of our home world has had many unique consequences. He is not a mate I would have selected for myself, but he has become my mate nonetheless. He is to be my child's father. It would be illogical to bear him ill will."

"Indeed."

"I sense you seek to understand a female perception of a male who would forcibly enter her mind."

"Yes."

"He was not in control of himself and his unintentional bonding eventually led to me losing control of my own faculties. I cannot hold him responsible for something that was beyond his power to control, because I would ultimately have to hold myself responsible as well."
Voris folded his hands behind his back and nodded.  
"I sense you are not satisfied with my explanation," she mused.  
"You have been very gracious to answer my questions. I am grateful."  
And he was grateful, but her answer was very Vulcan. Dagny was not Vulcan.  
"Allow me to express my regret for the inconvenience my decision will cause you," she said.  
"I respect your decision," he replied. "Have you informed Velik?"  
"No. I wished to speak with you first."  
"I will inform my father and uncle this evening," he said.  
"Then I shall speak to my brother this evening as well."  
His PADD chirped in his breast pocket. He nodded and took a step back. "I should leave."  
"Yes," she agreed, walking with him to the door. As he stepped outside she said, "May you live long and prosper, Dr. Voris."  
He raised his hand in the ta'al and replied, "Peace and long life, T'Rya. For you, your intended mate, and your child."  
As he walked back toward the street, he extracted his PADD, anticipating a message from either his father or the hospital. Instead it was from the Federation Information Office via the Terran Embassy to Aldebaran.  
He read Dagny's message three times. The language was cryptic but there was only one logical deduction. He exited the messaging program and immediately searched for transportation back to Aldebaran.  

Dagny tucked her hair behind her ears and scanned the brochure. She'd already read it a dozen times, but she was convinced the Federation's Occupational Experience in the Health Professions Program was probably her best chance at medical school.  
Because she had training and experience as a paramedic, there were a number of Terran universities that would allow her to work as a paramedic while and attending school. It meant three years of prerequisite science classes, four years of actual medical school, and then another three to eight years of residency. Best case, she would be thirty years old by the time she was done, but she would turn thirty no matter what she did, so did she want to be a thirty year-old doctor or a thirty year-old paramedic?  
She was due to meet with Beatrice that afternoon and was relieved she'd finally be able to tell her she'd made up her mind. She'd be able to tell Laura and Paul that they could have their house to themselves again. It was what she wanted, wasn't it? She wasn't really sure, but she felt like she had to do something.  
She stretched her neck and sighed as her hair fell back into her face. The cellular regeneration therapy had kick started its growth, but the growth had slowed quite a bit. It was still only about fifteen centimeters long and despite her hopes, it continued to grow in reddish blonde rather than the rich rust hue she'd been born with.
"Dagny, are you ready?" Nurse Beckley asked.

She looked up from her PADD to see the older nurse waiting for her. It had been three full weeks since the storm—sometimes it felt like a lifetime and sometimes it felt like only yesterday.

She'd come to the hospital with Laura that morning for a weekly checkup to monitor her progress. Her course of medication had been finished a week ago and her vitals were mostly back to normal; Laura checked them several times a day. She checked them in the morning and at random if Dagny even so much as sneezed, and each time the tricorder returned typical results. Her body seemed to be on the mend, but her soul still had a long way to go.

She hadn't stopped being tired. Dagny was sure it was depression but Laura remained convinced she was anemic and in need of another course of therapy to improve her red blood cell count.

"How have you been since I saw you last?" asked Nurse Beckley.

"About the same," Dagny admitted, hopping onto the edge of the biobed and rolling back her sleeve to allow her to take a blood sample.

"Beautiful weather we're having," Nurse Beckley mentioned. "Have you gotten to get out and enjoy the sunshine?"

"Uh, no," Dagny mumbled.

She'd spent her entire life aboard a starship. On the Albret, there was no such thing as "enjoying the sunshine." It rained a lot on Aldebaran and Dagny was certain she'd never get used to the idea of water randomly falling from overhead.

"You should get out more. It would be good for you. Enjoy the warm weather while it lasts."

Dagny had never admitted it to anyone, but she found the wide-open spaces of Aldebaran disconcerting. Her lodgings on Andoria had been underground and during her six-month stay on Deneva Station, she'd never ventured up to the planet's surface for leisure activities.

"Laura says you're thinking about going to medical school," Nurse Beckley said, plunging a small needle into her forearm to collect a sample of blood.

"Yes," she replied, rubbing the area where the needle had penetrated. "Laura's been so nice but I can't stay with her and Paul forever."

"I understand," Nurse Beckley murmured, placing the blood sample into the side of a tricorder for analysis. "We'll miss you around here. Maybe you could come back for a visit someday. This hospital could always use good doctors."

Dagny grimaced. She was going to miss them too. She'd hated being in the hospital, but Laura and the rest of the staff had been so supportive after everything that had happened.

"Well everything looks- huh. That's weird." Nurse Beckley was staring at the tricorder screen.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm getting some really strange readings. Let me go get another tricorder. This one's probably due for calibration."

She came back with a different device and took another blood sample, but rather than laugh about
the previous tricorder's mistake and declare everything was as it should be, her face darkened. The hairs on the back of Dagny's neck stood up. "What is it?"

"I'm going to go get Dr. Iverson. Sit tight."

"What is it?" Dagny repeated more loudly.

"I'm sure it's nothing," she said, patting Dagny's arm.

After five agonizing minutes, Nurse Beckley returned with Dr. Iverson who took a third blood sample and plugged it into a third tricorder. The moment the tricorder beeped, his face registered utter confusion.

"Is someone going to tell me what's going on?" she snapped.

"Dagny, is there a chance you could be pregnant?" Dr. Iverson asked.

Her mouth fell open. "What? No? I mean…" Whatever words were going to come out of her mouth remained trapped in her throat. She'd had sex with Erik right before the Albret's destruction, but surely the radiation… "I uh, I mean maybe? I didn't- I mean, weren't you the one who told me that the radiation had damaged my reproductive organs and I might not ever be able to conceive naturally?"

"Yes," Dr. Iverson stammered. "It is possible there's something else going on. These hormones... sometimes tumors or other medical problems can produce them. I'm going to go consult with the resident obstetrician. I'll be right back."

Dr. Iverson scurried out of the room but she barely noticed. She couldn't catch her breath. She was dizzy. How could this be happening? After everything that had happened, it had never even occurred to her that her reckless tryst with Erik in the clinic could have led to this.

"Dagny, are you ok?" Nurse Beckley asked, rubbing her back.

She was starting to hyperventilate. "What am I going to do?"

"Calm down. We'll get this figured out."

"He's dead," she gasped, feeling the first tears trickle down her cheeks. She hugged the nurse and started to sob. "Erik's dead. This can't be happening."

"It's going to be ok," Nurse Beckley insisted. "Let's not jump to any conclusions yet."

Dr. Iverson returned with an elderly human woman who identified herself as Dr. Knox. She took a fourth blood sample, inserted it into her own tricorder, and compared it against Dr. Iverson's results.

"Miss Skjeggestad, I'd like to run a few scans on you," Dr. Knox said.

"Am I really pregnant?"

"I'm not sure. Your hormone readings are very strange. You said it was a possibility, right? Do you have any idea when you might have conceived?"

"My birthday," she mumbled. "The day the Albret was destroyed."

Dr. Knox gave her a solemn nod. "I see. Well, we're going to get to the bottom of this, ok? Do you want to come with me?"
She followed Dr. Knox down a short hallway into another room and was directed onto a table and told to lie still. She closed her eyes as the doctor entered information into a computer on the wall.

She didn't even know how to process this kind of news. Maybe this had happened for a reason. She'd thought she'd lost everything from the Albret, but maybe a tiny piece of her former life was living on inside of her. She felt thankful, blindsided, and terrified. But the radiation... if she really was pregnant, would the baby be ok?

She trembled as Dr. Knox took a set of scans with a large imaging device mounted to the wall. "What does it show?"

"There's definitely an embryo. You are pregnant."

"Is everything going to be ok with the baby?" she asked, holding her breath for the answer.

"It's too early to tell," Dr. Knox admitted. "Your hormone readings are... strange. The father... is he human?"

Dagny swallowed hard. "Uh, um, yes. The Albret had an entirely human crew."

"I see. Ok." Dr. Knox turned back to the computer and started flipping through a database.

"Why do you ask if he was human?" Dagny breathed, terrified of the answer.

"You're producing detectable levels of beta-hCG hormone, but you also have low levels of another hormone called yam'tan. It's a pregnancy hormone associated with Vulcanoid species."

Dagny couldn't breathe. She was somehow both freezing cold and burning up. She felt on the verge of fainting.

"Miss Skjeggestad?"

Nurse Beckley reappeared and after about five minutes, Dagny had calmed down enough to start forming coherent sentences.

"So, is it possible that the father is Vulcan?" Dr. Knox asked. "Or maybe Rigelian?"

"I don't see how, but... yes," she choked. "I didn't think humans and Vulcans could- I mean, the physiology... it's so different."

"It's extremely rare, but there are a few reported cases in the medical literature of natural conception between humans and Vulcans."

"But between that and the radiation poisoning, it never even crossed my mind."

"But you're saying it is possible?" Dr. Knox asked.

Dagny nodded and squeezed silent tears from her eyes.

"The ship that brought you in was Vulcan," Nurse Beckley said. "I know this is uncomfortable, but did something happen to you? Something you don't want to talk about?"

Dagny shuddered. "No. Not like... not like that. I wasn't- he didn't- no."

"You can talk to us, you know," the nurse encouraged.
"I was in a very bad emotional place, and he was very kind, and it's very... complicated," Dagny mumbled. "I'm sure you must be thinking all kinds of things, but he didn't rape me, if that's what you're saying."

"No one's saying anything," Dr. Knox explained. "We're not here to judge you, we're not here to make you uncomfortable, we're just here to make sure you're healthy."

"What am I going to do?"

"You have options," Dr. Knox said, wheeling her small stool toward the biobed. "I can't even think straight right now," Dagny muttered.

"I know that this must be very overwhelming, but you have some serious decisions to make and you don't have a lot of time to make them," Dr. Knox said, gently touching her arm.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you were right about the very different physiology," Dr. Knox explained. "The levels of yam'tan necessary to sustain a Vulcan pregnancy beyond the first few weeks are toxic to humans. Then there's your immune system to contend with and temperature regulation. If you decide you want to carry this baby to term, you're going to need a lot of medical intervention and the sooner the better."

"I need to think," she gasped, bending forward at the waist and trying to catch her breath.

"I understand," Dr. Knox replied. "But time is of the essence. Will you allow me to at least administer a medication that will stop the yam'tan synthesis?"

"What will happen to the baby if you do that?"

"Nothing. Yam'tan does for Vulcans what hCG does for humans—it's produced by the placenta and stimulates the ovaries to make more progesterone, which helps build up blood vessels in the uterus to sustain a pregnancy."

"But if the baby is half-Vulcan, won't it need that?"

"There's a big difference between human and Vulcan ovaries—the yam'tan isn't going to do anything but make you violently sick and slowly kill you. Your human hormones will be enough to sustain the pregnancy for now."

"For now?"

"Like I said, the further this pregnancy progresses, the more medical support you're going to need to keep from experiencing life-threatening complications or miscarrying."

"I don't know what to do," she mumbled, sensing fresh tears were brewing.

"I know you need some time to think this over and let it sink in. Maybe you'll want to reach out to the father, I don't know. But will you at least allow me to provide immediate supportive interventions while you're thinking about it?"

Dagny numbly nodded. *Reach out to the father?* Of course he deserved to know, but what would he say?

Dr. Knox gave her an injection and asked her to come back tomorrow to check her hormone levels.
again. Dagny wandered out of the hospital, wondering what the hell she was supposed to do. What would Dr. Voris want to do? What would Laura and Paul say? What would her mother have said? What would her father have said?

She waited on the sidewalk for twenty minutes, trying to figure out what to do, both generally and literally. She'd ridden to the hospital with Laura in her private vehicle and had no idea how the public transportation system worked. There were fast moving trains on rails overhead and shuttles flying every which way. It was chaos and she felt on the verge of panic.

She needed to tell Dr. Voris but she had no idea how to go about finding him. Of course, away from the familiarity of the Albret, she had no idea how to find much of anything. She doubted her ability to get back to Laura's house from where she was. She eventually sat down on a bench, pulled out her PADD, and located the contact information for Peter Jamieson from the Terran embassy.

She initiated a communications link and within seconds his face appeared on her screen. "Dagny! I haven't heard from you in weeks! How are you?"

She brushed her hair back behind her ears and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry to bother you, but you said I could contact you if I needed anything."

"Certainly, how can I help?"

"I need to get in contact with someone on New Vulcan and I don't know where to start." Her voice shook, but she managed to keep it together.

"Yes, that's easy enough. Who do you want to get in touch with?"

"His name is Voris."

"I don't know much about Vulcan, but that seems like it might be a common name. Do you have any other information?"

"Well, he was the doctor on the Sekla, the ship that rescued me."

"That should be easy enough to track down," Peter admitted. "What message would you like to pass along?"

"Pass along? I was hoping I could get his contact information so I could message him myself."

"Every planet has different rules about the release of citizens' information, but I can already tell you the New Vulcan government isn't going to hand out his private information without a Federation warrant. But I can forward your message and your contact information so he can get back to you."

"That's the only way?"

"Afraid so, but it's pretty routine. The embassy processes dozens of these every day."

"It's a private message though," she replied, blushing.

"They usually are. Best to keep to the basic facts and wait until he contacts you back to discuss the details."

"Oh."

"So, what did you want to say?"
"Tell him… tell him there's been a development. Tell him I'm going to need to make a decision very soon because of what happened on Aldebaran and it's the kind of decision that I thought he might want to be involved in. Please tell him I'm so sorry and to please respond."

Peter's face fell, but he nodded solemnly. "Consider it sent. Hopefully he gets back to you soon."

"Thank you, Mr. Jamieson."

"Please, it's Peter, and that's what I'm here for. I hope things are looking up for you."

She ended the transmission and sat on the bench, cringing at the sensory overload of thousands of speeding vehicles and lights and sounds and people moving in every direction. How did people live this way?

She was starting to wonder if she should go back into the hospital and find a waiting room and wait for Laura to finish her shift. Laura had told her to come find her when she was done with her checkup. She stood to go back inside but her PADD dinged. She had a message from an unidentified sender. She opened it to read:

"Miss Skjeggestad, this is Dr. Voris. I believe I understand your message. Please do whatever is necessary for your health, safety, and well-being. I can be on Aldebaran within 19.4 hours. Will you agree to meet with me?"
Voris looked up from his PADD to gaze through the tiny portal into the blackness of space. He would be arriving on Aldebaran in exactly one hour.

He'd spent most of the journey reflecting upon the events of the past twenty-two days and reading obstetrics journals. He had little experience in obstetrics outside of the mandatory rotations he'd done during his medical internship thirty years earlier and even then he only had experience working with Vulcan patients. He'd treated a handful of pregnant human females during his fellowship on Earth, but as his primary focus had been emergency interspecies medicine, he hadn't been responsible for any part of their labor, delivery, or post-partum care.

He evidently had much to learn. He had already read all the recent literature and guidelines published by the Federation Association of Physicians. Though there were only minor disparities between the anatomies of human and Vulcan females, the physiology was markedly different. The vast differences in biochemistry—hormone signaling, temperature regulation, oxygen requirements and so much more—tended to make pregnancies between their species complicated and dangerous. Of course, he did not know if Dagny wished to continue the pregnancy, but he wished to be prepared for any eventuality.

His PADD chimed and he tore his eyes away from the portal to read a message from Dr. Janice Govorski, a human physician at Kanunsh'es district hospital who specialized in Vulcan hybrid obstetrics.

"Dr. Voris, I've attached all the data and case studies I've collected for the past two years on human-Vulcan hybrid pregnancies, as per your request. Were you looking to refer a patient?"

He swiped his finger over the microphone to dictate a reply and suddenly realized he wasn't sure what to say. He had no idea of what Dagny intended to do. He had no idea what he intended to do. Whatever she decided, he'd concluded hours ago that he would do whatever she asked of him.

Eventually he found the words. "Dr. Govorski, thank you for your prompt response and the information you've provided. I do not have a patient to refer at this time, but I may in the near future."

He sent the message and prepared to open the first of the files she'd included when he received another message, this time from his father. T'Rya had almost certainly informed her brother Velik of her decision by now, and Velik would have almost certainly spoken to his Uncle Sarek of it, who would have almost certainly discussed it with his brother, Voris' father. He had told T'Rya he would discuss their broken engagement with his family, but in his haste to secure passage to Aldebaran, he'd neglected to inform anyone of anything.

It was not precisely logical to ignore his father, but knowing his father's opinion on his decision to allow T'Rya to break their agreement would not alter Voris' present circumstances. In approximately one hour, he would be meeting with a young woman who was carrying his child and he wished to be as informed about her condition as possible.

His PADD chirped again with a lower tone, indicating he was receiving a video transmission from his father. If Silek disapproved of his actions now, he would likely still disapprove tomorrow. Voris refused the transmission and switched back to the information Dr. Govorski had sent and began.
reading through complications associated with human-Vulcan hybrid pregnancies and best practices for maternal support.

His PADD continued to chirp periodically, eventually forcing Voris to silence the device. He continued reading all the relevant literature on Dagny's condition he could find, all the while struggling to keep a number of unpleasant emotions in check.

"Are you sure you're ok?" Laura asked, chewing her lower lip and narrowing her eyes. "You look exhausted."

"I'm great," Dagny lied, giving her the most genuine smile she could manage. Laura was right—she hadn't slept more than an hour last night.

She hadn't found the courage to tell Laura and Paul about her appointment yesterday. It would only lead to understandable questions about how she'd come to be two weeks pregnant with a half-Vulcan baby. Laura had become so fiercely protective of Dagny that she wasn't really sure how Laura would take the news. It was an unusual situation and particularly after Nurse Beckley's insinuation that she'd been assaulted, she didn't feel like divulging the details to anyone. Whatever had happened between her and Dr. Voris, it wasn't rape and she didn't want anyone else thinking that it was.

She glanced at the digital clock above the kitchen door. She was due back at the hospital to meet with Dr. Knox later that morning and Dr. Voris would be arriving in less than an hour.

"Well, I'll be off to work then," Laura sighed, grabbing her bag from the chair by the door.

"Uh, Laura, I had meant to mention this earlier, but would it be ok if someone came by the house in a little while? I have a… a friend who told me last night that he would be passing through Aldebaran and… well…"

Her cheeks burned with shame for lying to this wonderful woman who had taken her in when she had nowhere else to go.

"A friend?" asked Laura with an obvious hint of curiosity in her voice.

"Yeah, someone I knew from… well, from Vulcan."

It wasn't exactly untrue. Dr. Voris was Vulcan and since Laura knew the story of the Albret's actions during the Battle of Vulcan, the idea that Dagny could have a Vulcan friend couldn't be that weird, or at least she hoped. Even though it wasn't literally a lie, it felt like one because she was still misrepresenting the truth.

"Sure, Dagny," Laura replied with a wide grin. "You said he's passing through—how long will he be here? Would he like to join us for dinner?"

"Oh, I don't really know," Dagny confessed. "But I didn't want to invite anyone here unless it was ok with you."

"I appreciate the consideration," Laura nodded. "It's not a problem. Just let Paul know if we need to cook for an extra person tonight."

Dagny gave her a weak smile and waved goodbye. She watched Laura's vehicle move down the street from the kitchen window and flopped back down onto the barstool by the central island. She was exhausted and her stomach was in knots. She'd been nauseated ever since she'd heard the news and figuring it was too early for morning sickness, she'd decided it was probably nerves. What was
she going to do? What would Dr. Voris want to do?

She'd agonized over it since she'd received his message the day before. Would he be angry that she had not thought to go to a doctor for emergency contraceptives? Of course not: Vulcans didn't get angry. Disappointed, maybe, but probably not angry. She just couldn't know how he would react and she'd written and deleted multiple responses before simply sending him her current temporary address when he'd asked where they should meet.

She knew almost nothing about him, but she did know he was the private physician of a Vulcan diplomat, so it seemed quite likely he had no interest in becoming a father. If he wanted nothing to do with her or the child, what then? Or what if he was interested in raising the child, how would that work?

She felt too many emotions to be able to identify any particular one. She thought of her family, her future hopes of medical school, her feelings on motherhood and so much more. No matter what the future held, it was terrifying. Her hands instinctively went to her abdomen and she leaned forward and looked at herself.

She'd been told the radiation had probably permanently damaged her ovaries. Of all the things she'd lost, the ability to have children on her own one day had been pretty far down on the list and she hadn't given it much consideration these past weeks. She liked children but growing up with thirteen brothers and sisters had made her seriously question whether she ever wanted to have any of her own. Besides, she'd just turned twenty and assumed she'd have time to think about that later. But what if this baby was her best chance to become a mother?

Facing this would have been difficult enough with the support of her family and friends, but they were all gone. She'd struggled mightily to stop missing them so much and adapt to life away from the Albreth, but it hadn't been going well. If she continued with this pregnancy, the baby would have a whole family it would never know. Her parents would never get to hold their first grandchild and her child would miss out on the love and support of aunts and uncles and cousins.

Her eyes were threatening tears so she tried to think of something else. When she thought about Dr. Voris' impending arrival, she reflected upon the fact that it was his baby too, and given his Vulcan heritage and the tragic events of two years earlier, it was probably fair to say this baby would have two families it would never meet. She took a ragged breath and gave in to her emotions.

She didn't feel ready to be a mother, but she didn't feel ready to be anything. She thought of her father's many sayings, and the one he probably used most often was, "Everything happens for a reason."

She felt a surge of anger. How could that be true? She refused to believe there was some fundamental purpose for a whole ship full of people, ranging from old men to infants, slowly dying a miserable death from radiolytic isotopes. Be that as it may, she would give anything to hear one of his corny expressions just one more time.

Her stomach turned again and she rubbed it absentmindedly, knowing it would be months before she felt any fetal movement but imagining she could feel the baby moving anyway. A sudden realization struck her. For all her anguish since finding out, she'd never really thought about not having the baby, she'd only thought about how she would manage. It was mostly those thoughts that had kept her awake all night.

She had her paramedic's certification and could find a way to make a living. Maybe she could still go to medical school after the child got a little older. She wasn't afraid of hard work or long hours and she was an old hand at balancing childcare with work and studying. But that had been in another life.
She’d been on the *Albret* then, surrounded by an incredible support system. Now she was facing the prospect of starting over with nothing and no one and no real experience with living anywhere besides the confines of a salvage ship.

She felt the porridge she’d eaten half an hour earlier creeping up the back of her throat so she helped herself to a glass of water and tried to take several deep breaths. She had always found a way to adapt and get by and she could do that again. *Somehow.*

She gazed out the kitchen window and saw it was beginning to drizzle. So much for Aldebaran's sunny streak. She took another indifferent sip, watching the sky grow darker and darker. She noticed a dark object moving down the lane and watched a taxi pull up to the curb. A tall, slender figure in a black cloak emerged and proceeded up the sidewalk. Dagny gripped the glass so tightly she was surprised it didn't shatter in her hand. Dr. Voris had come.

She set the glass on the counter and made her way to the front entrance, feeling like she was in someone else's body. The buzzer sounded and she waited several seconds before opening the door. He looked different. His eyes were quiet and had a sad quality; the last time she'd seen him, there had been a lot more torment. He stood straightly and bowed his head. "Miss Skjeggestad."

"I told you before—please call me Dagny." The words fell from her mouth in a hurried jumble. "Will you come in?"

He nodded and stepped across the threshold. He waited patiently on the mat by the entry for her direction, but she wasn't exactly sure what to do or say.

"You're taller than I remember," she blurted.

He cocked his head and said nothing, leaving her to feel even more awkward and anxious. What a *ridiculous* thing to say. He certainly couldn't have grown since their last meeting.

"You look well," he eventually said.

Her hands instinctively reached for her reddish blonde hair. She was shaking and wondered if he noticed. She wanted to say she was doing a lot better, but that would be a lie, so rather than continue to dance around the facts, she simply said, "I'm pregnant."

"Yes, I had surmised as much."

How could he be so calm? "Uh, you didn't have to come right away, I guess, but I'm glad you did. Thank you for coming."

"What do you intend to do?"

"I don't know," she mumbled. "What do you want to do?"

"I do not believe that my wishes are equal to yours in this circumstance."

"Sure, but I feel like they at least matter," she argued.

"My interests are conflicted," he explained. "I have put you in this position and my ultimate concern is for your well-being. Yet your child is also my child, and I am bound consider it as well."

"I want to keep it," she declared, feeling warm tears fill her eyes.

His expression seemed to soften. "Then I accept your decision and am willing to provide for you and
the child in any way you require."

"What? No, I don't need anything from you, I only want to know that you're alright with this."

"As I have already explained, the decision is yours. Whatever you choose, I have a duty to support and provide for my offspring. It is the logical order of things. And given that you would not be in your present situation were it not for my actions, I feel equally obligated to see that your needs are also met."

"I'm a certified paramedic: I can work. I don't need you to-"

"I admit you are likely capable," he interrupted. "Please excuse me: will you permit me a query?"

"Yes, sure."

"Do you intend to refuse to allow me to assist in the upbringing of this child?"

"No," Dagny answered sincerely. "No, not at all. I would never keep the child from you. I'm just trying to explain that you can be as involved or not involved as you want. I want you to do this because you want to, not because you feel obligated to."

"I see," he said, nodding thoughtfully. "I would like to be involved."

"Ok," Dagny said, feeling another batch of tears making their way down her cheeks.

"Why do you cry?"

"I didn't know how you were going to react. I thought you would be angry or- I didn't know how you would be."

"Anger is illogical," he explained. "I ought to have considered the remote possibility of conception following our coupling and provided you with prophylactics but I was regrettably not thinking logically."

"Neither was I," she stammered, letting out a deep sigh. "I never imagined something like this happening, all things considered."

"When I spoke earlier of a conflict of interest, there is another matter I wish to discuss with you, not as the father of your child, but as a physician."

"You're wondering if I've thought this through and understand the risks."

"Yes. Pregnancies between our species carry a number of possible complications, both for the fetus and the mother."

"Dr. Knox explained some of it yesterday but it doesn't matter—I want to do this. On some level, I feel like this happened for a reason."

He stared at the stairs to his left and said nothing.

"What do you think?" Dagny asked, wringing her hands.

"I believe it happened due to a highly improbable consequence of biology," he replied. "And due to the simple facts of biology, you will bear the entirety of the physical burden and risk of bringing this pregnancy to term. I am merely attempting to ensure you are making an informed decision."
"I don't think anything is without risk," she argued.

"True, but not all risk is equal. The sample size is small, but even with managed care, there is sufficient evidence to show maternal mortality for human females carrying Vulcan hybrid fetuses is as high as one percent."

"After everything I've been through, a one in a hundred chance of dying doesn't seem so scary. It almost sounds like you're trying to talk me out of it."

"Thus, my reason for explaining it is a conflict of interest," he replied. "I am not attempting to dissuade you, I only seek to ensure you fully understand what you are committing to."

"I do understand."

"Very well then. Have you been placed on a regimen of lentrazole?" he asked.

Dagny blinked several times and shrugged. "Is that the drug that's supposed to inhibit yam'tan?"

"It is."

"I got an injection yesterday and I'm supposed to go back in about an hour so they can check my hormone levels."

"Have you located an obstetrician who specializes in interspecies pregnancies? My cursory search found two on Aldebaran, but none with notable experience with Vulcanoid species."

"I hadn't quite gotten that far," she admitted. "I'm still trying to process this, I think."

"There is a human physician on New Vulcan I would recommend and I had a colleague on Earth who I believe would be suitable. If you intend to remain on Aldebaran, I am willing to assist."

"I don't know where I'm going to go," she interrupted. "This isn't my house; I'm staying with one of the nurses who treated me in the hospital at Valder Station right after I arrived. I don't have anywhere to go, really."

Their eyes locked and Dagny could feel her face growing hot. She was practically homeless and insisting she didn't need his help when in all reality, she needed all the help she could get.

"You are welcome in my residence on New Vulcan," he explained. "It could be easily adapted to suit your specific needs. However, if you desire to seek accommodations elsewhere, I shall accept that also."

"You want me to come live with you?"

"It is an option I wish to make available."

"Do you live alone?"

"Excepting a Terran feline who comes and goes as he pleases, yes."

"You have a cat?" She couldn't help but smile. Dagny had always wanted to have a pet but keeping one aboard the Albreth would have been an inconvenience.

"I acquired him from my former landlady's mother."

She was struck by the realization that she knew virtually nothing about this man, but she was having
his baby and seriously considering moving in with him.

"Perhaps you would like time to consider my offer," he said.

"I don't really know what there is to consider," she replied hastily. "I can't stay with Laura and Paul for forever and you're right—I probably should be making arrangements with doctors and whatnot. I have no idea what I'm doing. I don't know you, Dr. Voris; you're a stranger to me. I don't know how I know, but I know that you're a kind person who wants to do the right thing, but I'm afraid."

He inched forward on the mat near the entry and folded his hands behind his back. "Fear is illogical, but hesitation is understandable. I must leave for New Vulcan this evening and have already arranged my return travel. You are welcome to join me now or at a later date. If you decide you would like to relocate elsewhere, I am willing to discuss it."

"I might as well go tonight: Dr. Knox explained time is critical and you bring up a good point about finding a specialist. If you say there's one on New Vulcan, then that's where I'll go, if you're sure it's not a problem. I'm worried about feeling like I'm taking advantage of you."

He turned his neck slightly to look into her eyes once again. "You would be unable to take advantage of me to a greater degree than I have already taken advantage of you."

Dagny couldn't manage to maintain eye contact. Apparently, he still felt guilty, which on some level made sense. She wasn't sure how she would feel if she were in his shoes. "What time are you scheduled to leave?"

"The transport departs at 1845 hours. You had mentioned you have an appointment to check your hormone levels in approximately one hour. Do you have transportation to the medical facility?"

"I have a shuttle pass but I've never used it," she admitted.

"If you will begin assembling and packing your belongings, I can arrange for your transportation to your appointment and passage to New Vulcan."

It hit her just how quickly things were moving. If they were leaving on a shuttle at 1845, that would barely give her any time to say goodbye to Paul and Laura. Was she making the right choice? What choices did she really have? She tasted bile at the back of her throat again and felt like all she really wanted was to curl up in bed and never come out.

"Miss Skjeggestad?"

"I told you—please call me Dagny."

"Very well. Dagny, is something the matter?"

"Do you think we're making the right decision?"

"I do not know," he admitted. "The logical decision and correct decision generally overlap, but they are not mutually inclusive."

She gave a small nod and moved toward the stairs. "I'll go pack my things."

She didn't have much, so packing wouldn't take long. It was going to take far longer, she sensed, to get used to living with a Vulcan. If she ever did.
information screen to display boarding instructions for their transport to New Vulcan. He stood with Dagny's two small pieces of luggage and glanced in her direction. She was standing twenty meters away near a beverage counter, hugging the woman again. *Laura Frost.*

They were both crying and Laura's husband was gently rubbing his wife's back. It was evident Dagny would be greatly missed. He was appreciative of their efforts to shelter her following the loss of the *Albret,* but for all his gratitude, he doubted Laura felt any similar sentiments toward him.

She had been cordial enough at first—*jovial,* even—until Dagny explained she would be leaving that evening to join him on New Vulcan to raise their child together. After a barrage of questions, explanations, and subsequent emotional effusions, the two women had gone upstairs to finish packing Dagny's things and Paul had offered him a beer. It had seemed impolite to refuse given the circumstances, so he'd stood with Paul in the kitchen, imbibing a foul alcoholic beverage made from Terran grain and listening as Paul talked about how wonderful it had been having Dagny stay with them. Evidently, Dagny was an exceptional cook.

Voris knew so little about her. They'd spent the day together but hadn't spoken much. He'd taken her to her appointment with Dr. Knox and reviewed her medical history since her arrival on Aldebaran. He'd made arrangements with Dr. Govorski to see Dagny the day after tomorrow and had her chart forwarded to her offices. He had gone with her to meet someone named Beatrice Deveraux from the local office of Federation Health and Social Services, where there had also been tears and hugs and goodbyes.

A minute later, the green light flashed at the top of the departures screen, granting them permission to board the *Treitau,* the mid-sized passenger transport that would take them to New Vulcan. He saw Dagny, Laura, and Paul moving in his direction and lifted Dagny's bags to his shoulder.

"You're *sure* this is what you want?" he heard Laura grumble.

He knew she hadn't intended him to hear it, but like most Vulcans, he had exceptional auditory acuity, even through the loud, ambient noise of the terminal.

"It is," Dagny replied.

"This doesn't feel right. It doesn't seem like you really know him and all of a sudden you're moving in together and having a baby?"

"It's crazy I know but please trust me," Dagny murmured, softening her face as they approached and came to a stop next to him.

"No matter what, you're always welcome to stay with us," Laura announced, looking directly at Dagny, which resulted in the impression that her invitation most certainly did *not* extend to Dagny's Vulcan companion.

"I am very glad you have made your acquaintance, Mr. and Mrs. Frost," Voris said, glancing at Paul.

"Yeah, it was great to meet you," Paul said, stuffing his hands in his pockets and nodding. Laura said nothing.

"Are you ready to go?" Dagny asked, her eyes glistening with tears.

"If you are."

"I can get those," she said, pointing to the bags.
He could see Laura watching him closely and it would be illogical to insist on carrying two small bags weighing less than ten kilograms when Dagny was certainly capable. He shrugged the straps from his shoulder and gently placed them over hers.

"Well then, I guess this really is goodbye," Dagny said, looking to Paul and Laura and offering one final embrace.

Laura began crying again. Humans were incredibly emotional creatures, but his recent pon farr had reminded him Vulcans were no different, deep down. After several more pleas to send messages and reminders that Dagny would always be welcome to utilize their spare room, they finally acquiesced to allowing her departure.

As they turned and made their way to the ramp that would take them to the Treitau, he heard Laura hiss to Paul, "Are we really going to let her go with this guy?"

"I don't see that we have a choice, honey."

"He could be anyone. He could be a criminal."

"Laura, he's Vulcan. He could be a lot of things but I doubt he's quite on par with an Orion slaver or Nausicaan terrorist."

"She's emotionally fragile and I'm afraid she's making a huge mistake."

"I am too, but she's an adult."

"Ugh, I can't do this," Laura moaned.

Paul said something in reply, but by that point, Voris was no longer within earshot. If Dagny had heard any of their conversation, she gave no external indication.

When they arrived in their cabin, he helped her stow her bags in a high overhead compartment. It was a private space for two passengers with two narrow beds mounted above a small central room measuring three meters by three meters. Dagny fell into one of the two chairs and stared out the portal at the view of Aldebaran several kilometers below. He took a seat across from her and said nothing.

Twenty minutes later, the ship moved away from Valder Station and broke standard orbit at impulse before going to warp. He noted a subtle smile on her face as the inertial dampeners thrummed to life and the warp engines engaged, but her happiness quickly faded into a more complicated expression.

"It almost feels like home," she muttered.

"How long did you live aboard the Albret?" he asked, glancing in her direction.

"My entire life." Several minutes of silence passed before she said, "I'm sorry about Laura. She really is a nice person."

"Her concern is understandable."

"I feel like I'm in over my head."

"It is a complex situation," he admitted.

She pulled her gaze away from the portal and allowed her eyes to rest on him. "I don't know much about Vulcan culture, or Vulcans, or you. Part of me feels like this is a huge mistake. Please tell me it
isn't."

"By 'this' I presume you refer to your decision to cohabitate with me?"

She blinked several times and shrugged. "I suppose."

"What are your parameters for a mistake? I would never harm you or attempt to limit your freedom in any way."

She ran her palms over her forehead and sighed. "I know."

"It is my hope that you can build a comfortable life for yourself on New Vulcan. If you decide that is impossible, I will gladly arrange for your return to Aldebaran or wherever you wish to go."

"I don't think it's about the place, exactly. I think it has more to do with the people."

"You refer to me," Voris stated.

"A small part of me feels like I know you, but in all reality, I know almost nothing about you or your life."

"I could say the same of you," he remarked. "I believe the feelings of familiarly likely stem from the lingering telepathic mating bond we share."

"What's your favorite color?" she asked abruptly.

"Why should one have a preferred color?"

"I guess I'm trying to get to know you." She scoffed and pushed her light-colored hair back behind her ears. He noticed, not for the first time, just how small she was. She was beautiful down to her bones and he'd thought so even as he cared for her during the ravages of radiation sickness. He repressed a strange emotion and stared down at the table.

"So, no favorite color then?"

"No."

"Are you all alone?" she asked.

He looked up and caught her eye. "My father and uncle live, as do two cousins. I was more fortunate than most."

"Did you have children? You know… before? Ugh, I'm sorry if that's too personal of a question, I just…"

"No." His answer was soft and void of emotion. "I had a bondmate. We had no children."

He watched her right hand travel to the amulet around her neck and her left hand fall to her lower belly as if on instinct. It had occurred to him on several occasions since he'd received Dagny's initial message that the prospect of fatherhood was a real possibility, but now that she'd confirmed her intentions to proceed with the pregnancy and had agreed to allow him to participate in the child's upbringing, he was forced to consider that prospect more seriously.

"I'm getting kind of tired," she said, looking at the bunk overhead. "I know I'm due for another round of lentrazole in a couple of hours, but I don't think I can keep my eyes open any longer."
"If you consent, I can administer a dose while you sleep," he replied, looking the side pouch of one of her bags where he knew the autoinjectors Dr. Knox had prescribed were packed.

"I'm so tired I'd probably sleep through it," she laughed, climbing the short ladder to mount the bunk.

She was asleep in less than a minute and Voris contented himself watching the slow rise and fall of her chest for a time. Two hours later, he gently delivered an injection of the hormone inhibitor into her neck. She didn't even stir.

He considered reading his messages but decided against it. They would have a sixteen-hour journey to New Vulcan and he had much to meditate upon. He closed his eyes and began to regulate his breathing, and what felt like seconds later, the ship shuddered and an announcement rang over the internal communications system that they had arrived in orbit of New Vulcan.

He hadn't meditated: he'd fallen asleep. It had been the first proper period of rest he'd had since entering pon farr weeks earlier and though he was well rested, his mind was teeming. He gazed out the portal at the reddish planet below and repressed a mild sense of foreboding.

"Are we here already?" Dagny groaned, sitting up from the bunk.

"Yes," he replied, rising to his feet to collect their bags.

He did not look forward to meeting with his father, and his lingering sense of apprehension gave him pause to consider what kind of father he would be.
Dagny followed Voris down the shuttle ramp and into the brightly lit terminal. It was quite warm and the gravity was intense, and Dagny took several deep breaths to try and acclimate herself. People, mostly Vulcans, were moving in quick, orderly fashion. It was far more organized than any other terminal she'd ever seen; Dagny figured it was a consequence of Vulcan logic and efficiency.

It was awkward shuffling through the methodical crowd with her two small bags, but Dr. Voris didn't attempt to hurry her along or insist on carrying them for her. He'd already offered, she'd declined, and that was that. He slowed his stride and patiently walked beside her, even though they seemed to be hindering others from moving as quickly as they wanted to.

She soon encountered a phenomenon she hadn't anticipated—every so often, someone would glance in her direction and hold their gaze just long enough to be considered staring before they would suddenly look away. She wasn't the only human in the terminal—she'd already seen nearly a dozen others—but she was the only one getting the bizarre looks. Did she really look as out of place as she felt?

They boarded a lift to take them to a lower level and Dagny saw a woman's head snap around to get a glimpse of her out of the corner of her eye. As the door closed, she asked, "Am I doing something wrong?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Then why is everyone staring at me?"

"Perhaps it is because they recognize you from the Albret."

The thought hadn't even occurred to her. That tragedy had been more than two years ago and she could barely remember any of the Vulcans she'd met that day. She would never forget Tolik or Dr. Sevek, but the thousands of others had been little more than a chaotic blur of suffering and numbness.

"I'm surprised they remember," she murmured. The lift door drifted open and they stepped off on the ground level.

"It would be surprising if they ever forget," he replied. "There are many on this planet who owe their lives to the actions of the crew of the Albret. There are also many on New Vulcan who grieve with you for its loss."

A niggling feeling of sadness crept into her stomach. The Albret's destruction wasn't nearly as raw as it had been three weeks earlier, but when she dwelled on it for long, tears inevitably followed. How could her life have changed this much in less than a month?

She followed him to a customs line where they waited in silence for several minutes until an older Vulcan man called her forward. She looked to Dr. Voris for guidance but he was already being directed to another queue. She'd been through customs many times before at various ports, but this
The man pressed a button at the edge of the counter and asked in an echoing voice, "Do you require the assistance of a universal translator?"

"No, I speak Standard."

He pressed the button again and his voice returned to normal. "Do you have any significant cognitive or sensory differences that may prevent you from answering basic spoken questions?"

"No?"

"Please place your hand on the scanner and then be seated," the Vulcan man in the dark blue uniform said, motioning toward a chair.

Dagny set her bags on the floor and complied. After her handprint had been scanned, she sat, folded her hands in her lap, and tried remembering the kinds of questions customs officials asked—they usually asked about the intended length and purpose of her visit and what she had in her bags and pockets. Often on non-Federation planets, there would be unusual questions about religion, political affiliation, and so on.

A screen below the man's desk illuminated and displayed text in both the loopy Vulcian script and Federation Standard below symbols of various things. Some were easy to decipher, others, less so. Below the universal symbol for radioactive material was something that looked like it might be a tribble. Or an explosion. She wasn't sure.

The man finished reading the results of her hand scan and her information appeared on the screen before her. A photograph that had been taken during her stay at Deneva Colony four years earlier appeared, making her feel wistful. She had been so young.

Name: Dagny Skjeggestad
Species: Human
Gender(s): Female
Home World: Earth
Age: 20.06 Federation Standard Years

"Is this information correct?"

It had always seemed strange to declare Earth as her home planet when she'd never actually been there, but for the purposes of Federation citizenship, she had to have some stretch of rock to call home. "Yes."

"Do you consent to a scan of your person and belongings?"

"Yes?" she answered, her voice barely rising above a squeak.

"Before I proceed to the bioscan, do you have any of the following in your possession that you wish to declare—alien plants, seeds, animals, minerals, weapons, radioactive substances, known disease-causing agents, pharmacological chemicals…"

The list droned on and Dagny was too polite—and too nervous—to stop him and explain that all she had were two small bags of clothes and a data device. A beam of light came from overhead and
scanned the chair she was sitting in and her bags, and when the man seemed satisfied with the results, he asked, "How long do you intend to stay on New Vulcan?"

"Uh- I- uh," she mumbled. She started to look around for Dr. Voris and then noticed he was approaching. "A while."

"Specify." The man behind the counter stared at her with a disinterested, neutral expression.

"I don't know."

"If you intend to stay longer than thirty standard days, you are required to apply for a visa."

"Ok?" She tugged at the collar of her shirt, wondering if the building had environmental controls. It was so hot.

"May I be of assistance?" the man asked, glancing away from Dagny to Dr. Voris, who had come to a stop next to her chair.

"I intend to sponsor an temporary visa for Miss Skjeggestad," he replied.

The man raised an eyebrow and directed them to another line where another Vulcan man asked even more questions about the purpose of Dagny's relocation to New Vulcan. Dr. Voris managed to answer without expressly explaining Dagny's condition, but it was still incredibly awkward and she couldn't shake the sense that the Vulcan man disapproved of her.

An hour later, she received an electronic visa that was good for forty-nine days. It seemed like an oddly specific number and as they left the customs area, she asked him about it.

"New Vulcan is set to hold elections in nineteen days," he explained. "Should certain individuals come to power, customs and immigration will likely become far more challenging."

"So… what? I would have to leave?"

"I do not know," he admitted. "I cannot say what the Ba'taklar party will do if they achieve a majority vote. It is unlikely that they will, but it is a possibility."

Dagny knew nothing about Vulcan politics. She was used to dealing with a fair amount of uncertainty, but she already felt like she was drowning in it. The idea that she could be forced to move again in a month and a half wasn't comforting.

"So if that happens and I can't stay, then-"

"We shall seek accommodations elsewhere," he finished, glancing sidelong at her.

She heard a chirping sound emanate from his breast pocket and he touched a finger to his chest to silence the sound. His PADD, probably.

She wasn't sure what time it was where they were on New Vulcan, but she could see radiant light streaming in through long, glass walls ahead in the distance. It grew warmer as they neared the exit doors and when the automatic sensor noted their approach and the glass doors slid open, Dagny gulped in surprise. The gravity was bad enough, but the heat was a sucker punch to the senses. It was like opening a plasma vent moments after the warp core had been taken offline.

"Dagny?" Dr. Voris asked, turning to her.

"You live here?" she choked, gazing around at the bright, reddish landscape.
When she looked back at him, there was a serious expression in his eyes. "Come."

He took the bags from her shoulders without even asking, but she didn't complain. They weren't heavy but the gravity and heat were fast becoming more than she could tolerate.

She followed him down the covered sidewalk and out into the overpowering sunlight. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead and her pale skin started to feel exceptionally warm.

"So are we- are we going to your house?" she asked, swallowing the thickening saliva at the back of her throat.

"Yes," he replied, slowing to match her pace.

After about a hundred meters, she started to feel dizzy. She was stunned by her lack of fitness, but reasoned she was still recovering from the radiation sickness, not to mention she hadn't eaten since the night before on Aldebaran and had never experienced a climate quite like this one. She didn't want to complain, but she wasn't sure how much further she could go.

She started to wonder if she was going to faint when Dr. Voris stepped under an awning on the broad sidewalk. She tried to catch her breath, but she felt like she was breathing in plasma fumes.

"Are you well?" he asked, looking at her carefully.

"It's very hot," she admitted, tugging at the collar of her shirt again and noticing it was soaked with sweat.

"The train should be here momentarily," he said, standing to the side to reveal a bench. "Please, sit."

Moments after she sunk down onto the bench, a shuttle train glided to a stop in front of them. She stood on shaking legs and followed him aboard. There were a dozen people sitting on long benches against the walls of the passenger car. Dr. Voris sat down near the front and she took a seat next to him, trying to maintain her composure as best she could.

It was cooler on the train than it was outside, but not enough to make any difference. A distant ringing began in her ears and she was struck by a wave of nausea. She was grateful there was nothing in her stomach to throw up.

"We are approximately ten minutes from our destination and it is a short walk from there to my home," Dr. Voris said, turning to her. "Can you endure the climate until then?"

Dagny wasn't sure, but she didn't see that she had any other choice. "I think so."

"I can administer a trioxirane compound when we arrive which should help you acclimatize," he said. "I ought to have considered it prior to our departure from Aldebaran."

"I'll be ok," she lied, feeling rivers of sweat stream down her back.

Three stops and an eternity later, they disembarked at a station on the outskirts of a maze of seemingly deserted multistory buildings. Every step took incredible effort and they were only about fifty paces into their expedition to his house when her knees suddenly buckled. Her caught her under her armpits and supported her weight. She was incredibly embarrassed and felt her face growing even hotter than it already was.

"I'm fine," she croaked. "I just need to get inside and lie down, I think."
"I believe it would be wise to call for an emergency transport to the hospital," he replied, shifting her weight to extract his PADD from his inner breast pocket.

"How much further?" she panted.

"There," he said, glancing to the second story of a building about twenty meters ahead on the right. So close and yet so far.

"I can make it," she insisted.

Dr. Voris raised an eyebrow but helped her along until they reached the stairs. Dagny managed to make it about a third of the way up before the urge to sit down became too overpowering. Her head throbbed and her muscles were cramping. How could she be this weak?

Dr. Voris' response was both kind and humiliating. He slid one arm under her arms and the other under her knees and carried her to his apartment. The moment he stepped inside, he announced, "Adjust environmental controls to twenty degrees Celsius."

He carried her past a front sitting room and down a long hallway to a back bedroom where he deposited her on a large, firm bed covered in a soft, gray blanket. Then he disappeared. Dagny rolled over onto her side and listened to the pounding of blood in her head and the hum of the air ducts. Then she started to retch.

She tried to lean over the bed but didn't make it in time. She vomited watery spittle down the side of the blanket in waves, then continued to heave even after there was nothing to bring up. Dr. Voris returned with a medkit and delivered several injections into her neck. The first one stung and the second one brought with it a flood of euphoria.

"I'm sorry," she hiccupped, looking at the wet mess that was running down the edge of the bed onto the floor.

"It is illogical to apologize for that which is not in your power to control," he replied, offering her a towel to wipe her mouth.

Her sluggish hands fumbled at the simple activity, but she was glad he let her do it. It was bad enough he'd had to carry her to bed like a sleepy toddler. She started to blot the blanket with the towel, insisting she could clean it up.

"Do not trouble yourself," he replied, checking her vitals with a tricorder. "Rest."

He set up a small intravenous unit, turned her left arm over, and set the sensor in the crook of her arm to find a vein. She felt a small prick and then a cool rush of liquid flowing into her veins. "What are you giving me?"

"A standard buffered crystalloid solution."

She wanted to ask more questions, but decided it would probably be rude. He'd already proven he was a competent doctor, having brought her back from the edge of death once before, so it seemed reasonable that he could handle a little heat exhaustion and dehydration.

She bit her lower lip and turned her head to face the wall. Her headache was slowly fading and she was feeling sleepy once again. Her stomach grumbled but she was too worn out to want to eat. She mumbled a word of thanks and he left the room, shuttering the lights off as he went. She quickly got lost in the forest of her own troubled thoughts.
Ever since she'd agreed to come with him to New Vulcan, she'd wondered how she could possibly make a life in a place where the only person she knew was still practically a stranger, but now she was wondering how she could ever literally live there. She quietly cried herself to sleep, certain she'd made the second worst mistake of her life in moving to New Vulcan, right behind allowing everyone she'd ever cared about to die on the Albret.

Voris heard his PADD buzz on the kitchen counter and glanced up from his research on New Vulcan's immigration policies. It was almost certainly another transmission from his father. He'd received seven transmission requests since his return to New Vulcan six hours ago. He would acknowledge his father eventually, but it was time to check on Miss Skjeggestad again.

After she'd fallen asleep, he'd placed thermal regulator pads on her head and abdomen to quickly and safely stabilize her body temperature to thirty-seven degrees Celsius. He'd given her another dose of the lentrazole shortly thereafter and monitored her vitals periodically ever since. He'd taken her off the intravenous fluid replacement and she was doing much better, but he had made a careless oversight in allowing her to travel to a planet with gravity twice that of what she was accustomed to and an average daytime temperature of forty-seven degrees Celsius without administering a trioxirane compound.

He should have taken his medical kit to Aldebaran but he had left in a hurry. He hadn't planned for her arrival, but he had left New Vulcan to retrieve her on such short notice and he couldn't have known at the time that she would agree to come. Now that she was here, there was much to do to accommodate her.

He'd put her in his bed because it was the only bed he had. His apartment home had two bedrooms, but the spare bedroom was empty aside from some emergency medical supplies and extra linens that Harold often turned into his private nest. He would need to purchase suitable furniture for her, and eventually for the child, provided her pregnancy proceeded normally.

He had already arranged for Dr. Govorski to meet with Dagny tomorrow, but he was due to return to work at the hospital the day after that. Her visa would expire in forty-nine days and after that, he wasn't certain she would be able to remain on New Vulcan. He knew little of the politics of immigration and nothing of immigration regulations. He was attempting to educate himself, but it was a highly complex issue.

His PADD chirped, alerting him to a message, but he silenced the device and proceeded to the bedroom, where he found Dagny snoring lightly. Her temperature, pulse, blood pressure, and other vital signs were all within normal range, but he would need to wake her soon so she could eat.

He left to prepare the day's end meal, wondering what she preferred to eat. He rarely kept food in the preservation unit—he ate most of his meals at the hospital—but when he did dine at home, he ate from the replicator. He laid out two place settings at the small round table and deliberated whether he should wake Dagny or contact his father.

He checked his PADD was prepared to initiate a link when he experienced a tingle of fear and heard a shriek from the next room a split second later. He bolted down the hall and found her standing to the side of the bed, staring at a small common sand lizard clinging to the wall above the headboard. The lizards were a pervasive nuisance on New Vulcan, though to be fair, perhaps the lizards viewed their new Vulcan neighbors in a similar light.

"Is it poisonous?" she asked, glaring at it with wild eyes.

"They are not," he replied.
"Why is it inside? I woke up and it was right by my face."

"Despite my best efforts to keep them out of doors, they manage to find their way in."

Dagny peered at it but her shadow on the wall startled it and sent it scurrying down behind the bed. She jumped and took several steps back.

"They are harmless," he insisted, wondering why she should continue to fear them after she'd been told there was no reason to.

"I'm sorry, I'm not used to being in a place where reptiles climb on the walls," she muttered, wringing her hands.

"I see. How are you feeling?"

She took a deep breath and glanced over her shoulder. "A lot better. I'm sorry about earlier. I didn't realize the heat would get to me like that. I don't think the gravity here helps either."

Why did she continue to apologize when he had told her it was unnecessary? It was a problem he'd experienced with humans before, but never on this scale.

"No apology is necessary. I administered a trioxirane compound, which will help you adjust. I also delivered another dose of lentrazole while you slept."

"Thanks."

"You are welcome."

Her gastric juices gurgled, but she didn’t flinch.

"It is the customary time for end meal, or dinner, I believe you call it," he declared.

"Ok," she replied, turning to face him.

"I do not have fresh food available, but I have access to a replicator."

A small smile broke across her lips. "I've eaten out of replicators for most of my life."

She followed him through the multipurpose front room that served as both a sitting room and a dining room and joined him in the kitchen. She stared at the Vuhlksuu script and chewed on the inside of her cheek. He made several programming adjustments to switch it to Standard but she continued to stare at the screen with a considerable amount of hesitation.

"What do you recommend?" she asked.

Her trepidation suddenly became obvious. Nearly all of the items programmed into this model were classic Vulcan dishes and the Standard translation likely did little to help clarify what they were.

"What varieties of foods are you accustomed to eating?"

She gave him a questioning yet polite look. "Regular things? Soups, stews, casseroles, sausage, meat cakes?"

"I do not consume meat and I do not believe any meat-based dishes have been programmed into the replicator, but there are many vegetable soups and stews to choose from."
"You don't eat meat?"

"The standard Vulcan diet has been plant-based since the Reformation of Surak. It is illogical to commit violence against an animal if it is unnecessary for survival."

"I agree?" she replied, looking nervously back at the replicator. "But it's not like we had fish and chickens and pigs aboard the Albret though. That's the point of a replicator, isn't it? To reassemble matter from one form to another? It's food that's based on animals, but it isn't actually made from them."

"I am aware. While it is true that meat produced in a replicator does not originate from animal flesh, it still holds no appeal for me."

Dagny swallowed and nodded. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"You have given no offense. We simply share different philosophies."

Her stomach growled again. She looked back at him and asked, "So what are you having?"

"I intended to have barkaya marak. It is a thick soup made from protein-rich beans."

"That sounds fine," she replied quickly.

He saw her searching for the barkaya marak option from the current display. He reached over her shoulder, toggled forward several pages, and selected the dish. Ten seconds later, a bowl of the warm, golden brown soup appeared at the dispenser tray.

"Please," he said, gesturing to the bowl. "Take it and be seated."

He made himself another bowl of the barkaya marak and a plate of krei'la and joined her. He set the dry krei'la biscuits between them so they could share and took his seat. He unfolded the cloth napkin and placed it in his lap, collected his spoon, and added a heap of the small krei'la biscuits to his soup. He was on his second bite when he realized Dagny was watching him carefully.

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

She pursed her lips and shook her head. In a clumsy series of motions, she repeated each of the steps he had just taken to prepare herself to eat. It wasn't until she drew the first spoonful to her mouth that he realized he was watching her just as intently as she had been watching him.

"Is it to your liking?"

She gave a small bob of her head and swallowed the bite. He sensed she wasn't being entirely truthful.

"I am willing to assist you in making another selection, if you would prefer something else."

She furrowed her eyebrows. "This is good. I don't want to waste the food."

"It is no waste. It would simply go back into the reclaimator and be recycled."

"It's a waste of the energy," she replied, taking another bite.

Voris considered her response for a moment. While it was literally true that returning her food to the reclaimator and replicating something else would pose an energy cost, it was negligible. He recalled his first examination of her aboard the Sekla. She had been thin and slightly undernourished. Not
starving, but she'd certainly not been consuming an optimal amount of nutrition aboard the Albret. He had not known whether that was a result of a metabolic disorder, personal discipline, or hardship, but as he watched her attempt to scrape every last drop of liquid from the bottom of her bowl, he sensed he had his answer.

Like virtually all living creatures, he’d experienced hunger numerous times throughout his life, but he had never been hungry for any length of time. Whenever he had required sustenance, it had been available in variety and abundance. He had never thought about what a transient existence aboard a vessel would be like, but it seemed logical to conclude that intermittent food insecurity had been a reality for Dagny at various points in her life.

"What's supposed to happen tomorrow?" she asked, setting her spoon in her empty bowl.

"I shall take you to meet with Dr. Govorski at the Kanunsh'es district hospital."

"Is it very far?"

"Approximately a thirty minute journey by train."

Dagny frowned, pulled the napkin from her lap, and attempted to refold it to its previous conformation.

"I intend to give you another trioxirane injection before we depart to make it more manageable for you."

A pink flush spread across her cheeks. His experience with human physiology suggested she was either becoming overheated, deprived of oxygen, or suffering from an unpleasant emotion such as anger or embarrassment. "Are you feeling well?"

"Yeah, uh, I'm fine. What should I do with my dishes? Does everything go back in the reclaimator or… how do you do things?"

"I retain the utensils but the dish can go in the reclaimator."

He looked down at his bowl of soup. Approximately a quarter of the liquid remained in the bottom of the bowl and though he'd eaten his fill, he sensed it would be indecorous to dispose of it. He was contemplating the logic of altering his behavior in her presence when she asked, "Are you going to eat these… what it they called? Kray-lah?"

Her tongue had completely fumbled the word, but it was easy to deduce from context that she referred to the half-consumed plate of krei'la. While it was considered customary for females to wait on their mates during meals, it was also customary for hosts to wait on their guests during end meal. His relationship with Dagny was so complicated and poorly defined that he wasn't sure which protocol more adequately applied.

He had not broached the subject of formally bonding with her. He had been surprised she'd agreed to come with him to New Vulcan at all and he sensed it would be unwise to press the issue at this juncture. Many species raised offspring together without being formally bonded or married, humans included. It was becoming slightly more common on New Vulcan due to marked societal changes following the loss of much of their population, but it was still considered highly irregular.

Yet even without being formally bonded in a temple, the telepathic mating bond he’d forged with her in his quarters on Aldebaran evidently persisted. He'd experienced her fear when she'd encountered the sand lizard and he often vaguely sensed her shyness and embarrassment. He didn't really know what to make of it.
Their bond was much weaker than the one he'd shared with T'Sala—whether due to her humanity or their incompatibility, he could not say—and they probably could have severed it if they'd maintained their distance, but now they would be living together, he didn't know what would happen between them. Irrespective of his speculation, Dagny was carrying his child, but she had not agreed to be his mate.

He saw her shuffle her feet and turned his attention to her. She was studying the kre'i'la biscuits and gnawing on her lower lip.

"Are you still hungry?" he asked.

He felt a small wave of nervousness emanate from her. "I was just trying to clear the table. Make myself useful, you know."

He rose to his feet and collected his bowl and the plate of dry biscuits. It didn't seem correct for either of them to wait upon the other, so perhaps it was more logical that they should complete the task of clearing the table together. She collected the utensils and set to work removing the debris in the sonic recycler while he disposed of the dishes and food particulate in the reclaimator.

When he was done, he joined her in the kitchen. "Is there anything I can provide you with to make you more comfortable?"

She initially seemed perplexed by his question but offered a crooked smile. "Could you show me where the lavatory is? I would like to wash. I'm all sweaty from earlier."

"Certainly." He directed her to the singular lavatory at the end of the hall.

As they passed the empty second bedroom on the left, she asked, "Am I sleeping in your bed?"

"I had lived alone before your arrival. I intend to procure additional furnishings for you, but at present, my bed is all I have to offer."

"Dr. Voris, I can't take your bed," she stammered. "Where are you going to sleep?"

"I had planned to sleep on the front couch."

"The black sofa in the front room? You're too tall for it. Please, I'll sleep on the sofa. I don't mind."

In terms of their relative sizes compared to the furniture, her suggestion was logical. Yet he had also never cohabitated with a female other than his mother, sisters, or former mate. She deserved the privacy of a bedroom. "The couch will be adequate for me for the time being."

"I don't want you to have to go out of your way," she insisted. "I promise you, I can sleep just about anywhere. I used to share a tiny bottom bunk with Ingrid before Aksel and Benjamin passed."

He presumed she referred to members of her family, but decided he should avoid asking who Ingrid, Aksel, and Benjamin were. He insisted on his initial plan and she eventually relented and made her way to the lavatory to shower.

Voris returned to his studies on New Vulcan's immigration policies. She was in the lavatory for a long time before he heard the sonic shower engage and shortly thereafter, he heard her retire to his bedroom. He was in the midst of exploring options to allow Dagny to stay on New Vulcan without formally marrying her when his PADD began vibrating once again. It was illogical to continue to postpone the inevitable. He slid his finger across the glass to accept his father's transmission.
"Voris." His father's face appeared on the PADD's screen.

"Live long and prosper, Silek."

Rather than return the greeting, his father got straight to the matter at hand. "Why have you broken your arrangement with T'Rya?"

"Because she requested it."

"You would do well to remember what is at stake."

"She has made her decision and I accept it."

"I have spoken with Velik and he has persuaded her to reconsider. They invited us to dine with them at their home this evening, an invitation I was forced to refuse because I could not contact you."

"I see."

"I attempted to reach you at the Va'ashiv hospital, and I was informed you had taken an emergency leave of absence."

"That is correct."

His father's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps you could explain your actions."

"I have no intention of bonding with T'Rya."

"You would risk my candidacy, as well as that of your uncle, to satisfy some illogical need to defy me? I accepted your decision to follow medicine, but your selfish desires in this instance carry wider repercussions."

Voris knew little of politics and cared for politics even less, but he understood his family's position. To help guarantee a majority over the ultra-conservative Ba'taklar party, the moderate Storilayar party to which his family belonged and progressive Vinem-lar party to which T'Rya and her brother belonged needed to be united. Voris and T'Rya's bonding was supposed to have been an official and public declaration of that partnership, but Voris could not see why the duty of merging two political parties had befallen him and T'Rya, two people who had no interest in politics.

"I believe both you and Sarek both remain unbonded. If your candidacies are truly so important, I do not see what is preventing either of you from taking T'Rya as a mate."

"You remain unbonded as well," Silek replied. "You will require a mate in the future and T'Rya is quite suitable."

Rather than tell his father of T'Rya's private situation—she had told him of her pregnancy in strict confidence—Voris decided he could no longer withhold his own private matter from Silek.

"I have informally taken a human mate and she is expecting my child."

Silek's face remained stony and unmoving and for several seconds, he did not speak. Voris attempted to center himself as he waited for a response. He did not know exactly what Silek would say, but it was easy to deduce from past experience how he would react. So he attempted to prepare himself for his father's reaction, but when Silek finally spoke, it still took considerable discipline to keep his emotions in check.
Dagny's stomach churned as she brushed her teeth and spit into the sink. She'd never eaten soup for breakfast until that morning. The plameek broth—or whatever it was he'd called it—had been bland but generally edible. Dr. Voris had explained it was a customary Vulcan breakfast and she supposed she could get used to it. She couldn't imagine food being much worse than the barka mark soup from the night before. Or was it barka malak? Whatever it had been, she had a hard time believing it was food.

There was a gentle tapping on the door. "Have you finished your morning hygiene ritual?"

She almost laughed when she saw the reflection of her involuntary facial expression in the small mirror above the sink. Dr. Voris always had a way of putting things in the strangest, most formal way imaginable, which often had the effect of making her feel intimidated and uneducated.

She packed her toothbrush into her small blue hygiene bag, opened the door, and replied, "Yes. I'm sorry if I took too long."

"It was not my intention to rush you," he replied. "But our transportation will arrive in approximately nine minutes."

Dagny was accustomed to being hurried along in the washroom. Peaceful moments in the lavatory aboard the Albret had been almost non-existent with so many Skjeggestads vying for time and space.

"I'll get my shoes on," she said, offering him a small smile.

His features remained smooth. He nodded his head and retreated down the hallway toward the front room without another word. She had imagined settling in with Dr. Voris would have its awkward moments but after the past twenty-four hours, she wondered if there would ever be any normal moments.

She shuffled back to his bedroom on heavy, aching legs and slumped down on the bed. She'd taken extra care that morning to remake it the way it had been by tucking the corners of the blanket at crisp ninety-degree angles, but it didn't look right.

She sighed and reached for her shoes, thinking it was probably a bad sign if she was already tired. He'd given her another dose of tri-ox compound that morning to help her adjust to the planet's punishing climate but there was no compound known to science that could make the feeling of suddenly doubling in body weight any less exhausting. She wasn't sure what the actual gravity on New Vulcan was, but it was brutal.

Dr. Voris said something from the other room and she was about to respond when she realized he was speaking in his native language. She held her breath and listened, not because she understood a word of what was being said, but because she was trying to intuit his tone.

Monotone speech was a way of life for Vulcans, but last night, she'd been trying to sleep when she'd overheard him speaking to someone in a surprisingly harsh tone. Harsh for a Vulcan, anyway. They had also been speaking in Vuhlkansu so she had no idea what the conversation was about, but Dr. Voris had seemed angry. She knew that probably hadn't been the case—Vulcans repressed their emotions, after all—but she'd sensed fleeting moments of irritation and anger that felt so real and so
uncharacteristic of Vulcans.

Dagny mustered the strength to get back on her feet and trudge down the hallway. She found him waiting for her by the entry and pushing away her usual feelings of awkwardness, tried to hurry. He opened the door and she took a deep breath. Despite being early in the morning, it was already quite warm outside.

They made their way down the stairs to the curb and moments later, a vehicle came to a stop in front of them. She didn't immediately understand that it had stopped to pick them up: she had been expecting to take the train like yesterday. It was spacious inside and there was no driver or pilot of any kind. Dr. Voris went around the other side of the vehicle, programmed something into the computer in the front, took a seat next to her, and pulled out his PADD and sent a message.

As the car shot forward, she turned to gaze out the expansive side windows at her surroundings. She had wanted to do this yesterday on the train but she'd felt so sick and woozy she could barely keep her eyes open. The morning sun was still low on the horizon, but everything had a reddish brown tint. It was far more organized than Aldebaran had been—the streets were neat, even little rows and the buildings almost seemed arranged according to height. It was incredible to think they'd built all this in only two years.

"Are the environmental settings adequately adjusted for your comfort?"

She glanced over her shoulder at the doctor and nodded. Dagny was a little on the warm side, but it was much more tolerable than it had been the day before on the train and she supposed she was going to have to get used to it. This was her new home, after all.

They continued on in silence for a time, both of them facing away from each other and watching the scenery from their respective windows. When the city abruptly came to an end and the car pushed forward into the open desert, she turned to look at him. "Where are we going?"

"To the Kanunsh'es district hospital to meet with Dr. Govorski."

"I know, but isn't the city back there?" she asked, pointing over her shoulder with her thumb.

"I live in the Va'ashiv district," he explained. "The Kanunsh'es district is fifteen kilometers north of it."

"How many people live on New Vulcan?"

"As of last month's census, I believe 34,248."

Dagny thought of the 2,896 people the Albret had saved from Vulcan's destruction. It was a number that had been seared in her memory since the first time she'd read Dr. Sevek's records. Before her mind could linger too long on the Albret, the vehicle passed a dilapidated settlement on the right. She saw two humans and a Vulcan boy dispassionately kicking a ball between them. Behind them, she could see other humans and a few Vulcans milling around between buildings with FESA labels printed on the sides.

"What is this place?" she asked without turning to look at Dr. Voris.

"It is the Komihn k'tur settlement."

"What is that? It looks like it's mostly humans."

"There is no exact translation, but Komihn k'tur loosely translates to others with logic," he explained.
"They are non-Vulcans who follow Surak's teachings."

"Why do they live out here?" she asked, thinking the run-down settlement stood in stark contrast to the modern, pristine city center they'd just left.

"Many of the Komihn k'tur arrived on New Vulcan at its founding to assist with building and urban planning efforts. This was the site of temporary lodging for the Federation Emergency Services Agency workers."

"So they came and never left?"

"Most returned to their respective home worlds but the ones you see now are those who chose to remain; a handful of others who joined then later. Some stayed because they inter-married into the Vulcan population, others simply embraced Vulcan philosophies."

"These buildings look like they're falling apart."

"New Vulcan experiences frequent electrical and dust storms that have not been kind to these temporary shelters."

"But why wouldn't they move into the cities they helped build? Why stay here?"

"I am not well informed on the situation, but I believe they continue to live here because their citizenship is contested. They wish to be recognized as citizens of New Vulcan because they helped build it, yet they are not Vulcan."

"You said some of them married Vulcans though. Doesn't that count for something?"

"Under Vulcan's former constitution, those who married Vulcan citizens would have been granted automatic citizenship without the need to apply, but New Vulcan is currently governed by a transition charter that makes no mention of citizenship. This charter will expire after the upcoming elections, and whichever party gains a majority vote will draft a new constitution and decide the fate of the Komihn k'tur and other groups whose right to remain on the planet is in dispute."

"Like me?" she asked, thinking of her visa that was now only good for forty-eight more days.

"Yes, among others. There are several off-world corporations that wish to establish settlements on the planet and their right to do so will also be determined by the elections that are due to take place in eighteen days."

"And what's your opinion?"

"Clarify."

"What's your opinion on these Komihn k'tur?" she said, slurring over the Vulcan word because her tongue was too inexact to form it correctly.

"I am the only physician on New Vulcan with expertise in interspecies emergency medicine and as a result, I have treated many of them at the Va'ashiv district hospital. I believe them to be good people and their interest in Surak's teachings appears genuine."

"It sounds like you think people should only get to live here if they follow Surak's teachings."

"Your assumption is incorrect and based on faulty logic."

His flat tone made his words sound like a cold rebuke. She wasn't sure how to respond, so she turned
to stare out the window again. They had already passed the Komihn k'tur settlement and she could see a city growing on the horizon.

"Will you permit me a personal query?"

"Hmmm?" she mumbled, sneaking a look at him.

"Will you allow me to ask a question that may have an answer that some would consider private?"

"You don't have to ask if you can ask," she responded, craning her neck to look him in the eye. "Just ask. We should probably try to get to know each other anyway, given the circumstances."

He gave a small nod of his head and after a brief pause asked, "You said you had not read Surak's teachings, but did you mean you had never read them, or that you had not read them in the original Vuhlkansu because you do not speak the language?"

"I've never read them in any language." She bit her lip, praying he wasn't trying to convert her to his religion, if logic really could be considered a religion. "Why do you ask?"

"When you were brought aboard the Sekla, you had a copy of The Teachings of Surak in your pocket."

She closed her eyes, remembering the immediate hours after regaining consciousness on the Vulcan ship that had rescued her. She'd spent a long time thumbing through the worn pages, staring at the loopy script and wishing she could find some meaning for the loss of her friends and family.

"The book was- it was- someone gave it to me. A Vulcan man named Tolik. He was reading it the first time I met him."

She glanced at Dr. Voris, waiting for him to say something, but he didn't. He continued to watch her, almost as if he were expecting her to finish the story.

"I don't know why I used to carry it around sometimes," she sighed. "I'm sure you'd say that carrying a book you can't read is illogical and it probably is, but feeling its weight, sometimes it... it's hard to explain. I can't even really explain it to myself. Aside from the clothes on his back, I think that book was the only thing Tolik had left. He gave it to me before killed himself."

She touched the aquamarine necklace at her throat, wondering if there would ever be a day when she didn't feel like crying because she missed her family. That book had been the only thing remaining from Tolik's previous life, and now that book and Erik's necklace were the only things she had from her life on the Albret. She'd never thought about the psychology of why she carried Tolik's book in the front pocket of her medical smock, but she hadn't touched it ever since the Sekla had dropped her off on Valder Station.

"I grieve with thee," Dr. Voris said.

"I'm sorry to get emotional." Her voice started to crack as she finished her sentence. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"It was not my intention to cause you emotional distress."

"I know."

Why did every conversation with him feel so forced and awkward? Probably because they were both in a forced and awkward situation. She'd spent the last weeks on autopilot, surviving one day at a
time, as Laura used to say. Her future had been up in the air, but now that it was starting to take shape, it was so terrifying and overwhelming. This planet, this place, and this man sitting next to her were all so alien in every sense of the word, and it had been hard to sleep the night before, knowing that this was her life now.

The vehicle dropped them off under a carriage porch of a multi-story building in a city that looked identical to the one they'd just left. She dreaded having to get back on her feet and move in the planet's impossible gravity, but she managed. She followed him to a desk halfway down a long hall, moving as quickly as she could manage but sensing he was slowing his pace dramatically for her.

A Vulcan woman behind the desk handed Dagny a PADD and directed her to take a seat in a nearby waiting room. Thankfully the form was in Standard and she had no problem answering the initial basic questions about herself and her medical history. When she got to a part where she was supposed to list any major illnesses and surgeries, she realized had little idea what procedures Dr. Voris had performed aboard the Sekla.

"Can you help me?" she whispered. "I don't really know how to answer some of this."

He cocked his head and studied the form. "Would you prefer I filled that portion out?"

She pursed her lips and nodded. It would be easier than having him recount in vivid detail how he'd treated her gruesome radiation sickness, bloody vomit and diarrhea and all, to a room full of Vulcan strangers. Mostly Vulcan, anyway.

There was a human woman with dark skin and a swollen belly sitting next to an older Vulcan man. Dagny had thought she and Dr. Voris must look like a strange couple, but these two were in a league of their own. The man looked old enough to be the woman's grandfather, and given the average Vulcan lifespan, he was probably literally old enough to be her great-grandfather. Surely they weren't married and having a baby together? When she saw them touch their first two fingers together in the most loving way, Dagny decided they must be.

The woman seemed to sense they were being watched and glanced in her direction, but Dagny was too slow to look away. Their eyes locked. Her face was so kind and radiated an unusual expression for a half second, Dagny felt a connection to this stranger.

"Dagny Skjeggestad?" called a monotone female voice.

She looked around and saw a Vulcan nurse waiting by a set of double doors. She and Dr. Voris rose to their feet but the nurse stopped him. "Males are not permitted in these exam rooms."

Dagny wasn't sure what to say. A small part of her wanted him there—not only was he the father, he was a doctor and could probably ask better questions than she could—but a bigger part of her was grateful for this policy. What if she was asked to get undressed or undergo an internal examination? While there was very little of her that Dr. Voris had seen on different occasions, it still felt weird.

Dagny shot him a nervous look. He seemed prepared to argue until the nurse added, "Dr. Govorski can meet with both of you in her office to answer any questions you may have once the exam is complete."

He gave a slight bow of his head, handed Dagny the PADD with her medical questionnaire, and resumed his seat. She followed the nurse through the double doors and into a dimly lit exam room.

After the nurse checked her vitals and transferred the data from her PADD to the hospital's computer, she handed her a thin black gown and said, "Completely undress and put this on. You may set your
clothes in this bin. Dr. Govorski will be with you shortly."

Several minutes later, a human woman came in and shook her hand, introducing herself as Dr. Janice Govorski. She looked to be in her early fifties with hair caught between blond and gray and patient gray-blue eyes.

"Dr. Voris forwarded me your medical history the other day," she murmured. "I can see you've been through the ringer lately. I'm very sorry."

Dagny chewed her bottom lip and nodded. "Thank you."

"Well, let's get down to it. I see from your file that you sustained severe radiation poisoning and have received treatment and naturally conceived a Vulcan hybrid five days following exposure."

"That sounds about right." Dagny wondered what the woman must have been thinking, but everything about her was so placid and free of judgment.

"Did the doctors on Aldebaran perform a chromosomal scan on the embryo?"

"No," she replied. "They didn't have the equipment to do one so early in the pregnancy, but Dr. Knox explained there was a moderate chance something could be wrong."

Dr. Govorski offered a reassuring smile and rested her hand on Dagny's left shoulder. "I won't lie to you—there is a higher chance for chromosomal abnormalities in a natural conception and given the radiation exposure, I'd say it's an even better chance, but... we've come a long way in treating these things in utero and because you're so early into this pregnancy, we have a lot more options. Even if we do find something wrong, there's also a chance we can get it fixed and you can go on to have a healthy baby."

Tears of relief sprung from nowhere and she wiped them away with the back of her hand. Dr. Govorski handed her a tissue from a box on the wall. "It seems like you've been under a lot of stress."

"I don't even know where to begin," Dagny choked, blowing her nose into the tissue. "Every day I wake up thinking things can't possibly get any worse or weirder and they always do. I just want to hear some good news for a change."

"I can appreciate that. So will you let me do this chromosomal scan and we can go from there?"

Dagny nodded and blew her nose again.

"Now I need you to scoot back and put your feet in these stirrups," she said, unfolding two long metal rods from the end of the biobed. "I'm going to insert this needle into your uterus through the vagina and collect about ten embryonic cells. Does that sound ok?"

Dagny wasn't entirely sure. She'd figured something like this might be coming, but she'd never had to submit to a pelvic exam. All of Dr. Knox's scans had been external and no one on the Albret had been qualified to do one. But she figured if everything turned out fine with the pregnancy, she'd have to find a way to get over her crippling modesty eventually.

She laid back, closed her eyes, and after a quick pinch and about thirty seconds of holding her breath, it was done. Dr. Govorski sent the sample for analysis and continued with a routine examination. The Vulcan nurse returned and took a set of blood samples and a urine sample and left.

"163 centimeters tall and only forty-six kilograms?" Dr. Govorski mused. "You're underweight, my
dear. What is your diet like?"

"Regular, I guess? But maybe not anymore. Vulcans really seem to like soup."

Dr. Govorski laughed. "That they do. And they like it bland. I've lived with Vulcans for going on twenty years and I still have to add salt and pepper to most things."

"You've lived with Vulcans for that long?"

"I married a Vulcan healer right out of medical school."

"Have you seen a lot of cases like mine?" she asked, looking down at her knees and fumbling with her hands.

"I don't know exactly what you mean by 'a case like yours,' but the past two years have been like nothing I've ever seen. I've worked in interspecies obstetrics for most of my career and have cared for more human/Vulcan hybrid mothers in the past two years on New Vulcan than I did in twenty years of practice on Vulcan. I blame a lot of it on pon farr."

Dagny blinked and looked up. "Dr. Voris said people don't talk about that."

"Vulcans don't talk about it: I'm not Vulcan. I'm a human obstetrician who's up to her elbows in caring for the consequences of pon farr every day. I never understood the point in being so hush hush about a perfectly natural process."

"That's what happened," Dagny said, her voice hardly rising above a whisper. "Pon farr I mean. I barely know him and now I'm having a baby with him."

Dr. Govorski offered a solemn nod. "I'm much better with medical advice than I am with personal advice, but no matter what, you can confide in me, if there's something you think I should know or maybe something you're too embarrassed to talk about."

"He thought he raped me," she blurted, unsure why she was confessing these things to someone she'd only met ten minutes earlier, but Dr. Govorski's grandmotherly eyes made her feel safe. "But it wasn't like that at all. He saved my life and I came to him. He didn't want to but I begged him. And he's so kind, but..."

"It's scary having a baby under any circumstances," Dr. Govorski interrupted gently. "You can report anything to me that you like, you know. I want to put that out there, just in case you didn't know."

"I don't have anything to report. We were both going through a very bad time and now we're having a baby together and I'm scared and feel alone and I don't know what to do."

"As someone who's lived in this culture half my life, I can appreciate the unique challenges that come with it," the doctor replied. "I know sometimes it feels good to get things off your chest, but unfortunately, there really aren't a lot of resources available for you on this planet. That's another drawback to Vulcans—most of them think problems can be meditated away. It works well enough for them most of the time, but we're not Vulcans."

The Vulcan nurse returned with the results of Dagny's tests. She searched the woman's face for some clue of how everything had turned out, but her expression was completely Vulcan and neutral. Dr. Govorski skimmed the data on the PADD, nodding and smiling to herself.

"Would you like to know the baby's sex?"
"I was really hoping you could just tell me the baby's going to be ok."

"Everything looks fine from the chromosome scan. You're a different story. You're still a bit anemic and your yam'tan levels haven't come down as low as I would like, but these are easily treatable issues."

A faint ringing began in her ears as she tried to process the news. "So the baby's fine?"

"The baby's chromosomes look normal. I'm not going to lie to you—hybrid pregnancies in general tend to be a hard road and human/Vulcan pregnancies are some of the worst. You and baby aren't out of the woods yet, but this is a very promising start."

Dagny exhaled loudly. She started to laugh but clasped her hand over her mouth. "So was that a yes or no to learning the sex?"

Her mother had always been superstitious about knowing the sex beforehand. Thinking it would be nice to honor her mother's traditions, she shook her head and said, "No. Whether it's a boy or girl, I'm just happy to know it has a chance."

"Well, we still have a lot to discuss. It's going to be a few weeks until we can pick up a heartbeat—that's the next big milestone for us. I'd like to see you every two weeks for the next three months to monitor your hormone levels. It's going to get a bit trickier after that, I'm afraid. Then there's-"

"Um, would it be possible for Dr. Voris to be part of this discussion?"

Dr. Govorski gave her an odd look. "I know Dr. Voris. He has a lot of experience in interspecies medicine, but he's not an obstetrician, which is why he referred you to me, but if you'd like to seek a second opinion-"

"I don't want him here as a doctor," she muttered. "He's um- he's the father."

The strange look on Dr. Govorski's face briefly transformed into one of shock. "Oh."

"He wanted to come back here with me but the nurse wouldn't let him, but she said he could meet with you in your office. I think it would make him feel better—not that he probably feels any way about it—but I think it would give him peace of mind, maybe? You know, discussing it with you?"

"Knowing Dr. Voris as I do, I think you're probably right. Why don't you get dressed and then let's go get him, shall we?"

Voris followed the nurse down the left hallway and found Dagny sitting hunched in a chair across from Dr. Govorski's desk. She looked up when he entered the room, but he already had a sense that she'd received welcome news. Her face bore signs of unmistakable relief, which he could also vaguely sense through their bond if he focused his thoughts on it.

"Everything's ok," she breathed, biting down on her lower lip. "The baby's chromosomes are normal."

"Hello, Dr. Voris," Dr. Govorski murmured, motioning for him to sit.

"Dr. Govorski," he nodded, taking a seat in the hard chair next to Dagny.

"As Dagny has already told you, the results from the chromosomal scan look good."
"May I see them for myself?"

"I thought you might ask," she answered, giving him a smile and holding out a PADD.

He scoured the results of the digital array for a full minute and noting no obvious anomalies in chromosome number or major deletions, duplications, or translocations, he started examining Dagny's blood work. "The levels of human pregnancy-associated plasma protein A appear to be low," he mused.

"They are on the low side of normal, but that's unsurprising because of the persistence of yam'tan."

"From my research, low levels of this protein may indicate increased the risk of spontaneous abortion and stillbirth."

"What?" Dagny gasped.

Dr. Govorski glanced at Dagny. "Studies have gone back and forth on that for years and all of the data we have comes from typical human pregnancies. Dagny's levels are a bit low, but still in the normal range. I intend to increase her dose of lentrazole to decrease the Vulcan pregnancy hormones and we'll see if things improve."

He scanned through Dr. Govorski's notes. "Will not increasing the daily dosage of lentrazole to 250 ccs put her at greater risk of hypertension?"

"It will, which is why I'm also sending her home with a daily dose of apropamine to keep her blood pressure in check."

"And I see her hemoglobin levels are only 10.5 grams per deciliter, which is also low."

"Given the recent radiation sickness, I'd say those numbers are actually pretty good. I've already talked with Dagny about gaining weight, but I'm going to prescribe a daily prenatal injection that's formulated with an extra dose of iron to combat this anemia." She glanced over at Dagny. "You're going to have to get used to shots, I'm afraid."

"When do you intend to start a regimen of immunosuppressants and which ones do you plan to prescribe? I read in a recent Rigelian medical journal that sixth generation corticosteroids may have detrimental effects on fetuses or lead to preterm labor when administered too early in the pregnancy."

"I had read that too and although the data was inconclusive, I tend to prescribe nalaproleine at around three months anyway," Dr. Govorski explained.

He saw Dagny move out of the corner of his eye and turned his head to see her rising to her feet.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked.

"I'm just going to the lavatory. Don't mind me."

Voris turned back to Dr. Govorski and started to ask about which prenatal vitamins she planned to prescribe, but the moment the door closed behind Dagny, she raised her hand to cut him off. "Dr. Voris, I realize that it's easy for the doctor in us to come out in times like these, but you referred Dagny to me. Maybe this is none of my business, but I think you could make it easier on her if you treated her more like a partner than a patient. You're talking about her like she isn't even in the room."

"I am merely trying to ensure I am adequately informed with the latest research," he argued.
"I understand, but I think you're needlessly scaring her, throwing out terms like spontaneous abortion and stillbirth."

"Both of which are possible even in typical pregnancies," he replied. "It is logical to consider these potential negative outcomes."

"Logical, maybe. But from where I'm sitting, it's only logical to consider if there's something she can do to prevent these things from happening and in most cases, there isn't. These pregnancies are difficult and a lot of it is sitting and waiting for something to go wrong. She already has a lot to worry about—I don't want to make it any worse."

"I would argue there are things she can do which may have a greater chance of providing a more optimal outcome," he countered. "She suffered from radiation poisoning and poor nutrition just prior to conception and—"

"Believe it or not, despite the prior radiation sickness, I'd actually categorize her as pretty low-risk, relatively speaking," Dr. Govorski interrupted. "Hers is one of the best chromosomal scans I've seen in a hybrid pregnancy in a while and that's including artificially conceived embryos. Dagny may not be in ideal shape at the moment, but the embryo looks pretty good and she's got plenty of time to put on a few kilograms and get her iron levels up before this pregnancy starts getting trickier."

Voris nodded and glanced down at the PADD in his hands.

"If you want my advice, the absolute best thing you could do to increase the chances of getting through this with a healthy mom and baby would be to get off this planet. I don't know if that's possible, but as her pregnancy progresses, the heat and gravity here make things really complicated."

"Yet you are located here and are widely regarded as the leading expert in human/Vulcanoid hybrid pregnancies."

"Thank you," she smiled. "But believe it or not, about half of my patients aren't on New Vulcan. I get calls and messages for consults at all hours of the day from all over the Federation. I know you've done your research and I know you know that after the fifth month of her pregnancy, her body temperature is going to have to be closely monitored. If she overheats, the fetus will almost certainly die and stands a good chance of taking her with it."

Voris nodded and set the PADD on the edge of Dr. Govorski's desk. "I had intended keep the environmental settings in my home at an adequate level for her physiology."

"Use some of that logic your people are famous for, Dr. Voris. We've come a long way in two years, but the power grid still has occasional failures. Remember the electrical storms last year? No power for six days."

Voris remembered quite well. The hospital had been chaos and he had been forced to perform an emergency appendectomy on a human patient using a portable headlamp and a laser scalpel. "Where do you recommend she go?"

"Somewhere she won't be confined to a house and dependent on environmental controls to keep her body temperature down. Aside from being good for her physically, it would probably be good for her sanity too. Anywhere with a reasonably cool climate should do fine. Andoria might be a little extreme, but some of the cooler regions of Earth, Rigel VII, Deneva, the lunar colonies… There are a lot of possibilities."

"I shall investigate options and confer with her."
"There's no rush. You have a few months before this will become an issue but in the meantime, you have the list of everything I'm prescribing to her. I can give them to you as autoinjectors or hypospray canisters: whichever is easier. I was going to have the nurse show her how to inject herself, just in case you're not always around."

"She's a paramedic," he replied.

"Oh, she didn't mention it," Dr. Govorski frowned. "Either way, we'll go through this list of prescriptions with her in detail so she knows what to expect."

Dagny returned a moment later, her face slightly red. He detected a momentary sense of embarrassment as she returned to her seat. Dr. Govorski spent the next half hour going through the medications Dagny would need to take and what she should expect as the pregnancy progressed. He continued to experience her fleeting emotions of anxiety, relief, and frustration.

It was early afternoon by the time they left the Kanunsh'es district hospital. Voris carried a box of hypospray canisters with Dagny's prescriptions and attempted to be mindful of his pace. She moved so slowly, but he knew the gravity and her mild anemia were causing her to be easily fatigued.

He called for another automated taxi and they waited quietly in the lobby for it to arrive. She sat in the corner and closed her eyes and he sat next to her to begin researching planets with optimal climates to relocate to. Earth would be the most suitable location, as he'd previously lived there and could easily continue practicing medicine.

"Excuse me," said the high-pitched voice of a child.

He glanced up to see a Vulcan boy of about ten addressing Dagny. She opened her eyes and sat up more straightly. "Yes?"

"I remember you. You fixed my broken arm. My mother has told me of the loss of your ship and I am very sorry. I grieve with thee."

The look on Dagny's face was difficult to identify and her emotions were suddenly powerful and chaotic. Voris struggled to suppress the feelings flowing into his consciousness from her, but he noticed she seemed to be making a valiant effort to do this for herself.

"Thank you," she said to the boy, giving him a small nod.

"Live long and prosper," replied the boy, showing her the ta'al.

She returned the gesture and nodded. Voris could see her chin quivering and the first drops of moisture welling in the corners of her eyes. As the boy turned to resume his seat, she erupted into a fit of tears. Many people in the front lobby turned to identify the source of the outburst. Voris had not seen her cry this way since he'd told her of the Albret's fate.

"Dagny?" he murmured, setting the hypospray canisters on a nearby chair. "Dagny, please."

He gripped her hands but she pulled away. She continued to look away into the corner and sob, and amid her overpowering feelings of sadness, loneliness, and fear, he detected incredible embarrassment. He took her hands again and began tracing his fingers over hers.

Ozh'esta was a practice only performed between bonded mates. She wasn't his mate in any formal sense, but they did share a telepathic mating bond and he was unsure of any other method of calming her. It took her nearly a minute to for her to regain her composure, but as her sadness started to fade, the feelings of embarrassment only grew.
Fortunately their transportation arrived quickly and he ushered her into the back of the taxi without further incident. She leaned her head against the interior panel of the door and closed her eyes. He received an incoming transmission on his PADD but silenced it before it could disturb her.

"It was not my intention to frighten you in Dr. Govorski's office," he said.

"I know," she replied without opening her eyes. "You were asking good questions; I'm glad you were there."

He turned his attentions to the passing scenery. The forward monitor indicated the outside temperature was forty-eight degrees Celsius and he once again considered Dr. Govorski's recommendation to relocate to a cooler climate. Earth was the most logical choice, but it occurred to him he ought to ask Dagny where she wished to go. She hadn't been enthusiastic when Earth had been mentioned before. He turned to her but before he could speak, she said, "I'm really sorry I caused a scene. I'm really overwhelmed with all of this."

"That is... understandable."

"I'm so relieved and afraid and sad and tired and out of place all at the same time."

"I know."

He decided to postpone the discussion of relocating for a time when she was less emotional. Dagny slept for the final fifteen minutes of their drive and was slow to wake when he shook her on the shoulder as the vehicle pulled into his housing complex. He theorized she was growing dehydrated and was overdue for a midday meal; Voris decided to rectify those things the moment they got indoors.

The instant he opened the door for her, the heat seemed to sap the last reserves of her energy, but she refused all offers of assistance. They were halfway up the stairs to his apartment when he caught sight of a man standing by his front door studying something on a PADD.

Dagny noticed him too and whispered, "Who is that?"

"That is my father, Silek."
Vulcan Family Problems

Stardate 2260.74

"Voris."

"Silek."

It was the shortest verbal greeting possible between father and son, but there were a lifetime of tense exchanges woven between those four syllables.

"You might have informed your family that you had decided to take a mate," his father said, the lyrical Shi’Kahran accent punctuating his Vuhlkansu.

"And you might have informed me you intended to come for a visit," Voris replied.

"I attempted to contact you, but you have been disregarding my communiqués."

"You are blocking the entry to my home and Dagny must get inside," he said, taking several bold steps up the stairs.

Silek took a step back to allow them to pass and studied Dagny. She had perspiration forming on her forehead and was starting to quiver—whether from trepidation or heat exhaustion he wasn't sure.

"You might have chosen a less fragile mate."

"And you might try speaking in Standard so that she can understand you when you insult her," he retorted in their native tongue.

"It is illogical to imply I have offered an insult," Silek insisted. "I have merely made an observation."

Silek's eyes came to rest on Dagny and the longer they lingered, the more Voris could feel her anxiety increasing.

"H-h-hello," she mumbled, nodding at Silek and offering a little wave.

Silek's eyes narrowed but he bobbed his head and replied in Standard, "Hello."

"Let us go inside out of the midday heat," Voris said to Dagny, motioning for her to move forward and keying in the access code on the door panel.

It slid open and both men stood to the side to allow Dagny to enter first. Voris followed her and paused halfway in the threshold. He turned and he and his father stared at each other for several seconds. To refuse his father entry into his home would be synonymous with declaring that he was not welcome, and such a gesture had grave repercussions within Vulcan family circles.

He was not ready to formally cut ties with his father and by extension, the rest of his family, without first attempting to come to an understanding. His father strongly objected to Dagny—he'd made that clear the night before—but he did not know the entire story. They had mutually ended last night's transmission before Voris could explain that he hadn't chosen Dagny so much as she had been the only female available at a very unfortunate time.

"Will you allow me to enter or do you require that I ask first?"
Voris stepped back and Silek breezed through the open doorway. He surveyed Voris' small and sparsely decorated home, his eyes drifting toward T'Sala's candle on the mantle above the ceremonial hearth. It would be illogical to speculate what his father was thinking.

"It is polite in Vulcan society for the lady of the house to offer refreshment to her guests," Silek finally said, glowering at Dagny.

Her sweaty face paled by several shades and she started to mumble in reply, "I can- um, what- what would you like-"

"You will not come into my home and intimidate her," Voris interrupted.

"I am not at fault for her timidity," Silek replied. "And I meant no offense. I was simply trying to educate my new daughter-in-law on Vulcan hospitality customs. Additionally, are you going to introduce us or will you force us to acquaint ourselves?"

"Dagny, this is my father, Silek. Silek, this is Dagny Skjeggestad," Voris said. "And as we are not formally bonded, she is not your daughter-in-law."

"If you have not yet bonded, that gives you more options to settle this distasteful business quietly." He turned to Dagny and added, "Would you be willing to accept an annuity?"

"What?" she blurted, looking at Voris. For the first time since he'd known Dagny, there was no sadness in her, only shock and growing anger.

"My son informs me you are pregnant with his child," Silek explained. "It is logical and appropriate that Voris should tend to his responsibilities, but it is not necessary for you to reside in his home."

"I- I don't understand," she stammered, her eyebrows furrowing.

"It is very simple," Silek began to explain.

"Dagny has elected to stay here at my invitation," Voris interjected, forcing his own budding anger into submission. "It is one I have no intention of rescinding."

"Surely more suitable arrangements could be made," Silek insisted.

Voris locked eyes with Silek and quietly said, "Please, leave my home."

"You are becoming emotional. It is logical to discuss a more appropriate resolution to providing for your mutual offspring than having an unbonded human woman living with you."

"I invite you to leave," Voris reiterated.

"Dr. Voris, I should- maybe I should- I- I should go," Dagny mumbled, shuffling toward the hallway that led back to the bedrooms.

"There is no reason for you to," Voris explained. "Silek was just leaving."

"I urge you to consider your actions," Silek said, his tone subtly darkening. "You would reject your family, your-"

"Get out," Voris interrupted, taking several steps toward his father.

They'd had numerous disagreements over the years, but Voris sensed this one would come to define the course of their relationship. He and Silek stood silently, glaring at each other and waiting for the
other to back down. A full minute later, Silek uttered a discontented sigh and said, "You will regret not allowing reason to guide you in this matter."

"Regret is illogical," Voris replied. "Live long and prosper, father."

"I no longer have a son."

Silek departed and as the door glided shut behind him, Voris attempted to re-center himself. He took several slow breaths and replayed the events in his mind. He had become emotional, and emotions were illogical. Yet his father had not acted rationally either. He'd come into Voris' house and offended... his mate? His guest? The soon-to-be mother of his child? He decided it did not matter how anyone would characterize his relationship with Dagny; she currently lived in his house and Silek did not. He looked around the front half of the dwelling and noticed Dagny was gone. He found her sitting on the edge of his bed, staring into space.

"Dagny?"

"Please go away," she whispered. "I'm not in the mood to do this right now."

"It would be illogical to apologize for the behavior of another, but I can apologize for subjecting you to it for so long."

"Your father hates me."

"Hatred is illogical, therefore-"

"Stop saying that!" she snapped, turning to face him.

"I have only said it once in your company."

Her face started turning red and after a few gulping breaths she said, "Your father hates me and I hate it here. I shouldn't have come."

"I have already told you I would not keep you here against your will. Where do you wish to go?"

"Anywhere I don't have to hear the word 'illogical' a hundred times a day," she spat. "And anywhere that isn't a billion degrees would also be nice."

Five years in a Terran emergency hospital had taught him humans didn't prefer to have their frequent exaggerations corrected. Rather than explain that one billion degrees was 66.4 times hotter than the temperature within New Vulcan's local star, he simply asked, "Are you angry with me?"

She didn't reply immediately. Instead, her mouth formed a series of silent words and her face rotated through four different expressions before she rubbed her temples and mumbled, "No. But as awful as your father was to me, I don't want to come between the two of you."

"You would not be the first person or thing to do so."

"I would give anything to have my father back," she retorted. "I don't want to be the reason you never speak to yours again."

"So you would have me reject my child in favor of my father?" he asked. "What kind of father would that make me?"

She cast her eyes down at her hands. "I don't know."
"Whatever happens between my father and myself is his decision. He has essentially declared an ultimatum and ought to have anticipated it would not work in his favor. Now, will you come eat a midday meal and take your prescriptions?"

She took a deep breath and replied with a cracking voice, "I'm sorry I yelled at you. You haven't done anything other than try to help me."

"I can appreciate these circumstances are very difficult for you."

She rose to her feet, crossed her arms tightly around her body, and followed him into the kitchen. He could perceive a mixture of emotions flowing from her, but she gave no external indication she was feeling anything. She stopped at the replicator and rather than ask for guidance in selecting a meal as she had done on previous occasions, she unceremoniously chose the first option on the list.

She seemed surprised by the dish that appeared before her. Ameelah was a dessert made of fried fruit and nuts, typically served at Vulcan banquets and religious festivals. She shrugged, collected the bowl, and made her way into the kitchen to collect utensils. He prepared himself a bowl of pok tar and followed her.

She offered him a spoon and he prepared a glass of water for each of them and then they sat down next to each other on the stools under the central kitchen island. He considered asking her if she would prefer something more balanced and nutritious to eat, but the moment her spoon touched her tongue, she smiled.

"This reminds me of my mother's applesauce cake." Her eyebrows furrowed in sadness but her smile refused to fade.

"What was your mother like?" Voris asked, hopeful his query was not indelicate.

She pressed the spoon to her lips as she thought. "She was kind."

Voris took a bite of his noodle soup. He was uncertain if discussing her family would upset her. Her moods were so unpredictable.

"What was your mother like?" Dagny asked suddenly.

He paused before replying, "She was kind also. Her name was T'Para. She was a renowned healer."

"My mother's name was Sofie. She was… a mother," Dagny said with a little laugh. "My father was Emil. He was the Albret's captain."

"You have had the pleasure of meeting my father already. Silek has worked in politics and diplomacy for most of his life," Voris continued. "He is likely to become Vulcan's Minister of State in the upcoming election."

Dagny's eyes widened. "That sounds like an important position."

"My family has been involved in high-level politics for generations. T'Liri, my elder sister, was a legal advocate and my younger sister L'Nai was an administrator in Vulcan's former Transportation Ministry before their deaths. Both intended to follow my father's path and eventually enter Vulcan's Diplomatic Service."

"Why didn't you do that too?"

"I was more interested in my mother's profession. Any attempt to be successful in Vulcan
bureaucracy would have been hampered by my lack of ambition and talent for such things."

Dagny chuckled. Voris was uncertain why, but it pleased him to experience one of her lighter emotions, however briefly. He noted that he was detecting her emotions more readily and began to hypothesize whether it was due to being in close proximity to her or whether their bond was deepening more than he'd anticipated.

He waited for her to finish a bite and asked, "Did you have siblings?"

She nodded. "More than most people."

He cocked his head and waited to see if she would clarify her statement. After a brief period of silence she said, "Aksel and Benjamin were older than me. Aksel was twenty-one and Benjamin was nineteen when they died. I was the third child, and then after me was Daniel, then Ingrid, then Frida, Martin, Johan, Olav, Hedda, Sigurd and Sigrid—they were twins—and then Henrik and Tilde."

"You had thirteen siblings?"

She displayed a thin, pained smile. "Like I said, more than most."

"You said that Benjamin was older than you but also claim he was nineteen years of age when he died."

"Aksel and Benjamin died at the Battle of Vulcan," she explained. "I used to hate talking about it, but... it was more than two years ago. It hasn't even been a month since I lost the rest of my family and already I can't remember certain things about them. Their faces are fuzzy around the edges in my memory. How long is it going to be before I forget?"

"At the very least their images are available in Federation identity databases," he offered, recalling the hours he had spent in the weeks shortly after Vulcan's destruction staring at the identity scans of his friends and loved ones in an effort to commit them to memory.

A strange look came over her face. "It would be nice to see them, but I don't think I should right now. I've probably cried enough for one day."

"I apologize if my inquiries about your family were inappropriate."

"Don't be," she insisted. "I asked about yours too. I think this is the longest and most normal conversation we've ever had. I know things are weird between us and probably always will be, but I would like to get to know you."

"I quite agree," he said. He looked down at the empty bowl of ameelah in front of her and asked, "Are you still hungry?"

She looked prepared to say no but hesitated. He sensed she was struggling with two opposing forces—a belly that was still currently hungry and a lifelong habit of eating just enough to keep hunger at bay.

"Dr. Govorski recommended that you gain weight," he reminded her. "It would be preferable to balance your nutritional intake and remain mindful of your diet, but at this juncture I would encourage you to eat until you are satisfied."

"This was pretty good, whatever it was," she said, gazing down at the bowl in front of her. "But it would be nice to eat something with a little less sugar and a little more substance. Are you're sure it's not a problem, I-"
"I would not have offered if it were a problem," he insisted. "What would you like?"

"I'm not picky," she said, getting up from the stool to return the dish to the reclaimator.

"I did not accuse you of being so. There is nothing wrong with having preferences if numerous options are available."

"Whatever you just ate looked pretty good," she said, studying the long list of options on the replicator screen.

"Pok tar," he said, approaching the replicator and toggling through several screens before locating the item.

"Is your language hard to learn?" she asked, gently touching the loopy vertical script on the screen.

"It is not difficult to learn, but it is widely considered one of the most difficult to learn to speak."

"Is there a difference?"

"There is a marked difference. The written language can be easily mastered with practice, but I am told the human tongue and ear have considerable trouble with the spoken aspects of Vuhlkansu."

"Could you teach me some words?"

"If you like."

Dagny took the pok tar and resumed her place at the kitchen counter. Voris made his way to the spare bedroom to locate his hypospray and give Dagny her afternoon medications. When he returned to the kitchen, he set the hypospray on the counter and sifted through the box to find the lentrazole and apropramine canisters. Dagny set her spoon in the bowl of pok tar, made quick modifications to the hypospray, and held out her hand for one of the canisters.

"You have adjusted for the increased dosage?" he asked, offering her the lentrazole.

She placed the canister in the hypospray chamber and smirked. "I was at the same appointment you were. 125 ccs of lentrazole twice a day instead of 50 four times a day."

She quickly injected herself, checked the canister, and asked for the apropramine. "I know you can do this," she muttered, delivering the second injection to the opposite side of her neck. "But I can too. I don't need you to do everything for me. Besides, I can't imagine you're always going to be here to do it anyway."

He observed as she removed the canister, checked it, and then reset the hypospray settings to default. She moved quickly, efficiently, and according to standard protocols. "How long have you been a paramedic?"

"Officially? About three and a half years," she replied. "But I've been working in the ship's clinic since I was eleven. My Aunt Birgitte was a doctor. She died when a small asteroid clipped the starboard side of the ship about five years ago. I sort of filled in the gap after she passed. We should have had a proper doctor, but wasn't easy to lure people with that kind of expertise to work on a salvage ship when all we could offer them was long months of dangerous work in deep space for unguaranteed pay."

"Understandable," he murmured. The bulletins were always flooded with requests for physicians for various colonies and space expeditions. The better-funded missions could pay quite well, but there
were also many job postings begging doctors to work for only lodging and supplies. Those often went unanswered for years at a time and if they were ever filled, it was often by lesser-trained medical staff, recent medical school graduates with poor performance records, or individuals who had had their licenses revoked or suspended.

"So how long have you been a doctor?" Dagny asked.

"30.8 Standard years."

She blinked and gave him a nervous look. "If you don't mind me asking… how old are you?"

"I am 50.6 Standard years of age."

"Oh," Dagny replied, turning her attention back to her bowl of pok tar.

"You seem surprised by my revelation."

She shook her head. "I knew that Vulcans lived a long time, but you're older than my father was. That's weird to think about."

She took a few bites of her noodle and vegetable soup. Voris considered returning his medical equipment to its case, but Dagny asked, "So you specialize in interspecies medicine?"

"Yes, I spent five years at a fellowship at Sarah April Memorial Hospital in San Francisco. I also hold a medical degree with a concentration in emergency medicine from the Vulcan Science Academy and advanced degrees in genetics and applied chemistry from the Institute of Gol."

Her jaw fell open. "I would have killed to do any one of those things."

Voris doubted she would literally have killed someone to have any of his experiences, but her confession still intrigued him. They both chose the next moment to speak.

"So what made you-" she started, just as he began to ask, "Why do you say-"

They fell silent. Dagny offered a little wave and said, "Please, go ahead."

"Your statement suggests you have an interest in medicine that extends beyond being a paramedic."

"I always thought it would be fun to be a doctor growing up," she admitted. "After I went to paramedic school at Deneva Station, that was when I knew I really wanted to do it."

"Why didn't you?"

She took several bites of her food before she answered. "I was always supposed to, I guess? I mean, it was the eventual plan, but the timing was never right. My family needed me. There was never enough money to send me. I didn't have the best education. Pick a reason."

"Do you still desire to become a physician?"

She shot him a strange look and said, "I had thought about it, before…" She motioned to her abdomen. "I guess it wasn't in the cards."

"You believe that pregnancy and motherhood preclude you from studying medicine?"

She scowled. "I was already so far behind before all this happened and to be honest, I struggled through parts of paramedic school. If it didn't relate to the running of a ship or the economics of
"Receiving a poor education does not guarantee you are incapable of thriving academically under better instruction."

"Maybe not, but I want to be a good mother, like my mother was. I have no idea where I would find the time to study to get into medical school, let alone get through it."

"There is no correct way to be a mother, therefore, it is incorrect to say the only way to be a good mother involves forgoing schooling."

"Ok, sure, but with only 30,000 people or however many you said, I don't suppose there are a lot of options for medical schools on New Vulcan."

"While it is true there is currently no institution on New Vulcan where you could study medicine, there are many such places throughout the Federation."

"Do you have a counterargument for every excuse?" she sighed.

"Perhaps. How many more excuses can you contrive?"

"Was that a joke?"

"Jokes are illogical."

She laughed again and gazed down at the dwindling reserves of pok tar in her bowl. "Sometimes I guess it just seems like the universe is telling me I wasn't made to be a doctor."

"You were not made to be anything. You are able to be what you are willing to work to become. I am willing to assist you."

"You would really do that?"

"My actions have had a profound effect on your life and I believe I have already explained I intend to provide for you and our child in any way necessary. I cannot change what has already happened, but I can assist you in achieving the things you would have achieved prior to your becoming pregnant."

She set her spoon down and stared at him. She swallowed hard. "It just seemed overwhelming enough before there was a baby and a Vulcan father sort-of partner person to think about." Her words trailed off and she looked away. "I know you said before you would move anywhere I want to go, but I feel like New Vulcan is your home and you're already going so far out of your way to help me. You said you-"

"Vulcan was my home," he corrected. "New Vulcan is where I currently reside. And regardless of your ambitions, Dr. Govorski recommended relocating prior to the fifth month of your pregnancy. Perhaps proximity to suitable medical programs should be a factor when selecting a new place to live."

"I don't even know what to say."

"You do not need to make a decision now."

She nodded, drank the remnants of the pok tar broth, and placed her bowl in the reclaimator. She returned to her seat on the kitchen stool and put her hands in her lap.
"Would you like to continue this exercise of becoming acquainted?" he asked.

"I would," she replied, giving him a crooked smile. "But I'm getting really tired. I think that's one of the main side effects of the apropane. Do you mind if I go lie down?"

Dagny retired to the bedroom and Voris went to his computer to begin researching potential places for relocation. He was in the middle of reading about the recent transition of power on Rigel VII when he received a notification on his PADD. Given his recent break with his father, he suspected it was from the hospital, but it turned out to be a missive from his Uncle Sarek.

Dr. Voris—

I invite you and your human companion to dine with me in my home this evening at 1900 hours. Kindly respond by 1730 hours if you accept.

Sarek

Dagny awoke to a gentle knocking on the door. Her mind felt alert, but her body remained sluggish.

"Yes?" she called, her voice muddled with slick saliva.

"May I enter?" Dr. Voris called through the door.

She scoffed to herself and shook her head. "It's your room."

"Yet you are currently occupying it and are owed privacy. I was merely-"

"Come in, Dr. Voris," she interrupted, sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

The door sprung open and he wandered in, tucking his hands behind his back. "Will you permit me a query?"

She gave him an exasperated look and said, "I thought we talked about this. You don't have to ask if you can ask me a question."

His eyebrows rose and he replied, "Why do you call me Dr. Voris?"

"Because… that's your name?"

"Voris is my name; doctor is my title," he corrected. "You asked that I refer to you as Dagny rather than Miss Skjeggestad, and is it not human convention to show a similar level of formality between individuals?"

"You want me to call you Voris?" she asked, licking her lips to get the dryness out of her mouth.

"I have no preference."

"Voris it is then," she said, giving him a thin smile. "What time is it?"

"It is 1700 hours. I would not have disturbed you, but my uncle has extended an invitation to end meal."

"Your uncle?"

"My Uncle Sarek," Voris explained. "He is New Vulcan's interim First Minister."
She started to feel numb. She'd had no idea Voris was from such a powerful and well-connected family.

"It is likely he has also invited my father," he continued. "I believe this is an effort to settle the conflict between Silek and myself before it becomes more publicly known."

"He invited me also?" Dagny mumbled.

"He did."

"I- I don't know," she stammered.

"Earlier you expressed desire that I should come to an understanding with my father."

Dagny would have preferred that he do it without her being present—there were only so many insults she could tolerate. Besides, what if his Uncle Sarek held a similar opinion to Silek's? It had been bad enough being dressed down by one tall, terrifying Vulcan: she doubted if she could handle two of them.

"Do you want to go?" she asked.

"I believe it would be prudent."

She sighed and gave a little nod. "I just don't want to embarrass you. I don't-"

"Embarrassment is illogical," he interjected.

She took a deep breath and continued. "I don't want to start crying and I know nothing about Vulcan hospitality customs, like your father said. I don't- it's just that I-"

"I have not spent much time in my uncle's company, but I think you will find he is quite different than my father."

"How so?"

"My Uncle Sarek married a human woman while serving as ambassador to Earth."

"Really?"

"Yes, and they had a child together—Spock. You met Ambassador Spock aboard the Sekla."

She was about to ask how old his Uncle Sarek was if Ambassador Spock was his son, but decided it would probably be a rude question. She was intrigued by the idea of an important Vulcan man marrying a human woman, which made Silek's attitude toward her even more baffling.

"What should I wear?" she asked, thinking she was going to regret signing up for more verbal abuse.

"The invitation did not stipulate formal wear, therefore, it is reasonable to conclude daily attire is acceptable."

Dagny nodded and rubbed her face with her hands.

"Was your nod indicative of consent?" Voris asked.

"I guess so. When are we supposed to leave?"
"We should depart in ninety minutes if we are to arrive at the specified time."

"I'll get dressed then," she said, throwing her legs over the side of the bed.

He left her to sort through the bags of clothes Laura had given her for something suitable to wear to dinner at a Vulcan First Minister's house, whatever *that* looked like. She remembered how strange those first meals with Laura and Paul had been, but they had been patient. Dagny had never dealt with things like napkins and place settings and politely asking someone to pass the salt.

She had been mortified when Laura had casually mentioned she should try chewing with her mouth closed and never talk with food in her mouth one evening as they'd cleared the table. Apparently those were widely considered to be good table manners, but no one had ever bothered to tell her.

Family meals aboard the *Albret* had been eaten in chaotic shifts. They'd had a table in the main room of their quarters that could comfortably sit six people, but in practice usually sat eight plus a baby in a high chair, whichever Skjeggestad had been on shift as a baby at the time. That arrangement had barely left room to comfortably cut one's food, let alone indulge in luxuries like special places for extra spoons and cloth napkins and water glasses.

Whoever showed up late to dinner often joined her mother at the tiny galley counter and ate standing up. Anyone who was too late to snag one of *those* limited spots had to wait for someone to get up, and thus, meals in the Skjeggestad household were full of elbowing and cajoling and shoving food in one's mouth as quickly as possible.

She thought of her first meal with Dr. Voris—*correction*, Voris—and how she'd agonized over trying to follow his example. She still had to consciously think about keeping her mouth shut when she chewed and avoid slurping on her water. It was daunting enough eating a simple meal with him and now she was going to be expected to eat with an important Vulcan bureaucrat?

It took her forty-five minutes to select a pair of gray slacks and a black shirt with ruffled sleeves. Laura had said it was a very fashionable shirt, whatever that meant. Dagny could count on one hand the number of articles of clothing she'd owned in her life that had been brand new. No one on the *Albret* ever really made a point of caring about the way clothes looked, so long as they were warm, clean, and covered the necessary parts.

It took her another thirty minutes in the lavatory to tame her hair into submission. It wasn't long enough to braid or collect in a ponytail and it was oddly kinked from the way she'd slept. She combed water into it to smooth it out but the end result still looked wrong. She finally gave up, brushed her teeth, and wandered into the front room to find Voris waiting for her.

He called for another automated car and they rode together in relative silence until Dagny said, "Your father said something about offering guests refreshment."

"Yes. Why do you mention it?"

"Only because I know nothing about Vulcan table manners or hospitality. I meant it earlier when I said I was afraid of embarrassing you. I know you think you can't get embarrassed, but *I* can. I want to make a good impression, especially after this afternoon."

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "That is understandable, but I do not believe Vulcan dining habits differ greatly from human ones."

"Ok," she murmured. "But could you at least tell me what I should expect? Surely they can't all be the same."
"Sarek will understand that you are not well acquainted with Vulcan customs."

"Your father didn't seem to."

He turned his head to look at her more closely. "It is commendable that you would attempt to honor Vulcan customs. There are several differences between our cultures that come to mind. Vulcans do not prefer to touch prepared food with their hands. It is also considered a gross breach of etiquette to leave the table before the host, excepting incidents of extreme emergency."

Dagny started making mental notes in her head to keep utensils in her hands at all times and use the lavatory before sitting down to eat. Her stomach did flip flops for the rest of the drive, and as the car turned into a long circle leading up to an enormous structure, she started to worry that she was going to throw up.

"How many people live here?" she asked, leaning against the glass to get a better view of the building.

"Only my uncle and perhaps a small staff."

"This whole building is his house?" she said, unable to hide the disbelief in her voice.

"Yes. The structures to the rear of the building house other members of the New Vulcan government, but this house was built specifically for the First Minister."

She couldn't help but gawk. Daniel had once shown her pictures of a place called Buckingham Palace that he'd found in one of the databases. Apparently it had been the home of Terran kings and queens for centuries. They had laughed about what it would be like to live in such an extravagant home and have their own rooms and eat off golden plates and have pet swans that waddled through rose gardens.

The First Minister's home didn't look quite that grand, but it was still the nicest home she'd ever seen. It looked like three distinct houses—a taller structure flanked by two shorter ones. An angular series of stairs and landings lead up to what looked a main courtyard that had a lot of flowering plants and statues guarding the house's impressive front door.

It took her a long time to climb those stairs, but she managed. She started to sweat and wondered whether it was from anxiety or the planet's oppressive heat, but then decided it didn't matter. Whatever the reason, she was showing up to the Vulcan First Minister's house looking like a sweaty mess. Voris pressed a button on a panel near the door and then folded his hands in front of him.

"Good evening, Dr. Voris and Miss Skjeggestad," said a calm voice behind them.

Dagny whipped around to see Ambassador Spock approaching the house's main entry.

"Good evening, ambassador. Live long and prosper," Voris said.

"Yes," the elderly Vulcan man replied, lifting his hand in the gesture that Vulcans called the ta'al. "Live long and prosper, Dr. Voris."

Dagny wondered if she should offer the same greeting, but the front door sprung open to reveal a young Vulcan woman. Her small and sharp features gave her a unique variety of beauty that Dagny felt compelled to stare at. She said nothing but motioned for the three of them to follow her down a long hallway. Voris had said Sarek lived alone, so who was this woman?

"May I offer some refreshment?" she asked, stopping in front of the last door on the left.
Both Voris and Ambassador Spock refused, so Dagny felt compelled to do the same. The woman bowed her head, motioned toward the door, and said, "They await you."

Ambassador Spock entered the room, followed by Voris and then Dagny. She found herself in a spacious chamber with unusual artwork and mirrors on the walls, a rich red patterned carpet on the floor, and a series of couches all facing inward on a wide, square table.

"Welcome, Spock and Dr. Voris," said a pleasant voice from the other end of the room.

Dagny had been too entranced by the rich décor to notice his presence. He was not alone, however—Silek stood next to him, unmoving and unspeaking. Dagny felt the blood drain out of her face. Voris had warned her that Silek might be here but she'd been secretly hoping he was wrong.

"Live long and prosper, Minister," Voris replied. He gestured in Dagny's direction and added, "Minister Sarek, this is Dagny Skjeggestad. Dagny, this is my uncle, First Minister Sarek."

She raised her hand as if on instinct, formed it into the ta'al, and uttered the words, "Live long and prosper," dumbfounded that they came out clearly enough to be understood. She could feel Silek's eyes on her but didn't dare to look in his direction.

"Yes, live long and prosper," Sarek replied. He glanced at Silek and said, "My brother informs me you are already acquainted."

"We- we met this afternoon," Dagny replied.

"If there are no more introductions to make, then let us sit for end meal," Sarek said. "The chef has informed me it is ready."

Dagny wasn't sure whether to dwell on the idea that Sarek employed another person whose only job was to cook or the fact that she was about to sit down to a meal with Silek, a man who just earlier that day had suggested she should take Voris' money and leave his family alone.

They entered a softly lit formal dining room with a long, rectangular table that could have easily sat half the crew of the Albret. At the far end were place settings for five people; Dagny wondered if there was a certain place she was supposed to sit. Sarek went to the head of the table; Spock went to his right and Silek to his left. She snuck a nervous look at Voris and saw him nod in the direction of the seat next to the ambassador.

Once they were all standing behind their chairs, Sarek told them to be seated but remained standing himself. She was sitting across from Voris and was secretly grateful to have someone directly in front of her to give her visual cues on what to do. Moments later, the woman who had greeted them at the door emerged through a side door carrying a large bowl. She offered it to Sarek, who set it in the center of the table.

One by one they ladled helpings into their heavy and ornate bowls. Dagny was reluctant to take more than a spoonful, but seeing how much there was for only five people and watching Ambassador Spock help himself to three scoops, she split the difference and served herself two spoons of the thick brown stew. It smelled delicious.

Her eyes darted around the table and after noticing the others placed the embroidered napkins in their laps, she followed suit. She saw Voris pick up the larger of the two spoons in the place setting and did the same, dipping it into the thick liquid.

She ran through a checklist in her mind, reminding herself to chew with her mouth closed, take small bites, only touch food with utensils, and so on. The others had started eating, but as she prepared to...
take in her first bite, Sarek said, "It is an honor to have you at my table, Miss Skjeggestad."

She nearly dropped her spoon in the bowl. "Thank you for inviting me."

"There are many on New Vulcan who owe their lives to you and the crew of the Albret," the First Minister continued. "Its loss is our loss. All of New Vulcan grieves with you."

She took a deep breath, suddenly horrified at the thought of being reduced to tears at the table. "Thank you."

They settled into their meal and for a long time, the only sounds were the clinking of metal utensils on china and gentle thuds of glasses being set down on the cloth-covered table. She focused on eating politely like Laura had shown her, but the silence of the dinner party was palpable.

She was nearly done when she noticed Silek place his napkin on the table, set his spoon on top of it, clear his throat, and say to his brother, "It would be illogical to pretend you didn't have an underlying motivation for summoning us here."

"You are correct," Sarek replied, setting his own spoon down. "The elections are in eighteen days and you are foolishly risking the outcome because you intend to openly disavow your son's mate."

Dagny held her breath and started studying the intricate pattern on the soup bowl. Vulcans certainly didn't waste time dancing around the issue.

"She is not suitable."

"My choice of mate is none of your concern," Voris interjected.

"It is my concern," Silek countered. "You have always followed your own selfish ambitions. T'Rya was the most appropriate match you could have made. It was illogical to reject her."

Dagny had no idea what he was talking about, but the conversation was moving so quickly she didn't have time to reflect upon it.

"She rejected me," Voris replied, his voice noticeably rising by several decibels.

"You might have persuaded her to see reason," Silek retorted. "Her brother had convinced her to change her mind, but you refused to even consider the possibility because you'd already chosen to bond with an uneducated human female from a garbage scow."

Dagny's mouth fell open and her hands started to tremble.

"I believe the Albret was a salvage ship operated by a crew that saved the lives of a considerable portion of our population at great risk and cost to themselves," Sarek rejoined.

"The Albret's actions are not at issue here," Silek insisted. "Voris' behavior not only reflects poorly upon his family, but also has serious implications for the future of New Vulcan. I do not imagine many people would be receptive to the idea of a First Minister or Minister of State who permit a member of their family to cohabitate with a female they are not bonded to."

"So what is your solution?" Voris asked. "Would you be satisfied if Dagny and I were to formally bond?"

Silek's face darkened. "I already proposed the most logical solution this afternoon."

Dagny wanted to say something, but she wasn't sure where to start. Voris and Ambassador Spock
began speaking at the same time, but Voris yielded to his older cousin.

"It also seems implausible that a single human woman could destroy Vulcan society simply by giving birth to your grandchild," Ambassador Spock mused.

"A half-breed," Silek snapped.

Dagny's face suddenly felt incredibly hot. Voris, Ambassador Spock, and Minister Sarek all slowly turned to look at Silek. Something in his eyes suggested he was acutely aware he'd overstepped a serious boundary.

"Fine, I grew up on a garbage scow," Dagny spat. "That's one way of putting it. And no, my parents didn't teach me a lot of fancy manners and this whole time we've been sitting here, I've worried about doing or saying the wrong thing. But even on a garbage scow I learned how to treat people with respect."

Silek's eyes narrowed but he didn't respond. It almost felt like an out of body experience and though she knew she was probably going to regret this outburst, she no longer cared. "I didn't ask for this," she continued bitterly. "I didn't ask for any of this."

"No, you did not," Ambassador Spock agreed, finally tearing his gaze away from Silek to look at her.

"Regardless of what my brother will do, I invited you here to welcome you into our family in whatever capacity you and Voris agree to," Sarek said, turning to Dagny.

"And I would welcome you also," Ambassador Spock replied.

Dagny's hands were shaking so she placed them in her lap hoping that no one would notice. There was a noticeable ringing in her ears and her face felt like it was on fire. She wasn't sure what to do. Apologize for shouting at a Vulcan dinner table? Keep standing up for herself? Thank the ambassador and the First Minister for their unexpected acceptance?

"I should leave," Silek said, rising from the table.

"You are still welcome in my home, Silek," Sarek replied. "It is my hope we can come to an understanding on this matter. It is logical to preserve our limited familial ties and present a united front for the Storilayar."

"You would destroy everything we've worked for because of a human woman who wedged her way into this family by conceiving my son's child?"

"I might ask you the same question."

Silek turned and left the dining room without another word. Dagny took several slow breaths, willing herself to keep from crying in anger and making an already awkward situation worse.

"I regret that I have brought a disagreement between my father and myself into your home, Minister," Voris said.

"You were both here at my invitation," Sarek replied.

"I'm sorry I yelled," Dagny gulped, trying to look at Sarek but unable to coax herself into looking him in the eye.
She detected a minor hint of surprise in his expression. "Your apology is unnecessary, Miss Skjeggestad. You are not the first human woman to lose her temper at my dinner table."

"Perhaps we should leave also," Voris said, setting his napkin on the table.

Sarek steepled his hands and nodded. "I thank you both for coming. I regret the evening was not more civil. As I told Silek, you are welcome in my home, as is Miss Skjeggestad."

Ambassador Spock chose to leave at the same time, and Sarek escorted his three guests back down the long hallway. After a quick series of goodbyes, they followed Ambassador Spock to a car that was waiting in the driveway and accepted his offer of transportation home.

Ambassador Spock spent most of the journey discussing the itineraries of several upcoming trips with Voris. Dagny occupied herself by gazing at the beautiful lights of the city whose name she could barely pronounce. Vah-shev? Vah-shy-ev?

It seemed like they were all going out of their way to pretend like nothing had happened. While it didn't seem very logical, Dagny was grateful. She wasn't interested in reliving the most awkward meal of her life, but she had a lot of questions. Who was T'Rya? What had happened between Voris and this person? She almost didn't want to know.

When she and Voris arrived back at their housing complex twenty minutes later, there was a cat sitting by the doorstep, the image of a statue except for a swishing tail. For a moment, Dagny forgot all about the awkward, awful, angry day she'd had and marveled at the cat called Harold.

He allowed her to pick him up and scratch his head while Voris keyed in the door code. He was an ugly thing with a fat face, a milky eye, a torn ear, several missing teeth, and a number of scars on his head and chest. He looked like the physical embodiment how Dagny currently felt and she decided immediately she liked this wayward creature very much.

"I have never seen him express affection for anyone," Voris remarked as they walked inside.

Dagny scratched his cheek and he rubbed her hand with the side of his face. She smiled. "I don't think anything is unlovable."
Stardate 2260.75

"I believe you have everything you should require," Voris announced. Dagny was sitting on the couch, gently scratching Harold between his ears.

"I think I can manage on my own for a few hours," she said, giving him a weak smile.

"A minimum of ten hours," he corrected. "I am not due to return until 1900 tonight."

"It's still not forever," Dagny replied.

"No," he agreed.

Voris was due for his shift at the Va'ashiv district hospital in forty minutes. He'd awoken several hours earlier and given Dagny a thorough tour of the small apartment, making sure she had access to her medication, the food replicator, and his contact information in the event of an emergency. He demonstrated the door locks and hardwired communicator on the wall and ensured she could call emergency services in the event of a fire or some other crisis.

He had contemplated taking several additional days of personal leave to help Dagny transition to life on New Vulcan, but he and Dr. Sevek were the only healers scheduled for the midday emergency room shift and many of his alien patients from the Komihn k'tur settlement had already had appointments rescheduled due to his unanticipated personal matters. He also reasoned that earning a stable income had become more essential due to recent developments.

"Is there anything else you require?" Voris asked, reviewing the medical supplies he was leaving with her.

She stood and wandered in his direction. "Is there anything you'd like me to do while you're gone?"

"You are free to do as you like," he insisted, checking the quantity of her medications. She had enough to last a month.

"I'm just not sure... I can clean, I can… I've never just not done anything."

"I sense you are seeking suggestions for staving off boredom."

"I don't mean to be a bother, I just…" She bit her lip and looked at the floor.

He studied her face. It was only natural for a sentient, intelligent being to seek some form of mental stimulation. Unfortunately, he was so rarely at home and as a result, his apartment had very little in the way of entertainment.

"You had expressed interest in learning Vuhlkansu and studying for medical school," he said, taking a step in her direction.

"That would be nice. The problem is, I can send messages, but I can't link my PADD to Vulcan's networks," she said, nibbling on her lower lip. "Could you maybe show me how?"

"Certainly. I am also willing to grant you the liberty of utilizing my private computer," he said, wandering to his desk in the corner.
He had her sit in his chair and gave her a quick lesson on how to operate his computer and synced her PADD to the local network. He showed her a number of scientific databases, noting how her eyes lit up when she skimed through the titles of biochemistry and physiology pages.

"Thank you," she said craning her neck to look back at him. There was a small smile forming on her lips and a radiant glow in her eyes. The idea that he'd been able to please her pleased him.

"I am due at the hospital shortly," he said, taking a step back from the desk.

She walked him to the door. "I hope you have a good day."

They stood and observed each other for several seconds. It had been years since he'd had someone to see him off to work. Given the complex nature of their relationship, he wasn't sure how to respond, so he simply opened the door and said, "You also."

He arrived at the hospital precisely on time and made his way to his office to don his white medical coat and review his schedule. He tended to work in emergency care but due to his expertise in interspecies medicine, he also saw alien patients by appointment in the mornings.

The first two hours of his morning shift went by without incident. He performed several physicals, treated a chronic ear infection in a young human female, authorized refills on multiple prescriptions, repaired a broken arm, and referred an elderly man with chest pains to Dr. Sevek. His last scheduled patient of the morning was an eight-month-old human/Vulcan hybrid whose mother had brought her in from the T'Kahr district due to a severe rash.

When he entered the exam room, he found a human woman clutching a baby in her lap. They were both sobbing. The child, a female, was naked except for a diaper and mittens tied on her hands. Crusted blisters surrounded her lips and nostrils and she also had a papular rash on her upper torso and back.

"Good morning," he said, raising his voice to be heard over the baby's shrieks. "I am Dr. Voris."

The girl's mother didn't bother with pleasantries. "Please help her," she sniffed, rubbing her nose with the back of her hand. "I'm at my wit's end. I've been putting the cream on her and it's not getting any better. All she does is cry and scratch and I can't make her better. She's hurting."

Voris had treated many children in emergency rooms during his career, but he didn't specialize in pediatrics. Some medical professionals had a natural ability to develop a rapport with young patients, but Voris was not one of them. He pulled the stool from the corner and sat across from the woman.

According to the chart, the mother's name was Angela Mosby; the infant in her arms was T'Sena. "Your daughter's medical files show that healers at the T'Kahr district hospital diagnosed her with cellulitis and prescribed a topical antibiotic cream six days ago, is that correct?"

"Yes," the woman sighed, bouncing the baby on her lap. "But it's only gotten worse."

"Has it spread beyond her torso?" he asked, scanning the girl's legs.

"No."

"Have you done anything else to help relieve her discomfort?"

"I give her cool baths and that calms her down but a few minutes after I take her out, she starts crying again."
"And how long has she had the blisters around her mouth?"

"They showed up two days ago and they're only getting worse."

"I see," Voris said, making a note on his PADD as he pulled a rapid diagnostic probe from a cabinet on the wall. "Is she feeding normally?"

"She doesn't seem to be eating as much, but I think it's because her mouth hurts."

"And has she shown any other unusual symptoms or behaviors?"

"No, she just cries and tries to scratch herself. Can you tell me what's wrong with her?" Ms. Mosby pleaded.

"I am attempting to," he said, pulling a sterile swab from the end of the probe. "I need to collect a small sample from the blisters on her mouth and nose."

"Will it hurt her?"

Voris looked at the baby, who appeared completely inconsolable. Even if the test were to cause pain, which it wouldn't, it would be difficult to detect through the child's current level of misery. "No."

He ran his scan and the test came back as he expected. "Your daughter has a staphylococcal infection. It is a commensal bacteria common among humans."

"Is that serious?"

"Not generally. It is very easily treated."

"Please no more creams," the woman sighed. "She screams when I put it on her."

"I did not intend to prescribe any topical medication," he replied. "I believe the cream has exacerbated her other condition."

"What do you mean?" Ms. Mosby yelped. "They said it was supposed to help."

"Will you set her on the table so I can examine the rash on her chest and back more easily?"

Ms. Mosby readily complied with his request, gently positioning her daughter on the exam table and standing behind her to support her. The child was no longer screaming, but that was mostly due to the fact that she was out of breath from crying. Voris cleansed his hands in the particle fountain and gently touched the rash on the girl's left shoulder. He performed a microscopic scan of the girl's skin using his tricorder and said, "I believe she's suffering from miliaria."

"Is that bad?" she gasped.

"Compared to humans, Vulcans have very few eccrine glands. Because of T'Sena's hybrid physiology, she has human eccrine glands and epidermal ducts, but they are underdeveloped. In essence, she is attempting to sweat to cool herself, but the sweat cannot escape through the ducts and is becoming trapped in the dermis and epidermis. Bacteria, likely the same strain of staphylococcus that has caused the infection on her face, has also become trapped and is causing these papules on her torso."

"So how did the cream make it worse?"

"The healers at the T'Kahr district hospital prescribed a topical ointment with an antibiotic that is
ineffective against this species of bacteria, so not only did the cream fail to eradicate the infection, it made her skin more moist, which only aggravated the blocked ducts. The cool baths would have had a similar effect."

"So, you're saying I also made her worse?" Ms. Mosby gasped, tears welling in her eyes once again.

"Unintentionally, yes."

She choked back several sobs. Her daughter, whose immature telepathic midbrain clearly sensed her mother's distress, started to whimper again also.

"Her condition is treatable," Voris continued. "I can also administer medication to relieve her discomfort while she recovers. But it is essential to keep her skin dry. I would also recommend leaving her undressed while the rash heals. Occlusion of the skin due to clothing can further contribute to sweating and overhydration of the skin's outer layer."

"Why did the doctors at our regular hospital not know this?" she snapped. "I've been making my baby miserable for almost a week!"

"Many physicians lack experience in treating hybrids between our species. That is why you were referred to me."

"They hate us over there though," she retorted. "I see the way my neighbors look at me. And the doctors. They think we don't belong here."

Ms. Mosby lived in the T'Kahr district, and the T'Kahr district was where most of the conservative Ba'taklar faction lived. The most fundamentalist Ba'tak adherents would consider T'Sena's very existence to be a violation of the natural order, but even the most radical zealots would have agreed it was illogical to cause another being, any being, to suffer needlessly. Healers also swore oaths to do no harm, so Voris doubted whether prescribing the incorrect medication and failing to correctly diagnose T'Sena's condition was deliberate.

Yet though hatred was illogical, he was also reluctant to discount Ms. Mosby's opinion. It seemed strange that a human with a hybrid child would voluntarily live in a place where she was not welcomed, but it was her decision.

"You're wondering why I live here, aren't you?" she asked.

"Your private choices are none of my concern," he replied. "My most pressing concern is treating your daughter's condition."

Ms. Mosby clucked her tongue, picked up her daughter, and whispered in a childish voice, "I'm so sorry my baby. I didn't know. I didn't mean to do this to you."

Humans were obviously emotional creatures, so it was unsurprising that they made emotional parents. Angela Mosby clearly cared for her daughter, but he wondered about the child's emotional and cognitive development. T'Sena was far too young to comprehend repressing her emotions, but what would happen as she aged? How could a Vulcan child with an emotional primary caregiver learn to live as a Vulcan? His cousin Spock had been able to overcome his mother's influence, so it clearly was possible.

He recognized that without evidence of abuse, T'Sena's upbringing was none of his concern. Also, T'Sena was only half Vulcan; perhaps her parents did not intend to raise in her the Vulcan way. But T'Sena and her mother were forcing him to consider what he desired for his own child. It was difficult to comprehend a life without the serenity of logic, but it was reasonable to conclude it would
be difficult for Dagny to comprehend a life with muted and repressed emotions.

Were it a typical appointment, he would have input a prescription and sent a nurse to administer it, but this was his final scheduled appointment of the morning before he began his emergency shift and he was interested in continuing to observe the interactions between a human mother and her half Vulcan child. He excused himself to collect the necessary pharmaceuticals and supplies and returned to find Ms. Mosby had sat down and was attempting to soothe T'Sena by rocking her.

"I have prescribed injectable antibiotics and an anti-inflammatory that you will need to administer three times per day for the next five days," he explained, showing her one of the pre-dosed autoinjectors. "It will treat the rash on her upper body and the infection around her mouth, as well as provide temporary relief from the itching."

"I have to give her a shot?" Ms. Mosby asked, her face wrought with worry. "I've never done that."

"I will provide you with a demonstration," he said, motioning for her to stand. "Hold the autoinjector at a forty-five-degree angle to this part of the neck-"

T'Sena started to squirm and locked her eyes on the autoinjector in his hand. Her mouth fell open and she squealed in delight. Ms. Mosby sighed and shifted the infant onto her hip.

"She probably thinks you're trying to feed her," she laughed, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. "I make a similar motion when I'm trying to get her to eat pureed foods."

"Why?" Voris asked, intrigued.

"Because she seems to think it's funny?" she replied, offering a slight shrug. "It's gotten to the point where she'll refuse to eat unless I pretend the spoon is a bird or a starship or something."

Voris blinked. He had no idea what she was talking about.

"Um, I tell you what, maybe it would be better if you held her and showed me what to do," she sighed, holding T'Sena outward. "I learn better by doing anyway and I want to make sure I'm doing this right."

He was about to tell her she could set her daughter on the exam table instead, but T'Sena was already reaching for him with her mitten-covered hands. He held her under her arms, trying to maneuver her into a more comfortable position. Ms. Mosby watched him carefully, a small smirk spreading across her face.

"Do you have kids?" she asked.

Voris raised an eyebrow. "No."

She sniffed away her tears and grinned. Voris managed to get his arm under T'Sena's legs and she leaned her small body forward onto his chest. She attempted to grip his medical smock to stabilize herself, but was unable to grasp anything due to the covers on her hands. She started to wriggle and push herself off of Voris' sternum, trying to look up at his face. She seemed entirely captivated by her new temporary caregiver, which gave Voris a small window to show Ms. Mosby exactly where to deliver the injection into her neck.

Her mother was nervous and reluctant, but the autoinjectors had a safety feature that prevented them from releasing unless they were able to penetrate a vein. It took her several attempts, but eventually she got it. T'Sena gave her mother an indignant scowl and started to grumble.
"Where do I put this?" Ms. Mosby asked, holding up the spent autoinjector.

"There is a biohazard waste bin on the wall," he explained.

T'Sena whined and squirmed against Voris' hold on her and her face cycled through a series of unpleasant expressions. She was not the first infant he’d ever held, but she was the first to defecate on him. It happened so suddenly that it took his mind several seconds to process what had occurred, and by that point, runny golden-brown feces were dripping down his sleeve and off the front of his white coat onto the floor.

"Oh no!" Ms. Mosby said, clasping her hands over the lower half of her face. There was an unusual glint in her eyes, almost as if she were amused and shocked at the same time, though it was impossible to tell with her mouth covered. The child was wearing a sanitary undergarment, but apparently it had been insufficient for the task of containing so much semi-liquid waste. "I'm so, so sorry."

T'Sena's face returned to a more playful expression and she twisted at the waist to scan the room for her mother. "It is illogical to apologize. She is still several years away from learning to control her bowels."

"She's been so fussy and her sleeping and feeding schedule has been all over the place because of this rash," she said, gently taking her daughter from Voris' arms. "I'll clean this up."

"That is not necessary," he replied. "You need only look after your daughter. I shall send in an orderly and you have her prescription. Do you have any other concerns?"

Ms. Mosby was digging through her oversized bag and pulled out a new diaper. "No. I just wanted to say thank you for being so kind and patient with us. I know I'm a mess, but…"

"You are welcome, Ms. Mosby."

Voris returned to his office, put his soiled coat in the laundry cycler, and extracted a clean one from the small closet. He was en route to alert the orderly at the main desk to the mess in exam room 3 when he encountered his superior, Dr. Sevek.

He informed Voris that the Oglethorpe, a cargo vessel en route to Nausicaa from Cestus III, had arrived in orbit and was requesting immediate assistance for a number of injured crewmembers. Most of the crew was human, but the New Vulcan Planetary Customs and Control Ministry was waiting for a final copy of the ship's manifest before transporting them to the surface.

Voris and the rest of the staff at the hospital immediately began preparing to receive casualties—initial estimates were between ten and twenty patients total—but almost nothing was known about the cause, nature, or severity of their injuries. Minutes ticked by, yet the emergency transporters remained inactive. After half an hour, Dr. Sevek contacted customs officials who explained the brewing political situation.

The ship's crew was entirely comprised of people from a colony based on Cestus III and due to their open affiliation with a number of species considered hostile to the Federation, New Vulcan's interim government was reluctant to allow them to disembark, even for medical care. New Vulcan was legally obligated to assist Federation citizens, but not all the passengers and crew aboard the Oglethorpe held Federation citizenship, and the injured citizens were refusing care unless treatment was also offered to a seriously injured Orion comrade.

Rather than waste critical time arguing about politics and bureaucracy, Voris approached Dr. Sevek
and said, "The High Council can refuse entry to the Orion individual, but is the council prepared to refuse to allow New Vulcan medical personnel to board the ship to treat these patients?"

"We are of one mind," Dr. Sevek replied, activating a hardwired comm switch on the wall and requesting to be patched through to the Immigration Ministry. "Given your expertise in interspecies medicine, particularly with human patients, you are the logical choice to send for such an assignment."

It took another fifteen minutes of discussion and coordination, but the High Council and the captain of the Oglethorpe agreed to allow a small team to go aboard and assess and treat their injured personnel. In that time, they received more information about the ship and the events that had led them to limp into orbit of New Vulcan.

They had been travelling from their colony on the southern continent of Cestus III to Nausicaa to deliver a shipment of ore. They'd set a course through a region of space colloquially referred to as the Briar Patch, which was known to experience high-density cosmic debris and false vacuum fluctuations. The ship had suffered a hull breach during a particularly violent vacuum fluctuation and several members of the crew had been killed and others remained in critical condition.

Voris assigned several members of the junior hospital staff to assemble supplies while he synthesized doses of trialgenine to protect them from any residual radiation. He met Veran, the nurse, and T'Nar and Selaara, the two paramedics, in the hospital's emergency transporter room, administered the inoculations, and waited for transport to the Oglethorpe.

Just before he was pulled into the matter stream, he realized he'd left his PADD on his desk. Should Dagny need to contact him, she would be unable to do so. It was a significant oversight, but he had the growing sense she was doggedly independent and uniquely resourceful, and he did not intend to remain on the Oglethorpe for long.

Dagny's eyes scanned the screen, trying to make sense of the loopy Vulcan text. It looked more like art than words. She'd studying it for hours, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't discern patterns in the lines to distinguish one letter from another with any real accuracy. And that was a problem.

Her stomach growled. Dagny had been hungry before, but she'd never actually gone an entire day without a meal. The clock said it was 1456—Voris wasn't due home for another four hours. Normally, it wouldn't have been a big deal to skip a meal or two, but she wasn't just eating for herself anymore. She wanted to kick herself for not eating breakfast that morning when Voris had recommended it. She felt dizzy, queasy, and exhausted and the longer she remained hungry, the weaker she felt.

She took a deep breath and tried to put it in perspective. She wasn't going to die without eating for ten hours. Of course, it had really been longer than that—her last meal had been at Voris' uncle's house the night before. It seemed like ages ago.

Dagny had spent the first part of the morning reading about various biochemical processes, but around 1000 hours she'd laid down for nap. When she'd awoken some time later, she was disoriented and soaked in her own sweat. For whatever reason, the power had gone out, cutting off her ability to use the environmental controls, computer, lavatory, or food replicator. The networks had also been down. Even if she'd wanted to call for help—which she absolutely didn't want to do unless she was on the verge of death—she wouldn't have been able to.

Luckily, the power was restored around 1230 hours and she was no longer withering in a sweltering
apartment. The environmental controls were back online and the toilet was functioning, but something had happened to the food replicator. It had gotten reset and she’d received an error message when she’d tried to push the button to select Standard rather than Vuhlkansu. At least she’d assumed it was an error message.

Life aboard a ship had taught her how to troubleshoot technology from an early age, but she’d met her match in Voris’ replicator. She’d started by using his computer to search for a technical manual, but couldn’t find one because she couldn’t even identify the machine’s model number. She’d finally captured an image of the error message on her PADD and used an online universal translator to translate it but as it turned out, all it said was, “Press 'start' to continue” and she couldn’t find anything that looked like a distinct start button.

She’d tried touching several keys on the side of the replicator at random and then it had shut itself off and she couldn’t find a way to turn it back on. After more than an hour of combing various databases for information on how to resolve the issue, she finally felt ready—and hungry enough—to swallow her pride.

She picked up her PADD and typed a quick message –

Sorry to bother you, but I think I did something to the replicator and I can't get it working. I looked through the kitchen for something to eat, but I couldn't find anything there either. I'm so sorry. The screen won't come on. Do you know how to fix this problem?

She poured herself a glass of water, gave herself her afternoon medications, and trudged to the bedroom to lie down again. She set the PADD by her pillow and stared at it. Hopefully he would reply soon.

The moment Voris re-materialized on the Oglethorpe's transporter pad, he and the medical team were thrust into chaos. The ship had a crew complement of twenty-two and had been transporting nine passengers—twenty-five humans, two Orions, and two Nausicaans. The passengers had been asleep in their bunks at the time of the hull breach and were mostly uninjured but the same could not be said for the crew.

The first officer and a payload specialist were dead from depressurization injuries and twelve others were suffering from decompression or radiation sickness or both. The Oglethorpe wasn’t equipped for extended deep space missions and as such, lacked a formal sickbay or clinic. A young woman wearing a tattered dress and tear-streaked cheeks led them to a series of small central storage lockers they had been converted into a makeshift hospital.

"T'Nar, begin triage. Isolate those with radiation sickness into the closet on the left," he said, pulling out his tricorder. "I will begin decontamination protocols on those affected patients. Veran will treat the patients with decompression sickness and Selaara will assess the minor injuries and ensure they are in fact minor, and once you have completed that task, assist wherever it is most logical to do so."

Voris then set to work reversing the radiation sickness in an Orion and multiple human patients. Their situation was urgent, but it was not nearly as dire as Dagny’s had been. He worked through the standard decontamination protocols, inoculating his patients with trialgenine to stop the progression of their radiation sickness and removing the lingering radiation from their clothing and tissues.

He and his medical team worked methodically and after several hours, they’d wrestled the crisis into a more manageable state. Within the first hour, all of the patients were stable and though a full recovery remained uncertain for three of the patients with decompression-induced ebullism, there was nothing anyone could do but wait and see if their condition would improve.
He was in the midst of delivering an anti-emetic to a young human man suffering lingering nausea from the radiation exposure when he heard shouting coming from the room next door. Moments later, a man entered and said, "That other Vulcan guy says you're the doctor. You have to do something. Please."

A human woman with honey colored skin and full black hair came in immediately behind him and choked, "He's going to die no matter what we do. Exposing him will mean exposing us. He doesn't want that."

His conscious patients began to murmur among themselves and shout questions at the people standing in the doorway, asking things like. "What's wrong, Jake?" and "Is it Rhaal?"

"Explain," Voris said, trying to speak over the pandemonium.

"We have another person on board not on the manifest and he needs help."

"Lead me to him," Voris said, straightening his back.

The woman gave a pained scowl and ran her hands through her mass of hair. The man's face paled but he nodded and backed out of the doorway. He led Voris down a corridor, moving so purposefully he was nearly stomping.

"I know having a passenger unaccounted for it a violation of Federation regulations and I accept full responsibility," the man said, wringing his hands. "But he was down in engineering trying to keep the warp engine from breaching and he has really bad plasma burns. We tried patching him up but he can't breathe and he's got radiation sickness too and I don't know what to do for him. He's dying."

"I do not work for the Federation," Voris replied. "You should have informed me immediately."

"He begged us not to, but I can't stand to see him suffer anymore," the man insisted. "He asked me to kill him and I don't have the stomach for it."

His guide suddenly took a sharp right; Voris followed him into a dimly lit room and could hear raspy breathing coming from behind a stack of several small cargo drums. "J-J-J-Jake, is- that- you?"

"Yeah, Rhaal," the man said, ducking out of view behind the containers. "I brought the doctor. He's Vulcan. Maybe he can help."

"Why?" the voice yelped. Why- would-"

Voris came around the stack of containers and saw a Vulcanoid man with severe burns on the upper half of his body and most of his lower face. His clothes were melted to his chest and his nose was partially burned away. The exposed areas of his flesh were charred and oozing plasma around brilliant green wounds.

The raspy quality of his breathing and the frothy green-tinged spittle on his lips indicated he'd sustained burns to his lungs as well. Voris turned on his heel to return to the storage locker and collect supplies to intubate the man, but his human companion stopped him. "Where are you going?"

"I require additional medical supplies, I-"

"No," snapped the man, erupting into a fit of dry coughing. "I'm- not- going to- live. Get Suna-"

"I'm here," called a female voice from behind him.
The woman with the golden skin and wild hair inched forward. "He's going to die, isn't he?"

A Vulcan would readily prefer a hard truth to a reassuring lie and though he wasn't certain his patient was Vulcan, it was evident he'd already accepted his fate. "Yes, I believe so."

"Is there anything you can do?" she asked.

Voris studied the man. He didn't need to perform a more thorough examination to know that he didn't have long to live, even with the best medical interventions available. Even if he'd received immediate treatment following the exposure to the hot plasma and radiation, his prognosis still would have been very poor. Vulcanoid lungs were extremely delicate and slow to heal and even with the best care available, Voris couldn't conceive of the man surviving beyond twenty-four hours.

"I can make him comfortable," Voris replied.

The woman inhaled a staggering breath and nodded. Silent tears slipped down her cheeks, converging on her chin where they dripped onto the front of her rumpled shirt. Voris reached into his medical kit and prepared a hypospray of pain-relievers and sedatives.

"S-S-Suna," the man groaned, extending two feeble arms in her direction.

"I'm here, love," she sniffed, shuffling forward to sit down cross-legged next to him.

"Stay- with- m-me," he whispered.

The human man ran his hands through his close-cropped graying hair and winced. He gave Voris a pleading look but Voris shook his head.

"Perhaps you should wait outside," Voris suggested quietly. The man left without uttering another word.

Voris approached the unusual couple; they both seemed oblivious to his presence. "I can administer medication to relieve some of your pain. Do you consent?"

"Why- did y-you tell h-h-him?" the man gurgled, ignoring Voris and touching the woman's hand with his charred fingers. "He-he'll expose-"

"I told Jake you didn't want this but you know how he is," the woman interrupted with a sob. "And the truth is, I can't bear to see you this way. I love you."

Voris took another step forward and was about to speak when the woman yelled, "Just give him the meds and get out. Please."

Voris pulled a laser scalpel from his kit and cut a small hole in the inside of the man's trousers to deliver an injection of a near lethal dose of triptacedrine into his femoral vein, a site he'd chosen due to the severe burns to other more traditional injection locations.

Voris excused himself just as the woman lay down next to him and started to cry. The human man was waiting by the door, agony sketched into every feature of his face. "We'd all be dead if it wasn't for him."

"I grieve with thee."

"The medicine you gave him—is it going to kill him?"

"No, but it will ease his journey into death."
The man took several deep, gasping breaths and said, "Look, I know I don't have any right to ask this of you, but is there any way I could convince you not to mention any of this to your people?"

"Is it because he is unaccounted for on the ship's manifest or because he is Romulan?" Voris asked, locking eyes with him.

The man's face hardened. He gritted his teeth and replied, "Both, I suppose."

Voris was legally obligated to report deaths to the New Vulcan authorities, who in turn were obligated to report them to the Federation. This man was not a Federation citizen, but planet of origin and citizenship were irrelevant to Voris' duty to report his death.

"Perhaps you could explain his presence on your ship."

"We're from Bergeron colony on Cestus III," the man replied, giving a small sigh. Voris expected the explanation to continue, but the man gave him a look that suggested he'd said all he needed to say on the matter.

"Expound."

"We take all people at Bergeron colony. We don't care where you're from or why you want to join us, just so long as you're peaceful and you carry a reasonable share of the work."

"I see."

"It's not an officially sanctioned Federation colony," the man continued. "We split off from the official Cestus folks three years ago and set up a mining colony on the Southern continent. The Klingon- never mind, it's a really long story. The point is, we have all kinds of people at Bergeron. Cestus colony was Terran so it's still mostly humans, but we have Klingons, Suliban, Nausicaans, Orions, Gorn, and yes, even a few Romulans. A lot of our people are political dissidents or exiles or refugees."

The idea of such an inclusive haven intrigued him, particularly given his current living situation. Humans were such a fascinating species. They so often rebelled against logic, but could occasionally embrace Kol-ut-shan better than most Vulcans.

Voris was not a lawyer, but as far as he was aware, the presence of an official Federation colony on Cestus III didn't automatically make the entire planet part of the Federation. His knowledge of cosmological geography was poor, but he knew Cestus III was approximately thirty light years away and lay in a neutral region of space between the Gorn Hegemony and the Klingon Empire. If the planet and the sector of space it was in were neutral, the Federation had no jurisdiction to prohibit non-Federation citizens from living there.

But New Vulcan was Federation space, and the Federation was well within its authority to restrict access to non-citizens if it chose. Romulans had been unable to freely enter Federation space as part of the peace treaty following the Battle of Cheron in 2160 that established the Romulan Neutral Zone. Tensions with the Romulan Star Empire also remained extremely high after the loss of Vulcan two years earlier and a Romulan on this side of the Neutral Zone for any reason would have been a catalyst for an interplanetary incident.

"And why would this man, I believe you referred to him as Rhaal, choose to enter Federation space knowing he could be detained or apprehended?"

"He was trying to get his kids out of the Empire," the man replied. "It's a long trip back to Romulus no matter how you go, but he decided he'd take his chances going the longer way through Federation
space than the shorter route through the Klingon Empire. We were taking him to Nausicaa and the Nausicaans were going to get him the rest of the way."

"Logical."

"Like I said, I can't tell you what to do, but I'm not above begging. Rhaal was a good person and he deserves to be remembered by good people, not as a Romulan terrorist who died trying to infiltrate the Federation or however the press services will spin it once the investigation starts. I just need you to understand, doctor…?"

"I am Voris," he replied.

"I'm Jacob Diels," the man responded, offering a grim nod. "I'm captain of the Oglethorpe. People call me Jake."

Voris tore his gaze away from Captain Diels' face and thought for a moment. "I have not decided what I will do in regards to reporting Rhaal's death, but I am a physician, not a politician."

"Do you have a minute to give me an update on my crew?" the captain asked. "They look a lot better than they did. We have our passengers running the ship right now, but I need them back on their feet so we can start making repairs and get out of orbit of this godforsaken planet." He scowled but quickly added, "No offense."

Voris conferred with his medical team and made his rounds with Captain Diels. Watching the captain interact with his crew, it was evident they would die for him and he for them. He listened as Diels made idle talk and gave hugs and handshakes to his people, piecing together a better firsthand account of the events that had led the Oglethorpe to hobble into orbit with two dead crewmembers and substantial damage.

They'd encountered a massive, unexpected vacuum fluctuation in the Briar Patch and the subsequent radiation had inversed their warp field and flooded their impulse manifolds, leaving them adrift and exposed. Before engineering crews could restore power to the shields and impulse engines, a small asteroid had collided with the port side of the ship.

The ship's first officer and payload specialist had been conducting an inspection of the port cargo hold at the time of impact and were killed almost instantly from the rapid depressurization. The buildup in the impulse manifolds had nearly caused a warp reactor breach, but Rhaal had remained behind in their engineering section to shut it down.

As they left one of the storage lockers and moved to the next, Veran stopped him. "Doctor, it is 1845 hours. Have you made arrangements with other physicians on the surface to continue our efforts? All of the patients are stable, but they will require continuing care."

"I will speak with the captain," he replied.

"No need to speak to me," Diels said, turning around and flipping open a communications device he wore on his belt. "You and your people have done a lot of good and deserve a break. I don't know how to express just how grateful we all are."

"I also wished to confer with you about the status of the Orion patient," Veran said.

Voris excused himself and followed the nurse into the adjacent storage locker to examine a young Orion man. He was in the middle of explaining to his patient that he was going to lower his dose of analgesic when a feral, anguished cry rang out from down the hall. It was the singular voice of a human woman lost in the throes of emotional pain and confusion. It was the sound Dagny had made
just weeks ago, the memory clawed at his soul. He was due at home very shortly and realized he looked forward to seeing her.

"Uh, Dr. Voris?" Captain Diels muttered, standing in the entry to the storage locker and scratching his head.

"Yes?"

"There's a bit of a problem—your government won't send anyone to replace you."

Voris and Veran exchanged looks. "I can remain behind as long as necessary," Veran offered.

"I don't think you have a choice," the captain said slowly. "The New Vulcan government is quarantining the ship. No one is coming in or going out for at least the next three days."

"I need to send a message to- to someone," he said, wondering how long Dagny could fare on her own. He had nearly called her his mate.

"The New Vulcan Security Ministry is also jamming our signals," Captain Diels replied angrily. "Nothing is going in or out, no people, no communications, nothing. I've been told to direct all pertinent comments, questions, and concerns to someone named Vanek at the Security Ministry: they're the only people I can make contact with. They won't even give me a straight answer about why they're doing this. Any ideas?"

"No."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but are your people always like this?"

"Not always, no," Voris murmured. Vulcans had always been cautious people, but they'd become a lot warier of aliens in the past two years. Vulcans hadn't always been like this, but it was becoming more common, even among those who would call themselves progressive.

"I guess you're going to be our guests for a while," Diels sighed. "I'll see about getting you some quarters and rations."

"Thank you," Voris replied. He took a slow breath and tried to tame his frustration and worry.

Dagny's stomach screamed in protest as she heaved more gastric juices into the toilet. She was now well past twenty-four hours without eating a meal and all she had to throw up was water. She leaned her head against the cool tile on the wall and checked her PADD for what felt like the millionth time.

Voris had never responded to her question about the food replicator and she'd been unable to figure it out how to get it working. He should have been back more than three hours ago. She'd sent two more messages asking if everything was ok and another one to ask if he was coming home late, but all she got in reply was silence. She was worried and frustrated and couldn't shake a horrible feeling that Voris wasn't coming back any time soon. What had happened? Was he safe? She had a sense that he wasn't in any real danger, but how could she really know that?

Another wave of nausea kicked her in the gut and her stomach contracted. All she did was gag until she cried. Hunger, gravity, and the symptoms of early pregnancy had completely tapped her strength.

How pathetic she felt, to be surrounded by so much technology and be so desperate and hungry. She supposed her next step was to try and call for help, but who was she supposed to call? The police? And what should she say? "Please send help, I'm hungry?"
She wasn’t accustomed to having to rely on anyone. On the *Albret*, everyone had always relied on her, but now here she was, unable to make herself dinner. She didn’t know anyone on New Vulcan besides Voris, Silek, Sarek, and Dr. Govorski. Voris wasn’t answering her messages, Silek probably wouldn’t throw water on her if she were drowning, Minister Sarek was kind but still far too intimidating to even consider bothering with something this embarrassing, and then there was Dr. Govorski.

Dagny had just made up her mind to contact the friendly human doctor first thing in the morning—it was so late, after all—when she heard a buzzing sound that made her jump. She held her breath, training her ears for the direction of the noise. After about twenty seconds she heard it again and realized someone was at the door.

The time on her PADD read 2214 hours. Was it normal for Vulcans to visit at this time of day? She climbed to her feet, steadying herself on the edge of the counter and praying the black spots in her vision would go away. She shuffled out of the lavatory and toward the front door, wondering what she should do. It buzzed again and she gritted her teeth. From somewhere deep in her heart, she knew something had happened to Voris. She didn’t know what, but she was certain it wasn’t him outside insistently pressing the call button.

"Miss Skjeggestad, my apologies for the late hour," called a male voice through the door. "Please come to the door."

It was Sarek. It took her several seconds to summon the courage to decide to open the door, another few seconds to fuss over her appearance, and a couple more seconds to make her way to the front entry hall without fainting from hunger and anxiety. Each step seemed to demand a conscious decision on the part of her muscles.

The comm on the wall started to chirp. She shuddered, disengaged the door release, and found First Minister Sarek. He was dressed in dark purple robes and keying in something on a small PADD. He looked up from his device and said, "Miss Skjeggestad, please accept my apologies for disturbing you at this late hour."

"It's ok," she mumbled. Though talking to him made her nervous, she was starting to feel relieved he'd shown up when he did.

"I regret to say there has been an incident. May I come in?"
New Friends

Stardate 2260.75

The door closed behind the First Minister. "Is Voris ok?"

"I have been unable to communicate with him, but there is no reason to believe he has incurred harm," Sarek explained. "Earlier today he boarded a cargo vessel to treat its injured crew and passengers. A short time later, the New Vulcan High Council received a report that there was an outbreak of Orion lungworm on Bergeron Colony, a collective on the southern continent of Cestus III from which the cargo vessel originated."

"So what does that mean?" Dagny was so dizzy she had to grip the back of the couch to stay upright.

"The ship has been quarantined for a minimum of three days while New Vulcan health authorities investigate the matter."

"Is Orion lungworm very dangerous?"

"I have been informed it does not infect humans, though humans can transmit it. It causes a mild respiratory illness in Orions but it is far more serious for Vulcanoid species. It was eradicated in the Federation through an aggressive vaccination program and ten years after the last reported case, Vulcan physicians ceased vaccinating against the disease. While the report from Cestus III is dubious, the High Council is unwilling to risk exposing an unvaccinated population to Orion lungworm."

"So he isn't coming back for three days?" What was she going to do?

"Possibly longer," Sarek admitted. "I am working with the interim government to resolve the matter as quickly as possible but in the meantime, I invite you to stay with me."

"In your house?" Dagny asked, wishing she could unsay the ridiculous words as soon as they'd left her mouth. She doubted he would invite her to sleep in his outdoor storage shed.

"I believe that was the implication."

She nearly launched into a gracious refusal on instinct, ready to claim she didn't want to be a bother and didn't need anything, but that wasn't entirely true. She needed food. She would eventually need medical care. And she didn't know how to get those things without any money, or even where to get them.

"I am not in the habit of making offers to be polite," Sarek continued. "I offer because I appreciate the difficulty of your situation."

She nodded and said, "Thank you."

"I have a car waiting," the minister replied. "Take whatever time you need to collect your belongings."

"I don't have much," she admitted, taking a few steps and sliding her hands along the back of the couch for support. "Can I bring Harold?"

"I do not understand."
"He's Voris' cat," she explained, feeling saliva pooling in her mouth again, signaling that she was on the verge of dry heaving again. "Voris lets him roam the neighborhood to hunt, but he-" She took a breath to keep from retching. "He uh, he comes back every couple of days for water and food."

Sarek paused, giving the impression he was recalling some distant memory. "You may bring the cat."

"Thank you," she mumbled, before forcing herself to say more loudly, "Thank you."

"Do you require any assistance?"

"I think I can manage," she replied, stopping at the edge of the couch and dreading having the walk down the long hallway on her own two feet. She was exhausted. She was trembling. She was hungry and nauseated and dizzy.

"Are you well, Miss Skjeggestad?"

"Just a little tired," she lied. "I'll be ok."

As if to prove her point, she let go of the corner of the couch and proceeded toward the back bedroom. She made it exactly six steps before her left knee hit the tile floor with a loud "thunk." That was the last thing she remembered.

Voris surveyed the cargo bay, straining his eyes against the dim light to find a focal point. He sat on the floor of the observation deck, his legs splayed out in front of him and his back protesting from the uncomfortable position. His colleagues were asleep in the cramped guest quarters the captain had provided. He couldn't sleep through T'Nar's snoring so he'd sought out a quiet place to meditate, but meditation was a poor substitute for rest. He was troubled.

The New Vulcan High Council had refused to allow him, Veran, T'Nar, and Selaara back on the planet's surface out of fears of Orion lungworm. He sensed that the New Vulcan government had concerns about the Oglethorpe that extended beyond public health—they wouldn't have cutoff transmissions between the ship and the planet below based solely on fears of an outbreak—but that was the current justification for refusing to allow anyone to disembark.

Several hours ago, the Vulcan Health Ministry had sought his assistance in confirming the presence of Orion lungworm on the ship, so he'd taken blood and saliva samples from everyone on board and then transported the samples to a Vulcan medical ship in orbit where physicians could run tests in a contained environment.

He had requested that Veran, T'Nar, and Selaara be transported to the Vulcan ship as well for the three-day quarantine. He had agreed to stay on the Oglethorpe because there were patients who required ongoing care, and though the New Vulcan Health Ministry had initially agreed to this arrangement, just before the transport was scheduled to happen, the New Vulcan Security Ministry had denied the request. They had also denied his request to send a message to Dagny, even through a third party. It now seemed that whatever happened, their fates had become intertwined with the crew of the Oglethorpe the moment they'd materialized on the transporter pad.

He understood the necessity of exercising caution if Orion lungworm was suspected to be aboard the vessel. Orion lungworm was a highly contagious airborne virus, not a parasite like the Bolian lungworm or the Terran rat lungworm. The disease was one of the most infectious viruses known to medical science—a susceptible individual coming into contact with an infected person had a ninety-eight percent chance of contracting it. It was also such a tiny microbe that it was not always removed...
by transporter biofilters. It was only known to cause disease in Orions and Vulcanoids, but most species, including humans, were capable of passively carrying the virus without exhibiting symptoms.

Orions would typically only suffer a three to seven day period of mild wheezing and coughing, but Vulcans, Romulans, and Rigelians often descended into respiratory failure without adequate medical intervention. Even with advanced medical treatment, it had a 15.4 percent mortality rate among Vulcans and a nineteen percent mortality rate among Rigelians. Morbidity among Romulans was unknown due to insufficient data, but there was no reason to believe they were immune.

The disease had been eradicated from the Federation after a successful vaccination program and there hadn't been a single case reported in more than forty years, but that data was only relevant within the Federation. It was possible there were reservoirs of the disease outside the Federation, and because Bergeron colony was home to many non-Federation species, it was also possible Orion lungworm could have made its way to Cestus III.

So it was logical for the High Council to exercise caution, since a large percentage of the New Vulcan population had either never been vaccinated or had waning immunity because so much time had transpired since their last immunization. Voris fell into the latter category, but he was not particularly concerned: he doubted whether anyone on the Oglethorpe was carrying the microbe. Given that it had an incubation period of two to seven Standard days and the crew and passengers of the Oglethorpe lived in such close quarters, it was a near impossibility that the two Orions and Romulan aboard the ship could have made the twenty-two-day journey from Cestus III to New Vulcan without falling ill if the virus were actually on board.

He had no doubt that the Security and Health Ministries understood this. He hadn't mentioned Rhaal in his report to the Health Ministry, but he had mentioned the Orions. He had included information about their medical histories, indicating that neither of them had ever been vaccinated against Orion lungworm, nor had they been sick at any point during their journey. When he'd explained the situation to Captain Diels, Diels had compared his Orion crewmembers to "canaries in coal mines," whatever that meant. Given the facts as he understood them, Voris would be very shocked to learn that anyone on board was actually infected with or passively carrying Orion lungworm.

So he had his suspicions that the quarantine was a pretense for something else, but as to what that was, it would be illogical to speculate. In the meantime, he was stuck aboard a ship in orbit of his home planet with no way to contact anyone on the surface.

It was 0358 hours. Voris had been due back at his home nearly nine hours ago. How was Dagny managing? She had enough medication to last for weeks and she had an endless supply of food from the replicator, unless the power went out, as it occasionally did.

Worry nibbled at him. Resetting the replicator following a power failure was an arduous process and he ought to have considered that possibility. He breathed deeply and closed his eyes, reminding himself there was nothing he could do and that Dagny was intelligent and resourceful.

She was also human. Even if she possessed the things necessary for survival, he understood the typical human disliked being completely alone for extended periods of time. They were social creatures poorly suited to solitude.

The door creaked open and the small, round face of a woman appeared in the doorway. "Someone said you'd come in here; I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"No," he replied, facing forward once again.
"I brought you some plomeek soup," she said. "I figured it's almost breakfast time and I noticed you didn't eat much at dinner."

His stomach grumbled at her offering. She held out a simple gray bowl with steam wafting up from the top. "I am grateful to you," he answered, accepting the dish.

"Mind if I sit?" she asked.

"Please," he replied.

She slid down the wall and folded her legs underneath her body. "I've never had plomeek soup but Velara programmed it into the replicators. Said it was her grandmother's recipe."

Velara was a Vulcan name. Voris recalled Captain Diels explaining that Bergeron colony was home to people of all species and creeds, so perhaps there were Vulcans residing there as well. An intriguing thought.

He picked up the small spoon that was resting in the bowl and drew it to his mouth. The rich textures and distinct flavors made it difficult to believe it had come from a replicator. It reminded him of his own foremother's plomeek broth. He began to eat steadily.

"My name is Ann."

"I am Voris."

"It's nice to meet you. Thank you so much for coming aboard when you didn't have to."

"Your gratitude is unnecessary."

"I disagree. You saved Nicolas' life. My son. I was sure he was going to die from the decompression, but he woke up a little while ago. He's going to pull through."

"I am a healer," he replied. "I was merely performing my duty."

"I know this whole mess is keeping you away from your family and I just wanted to say how sorry I am."

"I fail to see how you are at fault," he replied, thinking of Dagny and wondering if she really constituted a family. "It is an unfortunate situation, but it will be resolved."

"Yeah, Captain Diels says the damage isn't as bad as he initially thought and thinks he can get it repaired in under two weeks so we shouldn't be in orbit much longer."

"Do you intend to continue on to Nausicaa?"

"Don't really have a choice. There are five hundred tons of lithium, lithium-6, and dilithium on this ship. People back home worked six months to mine it. They're counting on us to get it delivered and bring back some much-needed supplies. Besides, Nausicaa is only four days away at warp 5, assuming we can coax the engine into going that fast."

"Will you permit me a query about Bergeron colony?"

"You don't have to ask," she laughed. "Just ask."

It occurred to him that Dagny had once said a similar thing. As he came to that realization, he decided this woman reminded him of Dagny quite a bit. Though Ann was easily twice Dagny's age
and had hair caught between gold and silver, they both radiated a similar pragmatic yet kind personality.

"Captain Diels said your colony was inclusive and that you admitted species from worlds that have been historically hostile to the Federation."

"Yes, it's true. I'm guessing you want to know how it's working out?"

"Yes."

"I won't lie—it hasn't been perfect, but I think it's a good enough place. We've got almost a thousand people now. With having so many people from so many different planets, we've had some bumps. We've had to ask a few people to leave because they couldn't get along, but that's pretty rare. Most of the people who come to Bergeron colony were rejected by their own people and I get the sense they're just tired. I see it mostly with the Romulans, but it's obvious in the Klingons, Nausicaans, and Gorn too. They're tired of fighting for their government or being persecuted by it—they just want to live their lives, you know? So we get by with very simple rules. No killing, no stealing, everyone contributes, no one gets left behind."

"Captain Diels said Rhaal was returning to Romulus to collect his family. Are there children there?"

"Oh yes. In some ways it's more of a community than a colony I suppose. I have four children of my own. You already know Nicolas—he's seventeen and almost full grown, but my youngest is nine. My other children stayed home with my husband."

"And you feel it is an environment safe and conducive for raising children?"

Ann laughed. "I spent more than half my life on a salvage ship, so 'safe' is probably relative to me. Maybe some people would think it's crazy to raise a family so near the Klingon border, but a life in space taught me that safety is an illusion. I mean, Vulcan was supposed to be a safe place to raise a family."

Voris raised an eyebrow and Ann suddenly seemed to remember she was speaking with a Vulcan. "I- I'm so sorry," she stammered. "I stick my foot in my mouth all the time. I didn't mean to offend-"

"You speak truly," he interrupted.

"I guess what I meant to say is life at Bergeron colony isn't easy, mind you, but it's really grown up over these last three years. We have a school and even a clinic now. Of course, Velara died three months ago and we haven't found a replacement doctor. We have Aisla—she's a nurse—but she's in over her head. I don't suppose you know anyone who'd want a job as a doctor on a remote colony world? Or even a paramedic?"

Dagny awoke what felt like seconds later, lying flat on her back on a biobed and staring up at two Vulcan faces and two medical tricorders. One was a woman she didn't know, but the other was a man she could never forget. He was Dr. Sevek, the surgeon who had kept her sane aboard the Albret in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Vulcan.

Where was she? A hospital of some kind, obviously, but why? A gush of nausea swept over her and a painful hunger cramp hit her stomach. It started coming back to her. Sarek had been in the apartment and she must have fainted.

"Miss Skjeggestad, can you hear me?" Dr. Sevek asked.
"Dr. Sevek?"

"Yes. It is good to see you again," he remarked, lowering his tricorder. "Though the circumstances are regrettable."

"Where am I?"

"The Va'ashiv district hospital."

"Am I ok? Is the baby ok? Where is Sarek?"

The woman handed Dr. Sevek a PADD and left the room. His eyes flicked down at the information on the screen and he nodded. "The First Minister is waiting in the lobby. The intake information indicates he called for an emergency transport when you lost consciousness in your home three minutes ago. Your neural scans appear clear, though I would like to perform an additional assessment to rule out a concussive injury."

She'd been transported and scanned in less than three minutes. Vulcans were nothing if not efficient.

"I have a mild headache, dizziness, and nausea, but I had those before," she explained, beginning to run through the standard concussion screening from memory. "It's been some time since I've eaten and I'm currently--" She hesitated to explain her condition. She didn't really know Dr. Sevek that well, but somehow admitting her situation to him felt incredibly awkward. He was a doctor, but he worked in the same hospital as Voris. They probably knew each other. Maybe Dr. Sevek already knew.

"You are currently what, Miss Skjeggestad?"

"I'm five weeks pregnant with a high-risk Vulcan hybrid pregnancy," she finished. "But I don't have any neck pain or vision or hearing disturbances. I don't think I have a concussion, but if you want to do your own exam, I understand."

Dr. Sevek gave a small nod. "I have yet to review your medical file, but the nurse is checking your blood work now. You claim you haven't eaten for some time. Please specify."

"It's been more than twenty-four hours," she admitted.

He swiped his fingers across the PADD several times and said, "I see physicians on Aldebaran, my colleague Dr. Voris, and Dr. Govorski from the Kanunsh'es district hospital have all instructed you to gain weight. I also see no evidence of a psychological aversion to food, an emotional disorder involving obsessive weight loss, or a condition or medication that would suppress your appetite. Are you unable to obtain food?"

"Um, in a way, I guess," she muttered, biting her lip.

Her face grew hot. It was humiliating to explain to a distinguished surgeon that his colleague had gotten her pregnant and left her alone in his quarters but he never came back and she couldn't figure out how to use the replicator and didn't have any idea how to find or buy non-replicated food. She tried being as vague as possible and left Voris' name out of it because she wasn't sure how much Dr. Sevek knew, but he wasn't stupid. It didn't take Vulcan logic to put all the pieces together, and when she was done explaining that she didn't have anorexia so much as a complete inability to function in a society bigger than a medium-sized salvage ship, she noticed his jaw tighten slightly.

The longer she spent in the company of Vulcans, the more she was learning to read their muted facial expressions. He seemed uncomfortable, even if he would never admit it, and all she wanted to do
was hide in a hole and pretend like none of it had ever happened.

Thankfully the nurse returned and broke the awkwardness before the silence grew unbearable. She said something inaudible to Dr. Sevek as she handed him a PADD, and after he skimmed the information, he said, "Your blood work indicates you are anemic and hypoglycemic, which are easily explained by your recent radiation exposure and lack of food. I would like to perform additional scans to ensure the fetus remains healthy, but it appears you have suffered an episode of syncope due to insufficient blood sugar. I shall have the orderly fetch a nutritional supplement. Do you wish me to notify First Minister Sarek of your current status?"

"Is he still here?" she sputtered, horrified at the thought of the most important person on the planet was hanging around a hospital waiting room all because she'd fainted.

"I am told he is."

Dagny groaned inwardly. It took another hour and a half for Dr. Sevek to determine she and the baby were not in any immediate danger. The nurse gave her dextrose tablets and a bowl of soup that tasted like thick, potato-flavored sweat, but she was so famished she didn't care. Her nausea faded almost immediately as the food hit her stomach, but the hunger pangs were replaced by tiredness.

It was 2358 hours when he released her from the hospital with instructions to eat small balanced meals at least five times per day and follow up with Dr. Govorski. Dagny was getting tired of being a patient, but she was sure there was a lot more of this in her future. She was practicing what she would say to Sarek in her head but the hallway into the main lobby was much shorter than she thought, and when she wandered into the waiting room, she found him sitting upright in a chair closest to the door and her rehearsed composure faded. The moment Dagny appeared, everyone turned to look at her.

There were four other Vulcans sitting in the waiting room. They sat opposite their First Minister, and the scene would have felt comical were it not so mortifying. They were trying hard to look like they weren't curious about the New Vulcan First Minister's presence in a hospital waiting room on a random night, but they weren't fooling anyone.

"Are you ready to depart?" Sarek asked, rising to his feet.

She nodded and gave him a thin smile, then wondered if smiling was appropriate. Probably not. She followed him outside to a long, black car that was waiting at the curb. Unlike the self-piloting cars she'd ridden in with Voris, this one had a driver, and the moment Sarek appeared, he exited the vehicle and opened the door. She waited for Sarek to get in—he was the more important person after all and she didn't want to assume she was entitled to the same treatment as a planetary leader—but he motioned for her to enter first.

She slid into the seat, thinking the soft texture of the fabric was the nicest thing she'd ever touched. She wanted to squeeze it and rub her face on it and she might have, if the First Minister wasn't there. She halfway expected him to ask if she was ok, but he didn't. He simply asked, "Would you prefer to collect your belongings yourself or will you permit me to send a member of my staff?"

She would prefer the option that troubled everyone else the least, but she recognized there was no such choice. Sarek had already spent so much of his night attending to her, so the thought that she would make him drive all the way back to Voris' quarters just so she could pick up Harold, her PADD, her medicine, and the two bags of clothes she owned made her cringe. But sending a member of his staff to run a personal errand for her also felt wrong and she wasn't sure she wanted a Vulcan stranger rifling through her underwear. And what if they forgot something? Then she would
have to go back.

"Your silence suggests you are deliberating the option which inconveniences me least."

She ran her bottom teeth along her upper lip. It was like he could read her mind. "You've already gone so far out of your way to help me."

"And my assistance would be irrelevant if you did not arrive at my home fully provisioned to care for yourself."

"I guess I would prefer to do it," she mumbled.

Sarek lowered the privacy divider between the backseat and the driver and gave him instructions to return to Voris' home. It was a short trip. She tried to be quick but the gravity of the planet still exhausted her and Harold was less than pleased at the idea of being shoved in a crate that she'd found at the back of Voris' closet. It took five minutes to collect her things and thirty more to convince Harold that captivity wouldn't hurt him.

Eventually they returned to the car with Harold uttering a series of throaty growls from inside the crate. Before they left, Dagyn patched up the shallow scratches on Sarek's driver's hands with the dermal regenerator Voris had left her. As the car pulled away from the housing development, she brushed the tips of her fingers along the luxurious fabric of the car seats and said, "Thank you so much for helping me, First Minister."

"Your gratitude is unnecessary. It was logical to assist you when I learned of my nephew's circumstances."

"Have you talked to him?"

"The Security Ministry would not permit me at this juncture."

Dagny was about to ask how they could do that if he was in charge of the Security Ministry, but she realized she didn't know how the New Vulcan government worked. Maybe the Security Ministry didn't answer to the First Minister. She knew the Coridan military was completely independent from the Coridan civilian government, so maybe the New Vulcan Security Ministry worked the same way. Or maybe he was in charge but didn't want to press the issue for some political reason. Voris had referred to him as the interim First Minister and had said he was campaigning to be elected to a permanent position, so maybe there was some other reason he wasn't leaping to his nephew's aid.

Politics were frustrating. She didn't know much about the inner workings of New Vulcan's political atmosphere, but she wasn't a complete stranger to politics either. A transient life on a salvage ship had given her a firsthand look at what power struggles and internal conflicts could do, especially to innocent bystanders. The Federation raised and lifted its embargos on Orion goods almost every other year, depending on how connected the Orion government was to the Orion Syndicate at any given time. She remembered being ten years old and spending a tense few weeks stuck behind a Nausicaan blockade in Ithen's orbit.

She never really understood the point of political maneuvering, but she understood that it happened. At the root was the need to maintain power, resources, or relationships. It would be so much easier if people could just get along.

"May I ask a personal query?"

She hid a blossoming smile, wondering why Vulcans so often felt compelled to ask if they could ask a question that would be considered even remotely personal. "Of course."
"Do you know a woman named Ann Svendsen, or her son, Nicolas?"

"Of course I do!" she replied, unable to hide the excitement in her voice. "She was on the Albre. The whole Svendsen family was. She's actually my father's second cousin. They left the ship right after the incident at Vulcan and moved to Cestus III."

"Have you spoken with her recently?"

"I haven't talked to any of the Svendens since the day they left Andoria. I guess it's been more than a year and a half now."

"I see."

"Why do you ask, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Ann and Nicolas Svendsen are currently aboard the Oglethorpe, the vessel Dr. Voris boarded yesterday morning. They come from a non-sanctioned Federation colony called Bergeron colony, and the Federation Security Service has concerns it is harboring terrorists."

"That doesn't make any sense. The Svendsens aren't terrorists."

"You just admitted you hadn't spoken with them for a year and a half. Much could have changed during that time."

Dagny took a slow breath to try and temper the hostility in her voice. "You're right, but I've known the Svendsen family my whole life. Ann used to babysit me and when I got older, I used to babysit her daughters. She taught me how to sew. No way did her family become terrorists."

"I did not say they were terrorists, nor did I say I believed anyone on Bergeron colony is involved in terrorism. Bergeron colony is hardly the first colony where Federation citizens have lived peacefully with non-citizens, but they are the first to openly grant asylum to Romulans and Klingons. New Vulcan remains highly mistrustful of the Romulan Star Empire due to the loss of our planet two years ago, and tensions with between the Federation and the Klingon Empire are escalating due to territorial disputes."

"Can I ask why you're asking about Ann in the first place? Is she in some kind of trouble? Am I in trouble just for knowing her?"

"No, but the New Vulcan elections are in sixteen days," Sarek replied. "It is anticipated to be a very close election. There are certain individuals opposed to my appointment to First Minister who are seeking to discredit me in any way possible."

Dagny mulled it over in her mind for several seconds before replying, "So because you're connected to Voris and Voris is connected to me and I'm connected to Ann and Ann is connected to Bergeron colony and Bergeron colony has Romulans living there, they think you're involved in some kind of plot with the Romulans?"

Sarek's lip twitched, almost as if he was suppressing a smile. "You understand the situation quite well, Miss Skjeggestad."

"But that's ridiculous!" she cried, momentarily forgetting to try and reign in her emotions. "Do they think Voris went up there on your orders to have a private meeting with Ann or something?"

"No one has made any accusations or sought any formal charges, nor do I believe any will be forthcoming. There are other facts about this situation that I am not at liberty to discuss with you, but
for the moment, it seems as though you and my nephew have been unintentionally caught in the middle of my political struggles."

"I'm so sorry," Dagny breathed. "This wouldn't have happened if-"

"It is illogical to apologize for that which is beyond your ability to control," he said, cutting her off. "Your association with the Svendsen family has been a factor in this developing situation, but so too has my relation to Dr. Voris."

They arrived at the First Minister's lavish home a short time later and the young Vulcan woman with the sharp features that had greeted her last time showed her to a spacious room with a bed that was obscenely large. Dagny let Harold out of his crate and he zipped around the room several times, trying to orient himself to his new surroundings. He ultimately darted under the bed and refused to come out.

Dagny crawled up on the tall bed, thinking the mattress must be the closest simulation to a cloud ever created. She stretched her arms out as far as she could, but she couldn't reach the edges of the bed. Surely this bed was designed to hold more than one person? All of the Skjeggestad girls could have slept in it comfortably without the risk of shoving their elbows and halitosis on each other in the middle of the night.

A flood of painful nostalgia crashed into her. She closed her eyes and tried to remember Ingrid and Frida and Hedda's faces. She tried to remember Erik. She touched her necklace and shuddered. They hadn't even been gone for a month and already she couldn't remember.

She was forgetting more than just their faces: she was forgetting them. She'd never been the sort of person to get attached to things—a life in space had taught her that things broke, deals fell through, people left, people died, but life went on. Every day since the loss of the Albret had been about getting up and enduring the waking hours and then trying not to cry herself to sleep every night. She wasn't always successful at keeping the tears at bay, and she failed in her efforts that night.

It felt like moments later when she heard a buzz at the door and rolled over onto her back. Light streamed through the tall narrow windows on the right side of the room and Harold was sleeping next to her pillow, apparently having forgiven her transgressions against him the night before. She sat up and rubbed her face, feeling the gritty sensation of dried tears.

"Miss Skjeggestad, it is T'Mir. It is well past first meal. Are you hungry?"

Her stomach growled and she tried to respond, but her throat was dry and the words came out garbled. She flung her legs over the side of the massive bed and stumbled to the door. She'd slept in her clothes and she was sure her hair was a mess, and though the woman at the door was a picture of immaculate and groomed professionalism, Dagny didn't feel self-conscious. Vulcans tended to be an intimidating lot, but this woman's dark eyes were bright and welcoming.

"You said your name was T'Mir?"

"Yes."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Dagny."

"I know."

"I meant, you can call me Dagny. You don't have to call me Miss Skjeggestad. I know it's a mouthful."
T'Mir's eyes shifted but she canted her head slightly and replied, "If you like. Perhaps you would like to dress before first meal."

Dagny smoothed down her rumpled clothing and chuckled, suddenly starting to feel anxious.

"I shall wait outside," T'Mir added. "Please, take whatever time you need."

Dagny rushed to dress herself. The room had its own attached lavatory that was roughly the size of Voris' bedroom. She administered her morning dose of medication, brushed her teeth and combed her hair, and found T'Mir waiting in the hallway, just as she'd promised. She led Dagny down a back corridor and a short series of stairs into a kitchen so large it could have served as a cargo bay. There were four sinks and what looked like two thermal cooking units and the biggest replicator she'd ever seen next to an enormous food preservation unit. The kitchen looked like it could easily prepare a feast for hundred people in less than thirty minutes, but she figured New Vulcan's First Minister probably entertained a lot of guests.

"There is plomeek broth available and First Minister Sarek asked me to prepare cinnamon rolls this morning."

"Cinnamon rolls?"

"Yes, I am told they are a Terran delicacy. His deceased mate was evidently quite fond of them, and he asks for them on occasion."

"Oh," Dagny smiled.

"If neither of those options are appealing, there is fresh fruit and bread available, and the replicators are programmed with 1.2 million different Federation dishes."

"I think a cinnamon roll sounds really nice," Dagny said.

T'Mir opened the food preservation unit and extracted a plate with six large frosted buns. She warmed one in the thermal unit, and ten seconds later offered it to Dagny on a plain white plate with a fork. Dagny would have preferred to just pick it up and eat it with her hands, but she remembered the Vulcan aversion to touching food.

Dagny sat at a small table in the corner and T'Mir set to cleaning. She'd eaten pastries before, but none half so exquisite as this. There was just enough icing and cinnamon to complement the perfectly baked and flaky bread. She devoured it and it took a lot of discipline to avoid scraping the bits of icing off the plate with her fingers.

"You said you made this?" Dagny asked.

"I did," T'Mir replied without looking over from the cabinet where she was restocking cleaned dishes.

"It was so very good."

T'Mir glanced at her. Dagny expected her to either say thank you or tell her that praise was illogical, but instead, she said, "I remember you."

They locked eyes with each other and stayed that way for a time before Dagny stated the obvious. "I'm guessing you were on the Albret."

"I was," T'Mir admitted.
"I'm sorry."

T'Mir nodded solemnly. "As am I. I grieve with thee."

Dagny clenched her jaw, feeling the raw emotions from the night before threaten to bubble back to the surface. This woman was so kind; the last thing Dagny wanted to do was embarrass herself in front of her. "Can I- uh- can I help you with the dishes?"

T'Mir almost looked shocked. "You are a guest in the First Minister's home. You are not expected to perform work."

"I want to," Dagny mumbled, rising from the table to join T'Mir in the main kitchen area. "If that's ok with you, I mean. I'm not trying to take your job away from you or anything." She paused and looked up at the ceiling, wondering if she was offending this woman. "I think maybe it would be nice just to talk to someone again."

T'Mir looked uncertain, but she slowly bobbed her head. "You do not seem well-acquainted with Vulcan customs."

"I'm *not*," Dagny admitted. "But I would love to learn. The problem is I don't know any Vulcans aside from Voris and First Minister Sarek and his brother Silek. I started reading about some things in a database yesterday, but I feel like if I want to understand Vulcans, I need to actually talk to some."

T'Mir backed away from the stack of dishes, moved to the cycler, extracted a rack of silverware, and set it on the counter. "Wash your hands first. These go in the two drawers there," she said, pointing to a set of drawers by the replicator.

Dagny grinned. "Thank you."

T'Mir raised an eyebrow and returned to the stack of dishes that she had been putting in the cabinets. "What do you wish to know about Vulcans?"

"Anything," Dagny admitted, rolling up her sleeves to wash her hands in one of the sinks. "Everything. Whatever you want to tell me."
"You must constantly whisk in small circles while gradually lowering the applied heat, otherwise, the sauce will not emulsify correctly," T'Mir explained, gazing at the whisk in Dagny's hand and reaching across her to adjust the setting on the stovetop thermal unit.

Dagny adjusted her stirring technique and after about a minute, the brown sauce began to lighten and become smooth and creamy. "Is this right? Does this look ok?"

"It is acceptable, yes," T'Mir replied, completely turning off the heat.

Coming from T'Mir, "acceptable" was high praise. Dagny smiled. Hoisting the saucepan with both hands, she poured the fluffy golden cream over the lightly steamed vegetables and noodles in the glass pan on the counter. She jiggled the casserole dish to get the cream to coat the vegetables more evenly and then sprinkled the top with the ten grams of crushed grain she had prepared with a mortar and pestle.

"Now it must bake at 190 degrees Celsius for fifty-two minutes."

"Fifty-two minutes seems oddly precise," Dagny murmured, sliding the glass dish across the metal rack of the thermal unit. "Surely a minute either way wouldn't make a huge difference."

T'Mir pursed her lips and Dagny fought the urge to smile. "It is the correct length of time to obtain the most optimally tender vegetables."

"What if someone likes their veggies on the crisper side?" she asked, setting the timer for fifty-two minutes.

T'Mir raised an eyebrow and Dagny decided to drop it. T'Mir reminded her so much of Ingrid that it was easy to fall into the natural habit of teasing her, just as she had done with her younger sister. Ingrid had been introverted and enjoyed rules and order: she wouldn't have thought twice about being told something needed to cook for exactly fifty-two minutes.

They had just finished preparing a casserole-like dish called balkra for the evening meal, or aru-yem, as the Vulcans would say. Dagny had spent three days in Sarek's household and they had been informative beyond measure. She had learned about Vulcan language and culture, absorbing anything and everything she could. T'Mir had shown her a number of recipes that had belonged to her grandmother, or ko'mekh-il.

Dagny lapped up Vulcan vocabulary readily and was fair with grammar, but T'Mir insisted her pronunciation left a lot to be desired. She'd spent yesterday afternoon trying to teach Dagny how to raise her tongue to the roof of her mouth to form certain vowel sounds and focus on accentuating the right syllables, but Dagny wasn't sure it had made much of a difference. T'Mir had told her that her articulation had gone from being entirely unintelligible to merely terrible, so surely that had to be an improvement.

A small chime echoed from the other room and T'Mir left and returned with a PADD in her hands. "First Minister Sarek will be joining us for end meal."

Dagny offered a small smile, even as anxiety welled in her gut. The First Minister was rarely at home; most days he left before Dagny woke up and returned after she went to sleep. She'd only seen
him once since the night he'd fetched her from Voris' quarters and took her to the hospital. He had been unable to speak with Voris directly but had been informed by the Security Ministry that Voris was alive and in good health and that he aware she was staying with Sarek in the interim.

Voris should have been allowed to come back to New Vulcan today but she'd heard nothing about it. She was sure someone would have told her if the situation had escalated or changed, but maybe that was why First Minister Sarek was coming home early tonight. Maybe he had bad news.

"I should prepare the dining room," T'Mir said, walking toward the rear kitchen exit that fed into the formal dining room.

"Is it just going to be him or is he bringing guests?" Dagny asked, following her.

"The First Minister will be alone," T'Mir replied, activating the switch on the wall and illuminating the room.

Dagny looked out over the long table, wondering why Vulcans enjoyed standing on so much ceremony. She remembered her first night sitting at this table with Voris, Sarek, Silek, and Ambassador Spock. She had been so intimidated then and despite T'Mir's lessons, she was intimidated now.

Since her arrival, she'd eaten small, quiet meals with T'Mir in the kitchen. She wondered at the logic of eating at this enormous table. To Dagny, it made more sense for two people to sit at a table for six rather than at a table for fifty, but T'Mir had explained that breakfast and lunch were traditionally consumed in the kitchen and dinner was eaten in the formal dining room, regardless of the number of guests.

T'Mir was a member of the staff and she took all her meals in the kitchen, so apparently sometimes Sarek ate alone in this massive dining room. She wondered what it would be like, sitting at the head of a table staring down two long rows of empty chairs. Was it lordly? Humbling? Depressing?

Dagny's eyes skimmed the surfaces of the dining room, thinking it was already in immaculate condition, but T'Mir had an eagle's eye for dirt and disorder. T'Mir started directing a number of small domestic bots to polish and buff the long table and sweep the plush rug beneath it. Dagny stood by, watching the robots' progress and watching T'Mir occasionally go behind them to correct tiny deficiencies they'd missed.

She did everything with such precision and attention to detail, but Dagny never got the sense that she was suited to being a housekeeper. After three days together, she still didn't know much about the woman, aside from the fact that she was young and had been on the Albret.

Dagny hadn't told T'Mir everything either. She had talked at length about her previous life—her friends and family and her interest in medicine—but she had left out all the parts about Voris, the destruction of Vulcan, and the loss of the Albret. She'd mentioned her pregnancy in passing, but T'Mir had never pressed her for more information. She wondered how much Sarek had told her, if he'd said anything at all, but if she was curious about Dagny, she did a very Vulcan job of keeping it to herself.

Dagny was certainly intrigued by T'Mir. The Vulcan woman's former life had come up exactly once and she'd changed the subject, so Dagny had just assumed she didn't want to talk about it. She knew Vulcans were very private and she wanted to respect T'Mir's space, but her curiosity was gnawing at her.

"Were you a housekeeper… you know… before?" Dagny asked as casually as she could manage,
moving down the opposite side of the table from T'Mir.

"No."

Dagny bit her lip, keeping her eyes on the backs of the chairs and making sure they were perfectly aligned. She made a quick adjustment to one chair and stepped back to observe the difference, but before she could decide if she’d made things better or worse, T'Mir said, "It is now out of alignment."

Dagny moved it back to its previous position, feeling like it looked crooked but deciding to trust T'Mir's judgment. "So were you a chef then? You make such wonderful meals."

"I was a student," T'Mir replied. "I was accepted to the Vulcan Science Academy to study theoretical chemistry."

"You were a chemist," Dagny mused, deciding it made a lot of sense. T'Mir had a habit of explaining thermodynamic processes and chemical properties whenever Dagny asked a question about cooking.

"No," she replied. "I did not finish my studies."

Dagny frowned and looked away from the center of the room. She didn't need three guesses to figure out why T'Mir hadn't graduated. Figuring she'd pushed the issue far enough, she struggled to think of a more neutral topic of conversation, but T'Mir surprised her by adding, "I was midway through the first year at the Vulcan Science Academy when I was recalled to my family home in Gol to be married."

"Oh," Dagny mumbled. T'Mir had never spoken of a husband, and the phrase, "I was recalled to Gol to be married," was really strange. She made it sound like she had no choice in the matter.

"We had been married for four days when Vulcan was destroyed," T'Mir continued, staring down at the table and running her hand over the gentle arch of one of the chair backs. "We were taken aboard your ship, but he had been severely injured when the roof of our home collapsed. Despite your best efforts, he succumbed to his injuries."

Dagny's heart sank. "I treated your husband?"

"You did," T'Mir replied. Dagny's breath caught in her throat. How she wished she could do anything to rewind time and avoid starting this conversation. She had no recollection of T'Mir or her husband, but he had died under her care. How callous she must seem to not remember him. There had been so many injured Vulcans and so few supplies and her memories from two years ago were one giant blur that she usually kept locked away in the darkest recesses of her mind.

"I'm so sorry."

"You have already apologized once," T'Mir replied. "Furthermore, it is illogical to apologize for that which you could not control. There was nothing you could have done to prevent his death with the limited resources available to you at the time."

"I'm sorry for his loss, but also sorry that I don't remember," Dagny admitted, biting her lip to have something to focus on in order to avoid tearing up. "What was his name?"

T'Mir was quiet for a short time, but she eventually replied, "His name was Verel."
She fought the impulse to apologize again, but she was unsure of what she should say to bridge the silence. Changing the subject felt wrong somehow, like she didn't want to acknowledge Verel's death, but she also didn't want to pry any further into a subject she doubted T'Mir wanted to talk about.

They came to the end of the long table and T'Mir finally broke the tension by saying, "It is in the past."

"Yeah," Dagny mumbled. "So anyway, why don't you go back to studying chemistry if that was what you were doing before?"

"The New Vulcan Science Academy was founded within months of the establishment of the New Vulcan colony, but it remains small and unable to support many students or disciplines," she explained. "Furthermore, New Vulcan has an excess of chemists and other scientists. What the planet requires are laborers, farmers, merchants, and tradespeople, but I am not well suited to any of those occupations."

Dagny suddenly felt very sad for T'Mir. She knew exactly what it was like to have a passion for something and be unable to pursue it because of unfortunate circumstances. She knew better than to tell T'Mir she should follow her dreams no matter what: Dagny didn't adhere to logic like Vulcans did, but she knew just how far empty optimism went. Optimism didn't pay for schooling, it didn't take care of other responsibilities, and it certainly wouldn't guarantee a job after she graduated if there were already too many chemists on New Vulcan. Dagny didn't know all the finer details of T'Mir's personal situation, but she had the strong sense that if T'Mir felt like she could go to university and be successful, she would have already done so.

She made eye contact with T'Mir and nodded. Dagny had always considered herself a pragmatic optimist—she was willing to work hard to achieve her goals, but she was also willing to accept that just because she wanted something and it wasn't theoretically impossible didn't necessarily mean it made sense to pursue it.

She excused herself to take her evening medication and once in the bedroom, she hopped up on the towering bed and thought of Voris' insistence that she could still attend medical school despite everything that had happened. She was still young, but the longer she waited, the harder it would be. Without a baccalaureate degree in a scientific field, the only way for her to get into a medical program was to have two years of professional medical experience, an active paramedic's certification, and pass an entrance exam proving she had the basic scientific knowledge to be successful in medical school. She needed to be employed as a paramedic, not only to keep her skills sharp, but also to maintain her credentials.

New Vulcan seemed to have a glut of medical personnel and her temporary visa wouldn't allow her to legally work on the planet anyway. Voris had talked about relocating to a place that had a medical school nearby, but she wouldn't be able to start school until after the baby was born.

She laid back on the bed, running through different scenarios of how she could manage juggling a difficult pregnancy, a newborn baby, a Vulcan partner who was still practically a stranger, working as a paramedic, and going to medical school. She closed her eyes and tried not to let it overwhelm her.

She ran her hands over her stomach and felt a surge of panic. Being a mother was something that was constantly on her mind, which was strange because her pregnancy felt very abstract. She focused on how she would raise a baby, but all too often, she forgot that she was currently growing a baby. She didn't feel pregnant. Aside from some nausea on the day she'd been trapped at the apartment with no food, she hadn't really had any symptoms. She felt constantly hot, sweaty, and
drained, but that was just a simple fact of living on New Vulcan.

At this point, the baby wasn't even the size of a pea. Her stomach was completely flat and would remain that way for several more months. It all seemed very theoretical still, and that had her worried. She knew all about pregnancy symptoms... her mother had been perpetually pregnant for more than twenty years. It suddenly occurred to her that at almost four weeks post conception, she should be experiencing tender breasts and more frequent urination, but she felt the same as she always did.

She closed her eyes and sighed, begging herself to stay calm. She had never been pregnant before, nor had she ever cared for a patient with a hybrid pregnancy, so she didn't know what was normal. She was due to visit Dr. Govorski again the day after tomorrow, but she knew she was lying when she promised herself she wouldn't worry.

She hated not knowing how to feel about it. This baby hadn't been planned; it was still smaller than her pinky fingernail and was already putting major hitches in her future plans. She couldn't imagine having a weirder relationship with the father than the one she currently had with Voris, and yet… she wanted the baby so badly. It would have just been easier to skip the hormone suppressants and let nature take its course, but the thought of doing that filled her with a deeply negative emotion that she had no name for. It felt so strange to be worried about a baby that she hadn't even wanted, but its unexpected existence had given her a sort of purpose when everything else had been stripped away. Regardless of anything else, it was keeping her going for now, and that was better than nothing.

She closed her eyes and tried to relax, but what felt like just moments later, there was a knock on the door.

"Miss Skjeggestad, end meal is ready to be served." Despite her request that she call her Dagny, T'Mir still insisted on using the more formal honorific.

She sat up, thinking that couldn't possibly be right: she had only rested her eyes for a minute. She glanced at the clock on the wall, scarcely believing it was 2015 hours. "Um, give me just a minute," she called, leaping from the bed and scrambling to take her medication and change into a nicer, less rumpled shirt.

She moved as fast as she could to the formal dining room without breaking into a run, pausing at the corner of the hallway to smooth down her hair and shirt. She entered the dining room and found two place settings laid out on the great table and Sarek standing behind a chair on the end. T'Mir stood in the corner with her hands tucked behind her back.

"Good evening, First Minister Sarek," she said, feeling very awkward.

"Miss Skjeggestad," he replied, giving a small bow of his head.

She made her way to the other place setting, trying to remember the Vulcan rules of formal dining etiquette she'd picked up over the past week from Voris and T'Mir. She should stand behind her chair and wait for Sarek to tell her to sit. The moment she found her place, Sarek looked over his shoulder to T'Mir and said, "Fetch a dish and utensils for yourself. I shall see to the serving of the meal."

T'Mir raised an eyebrow and hesitated, which prompted the First Minister to add, "We dine together regularly when we do not have guests. I see no reason to alter our conduct due to Miss Skjeggestad's presence. Unless of course she has some objection."

Dagny uttered a tiny sigh of relief and shook her head. T'Mir had served them the last time she'd eaten at this table and it had been weird then. Now T'Mir was the closest thing she had to a friend on
this planet and the idea of her waiting on Dagny would have been almost too uncomfortable to bear. The three of them made their way to the kitchen—T'Mir grabbed a place setting for herself, Sarek collected the casserole dish, and Dagny poured water for the three of them.

T'Mir set her plate to Sarek's left, but when Dagny looked to Sarek for the invitation to be seated, he said, "Perhaps it would be more appropriate to forgo the formality, as we are such a small party. Please, sit and serve yourself."

Dagny couldn't help the broad smile of relief that spread across her face. She sat and folded her hands in her lap, thinking that just because Sarek had kindly decided to skip all the fancy rules didn't mean she should forget some of the more basic ones. She remembered Vulcans didn't touch food with their hands and prayed she would remember to eat with her mouth closed.

"T'Mir informs me you prepared the evening meal," Sarek said, unfolding his napkin and placing it in his lap.

"Oh, uh, not really," Dagny admitted, shooting a glance at T'Mir. "I mean, I did a lot of the prep work but it wouldn't have been possible without her direction. She's a very good cook and I learned a lot from her."

"Please, serve yourself," Sarek said, gesturing toward the casserole. It certainly smelled delicious, but now that Sarek knew she'd had a hand in making it, she was terrified it something would be wrong with it.

She heaped a large spoonful onto her plate and passed the serving spoon to T'Mir. She had never seen half the vegetables in this casserole prior to that afternoon, but one looked a bit like a snap pea and another like brown eggplant. She took a cautious bite and immediately relaxed. It was near perfect.

They tucked into their dinner, and though Dagny knew Vulcans didn't prefer to talk during meals, Sarek had said that he didn't mind ditching formality. She did her best to read the situation, but she eventually decided she couldn't wait until after dinner.

"I hope you don't mind me asking, First Minister," she began, doing her best to project confidence, "but I thought Voris was supposed to be done with quarantine today. Is he ok? I mean, do you know? I don't mean to interrupt your dinner, I just…"

Sarek looked up from his dish. "I had intended to speak with you privately following our meal, but I am told Dr. Voris was allowed to leave the Oglethorpe this afternoon and boarded a Vulcan medical vessel. He should be released within the next twelve hours pending the results of an independent medical examination."

Dagny chewed her lip and momentarily closed her eyes, allowing the good news to sink in. "Thank you."

"You have nothing to thank me for," Sarek replied. "Dr. Voris is returning as scheduled. It is regrettable I was unable to secure an earlier return for him."

She was about to launch into an explanation that she was grateful he'd been so considerate to help her but had the distinct impression that would be a conversation better held in private. They ate the rest of their meal in relative silence, but Dagny noticed Sarek and T'Mir exchange occasional glances that were hard to categorize.

When they were finished, Sarek asked T'Mir to attend to the dishes, but it seemed less like an
employer giving his housekeeper an instruction and more like a friend requesting a favor from another friend. Sarek invited Dagny to join him in his sitting room for evening k'vass, so she followed him into the room at the end of the hall with the mirrors and artwork and red patterned carpet where she'd first met the First Minister five days earlier.

He offered her a tall thin glass full of light brown liquid that smelled of butterscotch, apples, and exotic spices and directed her to sit on one of the central couches. She sipped the k'vass and shuddered. It had a bite to it that was vaguely reminiscent of alcohol and she was torn between spitting it out and swallowing it to be polite. She allowed the drink to slide down her throat, wondering if she'd just made a huge mistake.

"Is this alcoholic?"

"It contains no ethyl alcohol and is safe for pregnant women to consume," Sarek replied. "My late wife enjoyed k'vass and drank it throughout her pregnancy."

She gave him a weak smile. She had so many questions about Sarek's human wife, but she wasn't sure if it was appropriate to ask about her under any circumstances. She took another sip of her drink, thinking it was really quite good, now that she wasn't afraid of it harming the baby.

She waited until Sarek took a seat on the opposite couch and said, "I thanked you at dinner for trying to help Voris, but I also want to thank you for helping me."

"You have already thanked me on three separate occasions," he replied.

"I know, but I don't know what else to say," she confessed. "I know that my presence here probably isn't helping your election, and I just- I'm so thankful that you've been so kind to help me anyway and welcomed me into your family."

Tears started to blur her vision. Horrified at the thought of crying, she took another drink of the k'vass and looked away.

"I believe I understand the circumstances that brought you and my nephew together and they are regrettable, both for you and for him," he replied. "You are in this situation through no fault of your own and are attempting to resolve in accordance with your conscience. It is not my place to give you my opinion on the most optimal solution, even if my brother has no qualms with making his opinion known."

"I'm still sorry if I've caused problems between you and Silek."

"My brother and I have had many disagreements that have led us to avoid speaking to one another as brothers should. He has always held very strong opinions regarding interspecies partnerships. It is illogical to believe you are responsible for his conduct toward you."

Dagny wasn't sure what to say. She'd had plenty of occasions where she'd butted heads with her siblings, but nothing quite like this. She finished her k'vass and excused herself for the night.

She stopped by the lavatory in the hall and took her time washing her hands, studying her reflection in the mirror. She still didn't look like herself, but she couldn't remember what she used to look like. She leaned against the counter and slipped the aquamarine pendant from around her neck, fingering the gemstone tenderly.

Erik had given this to her on her birthday, the day the Albret had been destroyed. Looking at it should make her feel sad, but she felt nothing, aside from the same sense of grief and loss that she felt for everyone else. She felt guilty for feeling nothing. She had been in love with Erik, hadn't she? She
took a moment and used the mirror to affix it back around her neck, shut out the lights, and then opened the lavatory door. She jumped.

There were two figures in the hallway and it took her mind a second to process that what she was seeing was a reflection of a reflection in the row mirrors that lined both sides of the angled hallway. Sarek and T'Mir were standing outside T'Mir's bedroom at the other end of the corridor, their bodies much closer than anyone would consider appropriate for a housekeeper and her employer.

Awkwardness forced her back into the dark shadows of the lavatory. She was fairly certain they hadn't seen her, but she felt awful for spying on them and intruding upon a private moment. Should she walk out there and act like everything was normal? Footsteps echoed on the tile floor. Someone was moving in her direction. She took a deep breath and strolled out of the lavatory as casually as she could and almost ran into Sarek.

"Oh, I didn't expect to see you here," she lied, hoping she wasn't blushing as badly as she thought she was. "I was just going to bed. Goodnight, First Minister."

"Goodnight, Miss Skjeggestad."

Once in her room, she uttered a silent laugh and covered her mouth. She'd had a fleeting suspicion at dinner that there was more going on between Sarek and T'Mir than met the eye, but figured she was just imagining things. To use a Vulcan turn of phrase, she was being "illogical" to assume a few furtive glances meant anything.

Maybe she was still being illogical. They had just been standing in the hallway and his room was next to T'Mir's. That alone didn't prove anything. But they had been standing so close that she would have thought they were romantically involved if they were human, and Vulcans seemed to crave personal space.

She shook her head and smiled, drumming her fingers on her chin. T'Mir was Sarek's housekeeper and as far as she could tell, T'Mir was only a few years older than Dagny. There was no telling how old Sarek was, but if Silek were younger than Sarek and Silek had a fifty year old son... She decided it didn't matter: it wasn't really any of her business and she was in no place to judge. Sarek and T'Mir were both good people and deserving of happiness just like anyone else, and if they had found it with each other, then she was happy for them.

Voris rematerialized outside the Va'ashiv district hospital. The Vulcan medical ship had transported him and the rest of the staff back to the planet's surface. It was now more than four days after they had been due to return.

He had spent three days on the Oglethorpe and in that time, Voris had become acquainted with many of the crew and passengers. He had initially dismissed Ann Svendsen's offer to join them on Bergeron colony, but the more he learned of the colony and its people, the more he began to consider it as a viable possibility.

The colony was reasonably developed and had become profitable early last year. He would not be guaranteed a salary, but like all the other inhabitants of Bergeron colony, he would be entitled to a share of the miner's rights and profits, as well as food and housing. It was a financial gamble but he had accrued a substantial amount of savings over the last two years. He also wouldn't be bound by any contract and could choose to leave at any time.

He had always been interested in practicing medicine on a colony world. He had received an offer from Vega colony prior to Vulcan's destruction and would have accepted if T'Sala would have
joined him. If he were ever going to practice medicine on the frontier, it would be most logical for his career progression to do so within the next ten years while he was still young, but his situation with Dagny complicated things.

There were many things to consider, but her health and safety—as well as that of their child—were paramount. Cestus III was situated in a region of space just beyond the Federation's borders between the Klingon Empire and the Gorn Hegemony. While that was cause for concern, he also rationally understood that even though New Vulcan was technically within Federation space, it was almost as vulnerable as Cestus III, should either the Gorn or Klingons decide to attack the Federation.

It also lacked many resources he took for granted. Neither Bergeron colony nor the Federation colony on Cestus III had a dedicated spaceport. Transportation to and from the colony was intermittent and unpredictable. The Oglethorpe made three passages to Nausicaa annually and the colonists also had access to a smaller transport vessel that made a several trips to Aldebaran each year as needed to pick up and drop off passengers or to receive specialty supplies.

There were places that would probably be considered more appropriate, but there were also many benefits to Bergeron colony. Dagny would be able to resume work as a paramedic if she wanted to, so long as her pregnancy remained healthy. The gravity and climate were ideal: the average temperature was nineteen degrees Celsius and the gravity was 0.99G, making it quite similar to northern regions on Earth.

Aside from practical considerations, he had learned yesterday that Ann Svendsen and her family were distant relations to Dagny and had been aboard the Albret for more than twenty years. Ann already knew of the Albret's fate but had been unaware Dagny had survived. It had been difficult to admit that Dagny was currently living with him and he hadn't seen the necessity of informing her that she was expecting his child, but Ann was very eager to see Dagny again, and given the scale of Dagny's loss, he supposed she would be pleased to see Ann also.

He did not have much time to make a decision—the Oglethorpe was scheduled to leave New Vulcan's orbit in approximately five days and had no plans to come back through New Vulcan space in the near future. There were also no regularly scheduled direct transports between Cestus III and any Federation port. If he and Dagny were not on the Oglethorpe within the next five days, their next opportunity to get there would be in four months and they would have to travel to Nausicaa, and Nausicaans were not renowned for the hospitality, particularly to Vulcans.

"Do you require anything else from us, Dr. Voris?" T'Nar asked, looking down at a PADD in her hands.

"No," he replied. "Live long and prosper."

The four of them exchanged goodbyes and Veran, T'Nar, and Selaara left to return to their homes, but Voris called a taxi and went to his office to upload his reports for the hospital's records while he waited for his transportation to arrive. His reports had also been sent to the Federation and New Vulcan health agencies, as well as the New Vulcan Security Ministry. He had filed death certificates for the first officer and payload specialist who had been killed during the initial vacuum fluctuation, but he had made no mention of Rhaal. He had also found no evidence of Orion lungworm on the Oglethorpe, but he had not expected to.

When he was finished transferring his files to the hospital's servers, he met his taxi outside and went directly to his Uncle Sarek's house. He was immeasurably grateful that his uncle had taken time from his schedule to attend to Dagny's needs while he was detained in orbit.

He sent the First Minister a message saying he would arrive in approximately thirty minutes to collect
Dagny, but his uncle informed him Dagny had already retired for the evening. He was about to suggest he could come by in the morning, but he received a second message from Sarek that said, "You are still welcome to come. There is much I wish to discuss with you." Voris arrived at his home precisely twenty-eight minutes later and was surprised when First Minister Sarek himself answered the door.

"Good evening, First Minister," Voris said, raising his hand in the ta'al. "Live long and prosper."

"Yes," Sarek replied, returning the gesture. He stepped aside to allow Voris to enter. "Have you taken end meal?"

His last meal had been approximately six hours ago on the medical transport, but he wasn't particularly hungry and didn't wish to inconvenience his uncle. "Your offer of hospitality is appreciated but unnecessary."

He followed Sarek into the sitting room at the other end of the hall and was invited to have a seat. His uncle offered him a glass of k'vass, which he readily accepted, and they began a discussion of the events of the past four days.

As Voris had suspected, the fears of Orion lungworm had been largely unfounded and the quarantine of the ship had been a ruse to give the New Vulcan authorities more time to investigate the people on board the Oglethorpe for terrorist connections and activities. He was unsurprised to discover they had looked into both his and Dagny's backgrounds as well, but apparently four days of exhaustive investigation had yielded nothing of interest to the New Vulcan Security Ministry.

In the current government, the highly conservative and isolationist Ba'taklar dominated the Security Ministry and though they were anticipated to lose most of their power following the elections, the elections would not be held for another thirteen days. It was logical to conclude the quarantine of the Oglethorpe had been a feeble attempt to apprehend terrorists or foil a terrorist plot and prove to the New Vulcan populace that they continued to face significant threats from offworlders.

He thought of Rhaal. If he had noted the Romulan refugee in any of his reports, it was quite possible he, the rest of the medical team, and the crew would have been placed in detention for a significant period of time while they struggled to prove their innocence. Lying and falsifying reports was still illogical, but that did not mean it couldn't also be personally beneficial.

"I am grateful for your efforts to look after Dagny in my absence," he said, finishing the last of his k'vass.

"It was logical," Sarek replied. "It was a duty that your father ought to have undertaken, but as he has vowed to disown you, it seemed logical to conclude he had no interest in assuming responsibility for your mate."

Voris nodded slowly. "I regret that this situation has caused you personal difficulty."

"Miss Skjeggestad attempted to apologize also and I shall say to you what I said to her—your apology is unnecessary. Silek is behaving as I expected he would. He never approved of my marriage to Amanda and didn't speak to me for more than twenty years after we were married."

Voris remembered well. He had just entered medical school when his Uncle Sarek had announced he intended to take a human mate, citing his choice as logical due to his position as Vulcan ambassador to Earth. Voris had thought it peculiar and unorthodox but had never given the match much consideration. Whom his uncle wished to bond with had been none of his business, as far as he had been concerned.
Voris had few memories of Sarek from his childhood. His uncle had been in the diplomatic service for many years and was rarely on Vulcan. They had seen each other on occasional holidays and at family functions—weddings and funerals, mainly—but Sarek had never been a guiding influence in Voris' life. When his father had cut ties with Sarek following his marriage to Amanda, Voris had unofficially done so also because at the time, his father was disappointed that his son had chosen a career in medicine and it had been easier to make the small concession of supporting his father in his disagreement with Sarek. Now he was coming to believe he had made a grave mistake.

"I have convinced your father not to publicly disavow you," Sarek continued, setting his empty glass on the table between them. "But I cannot convince him to meet with you privately. I believe it would be prudent to leave New Vulcan for a time, if you are able."

"I have already begun making arrangements to do so," Voris admitted, stopping short of confessing he was seriously considering relocating to Bergeron colony, a place where the current New Vulcan Security Ministry thought was a terrorist haven.

Sarek rose to his feet and replied, "Wherever you go, I wish you peace and long life, nephew."

Voris nodded. "Thank you, uncle."

Sarek showed him to a bedroom in the middle of the back hall. Dagny was in the next room and for the first time in days, he fell into a peaceful sleep. He awoke early the next morning, intending to fulfill his duty as a guest and prepare first meal for the household, but when he entered the kitchen, he found Dagny and the First Minister's housekeeper already making plomeek soup.

He watched her in the entryway for nearly a minute before she noticed his presence. The moment her eyes flicked in his direction, she gave him a wide smile and took several steps toward him.

"You're back," she breathed, the smile on her face only growing wider.

"Yes."

"Uhm… how have you been?"

He approached her. "I am well. How have you been?"

She made a strange expression and shrugged. "First Minister Sarek and T'Mir have been very kind to have me," she replied, glancing over her shoulder to the housekeeper.

"Yes," he agreed, glancing at T'Mir and adding, "Will you give us a moment to speak privately? I can assist Dagny in preparing the first meal."

The woman called T'Mir nodded and excused herself. Dagny seemed flustered to watch her go. "Is everything ok?" she asked, once T'Mir had left the room.

Voris moved toward the sink to wash his hands. "I have received an offer I wish to discuss with you."

It had been ten days since he had brought Dagny to New Vulcan and already they were leaving. She was sitting in a chair just behind him, trying to pacify Harold's fury by petting him through the wire mesh of the animal crate.

Harold was old and Voris was uncertain how well he would handle the journey and though his relationship with Mrs. DePaulo's cat had never been a particularly friendly one, he found himself
incapable of abandoning him now. Whatever life had in store for them at Bergeron colony, they would share the experience with Harold.

It hadn't taken long to pack his belongings. Most of the items packed in the meter long black cargo containers were medical supplies. His household goods, clothes, and other personal effects barely filled one of the boxes. He had lived on New Vulcan for exactly two years as of today, and in that time he had accumulated very few things. The furniture and appliances belonged to the housing agency, so all he owned were some dishes, some towels, a set of bedding, a compact cleaning android, and a few other simple items. There was also T'Sala's candle. He had very nearly tucked it in his breast pocket as he often did when he traveled, but at the last moment he'd decided to pack it with the rest of his meager possessions.

It was 0013 hours and he hadn't slept since the night he had stayed at his uncle's home. He had been occupied during daylight hours making arrangements to leave New Vulcan and meditating at night while Dagny slept.

It had taken two full days to settle his accounts and make arrangements with a financial manager to tend to his assets in his absence. Voris had amassed a considerable amount of wealth over the last thirty Standard years and T'Sala had wisely made a number of extraplanetary investments. The destruction of Vulcan had financially ruined many survivors and though Voris had lost a great deal as well, he had fared better than most.

He had liquidated several of his investments to purchase vital medical equipment the colony was lacking. Ann had forwarded him an inventory of the clinic’s supplies and the provisions they were due to collect on Nausicaa, but the clinic was still poorly outfitted. Voris had added an industrial pharmaceutical synthesizer, a chemical analysis unit, a non-organic replicator, a stasis unit, and a large tissue regenerator to the colony's requisition and had paid for them with his own funds.

He wasn't certain moving Dagny and their unborn child to a remote colony world was the most logical course of action, but she wanted to go and Dr. Govorski had approved of the location for its cool climate and lower gravity. He was unconcerned for his own safety, but Dagny and the child were a different matter. Dagny didn't seem to think in the same terms he did though, which was unsurprising given she was born only a few thousand kilometers from the Romulan Neutral Zone.

For now, Dagny and the child were healthy. She'd had an appointment yesterday and all of her tests and scans had come back within normal parameters. The embryo was continuing to develop correctly and the levels of yam'tan in Dagny's bloodstream were no longer detectable even with the most sensitive tests. Dagny had gained more than a kilogram since her previous visit and her blood count continued to improve. It was still very early, but everything was proceeding normally, or as normally as could be expected in a hybrid pregnancy.

Despite this, Voris had concerns about his ability to manage Dagny's complicated pregnancy. He had scheduled weekly transmissions with Dr. Govorski and she would be available to answer questions should the need arise, but Dagny was his patient once again.

In Vulcan society, male healers rarely tended to matters of gynecology and obstetrics. He'd received training in those specialties as was required of all healers, but he had never actually heard of a male physician regularly working in female health fields. He had treated many pregnant patients over the years, human and Vulcan alike, but his concentration was emergency interspecies medicine and all of those patients had come to him with other concerns. The fact that they had also been pregnant had been secondary.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Dagny asked from behind him, breaking his internal reflection.
He turned to find her standing, arms crossed, shoulders slightly hunched and peering at him with wide eyes. He detected a hint of worry from her, but he could not determine the cause.

"Have you changed your mind?" he asked.

"No," she mumbled. "I mean, I don't think so. I'm just worried about you. Is this really what you want?"

"I have my concerns," he admitted. "However, I am content to follow you wherever you wish to go."

She opened her mouth to protest but the transport manager interrupted her. "The Oglethorpe is ready to receive your supplies."

Voris helped the man lift the five storage boxes onto the transporter pad and moments later, the manager informed the ship and their things disappeared into a matter stream.

"I am reconfiguring the transporter for organic life forms," the manager said. "Please position yourselves on the pad according to the diagram and standby."

Voris glanced at Dagny, noting her arms crossed even more tightly around her body. He grabbed the handle of Harold's crate and after an initial fit of hissing and growling, the cat settled down. They made their way to the platform and waited for further instructions from the transport manager.

"I don't like being the reason you have to pack up everything and start a new life and I'm sorry," Dagny muttered.

"These are the circumstances. It would not be the first time either of us have begun again," he replied.

She pursed her lips and nodded. "I'm so thankful for you, Voris."

As he disappeared into the matter stream and left New Vulcan behind, he found himself thinking he was thankful for her also.
Cautious Hope

Stardate 2260.83

Dagny blinked her eyes to adjust to the dimly lit transporter room. She heard a gasp and saw someone move straight ahead, but she couldn't quite make out a face.

"You're a sight for sore eyes."

A pained smile instinctively appeared on Dagny's face. She would recognize Ann Svendsen's voice anywhere. She stepped down from the transporter pad into a warm embrace and soon, both of them were wiping away the beginnings of tears.

"How have you been?" Ann asked.

Dagny bit her lip.

"Oh, that's a stupid question, if I ever asked one," Ann sighed, wringing her hands together. "What I meant to ask is, how are you getting on?"

Dagny sensed Voris standing just behind her and turned to look at him. The three of them exchanged awkward looks and it occurred to Dagny that Ann probably didn't know about the entire situation with the Vulcan doctor. She doubted if Voris would have said anything; Vulcans were so private, after all. She would have to tell Ann about the baby eventually, but it hardly seemed the time or place. There was a human man standing behind the transporter controls that Dagny didn't know and she wasn't eager to start spilling the whole uncomfortable story right then and there.

"Well, I'm alive and I'm here," Dagny finally said.

"That you are." Ann let go of Dagny and turned to Voris. "And it's good to see you again, doctor. You have no idea how much the colony needs you. Needs you both."

"It is our honor to serve."

Dagny craned her neck to look at Voris. It was such an odd thing to say, a very Vulcan thing to say, but it also seemed to fit the moment quite well.

"We have some catching up to do," Ann said, shifting her focus back to Dagny.

"Perhaps I should excuse myself," Voris said, moving in the direction of their five trunks.

"Nonsense. Let's get you settled into your quarters first. We still have the bunk set up in the back of the makeshift clinic." She turned to Dagny and added, "You know how it is: not much privacy on cargo ships."

Dagny winced. She'd wondered what kind of sleeping arrangements she would be walking into. It certainly seemed like Ann thought they were partners, but she wasn't sure if that bothered her or not, because she wasn't sure if it was true or not.

Voris and the human man loaded the five crates onto a gravity jack and they followed Ann down the darkened narrow corridor to the upper deck where they stopped in front of a small door. The Oglethorpe was small for a cargo vessel, only about a third of the size of the Albret and sported eight designated sleeping compartments, meaning the crew and passengers were already sleeping three and
four to a room.

Their home for the next month turned out to be a retrofitted storage compartment, probably no bigger than nine square meters with a bunk bed in the corner and what looked like makeshift cots and blankets piled along the opposite wall.

"This was our temporary emergency clinic, along with the lockers across the way," Ann explained, waving her hand around the tiny space. "Dr. Voris could tell you, it was chaos. Touch and go. But we got through it, like we always do. Lost two people though."

"I'm sorry," Dagny replied.

"It is what it is," Ann grimaced. "But thank you just the same."

Dagny glanced at the bunk bed and then snuck a look at Voris. She'd slept in bunks her entire life and was used to the sounds and sensations of people fidgeting and snoring above and below, but she wasn't accustomed to sharing a space with him. His face remained motionless so she couldn't even begin to guess what his opinion on the sleeping situation was.

"Now, there's no replicator in here. There aren't replicators in any of the quarters, but we have a proper mess on the deck below. I'm happy to give you a tour or perhaps the good doctor can show you what's what."

"What additional duties have we been assigned?"

"No need to worry about any of that," Ann laughed. "Just do what you've always done and see to the medical side of things."

"I don't mind. I really wouldn't feel right-"

"You're your father's daughter, through and through," Ann sighed. "Never wanting a free ride." The mention of her father stung in a way she hadn't expected. Ann must have seen something in Dagny's face, because she added, "Trust me, you'll have your work cut out for you at Bergeron colony. Enjoy the downtime while you can. If you really get bored, I suppose there are always injectors to scrub."

"I should check up on some of my previous patients," Voris announced from behind her. "Is Captain Diels available?"

"He is. He's on the bridge," Ann replied. "If you will both excuse me."

Dagny glanced down at her feet. The moment the door slid shut behind him, Ann asked, "So how are you really?"

She would have preferred to lead up to it, but she didn't really see the point in dancing around the issue. "I'm having a baby."

Ann didn't immediately react, but after several seconds she crossed her arms and uttered a slow sigh. "Congratulations?"

Dagny barked an almost bitter laugh. "I think you're the first person who's said that."

"I've known you ever since you were born," Ann replied. "I know you're all grown up now and it's your own life, and I certainly don't want to pry, but-"
"It's his baby. Voris, I mean."

"Oh, Wow."

"I know."

"He seems like a good enough man."

"He is."

"And he treats you well?"

"He does, but we're not- we're not married or together or anything. We're just having a baby together."

Ann's eyes shifted uncomfortably. Words started falling from Dagny's mouth and she rambled for fifteen minutes, doing her best to explain the situation as delicately as she could, leaving out the more technical aspects like pon farr, and by the end she was sobbing. She and Ann sat down on the edge of the bed and Ann rubbed her back and listened.

"I don't know what to do," Dagny choked. "Every morning for the last month I've woken up and it all feels so surreal. Like this is happening to someone else."

"Oh, now," Ann whispered. "You're no stranger to hard times or strange circumstances. If there's anything I know about you, it's that you'll do what you know is right in your heart."

"Do you think my family would be disappointed in me?"

"Not for a second. Your parents loved you and your brothers and sisters so much. Your mother was younger than you and not married to your father when she came down with Aksel."

"But I don't know that I want to marry Voris. I don't know that he wants to marry me."

"And that's all well enough, just as long as you both take care of that little one. There's no right way to be, Dagny."

"I've tried to imagine how they would react when I told them and I can almost see papa crying."

"He might well have done. He knew how much you wanted to go to school. If he were going to be disappointed about anything, it would be that having a baby would set you back. But he wouldn't be angry. He wouldn't hate his first grandchild. Your mother and father would love you no matter what, probably even if you killed someone."

"I miss them so much," Dagny cried, hugging Ann tighter. Ann hugged her right back and replied with a shaking voice, "I know. I do too."

They sat that way for several minutes, with fresh tears occasionally springing up between them. For the first time since losing her family, she felt like she was talking to someone who understood exactly what she'd lost.

"You're not alone, Dagny," Ann finally said, seemingly reading her mind. She dabbed the corners of her eyes with her index fingers. "Me and Jon will help you any way we can."

Dagny took several deep breaths. "You don't know how much it means to hear you say that."

"I know I'm a poor substitute for your mother, but I still care about you. I'm sorry we haven't spoken
in so long."

Dagny wiped her nose on her sleeve and nodded briskly. "I still wonder what mama would say about all this."

"It's an odd situation, no question about it, but I think it goes without saying your mother loved babies. She had fourteen of them. She never thought she'd get any grandchildren out of you—you were always so set on going to school and being a doctor. So, I imagine she'd be overjoyed."

"I doubt she thought she'd have any non-human grandkids."

Ann laughed. "She was never the type of person to care about something like that. Your mother was sold on anything she could cradle in her arms that would look up at her with innocent wonder. That baby could have scales and tentacles and razor-sharp fangs and she would have still loved it to bits. Your father too."

Dagny massaged her forehead and sinuses and looked around the cramped compartment for something to use to blow her nose. Seeing what she intended, Ann pulled a small purse from her pocket and offered her a tissue.

"I take it you still get nosebleeds?" Dagny asked.

"The dry recirculated air in these cabins will be the death of me one day."

"And how's your blood pressure? Still high?"

"Who's supposed to be looking after who now?" Ann teased. "I'm a picture of health as of a few days ago, according to the Vulcan doctor."

"I don't know much about him, but he is a good doctor," Dagny agreed, her voice hollow and monotone. "I would be dead right now if it wasn't for him."

"Well, it sounds like I owe Dr. Voris more than I thought I did."

"Yeah," Dagny sniffed.

"Are you ok?"

"No, not really," Dagny admitted. "But I think I will be. Someday."

"Right then. Are you ok with bunking with him? He said you were living together so I sort of assumed you were partners, but."

"It'll be fine. I don't want to put anyone else out."

"You wouldn't be. Me and Nicolas are sharing a cabin. I could move Nicolas in here with Dr. Voris and you could come stay with me, or-"

"It's ok, really. I should be getting to know him anyway. We're having a baby together."

"You're sure?"

"Am I sure I'm having a baby?"

Ann rolled her eyes. "You know what I meant."
"Yeah, I do. This compartment is fine and I'll be alright in here with Voris."

"Right then, I should be getting back down to engineering," Ann sighed, slapping her knees and rising to her feet. "Are you ok for now?"

"I am."

"We'll be breaking orbit soon. It'll be four days to Nausicaa and another twenty-one days back to Cestus III from there."

"Yes, I know. Will I see you in the mess later?"

"I take my breakfast at around 0630 hours. Hope to see you. And Voris. I'd like to get to know him better."

After Ann left, Dagny released Harold from his temporary prison and he raced in circles around the small room. She was physically tired but she didn't feel capable of sleeping. It wasn't even 0100 hours, so the lights around the ship were currently only at thirty percent to keep the crew and passengers on a standard night/day cycle. She had missed living on a ship.

She started going through the trunks to find her personal effects, but the first one revealed standard medical supplies. She shut the lid and tried to lift it so as to get at the trunk underneath, but it was impossibly heavy. She could find someone who could lend her a gravity jack—an unlikely proposition at that hour of the day—or she could wait for Voris to come back and help her.

She scowled. She hated relying on him for everything. She decided accessing her clothes wasn't an emergency, so she popped the lid on the top trunk back open and stared at the medical supplies. Taking up much of the left corner was a chemical analyzer, far more sophisticated than anything Dagny had ever seen. She would love to learn to use it, and thought of Voris' offer to tutor her. She wanted to be a doctor and he was willing to help her achieve that goal, but that just meant one more occasion where she would be dependent upon him.

On the right side was a standard medical kit and she lifted the lid for no reason in particular. The moment she caught sight of the tricorder, she began dueling with a powerful impulse.

She wanted to hear the baby's heartbeat. All tricorders came equipped with acoustic enhancers to amplify internal body sounds and this one was certainly sensitive enough to detect a fetal heartbeat. She just wanted to know everything was ok.

She suddenly felt queasy. The logical side of her brain knew she was setting herself up for disappointment. She was only at four weeks gestation, which put the fetal age at about two weeks. The absolute earliest she could find a heartbeat wouldn't be for another week or so. Even still, she pulled the tricorder out and gently fingered the settings on the front.

The whooshing sound of the door behind her made her jump. She spun around to see Voris standing in the threshold. She wasn't sure why she felt like she'd been caught red-handed, but she quickly put the tricorder back in its case and asked, "How are your patients?"

"Many of them are off-duty and asleep. I will have to wait until morning to check up on them."

"Ah."

"What are you doing?"

"I was uh- I was just looking through some of your equipment."
"It is your equipment also."

"Not really," she laughed. "You're the one who bought it and I don't know how to use most of it."

He cocked his head. "Would you like to learn how to use it?"

Dagny chewed the inside of her cheek, wishing the wave of anxious nausea would pass. "Honestly? Yes."

"Then let's begin."

"Right now?"

"Did you have a prior engagement?"

"No, I just… it's really late and I don't think you've slept since you got back."

"Vulcans do not require as much rest as humans."

"Ok, but still: you're not a machine. You still have to sleep sometime."

"And I intend to, later this evening," he replied. "Do you require rest at this time?"

"No," she mumbled, looking at the bunk bed. "And I wanted to ask you earlier but I didn't want to make things weird in front of Ann but… um, are you ok with sleeping in here with me?"

"I would prefer to give you your privacy, but I understand concessions must be made with limited available space. Should you desire I sleep elsewhere, I-""No," she interrupted. "I'm fine with it if you are. Do you want to be up top or on bottom?"

"I would advise you to sleep below, in the event of an emergency."

She almost laughed and was about to tell him she'd slept on top bunks for most of her life and wasn't exactly prone to falling out of them, but decided she didn't really care where she slept so there was no point in possibly starting an argument over it.

Voris moved the trunks around and they set to unpacking, spreading their linens over the bunks and hanging clothing on high bars mounted on the ceiling. Dagny set the case with her medications underneath her bed so she'd have access to it and after she fed Harold a quick meal, Voris pulled out the chemical analyzer and started showing her the inner machinery the theories behind how it worked. He showed her how to calibrate and perform maintenance on it and eventually he showed her how to test compounds. She had thought he would be a boring teacher, but he was supportive and patient with her questions, so patient in fact that four hours flew by before Dagny thought to look at the time. They tested a number of compounds for content and purity, everything from a few strands of Harold's fur to some of her medications.

It was the longest conversation they'd ever had, and also the easiest and most relaxed. It was purely professional and unrelated to the circumstances that had brought them together. It was nice. At around 0615 hours, Dagny was so tired she could barely keep her eyes open, but remembering her promise to Ann, followed Voris in the direction of the ship's mess. She trailed behind him for a few meters but he stopped in the middle of the corridor.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"I was simply waiting for you. I am content to walk at your pace."
She wasn't sure why, but it made her smile.

Stardate 2260.109

Voris' ears detected a soft groan, causing his eyes to flick open. He'd been dozing but he wasn't sure how long he'd been between states of consciousness. He sat forward on the trunk and peered at Dagny. She was asleep and lying on her belly on the lower bunk, her right cheek half on the bed and half hanging in a tall bucket. The acrid smell of stomach acid hung in the air.

She had been nauseated for most of their journey and had vomited every single day for the past nineteen days. It grew worse in the evenings and throughout the night but waned somewhat in the late mornings and afternoons. He gave her anti-emetics, but they only provided limited relief. Four days ago, he'd been forced to administer intravenous fluids to keep her hydrated but since then, she'd been able to keep the majority of her recent meals down. Still, he continued to monitor her closely, checking the hormone and iron levels in her blood once daily and performing qualitative exams to check her hydration levels as needed.

He knew nausea and vomiting were common in the early stages of human pregnancy due to hormonal changes in the body but he'd still sent a subspace consult to Dr. Govorski, asking if there were alterations he could make to Dagny's medications to ease her discomfort. Unfortunately, Dr. Govorksi had no suggestions to offer, other than the same anti-emetics he'd already prescribed and countless natural remedies such as peppermint tea and carbonated water.

He sat up and caught his PADD just before it slipped from his lap. He'd been researching foods human females could tolerate during the early stages of pregnancy. Several times she'd woken up and either vomited or gagged and though he was a poor substitute for a proper nurse, he'd fetched her water to rinse her mouth or cool, wet cloths for her face despite her protests.

The current time was 0645 and the customary period of first meal was underway on the Oglethorpe. She had only been asleep for an hour but she needed to eat and could return to bed once she was finished. He stood and gently touched her shoulder.

She didn't move, so he knelt down and nudged her more insistently. She uttered a low moan and rolled onto her back.

"Dagny?"

"Hmmm?" Her eyes remained closed.

"It is time to take your breakfast."

"No," she muttered.

"Yes."

"I can't," she replied, taking a few breaths. "There's no way I can hold it down."

"You did not eat end meal, nor did you retain the majority of your midday meal from yesterday."

She smacked her lips and grimaced, but still she did not open her eyes. He waited several more seconds until she began a series of soft snores.

"Dagny?"
"I'm up," she grunted. Despite her statement, she did not actually sit up. She did not do anything.

"Will you come eat?"

"I'm so tired."

"If I bring food back to the cabin, will you make an attempt to eat it?"

"Ok," she sighed. Her head rolled over on the pillow and she scratched her stomach. She did not appear to be fully conscious, but that was unsurprising. In addition to nausea, fatigue was also common in early human pregnancies and she hadn't been sleeping regularly because she was so often sick at night.

"I shall return within the half hour," he said, but it was evident she was already asleep. He passed Ann and her son Nicolas leaving the mess as he entered it.

"How is Dagny doing?" Ann asked.

He didn't prefer to discuss her condition with others on the ship out of respect for her privacy, but Ann was a distant relative and she and Dagny were quite fond of each other, so he replied, "She remains unwell, but neither she nor the child are in danger."

"Good news, bad news then. I've got to hurry along to engineering, but would it be alright if I stopped in and saw her this evening?"

"I am sure she would welcome you."

"Dr. Voris?" someone called from behind him.

Voris turned to see Captain Diels striding in his direction. "Good morning, captain."

Ann and Nicolas exchanged quick pleasantries with the captain before disappearing down the corridor. As they left, Diels turned to Voris and said, "I was heading up for breakfast and figured I see you here. The comms chief received a message on subspace for you a few hours ago. I was actually sent over two weeks ago, but it got hung up on a faulty relay beacon and we only just now got it." He offered Voris a small glass PADD.

"Thank you."

"Are you on your way in to breakfast?" Diels asked, gesturing to the mess.

"I am."

"Mind if I join you? Haven't gotten to talk to you much since we broke orbit of New Vulcan. Unless you want to read your message, of course."

"As you said, it has waited for more than two weeks to reach me. I am uncertain twenty additional minutes would matter," Voris replied, glancing at the header on the screen and seeing the message came from First Minister Sarek.

He suspected the message contained news of the elections on New Vulcan and while was curious about the outcome, he was no longer living on New Vulcan and the election results no longer directly impacted his life.

"So we'll be at the colony in thirty-four hours," Diels announced, crossing his arms. "You got everything packed up?"
"I do. We are prepared to disembark."

They entered the mess. "I wanted to catch up with you to say congratulations. Word is your wife's got a bun in the oven," Diels grinned, walking over to one of the two replicators on the far wall.

"I do not understand," Voris said, following him to the neighboring replicator. "We do not have an oven aboard this ship. And I am not married to Dagny."

"Oh, um, I meant Dagny is expecting a baby."

"She is." Voris did not understand the human need to fawn over biological processes like reproduction. Pregnancy and childbirth were both natural things, but Vulcans considered it impolite to discuss such things outside of family circles.

"My wife is due within the month," Diels said, collecting two bowls from the dispenser tray. "If this one survives, it'll be our first."

Voris raised an eyebrow and perused the familiar selection. He decided to forgo collecting food for Dagny until it was time to leave and ordered himself a bowl of porridge and fruit. It was not a traditional Vulcan breakfast, but it was adequate enough. He took a seat across from the captain at one of the small metal tables by the door.

"I'm so thankful you've agreed to come," Diels said, scooping a heap of grains and dried fruit soaked in milk onto a spoon. "Khel lost two babies already. Aisla works as a nurse, but she's Orion and doesn't have a lot of experience working with other species."

He sensed the captain expected him to converse during their meal. Voris was not exceptionally skilled in the human art of talking small, but he had a fair amount of practice from his tenure at an Earth hospital. Though Voris was a physician, this was not a professional situation and it was inappropriate for two males to discuss matters of female biology, particularly as it pertained to their mates.

He analyzed the information Diels had revealed and selected the least intrusive item upon which to comment. "You say the colony has a nurse—does it have other individuals with any medical training?"

"We have some people who know some basic first aid," Diels admitted. "But no one is really qualified to do more than patch up a scraped knee. In this day and age, we shouldn't be losing people to sickness and childbirth, but it's happened a few times since Dr. Velara died. It's hard."

"I understand."

"Do you have a lot of experience… you know, caring for hybrid babies and their mothers and such?"

"No," Voris admitted. "But I am trained in interspecies medicine."

Diels' brow furrowed and he took a large bite of his food. "My wife, Khel, she's Romulan. It seems like there are a lot of similarities between your species, but I don't really know."

"There are."

"So you think you'll be able to help her?"

"I cannot make that determination until I examine her."
"She's just been through so much. We all have. We're so grateful to you."

"I come to serve. I will do what I can for her, as well as the other colonists."

"And I also wanted to thank you, you know, for not saying anything about Rhaal."

Voris nodded. He'd disliked falsifying his reports. There was no logic in lying, but neither was there logic in persecuting a dead man. Sunayana, the woman with the wild hair who had stayed with Rhaal until he died had remained behind on Nausicaa, presumably to finish his quest to retrieve his children from the Romulan Star Empire.

Voris and Diels sat in silence for the rest of their short meal and when they were finished, the captain returned to the bridge and Voris turned his attention to the clear glass PADD. It was a short and uncomplicated communique.

*Dr. Voris—*

*The elections have passed and boded well for the Storilayar party. I have been elected First Minister, and your father, Minister of State. May your new life on Cestus III be both long and prosperous.*

—Sarek

Voris considered the news. The possible success of the conservative Ba'taklar party had been a minor factor into his decision to relocate, but this development changed very little. His father still wanted nothing to do with him, Dagny, or the child, the planet's climate was still harsh, and there were still few opportunities on New Vulcan for Dagny. He decided he would meditate on the matter when he was able.

He made his way back to the replicator to select the most balanced meal for Dagny that he believed her upset stomach would tolerate based on his research. Unfortunately, most information in the databases was anecdotal—if some females reported craving one food, others would report vomiting at the mere thought of it.

Dagny's experimental diet had been largely trial and error over the past week and she'd had little success in finding suitable foods that she could retain. The few foods she'd successfully kept down, russet potatoes and cucumbers, were lacking in substantial nutritional value.

He carried a meal of toast with almond butter, dried bananas, orange slices, and lemon tea back to their quarters. It took some coaxing to rouse her from her sleep but she eventually sat up and nibbled at the toast. After a few bites, she offered him a thin-lipped smile. "Thank you so much for this."

"Your gratitude is unnecessary. It is my duty."

"Your *duty*?"

"Yes." He leaned over to pick up the emesis bucket by her bedside.

She took a small sip of the tea and waved him away. "Oh, you don't have to do that. I'll clean it up."

"You are eating and I am momentarily unoccupied. It is only logical."

"Voris, please. You've taken really good care of me, but *please*, just let me do that."

Her request was quite illogical but he acquiesced rather than argue over such a trivial thing. She ate slowly but managed to consume everything he'd brought for her. When she was finished, she set her
dish to the side and checked her iron and hormone levels.

Her eyes scanned the tricorder screen. "Everything looks good."

"And your nausea?" he asked.

"A constant companion, but not as bad as it has been. The trick seems to be to eat a lot of small
snacks: never stay too hungry or too full."

"My research has indicated human females who report nausea and vomiting in the early stages of
pregnancy are seventy-three percent less likely to miscarry."

Dagny swallowed hard and smiled. "I've always heard that but had never read any studies on it."

Several seconds of silence passed and Voris was contemplating excusing himself to one of the
deserted cargo bays to meditate when she asked, "Do you wonder what our baby will look like?
What it will be like?"

"Studies of interspecies genetics indicate the child will heavily favor many of my traits."

"I figured as much. Ambassador Spock is half human but I wouldn't have known that just by looking
at him."

"Ambassador Spock is only one example. While his features are exceptionally Vulcan, not all
hybrids between our species present a predominantly Vulcan appearance."

She crossed her legs on the bed and turned to face him. "How so?"

"The chromosomal scans from the embryo show typical Vulcan pattern development. The reason
many naturally conceived hybrids fail to develop beyond the early weeks is due to chromosomal
mismatches involving physiological structures. As you are aware, both of our species possess organs
that the other lacks and the placement of shared organs differs in some cases. There are also
considerable differences in the composition of the brain, with Vulcans having a far more developed
midbrain. The only hybrids that have survived are those that have inherited Vulcan characteristics,
either by chance or engineering."

"So our baby will look like you."

"Internally, yes. But there are a number of less vital human traits that can appear in hybrid offspring."

"Like what?"

"Skin color, eye color, hair color and texture-"

"Are you saying we could have a redheaded Vulcan baby?" she laughed.

"It is extremely unlikely, as hair color presents in a typical dominant and recessive pattern and there
are no members of my family with light-colored hair going back many generations."

"Oh."

"But there is a possibility it could inherit your hair texture. My father's hair is straight, but my
forefather possessed thicker, wavy hair, as does my Uncle Sarek. Furthermore, my mother and my
sister T'Liri had blue eyes; it is possible our child could also."

She offered a genuine smile for the first time in days. "Interesting."
"There are other traits that are controlled by multiple genes that reflect polygenic inheritance and can be expressed in an additive or subtractive fashion. For example, the arched ariculae found in Vulcan ears is controlled by four known genes and depending upon genetic composition, they may be longer and more arched or shorter and less arched. My ear shape is fairly intermediate and resembles the ear shape of the vast majority of the Vulcan population, but because human ear shape is less variable, it is likely our child will have less arched ears than I do and there is a small yet distinct possibility it might develop ears that do not greatly differ from your own in phenotypic expression."

"So we could have a Vulcan baby with round human ears?"

"It is unlikely, but it is possible."

"Is there any way to tell from looking at the chromosomal scan?"

He reached into his breast pocket, extracted his personal PADD, found the files Dr. Govorski had sent him relating to Dagny, and opened the embryo's scan. "As you can see here, this is the overview of the child's twenty-three chromosome pairs. It only shows there are no severe abnormalities in chromosome number, shape, pairing, or fusion that would be incompatible with life."

"I had thought it was more concrete than that," she replied, frowning. "Dr. Govorski said it had a good chance of being born healthy."

He switched over to the long report, showing her the computer analysis of the embryo's genetic code. "Detailed analysis of each chromosome pair shows fairly typical arrangements in the genetic material. The embryo does not differ very significantly from non-hybrid Vulcans, thus indicating the likelihood for survival is very high indeed. Ninety-four percent, according to this report."

She uttered a heavy sigh and nodded. "Can I see it? I don't really know what I'm looking at, but I'm just curious."

"Genetics is not my field, but I can attempt to explain anything you wish to understand."

She moved her body so that she was sitting next to him and held the PADD out so they could both see it. On days when her nausea had subsided enough for her to function, he had taught her how to use the pharmaceutical synthesizer, the chemical analysis unit, and the large tissue regenerator he had brought with them. It had required many remedial lessons in biochemistry and physics, but though she was poorly and haphazardly educated, she was extremely intelligent and most importantly, willing to learn.

"So if the scan can determine that this is an acceptable combination of our genetic material, why can it not also give some indications about certain traits?"

"There are programs that can extrapolate genetic sequences and approximate many features, but it is still an approximation. Many physical qualities have highly complex inheritance patterns that involve multiple genes and environmental effects. Height is a frequently cited example. It is impossible for a person to determine such things simply by looking at the data contained in a preliminary scan."

"I guess we'll just have to be surprised then," she said, chewing her bottom lip. "The truth is, I care more that it's healthy than anything else."

"There are some characteristics that can be determined from this scan," he clarified, switching over to the chromosomal images. "For example, the sex is determined by the length of the last pair of chromosomes. The child is-

"I don't want to know," she yelped, clapping her hands over her ears.
"I had believed you wanted more information about our child's genetics. Sex is the most easily
identifiable piece of information available on a chromosomal scan."

"So you know the sex of our baby?"

"I do."

She made a face. "If you know, I feel like I should know too."

"Then will you permit me to tell you?"

"Uh… sure? Wait, no. I don't know. No."

"Which is it? Once I tell you, you cannot un-know what you have been told."

"No, I don't want to know."

"May I inquire as to why?"

"It's probably an illogical human superstition. There are blood tests you can give later in pregnancy
that can detect the biological sex of a child, so long as there's not more than one fetus. I always
wanted to try doing one on my mother, but she always refused. She was very patient that way. I
never was." Dagny wrinkled her brow and looked down at the PADD.

"If you wish to honor your mother's tradition, I respect your decision."

She thought to herself for a moment. "I do but I don't. I'm going to guess you would say it's illogical
to refuse to know something."

"Knowledge of the child's biological sex has no bearing on your health. It is a trivial fact and one that
will not alter the care you or the child receive. Therefore, it is not illogical to remain ignorant if you
so choose, particularly because you will learn the truth eventually regardless of your decision."

"Good thing Vulcans are good at keeping secrets then," she replied with a smile. She rose to her feet,
paused, and clapping her hand over her mouth.

He suspected she was about to be sick again, but she took a slow breath and picked up the emesis
bucket. "I'm going to go rinse this in the lavatory. Thank you for letting me get it."

He nodded. "I would like to meditate for a time in one of the empty cargo bays. Will you require
anything of me within the next three hours?"

"No. I'm grateful for anything and everything you do. I think I'm going to try and get a little more
sleep while I can since we'll be at the colony tomorrow night."

He left her alone and found his way to the cargo bay, where he spent several hours in deep
meditation, reflecting upon news of his father and uncle's success in the New Vulcan elections and
his growing partnership with Dagny. Each day that she remained pregnant, the likelihood of her
giving birth to a healthy child increased. Looking at the embryo's chromosomal scan, he had nearly
felt an emotion he could not identify. Hope? Anxiety? He wasn't sure.

But the reality was there was a strong possibility that in eight months' time, he would be a father,
responsible for the care, protection, and development of another sentient creature. The feeling would
have overwhelmed him were it not for the serenity that logic afforded.

He returned to their quarters to find Dagny asleep and he took the opportunity to rest also. They slept
through their midday meal, but were awoken at 1800 hours by Ann Svendsen, who had come by to check on Dagny. They shared end meal in the mess with Ann and her son Nicolas, but by the late evening, Dagny had become quite ill again, so they returned to their cabin so she could lie down.

"Do you require anything?" he asked, watching her pull the emesis bucket to her bedside and ease herself onto the bottom bunk. "Can I get you some water?"

"What I need is for you to get some sleep," she groaned. "There's nothing you can do for me. I appreciate that you're trying, but there's no reason for both of us to be miserable."

"You are certain?"

"Voris-" She clenched her jaw and shook her head. "Thank you so much, but yes, I'm certain."

He climbed up on the top bunk and stretched out. He could easily sense her discomfort, not only through their poorly formed mating bond, but also through the grunts and groans and fidgeting on the bed down below. He was completely responsible for her present state and he disliked it very much. Though he didn't feel particularly tired, he fell asleep anyway. When he awoke, the room was completely dark, excepting faint red and white lights trailing up the wall from the bed below. He didn't know what time it was but he could sense from Dagny's breathing that she was awake. He rolled over and peered over the side of the bed and found her huddled against the wall, fiddling with the settings on a tricorder.

"Are you well?"

She jumped. "Did I wake you up?"

He wasn't certain what had disturbed his sleep, but he did not believe she was to blame. "No. May I ask what you're doing?"

"It's nothing."

"Then what is the purpose of the tricorder?"

She hesitated. "I just thought… after our discussion and everything… I just wanted to see if I could find the baby's heartbeat."

"And have you?" he asked, suddenly very curious.

Several seconds of silence passed before she replied, "No." Though it was a single syllable, her voice cracked when making it.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and leapt to the floor. "It is still quite early-"

"I know, but the tricorder is supposed to be sensitive enough and…"

"Will you permit me to make an attempt?"

She gazed at the instrument in her hands and offered it to him without another word. He checked the settings, narrowed some of the frequency bands, and sat on the edge of the bed. He had never attempted to find a fetal heartbeat before, but the principles were no different than attempting to diagnose an intestinal blockage or a slight heart murmur through acoustic means.

"Please lie back."
She laid back on the bed and covered her mouth with her hand. He traced the device over her lower abdomen and heard nothing. Seconds ticked by, but there was no evidence of any sound beyond the expected background sounds of her bladder and intestines. After a minute of scanning, he checked the settings on the tricorder again. Dagny whimpered.

After broadening the frequency, he made a second attempt and almost immediately, the tricorder emitted a loud and steady swooshing sound, startling them both. Dagny yelped and sat up on her elbows, causing the sound to become briefly distorted. Voris adjusted the position of the tricorder and the swooshing sound continued as before. It was a wondrous and constant melody, the beating of their child's tiny and underdeveloped heart.

He had never seen her smile like she smiled in that moment. "Can you measure the heart rate?"

He switched through several screens on the device and after about fifteen seconds replied, "109 beats per minute."

She pushed off her elbows, leaned forward, and threw her arms around his neck to pull him into a deep embrace. He would have enjoyed listening to the embryo's heartbeat for a while longer, but he was surprised to discover he didn't mind this display of affection either. She had hugged him before, right before he had unconsciously forced a mating bond upon her, and the fact that she was willing to do it again intrigued him.

"Thank you," she whispered as she pulled herself back.

"You have nothing for which to thank me."

"I don't care. Thank you."

She took several gulping breaths and then lurched forward to vomit into the bucket on the floor. Though earlier in the evening she had insisted she didn't want any water, he fetched some for her anyway and she drank it without complaint.

He was unable to return to sleep. In the morning, the ship surged to life in preparation for their arrival at Bergeron colony. Ann Svendsen came by to give them instructions for taking their belongings down to the transporter room, and at 1715 hours, he and Dagny stood in the transporter room with Harold and three other humans, waiting to beam down to the surface of the planet.

"Standby. Transport in ten seconds," said the man at the control panel.

He saw Dagny move out of the corner of his eye and turned to find her looking at him. Her complexion was gray from the nausea and her eyes seemed to be seeking some reassurance. He nodded at her and she nodded back and soon he heard the transport compensators hum to life. He didn't know what awaited them on Bergeron colony, but he found himself looking forward to finding out.
Bergeron Colony

Part IV: Found
"No winter lasts forever; no spring skips its turn."
-Hal Borland

Stardate 2260.110

They appeared in a dusky room that smelled of alkaline metal and wet earth. Their human companions laughed and stepped off the designated transporter site, greeting people waiting at the entrance. Voris and Dagny moved out of the way to allow the next group to transport in, but unlike the others, they had no one waiting to receive them. Or so they thought.

"Are you the doctor?"

He turned to see a woman with vivid dark skin and close-cropped hair stepping towards them from the side wall. She offered a full smile, revealing a row of straight white teeth. Her eyes were tired but welcoming and her face carried the stark wrinkles of someone who was more accustomed to surviving life than living it.

"I am. I am Voris."

"I'm Samantha Bergeron," she replied, lifting her right hand in the ta'al. "Live long and prosper."

He returned her gesture. "Yes, live long and prosper. I am told you are the governor of the colony. We are honored to make your acquaintance, Governor Bergeron."

She smiled warmly. "I prefer Sam. Besides, we never formally had any kind of election or anything."

"Very well," he replied, bowing his head.

"And Ann said we were getting a proper medic too," she said, looking over to Dagny. "I don't suppose that's you?"

"Yes, I'm Dagny. Dagny Skjeggestad."

The two women shook hands while Sam looked them over more closely. She noticed the crate in Voris' hands and said, "Is that a cat?"

"It is. I am prepared to look after him and have ensured he has received all the necessary vaccinations."

"Does he hunt?"

"He does. I attempted to break him of the habit, but it appears to be rooted in a powerful instinct."

"Goodness knows Tunnel 2 is swarming with voles every spring. We lost a good chunk of our wheat crop our first year until we got our first Gorn settlers. We never have turned anyone away, so why should we turn away a cat, I suppose?"

"I appreciate your concession. I shall take the necessary precautions to ensure he is not a nuisance."

"I'm sure he'll be fine. I recommend keeping him away from the Gorn kids though. Like your cat, they also have a pretty strong predatory instinct where small mammals are concerned. Tunnel vole or
Terran cat, I doubt it would make a difference to the pups. Anyway, welcome, all three of you. I hope you brought warmer clothes than the ones you're wearing. It's still only autumn, but winter is just around the corner."

Voris looked at Dagny and then glanced out the window. A shriek of wind rattled the glass and he could see in the fading light of day the sky was blanketed with ominous clouds. "We shall manage, I'm sure," Voris answered.

"I think you'll find the people here are pretty friendly and happy to help newcomers," Sam explained. "But I wanted to be here to personally thank you for coming. I know we don't have much to offer to a doctor with your kind of training, but whatever you need, just ask and we'll do our best."

"Captain Diels said accommodations were waiting for us," Voris said, just as five more people materialized on the pad behind them.

"Yes, Velara's clinic is still set up and has attached quarters. It's not far from here and I'm happy to show you the way."

"Thank you," Dagny said, her voice soft.

"It's pretty damp outside, so I'll have Mike transport your things directly to the receiving station at the entrance to the tunnels. The transporter is a huge drain on energy so we try not to use it too often, but Jake says you brought a lot of medical equipment and I wouldn't want any of it getting wet."

"Thank you," Voris replied. "We only have these five trunks, but the equipment is quite sensitive."

"Mike!" Sam said, waving at the direction of the large man at the transporter control station. The man didn't react until she was practically standing in front of him. "Those boxes need to go to the clinic."

The man she called Mike gave no indication that he heard her. "The clinic," Sam said more slowly, pointing to the trunks. Mike smiled and gave a slow nod.

"Well, then, if you'll follow me," Sam murmured, turning back to Voris and Dagny. "I wish I had time to give you a proper tour, but I've got a lot on my plate today."

"We are grateful for any measure of hospitality," Voris explained.

"We don't have much here, but we have hospitality in droves," Sam laughed, breezing through the doors of the transporter station.

An icy breeze slapped their faces as they emerged into the fading afternoon. Voris reflexively shivered and saw Dagny cross her arms tightly across her body. There was a main path ahead with an improved surface, but no concrete connecting that walkway to the transporter station. They slogged through cold sludge and it only took several steps for Voris' lightweight shoes to be soaked through and caked with heavy mud. People greeted Sam as they passed and they eyed Voris and Dagny with open curiosity, but Sam moved with such obvious purpose that no one stopped to talk or formally introduce themselves.

"I don't know how much Jake told you," she said, looking over her shoulder as they reached the main path, "But much of the colony is underground. Pretty much all the dwellings are, anyway, aside from the Andorian community. The winters here are too harsh for everyone else but it actually stays pretty temperate year-round in the caves."

"And what are these other extant buildings?" Voris asked, pointing to the standalone hangar-like structures they were passing between.
"Some ore processing and storage, mostly, and a few workshops. The Andorians live down that way," she said, pointing to an unpaved street on the left with dome-shaped buildings a few hundred meters away.

Voris thought he'd been prepared for their new subterranean home, but the reality was much different than he envisioned. The path wound around a tall hill and led down a long set of stairs that took them into a narrow valley with several entrances on both sides.

"Most of the trade shops are down there," Sam said, tossing her head in the direction of the widest entrance on the right. "And the clinic, school, temporary lodgings, underground greenhouses, and the grocer's market are up this way."

"It seems like a lot of the essential stuff is underground," Dagny noted, staring up at the tall towers of rock on either side of them. "Why is the transporter station on the surface?"

"There's some gallicite in the rock that deflects transporter beams and scanning technology in many places. We're working on establishing a tunnel system to a lot of the above ground sections of the colony, but it's slow going and it's kind of on the back burner. The primary focus is on mining lithium and refining it: that's what's keeping everyone on this colony fed."

"Where are the mines?" Dagny asked.

"That way," Sam said, using her thumb to point to the openings on the left side of the rock. "Everything underground is interconnected and for good reason. Last winter much of the colony was snowed in for nearly a month. But we kept production up and life went on."

"Does the phrase 'snowed in' imply that you were unable to reach the surface due to heavy snows?"

Sam looked back over her shoulder, sporting a grin that spread across her entire face from her coal black eyes to her chin. "You catch on quick."

Voris had expected there would be a certain measure of hardship and adjustment, but he was unsure how to respond to this new bit of information. A slow rain began to fall, spurring them to walk more quickly. He recalled his first year in San Francisco and the enormous discomfort at experiencing rain, cold, and constant humidity, at least relative to his life on Vulcan. The weather on Bergeron colony seemed far more severe and variable than his previous research had demonstrated.

He was beginning to formulate questions about where to obtain more suitable clothing when Sam led them into one of the far tunnels, which immediately descended into a path of long, narrow stairs. The corridor was poorly lit; the only light came from dim lamps overhead every three meters, which left large swaths of the tunnel in near darkness.

Two thirds of the way down, a form emerged from the darkness into the light of one of the lamps. She was Romulan and even in the pale light of the stair tunnel, Voris could see she was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever encountered. Tall and slender with a sheet of icy black hair tumbling freely down her back, she greatly reminded him of a pre-Reformation statue. When her eyes locked onto Voris' she smiled, which he found off-putting, given her Vulcanoid features.

Unlike the others, she stopped and said, "Good evening, Samantha. Who is this?"

Sam turned to the pair of new arrivals. "This is Dr. Voris, and this-"

"A doctor! How wonderful!" the woman interrupted, alighting two stairs to be closer to the group.

Sam sighed and glanced at Dagny. "And this is our paramedic-"
The Romulan woman interrupted again to say directly to Voris, "I'm Vaksur. It's so nice to see another Vulcan face."

Voris was taken aback. Another Vulcan face? Vaksur was a Vulcan name, or more precisely, a Vulcan word—he'd never heard it used as a proper name. It literally meant beauty, and she was also a Vulcan.

"It is an honor to make your acquaintance," he said.

"I'm Dagny." Dagny's tone was short and unwelcoming.

Vaksur's eyes darted in Dagny's direction and she offered a thin-lipped smile and nod. "Hello." She turned back to Voris and smiled. "Nice to have you here."

"You are Vulcan?" he asked.

"I am. Velara, my foremother, used to run the clinic."

"We really need to get going," Sam said, taking several steps down the stairwell.

"I understand," Vaksur replied, not taking her eyes from Voris. "It was really nice to meet you. We've been in need of a doctor for some time. I'm sure I'll be seeing you." Voris nodded and shifted toward the wall to allow her to pass, but the stair tunnel was so narrow that her hip brushed against him as she moved. A subtle scent in her hair filled him with a powerful nostalgic feeling. It was familiar, and though he couldn't identify it, he loosely associated it with T'Sala's meditation candles. Dagny was already following Sam down the stairs and Voris turned to follow. He faintly detected an emotion lingering in Dagny's subconscious, something ugly and powerful. Jealousy.

Jealousy was illogical and he had no cause to understand why she might feel such a distasteful emotion. As he began to ponder this unusual development, he also became aware of the sound of distance voices beginning to echo from the stone walls and the air was growing warmer. They reached the bottom of the stairs at long last and entered a wide tunnel bathed in a rich red-orange light.

There were several dozen people moving throughout the open space, but the tunnel was hardly crowded. He studied the scene, taking note of a series of narrow doors to the left and a wide stall to the right with a Tellarite man selling produce. Some of the vegetables Voris recognized, including gespar and kaasa, and others he did not.

Next to the produce stall were racks of clothing, shelves of boots, and other assorted cloth goods. Sitting in the middle of it all was an elderly human woman, perched on a stool and knitting yarn from a rough spool on the ground. She suddenly fell into a violent fit of coughing, nearly knocking her from her seat, and Voris prepared to ensure she was well when a large mass slammed into his lower legs.

He tripped and twisted, just barely managing to hold his balance before tumbling into the stone floor.

He observed the figures of six Gorn pups, skittering on all fours toward the stairs, snarling and snapping at each other as they moved. He saw Dagny lunge out of the corner of his eye and caught her shoulder just as a much larger Gorn blazed past in pursuit of the children. Their mother, most likely. Judging from the roar she uttered at the base of the stairs, she was quite angry with her brood.

"Don't mind the Apras family," Sam said darkly. "Gorn kids are little monsters, but I'm told they
grow up to be decent members of society.

Dagny pushed off of Voris, smoothing out her rumpled shirt and taking a deep breath. A strange gurgling sound bubbled in her throat and she covered her mouth.

"Are you well?"

Dagny closed her eyes, nodded, and took a deep breath through her nose. "I'll be ok."

They followed Sam another hundred meters into the cave system. She fanned her hands out and twirled to face them. "This is Tunnel 3: we passed 1 and 2 outside in the central valley. Tunnels 5 through 10 are devoted to mining, and each of the tunnels are connected by a large outer loop. Some of the side passages can get confusing, but most of the tunnels are clearly marked with arrows that should set you back on the main system if you get lost and all the main ones converge on the central auditorium."

"Does the colony have a central computing system?" Dagny asked.

"It does," Sam replied, glancing over her shoulder. "And there is a computer in the clinic, along with a hardwired subspace radio and one of the few replicators we have in the colony."

"Does the colony have any special policies about computer and replicator use?" Dagny inquired.

Sam smiled. "The replicators are a huge drain on energy, so I ask that you use it for medical emergencies only. I know many planets have made the switch to replicating the majority of their food, but we just don't have organic matter to spare to feed all our people that way. The greenhouses are at the far end of this tunnel and we have a ration system. And while we do have people dedicated to growing our crops, we do ask people to volunteer when they can. Of course, I imagine you two are going to have your hands full most of the time. As of this morning, we have 1,101 people living on this colony, but I guess you two make it 1,103."

"Are there any other laws, rules, or regulations we should be made aware of?" Voris asked, just as Sam stopped before a wide gray door.

She put her hands on her hips and gazed at the ground. "This colony started with only about seventy people: none of us ever imagined it would grow into this. We tried coming up with a charter a few times, but people worried that would just complicate things. We don't feel like we should have to tell people not to steal or kill or hurt others. We live by an unwritten social code here. The main thing we ask is that people contribute however they can. Don't be wasteful with resources. Be kind. Help your neighbors. Accept this colony for the weird melting pot that it is and try to bridge the gaps in cultural differences. Try to… I'm rambling. It happens from time to time. Anyway, this is the clinic."

Voris looked from Sam's worry-worn face to the gray door that led to the clinic. The lights came on automatically when Sam stepped into the room, and what they revealed was startling. It was in a sorry state of disrepair and so poorly equipped that Voris believed it wouldn't have been out of place in a hospital from five centuries earlier, with the exception of a few anachronistic pieces of equipment.

The five trunks they'd brought with them, along with the supplies they'd picked up on Nausicaa, already sat in the middle of the room next to a central island workbench. There was a decrepit biobed near the door and four simple cots stacked along the left wall by three supply cabinets. On the right side of the room was a single surgical suite and another door, which Voris had presumed must be a laboratory but turned out to be a supply closet with a single mop and a broom. He ran his hand along the cracked counters of the workbench by the closet, noting they were badly worn, but clean. He
sniffed the air, detecting a faint antiseptic smell. For all its faults and everything it lacked, it *was* clean.

"I know it isn't much, but it's what we've got," Sam said, her eyes darting around the room.

"It's good enough," Dagny announced, giving her a reassuring smile. "We're good at making do."

Voris thought she was being politely optimistic. He studied the room more closely, believing it wouldn't pass even the most liberal of regulatory standards on either Earth or New Vulcan. There were chipped and cracked tiles in the floor, no drainage, no designated chemical and biohazard disposal, no emergency safety equipment. On a relative timescale, the technological sophistication of this clinic would have been closer to the Dark Ages than the modern age.

"Oh, and let me show you to your quarters. They're up this way."

She gestured to a dark passage nestled between two of the supply cabinets, but halfway across the room, a communications device on her belt chirped. She sighed, flipped it open, and said, "Sam here."

"It's Jake. Any chance I could get you to come up here? We're almost done unloading the supplies, but some of the Klingons are upset."

She pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. "Sure thing. I'm in the clinic now but I can get back up to the surface. Give me about five minutes."

She snapped the communicator shut and took a slow breath. "I'm sorry to have to race off like this. I hope you can find your way around. I imagine there might be more things you need. Get with Hadrian: he handles all the requisitions for the colony."

"I am not familiar with Hadrian," Voris admitted.

She closed her eyes and nodded. "Hadrian Moore. I'll be sure he stops by to see you. He's familiar with the clinic because he's one of the few people here with any formal medical training. Used to be a Starfleet medic or some such. But I've got to go. I'll try to check in in the next couple of days and make sure you both are settling in. For now, good luck, and welcome."

When the door slid shut behind her, Voris and Dagny slowly turned to look at each other. Beads of moisture glistened on her forehead and her complexion remained an atypical shade. It was evening, and she tended toward sickness in the evenings. He was about to recommend that she lie down when she said, "Let's get to work."

"Are you certain you are well enough?"

She scoffed and swallowed hard. "I don't imagine I'm going to feel well enough for a long time, but look around. This place desperately needs an overhaul. Why don't we start by putting our personal stuff in our rooms and we can take it from there?"

He was about to protest, but she narrowed her eyes and put her hands on her hips. "If I dwell on being sick, I'm just going to feel sicker. I need something to *do.*"

He sorted through the trunks, and after locating the one with their personal effects, hauled it into the passage between the supply cabinets. He found more stairs that snaked upward to a second level directly above the clinic. There were no *rooms,* per *se,* only a single square room with a small stove and food preserver by the door and a water closet in the corner. Opposite that was a single metal frame bed with a sagging mattress.
When Dagny reached the top of the stairs with Harold's cat carrier, she glanced around. Her initial look was one of shock, but her face hardened and she bobbed her head. "This is ok."

The room certainly would have been sufficient for one of them, but sharing this space for the long term would be difficult. They had cohabitated in the cramped cabin aboard the Oglethorpe, but Dagny was often sick or sleeping and he'd preferred to wander the ship so as to avoid disturbing her. They had spent some time together, but it had never seemed like they'd truly lived together.

"We'll just have to find another bed," she said, nodding vigorously to herself.

Voris looked over what could only be called the kitchen that spanned the wall by the door. He opened the food preservation unit. "We shall also have to procure food."

No sooner had he uttered the words than a melodic voice called up to them from the base of the stairs. "Hello?"

He followed Dagny down the stairs where they discovered an Orion woman with wavy black hair holding a large wicker basket full of assorted linens. She grinned and rushed forward. "I'm Aisla. I heard we finally got a real doctor. Welcome!"

Dagny shot Voris a hopeful look and strode forward to meet their guest. "I'm Dagny. I'm actually a paramedic. Voris is the doctor."

"I'm so happy to meet you!" she said, throwing her arms around Dagny. "And Voris, can I give you a hug or are you... you know? That kind of Vulcan?"

He stared at the Orion woman, unsure what specific kind of Vulcan she referred to. He thought of Vaksur and her lovely smile, realizing that she was almost certainly V'tosh ka'tur, or a Vulcan who did not follow logic. Perhaps that was what she meant. "I am not accustomed to making physical contact with newly formed acquaintances."

"Oh, then in that case, how does it go?" She lifted her left hand and tried splitting her fingers apart in the ta'al to no avail.

"I appreciate your efforts to honor my custom, but it is unnecessary. I am honored to make your acquaintance."

Aisla flashed a vivid smile and turned back to Dagny. "I heard from Deepak who heard from Zernon that you arrived on the quarterly transport and he said you didn't have warm enough clothes. And look at you: you must be freezing! So, I came to offer up some of my old things. We're about the same size, I think."

She held up the basket draped over her arms and started leafing through several thick sweaters. "This blue would go well with your eyes. You have such pretty eyes."

Dagny's jaw dropped. "These are really nice clothes, but I don't have anything to offer in return."

"Hush!" Aisla barked. "Just being here is more than enough. I've been this colony's unofficial nurse ever since Velara passed. I know a lot about Orion bodies, but I barely know what to do with anyone else and don't even get me started on making medication."

Her eyes volleyed between Dagny and Voris, prompting him to say to her like he'd said to many others aboard the Oglethorpe, "We are here to serve."

"And I'm here to make sure you don't freeze to death this winter," Aisla said, gently gripping
Dagny's wrist to slip the basket into her hands. She paused and sniffed the air around Dagny's hair. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were pregnant."

Dagny started to sputter and blush. "I uh- well, yeah. How did you know?"

"A superior sense of smell. It's in the hormones."

There was a knock at the door and the Tellarite grocer's head peeked in through the cracked opening. "I saw you in the tunnel with Samantha and decided you would probably be hungry."

He pushed his way through the door and deposited a box of fruits and vegetables on the center workbench. He had a slight limp. He wagged his eyebrows at Voris and peered around the room in a manner suggestive of derision. Tellarites were a proud race and were notorious for beginning relationships with a series of loud complaints and insults. He had personally introduced himself to very few Tellarites in his life and had no talent for deliberately attempting to offend someone. Thankfully, Dagny seemed to know what to do.

"You offer us this?" she sneered, trying to twist her face into an expression of scorn. "I had assumed this produce was meant for the matter reclaimator."

The Tellarite man's eyes lit up and he stroked his chest with his furry hands. "If you like Tellarite debate, I think we'll get along famously. Tell me human, what are you called?"

"I'm Dagny."

"And I am Zernon."

"Ah yes, Zernon," Aisla said, playfully rolling her eyes. "Our professional grump."

Zernon emitted a low growl and narrowed his eyes at Aisla. Dagny appeared to be struggling to formulate some new insult, but Zernon slapped her on the shoulder and roared with laughter. "You're a credit to your species, small one, that you can't think of a single combative thing to say. I appreciate the effort."

Dagny breathed a sigh of relief. "The vegetables really do look very good."

"Of course they're good! I grew them!"

"We are grateful for this," Voris said, stepping forward.

"Ah yes, the Vulcan," Zernon said, patting his chest and tilting his head back to observe him.

"I am Dr. Voris. Would you accept payment for the food?"

Zernon uttered a shocked gasp that came out more like a squeal. "I most certainly would not."

"It was not my intention to offend you," Voris explained, folding his hands behind his back.

"Then we'll speak no more of it," Zernon said, scowling. "Though perhaps you could be so kind as to look at my foot."

"Certainly." He glanced around the room, considering all the changes he would prefer to make before seeing patients, but Zernon was kind enough to bring them food when they had none and besides, he was a doctor. He pulled one of the cots from alongside the wall and directed him to sit while he sifted through the trunks for a tricorder to sterilize his hands and begin an examination.
He noticed Aisla take Dagny aside and wondered what they were talking about, but he put it out of his mind as he watched Zernon remove his foot from his boot with much grunting and squealing. He was not well-versed in Tellarite medicine, but the man clearly had a severe infection in his claw. He had a deep abscess above the horn that was swollen and warm to the touch.

"How long has it been like this?" he asked, consulting a medical database on his PADD for special considerations before lancing the abscess and clearing away the infected tissue.

"Several weeks," Zernon admitted, swearing under his breath as Voris palpated the tendons in his leg to see how far the infection had spread.

A third person knocked at the door, and moments later a heavily pregnant Romulan woman entered, wringing her hands. "Are you Dr. Voris?"

"I am."

"My name is Khel. Jake, my husband, said you were here. I was hoping you could tell me my baby is healthy." Her face was both hopeful and desperate.

"Why don't you let me have a quick look first while he tends to Mr. Zernon?" Dagny offered.

Khel nodded and followed Dagny to the other side of the room. As Voris administered a topical analgesic to Zernon's infected claw prior to cleaning out the sore, he watched Dagny in his peripheral vision. She created a privacy divider by hanging a blanket from the ceiling using a length of nylon cord and then enlisted Aisla's assistance in sliding the biobed behind it. She was remarkably resourceful, as was Aisla, who stayed behind with Khel's consent to learn more about Romulan maternity care.

More people came. They trickled in at first, then became a steady stream until the room was packed and they started to line up outside in the tunnel. Almost all of them came with some kind of offering: food, clothing, ration credits, offers to clean and even potted plants. Ann arrived with her youngest son Jørn, who had broken his arm last winter and had had the limb set improperly, which had led to slight deformity.

Dagny began triaging people as they came in, trying to schedule appointments for the less critical cases to come back at a later date and offering basic prescriptions for conditions that ran the gamut of mild bodily discomfort: headaches, toothaches, ear aches, heartburn, constipation, congestion, and upset stomachs, to name a few. She had transformed into a different person among the sea of anxious people who had been too long without basic medical care. There were times she would duck into the lavatory by the surgical suite and emerge a few minutes later, sweaty and pale, but she never once complained. Any time Voris would approach her to recommend she should lie down or eat something, she would automatically shake her head and insist she was fine.

It was approaching 0100 hours when the last patient finally left, which gave them a brief respite before more patients were scheduled to come back six hours later. There were instruments to clean and the clinic still needed drastic reorganization to make it more functional. They had eaten through most of their stocks of basic medications and would need to synthesize more, but he would need time to devise a plan of the most efficient way to do that, as well as decide how much to make and what to keep in regular stock. They had picked up two biobeds on Nausicaa that still needed to be assembled and calibrated and the surgical suite still needed to be set up. The patients were gone, but there was still so much to do.

"At the current count, we have thirty-six coming in tomorrow with urgent concerns," Dagny said, tracing her finger along the computer screen at the desk in the corner of the room. "I tried to group
types of appointments on certain days to make things easier. Tomorrow will be vision and neurological patients, the day after will be primarily orthopedic cases, but a lot of people have multiple problems and no matter how I tried to manage it, we're still scheduled to see between thirty and forty patients every day for the next week. Plus whoever else walks in."

"You have performed admirably."

"Me? What about you?"

Voris looked around the room. The boxes of medical trunks lay open and equipment was strewn everywhere. Boxes of food, blankets, clothes, trinkets, and other supplies people had dropped off lined the floors by the supply cabinets. The colonists' kindness and acceptance did nothing to alleviate the tired ache in his bones, but somehow, he found he didn't mind it as much as he surveyed the bounty they had delivered. It was generosity beyond measure.

"You should eat and then rest," he replied. "And did you take your evening medication?"

She scowled. "I did. You should eat and rest too."

He pulled an apple from the crate that Zernon had delivered and bit into the sweet flesh. Dagny gave him a strange look, which quickly faded as a smile broke across her face. "I can't believe you're touching food with your hands."

"I have done many things today that I am not in the habit of doing," he replied. She started to laugh, and soon tears were streaming down her face.

"What is the source of your amusement?"

She coughed and struggled to catch her breath. "I guess I've always had this idea of you being a certain kind of person, but you're full of surprises, Voris."

"Explain."

She shook her head. "I don't think I know how to. Just… thank you. Thank you for being you."

She grabbed a box with towels and a hand-sewn quilt a kind human woman with an eye infection had dropped off and made her way up the stairs without another word. He finished his apple and set to work installing the pharmaceutical synthesizer and chemical analyzer on the far workbench in the corner of the clinic while Dagny carried the colonists' donations upstairs. He felt compelled to assist her, but every time he made eye contact, she would give him a knowing look and shake her head.

After he had set up most of the equipment he'd brought with him from New Vulcan, he began sorting through the supplies they'd picked up on Nausicaa. It would take hours to properly assemble and calibrate both biobeds, but he would prefer to have at least one acceptable place to put a critical patient prior to beginning work tomorrow. Rather than build one of the new biobeds, he set to work trying to repair the older Andorian model that had come with the clinic.

He wasn't sure what happened next, but he jumped when he felt a soft hand on his shoulder. His chin was wet: he'd been drooling. And his forehead ached. He rubbed it and discovered lines in his skin from where he'd rested his face against the biobed's control panel.

He blinked and saw Dagny standing over him sporting a kind smile. "Hello, sleepyhead."

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It had been an evening of pure and utter chaos and though they hadn't been able to help everyone,
they had still done a lot of good. She felt good. She was still nauseated and exhausted, but she felt better than she had in months. This newfound purpose had gone a long way to restoring her soul.

She looked around their little apartment and grinned. It had been so rundown a few hours ago, but now it almost looked like a proper home, thanks to the generosity of strangers. It reminded her of the camaraderie and cooperation of the Albret, and it brought tears to her eyes.

She had stitched up a bad wound in a man's hand a few hours earlier and to say thanks, he'd dropped off a second metal frame bed and tightened the springs on the other bed so it didn't sag to the floor anymore. She couldn't remember who had donated the mattress for it, but now she and Voris had their own beds covered in beautiful handmade quilts, plus a lovely embroidered curtain that hung between them to give them some privacy. Ann had been so kind and thoughtful to let Harold out of his crate, feed him, and put many of the perishable food donations in the food preserver.

Jørn would be coming back the day after tomorrow for a consult to do surgery on his arm. She couldn't believe how much he'd grown. He was already nine years old; it seemed like he had been a baby just yesterday. She had found a fast friend in the Orion nurse, Aisla, who had stuck around for most of the evening to learn and help however she could. There were so many other names and faces she couldn't remember, but she almost felt at home again.

She'd spent the last hour unpacking their belongings and trying to find places for all the food and supplies people had dropped off. Most of the stuff was pretty practical, but some of it was on the more exotic side. In addition to brand new boots and mitten, dishes and silverware, they had also been given an antique Andorian tea set, a rack of foul-smelling spices, and even a box that contained live insects that loosely resembled cockroaches. It had taken everything in her power not to scream and curse the person who had done this, but she quickly figured out they were probably food for the carnivorous plant, not that it made it any better. She set them to the side and decided Voris could handle that later.

It was 0215 hours. She was so tired but there was so much more to do. Her stomach grumbled, sending a wave of nausea in its wake. She looked in the preserver and found a number of Vulcan root vegetables sitting toward the front. She smiled and started collecting ingredients for a casserole. She was forced to substitute a Terran onion for a Vulcan one and skip several classic Vulcan spices, but thirty minutes later, thanks to T'Mir's tutelage and the colonists' generosity, she had a hot dish cooling on the stove.

She portioned it into two bowls and went downstairs to find Voris sitting in a chair, his face pressed sideways against the biobed. The awkward position clearly constricted his airway because he was snoring and it took a lot of effort not to laugh. He was so sweet and he worked so hard. She walked over to him and gently placed her hand on his shoulder, startling him awake.

Logic was clearly one of those higher order brain functions, because his faced shuffled through surprise, confusion, and embarrassment before settling on its usual smooth and placid state. He had lines on his forehead and cheek from the buttons on the control panel. "Hello, sleepyhead."

He cleared his throat and stood. "I was just making repairs to the biobed."

She looked it over and raised her eyebrows. The power source was still disconnected. "Yes, I see. I thought you might be hungry."

They took a seat opposite one another on two of the cots and ate in relative silence. Her cooking was not as good as T'Mir's but it had still turned out better than she'd expected.

"Thank you," Voris said as he set his empty bowl on the cot beside him.
"You're welcome. And thank you," she replied, nibbling at a carrot-like vegetable.

"Why do you thank me?"

"Because you deserve it. You did a lot of really good work today. You helped a lot of people and I learned a lot just by watching you."

"There were many we did not help, and they will return in several hours."

"True," she nodded. "So why don't we get a little bit of sleep?"

"Because there is much to do to prepare. We still lack a functioning biobed and have no suitable place to perform any but the most basic surgeries."

"I used to feel overwhelmed caring for 141 people aboard the Albret. There are almost eight times as many people here and I can tell you from experience, it never stops. There's only so much you can do. You do the best you can with what you have, but you have to take care of yourself to take care of them."

They locked eyes and Dagny started to feel awkward. She could fill whole libraries with all the things she didn't know about medicine, whereas he had thirty years of experience. She was a lamb lecturing a lion. "What I mean to say-"

"You are wise," he interrupted. "You claim to have learned much simply by observing me, but I believe there is much I can learn from you. I have never worked in a setting quite like this."

Dagny swallowed, feeling a slight flush come over her cheeks. She grabbed his empty bowl and said, "Let's go to bed."

He followed her up the stairs, but no sooner did they walk through the doors of their quarters than a scream echoed from downstairs. They hurried back to the clinic to find two people on the floor and two more materializing next to them. They were bloody, broken, and covered in powdery dust.

"Ops station to clinic!" cracked a voice over the internal hardwired radio system.

They quickly learned a claw drill had hit a pocket of natural gas and there had been an explosion, killing one and badly injuring seven others. They were transported in two at a time using the subterranean transporters, almost all of them worse off than the last. Two had been pinned under the drill and had catastrophic crush injuries, and though they didn't have a sterile surgical suite, Voris quickly set to work in a last-ditch effort to save their lives while Dagny tended to the others.

They were all human and had burns of varying severity, along with broken bones and hypoxia. All but one of them were fading in and out of consciousness and the one who was awake was demonstrating signs of confusion, whether from oxygen deprivation or a concussion, she couldn't say. One of them, an older man, had a piece of metal shrapnel embedded in his ribcage. A penetrating chest wound. She worked first to clear their airways and restore a sufficient level of respiration for each of them, sealing the one chest wound with an occlusive dressing and putting all of them on high flow oxygen.

"Are they going to be ok?" someone muttered from the doorway.

Dagny looked up to see two women and a man standing just beyond the threshold, covered in white dust and clutching safety helmets. "It's too early to tell for some of them."

"Can we do anything?" one of the women asked. Dagny surveyed their clothes and dirty work
boots, and then looked at the deep, wet burns covering her five patients' bodies. The clinic was far from sterile, but the last thing any of them needed was more dirt and debris floating into their charred flesh.

"What kind of gas was it?" she asked, rubbing her forehead with the back of her hand as she went from patient to patient, administering powerful, general purpose antibiotics.

"The scanners say methane," the man replied.

"That's good," she explained, shuffling to the computer to search for the best compound to counteract methane poisoning.

The other woman inched her way into the clinic, tears forming rivers in the dust that caked her face. "I just want to hold his hand. He's my husband."

Dagny gave her a resolute nod. "I understand. Listen, right now your husband is very vulnerable. Any dirt, any contamination that gets in his burns could make him very sick. The best thing you can do is go home, get as clean as you can, and come back. He'll want someone holding his hand when he wakes up, I'm sure."

The woman's features softened into relief at being given a task. She turned to leave, but Dagny called after her, "See if you can round up the family members of the others!"

After learning the most effective treatment for methane poisoning was the administration of oxygen, which she had already done, she turned her focus to treating the broken bones and burns. It would take hours of dermal regeneration to restore the layers of skin for each patient and every minute that passed was one more minute they were susceptible to infection.

Her Aunt Birgitte had once shown her how to sterilize plastic packing material to use as a temporary dressing—it reduced pain, wound contamination, and fluid loss and was nontoxic and transparent, which allowed for monitoring of the wound without removing the dressing. It was also less expensive but just as effective as biomedically engineered skin, but perhaps most importantly, she had some on hand.

She began to pull off long sheets of plastic from the supply box, sterilize it with ultraviolet light, and use it to cover their burns. Two of them were beginning to come to and she kept a close eye on their vitals, which would have been easier if they were in biobeds that could monitor their condition in real time, but she made do with what she had. Several people stopped by the clinic looking for their loved ones and now that their burns were primarily covered, she felt better about allowing people inside.

She hated having to tell a woman with two young children that her husband was currently in surgery and she didn't know his condition. She began the slow process of mending broken bones with the bone knitter, and when she was done, she started mending their burned flesh with the dermal regenerator, but it would take her at least a full day to treat their partial and full-thickness thermal burns with a handheld unit. Unfortunately, it was all they had.

At 0630 hours, Voris emerged from the surgical suite and was instantly approached by the woman and her children. The woman started to scream and her children started to wail, and involuntary tears ran down Dagny's face. She didn't have to ask: she already knew. She had made a similar sound herself upon receiving similar news not that long ago.

She sniffed and wiped her face before anyone could see. The volume of the clinic seemed to grow louder with the woman's grief as some of the patients and their family members moved to comfort her. Voris approached and quietly asked, "How are these patients?"
"Doing better, but it's going to take time with the dermal regenerator. I have one with a penetrating chest wound that's going to need surgery, but it wasn't as urgent as the other two you were working on. Did they both die?"

"No, I managed to stabilize one, but he has lost his legs and most likely will lose his right arm at the shoulder. We lack the resources to regenerate limbs, but I intend to contact the hospitals on Aldebaran and New Vulcan and see if they can offer assistance."

"That's going to take months to arrange that kind of care," Dagny sighed, feeling ready to collapse from mental and emotional exhaustion.

Voris' jaw tightened slightly. "Yes."

She realized he wasn't used to not being able to pull from an available, bottomless bag of medical tricks. It almost seemed like he felt guilty for not being able to do more. "He's alive. We'll get him the help he needs, even if it takes some time."

"The scheduled patients are due to arrive in approximately twenty minutes," Voris said, glancing at the door.

"I'll do what I can and keep looking after them, but the penetrating chest wound needs surgery."

Voris nodded. "Thank you."

It was only two simple words, but his tone conveyed genuine gratitude and for no particular reason, she noticed her heart skip a beat. Neither of them had slept and they were already starting the day behind schedule, but she shuddered to think what would have happened if they had arrived a day later. All seven of these people would have died. She closed her eyes and tried to keep that at the front of her mind instead of the poor woman sobbing uncontrollably in the corner.

She took a deep breath and seized the opportunity to check the vitals on her patients before the routine appointments started to show up. The one on the end was a man, almost more of a boy, really, with sandy blond hair and wide facial features. He had burns on the right side of his body, mainly on his arm and upper torso. He had several cracked ribs and was still unconscious, but his brain activity registered as normal on the tricorder.

No one had come for him. The other four patients had people sitting by their cots, holding their hands or patting their arms, but this one was alone. She wondered why. As if on cue, his eyelids drifted open and he looked at her, cleared his throat, and mumbled in a cracked voice, "Wow, you're pretty."

She laughed in disbelief. "Thanks. Welcome back to the land of the living. How are you feeling?"

He groaned and turned his head on the cot to face her. "Like I got run over by a claw drill."

"From all accounts, that's more or less what happened."

He grunted and tried to sit up, but she motioned for him to remain still. "You're not going to die, but you've got some healing to do yet."

He glanced down at the oozing red burns beneath the clear plastic and recoiled, which prompted her to add, "I know it looks bad, but I've seen worse. We're going to get you patched up, I promise."

"Where am I?"
"The clinic."

He smiled. "And who are you?"

"My name is Dagny. I'm a paramedic. I arrived yesterday with Dr. Voris."

"Lucky for us then. You're an angel."

She reached for the pendant around her neck, suddenly aware that her heart was pounding. *Why?* Then it hit her. He reminded her so much of Erik. Sure, his hair was blond and not red and his eyes were a muted gray rather than blue, but it was something about his smile and the way he spoke. He was handsome and she suddenly felt guilty for thinking so.

"I'm just doing my job," she muttered, starting to turn away to check on the others.

"I'm Pearson, by the way. Pearson Schoenbein."

She swallowed hard and nodded. "Is there anyone you want me to contact? You know, do you have anyone who would come see you?"

"I'm here alone. Just me."

"Oh."

"I wouldn't mind seeing more of your pretty smile though."

Her breath caught in her throat. She should tell him about Voris, about the baby, about the whole awkward situation, but she couldn't find the words. She was ashamed that she found him so attractive, and as the seconds passed by without either of them speaking, she began to feel complicit in a vague lie, which only served to further paralyze her.

"You're blushing," Pearson said, chewing his lip as he grinned at her.

"I have to go," she said, whipping around.

She noticed Voris watching her from the bedside of the patient she'd recommended for surgery and suddenly felt the presence of an emotion that didn't quite feel right. It didn't take her long to identify it as jealousy. Why should she be *jealous?* She wasn't jealous; she was embarrassed, flattered, guilty, and anxious, but of all the emotions she could be feeling, jealousy didn't make any sense. It also didn't *literally* feel right: it almost felt like she was picking up on some kind of out-of-body emotional experience.

Voris noticed her looking at him and when he turned his attention back to his patient, the sensation faded from her consciousness. She became acutely aware of the blood rushing through her ears. Somehow, some way, she knew she had been feeling what Voris was feeling. It wasn't *her* jealousy: it was *his.*

That realization only added to her confusion and guilt, but she didn't have time to dwell on it because soon enough, patients started arriving at the clinic for their scheduled appointments. At 0800 hours, she snuck upstairs to give herself her morning dose of lentrazole and for no reason at all, burst into tears.

She and Voris weren't married; they weren't in any kind of relationship, they were just having a baby together. But didn't that count for something? She didn't know. She didn't *love* him, did she? Maybe she *could,* but would he ever love her back? She had made Voris feel jealous and she hated herself
for it. What did that mean? Why hadn't she told Pearson Schoenbein she wasn't interested? Maybe she was interested, but she didn't really know. Maybe it was just that he reminded her of Erik, and that thought made her hate herself for forgetting about Erik so soon. She sobbed harder. How had her life become so damn complicated?
Anticipation

Stardate 2260.140

His hands trailed along the sides of her breasts, sending tingles down her spine that put a curl in her toes. He pulled himself up over top of her, exploring her chest and neck with his tongue as he moved. She moaned, pressing her fingertips into the sinewy muscles of his back and drawing her hips upward toward him. It was euphoria.

Their bodies began to rock in tandem to a rhythm that belonged exclusively to them. Soon they were panting and growling, but each time their efforts grew too frantic, he would draw away and become tender again. Dagny craved more.

Tension and anticipation started to build low in her belly, but just before she could surrender herself to the climactic burst of pleasure, something jabbed her hard in the chest.

"Argh!"

Dagny bolted upright, sending Harold tumbling to the floor with a loud yowl and series of hisses. She rubbed her chest where the cat had jumped on her and blinked in the darkness. She was alone and tangled up in her sheets and for the third night that week, she'd been the victim of a subconscious mind obsessed with sex.

How could she be having dreams like that about Voris? She was thirteen weeks pregnant, so it wasn't like the thought of having sex with Voris was that far-fetched, but given the present circumstances, it was just too weird to think about. She barely remembered the night on Aldebaran that had led to this whole mess, but apparently some part of her desperately wanted to revisit it.

Or maybe it was just her hormones running wild. They'd been all over the place lately, making her irritated one minute and weepy the next. She cried at the drop of a hat—just yesterday Zernon had given her a box of strawberries on her way back from a house call and she'd burst into tears at his kindness. Maybe it was just whacky pregnancy hormones making her do and think funny things.

Dagny closed her eyes and instantly saw images of Voris' naked back. She ripped her eyes back open, blushing like an idiot. Did Voris know she felt this way? Every so often she would sense hazy emotions in him, or at least she thought that was what was going on. If she could feel what he was feeling, then it seemed probable he could do the same with her. Or maybe she was just dreaming it.

She grimaced and held her breath, listening hard for any sounds coming from the other side of the dividing curtain between their beds, but some unnamed instinct told her Voris was already up for the day. Dagny had no idea what time it was but she knew from experience that Voris had probably been up for at least an hour, if not more.

She stumbled to the lavatory, ignoring the goosebumps pricking her flesh in protest of the cool air. The clock on the sidewall read 0521 Standard time. It was still early, but she knew from experience that Voris had probably been up for at least an hour, if not more.

Today marked a month at Bergeron colony. Things had settled a bit, but between the fact that the colony of more than a thousand people had gone without professional medical care for four months and the sorry state of the clinic, there was always work to do. Voris was running himself ragged trying to get the pharmacy cabinet stocked and surgical suite up to code, despite the fact that they
weren't a sanctioned Federation colony and therefore wouldn't be on the receiving end of any inspections.

Dagny had learned more in a month under Voris' tutelage than she had in four years of being a paramedic on her own. During slower parts of the day, he made a point of having her sit in on his visits with patients and then later in the evening, they would discuss the cases they had seen that day over dinner. Whenever she didn't understand some point, he would stop and give a quick lesson in physiology, chemistry, genetics, molecular biology, or whatever discipline related to the topic at hand. Subjects that had seemed so daunting and impossible when she'd tried learning them on her own seemed more manageable with a patient Vulcan tutor.

Something brushed her calf, causing her to jump. She looked down to see Harold winding his way between her legs, rubbing his whiskers on her as he moved. No doubt the grouchy cat was hungry. He started to meow.

"Alright, let me get dressed first," she groaned, stretching her arms above her head and enjoying the pull of the muscles in her arms, back, and abdomen.

Dagny grabbed a pair of trousers, underclothes, and a light sweater from her dresser and tossed the clothes on her bed. She pulled the nightdress over her head and stretched again, staring at her thin, pale body. She'd put on some weight, but she still didn't really look pregnant.

At least she didn't think so, until she pulled on the trousers and noticed they didn't seem to be fitting right. Dagny had always been thin and lanky and as a result, she didn't wear clothes as much as clothes wore her. But now it was difficult to close the top button of her pants. She stared hard at her stomach, looking for any evidence of a bump in her abdomen but not really seeing one.

She ran her hands along the inside of the waistband, deciding her clothes weren't lying. Her pants were definitely fitting tighter. She smiled. Despite the exhaustion, frequent urination, sore breasts, and awful morning sickness she'd experienced in the initial weeks, she hadn't really ever felt pregnant, only miserable. She rested her hands on her stomach, deciding maybe she did look a little fuller.

"Dagny?"

Dagny yelped and scrambled to cover her bare breasts as she flipped to face the wall. "I'm not dressed."

They had a curtain hanging between their beds, giving them semi-private rooms, but both beds were still exposed to the common area of their quarters. A surge of uneasiness came and then quickly faded away. Whether it was his or hers was impossible to say.

"I apologize. Please excuse me." The sound of his voice told her he hadn't quite made it to the top of the stairs so maybe he hadn't seen her.

"Um, it's fine. Just give me a second," she mumbled, fumbling with her bra.

It was probably stupid to be shy in front of him, all things considered. He was a doctor and had obviously seen breasts before. He'd seen her breasts before, both in a medical context when he'd treated her aboard the Sekla and… that other time on Aldebaran. She recalled her very racy dream and started to feel wretched and embarrassed as she pulled the sweater over her head and wriggled her arms into the sleeves.

"I'm decent now," she called. "Did you need something?"
"I have come for first meal," he said, emerging from around the corner at the top of the stairs.

"You didn't eat when you woke up?"

"I have been awake for some time. Jester Blakely arrived two hours ago with mild abdominal pain and I treated him for an umbilical hernia."

"I didn't even hear the call alarm go off." The clinic was equipped with a buzzer on the front door for after-hours emergencies, in addition to a direct line to the mining operations center.

"That's because it did not. I was already awake when he arrived."

"Did you even go to sleep?" she asked, walking toward the kitchen counter to find Harold's food so he would stop yowling.

"I slept for approximately two hours before waking to meditate."

She stole a glance at Voris as she leaned over to deposit two scoops of cat food into Harold's bowl. The whites of his eyes were greenish and bloodshot. He looked thinner too. "You can't keep going like this. You're running yourself ragged."

He raised an eyebrow. "There is much work to do."

"There are two of us and 1,100 colonists: there's always going to be work to do. But things are slowing down. All the serious cases have been seen to and we finally have the routine appointments down to four days a week."

"We are still unprepared for many situations."

"It's impossible to be prepared for every eventuality."

"While I agree with the logic of your statement, I am Vulcan. I do not require as much rest as you. I could lose even more sleep and still function adequately."

Dagny wanted to argue with him, but didn't see the point. "There's still some plomeek soup in the preserver from yesterday. I can heat that up for you if you like."

"I am capable of preparing it."

"I know. But I'm hungry too and was already thinking of making some for myself."

Voris nodded and sat down at the small, round table in the middle of the room. A minute later, she set a warm bowl of soup in front of Voris and took a seat across from him, noting the pinch of her trousers around her midsection.

"We are scheduled to conference with Dr. Govorski tomorrow."

"I know," Dagny replied, stirring the broth to speed up the cooling process. A few seconds of silence passed before Dagny realized Voris was staring at her. "Was that a way of asking how I'm doing?"

"I know you have been diligent with your medications. I have observed you appear to be less fatigued and nauseated, but it occurs to me I have not asked."

Dagny had improved a lot. Most of the nausea had disappeared and she was able to eat more, though she still tasted bile in the back of her throat whenever she encountered certain smells. And he was right: she had a lot more energy too. She relaxed a little more with each passing day, but she still
checked the baby's heartbeat every morning, just to hear the reassuring sound. "I'm feeling a lot better than I was a month ago."

"I would like to check your hormone levels prior to our conference with her. I would also like to consult with her regarding Mrs. Diels, who is past her due date, as of yesterday."

"Sure." She took a bite of her soup, crunching one of the vegetables between her front teeth. Jacob Diels' wife, a Romulan woman named Khel, was extremely anxious following a previous late term miscarriage and a stillbirth. She came into the clinic often, begging to have every pain and twinge investigated. Dagny always felt happy to oblige her; she knew exactly what it was like to hold her breath and wait for something to go wrong.

Beyond her thoughts of Khel lay more awkward realities. An informal division of labor had emerged between them almost from day one. Dagny had assumed the role of attending to most of the women's health issues that came through the clinic doors, not because Voris was incapable of performing breast exams or delivering prenatal care, but because apparently male Vulcan physicians didn't involve themselves with women's health except in instances of emergency or when there were no female physicians available. Apparently the inverse was true also in that female healers would refer issues of men's health to their male colleagues if at all possible.

Dagny didn't really mind his reluctance but it seemed very silly, old-fashioned, and illogical. Like all doctors, he'd received training in obstetrics and gynecology during medical school. He wasn't squeamish or uncomfortable around females and he certainly hadn't ever hesitated to get involved if Dagny asked. Just last week she'd had to ask for his help with a human patient with abdominal pain that had turned out to have a moderate case of uterine fibroids.

While he was always help a patient if Dagny couldn't and while Dagny was more than willing to assess, examine, and assist every single woman at Bergeron colony with issues relating to their female anatomy, there was only so much she could do for herself. She would give birth in about seven month and though Khel had Dagny to help deliver her baby, Dagny only had Voris. She supposed there was Aisla, the Orion nurse who had become the colony's informal doctor after Velara had died, but it wasn't really the same.

Aisla had four children of her own and had helped deliver the babies of her relations when she'd lived in a collective of Orion females, but her expertise was wrapped around Orion physiology, which was very different than most other species on the colony. She came to the clinic whenever she could to volunteer and learn, and while Dagny and Voris were always grateful for an extra pair of hands to treat minor injuries or help with clerical duties, the clinic wasn't her primary job.

Aside from the end goal of delivering the baby, Dagny was certainly going to need pelvic exams as her pregnancy progressed and Voris was the only other person qualified to give her one. The thought of getting up on a table, putting her heels in stirrups, and letting him probe around the more sensitive parts of her anatomy was not a particularly pleasant one. She wondered what his thoughts on it were. They couldn't avoid the subject forever. She debated just asking him about it right then and there, but the sudden memory of last night's dream flickered into her mind, burning her cheeks with embarrassment.

"Are you well?"

She nearly choked on her soup. She dared herself to look at him and act casually. "Yeah, fine. Why do you ask?"

"Your complexion is reddening."
"I'm ok."

"You are certain?"

"Yes."

She finished off the last of her soup and moved to the freestanding sink to rinse her bowl. Washing everything with water was weird. Bergeron colony carefully rationed energy because the power grid was insufficient to support the demands of the mining operations and so many people. Sonic showers, sinks, replicators, and other technologies that devoured energy were used as sparingly as possible. There were plans to add a third fusion reactor on the sixth corridor next spring with the profits from the next shipment of ore, but that was still months away.

The radio chimed downstairs, giving them both the excuse to turn their attention to work. It wasn't even 0600 hours, but Hadrian Moore was asking for their final requisition request for Sam's approval by the end of the day. Their budget was small and Voris had spent many hours running different analyses on the most efficient way to allocate resources for the clinic.

He sat down at the computer in the corner to review his request for what seemed like the hundredth time while Dagny got to work processing the last of the medications he'd synthesized the night before and stocking them in the pharmacy cabinet. A short time later, the clinic opened for its regularly scheduled hours. It had taken time to arrange a schedule, but they settled on following the colony's standard seven-day week, open for six days and closed on the seventh. They worked from 0630 to 1930 hours to accommodate miners on all three shifts. Three out of the six days, they saw people by appointment, they held a walk-in clinic on two days, and the other day they would alternate making home visits to check in on patients. At least that was the schedule in theory.

In reality, they were open twenty-four hours a day for emergencies and many people still just dropped by without an appointment. Quite often they ended up making home visits at odd hours because many of the miners worked unpredictable shifts. Dagny had even gone down to the mines during the middle of the day to catch people on their lunch breaks if they were too busy to stop by the clinic. People were slowly catching on though and as the weeks went by, things were settling into a routine.

The clinic was always busiest first thing in the morning because many miners on the Alpha shift would come in before work for pain relievers or quick checkups. That morning ended up being busier than usual, with a lot of people coming in with a dry, hacking cough. Voris quickly isolated and identified a new strain of a mild Tellarite influenza virus and got busy designing a vaccine, doing his best to give Dagny a crash course in modern immunological theory as he worked.

Things tapered off at midday and Dagny took advantage of the opportunity to go upstairs and make lunch. When she came down fifteen minutes later with two plates of rice and bean salad and sliced fruit, the first thing she smelled was vomit. Pregnancy had heightened her sense of smell in ways that were really unfortunate.

A boy with a gray complexion sat on the edge of a biobed in the front room, slumped against his mother and holding her hand as Voris examined him. Dagny tried to hold her breath against the vomit smell but another odor caught her nose. It smelled so familiar, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

"Is everything ok?" Dagny asked.

"Mr. Li is suffering from acute nausea."
"The school sent for me because he got sick after lunch," his mother sighed. "It must have been something he ate."

Voris asked them a battery of questions but the answers didn't reveal much. Shen Li had no fever or diarrhea. He wasn't allergic to anything and wasn't taking any medications. The boy started to retch and Dagny grabbed an emesis bucket. As he leaned forward to vomit, she got a whiff of his hair and the same familiar smell assaulted her nose. Suddenly, she suspected she knew exactly what was going on.

She waited until he was done vomiting to ask, "Shen, what were you doing today at lunch?"

"We ate and then played above ground for half an hour like we do every day when the weather is nice," he replied pitifully.

"Yes, but what did you do?"

He glanced at her and shrugged.

"Did you spend time with any friends?"

"Just Saul and Lharess."

"Lharess, is he Caitian?"

"Yeah."

"You know, growing up, I used to live on a salvage ship. We would stop at a lot of ports. We stopped on Cait a few times. It was always really nice to stop at a port and get off the ship." Dagny realized both Mrs. Li and Voris were staring at her, but she continued. "I remember this one time, my brother Benjamin found these boys on Cait and when he came back to the ship for dinner that evening, he was sick as dog, kind of like you are now. He got so sick he had to go to hospital and we thought he was doing to die."

Shen's eyes ballooned to almost twice their normal size. His white knuckles gripped the emesis bucket, but he admitted nothing.

"At the hospital, they finally figured out he'd smoked this Caitian herb. I think it's called kra'shaa? Anyway, I don't remember much else, other than it had this really pungent smell, sort of bitter and minty. It smelled kind of like you smell right now."

"Am I going to die?" Shen blurted, tears welling in his eyes. "Lharess said it was ok."

"You did drugs?" his mother roared. "How could you be so stupid?"

"I don't want to die," Shen sobbed.

"You're not going to die," Dagny said, glancing at Voris. "But for the next day or so, you're probably going to wish you were dead as it works its way out of your system."

Voris searched the databases for information regarding human ingestion and inhalation of kra'shaa, a popular Caitian recreational herb, but like Dagny already knew, there was very little they could do other than keep Shen hydrated and wait for his body to metabolize it. Shen and his mother left a short time later, leaving Voris and Dagny alone to eat their lunch.

They had barely taken their first bite when Khel appeared in the doorway, gripping her back and
looking entirely miserable. "I think I'm in labor."

"Let's have a look, shall we?" Dagny said, setting down her fork, wiping her face, and gesturing toward the back of the room where a privacy curtain cordoned off two semi-private exam rooms.

After a few short questions and a pelvic exam, Dagny shook her head. "I don't think you're quite there yet but I have a feeling you're getting close. Could be tomorrow or maybe even tonight."

"You're sure?" Khel sniffed sitting up. "I'm so uncomfortable."

Dagny nodded. From everything she'd studied, there were few differences between the human and Vulcanoid birthing processes. "I can ask Dr. Voris to confirm."

Khel frowned and shook her head. "I believe you. It didn't hurt this much the last time."

"Why don't you go home and I'll try to check on you every two hours and see how you're doing."

Khel only lived six doors down from the clinic, so it would be no real inconvenience. She nodded and accepted Dagny's help in getting down from the biobed. Dagny gazed at Khel's swollen and unbalanced figure as she moved, thinking she wouldn't look much different in a couple of months. What a strange thought.

Dagny had either delivered or helped deliver nineteen babies, including her youngest siblings, Henrik and Tilde, plus four babies since their arrival at Bergeron colony. She wouldn't call herself an old hand at midwifery, but she wasn't completely inexperienced either. But pregnancy and labor were things that had always happened to other people. Seeing Khel so nervous made her nervous because they had a lot in common. They were both young and carrying human/Vulcanoid hybrid babies and Khel had lost two children before this one. Dagny wanted to tell her that everything would be fine but she honestly didn't know if that was true.

A loud crashing sound erupted from behind the curtain, causing both Dagny and Khel to jump. The source of the commotion ended up being the Apras family, a single Gorn mother with her five young boys. Apras, the mother, was holding one of her children in the air by his arm and keeping another one at arm's length to prevent him from assaulting one of his other siblings.

"I should get out of here," Khel groaned, taking a deep breath and skirting the edge of the room until she reached the door.

Dagny promised to check in on her in a few hours and shifted her focus to helping Voris with the disastrous Gorn family. The Gorn were so unlike anything Dagny could wrap her head around. Their vocal cords and tongues made speaking Federation Standard impossible, along with any other Federation languages. Like many of the Romulans, Klingons, and other non-Federation member species at the colony, they communicated through universal translators, but the Gorn UTs were really unusual.

They wore them strapped around their necks like little choker collars and they apparently functioned by detecting the vibrations in their throats and converting them to typical speech. The programming was a little rough though and often delivered sketchy and bizarre translations in stilted speech and awkward syntax.

That wasn't the only weird thing about the Gorn. Samantha Bergeron had said Gorn children were "little monsters" on their first day there, and though she'd assumed she was joking, Dagny was now convinced Sam had meant it literally. Perhaps it was a little unfair to call them monsters; they were more like impulsive feral animals, not as a result of neglect or bad parenting, but because of biology.
As Dagny had learned in the last month after several run-ins with Gorn families, Gorn child development was like nothing she'd ever heard of in other sentient species. Their bodies grew very quickly, usually reaching physical adolescence around age six and adulthood at age thirteen. Their minds matured along a different trajectory however, making them incapable of coherent speech until around age four. Things like higher order reasoning or impulse control didn't kick in until around age eight. As a result, many Gorn children were aggressive, reckless, and impetuous, but they legitimately couldn't help it. Making matters worse was the fact that they were almost impervious to pain.

But the most shocking thing to Dagny was the fact that the Gorn just assumed that only a third of their children would survive to adulthood. Gorn mothers frequently delivered litters of between six to ten offspring and on average, only three survived to become adults. Once their claws hardened during infancy, it wasn't uncommon for littermates to kill each other in the nest, not out of any malicious intent, but out of pure biological instinct to compete for resources. Gorn families did their best to mitigate violence between siblings, but they had simply resigned themselves to the idea that some of their children would die.

The Apras brood was three years old and approximately the size of six-year-old human children with razor sharp teeth, ten centimeter claws, and horrible attitudes. Many of the colonists were wary of Gorn children, which was why the Gorn occupied their own tiny tunnel at the end of the loop, but sometimes the children refused to stay segregated.

It wasn't just the Gorn kids either. The other children on the colony were intrigued by their feral peers and just last week, Voris had to perform surgery on a Klingon boy who'd attempted to capture one of the one of Apras' pups on a dare. Calo, Apras' son, had nearly taken Garlon's arm off after the Klingon had cornered him in a dead-end tunnel and it had caused something of an uproar around the colony. A lot of colonists were tired of being understanding and wanted the Gorn pups either locked up, medicated into compliance, or gone.

Now all five of Apras' children were in the clinic and on the verge of outright rebellion. Two of them had severe lacerations to the face, with one of them clearly missing an eye. Apras roared at them to be still, but it had little effect. Voris was trying to patch up the forehead of a boy sitting on the biobed with a dermal regenerator, but every time his hand came too close, the boy would snap at him and giggle.

Dagny sighed. "Apras, can you please take these three boys outside while Voris and I see to the two with the more serious injuries? I think they're just riling each other up and making things worse."

"That would be appreciated," Voris agreed.

"This I will do to make work smooth. And thank you," the Gorn woman replied. Apras snarled at her pups. She was already holding one in the air by his left arm. She threw him over her shoulder and grabbed the two others by their ears and hauled them toward the door. Gorn mothers were quite rough with their children, which Dagny found unsettling, but apparently it was the only way to get them to comply.

Dagny pulled a dermal regenerator out of the equipment cabinet, but Voris straightened his back and shook his head. "I do not want you coming near them. Leave this to me."

"They're not too big to manage," Dagny insisted, inching toward the biobed. "Not yet, anyway."

"Dagny, no."

His tone made her bristle. He was talking to her like she was a naughty child instead of another
medical professional trying to help an injured boy.

It took a lot of patience and a lot of near misses for Voris to patch up Echin, the boy sitting on the biobed, not only because Echin kept squirming and trying to bite Voris, but also because his brother Eury kept taunting him. The end result was an awful maze of bright red marks on his face, but he wouldn't let Voris any closer to do a neater job. Echin would probably have scars, but scars weren't unusual for Gorn pups.

Apras came in to collect Echin and shoved Eury, the boy with the avulsed eye onto the table.

"I am not certain I can save the eye," Voris said, looking at his mother.

Apras shrugged. "His fault, it is. He learns. This learning for Gorn young."

"It might be easier if I sedated him," Voris called after her.

"You be safe," Apras said, pushing Echin out the door. "He sleeps if he sleeps."

"Will you get me a hypospray loaded with four percent improvoline?" Voris asked Dagny, not taking his eyes off Eury.

Dagny handed him the requested hypospray without comment, trying her best to quash the anxious feeling in her gut. There was no telling how Eury would react to being injected with a sedative and there was no explaining it to him or reasoning with him. Voris tried a few times to deliver the shot to his neck, but the boy never took his eyes off his Vulcan opponent. Every time Voris bobbed, Eury weaved, and twice Eury nearly sank his teeth into Voris' hand. After five frustrating minutes, Voris managed to make contact with Eury's neck, but he was just a fraction of a second too slow.

Eury's neck whipped around and his powerful jaws clamped down on Voris' wrist, releasing a bright shower of green blood. Voris leapt back, stifling a scream. Reality slowed. Eury sprang from the bed and loped around the clinic, howling and shrieking at the personal violation. Dagny ignored him and stumbled forward to Voris.

There was so much blood. She raced to the supply cabinet and tossed things aside looking for a compression tourniquet and after an eternity, she found one and slapped it on Voris' right bicep. His skin was pale but he was alert.

"Going to die?" asked an anxious voice from behind her.

Dagny whipped around to find Apras standing over her, wringing her hands and staring at Voris. She reached for Voris' mangled arm, realizing it wasn't as bad as she'd first thought. He hadn't reached the bone or shredded any of the muscle.

"My condition is unlikely to deteriorate in the next ten minutes," Voris gulped, composing himself. "Tend to Eury while he is sedated. Move quickly."

She wanted to protest, but he was right. She had no idea how much improvoline Voris had administered and there was no way to know how soon Eury would wake up. He had crashed face down in the corner of the room, and despite her shaking hands, Dagny made short work of the deep cuts to his face. A quick examination revealed his left eye was completely missing and Dagny wasn't sure she wanted to hear the story of how he'd lost it.

She checked his vitals quickly and turned him over to Apras, asking her to wait in the clinic until he'd regained consciousness to make sure he was ok. She took him outside with her other children while Dagny tended to Voris. He was sitting in the computer chair with his injured arm draped over
"Voris?"

His eyes flicked upward to look at her. "I believe he nicked the radial vein, but repairing it should be simple enough."

"You might find this difficult to believe, but I actually have some experience in treating Vulcan trauma patients," Dagny replied darkly. "Mind if I have a look?"

He leaned back in the seat and wincing, angled his arm so she could get a better look at it. She retrieved an instrument tray from the surgical suite and set it across the arms of the chair, making a table for him to set his arm on. She went to the supply cabinet and extracted a tricorder and tissue regenerator.

"Will you take a painkiller?" she asked, calibrating the instruments for the task at hand.

"I believe I can endure without one."

She had a feeling he'd say that. There were three sets of bite marks running from the middle of his forearm down to his knuckles. Dagny took a deep breath, conscious of the fact that he was studying her. She started by carefully repairing the punctures to radial vein, and when she thought she'd gotten them all, she loosened the tourniquet on his upper arm to check her work.

She expected him to offer guidance or pointers, but he said nothing at all, he only watched her. It took half an hour to repair the damage to his forearm and wrist and when she was done, she turned his arm over to work on his palm. She rested the heel of her hand on his fingers as she keyed up the device to piece his tissues back together.

A memory flashed through her mind of them sitting on a sofa in his quarters on Valder Station the morning after their pon farr tryst. She gulped and fought to keep her hands steady.

"Dagny?" he said, his voice barely a whisper.

"Yes?"

"You are shaking."

She took a deep breath and tried to concentrate. "I was thinking of the last time I did this."

The muscles in his neck tightened.

"You never did answer my question, by the way," she added.

"Explain."

"That morning on Valder Station and the cut on your hand… I asked if you had been trying to hurt yourself."

"It does not matter."

"It matters to me."

"It is in the past."

She considered her next words very carefully. "You also said that we had a bond, one that would last
unless we consciously tried to break it off.” His body tensed and he shifted his weight in his chair. ”Anyway, you said the only way to break it was to avoid future contact and try to meditate it away, but it's not like we can avoid seeing each other.”

"No."

She hesitated before saying, "Sometimes I feel like I can feel things. Feelings that aren't mine, I mean." Voris' eyes trailed down to the crook in his elbow. "I guess I'm trying to ask if we still have this bond? And do you spend so much time meditating because you're trying to get rid of it?"

Voris' mouth drifted open. "You are expecting my child. We will share a bond in some form whether we want it or not."

Dagny nodded, biting her lip and sniffing back tears. "But is that why you meditate? To try and… you know… keep me at a distance?"

"I meditate because my life has undergone a rapid transformation."

"So has mine,” she retorted.

"I lack your unique variety of human resilience."

His eyes glanced up and by chance happened to meet hers. To Dagny they looked so dark and serious and absurdly emotional. They sat at an impasse, staring at one another, almost daring the other person to speak.

At long last, Voris broke eye contact and said, "Your hands are still shaking."

"That's probably because I'm nervous."

"What cause do you have to be nervous?"

"I don't know," she mumbled, returning to repairing his injured hand.

Ten more minutes with the dermal regenerator and Voris had swaths of smooth, greenish skin where there had been gore less than an hour ago. At his advice, she administered a general antimicrobial agent and blood proliferating serum to accelerate blood production to replace what he'd lost, then she helped him stand and ordered him into bed.

He tried to protest, but Dagny wouldn't hear of it. She did her best to manage the people that trickled into the clinic for the rest of the afternoon and evening and checked in on Khel as she'd promised. At 1930, she trudged up the stairs to their quarters to find Voris fast asleep.

She made herself a light supper and when she set Harold's food down on the floor, she was startled to find he wasn't in their quarters. A search of the clinic and the nearby tunnels turned up no sign of the grumpy cat and though she was worried—Sam had warned them that the Gorn pups had strong predatory instincts—she was too tired to keep looking. Voris had let him roam around New Vulcan without supervision and she got the sense Harold was accustomed to going his own way but even still, would he know how to find his way back to the clinic? She certainly hoped so.

Less than an hour later, she was lost in a forest of dreams, but this time they were neither sensual nor pleasant. She was trying to run away from a black void but the faster she ran, the more she seemed to stay in place. There were voices swirling around in the blackness, and when she realized they belonged to her family, she felt the urge to give in to the emptiness. The moment she did, she was struck with terror so powerful it jolted her awake.
She groped around in the darkness of their quarters, wondering if she was still dreaming or not. She took several slow breaths, noting the dim light of the clock on the wall. It was just a dream. She shifted onto her left side to try and go back to sleep, but she realized her legs were wet. She put her hand between her thighs, shocked at the idea that she might have wet the bed, but the liquid was sticky. A yelp got caught in her throat. "Lights," she gasped.

She threw back the covers to find she was sitting in a huge red spot. She started to shriek. "No! No no no!"

A warm arm slid around her shoulder. Voris. She turned and buried her face in his chest and sobbed, "Please do something…"

Voris stood at the clinic's sonic sink, carefully scrubbing the dried red blood from his nail beds. Dagny had finally drifted back to sleep several minutes ago, probably an effect of the medications he'd administered to keep her immune system in check.

Given the amount of blood that had been on her sheets, he had initially believed that she miscarried until he examined her and determined her cervix was closed and the presence of a strong fetal heartbeat remained. Though he lacked the equipment to perform a detailed scan of her reproductive tissues, he was able to obtain a rough image using a standard tricorder and both the fetus and placenta appeared to be intact, though he'd sent the file to Dr. Govorski for her opinion.

The most likely explanation for the sudden blood loss was a subchorionic hemorrhage, which was cause for concern, but didn't pose a threat to Dagny or the fetus, or at least it wouldn't have, if she hadn't also lost paternally derived cupric blood. Some of the fetus' copper-based blood had leaked out of the placenta and into Dagny, which had the potential to cause hemolytic disease in both mother and fetus.

In a healthy hybrid pregnancy, the cupric blood vessels necessary to sustain a Vulcan fetus in a human body were sequestered away from the lining of the uterus, essentially hiding it from the mother's immune system, but because of this blood loss, now there was the potential for maternal immunization against fetal paternally derived cells—Dagny's body would attempt to mount an immune response against the fetus.

From his research, the placentas of human/Vulcanoid hybrid pregnancies often ended up being abnormal due to the conflicting biochemistries of the mother and fetus and Dagny's pregnancy appeared to be no different. The placenta measured within the normal size range, though from his scan it appeared to be misshapen, which had probably led to the clot that had formed between the placenta and uterine wall, leading to the bleeding Dagny had experienced just hours ago.

There was little they could do but wait and observe. As far as he was concerned, she was on bedrest until further notice, but for now she was stable and so was the fetus. He would miss her assistance in the clinic—a month of working with Dagny had led to many insights into improvisation and building rapport with patients. Unlike most humans he'd worked with on Earth, she rarely complained. She was both eager to learn and easy to teach, but most importantly, the colonists liked her. He did not look forward to answering their queries about her condition in the coming days.

Most species were given to gossip, but news about Dagny's pregnancy and their unusual relationship had spread throughout the colony in fewer than forty-eight hours after their arrival. No one spoke of it, presumably because most people at Bergeron colony had their fair share of past mistakes and embarrassments, but that didn't change the fact that everyone knew. As a Vulcan he preferred privacy, but as a physician to a small colony, he also sensed it was important to maintain certain relationships with his patients and neighbors and he feared that included assuaging their concern for
Dagny's wellbeing.

He wandered upstairs, massaging the ache in his right forearm from where Eury had attacked him earlier that afternoon. He was still in his underwear and undershirt—he hadn't even bothered to dress himself once he'd heard Dagny screaming. He had a bit of her blood smeared on the hem of his shirt, but it was too late to wash his clothes with her soiled sheets. They would simply have to go in with the next laundry cycle.

He pulled his shirt over his head, folded it, and deposited it in the basket by the foot of his bed that he used for dirty clothes. It was 0330 and he considered meditating, but he thought of Dagny's earlier remark. He didn't meditate to break their bond as much as he did to ease his guilt over putting her in her current situation. He decided to follow her advice and attempt to sleep for the next two hours, but just as he pulled another gray undershirt over his head, the call alarm rang.

He dismissed a passing feeling of irritation and after glancing at Dagny to ensure she was still asleep, he pulled on his meditation robes and went downstairs to answer the door. It was Vaksur, the lovely Vulcan woman with the playful smile and shining black hair.

"How may I be of assistance?" he asked.

"Aisla sent me to come fetch the woman who works with you," she explained, running her eyes over his satin robes. "Khel is having her baby."

His first thought was of Dagny. He couldn't leave her alone, but nor could he ignore Mrs. Diels' needs. "Can you find Ann Svendsen and ask her to come to the clinic?"

Vaksur frowned. "I'm not a messenger service."

"Dagny is unwell and I require someone to monitor her so that I can attend to Mrs. Diels."

Vaksur shrugged and fluttered her eyelashes. "I'll go wake Ann then. This means you owe me, you know."

"I am grateful for your efforts," he replied, thinking there was something about the beautiful V'tosh katur woman that made him uneasy. Mistrust without reason was illogical, but he could not bring himself to ignore his irrational judgment.

"Say, do you know anything about neuropressure?"

"I do," he replied, wishing to break from the conversation to tend to his duties.

"It's just that I get these headaches and-"

"Come by the clinic during regular hours and I will assist you."

"It's just that it's kind of a private thing, isn't it? Think you could come to my quarters?"

"If you wish," he replied, making a mental note to add her to his next set of house calls. "Now, will you please fetch Mrs. Svendsen?"

Vaksur left and he quickly dressed himself and collected supplies into the kit that Dagny took with her when she attended births. He repressed a small amount of anxiety as he packed. Voris had never delivered a baby without assistance.

He had witnessed and assisted in several deliveries during medical school and his subsequent
internship, and he was quite familiar with the relevant biological processes that went along with pregnancy, labor, and delivery, especially after his recent studies. But in more than thirty years of medical practice, he had never participated in a delivery without the supervision of an obstetrician.

He passed Ann on his way out of the clinic and gave a brief explanation of what had happened, urging her to notify him at once if Dagny's condition changed. He wasn't certain where Mrs. Diels lived, but it wasn't hard to figure out: he simply followed the agonized moans directly to her doorway, where he was greeted at the door by Aisla.

"Where's Dagny?" she asked.

"Unwell," he replied, breezing through the doorway.

"I need Dagny," Khel yelped from the next room. "Where is she? I need her. I can't do this without her…"

"You can do this, love," urged her husband. "You can."

Their quarters were slightly larger than his with a separate bedroom to the left of the kitchen. He found Khel on her feet, hunched over the side of the bed while Jacob rubbed her back. "Thank our lucky stars you're here, doc. She's in a pretty bad way."

Khel hissed and started to go weak at the knees as another contraction racked her body. Voris' training began to kick in. "How frequent are the contractions?" he asked, setting his kit in a chair by the door to extract some supplies.

"About four minutes apart," Aisla answered.

He waited for her pain to pass before asking, "Mrs. Diels, will you lie down on the bed so I can examine you?"

He and Aisla quickly pulled a rubber sheet from Dagny's kit and spread it over the mattress. Vulcans would have considered it inappropriate for a father to attend the birth of his child, just as they would consider it inappropriate for a male healer to preside over the delivery, except in extenuating or emergency situations, which this clearly was. Khel had also always seemed just as reluctant at the idea of having Voris provide her with maternity care, but now she appeared to be in far too much pain to care.

Things moved quickly and smoothly though and after twenty minutes of Khel's agony and everyone else's encouragement, Voris held in his hands a slimy, squalling neonate with a tuft of black hair and pointed ears. It seemed to Voris to be a transformative experience, holding this newly born thing as it drew in its first breath. He stared at the infant, a male, marveling at how a pair of immature lungs could produce such volume.

"What is it, doc?" Jacob laughed, bringing him back to the situation. "Boy or a girl?"

"It is male."

"We have a little boy, Khel," Jacob exclaimed, gripping his wife's hand and wiping away a tear. His wife's pale face beamed. "Can I hold him?" she croaked.

"Certainly," Voris replied. He clamped and cut the umbilical cord, then handed the baby over to Aisla so she could swaddle him and present him to his mother. He shifted his attention back to Mrs. Diels, who was now in the third stage of labor and needed to deliver the placenta.
He was about to tell her what to expect during this next stage, but her contractions hadn't yet begun and she seemed lost to the world as she and Jacob stared into their son's face for the first time. The sight stirred a strange emotion in Voris. He thought of Dagny, asleep in her bed and still supporting the fetus inside her. For now.

Watching the Diels family bond with their new addition made Voris realize just how much he wanted this for himself. He had always wanted children, but because he'd loved T'Sala more than himself, he'd accepted that he would never experience fatherhood. But that was all in the past. The situation with Dagny wasn't ideal but it was what he had, and he was grateful for everything she was. He stood back and allowed the new parents to have their moment with their son, and suddenly felt very desperate to experience the same thing with Dagny and their child.
Stardate 2260.171

Dagny's eyes sprang open following the strange dream about Voris. The awkward, erotic images from several months ago had been replaced by something more mundane and only slightly less weird. During the last month, she'd had dreams featuring bland domesticity. She'd just woken up from a dream where Voris had been sitting around her family's cramped dinner table aboard the Albret.

She peeked her head up over the quilt. The room was dark and cool but she had to fight the impulse to leap from the bed. A month of bedrest had been more difficult than she could have ever imagined, but as of that morning, it was over. Voris had wanted to keep her in bed for another week, but Dr. Govorski had assured them that so long as there had been no more bleeding, the baby continued to grow, and Dagny remained healthy, there was no reason to keep her cooped up any longer. As far as anyone could tell, the subchorionic hemorrhage she'd had last month was a one-time event.

Because some of the fetus' copper-based blood from the placenta had leaked into her uterus, Dr. Govorski had recommended immunotherapy to remove any antibodies her body had made against the fetal cells, but Voris had already done that immediately after she'd had the hemorrhage. He was an extremely competent and experienced doctor but for whatever reason, he often doubted himself where Dagny's pregnancy was concerned.

All throughout her bedrest, he'd contacted Dr. Govorski with questions and concerns, but as far as Dagny could see, there wasn't much point. Anything the specialist obstetrician recommended, Voris had either already done or already planned to do. He was almost like he was... nervous. She knew it wasn't logical, but she didn't know how else to describe it.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. It was 0438 hours, but after thirty days of living in a bed, she was wide awake and ready to seize the day. She threw her legs over the side of the bed and grunted. She stood on the balls of her feet, stretching her back and calf muscles. Part of what had made her bedrest so maddening had been the fact that many of her early pregnancy symptoms had faded. She was no longer sick or fatigued. After a month of lying in bed, only getting up to use the toilet and take an occasional shower, she almost felt the urge to do cartwheels, but the experience had taken a toll on her body as well as her mind.

Yet what she had lost in muscle tone, she'd gained in her belly. She still wouldn't say she had a distinctive bump—she looked more bloated than pregnant—but at the rate she was going, she wouldn't be fitting into her trousers for much longer. She ran her hands along her abdomen, enjoying the tickle on her skin and wondering when she would feel the baby move.

Dagny frowned, resisting the urge to grab the tricorder from the bedside table and listen for the baby's heartbeat. She'd checked it so frequently during her stint on bedrest that mixed among the dreams of a domestic life with Voris had been rapid swooshing sounds of the baby's heart. During the last month, it had been the first thing she listened to when she woke up and the last thing she'd heard before going to sleep for the night. She wanted to listen to it now, but she also didn't want to wake Voris.

He'd been working longer hours in the clinic without Dagny's help and was probably getting even less sleep than before. Aisla had been pitching in more around the clinic in her absence but that didn't make Dagny feel any better. The fact that he'd worked so hard while she'd been lying in bed all day had been a source of enormous discomfort. What little free time he did find, he'd devoted to taking
care of her and keeping her company.

She'd spent most of her time alone during the day either sleeping or studying medical texts and journals. In the evenings after the clinic had closed, Voris would make dinner and sit with her, discussing all the cases he'd had during the day and giving Dagny more lessons in the medical sciences.

She'd had some visitors. Aisla visited nearly every day and the Svendsen family had stopped by once. Ann and her oldest son Nicolas were away on the Oglethorpe, but her husband Jon and their three younger children, Britta, Frøya, and Jørn had come by with well-wishes and a casserole. Jon had known her since she was little and it had been a very awkward visit. A handful of other colonists had delivered casseroles and pies but for the last month, Voris had been her primary link to the outside world and respite from boredom.

Dagny took a deep breath and tip-toed to the dresser, and through a series of slow, deliberate movements, extracted a set of clothes. She was about to get dressed, but the moment she started to pull the nightshirt over her head, she caught a whiff of her body. She didn't exactly smell bad, but she didn't feel clean. It had been six days since her last shower and even though she hated the water based shower, she hated being grimy even more.

She slunk to the tiny bathroom in the corner and shut herself in. It smelled damp and earthy and no matter how much either of them tried to clean it, it was determined to maintain the grungy film on every surface. It was also ridiculously cramped. There was just enough room for a toilet and shower and getting undressed required careful contortionism. The shower ceiling was so low that she could reach up and touch it with her fingertips and she wondered how Voris, who was at least forty centimeters taller than she was, managed it. She figured he must have to crouch to get inside it comfortably, or maybe he showered on his knees.

She covered her mouth to stifle a giggle at the thought and held her nose as she turned on the water. It came out ice cold, nearly making her scream but after it warmed up, she turned and leaned her head backward, allowing it to soak her hair. As weird as water showers were, there was something relaxing about them. She grabbed her bar of soap from the upper dish and turned to the business of getting clean.

Getting dressed afterward was an awkward chore in the confined bathroom, but it was better than changing in the room where Voris might see. They'd gotten a little more comfortable with each other during the last month, but not that comfortable. As she'd predicted, she couldn't close the top button of her trousers, which was frustrating. She tried to wring her hair out as best she could—it had grown halfway to her shoulders now—but it still dripped from the ends and soaked into her sweater.

Though the bathroom was humid, it was also warm, and she was reluctant to open the door to the cold room beyond. When she finally did, the first thing she heard was a thump, followed by the sound of breaking glass. "Voris?"

"Dagny."

She nudged the door all the way open to find the floor was covered in the shards of a broken mirror. "Oh no! What happened?"

"I believe rapidly opening the door caused the mirror to fall from its perch," he replied, glancing at the thin ledge on the wall behind the bathroom door.

"Since when is there a mirror there?"
As soon as the words came out of her mouth, she noticed Voris was holding a pair of scissors in his left hand and had a towel draped around his shoulders, which was covered in a fine layer of black hair clippings. It slowly dawned on her that he'd set the mirror on the ledge to be able to see the back of his head to trim his hair.

"I'm sorry," she stammered. "I'll clean this up."

"You are not wearing shoes," he replied. "Remain where you are."

Her instinct was to argue but she'd learned there wasn't much point in sparring with Voris over trivial things. And he was right: he had on shoes and she didn't. She got on her hands and knees and picked up some of the larger pieces, but when Voris came back with the compact cleaning android trailing along behind him, she tossed them back on the ground and let the little bot work its magic.

"I'm sorry," she muttered.

"You have already apologized," he reminded her. "And there was no need to apologize the first time. You could not have predicted I would be tending to my own personal hygiene."

"I could have been more careful. This is such a tight space."

Voris gave a slight nod of his head. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine. Good. Better than good, really. I feel great. It'll be nice to get back to work."

"I would prefer you remain on light duty in the clinic for the time being."

Dagny clenched her jaw, unsure which version of Voris she wanted to address her frustration to: Dr. Voris, her coworker and pseudo-supervisor, Dr. Voris, her medical practitioner, or Voris, the father of her child. She understood his concern and in some ways agreed with it, but she also didn't like the idea of being handled with kid gloves. But the last thing she wanted was to start bickering with him in the predawn hours. "I'll take it easy, I promise."

"I would also like to collect a blood sample and ensure that your hormones levels are within an acceptable range."

She was about to point out that he'd tested her blood just yesterday afternoon and she'd been especially diligent with her medications, but decided it wasn't worth arguing about. "Sure. Ok."

The bot finished sweeping up the remains of the mirror and returned to its base, allowing Dagny to step over the threshold of the humid bathroom. Voris remained frozen by the sink, staring at the pair of scissors in his hand.

"I'll uh- I'll give you some space so you can finish cutting your hair."

"I cannot see what I am doing without the mirror."

Dagny bit her lip. "I don't think we have another mirror. Or even anything particularly reflective."

"That has occurred to me."

She took a step toward him, horrified to see he'd been almost literally halfway done with cutting his hair when she'd interrupted him. A clean line stopped almost right in the middle of the back of his head, giving it a very avant-garde, but not particularly Vulcan, appearance.

"I could cut it," she offered. "I used to cut my siblings' hair all the time."
He gave her a strange look. "I have cut my own hair since adolescence."

Dagny tried to keep her face neutral. She'd wondered how Vulcans managed to have such perfectly trimmed and groomed hair. "You've never let anyone else cut it?"

"There has never been any need to."

"It seems like you need it now."

He blinked several times. "Perhaps I could locate something with sufficient reflective properties in the clinic."

She rolled her eyes and grabbed her dirty nightdress from the bathroom. "Suit yourself."

Dagny was slicing some fruit and bread for breakfast when Voris returned ten minutes later, holding the scissors between his left thumb and forefingers and still wearing a very lopsided haircut. "Perhaps you could assist me in tidying my hair until I can procure a new mirror."

She gave him a warm smile and rinsed the gespar juice from her hands. "I'd be happy to."

He started to walk back to the tiny sink and mirror tucked into the nook by the bathroom, but Dagny called after him, "It would probably be easier if you sit. You're very tall."

He bobbed his head and pulled one of the chairs from the kitchen table. She stepped behind him, but the moment the scissors touched her hand, she started to have doubts. His hair was thick and straight and usually so immaculate that she would have believed him if he'd told her he used a guided laser to achieve such neat lines and edges. Any wobble in her hands while she was cutting and it would show in the resulting haircut. She'd never much cared if Sigurd or Sigrid's hair had come out a little crooked: that was what they got for the price of a free haircut and for fidgeting when she told them not to. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and was about to get started when the image of cutting a huge chunk out of his hair flashed through her mind and made her shudder.

"Are you certain you are capable of this task?"

"Of course," she lied.

To keep the momentum of her false confidence going, she raised her hands and made a small first cut. Twenty nerve-wracking minutes later and she stepped back to observe her work. It looked straight, but maybe he was sitting crooked or maybe she was afraid her mind was playing tricks on her.

"Are you nearly finished?" he asked.

"Yeah, all done." She gulped and swept the back of his neck with her palm. When he went to examine the result in the small mirror mounted over the sink, she held her breath, waiting for him to find some flaw in her work.

"I am unable to assess the back, but the lines around the sides look correct," he said, rubbing his hands over the back of his scalp.

She exhaled a sigh of relief. "I'm sure it's not as good as you could do, but I think it's ok? I feel like it'll pass until we can get you a new mirror."

"It is adequate. Thank you."
"Do you mind if I ask… why do all Vulcans wear their hair that way?" Once free of her mouth, the question sounded embarrassingly personal.

"Not all Vulcans wear their hair in this fashion, but the reason many of them do is to honor Surak."

"Like Surak from The Teachings of Surak?"

"Yes."

"But you said not all Vulcans wear their hair that way though."

"That is correct."

"What about our baby, when he or she gets older?"

His expression changed. "Specify."

Her cheeks started to burn. She had inherited her mother’s superstitious streak and discussing how they were going to raise their child seemed to be tempting fate when she was still so far away from giving birth. But it had nagged at her ever since she found out she was pregnant.

"How are we going to raise this baby? We’re very different people and I’m sure we have some pretty different ideas on the subject."

He didn’t answer right away, which made Dagny regret saying anything at all. She eventually added, "Maybe it’s not a good time to talk about this."

"Our child will not be the first to be born between two cultures rather than within one," he replied, turning to look at her. "I believe it would be appropriate to allow the child to decide for itself when it reaches an age where it is capable of understanding."

"You want our child to decide which of its parents it wants to be like?"

"It is the most logical way."

"But why does it have to decide? Can’t we just love it and teach it what it means to be both human and Vulcan?"

"That would be exceedingly difficult. To be Vulcan means to dismiss emotion: to be human means to embrace it."

Dagny started to feel sick to her stomach. Voris had already said their child would end up looking Vulcan; what if it decided it wanted to be Vulcan? She had been so afraid of losing the baby all throughout her pregnancy, but it suddenly occurred to her that there were other ways she could lose her child. What if it grew up and decided it wanted to reject its human half and by extension, its human mother?

The question of how they would raise their baby had been in the back of her mind since day one, but she’d always assumed they would figure it out as they went along. Or maybe deep down she’d been operating under the assumption the baby wouldn’t make it to full term. But if it did, then what?

They wouldn’t be the first interspecies parents—Voris’ cousin was half human, after all—so surely there was a way to make it work. But when she thought of Ambassador Spock, all she could picture in her mind was a stoic, logical Vulcan. What had his human mother been like? Hadn’t she made some impression on her son?
Voris was watching her closely, which made her feel embarrassed and irritated. She spun on her heel and numbly walked back to the kitchen counter to finish preparing breakfast.

"You are upset."

Her hands shook as she picked up the knife to resume slicing the gespar. "What if our baby grows up and wants nothing to do with me?"

"You are being irrational."

"And you're being mean!"

"Yet it is irrational to speculate about the future decisions of a child who is not yet born. No matter what choices it makes, you will always be its mother."

She suddenly felt bad for yelling at him, but not enough to apologize. The floor creaked under his feet and several seconds later, she sensed him standing behind her right shoulder. "I know when you first informed me of your pregnancy that you were convinced you did not require my assistance in raising the child. I asked your permission to be involved in its upbringing and you agreed."

"I remember," she snapped, whipping around to face him. "I was there. I didn't know I was agreeing to... to..."

He glanced down at the paring knife dripping with gespar juice in her hand and cocked his head. She sighed and set it on the cutting board, leaning over the counter as her mind tried to make sense of her feelings. How had this conversation escalated so quickly? "This baby isn't even born, but it's the only real family I have."

"Are you not related to the Svendsen family?"

"Ann was my dad's second cousin. I grew up around the Svendsens, but they're more like close family friends. We didn't keep in touch after they left the ship two years ago. They're a link to the life I lost, but they're not a replacement for it." Dagny sniffed away the beginnings of tears, wondering if there would ever be a day she didn't feel like crying when discussing her family.

"This child will be the only close relation I will have as well."

"What are you talking about? You have your father, your uncle, your cousin..."

"As you are aware, my father has disowned me, but even before that, we were never on good terms. And though I am on good terms with both my uncle and cousin, I have not been acquainted with them for most of my life."

Dagny frowned. She'd had her disagreements with her parents and siblings over the years, but she couldn't imagine being completely estranged from them. She also technically had biological relatives—her Uncle Knut, for example—but she did not really consider them family. It had never occurred to her that for all intents and purposes, Voris was just as alone as she was.

"I don't want our baby to have to choose between being human and being Vulcan," she sighed, turning around to face him and crossing her arms.

"Biologically, it will not have a choice."

"You know what I mean," she moaned. "If it decides it wants to be like you and be logical, I won't know how to relate to my own child. I don't know how to teach a child to be Vulcan. I can't speak
your language. You were right: my tongue is too stupid to form Vulcan words. T'Mir tried teaching me some and it all sounds like gibberish to me."

"There is nothing preventing you from learning if you wish to learn."

"You're missing the point, Voris. I'm afraid I won't be able to interact with or understand a significant side of my child."

"And there is much I do not understand about the human experience. Speculation is illogical, but did you consider the possibility that the child could reject Vulcan teachings in favor of human ones?"

The sudden thought of the child choosing her over Voris was surprisingly just as painful. "Surely there has to be some way for us to raise our child together without making it take sides."

He glanced at the fruit on the cutting board. "The clinic is scheduled to open in less than an hour and I need to replenish the pharmacy cabinet stocks."

And just like that, their conversation was over, but Dagny's new brand of worry was just beginning. They ate a quick breakfast in relative silence, speaking only in relation to their meal and cleaning up the dishes. When they were done, they headed downstairs to the clinic and Dagny's grim mood instantly felt lighter. She cruised down the steps, skipping the last two and landing on the floor below with gusto, ready to enjoy her first day of work in more than a month.

"You should take greater care," Voris chided, following closely behind her.

Dagny glanced over her shoulder, suddenly struck by a weird twinge of anxiety that rapidly dissipated. She shrugged. "I'm just happy to be out of bed."

"But consider the reason you were confined to bed."

She didn't want to be annoyed at his comment—he did have a point—but it was something in the way he said it that set her nerves on edge. She bit down on her tongue and replied, "Why don't we get the clinic ready?"

"I would prefer to take a sample of your blood first."

Her irritation grew, but she rolled up the left sleeve of her sweater without complaint as he drew a small sample from her arm and placed the vial in the standard tricorder. His eyes skimmed the results, but he said nothing.

"And?" Dagny sighed, pulling her sleeve back down. "How does it look?"

"Complete blood counts, sugars, lipids, and hormones are all within acceptable parameters."

"I told you I feel fine."

He nodded and busied himself at the chemical synthesizer as Dagny reacquainted herself with the clinic. Several colonists had helped Voris make some improvements, including a permanent workbench by the surgical suite and semi-permanent aluminum dividers between the biobeds in the rear of the room.

There were also plans to expand the clinic to include a convalescent ward directly underneath their quarters. The family that had lived there had relocated and before the quarters could be reassigned, Voris had asked Samantha Bergeron if the clinic could absorb the space. They obviously lacked the staff to operate a proper full-time hospital, but having a dedicated space for people to recover was
better than letting them go home and then running all over the colony trying to check up on them later.

"Will you pack a medical bag for out-of-clinic rounds?" Voris asked.

"Is that today?" she asked, moving toward the cabinet to begin assembling basic equipment.

"It is. I have nineteen patients to visit."

"That's a lot. How many have you scheduled for me?"

"None. I intend to see all the follow-up patients myself."

"Why? I used to do most of the rounds."

"Earlier you agreed to remain in the clinic on light duty."

"No, earlier I agreed that I would take it easy," she huffed. "I don't remember saying anything about staying in the clinic. Besides, how hard could it be to pop down the tunnel and take a few sets of vitals?"

"I am the logical choice to perform this work," he insisted. "I am more familiar with these patients and more efficient at tending to their needs."

"Are you calling me lazy?" she blurted.

"No, I simply refer to the fact that you often tend to speak at length with patients on topics irrelevant to their health."

"It's called being friendly and gaining people's trust."

"It is also inefficient."

"Not everything's about efficiency," she said, her voice little more than a low growl.

"You are becoming irrational once again."

"I've been cooped upstairs for a month!"

"And now you are not."

"It's almost just as bad being stuck in the clinic. Voris, I need to get out. I need to see people."

"And you will see people—while on light duty in the clinic."

She took a slow breath to stop herself from saying something excessively hateful. "You can't stop me from going out."

His eyes narrowed. "You are correct, but need I remind you I am ultimately responsible for the clinic and the management of medical operations on this colony?"

She scoffed in disbelief. "Are you ordering me to stay in the clinic?"

"I am urging you to see reason."

Dagny was suddenly conscious of the fact that she was shaking. What had made him suddenly decide to start acting like a patronizing jailer? She felt a wild urge to storm out into the tunnel just to
prove a point, but even through her anger, she couldn't bring herself to be that childish and defiant.

Voris picked up a PADD and turned to the pharmacy cabinet. "The clinic will open and I need to replenish the clinic's supply of dexalin and formazine," Voris said suddenly, looking from a PADD to the pharmacy cabinet. "Will you assist me?"

Ordinarily she jumped at the chance to get guided experience with the different equipment in the clinic but she didn't even want to look at him right now, let alone have him stand over her shoulder and watch as she prepared medications. "I have to pack your bag, remember?"

They worked without speaking a word until 0630 hours when the clinic opened. Patients trickled in with minor ailments and complaints, and she and Voris managed to work around each other without interacting much. Traffic tapered off around 0830, and when the last of their early patients left after receiving a hypospray for arthritis relief, Voris collected the bag she'd packed and donned his cloak and a pair of rain boots.

"I anticipate returning by 1830 hours. I will take one of the communicators, should you need to contact me."

Dagny looked up from inputting patient notes into the computer. "I'm guessing if you're putting on rain boots, you're going up to the surface?"

"Yes."

"Don't know what good a communicator will be then." The rock lining the tunnels was packed with gallicite that interfered with sensors and communication. They could talk via communicators well enough within their own tunnel and had limited signal in nearby tunnels and portions of the loop, but reaching someone on the surface was only possible through the hardwired radios.

"I only have two patients to see on the surface and I intend to visit them last," he replied, pulling the bag's strap over his shoulder. "I shall contact you just before going out of range."

She shrugged and turned back to her patient files, barely noticing when he ducked out the door. For the first time since arriving at Bergeron colony, it was a slow day in the clinic, which unfortunately gave her plenty of time to dwell on her conversation with Voris.

They'd had disagreements before but she wouldn't classify any of those instances as legitimate fights. She replayed their interactions in her mind over and over again, which only amplified her irritation as the day went on. Who was he to tell her what to do? Who was he to act like she was being reckless with her health for wanting to walk less than half a kilometer down the tunnel to check a few pulses and take a few blood samples? She'd been so careful for the last month and even Dr. Govorski had said a full month of bedrest had probably been unnecessary. It wasn't like the baby was just going to fall out of her from some light walking.

From between 1015 and 1330 hours, Dagny didn't have a single patient walk through the door and she was just starting to feel like she might as well be back upstairs in bed when she heard the door open.

"It is good to see you, Dagny."

She looked up from reviewing the clinic's records from the previous month to see Khel standing in the threshold, cradling a baby in her arms.

"Khel! Oh! Let me see him!" Dagny exclaimed, jumping to her feet. Khel stepped forward and peeled back the dark blue blanket to reveal the face of her tiny son.
"Voris tells me you were ill."

"I'm doing better."

"And your child?" Khel asked, glancing at Dagny's belly.

"Doing good as far as anyone can tell."

"I am relieved."

"And what about you? What about this little one? What have you named him?"

"He does not yet have a name," Khel replied. "Romulans do not name their children until after the sitting in period has ended and the baby has survived the night trial."

"What does that mean?"

"By our custom, after giving birth, mother and child remain secluded from society for a period of thirty days while the mother nourishes and prepares the infant for the night trial."

"The night trial?"

"Yes, Romulans cull their weaker newborns by leaving them exposed and alone to the elements from dusk until dawn. It is the first of seven tests of a Romulan's life for the child and the sixth test for the parents."

Dagny couldn't help the look of horror that must have washed over her face. "You can't be serious?"

Khel's face darkened. "There is a reason I left Romulus."

"So… please tell me you're not going to leave him outside to freeze?" Dagny stammered.

"He's far too dear for that," Khel replied, smiling at the infant in her arms. "I went through too much to bring him into this life. But I still could not bring myself to name him until he survived the month. It would distort the fates."

Dagny wasn't exactly sure what she meant by "distorting the fates," but she got the distinct impression that Khel was more superstitious than she was. She had a lot in common with this woman, and after her fight with Voris that morning, she found herself desperate for advice but unsure how to ask for it. "So, what can I do for you, Khel?"

"Jake and I plan to have his naming ceremony this evening at dusk and I wanted to make sure it is safe for him to be outdoors for a short time while we light the fire and make the necessary offerings. Dr. Voris came by and saw him last week and said he's growing as he should, but he cries a lot."

"Babies will do that," Dagny replied, giving her a reassuring smile. "But I can give him a quick look over to put your mind at ease."

The moment she took the baby from Khel, she found herself smitten by the tiny boy with the pointed ears and crop of feathery black hair. She'd always liked babies well enough—she certainly had plenty of practice with them with eleven younger siblings—but this one was different. He was half-Romulan, but he looked so much like what she imagined her baby would look like that she almost felt like he was hers.

She grabbed her data PADD and put him on the end of a biobed to measure his weight and height. Voris had begun keeping medical records for all the colonists and so Dagny was able to pull up
Khel's baby's file, which was currently listed as *Diels: Infant Male.*

"So, you said his naming ceremony is tonight… what do you plan to name him?" Dagny asked as she began running through the checklist of infant reflexes and recording the results on the PADD.

"I do not know. In Romulan society, fathers name their children, but they do not discuss it with the mother beforehand."

"But your husband isn't Romulan."

"No, he is not."

"Do you mind if I ask you a kind of personal question?" Dagny murmured, lightly stroking the baby's palms to check for a grasping reflex.

Khel gave her a quizzical look. "You may, though I may choose not to answer."

"Fair enough," Dagny muttered. "Humans and Romulans are so different. How are you and your husband planning to raise your son together?"

"I sense your question is not one of simple curiosity but rather one of personal importance."

"Something like that," Dagny replied, looking down at the baby and feeling both relieved and mortified that she'd dared broach this subject. "Do you find yourself wanting to raise your son as a Romulan? And how does Jake feel about that?"

Khel considered her questions for nearly a full minute before saying, "There are many things that could be improved about the Romulan way. My people are never going to change, so I left. But I did not stop being Romulan and my husband did not stop being human. I do not know what awaits us in the future. I do not care, so long as we are all together."

Dagny swallowed hard and nodded. As much as she and Khel had in common, there were some significant differences. Khel actually loved her son's father: she wasn't simply living with him because it seemed like the right thing to do.

She finished checking over Khel's baby and pronounced him in perfect health. When she attempted to submit the record, she received an error message stating that she had not checked for a telan reflex, but she had never heard of that. She frowned and swiped her finger over the screen to override the message and told Khel she was free to go.

As Khel was leaving, she gently touched Dagny's arm. "I would like to invite you to my son's naming this evening. And Dr. Voris, since he helped deliver him."

Dagny would have loved to go, not only because she liked Khel, but also because she was curious about what a Romulan naming ceremony was like. But she doubted Voris would be receptive to the idea of her walking *all the way* to the surface just to watch a baby get named. "I might be busy in the clinic, but I'll try."

Khel smiled and turned to leave, but once she reached the door, she looked over her shoulder and said, "Not every happiness is chosen, you know, but you *will* find a way."

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Voris reached the bottom of the stairs and shook the snowdrops from his hair. Winter had ignored the calendar and come early to Bergeron colony. It was much warmer underground than it was on the surface but it was still colder than he was accustomed to.
He turned the corner and nodded at Zernon as he passed the produce stand, but paused at the stall just beyond it. There were racks of clothes and rows of shoes and boots in styles from all over the Federation. He stared down at his waterproof overshoes and cloak. He would need to acquire sturdier footwear and a heavier overcoat if he was going to be making house calls above ground in the coming months.

He looked around for the attendant and quickly identified her, not by sight, but by the sound of a deep, rattling cough coming from the other side of a rack of shirts.

"Excuse me?" he asked.

"Yes? How can I-" Her reply was interrupted by another coughing fit.

"I am seeking clothing more suitable for the winter weather," he replied after the coughing had quieted down.

"Let me have a look at you then." She stood, but she was so short of stature that only her head was visible over the rack of shirts.

Voris recalled seeing her the day he'd arrived, but this closer viewpoint gave him a picture of a woman who was far more ill than he'd first supposed. Her face was a maze of wrinkles and age spots and partially hidden behind a shroud of white hair. Everything about her posture indicated she was in pain.

"How long have you had this cough?"

"What's it to you?"

"I am a physician."

"Don't need no doctor. Just need to be left in peace, unless you're here to trade." She took a series of slow breaths, suggesting that she was about to succumb to another bout of coughing, but she managed to keep it at bay.

"I recall seeing you the day of my arrival," he replied. "You were coughing then."

"And I haven't died yet, have I?"

"It does not mean you are not ill or that your condition is not serious."

"Everyone dies, doctor."

"That is true, but most people would prefer to postpone it, if given the choice."

She threw her head back and howled in laughter. "You remind me of Velara, always poking around and asking how I'm doing. And now she's dead and I'm still here."

"Did it occur to you that you might be contagious and making other people sick?"

"Ain't no one's been sick. It's the way this goes. My ma died of the coughing fits and she made it to seventy-three. I'm already seventy-six, so I figure I'm going good enough."

Voris raised an eyebrow. He would have approximated her age at closer to a hundred, given what he understood of the human life cycle and aging process. "When was the last time you saw a doctor?"

She shrugged and licked her lips. "As a child on Cygnia Minor."
"Will you permit me to ask why you have refused to see a doctor for so long?"

"No. Now do you want a warmer coat or not?"

He was about to argue but he thought of Dagny's earlier statement about gaining the colonists' trust and friendship. He had done a lot of thinking about Dagny that day. He also respected the woman's right to refuse medical care, though there was no logic in it.

"If you will not trade my medical services for clothing, I do not see what I can offer you," he replied. The colonists accrued Federation credits through their mining efforts, but had no internal system of money. Everything was done by bartering for goods, services, and favors.

"From where I'm standing, you have plenty to offer. That cloak you're wearing looks like pure Vulcan flax. Vulcans do know their textiles."

He glanced down at his overgarment. He had acquired it just after his arrival on New Vulcan. It was well tailored and very comfortable but it would not be nearly warm enough to see him through the winter. "What can you offer me for it?"

He walked away from the encounter with an Andorian fleece coat, a pair of heavy Klingon insulated boots, and a small pocket mirror to replace the one Dagny had broken. The navy blue coat had some worn patches in the elbows and a few loose fibers, but it was well made and extremely warm. The boots had not been his first choice but they were sturdy and fit well enough.

As he approached the door to the clinic, his thoughts turned to Dagny. She had been quite irritable that morning and he could not understand why. She had been eager to be done with bedrest for so long, but now that she was, she remained unhappy.

He suspected some of it had to do with the levels of her hormones. Human pregnancy hormones had the effect of creating emotional disturbances, so perhaps she was not truly at fault for her behavior that morning. But she was also only seventeen weeks pregnant and Voris understood it would get much worse before it got better.

Within the next month, the placenta would begin producing certain hormones vital to Vulcan fetal development. They were not nearly as toxic to human physiology as yam'tan, the hormone secreted in Vulcan females following conception, but they still had the effect of producing powerful emotional responses in pregnant females. Aside from hormones, there was the more peculiar issue of innate telepathy in the developing fetal central nervous system. During the last months of gestation, the fetus' brain would be sufficiently developed to begin experiencing crude emotions.

It was impossible to know what an unborn fetus who spent much of its time in different stages of sleep and had no memories of an existence beyond its mother's womb thought about, but it was easy enough to discern what they felt. It was a well-documented phenomenon that whatever brain activity was present in a fetus would also be experienced by the mother, which often led to maternal emotional outbursts.

Vulcan females tended to view controlling fetal emotions to be a personal test of character, much as Vulcan males viewed controlling their behavior during pon farr. As their pregnancies progressed, they would spend more time at home, deep in meditation, but as far as he was aware, Dagny had never even attempted to meditate.

He understood that males often ended up assisting their mates in maintaining their emotional balance by bonding with them in the final stages of pregnancy. It wasn't that he wasn't willing to assist Dagny in any way he could, but he wasn't certain she would want that kind of support, given it had
been his forced mental contact with her that had led to their current situation.

Voris stopped outside the clinic door but paused before entering. It was 1827 hours and he'd been absent from the clinic for most of the day. Perhaps he could have allowed her to visit the four follow-up patients who lived in their tunnel, but he knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't "take it easy," to use her euphemism. She was a poor judge of recognizing how hard she worked and he'd feared she would overexert herself.

He found Dagny cleaning out a deep laceration to a Klingon patient's leg and two human patients waiting on the long bench by the entry. They were due to go on their mining shift in half an hour, so Voris quickly treated one of them for an eye infection and the other for a toothache and released them both. When the Klingon man left, Voris locked the clinic door behind them.

"Thanks," Dagny muttered, entering data into her PADD for the colonists' records.

"You do not need to thank me for performing my duties."

"No, I guess not." She looked up from her work to give him a neutral expression, but once she caught sight of him, her eyes narrowed. "That's not the coat you left here wearing."

"No. I exchanged my cloak for more appropriate winter attire. It began snowing on the surface late this afternoon."

Her jaw dropped. "There's snow outside?"

"Yes."

Her face lit up and she looked as though she were about to speak when suddenly her expression fell and she turned away.

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

"I want to see it."

"For what purpose?"

"I grew up on a cargo ship. Snow is something… I don't know. It's almost mythical and mysterious."

"I spent my formative years on a planet that never experienced snow but I would hardly call a natural phenomenon mythical or mysterious."

"But you're Vulcan."

Voris considered their argument that morning, when she'd expressed her deep desire to leave the clinic. "If you wish to see the snow, I shall accompany you to the surface."

She scoffed, "Are you sure?"

"I would not have offered if I were not, but I insist you don warmer clothing."

He doubted she heard the last part, because she was already tearing up the stairs to their quarters. He suppressed a feeling of anxiety as he watched her disappear from view. Why did she insist on running up and down the stairs when she could so easily fall?

She returned several minutes later wearing a pair of tall snow boots and a thick pleated pink coat. "Oh, I just remembered. Khel invited us to her baby's naming ceremony. It's supposed to be at dusk,
which I think is about any time now."

She wanted to hurry up to the surface, but she was quickly limited by her lack of fitness. Severe radiation poisoning, followed by pregnancy, followed by a month of bedrest had taken a toll on her body and they were only a third of the way up the stairs when he noticed she was breathing harder. Voris suggested they return to the clinic, but she refused, so he followed her slow pace as she ascended the stairs, positioning himself directly behind her in the event that she became light-headed.

But she neither stopped nor complained and by the time they reached the surface, the gray sky had begun to transform into brilliant hues of purple and pink. It had stopped snowing, but it was cold enough to see their breath when they exhaled. Voris pulled the collar of his new coat higher around his neck and followed Dagny up the walk to the ground level. They found Mr. and Mrs. Diels, along with a group of people standing near a small fire at the edge of the central road leading to the tunnel complexes.

They fell into the back of the small crowd, but their presence did not go unnoticed. Khel smiled and waved at them and Dagny returned her gesture. They conversed with several members of the ship's crew until a natural silence fell over the gathering. It was nearly twilight and the flames cast odd moving shadows across the faces of the others.

Khel held out her baby to Jacob and said, "He is yours to do with as you will."

The father took his son, staring nervously at the fire and glancing back at his wife. "I accept him, and I name him Christopher."

Voris noticed unusual expressions streak across the Romulans' faces, but no one spoke. Christopher was a human name, but the child was half human. He was reminded of his earlier argument with Dagny about their child's upbringing. Vulcans did not share the Romulan custom of fathers naming their children. Perhaps she would insist on a human name.

Khel brandished a knife and he sensed Dagny stiffen next to him. Voris was also intrigued by the weapon's presence, but said nothing. Khel waved it through the flames and then made a small cut in her husband's arm, dipped her finger in the blood, and dabbed three circles onto Christopher's forehead. She looked to the crowd and declared, "He is made of our blood. He is Christopher."

"He is Christopher," the Romulans among the group echoed in reply.

And with that, the ceremony was over. Someone put out the fire and the group headed back to the tunnels to get out of the cold, but Dagny didn't appear to be in any hurry. She stooped down and picked up a clump of snow, rolling it over in her hands to form it into a ball.

"Why are you doing that?" he asked.

"I'm making a snowball," she grinned, tossing it up and catching it.

"Yes, but why?"

"Why not?"

Voris didn't reply. He tucked his hands behind his back, flexing his cold fingers to increase circulation to them and watching her turn around in circles as she examined the scenery in the fast fading light. It was childlike and innocent, and Voris was struck by just how young Dagny really was.

"My family comes from a place where it snows," she finally said, studying the tracks she had made.
"Several generations ago, I guess."

Voris wasn’t sure how to reply, so he remained silent. Dagyn turned the clump of snow over in her hands. "Is there even a Vulcan word for a snowball?"

"In Vuhlkansu, snow is 'izh' and ball is 'dukal,' so to say snowball, one might say duka'izh, but it is an unusual term."

"T'Mir was trying to teach me some Vuhlkansu when I was staying with your Uncle Sarek."

"Vuhlkansu," he corrected, stressing the second syllable and shortening the s sound.

"Vuhlkansu-stue? Vuhlkansu-soo?" she repeated slowly, trying to mimic his pronunciation but failing. "Well, I guess you can imagine how well the lessons went."

"It is difficult for a human tongue to master."

"It's not just my pronunciation—I've already forgotten what you said snowball was."

"Duka'izh."

She dropped her snowball on the ground with an unceremonious wave of her hand and practiced rolling the words off her tongue. After five unsuccessful attempts she turned and said, "Teach me to say something else."

"What do you wish to know?"

"Anything."

"What do you already know how to say?"

"Nothing meaningful," she laughed. "I can fumble my way around words relating to cooking, housework, and basic pleasantries." She placed her index finger on her chin and thought to herself. "Let me think… ni'droi'ik nartau?"

Voris cast a sidelong glance at her. Her tongue was heavy in her mouth and without any context for what she was trying to say, it was difficult to interpret what she meant. Surely she hadn’t intended to ask that?

"You're looking at me weird," she muttered, offering him an anxious smile.

He turned on the heel of his boot and began to take slow steps back in the direction of the tunnels. "It was an odd request."

"Request? What did I just say?" she asked, trotting to catch up to him.

"What did you intend to say?"

"It doesn’t matter. What did I say?"

"I cannot be certain, but I believe you asked if I would accept your embrace."

She buried her face in her hands and groaned. "Well that was embarrassing. I meant to say I'm sorry."

He nodded. "There are fourteen distinct ways to offer an apology and they vary according to the
offense. I believe you meant to say ni'droi'ik nar-tor, but that is an expression reserved for apologizing for a very grave mistake."

"Oh."

"For what do you apologize?"

"For being so moody this morning. I know it's probably not easy for you, living with an illogical human."

"I sense you also have difficulty cohabitating with me."

"That's a fair statement," she muttered. "But I still shouldn't yell at you."

"I am aware that human pregnancy hormones often cause unpredictable emotional fluctuations. These disturbances will only increase as your pregnancy progresses."

"Which is why I'm also sorry in advance."

"And your apology is still illogical. You are not Vulcan. You lack the lifelong training to adequately master your emotions."

"I know, but the fact that I'm not Vulcan and might not be able to relate to our child is what scares me most. But it occurs to me after watching Khel's son's naming ceremony that I don't really have much in the way of a culture, not like you probably do. My people come from Norway originally and I guess some things have stuck with my family during the last six generations we've been living in space, but for the most part, we just did as we liked without worrying too much about tradition."

"Just because your traditions are not formalized does not mean you lack them."

"No, but I'm starting to realize that I should try to be open to exploring new traditions. It's why I want to learn more about you—your culture and philosophy and language. I guess I don't have to be fluent in Vuhlkansu, but I'd at least like to know a little."

Voris nodded. He admired her willingness to learn about his people for the sake of their child but he also detected within her a deep feeling of alienation and loneliness. He didn't want their child to be estranged from either one of them, but he could not see a perfect compromise: it was not possible to be both logical and emotional. But he also knew that just because there was no perfect compromise did not mean no compromise was possible. They reached the valley floor and proceeded to the entrance to their tunnel.

"Ashau nash-veh du," Voris said.

"Huh?"

"You had asked me to teach you a Vulcan phrase."

"Oh," she chuckled. "What does that mean?"

"It means I love you."

It was too dark to see her face, but he sensed her immediate and immense discomfort, prompting him to clarify, "I had thought you might want to say it to our child. It would be a way of expressing human sentiment in a Vulcan manner."

"Oh, right. Ashau nash-veh du," she whispered to herself several times as they began their descent.
down the steep narrow stairs into their tunnel.

Her pronunciation was still mangled, but he did not believe it mattered. It was effort that counted, and he was grateful she had reminded him of this.
"Good afternoon, lovey!" The high-pitched voice split the silence like a lightning bolt, nearly causing Dagny to fall off her stool.

She turned to see Aisla approaching and did a double take. "Is it already afternoon? I didn't know you were coming in today."

"It is afternoon but no, I'm not working today; I have work in the greenhouse this afternoon," Aisla replied, stopping next to Dagny and giving her a sideways hug. "How are you? How's the bump?"

Dagny's hand instinctively brushed her stomach and she smiled. "Everything is good."

"Is that baby moving yet?"

Dagny's face fell as she pressed her hand harder on her belly. "No, nothing yet."

Aisla rubbed her shoulder. "I know it's pointless to tell you not to worry, but everyone worries with their first. But remember, it is your first."

"I know," Dagny sighed, thinking this baby would be her first and only. "I know it might be another month or more before I feel any fetal movement. I know these things. But you're right, I'm still worried."

"You're doing everything right and I know Dr. Voris is taking good care of you. What does that specialist on New Vulcan say?"

Dagny grimaced. "We have another conference scheduled with her next week."

"You don't sound excited."

"I know she's going to change all my medications again and tell me all the same things I have to look forward to. She'll probably prescribe a new series of immunosuppressants, which means Voris will be even more keen to keep me locked up in the clinic so I don't get sick. I'll have to start wearing a temperature monitor soon to make sure I don't overheat."

"Hybrid pregnancies are really that serious?" Aisla said, offering a look of concern.

"They are when they're between humans and Vulcans, apparently."

"I don't understand. Khel never did any of those things."

"Khel is a Romulan mother and had a half human baby, not a human carrying a half Vulcan baby. And besides-" Dagny caught herself before she pointed out that Khel had also lost two pregnancies. Aisla seemed to sense what she was going to say anyway and cleared her throat, so Dagny quickly got back on topic.

"Anyway, it's nice to talk to Dr. Govorski and have another person give me some reassurance, but with her being so far away, it always feels like she's really just talking to Voris and they spend the whole time discussing me like I'm just some case file."

"You're not some random patient to him," Aisla huffed, crossing her arms. "That man dotes on you."
"Voris?" She didn't mean to choke when she said his name, but she had no idea what Aisla was talking about.

"You're the best cared for patient on this whole colony."

"The baby is, maybe. I just happen to be part of the package for the next five months."

"You don't really believe that." Aisla's face was hard to read, but Dagny suddenly felt ashamed. She hadn't meant to criticize Voris.

All things considered, he had been incredibly kind to her. He had sacrificed a lot too, even uprooting his life when it became clear New Vulcan wasn't a good environment for her. She understood on some fundamental level that Voris probably cared about her well-being beyond the fact that she was currently serving as a home for his child, but she assumed the baby was his primary concern and that he thought of her as another one of his patients.

Dagny gave Aisla an apologetic smile. "I don't mean to be moody, Aisla. You came in here with a smile on your face and all I'm doing is complaining."

"Everyone's entitled to that now and again," Aisla shrugged, holding her arms out to give her a hug, which Dagny gladly accepted. "But you need to put the idea that Voris doesn't care about you out of your head. He's devoted to you."

Dagny was about to argue that "devoted" seemed hilariously extreme, but she didn't want to bring up the subject of the baby's father again. "Right, so what can I do for you?"

"I was actually here to see Dr. Voris," Aisla said, pulling away from Dagny.

"He's out on rounds today. Is there something I can help you with?"

"It's not about medicine. Well, it is, but I don't need medical attention. I was actually going to ask if he would write me a recommendation."

"A recommendation? For what?"

Aisla bit her lip and looked away. "I... I want to go to nursing school. Well, a proper Federation nursing school anyway."

"Really?"

"There's a school on Earth that offers classes to non-traditional alien students. I know it must sound crazy."

"It doesn't sound crazy," Dagny interrupted, breaking into a smile. "I had no idea you wanted to go to nursing school. I mean, I guess I thought you already had."

"Well yes, I did my three year Orion apprenticeship, but it's not the same thing as a proper nursing education, is it? All my life I've been told what I couldn't and couldn't be. Then I moved to Bergeron colony and found out I really like helping people. I mean, I like working in the greenhouses too, but that's where they stick a lot of the unskilled labor. I know I'm probably too old."

"You're already a great nurse, but I'm excited for you!" Dagny said, cutting her off to give her a hug.

"So, do you think Dr. Voris would write a recommendation for me?"

"I'll never forgive him if he won't. There are days I don't know how we'd cope if you weren't here."
Voris would never admit it because of logic and whatnot, but I think he would have lost his mind if you hadn't been helping him while I was on bedrest. But if you go to school, we won't have you around anymore."

"Don't get ahead of yourself. I haven't even gotten in yet and besides, the classes don't start for another eight months."

"You'll get in," Dagny insisted. "And we will definitely miss you around here."

"And I'm going to miss you, but I'll be back, eventually. The school is four years long, but I like it here and my girls like it too."

Dagny thought of Aisla's four daughters, two of whom were grown and the others who were not far behind. "Will they go with you?"

"No, Salai wants to stay and Mora does whatever Salai does. Xhela is putting in an application for Starfleet—apparently they allow Orions on a provisional basis now—and Lida is head over heels for some boy. I don't want to uproot them. I will miss them, but my aunt and sisters are moving here next month, so my girls won't be alone."

"I'm proud of you, Aisla and so happy for you too."

"You really don't think I'm too old?"

Dagny paused, suddenly thinking of her own situation. She was eighteen weeks pregnant and living on a remote colony world outside Federation space; medical school never felt so far away, both literally and figuratively. "It's never too late."

"I also wanted to ask Voris if he would talk to Sam about me working more hours in the clinic. I need the hands-on experience and you'll need the help, especially as you get further along. And once the baby comes, you're going to need time off. Besides, the last time I looked through the patient files, we have twenty-two babies due in the next three months."

It was weird to think about the idea that in a little more than five months, assuming everything continued to go smoothly, most of her time would be consumed by caring for a baby. Her baby. Instead of allowing her mind to go down the rabbit hole of sobering panic, she nodded. "We could definitely use the help. We seem to be going through something of a mini baby boom."

"It happens around this time every year," Aisla laughed. "Some species gestate longer than others, but there are always a lot of babies born at the beginning of winter because they're holdovers from the last snowy season. I can almost guarantee if you do the math, most of them were conceived during the last snow-in. Long, cold winter nights have a funny way of making babies. Your little one will be a spring baby, which will make her a bit of an outlier, but I guess she wasn't made here either so what can I say?"

Dagny blushed furiously at the thought of discussing how and when she'd ended up getting pregnant. She knew it was a popular subject of colony gossip, but no one had ever directly asked her about it. In a way, she couldn't blame people—she would have been curious too.

"She?" Dagny asked, trying to ignore her embarrassment.

"Hmmmm?" Aisla murmured.

"You called my baby a she."
Aisla shrugged. "It's a habit. To Orions, all babies are 'she' until you know what's what. Better than calling your baby an 'it.' Have you thought about whether you'd like a son or a daughter?"

"I don't really know. My mother never wanted to know beforehand. I thought it would be a nice tradition. Voris knows though."

Aisla's eyes lit up. "Now I have another reason to talk to him!"

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I don't want anyone else knowing. It's bad enough that he knows."

Aisla gave her a warm grin. "Boys are nice enough, but girls are a treasure."

"Coming from a woman with four daughters."

"Maybe I'm a little a partial," Aisla winked. "Anyway, it's getting late and I've been at lunch for too long. Any chance Dr. Voris will be back in the next ten minutes?"

"I doubt it: he had twenty patients to see today." She glanced at the wall where the convalescent ward would eventually be installed, thinking it couldn't be built soon enough. Visiting sick and recovering patients in their homes seriously cut into the clinic's efficiency. Someone should have come by the day before to conduct a preliminary structural survey, but that had never happened. "I don't think he'll be back before 1800 hours. But I can talk to him for you, if you like."

"If it's no trouble."

"It's the least I could do."

"You're the best!" Aisla said, throwing her arms around Dagny for yet another hug. "I've got to run back to work then. I'm off tomorrow, so I'll be here in the afternoon."

"See you then," Dagny agreed.

Dagny went back to reviewing the inventory of drugs in the pharmacy cabinet, noting the stocks of nalapronie were low. Nalapronie was one of the medications she was currently taking to keep her immune system from attacking the baby. She had a feeling Dr. Govorski was going to prescribe an even more aggressive immunosuppressant during their conference with her next week, so she didn't want to make more nalapronie if she wasn't going to need it. She was in the middle of running the numbers in her head to see if it was even worth bringing it up to Voris when a hand came to rest on her shoulder.

She flinched, but thinking it must be Aisla, who was always touching and patting and hugging, she teased, "You really shouldn't sneak up on people!"

But instead of a petite Orion with thick, loopy hair, there was a tall, stocky man with sad black eyes and a bad gash near his temple. Instinct made her jump. He looked familiar, but she couldn't think of his name. "I'm- I'm sorry," she stammered. "I didn't mean to be rude. I thought you were someone else."

His only response was a single, slow blink. Dagny wrung her hands and shut the pharmacy cabinet door. "That's a nasty cut in your forehead."

The man's eyes shifted back and forth, but he remained silent.

How'd it happen?" she asked as she went to the supply cabinet for a tricorder and a dermal
No response. She was starting to feel awkward, like she was talking to herself. Maybe he didn't speak Standard. She turned back around and made eye contact with him. "What's your name?"

He gave her a sad look and said nothing. She pointed to herself. "I'm Dagny." Then she pointed at him. "You?"

He shook his head and pointed to his right ear, very near where the laceration was. "Yes, I see you're injured and I want to get you patched up," Dagny added. "It would help if I could find out what happened. Do you speak Standard?"

"He doesn't speak anything. Mike's deaf and mute."

Only then did Dagny notice the tall, slender woman standing in the doorway, watching Dagny with a smug look of amusement. It was ridiculous to dislike a woman she barely knew, but Vaksur's mocking tone and calculating eyes spoke volumes.

The man turned around to see what Dagny was looking at. He shifted his weight and glanced at Dagny. They didn't need words to share understanding: they both deeply disliked the idea of Vaksur's presence.

"Can I help you?"

"I was looking for Voris."

"Dr. Voris is out on his rounds right now."

"Oh, I was hoping to see him."

Dagny clenched her teeth, gathering her reserves of civility. "I figured as much, but he isn't here right now. If it's an emergency-"

"It's not as serious as that," Vaksur interrupted without even bothering to look at Dagny. "When will he be back?"

"In a couple of hours, maybe."

"Hey, Vaksur," called a masculine voice from behind the Vulcan woman.

Dagny had thought Vaksur was the last person she would have wanted in the clinic at that moment, but apparently, she had been mistaken. It was Pearson Schoenbein.

She hadn't seen him since that first night at Bergeron colony when he'd come in with burns following a mining accident. He had called her an angel, but he'd also had a concussion. The problem with Pearson was not only that he was probably the most attractive man she'd ever met, but also he was so kind and friendly. She didn't want to like him, but she couldn't help it.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Schoenbein?" she asked, her voice cracking like a teenage boy's.

"I can't remember the last time someone called me that," he replied, grinning and rubbing the back of his head. "It's just Pearson. Anyhow, Joe was supposed to come by yesterday and do a survey of the rock in here but he got stuck covering a second shift down in the tunnel and now he's back at it today. He says he's sorry and asked if I could come do it. I'm sorry if it's caused you any trouble."

Voris had expressed a considerable amount of displeasure over it last night and in truth, Dagny had
been kind of annoyed that the project had been neglected too, but all she could bring herself to say was, "It's no trouble at all!"

It was bad enough that her voice had become awkward and squeaky, but the fact that she could see Vaksur smirking out of the corner of her eye only made it that much worse. "I'll try coming back tomorrow when the doctor is in," she announced, as if Dagny cared. Without any further ceremony, she turned on her heel and left, calling over her shoulder, "Bye, Pearson. It was good to see you."

"Sure thing," he called after her, before turning to Dagny, gesturing to the side wall, and saying, "All I need is about half an hour to take some readings. I'm not going to be in your way, am I?"

"No," Dagny gulped. "Stay as long as you want."

The moment her sentence ended, she wished she could suck the words back in. *Stay as long as you want?* What a stupid thing to say.

Pearson pulled a tricorder-like instrument from his tool bag. "I'm going to start from outside and work my way back in. The tunnel plans say there's a room above the clinic. Any chance I can get access to that?"

"Oh, that's-" She paused. She had been about to say, "that's our quarters," but she felt weird associating herself with Voris. She figured he had to know about her situation with Voris, but she still didn't really want to discuss it with him. She noticed Mike staring at her and pulled her shirt down further over her tiny bump, as if that would hide it. "I live above the clinic."

"I don't want to snoop around in your private things," Pearson replied. "I can try to go to the surface and take a reading."

"Oh, it's not really a problem," Dagny stammered. "Let me see to my patient first and I'll show you upstairs."

"Sure thing," Pearson replied, offering her a lazy salute. "Like I said, I gotta start with my readings outside the clinic anyway."

She watched him head toward the door, suddenly uncomfortable at the thought of Pearson Schoenbein poking around the tiny space she shared with Voris. He would certainly notice their two beds. What would he think? She glanced down at her stomach, wondering if it was obvious that she was actually pregnant at this point and not just bloated. She hated that his presence made her so flustered, but she especially hated that other people seemed to notice. Above all, she hated that she couldn't really explain why she had become immediately infatuated with him.

Rather than let it get to her, she turned to the man sitting on the exam table and said, "So, your name is Mike?" momentarily forgetting the fact that he wasn't able to hear her.

He closed his eyes and gave her a thin-lipped smile. Something in his expression triggered a memory and she suddenly remembered he operated the transporters at the colony. She could patch up the wound to his head in less than five minutes, but with as bad as it was, she knew she needed to assess him for a concussion.

She grabbed her PADD from by the computer desk and tapped the button on the device to dictate a message, saying, "How did you get that cut on your forehead, Mike?"

She handed the PADD to him. He scanned the words and sighed. He pulled up an application, quickly typed out a response, and handed the PADD back to her. She read, "*It's not important. Will you please just stitch it up? I need to get back to the transporter.*"
She clucked her tongue and dictated a response into the handheld device. "If you got hit in the head hard enough to make that kind of cut, you could have a concussion. I'm happy to patch you up, but can you answer some questions for me first?"

It took forty-five minutes of dictating and typing messages back and forth on the PADD, but it was much better than playing charades to understand each other. After her assessment and tricorder scans left her satisfied he probably didn't have a concussion, she asked him to stay while she updated his medical records.

His name was Mike Yates. He was thirty-four years old, had been born on the Alpha III colony, and had a degree in mechanics from the University of Ottawa, wherever that was. Other than a few notes about routine vaccinations since his arrival at Bergeron colony three years ago, his file was empty. There was no indication about why he lacked the ability to hear or speak.

She turned to him and held out her hand, indicating she wanted the PADD. He gave it to her and she quickly dictated, "Have you always been deaf?"

He read her question, but rather than reply by typing on the PADD, he simply nodded.

She held the PADD up to her mouth and dictated, "Have you ever been assessed for the cause of your hearing loss? Maybe Dr. Voris can help you."

As he read her message, a dark expression washed across his features. He shook his head and slid off the examination table, tossing the PADD down where he had been sitting just moments before. He turned to leave, but his demeanor gave Dagny the distinct impression she'd struck some sort of nerve and she started to feel very foolish. She doubted whether he had gone his entire thirty-four years of life without at least someone asking about his deafness.

She started to call after him, to apologize if she'd offended him in some way, but immediately felt even more ridiculous. He wouldn't hear her. She was torn between the deep instinct to chase after him and beg forgiveness and her fear of sticking her foot even farther into her mouth.

As she approached the threshold, she bumped into Pearson, who was just coming around the corner. She started to lose her balance, but he caught her by the arm and said, "Careful there."

Her heart flip flopped wildly. Dagny pulled away and mumbled, "Yeah, thanks."

"So, I think I have good news. I'm going to need to take a scan from your quarters to be sure, but I think we can not only install the ward you want, but also add some additional storage too."

"Dr. Voris will be happy to hear that," she replied, slinking back into the clinic.

"He must work you like a dog," Pearson grinned. "I don't ever see you around."

"I uh- I do work a lot," she explained, clearing her throat and crossing her arms. "So, do you uh-want to join me in my bedroom then?"

A long enough silence passed between them to make it wretchedly awkward. It took longer than it should have for Dagny to realize the implication of choice of phrase. "I mean, to take the scans. Not-you know, to… yeah."

Pearson chuckled. "I knew what you meant. Lead the way."

Dagny hurried past him before he could see just how red her face was. She was halfway up the stairs when he said from behind her, "I bet it gets old, working where you live."
"Yeah," she said, reaching the top of the landing.

"I'll try not to take too long," he said, walking into the middle of the room and pulling out an engineering tricorder.

She felt the urge to tell him again to take as long as he wanted, but managed to catch herself that time.

"How are you liking Bergeron colony?" he asked.

"It's nice."

"What brought you here?"

She held her breath, wondering where and how to begin. "It's kind of complicated, I guess. What about you?"

"Not complicated at all," he replied, holding the tricorder out in front of him and taking several slow steps forward. "I just came here looking for something different."

"Different from what?"

"I grew up on a transport ship. My mom passed away shortly after I was born, so I was raised by my dad. He was the ship's captain. We had regular routes in the Sol System. I guess I got tired of seeing the same old places but never really settling down in any of them."

"I grew up on a salvage ship," Dagny said wistfully. "I know what you mean... about settling down, that is."

"The longer I stay, the less I think planetary living is for me," Pearson sighed, looking up from his scanner. "Don't get me wrong, I like the people here, but I have half a mind to go back to my dad's ship. I even toyed with the idea of joining Starfleet for a while."

"That sounds exciting. I used to hate the fact that I grew up on a salvage ship, but I miss the sounds of the engines."

Dagny missed a lot more than the feeling of being on a ship, but she didn't really feel like telling Pearson her entire life story. "So, uh- can I get you something to drink?"

"No, I'm good for right now, but speaking of drinks, does the good Vulcan doctor ever give you time off?"

"We take a day off each week, but we're always on call," Dagny explained.

"Me and some friends meet down at Jester's for drinks every so often. It would be good to have a new face. Why don't you join us?"

Dagny gulped. "Oh, I don't think- I- I shouldn't."

"No pressure or anything," Pearson shrugged. "Just thought you might like to make some friends."

Dagny stared at him. Was he asking her to join him because he really just wanted to be friends, or did he want something more? What did she want? Maybe it didn't matter what she wanted—she doubted Pearson wanted a girl who was having someone else's baby.

She felt enormously guilty even contemplating the idea that she liked him in a romantic sense. What about Voris? What about their baby? The longer she went without mentioning it, the more she felt like she was lying.
"I uh- I just… I can't. I can't drink, I mean."

"Are you allergic or something? Religious?"

"I'm expecting a baby."

"Oh, I didn't know. Congratulations!" He spoke so genuinely and calmly, without hesitation or a hint of jealousy in his voice. "You can still join us for drinks, you could just have juice or something."

Maybe he really just wanted to be her friend. The thought of that filled her with unexpected relief. "I just- I don't know. I don't know how Voris would feel about it."

"Oh, are you two... you two are... oh."

Dagny closed her eyes and grimaced. Everyone else on Bergeron colony seemed to know about her and Voris. Did Pearson live under a rock? "Yeah, it's... complicated."

"I didn't mean to pry," Pearson quickly added. "I mean, you can bring him if you want. It'd probably be good for him to have a night out too."

"I'll uh- I'll let him know about your invitation," Dagny muttered. "I make no promises."

"Did I just make things weird?" Pearson asked, giving her a serious look.

"No," she explained. "Things were already weird. It's a weird situation. I figured everyone on the colony knew about it."

"I don't really get involved in colony gossip and drama," Pearson shrugged. "I keep my head down and spend time with friends. I would never try to cause trouble in someone's relationship."

"We're not- I mean..." Dagny cleared her throat and nodded. "It's exactly what I said earlier. It's complicated."

"Most things are," Pearson replied, looking over his shoulder and giving her a smile.

It had been an embarrassing conversation, but she felt better. She felt honest. At least she felt honest until she turned around to see Voris standing at the top of the stairs, staring at Pearson with unusual intensity. She didn't know why, but she felt like she had been caught.

Voris breezed through the side tunnel and headed toward the main loop. He had completed his rounds much sooner than he'd anticipated and he found himself looking forward to a late midday meal. Korva, a Klingon matron, had offered him a fresh plate of gagh in appreciation for him checking up on her son, but he had refused. Eating animal flesh was repugnant; eating the wriggling, worm-like creatures the Klingons enjoyed would have been doubly so.

He paused when he heard a crash up ahead. It was the sound of rock smashing against rock, and was followed by the giggle of adolescent, masculine voices. They spoke in a choppy language that reminded him somewhat of his native tongue. He thought he heard words like "idiot" and "throw" and "cry," but he couldn't be certain.

He approached the voices cautiously, immediately realizing they were coming from a secondary tunnel that connected to the surface. Another rock collided with a wall, followed by more laughter.

"You think it's funny, throwing rocks at people?" shouted a female voice.
Voris finally made his way to the tunnel opening to find the elderly haberdasher with the cough facing down three young Romulan boys. They stared at her quizzically, unaware of Voris' presence.

"You could have killed him, you little turds!" she howled, picking up a loose rock from ground. "How would you like it if I threw rocks at you?"

The tallest boy in the middle smiled at her and shrugged. "You won't throw it."

His Standard was short and clipped, but it was perfectly clear and delivered in a sure tone. The woman wound her arm back and hurled it, clearly aiming over the boy's head. It smashed into the wall behind the trio, who all ducked on instinct. The woman fell into a violent coughing fit from the exertion.

"May I inquire what is going on?"

The three boys' heads whipped around. "She's trying to kill us."

"Why would she do that?" Voris asked.

The smallest boy looked back at her with open scorn. "Because she's crazy."

"I'm not crazy," she wheezed. "You're savages. Attacking an innocent man who couldn't even hear you."

"He should be culled," the middle boy scowled. "I don't know why humans let their sick and infirm live."

Voris wasn't sure who or what they were talking about, but deduced they were referring to ancient Romulan traditions regarding euthanizing weaker members of society. "Perhaps you should return home."

"You can't tell us what to do," the tallest boy retorted, puffing up his chest and eyeing Voris in open challenge.

"I don't have to tell you what to do," the woman choked. "I'll drag you home by those pointed ears and tell your parents exactly what you did."

"I cannot tell you what to do, but I can inform the constable of your activities," Voris interjected. "I urge you to return home."

"Vez, let's go," the third boy muttered. "It's not worth it."

"You should listen to your companion," Voris agreed, locking eyes with the boy called Vez.

As they slinked down the side tunnel toward the surface, Voris turned to the elderly woman, who was only just beginning to regain her breath. "And may I inquire why you were throwing rocks at young boys?"

She cleared her throat and took a deep breath. "They threw rocks at Mike Yates. Probably to see if they could get him to speak."

"It is unacceptable to throw rocks at another individual."

"I know," she spat.

"And yet you threw rocks at them."
"Oh, high and mighty Vulcan," she sneered, turning her back to walk away. "Always above violence. Always insisting you know the better way."

"I do not always know the best way," he argued, following her.

She stopped in her tracks to begin coughing. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and held it up to her mouth, and when she pulled it away, it was freckled with bright red blood.

"But I do know you require medical treatment," he added, approaching her.

"Go away," she insisted, hobbling into the main loop.

"You clearly have a significant pathology."

"And you clearly don't respect people's privacy," she snapped.

He didn't know how to reply, so he continued to trail behind at her languid pace. She was evidently irritated by his presence, but said nothing until they reached their tunnel.

"You don't have to follow me. I promise not to keel over dead and make more administrative work for you."

"Your booth is located very near the clinic," he explained. "I believe we are simply heading toward proximate destinations."

"Hmmmmf."

"It occurs to me that I do not know your name," he said, lengthening his stride to walk abreast with her.

"Adelaide Proctor."

"I am Dr. Voris."

"I know," she mumbled. "Zernon tells me you have a baby on the way."

"Yes."

"With that little redheaded girl who works in your clinic."

"Yes, her name is Dagny."

"How'd that happen?" she asked, giving him a sly smile.

"You require an explanation of reproductive processes?"

It began as a hearty laugh and ended in a wheezing cough. She placed the handkerchief over her mouth again, and began to sway. Voris reached up to steady her shoulder, but she batted his hand away.

"Trust me, I know how babies get made," she panted. "You just don't see a lot of Vulcans dipping their wick into humans. You lot seem to stick to yourselves."

Voris swallowed hard and took a small step back, unsure how to respond to her crude language.

"I do like an unlikely love story though," Adelaide mused. "Had a few myself, but they never
"I do not love Miss Skjeggestad." He hadn't expected to make such a frank confession to a woman he barely knew, but there it was.

"Oh, just knocked her up then. Still... how'd that happen?"

He raised an eyebrow and inhaled a slow breath, trying his best to be mindful of his outward appearance. Embarrassment was illogical, but in this instance, it seemed insurmountable. "I do not care to discuss my private matters with you."

"And now you know how I feel," she laughed. "Still, good on you for sticking around though. A lot of men don't."

"It was the only logical option. She is carrying my child."

"And you say you don't love her."

"My opinion of her is irrelevant."

"Commitment is its own kind of love," she insisted. "Some people go their whole lives without ever figuring that out."

He was in the midst of devising a reply when he heard a melodic voice call his name. "Dr. Voris! I'm happy I ran into you. I was just coming from the clinic."

He craned his neck to see the elegant, glossy-haired woman approaching from an adjoining tunnel. "How may I assist you, Vaksur?"

"I'm still having headaches," she whined. "And you never did come to visit me."

Voris' mind stalled. She was quite correct: she'd requested he visit her to perform neuropressure and he'd forgotten to add her to his rounds.

"The neuropressure?" she murmured, as if trying to remind him of what he already knew.

"Yes, I apologize for overlooking your care. If you would follow me to the clinic—"

"Can't you just come by my room?" she interrupted. "I just live right down the way. And your assistant said you were out on rounds today. She also seemed to be under the impression you would be gone for hours. And you owe me, remember, for going to get Ann to babysit her?"

Adelaide began coughing again, but it sounded as though she were attempting to disguise a laugh. "Bye, Dr. Nosy," she called over her shoulder in between coughs. "And good luck."

He could not determine why she would wish him luck, but he did not have time to reflect upon it before Vaksur again asked him to join her in her quarters to perform neuropressure to alleviate her headache. He followed her, reasoning Dagny did not anticipate him back in the clinic until 1830 hours.

He stepped through the entry of Vaksur's quarters, finding a cluttered space filled with pink and purple décor. It was a small room, only approximately only ten square meters, with a single, unmade bed against the far wall.

"Pardon my mess," she said, undoing the sash of her coat and tossing it over the back of a chair. "My grandmother used to tell me neuropressure could heal just about anything."
"That is incorrect," he explained. "It is useful for treating minor ailments, but I believe you could benefit from meditation as well."

"I never saw much use in meditation," she shrugged. "I wasn't raised on all that logic nonsense."

"Logic is not nonsense."

She offered him a sly grin. "We'll just have to agree to disagree."

Voris was curious about Vaksur's upbringing, about why she rejected logic and how she had come to live on Bergeron colony, but it would have been extremely indelicate to pry into her life. Instead, he stood in the center of the room and waited for her to direct him to sit. Then she began unbuttoning her blouse. He instinctively looked away and asked, "Why are you removing your clothing?"

"Isn't that required for neuropressure?"

"Certain forms of neuropressure, yes," he explained. "But it is neither necessary nor appropriate in this circumstance."

"Oh, I didn't know." She gave a small laugh and began re-buttoning her buttons, noticeably leaving the top two unfastened. "So, show me, how is this done?"

"The effect would be greatly enhanced if you would commit to learning basic meditation techniques," he explained, taking a small step toward her.

"Let's see how it goes without it."

"Very well, I need to access certain pressure points on your neck and jaw—will you move your hair out of the way?"

She did a half turn, sweeping her black locks into her left hand before lifting it up to reveal her long, slender neck. "Is this ok?"

"Yes." He moved behind her and prepared to place his hands on her, but hesitated before making contact with her skin.

Something was wrong. He felt… he did not know. It bothered him that he felt anything at all, but it bothered him more that he could neither identify nor repress it. He supposed humans would call it intuition, but that was illogical. This woman posed no threat to him.

He spent the next five minutes applying pressure to different locations along her cervical spine, all the while thinking it would have been better were there a female healer available to perform this treatment. The moment his index fingers touched her jaw for the last series of adjustments, she uttered a low, guttural moan. His discomfort grew, causing him to step back.

"Is something wrong?" Vaksur asked, looking over her shoulder at him. Her eyes cast upward, looking into his with patient focus.

"I believe that should be sufficient to relieve your migraine," he said, taking a slow breath.

"Oh yes," she said, releasing her hair and tossing it side to side. "Much better. But what if it comes back?"

"You know where the clinic is," he explained, taking another step toward her door.

"Do you have to be in such a hurry?"
"Dagny is in the clinic by herself. She may require assistance."

"I doubt it," Vaksur shrugged. "I came from there not that long ago. She was making heart eyes at Pearson Schoenbein."

"Heart eyes?"

"Yes, flirting with him."

His discomfort with Vaksur metamorphosed into something darker and more resolute, not to mention more shameful. He knew this emotion: jealousy. He'd felt it before, the last time Mr. Schoenbein had been in their clinic. Jealousy was illogical for any reason, but particularly in regards to a human man who was interested in a human woman who was not his mate. Just because Dagny was pregnant with his child did not mean she owed him fidelity, and yet… he greatly disliked the thought of her seeking out a mate. It was illogical in her condition.

"If you will excuse me," he said, offering Vaksur a small bow. He traveled the short distance to the clinic, doing his best to assuage his emotions.

When he opened the door to the clinic, Harold darted between his legs and into the clinic. He had been missing for weeks but rather than reflect upon his sudden return, he scanned the room. Dagny was nowhere in sight, but his sensitive ears detected voices coming from upstairs. One was soft, the other, deeper. Why would she have invited him up to their private quarters? It was her home and she was free to have guests, but it was also his home and he had not consented to this violation. Furthermore, she was on duty.

He strode up the stairs and upon reaching the top, found Dagny leaning against a table, watching Pearson Schoenbein study a tricorder.

"Voris?" she said, her tone oddly strained. "You're back early."

"Yes, and no one is on duty in the clinic."

"Oh, hello Dr. Voris," Mr. Schoenbein said, looking up from his handheld device.

"What are you doing in our quarters?"

"He was just taking some readings, you know, to do the structural survey for the convalescent ward."

"And he required access to be in our private quarters to do this?"

"To make the most accurate assessment, yeah," the man explained, rubbing his free hand through his straw-colored hair.

"You were supposed to have conducted the survey yesterday, were you not?"

"Um, actually, the foreman, Joe Jensen, was supposed to do it, but things are hectic down in the mines right now, so he sent me."

"And you are qualified to perform a structural survey?"

"I've done half a dozen," Mr. Schoenbein said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Uh, anyway, I'm pretty much done here. I'll turn my report over to Sam and hopefully she can get a team down here pretty soon to add this ward you want, plus that extra storage space."

"Thank you, Pearson," Dagny said, exchanging glances with him. "I'll show you out."

"We should both return to the clinic," Voris suggested, stepping into the room to allow Mr. Schoenbein to pass so he could follow him down.

Once downstairs, the human man waved his tricorder in Dagny's direction and said, "It was good seeing you, Dagny. And you too, Dr. Voris."

"Yes. Goodbye."

The moment the clinic door shut behind him, Dagny hissed, "What is wrong with you?"

"There is nothing wrong."

"You didn't have to be so rude to him. He came here to help improve the clinic."

"His intentions were commendable," Voris replied. "But he does not seem qualified. What are his credentials?"

"You are unbelievable!"

"What do you not believe about my statement?"

"It's not about what you said—it's about what you're doing. You complain about the inefficiency of trekking all over the colony to visit patients, you complain about not having enough space here, and then when someone shows up to try and fix those things, you complain about that too."

"I was not complaining," he corrected. "I was merely observing that he is poorly qualified for the task he was performing."

She scoffed and turned her back on him.

"Have you finished the inventory of the pharmaceutical cabinet?"

She wheeled back around and her mouth slowly fell open. "No, actually. I've been seeing to patients. Your girlfriend came by the clinic looking for you, by the way."

Voris had spent enough time in the company of humans during his time on Earth to know a "girlfriend" did not literally mean a friend who was a female child, but it seemed odd that Dagny would insinuate he was romantically attached to anyone. "Clarify."

"Vaksur."

"Yes, I spoke with her. But we are not involved in any kind of romantic relationship."

Dagny rolled her eyes and turned her back on him once again. "Maybe you should tell her that."

"Have I upset you?" he inquired.

"You're so- you're just completely- ugh, I'm not in the mood for this." She waved her hands and flopped down on the stool by the computer.

"So... do you intend to continue with your inventory of the pharmaceutical cabinet?"
"Yes, Voris," she barked, glaring at him. "Why are you back so early, anyway?"

"I was able to visit four of my patients simultaneously while they were on their shift in the second mining tunnel, and two patients insisted they did not require follow-up care."

"Lucky me," she muttered.

"It was not luck."

She turned toward him on the stool, biting her bottom lip. "You know what, fine. I'll just ask: what is going on with you?"

"Clarify."

"I shouldn't have to," she replied, crossing her arms. "It's a pretty straightforward question."

He cocked his head, studying her firmly set features. They stared at each other for a full minute. He noticed her complexion was reddening and was about to ask her if she felt well when she uttered a loud sigh and said, "It's not like I want to feel what you feel, but no matter how hard you try to meditate this weird psychic bond away, I can still pick up on your feelings sometimes, Voris. You were jealous. You were jealous of Pearson Schoenbein."

"Jealousy is illogical."

"That may be, but you were."

"And you are jealous of Vaksur."

Her face turned even redder. She sputtered a few syllables, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. "I don't like her."

"Why?"

Before she could give an answer, a woman walked in with a broken nose and Voris found himself tending to her while Dagny returned to the inventory. They stayed steadily busy until the clinic closed several hours later.

Once upstairs for the evening, Dagny began preparing end meal while Voris reviewed and updated the clinic's logs for the day. Dagny's entry at 1358 hours caught his eye. "You treated Mike Yates for a head laceration?"

"Yeah," she answered, not bothering to look back at him as she stirred a pot of soup on the stove. "He wouldn't tell me what happened, but I was able to do a trauma assessment by typing messages back and forth on my PADD. Why do you ask?"

Voris was aware of the transporter operator's inability to speak or hear, but his records contained no indication of what might have caused such a pathology. Certain congenital or degenerative diseases or traumatic injury to particular areas of the brain, ear, mouth, or larynx were all possibilities.

He thought of the Romulan boys in the tunnel and Adelaide's assumption that they had been throwing rocks in an attempt to get him to make a vocalization. "I believe he was attacked."

"Attacked? Who would do that?"

"It is not a matter we should involve ourselves with," he replied. "I'll speak with the constable in the morning."
"No, I want to know who hurt him. And why. Aside from being on the edge of Gorn and Klingon space, I thought this colony was pretty safe."

"I do not believe we are at risk," Voris explained. "I believe he was targeted by adolescents seeking amusement."

She whipped around, sending droplets from the tip of the spoon in her hand onto the floor. "Who are these kids? Where are their parents? I'll go talk to them right now."

"This is a matter for the constable and does not concern us," he insisted.

"Yes it does!" she yelled, tossing the ladle into the pot of soup. "He came into the clinic with his head split open."

"Does it occur to you that he is a competent adult capable of filing his own complaint with the constable?"

"Maybe he doesn't want to make trouble," she argued, putting her hands on her hips. "He doesn't deserve to be treated that way."

"No, he does not, but if your assumption is correct that he does not want to make trouble for himself, why must you insist on making it for him?"

"I felt so helpless today, when he came into the clinic. I didn't know how to talk to him. And he looks so sad. Then I think I made him mad by suggesting maybe there was something we could do to fix him."

"Is he broken?"

"He can't hear, Voris. He can't talk to people."

"You said you communicated with him effectively via a PADD."

"Basic communication isn't the same thing as… as…"

Voris arched an eyebrow, but she never finished her sentence. "Perhaps he does not see himself as needing to be 'fixed,' as you say."

"How could someone not want to hear? He said he's been deaf since birth. He's never heard music or the sound of his mother's voice."

"And you have never perceived magnetic poles as Andorians do. Do you believe your perception of your surroundings is impaired?"

"That's different."

"Because you have never sensed a magnetic pole?"

"Because what's the point in being able to hone in on magnetic poles?"

"It was merely an example, but if you were to ask an Andorian, they would consider it an essential part of their sensory perception. They might even pity you for being unable to perceive it. Your species primarily relies upon five main senses for experiencing their surroundings, two of which—hearing and vision—are highly integrated into routine function. Yet there are other species who use different senses to navigate their environment. And all species perceive things in different ways; there is even variation within species."
She gave him a perplexed look, evidently struggling to find a counterargument. Voris sniffed the air, smelling the savory tones of the soup, and rose to his feet to collect two bowls.

"But pretty much every species I've ever encountered perceives sound. It's not species specific. And besides, Mike Yates is human."

"True, it is evidently quite heavily favored by natural selection to have arisen independently on so many species. But there are differences. As a Vulcan, I am capable of hearing a much wider range of frequencies than you, a human, are."

Dagny ladled some soup into her bowl and gave him a pointed look. "I'm trying to talk about what we can do for Mike, not get a lecture on Vulcan exceptionalism. I know Vulcans are better than humans at everything."

"Your assertion is incorrect." Voris sat down at their small round table and waited for her to join him.

"Do tell," she called over her shoulder as she searched the utensil drawer.

"Your species has unique photoreceptors that enable you to see a wider spectrum of the electromagnetic field than I can. On average, a human can perceive approximately three million more colors than a Vulcan. I am unable to discern the color you call purple from the colors you call blue and green."

She took a seat across from him and glanced around before gazing at the rug underneath their feet. "What color is the carpet?"

"Dark," he replied. "Brown or gray, perhaps."

"You've lived with this rug for months and really had no idea it was navy blue? You're colorblind?"

"To a human. To a Vulcan, my color vision is normal. Yet I do not believe your inability to hear high frequency sound or my inability to see high frequency light renders either of us broken."

She lifted a spoonful of soup to her mouth and paused. "I see what you're saying. I can think of more examples—I know Betazoids 'see' others' emotions and Orions have noses that could put dogs to shame—but I just can't wrap my mind around it. I just want Mike to have what I have, and if we can give that to him, is that so wrong?"

"If Mike wanted to hear and speak, it is logical to conclude he would visit a physician. If the physician had been able to help him gain these abilities, we would not be having this conversation. Therefore, either Mike does not want my assistance or there is no assistance I can give him."

Dagny sighed and slid the spoon between her lips. He detected a soft emotion growing in her subconscious.

"You are sad."

She glanced up at him. "Not really. Well, maybe a little. I'd rather not talk about it."

He nodded and looked down at his bowl of soup. "Would you like to continue your studies in organic chemistry this evening, or would you prefer a different subject?"

"Hmmm?" she muttered.

"You are still underperforming in organic and biological chemistry," he reminded her. "They are
essential topics for medical school."

She frowned, but suddenly sat up and replied, "That reminds me—Aisla came by the clinic this afternoon. She wants to know if you'll write her a recommendation to attend a nursing school on Earth."

"I will. I believe she would make an exceptional nurse with more formal training."

Dagny's sadness grew to include relief, excitement, and jealousy, and yet she wore a smile on her face. "Great, I'll let her know."

Voris felt tempted to ask her about her perplexing bundle of conflicting emotions, but recalled their argument from earlier and decided he didn't want to revisit the topic of his own shameful jealousy regarding Pearson Schoenbein. He had repressed the emotion, but could not repress the memory.

Through their jumbled bond, he understood what she was feeling, but not why. Should he have said he would not write a recommendation for Aisla? Had he been wrong to praise their Orion volunteer? He felt a fleeting and illogical urge to retract his previous arguments regarding varied sensory perception among sentient species. His emotional blindness where Dagny was concerned was a failing he often wished he could compensate for.
"Thank you for your time, Dr. Govorski," Voris said, rising to his feet.

"It's like the Vulcans say, I'm here to serve," the human doctor replied with her usual warm smile. "Now get some rest, I know it's quite late there."

"Good night, doctor," Dagny added, aware that she was slouching in her chair but too weary and exasperated to sit up. "And thanks."

Voris terminated the transmission. "She is correct. It is late."

"We should check in with Aisla," Dagny murmured, thinking of their Orion nurse who was assisting one of her Orion friends in the early stages of labor.

"I will go within the hour," Voris replied. "But I must finish amending the clinic's logs. I would also like to begin synthesizing your new medications."

"I can help you then."

"You should rest."

"It sounds like I'm going to have plenty of time to rest soon enough," Dagny said darkly.

None of Dr. Govorski's recommendations had surprised her, but she still wasn't looking forward to them. Aside from the continued monitoring of her hormone levels, Dr. Govorski wanted her to start wearing a device to monitor her internal body temperature.

Vulcan body temperature was more variable than that of humans but on average, it was two degrees cooler. Because her usual temperature of 37°C would essentially be considered a fever in a Vulcan mother and because the fetus was approaching a stage in its development where it was extremely sensitive to temperature changes, overheating even from light exercise could spell disaster for the baby, leading to neurological damage and potentially even death.

Not that she would have much opportunity to exercise. Next week she would be at twenty weeks gestation and Dr. Govorski wanted to begin a regimen of more aggressive immunosuppressants. She would have to begin a series of medications to downregulate human pregnancy hormones and increase production of mid-stage Vulcan pregnancy hormones that were necessary to the development of a healthy hybrid baby. The hormones would stimulate her immune system, which would then in turn attack the baby if her immune response wasn't sufficiently tamped.

With a weakened immune system, she would be vulnerable to infections until the final month of her pregnancy, when she would no longer need the Vulcan hormones or immunosuppressants. Unfortunately, it still meant spending most of the duration of her pregnancy wearing a face mask and being confined to the clinic where biofilters continually purged the environment of pathogens. They would need to install a similar filter in their quarters and she would have to be mindful of food handling and contamination. She wasn't sure whether she hated the idea of being handled with kid gloves or being a prisoner in the clinic more.

"You are annoyed," Voris said, cocking his head as he turned to look at her.
Dagny pursed her lips and gazed back at him through sluggish eyelids. Ever since their confessions about being able to sense each other's jealousy the week before, Voris had taken to commenting on her moods, as though she didn't know what she was feeling at any given time. Not only was it annoying, it was also extremely distressing. It felt like a complete violation of her privacy that he could just know she was feeling sad or irritated or bored throughout the day. He was more skilled in concealing his feelings. She wasn't sure if his talent was in concealing them from himself or from her, but either way, the exchange of feelings between them was very one-sided.

She realized Voris was looking at her as though he wanted some kind of confirmation of his statement, so she rolled her eyes, searched her mind, and slowly replied, "Yes, I'm... ornai'ga."

"Ornai'tau," he corrected.

Dagny gritted her teeth and forced a smile, recognizing her linguistic mistake immediately. By altering the ending of the word, she'd claimed she was annoying rather than the one who was being annoyed. T'Mir had been very patient in trying to teach her the basic aspects of the Vulcan language and Voris had made a few attempts to continue expanding her command of Vuhlkansu, but most of the time, it all sounded like gibberish. "Your language is hard."

"It is, but you are making fair progress with the vocabulary."

"I know you still think my pronunciation sounds like I'm shaking a bag of rocks."

"You have a human tongue."

"And you have a Vulcan knack for stating the obvious."

Voris' eyes shifted from right to left. They stared at each other without speaking. When Dagny's guilt over her snippy attitude finally outweighed her irritation, she sighed and said, "I'm not very tired. I don't feel like resting."

"Would you prefer to continue your studies of Vuhlkansu?"

"Nirsh," she replied with a smirk, using the Vulcan word for "no." Two weeks of intermittent and informal Vuhlkansu lessons had been as agonizing as pulling teeth. She hated failing at something so miserably no matter how hard she tried.

"Then perhaps we could resume last night's lesson on novel amino acid synthesis," Voris suggested.

"I can't do chemistry tonight."

"I am aware of your dislike of organic and physical chemistry, but amino acids are a topic more closely aligned with biological chemistry."

"It has the word 'chemistry' in it, doesn't it?"

Voris uttered the slightest of sighs. "Chemistry is integral to virtually all aspects of medicine."

"I know."

"If you wish to matriculate into a medical training program-"

"I know, Voris," she snapped. "I know I need to study harder and learn more. I know I'm 'underperforming,' as you say. I know."

"If you know these things then why do you raise your voice? It is illogical to be angry with facts."
Her cheeks started to burn and she literally bit down on her tongue to keep her from unleashing the full weight of her fury onto the clueless man standing in front of her. She wasn't sure if it was the pregnancy hormones or if he had always been such an obnoxious know-it-all, but at that moment, he was the most irritating thing in the entire galaxy.

Voris took a step toward her, tucking his hands behind his back as he moved. "During my fellowship on Earth, I worked with a highly respected human physician named Dr. Kelley."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"He relished in shouting and seemed to delight in belittling the staff underneath him."

Dagny crossed her arms and leaned back in her seat, wondering where he was going with this. Was he about to apologize for making her feel stupid on a regular basis?

Voris continued. "I once asked a colleague why he did this, and I was told Dr. Kelley simply had a habit of punishing other people for his own frustrations and failures. I believe the colloquial phrase Dr. Kayala used was 'to take it out on the wrong person.'"

Dagny's breath caught in her throat. It was bad enough that he seemed to understand everything she didn't, but now he had to show her he understood her better than she understood herself?

Angry tears welled in her eyes. She stood and stormed in the direction of the stairs to their quarters, feeling ashamed she was being so mean but still annoyed that Voris was an obnoxious know-it-all. She didn't quite make it to the stairs before the after-hours buzzer sounded. Voris gave her a patient but knowing look and answered it to find Sora, a young Tellarite woman, being propped up by her fiancé, frothy red blood bubbling from her mouth.

"She said she couldn't breathe," the man cried, clutching her tightly. "We were halfway down the tunnel when she started choking on her own blood."

Voris and Dagny immediately jumped into action, scrambling for diagnostic and supportive medical equipment.

"Has she been ill recently?" Voris asked, scanning her chest with a tricorder.

"No, she was fine," Gaz, Sora's fiancé, insisted. "She was good just a few hours ago. Is she going to die?"

Dagny rifled through the closet for the supplies to insert a nasal cannula to deliver supplemental oxygen and looked over at Sora, who looked delirious and on the verge of losing consciousness. "Not if we can help it," she answered firmly.

"We're supposed to get married next spring," Gaz cried, pacing back and forth between the doorway and his partner.

"And Voris and I are going to make sure that happens," Dagny insisted, hooking up the supplemental oxygen. She glanced over Voris' shoulder and was shocked to see the woman's blood pressure was almost non-existent.

"Why did this have to happen to her?" Gaz wailed. "What's wrong with her?"

Voris began to explain. "I believe your betrothed is suffering from a-"

"Pulmonary embolism," Dagny finished, racing to the pharmacy cabinet to load a hypospray with
empinidrine, a Tellarite vasopressor to treat Sora's plummeting blood pressure.

Voris looked in her direction and nodded. "She'll require ten milliliters of a ten percent solution of empinidrine to stabilize her."

"Blood pressure," Dagny interrupted, programming the dosage into the hypospray. "Already on it."

"And the next recommended course of treatment after stabilizing blood pressure?" Voris asked, heading toward the pharmacy cabinet.

"Thromolysis," Dagny answered. "Either through medication or surgical removal."

"Surgical removal?" Gaz choked, stepping forward and pulling anxiously on his long beard.

Sora seemed to half understand and gripped Dagny's hand. Her breathing was even more labored now and a bloody bubble was forming on her lips.

"Yes," Voris called over his shoulder. "According to my readings, blood flow through the pulmonary artery has been reduced to approximately thirty percent. I believe her case is severe enough that anticoagulants and thrombolytics will be ineffective."

"I don't understand all these words," Gaz cried, falling to his knees in front of Sora and grasping for her free hand. "Just tell us."

"Your fiancé has a large blood clot in her lungs," Dagny explained as calmly as she could manage, looking back to Voris for his medical opinion. "We need to take it out so she can breathe."

Five minutes later they were in the surgical suite, wearing surgical gowns and standing over Sora. She watched as he guided her through the steps of intubation, explaining that it was typically contraindicated for pulmonary embolism patients but necessary in this case due to the general anesthesia required for surgery. Dagny's hands were shaking, but if Voris noticed, he said nothing. She had assisted him in several surgeries before, but most of them had been routine and scheduled.

He threw question after question at her as they worked. It was nerve-wracking, handing Voris equipment and trying to answer questions about blood flow in the inverted Tellarite heart and whether administering fluids would lead to worsening ventricular dilation or hypovolemia. It was made much worse by the fact that she could hear Gaz sobbing just outside the door.

She appreciated that Voris did his best to use every patient as a learning opportunity and she recognized many medical school hopefuls probably would have killed to get this kind of practical experience, but when it came to really serious emergencies, it was just plain overwhelming. She was still only a paramedic, not an interspecies cardiologist. She wasn't even trained as a surgical technologist, and so helping him during this surgery felt mildly surreal. Life as his assistant on a remote colony world was like living a unique kind of imposter syndrome.

Even so, thirty minutes later, the clot had been removed and Voris was sealing the surgical site when they heard a knock on the door.

"She's doing wonderfully, Gaz," Dagny called. Her nose and chin were sweaty and itchy from the fabric of the surgical mask on her face and she groaned inwardly thinking that pretty soon, she'd be wearing one full time in the clinic to keep her from getting sick.

There was another knock. Voris and Dagny exchanged looks, and Dagny called through the door, "We're almost done. She's stable and it looks like she'll recover."
"It's not about Sora," Gaz called, before another voice cut him off and added, "My friend is having a baby and I think something is wrong."

Dagny made eye contact with Voris, who said, "I am able to finish surgery without your assistance."

She nodded and stepped back, quickly exiting the temporary sterilizing force field around the surgical biobed. She rinsed the blood from her hands and sanitized them in the sonic sink, making sure to remove her face mask, apron, and surgical scrubs before exiting the surgical suite to avoid upsetting Gaz. The moment she opened the door, she was approached by Gaz and an Andorian woman, who began speaking at the same time.

"So, she's going to pull through?" Gaz insisted.

"My friend needs help," said the Andorian woman, who Dagny didn't recognize.

Dagny gently laid her hand on Gaz's arm and said, "Dr. Voris is finishing up surgery and he'll be able to tell you more in a few minutes. Things look very good for Sora."

She didn't wait for his response before turning to the Andorian woman to ask, "Who's your friend?"

"Melana. She- she's having a baby and, well, her face is so hot and- I don't know. Something's wrong."

Dagny wasn't aware of any obstetric Andorian patients but the Andorians lived above ground and generally kept to themselves, so she didn't see the point of bringing that up. If the woman's friend was in labor, Dagny supposed it didn't matter. She hurried up the stairs to grab her coat, scooped up her medical bag, and offered another quick round of reassurance to Gaz before heading out the door.

She suspected Voris would dislike the idea of her hiking all the way to the Andorian settlement above ground in her condition, but she didn't see much of a choice. Aisla was already attending to a patient and it wasn't like she could finish up Sora's surgery on her own. Surely even Voris with all his logic would agree.

Still, she thought of Dr. Govorski's recommendation that she should wear a monitor to track her internal body temperature. If overheating could hurt the baby, was it a good idea to go racing up to the surface? She still didn't see that she had much of a choice.

The thought of all those stairs was immediately daunting. There were industrial turbolifts in some of the mines that would get her to the surface faster but they were so far out of her way it didn't make sense to use them. There were plans to install a passenger turbolift in the spring, but that did her no good right now. Dagny made sure to consciously walk at a quick but careful pace as they moved through the tunnel to the stairs. "How long has your friend been in labor?"

"I'm not sure. I heard her crying and found her on the floor on her hands and knees."

"Does she have any other children?"

"No."

When they reached the stairs leading to the surface, Dagny charged upward, but it wasn't long before she was struggling to breathe against her terrible state of fitness. She was also starting to sweat, and the sweat made her panic. She was barely a quarter of the way up when she paused and moved her bag over to her other hand, wiping the droplets from her forehead and wondering if this exertion was hurting her baby.
The Andorian woman turned around and offered a look between scorn and concern. "Are you sick?"

"I'm expecting a baby of my own and I'm a little out of shape," Dagny explained, trying her best to remain calm and opening the buttons of her coat.

"I see. I can carry your bag, if you like."

Dagny typically would have hated needing help performing her job but knew she really did need it, both for her own sake and that of her obstetric patient on the surface. She handed her bag over and continued slogging up the stairs. It was grueling and slow going, but she had too much pride and too much concern for her patient to quit.

Her worries about overheating quickly faded. The temperature dropped with every step they took and halfway to the top, she noted the whistling of an angry wind. They went a little further and then Dagny decided there must be a storm raging above ground. She re-buttoned her coat and pulled it tighter around her body, but she still wasn't prepared for what she found when they reached the surface.

It was snowing so hard and the wind was blowing so fast she could barely see two meters in front of her face. The cold air shocked her tired lungs, sending her into a coughing fit. Life aboard a salvage ship had never prepared her for anything like this.

"Are you going to make it?" the Andorian woman asked.

"I'm fine," Dagny choked.

"Well then—come on, pink skin," the woman laughed. "We still have a long way to go."

She was glad the shrieks of the wind drowned out her instinctive whimper. She followed the woman slowly and steadily, wondering how she knew where she was going. She thought of her conversation with Voris from a week ago, about how Andorians used their antennae for detecting magnetic poles, and supposed that probably had something to do with it.

"The storm knocked out the direct comm lines to the mines," the woman shouted over her shoulder.

"Oh," Dagny yelled back, unsure what to really say.

Within minutes, Dagny's fingers and toes were numb. The wind tore at the exposed parts of her face, sending involuntary tears streaking down her cheeks where they quickly froze. They walked for hours—or at least it felt like hours. It was probably closer to twenty minutes, but by the time they reached the dome-like house at the end of the lane, Dagny wondered how long she could survive in this weather without becoming frozen solid.

The first thing Dagny noticed when the Andorian woman cracked the door were the cries of a woman in pain, which while not unusual for a woman in the throes of childbirth, were unusually soft and garbled. The other thing was the smell.

"Leera, is that you?" panted a quiet voice from a back room in between yelps.

"I brought the doctor," the Andorian woman replied, looking nervously at Dagny as she marched forward.

"I'm not actually a doctor," she whispered through chattering teeth. "I'm just a paramedic."

"You're better than nothing," Leera answered darkly.
Dagny followed her into a pale and dimly lit bedroom where they found a woman with a bulging stomach on her knees on the floor gripping the footboard of a bed and crying bitter tears of pain. This was also not surprising. Most women had a tendency to adopt strange positions in an effort to seek pain relief, but she could tell even in the poor light that something was very wrong with Melana.

Her antennae were flat against her white hair and she was sweating—a biological process Dagny didn't even realize was possible for Andorians. The room smelled stale and slightly putrid and as she grabbed her tricorder and stepped forward, she recognized the smell was coming from her laboring patient. Her first thought was that it was some kind of Andorian biochemical process, the way certain immunological responses in humans gave off a particular vinegary odor.

"Melana, I'm Dagny," she said, shocked that she could see her breath in the freezing cold air of her patient's bedroom. "I'm a paramedic, here to help you and the baby. How long have you been in labor?"

"I don't know," the woman hissed. "I woke up feeling sick but I held myself together long enough to see Shrell off to work in the mines." Her hiss descended into a guttural wail. "It hurts."

"I know," Dagny replied, putting a hand on her shoulder and lifting the tricorder to take some readings. "I take it Shrell is your husband?"

"Yes, and he can't be here. I need to have this baby in the next four hours before he comes home."

"I can't make any promises. Babies come when they come..." Dagny's voice trailed off as the first set of readings came in on the tricorder. Melana's blood pressure was low and she had a dangerously high fever.

"What's wrong with her?" Leera asked, crossing her arms tightly and inching in Melana's direction.

Dagny held her breath. She sometimes got frustrated when Voris drilled her on possible diagnoses as they worked on patients, but she would have given anything to have him here now to offer some suggestions. She'd felt so confident earlier when she had correctly identified Sora's embolism. Now she was completely lost. How had she managed for so long on her own in the Albret's clinic? She knew very little about Andorian physiology, and though she had a database available on her handheld tricorder, Melana's symptoms were so generalized that the tricorder was suggesting everything from systemic infection to cancer.

"Have you been feeling sick recently?" Dagny asked, taking a stab in the dark. "Fever, aches, chills?"

Melana started to scream. Dagny set the tricorder down and squatted behind the kneeling woman to rub her upper back through the contraction. "Deep breaths, deep breaths," she urged.

Delivering babies had always been exciting and rewarding, but now that she was expecting one of her own, she often felt like she was in a constant struggle to keep terror at bay whenever she attended a birth. Was it really that painful? In five months, would she be kneeling on her bedroom floor, begging Voris or Aisla to do something?

Leera joined them on the floor and rubbed her friend's shoulders, exchanging nervous looks with Dagny as Melana continued to cry. The warmth radiating from Melana's back through her sweaty nightshirt would have been about normal body temperature for a human, but it was a dangerous clinical sign for an Andorian.

"Can't you do something?" Leera mouthed.
Dagny's thoughts were paralyzed with fear. She kept running over Melana's symptoms in her mind, the high fever, the odd smell, the low blood pressure, but she couldn't form a coherent thought in order to even guess at a diagnosis.

"I don't know," Dagny admitted. It occurred to her that Voris was almost certainly done with Sora's surgery by now and might be able to help. She turned to Leera. "Can you call-" She remembered the storm had knocked out the direct comm lines linking the surface to the underground colony, forcing Leera to go all the way to the clinic on foot. "Can you go get Dr. Voris?"

Leera frowned and opened her mouth, but instead of saying anything, narrowed her eyes, nodded, and left the room. Melana slumped against the foot of the bed, taking rapid breaths, likely as a result of her low blood pressure. Dagny needed to find a way to treat her, but she was poorly trained to cope with Andorian obstetric complications. She started flipping through the medical database on her tricorder, searching for ways to treat Melana's hypotension that weren't contraindicated for pregnancy.

"Am I dying?" she moaned, her voice barely heard over the shriek of wind outside.

"Not if I can help it," Dagny reassured her patient, wishing she could reassure herself.

"I'm so afraid," Melana mumbled, starting to cry.

Something about her raw confession made something click in Dagny. "Let's see if we can get you up in bed so I can examine you, ok? We'll get this sorted out."

Melana started to scream again as another contraction tore through her, and after allowing her breathe through it, Dagny got her up on the bed. She followed the tricorder's recommendations for treating Melana's hypotension by adding fluids with standard Andorian electrolytes, just in time for Melana to lean over the side of the bed and vomit.

She was about to perform an internal exam when Melana gasped and yelped, "I think I wet myself."

Dagny leaned back and froze. There was a strange, purplish blood beginning to stain the bottom of Melana's nightshirt. Andorians had a form of hemocyanic blue blood and though she had no explanation for the bizarre purple color, the presence of so much blood at this stage of labor indicated a placental abruption. Melana needed to give birth immediately to save the baby and needed immediate surgery to save herself.

Why hadn't she recognized earlier how severe the situation was? Why hadn't she sent Leera to find someone to help her get Melana back to the clinic rather than sending her to fetch Voris? Even with all his skills and education in interspecies medicine, there was little he could do for this woman in a frozen, primitive hut in the middle of a snowstorm. She was torn between going to get help herself or waiting for Leera to come back with Voris. How long ago had she left? Ten minutes? Twenty? She balled her hands into fists, her muscles sluggish from the frigid air.

"What's wrong with me?" Melana sobbed, choking back tears.

"Things aren't going quite as planned, but help is on the way," Dagny managed to reply. "I'm just going to do a quick internal exam, ok?"

She had just finished putting on her gloves when Melana experienced another contraction. Dagny seized on the opportunity to get another tricorder scan and saw that her vital signs were getting worse. Dagny exhaled sharply, the warm vapor in her breath visible in the freezing room.

"Do you have any family that can come be with you?" Dagny asked, gently tiptoeing around the fact
that Melana's condition was fading fast. "Your husband?"

She whimpered a reply Dagny didn't understand.

"Melana, stay with me. I need to do an internal exam and figure out how fast this baby is coming, ok? Can you-"

"He can't know… please."

Dagny heard the door open in the next room. She was both shocked and extremely relieved that Leera had made it back with Voris so quickly. It had taken her nearly twenty minutes to get here through the storm, but she had been moving at a snail's pace in her condition.

"Voris?" The sight of him breezing through the doorway was the most welcome thing she'd seen in a long time.

"What are her vitals?" he asked, stopping at the side of the bed and putting his hand to Melana's skin while examining the scene.

"Her blood pressure is still dangerously low for an Andorian," she sputtered, holding up the tricorder. "I think… It's-"

He grabbed the tricorder out of her hand, skimmed it quickly, and then glanced down at the dark purple blood staining Melana's legs. "Is the father Andorian?"

"Of course Shrell is Andorian," Leera answered from behind them. "What else would he be?"

Dagny felt her heart thump harder in her chest as the full weight of Voris' implication hit her like a train. A hybrid pregnancy explained a lot, especially if Melana was hemorrhaging hybrid placental blood.

"Can you find a way to notify the transporter operator we need to initiate an emergency medical transport to the tunnel entrance?" Voris asked Leera, without bothering to look at her. "We also need to arrange for a team to assist in carrying her from the entrance to the clinic."

"Melana, what are they talking about?"

"Please, your friend is in the midst of a medical emergency and requires immediate surgery," Voris interrupted. "We need to get her to the clinic and time is of the essence."

Once Leera left and the door shut behind her, Melana rolled her head along the pillow to look at Voris with tired eyes. "I'm so ashamed."

"I am not here to judge your shame, I am here to tend to your health and the health of your unborn child. I need to know—is this child fully Andorian?"

"I don't know."

Melana uttered a weak cry and started to scream. More blood gushed from her, prompting Voris to stand up. "I do not see that we have any choice but to assist her in delivering here."

"I'm so sorry," Dagny whispered. "I didn't realize it was so bad."

"Apologies are irrelevant at the moment," he replied. "Let us see to our patient."

The following five minutes were a gruesome and bloody nightmare. In the end, Voris had to forcibly
pull the baby from its mother while Dagny held her hand and begged her to hold in there and keep trying her best. Dagny's emotions were running high but for a brief moment, she detected abject shock and disbelief and realized it was coming from Voris. Several seconds later, he shook his head and said, "Will you tend to the neonate while I continue treating the mother?"

Dagny leapt to grab a tricorder and a blanket and when she reached over Voris' shoulder to take the baby, she understood. Her heart broke the moment she caught sight of the tiny form lying on the bed between its mother and the doctor who had delivered him.

All four limbs were severely deformed and his skin was an unusual pattern of mottled blue, gray, and white. His head seemed too large for his body and there was an odd, bulging sac protruding from his chest. She had never seen a dead baby before and her instincts told her to cover her face, cuddle the baby, run away, and comfort Melana all at the same time.

"She has lost consciousness," Voris announced, jumping from the bed to grab equipment from his medical kit.

The blood pulsed through Dagny's ears and time seemed to slow. She felt so bitterly responsible. Why hadn't she called for Voris earlier? Why hadn't she known what to do? How could she have let this happen?

If the baby was dead and Melana was dying, she knew she needed to assist Voris, and yet she couldn't bring herself to let the baby lie open and exposed to the cold like a piece of medical waste. The moment her fingertips made contact with his chest, his mouth snapped open and he gasped.

"He's alive!"

"Tend to him," Voris barked. "I do not believe his mother will be so fortunate."

Dagny had just scooped him up and started to run a quick scan for his vitals when the door flew open again. She instinctively knew it wasn't Leera coming back with help.

"Is it here yet? Is it a boy?" called a strange, masculine voice brimming with excitement.

"Sir, if you could wait outside-" Dagny began, but the tall Andorian man she assumed was Melana's husband strolled in with excitement, that was, until he saw the state of his wife.

"Melana? What are you doing to her? What happened?" he shouted at Voris.

"Please, please go outside," Dagny urged, annoyed that she couldn't get accurate vital signs on the tricorder.

He took a few steps forward and recoiled. "What is that thing? Is that- that's…"

"He's very sick," Dagny explained, resisting the urge to tell him to shut up with every permutation of swear word she knew. "So is your wife. Please give us some space and let us work."

"That monster can't be my son. It can't."

"Get out!" she yelled.
"No!" he yelled, lunging at her.

Dagny wasn't exactly sure what happened next, because she flipped around and pulled the baby tight to her chest just as the Andorian man lunged at her. She stumbled forward, trying to get away and protect her tiny patient, but glanced under her armpit to see Voris grabbing the man by the neck just before he slumped to the floor. The moment after that, they all disappeared into a matter stream.

Voris glanced at the time and then back at the neonate in the biobed. He didn't have a pediatric unit, but the standard one was functioning well enough, even if it was grossly oversized for his little patient. The temperature monitor continued to swing between 27 and 37°C. The biobed was programmed to automatically detect a patient's species and adjust its settings to accommodate for standard resting body temperature, but the biobed couldn't determine if the child was human or Andorian.

Moments later, the machine dinged, alerting him that the scan was complete and the biobed was compiling its comprehensive report on the child's anatomy. He initiated a secondary neural scan and turned to collect his PADD from the computer desk and check on the status of the DNA and biochemical analyses.

The infant was a male Andorian/human hybrid. According to the medical literature, no such naturally conceived hybrid had ever survived and the success rates of genetically engineering healthy offspring between the two species was extremely low. Few reproductive specialists would even attempt to create such a hybrid because it posed great risks to the mother for such a small chance of a viable child.

He gazed at the cot in the corner where the child's mother lay. Despite being covered with a sheet, it was evident the early stages of rigor mortis were setting in. In a modern hospital setting, corpses were kept in stasis units to preserve the bodies for autopsies and funeral rites, but he did not have such luxuries at Bergeron colony. On Cestus III, he did not even have the luxury of preventing maternal mortality, something the modern world had all but eliminated centuries ago.

Had Melana come to the clinic for care prior to the birth, he could have informed her that the child she carried was a hybrid and that the placenta was not only malformed, but also dangerously positioned above her cervix, which was certain to result in hemorrhage during a vaginal delivery. He could have informed her that without preventive intervention, she was almost certain to die giving birth to a child that also had no hope of survival.

Yet neither he nor Dagny had ever seen her prior to that evening. The Andorian community on the surface tended to eschew the company of the rest of the colony, but he still could not understand why she would have refused all medical care for her pregnancy. He thought of Adelaide Proctor and her aversion to doctors and wondered whether Melana suffered from a similar phobia or if she had preferred to ignore the possibility that her pregnancy might have been the result of her infidelity. Denial was such an illogical phenomenon. Humans seemed to adore it; perhaps Andorians did also.

He transferred the anatomical scan data from the biobed to his PADD and began reading the infant's grim prognosis. His cardiopulmonary system was an inverted maze, neither exclusively human nor Andorian. His heart was behind his lungs, which was typical of Andorian anatomy, but the organs more closely resembled human ones, except that his lungs were undersized, his great arteries were duplicated, and his heart appeared to only have a single atrium. Rather than focus on the task of devising a plan to surgically repair the extensive congenital defects to his heart and lungs, Voris decided to read on. The more he read, the more astonished he grew that the child even made it to full gestation and birth.
His digestive and renal systems were likely beyond treatment, even for the best Federation medical specialists. He had a single enlarged kidney where a human liver should be that did not appear to be functioning, a vestigial tubule where an Andorian bladder should be, and no obvious stomach or small intestine. He was just beginning to analyze the child's enlarged liver when he heard a soft chime, indicating the biochemical analysis was complete.

His biochemistry was a tangle of competing human and Andorian proteins and hormones. It was as unsurprising as it was serious. Many Andorian metabolic proteins denatured or failed to function at human physiological temperature and pH. Were it just a matter of correcting for a single deficiency, his condition might be treatable, but the list of absent and malformed enzymes was extensive. Even a cursory reading of the report made it obvious that treating one problem would exacerbate others.

If he found a way to repair the genes that generated fumarase and aconitase, enzymes necessary to a key metabolic human pathway, they would have an improper conformation at Andorian physiological pH. If he found a way to compensate for that, other critical Andorian enzymes would denature. He read on, growing more convinced there was nothing he could do to keep the infant alive.

"How bad is it?"

Voris looked up from his PADD to find Dagny standing on the last stair leading up to their quarters, clutching a blanket. He had sent her up to rest a short time after the constable had taken Shrell, Melana's husband, back to his home on the surface to help him "clear his head." The memory of Shrell attempting to assault Dagny flashed through Voris' mind. It was regrettable that he had been forced to subdue the man with a nerve pinch, but his initial, primal instinct had been to do much worse.

"How bad is it?" Dagny repeated.

"He has extensive systemic defects."

"I understand: it's bad. But can you help him?"

"Based solely on his anatomical issues, it is unlikely he would survive multiple, extensive surgeries."

"But we should try, at least," Dagny whimpered, pulling the blanket tighter to her chest and wiping away a tear. "Please tell me you'll try."

"Were it only a matter of correcting his anatomy, I would believe it my duty as a physician to make an attempt, yet his problems extend beyond that. His body is at odds with itself even on a molecular level."

"There has to be something you can do."

"Sustaining his life in the long term would require medical interventions than science has not yet devised. I believe attempting to treat him would only prolong his suffering."

She sighed heavily and shook her head. "Then how long does he have?"

Voris cast his eyes downward. "It is remarkable he is alive at all."

"How long?"

Voris' eyes fell on the biobed. "Minutes? Hours? It is impossible to estimate. If you would like to examine the scans, I believe it would make an excellent case study in-"
She cut him off. "No. He isn't a medical specimen, he's a baby. He's a baby who just lost his mom and apparently isn't long for this life himself. Not everything has to be about learning, Voris. Can't we just let him be a baby in the time he has left?"

"What do you propose?"

"I want to take him home. He deserves to live in a home, even if just for a little while. He deserves to be held and loved."

Voris searched his logic and ethics for an answer. The biobed was trying to maintain homeostasis of the infant's biological processes, but it was failing because there was no possible set of conditions that were ideal for his physiology. Removing him from the biobed would likely hasten his death, but by how much, he could not say. Regardless, he would die soon no matter what they did. More tears fell down Dagny's cheeks. He nodded.

He slid back the hood of the biobed as Dagny walked around the backside. She flipped open the blanket to reveal a diaper and a set of baby clothes tucked inside. She took great care in dressing him, gently pulling his gnarled limbs through the arm and leg holes and talking to him in a loud whisper as she worked. When she began swaddling him in the blanket, the baby emitted a series of squeaks suggestive of discomfort.

"I'm not trying to hurt you, little one," she cooed. "I just want you to be warm."

"That is part of the problem," Voris tried to explain, moving alongside her to examine the child in her arms. "It would be necessary to keep a human infant warm, but an Andorian infant would be overheating under the same conditions. Neonates are not as adept at regulating their body temperature and unfortunately, he is both hot and cold at the same time."

Dagny bit her lip. "Then what should I do?"

Voris hesitated before answering, "The best you can."

He followed her upstairs and helped her get into bed. She cradled the baby in her arms, resting him on her growing belly. He wasn't sure if her pregnancy was driving her toward this instinctive maternal behavior or if she was acting on innate compassion, but she seemed both so at ease and so upset at the same time.

"That's it," she whispered to the baby. "It's going to be ok. We're going to be ok."

Voris wasn't so sure. She had been through quite a lot that evening, emotionally and physically. He did not known how best to manage her emotions, but he could manage her health. He had not had the chance to assess her physical state or that of the fetus. "Will you allow me to examine you?"

"I already checked our baby's heartbeat," she replied, not taking her eyes off the baby. "It doesn't seem to be any worse for wear. I'm not on the strong immunosuppressants yet and there wasn't exactly a huge chance of me overheating in a snowstorm, was there?"

"No, but I would still encourage you to wear the temperature monitor, per Dr. Govorski's recommendation."

He braced himself for her curt rebuttal—she had been so irritable lately, whenever he'd attempted to remind her to look after her health—but she said nothing. She canted her head to look at the baby in her arms and her chin started to quiver.

"He called him a monster."
Voris said nothing. There was nothing that could be said.

She started to cry. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Why do you apologize?"

"His mother is dead because of me. I didn't know what to do."

"There was little you could have done. Melana is dead because she did not seek medical care for her pregnancy until she was in labor."

"But she was dying and needed help and I completely choked. I made all the wrong decisions. I don't think I'm cut out to be a doctor."

"Hindsight often has as many lessons to offer as experience."

"But she died... having a baby. A hybrid baby."

"You are sad, but you are also worried."

"How could I not be? Am I really that different from her? What if our baby-" The words caught in her throat as she looked down at the child in her arms and cried harder.

"The child you carry appears to be healthy and your pregnancy is progressing normally, given the circumstances."

"But you said the scan only showed the likelihood of survival as being ninety-four percent. That means our baby has a six percent chance of dying. What if I die like Melana did?"

"All of life is a gamble," Voris replied. "Even if the child inside you were fully human, nature provides no guarantees."

"It just doesn't seem fair," Dagny sobbed. "Why should I get to have a healthy baby while this one is dying? I want to help him but I can't."

"I was once given a sage piece of advice by a respected colleague."

"Are you going to tell me I'm taking my anger out on you again?" she wailed.

"No. I was going to say that someone once told me there is only so much you can do. You do the best you can with what you have."

"I don't see how that's relevant right now."

Voris approached her bedside and sat down at her feet. "It is more relevant now than it was when you said it to me two months ago."

Her face softened as she ran her forefinger over the stubby bridge of the baby's nose. Silent tears continued to rain from her eyes. He watched her for a time, but soon her eyelids began to drift shut. When he was satisfied she was fully asleep, he rose to his feet, wondering what to do about the infant.

He fetched a tricorder from the clinic, silenced it, and ran a quick scan of the child's vitals. He was still alive, but barely. He thought of Dagny's insistence that he should be held and loved rather than tucked away in a biobed to die. He did not wish to violate her wishes, but neither did he relish the prospect of her waking the next morning to find a dead baby in her arms.
Voris very carefully extracted the swaddled infant from her grip. As he gazed down at him, he was struck by a strange emotion. Pity, perhaps? Sorrow? Anguish? He did not know. He did his best to repress the sentiment, but he could not resist the urge to lightly stroke the baby's forehead with the back of his knuckles. He had held babies before, but this experience was novel somehow.

The child licked his lips and tried to bite Voris' finger. He clearly retained the instinct to feed, but he could not digest food without a stomach or small intestine. Voris could attempt to deliver nutrients intravenously, but he lacked the necessary enzymes to metabolize them into biologically useful molecules.

Voris loosened the blanket and began to pace back and forth across his quarters. The child looked up at him with milky, unfocused eyes. Voris started to lose the battle over his emotions. He had lost patients before, but never one so young as this. It was remarkable that he had been born alive, but now that he was alive, it seemed so regrettable that he should soon die. There was nothing more he could do for the infant, and the feeling of helplessness that the situation created only added to his growing tide of emotions. He did his best to push them aside and focus his thoughts. He would need to meditate on the night's events, but not now.

Less than fifteen minutes later, the child slipped away in Voris' arms. He looked at Dagny, thinking he would greatly dislike breaking the news to her when she woke. It was easier to think of managing Dagny's emotions than his own.

He quietly walked downstairs to lay the child next to his mother. Tomorrow he would have to figure out what to do with their bodies. Perhaps Melana's husband would want to claim them and hold a funeral, or perhaps Melana had other friends who would tend to it. Regardless of how their remains were handled, he had two death certificates to process, and he did not look forward to that unpleasant task.

He sat down at the desk by the door, turned to the clinic's computer, and said, "Computer, begin processing a death certificate."

The screen illuminated, showing the computer had finished compiling the data from the infant's neural and DNA scans while he and Dagny had been upstairs. The header of the DNA scan caught his eye. He had been curious about the child's genetics from a medical perspective, but had not intended for the system to search the medical records of the colonists to establish paternity. The child did indeed have a human father. The name at the top of the file read, Schoenbein, Pearson J.
Voris' eyes drifted open. He sniffed the air, finding it cold and full of a pleasing, savory smell. For the briefest of moments, he was transported back to his home with T'Sala, shortly after their wedding when they'd had in a single room apartment above a library in Gol, right before he had begun medical training at the Vulcan Science Academy. His former mate had often insisted on rising early to make plomeek soup, which they would eat together while watching the traffic on the busy streets below through the tall windows of their tiny home. They would often mate afterwards. They had both been eager to begin a family, but that had been before they had learned T'Sala would never be able to carry a child of her own.

A clang followed by a loud splash interrupted his reverie. "Dammit!"

The piercing sound of Dagny's curse caused any last memory of T'Sala to fade from the forefront of his consciousness. He was no longer curled up in bed next to the naked body of the love of his life on a warm spring day in Gol, he was huddled under a pile of quilts on a remote colony world listening to the moody grumblings of a human woman, pregnant with a child neither of them had intended to have.

He saw her shadow moving through the blanket they had hung as a privacy curtain. "Dagny?"

"Sorry to wake you up," she called.

He blinked several times. Reminiscing was illogical; T'Sala was dead and Vulcan was gone. He had experienced more lapses in his logical judgment in recent weeks. He had been unable to find a private moment to meditate and an influx of new colonists earlier in the week had left him quite busy. He was exhausted, mentally and physically, but he could see no opportunity for respite in the near future.

He threw his legs over the side of the bed and stroked his chin. Deciding he did not need to shave, he quickly dressed and pulled back the privacy curtain to see Dagny on her hands and knees sopping up what appeared to be plomeek soup into a large pot with a sponge.

Voris silently grabbed a second sponge and got down on his knees to assist her, but she quickly muttered, "Don't bother, I'm almost done."

"Then I will mop."

"I've got it, Voris." Rather than argue with her, he stood and made his way to the food preservation unit to find an alternative to breakfast.

"So, you're just going to eat without me, then?" She twisted around to stare at him.

"I intended to prepare food for you as well as well," he replied, unsure why she would insist on cleaning up the mess herself but be angry that he would continue to assemble their first meal while she cleaned. "Furthermore, you led me to believe you would tend to the spill on the floor."

She grunted, turned back to the spilled soup, and scrubbed so vigorously that pieces of the sponge started to catch on the uneven stone. He could feel intense irritation flowing from her, but that wasn't unusual. Ever since she had started wearing the temperature monitor and taking the immune suppressants, she had been perpetually annoyed, unhappy, and withdrawn. He sensed it was largely
due to the emotional disturbances associated with human pregnancy, but he was reluctant to attribute
the whole of her wrath to her condition.

Something was bothering her. They shared a weak bond and he could easily detect powerful
emotions and sometimes even fleeting thoughts, but she kept whatever was upsetting her tucked
away so far into the recesses of his mind that he couldn't venture a guess. Any time he tried to speak
to her about it she would grow defensive and angry.

He grabbed two bowls and portioned out two helpings of the thick stew she had made the night
before and set them on the table. She wrung out the sponge into the pot and stumbled to her feet,
wiping her hands on her thick sweater. The outline of her figure startled him. For weeks, her belly
had slowly filled out, giving her a plump, slightly overweight appearance, but the woman standing
before him now was obviously pregnant. Had she looked that way the night before?

"Why are you staring at me?"

Voris looked away, conscious her growing anxiety and insecurity. "You look well."

"I feel fat."

"You are pregnant."

"You thought I didn't know?"

He blinked and sat down at his usual place at the table without further comment. Dagny sat across
from him and began shoveling the root vegetable stew into her mouth with ravenous speed. She had
only taken two bites before she set her spoon down and asked, "Do you have to breathe so loud?"

Voris cleared his throat. "I require oxygen to live."

"But do you have to suck in air through your nostrils like that?"

"I am not breathing any differently than I normally do."

She huffed and resumed eating. She ate at a frenzied pace, driven by an appetite that seemed to grow
every day. Voris was curious how much weight she had gained—a month ago, she had weighed
fifty-three kilograms, which was much healthier than her pre-pregnancy weight of forty-six
kilograms, but she was retaining a considerable amount of water, giving her hands and face a
somewhat bloated appearance. To accurately gauge her true weight, he would need to perform a
body mass assessment, but he decided he would avoid mentioning it for several days.

She was so often irritated when he mentioned anything relating to her pregnancy and since he lacked
the free time to perform a detailed scan until the day after tomorrow, there was no logic in upsetting
her until he needed to.

"You can talk, you know," Dagny mused. "You don't have to walk on eggshells around me."

"I presume the concept of walking on eggshells is euphemistic and not literal?"

Dagny rolled her eyes and swallowed hard. "I'm sorry if I snapped at you earlier."

Voris' eyes made contact with hers. They were sad and sullen, but he got the distinct impression
Dagny was aware of how unpleasant she'd been in recent weeks and was angry with herself for
being unable to control it. The problem Voris now faced was how to respond to her confession.
His experience in the past few weeks had demonstrated that agreeing with her might make her angry, or it might make her cry. Lying and trying to persuade her that she hadn't been as disagreeable as she believed could also make her cry, or it might make her angry. Dismissing it as a consequence of her hormones would also probably make her angry, but probably not as angry as ignoring her confession altogether. There was no possible way for him to respond that would not invoke another series of unfortunate reactions. Then again, there was no possible way to accurately predict how she would react at all, which she proved moments later when she asked, "Did you eat the last apple in the preserver?"

He furrowed his brow and stared at her. "How is an apple relevant to our conversation?"

"I thought we had an apple in the preserver."

"I have not consumed an apple in quite some time. If there was one in the preserver that is now missing, I did not eat it."

"All I really wanted was an apple for breakfast." She sighed loudly and turned her focus to scraping the last of the stew from the bottom of her bowl.

He blinked several times, struggling to understand how her desire to eat apples related to her moody behavior and subsequent apology.

"Anyway, aren't you supposed to be down in the mines in thirty minutes?" she asked, rising to her feet and collecting their bowls.

"Yes," he admitted, retreating to the lavatory to perform his customary morning hygiene rituals of cleaning his teeth and oiling his hair.

He had a very busy day scheduled. Samantha Bergeron and the shift supervisors had recently approved his request to visit the mines to perform wellness exams for workers on each of the three shifts. That morning, he was scheduled to spend eight hours in the secondary mines meeting with the workers of Alpha shift to update their medical records, perform annual wellness exams, offer routine vaccinations, and write and refill prescriptions.

Most colonists only visited the clinic when they had an immediate need and due to the demands of the mining schedules, most of the miners never came to the clinic until a minor problem had expanded into a more serious one. His goal was to improve the overall wellness of the colony through education and prevention, which would improve the efficiency of his medical practice.

He left Dagny to tend to the dishes and descended the stairs to the clinic to perform a last inventory of the equipment Dagny had packed the day before. The clinic was in a state of disarray with cabinets and tables from the left wall now positioned along the wall by the surgical suite. An engineering team had come the day before yesterday to begin work on the convalescent annex, and they would begin drilling early next week.

Dagny would have to be sequestered to their quarters while they worked due to the large amount of dust they would generate. He had installed biofilters on the entrance to the clinic to remove most pathogens from anyone entering or exiting, and she wore a face mask and took level 2 precautions when treating patients to protect herself from any pathogens that might slip through in patients who were sick with an active infection.

There was another set of biofilters on both ends of the stairwell leading to their quarters to make their home a sterile environment where she could remove the face mask and gloves. All food and outside items had to go through a decontamination process before going upstairs and the tedium of
maintaining such rigorous sanitary protocols was wearing on Dagny.

She often complained of the discomfort of the mask, the indignity of having to wear gloves when handling patients, and the frustration of being confined to such a small space for the next three months while she was on immunosuppressants. She didn't complain about loneliness, but he suspected the social isolation was wearing on her most of all.

Aisla had come by a few times since Dagny’s confinement had begun, but several of her Orion relatives had arrived on the *Oglethorpe* several days earlier and she had been too busy to work in the clinic since then. The Ann and Nicolas Svendsen had also returned on the *Oglethorpe*, which had been on a routine mission to the Aldebaran sector to pick up and drop off ore, and though Ann Svendsen had come and spent most of the afternoon with Dagny the day before, Ann had her own duties and family to tend to.

"Aren't you going to be late?"

He turned to see Dagny at the base of the stairs, arms crossed over her swollen stomach and eyes squinting over the top of her white face mask.

"It takes 9.5 minutes to reach the secondary tunnels from here at my usual pace," he explained, closing his bag of supplies and hoisting it onto his shoulder. "I simply wished to ensure I had the necessary equipment."

"I packed that bag."

"I am aware."

"Are you saying I'm too incompetent to pack a bag now?"

"I do not recall ever having referred to you as being incompetent."

She rolled her eyes, an action which was all the more noticeable because the bottom half of her face was shielded from view. "What all do you need me to do today? I mean, I know you'll just go back behind me tomorrow and fix it, but…" Her words trailed off and hung in the air. It eventually became apparent she had no intention of finishing her thought.

"The *Oglethorpe* delivered a drive with software updates for the tricorders. It would be helpful if you could install them on the secondary tricorders to ensure the new software is functional."

"Wow, it's like we're living in the year 2000," Dagny smirked.

"It is an antiquated means of enhancing technology, but given the colony is isolated from all Federation servers, it is the only conceivable way."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing, other than tend to patients. I will take a communicator, should you require assistance."

"You're sure the communicators work down there?"

"The communicators are functional in the vast majority of the underground complexes and tunnels. The bulk of the gallicite that prevents us from using communicators to contact the surface is in the tertiary tunnels near the main entrance."

Dagny didn't acknowledge his response. She simply hoisted herself onto the stool by the computer
and began flipping through the medical databases. Voris readjusted the position of his bag's strap and headed for the door. "Goodbye."

"Bye," Dagny murmured, shifting herself on the stool to face away from him.

Voris moved at a brisk pace through the main tunnel system. Rather than reflect on his duties for the day, he thought of Dagny's recent erratic and unkind behavior. It was so unlike the woman he knew but truthfully, he didn't really know her. They had only met five months ago. Perhaps his initial impression that she was a calm, gentle, and resilient individual had been incorrect. Or perhaps she really had just become a slave to the Vulcan pregnancy hormones that were currently sustaining their child.

He had the sense he was being unfair. Vulcan females had a lifetime of experience with controlling emotions to assist them during the tumultuous period of pregnancy and childbirth, and even most Vulcan mothers eventually spent more and more time in intensive meditation as their pregnancies progressed. Dagny didn't even know how to meditate. He wanted to help her any way he could, but given her recent meanness, it was logical to conclude that offering to teach her how to meditate would be met by a vicious verbal assault.

But he also knew he would need to do something. In another month, the fetus' midbrain would be developed enough that Dagny would begin feeling what the child felt in addition to the chaotic and unpredictable emotions caused by the hormones. If her mood was difficult to tolerate now, it would be much harder to endure when that started happening.

Were they on Earth, he would have recommended she meet with a psychiatrist. Though he had a broad set of skills, he had little training or experience in assisting human patients with mental and emotional health. He was ill-equipped to handle mental health patients of any species, really. There were Vulcan psychiatrists and psychologists, but they specialized in treating Vulcan patients who lacked the ability to control their minds through logic and meditation, usually as a result of a degenerative neurological disease.

He considered himself. It had taken months in the wake of Vulcan's loss to come to terms with his grief and in that time, he'd lost weight and slept poorly. He might have considered meeting with a Vulcan mental health professional, but there were none who had survived Vulcan's destruction and he had believed alien specialists not suited to the task of caring for Vulcan patients. So, he had continued meditating and eventually restored his emotional balance, but it had taken nearly a year to adequately heal himself.

But was he fully recovered? He recalled enduring pon farr in the hotel room on Aldebaran. He vaguely remembered destroying furniture and feeling angry that T'Sala had died. No matter how much he meditated or ignored it, that pain was still buried deep within him and had reemerged when he'd been vulnerable because of pon farr. It seemed probable, likely even, that a similar phenomenon was occurring with Dagny because of the side effects of pregnancy. She had lost her family, friends, and home only five months ago and was also coping with an unintended, high-risk hybrid pregnancy.

It was a logical explanation, but it offered little in the way of a solution. He was considering seeking Dr. Govorski's opinion when he noticed a figure waving at him. "Good morning, doctor!"

"Good morning, Mr. Zernon."

"Just finished dropping off a box of apples to the Conroe family," the Tellarite huffed, pausing as he reached Voris.
While he wasn't sure why the grocer would feel compelled to offer Voris an explanation of his whereabouts, his confession still gave Voris pause. "Do you have more apples?"

"The greenhouses gave me the last of their harvest this week. I don't have much left, but I have a few boxes."

Dagny had developed an unusual fondness for apples in recent weeks, eating four or five a day. He thought of her frustrations earlier that morning that their preserver no longer contained any apples and asked, "What would you trade for one of your boxes?"

"For you? Nothing. Can you come pick them up now?"

"I have other obligations to attend to at present."

"As is always the case for me too," Zernon replied, a small squeal escaping as he sighed. "But I can reserve a box for you, if you'd like to pick them up on your way back to the clinic."

"Yes, thank you."

Just as he and Zernon parted ways, he was immediately confronted by Aisla and two other Orion women, one of them was holding a baby on her hip and had clearly been crying.

"We were just coming to see you!" Aisla said, stroking the infant's head.

"Is something the matter?"

"Lula has a small cough and runny nose. I keep telling her they all go through this, but she wanted to come see a doctor, just to be sure."

Voris turned to the group of Orion women, unsure which one Lula was. Aisla, sensing his confusion, laughed. "I guess I should start at the beginning. My aunt, sister, and niece arrived on the Oglethorpe two days ago. Dr. Voris, this is my aunt, Anja, my sister, Morna, and her daughter, Lula."

"I see," he replied, turning from Aisla to the women. "It is an honor to make your acquaintance."

The younger woman, whom Voris assumed was Morna, shot a sideways glance at Aisla and mouthed something. Aisla rolled her eyes and said, "You're not in the commune anymore. Male doctors are quite common."

Morna looked unconvinced but turned so that Voris could see her daughter. The girl had two rivers of mucus streaming down her nose and puffy eyes. Voris leaned forward to get a closer look, but the little girl sneezed, sending moisture into Voris' face. He winced and wiped his face, the pulled his tricorder out of the side pocket of his bag to check the child's vitals. "How old is she?"

"Seven months, measured in Standard time," Morna replied.

"And how long has she been showing symptoms?"

"This started about three days ago."

"Is she eating normally?"

"Yes, but she hasn't been sleeping as much and I'm worried she's going to stop breathing in her crib."

Anja scoffed. "All babies get the snuffles. I never heard of it killing anyone."
"I would think you would be more worried about your own granddaughter," Mora snapped, bouncing Lula on her hip to try and keep her from fussing.

"She is your first child," Anja sighed. "When you have five children like I did, you'll stop worrying about these little things."

"But you're not a doctor," Morna retorted, looking from her mother to Voris.

"Her temperature is slightly elevated, but I am in agreement with your mother," he replied, powering down the tricorder. "I regret I do not have the time to perform a more comprehensive exam, but Dagny is in the clinic and can assist you."

"You're sure she's ok?"

He knew she was referring to Lula, but he thought of Dagny. The child appeared to have a mild respiratory infection, but if it were a pathogen that could also infect humans, Dagny would need to exercise care. The clinic's biofilters could only offer so much protection, which was why Dagny also taking level 2 precautions to prevent contracting disease from patients. She often complained about the mask in particular. What if she took it off while she was alone in the clinic?

"I cannot say for certain without a more detailed examination, but I see little cause for concern. I would recommend a decongestant to alleviate her symptoms and if they get worse and do not improve within three days, I urge you to return to the clinic."

"But what if-"

"Thank you, Dr. Voris," Aisla replied, cutting her sister off. "I know you're very busy and have places to be. We won't keep you."

The women started off in the direction of the clinic and Voris continued on to the secondary tunnels, listening to the sound of Orion bickering echoing off the stone walls of the main tunnel. Traffic was light but he was still forced to lengthen his stride. His delay in talking to Zernon and Aisla's family was threatening to make him late.

As he walked, he extracted the communicator from his bag to warn Dagny that she was about to receive a patient with symptoms of an upper respiratory infection. It took three attempts to reach her and when she finally replied, the sound of her voice was tinny through the upper speaker. The gallicite didn't prohibit the use of communicators below ground, but it still had an impact on clear communications. "What?"

"Dagny, did you receive my last transmission?"

"Yeah, Aisla's niece is coming by the clinic with a cold. So what?"

"I was checking to ensure you were wearing the proper protective equipment," he explained, swerving as he rounded the corner to avoid hitting two men leaving the secondary mining tunnels.

"Yes, Voris. Ugh, why do you always have to check up on me like I'm a little kid?"

"I was simply giving you the courtesy of informing you." Rather than wait for her reply, which was almost certain to be hostile, he snapped the communicator shut and made his way to the shift foreman's office. He passed a number of people who were leaving and filed in with a group of workers waiting to begin their shift.

In an effort to circumvent the crowd and avoid being late for his initial meeting with the foreman, a
Klingon woman named Kor'la, he excused himself to a narrow tunnel that lead to a side entrance of the main control room of the secondary tunnels. He walked quickly but paused when he heard a pair of whispering voices.

"I'm not so hard up that I'd lay down in a tunnel with you," a woman giggled.

"This isn't about being hard up. I like you, you like me. So, let's have some fun." Despite the hushed quality of the voice, he had good ears. It was Pearson Schoenbein.

His identification was confirmed seconds later when the woman sighed and replied loudly, "Bye, Pearson. Come by my quarters this afternoon after your shift. If I'm still in a good mood, maybe I'll let you in."

"Well then, I look forward to it."

A woman with green and copper mottled skin emerged from behind a large rock on the left and startled when she saw him. She was Suliban, tall and elegant. She stepped out of the intermittent shadows created by the sparse overhead lighting and gave him a polite nod just as Pearson appeared behind her.

"Oh, uh, good morning, doctor," Pearson said.

"Yes."

Voris hadn't seen Pearson since the day he'd found him in their quarters, talking to Dagny. He hadn't spoken to anyone about the paternity of Melana's child, not only because he was obligated to maintain his patients' privacy but also because he could find no logic in revealing such information. Melana and the child were dead and revealing the truth would not alter that fact. Also, the only living people who might be entitled to the truth—were he not bound by ethics to conceal it—were Shrell and Mr. Schoenbein, and he failed to see how revealing it would benefit either of them. Given Shrell's temper, it could possibly even lead to violence.

"Do you... need something?" Pearson asked.

"No."

"Well, uh, I should get to work," Pearson, said, rubbing the back of his head and shrugging. "See you around, Lejiin."

He exchanged nervous looks with the Suliban woman and started shuffling toward the control room. Voris followed behind.

"So, how've you been, doctor?"

"Well."

"How is Dagny?"

"She is well also."

"I heard she's sick, like she has to wear a mask and stuff in the clinic."

"I am obliged to protect the privacy of my patients and thus, I cannot discuss her condition with you."

"Good to know you're a man who can keep a secret."
"It isn't about keeping secrets, Mr. Schoenbein, it's about professional integrity. I take the confidentiality of my patients seriously."

"Right, anyway, I'd really appreciate it if you didn't mention seeing me with Lejiin to anyone."

He nearly replied that Pearson's dalliances were none of his business, but that wasn't literally true: the deaths of Melana and her child were a direct result of his indiscretions. He was still considering his response when Pearson shrugged and added, "It's not that I'm ashamed or anything, it's just that I don't like getting involved in colony gossip and drama."

"Nor do I."

They reached the door of the control room and strode through it without another word.

"You are late," barked a tall Klingon woman standing over a bank of monitors.

"Sorry, Kor'la," Pearson said. "I was triple checking those scans from yesterday. Just wanted to make sure everything was in order."

Voris slowly craned his neck to observe Pearson. He'd just told a lie and appeared genuinely untroubled. And he knew that Voris knew it was a lie, and yet, the falsehood seemed to come so easily to him.

"Do not be late again," Kor'la barked, crossing her arms and glancing at Voris. "You are the doctor?"

"Yes."

"You are late too."

"I apologize."

"You do not work for me; it is not my duty to account for you. You will avoid interfering with operations, but you are free to move around the upper levels."

"I understand, thank you."

"You will also be with a technician at all times. I have assigned someone to escort you." She tilted her head in the direction of a pair of people sitting at a monitoring station along the back wall.

Voris was paired up with Gaz, the fiancé of the Tellarite woman he'd treated for a pulmonary embolism two weeks earlier. It turned out that when Gaz wasn't fretting over his fiancé's health, he was excessively chatty and familiar. Voris followed him down to a break room on the level below where a handful of people were already queued to receive vaccinations.

His first patient was a middle-aged human man who, in addition to needing a full battery of vaccines, was deeply concerned about a growth on his posterior and willingly pulled down his trousers in front of everyone so that Voris could get a better look. Gaz roared with laughter and all Voris could think was it was going to be a very long day.

Dagny turned away from the computer screen. She wanted to scream, but managed to hold it in. She didn't relish the idea of feeling her hot breath lingering in the itchy surgical mask covering the lower half of her face. She wanted to take the ridiculous thing off but every time she felt tempted, she would snap back to reality in a flood of guilt and panic. The mask wasn't just protecting her, it was
protecting the baby. It was the last line of defense against dangerous pathogens and based on the results of the blood test Voris had taken the day before, she didn't have much of an immune system left.

It wasn't just the mask though. She was constantly hungry, none of her clothes fit, she was bored out of her mind, and grouchier than she'd ever been in her life. Even just taking a hot shower ran the risk of setting that stupid temperature monitor off and every time it went off, Voris would remind her to be more careful. She was chilly right now, but she knew putting on a sweater would eventually make the thin, latex beacon adhered to her abdomen start that annoying beeping sound.

In addition to the fact that her trousers were being held up by a rubber band woven between the fastener and the loop, she'd also found a couple of stretch marks on the underside of her belly that morning in the shower. She didn't tend toward vanity but the angry red marks on her stomach bothered her. When she admitted it didn't make sense that it would upset her so much because after all, she didn't have a partner to maintain a pretty figure for, she decided she was upset because she was so alone. No Erik, no family, no friends... just Voris.

Smug, know-it-all Voris who breathed loudly through his nose and never stopped staring at her. Dr. Voris, who seemed to notice every single thing she did and remind her how it was hurting the baby. He talked about the baby so much and she often felt like he only bothered to express concern for her well-being because her body was temporarily housing his child.

She slid her index finger over the bridge of her nose and scratched under the mask. She knew she was being ridiculous, and it bothered her. Did awareness of her irrational thoughts make her any less irrational? Probably not.

She glanced around the mess of the clinic, wondering what was taking the tricorder software so long to update. She'd had to rely on old-fashioned techniques of measuring pulses, blood pressures, and temperatures all morning. It had taken nearly twenty minutes just to collect the same amount of data that a tricorder could collect in about twenty seconds, but since she'd had so few patients, it hadn't really mattered.

Still, it had been inconvenient. Earlier that morning, Aisla had come by the clinic with her relatives to get her sick infant niece checked out, and she'd been unable to run a blood or sputum sample without a working tricorder. But Aisla had indicated that Voris had seemed unconcerned when he'd met them in the tunnel, so she'd sent them home with a decongestant and a suggestion that they should come back if the baby got worse.

She turned back to the computer screen to continue reading the organic chemistry text on the outdated database. She had read the same paragraph on carboxylic acids three times and still hadn't retained any of it. Her heart wasn't in this anymore. It seemed pointless, wasting her time studying for the impossible task of getting into medical school. Even if she ever moved to a place that actually had a medical school and even if she could actually get admitted, she didn't want to go anymore.

Something changed the night Melana died. She'd thought she had everything under control and it had cost Melana her life. How arrogant she had been. Holding Melana's dying son in her arms had broken something in her and now she knew just how tired she was of death and how it seemed to follow her everywhere.

She closed her eyes and tried to hold back the tears. How had she managed to care for 141 people on board the Albret for so long by herself? She realized only now just how lucky she'd been for so long. Aside from the loss of Vulcan, the worst thing she'd ever encountered was an ion storm that had overloaded several engineering plasma conduits and sent a quarter of the engineering crew to her tiny clinic. She'd kept everyone alive, but they'd also been lucky that they had been within three hours of
She used to think she was good at her job, that she was a plucky, resourceful paramedic, but when she really thought about it, she decided she wasn't a skilled medical professional—she had just been lucky. Until she wasn't. Her luck had run out that day the neutronic storm had struck and her ineptitude had killed almost everyone she'd ever known and loved. She used to beam with pride whenever Voris had praised her skills, but now it made her feel angry. She wasn't talented or capable—she was an imposter.

She finally burst into tears and descended into a vicious cycle of grief, hating herself for crying, and crying for hating herself. If she wasn't a paramedic, what was she? If she wasn't going to go to medical school, what was she supposed to do? Raise a baby with Vulcan guy she barely knew and live happily ever after? She ran her hands over her bulging tummy and really started to wail as she tried to figure out how her life had come to this junction.

"Dagny?"

The voice was a woman's but she couldn't bring herself to open her eyes and see who it was. Instinct drove her to twist around on the stool and reach out her arms to hug the person standing just behind her shoulder. It was awkward, but it felt good to just cry, even if it was soaking her face mask.

"Oh Dagny, what's wrong?"

"I- I- It's- I just-" was all she could manage to choke out. After another minute, it slowly began to dawn on her that the kind stranger wasn't a stranger at all, but Ann Svendsen.

Ann petted her head and extricated herself from the desperate embrace to find a tissue and offer it to Dagny. She wanted to blow her nose, but the mask on her face made it impossible. She nearly started to cry again, but took several deep breaths.

"Did something happen?" Ann asked, tilting her head to listen.

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't want to be a doctor anymore. I don't even want to be a paramedic. I don't want to have a baby. I didn't want any of this."

Ann's face fell and she pulled Dagny back into another tight hug. Dagny took it as a cue to burst into tears once again and thankfully, Ann just let her cry without demanding any further explanation. When she finally managed to get hold of herself a second time, Ann asked, "What makes you say you don't want to be a doctor?"

"So many people are dead because of me."

"And a lot of people are alive because of you too."

"I don't feel cut out for this. Any of this."

"I'm not even sure where to start," Ann mumbled, finally stepping out of the hug to look Dagny in the face. "Can't you take that silly mask off? I'm not sick. You won't catch anything from me."

Dagny nearly started crying again, but dabbed at her eyes with the tissue and shook her head. "It's because of the baby."
Ann bobbed her head. "I know this has to be very overwhelming. Even when you plan to have a baby, it never stops being terrifying."

"I know how to take care of babies," Dagny groaned bitterly. "My mother gave me plenty of practice."

"But I understand when you say it wasn't something you had in mind for your life. What does Voris think about this? Have you talked to him about it?"

"No, and I don't think I can. He just constantly reminds me that I'm not taking care of myself."

"That's because he cares about you."

"He cares about the baby."

"And you're that baby's mother. He cares about you too."

Aisla had said something similar once. Dagny clenched her jaw, barely managing to keep herself from saying something hateful about her baby's father.

"But I get that he's not exactly the man you thought you'd settle down with."

Dagny uttered a weak laugh and pulled out the aquamarine amulet tucked into her shirt, holding it out so Ann could see. "Did you know Erik Larsen asked me to marry him, right before the Albret was lost? He gave me this for my birthday. It was his mother's."

Ann offered a pained look. "Did you love him?"

"Not really." She hated herself for this confession, but it was the truth. "I think I was just in love with the idea of being in love. He was a nice person and I'd known him forever."

"It's not wrong to want to be in love."

"All the boys always liked Frida and Julie because they were pretty and funny and always knew what to say. It was nice to have someone notice me. But now I can't help but wonder if we would have been happy. I feel like if the storm had never happened, I'd probably be in the same situation, pregnant and resentful. The only difference is, it would be Erik's baby instead."

"There's no point in thinking about what might have been: that's done with. I think it's a bit late to change your mind about having a baby, but that doesn't mean you can't go to medical school and maybe fall in love someday."

"Who's going to want me when I already have a baby with someone else?"

"It's not the twentieth century and even back then, people fell in love with people who already had children."

"Just once, I wish something in my life could be easy," Dagny sighed, slumping back onto the stool.

Ann gave her a sad smile. "But then you wouldn't be you. You are a good person and you deserve to be happy."

"Thank you."

"It's the truth."
Dagny nodded, desperate to go upstairs and wash her face. "Did you need something? Medication? Check up?"

"Oh, no," Ann laughed. "When I saw you the other day, you said your clothes weren't fitting, so I went through my trunks and found my old maternity clothes. They're definitely worn, but I gave them a good wash and they're almost good as new." She lifted a bag from the floor and offered it to Dagny.

Dagny resisted the urge to start crying all over again and would have been successful, had she not reached into the bag and pulled out a dress printed with pineapples. She didn't even need to check the tag: this had once belonged to her mother. Clothing on the Albret tended to cycle through at least a dozen owners, getting patched and mended many times before finally being retired to the reclaimator. Even though it didn't make any sense, she held it up to her face mask and inhaled deeply, searching for any lingering scent. Even if her nose weren't stopped up from crying, it had been years since this dress belonged to her mother. She was truly gone.

Ann stayed with her for another two hours and left just after 1800. Voris should have been back and she considered reaching him via communicator but decided against it. It was technically too early to close the clinic, but aside from Ann, no one had come through her door since early afternoon so she made sure the buzzer was working and headed upstairs to get rid of her awful mask.

When they'd first arrived at Bergeron colony, she'd wondered if they would ever get clinic traffic back to a manageable level and their hard work had paid off. Mornings could still be busy sometimes, but now the clinic was also subject to lulls that could last for days. It probably wasn't in good taste to wish she could have more patients just so she could have some more company, but talking to Ann for the second half of the afternoon had kept her mind off her troubles.

Ann had made some good points about giving motherhood and medical school and Voris a chance, but now that she was gone, she felt the temptation to start feeling sorry for herself again. When she reached the top of the stairs, the first thing she saw was the little round table in the center of the room, and then she felt bad for a different reason. She ripped off the damp, itchy face mask, slinked forward, and set the bag of maternity clothes Ann had given her on the worn surface.

She thought of breakfast that morning and winced at the thought of how mean she'd been to Voris. The way he breathed through his nose was annoying, but he hadn't deserved the way she'd snapped at him. Before she could start feeling awful for being so moody, she thought of her father and his many sayings. One of his favorites had been, "You can't change the past but you can always fix the future."

She vowed to apologize but decided an apology probably wouldn't scratch the surface of how insufferable she'd been lately. None of this was his fault, really. She absentmindedly stroked the top of her bump and smirked, correcting her thought slightly. Some of this really was his fault, but he still didn't deserve to be yelled at for whistling through his nose.

She wondered how she could make it up to him. She had a feeling he would just dismiss any kind of nice gesture as illogical and unnecessary, but she still wanted to try. He'd been working so hard and getting so little sleep lately that she thought he might appreciate a nice dinner and an early bedtime.

She checked the food preserver and found some rillan, a stringy Vulcan gourd and other assorted herbs and thought he might enjoy balkra, a traditional Vulcan casserole. Dagny had no opinion on the dish either way, but he seemed to like it and she didn't have any better ideas. She set on a pot of water to boil to soften the hard, outer skins of the rillan and started chopping the herbs. When she realized she'd forgotten the k'rhth'a—a word she couldn't pronounce but described an herb that was somewhat similar to rosemary—she went hunting through the bottom drawers of the preserver. What
she found at the back of the drawer on the left made her equal parts ashamed and excited.

The *apple*. That round, shiny, red, delicious ambrosia fruit she'd accused Voris of eating that morning. It was just an apple; why had she had to snap at him over it?

She sniffed it fondly, feeling her stomach grumble. She'd never particularly liked apples… until now. Cravings were one of those silly pregnancy symptoms that she'd always laughed about. She'd teased her mother for wanting pickles or sauerkraut or vanilla ice cream, but now she understood. There were times she felt like she could kill someone just to lick apple juice from their fingers. She tore hungrily into the outer flesh, relishing in the juice that flowed over her tongue.

She dipped the rillan into the boiling water, greased a square pan, then sat down at the table to finish off her apple, gnawing it down to the core and then polishing off the core too, just for good measure. She collected the maternity clothes and started making room for them in her dresser, but soon she was faced with a pile of regular clothes that needed a new, temporary home. Unfortunately, there wasn't much storage space in their tiny quarters.

Thanks to the generosity of the Bergeron colonists, she and Voris had ended up with way more possessions than they needed. Another group of thirty or so people had arrived with the *Oglethorpe* several days ago and she thought about paying forward some of the kindness they'd been shown. Dagny sighed, frustrated that she couldn't leave the clinic to go out and meet some of these newcomers.

She pulled the storage trunks out from underneath her bed and moved things around to make space to store her old clothes when a large, cylindrical item fell out, hit the floor with a thud, and rolled under her bed. She had to get down on her hands and knees but what she uncovered was an orange and purple candle. It looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't remember where it had come from. She sniffed it, thinking it smelled musky and herbal, like Voris' home on New Vulcan.

After putting away her clothes, she carried the candle to the table and set it in the center, thinking it would make a nice centerpiece, especially if she was making a traditional Vulcan meal. She lit it and then turned her attention back to preparing dinner. The skins had finally softened on the rillan so she dumped the hot water into the sink, blanched the gourds, and started peeling off the thick outer layers.

She was so focused on her work that she didn't see Voris standing in the doorway. He was holding a box and staring at the candle, and she suddenly felt a flash of sadness and anger pulsing from him.

"Is everything ok?"

"Where did you find that candle?"

"In a trunk under my bed."

"It is not yours."

Dagny's ears started to ring. "I-I couldn't remember where it came from. It was packed away with a lot of the stuff we got when we first moved here."

"It is not yours."

"It's just a candle."

Voris turned his head to look at her and the apparent fury in his eyes made her feel nauseated. She had sensed his anger on a few rare occasions before, but had never actually seen any outward sign that he was angry. "It was given to me by my *mate*."

"I'm just curious. We had other candles, and even the one I brought from New Vulcan was a different one..."
She swallowed, suddenly aware how dry her mouth was. "I'm sorry."

Voris' brow relaxed. He blinked several times, seeming to realize just how close he'd come to losing his temper. "It is not yours."

"I said I'm sorry," Dagny repeated, her voice cracking as she started to cry tears of hurt and anxiety.

"Your apology isn't necessary. Do not touch it again."

Her hands started to shake, sending flecks of mashed rillan to the floor. "It doesn't seem very logical to get mad over a candle."

"Nor is it logical to cry."

His curt rebuttal sent Dagny over the edge. She descended into hysterical tears, wondering why he was being so mean. It was just a stupid candle.

Voris stepped forward, set the box on the table, and extinguished the flame between his thumb and forefinger.

"All I wanted to do was make a nice dinner and make you feel at home!"

"You should make a greater effort to control your emotions."

It was the worst possible thing he could have said. She wasn’t sure why she did it, but she picked up one of the gourds she’d recently skinned and hurled it at him. Voris ducked and it splattered on the wall behind him. He turned to face her, glaring at her with dangerous eyes. She bit her lip and said in a low voice, "I hate you. You ruined my life."

His expression instantly neutralized. They stared at each other for what felt like hours, but it was Voris who looked away first. Dagny took an anxious step forward, fighting both the wild urge to keep yelling and start apologizing profusely. Without saying a word, he swiped the candle from the table, glided in the direction of the stairs, and was gone.

Dagny started crying again, shocked and confused by what had just happened. She had never been so angry and she couldn't understand what could be making her feel that way. She stumbled toward the table, and seeing what was in the box Voris had brought home, started wailing uncontrollably.

*Apples.*
"Thank you so much, doctor. We all really appreciate everything you did tonight."

Ace Conroe extended his hand to Voris, a wide smile spreading over his face. He was a much more agreeable foreman than Kor'la, the Klingon who supervised the Alpha shift, but he had a disturbing fondness for physical contact. Voris had spent all night in the tunnels giving routine checkups to the miners on Gamma shift, and after Voris had refused to be instructed in the custom of "fist-bumping," Mr. Conroe had simply taken to slapping him on the shoulder to express his delight that Voris had come to take care of his crew.

He braced his mind against the mental transference and shook the foreman's hand, then turned to make his way back to the clinic before it opened. In truth, he had only spent the night in the mines giving checkups the night shift workers because he had nowhere else to go. It had been illogical to leave his quarters the night before, but he had been experiencing anger he couldn't control and it had seemed more logical to extricate himself from the situation than allow his temper to continue to escalate.

It was the deepest shame, to know that he'd allowed his anger to surface. It had been hours since he'd taken T'Sala's candle and left Dagny sobbing in their quarters, and though he'd managed to restrain his anger, it was harder to contain his embarrassment over the way he'd behaved. It was even more difficult to reign in the fresh guilt over the entire situation.

Her words still rang in his ears. "I hate you. You ruined my life." She had finally confirmed aloud what he'd suspected since their encounter on Aldebaran. It was a terrible burden, to know she believed that. He had offered to surrender himself to the authorities, which she had refused, and upon discovering she was pregnant, he had offered to support her financially, which she had also initially refused. Then he had offered to tutor her and relocate to this colony, and she had thrown a rillan fruit at him. He had nothing else to offer her but apparently, it wasn't enough.

While he appreciated her hormonal imbalance had probably been the catalyst of her outburst, her hormones were not the source of the content of her words. That was how she truly felt, and the hormones had simply allowed her to speak without the filter of rationality. What a burden humans must face, he thought.

It was 0314 hours and he was exhausted. The clinic would open in three hours and sixteen minutes, and he could not recall the last time he'd slept for any length of time. Though he was not eager to return to his quarters, he could not avoid Dagny indefinitely and he certainly could not avoid returning to the clinic.

And avoiding her would be illogical, at least from his point of view. But if he was truly the source of her misery, maybe it would be more logical to avoid her and prevent upsetting her further. He continued to mull over it, unable to clearly focus his thoughts.

He was well overdue for not only rest, but also extended meditation. Unfortunately, meditation required silence and privacy but he had little of either of those things in his quarters, especially now that Dagny was confined to them for her health. It occurred to him that he could speak with the housing council about finding alternate accommodations—he could continue to support Dagny and eventually be involved in his child's life without cohabitating with her—but that wouldn't be particularly convenient at present. Living in close proximity to the clinic was essential, particularly
for after hours emergencies.

It occurred to him Dagny was likely asleep at present, which meant he had approximately two hours of privacy prior to her waking to begin her day in the clinic. Two hours of meditation would not be nearly enough to soothe his mind and two hours of meditation meant he would receive zero hours of sleep. Meditation without sleep was not only ineffective, in many cases, it was counterproductive.

He thought of T'Sala's candle nestled at the top of his medical kit and forced himself to ignore the sadness creeping from his heart. He'd never stopped missing her and it occurred to him now that perhaps he never would. But he had allowed his grief for T'Sala to be transformed into obscenely illogical anger at Dagny. She had not understood the candle's significance. Even if she had, it was illogical to attach sentimental value to an inanimate object. Regardless, he had done to Dagny what he had warned her against—he had used her as a target for his negative emotions.

He suddenly tripped on a rut in the stone tunnel and just barely caught himself on the wall. Why was he so close to the wall? How had he not seen the crack in the stone? It dawned on him that his eyes had been closed. For how long? Had he been falling asleep as he'd been walking?

"Little tipsy, doctor?" The laughing accent was so thick Voris barely understood the words, but he recognized the odd lilt immediately.

"I tripped over the floor, yes," he admitted, turning to see Cillian Kilpatrick, the colony's chief constable, trotting up behind him.

"Ye're the most honest drunk I ever did meet then," Constable Kilpatrick grinned.

"I am not inebriated."

"Ye just said you were."

"I admitted to being tipsy."

"Tipsy, sloshed, hammered, pissed, drunk, all the same thing."

Voris raised an eyebrow. "I had presumed your slang indicated clumsiness."

"Drunken people are clumsy, aren't they?"

A slight sigh escaped his lips. "I am not drunk."

"Then why ye running into walls then?" the constable roared, slapping him so hard on the shoulder that he nearly fell over.

Constable Kilpatrick was a large man, nearly has tall as Voris and thickly built. Most of his face hid behind a thick red beard, but even in the dim light of the tunnel, the bright exuberance of his eyes was difficult to miss.

"I am quite tired," Voris finally admitted.

"Ye don't have to explain yourself to me."

"I was replying to your inquiry."

Kilpatrick grinned. "So ye were. So ye were. Bit late to be visiting patients, though, isn't it?"

"I was performing preventive examinations for the miners on Gamma shift. I am returning to the
Voris would have preferred to walk alone but he could see no reason to refuse his company. As they set off in the clinic's direction, he said, "It is quite late for you to be awake also, is it not?"

"Ah, I got called down to Jester's to break up a scuffle. Those eejits do all sorts when they've had a few. I really oughta sent that new boy yer way, noggin split to the bone from a bottle, but he wouldn't hear of it. His mates carried him off. Sure he'll feel like boiled shite in the morning."

He understood enough of the man's words to know he was speaking Standard, but his thick accent and unusual slang made him nearly impossible to understand. He was tempted to ask for clarification on words like noggin and shite, but he decided he truly did not care to know.

The tunnels were nearly deserted at this hour, and the few people they did pass looked as tired as Voris felt. The constable continued to ramble on and eventually Voris got the sense that he'd been called to put an end to some sort of public disturbance in a local tavern, but still, he could not bring himself to be concerned with the drunken inclinations of the colony's more reckless and irresponsible residents.

"Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"Ye alright? Ye look like yer zoning out."

"I am quite well."

"Oh, well, as I was saying, the man who lives across from me went back to Corvan II. I suppose I'll end up with one of these new flunkies. I had a Klingon fellow living there last year, but he's gone now too."

"There is a vacancy in the quarters adjacent to yours?" Voris interjected.

"Haven't ye been listening to a thing I've been saying?"

"And your quarters are across from the clinic?"

"Not directly across, I suppose, but I could throw a rock and hit the clinic door, sure. Why, ye looking for a new place for you and the missus? I'll warn ya, they're not big flats, not a good size for a family, anyway."

Voris didn't care to explain he was considering obtaining separate accommodations from Dagny, but before he could change the subject, he noticed an unusual brown shape in the shadow between two of the lamps on the tunnel wall leading into the main tunnel. It was large and after several steps, he easily identified it as humanoid.

"Doctor, where ye going?"

Voris was already opening his medical kit to extract a tricorder as he glided in the direction of the motionless form on the ground. It wasn't until he was a meter away that he identified it as a human woman lying face down on the ground, and it wasn't until he knelt beside her that he realized it was Adelaide Proctor. Her nose was bleeding and her skin was so cold to the touch that he would have believed she were dead, had the tricorder not detected a faint pulse. Her drab clothing and the
shadows cast by the overhead lights had camouflaged her quite well and he had no way of knowing how long she'd been lying unconscious in the side entrance to the main tunnel.

"Another pisser, is it?" the constable sighed, approaching the scene. "What is it about this time of year that makes people drink themselves half to death?"

"I do not believe she is drunk," Voris announced, replacing the tricorder in his bag. "But I do need to get her to the clinic immediately."

"My stars! Miss Proctor? What's she doing here? How long has she been like this?"

"Reasonable questions, constable, but answering them at this moment will do nothing to preserve her life. Can you assist me in carrying her to the clinic?"

He was about to recommend the constable fetch something that could be improvised into a stretcher while he braced her head and neck—she had fallen and he had no way of ascertaining the state of her central nervous system in a dark tunnel with only a standard tricorder—but Kilpatrick snapped into action, lifting her from the ground into his arms. Voris resisted the urge to cringe and analyzed the situation logically.

If she had a spinal injury, it was likely the constable had just made it worse, but now that she was in his arms, putting her back down wouldn't alter her prognosis.

"Are you sure she's not dead?" Kilpatrick asked, giving Voris a pained looked. "She don't weigh hardly nothin'."

Voris was certain she wasn't dead but he could not speak to how long she would remain alive. "Let us get her to the clinic."

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When Dagny had sat in the clinic earlier that afternoon, she had been certain life could not possibly get more wretched. She had been wrong, apparently. It *was* possible to feel worse, as she'd discovered when Voris stormed out of their quarters the night before.

Assuming he'd just come downstairs to cool down, she'd wandered down to the clinic a few minutes after he'd left to apologize for being such a mean, hateful, *violent* bully, but she'd found the clinic empty. Now she was waiting for him to return, and it was agony. She'd run him off. How terrible of a person did she have to be before even a *Vulcan* couldn't stand to be in the same room as her?

Well, she *had* thrown the rillan at him. What had she been *thinking*? She *hadn't* been thinking. But what had possessed her to do it? Even though the rillan couldn't have seriously injured him, it had been an act of violence all the same. She could see herself clearly in her mind's eye, reaching into the pot, gripping the mushy gourd in her hands, and lobbing it at him with as much force as she could muster. She was so embarrassed, looking back on it now.

Worse yet, she'd told him she hated him, that he'd ruined her life, and those things simply weren't true. She'd told her mother she hated her once too, in a fit of anger. She couldn't even remember *why* she'd been angry, but she vividly remembered the look of pain on her face the moment the words fell from her mouth. She'd hurt her mother and reflecting on that memory on top of everything else just added to her pain. There were so many things to regret, and not enough mental energy to regret them all at once.

But perhaps worst of all, she had been awful enough to make Voris snap. He had been *angry* with her, and seeing him pushed to his limit was as terrifying as it was distressing. How could a candle mean so much to him?
What had he said? "It was given to me by my mate."

Dagny's cheeks burned. She knew almost nothing of Voris' life before they'd met, other than that he had been married but hadn't had any kids. What had his wife been like? Had they been happy? She felt an odd twinge of jealousy, thinking about Voris having a wife. It was silly to feel that way and she knew it, but she was jealous all the same. How irrational and petty to be envious of a dead woman who'd died before Dagny had ever even met him.

Maybe she wasn't jealous of his wife specifically, but jealous over what he'd had. What would it be like, to be loved by someone as much as Voris had loved his wife? He clearly must have loved her greatly, to get so angry over a candle.

Her hand traveled to her aquamarine necklace. Erik had given it to her, but she didn't wear it because she missed him, but because it was a reminder of everything she'd lost. It was the only tangible connection she had left to a happier life, or at least it had been until Ann had come by with the maternity clothes, some of which had been her mother's. Dagny understood the need to hold onto things, if only just to remember, and if she'd known the candle meant that much to him, she would have never...

She wanted to cry, but she was all out of tears. She wanted to hug someone, but there was no one to hug. Not even Harold. He had taken to roaming the tunnels for longer and longer periods and now she couldn't even remember the last time he'd been home for a meal. She was completely, utterly alone.

Until she wasn't. A very large man burst through the door, carrying a limp human form in his arms, and it took her mind several seconds to process this development. Cillian Kilpatrick. Why was he here? Had the buzzer gone off? Had he broken the door down?

She stumbled forward from the stool, instinctively going to the cabinet to fetch a tricorder when she saw Voris step out behind the hulking constable. They made inadvertent eye contact, sending her emotions in a million different directions. She was so happy and relieved to see him. Where had he gone? Was he still angry? How should she start the process of apologizing? Would he ever accept her apology?

"You are not wearing your proper protective equipment," he barked, motioning to the constable to set the woman in a biobed.

She touched her chin, realizing she'd wandered downstairs without that awful mask. But she wouldn't have come downstairs at all if he hadn't run away. Then again, he wouldn't have run away if she hadn't thrown their dinner at him. "Listen, I wanted to say I'm sorry."

"Now is not the time. Go upstairs if you will not wear your mask."

Her first instinct was to bristle. He'd disappeared all night and had her worried sick, only to come back and start barking orders at her?

"I don't think she's going to make it," the constable murmured, patting the woman's cheek, who Dagny now recognized as the clothier who ran the stand next to Zernon's.

She blinked. Voris was right: now was not the time to reignite a petty spat. She took several steps back and whispered, "I'm sorry," but rather than acknowledge her admission, Voris turned his back to her and glided in the direction of his patient. Dagny cleansed her hands in the sonic sink and then wandered upstairs to find the mess she'd made the night before.
The rillan had dried into a crusty paste all over the wall. The box of apples was still sitting on the table and the water in the pot with the unpeeled rillan had boiled away and fused the rest of the stringy gourds to the bottom. It would take hours and a lot of elbow grease to get it cleaned away, but that seemed like an easy mess to clean, compared to the damage her words and actions had caused.

The glass dome of the biobed reflected the overhead light, obscuring most of Adelaide Proctor's face, but Voris didn't need to see her face. She was unconscious. She'd started to come to about an hour ago, mumbling about someone named Ada. He'd sedated her in order to perform a more comprehensive full body scan, and her vital signs were weak but stable. For now.

It was remarkable she was alive at all. He'd encouraged her to come to the clinic from the first day they'd arrived at the colony, but based on the mathematical projections of the scan, she had been beyond help for more than a year. The tumors were simply too large and too embedded in the fabric of her physiology to be excised and successfully treated.

The cancer had started in her skin, metastasizing to the bones, liver, brain, and lungs. Cancer was an ailment of the pre-modern Federation, much like heart disease or antibiotic resistant bacterial infections. Early and rapid detection, along with personalized immunotherapies, had virtually eliminated cancer as a cause of death in developed parts of the Federation.

But they weren't in the Federation, technically. Citizens of Earth, New Vulcan, and all the other central Federation planets had access to advanced facilities staffed by large teams of medical personnel, and he was just a lone doctor on an isolated colony world with scant equipment, a paramedic, and a part-time, half-trained Orion nurse at his disposal. He'd lost a patient to childbirth just two weeks ago, so perhaps the idea that he would lose a patient to cancer should not have surprised him.

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. Another of his patients was going to die and he could do nothing to prevent it. He had had better access to more advanced equipment on the Sekla, a small diplomatic vessel that could carry no more than thirty passengers, than he had on a stationary colony world with more than 1,100 inhabitants. Had Dagny arrived in this clinic in the same condition she had arrived in on the Sekla, she would have died.

"Voris?"

He opened his eyes, blinking several times to clear his vision. Had he been falling asleep again? Something brushed against his left arm, sending shivers down his spine. He rubbed his eyelids with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, glancing to his left to see Dagny standing beside him. How long had she been there?

"Is everything ok?" she asked.

"Yes." His answer was reflexive and not technically correct, so he added, "Though Miss Proctor has metastatic cancer."

Dagny frowned, taking several steps toward the biobed. "Is there anything you can do for her?"

"No. I can continue to sedate her and provide relief for her symptoms but she will live much longer."

"Are you ok?"

"Ok is an imprecise term. Clarify."
Dagny's shoulders rolled forward. "I'm so sorry for last night."

Voris didn't immediately reply, but before he could contrive any response, she continued. "I didn't know that was your wife's candle. If I had known, you know, that it was special to you, I wouldn't have-"

"It is illogical to attach meaning to material objects."

She turned and gave him a strange look. Her mouth silently formed the beginning of several sentences, but before she spoke any words aloud, the biobed beeped, alerting him to an increase in Adelaide Proctor's cardiac activity.

"Excuse me," he said, moving past her to see to his patient.

Miss Proctor's eyes sprung open as he came along her bedside, revealing a woman in the throes of confused terror. "Where- what- where-"

She started to cough violently, sending bloody sputum against the glass. "Get-me-out!" she wheezed, weakly pushing against the dome.

"Miss Proctor, you collapsed in the tunnel leading to-"

"Get me out!"

Her heart rate continued to accelerate, as did her cough. Her panic reminded him of Dagny, straining against the pain of radiation poisoning in the biobed aboard the Sekla. A lifetime had passed in those five months.

"Get me out get me out get me out!" Adelaide shrieked, in between bloody coughing fits.

"Voris!" Dagny pleaded, reaching for the switch to release the dome.

"The atmosphere of the biobed is providing supplemental oxygen, which you-"

Adelaide's pleas turned into a single, animalistic scream. Dagny gave him a determined look and released the dome. The lack of a glass barrier amplified his patient's screams, but it slowly subsided as she fell into another bout of violent coughing.

"She requires supplemental oxygen," Voris said, too physically and mentally fatigued to subdue his annoyance.

"She was having a panic attack," Dagny snapped.

"And now her dissolved plasma oxygen levels are falling," Voris replied, racing to the cabinet to get a nasal cannula.

"I said I didn't want no doctor!" Adelaide wheezed.

"Constable Kilpatrick and I found you unconscious and hypothermic just off the main tunnel. You would be dead now had we not intervened."

"I want to go home."

"That is out of the question," Voris replied, fumbling with the plastic hose and machine that concentrated the oxygen from atmospheric air.
"You can't keep me here! I have rights!"

"And I have a duty to keep you alive. You will die if I send you home."

"I'm going to die anyhow!"

"Yes, you will, and quite soon."

Adelaide closed her mouth and glared at him, but couldn't conceal the fear that crept into her eyes.

"Maybe we should all calm down," Dagny interrupted, stepping between them and giving Voris a dark look.

"I want to go home," Adelaide insisted.

"You require medical care."

"I don't want your medical care," she sneered. "If I'm going to die, I want to die at home."

Voris blinked. How could she be so intransigent? "You truly prefer to suffer alone rather than concede to treatment?"

"Maybe she doesn't have to be alone," Dagny mused, looking at him.

"Explain."

"What if I go with her? You know, to her home?"

Voris exhaled slowly, sensing he was on the verge of fighting a battle on two fronts. "That is also out of the question. You remain immunocompromised-

"We could install the biofilter leading up to our quarters in the doorway of hers," Dagny interrupted, crossing her arms.

"Even with the installation of a biofilter, her quarters would have to be thoroughly decontaminated as ours were, which will take a number of days, and-"

"I want to go home!" Adelaide yelped.

"Then what if she stayed here?" Dagny sighed, throwing her hands up.

"Construction has only just begun on the convalescent ward."

"Exactly. You've been saying I would need to stay in our quarters when they started drilling on account of the dust and they've been waiting for you to decide a convenient time. I can stay in our quarters and take care of Miss Proctor and the drilling teams can start on the ward."

"I ain't staying in any clinic or ward."

"You wouldn't be staying in the clinic, you'd be staying in our quarters," Dagny replied, glancing over her shoulder.

"I said I wanted to go in my own home, surrounded by my own things."

"If you want to go home and die alone, choking on your own bloody spittle, then be my guest," Dagny spat, whipping around to face her. "But you're going to have to walk there on your own."
Adelaide gave her a dangerous look, which Dagny returned. The two women glared at each other with such intensity that he began to wonder if they were on the verge of a physical altercation. "I don't trust no doctors. Why should I trust you?"

"Because I'm actually not a doctor," Dagny said triumphantly. "If you want to die, we can't stop you, but we're not going to help you along. So, what's it going to be?"

It had taken two hours and many more fights to get their quarters turned into a suitable site for short-term hospice. Voris had wanted to move the secondary biobed upstairs, but Adelaide had flatly refused to die in a "technological monstrosity."

It fascinated Dagny, watching Voris interact with his very crotchety patient. Despite their outward bickering, it was evident they respected each other on a fundamental level. Dagny had never formally met Miss Proctor, but she seemed well-acquainted with the Vulcan doctor, and he with her.

They had moved one of the beds from the backside of the clinic upstairs. Adelaide had insisted on having her own linens and quilts, so it had taken some coordination with the housing council to collect her things from her quarters. The clinic had opened shortly after Miss Proctor had regained consciousness and because Voris was needed to tend to the morning walk-in patients, he had recruited Zernon to fetch the many additional things Miss Proctor had decided she simply could not do without.

She'd sent the poor Tellarite back several times and Dagny was starting to think the whole of the woman's apartment would be moved into their tiny quarters before it was all said and done. It was late afternoon and Adelaide was resting when Zernon knocked on the door with a handful of items that included a rug, a hot water bottle, two separate shawls, a medium-sized wooden box, and a hair iron for curling hair.

"I think that's the last of her list," Zernon sighed, piling the items on the table. "I sterilized everything too, like the doctor said to, so you don't have to worry."

"Thank you, Zernon."

"Addy's been a good friend," he replied, patting his chest and glancing at the dozing woman in the corner. "I didn't realize she was so sick. I always told her she should see the doctor, but she would never go, not even when Velara was here. Won't be the same without her pestering me every morning."

"Do you know why she hates doctors so much?"

"No idea. She never talked much about herself at all. I know she had a daughter who died on Cygnia Minor. Sad business."

Dagny frowned, crossing her arms as she gazed at the sickly woman.

"I don't want to wake her up, but I'd like to come see her in the morning, if you agree. Dr. Voris already said it was fine. I thought I would drop off some cantaloupe. It's her favorite."

"I'm sure she would appreciate it," Dagny replied. Truthfully, she had no idea what Adelaide Proctor would and would not appreciate. Based on their interactions in the clinic that morning, she had one of the most ornery and obstinate personalities Dagny had ever encountered, but Zernon had worked next to her for several years.

"I'll be going then. I need to get back to the stand and close up for the evening."
Dagny nodded and inched toward her sleeping patient. She trembled and moaned softly, whether from pain or dreams, Dagny couldn't tell. Adelaide had made it quite clear she didn't want any medication, not even a mild pain reliever, but had agreed to the supplemental oxygen. She grabbed a chair and her tricorder and prepared to sit by her bedside when she saw Voris coming up the stairs.

There was so much to say, but where to begin? He noticed her watching him once he reached the top of the stairs and paused. "How is Miss Proctor?"

"The same as she was a few hours ago. She drifts in and out. Are you done in the clinic?"

"Yes, it is 1830 hours."

"Can I get you something to eat?"

Voris gave a single shake of his head. "Zemon brought me a plate of vegetables, which I ate in the clinic. As she has made it quite clear she doesn't want any assistance from me, I planned to relocate to new accommodations for the duration of her stay."

"Wait, you're… moving out?"

"It is the most logical solution." Voris made his way to his chest of drawers and began stacking his clothes in neat piles on his bed.

"Where are you going to go?" she asked, eyeing the growing stack of clothing on his bed.

"I intend to sleep in the clinic tonight, and tomorrow I will speak with the housing council. I understand quarters have become available adjacent to the constable's."

Dagny swallowed hard. "You're coming back though, right? I mean, I thought this hospice arrangement was supposed to be a temporary thing. You said she might not even make it through the night."

He glanced at the far wall, where he had been standing last night when Dagny had thrown the rillan at him. "I believe finding permanent separate accommodations would be mutually beneficial."

"I don't," she protested, not bothering to hide the automatic tears welling in her eyes.

He closed his mouth, not taking his eyes off the far wall. "When you first informed me of your decision to carry your pregnancy to term, you insisted you required nothing from me, but agreed to allow me to participate in the upbringing of our child. After openly expressing your hatred for me--"

"I don't hate you. I said some terrible things last night," she blurted. "I didn't mean them. I'm so sorry, Voris. I don't know what's wrong with me. I just can't control the way I feel anymore and it's making--" Her speech had finally become so distorted from her tears that she could no longer talk.

He finally looked in her direction, but did not make eye contact. "Perhaps we can discuss our living arrangements when Miss Proctor no longer requires hospice."

"P-p-please don't move out."

Voris began stacking his clothing into the bag in neat rows as though he hadn't heard her. He closed the top portion of the bag, swung it over his shoulder, and replied, "I believe it is necessary, at least in the short term."

"Promise you'll come back."
Voris cocked an eyebrow. "We cannot avoid each other. We share a workspace and in the near future, we will share the responsibilities of raising a child. Just because I would prefer to seek alternate accommodations does not mean I intend to extricate myself from your life."

"I just don't see why things have to change."

"Change is an essential process of life. It was never necessary for us to cohabitate. My departure would afford us both more privacy and, as you explained yesterday morning, would relieve you of the irritation of listening to me breathe."

"I'm pregnant and moody and said some stupid things. It doesn't mean I want you to leave."

"Ada?" Adelaide whispered. Her breathing was becoming more labored and though Dagny desperately wanted to finish her conversation with Voris and convince him to stay, she couldn't neglect her patient.

"I shall be down in the clinic, should you need anything," Voris replied, moving toward the stairs.

Dagny bit her tongue and rolled her eyes, wishing she could find the magic words that would fix this whole mess. Adelaide's pulse was weak and her blood oxygen was low, but overall, her condition was neither better nor worse than it had been all afternoon. She collected the last items that Zernon had brought and placed them around Adelaide's bedside, and when she'd smoothed out the wicker rug on the floor, she set a series of alarms to check on her every hour and laid down on her own bed, leaving the privacy curtain open so she would have a line of sight to her patient.

She was exhausted. She hadn't slept at all the night before, wondering if and when Voris would come back. She looked at the privacy curtain, wondering if he was right. It had been really awkward living with him, but she had grown used to it. She had grown used to him. She had spent her whole life living in overcrowded quarters, and even if she had fantasized about having her own room as a child, the thought of living alone was terrifying.

She pulled back the curtain separating his bed from hers, hating the fresh tears that welled in her eyes. She ran her hands over her swollen midsection, realizing that even if Voris did decide to leave, in a couple of months, she wouldn't technically be alone anymore, but maybe that would be worse. Maybe she needed him more than she realized, and it haunted her to think that maybe she'd realized it too late.
A Last Breath

Stardate 2260.203

Dagny was semi-awake long before her eyes flickered open. She had been dreaming about something, but she’d already forgotten it. When she did manage to pry her eyes open, she found herself fully dressed and covered under a light, threadbare blanket. She blinked several times, taking stock of her surroundings and wondering what time it was.

A loud clang rang out from downstairs, followed by the thrum of a laser drill. Crews had started working on expanding the convalescent ward the day before, which would be lovely when it was completed but was inconveniently noisy in the meantime. She rolled over onto her back, but upon seeing the clock on the far wall read 1558 hours, she lurched upright. When was the last time she’d checked on Adelaide? Four hours ago? Five? Why hadn’t her alarms gone off?

She threw her legs over the bed, which quickly tangled in the blanket and nearly caused her to fall flat on her face. She couldn’t remember covering herself up, but she’d been so exhausted that she reasoned she might have at some point. She then decided it didn’t matter—she needed to check on her patient.

She took a few slow breaths, collected herself, and slinked toward the bed in the corner, grabbing the tricorder from the table as she went. She could have sworn she’d left it by Adelaide’s bedside, but maybe not. The moment she held it to the frail woman’s chest, it began purring, and a moment after that, Adelaide’s eyes burst open with such alacrity that Dagny nearly jumped back.

"How are you feeling?"

"I’m dying," Adelaide coughed. "How do you think?"

Dagny grimaced as she watched the numbers trail across the device’s screen. Even with the supplemental oxygen, her vitals suggested she could barely breathe from the tumors strangling her lungs.

She checked the history on the tricorder to compare her current vital signs to the last set she’d taken, and was stunned to find out they’d been read just thirty-eight minutes earlier. Had she done that? She couldn’t have. She frowned and glanced at her patient, who gazed back at her with a neutral, gray expression.

She had been living with Adelaide for two days—or had it been one? She had to stop and think about it. Time was becoming a blur. Caring for the dying woman was like caring for a newborn baby, checking on her every hour and making sure to stick to a regular schedule of meals, calibrating the oxygen machine, and changing her soiled garments.

Amid bouts of sleep, Adelaide drifted between clarity and confusion. Last night she’d referred to Dagny as Ada and had refused to entertain the idea that Dagny had no idea who or what Ada was. Or had it been earlier this morning? Dagny bit her lip and stared into her dark eyes. She looked lucid enough right now.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No."

"Aren’t you hungry?" Dagny asked, thinking that if it was already nearly 1600 hours, Adelaide must
have skipped lunch.

"No."

"You really should eat."

"I'll eat if you're offering something other than that boiled piss you tried giving me this morning."

"That was plomeek soup."

"Is it made from cat piss?"

"No, it's made from—never mind." Somehow, she didn't think finding out plomeek soup was a Vulcan breakfast staple would make Adelaide appreciate it more. "Anyway, we have some of the cantaloupe left that Zemon brought over yesterday."

Adelaide grumbled but it was clear from her expression that she liked the idea very much. She descended into a fit of coughing, so Dagny adjusted her pillow, offered her a tissue, and headed toward the kitchen to prepare their meal.

As she cut the sweet melon into tiny cubes, she thought of the rillan she'd thrown at Voris several days ago. The cantaloupe was very nearly the same color and the stringy insides were quite a bit like the large Vulcan gourd.

Taking care of Adelaide had kept her busy and exhausted, but it was still impossible to avoid thinking about Voris. He had come by yesterday evening while Adelaide had been sleeping to see how she was getting along and though he'd been cordial, Dagny was struck by how different things seemed. They were like strangers again, but to be fair, they had never been particularly close. Had they?

"What's taking so long? Are you cutting up melon or writing your memoirs?" Adelaide coughed from across the room.

"I'm trying to cut it into small pieces so you don't choke."

"Are you afraid I'm going to choke to death?" Adelaide wheezed. "Because it seems to me like that's going to happen no matter what you do."

A loud series of banging noises came from downstairs, prompting Adelaide to groan, "Can't they be quiet? Don't they know I'm dying up here?"

Dagny rolled her eyes, jammed a fork into the center of the bowl of freshly sliced fruit, and proceeded to her bedside. "You don't have to act so grim all the time."

"What? I am dying and I'll act however I damn please," she retorted, reaching up for the bowl from Dagny's hands.

Dagny pulled it back and shot her a cynical frown. "Say please."

Adelaide's eyes bulged out of their sockets at the suggestion she should exchange manners for food. "Anyone who has to demand respect ain't worthy of it."

"And anyone who is so awful to other people that they have to be told to show respect doesn't deserve much of it either."

Dagny momentarily worried that she'd gone too far, but the old woman tossed her head back and
cackled, which turned into a prolonged and vicious cycle of coughing. When she finally caught her
breath, she gasped, "I knew I liked you."

Dagny sighed, plopped down on the stool, and set the bowl in Adelaide's hands. She could mostly
eat by herself, but sometimes she needed assistance in steadying the fork. They sat in silence for a
time, aside from the sounds of the oxygen machine's beeps and Adelaide's wheezing.

"Aren't you going to eat?"

"I'll have some soup after you go to sleep."

"The cat piss soup?"

She gave Adelaide a dark look and took the empty bowl from her hands. "Yes, the cat piss soup."

"You must have a strong stomach."

"No, I was just raised to eat my food and be grateful."

"Are you calling me ungrateful?"

"I'm explaining why I'm grateful and don't complain whenever someone offers me food."

"What does a pampered Earth baby like you know about being grateful for food?"

Dagny wasn't sure whether to laugh out loud or be angry. "What makes you think I'm a pampered
Earth baby?"

"Every Federation citizen on this colony is a pampered, entitled baby," Adelaide replied with a
scornful cough. "The lot of you. You all came here because life in your perfect Federation society
was boring and you wanted an adventure. Or maybe you were running away from mommy and
daddy. The fact is, people like you don't last very long. Six months, maybe a year and you run home
with your tail between your legs because you don't have the stomach for hardship. You don't know
what true suffering is."

"And you do?"

"Of course I do! I lived through three famines on Cygnia Minor and survived Kodos on Tarsus IV. That
was hardship. Do you have any idea what it's like to watch your family die a slow and painful
death and not be able to do anything about it?"

"I do, actually."

It seemed to take Adelaide a few seconds to process Dagny's response, and when she finally made
eye contact with her, her expression was caught somewhere between curiosity and confusion.

"Not from hunger, exactly, though growing up on a salvage ship, there were plenty of times I wished
I had more to eat," Dagny continued nonchalantly, rising to her feet to set the bowl in the sink. "But
life was ok. I never would have described it as pampered, but we had enough food and clothes and
good times to make us forget about all the things we didn't have. So, it was ok, at least until my
parents, thirteen siblings, and most of my extended family and friends died in a neutronic storm on
my birthday. But please, continue to tell me what true suffering is, because I really have no idea."

Dagny did her best to keep her tone neutral, but by the end, it was soaked in bitter defiance. She
crossed her arms and leaned back against the kitchen counter, staring at her patient in rabid
expectation. Adelaide remained silent.

"Oh, and Voris, sure, he grew up on Vulcan so I guess he probably never went to bed hungry. Life was probably pretty good for him, until his home and most of his family were wiped out by some angry Romulan renegades. Should I call him up here so you can he can sit in on your lecture about the nature of true suffering?"

Her face was burning. The months of pent up frustration, loss, grief, and anger threatened to explode and it took her longer than it should have to realize she was holding her breath. None of this was Adelaide's fault, but she'd opened this can of worms and Dagny felt ready to give it back to her wholesale. That was until she noticed a single tear sliding down the old woman's cracked face.

"Ugh, look, I'm sorry…" She massaged her temples and fell back onto her stool at Adelaide's bedside. "It's just… I don't see the point in having a competition to see who has the worst life. You don't really know anything about me."

"And you don't know anything about me," Adelaide sniffed.

"I'm willing to listen." Dagny waited for another one of Adelaide's coughing spells to pass before she ventured a question. "If you don't mind me asking, who is Ada?"

Adelaide scowled. "My sister. And my daughter."

She waited for Adelaide to clarify. The old woman rolled her eyes when she saw the curiosity her statement had garnered. "I haven't talked to anyone about them in years."

The pain in her face was the most obvious thing Dagny had ever seen. "I haven't really talked about my family much either. They only died five months ago. Seems like forever ago sometimes, and other times it seems like yesterday. Sometimes it feels like they aren't really dead, but if I talk about them like they are, well, then they are. I can barely remember what they look like anymore."

Adelaide frowned and nodded. "Ada was my twin, so I could never forget her face, unless I stopped looking in a mirror."

"What happened to her?" The question hung in the air, raw and probing.

Adelaide's face hardened and Dagny wished she could take it back, but then Adelaide took a few coughing breaths and said, "When I was eleven, me and my twin sister, Ada, we went down into Smuggler's Valley. That was on Cygnia Minor."

She hesitated and then descended into a bloody and severe coughing fit. The oxygen machine started to beep and Dagny increased the cycles, and after several minutes, she had her breathing back under control.

"So, what happened in Smuggler's Valley?"

"This was all a long time ago," Adelaide moaned, closing her eyes and resting her head on the pillow. "No good in digging up the past."

"I don't think there's much good in burying it either."

"Hmmm," Adelaide murmured.

She was quiet for a long time. Dagny suspected she was pretending to be asleep but could tell from her respiration that she was still very much awake. She looked up at the ceiling and ventured,"I
know what it's like to lose a sister."

"I guess you do, if you had thirteen of 'em."

"I actually only had five sisters. The rest were brothers."

"Hmmm."

"Anyway, they didn't all die in a neutronic storm. My two oldest brothers, Aksel and Benjamin died trying to save a bunch of Vulcan strangers."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. My family's salvage ship was at the Battle of Vulcan. It was an old ship, held together by hope and luck, and they were repairing a plasma ejection port. My father, he was the ship's captain, he had to vent the plasma or he was going to lose the whole ship. So, he killed his sons to save the rest of us."

"Why are you telling me this?" Adelaide asked, finally opening her eyes but not bothering to turn and look at Dagny.

"I don't know."

Adelaide blinked several times and finally said, "Me and Ada went to Smuggler's Valley because Timmy Noonen said there was ghosts down there and- well, it ain't important. Anyway, there was a rockslide; me and Ada was buried. She got the worse of it. In the hospital, the doctor said she was too far gone. Said I probably wouldn't live neither. In the end, the doctor decided to take parts of her to piece me back together. Said it was safer than synthetic organs."

"I'm so sorry, Adelaide."

"Me too. Sorry about your brothers."

"Yeah, me too."

"Anyway, I never went to another doctor after that. Not on purpose anyway."

"Well, like I told you, I'm not a doctor. If I'm going to be honest with you though, I always wanted to be one."

"So, what stopped you?"

"I grew up on a salvage ship. I had a patchy education and a family that needed me more than I needed a medical degree."

"I always would have liked to be an artist," Adelaide mused, closing her eyes.

"What stopped you?"

She fought back a cough and answered, "Same as you, more or less."

Her words trailed off and Dagny thought that would be the end of their conversation—the longest conversation completely free of verbal barbs they'd ever had—when something unexpected happened. Adelaide closed her eyes and began to talk without any prompting.

"Grew up on a mining colony. Too much real work to do. Met Aaron when I was nineteen. Had two
babies, one born dead and the other died not too long after he was born. Too much residual radiation and bad nutrition, they said. Could have been bad genes too, but so many babies died on Cygnia Minor that we got used to it."

Dagny's arms folded over her round belly almost on instinct. She'd cared for women who had had early miscarriages, but she struggled to wrap her mind around a place where dead babies were common. She closed her eyes and grimaced, briefly thinking of Melana's son. What would it be like for that to be normal?

Dagny cleared her throat, opened her eyes, and asked, "I thought you only had one child?"

"No, no. After Aaron died—drank himself stupid one night and wandered out in a dust storm—I married Harvey and we had three more. Ada was the only one who made it past the first year. Named her after my sister. I like to think she lived because my sister didn't get the chance to."

"So, where is she now?"

"Dead, along with my fourth husband on Tarsus IV."

The mere mention of the name sent tingles down Dagny's spine. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear the rest, but she had asked and Adelaide was drawing in a deep breath to continue her story, almost as if determined to deliver her final confession.

"Funny thing, we left Cygnia Minor because it seemed like there was never enough food and because Ada was always sick. We had some good years on Tarsus though." She paused to cough and catch her breath. "Ada found herself a nice young man and was on her way to giving me my first grandchild when the blight hit the crops. Wasn't long before the first riots. Soon after they got the rioting and looting under control, the doctor came to our door, wanting to do routine scans—said it was for calculating out the rations. To be fair, he didn't lie, we just didn't realize we was going to make the list to receive no rations at all."

She watched Adelaide's lips move, but had a hard time focusing on what came next. A high-pitched sound flooded her ears and all Dagny could think about was her family. She remembered being about seven years old when her brother Aksel had gathered her, Benjamin, and Daniel around his bunk and told them that there were ghosts on Tarsus that ate the souls of anyone who came too close to the planet's orbit. Dagny hadn't been able to sleep from the nightmares, but when her father had made a ship wide announcement the next morning calling for a moment of silence as they passed by Tarsus IV, Dagny had hidden in the linen closet and refused to come out for hours.

She'd eventually grown older and wiser and accepted that there weren't any ghosts on Tarsus IV. It was just a story from one of the darker parts of the Federation's history, but to the dying woman lying in the bed beside her, it had been her life. The ringing in her ears suddenly stopped and Adelaide's voice came back into focus.

"... and like I said, me and Barry were near sixty and Ada's health was still pretty delicate. Had no idea that doctor was singling us all out for extermination. Socially beneficial euthanasia, they called it. It was murder."

"All of you?" Dagny blurted, hoping she wasn't being indelicate.

Adelaide pursed her lips and gave a single, grim nod. "But you obviously made it out alive..."

"I was at the back when they turned their phasers on us. I got separated from Ada and was pushing my way through the crowd when Kodos told us the real reason we were standing in a ditch at sunset.
The bodies piled up and I near got myself crushed. Laid in the mud for three days."

"No one fought back?"

"Most people were already starving by that point and too weak to kick up much of a fuss. Hunger has a funny way of turning people into wolves at first, but they all become lambs in the end. Don't think anyone thought Kodos would actually go through with it either, 'til he did. I was one of two survivors that was on the list to be executed."

"It's a weird thing, wondering why you get to live when everyone else dies," Dagny murmured. "Every day I think about why things had to happen that way."


"In my case, it was a mistake. My mistake."

Adelaide offered a lazy and listless glance, neither urging her to continue nor suggesting she stop. The story started flowing out of Dagny and much to her surprise, she managed to get through it without crying for the first time. "And so they're all dead because of me."

Adelaide took several heavy breaths and replied, "You think it would have been better, running around your ship deciding who lived and who died? Maybe the way it happened was the best way. You didn't have to watch or nothing. They just fell asleep and died."

"Radiation poisoning from radiolytic isotopes isn't quite the same thing as carbon monoxide poisoning," Dagny scowled. "It wasn't as pleasant as that, trust me. I was almost dead when Voris found me."

"Voris, that pointy-eared doctor downstairs?"

"He was with a diplomatic ship that managed to ride out the storm. They beamed me aboard and Voris saved my life. At first, I wished he hadn't. Sometimes I still wish that, but..." Her left hand fell on her stomach, her right hand rubbed her forehead.

"So that's how that happened," Adelaide said with a laugh disguised in a cough.

"What?"

"He saved your life, you fell in love with him just long enough to fall into bed with him—not such a very unlikely love story after all."

"We're not in love," Dagny replied hastily. "It's... complicated."

"Life is complicated. And ugly. And unfair. Just like love."

"Did you read that in a holocard?"

Adelaide erupted into laughter and it took her five minutes to quell her coughing and catch her breath. "I never got any holocards. And I don't know the whole story, but I can see the ending plain enough." Her eyebrows wagged at Dagny's belly, causing Dagny to instinctively straighten her back and try to suck in her stomach to disguise her bump. Her cheeks began to burn as Adelaide started laughing and hacking all over again.

"There's no sense in being embarrassed," Adelaide wheezed at long last. "It keeps the species going. Ours and his. It's a twofer."
"I should probably go back to bed," Dagny said darkly. "I'll check on you again in an hour."

"What, you're allowed to poke and prod and ask uncomfortable questions but I can't?" the woman called after her.

"Like you said, life's not fair."

"It's rotten, having other people dig in your business, ain't it?"

"Fine," Dagny seethed. "I jumped into bed with the first guy I saw after my family died and now I'm going to have a baby to show for it. There. I said it. Whether or not you want to believe it, there actually is more to the story but it's really none of your business. Judge me all you want."

"Sounds to me like the only one judging you is you."

Dagny ignored her and tucked herself into bed after making sure to set an alarm to wake her in an hour. She shut out the lights and closed her eyes. Adelaide wasn't willing to give up so easily. "Say what you want, but you two care for each other."

"We're having a baby together, that's all."

"He came up here and covered you up. You was shivering in your sleep and he put that blanket over you. Then he checked up on me so you could sleep."

Dagny swallowed hard, glad for the confirmation that she wasn't losing her mind about the blanket and the fact that the tricorder was on the table rather than by Adelaide's bedside. "I'm surprised you didn't threaten to kill him, what with you hating doctors as much as you do."

"Eh, he turned my oxygen up. That was nice of him. I still think he did it for you more than for me. Like I said, he cares about you."

Without opening her eyes, Dagny replied, "Caring isn't the same thing as loving."

"No, caring is the better way, much better than love."

"How do you figure?"

"You young people love to love love. Love is dangerous. People in love leave their families, destroy other people's marriages, and tear lives apart for their own selfishness. You don't want to settle down with someone you love: you want to settle down with someone who cares about you. People who care can be trusted, people in love can't."

"I never even got the chance to be in love," she said, her voice hardly rising above a whisper. She fumbled with the aquamarine necklace at her throat, thinking of Erik and Pearson and what her life might have been like.

"You only feel sorry for yourself because you've probably been sold love stories your whole life. Trust me when I say most girls don't grow up dreaming of settling down with the first man to put a baby on them. But now that it's happened, you couldn't ask for a better partner. Forget all the love nonsense. You've got something much better."

"So, you're saying love isn't important at all?"

"It's nice to have, if you can get it, but not necessary. Caring is more important. Partnership too. A good relationship is like a business and anyone who treats it as anything less is kidding themselves."
"I always suspected you were a hopeless romantic under all the piss and vinegar," Dagny groaned, rolling over onto her back.

"I had four husbands, remember? Trust me when I say that someone you can depend on to pull their weight is a much better find than someone who makes you feel all giddy and girlish. Those feelings go away and when they do, you'll want a reliable partner willing to stand by you. I'm sure he's boring as an old shoe and I've seen plenty of men with better looks than he's got, but he cares. I could have gone a lot farther in life with someone like that by my side."

"He only cares because we're having a baby. If this baby hadn't come along, we would have never spoken to each other again."

"Maybe not, but here you are. Hold on to that one, if you can. I doubt you'll listen to me though because what do I know?"

Dagny was very tired, but she couldn't bring herself to sleep. Her mind and heart were too full. How had Adelaide maintained her sanity all those years after famine and genocide and the loss of her children?

She tenderly touched her stomach. She'd never felt more conflicted about anything as she did the baby growing inside her. She had never wanted to be a mother, but the baby's existence had kept her going in those early days when she'd just wanted to fall asleep and never wake up. Now her impending bundle of joy was holding her hostage inside the clinic and their quarters and she resented it. But she also couldn't wait to hold it in her arms. Then there was the issue of getting on with her education and how difficult the baby would make things. Then there was the fear that her baby would grow up and decide it would rather be like its Vulcan father than its human mother, and she didn't think she could bear it. And under all that was the worst fear of all: that something would go wrong and the baby wouldn't make it. Was it normal, to love and resent something so much at the same time?

Dagny hadn't listened for the baby's heartbeat in several weeks. She suspected it was because she was afraid—she was twenty-one weeks along and she was definitely showing, but there was still not so much as a fluttering movement. She pressed hard into her navel, wishing the baby would press back, but there was only stillness. If the baby had died, she wouldn't be tied to Voris for the rest of her life, but she also didn't think she could bear it. She wasn't Adelaide, she couldn't just accept the death of her baby as "one of those things," not after everything that had happened.

She thought of Adelaide's advice and scoffed more loudly than she'd intended. How was she supposed to hold on to Voris when he couldn't even stand to share living quarters with her anymore? Even if they hadn't had a falling out, she'd never imagined herself being with him and living happily ever after. He was her colleague, her mentor, the father of her child, and maybe even her friend, but certainly not her partner. He was a nice enough person and she couldn't hate him, but she couldn't bring herself to love him either. Adelaide had said love wasn't important, but what did she know? She'd been married four times.

When it came down to it, Dagny hardly knew Voris, despite their five months together. They'd always managed to occupy silences with work or tutoring; sometimes they hadn't bothered to fill the silences at all. Were it not for the fact that she was growing fatter every day, she would have almost forgotten that they'd shared a regrettable one-night stand. She no longer had any real memories of the night of passion that had permanently fixed them together; it was like it had been a dream and the harder she tried to remember it, the fuzzier it became.

Several months earlier she'd had dreams about Voris, some steamy and romantic and others more mundane and domestic, but now she couldn't remember the last time she'd had any kind of dream...
about Voris. What was her subconscious mind trying to tell her?

She tossed and turned for the next forty-five minutes, skirting the edges of sleep but never quite managing to drift off between her troubled thoughts and the sounds of Adelaide's cough and the construction noises downstairs. Just as she was starting to think her alarm was about to go off and remind her to check on her patient, the oxygen machine began to beep, signaling that Adelaide wasn't breathing properly.

Dagny stumbled out of bed and engaged the lights. Adelaide's skin was the color of paper, her chest was rising and falling in rapid, shallow motions, and a trickle of blood was forming in her right nostril.

"I'm going to go get Voris," Dagny announced, grabbing her face mask from the table and preparing to run downstairs.

"Please, let me go." It was a faint whisper, but there was no mistaking what she'd said.

Adelaide coughed, stretched out a sluggish hand, and nodded to Dagny. For the first time, there was peace in her usually hawkish eyes. Dagny faltered. She felt a strong professional duty to treat this woman and she was so very tired of death, but she still stopped and remained frozen in the middle of the room. She took several cautious steps to Adelaide's bedside, hating the tremble that was beginning in her lower jaw.

"The box… under… the bed," Adelaide gasped. "Take… it."

Dagny bit hard on her upper lip and glanced down at the floor. Among the possessions that Zernon had brought over, there was a worn, carved box that Dagny had slid under the bed to make space. She started to pull it out, but Adelaide gripped her arm. "Don't be… in… such a hu-hurry."

Dagny sat up and blinked the tears from her eyes. "Can…you…make…sure I… look…my best?"

Dagny squinted and leaned forward. "What do you mean, look your best?"

The beeps of the machine were coming faster now and she fought her instinct to go get Voris. Adelaide closed her eyes and mumbled something. She couldn't be certain, but it sounded like, "I'm not afraid." Two breaths later, she was gone.

Voris shrugged his shoulders to push the collar of the navy fleece coat higher around his neck. It was a clear day but bitterly cold. The slight breeze stung his skin and made him wish he'd heeded Dagny's advice about the scarf.

Dagny had wanted to come but it was out of the question in her condition. She'd taken great care with Adelaide's body, washing her and trimming her nails and curling her hair. It seemed a strange custom, but Dagny assured him it had been the elderly woman's last request.

He held in his hands an ornately carved wooden box, square and about twenty centimeters in length. Dagny had insisted it be buried with her and because she had been unable to attend, she'd passed the duty on to Voris. It didn't contain anything of value—three blurry holographs of young children, a few rocks, some bits of hair wrapped in twine and string—but Dagny had indicated they had enormous sentimental value. Sentiment was illogical but Adelaide Proctor had not been a logical being, and it would be illogical for him to refuse her final request.

Voris surveyed the tiny gathering, noting few people had wanted to brave the frigid temperatures to witness the burial of Adelaide Proctor. Aside from himself, Zernon, Mike Yates, Cillian Kilpatrick,
and Samantha Bergeron, the only other people in attendance were two miners, and they had only come because a laser drill had been required to cut through the frozen soil.

The cemetery was small and held forty-three graves, including the one that had just been carved for Adelaide. He was only intimately acquainted with the five most recent additions—Hannu Järvinen, the man who had died in a mining accident on Voris' first night at the colony, two Klingon men who had committed suicide shortly after their arrival, and Melana and her child. He recognized other markers though, if only by name. Velara, the colony's previous healer, was buried next to a small headstone that simply read "Baby Boy Diels."

The drill suddenly came to a screeching halt and one of the miners stepped down off the machine and motioned to Samantha Bergeron. "That's about as good as it's gonna do! Best get her in the ground before sundown."

She gave a tiny nod and glanced at Mike Yates, who was standing next to Adelaide's body, which was wrapped in cloth and strapped to an anti-gravity jack. Mike maneuvered it into position beside the hole and glanced at Voris. He stepped forward, placed the box on Adelaide's chest, and with the help of Mike, Zernon, and Constable Kilpatrick, lowered her into the ground with a set of straps.

No sooner had they pulled the straps up after her than the miners started shoveling the frozen dirt back over the body. Zernon wiped away several tears and Mike and Cillian pulled off their hats and clutched them to their chests. It was most illogical to remove warm clothing given the conditions, but it was logical to conclude it was done out of custom, so he followed their example.

He glanced down at the snow and winced. His head ached. It had started at the base of his neck and spread to the backs of his eyes and down into his teeth. His neck was stiff too and it hurt to breathe. He suspected his symptoms were likely the result of the cold air and overwork.

"Shouldn't someone say a few words?" Zernon asked, his teeth chattering.

"You knew her best," Sam replied.

"Well, yes. Well then. Adelaide Proctor was a sharp old woman, but she was a friend."

Voris exhaled slowly, the fog of his breath catching in the air. He saw a small figure approaching in the distance. A latecomer. He turned his attention back to Zernon, suddenly aware how sore his neck really was. Had he strained it? He breathed more deeply, sucking in the icy air, which sent his lungs into a series of coughing spasms.

"You alright there, doc?" the constable asked, patting him on the back.

"I am," he replied, trying to catch his breath.

"You might be, but I'm freezing me balls off."

"Cillian!" Sam barked.

"What?" he shrugged. "Old woman said much worse to me in her day. Were she still 'round, she'd be mocking the lot of us for standing out here in the cold like this."

Voris would never have phrased it so crudely, but he agreed with the constable's assessment. Fighting his way through a grim smile, Zernon continued with his strained eulogy. "A lot of people called her mean, but I believe she was misunderstood. She had a big heart. She was always giving away coats and blankets to newcomers. She had a lot of demons, I think, but most people here seem to. I hope if there's an afterlife, that she's there and she's at peace."
The others in the group murmured and the humans donned the hats, prompting Voris to do the same. The figure approaching from the colony was much larger now and close enough for Voris to identify it as probably human. A sudden blast of wind blew snow into his eyes, causing him to turn his head away.

"I don't know what else to add," Zernon sniffed.

"You did well enough, I say," Cillian mumbled. "Now, everyone up for a pint at Jester's?"

"Count me in," Sam replied.

"Might as well," Zernon added.

"Mikey, you in?" Cillian asked, turning to Mr. Yates and making a gesture with his hand indicative of drinking from a glass. Mike shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

"Doc?"

"I have never been to Jester's."

"Oh, now ye gotta go!"

"I have been made to understand it is an establishment that primarily serves ethyl alcohol, which I have never been in the habit of consuming."

"Come on! No one likes a teetotaler! Just one pint. Addy wouldn't mind and it's not like the missus is gonna tan yer hide for coming home late. You don't even live there no more."

Voris slowly turned to the constable, trying to make sense of what he'd just said. "The clinic does not close for approximately two more hours and Miss Skjeggestad is anticipating my return. I thank you for your offer, but I must decline."

"Oh, come on-"

"He said no, Cillian," Sam interjected. "Leave him be."

"Alright, alright. You know where it is though, if ye change yer mind."

"I should return to the clinic," Voris replied, thinking of the long trek back to the main entrance and suddenly feeling exhausted.

"I'm gonna head out too," Cillian agreed, before glancing at Sam and adding, "Unless you need something, of course."

"No, you guys go on ahead. I'll catch up with you," she replied. "There's something I'd like to do first."

Cillian, Zernon, and Mike set off along a course to the large secondary tunnel that led to the back of the main ring, their feet leaving choppy tracks in the virgin snow. Voris and Sam turned the opposite direction toward the main entrance, which was the shortest route back to the clinic. The figure on the horizon was only about two hundred meters off now, definitely human, judging by the stature and gait, but impossible to identify under the thick swath of clothes.

Voris lengthened his stride, eager to return to the warmth of the tunnels. He was worn and aching. He deliberated closing the clinic early, or at least leaving Dagny to tend it for the final two hours of regular operations, but he disliked leaving her alone when it wasn't necessary and he had nowhere
else to go. He hadn't even planned on attending Adelaide's funeral, but she had insisted he go, even if only to deliver the box.

Tomorrow the clinic would be closed, as it was once every seven days. He could rest then. It had been four days since he'd moved out of the quarters above the clinic, but he had yet to move into the empty apartment adjacent to Constable Kilpatrick's. The engineering crews had been working continuously on the convalescent ward expansion and he hadn't wanted to leave them in the clinic unsupervised, so he had taken to sleeping on a cot at the back of the room. The arrangement had been excellent for monitoring the crew's progress, but less than ideal for procuring meaningful sleep.

The crews had completed their excavation and installed the necessary structural supports the evening before and secured the site behind a force field, and so Dagny had returned to her shift in the clinic that morning. He would need to speak with the housing council about gaining access to the vacant quarters adjacent to the constable's, but he hesitated.

It was already quite late in the afternoon and it would take a considerable amount of time to move all of his belongings. He could sleep on the cot in the clinic for one more night, surely. It seemed likely the stiff cot was the source of his neck and back pain, but he decided he was more tired than he was sore. Yes, he would spend one final night in the clinic and visit the housing council tomorrow. It was most logical.

Sam suddenly drifted to the right and walked down the first row of headstones, stopping before one that read Lucy Coronado. Voris would have preferred to keep walking, but he was not sure what the proper protocol was. If one person paused to show deference to a particular marking, was it polite for others to do the same?

He looked to her for guidance, but she never took her eyes from the small, gray marker. "She was my wife. She was the first person we buried here."

"I grieve with thee." He swallowed hard, not out of an attempt to subdue emotion but rather, to quell a cough.

"I miss her every day."

Voris understood the sentiment, even if he did not say so. Vulcan funeral rites varied, at least in terms of the disposal of the physical form. Burning, burial, and desiccation were all common methods, though the people of his father's line preferred burning to entombment. Visiting the remains of a cherished relative was sentimental and illogical. The body was just a physical shell.

Many Vulcans elected to have their katras preserved in the Hall of Ancient Thought atop Mount Seleya, but that was all gone now. Nero's destruction of Vulcan had done far more than claim the lives of six billion people, it had also devastated centuries of accumulated knowledge and culture. Had he been able to maintain T'Sala's katra, it would have made her death more bearable.

"Can you leave me? I just want to be alone for a little while."

Voris nodded and proceeded down the path alone. The black-clad figure was only a hundred meters away now, but it was near enough for him to make an identification. When they were within ten meters of one another, he raised his right hand in the ta'al and said, "Live long and prosper, Mr. Schoenbein."

"Hey there, Dr. Voris. What's everyone doing out here?"

"By 'everyone' do you refer to the seven people who attended Ms. Proctor's funeral?"
"Who?"

"Adelaide Proctor. The clothier whose funeral was this afternoon."

"Oh, the old lady? Yeah, I heard she died. Shame, I guess. Say, how's Dagny doing?"

Voris bristled involuntarily before he could repress the emotion. "She is well."

"That's good to hear. Anyway, I also found out yesterday an old friend of mine died a couple weeks back. Thought I'd come and pay my respects."

Voris believed it was illogical for him to involve himself in the man's private matter, but he could not resist the impulse to ask, "Do you refer to Melana?"

His eyes widened slightly and he gave a small shrug. "You knew her too?"

"I am this colony's physician and as such, I am usually aware when one of its members dies."

"Oh, yeah, I guess I didn't think of that. Any chance you know where she's buried?"

"She is in the grave next to the laser drill at the top of the hill, buried next to her son."

Pearson Schoenbein's countenance shifted between confusion and shock. "I didn't realize she had any kids-

Voris blinked and tried to shield his face from the chilly wind, fighting the urge to cough. "She didn't, until the day she died."

Another gust of cold air smacked him in the face and he could no longer resist the need to cough, and once he began, it was difficult to stop. He needed to return to a warmer environment and decided a hot mint tea might serve him well. He started to move past Mr. Schoenbein, but the young man stopped him.

"Wait, what do you mean, until the day she died? You mean, she died having a baby?"

He wasn't sure why he said what he said next and when he would reflect on it later, he would never arrive at a logical explanation. He was so tired, and his head and neck ached, and it took so much energy to avoid coughing from the tickle in this throat. Perhaps it was because he assumed almost everyone on the colony knew the sordid details surrounding Melana's death—few things traveled as quickly as gossip—or perhaps it had simply been a momentary slip in his mental faculties, but whatever the case, he had duty to maintain Melana's privacy, and he failed her. "Yes, as a result of the fetus' human blood mixing with hers. The child died several hours later owing to his unstable hybrid physiology."

Pearson stared at him dumbly, overcome by shock and horror. Voris swallowed and coughed again, more desperate than ever to find respite from the frigid winter air. He pushed past Pearson without another word and set off down the path, following the footprints he'd made on his ascent to the cemetery.

His head was pounding now and he was short of breath and by the time he finally reached the mouth of the main tunnel and began descending the stairs, he was seeing black spots in his vision. He tried to recall the last time he'd eaten. Dagny had brought him a strawberry muffin and some cantaloupe that morning, but he'd only eaten several bites before the clinic had received its first patients. He was overtired and undernourished, that was all, and those things were easily remedied. When he reached the bottom row of stairs, his knees nearly buckled, but he somehow managed to stay upright.
"You ok?" someone called.

"Yes," he tried to answer, but all that came out was a series of coughs.

There was a faint ringing in his ears and he started to realize that despite the fact that it was at least thirty degrees warmer down in the tunnels, he didn't feel any warmer. In fact, he couldn't stop shivering. His chest felt taut and he couldn't catch his breath. He made it the short distance from the stairs to the clinic entrance, and just as he pushed open the door, he saw a dark figure creep past his legs.

"Harold!" Dagny cried from inside the clinic. Her voice sounded hollow and distant. Was she in the surgical suite?

He nearly tripped over the threshold. He needed to sit down, get warm, and take a meal. More than anything, he needed to sleep.

"Voris? How was the- Voris?"

She was standing right in front of him, eyes wide and panic-stricken, but she sounded so far away. The ringing in his ears grew louder. How could she be so far away when she was so close? He was so cold. He was so tired. He sensed her hands gripping his shoulders and then his neck. She was yelling, but he couldn't make sense of her words before his world faded to black.
The Other Side

Stardate 2260.205

She'd managed to catch him under the armpits before he fell to the floor and smashed his head, but he was heavy beyond belief. She eased him onto his back and discovered his airway was clear but his breathing was rapid and shallow. The skin of his face was a hideous shade of gray.

She bolted for her tricorder and when she returned, his eyelids were fluttering open. "Voris? Voris, can you hear me?"

He turned his head to look at her, licked his lips, and gasped, "Yes."

Then the coughing fit began. It was so violent she worried he was going to vomit and when he was finished, his desperate attempts to breathe broke her heart and terrified her. Adelaide had had similar symptoms, but she'd had cancer, nothing contagious. Or had she? Had there been some other respiratory disease that had compounded her symptoms? Surely, Voris would have noticed something like that.

"Dagny, I need-" His breathing was so labored it seemed like every shuddering breath would be his last.

"You need to shut up and let me get you on some oxygen," she snapped. "Can you stand so we can get you in the biobed?"

His eyes were dark and quiet, quite different than she'd ever seen them before. "Yes."

She pushed her upper body under his shoulder and helped him to the nearest biobed, but actually getting him up onto the thing was surprisingly difficult. His coordination was poor and it was evident he was dizzy. It took him enormous effort to hoist himself up onto the bed, but the moment he was lying down, she snapped the dome over him and activated the homeostatic controls.

"I'm s-s-sor-"

"Don't talk," she ordered.

Within several seconds, high flow oxygen flooded the chamber and his color improved slightly, but he was still in severe respiratory distress. She analyzed his vitals and did her best to keep from panicking. It was instinct really, not to let a patient know just how bad their condition was in order to avoid frightening them. But Voris was Vulcan and probably would have preferred the truth, but at that moment, she had no truth to give him.

He'd been fine when she'd joined him in the clinic that morning, or whatever passed for "fine" for Voris these days. He wasn't eating or sleeping nearly enough and he was working himself to death, but he'd looked generally healthy, at least.

Voris entered another coughing fit and she crossed her arms to hide the fact that her hands were shaking. He was sick, that much was clear, but sick with what? She glanced at the biofilter above the door and shuddered. It was supposed to neutralize 99.1% of all pathogens that came through the clinic door and recirculated the air so that the interior of the clinic was more or less sterile, but that still left almost one percent of pathogens unaccounted for. It was why she wore the mask while in the clinic and it was why they'd installed a second biofilter at the entrance to their quarters.
But Voris was definitely sick and coughing all over her. Had the mask slipped below her nose when she'd helped carry him? She tightened the rubber seal across the bridge of her nose, trying to swallow her terror. Things moved in slow motion for nearly a minute while she contemplated what it all meant. If Voris had gotten her sick, then what was done was done. Whether or not she was on borrowed time, she needed to treat him now.

His brain activity showed he was slipping into a dreamlike state. His elevated heart rate and blood pressure dropped slightly but was still high. Dagny gripped her forehead, trying to figure out what to do.

He needed medication, but to figure out what kind of medication, she needed a diagnosis. She could do that. She could do this. She grabbed her PADD.

"Check symptoms against patient data for diagnosis," she said, dictating into the PADD's microphone. "Vulcan male age fifty Standard years, presenting with rapid onset respiratory distress and coughing."

The PADD scrolled out a list of 2,411 possible causes. She groaned and added, "Eliminate sources of trauma."

The PADD narrowed it down to 891 potential causes, but she wondered if she really could eliminate things like smoke inhalation and dry drowning. What had happened to him up on the surface? What was the air temperature like? How had he managed to walk all the way to the clinic without someone noticing how terrible he looked?

She strongly suspected his symptoms related to some kind of pathogen, but she needed to run a DNA sweep to be sure. Until she was, she couldn't really rule anything out. She leaned forward toward the biobed and shouted, "Voris, can you hear me?"

His heart rate spiked. He opened his eyes and looked at her and only then did she notice how bloodshot they were. He also now had clear fluid running from both nostrils.

"I need to figure out what's going on, Voris," she said, keeping her voice as pleasant and level as she could manage. "I need to take a quick saliva sample, ok?"

"Yes." It was only one syllable, but it seemed to take extraordinary effort for him to get it out.

She raced to the storage cabinet to get a probe and once she was back by his side, she explained, "I'm going to lower the dome now. I'll be quick."

As the dome of the biobed snapped back, Voris' mouth formed a wide O shape as he struggled for air. She slipped the probe into his mouth and swabbed his cheek quickly, pulling it out just as he entered another coughing spell. She returned the dome to its closed position which muffled the sound of Voris coughing.

The probe was tinged green. She swallowed hard and slipped it into the receptacle of her tricorder for analysis, and after she synced the biobed with her handheld tricorder, words scrawled across the glass dome. "Initializing… analyzing…"

The machine started digesting the sample and separating out all the separate DNA she'd collected on the swab. "Primary genome detected… double-stranded DNA of Vulcan origin."

Dagny selected the button indicating that that DNA belonged to her patient and then it began the process of analyzing the nucleic acids of everything else in the sample. The average human mouth contained between one and two hundred separate species of commensal bacteria, plus a few dozen
harmless viruses at any given time. She had no idea what normal Vulcan oral flora looked like, but the biobed would tell her soon enough.

Ten seconds. Thirty seconds. A minute. Segments of DNA, RNA, and proteins flashed across the screen. None of it made sense to her, but the biobed's computer had already identified eighteen species of harmless bacteria. She checked Voris' vitals again, noting he'd once again entered a trance-like state. His blood oxygen levels were trailing downward in a gentle slope—the increased oxygen atmosphere of the enclosed biobed wasn't going to cut it for much longer. She guessed if things continued on as they were, he would need mechanical ventilation within the hour.

Dagny activated the speakers and amplified the internal sounds of the biobed. There was definite wheezing and a rattling and creaking sound indicating pleurisy. She trotted around to the other side of the biobed and activated the bioscanner, which sent a beam of light trailing across the upper half of Voris' body. The resulting image was upsetting but not particularly shocking, given his current state. His lungs were filling with fluid.

She whimpered and raced back to the other side of the biobed where the genetic analysis was still working to determine the pathogen that might be responsible for Voris' sudden illness. Thirty-seven separate organisms identified so far, but all of them harmless.

How could this be happening? He had been fine. He had said goodbye to her less than three hours ago when he'd left for Adelaide's funeral. She had given him the carved wooden box to place in her grave and he'd promised her he would. He had seemed perfectly healthy, except for being a bit fatigued.

Dagny closed her eyes and shuddered as a strong ringing sound filled her ears. What if he died? What if he'd gotten her sick and she died too? She glanced up at the biofilter by the doorway, noting the red light was still blinking. She checked the position of her mask again and tried to remain calm.

Voris' brain activity was ebbing into coma territory. She vaguely remembered the Battle of Vulcan and Dr. Sevek explaining to her that Vulcans were capable of controlling many of their physical processes through intensive meditation. They could raise or lower their body temperature, regulate their breathing and heart rate, and even modulate their immune functions to promote healing. Her eyes darted back to his vital signs, noting they weren't improving. The data was suggesting that he wasn't going to think his way out of this, no matter how hard he tried.

What was she supposed to do? What would Voris tell her to do? Probably calm down and think logically. But how was she supposed to do that when he was practically laying in a coma in a biobed when he'd walked out of the clinic looking fit as a fiddle that afternoon?

The fiftieth organism identified by the biobed's DNA analyzer flashed green, indicating it was another known species of commensal, perfectly harmless oral bacteria. She brought her thumb up to her mouth to chew the nail, but upon jabbing it into her mask, she pulled her hand away and shook it out.

Her heart was racing. Was that a symptom of whatever Voris had? Was she also getting sick? She grabbed her tricorder from the computer desk and took her own vitals and upon discovering they were normal, suddenly felt very foolish. She felt healthy, and the idea that Voris would stumble through the door, get her sick, and that she could turn around and start showing symptoms twenty minutes later was pretty ridiculous. The universe was full of highly pathogenic bugs, but very few were known to science that were quite that efficient.

But that still didn't really mean much. He could have been sick for days—perhaps he was only just now showing symptoms. But if that were true, she would have expected a lot more affected people.
coming through the clinic door, but there had been nothing like this. She watched the analyzer pick through the genetic elements from Voris' saliva sample and clenched her jaw. How could the thing be so slow?

She strode over to the clinic's computer and tapped the screen. "Computer, pull all logs from the last week—correction, two weeks—and search for any patients with acute respiratory problems."

Almost immediately, it returned two results. Adelaide, who despite her underlying cancer had been admitted to the clinic with acute respiratory problems prior to her official diagnosis, and Aisla's ten-month-old niece, Lula, who had come in with a mild cough and runny nose five days earlier.

She remembered now—she'd been installing updates on the tricorders and hadn't been able to run a scan for potential pathogens—but Aisla and her mother hadn't been all that worried and neither had Voris, plus the baby's symptoms were so mild, so she'd sent Lula and her family home with a decongestant and hadn't heard from them since. She gazed back at Voris in the biobed and shook her head.

So maybe she wasn't staring down the barrel of a colony-wide outbreak. He could be sick with a pathogen that only affected Vulcans, or maybe one that wasn't particularly contagious. She was halfway back to the computer desk when the door to the clinic burst open. "Dr. Voris? Oh no—where's the doctor?"

Dagny wheeled around to find Jacob Diels standing in the threshold and wringing his hands. "Please, help me!"

It was hard to rip her mind away from her own worries, but the evident fear and desperation in his eyes was hard to ignore too. "Captain Diels, what's wrong?"

"The baby. Khel. They're both sick. Khel can hardly breathe. She's coughing. There's blood. I would have brought her straight here, but she's barely conscious and I can't carry them both."

A chill rippled across her consciousness, settling into the pit of her stomach as a heavy knot. She turned and looked back at Voris and without making eye contact with Jacob ordered, "I need you to bring them here. Now. I can't leave the clinic, but it's very important that you get them here as fast as you can. Get someone to help you carry them."

He was already out the door before she finished speaking. Dagny fought valiantly to remain calm, but she was all too aware of a painful fact without even consciously thinking about it. Voris was Vulcan, Khel was Romulan, and her baby Christopher was half-Romulan. Maybe she had been on the right track with her theory that whatever Voris had only affected Vulcans or more generally, Vulcanoid species.

Almost as if on cue, the biobed emitted a series of three angry beeps. The genetic analysis had found a potentially harmful organism in Voris' saliva. She couldn't make it out from where she stood, but it was easy to spot the red highlighting of the word mixed in with the other green-coded, harmless organisms.

Rather than take the time to dwell on it, she marched over to the biobed. There were only three little words that read Orion Respiratory Virus. She'd never heard of it, but there were so many pathogens throughout the Federation and beyond she'd never heard of. She trotted back to the computer and blurted, "Computer, show all information relating to Orion Respiratory Virus."

There were millions of search results that were quickly compiled into a quick dossier. The very first sentence nearly made her heart stop.
"Orion Respiratory Virus (ORV) is a highly contagious single-stranded RNA virus indigenous to Orion and its outlying moons and is the causative agent of a disease commonly referred to as Orion lungworm…"

Voris stood outside the library in Gol, staring up at the third window from the left on the seventh floor. The distorted images in his periphery indicated this was a dream of sorts, woven into a memory to create a fantasy. There were loud, disembodied voices in the distance. He was dying, or his body was, and evidently his mind had decided to spend its final hours of life reminiscing over this period of contentment from his days of early adulthood.

He had a sense that when he entered the library and climbed the stairs to the seventh floor, he would find his first home with T'Sala and likely T'Sala herself, but how could he possibly face her, after everything that had happened?

He wanted to go to her but he was afraid. In his current state, controlling his emotions felt virtually impossible. Nostalgia and love and loss rolled over him like waves and he inhaled deeply, but could not remember the exact smell of this place. How could he have forgotten what it smelled like? There had been a bakery nearby, hadn't there? Suddenly his nostrils were full of the smell of warm bread.

The traffic moved quickly around him and the sun was low on the horizon, indicating it was very early morning. How dearly he had missed this place, and how greatly it shocked him to admit it. It was Vulcan, and it was his home.

"Will you come in?"

He shifted his eyes to the right and nearly gasped. T'Sala stood beside him, glancing up at him with patient and inviting eyes, just the way she always did, or the way she always had done. She was exactly as he remembered her—slender and petite with glossy black hair and fair skin. This vision was based on his memories, so even if the small details were wrong because his memory was imperfect, how would he ever know?

He looked straightforward once again to the steps of the library. He asked, "What will I find if I do go inside?"

There was no answer. "What will I find?" he insisted.

When he dared himself to look to his right again, he discovered she was gone. He missed her already and very nearly took off at a sprint toward the library, but he remained glued to the sidewalk. He wanted to go to her, but then he would have to tell her everything, about agreeing to marry T'Rya but instead consummating his pon farr with an innocent human woman who was now carrying his child. There was so much shame he could hardly bear it.

Voris managed to take a step forward and then another and after what felt like an eternity, he found himself standing outside his former apartment. Should he ring the bell? It was his home, or at the very least, it was his memory of his home, but he did not feel welcome there. He could barely breathe. Just as he raised his hand to activate the bell, the door sprung open to reveal T'Sala in her nightdress.

"Good morning," she said. "Come inside. I have been waiting for you."

"You have?"

She tilted her chin and offered the two forefingers of her right hand. "I have always been waiting."
He stared at her fingers, desperate to feel any connection to her but unable to bring himself to actually do it. What if nothing happened? This was just a memory, or a fantasy, after all.

"You have been away a long time," she continued. "Why do you refuse me?"

"Because you're dead."

His admission elicited no outward response in T'Sala. It suddenly occurred to him that he might not be experiencing some fleeting vision. Vulcans did not believe in the idea of an afterlife, but it would be illogical to claim an afterlife couldn't exist, simply because it had never been observed. But then suddenly, almost as if she knew his mind better than he did, she said, "You are not dead."

"Then why am I here?"

"I had supposed you might tell me."

He closed his eyes and thought he could hear the whisper of voices in the distance. Why had he come to this distant corner of his mind? He couldn't remember.

"Would you like first meal?"

He did not feel hungry but he slowly nodded, trying to remind himself that this wasn't reality. But the plomeek soup tasted real enough, hitting his stomach and sending a cascade of longing through him. T'Sala sat down across from him, her nightdress on the verge of slipping off her left shoulder. She was so beautiful and he wanted her so badly.

"Is it to your liking?"

"Yes," he said, unable to mask the desperation in his voice and unsure whether he was referring to the soup or the mere sight of her.

He watched her eat with almost ravenous delight, drinking in the lovely angles of her face and body. When she was nearly done, she looked up and said, "You are not eating. Why?"

"This isn't real. None of this is real. The soup, the apartment, you…"

"I'm as real as you want me to be."

"That doesn't mean anything. You're a figment of my imagination."

"Then why do you stay?"

"I don't know how to leave," he growled.

"You are angry."

"I cannot control my emotions in this place," he said, rising from the table with such force the soup in his bowl sloshed onto the table.

"Then do not try to."

Voris rubbed his forehead and wandered toward the window. He closed his eyes, suddenly noticing he could smell the spice in the soup and the fragrant scent of his mate's skin. The voices in the distance grew quieter. When she ran her hands over his shoulders, he jumped in surprise.

"Will you bond with me?" she asked.
"I cannot."

"Why?"

"Because you are not real." A tear slipped down his cheek, then another.

"Or is it because you share your heart with someone else now?"

"No."

"You lie."

"Lying is illogical."

"There is no logic in this place."

Voris turned and glared at her, but his anger melted into sorrow. He hadn't shared his heart with Dagny, but he'd certainly shared his body with her. "I have acted most regrettably."

"Bond with me," she repeated, reaching her hands toward his face.

He clutched her wrists, stopping her before she could make contact with him. Undeterred, T'Sala pulled her wrists away and slid her fingers over Voris'. The effect bordered on magical. She drew close to him, rubbing her slight body along his frame.

"I have missed you," he whispered, fighting the sensation of physical arousal.

"I know," she replied. "I have always known."

They stood together, quietly marking the time only by the sounds of their breaths. T'Sala shrugged the nightdress from her shoulders and allowed it to fall to the floor, and as much as he wanted to observe his mate's body, he forced himself to look away.

"You may have me, if you want me."

"It is not a matter of wanting," he insisted, moving toward the kitchen.

"It is logical to conclude you have taken a new mate."

"It is not as simple as that."

"I have always known that you would take a new mate one day," she called after him. "It is simply a necessity of your biology."

"I did not choose her."

"You did not choose me, either. Our parents chose us for each other."

"My father urged me to nullify our marriage. I chose you then."

"Yes, and you also chose to continue living after I was gone. I am glad for this."

"You are glad I have taken another mate?"

"A sentient being's optimal chance at maximizing utility is a long and prosperous life. I am glad you are alive and not alone. Do you care for her?"
"Not as I cared for you."

"Do you dislike her?"

"No."

Voris whirled around and stared at T'Sala, who was now fully dressed in casual attire and sitting on the bed in the corner. There was no hint of bitterness or jealousy in her but there never had been, not only because she was Vulcän and would have never expressed such things, but also because her personality lacked the ability to produce such sentiments. Or maybe his memories of her were tainted. She patted the quilt.

When he sat down beside her, she shifted her weight and turned to face him. "What has happened to you, adun?"

He fought the urge to cry again as the story of the past two and a half years poured out. He told her everything in a jumbled and incoherent narrative, explaining in no specific order the falling out with his father, the events aboard the Sekla, Mrs. DePaulo and Harold, Dagny and Vaksur, Cestus III and life on New Vulcän. When he began babbling about his impending fatherhood, she took his fingers in ozh'esta. He held his breath for longer than should have been possible.

How he wanted to kiss her, to mate with her, to have her in every conceivable way and to give himself to her in return. They laid down on the bed together and T'Sala nestled her forehead onto his chest. It was entirely right and entirely wrong. The moment her fingers brushed his, all he could think of was Dagny.

"I should go," he said softly.

"Then go."

Voris swallowed and stared up at the ceiling. It was becoming harder to breathe and the voices in the distance were becoming fainter. He rolled onto his left side to face T'Sala, who brushed the hair from his eyes.

"But I do not want to go," he finally said.

"Then stay."

He closed his eyes, allowing the idea to settle into his mind. It was incredibly tempting. He was very nearly asleep when he heard another voice from somewhere even deeper within himself.

"Please come back to me. I need you. I love you."

The last four hours had been utter hell. Khel and the Romulan boys, Rh'aen and Rh'ael, were conscious but still struggling to breathe and Voris remained comatose, no worse but also no better. Christopher Diels was sick but his symptoms were relatively mild, which she hoped was the result of his hybrid physiology, but the disease could shift so quickly that there was no telling what might happen, so she asked Jake to keep him in the clinic, not that he had any immediate plans to leave anyway.

She'd sent an emergency subspace message to Drs. Govorski and Sevek on New Vulcän, asking for any guidance they had for handling an outbreak of Orion lungworm, but it was the middle of the night in that region of New Vulcän. At present, Samantha Bergeron was sitting at the clinic's computer desk, reading the dossier on Orion lungworm.
"Give it to me straight—how bad is this disease?" Sam asked, turning away from the biobeds to face Dagny.

"It depends," she admitted, wondering if Sam had read the information or just wanted Dagny to confirm it. "To Vulcans, Romulans, and Rigelians, it's devastating. Orions generally don't get all that sick—they've spent millennia coevolving with the virus. Just about everyone else on the colony is probably going to be ok, but they can still transmit it. I sent a subspace message to some doctors I know on New Vulcan, but until they reply back, I think we need to go ahead with the quarantine of all Vulcanoid colonists in their homes."

"How did this happen?" Sam asked, slumping down on the stool by the computer.

"It seems some of the new Orion colonists brought it with them from their previous colony. The biofilters on the ship's transporters might have filtered it out, but Captain Diels says they were brought to the surface via shuttle because they needed all the power they could get to transport up another shipment of bulk ore. And there actually have been documented cases of the virus slipping through transporter biofilters, so it could have happened either way."

At the mention of his name, Samantha Bergeron glanced in the direction of Jacob Diels, who was clutching his son to his chest and sitting by his wife's side as she lay encased in a biobed. Khel had also been forced to resort to a biobed to breathe and in the last hour, two Romulan teenagers had arrived with their parents, complaining of shortness of breath and sore throats. The parents were fine, but the boys were rapidly deteriorating.

"At last count, we had two Vulcans, twelve Rigelians, and thirty-three Romulans on this colony," Sam sighed, biting her lip.

"I know, but many of them were vaccinated as children, which might provide some protection, depending on how long ago it was. The Vulcans and Rigelians stopped routinely vaccinating against the disease twenty years ago after they went twenty years with no cases, but the Romulans tell me that they still vaccinate for it," she explained, nodding in the direction of the Romulan family in the corner of the clinic. "The Romulan kiddos over there didn't get the vaccines because they grew up in a forced labor camp and only escaped with their parents two years ago. Getting routine shots wasn't high on the list of priorities."

"But wasn't Dr. Voris was giving inoculations to the miners?"

"To the miners, yes, and as far as I can tell, every Orion and Vulcanoid working in the secondary tunnels on Alpha and Gamma shift got a vaccine for Orion lungworm within the last five days, but it can take up to two weeks for that vaccine to be fully effective. They might be partially protected, along with anyone who got a vaccine as a child, but then again, both Voris and Khel were vaccinated as children and they're both sick."

"And it's really as contagious as you say?"

"It's among the most contagious diseases known to medical science," Dagny explained, almost feeling annoyed that she was being asked to confirm everything Sam had just read. "I almost don't know how effective a quarantine will be if this virus has been on the colony for the last five days, but it's better than nothing. At a bare minimum, we need to tell people to watch for symptoms and I need to get the clinic ready to receive at least fifty patients in the event of a worst-case scenario, and I don't have the space, equipment, or staff to do that. And that doesn't even address the other medical needs of the rest of the colony."

"Ok, we can send for more supplies from Aldebaran and pushing the Oglethorpe, we might have
"This disease has a three to seven day incubation period, but once symptoms start, it gets ugly fast. I saw Voris this morning and he was fine, but three hours later, he could barely breathe. Even with aggressive medical intervention, this disease has a mortality rate of between fifteen and twenty percent. And we only have the resources to treat about eight people with aggressive medical intervention. In three weeks, there's a good chance most of the Vulcanoid population of this colony will be dead."

Sam leapt off the stool and swore under her breath.

"What if we asked the colony on the northern continent for help?" Dagny suggested. "If they can send supplies, that'd be something."

"There are forty-three graves on the surface of this colony," Sam said darkly, pointing upward. "If the Federation colony were willing to help us, that graveyard wouldn't exist."

"They would let around fifty people die to prove a point? That doesn't sound very Federation-like."

"Our split from the main colony wasn't… well, it wasn't very popular with the people who stayed behind. The Federation wasn't happy about the Klingons and actually considers it a crime to associate with Romulans, but because we're not technically in Federation territory, there wasn't much they could do. They worry that associating with us could get their colony status revoked, so they've largely refused to communicate with us."

"Ok, well, what if we reached out to their medical staff directly? They still have a duty-"

"I don't think you realize what's really at stake here, Dagny." Sam said, lowering her voice. "Captain Diels and the Oglethorpe were held in New Vulcan's orbit and not allowed to transport down to the planet just at the mere mention of the disease."

The corners of Dagny's mouth twitched. She didn't like where the conversation was going. "Yes, I remember."

"And according to the report you gave me, at least a dozen species have been shown transmit the virus without getting sick, including humans. If word gets out that there's Orion lungworm here, not only will all the Vulcans and Romulans and Rigelians die, this colony will die. We'll be turned away from pretty much every port. No one will trade with us. I don't know if you realize this, but our greenhouses don't produce nearly enough food to feed everyone. Our economy runs on lithium and dilithium and it's worth a lot of money, but we can't eat it."

"I grew up on a salvage ship," Dagny shot back. "There's always a demand for dilithium and even the squeaky-clean Federation has done some shocking things to get it when there's been a shortage. They negotiated with the organized crime syndicate in the Corvan system, they-"

"What I'm saying is," Sam interrupted slowly, "I think for now, we're on our own."

"I already sent messages to doctors on New Vulcan detailing the problem here," Dagny responded, her hands shaking once again, this time in anger. "This isn't going to stay a secret."

"You gave the message to the ops station, and they contacted me. I told them to hold off on sending them until I spoke with you."

Dagny fought a fleeting, wild impulse to attack the colony's leader. "You're seriously going to try and cover up an outbreak because it would be bad economics?"
The loved ones of the sick people in the clinic turned to look at her. "Lower your voice," Sam urged.

"No, I will not lower my voice. What you're implying is dangerous, irresponsible and probably even criminal. You said yourself you understand that other species can still transmit the virus even if they don't get sick. If you send people out there to keep trading, lungworm is almost guaranteed to make its way back to Rigel and New Vulcan eventually and they wouldn't even see it coming! They stopped vaccinating for this disease because they assumed it had been eradicated, but if they knew it wasn't, they would at least have time to protect their populations!"

By the end of her rant, Dagny was shouting and everyone in the clinic was staring at them, or at least, everyone who was conscious. Sam glowered and replied, "I only wanted to have all the facts before I took any action. Help me to help you. What ideas do you have for getting through this with as few casualties as possible? And that includes casualties from starving to death when we run out of food to feed the colonists."

"Yeah, well, what about the casualties that would come from reintroducing a long-eradicated disease back into vulnerable populations? Do you really want to go down in history books as being the deciding factor that finally pushed the Vulcan species to extinction?"

The buzzer to the clinic sounded and Dagny hit the switch to open the door. Aisla walked in with a basketful of food and surveyed the scene. There were tears forming in her eyes. "Thought I might help, lovey."

Dagny was about to reply, "Please, we need all the help we can get," when Rhaev, Rh'aen and Rh'eal's father, barked, "What is she doing here?"

Aisla's green face blanched into an odd shade of beige. "I work here part time and-"

"You are the reason my sons are going to die. You and Orion filth like you."

"Rhaev, what's done is done," Sam said with a cold tone of finality. "And Aisla has been on this colony since it was founded."

"I don't want her near my sons," Rhaev insisted. His wife peeked over his shoulder, fear and anger in her eyes.

"I have a feeling things are going to get worse before they get better," Sam continued. "And we're going to need all hands on deck."

A shouting match ensued between Rhaev and Sam about who deserved the blame for the current situation and Dagny tried to keep Aisla from retreating through the clinic door. Jacob Diels joined in when Nhael, Rhaev's wife, suggested it was his fault for bringing Orion lungworm back to the colony in the first place and soon Christopher's screaming was added to the mix.

Dagny pulled herself onto a nearby table and screamed, "Everyone shut up!"

The din faded, aside from the crying infant in Jake's arms, and soon five angry and shocked faces were staring at her. She hadn't actually expected them to quiet down and listen, and so she didn't know what to say.

"L-listen, Sam's right. She's right. Things are bad and they're probably going to get worse. Everyone shares some blame here. The Orions didn't screen people leaving their colony to make sure they were healthy and had all the necessary vaccinations, Jake didn't screen people boarding his ship, the colony had no policy to screen new people and so Voris and I didn't screen anyone or make sure they were up to date on their vaccines, and even the parents didn't bother to make sure their kids
were vaccinated. There's plenty of blame to go around, but what's the point? It's not going to improve anyone's chances."

"I don't want her treating my sons," Rhaev snarled, pointing at Aisla.

"And I don't feel like dealing with your racism right now, so fine," Dagny growled back. "If you want to limit the care your sons can receive, that's on you, but I'm only one person and I can't be everywhere at once."

He puffed his chest out to reply but Nhael put her hand on his shoulder and shook her head. Jake helped Dagny off the table and she furiously rubbed her temples. Her face mask was itchy and she wanted to rip it off and stomp on it, but even though neither she nor the baby were at risk of contracting Orion lungworm—the virus was unable to cross the placenta—there could still be other pathogens present in the clinic.

How badly she wanted Voris' guidance and advice. She should check on him, she thought. She should check on Khel and the boys. She should start working on a colony-wide notice about Orion lungworm symptoms, assuming Sam still wanted to go ahead with the quarantine. She sighed heavily and glanced at the colony's leader, who looked just as afraid and desperate as Dagny felt. The two women stared at each other, almost as if waiting to see who would take charge first.

Sam looked away and said, "I'll send out an advisory and see if there is anyone who can get us medical supplies."

"Thank you."

She left the clinic and Dagny wandered over to her patients. The boys were on nasal cannulas and high flow oxygen and though their blood oxygen was dangerously close to dipping below an acceptable threshold, it had remained stable for the last hour, probably due in part to the throxinidizine she'd administered to stave off the development of excess fluid in their lungs. Throxinidizine had some unpleasant side effects, chiefly that it worked to keep fluid out of the lungs by dehydrating the body, and so it could lead to other lung complications or even renal failure.

She was just on her way to examine Voris when the light on the end of his biobed flashed red and began to beep. He had stopped breathing but he had a weak pulse.

"No!" she shrieked, flipping back the biobed dome and gripping his cheeks.

He was lifeless and his skin was cool to the touch. She raced to the surgical suite, knocking over the small table they used to hold instruments, and grabbed the primary ventilator. She had never actually intubated anyone. She'd done simulations and worked on dummies in her paramedic training and had watched Voris do it several times, but despite many advances in modern medicine, many things could still go wrong.

She took a deep breath, pried his mouth open, slid the laryngoscope blade into position to the right of the tongue, and begged her hands to stop shaking.

"Do you need help, lovey?"

"No," Dagny snapped, feeling dizzy.

She was moving on instinct, the steps of the procedure hazy and jumbled in the back of her mind. She lifted his jaw upward to move it into better position, applied cricoid pressure, and had a clear view of is larynx. This seemed so textbook. She fumbled for an appropriate size tube on the side of the ventilator and just as she was about to insert it, she heard another insistent beeping sound from
the biobed next to her.

"No!" Jake yelled. "I think Khel stopped breathing! Please, please no!"

Dagny had pretty much stopped breathing too. She froze and without looking up said, "Aisla, can you provide manual ventilation until I can get over there?"

She saw movement out of the corner of her eye and wondered why the beeping sound wasn't stopping. Then she realized the monitor on her abdomen was alerting her to a dangerous increase in her body temperature. All she wanted was a small break, but sensing she wasn't going to get one for a long time, she closed her eyes, took a few slow breaths, and slid the tube into Voris' mouth and watched the tube enter the trachea. She secured the tube and checked to ensure it was actually in the trachea and not the esophagus and after a minute when she realized she had done everything correctly—Voris' chest was rising and falling and his blood oxygen levels were ticking back up again—she nearly laughed, at least until she remembered Khel had stopped breathing and she needed to do it all over again.

The clinic only had two ventilators, though theoretically, the units they had could provide oxygen to four patients. She grabbed a smaller set of equipment and headed for Khel, whose airway was being manually maintained by Aisla with a mask and a bag. Her temperature monitor continued to beep and her hands were shaking once again. It was so hot in the clinic.

Just as she leaned down to attempt her second ever intubation, a sharp pain cut through the lower part of her belly. She gasped and dropped the laryngoscope blade, which clanged to the floor.

"Dagny, are you-"

"I'm fine," she winced, trying to keep from doubling over in pain and terror. "I'm fine."

The next several hours saw her intubate not only Khel, but also Rh'aen. It never seemed to stop. Every time Dagny managed to get one life-threatening crisis under control, another one would pop up somewhere else. She kept lowering the temperature in the clinic only to have her temperature monitor go off again a short time later, and though the pain in her belly went away, its cause remained unknown, and that only added to her worry.

In between it all, she enlisted the help of the others in the clinic to help set up the unfinished convalescent ward in the event that they received any more patients. They transferred Voris, Khel, and Rh'aen out of the biobeds and onto regular cots to free up space for triage, but just as she was preparing to administer IV solutions and catheters, Rh'ael stopped breathing and she had to stop what she was doing and intubate him as well.

All four of her patients had woken up healthy and now less than twenty-four hours later, they were on life support. She had another ventilator that could handle four more severe Orion lungworm cases, but that was it. It was like being back on the Albret again—too many patients and not enough equipment or training to handle it. How could she have been so lucky for so long to have not had to deal with something as bad as this? Even at the Battle of Vulcan, she'd had other physicians with far more experience to rely on. Now all she had was Aisla, and though she dearly appreciated her help, Dagny wasn't ready to be in charge of a major outbreak.

Her temperature monitor went off again and without skipping a beat, she lowered the internal temperature of the clinic to eighteen degrees Celsius.

"It's getting a little cold in here, don't you think?" Rhaev asked, looking up from Rh'ael's bedside.
"Put on a jacket if you're cold," Dagny grumbled. She went upstairs, fetched some blankets, and she and Aisla started covering the patients to keep them warm.

She took extra care tucking the edges around Voris' feet, watching his vitals on the secondary monitor she'd hooked up to the foot of the cot. He was alive, but for how much longer?

"Why don't you have a bite to eat and put your feet up for a few minutes?" Aisla said from behind her.

"There's too much to do," Dagny replied, thinking she should administer another round of troxindizine to her patients and make sure the clinic was ready to receive any more patients.

"You're going to work yourself to death and then where will we all be?" Aisla stepped forward, holding a bowl of fruit salad. "Eat. I'll keep an eye on things for a little while and won't hesitate to come get you if I need anything."

The scene in the convalescent ward was pretty subdued. Dagny looked around and saw Jake sitting next to Khel. Christopher was fast asleep in his arms and he was gently stroking his wife's hand. Rhaev and Nhael were sitting between their boys, backs to each other but touching so that they were still close and both of their boys had someone with them.

Dagny took the bowl and gazed at the cantaloupe and strawberries, which made her think of Adelaide and of the dead woman's hard life. She had survived several famines and now that Orion lungworm had come to Bergeron colony, maybe they were all standing at the threshold of starvation too, assuming Sam's worst case scenario came true. Aisla pulled a chair from the clinic's waiting room over to Voris' bedside and motioned for her to sit, which she did.

She set the fruit salad on her thighs. She was hungry, but she would have to go upstairs and eat on account of the mask. She allowed her eyes to rest on her swollen belly and started mulling over all the events that had led her to this moment, but stopped when she realized it was going to drive her crazy. The only thing that had kept her from going crazy during this whole mess had been her ability to stay busy. Aisla was right: physically, she needed rest, but mentally, rest was probably the worst possible thing, because it gave her time to think. She was in the middle of a high-risk pregnancy and her baby's father was lying in a coma next to her on life support. It didn't matter how it had all come to this, because they were here now, and she was so incredibly afraid.

She took several slow breaths, trying to keep control of herself. Some ingrained instinct made her reach for Voris' hand, but the moment her skin made contact with his, she felt the last of her emotional strength crumble. She leaned forward, rested her head on his arm, and whispered, "Please come back to me. I need you. I love you."
When Voris opened his eyes again, he was standing at the entrance to the Hall of Ancient Thought on Mount Seleya. The images were hazy and ill-formed, but he had few memories of this place. His forefather, Skon, had brought him here once as a boy, and he had visited upon the death of his mother's father a short time after that, but he was not well acquainted with this sacred site. Strange that his mind would choose to bring him here.

"Have you decided to stay?"

He didn't need to turn around to know T'Sala stood behind him. He could not answer her question, because he had no definite answer.

"Come to me, adun."

He slowly turned, startled to find her wearing the clothes she wore on the day of their bonding ceremony, her face partially hidden beneath the mask of a pale purple veil.

"Do I have a choice?"

Her eyes scanned the scenery. "Everything you see before you is a choice."

He nodded and walked toward her, one slow step at a time. Her back stiffened and she cocked her head, almost conspiratorially. "You must decide soon. This place will not last forever."

"It would be illogical to elect to remain in an impermanent location."

"Every logical decision has an illogical element."

Voris threw up his hands. "I want to stay, but I want to stay with you, not my memory of you."

"There is a reason your mind has brought you here, Voris," she replied, motioning behind her to the Hall of Ancient Thought.

"This place is gone also. It now only exists in my memories, and the memories of the Vulcans who survived."

"The place is gone, but the idea of it is not."

Voris gulped. "You imply you exist somewhere else."

She tilted her chin. "I exist in your heart."

Voris sighed, turned his back to her, and paced several irritated steps. She was talking in circles. "And when I die, then where will you exist?"

"That is for you to discover on your own."

His chin trembled. "I want to stay with you."

"Then stay."
He exhaled sharply, and turned to face her. "It cannot be so simple as that."

"No, it isn't," she agreed.

Voris stared at her for a long time. He loved this woman and for a time, it seemed as though nothing else mattered. He could stay here, even in this half-existence, and he could be content. He was about to tell her so when he noticed movement from behind her flowing skirts. A small face peeked out from behind T'Sala's thigh before quickly disappearing again.

"Who is that?" he asked, afraid of her answer.

"You already know," T'Sala replied, turning slightly without taking her eyes off him. "She is a fascinating thing."

Voris took a cautious step forward as T'Sala led a small girl from behind her back. The harder he stared at her, the less clear her features became, but she had a pair of unmistakably blue eyes. Human eyes.

"I always wanted one of our own," she said wistfully, kneeling down to the child.

"I know," Voris choked, stepping forward.

"She reminds me very much of you."

When he looked at her indirectly, she seemed so clear, but whenever he tried to focus on her, her form became blurry, like he was seeing her through the edges of a magnifying glass. Voris desperately wanted to see her. He knelt down beside T'Sala and offered a shaking hand to the girl.

The child hugged T'Sala tightly and buried her face in her chest, only to peek back at Voris several moments later. It was like Dagny was looking back at him. T'Sala whispered, "You are still a stranger to her."

He replied without thinking, "I do not want to be. I want us to know each other."

T'Sala stood suddenly, the girl evaporating into the folds of her wedding dress. "You cannot have both."

Voris instinctively started to lunge forward at his daughter's disappearance but stopped himself when he realized he would only be grasping at air. Seeing her and having her taken away was a unique kind of emotional pain that he hadn't anticipated. T'Sala wasn't real, but neither was the child. How he hated this place and his inability to repress emotions.

"You do not realize it yet, but you love her," T'Sala finally said.

"And I love you too." He had never actually spoken those words to her, but she did not seem surprised by his admission. She had always known he loved her, just as he had always known she loved him. Words were unnecessary.

"Your time is running out." She descended the stairs and walked toward the edge of the cliff. Voris squinted against the fading evening sun and walked down to meet her. The valley floor stretched on forever in all directions.

They watched the sun sink and as the light faded from rich orange into red and threatened to become purple, Voris clutched her hand but could not bear to look her in the face. "I'll miss you."
"I know. But adun, if you are going to go, you must go now."

He let go of her hand and turned to see her face one last time, but she was already gone. He gazed out over the horizon, closed his eyes, and stepped over the edge.

"Is he doing any better?" Ann asked, clutching the basket of food so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

Dagny's answer was automatic. "Not really."

"But he's not getting worse, is he?"

Dagny blinked several times, gently touched the blanket around Voris' feet and replied, "No. He's just... there. He has a pulse and brain activity, but..."

"He's going to be ok," Ann said, cutting off Dagny's train of thought. "We're going to be ok."

Even if it didn't feel like it, she was probably right. The number of confirmed cases of Orion lungworm had risen to twelve in the last forty-eight hours, but things were still manageable. Seven of her patients were on a ventilator, but three of those patients, Khel and the teenage Romulan twins, had regained conscious and were slowly being weaned off mechanical ventilation. With any luck, all three would be breathing on their own within the next several hours.

Four other patients, two Rigelians and two Romulans, were stable on supplemental oxygen. Their records indicated Voris had vaccinated three of them in the days prior to the outbreak and the fourth had received a vaccine twenty-two years ago as a child. They were sick enough to need to be admitted to the clinic, but their immune systems were getting around to responding to the virus and they would probably be back on their feet in a week.

Four hours ago, some men had brought in a nonresponsive ninety-nine-year-old Romulan man, and though Dagny and Aisla had fought for the better part of an hour to stabilize him, it hadn't been enough. Ann's son Nicolas had helped move the body into the surgical suite, but Dagny needed to process a death certificate before his friends could perform a ceremonial cremation.

She'd had a lot of help from various volunteers. Hadrian Moore, an older gentleman who had been through Starfleet's First Aid Course, was now working a regular shift in the clinic in addition to managing logistics for the colony. His skills were a bit rusty but he was good enough at checking vitals and making notes in charts. Aisla had been in the clinic since the outbreak had started and had managed to get by with taking naps upstairs in Dagny's bed every twelve hours. The Svendsen family, along with many people who routinely stayed on the Oglethorpe, rotated through to sit with patients and give their loved ones—if they had loved ones—the chance to go home and shower or rest. And through it all, Zernon and Jester Blakely, the man who ran the local tavern, had kept everyone in the clinic fed.

Even though people seemed to be pulling together for the greater good in the clinic, Constable Kilpatrick had remained busy breaking up scuffles between Orions and some of the other colonists. It was bad enough that all the Vulcainoid colonists were at risk of contracting a dangerous virus without the added risk of Orion colonists being assaulted because of it.

That morning, or maybe it had been last night, Aisla had been summoned to the detention center to patch up some lacerations and broken bones following a brawl in the main tunnel that had pitted three Orion men against a mob of about a dozen people. For once, Dagny was glad she was confined to the clinic because the world outside currently seemed to exist on a razor's edge, with everyone...
looking for an excuse to descend into civil disorder. Bergeron colony had always seemed too good to
be true, and all it had taken were a few cases of Orion lungworm to prove people still had an ugly
side, if they were scared enough.

The clinic door opened and when Dagny heard her name, she jerked her eyes open, shocked to
discover she'd been drifting off while standing next to Ann. She rubbed her forehead and turned to
greet Samantha Bergeron, who was holding a PADD and wearing a resolute expression.

"I can only handle good news right now," Dagny said.

"I can't promise it's all good, but it's not the worst news we've had this week."

Dagny raised her brow and waited for Sam to continue. Sam looked around and noticing Jake in the
corner watching them, motioned for him to join the conversation.

"Is the northern colony going to send supplies?" he asked excitedly.

"Ah, no, but the Federation is willing to provide an emergency relief package. It's going to take a
month for them to get out this way, but they'll deliver three months' worth of food and some extra
medical supplies."

Dagny almost wanted to laugh because in the back of her mind, she could hear her father say,
"Better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick." How she missed his silly little sayings.

Sam handed her the PADD, which contained an inventory of the items the Federation was donating,
including the stasis chamber she had Voris had asked for two months ago, plus two extra biobeds,
four more biofilters, and another chemical synthesizer. The other items were nice to have but not
really essential. Two more tricorders, another bone knitter, and two more dermal regenerators were
useless without another person trained to operate them. Still, she was grateful and understood the
inherent value in having spares on hand.

"It's nice that the Federation is willing to help out," Dagny shrugged. "That's got to be a good sign,
right?"

"I have a feeling they're coming this way to see what the Klingons and Gorn are up to and delivering
medical relief to us was just a convenient excuse," Jake replied darkly. "I have it on good authority
they checked on the northern colony last month, so they weren't due out this way again for a while."

Sam crossed her arms and nodded in agreement.

"What's going on with the Klingons and Gorn?" Dagny asked, looking back and forth between Sam
and Jake.

"I don't know for sure, but I'm hearing through the very end of the grapevine they're in the midst of a
territorial dispute," Sam explained. "If they go to war, we're going to end up getting caught in it;
maybe not right in the middle, but close enough that it won't matter."

She should have been shocked or at least frightened by the news, but she was too worn out from the
current crisis on her doorstep. "So, we'll get food and extra medical supplies in a month, which isn't
much use now, but it's better than nothing. You were right, it could have been better, but it could
have been a lot worse."

"Don't count on it," Jake scowled, glancing at Sam. "If I know Miss Bergeron, she likes to lead with
the good: softens the blow, you see."
Sam winced and nodded. "The reason the Federation is dropping off food is because they're quarantining us for a year."

"A year?" shouted Jake, drawing the attention of the rest of the clinic.

"No one goes in or out—that was the deal," Sam said gloomily. "You'll have to land the Oglethorpe and I need to submit a by-name list of all colonists within the next twenty-four hours. The Federation Health Service will send people out here in a year to screen everyone and confirm the colony is free of the virus. I guess in the meantime, New Vulcan and Rigel have resurrected their previous vaccination programs."

"They're cutting us off from trading for a year and only giving us enough food for three months?" Jake protested. "That's worth about as much as a fart in the wind on a cold day."

"We have the food you brought back on your last trip, plus the current food on hand in the greenhouses, and we have plenty of land on the surface."

"We're in the dead middle of winter," Jake shot back.

"Snow melts," Sam responded. "And when it does, we need to be ready to start planting."

"So that's it then? We go from being a profitable mining colony to one relying on subsistence agriculture? Most of the people here are miners, not farmers."

"Most of the people here weren't miners when they showed up, but they learned. I have a feeling they'll learn to plant crops if it means their kids get to eat."

Jake clutched his head and turned around. "This is unbelievable."

"Do calm down, Jake," Sam sighed. "It's not the end of the world."

He grumbled and shuffled back to his wife's bedside. Dagny was about to join him and check up on the patients when Sam added, "The Federation Health Service also wants an update on the current outbreak. Still only one fatality?"

"Yeah."

"How's Dr. Voris doing?"

Dagny exhaled slowly through pursed lips. "He's hanging in there, but he hasn't regained consciousness."

Sam's eyes flicked to Dagny's belly. "I've known a few Vulcans in my time. They're real stubborn when it comes to dying. He's going to be ok."

For her sake and the rest of the colony, she desperately hoped so. Dagny shuddered at the thought of being forced to live on Bergeron colony for the next year all by herself. Her need for Voris to get better extended far beyond her complicated feelings for the man. Not only was she not prepared to have a baby on her own, she wasn't prepared to assume the responsibility for caring for more than a thousand colonists by herself.

The hours ticked by and she was able to remove Khel and the twins from the ventilator and two of her other patients on mechanical ventilation were now awake and would probably be able to come off it in the morning. From everything she'd read, it would take them between four and six months to fully recover from Orion lungworm, so they were at the beginning of a very long journey, but the
atmosphere was far more hopeful than it had been in days.

She intended to keep them all in the clinic for at least another week if she could spare the bed space because approximately five percent of patients were reported to suffer from spontaneous relapse syndrome within the first few days of recovery. Even if they didn't relapse, they had weeks of extreme fatigue, shortness of breath, and muscle weakness and spasms to look forward to.

The situation remained serious but the scenes unfolding in the convalescent ward were beautiful to behold. In the far corner, Nhael was patiently helping her sons eat their broth when they grew too tired to hold a spoon. On the left side of Voris, Khel and was sitting up and baby Christopher was lying on her legs, gripping his mother's fingers with happy zeal. She was pale and her voice was raspy from the endotracheal tube, but the wide smile on her face was only slightly smaller than that of her husband's.

The ward was packed with volunteers and friends and family huddled around bedsides, telling tired jokes and immersing themselves in the unique brand of camaraderie that was found only in hospital settings. Nearly everyone seemed to be doing better. Voris was the lone holdout, and staying busy checking up on everyone else was losing its effectiveness at keeping her mind off his situation.

She was exhausted and uncomfortable. She'd developed a rash on the lower part of her face from wearing a mask for three days straight, taking it off only to race upstairs and gobble down a quick meal and slurp of water before wading back into the trenches. She wanted sleep, but she wanted Voris to wake up more.

Another hour passed by and then another and soon, the ward started to quiet down as people settled into sleep for the night and most of the visitors trickled home, promising to come back first thing in the morning. Dagny made another quick round to check her patients, gave herself her weekly injection of immunosuppressants, and then found herself back at Voris' bedside.

She was so desperate for him to get better that it was almost making her angry, though she wasn't exactly sure what she was angry about. Being angry at him was ridiculous and being angry with herself was just as unproductive—she'd done everything she could. It was up to him now, and waiting for him to make up his mind about whether or not he wanted to live made her feel as helpless and overwhelmed as she had on the Albret, trying to synthesize trialgenine in the midst of a Class 9 neutronic storm.

"Excuse me, Dagny?" She felt a gentle hand shake her shoulder and sat up with a loud snort.

Her eyes drifted back into focus to see Jacob Diels standing over her with Christopher in his arms, and she realized she'd been sleeping sitting up in the chair. The right side of her mask was wet from where she'd been drooling. "Oh, sorry, was I snoring?"

"Yeah, but it's ok. You're not the only person." Jake smiled and glanced over at the two Rigelians in the opposite corner who were snuffling in tandem.

Dagny sat forward and rubbed her eyes. "What can I do for you, Jake?"

"I hate to trouble you, but Christopher needs formula and you said Khel still couldn't feed him and-"

"Say no more," Dagny said, bouncing to her feet with more energy than she'd have previously guessed she had.

Khel breastfed her son, but ever since she'd been admitted to the clinic, Dagny had been forced to replicate infant formula so Christopher could eat. Replicating food was a moderate energy expense
and the ops station had contacted her the day before to ask about it, but there was nothing to be done. Some nursing human mothers had pumped and donated breastmilk, but human breastmilk was exceptionally fatty and lacked sufficient iron and copper that his unique Romulan physiology required, and so she'd been forced to supplement his diet with replicated formula.

When she returned with the bottle, she found Jake in a semi-dozing state next to Voris' bed, Christopher fussing in his arms. Dagny shook his shoulder and asked, "Are you going to make it?"

His eyes jerked open, revealing the bloodshot whites around the irises. He vigorously shook his head to wake himself up and replied, "I don't know that I've ever been this tired."

"Why don't you let me feed him? You go rest."

"What about you?"

"I have to stay up at least until Aisla wakes up and comes down to keep an eye on things, which should be in about half an hour. It'll keep me awake."

Jake looked unsure, but he also looked exhausted, and after a few short seconds of hesitation, passed off his infant son and slumped onto the cot next to his wife's. Dagny pulled Christopher's infant cot to the other side of Voris' bed, sat down in the chair, and popped the nipple of the bottle into his mouth. He fed hungrily.

Christopher was only two months old, but he was already bigger than a human baby would be at his age. Her own baby would probably develop much as Christopher had, which was interesting food for thought. She gently stroked the fine black hairs on his head and fingered his tiny, pointed ears. In many ways, it still didn't feel real that she would have one of these for her own in a little more than four months, assuming everything turned out ok.

She hadn't listened for her baby's heartbeat in ages and after the intense pains in her stomach several days ago, she was too afraid to. The medical literature had suggested Orion lungworm couldn't cross the placenta and affect a fetus, but that was only true for mothers who were fully Vulcan. No studies had ever been done on hybrid pregnancies.

She started having flashbacks of all the times her mask might have slipped down from her nose, wondering if she'd been exposed to the virus. If not Orion Respiratory Virus, maybe she'd been exposed to something else. Maybe all the times she'd started overheating from the early stresses of managing the outbreak had hurt her baby, or maybe lack of sleep was doing some kind of harm to it.

She looked down at Christopher, who was suckling earnestly at the bottle, and her eyes started to well up at the thought that after everything she'd been through, she might lose her baby anyway. She'd offered to feed him because she thought it would take her mind off her troubles, but it was only making them so much worse. The what-ifs were threatening to drive her batty.

Even more than hearing her baby's heartbeat, she wanted to feel something, any little kick or flutter or movement to let her know things were alright. She was almost twenty-three weeks along, visibly showing, and still had felt nothing. If Voris were awake, he'd tell her to stop worrying and offer to perform a scan to set her mind at ease. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and with a shaking voice whispered, "Dammit, why won't you wake up?"

Then something brushed her knee. Surprise made her open her eyes and when she did, she found Voris blinking frantically up at the ceiling. In her hurry to get to her feet, she nearly dropped the baby. She slid her left hand under the baby's bottom and propped him up on her chest, and with her free right hand, gripped Voris' fingers and said, "Voris, can you hear me? If you can understand me,
Holding Voris' fingers sent an odd, subtle wave of exhilaration through her hand and all the way to her chest. It was familiar, but she couldn't remember when she'd ever experienced it before. When he gave her hand a weak squeeze, she almost laughed in delight.

"Give me a second, I'm going to check your vitals, ok? Squeeze my hand if you understand."

Voris squeezed her hand again, firmer this time, and when she tried to pull away, she noticed his eyes were darting between her and Christopher. The look of shock on his face was probably the most un-Vulcan thing she'd ever seen, and it took her a few seconds to realize what he was probably thinking.

She put her hand over her mask to stifle a sharp laugh and nodded to her stomach. "This is Khel's son, Christopher. You've only been out for two days, not six months."

His facial features relaxed, but when Dagny tried to pull away from him again to check his vitals on the monitor at the foot of his bed, he tightened his grip. He was too weak to hold her, but the action sent a strange jolt through her. Her worry started to melt away and she felt more content than she had in ages.

"I'm so glad you're ok," she replied, squeezing his hand in return. "A lot's happened in the past few days. I don't even know where to begin."

Voris gripped the counter, thinking he would need to sit down and rest soon. It was remarkable how the act of even standing for thirty minutes at a time could exhaust him. Still, he had a desire to be useful, particularly since Dagny had been forced to manage everything on her own for so long and so, he returned to slicing the vegetables for their end meal later that evening.

He was supposed to be resting, but spending the entirety of his day in bed wouldn't be good for his recovery either. Extended periods of bedrest led to muscle atrophy and reduced circulation and so every two hours, he made it a point to get up and walk a lap around the room.

He was already much stronger than he had been five days ago when Dagny had removed him from the ventilator, but his fitness remained very much diminished. Earlier that morning, he had showered and dressed himself, but by the time he returned to his bed, he was panting heavily had required a long nap. It would take him months to adequately recover, but in his professional opinion, he would recover.

Two days ago, he'd agreed to move from the convalescent ward to his former bed upstairs in order to make space in the clinic. All but one of the Orion lungworm patients had been released to finish their period of convalescence at home, and because Dagny was confined to the clinic, Aisla stopped in to check on the home-bound patients once per day.

The outbreak could have been much worse. In the end, twenty-five percent of the Vulcanoid colonists, including Khel's infant son, had been infected. It was remarkable there had been only one fatality. The outbreak had revealed many failings of the current immigration system and he'd spent the past two days devising plans to in-process new arrivals and screen and immunize the entire colony against other notable pathogens. He had begun drafting the proposal for Samantha Bergeron that afternoon, but even dictating a memorandum had been tiring and he'd dozed off while composing it.

The stairs creaked. Dagny was coming up from the clinic and he suspected she would be cross that...
he was out of bed. Since he'd regained consciousness, she had fallen into a habit of forgetting that he held a medical degree and had been practicing as a physician longer than she'd been alive.

"What are you doing?" He glanced over his shoulder to see her standing in the threshold.

She pulled off her mask and scowled at him. His assumption that she would be irritated had evidently been correct.

"I am slicing vegetables, as you can see."

"If you were hungry, why didn't you call for me? I had my PADD on and-"

"It was not necessary to disturb you when I am perfectly capable of performing this task."

"Why are you so stubborn?"

"Obstinacy is illogical, as is your opinion that I am too frail to assist in preparing an end meal."

She clenched her jaw and exhaled loudly. "I know how you feel. It's no fun to be in bed. I spent a whole month on bedrest not that long ago, remember?"

"I do."

"What would you have done if you came back from the clinic and found me in the kitchen cooking you dinner when I was supposed to be on bedrest?"

"You are creating a false equivalence. Bedrest was essential to maintaining your pregnancy, and while rest will be necessary to recovering my health-"

"Get back in bed, Voris," she interrupted with a loud sigh.

He raised an eyebrow and finished his sentence. "I am unlikely to regain my strength by being entirely idle."

She crossed her arms. "Your hands are shaking."

His eyes darted to the cutting board. Her observation was correct. He made the last few cuts in the potato, heaped the sliced sections into the strainer, and began the grueling journey to the kitchen table.

Dagny tossed her mask on the counter, rinsed her hands in the sink, and took over his task. "Did you sleep at all after lunch?"

"Yes," he replied. "What is the current status of the clinic?"

"Arjen, the Rigelian boy, went home today with his mother. He still has a little swelling in his spleen, but it's almost returned to normal. I sent them home with the steroid autoinjectors you recommended. So, thank you."

"You have no need to thank me," he responded.

"I know, but having you around to offer advice has been nice. I took it for granted and sometimes got annoyed with you for dispensing it when I didn't want it, I had no idea how much I relied on it until I didn't have it."

"By all accounts, you managed this incident well without me. You will make an excellent
Dagny finished cutting the rest of the vegetables, set the casserole in the oven to bake, and joined him at the table with two glasses of water. She wore dark circles under red-stained eyes. She was tired, that much was evident, but there was something else.

"You are worried."

She looked up from her glass of water, her light blue eyes subdued and quiet. "I hate it when you can feel my feelings."

"I also dislike it when you can sense mine."

She laughed and set her glass down. "Then yes, I suppose I'm worried. You caught me. If I'm going to be honest, I was terrified the whole time you were out. I kept thinking, what if I lose you? I don't want to raise this baby alone."

"You once insisted that's what you would prefer."

"But things have changed, haven't they? We've gotten to know each other and you've been a good friend and mentor to me. And then I said some really stupid things and you moved out. I never wanted you to go. I missed you."

Voris took a sip of his water. "I believe my decision to leave may have been hastily made without a logical evaluation of the entire situation."

Dagny shot him a look of disbelief. "What does that even mean?"

"I regrettably allowed myself to go without sufficient rest and meditation for an extended period of time and it affected my decision-making."

"You mean, you acted illogically."

"I did not say that."

"That's the only logical conclusion."

He set the glass down and asked, "Why are you worried?"

"Why are you changing the subject?"

"I am returning to the original subject."

"Before we do that, I have to know—will you stay?"

"Specify."

She shot him a dark look. "You don't have a choice but to stay on the colony for the next year, so shouldn't it be easy to deduce I'm asking if you'll stay in our quarters with me?"

He met her eyes. Humans never ceased to surprise with their occasional clarity of mind. "Yes, if you want me to."

Dagny smiled, finished the last of her water, and stretched out her legs. "Of course I want you to, or I wouldn't have asked. Thank you."
"It is illogical to thank me for opting to remain."

"It was illogical to move out in the first place."

"Are we to have an accounting of every irrational decision either of us has made since we've been in each other's acquaintance?"

Dagny shook her head and laughed. "I guess we can stop there."

"It would be advisable. And so tell me, why do you worry?"

She folded her hands on the table and sighed. "There's a lot to be worried about. It's not safe to say we've seen the last of Orion lungworm, we're stuck on this colony for at least another year, tensions are still pretty high between the Orion and Romulan colonists, there are a lot of rumors flying around about the Gorn starting a fight with the Klingons."

"What has transpired between the Gorn and Klingon colonists?" Voris interrupted.

"I don't mean the colonists. I mean the Gorn Hegemony and the Klingon Empire."

"You say they are rumors."

"They are, but don't many facts often start out as rumors?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Yes. But all rumors are illogical, as is worry."

She broke eye contact with him and leaned forward over the table. "I'm also worried about the baby."

"Do you have cause to be?"

"Over the past few days, I've been experiencing sharp pain in the lower part of my belly. It could be round ligament pain but I don't know for sure."

"Are you experiencing bleeding?"

"No."

"And have you maintained your regimen of medications?"

"Yes. I've done everything I was supposed to. I mean, my temperature monitor did go off quite a bit, especially in the initial hours of the outbreak, but I tried to be careful. I'm worried about the virus crossing the placenta too. I know it's not supposed to be able to, but what if a placenta in a hybrid pregnancy is different?"

"Did you fail to wear your mask in the clinic?"

"No, I did, but what if it slipped or what if it still got through? It's not foolproof, you know?"

"It has been sixteen days since your initial exposure to Orion lungworm through Aisla's niece. You have worked in the clinic caring for patients sick with Orion lungworm for eleven days. The incubation period is only three to seven days, and it is highly contagious. If you were exposed and the fetus was harmed as a result, you would certainly know by now."

"I know and I keep telling myself that, but..."
"Can you still detect a fetal heartbeat?"

"I haven't checked."

"Why not? There is no harm in performing a routine scan."

"Because I'm not ready to know," she said, rising to her feet to check the status of their dinner.

"You prefer to remain ignorant?"

"It's not about being ignorant, Voris, it's about being scared!"

"Knowledge is the means by which fear can be successfully overcome. Your pregnancy was progressing well, and-"

She held up her hand and cut him off. "I haven't felt the baby move yet and I feel like I should have by now. Why haven't I felt a kick or poke or something, anything, yet?"

"It is unusual, but not necessarily indicative of a problem. Why not bring a tricorder upstairs and scan for a heartbeat? It seems preferable to distress."

She bit her lip, whirled around, and pulled the casserole dish from the convection unit. "Maybe tomorrow."

Voris was too tired to continue arguing with her over her irrational decision to remain uninformed about the health of their child. They ate a quiet dinner together and despite it only being 1915 hours, they both retired to bed immediately after. He was troubled by Dagny's admission, but was simply too tired to remain awake.

For the first time in weeks, he dreamt. Visions of the Hall of Ancient Thought were interwoven with the clinic. His father made an appearance, as did Dagny, but the visions were too chaotic for him to make any sense of them. The last thing he remembered, he heard Dagny yelling in the distance. The yelling grew louder until finally, he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Voris? Voris, are you awake?"

He opened his eyes and though it was dark, he could see Dagny's silhouette in the pale light of the tiny, emergency kitchen light. She was clutching her belly.

"I am now," he answered, trying to pull himself into a sitting position. "Is something the matter?"

"Nothing," she breathed. "The baby, it's moving!"

He leaned forward, squinted, and mumbled, "Lights, dim to fifteen percent."

A warm glow fell over the room, allowing him to see the exuberant look on Dagny's face. She sat down on the edge of his bed, grabbed his hand, and pressed it low on the left side of her belly. It felt like a rapid and erratic pulse.

He attempted to suppress emotions of surprise and delight, but realized he was sensing the same emotions in Dagny and gave up. They shared in each other's wonder for several minutes, tracing their hands over her abdomen as they attempted to follow their child's movements.

When he eventually pulled his hand away to shift his weight, Dagny's face fell. "It stopped."

"The fetus cannot sustain constant motion," he replied. "It requires periods of sleep and rest, much as
"I know, but…" She pulled his hand onto her stomach again and almost instantly, the baby within her started to wriggle again. Dagny clasped her free hand over her mouth in a poor effort to hide her joy. "It's like it knows you. Vulcans are supposed to be touch telepaths, right? What if it's responding to you?"

He cocked his head and glanced into her eyes. There had been research done on Vulcan fetal development to see if fetuses could respond to telepathic movement, but it was very difficult to control for the mother's innate telepathy as well. It was an interesting theory and he removed his hand several times, and each time Dagny insisted the baby had gone quiet. He traced fingers over her belly, and it seemed as though the fetus was following his movements. Voris could not deny there were times it was difficult to repress his emotions as he felt their child respond to his touch, but after half an hour, he caught her eye and said, "Perhaps we should return to sleep."

"Yes, I know. I know you're very tired and need your rest and I know the novelty of this is going to wear off, but I just- I'm not ready to let it go just yet. Please?"

He sighed. "If that is what you prefer…"

"Ok," she replied, cutting him off.

He had a hard time suppressing his shock at what happened next. Dagny pulled back his quilt, slid her legs under it, and laid down facing him. Her body was situated far enough away that there was no real intimacy to it, but it was still very… he wasn't sure what it was. It was certainly very forward of her—both of them were hardly dressed and sleeping together in a bed was generally only appropriate between mates. He was only wearing underwear and an undershirt and she wore a nightdress that made it apparent that she wasn't wearing any undergarments. Despite these facts, he was reluctant to call her gesture inappropriate, even as she grabbed his hand again and rubbed it over her belly to elicit a response from the child inside her.

He sensed pronounced awkwardness growing in Dagny but rather than allow her to succumb to it and go back to her own bed in embarrassment, he simply shut out the lights and allowed the darkness to set them both at ease. He stayed awake as long as he could, stroking her stomach to keep the baby moving, but Dagny was asleep long before he was.

The focus of his dreams shifted. They were still indistinct and nonsensical, but Dagny was a constant presence throughout and the mood was more peaceful. They awoke several hours later to her temperature monitor going off. Somehow during the course of their sleep, they had rearranged themselves such that her back was to him and she was snuggled tightly against his body, and his right arm was draped over her stomach, his right hand nestled on her breast. They pulled themselves apart with excessive haste.

"Oh, I uh- I'm so sorry, I didn't mean…" Dagny's face was turning a brilliant shade of scarlet.

"Nor did I," he added, doing his best to avoid looking at the clear lines of her nipples under her night dress. He pulled the quilt higher up on his bare chest and took a slow breath.

"I mean, nothing happened. Nothing would happen, anyway, I just- yeah. Thank you for, you know, humoring me. Sorry if I- well, it won't happen again. I really didn't mean-"

"I know," Voris interjected. "I apologize if I have caused some offense."

"N-no," Dagny muttered, rising from the bed and covering her breasts with her hands. "I mean, it's..."
not like we haven't- it isn't like we've never seen each other- well, you know. I wasn't offended. I'm sorry if you were."

"I was not offended," he admitted, finally looking in her direction.

Her temperature monitor finally stopped beeping and she glanced down at her stomach. "Ok then, well… good."

He stared at her for several seconds before she quickly added, "Well, we're up a bit early but I'll get started on breakfast and…” She stumbled through the curtain to her side of the room without finishing her sentence, leaving Voris to wonder at the illogic of two people trying to avoid acknowledging mutual embarrassment over a shared incident.
Adventures in Romulan Babysitting

Stardate 2260.229

"You sure you're ok?"

Voris glanced down at Aisla's plump face, noting the obvious concern furrowed into her brow. He was starting to feel dizzy from holding his arms over his head for so long, but he was nearly done. "I am sure."

"Dagny would peel my skin if I let you wear yourself out."

"I am certain she would do no such thing," Voris replied. "Cruelty is not in her nature."

Aisla laughed. "I didn't mean literally. It's just an expression. It means she would be very angry."

"On that, we concur."

Voris let his arms fall to his side, stepped down from the stool, and craned his neck upward to examine his work. The new biofilter appeared to be straight: now all that remained was to sanitize the convalescent ward. Earlier that morning, the Federation had beamed down the food and medical supplies they'd promised, and the drop had included four next generation biofilters.

It had taken most of the day to install them, but the powerful biofilters now graced the doorways of the clinic entry, the surgical suite, and the convalescent ward. He'd put two at the entry, one on the exterior and one on the interior, and preliminary scans of the room indicated the microbial levels had become undetectable. Dagny was now free to move about the clinic area without a mask on. It pleased him to know that she would be pleased.

"So, should I sterilize the ward while you calibrate?" Aisla asked, nodding toward the bucket with the sanitizing packets.

"Yes, thank you."

"After this, can I go home? Morna needs me to watch Lula while she goes to work."

"I have nothing else for you this evening," Voris replied, returning to his perch on the stool.

Aisla was now officially his subordinate, as was Hadrian Moore. Following the outbreak, Samantha Bergeron had seen the need to create an auxiliary force of medical personnel to rely on in the event of an emergency, and so Hadrian now worked part-time in the mornings and Aisla covered a part-time shift in the evenings. The quarantine had put Aisla's goal of nursing school on hold, but spending an additional year gaining hands on experience in the clinic would be beneficial to her long-term plans.

Sam wanted him to find four more people to begin training in the next year with the hope of sending them to paramedic school on a rotating basis once the quarantine was lifted. While Voris was happy to comply with her request, he got the impression Sam believed he and Dagny had become permanent fixtures on the colony.

He was required to stay for the period of quarantine, but Voris had spent a lot of time in recent weeks thinking about his future, as well as the futures of Dagny and their unborn child. It had been easy to make decisions when he had only himself to consider, but his brush with death and the current
tensions with the Klingons and Gorn were making him reevaluate his situation.

Were it only a matter of thinking of himself, he would gladly remain on Bergeron colony for the rest of his life, or the rest of the colony's life, whichever came first. The hours were long and the clinic was understaffed and undersupplied, but he appreciated the atmosphere of cooperation among so many cultures. Bergeron colony was far from perfect, but life on Vulcan, Earth, and New Vulcan had shown him there was no perfect society, no matter how often the Federation referred to Earth as a utopia.

But Dagny was due to give birth in less than four months and the reality of fatherhood was weighing on him in a way that it never had before. Many people raised families on Bergeron colony, but he was not certain he wanted his child growing up in a place of such uncertainty and instability. Though the safety of his child and Dagny were paramount, there were other significant considerations as well. Dagny still wanted to attend medical school and he had promised her he would do everything he could to assist her in realizing her ambitions.

He had all but decided on the logic of leaving Bergeron colony, but actually leaving would not be so simple. When the quarantine was lifted a year from now, he would still be the only physician for a colony of more than 1,100 people. By then, Aisla and Hadrian would be better trained and ideally, there would be four other apprentices with a year of training, but that was inadequate. The only way he could leave in good conscience was to find a replacement for himself and recruiting a qualified physician to a place as remote as Bergeron colony would be difficult.

Voris resolved to speak with Dagny about relocating later that evening. He sensed she might have reservations about leaving—the Svendsens were here and she'd forged many other friendships—but he had an entire year to convince her, which was fortunate, because Dagny had a tendency to be intractable on many matters.

He had spent a week upstairs in their quarters recuperating following his release from the clinic and since then, she'd made his return to work a constant battle. He had begun working half-days to ease the burden of the morning rush of patients and she'd never stopped insisting that he was "overdoing it." Today had been his first full day back and though he was exhausted, he felt perfectly capable of performing his duties. Half an hour ago, she'd agreed to go upstairs and prepare end meal and let him finish installing the biofilters, but he suspected she'd conceded because the presence of so many biofilters meant she would no longer have to wear a mask.

Why did she worry? Shouldn't he be allowed to be the judge of what he could and could not manage? He returned to the business of calibrating the biofilter, thinking that he really was rather tired and would probably retire to bed following end meal.

"How's it coming?" Aisla asked, looking over her shoulder from the other side of the room where she was installing a fourth sanitizing system.

Voris glanced at the air quality index monitor on the biofilter, noting it was still flashing green, indicating the concentration of biological indicators was extremely low, but still detectable. It had taken twenty minutes for the biofilter on the surgical suite to read clear, so he suspected the convalescent ward would take a similar period of time.

Voris stepped down from the stool, reasoning he could watch the monitor from his seat at the desk. He was about to tell Aisla she should go home for the night when the after-hours buzzer rang.

"I'll get it!" Aisla said cheerfully. "You keep doing what you're doing."

He watched her trot toward the door and open it, revealing a woman holding the hands of two very
small children. She was human, the two children were Romulan, or possibly Vulcan. He knew her, but not in the way he'd come to know most of the colonists.

She was thinner than she'd been when he'd first met her four months ago aboard the Oglethorpe, but her black hair was still large and untamed. She was Sunayana, Rhaal's mate, and he judged by the two children clutching her hands that she had been successful in retrieving his children from the Romulan Star Empire.

"Suna?" Aisla gasped. "What's wrong?"

"I-I dun't fel whe-whull."

Sunayana's speech was slurred and it was clear by the look in her eyes that she knew it and was afraid. Her face was pale and clammy and she was breathing hard. Voris grabbed his tricorder and motioned for Suna to step forward, but the children's eyes widened and they squirmed violently, trying to get away.

"Perhaps you could tend to the children while I see to her," Voris suggested.

The children, a girl of about four years of age and boy no more than three, both resisted being pulled from her. The moment Sunayana's hands were free of their grip, her arms began to shake violently and when she stepped forward, it was clear she could barely keep her balance.

"Pulze halp muh." There were tears in her eyes. Voris helped her onto a biobed and quickly initiated a neurological scan.

"How long have you had these tremors and speech impairment?"

She shook her head, though Voris wasn't certain it was intentional. "I bun seck fer while. Shakin' sturt thess mornin'."

"You have been sick for a while?" he asked, seeking clarification.

"Yus."

"Can you specify what you mean by 'a while'?"

"I dunno. I half nut bun raight sunse Rom-romuhlus."

"You mean you have experienced these symptoms since you left Romulus?"

She nodded awkwardly, silent tears spilling down her cheeks. After a strained twenty-minute interview, Voris eventually learned that Sunayana's symptoms had been worsening for more than two months. It had started as a headache and slowly progressed to muscle weakness by the time she'd rendezvoused with the Oglethorpe on Nausicaa, but she'd thought little of it until two weeks ago, when she'd started to suspect she was losing her mind. She reported confusion and occasional memory loss and had wanted to come to the clinic, but had been afraid to expose the children to Orion lungworm because she wasn't sure if they were vaccinated. The tremors had started that morning and it had taken her all day to collect herself and make it to the clinic.

Voris also learned that she'd been injured by a projectile weapon in her attempt to get the children out of a state criminal processing facility. There were dark splotches on her left arm, which she explained were remnants of shrapnel that she'd been unable to pull out. Her arm was shaking so badly that he had to hold down it down to extract a piece for examination with a laser scalpel.
"Is she going to be ok?" Aisla asked, bouncing the little boy on her hip.

Voris set the tiny metal shard in the chemical analyzer and replied, "I do not know."

"Did she have a stroke or something?"

"Cerebrovascular incidents rarely affect both sides of the body. Her symptoms are more indicative of neurological degeneration."

Sunayana tried to grip Voris' arm and mumbled, "Um ah gon d-duh-aye?"

"What's going on?" He turned to see Dagny standing at the base of the stairs, eyeing Sunayana, Aisla, and the children.

Voris peered down at the chemical analyzer screen, noting it was still processing the sample and replied, "We have a thirty-two-year-old human female whose symptoms over the past two months have progressed from headache, muscle weakness, and fatigue to confusion, memory loss, tremors, difficulty controlling gross motor movement, and slurred speech. What do you suspect?"

"Neurological damage," Dagny replied, joining him by the side of the biobed.

"But more specifically?"

Dagny gave him a worried look, clutched Sunayana's left hand, and replied, "Either neurodegenerative disease or neurotoxicity."

"Um ah gonna dah?" Sunayana asked, looking at Dagny.

Dagny clasped her other hand around the terrified woman's hand and replied, "You're here with us now. Dr. Voris will get to the bottom of it."

She shot him a helpless look and he was surprised to see Dagny was also crying and trying to hide that fact by wiping her face on her sleeve. She had been so emotional when they'd first met, but he understood they'd met under very unusual circumstances. As he'd grown to know her, he'd learned she expressed a lot of intense empathy for patients, but she almost never cried over them.

The chemical analyzer beeped, revealing the shrapnel he'd extracted from Sunayana's arm was a common iron alloy, but also contained traces of a compound he didn't recognize.

"So... what is it?" Dagny asked nervously.

Voris entered the molecule into the computer's database, and though he found no precise matches, he did find two close analogs, both which were powerful synthetic neurotoxins.

"I believe she's been poisoned."

Dagny grabbed the two puffy blankets from the chest under her bed, set the casserole dish on top, and waddled downstairs. She wanted to hurry—Aisla needed to leave and the children needed someone to watch over them. They must be frightened half to death.

They'd transferred Sunayana, or Suna, as Aisla said she preferred to be called, to the convalescent ward while Voris worked to find an antagonist to whatever compound was poisoning her, but he wasn't very optimistic about being able to find one before it killed her. Dagny couldn't explain why, but the thought of this total stranger dying, leaving two children without a caretaker, made her want to curl into a ball and sob for days. She'd been particularly emotional lately but she figured now
wasn't the time to get hung up on that if she could help it.

She heard two masculine voices coming from downstairs and when she arrived in the clinic, she found Voris hunched over the lab bench, feverishly performing some kind of calculation and Rhaev, the Romulan man who had stayed in the clinic with his wife and sick sons several weeks earlier, standing directly behind him.

"I am not aware of the precise composition of the antidote, but I do know one exists, as does a vaccine," Rhaev said.

"And you have been vaccinated?" Voris asked, suddenly sitting up.

"I presume so," Rhaev replied, cocking his head thoughtfully. "I received many vaccinations prior to beginning work with the Rateg Police Force."

"Would you permit me to draw a sample of your blood?" Voris asked. "It may be possible for me to extract the antibodies and clone them."

"If you believe it will be helpful."

Dagny didn't want to interrupt so she soundlessly glided toward the entrance to the convalescent ward, where she found Suna sitting up in bed and the two Romulan children sitting on the adjacent bed with Aisla watching her. Aisla was petting the little boy's hair and whispering softly to him.

"I'm here to take over if you'd like to get going," Dagny announced.

"Alright then, lovey," Aisla sighed. "I don't like the idea of leaving these babies here in a scary hospital ward. You're sure you won't let me take them home with me for tonight?"

"Dey steh wid muh," Suna mumbled, spittle flying from her mouth as she tried to form the words.

"Of course they're going to stay with you," Dagny replied, nodding toward the blankets and food in her hands. "I was going to set them up some beds so they can sleep in here with you without it feeling too much like a sterile clinic."

"You take care of yourself," Aisla said, giving Suna's arm a comforting squeeze. "If anyone can get to the bottom of this, Dr. Voris can. I can bring some pajamas by for the little ones if you like."

Suna nodded, looking toward the opposite wall. Dagny suspected she was trying to hide her tears. Aisla left and Dagny turned toward the children, stooping down and putting her hands on her knees. "Can you tell me your names?"

The little boy stared at her, then looked to his older sister for direction. Suna tried to say something, but it came out as slurred gibberish. The girl looked from Suna to Dagny and back again. She didn't seem shy, which gave Dagny the impression that she didn't understand.

"They don't speak Standard, do they?" Dagny asked, looking at Suna, who shook her head. "Well, that's ok," she replied, giving the girl a reassuring smile. "My PADD has a translation app. I'll be right back."

Dagny wasn't exactly sure who she was talking to because Suna could understand but barely speak and the children could speak but not understand. As she moved toward the door, hunger rumbled in her stomach and moments later, she felt a burst of unexplainable rage that stopped her in her tracks. She knew that sometimes she could feel Voris' emotions if they were particularly strong, but when she entered the clinic, she thought he seemed calm enough. He was taking a vial of blood from
Rhaev's heavily tattooed forearm and listening to Rhaev explain the operating procedures of the Romulan police.

"A lot of poisons are slow acting—it makes them hard to trace back to a source. It wasn't uncommon to see people fall down dead in the street of poisoning, especially during an election year. It happens. People die."

"But my patient wasn't a Romulan politico."

"No, but you understand the point. All military and police projectile rounds had some kind of poison in them, that way even if the person survived, they would just die later, usually a painful, horrible death. It kept people from trying to escape from prisons and interrogation facilities. The rounds were designed to fragment and once the poison enters the bloodstream, it doesn't matter if the shrapnel is removed."

"Is there anyone else on the colony with expertise on Romulan poisons?"

"None that I know of. I would hardly call myself an expert."

Rhaev's eyes drifted in Dagny's direction, narrowing when they made contact with her. She'd never gotten the sense that Rhaev liked her much, though she wasn't sure if it was because of their heated exchanges a few weeks ago during the outbreak or simply because she wasn't Romulan. The man had a definite racist streak. He was being polite enough with Voris, but Voris had the advantage of at least looking like him, not to mention he'd also asked him to come to the clinic to assist with a problem, which no doubt made him feel important.

"Hello, Rhaev," Dagny murmured, offering a weak wave. He delivered a slight nod but said nothing.

"How are Rh'ael and Rh'aen?"

"They are thriving."

"That's good to hear." She glanced over at Voris and asked, "Any progress?"

"I am attempting to extract antibodies to the toxin from Rhaev's blood. It may not correct the damage that's already been done, but should halt its progress. Has her condition changed?"

"Suna's scared, but she's-"

"Did you say Suna?" Rhaev interrupted. As in Sunayana Dalal?"

"Um, well, yes."

Rage engulfed Rhaev's face. He leapt out of the chair and stalked several steps in Dagny's direction. "That whore and my brother cost me everything!"

Dagny instinctively put her hands out and stumbled backward and in the same motion, almost as if they were participating in a choreographed dance, Voris positioned himself between her and Rhaev.

"You deceived me! I did not know I was here to help her." Rhaev pointed toward the convalescent ward, but his hand faltered. Dagny turned and saw the little girl standing in the doorway, eyes wide and staring at the hulking, yelling Romulan man. The girl began to shake and Dagny's fear melted
"I think you need to leave," Dagny growled.

"Maera?" Rhaev said, ignoring Dagny in favor of the little girl. "Maera, it's Uncle Rhaev."

The girl squeaked and cowered in the doorway. She tried to turn and run away, but she slammed into her brother, who appeared immediately behind her.

"Malen?" Rhaev pleaded. "Malen, I am Uncle Rhaev. Your father, Rhaal, was my brother."

"You're frightening them," Dagny snapped, inching to her left to block Rhaev from accessing them.

"They are my niece and nephew!" Rhaev roared, turning to Dagny. "They have no reason to fear me!"

"Then stop yelling!" Dagny retorted.

Rhaev brushed past her to storm into the convalescent ward, slamming into her left shoulder and knocking her off-balance. Voris caught her before she could fall, steadied her, and then followed Rhaev.

"They aren't yours!" Rhaev kept shouting. "You have no right to them!"

Suna's reply was unintelligible but clearly very passionate. It was difficult to tell what happened next amid the yelling and screaming. Rhaev was shouting at Suna, Suna was attempting to defend herself but could barely talk, the children had crawled into Suna's bed and were clinging to her, and Voris and Dagny were trying in vain to calm the situation.

Rhaev ripped the universal translator device from his collar, lowered his voice, and started addressing the children in Romulan, but they were too frightened to acknowledge him. He moved toward Suna's bed and tried to pick up the little boy and Suna feebly tried to fight him off.

Dagny tried to put herself between Rhaev and the children. "Leave or I'm calling the constable."

Rhaev responded sharply in Romulan, turning to face her. He straightened his back, a motion clearly designed to increase his height and intimidate her, and she was ashamed to admit it worked, though she prayed it didn't show. Over Rhaev's shoulder, she could see Voris inching closer from behind.

"Get. Out." She demanded, pointing toward the door.

"No." Rhaev replied in Standard, adding in a breathy, difficult-to-comprehend accent, "This business not yours."

Evidently, he spoke enough Standard to speak and be understood. "This is my business if you're frightening children and patients in my ward."

Time stood still as he and Dagny remained locked in an emotionally-charged standoff. A small voice inside of her told her this was insane, challenging a man who was more than a head taller than her. Just as Rhaev started to lean toward Dagny, Voris' hand shot out from behind him, clutching Rhaev at the joint between his neck and shoulder, an action which sent Rhaev crumpling to the ground in a pile.

She vaguely remembered him doing a similar thing to Melana's husband. She blinked several times, trying to process the series of events that had just unfolded. "How do you do that?"
"The precise mechanism is not important at this moment," Voris replied, stooping down to check on Rhaev.

"Ged em aht," Suna murmured. She was shaking, but Dagny couldn't tell whether it was from fear or the neurotoxin coursing through her blood.

"What's going on?" asked a high-pitched voice from the other end of the room. Dagny glanced up to see Aisla, clutching her niece Lula in one arm and holding a bag in the other.

"We had a bit of a misunderstanding," Dagny tried to explain. "What are you doing here?"

"I said I'd bring some overnight things for the children, remember?" Her eyes scanned all the occupants in the room, including Rhaev's unconscious body.

"Oh, right." Dagny sighed and brushed her hair out of her face. "I don't suppose you speak Romulan?"

"Not a word," Aisla replied, biting her lip. She nodded to Rhaev and added, "Is he ok?"

"Yes," Voris replied.

"Ok, good. So, how can I help?" Aisla asked.

Voris dragged Rhaev back to the clinic while Aisla contacted the constable. With some encouragement from Suna, the children agreed to let Dagny get them ready for bed. The pajamas Aisla had brought were far too big, but Dagny managed to roll the cuffs of the sleeves and pants enough that they didn't drag the ground.

They were adorable little things, even if they were skittish. The little girl was called Maera. She was four years old, and her little brother, Malen, had just turned three. She showed them how to wash their hands in the sink by the door and got them two glasses of water. The dish Dagny had made for dinner was cold by now, but she hoped they wouldn't mind.

She had just set them on the floor with two plastic mixing bowls full of the vegetable casserole and was preparing to help Suna eat when Aisla and Voris appeared in the doorway.

"Constable Kilpatrick has taken Rhaev to the colony jail for the night," Voris announced, glancing between Suna and Dagny.

"Fank ooh," Suna mumbled.

"So, what happens now?" Dagny asked, stroking Malen's hair. "Oh, no sweetie, use the spoon."

The children were stuffing the casserole into their mouths with their bare hands. She dipped the spoon into the food and lifted it to Malen's mouth. The boy seemed annoyed by what Dagny was suggesting and shoved it away from her with his slimy hands.

"The constable will keep him for the night for disturbing the peace, but the issue of custody of the children has yet to be resolved."

"We can't seriously let him take them?" Dagny gasped.

"It is not a matter of letting," Voris replied, looking over to Suna. "I have no experience in the law, but it seems reasonable that Rhaev would have a valid claim to them. He is their biological uncle."

"He neber- he dint-" Suna stammered. "He leff dem der. I gaught dem."
Aisla made her way to Suna's bedside, sat on the edge, and patted her shoulder.

"He's really their uncle?" Dagny asked, rising to her feet and sidestepping the children on the ground to join Voris in the doorway.

"I have not compared their genetic material, but he claims to be Rhaal's brother, and Rhaal was their father."

"Yus," Suna mumbled. "Es truh."

"Who is Rhaal?" Dagny asked.

"He died of burns and radiation sickness aboard the Oglethorpe in New Vulcan's orbit. I treated him just before he died. Sunayana was his mate. They were travelling to the Romulan Star Empire to rescue Rhaal's children and Sunayana stayed behind on Nausicaa to travel there on her own after his death. Apparently, she did manage to retrieve them from criminal processing facility, and she arrived here with the Oglethorpe several weeks ago."

"Wait, what do you mean a criminal processing facility? Why would they be there? They're babies."

"The Romulan Star Empire operates on distrust, not justice."

"But doesn't that mean Suna is their stepmother? Doesn't she have rights?"

Suna shook her head and looked away. Voris glanced at her, then back to Dagny. "Not legally, no. They were not married."

"But they're so young," Aisla argued, trying to soothe Lula, who was becoming fussy. "Rhaev has been here for at least two years. Has he ever even met his niece and nephew?"

"Yeah, they seemed scared of him," Dagny added.

"I imagine there are many questions that will be asked and answered in the days to come. It would be illogical to dwell on it tonight."

His eyes wandered down to the children, who had made a horrible mess of the vegetable casserole. Dagny had wondered why they didn't know how to use a spoon, but the knowledge that they'd spent time in prison at the tender ages of three and four shed a whole new light on their untamed behavior.

"I need to process the blood sample that Rhaev gave me," Voris said, taking a step back.

"Will that make her better?" Aisla asked.

"If I am successful in isolating and cloning the antibodies, it should prevent her from getting worse while I develop a course of treatment."

Suna took a deep breath and nodded. "Fank ooh."

"How can we help?" Dagny asked.

"If Aisla will agree to stay with Sunayana and the children, I could use your assistance in processing samples."

Dagny followed him back into the clinic. She sat on a stool and listened as he explained what he was doing and showed her how to isolate antibodies in serum. He was clearly very tired, but watching him work filled her with a strange sense of affection. When he allowed her to look through the
microscope at the assays, their shoulders gently brushed and the baby started kicking up a storm.

Two hours later, they'd identified the correct antibodies and produced enough clones to provide Suna with a workable treatment. When Dagny entered the ward, she found Suna fast asleep with the children curled up on either side of her.

"I need to be getting home," Aisla whispered, motioning to Lula. "My sister will be off work soon."

"I believe we can manage. Thank you for your assistance."

She stood, hauled the little Orion baby in her arms up onto her chest, and snuck out, leaving Dagny and Voris alone with Suna and the children.

"We should wake her, shouldn't we?" Dagny murmured.

"Yes."

"Any idea how we can do that without waking up the kids?"

Voris glided toward Suna's bed, slid his hands under Malen, lifted him gently, and placed him on the bed to the left. The boy didn't even stir. He repeated the process with Maera, and though she let out a loud snore when Voris rolled her onto her back, she also remained fast asleep. The same wave of affection rolled over her again. She rested her hand on her belly and smiled, and when Voris turned back to her, he seemed confused.

"You may wake Sunayana now and administer the vaccine. Monitor her closely. I am going to pursue formulating a course of treatment to reverse the damage."

"Thank you, Voris."

"Why do you thank me?"

"I don't know. It just feels right. Thank you for being so wonderful."

His brow wrinkled and he frowned slightly, but he nodded. He headed for the door and just before he disappeared behind it, she called, "Please try to get some rest, if you can."

"Your worry is illogical," he replied.

She smiled. He was probably right, but she was never going to not worry about him.

Dagny woke Suna, gave her the vaccine, and watched her closely for the next several hours until she could no longer hold her eyes open. When she awoke some time later, Suna was snoring soundly, but the children were missing.

A crash at the other end of the room roused Voris from a very sound sleep. He blinked several times, trying to get his bearings. He'd fallen asleep at the lab bench, trying to develop an antidote to the neurotoxin that was currently poisoning Sunayana Dalal.

He scanned the clinic, trying to zero in on direction of the noise and spied a tiny head of black hair quivering behind one of the biobeds. He stood and rolled his shoulders, trying to work out the inevitable kinks that came from sleeping upright on a stool. He heard a hushed gasp and found the two Romulan children cowering behind the biobed, the girl standing slightly in front of her brother in a defensive stance.
Given they had been held in a Romulan prison camp for much of their very young lives, it was not surprising that they would be afraid of someone who appeared to be Romulan. They had certainly seemed afraid of their uncle the night before.

The Romulan and Vulcan languages were somewhat similar, but had diverged enough that they were quite distinct. He knelt down and thought to himself over what an appropriate Romulan greeting to a small child might be, and said, "y'hhau."

The girl's face relaxed a little, but she didn't budge. He didn't know how to say anything more complex in Romulan, but he hoped that between their Romulan, his Vuhlkansu, and some hand signals, they might be able to forge an understanding.

"Tra wi k'avon?" he asked, gesturing toward his mouth. For good measure, he asked in Standard, just in case they'd learned some from Sunayana. "Are you hungry?"

"Eat?" the girl asked excitedly, imitating his motion. "Eat food?"

"Yes. Do you want to eat food?"

The girl turned and mumbled something in Romulan to her brother, and moments later, he had their undivided attention. "Yes," Maera answered. "Eat food."

They appeared to be very small and underweight for their age. Voris thought he should examine them, given all that they had been through, but reasoned it would be prudent to wait and discuss it with Sunayana.

Voris stood up and the children shuffled toward him. A thick odor struck Voris' nose and it quickly became apparent Malen had urinated on himself during the night. He thought of waking Dagny and asking for her assistance—he knew so little about child care—but surely feeding and dressing two small children didn't require any special skills.

Malen grabbed Voris' left hand and peered up at him. The physical contact surprised Voris, but he theorized Malen was used to being led places in this manner. It was very common for human parents to shepherd their children this way, so perhaps they had learned the behavior from Sunayana.

He walked them toward the stairs to his quarters, glancing at the laboratory bench as he passed it. He'd made significant progress in synthesizing an antagonist for the neurotoxin, but devising a course of treatment to correct the neurological damage would take time. For now, she was stable, and that was already significant progress.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Maera and Malen freely wandered about his quarters, driven by curiosity and oblivious to social etiquette. He sat them down at the table, but they were too short to see over the edge. He found a piece of gespar in the preserver, peeled and sliced it, and placed it on the table. Without even being invited to do so, both children stood on the chairs and devoured it readily with their bare hands in less than a minute.

"K'hei?" Malen asked.

Voris cocked his head. "Weh?" he asked, uttering the Vulcan word for "more."

"Eat food," Maera added, pointing to the empty bowl and back to her mouth. "K'hei food?"

Voris went back to the preserver, took a knee, and rifled through the bottom drawer. That had been the last of the gespar, but there were two apples and an orange remaining. He was considering what
else he could prepare besides fruit when he noticed both children were now standing behind him, watching his actions intently.

"Lhiet," Maera asked, pointing to the apples. "Want."

"It is an apple." He held it up to show her. "An apple."

"An apple?" she repeated, looking from the fruit to Voris expectantly.

"Apple."

She pointed to it and said, "Apple. Want."

Voris handed her one of the shiny red fruits, intending for her to hold it while he rose to his feet, but she didn't hesitate. She sunk her teeth into it and giggled as the juice rolled down her face. She took another large bite and handed it to her brother, who feasted on it until she took it back from him. They took turns stripping the apple of its flesh until they ate it down to the core, which they also ate. Malen held the stem between his tiny thumb and forefinger, then popped it into his mouth.

"K'hei?" both children asked in unison.

"You want more? K'hei? More?"


"Sit," Voris said, pointing toward the table. He added the Vuhlkanus word for sit, which was "san," and the children seemed to understand. They hustled back to the table and sat down on the chairs, leaning their faces against the bars that made up the chair backs to watch him.

He located the flour, salt, and oil and made a batch of Dagny's griddle cakes, which the children devoured faster than he could make. Their appetites knew no limits. He fed them the rest of the fruit in the preserver and the remnants of the ravioli Dagny had made two nights ago and though he tried to demonstrate the use of a fork, neither of them seemed interested in utensils.

Eventually their obsession with food seemed to fade and Voris turned his attention to cleaning them up, since Malen stank of urine and both of them were covered in ravioli sauce and fruit juice. He took both of them to the bathroom and washed their faces, which they tolerated. Malen even readily submitted himself to being undressed and placed in the shower, but the moment water started to pour from overhead, he started to scream hysterically and Maera began pathetically punching Voris' leg with her tiny fists.

He quickly shut the water off and tried to apologize, but Malen tucked himself into Voris' chest and continued to shake violently. It was difficult to determine if he was afraid of the shower or just water in general. Voris wrapped him in a towel, carried him out of the cramped bathroom, and set him in the sink just outside the bathroom door.

He slowly turned on the water so that it was barely a trickle, and though Malen seemed wary and skeptical of the water flowing over his pudgy knees, he allowed Voris to bathe him. He was attempting to wash some of the red ravioli sauce from Malen's soft black hair when he felt a series of pokes on his thigh. He glanced down to see Maera prodding him with the index finger of her right hand and pointing to the door with the index finger of her left.

He followed the line of her little hand and saw Dagny standing in the doorway, hands perched on her swollen stomach and watching him with a warm smile. "Good morning."
"Good morning," he replied.

"Do you need any help?"

"I believe I have the situation under control."

Just as he said that, Malen slammed his hands down onto the surface of the water pooling in the sink and laughed hysterically. The bathwater splashed into Voris' face, which caused Maera to fall into a fit of giggles. When he looked back at Dagny, he noticed she had a hand over her mouth in a vain attempt to stifle a laugh.

"Is this amusing?" he asked, trying to wipe the water from his eyes.

"I don't know if amusing is the right word," she replied. "But it's definitely adorable."
"How is she?"

The sound of his voice made the hairs on the backs of her arms tingle. Dagny's eyes snapped open and she sat forward in her chair. Evidently, she'd been dozing. The children squealed Voris' name from the other end of the room and Malen barreled toward him to hug his legs. Voris stiffened slightly at the boy's zeal and reached down to pat his back.

"I'm… better. I think," Suna answered for herself, her words labored but much clearer than they had been. "You work miracles."

"It was a novel therapy that I could not guarantee would be effective."

"It seems it was though. You've given me my life back."

Dagny and Voris exchanged looks—it had been long hours of waiting to see if the treatment protocol he'd spent much of the past twenty-four hours developing would work and reverse the effects of the rare, Romulan neurotoxin. Suna was still pale, but the trembling in her hands was barely noticeable.

"We shall continue to monitor your condition in the coming days," Voris replied.

Malen let go of Voris' legs and wandered to Suna's bedside, lifting his arms to indicate he wanted assistance in getting into the bed with her. Dagny stood from her chair and started to walk around the foot of the bed, but Voris moved quicker and beat her to it. He grabbed the boy under the armpits and in a single motion, settled him next to Suna.

"Will you permit me to examine you?"

Suna nodded, prompting Voris to perform a series of tricorder scans and a quick physical examination. Maera, who had been playing a game on a PADD at the far end of the room, joined them and stood next to Dagny, curious about what Voris was doing to Suna.

It was early in the afternoon and as it was the last day of the standard week, the clinic was closed to walk-ins and routine patients. It was never really closed though, because there was always some emergency or crisis lurking around the corner, or now that the convalescent ward was open, there was always at least one patient who needed to be cared for.

It seemed to Dagny that the clinic was unbearably slow when she wanted to stay busy and impossibly busy when she needed rest. Today had been a nice change of pace though, with Suna and her adoptive children staying in the ward.

The odd little family was a distraction when she needed it most, because in the past few weeks, whenever her mind had been free to wander, it had always chosen to settle on thinking about Voris. It had only been two weeks since that night the baby had started kicking and she'd crawled into bed with him, but it might as well have been a lifetime. What had she been thinking? What had he been thinking?

They'd never spoken of it again and she'd never worked up the courage to ask him to touch her belly since that night. She thought the baby could sense his presence because it seemed like it kicked more when he was nearby, but she admitted she could easily be imagining it. Either way, the baby needed
little provocation to turn her insides into a playground these days, but she didn't mind.

"Your neural function is returning," Voris declared several minutes later, powering the tricorder down. "I cannot say whether your recovery will continue in this way or how completely you will recover, but there is good reason to remain optimistic."

Suna hugged Malen and kissed the top of his head. "Thank you."

"Now that you are able to sustain a conversation, there is a matter I would like to speak with you about," Voris added, glancing down at the little boy.

Suna's face fell and she hugged Malen tighter to her chest.

"I merely wondered if you will allow me to examine the children. They appear to be underweight."

"They were in prison." Suna's voice held a threatening timbre.

"I understand the situation and I am not accusing you of any abuse or neglect. I merely want to ensure they are healthy."

Suna looked at Dagny. "I do want the best for them, but…"

Dagny interrupted to say, "We're not trying to get involved in whatever kind of dispute that exists between you and Rhaev."

Suna shifted her gaze from Dagny to Voris, sighed heavily, and then whispered a few words to Malen. Several moments later, he scooted around and lifted his arms in Voris' direction again, allowing himself to be plucked from Suna's bed and placed on the one next to hers. Voris lifted the tricorder to begin a routine scan, but Malen clearly thought it was some kind of game because he laughed and tried to swat it away.

Voris tried several more times, but Malen was doubled over in giggles and soon Maera left her seat at the other end of the ward to investigate the source of her brother's amusement. Voris looked helplessly at Dagny. She wanted to laugh and ask if he'd really never dealt with an unruly toddler in an exam room, but she figured as a doctor, more specifically as a male Vulcan doctor, he probably just recruited parents or nurses to do the work of keeping little ones occupied while he went about the business of actually treating or examining them.

Dagny grabbed another tricorder from the clinic, pulled out the power source, and sat on the bed with Malen. She allowed him to play with it and pretend to scan her while Voris did his scans. She then distracted him while Voris took blood samples and made a game out of stepping on the scale and body mass analyzer. Maera was a lot more cooperative and had a better command of rudimentary Standard than her brother and so Dagny chose to sit back and let Voris handle it by himself.

When it came time to weigh her and analyze her body mass, Voris looked down, gestured toward the door, and asked, "Will you follow me?"

Maera scrunched her nose and repeated, "Follow me?"

Voris pointed to the door leading into the main clinic and then to himself. "Go. There. With me."

"Yes." Maera reached up and grabbed Voris' hand and though he seemed to bristle, he leaned down slightly to adjust for the great difference in their height and escorted her to the main part of the clinic where the scale and analyzer were. Warm feelings flooded through her at the sight. When he
returned, he was holding a PADD in one hand and leading Maera by the other.

"Are they healthy?" Suna asked, motioning for Maera to join her at her bedside.

"They are quite small for their age and genetic profiles and have below average body fat compositions, Maera more so than Malen. This is easily attributed to the prolonged period of undernutrition you claim they both endured in the prison."

"But are they ok?"

"I have no samples for reference, but they do not appear to be suffering from the types of cellular stresses frequently seen in persistent undernutrition, so I believe they are on the path to recovery. Both have notable copper deficiencies, but that is treatable with dietary changes and supplemental injections."

"And you're going to make notes of that? Like, in their records? So people can see that I'm not starving them?"

"Yes."

"And you can give them these injections today?"

"Yes. I can give them now, if you consent. As I have no record of their immunizations, I would also like to give them a full battery of vaccines."

Suna nodded. "Please. Whatever they need to keep them healthy. You're sure they're going to be ok? Like, developmentally?"

"It is likely both will grow to be smaller adults than they would have under normal conditions. I can prescribe a series of growth treatments, but I would advise giving them the opportunity to develop without them until they are old enough to understand what is involved with the protocol and make an informed decision for themselves."

Suna bit her lip. "But psychologically… you know… will they be ok? They were in prison. These little kids, they were… it was awful there. You have no idea."

Voris shifted his weight on his feet. "Children are quite resilient. I am not a psychiatrist and unfortunately the colony lacks any child development or behavioral experts to treat them. I can make contact with a former colleague on Earth and ask for their professional opinion. Are there any specific concerns you had?"

"Maera hordes food and has temper tantrums that would wake the dead. Malen barely talks, except to Maera. He doesn't like to make eye contact. He has nightmares and he refuses to learn to use a toilet or utensils. I've tried so many things but a lot of the time, he just shuts down and stops responding if I push him too hard to learn new things."

"You haven't even had him for two months though," Dagny interrupted, gazing at the boy and feeling her heart swell with pity.

"True, and they're doing better than they were, but I worry they're going to be permanently scarred somehow."

Voris opened his mouth but Dagny spoke first. "We can't change what they've been through, but we can do our best to do better by them from here on out. I think we need to just give them some time."
"I agree," Voris said quietly. "And as I said, I will communicate your concerns to my former colleague and relay any advice she has."

Suna sniffed and smoothed Malen's hair. "Thank you both. For everything."

Voris excused himself to prepare vaccines for the children and though Maera allowed Voris to inject her without complaint, Malen screamed and hid under the bed when approached with a hypospray. When Voris tried to coax him out, Malen bit him hard enough to draw blood. Suna snapped her fingers and uttered some stern-sounding Romulan, but Malen ignored her. When Voris made a second attempt to pull Malen from under the bed, Maera started pummeling Voris in the leg to get him to stop and yelling what Dagny could only presume to be Romulan curses.

Twenty minutes later, the children were curled on either side of Suna. Malen seemed to have already forgotten the incident, but Maera continued to watch Voris with keen suspicion.

"Do you need help patching up your hand?" Dagny asked, reaching for Voris' bloody fingers to examine the wounds created by Malen's sharp tricuspid teeth.

No sooner did her fingertips meet the meat of his hand than he pulled back and muttered, "I can manage. Will you monitor Miss Dalal while I finish resupplying the pharmaceutical cabinet for the coming week?"

She glanced at him, unable to look him in the eye. "Sure."

She watched him return to the clinic and made her way back to the chair by Suna's bedside.

"I'm sorry they're so wild," Suna groaned, brushing Maera's long, black locks behind her ears. "And thank you both so much for being so understanding."

"We get all kinds of families in here," Dagny replied. "This is what we're here for, is to take care of people."

"I bet none of your other patients bite."

Dagny grinned. "Now that you mention it, there was a rather unruly Gorn boy a few months back who could give Malen a run for his money."

Suna snorted. "Ok. Fair enough. I've seen Gorn kids—they're no walk in the park."

Silence started to grow between them before Suna took a deep breath, held it for several seconds, then murmured, "I have no idea what I'm doing."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not cut out for this. I never wanted to be a mom. I have no idea how to begin raising human kids, let alone Romulan ones."

Dagny's eyes shifted to Suna's hands, which were absentmindedly tracing lines through Malen's hair. "You seem to be doing good enough."

"I don't want to be 'good enough.' They deserve the best after everything they've been through. What if Rhaev was right? I don't know if-
"

"There's no right way or best way to raise a child," Dagny interrupted. "I can't say I have much experience in wrangling little Romulans, but based on everything I've seen, they can't be that much
different than human kids."

"What if they need more than what I can give them?"

"I never actually heard them say it, but I'm positive my parents asked themselves that every day. I grew up on a salvage ship and I know it bothered my father that sometimes there wasn't enough food for us to all have second helpings for dinner or that clothes passed from one kid to the next until they ended up being little more than a few fibers of thread hanging from the collar of a shirt."

Suna scoffed. "I grew up on a transport ship and had two older brothers. I can relate."

"I had two older brothers too." Dagny's mouth turned into a faint half-smile at the thought of Aksel and Benjamin.

"It's not easy being the baby of the family and the only girl to boot, is it?"

"Oh, I wasn't the baby. Not by a long shot. I was third of fourteen."

Suna's eyes widened. "You're joking."

Dagny shook her head. "Families tended to be big on the *Albret*. My mom used to say there wasn't much else to do on deep space missions."

"The *Albret* … that sounds familiar. Wasn't that the ship the Svendsens were on?"

She nodded. "They left several years ago to come here."

"Nicolas told me what happened. I'm very sorry."

Overwhelming sadness threatened to engulf Dagny. It seemed disproportionate to the amount of grief she'd come to accept as normal whenever she thought about her family. "Thanks," she whispered.

"Anyway, it's a small galaxy," Suna mused, clearly trying to change the subject.

"It is," Dagny agreed. "And we covered a lot of it over the years."

"It must have been nice to have a change of scenery. I spent the first sixteen years of my life travelling between the Utopia Planetia Depot and the Bolarian sector. Same boring transport route. Back and forth, back and forth, eighteen times a year."

"Have you ever been to Earth?"

Suna gave her a wry smile. "I saw the lunar colonies once when I was little. Does that count?" When she saw Dagny smile and shake her head, she added, "I'm technically a citizen, but I've never been to Earth. Pretty weird, huh?"

"Me either. After the *Albret* was destroyed, everyone kept suggesting I should go home to Earth, but it's not home. Not really."

"I tried to go. I left the *Kluwer* when I was sixteen because I hated it so much. I had the idea that I would go to Earth. I have no clue what I would have done there."

"The *Kluwer*, that was your transport ship?"

"Yeah. One day, we settled into the Port of Zjim and I told my mom I wanted to go to the shops. I never came back."
"That must have broken your family's heart," Dagny replied without thinking.

Suna winced and gazed at the children sitting in the bed with her. "My brothers were troublemakers and kept my parents pretty busy. Danesh and my dad used to get in such bad fights. I guess I never really felt like my parents noticed me. I was a bitter little brat back then."

"Have you talked to them since?"

"Oh yes. My mom was angry, but she got over it. We still don't talk much, but why would we? We never talked back then."

"So where did you go?"

"When I left the Port of Zjim? Where didn't I go? I hitchhiked with some Bolarian traders to Babel, then worked odd jobs to buy passage to back to Earth, but the day I was supposed to leave, I overslept. I had been sleeping in the attic of this house in the old part of the city and I missed my ride. So I stowed away on another vessel, ended up at Wolf 359, then I just kind of wandered around the Alpha quadrant for a while. I never stayed in any one place for long."

Suna stopped talking and gazed at Dagny, and only then did Dagny realize her mouth was hanging open. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude. Your story just sounds very…"

"Crazy? Irresponsible? Dangerous?"

"I- well, I wasn't- I didn't mean-""It's ok, I was. But the story only gets wilder from there."

Dagny raised her eyebrows, making Suna laugh. "Oh yes," she added. "Should I start from the beginning, or just skip to the part where I ended up blockade running with Nausicaan smugglers?"

"Seriously?"

"Are you asking if I seriously just asked that question or if I seriously profiteered off the Laurentian conflicts?"

"I guess start at the beginning, please. I've got nothing but time."

Over the next hour, Dagny sat in awe and listened to Suna's sometimes funny, sometimes shocking tale of her life over the past fifteen years that included captaining a merchant ship and spending six months in an Orion prison for counterfeiting, a sentence that had been cut short by an escape made possible thanks to her crafty cellmate, who had once been a Laurentian pirate. There were times it seemed like a tall tale, but when Dagny would stop and ask questions for clarification, Suna had no problem keeping the story straight.

Eventually she talked about how she'd met Rhaal when she'd been on a mission with Orion pirates, whom she'd met through her Laurentian pirate cellmate, to capture Romulan cloaking technology to sell on the black market. Rhaal had been the first officer of a small scout ship, and following a vicious battle between the Orion pirates and the Romulan troops that had left most of both crews dead, Rhaal and the three surviving Romulans had surrendered to the Orions on the condition they be taken to the Federation side of the Neutral Zone.

"So he… defected?" Dagny asked.

"Not exactly," Suna explained. "He didn't want to help the Federation any more than he wanted to
help the Romulans. I think he was tired of all the fighting; he just wanted some peace and quiet. I told him the Orions wouldn't honor their promise, and I was right. The Orions tried to put them out an airlock that night, but I warned them and they fought back and took control of the ship. We toured the Neutral Zone for a few months, trying to find a place to cross back into Romulan Territory so the Romulans could retrieve their families, but there were listening posts everywhere. Eventually the ship broke down near the Hromi Cluster, and we were rescued by the *Oglethorpe*.

"And that's how you ended up here?"

"More or less. Rhaal and the Romulans tried seeking asylum at the Federation colony, but they wouldn't allow them in. That was when Sam had had enough and we split off into Bergeron colony."

"So Rhaal is the reason this colony exists?"

"I doubt it. I think it would have happened eventually no matter what. Samantha Bergeron and Lucy Coronado are the reason this colony exists. Either way, the colony became a magnet for all kinds of Klingon and Romulan refugees. Rhaal forgot about his family for a while, but when his brother Rhaev and his family showed up here and told Rhaal what the Romulans had done to his wife and kids because they'd believed he'd defected, he decided he had to try and go back, no matter the cost."

"Last night, Rhaev said you and Rhaal cost him everything," Dagny replied, electing to leave out Rhaev's more colorful language.

"I can't say it isn't true, I guess. The Romulans have a way of punishing innocent people to keep the masses in line. Sometimes things can get bad enough that people are willing to risk their lives to try and change it, but they aren't usually willing to risk their kids' lives."

Anger bubbled in Dagny's gut at the thought of Maera and Malen sitting in prison because Romulans had no qualms with punishing children to get back at their parents.

"You know, Rhaal never even met Malen. Maera was just a baby when he left to go on that mission."

It was a statement full of sad information, but the more Dagny reflected on it, the more confused she became. "I thought you said you and Rhaal were partners? Like, romantically."

Suna winced. "Maera and Malen's mother, Nha'll, was from an old senatorial family and would have never deserted the Empire, or so Rhaal says. He always used to say she'd have turned him in to the squads in a heartbeat if she'd even suspected he wasn't fully loyal. I guess that's why he never worried too much about what they might do to her—he figured her family would protect her. Then when he found out she'd been arrested and executed and Rhaev and his family had been forced to flee in the night, it ate him up inside. I don't think he ever forgave himself."

"I don't even know what to say," Dagny replied.

"What can be said? The Romulan Empire is evil and its people are brainwashed."

Dagny looked at the children again, who were starting to doze off in Suna's arms. Even if it were true about Rhaal's wife, it seemed wrong that he had left his pregnant wife and young child to fend for themselves, knowing what the state might do to them. How could he have left them so vulnerable? How could Suna have agreed to enter into a relationship with someone who was married? It didn't seem like it was her place to judge and it definitely didn't seem right to judge a dead man and a woman who had nearly died trying to save two young children from prison, but the whole
thing left a bad taste in her mouth.

"Anyway, as you can see, I don't really think I'm mother material."

Dagny's mind snapped from her internal reflections back to Suna and she struggled to think of something to say. "I had wondered where you'd found the guts to break into a Romulan prison camp, but after that story, I'm surprised you didn't take it over and disguise yourself as the camp's senior official."

"I'm bold but I'm not insane," Suna laughed.

Seconds ticked by and the awkwardness grew. Eventually Suna said, "I bet you're a wonderful mother."

Suna gazed down at Dagny's bulging stomach, an act which made Dagny feel immediately defensive and embarrassed. "I guess I wouldn't really know. This is my first one."

"Well, you said you had a lot of younger brothers and sisters and I can tell by the way you handle Maera and Malen that you'll be a good mom."

"Thank you? I guess? If you want to know the truth, I'm actually terrified."

"Really? You seem like an old prol."

"I know how to raise kids on a salvage ship and I know how to raise human kids…"

Suna looked deeply confused and it occurred to Dagny that Suna probably didn't know the situation if she'd only been back on the colony for a few weeks. Unfortunately, Dagny didn't feel like she could walk back such an idle comment without offering at least some kind of explanation for why a human woman wouldn't be having a human baby and besides, Suna was bound to find out eventually, so she simply said, "My baby is half Vulcan."

Suna smiled awkwardly. "I can't believe I didn't guess that, but it makes a lot of sense. You and Dr. Voris seem so natural together."

The words immediately made her cheeks burn. "Oh, we're not together. Not like that."

It was Suna's turn to look embarrassed. "This is what I get for assuming. There are so few Vulcans on the colony. This is awkward."

"No, Voris is the father, but we're not married or anything. It's… it's complicated."

Suna frowned and thought to herself for a moment. "Really? You're not even casually dating?"

"I mean, we work together and we live together." Dagny groaned inwardly as the words rolled off her tongue. She felt like she'd had some version of this conversation so many times that it should come naturally but for whatever reason, it felt especially awkward now.

Suna's eyes drifted down to Dagny's stomach and it didn't take a lot of effort to guess what the woman must be thinking. She constructed the conversation in her head, imagining Suna asking, "How you'd end up pregnant with his kid then?" to which Dagny would have wanted to answer something like, "Vulcans get horny every seven years and I had just lost my entire family and probably would have latched onto a Klingon warlord if he had shown me even a hint of kindness and five months later, here we are."
Fortunately, Suna offered a thin-lipped smile and told her, "We don't have to talk about it, if you don't want to. And I'm sure I'm the last person who should judge anyone's life choices. However it happened and however you make it work, I think you're both going to be good parents."

Dagny almost felt compelled to burst into tears. She blinked several times and looked away and a second later, the door opened and Voris appeared. She felt herself blushing, but her sudden girlishness disappeared when she saw the constable standing behind him.

"What's going on?"

"Constable Kilpatrick and Nhael have come to speak with Miss Dalal."

Only then did Dagny notice Rhaev's wife standing behind the burly, redhead constable. She sensed Suna tensing in the bed next to her.

"We're not here to cause trouble," the constable said grimly. "We just want to talk."

"About what?" Suna demanded.

Nhael took a deep breath and wandered out from behind the constable. "I would like to meet my niece and nephew. You cannot object to that, surely."

"You're not going to take them," Suna replied. "They stay with me."

"You are in hospital," Nhael sighed. "This is not a good place for them."

"They were in prison before. Prison. If Rhaev cares about them so much, why didn't he go get them out?"

"Why don't we focus on the present?" Constable Kilpatrick said, inching forward to stand slightly between Nhael and Suna.

Dagny turned to Suna and realized both children had woken up and were staring at Nhael with burning curiosity. Nhael smiled and offered a little wave, but the children didn't respond.

"They stay with me," Suna said, her tone more like an accusation than a declaration.

"I was hopin' to ease into this subject, but to be fair, both Romulan and Federation law appear to favor Rhaev and Nhael."

"I'm no lawyer, but I didn't think Bergeron colony was under Romulan or Federation jurisdiction," Suna replied icily.

The constable sighed. "We don't have any precedent for something like this. We've had kids who ended up without any parents, but never kids with too many parents."

"I don't know that there is such a thing as too many parents," Dagny interjected.

Voris gave her a sidelong look and she got the sense he was trying to encourage her to not involve herself in other peoples' business, but she also sensed where this was going and she didn't like it.

"There has to be some way to compromise," she continued. "I grew up on a ship with many families and yes, I had my own parents, but I also had other parental figures I looked up to and listened to and learned from. We were all kind of one big family, in a way."

Nhael gave her a sympathetic look and then turned back to Suna. "The nurse is right. We do not
want to keep you from seeing them and Rhaev and I are very grateful to you for-"

"No," Suna said flatly. "No!"

"No!" Maera echoed. "No no no!" Her brother joined in, and soon, the ward was in chaos.

"Perhaps Dagny and I should give you the opportunity to speak privately," Voris said, narrowing his eyes slightly at Dagny.

She mouthed, "Voris, please…" but he shook his head and motioned toward the door. It was an ugly enough scene without her getting involved and she supposed he was probably right, but she hated it all the same. She followed him out, fighting against her feelings of helplessness at the situation and irritation at Voris.

The moment he closed the door behind them, she blurted, "You're going to let Nhael take them, aren't you?"

"I do not see that we have a choice. She is their aunt."

"You saw how Rhaev acted yesterday! He had to be hauled out of here because he was making a scene. Rhaev and Nhael are strangers to those kids!"

"Please lower your voice."

"Voris," she hissed, "I don't think Suna can handle losing them."

"It is a difficult situation but as the constable pointed out, the children are fortunate to have so many adults invested in their upbringing."

"Rhaev is a racist."

"Rhaev is Romulan and holds many traditional Romulan values, but I have no cause to believe he or Nhael will abuse or neglect them."

"How can you take Rhaev's side?" she shouted.

"It is not about taking sides," Voris replied. "It is about ensuring the most appropriate living situation for the children and it is not our place to say what that is."

Dagny scoffed and crossed her arms, feeling the warmth rising up into her face. Suddenly, her temperature monitor went off and it took incredible discipline to keep from ripping it off her stomach.

"Perhaps you might go upstairs and prepare an end meal," he encouraged.

"And perhaps you might pull your head out of your ass," she snapped, turning on her heel and stomping toward the stairs without looking back at him.

Dagny spent the next twenty minutes cooking so vigorously that it might have been comical under any other circumstances. She diced the vegetables with such force that the tip of one of the potatoes went sailing halfway across the kitchen.

"Perhaps you might go upstairs and prepare an end meal," he encouraged.

"And perhaps you might pull your head out of your ass," she snapped, turning on her heel and stomping toward the stairs without looking back at him.

She could hear muffled voices in the convalescent ward below and eventually there was wailing and screaming. She covered her ears and began to cry, and after a minute, she decided she couldn't take it anymore.

She raced downstairs to see Nhael holding a squirming, squalling Malen and Constable Kilpatrick
trying to subdue Maera, who was screaming at the top of her lungs and trying to run back into the ward. Suna was standing in the doorway in her hospital gown, hands clasped over her mouth and silently sobbing. The whole scene took Dagny's breath away.

The constable and Nhael left with the children and when the door closed behind them, she sank to her knees and started to howl. Instinct made Dagny join her on the floor and wrap her arms around the broken woman and they cried together for a long time.

In the back of her mind, she knew it was strange that she would react this way. It was a sad situation, but she had seen worse. She had lived through worse. No one was dead, no one was physically hurt, and Suna would see them again, but there was something about seeing a mother so casually stripped of her children that struck wild fear into her heart.

Exhaustion was creeping in and it was taking enormous effort to keep his eyes open. It was tiring, being so tired all the time. He was still recovering from Orion lungworm and the clinic had stayed fairly busy in recent weeks, but Dagny's manic emotions were adding to his fatigue in a way that excess work and lack of sleep could not.

She was approaching the sixth month of her pregnancy and it was likely the fetus' developing brain was beginning to experience primitive emotions, and because of the innate telepathic abilities it had inherited from Voris, the child inside Dagny would spend the rest of its gestation period caught up in a positive feedback loop of emotions with its mother.

Whenever Dagny was sad, the fetus would begin to feel sad. If the fetus was frustrated, Dagny would feel frustrated. Mother and child were feeding off each other's feelings and Voris had been invited to indirectly participate via his mating bond with Dagny.

He had only noticed that evening just how strong the haphazard mating bond between them had grown. Perhaps it was inevitable after spending so much time in close quarters and after everything they'd been through. He was certain her emotions had not always been this powerful, but they had increased in severity so gradually that he had not noticed how taxing it had become to maintain his own emotional balance.

Where he'd once only detected minor glimmers of her feelings, now he was suddenly drowning in a constant barrage of joy, irritation, and despondency if he relaxed his mind for even a moment. What struck him as particularly odd was the way her mood shifted whenever he was nearby and there were times that despite his best efforts, he could not repress the effect her feelings were having on him. Often he sensed pure affection that bordered on love, other times, intense loathing. Yesterday when she'd found him bathing Malen in the sink, for a brief moment, he'd felt the same profound love he'd once shared with T'Sala, but earlier that evening when the Nhael and the constable had left with the children, he'd felt hatred and helplessness in her that were difficult to describe.

He knew Dagny neither loved nor hated him—it was the unique complications of her hybrid pregnancy that were responsible for her feelings. He also knew Dagny could only be who she was, but there were times he wished she could make some kind of effort to control her feelings. Perhaps she was trying to keep them in check and this was the best she could do. If that were true, it was a wonder she didn't go mad.

Even if Dagny managed to maintain her sanity, he knew he could not continue in this way, nor did he want her to suffer needlessly. Because of his recent illness and the demands of the clinic, it had been many weeks since they'd devoted their evenings to study and personal development. He considered proposing they renew their lessons, except instead of focusing on medical school prerequisites or Vuhlkansu, he would offer to instruct her in meditation techniques.
Of course, he still hadn't found an opportunity to speak with her about leaving Bergeron colony once the quarantine was lifted. He had much to discuss with her and was in the midst of planning the most logical order to broach these subjects when the door buzzed. A muscle in his forehead twitched.

It was late, nearly 2100 hours, and Dagny had only retired upstairs a short time ago. Sunayana Dalal had just gone to sleep in the convalescent ward and he did not feel physically or mentally capable of dealing with another complex crisis. When he opened the door, he was relieved to find there was no one bleeding or suffocating or otherwise dying, only Samantha Bergeron.

"What can I do for you, Miss Bergeron?"

"Sorry for the late hour, doctor. Can I come in?"

Voris nodded and stepped aside to allow her to enter. It was taking conscious effort to quell the exasperation he felt at receiving what appeared to be a social call at this late hour.

"I don't want to take up too much of your time. I was hoping I could get some advice."

"I dispense medical advice six days per week from 0630 to 1830 hours," Voris explained, trying to keep his tone level. "If it is not an emergency-"

"It's not medical advice I'm here for."

"Then please, enlighten me."

"I heard your uncle is First Minister of New Vulcan and your dad is... some other kind of important bureaucrat."

"You were informed correctly—my father is New Vulcan's Minister of State."

Sam allowed her eyes to wander around the clinic. Voris watched her and swallowed his impatience.

"I guess the reason I'm here is... I don't have any experience with leading people. Not in any kind of official way. I started this colony with a handful of outsiders. It was never supposed to get this big and it definitely wasn't ever supposed to be this complicated."

"And what would you like me to do?"

"I don't know," she groaned, running her hands through her hair. "All I know is this colony is too much for one person to run."

"I agree."

"I guess I'd hoped that you had some advice about running a government."

"My uncle and father have many years of experience in such matters, but I am only a doctor."

"People look up to you," Sam replied, shooting him a tired look.

"I believe they admire you as well."

"You don't get it," she snapped. "You just don't get it."

"Perhaps I could 'get it,' as you say, if you could be more specific as to what it is I do not get."

"The Federation pulled the northern colony. When they dropped off our food and supplies, they also
evacuated the other colonists back to Aldebaran."

"What does that have to do with your ability to govern our colony?"

"Everything. The Gorn are threatening to invade Cestus III and as far as I can tell, the only thing stopping them is the fear that the Klingons might fight them for it, and meanwhile, we're stuck in the middle, completely defenseless. If spring comes too late, we might also be facing a famine. People are blaming me."

"There is no logic in creating scapegoats, but rarely is there any logic to be found when people are facing the threat of invasion or starvation."

"No kidding."

"I was not making a joke, I was merely-"

Sam held up her hand. "Even if we don't get invaded by the Gorn or Klingons, the rest of the colony is falling apart. It's just grown too big and there are too many factions and groups and cliques. The Romulans are angry about the Orion lungworm outbreak, the Orions are angry that the Romulans weren't punished more severely for the random attacks in the tunnels, the Andorians are trying to declare independence—like they're not independent enough up there on the surface, for crying out loud! Most of the humans and Tellarites don't trust the Klingons or the Gorn, and so many rumors are flying at me every day that I don't even know what's true anymore. Maybe I was naïve to think everyone could just get along without having to write down a bunch of laws. I really hoped people could just be decent to each other. I really didn't start this colony with the idea of being a dictator, but that's what people think I've become. I'm just... I'm lost, Dr. Voris."

"Perhaps it is time to institute a formal government."

"Yes! Yes, exactly! That's why I'm here, asking you to help."

"I know nothing of forming a new government."

"I thought New Vulcan spent the last few years rebuilding a government."

"True, but I was not involved with that."

"I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel—I figure we can borrow from existing colonial charters and constitutions—I'm just asking you to help me figure it out. I'm planning to call a colony meeting very soon, but I wanted to have some ideas to present to people at that meeting. I was also hoping you would help me talk to the people."

"You fear you have lost legitimacy as a leader and you think they will listen to me?"

"You're probably the most respected person on this colony and not to stereotype or anything, but I think people are naturally inclined to trust Vulcans to know the best way forward out of a bad situation. Please?"

"I will attend this meeting, but I have no expertise in governing."

"I'm in the middle of drafting a proposal for establishing a formal council. Will you at least look it over and give me your thoughts before I present it to the colony?"

Voris gave a small nod. "Yes, but I do not believe my opinion is more valid than anyone else's."
"Thank you. And you should stop trying to be so humble."

"Excessive humility is more of a vice than a virtue, but I assure you, I am no expert on government."

Sam nodded. She gave him a tiny smile, lifted her hand in the ta'al, and said, "Live long and prosper, doctor."

It had been so long since he'd shared this traditional Vulcan exchange with anyone and he was briefly struck by a feeling of nostalgia. He returned the salute and walked her to the door.

"I'm sure it goes without saying, but could we keep this just between us for now? The meeting will probably be sometime next week, but like I said, there are so many rumors-"

"I shall be a paragon of discretion."

Samantha laughed and hit the door release, but just as she started to walk through it, she froze. "Oh, hello, Vaksur."

Voris noticed the slender Vulcan woman standing outside the clinic door, hand raised as though she had been preparing to ring the after-hours buzzer when Sam had opened the door.

"Do you have an emergency?" Voris asked.

"Not exactly," Vaksur replied, ignoring Sam in favor of gazing directly at Voris.

"I'll leave you two to it. Have a good night."

Sam and Vaksur brushed past each other as one departed and the other entered. Vaksur shut the door behind her and drifted into the room. Despite his Vulcan discipline, Voris' irritation threatened to boil over at the prospect of ridding himself of one uninvited visitor, only to be burdened with a second one.

Before he could ask what she wanted, she blurted, "I'm very glad to see you're better."

"Thank you."

"I would have come by sooner, but there was the quarantine and then… well, it's not important. As I said, I'm glad you're alright."

Voris blinked several times. "Is there something I may assist you with? It is growing quite late."

She opened her mouth and winced. "Um, I've been having the headaches again."

"I can prescribe an immediate analgesic and perhaps you could return in the morning."

"The hypos never help. Can't you just do the neuropressure?"

She had unique talents of persuasion and despite the fact he wanted to retire for the evening, he consented to her request. She undid several buttons on her shirt and allowed it to fall slightly down her back, exposing the top part of her shoulders.

The last time he had performed neuropressure on her, he'd felt considerable trepidation at touching her, and his hesitation had only grown much worse. Rather than draw it out, he mentally collected himself and quickly traced his fingers along the vertebrae of her neck, searching for the proper pressure points.
"I was worried about you," she whispered.

"Why?"

"Because you're the colony doctor," she answered, her voice louder. "What would we do if something happened to you?"

"The colony managed with no trained medical staff for months," he reminded her, pressing down hard into trapezoid.

"Were you not worried about me? I could have come down with the lungworm too."

"I was unconscious for several days and even if worry were logical, which it is not, I could not have worried over your welfare in such a condition."

She snorted a soft laugh. "That's the most Vulcan thing I've ever heard."

"When I regained consciousness, I asked for a report of potentially susceptible Vulcanoid colonists and was informed you and several others had been vaccinated within the past ten years, according to the records my predecessor kept, therefore, there was no reason to be concerned for your well-being."

"This feels really nice," she said, craning her neck to look at him.

"It is not intended to be pleasant: it is intended to be therapeutic. Please face forward."

"If I didn't know better, I could swear you were in a bad mood."

"I am not."

She stepped forward, shrugging out of his grip, and when she turned around to face him, her shirt had fallen so low on her chest that it threatened to expose her breasts. He immediately looked away.

"Sometimes I feel like you're the only person on this colony who could ever understand me," she murmured.

"We are hardly acquainted."

"Do we have to be? We're the only two Vulcans here."

"We are of the same species but that does not make us familiar."

"Voris, I've lived my whole life away logic and discipline and everything Vulcan. When my grandmother died, I started to think maybe she and my parents robbed me of something I needed. Then you showed up. You're the first logical Vulcan I've ever met. I want to learn how to control my emotions like you do. I want to learn how to be Vulcan."

"Most Vulcans spend their entire lives seeking logic's serenity—I am hardly qualified to train you to learn what I myself am still seeking to master."

She smiled and took a step forward. "So you're telling me that you really do have feelings under that stone cold façade?"

"You obviously know that Vulcans experience emotions."

She bit her lip and took a slow breath. "Do you... have any emotions about me?"
"Specify."

She covered her face with her hands and shrugged her shirt back up onto her shoulders. "I used to think I just admired you but if I'm going to be perfectly honest, I think I have feelings for you. I think I knew it the first time you did neuropressure on me. Maybe I knew it the first time I saw you."

Voris blinked several times, unable to absorb the weight of her words. Strangely, his mind turned to Dagny, wondering what she was doing upstairs. The hopeful look on Vaksur's face began to transform into something else entirely.

"Please say something," she whispered through clenched teeth.

"What would you have me say?"

"Say you feel the same way."

But he did not feel the same way. Did he? He had never considered his relationship with Vaksur to be romantic in nature. She was certainly very beautiful but their personalities were so diametrically opposed that he had never bothered to consider her as a potential mate, and why should he, when he had Dagny?

It suddenly occurred to him that he didn't have Dagny, not really. She was pregnant his child, but she was not his mate either, and he would need a mate eventually. Dagny had helped him resolve his most recent pon farr, but even if he dared ask her, which he didn't, he doubted she would be willing to assist him a second time.

He turned his attention back to the slender Vulcan woman standing in front of him, unsure of how to proceed. He knew so little about her. He started to realize just how much time had passed since she'd urged him to assert his feelings for her. He should say something, but what?

Before he could decide on a response, Vaksur inhaled a slight gasp, clenched her eyes shut, then stepped forward and pressed her mouth to his. Her lips were warm and dry, her touch, gentle yet insistent. Soon he felt her tongue sliding over the part in his lips, but he remained paralyzed by indecision.

She suddenly tore her mouth away and gulped. "What's wrong?"

"I- I am surprised by your display of affection. I am surprised that you harbor any affection for me at all."

"But I do. Are you not at all interested in me?"

"You are aware of my current situation with Dagny Skjeggestad?"

"Your paramedic? Yes, everyone knows about that, but I bet not everyone can figure out how it happened. I might not have been raised as a Vulcan, but Velara did tell me things. I know about pon farr. I know you can't go without a wife forever."

He took a step back and glanced at the wall.

"I know Vulcans don't like talking about it so I'm sorry to bring it up, but since we are on that subject-"

"You would accept my child by another woman?" he interrupted.
"Lots of people have children from previous relationships. I have two half-siblings out there somewhere. It's not unheard of."

"Admitting you understand the situation is not the same as accepting it."

"Life is messy. What else is there to say?" She reached for his hand, but her touch failed to generate the usual feelings of mild euphoria that came with ozh'esta. T'Sala's touch had elicited that sensation, and so had Dagny's. He thought of Dagny and suddenly felt ashamed for ever considering Vaksur as a potential mate.

"I do not believe we are well-suited to one another."

"How can that be logical?"

"Explain."

"There are so few Vulcans left—isn't it logical that the only two on this colony should be together? It almost feels like fate. You came here for a reason—you obviously didn't like living on New Vulcan."

"It is illogical to assume you understand my motives for relocating here. Furthermore, there is no logic in forcing a bond between us for the sake of perpetuating our species."

"Is it because I don't follow logic?" she asked, the pitch of her voice clipping several syllables. "I told you—I want to learn. Teach me. Teach me to be with you."

"Our incompatibility is not a personal failing on either of our parts. We simply are not suited to one another."

She exhaled sharply and squinted at him. "I think we could be, if you would just give me a chance."

Voris stepped back. "Perhaps you should leave."

Vaksur's face turned from confusion and hurt to rage. "I've just poured my heart out to you and all you can say is go away?"

"I think it would be for the best."

"You love her, don't you?"

"Whatever I feel or do not feel for Miss Skjeggestad is irrelevant now."

Vaksur balled her hands into fists and leaned forward assertively to kiss him a second time. He could not subdue the instinctive arousal that resulted from her hungry touch and the more primitive parts of his brain briefly overrode any trace of reason, but then Voris suddenly felt very calm. The calm lasted for perhaps three seconds before it started to transform into indignation and fury.

He made every effort to center himself but his anger was beyond him. He started cycling through feelings of hurt and betrayal, ugly emotions that he could barely comprehend, let alone control. He tried to push her away and when he did, he noticed the desperate, pleading look in her eyes and might have felt pity for her, if he could feel anything besides anger and pain. She reached for his face and he grabbed her by the wrists, and only then did his eyes register a flash of movement from behind Vaksur.

Dagny was standing on the stairs to their quarters, her face a strange shade of red and her mouth
hanging slack at the sight unfolding before her in the clinic. She steadied herself on the wall behind her and turned to flee upstairs, tripping over herself to get away from the scene.

It would have been an awkward motion for anyone, but Dagny’s protruding belly put her entirely off-balance and her left foot got tangled with her right. She started to fall backwards and despite her desperate attempts to keep herself from falling, her hands had nothing to grab onto and could do nothing to prevent her from crashing down the stairs.
New Roles

Stardate 2260.230

Her limbs scrambled to make sense of her immediate surroundings, which had suddenly been inverted thanks to her feet getting hung up on the stairs. She was falling, twisting, groping blindly, then agony tore through her arm. Her head bounced off the stone floor, sending stars ricocheting through her field of view.

For several seconds, she was too stunned to think about anything, about the baby or Voris or Vaksur. All she could do was blink and try to figure out what had just happened. She had a feeling someone was talking and when she turned her head to see where the voice was coming from, reality flooded back.

She gasped and craned her neck to look at her stomach. Had she fallen on it? She tried to sit up but couldn't maneuver over the pain in her right arm.

Voices were whispering around her. "Is she ok?" There was more murmuring, followed by someone saying, "Please leave."

"Voris?"

Dagny snuck a look over her shoulder and saw Vaksur looking at her with a feigned look of concern. The pain drifted into rage and all that was left was the pounding of her heart. "Get out!"

"Dagny, please-" Voris began, reaching down to help her up.

"Shut up!" she spat at him. "Get away from me!"

She tried to stand again but it was all too much to manage. Her protruding belly, her injured arm, her rage and humiliation all conspired to keep her flailing around on the ground. Voris clapped a hand on her shoulder but she tugged it away from him. She tried hard to catch her breath but it suddenly seemed like the room was closing in on her.

"Please, Dagny, remain still," Voris said.

Pride and shame threatened to choke her. She took several ragged breaths and tried to cradle her stomach, but her right arm didn't seem to be cooperating.

"I want her to leave," Dagny hissed.

"She is leaving," Voris replied, nodding over his shoulder.

Dagny started to cry. "Is the baby ok?"

"I do not know."

She sobbed harder. What had she done? "No… no… please no…"

It took a few minutes for Voris to coax Dagny out of her hysterics and get her onto one of the biobeds. She listened to the beeping of the tricorder and tried to get her mind in order. Why couldn't she think straight?

"You have a broken arm."
She closed her eyes and canted her chin away from him. Had she felt the baby move since the fall? She hadn't thought about it. "Is the baby ok?"

"I can still detect a heartbeat. You do not appear to be bleeding, though I would ask you allow me to perform an internal exam."

She recoiled at the idea of his hands on her in such a way, even if he was a doctor and it was medically necessary. It struck her that maybe that was what upset her the most, the idea that he could touch her in such a sensitive place in such a neutral and unaffected way. But it wasn't like she wanted him to touch her in any other way, was it?

"Dagny?"

"What?"

"Will you consent to an internal exam?"

"No."

"I believe it would be wise-"

"Don't touch me," she whispered.

"Will you at least consent-"

"No!"

"To me correcting the fracture in your right arm?" he finished.

She scowled and took a breath. She knew she was acting like a child, but she felt like a child. Maybe she still was. "Do as you like: fix my arm, put your hands in me. I don't care."

She looked at the far wall and studied the rippled patterns in the rock harder than she probably should have. Voris shifted his weight. "I will need to set the limb."

"Whatever."

"I would recommend an analgesic."

Dagny swallowed. Thinking about her arm only seemed to make it throb harder. She gave the subtlest nod of her head and moments later, there was a sting in her neck and a cool sensation trickled down her chest and into her arms, muting her pain considerably.

He jerked her forearm hard and though it still hurt, it almost didn't register. Then she sensed a warm, vibrating sensation moving through her elbow. She hated the feeling of bone knitters in action, but it was followed by a feeling that made her immediately joyful. Whether it was the action of the bone knitter or Voris' proximity, the baby was once again wriggling around inside her. She bit her lip to keep from smiling.

"Is something the matter?"

"The baby is moving."

"That is an encouraging sign, however, your behavior seems rather altered. I believe you may also be suffering from a concussion-"
"Why did you kiss her?" She had no idea what had made her say it, but there it was.

Voris stiffened and she shut her eyes tightly against it. "That is irrelevant to-"

"It's not irrelevant," she interrupted.

"Why do you believe my interactions with Vaksur concern you?"

She nearly choked. "How does it not concern me?"

"You and I are not mates."

She dared herself to look at him. She tried to find words, any words, to describe how angry and betrayed she felt, and then like a lightning strike, they started to pour from her mouth. "Oh, right, you just got me pregnant! You just saved my life and got me pregnant and dragged me halfway across the galaxy and now I'm here and I depend on you and you act like it means nothing!"

Voris pulled back. "That it incorrect."

"Which part?"

"That it means nothing."

It should have been an intriguing thought, but she was too focused on his betrayal to let it sink in. She was shaking and she hated it.

"Why are you so troubled by the thought I would seek out another mate?"

Fresh tears pooled in the corners of her eyes. "I shouldn't have to explain it to you!"

"Why are you yelling?"

"Because I'm upset!"

"I am trying to understand why, Dagny."

The sound of her name rolling off his tongue almost broke her. If she didn't know better, she'd say he was exasperated, and the idea that she was making him feel that way was awful. But why did she feel badly? Shouldn't he be the one?

"I merely wish to understand why you would be so opposed to my seeking a mate when you are not and have no interest in being my mate."

"Who said I had no interest?" The admission took her by surprise. As the last syllable fell, she instantly wished she could take it back.

He was uncomfortable, and she knew it. He even seemed to be at a loss for words, which was somehow upsetting. "As I said, you may also have a concussion…"

Dagny's breath caught in her throat. If he was happy to pretend like she'd never implied she was interested in him, that was fine by her. Why would she have said such a thing?

The next thirty minutes felt like an out of body experience as Voris checked the range of motion in her recently repaired arm and performed a concussion screening. He administered a dose of taurelazine, standard treatment to prevent eventual protein aggregation in her brain following a blow to the head, and when he was done, they sat quietly, neither speaking nor looking at each other.
"I acknowledge your prior objections, but I feel it is my duty to encourage you to at least allow me to examine-"

"I know," she interrupted, closing her eyes. "You want to do an internal exam. Do whatever you have to do to make sure the baby is ok."

"Will you remove your trousers and undergarments?"

Her heart started to race. He'd done an internal exam before, the night she'd woken up bleeding from a subchorionic hemorrhage, but she had been too scared for the baby to really think about it and she had already been wearing clothes that had made an internal exam quick and easy.

He helped her down from the biobed. The moment his right hand touched her left and his left hand gently touched her waist, the baby started going wild. She couldn't help but smile, but given the bigger picture, he probably thought she was going crazy. Maybe she was. He'd said her behavior was "altered." Maybe the knock on her head really was more serious than she realized and she was saying all kinds of things she didn't mean. Maybe if she was really lucky, he'd chalk her earlier confession about being interested in him up to mental confusion due to a concussion.

He went to cleanse his hands in the sink, mercifully turning his back to allow her to get undressed without a captive audience, and she slid herself back onto the biobed, keeping her knees locked together. When he returned, neither of them were able to make eye contact.

"Can you slide to the edge of the biobed?" he asked, his voice even more monotone than usual.

All in all, it was relatively quick, but as far as Dagny was concerned, decades passed in the twenty seconds it took him to declare that everything seemed fine with the baby. She hated the vulnerability that came from lying flat on her back, legs wide open, while Voris of all people probed her most private areas. Her heart was pounding so fast her temperature monitor started to go off, almost as if it wanted to declare to the entire colony just how nervous and uncomfortable she really was.

"You may get dressed," he mumbled, tripping backwards to wash his hands in the sink.

It suddenly occurred to her that it had to be just as awkward for him as it was for her, and the blaring chant of her temperature monitor was only making things more tense. She nearly fell again, trying to hastily stuff her left foot into her pant leg, and she was just doing up the button of her trousers when Voris turned to face her.

Her mouth got away from her brain once again, and she said, "What I said earlier, I… I…"

Voris' face scrunched and he lightly sniffed the air. "Is something burning?"

Dagny blinked. "Oh no."

She raced toward the stairs, nearly tripping up them again. She had a sense Voris was calling out to her, pleading with her to slow down. She had been cooking dinner while Voris closed up the clinic, and she had left a pot of beans and rice on the stove.

Voris was on her heels. When she made it to the top of the stairs, she was horrified to discover thick smoke billowing throughout the tiny apartment and their dinner on fire. Voris raced back downstairs and returned with a fire suppression cylinder. "Wait downstairs."

"I'm sorry," Dagny choked. "I didn't mean to ruin dinner."

"Go downstairs," Voris repeated, giving her a stern, sidelong glance.
She suddenly felt like a little girl being admonished by her father and it made her angry beyond measure. Her temperature monitor continued to wail, but Voris was already stepping forward to tend to the small kitchen fire.

"Go, Dagny!"

He was angry. She had pushed him to the point of anger, and it frightened her such that she erupted into tears. She coughed from the smoke and sensing it would be pointless to keep trying to apologize for dinner or be mad that he was treating her like a child, she wandered downstairs and really let her emotions loose.

It was wild and chaotic. She cried until she started to hyperventilate and feel dizzy. She was so embarrassed and hurt and felt guilty about ruining the food. All that food and now it was probably little better than charcoal. She slumped down onto the ground and cried still harder. She was well into hysterical territory when she realized Voris was squatting before her, holding a hypospray.

"Dagny, please. Please attempt to calm yourself, otherwise I will be compelled to sedate you. You are overheating and it's posing a risk to both you and the child."

"I'm- I'm sor- I hate- why-"

"Dagny...

She started to scream, then there was a pinch in her neck and she was swallowed up by darkness. When she awoke, she was freezing. She was lying in her bed, stripped down to her undergarments and covered in damp towels. Her head seemed to weigh a hundred kilograms, her right arm ached down to the bone, and her mouth was dry as a summer desert.

There was a soft beeping noise and moments later, the sheet that served as a privacy divider between their beds was peeled back, revealing Voris. Dagny groped for a sheet to cover herself and tried to sit up, but her head was in agony. What had happened? How had she come to be like this?

Voris sat down on the edge of her bed and turned on the tricorder, then it all came flooding back. The kiss, the fall, the broken arm, the very personal exam, the ruined dinner, the fire… Her chest started to tighten and she took several gasping breaths.

"Try to remain calm." His voice was soft and pleasant, but all it made her feel was shame. She had acted like a complete and utter lunatic, ruled by emotional mania. How could she ever look him in the face again? The longer she thought about it, the more panicked she started to become.

"Dagny, please look at me." Voris waved his hand in front of her face, but her cheeks started to burn and she closed her eyes and looked away.

"Dagny-

"Am I going crazy?" she croaked.

"No, or at least, I do not believe so."

"Then what's wrong with me?" she squeaked, fighting hard against the tears that were soon to come flowing down her face. "This can't be normal, this… this way I'm feeling."

"I believe you are suffering from a phenomenon known as kohnar-shan."

"What does that mean?"
"It is extremely common among expectant Vulcan mothers. The child's brain has reached a stage in development where it is capable of telepathic transference. Little is known about the emotions a fetus may feel in the womb, but what is clear is that the child is capable of enhancing emotional stress within the mother."

"Huh?"

"Whatever you feel, the child also feels, and because the child is in constant contact with you and is now capable of primitive telepathy, it's amplifying your emotions. It is causing you to feel things much more intensely."

"Well, how do I stop it? I don't like being like this."

"Many Vulcan mothers find meditation alleviates many of their symptoms-

"I don't know how to meditate!" She glared at him.

"Yes, you informed me of this the morning after… it is not important how I became aware of this fact. I am aware of your inexperience with centering your thoughts to overcome emotions. There are certain mood stabilizing drugs that have shown some efficacy in treating early symptoms of kohnar-shan, but as your pregnancy progresses, they will likely become less effective."

"So I'm just supposed to keep having meltdowns and being awful?"

"To achieve emotional stability, there is… another… a different means of…"

"Ugh, just say it," she barked, wondering why he was so bashful all of a sudden.

"If you cannot meditate for yourself, it is possible I could assist you through mind melding with you."

"Ok, what is that?"

"We have already initiated several mind melds before," he explained, looking away from her. "A mind meld can take many different forms and have many different functions. They can facilitate healing or memory transfer or…"

"Or what?"

"Or the bonding between mates."

Dagny gulped and looked away. "So, on the Sekla, when you grabbed my face, and then… all those other times in the hotel…"

"Yes," Voris replied.

"Oh."

She felt numb. "Are you- you're saying- we have to- you know- have sex?"

"No," Voris answered, probably much more quickly than he'd intended. "It would require no physical contact beyond my fingertips on your face. As I said, there are many different forms of mind melding and the kind I propose would be more therapeutic in nature, not…"

Dagny covered her eyes with her hand, suddenly very conscious of the fact that she was sitting up in her bed wearing a bra and underwear and damp towels. "So if it's not that, then… what is it you
would have to do?"

"The type of mind meld I would perform would simply involve touching my hands to your face to access your mind and aid you in sorting through your thoughts."

"You would know what I was thinking?"

"I likely would not be able to discern every literal thought you were thinking, but-.

"No."

"When you say 'no,' do you mean to imply-"

"No," Dagny repeated. "It's bad enough that you can know what I'm feeling at any given time. You don't get to know what I'm thinking too. That's private."

"I appreciate your hesitation, particularly because such a meld would simultaneously allow you access to some of my thoughts."

Dagny finally peeled her hands away from her face and gave him a perplexed look. "You're willing to let me inside of your head?"

"You would do that to make me feel better?"

"It is not only you who suffers. We share a bond: it would be illogical to deny it. When you experience particularly powerful emotions, I experience them also and in recent weeks, I've found myself increasingly incapable of repressing my own emotions."

Dagny's jaw sagged open. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know. I guess I should have. I didn't realize how bad things were until now."

"Nor did I," he admitted. "Will you allow me to meld with you?"

She wanted to say yes, for both of their sakes, but she hated the idea of giving him free access to her thoughts. She recalled telling him she might be interested in him earlier that evening and groaned inwardly. She didn't know how she thought about Voris, or how she felt about him, and the idea that he might learn things about her that even she didn't know was certainly a strange one.

"I- I- couldn't we- there has to be some other way."

Voris' eyebrow twitched, if only slightly. The microexpression seemed like the tip of the iceberg, a small crack that had finally reached the surface of what was really an enormous, internal divide. He was exhausted and weary and it was largely her fault. She felt terrible.

"I'm sorry, I."

"Do not apologize. I can prescribe the mood stabilizers; they should be somewhat beneficial."

Dagny nodded. "Thank you."

"It is late, but you should consume a meal. I prepared a stew and took some to Miss Dalal approximately one hour ago."

Even though she hated being taken care of, she was hungry. He left her bedside to allow her to dress,
and then they sat down to a watery bean soup. Neither of them spoke, but what was there to say?

They went to bed shortly after and Dagny lie awake in the darkness, rubbing her aching right arm and wondering what the hell she was supposed to do. She hated feeling intensely emotional, but she just couldn't give Voris access to her thoughts—that was out of the question.

He would learn things about her that she had never told anyone. What if he learned she'd lost her virginity on a biobed to a guy who had just proposed to her? What if he learned about Erik and Pearson? Worse, what if he learned about… She swallowed hard. She didn't allow her mind to finish its train of thought, but it didn't matter: thoughts were thoughts and they were hard to control once they'd already started.

She touched her thumb to her chin and shuddered. How was she only just now figuring out she was falling in love with Voris? There had to be some way to avoid it. But did she want to avoid it?

She rolled her head on her pillow and stared at the sheet dividing their beds. She thought of falling asleep with him the night their baby had moved, of all the tender ways he'd taken care of her. She thought of Adelaide's advice and all the evenings they'd spent together as he'd taught her about medicine and his native language. How had she been so blind?

One thing was for sure, she could never submit to a mind meld now. She had to find some other way to get control of her feelings, or else he would certainly find out how she felt. Maybe he already knew. Now that she thought about it, he had to know. If he was feeling everything she was feeling and it was taking a toll on him, surely he knew how she felt about him, even if she'd been denying it to herself.

This realization put everything into a different perspective. She'd told him she might be interested in him and he'd just ignored her confession. It was a brutal punch to the gut. He'd also kissed Vaksur—another painful jab. She rolled onto her side to face the kitchen, clutched her belly, and tried to keep the tears from coming.

She wasn't successful.

"Do you require anything from the grocer?" Voris asked, collecting his cloak and tossing it around his shoulders.

"No."

He'd anticipated she would say that. It had been two days since her fall and emotional outburst and she had barely looked at or spoken to him since. She'd begun a regimen of mood stabilizers and her emotions were far more manageable, but he still sensed incredible conflict in her.

"There is little food remaining in the preservation unit," he reminded her.

"Oh."

"Is there anything else you require for the next several hours?" Voris asked, making a note to himself to speak with Zernon about delivering a parcel of food in the morning.

"No."

He nodded and left without bidding her goodbye, only because he doubted she would respond. The main tunnel was already full of people wandering toward the primary mining tunnel where there was to be a colony-wide meeting beginning at 1900 hours.
"How ye doin', Doc?"

"I am well.

"And the missus, how is she?"

Voris hesitated. "She is well also."

"Doctor, doctor!" a voice squealed from behind them. Voris wheeled around to see Zernon trotting toward them. "I've been meaning to come by all day but couldn't find the time. My arthritis is flaring up again."

"I had also meant to speak with you," Voris replied. "We require groceries."

"Doesn't everybody," Zernon sighed, a soft, porcine squeal escaping his lips. "The greenhouses just can't keep up with demand. The strawberries they brought me are the size of marbles. It's truly shameful."

"We do not require anything specific," Voris replied. "The standard grocery delivery will be acceptable."

"The standard's been cut by a third until further notice," Zernon said. "Not my rules. I guess the people in charge have decided we have too many mouths to feed and not enough food to go around. And people have been yelling at me all day, as though it's my fault."

"People do strange things when they think they'll be goin' hungry," the constable replied, looking around nervously as the crowds of people zooming around them.

"They're going to want Sam's head on a pike," Zernon added. "I'm amazed she has the nerve to show herself in front of the whole colony."

"If there were ever a woman with more nerve than Samantha Bergeron, I'd eat my hat," Constable Kilpatrick insisted.

Voris cocked his head. "You are not wearing a hat, though if you were, what would consuming it accomplish?"

Zernon and Kilpatrick exchanged smug looks. "They blame her for the quarantine, for the Gorn and Klingon incursions, for the outbreak, and now people aren't eating as much as they used to. No one's on the verge of starving, mind you, but it certainly hasn't made her any more popular."

"Who is 'they' then?" the constable asked.

"Everyone. All I'm saying is, there are a lot of people out for her blood right now so maybe it's a good thing the colony doctor and the head of the police force will be in attendance."

They fell into the back of a large group and entered the primary mining tunnel, the only place underground large enough to comfortably fit all the colonists. The primary mining tunnel had been tapped out nearly a year ago, but engineers had come behind and cut terraces into the rock to create an amphitheater that could seat up to 6,000 individuals.

Many of the seats near the stage had already been claimed, but few people were sitting. Most milled around, some leaning against the walls with crossed arms while others were speaking in hushed, conspiratorial voices. Occasionally, the cry of a child or raucous laughter would ring out and the acoustics of the underground amphitheater amplified the sound.
He saw many people he knew, including some who took the opportunity to solicit medical advice or request an exam, but he had grown strict in his policy to only treat patients during duty hours, unless it was an emergency. Beyond the requests for medical service, he found himself greeted by person after person who wanted to thank him for his previous work. He saw Sora, who had visited him a month and a half ago with a pulmonary embolism, and her husband, Gaz. Sora began asking him questions about Tellarite fertility when a static hum echoed off the walls. He glanced at the stage below to see Samantha Bergeron waving her hands to settle people down.

"Excuse me," Voris said, wandering toward the back where Zernon and the constable were standing.

He caught sight of a lone, haggard man slumped on one of the benches carved into the rock and nearly thought he was ill, but it was difficult to tell behind the patchy beard. He stared at the man, tempted to approach him and ask if he was feeling well, then realized it was Pearson Schoenbein.

"Sad story, that," the constable whispered, realizing what Voris was looking at.

"Explain."

"The usual. Young man comes to a colony world, takes a fondness fer drink. He's been down in Jester's nearly every night, until Old Man Blakely finally had to throw him out. It's like the kid thinks he can drink all the booze on the colony."

"This must have been a fairly recent development," Voris said. "He appeared healthy when last I spoke to him."

It occurred to Voris the last time he'd spoken to Mr. Schoenbein, it had been the day of Adelaide Proctor's funeral, when he'd vaguely hinted to the man that Melana's child had been his. Pearson coughed and looked around, then noticed Voris was watching him and quickly looked away.

"I want to thank you all for coming this evening," Sam began, summoning Voris to turn his attentions away from Mr. Schoenbein.

"Like we had a choice!" shouted someone on the left.

"You did have a choice," Sam retorted firmly. "This wasn't mandatory."

"We'll be starving outside of six months and she says this isn't mandatory!" cried someone else.

"We've faced tougher times than these," Sam replied.

"Yeah, back when there was just a few hundred of us!"

The auditorium erupted into shouts and accusations against everyone from the Orions to Samantha Bergeron. Voris was nearly tempted to return to the clinic and prepare to receive mass casualties from the riot that seemed certain to ensue, but a loud horn shrieked several notes, and people settled down.

"I get it," Sam growled. "You're angry. And you think I'm not doing a good job-"

"That's 'cause you-" someone started to interrupt, but Sam's head snapped in the man's direction and she said, "Shut up, Amos!"

There was a bit of laughter and some grumbling, but no one followed the man's example of insolence. Sam took a deep breath and continued. "The truth is, this colony has grown so much bigger than it was ever supposed to. I never wanted us to be the sort of place that turned people away
and I certainly don't want to be the sort of place that turns on each other, but I've been seeing a lot of that lately."

Some heads nodded in agreement.

"It was naïve of me to think we could get by on the golden rule. It's becoming clear we need some kind of government, some basic laws, just to remind us that we can do better than finger-pointing and silly tribal politics."

"And who's going to be in charge of this government?" a woman called out. "You?"

"A lot of you have called me a dictator in the past couple weeks," Sam began, her words nearly drowned out by the colony's reaction. "But I want everyone to know I'm stepping down."

That statement caused an uproar that lasted for nearly ten minutes and from the nearby grumblings he could discern, it seemed that though the colony was dissatisfied with Samantha Bergeron's recent performance, few people had any idea of who should succeed her.

Sam was eventually forced to sound the horn again to quiet everyone down, but she was unable to achieve total silence. "Listen, I want to establish a council. An elected council. One that will establish a constitution. I've spoken to several of you over the past few days and you've given me good advice. We need an elected government—it can't just be me anymore."

"Who's gonna be on this council, then?" asked a man near the front, sending a wave of murmurs and nodding heads through the assembled group.

"Starting tomorrow morning, we're going to open up three polling stations around the colony for people to begin a nomination process. Everyone over the age of thirteen—or anyone considered a legal adult according to their respective culture—will be able to nominate up to three other people they think would be a good fit for our new council. After a week, we'll tally the votes and notify the top nine people they have been selected to sit on the council."

Voris glanced around the amphitheater, sensing more optimism radiating from the populace than there had been in weeks. The debates continued on for nearly another hour as people shouted questions about how they were going to ensure fairness and whether it would be a better idea to have a representative from each of the most populous races. The Andorians and Romulans were particularly leery about electing a government of humans.

The conversation went in circles and several changes were made to the nominating process, such that each voter would be biometrically scanned to ensure they couldn't vote twice, but also to ensure that at least one of the three people they nominated was of a different species than themselves. Then arguments began about how to achieve the kind of diversity that would satisfy everyone, as most of the Orions refused to accept a council dominated by men and most of the Andorians didn't want anyone under the age of sixty to sit on the council, which the handful of Suliban colonists found offensive, given the average lifespan of the Suliban was only fifty-eight Standard years.

Voting would not begin until tomorrow but it was clear that certain people were already well-positioned to become clear favorites to win a seat on the new council. Kor'la, a Klingon woman in charge of one of the mining shifts and Anja, Aisla's aunt, were garnering a lot of attention. Someone shouted out the constable's name and many people turned to look, but upon seeing Voris standing next to Constable Kilpatrick, several dozen people shouted in unison some version of, "What about Dr. Voris?"

"I have no interest in governing," he tried telling the people in his proximity. "I have no experience
and I stay quite occupied with the clinic."

His protestations were drowned out by enthusiasm. It seemed Samantha Bergeron had been correct in her assumption that people trusted Vulcans, not only because they were viewed as dispassionate and intelligent, but because as one of only two Vulcans on the colony, people seemed to think he would be impartial and not have any vested interest in supporting any one group over another.

He heard someone argue, "But his wife's human!" to which someone else responded, "She's not his wife, stupid. She just works in the clinic."

It was nearly 2100 hours and as Voris sensed the conversation wasn't bound to become more productive, he started moving toward the exit. He had no interest in serving on the council and if he were elected to it, which seemed likely, he could simply refuse the position. Other people were already leaving too and just as he turned the corner to head toward the main tunnel, he encountered Jon and Ann Svendsen, along with their brood of four children.

"Good evening, Dr. Voris," Jon smiled.

"Yes. I trust you are well?"

"As well as can be, I guess," Ann replied. "How's Dagny?"

He wasn't sure how to answer and Ann evidently detected something amiss from his hesitation. "Why don't you get everyone home?" she said to her husband, kissing him. "The children have school tomorrow."

Voris bid goodbye to Jon and their children and when they were out of earshot, Ann turned and started walking with him to the clinic. "Is something wrong with the baby?"

"Both Dagny and the child are healthy," he explained. He was uncomfortable discussing his and Dagny's private situation, but Ann was an old friend and relation of Dagny's.

"She must be going a bit stir-crazy, cooped up in that clinic until the baby's born," Ann replied. "She will not need to be confined for the duration of her pregnancy, only until approximately the eighth month of gestation."

"I'm really sorry I haven't stopped by more to see her ever since the outbreak. We've been so busy, trying to get the Oglethorpe landed and settled for the quarantine. Now that it's done, I've got too much time on my hands. I could probably come by for a visit."

"I am confident she would welcome you," Voris replied. "I believe she is… lonely."

Ann grimaced and swallowed hard. "I feel so bad. Dagny's like a daughter to me, but sometimes… it's hard to explain. She looks so much like her mother. Sometimes being around her makes me think of all the people I'm never going to see again. That must sound so selfish."

Voris thought it was rather illogical, but he was also well enough acquainted with loss to know there was no logic to it. He nodded and said, "You are welcome in our home whenever you like."

"It's so weird to think of Dagny being grown up and having a home and family of her own," Ann sighed. "It seems like just yesterday she was missing her two front teeth, wearing her hair in pigtails, and running around with the Karlsen sisters. Or maybe that was Frida. Anyway, I've known her since she was born and it's hard not to think of her as a little girl but the truth is, she hasn't been a little girl in a long time."
Voris often did his best to ignore the fact that Dagny was as young as she was and perhaps he had been doing her a great disservice because of it. He expected quite a bit from her because she had proven herself capable of so much, but perhaps that was unrealistic.

"Of all the kids on the Albret though, I never imagined she would be one to settle down and have a baby."

"She seems quite fond of children."

"Well, she helped her mother raise enough of her brothers and sisters, not to mention she was something of a mother hen to most of the other kids on the Albret, but I never got the sense she wanted any of her own. She always so focused on going to medical school."

"She still intends to receive her education."

"It'll be hard with a baby though, not to mention no matter what any of us wants, we're stuck here for the next year."

"There are many challenges and impediments to consider but she is capable, if she wants it, and I will assist her in any way I can."

Ann smiled. "I'm not going to pretend like I understand the situation between the two of you—there's enough colony gossip about it anyway—but thank you for taking care of her, after everything that's happened. She's a smart girl but she was forced to grow up way too fast and she's never known life beyond a salvage ship. She could have easily gotten lost in some kind of bureaucratic maze or met the wrong people and been taken advantage of or worse. You're a good man, Dr. Voris. It's why everyone on the colony wants you on the council."

As they approached the clinic, Voris spied a figure hunched over by the door and lengthened his stride. "I must go. Thank you, Mrs. Svendsen."

"Take care, Dr. Voris."

After several more paces he was able to identify the person on the clinic's doorstep as a Gorn, and after several more steps, he realized it was Apras' son, Eury, who only had one eye and had bitten him hard enough to puncture his radial vein.

"Is something wrong?"

Eury wore one of the Gorn's cumbersome universal translators around his neck, but he didn't say anything, he merely pointed down the tunnel toward the stairs leading up to the surface. He repeated himself, but as Eury remained silent, he opted for a different tactic.

"What do you need?"

Eury looked around and so did Voris. There were about a dozen people milling around, whether on their way to their homes or somewhere else, but his mother and brothers were nowhere to be seen. Eury pointed toward the stairs and moved in that direction, giving Voris the impression he was expected to follow.

Eury picked up speed when he started to scurry on four legs and Voris nearly had to trot to keep on pace. Rather than turn up the stairs, they passed Zernon's closed grocery and down a narrow side tunnel Voris hadn't noticed before. It was incredibly dark—just meters away from the main tunnel, Voris couldn't see his hand in front of his own face.
He extracted his PADD from his breast pocket and turned on the small light, but Eury was far ahead of him. Gorn had exceptional night vision and even in total darkness, they were capable of moving through a form of echolocation, but Voris was quickly disoriented. Suddenly something pulled at his pants leg and he was stunned to find Eury had come up behind him.

Then he saw why the boy had brought him here. Tucked into a pocket in the rock was a pile of five dead rats and an emaciated Harold lying on his side with his back facing them. When had Voris last seen the cat, or even thought about him? He could not remember. Harold had been fairly independent when he'd lived on New Vulcan, but since relocating to Bergeron colony, he'd become virtually feral, spending longer and longer periods of time away from the clinic.

Eury squatted down, picked up one of the rodents, and tried to feed Harold, but the cat didn't make any effort to eat it. Voris took a knee and stroked Harold's back and though the cat's skin reflexively twitched at the contact, he didn't otherwise move.

"Have you been feeding him?"

The nictitating membranes of Eury's eyes flicked and he seemed to think to himself for a long time before shrugging and saying, "Friend."

"He is very sick," Voris tried to explain, wondering if Eury could comprehend. Though he wasn't sure how much he could do for the feline, he also added, "I want to take him to the clinic."

Eury took nearly a minute to think it over, wringing his front claws and stamping his feet, but eventually he seemed to consent and allowed Voris to pick up Harold, the Terran cat he'd called his "friend." Eury began bouncing and scrambling around in the narrow tunnel, driven to motion by some instinctive impulse.

Harold was little more than skin and bones. Voris cradled him in his arms and he let out a soft "mew." He started back down the tunnel, doing his best to follow his young Gorn guide. Out in the light of the tunnel, he looked over Harold, but it was difficult to make a diagnosis. He had been old when Voris had inherited him from Mrs. DePaulo, and more than two years and two different planets later, it was unsurprising that Harold might be approaching the end of his life.

Eury was running laps around Voris on all fours, clearly excited someone was helping his feline companion. It was peculiar that two social misfits should have forged such a bond but Voris was grateful to Eury. "Does your mother know where you are?"

Eury crouched at the clinic door and shook his head. Voris supposed he was obligated to escort Eury home but he also supposed another five minutes would matter little, and he would prefer to stabilize Harold first. They entered the clinic and he set the cat on one of the biobeds. The clinic wasn't set up for veterinary practice and Voris had little knowledge of Terran feline physiology, but he was well-practiced in interspecies medicine. Harold wasn't humanoid, but for all intents and purposes, Voris biologically shared more in common with the mammalian cat than he did with Eury.

Before Voris could begin a scan, he was stopped in his tracks by a loud crash. Eury had upended one of the shelves of the pharmaceutical cabinet and dozens of hypospray canisters littered the floor. Voris decided there was no value in attempting to be polite. "Sit down."

Eury complied immediately, pushing his tail out of the way and plopping down on the floor. Voris had intended him to sit in a chair, but he saw no need to alter the current situation.

Harold was in very poor shape. In addition to being very underweight, he was dehydrated and appeared to have lost most of the vision in his good eye. He started him on fluids and ran a quick
scan, but he stopped counting at thirteen tumorous masses. He set the tricorder down and gently scratched Harold between the ears.

He wasn't particularly confident about his ability to correct the cancer that had taken over Harold's body. He couldn't decide whether he had neglected Harold or whether Harold had neglected him, but perhaps it was a bit of both. Harold had never really been his cat; they had only forged an informal relationship in the wake of the loss of their respective families.

In the early weeks after Vulcan's destruction, they had been very close, but as time went on and they'd both healed, they'd come to the unspoken agreement that neither of them really needed the other anymore. How foolish he'd been. Powerful sadness washed over him as he stroked Harold's torn ear.

Then his reverie was broken by a piercing scream coming from upstairs. Without stopping to think, Voris flew up the stairs four at a time and tripped over Eury, who came bursting out of his quarters. He slid halfway down the stairs and blinked several times, trying to catch his breath.

"What was that?" Dagny screeched. "Voris?"

He hoisted himself to his feet and glared at Eury, who was huddled into a ball at the base of the stairs. Apparently in the split second Voris had been distracted over his sadness for Harold, Eury had taken it upon himself to go wandering into his quarters. Dagny appeared at the top of the stairs and was wrapping a robe around herself. "What's going on?"

"Harold is sick," Voris said, wincing from the pain in his right side. "Eury brought this to my attention."

Dagny glided down the stairs to meet him. "Are you ok?"

"I believe so."

She furrowed her brow, clutched her chest, and glanced over Voris' shoulder. "Sorry to disturb you, I guess. I just wasn't expecting to be woken up by a little Gorn boy jumping into bed with me. Anyway, what's wrong with Harold? I don't feel like I've seen him in over a month."

"He has cancer. I do not expect him to live much longer."

Dagny clasped her hand over her mouth and pushed past him. When he met her at the base of the stairs, he saw that Eury had climbed up on the biobed with the cat and was petting him, quite roughly by any normal standard, but what was probably quite gently to a Gorn.

"Hi, Eury," Dagny cooed. "Sorry if I scared you, but you scared me too."

Eury continued to stare at the cat, then mumbled something that sounded like, "Friend?"

"I'm afraid there's nothing I can do for him," Voris said, approaching the bed. "I can make it so he doesn't hurt anymore."

"Hurt?"

"No hurt. No pain."

"Is there really nothing you can do?" Dagny croaked.

"I can try to prolong his life by several days, but I believe palliative care would be the kinder option."
Dagny sniffed and turned back to Eury. "Have you been taking care of him?"

Voris thought of the rats in the tunnel and suspected Eury had been catching them to feed to the sickly cat. Eury nodded. Dagny continued to smile even though tears trickled down her cheeks. "Thank you so much for helping him."

"It is growing late and his mother does not know his whereabouts," Voris said. "I had thought I would take him home."

"I can stay with Harold," she said, her voice cracking as she started to cry openly. Her despair was adding to Voris' and for a moment even he felt compelled to join her.

It was difficult, watching Eury say goodbye to his feline friend, but after a brief scuffle, he agreed to follow Voris out of the clinic into the main tunnel. It took fifteen minutes to reach the Gorn settlement, and he got several curious looks from several Gorn men as they passed.

Apras seemed unsurprised to see that her son had been wandering around unsupervised in the main tunnel, but as two of her other boys, Calo and Echin, were snapping at each other's throats, he supposed she had been too occupied to notice.

The tunnels were filling up and it seemed that the colony meeting had officially concluded. Many people nodded or waved to Voris as they passed, which gave him the distinct impression they knew something he didn't, but he had no current interest in making inquiries. The closer he got to the clinic, the more intense his grief over Harold's impending loss became.

When he opened the door, Dagny was clutching him to her chest and sobbing. "He stopped breathing and I couldn't get him to come back to me."

Voris approached her and peeked under her arm at Harold's face. His eyes were half open, but the light was gone from them and it took enormous concentration to prevent himself from joining Dagny's emotional display. Death was the natural conclusion of life. Death came for everything eventually. It was logical. But watching Dagny squeeze Harold to her chest and bitterly weep into his fur made him intensely distressed.

She took a stumbling half step forward, and some ancient instinct compelled Voris to reach forward and the next thing he knew, he had Dagny caught in a tight embrace. She sobbed and he held her, and he resolved to continue holding her until she no longer needed him to.
"So of all these compounds, which would you select to treat a Tellarite adolescent for nausea?"

Dagny blinked and gazed disinterestedly at the pharmaceutical cabinet shelf to which Voris was pointing. She wasn't sure why she was looking at all—it wasn't as though the answer was written anyway. "Zelamine?"

"Why?"

"Because it's a good anti-emetic."

"Yes, but why would you use it in this particular instance?"

Dagny moaned a disgruntled syllable and crossed her arms. "Because… I just would."

"There is no value in a correct answer if one cannot understand why it is correct."

"So I was right then? It is zelamine?"

"Yes."

A staring contest commenced. She knew she was acting like a petulant child when she really should be grateful that Voris would even take the time to teach her about pharmaceuticals, but she didn't really feel like learning right now. She didn't feel like doing anything. She was tired and restless and things were still awkward between them.

The mood stabilizers had helped keep the worst of her emotions in check, but they'd been indiscriminate in their function. For a while, she'd stopped feeling manic surges of rage or depression, but she also hadn't felt much in the way of joy or excitement. She'd mostly felt numb.

At first, having muted emotions had been a blessing because it had given her time to process her feelings about Voris with a rational mind. She'd decided it wasn't so strange that she might fall in love with him. They were having a baby together and they lived together and they'd been through so much together, so the idea that some subconscious part of her brain might fantasize about being together romantically actually made a lot of sense. It was just a harmless little crush, born out of convenience and proximity. She hoped that once the baby was born, sleepless nights and dirty diapers would dampen any romantic feelings.

Being on the mood stabilizers had given her a whole new appreciation for Vulcan logic. If that was what it felt like to be Vulcan, there were a lot of advantages, so long as one didn't really mind giving up all the positive feelings as well. Her mind had never been clearer and she'd been able to reexamine her life with renewed focus. The idea of having a baby and someday going to medical school had seemed incredibly achievable, but doubts were sinking back in.

With every passing day, she required higher and higher doses of the stabilizers to keep her balanced, and last night, she'd taken the maximum possible dose. Despite this fact, she'd stubbed her toe getting out of the shower that morning and had kicked the bathroom door out of some ridiculous reflex to get even with an inanimate object. She was on the verge of losing control again, and it was incredibly distressing.
"Dagny?"

"What?"

"Perhaps you would like to cease our lessons for the day?"

"Yes," she grunted through gritted teeth, before softening her tone and adding, "Please."

"Would you like to go rest?"

"I'm fine. Besides, the clinic doesn't close for another three hours."

Voris exhaled softly. "And we have not had a patient for the past two hours. I do not believe you are needed."

His words stung. From a purely objective point of view, she knew he was correct, but had he needed to say it that way?

"You are scratching your arms again," he added.

Dagny looked down and saw he was right. The flesh on her forearms was red and angry. The scratching was an odd habit that had developed out of nowhere. It wasn't intentional; it was an absentminded ritual that had drawn blood on two previous occasions, despite preventive measures such as clipping her fingernails and wearing long sleeves.

She dropped her arms and folded her left hand over her right, trying to ignore the fact that the baby seemed to be doing somersaults in her belly. She didn't want to go upstairs and take a nap, but neither did she wish to sit around the clinic with Voris constantly prodding her. She wanted to get out of the clinic but still had two more months of immunosuppressant therapy.

Having grown up on a ship, she was no stranger to cabin fever, but at least the Albret had been home. It had been large and full of people. The clinic was tiny and feeling more like a prison cell with each passing day.

The clinic door suddenly opened behind Voris. Aisla's cheerful presence lit up the room as she declared, "Mae's baby decided to come a week early! What luck! I just came to get some supplies. I've got it all under control."

"You have proven yourself quite capable," Voris agreed.

Dagny gritted her teeth. Mae Faehren was a nineteen year-old first time mother and would probably have a long, difficult labor, but Dagny would gladly go to her and tirelessly support her for days, even if only to get out of the clinic.

"Oh, I also wanted to say congratulations!"

"For what?" Dagny asked, wandering in Aisla's direction.

"Congratulations to Voris," she said, turning to face him. "I just heard you were picked to be on the council."

Dagny nearly choked. "Huh?"

"That is not possible," Voris replied.

"I heard it from Sanjay who said the results were going to get released this evening. If anyone would
know, he would."

"No, I mean that it is not possible because I was not campaigning for a seat on the council."

Aisla zipped up her medical bag and hoisted it onto her shoulder. "I'm just passing along the message. You almost sound annoyed."

"I am not annoyed," Voris retorted. "I am merely pointing out that there have been no formal elections, only a nomination process. I have not accepted the nomination."

"Well, I voted for you," Aisla said with a warm smile.

"Had you consulted with me, I would have urged you to save your vote."

Dagny looked from Aisla to Voris. She was dimly aware the colony was trying to build a new government, but she had no idea Voris had been in the running for it.

"So, what does this mean, you being nominated?" Dagny asked.

"It means precisely that—that I have been nominated. I have no intention of serving on the council."

"I would love to stay and listen to you complain about having the respect of most of the colony, but I have an expectant mother who is expecting me," Aisla grunted, whipping around and marching toward the door. "I'll call you if I need anything."

The door closed behind her and Dagny turned back to Voris. She wasn't sure what to say so she simply muttered, "I guess I should pay more attention to politics. I knew there was some kind of vote, I just didn't know people were voting for you."

"It was logical of Samantha Bergeron to share the burden of governing, but I have informed her and many others that I have no intention of accepting a leadership position here."

"Why not?"

"I believe I have previously explained my lack of ambition and talent for governance."

"Have you ever actually done it?"

"One does not need to attempt a thing to know they would not excel at it."

"That doesn't sound very logical."

"It is, I assure you." His answer seemed oddly stilted and curt, giving Dagny the impression he was growing irritated.

"Maybe you can explain it to me."

"Perhaps I may have some aptitude for governing and politics, but because I lack any desire to perform such a duty, I would be unable to fully commit myself to the task. Perhaps if there were no one else capable or willing, or if there were another doctor to take my place, I might consider it, but this is not the case."

His vehemence was surprising, but it was also impressive. "I think you would be good at it, no matter what you say."

His left eyebrow sprang upwards. "You are encouraging me to do this?"
"No, I think you should do what you want, I'm only telling you I think you might be better at it than you think."

"What gives you cause to say so?"

She suddenly felt shy and silly. "You're Vulcan. You have a knack for remembering rules and regulations. People seem to like you. You're logical. You're fair. You're kind." Dagny's cheeks started to feel warm from all the praise she was singing, but it was true. He was all those things and more.

Voris tilted his head downward in what was obviously a posture of deep self-reflection. She didn't expect him to say anything else, so she headed toward the stairs to their quarters when he said, "There is something I would like to speak with you about."

It sounded so final and serious. The hairs on the back of her neck and arms stood erect and without turning to look at him, she asked, "What is it?"

"Are you satisfied with your life on Bergeron colony?"

She swallowed a lump in her throat. "It's not the home I used to have, but it's home enough, I guess."

She heard the sound of his shoes clicking on the stone floor and sensing he was approaching, she turned to face him at last. "Is something wrong?"

"There is another reason I would prefer to avoid serving on the council."

"What's that?"

"I do not want to remain here indefinitely. I do not wish to stay beyond the Federation-imposed quarantine, and I feel it would be improper to accept this position if I have no intention of remaining."

"You're leaving?" Dagny choked, instantly apprehensive.

"I had hoped you would come with me."

Dagny allowed his words to sink in and was surprised to discover she probably agreed with him. She wasn't sure why she'd really agreed to come, other than that Cestus III wasn't New Vulcan, the Svendsens lived here, and the planet's climate would be compatible with her hybrid pregnancy. But there were a lot of places that weren't New Vulcan and she wouldn't be pregnant forever and all things considered, there were a lot of things Bergeron colony lacked.

"My primary hesitation in leaving is that I would be leaving the colony without a physician," he added.

"You can't think in those terms," Dagny blurted. "I stayed on the Albret initially because I felt indebted to them for covering the expense of my paramedic school but after a while, I realized I was staying because I thought no one would replace me if I left."

"Was there anyone willing and qualified to replace you?"

"No, not immediately on hand, no. They would have had to post an advertisement. Probably pay some med school dropout an exorbitant rate for a short term contract. But the point is, every adult on the Albret made a conscious choice to be there. There are other ways they could have made a living, ways that would have been safer and more stable for their families."
"I want a safe environment for our child," Voris nodded.

"I do too," Dagny admitted. "It never really hit me until now. I feel like we came here to run away from our problems or try to find something we thought we lost. You grew up in a place that doesn't exist anymore and I grew up in a place where uncertainty was the rule. I guess it never occurred to me that there could be another way to be."

"There will be a degree of uncertainty to any decision we make and safety is relative," he reminded her.

"I know. I'm sure everyone thought Vulcan was a safe place to live." She regretted saying it almost immediately. She flicked her eyes in Voris' direction and was startled to find him nodding. "I guess what I'm trying to say is maybe we shouldn't feel forced to stick things out because other people have made a choice to stay."

"So you will leave with me?"

Dagny went through the motion of allowing him to think she was thinking about it, but she already knew the answer. "I know that I want our child to grow up in a home that stays in one place and doesn't get threatened by Klingons and starvation as a general rule."

Voris nodded and for some strange reason, Dagny started to feel light and giddy. She took several deep breaths, trying to get her feelings under control.

"I am glad we are in agreement. However, I think it would be wise to keep this decision to ourselves for now."

"Yeah, we still have to live here for the next eleven months," Dagny sighed.

"331 days."

Dagny laughed. "But who's counting?"

"I am."

Dagny laughed harder, then suddenly felt the strange impulse to cry. She knew Voris' eyes were on her and she hated it.

He cleared his throat. "It would seem the mood stabilizers are not as effective as they once were."

She sniffed and gave him an apologetic smile. "No, I don't think so."

Neither of them said anything and Dagny supposed it was because they both knew how the conversation would go. He would offer to mind meld with her, she would refuse, he would remind her they couldn't live this way for the next three months until she gave birth, she would start getting upset, and around and around they would go. Deep down she knew something would have to give, but she would prefer to find an option that didn't include her giving up her most private thoughts, feelings, and memories.

"Where will we go?" she asked.

"I presume you are changing the subject and inquiring about a potential future destination after we leave the colony?"

"Yes."
"Where would you like to go?"

She scowled. "I didn't know where we should go five months ago and we somehow ended up here, so I'm probably not the best person to ask. I'm willing to entertain any suggestions you might have."

"I know you do not consider Earth to be your home, but I have lived there and believe it would be quite suitable for all our needs—a safe place for our child, adequate employment for myself, and medical school for you."

She rolled her eyes. "You still think I could go to medical school? After all, I don't even know why you would give zelamine to a Tellarite kid with an upset stomach."

"What you lack in formal training and education, you compensate for with care and dedication and I do believe with time and discipline, you will prove yourself to be an exceptional physician."

"You've said things like that before."

"It is the truth."

Her eyes began to water and she looked away. As ridiculous as it was, she couldn't bear to listen to his encouragement. She didn't feel deserving.

"You are crying," Voris noted.

"You are stating the obvious," Dagny rebutted, mimicking his dry tone.

"Would you reconsider my offer-"

"No."

"You did not allow me to finish speaking."

"That's because the answer is still no," Dagny glowered. "I don't want you poking around in my head."

"I was referring to my offer to instruct you in some basic meditation techniques."

"Oh."

"I do not know how beneficial-" Voris was interrupted by the sound of the clinic door sliding open to reveal Samantha Bergeron.

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything," she said, straightening her jacket.

"Not really," Dagny said, putting on a fake smile. "What can we do for you?"

"I had come to talk to Dr. Voris, actually, but as it turns out, I'm getting a bit of a headache. Could you maybe get me something for it?"

Voris and Dagny exchanged sidelong glances and she quietly excused herself from the pair of them to sift through the pharmaceutical cabinet for a mild analgesic.

"Sanjay finished tabulating the nomination results," Sam said straightforwardly. "We have thirteen people who will need to participate in runoff elections, but there were three people who received more than fifty percent of the vote so they can automatically assume one of the nine council seats."
"And I am one of those people," Voris finished for her.

"It just so happens that you are, along with myself and Kor'la."

"I must respectfully decline."

Dagny bit her lip and held her breath. It took Sam ages to answer. "I realize you're very busy and you made it pretty clear you aren't interested, but people here believe in you."

"People here believe in misplaced stereotypes that Vulcans make exceptional politicians. Either that or they wrongly believe my skill in medical care translates into a talent for governance, which it does not."

"Can't you just try? No one expects you to be perfect. Everyone knows I haven't been, but if you just gave it a chance-"

"I have given you my answer."

"How can you be this selfish?"

Dagny's tongue jumped into the conversation on instinct. "Don't call him selfish."

"Dagny, please-"

"No, Voris," she interrupted, fitting a canister into the hypospray and shifting to face Samantha Bergeron. "We came here because this colony needed a doctor. He works harder and longer hours than most people here, so you don't get to act like he isn't doing enough."

Sam made an ugly face but quickly corrected it. "I didn't mean to imply Dr. Voris doesn't already provide a valuable service to this colony."

"But that's what you're doing," Dagny replied.

"Dagny, allow me to speak for myself."

It suddenly occurred to her to feel embarrassed, but before the awkwardness could get out of hand, she thrust the hypospray into Voris' hand and muttered, "Well, that is what she was doing."

Before Voris and Sam could resume their argument about the state of the colony's council, a lanky Andorian girl wandered into the clinic. "I'm here to see the doctor?"

"How may I be of assistance?" Voris replied.

"It isn't for me," the girl replied, eyeing Dagny and Sam warily. "It's for my mother. She has a really bad cough."

"The clinic is open for another two hours and will be open tomorrow," Voris explained.

"Can't you just give me some medicine?"

"It would be best if she came in person so I could make an accurate diagnosis and provide her with the most appropriate treatment for her condition."

"She won't come though. She says it's too far, she says she doesn't feel that bad. I'm worried. It's getting worse. Last night she could barely breathe."
"I can visit her but I cannot compel her to accept treatment."

"But you'll come?" the girl asked, her antennae swiveling on her forehead.

"Yes."

"I'll pack you a bag," Dagny murmured to Voris, avoiding Sam's gaze.

"I wish to thank you for your encouragement and I thank the colony for its consideration, but I am quite resolute in my decision," Voris said, turning away from Sam. "And as you can see, my present duties keep me quite occupied. I do not believe I would be able to devote sufficient time to both the council and my patients."

Samantha Bergeron pursed her lips and left without another word, and several minutes later, Voris followed the Andorian girl out the door, leaving Dagny alone. Three more patients trickled in with minor ailments, the last one being a nine year-old boy named Andrew Allsworth. He was a pale, slender wisp of a human, and it was a split lip, scraped chin, and bruised ribs that had brought him to her.

She had him sit up on the edge of one of the biobeds, crossed her arms, and stared at him. He refused to look her in the eye, but eventually, he just mumbled, "I was playing football in one of the back tunnels and I fell."

"You were playing football by yourself?"

"Maybe."

"And you fell hard enough to scrape up both sides of your face and bang up your ribs? Must have been one hell of a fall."

"Hmmm," he moaned, shrugging his shoulders.

"Did someone hurt you?"

His eyes finally flicked up from the floor to glance in her direction. "It's not a big deal."

"Who did this to you?"

"If I tell you and they find out, it'll get worse," he sniffed, rubbing his nose and wincing.

Dagny nodded, feeling utterly helpless. She could patch up bumps and bruises well enough, but as far as she was aware, there was no vaccine against bullies. She wanted to hug him and tell him it would be alright, but she didn't really know what to say. All the kids on the Albret had made it a point to tease and pick on each other, but no one had ever been beaten up.

She picked up a dermal regenerator and decided to try a more casual tactic to coax him to talk. "Let's get to work, shall we?"

She had finished mending the scrapes to his chin and lip when she noticed Ann Svendsen had come into the clinic carrying a bag.

"Hi Andy," Ann said. "What brings you by the clinic?"

"I was playing in one of the back tunnels and I fell."

"You sure those Romulan boys weren't pushing you around again?"
Andrew gulped and looked away.

"What Romulan boys?" Dagny asked.

"You know, the ones who were sick in the clinic a few weeks ago," Ann replied, crossing her arms. "Vezael, Rh'aen, Rh'ael. Those boys—and I say the term 'boys' loosely because they're really teenagers who should know better—they're awful. They used to pick on Jørn all the time. They're the ones who broke his arm. Remember how Dr. Voris had to do surgery to fix it when you first got here?"

Dagny heard her, but she wasn't really paying attention. All she could think of was Maera and Malen. "You mean Rhaev's kids?"

"I think so," Ann frowned. "I don't know who Vezael's parents are, but I think he's actually the ringleader of the little group, according to Jørn and Frøya."

"Please don't say anything," Andy groaned. "If I don't cause any trouble, they'll give up eventually."

"Well, that's about all I can do for you then," Dagny said, patting him on the shoulder and thinking she would like to go have a long talk with Rhaev. "That shot I gave you should help keep the bruising and swelling down."

"Thank you, Mrs. Voris," he said, sliding off the table.

"Oh, no," she blurted. "I'm just Dagny."

"Mother says it's rude to call adults by their first names."

"Oh, uh, well, my last name is actually Skjeggestad."

"Oh," he said thoughtfully. "Then why isn't Dr. Voris called Dr. Skjeggestad?"

"Because that's not his last name," Dagny replied, hating the fact that she was blushing almost as much as the fact that even a nine year-old seemed to be under the impression she and Voris were married. "His last name is, well, it's very hard to pronounce, so he prefers people to call him Dr. Voris."

"Oh, I see."

"Hey Andy, why don't you stick to the main tunnels, yeah?" Ann added as he headed for the door.

"Yes, Mrs. Svendsen."

"And you're always welcome to come by," she called after him. "Jørn could always use a few more friends."

The door closed behind him, giving Dagny the impression that he'd probably heard her offer but figured he could safely ignore it.

"It's good to see you, Ann," Dagny smiled. "It feels like it's been forever."

"It has been a few weeks," Ann replied, offering her a hug. "And you look bigger than the last time I saw you, that's for sure. How's the baby?"

"Growing. Kicking up a storm when I'm trying to sleep. Making me incredibly emotional."
"Pregnancy hormones are no picnic."

"It's worse than that," Dagny sighed, slumping down onto a stool and scratching at her forearms. "Vulcans are telepathic, so whatever I feel, the baby feels, and it just ends up making my emotions so much worse. I cry at the drop of a hat. I laugh for no reason sometimes. I yell at Voris for the stupidest things."

"That doesn't sound like any fun," Ann murmured.

Dagny wanted to burst into tears at the mere thought of yelling at Voris. "I hate being this way."

"There's got to be something Dr. Voris can do, surely, and- Dagny, why are you scratching yourself?"

Dagny descended into tears as she choked out a very detailed yet very incoherent account of her life since the outbreak, explaining about Harold's death and the mood stabilizers along with her frustrations about being cooped up in the clinic and everything that had happened with Maera and Malen.

"I know things have been really tough for you," Ann sighed, pulling her into another hug. "And I feel awful for not coming to visit more."

"You have your own life and your own family," Dagny hiccupped. "I don't expect everyone to take time out of their day to come keep me company."

"What if I started coming by in the afternoons? I used to be away on the Oglethorpe half the year, but we're not trading for the next eleven months and there's only so much I can do in the greenhouses—too many hands and not enough work."

"You would do that?" Dagny whispered, feeling emotional to the point of crying all over again.

Even Ann started to get misty-eyed. "I have a confession to make. I've been avoiding you, kind of accidentally on purpose. I feel so guilty looking at you, thinking how I still have my family."

Ann started to cry, which sent Dagny over the edge, and soon, they were crying to the point of complete ugliness. Dagny started overheating and invited Ann upstairs for a cold glass of water and after about ten minutes, they were composed enough to speak again.

"Uh, the reason I came by today was because I found a bunch of baby clothes. I've been going crazy with all this free time on my hands and cleaning a bunch of things out. I didn't know if you had started collecting things for the little one yet."

"I have a few sets of clothes and some diapers that Aisla gave me," Dagny admitted. "But I think Voris and I are still in some intermediate stage of denial about the fact that we're going to have a baby in three months. We don't have a crib or a carrier or anything like that."

"You still have time," Ann smiled. "Maybe we could have a baby shower for you."

"Oh, I don't know about all that."

"Planned or not, this baby is coming and he or she is going to need things. Every baby deserves to have at least one good fuss made over them."

"You're going to make me cry again," Dagny mused, pulling a small blue onesie from the top of the pile inside Ann's bag.
"Well, there's something else. I found something a little while ago, in one of Britta's trunks. I have no idea how it got there, but I found a memory album. I got Nicolas to copy it for me. There's a bunch of stuff—a lot of it is my family, but there's a lot of other people from the Albret. For whatever reason there's an hour or so of footage of Anders Eriksen's twentieth birthday party. Things like that. Just a slice of life."

Dagny's blood ran cold and her hands started to shake.

"I know you don't have anything left from the Albret. I mean, there are identification photos in the databases, but I thought you'd like to have actual recorded memories of happy times. I thought maybe your son or daughter might like to see what their grandparents and aunts and uncles were like."

"Yeah," Dagny whispered. "That would be nice."

"I know you're especially emotional right now, so if you want, I can hold onto it for a while…"

"No, I'd like to look at it."

"You're sure?"

"Not really, but yes, if that makes sense?"

They stood at the small table in the kitchen without speaking. It was taking Dagny such enormous effort to keep her tears in check that she barely noticed.

"I can't tell if you'd rather be alone or if you're glad I'm here," Ann finally said.

"Both, probably."

"I can leave. I meant what I said, about coming by to visit in the afternoons."

"That would be really nice," Dagny replied, her voice shaking.

Ann gave her another long hug and left her alone with the baby clothes and the PADD-like memory album. Dagny took her time sorting through the soft and well-worn items, occasionally finding things that looked familiar. There was a blue and white striped set of flannel pajamas that she was almost certain had been Johan's at some point.

Even under ordinary circumstances, it would have been impossible not to feel emotional about yet another link to her past Ann had brought her. She'd never worked up the courage to take her mother's pineapple print maternity dress out of the trunk from under her bed and wear it.

Eventually she sat down and traced her fingers over the memory album, desperate to see the faces of all the people she'd lost but terrified of how she would react. She knew this was a bad idea in her present condition, but it didn't take long for loneliness and curiosity to win out over prudence.

She flipped the top back and was greeted by an artful wheel of thumbnail images, most of which appeared to belong to the Svendsens. She made a mental note to take slow breaths and opened a file that turned out to be Jon, Ann's husband, holding their youngest daughter Frøya's hands as she learned how to walk in one of the cargo holds.

Dagny smiled and clapped a hand over her mouth. According to the stardate, this had been about ten years ago, well before the Battle of Vulcan and the subsequent upgrades to the ship, but everything looked so familiar. Even seeing the Albret as it had been ten years ago was making her emotional.
Then the scene shifted in a direction she hadn't been expecting. There was a voice, squeaking yet familiar, calling to Jon from outside the frame. Then the camera angle shifted and she was confronted with a very gangly, very awkward, thirteen year-old version of her oldest brother Aksel. He was grinning his usual crooked smile and then he said, "She's getting so big."

"No time for babies, we've got work to do," called another familiar voice, then Arvid, the ship's engineer, appeared and slapped Aksel on the shoulder. "Back to scrubbing those injectors."

The sound faded in Dagny's ears and all she heard was blood rushing through her head. It was the weirdest sensation and she felt like she was going to burst. It was like all of her emotions had fired at the same time and were beginning to short-circuit her brain.

The noise she eventually managed to emit probably sounded like something between a scream and a squeal, but it didn't really sound human. She repeatedly slammed her fist on the table and out of nowhere came physical pain and blood, but she was powerless to stop.

Voris was incredibly anxious and he had a sense it had something to do with Dagny. He needed to get home, and he needed to get home quickly.

As it had turned out, Ael, the Andorian girl, had judged her mother's need for medical attention wisely. The woman had a common Andorian degenerative disease that was destroying her cartilage and it had progressed to the point of collapsing her airways. It would be easily treatable with gene therapy, but she would need to come to the clinic for several rounds of it, and it had been a fight to convince her that she could either come to the clinic or she could die.

After leaving Ael and her mother, he'd come across several more Andorian colonists complaining of one minor problem after another—arthritis, diarrhea, a particularly nasty case of bunions—and though he'd urged them all to visit him at the clinic, they'd all refused, citing the fact that he was already here and they didn't like going down into the mines.

According to the thermometer, the weather was technically getting warmer, but it was still winter and the sun was fading, and the brutal winds showed him no mercy. He pulled the collar of the Andorian fleece coat he'd gotten from Adelaide up around his neck and pushed through the hostile climate.

Seeing a group of people coming down the main street of the small Andorian village and fearing he might be conscripted into yet another unscheduled house call, he darted between two shelters and emerged in what looked like an alley flanked by a high snow bank. He had barely gone five meters when he saw a door spring open up ahead and a muscular Andorian man emerge.

"Hello, doctor."

"Hello," he replied briskly, trying to avoid getting caught in conversation. Unfortunately, the Andorian stranger wasn't willing to give up so easily.

"It's a bit cold out here for a Vulcan to be prowling around, is it not?"

"It is," he agreed. "I am on my way back to the clinic."

"Well, since you're here, could I ask- I have- I have a problem."

"Is it an emergency?"

"It is to me."
"Are you in immediate danger of losing life, limb, or a major sensory process such as hearing or eyesight?"

The man shut the door behind him and looked around. "It's about… things relating to men. Those parts."

"Your genitals," Voris stated matter-of-factly.

The man's antennae twitched. "Ah, yes."

"Come by the clinic tomorrow and-"

"No, you don't understand. I- I- I can't-"

"You can't what? Come by the clinic?"

"No, I'm not able to… you know…"

"No, I do not, unless you tell me. You're unable to urinate? Experience sexual arousal?"

The man winced. "Either of those things. It's… swollen."

Voris sighed, trying to subdue his growing anxiety and irritation. He needed to get home, but if what this man said was true, he was facing a legitimate medical emergency. "Will you accompany me back to the clinic?"

"I have work right now and I can't leave."

"It is your health," Voris replied. "Decide what is important to you."

"Can't you just come in the back room and take a quick look? If I have to, I can come by tomorrow morning but please don't tell anyone."

"I would never discuss a patient's private medical concerns with anyone else," Voris replied, shifting his medical bag to his other hand. "Where is this back room?"

The man leaned against the door he'd just emerged from and escorted Voris into a dark space that smelled of stale spices, sweat, and dirty linens. He heard moaning suggestive of sexual intercourse coming from the room immediately to the right and saw a woman wearing barely any clothing coming up the narrow hallway. "Another customer, Shurnel?"

"No. The doctor."

"Why didn't you say the doctor was coming?"

"I had not planned to," Voris explained, trying to avert his eyes away from her large breasts, which were threatening to spring from the small bit of cloth she had wrapped artfully around them.

The moans from the other room progressed into screams that culminated in strange gurgling sounds. The woman smiled and said, "I'll tend to your needs, if you like. My rates are reasonable."

"My needs?" Voris replied, the reality of his current situation slowly dawning on him.

"Yes, unless of course you prefer boys."

"I- I- I- is this- this- this is a brothel?"
"You're a clever one," she smiled. "So what'll it be? Me or Shurnel?" She nodded to the Andorian man who had flagged Voris down.

"I am not here to patronize this establishment," he said quickly, straightening his back.

"Go away, Soneil," Shurnel moaned. "Like he says, he's here as a doctor, not as a customer."

"Is someone sick?" she teased.

"It's none of your business," he answered, turning and adding, "It's this way, doctor."

Voris followed him into a side room that had a single bed in the corner and an odd assortment of objects, some of which had obvious functions, like the whips and vibrators, and others which did not. Try though he might, there was nowhere safe to rest his eyes.

"Will you kindly remove your trousers?" Voris asked.

"I know this is strictly medical, but I never thought I'd have a Vulcan asking me that," Shurnel said with a weak laugh.

"There is no need for levity."

Shurnel started unfastening his belt and nodded. "I can only imagine what you must be thinking."

"I am thinking I was unaware there was a brothel on Bergeron colony."

"Everything is kept in order. Everyone's the right age, everyone consents, no one causes trouble. We do a lot of trading."

"And how do you contend with things like sexually transmitted infections and unintended reproduction?"

"We've never had any problems," Shurnel said. "It's a small community. I have six regular customers, plus only about ten others that I see now and then."

"Nevertheless, brothels have always posed unique challenges to public health. You have asked me to come here because you are experiencing a medical issue that might be related to your profession."

"True enough," Shurnel replied, dropped his pants to the floor. Despite decades of medical training, it took a considerable amount of discipline to keep from recoiling in horror. As it turned out, his patient did not have a sexually transmitted disease but instead had several blocked reproductive glands which had caused extensive swelling and discoloration to his genitals.

After administering a hypospray to alleviate the swelling and advising him to come to the clinic in the morning for more comprehensive care, Voris accepted a small bottle of Andorian ale as payment and excused himself. He had never tried the curious blue drink and had tried to refuse, but Shurnel had insisted and it would have been rude to continue to refuse and he was in a hurry to get home.

It took some effort to avoid sprinting out of the building, and he decided to leave by the back way to avoid being spotted. The last thing he needed were rumors about him frequenting an Andorian brothel.

Despite his best efforts to leave the establishment unseen, his timing was horrendous, and he literally ran into Mike Yates, who was exiting a room on the left. The two men stared at each other for several seconds, then made a show of pretending not to notice or care that they had encountered each
other in such a place.

Unfortunately, they were heading in a similar direction and ended up walking side by side all the way back to the tunnels. The only small mercy in the entire charade was that Mike Yates wasn't a man for small talk.

The anxiety was swirling around him faster now and once he reached the bottom of the stairs, it felt positively manic. He split off from Mike Yates without even a gesture of goodbye and entered the clinic, finding it still open. Dagny was nowhere in sight.

"Dagny?"

He heard a guttural scream from upstairs and when he found her, she was smashing her fists on the table and had scratched her arms into a bloody pulp. "Dagny, stop."

She picked up a black object the size of a PADD and hurled it at the wall with surprisingly force, missing him by less than half a meter. Now that he could properly see her face, it took effort to subdue his fear at what he saw in her eyes. She screamed again and without a second thought, he covered the distance between them in four long strides and wrapped his fingers around her cheeks and jaw so tightly he feared he would leave bruises.

He initially missed the necessary contact points and as he tried to slip his hands into place to meld with her, she made feeble efforts to push him away and slapped him in the face, but she was too disoriented to put up any significant resistance. A moment later, their minds connected and the shock of the full force of her emotions nearly caused him to black out.

She slumped against him and sobbed and he slowly sank down onto the floor with her, careful to avoid breaking the meld. Vivid scenes flashed through her mind and into his and he saw faces of people he did not know, but based on the intense feelings they were creating within Dagny, he supposed they were her family.

For approximately ten minutes, he focused with all his might on centering himself and steadying Dagny's chaotic feelings, trying to ignore the finer points of her memories and focusing instead on her emotional centers. When she had finally calmed down enough to stop crying, he leaned his back against one of the table legs and she instinctively followed his movements, resting her body against his.

What transpired between them for the next hour wasn't a conversation, but a sharing of sentiment as Voris maintained the meld between them. They didn't need to consciously think to understand one another; it came naturally. He didn't need to express his regret for melding with her without her consent, and she didn't need to apologize for the violent outburst. Each knew how the other felt, and it was enough that they could both appreciate that none of this was Dagny's fault and had he not intervened, she could have caused significant harm to herself.

As the minutes ticked by, he sensed a subtle shift in her mental patterns. Her body slackened and her breathing grew slower. She was falling asleep with her forehead propped against his chest. His position on the floor was growing physically uncomfortable, but he waited until he was confident she was asleep to break their meld.
The first thing he did was reach for her mangled hands to make an assessment. She flinched. It would be better to repair them while she slept, but he decided to sit with her for a while longer. He gently stroked her cheek and wondered how many more incidents like this there would be for the duration of her pregnancy and not for the first time, he found himself ashamed that he had done this to her.

Eventually he felt compelled to carry her to bed. He removed her shoes and checked her temperature, then brought his medical kit upstairs to mend her injuries. Though part of him wanted to watch over her for a time, he felt as though he had violated her privacy enough, so he closed the curtain around her bed and set about cleaning up their quarters.

There was a stack of infant clothing on the table and something compelled Voris to pick up a blue and white striped shirt. It was so small and it seemed odd to think that in three months he would be responsible for a person small enough to wear this tiny garment.

He neatly folded the clothing and put it back in the bag, sensing it would be better to entrust its storage and maintenance to Dagny. He picked up the pieces of the broken PADD, which had been damaged beyond repair. He removed the chip from the bottom and stored it in an appropriate case in one of the trunks under his bed, then he retired to bed himself.

When he awoke the next morning, he was startled to find Dagny had crawled in beside him at some point in the night and had nestled her face on his chest underneath his left hand. He woke her as gently as he could, but unlike the previous occasion when she'd fallen asleep next to him, there was no embarrassment.

That evening, she asked him to meld with her again to help her manage her emotions and he readily consented. They said nothing to each other, but nothing needed to be said. They again went to sleep in their separate beds, only to wake and discover Dagny had wandered from her bed in the night to join him a second time. Their unspoken ritual of Voris melding with Dagny and Dagny sleep-walking her way into his bed happened the following night too, and the night after that.

After a week, Voris decided he'd had enough. He'd changed into a nightshirt and when Dagny emerged from the bathroom and proceeded to her bed, he stopped her and gestured to his own side of the room. "Perhaps your rest period would be more efficient if you simply resigned yourself to falling asleep in the location in which you are likely to wake up."

She bit her lip and a brilliant red color streaked across her cheeks, but she nodded and tucked herself into the small bed with him. They lie awake for a short time and he paid attention to the rhythm of her breathing, but their nightly mind melds had made him so attuned to her that he knew she was wide awake.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No," she said quickly. "Good night, Voris."

"Sleep well, Dagny."
A Day of Surprises

Part V: Tomorrow
"The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places."
–Ernest Hemmingway

Stardate 2260.307

Dagny crossed her arms and stood on the tips of her toes to catch a glimpse of the PADD in Voris' hands. "Is my immune system back to normal or isn't it?"

"Many of your leukocytes are still sub-functional and-"

"I want to go to the festival."

"Yes, you have made this quite clear."

"I'll wear a mask, I'll do whatever I have to do, I just don't want to be stuck in the clinic today. I want to see people, rather than waiting for people to come see me. I want to take part." There was a time when wide-open spaces had made her uncomfortable, but months of being trapped in a tiny clinic had done wonders for her mild agoraphobia.

Voris shot her a concerned glance but Dagny refused to give in. She had been off the immunosuppressant drugs for nearly two weeks and after a full round of vaccines, her immune system had been restored, or at least restored enough that a few wayward germs weren't going to be a death sentence. "Please, Voris. The exercise would be good for me."

"This morning you were complaining that you found it difficult to breathe and could barely leave the room without needing to urinate."

She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms across her chest. Voris cocked an eyebrow, signaling to her that he wasn't going to give in so easily.

"That's what happens when you're eight and a half months pregnant," she huffed. "Besides, you were the one who suggested we should go on a light walk. Sometimes I think you just enjoy arguing with me."

"By a light walk, I intended to imply we could walk through the tunnels where much of the air is filtered," he replied. "And on occasion I believe you prefer to be intransigent for the sake of intransigency."

Dagny rolled her eyes and then fixed them directly on Voris. "You can't keep me from going up to the surface."

"I am aware. I merely wish to keep you and the child healthy in the final weeks of your pregnancy."

"What about my mental health? Doesn't that count for something? Being stuck in this clinic has felt like being in prison at times."

"Your flair for the dramatic is impressive. I would again point out that-"

"Yes, you offered to let me walk around the main tunnel. I don't want to walk around the main tunnel. Come on, Voris. This spring festival apparently only comes once a year, the clinic is closed
for the day, the weather bulletin says it's sunny and warm outside, and things have been very quiet on the colony. I don't think we're going to have many more days off before the baby comes."

A slight flick of his eyes told Dagny she'd won. More than two months of nightly mind melds had taught her to read him like a well-worn, beloved novel.

"I will accompany you," he said slowly.

"Of course!" Dagny said brightly, trying to keep the momentum of her persuasion skills going. "I wouldn't think of going without you."

He gave her a knowing stare, prompting her to return his look with a sheepish grin. Their nightly ritual of melding to assuage Dagny's chaotic pregnancy-related emotions had apparently given Voris enormous insight into Dagny's mental processes as well. She was manipulating him and he knew it, and she knew that he knew, and he knew that she knew that he knew.

"You will agree to return to the clinic if you grow fatigued-"

"The moment I feel tired, we'll come back."

They stared at each other for nearly ten seconds and Dagny peered carefully at him, wondering if he was only agreeing to do this because he knew she would get winded quickly. At least she wouldn't have to contend with climbing the stairs to the surface.

A month earlier, crews had finished work on a bank of turbolifts. Now that so few people were engaged in mining and spring was here, the majority of the colony spent their days on the surface farming the land, and a handful of short stair entrances in different tunnels hadn't been up to the task of so much increased traffic.

She thought about taking a jacket, but decided there was already a risk of her temperature monitor going off from the exercise of going up to the surface and walking around. As she waddled across their quarters toward the stairs, Voris followed, lengthening his stride to casually cut in front of her and be first down the stairs.

It wasn't out of rudeness, but an instinct to prevent Dagny from falling. She was large, ungainly, and forever off-balance these days. Prior to their nightly mind melds, she would have found it annoying, infantilizing, and probably even controlling, but because she had come to know his mind so well, she knew the habit came from Voris' deep need to protect not only the baby, but also the mother.

The mind melds had been a extraordinary blessing and she wondered how she'd ever gotten along before, not only earlier in her pregnancy, but her entire life. All of her fears that Voris would learn all her most embarrassing secrets had been completely unfounded—apparently, the melds he employed weren't designed to exchange concrete information like memories and thoughts, but instead the melds seemed to work their magic by allowing the transfer of feelings.

The occasional errant memory did slip through from time to time when Voris wasn't careful to focus his energy or when one of them was feeling a particularly strong emotion about a certain life event—she had gotten several glimpses of Voris as an ungainly teenager and of his late wife, T'Sala—but for the most part, they had been able to retain their mental privacy.

The mind melds had become so integral to her evening routine that she wondered what would happen after the baby was born. As much as she was beginning to loathe the constant discomforts of late pregnancy and as excited as she was to meet their little one, she dreaded giving birth because it also probably meant giving up their nightly melds.
"You are certain there is no chance I might convince you to enjoy some light exercise by walking the main tunnel?" Voris asked, turning to her once they reached the bottom of the stairs.

Dagny grinned. "No. Fresh air or nothing, and nothing isn't an option."

"For someone who grew up on a salvage ship, I would think your concept of 'fresh air' would be somewhat different than the standard definition."

"Maybe it's because I grew up on a salvage ship that I appreciate what it is to feel the warmth of a sun on my face."

Voris offered a withering nod and opened the clinic door. The moment they stepped into the main tunnel, Dagny felt an impulse to run in all directions, to skip, to do cartwheels, and twirl around until she made herself sick. It was a small thing to step outside the clinic, but it meant the world to her.

Voris closed the door and posted a message on the bulletin that they were both out of the clinic but that Voris could be reached via communicator the event of any emergencies, then they set off together down the tunnel toward the turbolifts. Neither of them spoke, but there was little that needed to be said between them these days.

They shared a profound understanding that required language only on rare occasions. To Dagny, this arrangement didn't seem like love or passion or romantic affection in any way, but rather, two spirits who had merged and preferred the mutual contentment of being together over being apart. She was glad for this because it meant her silly little crush was over and they could move onto the business of preparing to become parents.

Not that they'd done much in the way of making preparations. Dagny had collected a hodgepodge of baby supplies from Aisla and Ann, but they still had yet to discuss the logistics of actually caring for a baby—chiefly, what the division of labor was going to look like. Dagny had just sort of assumed it would fall to her but from the very beginning, Voris had said he'd wanted to be involved. She wish she knew exactly what that meant.

"Dagny! Good to see ye out and about!"

She wheeled around to see the burly, red-faced constable coming toward them. "Yeah, I wanted to have a little outing before the baby gets here. How are you, Constable Kilpatrick?"

"No need to be so formal, lass: Cillian's fine," he grinned. "Ye going up to the fair?"

"No need to be so formal, lass: Cillian's fine," he grinned. "Ye going up to the fair?"

"That was the plan, yes."

"Mind if I join you both?"

"Why should we mind?" Voris asked.

"Ye shouldn't," he bellowed with a pleased laugh. "I'm right good comp'ny, if I do say so meself."

They entered the turbolift together and as the doors closed behind them, Dagny asked, "Is this carnival something the colony does every year?"

"Oh, I suppose so. This is the third time we're having it, so I guess ye could call it a tradition by now. I guess it always has been for the Andorians. They're celebrating the feast of Fek-del-ahnn."

"I thought that was still several months away," Dagny mused, wondering if she was remembering the correct Andorian holiday.
"I think it is officially, but if you ask the Andorians, it's not the sort of holiday that has to have a fixed date on the calendar. Speaking of fixed dates, when's that little bundle of joy going to make an appearance?"

"Probably not for another few weeks," Dagny answered, instinctively rubbing her stomach.

"Ye must be gettin' excited."

Before she could answer, the turbolift jerked to a halt and the doors slid open to reveal a dazzling blue sky and a sea of people milling around on brilliant green grass. The overhead lighting in the tunnels below provided low levels of background radiation to mimic sunlight and prevent Vitamin D deficiency, but it was still a shock to experience this kind of light again. Dagny smiled and shielded her eyes, staggering out of the lift with Voris close on her heels.

"Isn't this amazing?" she beamed.

"Amazement implies a sensation of great shock or astonishment. I would hesitate to call it amazing."

"That's because you haven't been living in an underground clinic for the past four months," she said, lowering her hands from her eyes but still squinting against the vivid sun.

In the distance, fields of juvenile crops shrouded the landscape as far as the eye could see. Immediately in front of them, there were long rows of tables with people standing in front of different wares and there were other people who had set their items up on blankets. Food vendors were selling all manner of dishes, most of them deep fried, and children of all species bobbed and weaved through the patchy crowds.

She hadn't been sure what to expect from an outdoor colony festival, but as starved as she was for non-work related social interaction, she probably would have been delighted with a festival made up of only two people wearing party hats and blowing into novelty horns.

"Hello, doctor!" a handsome Andorian man said, smiling and waving from several tables down.

"Who is that?" Dagny asked, taking a half step in his direction. The Andorians liked to keep to themselves and usually only frequented the clinic in extreme emergencies, so she didn't recognize him.

"His name is Shurnel," Voris replied quickly. "I treated him several months ago for…" Voris hesitated in a most uncharacteristic fashion and finished his thought by saying, "The reason for his treatment is irrelevant. He is better now."

"I don't remember him," Dagny insisted, wandering in the man's direction.

"I first met him in the Andorian village and I believe you were indisposed the day he returned for a follow-up appointment."

They were close enough to Shurnel's table now to greet each other properly. Dagny boldly stuck out her hand and said, "I don't think we've met. I'm Dagny."

"Yes. Felicitations on your many blessings." Shurnel smiled. His face was severely handsome and he
had a natural sort of charm that drew her in. "What can I provide you with on this feast day of Fek-del-ahnn?"

"I... I don't really know," Dagny admitted, exchanging looks with Voris and surveying the table, which was covered with blue drinks and pies. "I didn't realize an important Andorian holiday was today and I don't really know much about it."

"Fek-del-ahnn will not be celebrated on Andoria for two more months, but the spirit of the holiday is more essential than the date. It marks the time of the year when the bitter parts of winter are over and we clean out our homes, share our remaining food surpluses with our neighbors, give thanks for surviving the cold, and prepare to start the year anew."

"That's really nice," Dagny replied.

"We have celebrated it since the colony's founding and many of the other races here have joined in on the joy of the season."

As if to prove his point, about twenty meters away, a Klingon man bellowed a laugh and raised a training bat'leth over his head in victory while a small crowd cheered him on. He then reached down and helped his muddy opponent, a young Klingon man who was probably only still a teenager, to his feet. It looked like some kind of tournament.

"Now, as I said before, what refreshment can we provide you with?" Shurnel asked.

"Oh, uh, we didn't bring anything to trade or exchange," Dagny replied, blushing. "I didn't exactly know what kind of festival this was."

"You may take whatever you like," Shurnel insisted. "I owe my livelihood to Dr. Voris' medical care."

"Oh, what do you do?" Dagny asked.

"I would like some of the pie," Voris interrupted.

"Ah, yes," Shurnel grinned.

Dagny looked back and forth between them. Voris was trying harder than usual to suppress some negative feeling. Embarrassment, perhaps?

She glanced back at the Andorian, who offered a broad smile and finally answered, "I work in the hospitality field."

They both helped themselves to a small piece of pie and left Shurnel to exchange several bottles of Andorian ale for other goods from other human customers. They browsed several of the tables and spoke to many former patients, all of whom seemed excited to see Dagny out and about.

Every time they stopped to talk to someone, Dagny was forced to deliver some version of the same speech, explaining that she felt well, her due date wasn't far away, and yes, she was still working in the clinic in the meantime. Several well-meaning people, most of them human women, rubbed her belly without invitation and though Dagny didn't mind all that much, it invoked strong, negative feelings in Voris.

She was explaining to Sarah Blakely that the baby wasn't kicking much anymore these days, probably because there wasn't a whole lot of room for it to move around, when Sarah clamped both of her palms onto the lower side of her stomach, as if to test Dagny's hypothesis. A tremendous
emotion riveted from Voris and though he managed to suppress any outward indication of discomfort, Dagny knew right away something was wrong.

After they said goodbye to Mrs. Blakely and headed toward the back row of vendors, Dagny asked, "Why does it upset you when people touch me?"

"I am not upset; it is an instinctive response to casual and unsolicited contact."

"Yeah, but they're touching me, not you."

"They are also making secondary contact with the child."

"So?"

"It is not appropriate for individuals outside a child's immediate family to handle it."

Dagny laughed. "That's about as far from the way I grew up as you could imagine. On the Albret, everyone looked after everyone's kids. That's just how it had to be for everyone to get their work done and have their kids taken care of."

"And you intend to allow the colony at large to assist in raising our child?"

"No, but I don't see the point of locking him or her away, either, or in getting some help if we need it because the clinic is busy."

Voris was quiet, but his pace was increasing. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"There is nothing wrong."

"I feel like we're having a fight and I don't know what it's about."

"It would be better to discuss this later, in private."

"But it's bothering me now," she replied, looking around to see if anyone was listening in on their conversation.

Voris didn't respond but instead, stared straight ahead. Dagny turned to see what had caught his interest and nearly did a double take. Near the end of the row sat Pearson Schoenbein and Vaksur, and it was expressly clear from their body language that they were romantically involved.

She had once found Pearson handsome and very charming, but she felt nothing now. It was almost alarming, not to feel jealousy or hurt when she was expecting it, but she felt nothing at all. He looked like he'd been through the ringer—he looked tired and had lost weight.

More surprising than her lack of sentiment about Pearson was her new perception of Vaksur. Dagny had never liked her, but like Pearson, all of her feelings toward this gorgeous Vulcan woman with the hair so shiny it looked like molten coal were entirely neutral. It was clear just how much she liked Voris, but that no longer bothered her, which was a stunning realization.

It was clear that Voris wasn't all that interested in Vaksur, but maybe Dagny's change in attitude also meant that she wasn't interested in Voris any longer. Not that she ever had been, not really. Things between them were forever doomed to be complicated, but maybe they had reached a point where they could care for each other and share mutual respect without misplaced feelings getting in the way.

She was still in the middle of trying to process this realization when she saw Vaksur turn in their
direction. She flashed a bright smile, tossed her head, wove her left arm around Pearson's, and waved at them with her right. Both Voris and Dagny hesitated, opting to look at one another before proceeding in toward their table. Voris was impossible to read clearly but she sensed he didn't like the idea of Pearson and Vaksur as a couple.

"We should go talk to them," Dagny muttered under her breath. "At this point, it'll be more awkward if we don't."

Voris said nothing. Dagny put on her best fake smile and stepped forward, Voris trailing a half step behind her.

"Pearson, Vaksur, how are you?" Dagny asked, stopping in front of their table, which was covered in scarves and various carved rocks and other trinkets.

"We are doing well," Vaksur replied, her tone half an octave higher than it probably should have been.

"And it's good to see you, Pearson," Dagny added. "It's been a while."

"Yeah," he mumbled, pursing his lips and nodding, his eyes resting on her stomach.

"Well, it was good talking with you," Vaksur said, staring at Voris.

"May you live long and prosper," Voris replied, neither looking directly at her nor giving the Vulcan salute that typically accompanied the expression.

After they were out of earshot, Dagny half-turned her face toward Voris and whispered, "I feel like something just happened but I don't know what."

"We briefly spoke with Mr. Schoenbein and Vaksur. What else do you imagine transpired?"

"Something happened beyond words, I mean. I think there was a lot of subtext there that I didn't really understand."

"Their private lives are none of our concern."

"At least on that, we agree."

"But you remain curious."

Dagny shot him an exasperated look and grimaced. He was right, of course, but she wasn't keen to admit it. They spent another thirty minutes wandering around and talking with several other people, and Dagny did her best to soak up the sun and atmosphere while trying to avoid admitting how tired she was growing.

As they were walking away from Zernon's food cart with a bag of candied nuts, Voris canted his head toward her and said, "Perhaps we should return to the clinic. Your skin is beginning to flush."

She nodded. "Thanks for coming with me. This was really nice."

They made their way back to the turbolift and had to wait in line as other groups descended back into the tunnels, and when it was their turn to board, Dagny looked out over the rolling hills and the crowds of people and was struck by a feeling of excited apprehension. The next time she came up to the surface, she would probably be a mother.
He slowed his pace to match Dagny's. They would be late getting back to the clinic but she had been right about the exercise and fresh air. She was happier and more content than she had been in months without the assistance of a mind meld.

"You keep looking at your PADD. Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No, I was merely checking the time."

"The clinic's closed for the day. Does the time really matter?"

The time did matter, but if he understood the purpose of a surprise party correctly, it was essential to maintain the deception, and explaining to her that the planners of the party had asked that they return at 1500 hours and that it was already 1507 hours would "spoil the surprise," as Aisla would say.

When Ann Svendsen had first approached him with the idea of a surprise baby shower, he had been intrigued by the human custom, once she had explained it was a euphemism and not an actual event where infants were drenched with water. In Vulcan families, infant supplies were often exchanged from one generation to the next within the same family and the burden of purchasing new supplies fell on the child's parents.

Voris reached the clinic door two steps before Dagny. They both hesitated. She raised her eyebrows and nodded to the door's keypad. "Should I open the door or…?"

"I had thought you might open it," Voris said.

She gave him a strange look and rubbed the small of her back with both hands. "You got here first and normally you're the one who bothers with this but I guess it's not a big deal."

She entered the code and the outer door opened into the short hallway, and the moment the inner door slid open, a group of female voices collectively shouted, "Surprise!"

Dagny staggered backward into Voris and clasped her hands over her chest. "What?" she choked, looking around the clinic in shock. "What is this?"

"Uh, it's a baby shower," Aisla laughed, pointing to a small sign they'd hung up that read, "Welcome baby!"

"I can't believe- and- did you know?" Dagny asked, turning to face him.

"Yes. I was charged with removing you from the premises for approximately one hour while this event was assembled."

"Yeah, normally you would worry that the person responsible for getting you out of the way for a little while would spill the beans, but we figured our secret was safe with Dr. Voris," Ann said.

"Yeah, if a Vulcan can't keep a secret, who can?" Aisla added.

"I trust I fulfilled my duties to your satisfaction?" Voris asked.

"Judging by Dagny's face, I'd say so," Britta Svendsen chuckled.

"Now, we have food and fun and all kinds of things planned," Aisla said, grabbing Dagny's hand and pulling her into the group of women. "And we set out some snacks upstairs for Dr. Voris because he said he still had some work to do and we didn't want him to go hungry."

"I am grateful," Voris replied. He caught Dagny's eye and added, "Enjoy yourself."
She offered a genuine smile, which she quickly tried to repress. "Thank you all so much for this."

Voris headed upstairs and found a plate of sliced fruit and crackers waiting for him on the kitchen table. He sat down and attempted to read recent medical journals, but every so often his thoughts were interrupted by laughter from downstairs. Yet he did not mind the disruption because he sensed Dagny was happy, and this pleased him.

Several hours later, Aisla enlisted his help to carry infant items upstairs to their quarters. She had received a crib, bedding, more baby clothes of differing sizes, and some things that he had initially believed were oddly designed pillows but were apparently more appropriately referred to as "stuffed animals."

Once everyone had gone home for the evening, Dagny slumped into the chair at the kitchen table he'd been sitting in and stared straight ahead at the wall. Her mind was very active, but he could not determine her mood.

"Would you care for end meal?"

"No, I ate a lot of snacks at the shower," she mumbled, awkwardly rising to her feet. "And it looks like you've been snacking too."

He watched her open the cupboards and extract a general purpose cleaning solution and several rags and begin wiping down the kitchen surfaces.

"The kitchen was cleaned this morning," he reminded her. "You should rest."

"I know, but…"

She didn't finish her sentence, but neither did she stop cleaning.

"Did you enjoy yourself at your party this afternoon?"

"Yeah, I did," she answered, not bothering to look up.

"Then why are you anxious?"

"Why do you always announce how I feel? Like I don't know?" she retorted, wheeling around. "Ugh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you."

"You are anxious," Voris insisted.

She waved her hand around the room, seemingly gesturing to the baby items stacked in the corner. "It's finally starting to hit me that I'm about to be a mom."

"You did not understand the end result of pregnancy?"

She barked a laugh and leaned back against the counter's edge. "I've spent so much of this pregnancy waiting for something to go wrong and I don't think I ever fully accepted the idea that things might turn out ok in the end. But the closer it gets, the more I realize this is really going to happen. I'm going to be a mom. You're going to be a dad. It's exciting and scary and we still have so much to figure out."

Her admission reminded him of the festival earlier that day, when Dagny so willingly allowed people to touch her stomach without a thought for what it might be doing to the developing mind of the child inside her. Normal human social development relied heavily on contact with other humans,
contact which was often satisfied by the care of the mother and other close relatives, but humans were far less selective when it came to who should be allowed to handle the child than Vulcans.

Because Vulcans were touch telepaths, contact with infants was restricted only to immediate relatives or professional caretakers as a means of protecting the child's developing mind and shielding them from inadvertent mental transference with strangers. For this reason, Vulcans would consider it a shocking breach of propriety to touch a child or a pregnant mother without an invitation. Yet he recognized his views on this matter were shaped by his Vulcan upbringing and understood that most species, humans included, did not consider allowing casual acquaintances to hold their child to be taboo.

This child would be Vulcan, but it would be human also. That was certainly something to reflect upon more during his evening meditations, but for now, Dagny had gone back to scrubbing the kitchen counters and seemed to be preparing to mop the floor. He approached her from behind and said, "I will clean. Please, rest."

"There's so much to do," she said, running her hands through her hair.

"Then let us do it together."

Voris took over her duties of cleaning the kitchen—even though the kitchen was already clean—while Dagny began sorting infant clothes to put through the laundry cycler. They worked late into the evening, barely speaking to one another except to ask questions about their immediate task of scouring their quarters.

As the evening faded into night, Dagny's emotions splintered and he could tell she was growing frustrated. When she hurled a tiny shirt at the wall because it refused to be properly folded, he decided it was probably time to retire for the night.

He didn't even need to speak to her to inform her of his thoughts. He sat down on the edge of the bed next to her and she leaned her body against his, allowing him easy access to her face so that they could meld with one another. She quickly fell asleep in his arms and even though they were still wearing their day clothes, he didn't dare disturb her.

When he was convinced she was entering a deep sleep, he gently rolled her onto her left side and slipped his arm out from underneath her. He stared at the ceiling, reflecting upon what she had said earlier. He had often given consideration to their child's upbringing but as she had confessed, it had always been in a very abstract way. It occurred to him that like Dagny, some part of him had always assumed the pregnancy would never reach full term.

The probability of her delivering a healthy baby had been very low. She had naturally conceived a hybrid child following severe radiation sickness, she had suffered a subchorionic hemorrhage and been on immunosuppressants for months, but despite everything, the child had managed to endure. They had nearly made it to the end and even if she were to go into labor now, the child would almost certainly survive with minor medical intervention.

Dagny twitched and jerked and he turned his head to watch her. She twitched again and clutched her belly and he was almost considering waking her when she yelped and opened her eyes.

"Are you well?"

She blinked several times and looked around, then looked down at her stomach. "Yeah, yeah, I uh- I think I just had a bad dream. Did I wake you up?"
"No, I was still awake."

"Oh."

They sat looking at each other for several seconds until Dagny rolled back over and muttered, "Good night, Voris."

"Yes, good night, Dagny."

Dagny's eyelids sprung open. She sighed. She had to pee again. Sleeping through the night wasn't a luxury she'd had in a long time thanks to a growing baby doing belly flops on her bladder. She held her breath and snuck a glance over her shoulder at Voris, who remained sound asleep.

It mildly surprised her because he was such a light sleeper, and so she took extra care to extract herself from the bed as quickly and quietly as possible. Once her feet hit the floor, she did her best to inch along the edge of the mattress and slide out of bed, but no movement she could make with such an enormous stomach was going to be swift and graceful.

The bedframe creaked and Voris uttered a low moan. Dagny held her breath as she waited to discover whether he was awake or not and after ten seconds, she decided he probably wasn't and stood up. Gravity had a cruel way of pulling everything downward and putting extra strain on her back and joints, but on this morning, her back was in a particularly miserable state. She flexed and tried to pop it, but decided the ache was in her muscles and no amount of cracking her vertebrae was going to fix it. She hated being pregnant.

She waddled to the bathroom and plopped down on the toilet, but the moment she looked down, she was shocked to see her feet were a lot more swollen than she'd been expecting. Her hands were too. She flushed the toilet and went to look in the mirror and was surprised to find a very bloated face staring back at her. She touched her cheek out of weird curiosity, but jumped when she heard Voris mumble, "What is the time?"

"Oh, uh, it's 0456. Sorry I woke you up so early."

"It's no matter. Are you well?"

"As well as I usually am," she groaned. "My back hurts, my feet are swollen, and it takes a conscious effort just to breathe, so, yes, I guess I'm ok."

She heard the sheets ruffle and Voris appeared behind her. He also stared at her reflection in the mirror and said, "I would like to check your blood pressure and take a urine sample."

"My blood pressure has always been low."

"I am aware, however, this degree of swelling you're experiencing may be-"

"A sign of preeclampsia, I know. I don't have any headaches or abdominal pain though."

"Nevertheless, I would prefer to be thorough. I would also like to contact Dr. Govorski."

"Oh, don't bother her. We have our last conference with her next week. I think we can get along just fine until then."

They exchanged looks in the mirror and then stepped away to get dressed. Just as she was pulling a dark blue maternity dress over her head, a powerful cramp struck her low in the belly, nearly causing
her to seize up and fall over. She took a slow breath, but the shock of the unexpected pain had taken most of the wind out of her.

Had she just experienced a contraction? She’d never had one so she didn't know exactly what they felt like. She doubted she would be going into labor now, because even for a typical human pregnancy, she was still at least two weeks away from her due date and Dr. Govorski had said hybrid pregnancies with human mothers tended to run a little longer.

The cramp started to fade away and she moaned a sigh of relief. It was probably just a random Braxton Hicks contraction and nothing more.

"Dagny?"

"What?"

"You were in pain just now."

She grunted. The mind melds had been great for helping get her emotions in check and giving her a sense of calmness, but sometimes she hated how attuned they were to each other and how Voris had developed a habit of announcing it.

"When am I not in pain? If it's not my knees, it's my back, if it's not my back, it's my ligaments!"

"You are becoming agitated."

"Oh, you noticed?" Dagny retorted. Immediate shame washed over her. This wasn't his fault. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm just tired of being pregnant. I want this baby out of me."

"That is understandable. Your body is under substantial strain."

"I know you logically know what this must be like, that you can technically understand, but you still really have no idea. Everything aches and I feel like I never stop peeing and-"

Just as she said that, she felt a warm trickle wind its way down her thighs, causing her to stand upright and cross her legs. Had she just peed in her pants? There was no way to disguise her embarrassment from Voris, who was now giving her a very strange look.

"Uh, um, excuse me," she said, shuffling toward the bathroom. More liquid dripped out of her and she realized it was starting to trail down her legs.

She couldn't breathe. Instinct made her touch the wetness running down her thighs and she immediately recognized it wasn't urine. Just as it dawned on her what was happening, Voris announced it aloud. "I cannot be certain, but it appears your amniotic sac has ruptured."

"How can my water have broken now? I'm not supposed to have this baby for another couple of weeks!"

"You should know as well as anyone that due dates are an estimate and-"  

"I'm having a baby," Dagny interrupted, trying to catch her breath.

"Yes, it would appear that event is imminent."

"I'm having a baby."

"You said that, yes."
"I'm having a baby," she blurted. "I can't have a baby today. We have appointments. We have appointments in the clinic. We have patients. We have to run the clinic."

"It does not seem your body has taken that into consideration."

"What are we going to do?"

"You are going to give birth and I."

"I-I-I don't... I can't..."

Voris canted his head and searched her eyes. "You are frightened."

"Yes!" Dagny screeched, descending into violent shivering. "I can't do this. I don't know how to do this. I don't want to do this. This can't be happening. I can't have a baby today."

Voris took several cautious steps toward her. "I do not believe you have a choice."

Dagny choked and coughed and tried to suck in air through her nose, but her world started spinning. Voris caught her and wrapped his fingertips around her cheeks. His mind was suddenly inside hers in a way it had never been before and even though his lips did not move, she somehow heard him say, "You may have never done this before, but you do know how to do this. Please remain calm."

She leaned her cheek against his chest and nodded numbly. Mind melding with Voris often worked wonders for allowing her to shed all her more extreme emotions, but anxiety and excitement refused to be tamed this time and it slowly dawned on her that it might be because the emotions on that day weren't only hers, but also his.
The Truth About Happiness

Stardate 2260.308

The last time Voris could recall having experienced so much agitation and anxiety, aside from perhaps the culmination of his pon farr symptoms precisely 254 days earlier, was the day of Vulcan's destruction. Today most of his emotions stemmed from Dagny, but a small fraction were his own. Voris was sensing every emotion Dagny was, and her emotions were considerably heightened. With every contraction, she would grow anxious and distressed and Voris would also. Where a Vulcan mother in labor would try to control her emotions, it wasn't even occurring to Dagny to make an attempt, and while he did not fault her for this, he wished she would allow him to help her.

She had been very receptive to his assistance initially. Following the rupture of her amniotic membranes, he had performed an extensive examination, noting both the mother and child were healthy. The fetus was measuring somewhat small but still within normal range and the heartbeat was strong. Unfortunately, the fetus was in the occiput posterior position, which was not particularly ideal, as the back of the child's head would put increased pressure on Dagny's spine with each contraction. It would cause Dagny great discomfort, but it was not life-threatening.

He was most concerned about lung development, because lungs were among the last organ to fully mature in both human and Vulcan pregnancies, but based on an analysis of the overall anatomical mass of the organs, they appeared to be the proper size, at least relative to the heart. Once delivered, the child would need to be closely monitored and might need supplemental oxygen, but he was fully prepared for that possibility.

He had already set up one of the biobeds to receive a hybrid neonate and had checked the inventory several times for any supplies he anticipated needing. He had also set up the adjacent bed to receive a human female in the event something happened to Dagny. Now all he could do was tend to his regularly scheduled patients and wait.

She had begun early labor approximately eight hours ago, but how long it would be until she delivered would be impossible to predict. Much research had been done on the subject of mammalian pregnancy and childbirth, but precise calculations for the length of a pregnancy or the duration of labor continued to elude the medical establishment.

Citing this fact, Dagny had insisted he go downstairs and tend to patients while she labored on her own, promising that she would call for him if he were needed. But since that initial examination, she had not asked for him again.

Despite this, he had already checked on her twice. The first time he'd found her pacing circles around the kitchen table and the second time she'd been on the bed, rocking back and forth on her hands and knees to relieve the pressure on her spine. She had been in the midst of a contraction then and had yelled at him to go away and he had, even though he would have liked to stay and meld with her to relieve her anxiety for both of their sakes, and the sake of their child.

He had last checked in on her two hours ago and was preparing to go upstairs and look in on how her again when the clinic door slid open and Mrs. Niedermeyer toddled in. Her appointment had officially been scheduled for ten minutes ago, but punctuality was rare on Bergeron colony.

"Oh, hello, doctor," she said, looking around nervously. "No Dagny today?"
"No, I'm afraid she's indisposed."

"Everything alright with the baby, I hope?"

"Yes."

She shook her finger at him. "Don't tell me she's having it, is she?"

Voris would have preferred to avoid discussing Dagny's current state, but assuming everything progressed normally with her labor, Leslie Niedermeyer would soon be able to deduce the truth for herself in the very near future.

"Miss Skjeggestad went into labor early this morning."

Her mouth fell agape. "And you here and not with her?"

"At this stage, there is little I can do for her."

"You could be supporting her."

"There is very little I can currently do for her from a medical standpoint and were I to simply sit by her bedside, I would be required to cancel your appointment. Furthermore, she has requested to be alone and has agreed to call for me should she need anything."

"Isn't it just like Dagny to always be thinking of other people?" Suddenly, Mrs. Niedermeyer clapped her hands together and giggled. "Congratulations, anyhow. You must be so excited! You're going to be a daddy!"

"I have been approaching fatherhood for nearly nine months now," Voris replied. "That fact is no more remarkable today than it was yesterday."

"Oh, you Vulcans! I feel sorry for you, never being able to feel excited or joyful," Mrs. Niedermeyer scowled.

"Your pity is unnecessary," Voris responded. "Now, according to my schedule, you were due to meet with Miss Skjeggestad for your quarterly cortisone injection?"

"Yes," she sighed, flexing her hands. "The tendinitis is getting so bad I can barely bend my fingers."

"As I mentioned the first time you visited the clinic, there is a simple surgery that could correct your condition without the need for you to return every three months for injections. The cortisone is merely alleviating the symptoms—not treating the underlying problem."

"I don't want any surgery," she insisted. "These are my hands. I can't afford to lose my hands."

Rather than argue with her, Voris fetched his hypospray and delivered the injections to both her hands. So many people on Bergeron colony were mistrustful of doctors or any medical procedures that went beyond basic pain relief. Voris had ceased questioning it long ago, excepting the rare occasion when patients would initially refuse treatment for a life-threatening condition.

He administered the cortisone to Mrs. Niedermeyer and was escorting her to the door when it opened again and Aisla entered the clinic.

"Hey, Dr. Voris," she said brightly, swinging her medical kit playfully. "Maina thought she was in labor so I just went for a visit but it turns out, she's still a ways off. Anyway, I thought I'd just come by and restock my kit, just in case."
"Dagny's in labor," Mrs. Niedermeyer announced, pride sliding off her tongue as though she wanted credit for the event.

Aisla's face transformed into excitement and shock. "Where is she? Is she upstairs? Why aren't you with her?"

"She is upstairs and has requested to be left alone for the early stages of her labor."

"And you listened to her?"

"Why should I not?"

"You lot have fun," Mrs. Niedermeyer winked, excusing herself. "I'm on my way to fields."

"I'm going to go check in on Dagny," Aisla announced, heading toward the stairs.

Voris felt conflicted. He wanted to honor Dagny's request for privacy but believed she might be more receptive to Aisla's presence, so he watched the Orion midwife fly up the stairs without offering further comment. He walked a tight circle and briefly sat down at the computer desk before thinking he hadn't checked the supply of hyalazine, a common coagulant of cupric blood.

He was just opening the pharmacy cabinet when he was struck by another wave of anxiety. He suspected Dagny was having another contraction but very quickly, the anxiety began to pass. Voris smoothed out his shirt and for the fourth time that day, performed an inventory of relevant medications Dagny or the child could potentially need.

Dagny's eyes were closed but there was no point in having them open: there wasn't much to look at. She wiped away the beads of moisture forming at the outer corners of her eyes and took a deep breath.

She was mildly embarrassed her initial response to her water breaking had been sheer and utter terror. After everything she'd been through and lived through in her short twenty years, having a baby probably didn't even break the top ten for scariest life event. It was exciting, yes, but certainly nothing to be scared about. Women had babies every day and had been having babies ever since the dawn of time and in all fairness, she knew a lot more about pregnancy, labor, and delivery than the average person, so there was very little to be frightened about. Her labor was progressing, the baby seemed to be doing just fine, and things were just as they should be.

And yet, every time a contraction came, she would clench her jaw and think of Melana, or of Adelaide and all of her dead children, or of the fact that the baby inside of her was only half human and there was still so much that could go wrong. Making matters worse was the fact that the baby was sunny side up, meaning its face was facing her stomach rather than her spine, and so with every contraction, she was half-convinced that the baby was trying to be born by tunneling through her back.

There was a creaking sound at the door and without opening her eyes she muttered, "I'm fine, Voris. I promise. Please just let me be."

"It's not Voris, lovey, it's me."

Dagny sighed a huge breath of relief and opened her eyes to see Aisla approaching her bedside. She laughed. "Hi."

Aisla smiled back at her. "What's this, then? You go into labor and don't tell anyone?"
"I figured you would be busy, considering there are two other babies due to be born just about any minute and Voris is downstairs…"

She took several breaths and clenched her fists as another cramp wound its way through her belly. The pressure on her back was maddening and she uttered a long, low moan. Aisla rubbed her hands along Dagny's lower back and encouraged her to breathe, but the pain was all-consuming. The contraction itself was painful but still bearable, but the strain on her lower back was like nothing she could have prepared for.

When the pain finally subsided, Dagny leaned forward on her elbows and took several deep breaths. "Are they really so painful already?" Aisla asked, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "The baby's facing forward," Dagny explained breathlessly. "I feel like my back is splitting in half."

"Well, I counted in my head and that one lasted almost forty seconds," Aisla replied. "How far apart are they?"

"Not far enough," Dagny laughed bitterly. "But I think about every fifteen minutes or so. What time is it?"

"A little after 1300 hours."

"Ugh," Dagny grunted, lying down on her left side. "I've been at this for eight hours."

"You know as well as I do that the first is the worst but it gets easier."

Dagny cracked her eyes open and cast a sidelong glance at Aisla. "Considering this first baby will probably be my last baby, I can't say I plan on ever really finding out."

"Would you let me take a quick look and see how well you're progressing?" Aisla asked gently.

Dagny balked. Aisla had attended a lot of births and so had Dagny, but their relationship had always been either friendly or professional, and never that of patient and midwife. Sensing the awkwardness, Aisla quickly added, "Or I could go get Voris, if you're more comfortable with him."

Truthfully, she wasn't comfortable with anyone poking their heads down there, but she knew she didn't really have much of a choice, given the current situation. What followed was a very short, very awkward internal exam that only resulted in Aisla confirming what she already suspected: Dagny was in labor, but she wouldn't be having a baby any time soon.

"Thanks for looking in on me," Dagny moaned, once again closing her eyes and trying to relax.

"I could stay, if you like. I find keeping expectant mothers company makes the time go by faster."

"I can't promise I'll be a whole lot of fun to be around."

"No one's expecting you to play hostess. You just do whatever makes you most comfortable and I'll be here to support you any way I can."

"A glass of water would be nice."

"Consider it done," Aisla said. Dagny didn't open her eyes but she sensed from the shift of the mattress Aisla had gotten up and gone over to the kitchen area. Twenty seconds later, she returned with a cool glass of ice water.
"Now then, sit up, take a few sips, and let's get ready for the next contraction, yes?"

They sat together like that for the next four hours, with Aisla telling Dagny stories about her childhood, Orion fairy tales, and every single bit of colony gossip she knew. Aisla got her to nibble on some crackers and fruit to keep her strength up and put on two pots of tea as the day wore on. Before Aisla had arrived, she'd been sure she would have preferred to be alone, but Aisla was right: idle chitchat was taking her mind off panicking in between contractions.

Around 1900 hours, just as she entered her fourteenth hour of labor, she experienced a contraction so powerful that she could no longer resist the urge to scream. So she screamed, allowed Aisla to hold her hand, and screamed some more.

"Your contractions are lasting almost a minute now and are coming every five minutes," Aisla said.

"Yeah, I noticed," Dagny spat, not bothering to temper her frustration.

"I think you're beginning-"

"Active labor, yeah, I know," Dagny interrupted.

"Well, I'd like to take another look and then I think maybe we should talk about where we go from here."

"What do you mean, where do we go from here?" Dagny sneered, fighting away tears of exhaustion and frustration. "I'm going to end up pushing a baby out of my body: that's where we're going from here."

"What I meant was, do you want me to stay with you until the end or do you want me to get Voris up here? Or we could both be with you."

"I don't want him to see me like this," Dagny choked. And that was true, she didn't want him to see her looking so bloated and sweaty and vulnerable. She was in a lot of pain and she knew she was probably going to say a lot of bitter and mean and hostile things, and he didn't deserve any of it. And yet, she wanted him with her because she was afraid and there had never been anyone that could make her feel as safe as he did when he melded with her. She started to cry.

"Lovey, he's a doctor," Aisla crooned. "He's seen people all sorts of ways. And he's also the father. I think he'll understand."

A soft knock on the door a minute later startled them both. "What is it?" Aisla called.

"I apologize for disturbing you," Voris called through the door. "But Maina has gone into labor and is requesting a midwife. I have closed the clinic for the night and am prepared to assist her, but she is specifically asking for you, Aisla."

Aisla grimaced. "Isn't that just the luck?"

"You should go," Dagny whimpered, anxiety building in her gut because she knew another contraction was eminent.

Voris continued to speak through the door, but it was barely audible so Dagny yelled, "Just come in, Voris!"

He appeared in the doorway but didn't fully enter the room. Aisla joined him at the doorway and they proceeded to have a hushed conversation that made Dagny feel irritated, like she was some kind
of child that needed to be managed or handled. As her annoyance grew, so too did another painful cramp in her belly and seconds later she was once again doubled over in agony. She cried and screamed her way through it, ignoring all useless recommendations that she should focus on her breathing.

"I hate to see you this way, lovey," Aisla said, rubbing her upper back as the contraction started to fade away.

"Maina, she's the teenage Orion girl?" Dagny gasped, trying to sit up.

"Yes."

"You should go," Dagny responded, taking in a breath through her nostrils and wiping away the tears. "She'll want a familiar face."

"What about you?"

Dagny glanced at Voris. The last time she'd seen him stand so rigidly and awkwardly had been the day he'd come to meet her at Paul and Laura's house right after she'd found out she was pregnant. She was struck by a sensation of intense guilt and had difficulty teasing apart where it was coming from.

"I tell you what, I could just pop over the Maina's and see how she's coming along and come right back."

"I think I'll be ok," Dagny replied, looking at Voris a second time. He took a hopeful yet hesitant half step forward. "Besides, I've got Voris here. I think between the two of us, we'll manage."

Aisla gave her a warm smile and clasped the back of Dagny's hand. "Good luck to you, lovey. I cannot wait to meet your little one. Take care of yourself."

Dagny nodded and tried to force her lips into a smile. Aisla turned around and said to Voris, "And you take good care of her."

"I shall."

"And you know, I always did like the name Aisla, if it turns out to be a girl." Aisla called as she headed for the stairs.

"Go," Dagny said, unable to keep herself from laughing bitterly. "And thank you for staying with me."

"You're worth it, lovey. You and your whole odd, lovely little family."

The door shut behind her and Dagny suddenly felt very awkward, being left alone with Voris. He tucked his hands behind his back and took several more steps forward. "Aisla informs me that you've most likely entered active labor. Will you permit me to do an internal examination following your next contraction?"

Dagny closed her eyes and nodded. She slid toward the edge of the bed and tried to sit up and Voris took a seat next to her. "When was the last time you performed a check of fetal vital signs?"

"About thirty minutes ago," Dagny groaned. "Everything's right as rain."

They sat quietly together another minute or so, with Dagny trying to clear her mind and avoid
thinking about either of their feelings and Voris watching her intently. When she was hit with another contraction, she cried out, but instead of being allowed to scream, Voris slid his hands over her cheeks and everything became slightly muted. The pain was still very agonizing and very present but all of her fear and anxiety had evaporated, which somehow made the agony more bearable.

When it was over, she coughed and looked up at Voris. "Thank you for being here."

"There is nowhere else I would rather be," he replied.

Her heart began to swell with gratitude and some weird emotion that might have been love, and then he added, "And besides, the clinic has closed for the evening and there was nowhere else for me to go."

She bit her lip and looked up at him. His face was so smooth and calm, and for reasons she would never be able to explain, she erupted into a fit of giggles that lasted until her next contraction.

Dagny was leaning forward against the back of one of the kitchen chairs and sobbing and not for the first time since he'd known her, Voris' nerves were beginning to fray. It was not her fault: she was in tremendous pain and lacked the mental discipline to cope with it. And so he did his best to comfort her, even if he could not fully understand her erratic emotions.

During the course of the past five hours, Dagny's emotions had ranged from intense affection and gratitude to profound hatred, the former often occurring immediately after a contraction and the latter immediately preceding it. Occasionally there were fleeting glimpses of sorrow or guilt, but he did not need to ask after the source of those feelings.

"How much longer?" Dagny whined, rubbing her lower back and rocking side to side.

"When last I examined you twenty minutes ago, your-"

"It's only been twenty minutes?" she shrieked.

Voris glanced at the clock on the wall. It was 0002 hours—officially the next day. "Yes, I'm afraid so."

"Ah!" she screamed, pounding her fists on the back of the chair before clutching her belly as another contraction set in.

Voris sprung to his feet to steady her in the event that she fell, and once he ensured he was adequately physically supporting her, he melded with her once again. Dagny's frustration over her labor had begun to outweigh her fears and he sensed she wanted the child freed from her body by any means necessary. He thought of offering her a spinal block once again to help ease the pain of the contractions, but he knew she would refuse. According to Dagny, her mother had never had one, so she didn't want one either.

He'd tried neuropressure on the back of her neck and upper part of her spine to alleviate some of the symptoms and it had initially provided mild relief, but its efficacy had significantly waned as her labor progressed.

As her contraction faded away, she leaned her head back against his chest and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry I've been so awful to you," she cried. "I just want this to be over."

"Your misery is understandable."
"You have no idea how miserable this is."

"You are correct: I do not. I am however sorry that you are enduring it."

"I have no idea how my mom did this a dozen times," she said, her voice suddenly light and quiet. She bent her knees and moaned, "It's so hot in here."

"Would you like me to fetch you some ice?"

Dagny started to turn around and seemed ready to answer, but instead of speaking, vomited. She tried to slam her hand over her mouth at the last moment, but much of it still ended up on Voris' tunic.

"I'm so sorry," she gasped. "I'm sorry."

"There is nothing to apologize for," he replied, gently touching her shoulder and doing his best to avoid looking at the mess she'd made of his shirt. "Hot flashes and nausea are quite common as you approach the transition stage of labor, as I'm sure you know."

"I never wanted you to see me like this," she sniffed, waddling over to the sink to with her vomit-covered hands in front of her. "And it's only going to get worse."

"We have both seen each other far more exposed than you are now," he said quietly, following her. "There is no shame in this and there is no logic in embarrassment."

"When have you ever been vulnerable?"

"On the day we met," he replied, unbuttoning the tunic. "I was entering pon farr."

"Oh, I remember." She laughed bitterly. She allowed the water to run over her hands for a few seconds and then sucked in a long breath through her teeth.

Voris folded his soiled tunic in half and tossed it in the sink so he would be free to catch Dagny as she endured yet another contraction. He melded with her again and once the pain had passed, said, "I would advise lying down now. I would like to examine-"

"I have to push," she interjected, her face contorting into a shocked frown. "I feel like it's going to fall out."

He escorted her to the bed, where an hour ago he had laid down a rubber sheet in preparation for this eventuality, but rather than lie down, she placed her hands on the bed's edge and squatted. She uttered a low moan and he was about to insist she lie down in bed when her moan crescendoed into a yell.

There was no logic in arguing with her over birthing positions—if she was most comfortable like this, he would find a way to work around her. He situated himself behind her and also squatted, gently pulling up the hem of her skirt so he could feel for the position of the baby and was mildly surprised to find it had already passed below the ischial spines of her pelvis.

Dagny started to pant and stared straight ahead at the bed. "With your next contraction, I believe you know what to do," he said gently, keeping his hand in position to feel for the baby's progress.

It took twenty minutes of pushing and panting, but she was no longer screaming. She was sweating and exhausted, but Voris had never seen her so focused. When he informed her the head had been born, she started to laugh, but her mirth was quickly transformed into a guttural yell that steadily
grew louder until the baby's shoulders popped free with another gush of liquid, sliding the tiny form of their child out of her body and into his hands.

Time stood still for Voris as he brought the baby out from between Dagny's legs to examine more closely. The child had grayish skin and wisps of wet, black hair streaking its scalp. His eyes surveyed the pair of tiny, pointed ears and miniature facial features. His heart was pounding and he realized he wasn't breathing, but neither was the baby in his hands.

Being mindful of the umbilical cord, he tilted the baby's head slightly downward and watched fluid run from the nose and then suddenly, there was a twitch, a brief period of sputtering and sneezing, then a loud cry pierced the tense silence of the room. The gray skin started to turn a vivid shade of green as the tissues became oxygenated. Voris swallowed hard and sat in awe of the little creature in his hands who could produce such a momentous and miraculous sound.

Dagny slumped forward against the bed, surprised that the pressure had disappeared so suddenly. It was almost disorienting, after pushing for so long for it to suddenly be over. She wanted to laugh and she also wanted to cry, but more than anything, she wanted her baby. Why wasn't it crying? Where was it?

She pushed off against the bed and tried to roll over to lean her back against it, and the instant she achieved this position, the shrill cry of an infant began to echo through her ears. It almost felt like an out-of-body event and she instinctively started to cry along. Voris was holding the baby, his face frozen in a look of confusion and fascination.

"What's wrong?" she croaked.

"Nothing," he said, tearing his eyes away from the baby in his hands to stare at her.

Then he did something she could have never anticipated. He actually smiled. Not a broad smile, but the corners of his lips definitely turned upward as he took several slow breaths. "We have a daughter."

"We do?" Dagny clapped a hand over her mouth and fought back a whirl of laughter and tears. "Can I hold her?"

"You are her mother," Voris replied, gently setting her on Dagny's chest and quickly covering her back with one of the fleece blankets he had left on the nightstand. "You need not ask."

Dagny didn't know where to look first but her eyes hungrily drank in all the wonderful sights of her daughter. She laughed and wiped the tears from the left side of her face on the sleeve of her dress. "I can't believe we made this whole new person. She's so perfect."

Voris leaned forward on his knees, probably to examine the baby, and Dagny couldn't explain what happened next, but her lips instinctively pressed against his as he drew nearer to her. He stiffened, but he didn't pull back. It took several seconds for her brain to process what she was doing but when she finally did, she was surprised she did not instantly jerk away.

They held the kiss for several more seconds before Voris gently pulled the lower half of his face back, leaving their foreheads pressed against each other. "I would like to sever the umbilical cord, perform a quick examination of her, and then prepare you for the next stage of labor."

Dagny slowly nodded. It was only now dawning on her that they had kissed and neither of them had been embarrassed or repulsed by it. But rather than allow herself to dwell on the insanity of having kissed Voris, she allowed him to pry the squalling baby off her chest.
The moment he took her away, she was filled with a powerful, almost maniacal urge to snatch her back. It was a completely irrational thing to say, but she whispered, "Please be careful with her. She's so little."

"Yes, she is," Voris admitted. "Perhaps we could get you into the bed and you could hold her while I perform several scans and a blood test?"

She tried to avoid looking at the disgusting mess she'd just made all over the floor as she allowed Voris to assist her in crawling into bed. Once there, he set the baby back in her arms. She quickly tried to wrap the fleece more tightly around her—newborn babies got chilled so easily—but the moment her hand touched the tiny hand sticking out from the blanket, Dagny started to cry.

"What is the matter?" Voris asked, sitting beside her on the edge of the bed.

She began to wail, which caused the baby to resume crying, which only made Dagny cry harder.

"Dagny, what is the matter?"

"I had no idea how much I needed her until just now," she sniffed. She leaned down to kiss her, leaving fat tears to drip down her little forehead. "Thank you so much. I love you. I love you both so much."

Voris headed back upstairs with the hypospray in his hands. The baby had been born approximately two hours ago, and the clinic would be reopening in four. The only urgent thing remaining for him to do was to administer the necessary vaccines recommended for human and Vulcan neonates.

He had performed every scan he could, had screened her blood and her genome twice, but she appeared healthy in every apparent way. At 3.15 kilograms and 44.5 centimeters long, she was small even by newborn human standards, but she seemed to be thriving. Just before going downstairs, Dagny had successfully gotten her to latch onto her breast and begin feeding on the antibody-rich colostrum. It would be several days until her milk came in and even then, the baby would need to be supplemented with replicated formula to provide her with the combination of fats and copper appropriate for a Vulcan diet, but he also knew the mere act of breastfeeding was important for forging a bond between mother and child.

When he reached the top of the stairs he found Dagny much as he had left her, cradling their daughter in her arms and staring at her with acute wonder. She was calmer now than she had been in months, even though immediately following the birth, she had been reduced to a chaotic storm of emotions. She had even kissed him, an action which continued to baffle him.

Yet he appreciated the phenomenon of erratic post-delivery emotions. Both human and Vulcan mothers experienced a massive release of certain hormones following birth to allow for the release of the placenta, the production of breastmilk, and the desire to bond with the child. Vulcan mothers carried an additional burden that Vulcan healers referred to as vo'ektilahr, or simply, the equilibrium. Due to the fact she had been carrying a half-Vulcan child, it was almost certain Dagny had experienced it also.

Vo'ektilahr was a term used to describe the overwhelming and even disorienting sensation immediately following birth of no longer being in constant telepathic contact with the child. Dagny had started to grow hysterical in the moments following the delivery, but she appeared quite calm now. Serene, even.

She noticed him standing in the doorway and smiled. When she looked away to cast an affectionate
gaze over the baby in her arms, Voris believed she was more beautiful than she had ever been. "I think she's fallen asleep again," Dagny whispered.

"I regret to say that I am about to wake her," he replied, gesturing to the hypospray in his hand.

Dagny stroked the knuckle of her index finger along the baby's nose. "Can you wait for just a few minutes and see if she wakes up on her own? She deserves her sleep: she's been through an awful lot tonight."

"As have you."

Dagny grinned. "I don't know that I'm ever going to sleep again."

"You will," Voris insisted.

"I don't want to sleep because if I sleep, I'll have to stop looking at her. I never want to be away from her."

"You will have to resign yourself to the fact that the day will come in which you will not have a choice."

Dagny sighed. "I know, but for now, I just want to love her. I love her so much it almost hurts. Like, I'm holding her, yeah? But I feel like I actually miss her, even though she's right here. And what's weird is I don't even know her name."

"We have thirty days before we are required to submit a certificate of live birth to the Federation authorities."

"I know, but we can't keep calling her 'baby.' She needs a proper name. Over the past few months, every time I would start daydreaming about names, I would stop myself because I didn't want to get my hopes up but now here she is and I don't know what to call her. I thought I would know once I met her."

Dagny brushed her fingers along the edge of the baby's jaw, and her gray-blue eyes jerked open and she reflexively stretched out her hands and started to squirm in Dagny's arms. "I didn't mean to wake you, baby. I'm sorry."

Dagny stroked the edge of her jaw again, eliciting a similar response from their daughter. Dagny frowned and looked at Voris. "Why is she doing that?"

He cocked his head. "It is the telan reflex."

Dagny made a strange face. "I feel like I've heard that term before but I don't know what it is. Is it some kind of grasp reflex in Vulcan babies?"

"The telan reflex is a bonding reflex," he explained, gently taking a seat on the edge of the bed and looking over her shoulder at the infant in her arms. "All typical Vulcan newborns possess the instinct to form a telepathic bond with their parents. As you have said, it is no different than a human infant gripping an object placed in its palm."

He touched the tip of his finger in her tiny palm and watched the four fingers curl around it. Then he stroked her jawline and as she had done with Dagny, she stretched her arms outward to probe for a receptive face. She blinked several times and gazed up at her parents with blank, unfocused eyes.

"Is bonding with your child the same as melding?" Dagny asked.
"Parent-child bonds are formed through certain mind melding techniques, yes."

"And when will you start this process?" Dagny said, her brow furrowing.

"I am not certain that I should."

Dagny shot him a strange look. "But don't you need to? Isn't it needed for normal development?"

"Not all parents form bonds with their offspring," Voris explained. "Neither of my parents formed such a link with me."

"Yeah and look how great your relationship with your father is," she muttered darkly.

"Yes, but I was quite fond of my mother, and she never bonded with me either."

"Why not?"

"The concept of parents bonding with their children remains mildly controversial. It is thought parental bonding, particularly if it is done too soon, strips a child of autonomy. Many studies have produced conflicting results."

"I do want her to be her own person," Dagny said, giving him a mournful look. "But I don't want to keep anything from her that will help her know who she is either."

"You would not be able to bond with her," Voris argued. "I do not know that I want to share something with her that you cannot also share."

"Well, that's illogical," she retorted, rolling her eyes.

"Explain."

"I carried her inside me for almost nine months; you'll never get to share that with her."

"That is a consequence of biology, not a freely made choice."

Dagny laughed and the baby in her arms smacked her lips and wrinkled her nose. She traced the outline of her face and once again, stimulated the telan reflex.

"Look at her," Dagny said. "She's a clean slate, brand new and ready to learn and experience life. I just want to make sure she has all the things she needs." She started to sniffle but before she could start crying, Voris interrupted her.

"It seems to me there are many ways to raise her and provide her with everything she requires, and while a few of them are objectively wrong, I do not believe there is an objectively right way."

"I obviously don't know, but I feel like sharing a bond with your parents has to have some kind of social or emotional benefit."

"Do human parents not bond with their children?"

"You know what I mean. A Vulcan bond."

"I could bond with her now, but I would prefer to give her the opportunity to discover who she is without my interference. It is a thing that once done is not easily undone. Additionally, a Vulcan bond can be quite strong, but you should not underestimate the depth of human attachment."
Dagny sighed a gripped the baby's little fist before lightly stroking one of her pointed ears. "Then I guess we'll let her do her own thing for now, if you're sure it's what you want."

"It is."

"You know, I can't get over how much she looks like you. Almost an exact copy of you."

"She has inherited your eyes."

Dagny sniffed. "They're my father's eyes. At least she got those, but I don't see any of my mother in her at all."

"Then perhaps we might name her for your mother as a way of honoring her memory."

Dagny paused and studied the baby closely for almost a minute while a silent tear fell down her right cheek. "It's a really lovely thought, but she doesn't look like a Sofie. And besides, if we're talking about encouraging her to grow up and be her own person, she needs her own name."

"Then allow me to modify my proposal," he said. "There is a children's myth I was once quite fond of. I asked my mother to tell it to me often."

"A children's myth? Like a fairy tale?"

"There were no fairies," Voris replied, shaking his head. "But, this particular myth featured a heroine in the time before the Reformation who led a great army before abandoning warfare to strive for peace. There are few credible historical records from that time as most were destroyed in the wars, but many historians believe this woman may have existed, either as an individual or a collection of individuals who were eventually merged into a single myth."

"This has been a crazy day," Dagny laughed incredulously. "I had a baby and I'm getting treated to a Vulcan fairy tale."

"There were no fairies," Voris repeated.

"Yeah, you said that. So what happened?"

"She was hunted by her former second in command and sought refuge in caves in Vulcan's Forge. A raiding party found her and had her trapped in the caves, but there was a secret tunnel that would have allowed her to escape. However, there was an electrical storm on the surface and so rather than fight her former troops or allow them to commit further violence by killing her, she chose to escape into the storm."

He paused for several seconds, watching Dagny's eyes grow wide. "And? Then what?"

"She was lost and believed dead."

"That can't be how the story ends."

"Seven days later, the storm began to subside and she emerged from the desert, holding a newly born infant in her arms. Her army, believing she was either a ghost or a god, threw down their arms and refused to harm her. Her daughter eventually became the first in a line of queens who kept the peace for nearly a century."

"That's really nice. What was her name?"

"Safi. I would propose it not only because she was also born from a storm, but also because it is a
name quite phonetically similar to your mother's."

A small smile began to grow on Dagny's lips as she studied the face of their daughter. "I think that's it. I think that's her."

"You are certain?"

"It's a Vulcan name, but in a way it also sounds human. It's lovely."

"Safi Skjeggestad," Voris said, testing the name on his tongue.

"What about your name?"

"S'chn T'Gai?"

"I don't think I'm ever going to be able to say it, but yes. She's your daughter too."

"It is the Vulcan custom, and I had thought was also often the human custom, for a child to accept the maternal family name when the parents are not bound by marriage."

Dagny's face fell but she gave a small bob of her head. "It's not always what humans do. Humans kind of do whatever suits them. Mother's name, father's name, both names..."

"You wish her to be Safi Skjeggestad S'chn T'Gai?"

"Wow, that's a mouthful," Dagny sighed, making a face. "I thought it was bad enough trying to tell people how to say Skjeggestad."

"What do you propose?"

"I don't know," Dagny said, her voice quavering. "I guess- I guess I just thought- I don't know what I thought. Maybe I thought because she's your daughter you would... you know..."

"You equate bestowing my family name upon her with my acceptance of her?"

"It's stupid, I know. You've already done so much for her. For both of us."

"If that is what you wish, we can give her my name," he replied. "I had only thought you would want to preserve your family name because you are the last."

Dagny's chin quivered and she looked away. Instinct made him want to reach for her face to bond with her but as she was no longer pregnant, he supposed it would be wrong to presume their former arrangement was still valid.

"We do not have to decide now," he reminded her.

"Yours or mine, I guess it doesn't really matter," she said, her voice cracking.

"It does matter, but for her, there is no yours or mine," he replied. "She is ours."

"Then let's use both of our names."

Voris nodded. "Then that is what we will do."

"You know that means she's going to spend the rest of her life trying to spell that for people."

"Then that is what she will do."
Dagny laughed, bumping her shoulder against Voris'. He was certain the contact had been intended as casual, but it had conveyed a strangely intimate idea. Dagny seemed to be growing self-conscious, so she shifted Safi into the corner of her other arm and sighed.

"You know, I never expected to be this happy, not after everything that's happened."

"Not every happiness is chosen."

"I think Khel said something like that to me once."

"It is the truth."

Dagny looked back at the baby in her arms and smiled. "I think you might be right."
Voris' eyes drifted open. Instinct made him reach for Dagny, but she wasn't there. She hadn't been there in five days because they had ceased sharing a bed following Safi's birth. It was logical they should resume sleeping separately, now that she no longer required mental and emotional support.

Logical, perhaps, but was it preferable? He briefly allowed himself to wonder if he missed the warmth of her body next to his in the night, but then dismissed his train of thought. Dagny was no longer pregnant and there was no excuse to sleep in such close proximity and that was that.

He blinked several times, allowing his eyes to adjust to the dark. What little light there was came from the clocks on the far wall and in the kitchen. He trained his ears to his surroundings, acknowledging Dagny's rhythmic snores. How long had it been since she had last risen to feed Safi? An hour? Two? The clock read 0412 and if he remembered correctly, Safi had woken them a mere ninety-four minutes ago, demanding sustenance.

He sat up slowly so as to avoid allowing his mattress to squeak and peered into the cot between his and Dagny's beds. His daughter was sleeping soundly on her back, arms stretched above her head. Her left foot twitched slightly, drawing Voris' attention.

She was such a strange thing to behold. Reproduction was such a perfectly natural process—perhaps the most natural of processes—but the sight of Safi sleeping contentedly in her cot seemed so unnatural, given the events that had brought her into existence. Dagny had endured so much—a traumatic conception, a difficult pregnancy, and a lengthy birth—but the reward for her suffering had yielded this entirely new person. The more he dwelled on it, the more fantastical of a concept it became and he doubted whether he would ever be able to express his gratitude to Dagny for everything she had done to give Safi life.

He stole a look at Dagny, who was sleeping on her side facing the cot and snoring softly. What had she said immediately following the birth? "I had no idea how much I needed her until just now?" Shifting his object of focus between his daughter and his daughter's mother, he understood just how profoundly he agreed with her sentiment.

Of course, she'd also thanked him and told him how much she loved him. It would be illogical to say he did not care for Dagny in return. He had spent many hours probing this idea, especially during the past five days. Perhaps his love wasn't of the romantic variety, but he suspected it would be impossible not to harbor some affection for a woman who was mother to his child.

Voris turned his attention back to the child in the cot, mildly overwhelmed by the responsibility that had been bestowed upon him to instruct this new person in life's intricacies. Looking at her, it was difficult not to reflect upon his own upbringing and wonder how it might be improved upon for this subsequent generation. His mother had been attentive and permissive while his father had been aloof and stern—which was the better way?

There was the matter of her humanity as well. At this very early age, logic would hold no meaning for Safi, but most Vulcan parents began training their children in foundational logic and emotional control between the ages of three and four. Dagny had on several occasions expressed her concern
for how they would guide their child's development, whether they should raise her as a human or as a Vulcan or as some peculiar combination of both. Was it even possible to be both? He thought of his cousin Spock and wondered what sort of conflicts he'd faced and how they had shaped him as a person.

He fed his inner turmoil for the better part of half an hour without really arriving at any concrete answers about the evolving nature of his relationship with Dagny or the best way to be a father to Safi. He was just thinking now that Dagny was no longer pregnant and he was not facing the incredible burden of emotionally supporting them both that he might attempt to resume his former meditation regimen when Safi's foot twitched again, more pronounced than before.

Such movements were likely just the product of an immature nervous system, though he wondered if they might be indicative of a more serious neurological problem. He observed the rise and fall of her chest and contemplated performing a series of scans, but he had already performed every diagnostic scan known to medicine on her following her birth, many of them multiple times.

In a rare display of both tenderness and absentmindedness, he reached over the bars of the cot and gently stroked her cheek. The moment his hand made contact with her face, her eyes snapped open. Safi blinked several times and began to coo, then whimper. Voris pulled his hand back and stood. He had not meant to wake her.

Dagny's snoring fell silent and for approximately five seconds, no sound could be heard. Then Safi started to wail. Dagny sat upright and looked around.

"Voris? Is everything ok?"

"Yes. I have inadvertently woken her. I am sorry."

"It's ok," she whispered, leaning over the cot. "It's ok, baby, I'm here. We're both here. What's got you so upset, huh?"

Safi continued to shriek and Voris stood back to let Dagny take control of the situation. Years of caring for her siblings had given her unique expertise for such work.

"Lights, dim to thirty percent," Dagny said, rising to her feet and propping Safi up on her chest as artificial illumination bathed the room.

With wild hair and dark bags under her eyes, Dagny looked the epitome of exhaustion, but the soft smile spreading across her lips as she gently stroked their daughter's back gave her a contented appearance. Within seconds, Safi's cries subsided. She carried her into the kitchen and opened the food preserver, clucking her tongue.

"Uh oh, we're out of your supplemental formula," she said, leaning down to kiss the top of Safi's head. She turned to face Voris and added in a more assertive tone, "I tell you what, will you hold her while I go replicate some more?"

Voris stiffened but gave a small nod of assent, but his reluctance did not go unnoticed.

"Why don't you want to hold her?"

"She seems to prefer your touch to mine."

"Well, that's because she's used to me," Dagny replied, offering a reassuring frown. "But the more you hold her, the more she'll get used to you too."
"I have held her."

"Yeah, you have. In fact, I suppose you were technically the first person to hold her at all, but whenever you do hold her, it's mostly in the context of being a medical professional. It's ok to be her dad sometimes: you don't always have to be her doctor."

Without giving him adequate time to respond, Dagny approached him and lifted Safi from her chest. Safi protested futilely, squeaking and thrashing her arms, but she allowed herself to be placed in Voris' care.

"She just needs to get to know you," Dagny said, softly tracing her fingernails through Safi's sparse, fine hair. "I'll be back in two minutes. I promise."

Voris watched her gingerly shuffle down the stairs and once she was out of sight, he looked back at his daughter. She twisted and writhed in his grip and started to cry once again. It wasn't as though he'd never heard an infant cry before, but watching his own child perform this action, particularly when she was tucked into his arms, was mildly distressing.

He tried Dagny's method of propping her up high onto his chest, but it did little to comfort her. He tried gently bouncing her up and down, another tactic he'd seen Dagny employ, but it also proved in vain. What else could he do?

Perhaps she was simply hungry and if that were so, she would have to wait until Dagny returned with her formula. He stroked the side of her cheek, which caused her to quickly tilt her head in that direction, a reflex both human and Vulcan babies possessed. She latched onto his forefinger, attempted to suckle, then tried to move her mouth away. Her cries grew even louder and more shrill.

When Dagny reappeared at the top of the stairs with a bottle in hand, he felt sudden relief. She caught sight of his face and raised her eyebrows, then asked, "Is everything ok?"

"She began crying the moment you went downstairs."

"She's probably just fussy because she's hungry," Dagny replied, craning her neck to look at the baby. The moment Dagny's hand made contact with her face, she began to quiet down. "It might be a little easier for you to feed her if you sit down."

"You would have me feed her?"

"Sure, why not?"

"I have little experience with such things," Voris explained. "She does not appear to accept me as a care provider."

Dagny sighed, clenched her jaw, and then forced a smile. "First of all, isn't it logical that in order to gain experience at such things, you need to do them?"

Voris swallowed and peeked back at Safi. "It is, but I do not see the need to upset her at this moment, if it can be avoided."

"It's like I said earlier: if you want her to accept you, you need to be around her. And don't think it's a matter of her accepting you or not: I think she really is just hungry. Won't you please sit and give feeding her a try? Since she can't be exclusively breastfed anyway, I think it would be nice if you gave her the bottles in the morning and evening."

Voris gave a small nod and sat in the nearest kitchen chair, sat Safi more upright, and accepted the
bottle from Dagny. He slid the nipple across the corner of her mouth and she immediately latched on and fell into the rhythm of suckling.

Even though she bit her lip to conceal it, he noticed a small smile form at the corners of Dagny's mouth. "If you hold her just a little more upright, she'll be less likely to spit up."

He readily complied with her suggestion. It was logical too: Safi had yet to develop the muscles in her esophagus and placing her in a more vertical position would offer a more direct route for the formula to descend into her stomach.

"Does she often regurgitate her meals?" Voris asked, catching Dagny's gaze.

"Uh… sometimes. In fact, let me get you a towel just in case." She hopped to her feet, hurried in a shuffling motion to the dresser, and returned with a soft yellow cloth. "Sometimes she'll take a kind of natural pause in the middle of eating, and when she does, try to burp her."

"What is the best method for inducing her to eruct?"

"Just lift her up onto your shoulder and gently pat her back, but before you do-" Safi uttered a barely audible *urp* and spit white liquid down Voris' shirt. Dagny winced and finished, "Be sure to put the towel on your shoulder."

Voris set the bottle on the table and shifted Safi to his other arm while Dagny tried to blot the regurgitated fluid from his shoulder. "Sorry about that," she sighed.

"There is no need to apologize. Perhaps you would prefer to feed her now?"

"Don't give up so easily," she pleaded. "I can't even begin to tell you the number of times I've been covered in baby barf. It washes off. It doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong."

He bobbed his head, draped the towel over his other shoulder, and resumed feeding Safi. "What volume does she typically consume during a single feeding?"

"About sixty milliliters, but just let her eat until she's full. She needs to put on weight."

"Yes, I know."

Dagny blushed and slid into the chair next to him, grimacing as she lowered herself. "I know you know."

"How are you feeling?"

She winced and blushed an even deeper shade of red. "Still pretty tender and there's still a lot of bleeding, but nothing out of the ordinary. I'm fine."

He detected a subtle emotional shift within her but could not comprehend why. They had not melded with one another since prior to Safi's birth and though the mental link between them was not quite as profound as it had been, it remained quite strong.

"You are… sad?" Voris probed.

Dagny frowned. "Not sad. I don't know, maybe sad. I don't know how to describe it but it goes beyond sad. I suppose maybe I'm just adjusting to not having her inside me anymore. Towards the end, her little emotional outbursts were definitely hell, but I miss having that connection with her."
"What you describe is quite common among Vulcan mothers."

"It's actually pretty normal in humans too, minus the telepathy part. I'll be fine."

They grew quiet, leaving them to be serenaded by the sounds of Safi smacking on the bottle. Voris had grown accustomed to melding with Dagny to assist her through her emotional struggles and gladly would again, but he supposed it would be too forward to ask outright, now that she was no longer pregnant.

"Is there any chance you could you keep feeding her while I take a shower? It's been a couple days and I really need to wash…"

"Certainly," Voris replied, feeling unprepared for the task of feeding Safi without supervision but remembering that he was a doctor, so even if the absolute worst happened and she somehow aspirated formula, he was perfectly capable of treating her.

He watched Dagny collect a change of clothes and disappear into the lavatory, leaving him alone with their daughter once again. As he had earlier that morning, he soon found himself lost in the casual wonder of simply observing her—her uncoordinated efforts to control her limbs, her disjointed facial expressions as she suckled. He gently touched her left fist, marveling at the size of her tiny fingers, which prompted her to open her hand and latch onto his index finger.

Safi's simple and reflexive gesture produced one of the most profound episodes of affection of his life. Nearly five decades of training in logic compelled him to repress these feelings, but he hesitated. Could there really be any harm in allowing himself to experience paternal love? It seemed almost heretical to wonder, yet it also seemed inherently wrong to believe caring for his daughter in this way could be more harmful than beneficial.

Suddenly, she spit out the nipple of the bottle and made a face. What had he done to provoke this? He attempted to reposition himself, but she resisted his attempts, choosing instead to ball her hands back into fists and squirm. She had no real muscle tone to speak of so her efforts were largely futile, but so too were Voris' attempts to comfort her.

She squeaked and uttered a series of short cries. Voris set the nearly empty bottle on the table and carefully stood to analyze her condition. Was she suddenly ill? Should he fetch his tricorder? He wondered whether she needed another round of the practice Dagny called "burping" in order to relieve the accumulation of gas in her stomach. He was repositioning the towel on his shoulder and trying to prop Safi up when a soft gurgling in her stomach gave way to rivers of feces dripping down his arm and abdomen.

To be fair, it wasn't the first time a baby had ever defecated on him: it was the second. He recalled Ms. Mosby's baby, T'Sena, at the Va'ashiv district hospital just prior to relocating to Bergeron colony. In that situation, Ms. Mosby had been responsible for tending to the mess and Voris had had the luxury of removing his medical coat and continuing on with his patients.

He studied his daughter's face and gave a small nod. She was now quiet and her face was forming the shape of a half smile. Whatever affliction had plagued her prior to this unfortunate incident now seemed quite resolved.

Voris had never changed an infant's sanitary garment, but reasoned it couldn't be difficult, once he located the supplies Dagny kept on hand for such matters. He paced the room, cognizant of the fact that the former contents of Safi's bowels were dripping from his shirt onto the floor and finally located a cache of diapers and wipes underneath Safi's cot.
After scouring the closet for a large towel, he awkwardly attempted to spread it over his bed with one hand while cradling Safi with the other and by the time this task was accomplished, they were both covered in dark brown, semi-liquid feces. He laid her down gently, examined the mess on his shirt, and recoiled at the smell. He gingerly and quickly pulled it over his head, folded it in such a way that the feces would not leak out, and turned his attention to Safi.

Dagny had dressed her in a singular shirt that extended below her waist, wrapping around her buttocks to be joined by a pair of clasps in the front. He was able to undo the clasps easily enough, but pulling the shirt over her head proved more difficult, particularly as he was trying to protect her vulnerable umbilical stump.

She kept curling her arms into her body and Voris disliked the idea of forcing them apart to remove the garment. She was so small it seemed that such an action would injure her. Logically, not to mention professionally, he understood that neonates were not nearly so fragile that their arms would break simply as a result of maneuvering them through the holes of a shirt, but he still found himself reluctant to do it.

The next fifteen minutes were consumed by wrestling with a person who was less than one twenty-fifth of his size and losing. Safi's smile faded into a frown and then eventually into crying. When Dagny emerged from the lavatory several minutes later wearing a loose-fitting dress and a towel around her shoulders, she froze in the doorway and yelped, "Ah!"

Voris stepped away from Safi and looked over at Dagny. She slowly clapped a hand over her mouth, but the squinting at the corners of her eyes strongly implied she was stifling a laugh.

"I was attempting to clean…" He wasn't sure how to finish the sentence, because as he began to survey the scene, he realized he had simply generated a much larger mess.

"It's ok," she said, breezing toward him. "You're doing fine."

"Fine has many variable definitions but I do not believe any of them apply to this situation."

She rolled her teeth over her bottom lip. "Changing a diaper is one of those things that seems straightforward but can be a bit daunting if you've never done it before. You tried and that's what matters. Can I show you an easier way to do this?"

He bobbed his head and studied Safi, who had stopped crying and now seemed perfectly content to lie half-dressed and covered in her own feces on her father's bed. Dagny sat down on the edge of the bed, gripped Safi by her ankles, lifted her bottom upward, and balked.

"Whew, baby, you sure did make a mess, didn't you? I don't think wipes are going to fix this: you're going to need a bath."

She stripped Safi naked with the sort of confidence and ease Voris had been unable to muster, then stood and pulled the towel from her shoulders. She glanced at Voris, paused, fought back a smile, then stood on her tiptoes to wipe his forehead with the towel. "You had poop in your hair," she said nonchalantly.

Voris resisted the urge to touch the area she'd just wiped and followed her into the kitchen. Dagny laid a large yellow sponge in the sink, ran the water until it was warm, then gently propped Safi upon the sponge, steadying her with one hand while dribbling water onto the lower half of her body with the other. He was about to ask whether she intended to keep Safi's umbilical stump dry, but decided against it: Dagny was very much the expert here. Less than ten minutes later, Safi was cleaned, dried, and dressed in a new blue one-piece shirt.
After setting Safi down in her cot, she began stripping the soiled linens off Voris’ bed. "I can assist you," he offered, moving in the direction of the kitchen to collect a sponge to wipe the feces from the floor.

"Why don't you go shower?" she said, offering him a reassuring look. "I can take care of all this."

"It is I who contributed to the mess," he insisted. "And your body is still recovering from the rigors of childbirth."

"It's just a little poop, I'll be ok." The same sadness he'd sensed in her earlier returned, only stronger now. He was about to inquire after it, but she shook her head and pointed to the lavatory door.

"Besides, you kind of smell like poop and no one wants that."

He conceded to her request but spent the entire time in the shower wondering how he had failed so egregiously to care for his daughter for a mere twenty minutes. He regretted creating extra work for Dagny and resolved to learn to do better, if not just for Safi's sake, but for Dagny's.

Dagny stared listlessly at the clock in the kitchen, consciously blinking as she waited for the pancakes to be done enough on one side to flip. She had finally coaxed Voris into helping with the baby and it had gone so badly. She had no doubt he had certainly tried his best, but he was hopelessly inept. How could someone so good at being a doctor be so bad at changing a diaper?

She supposed they weren't mutually inclusive skills. She wasn't angry: if anything, she felt bad that she'd put him through all that when he clearly wasn't prepared. She wanted Voris to develop a bond with Safi, but she felt torn between pushing him too hard and not pushing him hard enough to take an active interest in caring for her. Then there was that fear she kept buried as far back in her mind as she could manage, the one where Voris and Safi grew too close and Safi decided she would rather be Vulcan than human.

Dagny glanced down at the griddle, sniffed the air, and flipped the first pancake over to reveal a very dark stain. She rolled her eyes and flipped the others as fast as she could, but they were all burned too. She'd been raised on replicated food and had never been much of a cook, but it surely took a special kind of talent to ruin pancakes.

She decided she would take these burned ones for herself and save the next batch for Voris. She stepped away from the griddle and began setting the breakfast table, glancing over at Safi as she passed. The baby was sound asleep, but she spent most of her time that way. She resisted the urge to stop what she was doing and lean over her cradle, lest she waste time and burn both sides of the pancakes. It was easy to want to spend every waking minute with her baby, but the mundane process of living life also occasionally demanded attention.

It was no exaggeration to say she loved Safi more than she'd ever loved anyone, but something still felt amiss. At the most basic level, she understood her life had radically changed just five days ago and it was only natural she'd feel a bit disjointed. She'd gone from being pregnant and working in the clinic and bonding with Voris several times a day to pretty much exclusively caring for a demanding newborn all on her own.

Her body had gone from a swollen mess of stretchmarks to a true carnival of horrors overnight. Her stomach looked like deflated bread dough and though it had obviously shrunken, she could still probably pass for being pregnant. She had torn slightly during the delivery and even though Voris had patched her up, she was still so sore it hurt to sit down.

Then there was the sheer quantity of fluid streaming out of her. She was still bleeding so heavily that
it was a wonder she had any blood left in her body and yesterday her milk had finally come in, leaving her breasts rock hard, almost double their usual size, and excruciatingly tender.

She was very careful to avoid complaining about any of this to Voris, who would insist on performing an exam. Everything going on with her body was completely normal, but that didn't mean it was comfortable or that she had to be happy about it. She knew she just needed to give things time to heal and if she took care of herself, things would mostly go back to the way they'd been before.

Aside from her body, she also wanted her life back. During the five days since Safi's birth, Dagny had existed in a kind of purgatory where her entire reality had become tied up in her daughter. She was more than willing to make room in her life for the little baby sleeping in the crib behind her, but she wanted more than just changing diapers and cleaning up vomit. Dagny was an old hand at juggling childcare and life. On the Albret, she'd pretty much gone from wearing diapers to changing them. She had never thought she would be a mother and now that she was, she wouldn't trade it for anything, but surely that didn't have to mean she had to trade everything else for it?

By the time Voris emerged from the lavatory, breakfast was sitting on the table and waiting to be eaten. She sat down, motioned for Voris to sit, and dug into the bowl of Suliban melon she'd sliced.

"Do you have appointments today?"

"There are several this morning, but it is the final day of the week and the clinic will be closed tomorrow."

How could she have forgotten? "Anyone in the convalescent ward?"

"No, it is empty."

"So what do you have on the schedule for today?"

"I plan to do a inventory of the non-pharmaceutical medical supplies, recalibrate the biobeds, and if there's time, complete my first quarter assessment of medical readiness to the new council. Aisla will be coming in later this afternoon to assist with cleaning and restocking the surgical suite and ward."

"Maybe I could come help you," Dagny murmured casually, popping a large piece of melon in her mouth.

Voris canted his head. "That is really not necessary. Aisla and I can manage."

"I know you can, it's just, maybe I want to help."

"Why?"

Dagny bristled but tried to maintain her cool. "Because if you didn't come home at the end of every day, I would lose track of time."

"There are two clocks in our quarters, as well as-"

"That's not what I mean, Voris. I'm bored, sitting up here with the baby all the time. I want to do something besides breastfeed and change diapers and sleep. I want to feel useful. I want to contribute."

"Have I caused you to believe caring for our daughter is an insufficient contribution?"
"No, not at all. I just sort of feel like I should be doing more. Most women on the Albret who had normal pregnancies went back to work a few days after giving birth."

"And who cared for their infants?"

"They did. Most people took their babies with them on their shifts and either kept them close by in cribs or wore them in slings. They usually kept to light duty jobs until the babies were weaned, then everyone took turns watching all the kids on the ship so their mothers could work."

"And this is what you want to do?"

"I don't see why not."

"I would prefer not to expose Safi to large numbers of people while she is still so young. You must also be mindful of the fact that your body is still recovering."

Dagny glared at him. Like she didn't know her body was in shambles? Rather than be bitter, she bit her lip and sawed into her burnt pancakes. "So you think it's a bad idea."

"I did not say that. I would not compel you to work in the clinic unless you wanted to, I merely meant to propose it might be better to slowly transition back into your former duties. Perhaps you could join me in the afternoons after 1300, after the morning appointments have left and the lunch shift is complete."

Dagny couldn't contain the smile that spread across her face. "I guess that's a fair compromise. Besides, I think it'll be good for you too. You'll get to be around Safi more."

Voris blinked and nodded thoughtfully. Now that they were no longer melding with each other every day, it was becoming harder for her to tell what he was thinking. Dagny couldn't quite figure out how he viewed Safi, whether he thought of her as a completely foreign thing to be avoided until she was an adult or whether he was just nervous about caring for her. She sensed it was the latter, but she couldn't be sure.

At 0600 hours, Voris went downstairs to open the clinic for the day and Dagny cleared away the breakfast dishes. After she tried hand expressing some of her breastmilk to see if she could relieve some of the engorgement, she filled two plastic bags with ice and fell asleep with one on each of her breasts. Safi woke her twice, needing to be fed and changed both times, and by 1300 hours, she felt rested enough to join Voris downstairs.

It took nearly half an hour to fashion together a cloth baby carrying sling and another fifteen minutes to correctly position Safi in it, and even though it hurt her sore breasts, she was delighted to find the baby took readily to being tucked in the fetal position and nestled close to her mother's chest.

She descended the stairs and found Voris hunched over on a stool next to the supply cabinet, entering data into a PADD. "We're here to work," she announced, instinctively cupping a hand around Safi's head. "How can we help?"

He sat up and studied the arrangement of Safi in the sling around Dagny's chest. "It is safe to carry her in this way?"

She sighed. "It is. Every woman I grew up with carried their babies in something similar. She's sitting up high enough that I can see how she's doing and her face is exposed to allow her to breathe. It's perfectly safe."

He raised an eyebrow and stepped forward to see for himself. For a second, it almost seemed tender,
as though he was greeting his daughter, especially when he stroked the top of her head as he leaned down to see that her airway was unobstructed. On the one hand, it was irritating that he would question her methods, but on the other hand, it made her happy to know that he cared. What a weird dynamic this was shaping up to be, sharing a child with a Vulcan.

Dagny set to work calibrating the biobeds while Voris continued his inventory. It turned out to be a good day to return to work—during the first hour that Dagny and Safi were downstairs, not a single person walked through the clinic's doors. Dagny was in the middle of wondering if she'd run the correct diagnostic on the blood gas meter when Voris asked, "You are certain returning to work at this juncture is what you want?"

The question caught her off guard and she fumbled her words as she replied, "Yeah, why?"

"Safi's company may not be particularly engaging at this stage in her development, but she will develop."

"Yes, I realize this." And it wasn't untrue, exactly, but she sensed he was making a point. She was bored, but that was because her little one was little more than an eating, sleeping, crying, pooping blob. Would she still want to work when Safi started interacting with the world and learning to walk and talk?

"I merely want to express that you should not feel obligated to help in the clinic future, simply because you are helping now. You should work as much or as little as you are comfortable with."

His statement hit her like a shuttle crash. He was being entirely supportive, not only without her asking him to be, but without her even realizing that she might want this kind of support. She glanced down at the sleeping baby curled against her chest and resisted the urge to kiss her and wake her up.

"Thank you," said mumbled. "But on the colony, I feel like I should work at least some. Everyone contributes and I'm hardly the only person here with a baby."

"We will not live on Bergeron colony forever. The quarantine will only last an additional 260 days and after that, we will be eligible to relocate."

Dagny grinned. "260 days, but who's counting?"

"That was precisely what you asked the last time I mentioned our timeline for leaving the colony."

Dagny chuckled. Of course he would remember something like that. "Yes, I recall. So that gives us what, another eight and a half months here? Then where do we go?"

"We had previously discussed Earth. I still believe it is the most logical option available to us."

"That sounds fine by me," Dagny replied. "It'll be weird to go there after all this time. Maybe I could meet up with Julie Karlsen."

"Who?"

"She was one of my sister Ingrid's friends. She moved someplace called Australia to be an actress."

"I see."

Dagny had only just begun to contemplate what it would be like to finally visit Earth when Voris added, "I made inquiries about a position at my former hospital on Earth and received a response
"from them this morning. They are willing to renew my employment."

"Well, that's good," Dagny said. "And this hospital is in San Francisco?"

"Yes."

"What's it like there?"

"It is near a large ocean and humans find the climate quite temperate."

"What about you?"

"It is rather humid but the city has more to recommend it than the damp weather."

"And it will be a good place for Safi to grow up?"

"As good as any other."

"I mean, do you think she'll fit in? What with being half Vulcan. I don't mean to insult-"

"It is a valid concern, but San Francisco is one of the most diverse cities on Earth. Nearly a quarter of its population is not native to the planet."

That was a comforting thought. Dagny shook her head and glanced down at the baby and whispered, "Did you hear that little one? What do you think about San Francisco."

"There was another matter that I believe makes San Francisco an attractive option," Voris added quickly, rising from the stool.

"What's that?"

"There are three medical schools within the city and an additional eight in the region," he replied, offering her the PADD he'd been working on. She accepted it, stunned to find he'd prepared a dossier of each of the schools—admission requirements, deadlines, and so on.

"There is a program which I believe you may qualify for called the Federation Occupational Experience-

"In the Health Professions Program," Dagny finished. "I was thinking of applying to it before I found out I was expecting Safi."

"She is here now and ever since I have known you, it has been evident you express both an interest and an aptitude for medicine. You have occasionally expressed doubt in your abilities but I have never doubted your desire to become a physician."

Unexpected tears formed at the corners of her eyes as she read the report he'd compiled. Obviously attending medical school in 2261 would be out of the question—the new year started in less than two months. Even if the quarantine wasn't an issue, Safi was still tiny and she would need some time to prepare for the entrance exams. But beginning medical school in 2262 suddenly seemed like a real possibility.

"You are quiet," Voris said.

"I'm- I'm really overwhelmed," she sniffed.

"You do not need to decide what you wish to do right now, I only sought to remind you it is an
"No, I want to go. I do. You're right. I've tried talking myself out of it so many times, but I keep coming back to it."

The baby wriggled on her chest, causing her to cringe from the pressure on her tender breasts. Safi began to cry, prompting Dagny to remove her from the sling.

"Is she hungry?"

"Maybe, but I think she probably needs her diaper changed first."

"I am aware my skills at this task are not equal to yours, but will you permit me to make another attempt?" Voris asked, taking several steps toward them.

"I would never say no to anyone's offer to change a stinky diaper," she laughed. "Why don't you hold her while I go get the stuff from upstairs?"

She returned quickly and walked him through the process, encouraging him to be more assertive with handling her and preventing him from attaching the diaper too loose around her hips. When he was done, he held her up and examined her like a jeweler might examine a precious stone.

Dagny smiled. "Why don't you talk to her?"

"I have nothing to say that will interest her."

That made Dagny laugh. "I agree, it all probably sounds like weird jibberish to her, but the sound of your voice is comforting, and plus it's what will eventually teach her to talk."

He turned the baby toward his chest, lifted an eyebrow and declared, "Hello."

Dagny laughed so hard it made her still tender abdomen ache. "I said talk to her, not interrogate her."

"I do not know what to say."

"Just tell her who you are and what you're doing and where she is," she replied, waving her hands around the clinic. "She could probably eat again. Why don't you talk to her as you take her over to the replicator and make her some formula?"

Voris looked unconvinced but cradled Safi in the crook of his left arm, proceeded to the replicator mounted by the surgical suite, and announced, "I am taking you to the replicator."

Dagny rubbed her forehead and tried to keep from laughing. "What if you spoke to her in Vuhlkansu? You know, to impart some Vulcan culture?"

He paused, which made Dagny feel awkward. "It was only a suggestion. You don't have to-"

"No," he interrupted, turning to look at her. "Your suggestion is logical."

He pressed a button on the replicator and began speaking in his soft, rhythmic native language. The entire thing was beautiful for many different reasons, even if she had no idea what was being said. For all Dagny knew, he could be reciting the list of ingredients in the formula, but for the first time, Voris almost seemed at ease with Safi.

Suddenly the clinic door slid open unexpectedly, revealing a very frazzled looking Aisla. "Sorry I'm late, Dr. Voris, but I got- eeeek! The baby! And Dagny! How are you feeling, lovey? How's that
precious little gift of yours?"

Voris turned around, revealing himself to be bottle feeding Safi. Aisla had come by in the hours after Safi's birth to check on Dagny's progress and give the report of Maina's labor and delivery. She had held Safi for a short time and then wisely excused herself to allow mother and baby to bond. She and the Svendsens were the only other people who had yet met Safi, though many people had offered gifts of food and alcohol in the days since her birth.

Aisla clutched her chest at the sight of Voris feeding his daughter and asserted, "That is the sweetest thing I have ever seen."

"Ever?" Voris asked, slightly narrowing his eyes.

"You Vulcans, always so literal," she laughed, trotting up to him. "She is so adorable. I just want to pinch her pointy little ears."

Voris tensed his body and replied stoically, "I insist that you do not."

"Can I hold her? I'll feed her."

"Let Voris," Dagny interrupted. "He needs the practice."

"Ah, of course," Aisla replied, whirling around to Dagny. "Sorry to get all handsy, I just get so excited about teensy little babies. And Vulcans definitely make lovely little babies."

"They do," Dagny agreed, stealing a look at Voris and feeling her cheeks growing warm.

"Now tell me, how are you feeling? You should be resting, no?"

"I feel good enough to do some light work," she explained. "I was just helping Voris recalibrate the biobeds while it was slow in the clinic."

"I guess I should probably get started on scrubbing the convalescent ward but I just can't get enough of your perfect little family."

Dagny was about to explain that their "perfect little family" was one of the most imperfect and unconventional families she'd ever heard of, but an alarm drowned out her words. Safi started to scream at the loud and intrusive interruption, provoking Dagny to collect her from Voris' arms and try to soothe her.

"What's going on?" Aisla yelled, clamping her hands over her ears. "Were they testing the alarm system today?"

"There has been no notification of a test," Voris shouted, taking a seat at the computer.

Soon there was yelling outside. Aisla opened the door to reveal people running from the surface entrances to the back of the tunnels. It was sheer pandemonium but no one seemed to know anything until people started arriving from the surface. All of them were dirty and some were bloody and dazed. Dagny quickly tucked Safi into the loose sling draped around her torso and did her best to calm her, though she wished there was a way to calm herself too.

"What's going on?" Aisla yelled into the crowded tunnel. She was forced to repeat herself several times before a middle aged human woman grabbed her by the arm and shouted, "We're under attack!"
I'm going through a really rough time right now with my family and in recent months, writing has become more of a chore than a fun distraction. Well, updating on a regular basis has become the chore, writing is still a nice escape and it might be the very thing I need to help get me through this rough patch but I have to do it for me for now.

I won't abandon my stories because I have them planned out to the very end and I'm the kind of person who likes to see things through. I just need a little while to breathe. Thank you for understanding. There's no need to leave a comment.
Turning Point

Chapter Notes

Update: It's been a few days shy of three months since this was last updated. A lot has changed for me in that time but I got a lot accomplished this summer, academically and professionally. Now I'm on a two week break before resuming classes in the fall and I hope to use this time to catch up on this story a bit. I have one more major story arc and another smaller one to get through and then it will be about over. Crazy to think it's been almost two years of writing it. Thank you to everyone who left comments. :) That being said, it has been almost three months, so here's a quick recap of where we left off:

Dagny has given birth to a daughter, Safi, and she and Voris are adjusting to their first week as parents. They have agreed to leave the colony when the Federation quarantine imposed due to an Orion lungworm outbreak expires and move to San Francisco so Dagny can study medicine and they can raise Safi in a more stable environment. Dagny has returned to light duty in the clinic, but the colony is attacked without warning and the first patients have begun to arrive. With that, I now present Chapter 36.

Stardate 2260.315

"What's next, Hadrian?" Dagny called, adjusting the pitch of her voice to keep from waking the sleeping baby nestled in the sling around her torso. Safi had been whining and fussing all night and had only just now fallen asleep. Even still, it would be time to check on her soon, but it would also be easy enough to squeeze in one more patient. She was in bad need of sleep but there was still so much to do.

A man with blond hair fading into gray at the temples clucked his tongue, pivoted on his stool, and called, "Can you handle broken ribs and probably some torn knee ligaments?"

Dagny grinned, prompting Hadrian Moore to nod to a teenage human girl slumped against the wall and bearing all her weight on her right leg. The girl started to hobble in Dagny's direction, but Dagny held up a hand and replied, "If you've got a bad knee, I'll come to you."

Dagny tiptoed over empty hypospray vials and moved a cot out of the way to get to her next patient. The past three hours had made a shambles out of their humble clinic and they weren't done yet. There were still nearly a dozen people lined up along the wall waiting for medical care, some drooping in chairs and others sitting on the floor.

"I was here first," a woman called from behind her.

"You've got a teensy cut on your scalp, Madge," Hadrian sighed, looking up from his own patient, a Tellarite man with a broken arm.

"Doesn't feel so teensy to me," she grumbled. "And besides, if it's so teensy, you could patch it up, lickety split and I could be on my way."
Dagny peeked over her shoulder to see a human woman with light brown hair matted with blood but she didn't feel like getting involved in the argument that was teetering on the edge of breaking out. Hadrian had done a good enough job of triaging all the non-critical patients and Dagny didn't have the energy nor the can-do attitude to question his judgement on this particular evening.

She cupped a hand around Safi's head, leaned down on one knee, wincing at the pressure it was putting on her lower body. "Hi there."

"Hi," the girl mumbled. Upon closer inspection, she wasn't as young as Dagny had first thought.

"I'm Dagny."

"Greta."

"How old are you, Greta?"

"Seventeen." The girl's eyes fell on Safi and she winced. "Cute baby."

"Thanks."

"She doesn't look very old."

"Not even a week yet."

"I don't know how anyone could have kids in a place like this."

Her words stung for several reasons. Dagny was tempted to make a comment about Greta practically being a kid herself, but because she wasn't even four years older than Greta, it would only come across as sanctimonious. But she'd also just said aloud the thing Dagny had been thinking for the past several hours: what was she thinking, trying to raise her daughter in a place like Bergeron colony?

"Uh, so you're here for a busted knee?" Dagny said, trying to focus on the task ahead.

"And my ribs."

"Right." Dagny grabbed the tricorder from the holder on her hip and muttered a few words of agreement. Mending her ribs would be easy enough—only two clean breaks—but the damage to her knee would probably require Dr. Voris' experience. Unfortunately, he was up to his elbows in surgery, both literally and figuratively.

Dagny grabbed a bone knitter from the pile of scattered medical devices on the reception desk and said, "Can you lift your left arm over your head and pull your shirt up a bit?"

Greta took a slow breath and complied after two false starts. "How'd you get this job?"

"I was trained as a paramedic," Dagny explained. "I came to the colony specifically to work in the clinic."

The only reply she got was an ugly frown. "I hate pulling weeds in the fields. All it's ever gotten me is a sunburn and torn up hands."

"I can repair your calloused hands -"

"They're fine," Greta interrupted. "Besides, there's not exactly a lot of crops left."

"What do you mean?"
"I mean those people who attacked us, whoever they were, they burned them. Scorched to little crisps. I guess I was saying I'm in need of a new job and I get the feeling whatever's offered to me next won't be much better. Who can I talk to about working here?"

Dagny was too engrossed in Greta's most recent statement to answer her question. Obviously everyone knew by now that the colony had been attacked several hours ago. The details of who, why, and how were still sketchy—some said Klingons, others said Gorn, some claimed it was part of a territorial dispute and others insisted the colony had been accidentally targeted. She'd spent the last several hours treating casualties but most of the injuries had come from the ensuing chaos of people fleeing into the tunnels for safety once violence broke out on the surface.

She'd just sort of assumed the attack had been some random fly-by with phasers, based on the three patients with radiation burns consistent with certain classes of phasers, but as the vast majority of the colony was situated underground and casualties had been relatively minimal, she'd figured they'd escaped the worst of it. How could she have forgotten about the crops?

They might live underground, but their food came from the surface, thanks to the Federation quarantine. There were supplementary greenhouses in the tunnels but from everything Dagny had ever heard, it was not nearly enough to feed more than a thousand people. She'd been worried before but now she felt sick to her stomach.

"Didn't you hear me?" Greta asked.

Dagny's eyes refocused on the bone knitter in her hands. "Huh? Uh, no, I'm sorry."

"Did Sam die?"

"Who?"

"What do you mean, who? Samantha Bergeron. How long have you been here?"

Dagny rubbed a sheen of sweat away from her forehead and started to worry her temperature monitor would go off, but then she remembered she was no longer pregnant and wasn't wearing it any longer. How could she have forgotten something so obvious, particularly when she was currently wearing the baby on the outside? She was tired and hungry and it was a wonder Safi had remained relatively content these past hours.

"I've been here long enough," she replied grimly. "I'm sorry, I'm just a little out of it. And I don't know about Sam."

"If you're so scatterbrained, maybe I should wait for the man over there," she mused nodding in Hadrian's direction.

Before she could offer a curt rebuttal, Hadrian quipped, "You're better off with Dagny. She does this full time."

"Doesn't seem like it," Greta sighed, rolling her eyes and pursing her lips.

Rather than let the girl's sour attitude get to her, Dagny powered down her bone knitter and with all the courtesy she could muster asked, "How do your ribs feel?"

"Like they've been worked over by a Klingon street fighter."

"Broken bones will do that."
"What about my knee?"

"We're going to have to wait for Dr. Voris, I think."

As if on cue, he emerged from the surgical suite, pulling a surgical cap from his head and chucking it in the sterilization bin. The eyes of all the conscious people in the room turned to him but he didn't acknowledge their curiosity. If he noticed, he said nothing and proceeded in Dagny's direction.

"Is Aisla still here?" he asked, once he was about two meters away.

"She's in the convalescent ward keeping tabs on everyone. Is everything ok?"

He was about to answer but Greta interrupted. "Are you Dr. Voris?"

"I am."

"The nurse says you're going to have to fix my knee."

"You will receive treatment but currently I have more critical patients to tend to."

Greta made an ugly face and again rolled her eyes to such a degree that it almost demaded to be called a feat of human physiology. Voris headed toward the convalescent ward and after telling Greta she would be right back—a statement that was not well-received—Dagny followed him.

"Is something wrong?"

He leaned close to her and said almost in a whisper, "Samantha Bergeron is dead."

"What? How?" she said, forgetting to lower her voice. "How can that be?"

Voris' eyes scanned the room before giving Dagny a stern look. "I would prefer to keep this quiet for now."

"Keep what quiet?" Hadrian asked, coming up behind them.

"Ah, we're just running low on pain-killers," Dagny blurted, trying her hand at the first lie that came to her mind.

"I would offer to make some more but seeing as how I know as much about chemistry as I do making wedding cakes, maybe one of you two would prefer to do it."

Voris cocked an eyebrow and gave a small nod. Dagny knew how much he hated lying, but it was starting to occur to her that keeping Sam's death quiet for as long as possible was probably a smart move. Tensions were already high enough after the attack—the loss of the colony's namesake and founder, long-time unofficial governor, and current councilwoman would probably send everyone into full on panic. The longer she thought of the wider implications, the more Dagny started to panic.

She didn't get to dwell on it for long though. Safi squeaked against her chest and quickly found enough air in her lungs to stage a performance of shrieking, and as she had done many times already that evening, she prepared to ferry her baby upstairs to feed and change her.

"You should retire for the night," Voris said grimly.

"I can keep going," she insisted, raising her voice to be heard over Safi's cries. "I just need to get her situated and I'll be back down."
"She is not yet a week old," he replied. "You both require rest and our agreement was that you could work in the clinic for short periods on light duty."

"I'm fine, really. I just-"

"Safi is not as resilient as you."

He turned his back to her and resumed course for the convalescent ward and it took everything in her power to resist grabbing him by the shoulder, whipping him around, and demanding to know if he really intended to insinuate that she was exposing their child to harm. People were staring though and the last thing she needed was a bunch of witnesses to what should certainly be a private conversation. Even still, her jaw was clenched so tightly her back molars threatened to explode.

By the time she reached the top of the stairs and shut the door behind her, she was crying alongside her baby. She gingerly untangled Safi from the sling around her chest, thinking if she wasn't already crying from a whole host of confusing emotions and frightening current events, she'd be crying from the pain in her aching breasts. Not that it really mattered why Dagny was crying: the game of testing various hypotheses of why her baby might be screaming bloody murder was now underway.

Half a dozen attempts at breastfeeding and bottle feeding, two rounds of dressing and undressing, a tour through every method Dagny knew to hold, cradle, and rock a baby, three scans with a tricorder, and about eighty lullabies later, she still had no answer for why Safi was so upset. For the first time, she was unable to comfort her child. The longer she cried, the more frazzled Dagny became, and the more frustrated Dagny got, the harder Safi cried.

Olav and Henrik had been colicky babies. How could she forget the entire Skjeggestad family turning into zombies following several months of sleepless nights? But Safi seemed a little too young to be experiencing colic, but Safi was also not fully human. Maybe Vulcan babies were different. The idea that something was wrong with Safi and she didn't even know how to tell because all of her experience was tied up in caring for human babies started a whole new cascade of emotional turmoil.

Eventually exhaustion started getting the better of both of them. Dagny collapsed onto her bed, stripped Safi down to her diaper and laid her on her back, and then laid down next to her and gently massaged and stroked her stomach. It took a few minutes but she did quiet down. Despite her near delirious level of fatigue, Dagny wanted to spring from the bed and sing for joy. Maybe she wasn't a bad mother after all.

Dagny jerked awake some time later, half panicked and half confused. Her sudden movement woke Safi, who instantly began to fuss. How long had they been asleep? She rubbed her eyes and then scooped her little one into her arms before a real tantrum could set in.

Even for all her experience with babies, the newborn ones never ceased to amaze with their miniature scale. It was mind-boggling to know that pretty everyone started out life as a tiny little thing that could fit in the crook of an arm.

"Hello, little one," she murmured. "We had a little nap, didn't we? I bet you're hungry. You wouldn't eat earlier."

She lifted Safi to one of her badly engorged breasts and managed to endure several minutes of her daughter's mouth assaulting her nipple before trying the other breast and getting a better latch. Every mother she knew had always made breastfeeding look so easy. She so badly wanted to give up, go downstairs, and replicate her a bottle of formula, but she managed to stick it out without crying too much. Her breasts were so enormous they almost looked like a crude caricature.
When Safi had taken her fill, Dagny slipped her into her crib and eased herself back down onto her bed and slowly tried massaging the swollen masses of flesh that had once been a pair of breasts barely large enough to fill out a small bra. She was so tired the thought that she was still awake almost made her angry, but her breasts were hurting too much to sleep. For the last nine months, she’d assumed she knew what she was signing up for, what with having almost a dozen younger siblings, but five days in and this motherhood gig was turning out to be much harder than she’d ever imagined.

Voris stared up at the ceiling. Dagny was still dressed and lying flat on her back on the next bed, arms splayed outward and snoring loudly. Two bags of half-melted ice rested on each of her breasts in what Voris supposed was an attempt to relieve inflammation associated with engorgement or an obstructed mammary duct. He would inquire about it tomorrow.

The raucous sounds of her airways were rather jarring, but that wasn't what was keeping him awake. Wondering how he could protect her and Safi for the next 259 days was the primary source of his insomnia. There was no logic in worrying, particularly when he was utterly powerless to alter his current set of circumstances.

The afternoon's attack had been relatively small scale but Voris recognized everything changed the moment phasers scorched the surface. He rationally understood that safety was an illusion and he had never been safe on Bergeron colony, just as he had never truly been safe on Earth, just as his mother and sisters hadn't been safe on Vulcan. To be sure, some places were certainly safer than others but on this day, Bergeron colony had been rendered unsafe not only because of a violent outside attack, but also because it had lost most of its food supply.

Even if the attackers never returned, eliminating the majority of the colony's food guaranteed people would go hungry and creatures of any species, even Vulcans, tended to do peculiar things when facing the threat of starvation. Yes, life on Bergeron colony had been irrevocably changed.

He was pondering possibilities for leaving the planet prior to the end of the quarantine—there were none, really—when his ears picked up the soft gurgles of the baby in the cot between Dagny's jagged snoring. Apparently he wasn't the only one awake. He sat up carefully to avoid creaking sounds from the bed and peeked at his daughter. She was flexing her arms and legs in a motion that roughly suggested she was trying to climb and invisible ladder.

She had been asleep in her crib when Voris had come upstairs two hours earlier and if Safi was sticking to her usual schedule, she would be crying for food very soon. Dagny grunted in her sleep and rolled onto her side and seconds later, Safi began to frown and whimper. The attack had forced Dagny to work far harder than she should have so soon after giving birth. She needed rest. Deciding it was only logical that he should tend to Safi's needs since he was already awake, he hoisted the baby from her cot and gently propped her high onto his chest.

Her frustrated cooing ceased immediately and for several seconds, Voris repelled feelings of joy that his touch had provided Safi some consolation. He gently stroked her back and felt her body relax further against his. Deciding he was very much content if she was, he sat like that for a time. The sparse, feathery black hairs on her head were swirled into disarray and what a profound thing it was, to know she had acquired that hair from him. A few times he felt the bizarre impulse to do what he so often saw Dagny do, which was lean down and kiss the crown of her tiny head, but what would be the logic in that?

Voris had been overwhelmed these last months trying to balance Dagny's chaotic emotions and had thought things would settle for him once she'd given birth, but the experience of fatherhood was creating new emotional turmoil for him. He hadn't expected to feel this way. Childbirth and childcare
were perfectly routine functions and many Vulcans experienced aspects of one or both in their lifetimes but as far as Voris could discern, no one he knew had ever suffered from overwhelming feelings of love and tenderness simply from holding their own child. Or perhaps many people did and simply did not speak of it.

Eventually her whimpering resumed and her fragile body started to struggle against his grip, so as smoothly as he could manage, he stood and transported his young charge downstairs to replicate a bottle of fortified formula. He was halfway to the replicator when she finally broke into a raucous chorus of cries. He turned his eye to the convalescent ward where several patients were still recovering following surgery and did his best to soothe her so that he might avoid waking them.

"Please, be quiet," he said, bouncing her in a light up and down motion against his chest with one hand while he entered his order into the replicator. Thinking of Dagny's desire that he should impart Vuhlkansu on her, he added, "Sanu, nam'uh ralash-fam. Please, be quiet."

She was not yet a week old and could only communicate through reflexive facial expressions and wailing, so he did not blame her for her disobedience. Unfortunately, there were others who did. "Shut that brat up!" called a male voice from the convalescent ward.

A bottle appeared in the replicator dispenser and he grabbed it, calling back in a loud whisper, "My apologies!" He did not prefer to continue standing in the main area of the clinic within earshot of the four patients in the ward, but he also didn't prefer to retire upstairs and needlessly wake Dagny. The only other option was the surgical suite, which was also currently serving as the temporary morgue.

As the surgery's door closed behind him, his eyes naturally fell on the biobag in the corner that contained the physical remnants of the colony's founder and former de facto leader. He had done everything he could to save her, but her internal injuries had been just beyond repair. In the rush to get everyone on the surface to safety, Samantha Bergeron had fallen down the long row of narrow stairs and been trampled by several hundred people, at least according to several accounts, but there was no way to determine how credible those accounts were. As of now, no one even knew who had attacked the colony or why. There were hundreds of witnesses and zero answers.

Were Samantha Bergeron still alive, she'd have already come by the clinic and assessed situation and talked with some of the casualties. She would have given him a report of everything she knew. Voris understood the council was new and therefore not operating as efficiently as desired, but there had been no emissary to deliver news or reassure frightened colonists. She had never liked the mantle of leader, but she'd had a natural talent for it. She had been the first to greet them when they'd arrived and now she was reduced to a corpse in a bag in the corner of a side room in the clinic.

He experienced sadness and some trepidation that he instantly quashed, but Safi's cries shifted pitch and grew more frantic. He wasn't sure how he knew, but it was easy enough to understand his daughter was afraid. Was she picking up on his emotions, or was something else frightening her?

He turned his back to Samantha Bergeron's body and tried to slip the bottle's nipple in Safi's mouth, but she was completely inconsolable and wanted nothing to do with the formula. Rather than allow his anxiety to bloom, it occurred to him he might test his hypothesis. Was Safi really sensing his emotions and if so, if he could calm himself, would she be calm also?

Holding her as securely as he could, he carefully lowered himself, folding his legs to assume a cross-legged seated position. He cupped Safi's head with his hands, resting her on his forearms and watched the motions of her face as she bellowed. Then he closed his eyes, exhaled, and did his best to block the extremely distressing cries of his infant daughter from his mind. Ten seconds passed. Twenty. In and out he breathed, welcoming the peace that washed over him.
She didn't stop crying but her cries did become the more familiar cries of a hungry baby, rather than a terrified one. When he reopened his eyes, he found her green-faced and tear-streaked. He waited for her to catch her breath before trying the bottle a second time and the moment he touched the nipple to her lips, she gripped it with ferocious tenacity. A flurry of smacking and snuffling ensued.

"Finally!" shouted a very muffled voice from the other side of the door. Voris didn't like that his patients' sleep should be disturbed, but it was an open ward with little in the way of privacy or soundproofing. It was regrettable they should be woken by a crying baby, but a baby was just one of the countless things that might generate noise in such a place. Besides that, Safi was not only no longer crying, but she seemed largely content now.

She was halfway through the liquid in her bottle when she suddenly spit the nipple out and began squirming. Seconds later, a muted scream pierced the silence. Dagny was awake. Rather than wait for Safi to resume crying, he quickly scooped her into a cradle position, exited the surgical suite, and headed toward the stairs.

He was about a meter away from the first step when he nearly collided with Dagny in the darkness. She was crying and now Safi was crying too, and the irritated patient in the adjacent ward yelled, "What's a guy got to do to get some peace and quiet around here?"

"My baby," Dagny yelped, reaching for Safi. Voris felt strangely reluctant to give her up because she was his baby too, but decided it would probably be unwise to keep a mother from her child.

"Is something the matter?"

"I woke up and she was gone," Dagny choked. "Just gone."

"But I was absent as well. Did it not occur to you I might-"

"Won't you shut up?" the man from the ward howled.

Voris and Dagny exchanged looks and though he couldn't discern the finer features of her face in the dark, he sensed it was dawning on her that her child had never been in any danger and she was embarrassed she'd caused a scene in the clinic in the pre-dawn hours of the morning.

"Shhhhh," she whispered, her breath rustling Safi's thin layer of hair.

"Perhaps you should take her upstairs," Voris urged. "I'll see to the patients in the ward."

They went their separate ways, and five minutes and a long-winded lecture from Mr. Donaldson about wanting some "shut eye," he trudged up the stairs and discovered Dagny setting Safi down in her cot.

"I didn't mean to wake anyone up," she murmured, sitting on the edge of her bed.

"I believe the honor of rousing the ward belongs to Safi."

Dagny frowned. "I didn't even hear her cry."

"I woke a short time ago and discovered her awake and in need of food so I took her downstairs to avoid waking you."

"I don't mind getting up to take care of her: it's kind of my job."

"Yesterday you insisted that I take a more active role in caring for our daughter. I cannot do this and
also allow you to accept sole responsibility for caring for her."

She held up a hand and sighed. "I know. I'm being illogical. I'm tired. It's been a long day."

"Yes."

She drew in a heavy breath and held it before letting it escape through pursed lips. He wondered if now would be the correct time to ask after the inflammation in her breasts but she spoke first, and on a completely unrelated topic. "I'm scared, Voris."

"Explain."

"You really need me to? We were attacked today. Sam is dead. We were so busy I didn't really have time to dwell on it but now I'm overwhelmed by it. What happens now?"

He thought of his concerns over the food supply, but rather than speak them aloud and add to her fear, he replied, "I do not know."

She slowly lowered herself into a sitting position on her bed, ran her fingers through her tangled hair and said, "Safi was born less than a week ago. Just yesterday we were discussing our plans for getting out of here in eight and a half months. Living in San Francisco and going to medical school and now all I can think about-" The emotions growing within her halted her speech.

He understood her uncertainty—he shared it—but a lifetime of learning to repress emotionalism related to fear made him unable to fully appreciate the full depth of her anxiety. Then he stole a glance at Safi sleeping in her cot and experienced a strange tightening in his chest and pulling sensation deep in his belly.

"There is no logic in worry," he offered.

"And surely there can't be any logic in doing nothing about it either?"

"What would you do? What would you have me do?"

"I don't know. Your father and uncle are very important people. Isn't there something they could do?"

"They have substantial authority on New Vulcan, but New Vulcan does not speak for the Federation. And while my father is well-known throughout the Federation and my uncle perhaps more so, I don't believe they possess the influence to affect the quarantine or our current situation and even if they did, I doubt they would."

She made a face. "Not even to help their son and nephew?"

"It would be an abuse of power to express favoritism for a relation in a matter such as this. Furthermore, my father and I do not speak-"

"You're telling me he wouldn't even want to help you if your life were in danger? I know he doesn't care about me and he called Safi a half-breed, but you're his only son."

He watched Safi twitch in the cot. "Why are you raising your voice? Are you angry with me?"

Dagny pinched her forehead between her fingers. "No, I'm just throwing ideas out there and trying to brainstorm any kind of idea that will get us out of here. I'm not angry, I'm afraid. I'm on edge and I know when I'm tense, it seems to make Safi more tense. I feel like she senses my mood or
Voris nodded. "She is still very young, but she is displaying signs of atypical empathic response."

"What do you mean, *atypical*?" Dagny's face turned a curious shade of grayish white. "Something's wrong with her?"

"I would not classify it as *wrong*, merely that it is not observed in a many Vulcans and has never been reported in humans, which makes it surprising that our daughter might be capable of non-psionic telepathy when neither of her parents are. But as I said, she is too young for me to perform an assessment-"

"Slow down: what are you telling me?"

"Safi appears to sense emotions within others to an unusual degree. All Vulcans have some innate telepathy, but as with any ability, it manifests differently in every individual. Approximately two percent of Vulcans report possessing of some form of telepathy without the need for physical contact, which includes sensing emotions within others, somewhat like the recently encountered Betazoid species are rumored to be capable of. However, it is believed the true incidence is higher and may even be as high as ten percent."

"If it's really as high as that, why does everyone act like it's so rare?"

He paused to consider his words. "Telepathy is a taboo subject for many off-worlders because it creates an enormous imbalance of power. Many within the Federation know Vulcans are capable of telepathy but they also know it requires some form of touch and there is security in the idea that if one avoids physical contact, one can also opt out of an invasion of privacy through telepathy. Few would take delight in knowing another person could delve into their thoughts at will across great distances, and so, those Vulcans who can often keep it to themselves."

"And you think Safi can do this?"

"It is impossible to assess these abilities in newly born infants due to confounding variables such as parental bonding and lack of complex communication skills. It is only a casual observation and I have only recently made it, but you have corroborated my hypothesis."

"Is this *bad*?"

"No, it simply *is*. However, I have little experience in child development. It may be that I am mistaken or she will outgrow it."

"No, I guess I was kind of asking myself out loud. I'm trying to wonder what it would be like, growing up and able to feel what others felt. It seems like it would be such a terrible burden. And wouldn't it be confusing, not only to her but also her peers? What if this keeps her from making friends? Would living on Vulcan where people suppressed emotions be better for her? Or *worse*? What if-""

"It is premature to consider such things," Voris interrupted patiently.

"It's not though. If she really is picking up on what other people are feeling, me being upset or afraid or angry affects her. I don't want to hurt my own baby."

"All children can sense their caregivers' emotions to some degree."

"True, but if I were Vulcan like you, I wouldn't feel emotions and this wouldn't be a problem."
"She is half human and you are her human mother. You must be as you are."

"What kind of paradox is that?"

"Life is full of paradoxes; reconciling them is a fruitless pursuit but accepting them is a mark of wisdom," he replied, vaguely aware he was paraphrasing a passage from Surak's teachings.

She rolled her eyes and leaned over to assume a prostrate position on the bed. "It's late and we should try to get some sleep."

"I regret I do not have a simpler answer for you."

"Me too."

He wanted to ask if she intended to dress for bed but as it was already the early hours of the morning, he supposed it didn't matter. Voris retired to the lavatory to perform his customary hygiene routine and five minutes later, slipped under his quilt wearing the same undershirt and underwear he'd worn during the day, deciding now that Safi was generating so much laundry, perhaps it would actually be wise to attempt to be more efficient in his use of clothing.

He tried focusing on deep breathing to settle his mind, but his previous worries of providing for Dagny and Safi and keeping them safe resurfaced. He had told her not to worry, that worry was illogical for circumstances out of one's control, but he was guilty of it too. The breathing patterns coming from Dagny's bed suggested she hadn't followed his advice either.

"Are you awake?" he asked.

"Yes." He couldn't think of anything meaningful to say, but she broke the silence with a startling revelation. "I miss melding with you."

He allowed himself nearly a full minute to process her words, then cautiously asked, "Would you like to meld now?"

"Only if you want to."

"I would not mind."

"Ok, but do you want to? Would it be weird?"

He supposed it probably would, but he could not deny he missed the comfort of her chaotic mind and having her warm body pressed against his in the night. She was no longer pregnant so there was no reason they should continue the practice, especially because she was not his mate, but he could also think of no reason two adults should not meld if they both consented to it.

"I believe I would like it," he finally replied.

His ears picked up the rustling of fabric and the faintest slaps of Dagny's bare feet on the floor, then she peeled back the quilt and slowly lowered herself into his bed. He raised his hand to her face like he had done so many times before, but unlike before, she uttered a sharp gasp.

"Is something the matter?"

"You accidentally rubbed my breast."

"I- I would never-"
"No, I don't care if you touch them, just not right now: they're just really engorged and tender."

While he was stunned by the implication she would permit him to casually touch her breasts under better circumstances, he was still concerned that she was in such pain. Swollen and tender breasts were common in newly nursing mothers, but he was not convinced this level of pain was normal.

"Is it possible you have an obstructed mammary duct or mastitis?" he asked.

"I don't think so. There's no redness and I don't have a fever. I think I just need to get into the flow of regular feedings, so to speak."

"While I trust your assessment, would you permit me to examine you?"

"Tomorrow. I promise. But right now, please just meld with me." She placed her left hand over the back of his right, sending gentle waves of pleasure coursing through him.

He was slow to pull away, but eventually he did and settled his hand along her jaw. Her mind was teeming with fear and doubt, but it was so quiet compared to how it had been when she'd been carrying Safi. Her eyes drifted closed and her lips curled into a half smile.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Your gratitude is unnecessary," he replied.

"I know, but thank you anyway."

"You are welcome. Good night Dagny."

"Good night, Voris."

He closed his eyes, only dimly aware that neither of them had actually spoken the words of their conversation aloud. Perhaps their bond was deeper than he knew, but he was too tired and relaxed to dwell on it for long and soon they were both adrift in a sea of dreams.
The Cabbage Doctor

Stardate 2260.365

It had been several tense months on the colony since the attack but Dagny tried not to worry, mostly because in her scant twenty years of life, life had generally proven to be nothing but tension and uncertainty in some form or fashion. Between the pace of working in the clinic in the afternoons and adjusting to life with a new baby, she didn't have much time to dwell on it during her waking life anyway.

It was late afternoon and she was ambling through Tunnel 4 on her way to the specialty dispensary to collect Safi's formula. Last month, the clinic's replicator had been requisitioned as vital to the food and energy supply, which had made life a frustrating maze of bureaucracy for the clinic. They did their best to get by without specially replicated medical supplies, but Safi couldn't go long without replicated Vulcan breastmilk. Breastfeeding was now much easier than it had been at first, but all the vitamins in the world wouldn't make Dagny produce the nutrients Safi needed for a well-rounded diet and so, three times a week, she was forced to trudge to the dispensary and argue with whomever happened to be on duty that yes, she really had a prescription for breastmilk.

Today's was a small errand, but it marked a big milestone for Dagny. It was the first time she'd deliberately gone more than about ten meters away from her daughter since she'd been born more than two months ago. Normally she took Safi with her or Voris went by himself, but it had been evening by the time Dagny had gotten a free moment and Safi had been fast asleep in the crook of Voris' arm as he'd been updating the clinic's daily logs. Safi was going through a fussy stage and there was absolutely no reason to wake a sleeping baby, so she'd sucked it up and left Safi in Voris' care.

The tunnels were more packed than usual, but she supposed usual was a relative term. So few people had permanent work to keep them occupied these days, so most of them had taken to loitering in the tunnels. When they'd first arrived, more than three quarters of the colonists worked in support of the mining operations. Following the quarantine, most of those had become agricultural laborers, but following the destruction of the crops two months ago, the vast majority of the colony's populace had become unemployed overnight.

The new council was struggling to create jobs, but the majority of them were pointless make-work tasks performed in exchange for the colony's newly minted ration coupons. The clinic even had ten new part-time orderlies, and though they were nice and eager to work, they had no medical knowledge and the floor could only be swept so often. The colony had hastily erected six more greenhouses in the old tunnels but according to Voris' estimates, current demand was still on schedule to outpace projected supply within three months. No cuts to the rations had been announced yet, but they were expected any day now.

Many of the colonists were already looking ahead to how they would feed their families in the coming months. The council had severely limited travel up to surface—the Andorian community had been relocated to a newly dug tunnel near the Gorn settlement, which had ruffled more than a few feathers—but dodging the security patrols and sneaking up to the surface had become Bergeron colony's most popular past time. Most people went up to the surface to tend to private gardens hidden away in the forest or hunt native animals to supplement their dinner tables. They probably did other things too, but she preferred not to even guess what they were.

All of this instability was generating a lot of patients for the clinic. They were the busiest they'd ever
been, surpassing even their first chaotic weeks on the colony, only now instead of routine mining injuries, people arrived with bloody noses, busted lips, swollen knuckles, and the occasional knife wound. People were restless, bored, and afraid, and this new collective psychology was transforming Bergeron colony in ways Dagny didn't like.

The council's decision to strictly ration food and other essential items via a complex coupon system that no one really understood had caused a black market to spring up almost immediately. Just last night, Voris had been awoken to treat two young human men who had been badly beaten while attempting to buy a homemade phaser. They'd been brought in by two of the colony's new peace officers, provided with medical treatment, and carted off to join the colony's rapidly expanding jail population.

There were too many worrying trends, but Dagny didn't want to think about them this evening. It was the eve of the Federation New Year, it was getting late, and she was eager to get home to her baby and her… Voris. She'd spent the past week getting creative with cooking, trying to stretch their meals without shaving off too many calories, all so she would have enough ration coupons left over to make her mother's New Year's good luck stew.

She breezed through the front exit of Tunnel 4 and back onto the loop and upon passing two of the newly erected greenhouses tucked in behind a housing block, was startled to discover guards patrolling the perimeter. She must have looked like an idiot, literally stopping in her tracks to stare at them with mouth agape when one of them caught her gaze.

"Move along," he said tersely, waving at her with the baton in his hand.

All she could do was give a dumb nod of her head and comply, but the whole scene made her uncomfortable. Was it that the council had preemptively decided the greenhouses needed protection, or was there some legitimate reason they'd been posted there? Neither the thought of an authoritarian government nor a desperate and frightened citizenry gave her the warm fuzzies.

About a hundred meters off the main loop, she turned right into Tunnel 3 and was dismayed to find the line for the dispensary was backed up almost to the tunnel's entrance. There were about thirty or so people ahead of her, and often the people tasked with operating the replicators were inexperienced and slow. This was going to take at least an hour, if not more. If she weren't completely out of formula, she would just try again tomorrow. She checked the time, wondering if Zernon's stand would still be open to pick up the ingredients she needed for her stew.

She started to weigh her options. The dispensary was open all hours and she could come back later, but just as she was debating leaving the line, it shifted upward and two women walked away wearing surly faces.

"Yeah, he's gone too," muttered a man in front of her.

"Just him or the whole family?" a heavyset man asked.

She knew it was rude to eavesdrop, but it was hard not to listen in, not only because their conversation was making the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, but also because there was little else for her to do while she faced the drudgery of shuffling through a queue.

"Took his whole family. Little ones and all."

"What an idiot. They have scanners, you know and besides, where could they go?"

"I know. I told them it was insane, but he kept saying he didn't like the look of things here."
The original speaker cast a sidelong glance at her and nodded, "Good evening, Miss Dagny."

"Yes, you too," she replied through a thin-lipped smile. She had no idea who they were, but she was sure she'd probably treated them in the clinic at some point.

"You're pretty pale," added the heavyset man. "You feeling ok?"

"Yeah, it's just been a long day and I'm looking forward to getting home."

"Where's that baby of yours?"

"She's at home with her father."

"Shame, she's such a cute little thing."

Dagny examined their faces more closely, wondering why she had no idea who they were. Were they that busy in the clinic these days, or was her mind really just that fried from worry and sleep deprivation?

"Don't tell me you're getting any ideas about leaving?" asked the heavyset man.

Her heart started to thump in her chest. Of course she and Voris planned to get off Cestus III at the first available opportunity, but the way he'd asked the question made it seem like high treason. "No, we- we're staying here."

"That's a relief," he laughed. "Don't think the colony could afford to lose its doctors and anyway, isn't that baby of yours only a few weeks old? Doubt she'd make it out there."

Dagny crossed her arms, now thoroughly confused and a little bit scared and annoyed that someone would suggest under any circumstances that Safi wouldn't "make it." And somehow people were finding a way to leave the colony even despite the quarantine? "I'm sorry, what?"

"Sal Rogers packed up his family and snuck off in the night. They've got to be at least the fifth group to leave this month."

"Where would they sneak off to?"

"I imagine some people are heading off to the abandoned Federation colony. I guess other people might try to live off the land."

"But why? If there's another attack- I mean, the people who attacked us had phasers and if they have warp engines and phasers, they have to have scanners too. They're not going to be able to hide from anyone."

Before either of them could answer, shouting broke out at the head of the line over synthetic butter. A peace officer wearing black armbands walked briskly in that direction, prompting the smaller man to say, "I suppose they'd rather take their chance with an unknown attacker than the people they know at Bergeron colony."

"It was the Gorn who attacked us," the heavyset man said darkly. "No question about it."

"Then why hasn't the council confirmed that?" Dagny asked, trying to keep an eye on the front of the line.

"They don't want to start a panic and rumor has it, they're trying to work out some kind of deal with the Federation for protection. The Federation might not approve of some of our more undesirable
residents, but there's no way they're going to let those lizard bastards have all this dilithium. I hope when they do come they wipe every single one of them."

"Jeff, that's probably enough," the heavyset man interrupted, not taking his eyes off Dagny. "You're scaring Miss Dagny."

Dagny was barely listening over the sound of blood rushing through her ears. It wasn't her first time dealing with casual racism while living in the colony, but to hear someone so casually imply the Gorn should be "wiped out" shocked her beyond belief. She knew she should say something, but with all the victims of recent scuffles and fights she'd seen end up in the clinic in recent weeks, she suddenly felt afraid.

"Anyway, it's scary times we're living in. Scarier than any this colony's ever seen anyway. You stay safe and take care of that little one."

Dagny wrapped her arms tighter around her body and bit her lower lip. The two men went back to gossiping about other colonists and complaining about the council and soon the people standing in front of them joined in and it took everything she had to avoid listening. It was New Year's Eve—all she wanted was a quiet night at home with her daughter and her… Voris.

The line moved more quickly than she'd initially thought it might and about forty minutes later, she was handing a PADD to a surly looking man who looked vaguely familiar.

"Synthetic Vulcan breastmilk?" he asked, a definite tone of skepticism polluting his voice.

"Um, yes. Twelve bottles."

"What's it for?"

Was he really serious? "Um, to feed a baby?"

"What's wrong with those?" he asked, nodding in the direction of Dagny's chest.

Her face grew white hot, but remembering the confrontation from earlier about the synthetic butter that had resulted in a woman getting hauled off to spend the night in jail, she managed to temper her response, even if just barely.

"My daughter is half Vulcan and needs certain nutrients that she can't get from me," she explained through gritted teeth, suddenly ashamed that she was having to explain to a strange man that she was an inadequate mother.

"How old is your daughter?" he asked, leaning his elbows on the counter.

"A little more than two months old, but why does that matter? I have a prescription written right here.""

"Two months? Isn't that old enough to start eating regular food?"

"No!" Dagny shouted.

"You might want to watch yourself," he growled. "Or that baby of yours might be going hungry while you sleep your bad mood off in a cell."

It was impossible to hide the fact that she was shaking violently and torn between wanting to ring this smug man's neck and bursting into tears. Either he sensed he'd crossed a line or he was done
having his fun at her expense, so he straightened his back and said, "This prescription says twelve bottles. I can give you six."

"That's only half."

"Wow, some good school you must have gone to, to have figured that out so quickly. I can give you six."

"So when am I supposed to come pick up the rest of them?" she retorted, her voice dangerously low. She was so angry she didn't notice the people in line behind her who were irritated with the hold up.

"Two days from now."

"Twelve bottles is how much I need to make it through the next two days, not six."

"What's wrong with you, Kerry? Give her the twelve bottles," snapped a female voice from somewhere inside the dispensary. "She has a prescription."

"Yes, but Anja said we needed to-"

"Yes, my aunt said we needed to start managing people's expectations, but she didn't say we had gotten into the business of starving little babies." Morna, Aisla's sister, appeared from around the corner carrying her daughter Lula on her hip. "Hand me your prescription love and I'll get it filled for you."

Morna started to bicker with the rude, burly man, but eventually Dagny left with the twelve bottles she'd come for. She wasn't certain she would be so lucky next time, however, so she made a mental note to ask Aisla when her sister worked in the dispensary and try to visit during those hours.

She wandered back to the main tunnel in a daze, now more aware than ever just how much had changed on the colony in the past two months. There was more graffiti on the walls and more trash in the tunnels, which was surprising, given that so many people were now employed in maintenance and janitorial functions. She saw several people eyeing the refrigerated bag under her arm containing Safi's bottles and she tucked it closer to her body and walked faster.

As she approached the clinic, she remembered she was supposed to stop by Zemon's food stand and collect groceries for the week. Rather than drop the bottles off at home and then have to leave again, she kept walking past the clinic. When she arrived at Zemon's she was in for a major shock.

Three men were carefully packing up the empty boxes that had once contained many apples and potatoes and gespar and fruits and vegetables from all over the Federation. Zemon was leaning against the tunnel wall with his arms crossed, a defiant look in his eyes.

"Zemon?"

"Oh Dagny! I'm sorry you've come to witness my loss."

"I actually came to get a few potatoes, carrots, and onions."

"All out of everything, I'm afraid."

"But I saw you just this morning. I asked you-"

"I know. You asked me to reserve you a basket. I still have your list," he groaned, holding up his PADD. "But they came and took it. They took everything. I'm being shut down."
"What do you mean?"

"All independent food trade has been ended, effective immediately."

"B-but where am I supposed to get food?" she stammered.

"From the same place everyone will be getting it from now on—the central pantry. They retrofitted the old tunnel next to the auditorium into a central food storage and there's some new system for who can draw food and when."

"I haven't heard anything about this," she blurted. "When did this start."

"Oh, about two hours ago? I was only just informed. They've taken everything." He uttered a despondent sigh that turned into a soft squeal.

"I'm so sorry Zemon," she said, feeling genuinely sympathetic toward her friend but also concerned about getting groceries.

"It's not your fault."

"No," she agreed. "But I'm still sorry. I'm also sorry that I can't stay. I guess I need to get down to this new pantry and get my groceries."

"Oh, according to the order I was given, the hours are from 0900 to 1300. They aren't open right now and even if they were, people in the main tunnel draw food on day five."

"But that's three days from now. I have all these ration coupons I need to use and they're only good through tomorrow."

Zemon gave her a sympathetic look. "It's my turn to be sorry."

Dagny was on the brink of tears. "I- I don't have enough groceries to feed-

He stood and motioned her away from the men who were dismembering his food stand. "I know this is very frightening, but I can't stand to see you upset. Wait right here."

She did as he asked, mostly because she was too numb to process this new information and she was too occupied with trying to make an inventory of every item of food in the preserver and how she could possibly stretch it out over the next three days. Several people stopped to watch Zemon's food stand disappear and each made their own comments about it, and it was all Dagny could do to keep from breaking down.

About ten minutes later, Zemon reappeared and ushered her even further away from the work crew and onlookers. Faster and more casually than she would have believed possible, he tucked two small potatoes and a large carrot into the bag with Safi's bottles and immediately shushed her when she tried to protest and thank him. "Just get home and have a happy New Year," he said quietly.

When she finally made it back to the clinic, it was nearly 2000 hours and she found it dark and deserted. They did their best to keep people from spending the night in the convalescent ward these days because getting the extra rations to feed them had become quite difficult. Dagny could only imagine how much worse it would get in the near future.

Upon reaching the top of the stairs, she momentarily forgot all her cares when she discovered Voris sitting on the bed next to Safi, speaking in Vulcan and pointing to different parts on her body. He touched his finger to her big toe and said, "toe, gof;" then moved his finger to the top of her foot and
said, "foot, ash'ya." He then moved on to "ankle, mal-nik" and "knee, mal-nef" before he seemed to sense Dagny's presence in the doorway.

"Don't you think she's a little young to be learning the parts of the body?" Dagny chuckled.

"She is the child of a healer," he replied seriously. "And I so rarely know what to discuss with her."

"Just because you're a healer doesn't mean she'll want to be one."

"I am aware."

"It's hard to not get the sense that you're strongly encouraging her to take that path. She's only two months old—she still has a few years before she needs to start making some career decisions."

"It would be illogical to force her to choose a profession she was poorly suited to, but it is perfectly reasonable that I might cultivate an inherent interest in it by exposing her to the field at an early age."

"How did she do while I was gone?"

"She was distressed by your departure, but I managed to calm her and since then, she's been quite pleased with making gurgling sounds."

"That's good." And it was. She hadn't thought to be away from her baby so long and she wouldn't be able to hold Safi's hand every moment of every day for the rest of her life and yet... she hated that her baby could forget her so easily. Dagny knew she was being ridiculous, but hadn't Safi missed her at all? She entered the kitchen, set her bag on the counter, and opened the preserver door. There seemed to be less food than she remembered.

"You have returned quite later than I anticipated," he said, picking up Safi and tucking her into the crook of his arm.

"Uh, yes, there was a long line at the dispensary."

Safi began to struggle against Voris' hold on her and whimper. Despite what Voris said about her being too young to know whether or not she had heightened empathic abilities, Dagny didn't doubt it. Whenever she was the least bit sad, worried, angry, or scared, Safi knew it, and it wasn't just Dagny she was capable of reading. It was often difficult to have her downstairs in the clinic during busy times because the tension of a lot of patients in pain clearly aggravated her.

When Safi started to cry, Dagny took her from Voris' arm and held her close to her chest. Rather than interrupt the moment between mother and daughter, Voris began unpacking the bag. He held up the potatoes and carrot and asked, "Were these the only groceries you were able to obtain?"

She couldn't hold it in any longer—the tears flowed like rain. The harder she cried, the harder Safi cried and almost immediately, Voris was by her side offering to meld with her. She didn't even bother answering him with words; she buried her face in his chest and sobbed until the gentle touch of his hands on her face and the joy of mental transference began to calm her. She rambled about the events of the past two hours, sometimes aloud and sometimes not, and when she was done, he broke their mind meld and asked if she was calm enough to speak.

Sometimes she got angry at how placid and emotionless he could be. She'd just told him they weren't going to get any more food for three days and about how awfully she'd been treated at the dispensary, and he was acting like she'd just told him she stubbed her toe. Yet she didn't know what she would do if he wasn't the cool and collected person that he was. She needed him around not just for her own sanity, but for Safi's as well.
"I'm scared, Voris."

"It is a concerning situation," he replied. "We are fortunate Zernon was so generous."

"He said something about these belonging to you, I think," Dagny hiccupped, nodding to the potatoes and carrot on the counter. "But I didn't really understand what he meant."

"It is not important, what matters is Safi has sufficient food. You and I will find a way to manage until it is our day to visit the pantry."

Dagny dried her eyes and she and Voris worked together to fashion an odd meal out of the carrot, one of the potatoes, a green apple, and the last bit of plomeek broth from that morning's breakfast. Voris fed Safi half of one of the bottles while they ate and the sight of him artfully balance a baby in one arm while daintily spearing small bites of roasted potato with a fork to feed himself was a heartwarming thing to watch.

Safi was only two months old, but she was growing up at a rate much faster than Dagny remembered babies growing. She was cooing and smiling and could even hold her head up if supported in a sitting position. Safi was fast becoming her own little person and it made her mother's heart swell with about a million different emotions every time she thought about it.

They prepared for bed immediately following their hodgepodge dinner, but Safi seized the opportunity and decided she was wide awake and wanted nothing to do with being deposited into a crib for the night. She was sleeping longer these days, but her schedule was extremely irregular, thanks in large part to Voris being woken many nights to tend to emergency patients.

The only thing that would calm Safi on this particular night was to be held and walked around the room, so that was what Dagny did for several hours. When the clock struck midnight, she grinned to herself and began whispering the words to *Auld Lang Syne* in Safi's ear. It was a new year on Bergeron colony, but what it held in store remained to be seen. No matter what, she was very thankful for her child and her… Voris.

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**Stardate 2261.30**

Voris moved purposefully through the tunnels, nodding calmly to the few people he passed but paying close attention to the peace officers as he walked. He had been careful to wipe all traces of mud from his boots and all the dirt from under his fingernails. There was no reason for anyone to suspect he'd been on the surface, unless of course he'd been followed, in which case, the mud and dirt would not matter much.

Some of the root vegetables he'd planted three months ago were finally beginning to mature. The sweet potatoes and onions would require at least another month, but he had enough carrots and golden potatoes in his medical bag to make at least two full meals for himself and Dagny, but he had not wanted to overfill it and possibly draw attention to himself. Voris was rather new to the world of circumventing patrols and black market trading, but just because he was renowned for being honest did not mean he intended to be taken advantage of.

He had begun making his plans the night after Samantha Bergeron had died. In the early days following the attack, people still freely went up to the surface and nearly half the colony had attended her funeral. It likely would have been far more too, had people not been so afraid of another attack. Sam was buried next to her wife, a woman Voris had never met named Lucy Coronado. Voris had been the last to leave the funeral and he supposed most people had just assumed he needed to grieve privately or perhaps supposed he was particularly attached to Samantha Bergeron.
Both were true, but they were not the only reasons he'd remained by her grave well past nightfall. He had traded Zernon two bottles of Romulan ale for several packs of seeds and potato berries and tubers. He'd used them to turn approximately one quarter of the cemetery into a semi-cultivated garden. He was unsure if it was disrespectful to the dead to grow food over their corpses, but he meant no offense. It was only logical. They were dead and he was trying to avoid sharing a similar fate in the immediate future.

The cemetery was an ideal spot. Most of the colonists who were attempting to grow gardens such as his had elected to go many kilometers beyond the colony for fear of being caught by the peace officers or having their crops discovered by thieves. The cemetery was close enough for him to monitor every few weeks and was hiding in plain sight.

It was also well camouflaged. When he'd first sown the seeds into ground, he removed many of the weeds to allow the root vegetables space to grow, but as he could not tend it regularly and no maintenance crews came to the surface to tend the graves, it had grown quite wild throughout late spring and into summer. The tops of the carrots and potatoes blended in well with the native plant life and as he'd just discovered, no one appeared to be aware there was food mixed in among the graves.

He checked the time on his PADD and noticing it was now 0550 hours and there was no one in sight, he turned into Jester Blakely's tavern and found Mr. Blakely sweeping the floor behind the bar. "A bit early for a drink, isn't it doc?" he asked, yawning and propping himself up on his broom.

Voris surveyed the room and once he was satisfied it was empty, approached the bar. "According to my records, you never returned for a follow up appointment for your umbilical hernia."

Mr. Blakely began to reverberate with a slow, steady laugh. "So you're making a house call now? What's it been? A year?"

"As you were released from the clinic on 2260.141 and it is now 2261.30, the basic arithmetic informs me it has been 254 days, or approximately eight and a half months."

"Better late than never," he sighed, forcing his eyes open and returning to his morning chores. "I actually feel pretty great. Business is terrible and I'm on the Bergeron diet like everyone else, but my health isn't much to complain about."

"I have an ulterior motive for visiting you," Voris declared.

"I was starting to get that feeling," Mr. Blakely replied slyly. "Never thought I'd see a proper Vulcan in my bar, and let's face it: 6 o'clock in the morning is a little early to be drinking even for the most dedicated alcoholic. What do you need and what are you offering?"

"I have simply come to inquire what food you might have available."

"That depends on what you're willing to trade for it."

"This is a tavern, and based on my understanding of the local economy, I believe alcohol might be well received."

"Depends on the alcohol. What do you got?"

"What are you willing to accept?"

"It's pretty desperate here but I still have standards. If you came here to offer vanilla extract or mouthwash, you can save it. You have some kind of homebrew or something professional?"
"It was distilled locally."

"Distilled?" His eyes lit up. "You come bearing gifts of liquor?"

"Not a gift. A trade."

"Until I know what it is, I can't tell you what I can offer."

"Unless you can give me some indication of what you can offer, I see no reason to continue our conversation." Voris turned on his heel but Mr. Blakely stopped him.

"Never figured you'd be one to drive such a hard bargain, doc, but I respect the position you're in because I'm in it myself."

Both men stared at each other. "What do you have available?" Voris asked again.

Mr. Blakely rubbed his chin. "I've got about ten kilos of Klingon gagh. Not the best stuff, mind you, but the Klingons say it's edible."

"I do not consume animal flesh."

The old man's eyes narrowed. After several more minutes of détente and haggling, Voris left Jester Blakely's establishment with a kilogram of assorted nuts, two heads of lettuce, six tomatoes, six sweet potatoes, two jars of peanut butter, two jars of jam, and a large Tellarite gourd in exchange for the Andorian ale Shurnel had given him. Apparently it was a popular drink and becoming quite difficult to come by.

He carried his groceries in one of the large emergency medical kits normally stationed at the entrances to the larger tunnels, but it still bulged slightly along the sides and looked rather awkward. When he was stopped by a peace officer just thirty meters from the clinic and asked what he was doing with the medical kit in the early hours of the morning, Voris calmly explained he had been performing an inventory on each of the deployed kits and was returning non-serviceable supplies to the clinic.

It was a lie in every sense of the word, but he had the benefit of being Vulcan and the colony's respected physician on his side and the peace officer was a boy, probably no older than nineteen or twenty. Lying was illogical, but the threat of hunger made people do unusual things. Rations had already been reduced by twenty percent—and would likely be reduced again within the next month—and it was growing more difficult to obtain ration coupons every week.

When he entered the clinic, he was surprised to find Dagny awake and speaking with Anja, Aisla's aunt, who was a senior member of the council in the wake of Samantha Bergeron's death. Dagny was bouncing Safi on her hip and looked intensely relieved by his presence. "There you are! Where have you been?"

He nodded to the large medical bag hanging from his shoulder and told the same lie about exchanging old supplies in the tunnel's medical kits.

"It's a little early for that, don't you think?" Anja asked, slowly studying Voris from head to toe. He had the vague sense he was being interrogated, which might have been worrisome for anyone besides a Vulcan. Orions pheromones were often cited as being among the best pseudo-truth serums known to science, but Vulcans were largely immune to them.

"The clinic opens at 0630 and stays quite busy throughout the day," Voris explained. "I was merely trying to make the most efficient use of my time."
Her eyes narrowed but she said nothing further on the matter of him roaming the tunnels before
daybreak. "As I was telling Dagny, we have a bit of a problem."

"Anything I may assist with?" Voris asked, gently sliding the medical bag under the computer
station.

"What do you know about growing crops?" For a fleeting moment, he wondered if she knew about
his private cemetery garden, but a lifetime of logical training reminded him to admit nothing.

"As a boy, I kept a garden. I was an average horticulturalist, I believe."

"Did you ever get blight?"

"Most certainly. I would be surprised to encounter a gardener who did not."

Anja held out several cabbage leaves, which Voris took. They appeared almost burned and moldy.
"What do you make of this?" she asked.

"I'm a doctor, not a botanist."

"Out of everyone on this colony, you easily have the most training in the biosciences. I need you to
figure out what's on these leaves and find a way to kill it."

Voris held it up to the light for closer inspection. "It appears to be some kind of fungus, though I
won't know for certain until I ran some tests. Even then-

She held up a hand to cut him off. "This is a matter of life and death, Dr. Voris. This has already
spread through most of Greenhouse 1 and was found in Greenhouse 2 yesterday afternoon. We've
been trying to keep this quiet, but too many people work in the greenhouses. People are already
starting to panic and if we could show that we have a solution to this problem right away, I think that
would calm people down."

"The clinic opens in five minutes."

"Not today, it doesn't," Anja said, a note of apology in her voice. "The council has decided to close
the clinic to give you time to research this blight. Just temporarily."

"What?" Dagny blurted. "We have a full schedule today, plus any emergency that might pop up."

"The clinic will be open for emergency patients, but I'm afraid your appointments and regular walk-
ins are cancelled."

"Anja, you can't really think-" Dagny began.

"I don't know what to think," Anja interrupted. "But I do know managing the food supply is the
most important thing right now—more important than routine back aches and upset tummies."

As little as Voris liked having his clinic shut down, he found himself forced to agree with her. To be
fair, his specialty was interspecies medicine, he had just never imagined that interspecies would be
defined so broadly as to include lettuce.

"We are here to serve," Voris said. "I will require additional samples of the affected produce and will
likely need other supplies."

"Anything you need, I'll see that you get it."
"Live long and prosper," Voris said, making the sign of the ta'al.

Anja nodded gravely. "Yes, may we all live long and prosper, if only for just a few more weeks."

Once the door was closed behind her, Dagny gave him a shocked and ugly look. "You're just going to let her close down the clinic?"

"What choice do I have?" he replied. "And she is correct. It is only temporary and the colony's food supply is scant enough without this additional threat."

He picked up the medical kit and headed for the stairs. Safi began crying, leading Voris to deduce Dagny was upset. Once safely inside their quarters, Voris looked to Dagny and said, "Please close the door."

She did as he asked while he opened the medical kit with the food he'd bartered and grown.

"What's going on with you?" she asked, turning back to him. "I woke up and you weren't here and-where did you get all of that?"

He was hesitant to divulge his secret garden to her. Only two nights ago, they'd treated a man who'd been shot returning from tending to his illegal garden plot. Yes, he was certain knowledge of his secret in the cemetery would only worry her. "I traded for it."

"Traded what?"

"Alcoholic beverages I received as payment for medical services."

"There's almost enough food here for us for a week."

"I know."

"But we actually have enough food-"

"We have enough food for the next four days, but we cannot be certain that will always be the case. These items will last in the preserver until we need them."

She shifted Safi on her hip and rubbed her face with her free hand. "How much longer do we have of this quarantine?"

"Tomorrow will be six months."

"What are we going to do?"

"I do not know, but right now, I plan to go downstairs to the clinic and play doctor to the colony's cabbage. Perhaps you might join me? I believe it will be educational for both of us."

Dagny rolled her eyes and gave a small laugh. "None of this is funny, you know."

"No," he agreed. "So why do you laugh?"

"To keep from crying," she responded, giving Safi a gentle hug and reaching for his hand. Voris accepted the touch of her fingers, allowing the gentle sensation of ozh'esta to trickle through his hand and forearm.

Dagny still seemed to have no concept that this was an intimate gesture performed between mates, but he saw no reason to correct the record. It brought her comfort and truth be told, it brought him
comfort too.
Stardate 2261.34

Safi expelled the nipple of the bottle from her mouth and made an ugly face. Dagny knew better than to push her to eat more. When she was done, she was done and besides, they didn't have a lot of extra formula to feed her these days. She set the bottle on the counter, stole a glance at the stew, which was really more of a soup, and tossed a dishrag over her shoulder just as Voris appeared in the doorway.

"How'd it go with the council?" she asked, lifting Safi to her shoulder to burp her.

"Anja has agreed to reopen the clinic tomorrow," he replied, bending down to remove his shoes.

"Well, that's good news." Dagny grabbed two bowls from the cupboard and began setting the dinner table in between delivering gentle pats to her baby's back.

Voris did not reply, but Dagny hadn't really expected him to. No doubt he didn't view reopening the clinic as a hard-fought victory so much as an inevitable eventuality in the wake of having done the best he could against the blight currently devastating the colony's greenhouses.

He had spent the past four days researching the strange disease, puzzled by both its hardiness and affinity for a wide range of plant species. He had enlisted Dagny and Aisla as research assistants, giving them both crash courses in mycology and plant biology in between sending them to the greenhouses for more samples and asking them to monitor time-sensitive experiments.

He had isolated a novel strain of mold quite easily and within a day, had identified several compounds that could eliminate it. Unfortunately, finding one that was toxic to the mold without also being lethal to the affected plant or the people who would eat them had proved more challenging. After testing no fewer than sixty-eight separate chemicals, he found one he believed would work and had just come from submitting his findings to the council, along with a revised plan for isolating sick plants from healthy ones and decontaminating workers prior to entering and leaving the greenhouses.

In all, Greenhouses 1 and 2 were declared a total loss and as of yesterday, the mold had been reported in Greenhouses 5 and 7. Now all anyone could do was wait and see if Voris' solution would work. He was Vulcan and so she sort of imagined he could logic the pressure away, but she didn't envy him for holding the fate of the entire colony's food supply in his hands.

"Can I assist you with anything?" he asked, entering the kitchen.

Dagny considered the tired expression in his eyes. It was a look of resigned defeat.

"I think I have it handled," she replied, adjusting her hold on Safi and wondering if it would just be easier to put her down in her crib.

"Just because you are capable of doing it on your own does not mean you could not benefit from assistance," he replied, flicking his eyebrows slightly upward.

Dagny gave him a patient smile. "The stew is done and could go on the table."

As they sat down to dinner she asked, "So did the council say anything about the requisitions we asked for?" The clinic was fast running out of many essential items that they used to easily replicate. Unfortunately, their replicator remained in the custody of the dispensary in Tunnel 3, seized as an
Voris lifted the lid from the pot and ladled some of the contents into his bowl. Dagny had tried adding a little water to increase the volume, but it was now clear that no one in their right mind would call what she was serving a stew. It almost seemed generous to call it a soup.

Voris offered her the ladle, picked up his spoon, and replied, "The council took our requisition list for review and I am to meet with them tomorrow afternoon to hear their decision. I am not optimistic that many of our requests will be honored."

"What's there for them to review?" she scowled. "They don't know anything about medicine. How are they supposed to know why we need more catheters? I doubt any of them even know what a catheter is! Or if they even care. I bet they'd care if they ever ended up in the clinic, needing-"

"We have had this discussion many times," Voris interrupted, his voice cold but patient. "I cannot speak for the council; I can only relay their decisions to you."

Her face was growing hot and the baby in her arms started to fuss. When she heaped two spoonsful of the runny stew into her bowl with more force than she intended, Safi started to cry. Dagny gritted her teeth, frustrated that she'd upset her daughter.

"Perhaps you would like me to hold her while you eat?"

"You're eating too," she mumbled, trying to be more delicate and deliberate in her motions while she bounced the baby in her lap.

They dined in silence and despite the squirming baby in her lap, it was hard to miss Voris' reluctance to eat. Maybe he didn't like it? That didn't seem likely; she'd never known him to be particularly picky. She considered each spoonful going into her mouth, and though it was painfully watered down, she thought the taste was acceptable enough.

"Is something wrong?"

His eyes darted upward. "Clarify."

"You don't seem to be eating dinner. I added a bit of water to see if I could stretch it into two meals, so I'm sorry if it's not to your liking."

"It is adequate," he responded. "Thank you for preparing it."

Dagny nodded, scraping her spoon along the edges of her bowl to collect all the stray remaining diced vegetables. Describing her meal as adequate was hardly a glowing review, but Voris had never been one for gushing over anything. "Um, you're welcome, I guess, but you're not really eating it though."

"I am simply trying to conserve what we have."

"We pick up our rations tomorrow and we still have most of what you brought home the other day."

"I have heard from a reliable source that rations will be reduced another twenty percent within the week."

"You're listening to rumors now? That can't be very logical."

"Reducing rations based on current events is the only logical option open to the council," he
countered. "And if you will remember, I just came from speaking with them."

"Even so, you still have to eat."

"I have eaten."

"Eat more," she sighed, rising from the table to place her squirming child in her crib.

"I am satisfied that my minimum nutritional needs have been met."

Dagny could hardly believe what she was hearing. She'd grown up knowing about wanting another helping at the dinner table but holding off so her younger siblings could have their fill, but even back then, she wouldn't have called a single ladle of watery stew enough food. And Voris was much larger than she was.

"I would feel better if you had another helping," she replied, sitting down on the corner of the bed and half-heartedly trying to settle Safi down.

"And I would prefer that you drop the matter."

The coolness of his tone hurt, but she wasn't willing to give up so easily. "I know you're the doctor here," she began, carefully lacing sarcasm through her words, "But that's not enough food to meet anyone's minimum nutritional requirements. I wouldn't last long eating that much, and I'm only half your size."

"Our needs are quite different. I am Vulcan and possess a more efficient digestive system than you. Additionally, you bear the physically expensive burden of producing the breastmilk that accounts for nearly three-quarters of our daughter's diet. Therefore it is only logical that you require more food than I do."

His rationale changed her view slightly, but not for the better. She suddenly felt sick at the idea that Voris was going hungry so she and Safi could eat. A profound desire to share in his sacrifice began battling a powerful need to feed her child. Tears threatened to roll down her cheeks but she managed to choke them down and tried to think happy thoughts to keep from upsetting the baby.

Several hours later she found herself tucked beneath his right arm, warm beneath the pile of blankets heaped over their bodies. For the first time since they'd begun sharing a bed, Dagny wasn't dead as soon as her head hit the pillow and Voris fell asleep first. His slow breaths trickled across the back of her neck every twenty seconds or so and the coarse hair of his legs tickled her calves beneath the sheets. How strange it was to experience him like this. Despite everything going on in the world beyond their home, she felt secure and safe but because of everything going on, she was also wide awake.

A tugging sensation rippled through her lower belly and though she tried to dismiss the thought before it could fully form, it occurred to her that she was quickly growing aroused. She felt horrified and baffled at the same time. Was he really all that appealing? From a physical standpoint, she wasn't entirely sure. Or was she? He wasn't classically handsome—not by her limited human standards anyway—but he certainly wasn't ugly. The image of his long, lanky figure and plain yet kind face swirled in her mind's eye, spurring her sudden physical interest forward. She felt so powerless to stop it, then wondered if she really wanted to. Was she really so attracted to Voris?

Of course she'd known she cared for Voris ever since his brush with Orion lungworm, loved him even. After Safi's birth, she'd sort of come to terms with it, choosing to classify it as a platonic affection between two people who were being held hostage to a wild situation. She recalled briefly
thinking she was falling in love with Voris the night she broke her arm falling down the stairs after the shock of seeing him kiss Vaksur—that memory was a punch in the gut—but she hadn’t really ever been attracted to him in any romantic sense, had she?

Voris had said they shared a bond, but a bond didn’t have to mean any kind of special attraction, so it had been easy to write off those temporary lovesick feelings as a by-product of mental transference from Safi during pregnancy. Then Safi had been born and their lives had turned upside down and she hadn’t had much time to think about it in between changing diapers and wondering how to keep them all fed and clothed and clean. For whatever stupid reason, was thinking about it now. The warm press of his body against hers made it impossible to think about anything else.

It was overwhelming because it had come out of nowhere, but in the darkness of their room with no one to see her, she smiled broadly and blushed. When had she crossed the threshold from respect and appreciation for Voris to genuine love and now attraction? There was another pull in her belly, then sheer panic.

She thought of all the steamy dreams she’d had during the early days of her pregnancy. How many times had she wondered if Voris had picked up on that during their countless mind melds? She thought of the evening they’d conceived Safi in the diplomatic guest quarters of Valder Station in orbit of Aldebaran. Few memories remained of that night—their minds had been such a mess—but her body was in rebellion and unexpectedly begging her to reenact it.

It had been almost a year ago now. She had spent a whole year without her family, but in that same time she’d been piecing together a family of her own. There was still sadness, sometimes, but there was no longer any loneliness. Dagny groaned inwardly, abruptly understanding how her mother had stayed perpetually pregnant. Her mother had loved children and had few skills other than caring for them, and her father had stayed so busy as the captain of the ship. A new baby every few years meant having something to do and later, another person for company. If Dagny didn’t work with Voris and see patients every day, she could almost see herself falling into the same trap. Her unanticipated attraction was suddenly the most ridiculous of thoughts—the last thing she and Voris needed right now was another baby. Of course, there was birth control…

She shook her head as if it would help her banish the thought. Voris stirred behind her and she wanted to kick herself for doing anything that might wake him. Why was she thinking about him this way? Voris groaned in his sleep, wrapping his arm more tightly around her body and drawing her closer to him. Her breath caught in her throat and her heart became a frantic flurry of pulses. The hungry pull in her belly returned and she spent the next hour battling the psychology of it, wondering if her sudden sexual interest in Voris was just some subconscious effort to keep them together or whether Adelaide’s theory was proving true and she had stumbled upon a good, steady partner first and become smitten later.

It was maddening, being pinned so close to his sleeping body and feeling what she now felt. Girlishness over her growing infatuation mingled with helplessness as she realized Voris probably didn’t feel the same way about her. He’d never given her any indication that he was interested in her romantically or physically. The old fears that he cared for her only because she was the mother of his child resurfaced, raw and ugly. Just as her mind began to grow tired of gnawing on this bizarre development and overanalyzing every lumpy facet of her and Voris’ relationship, he uttered a low moan and pulled her body even closer to his.

She froze, keenly aware that despite his being asleep, Voris was obviously just as aroused as she was. It wasn’t just the mildly sexual groan, she could feel the evidence of his arousal pressed tightly against the bottom of her right buttock. A shocked giggle threatened to escape from her throat as she tried to rationalize it away. She knew blood flowed much slower during sleep, a fact that made
nocturnal erections not only possible, but quite common. Facts meant so little when feelings were
involved however, and so she went back to agonizing over where things stood between them until
eventually drifting into a restless sleep.

By some miracle, Safi slept through most of the night and when her cries finally woke Dagny, she
lazily pulled herself into a sitting position and realized Voris was gone. It was probably better that
way. How was she supposed to face him now? As she rolled out of bed and moved to investigate
whether Safi was crying because she was wet or hungry or both, she caught sight of the time and
panicked. The clinic would open in half an hour. Why hadn't Voris awoken her?

She rushed through her morning routine, doubling up on activities like brushing her teeth and
combing her hair where she could. When she opened the preserver to help herself to last night's stew
for breakfast, she was shocked to discover an abundance of carrots, potatoes, and even two tiny
sweet potatoes in the bins at the bottom. It was nearly twice as much as what they'd had the night
before. Voris said he was trading for extra food, but what could he possibly have to trade that would
be worth this much?

The fact that he was dealing in the black market at all set her nerves on edge. Prior to the clinic's
closure while they dealt with the mold in the greenhouses, they were seeing at least two or three
patients every day who had been roughed up as a result of illicit trading gone wrong or revenge for
secret food caches being raided. She sighed, thankful that at least he wasn't operating one of those
surface gardens. Rather than dwell on the surprise surplus lurking in her preserver, she dumped half
of the stew into a bowl and nursed Safi while she shoveled food into her mouth.

Five minutes before the clinic was due to open, she trod downstairs with Safi in her arms to find
Voris setting up the clinic for the morning's patients. After being closed for four days they were
certainly in for a busy morning. She wanted to ask him why he'd let her sleep in and where all the
vegetables in the preserver had come from, but the moment he turned to look at her, the blood started
to pulse through her cheeks as memories of the night before clouded her thoughts. Maybe he really
was handsome.

"Good morning," he offered, his voice void of any hint that he was aware how suddenly her feelings
for him had shifted.

"Morning," she croaked, striding to the crib they kept for Safi by the computer.

He was in the middle of maintenance on one of the tricorders and didn't look up as she marched past
him. "I did not anticipate you would be in the clinic until later."

"Why?"

"You and Safi were both quite asleep when I arose this morning."

"Why didn't you wake me up when you got up?"

Voris blinked. "It was unnecessary."

"How do you figure that? The clinic's been closed for four days. We're going to be swamped."

The clinic door opened and Dagny was about to tell whoever walked through it that they weren't
open for another three minutes, but it was Aisla. "Good morning, lovies!"

Voris acknowledged Aisla then looked back at Dagny and replied, "Because Aisla, Hadrian, and the
orderlies will be here to assist me. Your face is becoming quite flushed. Are you feeling well?"
Her voice emerged as a high-pitched whisper. "Yes, w-why do you ask?"

"Voris is right—your face is turning bright red," Aisla quipped.

"I'm fine." She didn't like being on the defensive against both of them any more than she liked turning bright red whenever Voris looked at her.

Aisla wagged her eyebrows as if she didn't really believe her and seemed poised to say something, but then she looked back and forth between Dagny and Voris and a small grin crept onto her lips. Aisla knew. She had to know. To Dagny's intense relief, she said, "The line's already halfway down the tunnel. Are we almost ready to go?"

The morning went by in a blur, full of patients complaining of headaches and stomachaches and everything in between. Many of the problems they were seeing were the result of short term hunger. Almost every single patient remarked about the fact that they were skipping occasional meals—some jokingly, others far less so.

The second patient Dagny saw that morning was a young mother who explained that she split her head open when she stood up too quickly and got dizzy, then lost her balance and fell. When she related that she hadn't eaten in two days because there had been a mix-up with her ration coupons and she was portioning out all the small amounts of food she had to her two children, Dagny almost felt compelled to give her some of the potatoes and carrots from their preserver but in the end, she couldn't do it.

She hated this new mentality she was developing, of wanting to tend to her own family first. Today they had more than enough, but who knew what tomorrow would bring? When they first arrived here, it had felt like the entire colony went out of their way to welcome them with household goods and food but now most people seemed hesitant to offer so much as a smile.

Though she stopped periodically to tend to her daughter, they worked clear through lunch and just as the activity in the clinic started to subside, he donned his cloak and announced he was leaving.

"Why? Where are you going?" she blurted.

"I believe I informed you I had a meeting with the council this afternoon regarding requisitions for the clinic."

"Oh." She felt silly for acting so shocked that he would leave without warning during the middle of the day. "I suppose I'll see you when you get back."

"It would be difficult for you to see me sooner," he replied, giving her the look he reserved for her frequent lapses in logic.

It was almost as if he were teasing her, which was usually annoying, but today it was mildly cute. The look in Voris' eyes changed slightly, revealing an expression of curiosity. Before she could let him see her face go red again, she turned around and pretended to be very busy cleaning the biobeds. After he left, she turned the task over to one of the orderlies and picked up Safi.

"Don't think I don't know," fluttered a gleeful voice behind her.

"Know what, Aisla?"

"I see everything."

Dagny clenched her jaw and spun around. She tried to think up some words to deny it, but her face
glowed red hot.

"Are you and Dr. Voris… together? Officially?"

Dagny looked around at the handful of orderlies lurking around and in a low voice replied, "No. Of course not."

"But you want to be."

"I- I don't know.

"What's not to know? You two are wonderful together and you have a beautiful baby girl."

"I don't think he thinks of me like that."

"It is hard to tell with Vulcans," Aisla sighed. "Have you told him how you feel?"

"Ugh, no. What if he- what if he doesn’t…"

"Feel the same way? I bet he does. I bet he could, with a little encouragement."

"What do you mean?"

Before Aisla could answer, the clinic door burst open and peace officers carried in two badly injured Gorn men. They sprang into action and soon, more officers came and dropped off two seriously injured human men. Where had all these peace officers come from? It seemed like half the colony had been arbitrarily assigned to police the other half. Either that or they were somehow spawning out of the walls.

She asked one of the orderlies to go fetch Voris and when the girl shrugged and said she didn't know where the council was located, Dagny didn't argue. Instead, she turned to the next orderly and told him to do it. All four of her patients were in terrible shape. The Gorn had injuries consistent with a severe beating while the humans were a bloody mess of claw and bite marks. It didn't take Vulcan logic to know a terrible fight had taken place.

One of the humans died of blood loss within a minute of his arrival and despite her shock, she didn't hesitate to move on to the next patient. Safi was screaming in her crib and Dagny pleaded with the girl orderly to take care of her while she got down to the business of tending to one of the seriously wounded Gorn men. He died several minutes later, but given the extensive crush injuries to his chest, it was hardly surprising. Most of his organs appeared to be halfway crushed.

The minutes ticked by and she wondered what was taking Voris so long to get back. Had the orderly known where to find him or gotten caught up in some other mess? When fifteen minutes had passed, she barked at one of the peace officers to get on the clinic's comms and find a way to summon Voris back to the clinic. The man glared at her—why were they even still here, anyway?—but he did as she asked. The second human patient died not long after, probably from internal bleeding, and Dagny felt ready to come apart at the seams.

"Where the hell is Dr. Voris?" she shouted at the peace officer, as though it was his fault Voris had failed to materialize.

"The council's office isn't responding," he whined, shouting to be heard over Safi's cries.

She, Aisla, and Hadrian threw everything they had into keeping the second Gorn patient alive. He was breathing on his own and not as bad off as the others had been, but his condition was still quite
serious. Both forelimbs had multiple compound fractures and his tail was a crumpled mess. Dagny doubted whether Voris would be able to save the mangled limbs, but she did her best to keep the circulation flowing through them.

Just as they started to stabilize their patient, another wave of injured colonists descended upon the clinic, all of them sporting similar injuries to the first four.

"What the hell is going on out there?" Dagny yelled to no one in particular. Some of the new patients were ambulatory; some of them were peace officers.

"There was a riot outside of the old freight office," a human man said. His hand concealed the right side of his face but the blood oozing out from between his fingers told Dagny that the wound it hid was probably a serious one.

"It started in the Gorn tunnel," someone else corrected.

"I just came from Greenhouse 8," a woman insisted. "It's a madhouse there."

Soon people were arguing with each other over where the riot was and it started to become clear that at least three serious, violent incidents had broken out all over the colony in the span of less than an hour. The casualties continued to trickle in and eventually Safi stopped crying. It broke her heart that she didn't have time to properly tend to her daughter, but three people were dead and at least three more were well on their way.

They needed surgery. They needed a doctor. Where was Voris? Anxious dread welled in the pit of her stomach and every time the clinic door opened, she feared it would be another peace officer carrying Voris' dead body over his shoulders. The clinic was almost at capacity and soon she was begging the remaining orderlies to check in and triage the new patients while she, Aisla, and Hadrian worked to get everyone stabilized.

She was engrossed in her efforts to patch up a nicked brachial artery and keep a middle-aged human man from bleeding to death when she saw the clinic door spring open out of the corner of her eye and for a second, she thought her worst fear had come true. Two peace officers supported the weight of a tall man between them and from the slackness of his body and their lack of urgency, it was obvious he was dead. She fought the urge to scream, even after she realized it wasn't Voris. It was Jacob Diels.

She looked around wildly, wondering if Khel was in the clinic. No. How would she react to such a tragic loss? Probably much the same way Dagny would react, if the roles were reversed. She blinked away tears and kept working, all the while wondering what was happening to the colony outside the clinic's doors and desperately willing Voris to come back to her. Even without the riots, he should have been back by now.

When one of the peace officers asked if they could be of any assistance, she swore at him, barking at him to find the doctor. He got on the clinic's direct comms again and much to her surprise, came back to her five minutes later with a dark expression on his face.

"Ma'am, you're looking for Dr. Voris, the Vulcan guy?"

"Yes! He's a doctor and this is a clinic. We need him here!" she snarled, pointing to the badly maimed arm of her human patient. "People are dying."

"Uh, I'm- uhm, I'm afraid he's been detained."

"Detained?" she spat, her voice so ugly it almost sounded mocking. Still, she couldn't deny that her
heart was bursting with relief that he was in fact alive, even if he was in jail.

"He's been detained on suspicion of rioting, along with about thirty other people."

"You're joking. He wouldn't participate in a riot. He's Vulcan."

"Don't shoot the messenger, ma'am, I'm just relaying the information to you as I get it."

"Listen, I don't care if he shot someone in the face with a phaser—not that he would. He's the only person on this colony capable of dealing with this," waving her free hand around at the mostly full clinic.

The officer gave her an apologetic look and walked away without another word. Two hours later, all six of the critical patients had died, most of the serious patients had been stabilized, and many of the people with minor injuries had been patched up and sent on their way. All in all, nine people were dead. She couldn't blame herself for the three that had been brought in that way, but looking at the bodies of the six who had died on her watch filled her with rage and anguish she could barely define. She wasn't sure Voris could have saved all of them, but she was almost certain that he could have saved at least some.

Things were still very tense in the clinic and several of the patients were touch-and-go, but as she watched Aisla try and heal a little Suliban girl's broken leg, something inside her snapped.

"Aisla, will you watch Safi for me?" Her voice came out a garbled, shaking squeak as she stormed toward the door.

"Of course lovey, but—"

She was out the door and marching up the tunnel and never heard the rest of Aisla's objection. Was she being reckless, walking out of the clinic while they were in the middle of a crisis? Were the tunnels even safe? Was she a bad mother for leaving her baby in a crowded clinic in the care of someone who was up to her elbows in catastrophe? Was she going to make things worse by showing up at the jail and demanding to speak to someone in charge? The answers to her questions in order were probably yes, no, perhaps, and almost certainly, but she was too outraged to care.

The moment she stepped inside the jail's lobby, her stalwart fury faltered as the faces of dozens of battered and forlorn prisoners gazed back at her. There were at least fifty people crammed into five cells, each designed to hold maybe two or three inmates. She thought she would instantly find Voris, but the cells in the back were largely obscured from view and the only person her eyes would focus on was Khel. She was in the front cell and sat with her forehead pressed up against the bars, her mouth slightly open and a blank look in her tear-streaked face. She didn't even seem to notice Dagny staring at her. She'd wondered earlier if Khel knew about Jake, and the fierce grief staring back at her told her that Khel most certainly knew her husband was dead. Where was baby Christopher?

"Can I help you?" asked a man standing behind the desk, his voice full of irritation.

She finally managed to look away from Khel and saw a portly man in a uniform slightly too small glaring at her. She straightened her shirt and replied as confidently as she could manage, "I need to see Dr. Voris."

"The doctor's being held in custody until he can be questioned about his role in the riot."

Rather than fume about how Voris couldn't have possibly been involved in leading a riot, she responded, "We need him in the clinic. People are dying."
Based on another cursory glance around the jail, quite a few of the inmates needed medical care also.

"I have my orders," the guard replied. "No one goes anywhere. Not even the doctor."

"Is there someone else I can speak to?"

"Constable's busy. You can speak to me."

"I don't think I can," she replied through gritted teeth. "You don't seem to be understanding that there are people literally dying in the clinic because they need surgery and the colony's only doctor is being held in a jail cell."

"Maybe the colony's only doctor should have thought of that before he went and got involved in a riot."

Even though she didn't for a moment think Voris could have been involved in any of the riots, she placed her hands on the counter to hide the fact that they were shaking and said, "If he could just come back to the clinic and tend to some patients, I'm sure he would be willing to come back to the jail afterward. He's an honest man."

"Everyone's honest, until they aren't."

"You think he would leave and not come back? He's the doctor; everyone knows him and besides, where is he going to go?"

"Lots of people have gone missing in the past few months. I don't care what anyone out there does, I'm only responsible for what the people in here do. Your doctor is in here and he's going to stay in here until I hear otherwise."

"What is wrong with you?" Dagny cried, slamming her hands on the counter and drawing the attention of several nearby prisoners.

The man narrowed his eyes and leaned over the counter. "Do you want me to show you the inside of a jail cell too?"

"I don't know," she retorted. "Do you want to end up in the clinic one day after another riot and find out there's no doctor to help you?"

"One more word out of your mouth and you'll be spending the night here," the man replied, his voice suddenly soft and sweet. "Probably a couple of nights."

She snapped back to her senses. Getting herself arrested wasn't going to help the situation and certainly wouldn't help Safi. Aisla would take care of her, but how would she eat? The blood drained from her face. Surely she could find Constable Kilpatrick or Anja or someone else on the council and talk some sense into them.

She wanted to raise objections about the bruised and bloody people sitting in the cells too, but he had said one more word would land her in there with them, and if he wouldn't let the doctor out to save people in the clinic, she doubted whether he would let prisoners out to go to the clinic for treatment if their injuries didn't look life-threatening. Or maybe he didn't care about how serious their injuries were. Maybe he was the kind of ass who got off on power and would be perfectly content to let someone die of slowly collapsing lungs in a cell. Who could say?

She first tried the council's office but it was closed and swarming with half a dozen peace officers, probably because the door was busted in. She tried the greenhouses, dispensary, auditorium, and the
tavern, but she had no luck finding anyone who might have both the sense and power to get Voris out of jail. Eventually she trudged back to the clinic, worried she'd already been gone too long. She found the clinic less full and a bit more subdued than it had been when she left, aside from Safi, who was screaming her head off in Aisla's arms.

"Any news?" the Orion asked as Dagny collected her baby.

"Voris is in jail, along with about five percent of the colony, the officer at the desk won't listen to reason, nine people are dead, no one has enough to eat, and everyone is turning on each other," she replied, her chin starting to quiver.

Aisla rubbed her forehead and nodded. "Things have quieted down a little bit here. Jae-suk still hasn't woken up and I'm afraid Darla's brain is swelling."

"Can you find your aunt and tell her what's going on? We need to get Voris back here as soon as possible."

"Say no more," she murmured. "We'll get this taken care of."

After Aisla left, Dagny paced around the clinic and convalescent ward, checking on the patients who remained while she breastfed her hungry baby. She agreed with Aisla's assessment about Darla Green's cerebral edema and based on the biobed's readings, her brain activity was falling off fast. Even if Voris were to arrive now, she doubted there would be anything he could do to salvage whatever was left. It seemed liked the body count would soon climb to ten. Less than half an hour later, it did.

She tried to keep calm and upbeat for Safi's sake and one of the afternoon orderlies took on the task of trying to entertain her while Dagny made her frequent rounds. She sent the staff home around 1900 hours, urging them to get whatever rest they could. Two of the peace officers tried to stay behind to keep an eye on the Gorn man on account of the fact that he was being charged with murder, but he was unconscious and cuffed to one of the beds in the ward and the officers seemed utterly exhausted. It should have been harder to get them to leave, she thought, but she was glad they left without much of a fuss.

Just as she was getting ready to shut down the clinic for the night, she saw a lone figure limping toward the clinic. Voris. She jogged out to meet him, horrified once she got close enough to see his face in detail in the dimly lit tunnel. His face was a bruised mess covered in dried blood and his left eye was swollen shut. He held himself in such a way that made it hard to believe his injuries didn't extend beyond his face.

"Oh Voris," she croaked, slowing up when she reached him and trying to extend her free hand to him, as if she could somehow help.

"I am injured but I will survive," he replied, taking her hand and giving it a small squeeze before nodding in the direction of the clinic. "Let us go home."

The anger she felt earlier toward the peace officers and guard at the jail paled in comparison to what she was feeling now. Not only had they conspired to keep Voris from saving lives in the clinic, they'd denied him basic medical care. She hated herself for not speaking up on behalf of the prisoners. What kind of awful place had Bergeron colony become? What kind of awful person was she becoming for not speaking out?

"What happened? They said-"
"Not here," he interrupted, dropping her hand and focusing on two peace officers patrolling the tunnel up ahead.

She walked at his pace and once safely inside the clinic, she laid Safi down and ordered him to strip off his shirt so she could assess the extent of the damage and start putting him back together. His shoulders and torso were splattered with bruises that would only darken in the next couple of days and his left collarbone didn't match the right one. He didn't argue and Dagny didn't even bother collecting a full inventory of his injuries—she just grabbed the nearest available bone knitter, tricorder, and tissue regenerator and got to work. She rambled about the events of the past six hours—all the deaths and peace officers and when she got to the part about Jake and seeing Khel in jail, he simply took her hand and said, "I know."

She sat down on the biobed next to him and gently touched his swollen face before raising the tissue regenerator to his eye. He winced but didn't pull away. "What happened, Voris?"

"I am in pain and quite fatigued," he replied, turning toward her. His one good eye looked at her with an expression that almost seemed sad.

"I refuse to believe you were part of a riot," she said. "Just tell me you weren't part of a riot."

He gripped the hand tracing the regenerator over his face and lowered it back into her lap. "Will you allow me to meld with you?"

His request caught her completely off-guard. Voris seemed vulnerable and that frightened her. She readily agreed, not remembering her newfound attraction to him until it was too late. If he detected it at all, he didn't acknowledge it. Instead, he spent the next minute telepathically exposing her to everything that had happened to him that afternoon and evening.

He had been on his way to meet with the council when he saw several people yelling outside the freight office. Several of the colonists were demanding access to the Oglethorpe and Jake Diels obviously refused. When the peace officers arrived, a fight broke out over who actually owned the ship and whether or not the Federation had any right to keep them quarantined on this planet and soon it devolved into whether or not the council had any right to withhold the food or keep people from replanting the crops on the surface. Then people started to throw rocks. He could remember being struck in the side of the head, losing consciousness, and waking up in a fifteen square meter jail cell with eleven other people. He had tried to look after his fellow cellmates' injuries as best as he could, but without medical supplies, there was little he'd been able to do and as far as he could discern, no one was as severely injured as he was. He had sat and tried to meditate his pain away until about half an hour ago, Aisla's aunt, Anja, had stormed into the jail and ordered the officer on duty to release him.

When he was done, he loosened his grip on her face but Dagny wasn't ready to let him go. She carefully slipped her arms around his neck and pulled him into light hug, careful not to aggravate his injuries. "I was so worried about you. I don't know what I would do without you."

"You would find a way to endure," he mumbled. "Our daughter needs you."

"And I need you. Voris, I-" She was on the verge of admitting everything to him, her infatuation and feelings, but then she wondered if he already knew. If he knew and wasn't acknowledging it, then that had to mean he didn't feel the same way.

She fumbled with the tissue regenerator and resumed her efforts to restore his broken face and body. It took nearly an hour and the bruises hadn't completely disappeared and no doubt he would be sore for a few days, but he would live, just as he said he would. He and Safi retired upstairs while she did
Voris was already asleep by the time she crawled into bed and just like the night before, she was tortured to sleep by her own thoughts. Several times she heard the faint grumble of his stomach and she was sure he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast or maybe even the night before. She wanted to hate him for it and beg him to eat something, but he was only doing what pretty much everyone else on the colony was doing—going hungry so his child could eat. She loved him so hopelessly and every time she thought about him not loving her back, it crushed her a little more. Even if she could live without him, she didn't want to.

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Voris trailed his fingertips along Safi's spine, relaxing the pressure as he made his way up to her head. As he began to release his hold on her, her body slackened and her arms went outward to try and catch herself on his forearms before she fell onto the bed. She had mastered holding her head up but still lacked the strength to completely support her own weight while seated. This was not unusual however, as she was only three months and six days old as of today. At five and a half kilograms, she was still quite small compared to either a typical Vulcan or human child, but her physical and mental development appeared to be progressing normally.

Safi began to frown and tried to stuff her right fist in her mouth. She was hungry, but Dagny was not yet home and there was only one more bottle of fortified Vulcan breastmilk to last for the next two days. He glanced at the clock, curious why she hadn't returned by now.

Approximately three hours ago, Dagny had gone to visit Khel, who was handling the death of her husband very badly. Perhaps she'd lost track of time, as humans so often did. In a bid to entertain his daughter until her mother returned and could breastfeed her, Voris picked her up and carried her downstairs to the clinic where there was more room to walk with her. He was unsure what she found appealing about the practice, whether it was that the clinic was more visually stimulating than their quarters or whether she simply liked the sensation of being carried along for a walk, but it was the surest way to pacify her, aside from feeding her.

Unfortunately for Voris, after several laps, Safi had decided her father's methods were not going to be sufficient to quell her agitation on this particular occasion. She began to fidget and whine, so Voris took her into the empty convalescent ward and tried his luck there. He walked up and down the row of beds, but she refused to be calmed. Eventually he resigned himself to sitting on the edge of the bed nearest the door and positioning on his lap so he could see her face.

She looked so unhappy. He tried Dagny's method of bouncing her up and down, but ultimately, it was a novel technique that proved effective. He lifted her up high on his chest and in his efforts to adjust his hold on her, she fell forward slightly, planting her palm on his jaw. There was a sudden jolt of unintentional mental transference that he immediately blocked, but the brief experience stunned his daughter.

He pulled her away from his chest and found her mouth locked open in wonder. That expression lasted for approximately three seconds before she uttered a sound that was a perfect blend of a laugh and a scream. Her blue eyes glowed with curiosity and delight and for a moment, Voris felt tempted to forge a formal, paternal bond with his daughter.

Her smile reminded him of Dagny, but almost everything else about her reminded him of himself, from her striking black hair and medium complexion to her short nose and long face. Because Voris also strongly resembled his father, the tiny person staring back at him was almost a mirror image of her grandfather, Silek, a man who had called her a half-breed and disowned his son for wanting to
raise her. For all his logic, he was not above appreciating irony.

She was not so completely like Silek, however. Her eyes were large, round, and blue, much like Voris' mother's had been, though the pale hue could only be attributable to Dagny, who claimed to have inherited this trait from her father. Soon the appeal of trying to touch her father's face lost its luster and Safi once again began to whine and squirm.

Just as he stood up to begin walking with her again, the clinic door burst open and Mike Yates stormed inside. He and Voris exchanged looks, Voris looking at Mike with hesitant curiosity and Mike looking at Voris with mad urgency. The tunnel was relatively quiet, but he could hear screaming far off in the distance. Mike frantically motioned for Voris to approach and once he was within arm's reach, Mike clasped a hand over his wrist and began to pull him through the door.

"I cannot go with you," he replied, shaking his head and wincing from the strain Mike was putting on his left arm. He'd broken his collarbone during the riots and it was still a bit tender. He nodded to Safi and said, "I cannot leave my daughter."

Mike pointed at Safi with his thumb and nodded, a gesture which he understood to mean that wherever he wanted Voris to go, Safi should come also.

"I can get my PADD so that we can communicate more effectively," he began, but Mike pulled harder on his wrist.

Safi began to howl and Mike looked at her anxiously, then grabbed Voris' free hand and placed it on his face. Understanding it was an emergency, Voris didn't retract his arm but instead slid his fingers into position to initiate a mind meld. Several seconds later, he ripped his hand away. Mike nodded, almost as if asking Voris if he understood what he needed to do.

He understood perfectly. He wanted to collect Dagny, but there was no time and she was not in as much danger as he and Safi were. Without stopping to collect any supplies, Voris followed Mike into the tunnel and toward the stairs, then was directed into the narrow, unmapped passage where Eury had once led him to a dying Harold. Mike did not go with him, but Voris didn't need a guide any longer.

Before proceeding into the sliver in the rock, he turned to Mike. He wanted to give Safi to him and go seek out Dagny himself, but he wasn't sure he had time and the last thing his daughter needed was to be orphaned, so he carefully mouthed the words, "Dagny. Please. She is with Khel."

Mike gave a slow nod and then took off at a brisk pace, hopefully to find Dagny, Khel, and Christopher and ferry them to safety as well. Voris bounced Safi up and down, certain he had done the right thing in choosing to secure the safety of his child before the safety of his… Dagny, but gravely disliking that he had been forced to choose at all.

It was pitch black and Safi's cries echoing off the wall were disorienting. They pushed further, squeezing and ducking through narrow cracks of gallicite. More than once he slammed his head, knees, and elbows into rocky protrusions that he couldn't see, but he kept going and did his best to remain calm and try to soothe his very agitated daughter. It occurred to him that perhaps his daughter had sensed the collective terror growing in the colony and been trying to warn him before Mike had even arrived.

He spied a light up ahead and soon they arrived in an opening that was approximately two meters wide by six meters long and not quite high enough for Voris to stand without scraping the top of his head. There he found three Romulans and Kor'la, the Klingon councilwoman sitting next to a small lamp. About two minutes after he arrived, two more Klingon women appeared, along with Nhael,
her twins, and Malen and Maera.

Malen giggled with delight and hugged Voris around the legs. Nhael scolded him and urged him to keep his voice down, but Voris dropped to one knee and spoke softly to him.

"You must be quiet, do you understand?"

"Why?" Malen asked.

Voris wasn't sure how much Standard the boy had picked up in the months since he'd last seen him. Another Romulan man and Rigelian woman appeared at the entrance, leaving Voris to wonder how many more people they could safely fit in this space. He turned back to Malen and replied, "Because the Gorn have invaded Bergeron colony. They have come to kill Romulans and Klingons."

"You're not Romulan," one of Nhael's twins spat. "Why are you hiding like a dog like the rest of us?"

"Because the Gorn will see a pair of pointed ears and shoot first and probably not bother to ask questions later," Kor'la barked from behind him. "Now shut up and sit down."

"Do not speak to my son that way," Nhael snapped. "Who put you in charge?"

"This colony did, when they elected me to the council."

"And some great job you have done," Nhael spat. "Riots, no food, now Gorn swarming the planet while we hide like vermin in the tunnels. What is next?"

Kor'la stood up, a move no doubt intended to accentuate her great size and intimidate Nhael, but due to the constraints of the ceiling, she was forced to stoop. The two women seemed ready to come to blows and Safi started to whimper.

"Nhael does raise a valid point," he said, hoping to diffuse the situation. "We cannot remain in this cavern indefinitely."

"True," added the Rigelian woman. "There's no food. No toilet. We can't even stay here for more than a couple of hours."

"And somehow I doubt the Gorn plan to leave any time soon, what with all this dilithium here," said one of the Romulan men.

"You are right," Kor'la said, her voice a hostile growl. "We cannot stay here forever, but the Federation is coming."

"Like we're supposed to believe that?" the Romulan man laughed. "And what will they do? Try and reason with the Gorn and ask nicely to leave us alone?"

"I do not lie, petaQ," Kor'la sneered.

"Why would the Federation come now if they were not willing to assist us after the last attack?" Voris interjected.

"And the last attack was the Gorn, wasn't it?" Nhael added. "Not that the council would ever admit it."

"There was no need to stir anti-Gorn sentiment," Kor'la replied before turning to Voris. "And the Federation is coming now for one very simple reason—negotiations with the Laurentians have
stalled once again."

"What does that have to do with anything?" snapped another Romulan man.

"Because the Laurentians supply approximately sixty percent of the Federation's dilithium. They may not regard many of the colonists very highly, but they will protect these dilithium resources," Voris replied, not taking his eyes off Kor'la, who flashed an ugly, crooked smile. "How do you know the Federation is en route to provide assistance?"

"We received a transmission from Starbase 141 early this afternoon," she explained. "They have dispatched a Starfleet ship and it will arrive in four days."

"One ship?" the Rigelian woman scoffed.

"Four days?" one of the Romulan men added. "What if we're all dead by the time the USS Gornkiller gets here? They'll find us: they have scanners."

"The gallicite in the rock reflects communications, scanners, and transporters," Voris replied. "And we appear to be located within a deep vein of it. As long as we remain quiet and no one in the colony alerts the Gorn to our presence, there is no reason they should ever find us."

"The doctor is correct." Kor'la's lip curled as she added, "You may complain like little children if you must, but the Federation is our only hope of salvation."

"Surely one ship will be insufficient to the task of expelling the Gorn," Voris countered, echoing the Rigelian woman's sentiment.

Kor'la shrugged. "It is more than none and they have sent the Federation's own flagship."

Voris nodded to himself. He knew the ship well. His cousin, Ambassador Spock had once been its first officer and his other cousin, Commander Spock, was its current second-in-command. The USS Enterprise was coming.
Stardate 2261.40

Dagny bounced Christopher up and down and inched toward Khel. "When was the last time he ate? When was the last time you ate, for that matter?"

Khel grunted, not even bothering to lift her head from the pillow. The light was gone from her dark eyes and apparently not even her son could rouse her from her sorrow. When Dagny had arrived ten minutes earlier, she'd found Christopher shrieking in his crib. It was impossible to tell whether he was protesting his vicious rash, the result of sitting too long in a soiled diaper, hunger, or sudden maternal abandonment.

Part of Dagny wanted to slap Khel, to violently shake her and call her every foul name she knew for neglecting her son, but grief was an insidious and unpredictable thing. Her own mother had taken to her bed in the wake of Aksel and Benjamin's deaths, and had it not been for the help of her older children and some family friends, the younger ones, the twins and Henrick and Tilde, would have been little better off than poor Christopher was now.

So while Dagny was angry at Khel's grief-stricken catatonia, she also understood it in a way. She decided she was being a bit unfair. Khel didn't have a large support network to lean on, but she did have Dagny and maybe it would be better to support and encourage than judge and berate, especially considering Jake hadn't even been dead a week.

"Khel?"

No answer. Dagny sat down at the foot of Khel's bed, trying to hold her breath against the smell of stale linens and body odor.

"Khel, won't you at least just look at your son?" she pleaded.

"The sheets don't smell like him anymore," Khel mumbled, her voice splitting into a sob.

Dagny allowed the empathy to wash over her. What would it be like if she lost Voris? Would she lie in bed with crippling depression while Safi cried for her mother's attention? She had done that in the days following the loss of her family, but no one had been counting on her then. The thought of her daughter crying for her caused her breasts to begin leaking. She gritted her teeth, hating to waste a single precious drop of milk that could go toward feeding her baby.

She wasn't entirely sure if Khel had fully weaned Christopher yet, but it occurred to her that if she was going to sit here and have milk soaking her shirt, she might as well feed one baby in need if she couldn't feed her own at the moment.

"Will you let me feed him?"

Khel nodded in between her sobs. Dagny adjusted her hold on Christopher and after a brief moment of acknowledging that it would be weird to breastfeed a child that wasn't hers, she began unbuttoning her blouse with her left hand. Christopher needed no prompting. He latched on hungrily and Dagny almost dropped him in shock. His top teeth scraped the top of her nipple, which was uncomfortable but didn't hurt nearly as badly as she thought it might.

His dark eyes stared up at her as he suckled and for the first time, it occurred to her how much he looked like his father. The ears, black hair, and complexion were all Khel's, but his round face and...
wideset eyes reminded her of Jake. She stole a glance at Khel, who gazed listlessly at the wall while another woman breastfed her child.

"Khel, when was the last time you ate?"

"I'm not hungry."

"I didn't ask that."

"It doesn't matter, there's no food anyway."

Dagny bit her lip. There was some leftover stew from the night before in her preserver and she badly wanted to offer it to Khel but a small, selfish part of her wanted to keep her mouth shut.

"What day do you pick up rations?"

"Third day, fourth day? I don't know anymore."

"I know this is a very difficult time, but this little boy needs you."

"I can't look at him," Khel sighed, fresh tears brewing in her eyes. "Every time I look at him I see Jacob staring back at me."

"Jake is gone, Khel," Dagny began, fully intending to finish her sentence by saying something to the effect of "but if he were here, he would want you and Christopher to be taken care of." She never got the chance.

Khel began to sob and though she badly wanted to hug her, Christopher was too busy sucking the nipple of her right breast raw. She patted Khel's leg and once she was done feeding the baby, she set him back in his crib and managed to coax Khel to her feet just long enough to change the bedlinens. Despite numerous attempts to get her to acknowledge her son or take a shower or change her clothes, Khel refused to participate in anything that would provide her any comfort.

Dagny put the dirty sheets in the wash and told Khel she intended to go back to the clinic and get the remains last night's stew, but Khel shook her head.

"Keep your stew."

"Khel, refusing to eat isn't good for you or Christopher-"

"Will you take him?"

"What?" Dagny blurted. "You want me to take your son?"

"Not forever," Khel mumbled. "Just for now."

"I can watch him for you for a few days if that's really what you want, but-"

"It is what I want," she interrupted, closing her eyes.

"I don't want to leave you alone like this."

"I didn't ask you to come here. I only want to be left alone so I can sleep. I see him in my dreams and it's the only way I can be with him."

Dagny tried protesting several more times but it was clear Khel had made up her mind. She was still
uneasy about leaving Khel by herself, mostly out of fear that she would try to hurt herself, but she thought back to her time on Valder Station when people kept butting into her life when all she wanted was to sleep and cry. If they were anywhere but a remote colony world she would call a psychiatrist, but they had nothing like that here. She decided she would check in on her again tomorrow and possibly stop by Aisla's home on her way back to the clinic and see if she could pop in on the grieving widow every so often.

As she stepped into the side tunnel, she couldn't help notice how quiet it was. She had no idea how long she'd been at Khel's, but it couldn't be later than 2100 hours and usually there were at least some people still out and about at this time of night. She adjusted her grip on Christopher, who was fast asleep in her arms, and wondered what Voris would say about their new temporary charge.

If he protested, she would just put her foot down and that would be that. She knew him well enough to know he wouldn't just throw Christopher out into the tunnel. But did she have the courage to stand up to Voris at all? Once upon a time she did, but now all she could do in his presence was mumble, blush, and try to avoid thinking about how much she thought about him.

She was no psychologist, but she almost wondered if her sudden infatuation had anything to do with the dire situation on the colony. Maybe subconsciously she was seeking someone who could keep her and Safi safe, but hadn't Voris always made them feel safe? Would her feelings disappear once they were free from the colony and on Earth? She wasn't sure. Would Voris ever feel the same way about her? She wasn't sure. Did he even know how she felt about him? How could he not, with the way she was always so flustered around him anymore? Then again, he'd never shown any indication that he understood how humans showed affection.

The past few days he'd been asking her if she felt ill, frequently commenting on her flushed skin and absentmindedness. Yesterday she'd caught him secretly taking her vitals with a tricorder and when she confronted him about it, he indicated that aside from an increased heart rate, she appeared to be in perfect health. But how could he not know, when they'd spent so much time mind melding? Was he really that oblivious or just a master of ignoring the obvious. It was maddening and she knew if she ever wanted any peace of mind, she'd need to talk to him about it. But what if he rejected her? She didn't think she could bear it.

She looked down at the baby in her arms, half-forgetting she was holding Christopher rather than Safi. Her mind became so preoccupied with thoughts of her current awkward situation with Voris that she didn't immediately register the shouting in the distance up ahead. Just as it began to dawn on her that something was wrong, someone slid their hand across her mouth and began dragging her into a nearby residential tunnel.

Instinct made her struggle, but with a baby in her arms she was no match for the strength of this much larger person. Soon she was concealed in the shadows. Her senses were all on high alert and she was shaking. She was certain the person clamping their hand firmly around her mouth was speaking to her, but the blood pulsing through her ears was deafening. There were bursts of faint, flashing green light coming from further down in the main tunnel.

Her mind burned with possibilities. Phasers? Another riot?

"I'm gonna take me hand off yer mouth now, alrite?"

Cillian Kilpatrick? She nodded dumbly and tried to turn around.

"And ye won't scream?"

She shook her head and tried to tell him to let her go. When he did, she took a staggering breath and
asked, "What's going on?"

He looked at the baby in her arms and said, "We've gotta hide that little one o' yers. Mike went to the clinic to fetch you lot. What are ye doin' out here?"

"What are you talking about? I was visiting Khel. This is Christopher, Khel's baby."

"All the same," he said, grabbing her arm and pulling her closer to the wall, "He can't stay out in the open. They'll kill him."

"Who would want to kill a baby?"

"The Gorn. They're here."

"What?"

"The Gorn are invading the colony. Three weeks ago the Romulans attacked a Gorn starbase and I expect there're here to exact some revenge."

The blood in her veins turned to ice. "I have to get back to the clinic. I have-"

"And do what?" he snapped, grabbing her shoulder. "Fight the Gorn by yerself? I told you, Mike already went to the clinic. If Voris was there, Mike's got him safe."


"Do ye think the Gorn'll do careful DNA scans before killin' people?"

Her tongue suddenly felt too big for her mouth. A surge of adrenaline rushed through her and the remains of her afternoon meal threatened to come back up. "Safi's was with him, she-"

"Ye think they'd leave 'er there to fend for 'erself?"

The phaser fire was growing brighter and the screams were getting louder. The constable swore under his breath and looked around. "Ye can't stay out in the open like this. Ye know anyone who lives in this tunnel?"

She looked around but her mind was too full of images of her baby and Voris lying dead on the clinic floor to form a coherent answer. "I don't know. Where are we?"

She could see people running out in the main tunnel now and some people were starting to come out of their homes to see what was going on. The man at the far end was Jon Svendsen, Ann's husband. Constable Kilpatrick pulled a phaser from his hip and said, "I think they're only lookin' for Romulans. Maybe Klingons—Gorn have always hated Klingons. But I doubt they're lookin' to pick a fight with the Federation. If ye do what they tell ye and don't cause any fuss, I think ye'll be alrite. And fer heaven's sake, cover that boy's ears."

He darted into the main tunnel and was gone. Dagny turned and ran toward the Svendsen's, fighting back the urge to race back to the clinic.

"Dagny, what's going on?"

"The Gorn are invading."

"What?" cried several of his neighbors. Several others slammed their doors, apparently not requiring any further explanation.
Jon looked at her seriously and asked, "You're certain?"

"No, not really but there's phaser fire at the tunnel entrance and people are running. Cillian thinks they're looking for Romulans and Klingons and if we do as they say, they won't hurt us. I don't know." She fought back tears. "Can I come inside?"

He swore under his breath and motioned her into his home. Ann, Nicolas, Britta, Frøya, and Jørn were sitting around a tiny table sharing a meal of broth, looking utterly confused when she appeared in the doorway.

"What's going on, dad?" Britta asked.

"Dagny, is anything the matter?" Ann asked.

Before she could reply Jon said, "The Gorn are here, but Constable Kilpatrick thinks we'll be ok as long as we comply with their orders. They're not here for us."

Dagny glanced at Frøya, and Jørn, who were only twelve and ten. He was obviously trying to keep from frightening them but it wasn't working.

"Why don't you kids go upstairs and finish your supper there?" Ann said, rising to her feet.

"Why?" Frøya asked.

"Because I said so, that's why," Ann barked. Her stern tone reminded her so much of her own mother.

Britta, Frøya, and Jørn got up from the table with their soup bowls in hand without another word, but Nicolas stayed put. Ann swatted him with a dishrag and said, "I'm not in the mood for this right now."

"I'm almost eighteen!" he yelled. "I'm not a little kid anymore."

"Nicolas!" she shouted at her son.

"Let him stay," Jon said darkly. "But I would prefer if you went upstairs with the children. Dagny too."

He was staring at Christopher, seemingly unaware that the baby in her arms wasn't Safi. It was obvious what he was thinking and it made her sick to her stomach, realizing that this baby's presence was putting his entire family at risk. Maybe it wasn't fair to ask him to shelter her; she had no idea what she might do if the roles were reversed. Jon Svendsen seemed to be a mind-reader, because before anyone could utter another word he said, "You're staying, Dagny. You and the baby. Please go upstairs."

"Thank you," she whispered, wandering up a steep set of narrow stairs that led to a single room partitioned off by blankets hanging from a network of strings and cords. The setup reminded her a lot of the clinic and her own home, only the downstairs area was much smaller.

Ann's younger children were sitting in a tight circle on the floor in the corner, holding soup spoons but barely eating. When she saw Ann, she tried to offer a reassuring smile but it felt like a lie.

"How are you doing, Dagny?" Ann asked, her voice falsely cheerful.

She couldn't bring herself to say she was fine. She nodded and asked, "Do you still have any baby
clothes?"

Ann shrugged. "I think I gave most of them to you and whatever I had left, I gave to other people with babies."

"I just need a hat."

"Is she cold?" Ann asked, coming over to see the baby. "She sure has gotten big."

"He. This is Christopher, Khel's baby."

"Why do you have Khel's baby?"

"Khel hasn't been handling Jake's death very well and asked me to look after him for a few days. I was on my way back to the clinic when-" She stole a glance at the children and lowered her voice. "When I realized the tunnels weren't safe."

Ann frowned and asked in a whisper, "The Gorn are really here? Like, they're invading the colony?"

"The constable thinks they're here to take revenge on the Romulans, which is why I need a hat. I don't know if they'll have scanners, but I don't want to draw attention to the fact that Christopher is half-Romulan."

It was Ann's turn to look positively sick. "Frøya, will you get me the hat off your doll?"

"What do you want with it?"

"Dagny needs it for her baby," Ann replied through clenched teeth.

"She doesn't have any other hats?" Frøya complained. "I just finished knitting it and I've been working on it for weeks."

"Just give me the damn hat," Ann snapped.

"I'll give it back to you, I promise," Dagny added. "I just need to borrow it."

Frøya made an ugly face but got up and grabbed a puffy rag doll that had been sewn together from scraps and presented Dagny with a knitted hat with purple and orange flowers on it.

"Thank you so much," Dagny said, pulling it down over Christopher's ears and the edges of his brow. If anyone had assumed he was her daughter before, they almost certainly would now.

When Frøya sat down to finish the rest of her soup, Ann turned to Dagny and asked, "Are Voris and Safi ok?"

Her chin began to quiver and she was about to admit she didn't know when the sound of the door bursting open downstairs interrupted her. The Gorn were here.

Three hours in a dark, cramped, and hot tunnel were taking a toll on everyone. The hungry infant in his lap was nearly inconsolable and it was greatly amplifying the tension. He had attempted all pacifying techniques, but Safi had been wailing inconsolably for the past twenty minutes and the weary glares were turning into threats.

"Shut that baby up or I'll shut it up," one of the Romulan men snarled.
"I am doing my best to quiet her," Voris insisted.

"She's going to get us all killed," someone else hissed.

Voris put a forefinger in her mouth, which she attempted to suckle, but upon realizing it would not provide her with any nourishment, she spit it out and continued crying.

"Will you let me hold her?" the Rigelian woman asked. "I raised four children and I have a knack for getting them to settle down."

Voris very much disliked allowing strangers to handle his daughter, but he had no other ideas for calming her so he agreed. Unfortunately, it only made her cry harder. The touch of an experienced mother was no substitute for food or a clean sanitary garment.

"The baby needs to leave," the Romulan man said. "It is putting us all at risk."

The other residents of the tunnel were silent. He could not deny the man spoke truly, but he also could not deny he would not allow his daughter to be expelled from this place of safety. He would kill anyone who tried it, if necessary.

In truth, he had not tried every possible means of calming her. What he was on the verge of attempting was truly was a last resort—if he'd had sedatives available to him, he'd have used those first. He collected Safi from the Rigelian woman, angled his legs in front of him, and propped his daughter up on his thighs. He had hoped to let her become her own person, but it was logical, necessary even, to do this if it would preserve her life. Rather than allow himself to dwell on it further, he touched the fingertips of his hands to both sides of her face to initiate a paternal bond with her.

Despite the relative darkness, their eyes locked. Safi fell silent, evidently shocked at the intrusion into her young soul. He found her mind much as he had expected to find it: immature, unformed, and mostly fearful and agitated. Her emotions were understandable. Though she was still too young to comprehend the gravity of their current situation or that her father was not intentionally withholding food from her, he tried to express to her in the most basic and fundamental terms that he intended to keep her safe.

"Finally," someone muttered.

His focus wavered and Safi began to whimper again so he turned back to her and concentrated on making her feel secure. She didn't have fully formed thoughts, but he got the distinct impression that she wanted Dagny, not only because she associated Dagny with food, but because she felt safer in her mother's arms. The longer he kept their minds joined together, the more intense his love for her became.

Soon she was asleep and he cautiously released his hold on her face, grateful he was near the back of the tunnel and mostly in the shadows so that no one would see the faint line of tears silently falling down his face. Rather than wipe them away, he allowed himself to experience their wetness and realized for the first time just how lax his adherence to logic had become since meeting Dagny. He had a sense that he ought to be ashamed: how could he casually abandon the teachings of his father, forefather, and all predecessors dating back to Surak?

He loved his daughter. He loved Dagny. He was afraid for them both, more than he was for himself. Was it truly wrong to feel such things? He had become so many things in the past year, so perhaps it wasn't surprising that he would also become a heretic. It was almost amusing, but apparently he hadn't strayed so far from Surak's teachings that he could allow himself to laugh. What would Dagny
say, if she saw him fighting off bitter laughter?

Voris finally permitted himself to think of Dagny. Mike Yates had not returned and no one had come to give them any news of the colony’s fate. He did not know for certain, but he sensed Dagny was still alive. An idea began to form. Dagny was not his mate in any formal sense, but they had bonded often and regularly enough that it was possible a sufficient portion of his katra had transferred to her to make non-psionic telepathic contact possible between them. He had never managed to make such contact with anyone, but he had also never tried. Before he could decide against it, he closed his eyes and stretched his mind as far as it would go, probing for any shred of Dagny in the colony beyond the tunnel.

Were the Gorn really this big, or was the room just really this small? Dagny was on the verge of fainting when the Gorn soldier lifted his phaser rifle to her chest and told her, Ann, and the children to go downstairs. Unlike the Gorn who lived in Bergeron colony, he had a universal translator that made his speech smooth and flawless. Ann went down first, calling her children after her and Dagny and the Gorn soldier brought up the rear.

There were two other soldiers waiting for them on the ground floor, tossing the sparse furniture over in a way that suggested they found it more amusing than necessary.

When one of them opened the preserver and extracted an onion and sniffed it, Nicolas said, "Hey!" His protest earned him the butt of a phaser rifle in his cheek. Ann tensed and Froya yelped, but the soldier didn’t strike Nicolas again. Dagny exhaled sharply, suddenly conscious of the fact that she was dizzy and had been holding her breath ever since she’d begun walking down the stairs.

"Is there anyone here besides you and these people?" one of the soldiers asked Jon, pointing in their direction.

"No," Jon replied.

"And these people are your family?"

"Everyone who lives in this house is standing right here."

It wasn't exactly untrue. Everyone who lived in these quarters was present, plus Dagny and Christopher. It didn't hurt that Dagny had the benefit of looking an awful lot like Ann and her children.

"You are not hiding any Romulans or Klingons?"

The children were certainly old enough to keep their mouths shut, but were they brave enough? Dagny was almost certain she was going to pass out and leaned her back against the wall to steady herself. It took enormous effort not to grip Christopher too tightly and wake him.

Jon looked directly at his family and Dagny and replied coolly, "We are not hiding anyone."

Jon didn't know the baby wasn't Safi, but it still wasn't technically a lie. If any of the soldiers wanted to, they could investigate the infant in Dagny's arms more closely, but he wasn't being hidden: he was out in the open and wearing a very silly doll's hat.

"You will remain in your quarters until further notice."

"And you should teach your pups to be more respectful," added the soldier who'd struck Nicolas.
Jon gave a small nod of his head and opened the door for the Gorn soldiers to leave. The moment the door closed behind them, Ann ran to Nicolas and cupped his cheeks in her hands. "What were you thinking, talking back like that?"

"Are we just supposed to let them take our food?" Nicloas protested. "Hurt our Romulan and Klingon neighbors?"

"They had phasers, Nicolas," Jon said angrily, pointing at his son with his entire hand. "Were we supposed to fight them off with our bare hands while your sisters and brother watch? Even if we did manage to win, what would you do about the dozens of other Gorn troops currently swarming the tunnels?"

Nicolas winced as his mother touched his rapidly swelling cheek and said, "We can't just let this happen."

"No, but we can't put this family and Dagny and that baby at risk either. Use your head, son."

Nicolas looked at Dagny with a look both stern and apologetic. Suddenly everyone in the room was carefully watching her. It seemed a miracle her legs didn't buckle beneath her where she stood. When she spoke, her voice came out as a haggard whisper. "Thank you so much."

"Did you really think we were going to let anyone hurt your baby?" Jon asked.

"He isn't my baby," she said, tears finally falling down her face. "I don't know where my baby is."

Jon gave her a strange look which prompted Ann to explain. "Dagny was visiting Khel and agreed to watch Christopher for a few days."

His face went pale. "So I really am hiding a Romulan in my house?"

"I'm so sorry," she said, trying to choke back tears. "I didn't mean to endanger your family."

His expression suddenly hardened and he replied, "Vulcan, Romulan, it doesn't matter. He's a baby and no one's murdering any babies if I can do anything to stop it. He's welcome here, do you understand?"

"What about Khel though?" she gasped. "I just left her lying in bed. What will the soldiers do when they get to her house?"

She didn't know why she was asking a question she already knew the answer to. It was impossible to say if they would actually kill Khel, but there was no doubt nothing good was waiting for her in the near future if the Gorn had their way. Nicolas suddenly pulled away from his mother and headed toward the door.

Jon grabbed him angrily, but Nicolas twisted around and freed himself from his grip. "I'm not going to sit here while they kill her."

"And I'm not going to stand by while my son tries to commit suicide," Jon shouted.

Nicolas turned again and took a swing at his father, causing Ann to scream and rush to break up a fight between her husband and oldest son. Dagny was finally coming to her senses and ferried the other children back upstairs. A minute later, Ann came up the stairs wearing a blank look.

"Did Nicolas leave, mama?" Britta asked.
Though she tried mightily to fight it, Ann finally burst into tears, which caused Britta to start crying and soon there wasn't a dry eye in the house, including Christopher, who was now awake and howling along with his saviors.

An hour passed by, then two, but Nicolas didn't return. She couldn't decide whether his efforts to save Khel, a woman he barely knew, were heroic or stupid or some combination of both. When Ann and the children were asleep, she wandered downstairs with Christopher and sat down at the kitchen table with Jon.

"I want to be proud of him," Jon said, not looking over at her. He was sporting a black eye and a busted lip that had likely come from a physical altercation with his son. "But I'm angry at him for risking his life."

Dagny nodded, blinking away tears. "You risked your life and possibly your entire family's lives for Christopher. You didn't have to."

"It was the right thing to do."

"Someone going to help Khel is the right thing to do too," she insisted. "I only wish I were brave enough to have done it myself."

"Maybe that's why I'm angry: because my seventeen year-old son did what I couldn't bring myself to do."

"Your seventeen year-old son doesn't have children of his own to protect like you do."

"And like you," he added. "You're a parent too, crazy as that sounds. I look at you and still see a little girl. You're not that much older than Nicolas."

"I don't know where my little girl is," she said, her voice shaking. "But I can only hope that someone risked their life to save her and Voris, just like Nicolas is doing for Khel right now."

Jon replied with a solemn nod.

"I don't know what good it will do," she said, confessing the fears she'd kept internalized all evening long. "I mean, the constable said Mike went to the clinic to get us. I can only hope he found somewhere to hide them, but where can anyone hide for very long?"

"There are lots of pockets of gallicite all over this colony and I don't think anyone's invented a scanner that can penetrate it," Jon said thoughtfully. "I don't see why they couldn't be hiding somewhere."

"They still can't hide forever. Even if the Gorn don't find them, eventually they'll starve."

"I know things seem hopeless right now," he said, reaching for her shoulder. "But never stop hoping. We saw some tough times back on the Albret, but we're still here."

"We are," she agreed. "But a lot of other people aren't. Not everyone gets a happy ending."

Before he could argue further, they were interrupted by three bold raps on the door. They exchanged wary looks. Jon rose to his feet to answer the door and found Anja, Aisla's aunt, flanked by two enormous Gorn soldiers.

"I heard Dagny was here," Anja said calmly.
"I'm afraid you're needed at the clinic," Anja said.

"You should be flogged for abandoning your post," one of the soldiers said.

"I'm sure there's no need for that," Anja replied, her voice steady and dispassionate. "After all, was is not your soldiers who instituted the strict curfew?"

Not wanting to cause any more trouble for the Svendsens, Dagny quickly said, "I'll come to the clinic. It's my job."

She didn't want to take Christopher, but she didn't want to burden the Svendsens with caring for a Romulan fugitive, even if he was just an infant. Thankfully Jon said, "You're not thinking of taking the baby with you? It's so late."

"Yes, you should leave her here," Anja added.

"This is your child?" asked the soldier to Anja's right.

Dagny swallowed hard and nodded. She was already hiding a Romulan baby from people who wanted to kill him, so surely the penalty for lying about it couldn't be worse than the actual crime.

"Bring it with you," the soldier said, his face twisting into what she guessed was a smile. "It is not right to take a child away from its mother."

Why was he looking at her like that? This was the stuff nightmares were made out of. Jon clearly looked like he wanted to argue, but Dagny numbly stepped forward. Making too big of a fuss about it would only arouse suspicion and she unwilling to put his family in any more danger. "We'll be just fine." If only she could convince herself that was actually true.

She followed Anja out into the narrow tunnel and began what could only be described as a forced march back to the clinic. Anja snuck a glance at Christopher and Dagny could tell from the resulting expression on her face that she knew it wasn't Safi she was holding. Christopher was almost nine months old and nearly twice Safi's size, but if she knew the true identity of the baby in Dagny's arms, she didn't reveal it in her face.

As they approached the entrance to the main tunnel from the residential tunnel, Anja gripped Dagny's bicep and said, "No matter what, just look down and don't stop walking."

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. "Is something wrong?"

"No talking," one of the soldiers barked, shoving Dagny so hard she nearly face-planted on the ground.

They turned into the main tunnel, which was completely empty except for several people standing by the main stairwell. As they got closer, she began to get the impression they weren't standing at all and when they were within sight of the clinic, she understood what Anja had been warning her about. Why hadn't she listened and kept her eyes down? A horrified scream caught in her throat at the grisly display and her knees started to buckle.

Anja tightened her grip on her arm and muttered, "There's nothing we can do for them now. Keep walking."

Even if Jon wanted to lie, Dagny was sitting directly in their line of sight. Why had she brought Christopher downstairs? She wanted to kick herself for exposing him unnecessarily. She stood and looked at Anja, too afraid to make eye contact with the soldiers behind her.
The Gorn shoved her hard again and Dagny only barely managed to maintain her balance and keep hold of Christopher. Bile crawled up the back of her throat and every instinct in her begged her to run, to fight, to do anything other than allow herself to be shepherded by these monsters.

She closed her eyes and kept walking but the image was already permanently burned into her mind. She would never forget it for the rest of her life and would go on to have nightmares about it for decades. The people she had imagined were standing near the stairwell were not standing at all, but hanging. The Gorn had erected a beam across the entrance at the bottom of the stairs and from it hung the bloodied and broken bodies of three Klingons, a Romulan man she was almost certain was Rhaev, and Khel.
"We must be willing to let go of the life we planned so as to have the life that is waiting for us."

– Joseph Campbell

Stardate 2261.40

"Where were you?" asked a Gorn soldier who was sporting an eyepatch and a broken canine tooth.

"I- I was caring for a patient."

"Do you care for that pup?" He was nodding to Christopher and picking his teeth with some kind of utensil.

Dagny could barely hear him through the blood thumping through her ears. She nodded, unable to get the image of Khel out of her head and only vaguely aware that she'd managed to walk through the clinic doors and was now standing before six Gorn troopers. She looked down at Christopher and it began to dawn on her that this little boy was now an orphan. She wanted to cry.

"Speak when the marshal speaks to you," grumbled one of the soldiers who brought her in.

"Y-yes. I care for him quite a lot."

"My lieutenant is injured. I am told you are a doctor. You will fix him or I will roast that pup of yours over a spit and make you watch as we eat him."

Dagny's knees started to buckle but she managed to stumble forward and ask, "W-where is your l-lieutenant now?"

"In there," he said, pointing to the surgical suite with the stick he'd been using to pick his teeth.

She began to walk toward the suite but one of the officers behind him joked, "You can leave the pup with us."

Dagny shot a wild-eyed glance at Anja, who frowned and said, "I am sure the junior marshal is only trying to frighten you."

The soldiers howled with laughter. Dagny did her best to calmly walk through the door of the surgical suite, but she was frantic to put as much distance between herself and these killers as possible.

"Give the pup to the Orion," one of the officers called to her. "You do not need the distraction."

Dagny turned on her heel and shuffled Christopher into Anja's arms, doing her best to casually shove the hat down further over his head as she made the transfer. She began to feel dizzy but she turned and walked back toward the surgical suite and when the door shut behind her, she began to hyperventilate.

An unconscious Gorn officer in a red and yellow uniform lay sprawled over the biobed, his face ruptured and bloody. She had seen worse injuries before, but something about the sight of him sent stomach acid surging through her throat and soon she was dry heaving into the waste bin as silent tears raced down her cheeks. Someone kicked the door so hard it left a dent clear through to the other
side. Dagny jumped and fell backward.

"This door will remain open!" snarled the voice of the lone female officer.

Dagny wiped her face with her hands and hit the door release, but with the newly dented metal, it refused to fully open. When the Gorn soldier saw Dagny's face and the spittle on her shirt from attempting to vomit, she sneered and muttered, "*Weak.*"

"The door will remain open," called the marshal who had threatened to rotisserie Christopher.

"I- it's a sterile room with negative pressure ventilation," she tried to explain. It was true, but that feature was only necessary during surgery and Dagny was hardly qualified to perform neurosurgery on the unconscious lieutenant. All she could hope for now was that his injuries looked a lot worse than they actually were.

"It is to dissuade you from sabotage," replied another soldier sitting in the chair by the computer. His universal translator was slightly out of phase, giving it a weird echoing quality.

"You have already threatened to flay me alive and eat her child if she does not save your lieutenant," Anja said quietly, her eyes locked on Dagny. "I think she has enough incentive to see that he lives."

Dagny gulped. Anja was right: she'd never wanted anyone to live half so badly as she wanted the Gorn on the surgical biobed to live. She gathered any last shred of courage remaining to her and stumbled toward the supply cabinet, grabbing a tricorder, some hyposprays, bone knitter, dermal regenerator, a PADD, and random sedatives and pain killers. When she was back in the suite with the door shut behind her, she took several deep breaths, desperate to hold it together.

Voris wouldn't go to pieces like this. He would be calm and say *logical* things. He wouldn't have vomit on his shirt or shaking hands.

She approached her patient, hoping against hope that most of the damage was cosmetic. He was enormous even for a Gorn—the biobed was 2.25 meters long, but the top of his head was at the edge of the bed and his feet dangled off the other end. She stretched out her arm and activated the bed's computer, trying to keep as much distance between herself and this hulking unconscious person as possible. *121.4 kilograms?*

He had a steady pulse and his breathing was slow but steady. He was alive; that was *something*. Now what?

She thought of the time Apras brought in her flock of hellions and how Eury, a boy only a fraction of this lieutenant's size, had nearly taken Voris' arm off in a matter of seconds. What would happen to her if he woke up while she was trying to piece his face back together? In an effort to have just a tiny fraction of control over the situation, she referenced the PADD for proper sedatives and dosage for a Gorn of his weight and administered 500 mg of azaprozamine. Then she got to work.

The bones in his skull and along the right side of his face were cracked, which was impressive in a way, considering the incredible density of Gorn bones. It gave her the impression someone had smashed him across the head with a very large, blunt object. It took her nearly an hour to straighten out the mess with a bone knitter and she was just about to turn her attention to making sure he didn't have any other obvious injuries when another dent appeared in the door with an angry thump.

She jumped back, her heart slamming against her ribs.

"What is taking so long?" growled a voice on the other side.
"His injuries are pretty bad," she called back with a shaking voice that sounded more like that of a frightened child than a competent medical professional.

She heard a baby start fussing through the door and froze. Of course Christopher would choose this moment to throw a fit. The tension of the moment was just another thick weight on her already buckling shoulders. When was the last time he'd eaten? Would Anja know to check upstairs for the bottles of Vulcan formula they kept for Safi? Would the Gorn even let her go up there?

She turned back to her patient, desperate to make him well. The dermal regenerator felt heavy in her hand as she began patching up the bruised and split flesh. It was slow going thanks to his thick and scaly skin and she wondered if the Gorn had a dermal regenerator better suited to the task of caring for their own species. Only then did it occur to her how strange this whole situation was.

Why would the Gorn ask her to heal their lieutenant? They hadn't walked here from their own home planet—they must have come on a ship, and any ship that could carry the number of Gorn soldiers currently stomping around the colony would surely have some kind of medical facility. Wouldn't it?

When she was all done doing everything she could, she stood back and made another assessment. His vitals were relatively unchanged and as far as she was concerned, his face was still ugly but at least it was no longer inside out. Now if he would only wake up. She wanted to kick herself for giving him enough azaprozamine to sedate an elephant—he would be out for hours and there was no way to know if it was because of the sedative or the head injury. In any other patient she could make a preliminary determination based on brain waves, but so little was known about Gorn physiology that there was really no way to tell.

If Voris were here, he'd use it as an opportunity to collect data. All Dagny wanted to do was collect Safi and Voris and run for the nearest exit. How could she go back out there and face all those soldiers with no news to report? She felt safe in the surgical suite, but she felt incredibly uneasy too. There was a wall separating her from her captors, but they had Anja and Christopher, not to mention they had the rest of the colony by the throat.

She was working up the courage to go outside and try and spin her efforts to repair their lieutenant with some kind of professional yet upbeat update when the door was ripped halfway open.

"Are you hiding in there, little vole?" called the marshal from the other side of the room.

"No. I was just finishing up. Your lieutenant is resting."

The female soldier came in, unnecessarily body checking Dagny out of the way. Pain ripped through her shoulder as she tumbled into the wall, but she didn't dare cry out. The soldier glared at the biobed's readings, though Dagny got the impression she couldn't understand the words. She leaned over the man's body and began to sniff near his face.

The seconds stretched on clear to eternity but when she was done she stood and called to the marshal, "He is sleeping."

"Good," he called back. "Let's eat."

Dagny's heart sank all the way down to her knees. Eat what? The Gorn weren't exactly famous for their vegetarian lifestyle. When was the last time she'd heard Christopher cry? Surely they were just engaging in some light terrorism when they talked about eating him and besides, if they had killed him and were preparing to sit down to a meal of locally sourced infant, they would have realized he wasn't human and she'd have definitely heard about it. Still, when she turned the corner out of the surgical suite and found Anja sitting on a still by the door with the baby in her arms, it took
everything she had not to laugh out loud in immense relief.

Most of the Gorn were huddled around a centrally located exam table, leaning against it or casually draped into chairs. A human woman in her early twenties who looked vaguely familiar stood off to the side, looking as terrified as Dagny felt.

"Get us four more of these tomorrow morning," the marshal barked, and when the woman backed away, Dagny could see what was on the table.

There were four tunnel voles sitting atop two plates. They had been skinned and their brownish-red muscle caught the overhead light in a way that almost made them look like they were glowing. Not for the first time that evening, Dagny wanted to vomit.

"That is all," the marshal said, glowering at the girl.

She uttered a squeak and ran from the clinic. Dagny inched toward Anja, doing her best to hold a conversation about how things were holding up with only a series of facial expressions.

"Is he going to live?" asked Anja's eyes, flicking toward the door of the surgical suite.

Dagny's shoulders shrugged but her eyes looked hopeful as if to say, "I think he should be ok."

Dagny made a motion to take Christopher back, but Anja shook her head and mouthed, "He's sleeping." As bad as she felt for burdening her with possession of a half-Romulan baby, there was no sense in waking him and running the risk of him crying and drawing attention.

"Join us!" called the marshal.

Dagny turned her horrified face to the table where the six Gorn soldiers were currently devouring the tunnel voles. She was already doing everything in her power to avoid looking directly at them and to block out the sights and sounds of the Gorn's razor sharp teeth tearing the flesh away from the rodents' bodies.

They had already wasted a few precious seconds being disgusted and terrified by the proposition and Dagny could tell it wouldn't bode well for them if they had to be told a second time, so she crossed her arms tightly around her body and shuffled toward the table. The Gorn rearranged themselves and fetched two more of the chairs from the waiting area and soon Anja and Dagny were sitting across from the marshal. His one good eye was trained carefully on Dagny, which set the hairs on her arms and the back of her neck standing up. What was the point of this exercise? Wasn't it obvious she was terrified enough?

"Are you hungry?" The marshal smiled.

In truth, she was literally starving, but there was no way she would be able to stomach a meal of raw tunnel vole. "No, thank you."

His gaze slowly shifted to Anja and he asked, "Did you like our little display at the tunnel entrance?"

Anja's jaw tightened. "No."

Dagny balled her hands into fists to keep them from shaking. She wanted to be brave and defiant like Anja but she had too much to lose. Awkward silence settled over the table for several seconds until the marshal burst into raucous laughter. Meat particles flew from his mouth, some of which hit Dagny in the face.
"What can we do to change your opinion? Add a few more Klingons?"

"The Klingons here were no longer with the Empire. Neither were the Romulans with the Romulan Star Empire. These people were not your enemy. It was not necessary to kill them and maim their bodies."

The marshal's eye swiveled around the gathering as tense silence settled over the room. Suddenly he smashed his fist on the table, rattling the dishes and leaving a small dent in the stainless steel surface.

"Do you know what the Klingons have done to us? They have raided our moons for centuries, enslaving and terrorizing my people! And you say I should show them mercy! Where was mercy for the inhabitants of Zalalh?"

"I cannot speak for what happened at Zalalh," Anja said patiently. "I can only speak for these people, and I can assure you none of them were perpetrators of a massacre that happened nearly ninety standard years ago."

While Dagny was impressed with Anja's cool demeanor, surprising knowledge about Gorn-Klingon relations, and apparent utter lack of fear, she wished she would keep it to herself while Christopher was still nestled in her arms. It seemed like any moment the marshal would fly over the table and snap the Orion's neck like a twig. Instead, he leaned back in his chair, picked up the skeleton of one of the voles, and began to nibble at the bits of meat left on the carcass.

"You are not like most Orions I know," the marshal said, sizing her up as he tossed the vole skeleton over his shoulder.

"Thank you," Anja replied.

The Gorn found that hilarious and soon the clinic was echoing with the awful breathy, hissing sound of their laughter. It ceased only when another Gorn officer, dressed similarly to the marshal, entered the clinic.

They said something in a strange language that Dagny couldn't understand, which prompted the marshal with the eyepatch to disengage his universal translator and say something in return in his native language. Soon all the Gorn soldiers in the clinic stood up and filed outside.

Dagny started to give Anja a confused look, but Anja clutched her forearm and said, "Go upstairs and get me all the infant formula and food you can spare."

"Why?"

"It's for Voris and your daughter. Go."

Dagny nearly tripped several times trying to race up the stairs and when she got to the preserver, she tossed the eight bottles of replicated Vulcan breastmilk and roughly half the vegetables into a bag. When she made it back downstairs, she found Anja talking to a wide-eyed Zernon.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Anja snapped her fingers. "Get me medicine. Anything you can spare."

She was about to ask what kind of medicine, but then she decided there was no point: anything suitable for Klingons or Vulcanoid species would probably do. She suddenly thought of Safi. Even if she were being a perfect angel—which Dagny doubted, considering she probably hadn't eaten in many hours—she would eventually start crying. It almost seemed cruel to sedate a baby, but it was
better than letting the Gorn find her.

She opened up Voris' medical bag and stuffed the bag of food into it, then tossed in a hypospray and anything she thought might be useful to a population of people trying to hide directly under the nose of an invading army. Sedatives for babies and small children, milder sleep aids for adults, cough suppressants, antihistamines, medicines for diarrhea and migraines and anxiety.

"Are you taking this to Voris?" Dagny said, handing the bag to Anja, who turned around and handed it to Zernon.

"Not only Voris," she answered darkly. "We have people hidden all over the colony."

"So Voris and Safi are safe?"

"For now, yes."

"Is there any way you can smuggle Christopher into hiding too?"

Anja paused, then shook her head. "The Gorn already know he's here. If he suddenly went missing, it would only arouse suspicion."

"How much longer do you think I can keep up this charade?" Dagny rebutted. "Days? Hours? If they find him they'll kill him and probably me too. If you can get him into hiding, at least he'll be safer than he is here."

"But what will he eat?" Zernon asked, sneaking a look at Anja. "We can't hide people in the tunnels for months."

"Especially not babies," Dagny added, thinking that she and Voris were barely keeping Safi fed as it was.

"It's not going to come to that. The Federation-"

The sound of the door opening stalled Anja's sentence. Two new Gorn soldiers appeared in the clinic, smaller and younger-looking than the others had been but still definitely large and intimidating. The shorter one was average in every way, but the taller of the two was unlike any Gorn she'd ever seen, not that she'd seen all that many. His eyes were a shade of glowing scarlet and his skin was very nearly tar-black.

"What is the swine doing here?" the shorter one asked, crossing the clinic in several swooping strides and striking Zernon hard in the chest with the butt of his phaser rifle.

It seemed impossible that Zernon could take such a blow and remain largely silent, but he slumped to his knees, his eyes transfixed on the ground. In what might easily be described as the most reckless thing she'd ever done, Dagny pounced into the space between Zernon and the barrel of the soldier's rifle.

"We were told there were only two women and a pup here," said the soldier with the red eyes as he approached the scene.

"He came to get medicine," she blurted, her voice loud but oddly calm.

"This area is off-limits."

"We were not informed," said Anja.
"It should have been evident," the red-eyed Gorn growled. "Our lieutenant is here."

"It won't happen again," Dagny breathed. She was desperate to turn around and see if Zernon was ok. "He'll leave without any trouble."

His red eyes narrowed, making him look even more terrifying. Despite the slow curl of his lip, he gave a single nod of his head in the direction of the door and said, "Go."

The shorter Gorn soldier finally lowered his rifle and Dagny stepped aside to help Zernon to his feet. He was shaking, but so was she. He started for the door and Dagny slipped the medical bag into his hands as casually as she could. Unfortunately, her actions didn't go unnoticed.

"Stop!"

They both froze.

"Open the bag," the smaller trooper ordered, lifting his rifle again.

Zernon set it on the ground and pulled the top open, letting the sides slide open along the floor. The red-eyed Gorn sniffed the air as he scanned the bag's contents. He plucked one of the bottles of formula from among the vials of medications and turned to Zernon. They had been caught. They were going to kill both of them, she was certain.

"This is for you?"

Silence punctuated the tension. It took her a few seconds to register that the soldier didn't seem to know what the baby bottle was, but then it occurred to her that Gorn didn't nurse their young. Dagny would have laughed if there weren't weapons trained in her direction. Rather than let Zernon's fear betray them, Dagny quickly answered, "Yes, it is."

"This is a lot of medicine. You must be very sick."

Zernon gave a tiny nod. "Yes. But Dagny is a very good doctor. I am getting better."

"Then take your medication now," the soldier replied. "If it is really all for you."

"He can't take it all at one time," Dagny interjected. "That's meant to last him for several months."

The soldier shoved the bottle into Zernon's hand without ever taking his eyes off Dagny. "He can take some now."

Zernon swallowed hard and without a moment's hesitation, stuck the nipple of the bottle in his mouth and began to drink. It was just one more thing that would have been hilarious under any other set of circumstances.

"Zernon, remember the dosage?" she said nervously, desperate to not only stop this cruel performance but also to keep Zernon from consuming food that her baby needed.

He yanked the bottle away from his mouth and began to retch. The soldiers sneered.

"See, he's really very sick," Dagny's weak voice insisted. She gave Zernon the most apologetic look she could muster.

"Go," the red-eyed soldier said, waving his hand. "Get out of here."

Zernon tossed the bottle into the bag and scurried out of the clinic in record time. Dagny breathed a
little easier for about three seconds, until the red-eyed soldier turned to Anja and said, "You are to report to the captain."

"Did he say why?"

The red-eyed soldier took a menacing step in her direction. "You will do as you are told, Orion."

Anja gave a small smile and deferential nod before turning Christopher over to Dagny. No words passed between the two women, but it was clear Anja's eyes implored Dagny to stay calm and Dagny's gaze urged Anja to stay safe. The soft thud of the clinic door behind Anja moments later left Dagny feeling like a wild animal caught in a cage with two predators.

The Gorn soldiers took two of the seats that had been occupied by their counterparts only minutes earlier and proceeded to sit in stony silence. Was she free to go upstairs or were they expecting her to join them? Were they here to guard her, or to sit with their lieutenant and report to their superiors when he regained consciousness? If he regained consciousness.

"I'm going to go check on your officer," Dagny muttered, nodding toward the surgical suite.

The red-eyed Gorn shot her a lazy, disinterested look. "Go then."

She found the gargantuan lieutenant much the same as she'd left him, out cold on a biobed made for a much smaller patient. She paced around the suite, rubbing Christopher's back and trying to make sense of these past hours. When Christopher started to squirm in her arms, she tried to breastfeed him but he wasn't interested in feeding. Soon he was pawing at the doll's hat, his uncoordinated arms trying in vain to remove the annoying garment from his head. Less than a minute later, he was shrieking at the top of his lungs. When the red-eyed Gorn suggested she "silence her disruptive pup,"

Dagny found herself forced to sedate him to avoid drawing any more attention, though it took a lot of effort to avoid saying, "You think he's unruly? Have you ever seen the way Gorn children behave?"

Eventually she synced one of the PADDs to the surgical biobed to alert her to a change in the lieutenant's vitals and settled down in one of the beds in the convalescent ward. She set Christopher in one of the portable children's cots they kept in the closet and hung the canopy over it, which had the two-fold benefit of blocking out the light and shielding him from view, just in case the hat came off his head while he slept, not that she really expected the soldiers to check in on them.

Her new jailers could hardly be classified as friendly, but neither were they like the terrorists who had relished in intimidating her and Anja just hours earlier. As long as Dagny communicated to them what she intended to do before she did it, they mostly let her go about her business without any hassle. Still, she gave herself constant reminders to not get too comfortable around them.

Despite her deep exhaustion, sleep eluded her. How was she supposed to sleep without knowing where her baby was? How could she sleep when she needed protect Christopher and keep an eye on the Gorn soldiers posted in the clinic? How was anyone supposed to sleep knowing the bodies of their friends and neighbors were hanging in the tunnel entrance because hostile soldiers had occupied the colony?

She closed her eyes and tried breathing slowly. Voris had always made mediating look so easy. What she wouldn't give to have his warm body pressed against hers, his hands resting on her face as their minds melded, his patient voice telling her everything would be ok.

"Dagny?"

She twitched. "Voris?"
His voice sounded so far away. Her eyelids flickered. Was she awake or asleep? Perhaps she caught in that in between stage when she was conscious enough to direct her dreams but not so conscious that she could open her eyes.

"Dagny, this isn't a dream, listen to me."

She was unexpectedly standing and whirled around, wondering how she had come to be standing in a pitch black room. She spun around again and suddenly, Voris appeared out of the darkness.

"Dagny, please listen."

"Voris? Where are we?"

"In your mind."

"So this is a dream?"

"No. You are asleep but our thoughts are connected, much as they are when we meld. I have tried to reach your mind for hours, but you were too preoccupied with fear for me to be able to make contact."

"How is this possible? I thought we had to touch-"

"The details are unimportant at the moment. I need you to know-"

He winced. His eyelids fluttered and a shudder rippled through his body. He was hurting and in some vague, unspecified way, his pain was her pain.

"Voris, are you hurt?"

"No," he gasped. "Communicating this way is very taxing. I need you to know that Safi and I are safe."

"Anja told me," Dagny replied, trying to keep from crying. "Zernon was going to take you food and medicine. Oh Voris, where are you?"

"I cannot tell you that. In the event the Gorn should become suspicious that you have information about my whereabouts-" He choked and began trembling.

"I understand," she breathed, racing toward him. With every step she took, he seemed to move a step further away. "Please stay safe. Keep Safi safe."

"I will do that," he replied with a ragged voice.

"Did you get the food and medicine?"

"No."

"I don't understand! I gave it to Zernon hours ago."

"I am certain he will deliver it when it is safe for him to do so. Did you send formula for Safi?"

"Everything we had but it was only enough for maybe a day and a half," Dagny said bitterly. "I don't know how long it will be before I can get more to you. How-"

"The Federation is coming," he blurted. His breathing was becoming labored now.
"What?"

His image began to fade and Dagny broke into a sprint in his direction. He called out, "A Federation starship is due to arrive in less than seventy-two hours. If we can endure until then..."

Then he was gone and Dagny found herself lost in a swell of deep sleep.

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A hard slap startled him back into consciousness, but his mind was hazy and unfocused. Kor'la stood over him with a grim smirk on her face. He had been talking to Dagny, but apparently he'd also been talking aloud.

"Doctor's losing his mind," grumbled a Romulan man named Aen from behind Kor'la's massive frame.

Voris blinked several times and scanned along the wall of the dimly lit cave. Flames from a handful of candles cast an eerie glow on the ragged rocks of the narrow cavern. His head was pounding, but he didn't care. He'd finally managed to communicate with Dagny. He hadn't even been certain it was possible—she was human and they didn't share a formal bond.

"Are you alright, doctor?" asked the Rigelian woman.

He took a deep breath and replied, "Yes. I am quite well."

"You were talking in your sleep," Nhael sighed. As she spoke, she stroked the hair of her son Rh'aen, who was sleeping with his head in her lap. Rh'aev was curled up beside his brother. Maera and Malen had inched toward Voris in these past hours and now were tucked up against him and snoring loudly.

Voris looked down at the baby in his arms, hopeful that the food Dagny had spoken of would make its way to them soon. Placating Safi by bonding with her would only last for so long before her hunger would make her inconsolable.

Even for Voris the minutes passed by like hours when there was so much to be concerned about and so little to do. Several people tried to pass the time by telling stories, but of the two dozen people huddled in the cramped space, none turned out to have a knack for storytelling. Perhaps it had more to do with everyone being too nervous to speak above a whisper, even though they were far enough back into the cave that it would have been impossible for someone in the main tunnel to hear.

Voris' arms were growing stiff but Maera was resting her head on his lower thigh and he didn't want to disturb her, so he did his best to ignore his discomfort and focus on getting rest. He was just drifting off to sleep when he was riveted back awake by the sounds of excited chatter reverberating through the group.

Mike Yates had arrived with Zernon and immediately both men were inundated with questions about the state of the colony beyond their hiding place. Even Rh'aen and Rh'aev, who had once thrown rocks at Mr. Yates and insisted that not only was he defective but also that he should be culled from the population, seemed relieved to see the gentle transporter operator.

Mike and Zernon came bearing gifts of food, water, blankets, and two buckets designed to be turned into makeshift toilets, all of which were very welcome but grossly insufficient for the number of people needing such things. Voris was quite pleased when Zernon delivered his medical bag, which had been packed full of a wide variety of useful supplies. Most importantly, it contained the copper-fortified formula that Safi needed. Unfortunately, there were no sanitary diapers, but Zernon had packed a pile of clean rags that could be retrofitted for the purpose.
"I know things aren't going well for you right now doctor, but since I'm here and you are a doctor, could I impose on you to look at my chest?" Zernon asked.

"I am here to serve," he replied. "What's wrong with your chest?"

"One of the Gorn hit me with his phaser while I was in the clinic. I think something may be broken."

He lifted his shirt, revealing a purplish brown bruise staining the center of his chest. As Voris got to work with the bone knitter Dagny must have packed, he took the liberty of asking, "How is Dagny faring?"

"About as good as can be expected," he replied, a soft squeal punctuating his sigh. "The Gorn have her working in the clinic, looking after one of their injured officers. I don't know how it happened, but she has Khel's baby."

Voris gave a grim bow of his head. It had not escaped his notice that Khel was not among those hiding in the cavern. Zernon almost seemed to sense what he was thinking because he added in a soft, sorrowful voice, "They killed Khel. They strung her up. Her and several others. It's supposed to be some kind of warning. It's savagery is what it is."

Nhael's scream interrupted what he was about to say next. Voris looked over to see her punching Mike Yates and screaming, "He isn't dead! He isn't! You're a liar! You can't even talk!"

Cries and demands for her to quiet down began to ring out from the anxious assembly, but Nhael only grew more violent. Rh'aen stood next to his mother, shaking his head in disbelief while his brother had slumped down onto the floor and was now crying silent tears. Maera was trying to hug him, but he pushed her away.

"Nhael, please, you're frightening the children," the Rigelian woman begged.

"My children's father is dead," she wailed.

"And none of us wish to join him so kindly shut up," Aen said.

Before her hysteria could descend into violence, Voris handed Safi to Zernon, covered the distance between Nhael and himself in a matter of seconds, and subdued her with a nerve pinch. Relief oozed from each and every person present as her cries were instantly silenced and she slumped into Voris' arms.

He had never liked Nhael, but he pitied her now. He knew what it was to lose a mate. He thought of Dagny and suppressed the feeling that always resulted in the physical tightening of his chest. Even if she was not truly his mate in any formal sense, he did not ever wish to know the pain of such loss again.

Soon Mike Yates and Zernon left and the cavern was once again filled with quiet tension and the disjointed chorus of too many people trying to be perfectly silent but nevertheless perpetrating the occasional cough or sneeze or splash upon using the toilet.

He administered a sedative to Nhael to help her sleep, checked on her sons, and then made up a makeshift bed for Maera and Malen as he fed Safi one of the bottles. When Safi had eaten her fill, he changed her sanitary diaper and took up a position between Maera and Malen since Nhael wasn't currently in a position to care for them.

By now, the Enterprise would be due to arrive in approximately three days. He grimly surveyed the scene before him. Three days was nothing, but it was also a lifetime.
Dagny looked down at Christopher's round, pudgy face as he suckled on her breast. She wanted her own baby back, but after three days of caring for this little one, it almost felt as if he were as much hers as Safi was. It was early morning and she'd barely slept the night before, but sleep was an animal she wouldn't recognize even if it bit her.

She wouldn't say any of this was normal, but she was getting used to it. Three whole days had passed since the Gorn had arrived. After that first bloody night, no one else had been killed or executed, so that was something, or so she tried to tell herself. Apparently the bodies of the murdered Klingon and Romulan colonists were still hanging by the stairs, but Dagny didn't need to confirm this for herself. She hadn't left the clinic since the night she'd been summoned to treat the lieutenant with the head injury.

Fortunately, he had woken up yesterday and was no longer taking up space on the surgical biobed and now that he was gone, the Gorn apparently hadn't seen any need to post guards in the clinic. Yesterday a handful of brave colonists had visited the clinic for medical care. Each one had asked after Voris, but rather than make any statement that he was ok, she just put on her best concerned face and said she didn't know what had happened to him.

Perhaps she was being paranoid but she couldn't bring herself to trust anyone enough to tell them that he was being hidden somewhere in the colony. No food had been distributed since the Gorn's arrival and people were getting to the stage of hunger where some of them would willingly sell out their friends and neighbors if they thought it would earn them some favor with their new military government. Not that the Gorn were showing anyone much favor, from what Dagny could tell.

The dilithium mines were once again running at all hours of the day, fueled by the work of forced labor. Dagny suspected the mines were the real reason the Gorn had eased up on killing the colonists—the dilithium wasn't going to mine itself. She set Christopher down in Safi's crib and stretched her arms above her head. The clock on the wall read 0419 hours but time no longer felt relevant. She hadn't even bothered to open the clinic for its regularly scheduled hours yesterday, but no one had complained because no one had come until after 1300 hours.

She slumped onto the edge of her bed and cradled her face in her hands. Voris had said the Federation was coming and that they would be here in seventy-two hours. Hadn't it been that long already? If not, it was getting awfully close. What would happen once they got here? A negotiation? A bloody battle? Maybe it would be smart to get the clinic prepared to receive a lot of casualties, or maybe it would be pointless. She was only one person and she wasn't even a real doctor.

Her anxious self-pity was interrupted by an alarm that caused her to leap to her feet. Christopher began squalling and she moved to comfort him, but nothing she could do could silence the shrill cry of the emergency system. What fresh hell did the alarm herald? After ten minutes with no respite, she gave him a sedative and laid him back in the crib, fearful that the alarm might mean there was some kind of disaster underway and she would soon be needed downstairs. The sedative was better than trying to comfort him while she was up to her elbows in blood and guts, but still she hated herself for it.

She quickly dressed, wandered downstairs, and began prepping medical supplies until several minutes later when the clinic door sprang open. "Everyone out!" screamed a Gorn trooper.

Habit made her want to rush upstairs and grab Christopher, but instinct gave her pause. If something happened to her in the tunnel, Christopher would be left all alone in her quarters for hours or even days until someone thought to visit the clinic but then again, if something happened to her in the tunnel, having Christopher in her arms would be dangerous for both of them. She chose the least awful of the two options and shuffled into the massive crowd forming in the main tunnel without the
It was the pre-dawn hours and the stench of body odor and halitosis weighed heavy in the air. Crying children, hushed murmurs, and the random bludgeoning of colonists who inadvertently blocked the path for the Gorn soldiers to move freely only added to the dread rapidly filling the scene. Suddenly, the energy of the crowd instantly died and she could hear a voice far down at the end of the tunnel shout, "I will have silence or I will start killing you."

She bit her lip and shrank into the crowd, desperate to remain as anonymous as possible. Unfortunately, she was in the second row of people standing near a large, central clearing. She was so exposed. Large figures in the red and gold Gorn uniforms strutted in her direction. They had to be at least a hundred meters away still, but that wasn't far enough as far as she was concerned.

During another quick look around the massive crowd of colonists, she caught sight of a face she'd assumed she would never see again. Nicolas was standing with the group on the opposite side of the tunnel, clearly trying to look inconspicuous, which had the curious effect of making him more noticeable. He must have sensed her watching, because their eyes met.

"Don't," Dagny mouthed. "Whatever you're planning, don't."

"Thirty minutes ago, our captain disappeared," bellowed a Gorn soldier. Dagny turned to look at the speaker and was repulsed to see the lieutenant she'd treated several days earlier. "He evaporated into thin air, or should I say, matter stream."

Dagny tried to turn her attention back to Nicolas, but he'd already melted back into the crowd. Something bad was coming. She knew it in her bones.

"I was informed transporter capability was non-existent in these tunnels, due to the high levels of gallicite," the lieutenant continued. "It appears I have been lied to. I do not take kindly to falsehoods."

Where the hell was Nicolas?

"It has come to my attention that there are people on this colony hiding Romulans and Klingons," the lieutenant droned on. Time seemed to stop as the words flowed from his mouth. Somehow Dagny no longer cared where Ann's reckless, revolutionary teenage son had scurried off to or what he was planning to do.

"I believe I have made the penalty for hiding fugitives very clear. Do you really wish to trade your lives for these Klingon and Romulan vermin?"

Without any warning, he whipped a hand phaser off his utility belt and shot an Andorian woman in the chest, vaporizing her instantly. She had been standing only about ten people away from Dagny. This shocking act was met with a flutter of outraged cries, but no one did anything. Why wasn't anyone doing something?

"I will execute as many people as necessary until someone is wise enough to confess." He lifted his phaser again, but before he could take aim, a desperate scream rang out from further down the main tunnel.

"Silence that," he shouted to his subordinates.

"Sir, we have apprehended a Romulan," one of them cried.

Two Gorn troops, one of them the fearsome red-eyed soldier from the other night, were dragging a
woman by her hair. When they unceremoniously deposited her at the lieutenant's feet, Dagny saw that she wasn't Romulan at all.

Vaksur looked up at the enormous officer with terrified eyes. A stream of green blood oozed from her mouth and nose and she muttered incoherent strings of words that were obviously intended to be a plea for her life. And still, no one did anything.

"She's not Romulan!" shouted a panicked voice. "She's not- she's Vulcan."

The lieutenant turned and the shift in his massive bulk was just enough for Dagny to get a good look at who was speaking. Pearson. Of course. The Gorn officer backhanded Pearson across his jaw, landing his knuckles with such force that it certainly must have broken something. Pearson squealed but refused to relent.

"Please, she's innocent."

"I'm not interested in talking," the lieutenant said, training his phaser on Vaksur.

"I'll tell you where the real Romulans are!" Pearson shouted. "Just don't hurt her."

The crowd began to murmur again. Dagny's ears buzzed. A tiny voice inside her begged her to take action, to step in or step up, but before she could snap out of her shock-induced paralysis, Pearson was already saying, "There's at least twenty of them holed up in a side tunnel by the main stairs. It goes about three hundred meters back!"

The lieutenant cocked his head and stroked his chin with his free hand. "Thank you."

Then he did was he was always going to do. He turned his phaser on Vaksur and shot her in the head, scattering the molecules of her body into invisible nonsense. Pearson howled like a wounded animal and charged at him, but was felled just as quickly. He had sold out his friends, dozens of innocent people, some of them children, for a lover who had been doomed from the second the Gorn had found her.

"Investigate the tunnel he spoke of," the lieutenant said, nodding to the two soldiers who had delivered Vaksur.

An unanticipated scream ripped from Dagny's mouth, metamorphosing from anguish into a battle cry. All the rage pent up from the injustices of the past days collapsed like a supernova and without any warning, she was half-running, half flying through the air. A warm spray of hypercharged molecules tore through her body, and then she was gone.

Her last thought was of Voris and Safi. No matter how this ended, they would all be together soon.

"You've finished your evening checks?" drawled a masculine voice. It was muddled and sounded far away.

"Yes, finally." The voice that answered was soft and feminine and harbored a touch of sadness. "It's been a long time since we had this many."

"Then why don't you run along and get some supper?" the man replied.

"You have everything handled here?"

"I think I can manage."
Was this a dream? Was she even asleep? All she knew was she was terribly thirsty, laying in some kind of bed, and the weight of her own body seemed to be causing her pain. She tried to open her eyes, but they didn't cooperate. It wasn't much longer before she realized she couldn't move. She couldn't even twitch muscles in her arms or legs. Panic set in.

"Miss uh, Ske-jeg-uh-stad, is it? Hold tight."

There was a wooshing sound, followed by a rush of cold air slapping her face. She sucked in a deep breath and opened her eyes, startled to find herself tucked into a biobed and staring up at a smooth metal ceiling. The curious face of a human man with dark hair and a blue tunic came into view.

"Where- what- who- what is this?"

"I know it's easier said than done, ma'am, but try to remain calm. You've been out for quite some time and I know it must be a shock to wake up in a strange place."


He offered a patient smile. "My name is Dr. Leonard McCoy. You're aboard the starship Enterprise."
A New Home

Stardate 2261.49

"What happened to me? Where is Voris? Is Safi ok? And Christopher-" Dagny asked, choking on the dryness in her throat.

Dr. McCoy held up a hand and replied, "Everyone is ok, I promise. Dr. Voris is-"

"Here," interrupted a groggy yet all-too-familiar voice.

Dr. McCoy smiled and stepped back, then Voris' face appeared in her field of view. He looked utterly exhausted and his hair was slightly disheveled, as though he had literally just woken up.

"I suppose I'll leave you to explain things," Dr. McCoy murmured to Voris. "I'll be in my office if you need anything, doctor."

"Yes, thank you, doctor," Voris replied.

Before he could utter another word, Dagny blurted, "Why are we on a starship? Who's watching Safi? I left Christopher upstairs in the clinic and-"

"Dagny, there's something I need to tell you. You may be angry that I have made a decision that would have such a considerable impact on your future, but given the nature of all of our conversations in this matter, I felt sure you would agree with my actions."

His words sounded so ominous but she knew him well enough to know there was nothing to fear. "What are you talking about, Voris?"

"We are en route back to New Vulcan. I-"

"What? What about the quarantine?"

"If you will permit me to explain without interrupting, this may go more quickly."

Dagny shot him an icy smirk. "Just tell me Safi and Christopher are ok."

"Yes, they are both well. I was coming to that."

She relaxed, which Voris clearly took as a sign that he was free to continue. He asked, "What is the last thing you remember?"

Dagny was about to say she remembered leaving Christopher upstairs to go out into the tunnel, but she couldn't exactly recall why she had done this. "Um, I remember it felt very important to leave Christopher in our quarters. I went out into the tunnel. There was… Nicolas was there." How did she not remember?

"You recall the Gorn occupying the colony?"

"Of course," she sighed, beginning to tell him about treating the injured lieutenant while the other Gorn officers terrorized her and Anja.

He nodded patiently. "Did you ever wonder why the Gorn asked you to treat their lieutenant rather than electing to care for him themselves?"
"Yeah, actually, but at the time, I was just so afraid of them finding out Christopher was half Romulan that I didn't really think about it too much."

"It appears the Gorn who occupied the colony were part of a rogue operation which was unsanctioned by the Gorn Hegemony. They sent some troops down to the planet to secure the mines while the rest remained on board the ship. When they detected the Enterprise on long range scanners, they left orbit to engage it, leaving their occupying force on the planet."

"So we weren't so outmatched after all," she murmured. "I mean, they had phasers and training but there were only about a hundred of them. We could have fought back."

She thought of Khel and all the others who had died and wondered why the colonists hadn't tried harder to prevent any of it. Nicolas had, and probably a handful of others, but most of the colony, Dagny included, had just sat by in utter terror while the Gorn killed their friends. If Voris noticed how depressed and contemplative she was becoming, he didn't mention it.

Instead he told a fantastic tale about how the sector of space was actually controlled by an advanced race called the Metrons, which explained the lights in the sky many of the colonists had reported over the years, and how the Metrons forced the Gorn captain and the Enterprise's captain to fight to the death on Cestus III. She recalled the voice of a Gorn officer shouting "Our captain has disappeared" and she almost mentioned it to Voris, but her memory started to trickle back.

There had been hundreds of people in the tunnels and Pearson and... she swallowed hard. Vaksur had been there and she could vividly see in her mind's eye the Gorn officer drawing a phaser pistol and- she didn't want to finish the thought.

"Dagny?"

She blinked, suddenly aware Voris was staring at her. "Pearson was trying to protect Vaksur, but they killed her. They killed this other woman too. And Pearson."

Her voice cracked but before any real tears could emerge, Voris reached for her hand, gently stroking the tips of her fingers with his two forefingers. When she began to calm down she asked, "How am I still alive?"

"According to Nicolas Svendsen's account, you lunged at two of the soldiers and the officer prepared to shoot you with his phaser, but Nicolas tackled the officer, distorting his aim and resulting in him shooting his own soldier in the back. You were still in the direct line-of-sight of the phaser beam, but the soldier's body absorbed most of the energy. Still, you sustained sufficient damage to stop your heart and disrupt your neural pathways. Fortunately, the Enterprise had just entered orbit and was able to bring you aboard for treatment in time to save your life. I am very grateful to Dr. McCoy."

"I got indirectly hit by a phaser and survived?"

"Yes. It is quite remarkable. I am curious why you thought it was wise to enter into a physical altercation."

Dagny racked her piecemeal memory, remembering snippets of Vaksur and Pearson and the soldiers. "I think Pearson told them where to find you. I think they were on their way to kill you and Safi."

"And you imagined you, an unarmed human woman, stood a chance against three armed Gorn soldiers?"

"No. I mean, I don't really know. I can't remember what I was thinking at the time. I was probably thinking I couldn't just stand by and watch them kill my baby daughter, my- my family."
"It was a foolish thing to have done."

"You are the only reason I'm alive right now," she snapped. "I owe you so much. I get through each day because of you and Safi. Maybe you think that's foolish."

His face relaxed slightly. "I did not mean to upset you."

"You didn't," she insisted, trying to calm down. "This whole situation has been incredibly upsetting. People died for no reason and I feel like we all just let it happen. Even before the Gorn showed up, people were turning on each other and we all just stood by and watched. Why?"

Voris looked away. "I cannot answer your query with any certainty, but it seems to me that people can grow accustomed to hatred and violence when it is introduced slowly and over time. We find ways to rationalize it out of a need to protect our families and ourselves, until the day that it comes for us."

A silent tear dripped down Dagny's cheek. "I don't know what to say."

"I do not know that there is anything that can be said."

"What happened to the rest of the colony? What about Christopher? Are Zernon and Aisla-"

"The Federation was able to regain control of the colony quite easily. Zernon and Aisla survived, as did the Svendsens and Christopher and many others. I believe the confirmed death toll following the Gorn invasion was nineteen, though many snuck away from the colony or remained in hiding, so more precise figures have yet to be tallied. However, the vast majority survived."

"What will happen to the colony now?"

"The Enterprise remained in orbit for five days-"

"Five days?" she cried. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"Six days."

Dagny sucked in air through her teeth. "How have you been feeding Safi?"

"With replicated formula from the ship. As I was saying, the Enterprise remained in orbit for five days, offering medical assistance to anyone with severe injuries. The ship is taking a number of individuals back to Federation space for treatment or relocation, but the majority of colonists chose to remain. It seems the Federation has seen the value of maintaining a presence on Cestus III due to the dilithium deposits and intends to re-charter the original colony. It appears likely that many of the non-Federation citizens will be permitted to stay and may be eligible to apply for Federation citizenship after a number of years."

"What about the quarantine?"

"Vaccination programs on New Vulcan and Rigel are ahead of schedule and each of the colonists electing to leave were carefully screened. Dr. McCoy personally forwarded our health certificates to the Federation Health Ministry and we will be permitted to return to New Vulcan."

"So we're really leaving?"

"Yes. As I said, based on our prior conversations, I took the liberty-"

She held up a hand tried to prop herself up on an elbow. "No, you were right to get us out of there. I
want Safi growing up somewhere safe. I just- I thought we were going to Earth."

"We are, eventually. As civilians, we were fortunate to gain passage on the Enterprise. The ship's next destination is New Vulcan and from there, we will be responsible for our travel to Earth."

"Oh." She wasn't sure what else to say. It was such wonderful news at the end of a very dark tunnel. They were safe. They were going to Earth, just as they'd planned. It almost seemed too perfect and yet, she hadn't gotten to say goodbye to anyone. She could probably send a message to Zernon, thanking him for his incredible bravery in smuggling food to her baby, and to Anja, thanking her for her cool head and taking care of Christopher while she was in the clinic. She gulped.

"You said Christopher is safe, but what happened to him? Who's going to take care of him? Khel's dead and Jake-"

"There is another matter I need to discuss with you," Voris said, his tone growing somewhat hesitant.

"What's wrong?"

"Christopher Diels is an orphan, yet he has relatives residing on Earth. Jacob Diels' parents are still alive, as is his sister. Federation authorities have reached out to them, yet it seems Jacob Diels was quite estranged from his family. His parents have no interest in raising a half-Romulan grandson and his sister maintains she is quite unable to care for another child, as she already has two children of her own. They have waived any right to custody of him."

"So what happens now?" she asked, finally pulling herself into a seated position. "Who's going to raise him?"

"That is what I must discuss with you. He was brought on board the Enterprise under the assumption his human family would claim him, but now that they have refused-"

"Can't we adopt him?" Dagny blurted. "I know we already have one baby and I know this must sound really ridiculous, but I cared for him for three days after his mother died. I fed him. I love him. He's so close in age to Safi and they could grow up together."

Voris reached for her hand again. "As Christopher is half-human, Terran Children's Services have been granted temporary custody. I have already submitted a letter of interest to the appropriate department and they responded several hours ago explaining that in light of our prior relationship to him and his parents, we are eligible to adopt him, following the necessary interviews and home studies."

Dagny covered her mouth to hide her laugh. "So we can keep him?"

"Provided we are deemed suitable parents, yes."

Though she still felt weak and a bit unsteady, Dagny threw her arms around Voris' neck and pulled him into an awkward hug. "Thank you so much! I can't believe we have two kids now."

Voris gently pulled away. "There is a third matter I must discuss with you."

His face held the ever-neutral, classically Vulcan expression, but Dagny knew him well enough to know he was uneasy about something. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"I am certain you remember Rhaal's children, Maera and Malen."

"Of course I do," she responded.
"Their uncle, Rhaev, was killed during the Gorn occupation and their aunt has no interest in caring for them. They now find themselves without guardians."

"But what about Suna? She loves those kids."

"The situation with Sunayana Dalal is continually evolving. She had several Federation warrants issued for her arrest."

"For what?"

"Violating the Neutral Zone, piracy, smuggling, and trafficking of illegal weapons, to name the most serious offenses."

Dagny thought of all the wild tales Suna had told her during her recovery. A small part of her assumed they were full of half-truths and embellishments, but in truth Suna had openly admitted to doing all those things and more.

"What's going to happen to her?"

"She surrendered herself to security personnel aboard the Enterprise. From what I understand she is willing to allocute to her crimes for a reduced sentence but she will still serve at least fifteen years in prison."

"Maera and Malen will pretty much be grown up by then."

"Yes, I know."

"Poor Suna! Poor Maera and Malen! So what happens now?"

"I wish to ask you-"

Dagny raised a shaking hand to cut him off. "Are you about to ask me if we can keep them?"

Voris bowed his head, took a step backward, and tapped a button on the wall. A privacy divider slid back into the wall, revealing two small cots and two cribs crammed in the space next to an empty biobed. Apparently Voris had been sleeping in the clinic.

A crumpled blanket on the cot closest to Dagny's biobed gave her the impression Voris had been sleeping in it before she'd regained consciousness. Safi and Christopher were sound asleep in the two portable cribs on one side of Voris' cot, and on the other, Maera and Malen were stretched out on opposite ends. Malen was sleeping on his stomach and drooling onto his arm while his older sister was sleeping flat on her back and snoring up a storm.

"Oh my stars," she breathed. "We have four kids."

"The adoption process has not yet begun so it is premature to say-"

"We have four kids," she repeated, smiling a little.

"I am aware you did not consent to be a carer for four children. I know you desire to attend medical school and I."

"We'll figure it out, Voris," she interrupted, pulling him into a second, more tender hug. "You're amazing. Thank you."
Voris walked slowly behind Dagny, carrying Christopher tucked into the corner of his left arm while he held Malen's hand with his right hand. Dagny was cradling Safi and listening intently as Maera regaled her with tales of hiding in the caverns. Maera's Standard had improved considerably, but she still mixed many Romulan words into her speech which often made her difficult to understand.

Dagny had spent the previous night in sickbay and Voris and the children had stayed with her. Dr. McCoy had been extremely accommodating, but it would be eleven more days before they reached New Vulcan and now that Dagny had been released, there was no need to continue to occupy so much space in sickbay.

Dagny was much improved, but she was not entirely recovered. She still suffered some weakness and hand tremors, but based on her neural scans, both he and Dr. McCoy agreed her symptoms were almost certainly temporary inconveniences.

They stopped outside of Cabin 19 on Deck 6, which bore a placard that read *Uhura, Nyota, Communications Chief*. The ship's senior communications officer had been kind enough to offer her personal quarters and though he had never met this woman, he hoped he would have the opportunity in the coming days to thank her for her hospitality.

The quarters turned out to be approximately the size of their quarters on Bergeron colony, which was really quite spacious, given the size of the ship. There was a small kitchen and dining area and two small bedrooms off the main room. He and Dagny spent the rest of the day entertaining the children, practicing Standard with Maera and Malen and holding Christopher's arms as his legs toddled along beneath him in preparation to take his first independent steps in the coming weeks. Dagny had learned that lightly pinching the tip of Safi's nose would induce her to giggle and for many hours the quarters were filled with the sounds of happy babies and exuberant young children.

He made a hearty end meal from the replicator and at 1830 hours, the family of six sat down to a meal of vegetable spaghetti. It very quickly descended into chaos—Christopher was eating solid foods but lacked the dexterity to wield utensils. Voris fed him at first but Dagny insisted he should be allowed the opportunity to explore feeding himself and minced some of the noodles for him and placed them in a bowl. Baby Christopher ended up wearing more food than he ate.

Now that she was back with her mother, Safi had no interest in bottle feeding and any time Dagny tried to put her down so she could eat, Safi would scream. Maera and Malen had made some improvements in their table manners but on this particular evening, the pair had decided it was more fun to flick vegetables at each other rather than eat them.

After dinner they spent two hours preparing four young children for bed, which was made easier by an assembly line in which Voris helped each child undress and then passed them to Dagny, who hosed each one off in the sonic shower and then helped them into their night clothes. Many members of the nursing staff had assisted him with caring for his makeshift brood Dagny had been in sickbay, and while he was grateful to them, he was even more grateful to Dagny now. The ease and confidence with which she shepherded four children was truly remarkable. He felt very fortunate indeed.

When the last baby was rocked to sleep and the last story was read, he and Dagny shut out the lights of the front bedroom and wandered into the main living area.

"I know you must be very tired," he said. He nodded in the direction of the back bedroom and said, "Perhaps you should rest."

"I am tired but I'm going to spend the next ten years being exhausted," she replied with a smug smile, dropping down onto the sofa. "I might as well get used to it."
"I do not believe I expressly stated this before, but I wish to thank you for assisting me in caring for these children."

"Voris, they're our children. All four of them. If you hadn't insisted on adopting them, I would have. I'm pretty sure we're in this together. You, me, them, all of us. It's going to be hectic for a while, but we'll fall into a routine."

He took a seat on the opposite end of the couch, sitting upright and placing his hands on his knees, a formal position that stood in stark contrast to Dagny's weary and casual slouch. He gazed at her, reviewing all of the thoughts he'd thought while hiding in the cavern and while keeping vigil by her bedside in sickbay. These were the thoughts he had kept concealed even from himself for so many months, but now that circumstances had changed, perhaps they were worth speaking aloud.

"There is something I wish to discuss with you," he began.

"Please tell me you don't have a set of orphaned triplets stashed away somewhere that you were just waiting for the right time to tell me about," she grinned, propping her head up in her hand. "I adore the ones we have but I don't know if we could handle any more kids right now."

"No," he replied, unsure whether she was joking. "Dagny, I-"

Before he could say another word, the buzzer rang. Dagny sat up and made a face. "Wonder who that is."

When Voris engaged the door release, he found Dr. McCoy standing in the corridor. "Good evening, folks. Sorry to bother you this late. How are you doing, Mrs. Voris?"

Voris and Dagny exchanged looks. "Miss Skjeggestad and I are not married."

The doctor's face burned a bright shade of red and he began rubbing the back of his neck with his left hand. Dagny offered him a wan smile and added, "You're not the first person to make that mistake though. It's alright, really. And I'm doing fine. Thank you for asking."

"I actually came to get Dr. Voris' advice about a patient of mine," he said, turning back to Voris.

"I was about to go take a shower anyway," Dagny replied, rising to her feet. "It's been a long time since I've had a proper sonic shower."

She wandered into the back bedroom and Voris invited Dr. McCoy across the threshold. His eyes darted over the décor and he muttered, "Nice quarters she has. Too bad she never sleeps here."

Rather than address the man's cryptic remark, Voris asked, "What can I assist you with, doctor?"

"It's about a Vulcun patient of mine. Well, half-Vulcan anyway."

"I presume you refer to the ship's first officer, Commander Spock."

"Why, yes. Do you know him?"

"He is my cousin."

The whites of the doctor's eyes grew visible. "You're joking."

"I'm not in the habit of telling jokes. His father, Sarek, is brother to my father, Silek."

"He never mentioned it."
"Perhaps it he never felt it necessary to mention it."

Dr. McCoy mouthed a few silent syllables and then laughed to himself as he shook his head. "That green-blooded-

Voris cocked an eyebrow. Whatever Dr. McCoy had planned to say next, he clearly decided it was better left unsaid. He held up the PADD in his hands and presented it to Voris.

"I took these readings during his annual physical three days ago. But even before that, he's been-look, I know you Vulcans pride yourselves on logic, but he's been almost...agitated. I'd go as far as to say nervous, even. When I saw Nyota this morning, she mentioned he hasn't eaten in days. The thing is, the biocomps don't seem to think anything is out of the ordinary. I'm stumped."

Voris didn't need to study the medical charts in any depth—he had a strong suspicion he already knew what was wrong. He disliked that his cousin's very private matter was now a source of discussion between two physicians, rather than between Spock and his mate, whoever that was. Before Voris could find the most suitable words to insist that Dr. McCoy should drop this matter, he was already talking again, this time waving his hands in a dramatic gesture as he explained how Spock demanded they stop off at New Vulcan on their way to Altair VI.

"New Vulcan isn't even on the way to Altair VI! It's like he's lost his Vulcan mind!"

Voris capitalized on the brief pause in the doctor's rant to say, "He has not lost his mind, I assure you. At least not in a way that you would understand."

"Then what's going on?"

"It is a private matter."

The doctor's eye bulged. "What do you mean, a private matter?"

"The Nyota person you spoke of earlier, what is this person to my cousin?"

He seemed irritated by the question. "Well, I guess they would both probably say they don't like labels, but if I had to characterize her as anything, I'd say she's Spock's girlfriend."

"These are her quarters," Voris added, looking around. "Where is she staying while we are occupying them?"

"In Mr. Spock's quarters, I think."

Voris handed the PADD back to Dr. McCoy. "I think you will find that Commander Spock's condition will improve without any medical intervention."

"How can you be so sure? You haven't even told me what's going on."

Voris crossed his arms. "There are many medical mysteries that defy explanation, doctor. But you would be wise to trust me on this."

His face contorted into a bizarre expression, something stuck halfway between a scowl and a smile. "You're a lot like your cousin, you know that?"

"Am I? I have never formally met him."

A streak of incredulity tore across the doctor's face. He opened his mouth, then shut it again just as quickly. "I'd like to say you've been a big help, doctor. If you're sure he's going to be ok-"
"I am quite sure," Voris interrupted.

Dr. McCoy shook his head and moved toward the door. "It's been a pleasure talking to you. I'll let you get back to your quiet evening."

"I wish to express my gratitude," Voris said when they reached the door. "Your quick actions and expertise saved the life of someone quite dear to me. You are owed a great deal of thanks."

He slapped the tops of his thighs and laughed aloud. "Maybe you're not like your cousin after all. And I would say 'you're welcome,' but it's my job. I'm glad your- I'm glad she's alright. And sorry if I made any assumptions earlier, it just seemed."

"You have not caused any offense. Good night, doctor. I'm sure we shall see each other again soon."

Dr. McCoy raised his right hand to form a bad impression of the ta'al. Voris appreciated his attempt and returned the gesture, then the two men parted ways. Voris lingered in the main room for a while, wondering if Dagny had gone to bed and whether he should disturb her. They had shared a bed together on Bergeron colony, but it seemed wrong to assume he was welcome in her bed here just because he had been on the colony.

He knocked gently on the door and when he didn't get an answer, he supposed she was either still in the shower or had already fallen asleep. He snuck into the room to collect his nightclothes, but just as he began rooting through his bags, the lavatory door opened and she emerged wearing only a towel.

"Oh," she yelped, blushing and pulling the towel down to cover more of her exposed legs. "Did Dr. McCoy leave already?"

"Yes," Voris replied, turning his back to her to give her some privacy. "I am sorry if I have disturbed you."

"No," she said with a small chuckle. "I don't know why I'm so shy all of a sudden. It's not like you haven't seen everything I have to offer before."

"While you have permitted me to view you in a state of undress in the past, that does not mean you are permitting it in the present."

"I suppose that's true," she said softly.

He walked toward the door to give her some privacy and was halfway there when she said, "Voris?"

"Yes?"

"Does it- does it ever bother you that people think we're married?"

He froze. She was broaching the very subject he had wished to discuss with her earlier. "What would be the purpose in possessing feelings about the illogical expectations of others?"

"Are their expectations really that illogical though? I mean, we have a child together. Now we're going to raise three more kids."

He glanced over his shoulder, unsure whether it would be ruder to converse with her while facing the wall or to look at her when she was wearing nothing but a towel. He was also uncertain what she intended to imply and rather than make an illogical assumption, he decided it would be wise to allow her to continue speaking.
"I guess what I'm saying… I don't know. I don't really know what I'm saying."

"Perhaps you would like to get dressed and we could discuss it."

"Do you think you'll ever get married again?" she interrupted.

Voris swallowed and shifted his weight to the other foot. Not so very long ago, he had been preparing to take a Vulcan woman he barely knew as his bondmate.

"My biology is such that I cannot remain a bachelor for the remainder of my life."

"What if- did you ever-"

Her emotions were descending into chaos. So were his own. With each passing moment it was becoming more difficult to maintain his composure. He finally turned to face her and discovered her cheeks were a vivid scarlet color and her eyes were beginning to water.

"Do you think you might ever want to marry me someday?" she finally asked, her voice hardly rising above a whisper.

"I would marry you now if you would have me."

Her mouth fell open and her eyes flicked down to the floor. He could not sense whether she was shocked or confused by his admission. Fearing that he had misjudged her intentions, he felt compelled to explain his logic. "It was my first thought when I learned you were pregnant."

Her eyebrows furrowed. "But you didn't even know me then."

"No," he agreed. "But we shared a lingering bond and given the circumstances, I felt compelled to take you as my mate out of duty."

She bit her lip and shrunk nearer to the far wall. "Duty? Like, you didn't want to but you felt like you should?"

"Regardless of what I wanted at the time, you initially made it very clear you didn't want anything to do with me. You agreed to let me participate in raising our daughter as a compromise."

"I- it wasn't- I didn't want to marry you then because I didn't know you," she said, pulling the towel more tightly around her body. "And I definitely didn't want to marry you because it was the 'right thing to do' or whatever. It seemed crazy enough that I was agreeing to move in with you. But I didn't want to be petty and tell you that you weren't allowed to know your own child."

"You imply your opinion has changed."

"I don't- I don't know," she said, her voice cracking. "I've gotten to know you. I know we've had our differences and our arguments, but when you were in those caves with Safi, I didn't-" She was openly crying now, but he had the sense it would be better to approach her than to maintain his distance. When he was nearly a meter away from her she asked, "Is there ever a chance you'll want to be with me? Not out of duty, but because you want to?"

"I have wanted to be your mate for quite some time, not only out of duty, but also out of profound admiration and affection I have developed for you over the course of the past year."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"When we relocated to Cestus III, I became your de facto supervisor and the power dynamic of our
relationship became even more skewed than it had been when you were simply financially dependent upon me. It would have been extremely inappropriate to encourage you to become my mate under those circumstances. When I considered that in conjunction with your earlier attitudes toward me on Aldebaran, I decided the only proper thing to do was to allow you, when or if you ever wanted to, to be the one to broach the subject of matrimony. I am aware that I lack many things a young human female would prize in a mate, a sense of humor, for example."

"You're wrong," she interrupted, chuckling to herself through her tears. "You actually do have a sense of humor, even if you don't mean to."

"You fail to discern the larger principle," he countered.

"What's that? You think you're not enough for me?"

"No, merely that you are still quite young and may not yet know your own mind."

"I know I'm young, but I've seen enough of life to know I want you for who you are, Voris. I love you. You saved my life. You were there for me when I had nothing. You delivered our baby girl. You changed her diapers and went hungry so she could eat and now you're willing to take on three more little ones that need a home. If I knew nothing else about you, that would be enough. I don't care if you aren't romantic or if you don't laugh at my silly jokes or if we'll only have sex every seven years, I just want you."

Voris took a step in her direction and she did the same, bringing them both to within an arm's length of each other. The top row of her teeth sawed into her bottom lip. She was terrified and brimming with anticipation. He extended his left hand toward her and was pleased when she adjusted her grip on her towel and offered her own left hand. The warm sensation of ozh'esta flowed up his arm and it was clear she was deriving pleasure from it also.

"What is this feeling?" she mumbled, biting back a smile.

"It is ozh'esta," he explained.

"I don't know what that means."

"It has no direct translation, but the closest approximation is a finger embrace. It is a practice generally only performed between mates."

"You've done this before though," she said, finally looking him in the eye.

"Yes, in situations where you had become hysterical and it was necessary to calm you."

Not for the first time that evening, her complexion reddened. "It feels really nice."

He nodded. "I am curious about one thing."

"What's that?"

"A moment ago, you expressed the idea that we could only mate every seven years."

"Isn't that how your pon farr works?"

"No. While the hormonal fluctuations induced by pon farr make it necessary for me to mate every seven years, like all healthy, sexually mature Vulcan adults, I am capable of mating whenever I chose, provided I have a mate who also consents."
"Oh." Dagny's face flushed an even deeper shade of red.

"It was not my intention to suggest we ought to mate more frequently," he quickly added. "If you prefer we only mate during pon farr-"

His sentence was cut short by the press of her mouth on his. The kiss remained soft and chase for a number of seconds, then his tongue began to lightly trace along her bottom lip. Their kiss became more passionate and their ozh'esta grew more frenzied and soon his free right hand reached for her face to meld their minds together.

He was so eager to allow his mind to melt into hers that the world beyond her momentarily ceased to exist. Her thoughts became wild and consumed with physical desire and it was only when he released their finger embrace to run his free hand along her waist that he discovered her right hand had let go of the towel wrapped around her body and she was now completely naked.

She shivered in anticipation but he detected sufficient hesitation in her to prevent him from exploring her body any further. He dropped his right hand, broke their kiss, and began to pull his left hand away from her face to terminate their meld, but she took a half step forward to physically maintain the intimate link between them.

"Please don't stop," she pleaded, communicating via their bond.

"You seem uncertain," he explained, raising his right hand to her face to enhance their connection.

"I'm not uncertain about you. It's just that I've only ever been with two people. One of them was you and I honestly don't remember much of it. I don't want to disappoint you."

"I have also only coupled with two people, one of them being you," he explained, tracing his thumbs across her cheeks in an effort to get her to open her eyes. "You honor me by offering to share your body with me."

She shivered again and took a slow breath. "My body isn't- it's not- it's not like it used to be."

"Look at me," he urged.

She finally complied and for a brief instant, he felt lost in the light blue eyes gazing back at him.

"Your body is the greatest thing you'll ever possess," he insisted. "It is the physical form that is you. You are alive because of this body. It has given life to our daughter. It isn't rendered perfect by a lack of scars or wrinkles but because it encases your heart."

She rested her forehead against his chest and sighed. She said aloud, "Apparently I was wrong about you not being romantic."

"Was that romantic?" he asked, craning his neck to attempt to look her in the eyes. "I admit I am a poor judge."

A small laugh burst from her lips and they were quickly locked in another kiss. When she began to fumble at the buttons of his shirt, he gently pushed her hands away, not because he intended to keep his shirt on but because he thought himself capable of unbuttoning them more quickly. Rather than remain idle, her fingers traveled to the fastener on his trousers and it wasn't long before they were both naked and tumbling onto the bed.

The press of her warm belly and thighs stirred a hunger within him that he hadn't consciously been aware of until now. Her fingers played along his chest and down his back and it took incredible
restraint to keep himself from beginning the act of mating until she was physically ready. As the night wore on, the hot pulse of her body proved to be a formidable match for his logical mind but the fear of rushing through the arousal process and injuring her was sufficient to keep him in check.

It was only when her soft moans eventually shifted into garbled and frustrated cries that he yielded to the inevitable. The sensation was an initial disappointment, only because he was as close to her as he could possibly be and still somehow it wasn't enough. He wanted to be nearer to her. He wanted more of her. He shifted his weight to free up his right hand, which he used to grope at her face until her mind sprang into sharp focus and became intertwined with his. Their bodies fell into a natural rhythm.

Joy, expectation, pleasure, and love culminated in an eclipse of ecstasy. Despite their quaking and tensed muscles, they managed to pull themselves apart and ended up panting, sweaty, and trembling on tousled sheets. Dagny pulled the blankets over them and tucked herself against the right side of his body, then turned her head to stare up at the ceiling. Voris was more attuned to her than he'd ever been but he still had difficulty deciphering what she was feeling.

Rather than attempt to deduce her emotions, he decided to simply ask her, but as he composed the words, she slipped her fingers between his and gave his hand a gentle squeeze. If nothing else, he knew she was content.

"It feels like I've known you forever," she whispered. "It's strange to think I've only known you for a year."

It suddenly occurred to him that it had been exactly a year since he had first met Dagny. They had met under the most inauspicious of circumstances, but they had also met on the anniversary of her birth. Vulcans didn't regard such things except in an administrative capacity, though he knew human culture placed significant emphasis on such things as birthdays and anniversaries of major events.

"Today is your birthday."

She tore her eyes away from the ceiling to face him on the pillow. "It is?"

"The current stardate is 2261.50. You are twenty-one years of age today."

The view from his periphery indicated that Dagny herself had been oblivious to this fact. "Wow, that really slipped by me."

"I believe it is customary to say, 'Happy birthday.'"

She exhaled a light laugh. "Thank you."

"I regret that I have failed to procure a gift, which I am aware is also a human tradition."

"Well, last year you got me a baby—even if she was a little belated—and this year you got me three more. Let's stop there, shall we?"

He sensed she intended the statement to be a joke, but there was sudden, profound sadness pooling within her. It pained him in a way that she would forever associate meeting him with losing her family.

When she sniffed, he knew tears would soon follow. Rather than wait for her to turn to him for comfort, he tightened his grip around her and pulled her into a firm embrace. Salty rivers flowed from her cheeks onto his chest. He had never preferred to see her cry, but now her pain felt more tangible than ever before.
When her outpouring of grief began to subside, he brushed the wet, tangled hair back from her face and said, "I still have the images of your family Ann Svendsen gave you."

"But I broke the PADD. It shattered and-

"The duotronic memory core was salvageable. I transferred the data to my personal device after the incident. I would gladly share it with you."

A long silence fell. "You know, my dad used to have all these sayings. One I heard a lot was that we should look to the past only if it brings us joy, and look to the future only if it brings us hope."

"They are wise words."

"The future gives me a lot of hope but the past is still too painful."

"I will preserve them for you, until you are ready."

"Thank you," she breathed, landing a gentle kiss on his chest.

"There is still the matter of acquiring a gift to celebrate the anniversary of your birth."

She laughed. This pleased him. "Birthdays were never a really big deal in my family. With fourteen kids, it was always someone's birthday. My mom would usually make a small cake, but birthdays were more about spending time with family than presents."

"Would you care for a cake?"

She giggled. "The idea of cake sounds so extravagant after the past few months."

"It does," he agreed.

"What a year this has been. Losing the Albret. Three different homes. An outbreak, famine, invasion, a baby, three more babies." Her body stiffened and she turned her head upward to look him in the eye. "I wasn't kidding, you know, when I said the last thing I needed right now was another baby."

"I quite agree."

"Well, it's just that- we just-"

"It is highly unlikely that you would naturally conceive again."

"And I was half dead of radiation sickness the last time and about nine months later, Safi came along. I come from a family with fourteen children, Voris."

He cleared his throat. "Perhaps in the morning we should investigate contraceptive methods."

As if to second his remark, the sharp cry of a baby drifted in from the other room. By the frequency he could discern it was Christopher, though positive identification became irrelevant when Safi began crying seconds later. He and Dagny exchanged looks, rolled out of bed, and searched the floor for clothing to don.

When they entered the room, they discovered all four children were awake. Dagny began nursing Safi while Voris tempted to soothe Christopher, and when Maera said she needed to use the toilet, Dagny escorted her to the lavatory. It wasn't long before Voris noticed Malen was gone. Voris found him in the kitchenette area, playing with the replicator as some kind of white liquid poured from it and pooled onto the floor below.
Dagny was correct that it had been a very trying year and he was keenly aware the next one would be filled with its own unique set of trials. Yet the sight of Dagny standing in the doorway and smiling at him made him realize he rather looked forward to whatever lay in store.
Union and Reunion

Union and Reunion

Stardate 2261.52

For the first time in days, Voris awoke to the soft breeze of Dagny's breath on his cheek rather than a baby or young child demanding to have its needs met right that instant. He was exhausted but his heart was full. He wished he could allow her to sleep—humans had such a great demand for sleep and with four children to care for, Dagny hadn't had a chance to rest and recover from her injuries on Cestus III. Unfortunately, the Enterprise would be entering New Vulcan's orbit in exactly ninety-seven minutes.

He ran his hand up her bicep, stopped at her shoulder, and gave it a gentle shake. "Dagny?"

She responded with a disgruntled grunt. He shook more firmly and she cracked her left eye. "Which one needs a cuddle or a diaper change or a late-night snack?"

"None of them," he replied. "And it is morning. We will arrive on New Vulcan soon and I thought you would like to shower and get dressed while I tend to the children."

She closed her eye and frowned. "I just want to sleep. I hate being awake."

"Remaining in a state of perpetual sleep would be little better than being dead."

She snorted and buried her face in the pillow. "Fine, I just want to sleep until they're all in school."

He could not disagree with her sentiment. Christopher had been up most of the night with an upset stomach that had required a trip to sickbay and the night before that, Safi had been inconsolable for no apparent reason. Making matters worse was that Malen had a habit of waking in the middle of the night, wandering out of his bedroom, and taking things apart. Voris would need the assistance of a professional to reassemble his preferred medical tricorder.

"My human colleagues on Earth used to inform me that once sufficient time has passed since a hardship, it is often looked back upon with reverie," he explained.

"You're saying one day I'm going to look back on this and laugh?" Her voice was somewhat muffled by the pillow.

"Precisely."

"No, it's funny now," she sighed, rolling over onto her back and shooting him a wry smile. "Just not in a ha ha sort of way."

"Shower. Relax. I will dress the children and pack the last of our belongings."

She sat up, her breasts spilling out from beneath the blanket, and kissed him softly on the mouth. "Thank you."

Getting four small children up and dressed for the day by himself nearly proved to be more than Voris could handle. Twice he was tempted to ask for Dagny's assistance, especially when he got Malen out of the small sonic shower, only to have the little boy announce he needed to use the lavatory while simultaneously urinating on the floor. By the time she emerged from the bedroom
twenty minutes later, Safi was squalling in his arms and Malen was throwing a tantrum over being
denied the privilege of playing with the components of his dismantled tricorder.

"Give her here," she smiled grimly, stretching out her arms to collect Safi.

"I had intended to manage this on my own," he replied, eager to show her he was just as capable of
childcare as she was.

"Divide and conquer," she shrugged, having to raise her voice to be heard over Malen.

She put Safi to her breast, poured out a cup of dry cereal into the tray of Christopher's high chair, and
sat down next to Malen to try and talk him down from his fit. Voris was convinced he would never
compare to her caregiving skills.

The family sat down to their last meal aboard the Enterprise and when they were done, Voris stacked
the last of their baggage in the yellow square by the door for transport. Before he set his medical kit
among their belongings, he extracted a hypospray and turned to Dagny, who was changing
Christopher's sanitary diaper on the couch. There was a growing change in her mood, one of
apprehension and uncertainty, and when he sat down next to her he sensed her body tense.

"Will you permit me to administer a tri-ox compound to help you more readily adjust to New
Vulcan's climate?"

"Yes please." She gave a single nod of her head as she pulled Christopher's pants back up over his
 pudgy knees.

He injected the compound into her neck. "Is something the matter?"

She trained her blue eyes on him. "No, why?"

"Because you are nervous."

She hesitated before answering. "My last experience on New Vulcan wasn't exactly the best."

"Do you refer to your ill health caused by early pregnancy or my father's treatment of you?"

"Both, I guess," she frowned.

"I have already made arrangements to stay in a hotel and plan to visit the travel office as soon as you
and the children are settled to arrange for our passage to Earth. I see no reason why we should
encounter Silek or remain on New Vulcan for more than a matter of days."

"But maybe things are different now," she said, nodding to Safi in the infant carrier. "It's been almost
a year. Maybe he's had some time to think about things."

"I sense you are proposing some form of reconciliation."

"It's just a thought."

"He informed me he no longer considered me his son and he called our daughter a half-breed."

"Both were very unkind things to say," she agreed. "But time and distance have a way of helping us
see things more clearly."

Rather than explain the Vulcan heart was harder than she clearly believed, he packed the hypospray
into his medical kit and stood up. "If Silek wishes to see me I will not refuse him, but I have no
intention of seeking out his company."

They shepherded their hodgepodge brood out into the corridor, Dagyn carrying Safi in a gravity-supported child carrier and Voris carrying Christopher on his hip. Maera and Malen walked between them, though several times they had to remind Maera not to get too far ahead. When the lift arrived to take them to the transporter deck, it revealed James Kirk, the ship's captain, as well as his cousin Spock and Nyota Uhura, the woman who had been gracious enough to lend them her quarters.

"Going up?" Captain Kirk beamed, looking down at the Romulan siblings.

Malen looked back at Voris, as if seeking clarification.

"We are," Voris said, nudging the children forward so they could board the turbolift.

"Nice to see you again, Dr. Voris," the captain continued. He looked from Voris to Dagny, extended his hand, and added, "And I'm sorry I never got to meet you until now. It's a pleasure. I'm Captain James Kirk."

"Thank you so much for taking us back to New Vulcan," Dagny nodded, adjusting her grip on the infant carrier to return his handshake. She was looking directly at the man, but it was clear she was intrigued by Commander Spock.

"And I guess you two know each other," the captain said, pointing both at Voris and Spock.

"I am familiar with Dr. Voris, but we have never met," Spock explained.

Both Vulcans raised their hands in the ta'al and said in rapid succession, "Live long and prosper."

"I thought you said he was your cousin?" Nyota Uhura blurted, just as the captain scoffed, "What do you mean you've never met?"

"Our paths have simply never crossed," Voris attempted to explain.

"I guess I shouldn't be all that surprised," the captain sighed. "I didn't even know you existed until you boarded my ship a week and a half ago. Hiding any other relatives, Spock? Maybe an aunt in engineering? A sister in Section 31?"

"What is your fixation with my family, captain?" Commander Spock said, canting his head in Kirk's direction.

Nyota Uhura rolled her eyes, turned to Dagny, and said, "Don't mind him. I'm Nyota Uhura, by the way. It's so nice to meet you."

"Dagny Skjeggestad," she replied. "I think it was your quarters we were staying in and I just wanted to thank you so much for letting us use them."

"It's not a problem. You have a beautiful family, by the way."

Dagny gave Voris a warm smile. "Thank you."

The turbolift door slid open and they filed out into a brightly lit corridor. Maera bolted to the right and Voris gave chase. He caught up to the rest of the group in the transporter room and discovered Nyota cooing over Safi in the infant carrier while Dagny proudly explained she was three and a half months old.

"I just want to pinch her little cheeks and ears," Nyota mused. She gave Dagny an eager and hopeful
"Nyota, it is inappropriate to touch another individual's infant," Spock interjected.

"It's ok," Dagny replied. "I don't mind."

"Why is it inappropriate?" Lieutenant Uhura argued. "She's your niece, after all."

"She is the daughter of my cousin, making her my first cousin once removed, not my niece," he corrected.

Lieutenant Uhura rolled her eyes and tickled Safi's toes. "She's still your family and she's still adorable."

They entered the transporter room and Malen was immediately curious about the display of buttons and levers at the control station and he began to cry when Voris refused to lift him so he could get a better view. The engineer with the red shirt and unusual accent picked him up and pointed to each button in turn and for the first time that morning, Malen was calm. Spock and Nyota Uhura beamed down first, then it was their turn.

Unlike the Starfleet officers, they would first have to go through the customs office due to traveling with children of Romulan ancestry. It was pandemonium getting his entire family up on the transporter pad and standing still, but when he finally did, Captain Kirk raised his hand and smiled, "Good luck to you and your family, Dr. Voris. Live long and prosper."

Maera giggled and shouted, "Prosper!" just as they disappeared into the matter stream. They rematerialized on a pad in a warm, cylindrically-shaped room. A light crowd was visible through the glass panels, revealing the interplanetary arrival terminal. Once outside the customs office, Dagny's anxiety spiked.

"What is wrong?"

"The last time I was here it wasn't all that pleasant," she muttered. She looked down at Maera and Malen and added, "And I wasn't even trying to bring two full-blooded Romulan children and a half-Romulan baby onto the planet back then."

"The political situation has markedly changed," he replied, touching his forefingers to hers. "And I have all the necessary documents and health certificates for the children."

It took nearly an hour for all six of them to be processed through customs, but after the expected inquiries into Christopher, Maera, and Malen's presence on the Federation side of the Neutral Zone and close inspection of their documents, they were released. The crowds had thickened while they were in the customs office and Voris couldn't help but notice there were far more non-Vulcans woven into the fabric of people than there had once been.

"If you can wait here, I will arrange for transportation," Voris said, and noticing she already looked fatigued in the increased heat and gravity, he added, "Or there is a seating area near the door, if you would like to rest."

"Ok," she said. She turned and yelped. "Where's Maera?"

Voris quickly scanned the busy terminal. He had seen her not fifteen seconds ago, but there was already no trace of her.

"Maera!" Dagny shouted, drawing the attention of nearby travelers.
"Miss Skjeggestad?" called a polite and familiar voice.

They both turned to see T'Mir approaching them with Maera in tow. "I believe she belongs to you."

"Oh thank my stars!" Dagny cried. "And T'Mir, it's so good to see you again."

"Likewise."

Dagny wiped her brow and knelt down on the hard, stone floor to meet Maera face-to-face. "You cannot keep running off like this. Do you understand?"

While Dagny continued her stern discussion with Maera, Voris turned to T'Mir and after they exchanged the traditional Vulcan greeting asked, "What brings you to the interplanetary arrival terminal?"

"The First Minister has sent me to collect you, Miss Skjeggestad, and the children."

"We are certainly very grateful for his offer, but I had planned to stay in lodgings in the Va'ashiv district."

"And you are welcome to go there if you wish, but I assure you it will be no imposition if you choose to stay with the First Minister while you plan for your journey to Earth. The house is quite large and you would honor him by accepting this invitation."

Knowing that it would be rude to continue to refuse his uncle's offer of hospitality, the family was soon following T'Mir to a long car outside. The children seemed to enjoy the car ride, but by the time they arrived at the stately house of New Vulcan's First Minister, both infants required a change of sanitary underwear and Malen was beside himself because he had been forbidden from playing with the locking mechanism on the doors. His uncle greeted them at the front door.

"Live long and prosper, First Minister," Voris said, offering the ta'al.

"Yes, live long and prosper," Sarek nodded, surveying the flock of children in their possession.

"I wish to thank you for your hospitality, as well as your efforts to permit us to bring the Romulan children with us," Voris said.

"Yes, thank you so much," Dagny added breathlessly as she set Safi's carrier on the ground. "And congratulations on your election."

"Thank you. Perhaps you would like to come inside."

They passed through the large entrance hall and into the sitting room with a bright red carpet and decorative mirrors along the walls to enhance the natural light from the long windows. His cousin Spock and Nyota Uhura were seated on one of the large black couches facing the doorway and greeted them for the second time that day when they entered the room.

The day passed like most days had since adding three more children to his household—quickly and chaotically. Lieutenant Uhura—Nyota, as she had insisted—was enamored with the children. She was a linguist with a strong command of the Vulcan language and a fair understanding of Romulan and so Maera and Malen seemed captivated by her as well.

In an effort to expend some of their boundless energy, Voris took Maera and Malen in the back courtyard in the early afternoon while Dagny elected to nap with the babies. He watched the siblings chase each other for a time and was just considering trying to teach them to play karo, a handball
game, when he sensed someone standing behind him.

"Good afternoon, Minister Sarek."

"Yes, good afternoon." Sarek's eyes fell on the children and Voris thought he detected a brief hint of sadness in his uncle's eyes, though it would have been impolite to speak of it. "T'Mir informs me that you intend to travel to Earth."

"I have been offered the opportunity to resume my former position at Sarah April Memorial Hospital in San Francisco. Dagny plans to attend medical school and I believe it will be a better environment for the children."

"It is logical to want safety and security for your daughter and your wards. There is a civilian transport route between Earth and New Vulcan. I believe the next ship is set to leave the day after tomorrow."

"I am appreciative of your hospitality, minister, but I am eager to have my family settled on Earth as soon as possible."

"Speaking of family, Silek was on Earth meeting with the Federation Council and is due to return tomorrow," Sarek said.

Voris took a moment to collect his thoughts and replied, "How is my father?"

"I believe he is well. He has taken a mate."

He did his best to conceal and neutralize his shock. "I wish them peace and long life."

They grew silent as they watched the children continue to run around the yard. He had vague recollections of chasing his own older sister in a garden very much like this one. It was strange to think of his father with a woman other than his mother. It should have been strange to think of himself with a mate other than T'Sala too, but it wasn't. Time went on and so did life.

"She gave birth to a son four months ago," Sarek continued.

It was becoming more difficult to keep his utter astonishment at bay. It took several seconds to process all the information contained in his uncle's brief statement. Father had taken a mate who bore him a son who was several weeks older than Safi. That meant his father had taken a mate before they had become estranged and yet his father had never mentioned her. It also strongly suggested his father had been coping with pon farr in the weeks before Voris was, which could perhaps explain some of his father's agitation and inability to control his temper. Most importantly, it meant that Voris now had a half-brother and a step-mother to add to his rapidly expanding collection of relations.

"You do not respond."

"I am not certain how I should respond," Voris admitted. "Do you approve of your new sister-in-law?"

"Your step-mother is a pleasant woman. I believe you have already met her. She is sister to Vinemlular leader Velik. Her name is-" 

"T'Rya," Voris finished, fighting to keep his tone neutral. "She is the woman my father urged me to bond with."

"At the time, your father believed you would have made a more suitable match for her, being closer
to her in age and profession than he was."

"My step-mother is sixteen years my junior," Voris said hollowly. "She was pregnant with my half-brother when I initially agreed to take her for a mate. My father could not have known this."

"It is a delicate matter and it is in the past," Sarek said.

Voris repressed a mild feeling of embarrassment. Perhaps he should not have been so candid with his uncle—they were family but had never been particularly close.

As if he were privy to Voris' thoughts, his uncle added, "I did not know you as well as I would have liked during your formative years."

"I am aware you have had many disagreements with my father. I am sorry that I did not make more of an effort to know you once I had reached an age of majority. I confess his views regarding your marriage to Amanda may have influenced me in ways I did not realize. It was illogical of me to form an opinion of you in this way."

"We all have unconscious prejudice, myself included. Vulcans take pride in logic, but pride is itself illogical. We are a race of many contradictions. The past three years have done much to illustrate this to me. Whatever preconceptions you may have held against humans, you seem to have made great strides in overcoming them. I overheard Miss Skjeggestad telling Miss Uhura that the two of you intend to marry."

Voris gave a small nod. "She is the mother of my daughter and we have accepted responsibility for three more children. Marriage to Miss Skjeggestad is logical."

"Will you permit me to offer some unsolicited advice?"

"I welcome it."

"Your union with her may have practical purposes, but it tends to please humans when you also remind them of the sentimental nature of your regard for them."

"I will try to remember that," Voris replied.

"I do not know what form of matrimonial ceremony you had planned, but if you choose to honor the Vulcan custom, I invite you to use my home."

"You honor us immensely, minister. I will speak to her about your offer."

And it was a momentous honor indeed. Vulcan bonding ceremonies traditionally took place in the home of the head of the family, or if a family were wealthy enough, on land set aside specifically for bonding and death ceremonies. His family had once had such a place on a narrow mesa overlooking Vulcan's Forge. He had married T'Sala in that place, just as his father had married his mother there. But that had been the old way and that place existed no longer, nor did most of the S'chn T'gai family.

He wished to continue his conversation with his uncle, but Maera rounded a corner near a tall statue of T'Plana Hath too sharply and crashed hard onto her hands and knees, resulting in bloody rivers winding down her shins and forearms and howls of agony. He carried her inside and patched up the scrapes with a dermal regenerator, and soon enough she was back to bouncing down the halls after her younger brother.

They consumed a late end meal with the entire household and retired to their room early to prepare
the children for bed. He excused himself for twenty minutes to meditate and when he returned, he
found her curled up in bed next the Maera and Malen, reading them the story of Queen Safi from the
time before Surak. She clearly was as fascinated by the tale as they were.

Each time she mentioned the character's name, Maera's eyes would grow wide and she would point
to Safi’s cot and murmur, "Safi?"

"Yes, like our Safi," Dagny replied each time.

She was halfway through the story before she became aware of Voris standing in the doorway. Her
eyebrows flicked expectantly, urging him to join their nightly ritual. He sat down on the opposite
side of the bed from Dagny. They had tried to get them to sleep in separate beds but they ardently
refused. Dagny recommended that they create a more stable environment for the Romulan siblings
before encouraging independence a second time and so for now, they continued to sleep together.

"Why don't you give this one a shot, dad?" Dagny asked, extending the PADD toward him.

"Yes. Dad try," Maera nodded seriously.

Dagny had used the term several times in reference to Voris, usually in a teasing manner, but it was
the first time he'd heard any of the children utter this informal word for father. He was not Maera's
father and yet… Maera no longer had a father. Was she implying she wanted him to serve as a de
facto paternal figure, or did she not understand the meaning of the word? Her Standard was
improving but was still far from perfect.

He accepted the PADD from Dagny's hand and began to read, "A storm descended on the Vulcan's
Forge, trapping Commander Safi in a cave. She was without food and without water and feared she
would die."

"No," Maera scowled, touching the PADD. "Like she do."

"I do not understand."

Dagny giggled. "I think she's complaining about your reading."

"What is wrong with the way I read?"

"I think she wants you to put a little more emotion- more inflection in your voice. Anyone can read a
story, but it's more fun if you tell the story."

He read several more passages before Maera begged him to give the PADD back to Dagny so the
story could continue in a more animated fashion. When the story was complete, she kissed Maera
and Malen on the forehead and pulled the blanket up to their chins, leaned over each of the infant
cots and kissed Safi and Christopher, then led Voris into the adjacent room.

"Your uncle was really nice to let us stay with him," Dagny mused as she began undressing.

It took Voris several moments to realize he was staring at her and he looked away and began
preparing himself for bed also.

"And I really like your cousin and his girlfriend. She didn't want to put Safi down. They're planning
to get married next year."

"On the matter of marriage, my uncle has offered us his home, if you decide you would like a
traditional Vulcan ceremony."
"Do Vulcans usually get married at home?"

"Either at home or at a location common to the family."

"Is that what you want to do?"

"I want to be your mate. The details of how it is accomplished are not of high importance to me. However, in addition to genuine hospitality, I sense the First Minister had a political motivation in asking us to wed in his home."

"He had an ulterior motive?"

"He is the leader of the moderate Storilayar party and since his election has likely fought to bring some unity to the various factions on New Vulcan. I believe he intends to send a symbolic message by having a Vulcan nephew and his human mate undergo a Vulcan bonding ceremony in his home."

She slipped a night dress over her head. "You think he wants us to get married here to help his political position?"

"I do not believe that is the only reason, merely that it may have been a factor in his offer. Does this trouble you?"

"I feel like it should but it honestly doesn't," she confessed. "Your Uncle Sarek has been very kind to us, to me, and if marrying you in his house helps him politically, I'm fine with that. Weddings were always a very casual and last-minute affair on the Albret so it wasn't like I imagined myself getting married in some grand castle with thousands of guests in attendance. It's like you said, the details of how and when we do it aren't hugely important to me. In a lot of ways, I feel married to you already. I think at this point it's more of a formality than anything."

"A very logical explanation."

"Maybe you're rubbing off on me," she replied, a warm smile crossing her face.

"There is a transport vessel that can take us to Earth the day after tomorrow, so if we are to be bonded here, we will either have to do it tomorrow or return at a later date."

"Tomorrow?"

"I thought you had said the details weren't important."

"They aren't but do we need to give him some kind of notice?"

"The basic components of a bonding ceremony only include a priest or priestess, a ceremonial drum, gong, and two witnesses unrelated to the couple. It would be a simple enough thing to arrange."

"I guess if it's really not that big of a production…"

"So are you saying you are willing to be bonded tomorrow?"

"Sure, if that's what you want."

"Then I will speak with the First Minister."

Dagny's complexion reddened and she slowly sat down on the bed. "We're really getting married then. Wow."
He sat down next to her. "I look forward to becoming your mate."

"I look forward to becoming your mate too." She stared down at the floor, giving the stone pattern an incredulous smile.

"We should rest."

"Yeah."

Once tucked into bed with the lights off, Voris began to focus on slowing his breathing to transition into sleep more readily, but the sound of Dagny clearing her throat indicated she wasn't yet ready for sleep.

"I was thinking," she began, her voice cracking slightly. "It's been a couple of days since- well, I know we're getting married tomorrow and all but would it be weird- should we-"

"Speak plainly."

"Would you like to have sex?" Her sentence slurred together into one long, poly-syllabic word.

"I would," he admitted. "But only if it would please you also."

She laughed and soon she was kissing him and sliding her hands under the tangle of sheets to draw herself closer to him. He readied himself to pull off his nightclothes and climb over her petite frame but instead she threw her left leg over him and adopted a straddling stance. She was nervous and he was fast becoming aroused. Her hips swayed over his pelvis in a slow and steady rocking motion and rather than try to subdue his emotions about this very sensual experience, he opted to set them free.

"Touch my face," she whispered. "Meld with me."

All she had to do was ask. He reached up to grip her face, his hands rolling along her ribs and breasts on their way to his destination. Just as their minds began to blend into one, Dagny's hand slipped into his underwear, forcing him to expel a soft cry of surprise. How badly he wanted to flip her over and enjoy the feel of her small body beneath his, but he was too intrigued by her sudden assertiveness.

"Do you like this?" Her voice echoed through his mind through their telepathic link, thunderous and shaky.

"I do. Will you please mate with me?"

He hadn't quite finished communicating the thought when Safi's sudden shrieks from the next room sprung them apart. Dagny fell back onto the bed, frustrated and breathing heavily.

"I will tend to her," Voris said as he pulled up his underwear and grabbed for the robe hanging on the hook near the bed. "You rest."

"Let me know if you need any help," she groaned.

Voris shook his head. "Rest."

When Dagny awoke, she wondered how long she'd been asleep. She had no memory of crying babies or children waking up at 0400 hours wondering why breakfast wasn't ready yet. She felt well rested and confused about how she accomplished this feat with four children under the age of five.
She rolled onto her back and yelped when her eyes spied T'Mir standing at the foot of the bed.

"What are you doing in here?" she choked.

"Forgive my intrusion. Dr. Voris has asked if I would assist you in getting ready, since you have no female relations to perform this task."

"Huh?"

"Dr. Voris told me that you intended to perform the bonding ceremony today."

Dagny blinked, trying to figure out what that had to do with waking up to T'Mir standing over her bed. "What time is it?"

"0540 hours local time."

"Is there a reason we're doing this so early?" Dagny asked, rubbing her eyes and sitting up.

"Vulcan bondings typically take place just after sunrise."

No wonder Voris had told her to rest the night before. She rubbed her forehead and asked, "What do I even wear to a traditional Vulcan wedding?"

"A dress and usually a veil passed down from the groom's family. Your future step mother-in-law has offered hers."

"Step mother-in-law?"

"Yes, Minister Silek's mate."

"I didn't realize Silek had a wife."

"They were bonded shortly after your departure from New Vulcan."

Dagny sat in the bed, staring at T'Mir, doing her best to process the wild happenings of the past minute and a half. She had so many questions. Did that mean Silek was coming? Was his wife like him or was she kinder? What was this ceremony going to be like? Rather than ask any of those questions, she murmured, "Where is Voris?"

"Meditating. It is customary for the prospective mates to be separated before the ceremony so that each may reflect on the momentous decision they are about to make."

"I see."

"The sun will rise in forty-eight minutes," T'Mir said. "We have much to do."

Dagny flung her legs over the edge of the bed and stood, feeling like these events were happening to someone else and she was just an outside viewer. She hurried in the sonic shower and when she emerged, she saw a beautiful blue dress hanging from the back of the door.

"Have you finished washing?" T'Mir called through the door.

"Yes."

"The blue gown is for you. I realize it may be too long, but try it on and we'll make adjustments."
Dagny ran her hand along the skirt, deciding it was the softest, silkiest thing her skin had ever encountered. Much to her disappointment, it ended up being too big in the bust and too long. She emerged from the bathroom ready to tell T'Mir that she would just have to wear something else, but she found Nyota instead.

"I'm here to help you with your hair," she smiled.

She was ushered back into the bathroom and ordered to stand facing the wall. T'Mir began pulling at the excess fabric and tailoring the dress to fit her with a handheld tailoring device.

"What kind of style did you have in mind for your hair?" Nyota asked with a smile.

"Um, getting my hair clean is usually as far as I go with it and sometimes not even then depending on how the kids are behaving on any given day," she confessed.

"Something simple but elegant then?"

"Whatever's easiest for you," Dagny mumbled, feeling very strange to have two women devoting so much time to making her look beautiful.

Nyota rubbed her hands together with joyful glee and started to smooth out her hair with a styling iron and insert all kinds of clips and pins to arrange it in a neatly braided bun.

"This is going to sound really silly," she said, looking down at T'Mir who was kneeling to finish adjusting Dagny's hemline. "And I'm really so grateful that you're both up so early to help me with this, but I didn't realize this was supposed to be this big of a deal. Voris said it was really simple and that there would just be a priest and a drum and a few witnesses."

"I get the feeling you've never been pampered and made up," Nyota said, pulling a pin from between her teeth and inserting it into the back of Dagny's hair. "It's your wedding day and you deserve to feel pretty."

"And I do feel pretty and like I said, I'm so appreciative. But I'm starting to get the feeling this isn't going to be as casual as I thought. I don't even know what takes place at a Vulcan wedding. What do I do? Where do I stand? What do I say?"

"The traditional vows are really simple," Nyota said. She then began reciting something in the Vulcan language.

"I'm sorry," Dagny interrupted. "Could you go a little more slowly?"

"Vuhlkansu not a strong suit of yours?" Nyota asked.

"No," T'Mir answered before Dagny could.

Dagny couldn't even be offended. It was true.

"I believe some mixed species partners are choosing to say the traditional vows in Standard or their native languages," T'Mir added. "You may find that is a better solution than trying to teach your tongue to handle Vuhlkansu in the next nineteen minutes."

Both Nyota and T'Mir spent the remainder of their time drilling the appropriate words into Dagny. It was just a few lines, but she'd never been good at rote memorization. When Nyota finished affixing a light purple veil into the back of Dagny's hair, T'Mir announced it was time to go to the main hall for the ceremony. Nervousness twisted her stomach into tight knots.
"You look beautiful," Nyota sighed, gently taking Dagny by the shoulders and turning her to see herself in the mirror.

The woman staring back at her was a stranger. Would Voris even recognize her? Her red hair, which was not as red as it used to be but also not as blonde as it had been a year ago, was styled to perfection. The dress made her seem taller and trimmer and the color accentuated the light blue shade of her eyes.

"Thank you both so much," she whispered. "I don't think I've ever looked this good."

She had a strange yearning for her mother and before the tears could come pouring from her eyes, she shook her head, took a deep breath, and tried to remember the vows she was supposed to say in the near future.

They led her into the corridor and the sound of voices echoing from the stone walls made Dagny's blood run cold. There seemed to be dozens of people waiting in the main hall. She held her breath and silently cursed Voris for telling her it would be a priest and a few witnesses and that was it.

To Dagny's relief and still slight dismay, there were only fifteen people currently standing in the hall and five of them were children. A little more than a dozen, not dozens. Yet it was still more people than she had imagined might show up and she did not recognize most of them.

To her incredible relief, Silek was not present but she recognized Voris' cousin Spock as well as Ambassador Spock. A woman in a regal purple robe and ornate hair was speaking with Sarek and three other women, one of whom was holding a baby she did not recognize, were minding the children. Voris had apparently managed to coax Maera and Malen into traditional Vulcan robes but that did little to change the fact that they were three and four years old and had no patience for standing still. There were also three men Dagny didn't recognize, one of them human and wearing a suit and the other two Vulcans clad in shiny gray and black robes.

She stood in the hallway feeling paralyzed by the thought of so many people present to witness her mangle a Vulcan wedding ceremony. This wasn't what she had pictured at all. She wanted to be with Voris, but she also wanted to turn and run.

"Are you feeling ok?" Nyota asked. "You're really pale."

"Dagny?"

She would recognize the warm voice behind her anywhere. She whirled around and came face to face with Voris, who was wearing a patterned cloak with a deep green hood.

"We will excuse ourselves," T'Mir said with a bow.

"You are frightened," Voris said in a low voice after they were out of earshot, extending his two forefingers to her.

The warm feel of ozh'esta helped quell some of her terror but didn't completely erase it. "I didn't realize this was going to be so formal or that so many people would be here."

"We do not have to do this if you don't want to."

"I want to be your wife, I just don't want to get this wrong and embarrass you."

"It is a fairly simple ceremony."
"I think you underestimate my ability to ruin things that are supposed to be simple. I couldn't even say the first few words of these vows in your language so T'Mir taught them to me in Standard but every time I look at all those people out there, my mind goes blank and I feel like I can't even remember my own name."

A muscle in his brow twitched and he said, "I will help you if you need it."

It took her a moment to process that he hadn't said the words aloud but instead had delivered them telepathically. She couldn't help the incredulous and relieved smile that formed on her face.

"Do you know how the ceremony should begin?"

She blinked and shook her head. "Don't I just go up to you and kneel?"

He looked over his shoulder. "Do you see the green carpet on the floor in the middle of the room next to the gong?"

"I kneel on the right half of it," she breathed. "Or is it the left? Where am I supposed to be in relation to the gong?"

"You were correct; to the right."

"And you're supposed to strike the gong first and that's my cue?"

"No, I will raise my arm as if to strike it, then you will approach, kneel, and then I will strike the gong."

"Ugh," she said, pinching the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger. "I don't want to do this wrong."

"Anything you do will be acceptable," he encouraged. "All I ask is you don't stop me from striking the gong and declare kal-i-fee."

She gave him a blank look. "Huh? What- what does that even mean?"

She almost thought she detected a smile on his face but instead he clasped her hand and said, "I will help you. Just follow my lead."

"Are you ready?"

Dagny nearly jumped when she discovered the woman in the purple robes was standing at the entrance to the hallway. Voris looked at Dagny to confirm and she nodded numbly.

Voris squeezed her hand and led her out into the main hall. The first rays of light were beginning to stream in through the windows, casting a soft glow over the room. Someone extinguished the lights and it became quite dark, causing Dagny to groan inwardly. It was hard enough trying to not look like an idiot without the added fear of tripping over something in the dark.

The Vulcan woman cleared her throat and announced, "What you are about to see comes down from the time of the beginning."

A steady drum beat began and the room grew quiet. The Vulcan women in the corner collected Maera and Malen and urged them to stand still which incredibly, they did. Everyone turned to face the woman in purple. She continued.

"This is the Vulcan heart. This is the Vulcan soul. This is our way." Then she points to the gong and
says, "Kal-i-far."

Voris squeezed her hand a second time and walked toward the gong, stopping at his uncle to collect a mallet made of some kind of green stone. Either her eyes were adjusting or the sun was coming up more quickly than she imagined, because things were a lot clearer than they'd seemed just moments earlier.

Voris took his place to the left of the gong, made eye contact with Dagny, and lifted his arm. "Approach now."

She wandered forward, extremely conscious of each step and all the people watching her. It took an eternity to make it to the green carpet but when she did, she slowly dropped to her knees. Voris gave a small nod and struck the gong with the striker, handed it to his cousin Spock, then knelt down in front of her. He lifted his right hand and offered his first two fingers to her.

"Join your fingers to mine," he urged telepathically.

She did and fought with everything she had to avoid grinning like a fool. This was really happening. They were doing it. All the other people in the room began to fade away and all she saw was him. She was vaguely aware of the woman in purple saying something in Vuhlkansu, then Voris looked at her and began speaking in his native language.

Were these the vows Nyota had been trying to teach her to say? She swallowed hard, thinking she could study for the rest of her life and still not be able to recite them properly. Suddenly, he switched to Standard.

"As it was in the dawn of our days, as it is today, as it will be for all tomorrows, I make my choice. You are the one I choose to honor and support. I pledge my loyalty to you, Dagny, today and for the rest of my life."

Vulcan wedding or not, she couldn't help but smile. She was so happy she felt certain she was going to burst.

"It is your turn," Voris reminded her through their bond. "Do you remember what to say?"

"As it was in the dawn of your days," she said, swallowing hard and pausing to catch her breath. She had been holding her breath and not even been aware. "As it is today, as it will be for all tomorrows, I make my choice. You are the one I choose to honor and support. I pledge my loyalty to you, Voris, today and for the rest of my life."

The woman in purple made another short speech and soon everyone in the hall replied with, "Kal-if-ni. It is so."

Dagny's eyes quickly darted around the room before landing back on Voris. His mouth didn't move but she heard him say in the back of her mind, "That was all. We are now bonded."

He rose and helped lift her to her feet. Dagny was suddenly swimming in disbelief and bliss. After everything they'd both been through and everything they'd lost, here they were, married. It wasn't the ending either of them would have chosen for themselves several years ago, but it was the ending they'd arrived at nonetheless and they were happy.

They spent the next hour greeting, and in many cases, being introduced to their guests. One of the Vulcan men turned out to be Deputy First Minister and one of the women was his wife. She was content to allow Voris to do most of the talking and felt horrible for feeling incredibly relieved when she heard Christopher crying.
She cautiously approached the woman holding the baby, who was also trying to console Christopher. For a brief instant, she thought the baby in her arms was Safi but realized Safi was currently in Nyota's arms and being presented to Spock, almost as if she were seeking his approval.

"I can get him," Dagny insisted. "He can be a handful when he really gets going. And thank you for watching him during the ceremony."

"You are welcome."

"I'm Dagny," she said, pointing to her chest as she leaned down to pick Christopher up from the infant carrier.

"I am T'Rya."

"Live long and prosper, T'Rya," said Voris from behind her. "It was an honor to have you here today."

Dagny bounced Christopher up and down and patted his back. In an effort to make casual conversation she asked, "Do you two know each other?"

"We do," they answered simultaneously. Voris turned to her and added, "It was T'Rya who loaned you the matrimonial veil you currently wear."

There were many times Dagny wished she were as keen with logic and deduction as Voris was, because it took her several painful seconds to piece together that it was Silek's wife who had offered this veil and if Voris was claiming the veil was T'Rya's then that meant T'Rya was also Silek's wife.

"Oh," she said, desperate to put an end to the awkward silence. "Thank you so much."

"You are most welcome."

She turned her focus to soothing Christopher but her mind was stuttering as it tried to read between the lines of this very strange situation. This woman looked so young, barely older than Dagny. She knew Vulcans aged much more slowly but surely she couldn't be over forty, which would make her younger than Voris. And whose baby was she holding? Was that her baby? Was that Silek's baby? Silek's baby would be Voris' brother.

"I regret that Minister Silek could not attend today, but he is not presently on New Vulcan," T'Rya said.

"I am aware," Voris said.

Dagny noticed he couldn't take his eyes off the baby in her arms, but neither could she. The resemblance to Safi was pretty undeniable, but so too was Safi's resemblance to Voris. That had to be Voris' little brother, which would also make him Safi's uncle. She'd never really given much consideration to what extended lifespans could do to a family tree, but it was all she could think about right now.

It was impossible to tell what T'Rya was thinking but eventually she looked down at the baby and said, "His name is Loren."

"May he live long and prosper," Voris said.

"He's beautiful," Dagny added.
"I should go," T'Rya said. "Minister Silek will be home soon."

They said their goodbyes and when they were alone in the entrance hall, Dagny tilted her chin in Voris' direction and asked, "Was that baby your brother?"

"My half-brother."

"How old is he? He can't be more than four or five months."

"I suspect he is just over four months of age."

"And sorry if this is an inappropriate question, but how old is T'Rya?"

"I believe she is thirty-five years of age now."

"So, your step-mother is younger than you, closer in age to me than she is to you, as it turns out, and your little brother is only a few weeks older than your daughter?"

"That is all correct, yes."

"I can't imagine how this could possibly be any weirder."

"What if I were to tell you T'Rya and I were betrothed for a short time?"

"You're joking."

"I am not in the habit of telling jokes."

Dagny finally turned to look at Voris. The lines of his face were smooth and appeared untroubled. "So… your father married his son's fiancée, a woman who is younger than his own son?"

"Why do you keep stating obvious facts about this situation?"

"I'm trying to grasp it. There could be intense family drama on the Albret from time to time, but nothing that compares to this."

"It is quite unusual, I agree."

"I knew you were married before, but I didn't know you were engaged," Dagny said quietly.

"It was a very brief betrothal that began several days before I met you," he admitted.

"So you didn't marry her because of me?" Her mouth suddenly felt very dry.

"Consider all of the facts," he said, canting his head toward her. "Her son is several weeks older than our daughter."

"Oh my stars, your father was sleeping with your fiancée."

"We were not betrothed then. She was already pregnant when she agreed to bond with me. I believe my father encouraged us to bond because he considered me a more appropriate match for her than he was himself, based on age and occupation. It appears they decided to bond despite their incompatibility."

Dagny turned to look back at the door, then back at Voris, then at the door again.

"Your mouth is hanging open," Voris finally said.
"It's just too weird."

"So is the foundation of our relationship and yet here we are."

Dagny smiled a stoic smile. "Fair enough. I hope they're happy together."

"As do I."

A short time later, the last of the guests departed the house. Dagny went to change into less formal clothes but when she tried to give the dress back to T'Mir, she insisted that Dagny should keep it. They sat down to breakfast in the kitchen and played with the children throughout the afternoon in between packing for the journey to Earth the following day.

Just after dinner, or end meal, as the Vulcans called it, Sarek, Nyota, and Spock departed for some kind of state function and Dagny, Voris and the children were in the sitting room cheering on Christopher as he repeatedly tried to take his first steps. Dagny's heart was bursting with pride and a touch of sorrow, knowing that Khel and Jake were missing this wonderful milestone.

Maera announced that she needed to use the toilet and looked at Dagny expectantly. She was toilet trained and Malen was getting better, but their small size meant that they still often needed some assistance with washing their hands. She escorted the little girl down the hall and just as she shut the door behind them, she heard Malen go zipping through the corridor, cackling with glee. Several seconds later the sounds of Voris' footsteps thundering after him rang through the corridor and naturally several seconds after that, Safi began crying in the sitting room. Dagny closed her eyes and smiled.

Being pulled in all directions by four young children was just going to be their reality for the next few years. They would get through it somehow and probably look back on all of it and laugh, just as Voris had said. When Maera was finished, they hurried back to the sitting room but Safi was no longer crying. She expected to find that Voris had returned and calmed her down, but instead there was a tall, slender man standing on the blanket Safi had been laying on, holding her daughter in a cautious and curious way as if he were examining some exotic new species.

"Silek?"

Safi screamed in delight and stretched her palms outward to touch Silek's face, a maneuver she often tried with Voris.

Silek turned to face Dagny and gave a small nod. "Miss Skjeggestad. Or perhaps you have elected to take my family name. I understand you bonded with my son this morning."

"Who he?" Maera asked, looking up at Dagny.

"This is Silek, Voris' dad," she explained.

Silek regarded Maera with intense curiosity and she wondered whether he'd spoken with T'Rya about Maera, Malen, and Christopher.

"Silek, this is Maera. She's a Romulan orphan from Cestus III. We're in the process of adopting her and her brother, as well as another half-Romulan orphan."

"I see," Silek said, his voice totally void of any emotion. "Hello, Maera."

"Hi!" the little girl replied, looking up at Dagny for approval.
It would have been incredibly tense were it not for Safi being so obviously intrigued by her grandfather. She continued to giggle and coo and reach for his face and when he eventually pulled her closer to his chest, she began to paw at his cheeks in wonder.

"She seems to like you," Dagny said. "Her name is Safi."

He gave a small nod. "After the legend of Queen Safi, I suppose."

"Yes."

"Voris enjoyed that story quite a lot as a boy."

"He did?"

"Yes."

Watching the Safi and Silek together was truly stunning. "I used to think she looks like Voris, but she really looks a lot like you. I suppose Voris does too."

"That is the simple result of genetics," Silek replied.

Dagny cringed at his curt remark and desperately wished Voris would return. She prepared to excuse herself to go find him, but Silek chose that moment to speak.

"I would say she favors my late wife quite a lot, as well as my daughter, T'Liri. Your daughter is lovely."

Dagny nearly choked on a dozen emotions and found herself in the strange predicament of trying to fight back both tears and a grin. She suddenly felt sorry for the man, even after everything he'd said all those months ago.

"I wish to say I regret the things we said to each other at our last meeting," Silek began. "I should-"

"Silek?" Voris said from behind her. His tone made it seem like a challenge and the sudden sound of his voice nearly made Dagny jump.

"Voris."

"I did not expect to see you here."

"I regret that I could not attend your bonding ceremony this morning," Silek said. "I am not certain I would have been invited even if I could have been present."

"I would have invited you," Dagny blurted.

"Dagny," Voris began.

"What? I would have. He's your father." It was true she had been relieved when she found out Silek wouldn't be making an appearance, but if she had had any say in her wedding at all, she would have asked Voris to invite him. Family was family.

"Miss Skjeggestad-"

"Please, call me Dagny."

"Dagny," Silek corrected. "Will you please excuse us?"
"Of course," she said, shooting a sidelong glance at Voris, shocked to find his expression was
unrecognizable. She took a few steps forward and said, "I can take her."

"May I hold her for a while longer?"

She gave him a faint smile and escorted the other children out of the room, brushing her hand against
Voris' on her way out. She was so desperate for them to make peace but she couldn't remember ever
having seen Voris so on edge.

Once back in the children's room, she took her time getting each of them ready for bed and packing
the last of their things. Several hours passed and eventually the little ones went to sleep. It was nearly
0130 hours when her husband finally crept into their bed with Safi tucked into his arm.

"Safi hasn't eaten in a number of hours," he whispered. "I was hoping you could feed her before I
put her in her cot."

"Hand her over," Dagny replied, stroking her baby's cheek as she unbuttoned the top of her
nightgown to expose her breast. "How did things go with Silek?"

"We discussed many things."

"Are the two of you going to be ok?"

"We are both in adequate health."

"That's not what I mean and you know it. Are you father and son again?"

"I cannot forget the things he said, but he wishes to know Safi. And you. It is as you said—he is my
father."

She reached for his hand. "I know this can't be easy for you."

"I regret we spent the first night of our marriage apart while I made amends with my father."

"The night isn't over," she said, shrugging.

He glanced down at the baby hungrily suckling on her breast and then gave her a pointed look. She
laughed. "Let us wrap things up and we'll see how it goes."

Safi ate her fill and they set her down in her crib in the next room, and after checking that the others
were sound asleep, they snuck back into the adjacent bedroom.

"It's been a crazy day," Dagny whispered, leaning against Voris and wrapping her arms around him.

"You did exactly as you should have."

"You know it's weird, I thought it would feel different once we were officially married but it doesn't
feel like anything has changed at all."

"In a way, we've been bonded the night I touched my hands to your face aboard the Sekla," he said,
his voice growing slightly somber.
"We've been through a lot together," Dagny agreed. "And I have a feeling those four are going to put us through the ringer before it's all said and done."

"I look forward to it," he said, looking down at her.

"Me too."

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**Stardate 2261.55**

It had been a little more than three years since he'd last been on Earth. The skyline from the shuttle landing pad looked a little different than it had prior to Nero's incursion, but the bay was the same, as was the humid, salty air and the cries of the birds overhead.

He was nearly at the bottom of the ramp when he realized Dagny wasn't behind him. He turned, adjusted Christopher on his hip, and found her standing in the threshold of the hatch, gawking at the scene before her. Their eyes met several second later and he gave her a small nod.

"Welcome home, Dagny."


**Stardate 2340.50**

"Arriving at Earth in thirty minutes," chimed the friendly voice of a woman over the intercom. "Passengers are advised to return to their cabins and prepare for arrival."

Safi stood and stretched her arms above her head. After two and a half weeks of traveling, it was about damn time.

"Hold!" cried the toddler at her feet.

Safi gazed down at T'Para, her two-year-old niece, and decided she couldn't refuse the little girl's request. She picked her up, raised her over her head, and smothered her with air kisses. "Are you excited to see grandma Dagny?"

"She has only met her foremother on two previous occasions and one of those was on the day of her birth," said a voice behind her.

"And whose fault is that?" Safi asked, turning to tease her youngest brother Laren, who was T'Para's father.

"I fail to see how anyone is to blame for this," he replied, his face stuck in the classically neutral Vulcan expression. "Our mother raised eight children of mixed heritage. Surely she did not expect all of them and their progeny to live in close proximity to her for the remainder of her life."

Safi gave him a patient smile. She barely knew her baby brother. Laren was born two years after she left home to attend college on Earth and he was the only one of her siblings who elected to follow Surak's teachings. Her parents had even quit the Terran Medical Corps when he was eleven and moved to New Vulcan so he could study at Vulcan schools. She supposed it was a prime perk of being the last fledgling to leave the nest.

"My wife has asked for my assistance with packing the rest of our belongings," Laren said.

Safi sighed and set T'Para down. "Run along, little lady."

No sooner were they out of the cabin than Maera wandered in, a sandwich in one hand, a PADD in the other, and a sour expression on her face.

"What did that little turd want?"

"I assume you're talking about Laren, not T'Para?"

"Oh come on, I love my niece. And it's not her fault she's got a fundy twit for a dad."

"Maera, he's our brother."

"Doesn't mean he isn't a fundy twit."

Safi rolled her eyes and flopped back down in her seat. "I'm pretty sure the last thing mom wants at her hundredth birthday party is to have her kids fighting."
"I promised I wouldn't say anything mean in front of mom," she said earnestly, taking a bite of her sandwich. "But mom isn't here right now."

Safi closed her eyes and nodded. It was strange to think how her parents had brought up nine children—three adopted, four biological, and two grandchildren—only to have them turn out so drastically different from one another.

There was Maera, the oldest, who ran away from home at seventeen and joined a resistance group trying to smuggle Romulan refugees into Federation territory. When she was finally caught two years later, it was only thanks to the backroom dealing of their grandfather Silek that she only served eight years for piracy and violating the Neutral Zone, rather than the life sentence for treason the Federation prosecutor had recommended.

She gave birth to her first son Henry in prison at the age of twenty. Henry spent the first seven years of his life with his grandparents while his mother served out her term and that separation irrevocably damaged the relationship between mother and son. Maera never spoke about Henry's father but Safi always got the sense that he was the truest love of her life. The only thing anyone knew for sure was that he was human and dead.

Once out of prison, Maera married the Vulcan lawyer who had assisted in her case, a nice guy named Vos who technically followed Surak's teachings but in as loose a way as possible. He helped get Maera through law school and they had a son together who they named Rhaal after the biological father she'd never met. Eventually they moved to Cestus III, the site of the Federation's main refugee camp for non-Federation citizens, and started a foundation to help asylum seekers.

Then there was Malen, Maera's full biological brother, who enlisted in Starfleet as an engineer at age eighteen. He always dreamed of becoming an officer but it was hard for him to escape his Romulan ancestry and he eventually retired at a mid-level enlisted rank. In 2285 he married Bethany Tarses, a human Starfleet nurse, and they had four kids and eventually settled on Mars Colony 3. Their oldest son Vince and his wife just had twin sons of their own two weeks earlier, Simon and Spencer. Safi couldn't wait to meet them.

Christopher was the third, her half-Romulan adoptive brother who was orphaned when the Gorn attacked Cestus III. Safi and Christopher were close in age and as a result were very close growing up. Because their parents were in the Terran Medical Corps and moved every three years, friends came and went, but siblings were forever. Leaving home to go to college was hard for Safi, but leaving Christopher was hardest.

Like Malen, his Romulan heritage severely limited his opportunities, but he eventually found work on a freighter hauling ore between the Federation bloc and non-Federation planets. He worked hard for many years and eventually started his own company but to stay competitive, he was forced to take on increasingly more dangerous routes. They wouldn't hear from him for months or even years at a time, then he would just show up with lavish gifts and wild stories, stay for a week, and disappear again.

He was killed in a Klingon incursion in 2303 and the months following his death were some of the darkest of Safi's life. Out of that tragedy came shocking joy and surprise when they learned Christopher and his partner Jane had a two-month-old daughter named Lily, who had been back on the trading station with friends when her parents were killed. She was the second grandchild her parents would raise.

Safi was the middle child, born on Cestus III in the spring just before the Gorn invasion. She was very close to her father growing up and seriously considered following the path of logic, but strong empathic abilities made training in logic almost impossible for her. She drifted through her teenage
years, never sure what her purpose was, and at age eighteen went to Earth to go to college.

Four years later she earned a degree in education and worked as a teacher in the New Paris colonies until a series of devastating earthquakes rocked the planet. That very difficult experience taught her she had a rare aptitude for working with victims of childhood trauma and it wasn't long after that she applied to a renowned university on Betazed to hone her innate empathetic talent. She graduated in 2291 with an advanced degree in child psychiatry and spent a decade working in Federation Children's Services until Maera told her about the refugee camps on Cestus III. In 2301, she moved back to the place of her birth to help child refugees affected by the ongoing war between the Klingons and Romulans.

After Safi came her brother Soren, born 2267.312, exactly seven years and three days after Safi. In fact all of her biological siblings were born seven years apart, obviously the products of the hyper fertility brought on by pon farr, even though no one ever actually said anything about it. Soren was the joker of the family, always loud and eager to be center stage. His gregarious personality caused their father considerable confusion growing up, but Soren and Voris never really argued, they only existed in two separate planes, unable to relate to each other.

He left home in 2287 to move to New York, hoping to find work as a stage actor on Broadway. He came home with nothing to his name several times but always went back, eventually discovering he had more talent for producing than acting. He won numerous awards for his plays and married his partner James in 2298. Seven years ago, they adopted two Romulan orphans from the refugee camp where Maera and Safi worked.

Her youngest sister Sara was born 2274.301, less than a year after the Terran Medical Corps transferred the family to Mars Colony 3. Safi was fourteen when Sara joined the family and because she missed most of Sara's childhood, she often found it hard to separate her adult sister from the helpless baby that she once was.

She grew up to be a passionate animal lover, always bringing home abandoned and injured critters of all shapes, sizes, and species. Their mother still loved to tell the story about how when they were living on New Berlin, Sara had traded a gold necklace given to her on her birthday for a Terran chicken that Orion traders were trying to sell to hungry Nausicaans. She named the chicken Captain and threw a fit when their father didn't allow the bird to sleep in the bed with her.

She got a good education in either zoology or ecology or both—Safi couldn't quite remember—from a good school on Earth with a name Safi couldn't quite remember, but now she worked with the Federation Conservation Corps performing surveys of potential new colony worlds and making recommendations about minimizing impacts to native flora and fauna. She married a Vulcan biologist twelve years earlier and together they were raising three daughters aboard the ship they were posted to.

After Sara came Henry, Maera's son, who was born in a prison hospital on Terra Nova in 2276 and raised by their parents. Safi was nearly sixteen when Henry came home and like Sara, she had few memories of her nephew. By everyone's account he was a happy baby, but because of their parents' work in the Terran Medical Corps, they weren't able to take him to visit his mother more than once or twice a year.

When Maera was finally released in 2283, he begged to stay with his grandparents but was still sent to live with her and her new husband on New Vulcan. Difficulties in adapting to life on a logic-loving planet with a mother and step-father he resented resulted in him returning to his grandparents by the time he was eleven. He grew broodier as he grew older and when the family settled on New Vulcan in 2292, sixteen-year-old Henry decided he'd had enough.
He came to live with Safi on New Paris for a time, coasting through school as easily as he coasted through girlfriends. When he was nineteen he hitched a ride on an Andorian schooner and wandered the quadrant for several years before eventually attending art school on Andoria. He opened a moderately successful tattoo parlor in Toronto several decades earlier and ended up with four children by three different mothers but was by all accounts a very devoted, very tattooed father.

Last was Laren, or as Maera so kindly referred to him as the "fundamentalist twit" or when she was feeling particularly loving, "fundi twit." According to Sara, Laren had been a happy kid who used to like to play with her and Henry but one day just decided he preferred logic. He was fiercely intelligent even by Vulcan standards and when he started school, was often bored and frustrated living in a household with only "average" siblings to keep him occupied. He often pleaded with their parents to allow him to live on New Vulcan with their grandfather Silek and eventually they permitted him to attend boarding school there.

When their parents' tenure in the Terran Medical Corps was complete, all of their other children had already left home aside from their grandson Henry, so they packed their belongings and moved to New Vulcan to be closer to their last dependent child. Laren excelled on New Vulcan and dove headfirst into all the crazy rites of passage her father once told her about—the kahs-wan, the martial arts training, the Rite of Tal'oth.

He attended the New Vulcan Learning Center and the New Vulcan Science Academy, which by 2300 had become institutions nearly as prestigious as the former versions that had existed on Vulcan. He became a renowned xenolinguist and learned half a dozen languages before picking up the old S'chn T'gai mantle of interplanetary diplomacy. Unlike most of the rest of his family, Laren was rather conservative, which led to many disagreements over the years. Four years ago he openly criticized his Great Uncle Sarek's progressive plan for negotiating with the Klingons and he was an ardent proponent of limiting refugees entering from governments openly hostile to the Federation, which put him at odds with most of his family. He was now considered a rising star among New Vulcan's conservative party and several years earlier he married a conservative fellow politician, T'Sina, and now had a daughter by her.

The last child her parents raised was Lily, Christopher's daughter. By the time Lily came to live with them in 2303, they had relocated to San Francisco and were working half-schedules at a local hospital, ready to embrace a quiet, stable, and lifestyle as empty-nesters. Lily threw a small hitch in that plan, but they never complained.

Lily had the luxury of being her parents' only "only child," or rather, the only child they raised who didn't have siblings living in the household at the same time. She was spoiled rotten. Her parents went to every school play, every dance recital, every field trip to local museums. Safi sometimes wondered if she should be jealous of her niece for having a childhood filled so much devotion and undivided attention, but decided she preferred her own busy upbringing with inexperienced parents who just never seemed to have enough hours in the day.

It made her much closer to her siblings and she still received love in droves. At least one of their parents still went to every school play or orchestra performance or martial arts tournament, even if they were fifteen minutes late and standing in the back with dark circles under their eyes. They still went places together as a family, even if those trips featured packed lunches and sitting in the back of a car with all the kids shoving their elbows and stinky breath in one another's faces. Those experiences provided her and her older siblings with a lot of self-reliance and freedom and in the end, she was certain her parents loved all of them equally, regardless of the differences in how they were brought up.

After eight kids and her father's desperate attempt to sow a passion for medicine in each of them, it
finally stuck when he got to Lily. Sixty years to the day after their mother graduated from medical school, Lily graduated from the same university near the top of her class. She now worked at another hospital in San Francisco and shared a close relationship with the grandparents who raised her, coming over at least twice a week for dinner.

"Safi, are you listening?" Maera asked.

"No," she confessed, finally opening her eyes and realizing she was dozing off.

Maera was licking the last of the sandwich off her fingers and reading her PADD. "Another eight Romulan refugees arrived at the camp this morning. Two kids. Do you want me to send you their profiles?"

Safi gave her sister a solemn nod. No matter how many children she helped, it always felt like she was baling out an ocean with a teaspoon. In some ways she felt guilty for taking so much leave to come home, but it took between two and three weeks for a one-way trip to Earth and it was her mother's hundredth birthday, so she really didn't feel like she had a choice.

The last time she talked to Henry, their mother wasn't in the best of health. She was growing fatigued more quickly and the last surgery she had on her hip had uncovered yet another tumor—easily treatable since caught early, but nerve-wracking nonetheless. Safi couldn't imagine an existence without her mother in it. It terrified her to know her human mother probably only had another fifteen or twenty years left, maybe thirty with some luck and continuing improvements in medical technology. Her heart broke thinking about her Vulcan father, who at 130 years old was just beginning to crest middle age.

How badly she wanted to quit her job and move home and spend whatever time her mother had left by her side and be there to help her father pick up the shattered pieces of his heart when the inevitable end came. She hadn't told Maera yet, but she hadn't actually arranged for return travel back to Cestus III. Safi was sure she would go back, maybe next week with Maera and Vos or maybe a couple of weeks later. Maybe a couple of years later. All she knew was that she wanted to get home and hug her mom and see where things went from there.

Twenty minutes later, Safi, Maera, Vos, Rhaal, Laren, T'Sina, and T'Para went through security and then boarded the small shuttle that would take them from the transport vessel down to the Earth's surface. Safi sat between her brother and sister in an effort to keep the peace while Vos, Rhaal, and T'Sina made polite conversation in the row behind them. By the time they actually landed, several of the other passengers expressed concern that a fight was going to break out between Maera and Laren and when the hatch opened for them to disembark, Maera was shouting, "I'm your sister! If the policies you dream of passing had been in place a few decades ago, I would have never been allowed to stay in the Federation!"

"You do not know the policies I prefer. I have never once advocated for rejecting asylum seekers, it is merely that-"

An exasperated voice interrupted, "Hey mom. Hey Laren. Not much has changed, I see."

Henry stood at the edge of the gate, arms crossed and a bored look on his face. The sides of his head were artfully shaved, leaving a long central strip of partially dyed green hair that he'd slicked back and carefully styled. The phoenix tattoo on his neck looked new too, but he had so many Safi couldn't keep them all straight.

"Well at least you're acknowledging I'm your mother these days," Maera scowled, pulling him into a compulsory hug. She glanced down at the raven-haired girl standing next to him and gasped. "This
can't be Norah? You were just a teeny tiny baby when I last saw you!"

"I'm six, grandma," the little girl said proudly. She looked over at the rest of the group, raised her right hand in the ta'al, and proudly proclaimed in a squeaking voice in shaky Vuhlkansu, "Dif-tor heh smusma!"

Safi smiled. "Live long and prosper to you too, kiddo."

After exchanging warm hugs with Safi, Henry led the group down to a rented van and he, Vos, Rhaal, and Laren loaded the luggage into the back. She called shotgun and plopped into the front seat while Maera and Laren did their best to avoid each other in the three backseat rows by stacking as many family members as possible between themselves. It was a cool San Francisco morning and the vibrant sun peeking between the skyscrapers filled her with powerful nostalgia. She had been born on Cestus III, but she had done a lot of her growing up here.

"Grandma was really worried you guys weren't going to make it," Henry said, shooting her a glance. "It wasn't like we planned to get held up on New Vulcan," Safi sighed. They should have arrived on Earth two days ago, but a problem with the ship had delayed their journey. "But the party isn't until noon, right? We made it with about three hours to spare."

"You weren't the only ones cutting it close. Sara and her family got in late last night."

"She's bringing the kids?" Safi squealed. "I haven't even met the youngest two."

"Yeah, Lina's three now and Lyla is about to turn one."

Had it really been so long since she'd seen her baby sister? The thought that she had two nieces she'd never even met made her feel empty.

"She'll be so happy to see you," Henry said, running his hand through his emerald-colored coif. "Mom or Sara?"

"Both," he laughed. "With you and Maera living out on the border, we don't get to see you as often as we like."

She felt tempted to tell him about her plans for a sabbatical from her work on Cestus III, but she wasn't ready to deal with Maera's unsolicited opinions about her decision. Instead she just said, "I've really missed mom."

"She's been talking about this visit non-stop for the past few months. I honestly think this is the first time the entire family will be together under one roof."

"That can't be right," Maera insisted.

"Actually, that is correct," Laren interjected from the backseat. "An inevitable consequence of our mother bearing long-living children over the course of twenty-one years."

"Actually, the whole family won't be under one roof," Safi corrected quietly. "Christopher won't be here."

Laren cleared his throat. "I presumed you were referring to all currently living family members."

The mood in the van shifted. It was sad thinking her mother would never have all of her kids together, not even on her hundredth birthday, but even before Christopher's passing there was always
someone missing. Most of the older kids had moved away from home by the time Sara and Laren were born and though there had been get-togethers for weddings and funerals and baby showers over the years, there was always at least one no-show because of work or school commitments.

No one said much for the rest of the ride but things took a turn for the better when the van pulled up outside a small yellow bungalow with a bright red door in Daly City, just outside of San Francisco. Sara, Lily, and Malen were on the front lawn with Sara's two older kids, who were using croquet mallets to smack the ground rather than the balls. Safi leapt out of the car and waved frantically but stopped in shock when Lily turned around. Hanging from her niece's slender frame was a bulging pregnant belly.

"Lily?" Maera gasped in shock. "When did this happen?"

"Um, about nine months ago."

"Were you going to tell anyone?"

"Well, I told grandma and grandpa but I've been keeping it pretty low key."

It hurt in a way Safi hadn't expected to know her niece was having a baby any day now and she didn't even know. Had it really been that long since she'd had a conversation with Lily or her mother that was long enough to exchange important family news? How did time manage to slip by so fast? Safi gave Henry a playful punch in the arm. "When were you going to tell me your cousin was having a baby?"

He gave a coy shrug and scooped up three-year-old Lina, who had come barreling toward him when she saw him standing on the lawn. "Now, I guess?"

"When are you due?" Maera asked.

"Yesterday, actually," Lily groaned, rubbing the underside of her belly. "Dave's been a nervous wreck for weeks now."

Laren asked, "Have you two finally gotten married then?"

Lily rolled her eyes. "You sound just like grandpa. You don't have to be married to have a baby together. Dave and I are happy with things the way they are."

The group wandered inside and greeted the rest of the family. Safi gave big happy hugs, Maera delivered her usual self-deprecating humor and sharp wit, and Laren offered his typical stiff standoffishness. It was a very full house with four generations running around.

There were just too many people to catch up with, too many new spouses to meet, too many toddlers to tease, and too many babies to cuddle. She didn't even know where to start. For the first time, it truly dawned on Safi how very blessed her parents really were in the game of life. She was in the middle of asking Henry's three-year-old daughter Rachel if she liked puppy dogs because of the pattern on her t-shirt when she heard a voice that warmed her heart in ways no one else's ever could. It was older and shakier than she remembered, but it was unmistakably the sound of home.

"You made it!"

Safi turned around, stunned to find her eyes were watering at the sight of the woman standing by the kitchen island. "Hi mom!"
Her mother wrapped her in a warm embrace. Her body was hunched and frail, her hair was nearly white, and there were deep creases lining her face, but her eyes sparkled with the same fire they always had. Those blue eyes were Safi's favorite gift from her mother.

"Let me look at you," her mom sighed, pulling back and cupping her hands around Dagny's cheeks. "You still look just like your father."

"Where is he, by the way?"

"He's outside tending the barbecue grill. You know he likes his veggies cooked a certain way."

"It's so good to see you, mom. Happy birthday."

She gave Safi a warm smile and moved in for another hug. "It's good to see you too, my baby girl."

"I'll be eighty this year, mom."

"And about eighty years ago, I was wiping spit up off your chin and helping clean your poop out of your dad's hair."

Safi uttered a shocked laugh. "What?"

She winked. "You'll always be my baby girl. That's what."

Her mother went on to hug Maera and Rhaal and when she came to Laren, she stood in front of him looking hopeful and a little sad. Laren looked conflicted for a moment but in the end, leaned down and gave her a gentle hug. Maera chortled and Safi gave her a death glare, promptly shutting her up.

Safi decided to let them catch up and wandered out into the backyard where Soren and his husband James were watching their adopted twin daughters turn cartwheels on the lawn with Norah while Alyssa, Henry's oldest daughter, cheered them on. She found her father studying the grill, a spatula in one hand and some kind of orange and pink drink with a little umbrella in it in the other.

"Hi, everyone," Safi announced with a little wave.

Soren laughed and scooped her into a huge hug. James' hug was slightly less exuberant but still tight enough to compress her ribs. Her father glanced up and gave a nod, but Safi knew him well enough to know he was very happy to see her. She shared a much closer bond with her father than any of her other siblings seemed to. Humans might have called her a daddy's girl, perhaps, but it was more than that. He never spoke of it, but when she was a teenager, her mother told her the story about how her father had initiated a paternal bond with her to keep her safe while they hid from Gorn soldiers on Cestus III.

The four of them made idle chit chat for a while, though Soren dominated most of the conversation with details about his upcoming play that was set to debut next month. When her brother and his husband went inside to get another drink, she turned to her father and said, "How are things going?"

"Quite well. How are you doing, Safi?"

"Grandpa, grandpa!" The two little voices interrupted in unison.

Soren's twins were standing expectantly on the edge of the concrete pad, eyeing the plate with the portabella mushrooms, peppers, and tomatoes that had already been pulled off the grill. He exchanged a knowing look with them, speared two mushrooms with unused skewers, and handed them over to the hungry seven-year-olds. When Norah and Alyssa observed what had taken place,
they queued up and were also promptly served a preview of the meal to come.

Safi crossed her arms. "Where's mine?"

"If you continue to consume the vegetables as they come off the grill, there will be none to serve later." He then speared a mushroom and handed it to her.

The burst of juicy flavor in her mouth was nothing short of nostalgia and transported her back to countless family cookouts on at least three different planets. "Still perfect."

He turned to Safi. "I hope you did not think the interruption would excuse you from answering my query."

Safi laughed. "How am I doing? I'm doing fine, dad."

He took a sip of his tropical drink. "Fine has variable definitions."

"I mean, I'm healthy. I work a lot. I miss the family. Sometimes dealing with Maera can be exhausting."

"Your sister is very passionate about her work."

"And I am too but sometimes I feel burnt out," she sighed. "There are so many kids and no matter how many I help, twice as many show up at the refugee center the next week."

Her father turned to her, a sad look forming in his eyes. "I served in the Terran Medical Corps for a number of years. I know it is a difficult thing to encounter so many people needing assistance but only being able to help a few."

"It never feels fair," Safi mumbled bitterly. "And sometimes I worry that my life is passing me by while I'm up to my elbows listening to one tragic story after another. I'm sure it must sound really selfish, to worry about my life when so many of these people, a lot of them kids, are dealing with so much worse."

"It does not sound selfish at all. Many people would never even consider entering the profession you are in."

"It feels so wrong to be complaining and wanting to quit though."

"I believe you are suffering from what your mother once referred to as compassion fatigue."

"I have a hard time imagining mom ever feeling this way."

"I cannot speak for your mother, but I do recall a number of incidents over the years that nearly made both of us want to leave frontier medicine and return to Earth and open our own small practice."

"Really? It's hard to think of mom ever feeling worn out and jaded out but you?"

"Several years after you left for university, your mother and I were called away from our post at New Berlin to assist with emergency famine relief on Sklara Prime for a month while additional resources were being gathered. We were the first to arrive and we had a medical staff of seven to assist more than thirty-thousand starving Sklarians. We only had sufficient Federation rations to feed perhaps fifteen percent of them. I remember one night signing the death certificates from that day and when I reached the hundredth name, I announced to your mother I wanted to quit medicine. Fortunately, your mother convinced me to stay. It always seemed to work that way—when one of us felt it was
to difficult to go on, the other would find some hidden strength of character and carry the other one through.”

Safi sighed. "I don't even feel right taking time out of my schedule to have a personal life, so I have no idea when I would find the time to find a partner so I could have someone to lean on the way you and mom had each other."

"How long have you been working with child refugees on Cestus III?"

"Almost forty years."

"How many children have you helped in all that time?"

His question gave Safi pause. "Well, last year was a pretty average year and we helped about five hundred new kids under the age of twelve coming into the camps, so maybe around twenty thousand?"

"If you had only helped even one child, it would have been enough," her father said, raising the lid of the grill to remove several skewers. "Few people have the honor of being involved in the rescue and rehabilitation of more than twenty thousand children."

"So you're saying I should quit and pass the torch on to someone else?"

"I am saying we are only granted one life and should spend it doing what we think is right, but no matter what you choose, you have accomplished what very few people could. I am proud to be your father."

The back door slid open, interrupting their heartfelt conversation. Soren's head popped out and yelled at the kids to come inside before turning to Safi and Voris and saying, "Hey, mom wants to get a picture of the whole family out in front of the house."

"Tell your mother we will be there directly," their father replied, grabbing the last of the skewers from the grill.

When the entire family was gathered on the lawn, the sight of four generations filling up the patch of grass in front of the house filled Safi's heart with countless emotions. It took nearly half an hour to get everyone situated but in the end, Henry suggested the kids should stand in order in the back row with newer generations up front. Almost on instinct, Safi and Malen left a gap between them for where Christopher should go. They looked at each other and decided without uttering a single word they would leave that space empty.

It took a while to get the youngest kids to agree to pose for a picture, but the end result was truly stunning. Voris and Dagny had six living children, thirteen grandchildren ranging in age from sixty-four-year-old Henry to one-year-old Lyla, and six great-grandchildren with another one due any day. They had come from as close as twenty minutes down the road and as far away as Cestus III, some had brought spouses and some had come alone, but the family was all here as if some magic twist in the universe had ordered it.

Because there wasn't a table both large enough to sit all thirty-two people and small enough to fit in their parents' typically-sized dining room, people grabbed food from the buffet and found seating wherever they could. Safi tried on numerous occasions to sneak in a quiet conversation with her mother, but because she was the most loving of matriarchs and also the person whose birthday they were all present to celebrate, she had a crowd of at least four people gathered around her at all times.

Rather than finish off the festivities with a cake—her mother had always shied away from birthday
cake, for some reason—they all crowded into the living room and adjacent kitchen and dining room, sang happy birthday, and took turns telling her what it meant to have her in their lives. Safi laughed at some stories and got choked up at others, and when it was finally her turn, she found herself in a position of not knowing what to say.

She stammered out a rambling speech about her being the best mom in the universe and then yielded the floor to Laren, who delivered a surprisingly tender tribute to their mother. How she wished she were a better storyteller. It was nearly dark when the first people started to trickle out of the house and go back to their homes or the hotels they were staying in all over the city. Safi lingered longer than most and around 2100 hours, she found herself in the kitchen packing up the leftovers when her mother came in.

"You don't have to do that," her mother insisted, trying to shoo her away from the dirty dishes.

"It's your birthday," Safi argued. "And I don't live with you anymore but I'm never too old to do chores. Please, go sit down and rest."

"And I'm still your mom and you can't tell me what to do in my own house." She crossed her arms, trying to look serious but failing spectacularly.

"And I am your husband, it is your birthday, this is my house also, and I insist the two of you allow me to complete this task," said a voice from behind them.

Her mother wheeled around and grinned at the sight of her father approaching. He stopped in front of her, lifted his two forefingers, and gently tapped them to hers. She led Safi out into the living room.

"It's getting pretty late," Safi mumbled. "I guess you're probably wanting to go to bed."

"Not so fast," her mother replied. "I haven't seen you in nearly two years and I barely got to talk to you today."

It was the invitation Safi had been hoping for. She sat down on the sofa and expected her mother to join her, but she stopped by the hallway table and pulled a PADD from one of the drawers first.

"What's this?"

"Family album," her mother said proudly, holding it up to show Safi the image taken earlier that afternoon of the whole family out on the lawn. "It's a little tradition of mine, to go through these pictures on my birthday. Something I started with your father a few years after you were born but I was hoping I could do it with you this year."

"I would love that!"

"I'm glad," her mother smiled. "I always start here, with your grandmother Sofie."

She toggled to the start of the album to reveal a woman who looked startlingly like a younger version of her mother. Her stomach was swollen and her thick red hair was tied back in a braid.

"This was your grandmother when she was when she was pregnant with Martin."

Safi swallowed hard. She knew her mother came from a large family that had been killed in a neutronic storm but her mother very rarely spoke of them growing up. They spent nearly an hour looking at pictures of aunts and uncles who had died before Safi was born. Several times her mother wiped away tears as she flipped past picture after picture, each featuring her parents, brothers, sisters,
and other people that once lived on a salvage ship called the Albret.

When her father was finished tidying the kitchen, he entered the living room, stopped in front of her mother, and kissed her on the forehead. "Try not to stay up too late," he urged.

"I make no promises."

He gave her a small nod. "I will wait up for you. Then he turned to Safi and added, "Goodnight, daughter."

"Night, dad."

They returned to perusing the picture album, looking at pictures beginning in 2261 when the family first arrived on Earth. There was a picture of her mother wearing a shocked face and holding up a PADD with a message announcing she'd been accepted into the Federation's Occupational Experience in the Health Professions Program. There were countless pictures of early childhood, from Safi's first steps to Maera's first day of kindergarten.

There were pictures of Aunt Aisla too, the Orion woman who had moved in with the family when she came to Earth to attend nursing school. Aunt Aisla had always been so much fun and Safi was ashamed that she hadn't thought of the woman who had helped raise her in several years.

They stopped at a picture labeled 2267.151. Her mother was wearing a cap and gown and stooping to hug her, Maera, Malen, and Christopher.

"Your graduation," Safi said wistfully. "It's amazing to think you made it through medical school with four small kids. You inspire the stars out of me, mom."

"Your dad helped so much," she insisted. "And so did your Aunt Aisla. I never could have done it without them. Your dad made you all dinner and put you kids to bed on his own many nights while I studied."

Safi considered the picture more carefully. "2267.151? Soren was born 2267.312. Were you pregnant with Soren when you graduated?"

Her mother gave her a sly smile. "Soren took us both a bit by surprise. We thought we were being careful but it turns out pon farr makes Vulcans particularly fertile."

Safi knew this of course, but it didn't stop her from moaning, "Ugh, mom."

"Well, it's true. You know, when he was about twelve, he asked me once if he was an accident and I tried to tell him he was a surprise but he smirked and told me, 'Nuh uh, I was born on purpose.'"

Safi snorted. "He would say something like that. There were so many times growing up that I thought dad's head would explode from trying to make sense of Soren."

"He did try, bless him."

"It must have been hard though, having Soren right before finishing medical school."

"Having a brand new baby to take care of set me back a year in my residency, but I'm so glad your brother joined the family when he did. He slowed us down a little bit and reminded me of what was really important in life."

They continued on, past pictures of Maera and Malen starting middle school, Christopher and Safi
losing teeth and having awkward growth spurts, and Soren's baby pictures. Suddenly her mother laughed aloud. "Do you remember this trip to Norway?"

"I do!" Safi studied the series of images dated 2271.360-364 and smiled.

"My family is from Norway and your father thought it would be a good idea if I visited it before the Terran Medical Corps sent us to our first posting on the Alpha III colony."

"I was so mad we had to move," Safi reminisced. "I'm so glad that we did, but at the time, I thought I hated you for taking me away from all my friends."

"All kids go through that," her mother said, giving her a small hug.

There were many images of the children frolicking in the snow, trying to erect a snowman and drag each other around on sleds. Her father was in the background of most of the shots, bundled under so many layers of coats and scarves that only his eyes and nose were visible. There was a nice close up of him where someone had convinced him to remove the balaclava long enough to take a good portrait, but Christopher could be seen in the background pulling his arm back to take aim. Another image captured a fraction of a second later was a rather candid shot of her father making a shocked face as he was struck in the back of the head with a snowball.

The pictures soon showed scenes of the family on the picturesque Alpha III colony. Some of her most vivid memories of growing up came from this place. Safi had been going through her moody teenage years then, Malen was always tucked away in the basement tinkering on various projects, Christopher was always out with his friends, and Maera had become increasingly passionate about the plight of Romulans trying to flee the Romulan Star Empire. All of the tension and anxiety of growing up seemed to show in these pictures.

Maera had run away while the family was living on Alpha III and it pained Safi to see so few pictures between the years 2273 and 2274, but in 2274, three years after having her existence turned on its head by being carted off to Alpha III, the Terran Medical Corps gave them relocation orders and they moved to Mars Colony 3. Later that year, Sara was born, and a whole new flurry of baby pictures took center stage.

She laughed when she saw pictures of herself wearing a poofy and angular purple dress and standing next to a nervous-looking human boy. Tom Cisneros, her first boyfriend and deliverer of her first kiss. They were going to a school dance and she had vivid memories of hanging out behind the administration building with his friends, being pressured into smoking some kind of Andorian herb, and coming home so high and so sick that she was terrified she was going to die.

Her father found her vomiting in the toilet, examined her, interrogated her, gave her fluids through an IV, and never spoke another word of it again. She was certain he never told her mother about that incident, because she would still be grounded if he had. After that, she broke up with Tom, never tried drugs again, and had a newfound respect for her father's ability to be an understanding and discreet parent.

There were images of Malen shipping off to Starfleet and pictures of the family at his graduation from the basic enlisted engineering course, then the family album went dark for nearly a year until pictures of newborn baby Henry appeared. She exchanged glances with her mom and instinctively decided to give her a hug.

By 2277, the family had moved to the more remote Barisa Prime and only two years later, Safi turned eighteen and went to Earth to attend university. All the family pictures that came after were still of her family, but also seemed like someone else's family.
As they scanned through pictures of toddler versions of Sara and Henry splashing in a creek while Soren looked on under a floppy hat, Safi asked, "Is it ever weird to you that we were all so spread out?"

"Sometimes," her mother admitted. "You, Soren, and Sara bridged the gap a little, but sometimes it did feel like I was raising kids in sets, rather than in a single family. I guess it didn't help that we moved around every three years. I gave birth to all my children on different planets, which I suppose is pretty unusual. Sometimes I wonder if we made the right choice, joining the Terran Medical Corps."

"I never liked moving away from Earth but in hindsight, I think it was really good for all of us. It made it feel like we were all in it together."

Her mother smiled. "You have no idea how nice it is to hear you say that."

Safi was feeling quite tired by the time they reached images of the family's life on Barisa Prime and Laren's baby pictures. More baby pictures were appearing too as more grandchildren entered the picture. Maera had Rhaal in 2287 and a few months after that, Malen's wife Bethany had Vincent.

As Sara, Henry, and Laren grew older, she was struck by how Henry and Laren seemed joined at the hip when they were little. There were pictures of Henry teaching Laren to ride his bicycle and of the two of them playing together in a tree house.

Safi paused on an image of Henry pretending to stick his finger in Laren's nose and Laren obviously laughing. "I didn't realize they were so close."

"Thick as thieves. Laren really looked up to Henry when he was little."

"What happened? I can't imagine two people being more different now."

"Laren was bullied a lot when he was younger. He was smaller than the other kids and so much smarter. I don't say that as a proud mom either; he was too smart for his own good and could be snotty about it. Whenever Henry stood up for him, the teasing just seemed to get worse. Eventually your father started teaching him some meditation techniques to cope with it, and Laren was sold in the idea of Vulcan philosophy ever since."

"Does that ever make you sad?"

Her mother swallowed hard. "When I was pregnant with you, one of my biggest fears was that you would grow up to be like your father. You know, that you would follow logic and not want anything to do with your emotional, human mother. Laren's decision was really hard for me to accept for a long time, but he's happy. He's my son and I love him and I would be a fool to be disappointed in any of my children. It mostly makes me sad that it's driven a wedge between him and Maera, but Maera is responsible for that too."

Safi's eyes began to water, which obviously distressed her mother.

"What is it, Safi?"

"I miss being part of this family so much," she said, sucking in her breath to stave off tears.

"When did you stop being part of this family?"

"When I moved to Cestus III. Besides Maera and Rhaal, I hardly ever see or talk to any of you anymore. I didn't even know Lily was pregnant."
"Safi, you're very busy working in those refugee camps. Those children need someone in their corner and I am so proud that my daughter is that someone."

Tears finally started rolling down Safi's face. "I'm starting to wonder how much I've missed out on because I've been too busy with work for the last forty years. Everyone's gone on to have these amazing families and I haven't even been on a date with someone in a decade."

"Is having a family of your own something you really want or just something you think you should do?"

"I- I don't know."

"Can I let you in on a secret?"

"Sure," Safi coughed.

"I never thought I would have kids." She waved her hand at the PADD on the coffee table and said, "And look how that turned out."

Safi choked in disbelief. "How could you go from not wanting kids to having seven of them?"

"A very wise person once told me that not every happiness is chosen. Sometimes the best things in life are the ones that appear out of the blue. If you meet a nice person and decide one day to get married and have some babies of your own, I would be overjoyed, but if you didn't, it wouldn't change a thing. Sometimes I imagine all the babies you help in those camps are my own grandchildren. In a way, they are. You didn't give birth to them, but you've given them a second chance at life so don't think for a minute that they aren't a tiny bit a part of this family too."

Safi started bawling and pulled her mother into a tight hug. When she finally calmed down enough to talk she said, "I was thinking of taking a break from work for a little while and staying on Earth to be closer to you and dad."

"I would love that, but only if it's what you want."

"I honestly think it is," she confessed, suddenly certain of her choice. "Maera will be furious."

"Maera's always had very strong opinions, but it's not her decision to make. I understand what it's like to help desperate people day in, day out with no end in sight to their misery. By the time your father and I finished our twenty years in the Terran Medical Corps, I thought my soul would never be whole again. We all need a break sometimes."

"I want to be part of a family again."

Her mother closed her eyes and thought to herself for a moment. Then she flipped through the photo album back to the image taken of the family on the lawn earlier that afternoon. "You never stopped being part of this family. I love all of my children equally, the ones I gave birth to and the ones I didn't, but of all the babies I raised, you will always be a little bit more special than the others. Look at all of these people, Safi. None of this would have been possible if you hadn't come along and surprised the hell out of me and your dad."

Safi was on the verge of ugly crying. She grabbed a nearby throw pillow and nodded.

"Tomorrow is a new day full of new decisions," her mother continued, giving her a kiss on the forehead. "I should take my medicine and get going to bed but why don't you stay in the guest room and we'll continue this in the morning?"
"I just want to stay up and look at these pictures a little while longer if that's ok."

Her mother kissed her a second time and shuffled off down the hall to her bedroom. Safi barely made it through images of Laren's graduation from the Vulcan Science Academy before she slipped into a sea of vivid dreams. When she awoke the next morning, she was covered in a light blanket and soft gray light peeked in through the French doors in the kitchen.

She stood and stretched, instantly regretting passing out on her parents' stiff couch. She wandered into the kitchen to make some tea but paused when she noticed both of her parents were awake and sitting together in lounge chairs on the patio, watching the sunrise hand in hand. She tiptoed nearer to them, keen to observe the beauty in the moment but unwilling to disturb them.

Her mother leaned her head on her father's shoulder and said, "We did good, didn't we?"

He rested his head against the top of hers and replied, "Yes Dagny, I believe we did."

Chapter End Notes

I've been promising a happy ending for literally two years now, and I hope I've delivered on that promise. I want to extend a huge thank you to everyone who read and left comments on this. I'm a little sad that it's over, but I started a new Vulcan OC story called Velek and Mavis Go on an Adventure. It features two rather unconventional Vulcans in an action/comedy romance rather than the ongoing angst of this story. Check it out if you like, but if not, thanks again for giving No Winter Lasts Forever a shot over the past two years.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!