

the andorian incidents

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Summary

“Elan, have you met Ensign T’Lac?” Shi’ar drags a Vulcan woman over. “I think you would like each other.” T’Lac’s hair is long for a Vulcan, swept to one side of her head in a thick shining braid, and her eyes are strangely blue in the dim lights. One of her earlobes is pierced. Elan has never seen a Vulcan with any piercing, let alone one of their precious pointy ears.

“Nurse Shi’ar, you have no logical basis for that conclusion,” T’Lac says before Elan can even say hello. Typical Vulcan.

Elan joins Discovery.

zhen, shen, chan, thaan

The Andorian Empire's membership in the Federation is uncomfortably new when Elan decides to enlist in Starfleet. Her *zhavey* is vehemently against it; the idea of serving side-by-side with Vulcans is repugnant. Her *thavan* served under Thy'lek Shran and idolizes him. Her *shreya* and *charan* can't make up their minds. There are fights—physical, verbal, anything at hand—about Elan's decision.

None of her parents' opinions on the topic matter to Elan, and she tells them so loudly and at length. The last vestiges of the Imperial Guard are practically ceremonial at this point. Where is there left to go for a violent troublemaker like her (she likes to think that she's a violent troublemaker), but to an entirely new place with new people?

At the Academy, she never doubts where she'll go. She has no interest in science, in engineering, except as they can serve security. It's not war, it's security. *That* is one of the great lies that the Federation tells itself, tells everyone. Now that the Earth-Romulan War is long since over, the Federation says, there is no more war to be had.

She advances quickly in the ranks of security. Her generous interpretation of Starfleet rules means that she never rises to chief, but it doesn't matter. Her *thavan* is overjoyed when she returns home to show off her new lieutenant's pips, and even more delighted to hear that she's assigned to the U.S.S. *Shran*. Captain Yaras is one of the few Andorian captains, and one of the fewer who's old enough to have served in the Imperial Guard before it began to shrivel away into Starfleet, and likes to tell stories about the old days, spent in hand-to-hand combat putting down insurrections, fighting back against splinter Vulcan sects that didn't accept Federation-mandated peace. The *Shran* isn't a warship, but they're dispatched to squelch minor conflicts that arise around research installations across the Federation.

Then comes the Battle of the Binary Stars. The *Shran* is one of the first to go down against the Klingons, stippled with open wounds venting atmosphere. Elan wants to be on the bridge with her captain, with her chief, but she's ordered—repeatedly and increasingly firmly—to supervise the evacuation of the crew. There are only sixty of them, and she puts them onto shuttles, into escape pods, and waits for her captain.

Her captain never comes. The ship rocks and Captain Yaras calls, "Lieutenant Elan, get off the ship, that's an order," and Elan screams into the venting atmosphere and abandons ship just as the entire deck depressurizes. She watches the destruction of the bridge from the tumbling escape pod—suddenly gone, like a gaping tooth socket—and thinks, *so this is war*.

It's hard to contain her rage, afterward. Starfleet sets up a recovery facility, for lack of a better word, on a starbase, and sends the worst of them there to receive treatment and await reassignment to one of the new ships that Starfleet is building as fast as it can. More than a month in, she sees a strange empty-eyed man walking down a hallway and recognizes that posture—hypervigilance, the counselors call it. He's a captain without a ship and she thinks it wouldn't be the worst thing to serve under someone like that now that there's a real war.

"You'll be assigned to the U.S.S. *Discovery*," her counselor tells a group of them. They're a mixed lot, mostly human, a few that she knows from the *Shran*. "Captain Gabriel Lorca in command," and whispers run through the room at that. He's the man she saw that was ready for attack; she hears someone say "He abandoned his ship" and she should hate him for it, does see it as a breach of honor, but she can't help wishing that her own captain had done the same.

It takes very little time to see that Captain Lorca is, in the words of one of the cadets on the ship, a hot mess. Emphasis on mess. The *Discovery* is a science ship without functional science, frustration hanging heavy over everything. She's assigned to a secure engineering lab and almost every day, Lorca comes down to yell at his chief of engineering about a spore drive—Elan, well-versed in how these science things go, puts effort into not understanding what he's saying—and Lieutenant Stamets yells back. It's comforting in a way, after seeing so much Starfleet politeness. This, this conflict, this is what she knows and understands.

"He wasn't like this, before," Chrian confides in her at lunch one day. Chrian is part Aenar but has none of the bizarre tranquil affect that Elan has seen in other Aenar. As far as she can tell, Chrian's one and only love is the warp drive; she's surprised that Chrian has any awareness of interpersonal dynamics. "I wasn't on the *Buran* before the war started, but a friend of mine was, and he used to be...calm. Casual. Relaxed about the rules, but in a normal kind of way, like he didn't care whether your uniform was zipped up all the way and he slept with a couple ensigns." Elan has trouble imagining Lorca caring enough about anything but his spore drive and the war effort to take notice of ensigns.

Security here is more rigid, maybe in response to Lorca's obsessive focus. He always seems to be on the bridge, even on gamma shift, which Elan is assigned to as the third-most senior security officer who also has the most black marks in her file. Commander Landry, his chief of security, doesn't like nonhumans and doesn't bother to hide it. Elan is annoyed but not insulted; she respects Landry more for not pretending, even as it grates on her. Lieutenant Riley, Landry's second in command, is everything that Landry isn't—cheerful, downright welcoming, always happy to spar or run close-quarters combat simulations when Elan gets bored with all the waiting. There's a real war happening and they're *sitting* here while Stamets pokes at his special project and Chrian modifies and re-modifies the warp drive in the desperate hope that they'll do something exciting with it.

And then. Then Lorca brings Michael Burnham, the mutineer, aboard the *Discovery*. Landry talks about picking up garbage, but Elan is in the mess hall when that first fight starts. She wants to hate Burnham, reflexively, because everyone says that she started the war and the war is what took Elan's captain, but the woman is so controlled, so precise. She takes down three other convicts in a matter of seconds. Elan respects that. Landry doesn't.

If ever there was a man who can't hide his fascination with a woman, it's Lorca. Elan doesn't know why, but he *changes* when Burnham is around. Especially when Burnham solves the mystery of their failing black alert and they jump into a war zone and destroy Klingon warbirds and this, this is what Elan wanted in a war, to see the Klingons suffer and die for what they did.

She's sorry when the creature kills Kowski, less so when it kills Landry. Kowski mostly kept to himself, didn't join in their shooting competitions in the combat simulator, seemed like he'd lost someone important. He was boring, but she had nothing against him, and he was part of her team. Landry, on the other hand—her death makes room for someone better in charge, someone like Riley.

They find the Klingons again and again, and oh the satisfaction, when they jump during gamma shift and Elan gets to fire on the Klingons herself, watch those warbirds be obliterated, and she uses a photon torpedo on the fourth one and gets put on report—by Saru, Lorca wouldn't have cared. Riley shakes his head when he hears about it and says, "Elan, you can't do it like that. You wait until Lorca is on the bridge, and then you say something like 'Captain, permission to fire a photon torpedo,' and he'll give it to you." Elan tries it Riley's way and to her delight, it works. Lorca hates the Klingons as much as she does and when he's lurking on the bridge on gamma shift, he gives her free rein to overkill while Saru watches in disapproval.

Then the Klingons take Lorca. Elan has a strange faith that they'll get him back—Lorca is above all else a survivor, and the *Discovery* feels invincible—but that's another security specialist gone, Chiefowitz skewered by a bat'leth, and they're down three security personnel in as many weeks, just like that. The battered lieutenant that Lorca brings back with him is hardly enough of a replacement, especially when Lorca drops him into what should have been Riley's spot as chief of security.

It's either a strangely oblivious choice or a demonstration that Lorca doesn't give a shit what people on the ship think. Riley doesn't grumble, because he's not the kind of person to do that, but Elan openly tells him, "That's bullshit. Everyone knows it should be you. I'd like to see him shoot against you."

"He saved the captain's life," Riley says, and then elbows her because Tyler is approaching their table in the mess hall.

"Lieutenants." He shifts his weight a little. "I wanted to introduce myself. Ash Tyler." He tucks his tray under one arm and offers his hand to shake.

Riley shakes it. Elan doesn't. "Welcome to *Discovery*, Lieutenant," he says. He smiles falsely in a way that Elan doesn't approve of.

"Sir," she says coldly. She didn't pretend to like Landry and she's not going to pretend to like Tyler, not until he proves himself. Looking at him, though, she understands why Lorca did it. He has the same kind of half-hidden broken look that Lorca did, in the beginning, a little lost, but he's papered over it with friendliness in a way that the captain never has.

She hears about it quickly when Burnham collapses. Lorca has never been good at hiding his feelings about Burnham—sometimes walks around looking like he's been hit between the eyes, after he talks to her—but this is far beyond that. "He was in sickbay *almost as soon as she got there*," Nurse Shi'ar whispers to her. "She asked if we could go rescue her father and he just...*said yes*." Shi'ar always knows the gossip.

Elan is on duty in the shuttle bay as Tilly and Tyler and Burnham prepare to fly into the shuttle bay. She watches Lorca march into the shuttle, hears him tell Tyler, "Bring her back in one piece."

"Not a scratch," Tyler says confidently.

Lorca says something quietly, too quiet for Elan to overhear—and she is straining to hear it, make no mistake—and then, louder, "Or don't come back at all." She almost feels bad for him. Andorians value honesty, blunt emotion, but this feels almost shameful, seeing these feelings of his that spill out everywhere. If she can see it, Burnham must be able to as well.

When Admiral Cornwell boards *Discovery*, while Lorca is still—unshielded—there's a strange disconnect in their interactions. Elan escorts her—with Tyler gone, Riley is on the bridge—and she sees the awkwardness in the way they speak, the way they stand. Cornwell is like a puzzle piece trying to interlock her shape with Lorca's and he's a straight edge, nothing to fit against. When she leaves again for her peace envoy, Elan hears her tell Lorca that when she gets back, they'll figure out how Lorca will step down from command. Elan knows her captain well enough to know that that will never happen.

"He told Michael that *he did it all for her*," Shi'ar gushes at dinner. "*All for her*, and then he offered her a position on the bridge."

"You're too invested in their love story," Elan tells her. "You need to find yourself a nice ensign to work off some of those feelings." As far as she's aware, Shi'ar is engaged in friendly relations with at least two different specialists and a cadet, which is probably how she knows everything that's happening all the time.

When the party is announced, Riley tells her, "You go, I'll cover you. You'll have more fun anyway." Riley is human but has a Vulcan girlfriend who teaches at Starfleet and he talks to her at least once a week. This is bizarre to Elan—he introduced them over the video connection, the girlfriend was scrupulously polite and even attempted to smile once—but she's willing to accept the extra chance at socializing it gives her. It's been...a long time since the *Shran*, where the crew members tended to periodically pair off whenever they wanted.

Burnham and Tyler are there. Elan half-expects the captain to show up too, shadowing Burnham's steps and glowering at Tyler, but strangely Stamets appears and drags them both out of there. She decides not to worry about it, for once.

"Elan, have you met Ensign T'Lac?" Shi'ar drags a Vulcan woman over. "I think you would like each other." T'Lac's hair is long for a Vulcan, swept to one side of her head in a thick shining braid, and her eyes are strangely blue in the dim lights. One of her earlobes is pierced. Elan has never seen a Vulcan with any piercing, let alone one of their precious pointy ears.

"Nurse Shi'ar, you have no logical basis for that conclusion," T'Lac says before Elan can even say hello. Typical Vulcan.

"Well, I guess we've met now."

"You should dance!" Shi'ar is drunk, or at least she had better be.

"I do not wish to dance," T'Lac says. "Excuse me. I believe Ensign Chandavarkar is indicating that my presence is required elsewhere." She turns and walks away.

Shi'ar stares after her. "Elan, I'm so sorry—" she starts.

"I'm not interested in Vulcans." Certainly not now she isn't.

She ends up taking home a sweet engineering specialist who probably has a hopeless crush on Chrian and thinks that Elan will be the next best thing. They enjoy themselves and then part ways, and Elan is...happy enough but restless. Only later does she find out that they all missed the entire ship being taken hostage and repeatedly destroyed—that she missed a chance for a real fight—and she's grumpy then, the hours with the engineer an unsatisfactory substitute.

Elan and Riley spar the next day. "I can't believe I missed the entire thing," she complains. Riley knows *suus mahna*—learned it from his girlfriend—and it's fun to spar with someone who fights entirely differently than she does.

"Apparently the captain was killed repeatedly, before they worked it out—Stamets and Burnham, that is." Riley ducks out of her reach. He has better endurance than she does, one of the few benefits of being human, and she's starting to slow down. "He wasn't very happy to hear that."

"No, I'd imagine not." She thinks, absurdly, that the captain wouldn't take well to death.

"How was the party? Meet anyone interesting?"

Elan swings at him and misses again. "A rude Vulcan, but that's not unusual."

"Hey now," he objects.

"Shi'ar tried some very obvious matchmaking, the Vulcan didn't see a logical reason to talk to me, end of story." She realizes that's not entirely accurate. "Oh, I—spent some time with that cute engineering specialist."

"Which one?"

"The cute one," she says, exasperated at her failure to remember the woman's name—Hanna, maybe?—and allows Riley to knock her onto her ass to end the sparring session.

* * * * *

She's walking onto the bridge at the end of alpha shift to relieve Tyler when she hears Lorca tell Burnham that a mission is too dangerous for her. Elan's heart almost hurts for him. He's such a disaster when it comes to Burnham. Sitting there in his chair, telling this ordinary person—arguably the most disposable person, the mutineer—that a mission is too dangerous, he might as well be declaring it to everyone. The whole bridge can see it anyway. And he keeps fighting it when she says she has to go, until she says "Unless this is about me" and everything becomes too explicit for him to fight it any more. He slumps back, defeated, and Elan thinks that really, he needs a friend to tell him how stupid he's being. She wishes *she* could go on the mission. But at least she's at the bridge security station when the Ship of the Dead goes. Something fierce burns inside her when she sees the explosion and she wants to shout, wants to scream *that's for my captain*.

After that—after the insane dizzying jump that throws them all into darkness and pain and leaves half the ship on the casualty list—things change. Tyler is erratic, sometimes frightening. The captain goes on an away mission—with Burnham, of course, only ever with Burnham—and Tilly unloads samples from their shuttle and says, "Lieutenant, would you mind taking these to the biology lab?"

She accepts the cart of full of samples and trundles it down to the biology lab. When the doors open, she's confronted with T'Lac—dirt and fluids on her face and hands, hair tied back in a haphazard tangle—and can only say, "I was asked to bring these here."

The lab is a mess. There are sample cases smashed on the floor, equipment hanging haphazardly, and T'Lac appears to be the only one there. There's a trace of green blood at the corner of her lip. "Thank you, Lieutenant." T'Lac's voice betrays none of what's happening until she says, "If you have a moment and—would be willing to assist me—"

Elan sets down the new sample cases carefully. "What do you need?" She gestures at T'Lac's lip. "You should really go to sickbay and get checked over."

"That would be an illogical use of time. I am not significantly injured. Some of these experiments are time-sensitive and must be restored as quickly as possible."

"All right." Elan is too thrown to argue with her the way that she normally would.

"Please begin by collecting any cases that remain intact," T'Lac instructs. "Return them to the compartment that matches their numbering."

It's mindless work, but that's not a problem. "Most of these look fine," she tells T'Lac, holding up a case.

The woman comes over to investigate. "They do appear to be undamaged," she agrees. Elan watches her inspect the case. T'Lac doesn't look away from the case, but the tips of her ears turn the faintest hint of green. She's a lot cuter than the engineer from the party, Elan has to admit. "Lieutenant, is there a reason you continue to look at me?"

Elan doesn't bother lying, as a general rule. She settles for saying, "Nothing that's relevant right now," which is both true and the kind of answer that a Vulcan will accept. "You have something on your face." She gestures toward a clump of something gloppy hanging off of one of T'Lac's eyebrows—she doesn't want to think what it is—and T'Lac looks confused when she scoops it away and wipes her hands on her pants.

"Lieutenant, your continued attention to my person is unwarranted. There are still many samples to be restored."

"Yes," Elan says happily, and continues picking up the cases.

And then Lorca makes her his chief of security.

we have all the feelings

Chapter Summary

“Please cease what you are doing,” T’Lac tells her. Elan has her feet up on the control panel of the shuttle—not touching anything important, of course—and is fidgeting with a knife that she liberated from Gabe’s war room.

“Why?”

“You are diverting my attention,” and Elan thinks that that might be the sweetest thing T’Lac has ever said to her.

“Are you joking?” She adds, “Captain?”

Lorca looks nonplussed. “I’m not known for joking, Lieutenant.” He crosses his arms across his chest and looks almost suspicious. “You don’t want the job?”

“You know I’m not really chief material,” Elan tells him. “I’m not going to be polite and tell you that I think all your ideas are good. I think a lot of your ideas are bad.”

Lorca actually laughs at that, though she thinks it’s probably more in surprise than actual humor. “Lieutenant Riley was optimistic about you.”

“Riley is a filthy liar and is the one you should be putting in charge of this mess.” Too late, she remembers that maybe he won’t appreciate her referring to the security situation as a mess. One more reason that she’s not a good fit. “Tyler was useless as chief. There are barely enough people in security for a ship half this size, and we’re the only ones who ever seem to die.”

“It sounds like you have strong feelings,” Lorca says mildly.

She gestures expansively. “Have you met an Andorian before? We have all the feelings! There’s a reason I’ve never been made chief! They barely let Yaras be a captain!”

“Yaras.” He turns the name over in his mouth. “Your former captain?”

“For almost fifteen years. Our ship went down at the Battle of the Binaries.” Elan laughs. “I think you and I met right after, at the starbase where they put everyone too damaged to go right back out onto a ship.”

“Look,” he says, rubbing one hand over his face. “I’m not Yaras. I’m probably not much better than I was when we met, which I don’t remember. But I need a new chief of security, and I need someone who thinks differently than I do.”

Elan shrugs. She knows how to be a proper Starfleet officer, but she wants him to know what he’s getting into. “If you insist.” She smiles at him and bares her teeth just a little. “Gabe.” She turns and walks out.

Gabe—she’s going to call him that until he fires her—apparently can’t come up with an appropriate response.

* * * * *

Gabe is still taking her measure. He forces her to write reports about the status of the security team, a thing she’d hoped to never, ever have to do. When she complains—“I’m not in security because I’m good at writing reports!”—he says, “Well, all right, why don’t you go down to the surface” and sends her down with away missions.

“Please cease what you are doing,” T’Lac tells her. Elan has her feet up on the control panel of the shuttle—not touching anything important, of course—and is fidgeting with a knife that she liberated from Gabe’s war room. It’s a pretty thing, made of an unfamiliar metal that gives off occasional tiny shocks.

“Why?”

“You are diverting my attention,” and Elan thinks that that might be the sweetest thing T’Lac has ever said to her.

“I wouldn’t want to do that.” She does stop, though. “We’ve only got another thirty minutes down here, T’Lac. Finish up collecting your samples and get your people back here.”

“We will require another seventy-five minutes. There is more extensive megaf flora on this planet than was apparent on sensors.”

Elan sits upright. “No, thirty minutes,” she repeats. “That’s what the captain gave you.”

“And you obey the captain’s timelines scrupulously?” If she didn’t know that Vulcans don’t smile, she’d think T’Lac was smiling a little as she says it.

“I’m trying to get back on his good side!” Elan protests. “Well, get on his good side.”

“It is unlikely that an additional forty-five minutes will alter his opinion of you.” T’Lac taps something on her PADD and stands. “My presence is required at one of the sample sites.”

Elan stands up too. “Great, I’ll come with. I’ll *accompany* you,” she amends.

It’s good that she does, because no sooner does T’Lac join two of the other scientists at the foot of a giant plant than all three are somehow swallowed up entirely into the bulbous mass. Elan yells and shoots it, with no effect. Then she remembers Gabe’s knife and tries an experimental slice; the plant shudders and shrinks away from the metal even as its skin opens cleanly beneath the blade. It takes her twenty very tense minutes of hacking and—peeling, for lack of a better word—to open things up enough that she can grab T’Lac by the hand and drag her out, covered in some kind of iridescent pollen. The other two scientists follow.

T’Lac is angry beneath her Vulcan exterior, and the pollen glints on her pale skin. She splutters a little. Elan can’t resist brushing some of it off T’Lac’s shoulder. “I don’t care what you do to delay,” Elan says, “we’re going back to the ship on time.”

Every away mission with T’Lac seems to go that way. T’Lac finds some new way to extend the length of the mission, whether it’s getting swallowed by sparkling plants or falling into quicksand or getting wrapped up by vines. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you enjoyed this,” Elan complains. *She* certainly enjoys it, getting to do something more than run their limited security teams through drills and write reports about those drills.

“I appreciate these little treats you give me, Gabe, I do,” she tells him, still half-covered in mud. It’s dripping on the floor of his ready room and he looks less and less annoyed every time. “Shoot something, chop something, save the girl—” All right, she didn’t mean to say that last one. “It’s like you want to keep me happy as your chief.”

“Well, I have to make up for all the reports somehow,” Gabe says. “You seem to be having a lot of fun.” He’s starting to loosen up a little, at long last.

“You know, I am. Except T’Lac keeps making things difficult. She’s always the one finding the trouble.” Elan is still amped up from the last mission. “I suppose you’ve got a lot of paperwork to do?”

He raises an eyebrow. “What did you have in mind?”

“You could come down to the security division and run some close-combat simulations with me,” she offers.

“Go take a shower,” he says. His voice sounds almost affectionate. “You’re getting mud on my ready room floor.”

people do stupid things

Chapter Summary

“Is there a purpose to your presence, Lieutenant?”

Well, that stings. “Reports of strange noises,” Elan invents. “Thought there might be a swarm of ice-bores in the vents.”

“I am not aware of such a phenomenon,” T’Lac says. Is there the tiniest hint of amusement in her voice? “Have ice-bores spread beyond Andoria?”

“There have been unconfirmed hearings. Sightings. Very dangerous on a starship like Discovery. The heat they generate could burn through hull plating.” Elan spins side-to-side a little on the stool at the laboratory table next to T’Lac.

“Of course. Has your investigation revealed any danger?” T’Lac meets her eyes and raises an eyebrow.

“Not yet, but I’m vigilant.”

She hears about Gabe's Klingon-induced tantrum after the fact, which is a good thing. “If I’d been in the brig area, I would’ve stunned him first and apologized later,” she tells T’Lac. She’s started making up excuses to come by the biology lab, though sometimes she doesn’t bother to articulate them.

“I believe that would be a court-martial offense,” T’Lac says. She’s been examining a dirt sample through a microspectrometer, and when she takes her eye away from the lens, there’s a faint green impression where it’s pressed against her skin. Elan is surprised every time she remembers that Vulcans have green blood. “Is there a purpose to your presence, Lieutenant?”

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“Of course. Has your investigation revealed any danger?” T’Lac meets her eyes and raises an eyebrow.

“Not yet, but I’m vigilant.”

“Of course,” T’Lac repeats. “I expect you will be patrolling my lab periodically to defend against ice-bores?” That has to be a humorous note in her voice. No one could seriously engage with the story that Elan is making up.

“If it won’t disturb you too badly.” Elan can be an asshole, but she’s not actively trying to annoy T’Lac.

T’Lac looks back into the micro-spectrometer. “I have a number of delicate experiments that would be ruined by a swarm of ice-bores,” she says.

Elan leaves the lab in such a good mood that she almost forgets to go yell at Gabe. Almost.

“Were you—showing off?” she demands. “Trying to get Burnham’s attention? Undermine Saru’s confidence in you?”

“I don’t recall giving you permission to speak freely, Lieutenant,” he says, and his voice is cold. He stands behind that desk in his ready room like it’s a phaser-proof shield.

“Consider it a perk of my role as chief of security,” she snaps. “I provide warnings when people do stupid things.”

Gabe looks tired. He looks tired a lot. “It—accomplished my goal,” he says. Elan doubts that he knows what his goal *was*. “Dismissed.” When she doesn’t move, he adds, “I don’t plan to do it again.”

Elan frowns at him. She knows that her antennae make it virtually impossible for her to lie convincingly. There are Andorian diplomats who’ve trained themselves, but she’s not one of them. “Next time I’ll be there in the brig too.”

“I’m sure you will,” Gabe says, and the threat in his voice is undermined by the fact that he’s cracked a smile.

His behavior gets even more alarming the day that she walks into the mess hall and sees him eating at a table—back to the wall, of course, you can’t suppress that instinct once it develops. “*What is happening?*” Keyla hisses, when Elan sits down with her and Owo. “What is he doing?”

“Tilly is persuading him to have a party,” Owo says, obviously unimpressed by Keyla’s dramatics. “I suppose he didn’t feel like eating all alone again.”

“Yaras—my last captain—used to eat in the mess with us,” Elan says. She takes a bite of extremely mediocre dan dan mian. Not spicy enough. “Maybe he’s trying to soften his image.”

Keyla and Owo both stare at her. “Soften his image,” Keyla repeats.

Elan shrugs and takes another bite. She debates going back to the replicator and asking for hot sauce. “Probably going to be a long trip home. Everyone gets lonely.”

Keyla is too kind to snort at that. It’s not exactly a secret, the captain’s particular loneliness. “Right,” she says. “Well, Tilly should take care of that.”

Tilly scurries back to their table beaming. “The party is on!”

Elan claps her on the back. “Our hero! You’re captain material for sure if you can convince Gabe to throw a party.” All three women look horrified at her use of ‘Gabe,’ and Elan reminds herself that that’s a personal joke.

She goes to T’Lac’s lab after lunch. Technically it’s not T’Lac’s alone, but Elan has a good enough sense of when other people will be working that she can mostly go when T’Lac will be the only one there.

“Lieutenant,” T’Lac says, by way of greeting. She doesn’t look up from her padd. “Ice-bores again?”

“Water-beetles.” T’Lac doesn’t take the bait. Elan fidgets with a small metallic rock on the lab table in front of her, but she sets it down when T’Lac gives her an ominous look. “You heard that the captain gave Tilly permission to throw another party?”

“You are, in fact, the fourth person to interrupt my work to tell me that.” T’Lac’s voice is even, without the slightest indication of either interest or annoyance.

Elan is feeling increasingly awkward. “Are you planning to go?” This is terrible, she sounds like a teenager.

“Are you?”

Is that—interest? “Of course. Andorians are wonderful party guests.” She grins with all her teeth. She has a few bottles of Andorian ale that she’s been saving for an occasion like this.

“Is it appropriate for the chief of security to become inebriated in such a circumstance?”

That feels like a slap across the face. “I’ll have to check Starfleet regulations,” Elan snaps, and regrets it. She sets the rock down a little too emphatically. “Your lab seems safe from water beetles today,” she says, and leaves.

T’Lac’s apparent lack of interest has soured her somewhat on the party. The day of the party, she waits until the end of her official shift and then cracks open a bottle of Andorian ale in her quarters. It feels pathetic, though, a full-grown woman sulking in her quarters and drinking alone, so she goes wandering to find the only person on the ship who she knows is even more pathetic.

He’s in the mess hall in his well-protected table, the sad bastard, drinking straight out of a bottle of brown liquor. “How grim,” she says, and drops into the chair next to him. She leans back in it a little, lifting the front legs off the ground, and takes a drink from her own bottle.

“You don’t want to go to the party? It’s to improve crew morale.”

This is definitely better than sulking in her room. “That explains why you’re not there,” she cracks, and is gratified when he smiles. “Hoping someone will show up to keep you company?”

“Someone other than you and your Andorian rudeness,” he says. He offers her his bottle, and she trades him for her own.

“To bitter antisocial humans.” She toasts him and they drink from their respective bottles. She can’t help laughing a little at his expression when he tastes the ale. What kind of human made it through Starfleet Academy without ever tasting Andorian ale? “It’s the finest ever made on the moons of Andoria,” she tells him with a straight face, to see if he’ll call her out; when he doesn’t, she gives him back his brown liquor.

“What about my whiskey?”

Elan has never been a fan of the various brown liquors that humans distill. “Acceptable,” she says. “Not as good as mine.” She leans enough to reach an abandoned cup on another table—empty—and pours a good amount of ale into it. Then she offers him the cup. “You can drink yours anytime.”

There’s a moment of silence as they contemplate their drinks. “So why aren’t *you* at the party?” Gabe asks.

She takes a long drink and then peers into her bottle instead of looking at him. “You know T’Lac?” The bottle distorts her words a little.

“That Vulcan biologist you’re always going on about? Argumentative, rude, disrespectful?”

“Yes.” She remembers T’Lac’s face the last time that she’d dragged T’Lac out of a sentient swamp with a sample vial half-filled. “Yes.”

“I thought Andorians didn’t like Vulcans.” Sometimes he sounds like he learned everything he knows about the galaxy from some outdated Federation database.

“She has such adorable ears,” Elan says. She sips at her ale, which is beginning to numb her pleasantly. “I hear Vulcan ears are very—sensitive—”

He makes a very prudish noise and says, “I didn’t realize there was so much—”

“You’re so old-fashioned, Gabe,” she tells him. “My *zhavey* would love you.” He makes another noise of protest and she says, “Have another

drink. Your girl Burnham has a half-Vulcan brother, you know.” He doesn’t even bother denying it. “It doesn’t matter,” she says, abruptly sulky again. She can feel her antennae drooping. “The problem with Vulcans is that you can’t ever tell how they feel about you. You know what I mean, like your Vulcan.”

“Yes,” he says, and oh he must be a little drunk to say that. “No—no, I don’t have a Vulcan.”

“Oh, I know,” Elan says. She pats his arm and refills his cup. “We all know.”

“What?” Gabe sounds somewhere between outraged and horrified. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, she’s not Vulcan, and you don’t have her.” This is very obvious. She peers at the food synthesizers. They’re calling to her, even though they always let her down. “We should eat something.”

“I don’t know what Tilly told you—” He must be *very* drunk.

“Something happened? You had to swear her to secrecy?” She’s not sure she can handle this pace of revelations. “I’m getting food, you’re drunk. Your pathetic human constitution can’t handle Andorian swill.” Whoops.

He calls, “Nothing happened!” after her as she walks to the food synthesizers. In the history of the universe, no one has said “nothing happened” and truly meant it.

“Computer,” Elan says, “food for drunk humans.”

“Specify restrictions,” the food synthesizer says cheerfully.

“No restrictions.” She hopes it’s not—ah. A pile of oozing fried things. Exactly what she should have expected when she asked for human food. She carries it back to Gabe and deposits it in front of him.

“What’s this?”

Elan picks one up and tests the texture. “I’m guessing—fried cheese? I asked for drunk food.” She pokes at his mouth with it. “Chomp chomp.”

“You’re demoted,” Gabe tells her. “Ensign—no, cadet.” He takes a bite, and she takes a bite too. Bland, a little salty. Not the worst human food she’s eaten.

“You’re not subtle, Gabe. You declared your love on the bridge.”

He looks outraged. “I told her a mission was too dangerous for her!” His outrage is spoiled a little when he shoves another cheese stick into his mouth.

“Starfleet ordered us not to rescue the Ambassador and you did it anyway, for her.”

“She didn’t know about the orders,” he insists, and eats another cheese stick. He’s gone a little misty-eyed.

“You’re in sickbay every time she’s injured, before anyone even tells you.” She’s had enough of the cheese sticks and takes up the ale again. “I’m your chief security officer. I’m here to protect you, until you demote me again. You don’t need to lie to me. What happened?”

“Nothing,” he insists. “Nothing!” She wonders if he realizes that he’s rubbing a spot on his neck just under the collar of his jacket.

“It’s hurtful that you’re lying to me, Gabe, but I can’t make you be honest.”

He stares moodily into his cup. She wonders what was in it before the ale. “Unlike with you and your Vulcan, I *got* the information.”

And it was bad news, obviously, or he wouldn’t be sitting here in the mess with her eating fried cheese and drinking blue rotgut. She leans over, testing the limits of what the chair will handle, and pats his arm twice. “You could branch out. There’s a whole ship of other people—”

“I’m trying to be a Starfleet captain,” he says, and what a strange way to put it.

“You’re completely gone for her, you mean.” Elan heaves a sigh. “We can commiserate together.”

Gabe says some linguistic nonsense about English that doesn’t really interest her and holds his empty cup out. Against her better judgment, Elan empties the ale into his cup and tells him, “Give me your whiskey, you drank all my ale.”

That’s when they come in—joyful Tilly and her boys, Burnham, and—T’Lac, of all people, with an actual expression on her face. There’s a green flush high in her cheeks and her hair is in that sideswept braid again, her earring a bright point of light. The braid is a little mussed, tiny tendrils escaping, and Elan has never seen her anything but perfectly composed. She wants to taste that earring, see how T’Lac will react if she kisses the tip of that ear, see how dark that green flush will get—

“Captain! Elan! Come sit with us!” Tilly is beaming, and ignoring Rhys’s frantic motions.

T’Lac meets her eyes and it’s like a gut punch, the way Elan suddenly can’t breathe. “We’re fine here,” she eventually manages to say, and takes a pointed gulp of whiskey. Vile. “Gabe was just going to get us some water.” She kicks at his chair—she’s about an inch from overbalancing and falling on her ass—until he grudgingly stands up. It’s adorable how hard he’s trying to walk steadily to the synthesizer, like no one will guess he’s been drinking if he frowns hard enough. “How’s the party?”

“Amazing,” Rhys gushes, gazing at Tilly.

“Tilly can throw a hell of a party,” Chandavarkar agrees.

Elan doesn't really care what either of them has to say. She wants to hear what T'Lac thinks of it—why T'Lac went to the party at all. Did she think Elan would be there? Did she think Elan *wouldn't* be there? “You chose not to attend, Lieutenant?” T'Lac asks.

“Oh, you know,” Elan says, suffused with adrenaline and ale. “I found the captain drinking alone here. It was too sad to leave him alone.”

Gabe drops the glasses of water from a little too high up onto the table, and they splash a little but stay upright. “Lieutenant,” he warns.

She's pushing it, but she can see something in T'Lac's eyes and she says, “Pathetic, even.”

Gabe, rightfully, kicks her chair over and sends her tumbling to the ground. T'Lac starts laughing and it's the most gorgeous sound that Elan has ever heard.

“I told you that you would understand slapstick when you saw it!” Tilly exclaims as Elan begins to stand. T'Lac is still giggling. “That was a perfect demonstration.”

Elan staggers a little dramatically, and T'Lac hurries forward to put a hand on Elan's arm. It's the first time she's ever touched Elan. “I apologize for laughing. Are you undamaged?” That smile is still playing across her face. Elan could have a broken wrist and she wouldn't feel it right now.

“Completely,” Elan says, and she can't stop her grin. “I could use—some help getting back to my quarters, though. We drank—a lot.”

T'Lac nods as though this is perfectly ordinary between the two of them. “Of course. Place your arm around my shoulders for stability,” she says, and ducks a little to allow Elan to drape her arm over T'Lac. She's very warm against Elan's skin, and Elan shivers a little.

As they leave, Elan hears Chandavarkar shout, “Yeahhh, get it!” and spares a moment's pity for whatever trouble he's about to get himself into.

The corridors are long and dark and T'Lac says into Elan's ear, “I do not know where your quarters are.”

“Give me a minute,” Elan says. She leans against the hallway wall and lets her arm slip from T'Lac's shoulders to her waist.

“Are you certain you're all right?” T'Lac says. She leans close and peers into Elan's eyes. “You may have a concussion.”

“I'm good.” Elan gives in and reaches out to touch the glinting stud in T'Lac's earlobe. “I've never seen a Vulcan with a pierced ear before. I thought it would be—too sensitive.”

T'Lac's eyelids flutter a little and she presses just slightly into Elan's hand. Elan strokes her earlobe around the stud, very lightly. “It is uncommon,” T'Lac agrees, and her voice is thick. “I did it myself.” Elan brings her hand up from T'Lac's waist to thread her fingers into T'Lac's braid. T'Lac shivers when Elan brushes the tip of her ear and cups her own hand on Elan's cheek.

Elan is impatient, always has been, and she pulls T'Lac into the kiss even as T'Lac leans in. It's electric, when their mouths touch—even better when Elan runs her thumb very deliberately along T'Lac's ear and she moans into Elan's mouth and clutches at Elan's shoulder. Elan is barely aware of anything beyond T'Lac's mouth and the sounds she makes until T'Lac makes a reproachful noise and Elan realizes that she's pulled out the tie holding T'Lac's braid in place. “Sorry,” she says against T'Lac's mouth.

“You aren't,” T'Lac tells her, and Elan grins. At some point Elan's better judgment will kick in and she'll remember not to do this in a hallway, but for now—T'Lac tilts her head down a little and Elan licks the pointed tip of her ear, then kisses it with the barest scrape of teeth. T'Lac's strangled moan is a lot louder this time, and her hair is falling in a thick curtain across one side of her face. “I do not know where your quarters are,” T'Lac repeats. “But I am confident that they are more private than mine. Or this hallway.” Her pointed tone is spoiled a little by the way that she's panting slightly.

Elan isn't quite sure how they make it from the hallway to her quarters without bumping into anyone (or maybe they do and everyone pretends it hasn't happened), but T'Lac is gorgeous spread out on her bed, and the satisfied sigh she makes when she comes is almost as nice a sound as her laughter.

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