

Paradise Lost

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Paradise Lost

by [VelvetMouse](#)

Summary

Sometimes hell can sneak up on you; other times, it announces itself with bells and whistles.

Notes

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It was, Christine realizes later, absolutely inevitable that, when all hell broke loose, it would be on her watch. It was just the way the universe worked. It was just the way this mission worked. Or didn't work. The entire thing had been doomed from the very beginning.

She had been so nicely holed up in her lab on Rigel III, overseeing several experiments that she and her small staff had running. All of that was shot to hell when her comm had beeped and she had made the mistake of accepting the incoming transmission from Admiral Pike. Not that she really had a choice in the matter. One did not simply ignore a call from Starfleet command. Even if the call was being made by a friend.

"Hello, Admiral," she greeted him warily. "What can I do for you?"

Pike chuckled. "Now, Christine, is that any way to greet a friend?"

"Forgive me, sir, but since I spoke with your wife less than a week ago, I somehow doubt this is a social call."

A quirk at the corner of his mouth confirmed her accusation, and he sighed. "I'm afraid you're right. We've had a situation come up, and I think you can help. Are you familiar with the planet Gnalastia?"

That name caused Christine to become even more wary. "Sure, it's an uninhabited class-M planet that is being considered as a secondary planet for the Vulcans. It is my understanding that the Vulcan High Council wishes to be able to utilize the apparent abundance of natural resources on Gnalastia, in order to help pay for the reconstruction of their civilization," she replied neutrally. "I believe a Federation outpost was established there a few years ago, to serve as a base for the analysis of the planet." *And it's only two systems away from Rigel*, she added to herself. *Dammit.*

"Correct. Unfortunately, the CMO and much of the base personnel have fallen ill and are on their way to Starbase 423 as we speak."

"Ranni? Is he okay?" she interrupted. Dr. Ranni was one of the few surviving Vulcans with an interest in xenobiology; he had been stationed on Earth when Christine had been the assistant director of Starfleet Medical's bio-medical research lab, and she had grown fond of the stoic doctor. They had even discussed combining some of their research and publishing a joint paper.

"They'll be fine," Pike reassured her. "As best we can tell, they picked up some sort of mutated strain of the Kamalic flu. Fortunately, the *Xerxes* was in the area, and was able to get folks into isolation units fairly quickly. It still wiped out most of the medical personnel, though. Normally, this wouldn't be an issue - the two most senior nurses were apparently immune, and Dr. Ranni's staff is exceptionally well trained. However..." He paused and this time Christine wasn't able to suppress a groan. She buried her head in her hands, seeing where the conversation was going.

"However," Pike continued, ignoring her reaction, "next week, a representative from the Vulcan High Council will be arriving to personally look at the planet. And Starfleet command wants a full doctor at the base, just in case. . . ." He trailed off.

"No. No way," Christine replied flatly. "Chris, I can't just pick up and leave whenever the brass want me to. I'm in the middle of three different experiments right now, and time and science wait for no one. I did my time. They promised they'd leave me alone for a few years. I've barely been here nine months."

For a moment, the Admiral's features softened, and he become her friend, Chris Pike, again. "I know, Christine. And I'm really sorry about this. Believe me, I did everything I could to talk them out of it." Then he sighed and the Admiral reappeared. "I'm afraid they're not giving you a choice about this, Dr. Chapel. You're to take a shuttle up to Starbase 423 at 0800 tomorrow and rendezvous with the *Xerxes* after it discharges the patients. Captain Watson will brief you about the Vulcan visit and the flu outbreak on your way to Gnalastia."

"Understood," Christine spit out between gritted teeth. "Sir."

"Think of it as a working holiday," Pike advised. "You'll only be there for a couple weeks, a month tops, while Dr. Ranni recovers."

She merely glared and cut the comm connection.

Which is how she finds herself in Outpost XXVII, on the scenic, if not idyllic, planet of Gnalastia.

She is beamed down from the *Xerxes* to the Outpost's reception area, and briefly introduces herself to the Outpost Commander, a dour man with the unlikely name of Lovey Filpotz. Commander Filpotz barely grunts at her in greeting, clearly preoccupied with the impending visit by the Vulcan dignitaries, so Christine shows herself out and goes off to find the infirmary.

The first few days pass in relative quiet. Despite the reduced staff, Christine finds the infirmary neat and well organized, and she immediately understands why Pike said that, in other circumstances, the loss of Dr. Ranni would hardly be an issue. The head nurse is a blue-skinned Andorian named Thela, which (to Christine's mind) explains why he hadn't been infected with the flu. He is as good as any nurse Christine has ever worked with. He greets her warmly, saying "Dr. Ranni speaks very highly of you, Dr. Chapel. I'm sure you'll have no trouble finding your way around our little lab."

The only other nurse left standing is a small human woman of Lunar descent by the name of Natalie Kurtz. She is quiet, competent, and even more anal about the organization of the infirmary than Christine has ever been. Christine likes her immediately.

They settle in to an easy routine, dealing quickly and efficiently with the daily bumps and scrapes that come with the operation of a Starfleet outpost. It has been almost five years since Christine actively worked in an infirmary rather than a lab, but she readjusts easily.

It is, naturally, the afternoon after the Vulcan delegation arrived that all hell breaks loose.

After checking on the infirmary in the morning and finding nothing that needs her attention, Christine retires to the CMO's office to continue catching up on the medical journals that she never seems to have time to read at home. Her first clue that something is wrong comes just after lunch, when she hears what sounds like distant thunder.

Christine frowns; the weather schedule said nothing about storms until the following week. She wonders if there is something wrong with the weather net, but a quick look out the window shows nothing but clear skies. She hears the rumble again and, with a sigh, sets aside the journal she was reading, carefully marking her page. In addition to their professional interests, she and Dr. Ranni also share a love for printed, paper books; briefly, she wonders just how much it costs for Ranni to have the printed versions of the journals sent all the way out here, rather than just receiving the electronic versions on his PADD.

Consulting the map of the outpost on her PADD, Christine makes her way to the engineering section. If she were home on Rigel, she would never interrupt her work like this, trusting the engineers to fix whatever the problem was. But her time on the *Enterprise* taught her that in a small, isolated community, any anomaly quickly becomes *everyone's* problem, and she would rather know what is going on from the very beginning.

She taps her entrance code and is surprised to find a familiar shock of red hair bent over the Chief Engineer's terminal, green hands dancing across the keys.

"Gaila?" Christine asks in surprise. "I didn't know you were stationed here."

The Orion looks up quickly. "Oh hello, Christine," she replies cheerfully. "I see they drafted you too."

Christine looks curiously at her friend, and Gaila hastens to explain. "The Chief Engineer was one of the ones who got sick. Since I was in the area and between missions, I got called in to cover until Jemma gets back on his feet." She shrugs, sending her curls bouncing everywhere. "I don't mind, really. I haven't played with planetary networks since the Academy."

"Between missions? I thought you'd still be with the *Enterprise*?"

Gaila laughs, an easy, natural sound for the exuberant Orion. "I'm not there for the same reasons you're not, Chris. Well, some of the same reasons," she amends with a wink. "Basically, I'm too good. I'm not going to displace Scotty - I wouldn't accept it if they tried - but the brass felt I was ready for my own ship. So last year they gave me the Chief Engineer's position on the *LaSalle*."

"Congratulations," Christine exclaims, giving her friend a brief hug, and wondering how on earth she didn't already know this.

"Thank you. We got pretty banged up on our last mission, so she's in the yards at Proxima, getting a full refit."

"And they were able to pry you away? I didn't think you'd be willing to leave while they had your baby up in the docks."

Whatever Gaila is going to reply is cut off by another rumble, this one loud enough to shake the room. With a muttered Orion curse, the

engineer dives for her console again.

"I guess it's not the weather net, then?" Christine asks when Gaila pauses in her frantic typing.

"No. Well, sort of no."

"Explain, Gaila," Christine demands with a hint of exasperation.

"Those rumbles are definitely not thunder. But the weather net is acting a bit strange. We're getting some serious radiation bombardment, and that is screwing with a lot of systems right now."

"What sort of danger are we in?" In her mind, Christine immediately starts reviewing the supplies in the infirmary. Radiation poisoning can be difficult to treat without the correct syntheses.

"From the radiation? None, really. The planetary shield and atmosphere are still filtering out most of the really dangerous stuff. But. . ."

"But?"

"Something is affecting the planet. In a big way. And I can't pinpoint what it is or what's happening."

Another rumble shakes the room again and the two women share a worried look.

"We should check in with the Commander," Christine suggests. "I don't know where on the planet the group is right now, but we should find out if they're being affected by this."

Gaila nods and turns to one of the staff members in the room, one dressed in science blue rather than engineering red. "Bri, keep a close eye on the seismic activity. If this planet is about to come apart at the seams, I want at least five minutes' warning. T'val," she snaps at another person, "keep an eye on the weather net and the planetary shield. Let me know if either so much as twitches." With a nod, she leads Christine from the room.

"Why are we doing this again?" Christine mutters as they stride through the halls towards the communications center.

"Because with Commander Filpotz and Lieutenant Commander Lyran both escorting the Vulcan delegation around the planet, we're the two most senior officers left at the outpost," Gaila reminds her. "And if we don't look into this, who knows what will happen."

Christine makes a face but does not deny the truth of the words.

"Has there been any contact with the Commander in the last hour?" Christine demands of the ensign on duty as soon as she enters the room.

The ensign spins in his chair to face the two senior officers. "No, ma'am. The Lieutenant Commander missed his last check-in."

"Then why the hell wasn't someone informed?" Gaila demands angrily. Christine puts a calming hand on the engineer.

"Because I suspect the ensign was instructed to wait until two check-ins were missed before saying anything. Isn't that correct?" The ensign nods frantically, relieved to not have to try to explain himself. "When is he due for the next check-in?"

"At 1500, ma'am."

Christine glances at the chronometer on the wall. Half an hour. "Let me know immediately if they miss the next check-in," she orders.

"Actually, let me know either way."

"Lieutenant Commander Gaila?" A new voice comes in across the comm. It's Bri, in Engineering. "I think this is your five-minute warning." The panic is evident in her voice.

Gaila and Christine look at each other in horror and sprint back to Engineering, as another rumble rocks the outpost. This time there is no mistaking it for thunder - it's an earthquake, no question.

By the time they skid back into Engineering, Christine has run through half a dozen scenarios in her head, ranging from false alarm to planet-wide evacuation. She prays for the former, but largely expects the latter.

Gaila goes immediately to the station monitoring the seismic activity of the planet and begins reading through the logs.

"*P'tak*," she spits. Christine blinks in surprise and wonders where her friend learned to swear in Klingon. "The seismic activity is off the charts. The two northern continents look like they're trying to pull themselves apart along the fault lines. We're also seeing a huge increase in volcanic activity, and I can't even begin to tell you what kind of gases are being released into the atmosphere. Between that and the radiation, it's a wonder we're getting any readings at all."

"What about us here? Is this land mass going to tear us apart as well?"

Gaila taps a few keys and quickly skims through the outpouring of data on her screen. "The southern continent seems to be the most stable so far. None of the earthquakes have had their epicenters here. Not yet, anyway. But with all the instability I can't promise it'll stay that way."

"Can you make us safe?" That is the 64 million-credit question. The entire room seems to hold its breath and wait for the response of their interim Chief Engineer. Gaila's green eyes go unfocused and Christine can practically see the scenarios being run behind them.

"I - think - so," she replies hesitantly. "If I reroute the - "

"Gaila," Christine cuts her off. "I don't care about the *how*. I just want to know if you can *do* it."

"Yes. Yes," she repeats more firmly, meeting Christine's eyes. "I can stabilize the southern continent. I don't know how long it'll last, but I can buy us a few days."

Christine breathes a brief sigh of relief. They have a reprieve then.

"Get on that," she orders. "I'm going to issue a general recall to all personnel. Let's get everyone back here."

"Use that terminal over there," Gaila says, indicating with her chin. Her fingers are already dancing again. "It's got a direct link with the comm system."

Nodding, Christine sits down and begins to type out the order to return to the outpost by whatever means necessary. It will be sent to all comms and PADDs across the planet. Christine thanks her lucky stars that there are no civilians on the planet yet. Well, none except for those in the Vulcan delegation.

She types in her authorization code to distribute the message but after a moment the terminal beeps at her ominously. *Could not send message. Failure to establish contact with relay beacon. Please try again.*

She growls in the back of her throat and resists the urge to slam her hand down on the terminal. Then a red-clad engineer materializes beside her.

"Can I help you, Doctor?" Wordlessly, Christine points to the error message on the screen.

"Ah. Lieutenant Commander Gaila mentioned that we were experiencing significant interference from the radiation, as well as from the gases being released by the volcanic activity. I believe this is causing your message to be unable to reach the relay beacon, which is situated in orbit above the atmosphere."

"Thank you, Lieutenant T'val," Christine replies dryly. "Can you do something about it?"

"If I may?" he asks, indicating the terminal. Christine motions him in and watches as he types in several commands.

"I have rerouted the paths to the planetary relay beacons, rather than the ones in orbit. I believe this should allow your message to be sent. It will, however, be distributed at a slower rate. Please reenter your authorization code."

Christine does so and watches in relief as the message status blinks and then flips over to blue, indicating that it has been successfully sent.

"Thank you, Lieutenant." She is about to head back to the infirmary to start preparing for the inevitable influx of injuries when the comm chirps once again.

"Communications to Doctor Chapel."

"Chapel here. Please tell me the Commander checked in?"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am. I haven't been able to reach anyone in the party."

Christine swallows several invectives and takes a deep breath. "Keep trying them, Ensign. And find a list of all personnel on the planet. I've issued a general recall to the Outpost, and I expect we're going to start having people check in. I'd like to keep track of who we've heard from and who we need to go look for."

"Yes, ma'am. Communications out."

"Chapel to Transporter Room. I want you to lock on to Commander Filpotz and his whole team and prepare to beam them directly into the infirmary. We have reason to believe one or more members of their party are injured."

The silence seems to stretch on forever, although it is probably only a few heartbeats.

"Transporter room to Doctor Chapel, I'm sorry, ma'am. I can't get a lock on them. I've found their comm signatures, but they keep flickering in and out. Not long enough to get a stable lock on them."

Christine grinds her teeth in frustration. "Keep trying. We need to get them out of there. Wherever 'there' is."

"The Baral Mountain Range on the northeastern continent," comes the reply from the Transporter Room. "Judging by how weak their signals are, I'd guess that they're in a cave of some kind. Just the place to be when the continent is trying to tear itself apart."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Christine chuckles a bit. It is, perhaps, some rule that transporter chiefs have to be completely off their rockers.

She opens her mouth to respond when another voice cuts in. "Doctor Chapel? We've made contact with the Commander's team. It was only for a few moments, but Ambassador Spock reports that they've been trapped by a cave-in and have numerous injured and some dead."

"Dammit!" This time Christine can't quite hold back the curse. "Transporter Room, did you hear that? I want that team back here five minutes ago!"

"We're working on it, ma'am, but it doesn't look promising. I just can't hold a lock on them for more than a split second."

"Gaila, a little help here would be good," Christine calls out, with a bit of edge in her voice.

"Not now, Chris," the engineer snaps back.

"I'm looking at an interstellar incident if I don't get that team back here, Lieutenant."

"And you won't have a continent to bring them back *to* if I can't get this done." Before Christine can snap back at her friend, Gaila pauses and takes a deep breath and smacks her comm. "Ensign Moore, I'll be there as soon as I can, but in the meantime, boost the receptors as high as they can go and –"

Christine tunes out the rest of the technobabble, but catches her friend's eye and mouths, "Thank you", before heading back out to prepare her nurses and the infirmary. Hell is knocking and she has preparations to make.

Barely an hour later, the first patients begin appearing in the infirmary, people who were working on the southern continent, near the outpost. Most of the injuries are minor – cuts and bruises from falling objects or from being thrown off balance during one of the aftershocks – and, in the case of one unlucky woman, an impressive set of scratches from a falling ocelot-type cat native to world.

"I don't know who was more surprised, me or the cat," the woman says cheerfully, as Christine cleans out the long scrapes. Christine chuckles and gives the woman a hypospray of pain-reliever and an antibacterial agent.

Christine keeps in almost constant contact with the Communications ensign, whose name she has still not managed to learn. She would feel more guilty about that, but she isn't sure she is going to have the energy to spare. Between them, they start checking names off the master list. *10 down, 463 to go*, Christine thinks as she restocks her tray.

She is in the middle of pulling a batch of hyposprays out of the autoclave when her comm beeps.

"Chapel."

"Chris? We've got them." It's Gaila, sounding tired but satisfied. "We're going to beam the whole team directly into the infirmary, whenever you're ready."

Christine motions to the two nurses and they quickly clear an area in the middle of the room.

"We've got a clear space in the middle of the infirmary, Gaila. Go ahead and let's bring them home."

She holds her breath as the golden sparkles reform into people with agonizing slowness. The first thing she notices is that far too many members of the party are lying at angles that would be completely intolerable for a living being.

Nurse Thela and Nurse Kurtz are already moving among the peop – no, the bodies, Christine emends with a wince. She moves to Ambassador Spock, the one person in the group she can confidently say is still alive.

He is sitting, supporting himself with both hands, and one leg is bent at an odd angle. He regards her with a slightly quirked eyebrow that Christine knows means (at least in his younger self), "I'm mildly surprised but too polite to say anything."

"Nurse Chapel," he says as she runs her tricorder over him, "I was unaware that you were stationed at this outpost."

"It's *Doctor*, and I'm not usually. And put that eyebrow down before I shave it off," she mutters in exasperation. This draws a slight sound from the Ambassador that might be considered a chuckle.

"I apologize, Doctor. I have been unable to keep up with your lives as well as I would have liked. But I assure you that I am quite well, given the circumstances, and Lieutenant Commander Lyran needs your attention far more urgently than I do."

"If by 'quite well' you mean having a broken tibia and more bone bruises than I can conveniently count..." she retorts, and prepares to argue further, but meets his eyes and sighs in concession of his valid point. Amazing how much is said in silence.

Christine turns to the prone form of the Lieutenant Commander. "What happened to him?" she asks. If it were not for the readings from her tricorder, she would have a hard time believing the man is still alive. His pulse is so faint that she cannot find it with her fingers and the back of his head is soft in ways no skull should ever be.

"A large portion of the cave falling on his head is, I believe, the direct cause of his most severe injuries. When the cave collapsed, he and the Commander both sacrificed themselves to save my life. Lieutenant Commander Lyran appears to have survived. Commander Filpotz was not so lucky."

"I'm not sure you can call this lucky," Christine mutters, wincing at some of the readings. She raises her voice. "Nurse Kurtz, are there any other survivors?"

"I'm afraid not, doctor. Just the Ambassador and Lieutenant Commander."

"Dammit," she swears for the second time that day. It does not hit her until later that the death of the Commander truly places her in charge of the outpost – and, by extension, the planet. Now, she has patients to tend to. "Natalie, please give the Ambassador a hypo of pain-reliever. I'm afraid his leg is going to have to wait until we can get the Lieutenant Commander stabilized."

"I assure you, Nur-Doctor Chapel, I am quite capable of my own pain management," Spock protests, as the nurse approaches him with the hypospray.

"Well, you're getting some chemical help this time, so quit arguing with me, or I'll knock you out," Christine snaps back. Out of the corner of her eye she catches a brief flicker of expression - wistfulness? or perhaps a sad smile? - on the Vulcan's face. Surprised, she blinks, but when she looks again, all she sees is the stoic mask. Pushing it out of her mind (at least for the moment), she turns to her Head Nurse.

"Thela, we need to prep one of the biobeds for stasis. There is bleeding around the Lieutenant Commander's brain, and I don't think I'm going to be able to reduce the swelling. I lack both the facilities and the necessary skills to perform the kind of surgery that will be required to save his life. The best I can do is put him into a deeper coma and hope that we can get help soon enough."

She explains all this in a dry, clinical tone, but she is afraid the brightness of her eyes give away her internal agony. Decisions like this are why she prefers her lab over the infirmary. A brief touch of a blue hand on her arm tells her that Thela not only understands her decision, but agrees with it.

Taking strength from her colleague's agreement, she begins to prepare the necessary medications, while the nurses get the biobed ready. Transporting the prone officer to the bed is a terrifying maneuver and for a moment Christine thinks she has lost him. But then her tricorder picks up a faint, but steady, heartbeat again, and they continue on.

Once Lyran has been put into a deeper, hopefully healing, coma, and the monitors are set up around him, Christine slumps against the wall momentarily. Two Vulcan aides, the Commander and both Starfleet security men, all dead. She can't help but wonder how many of them she might have saved, if they had been able to beam the team out sooner.

Looking around, she sees that her nurses are occupied by another wave of patients, and so she makes her way back over to the Ambassador. He is still sitting on the floor where he was transported in, although someone has thoughtfully provided him with several pillows to lean against.

"I apologize for the delay in treating you," she says as she begins to run her tricorder over him again.

"Prioritizing the Lieutenant Commander's treatment over my own was the logical course of action. I am quite adept at managing the pain of my leg, especially now that I do not have to be concerned with the rest of the cave coming down on top of us."

Christine makes a noise that could be taken for agreement. "So," she says as she sets the braces around his broken leg, "I take it you have known another Christine Chapel in that other timeline of yours."

"You would be correct in your supposition, Doctor."

"Tell me about her," Christine requests. It's an old trick, keeping the patient talking to distract him from the unpleasant things she must do. She is mildly surprised when Spock answers.

"The Christine Chapel I knew was a remarkable woman. I met her first as - " a slight hiss from Spock is the only indication of pain as Christine resets the bone in his leg. " - as the Head Nurse aboard the *Enterprise*, under Doctor Leonard McCoy, when we embarked on our first five-year tour. She was a gifted healer and a compassionate woman. She completed her medical degree later, and went on to become CMO of the *Excelsior* for a time, and ended up as the director for Starfleet Emergency Operations."

"Huh, I wonder why she served as a nurse for so long before finishing the doctorate," Christine wonders as she runs the osteo-regenerator over his leg. The idea of having postponed her doctoral degree is alien to her.

"I believe it was due to her engagement with Doctor Roger Korby. When he disappeared while exploring, she elected to serve as a nurse on the *Enterprise* in order to search for him."

Christine snorts in contempt. "Yeah, I'm sure that worked out real well for her," she mutters.

Spock raises one eyebrow to the highest, "oh really?" position. "I see by your reaction that you too were entangled with Doctor Korby."

Christine gives a humorless laugh. "Yeah, 'entangled' is a good word, Ambassador. At the time when the *Narada* attacked, I was in the middle of my doctoral degree in xenobiology, keeping up my nursing certs by working in the Academy infirmary, and engaged to Roger. After that whole mess, Roger became most insistent that I leave Starfleet for a 'safer' career path. I told him to take a hike and walked out on him. Best decision I ever made. I finished my degree and did my residency on the *Enterprise* with Bones."

The eyebrow goes up again. "Fascinating." Again, Christine thinks she catches a flicker of something on the Vulcan's face, but it is gone before she can identify it.

Christine raises an eyebrow of her own at him. "You keep speaking of her in the past tense," she notes.

Spock nods. "She passed away at the age of 136. Old age, I fear, is something medicine will never have an answer to. It was a privilege to know her, and an honor to be considered a friend."

Christine smiles, unused to sentimentality from a Vulcan. But then, she remembers, Spock is only half-Vulcan; it appears that he eventually did manage to find balance between his two warring halves.

"I'm sure she was honored, as well, Ambassador. There, now, your leg seems to be regenerating nicely, but I don't want you putting any weight on it for a few days. I may be able to knit the bone back together, but the leg needs to recover from the trauma it's suffered. I'll have Nurse Thela help you to one of the beds so that you can rest more comfortably."

Before either of them can say anything further, another group of people stumble in to the infirmary, and Christine hastens over to them to see what needs doing. She feels like she is fighting a battle against the whole planet, and the planet seems to be winning.

It is nearly thirty-six hours before Christine can even attempt to call for outside help. She sequesters herself in the CMO's office for a few precious minutes and records her message.

"This is Doctor Christine Chapel, stationed at Outpost XXVII on the planet Gnalastia, to Admiral Christopher Pike. Chris, I know fifteen different ways to remove your spleen and I don't think any of them are painful enough to make up for this mess you've gotten me into. The planet is currently trying to tear itself apart at the fault lines. Chief Engineer Gaila has stabilized the southern continent by some means that I'm not going to even pretend to understand.

"As one of the two most senior officers left at the Outpost, I have assumed command. Lieutenant Commander Gaila has her hands full making sure we don't come apart at the seams. Commander Filpotz was killed in a cave-in while escorting the Vulcan visitors around the planet. Lieutenant Commander Lyran is in a medically-induced coma in an effort to reduce the swelling around his brain, due to massive head trauma when that same cave fell on him. I've got him stabilized as best I can, but he needs more help than I can give him. Dammit, Chris, I'm a researcher, not a surgeon. Lyran needs to get to a real medical facility ASAP.

"Ambassador Spock is the luckiest green-blooded hobgoblin to ever exist in any time-stream, and managed to survive that cave-in with only a broken leg. I'm afraid the same can't be said for the rest of the exploration party. They're all dead, Chris. Lyran and Ambassador Spock were the only ones alive when we finally managed to beam them out of the cave."

She pauses, trying to reign in the panic that has been creeping into her voice. "I have ordered a general recall of all personnel on the planet. We've been bringing them in by whatever means we can. Transporters are still unreliable, and seismic activity make landing shuttles a bit dicey, but we're managing. We've had a steady stream of visitors to the infirmary, but so far we've been able to treat nearly everything. I hope you can send the cavalry soon, though, because we really need the help here. None of us have slept for more than a couple hours at time in the last two days and we're wearing pretty thin. Chapel out."

She attempts to send the message, but encounters the same non-responsiveness as she did when she tried to send out the general recall order. Too tired to even sigh, she merely saves the message and sends it over to the Communications station with instructions to keep trying to send it. It will get through eventually. It has to.

The odd triple beep of her comm, signifying a transmission on a secure channel, rouses Christine from her semi-stupor. She has lost track of hours, and possibly even days. Her world has narrowed to the patient in front of her, the tray of supplies next to her and the chair she is sitting in.

She inputs her clearance code automatically and has to blink several times through bleary eyes before the image on the screen resolves itself properly.

"Len?"

"I hear you called for the cavalry." The southern drawl is unmistakable.

"Oh god. You're coming? Please tell me you're coming." A hint of panic creeps into her tone, but Christine ruthlessly tamps it down. She can't afford to fall apart now, not with help finally on the way.

"The *Enterprise* is twelve hours out. I need you to hold on until then, darlin'. Can you do that for me?"

"For you, Len? Anything." Relief floods through her like a drug.

"That's my girl. Now the captain has a few things he'd like to ask you, but he graciously allowed me to place the initial call."

"Upon threat of dismemberment, probably," Christine mutters at the screen as the familiar face of Jim Kirk appears.

"Nah," he says cheerfully, "I've gotten better. He only had to threaten me with a full course of Iotian immunizations this time." He pauses and the cheerful, happy-go-lucky friend is replaced by the concerned captain. "Now listen, Christine, here's what I need to know. . ."

Half an hour later, Christine is almost hopeful for the first time in forty-eight hours. She checks on the Ambassador, who is either sleeping or meditating - she still can't tell without a tricorder - and updates her two nurses on the situation. The knowledge that help is on the way buoys them all and somehow they make it through the final half-day.

When the distinctive golden sparkles indicate the arrival of the *Enterprise* away team, Christine hauls herself to her feet and smoothes her uniform as best she can. Not that she doesn't look like she's just spent the better part of two days awake and on her feet, but she can at least make the attempt.

Half a dozen individuals materialize and one is moving practically before he finishes reforming. The next thing Christine knows, Leonard McCoy is hovering by her side, one hand holding her wrist to feel her pulse and the other running a tricorder around her body.

Jim approaches her formally. "Doctor Christine Chapel, I hereby relieve you of command of Outpost XXVII."

Christine gives a sketchy salute. "I am very, very relieved. Sir."

Jim smirks and looks at his hovering CMO. "Bones, go debrief your wife." He pauses. "And make sure you get some information from her too. Eventually."

The only response are two middle fingers being extended from the two doctors, and Christine finds herself being half-escorted, half-carried into the small office by her husband.

Twelve hours later, Christine feels almost functional again. Somehow, shortly after the arrival of the *Enterprise*, transporter function became semi-reliable again. She doesn't know if this is due to a decrease of the radiation and gases, or another miracle cooked up between Gaila and Scotty, or some combination of the two. All she knows is that it allowed her to beam up to the ship, get a real meal, get clean, and sleep for ten solid hours.

The only thing that would have improved it, she decides, would be to have her husband in bed with her. But she knows that the reason she was allowed the break was because Bones took over the infirmary, overseeing the transfer of patients to the *Enterprise's* much more well equipped Sickbay.

And it is to Sickbay that she head when she wakes, in search of her husband, her patients, or both. She finds Bones sequestered in his office with Jim Kirk. They wave her in when she knocks, and continue their discussion, even when she sits herself down in the doctor's lap. Christine sighs in contentment as his arms wrap around her waist, even as he continues arguing with the captain. It is a rare public display of affection for them, and she notices Jim smirking at her. Abandoning any pretense of dignity, she sticks her tongue out at him, and he laughs. They've never been able to hide anything from Jim, anyway.

"So we're abandoning the planet?" she asks, dragging the conversation back on topic.

Jim nods. "I got the official word a few hours ago. The geologists are predicting that the level of activity will only increase. We'll be lucky if there's even a planet left there in six months."

Christine groans. "I swear, it just waited for me to get there before unleashing hell. Such a pretty planet, too. You'd never know it was booby-trapped."

They discuss logistics for a while longer, before the captain gets called away. The two doctors sit in silence for a few moments longer, before Christine stands with a wince.

"We should get back out there," she says, holding out a hand. "I, at least, have patients to see. And you, my dear, have a Head Nurse to demoralize when you tell her about the evacuation plan."

And so they exit the office together, into the harsh, sterile environment of Sickbay. *Paradise*, Christine thinks contentedly, as she goes to check the monitors on Lieutenant Commander Lyran.

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