

A Chorus of Ordinary Women

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A Chorus of Ordinary Women

by [kalima](#)

Summary

Stardate 2252, a Vulcan merchant vessel disappears. Stardate 2254, a luxury yacht leased by Vulcans for a family reunion disappears. Stardate 2256, a small mining consortium operated by Vulcans goes dark.

The Vulcan home world is gone. Investigations into those disappearances fall through the cracks of a greater disaster. Just inside the Romulan Neutral Zone, an outpost on a hostile world is conducting a far-reaching experiment in espionage that has now been rendered useless.

Notes

In the OS Star Trek universe Lt Saavik (featured in Star Trek Wrath of Khan and some tie-in novels) was found by Spock, one of many feral children who'd been abandoned on a hostile planet when power and politics shifted, and the priorities in the Romulan Empire changed. Her backstory suggests she is the product of an experiment in which abducted Vulcan women were raped and forced to carry Vulcan/Romulan hybrids who would be useful assets for espionage in the future.

But who were those women?

The title is taken from a translation of the Trojan Women in which the chorus is described as A Chorus (of ordinary women).

There are no graphic depictions of rape or violence or underage stuff. But it is *heavily* implied.

Prologue

“There hasn’t been a supply transport for fifty-seven days,” Talu said, following Hannam into the dispensary. “The men are more ill-behaved than is normal for them, and the commander took Shashi to his quarters. He only chooses her when he feels the needs to prove something.”

Hannam shut the door. Dust particles floated in the filtered light from the small window. She unfastened her shirt. “The boys are just bored.” She reached out, pushing Talu’s tunic up to encourage her to remove it. “Did you know they’re still called lancers? Part of their boot training is literally poking things with sticks.” As soon as she said it, she regretted it.

“They are well trained for their duties here. More violent than usual the past few days. Has some event occurred to make them worse?”

Hannam avoided eye contact, as if she were genuinely hiding knowledge instead of the usual dread she lived with every day. “I don’t – I don’t know what it is. You know they don’t me tell anything.”

“I am telling you. *Something* has changed. We must send our message as soon as the next opportunity presents itself.”

When Talu had shared her plan weeks ago, Hannam had been basking in the afterglow of orgasm. *Of course, my love, we’ll escape this place and be together forever.* But the more Talu pressed her on the matter, the more her banked terror of the Tal Shiar flared.

Standing shoulder to shoulder in the tiny dispensary in the modular building where she practiced something vaguely akin to obstetrics, she knew no one could see them yet she felt exposed.

She stretched tiptoes to look out the window, leaning as far left as she could, trying to see who was in the tower. She couldn’t tell. The heat shimmered between the canopy covered walkways. Across the compound Yhea stood guard in front of the women’s barracks. Even from this distance she could tell he was jumpy and restless and bored out of his mind. To the left, T’Lie was walking one of the children back from the latrines. Everything seemed normal.

She turned to face Talu. “You’re asking me to commit treason.”

“Against those who unjustly imprisoned you.”

Hannam gnawed her lower lip. She hadn’t told the entire truth in that regard, because Talu would not be nearly so sympathetic if she knew the crime, or that the Tal Shiar had commuted the sentence. If Hannam crossed them and was caught, they would take their time in killing her.

But it was clear she needed to be the voice of reason and common sense. “I think you may be worried for nothing. Supply shipments have been late before.”

An emotion passed over the landscape of Talu’s features like the shadow of a swift moving cloud.

Revulsion.

Hannam’s world tilted, her equilibrium off kilter. A movement at the corner of her eye pulled her attention back to the window. She could see Yhea relieving himself in front of the barracks entrance so the woman and her child would be forced to step through his urine. Ah, that was source of Talu’s reaction.

She turned back to her lover, saying, “They’ll all calm down once their allotment of *kali-fal* arrives—”

Did she step back wrong-footed? Was Talu catching her or pushing her? Her back hit the dispensary cabinet, rattling the tablets in their jars, and her brain inside her skull. The Vulcan woman smashed up against her, breasts to breasts, fingers digging beneath her clavicles, pressing bruises into the flesh of her arms.

Hannam’s legs turned to jelly then quivered in anticipation. Fear and desire had always waged war inside her.

“I will not allow you to be killed,” Talu said. Her hand slipped between their bodies like a fish and wriggled down between her legs. “We will be free, I promise you. Free of the past. Free of this place. *Together.* That is your desire, yes? Tell me you will do this for me, Hannam. Yes? Promise me, Hannam. Promise me. Say. Yes.”

Any coherent thought dissolved then, melted, hot and slippery between her legs.

Twenty minutes later Talu exited the medical structure, wiping her fingers on her trousers as she crossed the compound to the women’s barracks. Yhea stepped in front of her with a leer, snaking his tongue in and out. She ducked around him, through the canvas drape that served as the barracks door and closed her mind to his existence.

Seeking Something To Want

Chapter Summary

A cryptic message offers clues to the potential location of Vulcans whose ships were lost before the destruction of their planet. Spock is working through some issues.

Some ships lost were never found, having met with misfortunes in the deep black, only the vaguest trace of their passing left to drift through the vastness forever. Sometimes the corpse of an unlucky vessel would be discovered years later by lucky salvage crews or treasure hunters. Sometimes a distress call, too late to be of any use, would be picked up after bouncing around subspace for years. Fates determined. Cases closed.

Uhura came across those calls often enough, jumbled in with all the background noise, buried in the chatter, pulled out and sorted by algorithms and subroutines, until finally passed along to the appropriate agencies for further investigation.

But this one, supposedly sent via a luxury cruise ship's ultrafast data streams, had then been bounced off a transmitter from a small-scale mining operation near the Neutral Zone, hopped a channel normally used for trade vessels, before sliding into a Vulcan interstellar distress signal that hadn't been used in hundreds of years. It was weird, maybe a joke, or part of a scavenger hunt. A little brilliant. And sent recently too - ten days at most by Enterprise clocks.

"Greetings Aunt. We are swollen for our destruction."

On her left side, Kirk had his hand on the back of her chair, leaning in close enough that she could smell remnants of his breakfast burrito. She gave him the side-eye and he pulled back slightly.

"I double checked the translator's results, captain, and added the honorific form of aunt, but that's pretty much all there is to it."

"Weird use of a preposition, don't you think?"

His first officer, standing on the other side of her chair, was wrapped up extra tight in his blankie of solitude, far enough away not to crowd her personal space but close enough to defend her abilities re: Vulcan prepositions.

He did not.

"I can't be entirely certain, as this is an old linguistic variant from the Khomi Province in Na'nam." Again, she waited for confirmation of her assessment from the only native speaker of Vulcan onboard. But a quick glance told her he was doing what he often did when Vulcan was a topic of discussion – quietly replacing tenses in his head.

It *was* a linguistic variant from what *was* the Khomi Province.

"This isn't a coded transmission though, right?" Kirk asked. "Other than the words themselves. Nothing embedded in the signals or anything?"

"No, sir. This is supposed to look like a cheery transmission to a known recipient hitched to this old Vulcan distress frequency. I mean old. Like from before First Contact. This is as close to a literal translation as I can get without an expert." Again, she waited for Spock to add to her analysis. Again, he did not. "I'm not sure about the word swollen, to be honest. Ripen?" She tapped her stylus on the edge of the console. "I've been running searches in all data banks for any corresponding regional idioms, expressions, literary works or entertainment media still available—"

"We are ripened for destruction," Spock quoted, "bearing children who will kill us."

His sudden, unexpectedly dramatic recitation caused a stir in the bridge crew. Those who could turn from their stations to look, did, and those who dared not, displayed body language indicating they were listening – intently.

Spock felt the need to clear his throat. "It's – it is from a pre-Reformation play written in the 14th century, based on portions of an ancient heroic poem from the 1st Dynasty and set down in—" He stopped and seemed to forcibly swallow whatever was supposed to come after. "Not relevant. Apologies, Captain."

Recently, Spock had been especially subdued on the use of superfluous details. It was starting to concern his friends.

"Yeah, you don't really—"

"Yehenik," Spock went on, "a warlord, wished to conquer the world. What he knew of it. Unlike other warlords of his time – and there were hundreds – Yehenik understood the strategic benefits of the long game. One of the most successful methods he employed was to capture and forcibly impregnate women whose resulting children would eventually be used to infiltrate the strongholds of his enemies so he could conquer their clans from within."

“Was not expecting that,” Sulu said under his breath.

“The play requires an audience to know and understand from a cultural perspective those social constructs which once placed emphasis and value on descent through the mother’s line. For example, in the 14th century when this play was written, people knew full well children could and would betray their parents given motivation, but at the time the epic was recorded it was inconceivable that one could break the bonds of blood. Which created the dramatic poignancy for a 14th century audience. They knew when Yehenik’s ill-begotten offspring returned to their mother’s people, the tent flaps would be opened wide in grateful welcome, and thus, open the way to vanquish them all.”

“So, this message could be a trick to get us to open our tent flaps, so to speak?” Kirk asked him.

“I believe it is not a trap, *per se*, captain. The line from the play is paraphrased, but the play itself is key to interpreting the intent of this message.” He seemed reluctant to elaborate. “It is a somewhat overwrought work.”

“I think the emotional humans can handle it. If everyone else is amenable.” The non-human crew were too intrigued to say otherwise.

“The play is not the warlord’s story. It is told from the perspectives of his captives. Those women who escaped. Those who were betrayed. Those who aborted fetuses or committed infanticide. They killed Yehanik’s servants, and killed themselves to prevent him from succeeding, only to ultimately fail. All their tribes were conquered and absorbed by the sweep of Yehenik’s army across the plains.”

The emotional atmosphere of the bridge had become contemplative and ... weighty. He felt the need to add that the play fell out of favor.

“Someone besides you seems familiar enough with it.” Kirk drummed his fingers on the back of Uhura’s chair. “Only ten days ago? You’re sure?” He knew she was sure but asking gave him opportunity to mull things over.

“By ship’s time. Give or take.”

Kirk reached out to a file display at the top of her screen and opened it. “This second relay the transmission used, from the mining operation. Looks like their asteroids drift into the Neutral Zone from time to time.”

“That area doesn’t see much action from the Romulans, sir,” Suu noted. “The miners probably figured the risk was low compared to the benefits.”

“Doesn’t mean the Romulans aren’t there now.”

“There’s a system 2.2366 light years within the Neutral Zone there, captain – 872 Trianguli.”

“Then it could still be an invitation to a trap,” Uhura said.

“The odds of that are negligent, given the content of the message,” Spock said.

“You’re not going to calculate the odds to the last decimal for me, sir?”

“I have done, Lieutenant. But you find it irritating when I offer the results out loud.”

Her teasing had been inappropriate, but the public beratement stung. Uhura swung back to direct all her attention on her console. “Shall I attempt to trace the message back its original source, captain?”

“Yeah, but first inform HQ that we’re investigating a distress call, and that we suspect it may be from a Vulcan ship previously thought lost. That should give us leeway in case we need to act before they officially say we can.” He sent the coordinates from Uhura’s station to navigation.

“Mr. Chekov, lay in a course at Warp 3.”

“Yes, sir. Course laid in.”

“Estimated arrival, 19.23 hours, sir,” Sulu said.

They waited for the captain’s order to engage. And waited. He stood looking around at the bridge crew, worrying his lower lip in his teeth. After a moment he seemed to come to an important decision.

“Okay. Quick question for all you overachieving Academy graduates. Did anyone else spend three weeks of disciplinary detention cross-checking lists of missing or presumed missing ships against salvage and recovery reports?” If he hoped for an enthusiastic show of hands, the carefully neutral expressions of his people held little promise. He put his own hand down. “Just me then? Damn.”

Chekov cleared his throat. “Sir? Is the disciplinary detention part of the question important?”

“These are the last known vessels belonging to or engaged by Vulcans that were reported missing and in process of being investigated prior to – before –” Lieutenant Chekov could not find a nice way out the sentence. No one seemed able to look at Mr. Spock.

“It’s okay, Mr. Chekov,” Kirk said gently. “We’ll take the ‘before’ as a given. Go on.”

Having been whisked away from bridge duty to happily do what the captain had been forced to do once upon a time, Chekov had gotten results in only three hours of searching. He touched the display and a holographic image hovered over the center of the table.

“This is a merchant freighter believed to be owned and operated by a family group of the Clan Trazhu. Small-scale itinerant traders.” He moved the image aside to expand other bits of information, pointing them out one by one. “The general operating license. Port specific licenses. Federation interplanetary permissions, all of these.” He sent the information to the padds of the officers sat at the table. “There is no name visible on the hull, but the last known port of call said she answered to *T’Sai Suk* – the Fat Lady?”

“Large,” Uhura corrected. “As in abundant.”

Chekov nodded politely although he was not sure why the distinction was deemed necessary. Fat ladies were ladies of abundance.

“Disappeared sometime between 2252.6 and 2253.23. I am sorry I cannot be more specific, captain. The *T’Sai Suk* kept its schedule very... em, open? Merchant class vessels of that type are usually limited to a crew of eight and up to four passengers, but planetary authorities were certain the captain ignored regulations regarding occupancy. This is to say, we do not know how many people were aboard when she disappeared.” From under the table came the nervous tap-tap-tap of his of his boot heel as his knee bounced up and down.

He closed the file on the freighter and the next one opened. An image of a sleek pleasure cruiser hovered over the table prettily. “This is the *Valencia*, a yacht owned by the Tamsin Starr Luxury Cruise Lines, regularly leased for extended interstellar tours. It was *roskosh*, very fancy as you can see. Sooo many staterooms,” he said, watching the slide show of luxurious accommodations.

“Move this along, Lieutenant.”

Chekov tagged a file and sent his fellow officers the *Valencia*’s last known coordinates and her final all-clear. “The company claimed it as a loss last year. But they did not think it lost to piracy. A vessel like this with Vulcan civilians? Ransom demands would have come quickly. Pirates know Vulcan always pays ransom – would pay – *prosti menya* – *paid*. Its citizens took care not to make it necessary.” He looked to Mr. Spock for confirmation, but the commander was looking very hard at the surface of the table.

Chekov’s fingers shifted the display to show the ship’s non-Vulcan crew wearing their smart uniforms and professional smiles. And then the passenger list. Travel holo IDs floated like little ghosts in the air. Eighteen passengers in all. Five adult males, seven adult females, and five children ranging from six years to ten.

“The representative for the cruise line believed it was a family holiday or reunion. Siblings, cousins, their spouses and children.”

From the far end of the table Spock grunted. It was low and quick, like a word started and thought better of. He stood up without making eye contact with anyone. “Perhaps I might be permitted to review these at a later hour.”

“Go,” Kirk said.

Uhura was halfway to her feet, but Spock stopped her with a tense flick of his hand. “No.”

1,673 days. 7 hours. 17 minutes.

18 minutes.

19...

Stop. Stop.

He does not go to his quarters. He will not find peace there.

He will probably not find it in the Med bay either, but that is where he ends up. In the Med bay, in Dr. McCoy’s office. The doctor offers coffee, which he refuses, and then continues going through the “effing paperwork” none of which is actual paper of course, which is the joke, because there is still so much of it piling up.

“You were assigned a yeoman,” Spock points out.

“He’s off-duty today. And this shit? Never goes away. So,” McCoy says. He temporarily sets the “shit” aside and taps his coffee cup to reheat it. “What’s happening with you?”

What’s happening? How’s it going? How ya doin’ Spock? These are the inquiries the doctor offers that can be responded to with superficial truths or deeper honesty if he chooses. It is an interesting new dynamic between them. Spock selects the superficial in the form of a complaint.

“Lt Uhura has been leaving her cosmetics in my cabin.”

“Just to clarify - the woman who’s sleeping with you has left her makeup in your bathroom.”

“Yes. And jewelry. And now she insists that we converse in Vulcan at least once every twenty-four hours, as if we need the practice.”

McCoy looks mildly scandalized. “She’s *forcing* you speak your own language?”

“It makes more tactical sense to practice conversational Cardassian, or Klingon.”

“Uh huh.”

“Her insistence – her persistence in this regard is unwelcome.” He pauses, searching for a word more apt. “Pushy.”

“Hhmm.”

“You do not see this as an issue.”

“I see it as you looking for an issue. Looking for a reason to break up with her, are we?”

Not what he wants at all.

“Or maybe you’re looking for a reason not to speak Vulcan anymore?”

The question genuinely astonishes him. “Why would I want that?”

The doctor shrugs in a way that indicates he thinks the subject merits ‘soul-searching’ by someone not him.

A breath. Another.

“When we converse in Vulcan, she and I, we speak nothing of consequence, the minutiae of daily events. Our work. What we will have to eat. And for some reason I cannot fathom, it seems... *wrong* to do so.”

“Yeah. I see how it could.”

“Do you? Because I cannot. It is an ambiguous, amorphous *feeling*.” Spock says it like another person might say bullshit. He steepled his fingertips, an affectation born not so much out of careful consideration but the urge to obfuscate. He puts his hands in his lap. “Perhaps it is the ordinary nature of our conversations that makes me feel loss more keenly. Somehow.”

“You should tell her that.”

“I do not wish to hurt *her* feelings.”

McCoy blew out a sigh. “That’s mighty thoughtful of you, but in level of importance regarding the issue, her feelings on the subject are *here* —” He indicated height at the level of his desk. “And yours are *waaay* up here.” His hand reached above his head.

“I am not accustomed to noting how I feel at a given moment, so any hierarchy of significance is difficult to determine.”

“I’m saying it’s okay to be selfish in this. Better to be honest than pick a fight over cosmetics, don’t you think? She’ll understand. You’re a lucky man in that regard.” He took a sip of his coffee, grimaced, set the cup down. “Yeah, no reheats’ gonna save that.” A drawer slid open to reveal snacks. He dug around, saying, “What d’you make of that distress signal? Think there’s a chance we’ll find—”

Spock was already out the door.

It was the perfect ordinariness of the people on those lost ships that got to him.

All the Vulcans Jim Kirk had ever met were also the most extraordinary, exemplary overachievers of their kind. His first officer whose brilliance had saved his ass on more than one occasion. The elder statesman who was also Spock. Ambassadors. Revered scholars. Keepers of souls and council leaders.

He’d never met the Vulcan version of a Riverside city council member, or the folks who ran the fruit stand off the highway, or the families on vacation at Effigy Mounds. Lives *lived* were often unremarkable from the view outside. And those were the lives that made up the bulk of Vulcan dead.

He remembered afterwards, seeing the survivors, the shock in their faces they were unable to articulate, the waves of anguish that emanated from them. Later, how they would sit or lie like piles of clothes on the floor only to be roused and shuffled, dull-eyed, to wherever relief volunteers directed them. Here is food. Here are blankets. Here are the hygiene facilities. Here is our sympathy, which habit says you do not require.

The mining operation, the last piece of the mystery transmission’s puzzle, went dark on the edge of the Neutral Zone scarcely a year before Vulcan was lost. Whatever befell them had fallen through the cracks of a greater disaster.

Too many of the survivors at the New Vulcan colony were old or *very* old. The message the Enterprise had captured and the ships they hoped to find, those promised young families and children who were lost and needed to come home. If there was only one Vulcan kid alive out there, he’d move the goddamn stars to find that kid.

“Good evening, Commander.”

Nyota stood before him in the open doorway of his cabin, hands clasped behind her back in parade rest. The tilt of her head and the quirk of her lips were cautiously flirtatious.

“Good evening, Lieutenant.”

“You up for company?”

He gestured her in, and the door closed with a soft hiss behind her. “I am up for distraction, but I think it would be an unkindness to you.”

“That depends on the sort of distraction you have in mind.”

He paused. Too long apparently.

She dropped onto the only comfortable chair, leaned back and crossed her legs. “Not sex, then.”

“Perhaps later. Although I will admit I cannot determine exactly the distraction I seek.”

“My aunt Duni called that *‘psthana’ vel tor aitulun.*”

“Oh. Did your aunt speak Vulcan as well?”

“What?” Her cheeks flushed rosy brown. “No.” She blinked several times, looked down to examine some speck on the front of her shirt.

He had embarrassed her. “‘Seeking something to want.’ That does describe the mood.”

“Well, it’s twelve hours until we reach our destination. I was thinking about heading to the mess hall for a little R&R. Pasha’s programming music this evening. He’s nineteen so it’s bound to be pretentious and obscure if you’d care to join me.” At his hesitation, her dangling foot turned lazy circles. “I might, you know, get my jam on.”

His interior vision went to a place very quickly. “What kind of jam?”

“Really?” She arched a brow in amusement. “What kind? Not *why*?”

He sighed. “Nyota. Why will you get your jam on? Also, my initial question still applies.”

“*Jam* like when musicians get together to play music without a set plan.”

“Oh. Yes. I know this. When musicians who may or may not know each other well are familiar enough with the oeuvre of various composers to allow for improvisation amongst themselves.”

“So, if I sing, will you play?”

“You are free to sing. I am not going to play the *ka’athyra* in the mess hall.”

“But think of the distraction!”

“I may have used the word distraction incorrectly at the start of this conversation.”

She scrambled out of the chair as if already heading out the door. “Come on. Just grab your instrument – your *musical* instrument that is, wink wink –”

“A deeply disappointing *double entendre*. Especially considering the things being compared have no physical resemblance.”

“But if you played the clarinet—”

“Stop.”

“Please. Let’s go make some music.” She rose to tip toes, brushed his lips with her own. “It’ll be fun.”

“That is never an enticement. As you know.”

She pressed her lips to his again until he relented enough to bend his neck a little, arm behind her back to make it easier. After more thorough kissing, he startled a squeak out of her by lifting her off the floor, and with her legs wrapped around him, walked her to the bed.

Distraction. Result.

In the Garden Beds

Chapter Summary

The Chorus of women cope, commiserate, discuss options and plan escape. Spock and Uhura discuss comparative literature.

Be advised that though there are no graphic depictions of rape/non-con it is heavily referenced.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The women taken from the yacht had been a revelation. He hadn't realized Vulcans could be so wonderfully vain until he'd seen them in their fine clothes and jewelry. And their hair! Not for them the practical utilitarian haircuts worn by this new batch from the drillship, nor the modest head coverings of the tradeswomen from the merchant vessel *T'Sai Suk*. No. This was hair that tumbled down to the small of their backs, plaits and curls undone, pins and combs askew from their recent travails.

They reminded him of the ladies he used to see strolling the Plaza in Ki Baratan - daughters of wealthy industrialists, or the prettier, younger, *second* wives of senators. Beautiful, cosmopolitan, educated, and (he'd hoped) erudite. He missed conversation.

Overwhelmed by the sheer elegance of their persons, Commander Kaol ir'Khai tr'Khev had resented *intensely* the orders prohibiting him their company before the initial orientation period was over. Why should undisciplined miscreants and conscripts get the first taste? It was not as if those men had better connections back home. They were barely held in check by their own squadron leader, himself chosen specifically for disciplinary ruthlessness and his lack of interest in women of any stripe. Kaol knew only that the lucky soldiers plowing the "garden beds" were chosen for specific qualities that he, apparently, lacked. Refinement was certainly not one of those qualities.

On Romulus, women like that, so obviously wealthy and well-connected, would be missed. Private, costly vessels like theirs would *definitely* be missed. But that was the Tal Shiar's problem. He was only in charge of this little outpost.

Damned, if they weren't *still* beautiful though, those ladies from the yacht, lined up in front of the women's barracks with their children hiding behind them. Even T'Shri with shorn hair and an ear missing still had that haughty mien – though, admittedly he *had* stopped inviting her to spend an evening in his quarters after the ear was removed.

He wasn't supposed to invite *any* of them to his quarters now they were, *all of them*, pregnant or nursing infants.

This was the pattern. It might be a hundred days before the first embryo took hold, and then a sudden cascade of fertility. Eventually contraception wore off, or perhaps the biological cycles of their species were hastened by constant stimulus. He didn't know, or care really. Only that once they had caught, they were not to be touched until the infants were taken away, and the process begun again. An eternity. Though, there were occasional miscarriages in the interim. And if they didn't show...

Oh, *well now*. Was that Perren's youngest? She'd sprouted noticeably since last he'd looked. Ah, the verdant bloom of youth. Soon to be savaged by a boot soldier. Pity.

The new ones were – *new* at least. Five of them. Miners, engineers, and heavy equipment operators from a drillship. They had no children to ensure their cooperation, however. Worse, the males had been unceremoniously dumped here, rather than given over to profiteers like all the others. There were too many of them to keep watch over and why waste the food? Nocturnal scavengers outside the compound's perimeter shields would make fast work of their bodies.

But that was action best taken after the women were settled in, lots drawn and sorted, and the lucky winners off to plow and plant their seeds.

Talu spent the first nine days of captivity in a modular building being raped. She found out later this had been standard procedure for the earlier groups of captives as well, only it was fourteen days being raped and there were more men doing it.

On the tenth day, her beloved Mishih crushed a man's testicles and he bashed her head in with a rock.

The Romulan in charge of the compound decided to end their "indoctrination" early on account of it. The four of them that remained were taken to a communal shower where the drizzle of water used to clean themselves was only marginally better than the antiseptic wipes provided during their ordeal. They were issued dun-colored tunics and trousers, escorted to the infirmary, and treated for injuries, possible infections, given nutritional supplements, and then escorted to the women's barracks.

She knew her brothers were dead by then, and, also, the six other men – the crew of the drillship, friends, and partners in their mining business. The other prisoners believed that their men and boys, as well as the older women past childbearing age, had been sent into service or to work camps throughout the Empire. Why this had changed with Talu's crew they did not know.

The soldiers (their rapists and their guards) were replaced every 180 days. It was suspected many were conscripted from prisons. Normally a complement of twelve, but Mishih had injured one so severely he was unable to perform either duty. And another, she learned, had been killed by her brother Stele. Which doubled her sorrow for Stele, who had been such a gentle person in life.

Talu, with her sisters-in-law, Lodzhal and T'Gal and her cousin, Shashi made eighteen adult women in total. There had been others taken from a ship several years before. Of those, two had been "aged-out," one had been "accidentally" killed by a soldier, one died from sepsis, another bled to death from a self-induced abortion, two had escaped into the hostile environs outside the compound (likely dead), and the other managed to commit suicide. And like those women and all these women now, she would be rotated in and out of that same modular building locked into one of many tiny rooms. Being raped until she was pregnant.

All the women in the barracks, some no more than sixteen years of age, were in various stages of pregnancy or suckling infants. One was missing her left hand. Another, an ear.

The building in which they were housed was a single room, long and narrow with arched walls and roof. At one end, an opening with a heavy canvas sheet for a door. At the other end, horizontal windows set high that were barely the width of her hand. Down the center of the room were ten bunks stacked in twos, and along the walls were low benches. It was dark and warm and smelled vaguely of the soiled wrappings of infants.

The women introduced themselves and indicated which beds were available to the newcomers. The lower bunks were reserved for the heavily pregnant women as was logical. Some of the children slept on the benches. Necessities were kept beneath the benches in containers that were regularly searched. But there were no listening or visual observation devices within the building.

"We are free to plan as many escapes as we can devise," said T'Lie. A comedian, apparently.

"I assume you have tried."

The woman without a hand raised the stump. Her name was Balev.

Talu sat on one of the benches. Her mind felt as rubbed raw as her body, and she was too exhausted even for grief to find her. Lodzhal and Shashi sat on either side, leaning in, shoulders touching hers. But T'Gal climbed slowly to a top bunk, her hisses of pain politely ignored by women who remembered it too well. She stretched out upon the pallet, turned her back to everyone, and curled up into a fetal position. Her husband, Talu's younger brother Velik, had been their chief assayer. They'd been married less than a year.

"What is the purpose of this?" It was clear from the responding expressions it was a question every one of them had asked when they were new to this horror. Talu had ruled out prostitution as soon as she saw them. Sex traffickers were strong advocates of sterilization.

"We believe it is as it appears, a breeding program."

Every infant born here had been taken from its mother as soon as the milk teeth showed. The eight children old enough to walk were all female. It was reasonable to assume they would be subjected to the same traumas when they reached maturity.

"But ova could easily be extracted," she said. "Sperm from a donor, a willing surrogate. This seems a waste of resources."

The woman missing an ear, T'Shri, disavowed her of that notion. She'd worked for government officials in Shi`Kahr. "This is a project that wants no oversight or scrutiny from official Romulan ministries, offices or agencies. Whatever this is, whoever is in charge wishes it to remain secret."

"The commander is not in charge?"

"He acts as if he is but becomes obsequious when the Matron ship arrives. This is not the kind of post given to a respected military officer. There is a reason he was chosen for it. As to the matter of resources, it is, in fact, cost-effective. They need only provide the essentials as they would for livestock. We, in turn, provide all the necessary care and nutrition for the resulting offspring – until they take them."

"We kept my little brother Sunat until he was three," said Tes, a girl around ten or eleven years of age who was entertaining the little ones, "but only because Mother claimed he was female. One day they saw he was not and took him away. He was our father's son, not one of theirs."

"Have you determined why infants are taken or where?"

"No," came the answers from around the room. "Not yet."

Her unguarded mind, awash with sudden anxiety for babies snatched from their mothers, broadcast itself to everyone in the room. She put her face in her hands. "Forgive my rudeness."

"It is a lapse that cannot be forgiven often," T'Shri said. She glanced obliquely at the children then more pointedly at Talu. Open discussion in front of them was one thing, the unguarded emotions of adults quite another. It was too much for little minds.

"They treat the infants with appropriate care when they take them from us," a woman named Perren reassured her. "They do not seem to intend them physical harm, although future intentions we have not yet ascertained." She switched her infant to the other breast. "We are kept occupied, as you can see."

"They are making spies, Mother," Prisu snapped. Perren's oldest daughter was in late-stage pregnancy and irritable with the discomfort of it. "They are planting little spies in our wombs."

"Prisu's unsubstantiated theory," her mother noted, "is that the children are being raised to be weapons of espionage."

So, when Talu had not become pregnant after sixty-eight days, it presented a problem she knew was coming.

As soon as Dr. Mas finished the scan, Talu began preparing for her own execution. She would never become pregnant. Could never. Permanent sterilization rendered that impossible. She had endeavored to avoid the antiquated nonsense of Vulcan biology only to die for virtually the same reason – failing to reproduce. The irony of it amused her.

“I haven’t seen *that* on a Vulcan. Ever,” Dr. Mas said.

“You refer to the issue viewed on your medical scanner for which I will die?”

“Oh, that. That *is* a problem. I meant the smile.”

“We have wit like the desert.”

“Dry indeed. I didn’t realize that about your kind.”

“The fact that you are engaging with me leads me to assume you have not yet decided what to do with my medical information.”

The doctor huffed. A laugh, Talu realized. “That is correct. For now, I’ll advise Commander Kaol that you be taken out of rotation for the time being and prescribed a program of nutritional supplements.”

Avoiding what the soldiers called the “garden beds” was relief worthy of weeping. Still—

“I am appreciative. But your silence is an axe on the back of my neck.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean for it to be. My position, sadly, is without much authority. I’m not sure how long I can keep your secret. I’m as much a prisoner as you in a way.”

False equivalency Talu thought, as it was unlikely any Romulan soldier here had forced his sex organ into her mouth. “The compassionate prenatal and postnatal care you provide for the conditions forced upon us has been invaluable.”

“Thank you.” The doctor seemed pleased by the praise. Vulcan sarcasm was notoriously stealthy. “I must say, I find you a refreshing change to the dour passivity of your fellow Vulcans. You are probably the only other woman like me on this planet. It has been lonely.”

Like me. Meaning not dour and passive like the others? Or *like me* with a same-gender preference? Talu suspected Dr. Mas had similar proclivities to her own from early encounters. But parsing *intended* meaning from *implied* meaning, was often fraught. It had been “lonely.” She was in a “difficult position.” The phrasing and the timing of those statements combined with Talu’s vulnerability to discovery suggested a proposed *quid pro quo*.

Dr. Hannam Mas apparently had no idea that Talu’s dour and passive compatriots in hell had been formulating, planning, and calculating odds for various escape or rescue scenarios since their arrival.

Now, the potential for rescue fell into Talu’s lap. Literally.

She angled her chin so she could look up at the woman from under her lashes. “It has been lonely for me as well,” she said.

Balev telling the children warlord tales from the Sutra-varu was the catalyst that led T’Vria to recollect the play.

“*The Sundered Women of Irik-Ahkhan.*” She’d been a student at T’Lingshar University of the Arts. Finally, her knowledge in fanciful disciplines was useful. “One of the most profound pre-Reformation anti-war treatises in history.” There were a few blank looks. “Written by *Dzharok? Of the Well?*”

Ah. He’d written tragedies about heroic figures. Even Surak had referenced *Dzharok of the Well*. Though, curiously, not this play.

They decided on a message. One that was easily translated but would be recognized as uniquely Vulcan. Carefully crafted, with layered meaning, delivered via seemingly random transmission patterns that pointed to specific nodes. *This is where we were. Follow the clues to where we are.*

They had tried something similar before. Balev, who had expertise in such things, attempted to piggyback a coded file with approximate coordinates and an old Vulcan distress signal onto a bundle of data to be sent from the dedicated transceiver in the medical building. It was discovered before it could be sent. The interstellar transceiver had been removed from the facility and her hand from her wrist.

Now that transceiver lived in Kaol’s private quarters. None of the women he “invited” to spend the night with him had been able to access it, however. Talu’s cultivated relationship with the doctor could be the key they needed. There was a chance now. Hope.

And then. And then.

Days into years they'd spent subduing the sensorium, shutting tight the mental doors, stifling the passive telepathy between friends and family so no horror could slip out, raw and unfiltered into the minds of the children.

And so, with their heads packed in wool they jerk awake one morning, already choking on ash.

It is a loss so unfathomable they turn it back on themselves.

It must be they who no longer exist. They who are severed. Their noisy suffering shamed the whole world and they were cast off. Disconnected bit by bit. Intentionally forgotten. Removed from continuity. Cut out of the soul of Vulcan like tumors.

And on and on.

Despair distorts reason.

Nyota woke up from a dreamless doze, worried she'd been drooling, and confused about the time. She was naked on top of the bedclothes with a spare sheet thrown over her. Thoughtful. The temperature of the room was hot, the humidity low, but not as much as he liked. Again, thoughtful.

Spock sat at his desk with his back to her, the light from the console screen a flickering nimbus around his head and torso. Mostly dressed, though his feet were bare. "Time?" she croaked.

"One hundred hours and forty-three minutes."

She looked around for her underwear. "Do you need me to leave you alone?" Sometimes he needed time to ... reintegrate afterwards. She didn't begrudge him that.

He looked over his shoulder at her. It was a fond look. One might even say loving. "No."

"What are you researching?"

"Whatever is new in the world of pirates."

That made her laugh. Which, she thought, was likely his intention. Intrigued, she wrapped the sheet around her and padded over.

"Specifically," he said, as she pulled a chair around to sit next to him, "the use of synthesized, replicated, or stolen Romulan technology within the past five years." His voice was modulated to match the soft dark quiet that enveloped the room.

She watched his face in profile for a moment as his eyes followed information on the screen. It all seemed to be moving faster than she could absorb even though her comprehension at speed was well above human average. Every so often he'd pause to consider, move text around, expand schematics, read long threads between people who should have been much more careful, then tag it and throw it in a folder. There were several files perched at the edges of the display. One caught her eye.

"What's this?"

"The play I referenced yesterday. It was the only version I could find, a translation into Federation Standard."

"May I?"

He waved at the screen by way of consent. "I translated it myself when I was fourteen so be warned, it is ... terrible."

"Duly noted." She read in silence for a few minutes, then, "Oh my. Was your primary translation source Victorian pornography?"

"What?" He scanned the place in the text her finger indicated. "Ah. No wonder my parents were so disturbed. I have not looked closely at it for many years. For obvious reasons."

Nyota imagined his mother being confronted with the one aspect of adolescence she assumed she'd be spared.

"I'm surprised they let you translate it at all. It's pretty graphic." She'd already compared the few lines from the original to his translation. A lot of pre-Reformation literature hadn't been widely shared outside of Vulcan for this very reason. It was crazy violent. And now every bit of it was gone. Except this. Scattered passages for reference in a translation. By a child.

"Vulcan youth are encouraged to work on any projects outside their required studies that hold an interest for them. I did not ask permission. Though I also did not ask for advice. So perhaps I suspected there would be objections." He spared her a quick glance to remind her again, "I was fourteen."

She saw there were annotations as well – the beautiful script of both archaic Vulcan and modern, observations of historical context, contemporaneous works and the work of Earth's ancient Greek Euripides, the position of women within specific clans, the anti-war agenda of the author, the underpinnings of the work's symbolic imagery. It was both a mature analysis and a very immature translation by a fourteen-year old boy who knew nothing of the visceral horrors of war.

How things had changed for him. It hurt her heart.

“It reminds me a little of *The Trojan Women*. Except the individual characters in this play also serve as the Chorus. In Euripides there’s a value of losses based on the height from which a character falls, with the Chorus sort of agreeing, oh it’s worse for you because you’re royalty. This is a more pervasive and lateral kind of suffering.”

“Your comparative analysis is insightful.” His eyes were focused on her lips. He brushed her hair back. And then they’re making out like teenagers. Which was, maybe, inappropriate given the topic of conversation. “However,” he said pulling out of the embrace. “I find I cannot justify any comparison of their suffering.”

It was a jolting segue. Something she should’ve been accustomed to after four years of knowing him. She adjusted the sheet over her shoulders again, and twisted it closed in front. “I was comparing the use of the chorus, not comparing who gets to lay claim to the greatest suffering. They’re all still getting raped after all.” Her voice sounded unnaturally breezy.

He glanced at her askance. “Yes.”

“You know a woman sent that message, right?”

“That is a high probability.”

Done with both the literary discussion and his research, he closed the file of the translated play and then sent his findings regarding pirates and Romulan technology to the captain’s personal com and to the science station on the bridge. The screen retracted and he rose from the desk. “We can return to the bed now.”

Oh, can we? Now you’ve finished your very important business.

“I think I’ll sleep in my own bed tonight.”

“As you wish.” He picked up a PADD and started looking at *that* screen, his back to her.

“Are you annoyed?”

He turned around, bewildered by the question, and alarmed at the expression on her face. “I am not.” It was clear to him that she was the one annoyed and he was in danger of stepping into a trap.

And that made her even more pissed off. She could feel the anger at the back of her head like the crest of a wave about to crash. Self-awareness urged her to examine it. She wanted confrontation, that was clear. *Why?* She wanted to win. *At what?* She wanted to escape. *Leave then.* She wanted control back. *You still have control.* Most of all she wanted him to get *nothing*. Nothing that he wanted out of her.

The sundered women of *Irik-Ahkhan* had dug themselves deep into her psyche, it seemed. A long-held breath left her lungs in a noisy whoosh.

“Nyota?” She looked up. The sliver of anxiety he’d shown before was now a noticeable furrow between his brows.

“Visited by the ghosts of boyfriends past.”

“I have obviously done something that recalled to you an incident from the past.”

“Nope. It was me projecting. You’re good.”

“I made an assumption that you would want to stay. For that I apologize. But I am not annoyed you chose to sleep in your own bed.” His eyes widened suddenly “Have I ever given you reason to believe otherwise?”

She watched him replaying in his head every single interaction between them since they’d met, where he might have overstepped or asserted something he shouldn’t have, or been too aggressive or demanding or—

“No. No. Never. No,” she said, closing the space between them. “Sorry.” She leaned her forehead on his chest for a moment, then patted it. “You’re good. Your mother raised you right.” Her clothes were in a neat pile on the storage bench at the foot of the bed. “But I am going to leave.”

On a shelf in the bathroom was her lip balm and an earring she thought she’d lost. She put both into the pocket of her skirt, kissed him goodnight and resolved that tomorrow they would by god find whoever sent that message and bring them the hell home.

Chapter End Notes

In my head canon, Vulcan is not a monolith, not a homogeneous culture, even though most people follow the same basic philosophical tenets. There are regional differences, dialects, manners of dress and fashion. Though there is no poverty there is clearly wealth for some and not as much for others.

Hard No Pleasure

Chapter Summary

The message is sent. Several games are being played. Spock formulates a hypothesis based uncomfortably on a gut feeling. Rescue plans will be set in motion.

The small children had no way to process the loss. A limb they did not know they had was gone, a phantom hurting them. Worse, the grown-ups were here but not here, so they pulled at their mothers' hair and clothing, whining, weeping. It was only when a soldier kicked at a screaming child that the women knew they must gather all their disparate parts together. But it was still weeks before Talu presented the argument for sending their message anyway.

"I do not I accept that all of our people are gone. Nor that we have been utterly abandoned. We are still citizens of the Federation. Whatever has happened, whoever is left, the *Federation* has a duty and responsibility to come to our aid. They must be made aware of our situation and they *must* locate us and extricate us from it. Therefore, we will continue with our original plan. It is risky. It relies on variables that may be too haphazard or obscure. It may come to nothing. But if we do not try, then this is life until we are all dead. Opposing arguments?"

There were none.

Yhea stepped in front of her with a leer, snaking his tongue in and out - as if he knew how to pleasure anyone with it. She ducked around him, through the canvas drape that served as the barracks door and closed her mind to his existence.

"The doctor cannot be relied upon," Talu said. She sat on the bench across from the bunk she used, repressing rage. She could not look at the others, did not want to see how they were looking at her, nor open herself to the dashing of their already hollow hope.

All the time she had wasted, all the things she had *done*. For nothing. As soon as she extracted the promise from Hannam, she knew the woman would never be able to keep it. Self-preservation ran deeper than sexual desire or any delusion of love. But Hannam knew *something*. She was deeply afraid even as she denied there was any reason for it. It was possible her fear would precipitate a betrayal.

The transport with necessities, medical supplies, food, liquor for the rapists – fifty-seven days overdue. There were babies already crawling and no Matron ship come to take them away.

A condition had changed, and though Talu had no direct evidence of it, she believed that condition was Vulcan itself. She looked at her companions, her compatriots, her sisters in suffering.

"Hannam has not the will to assist us. I have failed. We will have to gain access to Kaol's quarters in the usual way." One of them would have to be invited. Find opportunity to use the terminal there. Manage to decipher his access code. Manage to key in the message by hand. Manage to program the transmission sequences. Manage not to be caught. Manage not to be killed.

"Then the news we have for you could be viewed as positive," Balev said.

The gown was T'Lie's. She'd designed it herself, an aspiring maker of beautiful clothing. It was the gown she'd been wearing when they were captured and brought to this place. Of all the things Kaol could have kept as a memento this is perhaps the most effective. The most devastating. The dress each of them must wear when they are with him.

It has lost much of its luster Talu notes as she pulls it over her head. She can imagine what it looked like before, when the embroidered bands of color were bright against the dark blue, when the seams weren't torn, and the fabric not stained. Imagines a father's disapproval at how much attention it draws to the wearer, a mother's disapproval at the amount of bare thigh showed when walking, the skirts billowing out. Mishih would have admired this gown. Mishih could have engaged T'Lie in conversation about textiles and the history of fashion in the different provinces. She wishes Mishih were here with her but would not wish this hell on anyone.

"If he believes he has taken you from cool and unresponsive to enthusiastically responsive, he will finish quickly," the others told her. They had learned to play parts as needed. They had learned the hard way some of them. T'Shri's missing ear was a testament to that.

Talu steps out of the curtained closet, passes in front of the bed with its deep mattress and rumpled linens, through the drapery that separates the spaces. In the main room Kaol stands with his back to her, dressed in loose-fitting shirt and trousers, leaning over a desk where the data access terminal is and the transmitter receiver.

When he turns to look at her, she can see he is disappointed. Her hand twitches with the urge to smooth her hair.

She lifts her chin. "You should know that I prefer women."

His expression alters, and she knows it was exactly the right thing to say.

The third time she spends in his quarters, he leaves the terminal display open.

"I'm sorry. Did you just say, 'it's lonely at the top' un-ironically?" McCoy asked. The right side of his face was being held up by a fist propped by an elbow that kept sliding incrementally along the slick surface of the table in his cabin.

"Well, it is!"

Playing Gin while drinking gin. Back in the academy days they would also play Rummy 500 while drinking rum. He'd say those were much stupider times, but...

"Seriously, Jim. If it's a hardship keeping your dick in your pants for three months how the hell are you going to last five years?"

"Assuming we get the mission, my hand and a little something I like to call imagination."

"Five years."

"New places. New adventures. I'm really good at making friends outside of work." McCoy snorted. Unfazed, Kirk continued. "Anyway, I said it's lonelier than I thought it would be. You assumed I meant sex."

"You did."

"Not only." He was carefully avoiding direct eye contact. "It's really not. Only."

"Is this gonna get maudlin? Because I've had too much to drink. I won't be able to take you enough serious- enough."

Kirk shot him a quick look over the tops of his cards. "You are the *only* person I will *ever* talk to about this."

"Yeah, yeah, goes without saying."

"I'm now in a position I told everyone I *didn't* want when I was a kid. And then, turns out I want it *so bad* I muscle my way through the Academy in just under three years. All that drive and ambition, *not* so I could prove something to myself but so I could give a giant middle finger to the whole universe."

"That is news to absolutely no one."

Kirk chuckled softly. "Yeah. Well, now my ego is happily married to this ship. I *am* a captain in Starfleet. I have no intention of screwing that up with – indiscriminate screwing of subordinates. On the other hand, I've also been told I'm a dream come true for Starfleet's PR department. Reasonably attractive, smartish, with a dead hero for a dad. What's not to love? They want me to go forth and look pretty. So, I do. I *will*." He drew in a deep breath and let it out noisily like air from a balloon. "But here, in the real universe, every day starts with me a little bit terrified I'm going to fuck something up and get my crew killed."

"If it keeps you from doing something idiotic then good."

"What if it keeps me from doing something necessary?"

"Jim. You already know you can make the tough decisions."

No. He knew he could make fast decisions. Quick on his feet decisions. And one decision that he thought would be tough but was way too easy for him. It was ultimately the right decision, but the cruelty of it still haunted him.

"Why are you second guessing yourself all of the sudden?"

"I need to get laid?"

McCoy threw up his hands. "Jesus. Fine." They were apparently done with serious.

"Bones." He waved a pointing finger in the general vicinity of wherever Spock's quarters were. "There is a Vulcan – *a Vulcan* having more sex than me right now. Up is down, man. Wait – is that your discard or mine?"

"Mine. Still waiting on you."

"I can see your cards," Jim said, drawing from the deck.

"Does it matter anymore?"

“Nope. Gin.”

“Thank god.”

A soft ping.

“Speak of the devil.” Kirk dragged his PADD across his winning hand, scanned the screen briefly, then fist punched the air. “Yes! He’s not having more sex than me.” He aimed the screen in the vicinity of McCoy’s bleary eyes.

“Does that say ‘Pirates?’”

“It does.”

“Can’t you two just go back to playing chess?”

“It’s about the missing ships. Chekov said piracy had been ruled out because there were no ransom demands and he was right. Vulcans would have paid.” He looked up from the screen. “You remember the SS. *Chibuzo*?”

“Probably better than you. I was in my first year of pre-med already. Everyone thought it was terrorists. Turned out to be an attempted coup between rival cartels in the Orion Syndicate or something.”

“Did you know there were eight Vulcans on that ship. Most of them girls in their teens. The Vulcan government was ready and willing to pay whatever ransom was asked, which they made clear repeatedly, only demands for it never came.”

“I forgot about that.”

“Weird, right? Apparently, efforts to find them were still ongoing when Vulcan was lost. I kept thinking about this intelligence report I read a while back. Romulan tech being dumped onto the black market, possibly by the Romulans themselves, a lot of it acquired by the Orion Syndicate. I just feel like there’s a connection.” He paused, frowning. “I’m surprised Spock didn’t see it before I did. We read the same intel.”

“He’s a little off his game.”

“Yeah. Forgot you weren’t at the briefing earlier.”

“Oh?”

Kirk gave a dismissive head shake. McCoy, also, chose not to share what he and Spock had discussed.

“Anyway, it’s just a hunch,” Kirk said.

He was embarrassed to admit having them now, *hunches*, given the shittery he’d resorted to in the recent past in order to act on them — people were *still* dealing with the fallout from that. But, as McCoy reminded him, best not to second guess himself. Back-pedaling never got results. He moved through Spock’s data, lists of sources, links, files, schematics, transcripts—

“Wow, there is a *lot* of stuff in here.”

McCoy leaned back in his chair, and crossed his arms with a “humpf.” “Exactly *when* did you ask him for all this *stuff*?”

“Uh... midnight thirty - ish.” McCoy’s brow went up accusingly. Kirk managed to look shame-faced, shifty-eyed, and a little smug at the same time. “He can’t be getting laid more than me, Bones. It goes against the natural order.”

“This little game of interruptus you’re playing? Mark my words, it’s gonna blow up in your face. You think you’re messing with him, but *she’s* the one who’ll be handing you your balls on a plate.” McCoy let that sink in for a second, before getting to his feet. “I’m going to bed. Get out of here. Go home.”

And thus, ended the night of Gin and gin.

After discussing it with Spock (who assured the captain he was not in the least put out by the late-night research request, thank you for asking), it was determined they needed to check out the asteroid mining operation first. Neither of them could determine how (or if) it fit the emerging pattern.

“Still hailing the *Larash Rai Sanosh* mining consortium, Captain,” Uhura said. “No response.”

“Lar-ash ray sanush... ? Doesn’t that mean bad luck? Hard luck? Something like that?”

“Something like,” Uhura said carefully. Her effort to neither confirm nor deny that Vulcans indulged in the concept of luck endeared her to Spock even more.

The literal translation was “hard no pleasure.” He did not feel comfortable sharing the literal translation on the bridge, as prurient responses from humans were not always predictable. Not that there weren’t salacious applications, Like all such sayings, meaning was dependent upon culture, context, and subtext. An archaic use of the phrase might indicate a woman who could not be satisfied or conversely a man not putting

enough effort into satisfying her. Often it was passively sexist commentary on a woman's implacability. (His mother had found this irritating in the extreme.) The miners could be comparing the yield of the asteroids to that of an implacable woman in this instance, or to a husband who failed to satisfy. Or both. Vulcan logic did not preclude a sense of humor.

"Idiom, captain," Spock offered, "often applied to situations or activities involving hard work for little or no return. It could also be an apotropaic usage, naming a thing for the qualities you do not want it to attract."

"Looks like it didn't help," Kirk said, quietly.

The image on the viewscreen made "mining consortium" seem more of an aspiration than reality. There was a small multi-function processing unit attached to the surface of a larger asteroid, with one of the scraper arms partially detached and hanging free. Some debris, likely from ore haulers, floated between the asteroid being worked and the smaller ones. The drill of an extractor was sunk deep into rock like a hummingbird at a blossom.

"Possible residual traces of antiprotons, Captain," Spock said.

"Possible?"

"Too faint to approximate the time of a plasma blast – or even if there was a plasma blast."

But plasma blasters were the Romulan weapons of choice.

"Let's just operate on likelihood and suspect a plasma blast. What else?"

"This type of operation usually has a drillship that also houses the workers," Sulu offered. Because everyone was already thinking about Romulans, memories of Nero's massive ship *Narada* loomed suddenly like a ghost on the bridge. He hastened to add, "Their drills are designed for the larger asteroids or small planetoids only." *Couldn't bore a hole into the core of a planet or anything.*

Kirk turned slightly, looking over his shoulder at Uhura at the Comms station. "Did they even attempt to send a distress call? Can you tell?"

"There's something stuck or looping, pre-load data in a buffer, I think. It's a relay in the processing building. I can't seem to extract it."

"Send people over," he said to Spock. "I want information up close and personal."

"Aye, sir."

"Might as well do the briefing you and I discussed while we wait. All department heads. Twenty minutes?"

"Affirmative, Captain."

Two engineers, two people from the sciences, and one from communications had beamed over to the large asteroid in EV suits and were in the process of investigation and information gathering.

In the conference room, Spock addressed the gathered officers without preamble. "Yesterday at 13:00 hours Lt Uhura intercepted a message. You have all read the translation and my supposition. We now have a tentative working hypothesis as to who might have sent the message, the urgency of the sender's situation, and where that person—"

"Persons," Uhura said.

"— *persons*, might be now. We believe these persons were abducted. Be advised that the most likely reason has not been entirely eliminated."

"What reason is that then, Mr. Spock?" Mr. Scott asked.

"That they are the victims of sex-traffickers."

"Christ," McCoy muttered. His reaction was echoed around the table.

"Mr. Spock believes it may be more sinister than that," the captain said.

"As I have said, a working hypothesis only."

"Noted."

Spock activated the display over the table, stepping easily into his Academy lecturer mode. "Several months ago, arrests were made in connection to a sting operation targeting the sale and distribution of Romulan technology on the black market. As a result of that operation, a scheme was uncovered involving two dock workers who had been tagging vessels of interest to Orion pirates. The technology used was modified from a weapon Starfleet intelligence believes was originally designed to disable fleet starships but somehow proved inadequate to the task. All the details of the technology should be in the data pack sent to your devices." Heads bent dutifully seeking that information. Spock sighed. "Which you should access after this briefing."

"Long and short of it," Kirk said, "in order to get a lighter sentence, the guy gave authorities a list of every ship he'd tagged, including the

T'Sai Suk and the Valencia."

There was a flutter of reactions from around the table.

Spock picked the thread up again. "The only specifications for tagging those first two was the presence of female Vulcans on board. The arrested man claimed he'd dealt with the same intermediary for all transactions, so had no reason to believe the intermediary was acting on behalf of any group other than an Orion cartel. Authorities were unable to locate and arrest the intermediary.

"Separately, but likely connected, is that a recent effort to crackdown on resurgent sex-trafficking in the Alpha Quadrant has uncovered clues to another mystery also involving Vulcan females. Lt. Beghail?"

The acting chief of security, Lt. Aida Beghail had been fast-tracked through the Academy from her previous position as a Starfleet Intelligence analyst. Before that, a stint in a police tactical unit in Ankara made for a useful skillset.

"Yes sir. Among those rescued in the initial sweeps was Quinton Adagonde, who'd been one of the passengers on the *SS Chibuzo*." A picture of Adagonde came up, a delicately handsome, dark-skinned human male in his mid-twenties, shaved head, hazel eyes, wary smile. It was the identification image taken after he was rescued.

The story of the *SS Chibuzo* found drifting with much of the crew dead or missing had been top of the news feed for weeks in 2245. Federation council members furious, blaming Starfleet for not having a better handle on interplanetary policing of space. Starfleet brass equally furious, reminding the council that they weren't the goddamned space police, and that all Federation member planets were required to police their own space. But the loss of a passenger ship had led to new regulations, charters, and amendments regarding cooperation between interplanetary police and agencies, and many, many sanctions against the Orion planetary system.

"Some of you are old enough to recall that there were eight Vulcan females on that ship. Members of a choral group on their way to a competition with their two chaperones. The girls were 16 to 20 years old. The chaperones in their fifties. I'll just note that fifty years is still prime childbearing age for a Vulcan female."

"I do not like where this is going," McCoy said softly.

"Yeah." Beghail acknowledged, "It's not great. Quinton Adagonde became friendly with the younger girls on the journey. He tried to stay close to them when the *Chibuzo* was captured. He was only twelve years old at the time. A *child*. Survived thirteen years of—" Her voice broke suddenly. She paused, shaking her head. "Excuse me. I'm still surprised by the horrors sentient beings will inflict upon each other."

She was clearly not the only one.

"The transcript of his deposition is there on your devices if anyone wants to read it in full." From their voiceless reactions no one would be doing that anytime soon. "Relevant to our discussion. Mr. Adagonde stated that the Vulcans were peeled off as group and quickly hustled into an air-tube. Right before the tube retracted, he saw a man step out, look around and then duck back inside. He thought at the time the man was Vulcan, though he'd never seen a Vulcan with facial tattoos before."

"Shit." McCoy rocked back in his chair as if he wanted to get up and pace, then clasped his hands together tightly and stared at the table.

"Romulan we assume," Beghail said. "Tattoos, therefore, not military. Possibly an operative for the Tal Shiar." There were some blank looks from the younger officers. "Romulan secret intelligence."

"Why not a trafficker like the rest?" Mr. Sulu asked.

"I don't believe these women, any of them, were abducted for the purpose of forced prostitution. At least not forced prostitution as it is currently defined by law," Beghail said.

"Nor do I," Mr. Spock said, "though I cannot say the purpose of their abduction was any less ... traumatizing for them. There is also the matter of the mining group that went dark around 2257.23. All Vulcans. Five women and eight men. The *T'Sai Suk*, the *Valencia*, the *SS Chibuzo* – these incidents in conjunction with the message we received yesterday form the basis of my hypothesis. The message, as seen in the file, was text from a play about abducted women who are forcibly impregnated. It was addressed to an unnamed aunt but used a specific honorific, typically applied to a person related by marriage who is bound to her husband's siblings and their offspring by a duty of care. Similar to a godparent. I believe the use of Aunt in this context is an appeal to the Federation itself."

Only three people in the room were close enough to him to sense what a strain it was to extrapolate so much from two lines of a play and the honorific form of aunt. It was too close to "a gut feeling" for comfort. Nevertheless, he soldiered on.

"I believe the Romulans are systematically breeding Vulcan/Romulan hybrids, raised to be loyal to the Empire, able to pass as Vulcan, with the intention of infiltrating the Federation for the purpose of espionage, terrorism, or sowing seeds of insurrection. It is a long game."

"But with the Vulcan planet gone—" Mr. Scott began.

"The Romulans must, of necessity, re-evaluate their long-term goals. In which case we have little time to find and liberate these women, if any yet live. It may already be too late."

"No," Captain Kirk said, jumping up from his chair. "I reject that possibility. The message was only transmitted eleven days ago."

"A lot can happen in eleven days, Captain," Spock said, looking him in the eye. The captain didn't flinch.

"Mr. Spock. We're rescuing Vulcans today. Understood?"

Reboot the Mission

Chapter Summary

Rescue operations commence, too slowly for some.

Chapter Notes

please note, there is violence

Talu's given name was Tallera, a common name for children who might prove ... difficult in the future. But Mishih said, "It does not suit you. You are not hard-nosed, hard-necked, or hard-headed, dear one. You are simply ahead." It amused them. Talu. Ahead of time. Ahead of the game. Ahead of the curve.

If only that were true.

She had not informed the others that she'd successfully sent the message. She was not even sure the attempt *had* been successful. And once done, gotten away with, she obsessed over the probable lack of success. The message lost, dismissed, none left to interpret it. It was needlessly complex. She should have sent a general distress call. Then, even if she were discovered, punished, or killed, at least the message would have a greater chance for a quick response. So, she said nothing. The others could at least maintain a level of plausible deniability.

Every time she returned from Kaol she would tell them *almost, close, next time*. It was not a lie. The next time Kaol let his guard down she fully intended to try again. As many times as she could get away with.

As anticipated, Hannam did not take the new situation well.

"You shouldn't have to do it!" She pulled Talu into an embrace. If it was meant to be comforting, her grip and the tension in her body said otherwise. Talu kept her arms at her sides and waited for Hannam to disengage.

"I have no special rights or privileges. Unless there was an agreement between you and the Commander about my services?"

Dismayed by the suggestion, the doctor pulled away. "No! No that is not what I meant. I care for you. I don't want you to have to *be* with him."

"It is the same for me either way."

Hannam scoffed, as if Talu had attempted a joke. "Of course. Because he's so good at reciprocity."

It is the same for me either way.

"Is he hurting you?"

"Specify."

"Physically. Is he inflicting pain?"

"Pain is inflicted on occasion. However, he can do as he likes to me without repercussion. As can you."

"I've never physically abused you," Hannam said, busying herself with a needless recounting of supplies that were already inventoried. Talu could tell she was running an inventory in her head as well, a list of pain she might have inflicted, then ticking off justification boxes. "You're just distressed. Lashing out and being cruel—"

"I am being Vulcan. I made a rational decision to prolong my life by having sexual relations with you. I have made the same rational decision with the Commander."

"Are you trying to hurt me now? Make it easier for me?"

"There is no need for further pretense on my part."

"What pretense? Why are you – are you—? You're *attracted* to me. You desired me. I saw it, that first time. You were lonely too, you said so."

Talu's well of sympathy was bone-dry. "I lay beneath a man while another man killed my beloved in the next room. *You* were lonely. I wanted to survive."

Though she wondered why she was so attached to survival. Those women who came before her, those who had taken their own lives, an act which had seemed mournfully illogical once, no longer seemed so.

“You’re trying to get me not to care.” Hannam’s needy self-deception was so tiring.

“I am not. Your care affects nothing.”

Hannam began pacing back in forth in front of the infirmary’s main door, hugging herself, fingers digging into the flesh of her arms as she dug through the depths of her delusions. She came to a predictable conclusion. “All this time? You’ve been using *me*? All this time? And I guess since you couldn’t get me to do what you wanted, you’ve moved on, is that it?”

Her pacing prevented Talu from “moving on” as she could not physically leave through the door. Weariness was replaced by irritation. “Yes. That is how all of this works, Hannam. So many options open to me. Which one to choose.”

“Sarcasm. The only emotion Vulcans wield with impunity.”

“Sarcasm is not an emotion. Derision perhaps—”

“Shut up! Bitch. Bitch! You think you’re going to seduce Kaol into giving you access to his communications terminal? I thought *I* was deluded. Your sexual skillset is extremely limited, Talu. He gets bored easily. And, of course, there’s the matter of your infertility.”

“He already *knows*. He has worked it out for himself. Why do you think he asks for me so often?”

Hannam drew in a sharp breath then, her eyes filling. “Get out.”

She did. Gladly. Her work team was waiting for her to join them in the grow-house. Roots to be dug, vegetables to be salvaged, dry the seeds in case there were never any transports with supplies ever again. Other contingencies for the future included eating insects, or the small lizards she’d seen the rapists roast on a spit. She would bury herself in futile plans and labors.

Suddenly, she stopped mid-stride, bending, pressing her hands over her heart, trying to still the sudden erratic beating, the rush of raw panic that threatened to overwhelm her.

The second briefing in so many hours was held on the bridge itself.

From the Comms station, Lt. Uhura detailed some of those results.

“Pre-loaded data buffered in the *Larash Rai Sanosh* relays were packets containing assay analyses, equipment leasing requisitions, payment transfer authorizations, orders for sundries and foodstuffs, and messages to be sent to various friends and relatives. The miners may have been waiting to add something else to the data packet or they didn’t have a chance to transmit. However, the message we received two days ago was sent to that relay from inside the Neutral Zone from a transmission array somewhere within the 872 Trianguli system.”

The science survey team had also discovered significant traces of anti-protons suggestive of the use of plasma weapons, confirming Spock’s tentative readings. But perhaps the most useful information was in the assay analyses that explained a trail of certain dense elements in the space around the mining operation.

Iridium and osmium.

“Both elements used in metal alloys throughout the galaxy,” Commander Spock said. “This particular grouping of asteroids is comprised primarily of ultra-mafic igneous rocks, chromite, olivine and rare, well-formed platinum crystals containing iridium and osmium. Obviously, they would not have abandoned this operation willingly. We surmise that when their drillship was forcibly detached, traces of all these elements were detached as well.” He turned to look at the viewscreen. “Accounting for lateral drift, the trail of iridium and osmium particles also takes us to 872 Trianguli in the Romulan Neutral Zone.”

“I guess we’re sticking to our original course then,” the captain said. “Mr. Sulu, proceed with caution. Warp factor 2.”

The children had constructed a maze of stones and mounded dirt under the canopy and were coaxing beetles to crawl through rather than over it with bits of reptile sheds. The two Romulans with blaster rifles did not have to walk through this elaborate creation, but they did. Stood to the side when Kaol approached the stiff drape that hung in lieu of a closing door. He grabbed it with both hands and tore it away from the frame.

The overly dramatic violent show of force announced his arrival to those within. The soldiers hustled the children inside with half-hearted kicking and shoving. Then flanked the open door so that Kaol could make his entrance. The Lord Commander was always most dangerous when his illusion of mastery and control had been threatened. Every woman knew it.

Women rose from meditation positions with infants tucked into slings. They had learned it was best to show the infants they carried as deterrent to rough or violent behavior from the men. But when they saw Kaol instinct told them to tuck the babes in closer.

Women on beds with babies kicking beside them. Women nursing infants. Women teaching lessons to the older children in a circle on the floor. Women with bellies swollen in various stages of pregnancy. A woman in a slow but active state of labor.

“Where are the rest?” Kaol asked.

T’Shri said, “Three of our number are currently in the garden beds.” Perren, T’Maru and Prisu trapped beneath whichever men were on the roster that day.

He looked at Talu, gestured that she should come forward. Anxiety welled up within the minds of the children she’d been instructing, and as she rose, she gave them a look – *stillness of mind*.

She walked the length of the barracks and stopped just out of his reach.

“I heard rumors that someone in this room is looking to lose a hand.”

Behind her, she could feel their fear rise up then recede, sinking down and down until all that was left was stillness of mind. They were buoying her for what was to come.

“I can assure you, Lord Commander, there is no one here who wishes to lose a hand. Who could have started such a rumor?”

“I am certain you already know.”

“Why give it weight? Why believe the claims of a jealous lover? She did not want me to be with you. Perhaps she feared I would never go back to women.”

Behind him the soldiers sniggered. Kaol took two quick steps forward and slammed his fist into her gut. The air left her lungs in a deep whoosh. She folded. He put his hands on his knees and bent down to be level with her face. “Did you attempt to send a transmission into Federation space, Talu?”

She had no air with which to force a word out. *No!* she wanted to spit at him. Not *attempted*. Done!

He dragged her upright by her hair and her throat, grabbed her by the armpit and escorted her out, into the courtyard where there was no shade, only a yawning expanse of white hot sunlight.

They’d discovered the remains of the drillship in a slowly decaying orbit around the sixth planet in the system, stripped of all its valuables. No signs of any other ships. A transmission array orbited the fifth planet. Nothing scanned them from the planet’s surface. It seemed too good to be true and for once, it was.

872 Trianguli V is primarily hot and dry, or semi-arid. The compound, surrounded by a forcefield perimeter fence five meters high, sits in the middle of a bone-colored expanse. In the distance, a sprawl of dusty red shrubs hug the ground for kilometers, fed by underground pockets of acidic water.

Initial scans of the area indicated nocturnal predators would start emerging about five hours after sunset. Sunset’s in an hour or so. There is no way to tell the difference between Romulans and Vulcans on life-reading scans. As they’d have to disable the perimeter field when the tactical team beamed down, reliable visual counts were necessary.

Lt Beghahi directs her reconnaissance team from her station on the bridge. Chief Petty Officer Tooli Sooka, Petty Officers 1st class Carlo Giacopetti, Tal Vikra and Lucky Nguyen. All in tactical mimetic-mesh EV suits that blend neatly into environs. Long range helmetcams. Phaser rifles. Hand phasers. Earpieces and commpads. Their suits are equipped with cooling packs and technically manage to reflect the worst of the sun’s rays. Even so—

“This heat’s a real motherfucker, Chief,” Giacopetti says.

“You’re on an open channel with the bridge, Gee,” Sooka reminds him.

“Shit. Uh, I mean. Copy that, sir.”

“Chief?” Nguyen’s voice modulated softer than Giacopetti’s. “I’ve got Roms on this side, going in and out of this structure,” she says.

The bridge has a good aerial view layout of the compound and she taps an image on her commpad to indicate the one she means. The actual view from her helmetcam is transmitting in real time, designated V4 on the bridge’s forward screen.

“Not a lot of activity. Barracks probably. Weapons signatures in a side room? Can’t tell for sure.”

“Confirmed,” Beghahi says from the bridge. “Small weapons storage most likely. We have six life readings inside now. Does that match your

count?"

"Roger. And one guy, big and nasty, sitting on a bench outside. He's playing with a knife." She zooms in. The magnification jumps close enough to see the ropey dark olive scar that goes from under his left ear to the corner of his mouth. Suddenly, he looks up from his knife fondling, seemingly directly into the camera. Both Sulu and Chekov jump in their seats. "Yikes," Nguyen murmurs, pulling back the zoom.

"One in the tower," Vikra says. He's V3. The tower houses a relay station, directional and tracking systems, bare-bones sensor arrays. The systems seem to be powered down or inactive. There is a purposefully flattened circular area about eighty meters diameter adjacent to the tower outside the perimeter forcefield. Presumably for transport landings. The tower also has a crow's nest with a railed surround where the one soldier stands watch, maybe shoots at things in the desert. Hard to know as he's not exactly paying attention.

"Easy target acquisition," Vik chuckles softly. "Vigorously masturbating at the moment. Nobody wants a zoom on that, I presume."

"You presume correctly," Beghahi says. "Chief Sooka? What's your read?"

Chief is V1. He's already tagged the structure under his observation. A long narrow modular building. "Ma'am. No visual confirmation of Roms or Vulcans but scans say six inside, grouped in twos. Uh..."

"I'm in position now, Chief," Giapopetti interrupts. "Got two Roms with blaster rifles? Yeah, run-of-the-mill energy blasters." The camera idles on the soldiers for a bit, then shifts suddenly. "Holy crap. There are honest-to-god *kids*. Outside. Here." He quickly tags the structure on the aerial image. "Four, nope, five. Just playing looks like."

Gee's V2. On the bridge V2 expands, zooms in close.

"Oh my god," Uhura says softly. "They're so *little*."

None of them can be older than six. All dressed in dun colored tunics and leggings in various states of cleanliness and repair. Messy braids on one, hair sticking up every which way on another. Squatting down, moving around, leaning over the terribly serious endeavor of their play.

"Your building has the closest concentration of life signals together," Lt Beghahi says into Giapopetti's earpiece. "Assume Vulcans."

"Copy that. Hold." The camera zooms out as Giapopetti turns his head. A dizzying shift in perspective for those watching on the bridge. "Uh. Guy crossing the courtyard. Looks like an officer." There's a pause, the camera zooms in. "That's an officer, right? He is def pissed off."

The officer in question barks something at the two soldiers and they fall in behind him. Every single person on the bridge tenses as the children scramble up and out of the way. Not the target of the officer's wrath. There isn't a proper door, but rather a heavy sheet or drape which the man tears from the frame and tosses aside. The kids are hustled none-to-gently inside. The Romulan officer enters the building followed by the armed soldiers who'd been standing guard outside.

On the bridge, Kirk leans forward in the command chair. "I don't like this, Lieutenant."

"Chief Sooka," Beghahi says, "Any way to get eyes-on confirmation who you've got in your building?"

"Ma'am. Given the specs on this, and the, uh, apparent positions of the occupants, I'd say three of each. I'd have to compromise the forcefield to confirm."

"Stand-by."

"Jesus." Gee whispers. Everyone on the bridge goes still watching the Romulan officer drag a woman out of the building—

No.

—kick her hard in the side—

The Bridge erupts, cries of horror, outrage.

—pick her up by the front of her tunic—

Kirk is on his feet, fists balled.

—punch her in the side of her head—

"Move faster on this, Lieutenant!"

"Sir," Beghahi says, "We can't go in full-on phasers until we've determined how many enemy targets and where they're located."

Bodies on the bridge involuntarily echo what they see and hear – boots and fists to flesh and bones. The dull grunts. The cries choked off. Moans that keen up then stop when the next blow is struck – no one had noticed sound much when nothing much was happening.

Uhura makes an adjustment, and everything is muted.

"Is the tactical team ready to go?" Kirk asks.

"They're standing by."

"I'll be with them." He's crossing to the lift. "Beam us down on my order."

Commander Spock gives the science station to Lt. Nez. And then, *also*, crosses to the lift.

“Lt. Sulu you have the con,” Kirk says. Sulu acknowledges and moves.

“*Sir!*” Beghail can’t keep shock out of her voice.

Kirk stops, turns carefully around. *Problem?* His expression dares her to find one.

She is new to this captain and he is new to being one. He has little experience with this type of situation. She makes an effort to modulate her tone. “Sirs. There is a mission *plan* in progress. Do you intend to take command from my team leader?”

“I have to get a read on the situation with my own eyes,” Kirk says, verging on defensive.

Spock’s gaze flicks to the screen, then back to the captain.

“That woman is one of many Vulcans down there, sir,” she says. “Chief Sooka and I have gone over this carefully. He knows the mission parameters. And he has experience keeping civilians from getting caught in the crossfire.” She catches Spock’s eye. “Sirs.”

Kirk looks at the screen yet again. “Fine. The Commander and I are extra boots on the ground. Sooka’s in charge until it needs to be otherwise.”

“That’s not—”

“We’re going.”

Beghail sighs, resigned.

The captain and his first officer leave the bridge. She connects with Sooka and apprises him of the additional team members which he can disperse as he sees fit.

Sooka, a soft-spoken easy-going badass Tiburonian, chuckles. “Yes, ma’am.”

What has seemed an interminable window into misery through Giacopetti’s helmetcam has, in fact been merely an interminable four minutes. The Romulan officer has spent his fury. The woman isn’t moving.

The tactical team has a medic. Hopefully, they’ll be able to get to her in time.

Then Beghail watches in dread with the rest of the bridge crew as the Romulan officer goes back into the structure. Giacopetti, upon receiving new orders, shuts down his helmet cam. One by one the others do the same.

In the lift, Kirk’s pent up frustration dissipated. “Why do I think I can do the job better than the people I picked to do the job?”

“I have no answers for you, Jim.” Spock’s voice sounded raw as if he’d been yelling for hours. Which was weird because Kirk didn’t remember him saying much at all once the recon team left the Enterprise.

“Are you okay?”

“I fear I will not behave in a manner that befits my position once we are confronted with the realities of the situation. I am deeply conflicted. And yet I *must* be there.”

Kirk looked at his feet. It was more words than he would have used but he understood completely. “I’ll keep you in check if you do the same for me.”

The lift doors slid open. They put on the EV suits and gear.

Morally Ambiguous Shit, Part 1

Chapter Summary

The act of rescue presents interesting moral dilemmas and the consequence of choice.

Chapter Notes

A little heads up. This should probably be rated Mature for language, descriptions, and child-in-peril situation.

"I know what I did!" Hannam snapped at the woman. She'd been brought into these rooms many times during her incarceration, forced to endure hours of verbal assaults from the victims, or physical assaults if they were so inclined to strike the blows or wield the whip themselves. She'd thought all the victims of her crime had come and gone, so she was understandably on edge.

Had she known anything about the Tal Shiar then, she would have been more circumspect. But like most ordinary people who commit crimes against other ordinary people, she had lived in blissful ignorance, aware only of rumors that verged on the ridiculous. Political maneuvering and the usual puffed up militarism.

The woman across from her was deceptively soft though, round of face, almost chubby. Her eyes were not warm in the least.

"Let me repeat your crimes back to you, Doctor," she said, "for the sake of clarity so that you will understand the significance of the offer I am about to propose. You accepted remuneration to aggressively prescribe a drug that resulted in the deaths of eight infants born to women in your care. You did this because you enjoy gambling but aren't very good at it. Are these the facts?"

A string of bad investments really, *but she said, "More or less."*

The woman waited, patiently, with something like a smile.

"Yes," Hannam finally acknowledged, looking away from the smile.

"Good. I have a proposal for you. A way to make it up to all those women and their dead infants. If you serve well, your family's good name will be restored, and you will be granted a new identity and the opportunity to practice medicine on the frontier."

But this was her last frontier, wasn't it? On the floor beneath the window of their last sexual encounter. She watched Kaol beating Talu only long enough to see that what she'd started could not be stopped. She was powerless to stop it. And so she recites stanzas of erotic verse, the love poems of Mhai, shouting the words, now screaming, now beating her heels against the floor, trying desperately not to hear the consequences of her choices.

When or even *if* Kaol had left himself vulnerable, he can't be sure, and that's the misery of it. And he can never express that suspicion aloud. The bitch had ruined everything, whether she *tried* to send a message or *succeeded* makes no difference.

He hopes she lives so he can beat her all over again.

He'd been sending his own encrypted entreaties and missives through the dedicated channel for weeks now and had only received two curt replies suggesting he await orders. Orders for what? Where are their supplies? They'll be into the emergency rations soon and the infants keep coming and growing and taking up space. Why has the Matron vessel not come to take the spawn off his hands?

The women's quarters reek, as if every infant decided to shit at the same time. Or maybe that's just the stink of fear on their mothers. Are they afraid? Are they properly afraid yet? Even now, they do not cower.

All these women he has had at least once. All these women with calloused nipples, leaky tits, loose cunts. He thinks of Talu with her sharp edges, so tight, resisting, right to the edge, her surrender hard won, and so delicious every time. A game they played together, he thought. They've *all* done it though, haven't they? Played him. He can see it in their eyes, in the gazes they drop just enough to make a show of deference.

But Perren's youngest daughter has no such pretense. She is not looking at him at all, but rather towards the open door, the fading light outside. An image springs unbidden to his mind – her sprinting suddenly for freedom and him giving chase, swooping down upon her like a

raptor-god.

She'd been a mere child when the T'Sai Suk was captured. She has breasts now, perfect little mounds with perfect little nipples probably. He can't tell under the utilitarian garments. She's slightly knock-kneed, but he could still get between them.

What was her name? Pua? Tes?

"Girl. Yes, *you*. Come with me."

Reaction to that demand from these infuriatingly staid Vulcan women is *very* satisfying indeed.

The recon team beamed up, save for Chief Sooka, and the tactical team beamed down, now a compliment of seven instead of five.

After sunset, the shade canopies retracted, and lights came up in the center courtyard. The poor woman was still lying where she'd been left. A little while ago he'd seen two women try to retrieve her but the guards at the door refused to let them. Sooka thought maybe she wasn't lying in the same position now. If she'd managed to move, she could still be alive.

On a gut feeling, he assigned Murad and Hohepa, the two female PO's to handle the six persons in the structure that had been under his purview. Smitty and Ramirez were on the men's barracks. He'd asked his captain and first officer to check the buildings on the outer perimeter of the compound, sharing updated scans that showed one life-reading in a unit Lt. Beghahi thought might be a mobile medical facility. There were also two readings in a structure as far from the communal hygiene facilities as possible—"nicest location, likely officer's quarters," he told them, which might have been a slight dig at the two officers all up in his business.

All the teams acknowledged their remits and moved into their positions. At Chief's signal, Lt Beghahi instructed Lt. Uhura to remotely disable the transmission array. The perimeter fence was disarmed.

First things first, Ch'zaasran took out the tower guard with an old-fashioned fast-acting tranquilizer gun. He entered the tower through the outer perimeter door, then climbed to the top by access rungs, disarmed and restrained the unconscious man and took position, phaser rifle aimed at the two guards in front of the building where most of the Vulcans were presumed to be held. As soon as he got the signal that Delucca was in position Ch'zaasran would hit them with phaser fire. Once down, Delucca, who was also the medic, would secure them, collect their weapons, assess the condition of the people inside, hopefully get the injured woman inside as well, and keep all occupants safe until the rest of the compound was secure. Ch'zaasran would pick off any stragglers that ventured into the courtyard.

Chief gave the final signal and it was a go.

It takes Kirk a fraction of a second to assess the scene - man with dick in hand, young girl on bed - and he fires his phaser without really thinking it through. Spock rushes forward, catching the man before he collapses on top of the girl, then drops the body to the floor face first.

It appears to be the officer they'd seen beating a woman less than three hours ago. Kirk refrains from a swift booted kick to the man's coccyx, and hands Spock the restraints. Once that's done, they lift/drag the guy - a solidly built individual - into the main part of the room.

"I think we're dislocating his shoulders," Kirk grunts.

"Yes," Spock says.

They drop him. On his face. Again.

"Not really keeping each other in check if we're doing morally ambiguous shit in tandem."

"We have effectively restrained him. It is one of the mission's objectives," Spock says curtly, then turns his attention to their other objective—

A terrified child of twelve.

They both suddenly remember that they are two grown men in military gear, one of whom is still holding a phaser and the other, possibly Romulan for all she knows, just dislocated a man's shoulders accidentally-on-purpose.

She's kneeling on the edge of the bed, head bowed, lank hazel-colored hair shrouding her cheeks, the tips of her ears poking out. A too-big dress is clutched over her chest, and she's *shaking*, shaking so hard it breaks Kirk's heart. When she looks up her eyes are huge, pupils blown wide, gaze jumping from him to Spock to the man on the floor.

Kirk starts to go to her, an instinctive urge to wrap her in his arms, comfort her, let her know she's okay. Spock gives him a warning look then physically stops him—"Jim, *no*." Because she will have *none* of it. An arm thrusts out like a spear with the flat of her palm warding them off. She scoots back on the bed, pressing a balled-up fist to her mouth, trying to keep sobs or screams from coming out.

Spock starts talking to her in their shared language. Kirk only knows a few words. "Assistance" is one of them ("help" is a word everyone needs to know in every language). Assistance with... to ... something ...? Help to calm down, maybe? Spock's voice is quiet, steady, with little inflection, not soothing exactly, but from her hiccupping gasps and guarded glances it seems to be getting through. He gestures for permission to approach. After a moment, she acquiesces.

He squats down next to the bed. She inches away from him then sits back on her heels in a very meditation-like pose and wipes her eyes as she closes them. Takes a few shaky breaths in through her nose. Then out. He repeats a phrase, softly. After a minute of this she's gained a measure of control.

"Are you willing to speak Standard so that my friend can understand as well?" Spock asks. "You are not obligated. But it will facilitate our efforts to help you if we both understand what you need."

"I am willing."

Kirk, taking a cue from Spock, sits on the floor a few feet away so as not to be looming over her. The position also manages to partially block the view of the unconscious Romulan officer on the floor behind him.

"I am Spock. This is Jim. Is there a name by which you prefer to be addressed?"

"Tes." She straightens and lifts her chin. Looks at Kirk. "Of the T'Sai Suk."

"Hello, Tes, of the T'Sai Suk," Kirk says. "First. Do you have any physical injuries that need medical attention?" She rubs at her left wrist, but other visual cues say no. He's pretty sure the man hadn't gotten that far. Maybe Spock could already tell that much, but he wants verbal confirmation.

"I do not. You are from the Federation?"

"We are. I'm the captain of the U.S.S. Enterprise and Spock is my first officer. We got a message that people here needed help."

Her expression threatens to crumple again. "Commander Kaol accused Talu of *trying* to send a message. Did she truly send it?"

"Someone did."

"He beat her. We could hear it. And then I saw her on the ground. I could not see her breathing. Do you know if she is dead?"

"We don't. Not yet."

"I thought he was going to do that to me. Beat me until I died. But he made me put on T'Lie's dress instead." She pulls the garment up over her skinny shoulders, plucks at the fabric of the sleeves where the embroidered threads are coming loose. "This dress used to be pretty."

"How many Vulcans are here?" Spock asks.

"Twenty-seven over the age of six years."

"We believe we saw younger children."

"Only their mothers are Vulcan."

"How many of those?"

"Four who are old enough to obey but do not listen to me." Kirk ducked his head to hide a grin. The classic lament of an older sibling. "Two new walkers and five infants under one year in age. There could be another by now. Shashi began the process of parturition earlier today."

Kirk rolls to his feet. He needs to make some calls right the hell now.

The Romulan officer Kaol starts groaning then thrashing around in a panic.

"I would like to see my mother. Can you find my mother? I want my mother." The anxious tenor of Tes's voice ramps up fast.

"I'm gonna go find your mother right now, okay, sweetheart? Don't worry." Kirk looks hard at Spock who is looking *too hard* at the Romulan officer. "You got this?"

A question with many other questions inside it. Spock gives a terse nod. "You will inform Dr. McCoy what to expect?"

Kirk waves his communicator. "On my list of calls." Tes has moved closer to the edge of the bed so she's almost shoulder to shoulder with Spock. "What's your mother's name?"

"Perren."

As soon as Kirk steps outside, the sounds of phaser fire and shouting blooms in the dark. He hails the Enterprise as he makes his way towards a skirmish.

Spock could tell Tes had not been assaulted prior to their arrival. Her mind would have broadcast differently if she had, of this he was certain. But it was only a matter of fortunate timing that she sat beside him now, wanting the comfort and protection of his proximity, while trying to mask her general anxiety towards any male person.

He and the captain had intended to split up, each take one of the buildings they'd been assigned for the sake of expediency – Spock's concern for expediency, not necessarily the captain's. But Chief Sooka had strongly advised against any team splitting up. They also debated whether to go to the other building first and then double back to this one. He was grateful they had not chosen that option.

Even before they entered, Spock could sense an unpleasant mix of fear, carnality, and delusion, but the visual confirmation of it shook him. The captain however, in typical fashion, moved from visual confirmation to proximal intent – phaser blast between the shoulder blades – in 0.43 seconds.

Now, a mere five minutes and thirty-three seconds later, energy weapons were discharging outside.

He studied Commander Kaol who, despite his uncomfortable position on the floor, broken nose and at least one dislocated shoulder, affected the expression of someone confident of a victory. In fact, the intermittent sounds of a battle were encouraging him to become more vocal.

He cursed the galactic venereal disease that was the Human race, cursed all disrespecting whores and their body parts by name, and had just begun to detail exactly what he was going to do to the Vulcans in his care when Spock walked over and calmly discharged a phaser at his back. It was close to the first hit and with enough power and duration to cause a burn and some cognitive impairment when he regained consciousness. It had also caused other unpleasant physiological reactions, such as muscle spasms and the loss of bladder control.

Still, Spock considered his action to be eminently practical, and for the most part, unemotional. The man was incapacitated and would remain so for at least an hour. But when he turned from this practical unemotional action, he saw Tes observing him with the hyper-vigilance of a person in constant anticipation of sudden violence.

Be it cold and calculated, vengeful and vicious, or done in the heat of the moment, all she knew of men was what he had just shown her. And for that he was deeply ashamed.

Murad moved swiftly and quietly to the end of the narrow access hall and the tiny room on her left. There were eight rooms total, in a long row. She wasn't sure if it was good or bad yet that the occupants of the rooms weren't adjacent to each other. Hohepa, at the other end of the hall and closest to the building's entrance, waited by the second door. Roughly in the middle, the fifth door roomed another couple. Hohepa indicated that she could hear noises from inside the second room. Murad indicated not so much. On the count of three they depressed the bars that opened their respective doors.

Hohepa's guy was busy humping away. The woman saw her over his shoulders and shoved him back hard. His look of petulant outrage and mortification would have been hilarious under some other circumstance. As soon as he rolled to the side, she blasted him, pushed him onto his stomach and restrained his hands behind his back. "Petty Officer first class Haloke Hohepa, from the U.S.S Enterprise, here to render aid and assistance, ma'am." When she looked up from her task, the woman was wiping between her legs with a fistful of disposable cloths. "Um... sorry we couldn't get here sooner."

"Better late than never, Petty Officer first class Haloke Hohepa," the woman said, reaching for her clothing.

The guy in Murad's room was lounging naked on a mattress, legs stretched out, eating a snack. The woman curled up on her side facing the wall next to him had what looked like bruises and bite marks on her buttocks and thighs. Which was just... *al'ama*.

Murad gestured with her phaser that he should stand, and he made a show of doing it, but predictably lunged for the weapon. The blast dropped him mid-stride. She followed procedure. Restrained the Romulan, made sure there were no weapons, declared who she represented, gave her name and rank. It was only then that woman rolled over to face her. Murad gasped audibly. Nobody that young should embody that much misery. She started to apologize for some reason, like, on behalf of the whole effing universe, but a commotion in the access hall drew her out.

Hohepa was trying to reason with a young Vulcan woman dressed in ugly tan prison sweats, standing in front of a young Romulan man in uniform. "Ma'am. If you could just step away—"

"Do not harm him."

"I don't have to harm him, ma'am. I just need to put him in restraints."

Murad opened her communicator. "Chief?"

"Tell me you've got it all locked down, Murad."

"Sir. Two targets secured. Two civilians safe, one in need of non-emergency medical attention. And, uh, looks like, maybe some kind of Stockholm Syndrome situation for the other two. Sir."

Delucca was just putting the restraints on the second guard, when three women ran out of the building. One grabbed the guards' fallen weapons, the other two lifted the injured woman then all ran back inside. When he stepped through the door, the weapons were aimed at him. A whole wall of united front beside them.

He put his arms up. "Hi. Corpsman Delucca, Starship Enterprise here to render aid and assistance." He slowly pointed at the kit slung over his shoulder. "I'm a medic."

The women exchanged glances, then moved aside so that he could see the injured woman laid out on a low bench. But the quiet stuttering groan he heard wasn't coming from her. Farther back in the room, a pregnant woman on hands and knees rocked back and forth on mattress that had been placed on the floor.

"The infant is presenting shoulder first," said one of the women. He noted with a start she had ugly scarification from a missing left ear.

"Oh. Okay. That's not good. Let me notify our CMO and we'll figure this out." He had intended to have the injured woman beamed up using his badge signal. He hadn't even checked her vitals yet. Or if she had any. Sadly, she'd have to wait.

Shouts and phaser fire sounded outside. "Everyone, get down behind the bunks on that side of the room, please. Bridge? This is Corpsman Delucca, can you patch me over to Dr. McCoy? Also," he said to the women holding the blaster rifles, "if you've never fired one of those things before, I'd really appreciate it if you just put them on the floor and push 'em over this way. Thanks."

Morally Ambiguous Shit, Part 2

Chapter Summary

Best practices debated. Who's the captain here anyway? Romulan codes of honor. And some moral ambiguity.

Once upon a time, before the month-long bender that led him to Starfleet, Dr Leonard McCoy was a newly married, very young intern on his first volunteer deployment with the interplanetary MSF.

A theocratic coup had swept across half a major continent on Ibazzi and caught the Federation diplomatic corps flat-footed. It shouldn't have. Ibazzi's trade partners had been warning of the possibility for years. The ethnic Demezi who had called much of that continent home for hundreds of years were refused sanctuary on the other two continents (for many spurious and unconvincing reasons). They were forced to flee the planet itself in the cargo holds of freighters and short haul shuttles, or by other more costly and dangerous means as Federation rescue attempts were increasingly thwarted.

His group had been one in a long line of many to arrive at the temporary shelter facilities housing the refugees on Deneva – “temporary” being a relative term as it would turn out. Hastily erected camps quickly became small cities that were overwhelmed within days. Ibazzi was staunchly isolationist now, and many of the Demezi were still living in those camps.

Because McCoy had been on OBGYN rotation at the time, he ended up delivering a lot of Demezi infants. There were miscarriages as well, and abortions (because nothing says “my god's better than your god” like rape and torture). As a result of that experience, he had a good idea how to prepare and what to anticipate.

Pregnant women under severe duress.

Spontaneous or chemical abortions.

Persons in need of culturally appropriate trauma counseling.

Oh, and no planet left to call home.

The captain gave him a rundown on what to prep his teams for – including a woman possibly in active labor, then Delucca asked to beam that woman directly to sickbay. Eight minutes later he was performing a C-section. On a Vulcan. It was a nerve-wracking success.

{Interlude: T'Maru and Jiekh}

The girl sat cross-legged on the cushioned pallet, her head bowed in meditation, she didn't even look up. And even though she didn't have any clothes on, the first thing he noticed was the perfect center part in her hair – a luminous white line through the jade black and wreathed with a braid like a coronet. But then he blinked and noticed *everything else* and immediately looked at the ceiling.

Then, for some stupid reason, he bowed and introduced himself. “I am Jiekhus tr'Sarine.”

She didn't extend him the same courtesy. Not that he blamed her. Why would she? Courtesy was neither expected nor required.

Shame knotted his gut. He did not want to be here. Did not want to do this. His father was the dissident after all, not *him*. *He* wrote boring dispatch programs for city sanitation robots and mediocre poetry in his spare time.

As it turned out (much to his surprise), his father's extended family had been far too notable to fall into ruin over the seditious rantings of a second cousin twice removed. And, as his father had never *once* mentioned these notable family connections in all Jiekh's twenty-six years, he was even *more* surprised to discover he'd be paying his father's honor debt with his own unremarkable life. His final days (one hundred and eighty he'd been told) spent in service to a greater purpose. For the Empire. Which apparently had something to do with forcing himself on this Vulcan girl.

There was no place to sit in the tiny room, save for the bed so he slid down the wall and planted his posterior on the floor beside the inset panels that hid a sink and waste elimination unit. His legs splayed out, the soles of his boots almost touching the pallet where she waited for him to commit an atrocity upon her person. She still hadn't looked up. His furtive glances flitted over her like a bird afraid to light, so observed her in flashes, contrasts of dark and light and also shapes – the delicate triangle of an ear, knees framing a smaller dark triangle of hair between them, the oval of her belly, the circles of the tips of her fingers meeting, the circle within a circle of nipple and areola.

Caught looking, he sucked in a breath. Her gaze on him was steady, a slow blink of long lashes over smoke gray eyes. Was that the famed preternatural Vulcan calm? Serenity or a singular resignation? He dragged his hands through his hair desperately wishing for a semblance of such discipline, then hid his face in them.

Before entering the room, he thought he'd be able to call upon his military training, will his body to perform a duty, to obey an order. But his was the same training every Romulan received, part of a formative education, whether active in the services or not. He was not a soldier. As soon as he saw her, he knew the drills of his youth could not be counted on. There was no muscle memory associated with what was expected of him here. Not a soldier, but not a rapist either.

He drew his knees up, hung his head. "I can't do this."

"Explain." Her voice startled him.

"This." He gestured broadly trying to encompass all of it – him, her, the room, the bed, the shame, the injustice of it all.

"Can you clarify?" He detected a note of irritation.

"I don't want to force you to have sex with me. I don't think I'm capable of it."

"Physically, constitutionally, or by reasons of sexual preference?" She was uncomfortably direct. He'd heard that about her kind.

If he'd been homosexual, he doubted he would have been offered this specific option in the first place. He would have paid his father's honor debt in a timely fashion with the requisite ritual suicide. He could have done that anyway and not be sitting on the floor of this ugly little room wrestling with his conscience. He took a deep breath, sighed it out. "Constitutionally."

She dipped her head. Acknowledgment. "May I be permitted to clothe myself again?"

"Oh, sorry. Yes. *Please.*"

He pulled his tablet and stylus out of a pocket, a focus for his eyes as she dressed in the cramped space. Looking over his most recent poem he recalled some quality of light he'd endeavored to capture, a curtain pulled back between worlds, his sense of impermanence in a fragile moment of time – but he'd reworked it so often and muddled the meaning so much that it seemed absent of any feeling at all. He doubted even a Vulcan would find it appealing. Not that he would share it with her. Or any Vulcan.

What he should be writing was a history of Here: One Hundred and Eighty Days of Hellguard, in verse, by Jiekhus i'Hellguard tr'Sarine. It would never be seen, but neither had anything else he'd written.

A quick side-glance told him she was back in the tunic and leg coverings all the Vulcan women wore. She sat primly on the edge of the bed, legs pressed tight together, hands folded in her lap.

He wasn't sure what to do next. "I suppose we have to stay here until the allotted time is up?"

"That would be advisable." It was hard to speak Rihan without inflection, even for a Vulcan. Still, a discernable flattened tone marked her accent as she slipped into less formal modality. "You understand I'm not the only woman with whom you'll be paired, don't you?"

He sighed, kept his head bent to his tablet. "Perhaps next time I'll have come to my senses. Or not." He glanced quickly at her then down to his work again. "Probably not."

They were silent until it became too awkward for him. "Do you know how to play Nohthe?"

"A game?" Her head cocked slightly. Maybe a glimmer of interest? He nodded. "I am unfamiliar with it."

"It's a strategy game played on a board with tiles and pegs. But I have a version on my tablet. I could teach you."

After a quick tutorial, they spent the remainder of the allotted time playing a board game. Right before they were released, she made certain it appeared as if the room had been occupied as required, the bedding mussed, the sink out and a few disposable cloths crumpled.

Ten days later when he was on the rota again, Tafv grabbed his arm and asked to trade rooms. "I had that woman," Tafv said, jerking his head in the direction of the door he'd opened and closed so quickly. It hadn't mattered to Jiekh. He wasn't going to rape anyone this time either. So, he shrugged and traded rooms. And there she was again.

Her name, she told him, was T'Maru.

Over the weeks he taught six other Vulcan women to play Nohthe and, by some strange and joyful providence, spent more time with T'Maru than any of them. Gradually, there was more conversation than game. Soaring exhilaration (on his part at least) discussing philosophies, similarities, and idiosyncrasies of their cultures, poetry, art and later stories of their childhoods, what had led them to this particular time in space.

So, it was sad, and ironic, and true to the tenor of his too short life that he should find himself in love with a beautiful girl who could not return it, who he'd never kissed or even touched really. Only another twenty-two days left of living more or less, depending on whether he died here or returned home and made a show of it. He decided at the soonest opportunity (if indeed, there was one), he'd give T'Maru the tablet with new poems (mostly about her), or give it to another woman to give to her, and then she could read the poems or delete them if she wanted and just play the game with other people.

“Do not harm him,” T’Maru repeated, standing in front of Jiekhus with her arms out as if that could in any way prevent a phaser blast. Completely illogical. Young people were exhausting, Perren thought.

The two Starfleet women who had come to their aid were deep in consult with their immediate superior about how to handle the situation. In attempting to protect him, T’Maru had put Jiekh in greater danger. He would be suspected by his fellows of being a conspirator, a collaborator.

“Step aside T’Maru,” Perren said. “These Starfleet officers will not injure him if he does not resist.”

“He will be executed.”

“He will not. Look to your *logic*.” Chastened, T’Maru let her arms fall to her sides at least. “Listen to me. Tell Jiekh to ask for asylum—”

“What is happening?” Prisu had finally emerged from the farthest room, moving stiffly. Perren’s urge as a mother was to extend her comfort, but she knew it would not be welcome.

“We are being rescued, daughter.” She turned again to the other young woman. “Tell him to ask for asylum. If he requests asylum, they are required to protect him.”

Petty Officer 1st class Haloke Hohepa interrupted politely, “Excuse me, please. Are any of you named Perren?”

Chief Sooka had taken down the only hardened soldier of the bunch, the big guy with the scarred face and a fondness for knife play. He’d put up a proper fight. But for the other six Romulans, long periods of complacency and a serious lack of discipline made for a pretty short battle. Ramirez picked off three as they scrambled over each other to get out the door. Two others managed to grab weapons from storage and climbed out a window, running into the courtyard instead of somewhere less exposed, Smitty giving chase. It was hard to believe there was any strategic thinking involved as they charged towards the open door where the Vulcans were housed. One turned, blasting away, his aim crazy wild before Ch’zaasran stunned him from the tower. The other one dropped his weapon immediately, arms above his head. In the barracks, Ramirez gave the last man left a chance to surrender as well, but the guy decided not to.

Sulu assured the captain all long-range sensors were being constantly monitored. The shuttles were being prepped and pilots assigned.

Beyond the well-lit compound the weird sounds of nocturnal fauna alerted everyone to the fact that the perimeter fence would need to be reactivated if they stayed much longer.

The severely injured woman had been beamed to sickbay as soon as Chief gave Delucca the all clear and he gave the captain a quick assessment on the rest. “The kids appear to be in really good health, considering. Some rashes, a mild respiratory infection. One woman has mastitis. All of them are a little malnourished. They’re definitely medically fit for a shuttle transport though.”

“Thank you, Corpsman, good job.” The captain gave Delucca’s shoulder a quick squeeze, but his *thank you, sir* was delivered to Kirk’s back whose attention was drawn elsewhere.

Chief Sooka approached the two senior officers, holding out a tricorder and looking mighty irritated. “Sirs, did you check the other building like I asked? With the one life sign?”

“Oh shit,” Kirk said, with a sudden flush of embarrassment. “I’ll go right now—”

Spock laid a hand on his arm to stop him moving. The second time that night. “Captain, I am certain Mr. Sooka would agree it is not necessary for you to do that. The situation here is sufficiently contained. He can send another of his team to secure the target. Is that not correct, Chief?”

Sooka’s eyes narrowed, his lips thinned. “Yes, sir.”

“I also left the Romulan officer secured in his quarters. You should send someone to retrieve him as well. He has been injured.”

“Aye, sir.” The chief’s tone was cool, professional once again. “I’ll get right on it.”

As soon as the chief walked away, Spock’s grip eased. Kirk pulled his arm in close to his side, rubbed at the place Spock’s fingers had sunk in. “Thanks for that,” he said.

“You are the *captain*.” Spock clasped his hands behind his back again and delivered a verbal smack upside the head. “Do not forget.”

The captain’s communicator trilled. “Kirk here.”

“ETA for the first shuttle is twenty minutes, Captain,” Sulu said. “The next should be fifteen minutes after that. We did a quick refit for the safety of kids and babies as best we could. Won’t seat as many people at a time, but we’ve got all four prepped so the turnaround should be fast. And we can always beam up whoever’s left.”

“Great. I want to be clear of this place in three hours.”

“Aye, sir. We’ll make that happen.”

Romulan soldiers suffering the after-effects of phaser fire, collapsed together with lolling heads and twitching limbs in the center of the courtyard. Mr. Ch’zaasran activated the security cage. A few were aware enough to be decidedly pissed about that turn of events. On the ship, Lt Beghahi was busy working the logistics of beaming prisoners up in groups via the cargo transporter pads. Cargo was closer to Security Detention than the main transporter rooms. Scotty was fine tuning the cargo transporters just to be safe.

As a flagship dedicated to deep space exploration, the Enterprise wasn’t expected to have much use for security detention. There were all of four cells in the brig. Three or four prisoners in each cell would make for an uncomfortable journey to Starbase 17.

“We should leave them here,” Spock said suddenly.

Kirk huffed a laugh. “Save us some headaches.” A profoundly unsettling silence followed. He shot Spock a look, then a straight-up WTF. “Are you serious, right now?”

“It is a logical course of action.”

“How? They abducted, tortured, raped, and likely murdered *citizens of the Federation*. We have a pretty good case for prosecuting the hell out of them.”

“The Romulan government will disavow any knowledge of this outpost either way. The people in power, the agencies responsible for this bizarre experiment, will never suffer at all.” Spock eyed the soldiers with ill-disguised disdain. “There will be backroom diplomacy, secret negotiations, trades for information, our prisoners for their prisoners. My father is a diplomat. I know how this works. If we want them to pay for their crimes, we should leave them here.”

“We’d be leaving them to die most likely.” But Spock’s posture and expression made it clear he’d already factored that in. “*Jesus*. Spock. Come on! Don’t make me be the voice of reason here. You know I’m terrible at it.”

“A Romulan ship could be on its way this very moment.”

“Still a death sentence.”

“I acknowledge my suggestion that we abandon these men to their fate is—” he drew in a breath—“emotional. But it is not unreasonable or without merit. If we remove our citizens and leave the Romulans here on this outpost, the Romulan governing authorities will not be able to claim the Federation broke the Neutral Zone agreement, not without admitting they did the same thing for reasons they will never be able to publicly justify.”

Kirk knew that was absolutely, unequivocally true. Even so. “They committed crimes against Federation citizens, against members of your own species—”

Those very members had begun emerging from the building where they’d been housed, herding their children and balancing bundles and babies on their hips. All dressed alike, prisoners-in-a-concentration-camp fashion, except some of the tunics were stretched over pregnant bellies and some of the women had small infants in slings across their chests.

“What if the hypothetical prisoners exchanged are Vulcans?” Kirk said. “Those women’s husbands or sons? Or even the crew of the Valencia?”

“Believe me, Captain, they will not be.” Spock looked him square in the eye. “*I know how this works.*”

They spotted Tes with her mother Perren among the milling group waiting for shuttles to arrive. When Perren had been delivered to the officer’s quarters, Spock was waiting with her daughter outside. He’d quickly excused himself so as not to impede any comfort the child required in case her mother felt constrained from being demonstrative in front him. He could not, in good conscience, appear to stand in judgment of her logic or her reactions, not after the way he’d behaved.

Observing the group of women, he could see that three of the adults were clearly related to Perren, her sisters or daughters. The infant in her arms, also hers, twisted and arched its back in that powerful way infants of a certain age had, expressing frustration at any kind of restraint. A human infant would have been vocalizing loudly as well, and this one seemed near to it, but Perren stroked the baby’s face and after a moment it settled, though its expression was still one of mild irritation. It was a pleasing tableau that touched an aching hollow place inside him.

“They will have to depose,” he said quietly, almost to himself, “to testify, to relive every second.”

Kirk tensed, feeling manipulated though that was not Spock’s intention. “What? You think they’re too delicate to handle it or something? Some of them have managed to survive this fucking shitshow for more than six years!”

Spock was long inured to the punctuation of Kirk’s curses. “The women of the SS Chibuzo would have been here for at least thirteen years,” he pointed out.

As was often the case, the captain’s anger dissipated as suddenly as it had come. It was a smaller group of Vulcans than they’d hoped to find. “A few might still be here. We don’t know yet.”

At the sight of PO Murad striding purposefully their direction, Kirk perked up, grateful for the interruption. “Sirs. One of the Romulan soldiers has asked for asylum. Chief wasn’t sure who had the authority to deal with that so told us ask you. Sir.”

Kirk opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. “Asylum?”

“Yes, sir. We got him locked in a room with his girlfriend.”

“Wait. His what?”

“Or whatever she is. Pretty keen on him not getting blasted that’s for sure. Other women have vouched for the guy. He’s one of three that were in the rooms where they – you know, in the rooms. We already put the other two in the cage.” She pointed at the energy net corralling the prisoners. “Didn’t think he should be placed with the rest of ‘em. Under the circumstances.”

“Good call. Keep him where he is for the time being. I’ll have Security make other arrangements.”

With a cheery “aye, sir,” she about-faced and went back to relay his message.

“Asylum. That’s an unexpected development.” Stating the obvious to make a point was one of Kirk’s most annoying verbal ploys.

“Yes, sir.”

The captain rolled his shoulders, tipped his head from side to side and shook out his hands. “We need to officially introduce ourselves.”

“Captain. May I also suggest that Lt. Uhura be present to help facilitate communications as the shuttles are boarded. It is likely not all speak Federation Standard and she is fluent in the language.”

In a few minutes they were joined by the Comms officer and together they went to extend apologies from the Federation for taking so damned long.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Responsibility is heavy and scary. Even for a Vulcan. Kirk made the best of an unpleasant childhood.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Vulcan woman saw the three officers approaching and by some communal agreement, separated herself from the larger group and stepped forward on behalf of all. She was pregnant, though not far advanced, and her features were of a similar genetic type to Spock's own – pale skin tone, black hair, though the symmetry of her face was disfigured by scarring where her left ear had been.

His own forward momentum slowed, a kind of temporal stutter, the weight of his responsibility no longer conjectural but immediate and real.

Did she – did any of them know Vulcan was gone? Had they felt it when it died? He'd already sensed how the vibration of their collective awareness had dulled, by intention or neglect. Or out of necessity.

Someone had sliced off this woman's ear.

Any relief he'd experienced on seeing them – not only alive but *pregnant* with life – dissolved. He saw that the forced commodification of their bodies on this outpost would also be attempted on New Vulcan by subtler means. Manipulative appeals to duty. Sacrifice for the greater good. Desperation disguised as logic. Ruthless practicality. And what of these infants in their mother's arms, those small children they'd seen playing in the dirt? They were all hybrids. Would they be welcomed and accepted among full Vulcans, or ostracized as he so often was?

If none of these women understood that Vulcan was truly gone, *dead*, they likely believed their rescue meant reunion with family and friends. He would have to tell them such reunions were statistically improbable. He did not want the burden of that. How could he possibly shield his mind from an onslaught of grief in the time it would take to walk from here to there?

"Which of you is captain?"

Startled from his musings, Spock hoped his discomfiture was not too evident. Her eyes widened slightly and then she looked down, away. He realized she misinterpreted the cause of his reaction, thinking it was because of her disfigurement. He would have corrected her misapprehension, but the captain was already reaching out his hand—

"That would be me, ma'am," Kirk said, remembering *not* to shake her hand and bowing his head slightly instead. "James Kirk, captain of the Starship Enterprise. This is Lt. Commander Spock, my XO and chief science officer. And this is our Comms officer, Lt. Uhura. We have shuttles on the way to transport you to our ship and there are people standing by to see to your comforts and medical needs once onboard. On behalf of Starfleet and the United Federation of Planets, I express our regrets and deepest apologies for taking so long to find you."

She blinked at him. "None of you seem old enough to have achieved these ranks."

"Well, ma'am," Kirk said carefully, "a lot has happened since you've been away."

Her gaze shifted to Spock again and he felt a nudge up against his mind, though he was carefully shielding. Fortunately, Uhura decided it was time to insert herself into the conversation. "How do you wish to be addressed, t'sai?"

The woman pulled her attention away from him like a burr pulled from cloth. "I am T'Shri. I was among those captured from a cruiser called Valencia."

"Lady T'Shri, I will be helping facilitate boarding the transports. I will also act as your intermediary once we are aboard the Enterprise as I am fluent in vuhlkansu."

"Noted. Though you need not address me with an honorific, Lt. Uhura. Can you tell me what has become of the women who were transported to your vessel? Shashi was in difficult labor, and Talu was beaten severely."

"I'll find out how they're doing for you," Uhura said, pulling out her communicator. T'Shri inclined her head indicating that Uhura should follow her to the larger group. As they walked away, the Vulcan woman put an arm out behind her and with a slight flutter of fingers let the two male officers know they were surplus to requirements.

Lt. Beghail informed the captain that they were ready to begin beaming up prisoners on his orders, which he gave. He also asked her to secure a berth for their asylum seeker. As a precaution, Spock ordered Ch'zaasran to stay on the tower watch until further notice.

The women had gathered around Nyota, asking questions. He could see by her body language that she was deferring some of the answers and he did not want her to turn to him for those answers, so he purposefully looked at anything else.

Just beyond the tower, the landing pad was now ringed in lights waiting for the shuttles. Out there, in the deepening night, blips on tricorders

indicated active lifeforms getting more active by the minute. Above their heads, the black was softened by the aggressive brightness of the compound. He could barely make out the stars.

Beside him, the captain progressed into familiar behaviors Nyota had dubbed “Captain Ants-in-the-Pants.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, crossed and uncrossed his arms, pulled at his lower lip, played his fingers against each other as if working out a tune on an invisible instrument.

Spock side-eyed him. Kirk made a show of relaxing. “Captain. If you wish to return to the ship and oversee operations from the bridge, I will remain with Lt. Uhura to expedite the process here.”

“Thanks, but I need to see the first shuttle loaded and on its way.”

Older children, all full Vulcans, and all female, were engaged in an unstructured game that involved running and dodging each other. They were not as vocal as human children, but they were clearly enjoying themselves.

“That’s nice to see. I wasn’t expecting them to be so kid-like.”

Spock stiffened and all the color drained from Kirk’s face.

“Oh god. Wow. That – that came out *all* wrong. Like mandatory seminar *wrong*. I am so sorry. I just meant it’s nice to see they can still *be* kids. Under the circumstances.”

“Of course.”

The ensuing silence stretched on until Kirk had to make it go away.

“I used to babysit for my uncle Frank’s girlfriend.”

Spock’s brow shot up. “To babysit is the same as child-minding, is it not?”

“It is. Her kids were six and nine. Whenever Frank and Delia went out to drink themselves stupid, they drafted me to babysit. I was thirteen? Maybe? Anyway, I remember building all these crazy obstacle courses for us in the yard. Reckless child endangerment *for sure*. But they loved it. It was so much fun. They were sweet kids.” He paused, reached up to scratch his ear. Spock experienced a sudden visceral sense of unease.

“This one time, Frank and Delia were gone for like two days and we ran out of stuff to eat. So, I hacked into the account he thought I didn’t know about and ordered drone deliveries of just *massive* amounts of food, including twenty super deluxe pizzas and twenty pints of ice cream. Most of ice cream melted before we could eat it, but I lived on those pizzas for the rest of the week. Frank was so pissed—” He broke off with a wan grin. “Seriously, child services should have been all over that.”

Or your mother. Spock did not say that, of course. He had no idea how to respond, or if a response was expected. He did not school his expression quickly enough, however, and Kirk’s smile thinned, and after a moment, he turned and walked over to talk to Chief Sooka.

It was difficult for Spock to reconcile firsthand anecdotal evidence of childhood abuse and neglect with the capable, highly intelligent, and often absurdly optimistic adult human he interacted with daily. The vague unease he’d experienced earlier settled uncomfortably in his solar plexus.

Suddenly the captain let out a whoop. “All right! There it is. Hallelujah.” A prick of light in the black overhead grew steadily larger, confirmed a few seconds later when the shuttle’s pilot hailed them.

And then another sound, an undulating susurration of both thought and utterance moving in a wave. It was not at the promise of leaving. It was aimed at the Romulan officer stumbling into the courtyard in front of Ramirez. Pain radiated from the man and there was fear too, but his face was locked into a mask of loathing.

Perren was on him in a blink, knocking him to the ground, straddling him, pinned beneath her before anyone could think to stop her.

With his hands still bound behind his back and his shoulders still misaligned, the Romulan officer’s initial cries were from renewed agony. The position kept his head up at an awkward angle, his face tilted back, exposed to the splay of her fingers as they dug into his cheekbone, temple, the tender corner of his mouth. Spock heard himself shout, but he could not seem to move, and the sound was swallowed in cacophony, flurries of motion, running feet, cries of fear, appeals to gods. Someone called his name, but he couldn’t turn to see who, could not look away.

Ramirez, Kirk, Delucca now hovered around the pair on the ground, uncertain, awed, afraid. The man began to writhe and buck beneath her and then to scream. Mere seconds stretched out forever until the screaming became ragged moans, and the moans turned to whimpers. Somewhere behind him a human woman whispered, “fucking hell.” He felt Uhura’s fingers close around his wrist. He saw Tes trying not to drop the baby her mother had thrust into her arms moments ago.

Kirk tried to pry Perren away. Ramirez joined him. They didn’t want to hurt her, but she was Vulcan, and even diminished from privation, she was strong, her body mass denser. It took a lot of effort. When they finally pulled her off the man, she hung in their arms, her eyes still fixed on the Romulan.

“Ha-tor k’ etwel yuk-eshu’a,” Perren said. “Ha-tor k’ etwel yuk-eshu’a svi’ ish-veh patam.”

Live with our nightmares. Live with our nightmares in your head.

Smitty saw that the lifeform glow on his tricorder had not moved in a quite a while. He was in some sort of medical building, had been through the exam room with its version of a biobed, and one of those exam tables that had stirrup things his girlfriend once described as “not the fun kind.”

The lifeform glow was in a small passage off to the left. He wasn't taking any chances, but he also wasn't too worried as he pushed on the door and ducked to the side for a second. Light from the compound spilled in through a small window across the floor and onto a wall of cabinets. He peeked around the door. On the floor beneath the window a Vulcan woman lay curled into a fetal position. He spoke to her, but she didn't rouse. He didn't want to take a chance on touching her in case she freaked out and he had to stun her or something. It looked like she might be in shock, or maybe even catatonic.

He hailed the Enterprise and informed Lt. Beghail that another Vulcan woman needed to beam directly to sickbay.

Chapter End Notes

I chose to use the original intended version of Frank, who was supposed to be Jim's uncle, because I would like to think a woman married to George Kirk would not marry a drunken asshole, whereas anyone can have a drunken asshole brother or brother-in-law.

Also, in this story Tarsus didn't happen to this Jim Kirk. It's just too much for one little soul to cope with.

This mission is really early in their careers. Take a couple of months place before Into Darkness. They are smart kids, but not vastly experienced and doing their best in difficult circumstances.

The Emotional State Where You Live

The young petty officer Murad spared a backward glance at her superiors as she followed Perren to a place where she could sit and breastfeed her child. Murad didn't vocalize it, but her expression clearly read, "*Seriously, sirs?*"

Kirk understood her discomfort and skepticism. Putting an armed guard on a woman while she nursed a baby looked ... excessive, to say the least. But while Spock could be accommodating for the sake of the child, he wasn't taking any chances with the mother until appropriate security arrangements were confirmed. He knew more about what she'd done to the Romulan commander than Kirk did. He felt it was Spock's call to make, being uniquely positioned to make one.

Although the intensity of the experience had faded a little, Perren's attack on the Romulan reinforced for Kirk the wisdom of the Vulcan commitment to emotional control. Mostly in the category of "thank god." Even as he'd tried to drag her away from her target, her emotions seemed to gain physical *mass*. The gravity well of that mass pulled everything towards it, crashing through the man's head and into his brain. He could even imagine the crater it left.

Fanciful, not factual, Spock would tell him. But fact was, her emotions were huge and complex, and he couldn't even name some of them. Energies alien to his experience and utterly unique to her species. Vulcans had emotional states with no Human equivalents. Which was kind of awesome in retrospect, and deeply terrifying in the moment. He had so many questions.

Spock noticed his expression and raised a brow in query. But Kirk shook his head. It was a conversation for another time. Meanwhile, across the courtyard, Perren sat down with her baby and opened the front of her tunic. It was such an ordinary thing to do.

He leaned his head back and groaned at the sky. "Goddamnit."

"Problem, Captain?"

"I know what she did to that bastard was way different from what you – other you, *future* you did to me but—"

"He is not 'future me,'" Spock protested. "*My* future has yet to be determined. He and I are separate beings. For example, his technique in melding with you on Delta Vega spoke more to laziness than the expediency he claimed it warranted." Spock's relationship with the Ambassador tended to run hot and cold. Right now, it was mostly bitchy. "Also, a similar act to Perren's would have left you dead."

"Got it. But she had good cause to want the guy dead. They all do. I don't blame them."

"Did she have the right to kill him for that cause? Because essentially that is what she has done. It is unlikely he will recover his mind. Which would not trouble me a great deal except that it has made it nearly impossible to question the only person with the most knowledge about this operation."

Kirk made a noise of irritation at the back of his throat. "I know. It sucks."

Uhura, helpfully getting small children and women with babies situated and squared away on the shuttle, started looking around. He knew who she was looking for. Perren was supposed to be in that group on the first shuttle.

"Your girlfriend's not going to be happy about this." Yup. She'd just seen Murad with the phaser rifle

"Her happiness cannot be a factor in this decision, Captain."

"Oh, crap. She's coming over here." He turned away from the fury of her march and the swinging pendulum of her ponytail, desperately searching for something that needed his immediate attention.

"She will agree with my decision once the reasoning behind it has been explained." Spock sounded very sure of himself.

"Right. You know her best I guess — Oh. Hey. You." He smiled and her expression smacked it right off his face. "Are they almost ready to take off?"

"What the *hell*, sirs?" She looked from one to the other. Settled on Spock for an answer. He was not foolish enough to ask for clarification.

"She is unstable, Lieutenant. I determined it necessary that she be kept under guard until such time that she can be securely detained in the medical bay."

"I see. She's unstable enough to need an armed guard but it's fine for her to sit there nursing a baby."

"She told me he needed to be fed," Spock said, looking slightly less certain than he did a moment ago.

"How can you possibly be okay with this?" she asked Kirk. It was not so much a question as a challenge to his humanity. He swallowed a hard lump in his throat.

"If Spock, a *Vulcan*, tells me another Vulcan is dangerous, I'm going with his recommendation on how to handle it." Her face got all pinchy. "I'm sorry that this causes you distress, Lieutenant, but it's done. You're welcome to file any objections in an official complaint."

“Oh, I will. *Sir.*”

“Go ahead.”

“I plan to.”

“Great. Do it.”

“Watch me.”

Spock sighed. Explosively. “Nyota. Trust me on this. She is in a volatile state right now.”

“Basically, she fried a man’s brain,” Kirk said.

“Then one of you should probably remove that baby from her sphere of influence!”

McCoy figures the lung was punctured when the poor woman got moved by whoever carried her to safety. Two broken ribs on the left and three cracked on the right. No loose bone fragments, thank god. Fractured left mandible and a couple of back teeth missing. Internal bleeding from severe blows including a contusion to the heart. The swelling on the brain was concerning. Hell, it was *all* concerning.

At least he’d had the foresight to backstock the green stuff. They grew Spock’s rare blood type live from stem cells if they ran out, but most everything else could be synthesized. Not ideal for the long term, but enough of a stopgap for something like an emergency C-section ... or this.

McCoy’s people are good, the best, but treating this woman’s injuries is slower going than he’d like. They keep having to pause to reference materials about Vulcan physiology and best practices. Like where to aim the shunt to drain fluid from the brain, for example. The refugees they’d treated were mostly in shock, a broken bone here and there, bruises, nothing like this. At least if Spock ends up in a similar condition, they’ll know what to do.

While they’re trying to get her stabilized, another one shows up on the emergency transporter, curled up and muttering to herself. Nurse Adamik does a quick scan for physical damage and puts the woman in one of the “quiet” rooms until the psych nurse on duty can access her further. McCoy never even sees her.

Dr. Sanyal takes a call from the security chief requesting a restricted access room and psych bed with restraints for another Vulcan. Fifteen minutes after that Adamik pops his head in saying two security guys have shown up with orders to guard the Romulan. Before anyone can ask “what Romulan?” the Romulan in question materializes. McCoy steps out of OR2, takes one look and loses it.

“What the hell? Get those cuffs off him! How long has he been restrained like this? Jesus Christ! You can’t abuse prisoners, you thick-necked goons—”

“We got nothing to do with it, sir!” The security officer with neck and shoulders like a bull gets down on one knee and unlocks the restraints. “We’re just assigned to guard him while he’s here and escort him to detention when you sign off.”

A scowling Adamik shoos him back to wave medical scanner over the unspeaking, barely blinking Romulan. “Dislocated shoulders. *Both of them.* Nasal fracture. Phaser burn in the back, below the shoulder blades. Muscles have seized up pretty bad.” He glances up at McCoy, then at the tricorder again. “I’m not sure about these brain scans. Some kind of neurological damage?”

McCoy gestures to a couple of orderlies, then looks at the readings. “From the phaser most likely. We’ll deal with that later.” After a struggle and some grunting the orderlies get the man onto a cart then onto a biobed. “We need to get the inflammation down before we can reset. Goddamn. It’s really bad, isn’t it? Let’s try that DVK type soprodol, see if we can get the muscles to relax. Start with 9cc’s.”

He takes a moment to glare solidly at the security guys. “If you get in the way of my people doing their jobs, I will happily sedate you into next week.”

There’s a bench shoved up against an outside wall of the women’s barracks, erected by one of the soldiers some years past who’d formed an attachment to a girl. A dead girl.

Perren sits on this bench nursing her infant. He latches on then pulls away repeatedly, only half-interested, constantly distracted by the activity beyond her breast.

Nearby a young human female in military garb stands armed guard. She is uneasy with the task, wondering why the Vulcan first officer found it necessary to keep an armed guard on a woman nursing a baby. Why her captain acquiesced. She does not understand the severity of the crime she witnessed, or the dangerous, volatile state of mind it implies in the perpetrator.

Currently, Perren's state of mind is no state at all. She'd processed the losses when the last one clicked into place (Tes, her little Tes-tehk). Then she counted them up and packed them tight—

fists-pounding, legs flailing, knees wide wider submit humiliation and penetration and capitulation and demand and thumb to the throat tell me you want it and twisted wrist and bite bruise flesh raw push don't push hard hurt lie and every severed bond bleeding and husband, brother, father, son, every baby taken and daughter pleading mother mother, heart racing, dread, open door shut door, trapped and blood hand sliced ear sliced and pressed down and raped and turned over and raped and on your knees and open your mouth no teeth bitch bitch move around do something bitch and every dark more kill more scream more and is it good say you love it love me or this and all and this

—a bomb, a missile, launched through her fingertips into Kaol's mind.

She thought she would be clean afterwards like a sand-scrubbed bowl ready to be filled with peace. Or at least empty. But no.

Some distance away, Lt. Uhura argues with the two men that outrank her, a strange kinetic dynamism between words and bodies, odd, intimate. They glance Perren's direction. Uhura says something to Spock, he responds. She makes emphatic gestures and he steps back. After a moment, he bows his head, then inhales, then straightens his shoulders, his body a pillar, all steadfast resolve. He walks across the courtyard toward the bench where she sits.

She draws her tunic together in the front, sets her latest son on her lap. Her oldest son is Spock's age – is, was, she has no idea. She cannot feel him inside her anymore. Not him, or Sunat that they took from her four years ago. She had another boychild for her captors after that, and a girl miscarried, and then this one. The last one.

She holds him out for Spock to take from her.

Impulse Power

Logically, Prisu knew what to expect that first time at sixteen. Or should have. They had been in captivity three years by then. But one could not *logically* prepare for an experience yet to be experienced. It was all conjecture. To make herself ready, she attempted to recreate it out of whispered conversations and stray, unguarded emotions that only served to magnify the anticipated unpleasantness. She'd sought reassurance from her mother's mind like a child and found it closed tight as it so often was after Sunat was taken away. Instead, Mother gave advice, "There is a short time in which you will be able to meditate. Seek stillness. Calm. The man is stronger than you. It is illogical to fight him. If you fight you will be injured." Prisu fully intended to follow her mother's advice, but as soon as she felt the press of the man's body on hers, the fear hormones rushed to her blood. She could not keep from fighting and, as her mother warned, she suffered for it.

After that first time, a serene mind was illusory at best, and acceptance was ... unacceptable to her. To make herself aesthetically unappealing she feigned a vermin infestation and shaved her head under the watchful eye of Dr. Mas, who knew she was lying about the vermin but did not care. The men mocked her but were otherwise undeterred. After a soldier ardently admired the softness her skin, pinching, stroking, nipping at it with his teeth, she rubbed a stinging weed on her naked flesh to make it blister. Again Dr. Mas treated her without question. But she had to spend two extra days in the garden beds making up for time lost. She gained a reputation for being *challenging*, which made everything worse.

She then decided to concentrate her meditation on making her womb inhospitable – thickening the cervical mucus to reduce sperm motility, thinning the uterine lining so that a fertilized ovum could not attach, trying to prevent ova from being released at all. But her efforts at this, like every attempt before, proved harmful only to herself. None of the other women used meditation techniques for contraception because the only reprieve from rape was pregnancy.

But even that certainty had fallen away. Commander Kaol had grown lax about so many of the rules. He'd never taken the visibly pregnant to his bed, but within weeks of her parturition, he'd done so with Shashi, *made* her do something that had deeply disturbed the older women. He'd also returned her mother to the garden beds though she was breastfeeding, and her fertility (and therefore, usefulness) was reduced by 98%. He'd taken Talu out of rotation to service him alone. Then beat her so severely – well, none of the Starfleet people could tell them if she was even still alive. And her little sister Tes, *a child*, nearly victim to the one perversion Kaol had never indulged in all the years of their captivity.

If Mother had killed him, Prisu would certainly not mourn the loss. If the Vulcan Starfleet officer expected *any* of them to experience regret for what Mother had done, he would be disappointed.

"Any one of us might have done the same," she told him.

"Only one of you did however."

Spock walked with Prisu and Tes toward the shuttle, concentrating on holding an infant who was squirming furiously and somehow managed to be dead weight at the same time. Tes had offered to take her brother from him, which he declined. Prisu had not offered, but she would be boarding in her mother's place so he assumed she understood she would have to take responsibility at that point. Though he learned quickly it was unwise to make assumptions about Prisu. Tes, on the other hand, was overcorrecting for any perceived disrespect.

"May I ask, sir, *why* Mother cannot come with us? She appears calm now."

"Your mother is unwell. I will escort her to the ship's medical facility myself once you and your siblings are safely away on one of the shuttles."

Tes glanced back over her shoulder at Perren still on the bench staring into the middle distance while her armed guard did likewise. "Your pardon, sir, but she does not look unwell."

"He means she is dangerous," Prisu said. "He fears her *tremendous* power."

Tes darted a glance at him, embarrassed for his sake at the accusation. Seeing no evidence of fear in Spock, another backward look at her mother showed a woman who seemed quite powerless at this moment. Prisu was obsessed with the rightness of her position. Tes was caught in the crossfire of provocations clearly directed at him.

They reached the shuttle and the pilot, Ensign Waeyur, stepped out for a final inspection. The second shuttle was in a holding pattern waiting for this one to take off and the delays had been unnerving and frustrating to the captain no matter how unusual the circumstances of those delays. This was the one shuttle outfitted with the safety of infants and small children in mind, so this was the one that waited.

Prisu took a couple of steps up the short ramp and turned to face him, gesturing that he should hand over her brother. He tensed, hesitating even as the infant stretched pudgy arms reaching out for her. She tugged the baby from his grasp.

"I would have done the same to Kaol, had I the skill or knowledge." She pressed her cheek against her brother's cheek. "Would I not, my

pretty *pi'kan-bu*?" A singsong inflection engaged her little brother's attention, but the words were meant for Spock. She placed one arm across the infant's back and the other beneath his bottom, swaying and rocking with him. "Unlike my mother, I would have made certain he was dead."

With that she turned and disappeared into the shuttle.

Beside him, Tes took a step forward, then stopped, her arms held stiffly away from her body, fingers splayed. She looked at the craft's interior and suppressed a shudder. None of the passengers could be seen from that angle, only the deck, the bulkhead dividing the pilot from the passengers and blinking indicator lights. Ensign Waeyur came around from the other side of the craft, trailing his hand along the outside hull, his inspection finished. He looked from one to the other. Spock knew the shuttle was now at capacity, and that most of Tes's relatives (save *one*) were currently onboard. Waeyur interpreted the situation without prompting. "I suppose I can seat her in the co-pilot's seat if you want her on this flight, sir."

Short runs like this didn't require a co-pilot or even a navigator. The course was set in and there were few changes the pilot couldn't handle. The navigator's chair was unoccupied, and he considered it. The next shuttle was to carry the women who were pregnant, and the last one would transport everyone else, including older children like her.

But the language of her body said *no*, arms crossed over her chest, lips pressed tight together to stop them from quivering. The stresses of the day were taking a toll. Her emotions were too close to the surface and he could not expect her to maintain equanimity as he might an adult.

"If you wish, I will allow you to beam up to the ship with me as I accompany your mother to the Enterprise's medical facility. That way you can assure yourself she will be treated respectfully and with compassion."

"Thank you, sir," she whispered.

Immediately he regretted his impulsiveness. But Ensign Waeyur took it as a given, stepping into the shuttle, and retracting the ramp. The door slid shut and after a second, running lights lit up as the interior preflight checks commenced.

On the compound's side of the tower, a ripple of anticipation as women still waiting to get off the planet realized the wait was shorter now. He could see Nyota expertly multi-tasking. None of the tasks fell strictly under her purview as communications officer and most were well beneath her paygrade. She had agreed to this because he had asked, and she never took on any task she did not intend to give her all. Observing her calm efficiency reminded him of when she'd been his teaching assistant. *And not angry with me*. She noticed him watching and turned her back.

"Come," he told Tes. They sped from the landing area. She was jogging to keep up with his long strides, so he slowed his pace. But distracted by the sight of a young Romulan soldier vanishing in a column of light, she did *not* slow down and ran into his back. Her cheeks colored. She pushed her hair out of her eyes. "Apologies, sir."

He dipped his chin in concession, then said, "There are conditions imposed on this offer."

"I am listening, Mr. Spock." He paused to make certain of it then started walking again. She half-skipped alongside until a sideways look from him reminded her to dampen her excitement.

"You will not touch her or allow her to touch you. Make certain that myself or the security officer is physically between you and your mother at all times—"

"She would not hurt *me*."

"I am certain she would never mean to do so, but her mind is ... in disarray. It is best to take precautions." Even with precautions his proposal sounded more illogical and fraught by the second. He stopped ten meters from the bench where her mother sat and lowered his voice. "I must also warn you that once there, she will be confined to a room and restrained for a time. It may be unsettling to witness, and you cannot interfere."

She looked at him with such earnest regard, her features an awkward mixture of prepubescent baby fat and adolescent angles. Head too big for her body. Eyes too big for her head. Teeth too big for her mouth. Her limbs thin and gangling. He could still change his mind. The third scheduled shuttle was surely a more appropriate option. Safer.

"I will adhere to your conditions, sir."

"Very well."

She returned to half-skipping, half-jogging again. "I-I have never been through a matter transporter beam."

He might have cited the Enterprise's rigorous safety protocols, regular inspections, upgrades, and factors of error percentages. Instead, he said, "Your safety is assured, *nu'ri veh*."

"It will be a constructive experience in every way then."

"And look at this, sir," Sooka said, pointing at the surveillance cameras above the doors. "Disabled. In every room. There's a monitoring setup for all these in the squad leader's office but it's just for show. Hasn't been active in a long long time."

Kirk's self-imposed condition of seeing the first shuttle off before returning to the bridge meant he now had time on his hands. Hence, he found himself standing in a tiny cell with a beefy Tiburonian pondering disabled surveillance devices.

"So," he ventured, "there was supposed to be oversight of some kind. And they just stopped bothering?" If voyeurism had been a motivation, the devices would be still be in operation. Likely surveillance was originally intended to protect their ... what? Breeding stock?

Everything about this outpost made him sick to his stomach.

The eight rooms in the modular building were essentially prison cells – about 2 x 3 meters, gray walls, strip lights in the ceiling, with a bed bolted to one wall and a toilet/sink combo that slid out of a panel on the opposite wall. A drawer next to that held a container of cleansing cloths, and a jar of what he assumed (with an involuntary shudder) was lubricant. This particular room was clean and tidy, but the air was stale and held traces of the much stronger odors they'd got whiff of in the disheveled, recently vacated rooms. Though never occupied by humans, there was familiarity by association in those odors. He wanted to blow this building into space and, also, call his mother and apologize for all the teenage-boy smells in his room when she was home that one time.

He concentrated his attention on the disabled surveillance devices instead.

Perhaps the experiment was never meant to last this long. Or the powers-that-be got lazy. Perhaps no one in the Romulan government had been able to figure a graceful way out of this mess once the planet Vulcan was destroyed. The fear of Federation reprisals for Vulcan's demise got all conflated with their usual paranoia and bad intentions as evidenced by this outpost. (Officially, the Federation noted that the Empire bore no responsibility, but the Romulans were a suspicious bunch and there were a lot of revenge rumors floating around the quadrant.)

Add to that, Vulcans were now a rare species, possibly perceived as valuable commodities.

Beside him, Sooka made a face, scrutinizing bare facts. "The tech seems kind of dated for a society that places so much value on innovative state-of-the-art military. This is all surplus, bargain basement stuff. And there's not much of it either."

"The medical equipment looked current," Kirk said, but he saw chief's point. The fact that the equipment in the tower hadn't been powered up for a while was definitely odd. "If this program was conceived and operated by Romulan secret intelligence, maybe they didn't want a lot of attention called to it – in case they had to scrap it quick. Political winds shift a lot."

"But the cheap stuff is easier to hack!"

"Why would anyone bother? Why suspect hacking would get them any information of value? Even the message we traced here was just straight-up text. I mean, sure the transmission method was clever, getting out through a dedicated channel, hitting all the right nodes, but—"

"They captured ships though, right?"

"Everyone thought the Orion Syndicate was responsible. This could all be attributed to the Syndicate."

No dis to Chief Sooka, but Spock was better at turning Kirk's intuitive speculations into actionable insights. There were still so many pieces missing from this puzzle. And lot of those missing pieces were actual people, some of those, hybrid infants. How many had already been born? Where were they now? Did Spock's hypothesis fit the evidence or were they fitting the evidence to preconceptions?

Interviews with the Vulcans would fill in some blanks, though he suspected they had no clear idea of the ultimate plan either. Unfortunately, not much clarity could be counted on from the Romulan soldiers in custody even if they all still had working brains. He was confident those men didn't know any more about the big picture other than they got to have a lot of sex with women who couldn't refuse them.

His communicator chirped. "Kirk here."

"The first shuttle is on its way back to the Enterprise, Captain," Spock said. "The second one is preparing to land. I have also taken the liberty of assigning a science team to do forensic sweeps of the outpost, all the hard and soft equipment and systems. Whatever information is here we intend to take with us."

"Perfect."

"I am beaming to the Enterprise with Perren shortly. Lt Uhura is directing the onboarding of the rest of the Vulcans, and they have all been assigned quarters. I have also been informed that the Romulan prisoners are confined to the brig. The commander is in the medbay being treated, and the young man who requested asylum has just beamed aboard. I have not spoken with Lt. Beghahi but assume she will handle the particulars of that situation as well as the finalities of the mission."

Kirk checked with Sooka who nodded. "Acknowledged. That's the plan." That was also his cue. "Thank you, Mr. Spock. Kirk out."

And moments later, he was.

By the time Jiekh and his armed escort reached the berth he'd been assigned, the device that translated his words into theirs was functioning so smoothly he hardly noticed it. He placed the clean garments he'd been given on the narrow bed. The room was small but had private hygiene facilities and a beverage dispenser. His guard demonstrated how to use these things and informed him that he was not to leave this room without an escort and that if he did so he would be placed in high security detention with the rest of his fellows.

“Do you have any dietary restrictions?”

“I am unsure. I have never eaten Federation foods.”

The man considered a moment. “There’s some Vulcan food on regular rotation you’ll probably do okay with. I’ll let the galley know. Your meals will be brought to you here.”

“My thanks.”

The man shrugged “Sure.” He entered information into a handheld device. “Once they’ve processed your asylum request you should be able to eat in crew’s mess. More options there.” He glanced up. “I don’t know how long that will take, mind you.”

“Will my tablet be returned to me soon?”

“Um... sorry. I don’t know anything about that.”

“Can you find out?”

A noise of frustration was followed by a suspicious look. “Maybe.”

“It has my games and other entertainment programs.”

The man lurched forward suddenly and Jiekh stumbled back. “Dude. Relax.” A holo-screen was activated at the small table. “Games and entertainment.”

Jiekh’s heart started thumping fast. “My tablet contains all of my work.”

“Oh yeah?” The suspicion deepened. “What kind of work is that?”

“Personal work.” He swallowed, looked at the grayish carpet, humiliated for no fathomable reason. “Writing.” A deep breath. “Poetry. Mostly.”

“Oh. Hey, that’s cool. I dabble myself. But you gotta know they’ll put it through a forensics examination before they can give it back, right?”

“But they will return it, yes? I intended to give it to my – to someone. So that she—” He cut off the words. They sounded strange to his ears. Not right.

He looked up and saw the guard watching him, his head cocked slightly. “Tell you what. I’ll ask around. See if we can get it back in one piece.”

“I thank you.”

The human started to say something, but seemed to change his mind. Instead, he said, “No problem,” and stepped out into the corridor. The door slid shut and Jiekh was alone. Colorful graphics bounced around on the holo-screen, but he couldn’t read the script.

He sat on the bed and wept.

In the confines of security holding cells there was much discussion about the coward, the traitor who’d sold them all out for a girl.

The Logic of Compassion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tes held her breath – *illogical* – and exhaled 409.497581 kilometers from where she'd been standing. Looking out onto the world of the ship.

People with slashes of bright color across their torsos stood in stark relief against pale, slick surfaces, schematic threads of light suspended in the air above them. She squeezed her eyes shut, felt the subtle press of artificial gravity, the soft thrum of engines beneath her feet. In her ears, incessant activity punctuated by crisply spoken Standard.

The only other ship she'd known was the *T'Sai Suk* – *home* – all soft browns and grays, with big cushions and a big round table, brimming bowls and heaping platters of food. She remembered patterned blankets on the bulkheads, warm laps, warm thoughts, hammock swings. The cockpit where Father sometimes let them sit. Crawling with her cousins over cargo in the holds and hiding in between until Grandfather sent his displeasure and *come out of there!*

Mr. Spock tugged gently at her sleeve. She opened her eyes. They stepped from the platform. A male human in red shirt and black trousers joined them. Doors parted onto wide corridors that gleamed cool and clean. "This transporter room is closest to the Medical Bay and suitable for non-emergency purposes," Spock said. "We will arrive there in approximately two minutes."

She appreciated his efforts to provide information to ease her discomfort, but there were so many people in the corridor. "Shift change," the red shirt man said. Her mother made a tiny sound and Tes sensed a constriction in Spock's general quietude. It made the short journey to the Medical Bay more difficult considering her mother's affliction. Human minds and mouths were loud. She'd also been told that humans stank. That's what the soldiers at the compound said. Humans smelled so bad they had to be kept separate from other slaves and were only permitted to work outside in the open air. But she did not find the odor intolerable. In fact, she was far more aware of her *own* smelly molecular cloud travelling the corridor with her, dirt ground into her tunic, grime beneath her fingernails, the stink embedded in her pores and caught in the snarls of her hair. Humans smiled as she passed, sometimes showing teeth. Was her face dirty, too?

Flanked by Spock and the redshirt human (whose hand never left the energy weapon at his belt), Mother barely picked up her feet as she walked. The blanket Spock had draped over her shoulders before they beamed up was arranged in such a way that passersby could not easily observe her hands bound in front of her. The blanket was not a logical necessity. It was a consideration of her dignity. It was a kindness.

Prisu would not have seen it that way. She was not favorably disposed towards Spock and not merely because of Mother. "He is not your savior. He rescued you from Kaol because he was assigned that task. It was his duty. The timing was fortunate but not by his design or intention. If he favors you now, you'll do well to remember that any favors men do for you will exact a price eventually."

But he didn't *have* to put a blanket over Mother's shoulders. That was a compassionate act. And hadn't Surak himself written about the logic of compassion? That an action taken for the well-being of others was restorative to self and community? Spock was *kind* and he *had* saved her. Perhaps he could yet save—

Mother's mind tapped at hers like a nocturnal insect bumping against the compound's luminaires. Not *inside*, not all the way, more ... a fluttery nudge at her left temple then behind her eyes. Tes must have reacted, a sound perhaps, because Spock looked down at her over the edge of his shoulder just as the doors to the medical facility opened and the tapping stopped.

The activity inside did not slow at their arrival. They were seen, acknowledged, and then ignored. A moment later a person with blue flesh, white hair and white-tipped antennae approached.

Andorian!

Tes had been on Andor once, in a port city when the *T'Sai Suk* took on cargo. She got to go provisioning with her mother and aunts, bundled up in layers of clothing because it was very cold. There was snow! She sat in a hover-cart with her cousin Tan as the goods piled in around them higher and higher until Tan started crying because he couldn't see. It was strange how so many memories from *before* were pushing to the front of her thoughts.

"Good evening, Mr. Spock," the Andorian said. "As per your instructions, we have prepared a room to your specifications and the path to it should be clear of potential obstructions or provocations."

"Thank you, Nurse Bast. Will you be attending?"

"I am the most qualified, sir."

He turned to Tes. "Once your mother is made comfortable, I will return for you—" Her protest was cut off by a sharp look. "Until then our chief medical officer informed me that Shashi is recovered enough to receive a quiet and well-behaved visitor."

Mr. Malemo hits the mechanism to unlock the cuffs, lets them fall to the floor and kicks them aside for retrieval later, one hand on his phaser. For a moment, this caution strikes Spock as ridiculous, though it is at his behest. Nurse Bast stays out of arm's reach.

“Perren,” Bast says. Perren looks at her from under hooded eyelids. “You are in a medical facility. The bed is diagnostic and serves also to aid in rest and recovery. You will be restrained across the body in four places—” Bast indicates the areas on her own body— “and will remain so until the diagnostic program is complete. This bed is used for no other purpose. You are safe here. Do you understand?”

“Your assurances are unnecessary,” Perren says. She slowly climbs onto the bed and stretches her body out flat, arms at her sides, her feet turning out slightly at the ankles. The soles of her slippers are filthy, but her clothing cannot be removed until she is sedated. She surveys the ceiling with the sterile field projector overhead. Her words slip off her tongue in slow measured drops. “It would be illogical of me to resist. What is, is. I have done what needed doing.”

Bast dips her antennae forward in acknowledgement and triggers the restraints on the bed. They slide into place. As an added precaution, she fits security mitts over Perren’s hands, careful not to touch the flesh, tightening the bands around her wrists.

Perren’s psi-mind spasms intermittently like a muscle jerking her awake on the edge of sleep. He can feel it. She turns her head to focus on him, her gaze soft and unnerving. Then her eyes open wide in a disturbing and familiar terror. A sharp shock hits him like a blow to the sternum—

She’s fallen off the edge. Into an abyss.

He stumbles back a step, and another, one foot out the door as if to flee before regaining his composure. Thankfully, his reaction has gone unnoticed. Perren’s eyes are shuttered now, fine lines crimping the corners, indicating pain. Pain is what he saw. Whatever reminded him of his mother is gone. Except for the guilt. Guilt covers everything like an algal bloom. A smothering guilt that eschews forgiveness.

He knows his mother forgave his many varied (and in retrospect) small infractions regularly, long before she died. Everything he’d said or done, the ways in which he’d caused her pain, any childish insults formed out of insecurity and couched in logic were, she explained, quite normal between parents and their offspring. “Did you think you were the first snarky adolescent boy in the history of the universe to be embarrassed by his mother’s behavior?” She forgave his desire to excise the part of him that was *her* and *human*. She forgave his assumption that she would *always* be there when he had need of her (because she always had been) though the reverse did not hold true in the end. He cannot change that. In his daily meditation he has begun to incorporate a practice of self-forgiveness in her honor. It is an ongoing process. Only moderately successful.

T’Lingshar University, where cousins T’Lie and T’Vria matriculated, had been (to Uhura’s quiet delight) the Vulcan version of a liberal arts college. Her first impulse was to locate Spock and tease him mercilessly. Did T’Lingshar U. students congregate in arty little teahouses, discussing interplanetary economics? Did they earnestly debate the pros and cons of logical extremism, decry the performative activism of certain politicians, dip their toes into the forbidden tenets of the V’tosh ka’tur? Were there poetry readings? Open mics? Did they hand out fliers on the quad for their boyfriend’s retro-metal lyre band?

That impulse died as quickly as it came, her delight relegated to a growing pile of losses he would have to mourn.

Vulcans were not, by any stretch of imagination, chatty people. Still, it was notable that not one of them asked her about Vulcan, the planet, their home. This suggested that they knew, and it was a reality they either didn’t want confirmed or didn’t want to confront just yet. She was embarrassingly grateful for that. But there were degrees of conveyance that went beyond a general perception of taciturn, reserved people who stood in judgment of everyone else and found all those “not-Vulcan” wanting. Within the security of community and family, individual Vulcans were as varied in personality as any other race of beings. And some were surprisingly talkative.

T’Vria proved by far to be the most effusive as she absently bounced and patted the baby slung across her chest. Her olive skin was scattered with darker olive freckles, her irises were an unusual bronze-y green, and the dimples at the corners of her mouth made it appear she smiled frequently when in fact she smiled not at all. She peppered Uhura for news about the latest holovids, musicians she used to follow, and fashion trends on trendy worlds – not things Uhura expected a Vulcan to be particularly interested in (from her admittedly limited sample size), and not subjects she had much opportunity to keep current with these days. If this lack of knowledge disappointed T’Vria, she was politely Vulcan in not showing it.

T’Lie was the taller of the two, her blue-black hair arranged in messy horn shaped buns. She wore an expression of bland hauteur and somehow managed to look better in her prison sweats than anyone else. Her relief that they’d all soon be “leaving this *pekshsi*” was expressed with an air of exquisite boredom. Unlike her cousin, T’Lie was presently unencumbered by an infant and intended to keep it that way. She’d pulled Uhura aside early on to ask how fast she could obtain an abortifacient. Three other women, T’Maru, Prisu, and Vareshi, approached her separately with the same question. She told them all the same thing – that they would be medically assessed once on board the Enterprise and if pregnant they’d be consulted on how they wanted to proceed. “It’s entirely up to you,” she assured them.

Prisu was the only one not visibly eased by that assurance. “No one can deny our wishes in the matter?”

The rights of an individual to body autonomy was in the UFP charter, so technically, *no*. But the *T’Sai Suk’s* crew were a Sinti offshoot of Clan Trazhu. Maybe there were ethnic cultural prohibitions of which Uhura was not aware. Maybe she shouldn’t make promises she personally couldn’t assure.

Still, Vulcan had been a founding member of the UFP and signed off on all articles of the charter ages ago. Why had the other three women been so circumspect in asking her? She’d been uncomfortable with what their reticence implied. Spock could shed some light about it when she saw him. If she was speaking to him again. Abortion wasn’t a subject that had come up in their relationship so far, not even generally. They were both obsessively responsible, and besides, she was only in year two of her ten-year career plan. Unplanned...*anything* was out of the

question.

The third and last shuttle whipped up dust clouds as it landed. Squinting against the grit, she pushed back the errant strands of hair blowing around her face. A useless effort. In the courtyard area of the compound, Spock's people scurried around with tricorders scanning for transient evidence, any information held in buffers, programs that they could not risk uploading, and tagging whatever physical evidence they wanted the Ops people to gather into a pile to beam up all at once – computers, tracking systems, communications consoles, monitors, cameras and recording devices, medical equipment, etc.

She was surprised to see the two women from the tactical team were still on the planet, let alone walking her direction with their helmets under their arms. The shorter of the two waited until the shuttle finished powering down before introductions. “Lt Uhura. I'm PO Haloke Hohepa. This is PO Lisette Murad. We're supposed to return to the ship with you on the *Einstein* if there's room.”

“Great. Welcome to the shuttle for unencumbered women.” Both looked at her with carefully neutral expressions, encumbered as they were by their EV suits, equipment packs, small phaser rifles and helmets in hand. Uhura realized the “unencumbered” label needed context and that context probably needed to stay in her head. “Where's the rest of your team?”

Murad's lips tightened. Hohepa gave a twisted grin. “Yeah. It's just Ch'zaasran and us left.” Uhura hadn't realized Ch'zaasran was still up in the crow's nest. “The other boys got to beam up twenty minutes ago.”

“Seriously? Why'd you get stuck with the slow trip?”

“Chief's trying to keep his mission energy expenditures under budget. Or something. And somebody up top said there'd be room on this shuttle. And he's the boss. What're ya gonna do?”

“Are we waiting on Ch'zaasran then?”

Murad shrugged.

The Vulcan women observed this exchange with discreet interest. Although Prisu was already on the Enterprise and likely settled into a room by now, the number of her fellow unencumbered hopefuls had gained additional members – a woman closer to Perren's age called Sanvi, and T'Izhlen who seemed to be in denial about just how pregnant she was.

The shuttle hatch door opened, and the short ramp slid to the ground. Val Kochulaev stepped out and waved at her, “Hey girl!”

Uhura raised her hand to wave back but let out a startled curse instead when an energy burst cut through the darkness above their heads. Ch'zaasran had fired his phaser at something on the far side of the shuttle and from his triumphant whoop he must have hit it too. She whirled around to see Murad and Hohepa now flanking the group of Vulcan women with their rifles aimed into the inky black. Ch'zaasran yelled down, “Board quick. We need to raise the perimeter fence asap.”

Nurse Bast drew a blanket up to Perren's chin and tucked it in, covering the restraints, the padded mittens on her hands, and her now bare feet. Spock went to fetch Tes. He would allow her to see that her mother was being well cared for, but that was all. Bast had gently tried to discourage even that much.

As he walked past a darkened room, motion detectors raised the lights. Inside, a woman sitting cross-legged on a bio-bed winced at the sudden brightness. Her short brown hair was flattened on one side, and there was a slight indentation on her right cheek which suggested she'd been lying down until a few moments ago. She panicked at the sight of him, but he'd already depressed the emergency call signal and requested security before she could scramble off the table. Now she stood, her breath hard and fast, staring him with her hands clenched at her sides. A nurse came running and skidded to a stop in alarm at his presence.

“Who is this?” he demanded.

“We don't have a name, sir. She was beamed directly to sickbay from the planet. Non-physical trauma. We're still waiting for the psych-eval. She hasn't spoken since she got here.”

“Perhaps because she does not speak Standard,” he said, his gaze hard. A security officer rushed into the narrow corridor and Spock held up his hand. *Wait.*

The nurse looked uncomfortable. “Well, none of us speak Vulcan, sir—”

“Identify yourself,” he said in Romulan.

The woman opened her mouth, then shook her head in a manner that could be interpreted as either refusal or incomprehension.

“That's Dr. Mas,” Tes offered, her bright voice startling him. She'd appeared from around a corner, blocked from coming closer by the security person. At the sight of the girl, the Romulan woman drew a breath, her nostrils flaring, and her mouth pursed in a combination of anxiety and irritation.

“You were told to wait until I came for you,” Spock said, his tone sharper than he intended.

Tes gulped, squeaked out, “You said you would return for me once Mother was comfortable.”

"That you should wait until I did so was implied." Whatever rejoinder she intended was stopped by a finger thrust in the air. "No. Return to where you were and wait."

Tes spun on her heel and stomped back where she came from.

"That child has always needed a firm hand," the Romulan woman said, her smile tentative and oddly provocative at the same time. He was the only other person who knew what she was saying.

"Identify yourself," he repeated.

"Hannam ir'Thieurull t'Mas. Doctor of Obstetrics."

Chekov made a weird little meep sound and leaned sideways to glance at helm controls. Sulu grunted, "Yeah, I see it."

Kirk straightened in his chair. "See what?"

"We have a blip, Captain. Just outside orbital range of the tenth planet in the system."

Kirk looked over at the science station where Spock was *not*, but Lt. Nez *was*. "Can you identify it a little better than that?"

"Um. It's definitely not nothing, sir. However, a targeted scan might draw attention to the fact that we're now aware of...whatever it is."

"Run a metaphasic sweep."

"Aye, sir." A few seconds passed, then, "There's a mass displacement at 200. An object approximately 44 meters long, maybe 9 meters in height. Span of 36 meters." Nez straightened. "Rough configuration suggests a Stalker, sir."

Kirk pulled at his lower lip. "A Romulan scout ship. Great."

"Yes, sir. Likely cloaked until a few minutes ago."

"Go to yellow alert. Inform our people on the surface they have five minutes to finish their business before we pull them out."

"Aye, sir."

"Sir?" Lt. M'Ress said from the Comms station. "The Einstein is already in transit. It's 267 kilometers out. ETA twenty-two minutes."

"Dammit," Kirk mutters. "I knew this was going too smoothly."

Chapter End Notes

Metaphasic sweep? Sure. why not?

Stalker and Sycophant

Chapter Summary

Stuff ramps up. Spock butts head with a nurse.

It wasn't strictly necessary for McCoy to check in on the woman Shashi and her baby. She was already out of the ICU and her nurses were keeping him apprised. But the other Vulcan woman – her cousin, apparently – was still critical. He wasn't nearly as confident in *her* recovery. A little shot of mother and child goodness was just what he needed right now. Plus, C-section babies had those unsquished perfectly shaped heads.

But the little figure sitting forlornly on the floor outside Shashi's cubicle would have to be tended to before that could happen. He couldn't see her face, buried as it was in her updrawn knees. Only the tips of her pointy ears showed through unkempt hair. Sensing his nearness, her shoulders hunched higher around her ears and her arms tightened around her legs.

"We have chairs to sit in, if you're interested," McCoy said.

Startled, she looked up then hurriedly scrambled to her feet. It was clear she'd expected him to be someone else. He could practically see the battle waging inside her head as she tried to determine how much deference he was due.

"Mr. Spock commanded me to wait here," she said barely above a whisper. Poor kid was going to be wringing her hands in a second.

"On the floor? That doesn't sound like Spock to me. He's a firm believer in chairs."

She inched warily away from him with a furtive but dismissive side-eye, the kind of look characteristic of adolescents from many species when pondering the dangerous stupidity of adults. "Chairs *exist*. One needn't *believe* in chairs for that to be true."

"Well," he replied gently, ducking into Shashi's cubicle to bring out a chair, "quantum physics might argue a chair doesn't exist until we're looking at it." He placed it on the deck next to her. "Would you care to sit in this observable chair and tell me why Spock upset you with his command?"

She straightened up to her full not-very-tall height. He got the impression he'd insulted her.

"He did not *upset* me," she corrected. Yep. Definitely insulted.

"You don't mind if I sit down then? I've been on my feet for hours." He sat. They were closer to eye-level now, but she averted her gaze.

"I do not know you well enough to mind what you do or do not do, sir."

"You're right. Sorry about that. My name is Leonard. I'm a doctor. I helped deliver that baby in there." He aimed a thumb over his shoulder.

"You did well. His head is more symmetrical than some of the other newborn infants I have observed."

"Why thank you."

"I am Tes of the *T'Sai Suk*."

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance. Is your mother the one admitted a little while ago?"

"Yes. Mr. Spock told me to wait here with Shashi and her baby until he came to fetch me. But then Shashi became fatigued and wished to sleep. Her infant was also sleeping. I went to locate Mr. Spock and inform him of this—" Tes met his gaze directly for the first time, motivated by what was clearly a terrible injustice. "He was displeased I had disobeyed and would not allow me to explain my reasoning. His response was illogical."

And hurt her feelings McCoy suspected.

"Hmm. That is strange. Reasonable explanations are some of his favorite things. Is it possible that what you interpreted as displeasure was actually concern for your safety?"

"But it was only Dr. Mas!"

McCoy was pretty sure there was no one on staff by that name. "I'm sorry. Who is that now?"

"Dr. Mas. She is the physician who cares for us in the compound."

“Wait. The doctor from— She’s on the ship? In the Medbay?” She nodded. He got up. “Is Spock with her now?”

“I do not know. He sent me away.”

A Romulan doctor. In his Medbay. Why the hell wasn’t he informed there was a Romulan doctor in *his* Medbay? “Show me.”

The only move Tes made was a small shake of her head.

“Listen. I have way more authority in this department than Spock does. So, I’m overriding his command. Lead on, missy. You can introduce me to this Dr. Mas.”

After brief consideration she started towards the private exam rooms with him behind her. They hadn’t gotten but a few steps when the yellow alert sounded.

Hannam ir’Thieurull t’Mas.

Thieurull. “Hellguard.” The name of the planet, the outpost, the prison compound itself, the state of existence for those within.

The word was, in the Romulan language, a kind of portmanteau, though the Federation lingua franca rendered it as two distinct words linked together. Spock understood there were layered meanings and an ironic one as well, but he was not proficient enough in the language or in the culture itself to understand more than the superficial concept of something extremely unpleasant but obligatory. It was therefore telling that this woman had adopted *Thieurull* as her locative name.

Dr. Mas’s physical affectations were, he surmised, a show for his benefit, vacillating between guilelessness and a seeming insouciance regarding her circumstances. It confirmed what he had observed in her thus far – a cunning desperation that would turn to sycophancy or repudiation as the need arose.

One thing she had made clear, he had not handled Tes’s disregard for his authority appropriately. Mas’s tacit approval of his “firm hand” was steeped in sickening implications. He found himself actively disliking the woman, though he had laid eyes on her only two minutes and twenty seconds ago. An emotional response. One of many of late.

Practicing self-forgiveness was one thing, but the ease with which his various ... *feelings* surfaced went beyond the acceptable parameters of daily meditation. Careful examination of emotional states was not the same as allowing them free rein. The temporary measure he’d devised over a year ago was intended to act as a safety valve to relieve pressure when the loss of his mother and *home* threatened to overwhelm him. Now it seemed an unhealthy self-indulgence, not conducive to his well-being in the long term. He would need to address the issue once this current crisis was resolved.

Dr. Mas smiled vaguely at him. The masseter muscle over his right jaw twitched. Behind his back, his left hand curled into a fist.

“This woman is Romulan, not Vulcan. She should have been confined to security detention the moment she came aboard.”

The nurse whose name tag read “Chapel” said, “We made an erroneous assumption, Commander, and for that I apologize. We were told the adult females were all Vulcans.”

“Did no one bother to run a medical scan over her when she arrived? Surely that would have saved you an erroneous assumption.”

Chapel took up the gauntlet of irritation he’d thrown down and lobbed it back at him. “I believe I’ve already explained that she was beamed directly from the planet to the Medbay in an unresponsive state—”

“Actually, you did not mention an unresponsive state. You said—”

“—non-physical trauma! Yes. Yes, I *did*, didn’t I?” Her voice snapped at him, acerbic, right on the edge of insubordination. “At the time of her arrival, she was assessed as unresponsive in a manner that suggested catatonia related to psychological trauma or schizophrenia. Given the circumstances of captivity—”

“Vulcans do not suffer from schizophrenia.”

“Mr. Spock,” Nurse Chapel said, whipping out a medical scanner, “there was a lot going on at the time. We were a little too busy to reference the DSM for Vulcan mental disorders.”

She circled Dr. Mas, invading Spock’s space in the process so that he was forced to step back to prevent physical contact. He asked, “Is she well enough to receive medical treatments while in a security detention cell?” His vocal inflection at least *sounded* unperturbed.

“She’s currently demonstrating several indicators of stress, all attributable to the situation.” Nurse Chapel’s eyes were an icy blue. He took note because of how disapprovingly focused they were on him just then. “It’s your call, sir.”

“Commander?” the security officer interjected. His professional demeanor suffered under the weight of the news he was about to impart. “If you remember, sir, the cells in the brig are at capacity.”

Of course, he *remembered*. The cells were technically *over* capacity.

“Also, the, uh, prisoners? They’re all male, sir.”

And rapists. Could not forget that. Nurse Chapel had her arms crossed over her chest, watching him, her expression only slightly less trenchant.

“I can provide information,” Dr. Mas said softly.

And there it was. He thought it would have taken her longer. She was not present when Perren attacked Kaol and caused the damage that currently rendered him useless, Spock was certain of this. But Dr. Mas was now their only viable source of information. It seemed unlikely she knew it and yet...

Did she understand what was being said about her? Or merely adept at reading the room?

The two humans were looking to him for translation or summary. He gave them neither, just in case. “I will contact the quartermaster and arrange other secure accommodations. Meanwhile—”

Emergency lights started flashing. A calm, pleasantly female voice announced ship’s status as “yellow alert.” A moment later he was called to the bridge.

Kirk glanced over his shoulder as the lift doors parted and Spock entered the bridge. “Romulan Scout ship, we think,” he said as his first officer moved to his station. “Just idling there. Probably knows we’re aware of it by now.”

“A scout ship does not pose much of a threat to the Enterprise, Captain. However, if little has changed from the last intelligence we had on this classification, it is likely equipped with a banned cloaking device.”

“Yeah. We kind of figured that out already.”

“It must still disengage its cloak to fire a weapon.”

“Nose mounted disrupter, I’m assuming. Photon torpedoes?”

“No more than two, if it is even equipped with such. These stalker scouts are quite fast, however, with a running warp speed of 7.6 to a maximum of 9.67.”

“So, like five seconds for it to get from there to here,” Kirk said.

“I would estimate in the range of 10 to 12 seconds depending on speed.”

“Let’s just say pretty damned quick. Interesting it shows up now that we’re nearly finished with this operation. Any idea how long it’s been hanging around, Mr. Spock?”

“We’ve been running constant sensor scans since we crossed the Neutral Zone, sir,” Sulu offered, unprompted. “Both long and short range.” Kirk detected a hint of defensiveness.

“These vessels are designed for both stealth and speed, Mr. Sulu,” Spock said. “As yet, Starfleet has no consistently reliable technology for detecting cloaked vessels no matter how diligent and thorough our scans.”

“Captain,” Lt. M’Ress said. “Crew on the surface have begun transporting equipment up.”

“No, no. Inform them they are to beam *themselves* up first.”

He smiled sympathetically at Spock’s sigh of resignation. “We’ll get the stuff if we have time, Mr. Spock.”

“Of course, Captain.”

He turned back to M’Ress. “Hail the shuttle.”

We are finally leaving this place. We are rescued. We are free.

Despite that fulfillment, the passengers of the Einstein are oddly subdued. T’Izhlen’s fellow Vulcans share a hazy telepathic drift, equal parts vague disquiet, and relief. In the cockpit, the human pilot and Lt. Uhura talk quietly to each other with the ease of amiable co-workers. The two human women (who are not commissioned officers) sit across from T’Izhlen and Vareshi. They have stripped their protective outer garments and lean back in their seats, heads lolling, eyes closed, drowsing. Their odor is not pleasant, but then none of the Vulcans can claim much better. There is the promise of bathing and clean garments soon.

About midway through the flight, Uhura ambles from the cockpit to the small hygiene booth at the back. When she emerges, she pulls the elastic band from her hair and sits in one of the empty seats in the cabin. Her fingers dig into her scalp, drag through the loosened tresses, and scratch with abandon until the crown of her head sports a tangled nest. She catches T'Izhlen's eye, doesn't quite smile, but it is as if they share a deep understanding about constricting hairbands. Her gaze floats over the others without focusing on anyone, and for a while she seems merely lost in thought. Then she asks, "Were any of you on the *SS Chibuzo*?"

It is a rude question asked in the rude language of the Federation, a question with questions beneath. *Are any still alive? How did they die?* T'Izhlen is sure Uhura knows there is no way to answer such a question in vuhlkansu that would not be invasive, transgressive – even the dead have a right to some privacy.

There is a moment of silent exchange. In the rude common language of the Federation, T'Lie says carefully, "None that are on this shuttle."

"There are *none* left," T'Izhlen amends. What is the point of guarding secrets now? "The last of those women died 3.4 planetary rotations prior."

For a human, Uhura manages her response with little emotional expression. "I grieve with thee," she says, reverting to vuhlkansu. "I would honor her name."

"She was T'Aimnu," Vareshi replies. "Our children are siblings."

Uhura's equanimity falters. She appears ... distressed. Surely, she understands the odds of several women bearing children from the same genetic donor were high in the circumstances.

"Oh. Um. You mean, the little girls all around four or five years old? Half-sisters?"

An odd phrase. "Sisters of different mothers," T'Izhlen clarifies. She is one of their mothers.

Four girl children born within days of each other, all sired by the same man. A matched set Kaol had called them, held in reserve for some different scheme, some future horror. He gave them "amusing" names...

They are free now.

Almost free.

From the cockpit comes a chiming sound, "Enterprise to the shuttle Einstein."

Uhura scrambles to the cockpit, toggles a switch. "Enterprise this is Lt. Uhura for the Einstein."

Without preamble Captain Kirk says, "Your pilot needs to pick up speed, Lieutenant."

The pilot's eyes stay fixed on the control readouts. "Lt. Kochulaev here, Captain. How much speed does the situation call for, sir?"

"You're still fifteen minutes out and I need you in the hanger bay five minutes ago."

"Aye sir." Primary thrusters engage for the second time, and the vessel gives a subtle jump, barely sensed by its occupants – unlike the sense of urgency they now experience.

"What is happening?" T'Lie asks.

"Safety harnesses everyone," Uhura says.

Mr. Spock's voice cuts in, suddenly. "Raise your shields!"

Things One Through Four

Chapter Summary

The ship is under attack. Sort of. McCoy keeps adding to his list of things to investigate later. And some other stuff happens.

Spock whirled about, jumped up and slide-stepped to the Comms station in a dance-like move that startled Lt. M'Ress and belied the urgency in his voice, "Raise your shields!"

A concomitant flurry of action erupted all around the bridge as Kirk ordered the *Enterprise* to do the same, but the Romulan scout had already zipped past their starboard side and fired on the exposed shuttle, shearing off a piece of the smaller vessel's outer hull. The *Einstein* hadn't been able to raise its shields fast enough.

"Go to red alert. Ready phasers. Target its warp nacelle when it comes back around—"

"Captain," Spock said, back at his science station again. "The vessel is not coming back around. It appears to be on course for the planet."

"Do we have all our people onboard?"

"Except for the occupants of the *Einstein*, sir." Tension rippled. A few glances flicked in Spock's direction.

A barrage of data hummed in the background as Ops scanned the shuttle for damage and relayed that information to engineering. Lt. M'Ress had been frantically calling the *Einstein* with nothing but static coming back so far. Kirk ordered her to hail the Romulan scout, his fingers drumming the arm of his chair.

"Hailing on all frequencies. No response, sir."

Chekov looked from the forward screen to his console's instruments and back again. "Captain. The vessel has entered the upper atmosphere."

"Can we get a tractor beam on it?"

Spock turned from his station, a single eyebrow raised like a signal flag. He understood the impetus behind the question. Capturing the vessel would be quite a coup, but the odds were not in their favor. "Inadvisable. Engaging a tractor beam would strain our systems and likely hasten its inevitable destruction."

"Inevitable...?" Kirk's eyes narrowed. "A suicide run?"

"Perhaps. At this point a safe landing is not possible, though the pilot appears to be adjusting trajectory to maintain a general heading towards the vicinity of the compound. I estimate that an impact within 400 meters of the area it will cause significant damage to the site."

"Looks like the Romulans are giving us an out and saving face at the same time."

"I am personally reluctant to draw such a conclusion from the action of a single scout ship, Captain." Stating his reluctance gave Spock a *logical* out while quietly agreeing with Kirk's assertions.

"Captain," Ensign Banks from Ops interrupted, "Mr. Scott says the *Einstein's* barely holding off a hull breach. He'd like to beam everyone out now, with your approval."

"So ordered." But Kirk's gaze did not leave the forward screen, watching the white-hot glow of the scout ship plunge through the atmospheric vapors of the 872 Trianguli V. The *Enterprise's* exacting instruments tracked its progression in more minute and precise detail, recording data right up to the second the explosion registered on the surface.

"Did it hit where it was aiming?"

"Close enough, Captain." Spock's resigned tone and lack of precision spoke volumes. But whether it was for the foolish sacrifice of life or the loss of valuable evidence on the planet's surface, Kirk couldn't tell. He thumbed the comm on the arm of his chair.

"Scotty? Do you have them?"

"Aye, sir. Nine lovely lasses, safe and sound... mostly. They're headed to the Medbay. If you could give me a few minutes, sir, we'll haul the shuttle back in."

"How many is a few?"

"Twenty?"

"That already feels too long. Make it faster. Mr. Chekov, plot a speedy course to Starbase 17. Mr. Sulu, as soon Mr. Scott has the shuttle

secured, warp 6 us the hell out of here before the Romulan Empire changes its mind.”

He was met with a chorus of “aye, sir.”

Later, in the lift on their way to the Medbay, Kirk flashed Spock a grin of humble relief and pure astonishment that they’d pulled it off.

Tes huddled under Leonard’s desk as he’d instructed and pressed her hands over her ears. The alert status changed from yellow to red, altering the pattern of the flashing lights as well. The pitch of the alarm became excruciating, she could practically hear it in her *teeth*. It seemed to go on much longer than her internal clock marked. Then, both vocal warning and claxon alarm stopped, but the lights kept flashing. From her crouched hiding place, she watched the flickering patterns on the wall and after a time unmeasured, slipped without intention into the first level of meditation. Her mind stilled, calmed, opened. She could feel the lights beating softly against her closed eyelids. Just floating now, rocking, drifting.

“*Tes. Tes. Tes-pi’tekh.*”

“Mother?”

“*Peace and long life, little sprout.*”

“Mother!”

Fifteen minutes after the stand-down from Red alert the only casualties to show up were from the shuttle *Einstein* – a petty officer’s sprained wrist, a few scrapes and bruises for the passengers and pilot, and a goose-egg knot on Lt. Uhura’s forehead.

“Didn’t get your safety harness on in time?” McCoy asked, swiping the dermo-regenerator over it a couple of times. The purplish bruising faded slightly.

“I was too busy telling everyone else to put theirs on.” She tried to push her hair back from her forehead, but her fingers got trapped in the snarls on top of her head. She scrunched up her nose in exasperation, which McCoy found adorable and dared not vocalize.

The two petty officers and the pilot had already been dismissed, but the Vulcan women stood passively waiting for a yeoman to escort them to their assigned quarters. Three of them looked damned young to him, like fresh-faced Academy first-years after grueling morning exercises, but the one in close consult with Nurse Chapel was older and maybe five or six months pregnant. All the rescued Vulcans needed thorough exams, and his staff was coordinating with Operations and Admin to schedule those, but he figured unless they were in severe distress what they needed most was some decent food, a nice hot shower, clean clothes, and a bed with clean sheets.

He loaded a hypo and pressed it gently to the flesh behind Uhura’s ear. “Mild analgesic and an anti-inflammatory. Best to let the body take care of this kind of thing in its own wise way. Grab a cold-pack from the dispensary and you’re good to go.”

“Okay.” She hopped down from a diagnostic bed she totally didn’t need, looking around distractedly, as if suddenly attuned to a subtle disturbance in the ether. The doors slid open and the “disturbance” entered with the captain. Spock’s gaze zoomed in on Uhura and his body followed his eyeballs. Kirk ambled alongside him, smiling at the Vulcans, then remembered after he’d passed that smiling at them was not *de rigueur*. McCoy turned away, hiding his own grin.

“Wow,” Kirk said, drawing a circle in the air at Uhura’s injury. “That is quite a lump.”

“It’s feels gargantuan.” She touched it gingerly.

“It’s *massive*. Also, looks like your hair did battle with a squirrel. And lost. Big time.”

Uhura snorted. McCoy rolled his eyes. “If messy hair and bump on the noggin is the worst you get from *not* wearing a safety belt then count yourself lucky.”

“Does it look horrible?” She had turned to Spock for reassurance, which seemed like a bad choice.

“Clarify.”

McCoy laughed. “That’s code for ‘I would prefer not to answer lest my frankness get me into trouble.’”

Uhura grinned. Spock clumsily changed the subject. “I regret, Lieutenant, that I was unable to alert you in time to secure your safety restraints.”

“Not your fault. It happened too fast.”

“Indeed. Your injury looks painful. Your hair needs some attention.”

"Maybe you can help me with that later." A faint olive flush crept up from Spock's jawline to the tips of his ears. Huh. Maybe hair grooming was something sexual in Vulcan culture? McCoy put that on his list of things to look into ... later.

Spock and Uhura proceeded to gaze into each other's eyes until Kirk couldn't take it anymore. "All right, enough of that. You guys can kiss and make up on your own time." He grabbed Spock by the biceps to tug him along. "You said she was in one of the exam rooms, right?"

"Wait? Who?" McCoy interjected. "Are you talking about a Romulan doctor? The one who magically appeared in my medbay? The one nobody gave me a heads-up about?"

"Can't give you a heads up if I just found out myself." Kirk grunted. His attempt to tug Spock after him met with substantial resistance – resistance so strong he stumbled back, almost losing his footing.

Spock had suddenly turned into a boulder, stiff and unyielding beneath the captain's hand, his expression shuttered, impassive and void of any sentiment whatsoever. Uhura lowered her eyes and slowly stepped away, knowing better than to engage when Spock was in full Vulcan lockdown.

That's when McCoy realized the entire exchange, from Spock's single-minded focus on one human woman to Kirk's "kiss and make up" line, had been witnessed by the other Vulcans present. It must have seemed a shockingly overt emotional display by a member of their own species.

Four of the women averted their eyes immediately – out of respect for Spock's dignity and perhaps to hide their own embarrassment. The older woman who'd been conversing with Christine Chapel, actively pretended not to have noticed at all, which was a more typical response of Vulcan decorum. (But then again, she clearly had other issues on her mind. McCoy's clinical instincts were tingling, and he had a feeling he'd know what those issues were soon enough.)

The fifth young woman reminded him a little of his ex – gorgeous and singularly unimpressed with pretty much everything. She did *not* avert her eyes or pretend not to notice, but instead, focused her attention mercilessly on Spock's person, scanning him from head to toe, her head cocked slightly, lending an illusion of blunt antennae to the cone-like buns on top of it. When she turned her sloe-eyed regard to McCoy, he almost dropped the dermo-regenerator. Was she doing some Vulcan mojo on him? He shuddered, scrambling to gather the threads of his thoughts—

"Uh, yeah, well, Spock's young friend Tes was taking me to see her when the alert sounded."

"Tes?" Kirk suddenly connected the dots. He gripped Spock's arm tighter and gave it a shake. "That little girl we rescued?"

Spock unlocked his hands from behind his back, and Kirk let go. "I beamed her up with her mother."

"Hmm. You didn't mention that. Did we miss something? Is she all right?"

"She's fine," McCoy said, cautiously looking from one man to the other. There was a story there he'd need to dig out, but for now— "Currently hunkered down in my office. Seemed the safest place. Although, she's probably climbing the walls by now."

Spock opened his mouth, a precursor for clarification, but must have decided the statement was idiomatic. "Doctor, would you ask one of your staff to make certain she's reunited with the rest of her family? I believe they are already quartered."

"That will not be necessary." The officers turned to the young Vulcan woman with the funny hairdo and enervating gaze. "Her mother will be unavailable to care for her we are given to understand. Therefore, we will insure she is safely reunited with what is left of her family."

There was a heavy load of judgment in there, but Spock acknowledged her offer with a terse nod.

Kirk stood now with his arms crossed over his chest, frowning, and impatient.

McCoy pointed from one to the other with the dermo-regenerator. "If the two of you are having a chat with our new resident physician, I want in on it. I have a lot of questions for that woman."

"Doctor McCoy?" Nurse Chapel called, walking towards him. She eyed Spock askance as she moved past him, and his jaw twitched. A bit of tension there. McCoy added another mental note to the many things he needed to check into it later. She handed him the medical tricorder. "Can you take a look at this?"

After a few seconds perusal, he sighed. "Damn. Okay." He didn't look up from the device but said, "Looks like you and Spock will have to start without me."

"That's fine, Bones. Honestly, we just want to find out if she's got any real information or if she's screwing with us. She'll be interrogated thoroughly at some point like the rest of them. You'll be able to ask whatever questions you need to ask then."

"Great. Thanks."

Kirk looked at Spock and jerked his thumb in the direction of the gently curving wall that led to the exam rooms. Spock raised a hand requesting a moment's forbearance. "Captain. Might I suggest Lt. Uhura join us. Dr. Mas does not appear to speak Federation Standard, but it's possible she's attempting to deceive us in that regard. I believe having someone fluent in Romulan present would augment our use of the universal translator and make it easier to judge the veracity of her responses."

Kirk nodded at the wisdom in the approach but Uhura looked unconvinced for some reason. "You want me to make sure that what she says is what you hear?"

"Yes. Essentially. I am not as fluent as you in the Romulan dialects," Spock admitted. She tried and failed not to look smug. "Nor am I as adept at reading body language and facial expressions. Your expertise will be invaluable."

“Agreed,” Kirk said.

“Thank you, sirs. Uh...can I have a few minutes to fix my hair?”

It was more than few minutes and by that time they gotten a few insights into her character and had figured out an approach.

“Please may I inquire as to the welfare of the woman Talu?” It is the first thing Hannam wants to know after all. She asks before her interrogators have a chance to make any queries of their own – a tactical advantage she hopes, a chance to throw them off balance.

The humans, at least, look confused by her query. It’s a good start.

She is seated with her interrogators around a table in some sort of small conference room. She’d been moved to the room and then left waiting here alone until now. To her left sits a brown-skinned human female with an oval protrusion on her forehead. The Vulcan male is on her right, and the beige-skinned human male (whose eyes are disturbingly bright blue) sits across from her. They are all creatures of the Federation. Starfleet officers. The human male is captain of the ship.

It’s chilly in the room, intentionally so she surmises, but the Vulcan is probably more uncomfortable, so how advantageous can it be to keep her shivering when he must do as well?

All three interrogators started scrolling for information on their personal devices as soon as she asked about Talu. She sips from a tumbler of water and clarifies, “Talu was beaten severely by Commander Kaol recently. I – I was – sadly unable to come to her aid.” The female officer (whose name Hannam has already forgotten) tilts her head slightly at this and makes a note on her device with a stylus.

“There is a woman matching that description currently listed in critical condition in our intensive care unit,” the Vulcan says. His gaze is direct, unflinching. His expression gives nothing away. She’s forgotten that this is how Vulcans typically behave.

“That must be Talu. I would like to look in on her. See for myself how she fares.”

“As her physician?”

“As a concerned friend.” This time the human female scowls delicately before making a notation. Hannam takes another small sip of water, swallows hard. “When might I be allowed to see her?”

The captain leans forward slightly, his hands clasped together on the table, his expression schooled into one of polite neutrality. It’s not quite a Vulcan expression, but admirably close. “I don’t think that would be a good idea right now. I can assure you she’s being well-cared for by our medical staff.”

“I’m sure she is, Captain. But I’m worried. You can understand that, can’t you? We formed a connection over time. She assisted me in the infirmary. We became close companions.”

The human female makes a *hmm* sound.

“I doubt that is *her* perception of your relationship, Dr. Mas,” the Vulcan says.

On her lap her hands tighten into fists and she says too quickly, too sharply, “You doubt it? How would you know her perception of it, Vulcan man? Did you force your way into her mind while she was unconscious?”

Both the humans look affronted for his sake, the captain going so far as to inform her she must address the Vulcan as Commander Spock or not at all. But Spock himself is unfazed.

“No, Dr. Mas. I doubt because of the opinions about *you* expressed by *others*.”

She experiences a twinge of betrayal. “Those women should be grateful for my dedication to their welfare. I kept them from infections and venereal diseases. I made certain they were healthy for the duration of their pregnancies. I safely delivered their infants. But Talu and I were *lovers*, Commander Spock. We had to keep that secret from *everyone* or Kaol would have killed her.”

He is not as discomfited as she’d hoped by the word “lovers” or the suggestion of sex for pleasure. “Sexual preference would not have prevented her from bearing children, as I’m sure you know, Doctor. And, as that appeared to be the purpose of her captivity, it seems unlikely he would kill her over her sexual preference. Assuming of course that it was, in fact, a *preference* and not, as suggested by others, coercion.”

Hannam shifts in her seat. She hates that it was both. She hates that Talu may have told others.

“She’s also sterile.” The words leave her lips like she’s throwing a challenge tile onto the board. “He definitely would have killed her if he’d known that.”

But he did know. Or so Talu said. She said it to inflict pain. And it wasn’t why he tried to beat Talu to death. Again, the human woman eyes her unpleasantly.

“You can call it coercion if it makes it easier for you. Call it whatever you like. I tried to *help* her. I tried to help all of them.”

The captain, who has mostly been observing her reactions as the Vulcan challenges her, suddenly asks, “How many babies have you helped deliver for the Vulcan captives, Dr. Mas?”

“Safely delivered, around seventy-five.”

“There are only eight with their mothers right now. What happened to rest of them?”

“I will happily, *happily* tell you what I know *after* I’ve seen Talu.”

“You haven’t given us any indication that you have information worth bargaining for. We’ll need more convincing before we’ll consider making deals with you.”

A test. Of course. She scrambles to think what she might tell them that would ensure they’d offer protection in the hopes of more. She *needs* to see Talu. She needs to beg her forgiveness. To make her understand. It was just an argument—

“The *Vel*,” she exclaims.

The human woman and Commander Spock tip their heads in tandem as the translator burps on the word *Vel*. It is not a Romulan word.

“Vel is a Vulcan word for thing or object,” Spock says. “Are you using a Vulcan word here?”

“Yes. Commander Kaol amused himself by creating hybrid names. There are four of them – Velhwi, Velkre, Velsei, Velmne.”

The translator seems to agree that these are names and don’t need a literal translation.

Spock translates anyway. “He combined the Vulcan word for thing or object and the Romulan words for the numbers one through four.” His statement is strangely open-ended as if hoping she would dispute his conclusion.

“Oh my God.” It is the first thing the human female says.

“For the sake of clarity, the names given, these refer to the four children we found at the compound that are all approximately four years of age?”

“Correct. They were all sired by an illegitimate son of the Praetor’s cousin. Born within days of each other. He was a prolific young man. I did the embryonic screenings myself and can confirm the relationship if needs be. Kaol had intended to use them as bribes or gifts to the Praetor’s political rivals but I imagine they could easily provide the Federation with leverage in any negotiations.”

For a moment, the two humans just stare at her, open-mouthed. Then the captain inhales deeply through his nostrils and leans *way* back in his chair, dragging his hands over his face, pressing the pads of his fingers against his closed eyelids before exhaling explosively. He leaves the chair explosively as well, up and out the door, waving away the Vulcan’s questions. “I need a minute.”

But it is many more minutes before his associates suspect their captain will not return anytime soon. They gather up the information devices on the table and leave. The guard steps inside the room.

She idly picks up the tumbler and discovers she’s drank all the water.

The chance of crossing into death while in a healing trance seemed a fair exchange to Talu as she lay for hours in the dirt. Pain for peace, temporary or eternal. Unfortunately, her assumption that she’d slipped blissfully into a healing trance was not supported by current fact. She’d merely lost consciousness from physical trauma, may even have been comatose, and now, struggled to rise to the surface of a murky anesthetic haze. The pain itself was indistinct but *everywhere*, like a soft gelatinous substance in which she lay suspended.

She’d been sedated. The sedation was wearing off. Sedation implied medical attention. Medical attention implied relative safety. And yet she could hear Mishih’s voice sounding an alarm as light flashed against her shuttered eyelids. “Awaken. Awaken. Awaken.”

A sticky substance over her eyes prevented her from opening them, yet the colors struck at her over and over - hot white, ochre, orange like the sky before it turned black, red like the mountains collapsing into black. Black pain opened a blossom of colors that were also sounds.

Oh. Mishih was dead.

The sounds came out of her mouth.

Survivor's Guilt Liability

Chapter Summary

Oh, Lordy. It's still dark. Kirk and Spock have a heart-to-heart. Tes is not as remorseful as maybe she ought to be.

After he stepped out because he needed “a minute” he paced the hallway for some indeterminate amount of time (probably a minute) whisper-cursing like a crazy person. The second time he passed the security guard posted outside the conference room the poor guy gulped so loud it sounded like he'd swallowed a golf ball. Kirk gave him a captainly nod, like all's well, or good job mister, and then strode off, hiding his own embarrassment in purposeful action. In truth, he had no idea what he was going to do or where he was headed, only that a quiet, formless rage was coursing through him and he needed to walk it out.

Any decent person would think the *literal* objectification of small children was wrong. Right? That wasn't a hard call. But Kirk also knew what it was like to *be* a small child at the mercy of capricious, neglectful, self-serving, or otherwise self-absorbed adults whose care was predicated on conditions that were never entirely clear and changed on a whim.

Eventually Spock found him peering at the Romulan commander's supine form through a transparent Medbay wall. He'd dismissed the security detail. There was no point having them there. Kaol would not be getting up anytime soon and would be no threat even if he did.

“McCoy's gunning for whoever dislocated this guy's shoulders, so fair warning,” Kirk said without turning around.

“It was not intentional.”

“Tell that to the guy who didn't help you do it.”

“I am not proud of my actions, Captain.”

“Nor particularly regretful?”

“To my shame.”

“Wow. Pride? Shame? What's next on the emotional spin-the-wheel?”

“Spite? Petty revenge? I do not know. This is ... uncomfortable for me.”

“Spock,” Kirk said gently, “I was teasing. Inappropriately. I'm clearly in no position to judge.”

“May I ask why you are here?”

“Spite. Petty revenge.” A hand waved listlessly at the bad guy in the biobed. “Driven by a pointless urge to beat the crap out of a vegetable.” He rubbed his eyes, emitting a soft groan. “Where's Uhura? She annoyed with me again?”

“I think not. She is preparing a report of her observations during the interview with Dr. Mas. And, also, enjoying a much-needed meal.”

“Nice. And the interviewee?”

“Lt. Beghahi has found Dr. Mas an extremely secure berth.”

“Our security personnel will be earning their keep for the next few weeks that's for sure.” He paused, pulled at his lip. “I can't figure her out. Dr. Mas, I mean. That whole business about Talu and her being lovers threw me off. I think she knew it would, but...” He trailed off, no longer clear about the track they thought they were on.

Before the interrogation, while they'd been waiting for Uhura to make herself presentable, Kirk had taken the opportunity to ask the Vulcans about their Romulan doctor. The harried yeoman who'd been prepping quarters for them had only just arrived and their relief morphed into exhausted resignation as they realized he wasn't going to let them go just yet. He'd tabled his guilt about it. Just a few quick questions: Was she good at her job? Did she treat them well? Did her fellow Romulans respect her? Was she military or civilian? What did she know about the operation or its purpose? He'd been hoping for a glimpse into Mas's character as well as an edge going in.

It was clear from the moment he said her name, they did not like her *at all*. They were reserved in the expression of it, carefully acknowledging her expertise in obstetrics, that she was not military as far as they knew, but— “The only Romulan in the compound who was not a convicted criminal was the commander,” offered a woman named Vareshi. Another, T'Maru, pointed out that although many were conscripted from prisons, some of those were political prisoners. Did they know if Dr. Mas was a political prisoner? They did not. However, “In certain behaviors she has proven to be unscrupulous in a manner that suggests crimes of fraud or medical malfeasance. She has been coercive in her dealings with some of us. We also suspect Dr. Mas betrayed Talu to Commander Kaol and is complicit in his assault upon her.”

Then Tes came tearing out of McCoy's office and everyone got ... distracted.

So, the information Kirk, Spock and Uhura ended up taking into the conference room was 1. possible criminal, and 2. possible betrayal and complicity in grievous assault. Nothing about a relationship, sexual or otherwise.

And now Spock seemed uncertain how to interpret his own observations of Dr. Mas as well. "I am aware the term 'lovers' can refer to a strictly physical sexual arrangement without the sentiment of love. Yet, Dr. Mas appeared to demonstrate genuine concern for Talu's welfare."

"Abusers often convince themselves it's love."

"We have no actual evidence she is an abuser, Captain."

"If you coerce someone into a sexual relationship that's abuse."

"We have no evidence of coercion either. Until Talu is able to give it."

"I don't think it matters if it's a genuine emotional attachment or not. Dr. Mas was attempting to use vulnerabilities she perceived *in us* to manipulate her circumstances."

"Vulnerabilities such as sentimentality about the emotional attachments of others?"

"Yes."

Kirk pondered how he'd never once assumed Nero was representative of Romulans as a people. But if Dr. Mas and Commander Kaol were examples of the average Romulan citizen, that didn't bode well for future relations with citizens of the Federation either.

There *was* that asylum seeker though. Kirk resolved to have a chat with that guy at the soonest opportunity.

Spock, sunk in his own thoughts, had been staring at the bio-monitors over Kaol's bed, where all the condition-indicators hummed along unchanging. He blinked like he was coming out of a trance. It had been a rough couple of days, for him especially. "Captain. It might be best if we allow Lt. Beghail to take charge of all interrogational interviews and we merely observe and offer direction from a distance."

"Maybe." Kirk turned his back on Kaol's sightless eyes, carefully arranged limbs, and semi-discreet catheters. He leaned against the see-through wall with his arms crossed over his chest. "Have you contacted your dad about all this yet?"

It was a bold question considering he hadn't even started the report he'd be making to Starfleet Command about this spur-of-the-moment mission. That report would be much easier to write if the Vulcans happened to mention how satisfied they were with the mission's outcome.

"I – I have not contacted anyone on New Vulcan yet."

"They're going to be good with it though, right? Receptive? Welcoming?"

Spock cocked a brow at him, trying to decipher the hyper edge to his queries. "The women will be welcomed. Of this I am certain."

Of course, they would. A bunch of demonstrably fertile women on a colony of people near extinction? Open arms all around. (He made a quick mental note to find them an advocate as soon as possible.) But the phrasing of Spock's response pointed at another concern.

"You're worried about the little kids."

"Worried is perhaps the wrong word." Spock examined the toes of his boots a little too long. "I acknowledge my concerns are grounded in my own experiences as a child and, as such, are biased and likely unfounded under the circumstances in which we Vulcans currently find ourselves."

"You'd think. *Jesus*. I mean, beggars can't be choosers. Or picky or whatever the saying is..." *that I shouldn't be saying at all I now realize.*

"Although we are currently dependent on the good will of other species in the galaxy and could reasonably classify as recipients of charity, we have not yet needed to resort to outright begging, Captain."

Kirk cast a baleful eye at Spock's inescapable pedantry. "How about this then? 'Logical people shouldn't be prejudiced assholes.'"

The corners of Spock's mouth twitched up a fraction. He creatively rephrased. "New Vulcan would certainly be foolish to reject any child who might, in adulthood, contribute viable genetic material to a diminished population."

"Damn straight! If anyone had the right to reject those kids it would be the women forced to give to birth to them. But they didn't! They don't even seem *resentful* which is more than I can say about my own mother and she got pregnant with me on purpose. All those kids were healthy and happy when Delucca checked them over, and that's a freakin' miracle, and a tribute to superior mothering."

Spock seemed to have a knee-jerk reaction to the word "happy," but let it slide. "It would be illogical to resent a child for the circumstances of its conception." He gave Kirk a pointed look. "Or its birth."

It was Kirk's turn to contemplate his boots, suddenly embarrassed to be so caught out, *seen*. This simple gift of acknowledgement felt huge, and he was awash with gratitude at a kindness he wasn't sure he'd earned or even deserved from the man. Spock probably didn't see it as kindness. After all, he'd only pointed out the obvious.

Before Kirk could mortify them both, he clumsily joked, "Subtle, Spock, real subtle."

"I am seldom accused of subtlety." Spock's expression indicated he didn't know why he was being accused of it now.

"I can never tell if you actually don't comprehend facetiousness or if you're just yanking my chain."

“Why would I—”

“Never mind!” Kirk threw his hands up and laughed in surrender. “Okay. So, what are your other reasons for not contacting New Vulcan just yet?”

“One is the fact that I have not told any of the women that Vulcan is no more.”

“Oh, shit,” Kirk whispered. “*Shit*. I didn’t even – you think they don’t know already? I thought everyone – I mean I heard even the people on your colony worlds could feel it when it, uh... *went*.” But then again, these women had suffered so many losses *before* Nero exacted his vengeance against an entire world for the sins of one man, maybe that enormous loss didn’t resonate the way it had for every other survivor.

This was going to be *hard*.

“I’m so sorry—” “I am a coward—” they said at the same time.

“How are you a coward?”

“Why do you apologize? It is—”

“Illogical. I know. But I’m *sorry*, Spock. I *am*. Can’t help it. It’s a human thing. And *you are not* a coward for wanting to save those women more pain.”

“Yet I have caused pain myself. Tes is correct to be wary of my assurances about her mother’s condition. I have not been entirely forthcoming about the chances of treatment and recovery.”

“To spare her *pain*.”

“Jim,” Spock huffed out a rueful sigh. “None of this is about *their* pain. I am attempting to spare myself. I want them to already know so that we need never discuss it. I hope that they have searched for news from home and are even now viewing impartial accountings of events. Or perhaps someone will unwittingly express sympathy for the loss, or they will overhear a mention of it in passing and only *then* seek confirmation from me because confirming it after the fact will be easier – *for me*. Is that not cowardice?”

“You’re reluctant to open up a great gaping wound. That’s a healthy impulse toward self-preservation.”

“Not for a Vulcan.”

“Yeah, well, I’m calling bullshit. You can’t tell me other Vulcans aren’t struggling to cope with this.” He quashed an impulse to rattle off recent suicide numbers among survivors. “Spock. You *always* do what’s necessary, what’s right and what *needs* to be done. And not just because you’re Vulcan. Because you’re *you*.”

“Your opinion of my character, though generous, does not reflect my own at this time.”

Survivor’s guilt was a force unto itself. A self-destructive one too often. Kirk’s own mother was a living example and she’d carelessly burdened him with it throughout his life, (though he tended toward survivor’s resentment now). In a Star Fleet officer, survivor’s guilt was a dangerous liability. Which was why his mother now worked as an engineer in the private interstellar shipping sector.

He gripped Spock by the shoulders tightly, locked eyes, and refused to let go. “Listen to me. You don’t need to make this your sole responsibility. You absolutely do not have to take this on. You’re the only reason these women were found at all. If you weren’t familiar with that play, if your research had been less thorough, if you hadn’t been willing to act on a *hunch* they wouldn’t be here now. You’ve done enough for today, tomorrow and into next week. Maybe sometime down the line you can share your own story with them, but in the meanwhile, let me help, okay? Let me act in my official capacity and be the one to regretfully inform them—”

“No.” Spock tore his gaze away, shook his head. “That would be – I cannot.”

“All right. How about this? I’ll be the one to let it slip somehow, send them to you to confirm it. You can tell them about the new colony, everything that’s being done, let them know about the efforts to locate more survivors, any of the positives. All you.”

Spock opened his mouth, thought better of whatever he was going to say and then surrendered with a murmured “thank you.”

Tes sat cross-legged on the floor of the rooms they’d been given. She was clean, her hair brushed and braided, her clothes new, if uninteresting. She had not eaten yet. Everyone else had eaten but she would not eat until she had spent sufficient time meditating on her shameful behavior. Her brother and one of her baby cousins crawled and climbed on her, poking her in the cheeks, putting their fingers in her ears, but she refused to acknowledge them. She was still too anxious and frustrated and did not want to put negative emotions onto babies.

She had shamed her family in front of strangers, and she had no remorse. She might sit here for the rest of her life and still feel no remorse. Her concern for Mother was not wrong. She had expressed it badly, but her concern was justified. And it was still *there*, a niggling thing at the base of her skull.

Prisu made a scoffing noise. Tes opened one eye and glanced sideways at her sister. Prisu was viewing something moderately entertaining on the com-screen, but her attention immediately shifted. She increased the volume slightly on the vid, and after a surreptitious check that the

aunts were still dozing, she scooted across the floor like a conspirator.

“Did you actually strike him?” Prisu whispered. Her expression was disgracefully gleeful.

Tes, who’d opened both eyes when her sister approached, closed them again. Humiliation crawled up her neck, burning her cheeks.

In truth, she had *some* remorse.

She had hit Mr. Spock. With her fists. And raged at him. And called him a liar.

Though he’d seemed shocked, he merely clasped her wrists to stop her assault, looked into her eyes, and said, “Your mother is alive. She is not alone.” He led her to an array of monitors where Doctor Leonard pointed at the view of her mother lying in a bed, cocooned in a blanket with just her head poking out, eyes closed, breathing softly. Nurse Bast sat next to her. He showed her how to read the data of each indicator on the monitor and what each set of readings meant. Mother was not dying. According to the monitors.

Spock said, “You see now that you have allowed your fears to distort your sense of reality.”

“No.” Then the words tumbled out of her in their own language. “*She was in my mind. She called me her little sprout. She wished me peace and long life.*”

“*That would seem a pleasant reminiscence. A product of your own mind perhaps, seeking comfort in a trying situation.*”

“*She was saying goodbye.*”

“*You will be parted for a time, that is certain. This is concerning to you and may have heightened your anxiety about this current separation.*”

What he said was reasonable and he had treated her with more forbearance than she deserved. But she knew what she knew. Her mother had reached out to her along the familial bond. She was saying goodbye in a way that felt ... permanent.

Jim, the *Captain*, had also witnessed her lose her composure – for the second time. Dressed in his duty uniform, tawny gold and black, he’d met her eyes briefly, his own a flash of blue like a lara-bird as she stood before her family and the other Vulcans in a posture of contrition. He didn’t seem embarrassed *at* her or *for* her, but other than that she had no idea what he was thinking. For all that humans wore emotions like different sets of clothes, Jim could be surprisingly Vulcan.

Her cousin Vareshi and Aunt Sanvi, however, had been mortified. And when Sasav and Balev learned of her behavior she was subjected to their displeasure as well. Later, there would be discussions of virtuous atonement, restoring honor and making amends, but for now she was condemned to sit pretending to meditate, afraid to meditate.

Brother inched his way up her back using her braid as a handhold until he stood triumphant on wobbly legs and tiny feet, smacking her head with tiny hands.

“I wish I had been there to see it,” Prisu said softly. “What did he do to you?”

“Nothing,” Tes squeaked. The tiny hands grabbed fistfuls of the rest of her hair, as he leaned backwards. She reached around trying to disengage him, too aware of her aunts’ breathing, and Prisu’s glinting interest. She pried powerful baby fingers out of the tangle. He fell onto his bottom and then promptly tipped side-ways smashing his nose into the carpet. Twisting around fast, she lifted him onto her lap to comfort him before he had a chance to start wailing. The Halves were more vocal than Vulcan babies. And when Brother got vocal, he was *loud*. Mother could usually quiet him before he started—

He stiffened suddenly in her arms, eyes wide, little lips quivering. Prisu drew in a sharp breath, blinking hard, then staring into the air at nothing. Behind the partition, Sasav and Balev stirred as the threads of a bond unwound themselves from theirs.

In her secure room in the Medbay, Perren slipped past bio-monitors and quietly disappeared into death before Nurse Bast had returned from fetching a fresh cup of tea.

Conversations and revelations

Spock stood awkwardly at the end of Shashi's bed as a nurse took the neonate from her arms and returned it to the warming cot the orderlies had rigged up next to her. The nurse, a slight-framed human male, acknowledged Spock's presence with a vague smile and a nod and then left the room.

Shashi had been a member of the mining consortium, originally from the northern part of Khomi province. Mining had been the primary industry there and her phenotype was typical of the area – solid, broad shouldered with nut-brown skin, thick brows, tawny eyes, and small ears with blunted pinna. Her black hair lay in wavy wisps and clumps against the pale gray of the pillow.

"I am not permitted to lift or carry him yet," she explained in a calm manner, as if viscous tears were not sliding down her face. Did she think he was judging her for not placing the infant in the cot herself? She was recovering from an emergency surgical birth. He could see the distended swell of her abdomen beneath the blanket.

Vulcans rarely wasted water on tears.

"Do you require assistance managing pain?" he asked. It was also a polite way of inquiring about her emotional lapse.

"This is a normal postpartum physiological response. The result of hormones. I can still converse with some level of dispassion if you can ignore the weeping."

He nodded. She closed her eyes. The moments stretched on and he suspected she was drifting into slumber. "Dr. McCoy said you wished to speak with me."

Her eyes snapped open, and she wiped the tears off her cheeks with the back of a hand. "Yes. My cousin Talu has been calling out to me. I believe she needs *tow-kath* but cannot enter into it because of the sedation."

A healing trance. "How may I serve?"

"Determine if this is so and if it is, ask that they cease the use of sedatives and pain medication."

He could already imagine how well *that* conversation with Dr. McCoy would go. "I am given to understand she experienced a traumatic brain injury and is sedated to prevent agitation."

"Her continued agitation is the result of not being able to use the natural method of her body to heal." She shifted in discomfort. "Though, I admit, I cannot be certain. My biology is in flux. My emotional control is fragile. You, however, can easily make such a determination with a simple touch."

His hesitation was palpable, and her frustration with it quick to rise. "Mr. Spock, if you think she will see a truth you do not wish to acknowledge—"

"No. That is—"

"We know our Mother world is gone. Dead. We already *know*."

A burden eased then.

He expected relief but experienced only weariness and a quick stab of guilt. On another corridor, in another room, the family of Perren of the Sinti Clan Trazhu, of the vessel T'Sai Suk, performed a ritual for the dead before her body went into cold storage. Away from that tragedy, but close by, T'Izhlen, once denizen of Vulcana Regar, taken from the yacht Valencia, labored to expel a dead fetus. And elsewhere on the Enterprise women and children were sleeping their first sleep out of captivity in years – for some of the children, their first ever. They knew, all of them, that there was no home world full of eager family awaiting their return.

"It seems unfathomable even now," Shashi murmured, gazing unfocused past his shoulder. She shuddered, glanced quickly at him then down to her hands resting on her lap. "We thought at first that we had been intentionally abandoned, severed from the world, from *k'war'ma'khon*. The idea that we had been shunned was somehow easier to comprehend. Because how was it possible that our entire planet, the Mother of All, was gone? But as soon as we saw you, we knew." Her hands rise, sketch a wavy pattern in the air before him. "It is all over you. *Lak'tra wadi*."

Grief, the second skin. An old saying. An old concept, wholly inadequate to the circumstances, to the weight of this deep communal mourning he thought he'd moved through. But it had sunk below the surface, into the marrow, woven into cells. Grief on a molecular level. Inextricable, immeasurable, inescapable—

“—passed to our children through mitochondria for as long as we exist,” Shashi intoned in a thick, harsh whisper. She had picked up the threads of his thoughts as if they were her own.

A tiny high-pitched wail broke into the void of their dark musings, startling them both, and sobering Spock instantly.

No. *No*. Children must never be burdened with this, else what is the point of even trying to rebuild?

Shashi threw back the blanket to get to her child, but Spock was at the cot before she'd swung her legs over the edge of the bed. The face of the swaddled infant was mottled olive and vivid green, eyes squeezed shut, mouth open, tiny chest heaving between cries. Shashi's urgent need to hold and comfort her son pounded like a fist between Spock's shoulder blades, but he stood frozen, staring down at a person so small that a meter's drop might damage or kill it.

The nurse swept in then, edging Spock aside with an unrestrained sing-song prattle. “Oh, no! Baby, baby, my goodness gracious, what's got you so upset, huh? Tummy ache? Do you have a gassy tummy? Come here then. Poor little baby, poor little boo.”

Shashi and Spock exchanged a look. The infant seemed to share their unexpressed opinion. He ceased his cries in a cross-eyed attempt to focus on the mouth making all the ridiculous noise. But as soon as he was in his mother's arms again, he began to screech as if the dark thoughts hovering over them had returned to permeate the little sponge of his mind.

Spock willed the nurse to leave them with an icy stare. It was several minutes before Shashi had quieted the child.

He waited, hands clasped behind his back, head bowed.

“What is it you wish to say, Spock?”

“*This one asks forgiveness for a lapse in control, T'sai Shashi.*”

She dismissed his excessively formal apology. “Not all dark thoughts are yours.”

“Nor is it all darkness. Your child will be free to choose his own path. You are free to choose yours.”

“How shall I make this choice? What is left for us? Where will we go?”

“We were granted the rights to colonize the second planet of system Simon-316. Infrastructure for the first city is nearly established. The heavy construction printers are operating. Healing centers, housing and city buildings going up, arable land developed. I believe there is even a homesteading scheme under consideration.” He paused. Her expression was flat, not properly neutral but not as bleak. “New Vulcan.”

Her mouth curled at the name. “It speaks to a desperate sanguinity.” He did not disagree. Then she asked how many were left and he felt himself sinking again.

“12,070 people survived the destruction.” She squeezed her eyes shut, arms tightening around the swaddled bundle in her arms. He added, “But some of our people were safe on other worlds. 491,838 at last count.”

“My family are generational miners. We rarely ventured off-world.”

But *she had*. Left home, took a risk. And now, the worst consequence of that risk, all that she had suffered, was also the reason she still existed, and her family did not.

“I will provide you – all of you – with the name lists so that you might search for relations.” He stopped himself from calculating the odds of finding any. She was perfectly capable of reckoning the odds herself and he wished to convey some sense of hope. Yet he struggled to find words without emotive or supernatural connotations to summon that quality.

Their rescue had not been due to miracles or serendipity. It was not a convergence of coincidences, nor the result of Spock's superlative character, as the captain had implied. Accumulated evidence and conditional probability meant the outpost would likely have been discovered by someone at some point in the future. Perhaps a few of the women might have lived long enough for that to occur, or at least some of their offspring might have. Perhaps.

“I could not save my mother,” he said, suddenly. She looked up, sharp-eyed. He swallowed convulsively. “But *you* – you are here and alive. Your son has his mother. It is reason enough for me to be grateful.”

“Mr. Spock, do not misunderstand. I am grateful as well, but Talu nearly died to make it possible.”

That was his cue. “I shall tend to your request now.”

He left her and proceeded to the intensive care unit.

It takes Spock thirty-three seconds of contact with Talu to determine that the medically induced coma has outlived its usefulness. But Dr. Hemati, the physician on duty, is unconvinced of his ability to speak for a woman in a medically induced coma. She informs him that he will need to voice his concerns to Dr. McCoy when he is back on duty at 0800.

It is currently 0422. Spock does not anticipate a response from his father at the New Vulcan colony before noon, ship's time. His body requires rest, his mind needs meditation, but when he enters his cabin, he finds Nyota is asleep on his bed. Save for her boots (removed and discarded in an untidy tumble at the foot of the bed), she's still in uniform. She lies with her back to him, all curves, and slopes, and waves. He permits himself a brief swell of contentment and desire, then toes off his own boots and slips into bed beside her. He will meditate to the sound of her gentle snoring. Or so is his intention.

A chime from his desk console awakens him. It is 0740, twenty minutes before he is scheduled to be on duty again. He is still lying in the same position but Nyota is now sweat glued to his side, her leg over his knees, arm draped across his chest, face nestled in his armpit. The contusion on her forehead is less pronounced, and he resists the urge to brush his thumb over it. The chime sounds again.

Extricating himself as gently as he can, he stumbles over his own boots as he reaches the comm and croaks, "Spock, here."

"Good morning, sir," the voice of Ensign Jingyi is, as always, too cheery. "I'm patching through a call from Ambassador Sarek for you."

"Thank you."

A moment later the ambassador's visage appears onscreen. "Father. I was not expecting a response from you this soon."

"So I see." Sarek's keen gaze has shifted from a specific point over Spock's shoulder and back again. Spock keeps his face carefully neutral. Sarek blinks first. "Our new communications arrays are providing improved transmission bursts, courtesy of a generous donation from the Sindotec Corporation."

"An excellent public relations opportunity for a company facing crippling sanctions from several UFP environmental regulatory commissions."

"Indeed," his father replies. Only another Vulcan (or perhaps only his son) would be able to discern the rejective displeasure in Sarek's countenance.

Spock recalls a story McCoy once told, about "canoodling" in his childhood bedroom with his not-yet wife when his grandmother suddenly walked in on them. How quickly he'd gone from adult to child with one disapproving gaze.

On the bed behind him, Nyota stirs with a squeaky sigh. His father's eyes narrow fractionally, and Spock has the alarming urge to laugh. Sarek's next words quash it thoroughly.

"I assumed you had settled this affair by now."

His father is perfectly cognizant of the various idiomatic usages of the word "affair" in human cultures. An old dynamic between them flares up.

Edicts and defiance.

"I never agreed to that."

"Your continued intimacy with this young person strikes me as irresponsible and callous."

"It is neither."

"You would dismiss your duty to your people so easily?"

"I do not dismiss my duty at all, easily or otherwise. My duty is currently best served onboard the Enterprise." He raises a hand to stop further argument. "To that point, the reason I have contacted you." He then summarizes the rescue mission and its successful conclusion.

"...there are eighteen adult females and twenty-one children. Eight of those are infants. Four of the women are visibly pregnant, though there may be others. They will undergo medical assessments over the next two days."

"How many of the children are Romulan?"

"None of them are Romulan, Father. Twelve are half Vulcan."

Sarek looks vaguely contrite. "Forgive me. That was an ill-considered query."

"These children are a gift."

"Yes..."

"I know that when I was a child you believed I should have been more capable of weathering the regular abuses from my peers concerning my...racial shortcomings, and perhaps you were correct—"

"I was not."

That is an unexpected admission. "Then you realize these children should never be made to endure the prejudicial treatment that I often experienced. Such behavior is a serious moral failing in a logical people. You must give me your word it will not be tolerated, ignored or otherwise overlooked."

"You have my word, Spock."

He can sense that Nyota is now awake and aware. Listening.

“What of the women taken from the SS Chibuzo?” Sarek asks. “Stolvoc, a father to one of them, has joined us at the colony. He had been pursuing a search for his daughter on his own and was off-world at the time of the catastrophe.”

“None of those women are still alive. It is not confirmed, but generally accepted.”

Sarek closes his eyes, his posture sags. It is the first time Spock notices how weary his father appears. “However,” he offers, “Stolvoc is likely to have at least one living grandchild residing somewhere within the Romulan Empire. Sixty-three infants were born and removed from their mothers over the past twelve years. Perhaps more.”

“You are certain of this?”

“Only firsthand accounts and speculation by those involved. We are hoping to find indicators amongst the evidence we managed to collect before the outpost was destroyed by one of their own.”

“I cannot in good conscience tell Stolvoc of the possibility. The Romulans will admit to nothing.”

“But you are still a *diplomat*, Father. Surely you have connections, channels not even Starfleet can access. And more – you have an asset with deep knowledge of Romulan culture and politics.” *The elder Spock.*

His father nods. “We will discuss it further when we have more information. When will we be able to welcome our citizens to our new home?”

“We are on course for Starbase 17-” He stops, realizes he cannot give a reliable ETA since he has no idea the speed at which they are currently traveling. “I’m certain the High Council will be contacted upon our arrival, if you have not heard from me before then. Meanwhile I am sending you a list of their names so that you may begin searching for any surviving family.”

They sign off in the typical manner.

He now has four minutes before his shift begins. Not enough time to change into a fresh uniform. He passes an ionizer wand over his clothes then sits on the edge of the bed to pull on his boots.

Nyota hasn’t moved. Watches him with a grin as if she will not be late as well.

“What amuses you?”

“The captain moved the auxiliary and relief bridge crew around to cover our shifts. You’re hurrying for nothing.”

“Why was I not informed?”

“I was going to tell you when you got here. I just couldn’t keep my eyes open anymore.”

He drops the boot, a childish action given that he stumbled over it already. But she’s budging over, and he wants nothing more than to stretch out next to her, so he does, one arm behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. “How much did you hear of the conversation?”

“I thought he liked me.”

Most of it then. “He does. In as much as he is capable. It is my behavior that he does not like. Do not concern yourself.”

They lie in contemplative silence for three minutes and eighteen seconds.

Her breath hitches. He turns his head, questioning.

“You told him there were eighteen women,” she whispers.

Then he realizes. He had counted Perren among them.

The door to Jiekh’s cabin opened without his say-so. His poetry-loving security guard stepped in, moved sharply to the left and snapped to attention. It was the first time he had seen true military comportment from his guard, but he barely had time to wonder at it when another man stepped in behind him, and said, “At ease, Mr. Belanger.”

This man was young, no older than Jiekh, maybe younger. He wore a tunic of dark yellow with bands of bright gold at the cuffs. An officer then, an attractive human as well, with an air of someone not adverse to using that attractiveness for gain. But Jiekh could tell that the friendly, casual demeanor currently being projected was a guise. The same sort of guise used by interrogators hoping to induce a false sense of security.

And there was the bait, the lure – Jiekh’s confiscated tablet tucked under the man’s arm.

He wanted to shout, “I have no useful intelligence! I know nothing of reasons or motivations or schemes!” But instead, he stood stiffly in the center of the room. Waiting.

The officer had an information device in his hand and read aloud, “Jiekhus tr’Sarine?” He looked up with eyes so alarmingly blue they did not seem natural. They were *not* natural for Romulans.

Jiekh opened his mouth but only a raspy noise came out. He cleared his throat.

“Feel free to correct my pronunciation,” the man said. “I hate massacring a person’s name.”

“It is – it is satisfactory.”

“Great. Jiekhus tr’Sarine, I’m Captain James Kirk, commander of the starship Enterprise.”

Jiekh bowed. He did not know the proper way to address the highest commander of a Starfleet ship. Should he use the form of address for an officer of the Imperial Fleet, or the common *ihhai*? Fearing to offend, he kept his eyes lowered and his mouth closed.

“Belanger tells me you were hoping to get this back in one piece.” The tablet. Jiekh made no move to take it, but the captain pushed it towards him, his careful smile widening into a genuine grin. Jiekh finally took it from him, cursing the slight tremor in his hands.

“We had to scrape a few programs off it for security reasons, but most of your stuff is intact. That’s a pretty interesting game, by the way.”

“Nohthe? Yes. I - I could attempt to teach it to you.”

“If only I had the time. Thank you though. May I sit?” He pulled out the chair at the desk and sat down, not waiting for an answer.

Jiekh had an impulse to offer tea to the man, as one would a guest. But Jiekh was technically the guest here (or prisoner depending on which eye he used to view the situation). Uncertain of both proper protocol and his actual future he did not offer a beverage but chose to sit in the only other chair and wait for the interrogation to proceed.

“I understand you are requesting asylum.”

“Yes, Captain James Kirk.”

“You don’t sound too sure.”

“It no longer matters as I have no other choice. My – T’Maru said it was the only logical option for me. The other men know that I did not perform the duties required. They know I have asked for asylum. They will gladly kill me if given a chance. And I will be executed if I return home.”

“Yeah. I was talking to a few of your associates down in security detention earlier this morning. They have some pretty strong opinions about you.” The captain leaned forward then, his smile a tight line. “Executed for what crime?”

“Sedition. My father’s. I was tasked to pay his debt with my life. My time on Hellguard merely delayed the sentence.”

“Did you know what would be required of you on Hellguard?”

“Only in the abstract. The reality was ... not something I could do.”

The captain sat back again, with a short nod. “Okay then. When we get to Starbase 17, you’ll be assigned legal representation and the asylum process will begin. You’ll be asked to give a deposition regarding Hellguard – here on the ship as well as on the Starbase. In the meantime, Belanger, or another security guard will escort you around the public areas of the ship if you so desire. The, um, visitors’ quarters are off limits, but Mr. Belanger can probably help you find anyone onboard using the comm-directory – I mean, if you need to contact somebody in particular.” The grin returned, and he rose, clasping Jiekh by the hand. “Welcome to a new life, Jiekhus tr’Sarine.”

Pixie Perfect

Chapter Summary

Kirk and Spock are in a bit of trouble. Uhura would very much like to say "bitch, please." Kirk is a bad influence on Vulcan children.

Sixty some odd hours into the Enterprise's journey to Starbase 17, Kirk received a priority call from Starfleet Command. Fresh out of the shower and not quite in full uniform, he sat down to respond, rubbing a towel through still-damp hair, and wishing he'd thought to pour a cup of coffee first.

In retrospect, he probably should have been expecting some sort of reaction from Command, but he was still basking in the afterglow of an unqualified success. Mostly unqualified. Though Admiral Pike's expression when he appeared indicated he had quite a few qualifiers regarding the matter.

"First things first," Pike began, his lips wearing what could technically be called a smile, if one did not know what that smile usually preceded. "Captain James T. Kirk. You are hereby ordered to alter course for New Vulcan immediately."

"What? I mean, may I ask why, Admiral? We're less than two days away from Starbase 17."

"The acting High Council for New Vulcan has requested – well, more of a demand really – that their citizens you rescued from Romulan captivity be delivered to New Vulcan directly."

"Uh. Well, I understand why they're anxious, sir, but we have Romulan prisoners in tight quarters onboard. And one requesting asylum. Starbase 17 is already set up to process them."

"Yes. I read your report. Your very brief report. And we'll *definitely* be discussing that before this call is done. The problem is, however, that your first officer took it upon himself to inform his father about the successful completion of a mission we here at Starfleet Command knew next to nothing about. His father then shared that news with the Vulcan High Council who immediately contacted the *goddamn* president of the Federation."

"Oh. Crap," he whispered.

"Not only were we surprised to learn of the extent of your mission—"

"Sir, I'm sorry, but we had to act fast—"

"Oh, I don't doubt it. In fact, I look forward to reading all the particulars when I receive the formal, very *thorough* report your XO will be writing that I'll expect by this time tomorrow." Pike looked away for a moment and scratched at a spot beneath his right eye. "I'm pissed as hell at him, by the way. He shared the outcome of a mission *with civilians* before any official operational debriefing had occurred. Ignoring proper channels, disregarding chain of command and *protocols* for fuck's sake – that's more your bailiwick. Spock damned well knows better."

Kirk had hoped Spock would contact his father. Counted on it in fact. He practically popped the top off Spock's raw vulnerability, poured the suggestion inside then shook it up for good measure. Jesus. He was a terrible friend—

Pike's next words pulled him out of his flagellating mea culpas with a good old-fashioned lecture.

"Congratulations, Captain. You pulled it off. The angels of fortune and excellent timing smiled down upon you. The Vulcans are as near to ecstatic as is possible for them. But I'm telling you right now, you *cannot* sidestep the chain of command again – for your own protection and the protection of your crew. I'm serious, son. Look at my face." Pike pointed at said face. Kirk gulped loud enough to be heard across the void. "If things go tits up, sometimes the only protection we have is that we did things by the book. Do you understand?"

"I understand, sir."

Pike sighed heavily. "I'm not sure you do. But here's the thing. One day, after you've been captain for more than three damned months – say, ten years from now – when you and your crew are all on your own out in the black, you'll find yourself in circumstances where you *can't* wait for authorization, or even tacit approval after the fact. And for those times you'll need to have banked a shit *ton* of good will and trust with those at the top. Until then you are to take *no* actions beyond those defined by the Enterprise's authorized short-term commission. Clear?"

"Yes, Admiral. Sir."

"And Jim? I really mean it. Congratulations on the successful completion on your first *official* peacetime mission. The sooner I have that report, the sooner I can offer commendations to the officers involved."

“Yessir. Thank you, sir.”

After Pike’s image winked out, any fabricated self-assurance holding Kirk up collapsed. He sagged in his chair, put his head in his hands and groaned, “*Fuuucckk*.”

Yeoman Zhu wore a harried expression, frantically checking her PADD and her chrono. As soon as she caught Uhura’s eye she made a hurried one-handed circular gesture behind the backs of her charges – two young Vulcan women scrolling through images of all the clothing available in the “not uniform” category – *oh my god can you help me make this go faster please*. It took a moment for Uhura to realize the two young women were T’Lie and T’Vria.

Both were clothed in the utilitarian generic coverall they’d been issued after shedding the equally utilitarian garments they’d worn during their captivity. T’Lie had managed to turn it into a fashion statement, unfastened to the waist with the sleeves tied around her hips, exposing the regulation long sleeved black undershirt that looked like it was maybe a size too small, so it was *really* form fitting for someone not wearing a bra. Uhura thought this might be a bold effort on T’Lie’s part to re-assert her rights to autonomous sexuality. Empowering? Maybe? Or something?

Also, she’d chopped off her hair and it was pixie *goddamned* perfect.

T’Vria glanced up. Uhura gave a restrained little wave. T’Lie gestured an invitation to join them.

“Perhaps you can assist us,” T’Lie demanded as soon as Uhura stepped near. Then to Yeoman Zhu, “If you will allow?”

Well, shit. This was supposed to be a quick pre-breakfast stop to pick up shampoo before starting what was sure to be a difficult day. “I don’t think I– “

“Okaygreatbye,” Zhu chirped, scurrying away then mouthing “sorry, sorry, sorry” at her before disappearing into the corridor.

So. Maybe no breakfast. “How may I help?”

T’Vria eyed her up and down as discreetly as possible. Which was not very. “We have noticed that some on this ship wear a uniform with trousers and some, like you, prefer garments with a skirt.”

“Yes. I like skirts and dresses. It’s a personal preference. But when it’s impractical or illogical to do so, like, if I’m working out or on a mission for instance, then I wear leg coverings or long pants.”

“I would prefer to wear something other than this,” T’Lie said, drawing her hand down along her torso to remind Uhura why.

“Like a dress?”

The Vulcan woman gave an inconclusive shrug.

“I would prefer a dress,” T’Vria said. “However, none of these options cover one’s extremities. I am aware that it is permissible in many humanoid cultures to expose the flesh and I am not opposed to it in general. I have modeled two of my cousin’s more unconventional designs.” She looked at the other woman, her dimples deepening in that deceptively cheery un-Vulcan way. Not a smile but nearly. “I-I should not be concerned about propriety were it not for the presence of your first officer, Mr. Spock.”

What the hell did Spock have to do with it?

“I would not concern myself with propriety for his sake, Cousin,” T’Lie said, glancing askance in Uhura’s vicinity. Oh, that’s right! T’Lie had seen her and Spock together in the Med bay. Apparently, she hadn’t shared this tidbit with her cousin.

“He is owed all appropriate respect, T’Lie,” T’Vria admonished. She shifted her attention to Uhura once again. “We heard it was Commander Spock who recognized the import of our message. Is this correct?”

“It is. I doubt we would have understood the significance of the message if he hadn’t recognized lines from that play.”

“Those particular lines are recognizable to many Vulcans who have not read the play – in much the same way humans recognize the line “discretion is the better part of valor” and do not know it is a misquote from *Henry the IV Part 1* by William Shakespeare.”

Uhura’s mouth fell open. T’Vria inclined her head in a small bow, clearly pleased with herself. “I have an advanced degree in Pre-Reform History with a focus in Theater,” she said. “I have also read several of the works of William Shakespeare.”

Impressive. “You know, Spock actually translated the ‘*The Sundered Women of Irik-Ahkhan*’ into Standard when he was younger.”

T’Vria linked her hands together at her right side (*her heart*), her face alight with...well, what was going to prove to be a problem, Uhura suspected. “Then truly I cannot dishonor such a scholar with improper deportment.”

For her part, T’Lie was expressionless. Possibly frozen in embarrassment.

“I can assure you, T’Vria,” Uhura said, gently. “Commander Spock will not be offended by the length of your skirt.”

“You are smiling.” It was an accusation.

“I’m not making light of your concerns, honestly, but Spock has been in Starfleet for several years, and on Earth for many of those years. You don’t need to concern yourself about offending any Vulcan cultural sensibilities on his account. He’s accustomed to seeing women’s legs.”

And other things, T’Lie’s expression seemed to say. But her mouth said something else. “What my cousin is suggesting, Lt. Uhura – and we mean you no insult – is that there are different standards and expectations of comportment for women of his own kind, no matter how ... easy he may seem with you.”

All I wanted was shampoo and my damned breakfast.

“Are you closely acquainted with the Commander, Ms. Uhura?”

“She is, indeed, Cousin,” T’Lie said. T’Vria was beginning to seem nervous now.

“We serve on the bridge together. He also taught several classes at Starfleet Academy. I was his teaching assistant for a time, as well.”

“You would have no reason to share with him the private queries my cousin and others asked of you? Before we left the compound?”

It took a moment. Oh. The *abortion* queries. She shook her head, emphatically. “No. That has nothing to do with the ship so certainly none of his business.”

“I care little for his censure, Cousin,” T’Lie said. “He is in no position to judge any of us.” She gestured vaguely at the shopping screen. “My concern is only that these choices are dull.”

“Well. There *are* color options,” Uhura said.

T’Lie wrinkled her nose delicately. “But the designs are so uninspired.”

“I thought vanity was frowned upon in Vulcan society,” Uhura said tartly, grabbing her preferred shampoo and packet of breath mints.

“It is not vanity to present oneself in an aesthetically pleasing manner,” T’Lie replied with equal tartness. “Although my mother took issue with the degree to which I sought to please only myself in this regard.” She blinked slowly at the image of a dumpy-looking bathrobe. “I suppose I need never concern myself with her opinion again.”

Uhura squeezed her eyes shut, feeling like shit. She mentally shook off her annoyance with T’Lie’s ‘tude and said, “We usually shop for the aesthetically pleasing designs on leave. I’m sure you’ll find more choices once we get to Starbase 17. But let me contact the quartermaster and see if she’s hoarding anything good. Maybe we can scrape together some more interesting options by the end of the day.”

T’Vria looked at her cousin, who tipped her perfect pixie-cut head (with her perfectly upswept brows and perfectly elegant ears) to the side, as if suspicious of booby-traps. It was only a scant second but felt like much longer. “Thank you, Lt. Uhura.”

If Uhura’s “my pleasure” was less than sincere she doubted either of them would notice or, in T’Lie’s case, care.

Jim Kirk was good with kids. It was the only *genuinely* endearing thing about him McCoy would admit out loud without a sarcastic qualifier. And kids *loved* Jim. His daughter Joanna had met him twice and now whenever McCoy called, she barely got out “Hello, Daddy” before “Can I talk to Uncle Jim?”

So, when he stepped out to do a quick headcount of how many of Vulcan children were still waiting for vaccinations, he was not surprised to see the captain of the Enterprise losing a game of memory-match to a four-year old.

Two decks of playing cards were laid out, taking up entirely too much space on the reception area's floor. He noted lots of gaps in the grid, so they’d been at it for a while. Two other kids, a little older, had small piles of matched cards next to them, but the little girl’s stack was impressive. The captain’s stack, a close second.

McCoy watched as Kirk reached for one card, then another, his hand hovering indecisively before darting a glance at his competition. A tiny furrow of exasperation knitted the child’s brow before she directed his hand (with her own) to a completely different card. McCoy wasn’t sure if she was trying to help him or hinder him. But before Kirk could turn it over, an enthusiastic toddler broke through the line of players and scattered the remaining cards with one destructive sweep.

Kirk hoisted the toddler into the air with a growl of mock outrage, eliciting an answering growl. The older kids began gathering up the scattered cards, speaking rapidly in their own language. The younger ones were in the first throes of “rambunctious fever.” Restless and hungry, there was only so much distraction a Starfleet captain and two decks of cards could afford. Or so McCoy thought.

Kirk set the ferocious toddler on the floor, who immediately went for his knees. Keeping a hand on the tiny terror’s noggin so as not to be head-butted in the crotch, Kirk smiled and said, “Oh, hey, Bones.”

“Hey, yourself.”

“Criminy, these kids are strong,” Kirk said, laughing between gritted teeth.

“Did you need to see me?”

“Yeah, I— aaahhhh!”

Another little girl wrapped herself around the captain’s knees from behind. Then another from the side, all accompanied by high pitched squeals. Thrown off balance Kirk’s arms shot out, and the toddler, who’d been pushing against his hand, hit the floor face first.

A woman rushed forward, scooped the wailing child up, and was quickly back in a chair without a word. Kirk now had a kid clinging to each leg, his expression one of anxious amusement, as he attempted to walk towards the wailing toddler dragging his kiddie barnacles along with him. The decibel level was suddenly deafening.

That’s when McCoy caught a good look at them, mothers and caretakers darting furtive wary glances at the young captain currently working their children into a lather, their behavior devolving into what must have seemed like utter chaos to Vulcan sensibilities. Yet they said nothing, made no move to stop it.

Didn’t think they could, he realized.

He put thumb and finger between his lips and let loose a shrill whistle bringing everything to a standstill.

“Everyone not an adult, sit your bottoms down, right now!”

At this assertion of his authority, he set parameters for the mothers and they acted swiftly. He didn’t understand the language, but he knew the tone. Quiet, firm demands from mamas followed by the grudging obedience of children.

“All right, then. I think we’re through with the babies—” Elva, the nurse in charge, nodded. “It’s just these six here and you can all go eat lunch. Captain? A word?”

The door to his office hadn’t even slid shut before Kirk was holding up his hands in surrender, or maybe to fend off blows. “Sorry, sorry. I was getting them too rowdy, I know.”

“You were, but that’s not the issue. Well, it is the issue, but not the reason I need a word. Sit.” McCoy went to the synthesizer and hit “coffee,” asking if Kirk wanted any without turning around.

“I’m pretty sure you think I don’t need more coffee.” He hadn’t sat down yet.

McCoy slid into his comfy chair and leaned back with his mug semi-perched on his solar plexus. “Here’s the deal. You are, in those women’s minds, the ultimate authority figure on this ship and as they don’t know the limits of that authority as it relates to them and their children, they don’t know how to deal with you. You’re both too genial and too powerful at the same time.”

Kirk sat down, made a face and a mildly dismissive noise. “How the hell am I powerful?”

“Stop being obtuse, or falsely modest, or whatever the hell this is. Think about where they’ve spent the last few years. They don’t know what might cross the line with you. How you’ll react. What you might do if they displease you in some way—”

“Jesus! Do they think I’m like Kaol?”

“No. Well, probably not. But I just saw those women sitting on their hands, not correcting their children’s behavior because you, the ultimate authority, was the one riling them up.”

“Just those last couple of minutes! Jeez. We mostly played memory match.”

“*Jim.*”

“Yeah. Fine. Not sure what I can do about it now though.”

“Maybe just not do it again?”

Jim turned the small holo cube of Joanna towards him and flicked it on and off a few times – McCoy’s daughter at 3 in a tutu (adorable but not talented), 5th birthday (huge grin, huge cake), tutu again, at the lake with her grandpa (holding a catfish aloft in triumph).

He reached out and gently pulled the cube back his way. “You said you needed to see me.”

“Admiral Pike tore me a new one this morning. Then congratulated us all on a successful mission. And now, because the Vulcans found out we have their people, we’ve been ordered to go directly to New Vulcan. That means our Romulan friends in lockdown will be in close quarters for at least another two to three weeks. Not sure how that affects their general health or what, if anything, we need to do about it. Giving you a heads up.”

“Okay. I’ll get some people on it. Their health assessments are on the schedule anyway.”

“We’re going to start interviewing the women, regardless, get their insights while we have the opportunity. The prisoner interrogations can wait since we’ll have them longer. Maybe leave them for Fleet Intelligence to deal with? Eh, we’ll see. Except for Dr. Mas. That interrogation is a go if you still want to sit in on it.”

“I do.”

“1500 this afternoon. That scary room in security detention.”

“Got it.”

The captain jumped up, then stopped before he could trigger the door. “I’m afraid to go out there now.”

“Oh, for Chrissake. Go out through Emergency then.”

McCoy went back to finish vaccinations.

Three Hundred and Eighty Nine

Chapter Summary

Some comedy, some drama, some hard choices, some pillow talk.
Abortion is discussed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I’ve been thinking about Uhura’s birthday last month,” Kirk said.

They were in the secure interview room in the brig. McCoy was on his way, and Lt Beghain would soon arrive with Dr. Mas.

“That seems a curious memory to recall at this moment,” Spock said, not looking up from his PADD.

“You gave her a bottle of hot sauce. I thought it was weird.”

“Technically, a representational bottle. A crop blight caused production of the brand to cease. I located an entire case and procured it for her. It is her favorite hot sauce.”

“Yeah, I know that now. But the look on her face when she opened that box...” A fancy box that looked like it had fancy perfume inside. “I remember thinking, Spock, buddy, pal, you really screwed this one up. And then all of the sudden she’s hugging the bejeezus out of that box, squealing, ‘Oh my god, I love you *so* much!’”

His impersonation of Uhura’s voice (along with some girly hand-fluttering she definitely had *not* done) left much to be desired if Spock’s expression were any indication. But that blurted declaration had seemed so huge, a confession of love in front of a bunch of people who probably didn’t even know the two of them were together.

“I remember the whole room going *dead* silent, like oh no, oh shit, what’s the Vulcan gonna do, how’s he gonna crush her soul and step on her heart in front of everyone?”

Spock looked vaguely affronted. But as the images bloomed anew in Kirk’s mind, he started to giggle dignity be damned. “You looked around at all of us like we were just... *so so stupid*.” Giggles devolved into breathless laughter. “And you said—you said—” He could barely get the words out now – “oh my god, you said, ‘she’s talking about the hot sauce.’ And she *was*!”

“That is not an exact quote,” Spock informed him, which only made Kirk howl louder.

“She’s cradling this bottle of Pili Pili Moto like a precious little baby and you’re looking around like, ‘*What?*’ It was so *goddamn* funny! The two of you – tag team comedy gold!”

“Our behavior was not premeditated in any way.” Spock seemed surprisingly chill considering his captain could barely breathe and there were tears streaming down his cheeks.

After a few moments Kirk managed to regain a modicum of control. He dragged his hands across his mirth besmeared face. “Anyway, that was the night, all of us together, that’s when I knew, this was the crew I wanted with me on a five-year mission. You guys. All of you. If we were ever so lucky to get one.”

Spock was contemplative for a moment. “And you still feel this way after being reamed by Admiral Pike?”

Kirk bit down on another fit of giggles. Spock’s conscious echoing of a vulgarity was so adorable, he just wanted to smoosh his too-serious face.

“You’re the one who has to write the report.” It wasn’t much of a hardship, he knew. Spock liked writing reports. “But, to answer your question, *yes*. I still feel that way. Now more than ever. This mission proved it.”

When the elder Spock said they were destined to be friends, as close as brothers, it seemed such bullshit. Naïve and manipulative and ridiculous all at once. He could not have imagined a night like Uhura’s birthday party, or the depth of his regard for the man before him and this radiating warmth that suffused his soul.

Still, he could not resist one last bit of mischief.

“There was something else I realized at Uhura’s birthday party.”

“Indeed?”

“I remember looking at the two of you and realizing, man, that guy is gonna have *so* much sex tonight.”

Spock suddenly turned his attention to needless re-stacking of PADDs on the table.

“You did, didn’t you? Have lots and lots of sex?”

Silence.

“I mean, if you didn’t then I’m gonna have a word with her.”

Spock’s brows disappeared into his hairline. “You will not.”

“Can’t even share a tiny detail?”

“What tiny detail would compel you to never ask about it again?”

“Ooh. I’ll need some time to ponder.” The door clicked and whooshed open. Lt. Beghahi walked in with Dr. Mas in tow. “I’ll get back to you on that.”

McCoy arrived seconds later.

The day before, Lt. Beghahi reminded the captain that it might be better to allow Starfleet Intelligence to handle *all* the prisoner interrogations. Commander Spock agreed.

“We’re not interrogating,” the captain said. “We’re *interviewing*.”

She had deep reservations about the efficacy of either given their limited resources and the possible legal ramifications. The Enterprise should have had a JAG officer with couple of staff, along with an interstellar affairs officer that specialized in diplomacy and Federation law. But as the ship was on a sixth-month assignment intended to work out the kinks of both vessel and painfully young command crew, they had neither. As a security specialist, she navigated a nebulous legal area regarding the detention and interrogation of undeclared enemy actors.

She’d also suggested interviewing the Romulan woman in one of the smaller conference rooms, those designed for informal meetings with dignitaries and diplomats. “It will be easier to establish a rapport if there is at least an implied level of mutual respect. We’re likely to get better intelligence out of it.”

“We tried that already,” Kirk said abruptly. She’d read the transcript of that interview and had a different view. Instead, he insisted on a designated room in security detention the bare functionality of which was intended to cause unease in anyone forced to sit and wait for an interrogator to make an appearance. “The more pressure we can apply now, the better our chances of finding those babies and getting them back.”

Reasoning predicated on improbable outcomes.

Recovering the children taken as infants was unlikely, no matter what Hannam Mas knew or might be willing to tell them. If those infants had survived, they’d have spent their formative years as Romulans, thoroughly indoctrinated *by* Romulans. Commander Spock tried to temper expectations.

“Captain, you do understand many of those infants are likely children of an age now, some perhaps as old as eleven.”

“Old enough to be given as gifts in return for political favors I imagine, don’t you?” There was no arguing with him after that.

Which means that this afternoon Dr. Mas sits at a table, breaking a protein bar she’d been given into increasingly smaller pieces without putting any of it into her mouth. She appears genuinely despondent, but neither Commander Spock nor Captain Kirk are inclined to give her mood much credence.

The restraint-monitor on her wrist makes note of any spikes in her vitals and transmits those to the stenovid equipment discreetly collecting data and spitting out analyses to Beghahi’s PADD.

Kirk remains standing, arms folded tight over his chest, a posture that only unlocks when he raises an arm to chew a thumbnail. Spock is at the end of the table nearest the door, his face a mask of calm. Dr. McCoy scowls from a chair against the wall.

“This is a lovely room for torture,” Mas says, not glancing up.

“Isn’t it?” Kirk says cheerfully. Spock shoots him a look.

After covering the preliminaries, the first substantive questions are about the infants removed from Hellguard. When were they collected, by what means, how often, and why?

“They were collected as a cohort by medical transport, usually around the time they cut their first teeth. From my observations, they were handled with all due care. We are not all monsters, after all. I understood they were to be adopted into good households. But my speculations as to the purpose would be no more reliable than yours. I can tell you however, that the Matron ship scheduled to retrieve the latest group was long overdue. Our supply transports were also late by several weeks. Commander Kaol was anxious about this. You should ask him.”

Beghahi exchanges looks with the senior officers. It seems more and more plausible that the destruction of the Vulcan home world had, in fact, rendered the long-term goals of the program (whatever its true purpose) useless.

Dr. Mas also confirms that the first group of women in her care were from the SS Chibuzo. “The last of those took her own life three years

ago. She was called T'Aimnu." Her gaze turns inward for a moment. "Tough, that one. Hardened. Or perhaps only brittle at the end. Her death was the reason they went looking for others."

"The women from the mining consortium?"

"Yes."

Beghahi ticks off a list. "So that's the SS Chibuzo, the T'Sai Suk, the Valencia, and the mining consortium. Were you aware of any other Vulcan women captured and confined to the outpost on Hellguard?"

"I was brought on twelve years ago. If there were others before the Chibuzo I never saw them."

"You say you were 'brought on.' Did you volunteer?"

"After a fashion. My options for refusal were limited."

"Why is that?"

She breaks one of the small pieces of the protein bar into even smaller pieces. "Are you familiar with the Tal Shiar?" At the ripple of awareness through the room, she grunts a laugh. "Then you know why."

Beghahi's gaze flicks to the captain. This supports their suspicions. Romulan secret intelligence were likely the originators and facilitators of the breeding program on Hellguard.

"Well, we can only *assume* to know why in your case, Dr. Mas. The Tal Shiar utilizes any number of methods to motivate reluctant volunteers. Threats to family members. The exposure of secrets. Foolish mistakes made in the past..."

Mas brushes crumbs from her hands, a forceful clapping motion, leaving a scattered trail of dust across the table. She quickly wipes the remainder onto the knees of her pants.

"I was in prison."

"Something to do with the malpractice of medicine?" McCoy intones from the corner.

Her expression turns from contrite to hostile in an instant. "A Vulcan woman just *died* in *your* care!"

McCoy's eyes narrow. "A woman died, yes. I'm wondering how the hell you even know about it."

Kirk throws his security chief a pointed look. "I'd like to know that too."

Beghahi is already sending out queries. "Yessir."

Spock's impassive voice cuts through the tension. "The woman was not Talu, Dr. Mas. If someone implied it, they were either mistaken or intended to cause you distress."

The Romulan woman deflates, presses shaking fingers into the skin beneath her eyes. "Will she live, then?"

Grudgingly, McCoy acknowledges she will. "Indicators are favorable."

Beghahi glances up from her PADD. "Apparently the security detail was asked by a Vulcan woman to inform Dr. Mas of the death of one of her patients – neglecting to mention the patient's name."

"It was Prisu come to spit on me. Opted for another way when they would not allow her inside."

"I doubt her first inclination was to expectorate," Spock informs her coolly. "She would not have wasted the water on *you*."

Before his fellow officers have time to marvel at this quiet smack-down, he's moved on. "We have been told that each group of twelve men was cycled out after 180 days. What was the purpose of this practice?"

"That should be obvious to a brilliant man such as yourself." Her mild mockery dissolves under his unblinking scrutiny. "No man could lay claim to a child he would never see born."

Beghahi shifts in her seat, frowning. "Why would that matter if the men were killed after they'd served their time?"

"Killed? Who told you they were killed? I was not aware of this."

"We have at least one detainee who claims to be scheduled for execution upon his return to Romulus," Kirk says. "And you yourself told us that the— that those four girls were fathered by the illegitimate son of the Praetor's cousin. Why would he be there if not as a political prisoner?"

"I don't know. It was some scheme of Kaol's. Most of the men were conscripts from the colonies, or soldiers who'd committed some infraction. They were genetically screened for suitability, but I was never informed of the specific criteria considered." She blew out a sigh of exasperation "I rarely interacted with the men, save to treat injuries resulting from their own foolishness. These are questions only Kaol can answer. Why not ask him?"

"We're asking you."

Hannam Mas blinks slowly, then sits back in her chair, legs splayed, arm dangling in a show of confident ease. She looks from one to the other, shakes her head with a rueful smile. “The Commander kept me in the dark about so many things. You’d do better to interrogate him. He is a far better resource than I.”

In that moment Beghahi knows they’re done. Dr. Mas has figured out they *can’t* ask Kaol. She might not know why, or for how long, but she knows. Both Spock and Kirk have come to the same conclusion.

After that, nearly every query is responded to with some variation of – “Ask Commander Kaol.”

The Romulan prisoners in the brig had declined to give their names. They’d been assigned intake numbers when they were processed, but Beghahi was uncomfortable leaving it at that. She decided to use a little creative persuasion to get help from the young asylum seeker.

But the kid was a nervous wreck, half-regret, half despair. His reason for leaping into the unknown (a young woman named T’Maru) had abandoned him to his fate – or so it seemed to him after the first two days. Beghahi suggested that if he would be willing to provide names and personal information about his fellow conscripts, she would arrange for him to be in the galley mess when the Vulcan women took their evening meal. She could not assure T’Maru would be present, but he would at least be able to ask about her.

He didn’t exactly leap at the chance. “If I do this, I can never call myself Rihannsu again, can I?”

Oh honey. No. I don’t think you can.

Jiekhus tr’Sarine would need to become something else. Even if T’Maru reciprocated his feelings (a big if), his acceptance within Vulcan society was doubtful. Where was he going to live? Work? Where would he be welcome? She feared his most likely future was deep in the bowels of Section 31.

He was a good-looking boy with a slightly weak chin, a shy crooked smile and warm hazel eyes that met her own without hesitation. Earnest eyes. Incautious. Too open. And yet he’d spent nearly six months fooling his fellow conscripts into believing he was just like them.

Yup. Unless something else could be arranged, it was only a matter of time before secret-intelligence got their claws into him.

Now he paused uncertainly just inside the broad archway leading to the mess hall. His handler, Mr. Belanger followed slightly behind and to Jiekh’s left. He gave him a nudge forward. Beghahi, on his right, nodded toward the group of five Vulcans occupying a table near the back with Lt Uhura and Yeoman Zhu. He was perfectly aware of them, of course. If anything, he was hyper-aware. But her gesture acknowledged that she’d kept her part of the bargain.

“Belanger’s going to hang back, let you socialize for a while,” she told him. “When you’re ready to leave, he’ll escort you to your cabin.”

“But what if—?” He cut the question off, painfully embarrassed by his hopes for an evening he hadn’t even begun.

Across the room the Vulcan women had noticed him. One of them rose and began to make her way towards him.

Aida Beghahi patted his arm. “Ask her to recommend a Vulcan dish.”

It is rare for Spock to fall asleep immediately after coitus (only 12 out of 388 times to date), but of those times, five had been disrupted by variations of Nyota’s current utterance “we need to talk” – and four of *those* had ended in an argument.

He opens an eye with an understandable level of trepidation and cautiously queries, “About?”

“Abortion.”

Thoroughly awake now he surges upright, moves the pillow, shifts his back until it’s flat against the headboard, aiming for rigid self-containment while his thoughts careen through every permutation of every consequence of every possible outcome and potential future from this point forward.

“Oh my god. Your *face*.” She’s not laughing outright, but her mirth is evident in the tone of her voice. “Holster the eyebrows, babe. I’m not pregnant.”

He does not bother to hide the irritation evident in the tone of *his* voice. “Are you using the word ‘abortion’ in another context?”

She’s lying on her right side facing him, elbow bent, cheek propped in her cupped palm. A wry grin gives way to awkwardness. “No.”

“Then why the urgency to discuss terminating a pregnancy? Your tone indicated the need for an immediate discussion.”

Something in his countenance has her scrambling across his body and out of the bed, heedless of the placement of her knees and elbows. Her words are contrite, but her tone is anything but. “Sorry. Sorry. Never mind. It’s not important. Go back to sleep.”

Go back to sleep? She brought up abortion. How is that not important? Why does she consistently resort to this behavior? Demand, then apologize? Defer then react with rashness and rude illogic? He merely asked for clarification—

Oh. This is precursor to an argument. If he engages now, they will find themselves entangled in heated semantics, unable to approach the crux of the matter (whatever it is) for the duration. He must change the parameters of the interaction.

He catches her wrist as she's moving away. "Nyota."

"I'm sorry. Forget about it—"

"Nyota." He shakes her arm gently. "Tell me what troubles you."

"I have to pee."

He gives her the look she taught him – "whatever you are attempting to sell I am not purchasing." After a moment she sighs and sits on the edge of the bed with her back to him.

"Fine. It's about some of the Vulcan women."

"They have inquired about terminating pregnancies, I presume."

"Pretty sure they've already done it or started the process. At least two of them. One turned out not to be pregnant. I'm not sure about the other one."

He suppresses the urge to prompt. A restraint she takes as reticence.

"Do you have an opinion about it?"

"It is none of my business."

"That's what I told them! Why are they so worried about what you'll think?"

"Perhaps you apply a human interpretation to your observations?"

"No. See. You didn't deny the possibility. Also, framing your response as a question means you're being evasive."

"You implied the women were able to have the procedure."

"Medication in this case." She turns her torso to face him, drawing her knee up so her thigh rests along the edge of the bed. "And you didn't deny being evasive."

Her expression is troubled, earnest, and he is certainly paying attention, but the position of her legs – one on the bed, one not – allows the scent of her sex to waft his direction. He inhales discreetly. He does *not* close his eyes because that would be too obvious.

"Here's the unsettling part," she continues. "When they realized that you and I work closely together, some of them seemed concerned you'd find out somehow. That I might let something slip. About them getting abortions."

"In all fairness that is precisely what you are doing at this moment."

Predictably, Nyota glosses over his statement with a dismissive exhalation and wave of her fingers. "Why would that concern them in the first place? It's not like you have parental rights or anything. They don't even know you. You certainly have no authority to tell them they can't. So, I'm figuring they fear, *sorry*, have *misgivings* about your response or judgment regarding abortion."

"I have yet to form an opinion on the issue." His enunciation is slipping, but he thinks she hasn't noticed. The urge to sleep is almost profound.

"I think you represent broader public opinion to them. From ... *before*."

Before. "The need for such a practice was – *is* considered unnecessary in Vulcan society."

"Wow. It's great you Vulcans have solved all the problems that ever made it necessary in the first place."

Or the urge to sleep may simply be avoidance.

He opens his eyes to see her scowling at him with her arms crossed and shuts his eyes immediately.

He's not forgotten they're having this discussion while naked, but seeing her breasts pressed together and perched on her forearms is a potent reminder of what they'd been doing that had made him so pleasantly sleepy before this less pleasant topic disrupted his contentment.

He opens his eyes once again, but keeps them carefully averted, offering instead, the facts. "Even in modern human societies abortion is rare. Contraceptive methods are highly effective and the chances of an unintended pregnancy exceedingly low. Any serious birth defects, which in the past might have necessitated termination, are now easily eliminated through gene manipulation prior to conception or treated shortly after, in utero. Likewise, instances in which the continuation of pregnancy risks a woman's life are virtually non-existent."

"But you just used human models to suggest the same models are applicable to Vulcan views on the subject – probably so you wouldn't have to tell me what those views actually are. I'm wise to your ways, mister."

He trails his hand along the soft skin of her inner thigh.

“Stop. Stop it.” Slapping the hand away, she tries to smooth down a non-existent skirt before catching herself, then draws herself up regally, as if she meant to smooth down a non-existent skirt all along. “I can’t imagine Vulcans doling out contraceptives to teenagers, but I can imagine those teenagers maybe getting carried away, maybe having intercourse without protection. Pregnancy occurs. What happens in that case?”

“As I have told you, Vulcans are often pair-bonded as children. As we develop, meditation techniques sublimate those specific urges. Older youth are closely chaperoned, and you may have noticed our clothing is designed to cover every possible glimpse of temptation save the mind. Opportunities to get ‘carried away’ are few and far between.”

“Oh. Well, that explains something, at least,” she says, ducking her head with a soft laugh. When she meets his questioning gaze, her expression is suspiciously gleeful. “You might want to watch out for T’Vria. I mentioned you were the one who recognized the lines from the play. She’s enthusiastic to discuss your translation of *The Sundered Women of Irik-Ahkhan*.”

“I sometimes forget your penchant for cruelty.” He leans towards her and draws her in for a kiss. This goes on for some time until she recognizes it for a distraction and pulls away, returning to the prior thread of the conversation.

“So, accidental teenage pregnancy *never* happens. Is that what you’re telling me?”

“I am not telling you that. But I can assure you no young woman would ever be left to raise a child alone and unassisted.”

He thinks of Jim Kirk. Perhaps his mother had few options available to her. It would explain unreliable caretakers and general neglect through her absence due to deployments.

“She’d be forced to have the baby then?”

“No. Of course not. Why must you insist on imposing human social constructs to this specific issue? There is no force involved. Your hypothetical young woman might give birth and then entrust the child’s entire upbringing to extended family members. To raise a child to principled adulthood can only bring honor to the entire clan. If she chooses to raise the child herself, she will suffer no detriment to her educational pursuits or career ambitions. There are no socioeconomic reasons for a woman to seek an abortion. The state sees to her welfare with or without the support of her relatives because it is good for society as a whole.” *And now the state is all. Every child is family to every Vulcan left alive.*

“But what about rape?”

“The same applies. You may have observed that no rancor has been displayed towards the children born of rape. I would venture to assert it is not felt.”

“After the fact, Spock. You can’t say they wouldn’t have chosen to terminate given the option. Especially since they asked me about it at the first opportunity.”

“But we were initially speaking of a willing and hypothetical teenager. Had she chosen abortion I believe it would have been granted. I know other species consider us to be ... socially conservative. But we are not monsters.”

Hannam Mas had asserted the same thing. Odd. Nyota seems to give in then, unwilling to press him further, sensing he has reached the limits of how much he is willing to speculate. Or share. She shifts her body closer.

“I don’t know.” Her voice takes on a teasing quality. “I’ve heard some *pretty* wild stories about Vulcan men who go crazy with lust and jump the bones of the first female they see.”

The tone in her voice indicates she finds the idea implausible. Thankfully. He does not wish to have *that* conversation. “You are much too sensible to give credence to salacious rumors.”

“True. If I’d paid attention to half the ridiculous rumors about weird Vulcan sex kinks, I would have run screaming the first time you offered to treat me to lunch.”

“I am grateful you did not run from me screaming. Although I can only speculate as to the nature of these weird ‘kinks.’”

He coaxes her onto his lap, straddling him, her palms flat on his chest, pulled back a little, studying his face, looking for something. He wants to touch her mind, but brushes his tongue along her suprasternal notch instead, pulls his fingers through the curtain of her hair, down to the sacral dimple, her teeth on his earlobe, her hand in the place between them where they fit together, rock together, slick and tight, closer, closer, closer, not an atom between us she whispers, though it is nonsensical, impossible, illogical.

Nevertheless for her, he tries.

Chapter End Notes

Notes about abortion talk in this story:

I am pro-choice but would love to live in a world where abortion is not necessary because the reasons for it no longer exist, i.e.

We have reliable contraception consistently used,

No rape,

Respect for a woman's personal autonomy,

And total support for mothers and children because it is the good, moral thing to do.

(Jumps off soapbox)

The Secret Language of Concubines

Chapter Summary

Spock the elder converses with his young father. Uhura has a small breakdown. Spock is concerned that Kirk is better at comfort. A longish chapter with meaty dialog.

Simon-316 edges its radiance over the horizon of its second planetary body and Spock rises, stiff with the chill of morning, cold down to his marrow. This is merely the untimely onset of old age. He would have another forty years had he lived a less adventurous life. But there is also a bone-deep exhaustion he can never quite sleep or meditate away, and the hitching stumble rhythm of his heart and, as always, the tides of despair rolling in.

Odd, that his mind calls up a metaphor of Earth's moon-tide oceans rather than Vulcan's desert wastelands to represent his despair. It is a kindness he grants himself he supposes. Tides come in then recede, a respite before the next wave. In the wastelands, one must journey across a harsh and unrelenting expanse before any respite is possible. Or die trying.

But this place is neither of those. This is New Vulcan, the new Confederacy of Surak, and though the mornings are hard on old men, there is nothing here quite so unforgiving as Vulcan's Forge once was. In an hour it will be warm enough to soften the pain, and by midday the heat will be generous.

He steps outside the small dwelling he calls home – part tent part prefab – which is separate and some distance from the clusters of similar dwellings that dot the landscape. This distance is disguise. Disguise works best when it is close to the truth.

An eccentric old man sits on a bench, arms folded, hands tucked into the sleeves of his robe, watching the sun come up.

He does not recall closing his eyes and only realizes he's done so when they open, alerted by a sound – the careful, rhythmic crunch of sand and gravel. A man walks up the path, wrapped in chiaroscuro with the early morning light over his left shoulder.

Spock is suddenly awash in memory, filled with a child's joy at the return of his father after too long away. He allows the feeling to sit with him a moment—

Sarek's motion stutters to a halt, his discomfort palpable, before taking the few dozen steps that brings him close enough to speak.

“Greetings...” he begins but cannot quite say the name. His son's name. Spock's name.

Spock replies in the fashion of his mother, who lived a good long life for a human. “Good morning, Sarek. Will you take tea?”

Uhura had been holding it together quite well she thought. Sitting in on interviews all morning, offering translations of terms or descriptions that needed clarification, her voice even, expression neutral, body composed, mind steady. Guiltily contemplating lunch (having missed breakfast again), until the nurse asked T'Shri how she'd lost her ear.

“I did not appreciate Commander Kaol's poetry. He cut off my ear with a dagger.”

The nurse maintained professional composure, asking how the injury had been treated, was there any infection or hearing loss, would she like a prosthetic until a permanent replacement could be constructed or grown? Yet despite T'Shri's calm delivery about an act of stunning cruelty, Uhura was stuck on a tiny hiccup in the universal translator, a fraction of a second's pause, the odd catch between syllables—

Comprehension crashed over her like a sneaker wave. Sound and meaning rushed in, whirled round and around until every word spoken after that was heard under water.

When the assessment interview ended. T'Shri, the last of the morning group, left to attend a meeting in the conference hall in which Spock would brief his fellow Vulcans on their new world, Simon-316 II, and as promised, tell the story of the loss of their planet of origin in his own words in their own language.

Uhura wandered into the corridor, internally churning, outwardly placid.

At some point she walked right past Spock without realizing it. He grabbed her arm, which was weird because he rarely touched her in public and she wasn't falling, why did he think that? She was fine, fine really, getting a bite to eat, it's all good. Yet when she got to the mess deck, she just... couldn't and went to her cabin instead. Overwhelmed by a sudden urge to sleep, she pulled off her boots and laid herself out like the dead, imaginary lily clenched over her breast, body sinking heavily into the mattress. Twenty minutes later she woke up sobbing.

The door slid open. Lt. Uhura stood with the darkened interior of her cabin behind her. It was clear she'd been crying. Kirk felt a clenching in his chest. "Are you all right?"

"Captain. What's going on? Do you need me back on the bridge?" She turned away, headed for a chair where her boots lay like downed trees after a storm.

"No. It's all being handled." He waited just outside the door, looking at her – too hard apparently.

She blinked back tears, ducked her chin, trying and failing to meet his eyes.

"Your man sent me to check on you," he said, lamely.

Her lips twitched in an almost smile. "My *man*?"

He took the half-hearted smile as an invitation to come in. "Boyfriend doesn't have the right gravitas." The door slid shut behind him. "He said you looked shaky when he saw you and that he was really worried."

She sat on the edge of her rumpled bed, eyes downcast, plucking at the hem of her uniform skirt. "What did he really say?"

He ventured a little farther into the room. It was the first time he'd ever been in it and he was trying not to look around too much. "He said he believed the interviews had put a great strain on you, and that he was concerned about your mental well-being. He seemed, uh, frustrated that he couldn't come see how you were for himself." He spread his hands, smile wide with self-mocking charm. "So here I am. The next best thing."

She didn't rise to the bait. "I'm too emotionally messy for him right now."

"I don't think that's why I'm here and he's not." He nudged her boots out of the way and dragged the chair over so he could sit across from her. "Tell me what's going on. Lay it on me."

"I'm not – I don't – I don't know if I can."

As a communications officer that seemed problematic. "Try me."

He could see her holding back even as she wriggled her body into straight lines like a little kid about to recite all the Federation member planets for the entertainment of her parents' friends.

"Well, for one, I'm concerned about what's going to happen when we get to New Vulcan. They want the women back, obviously. But how are they going to feel about a bunch of babies fathered by men the same species as Nero? Spock dealt with passive-aggressive prejudice disguised as logic most of his life and he's the product of a happy marriage with an *ally*."

"He brought up the same concerns with me."

"His father promised the children wouldn't be subjected to that kind of bullshit but Sarek is just one man. He can't keep every asshole from being an asshole. And what if the only reason they're anxious to get these women to New Vulcan is so they can start pushing out a bunch of Vulcan babies? This can't be their whole lives going forward. It just can't! Two of them already had abortions—" Her hands flew to her mouth trying to shovel the words back in. "Oh. God. I should not have told you that. I *suck*."

"Told me what?" he said with guileless perfection. Her shoulders came down from around her ears.

"I thought I'd be better at this. I'm usually really good at keeping things to myself."

"Don't I know it! *Ny-o-ta*." He winked theatrically. But she seemed to have forgotten the long game they'd played about her name. "Look. Give yourself a break. A lot of their statements will end up part of public record anyway ... if any of this gets to court that is."

"But people should be able to trust me not to blab their business – I'm a Starfleet officer for god's sake. What is wrong with me?"

"Nothing." Nothing that wasn't wrong with him and the rest of the crew. "For all that we've been through we're still really new at this. And even though I hate to be reminded of it, we were thrown into roles we were not *remotely* experienced enough to take on. The fact that we succeeded under dire circumstances doesn't mean we automatically leveled up in wisdom. If that were the case, we'd all be ancient sages on a mountain top right now."

That got a little smile out of her, but it was gone in a blink. "I think I've screwed up in a significant way."

"Does it affect ship's operations?"

She shook her head but didn't meet his eyes. "It's not— God, I don't—I don't how they're still sane. Any of them. *All* of them. All Vulcans everywhere. How do they all not... fly apart?" She'd been compulsively clutching at the fabric of her skirt, and suddenly emitted a shuddering moan, rocking forward, her face practically in her lap. She flapped her hand at him when he reached out. "Ignore me," she said, her voice muffled. "I'm really tired."

He got to his feet. “Okay. I’m taking you off this.”

Her head shot up. “No!” She grabbed his hand. “No. They need to be witnessed. *Heard.*”

“You don’t need to be the *only* witness.”

“We don’t have anyone on board trained in this kind of counselling—”

“Including and *especially* you!”

“Who else is there then? Spock can’t do it. He’s hanging onto logic by his fingernails right now. And the nurse practitioners don’t understand everything that’s being said.”

“Wait. Are you telling me the UT isn’t functioning properly?”

“Yes. No. I mean. It *is*. But when I was listening to T’Shri a little while ago—”

“The spokeswoman? The one missing the, uh…” He wriggled his fingers at the side of his head.

“Yes. I think I overlooked a whole level of subtext. With all of them. I need to go back through everything they’ve already submitted into record.” Her hands twisted in her lap. “I can’t believe I’ve been so stupid. I mean, that’s the whole reason I’m there and I missed it!”

She leapt to her feet with a growl of disgust and began to pace in aimless agitation. Angry little shrieks came out of her intermittently.

“Ny. Settle down. Settle down, okay? Tell me what you’re worried about specifically.”

“T’Shri said Kaol cut off her ear because she didn’t like his poetry.”

Kirk stepped back like he’d been punched in the chest. “God, *god*, what a sick fuck.”

“He is. But that’s not *precisely* what she meant. About poetry.” She took a deep breath and held it a little too long. Then the words came out in a tumble. “The-the translator can identify and process all the Vulcan dialects with decent accuracy. It did its job – identified a word and found a corresponding word – but it can’t always ascribe subtextual meaning from little things like tonal emphasis or an accented syllable or…” Her eyes darted his direction then away like she was embarrassed.

“Or?” he prompted.

She sighed. “Or… a word from an ad hoc language composed of metaphor and used exclusively by concubines in the 12th century.” Her gaze flicked askance. “For example.”

And *that*, people, was why her skillset was essential in diplomatic negotiations, first contact situations and mixed-species dorm parties.

“Wow. Learning so many unexpected things about Vulcan culture.”

“The original usage by concubines has no modern applications of course, so it only comes into service rarely, and mostly as profanity – albeit a very Vulcan kind of profanity.”

“I didn’t know they used profanity of any kind. Ever.”

“Oh Jim. You sweet naïve boy. Do you know why Vulcans never developed ink and paper for writing?”

“It takes too much water. Weird segue by the way.”

“Do you know what they developed instead?”

“Engraving, oil paints and, uh, a kind of embossing technique.” She looked pleased, like he was an unexpected savant. He squashed the urge to remind her that he’d earned three advanced degrees in his spare time before he got out of high school. “I’m assuming you’re going somewhere with this.”

“The preferred method for composing poetry in the 12th century was the embossing technique. Probably an esthetic choice. Spock would know. Doesn’t matter. What does matter is that poets used a special embossing stylus. It had a substantial knob on one end.”

“Uh huh.”

“And, you know… rubbed. Things.”

It took him a scant second. “Oh. She didn’t insult his poetry. She insulted his dick. He cut off her ear because she insulted his dick.” His gaze dropped to the toes of his boots and he shook his head, breathing hard through his nose. After a second he said, “Don’t see either as justification for mutilating someone. So, forgive my ignorance but why does it matter why he did it?”

She clenched her fists, her voice catching in her throat. “Because– because I didn’t hear the difference. I should have heard the difference, but I was—”

“Isn’t it the same difference though? In this case? He cut off her ear because she’d insulted his ego.”

“That’s why I’m there though. So, they can be assured that their stories are recorded accurately, exactly the way they tell them – whether it’s bad poetry or penis euphemism. But it’s just so much, you know, too much after a while. Hard to listen to.” Her voice dropped, barely above a

whisper. “I think- I think I’ve been zoning out more often than I’ve noticed. Which is so shitty, right? They lived through it, live with it every day, and I can’t even do them the honor of my full attention?” She squeezed her eyelids tight, but tears leaked out the corners anyway. He stepped towards her, to hold, to comfort, to reassure, but once again, she wouldn’t let him, turning away, and waving him off.

“I’m all right.”

Clearly, she wasn’t. Spock should be here, not him.

She dragged her fingers under her nostrils hoping to stay an oncoming tide of snot, then darted into the bathroom to wash her face. When she emerged, her skin was dewy, but her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy.

“I never cry. Just so you know.”

“Well, that’s silly.” He cocked his head, gently scrutinizing her. “You need to eat something.”

“Okay, *doctor*.”

“Speaking as your captain now.”

“Fine. Yes sir. Just need a minute to freshen up and then I *promise* I’ll feed myself before I dive back in.” A shelf slid out of the bulkhead and she activated the mirror function.

“I still feel like I should assign you to another project,” he ventured, knowing that would never fly. He reserved it as a future option, nevertheless.

“I’m done having a breakdown, Captain. Honest.” She leaned in to examine her eyes, decided they’d have to do, and pulled the elastic band out of her frazzled ponytail. “Besides, the rest of the afternoon is already scheduled. I need to assist where I can be the most use right now.”

“Because you’re the only one who knows the secret language of concubines.”

“Yeah, well...the only reason I know *anything* on that subject is because Spock let me read a book he’d—” Her fingers curled into irony quotes, “*borrowed* at the urging of some” -more irony quotes— “*friends* when he was fourteen.”

Kirk laughed out a startled, “What?”

“His mother worked at the Vulcan cultural archive for a while.”

“He stole a book?”

“*Borrowed*, and then couldn’t figure out how to safely sneak it back in. Or didn’t want to. He was unclear on that. Fourteen was a seminal year for him.”

Kirk pondered Spock the teen rebel. She reached for a brush and began to tame her hair.

“I’ll bet that book is still in storage on Earth with the rest of his stuff,” she mused. She wound the elastic band around a bunch of hair with practiced ease then gave her head a shake. The sleek ponytail swung jauntily. Her features were once again composed, but there was a sly arch to her brow. “It’s weird that Spock has two surviving cultural artifacts in his possession and they’re both a little bit pornographic.”

Kirk chuckled then wondered what the other artifact was.

“The play?” Spock asked. His distraction was not overt enough to be noticed by any but him.

“*Wuh Kosu t’Irik-Akhkan Pushau*,” T’Vria clarified.

Ah. *That* play.

Though T’Vria was not exactly blocking the exit from the conference hall, her position made it difficult for him to move past without a rude touch, especially with her baby held in her arms instead of wrapped in the usual sling. He noted abstractedly that she’d made some effort to conceal her freckles and her hair was in a more formal arrangement than most of the others were wearing. Balev and Sasav hovered on the periphery also seeking his attention, with Tes in tow, tethered like a satellite in sullen orbit.

He’d recently finished telling the gathered assembly of every Vulcan woman and child (even those whose attention was intermittent at best) the story of how their home world was destroyed. Only Talu, who remained hospitalized, was not present, though she watched via the linked com screen in her room. Nero was the primary villain in the tale. He did not reference his counterpart’s specific role in the events that transpired as that information was conveniently classified. Afterwards, Shashi formally presented her son, Elik, named for his state of being born free. The group dispersed.

His attention immediately refocused on Nyota’s well-being. The captain had agreed to serve as Spock’s proxy, but now, after some consideration Spock wondered what exactly that might entail. Jim was human and far better adapted to serve in the capacity of comfort and counsel. What if he proved so proficient at meeting her emotional needs, she had no use for Spock at all? Or conversely, would she be

displeased he'd sent Jim in his place, would she feel betrayed, or worse, insulted by his presumption she needed care or counsel at all? He had overstepped certain boundaries before, forgiven only because his missteps were the result of cultural misunderstandings.

He experienced a sense of increasing urgency to go to her.

Unfortunately, his escape had been thwarted, at first by T'Prith of the Valencia who felt it necessary to tell him she'd once attended a lecture given by his mother, and now by T'Vria, currently ignoring the infant rooting around at the front of her gown – a gown ill-suited for breast-feeding infants it appeared to him.

"Lt. Uhura informed me that you had translated *Wuh Kosu t'Irik-Ahkhan Pushau* into Federation Standard," she said with unseemly enthusiasm. "I wrote a thesis on this play using both Stenek's and T'rin Iku's translations. Which did you use as your source? I would be most interested in reading your interpretation."

Her interest, though no doubt genuine, was marred by the unfortunate, natural jollity in her facial features. Moreover, the intensity of her mental shielding made her physical awkwardness in his presence somewhat off-putting.

"My efforts are not worthy of scholarly attention," he told her. "I was too young to fully understand the source material."

"We are often the sternest judges of our own efforts, I find." She shifted the increasingly frustrated child to her shoulder with movements sharpish and hasty. The infant grunted in surprise and then made its displeasure known. To everyone.

"You appear to be leaking milk," he said over the baby's angry wails.

T'Vria dropped her gaze, her cheeks coloring beneath whatever it was she'd used to cover her natural complexion. Her exit was socially uncomfortable but blessedly quick.

Any relief he experienced at this was short-lived. Sasav and Balev stepped forward, their stony expressions rife with maternal disappointment. They'd witnessed his pointed observation of T'Vria's state and seen it for the dismissal it was. He could hardly claim cultural misunderstanding.

Balev eyed him up and down. "It was T'Vria's idea to use the lines from the play in the message we sent. She is well-educated and will be an asset to the colony."

He bowed his head to hide his embarrassment. "I understand, t'sai. I will speak with T'Vria as soon as I am able and make certain she is aware that her knowledge is welcomed and appreciated."

The two women looked at each other.

"That is acceptable," Sasav said. She cast a glance over her shoulder, urging her niece to come forward. Tes shuffled closer, her gaze at him defiant for one daring moment before pointing her chin and eyes at a chair she deemed more interesting.

"It was intended that Tes would offer atonement for the violence she displayed towards you. This was delayed by Perren's death—"

Tes sucked in a sharp breath, any semblance of resistance collapsing. She spun about, her back to them, shaking hands tightening into fists.

It was a response taught to children when emotions threatened to overwhelm them, and they were unable to absent themselves from a situation completely. Adults would then act as if the child were not there until emotional control was restored and everyone pretended the loss of control never occurred. At her age, Tes was expected to have outgrown the need. But there were times when even he longed for the ease of a child's solution.

Her family had not assigned any blame for Perren's suicide on him. They were aware of her deteriorating mental state long before the incident with Kaol. Cumulative losses simply reached a critical moment, they believed. Perhaps the discovery of what Kaol intended for her youngest daughter was the tipping point.

For Tes, however, her mother's death was not only Spock's failure, but a betrayal of her faith in him to make things right. Her family's insistence on virtuous atonement seemed ill-timed and ill-advised.

"This hall is an inappropriate venue obviously," Sasav said. "The quarters we have been provided would be best."

"I apologize, t'sai, but I am unable to comply at the moment—"

"We understand that your position leaves you with little available free time. An hour during any day before our scheduled arrival at New Vulcan will be sufficient. Tes must do this so that she can begin life on our new world free of burden."

With her back still to them, Tes's narrow shoulders shook with anguish, though she made little sound.

"I will contact you with my itinerary," he said and left to find Nyota.

Sarek watched the older man fill the kettle from the dew collector's spigot and then followed him into the dwelling. Two minutes later they were sitting across from each other at a low table, waiting for the tea to brew.

Behind a screen he could see the foot of an unmade bed. A robe hung from a hook. Next to it, a tricorder hung suspended by its strap. The living space was tidy save for the scattering of PADDs removed from the table to make room for a guest, now toppled and scattered on the floor. A food locker had an assortment of containers on top – teas and herbs Sarek assumed. There was no synth unit. Not unusual. Many Vulcans did not care for synthesized food stuffs. Not even in desperate times.

Though the dwelling itself and the dew collector outside were standard kits issued to all when they first arrived, many of their people were already moving into more permanent dwellings. As an elder he should have been high on the list.

Sarek turned to say something to that effect and was immediately struck by the difficulty he had simply looking the man in the eye.

This was the face of an elder to whom honor, care and support was due, yet he wore the wry expression often seen on his son in an unguarded moment. Concern for the man's welfare did not stem entirely from societal obligation therefore but the natural response to a family bond – the ties of mind, blood, and heart. Was he warm enough at night? Did he have enough to eat? Did he have difficulties with mobility, or health concerns? Did he suffer here, alone, far from the shared comfort of other minds, this elder who was also, *somehow*, his *son*?

Spock poured their tea, straining the liquid through a sieve. The cups, the pot, the sieve, as well as assorted other household goods and sundries, appeared to be mismatched cast-offs from Earth– the mug Sarek brought to his lips for example commemorated Federation Day 2230. *Which one*, he wondered? Other small oddities were visible, but his gaze could not linger long enough to identify them, repelled perhaps by the force of their origin in another reality.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit this morning, Sarek?”

“My son—” he began, then stopped. Started again. “The Starship Enterprise and its crew have located and rescued eighteen Vulcan women and their children from captivity on a planet in the Romulan neutral zone—”

“872 Trianguli V?”

“Yes.” Sarek suspected the man would know this.

“How many children?”

“Twenty-one including infants.”

“That is good news. They will be coming here, I presume?”

“We petitioned the Federation to have them brought here directly instead of being processed at Starbase 17. They should arrive within eight days.” Spock waits expectantly. He knows there is more. “Four of the women are pregnant.”

“Forcibly impregnated.”

“All it would seem, yes. This place existed in your – where you are from?”

“It did. Or some version of it. Hellguard.”

“My son believes there may be other children, at least sixty-three who were removed from their mothers and taken to Romulus. The women were told their infants were being adopted into honorable households, however...”

“It is more likely they are being reared institutionally, a specific sort of indoctrination for an intended purpose.”

Sarek nodded his agreement. His knowledge of Romulans was limited, but their culture (at least from an outside perspective) would seem to preclude the broad acceptance of mixed-race children other than as slaves.

“And what was that purpose in your time?”

“The same purpose you suspect. Espionage. I discovered many years later the exact nature of the shift in power that caused the Tal Shiar to abandon such ambitious project, but at the time I had only suspicions and no evidence. It was all I could do to convince the Council that we had a moral responsibility to investigate. By the time we arrived, all that remained was an abandoned outpost, intentionally corrupted files and a handful of feral children.”

“Your knowledge of Romulan society and politics may be useful in our efforts to recover these children.”

“My knowledge may not be applicable, let alone of value. The past I knew is your present. Nero's acts, as well as my own, have likely altered the Empire's politic landscape in such a way as to make my knowledge of little use.”

“It cannot have changed that much. The Empire moves slowly in all matters save the technology of war.”

“True. Perhaps if I had access to your intelligence regarding the Empire. It need not be military intelligence per se.”

“I will make the necessary inquiries.”

“The intelligence would need to go back at least twenty years.”

Sarek inhaled tea and spent thirty-two seconds coughing fitfully. When he had recovered enough to speak, he assured Spock he would do what was in his power to make that possible.

He thought of Stolvoc who had spent twelve years and a small fortune to find his daughter. “If necessary, our efforts can be... privately

funded.”

Spock’s left brow rose in silent commentary, a gesture so achingly familiar Sarek had to avert his gaze. He quickly finished his tea and made ready to leave. “Tell me. Is there anything I can provide you? Anything you lack or need?”

Spock paused. He curled his right hand against his heart. “I require medication. I believe the only current drug therapy available for my condition is benjisidrine. No healer would prescribe a drug to a new patient without a thorough examination and DNA screen evaluation. Questions about my existence would be... difficult to address in that case.”

“Benjisidrine is for an impairment in a heart valve?”

“Yes.”

“Your condition is hereditary.”

“I have been fortunate most of my life to benefit from hybrid vigor, but my fortunes changed recently.” Spock’s lips curved into a pensive smile. “*You* should take preventative measures, however.”

“I intend to do so. I will have the medication sent to you this afternoon.”

“Thank you. Father.”

“That is...that is strange to hear and yet I feel the truth of it.” Sarek touched a finger to his temple and closed his eyes briefly. “I wonder how we differ, the man you knew and the man that I am?”

“You have a chance to be a better father to your son than mine was to me. You converse with each other at least. My father refused to speak to me for eighteen years after I left to join Starfleet.”

Sarek had not spoken to Spock for nine years for the same reason until tragedy made it necessary. *Essential*. Even now, he felt the physical absence of Amanda’s only child keenly.

“Do not misunderstand,” the elder Spock continued. “I respected his abilities. He was an adequate astrophysicist, a skilled computer engineer, and an excellent diplomat, as you undoubtedly are, sir – but with his children, and sometimes his wife, he was often, to quote an old friend, an asshole.” His mouth turned up at the corners. “Don’t be an asshole, Sarek.”

“I will take that under advisement,” Sarek said. He did not smile, but felt lighter as he headed back to the nascent city they had named ShiKahr.

Unthink a Thought

Chapter Summary

The journey is nearly over, but not without a few big rocks in the road.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You can’t unthink a thought, either it’s there or not.” Feist ~ *Undiscovered First*

Spock understood the people of Clan Trazhu to be an insular lot, clinging to their ways so fervently that a quarter of their relatively small number (only 14,432,703 at the last census before the Va’Pak) were born between the stars on long haul ships populated by extended family.

He’d seen them in the city on occasion as a child, intrigued by the woven striations of bright color in the women’s head-wraps, and the sheer number of children surrounding them. This active proliferation of children was mildly scandalous to the adults in his life, though none gave satisfactory explanations why, as he recalled.

Trazhu only mated within their clan, and though there were restrictions to intermarriage between certain subgroups, it was still probable the women from the T’Sai Suk would have relatives yet living. But from what his father had told him, those sixty thousand or more members of Clan Trazhu were avoidant in responding to New Vulcan’s requests to come to New Vulcan. Though they professed to be adherents to the teachings of Surak, they were averse to anything that imposed upon their established way of life. A new planet was apparently an imposition.

Much like Clan Trazhu, the ritual of atonement was deeply rooted in the past. In sacrifices. Offerings of water or blood. Public abasement. Suicides for honor and honor killings. Modern Vulcans did not perform the ritual so much as allude to it. One admitted to the wrong and made amends through service, or if the wronged party required it, remuneration. It was a sacrifice of *time* primarily, sometimes property, and occasionally, dignity. But it was the most appropriate way, especially for a child.

Though Tes had flown at him with her fists, she’d clearly been frightened and in distress. The worst she had done was startle him into an overt reaction of alarm. He did not require an apology or certainly not a rigidly formal *public* one.

To his relief, the ritual her aunts devised was constrained only to the Vulcans who’d been present at the time of the infraction. It began with a deep bow (forehead to the floor), followed by a lengthy formal apology spoken in painfully mangled Old Golic, and an offering of *masu vi’ mazhiv*. Water into sand.

Spock accepted the offering with all due solemnity – a handmade tile with the *sochya* glyph carefully etched into it. This represented the sand. He suspected the tile was made from a kind of patching paste used in engineering. Lt. Commander Scott mentioned his department had donated materials the children could use to make art.

There was a small depression in the tile at the top of the glyph to set a cone of incense. A smear of blood stained the depression under the glaze. The offering of water. Her own.

Only one thing remained to complete the ritual. The most difficult for Tes it appeared. It troubled him that she feared what he might ask her to do.

He trusted (hoped) she knew he would never ask anything of her that was untoward or inappropriate. But her autonomic nervous system was clearly gearing up to fight or flee. He attempted to project reassurance and calm.

Head bowed, she began, “Honored—” her voice cracked, she began again, “Honored osu, I have injured you with my words and deeds. I humbly request that you— that you choose the manner, by which I will – I will make restitution for harm done to your mental and physical well-being.”

She looked up then, radiating hope and fear in equal measures. Behind him he could sense the others stirring, a miasma of discomfiture at her lack of control. He reached out, took her hands in his and squeezed. Ignoring the ripple of shock at his actions, he looked into her eyes and held her gaze.

“Tes of the T’Sai Suk. It is my request that you proceed through life as the sort of person I would want my own child to emulate. Be kind. Be compassionate. Be fiercely loyal. Be of service when you are able. Will you do all this?”

“Y-yes. *Yes*. I will honor your requests as long as I live.”

“Then I consider the matter resolved.” He acknowledged the ladies with slight bow before raising a hand in the ta’al. “Live long and prosper, Tes.”

“Peace and long life, Mr. Spock.”

In his quarters, he placed the tile next to his asenoi.

My star in the deep well

Cannot drown the light of reason

Though her water leaps to my hand

Drips between my fingers

Sinks into sand.

Thirsty desert

I would drink star's light

Should she offer her cup

T'Maru reads the poem again, conscious of the heat blush of dilated blood vessels, the thudding of her heart in her side. Her sympathetic nervous system exposes her, betrays her. She commits the poem to memory, and promptly deletes it. The thought of her sisters seeing it, knowing who it was from, that he composed for her—

She had only asked him was he willing to commit to the Vulcan way of living? His answer, this poem. Written in her own language.

How carefully he must have chosen each word, meticulously translating from his own tongue to adopt the sensibilities of her own. And yet, it was far too sensual for a Vulcan composition. *Does he know this? Does he understand?*

In her mind she envisions him gnawing his lower lip as he writes, the way he does when they are playing *nohthe*. And the lock of hair falls across his left eye, which he pushes back, only to have it fall again. His eyes (green and brown with flecks of gold) gaze unfocused as he ponders how to arrange the words for optimal aesthetic utility--

her water leaps to my hand drips between my fingers

She can feel her pulse in her fingertips as she unwinds the coiled braid he calls her "crown." It unravels through her fingers until it ripples down her back. He will not know everything this gesture implies, but she will.

She sends the message by text so that neither voice nor face can betray her.

"Meet me on the observation deck at 2100 hours, preferably alone."

Jiekh reads the translation. Had he read it correctly? He clicks so that the message can be read as the standard language of the federation, then looks to Mr. Belanger who is leaning over his shoulder reading it, and whose expression, he imagines, is now a mirror of his own.

"Holy crap," Belanger whispers. "She wants to see you. *Alone*." He straightens up and tugs at the hem of his uniform tunic. His thick fingers rub at the burr of hair on the top of his head. "Uh, technically, I still have to be in the vicinity but--*My man!*" His thrusts a hand into the air where it hovers aggressively.

As he is clearly expecting some response, Jiekh raises his hand as well and Belanger slaps it with the triumphant cry of a conqueror.

Jiekh is not as confident. "Perhaps she wishes to be alone so that I will not embarrass her when she severs our friendship."

"Aw, dude, come on. You sent her a *poem*. A love poem--"

"It is not a love poem!" he lies.

"--and she wants to see you alone. I'm a sucker for free verse, but I *totally* did not expect that to work."

Belanger assists him with the details of his grooming and by the time T'Maru arrives on the observation deck, his hair is arranged in a style Belanger calls "artfully bedhead." He stands alone near a seated alcove, with a breathtaking view at his back and another coming towards him. It is difficult to breathe at the moment, certainly. Her crown is gone, undone, and her hair falls down her back like a wrinkled curtain. Prettier than that, but his mind stutters, he can't think of a decent simile. His lips part. He is certain no sensible sound will emerge and does the only other thing he can think of – he lifts his hand in the traditional Vulcan greeting.

Two days before their estimated arrival at New Vulcan, Balev discovered that the High Council were rumored to be considering instituting a breeding program. Buried leads in Federation newsfeeds cited undisclosed sources suggesting the program was already in the final planning stages and could become a *mandatory* policy in place for an unspecified length of time.

The Enterprise received its news in packets and data dumps from the Federation news outlets, and those were usually days, sometimes weeks out of date. As expected, she could find no hint of a such a program through the official New Vulcan Information Service, nor in any of the public access broadcasts on the planet.

A program that proposed controls over an individual's genetic material would never be enacted into law ordinarily, and certainly not without lengthy civic debate. But after nearly two years, it appeared the High Council still operated under a state of emergency, empowering them to enact policies deemed beneficial for the broader good without any input from citizens at all.

Balev suspected most of the "undisclosed sources" would be found in the forums of nascent intra-planetary communications platforms on New Vulcan, but she was in no position to request the monitoring of private transmissions even if the Enterprise were close enough to do so.

On the T'Sai Suk, it had been one of her duties to monitor unfiltered public chatter so that she could provide practical insights on shifting or potential markets, trending or unusual goods, new manufacturers, and new discoveries. She regularly utilized communication methods designed to entice potential customers to want what the T'Sai Suk had to sell. Such skill added value to her family's business endeavors, and to Clan Trazhu as a whole. Now that she was ... tainted in the eyes of the clan, she had hoped to be useful in a similar way on this new world. Or at least be free to choose how she would contribute.

She took the rumors to the others for their consideration. Given how few Vulcans were left, they all agreed that the implementation of a breeding program was a logical probability. Perhaps even necessary. But "compulsory" was a condition they would not tolerate.

Talu came upon Prisu in the corridor where Hannam was confined, sitting on the floor across from a security person guarding the sealed door. The young woman scrambled to her feet with a fleeting expression of concern and an aborted attempt at assistance. Her hands went down to her sides, tight-fisted as always.

"What are you doing here, Prisu?"

"Dr. Mas continues to ask to see you. I assumed you would succumb to her pleas."

"I will not. But I find it disturbing to think you have been waiting for me to appear for... how long now?"

"I come and go."

Talu glanced at her nurse standing with one hand on the invalid-chair, valiantly attempting a neutral expression. Doctor McCoy had not released her from care yet, despite the benefits the healing trance had provided, and it was too tiresome to argue with him. Instead, she convinced the human nurse to allow her to walk a different deck this evening. This one specifically.

Hannam's comfortable prison in guest quarters was guarded by a person she suspected looked human but was not quite. It would be impolite to ask of course. He stood with his arms behind his back, weapon at his belt in easy reach, staring at the blank wall just above Prisu's head as if there were not two Vulcan women in the corridor talking about the person he was guarding. Despite this posture of unassailability, and the fact that one of them was accompanied by convalescent nurse with a mobile chair, it was evident he was paying *very* close attention just in case.

"If you have not come to speak with her, why are you here?"

"I wished to assure myself she was sufficiently confined." A muscle jumped along the guard's jaw as if he was grinding his back teeth.

Prisu leaned against the corridor's wall and slid down to the floor again.

After a moment Talu eased herself down next to her, waving the nurse back. If she required help to get to her feet again, so be it. "I heard that you came here once to tell her I was dead."

Prisu's gaze flicked to the guard and she slipped into their common tongue. "No. I implied to her that it was you who— who had died."

"Did she suffer at this implication?"

"I heard her cry out. It was ...satisfying."

"Prisu. These dark emotions do you no good. Their power will turn in you like a cancer."

"Yes. Perhaps. I don't know why I'm here. I don't—" She wrapped her arms around her knees, and rocked forward, words coming out in a tense whisper. "What if it's true? What my aunt says. That we will be forced—"

Talu should have known the rumors Balev brought to their attention would infest minds like parasites, slowly eating away at whatever tentative, fragile sense of security they had barely established.

“First, no one said ‘forced.’ They will not *force* anyone. It would be morally reprehensible. And second—”

Vulcans were still a religiously ethical people. Weren’t they?

“I won’t do it. I will—I will *damage them*. I will destroy them—I will *fight*, kill if I must—”

“Prisu. Stop.” But she only leaned further into her fantasy.

“I will steal a ship—”

“Can you pilot a ship?”

“I’ll flee into the wilds then.”

“I see.” Talu shifted her body uncomfortably. The nurse noticed. “It’s fine, I’m all right” she said, rattling off whatever words in Federation lingua franca appeased, however briefly. To Prisu she said, “For myself, I do not intend to make a life on New Vulcan at all.”

Her people from Larash Rai Sanosh were looking forward, making plans. Shashi told T’Gal and Lodzahl they would likely be granted land for development. They all began discussing homesteading and researching what equipment they would need to raise or grow ... whatever. Talu had stopped listening by then. Without Mishih, there was no enthusiasm in her to embark on a new venture. The last one ended so badly.

Prisu had stilled at Talu’s declaration, and now her entire being was on alert. “What are your plans for a life if not on New Vulcan with the people?” It did not escape Talu’s notice that she did not say *our* people or even *your* people.

“There is a mining colony in the Corvan system that is constantly in need of persons with my expertise. Dilithium mining is not particularly interesting.” *Not like extracting highly desirable multimarket iridium and osmium from platinum.* “The conditions can be challenging, however. But you and I have survived much worse. As a life, it would be preferable, I think, to the wilds of a planet you have yet to set foot on.”

“Yes,” Prisu breathed out, her eyes wide with obvious relief. But uncertainty soon followed. This offer of escape could also be withdrawn. Her family would oppose – strongly. “If you would not mention these plans to my relations yet, I would be grateful.”

“You will need time to meditate on it, of course.” Talu felt the increasingly keen attention of the guard though he had not spoken or even looked directly at them. “Perhaps we should refrain from further discussion on the matter.” She switched to Standard. “The man is concerned we may be plotting a coup.”

It was Prisu not the nurse who helped her to stand again. She smoothed her clothing and decided to submit to the indignities of the hover-chair.

“If you speak to your charge,” she said to the guard as they were leaving, “will you tell her Talu came to see where she was being held and is extremely satisfied with the security measures in place?”

There was a slight tick upwards at the corner of his mouth. He dipped his chin in an abrupt, efficient nod and said, “Will do, ma’am.”

McCoy helped himself to the coffee and eyed the assortment of pastries placed at each end of the table – *bless my sorry soul, are those beignets?*

Coffee, two kinds of tea, both sparkling water and flat with lemon. It was a fancier spread than usual (in the fact that there was a spread at all) and *especially* for a leisurely morning briefing with department heads and bridge crew. Jim’s new yeoman must’ve been looking to impress. He’d need to have a chat with the young man about keeping the captain on the nutritional straight and narrow.

Didn’t mean his doctor couldn’t indulge in a beignet. He was happily dunking it in his coffee when Jim said, “Spock’s late.”

They all pondered that a second, oddly unsettled. The Enterprise was scheduled to enter the Simon-316 system in an hour or so, and then into orbit around New Vulcan shortly after that. Spock being late felt like a portent of pending disaster – or that they’d awakened this morning in an alternate universe.

Several pairs of eyes turned to Uhura, who scowled at the presumption she would know where Commander Spock was, even though it was a safe bet she did. She started to speak—

Spock entered the ready room at that moment looking, well ... less than serene. In fact, McCoy might even say “rattled.”

“My apologies, Captain,” Spock said, pulling out the chair reserved for him. “I have just been informed by T’Shri that she and the others will not disembark at New Vulcan until the High Council agrees to their conditions of return.”

“*Con-dish-uns...* sure.” The captain wore an expression that reminded McCoy of a little kid who didn’t understand how knock-knock jokes worked.

“Or perhaps more properly, demands and guarantees.”

“Okay. Why?”

Spock shifted slightly in the chair, drawing himself up straighter while avoiding making direct eye contact with anyone. "There are rumors, as yet unsubstantiated, that New Vulcan's interim governing council is considering enacting a mandatory breeding program."

Uhura let out a punched-in-the-gut kind of breath. McCoy leaned forward. "I'm assuming we're not talking livestock here."

"We are not."

"Mandatory? Seriously? I'd love to see how they plan to enforce that."

"It is but a rumor, Doctor. And the women wish to establish, through a legal advocate, their refusal to participate should rumors prove grounded in fact."

"They have a lawyer already?" Jim said. "Good on them."

"It seems Lady T'Shri was a legal practitioner who specialized in contract law for the previous Vulcan government in Shi-Kahr." Spock directed a vaguely apprehensive look at his captain before adding, "She has requested to confer with you at your earliest convenience. By which, she means as soon as we are done here."

McCoy snorted, sending a tiny cloud of powdered sugar from his beignet across the table.

Chapter End Notes

A few notes about Vulcan touch telepathy. I've been watching Star Trek since it first aired and I'm basing my approach on the original series. Touch did not equal automatic or accidental thought transference. Telepathic communion seemed to require a measure of intent (unless there was some mitigating trauma). So when Spock holds Tes's hands it is to communicate regard and support - a warm fuzzy, not something intrusive. If her relatives are disturbed it's because he's not Clan Trazhu. But he feels connected to her, protective and empathizes with her. That's all.

I love reading all the stories where touch telepathy factors into character development, relationships and plot though.

Child Blessing

Chapter Summary

The High Council corrects misapprehensions and delivers some harsh truths. Uhura goes for a walk and meets a familiar stranger. A measure of happiness is restored for some, and some questions go unanswered for others.

Chapter Notes

When I started this project to process trauma and escape the pandemic, I had a few goals.

1. To correct the erasure of women whose trauma serves only as plot device to motivate action by men.
2. To explore through fiction the lives of women who bear the burdens of war with their bodies.
3. Less serious, but very Star Trecky - to provide clues to and motivation for Spock's plunge off the deep end in ST Into Darkness. People don't get over genocide. They just don't.
4. Write likeable characters, doing their best, in positions they are way too young to have inherited.
5. Have people swear like sailors.

To say the council chamber on New Vulcan lacked grandeur would be an understatement, but also unsurprising, as it was not steeped in eight thousand years of bloody history, hewn deep into rock, and meant to withstand a nuclear winter.

In this unprepossessing room, with its thick walls and inset windows placed for optimal air flow, the interim High Council did not sit on literal *high*, but rather at the level of ordinary people, in ordinary chairs at tables set in a semi-circle facing the antechamber door. There were only five members currently rather than the usual seven, with ministers Norrith and Sula serving two positions each.

At the open end of the semi-circle, a smaller table faced the Council. This is where the women T'Shri, Talu and Balev would present their conditions. This is where Sarek and Spock stood now, intending to smooth the path for them. But there'd been an alteration in Spock's demeanor shortly after they entered the council chambers, an increased level of stress, the cause of which Sarek had yet to discern.

Though Spock's features maintained a marked stoicism, a small muscle spasmed intermittently along his jaw below his left ear and behind his back he had enclosed the wrist of his right hand with the left to still the clenching and unclenching of his fist.

T'Plis, the only surviving minister of Vulcan's previous High Council, observed Spock sporadically – darting furtive looks, each no more than 0.6 of a second. She had been among those successfully evacuated from the Great Hall before it collapsed. She had materialized on the Enterprise. Amanda had not. Perhaps that reminder was the cause of his son's strained control.

Concern that others could see Spock's current distress pricked at him. Then memory rushed in, sharp, devastating.

Amanda, anguished, furious, thoroughly disillusioned with his willful denial of evidence, screaming at him, "They are hurting *my* child!" She'd forgone the Vulcan language altogether so that the possessive pronoun would pointedly exclude him as a parent. Where she had seen bruises, tears of frustration and helpless rage at unrelenting persecution, Sarek had seen evidence of his son's lack of control. It was the argument that caused her to forsake him, to leave him, taking their son with her. He'd known where they were, as a security detail was required, but with each passing day he'd been less certain of their return. When they did come back, Spock offered his grim and determined commitment to the path of logic. In writing. Like an instrument of surrender. Sarek believed he had won the war of philosophical principles best suited for *their* child. What hubris. The other Spock had been correct. The crude descriptor for his own father aptly applied to this one as well.

Understanding the illogic of regret was not a talisman to keep it at bay.

His son turned a questioning gaze at him, sensing the tenor of his thoughts if not the content. A flash of empathy and a warm regard washed over him. Then Spock carefully flattened his expression and relaxed the bunched muscles in his shoulders to ease his father's mind. Sarek's thoughts narrowed in focus once again to Duvor's continuing grievance.

"We are not instituting a mandatory breeding program," the man reiterated in an emphatic tone. "Your advice to refute the rumors publicly would only have lent unwarranted credence to them."

Vulcans had never been particularly savvy about the need to get ahead of bad press. Sarek drew in a calming breath and addressed the minister's unwarranted certitude.

"A public, unequivocal refutation of these rumors early on would have minimized both the lurid speculation and the manufactured outrage currently proliferating through various Federation media outlets." He raised a hand, forestalling interruption and pointedly added, "It would also have prevented the situation in which we currently find ourselves."

“Are we to be ruled now by the whims of sensationalist press? The use of rudimentary logic could easily have dispelled these rumors for the parties in question had they bothered to apply it.”

Both fists clenched behind his son’s back and Sarek spoke before Spock could say or do whatever those fists implied. “I remind the Council that these women were held captive and forced to breed repeatedly over the course of several years. Requiring incontrovertible assurance on this matter is not an unreasonable request.”

“Which we would have provided had they *asked*. Instead, they arrive with an armed force as if their own people would detain them against their will.”

Spock squeezed his eyes shut. Sarek suspected an effort to resist an all too human eyeroll at this melodramatic turn of phrase.

The “armed force” in this case consisted of young Captain Kirk in formal dress uniform and a four-person honor guard, all currently waiting in the antechamber with the women’s delegation. Though Sarek had no doubt the honor guard were trained security personnel, their presence was symbolic, an acknowledgment of the Federation’s recognition and continued support of New Vulcan’s sovereignty. It was the Starfleet vessel in orbit that safeguarded against any irrational acts by desperate people. Duvor found the mere suggestion that they were desperate particularly galling, almost a personal affront.

Sarek allowed the man performed adequately in the position considering his previous experience had been administrator of a small municipality on the east coast of the Thanar Sea. And he was, like all of them, a refugee carrying his own burden of sorrow. It was necessary for Vulcans to be gentle with one another. But as he caught T’Plis surreptitiously observing his son yet again, an ungentle protectiveness arose in him.

This time Spock met her gaze before she’d looked away.

Color rose to her cheeks, but her expression maintained neutrality. She directed her words at Sarek. “We offer our solemn guarantee that no interference with or impositions upon their personal autonomy will be tolerated.”

It was Spock, steady and unblinking, that answered. “They demand a legal guarantee under Federation law.”

It was decided (not by Kirk) that an appearance in formal dress communicated the right combination of officiousness and respect, both as representatives of the Federation recognizing New Vulcan’s sovereignty *within* the Federation and as members of Starfleet in support of the women’s interests – a tricky diplomatic position he was under strict orders not to screw up.

Like Starfleet’s duty uniforms, the fabric of his dress uniform adjusted for the heat before he’d barely broken a sweat. But aside from looking awesome, that’s all it’s designed to do. Gravity and oxygen are still his body’s problems.

Standing in the council chamber, his head bears the burden of all the perspiration produced from the effort of moving in heavier gravity with a lower oxygen mix. Though the gravity is not as heavy as Vulcan, and tri-ox supplements help with breathing, it doesn’t make much difference when you’re standing at parade rest with sweat leaking down the back of your collar and dripping into your eyes.

His hat, which would have helped a lot with that, is under his left arm as etiquette dictates. Except for Lt. NgEtal who’s from Ruary, the honor guard isn’t faring any better.

The Vulcan women just bask like lizards. They don’t even seem nervous. Yeah, they’re Vulcans, but they’d been tense and even a little feisty when they all beamed down. Now that T’Shri has presented the lengthy contract of terms and conditions, they’re wrapped securely in righteousness. None of *them* are sweating from their eyeballs.

He looks longingly at the carafes of water all dewy with condensation. He can feel his lips chapping.

As the council members read over T’Shri’s comprehensive list for any details they might have missed, Spock leans close to his father, speaking quietly. Sarek glances over his shoulder at the Starfleet personnel, turns back, nods. Spock steps away and moves past Kirk with a look that says, “As first officer I am aware of the problem and will remedy it now.” He confers quietly with Lt. NgEtal who leaves the chamber and returns a few minutes later with small towels for each of them and what turns out to be neck coolers. Comfort and dignity restored Kirk turns his attention to the stirring spectacle of Vulcans reading the fine print. At some signal he doesn’t catch, the five interim council members have finished, and the three women stand up.

T’Shri’s litigator robes skim over her pregnant belly in a way that draws attention to it without shoving it in anyone’s face. But her recent very-Vulcan haircut provides an unobstructed view of the left side of her head. Although preliminary work has been done to restore her ear (the scars have been smoothed a bit) she’s positioned herself on the far left so that when she turns to speak with the other women its absence is glaringly obvious.

Balev is way less circumspect about it, not only visibly pregnant but *also* visibly mutilated, having purposefully left the temporary prosthetic hand back on the Enterprise. She’s also gone full-on Clan Trazhu from what Spock told him, in an eye-searingly bright tunic and loose trousers, her hair hidden beneath a striped scarf.

Talu, representing the women from the mining consortium, hasn’t bothered to dress to impress. She embraced the comfort of the generic coveralls as soon as she was able to clothe herself and makes no concession to the formality of the proceedings now. McCoy said she needed another week of physical therapy, so she’s come today with a special cane.

These are not theatrical props. They're evidence. He taps the translator in his ear to make sure it's still operating.

T'Shri summarizes four major points. "As stated, some of us are willing to donate ova. Some of us are willing to serve as surrogates. Some of us *may* be willing to enter marital bonds. But none of us are willing to become breeding chattel for our own race."

The man sitting at the center of the High Council stands up. "Duvor, acting minister of State. We assure you that although a breeding program *was* among the proposals made to address our diminished population, there was never a consideration to make it mandatory. We have read the conditions you require be met before you settle on New Vulcan and agree that all expectations of and for your group must be clear and explicit and approved by you before you take up residence here."

Tension Kirk didn't realize he'd been holding dissipated suddenly and he sighs in relief – a little too audibly if Spock's unsubtle side-eye is any indication. Duvor sits and another council person stands. Middle-aged guy with a slight build. The tips of his ears nearly crest the top of his head. His expression is less carefully neutral and more benign. Almost friendly?

"Sula, acting minister of Defense and Security."

Deceptively friendly.

"Regretfully, New Vulcan is not currently a recognized diplomatic entity. Therefore, we cannot officially petition the Romulan government for information about missing members of your parties who may yet be alive. However, diplomatic channels within the Federation have been apprised and are..." He glances down at the small screen in front of him then looks up to quote, "...working on it. As we cannot currently meet these terms of the contract, we request an addendum."

There follows a tedious, but thankfully brief, legal discussion. The changes are made, and a new version sent to the devices in front of each party. Minister Sula takes his seat, and the next minister rises.

This one looks too young for the job though she could be in her eighties for all Kirk knows. For some reason he's reminded of Ms. Babbit, his pretty 8th grade teacher who always got roped into chaperoning field trips, and who seemed to exist in a perpetual state of fluster, falling into disrepair over the course of the school day along with her neat morning hairstyle. The minister's sleek bun has likewise begun to frizzle around her hairline.

"Norriith, acting minister of Science and Education."

Ha! A teacher. Called it. He mentally high-fives himself. It must have been a loud mental high-five because Spock shoots him a look like he's just farted in church.

The pretty teacher continues, her voice vaguely tremulous. She might be nervous. Which is comforting somehow.

"If you will allow us to outline the current proposals and initiatives under review, we will later provide you with access to the research abstracts, papers, supporting studies and holovid presentations, along with projected timelines and outcomes."

T'Shri exchanges looks with the other two and they each agree with lowered eyelids and chin nods.

"The primary goal in this upcoming phase is to encourage the growth and development of our economy whilst also growing the population." She proceeds to list several schemes to encourage the recovery of traditional arts and crafts, the establishment of homesteads around agro-settlements, and the development of new business for the purpose of interplanetary trade. Then moves onto the subject of growing the population. If Vulcans could squirm, they'd all be doing it right now.

"A suitably diverse gene pool in the future requires a female of reproductive age to produce a minimum of three children with three different genetic donors over the next twelve years." At the reaction of the women, she rushes to add, "Donations of ova will fulfil that need if you choose to do so. As we currently have no in utero surrogate volunteers, we have created a program wherein elders past reproductive viability volunteer to serve as surrogates with the use of artificial uteri. Studies indicate this will benefit both our elders and the resulting children."

She then cites statistics to support the studies and brings up more studies and just as he's being sucked into the vortex of social science research and methodology, schoolmarm Norriith is suddenly talking throuples and sisterwives.

Spock has gone very still. Kirk's translator stumbles over a phrase it *thinks* should be a word before finally spitting out the term "polyfidelity." T'Shri remembers to close her mouth. Balev's brow seems permanently furrowed, and Talu emits a sound like a snort.

Apparently, the acting High Council has decided it's time to broaden the Vulcan concept of traditional marriage. Sarek doesn't bat an eye, so safe to assume it's not news to him.

It's a logical, reasonable approach to their population problem. But, he imagines, as difficult to implement as mandatory baby-making. It wasn't just getting past their sexual conservatism. Vulcans mated for life, like ... Canada geese. Hardwired into their DNA a girlfriend had once told him. They were chained to each other telepathically until they died. She may have said *linked* together rather than chained but regardless, it did not sound fun to him. Of course, *she* thought it was terribly romantic. Iowa girl. Never met a Vulcan. Obviously. He'd responded (mostly joking) with, "But it's hard enough to cheat already!" They broke up soon after. He knows he's not mated-for-life material, but he thinks he understands romantic. And Vulcans are not.

A gift of hot sauce is not romantic, no matter how much Uhura loves that sauce. No matter how much she loves the guy. Spock probably loves her back in his own weird way, but Kirk's pretty sure they're not linked together like Canada geese. Not yet. Maybe it's not even possible.

A raw, uncomfortable feeling gathers in his solar plexus, both the memory of loss, and a premonition of it. Spock is going to break Uhura's heart. And Kirk's as well, possibly.

Norrith has finished her presentation, and another woman rises.

“T’Plis, minister of Health.”

Not “acting” minister of health.

Kirk recognized her right away. He visited survivors several times during the Enterprise’s long limping trip back to Earth (after Nero’s shorter trip back to hell). On the ship, T’Plis was like every other Vulcan – stunned, detached, numb, overwhelmed by incomprehensible loss. But now she’s wearing the face his mom often wears. The *things-are-about-to-get-real-kid* face.

T’Plis proceeds to get real. With health statistics.

She gives the suicide rates amongst the different age demographics. The rise of reactive attachment disorders in children. Bonding detachment in mothers. Stillbirths. Sporadic or early onset of a condition all the Vulcans understand without any elaboration and his translator renders as “hemo-hyperpyrexia.”

There are cases of self-harm and cases of extreme risk-taking behavior. All justified logically he has no doubt. He eyes his first officer, standing stiff and still. Yeah. There’ve been a few incidents.

“Young people are not staying.” T’Plis is focused keenly on Spock when she says this. “We need them to stay.” And Spock can’t meet her eyes.

Shit. Fuck.

Kirk’s heart thumps loud in his throat, then revs up, beating so fast he almost can’t tell if it’s beating at all. There’s no oxygen in this goddamned room, his entire body vibrates, and the hum in his ears buzzes louder and louder until it’s just a long sustained high-pitched whine. He pulls the translator out of his ear, pretending that’s the reason.

Not a great time to have a panic attack, Jim.

Or maybe this is heatstroke?

Breaking etiquette, he goes to the stand with the water, pours himself a glass and sips slowly. After a measure of time wherein he cycles through worst-case scenarios and counts the passage of it in breathes and heartbeats, he puts the translator in his ear again. Catches Minister Duvor mid-sentence.

“— drafted for submission to the appropriate Federation legal authority. In the meantime, we have arranged welcoming festivities for the children in the city center commons if you will permit their participation. Musical performances and traditional craft demonstrations will take place. Exercise structures for informal play are also available. There will be nutritional treats on offer and toys suitable for the various age groups. They may, of course, keep these as their own regardless of your decision.”

T’Shri seems thrown by this generous gesture. Duvor waits for her to acknowledge the invitation and after a moment she gives a little sideways nod and bows slightly from the waist.

“Minister Norrith’s aide will provide you the details.”

He gathers up the data pads on the table in front of him and the others rise and do the same. And with that, the acting High Council leaves the chambers.

Uhura pauses to catch her breath and turns to see how far she’s come. Too far maybe. The booster of tri-ox contributed to a certain cockiness about hiking up this path with nothing but a parasol, but gravity is still a bitch. She’s not sure she can make it to the promised scenic overlook, despite the easy meander and gentle incline at the start of the journey.

There’s a good view from where she stands though, and she twirls her very pink parasol, pleased that she can easily make out all the other colorful parasols – buttercup yellows and corals, lavenders, pale greens, bright turquoise – like a moving mosaic in the city commons.

Vulcans carrying brightly colored parasols is not a sight she’d ever expected ever to see. Despite speaking the language fluently, the culture has once again proven itself elusive, even with an insider at her intimate disposal.

In all fairness, it is not something her insider ever expected to see either.

The parasols, Spock had told her, were a traditional part of *Kankudaya gad-muf*, the Festival of Child-Blessing – an ancient celebration of children that itself had developed out of an *even more* archaic ritual where clans would gather every seven years to tally their increase in number and honor their losses.

Spock had never participated in such a festival, had never seen one, could not answer any of her queries about what the parasols represented. The crowd of people in the commons made him uncomfortable. The noisiness of children seemed to tick him off.

A portable sunshade was sometimes called a *yelsvai* (sunflower) or *yelmor* (sunleaf) so she’d speculated that maybe they represented blooming or sprouting which, for Terrans, were terms applied to a growing child.

“Perhaps,” he’d said, She suspected every kid on the planet was there. They climbed over play structures, and played unstructured games made up on the fly. None of them seemed to walk if there was room to run. She saw a couple of kids making their dolls do suus mahna moves. Dirt clung to sticky chins, formerly neat braids flew half undone, even the oldest Vulcan children had abandoned the need for decorum and not one adult said a word about it. But compared to human kids they were positively mellow.

“Are you maybe a *teensy bit* resentful they’re getting away with stuff you and your cohorts couldn’t?”

“We are not a people whose children should go unrestrained,” he said. Then told her he should probably meet with his father alone, despite practically begging for her presence the night before.

“Okay then,” she said cheerily, picking the brightest, pinkest parasol from one of the stands. She opened it up, gave it a twirl (as one does) and added, “but you’re being a dick” as he walked away.

Fine. She’d have a great time. *By herself.*

She watched musical performances, watched kids learn how to carve resin blocks for fabric printing, embroider with cactus needles, paint the glyphs for their given names. She ate a traditional street food (a kind of falafel corndog on a stick) and drank a lot of surprisingly sweet water. Gradually she’d worked her way to the outer edges of the commons, where it was less noisy and where stern older men observed the goings on with strained reserve and eyed the newest additions to the colony with something else entirely. She hadn’t realized what that something else was at first. Because they were Vulcans. But a lot of her assumptions about Vulcans had fallen by the wayside recently and once she saw it, she could not unsee it.

Sensing her attention, an aged man with a long narrow features and silver shot hair turned his head slowly and stared at her unblinking for a full thirty seconds. She stared back, mouth tight, refusing to blink first. But when he turned back to his companions, she didn’t feel like the winner of that showdown *at all.*

She spun on her heel and marched away – or would have if the heavier gravity hadn’t slowed her march considerably. When she came upon a discreet sign indicating a meditation path winding away from the city, meditation had seemed like a really good idea.

Now the late afternoon sun seems to hang over her shoulder unmoving, though she can feel the temperature has dropped a tiny bit and the shadows are longer. A breeze flutters her kaftan against her belly and thighs. Somewhere up ahead, an enclosed seating area with a small fountain has been promised, and she makes herself move.

The new Shi’Karh is a city by aspiration only. From his seat in the enclosure at the apex of the path, Spock could watch it being built in real time. Well, he could on any other day. Today the heavy construction printers are quiet. Soil and sand shifters, trenchers, and excavators sit still. Today the High Council has reinvented the classic funfair in accordance with Vulcan aesthetic. For the entertainment and edification of children. It pleases him no end.

And the Vulcan aesthetic had made this enclosure and the path leading up to it one of the first projects of city planners. Members of the Federation corps of engineers wondered why Vulcans would prioritize a meditation walkway when there were so many refugees in temporary shelters and more arriving every tenday. Was this really the best use of time and resources?

But they need not have concerned themselves. All the resources needed to make the path and enclosed bench were, if not abundant, certainly available. People with rakes, hoes, specimen collectors and dirt tampers. A conveniently shaped rock overhang was the deciding destination. Making a meditation path was itself a meditation, and a way to gain more intimate familiarity with the landscape in this part of their new world. It was also a way to temporarily escape sorrow or live in peace with it for a while.

Other construction for the city had proceeded apace, but every day for ninety-seven days volunteers came here, disrupting the land as little as possible, making a path to the planned bench enclosure with attention to interesting features of the landscape, detours, small potential hazards, the breezes that came in from the south in the morning, the winged creatures that emerged from the rock faces at night. After sufficient reflection and a proper structural analysis, the bench and enclosure at the pinnacle were carefully carved and shaped, and a small evaporation-capture fountain installed. So far, most wildlife avoided the structure, but eventually they would grow accustomed to the Vulcan interlopers and an energy field of some kind might need to be employed.

Although there was no objection to works like this one, there had been many disagreements about the general direction of this new city – for example, many (mostly young people) asked, why call it Shi’karh? *That* city had been ancient before Surak, built in layers, new grafted onto old and stretching out over millennia from an oasis at its heart.

It was illogical and wasteful to attempt it.

There was nothing worse than to be called illogical by a young person.

A sudden memory strikes a blow – Jim pressing his hand to a wall in Old Shi’karh until the heat burned into his palm.

They had come to Shi’karh from a conference in Paris and Jim expressed a tourist’s interest in the Old City. Spock endeavored to experience the familiar through the fresh eyes of his companion, but he didn’t really “get it.”

“It feels like Sainte-Chapelle,” Jim said. But then he couldn’t explain what he meant, how an old tea shop (in a city already old when Paris was just an encampment of hunter gatherers on the Seine) could *feel* like a medieval chapel. It was a feeling that had no descriptors and Spock had

only Jim's expression as a guide, the hand to the wall, head bowed, eyes closed and breathing softly.

He thinks he understands now. It has nothing to do with katras or human souls. It is the pith and crux and bones of a place. It is how the all the lives lived there permeate the structures, roil beneath the eaves, and saturate the paving stones beneath one's feet.

But even the bones are gone now, and all the dead are angry, wailing at him because no stranger's hand will touch a wall ever *ever* again and feel the lives they had lived.

Before his mind can plunge into the depths of that guilt his eyes catch a glint of bright pink cresting the rise. A beautiful brown skinned woman in a billowing white kaftan appears, startled to see someone sitting in the spot she wants to be.

"Excuse the intrusion, venerable one." Her accent is scarcely noticeable. But she can't disguise the weariness in her voice. She bows. "This one retreats."

And she starts to.

"Wait," he says. She looks back at him over her left shoulder as the pink parasol spins angrily over her right. He wants to know why she is angry. "You are Ms. Uhura."

No need to speak Vulcan now. "I'm not privileged with an eidetic memory, but I think I'd remember if we'd met."

"We have not." *Technically*. "I am ... related to the young Lt. Commander Spock."

She lifts an imperious eyebrow. "Really? In what way?"

Prevarication was not his best first choice. But now he cannot think how to say what he should not say. She saves him the trouble.

"Oh my god. You're *him*."

Him. The one she wasn't supposed to know about.

She'd pieced together a few things already, about Nero who'd come from the future for Spock, about the weird gyroscope ship Spock had never set eyes on before but piloted so handily. And she'd seen encrypted communiques (she was a communications officer after all.) Even so, the *idea* of this other Spock, the one Nero hated and hunted and punished an entire world because of, this idea had sat on a shelf in her mind like a game cube she'd puzzle through someday when she had time.

"You're him," she repeats. "The other one."

"I would like to think of myself as the original but know I may be only one in an infinite number."

Jesus. "Can we just... not? With the theoretical physics crap? I'm hot and thirsty and really don't want to walk back down that hill right now."

He gestures to the little fountain and steps out of the way, though doesn't step out of the shady enclosure. She leaves the parasol open on the ground outside, gets onto her knees to scoop the water but hesitates to break the surface with her cupped hands – not with a Vulcan looming over her. A collapsible drinking cup appears suddenly in her peripheral vision and she realizes "looming" is probably an unfair assessment.

After she has gulped the first draught of water down, she dips out another and sits on the bench to savor it slowly. He sits beside her a body-width away. It's only a little awkward. They are quiet together for a while.

"I think he only wanted me here to annoy his father," she says softly, thinking out loud.

He stirs as if roused from a nap. "*Challenge* more likely."

"Right. And then I don't even get trotted out for *that*."

Wisely, he says nothing.

"I am not enamored with Vulcan men right now."

"We are difficult to love."

"Men are objectively more disgusting than women."

"I cannot argue your point. Though I am troubled that you should bring it up at this particular moment."

"Sorry. Not you. Or maybe you. You fall into the age category— *one* of the age categories disturbing me right now. Then again, it's possible I'm applying human-centric biases to behaviors that may not mean the same thing."

"What behaviors in particular have you observed?"

"Well, a lot of fertile young women going about their business and a lot of –" her palm makes a circular motion at the level of his chest—"old

man lurking behavior.”

Spock, the old man, emits a soft laugh, his eyes crinkled at the corners. “I like you.”

This throws her off guard, flattered and unsure of herself for a moment. “Didn’t you like *your* me?” An awkward question for an awkward circumstance.

“I did. Very much. She was brilliant and warm and lovely. And occasionally ruthless of necessity. You remind me of her, but you are not her. The two of you walked through very different fires, I think.”

“Yes,” she says, blithe and bitter all at once, “mine was the fire you brought with you.”

A sharp inhalation. She’s hit a mark she didn’t even know she was aiming for.

After a moment he says, “*Your* me is young. As you have suggested, many of the men are not exactly in their prime. Perhaps he is reconsidering his commitment to Star Fleet since last I saw him.”

She hesitates too long to convince him she’d be fine with it. “Why would he do that? He can donate sperm like any other man if that’s the issue.”

“True enough. Though a genetic donation would likely be rejected whether he stays or not.”

“What? Why?” That makes no sense to her at all.

He gives her a tender look as if her naivete breaks his heart a little. “Half-human.”

“Ugh. You people are supposed to be past all this shit. Pardon my French.”

“Merde is the French.”

She rolls her eyes. “I *know*.”

She wonders, yet again, what they’ve done bringing these hybrid children to a place they might never be welcome, despite this “festival” declaring otherwise. But then she remembers how uncomfortable it made Spock, watching so many Vulcans surrender their sense of propriety, practically falling over each other for the chance to hold one of the babies.

Babies are notoriously hard to resist, it’s true, but people still might not want them sullyng the gene pool when they reached maturity.

Old man Spock seems to hear her thoughts. “Romulans are genetically close. Cousins in a manner of speaking. It is why conventional methods for producing offspring with the women they captured were so successful—”

“I think you mean rape.”

“Of course.” He sighs, fiddles with his robes, adjusting, smoothing the fabric. “I only meant there would be few objections to reproduction with the offspring of those unions. For that matter, the human in *me* would be bred out in three generations. The health ministry may change its mind about your Spock’s future contributions.” He sees it in her face. “I did not intend cruelty.”

She gives half a shrug, turned away from him. “It is what it is.”

“Indeed. But you would prefer that he choose to remain with you, I assume.”

“Yes. No. It’s not—” A frustrated growl comes out next. She hates when she growls. “Look. I would *never* oppose him staying here if he felt it necessary. I wouldn’t make him choose. But I know what he wants, and it isn’t here. It isn’t even me necessarily. He may feel guilty about not doing his duty to his people and maybe he’s taking it out on me, but I still want him to be able to – excuse my language – follow his *passion*.”

“And what do you think that is?”

“The scientific exploration of worlds we’ve never seen and life we didn’t know existed before! That’s his passion. Right? Your passion? You got to do that, didn’t you? I want that for him. Because I love him. Even though it’s illogical.” She looks him in the eyes, daring him to deny love.

“Spock is fortunate to have you in his life.”

Something in his tone makes her wonder if he’d been less fortunate. But then she reminds herself that he’d lost an entire universe. And Spock was damned lucky to have her, wasn’t he? So, why didn’t she feel *seen*? Like a weight had been lifted?

Of course, she could barely lift her arm right now, so gravity might be the issue.

The Enterprise was scheduled to leave the day after tomorrow and she’d know where she stood with Spock one way or the other. Still...

“If you happen to see him before I do, could you remind him of that?”

It took longer than it should have for Stolvoc to recognize the sound of a door chime. No one called upon him without prior notification. He had never heard the door chime, so the sound got tangled in his mind with the sound of his neighbor's windchimes, the message alert on his personal com and the drone of the dissociative state he'd fallen into since the rescued women arrived.

Two days ago? Or five?

It did not matter. T'Aimnu is dead. Further denial is wasteful.

He'd clung too long to the idea of her survival. That their connection was merely frayed after eight years of searching, not drifting away into a darkness where he could not follow. So, he made himself believe against all logic that he could still feel her in his mind, his little child, his brilliant child, and that she was somehow protecting him from the depth of her suffering by keeping him out of *hers*.

After the Devastation, the Unfathomable Loss, he became more determined to find her. There was no returning, no other reason to live on. He'd been lost to his wife long before. He'd sold his shares of the businesses to his brother to finance his search. Gone were all the relations that had petitioned for his return to logic. But his daughter was not among the six billion dead. Therefore, she was still out there somewhere waiting for him to find her.

Waiting for her father to find her.

And though Sarek had told him she was not among the rescued women, had told him she was, in all probability, dead, still he watched as the women disembarked the shuttles, watched their children try and fail to stifle excitement, watched the Kasu come forward to receive them and escort them to their temporary homes. He'd stood at the margins with other perpetual mourners whose arms reached out impulsively to touch the infants as the women passed. An impulse he understood.

And the truth dropped like a stone into the empty part of him where his daughter had lived. He returned to the home he had procured for her, sat at the table where they would have shared meals and ... stopped. Now his body, so long unattended, protests any action, muscles stiff and trembling as he makes his way to the door. He has aged a hundred years in days.

The sound ceases by the time he opens his home to another unnamed day, and the women he presumes have sought him out are already walking away from his door.

"Ha—" His jaw protests the forming of words, but he finally manages, "Have you need of assistance?" It croaks out of him in the voice of a disagreeable old man.

The women spin about, movements sharp, skittish. He can see the fear writ on each face for the briefest moment before they overcorrect with chin juts and the thin straight lines of their mouths. The foremost woman is small of stature, round of face. Her hair is wrapped in a colorful cloth. A frizzy seed pod from a tree species yet to be catalogued is stuck to the folds.

"We seek Stolvoc, father of T'Aimnu," she says.

"I am – I am Stolvoc."

Another woman steps to the front, pulling a child from behind her, its small fist clenched in the folds of her robe. At a gentle touch from the woman, the child lifts her gaze to his face.

Fine black hair springs wayward from coiled bunches on the top of her head. Wisps escape the clip holding a too-long fringe out of her eyes.

Her eyes...

His legs are weak suddenly, and he presses a hand to the wall beside the door to steady himself.

All three women bow to him. The short woman with the headwrap addresses him in the formal manner. "*Osu* Stolvoc. We present Velhwi of T'Aimnu, child of your child."

Another gentle touch and the little girl bows. "Honored sa'mekh'al," she says, her voice high and sweet.

Stolvoc feels himself drifting down, a slow slide to his knees until he is, without intending it, at her level, eye to eye.

He sees *her* in that little face, in the rounds of her cheeks, the sturdy tips of her ears, hair with a will of its own. Her keen eyes perform an assessment of him. He wonders how he's doing. If he speaks, will he break? Will he frighten her?

He swallows, hums out a breath.

"Velhwi of T'Aimnu, child of my child. I bid you welcome."

Anhedonia and the Illusion of Free Will

Chapter Summary

The end of the road for some adventurers and the beginning for others.

Chapter Notes

Brief het-sex scene and suggestions of sexual activity and I didn't change the rating so...

T'Maru had looked back over her shoulder at him as she and the other women were escorted away. To where? How would they find each other?

Jiekh refused to return to his quarters on the ship. The Vulcans were too polite or too uncomfortable with him to make an issue of it. He ended up falling asleep in the port terminal listening to the growling of his empty stomach.

In the morning, a woman directing shuttle traffic offered him a container of soup that proved to be a cold, spicy vegetable concoction with a tang of vinegar. Quite refreshing, unlike the starchy root soup that was a staple of the Vulcan first meal. T'Maru had told him fresh plomeek was much tastier than the synthesized version he'd tried. It was clear to her that he wasn't impressed. But that was another small piece of a larger tragedy. The plant could be cultivated on their new world, but he'd never truly know if it was better fresh from the ground. It was not the same ground.

After volunteering to stack rocks, his second night on the planet was spent in a barracks for non-Vulcan construction workers. He did not see or hear from T'Maru until the day of the Children's Festival when they managed to slip away from her relations.

She led him to a half-finished building shaped like a mogari egg balanced on its narrow end. It was surprisingly quiet in the hollowed interior with the thrum of music and voices muffled. Under a tarp draped over cables they knelt facing each other. She touched the pads of her fingers to his temples, and he closed his eyes, momentarily overwhelmed by the potency of her mind caressing him. After a moment, she took pity on his trembling psyche and traced her fingertips down over his cheekbones to brush his lips. Then their lips met in a way that was neither Vulcan nor Rihannsu.

"S'haile Sarek will speak to the High Council on your behalf," she said, tugging his shirt out from his trousers. He had no idea who that was but assumed importance by the title. "You have practical skills that would be beneficial to the colony. They will recognize this, and you will be allowed to remain."

She was so certain.

His practical skills were limited, truth be told. He knew something about sanitation infrastructure as that had been his job, but mostly troubleshooting automated systems and programming bots. Still, he would dig tunnels with his bare hands if that's what it took.

But he must have looked worried.

"You *will* stay." She pushed his shirt off his shoulders. "We *will* bond." Her fingers hurried to unfasten his trousers. "And cohabit." Her lips pressed against the hollow of his throat. "And live *long*." His organ filled and hardened quickly in her hand. "And prosper."

She would brook no other consideration.

Now he waits, perched on a low, rounded retaining wall at the edge of the Commons. The city grows around this central area with many of the structures designed to reflect or echo the landscape. But other architecture feels forced, like the head of one creature has been grafted to the body of another.

There are only men on the streets and his unease grows. She is late. Vulcans are never late for anything.

Two men begin to walk directly towards him. One appears elderly so their progress is not swift. He could easily outrun them, and the urge is strong. He's on his feet, half turned towards the safety of shaded streets when one calls out.

"Jiekhus tr'Serine?"

He represses a sigh, turns to face them. "Yes, sir."

"I am Sarek, former Vulcan ambassador to Earth, currently the ad hoc diplomatic representative for this colony." This is the one T'Maru said

would help him. His severe features seem softened only by exhaustion and his robes are quite fine. He doesn't introduce the elder. Which seems strange.

Jiekh bows. "How may I serve, s'haile?"

The elder one shoots a quick sideways glance at Sarek before his eyes flick back. He smiles and Jiekh smiles vaguely in return before he remembers Vulcans do not smile.

"Regretfully," Sarek begins, an ominous start, "there are few ways in which you may serve at present." Jiekh's gut-flutter of dread is quickly given reason. "Your request to stay on New Vulcan has been denied. In thirty-six hours, you will leave with the Enterprise for Starbase 17."

"No."

Sarek's eyes briefly shutter but he keeps on talking. "It is best for all concerned. A legal advocate has been assigned to assist with your case, I understand."

"No. *No.*"

"After you have been thoroughly vetted—"

"Please..." Everything around him blurs, narrows.

"— and *if* your request for asylum is granted—"

"No." His heart tries to beat its way out of his side. "Please, please don't—"

"—your petition to reside on New Vulcan will be reevaluated."

The roaring in his ears is deafening. Someone takes him by the elbow, a firm grasp, and urges him to sit.

"Breathe, sa-kan. Just breathe. There now." It's the old man, his hand rubbing slow circles between Jiekh's shoulder blades.

"Where is T'Maru? Why isn't she here?"

"She will not be coming."

He looks hard at Sarek. All his muscles draw tight. The older man's hand stops rubbing.

"You would keep us apart?" The challenge implicit in his voice seems to come from far away. Someone else's voice. Someone brutal. Breaking.

"She will not come."

"I don't believe you."

"T'Maru has accepted the terms imposed by the High Council. She has no hope for your return otherwise. Do you understand?"

"I have done nothing to cause your suspicion but *be* Rihannsu!"

"I agree. There is distrust. Bias. And though you are not responsible for the destruction of — you are not responsible, but you volunteered for Hellguard, did you not? You chose—"

"I did not choose *any* of this." His emotional display has drawn the attention of onlookers.

"You chose to ask for asylum, Jiekhus tr'Sarine," the old man says. His voice is gentle, sympathetic, but it barely registers.

"Did I? I did what she told me to do! Even now." He bounds to his feet, pacing and pacing. Stops, points a finger at Sarek. "If she tells me to do this, I will. But she must come herself and say it."

"That will not happen."

And he knows it won't, *knows*, as he stands blinking the tears away, that she will not defy the edict and run with him. She is a rational woman. She wants him with her — *here*. She'll do what they ask, believing it.

He surrenders, because what else can he do? Sits and weeps, hiding his face in his hands. Angry that he weeps in the midday heat in the presence of cold-hearted people.

Over his head, a silent conversation. Sarek departs. The steady regard of the old man comforts and galls at the same time. Kindness is suspicious. Probably a lie.

Yesterday this broad plaza was filled with bright hope, music, delectable aromas, happy children and contented adults. He pulls his hands away from his face but then can't lift his gaze from the ground. Even the ache in his side is dulled, blunted. He's just... hollow.

After a measure of time that feels forever and too short, the old man says, "Humans call it 'anhedonia.' The inability to feel pleasure. You are young. It is temporary."

"Do not presume to read my thoughts, sir."

"It does not take a mind reader to tell what you are feeling, Jiekh. Your best intentions have availed you nothing. Your principles seem to mock you and the kindness you showed others has not been shown to you. You erred on the side of hope, not caution. You risked yourself for love. Now, here you are, out of place, out of time. Things look bleak."

Bleak. He takes a breath, releases it slowly. "I have a premonition."

"I do not doubt it."

"Once I leave this planet, I will not be returning."

"I think in that you may be correct."

Well. *If you don't want confirmation of your worst fears, don't share them with a Vulcan.*

The Vulcan keeps talking, and it's even *worse* than his worst fears. "I have it on good authority that Starfleet's Black Ops division is already seeking to leverage your situation and recruit you for espionage."

The illusion of free will slaps him in the face yet again. "I should have paid my father's honor debt with suicide and been done with it."

The man beside him is quiet for so long Jiekh nearly forgets he spoke out loud. And then, the most astonishing confession—

"I knew your father. Xonjiekh ir'Hieshala tr'Sarine. He was a visionary. A great man."

"Then you did not know my father, sir."

"He was one of the founders of a movement for peace and reunification with Vulcan."

"We speak of different men."

"Possibly. His son was a poet."

"I'm a sanitation engineer."

"Both important contributions in a civil society. But, no matter. I have a proposal for you. Neither of those skills is essential, though you may find use for them."

"Who *are* you?"

"I am Spock. The elder. And I believe there is a way for you to garner favor with the High Council *and* circumvent the clutches of Section 31. Your tasks will be no less dangerous, but far more rewarding."

He plucks at Jiekh's sleeve urging him to rise and follow. "*Come. Let us plot and scheme over glasses of tea.*"

Spock the elder speaks the workers' dialect of the great city Ihhliae, where Jiekh grew up.

Two days before their estimated arrival at Starbase 17 (and three weeks to the day since they'd left orbit) Spock made an appearance at Nyota's door.

She hadn't seen him at all that day, and honestly hadn't even thought about him for the past several hours, having just returned from impromptu karaoke fueled by Pavel's godawful homemade vodka and the noisy encouragement of friends she'd been ignoring far too long.

Still in her uniform, still a little drunk and waiting for the detox tablet to kick in, she propped herself against the door's sensor so she could keep him standing in the corridor with her inviting bed just a few steps away. Crossing her arms in what she hoped was a nonchalant manner, she looked at his face, his carefully neutral face that was so annoyingly handsome and said, "Yes. I sang the blues about a man that done me wrong. But it wasn't about *you* if that's why you're here."

"That is not why I am here."

"Well, if you came to break up with me you can't. Because *I*—" she poked a finger at his chest "—break up" — *poke* — "with you" — *poke* — "so, ha ha—"

He cancelled whatever else she planned to say with his mouth on hers, sliding into her personal space so efficiently that she barely noticed the door closing behind him.

Fingertips seared against her temples and she could feel him in her throat, her chest, tingling in her extremities, all her senses pulled into the core of her, focused between her legs. His thoughts pressed up against her mind, thick and heavy as the cock nestled in the hollow of her pelvis, assuming tacit permission to enter.

Her pride, exacerbated by alcohol, wanted to deny him but her need to know was stronger. There was something different now, something he wanted to show her, to make her understand in the only way it could be communicated. And when they merged, she realized how much he'd been holding out on her, how much he'd held back, concerned she'd be overwhelmed or worse, repulsed.

All these emotions grown out of different brain chemistry, autonomic nervous systems, sensory neurotransmitters she didn't even have. She tried to parse them, make sense of them with the language of her own emotions.

No “fight or flight” only FIGHT.

Ferocious sexual possessiveness bit hard and drew blood.

Despair roared and slaughtered.

Love coiled around legs, immobilizing, spat venom in the eyes and dissolved all reason.

Even tenderness pounded at the psyche like it was tenderizing meat.

No less strange were specific feelings associated with her

– a sensation like a lens aperture opening to admit her smile, and another of swirling color gradations (colors she couldn't see) as his hands drew over her flesh and made her heart race in the dark.

Words failed her as they were bound to do. And he needed none—

on the bed, skirt pushed up to her navel, he pulls her underwear off over her boots and stays her hand when she toggles one of the zippers, pushing her thighs back and open, burrowing his face between them. Boot heels pound a rhythm on his shoulders in counter-time to his tongue, lips, fingers sliding over her clit and into and out of her. Feelings sizzle and dance like water dropped onto a hot stone, and every fantasy he claimed he didn't have and everything she'd wanted to try is what they do for the next forever—

She limped back to the bed from the bathroom where she hoped he hadn't heard her whimpering as she peed. From his expression of vague embarrassment, she knew he had.

“The hazards of energetic coupling,” she said, tipping back her second bottle of electrolytes. After a few satisfying and noisy gulps, she crawled over him and flopped into the nest of bedding. “Thanks for your enthusiastic cooperation.”

“My pleasure.” He leaned in to kiss her freshly moistened lips. “Obviously.”

But as soon as her legs returned to their newly default noodle state and she was feeling limp and languorous, he got up and padded over to the pile of their clothes, lifting his pants from the floor.

“You're leaving?” she asked, annoyed at the needy, whiny edge in her voice.

“Not yet.” He pulled something out of a pocket. “I meant to give this to you. Before...”

“Did you think you needed a bribe?” But the lighthearted laugh stuck in her throat as he turned towards her again, a glint of silver between his fingers.

“It is intended only as an expression of my regard. A gift.”

Her mouth was still open in astonishment when the opalescent blue stone pendant dropped into her palm followed by the slide of the chain.

“Jewelry. That's-that's...unexpected.”

“Is it inappropriate?”

“No. *No*. It's *beautiful*. I just—” She made a little humming sound. “Your gifts are usually more practical.”

“It was my mother's.”

She drew in a sharp breath and her fingers closed around the pendant protectively.

“Father found it amongst her effects in their apartment at the embassy in San Francisco. He instructed me to keep what I wanted. He intends to donate the rest. I informed him that no one would be interested in the used cosmetics.”

She smiled at that. But melancholy drifted around them and settled in. He sat on the edge of the bed. He still had his pants in one hand.

“She knew about us. You. For a person with no psi skills whatsoever she was adept at pulling secrets out of me. I could never hide anything from her.”

Tears welled up and she rubbed her thumb over the warm stone. “Are you—are you sure?”

He tipped his head, signaling a need for clarification.

She swallowed a couple of times to steady her voice. “I mean, sure enough to give this to *me*.”

“I am very sure of *you*, Nyota.” The unspoken implication about himself she chose to ignore.

Almost immediately after the Enterprise docked at Starbase 17, debriefing began and proceeded over the course of two grueling 18-hour days.

Meanwhile, Starbase personnel got busy.

Their Romulan prisoners were beamed directly to waiting cells – practically luxury suites after nearly six weeks sleeping on top of each other. Commander Kaol was bundled off to a secure care facility, and Hannam Mas negotiated (through Lt. Beghahi) extra measures for her protection from the Tal Shiar in exchange for information she promised but probably couldn't possibly deliver, though she'd drag it out as long as she could.

Jiekhus tr'Sarine's legal advocate requisitioned housing for him on the base, vouchers for clothes and sundries, a food card, and a psychiatric counsellor to help him navigate the murky waters of asylum dislocation and depression. Kirk felt for the guy. New Vulcan was unlikely to welcome him back no matter how many hoops he jumped through to win their approval, no matter how much he loved a pretty Vulcan girl that might possibly even love him back.

It was a lot to chance for love, he thought. But then again, what did he know about it? The older he got the less certain he was that he'd *ever* been in love, let alone the kind he'd be willing to sacrifice everything for. "In love" was just the lusty precursor to something more. Or so the myth went.

He was still pondering the subject over breakfast in the officer's mess a few days out from Starbase 17. The Enterprise was on its way to a barely mapped area of space with three unique star systems – two M-type stars and one K-type. And dozens of planetary bodies potentially bursting with life.

Though Spock was presenting as his usual cooler than cool self, Kirk knew from the level of preparatory activity in the science labs, that beneath his dispassionate surface excitement churned like magma.

As captain however, Kirk was the lonely head of his own department and had little to do at the moment except all the administrative crap that was the XO's responsibility (except when the XO was also the Chief Science Officer).

With McCoy happily punishing a new intern, Scotty mucking about in the bowels of engineering complaining about what maintenance crews at Starbase 17 had fucked up, and Uhura opting to sleep in ahead of a beta shift schedule, his contemplation of "the things we do for love" commingled with an urge to stir shit up.

He ventured, ever so casually, "Remember that tiny detail you promised me?"

Spock glanced up from his padd in perfect blank incomprehension. His spoon idled over a bowl of oatmeal. Then his eyes and his mouth narrowed.

"I remember making no such promise." His voice lowered to a murmur. "And breakfast in the officer's mess hardly seems the time or place if I had."

"You didn't specify a time or place, so I'm calling it in."

"You cannot 'call in' what has not been –" A sigh. "Captain, you are aware that asking for intimate details about my relationship with Lt Uhura is wildly inappropriate and could rightly be classified as harassment."

"Uh, right. I guess we aren't friends that way."

"I would not be friends with *anyone* in that way. Also, if Nyota found out she would be ... extremely displeased."

"Okay. Nothing about oral then—"

"Jim!"

Vocalized outrage from Commander Spock, even a tightly controlled loud whisper, could not go unnoticed. *Did not*. But there were only four other people present and they were on the other side of the room. No one seemed to have heard the *cause* of his outrage.

Kirk modulated his next words so they *for sure* would only be heard by one person. "Here's the thing though. I know for a fact you two haven't submitted a consensual relationship agreement."

He knows, because it would be a conflict of interest for Spock to sign off on his own relationship agreement. His commanding officer would have to do it. So, either Spock was negligent in his responsibilities or, unsure of the relationship, conveniently "forgot." Either way, Kirk held all the good cards.

"You may ask *one* question." Spock steeled himself for the worst as Kirk poked a fork at eggs drowning in ketchup on his plate.

"Do you love her?" He quickly shoveled the eggs into his mouth.

Spock blinked, frozen for a moment as if processing an error message.

Kirk was sure he knew the answer to that question based on close personal observation, but he was curious to see how his Vulcan friend would wriggle out of a direct response. He chased down the eggs with a swallow of coffee.

“Only if she is amenable when I ask.”

The coffee came out, spraying the table, and dribbling down the front of his uniform. Spock handed him a napkin. “You may rest assured, however, that I will never allow my enduring and ...hmm... *prodigious* regard for her to interfere with my duties.”

Well. Damn.

He'd been played.

Studiously avoiding direct eye-contact, he dabbed at the beading liquid on the surface of his tunic. “Prodigious you say?”

“By any comparable standard of measure. Of love.”

A sound somewhere between a snort and guffaw sputtered out, but he clamped down, lips pressed tight together as his eyes watered with the strain of holding back laughter. The guy already looked too smug, sitting there calmly finishing his oatmeal.

As his captain valiantly struggled for control over his face, Spock carried his empty dish to the recycle chute and returned. Kirk cleared his throat. A few times.

“We should probably go to work now.”

“That seems prudent.”

Spock waited for Kirk to dispose of his own breakfast remains, and they headed into the corridor towards the lift.

“So... changing the subject completely...” Kirk ventured.

“Wise.”

“I understand one of the planets in the K-star system has massive colonies of fungi growing around some of the volcanic thermal vents.”

Kirk interpreted the subtle shift in Spock's stance as *ohmygodohtmygod it's so fucking cool!* – though his mouth said, “The colonies appear to cover hundreds of kilometers. That planet is particularly intriguing, although several planetary bodies within the three systems have active volcanoes. Complex living organisms abound. Scientific study could extend for seventy-five years or more.”

“Fun.”

“Indeed.”

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

The Chorus (of ordinary women)

Of the SS Chibuzo (deceased, voices felt but not heard):
T'Aimnu, Unnaith, T'Par, T'Mara, T'Kosa, Sovu, Elu, Aileth

Of the merchant vessel T'sai Suk:
Perren, Prisu, Vareshi, Sanvi, Balev, Sasav, Pikli, Tes (honorary)

Of the yacht Valencia:
T'Vria, T'Lie, T'Shri, T'Izhlen, T'Maru, T'Prith, T'Lanuth,

Of the mining operation Larash Rai Sanosh:
Talu, Mishih (deceased), Lodzahl, Shashi, T'Gal

Thanks for sharing this journey. I'm going to miss all these people.

Healer Telk asked Tes to sit by the woman's bedside, nothing more. Her name was Veth, and she was dying. Tes watched Veth's eyes move restlessly beneath bruised lids, watched her brow crease in fits and starts and wondered where she traveled within her mind that caused such agitation. When the woman awakened with a gasp and reached and grasped her hand Tes did not pull away. Confused about her location, a formless anxiety came through – nothing overwhelming. Then Veth turned her head and saw someone else where Tes sat.

Relief. A wave of affection. She could not take back her hand then.

“You are late returning from the learning center, ko-fu. I needed your assistance in the shop.”

She should have corrected the woman's misapprehension but could not. “I am here.”

Veth jiggled their entwined hands in playful admonition. “If you wish to retain the privilege of privacy between our minds, T'Surra, you must at least call me and inform me of your status and location.”

Tes swallowed a memory of her own and sent wordless reassurance through her fingertips.

“I could not sense you.” Veth squeezed her eyes closed against insistent pain. “It is distressing for a mother not to sense her child. I thought you were lost – *I lost you.*”

Memories commingled. A daughter, mouth open in a scream, bond snapped, severed, dead. A daughter late coming home from school, blocking the bond to her mother. Who would not prefer the gentler scenario?

“I am with you now,” Tes reassured her.

When the woman had drifted back into sleep, her breathing steady and her forehead smoothed of trouble, Tes slipped her hand out from between slackening fingers. Sensing Healer Telk behind her she turned. He gestured that she come with him. If he had observed her indulging the woman's delusions...

It was only her third time volunteering at the hospice and now she might not be allowed to do so again.

In his office, she stood stiffly, waiting to be lectured and dismissed, but he offered her a chair instead.

“Veth believed you to be her daughter T'Surra. You did not correct her. Why?”

“Apologies, Healer—”

“Do not apologize. Explain your reasoning.”

“It seemed unnecessary and cruel, Healer.” Her chin came up. She looked him in the eye. “I did not claim to *be* her daughter. I merely assured her that *I* was present and listening.”

Telk's features relaxed around the eyes and mouth, and he nodded. “Your reasoning was sound. If you are interested in pursuing the healing arts, there are several vocational pathways as professional assistant or surgical aide for example. I can offer training for those vocations here. But if you wish to become a medical healer such as myself you will be required to attend a medical school off world. New Vulcan will sponsor you.”

Yes! Yes, she wanted this. She knew before he'd finished speaking. But there were obstacles to consider.

“I am Sinti Clan Trazhu.”

“Do Clan Trazhu not believe in healers?” The question was rhetorical. At least his tone did not hold the mocking bias that she’d heard in others.

“Healers exist. It is not a question of belief.”

But there were no medically certified healers amongst Clan Trazhu. They had people skilled in traditional healing of course, but any education that required a prolonged absence from the family was simply – not done. Yet it seemed many prohibitions no longer applied to the Sinti women of Hellguard.

Prisu had left with Talu with no plans to return.

Her cousins Vareshi and Pikli, along with T’Izhlen from the Valencia now lived with Velwhi’s grandfather and *all* their children with more on the way. It was not a small house, but it was always noisy and untidy when she called. Pikli was pregnant with twins.

Her aunt Balev married a man outside the clan who farmed vegetables. They offered these and other goods every tenday at the Commons market. She’d seen her just this morning arranging peppers in a pleasing display with little cousin Saavik on her hip.

Tes was not yet 15. She still lived with Sanvi and Sasav, watched the children when they worked, prepared meals, kept the house neat. Prisu’s departure had not been favorably received. But when Tes left it would be with the understanding that she would return. Her family would see reason. Eventually. And if not, she would remind them she was guided by the tenets Spock set for her.

Telk gazed at her expectantly.

“If I might be allowed to continue my volunteer status until I reach my majority in eighty-eight days, I could begin training at that time.”

“That is acceptable,” Healer Telk said.

It was probably presumptuous of her to think that he seemed pleased. But the presumption made the walk home lighter.

Before Spock, the only things Jiekh knew about the “Sisters of the Lost Cause” were that they were radicals with traitorous ideas, had brutal tongues to go with their swords and could easily kill with either. Their uncompromising devotion to honesty was anathema to Romulan culture.

So, it seemed odd that an order of Qowat Milat would run a foundling home, let alone in a little town like Pirpae on a backwater planet like Artaleirh.

The first thing Sister Sindari said to him (with her sword to his throat) was, “You disguise yourself as a Norther. Why?”

He’d been living with the brow-ridge implants for over a year by then, no longer surprised at his own image in reflective surfaces. *Speak truth to them*, Spock told him, *though it goes against every instinct for self-preservation you have*.

“To accomplish my task.”

“Which is?”

“To find and reunite children with their mothers.”

Eight of the children at that first visit were half-Vulcan. He matched them to maternal DNA files in his trusty tablet. One boy around ten years of age had Perren’s unruly curls and sad eyes.

He owed Perren his life. If she hadn’t suggested asylum, he’d be dead. And though there was a time not long ago he’d wished he were dead, finding those eight children had greatly motivated him to continue the search.

Later, too late to do anything about it, Sindari showed him identical moles on three of her most recent half-Vulcan foundlings, all in the same exact location – 2.5 centimeters below the right armpit (with the arm raised), offset 1.75 centimeters to the left.

A quick scan showed these to be identifying markers for test subjects, like those used in health studies. Likely a means of relaying instructions as well, possibly embedded with sleeper activation codes or even more worrying, a way to “deactivate” the subject should it prove necessary. Any closer examination of the markers risked alerting Tal Shiar (if they weren’t already aware). It was reasonable to assume all the children of Hellguard were similarly tagged and they just hadn’t noticed.

Twenty children had already been moved, singly or in twos and threes via a remarkably straightforward network of Qowat Milat houses, foreign merchants and ships-for-hire traversing outposts along the neutral zone. After that, a rescue and recovery organization was supposed to ferry them into Federation space. He had yet to receive confirmation on the two most recent “packages.” And hadn’t been in communication with the Elder Spock in over a year now.

This morning he sits next to a child in a driverless groundcar headed to Caranam’s spaceport. The boy is called Sajvei – *Puppy*. He is nine years old. Jiekh bought him from a procurer in the Shortside warrens.

There are strict laws against the sexual exploitation of children, conviction of which could result in a prolonged and painful execution. But there was no deterrent strong enough to overcome some compulsions.

“When we are in public, you will refer to me as Daz, your family’s House warden.”

The boy continues to look out the window as if he hasn’t heard.

“Do you understand?” Silence. “I need your acknowledgment.”

Finally, a nod. Resigned. He’s done this before. Pretended for an adult intent on abuse.

“You’re expecting to be ill-used, I know. This is how the universe appears to operate so far in your short life. My intentions are not what you anticipate, but I don’t expect you to believe it, so I offer you information.” He opens the files on his tablet to the one matching Sajvei’s sampled DNA to that of his mother.

The boy looks in apathetic obedience for a short time, then closer – *a slow blink of long lashes over smoke gray eyes*. His narrow shoulders stiffen. He waves a hand at the screen. “Is that supposed to be my mother? She is Vulcan.”

“As are you. On your mother’s side.”

The boy scoffs, turns to look out the window again. “Does that make me worth more or less?”

Jiekh closes his eyes against an assault of emotion that won’t help either of them right now. He tables it for further examination later as he’s been taught. Takes a few steadying breaths.

“You were conceived on an outpost in a system near the border between our space and that claimed by the Federation. You spent the first four years of your life in a research facility in Ki Baratan and the next four in an institute for re-education. And after that, in circumstances that break my heart. But you are the son of the woman most dear to me, therefore you are my son. I will never harm you and I will not allow anyone else to harm you again. Not *ever*.”

The boy stares at him viciously for a moment, wanting to believe, unwilling to believe. Jiekh resigns himself to the fact that he may never believe.

But this is T’Maru’s child. He’ll bring the boy back to her himself. Together, they will show him a bright future.

Prisu ran to the cockpit and slipped into the pilot’s seat, running pre-flight checks, and ignoring as best she could the hissing breathes and padding footfalls of one hundred and thirty Daihe Zuqi youth moving swiftly up the ramp and into the hold. It only *seemed* loud she told herself, the combined effects of the need for subterfuge, and a night sky overcast at ninety-eight percent.

It was the third such operation in which she participated as part of the core team since joining the Interplanetary Rescue and Recovery Alliance.

Two minutes and forty-eight seconds left to get everyone loaded in the hold and buckled down before she had to power up the systems. Another ninety seconds, *at least*, to—

“Yebbi’s got our guests settled in, snug as bugs in rugs,” Mustafa said, sliding his bulk into the co-pilot’s chair. Normally she would have questioned the odd statement and they would have had an interesting exchange regarding idioms, but he started running his own systems checks and there was no time for that either.

“We are systems go,” Prisu said quickly, powering up before he could finish. Talu glanced sharply at her then buckled herself into the ops seat just behind Mustafa.

“I think we can spare twenty seconds for standard pre-flight protocols,” he said.

“We cannot.”

She felt the pressure of both pairs of eyes on her as the small ship lifted and balanced on a cushion of air. As soon as the bay’s aperture opened to allow the ship exit and ascent, alarms began to sound, jarring, alerting the militants to their departure.

They had expected alarms. Accounted for them. Her current sense of urgency was due to reasons her companions had not anticipated. Or had any prior notification about.

“What have you done, Prisu?”

Best to answer with a statement of fact. “It is dangerous to store thermally unstable compounds near plasma weapons.”

“Oh, *hell* no,” Mustafa breathed, eyes and hands flying over controls now.

“Dukhra Daihe could not be allowed to keep the weapons.” This was obvious. They could not in good conscience disagree with her on the matter.

“They can’t even access the cache until the Orions get their payment! Which, by the way, we have successfully liberated and are *snug as bugs in rugs!*”

“There is no need to raise your voice.”

“And now we’ll have Orions *and* Daihe rebels on our butts for the rest of eternity!”

“Again. You need not shout. We are sitting sixty-six centimeters apart.”

“What is the estimated time this explosion will occur?” Talu asked, words quick and over-enunciated, which was somehow worse than Mustafa’s yelling.

“Ninety seconds.”

“Aaaand ... they’re shooting at us.”

This had also been anticipated. The targeting systems relied too much on visibility which was why the weather was so fortuitous. Even so, near misses lit up the clouds through the view shields as the ship continued its ascent. Mustafa accused the ship of being purposefully slow. He told it to haul ass, then apologized, then begged and called it “baby” and “darling.”

His anxiety was irrational. Talu had disabled the rebels’ motley assortment of scout ships. There was little chance of a speedy pursuit. The destruction of the weapons cache was the only alteration to the plan.

The ship had just breached the stratosphere when the weapons cache exploded and gobbled up a section of the darkness below. In the weighty silence that followed, Prisu busied herself with escaping the planet’s gravity. She did not have to look at Talu to read her disappointment, so she offered reassurance.

“The Dukhra forces were likely still underground. There should be no resulting fatalities.”

Neither of her companions seemed reassured, though mission outcomes were considered most successful when no loss of life occurred. Another fact would support her assertion.

“The cache was 28.447 kilometers from their stronghold,” she said, yet neither seemed content.

Mustafa’s expression she interpreted as controlled fury. Reasonable justification for her actions was required. “Fewer weapons of torment and destruction in the quadrant seemed to me an optimal outcome for very little effort.”

“You think that’s why we’re pissed off?”

“Destruction of the weapons cache was not figured into the original cost-risk analysis of this specific operation,” Talu said. “Your actions were reckless.”

“Successful,” Prisu argued. She saw an opportunity and took it. Talu shook her head and turned back to her station.

“Here’s the deal, *bebeğim*.” Mustafa leaned sideways into her space – an action that would have severely disrupted her composure five years ago. “You put the people we’re trying to help in terrible and totally unnecessary danger. You risked the success of this operation to pursue your own agenda. If you pull anything like this ever *ever* again, I’ll have to cut you loose. Got it?”

Context was everything. She did not ask him to explain the expression. Nor did she waste any more time defending her choices. “I... got it.”

“Good. Now. Let’s get these kids back to their families.”

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