

## Fierce Blessings

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## Fierce Blessings

by [kalima](#)

### Summary

Thousands of years ago, an attempt to cultivate a rare genetic disorder for use as a weapon was stopped through an accord between all of Vulcan's warring factions. No infant showing the genetic mutations of Keikudaya – the fierce blessing – would be allowed to live.

Over time, genetic screening made infanticide in such cases unnecessary. Should an embryo show the markers of the mutation it was terminated before quickening. Eventually, few people understood the real reason behind such ruthless caution.

Now the entire galaxy is about to find out.

### Notes

To keep myself entertained in the coming dry spell (while people strike for what they justly deserve), I've decided to write a long plotty ensemble piece where every character gets time in spotlight. There will be intrigue, fate-of-the-galaxy stuff, pathos, political machinations, kindly priests and religious fanatics, angsty relationship nonsense, and workplace drama. This takes place sometime during S3 of Strange New Worlds. I'm side-stepping the as yet unseen resolution of the S2 cliffhanger by referencing it obliquely, or not at all.

## Prologue

Date: 2245 FST

### *Clinic for Obstetrics and Gynecology, Jaleyl City, Raal Province*

Dr. Shanik turned the viewscreen so that the information referenced could be seen by the young woman sitting across from her. She had discovered over the years that it was easier to receive certain unpleasant diagnoses if her patients could see the evidence for themselves, even if they didn't entirely understand it.

She glanced at the girl's name again. *Maat t'an su Lhai*.

"Lhai. With regret I must inform you that the genetic disorder detected in this embryonic scan is untreatable. I have consulted with specialists at the Vulcan Medical Institute in Shikahr. There are no current genetic reengineering protocols for treatment in utero nor any remedial therapies post-partum."

The young woman blinked at the numbers and symbols on the viewscreen but otherwise gave no indication the news affected her one way or the other. Ideally a Vulcan strives for such mastery, but in Dr. Shanik's experience, this lack of *any* reaction seemed troubling.

"Developmental aberrations will accelerate quickly in the second stage of pregnancy," she continued, "putting your own health at significant risk. Surgical termination is recommended as soon as it can be scheduled."

"I understood medication to be the prescribed course."

"Not in this case."

The case was one of the rarest genetic disorders Shanik had ever come across, and then only as an obscure reference in a medical text. In fact, when she'd contacted the genetic facility at the VMI they dismissed her diagnosis before even looking at her results.

"Your equipment is likely outdated," they'd told her. "Sufficient for a practice in Jaleyl perhaps, but not as exacting as what is available in *our* facilities."

"Which is why I have contacted you," she'd replied.

They promised to run the screens themselves and get back to her. But she'd had to contact them twice afterwards, the second time as a terse reminder that termination needed to occur before gestation passed the one hundred and twenty days marker. "Later than that," she stressed, "and it will unnecessarily traumatize the mother." By the next afternoon they'd responded in a tone quite different from the previous condescension.

Her results were correct. Would the young woman be willing to travel to Shikahr for the abortion procedure? Or barring that, would she agree to release the fetal remains for research purposes?

Research scientists could be somewhat... ghoulish.

In the end, it proved a moot point. A representative for the Ministry of Health contacted her almost immediately after the scientists from the VMI. Under no circumstances would the fetal remains be given over to research. Termination must take place in a clinical setting to ensure all tissue was expelled and disposed of properly. A medical examiner would be present to make certain the fetal remains were dispatched thoroughly.

If the Ministry of Health felt the need to get involved, that meant, *somehow*, this tiny fetus with a rare genetic disorder was seen as a threat to public health.

She looked again at the young woman's intake information: Employed as a shop assistant. Mother deceased. Father currently residing in T'Seret. No partner or bond-mate listed.

"You may wish to inform the other genetic donor."

"No," Lhai replied.

"That is your prerogative. It would, however, be advisable to have a family member, or colleague present to escort you home afterwards."

"I will make arrangements."

"Schedule the procedure with the reception desk. Within the next ten days. No later."

Maat t'an su Lhai nodded and left the room.

^^^

This part of Jaleyl seemed comparatively new, built on a well-ordered grid with well-marked signage that made it difficult for Lhai to get lost no matter how hard she tried. If she *somehow* got turned around trying to find the public transport station, then her reason for being late to work would not be a lie.

Even the mere thought of standing behind a counter filling orders made her sleepy.

Now she'd need to arrange time off for this... other thing as well. Her supervisor would not be amenable. She had so many absences recently they'd given two of her regular shifts to T'Ria.

This morning she'd received a notice from the housing co-operative reminding her of a "prolonged lapse in performing her share of those household duties integral to her dwelling agreement." If she did not fulfill her responsibilities within the next three days, it would be considered a breach of contract and due cause for removal.

She could lose her job and her apartment and a bean sized fetus all at the same time—

Suddenly overcome, she flopped onto a bench next to a tall blue door and leaned against the warm wall to illogically worry her situation.

Abortion had been the logical course even before the diagnosis. She knew Ahyan would never be a reliable co-parent. He'd been a most unreliable friend. She'd even gone to the chemist shortly after finding herself pregnant to acquire the medication. But then, suddenly, he was dead. Stepped off the Zharkur Canyon bridge as if stepping off a pavement. None of his friends could tell her why. It made little sense. Two of his pieces had been accepted by a prestigious gallery in Vulcana Regar. Perhaps he thought he'd reached the pinnacle of his achievements and there was nothing left. Or more likely found himself unwilling to channel his strange, mad fire into the productivity required for success.

Inside her was a small spark of that fire. She wanted to keep it alive though it made no practical sense. When Dr. Shanik delivered the diagnosis, her mind became a white space. She should have asked more questions.

What genetic disorder still existed that could not be fixed by modern medical science? Science could grow new teeth, new eyes, new brain cells. Program viruses to devour tumors. Her own cousin's severe spinal deformity had been fixed in the womb. Science could detect potential anomalies in the genetics of parents and take preventative measures before they'd conceived offspring.

How could her baby have the *only* disorder in the world that could not be fixed by science?

Grief roiled up suddenly beneath her solar plexus, caught in her throat so that she couldn't take even a single deep breath to calm herself. Two people walked by her, politely averting their gazes. She covered her head but wanted to scream at the sky.

Her sense of time slipped away, head bowed, wrapped in woe. No idea how long she'd been sitting when a touch on her shoulder had her on her feet.

A man with a weathered face pushed back the hood of his robe. "Are you in need of a healer, child?"

She opened her mouth to say no, but he peered at her with such compassion her soul cracked open. She began to weep.

"Come in, come in," he said, opening the tall blue door, "your sorrow is safe in my house."

He was a *sarda*, a priest, and used no other appellation. A small glyph of Oekon was embroidered on his collar, that was all. He brought a soft cloth to wash her face, fed her, poured tea for her as she poured out her story and after she'd done it, he sat still a moment, eyes closed, hands folded in his lap.

"I have a question for you to consider, Maat t'an su Lhai," he said.

She took a breath, acquiesced.

"If Oekon, unifying force and maker of all things, has arranged the shape of your fetus, can it truly be called disordered?"

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

In which Christine loses a hat, Nyota gets a lecture from her grandmother, the morning staff meeting features French toast and scrambled eggs, and Spock takes a call from his mother.

On Vulcan, you could always spot a first-time visitor by their bullet-shade hat – a cap with a kind of halo thing from which descended a darkened screen that covered the whole head and face right down to the shoulders. This ubiquitous headwear combined with full-length “cooling caftans” absolutely screamed tourist.

Christine Chapel would not be going about the great city of Shikahr dressed like *that*. There were plenty of kiosks in the 40EAX terminal that offered nothing but sunscreen sprays, wraparound sunglasses, and large brimmed hats. Her current sunglasses were not as cute as the ones she’d left in a Terra-Luna Spaceport bar, but the hat looked quite jaunty.

Unfortunately, as soon as she stepped off the intercity shuttle near the Vulcan Medical Institute the jaunty hat blew off in a breeze so searing it felt like a stripe of fire burned across her cheek.

*Note to self: pasty white human girls should be more circumspect on planets with thermostats set to HELL.*

She tugged the sleeves of her shirt down over her knuckles and hurried towards the north entrance where the research medical labs supposedly were. And where Dr. Korby – *Roger* – said he’d be waiting with the rest of the team.

^^^

Bibi was not pleased. She’d delayed the second funeral for five whole years. The most recent delay was so that her granddaughter could finish her midshipman assignment as a cadet only to discover (after the fact) that Nyota had received a graduating commission via subspace, thus denying her all the bragging rights and photo ops afforded a grandmother via pomp and circumstance.

“I’m so sorry, Bibi. There was just so much going on and they needed me right away. It was too good an opportunity to pass up. I didn’t even think—” she broke off, unable to meet her grandmother’s eyes even with the barrier of distance through the terminal’s screen.

“I served in Starfleet. I know how it works. I also know you could arrange time for a funeral.”

A *second* funeral, Nyota wanted to say. The happy funeral. Lots of favorite foods, joyful memories, singing and laughing. She should be open to that by now, shouldn’t she?

“Do we really need to though? I mean, isn’t it better to honor their lives by getting out there, making discoveries, exploring the universe?”

“Grief is not bound by the laws of physics, baby.”

Ugh. No matter how far she went or where she ended up, grief would be stowed with her gear. Intellectually, she knew this. Emotionally? Well, that’s what second funerals were for.

“Okay, okay. Fine. But I might only be able to give you a few days warning, so you and the aunties will have to move *a lot* faster than you normally do to plan it.”

“Now you’re a comedian.”

“I love you, Bibi.”

“Love you too, darling girl.”

^^^

It always seemed to work out that when La'an had an early counselling session with Dr. Sanchez, Captain Pike would just *happen* to be holding the morning staff briefing in his quarters – with French toast and scrambled eggs.

Una would douse her eggs with hot sauce. Joseph would drink way too much coffee with real *actual* cream, Pelia would mention something like how she used to whisk eggs with bundle of twigs, and Spock would eat melon while surreptitiously eyeing the bacon Erica shoveled in her gob.

This morning, instead of maple syrup, La'an buttered the thick slices of custard-y brioche then hit it with dollops of strawberry jam. It tasted weirdly of nostalgia, though her family didn't eat anything like this for breakfast back when they were squabbling happily at a breakfast table.

Maybe she was pre-gaming her nostalgia. Someday in the future, whilst eating French toast and scrambled eggs, she will think how they don't taste as good as Pike's did and fondly ache for *these* days, with these people, this comradery, this community, their shared purpose, and mission.

It was a strategy that *almost* assumed she'd live long enough to think back fondly on anything. So... progress? She'd ask Dr. Sanchez next time.

Captain Pike took off the apron and picked up his coffee mug with a sigh of satisfaction. That was the cue for each department to report.

Una gave a summary of the Enterprise's scheduled travel, assignments, and missions. She looked at her padd a moment too long, glanced at the captain. "There are some personnel situations I need to go over when we one-on-one later. Obviously, Commander Pelia is not in attendance, but she's sent a report showing all systems green-ish. Her word, not mine. Lt. Spock, you're up."

As Spock began quietly enthusing about a fascinating reflection nebula and spacetime anomalies, La'an took the opportunity to observe another kind of anomaly— Erica Ortigas absently poking her fork at a fluff of eggs left on her plate. Her head was bowed, her shoulders slumped. Lost in a dreary thought. Erica, who didn't really *do* dreary. She gave a mild start when the captain called her name the *second* time, straightened her spine.

"My stations are good to go, Captain. I, uh, I would recommend Lt. Jenty do a couple more supervised stints in the driver's seat before taking over gamma shift."

La'an saw Una's features go utterly still a fraction of second. Then she blinked and nodded. La'an made a mental note to ask about it later. Any small conflict between the crew could be a security risk down the line.

Joseph reported that he'd notified the health authorities at Beta Orgona that Ensign Kriika did *not* have choriocytosis. "Which is what I told them the entire time they were holding the poor being in stasis." Off Spock's raised eyebrow, he added, "You weren't in any danger. But, yes, to answer the question you aren't asking, that is why I gave you cuprum hemoglobin boosters."

Apparently chorio-whatever affected Vulcans in a serious way.

"When's your favorite head nurse getting back?" Pike asked. He was asking M'Benga but Spock's entire body seemed to clench. Everyone pretended not to notice.

"Last I heard, Dr. Korby had gotten privileges to use the genetic research archives at the Vulcan Medical Institute. Christine was disappointed they were only allowed three days."

La'an couldn't think of anything more stultifying than looking at a bunch of genes with a bunch of Vulcans hovering over you,

Una messed with the screen of her datapadd. "Well, she's *supposed* to be at Starbase 11 in five days if she wants to catch the shuttle bringing our shiny new crew."

Seven of their current crew had rotated out on this layover. La'an had already reviewed the new batch. "Security systems, weapons systems, all at the ready should they be required, Captain."

Pike started the cleanup, signaling the end of that morning's briefing. She picked up her plate and utensils, brushed at the crumbs with her napkin—

"Uhura to Captain Pike."

"Go ahead, Ensign."

"Is Mr. Spock still there? I have a private subspace transmission from a secure channel. I think it's the Vulcan Embassy's own transmit array?"

Momentarily taken aback, Spock glanced at the captain. "With your permission, sir?"

"Go."

"Route the transmission to the terminal in my quarters, Ensign," Spock said on his way out the door.

Erica caught the damp dishcloth Pike threw her way. "Well, that's one way to get out of KP duty."

His mother appeared to be traveling alone – or more accurately, traveling *without* his father. Spock had no doubt a security detail lurked in the background. Their family hadn't traveled without one since the attempt on their lives when he was six years old.

He could see vague details of the hotel room behind her. Her gloves lay on the desk to her left. A chubby wine glass of full-bodied red on her right. She clearly meant business.

"What has happened, Mother?"

"Can't a mother spontaneously contact her son simply to see how he's doing?"

"She can. But I suspect that is not why you have used embassy communications privilege to contact me."

She removed the filmy scarf hiding her hair and flung it behind her. It floated over her shoulder a moment before falling out of sight.

"I have taken my discordant human anger on a holiday."

She'd taken such breaks before when he was young, sudden departures, infrequent but troubling to his child's mind. Even Michael, who had assured him their mother simply needed time "to be human," admitted later, she, like him, worried Amanda wouldn't come back. He hadn't understood why his mother needed to absent herself from her family to be what she already was.

As an adult with an adult's perspective on what she'd willingly endured for the love of her family he understood it better.

That being said...

"On Argelius II?" Spock was not exactly sure of the time of day there, but he suspected it was too early to be drinking wine. Even on Argelius II. "That seems..."

"What?" Her features were perfectly composed, well-trained in dispassionate regard as she was, but the sharp edge in her tone gave her away.

"A very pointed choice on your part," he finished carefully.

Argelius had a reputation for hedonism. A culture devoted to love in all its many forms. Popular for shore leave. Unfrequented by Vulcans.

She took a sip of wine. "They don't call it Argelius II, you know. The people who live here."

"I am aware."

"It's called Nelphia."

"Yes. I know." He did not have time for this.

"Welcome to Nelphia," she said, flourishing her glass. "'Visit the fallen city of Terlip in the holy mountains of Nelphia, enjoy your stay on our beautiful world Nelphia, named for Nelphia, goddess and animating force of all things Nelphian.' And yet..." Another more substantial swallow of wine, "Nelphia is not the name listed on Federation planetary star charts. This suggests a certain colonial primacy in Federation naming conventions, wouldn't you agree?"

"Did you call merely to deliver a lecture from the paper you published on this subject ten years ago?"

She set the glass down carefully. Gave him a withering look.

"Have you spoken with T'Pring lately?"

"After my last attempt she made it clear she is not yet ready to resume our communications."

"Perhaps she's become aware of the rumors you've 'taken up' with a human."

The phrase between her air quotes caused an unpleasant sensation in his gut. It made the relationship he'd had with Christine sound tawdry. His stilted effort to formulate a response to the rumors only seemed to verify his mother's worst fears.

"Spock. Please, *please* tell me that's not the reason T'Pring—"

"Of course not. I never betrayed her trust or our commitment."

Which was technically fact. T'Pring had accused him of not trusting *her*. And after much consideration (made possible by Christine's absence) he could freely admit she'd been right.

His mother's countenance softened in relief. "That's what I told your father after T'Pril blindsided him with the accusation."

T'Pring's mother knew? How? He'd intended to tell T'Pring about Christine, face-to-face, when she gave him the opportunity. But then Christine broke it off and...

"Apparently, the whole disaster is my fault now."

"T'Pril blames you?" It was hardly surprising. To her, Amanda Grayson was the human vector for everything currently wrong with Vulcan society.

Amanda, his honorable, good, *kind* mother, picked up the glass and stared into the wine as she swirled it around, "I'm talking about your

father.”

The sudden tightness in his chest was a warning, one Spock had learned to heed in his teen years as confrontations with Sarek increased. He suppressed the churn of rage but held fast to the cause of it. He knew precisely *how* his father would have cast the blame on his mother.

Not directly. Never directly. A thousand small cuts, sideways. Like a seasoned diplomat.

“He should have been there himself if it was so important to him--”

“The two of you exhaust me,” she muttered into the glass, then tipped it back and gulped down all the wine in it.

They considered each other in silence. She leaned her elbow on the desk and cradled her cheek in her hand, eyeing him with the tenderest exasperation.

“What *are* you doing about your engagement, Spock? Is it over? Because no one seems to know. You’re headed out to deep space god-knows-where. T’Pring has returned to El-Keshtanktil and resumed her virtuous work. I’ve tried reaching out, but— but her mother is hinting at dissolution and breach of contract.”

“It is not a dissolution. We are taking time apart.”

“I’m very fond of T’Pring, you know.”

“She’s fond of you as well.”

“I would have liked to call her daughter.” She met his eyes and quickly looked away, thinking of the other daughter they couldn’t speak of.

His mother must be so lonely now.

“You may yet,” he said. “However, until she’s ready to speak with me I cannot promise my return to her good graces.”

“Do you want to?” At his sudden unease, she hastened to assure him, “It’s okay if you don’t.”

He’d waffled after the recent experience with the Gorn. Turned to Christine again until apologies and forgiveness became a constant yearning for something she didn’t have or couldn’t give. Perhaps no human could.

This indulgence in human emotions had been just that, a gross indulgence. An experiment rife with biases, but ultimately proved to be a test of his commitment to the path of logic. He would, from this moment forward, commit fully to that path.

T’Pring was the person whose opinion he *should* have valued above all others.

Except the woman looking through a screen at him from a hotel room on Nelphia.

“I want to marry T’Pring. If she will have me again.”

“Okay,” she said softly.

“I must return to my duties now, Mother.”

“Thank you for setting my mind at ease. Stay safe. Be well.”

“I will endeavor to do so. Please do not drink more wine.”

“Pfft,” she said with a smile and dismissive wave.

The screen went dark. He went to the bridge.

^^^

The children were off to work in their official capacities as senior officers. Christopher Pike and Una Chin-Riley (sometimes referred to as Dad and Mom, though not to their faces) sat across from each other – Una in the club chair and Pike leaning back at one end of the sofa, ankles crossed, cup of coffee in hand.

“What was that all about, y’think?”

Una looked up from her padd, brow furrowed, not a clue.

“Spock? Secure channel? Vulcan embassy?”

“Oh. That was his mother. She got in touch with me a few days ago to arrange it.”

“Vulcans certainly have a lot of family drama for a people who value logic.”

“Uh huh.”

“Okay.” Chris said, leaning forward. “What the hell is up?”

Caught out, Una sighed and set the datapadd on the low coffee table between them. “That personnel situation we need to discuss.”

“Is it going to make me mad, sad, or glad?”

“I’ve received a workplace harassment complaint. Against Lt Ortegas.”

He shook his head, blinked. “*Erica?*”

“Not sexual harassment, Chris. Calm yourself. But we’re deep in Appendix D-1 section-c territory.”

“But, I mean, what the actual fuck? Erica? *Erica?*”

It boggled the mind. People begged for training with Ortegas. Sure, he knew nobody got along with everybody, personalities clashed, command styles butted heads, but—

“Who filed the complaint?”

“Lt. Xenta Jenty.”



## Chapter 3

### Chapter Summary

In which Erica practices tai chi, Christine parties with Vulcans and suffers indignities, and the plot is stirred to a thickened consistency.

### Chapter Notes

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

Erica's martial art of choice was tai chi. Officers were required to be proficient in at least one and tai chi had seemed the least martial. Technically you could kick-ass if you wanted to, but... eh, *nah*.

Tai chi calmed the mind and improved focus, allowed her to be at one with the Enterprise the way the captain sometimes waxed poetical about being one with his horse. The horse had to trust you, you had to trust the horse. That was her and the ship. Same principle. Harmonious. Symbiotic. Etcetera.

But why anyone would want to spend precious *off hours* punching stuff and kickboxing and getting all sweaty doing jiu jitsu or whatever was beyond her. What was wrong with a nice swim? A little salsa dancing?

She pulled the ends of the towel over her shoulders, leaned against the bulkhead, and slid down to plant her butt on the deck. Dangled a bottle of cool water over the ledge of her knees and watched La'an take down a six-four, 230lb petty officer named Glenn for, like, the fourth or fifth time.

They were "sparring." For "fun." La'an might even have been pulling her punches a bit. Erica bet studly Glenn was questioning all his life choices right about now.

The mock battle, the tests of honor in the face of an enemy, trying to get somebody's hackles up so you can take them down – it just *bothered* her. Why pretend to fight? Hadn't they all had enough of the real thing? She sure had. The need for pay-back had nearly sucked the soul right out of her once.

Which is why she'd been so stunned when Lt. Jenty accused her of it—

*"Ever since you found out about my grandfather you've had a vendetta against me."*

And she'd stood there, mouth hanging open probably, brain stuck on an error code. Vendetta was a real strong word.

On a starship every bridge officer, no matter what station they worked, needed to be able to man the helm in a pinch. But *pilot* was a specialized position. Only a highly skilled pilot could do the hard stuff, the delicate stuff, the dangerous-as-fuck stuff and still get everyone out alive.

Lt. Jenty was one of three people Erica was training as relief pilots. All of them had areas that needed polish, but Jenty relied on the computer's predictive modelling way too much, had seemed reluctant to do any of the math in her head. Erica could not in good conscience put *any* pilot on *any* shift who couldn't do a bit of linear algebra and differential calculus on the fly. She knew better than anyone there'd be times when some program or system went kablooe, and suddenly your captain's asking you to predict the future and, in the same breath, demanding you change it.

But other than requiring Jenty to do another two weeks in the simulator for randomly generated scenarios, she couldn't think of anything she'd done that came near vendetta territory. She wouldn't even have known Jenty's grandpa was the guy who accidentally blew up a small flotilla of supply ships headed to the front if Jenty herself hadn't said, "I guess you know who my grandfather is then," prompting Erica to ask, "No. Who?"

A pilot had to be flexible but consistent, always ready but never jump the gun, brilliant but not easily bored. It wasn't for everyone. It might not be for Xenta Jenty—

"Lt. Orteg, please report to the XO's office."

She scrambled to her feet, hit the intercom. "Orteg here. I'm in the gym. Can I get twenty minutes?"

"Acknowledged," came the clipped reply. "Twenty minutes."

Huh. Maybe they pushed up the ETA for Starbase 11. Or pushed it back. She kind of hoped not. It felt like forever since she'd seen Christine and it sure would be sad if she missed her ride back to the Enterprise.

A very small sample size had formed Christine's initial impressions of Vulcan people. She quickly realized those impressions were based on a *lot* of assumptions.

Saf had to clue her in about the flirty girl at the pharmacy.

"How was that flirting?"

"She asked many questions of you."

"Um, yeah. Felt more like an interrogation. 'What genetic mutation produces that eye color? Is the lack of pigment in your hair natural or did you remove it for cosmetic purposes? Is this man your guide or your companionnn...*ohh*.'"

As a fellow "fellow" on the research team, Safeek had, in fact, been a gracious guide and interpreter of all things Vulcan. And though she wouldn't have been opposed to more of his company because he was quite pretty, turned out he already had a companion.

That second night in ShiKahr, Dr. Korby – *Roger* – had a meeting with Dr. Nivol, chief administrator for the genetic archives. He suggested the team take a few hours down time. "I'd recommend napping because we're in for a very long night, but you're all too young to heed that advice."

So Saf took her and Brownie and Rachana to a "standing restaurant" in Ha'gelek Street. The restaurant looked an awful lot like a food truck except you had to stand at a bar to eat your food because unlike *some* places in the galaxy (Earth), people did not stroll the streets of ShiKahr eating burritos (or in this case, spongy bread stuffed with curried peas).

After, they met up with his life partner Salek at a teahouse where the tea was mostly various kinds of imported spirits. Every place that served only beverages was called a teahouse, even the places that served coffee to mostly human tourists. For a people that valued precision it seemed a bit lazy. Which, apparently, she said out loud.

"You can order tea here if that is what you wish," Saf pointed out.

"Nope. That's okay. I'll shut up now." She put her lips around the straw in a melon daiquiri and did just that.

They listened politely to live acoustic music, chatting between sets and somehow the story of being flirted with at the pharmacy came up – something about subverting stereotypes. She mentioned how she'd thought Spock, the Vulcan guy she worked with, had been pretty forthcoming with her about his culture, but now she realized maybe that wasn't true.

"Most of us were not raised in such rarefied air as that of the S'chn T'Gai clan," Salek said.

She blinked. "Who they?"

Saf gave his boyfriend a subtle side-eye, but Salek leaned into the universal invitation to gossip.

"They are Spock's family clan."

"Wait. Do you *know* Spock?"

"I know *of* him."

"Most Vulcans have knowledge of S'chn T'Gai Spock," Saf clarified.

Salek elaborated, "He was born into an old family, notable, with a storied history and much influence. Their line goes back to Surak himself. Humans might think of his clan as... traditionalist, I suppose. Or socially conservative."

"But his father married a human being!" A few heads turned. She dropped her voice to a very loud whisper. "I've *seen* her."

"Perhaps you apply a human concept of conservatism," Saf said. "In Sarek's case, marriage to a Human might have been considered a logical sacrifice by the clan for one in the position of Ambassador to Earth."

Oh, right. His dad was the ambassador. Spock came from *privilege*.

She saw no judgment in Saf's observation, but she got the impression he found nothing there to admire either. He seemed to want the subject dismissed, but Salek's interest had piqued and he wasn't about to let it go.

"What is the son like then? Is he the rebel we've heard told?"

Rachana's lips turned up in the vaguest of sneers. "He's in Starfleet. How rebellious can he be?" She'd expressed *very* strong opinions about the continued post-war militarism of Starfleet as soon as she heard Christine had a contract with them.

True, Spock could quote regulations for any situation but he could also break them if he thought it ethically necessary. Rachana had no idea what an act of rebellion just joining Starfleet had been for him. Spock had *chosen* Star Fleet in defiance of his father and his family's cultural traditions.

He'd chosen *her*.

And she chose *this*.

"The Spock I know is a really good guy," she said, tender and protective all the sudden. "If he was born into privilege, you wouldn't know it working with him."

Saf picked up a tiny cup of... sake, maybe, and sipped. He flicked a glance at Salek, said carefully, "I believe you are thinking of the *other* son of Sarek, *t'hy'la*."

"Oh yes. That *one*. Rejected the path of logic if I recall. Fled the planet to avoid arrest."

Rejected the path of logic. Christine knew something about this. She even knew about Spock's brother. Sort of. And then there was that asshole Barjan—

Brownie barked out a laugh, "Well, damn. You Vulcans don't mess around. I'm surprised you cater to so many of our human vices." He tossed back a shot.

"Wait. Wait wait wait." Rachana held a finger up, the grown-up version of raising her hand in class, then asked in a voice squeaky with alcohol fueled self-righteousness. "Are you saying it's a crime to be illogical?"

"No," Salek replied. "Merely in bad taste."

"Was he *v'tosh ka'tur*?"

Both of the Vulcan men looked at Christine as if she'd grown a new, more interesting head.

"It is not a crime to reject the path of logic," Saf explained, "nor is it a crime to express logic extremist viewpoints, or to preach Tu-Jarok in the streets. However, if one commits a criminal act in the name of one's beliefs then one can expect arrest, prosecution and penalty as the logical outcomes."

"What crime did the brother commit?" Rachana asked.

Saf demurred, "I cannot say with certainty."

But Salek had no such restraints and said sotto voce. "A crime no human *could* commit."

At which point Saf decided his boyfriend had imbibed enough of whatever they were drinking (which she found out later was *not* sake), and they closed out the party portion of the night. Salek went home and the rest of them headed back to the research annex.

Tri-ox injections and alcohol were not the best mix, the humans soon realized. Brownie bemoaned leaving his jacket in the lab.

The night air was the kind of hot Vulcans called "cool" and humans found not-quite hellish. Rachana swiped a hand across a sweaty brow and pointed out that he didn't need a jacket.

"It has detoxy tabs in the pocket," he said.

At some point during the evening, Christine had removed the long-sleeved UPF 50 shirt she'd worn over her dress and now had it tied around her waist. Shoulders bare, sweating around the middle, she stepped into the softly lit haven of the transit enclosure with a sigh of relief. Soon they'd be in a temperature-controlled lab taking the cure with a cool glass of water—

"*Komee reetevaan!*" came a shout from behind her. A hard wet *splat* hit between her shoulder blades. She stumbled, turned to see what the hell —

Saf pulled her out of the way of another projectile aimed at her head. It burst against the side of the structure and slid down to the pavement. A moment later, he caught sight of someone darting around the curve of a building across the street and sprinted after them.

Brownie tried to follow but only got a few steps before the air and the heat proved daunting. Hands on his knees, panting, he muttered something about Roger tearing him a new one. Two Vulcan women approached to ask if Christine was injured. One had a comm open to the authorities.

But she could only stare stupidly at them, her brain stuck in a cognitive void. Rachana touched her arm and she shook her head, heard her own voice like it was coming out of someone else's mouth, "I'm all right. Thank you."

Rachana had begun to look around. The rusty colored glop splattered the platform, smeared the side of the structure. "Oh my god. Is that what I think it is?"

"It appears to be animal feces," one of the women said. Her companion's nose wrinkled discreetly as the odor started wafting up.

Christine pressed her hands to her mouth to keep from screaming expletives

*Feces*. Somebody threw shit at her. It was on her *back*, on her dress.

She strained to see the proof, turning frantically round and round like a dog trying to bite its own tail, trying to confirm this impossible horrible thing, until Rachana's voice broke through the buzz, grasped her upper arm and made her stop. "Christine. Christine. It's okay, it's okay, honey. It's mostly on your dress. The hotel's close by. We'll get you cleaned up, okay? It's all right."

She nodded. Took a deep breath. Big mistake. Took a shallow breath. Better. A few more of those until the shudders were intermittent rather than constant. But someone else's judgment of her was still there, on her back, where everyone else could see it. The two Vulcan women for instance.

"It appears the assailant put the fecal material into sov-dukal in order to throw it effectively," the older one said. "There are the remains."

Christine's gaze followed the gesture to the shreds of blue and green pasted to the transparent material of the transit enclosure by excrement. There were more pieces on the platform near her feet.

Balloons. She stepped warily around the mess, then twisted her hands together, her eyes unable to settle, trying not to cry.

By the time Saf returned she'd gone from unwarranted shame to quietly furious. Saf suggested Rachana escort her to the hotel while he and the other witnesses waited for the authorities.

Later, back in the lab, showered, dressed and all cried out, Christine assured everyone she was fine. She just wanted to get back to work. She got out her notes, but Roger drew her aside,

"I'm so sorry, Christine. Safeek told me what the man shouted at you—"

Her mouth went dry, her heart sped up. "What? What was it? What did he say?"

"A racial slur of some sort. Nonsense about indecency or corruption. I doubt you were being targeted personally. Not that it helps much."

It sure *felt* personal. Humiliating. Crushing. Almost like a betrayal. Like someone should have warned her this could happen. In a culture devoted to a philosophy of peace through logic, not only could individuals be complete jerks they could also be cruel and vicious.

But Spock had warned her she supposed. He'd shown he could be petty, rageful, possessive. She'd *seen* it and foolishly insisted its source was his human side.

She took a deep breath, put on her game face. "I'm sure I'll forget all about it once we're knee deep in ancient DNA microarrays."

No sooner had she made this plucky assertion then someone from law enforcement showed up to take statements – Primary Officer Irek, a woman whose hair and uniform were almost the same shade of gray.

The whole time they were being interviewed, Christine kept shooting glances at Roger, trying to gauge his mood, feeling guiltier with each minute that ticked by. They were behind and getting more so. But he seemed only concerned then relieved when Officer Irek told them the guy responsible had already been arrested.

"Though this person is currently confined for the public's welfare, I have been authorized to provide additional security if you have concerns for your personal safety during the remainder of your stay in Shikahr."

Wow. That sounded almost like an official apology. Christine opened her mouth to refuse but Roger did it for her.

"That won't be necessary, thank you, Officer. I doubt any of us will be venturing beyond these walls for the next forty-two hours. We have much work to catch up on before Dr. Nivol kicks us interlopers out of his labs."

They found out later that someone in the city's administration office had arranged for their hotel rooms to be comped. Which was nice, she supposed, even though they barely got to use them.

^^^

Chu'lak sat meditating in the confinement cell, a show of contrition for the V'Kor officers observing through the surveillance devices in his cell.

When interviewed, his brother Teska suggested to police that logic extremists had targeted a Chu'lak, grooming him for further acts of terrorism. He could almost hear Teska saying, "My brother is young, impressionable, without a father's guidance."

Tomorrow when Chu'lak went before the adjudicator, he would present himself as the perfect candidate for rehabilitation at Ankeshtan K'till on Omicron Lyrae III. If all went to plan, he should be there within the week.

It would take a little persuading to convince Sybok of the righteousness of their cause, but Chu'lak knew him well enough to think it possible. Sybok was probably the only one who could control the Blessing once she was primed and aimed at their targets.

The priest had moved her again, spirited her away, trying to keep her out of reach. But this time they knew where he was headed.

## Chapter End Notes

Heard as "Komee reetevaan" = Vulcan phrase "qomi ri'tevan," suggesting that humans are indecent, disgusting, or corrupt in all the ways that word might be applied.

But one individual or small group is not representative of all, which I hope I presented clearly.

Please note: I will obsessively go over this chapter, making incremental corrections a gazillion times before I leave it alone.

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Summary

In which Scotty cleans and pines. Una laments her current role as personnel officer. Christine ponders the Vulcan genome. And Sybok meditates.

### Chapter Notes

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

The lass from up-top was down here again even though the communications array interfaces were nowhere in the vicinity.

Ensign Uhura. Bonnie. Pure dead brilliant.

She wiggled her fingers in a wave before continuing to her target. Sadly, not him.

The other night she'd seemed so friendly and engaging. He'd been whiskey'd up enough to entertain the notion she fancied him. Turned out her interest had been strictly linguistic in nature.

Ms. Uhura could cock an ear, give half a listen, and pin any poor numpty to a place of origin – a Terraluna lilt, Andoria's Laikan Southie hiss – the slightest deviation of syntax, or subtle morphologies you didn't even know were there and *pow!* you'd be caught out trying to blend in.

"Aberdeen by way of Edinburgh. Am I right?"

Impressed, he acknowledged as much. "Aye."

"It's very... pronounced."

"No reason to hide my lamp under a bushel now is there?"

"That's lovely way to look at it. We can't smooth *all* the local color from our Federation lingua franca no matter how hard we try."

She directed his gaze to the Vulcan science officer in discussion with the scary little security chief. "Mr. Spock thinks he doesn't have an accent. Whereas La'an doesn't notice her own until someone points it out."

He imagined there weren't too many brave enough to do that more than once. Still...

"Like me then."

"No. I don't think so," she laughed. The bartender placed a drink before her, and she thanked him sweetly. Turned to face Scotty with a smile that took his breath away. "Yours has intention. You lean into it like you're testing the rest of us to see if we're worthy."

Whatever reaction she saw in his face, she must've mistook for offense because her eyes went huge.

"Oh god. Sorry, sorry. I get overanalytical when I'm tipsy." She reached out, touched his forearm. "Don't get me wrong. I *love* being tested."

But "love" it seemed was a specific sort of affection that did not extend to his many other stellar qualities. Oh, she was personable and friendly enough, but she was like that with everyone he'd soon discovered, and if he wished for more, he'd have to work a lot harder to get her undivided attention—

"Oi! Mr. Scott," Commander Pelia shouted from the catwalk. His old professor. Now his boss. "If you have time to gawk you clearly have too much time."

Amazing how a tiny person with a voice like squeaky gravel could make his balls shrivel up quick like that. For someone known to use her vast age as an excuse to forget promises made yesterday, Pelia had no trouble recalling a practical joke he'd played nearly ten years ago.

"Do I need to find you something else to clean?"

"No, Chief."

With a sigh, Scotty returned to scrubbing filters. Perhaps to save him further humiliation, Ensign Uhura skedaddled.

^^^

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

Lt. Ortega's reaction was not unexpected. Una pushed the datapadd with the open complaint across the table. Erica scrolled through the file with stilted acuity, far too fast to grasp any details. Eyes narrowed, mouth tight, she shoved it back and proceeded to fume, arms folded across

her chest. “This is bullshit.”

“You need to actually look at the complaints so we can address them.”

“What complaints? How can she have complaints? I can’t believe this! What about Bon and Shula? Have they complained?”

“Well, among Jenty’s complaints is that you single her out—”

“Bullshit!”

“Yeah, you’ve said that already. She’s the only one in her cohort who’s been ordered to retake the pilot proficiency test, is that right?”

“Not the whole test! *Jesus*. Just some scenarios that need work. And it wasn’t an order. A strong suggestion at most—”

“Same thing. You’re her commanding officer.”

“Look. She can’t do the math in her head, Chief. I can’t have someone in the seat who can’t walk and chew gum at the same time.”

“Well, that isn’t a requirement according to Starfleet.”

“Ha, ha.”

“As long, as she can utilize and adapt the computer models fast enough—”

“I’m not sure she can.”

Una cocked an eye at her. “I’m looking at her scores right now.”

“I don’t care. Shula and Bon have both managed it. Sometimes all you’ve got is what’s in the old cabeza.” Erica tapped her temple in case Una needed a visual aid. “I expect them all to be able to do what I do. Captain relies on it.”

“Very few people can do what you do. You’re like a wizard. Every maneuver’s some crazy spell the rest of us can only hope to repeat without blowing up the ship.”

“That’s not true,” Erica said, sounding both flattered and embarrassed. “Anyway, doesn’t change the fact that in this instance I haven’t singled anyone out. I’m not trying to make anyone look bad. Why would I do that? We need good pilots more than ever now that we’re building up the fleet for exploration again.”

Una agreed, but it didn’t matter. Her job was to investigate the complaints, make an evaluation and propose a solution going forward.

She mentally braced for Erica’s reaction to the next thing she was going to say—

“I’ll be taking over the remainder of the training for this group. Until we’ve resolved the situation.”

Erica started to protest, but then sank back into her chair. “What else am I supposed to have done?”

“Berated her in front of a group of shuttle techs in the hangar bay—”

“Nooooo. We were *all* kidding around—”

“Promoted or participated in a number of hazing events—”

“What? That’s not—”

Una held up a hand, “You’ll have a chance to respond to each complaint. We’ll go over them one by one.”

Erica pulled the chair closer, folded her hands on the table and straightened her spine. “All right then. Let’s wade through some shit.”

*Unlikely we’ll find a gem in that river*, Una thought.

After nearly two hours in which Erica seemed in turns confounded, and embarrassed, Una could see worrying self-doubt starting to creep in.

“Okay. I think that’s enough for now,” she said.

“What happens next?”

“I’ll interview Lieutenants Shula and Bon, talk to other witnesses.”

Ordinarily investigations were La’an’s purview, but Una was hesitant to bring her in. This wasn’t a security issue, but a personnel issue. Personnel was, unfortunately for her, the first officer’s department.

She flagged the list on her datapadd and it pinged on Erica’s. “You shouldn’t interact with any of these crew until I’ve completed their interviews.”

“Sure. Right.”

All the feisty had gone out of her friend, it appeared. Something was off about this whole business.

“I need to ask you something.”

Erica glanced up from the list of people she wasn’t supposed to talk to. Gave shrug of acquiescence.

“Did you have a relative on the guide ship for that fleet of automated freighters? The one that Lt. Jenty’s grandfather supposedly destroyed with friendly fire.”

“No,” Erica said. “I mean it’s weird. Like, that whole thing about me having a vendetta against her? Completely out the blue. I told her she was loco.” She huffed a sour laugh. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said that, huh? But honestly, I had no idea her grandpa was *that* guy until she told me.”

“I believe you. I just wonder where she got her information.”

“You think somebody else is involved?”

“Well,” Una said, slapping her thighs decisively, “that’s for me to find out and for you to keep your nose squeaky clean in the meantime.”

^^^

Christine only noticed the nervous jouncing of her right leg because the Andorian next to her seemed irritated by it. She scootched sideways on the bench and proceeded to worry a thumbnail between her teeth instead.

How bad would it be if she missed her connection to Starbase 11? She wasn’t technically *in* Starfleet. Worst that could happen, they’d terminate her contract. Roger had offered her a long-term position on his upcoming field expedition. Stanford Morehouse was sponsoring said expedition, so they’d probably be fine with it. It was for *Roger Korby* after all. Who could say no to him? He was very persuasive. Compelling.

Even so, the expedition was a year away at least. He already had Brownie to assist with the preliminary planning and a couple of TAs for his other responsibilities. What would she do with herself in the interim?

The butterflies in her belly turned into velociraptors.

*Face it, Christine. Only one reason you’re thinking about making a run for it—*

After the Gorn attacks, with everyone still reeling from losses and marveling at their own survival, Spock had appeared at the door of her cabin. A bare room now, a temporary berth for another temporary contractor. Even the bedding was gone.

Whatever apology she thought he’d come to offer didn’t happen. He just... pushed into her. Into the physical space, her personal space, her psyche, her body. She wanted not to think, so she let him. It was a relief really. To give up control, let him pin her against the wall and fuck the fear right out of her.

Waking up alone in an empty room was the first clue to a shift in their dynamic.

“Love sucks,” she muttered.

The Andorian gave a strangled cry, half-rising from the bench, and for a second Christine thought they’d found her view on love an outrage – *No, love is grand! It’s you humans that suck at it.* Then she saw the actual cause of the reaction.

Running, stumbling, wheeling round the open space in front of them, was a barefoot person trying to wrestle some kind of hood off their head. Muffled inarticulate shrieks came from beneath the hood.

Worried exclamations from witnesses punctuated the low ambient rumble of activity on the concourse as travelers darted out of the way, pushed their children behind them. Some stood frozen, gaping.

On her feet now, body buzzing with an influx of adrenaline, Christine looked around for who or what the hooded person was fleeing. Kidnappers? Port security?

Hospital orderlies?

The hood wasn’t exactly a hood, not like a sack thrown over the head. More like a soft helmet, with the impression of eyepieces and an O-shape where a mouth might be. It reminded her of something she’d seen used to treat conditions like PTSD. It was supposed to block external sensory input. Some of the devices used species-specific pulses of light, while others generated brown noise and high beta wave isochronic tones. But that was in a *controlled* setting. With supervision.

Maybe there was something wrong with the device. The poor being could be suffocating in there for all she knew.

She moved in closer, ignoring cries of “Careful!” and “Watch out!” as she dodged frantic, reeling limbs, making what she hoped were soothing sounds.

Christine had worked with traumatized beings before. She knew better than to touch someone who wasn’t (or in this case, couldn’t) anticipate it. Hands out, ready to push or grab as needed, she waved her arms around to displace the air, inching closer to determine if the other could sense her proximity.

Security drones darted in above them. A swiftly moving commotion on the concourse at her back suggested someone in authority was aware of the situation at least.

Suddenly the person stiffened, convulsed, and a scant second later dropped to the floor, legs askew like a floppy rag doll. A second later they began to rock and grunt softly. Christine stepped closer, went down on her haunches, reaching tentatively for a mechanism at the side of the hood—

“No!” came the shout. “Do not touch her.”

A Vulcan woman hurried towards her with two more following behind. They were visibly distressed which was, in and of itself, distressing.

Hands up, Christine rose and backed away. The woman went to her knees beside the person in the hood and brushed her fingers across a clenched fist. After a moment the fist uncurled, clasping the offered hand, then fell against her savior (or possibly *captor*). On the other side of her, another woman was making quick work of the mechanism to remove the hood. But before the Christine got more than a flashing glance of the girl’s features, the third woman swooped in and threw a blanket over the girl so she was once again hidden, covered from head to the tips of her fingers.

Protests rose from the gathered crowd.

“What’s going on? Why’d she run from you?”

“Why don’t you want anyone to see her, huh?”

The Vulcan women ignored it, keeping tight hold of the girl’s hands as they got her to her feet. Bare feet, Christine noted again, but not dirty enough to have been bare long. They began to walk with her in the direction of the boarding gates.

“Hey! Where are you taking her?”

“Don’t let them get away. Security’s coming—”

“Please. Let us pass. We must return to our vessel—”

“You’re not taking that girl anywhere.”

“Probably traffickers,” her Andorian bench mate muttered, gathering up their belongings. Apparently, their flight was being called for boarding.

The rough buzzing of her boarding pass in her shirt pocket made her realize, *oh shit*, so was hers!

By now five security officers were approaching, fingertips on the weapons at their hips as they looked around, assessing threat levels. Concerned citizens started talking all at once.

Christine looped her backpack over her shoulder. She was going to have to scramble to make the flight if she didn’t get going soon. But she felt compelled to keep watching, unaccountably anxious as one of the officers grabbed at the blanket. The collectively held breaths of people watching was almost comical. But the girl herself had managed to withdraw her hands from her handlers and held tight to the blanket from the inside. She emitted a squeal when he tried again - an unpleasant, raw, animal sound.

It was like everyone seemed to realize at the same time - there was something not quite right about the Vulcan girl under the blanket. Then it was all collective discomfort, thick silence cut with audible gulping and throat clearing.

Christine had to rush off before the situation was entirely sorted, but it did appear that one of the women – the one who’d yelled at her not to touch – was the girl’s mother.

As she walked across the loading bridge to board the S.S. Lady Galene, thoughts of the girl and her mother got pushed to the background. The Enterprise and all that awaited her there moved to the forefront.

Any idea of abandoning the crew dissipated. She missed everyone so much, more than she expected. Missed the comradery, the exploration and scientific discoveries, the opportunities to experience things new and exciting. Sometimes terrifying.

Truth be told, she really missed all those heightened adrenal responses. Something she’d have to admit to her therapist sooner or later.

Despite all that went down with her and Spock, she missed him too. But Vulcan-the-World had hurt her feelings more profoundly, ridiculous as that seemed. Being bombarded with poop balloons would do that to a person. It was not a story she planned to share anytime soon. Or ever. Oh, she’d get over it eventually. Meditation helped. That was a good thing to come out of her relationship with Spock.

Once she was aboard and had stowed her gear, she went to the bar to settle in with a glass of wine and datapadd of research to organize for the team. But her mind kept circling back to that brief glimpse of the Vulcan girl’s face – high forehead, ears too pointy, eyes too wide set – something about the features suggested a phenotypic manifestation she’d read about in medical texts attached to DNA microarrays in the archives.

She scrolled through her files looking for those notes. And... bingo.

There were three conditions, all neurodevelopmental disorders, though one of the more archaic microarrays had no accompanying files – corrupted ages ago, apparently. Looked like the most interesting one too, damn it, with a flagged mutation in a chromosome unique to Vulcans, and another flag on an autosome analogous to chromosome 15 in humans.



So... a kind of autism maybe?

In the Vulcan population, neurodevelopmental disorders had decreased significantly over the centuries, attributed to lifestyle changes, improved environmental conditions and the philosophical practices that had altered their brain chemistry. All touted as a triumph and a testament to a society risen from the ashes of violent conflict and nuclear warfare.

Roger Korby suspected they were systematically breeding neurodivergence out of the genome altogether (perhaps unintentionally) and argued this was not a good thing. He theorized that many higher-reasoning species may have survived and even evolved from near extinction events due to a broader range of neurodivergence across the spectrum. He believed the medical records he'd translated from the excavations on Orion supported the theory – at least for that species. His colleague at the VMI, Dr. Nivol, agreed and posited that allowing neurodiversity to be excised from the genome if it did not appear harmonious with Surak's guiding principles could lead to genetic disaster in a few thousand years.

Spock told her he'd been dyslexic as a child. Dyslexia was a condition caused by a gene change in chromosome 15. They'd probably blamed his poor human mother, but looked like it was just as likely to come from his dad.

*Damn it!* She was thinking about Spock again.

Christine tucked the padd in her bag, finished her wine and ordered another. Spent the next couple of hours flirting with a pair of musicians who were touring the galaxy by way of the S.S. Lady Galene's house band. When she got back to her berth she fell into the bunk, and didn't get out of it much until they made port at Starbase 11.

^^^

Eyes closed, face turned toward the light, Sybok sat in the losherok pose, raking his fingers lightly through the soft sand.

Half-lotus was the word Amanda Grayson used for the pose. Or... crisscross applesauce. She'd once been a teacher of small human children. Nonsense rhymes encouraged order, she claimed.

*Criss-Cross Applesauce, give your hands a clap.*

The sand had been imported from the eastern coast of the Vorothe Sea and laid upon this moon like a blanket. His fingertips remembered this sand. The first holiday he'd ever experienced. A Human woman and a Vulcan child. The looks they got. Her belly round with his brother. His father blessedly absent.

She'd been wearing something blue-green, diaphanous, wind whipping it about. He'd come running up to her and the wind blew the fabric over his face, which made her laugh. She clapped a hand to her mouth to stop the sound, but her eyes were still laughing. He didn't know eyes could do that.

How he missed that woman.

In truth, Omicron Lyrae III, the little moon that housed Ankeshtan K'til, had no atmosphere to speak of, and everything he felt that was not sand – warmth, light, weight, peace – was manufactured. A fragile troposphere held in place by sacred geometry, collective excitations of particles and a layer of solid light the width of a hair.

Only one way out or in.

The inmate population could only be transported off the moon via matter converters beamed to or from a small station in low orbit. The ships that brought them to the facility docked there and when they were declared fit to return to society, would also take them away.

Unlike most people confined to the facility, he had not been given a choice. His father's doing he suspected, though Sybok's true identity was known by few here. T'Pring had never questioned his alias. She'd been a child when last she saw him. And he supposed it hardly mattered to her mission to reform illogical sinners.

Sybok would have far preferred a Federation prison where his own calling could be of use, where he could take away the suffering of those sorry, damaged souls and lead them to God.

Also, his Angel had certain... connections. He would not have been in Federation prison long—

A sudden disturbance in his mental periphery had him grudgingly opening his eyes. Someone was trying to get his attention without calling attention. A new "patient."

Though, apparently, they were not new to each other.

*Criss-Cross Applesauce  
Quiet as can be.*

*Criss-Cross Applesauce  
Eyes on me.*

Two things.

1. Sometimes I get annoyed at the assumption of generic American accent = Federation Standard lingua franca. So, I have asserted here that everyone who speaks it speaks with an accent even if it's the accent of "I grew up only speaking Federation Standard."
2. I am not a scientist, or even very smart. So all the genetic talk is creatively rendered out of googled scientific articles.

## Chapter 5

### Chapter Summary

In which Pike loses a battle with one of his greatest foes -again. Spock runs afoul of the maintenance department - again. And T'Pring needs answers about the past before she can make decisions about the future.

### Chapter Notes

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

Before T'Pring nearly committed a crime to save Spock's life, Sybok had been Xaverius – a thief, a fraudster, guilty of telepathic coercion of non-telepathic species (though he'd insisted only his victims' own greed had been necessary).

She might have thought this *Xaverius* person would be better served by the rehabilitation offered in Federation prisons, might have suspected his sudden longing to return to the path of Surak merely an attempt to trick the system. There were many criminals who attempted such deception, thinking that being a patient would be better than being a prisoner. Most of those people requested prison after a few days.

If T'Pring had been there when he arrived at Ankeshtan K'Til, perhaps she would have seen he hadn't chosen to be there at all.

But she'd been at a conference.

By the time she got back, T'Pol had already performed the intake interview, and Stonn, assigned as the man's guide. Logically, she turned her attention to her own patients, occasionally reviewing Stonn's session notes, and offering suggestions as needed. She rarely interacted with Xaverius, and then only within the framework of her duties as an administrator.

One morning as she walked the grounds, she passed a group practicing art therapy. Xaverius had turned to watch her – not surreptitiously, but with a frank, assumptive familiarity. Her steps quickened. His gaze followed. She could feel it between her shoulder blades and turned to confront him only to find he was, like the others, meditating on the form his clay would take.

Over the next several weeks the sensation of him watching her persisted, the fine hairs at the back of her neck standing up and she'd think of a lizard's slow blink, tongue darting out to catch the scent of prey. But she never caught him doing it after that first time, and no one else seemed to notice.

Vulcans often dismissed as illogical the body's visceral reactions to intangible threats. Sometimes to their own peril.

She broached the subject with Stonn. As the man's *kakhartausu*, he had a duty to correct and guide him.

"He has no history of predatory sexual behavior," Stonn assured her.

How could she explain? It was not sexual but something else, something being shaped and aimed and—

Feelings not fact.

Nevertheless, Stonn swore to observe more closely from then on. T'Pring reinforced her mental barriers and did her best to avoid proximity.

But after the attempt to trade Spock's life had been thwarted and Xaverius returned to his cell, for a moment she'd seen not a sly manipulator but only a man, unkempt and defeated. Depressed, she'd thought, until he turned around—

*"You do not remember me."*

*Her flesh prickles, flushes, a body memory frantic for its correlation in her mind.*

*"You were barely seven years of age, a tiny terrified bride in ritual garb that weighed nearly as much as she did—"*

*She remembers how heavy the robes were, how many layers, how her skull ached, hair pulled taut and threaded through with silver cords and beads—*

*"I touched your head and took your fear away."*

Sybok. Spock's brother. Or so he claimed. Beamed off a prison transport mid-journey, sedated, and brought to Ankeshtan K'Til against his will. He'd rejected the path of logic long ago and had no interest in walking it again. *Someone* else wanted him there. His tone implied she

should know who that someone was.

Stonn appeared to know. "I was advised to keep you... unburdened with the knowledge of Sybok's identity." He couldn't look her in the eyes when he said it.

She chose at the time to believe Spock did not know. They'd been intimate only hours before. He would have told her.

She was not so certain of that now.

This morning, from her office window, she could see Sybok in the contemplation garden. Six months after the attempted escape he had all the appearance of a model patient, devoted to study and exercise, dutifully pursuing the way of Surak. In fact, he'd spent forty days in a period of deep meditation and had only recently emerged from this self-imposed solitude.

He looked serene. Beatific. The other inmates circled the sphere of his mystique like unwitting satellites.

One of those, Chu'lak, a new arrival, had taken bolder measures. She watched him approach the meditating Sybok and, uninvited, sit beside him. It was the third consecutive day he had done so.

As a clinician she might posit unmet familial guidance as the reason Chu'lak sought out charismatic male figures and adopted philosophies accordingly. Before logical extremism he'd been a follower of Tu-Jarok (after attending a series of talks facilitated by the Jarok master Pola), and before that had petitioned a Kolinahru monastery for admittance (coinciding with the rejection of a petition for marriage and a visit from his distant cousin, a Kolinahru adept). He'd spent less than a year as a lab assistant at the Vulcan Medical Institute in Shikahr and a year in his family's architectural restoration business.

Chu'lak was a person searching for purpose, but he also wanted someone else to tell him what that purpose was.

She imagined Sybok suddenly opening his eyes and turning to him—

*I am both the cause and the solution.*

T'Pring could not remember being afraid the day she and Spock were bonded as children. If Sybok had taken her fear away, what else might he have taken? Had he done the same to Spock?

Made him love her?

Or made her love him?

No. Impossible.

Sybok was attempting the same psychic manipulation on her as he'd been convicted of doing to others.

She turned back to her comm screen. She needed to confront Spock. Demand he tell her whatever secrets he hadn't trusted her enough to share.

Her hand hovered over an icon - Spock's face in profile floating in a holographic frame. The history of their courtship confined to this one file since the day she'd walked out of his quarters with her dignity still intact. A prison of sentiment. Here were all their conversations over wine and subspace, and every message he'd sent in between. Lengthy epistolary exchanges or short updates as well as holographic and 2D digital images.

The images were a curious indulgence, she had to admit. She hardly needed images to recall his appearance. But occasionally visual aids proved useful in subverting the assumptions of others (her mother's friends primarily) about his "suitability" and the "problem" of his racial duality. He was objectively attractive by Vulcan standards and what's more, shone with an intellectual vigor few possessed.

She opened his most recent message. If she responded to this - or to *any* of the messages he'd sent since she requested time apart - he'd assume she was ready to discuss their future. But she had too many questions about the past. Without answers there could be no future relationship to discuss.

After brief meditation and a steadying breath, she opened a communications channel.

^^^

The laundry fresher unit in Spock's quarters was malfunctioning.

He could probably fix it himself, but he'd have to override certain protocols, and the last time he'd done something like that (with the beverage dispenser), Chief Glolisl got word of it and Spock had suffered a sudden "mysterious" sonic shower malfunction. Spent three weeks forced to shower in the gym.

He'd been warned never to run afoul of the maintenance department, but it stretched credulity that any member of the Enterprise crew could harbor resentment at a perceived slight for so long, even a Tellarite like Glolisl. And yet, his repair request for the fresher had languished unattended for nine days now.

He could use an ozone wand on his uniforms, or send them out if absolutely necessary, but...

He eyed the last set of clean undergarments in the dresser drawer and considered the logistics of laundering by hand in the sink – not merely the time required for washing, but also to dry the garments efficiently, and how much of his monthly water allotment he'd have to use. Not that he used much of the allotment for bathing, preferring the hydro-sonic function.

Why was he saving it at all? The only person who'd used the all-water option in his shower consistently, exuberantly, and extravagantly was Christine after intercourse and *that* was never happening again—

Bzzzzzz “Maintenance.”

Spock allowed himself a quiet sigh of relief. “Enter.”

The person that entered, however, was *not* the person he expected.

“Heard you might be running out of clean smalls,” Lt. Montgomery Scott said as he strolled in, tool bag over his shoulder.

This was the man whose engineering genius had made the crew's rescue from the Gorn Hegemony possible. A man who now stood gazing unabashedly about Spock's quarters, grinning around a wad of chewing gum like he'd never read any of the interspecies relations protocols.

Spock gestured in the direction of the fresher, mostly as an invitation to proceed, noting as he followed the man, “This work seems outside your purview, Lieutenant.”

“Chief Pelia has me on loan to the maintenance department for a bit. She thinks it's punishment but joke's on her. I love digging through the innards of standard home appliances.”

He leaned down to disengage the fresher from its seat in the bulkhead. It moved out with a low grumble.

“I took me mam's sub-z apart when I was five because it was making a queer sound. Woulda had it back together again with none the wiser if my sister hadn't caught me. So really, her fault the scran went off.”

Spock could only speculate on the meaning of some of those words, so chose to ignore the story altogether. “The issue may be due to an error in the programming code.”

“Oh aye, like as not.” Mr. Scott removed a small diagnostic scanner from his tool bag, ran it, sucked on his teeth as he interpreted results. “Hmm. A bit of both, it seems. Dinna fash. I'll get it sorted.”

A moment later he was on his back sliding in behind the thing. For the next few minutes, Mr. Scott asked for tools and Spock handed them to him. It was pleasant in a way, the clicks and pings and whirs of digital calipers, and micro-resonators, and isolinear spanners interspersed with the hypnotic smack of gum-chewing, and the occasional swear.

“Mind me asking a question?”

“That is a question humans ask when seeking permission to pry.”

“Aye, that's fair. I'm wondering why you don't send your pants out like the rest of them?”

“The rest of whom?”

“Command staff.”

“I am not command staff. I'm the science officer.”

“Ah. Well. Figured as you're the CSO, head of your department, you're, y'know, *command*.”

“Command is a necessity of my position, but I prefer the scientific aspects of the job.”

“Same. Dinna mind people. Being in charge of 'em? Neh. Rather just get in and do it then explain *how* to do it to someone who can't see what I'm looking at.”

Spock understood that sentiment, even so...

“If you are incapacitated and someone else *must* take over for you, would you not prefer they had been trained by you to do that task?”

“Point made and taken.” Scott gave a slight huff of exertion from behind the fresher. “Notice you've not answered my question though.”

How to answer in a way that didn't seem paranoid or over-particular? Pranks? DNA theft? Too rigorous a cleaning process in the ship's laundry facility? All had happened over the course of his life, and all involved his underwear. But he was spared the attempt.

“Och, what's this wee speckle?” A soft metallic ping followed by a grunt. “Are ye the cause of all this trouble?”

Mr. Scott wriggled out from between the appliance and bulkhead, sat up and wiped his hand on the front of his tunic. In his other hand, pinched between two fingers, was T'Pring's earring. Squinting one eye at it, the engineer patted blindly on the floor for his diagnostic scanner.

Spock wrestled his sympathetic nervous system into submission as he recalled how her earring might have ended up in the circuitry of his laundry fresher.

“Interesting isotopic signature,” Scott was saying, “Not sure I've seen it's like before.”

The stone nestled in its bezel, smooth and warm, with the characteristic blue opalescence for which it was prized.

“It is vokaya.” Spock held out his hand. “A stone found only on Vulcan.”

Scott opened his mouth to ask something, thought better of it then dropped the earring into the outstretched palm. “Thinking that’s what mucked with the temperature sensor. The other issues are a software malfunction. Got it sorted for you.”

Within five minutes, Lt. Scott had everything back in place. He ran the unit through its cycle and declared it good-as-new then whistled his way out the door.

Later, laundry done and folded neatly into drawers, Spock set aside the reports he’d been working on and picked up the earring. The hook was twisted, and the stone loose in the bezel’s frame, but it could be repaired. He retrieved the tools necessary and set to work. When he’d finished, he wondered why he’d done it. Would she even want it back?

Before he could question the wisdom of it, his hand shot out and manually opened a channel, routing a call to her office at the facility. She wouldn’t see it for days, perhaps weeks, yet he froze, not knowing where to begin except, *I found your earring. It was broken but I fixed it. Shall I send it or keep it or...*

To his astonishment the screen flickered and brightened onto her face blinking back at him, live and in person.

^^^

Captain Christopher Pike had mastered some of the most difficult recipes from some of the most annoying culinary masters in the galaxy. Burnt-sugar croquembouche. Bolian twice-baked sour cheese souffle. Some weird fessel root schnitzel with a zhoug based sauce that took him a month to ferment. Milk bread in the shape of the cutest Klingon battle cruiser ever seen. A Ktarian chocolate puff that used seven different kinds of chocolate and three different tempering techniques. He’d made Vulcan tevmel, for god’s sake (and it was delicious no matter what T’Pring’s mother said).

Why couldn’t he get this lemon pound cake right? Why was *this* the bane of his culinary existence?

It should have been easy for him. Simple baking chemistry. A Maillard reaction. Proteins and sugars breaking apart, recombining, forming new molecules that should look, smell, and taste like his great-grandma Angie’s lemon pound cake and yet, somehow, never did.

He always started with room temperature ingredients (because that was just science). He’d tried it with lemon juice, then lemon extract, then both. Lemon zest, then no lemon zest. He creamed the butter and sugar together five minutes, eight, ten. Experimented with the reverse creaming method, butter paddled into the dry ingredients first. He’d messed with temperature, baking time, even the environmental controls in his quarters. And it never came out right. *Never*.

Perhaps this was simply the curse of any project inspired by nostalgia. A moment of homesick longing in an Academy dorm room and now, here he was, thirty years later, no closer than he’d been the first time he’d attempted to make it.

He only had so much time left to get it right though.

His latest attempt sat on the counter, a ring drizzled with icing, one slice out and laid next to it on the cutting board like a pulled tooth. The crumb seemed okay, a little dry maybe, but it didn’t smell lemony enough. He glanced up at the whoosh of the door.

Una took one look and groaned melodramatically.

“Oh god, Chris. *No*. Not the lemon pound cake again.”

He blew out a noisy sigh. “I know, all right? The definition of insanity.” He put the slice on a plate with a fork and slid it across the counter.

“You know I can’t judge,” she said, taking up the fork. “I’ve liked all the versions – except the one with that weird citrus fruit from that weird market on Zedipra—”

“Yeah, that was more... citrus adjacent really.”

“So,” she said, “what wild hair’s up your ass tonight then?”

He got another fork and reached across, ostensibly to taste his handiwork.

“The usual existential angst.” He held the morsel aloft, eyeing it critically. “Got anything to report?”

“In fact, I do. We’re expecting to rendezvous with a long-range shuttle from Starbase 11 in about four hours. Bringing our much-needed replacement crew and one, Christine Chapel.”

“Uh, do I need to be there?”

“You usually like that part.”

“Not at 01:30.”

“I suppose Spock can do it.”

Chris gave her the side-eye. “Una, come on.”

“He needs to put on his big boy pants and get over it already.” She stabbed her fork into the cake and stuck it in her mouth, tried to swallow, coughed, gulped, coughed a little more.

Karma, perhaps.

“It’s too dry, isn’t it?”

“The frosting stuff helps,” she said, and cleared her throat.

He snatched the plate away and dumped the slice into the recycling bin, followed by the rest of the cake.

“What else is going on?” He gestured that she should follow him to the living room if she wanted the glass of water in his hand.

When they were seated, and the dry cake safely down her throat, she briefed him on the “Ortegas situation.” Mostly that it was proceeding.

“...I still need to interview some tech crew before I can give you a full report though.”

He could tell there was more to it. “Can you give me a generalized notion?”

“There are some... hmm, *twists* in the narrative.”

He snorted.

“But, good news is, I’ll be finishing up pilot training in the coming week and after that they’ll officially be on the roster and on call 24/7.”

“They look good?”

“Erica trained them.” Which was all she needed to say. She gulped down the water and set the glass on the low table. “In other news, our girl genius Uhura is testing out a new bounce relay she’s cobbled together to boost transmission lag times. Pelia seems impressed with the concept. I guess it’s based on some of the data we got from our experience with that subspace fold—”

“If we start singing, I swear to god, she’s going straight to the brig.”

Una laughed and got to her feet. “I don’t think you need to worry. But I’ll certainly advise her of the risks.”

She wouldn’t, he was pretty sure.

When she was gone, he assembled the ingredients to begin again. Lemon juice, lemon extract and the zest of two whole lemons for this one.

^^^

Startled, they said each other’s names at the same time. Paused, then did it again. Then merely stared at each other across the void.

Calls in person like this were usually arranged well in advance and relied on a confluence of subspace idiosyncrasies to facilitate – arrays, buoys, and nodes needed to align and even then, there were lag times and glitches. This seemed strangely providential.

But assigning kismet to random chance would be illogical.

“I did not expect you to answer,” he said. “I have left you several messages.”

“Seventeen,” T’Pring corrected.

Framed by the window at her back another bright day shone under the atmospheric shell of Omicron Lyrae III - its spectrum chosen for the calming effects on inmates. But there were troubling shadows under her eyes.

“One might have taken a subsequent lack of response as an indication of refusal to engage.”

“You answered.”

They eyed each other for an awkward moment. Then she nodded, glancing away briefly – discomfort or distraction, he couldn’t tell.

“Your timing was fortuitous,” she said. “I was preparing to send you a message.”

“Fortuitous indeed.”

“You may think differently when I tell you why.”

He held his breath. *Here it is. The end of our engagement, the end her regard and affection.* A kind of white noise static scrambled his senses a moment, so he missed what she said after and had to ask her to repeat it.

“Were you aware that Xaverius is the assumed name of your brother Sybok?”

One expectation twisted into something equally unpleasant.

“I... I suspected. But I was hesitant to ask you for confirmation of his identity. Undoubtedly, there were ethical reasons you were not at liberty to share that information with me.”

“I kept *nothing* from you,” she said, her voice tight, but then cut off his attempted apology. “He informed me of his identity after that incident.”

He realized he’d told Christine about his suspicions before he’d told T’Pring, his intended wife.

“My understanding,” T’Pring continued, “is that his... *associate* had plans in place to extricate him from a *Federation* facility. Ankeshtan K’Til presented unanticipated security layers. Hence the need to involve you as a bargaining chip.”

“It seems curious he would choose to be there in that case.”

“He did not choose it.” She glanced at her hands folded on the desk. He filled in the blanks.

“Sarek’s doing.” Of course it was.

“When I spoke to your father he implied his concern was to preserve our chances – yours and mine – for a successful union.” She looked up, met his eyes. “My mother needed little enough reason to back out. As you know.”

It was difficult for Spock to believe his future well-being factored into Sarek’s plans it at all except as an afterthought.

“And you?” he asked. “Is this reason enough to end our engagement?”

“This would not be my reason.”

She had a reason then.

He’d been idly rubbing his thumb over the earring’s vokara stone and now held it up so she could see it.

“Recovered from my laundry fresher.” He noted with some satisfaction the verdant flush of color on her chest and cheeks. “It was damaged. I repaired it.”

“A casualty of a failed experiment.”

“That is not how I recall the evening.”

“Keep it. I no longer have its mate.”

The earring’s hook bent as his fist closed around it.

“Why did Sybok flee Vulcan?” she asked abruptly. “What crime did he commit there? I have been unable to gain any credible information on the matter.”

“I was never told, except that our clan renounced him. And that he was a person to be avoided at all costs.” He’d tried to find out once, enlisting his sister’s help, but they were caught quickly, privileges revoked, freedoms curtailed, and told never to attempt it again.

“Could he have been at our koon-ut-la? When we were children?”

The question caught him off-guard. “It seems unlikely.”

Sybok had left home by then, hadn’t he?

But in truth Spock could remember very little of the day of their first bonding ritual, except the moment her mind touched his, vibrating in tandem before they drew apart.

“He may still have been on Vulcan, but I do not remember him being at the ceremony.”

“Nor do I.” T’Pring leaned closer to the screen, her voice pitched low as if someone might hear. “He told me I was... that I had been... *afraid*. That he took the fear from my mind. I do not remember being afraid. I don’t remember—”

Just then, a distraction drew her eye. Something she could see through her window. She drew in short, sharp breath--

“I must go.”

The screen folded into blackness, leaving him with a brief ghostly afterimage of her face in profile.

## Chapter End Notes

Do officers have super fast washer/dryer combos in their quarters on the Enterprise even though there's probably an automated service for the ship? Well, if it's anything like the laundry facilities for enlisted types on naval vessels currently, I imagine W/D convenience in quarters would be a definite perk.



But mostly I thought it would be funny. They probably have self-cleaning clothes.

## Chapter 6

### Chapter Summary

In which we take a short trip to the past, Christine arrives on the Enterprise and is greeted by a less-than-friendly face, the "Twat Triplets" are introduced, and Una calls in reinforcements.

### Chapter Notes

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

### Then...

*"Why are you---? Stop. This is unlawful. It is one thing to appropriate my personal data and servers, but I cannot allow you to seize the files of my patients."*

*Dr. Shanik's concern for her patients had compromised her emotional control.*

*A certain open empathy was necessary when tending to the needs of persons gestating offspring, so Tashsu Svaïd politely ignored her outburst. And yet she persisted in the same vein, going so far as to put herself between the data servers and his officers. He could feel her outrage in the very air itself, palpable, unsettling.*

*"I must insist that you stand aside, Doctor," he told her. "Further interference may be cause for your arrest."*

*She adjusted her countenance, but rather than a veil of calm and concession, she became a statute of judgement, staring him down. He met her confrontational gaze with his own unwavering one and after a moment's consideration, she stepped back, giving the officers just enough room to proceed.*

*"Aside from ethical considerations by which even the Health Ministry must abide," she said, watching the dismantling of her office, "you already have the medical files of Maat t'an su Lhai. You have my diagnosis, and its confirmation from the VMI in Shikahr. What's more, I have provided you with all information regarding her that she provided to me. If she is no longer at her residence or place of employment, you will find no hint of her whereabouts in anyone else's private medical information. Unless you have cause to suspect my other patients are carrying infants with the same rare genetic disorder your actions are illogical."*

*It would seem so to her, perhaps to any outside observer. But as lead tashsu for the Health Ministry's Disease Control and Prevention Agency, Svaïd knew far more than he could share with his own staff let alone a provincial obstetrician.*

*He attempted to offer her reassurance.*

*"Those patients that are due within the next ten days have been referred to Dr. T'Gra at the Tershaya Birth Center. The remainder will be required to delay appointments until we have vetted the data, at which time it will be returned to you – a matter of two to three weeks at most." He held up a hand anticipating her protest. "Emergencies will be forwarded to the Jaleyl Medical Facility where both you and Dr. Gra have privileges. Be assured your patients will not suffer undue duress."*

*"I suspect, Tashsu Svaïd, that you have little experience with pregnant women."*

### Now...

In the cavernous space of Enterprise's docking bay the newly arrived replacement crew stumbled down a shuttle ramp on wobbly space-legs.

Some were deep-space exploration virgins, some were old hands, but all were super pumped to be on the NCC-1701 despite (or because of) its reputation for dangerous encounters and truly bizarre adventures. Word of the weird and wacky got around fast considering the limitations of subspace communications and had only added to Enterprise's growing cache.

Christine stood yawning and stretching, a little disappointed none of her friends were there to greet her. She knew the Enterprise was in gamma shift, but even so, Erica was known to party into the wee hours and still be at the helm at 0800 sharp, annoyingly perky. The least she could have done was show up for Christine's return.

Maybe no one knew she was coming in on this shuttle?

Unlikely. Nyota would have known. And Una. And Spock probably knew, but *his* absence was hardly surprising.

*Bleah. I'm way too tired to deal with complicated feelings right now.*

She adjusted her backpack and shifted her duffel to her other hand, debating which she wanted most – a shower or her bunk – before realizing she didn't know where her bunk would even be. Her comfy cabin was someone else's now. She'd have to wait for a room assignment with everyone else.

Crap! What if she had to double up? Bunk with a resentful stranger? Or one of these noobs?

The interior doors whooshed open, and everyone went stiff to attention before realizing it wasn't the captain or the XO. Just a gamma shift admin officer with his yeoman.

Well, not just *any* admin officer. Lt. Willam Pudi. Buff and burly, thick neck, little head. He'd asked her out. More than once. She'd refused on the principle that she didn't date people she worked with.

He spotted her. A shift in his demeanor suggested he'd heard rumors disputing her commitment to aforementioned principles.

Oh god. She was going to end up sleeping in a utility closet, wasn't she?

She embarked on a desperate charm offensive.

"Billy!" she exclaimed in a tone so forcefully jolly the people next to her took a step back. "It's so great to see you again!"

"Is it?"

"Of course. Who doesn't wanna see a..." *deep breath* "...friendly face?"

The yeoman began calling out names and handing respondents their very own official Enterprise datapadds.

*Please please call my name please...* "Gosh. I feel like I've been away for years. How've you been?"

He didn't look up from the datapadd in his hands. "I'm onboarding crew at two in the morning."

His yeoman shot him a glance followed by a soft apologetic laugh to rest of the group. "This isn't the *official* onboarding though. Don't worry."

"Why would they be worried, Finch?"

"Oh. I-I didn't... I just meant..."

"Have I been less than professional? Created undo anxiety?"

"No sir," squeaked Finch.

"Glad to hear it." Pudi looked out over the group and smiled *professionally*. "Official onboarding is later this morning. 0830. Details are in the info-packets on your padds."

Like the one Christine had not received. There'd be maps, ship's rules and protocols, department supervisors and galley menus – which, admittedly, she did not need (well, maybe the new galley menus) – but also containing stuff like the biometric lock which everyone needed in order to get into, say, *your assigned cabin*.

"Will Captain Pike be there?" asked one of the starry-eyed noobs.

"Yes. Barring unforeseen ship's business. And, uh, he'll say it better when you meet him, but... welcome aboard everyone. Catch some zees. You're gonna need 'em. Dismissed."

As her shuttle pals drifted towards the doors, a few glanced at Christine uncertainly, or spared her a sympathetic smile, but mostly they were anxious to get the hell out of there, steps speeding up the closer they got to those doors. No one looked back as they disappeared into the ship's cheery interior.

Yeoman Finch seemed desperate to do the same, trying to look anywhere that was NOT two officers squaring off in front of God, and the weary shuttle pilot from Starbase 11. That guy, Lt. Henry – skinny, gray buzzcut, and oddly hairy knuckles – took in the scene, and decided he wanted no part of it. He muttered something about a temporary berth in lower decks and walked out.

She tipped her head back, groaned softly, then looked Pudi in the eyes.

His eyes narrowed. His smile slid sideways. He shook the datapadd in his hand like a bag of kibble.

"You don't really need this, do you, Nurse Chapel? I believe you're intimately familiar. With the ship."

“I don’t know where I’m supposed to bunk. *Lieutenant.*”

“Aww. Can’t your boyfriend put you up?”

“I’m really tired. Can you be an asshole tomorrow?”

Yeoman Finch made a “meep” sound.

A couple of seconds ticked by. Pudi grunted, blew out a turbulent sigh that rippled from his pursed lips like a cross between a baby’s burble and an angry fart.

“Fine.” He made a show of examining some bit of information on the padd. “Seems you’re quartered in the same cushy cabin you had before.” He thrust the device at her. “Friends in high places, I guess.”

“Oh my god,” she snapped. “It’s near the medical bay, you dick.”

But as she marched away righteously, she also felt relief that she wouldn’t have to figure out where she was going. Her feet could just carry her there automatically. Soon, all those things that kept her restless and awake for the entire fourteen-hour shuttle trip would recede into oblivion.

Roger’s offer. Spock. Her place on the Enterprise. *Spock*. Mysterious chromosomal mutations. And Spock.

In her cabin, the same blank slab of a mattress greeted her. The way she’d left it for someone else had been left for her. Bedding in a neat stack at one end. Single pillow at the other. She blinked blurry-eyes, swore she could see the indentation of bodies. Her own. *His*. She didn’t bother with the sheets. Just stripped out of her travel clothes, laid herself out like a corpse and pulled a blanket up to her chin, asleep in seconds.

^^^

Angel Leitaο didn’t use the gym if he knew the Twat Triplets would be there together, all at the same time.

Locker room etiquette went out the window then. Bare butts on benches. Mirror hogging. Roughhousing like they were goddam ten years old or something. Stupid bets on *literally anything*. And the constant, just fucking *endless*, pilot-specific technobabble spoken loudly at each other but in full awareness of who they were leaving out.

Not this morning though. And not simply because that old guy shuttle pilot from Starbase 11 was currently using the showers.

No. After a year building a rapport with the ship and each other, the pilot trainees were experiencing a crisis of trust.

Braced one-handed against the bulkhead, Angel wriggled a foot into a boot and snuck a peak from under the damp fringe of his hair.

All the machismo had gone out of Shula’s jaunty blue antennae as he stood scowling in the mirror, patting the cotton fluff of his hair. Rosalia Bon sat perched on the far end of the bench with a bottle of spray moisturizer aimed at her shins, staring into space like she’d forgotten what she meant to do with it. And in between was Jenty, hunched in on herself.

“It’s not like shit decisions are hereditary,” Jenty muttered. A continuation of an ongoing dialog Angel was catching the tail end of.

Bon came out of her fog with a little shudder, immediately pissed off. “No one disputes that. Ortega wouldn’t.”

Jenty bristled but before she could counter, Shula singsonged—“We’re not-sup-poze-to-be-talk-ing-a-bout-it.”

Angel ducked his head to hide his reaction, pretty sure what “it” was.

Just then a cheerful little Bolian ensign wandered in with a bag of workout gear, and oblivious to the vibe, asked, “Talking about what?”

“Mind your business, Ensign,” Bon shot back.

“No need for that,” Sam Kirk admonished as he came around a corner.

Oh look. Xenanthropologist playing white knight in a karate gi.

“If you don’t want people asking what you’re on about,” he continued, “stop going on about it.”

The shuttle pilot from SB-11 chose that moment to enter with a towel wrapped around his lower half. Everyone went very still, *very* self-consciously. “Well,” he said into the awkwardness. “That was certainly refreshing.”

Time to beat a retreat.

Angel grabbed his insignia badge and tricorder from his locker and slid his thumb across the keypad, reactivating the forcefield for the next guy. Most crew didn’t bother to actually *lock* the lockers, but Angel knew better than to trust people just because they were Starfleet.

^^^

Doctor Joseph M'Benga leaned his head out from the exam table's privacy screen, his grin immediate and sincere. "Christine! Welcome back."

"Thanks."

"Hold on." He ducked back. She could hear a quiet exchange. A few seconds later an orderly appeared and soon had the patient, Ensign Ootis (aka Tootie), on a hoverbed headed towards OR 1.

Tootie was the only Saurian currently serving on a starship, but Christine knew better than to ask what was wrong within earshot of the the patient.

Joseph made what she assumed were surgical notes, only looking up to engage when she was standing right in front of him. He smiled again, but it was tentative.

"I was getting ready to call Esther to assist. Unless," he ventured with a hopeful quirk of his lips, "you're ready to dive in?"

"You wouldn't believe how ready." She followed him to the sterilizing station. "What are we doing?"

"Removing a clutch of eggs before they're viable." His voice had that comforting, familiar low rumble that made the cilia in her ears quiver. "Ensign Ootis has had an unfortunate spontaneous parthenogenesis."

Saurians reproduced sexually, but some females retained a kind of vestigial reproductive backup plan. Self-fertilized little clones of themselves.

"Yikes. Poor Tootie. Wait..." Christine seemed to recall a prescription. "Isn't she on hormonal suppressants?"

"She is. Was. I think she simply forgot. It's been a stressful year."

*And then some...*

He handed her the surgical plan to look over and started walking, saying over his shoulder, "She's mortified, so I'd like to take care of this quickly and quietly."

Irritation flared suddenly, fizzing in her brain. "I've only been gone for three months. I think I can still remember medical privacy protocols for godssake."

He paused midstride, and turned to stare at her, a little flabbergasted. "O-kay. I wasn't implying otherwise."

The fizz fizzled out. "Sorry. Caught some flack when I arrived. It still chaffs a little."

"Should I ask who from?"

She shook her head. "Not important. It was a long trip," she admitted.

"Are you certain you're up for this?"

"Yes. Absolutely."

A few minutes later she was telling Tootie, "Everything's going to be fine. You're in good hands."

^^^

Una made the decision based on time commitments.

First officer, executive officer, flight trainer *and* personnel officer investigating harassment complaints? She needed to delegate.

Laan gave her a *well, duh* look. "What do you need, Chief?"

"Do you recall an incident that happened during the war? Friendly fire maybe, or a tragic miscommunication. Took out a bunch of cargo ships."

"Relief supplies headed to Dakka system?"

"That's the one."

"Automated freighters and a guide ship with three crew. All lost."

"Yes. Do you know if anyone onboard the Enterprise is related to any of the three crew?"

"Not off the top of my head," Laan chuckled. "But I can look into it."

"I'd appreciate that. Let me know what you find." Una reached to sign off, stayed her hand to add— "For my eyes and ears only though."

A soft snort. "Yeah. Not my first rodeo."

## Chapter End Notes

The Enterprise is a village that flies through space for science. (I mean, yes, it's a military hierarchy but mostly made up of science geeks.) It is a lived space populated by varied species and personalities. I'm exploring that here.

Tashsu - controller or person-in-charge.

## Chapter 7

### Chapter Summary

In which Sybok and Chu'lak discuss sedition. Christine learns that Erica is in trouble. A group of missionaries being sought by Vulcan security forces find themselves adrift in a derelict spaceship. Christine goes to Spock for answers, and, well...

#### *Vulcan Rehabilitation Facility Ankeshtan K'til.*

On the third day Sybok opened his eyes, glanced sideways and closed them again. "You have successfully disturbed my serenity, Chu'lak."

"Then engage with me or reject me."

"Either option will only give pride to your misery. You and your brother can martyr yourselves on your own time."

"That is not our goal."

"That is how it will end."

"Not this time."

"I am not interested in your latest attempt at a holy war, or whatever petty vandalism you and Teska are calling 'sedition' these days." That hit a little too close to the mark. "I am only speaking to you now to impress upon you how deeply you will suffer should you reveal my name to anyone here."

Chu'lak glanced about. The hardened features of some of the other inmates had not softened much that he could tell, though many claimed to have found a renewed peace under the ministrations of counselors and logical disciplines. But surely at least one of these criminals knew Sybok as *Sybok*? The administrators *must* know.

"Your name is not as useful as your connections. Or your unique mental acuity."

"Is that what they're calling it now?" Sybok muttered. A rhetorical question easily dismissed.

There *was* an agenda and the optimal time for action would soon disappear.

"We have reason to believe, based on information from a *primary* source, that a weapon of unimaginable power has been discovered. The first of its kind in over six thousand years."

"My partner and I do not traffic in weapons of mass destruction."

"It could be used that way, but with guidance of the sort *you* could provide it would be far more effective. 'The greatest victory is to change the minds of one's enemies.'"

Sybok had canted slightly towards him, his features schooled into careful neutrality. "If you're quoting Surak this must be a *very* good scheme."

Which was encouragement enough for Chu'lak to press his case.

"Fourteen years ago, when I was a laboratory technician at the VMI, our team received a case for review – a female fetus in utero with a genetic disorder so rare it was no longer in the current databases, only in historical archives. The outcome for infant and mother was believed to be dire, and termination was not only advised but *required*."

"An edict such as that strains the ethicism of logic."

Every adherent of V'tosh ka'tur debated the ethicism of logic, especially as it applied to fundamental moral issues such as *body autonomy*.

"It does indeed. Soon after our confirmation of the diagnosis, agents for the Health Ministry arrived. They removed all communications about the case, every record or exchange, scrubbed the files completely. Not a trace remained." Chu'lak knew this because he'd tried to find them covertly, been caught and dismissed. "We were all required not to speak of it to anyone, not even each other, lest it alarm the public."

"Was an environmental cause suspected?"

"No such investigations were pursued that I knew of. Our facility would have been the one to do the testing. The concern was not for the danger the disorder presented to its mother or to the public at large but rather the danger a living child with those genetic characteristics would pose on an unwitting populace should it ever reach adulthood."

"A *Keikudaya*?" Intrigue radiated off Sybok now and Chu'lak ducked his head to hide his glee. But the man's next words poured sand on the

fire, “You want my assistance to chase down a myth.”

“It is not a myth. The keikudaya lives. Her gift is demonstrably real.”

“I doubt you and Teska would know what to do with it even if was real.”

“But you *would*.”

“Hush.”

“Think what we could accomplish, Sybok—”

“Be *still*.”

Chu’lak bristled, but a commotion in his periphery stopped whatever protest he thought to make.

T’Pring, the administrator betrothed to Sybok’s mixed-race brother, was crossing the grounds in a hurry, the tails of her headscarf flying back. She ignored logically designed walkways and disrupted meditative patterns raked into the sand in her single-minded march towards the pair of them.

Chu’lak’s first thought was accompanied by a prurient thrill – *here comes the goddess Akraana riding her sandstorm, bringing war and sex and boiling blood.*

His second thought?

*She knows.*

^^^

“You’ve never been a fan of the slow burn.” Erica picked up a french-fry, examined it listlessly and put it down again. “Not in romance fiction or in real life.”

Christine shifted on the bar stool, trying to keep the very short skirt of her very short dress tucked under her butt. It was the first time she and Erica had met up since she’d been back. Cocktails and a sparkly outfit seemed the perfect prescription to shake off the cranky cloud that hovered over her since she got off the shuttle three days ago.

Until Spock had walked into the bar, took one look at her and walked right back out again.

If he didn’t want to be friends, fine. But there was no logical reason they couldn’t occupy the same public spaces at the same time. *He* was supposed to be the logical one. Or at least better at compartmentalizing--

Just one of the issues regarding him she’d been expounding on in various ways for the last forty minutes.

“Life’s too short for all that ‘will-they-won’t-they’ stuff.” She downed her martini and signaled the bartender for another. “Everybody knows they *will* so why not get to the point?”

“Maybe that’s *not* the point though. Not everybody lives like they’re gonna die tomorrow.”

“I don’t do that!”

“—and Spock’s deep, you know.”

“So, I’m shallow? Is that what you’re saying?”

“I dunno,” Erica muttered, elbow on the counter, cheek smushed into a hand. “Maybe.”

“Wow. Ouch.”

Erica unhunched her shoulders, wriggled her spine into a straight line and pushed the plate of fries - still piled high next to a pristine pool of ketchup - away. “I’m not in the mood for this.”

Still stinging, Christine spun round on the bar stool so she could scowl at the crowd. “Order something else then. Jesus.”

“No. Not... this.” Erica waved a hand at the plate, then made whirling motion in the space between their bodies. “*This*.”

Socializing? Friendship? Air? “What?”

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, on account of you’ve been talking about a **guy** non-stop, but I’ve got my own stuff going on.”

Well. Crap.

“Oh my god, Erica, you’re right. I’m *so* sorry. I was venting. I never intended to dominate the evening with whiny bullshit.”



About a man, no less.

*What is happening to me?*

"I know," Erica said, dismissing both apology and excuses. "It's fine."

"It's not *fine*. I hate people like me. I'm a terrible friend. You should have shut me down sooner."

"You're not a *terrible* friend. *Per se*. It's just... I wanted to be regaled with tales of your nerdy adventures. Listen to gossip about people I don't know and don't see every goddamned day."

"Yeah, again, so so sorry. Distracted from what though? What's going on? Tell me."

"Eh. I can't."

"You can tell me anything."

"No. I *can't*," Erica stressed with an exaggerated grimace.

"*Classified*. Right. Sure."

Christine was pretty much indifferent to the whole "classified" thing. Authorities and their secrets, right? If she needed to know they'd read her in on it, otherwise, no point wondering what warranted the label.

"It's more like an investigation," Erica corrected, watching bubbles collapse in her beer. "Or *exactly* like, I guess. About me."

"Over *what*? You being too good at your job?"

But try as she might, Christine was unable to pry any more out of her friend and had to settle for an extra-long hug followed by the requested tales of her nerdy adventures – waxing poetic about the facilities at Utopia Planitia's famed IXAA, how the city of Shi'kahr on Vulcan actually had a nightlife, watching holovids never seen by the public of the Orion digs—

"So, what's he like, your hero Roger Korby?"

She paused, thought about it, finding her impressions of him hard to pin down - the way she thought he would be, the way he was with her, and the way he was with the others on the team. How she'd felt seen, really *seen* in away she hadn't felt with anyone else – not with family or mentors or lovers. And other times she just felt... watched. Not in a creepy way, but definitely in *some* way.

"He's actually kind of sexy. In that ginornous, gorgeous intellect fashion."

"Are you changing types?"

"What d'you mean? I've always found the brain to be the sexiest organ."

"But you didn't used to date them."

"I should have stuck with that policy," she laughed.

She didn't mention the assault. Started to but it just wouldn't come out of her mouth. It wasn't the vibe she wanted to end the evening on. And even though she had no reason to feel ashamed about it, being slammed with shit balloons was a singular experience with few correlations in her life to date. She didn't know when she'd be ready to talk about it, if ever.

Around 2200 she and Erica parted ways in the corridor outside the galley with promises to work out together at 0630.

Her reasons for ending up at Spock's door fifteen minutes later would not bear scrutiny in the morning. Suffice it to say she'd worked up an ire and leaned on the chime until the pleasant notes compressed into an uncanny squeal. By the time she considered he might not even be in his quarters, the door whooshed open.

How a door *whoosh* could sound so thoroughly pissed-off was a question for another time, because there he was: barefoot, shirtless, hair mussed, expression icy.

^^^

### ***The S.S.Yuno. Somewhere between Tau Aerto and Yael 129.***

They had been ministering to refugees at a colony on Mossiv for three months before Sarda Romar learned they were being hunted, that V'Shar agents had been seeking their whereabouts since they'd left Vulcan.

By that time they had gathered others who'd been called to their mission, bringing the logic of compassion in one hand and *Oekon's* gift of *k'war'ma'khan*, the awareness of All as One, in the other.

Benefactors amongst those they'd helped were eager to help them in turn, providing funds and transport to worlds on the outskirts and edges of

Federation law where their ministry was needed. The V'Shar were never far behind but they trusted Oekon to guide them and keep them safe.

The *child's* gift had not yet manifested then – or at least not in the form Vulcan's Ministry of Health believed required termination in the womb.

The idea that any ethical being would think such a thing ran counter to his understanding of logical morality. It appalled him and reinforced his belief that *Oekon* had divinely intervened, guiding Lhai to his door that day to save her beautiful child.

And she was beautiful, their Sulei. Soft and brown, a verdant glow beneath her freckled cheeks, and a halo of hazel hair that seemed constantly lit by static charge. Unlike most young children, her emotions were slow to surface. And though she showed little intellectual curiosity, her presence, even as an infant, had a calming effect on others, particularly those in pain. Perhaps because her eyes, often unfocused or looking inward, saw a different, more benevolent reality. When she did fix her gaze on someone in need, truly *looked* at them, they felt themselves part of that reality, wrapped in her contentment like the plush toy animal she held to her chest.

Sarda could not have imagined, let alone anticipated, what his counsel to a young woman caught weeping at his doorstep would mean for him these many years later, would bring him to this point in time and space, in a small cruiser of questionable registry drifting in the vast black.

When the catastrophic event occurred, it seemed to erupt out of nowhere, an unexpected disaster with no prior warning. Yet, like any disaster, in retrospect the signs of its imminence were always there. He'd simply chosen not to see them.

He could not shirk his responsibility now, *would not*, though his weariness was constant and bone-deep, unrelieved by meditation or slumber.

Leaning against the open door of the captain's berth, he watched Lhai and T'Kar carefully roll the child onto her side and cover her with the weighted blanket again.

"We can't keep her sedated for the rest of her life," T'Kar said.

Though Lhai's shoulders tensed, she made no reply to the obvious. Sarda touched her forearm, squeezing gently. "I will see how the repairs are progressing."

T'Kar shot him a look. None of them were engineers. She'd been a reclusive, anti-social artist before she was called. Yiluv, up in the flight deck, had gotten her pilot's certification via subspace. T'Rehu was the rebellious daughter of a Shikahri industrialist. Metana, a nurse practitioner. All the non-Vulcans of their coterie (which had included *at least* a flitter mechanic) had chosen to part ways after the tragic event.

This little ship, the S.S. *Yuno* had been leased for their use by an anonymous benefactor, its captain (and sole operator) given coordinates to a moon in the Tau Aerto system – safe, unpopulated – but only if they could make it to Epitome Station in time.

A busy hub like Epitome was both a risk and a blessing. Easier to slip through unnoticed, but more likely to be flagged for alerts. Sulei had been particularly agitated and in their desperation to get her through the terminal without incident, they'd tried using a device—

Despite the resulting commotion of that mistake, somehow, miraculously, they got away.

The captain's body was now in a stasis hold below deck. It was possible Sulei had inadvertently done something to the ship's propulsion systems as well. They still had functioning life support.

And an emergency beacon.

"We have to use it, Sarda," Yuliv urged. "I haven't the knowledge to determine what has failed let alone to fix it."

Metana's hand covered the lever that accessed the signal. "And if the V'Shar are close?"

"Then they will be pleased their aid made it so convenient to capture us."

T'Rehu, in the jump-chair next to the cabin door, tucked her trembling hands between the seat and her thighs. "We can't be sure anyone will hear us."

They had been adrift for sixteen hours now.

"*That* is a certainty if we do not use the beacon at all," Sarda pointed out. Logic and a positive perspective were not incompatible approaches. "We are, as always, in *Oekon's* hands. We must take what action we can and trust there is a greater plan for us."

He nodded at Metana. She swallowed and removed her hand from the lever. Yuliv pulled it up and twisted it. A light began to pulse softly and a single, small bloop sounded, but only to let them know the beacon was transmitting.

^^^

Spock, fully prepared to voice his displeasure at the person on the other side of the door (Christine) was unprepared for how she would look under the bright lights of the corridor, bedazzled in pink and white from the top of her bright teased-up hair to the toes of her shimmering tights. Her shoes, impractical (also pink), she held in one hand by the straps.

Her dress was ... quite short.

“Oh, shoot. Did I get you out of the shower?”

“I was preparing to retire for the evening.”

She laughed – a bright, tipsy burble. “At 2200? What are you a monk now?”

It was 22:18 but he refrained from correcting her. It would only prolong the conversation.

“I have had a long and trying day.”

“You tell me to meditate when I’ve had a hard day.”

“Why are you here, Nurse Chapel?”

“I need to ask you about something. In private.” She glanced over her shoulder at the sound of voices and footsteps. “Please.”

Lieutenants Boateng and Virtanen slowed down as they passed, mouths open at the sight of her vivid outfit and his unfortunate lack of attire, but they quickly and wisely averted gazes. Humans had a way of pretending nothing at all was amiss that he sometimes envied.

Virtanen was the new replacement at bridge ops. He’d arrived with Christine on the same shuttle. Boateng was from engineering. Which meant the gossip was sure to spread like a virus, fore to aft, port to starboard, deck by deck.

He waited until they’d rounded the curve and were out of view before stepping aside to let her enter.

The door slipped shut. She stood, swinging the shoes absently, perusing the premises as if something might be different from the last time she was there.

She’d only been gone three months and eight days. It was much the same. But when he turned to her to say so, she made a squeaking sound, and looked quickly away. Her chest flushed, then her face.

That usually happened when she drank alcohol, and usually within minutes.

She cleared a thickness in her throat, said, “Um, could you maybe put on a shirt or something?”

He moved to comply before a thought stopped him - *why should I?*

“I did not invite you here. You should have no expectation that I will adjust my routine for your comfort.”

“Oo-kay. May I sit down?”

*There’s the chair*, he indicated but then kept his arm out like a bar blocking her way to the more comfortable floor cushions in the communal area.

She sighed. Eyes on his face, she sat and pointedly crossed her legs.

The chair was ... a mistake. Worse than the cushions because her legs would have been hidden by the table if she’d sat on the cushions. Now he would need to avoid looking at her legs lest she become smug. Worse still, he’d fully intended to put on a shirt for sleeping and now felt he couldn’t because it would admit his own discomfort.

He refused to let her request be the logical one.

“What is it you wanted to ask?”

“Well. I’d *like* to ask why you bolted as soon as you saw me—”

“You were not the reason I left. I remembered that Number One—”

An impatient gesture cut off his explanation, “Doesn’t matter. Not why I’m here. Okay...”

She paused, seeming to weigh the efficacy of whatever she was about to ask. It warranted a deep, fortifying breath, and a slight squirm on the chair seat.

“Okay. I need to know if there’s some sort of official investigation going on about Erica?”

He didn’t know what he’d been expecting exactly, but it was not that. “Lt. Ortegas?”

“Yes, Spock. *Of course*. Who else?”

“There are five crew members who use the name Erica, including Erica Fassbinder who trims my hair.”

Her glare of mild exasperation forced him to forgo his pedantry and admit, “I know nothing of an investigation concerning Lt Ortegas.”

“Really?”

“I have no reason to deceive you on the matter.”

She regarded him skeptically a moment, then sighed. “All right. That’s too bad.”

“Do you wish me to inquire—”

“*No*. Uh, definitely not. I got the impression she wasn’t even supposed to mention the investigation let alone what it’s about. She just seemed so beaten down. I thought maybe if you knew something...”

“You assumed I would tell you.”

“She’s our friend, Spock.”

“She is *your* friend. She is my colleague.”

“Right, of course.”

“But I will attempt to find you information if I can manage it discreetly.”

“Thank you.”

There was nothing more to say but neither of them moved. All the words they weren’t saying hung awkwardly in the air between them. Instead of urging her to leave, his mind scrambled for a way to keep her there.

“How-how was the research? Your fellowship?”

“Amazing. Dr. Korby is brilliant of course. And everyone else was too. I was a little intimidated at first but as soon as we were working, we just meshed into a team. I’d love to tell you about the research when you’ve got time.”

“I would enjoy that.”

She sighed, “I’ve missed this. Three months went by really fast but in some ways, it seemed like forever.”

“Subjectively, time will appear to pass more slowly when one is anticipating a result or longing for... something.”

She gulped hard, her eyes flicking sideways then down to her hands twisting in her lap. A breathy laugh, “I *really* wish you’d put on a shirt.”

The pause was just long enough for him to consider it before her gaze shot up again.

“Or, you know, take off your pants.”

The atmosphere buzzed and hummed, charged with a very *specific* energy.

“That dress is an affront to the eyes,” he countered. “One risks the possibility of a seizure.”

“For a guy with inner eyelids that’s really saying something. I’d need help getting out of it though. It’s got this old-fashioned, finicky zipper.”

“I offer my assistance.”

She uncrossed her legs with languorous precision, for his benefit he knew. But she didn’t take his offer. Both feet on the floor, she held his gaze steady and widened her legs just enough to remind him what he knew of her, there, at the core. Two steps. Three. And he was standing between her knees.

"Pants," she said, her voice thick.

He hooked his thumbs in the waistband, pushed them down over his hips and thighs until they fell of their own accord to the carpet, and he stepped out and kicked them aside.

She dipped her head and inhaled. It was obscene, thrilling, and her mouth was right there, right *there*. He surrendered to the wet well of it and the risk of her teeth.

Later in the bed, as he aligned his body with hers so they could slot together with one smooth push, a glint of something caught in his peripheral vision.

T’Pring’s earring on the nightstand.

He remembered putting it there, but the why escaped him.

Suspended between a woman’s thighs, his arms stiff, he felt himself a bridge over a river of probabilities, potentialities, and scenarios with myriad possible outcomes.

Christine gazed up at him, shining with the preternatural patience she had whenever he wavered. But he’d already decided. At least for tonight.

Braced on one arm, he reached over and brushed the earring off the nightstand to the carpet. Then slipped that arm beneath her back and rolled them both, so it was her above, straddling him the way she preferred. She canted her hips, sank down to engulf him. He slipped a hand between their bodies, sliding his fingers over her clit.

*In the morning, he will step on the earring. In the morning, she will try (unsuccessfully) to slip out unnoticed into a too bright corridor, a beacon of pink and white sequins, with her hair in tangled tufts and her makeup smeared.*

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