

For Want Of A Nail

By

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First of a Series:

- 1) For Want of A Nail
- 2) In the Cold of the Night
- 3) Father To the Man
- 4) Purgatory

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Notes and Acknowledgments

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Vulcan terms used in this story were taken from the online [Vulcan Language Dictionary](#), the [Vulcan Language Institute](#), or I made them up myself.

Chapter 1

San Francisco: 2161

“You look very -,” she searched for the right word, “heroic.” T’Pol watched Archer’s eyes flicker with sad understanding. Then he turned and mounted the stairs again, leaving her standing alone. Completely alone.

Applause and voices drifted in from the podium outside. The Vulcan woman took a step toward the opening and saw the top of the crowded bleachers. The entire surviving crew was out there, along with most of the staff of Starfleet Command and the entire diplomatic corps for every alien embassy on the planet.

And Trip’s parents would be sitting out there somewhere too. They and the rest of the surviving kin of the slain crew had been placed in prominent seats. Given positions of high honor and respect in acknowledgment of their sacrifice. Would they care? Would it matter to any of them where they were sitting today, when the honor and respect had been bought with their own flesh and blood?

Briefly T’Pol reconsidered. Perhaps she should make contact with Trip’s family after all. At least meet them and give them a chance to say the things that no doubt they had been wanting to say to her for all these years. Let them release the anger and bitterness they must still be holding within their hearts for the pain she had caused their son.

She couldn’t do it. It was too much, she didn’t have the strength. “From the first I have been weak and a coward. I suppose it is only fitting that I finish that way,” she brooded bitterly.

T’Pol turned away and moved with a steady pace down the corridor to the visitor’s wing where the Enterprise crew had been assigned quarters. Only a skeleton staff was on duty today, and even they were distracted by the broadcast being piped over the intercom. The sight of her approach caused them to snap to alertness. Some of the younger officers even saluted. Had she been human T’Pol would have permitted herself a wry smile. She had not been subjected to such military formality since the war ended.

Her amusement faded quickly. The last details of her arrangements were complete. All that remained now was to return to her quarters and wait for the proper time.

Only a dim trace of light managed to leak around the curtains when she entered her room. It was as bare and spartan as the cell she had occupied during her time studying the disciplines of Karolina, after Elizabeth’s death. “My last and greatest mistake,” she admitted, not for the first time.

The pain of watching her baby die had been crippling, unbelievable. She would never have believed that such grief could be experienced and survived. Trip had tried to help her, had tried to beseech her to help him with his own pain. But once again she had fled from him. She could not face him, could not face the pain of her loss and his loss at the same time. Trip had begged her not to do it. He had wept and pleaded with her to stay with him, to hold him and let them both heal together.

But she had fled to the Mind Masters of Gol. For a full year she had stayed in isolation from everyone and everything. Meditating and studying. Hiding from her grief. Hiding from Trip's grief. Slowly she had felt the pain subside. Slowly her control returned. Slowly she learned to think again without wanting to scream. Finally the Student-Adepts told her that she had achieved as much as they could teach her. It was time for her to return to her life outside the sanctuary.

Enterprise: 2156

The High Council willingly agreed to request on her behalf that she be allowed to return to Enterprise. Captain Archer welcomed her back with sober pleasure, glad to see her feeling better. The rest of the crew offered friendly, albeit restrained, greetings as well.

Trip did not come to meet her shuttle. Nor did he show up for her welcome back gathering in the mess hall. The next day she went looking for him in Engineering. He was in his office hunched over a terminal. She knocked on his door. "Good Morning Commander," T'Pol had said uncertainly.

Trip glanced up without expression. "Good morning Commander. Welcome back." He turned back to the monitor and removed her from his personal universe. She stood there for a moment longer wondering whether to say or do anything else. Then she walked away.

After that nothing was ever the same. T'Pol resumed her former habit of sharing meals in the Captain's Mess. But Trip did not join them. "He never socializes much anymore T'Pol," Archer told her wearily. "Not even with Malcolm. Not with Hoshi, Travis, Hess, none of his old friends. I have given up on trying to get him to come by and watch a polo match anymore. He does his job and he does it superlatively. But then he quietly goes to his quarters, or works out in the gym and then goes to his quarters, and that's all we see of him until he goes back on duty again."

"Have you spoken to Phlox?" She automatically invoked the second level of *klarahu deni* to suppress any trace of worry. "It is not healthy for a human to live completely without social contact."

Archer shook his head. "Unless and until he does something out of line I have no authority to interfere with how he chooses to spend his off hours, T'Pol. It isn't

interfering with his duties at all as far as I can tell. He just doesn't seem to give a damn about anything or anyone else except his work now."

That evening T'Pol stood outside Tucker's quarters. She had managed to convince herself that as First Officer it was her duty to monitor any and all personnel matters that might have a bearing on ship's efficiency. She pressed the button and waited. Thirty seconds passed and she firmly quashed an urge to fidget. After a full minute she started to reach for the buzzer again just as the door slid open.

Trip was in his uniform but barefoot with his collar unfastened. He looked at T'Pol quizzically and said, "Commander. What can I do for you?"

"A matter of ship's business Commander," she told him. "May I come in?" Trip stepped aside and gestured her to enter. She stepped inside and all her training could not stop a prickle of shock. Everything was gone. All the photographs of his family and shipmates, all the souvenirs, the meditation candle and holder that she had given him, it was all gone. The room was unadorned and unmarked by any personal memorabilia at all.

T'Pol glanced at Trip and saw him watching her closely. She raised her chin and mentioned, "I see that you have redecorated."

"Is that the ship's business you wanted to talk about?" Trip asked her. For the first time since her return his voice held a trace of emotion. It did not sound pleasant. T'Pol turned to face him.

"Actually it may have a bearing on the matter, yes." She took a deep breath. "The Captain has advised me that you have become atypically solitary of late. He is concerned, as am I. I thought perhaps that you should -"

"I think perhaps that you should mind your own business Commander," Trip hissed. The look in his eyes struck her like a knife in the belly and froze the words in her throat. "I will say this once, and once only. How I live and how I decorate my quarters and who I do or do not associate with on my own time is my business and none of yours." Trip advanced like a stalking cougar, forcing her to step back a pace. "If my job performance is not up to standard then put me on report. Otherwise BACK OFF."

T'Pol straightened and countered, "It is my responsibility as First Officer to-"

"It is your responsibility as First Officer to tend to the ship. That means the ship and the crew as far as duty related matters. It is neither your responsibility nor your right to interfere with my private life. You gave up that right when you threw me away like a sack of trash. Now get your Vulcan ass out of my quarters and don't ever set foot back in here unless you have a real matter of ship's business to deal with. Otherwise I will file a harassment report and have you up on charges. Now GET OUT OF HERE."

T'Pol stumbled away from him in shock and reached blindly for the door button. It took everything she had learned at Gol and more to make it to her quarters with her facade of control intact. Once inside she sat down on the edge of her bunk and stared blindly at the far wall, trying to make her mind a blank. She reached deep within to find the discipline she had been taught. It had never seemed so elusive.

Under the heat of Vulcan's sunshine, she had felt warmed and renewed. At Gol she was able to burn away her grief and pain, to emerge once again sharp and bright like a blade newly forged.

Now she finally understood. In burning away her pain she had also burned away half her soul.

They eventually worked out an effective professional relationship. They never argued. When a point of disagreement came up, they simply discussed it dispassionately and settled it with a minimum of friction. They seldom spoke off duty. In fact they seldom spoke at all if it could be avoided.

Then the war started and ironically things began to improve. In the turmoil of combat Enterprise was once again welded into a unified team focused with single minded determination on a simple goal - survival. Trip didn't really become much more sociable, but no one noticed because everyone else started acting like he did. Social activities dropped off to a bare minimum. Movie nights and rare get-togethers in the mess hall were about the limit. Other than those and the rare shore leave stops, the entire crew was tuned like a phase cannon on fighting and trying to stay alive. They became a team again.

But it wasn't like it had been in the Expanse. Trip never let T'Pol get close enough renew anything like their old connection. If she tried to approach closer than casual friendship Trip instantly threw up an impenetrable barrier and retreated. She finally gave up pressing and decided to wait. Time, she decided, would be the key. Patience and persistence would eventually allow her to convince him that there could still be a future for them together.

Small things gave her hope. Tiny things, but she found herself clinging to them. One at a time, Trip starting replacing a few of the decorations in his quarters. He never put them all back, but some of his favorite items like that ridiculous toy doll regained their former pride of place. Others seemed to have disappeared for good. She never saw the Vulcan meditation candle and holder again. In fact, there was nothing left in his quarters to provide evidence that she had ever entered his life.

San Francisco: 2161

T'Pol took off her uniform and put on her meditation robes. Instead of the ones she had been using most recently she opened her storage chest and carefully withdrew a wrapped package. Gently T'Pol removed the tissue paper to reveal her old robes, the ones she had

worn during her first time aboard Enterprise. The ones her mother had made for her. The ones she wore when Elizabeth died.

The robes that she was wearing the last time that she and Trip cried together.

T'Pol concentrated on her breathing and quickly dressed herself. Finally she drew out her mother's IDIC amulet and hung it around her neck. Closing the chest with a sharp slap, she shoved it carelessly back into the closet and slid the door shut. Then she stopped and made herself stand quietly for a few moments, breathing and running through the preliminary exercises meant to quiet the mind and settle the katra. Now was not the time to lose control. Now, of all the times in her life, was not the time to lose control.

T'Pol lit her meditation candles with rapid efficiency before settling down on her cushion. Conditioned reflexes aided her now as her breathing fell automatically into the proper patterns. She dropped easily into the first level of meditation and began to relax her muscles in preparation for the second level. As she descended deeper into her mind her heartbeat slowed and her metabolic rate subsided into almost imperceptible levels. Her core body temperature fell several degrees. T'Pol's head sank forward to her chest and her breathing nearly stopped.

She walked through the swirling mist of her mind. Images and sounds came and went around her as her subconscious mind processed the day's memories. Scent and taste and touch flickered across her perceptions and were gone as swiftly as they came. This was not what she was looking for. She pressed onward, searching deeper. She visualized a tunnel leading downward, into the darkness of the past. Leading into the memories of long ago.

Here.

T'Pol paused in her journey as a scene formed. She watched herself sitting at a table across from Trip in the Enterprise mess hall. He was younger. How could he have aged so much in only six years? There was gray in his hair only yesterday. Surely it was there back then? But no. This version of Trip had no trace of gray. No lines marked the corners of his eyes, and his mouth lacked the hard carved grooves of bitterness that were permanently scored into the face of the Trip she had spent the last five years with. But... his hair had been gray at the temples when she returned from Gol, she was certain of it.

Had she done this to him? So quickly?

The voices came to her now, eating into her katra with acid shame. She heard Trip mutter the words "lab rat" and bit her lip, turning her face away. When she looked back the scene was gone.

"From the beginning I was unworthy of you ashayam," she thought. "We were both afraid that day, afraid of what had passed between us and uncertain of what it meant. But your fear was justified, because you had no way of knowing what I felt. I had no such

excuse. I knew exactly what you felt. I knew it the instant you touched me. I could feel your love and it terrified me. I feared the power of your emotion and I ran like the coward I have always been.”

“Follow your heart”

The words yanked her head around to see her older, other self from the alternate timeline Enterprise. The older T’Pol was sitting just as she had before, in her quarters aboard the ancient ship talking to her younger self, advising her that Trip could be her salvation if only she could learn to trust him.

“What if my heart doesn’t know what it wants?” The younger T’Pol could not hide the raw fear in her voice. The watching T’Pol let herself acknowledge the disgust it generated within her.

“It will.” The old woman reached over comfortingly.

“Indeed. You were quite right my older self,” T’Pol mused as the scene faded. “If only I had learned in time. And if only I had held the courage within myself to accept what was within my grasp.”

He had been so patient with her. So incredibly patient. He had waited for her to decide what she wanted as they struggled through the Expanse. Even when he was not aware of the Pa’anar Syndrome or her Trellium addiction, he had been there to support her without a trace of judgment.

Then Koss... She stopped and her control slipped. The mist around her flickered into blackness and then flashed into multi-colored chaos for a moment as T’Pol fought with all her strength to regain her focus. Finally she managed to stabilize the trance. Even then, when his heart was breaking, when she could feel his pain like an icy wind blowing from his mind into her heart, even then he had supported her. Even then he had tried his best to be her friend. Even then he had still loved her.

Grief as intense as any she had ever felt made her mind stagger. Her concentration broke and T’Pol’s eyes snapped open to the dimness of her guest apartment. She felt wetness dripping down her cheeks and did not even bother to wipe the tears off. What did they matter now?

And afterward, when Koss released her from her marriage Trip forgave her for what she had done. As soon as she was free he had come to her. Eagerly and hopefully, offering her his love. Wanting to give her as much of himself as she would accept. And she had spurned him, disrespected him, and driven him away.

And still he had taken her back again. Over and over he forgave her, no matter how she hurt him. No matter how many times she abandoned him, hurt him, treated him as if he did not matter. Still he loved her.

Until her final betrayal. That one, he could not forgive.

It was time. She stood and extinguished the candles. T'Pol took a deep breath and walked over to her desk. Placing her thumb on the security lock reader, she recited the seventeen digit alphanumeric security code, then leaned over and submitted to a retina scan. The drawer popped open and she drew out the hypo. She checked the contents automatically and nodded to herself.

She remember the time when Trip compared the two of them to Romeo and Juliet. "How appropriate," T'Pol considered ironically. "Although I suppose a dagger would be rather inconveniently messy." She walked over to her bed and lay down, carefully arranging her robes around her.

So many times she had failed him. Not again. Not ever again. Her time was coming soon, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Not even the disciplines of Kohlinar could hold it off forever. She would not do this. Too many times she had forsaken him because of her fear, or her pride, or simple selfishness. Not again. She would not take another merely to save her own life. Not when Trip had willingly sacrificed himself so that others could go forward into a better future. This once, she would not betray him.

"Goodbye, ashayam," T'Pol thought, closing her eyes. "You promised me that we would see each other again." She knew nothing of gods, but she offered up a silent prayer to Trip's god that she might be granted the chance to be with him again. Then she raised the hypo toward her neck.

A hand grabbed her wrist. "No."

T'Pol snapped her eyes open and glared up. Her first blaze of fury phase-shifted instantly to berserker rage.

"Commander," Daniels said soothingly, "This isn-"

T'Pol screamed like a wounded Le'Matya, coiled and struck up from the bunk with teeth bared straight for Daniel's throat. The Temporal Agent ducked for dear life and rolled frantically to avoid the backhanded follow up strike.

"Commander!" Daniels shouted desperately, "I am here to help you!" Her reply was an inarticulate snarl and a savage kick that came within a millimeter of taking his lower jaw off his face.

"Please! Listen to me!" He dove for the floor and rolled just in time to miss being under T'Pol's hammering heels. Daniels hopped to his feet and pleaded, "What did I do?"

"You let him DIE!" T'Pol screeched and leaped with claws outstretched. Daniels dove again and T'Pol sailed over his back, rolling across her desk and landing on her feet.

Before Daniels could fully recover she jumped to the desk and sprang into the air, executing a perfect spinning backward kick. Daniels let himself crumple in sheer desperation and T'Pol's foot merely grazed his temple, knocking him sideways into the wall. Her deflected kick impacted the corner of the bunk support, snapping the titanium post like balsa wood.

"I came here to stop that from happening!" Daniels choked out, holding a hand to his throbbing head.

"Liar!"

"It's true! I swear it's true Commander!" Daniels tried feebly to brace against the wall and force himself to his feet, only to feel the wall slam his back as T'Pol's hand closed around his throat and lifted him off his heels.

"You are lying," T'Pol told him murderously. "If you were here to stop it you would have arrived before it happened."

"I... need... your... help..." Daniels managed to gurgle weakly. T'Pol's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"I would have helped you then. You are well aware of it. You are still lying." She tightened her grip. Daniels' face turned liver colored and his lips moved without sound to form the word 'no'. He tried to shake his head. His mouth continued to move and T'Pol saw him form the word 'daughter'. She grimaced and loosened her grip a fraction.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded. "Whose daughter are you referring to?"

Daniels sucked in a partial lungful of air and burst out in a single gasping rush of words, "Yours-I-want-to-save-your-daughter-and-Commander-Tucker-too-but-I-need-your-help."

T'Pol opened her hand and let him fall like a rock. She stood paralyzed and listened to her heartbeat surge in her ears like the surf washing across the San Francisco shoreline. Dizziness made the room sway. Daniels choked and gagged at her feet for several minutes before she leaned over and picked him up.

"Explain," she said coldly. "Why do you care about this? You have what you wanted. Captain Archer survived. The Federation has been founded, and he is out there even now signing the charter, just as you desired. Everything you said must happen has been achieved."

Daniels nodded and tried hoarsely to talk. "But it wasn't supposed to happen this way." He coughed and asked, "Could I please have some water?" T'Pol point at the bathroom and he nodded thanks. While Daniels got a drink T'Pol thoughtfully picked up the hypo from the floor beside the bed and slipped it into the pouch under her robe. By the time the

Temporal Agent returned T'Pol was seated on the bunk with something faintly resembling control back in place. She indicated that Daniels should take her desk chair.

T'Pol waited silently. Daniels sighed and gathered his thoughts for a moment. "Tell me Commander. If you had never heard of time travel, what would your opinion of this current Federation charter be?"

T'Pol raised an eyebrow. "I was not overly impressed when I read it. However, since it is already established that the Federation will endure it seemed pointless to dwell on the matter."

"What specifically about this charter bothered you?" Daniels asked with interest.

T'Pol shrugged. "It seemed only a slight improvement over the previous Alliance agreement. There is very little internal authority and only small incentive for any of the member races to comply with the laws and standards put in place by the Federation Council."

"Precisely," Daniels sat back in satisfaction. "Without an immediate external threat to bind the members together this type of agreement is too loose to be effective. If the Federation is to endure it needs a real government with real teeth. There are external threats out there, many of them. But at this point in time they are too vague and distant to provide the necessary motivation."

"You claim that somehow Trip and Elizabeth could change this." T'Pol spoke with flat disbelief in her voice.

"Actually yes, odd as it sounds," Daniels told her. "Not directly of course. But they will have an effect long term. Of course there are also other aspects to consider."

"Such as?" T'Pol asked intently.

"Such as," Daniels said mildly, "the fact that your husband, Charles Tucker III, is on record as being the lead engineer and primary design specialist for humanity's first warp eight capable engine. I believe that counts as historically significant, wouldn't you?"

T'Pol found herself trembling. She tried twice before she could force out the words, "What about Elizabeth?"

Daniels looked at her sympathetically. "Elizabeth Tucker's contribution to history is not as overt as yours or her father's, but in her own way it may be even more profound. For example one of her favorite students will eventually become Vulcan's ambassador to Earth. He will marry a human woman openly, causing a firestorm of controversy in the process, and their child in turn will," Daniels paused and smiled. "Let's just say that there will be a cascading domino effect of massive historical consequences."

T'Pol stared at him, then down at her hands. She raised her eyes again and Daniels had to look away. "Why did you wait so long?" T'Pol whispered.

Daniels swallowed hard. "In the original time line, Elizabeth survived. However to protect her from Terra Prime and other xenophobic factions that might wish to harm her it was decided to spread a false rumor that she had died." He forced himself to meet her eyes. "That's why we didn't realize that the time line had gone off track until now, when Commander Tucker was killed. We thought that Elizabeth was still alive and in hiding on Vulcan, just as she was supposed to be."

T'Pol nodded. She closed her eyes and called up the breathing exercises that promoted calm and strength. "What do you need me to do?"

Daniels stood up. "I need you to come with me to my ship. I will explain once we get there." T'Pol stood and followed him to the door of her apartment.

Chapter 2

Daniels Ship: Time Frame Indeterminate

Daniels opened the door and they stepped through into a dark corridor that stretched into invisibility in both directions as far as her eyes could see. The only light came from small fixtures attached to the ceiling at three meter intervals. The floor, walls and ceiling were sound absorbing black. A narrow track of light gray carpeting ran down the center of the deck. Otherwise she might have been walking through the emptiness of intergalactic space.

The Temporal Agent turned left and set off down the passageway. “Are you familiar Commander, with the old Earth saying ‘for want of a nail’?”

“No,” she snapped impatiently. “What possible relevance does this have?”

Daniels sighed. “I am trying to explain what happened to Elizabeth and why your daughter died when she should not have.”

“Oh,” T’Pol said, suddenly subdued. “I apologize. Please continue.” Daniels nodded.

“I am sure you know what a horse is. I presume you also know about horseshoes, and how they are nailed onto the horse’s feet?” T’Pol looked quizzically at him and nodded. Daniels continued. “If the shoe is not nailed on securely it can work loose. This sometimes has been known to cause the horse to stumble, throwing the rider. This potentially can injure or even kill the rider, so it is important for safety that the shoes be secured properly.”

“I am aware of the basic information,” T’Pol told him with barely restrained frustration.

Daniels glanced at her. “Please bear with me Commander, I am getting there. Try to keep in mind that my genetic makeup is fifty-nine sixty-fourths human, so I have a tendency to ramble a bit. Anyway the saying I was referring to is very old. It dates back to the time when messengers were the fastest way to pass information during battles. The full saying goes like this.” Daniels cleared his throat and started to recite.

“For want of a nail the shoe was lost. For want of the shoe the horse was lost. For want of the horse the rider was lost. For want of the rider the message was lost. For want of the message the battle was lost. For want of the battle the kingdom was lost.” He finished up and looked over at her, noting her thoughtful expression. “I see you get the point. It teaches that big problems can be caused by small oversights. That is what happened with Elizabeth. It all started with the alien incursion that you discovered when you returned from destroying the Xindi weapon.”

“You told Captain Archer that the time line had been reset,” T’Pol accused him.

“It was,” Daniels sighed. “But resetting a time line is not quite the same thing as re-aligning a phase pistol. There are an almost infinite number of variables involved. Most of these are not critical. In the long run it doesn’t really matter whether a farmer decides to plow his back forty on Wednesday or Thursday. Or whether a house painter decides to start on the north side of a house or the west side. The vast majority of these variables are simply irrelevant to the time line. But some of them are not.”

“What happened and why?” T’Pol asked him bluntly.

Daniels told her. “The answer to your ‘why’ question is that the aliens chose to interfere with the history of Germany. Throughout the entire nineteenth and twentieth century, Germany was one of the most advanced nations on the planet in terms of scientific research, particularly in biochemistry.” T’Pol abruptly stopped short.

Daniels paused and turned to look at her. “Exactly. What happened is simple. At one point in some obscure lab a small bit of relatively unimportant research work did not get completely finished. Had it been completed properly, the results would have been used to fine tune a theory. Since they were not available, the theory was never quite as precise as it could have been and should have been. As a result, the medical advances that were based on that theory were slightly inaccurate. They were not totally wrong, or they would have never worked at all. But they were not as effective as they might have been.”

T’Pol clasped her hands together. Suddenly she felt cold for some reason.

“The bottom line is this,” Daniels said soberly, “when the Terra Prime technicians cloned Elizabeth they were using the best information they had and did the best job they could. But their information was not good enough. The knowledge they were using was flawed. Just a little bit flawed. It was good enough to let them create her, but not good enough for them to create a viable hybrid clone that could survive long-term.” Daniels sighed. “They should have been able to do it. In the original time line they did do it. But the information that was supposed to be there had been corrupted by the previous temporal incursion. So Elizabeth died.”

T’Pol did not care that tears were silently dripping down her cheeks. She had long since reached the point where nothing mattered anymore. Daniels turned and continued onward and T’Pol followed silently. They walked together for several minutes before Daniels spoke again.

“Through this door is some medical equipment and two people I want you to meet.” He grinned. “I think you will find them interesting.” He touched a spot on the wall that to T’Pol look identical to every other spot, and an invisible door slid aside. She followed Daniels into a large, brightly lit room.

The center of the room was filled by a large incubator that was connected to a bewildering array of diagnostic equipment. T'Pol acknowledged to herself that even in a modern hospital she probably could not have identified all of the machines. With thirty-first century devices she did not even try. Besides which, there was a more pressing issue to be addressed.

The sound of their entrance caused two individuals at the far side of the room to straighten from their bent positions over a work bench. The pair turned to face T'Pol and Daniels with curious expressions and advanced slowly, clearly trying not to startle her. Daniels smiled and said, "T'Pol, daughter of T'Les may I present T'Prell, daughter of Alicia and Chief of Xeno-Pediatrics at the Medical Academy of T'Pol."

At her expression Daniels chuckled. "At this point in time the city is named Kah'dhar. They renamed it in your honor approximately fifty years after your death." T'Prell shot him an annoyed look and shook her head in vexation.

T'Pol noted that despite her Vulcan name the young woman seemed completely human in appearance. She had cornsilk blonde hair, deep green eyes and a pale complexion. Her ears were round and her pale eyebrows did not arch at all.

Daniels turned and gestured to the dark-eyed, dark haired Vulcan man standing impassively beside T'Prell and said, "This is George Hopkins, M.D., J.D., Ph.D., M.S., M.A., B.S., B.A., and most likely PDQ and QED too for all I know. George is currently chairman of the Interspecies Council on Genetics. He agreed to take time off from his busy schedule to help us with this little problem because he has a personal fascination with the specifics of the case." Daniels grinned even more broadly until it seemed his face was about to split apart. Then he stepped back and gestured broadly.

Dr. T'Prell, Dr. Hopkins, may I present your great to the nth grandmother T'Pol of Vulcan."

T'Pol froze and stopped breathing. T'Prell and George made identical head bows of respect. Then T'Prell crossed her arms in the traditional manner and tentatively approached. "Fore mother," she asked in perfect Vulcan, "may I be permitted to offer greeting?"

On autopilot T'Pol watched her arms cross themselves and her hands form the required positions. The instant that their fingers touched, she knew it was true. The precise relationship could not be determined from a simple touch, but that this woman was family could never be denied. Moreover it was beyond any question that not only was she blood kin, she was blood of T'Pol's own blood and flesh of T'Pol's own flesh. T'Prell was her descendant.

George approached with the same gesture and was accepted. He also proved himself to be blood kin. These two were her child's children. It was beyond debate.

T'Pol forced herself to maintain her shields and withdrew as quickly as decorum would permit to keep her grandchildren from detecting her turmoil. She summoned up her reserves and demanded of Daniels, "What do you need of me?"

He replied solemnly, "What we must do Commander, is bring your daughter here so that T'Prell and George can heal her. The only point at which we can retrieve her from the time line with minimal disruption is to take her out of Enterprise's sickbay just before she dies." He looked at her seriously. "Now you understand why I need your help. Captain Archer doesn't trust me. Your earlier self doesn't trust me. Commander Tucker doesn't trust me. If we are going to do this we will need to move quickly. Elizabeth doesn't have much time. We can't afford to waste precious seconds arguing and trying to convince them. I need you to come with me and make them believe what we tell them. Quickly, while we still have time to act and save her."

"Understood." T'Pol straightened grimly. "I am ready."

Daniels looked at the two doctors. "Prepare the equipment then. We will be right back." They acknowledged the order and started gathering tools and supplies while T'Pol and the Temporal Agent walked out into the corridor.

Daniels told her, "It would be best if we could simply walk in and pick her up when no one else was around. I suppose it would be too much to hope that she was ever left alone at any point?"

"No," T'Pol shook her head firmly. "I was with her constantly, as was Trip once we returned to Enterprise."

Daniels nodded. "About what I expected. The next best thing would be to find a time when it was only the two of you with her then. Do you remember that night well enough to help pinpoint a possible time interval we can aim for?"

T'Pol's memory of that time had been branded into her brain with white hot knives of unspeakable pain. Every nanosecond of it was instantly available to her. "There was a point when Phlox had administered an injection and then returned to his office to look up something," she said thoughtfully. "He was gone for approximately 17.3 minutes."

"Perfect," Daniels said. "Can you give me an approximate time?" he pulled out a small instrument and stood with his fingers poised over it.

T'Pol considered. "The injection was for pain. He informed us that it would take effect in three to five minutes. It actually began to take effect in three minutes and eleven seconds, reaching maximum effectiveness at four minutes and two seconds. Two minutes and five seconds later Phlox went to his office." She thought hard. "He administered the injection at precisely 23:15:48 hours."

Daniels nodded and input the data without hesitation. Then he withdrew two small strips and handed one to T'Pol. "Wrap this around your wrist please. When we step through it will keep us synchronized. Then when we return it will key us to return to this point, along with anyone that comes along with us." She obeyed and saw Daniels hang the instrument from his belt. "Let's go."

Enterprise: 2155

They stepped forward and into Enterprise's sickbay. Despite having been through the process before more than once, T'Pol still found it disorienting. While she got her bearing Daniels stepped forward silently. Just ahead of them two figures stood whispering with heads bent over an incubator where a baby was laying far too quietly.

T'Pol couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't breathe, couldn't think. She stared immobile at her younger self as that earlier version talked to Trip and stared at Elizabeth. She remembered standing there. She remembered the feel of the plexiglass under her fingers, and the plaintive longing to pick up her child and hold her. The warmth of Trip's closeness next to her and the puff of his breath flowing across her skin was etched into her mind, along with the tortured sound of her daughter's faint rasping breaths.

Trip burst out in a quietly strangled sob, "There has to be something we can do for her! There has to be!"

"There is," Daniels said calmly. Two heads snapped around and stared at him in disbelief. T'Pol, standing behind and blocked from view by Phlox's animal cages, escaped their notice at first.

"Daniels," Trip growled in frustration. "What do you want now? We don't have time for your games."

"I am here to help Elizabeth," the Temporal Agent told them. "You must let me take her with me to-"

"NO!" Trip's frustration boiled over into irrational anger. He needed to strike out at something and right now Daniels was available. "You are not going to drag our daughter into your damn time games. Can't you leave us alone for once! Can't you see she's dying!"

T'Pol broke free of her paralysis. The sound of Trip's voice broke everything free. Her paralysis, her control, her grief, her fear, her need. She began to weep without shame and strode forward past Daniels to confront her younger self and her ashayam.

Trip stopped with his mouth open, transfixed by the sight of a duplicate T'Pol, especially one with tears streaming down her face and being wracked with sobs. The younger T'Pol stiffened and her eyes widened incredulously, then narrowed in suspicion.

“T- T’Pol?” Trip stammered. He looked back and forth between the two women.
“What...”

“Believe him Trip,” T’Pol’s voice sounded raw even to herself. “It is our daughter’s only chance. I watched her die once. I will not watch it happen again.” She turned to her other self. “You doubt me. This is only logical. But you know that Elizabeth is dying. You know that Phlox cannot save her. You know that Daniels does possess the technology to save her if he chooses to use it. You know all of that. What do you have to lose?”

Her younger self stared in calculation for precisely 3.4 seconds. Then she moved with eye blurring speed, reaching for the latches of the incubator, opening the lid and lifting Elizabeth out. “We are coming with you.”

“Of course,” Daniels said impatiently. “This way.”

Daniels Ship: Time Frame Indeterminate

The four of them stepped forward and the older T’Pol found herself once more aboard the darkened ship with Daniels striding down the gray carpeted corridor. Trip and young T’Pol hurried after him with Elizabeth while she followed and tried to settle her shaking nerves.

They entered the room full of medical equipment at a half run and Daniels barked, “Put her in here,” pointing at the incubator. T’Prell and George stood nearby. As young T’Pol tenderly placed the baby in the diagnostic bed Trip look defensively at the strangers. “They are... they are doctors Trip,” older T’Pol forced herself to say. “They are thirty-first century doctors that Daniels brought here to help Elizabeth.”

Trip nodded and relaxed as the two medical personnel moved into action. The younger couple stepped back a pace to get out of the way and watched fixedly as the blond human woman and the dark Vulcan man checked instrument, made adjustments and applied medicines.

“Immuno-rivalry syndrome,” George muttered.

T’Prell grunted agreement. “Standard complex but with complications because it was allowed to progress this far.”

“I recommend Thragloykryjar 44 cc’s to start.”

“Affirm.” The hypo hissed. “BP is currently 73 over 50, much too high. We need to dilate the vessels and administer Locolotel to get it down.”

“Too high?” Trip screeched.

“Yes,” George replied without looking up or missing a beat. “Her physical configuration conforms closely to Vulcan patterns. But her human heritage is attempting to drive her blood pressure up to human standard, which is much too high for what her circulatory system is designed to handle. We need to get her pressure down to Vulcan normal levels.”

“Oh.” Trip subsided and shook his head in tired confusion. Worry and fear shone in his eyes which never left the tiny form.

T’Pol locked her jaws. “I cannot wait. I must tell her now before I miss another chance. I dare not risk any more.” She reached over to her distracted other self and deliberately placed her fingertips on the back of her hand. They both jumped as if they had been electro-shocked.

The younger T’Pol turned to look and met a gaze that pinned her to the spot. Clearly as if spoken aloud she heard her older self transmit the telepathic message, “We must speak privately. There is much to tell and little time to say it. Trip’s life is also at risk. You MUST know these things. Come with me NOW.”

Her younger self’s eyes flew wide and shot toward their bond mate. He was still engrossed in the doctors working over Elizabeth and paid no attention as they drew back toward the doorway.

Daniels caught her eye and walked over. He keyed the door for them and followed them into the corridor. He waited without speaking as older T’Pol fumed for a moment. “This is a private conversation,” she finally managed.

“I can well imagine,” Daniels told them both. He focused on the older version of T’Pol and told her bluntly, “My primary concern here is to save Elizabeth and prevent Commander Tucker’s premature death. Those two aspects are the Temporal Authority’s priorities.” At his words younger T’Pol’s face tightened and paled slightly. “Frankly, whether or not the two of you stay together and ultimately marry is one of those non-critical aspects that I talked about. Whether you are together or apart, you will still be Elizabeth’s mother, and Trip will still be Earth’s top warp field theorist. Your private lives will not change these things.”

T’Pol lifted her chin. “You know why Trip died,” she said bitterly.

Daniels raised a single eyebrow in Vulcan fashion. “You blame yourself? I am afraid that you are mistaken. Our psychologists have analyzed the situation quite thoroughly you see.”

He looked back and forth between them. Then he renewed his focus on the older version of T’Pol. “I don’t want to cause you any more pain than you are already suffering, but simply losing you would not have been enough to destroy his will to live. It hurt him deeply, of course; it broke his heart and left him a bitter and lonely man. But he would

have eventually recovered and learned to love again. No. I am afraid that the reason Trip stopped caring whether he lived or died was because of what happened to Elizabeth. It was because of her that he chose to die the way he did.”

T’Pol bowed her head. Her breath burned in her throat as she whispered, “I could have saved him.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.” Daniels looked at her in pity. “It may be that if you had stayed together you might have been able to help him heal from the loss. Or perhaps not. Trip’s psych profile shows that his familial bonding coefficient is unusually high. He might still have been emotionally crippled for life, even if you had not left him.”

“Left him.” Her younger self’s voice cut in like black ice. There was no trace of mercy in it.

T’Pol looked up. “Yes. I left him. Just as you were going to leave him.” Young T’Pol glared denial. “Just as you have always left him when faced with any kind of challenge.” She met her younger alter ego eye to eye and saw her falter.

She told Daniels, “If it is not a critical factor to you, then you cannot logically have any objections if I converse with my earlier self on the matter.” T’Pol drew from some unsuspected reserves and stood tall and strong for a moment. “We are working for the same goals. And you did say that in your original time line Trip and I were married, did you not?”

Daniels nodded. “Yes I did. I never said I disapproved. But I cannot actively work to support you in this. It is entirely up to the two of you. If you want a private place to talk I have some guest quarters you can use. Follow me please.”

He led them a short distance down the corridor to what looked like a small motel room. Neither woman was interested enough to pay close attention to details. Both noted a bunk, a table with a two chairs and soft indirect lighting. Daniels waved a hand at a small square panel on the wall. “If you want anything, the replicator works just like the resequencer aboard Enterprise. Tell the computer what you want and it will provide it. Not just food or drink, anything you need can be provided. I will get back now. I imagine Trip is getting impatient.”

After he left the two women stared at each other a moment. Then the older T’Pol said, “We have no time. I cannot give you six years worth of information in spoken words with the time we have available.”

Her younger self nodded understanding. “You suggest a meld?”

“It seems the logical solution.”

“Agreed.”

They moved as one to sit beside each other on the edge of the bunk and reached for the proper contact points. Connection came almost instantly.

T'Pol stared into her eyes and felt the weight of her mother's IDIC amulet pressing on her breast [as she saw the amulet shining in the dim light] while her older self looked at her younger eyes [and saw the tiredness of long years alone] while the red uniform made her pale face stand out even more sharply [and the sight of her own robes seemed so strange on another who was also her] but not her yet the other must be told before it was too late.

"I hear your thoughts My Mind To Your Mind My Thoughts To Your Thoughts Our Minds Are Merging Our Minds Are One."

"We are one."

She remembered. She who was one and yet also two roamed across the years in memory. She saw what had been and what must never be allowed to be again. She saw. She remembered. She understood.

They broke the connection.

Older T'Pol turned her head to look away. Younger T'Pol sat swaying for a brief instant, then she leaped to her feet and ran for the head. The sound of explosive vomiting came clearly for quite a long time.

When the younger version of T'Pol finally emerged her older self told her, "Now you know."

T'Pol stood trembling in the aftershocks of the meld and the weight of terrible new knowledge. "How did you survive?"

"Trip might say," she smiled sadly, "that while there is life there is hope. As long as there was still life I refused to surrender hope. He had always forgiven me before you see. Eventually. It was foolish perhaps. It was too much to hope for. But I could not force myself to stop hoping. It was all I had."

Her younger self couldn't stop trembling. She rubbed her face and said, "And now I am you." Her counterpart raised an eyebrow enquiringly. "The only difference between us was memory. Now there is not even that much difference. I am you now. You have your second chance and my future is pre-empted."

"Your illogical babbling approaches the point of idiocy," her older self snapped impatiently. "I recognize your fatigue and emotional strain. But refrain from inflicting such inane comments on me please. You are yourself as you have always been. The

memories you hold are merely warnings, no more. They are not yet real. If you manage to avoid the mistakes I made they will never be real. Stop talking like a fool.”

She watched her younger self initiate the breathing exercises that brought calm and control. Eventually she said, “You should go back to him now. I have done all that I can. The rest is up to you.”

Younger T’Pol looked at her. “You are not coming?” Her counterpart shook her head.

“No. I... cannot.” Unspoken and unnecessary were the rest of the words. I cannot bear to be there, seeing him. Seeing her.

Younger T’Pol nodded assent and turned to leave. Suddenly Older T’Pol said, “Wait.” She stood and took off the IDIC amulet. “Give this to Trip. Please.”

She took the necklace from her older self’s fingers with sudden understanding. “Are you certain?” She did not refer to the amulet.

“Yes.” The older T’Pol told her calmly. “I have done what I needed to do.” They shared a look and then her younger self turned to leave without a backward glance. After the door closed she sat back down thoughtfully. A few moments later Daniels entered without knocking.

“I see politeness will never enter your exhaustive repertoire,” T’Pol told him dryly.

“One character flaw of which I have never stood accused,” Daniels admitted cheerfully.

“Tell me Daniels,” T’Pol asked him thoughtfully. “After they return to Enterprise with Elizabeth, what will happen to me? Will I simply disappear? Cease to exist because I never did exist?”

Daniels looked troubled. “That is a thorny philosophical question Commander. I am not trying to be evasive. The truth is I don’t really know. We have been debating that issue ever since time travel became feasible, and no one has ever proven a definitive answer. In my time the experts are about evenly divided on the issue. Half of them think it is as you said, that when the time lines change those individuals and things from the altered time line simply disappear into oblivion. The other half have a different theory.”

“And what might that be?”

Daniels looked at a far corner of the room. “Some people theorize that we do not actually change time lines at all. Instead they propose that what we are doing involves selecting among multiple possible variations. By this reasoning when we return Elizabeth to Enterprise we will not be re-setting the time line per se, but rather we will be re-routing it. Sending our own particular universe down a different pathway through the multiverse. The other time lines will still exist in some real or quasi-real form as alternate branches in

space-time, but we will no longer be aware of them unless and until someone does something to reactivate them.”

“So it is possible that I might continue my life just as it was in my own world,” T’Pol asked him without a trace of emotion in her voice. “I might survive and be forced to return to the world I left.”

“I don’t know,” Daniels repeated. “I am sorry. I just don’t know.”

“Understood,” T’Pol said simply. “It has been a very stressful time for me. I find myself fatigued. If you do not mind, I would like to use this room to rest.”

Daniels look at her for a long moment. A sad look flickered across his face. Then he forced a kind smile and told her, “Of course Commander T’Pol. You are more than welcome here. And while I have the chance, no matter what happens, I want to say that it has been an honor and a privilege to work with you. I promise you that I will do everything within my power to make sure that things work out for your loved ones.”

T’Pol’s eyes shone with gratitude. “Thank you Mr. Daniels. It has been an honor to work with you as well. May you live long and prosper.” Daniels bowed low, turned and walked out. T’Pol sat for a moment with a tiny smile on her face. Then she laid down carefully and arranged her robes neatly around her.

Daniels stepped along the corridor of his ship with a grave expression on his face. Sometimes his job was unbearable.

Chapter 3

He opened the door and walked in to find the scene essentially unchanged. T'Pol and Trip stood close together in front of the incubator watching the doctors work over their baby. As he watched, T'Pol reached out and took Trip's arm. He suddenly shuddered and turned to her, seizing her in a fervent embrace. T'Pol made no objection to this blatant display of public affection. In fact, she put her arms around him and returned the hug firmly, holding him and rubbing his back gently as Trip fought to hold back his grief and fear.

"It will be all right, ashayam." T'Pol whispered gently, "They will heal her. This is routine for them. They knew what was wrong with her as soon as they saw her, remember? They saw what was wrong and they knew just what to do. She will be fine." She continued to murmur reassurance and rub his back until his breathing steadied.

Trip finally seemed to realize where they were and what he was doing. he pulled away looking flushed. "Sorry." She seized his face between her hands.

"Stop. Do not ever tell me that, ashayam." T'Pol looked into his eyes. "Do not ever be sorry for loving our child. Do not ever be sorry for caring. Do not ever be sorry for grieving over her pain. And do not ever dare to be sorry for being who and what you are, Trip. My beloved." She kissed him quickly.

He stared at her in total shock. "What did you say?"

"What I should have said a year ago but lacked the courage," she told him. "But now I finally understand what I have and what I risk losing. I will speak the truth that I was afraid to say before. I love you Trip."

He gaped at her. The room started spinning in black circles and his legs folded under him. T'Pol caught him and eased him to a sitting position on the floor. This was the final hit. Facing Paxton, finding Elizabeth and then learning she was sick, encountering Daniels and the other T'Pol (where was she anyway?), and now this. One hammer blow right after another had finally been just too much. He felt himself drifting and clenched his fists. He wasn't going to black out. He was NOT going to black out. Not an option.

A hiss caught his attention and he felt a hypo against his neck. The Vulcan man straightened up and offered a smile (a smile?!). "That should help. There's a bench against the wall over there. Maybe you two should sit down. Elizabeth is starting to stabilize but it will be several hours before she is out of the woods. You can't stand here all night."

"Yes," T'Pol agreed. She essentially picked Trip up by the shoulders and carried him to the bench. His feet only grazed the floor occasionally along the way. T'Pol placed him

gently on the bench and manipulated the built-in foot rest to shift Trip into a reclining position.

“I’m all right,” Trip protested and tried to sit up. T’Pol firmly put her hand on his chest and held him down.

“Ashayam,” she told him softly, “in the last 24 hours you have been kidnapped, beaten and kicked, put to forced labor, fought for your life and for our freedom, and now you have been put through a nerve wracking ordeal. Rest while you can. I will be sitting here right beside you, I promise.”

He slumped back in surrender. “All right, if you really will sit down too.” She rewarded him with a tiny quirk of her lips and settled next to him, taking his hand and sliding close.

Trip sighed wearily and asked her, “What happened to the other T’Pol? Where did she go?”

Just as the woman beside opened her mouth to answer, she stiffened. T’Pol’s fingers tightened convulsively on his hand and her eyes widened. For a fraction of a second Trip felt... something... very strange through their bond. Almost as if there were two people sitting next to him instead of one. T’Pol’s eyes fixed on his face. Trip looked into their depths and saw surprise, understanding, grief, despair, resignation, wistfulness and deep love. Then the moment passed and T’Pol shivered her way back to normal.

“She-” T’Pol swallowed and looked away for a breath. She turned back to Trip and lifted her chin steadily. “She has gone to rest,” she told him with a note of finality. He nodded feeling somewhat mystified.

Trip decided to roll the dice and put his arm around her shoulders, figuring that if she ripped it off he still had another one for backup. Or he would have another one once the sling came off. Besides there were two doctors in the room anyway. She not only let him get away with it, she actually snuggled a little bit closer. Trip was nonplussed to say the very least.

“What the...” he wondered incredulously. Since his return from Columbia they had been cautiously exploring a clandestine romance of sorts. But it was strictly clandestine. T’Pol had been adamant about that. Even in private she made sure Trip understood and respected her boundaries with respect to casual touching. And the word love had never crossed either of their lips, although Trip had thought of it more than once.

“Is this change in behavior because of Elizabeth?” Trip wondered. “Maybe it is. Vulcans are almost obsessed with family and that’s the truth for sure. Maybe now that we have a kid together she figures everything has changed. Heck, maybe she is right. Honest to Cochrane, I haven’t even had time to think all this through. But we are gonna have to figure out some way to take care of her. No way either of us can do it alone. Not with her mixed blood. I wouldn’t know where to start helping her with her Vulcan heritage, and

T'Pol would bust a blood vessel trying to deal with a human style temper tantrum." The thought brought out a brief chuckle.

T'Pol gave him a curious look. Trip tried to explain, "I was just thinking about the future. Imagining some of the challenges we are going to run into." He stopped with a thoughtful look. "The future. I guess I'm starting to believe that we're gonna have one now."

"You are." The blonde woman came walking over wearing a Vulcan lack of expression. "The difficulty that Elizabeth is having was once common during the early years of inter-species mating. The syndrome is well documented and the treatment is routine. She is responding well to the medications that we have administered and her vital signs are stabilizing near normal levels."

Resting be damned, Trip leaped from the bench and sprang for the incubator with T'Pol a half step behind him. For the first time since they found her Elizabeth seemed to be comfortable. Her plump little cheeks had more color than before. Trip thought they were starting to look like tiny green apples. Her breathing was steady and silent. "Thank you God," he whispered. "Thank you."

"We will need to monitor her condition for the next several hours to make sure that no further complications arise," The woman told them.

"But by this time tomorrow," the Vulcan man said, walking over to join the group, "you should be able to take her home."

"Is there any chance of a recurrence?" T'Pol asked tightly. She watched Daniels walked over and look down at the sleeping baby with a thoughtful expression, shaking his head.

"None," the Vulcan man told them both cheerfully with a broad grin that shocked Trip's bowels into quivering. "We fixed the problem permanently."

"What was wrong with her?" Trip asked him. "In terms that an ignorant savage can understand."

The man thought for a moment. "Are you familiar with the concept of dominant and recessive genes?"

"Sure," Trip said. "I'm a savage, not an ape."

The Vulcan snorted in amusement and shot Trip a glance that glittered with humor. "Touché. OK then. When you mate, two people from the same species you can get away with matching genes from both parents being dominant because evolution has prepared those genes for getting along with each other. But you can't get away with that when you mate two people from different species. When two dominant genes from different species ram into each other, they both try to fight it out for dominance and neither of them are

willing to give a millimeter. Each set of genes regards the other as an invader and attacks.”

“So what did you do?” Trip wanted to know.

“The solution is to pick one set of genes and let them be the dominant set, and tell the other set of genes to settle down and allow themselves to become recessive,” the Vulcan man replied. “When dealing with Human/Vulcan mating the standard approach is to make the Vulcan genes dominant and the Human genes recessive. Why? Because it works better that way. It just does and we aren’t really sure why it does. Even in the thirty-first century the practice of medicine is as much an art as it is a science. All we know is that for some reason a first generation Vulcan/Human hybrid does better and lives healthier when they are selected to have Vulcan dominant genes. So that is the way we do it.”

“Whatever. Good with me,” Trip declared. “As long as she is healthy I don’t give a rat’s ass.”

“Perhaps that is why it works better,” the woman said dryly. “A Vulcan father would not have accepted such a statement without at least a trace of uneasiness. Humans generally exhibit a more flexible attitude toward such matters. Perhaps that flexibility goes all the way down to the molecular level.”

The Vulcan threw back his head and laughed out loud, which was finally too much for Trip. “Say who are you people anyway? I mean, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for what you are doing for our daughter. I owe you a debt that I can’t ever repay, and if you ever need anything from me all you have to do is say the word. But who are you?”

The Vulcan stopped laughing and looked at Trip with respectful affection. “You don’t owe us anything... grandfather.”

Ten minutes later

Trip let his breath whoosh out. “Wow.” He sat back and thought hard. “This time travel shit is making my head spin.”

“Tell me about it,” George said ruefully. “I am not a Temporal Agent either. This wasn’t what I trained for. I just got conscripted into this.”

“As if a pack of wild sehlat could have held you back once you found out what we needed you for,” Daniels gibed.

“It has indeed been a rare opportunity that I for one would not have missed,” T’Prell offered.

“Speaking of opportunity,” George interjected, “now that we have an opportunity how about letting us look at that arm of yours, Grandfather?”

“Oh.” Trip glanced down at the sling. “That’s all right. Phlox has already fixed me up. But thanks anyway.”

“With all due respect to Dr. Phlox,” T’Prell told him briskly, “I doubt that he has access to our equipment. Please allow us to examine your arm, Forefather.” The inexorable stubbornness in her voice reminded him that this human looking woman was actually descended from the Vulcan lady sitting beside him. Trip decided not to make an issue of it.

T’Pol turned sideway and put a reassuring hand on Trip’s leg. He looked happily confused and she smiled at him with her eyes. “It is so simple ashayam,” she considered. “It takes so little to put that look on your face.” A touch, a look, and her presence. That was all he asked of her to remind him she cared. For this she had spent so much time in fear?

T’Pol watched the medical pair ease the sling off their grandfather’s arm and unwrapped the dressings. Trip obediently stretched it out along the bench’s armrest, then George steadied Trip’s arm while T’Prell went to work. First she scanned the injury with some type of instrument. Then she walked over to the work bench and came back with a tool that strongly resembled an engineering grappler. The jaws of the tool opened widely enough engulf the damaged area.

T’Prell pressed a control. The tool closed snugly to grip Trip’s arm and he winced. “Pain?” she asked him. He gave a quick nod. T’Prell adjusted a sliding switch and manipulated the control pad. Several lights flashed and Trip’s expression eased. “Better now?”

Trip sighed. “I feel like a wimp. Your ancestor, my great-great-grandpappy Tucker, once dug a bullet out of his leg with nothing but a Barlow pocketknife and some rotgut whiskey to flush the wound. Then he tied a strip from his pants leg around the hole to keep the bleeding to a minimum and hobbled back into the fight. And here I am moaning about a little twinge.”

T’Prell and George exchanged looks with T’Pol. “I believe it,” T’Pol told them in resignation. “I have seen humans, especially human males, do things equally as foolish more than once.”

“I still have the knife,” Trip added. “Dad gave it to me just before we shipped out to remind me of who I was and where I came from.”

T’Prell’s eyebrows drew together. “Klingons have a saying that keeping a human away from a good fight is like trying to keep a starving targ away from a fresh blood pie.”

“Klingons regard humans as unusually devoted to fighting?” T’Pol murmured in a carefully restrained voice.

George chuckled. “Klingons, as I am sure you know, regard themselves as the supreme warriors of the galaxy. There are only a few races that they consider good enough to be worthy enemies. Humans are one of them. Nowadays we are allies most of the time. Unless somebody gets into an argument over some minor squabble for awhile.”

“It’s not like we go looking for trouble,” Daniels broke in. “In all fairness we get along well with most races.”

“This is true,” T’Prell offered. “Humans do manage to maintain good relations with most races. Most members of the Federation honestly like humans, even if they are universally acknowledged as crazy.” Her expression never wavered as she spoke, and her gaze never left the controls of her instrument.

“Crazy T’Prell? I know you are three quarters Vulcan but still...” Daniels protested. “Have you ever heard the ancient saying about pots and kettles? Besides what do you mean by crazy?”

Trip wasn’t even trying to fight back his grin. T’Pol watched and listened with interest. She looked over at George and he winked at her.

T’Prell answered Daniels, “I was speaking colloquially, but I meant that humans generally exhibit an extraordinary lack of common sense. A human will run into a burning building just to take a temperature reading. And the surest possible way to get a human to explore a new area is to swear solemnly to them that it is certain death to go in there. After that, you could chain them to a boulder and not keep them out.”

Trip suddenly developed a coughing fit and tried to look away from the expression on T’Pol’s face.

It was a night that Trip never forgot. His body was still exhausted almost to the point of collapse but euphoria kept him going in a kind of fatigue high. The grandkids, both of whom were older than T’Pol, took turns monitoring Elizabeth periodically. The rest of the time everyone spent just talking.

T’Prell and George were fascinated by their ancestors and wanted to hear stories about the--to them--ancient days. Trip and T’Pol tried to oblige and answered every question as best they could. Daniels helped out as technical consultant and cultural interpreter whenever a concept proved to be too strange for them to grasp.

Every few moments Trip walked over to look down in disbelief at his daughter. With each breath that passed through her tiny lungs she became more real to him. Something very old and very primitive and powerful beyond belief was coming awake inside Trip. A part of his mind that he had never suspected to exist was activating itself and taking over.

Trip and T'Pol asked questions about their grandchildren, who themselves got clearance from Daniels to answer the personal details that wouldn't reveal anything disruptive. They learned that George was married with five children and seven grandchildren of his own. They learned that T'Prell was married and planning with her husband to have their first child within two years.

Trip stirred when T'Pol touched his shoulder. "Trip. Wake up." He jerked and sat up.

"What is it? What's wrong?" She put a finger across his lips.

"Nothing is wrong. Relax. Elizabeth is well now. It is time for us to return."

She watched awareness flash into his eyes. Her ashayam stood up and gave one yawn. Then he shook off his fatigue like a dog shakes off water. (Idly she noted that the bond was having a serious effect on her mental imagery.) Trip walked over to Elizabeth's bed and waited for her.

The baby was kicking and rocking back and forth. She twisted her head back and forth, alternately watching one person after another. When Trip came over she turned to look at him with deep interest. Suddenly she reached up at him and started squealing. Trip's face lit up like a sun and he started to pick her up, then stopped and looked at the doctors for permission. T'Prell nodded and Elizabeth found herself hugged up against her father's chest. She gurgled happily and drooled all over his shirt while he made strange noises at her.

"Daddy's got you now honey," Trip whispered to her from his heart. "The bad people won't hurt you now. Nobody will ever hurt you while I've got you." He bent his head and kissed her.

T'Prell and George offered the traditional salute. "Peace and long life to you both Foremother, Forefather."

"Live long and prosper, George and T'Prell," T'Pol returned with shining eyes. "You have brought honor to our line." Both of them straightened proudly at these words.

Trip looked up and started to speak. Then he muttered, "To hell with it." He walked over and handed Elizabeth to her mother and then told George, "Come here son." He wrapped his grandson in a bear hug and squeezed. George returned the embrace emphatically. T'Prell looked on with trepidation but submitted to a hug without objections. Trip took it easier on her but added a quick kiss on her forehead. He stepped back to T'Pol's side and told them. "I am so proud of you both that I could bust."

Daniels was waiting by the door. Just as they stepped through George called out cheerfully, "Watch out for ducks grandfather!" The door closed before Trip had time to

reply, but he could almost have sworn that he heard a slap. Daniels stood in the corridor struggling manfully to control his expression.

“Ducks?” Trip wanted to know.

“No idea,” Daniels said hurriedly and headed off down the corridor, forcing them to take long steps to catch up.

T’Pol suggested, “Perhaps he meant those ludicrous house slippers. I am astonished that you haven’t tripped over those things long ago.”

“Hey,” Trip protested, “they are warm and comfy.”

“That may be the case,” T’Pol sniffed disdainfully, “But I doubt that having a huge plastic bird’s head mounted on the toe of each foot adds anything to their functionality.”

Daniels cleared his throat. “We are here. Before you go back there is one more thing I need to tell you.” He sounded serious enough to grab their attention.

“What is it?” Trip demanded.

Daniels sighed. “You know that someone aboard Enterprise stole your DNA samples for Terra Prime don’t you?” They nodded. “It was Massaro in engineering.”

“No.” Trip’s face turned crimson, then pale, then splotched. His breathing turned fast and ragged. The muscles in his scalp tightened and pulled back on the sides of his face. The blood vessels at his temple and throat began to stand out and pulse.

His rage was cold and dark and feral. It poured through the bond in an endless surging river of blood lust. T’Pol’s eyes widened in surprise that was just short of shock. She hugged Elizabeth close with one arm and reached over to grab Trip’s hand. “Ashayam,” she said urgently. “Trip. Listen to me Trip. Hear me! Trip!”

Trip’s nostrils flared wide and his pupils contracted to nothing. His eyes were blue chips of merciless ice. T’Pol started looking scared.

“Killing him will not help you Commander,” Daniels pointed out soberly. “You need the information in his head.” He waited.

Minutes passed while nobody moved. Finally Trip closed his eyes and shuddered. When he opened them again they were the eyes of a man once more. “I understand.” His voice was still a snarl. “I will stay away from him.”

Daniels said, “In that case please step forward.” A breath later they were back in sickbay. T’Pol glanced at the chronometer. They had been gone precisely four seconds. Trip spun into motion and jumped for the door controls. He keyed in the security overrides and

locked the doors. Then he entered in an engineering override and bypassed the security lock. A sheet of hull metal slid down from the ceiling to seal the doors completely.

“Now,” he said in satisfaction, “nobody comes through those without a cutting torch. Since sickbay is designed to be the most heavily protected part of the ship, it will have to be a heavy torch. The standard electro-arc cutters won’t do the job. Even a phase pistol would take an hour to get through.”

The noise of the door seal slamming into place brought Phlox out of his office at a run. “Commander Tucker! What do you think you are doing? And Commander T’Pol! Really I must protest. Please believe me. I understand your distress. I am a parent also you know. But she will be better off if you leave her in-”

“Scan her doctor,” T’Pol interrupted him rudely. “Don’t ask any questions right now. Just scan her. Closely.” She nailed him with a glare that stopped him in his tracks. Phlox shot another glance over at Trip, who was busy reconnecting something at the door panel, then he picked up a portable diagnostic tool.

While Dr. Phlox ran the scanner over Elizabeth, Trip keyed the intercom. “Tucker to Captain Archer. Emergency. Secure channel.”

A few seconds later the captain’s voice came through. “Archer here. What’s wrong Trip? What’s your situation?”

Trip looked at T’Pol, who was watching Phlox stare blankly at his scanner and shake his head. He told the intercom, “We just had a visit from Daniels captain. Can you confirm that this channel is secure? I mean absolutely secure? Secure enough that not even Malcolm or I could crack it.”

A pause, then, “Hoshi confirms it. I am in my ready room with the door locked and she tells me that nobody on the ship except her could possibly break the encryption. Are you worried about Hoshi? She is on the bridge being watched.”

“Nah, Hoshi is safe.” Trip let out his breath in relief. T’Pol approached with the baby and Phlox followed with a befuddled expression. “Daniels told us that my guy Massaro is the Terra Prime mole. I sealed sickbay and figured we could stay here with Elizabeth until you scoop him up.”

“This is Commander T’Pol,” she broke in. “Trip and I have just spent a night on Daniels’ ship. Elizabeth has been cured. Dr. Phlox will confirm this.”

A pause. “Phlox?”

The Denobulan scratched his brow ridges in puzzled frustration. “She’s absolutely correct Captain, and I haven’t the faintest idea how. But my initial readings indicate that the child’s fever is gone, her vital signs are stable and she seems completely healthy.”

“Why? What was his purpose in this?” Archer asked.

“She wasn’t supposed to die Cap’n,” Trip said roughly. “I dunno the details. Maybe he told T’Pol. They were out in the hall together for a while. All I know is that Elizabeth wasn’t supposed to die so he came back to fix her.”

“T’Pol? Do you know any more about this?” Archer wanted to know.

T’Pol considered the advisability of releasing some of the additional information that she had been given during the meld. “I can confirm that Ensign Massaro is indeed the Terra Prime operative aboard Enterprise. I can also tell you this. Before we left his ship Daniels informed us that we needed to know the identity of the mole. This is important captain. Because he had previously told me that his mission had two specific objectives. If he believes that we need to know about Ensign Massaro it can only mean that it will be needed in order to accomplish both of his objectives.”

“And what were those objectives?” Archer demanded brusquely

T’Pol looked over at Trip and tightened her shields to keep him from picking up any trace of her prevarication. She was going to have to confess this deception later, and wasn’t looking forward to it. But it would be worth it to keep her family away from the potential danger of the upcoming confrontation.

“The first objective,” T’Pol informed them quietly, “was to save Elizabeth. This has been accomplished.” She looked at her bond mate. “The second objective according to Daniels... was to prevent Trip’s death.”

“You mean Massaro is going to kill Trip.” Archer said in a lethal monotone.

“I cannot tell you more than I have,” T’Pol responded. Trip’s jaw muscles tightened.

“If I had known that I would have gone after him instead of sealing us up in here,” he growled.

“Which is precisely the reason that I did not tell you,” T’Pol snapped. “I am not about to lose you now. I finally have everything I have ever wanted. You think I am going to risk losing it for the likes of him?”

“Commander T’Pol, keep that wild man in sickbay. Sit on him if you have to. You have my authorization to use whatever force is necessary to accomplish this. We will take care of things out here. Archer out.”

The Captain stabbed a button on his desk. “Lieutenant Reed, report to my ready room on the double.” He stood to unlock his door and barely made it in time before Malcolm stepped in.

Three minutes of rapid explanation later, and a highly pissed off Malcolm Reed was headed for the armory to gather a security detail. Nine minutes from the time Archer hit the button on his desk Lieutenant Reed and his men marched into engineering. Massaro was working at a console on the far side of the warp core. Malcolm did not bother with formalities.

“Massaro!” The ensign looked up and turned pale.

“Yessir?” Malcolm’s stun beam caught him in the chest and dropped him like a tree. When the security officers went to gather their comatose prisoner the rest of the engineering team gathered around to demand an explanation. Once they got an explanation, Malcolm needed the team and all their training to keep Massaro from being shredded then and there. Only his loudly repeated assurances that the captain wanted Massaro alive for questioning, and that he would personally make sure that the interrogation was as miserable as possible allowed them to get their prize back to the brig alive.

It took more than two hours to unseal sickbay, even with Trip working from the inside and an entire engineering team working from the outside. But they finally got out. By which time both Trip and T’Pol were at the point of collapse from total exhaustion. Elizabeth however was just hitting her stride and getting ready to play.

The two new parents sat side by side on a diagnostic bed huddled over their baby. Elizabeth couldn’t make up her mind which fascinated her more, T’Pol’s nose or Trip’s lower lip. So she decided to remove both for further study.

“Right now I would let her keep it if it would buy me a couple hours of solid sleep,” Trip yawned weakly.

“She would merely try to put it in her ear,” T’Pol pointed out. “That is what she did with the chewing toy Phlox gave her, and the fuzzy animal Ensign Sato brought down, and her foot.

“I still don’t see how she does that without dislocating her hip,” Trip said admiringly.

“Babies are notoriously limber,” T’Pol told him.

“There they are, Captain,” Phlox’s voice distracted them. The doctor stood next to Archer beside the curtains that gave the bed a modicum of privacy. Both men were smiling broadly.

“I think Phlox is right you two,” Archer told them. “Take him up on that baby sitting offer and get some sleep.”

“We’re not leaving her,” Trip said stubbornly. “Not gonna happen.” Phlox looked upward in defeat.

“In that case will you at least rest on a bed here in sickbay? Take turns napping if nothing else. Neither of you can keep going much longer in your current condition. You won’t be any good to Elizabeth, yourselves, the ship or each other like this.”

“He has a point,” Trip trembled to another gargantuan yawn.

T’Pol nodded. “But first there is one final piece of business to take care of.” She stood up shakily. “Would you mind holding Elizabeth for a moment Doctor?”

“Certainly not,” Phlox said heartily. “I would be delighted.” His broad smile and brow ridges were just what the doctor ordered as far as Elizabeth was concerned. She instantly started an in-depth investigation of Denobulan gross anatomy.

T’Pol turned to Trip. “I love you Trip.” He sat and looked at her. He was too numb with fatigue to show any reaction, but his internal alarms were blowing their stacks. It was amazing enough that she would say it in front of strangers or Daniels. But here? In front of the captain and the doctor? So much for the non-fraternization policy.

T’Pol let a tiny smile show. “I am not concerned about the non-fraternization policy Trip. I cannot raise Elizabeth on a starship. You know that. I will have to resign my commission and make a home for her. I am her mother. This is my task.”

“Not necessarily,” Captain Archer broke in. “Starfleet has ground based positions--teaching positions at the academy, for example. They would certainly be overjoyed to have you there.”

“Wherever I ultimately go, I do not want to go alone Trip,” T’Pol said softly. “I know that it is traditional among your people for the male to be the one to ask this. But I need you. You are my ashayam, my bonded mate and the father of my child. I want to marry you by the laws and customs of your people Trip. Will you agree to this? Will you at least consider it?”

Trip looked at her for a long moment. “You going anywhere in the next few minutes, Cap’n?” Archer wrinkled his brow.

“You mean right now? No preparation? No music or ceremony?”

Trip never looked away from T’Pol. “Right here and right now. I have waited too long for this. I wanna do it now before she comes to her senses.”

Malcolm got dragged out of bed and called to sickbay under the initial impression that there was another emergency. When he found out what was going on his jaw almost hit the floor. “You can’t be serious!”

“Look, Malcolm, are you gonna be my best man or not?” Trip was in no mood to put up with naysayers. Malcolm nodded dumbly. “Good. In that case go to my quarters. In my desk drawer, second drawer down on the left side there is a small leather box. Get it and bring it here, please.”

Malcolm returned with the box and Trip showed T’Pol the twin platinum bands inside. “I made ‘em. Wasn’t sure I would ever get the chance to use ‘em.” Her fingers shook as she picked up the ring intended for her. It looked like a perfect fit. “I snuck the glove from your pressure suit and took some measurements. Then one time when you were helping me in engineering I was scanning a joint to size a fitting properly while you held it. So I just went ahead and scanned your finger too. I hope it works.”

“... do you T’Pol, daughter of T’Les, take this man...”

“... do you Charles Tucker III, take this woman...”

“Then by the authority vested in me as a starship captain, I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

They spent their wedding night huddled together in each other’s arms on a bed in sickbay that was intended for only one person, dead to the universe. Meanwhile their daughter had a wonderful time watching Phlox’s animals eat their live food and practicing her skills at kicking and squealing.

Chapter 4

Trip woke up feeling like he had been dragged uphill over a lava field. Movement was not good. Not good at all. T'Pol was gone but he could hear her murmuring somewhere nearby along with Elizabeth's gurgles. He smiled despite the fact that it made his face hurt. Trip came out from behind the curtain moving very slowly and carefully. He would be willing to swear that he could hear every joint in his body creak.

T'Pol was feeding Elizabeth a bottle under Phlox's watchful eye. The baby was happily gorging herself, hanging onto the bottle with both hands and both feet like a monkey. T'Pol looked concerned. "She isn't supposed to be doing that."

"What?" Trip stepped forward. "You mean hang on with her feet? Human babies do it all the time. She will outgrow it. Don't worry about it."

"He's right Commander," Phlox soothed the anxious mommy. "It is entirely typical behavior for a human infant. She is merely stretching and exercising her body, trying out her abilities."

T'Pol's expression cleared and she looked up at Trip in relief. He smiled and bent forward to kiss her. At the last minute he happened to think and adjusted his aim to hit her cheek. She looked surprised and not pleased. "Sorry, hun," he said drawing back. "No way would I inflict this morning breath on you. In fact I need a shower so bad that I fear for the health and safety of Phlox's critters if I don't get one pretty soon."

T'Pol wrinkled her nose and nodded. "You are in fact becoming quite pungent. It might be advisable to shower before the Vulcan Healers arrive later this morning to examine Elizabeth."

"Say what?" Trip bristled. "Why do they want to poke and prod at her?"

"They don't believe me," Phlox said with irritation in his voice. "The Vulcan Science Directorate has officially gone on record that Human and Vulcan DNA are incompatible. Therefore a Human/Vulcan hybrid is inherently impossible. Therefore I must be mistaken."

"So screw 'em," Trip growled. "We know the truth. What difference does it make if a bunch of narrow minded fools refuse to see what's in front of them?"

"Please husband," T'Pol touched his hand as a tingle ran through Trip's spine.

"Husband," he thought. "I like the sound of that. I REALLY like the sound of that." A foolish grin spread over his face. He replied, "What is it... Mrs. Tucker?" He was still grinning.

T'Pol said earnestly, "Dr. Phlox's results are sufficient to establish Elizabeth's parentage by Earth law. Captain Archer has consulted with Starfleet's legal department on our behalf while we slept. Apparently there is legal precedent for cloned children that was established in the latter part of the 21st century. In compliance with this precedent we are already listed as Elizabeth's parents. But not under Vulcan law."

"How do they plan to deny it?" Trip said indignantly.

"They cannot," T'Pol said simply, "if we allow them to confirm Dr. Phlox's results themselves. T'Pol's new government is willing to acknowledge that many of the old Science Directorate's findings were based on political expediency rather than fact. But before an established ruling can be officially overturned the Vulcan government will require a Vulcan Healer to provide evidence from their own investigation to contradict the previous finding."

"In other words Commander Tucker," Phlox said in aggravation, "it is a bureaucratic formality. But a necessary one if your daughter is going to claim her Vulcan citizenship."

"Well, all right," Trip grumbled. "But they better not give me any attitude. I am not in the mood to put up with it."

"Nor am I husband," T'Pol told him. "They will not."

Trip staggered off to his quarters for a scalding shower and vigorous tooth brushing. A chin scrape and new uniform later found him headed back to sickbay. The entire alpha shift bridge crew was gathered around a nervous looking T'Pol making 'oohing' and 'aahing' sounds over Elizabeth.

The kid was eating it up and putting on a show for her audience. She ran through her entire list of talents. She kicked, she squealed, she drooled, she jabbered, she grabbed, she squirmed, she jackknifed, she blew spit bubbles, and for a grand finale she even burped some upchuck. For some obscure reason Hoshi looked gratified at being granted the honor of wiping it off, Trip was unable to fathom why.

"Who's running the ticket booth?" Trip asked. Travis turned around and shot him a snicker.

"We caught Phlox's back turned and sneaked in, then Ensign Sato gave him the puppy eyes until he agreed to let us stay a few minutes. We are on the way to the bridge to start our shift and we all decided to drop in as a mob. Figured it would be easier to overwhelm resistance that way."

"Since you brought it up," Hoshi sighed, "we better get moving or the captain is going to overwhelm us when we show up late for our shift."

After the visitors left Trip suggested to T'Pol, "If you want a turn at a shower, now's your chance. I can play with Lizzie while you rinse off, then we can grab some breakfast before the stone faces get here."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Stone faces? Is that how you really see us?"

Trip stopped in his tracks and sighed. "No. No. No." He looked at the ceiling. "I was talking about the crotchety old farts that always seem to end up getting sent out as government reps for this kind of thing. Not you hun, you know better than that."

T'Pol stood up and handed the baby to him. Then she gave him a quick peck on the lips. "I see you have taken care of the 'morning breath' problem. I believe your suggestion of a hot shower has merit. Let's go."

T'Pol felt an odd sense of anti-climax when she walked into her quarters. They looked exactly the same as they had for the last year. How could they be unchanged when everything else in her entire existence had been so radically altered? Trip headed for her bunk with the baby and let Elizabeth stretch out for some cooing and thrashing. T'Pol watching the pair of them with an indescribable feeling in her belly for a few seconds. Then she put down the diaper bag and turned toward her closet to select a clean uniform.

Trip looked up at the sound of the zipper. He watched his new wife slide out of her uniform casually and tried to swallow a dry cannonball. T'Pol normally kept her quarters warmer than the ship's standard temperature, but he never realized before just how warm it really was in here. Sweat rose up on various parts of his anatomy. That wasn't the only thing either.

T'Pol turned to face him with her eyes wide and a little bit mischievous. She slid off her upper undergarment, then stepped out of her lower one. The scent of Trip's pheromones was thick in the air. She smiled and told him in a husky whisper, "Soon beloved. I promise you."

"I... uh... I know..." Trip gulp and cleared his throat. "I mean I know you need to... uh... shower 'cause... I mean... the... uh... I mean... you know... the Vulcan guys are coming and you... I mean you don't wanna meet them like that... I don't mean like that... I mean without a shower. You know what I mean. Doncha?"

She sputtered helplessly and for the first time since he had known her, Trip heard T'Pol cut loose with an honest to goodness giggle. It was only a second and a half long, but by Cochrane it was a real giggle. He grinned until his cheeks hurt.

She walked over to kiss him and he pulled her close for a long embrace. Her planned quick one turned into a deeply passionate encounter that threatened to advance to bigger and better things. Fortunately for decorum Elizabeth reminded them forcefully of her presence with a loud squawk. They broke apart in sudden realization of circumstances.

“I will not make you wait much longer husband,” T’Pol swore as she gently disengaged herself from Trip’s arms. Trip took a deep breath and nodded.

As T’Pol turned to walk toward her shower Trip jokingly told his daughter, “Between you and your momma I am gonna be white haired before I am forty.” T’Pol stumbled and grabbed the doorway with a loud gasp. Suddenly she whirled around and dove back to Trip, seizing him in a tight hug.

“Hey! What is it? C’mon now, what’s wrong, hun?” Trip hugged her tight and started rubbing her back. Then he thought a moment and reached carefully around to find the proper neural nodes. He delicately applied pressure in the sequence she had taught him to induce relaxation. Gradually her breathing steadied. She still kept a tight grip around him with both arms. Trip shifted her to his lap and locked arms around her waist to hold her there.

“Tell me, what’s going on?” he demanded firmly. “No evasion. No ifs, ands, or buts. I wanna know what’s wrong and I wanna know now.”

“I am sorry. I am so sorry,” she told him in a broken whisper.

“For what?” he asked. “Getting upset? How many times have you been around me when I got torn up about something? Come on honey, that’s nothing to be sorry for.”

Even before he finished speaking she was shaking her head. “No. I am sorry for being unworthy of you.”

“Bullshit,” Trip shot back automatically. He pulled his face back to stare at her in disbelief. “What kind of foolishness is that? Unworthy of me?” He gaped at her. “Good lord. You? Unworthy of me?” His mouth worked a few times.

T’Pol told him in a small voice, “I have never treated you with the respect you deserve. I have never cherished you properly.”

“Aw crap,” Trip protested. “If it weren’t for you I wouldn’t be here. I never would have made it through the Expanse without you. How many times did you keep me from cracking up in there? And all the time you were doing it while you were sick yourself from what that sonuvabitch Tolaris did to you.”

She wiped her eyes. “I brought that upon myself as well. I agreed to the meld at first.”

“Stop this,” Trip started to get angry. “Stop this right now. Where is this coming from all of a sudden T’Pol? That...” Trip caught himself. He took a few breaths and went on in a calmer voice. “He attacked you. I only wish you had trusted me enough then to tell me what happened. He would have accidentally returned to his ship by way of the wrong airlock.”

She looked touched and exasperated at the same time. “Trip,” but he stopped her with a kiss.

“Listen to me,” he instructed. “You want to talk about respect and treating people right? Am I going to have to pay for all the harassment I piled on you when you first came to Enterprise? Remember all the grief I gave you about being Vulcan? If we start keeping score about who owes which the bigger payback we are both in trouble.”

“That’s not what I mean-”

“Shush,” Trip kissed her again. “We got through it. We survived it all and we are together now. Let go of it. I love you lady. I have loved you since the Expanse, but I was too chicken to say it. Now that you have finally had the guts to break through for both of us I am not letting anything get in the way.” He held her eyes adoringly. “We have each other now, and we have this little squirt trying to roll over and crawl off the bed! Holy Crap!”

Trip lunged and grabbed Elizabeth’s legs. T’Pol stood up more leisurely and sat down to take her arms. “There’s no way! She is way too little to be trying stuff like that!” Trip babbled in near panic.

T’Pol gave him an odd look. “No, she is not husband. She would not have succeeded of course. But it is entirely normal for Vulcan babies to be making the attempt at her age.”

Trip stared slack jawed and moaned painfully, “Oh ma-a-a-an. I just hope she isn’t a climber.”

“A climber?” T’Pol looked up sharply. Trip nodded.

“My folks tell me I started trying to climb the furniture about the same time I started trying to walk. When I was two, Dad caught me at the top of the front porch post, hanging off the edge of the roof.”

Trip saw T’Pol flinch and hurried to do damage control. “Remember her Vulcan genes are dominant,” he reminded her comfortingly. “She probably won’t take after me like that.”

“We can hope,” T’Pol said with quiet intensity. “If you are sure you can handle things I will go ahead with my shower now. We have one hour and 48 minutes until the Vulcan Healers arrive.”

-&-

Malcolm Reed keyed the lock and stood to one side to let Captain Archer step into the cell. He followed and closed the door behind him. Massaro sat miserably on the bunk staring down at the deck between his feet.

The two senior officers regarded the prisoner with a liberal mixture of disgust and contempt, mixed with a generous seasoning of righteous anger. Archer said evenly, "Ensign Massaro."

The prisoner lifted his head. He bore the expression of a man who expected the worst and was trying to resign himself to it, but hadn't quite gotten there yet. Malcolm judged that a firm hand was likely to get the best results with this one so he barked, "On your feet Ensign! Attention!"

Massaro jumped by reflex and snapped to attention like a cadet. Archer let him stand and sweat for a while as he paced back and forth in front of him, looking him up and down and letting Massaro see his absolute disgust.

Finally Archer spoke, but to Malcolm instead of Archer. "Remember Azati Prime, Malcolm?"

"Yes sir," Lieutenant Reed replied crisply. "Quite clearly, Sir."

Archer continued to pace and keep his eyes on Massaro while he spoke to Reed. "When I got back to the ship after being interrogated by the Xindi, Phlox hauled me to sickbay for a once over. Guess who was also in a bed there?"

"I really wouldn't know, Sir," Malcolm played along.

"A certain engineering ensign who had been badly burned during the fight Malcolm," Archer answered with a sneer. "It seems this ensign was burned so badly that he couldn't even see. So his commanding officer, Commander Tucker, led him out of the flames and escorted him to sickbay himself."

"Not surprising, Sir," Malcolm replied. "Commander Tucker's loyalty to the people under his command is well known to everyone on the ship."

"Yes. It is, isn't it?" Archer stopped and looked Massaro straight in the face. The prisoner's chin was trembling. "We know you sabotaged the shuttle Massaro. You almost killed all of us. We also have solid testimony that you were the one who stole the DNA for Terra Prime. Now I am not in any mood to waste time with you or let Malcolm get his hands dirty. So this is how it is going to be. Are you listening Ensign Massaro?"

"Yessir. I am listening, Sir." Massaro's voice was a whispering squeak.

"Excellent," Archer hissed. "Listen very carefully because I have no intention of repeating myself. Do you realize that you haven't just committed a crime under Earth law? By stealing Commander T'Pol's DNA, you have committed a crime against a citizen of Vulcan. That makes you subject to Vulcan law as well as the Starfleet Code of Justice." Massaro started to look queasy.

Archer smiled very coldly and pushed his face closer. "Have you heard of something that Vulcans can do called a mind meld? It lets them use their telepathy to dig down into a person's mind and rip out EVERYTHING that is in there."

At Archer's sudden shout Massaro jumped and spasmed. Archer continued icily, "I mean everything Massaro. Every single thing you have ever done wrong. Everything in your entire life that you have ever been ashamed of, all the way back to the time you swiped your classmate's cookie when you were five. Would you like to go through that Massaro? Would you like to have a Vulcan come in here and take those alien fingers of theirs, put them on your skull, and..."

Massaro fell back onto the bunk and curled up into a whimpering ball. "Please! No. Please..." He shivered and tightened even further. Archer decided to quit before he drove the poor coward into catatonic terror. He waved Malcolm to take over.

Lieutenant Reed stepped forward. "We want it all Massaro. We want names, dates, places. We want every contact you have. We want passwords. We want drop off points. We want chain of command. We all the details of how the money was handled. We want everything you have and we want it right now. Not in fifteen minutes Massaro. Now. There are three Vulcans on their way up from the planet that are due to arrive in eleven minutes. If you aren't talking a blue streak when they get here..."

They couldn't shut him up. They literally could not shut him up. Finally Malcolm called in two more security officers and Archer went back to the bridge. It looked like Massaro wasn't going to run dry anytime in the near future.

-&-

The Healers looked about like Trip had expected. There were three of them, two old men and one old woman. None of them looked overjoyed at the unique opportunity they were having to visit a human starship.

T'Pol got up and walked over to join Phlox in meeting them at the door to sickbay. Trip remained seated on the edge of the biobed and picked up Elizabeth, holding her protectively to his chest. He seriously considered putting his foot down and refusing to let any of the Vulcans near his daughter. They hadn't said a word yet and he already didn't like them, just from the 'something stinks in here' expressions on their faces.

T'Pol offered the split fingered greeting that was becoming standard since the discovery of the Kirshara. "Peace and long life to you all."

"Live long and prosper," the oldest looking man replied. "I am S'Lask, this is Kerlek and T'Rul. We are here to examine the clone and conduct genetic testing on it."

Trip's anger flashed through the bond hot and fast enough to make T'Pol stiffen involuntarily. "This is Dr. Phlox," she forced her voice to remain quietly controlled, "our chief medical officer. He has been the physician in charge of our daughter's care."

S'Lask and the others immediately turned to Phlox and started ignoring T'Pol. They fired off medical jargon at warp speed for several moments while T'Pol stood by and listened. Trip sat and steamed. Finally, after examining Phlox's equipment and pronouncing it barely adequate, the Vulcans were ready to start.

S'Lask looked around sickbay and saw Trip holding Elizabeth. "Is that the clone?" he demanded.

Phlox put in quickly, "Yes. That is baby Elizabeth. Commander Tucker, Elizabeth's father, is holding her."

"Bring it here," S'Lask commanded. Trip's nostrils flared. He did not move. But to T'Pol's profound and heartfelt gratitude, he did not speak either. "We cannot examine the clone from over there Commander," S'Lask said condescendingly. "Bring it here so that we can begin our analysis."

"Why should I?" Trip asked mildly. Much too mildly. After four years of close association with Charles Tucker III, Phlox did not like the sound of that tone at all. He started easing his way over to the sedative shelf and palmed a hypo.

S'Lask looked flabbergasted. The three Healers traded looks of incomprehension. T'Pol closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable. There was no way to stop it now.

T'Rul said carefully, as if to one of extremely low intelligence, "This was the purpose of our visit. We came here to analyze the genetic makeup of the clone and determine its ancestry. The arrangements were made through official diplomatic channels and approved by Starfleet command."

Trip smiled tightly and stood up. He walked over slowly with Elizabeth in his arms, stopping a few paces away from the Vulcans. "First of all," he said in a voice so low that even Vulcan ears found it soft, "my daughter is not an 'it'. My daughter is a person. She has a name. Her name is Elizabeth Tucker. Do you customarily refer to your patients as 'it'?"

Healer Kerlek had been keeping his mouth shut through all of this. After watching and listening he finally offered, "No offense was intended Commander. Your point is taken however. Your daughter will be referred to by her proper name hereafter."

Trip eyed him speculatively. Then he went on. "Second, I don't care if the Vulcan High Council, the president of Earth, and every damn admiral in Starfleet comes in here personally and gives you permission. Elizabeth is a minor child and T'Pol and I are her parents. We hold final authority over things like this and under human law no one has the

right to overrule us. You don't need Starfleet's permission to examine Elizabeth. You don't need Phlox's permission. You don't need any diplomat's permission. You need mine. And you need T'Pol's. Is That Clear?"

"Perfectly," S'Lask said grudgingly.

"Good. Because the last thing I want you to remember is this," Trip paused to look at T'Pol. "I am only permitting this so that my daughter can claim her Vulcan citizenship. This is for T'Pol's sake, not mine. I personally don't care if you believe us or not."

He gave Elizabeth to her mother and told her in a much louder voice, "I am going down to engineering for a while. I don't know what Vulcan law says, but this is Earth jurisdiction and Elizabeth is an Earth citizen. As her mother you have the right to stop this at any time, with or without a reason. They have no authority to do anything at all without your express permission." He turned and stalked away without looking back, still simmering.

Kerlek sounded interested, "The humans have already granted her citizenship?"

"Yes," T'Pol answered in satisfaction. "Humans do not discriminate based on method of conception or gestation, unlike some races. On Earth it does not matter if one is conceived naturally, or through in-vitro fertilization, or cloned. Under human law our daughter is entitled to the same rights and protections as any other citizen."

T'Rul blinked in surprise and looked at Elizabeth with a different expression than before. "Even if it were proven that the... child was constructed using 50% of your genes you do realize that you would need to file for recognition before the High Council before she would be listed as a citizen, do you not? And even then since she was artificially gestated she will never be specifically listed as your daughter under our law, but rather as a genetic derivative."

T'Pol gritted her teeth. She forced out, "I am aware of all this. But at least she will be recognized as a Vulcan citizen by right of heritage."

S'Lask let out a puff of air that was almost a sigh and suggested, "Let us proceed. The sooner we begin the sooner we can settle this matter."

T'Pol insisted on remaining close throughout the entire examination. At several points Elizabeth started getting upset and T'Pol made the Healers stop while mommy gave comfort and made it all better. The Vulcans could barely contain their impatience. At one point S'Lask snapped, "We will likely be here all day at this rate."

T'Pol raised her eyes from her baby and told him simply, "I am sure that you can find the exit whenever the desire to leave becomes irresistible." S'Lask shut up.

Finally they were done with the poking and prodding. The analysis didn't take nearly as long as collecting the samples. Phlox didn't even try to contain his satisfaction at the naked chagrin on the Vulcan's faces when they saw the results start to come in. They re-ran the analysis, then re-ran it again.

Finally Kerlek walked into Phlox's office, where T'Pol and the doctor were sitting over tea and quietly observing Elizabeth's napping form. Phlox straightened in his chair.

"Healer Kerlek, have you finished your work?" His normal amiable smile had a trace of friendly malice in it.

The Vulcan stood ramrod straight. "Doctor Phlox, I believe that we all owe you an apology for questioning your results. I confess that it is most disconcerting to realize information which one has relied upon is in fact undependable. However, there is no denying the data. The child Elizabeth Tucker is unmistakably a binary clone produced by combining the genetic material of Commander T'Pol with genetic material from the human Commander Tucker. You were correct all along and we were wrong to question your findings. On behalf of the Vulcan Science Directorate, I ask your pardon."

"I must say," Phlox told her in a wondering voice as he stood up, "I don't really know what to say. That is most gracious of you. An apology wasn't really necessary, but I certainly do appreciate it very much. I am glad for Elizabeth's sake that she will be able to claim her rightful heritage on both of her parent's worlds now."

"Indeed." Kerlek turned to T'Pol. "Commander T'Pol. Our report will make special note that Earth has already recognized Elizabeth as a full citizen, and specifically acknowledges you as her mother. I do not know how much weight this will carry under our laws, but I doubt that it will do any harm."

"That is most agreeable," T'Pol bowed her head gratefully. "I will contact Ambassador Soval as soon as possible to file the necessary request for a hearing to establish Elizabeth's Vulcan citizenship."

Kerlek told her, "In the interim our certification of her Vulcan blood will be sufficient to authorize access to all facilities of the compound. If I may suggest, the temperature aboard this ship is rather cool. The Vulcan compound can supply warm baby clothing and related supplies that you may find useful."

T'Pol was pleased. "That is a most logical suggestion Healer Kerlek. I will contact Commander Tucker to make arrangements for us to visit the compound immediately."

Kerlek kept his mouth shut about the idea of letting the belligerent Tucker set foot inside the Vulcan area. It was none of his business and, after all, the human was the baby's father.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

T'Pol keyed the intercom on Phlox's desk. "T'Pol to engineering."

The reply came very quickly. "Tucker here. How's it going up there?"

"The healers have finished their examination and confirmed Dr. Phlox's original results. I will now be able to file the required paperwork to have Elizabeth declared a Vulcan citizen." T'Pol winced and drew back a little at the victory yell that came through the speaker. "I also wish to visit the Vulcan compound immediately to obtain some warmer clothing for her and some other Vulcan baby supplies that I need. Would you like to come with us?"

"Don't go anywhere without me. I am on the way. Tucker out."

"You are welcome to ride with us Commander," Healer Kerlek gallantly offered. T'Pol accepted the peace offering with dignity. She hoped that Trip could contain his irritation long enough for them to get to San Francisco without incident.

The best laid plans of mice and Vulcans gang aft agley however. T'Pol was still assembling her diaper bag supplies and waiting for Trip to arrive from engineering when the intercom went off with a screaming alarm.

"Tactical Alert! Tactical Alert! All Hands To Battle Stations!"

T'Pol sprang like a cat to hand Elizabeth to Phlox, who took her in one smooth motion as if they had been practicing for years. She turned and dashed for the door, yelling over her shoulders, "All three of you will remain here until you receive further instructions."

She took off for the turbo lift at a dead run, passing other crew members heading in both directions. Everyone kept their heads down and focused all their attention on getting their backsides to where they were supposed to be at top speed, paying no attention to what anyone else was doing. The lift stopped and T'Pol leaped aboard, stumbling straight into Trip's chest. The door closed and he steadied her as they resumed the ascent to the bridge.

Her look told him the answer before he asked it. "You don't know what happened either?" She shook her head. The door opened and they got to their posts in a hop and a jump, relieving the beta shift officers who turned over the reins with visible relief.

Ambassador Soval was on the main view screen talking to the captain. "Our personnel are evacuating as quickly as possible Captain Archer. If the information that your prisoner provided is accurate the bomb is scheduled to go off in precisely 7 minutes and 9 seconds. This will not be sufficient time for everyone to escape from the compound.

However, it will at least allow time to save our women and children. We are deeply grateful.”

“Don’t give up yet Ambassador,” Archer said between his teeth. He turned to the engineering station. “Trip, get down to the transporter and start locking on Vulcan life signs in the compound down there. Beam them up as fast as possible. Start with the Ambassador himself, that way he can direct you with the rest.”

“I’m on it, Cap’n.” Trip was already in the turbo lift by the time he finished.

“Send us your coordinates Ambassador,” Archer instructed firmly. Soval gave him a look and sighed.

“Very well captain.” He manipulated something off screen. “They have been sent.”

“Got them sir,” Hoshi murmured. “Sending them down to Commander Tucker.” Soval stood up, shimmered, and disappeared from the screen.

“He’s here, Cap’n,” Trip’s voice came through.

T’Pol told them, “I am routing sensor data directly to Commander Tucker’s console.”

“I’ll just start at the back of the compound and work my way toward the front. That work for you, Soval?” Trip’s voice sounded again.

“It seems as logical an approach as any,” Soval agreed. A moment later a muted whine came through the intercom and Soval was heard briskly telling someone, “Please clear the pad for the next arrival. Proceed down the corridor and await further instructions.”

“Perfect,” Archer sagged back against his chair. “T’Pol, is there anything you can do to help from up here?” She shook her head. “Then head down there and organize a welcoming committee for our guests. Warn Phlox in case some of them are hurt or sick. The ones that aren’t hurt can go to the mess hall or wherever you think we have room. Let’s keep this operation tight people. Malcolm, make sure that your team keeps an eye on things. I don’t want any nasty surprises. And post someone in sickbay to watch over Elizabeth.”

T’Pol stopped at the turbo lift and looked back. “Thank you... Jonathan.” He grinned and waved her onward.

In the end not everyone made it out. But Trip’s mastery at the transporter controls got enough people away from the center of the blast zone to ensure that nobody died or was permanently damaged. Emergency response teams flooded the compound while police and MACO squads cordoned the area tightly.

The secondary Vulcan compound in Cairo was not prepared to accept so many refugees without some time to prepare. Rather than move everyone around again, Starfleet just shipped up some camp beds and basic supplies. Cargo holds one and two were converted into dormitories and the environmental controls were re-set to Vulcan normal.

The refugees were advised to settle in for the next few days until their new homes were ready. Chef was beside himself with the culinary opportunities. He happily declared that he had never imagined there were so many different things that you could do with plomeek. Someone soon introduced the Vulcan children to the wonders of chocolate, to the deep chagrin of their parents. Things started shaping up to be an interesting few days.

An hour after the final Vulcan was beamed aboard Trip and T'Pol sat in the briefing room with Soval, Archer, Phlox, the three Healers who had examined Elizabeth, and Admiral Gardner who had flown up for the consultation. No one looked thrilled to be there but all present acknowledged that it could have been much worse.

“So what’s the deal Cap’n?” Trip asked, rubbing his forehead. “Are you telling us that Massaro gave you the tip about the bomb?”

“Not quite Trip,” Archer replied. “The tip was turned in by Gannett. I am sure you remember Gannett.” He looked to the seat beside him. “She was aboard our ship for a while Admiral. We even thought at first that she might be a Terra Prime operative herself, but it turned out that she was working undercover trying to find the mole.”

Admiral Gardner looked his age at the moment but his voice was by no means weak. “As it happens one of the access codes that your man Massaro gave us worked to unlock a system that she had been trying to hack into for weeks. It is only by the grace of God that we found out about this when we did. If the information had come even a few minutes later it would have cost hundreds of lives. The timing is amazing.”

“In’t it though?” Trip muttered sardonically. He shot a glance at T’Pol, who could have made a fortune at any poker table in the galaxy.

“The timing that concerns me is the fact that Trip and I were just about to visit the compound with Elizabeth when the alert sounded,” T’Pol said. “I gather from what you said Admiral that Terra Prime was responsible for the bomb. What was their reasoning? Revenge for the Earth embassy on Vulcan?”

“Partly,” Gardner sighed. “Partly sheer cussedness. They want to cause trouble and turmoil any way that they can. We have Paxton and his chiefs, but the main body of Terra Prime is still out there. It will take a long time, perhaps even years, to eradicate this particular cancer.”

T’Rul said coldly, “Meanwhile no Vulcan will be safe on Earth.”

Soval looked reprovably at her while the humans looked down at the table. “That is hardly the case Healer T’Rul. I regret to say that I find your statement highly illogical. Terra Prime is no more representative of humans generally than V’Las and his associates are representative of Vulcans. Neither of our races is perfect. But at least we are both trying to improve ourselves. What more can we do?”

“Elizabeth’s safety is what matters to me,” Trip broke in roughly. “From the sound of things it doesn’t seem like it will be safe for her on Earth for a long time, if ever.”

Archer looked exceedingly unhappy. “Trip...” He stopped and took a deep breath. “Massaro wasn’t going to kill you. We were wrong about that. He...” The captain looked away for a moment.

“What?” Trip said very softly, his eyes never leaving his friend’s face.

Archer looked back in the suddenly silent room. “His orders were to kill Elizabeth. Paxton sent out the command just before he was locked up. He expected her to die you know. In fact he counted on it. But if Phlox somehow managed to save her, Massaro was instructed to make sure...” Archer couldn’t stand to look at Trip’s face any longer. Neither could Gardner. The Vulcans politely turned away to spare another the shame of having such blatant emotion be witnessed publicly. Only T’Pol reached out to him and grabbed his hands.

“Is Massaro still aboard?” Trip managed to force out the words in a barely audible whisper that was still sentient. But only just.

“No,” Archer said emphatically. “When Admiral Gardner arrived we sent him back down immediately on the same shuttle. I wanted him off my ship and Starfleet wanted him in their interrogation chambers just as badly.”

“Good,” was all Trip had to say on the matter.

“Logically, of Elizabeth’s two possible home worlds Vulcan would seem to be the safest option at this time,” T’Pol said flatly. “Ambassador. I wish to enter a request for a hearing to have my daughter declared a citizen of Vulcan based on her genetic heritage.”

“Certainly. I will forward your request to T’Pau immediately along with my endorsement. However I believe that approval is a foregone conclusion.” Soval looked across the table at the young couple. “Considering that you are one of the three who found the Kirshara, and that Commander Tucker led the Enterprise into single handedly preventing war between Vulcan and Andoria, I sincerely doubt that the Council will have any objection to declaring your offspring a citizen.

“What about me?” Trip sat up and ignored the stares he suddenly got from the head of the table. “What would I have to do to immigrate?”

Four gray Vulcan eyebrows rose in unison. T'Pol just beamed at him without allowing her expression to so much as twitch. Trip made a note that someday he was absolutely going to have to figure out how she did that. Soval said slowly, "I am not certain what you mean Commander. Surely you will be allowed to visit your daughter whenever you wish. If you desire to take up residence on Vulcan there is a human compound..."

"No," Trip shook his head vehemently. "No compound. No separation from the rest of the world. I want to live with my family in a normal home and give my daughter a normal life. Or as normal as it can be with an alien for a father."

"I..." Soval looked floored. He looked at T'Pol, who simply held up her left hand to show him her wedding band and said nothing more. Soval blinked and stared for a moment, then came back to himself. "I see. In that case the situation is entirely different Commander. As the husband of a Vulcan citizen, you are automatically entitled to make your home on Vulcan if you choose to do so. This right is unassailable and irrevocable. Even if something happens to T'Pol now, your status will not change."

"Horse piss Trip!," Archer slapped his hand on the table in frustration. "I just got you back from Columbia! Are you seriously going to resign your commission now? You are on the fast track with your career and right now the sky is the limit. If you quit now you will never know what you could have accomplished."

"No, he is not going to give up his career. I will not allow it." T'Pol said decisively.

"Oh really," Trip turned to look at her. "It's all right for you but not all right for me? Anyway don't they have engineers on Vulcan?"

"Assuredly we do," Soval said. "Some additional training might be required to accustom you to our technology. But you could certainly find employment on Vulcan."

"But not as a warp field specialist, which is your area of expertise," T'Pol pointed out.

"So exactly how long have you two been married Commander?" Gardner asked, scowling.

"Exactly 19 hours and 12 minutes Admiral," T'Pol replied with unshakable equanimity. "By the way. I hereby resign my commission."

Admiral Gardner groaned and sat back looking like he had a headache. "We can't fill positions to begin with. Then as soon as we fill 'em our best people start spawning and bail on us." He ran a tired hand through his hair. "Hernandez is still trying to come up with a chief engineer that satisfies her. And we haven't got half the senior officers picked out for the NX-03 yet even though she is due to launch in 17 months."

"I sincerely sympathize Admiral," Soval told him. "We have the same problem. It seems that some things are universal."

“With all due respect Admiral,” Archer looked put upon, “you are not the one losing both your chief engineer and your science officer plus your first officer all in one fell swoop.”

“You are not going to lose your engineer Captain,” T’Pol returned. “We will work something out. Trip and I will discuss arrangements.”

“And just what gives you the authority to make statements like that?” Trip demanded, starting to get steamed. “I thought on Vulcan wives were supposed to obey their husbands, not the other way around.”

“We are not on Vulcan, husband,” she pointed out reasonably. “You married me by the laws and customs of Earth. There was nothing in our marriage oath about obedience.”

Gardner snorted. “We used to put that in our vows, but gales of hysterical laughter kept interrupting the ceremonies.” He looked at Trip. “I take it that your main concern here is having time with your family. As long as we could figure out a way for you to have that, you would stick?”

Trip looked intrigued. “Sure. I would love to stay. But I gotta put my family first Admiral. I am not gonna leave my baby girl to grow up without her daddy. I can’t do that to her. I am sorry, but it just i’n’t gonna happen.”

“Well for at least the next few months we can arrange for you to stay on Enterprise but be granted frequent extended family leaves.” Gardner told the room, “With everything that has been happening in the last few years, Starfleet has instituted a new policy. Now that we have more than one of them we are going to keep at least one NX class vessel within three day’s travel of the home world at all times, just in case of emergencies.”

Captain Archer nodded emphatically. “As much as I would love to be back out there, I can’t argue with the logic of that.”

Admiral Gardner told Trip, “While you are away from the ship on Vulcan you can be working on detached assignment with our R&D team. We have a new set of theoretical designs that need to be fine tuned and I believe that you are just the man to do it. These theorists are fine and dandy at drawing pretty pictures. But pretty pictures don’t make a ship fly. I want a man to look at those designs who understands how things work in the real world and knows what it means to get his hands dirty. If these designs pan out we will be building warp six engines in less than ten years.”

Trip’s eyes lit up. “I... I suppose I could take a look at them...”

“Great,” Gardner said and stood up. “We will work out the scheduling once this emergency is settled. Meantime I need to get back to my office. That gold mine you tapped, Jon, has caused the Terra Prime thugs to start scurrying like rats from a burning barn. I have a dozen teams right now out with nets, ready to scoop them up.”

“Good hunting Admiral,” Archer told him with a grim smile. “I will arrange a shuttle for you.”

“Captain,” Soval spoke up. “If I might impose. There are several items in my office in the compound that I have need of. Particularly those related to filing the request for baby Elizabeth’s citizenship. Given the location of the bomb and the strength of the blast, it is likely that my office is still somewhat intact. Might I impose for transportation down to the compound?”

“Certainly, Ambassador.” Archer turned to Gardner. “You wouldn’t mind sharing a shuttle pod would you sir?”

“Absolutely not,” Gardner replied. “Glad to have the company.”

“Cap’n,” Trip looked concerned. “You better let me go with him. It’s not like he’s in shape to do rock climbing. There’s gonna be debris, and some of that stuff is no doubt unstable. I can go in and get the stuff for him if he will tell me what he wants and where it is.”

“That is inadvisable,” T’Pol said tightly. “There is no logic in risking yourself husband. Terra Prime considers you a traitor to your species. You have been marked as a particular target. You should not go down there.”

“I am not gonna let those...” Trip visibly got a grip. More calmly he said, “I am not going to let terrorists drive me away from my own planet T’Pol. I refuse to live my life in fear of what might happen. If I start to do that I might as well cut my own throat and be done with it. Besides, I may be a target but I am no more of a target than Soval is.”

She still looked unhappy. He softened his tone and took her arms in his hands. “T’Pol,” he said gently. “I will be as careful as I can be. I promise you that. I have no desire to get hurt, believe me. I have far too much to live for now. I have you, I have Lizzie. I have it all. I won’t take any risk I can avoid, I swear.”

She closed her eyes and drew in the deepest breath she could hold. She let it out and nodded, then she opened her shining eyes. “You have no way of knowing what those words mean to me husband. I will wait for you. Please come back soon.”

“I will.” He gave her a quick peck and went to join the Admiral and the Ambassador where they waited at the door to the briefing room.

Trip piloted the shuttle down to Starfleet HQ without incident. Once there it was easy for Admiral Gardner to summon ground transport to carry Soval and Trip to the compound. Soval casually waved his credentials and vouched for Trip, which got them through the barricade.

The compound was a mess. Trip visualized some giant with a ten story high mixer thrusting the beaters into the center of the compound and hitting the switch for high speed. The main residential area was hardest hit, with the school being completely flattened and the married/family housing almost completely destroyed. The medical offices next door were crumbling and slumping into a rough hill of dirt and stones that leaned against the corner of the diplomatic offices. The debris had shifted down and uprooted a tree, throwing it over and into an ornamental pond where a few hardy water fowl still paddled around looking befuddled.

Humans in uniform were everywhere. Taking pictures, measuring things, taking samples. Soval led Trip over to the front of the diplomatic building where they discovered a major setback. The front door had caved in. So had the five stories on top of it. This did not seem auspicious. The two men withdrew to discuss options.

“Hello Commander, Ambassador.”

Trip turned with Soval to regard the young woman. “Hello Gannett.” He felt a warm rush of friendly feelings mixed with embarrassment for his earlier suspicions. “I... uh... thanks for the help. I’m sorry about before. You know, on the ship.”

She grinned. “I’ll find a way to let you make it up to me somehow Commander. I’m just grateful that no one got killed here. That would have been too much. And as far as thanks go, I think we all owe you thanks. I understand you were the reason Paxton’s beam hit the water instead of the city.”

“Well, yeah.” Trip felt a little sheepish.

Ambassador Soval stepped forward with his hand raised and fingers spread. “Peace and long life to you, Lady. Your timely warning saved the lives of many of my people. A debt is owed, and it will not be forgotten.”

“I was only doing my duty Ambassador,” Gannett told him politely. “I am sure you understand. I am here to serve.” She bowed.

Soval raised his eyebrow. “In that case, perhaps you know of a safe way that we might enter the diplomatic building. I am urgently in need of some items from my office if they can possibly be obtained.”

She wrinkled her brow and considered. “I heard some of the rescue workers mention that the side door was unblocked. But I don’t know if you want to try it. They went over that pile of debris to get in, but they are trained and had special gear.”

“Necessity impels me to make the attempt,” Soval replied and started forward.

“No it doesn’t,” Trip said, stepping in front of him. “It impels you to wait right here while I make the attempt. You aren’t as young as you used to be Soval. Besides somebody needs to be out here to yell for help if I get into trouble.” The Vulcan didn’t put up any real fight about it.

Gannett pulled out her recorder and started taking shots as Trip cautiously approached the pile. “What are you doing?”

“I am a reporter you know,” she retorted, aiming the recorder to catch a shot of Soval watching Trip set his foot on the first big rock. Trip didn’t say anything else. All his attention and breath was spent on climbing. He soon found that scrambling up a pile of loose dirt and shattered concrete was not in any way comparable to rock climbing. It was much, much, worse. Every time he started to make any progress he slid backward to the bottom.

Soon a few casual observers ambled over. As his audience grew, remarks became wagers and Trip started to simmer. Finally he backed off and took a running start. When he hit the pile he started scrambling like a madman on all fours. By dint of furious effort and dogged determination he finally made it to the top of the pile. Filthy and triumphant, he turned with a smile and looked down at the observers below. He saw Gannett with her recorder smiling and giving him a thumbs up sign, which he returned.

Then the rock he was standing on shifted and flew out from under him. Trip hit the slope rump first and already picking up speed. Stopping was hopeless. Slowing down was futile. Steering was laughably unlikely. He did manage however to get enough purchase on the slope with his hands to change his angle of descent. Instead of heading feet first for the place where he started, he ended up pointed head first at the pond.

The splash was quite impressive. So was the eruption of waterfowl. Soval started forward along with several others to offer assistance when Trip exploded up from the bottom of the pond. Soaked to the skin, covered with slime and mud, scraped from the slide, draped with water lilies, and directly underneath an outraged mother duck along with her four half grown ducklings.

In strict obedience to immemorial instinct, the momma duck attacked. Trip tried to stand up but his feet kept sliding out from under him on the slick mud of the algae infested pond. Meanwhile the duck braced herself atop his brow and alternated between jabbing at his face with her beak, and flogging him about the head and neck with both wings while quacking at the top of her lungs.

Trip flailed wildly and finally gained enough control of his arms to shove her off. The irate matron left, but not without placing a final notice of her stern disapproval in Trip’s hair. Trip let himself flop back down into the water in defeat. Chest deep in stinking green slop, he reached up and wiped away a handful of something slimy from the side of his head. With his other hand he numbly unwrapped the water lily necklace and flung it away. Then he sighed tiredly.

Gannett was holding her sides and down on her knees laughing herself sick. “I got it all! From the bottom to the top and back down again! If I don’t get a Pulitzer there is no justice in life!”

Soval asked in real concern, “Are you injured Commander?”

Trip sat staring glassy-eyed at his erstwhile nemesis for a moment as she waddled off, still quacking to her trailing brood. He shook his head. Soval repeated his question. “Are you injured Commander? Commander Tucker. Are you all right?”

The Vulcan saw the young human blink and turn to look at him for a moment. He listened in total incomprehension as Trip muttered, “This nails it to the barn. That boy is definitely out of the will.”

Finis