

[See Chapter 1/title page for disclaimers and rating](#)

Archer glanced around the compound. He made brief eye contact with Reed before entering the main hall. Enterprise's crew had moved swiftly and silently, taking the rebels by surprise. The Vulcans had notified him just a few moments before of the capture of Arven and his ships, and the crew was securing the last of the prisoners. There was no sign of his children, though. A systematic search of all the rooms had lead to nothing. He sighed as Tucker approached him. There was nothing to indicate the children had ever been there.

"We've combed the compound, Cap'm. If they are here, we can't find them."

Frustration rolled through him. Where were his children? He prayed the Vulcans would be able to draw some information from Arven. He glanced up as the sounds of struggle caught his ear. The tall Vulcan male was being searched by his men, and wasn't happy about it. His breath caught in his throat as a long, dark braid was pulled out of the man's pocket. Recognition kicked his heart into overdrive. He stormed to the man, arm to throat, pinning him to the wall. "My children, where are they?"

The Vulcan blinked at the attack, and then glared. The words were spit at Archer, full of contempt. "You fathered those ungrateful bastards?"

It took all his strength not to crush the windpipe under his arm. "Where are they?"

For a moment Vek considered using information to buy his freedom, but he realized quickly that the man holding him was barely under control. He didn't think it would take much for the human to snap. He couldn't resist a taunt though. "I sold them... to a Satorian." He had a moment of satisfaction at the look of horror in Archer's eyes, and then he was unable to breathe.

It took both Trip and Reed to pull him free of the Vulcan, so deep was his rage. It took another few moments for their words to filter in and yet another few to calm himself somewhat. He knew Satorians and what they could do, and the thought of his precious children in their hands made his stomach turn. His fists clenched and unclenched as Trip continued to ask the Vulcan questions, but he couldn't focus on the words.

He turned his eyes to the heavens, his heart in turmoil. *When is this nightmare going to end?*

The forest at night was a dark, dank, musty place, filled with even darker shadows, and unimaginable sounds. Everything seemed amplified and terrifying, especially to a man seeking children. Were they hurt? Lost? Hiding somewhere, jumping at shadows? Only the scanner's constant flickering signals gave him hope as he traveled on. Vek had told them of the Satorians still out hunting the children. He had also mentioned the training the boys had received. He tried to picture two young boys practicing survival training, but his mind just couldn't wrap around it. Neither of his children had the patience for intense training; despite the skills they had been offered. He couldn't imagine them using the assorted Starfleet and Vulcan skills they had been taught, much less anything the Satorians had offered. However, the facts seemed to state otherwise. Technology wasn't helping him find them. He sighed, glancing back at the scanner. There were life signs ahead of him, two of them with human DNA. His eyes narrowed in the darkness. They had hesitated in calling out, relying on infrared glasses instead. There was no telling who else might be stalking the children, or if these signals even belonged to them. He stopped suddenly, a soft sound catching his ears. Slowly he panned the area, ignoring the scampers of small mammals in his field of vision. The scanner was indicating something close, but there was no visual sign of anything. Again he searched, finally catching a faint outline of red pulsing near a stand of trees. He moved forward slowly, lifting the glasses as he did so. Nothing, he could see nothing. Watching, waiting, he caught a flicker of white and moved closer. A sudden screech of fury erupted from the stand of trees, and Archer found himself tumbled to the ground as a small form swept his legs from under him. He grabbed out automatically, fingers closing on the small wrist as he fell, pulling the creature to him. He grunted as a well aimed elbow jabbed his sternum, and then the spitting fury was pulled from him. As he rolled to his feet, he took a good look, and froze, disbelief shining in his eyes. "Zack?"

The boy ceased trying to escape the minute he heard his name and tried desperately to pull his cloak of calm around him. He prayed his original cry had alerted the others and they had had a chance to escape, but he knew his sister would not leave him for long. He was plotting his next move when strong hands closed over him and pulled him into a tight hug. Confusion twisted in his mind and he gasped. It was the smell that clued him in, more so than the words and hands that held him. His father, he smelled his father. At first he was afraid to believe, afraid it was a trick, and then he knew. He pulled back as the words rolled over him and glanced up into that beloved face. Tears started to fall, and for the first time since he had been in this horrible place they were of joy. He reached up, patting Archer's cheeks. He was real, real! "Daddy?"

"That's right Sprite, it's daddy."

"Daddy!" The boy launched himself at his father, nearly knocking him over again. He burrowed close, as if he could himself be absorbed into the man before him. "You came for us. Pixie said you would."

Archer held the boy close. He could hardly believe the creature he held in his arms was his son. The child was reed thin, bony, as if he had been starved. The frail body was covered with ragged clothes, soaked in mud. The cold, slimy surface accounted for the inability of the infrared to trace body heat. Even as he acknowledged it, the boy shivered. "You're like ice."

Zack nodded. "Have to stay cold. Keeps the bad guys from finding us. We thought you were the bad guys."

Archer shot a desperate look at Trip. "I'm sorry, son. We weren't sure who or how many were out here. We've been searching for you since morning. Where is your sister?"

Zack glanced around. "Pixie is on recon. She said she needed to find out who was tracking us and how many." His eyes slid beyond Archer and he smiled, waving to someone only he could see. As the others turned, Zack spoke. "Come on out. It's my Dad. He won't hurt you." They watched as a boy, slightly taller than Zack, and just as thin slipped from the shadows. His clothes matched Zack's. "Come on Aidan, it's alright."

The boy spoke, low, almost a whisper. "Pixie said to stay out of sight. It isn't safe in the woods."

"She didn't mean we should hide from my dad."

The boy's gaze flickered over the group. "We need to hide them before the others come back. Sorka will kill them."

Zack stiffened against Archer, and drew back further. His eyes met his father's and they were infinitely sad. "Aidan's right. The Satorians are really mean, bad. They killed Grace and they will try to kill you too. We need to hide you."

Archer refused to release his hold on his son, though the boy was trying to move away. He motioned to the other child, gesturing him closer. "Aidan? Come here. It's alright. Malcolm, Trip and I all have phase pistols, and the other men are armed as well. We won't let them hurt you. You're safe now."

The child gave him a look mixed with doubt and hope. "You're just humans. He's Satorian." The last was said with great emphasis, as if Satorian equaled a malevolent god. "Besides, I was able to come up behind you without you knowing. He's better at it than I am."

Archer stood slowly. "So we will be even more careful now. Come. We need to find Pixie and get back to the ship. You'll be safe there."

The boys exchanged looks. Finally Aidan moved closer to the group. He stood near Zack and studied them before turning back to the forest. "We should go back to camp. Pixie will be expecting us there."

Zack nodded, his hand curling into Archer's. "We can hide there until she comes."

"Shouldn't we go look for her?" Trip asked as he reached out a hand to touch the boy. Like his father, he could hardly believe the child was real.

"No. Pixie's rule. Besides, you won't find her Uncle Trip, not unless she wants to be found. She's the best at hiding. She has to be, Sorka wants her the most."

Archer shuddered at the image those words brought to mind. His eyes flickered over the child in the lead, who was barely visible. "You were sold to the Satorian?"

"No, he just took us. Arven took Grandmother away, and Sorka got all weird. He and Vek got into this huge fight and the Satorian started grumbling about payment. He wanted Pixie but Vek wouldn't let him have her. Sorka said he was gonna take her anyway. When he came to get her, I challenged him." The look his son shot him was a mix of disgust and pain. "He swatted me down like I was a little bug. Pixie decided to jump in. It was really stupid of her because Sorka was bigger and stronger. He wouldn't have killed me, he could have when he hit me, but he didn't. Pixie is just a girl though, less then nothing to him, and it really made him mad when she challenged him. He underestimated her though, and she was able to get his knife." The boy flashed a grin, this one of pride. "She gutted him with it." The boy paused, showing them by tapping his own body, where the knife entered. "Zip, gut to groin." He paused again and glanced around before leading them into a small clearing. Aidan was shimmying up a tree and disappearing into the branches when Zack continued his tale. "We thought she had killed him. He fell over, and there was blood everywhere. Vek actually laughed, then they pulled pistols on us and made us go back to our room. We found out later that he was still alive." The boy looked up as he released Archer's hand. "Only one good way to kill a Satorian, you have to cut his head off."

The matter of fact way he spoke made the bile in Archer's stomach churn even more. No seven year old should know so much about death. He watched the boy for a moment as the child waded into the stream and began to coat himself with mud once more. He could see the shivers wracking the little body. "You don't have to do that now. We are with you and will keep you safe." He jumped as Aidan dropped from the tree and into the water with Zack.

Zack shook his head and began applying the mud to Aidan's back. "I'm glad you are here Daddy, I really am, and I'm glad you have phase pistols too, but I gotta take care of myself and Aidan." He turned and allowed the other boy to repeat

the process. "Pixie says we are a team and we have to look out for one another to survive, but first and foremost we have to be responsible for ourselves." He waded out of the water and back to his father, Aidan silent at his side. "If I make myself visible to Sorka and his men, then I put you and Aidan and Pixie in danger. We won't be safe until we are away from here, until Sorka is dead." Zack glanced at Aidan and gestured back to the tree. The boy nodded and was up it again before Archer could do more than blink. Zack took his father's hand and tugged him to the edge of the water. "You should hide too Dad."

It broke his heart to imagine his carefree children trying to survive in this place. He knelt before his son. "I'll have the others check the perimeter and then we are taking you back to the shuttle. I'll come back for Pixie."

Zack studied his father for a long moment. He wanted desperately to believe he was safe and secure and that his father would take care of everything. He wanted to believe that good would prevail and that soon, very soon he would be home and safe. He couldn't though. He had seen too much, been exposed to too much violence. He knew about good intentions and that his father was good and strong, but he was still mortal and could die. Grace had been good and strong and had tried to protect them, and she had died. Despite all of it he still wanted to believe, and this man, his father had always been so dependable, someone he could believe in... until he had sent them away. Shaking away the doubt, Zack glanced around. He took in the concerned faces of his uncles, and the other crew. People who had known him all his life. Who to believe, to believe in? He was about to step away when Archer pulled out his communicator.

"Archer to Enterprise"

"You've found them?"

The cool voice, with just a hint of tremor was the sweetest thing Zack had ever heard. His hand reached up and curled around the communicator, pulling it down so he could access it. "Mommy?"

"Zack?"

The response was nearly a sob of sound, and made his decision for him. "I want to come home now Mommy. Can we come home now?"

"Yes." The voice was silent for a moment as if fighting for control. When she spoke again it was stronger. "Jonathan?"

"We've found Zack and another child, the one V'Lar told us about, but there is no sign of Pixie yet. Zack is pretty certain she will meet us here. There is still some danger though. According to the children, there are still Satorians roaming around."

"Sensors are unreliable. The life signs in the area around the compound keep flickering. We thought there may be a malfunction in them."

Zack tugged on his father's arm. "They have ways of hiding, like the mud. It makes sensors read wrong."

Archer glanced at his son in concern. "If we take you back to the compound, how is your sister likely to react."

"If Pix thinks we've been captured, she'll come after us. I don't know how long it will take though. Better we wait here for her."

"T'Pol, ask the P'Tarrol to send down another security detail. I also want constant scans of the surface. Let me know if you get any flickers in our area. See if we can't find a way around whatever they are using to mask their signals."

"Understood... And Jonathan...bring them home safely?"

"Soon Love, soon. Archer out."

As he pocketed the communicator, he gestured around the clearing. "Is this where you've been hiding."

"No. Pixie makes us move every couple of days. This isn't far from our camp though."

Archer shot a quick glance at Reed. He watched as the security officer and his men disappeared into the trees. "How long have you been out here Zack?"

"I don't know for sure. A week maybe. It's hard to keep track."

His stomach ached at the thought. "When was the last time you ate?"

The boy rubbed his tummy. "Early this morning. Pixie caught a fish. It wasn't very big." He wrinkled his nose. "We had to eat it raw cause we couldn't risk a fire. It was yucky. We didn't have time to look for anything else."

Archer glanced at Trip and nearly smiled in relief as his friend knelt beside him. "We have some emergency rations in the shuttle, but they aren't much better than raw fish. Should hold you until we get back to the ship though."

Zack shrugged. "It's okay. I'm used to being a little hungry." He went still instantly and jerked from Archer's hands. Before either man could ask what was going on, the child let out a low whistle, mimicking one of the many night bird sounds. They watched as the child paused and repeated the sound several times. He was fairly

shining with excitement when he returned to them. "Pixie's coming. I just gave her the all clear."

The men jumped as Aidan dropped from another tree, this one different from the one he had shimmied up. Trip blinked. "Damn that kid is quiet. Where did he come from?"

Archer shrugged as Zack moved next to the boy. The two exchanged a whisper, and then Aidan was climbing another tree. When Zack came back to Archer, he curled his hand in his. "Aidan says your crew is too noisy."

"Then the bad guys will know we are around and looking for them, right?"

"Or use the noise to disguise their own movements and sneak up on you." The soft voice startled them all and they whipped around, searching for the owner.

"Pixie?" Archer's eyes searched the area for his daughter. His body was tense, alert, but nothing prepared him for the slender form that materialized from the shadows. The girl before him looked more like his T'Pol and less like his Pixie; a young woman, no longer a child. Her feet moved silently on the debris at the edge of the forest, as if she were floating above it. A mud covered sleeveless shift draped loosely about her, and her ragged hair fluttered in the breeze. She stood poised in the shadows like a young deer on the edge of flight. She seemed frail and ethereal and every bit as magical as her nickname. Though he wanted to embrace her, he was hesitant to move, afraid of spooking her.

Zack dropped his hand and rushed to her, his arms wrapping around her waist. "It's daddy Pix, he came for us. Uncle Trip too."

T'Lin's eyes blurred and she stumbled forward slowly. Tears began to slide down her cheeks as she approached him. One hand reached out tentatively and her breath caught on a sharp sob as his fingers closed around it. "I didn't think you were real."

Archer tugged his daughter to him, burying his face in her damp hair. She smelled musty and wild like the forest. "I'm real Pixie. I've come to take you home."

The strength that surrounded her, the smell and very presence of him, screamed daddy to her and she had to believe her senses. Nothing could look and smell and sound and feel so much like her father and not be real. That knowledge broke through her final restraints and she clung to him, desperately.

Archer glanced at Trip over his daughter's head. It was one of concern and gratitude. He closed his eyes as Zack huddled against him, arms curling around father and sister. Archer held them both.

It was Pixie who finally broke the embrace. She drew back, her eyes searching and lighting on Aidan. She reached out one arm and the boy came to her and ducked under it. She rested her arm lightly around his shoulders. Archer noticed she also kept a possessive hand on Zack. Her eyes were clear, yet worried as she spoke. "Aidan is mine, Daddy. His mama died protecting me and asked me to care for him. He doesn't have anyone else."

The look in her eyes confused him, but he decided to play it safe. This was not the time or place to get into a debate on her responsibilities to the boy. "We had planned to take him with us Pixie. In fact, now that you are here, I suggest we get back to the compound and the shuttle. Your mother is anxious to see you."

The girl's eyes widened at that. "Mother is okay? She's not sick anymore?"

"Your mother is fine now sweetheart, but she's been very worried about you."

T'Lin took both the boys by the hand. "Can we go now daddy? Please?" The flow of words stopped suddenly, and then resumed at a much more hesitant pace. "We are going home with you right daddy?"

In that instant Archer realized how much his children had hated being sent away. They had missed their parents every bit as much as the parents had missed them. "We aren't sending you away ever again. You are stuck with us forever."

Something loosened in T'Lin and she flung herself back into her father's arms. "I'm really glad you are here Dad."

"Me too, Pixie." His eyes met Trip's over her head. "Why don't you guys wash off some of that mud and we will be on our way." As the children went to do his bidding, Archer turned to Trip. "Get with the rest of the security team and let them know we are heading out. I want these kids out of here now. For once I'll trust the Vulcans with the last of the cleanup." The gentle sounds of water splashing brought his gaze back to the children. He watched as they stood in the shallow stream and rinsed each other off. He also noticed that three sets of eyes searched the environment constantly. His voice was low when he spoke, for Trip's ears only. "I barely recognize my children Trip. It frightens me almost as much as not knowing where they were."

"I imagine it's gonna be quite an adjustment for all of you, Cap'm."

The voice was the first indication of trouble. "Vulcan spawn!"

Archer's head whipped around at the sound and his blood ran cold. He drew his phase pistol, breath deserting him, but there was no clear shot. Pixie was held securely against a wiry man, his bald head and gleaming yellow eyes proclaiming



him Satorian. The man held a knife to his daughter's throat, and the boys stood in a semi-circle around him, just out of reach. "Let her go." He tried to keep his voice calm.

The Satorian ignored him, running the edge of the knife along Pixie's throat. "Remember my friend girl? He is eager to taste your blood."

Archer winced as a thin trail of red followed the knife's path. Pixie for her part didn't utter a sound. Zack on the other hand reacted violently. "She's my sister, Sorka. You have no right to her. I challenge you." The boy crouched into a defensive fighting stance.

"Zack, no." The child ignored him as well. Archer shot a desperate glance at Trip, who directed his gaze behind the Satorian. Following that look, he noticed Reed getting into position in a stand of trees. He too was looking for an opening, but couldn't risk a shot with the knife at Pixie's throat.

The Satorian gave the boy a malicious grin. "You cannot hope to defeat me little Vulcan. You are no more than a bug to be squashed, you and your young friend. This one," he shook Pixie slightly, "she has been more trouble than she is worth. Her life is mine."

"You can't have her. You have to go through me first and then my father."

For the first time since the encounter began the Satorian focused on Archer. "You are nothing but a troublesome human. My knife will taste your blood before this is over."

Before Archer could respond, Zack let out a wild war cry and dived for Sorka. The child aimed straight for the Satorian's groin, instinctively going for the most vulnerable spot. An odd thunk reverberated through the air as the boy made contact, and then the knife was slashing downward, even as Pixie was dropped. A bright splash of blood sprayed the ground. Archer was moving without conscious thought, desperate to find out which child had been hurt. Trip caught his arm, holding him back. "Jon no, you can't help them by getting in the way." The blast from Reed's phase pistol seemed no more than an irritant to the furious Satorian. Archer watched in horror as his son remained motionless in the ever darkening flow of water.

T'Lin pushed herself from the stream and shook the water from her face. Her eyes passed over the limp form of her brother and Aidan's defensive crouch. She barely noticed the crew surrounding Sorka. All she could see in her haze of anger was her precious brother lying in his own blood. With a banshee shriek of pain and rage, she flew at Sorka, hands out in a motion to push him away. "Zack!" As she made contact with Sorka, a great, sharp crack, like thunder echoed through the air, and a smell reminiscent of burning flesh permeated every

corner of the clearing. The Satorian's eyes widened in shock as he fell away from her. Pain seared through T'Lin, racing along her nerve endings. Her hands felt raw and burned but she didn't care. The pain in her head was magnified a hundred times and nothing compared to the ache in her chest. Her hands shook as she reached out to her brother, gently turning him over. *I failed him, just like I did Grace.* She ignored the hands tugging at her, at Zack. She curled him to her, tight to her chest, rocking with him in the stream. The deep slash along his throat and collarbone bled sluggishly now, and no breath moved his chest. Tears slid down her cheeks as she rocked, *he is dead because of me.*

Archer stared in horror at the lifeless body of his son. He had lost him only to find him, just to lose him again. He didn't think he could bear it. He watched, helpless as his men tried to take Zack from Pixie. She refused to relinquish him, and Aidan was standing like a guard dog beside her. He jerked as a hand touched his arm and turned to find Trip beside him. Forcing his numb mind to work, he listened to what the engineer had to say. "The Satorian is dead, Jon. Don't ask me how, but somehow Pixie killed him. His chest has a burn imprint the size and shape of her hands. You need to go to her, see if you can get her to turn Zack over to us... I..."

The soft keening sound caught both their attention, and they moved closer to the grieving girl. She held the boy as if he were a lifeline, her eyes tightly closed. As they watched, a soft glow formed around her hands. The gaping wound on Zack's neck began to knit itself. Within moments there was nothing but an angry red scar. Archer nearly collapsed as the boy moved and his eyes fluttered open.

At his movement, T'Lin shifted, opening her eyes. Zack's confused gaze met hers and she nearly sobbed in relief. She had wanted him to live so badly, she had bargained with every god she had ever heard of to give him her life-force, to heal him. She didn't know the how or why, only that it had worked. She stood shakily, leaning heavily on Aidan as she helped Zack to his feet. Taking a few wobbly steps out of the water, she turned to look at her father. A blast of pain, followed by a wave of exhaustion crashed into her and she collapsed, darkness surrounding her.

Archer caught his daughter as she went down. His arms closed securely around her and he lifted her high against his chest. The rise and fall of her breathing reassured him. "Trip, get the boys and lets get the hell out of here before something else happens." He nearly smiled as the engineer picked up Zack and grabbed Aidan's hand. With a quick gesture to Reed and his men, Archer made his way back to the compound, team in tow.