

Pixels

By Kat

R

Disclaimers: Mostly mine thank you! Of course the Universe is Roddenberry's and Trek belongs to Paramount, but the rest belongs mostly to me. Please do not replicate without permission. Wish I could get paid for it...but I'd still be broke...

Author's Note: R to be on the safe side, story deals with sexual situations and extreme violence.

Beta work by Monica and Mana.

Chapter 1

Twelve year old T'Lin Archer stared out the view port as the stars passed by. She allowed herself to leave the worries of her mind and float out with them. The stars were constant to her. When everything around her changed and her world crumbled, the stars were always there. She used to think that her parents would always be there, but they had sent her and her younger brother away. Even after nearly six months she didn't understand it, and the Vulcans didn't help. There were times when she wondered if she were destined to be stuck with the Vulcans forever.

The opening of the door caught her attention and she pulled back into herself. She barely had time to turn when a solid body collided into her. Her hands came up automatically, hugging the form to her. As she registered the sobs coming from the boy, she continued to cuddle him in a soothing tone, a soft lullaby coming to her lips. Patience had never been one of her finer qualities, but six months on a Vulcan ship had changed that. She had discovered an amazing capacity for both patience and logic even though she preferred to ignore them both. She could wait for the storm to pass before she quizzed the boy in her arms. Her brother's mind was chaotic in his upset but it would eventually clear. She held him and waited and finally the boy lifted his head. Troubled eyes gazed up at her and T'Lin had to fight back the anger that rolled through her. Her hand stroked over his cheek and her mind touched lightly to his. *What happened now Sprite?*

The boy shook his head. *Grandfather scolded me again. He said I have no discipline and that I should be sent to the monks for training.*

T'Lin turned back to the view port and pulled her brother in front of her so that he too could see the stars. At seven Zack was a tall, slim boy that came to her chin. Her father often joked that Zack reminded him of him when he was a boy in that he was all arms and legs. T'Lin on the other hand was destined to be petite like her mother. Her arms curled around him and she rested her chin on his shoulder. The mental connection between them was strong and had been since Zack's birth. They kept the telepathic link for both privacy, though there was no one else around, and because it seemed to irritate most of the Vulcans. *Grandfather is not usually so harsh with you. What happened exactly?*

Zack's head dropped a little and she felt a twinge of guilt fluttering from him. *I tried Pix! I really did!* She sighed and waited. *We were going through the routine of Tak Nar. You know how I hate that stupid routine. I don't mind the other martial arts, they are all kinda cool, but Tak Nar is stupid. I think Grandfather made it up just so I'd have to sit still for hours on end.*

T'Lin shook her head and cuddled her brother closer. They both had extensive exposure to Vulcan martial arts. Neither one of them liked the Tak Nar, for it required hours of stillness. It was an art that honed stealth. For a seven year old boy who was used to roaming a starship it was torture. *And?*

Zack's head dipped lower. *Grandfather caught me fidgeting and scolded me. He added 10 minutes to my evening meditation Pix! That's almost an extra hour today.*

If you hadn't stuck itching powder in Sub-Commander T'Vir's robes, and you hadn't put pepper in the Captain's Plomeek soup, and run through the ship in your underwear screaming like a loon, then you wouldn't have gotten the rest of the extra meditation time.

The boy turned and scowled up at her. *That's not fair Pixie and you know it. The itching powder was your idea and so was the soup. And if you hadn't chased me with that spider I wouldn't have run into the hallway.*

It wasn't real Zack, and I got in trouble too.

Only once, for the powder. I didn't tell about the rest. He leaned his head against her chest. *I wouldn't tell on you Pix. You're all I've got.*

T'Lin stroked her hands over her brother's head. Her words were soft when she spoke. "I know Sprite. I know. I'll go talk to Grandfather and see what I can do to fix it."

He stepped back and took her hand. "I don't want you to get into trouble."

"I won't." She started for the door. "Perhaps I can get him to let me supervise your meditation." She sighed, wishing for the dozenth time that her parents had chosen to send them to their human grandfather rather than their Vulcan one.

Zack tugged, causing her to stop and look at him. "Pix? Why did mommy and dad send us away?"

"I don't know Zack. I just don't know." The answer was extremely sad.

T'Lin rang the chime. As the door slid open she schooled all expression from her face. She released Zack's hand with a reminder for discipline and tucked her own behind her back. She nearly smiled as Zack followed her example. Entering these quarters still had the ability to stun her. For as long as she could remember her parents quarters had been neat yet personal. Her mother's style had always been more spartan, where her father's had been full of flare. Somehow the two of them had managed to mesh their lifestyles and compliment each other. Her grandfather's quarters were bare to the point that were he not in them she would have thought them empty. She took a moment to study the man she called Grandfather. Unlike the humans of her acquaintance, he seemed ageless, much like her mother, for such was the way of Vulcans. For an instant she wondered if she too would remain ageless for an eternity and hoped not. As much as she loved her family, she much preferred the character lines on her father's face to the emotionless mask of the Vulcans. She came to a stop, Zack beside her, when the older man stood. For the briefest instant he seemed every bit the tough ambassador she knew him to be, then the most subtle softening of his features occurred and she saw her grandfather.

Soval moved toward the two children. He had thought when he had volunteered for their care that he would be able to separate himself from the wild, human half breeds, but they touched him just as his own children and grandchildren had, exactly as T'Lin had when he'd first gotten to know her. He could see her trying to hide her emotions behind a shield just as he had been coaching her. While he was proud of the effort, part of him missed the smile she often gave him whenever she greeted him each day. He glanced first at T'Lin and then Zack. "You came to see me?"

T'Lin nodded. "Yes sir. I came to apologize for our behavior earlier and Zack's last transgression. I... I would like to supervise our meditation for tonight Grandfather and ask that you remove Zack's latest punishment. He is just a little boy. It is so very hard for him to be still."

Soval admired the young lady standing before him. "Zack Henry must learn to be still and silent. It can mean the difference between life and death."

T'Lin tamped back the flare of temper. "I agree Grandfather, but Zack is used to running the corridors of a starship. He has an abundance of energy and is used to having other children to play with. It is so very hard for him here. He does try."

Soval knelt in front of the children and waited until Zack met his eyes. "Even on your father's starship there could be a need for you to be still and silent. It could save a life."

"But Grandfather... I don't like the Tak Nar. It is so very dull."

"Indeed. The Tak Nar can be tiresome, but it teaches you patience, stealth and discipline. These are things you will always need in life."

Zack sighed. "But it is so hard. I can't do it."

Soval stood and looked down at the boy. "Never say you can't do something Zack Henry. Every task can be achieved with discipline and effort. What would your father say if someone told him he couldn't do something?"

The boy glanced at his sister, who answered. "Daddy would show them it could be done as he was doing it."

"Exactly. Your father might be a human, but he is very determined and has often shown us that anything is possible."

Some little imp bit at T'Lin and she couldn't resist asking. "Even Vulcans having emotions?"

Soval raised a brow as he studied her. "You and your brother exist do you not?"

She chuckled before quickly schooling her features back to blank. "We will both try harder Grandfather." She nudged her brother. "Won't we Zack?"

Soval studied them both as the boy nodded. Finally he responded. "On your word then. I still believe meditation would enhance your calm but perhaps this once we shall see." He nodded to Zack before returning to his seat. "Your latest addition to meditation is removed Zack Henry and I will trust your sister to hold you to the rest." His eyes locked with T'Lin's. "On your honor then?"

T'Lin's eyes widened. "Yes sir." She was just about to respond when Soval's communicator went off.

"Ambassador Soval?"

"Yes?"

"We are receiving a transmission from the Vulcan ship P'Tarrol. Their shuttle will be docking in ten minutes."

"Thank you Captain. I will meet them in the shuttle bay." He gathered his outer robe and pulled it on.

T'Lin stepped forward. "Who are you meeting Grandfather?"

"Ambassador V'Lar will be joining us for the rest of our journey. She is traveling to Earth for the upcoming counsel with Starfleet."

T'Lin nearly bounced with excitement. "We are going to Earth?"

He glanced at the children, both seemed unusually excited, and then he realized why. "Walk with me to the shuttle bay, and if you mind your manners you can help me greet V'Lar." T'Lin took her brother's hand and followed Soval from the room. The pace was quick and efficient, but not a difficult trek for the youngsters. Soval continued. "There is a great deal of conflict with the Klingon empire and the Andorians. The High Command and Starfleet are pulling in necessary resources to deal with the situation. V'Lar and myself have been called to Earth to advise."

"Is Ambassador V'Lar as good a negotiator as you Grandfather?" Zack asked, with innocent hero worship.

"V'Lar is one of the oldest and best Ambassadors to come from Vulcan. She is very efficient."

T'Lin bit her lip. Vulcans in her opinion were quite arrogant when other Vulcans considered them efficient. Most of her contact with Vulcans tended to be tense once they realize she was half-human. "Perhaps Zack and I should return to our quarters. We would not want to inconvenience the Ambassador."

Soval glanced at the child as he opened the door to the shuttle bay. He understood precisely where she was coming from. "Avoidance of a situation does not make it go away child. Besides, I think V'Lar would like to meet you."

T'Lin chewed her bottom lip as she watched the shuttle dock. Zack stood still and silent beside her, fascinated with the idea of meeting someone new, even if it was a Vulcan. T'Lin was just pleased that he was able to be still. Grandfather had given them a great honor by allowing them to be present, and she hoped

they were both up to the task. She watched as the doors opened and an older Vulcan female exited the ship. The woman was older than any Vulcan she knew except her Grandfather and the first female her age she had ever seen much less met.

The children stood back as Soval approached her, hand held in a traditional Vulcan greeting. The two seemed to know each other and spoke in Vulcan for several minutes. Finally the Ambassador's eyes turned to them and T'Lin held her breath. She moved forward even as the Ambassador did and held up her hand. The words slid easily from her tongue, the language as easy to pronounce as English from her time on the ship. "Welcome aboard Ambassador. I am T'Lin Archer and this is my brother Zack Henry."

The Ambassador glanced at Soval before gazing back at the children. Then she did something that T'Lin had never seen from another Vulcan. The woman smiled and extended her hand. Her words switched to English and the children greedily absorbed the sounds they had not heard in what seemed a lifetime. "You are the children of Jonathan Archer, are you not?"

"Yes. Our father is Captain Archer. You know of him?"

"Yes yes, and your mother too. Captain Archer is quite an emotional human, but he is an honorable man. Your parents helped me out of quite a mess once." She tipped her head as she studied them. "You have the look of your mother, and your brother takes after the Captain."

Zack lacked the tact of his older sibling and clasped the woman's hand. "You don't mind that we are half-human?"

V'Lar raised a brow. "Why should I child? Your parents are both dedicated and honorable and I consider them friends, even if I haven't spoken to them in years." She squeezed Zack's hand.

The boy grinned at her, thrilled at the contact and the praise. T'Lin tucked her hands behind her back. "You'll have to excuse him ma'am. Zack and I have found most Vulcans don't like us because of our human blood."

For a moment V'Lar looked disgusted, but she quickly covered it. "Then they are fools children, for how can there be infinite diversity in infinite combinations, if there is no tolerance for anything different." She took T'Lin's hand as they headed for the door, shocking the girl with the contact. "The last time I saw your mother I told her that I sensed a growing friendship and respect for her captain. I never imagined they would marry and produce children, but I am pleased. I did not realize your parents were onboard."

T'Lin slowed, causing V'Lar to stop as her sadness transmitted itself. "Mother

and Daddy aren't here Ambassador. They are on Enterprise."

V'Lar's brow rose. She glanced at Soval. "Why then are the children here?"

Soval gestured her forward. "The children are visiting with me for a while."

Zack nodded. "Grandfather is teaching us more about Vulcans."

T'Lin couldn't stop the anger that welled up inside her. She released V'Lar's hand. "They sent us away. They don't want us anymore."

Zack's eyes widened at the comment and his lower lip began to tremble. Tears filled his eyes. "Pix?"

T'Lin wouldn't look at him, or the others who had stopped to stare at her. V'Lar glanced at Soval who knelt in front of the girl. "I don't know where you got that idea T'Lin, but it's not true. Your parents want you very much and miss you too. Your father told me so in his last communication."

Anger flared and spilled out, followed by tears. "Then why did they send us away? Why haven't we talked to them for almost a month? Why can't we talk to Mommy? They don't want us anymore!"

V'Lar surprised all of them by pulling the girl into a hug. She held her tightly and rocked slowly. "Child I am sure there is much going on that needs to be explained. It's true I haven't spoken to your parents in a very long time but I know they wouldn't just abandon you."

Soval placed a hand on T'Lin's shoulder. "Take your brother to your quarters. I will join you there in a moment. It seems we have more to talk about than I thought."

V'Lar released the girl and as the children walked away she glanced at Soval. "If possible I would like to be present. I too would like to know why Jonathan Archer would send his children away."

"Of course." Soval realized instantly that he was going to need this ally for the children. V'Lar seemed to understand them so much better than he did, and she had never met them before. "Let us take your things to your quarters, and then we will talk to the children. I will explain on the way."

V'Lar wasted no time in depositing her bags. Once finished she turned to Soval with a raised brow. "What is going on?"

Tucking his hands behind his back, Soval gathered himself. "How much do you know about T'Lin Archer?"

The look she gave him suggested that she knew it wasn't enough. "Captain Archer and Sub-commander T'Pol got together and had a little girl around the Earth month of December in 2152. They were married by Vulcan ceremony and had a son nearly five years later. I assume that is the official version?"

"Indeed. During the beginning of Enterprise's second year in space, the crew came across a planet held by the Javians. You are familiar with them?"

"An odd race who has practically managed to drive themselves into extinction."

Soval nodded. "The Javians contacted Enterprise with some information they thought would be interesting. It seems they were running an experimental lab on the planet. Genetics. When the command team went down they found the majority of the inhabitants dead, and the lab overrun by large ant-like creatures. They also came across a series of genetic experiments. In essence large canisters filled with infants in various stages of fetal development. Many of them were hybrids of human and Vulcan DNA, specifically Archer and T'Pol. Their DNA was sampled and sold by the Andorians according to the files. Most of the canisters were damaged and their inhabitants dead, all except one, a female."

"T'Lin."

"Yes. The child was sent up to the ship and it was discovered that she could in fact survive. Despite everything against them, Archer and T'Pol decided to keep the child and raise her. There are so many things about T'Lin and Zack Henry that we don't understand. In fact all our tests show that it should be unlikely that they even exist. Though T'Lin is a genetic manipulation, Zack was born the normal way, though he nearly killed his mother. While possible, there are a lot of problems with a mixed pregnancy." He turned and rotated his neck as if to stretch out the kinks. "We think it is because of something the Javians did when they created her, but we are not certain. T'Lin is highly telepathic. It seems restricted to touch most of the time, as is normal for a Vulcan, but she and her brother can actually speak telepathically whether they are touching or not. She has a similar ability with her parents, though her connection with them is more empathic."

"There is a point to this Soval, get to it."

He faced her, one brow arching into his hairline. "I was. Because of her connection with her mother, T'Lin was actually affected by her mother's pregnancy with Zack. T'Pol had to shield the child from experiencing too much and the toll on her was difficult to say the least. It does however seem to be affected by proximity. The farther away the child is, the less she is affected."

"T'Pol is ill then? That is why they sent the children away?"

The look Soval gave her was one of irritation. "T'Pol is pregnant."

V'Lar blinked. "What?"

"T'Pol is pregnant. Apparently this one is going even worse than when she carried Zack."

"Surely they know better? What were they thinking?"

Soval gestured her toward the door. "Even in our day and age it seems the only sure method of birth control is abstinence. I believe Archer's comment when I suggested it was something along the lines of 'could you walk away from her if she were in your bed every night?' As if that were all there was to it."

V'Lar had to bite back a chuckle. She could see the jaunty Archer making such a comment. "Human males are highly sexual creatures from what I understand." She cut Soval a look from the corner of her eye. "Even Vulcans appreciate their mates more than once every seven years."

The look he gave her suggested fondness. "Indeed. From what I understand, both of them were using contraceptive boosters but it seems that they failed them and a couple others on their ship as well."

"Defective medication?"

He motioned her to the door. "No. It seems there was a planet they visited. Something there affected the contraceptive boosters. In fact, the doctor believes that it acted as a fertility booster."

"So they sent the children away to protect them?"

"Yes. As soon as they discovered T'Pol's pregnancy Archer arranged for the children to be removed from the ship. He didn't want to take any chances with T'Pol's condition affecting T'Lin or Zack, and he didn't want T'Pol to have to deal with the strain of having to put up shields to protect the children. As I mentioned, this pregnancy is much worse than her previous one." As they entered the hallway he continued. "Before you ask, we all suggested abortion, even Archer to protect T'Pol. She wouldn't even consider it."

V'Lar shook her head. So much conflict, what a shame. "What are you going to tell the children?"

"I don't know. Their parents do not want them to know about the baby in case T'Pol is unable to keep it. They don't want them suffering that heartache."

As they approached the door to the children's room, she nodded. "Perhaps then we should just explain that their mother is very ill?"

"I only wish I had time to talk to Archer about this."

"Why don't you contact him, and explain what is going on and have him sort it out? We could then go from there?"

Soval glanced at her. "Of course. That is an excellent idea."

"Of course it is." V'Lar tossed over her shoulder as she rang the chime.

As she entered the room, Soval tapped the comm panel and requested contact with Enterprise. Just as he entered the children's quarters, the ship rocked with the force of an explosion.

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

Sound, she was surrounded by a cacophony of sound. The noise shook the walls around her and made her ears ache. It was like nothing she had ever heard before. Beneath it and around the roar which rose and fell and came back every few minutes was the constant ping of something against the roof and walls. For all that the first was frightening and loud, clapping hard and causing brief flashes of light, the other was somehow soothing and reminded her of the sound of her brother's soldiers as he flung them against the wall of the cargo bay. Zack must be terrified, she thought. The thought of her brother was what completely pulled her back to herself. She sat up slowly, ignoring the pounding in her head that was amplified with each loud bang outside. Pain shimmied along her nerve endings and she took a brief moment to try to close out everything and access her injuries. Her ribs ached with each breath but not enough to keep her from rising and her lower abdomen throbbed with a deep ache. There also seemed to be assorted scrapes and bruises. Her head was the worst though as it kept throbbing, barely allowing thought to enter. With another deep breath, she stood, using the wall beside her for support. Her fingers slid over the rough cold surface and she acknowledged the familiarity of it. *Metal then*, she thought to herself. The pounding in her head increased as she stood and for a moment she thought she might vomit, but then the awareness that she did not sense her brother came crashing down on her. The total sense of loss forced her to her knees and her mind sent out a frantic call of \*Zack!\* There was nothing, no response, and she curled into herself. Where ever she was and where ever he was, she couldn't feel him, hear him, and that scared her more than anything. For the first time she could remember, T'Lin Archer was truly alone. She allowed the noise to surround her once more and the pain in her head to pull her back into darkness.

Zack awoke sharply and suddenly, rolling to his feet in a move that would have made his father proud. He was sore and bruised but alert and he knew something was wrong with his sister. A quick glance around told him he was in a small metal room. It was cold, and the noise battering at the walls was frightening. He closed his eyes tightly as a loud boom caused the floor beneath his feet to tremble. Fear tugged at him making him want to cry, and he sent out a desperate call to his sister. \*T'Lin?\* Silence answered him, that and the feeling that she was hurt, maybe so hurt she couldn't respond. Tears began to slide down his cheeks and he choked on them. He was only seven he reasoned to himself it was okay to be scared, but somehow the tears tasted sour. He stood there for a long moment, waiting, deciding, and then made his choice. Throwing himself at the door, he slammed against it full force, his small body making a noticeable thud. His fists battered the door as he screamed at the top of his lungs. "T'Lin! Let me out! Let me out! T'Lin!" The noise echoed through the room, even over the rumbling outside and still he continued.

Zack fell to the ground, earning himself another bruise and a face full of dirt as

the door flew open. He didn't lay there long, instead, he rolled, once more rising swiftly to his feet. His instincts screamed at him and he dropped back into a defensive crouch as a fist swung right where his head had been. The hand dropped suddenly, glancing off his ear as it fisted in his shirt collar. He was lifted off his feet, but did not remain still. Screaming his frustration, he kicked out at the form in front of him, making solid contact with a muscular thigh. The man grunted in pain but did not release the boy, choosing instead to shake him until his head rattled.

Having never been exposed to such violence, all the fight was leached out of him in moments and the man holding him chuckled. "Little Vulcan bastard, just like the rest of your people, weak and spineless." He carried him from the room, fist outstretched as if the boy were something contaminated.

When his head stopped spinning, Zack studied his captor. The man was short and ugly with stout arms and legs. Though bald and wiry, the man had a strength that could be read in the twist of muscle in his arms, and the power of his stance. The eyes were the most frightening with their bold yellow gleam and malicious intent. They reminded him of a picture he had seen of a cat, so similar were the shape and design, but he didn't recognize the species. He had barely thought to take in his surroundings when he was flung to the ground. Once more his ears rang as he made contact with the floor. He slid about three feet, and decided as he came to a stop not to move. The smaller a target he made of himself, the less likely he was to be hurt. Turning his head slightly and slowly, he was able to peek out through his bangs at his surroundings. He was lying on the floor of yet another room. It was dimly lit, mostly by the fire barrels that were providing heat as well. As the ringing in his ears faded, he noted several other voices. The language they were speaking was familiar to him and he was able to make sense out of what they were saying. *What was it again?... ah Andorian, but the man who brought me out here is not Andorian.* He shifted a little more and was able to make out the familiar blue species. Once more he shifted, only to yelp as he was dragged to his feet once more. This time the words spit at him were in Vulcan, as was the man holding him. "Useless child!" He flung Zack away from him causing the boy to stumble, but the child kept his feet. The Vulcan turned toward the Andorians. "You wasted firepower and risked a conflict with the High Command for a stupid child?" He sighed in disgust. "I knew I should have sent the Satorian. At least he knows the difference between a useful prisoner and a useless one. Even the Captain would have been a better choice, but no, you bring me a couple of children."

*Satorian, so that's what he is,* Zack thought. He filed away that thought. He would remember that species. He stood his ground as the wiry man walked over to him and grasped his chin. "At least he is a male. He should have some value, unlike the other one."

The Vulcan sighed again. "Vulcan females are much more valuable than

Satorian ones, Sorka, even children. But they are children and I can't figure out why you took them." As he turned to glare at the Andorians, Zack shuddered.

*Too much emotion for a Vulcan,* he thought. *He is showing way too much emotion.* Unable to remain silent any longer, he screwed up his courage. He stuck with Vulcan, grateful for once for his appearance. He pulled everything he had been taught about control and logic around him and faced the Vulcan male. "Where is my sister?" He could almost see his mother's approval as all traces of emotion left his voice. His face was calm and steady.

The Vulcan raised a brow. "Very well done my boy. Compared to the racket you were raising earlier, you seem to have gotten control of yourself."

Though trembling inside, Zack countered his look with one of his own. "My sister. Where is she?"

The Vulcan glanced at the Satorian. "Sorka, bring the girl here. We need to find out who they belong to so we can ransom them." He barely acknowledged the Satorian's grunt before turning back to the boy. "I like the look of you boy. How old are you?"

Zack swallowed. He considered lying, but decided against it. "Seven."

The Vulcan's brow raised again. "You are small for your age. What is your name?"

Again Zack considered lying, but the thought of T'Lin kept him from doing so. He still couldn't reach her with his mind and had no way of telling her. "Zack."

The man walked around him, studying the boy. "What an unusual name." Zack nodded, but said nothing. "Come into the light Zack. I would get a better look at you."

The boy stood firm. "Your name, Sir. I would know who has taken me from my ship."

"I am Vek. The fools who took you from your ship are Andorian. Your removal was a mistake. We were after much more valuable hostages. Mind your manners and you will be returned to Vulcan."

Again Zack nodded. It made sense in his mind. He wondered where his grandfather and Ambassador V'Lar were. They would have made valuable hostages. Of course, if these people knew who he and T'Lin really were, they might find them more valuable than they thought. "Why were you looking for hostages? What you have done is considered treason to the High Command."

Vek laughed, startling the boy. "The High Command already considers me a traitor boy. I have been isolated from my people for far too long. I chose to follow an obscure path, one in which we as Vulcans embrace our emotions. We were exiled, forced to leave Vulcan and our families. So you see, I really don't care what the Vulcans think of me."

The word flitted about in his brain, but wouldn't land on his tongue. He remembered the stories of Vulcans who experimented with emotions, but he had never met any. He was just about to speak when Sorka returned. His heart clenched in fear as his sister dangled from the Satorian's arms. Though he wanted to run to her, he forced himself to remain still. "What is wrong with her?"

Sorka grinned. "She is female."

Zack bit back a scowl. "Why is she unconscious?"

Vek glanced at her, catching the filthy tangle of hair that cascaded nearly to the floor. He pulled it up and away from her face, taking in the deep purple bruise at her temple. "It looks as though she has a nasty bump to her head." He dropped her hair and turned back to Zack. "She will live."

Zack flinched as the Satorian dropped his sister at his feet, but he refused to move. He could see from the look in their eyes that they were watching him, waiting to prey on any weakness. The moment was interrupted as Sorka knelt and grasped a corner of T'Lin's robe. He didn't like the look in the man's eyes as he handled his sister. Zack moved swiftly, jerking the material out of Sorka's hands and pulling it until it completely covered his sister's legs. Fear raced through him as the man lifted a hand stained in bright red blood.

Sorka stood and held his hand out to Vek. "What's this? I thought you bastard Vulcans bled green."

Vek glanced at Sorka's hand and then to T'Lin, noticing the spreading stain near her hem. He knelt quickly and jerked the skirt up once more until he bared the lacerated calf. Anger pulsed through him as Zack's tried to pull the material down again. He pushed the boy with enough force to send him flying. Watching the blood pulse forth with every beat of her heart, Vek wondered what exactly he had in his possession. A Vulcan with red blood, was it possible? He had heard the tales but hadn't believed them to be true. Perhaps what he had in front of him was much more valuable than he thought.

Zack rose slowly to his feet. Fear ate at him and once more he felt himself fighting back tears. The taste of them was still sour and he could barely stand it. He wanted to scream and yell and throw a tantrum, but none of those things would help his sister or himself. He moved forward slowly, positioning himself next to T'Lin with the Satorian on one side and the Vulcan on the other. "Leave

her alone.”

Vek stood slowly and studied the boy. His hand lashed out suddenly catching the boy on the cheek. The blow snapped his head back and split the skin causing a spray of bright red blood to spatter on Sorka. The Satorian laughed as he wiped the spray from his face. With a leering grin he held the blood smeared hand before his face. Zack could have sworn he could see the difference between his and T’Lin’s blood. His stomach jumped and turned as the Satorian licked a long stripe clean. The garish blood smeared grin made him want to run and hide but he knew he dared not move. The blow had stunned him but he had managed to stay on his feet. His heart skipped several beats as T’Lin groaned and shifted. He wanted to move, to curl around her and let her comfort him, but as her eyes fluttered open he realized that he still couldn’t hear her. For the first time in his life there was silence.

He didn’t have time to consider it as Vek dragged T’Lin to her feet. To her credit, his sister didn’t make a sound, but she seemed to have trouble focusing her eyes. She stood still and silent, trembling. Zack moved without thinking, sliding by Vek and pressing against T’Lin’s side. He curled one arm protectively around her waist and nearly sighed in relief as she sagged against him. “Leave her alone.”

Vek’s eyes narrowed at his words, but amazingly he released the girl. “Alright, for now anyway. What are you boy? Who are you? You look and speak Vulcan, but you do not bleed like one.”

He was saved from answering as another voice echoed through the room. “Leave the children alone Vek. I did not have my men bring them to you for abuse. They are too valuable for that.”

Zack nearly smiled at the startled expression on the Vulcan’s face. As the man spun to face the speaker, Zack got a good look at him. It was another Andorian, this one with a commanding presence and behind him were other Andorians, one holding his grandfather and the other holding V’Lar. Vek seemed to pull himself together. “Perhaps you should have told me how valuable they are, Arven, and I would have cared for them better.”

The Andorian glared at him. “The last time I checked Vek, you worked for me. I don’t have to explain myself. And if you knew as much as you think you do, you would realize what a true treasure we have in those children. They are unique you see, the only children of a human and a Vulcan. That in itself would not mean much except they are highly valued by two top officials in both the Earth and Vulcan governments.” He turned to face Soval and smirked. “Isn’t that right Ambassador?”

Zack’s first instinct was to run to his grandfather, but he wouldn’t leave his sister.

After a moment he realized his best course of action was to stay put and listen. If Soval's expression were anything to go by, his grandfather would not appreciate the act. He thought back on the older man's words about patience and stillness saving his life. He now understood the lesson, even if he didn't like it. It gave him a new respect for Vulcan teaching and control. He listened closely as his grandfather spoke. Politics meant nothing to him, but that didn't mean there weren't clues to his survival just the same.

"They are simply children. Krenath if you must know and of very little value in the general scheme of things."

The Andorian's smile made Zack's skin crawl. "You can try to downplay their worth, but you have made no secret in your support of them and their family on Vulcan, the same goes for Admiral Forrest on Earth. They have value, why else would too such notable men claim children with no blood ties to them? Especially children who are scorned by both societies for their very mixed blood?"

Zack blinked in surprise. He knew there were people who didn't care for Humans and Vulcans, but this scale of dislike was new to him. He hugged his sister tighter as his young mind tried to make sense of all the things he heard. He knew Pixie was listening as well, for there was a stillness to her that matched his own.

"The children are the result of a union that is barely tolerated among both cultures, but they represent a hope for the future and are innocent. Forrest and I decided to do what we could to help them. There are enough roadblocks in life, race should not be one of them."

"A noble sacrifice Ambassador, but I still say you are bluffing. Vulcans are known for their lies, especially to the Andorians, and no amount of treaties will change that."

Soval's eyes narrowed fractionally. "Do not pretend to represent the Andorian people."

Arven's temper blew and he backhanded the older man, nearly knocking him from his feet. "I represent those who would be free of Vulcan logic and interference, including those whom Vulcan has abandoned."

Soval glanced at Vek and raised a brow. "Vulcan has not abandoned any of her people, rather they have chosen to leave her fold."

"Arrogant bastard... It matters not. Those children will make the humans listen if nothing else, and the humans will do their damndest to influence the Vulcans. They will also bring Jonathan Archer to me, and then I can get my revenge." He



glanced at the children, his eyes narrowing further. "Get those children out of my sight. Put them in with the others for now."

Even though the men turned away, Zack refused to let down his defensive stance. His tightening hold on T'Lin was the only sign he showed of his unease. As hands reached for them, he smacked them away, shoving his sister behind him. "Don't touch us. We will go where you want us to go, just don't touch us."

Sorka grinned. "Such a tough little man, hehe, we shall see how strong you are soon enough little Vulcan."

Zack didn't want to even think what he was referring to. The Satorian led them to another room in the compound. This one was just like the others only larger, with a scattering of furniture throughout, and an almost lived in look. Sorka couldn't resist shoving them into the room, laughing heartily as Zack stumbled and T'Lin fell. As she hit the floor, T'Lin made no sound, and this frightened Zack. In fact her total lack of coordination and communication concerned him. Neither of the ambassadors joined them. Kneeling next to his sister, he stroked her hair away from her face. "Pix?" She looked up at him, but her eyes were unfocused and cloudy. Zack didn't know what to do. It was obvious his sister was hurt, but she had always taken care of him, not the other way around. His fists clenched in frustration. "I don't know how to help you Pixie?" It was a whispered plea and he wasn't certain she had heard him.

T'Lin heard him. Pain wracked her body but she couldn't figure out why or where. It seemed she was one giant ache. All she wanted to do was curl in on herself, but the desperation in Zack's voice wouldn't let her. She had never been able to ignore him, even when she wanted to, and she wasn't about to start now. Raising her hand, she curled it around his. "Just hold onto me for a minute Zack. I'll be okay in a minute." The words were weak, but then so was she. She lay silently, taking in her surroundings the only way she could.

A soft voice interrupted their conversation. "Let me help."

Zack whirled on the voice, positioning himself between T'Lin and the woman approaching them. She moved slowly as if approaching a wounded animal. She was tall, taller than any woman he had ever met. It was rather intimidating at first, but her eyes, her eyes reminded him of his Aunt Hoshi's, warm and brown and full of tenderness. He couldn't imagine anyone having eyes like that and being bad, and yet, he was still cautious. "My sister is hurt."

The gentle smile set him even more at ease. "I can see that." She knelt beside them and brushed a strand of curly black hair behind her ear. "So are you." She raised that hand to his cheek, but Zack jerked away.

"Pixie needs your help more than I do."

The woman nodded. "Alright." She reached out and gently turned the girl onto her back. Her voice was soft and soothing. "My name is Grace. Your sister's name is Pixie?"

Zack tightened his grip on his sister's hand. "Her name is T'Lin, but we all call her Pixie. Dad says its cause she's so damn cute."

Grace smiled. "I bet he has something to say about you repeating that."

"Not really, but my mom does. Only she doesn't say anything to me, just my dad." He was surprised at how easy it was to open up to this woman. "My mom is Vulcan, but you can tell when she's mad cause she gets this look on her face, actually its more like no look, but suddenly she uses our whole name instead of our nicknames. It's kind of funny. My dad really gets a kick out of it, though he always makes us do what she says."

"Sounds like your parents get along really well. What is your name?"

"Zack. Zack Henry Archer, but everybody calls me Zack or Sprite. You can if you want."

"I'd like that." She studied the blood on his cheek and the pointed ears. "You are part Vulcan?"

He nodded. "Yeah, my dad is human. We live on a starship." He watched as she washed the blood from his sister's head. "Is Pixie gonna be okay?"

Grace smiled at him again. "I think so. I see a lot of cuts and bruises, but none of her bones appear to be broken."

"That Sorka dropped her on the floor like she was trash. I don't like the way he looked at her either. It made my tummy hurt."

The look she gave him was sympathetic. "Satorians aren't known for their kindness to females. Can I clean your cheek now Zack?"

"You've done all you can for Pix?"

"For the moment. I have a pallet in the corner of the room. We'll move her there in a few minutes."

"Okay." He tried not to flinch as she cleaned his cheek. The gentleness was a balm to his soul after the violence he had experienced. He fought back a sudden rush of tears. He wasn't successful though and they spilled down his cheeks. His body stiffened for a moment as she drew him into a loose hug. "I think your

parents would be proud of you and how you've taken care of your sister."

He rubbed his face in her shoulder. "You think so? Pixie always takes care of me and I don't know what to do to help her now."

"I think you are on the right track. You let me help her, and you are trying. That's a lot for a young man to think about. How old are you Zack?"

He wiped his running nose on his shirt sleeve. "Seven. Pixie is twelve." He glanced down at his sister, the tears rolling harder. "Know what the worst part is?" At her negative shake, he continued. "I can't hear her in my head." He tapped a finger to his temple. "For as long as I can remember, I could hear her, even if she was on the other side of the ship. If I needed her, needed to talk to her, she was there. Now she's gone in my head and its scary... and lonely."

Grace hugged him again. "I'm not a doctor but I think that your sister has had a bad blow to the head. I think maybe your sister has some swelling there and it may be affecting that. Once it goes down, she'll probably be able to talk to you again."

"Really?"

"Probably. Try to look at it this way. You've never had to learn to communicate with your sister in any other way. You've never had to read her body language or her eyes, you've just heard her. Now you have to listen. Look at it as a learning experience."

Zack pulled back a bit and scowled at her. "You sure you're not part Vulcan too? That sounded almost... logical."

Grace laughed, and it was sweet and clear. "I've been around them for a long time. It probably rubbed off on me."

A soft voice floated up to them. Both looked surprised as T'Lin spoke. "Why are you here?"

Grace brushed the hair from T'Lin's face. "Can you stand?"

T'Lin rolled slowly to her side, hissing as pain rolled through her head. "I think so." She let go of Zack long enough to try to stand. She stumbled and swayed, but Grace wrapped an arm around her waist to support her.

"Take it easy, Honey. It's just a short walk across the room, and then you can rest some more. Your eyes are dilated so I don't think you should sleep, but I don't see a problem with you resting."

"Thank you." T'Lin relished the strength of comforting arms around her. It made her miss her parents fiercely and she had to bite back the tears that threatened. Tears would get her nowhere, and would probably just make her head hurt more. Her arm curled reflexively around her belly. The pain was becoming more distinct now. Her lower belly was cramping as though she had eaten something that didn't agree with her and her head was pounding with each pulse beat. She sank gratefully onto the pallet, afraid to move. "Grace?"

"Hmmm?" She fussed with a blanket, covering the children as Zack laid down next to his sister and snuggled into her as she wrapped her arm around him and spooned around him protectively.

"Why are you here?"

"I was in the wrong place at the wrong time it seems."

"What do you mean?"

"I was traveling on a cargo ship on my way back to Earth. We were attacked by the Satorians and the crew was claimed as slaves."

"How can they just do that?"

"Satorians do what Satorians want to do. They don't care much for rights, especially those of a female. They have a strange sense of honor. Men, even boys," she tapped Zack's nose, "have power. They have the right to speak and challenge things they don't think are right. Females on the other hand are worth less than nothing. If you two are going to survive, Zack is going to have to continue to be strong and fight back." She her attention to Zack, giving him a deep look. " You have to make them understand that T'Lin is yours to do with as you will. Do not let them see you treat her with any type of contempt, or babying, or they will use it against you."

T'Lin hugged Zack tighter to her. "Surely there were men on the freighter who could protect you?"

"Most of the men were killed in the attack. Those that survived were sold before they had a chance to learn Satorian codes of honor, such as they are." She said with a snort.

"So they treat you okay?"

"For the most part. I have some value you see, more than the women they are used to. I have a son and he protects me. I also have some healing skills and that makes me valuable as well. That and the Vulcan has taken a liking to me. Sorka sold me to him after only a few days. He has not harmed me, but he is

unpredictable."

Zack spoke up. "He's scary." As Grace nodded, he glanced around the room. "Where is your son?"

She smiled then, a beautiful smile that lit up her face. "Vek has him training. Aidan is about your age. He's nine. My husband and I were stationed on Vulcan, part of a scientific cultural exchange. Aidan was born there. When my husband died a year ago, we made arrangements to return to Earth. We've been here nearly four months."

Zack sat up, dislodging the blanket. "I've never met a boy near my age. Will he be back soon?"

Grace chuckled. "Starfleet isn't big on families on Starships. I'm surprised your parents were allowed to serve together and have children."

T'Lin sat up slowly. "My parents are... unique. They are the only people to have an interspecies marriage. Daddy says that humans aren't comfortable with a human/Vulcan marriage, any more than the Vulcans are. Being in space makes it easier."

Zack nodded. "My dad is Captain Jonathan Archer of the Enterprise and everybody lets him do what he wants. That includes marrying a Vulcan and having kids."

T'Lin sighed as she stood, bracing her hand against the wall. "That's not quite true. Daddy does get away with a lot, but he does a lot too. Everything requires compromise, he says."

"That's true. Are you okay Pixie?" Grace stood and held out a hand to the girl.

T'Lin bit her lip. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I need a... a bathroom."

Grace nodded sympathetically and guided her to a door to the left of the pallet. "If you need me, holler."

T'Lin would have nodded but her head hurt too much, so she gave her a weak smile.

Grace walked back over to Zack. "So you are the only children on your ship?"

"Nah, my Aunt Hoshi and Uncle Trip have kids. Lots of them." He leaned forward conspiratorially, his voice dropping to a loud whisper. "They're all girls."

"Really? How many?"

"Four." He started counting on his fingers. "Charlie, Alex, Teddy and Tommy."

"I thought you said they were girls."

Zack nodded. "Yup, but Uncle Trip wanted a little boy so they all have boy names."

"And his wife goes along with it?"

"Aunt Hoshi thinks its funny and tells him its all his fault." He glanced at the bathroom door for a moment then turned back to Grace. "I don't see how though." He sighed, his eyes taking on a distant look. "I miss Charlie. She's my best friend. Our birthdays are only four days apart. She's seven too."

The tone of his voice caught her attention. "How long have you been away?"

His eyes widened, and a deep sadness entered them. "Six months. Mommy and Dad sent us away. They didn't want us anymore."

She hugged him tight, finding it hard to imagine anyone not wanting such precious children. "That doesn't sound right to me Zack. There has to be another piece of the puzzle we aren't seeing." As she spoke the main door opened again and an older Vulcan woman was shoved in. Like Zack, she stumbled but kept her feet. She was surprised when Zack jumped out of her arms and raced over to the woman, throwing his arms around her. She was even more surprised when the Vulcan embraced the boy back.

"Ambassador!"

"I am pleased to see you as well, Zack Henry."

"Pixie is hurt, but Grace helped her. Where is Grandfather?"

V'Lar's eyes settled on Grace as the woman moved toward her. She held out her hand in a standard Earth handshake. As the woman took it, she shook her hand, and nodded appreciatively as Grace raised her hand in the customary Vulcan greeting. "I am V'Lar and you must be the Grace the boy spoke of."

"Yes Ma'am. It is an honor to meet you. All the humans who lived on Vulcan have learned of Ambassador V'Lar and the good she has done for her people."

V'Lar stroked her hand over Zack's hair. "Some deeds have been better than others." As Zack bounced impatiently next to her she raised a brow. "Patience young one. Your Grandfather is being sent to Earth. It seems these men have a desire to be heard, and are using us to make their point." V'Lar glanced around

the room. "Where is Pixie?"

Grace glanced up, concerned as Zack answered. "She had to go to the bathroom. She's been in there a long time. Do you think we should check on her?"

Grace and V'Lar shared a glance, and both women moved toward the bathroom door. Grace knocked lightly. "Pixie?" A soft sob in response had her cracking open the door as V'Lar drew Zack farther away. The girl was standing against the wall with her arms wrapped tightly around her waist. Grace approached her slowly. "What's the matter, Honey?"

Tear filled eyes raised to hers. The misery there was almost palpable. "I think I'm hurt really bad."

"Why? Where do you hurt?" It was possible that she had missed something, but she couldn't be sure.

"My tummy hurts really bad... and... and... there is b...blood everywhere."

Grace stared at the girl in confusion, her brow crinkled. Suddenly realization dawned. She reached down and placed her hand on the girl's lower abdomen. "It hurts here?" When T'Lin nodded, she drew her in a hug. Her hand drifted to her lower back and pressed lightly. "And here?" Again the girl nodded. "Does it hurt when you push on your tummy?" T'Lin shook her head. "Just a few more questions okay? Did any of them hurt you or touch you in any way?"

"Not that I know of."

"Okay. This has never happened before?" As T'Lin shook her head Grace smiled gently. "Has anyone ever talked to you about the changes your body will go through when you grow up?" Again the girl shook her head. "A ship full of humans and no one thought to explain the reproductive process to a little girl. Honey, it's just your body growing up. It's preparing itself for the ability to carry young."

T'Lin's eyes widened and horror replaced the fear. "You mean? But...But I'm half-Vulcan. Doctor Phlox taught us about the reproductive cycles of humans and Vulcans but I didn't think... know..." She gave Grace a helpless look. "What do I do? Does it always hurt?"

Grace hugged her quickly then pushed her toward the shower. "Everyone is different Pixie. Wash up and I'll bring you something to take care of the other." With a relieved sigh, she left the girl to her bath and returned to the main room. As she collected the necessary supplies, she filled V'Lar in on what was going on.

The older woman nodded. "Her mother would not have thought to tell her as Vulcan women do not have to deal with such things, and her father would most likely have not thought about it. Human males are reluctant to discuss such things as it usually means their little girls aren't so little anymore."

"I hope that is all it is and there is not something else going on. I would feel better if a doctor could check her out."

"You have done your best for her. We could not have asked for more." It was during this exchange that Aidan joined the group. After his mother introduced the two boys, they stared at each other uncertainly. Neither child had any experience with boys their own age, and weren't certain how to interact. They remained in a silent study of each other broken only when T'Lin and Grace came out of the bathroom. Zack glanced at his sister and started to laugh. Gone were the grungy Vulcan robes. The girl wore a pair of trousers that were about two inches too short and a button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. In one hand she held her shoes, a pair of simple tan half-boots. She threw him a disdainful look and sat on the bed, taking a minute to put on her boots and tuck the pants into them.

The boy beside him spoke up, his tone indignant. "Mama, those are my pants!"

T'Lin sighed and tried to smile at the boy. "Thank you for letting me borrow them. My clothes were a mess."

Grace smiled at the diplomacy in her tone. Sometimes a shower could work wonders, so could knowledge for that matter. "Pixie, this is my son Aidan. Aidan, this is Pixie."

The boy pulled a pouty face. "That's a stupid name."

Zack scowled at the boy. "You leave my sister alone. She didn't do anything to you."

Aidan glanced at the boy in surprise. There was something in his face that said he loved his sister as much as Aidan loved his mom. That was enough in Aidan's book, and enough to open the door. Aidan nodded at T'Lin. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. I've never heard of anyone named Pixie before. It's the name of an imaginary creature, not a person."

T'Lin sagged against the wall. She patted the bed beside her and Zack came instantly, curling against her. She glanced at Aidan and raised a brow. He came closer and sat next to his mother. "My real name is T'Lin, but when I was a baby my daddy started calling my Pixie. It stuck."

Aidan frowned. "Why'd he call you that?"



T'Lin pushed her hair behind her ears, turning her head so he could get a good look. "He said I reminded him of a little pixie with my pointed ears. He calls Zack, Sprite." She wrapped an arm around his shoulders as she said it, taking comfort from the solid feel of him against her. "Our mom is Vulcan and our Dad is human, so we are a mix of both."

Aidan smiled. "That's cool. I like Vulcans most of the time. I was born on Vulcan. Were you?"

"No. I was born on a Starship. Zack was born on Earth."

"Wow." He glanced at his mom, before continuing. "Is your dad dead too? Is that why you are here?"

"No, at least I don't think so. My parents sent us to live with the Vulcans for a while."

V'Lar moved closer and took a seat next to T'Lin. Her brow rose as Aidan pointed at her. "You her Grandma? I had one but she died like my dad."

V'Lar blinked. "The children and I are not related by blood, but yes I think I am the closest thing to a Grandmother that they have on Vulcan." Her eyes met T'Lin's. "I would be honored if you would call me such."

T'Lin nodded and nestled against V'Lar. She loved the way the older woman smelled and sounded. It was almost like having her mother in her arms again. "I miss my mom, Grandmother."

V'Lar stretched so her arm could go around both children. "I know, Child. I am sure she misses you as well."

The pain had receded somewhat, though not enough so she could completely ignore it. It was enough, however, for the anger to build back up again. If her parents hadn't sent them away, they wouldn't be in this situation. "Like they care. They sent us away remember? They don't want us anymore!"

V'Lar and Grace shared a look. Finally the older woman spoke. "That's not true." She took a deep breath as she considered how much to reveal. "T'Lin, Soval told me that you and your mother are very close, that you can sometimes feel what she feels? Especially if she is hurt or sick?"

T'Lin sat up and nodded slowly. "I can do that with Daddy, and Zack too." Her hand came up to her head. "At least I could before my head hurt."

"Your grandfather told me that the reason your parents sent both you and Zack

away was because your mother was very sick. Your parents didn't want you to go through that with her. Your mother would have tried to block you from feeling what she was feeling and it would have drained her too much. She wouldn't have had enough energy to get well."

T'Lin's eyes widened. Zack clutched her hand. "Is it the Pa'nar's syndrome?"

V'Lar blinked, surprised. She had not been aware of that. "I don't believe so."

Zack's voice was small when he spoke. "Is she going to be okay?"

"From what I understand, she isn't well yet, but she is stable."

T'Lin nodded. "Doctor Phlox will take good care of her, so will Daddy. They didn't have to send us away though."

"Knowing your parents the way I do, it must have hurt them a great deal to send you away. Your father has such a generous spirit, and your mother... I've never met anyone with her integrity. I knew them before you were born, not long after they had started their journey. I told them I sensed a great bond between them. I had no idea how right I was. I wouldn't be surprised if Enterprise comes to get you, your father leading the charge."

T'Lin sighed. "I hope you are right, Grandmother. I hope you are right."

Aidan took that moment to break in. "I like Vulcans. I've lived with them my whole life except for our time here." His gaze was focused on V'Lar, and so solemn his mother had to bite back a grin. Only heaven knew what her child was going to ask the woman, but she heard the question in his voice. She didn't expect what he came up with. "May I call you Grandmother too?"

V'Lar floored her with her answer. ""Of course."

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

Jonathan Archer was tired. He was tired physically and he was tired of endless nights of worrying, and most of all, he was tired of missing his children. On top of that he felt old. Not that being in his fifties was old, but he felt it now. Most of it had to do with the constant worry that wore at him like the chronic dripping of water against stones. The job of captain came with plenty, but those weren't the ones that tended to drag him down. No the thing that was making him old and tired was family. He stood from his desk and moved to the view port, taking in the stars. His hand came up to knead the stiff muscles in his neck in an unconscious gesture. The stars still had the power to soothe him. Even with all the changes his life had taken, the stars were his constant, as was T'Pol. If he had known what he was getting into when he had asked her to stay aboard Enterprise, fought for her to stay, would he have run the other way screaming? It was an amusing thought, and though tempting at times, he wouldn't change anything. He was a man who thrived on the challenges of life, and being a husband and father were two of the hardest and most rewarding. He had spent the majority of his adulthood confident in his choices, certain space was his one true love, and that home, hearth and family were not meant to be, at least not in the traditional sense. The stars and the ship would be his home; and his family would be a crew of subordinates and friends. He had been half right. The stars and ship were his home, and his crew, family, but thirteen years ago, a beautiful Vulcan had invaded his space and he had fallen in love with her and she had given him a daughter. Five years later she had presented him with a son. With the love of a good woman and two beloved children, his life was complete. He had a daughter as lovely as her mother to dote on, and a son, bright as a star, to carry on the Archer name, and he was content with that. He had not asked for nor wanted this third child. In some ways he resented it, for it had removed his children from his life and posed a constant risk to it's mother. But he couldn't hold that resentment for long, nor could he hold the impersonal it. The doctor had told them it was a little girl, and he tried to imagine what she would look like, be like, when he finally held her in his arms. Perfect, and precious, just like her siblings.

A wave of longing swept through him. He missed his children as he had never missed anything before. Even with the chaos of work and the random chatter of the Tucker children, the ship still sounded empty. There was no bickering in his quarters from high pitched voices. There were no storms and tantrums, nor was there wild laughter and giggling mischief. He wouldn't have thought he would miss it. In fact, he had savored the silence for the first few weeks and felt guilty for it. Now, however, he wanted it, right along with the hugs and the certainty they were there. Each time he saw them it seemed they had grown and changed. He sighed and turned away from the view port. A quick glance at the

clock told him Delta shift had the bridge. It was late and he was tired, and if he couldn't hold his children, he could his heart, and share a few quiet moments with her and the child she carried. The missing he would just have to deal with. It would be over soon enough, and he would never let them out of his sight again.

With a nod to the lieutenant on duty, he slid into the 'lift and headed to his quarters. The door to the main room opened with ease. Over the years the living space had changed drastically. What had once been two dorm like single rooms with a storage area between them had erupted into a small comfortable living room, dining room combination with three small bedrooms. He and T'Pol had taken over his room while T'Pol's room had been converted into two smaller bedrooms. When the Tuckers had started their family, the arrangements had been similar. In fact, several walls had been knocked out to enlarge the area for children. He still didn't think children on a starship were practical, but he didn't have too many options with his family, and the Tuckers were content to stay as well. It worked for all of them because Enterprise kept the best engineer and communications officers in Starfleet. As he looked around the living room, he felt a pang at the missing clutter that indicated children were present, and was unable to stop himself from heading into the smaller rooms his children slept in. Someday perhaps Starfleet would see the necessity of setting up rooms like a small apartment rather than an impersonal dorm, but he didn't see it happening any time soon.

The trip through the children's' rooms had done nothing but make the ache in his chest grow so he didn't linger as long as he would have liked. He rubbed absently at his chest as he moved toward his room. He would contact Soval and talk to his children and assure himself they were well.

As he entered the bedroom his eyes were drawn to the elegant, shadowy figure standing by the window. T'Pol was as graceful as ever, even with the swell of pregnancy bowing her belly. In fact, he couldn't remember a sight more beautiful. His arousal was swift and sure, and he regretted he would be unable to do anything about it. Even after thirteen years she had that power over him and he hoped it never faded. Bathed in starlight, she looked soft and magical, like a dream and almost as elusive. He shook away the flash of fear that swept over him as she turned. Even in the softer light her face was pale and drawn, her eyes bruised. This baby had been so much harder on her than Zack had. As he came up behind her, he wrapped his arms around her belly and drew her gently against him, shifting her so her back was against his front. He dropped a kiss on the top of her head and just held her, his hands resting contentedly on the mound of her stomach. "Are you feeling okay?" She didn't sleep much, hadn't for most of the pregnancy but anything serious would have been routed to him. She hardly worked anymore. If she was up to it, she worked in his ready room or in their quarters, but more often than not she was resting or in sickbay. He would be glad when this child was born and she grew stronger. He only hoped the baby had her constitution. Either way, once she was born, her parents, both of

them, were getting fixed.

T'Pol patted his hand in a comforting gesture. "You worry too much. The baby was restless and so was I."

He nodded against her head and hugged her tighter. She felt as though she would break apart in his arms. "I was thinking about the children and missing them. They are in for quite a surprise when they get home."

T'Pol nodded. She tried not to think too far ahead where her pregnancy was concerned, but now that her time was coming near, she was more open to the possibilities. "I have missed them as well."

"Do you think they will like having a little sister?"

"Considering how much they enjoy the Tucker children, I believe so. It doesn't matter though, they have a limited choice in the decision."

Jonathan chuckled and nuzzled her neck. "True. I've been thinking... We can't keep calling the baby her and it. I think we should start thinking about what we want to name her."

T'Pol stilled in his arms, barely breathing. Then she relaxed against him once more. "I've been... uncertain."

He understood what she was saying. "I know. To give her a name makes her even more real." His hands soothed over the mound of his child and he smiled as a little foot connected solidly with his hand. "I don't think it would hurt any less to lose her now, with or without a name."

Again T'Pol nodded. Communication with words was rarely needed between them now. Even with a limited telepathic link to share their thoughts, the need was not there. It was available and convenient, but not necessary. They knew each other well enough that in most cases they knew what the other was thinking. "I was thinking perhaps we should name her after your mother as T'Lin is named after mine."

Jonathan smiled at the thought. "No, I don't think so. We've got a theme going with our children. I would like to name her after her mother."

T'Pol squeezed his arms lightly. "Given your penchant for nicknames, that would not necessarily be a bad thing, but I would like something different for our child."

Jonathan's grin grew wider and he backed T'Pol away from the window. He sat in the chair he had been aiming for and drew her into his lap, turning her slightly so he could see her face. Her arms looped around his neck and her head rested

on his shoulder. One of his arms supported her back, while his free hand moved in soothing circles on her belly. "Okay, so we get to negotiate here." At her raised brow he dropped a kiss on her mouth. "Compromise?" The brow settled and she shifted to find a more comfortable position. The contact spawned other thoughts and he blew out a deep breath. "Little girls, what names can we come up with for little girls..." And thinking that, he hoped to distract himself; but it wasn't helping much. He could feel the exhaustion rolling off of her, and he snuggled her closer. "What about T'Mir after your great grandmother, and Diana after mine?"

T'Pol blinked at him, love curling even tighter around her heart. That he would remember amazed her. She had told him of her great-grandmother years ago, and though the children had heard stories, it rarely came up. The more she thought about it though, the more certain she was. Her great grandmother had been the first Vulcan woman to come in contact with Humans, and had even lived companionably among them. She desperately wanted that ease of relations for her children, but feared it would not be something she would see in her lifetime. "Yes, I... it is a good, strong name."

Jonathan smiled. It was a good name, and he liked the sound of it. He pressed lightly on the odd shaped lump that could have been a head or a bottom. "T'Mir Diana Archer, a blend of yours and mine just like she is. A strong name for a strong child." *I hope.*

Words drifted away as they sat. The weariness in Archer was still there, but it didn't seem as noticeable with T'Pol in his arms. She had eventually fallen asleep, and though his arm had long since gone numb, he was reluctant to move. He shifted slightly, stretching more until he was somewhat comfortable and she was draped over him like a blanket. She barely sighed with his fidgeting, and once they were both settled, he too slept.

Unease settled around T'Pol, amplifying the discomfort that constantly plagued her. She tried to ease into a sitting position and move carefully off her husband's lap without waking him. Neither endeavor was successful as she struggled up. Jonathan silently assisted her when he realized her need. Frustration seemed her constant companion, especially as the child grew, frustration and fear. Though neither were logical for a Vulcan, they were as natural as breathing to a pregnant mother. She accepted Jonathan's help silently and moved into the bathroom. Once the door was closed, she rested her head against it and rubbed the nagging ache in her back. There was something else bothering her too, a silence in her mind that she couldn't quite place, and a nagging unease that something was wrong. Even as she tried to shake it off, awareness clicked into place. Something was wrong with T'Lin. The part of her mind that hummed with awareness of her oldest child was silent. Though it had been muted severely by time and distance, it had still been there. As quickly as she could, she exited the bathroom and went in search of her husband. They needed to check on the

children, now.

She entered the living room to find Jonathan on the comm. The familiar voice of Admiral Forrest registered and she shifted so that she could see him. The children were supposed to be on their way to Earth. Surely he had talked to them. She was about to ask when she noted the grim look on the Admiral's face. She leaned against her husband as the older man spoke.

Forrest took one look at T'Pol and wished he could send her away. It was hard enough to tell Jonathan what he had to say, it was another to talk to both parents, especially when the health of one was at risk. He could tell by the look in her eyes that T'Pol knew this was not a social call. Better to get it over with, and then he too could do his grieving. "I'm sorry to disturb you so late..." He sputtered off. Niceties seemed so out of place, but he didn't know where to begin. "Jon... T'Pol... Damn... I don't know how to tell you this, I don't want to believe it." He ran his hands through his hair in frustration and tried again. "Over the last few months there has been an increase in attacks on ships throughout the quadrant. The general consensus is that it is a combination of Klingon and rogue Andorian attacks."

Jon's eyes narrowed. "That's why you've called us back to Earth. Starfleet wants to attempt a plan to eliminate the aggression."

"Yes..." Forrest closed his eyes. "That's only a part of why I called." His eyes when he opened them were bleak. "I received a call from the Vulcans. The T'Barra was attacked ten hours ago. The Vulcans received a distress call, but when they got to the ship there was nothing left but debris. Nothing..."

Jonathan's mind drew a blank until he heard T'Pol gasp, and then the realization slammed into his brain with the force of a sledgehammer. His mind could not wrap around it though. "Our children?"

Forrest shook his head, tears clouding his vision. "I'm so sorry Jon."

It didn't make sense, couldn't seem possible. He shook his head, denying it to himself and the others. It just wasn't possible that he wouldn't hold his beautiful children again. It wasn't supposed to be like this, they were supposed to grow up and grow old. He was supposed to be able to see them do so. Grief, sharp and deep swamped him and he nearly doubled over in pain. His mind tried to shut down, but he wouldn't let it. He grabbed the grief, wrestled it, realizing that it was amplified by T'Pol's grip on his shoulder. He forced it down with anger and locked it away. Denial was his strongest point. "I can't believe that Admiral. I would know, I would feel it if my children were gone. It's just not possible."

T'Pol's fingers dug harder in his shoulder. It all made sense now. Logic deserted her as grief moved in. She had never felt anything so overwhelmingly

destructive. She swayed under the force of it, causing Jonathan to look up in concern. His arms closed around her and she tried to draw on his strength, his control. "The silence Jonathan... death explains the silence in my head where T'Lin used to be." It was too much for her and she collapsed.

Jonathan caught her as she went down and swung her up in his arms. He couldn't accept it. The Vulcans had to be wrong, even T'Pol, and yet he knew she believed it. He turned to Forrest. "I want every piece of information you have on the attack. I want who, where and when, and I want it now." He didn't wait for Forrest to answer. T'Pol was his focus, T'Pol and revenge.

Seven hours later Jonathan was again staring at the stars. He was still tired and still felt old, but the anger that had fed him earlier was gone. Now it was defeat that swamped him, rather than despair. It was sheer will that kept him going. He had come to the mess hall to get a cup of coffee, but the stars had distracted him. Funny, a few hours ago they had seemed bright and alive and full of promise, and now they were dim, a leftover light from something that no longer existed. He felt like that, an echo of what he had been. He had taken T'Pol to sickbay and left her in Phlox's care while he recruited the troops. He had barely been able to get out what had happened when Phlox had called him to sickbay. T'Pol it seemed was unable to handle the stress of loss and pregnancy. Her body had decided to release its precious burden. After nearly an hour of surgery, both mother and child were in critical condition, but alive. He wondered for how long. It seemed incomprehensible to him that he could have been so amazingly happy one moment and so lost the next. If T'Pol left him, how would he ever survive? No T'Lin, no Zack, no T'Pol... he could barely stand it. He couldn't even consider his infant daughter. He was already trying to distance himself from her.

He flinched as a cool hand rested on his arm. His eyes abandoned the stars and focused in on his communications officer. She looked as bad as he felt. Her husband stood behind her, his hand resting lightly on her shoulder. The grief he had been holding in spilled at their compassion and he fought for composure. He faced the stars once more, but all he could see were things he could no longer touch. "Pixie would have been thirteen next month. T'Pol and I were considering a surprise party for her. You only become a teenager once..." His voice broke on the words. Why oh why had he ever had children? He hadn't realized something could hurt so damn bad.

Hoshi had released his arm and was drawing soothing circles over his back, trying to comfort him as she would her children. "Jon..." There was nothing she could say that would ease the pain. She could barely accept it herself. Children and starships... for the first time she felt the urge to pack up her young and send them back to Earth. She shot Trip a desperate look, hoping for some help from that quarter.

Trip took his friend by the arm and guided him into a chair while Hoshi went to get some coffee. While the captain had been in sickbay with T'Pol, he and Hoshi had both slipped back to their quarters. They had watched their daughters sleep and held one another. Grief was rampant through the ship as the news had spread like wildfire, and yet no one had approached the captain with clumsy declarations of sorrow. Most of the crew had watched the Archer children grow up. Everyone from Chef to laundry personnel had talked to them and played with them, tutored them and loved them, just as they had the Tucker brood. It seemed impossible that such vitality was gone and they were all trapped in this loss. Like his captain, Trip wanted vengeance, but as a friend he offered comfort. He glanced at Hoshi as she set down the coffee cups. He tried to imagine, just for a minute, losing his whole world. He might, though he didn't know how, survive the loss of his girls if he had Hoshi with him, but if anything were to happen to her... He shook off the thought, grateful that he didn't have to try to cope with that. There was enough heartbreak in losses he had to deal with. He felt a little guilty as well. A week ago Hoshi had given birth to the fifth Tucker girl. Like T'Pol, her pregnancy had been conceived on a lush little planet, but unlike T'Pol it had been an easy one, and an easier birth. He wondered if his little Samantha would ever get a chance to play with the sick little girl in medical. He rested his hand on Jon's arm. "You should get some rest. It will be a while before we hear anything new."

Jonathan took a sip of his coffee and shook his head. "I can't sleep without T'Pol. I can't..." The overwhelming grief was being pushed back by will once more. Now wasn't the time, not yet. "How are the engines taking the strain?"

Trip took the change of subject gracefully. "We are holding steady at 4.5. Travis says we could squeeze a bit more out of them, but it wouldn't last long, and we can't afford to blow any relays."

Jonathan nodded. His eyes were blurring. He tried to shake it off and concentrate on the facts. Forrest had sent them everything the Vulcans had at the moment. The T'Barra had been a small vessel, geared more for transport than combat. Whoever had hit her had known exactly how to disable her and had done so in less than an hour. The attackers had then disappeared, leaving only an Andorian signature behind in the debris when the P'Tarrol, which had been the closest ship, had arrived in response to their hail. While the Vulcans tracked the Andorian signal, the Enterprise was heading at her fastest reliable speed to join them. Jon stood suddenly. "I need to check on T'Pol."

The Tuckers shared a knowing look as the youngest of the Archers was not mentioned. They said nothing as Jonathan walked out of the room.

Sickbay was dark and quiet but for the beep and lights of the monitors. Jonathan

entered and went to stand beside T'Pol. She looked for all the world like something out of a fairy tale and he desperately wanted to kiss her to see if she would wake up. It was stupid and irrational and he didn't care. He leaned over slightly and brushed his mouth across hers. His eyes were closed as he whispered "wake up sleeping beauty." He hadn't really expected it, had no hope of it, but was comforted somewhat in the doing. He was startled out of his thoughts by a loud, shrill beep, and automatically looked at the monitor near T'Pol to see what was happening. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but there was another beep, this one followed by a strained cry. The very reed thin quality identified the owner, and despite his misgivings, he found himself moving closer to the covered crib to the right of T'Pol's bed. He cautiously peaked into the glass lid and took in the tiny form of his daughter. She was very active, arms and legs moving, much as Pixie had done in her cylinder. Though early by Vulcan standards, her mother had managed to carry her a full nine months. She looked stronger than Zack had at birth. In fact, she looked stronger period. One little fist swung and pulled free the tubing at her nose. This caused the monitor on the crib to beep loudly yet again and more insistently. He was about to open the crib when Dr. Phlox came in. "Ah Captain. I am glad you are here. I was hoping of course that you would get some rest but I wasn't counting on it." The doctor's enthusiasm lightened his heart somewhat, and then he felt guilty. How could Phlox be happy when the children were dead? The doctor continued as if Archer's death glare had bounced right off him. "This little girl is doing so much better. It seems once free of the stress of her mother's womb, and birth, she is bouncing right back. If she continues to progress we will be able to remove her from the incubator."

Archer shook his head, afraid to hope. "T'Mir... We named her T'Mir." He glanced back at his wife. "How is T'Pol doing?"

The smile slipped for a moment. "She is stable, Captain, but she has not regained consciousness. I don't think she wants to and I can understand why."

"Yes..." He watched as Phlox flipped up the lid expertly. The physician wasted no time adjusting the tubing back into T'Mir's tiny nose. He then scooped up the little girl and wrapped her in a clean blanket. With barely a glance at the captain, he thrust the baby in her father's arms. Jonathan was so startled he nearly dropped her, but the warm weight felt both familiar and too good, and he cuddled it to him. He didn't notice Phlox's grin as the doctor prepared a bottle for the newest addition. Before he realized it, he was ensconced in a rocker by T'Pol's bed, singing a lullaby as he fed his daughter. The tears that slid silently down his cheeks were a combination of wonder, joy, and the deepest of sorrows.

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When she woke, it was sudden and sharp. She was instantly alert, despite the pain in her head and the nagging aches of her body. She tensed as she took in her surroundings, trying to figure out what exactly had awakened her. The bed dipped beside her and she turned her head to see what had caused it. Her eyes widened as she took in the figure of a large male form easing onto the bed. Panic flared for an instant, and then logic prevailed. He was not interested in her, rather in Grace, who had been sleeping beside her. The older woman was awake, her hands pushing against the man intent on joining her.

A hushed whisper echoed through the room. "You can't. The children are here."

As he spoke, T'Lin recognized him. It was Vek. He didn't bother to whisper. In fact, his eyes met T'Lin's as he spoke. "I can. Send them away, or give them a lesson. It matters not to me."

T'Lin shuddered. For all that Vek looked Vulcan, he was not what she was familiar with. She had always thought an emotional Vulcan would be a good thing, after all her mother displayed a glimpse now and then, and V'Lar certainly wasn't typical, but Vek just plain frightened her. As Grace agreed, Vek stood to allow her to move. His eyes glittered with a strange light as she turned to T'Lin.

Grace sighed in relief as she noticed T'Lin was awake. Her hand came up to gently cup one cheek. "Take the boys and go into Aidan's room with V'Lar." Reaching down, she gently shook Aidan awake. "Don't come out until I come for you."

As the boys woke, T'Lin rolled off the bed, ignoring the pain that flared in her body. She silently encouraged the boys to follow her, staying as far from Vek as possible. Grace too encouraged them to move quickly and quietly.

Aidan's bed was in a corner of the room that had been curtained off. To call it a room was stretching things a bit. Grace had given the space to V'Lar in an effort to provide the older woman with some privacy. T'Lin and the boys had sprawled across the big bed in the main room with Grace, never expecting to have their sleep interrupted. It had been obvious to T'Lin that Grace hadn't expected any visitors either. They had barely made it behind the curtain when the first soft sounds filtered their way. T'Lin shuddered and hugged both boys close, barely noticing as V'Lar made room for them. T'Lin fought back tears. She knew about love, and love making, to some extent, for she had been surrounded by it all her life. She understood the affection and its expression through sex, and had even walked in on it once or twice with both her parents and the Tuckers. She

understood the technical aspects of it and the purposes, and while embarrassing, accepted it. This however, was new to her. This was something she couldn't define or understand, but knew was wrong just the same. She sat, huddled against V'Lar and the wall, with two young boys curled into her, and waited through the long night for Vek to leave.

The first light of dawn was creeping through the barred window when T'Lin heard the gentle click of the door closing and locking. She paused only a moment, glancing at her sleeping companions, before easing from the bed. Both boys slept like the dead, arms and legs flung in different directions. They seemed to connect though, even in sleep they curled in and around each other like a couple of puppies. Pain speared through her and she fought to ignore it as she moved to the window. Her fingers curled into the crumbling brick at its edge as she studied the area with hopeful eyes. A soft sigh eased from her as she took it in. Rain fell in a shifting gray sheet that reminded her of the mist that had seemed to coat her dreams. Weak sunlight tried to filter through it but only succeeded in enhancing the miserable wash of gray and black that surrounded the compound.

Even with the rain, people were moving about. A large metal building stood about 50 feet from the one she was in. The square of the courtyard was completed by two long units running the length of the yard, one on each side. Treetops waved in the wind, indicative of the forests surrounding the compound. With another sigh, she turned. Her eyes skimmed the small enclosure as she moved toward the curtain. Chilled fingers hovered over the edge of the rough material. Time stilled as she tried to decide her next move. Screwing up her courage, she eased the curtain aside and stepped into the main chamber. The room was the same dusky gray as her area, the weak light valiantly trying to chase away the gloom, and failing miserably. She noticed Grace standing by another window, her stance remarkably like T'Lin's had been moments before.

The pose lasted only a moment as the older woman noticed her presence and turned to face her. The same encouraging smile she had used the day before graced her lips, and her eyes lit with welcome, chasing away the shadows almost instantly. "Good morning, Pixie. How are you feeling today?"

The girl shrugged, confused. "My head still hurts and so does my stomach, but it's better than it was."

Grace's smile widened. "That's something then. Why don't you come help me get things started for the day?"

The forward momentum was jerky at first and then smoothed until she was within an arms length of the older woman. She started as a gentle hand reached out and brushed the hair away from her eyes. It was a parental move and one so missed that T'Lin nearly cried. That warm hand cupped her chin and studied her eyes. She stilled as Grace looked her over.

"Your eyes are clearer this morning." The softest of touches tested the lump on her head. "This is a pretty color, but the swelling should go down soon. We'll put a cold pack on it later."

T'Lin nodded, slightly uncomfortable. Finally she could stand it no longer. "Grace?" As the older woman met her eyes, she swallowed. "Vek? You didn't want him here right?"

Sympathy filled her eyes and she drew the girl into a loose hug. "No, I didn't want Vek here."

"Then why...?"

Grace drew her to the bed and sat, encouraging T'Lin to do the same. The girl shuddered at the contact, but did as she was bid. "I mentioned to you that I was sold to Vek. In essence I am a slave, his."

Anger rolled through T'Lin. "But you are a person... not a thing. Why don't you fight him?"

Grace's smile disappeared. "Vek and I have an understanding, Pixie. I provide him with what he needs and he provides for me and Aidan. That protection includes food, clothing, and training for Aidan."

"But it's wrong!"

Grace stood and paced away. For the first time since she had been there, T'Lin saw the edge of temper in her eyes, though the bite was softened by the time she spoke. "I don't like the situation, but I don't have many options. I do what I have to do to ensure the survival of myself and my son. What would you have me do?"

"Escape!"

Grace's hands slid to her hips. "How? I don't know the first thing about surviving in the wild. The compound is surrounded by woods. I don't even know how to make a fire without some kind of accelerant. What types of wood can I burn? What is safe to eat? What types of predators are waiting to kill me and pick my bones?" She spun on her heel and paced the length of the room. "You would judge me for catering to Vek, but it is the only thing I know how to do. Even if I could steal a ship, I don't know how to fly it." She faced T'Lin again, her eyes narrowing. "I imagine you know more about those things than I do. Why do you think I allow them to train my son? Why do you think I let them teach him to fight and survive on his own? We may be here for days or years, but I never give up hope. I don't want to be a sex toy, a slave, but better Vek than one of those

damn Satorians."

"But..."

"Enough, child." T'Lin's head snapped to the side at the soft command. V'Lar moved closer to her, eyes meeting hers. "Grace is more aware of her abilities and limitations than you are. She also knows these people, what they are capable of. You should watch and listen."

T'Lin's head dropped as she considered the words. "I just... how does she do it. How can she be that...close to someone she despises?" She shuddered as the memory of hatred through a touch chased through her mind, intertwining with a memory of violence she barely remembered or understood. A Vulcan, an out of control Vulcan, and her mother... and the wrongness of it all. She shook away the thought. It wasn't real, was it?

V'Lar placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "What is it that bothers you child?"

"I don't know how to explain it Grandmother. I have this image in my head of a man like Vek, only not Vek. He doesn't act right. There is anger and desperation and... hate. It feels like a memory, but I can't remember. I just know it scares me because I see, feel that so un-Vulcan like behavior and an image of my mother covered in blood comes to mind. Vek makes me uneasy like that only..."

"I'm not sure what is playing in your mind. Vek is very emotional for a Vulcan. He is one of the V'tosh ka'tur, Vulcans without logic. Because of it he is unpredictable."

Grace knelt before the girl. "I think I understand why you are confused. I have explained to you that I do not want to be intimate with Vek, but I allow him sexual liberties without a fuss. You don't understand how someone can be passive about sex if they don't want a part of it?"

T'Lin nodded, her eyes meeting Grace's. "It's wrong."

Grace glanced up at V'Lar and receiving silent support, continued. "No one, man, woman, child or anything in between should be pushed to engage in sexual relations if they do not wish it. In a perfect universe it would be thus, but there is always someone who must have that control over another, just as there are always people who participate for all the wrong reasons. Some do it for experimentation, or because of low self-esteem, or even because they just want to be accepted by others. Sexual situations should be between consenting adults who care for and respect one another. However, there are times when necessity dictates your actions and you have to find a place, something in yourself that you can live with. Vek rarely hurts me. I have value to him even if I am a slave. My choices are limited, and I choose the devil I know. I've seen the

Satorians in action and that frightens me more than Vek ever could. They care about nothing, especially if it's a female." She stood then, rubbing her arms as if chilled. "I need to get the boys up and head to the kitchens. Its almost time for the morning meal." She wiped her hands nervously on her pants. "Pixie, I want you to stay with me at all times if possible. In fact, I would prefer you stay out of sight as much as possible. Satorians are extremely aggressive and violent. I'd rather they not take an interest in you."

V'Lar's eyes snapped up to Grace's. "You think she is in danger from them? She's just a little girl..."

"She's female. Sorka has a child on his ship, she can't be more than five, and he..." She shook her head to clear it of the image. "Vek tells me she's a half-breed, but she looks Satorian. If she looked enough like the other half of her parentage, she would be trained in languages and such and used as a translator or even taught to infiltrate that culture, used as a spy or a highly trained whore to gain information. But because she looks Satorian and is a half breed, she is less then nothing. From what Vek has told me, the child will be lucky to reach her teens. Those unlucky enough to be of no use to the people are sold and traded and used, until there is nothing left. The Satorians care only about the male line and warring. Vek believes they will destroy themselves if they do not change. Pixie is an exotic young woman compared to that child. She's definitely in danger."

V'Lar's hand tightened for a moment on T'Lin's shoulder before releasing her. "So barbaric, so sad... Listen to her Pixie, in this I believe Grace knows best."

"Stay with me, stay out of sight, or stay with your brother."

The conversation and the seriousness of both women were enough to convince her. She stood slowly. "Do what you have to Grace, I'll wake the boys for you."

The older women shared a concerned look as the girl walked away.

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Zack leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. They were training in the courtyard today, the first day without any rain since they'd been there. He didn't know how long it had been, he was too tired to care. Every muscle in his young body ached from the intense training he'd been forced into. Day and night blended in this hellish place, especially when the overcast skies and constant storms made it hard to differentiate between night and day. He opened his eyes at the first sound of movement, his instincts automatically on alert. Weak sunlight struggled against the clouds and he squinted to make out the form in the doorway. His body stiffened, coming to attention. Sorka had ordered him and Aidan to the yard only a short time ago. The Satorian was an unyielding taskmaster, tough and fierce, and scary enough that the boy wanted desperately to hide from him. Hiding wasn't an option though, nor was refusing to train. He had to learn to protect himself, as well as Pixie and Grandmother. If the Satorian caught him lounging around, he would punish him. It might come in the form of words, but was more likely to come in the form of a belt or a fist. Zack could barely remember a time when he had felt safe and secure, able to play and run at his own will. He knew it hadn't been all that long, but it seemed a century. He felt old, grown up, and alone. The only person who truly seemed to understand him now was Aidan. Like Zack, Aidan wasn't allowed to do those little boy things anymore. He too had to protect and fight. Zack was afraid fighting was all he was good for anymore. Another sound caught his ears, and he turned slightly, this time taking in the form of his sister. She stood just inside the kitchen door, barely visible, using the shadows to her advantage.

For just an instant, the child in him soared up and smiled. He wished more than anything he could talk to her, let her know how scared he really was, confide in her like he always had. He wished his sister were the one doing the protecting. It was funny how Pixie had always seemed so large to his eyes, so capable of anything. Now she looked lost and fragile. Some of the bruises were healing, but she was still so very pale, and she was thinner too. She looked different too, as if she had somehow grown and changed while he wasn't looking. His eyes narrowed slightly. She looked like a girl, not just a sister and that scared him to his bones. He and Aidan had been included in the male discussions, or at least the ones that reigned around the lunch table. The comments had taken some explaining, and he had asked Grace and V'Lar a couple of times, but once he understood the gist of them, he tried instead to ignore them. He would train harder because he had to. It was the only way he knew to insure their survival.

Another movement, this one from a different area, caught his eye, but he was too late, too slow. He had allowed himself to be distracted and it cost him. Sorka had come up on him, and he was on the ground before he knew it. He nearly

groaned as Pixie came flying out of the doorway, moving between him and Sorka.

"Leave him alone!"

Sorka reached around T'Lin and grabbed Zack by the collar, sneering as he did so. He lifted the boy until his feet barely touched the ground and shook him fiercely. "Are you a baby child that you must hide behind a woman's skirts, and not even a grown woman at that?" He shook the boy again to emphasize his point before dropping him to the ground.

Zack landed with a thud, and though the breath was knocked from him, he forced himself to his feet. He desperately wanted to scream yes, but he knew it was the wrong decision for both himself and Pixie. He shook his head to clear it and straightened his spine. His eyes when they met Sorka's were clear, and steady, though he was shaking inside. "My sister feels it is her duty to protect me as she is the elder. Even among your kind there must be some sort of maternal instinct."

Sorka glanced from Zack to T'Lin and back again. The Satorian grunted. "That is the case sometimes. You would do well to convince your sister to keep her mouth shut, or I will give her something else to do with it."

Zack turned to T'Lin. "You will remain silent, or you will leave. I cannot have you disturbing me."

T'Lin took a step toward him, hurt plain on her face. "But Zack, you are just a little boy."

Neither saw the Satorian move until he was upon her. His hand flew out, catching the girl across the cheek. The blow was so hard it knocked her to the dirt, splitting her lip. "He is male and your better. If he is old enough to claim you as his responsibility, then he is old enough to learn to protect what is his. You will not interfere again."

When her eyes cleared, T'Lin sat up slowly, and finally stood. Her fists clenched at her side as Sorka once more faced off with Zack. Her brother assumed a Vulcan fighting stance, and waited. Once more she wished her link with him was working. He had never looked more Vulcan or more unapproachable. She wondered if he were as scared as she.

Zack bit back the anger and fear that ate at him. Everything in him wanted to run and hide, behind Pixie if at all possible, but he understood that wasn't possible. He understood a lot of things he hadn't before. He knew the look in Sorka's eyes when he looked at Pixie, and he understood what it meant. He also knew he was the only thing standing between his sister and Sorka. For now the Satorian respected him, at least somewhat. They all knew the man could kill him with a

simple twist of his hands, but Sorka seemed intrigued by him, and was determined to teach him to fight as a Satorian. As far as Zack could tell, the lessons would hurt, but they would also help him and his sister survive. Grace had said just about anything was bearable to protect ones you loved, and she was right. He could do this. A shiver of fear raced down his spine as the man smiled, but he didn't let it show. Any display of emotion brought taunting, or worse, a fist in his direction that he couldn't dodge. He had learned quickly to temper his reactions.

As Sorka came at him, Zack dropped and rolled. He grunted as the Satorian's foot caught his ribs, but nearly crowed in triumph and the bigger man fell. Zack was up and moving, landing a series of blows before the Satorian got to his feet. As the elder stood, Zack danced out of his reach.

Though wiry, Satorian fighting depended on mostly brut strength. If they couldn't beat something into submission, they used weapons, and often fought dirty. Zack couldn't understand why Vek and Sorka had decided to train Aidan and himself in different fighting techniques, but he wasn't about to complain. Malcolm had told him once that the best way to defeat an enemy was to know its weakness and to never underestimate it. He figured Sorka and Vek were doing just that with him and Aidan, and he was smart enough to take advantage of the fact, even if it brought a few bruises.

The training session was relatively brief. Once Sorka had Zack pinned, he explained where the boy went wrong and actually showed him a few counter moves as well. Zack watched and listened, and when the Satorian told him to practice with Aidan, he did. He barely noticed when Grace came to get Pixie, but he relaxed a little once she was gone. His sister was the hardest to remain impassive to, especially when she was trying to defend him. He would talk to her later that evening. For now he had to get through his own lessons.

Sorka worked with them for another hour, finally deeming the lessons over. Both boys were sweaty and filthy, and eager for a bit of rest, though neither said a word. Aidan was almost as good at hiding his thoughts and feelings as Zack. As the Satorian ushered them to dinner, the boys shared a look. Tomorrow they were going to learn about knife fighting. Zack wondered if the man would be stupid enough to arm them.

Grace sat on the bed and watched as the boys walked T'Lin through the fighting techniques they had learned. She wanted to object but knew it would do no good. She also knew the child needed every edge. She flashed V'Lar a smile as the older woman sat next to her. "She's so fragile looking."

"Pixie is stronger than she looks."

Grace nodded, trying not to flinch as Aidan flipped the girl onto her back. T'Lin did not stay down, rather, she rolled away and to her feet with an obvious grace and skill. "The boys are nearly as tall as she is, and I would swear they both weigh more."

V'Lar watched as the girl spun away, and moved smoothly into a counterattack, taking on both boys at once. "She uses it to her advantage. Speed, stealth and inner strength are her gifts."

"It won't protect her from Sorka, or Vek." Her eyes slid over the swollen cheek. A dark purple marked the cheekbone, and a cut swelled the lower lip.

"Or Arven."

Grace glanced at the older woman. "He's back then?"

"Yes. That's why they called me after dinner."

Grace's eyes traveled over the older woman, looking for any obvious signs of damage. "You are well?"

"For all that he is obsessed, Arven will not harm me. I am too valuable to the cause."

"What exactly is the cause?" She glanced back at the children as a grunt echoed through the room. Aidan was on the floor this time, Zack quickly joining him as T'Lin flipped him. The younger landed solidly on the elder, making her wince. She nearly smiled as T'Lin tossed her head and grinned proudly. The boys took it as a challenge and were back on their feet within minutes. "Vek spouts some nonsense about revenge against the Vulcans and humans for siding with them. It seems senseless to me."

"Vek believes that is exactly the case, and it is to a point. Revenge is a strong motivator, and that is Arven's ultimate goal."

"I understood things were getting better between Andorians and Vulcans?"

"Officially, they are. Both people want peace, and the humans are in the middle of it, the only trusted mediators between the two." She gestured to the children. "Jonathan Archer is at the heart of it. It is he who Arven has a grudge against. Almost thirteen years ago, Archer helped negotiate a treaty between Andoria and Vulcan. He was also the one who facilitated the break in the original one."

"I bet that made the Vulcans happy."

"They were not pleased with the interference. Archer exposed a secret base that had been observing the Andorians for years. That exposure led to the destruction of one of our most sacred monasteries." The silence caught the attention of both women and they turned to find three sets of eyes on them.

The children moved closer. T'Lin tipped her head to the side. "I remember Daddy telling us about that. P'Jem right?"

"Exactly. As I recall, you hadn't been born yet."

"But Daddy said he and mom helped the Andorians and the Andorians helped them. Daddy was part of the treaty that was signed."

V'Lar closed her eyes for a minute. "Your father did indeed help with the treaty and he was to be an instrumental part of the current negotiations between the Andorians and Klingons. When people want to make a change, it is usually engineered through violence. Unfortunately that violence can scar the outcome, alter it so it isn't quite what people expected. There are groups, such as Arven's who do not approve of the negotiations and will stop at nothing to make trouble. Arven, however has a personal vendetta against Jonathan Archer. I wasn't able to get all of it out of him, but apparently it has something to do with the dishonor and death of a sibling."

T'Lin bit her lip, wincing as the motion pulled at the cut in the corner. "Why wait so long?"

"Some believe revenge is a dish best served cold." The children shot her a confused look. "After a while people forget the wrongs they have done others. If one waits long enough, the revenge is sweeter, because no one is expecting it."

Zack scowled. "If my father killed someone, then that person deserved it. My dad is a good man."

V'Lar nodded. "Jonathan Archer is indeed a good man. But even good men can be targeted. If your father was responsible for the death of Arven's sibling, then it was not something he did lightly." She glanced at Zack, then T'Lin. "They are sending me away tomorrow. I'm supposed to be a good faith exchange for weapons and such. You must be careful. You are the tools he intends to use against your father."

T'Lin shivered and wrapped her arms around herself in a self hug. "Do you think he will come?"

V'Lar nodded again. "Your parents would never leave you to these brutes. I have no doubt your father is trying to find you right now."

Zack rested a hand on her arm. "You will warn him won't you Grandmother?" His voice was worried, pleading.

"If it is within my power, I will warn your father."

The boy gave in to the need for comfort and buried his face in her robes. V'Lar gave Grace a helpless look, and then held out her arms. They were soon filled.

V'Lar waited until the children were sleeping before approaching Grace again. The words felt unnecessary, but she needed to be sure. "You will watch over them for me?"

"Of course."

"Thank you." Both women went uneasily to their beds that night.

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Jonathan Archer stared blindly around sickbay. The difference in the room between the night shift and the day shift amazed him. It also made an impression on how different the atmosphere was during those times. Doctor Phlox kept the place alive, jovial, most of the time, and efficient in emergencies. It was one of the most comforting places on the ship, normally, but now it seemed to exemplify all that was lost to him. Exhaustion weighed at him, dragging at his steps as he moved toward the biobed. The tiny girl in the sling around his neck seemed to gain a hundred pounds as he moved forward. His eyes blurred and for a moment the lights of sickbay seemed the endless stars, and the sounds diminished to nothing. With a quick shake of his head, he continued forward, carefully unstrapping the infant and laying her in the crib next to her mother. Content she would continue to sleep, Archer climbed carefully onto the biobed. It was narrow and he clung to the edge, but it didn't matter. T'Pol was next to him and he desperately needed sleep. For the briefest of moments, he closed his eyes, pretending they were in their bed and she was asleep next to him. His arm banded loosely around her waist, and he held her close to him. The words when they started, were a hushed whisper, as if they would wake the sleeping woman. "The Vulcans have found an Andorian ship. Its a renegade according to Shran, one of the rebels who insist on keeping this skirmish open. Just a shuttle really from a much bigger ship. There was no one inside save Soval. He was unconscious, beaten. They don't know when or if he'll come out of it. The Vulcans believe Soval was a message of some sort but the fools were unable to keep from harming the messenger. Logic dictates that he was spared for some sort of political statement, but we won't know for sure until he wakes." His breath slid out on a sigh and for the hundredth time that day he wished she were awake to deal with the Vulcans. She would understand so much more than he.

His head ached with the strain and the hopelessness of it all and he switched subjects, the words becoming a plea. "Come back to me, T'Pol. I'm so lost without you. I can't bear this alone. You promised me you wouldn't leave me, well you have. The doctor thinks the choice is yours, a mental thing you are doing to yourself. How could you leave me like this? I need you! We need you! T'Mir... I don't remember what to do and I need you to remind me. Please sweetheart, come back to me..." Silent tears slid down his cheeks. T'Pol was his world. "It's not supposed to be like this. We were meant to be together always. The children were meant to grow up. T'Mir needs her mother. I love you..."

He buried his face against her shoulder and breathed in the scent that was uniquely T'Pol. Taking several deep breaths he calmed himself. "She's beautiful you know? It hurts every time I look at her. I see you and Pixie. There doesn't seem to be any of me in her except in temper. She has a fierce little temper, and

yet... when she's sleeping, or looking up at me with those big green eyes of hers, I see your serenity. She needs you to guide her, love." Breath puffed out slower as his body relaxed some more. "Phlox makes me carry her with me. Says we both need something constant to hold on to. I think he's trying to make her my focus so I'm not so lost, and he's right for the most part. She is such a good baby, really. She eats and sleeps and coos at everyone, but they are all leery of holding her. I don't blame them. She reminds us of what we have lost and we don't want to get attached again. Can't help it though, she's just so damn cute. Trip asked me if she had a nickname yet. I can't seem to find one for her. Anything that comes to mind reminds me of Pixie and Sprite and that fantasy world, that magical place. I just can't seem to find it. Nothing there seems to fit."

His fingers twined in hers and he snuggled closer. "Malcolm calls her the prettiest little Poppet on the ship and he reserves that phrase for her. I like the sound of it. She reminds me of a beautiful little doll, but still... Trip and Hoshi help me with the care of her, as does Phlox. Hoshi tucks her right in with Sammy. She's the only one of the Tucker brood to have blond hair. Malcolm calls her the prettiest little bit of Sunshine on the ship. Poppet and Sunshine, where do we come up with these names anyway?" Exhaustion pulled at him, dragging him under. He shifted, drawing T'Pol closer still. "Perhaps you should wake up and explain the logic of it all. Come home sweetheart, please..."

Phlox stood off to the side and watched the Captain for several minutes after he fell asleep. It had been on the tip of his tongue to object when the Captain had crawled onto the biobed with T'Pol, but he hadn't been able to. The Captain was as incapable of harming his wife as he had been of ignoring his infant daughter. Besides, the man needed sleep desperately. It had been nearly a week since this had started, and as far as he knew the Captain had barely rested, only doing so while he was in a chair in sickbay. Perhaps this way he would sleep more than a few hours. Phlox waited a few more minutes before pulling out a blanket and draping it over Archer. A soft whimper from the crib caught his ear, and he scooped up the baby, cuddling her close. The Captain was right, she did resemble T'Pol and Pixie and yet was uniquely herself. Expertly holding the baby in one arm, Phlox prepared a bottle and carried the little girl back to his quarters. While she ate, he traced the pointed little ears, sharp Vulcan brows, and the silky cap of soft brown curls. "Poppet hmmm... I think Malcolm is right. You are the prettiest one on this ship, and don't you forget it."

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Mist, thick as soup, surrounded her. It was so dense that she couldn't even see her feet, though she could feel the solid ground beneath them. Each breath inhaled the mist, and though there was no scent, she could taste it. It tasted damp and unfamiliar, and with each breath her chest hurt with the effort to inhale. She stumbled forward, certain only that continued movement was all that was keeping her from drowning in the stuff. Finally it began to clear, yet as she looked around, she almost wished it back. She was alone in a room with high, gray walls. As the mist faded, she noticed the shine of the panels. Moving forward, she touched one. It shimmered like a pond with a pebble thrown in the center, moving in slight ripples from her fingertips, ever widening, until all the walls felt the effect. She followed the farthest wave as it cascaded over the wall until it met its companion, causing another set of ripples, as it made a full circle. She had left the mist and entered an odd room, with no sign of a door and no opportunity for escape. Again she touched the barricade, and again it caused a cascading effect, though it seemed too solid to be able to do so. The walls were darkening, filling to a glossy black, and as they did so, she saw her reflection surrounding her. By all rights the black surrounding her was such that she shouldn't be able to see anything, but she could. The walls and her reflections stared silently back at her, nothing but the pattern of the waves to suggest a hint of life.

Panic began to bubble inside her. She was lost and alone, trapped in a world of darkness with no one to help her out. She turned, breath leaving her in a sob as the mirror girls turned too. With halting steps she headed back the way she thought she had come, only to thud solidly into a wall. Breathing became even harder as panic tightened her lungs. She stumbled along, her hand flowing over the walls, ripples shooting out in frantic directions as she sought escape. The shadow girls mimicked her movements. As she focused in on their movements, she stumbled to a halt. Their gaping mouths seemed malevolent masks of laughter. Collapsing to the floor, she buried her head in her knees, arms coming up to cover her as if the ceiling were going to fall. She stayed there, knees to chest as she struggled to breathe. As air became easier to pull in, the panic receded somewhat. Cautiously she lifted her head, flinching at the mocking reflections. Glancing up, she saw herself once again, only this girl, this reflection seemed more real, truer. Her eyes blurred as tears began to fall. The images began to disperse until nothing but black gleamed back at her, nothing but black, and the image above. She stood slowly, lifting her arms in supplication. The mirror girl stared back at her solemnly, not moving. "Let me go!"

The shadow creature shook her head, and disappeared.

T'Lin snapped awake. She took a moment to take in her surroundings. The familiar snores and snuffles of the boys comforted her, and she drew them in for



a moment before slowly sitting up. She moved cautiously, careful not to disturb them as she slid free of the bedding. After tucking the blanket back over them, she moved across the small room to the bar covered window. A quick glance showed her it was still dark outside, but the subtle stirrings in the courtyard of the compound told her it was nearly dawn. Her fingers traced lightly along the window casing until they encountered a loose brick. She lifted it carefully, ferreting underneath it until she found what she was looking for. Pulling out the small knife her uncle had given her, she clutched it desperately for a moment. Then, with a small sigh, she opened the blade, and pressed the thin tip against the wall. It only took a moment to carve a thin line, and then she was lifting the brick and hiding the knife once more. Her fingers traced over the lines, her only way of marking time in this place. There were nine of them, nine thin, barely noticeable lines, representing nine days that already seemed an eternity. With another sigh, she turned away from the window and grabbed her boots. As she headed for the bathroom, she avoided looking at the bed. She had discovered her first night at the compound that Vek made use of his slave. It bothered her, but she had learned quickly not to say anything. She hadn't understood all the dynamics, but she understood enough. She and the boys had slept in with V'Lar since that first night, though Vek's visits were sporadic.

She washed her face and hands and braided her hair. Her days were spent helping Grace in the kitchens. She knew more about cooking and cleaning up after others than she ever wanted to know. After her second day of kitchen duty she had resolved to make a point of thanking chef and the stewards for all they did to make life more comfortable on Enterprise. That is, if she ever got home. Finished with her clean up, she got dressed. The boys would spend the morning practicing different fighting techniques with Vek. Their afternoons would be spent learning similar skills from Sorka, and the Andorians if they chose to participate.

For all that he was Vulcan, Vek was like none she had ever met. He could be all that was calm and patience one minute, and flyaway temper the next. Though unpredictable at best, Vek had developed a keen interest in both the boys. He made a point of encouraging them in a variety of fighting styles from Vulcan to Satorian, as well as different types of weapons. The boys would leave right after breakfast and wouldn't return until well after lunch. She worried about Zack during this time, for he had become quieter and much too solemn for a little boy, but her brother never complained. After the dinner meal was served, they all would troop back to their shared quarters. It was during these quiet times that the boys would replay their lessons, encouraging T'Lin to join in. Despite the headache that never seemed to go away, T'Lin threw herself into learning the different fighting techniques. What once had been a chore, was now a hope for escape.

As she walked back into the main room she noticed the pale light of dawn slipping through the windows. She shot a quick glance at the bed, relieved to find it empty. Grace was already up and about, most likely dragging the boys from

their sleep. T'Lin nodded at V'Lar as she headed back to help Grace and the boys get ready. The silence, like the pain, was something she was getting used to, but she didn't like it. She was too used to hearing Zack that it made her feel even more lonely, though she rarely had the time for it. She wondered briefly how her parents were and what they were doing, and when, if ever, they would come for them.

Zack stared at the pattern of weak moonlight playing across the ceiling. The rain had stopped again, though temporarily. He was tired and achy, but he couldn't sleep. It was unusual for him, as all the exercise wore him out. Perhaps it was because Grandmother was gone, and the safety that she seemed to provide was missing with her. He wondered if they would return her to the Vulcans. He had overheard the Satorians talking about killing her and though he had wanted to object he knew better than to speak up. Faith was all that was keeping him going these days, and the belief that Arven and his people had a better use for V'Lar kept his hopes alive. Shifting slightly, he tried to get more comfortable. The small bed the three of them shared was cramped, but there was something comfortable and secure about snuggling into two other people. In these quiet moments, he could imagine things were as they had always been and that Pixie was watching over him. There were many times in the past when he had been frightened by a dream or some other such nonsense. Pixie had always heard him and come to him, or called him to her and allowed him to snuggle close. If the Satorians knew how much comfort he drew from being with her, they would take him away, or her. It terrified him to think on it, but each display of emotion toward his sister, or Grace for that matter, earned him and Aidan both a sharp slap. It was a tough lesson, one both Sorka and Vek seemed determined to teach. He wondered if it were out of meanness, or simply the belief that softer emotions, especially where a woman was concerned, would be their downfall. He shifted again, wondering if perhaps he should meditate, but he didn't want to disturb anyone. He started as a soft hand stroked over his ear. His voice was a soft whisper. "I didn't mean to wake you Pix."

"I know. What's wrong?"

"Too quiet maybe. Can't sleep."

Aidan stirred next to them, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "Wha?"

Pixie pushed herself up until she was in a sitting position, her back against the wall. She drew both boys to her, encouraging them to rest their heads on her shoulders. Her hands stroked slowly up and down their arms, the moves steady and repetitive. "Shhh now. Sleep." The voice when it began to sing, was sweet and soft, reminiscent of a dream. "Thank the stars in heav'n above for sending me my boys to love. Bless them keep them from all harm, and protect them all

night long. Help me watch them as they grow, help me teach them all I know. Thank the stars in heav'n above for sending me my boys to love..."

Tears pricked Zack's eyelids. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, his little heart breaking. It was one of Daddy's lullabies, sang with just his inflections, and it made him miss his father desperately. As the tears fell, Zack rubbed his face in his sister's shirt. "Will he really come for us Pix?"

T'Lin continued to sing. She didn't know if her parents would come or not. V'Lar had seemed so certain, and so had Grace, but she just didn't know. Even as the doubt remained, she knew she had to do something to keep them all strong. Pushing it aside, she snuggled the boys closer. "Of course he will Sprite. Daddy loves us." With that, she went back to the lullaby, using it to hold the hope in her heart. She continued singing long after the boys fell asleep.

Even as the mist surrounded her, T'Lin recognized it for what it was. It was uncomfortable and frightening but she had been here before. This dream, and she recognized it as such, was becoming a common fixture in her nights. In her more lucid moments she recognized a message here, but she couldn't quite figure out what it was trying to tell her, other than she was alone. She pushed the fear aside and continued to place one foot in front of the other. Regardless of where she went, it always led to the same place. She was determined not to panic this time. As before the mist began to thin and the mirrored room encircled her. She turned once, a perfect circle, just to be sure, and nodded as her eyes confirmed her suspicions. There was no exit from this place. Taking a deep breath, she glanced up automatically, trying not to flinch as the reflected girls mirrored her movements. Sure enough, the shadow girl was staring down at her, only something akin to approval shined in her eyes. A smile flitted across the shadow face, and as T'Lin watched, the girl reached out a hand, touching one of the walls. T'Lin blinked and glanced back at her reflections. She studied them a moment, seeing more curiosity than anything on their faces. Taking a deep breath she moved forward and pressed her hand against the mirror in front of her. As before, ripples eddied from the contact point and traveled around the room spawning answering waves and currents. Frustration welled up inside her, but she bit her lip and remained still. Glancing up, she was surprised to see the shadow girl disappearing through the wall. T'Lin waited, and slowly the ripples faded out of existence. The image in front of her sharpened briefly. She jerked, but instead of pulling away, she continued contact. Though the mirror blurred at her movement, the waves did not return and within moments it cleared again. Her breath caught as the image sharpened. Instead of a reflection of herself, T'Lin recognized her father's ready room.

A soft cry of joy escaped her as she pressed her face to the wall. She ignored

the blurring effect, squinting to keep the image, both hands pressing solidly against the surface. Her fists clenched but she stilled, allowing the image to clear once more. The man that entered looked enough like her father to lighten her heart, but there were enough differences to frighten her as well. Jonathan Archer looked pale and gaunt as though he had not eaten or slept in days. Dark circles bagged under his eyes, and streaks of white stained the hair at his temples. She knew instantly he was grieving. Remaining as still as possible, she focused on him, willing him to look up, to see her. He did look up, but his eyes looked past her, and she knew he was seeing the stars. Pushing against the window, she screamed in frustration. "DADDY!!!"

She blinked, startled as his head jerked up. His eyes locked on hers and she could see the disbelief in his eyes. He raised a hand slowly, and then dropped it. His words came to her as though through a tunnel. "Even the stars taunt me now." His head dropped and silent tears slid down his cheeks.

"No! Daddy! Daddy look at me! I'm here! You have to find me!" Her words seemed to reach him as he looked up once again, but the sadness there was nearly palpable.

"Don't haunt me Pixie-mine, I can't bear it. I miss you so much."

*He thinks I'm dead. He's grieving for me,* she thought. She tried again, desperate to reach him. "I'm alive Daddy. We need you! Help us!" Again it seemed as if she had reached him, for he stared at her intently for several moments, then he shook his head and turned. The image blurred as she pounded on the walls, desperate for his attention. "DADDY!!!" The image faded completely as she collapsed against the wall in tears.

It could have been minutes or hours before she noticed the emptiness of the wall in front of her. There was no ready room and no reflection, just a black wall that seemed dull, as if its light had gone out. T'Lin stood slowly, bracing herself on the blank surface. She leaned her back against it as she turned to take in her surroundings. The room she was in still had no exit, but the walls reflected her image back at her, all of them, except the one she leaned against. "Mirrors, glimpses into different worlds and places... things that may or may not be... possibilities?" Her words seemed hollow, even to herself, but real, much more real than the images surrounding her. Her breath caught as she pushed away from the wall. She crossed the room and placed her hands against the opposite wall. The mirror girl shimmered in a series of waves, and as they settled, she found herself staring into the eyes of a woman. The stance on the opposite side of the glass was exactly like hers, hands flush against the surface. She could almost feel the heat of them against her own. At first, she thought it was her mother, so similar the features, and then she realized the height wasn't right, nor were the eyes, or the long fall of hair. She bit her lip in confusion, surprised as the woman did the same.

The words tumbled forth, and she realized they had both spoken. "Who are you?"

The words were clear, with none of the tunnel effect of before. As the woman smiled, T'Lin could have sworn she felt fingers interlocking with her own in a gentle squeeze. Her breath stopped as she noticed she could no longer see her hands. They had sunk into the mirror, as had the woman's. Her moment of concern fled as the woman spoke. "I remember you. "

T'Lin shook her head. "But who are you?"

"A friend I think. Be strong Pixie-girl and have faith."

T'Lin blinked in confusion. She heard the echo of her name, as if from a great distance, and was surprised when the woman turned and answered, "Over here." Then she gave T'Lin one more comforting squeeze of her hands and pushed away from the wall. As the child watched, the image began to blur. Two men joined the woman, but the image had already begun to fade and she couldn't tell who they were.

Small hands clenched into fists once more. "Don't leave me!"

Though the wall was nearly blank, the light leaving it, the response was still clear. "It's just a change Pixie. Don't be afraid. It's a good thing, this change."

T'Lin pushed away from the mirror as tears started to fall once more. "I can't help it!"

"I know... I'm sorry..." And then the voice, like the image was gone.

T'Lin slammed her hands against the dark mirror. Frustration rolled through her. What was the point of these glimpses. Why here? Why now? Tossing her head back she scowled at the image above her. "Why me?" The face staring solemnly back at her had no answers. With a low growl she pushed away from the wall and moved back to the center of the room. Her fists clenched and unclenched as she tried to control her anger. A low litany of "wake up, wake up now," followed her as she made a slow pirouette around the room. Her eyes narrowed as her reflections copied her every move in a sickening parody. Infinite echoes of herself taunted her from every angle except from the two dark panels. Stopping, she closed her eyes. "Windows... each one a window... Real... or possibilities?" Her mind was frantic as she tried to connect the pieces of the puzzle. She made a quick circle, hands outstretched. With a silent prayer she moved toward another image and made contact with the surface. This time the surface seemed to glow as heat shimmered off the glass. As she watched, the glow sharpened until she recognized the bright orb of a sun. She couldn't place

why it seemed familiar. Heat, sun, red desert sands... Vulcan. Her hands clenched in an unconscious move, and suddenly the barrier was gone and she was tumbling into the sand. Her eyes widened as she took in her surroundings. It seemed so real, the grit of the sand between her fingers, the warmth of the sun on her face. She stood slowly, turning her face to the sun as if in supplication. It seemed she had been cold and damp for so long. All she knew in that moment was that she was content to stay there. It was warm and safe and so much less confusing than the rest of her dream. If not for the whisper of a lullaby floating around her, she would have absorbed it completely.

Try as she might, she couldn't ignore the sound that called to her. The lullaby was a memory she had nearly forgotten, reminiscent of a time when all in her world was secure. It held the love of her mother, the memories of the subtle ways that love was expressed, and reminded her of how much she was truly loved. It was an echo of something she needed desperately and she followed it, full of hope. As the song became louder she stopped and rubbed her eyes. It wasn't wishful thinking. There sat T'Pol in a typical meditative position, but instead of chanting traditional Vulcan mantras she was singing. T'Lin stumbled forward, tears sliding heedlessly down her cheeks. Her arms reached toward her mother even as she called out. "Mommy?" She tripped, landing on her knees, her hands fisting in the sand. She was afraid to touch for fear of finding her mother wasn't real.

The singing stopped. "Why are you crying?"

T'Lin's breath stopped for an instant, her eyes opening back up. "You're not real Mommy and I really wish you were."

The serene face looking back at her seemed too controlled somehow. "I was just thinking the same thing." A moment of sadness slid into T'Pol's eyes. "I am more real than you, Pixie-mine. It is strange is it not, that I would understand how important you and your brother are to my existence when you are no longer a physical part of it?"

T'Lin's brow furrowed together as she tried to make sense of her mother's words. She couldn't. "Mommy?"

T'Pol continued as if she hadn't spoken. "This is something anyway. My Katra and yours, sharing this place."

"Katra?" *Soul, spirit...* Her head tipped to the side. "Oh no, I'm not dead Mommy, neither is Zack. We are alive and we need you. You have to find us! You have to convince Daddy to keep looking."

A single brow rose in response. "If you are not a spirit then how is it you share this place with me? We are in my mind and even here I cannot find peace from

the senselessness of your loss, but I would keep you with me."

"I want to be with you. I don't know how I'm here, or why. Maybe it is a dream for both of us and means nothing but comfort, and maybe it's real, but you have to go back. You have to find us, before we really are beyond your reach." She shuddered as T'Pol raised a hand and stroked her cheek.

"I can't bear the thought that this may be a dream. At least I have you here. I can touch you, talk to you."

T'Lin caught her mother's hand, marveling at the strength of it, before shuffling forward and curling into the woman it belonged to. "I don't want to leave this place either Mommy, but I have to. I have to protect Zack until you come for us, and you have to take care of Daddy. He needs you just as much as we do. He's grieving too." After indulging in one more moment of comfort, T'Lin stood and backed away. "You once told me you were stronger together. I have to believe that, have faith in it, and so do you. He needs you and you need him. You have to tell him we are still alive. Find us Mommy, please."

Panic flashed over T'Pol's face. "Wait! Stay with me, just a little while..."

"I want to Mommy, but I can't. Zack needs me, and Daddy needs you. Find us Mommy, please." She turned then, and ran across the sands, blocking the sound of the voice calling to her. She ran until the voice was gone and the sweat poured down her face, heat beating her down. Exhaustion swamped her, tripping her, sending her tumbling into the sand. As her body made contact, her eyes snapped open, and absorbed the reality that surrounded her days. The heat from the sun was nothing more than the boys snuggled against her, and the dream, wishful thinking. She glanced out the window and noted the steady fall of rain. That was all the planet seemed to do. The constant patter of rain, or strum of storm, and the endless gray that came with it made time seem unending. It was only the sound of movement in the next room that hinted at the coming dawn. With a silent prayer that the images in her dreams were more than wishes, T'Lin slipped free of the boys and dressed.

## Chapter 8

## Pixels

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

T'Lin was clearing the last of the breakfast dishes from the main table when Sorka and Vek walked in. She hurried her movements, but tried to stay quiet. Vek plopped down in the chair at the head of the table while Sorka paced.

The Vulcan slouched in his chair, resting his head in his hands. He managed to look both pouty and bored in one move. "Arven sent a message. The transfer went well. V'Lar is back among her people. They paid well for her."

"I thought it was Vulcan policy not to give in to terrorists?"

"It is, but they saw what we did to Soval, and she is just as valuable to them."

Sorka wrinkled his nose. "She is female. She should have been killed as an example, then returned to the Vulcans as a message."

"Perhaps..."

T'Lin turned to face them, anger radiating in her stance. "What did you do to my Grandfather? How could you hurt an old man?"

Vek's gaze was almost amused as he focused on her. "Ah, the little half-breed has a voice. We taught him a lesson for his arrogance. He will survive though." The look in his eyes went speculative, then malicious. "He called you Krenath, you know? Do you know what that means?"

Some of the anger fled as reason returned. She had done something stupid by bringing attention to herself. She shook her head in the negative. She had heard the phrase when Soval had spoken their first day here, but she didn't know what it meant.

"It means bastard, shamed one. That's what you and your brother are. I did some research you see. Your parents were not even life mates when you were born and your mother was ostracized because of it. She was a whore, and to a human no less. It wasn't until your brother was nearly born that their union was sanctioned by the Vulcans, and even later before it was sanctioned by the humans. You are nothing but the side effect of a useless human and his Vulcan slut."

T'Lin's hands fisted at her side, her temper boiling over. "You know nothing of my parents. You are lying, just trying to hurt me. It is you who are the Krenath, the bastard, you who are shamed in the eyes of Vulcan, and unworthy to even speak my parents' names!" She moved forward, ready to attack, only to find her



arm in the unyielding grip of a Satorian.

"She is something with that temper is she not, Vek?" The fingers of his other hand trailed over T'Lin's cheek. He chuckled as she tried to bite him. "She's a fierce little creature. I bet that passion could be harnessed." The look in his eyes as he said that last part sent a chill down her spine. "Yes, so much fire." His fingers slid over her cheek again.

Vek's mood shifted from taunting to bored once more. "Leave the girl alone Sorka, she's not for you."

"But I want her Vek. She is beautiful and unique. She will make a good breeder."

Vek's lip curled in a sneer. "She is a mixed breed, half-Vulcan and half-Human." The last was said with distaste. "She is an anomaly and an unlikely candidate for the indiscriminate breeding you Satorians are noted for."

"Perhaps, but she would still make a good slave."

T'Lin hissed at him and jerked in his grip. "I am no one's slave."

The Satorian turned his gaze back to her, a mixture of disdain and amusement crossing his features. "You have a strong spirit and a temper. It will be amusing to break you." He glanced back at Vek, ignoring the growling girl. "Sell her to me. I will give you a good price, even if she is untrained."

"She is not mine to give Sorka. Arven has specific goals for her and her brother."

"Bah, his revenge can be doubled by selling her to me." As T'Lin kicked out at him, Sorka focused on her once more. His hand wrapped around the long braid, forcing her head back. "I want her Vek. Make it happen."

The coldness in his eyes sent a shiver down T'Lin's spine. She fought against it as she did the pain of his grip. Fury sparked through her and she spat in his face. "I am mine, no matter what you say or do!"

Sorka swiped the spittle off his face in a deliberate move and slowly released her. As T'Lin stood defiantly before him, he studied his hand. Before she could blink, that hand swiped out in a vicious backhand that knocked her on her backside. Blood blossomed along her right cheek and dribbled from the corner of her mouth. Her ears rang from the force of the blow and as she tried to rally herself, Sorka removed his belt and looped it around his hand. He stalked toward her, grinning evilly as she tried to scramble away. The first lash caught her across the belly, forcing a whimper out of her. She flipped, still trying to get her feet under her and run. The second lash caught her hip and nearly flipped

her back over. The best she could do as they continued to rain down on her was curl into a tight little ball and pray.

Sorka punctuated each stroke with a word. "Slave or no, disrespect to a man will not be tolerated!"

The viciousness of the attack paralyzed her. As pain speared through her body, she bit her lip, trying desperately not to cry out. A mantra chanted through her head with each lash, *I will not cry out, I will not cry out...* She didn't want to give him that satisfaction. Blood dribbled down her chin as sharp little teeth imbedded in flesh. *I am mine, and I will not cry out...* Her concentration was so deep she barely heard the soft pleas filling the air, or felt the protective curl of another body around her. For a moment her mind couldn't comprehend that the sound of the belt and jerking of a body against her meant the stop of leather biting into her own skin. It took another moment for her to recognize Grace's voice, and scent.

"Please... she doesn't know any better..." The words were punctuated by sobs of pain as the belt continued its downward motion. Sorka didn't seem to care who was on the receiving end.

Finally Vek intervened. "I did not interfere with the punishment of the child, for it was deserved, but I will not allow the abuse of my slave."

"She intervenes where she has no right."

"Yes, but she is female and maternal. It is her nature to protect and care." He stood and came closer, but stayed out of reach of the furious Satorian. "Let it go, the child is barely conscious as it is." His eyes flicked down with disdain. "I doubt your belt would make any more of an impression on her."

Sorka scowled down at the women on the floor, his lip curling in disgust. He nudged Grace with his foot, sneering as she looked up at him. "Clean her up and have her serve the evening meal." With that he turned and stalked off.

Grace dragged T'Lin to her feet. Though the girl wobbled and barely responded, the older woman wasted no time in getting the child out of sight. Once in their quarters, she helped T'Lin onto the bed. "You foolish little twit! I warned you. That was so stupid. How could you challenge him like that. What? You wanted to be beaten? You're lucky you aren't dead!"

T'Lin groaned in response. She was dazed, confused, and winced as Grace began to peel the bloodied shirt off her. She had not meant to set Sorka off. The violence that surrounded her was incomprehensible. She had come from a place where she was loved and cherished. Punishment was something she was familiar with, but nothing like this. Even discipline in her childhood had been tempered with love and logic. This was beyond her scope. Here hatred and

domination ruled and she wondered what she had done to end up in this place. Wincing again as Grace began washing the bloodied lacerations, T'Lin tried to figure her next move. Her words were weak when she spoke, but they made Grace pause. "I am mine... I didn't cry out... I didn't cry... I'm stronger than he is..."

Grace ran a hand lightly over her hair. "Oh baby... of course you are, but don't push him. You got off lightly Pixie. Sorka was furious. He could have killed you, or worse, raped you. It doesn't take much to push a Satorian over the edge. I'm worried he'll take the last of that temper out on the boys."

Tears began to fill her eyes, but she fought them back. "I'm sorry, Grace. I wasn't thinking, at least not about the boys, or you." Her eyes met Grace's. "You took part of that beating for me. Are you okay?"

Grace was pale, her hands shaking. "I've been through worse. I only caught a couple of lashes really. I'll clean up in a minute." She stood slowly, picking up as she went along. "Sorka wants you to serve dinner. Your clothes are ruined from that beating you took. I suggest you wear your robes. They will cover you more completely than Aidan's trousers anyway, and possibly even hide more. After the meal, I suggest you get back to the kitchens and stay out of sight."

"I'm scared Grace."

I know, and well you should be. That was a hell of an insult you threw at him today. Just..." She stilled, chewing on her lower lip, "just stay out of his way. Sorka wants you Pixie, and he is used to getting what he wants. You have to stay away from him. Be smart, and give your folks a chance to find you."

"I'll try, but it's so hard. I've never been good at disciplining myself, I've never had to really. It's just that I'm nothing to them, less than nothing, and I've never been that before." Tears swam in her eyes again and this time she let them fall. "Do you really think my parents will come for us?"

"Yes, I do. If you were mine I'd come for you and I know your parents love you even more than I do. You have to believe. You must harness your fear and anger and doubts, and if you can't suppress them, then use them to help you achieve your goals. You do none of us any good if you are dead."

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The dead haunted her. Sleep came in spurts, disturbed by the frightened cries of a small child. For once she wished for the mist, for all that it was frightening, she understood it somewhat. Death however, was new to her. As the small broken body invaded her sleep once more, T'Lin gave up on the attempt. She was tired and worn, and filled with hopelessness. Easing herself from the bed, she moved to the window and stared out into the rainy night. Flashes of lightening lit the sky, and yet the memory haunted her. Her arms came up in a protective gesture. She finally understood what Grace had tried to tell her. Satorians were ruthless and a female was less than nothing.

At dinner she had moved slow, but with a purpose, determined not to show Sorka how sore she was. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he had hurt her, and she could tell it was working. He glared at her most of the night, his expression getting more ominous by the moment. He had said nothing, though, continuing to watch her. As the evening had progressed he had sent one of his men to his ship. The man had returned with a small girl in tow. The boys had at this time been sent off to meditate while the women cleaned up and the men talked. The child had been ordered to refill the drinks as the women had taken care of clearing away the dishes.

The child was so small, skinny, and bruised it broke T'Lin's heart. Scars from various lacerations covered the bald head. A dirty, sleeveless sheath barely covered the child, emphasizing the shivers and gooseflesh from the cold. Still the girl toiled on, paying little attention to the goings on around her. The only sign of awareness she showed was the occasional longing look at leftover scraps of food. Twice the child entered the kitchen. The first time T'Lin tried to get her name. Though she paused to listen, there was no verbal response. The second time, she offered the child some food. At first the poor creature looked at her dumbly, then with doubt. Finally she snatched the scraps from T'Lin and shoveled them into her mouth, chewing rapidly. She crouched where she stood, in a defensive position, as if she expected the treat to be taken from her. T'Lin quickly found her some more food. She reminded T'Lin of the Tucker's daughter Alex. Small, petite, and appearing for all the world no more than three or four. Was this the child Grace had mentioned? It had to be.

The little girl eagerly wolfed down all the scraps T'Lin gave her. But the time it took her to do so was enough to make Sorka wonder where she was. It took only a moment, but the Satorian entered the kitchen, took one look at the child, and let out a growl of anger. One hand came up, catching the child by the scruff of her neck. As he lifted her, T'Lin noticed the briefest flash of fear, then nothing in the child's eyes. Sorka shook the girl, though his words were directed at T'Lin. "This is mine. It eats when I feed it. How dare you contaminate it with your foul

ways. Stupid human female! You are nothing, just like this!" Again, he shook the girl. Both hands came up and wrapped around the child's throat. He grinned as a sharp snap rent the air. Then with a careless shrug he tossed the child to the floor. His eyes locked on T'Lin. "You ruined her, now you will replace her." With that, he stormed from the room. To him the child had truly been nothing, and all T'Lin could do was stare in horror at the broken bloodied form that used to be a little girl.

She shuddered as the cool air seeped through the window and wrapped around her. How was she to have known Sorka would kill the child? He and Vek had argued for quite some time. She hadn't been able to hear all of it, as Grace had sent her back to her room, but she had understood it. Sorka wanted her and Vek wasn't giving in yet. Shivering again, she rubbed her arms, certain the eyes she felt on her were those of the dead. She nearly jumped out of her skin when Grace moved beside her. "You couldn't have known he would kill her Pixie. It wasn't your fault."

"You warned me. I should have thought... realized... I'd been provoking him all night. She just seemed so helpless, so tiny... I thought I was helping. I didn't even learn her name."

Grace wrapped an arm around her. "She probably didn't have one. Girls, especially useless half-breeds, are rarely named. They are called Trata, which is Satorian for nothing. They don't even name them trash or crap, because those things have substance. If she had been full Satorian, her father might have named her. But usually they are given only the father's last name. When they are mated, then the husband names them, thus giving them some status, if he chooses. The same goes for those sold into slavery. A girl-child might be allowed a name if her mother is cherished, which sometimes happens, or if her father holds some affection for her. Again though, it is unusual."

"How do they survive if they are so careless with life?"

"I don't know. I imagine they are less destructive with their own females. I have never seen a full Satorian female. Usually there are just half breeds and slaves, and most of those appear to be children."

"It seems so senseless." T'Lin turned and buried her face in Grace's shoulder. "She's haunting me and I can't help her."

Grace curled her fingers into T'Lin's shoulders, pushing her back so she could look into her eyes. "Yes you can. Remember her as something more than Trata, and don't become her. That's all you can do."

T'Lin shuddered at the thought. "I'll call her Sorrow, because that's what I feel every time I see her." Turning back to the window, she pressed her face to the

cold stone ledge. "I have to get out of here Grace. He's going to kill me."

The older woman's silence felt like a death sentence.

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Archer stared down into the little face before him. Despite his grief, his little daughter had managed to get to him. She was irresistible, his little Poppet, just like her siblings had been. His heart ached anew at the thought of this darling girl never meeting or playing with her brother and sister. At a giggle, he focused in on the oldest of the Tucker girls. Charlie was playing on the floor with her newest sister. She was an energetic little girl with Hoshi's coloring and Trip's mischievous streak. Jonathan couldn't help but smile at her. "What do you think of your new sister Charlie?"

"She's a girl."

"That is why they call them sisters."

She nodded as if he had spoken great words of wisdom. "Yup. Woulda liked a boy though. Got enough sisters."

He bit back a chuckle. Leave it to kids to say the funniest things. "Someday you will appreciate them more."

"Maybe." She paused a minute to play with the baby's toes. "Uncle Jon?"

"Yeah?"

"When are Zack and Pixie coming home? When I asked Mommy, she started crying. I woulda asked Doctor Phlox, but he's been so very busy with Aunt T'Pol and baby T'Mir. I miss them."

Archer's eyes closed and tears burned behind them. He flinched when a tiny hand covered his. "Uncle Jon?"

As he looked into those sad little eyes he wanted to scream. How in the hell was he supposed to explain to a seven year old that her closest friends were never coming home? How was he supposed to explain their senseless death when he couldn't understand it himself. It was bad enough the dead were haunting him. He imagined they would for a lifetime. "Charlie, I..."

Breeop... "Doctor Phlox to Captain Archer."

Relief swamped him, followed quickly by guilt. Phlox had saved him for the moment. He stood slowly, cradling T'Mir close. "Archer here."

"Ah Captain... My patient has awakened and would like to see you."

His knees nearly buckled, and he leaned against the bulkhead. His eyes met Hoshi's, and at her nod, he fled the room. As eager as he was to see her, Archer was almost afraid to face T'Pol. How much did she remember? As he slid into sickbay, he approached her bed cautiously. He was surprised to see T'Pol sitting up. A smile of relief ghosted his lips and then he was holding her in his arms, the baby against his chest nearly forgotten in his need to hold her. For the briefest of instants she held him back, and then she was cupping his face to get his attention. "Jonathan? The children..."

"Sweetheart, please. Just give me a minute."

"It's true then." She glanced down at T'Mir as the baby let out an indignant squeak at being squashed between her parents. "I was hoping it was just a horrible dream, but this little one makes it real." Her hand came up to gently stroke the baby's cheek. "She is well?"

Breath huffed out in a sigh. "Yeah. She's doing fine." He began to unfasten the harness, drawing the infant free. "Do you want to hold her?"

T'Pol could only nod. The warm, solid weight of the little girl was a comfort to her and for the briefest of moments she allowed herself to be absorbed in the wonder of her new daughter. Time passed slowly, comfortably as she counted fingers and toes. Her eyes skimmed the child. "She looks as Pixie did at this age."

Jonathan swallowed back the lump in his throat. "Yes, some. She has a lot of you too." He lifted the little girl and turned her gently. As he did so, he pulled up the corner of her diaper, exposing the lower part of her left buttock. "She has the Archer birthmark too, like Zack...and me." His thumb brushed lightly over the small crescent shaped mark.

T'Pol watched as he righted the child, grateful when he passed her back. "She has bits of all of us." Her voice was husky with grief.

Jonathan couldn't speak. His hand rested lightly on her knee and he leaned forward until their foreheads touched. "I'm glad you came back, I've missed you so much."

"How long..."

"It's been nearly two weeks, eleven days...." He drew back suddenly, all business. "The Vulcans located Soval. He is unconscious, but alive. The bastards that destroyed the ship kept him that way, barely. They sent him back to us in a damned shuttle."

Hope brightened her eyes. "If Soval is alive then the children..."



“Honey, you know I wish that were possible as much as you, but what point would there be? Soval is a political figure. The children were just... children. Until he wakes up, we don’t know who, if anyone, else was taken.”

“But it is possible?”

Jonathan raised his hands in a shrug. “Anything is possible, but why would they? I wish it were true. Hell, I’d rejoice in it. Anything would be better than this nightmare, but frankly there is no logic to it.”

“Jonathan... I know I’m not being logical, and logic is what I live by, but... this grief... the reality is such that I can’t bear it.” Her eyes locked with his. “I have to hope, despite the silence in my head. I didn’t want to come back. As much as I love you and as much as I wanted our baby, I didn’t want to come back. No parent...” She choked on the words and had to stop to calm herself. “No parent should have to suffer the loss of a child. I can’t...” She shook her head, to gather her thoughts and shake away the excess of emotion. Her voice was whisper soft when she spoke again. “I wasn’t going to come back.”

His eyes teared as he digested her words and meaning. His hand came up to cup her cheek and when he spoke his own voice was hoarse. “Only the thought of knowing you needed me kept me sane.” He gave a wistful smile. “You would have come back eventually. I wouldn’t have let you go without a fight.” His eyes narrowed. “What made you change your mind?”

She pressed her face into his palm. “I was lost in a dream of Vulcan, trying to meditate, but the grief was too strong, even there. The words of my chants kept slipping into the words of a lullaby, their lullaby. Finally I just let it come. I closed my eyes, and tipped my face to the sun, and sang, imagining them near me. There was this moment... I actually smelled T’Lin.” Tears hovered near the surface as she brought it forth, but she swallowed them down. “I kept my eyes closed and kept singing. If I didn’t open them, I didn’t have to admit there was nothing there. Then I heard this sob, and it was one of the saddest sounds I had ever heard. There she was Jonathan, our beautiful little Pixie, and she was crying. She looked so sad and so very lost in that moment. I thought to myself this is a dream and she shouldn’t be crying. I spoke to her, asked her why she was crying. She said it was because I wasn’t real.” Her eyes took on a glazed look, as if she had disappeared into herself. “It was my dream, and she thought I wasn’t real. I dared to hug her and talked of spirits and such. And then she pushed away from me. She insisted that she was alive, she and Zack, and that we had to find them.” Her eyes cleared as they met his once more. “She insisted they needed us. She walked away from me Jonathan, crying. I tried to make her stay but she wouldn’t let me. She said you needed me and Zack needed her and we had to hurry. It seemed so real.... I had to come back.” Her eyes implored him. “We have to keep looking.”

He closed his eyes. "Honey I want to believe they are alive, that there is the slightest chance. I've dreamed of her too. She just seemed so real. I thought she was a sad, bruised little ghost."

T'Pol's head snapped up. "Bruised?"

"Yeah."

"Right cheek? Split lip? Dressed like a boy?"

His eyes narrowed. "Yeah..."

"What if it wasn't a dream Jonathan? Why would we both see the same image of her? Why battered and bruised? If she were a spirit would it be possible she carry the scars of her death? And why wasn't Zack with her? Why would one cross that plane and not the other?"

"What you're suggesting is just..." He shook his head.

"I know, but what if? Pixie has abilities we can't possibly begin to understand. She's unique. Don't you see? I can't get past the what if?"

"But the silence you hear? You were so certain."

"As were you... You were certain you would know, would feel it if they were gone. What does your heart tell you Ashal-veh? What does it hurt to believe until there is proof otherwise?"

Jonathan rubbed his chest where it had been aching for days. What if? Was it possible that his beloved children were alive somewhere? Could he chance walking away, abandoning them? A soft mew from his baby daughter caught his ear and he studied her for a long moment. He could no more give up on his eldest children then he could walk away from his newest child. He stroked a finger along the baby's downy cheek, smiling at her instinctive suckling response. "If you feel there is a chance, any reason at all to hope, then how can I do any less?" His eyes met hers and he gave her a wry smile. "It would be a miracle."

She nodded. They both turned as Phlox coughed to their attention. "It seems to me you two are pretty good at overcoming the impossible... and at making miracles." With a Cheshire-cat grin he passed T'Pol a warmed bottle and walked away.

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Gleaming silver walls blurred as she ran through the halls of Enterprise. Laughter bubbled out of her. She was free, spinning and twirling as she tumbled through the door of the cargo bay. One hand reached out, lightly slapping the back of her brother's head as she shouted. "You're it!" She darted away as the boy took chase, and a bevy of little girls squealed and scrambled out of his reach.

Tag was a favorite game for the children of Enterprise. The converted cargo bay was a joyous place, filled with toys and swings and things for young people to climb on. There was even a huge mat on the floor in the corner of the room so they could tumble and roll. This was their space, their haven.

A giggle spilled from her lips as she spun away from an outstretched hand. Her hair flew around her, the multicolored ribbons twined through it, shimmering like a rainbow. Despite the peace and comfort of it, it didn't feel right and she stumbled to a stop. Her head tipped as she watched Zack crawl/chase the Tucker girls around the bay. He could catch the littler ones easily if he wanted, but he ran after them with exaggerated steps, his face twisted in a mock growl. It occurred to her in that moment that sound was gone, all except her own breathing. As she watched, the door to the bay opened and in walked her father. As the image blurred around her she realized it wasn't really happening, but a memory; a bright moment that had turned horrible. That day of tag had been the one where her father had informed them they were going to spend some time with the Vulcans.

Pain blossomed in her chest and the walls of memory fell away. She was floating in the blackness of space, cold, alone, and then she was freefalling, into memory once more. Zack was lying on the floor before her, still, silent, blood pouring from the wound on his temple. She knew she should be silent. Sorka would not appreciate her interruption and her brother was breathing, for all that he was lying there. Still, his sneer irritated her and she spoke, once more allowing her temper to rule her actions. She stepped forward, crouching in a fighting stance. "Leave him alone. Damn you! Just leave him alone. He doesn't have to be a warrior. He is just a little boy! Why don't you fight someone your own size?"

The Satorian stared at her, amazed at her audacity. He could see she was challenging him. *How dare she, a little bit of a girl?* "You would challenge me, Trata?" One brow rose in mocking salute.

Her chin lifted in stubborn response. Fingers flexed in anticipation. Time slowed, seeming to stop as she realized this was it, her moment of truth. She debated only a second then took the initiative. If she was going to die, then she was going to go down fighting. Emotion slid away. As calm settled over her, she found herself running forward. He came at her as she expected, and she

twisted, her right leg flying out and catching him in the face. The sharp crack of bone echoed through a room suddenly silent. She had no time to savor that small victory as it hadn't stopped him. His fist flew out, catching the side of her head and knocking her to the floor. She barely had time to take in the startled faces of the camp's inhabitants as she rolled away. If Sorka got a hold of her, the fight would be over before it started. Her eyes scanned quickly and she scrambled to her feet. Sorka was a sight, blood pouring from his nose as he grinned at her.

Circling him slowly, she waited for him to move this time. Clarity surrounded her. Pain throbbed, but seemed more an annoyance than hindrance. It was there, should have been sharper, but seemed lost in the need, the fight for survival. A movement caught her eyes and she noticed Grace hovering over Zack. Someone had pulled him out of the line of fire when the fight had begun and Grace was holding him. The boy was awake, and they were both watching with horror in their eyes. Relief flashed through her briefly and then her eyes were back on Sorka.

She kicked and punched, ducked and darted, and barely managed to stay clear of him. She was tiring quickly and he seemed more amused than anything. Chants of "Trata" echoed through the room. She couldn't tell if they were cheering her on, or condemning her, but no one made a move to interfere. It was her fight and her choice to take a stand. In some small part of her she was relieved. Death was not something she had ever seriously contemplated, but in her mind it was better than this captivity. The constant fear was eroding her belief in herself. She was no longer the cherished Pixie Archer. Instead she was a lost little slave in a world where she had no value. Some part of her recognized the death in Sorka's eyes. He had killed, and would do so again, unless she could find a way to stop him. Sweat dripped into her eyes, blurring the vision. It was a small thing, stinging, distracting, but enough to make her slow down. She didn't see that hand that came at her until it was nearly too late. She ducked it, jerking swiftly to the side. She came up short as his hand caught the whip long length of her braid as it flew out behind her. The pull of it forced her head back and she faced him, dropping into a defensive stance again. She heard a cry, and her eyes sought out Grace and Zack. She was well and truly caught. Death was staring her in the face, but she wasn't scared, fear seemed gone, resignation in its place. Her eyes blurred again, and for a moment she thought she saw the little Satorian child standing by Grace and Zack. She squinted. The child was there, a waking ghost. Her hand was resting on Grace's shoulder and tears slid down her little cheeks. Sorrow... her own personal sorrow, and so much of it for the things she wouldn't be able to do. Pressure increased in her skull and her attention focused back on Sorka. Resignation fled in an instant as she remembered her resolution to go down fighting. She would not be a defeated child who accepted her fate.

Breath froze, time slowed until everything seemed highlighted in finite detail. Sorka's grin seemed more amused than angry as his hand twisted in her braid,

drawing her closer. Fetid breath washed over her and the scent was that of death. Unlike most of her decisions up to this point, this moment was defining for both of them. Something would be settled tonight. It seemed as though she could count the seconds, process each move, and follow through in slow motion. She saw it all and couldn't understand why Sorka didn't. How could he not? She ducked into him, using the pressure he was exerting to increase her forward momentum. He wasn't expecting it and she used it to her advantage. She slid along his right side, dipping in and grabbing the vicious looking blade he wore at his hip. The shiny metal slid from the sheath with a sigh of pleasure. Power sang up her arm as she accepted the weight of it and pivoted. The pressure on her skull increased as he twisted the braid around his fist again in an attempt to control her. Pain was forgotten as the need for survival honed every instinct. Nothing seemed real, not the ghost child by Grace, her brother on the floor, or the situation she was in. Instinct and adrenaline ruled, guiding her actions, forcing her training into play. The first swipe of the knife cut through the taut braid like butter. The sudden freedom should have thrown her off balance, as it had Sorka, instead she shifted into it, using it to allow her to propel forward once more. The knife slid into his belly with a satisfying slurp. Her mind processed how easy it was, how unique the feel, and then she was pushing in and down, allowing her weight to assist in the drag, and praying the bright spray of blood indicated a mortal wound.

Blood coated her hands and face as the Satorian dropped like a stone. As he fell, she tumbled to the side. Her grip on the knife was anything but sure, but she refused to let it go. Slowly she stood over him. Shock slammed into her and she began to shake. She barely noticed as Grace wrapped her arms around her. She allowed the woman to lead her away. The men with their weapons drawn seemed as illusory as the child had been. She had won. Somehow she had won.

The soft patter of rain woke her long before the gentle wash of it coated her face. She stretched, ignoring the scratch of bark against her back. Moonlight streaked through the branches, casting an eerie green glow across the landscape. Raindrops twinkled like pale green gems as they fell, lending an air of magic to the atmosphere. For the briefest of instants she allowed herself to be enchanted. She was after all a Pixie, and enchanted forests were supposed to be her element. The cold rain and the rumble of her empty belly brought her quickly back to reality. Pixies don't survive long in captivity, she thought as she scanned the surrounding area. *Nothing on the ground... good.* She searched through the trees. She made a point of knowing where her boys were. She took pride in the fact that if she didn't know where they were she wouldn't be able to see them. She scratched idly at a dirty spot on her arm. All of them were coated with mud and leaves to better help them blend in. The mud was camouflage, insect repellent, and disguised their scent. Time lost all meaning as the days and nights flowed together. There was no way to mark time here in the forest. They

moved often, staying to the trees whenever possible. Everything they did was designed to help them hide. Her eyes moved to Aidan once more and she noted he was awake and aware. With a couple of quick hand motions she indicated he was to stay in the trees and keep an eye on Zack. As Aidan nodded, she began to climb down from her tree. She paused only a moment to watch Aidan shimmy further up his tree and across to another. As he disappeared from view, she continued her descent. It took longer than she would have liked, but stealth was everything, especially where the Satorians were concerned. The last branch she came to overlapped a stream, and she used it to ease into the water. The gentle splash was covered by the patter of rain. She moved slowly, using all her senses to search the area for any signs of humanoid life. The slither of a water snake caught her eye, and she froze, watching the ripples in the water as it swam away. A quick glance at the sky told her dawn was still several hours away. With another glance towards the boys, she waded downstream, looking for a quiet place to attend her personal needs.

Everything in her balked at the methods they had to take to escape detection. Water was their greatest ally, but she was beginning to hate it with a passion. She was so tired of being dirty, cold and wet. The rain was a nearly constant companion in this place, and while it tended to wash away most evidence of their existence, it also made things more difficult. The ultra soft soil sucked at their feet, leaving deep prints that filled with fluid. It also made it harder to see if their tracks had been covered. There had been more than one occasion where they had backtracked and found prints they thought had been covered. At the same time though, it made it easier to track the Satorians and to leave a false trail. The Satorians continued to underestimate them, and that was something in their favor.

A rustling in the brush caused her to snap to attention. She barely avoided any movement except that of her eyes, but it was a tough one. She noted a large feline-like creature drinking at the shoreline, and made a point of being still. The forest was full of predators, most of whom cased the waterline at night. The children disturbed as little of the habitat as possible and this seemed to suit the local wildlife as well. None of the creatures seemed overly aggressive, and there was plenty of easy prey for those inclined to hunt. For all their grunts and teeth and potential danger, the kids preferred the wildlife to the animals left behind. The creatures of the forest were instinctive, the need to eat, sleep, and protect their turf paramount. The children both understood and respected that, and used what they saw to help them survive. Most of the animals had grown accustomed to the children in their midst, but acted as an early warning system when a predator was around. The birds and the vegetarians showed them what plants could be harvested for food, nuts and berries and roots that were all part of their diet. But the survival rations, like the waiting and the water, were wearing them down.

A slight nibbling at her toes indicated another form of curious life. Fish was also a staple for the children, but one that was not preferred as it was usually

consumed raw. There was rarely anyplace safe or dry enough to build a fire. The water was fairly clear, with only the ripples from the raindrops distorting the view. She knelt, her hands catching the hem of her dress, moving with exquisite stealth, until her fingers could nearly tickle the curious fish's belly. Then, with a lightening fast move, her hands flew upward and together, catching the creature in an impromptu net. The low whistle of a night bird rent the air and she dropped low in the water, her eyes scanning the area. She moved slowly, allowing the water to cover her. Being careful not to splash, she maneuvered into a stand of brush near the bank. It was close to shore, but easier to get into than a tree. She let out a long slow whistle, mimicking another of the night birds. A trio of whistles blended into the cacophony of forest sounds, and she burrowed down, making herself as small as possible. The fish was freed and forgotten in a matter of seconds. Water lapped at her chin, leaves tickling her neck as she allowed both to shelter her. One hand came up to recoat her face with mud, as her feet and knees settled into the silt. Then she waited, nothing more than breath and eyes moving as seconds passed. She was rewarded for her patience as the rain increased, solidifying her shield.

Breath stopped as forms silhouetted the bank. She recognized Sorka in the group. Studying him with narrowed eyes, she searched for signs of weakness. She couldn't see any. If she hadn't inflicted the damage herself, she would never have known he suffered from a nasty knife wound. At the time, she thought she had gutted him, killed him, but Satorians were amazingly resilient. Fear skittered down her spine, but she fought it off. He would kill her if he got his hands on her, for she had humiliated him multiple times. Just as she knew her actions against him were her death sentence, she was just as determined to survive.

She stayed there, still and silent long after they left. She watched a washed out sun rise and a heavy downpour of rain fall. Even as a fifteen foot water serpent swam under her nose, she stayed still and waited. Time passed with agonizing slowness. Creatures drank leisurely at the edge of the stream, and still she waited. She could no longer hear the Satorians or smell them, but that didn't mean they weren't near. She waited, and then waited some more. She was cold, and tired, and so very frightened, but she was free. And because she was determined to stay that way, she waited. Worry for the boys was minimal. They were smart and knew to stay to the trees. They wouldn't move until she did, until she gave them some signal letting them know all was clear. When Grace had died, she had been designated leader. It was a task she took seriously.

Her heart fluttered at the thought of Grace, such a strong woman, and one more of the dead to haunt her in this hellish place. It seemed her world was now filled with ghosts; memories of things that used to be, and people as well. Her eyes closed tightly as the wish that this were just a dream nearly drowned everything else out of her head. Wishing wouldn't make it so, she had learned. People changed things, not wishes, and there was more blood on her hands than she could believe possible.

Her palms itched as if the thought could recoat them. Her fingers twitched in the water and as the fluid slipped between her fingers, it seemed to change, becoming hot and sticky. Her breath stuttered in her throat and her eyes squeezed tighter. Unbidden the memory flowed forth, and she could smell that slightly metallic scent. Tears slid down her cheeks. She had cried when Grace had died too. Memory surrounded her, as substantial as the water she hid in, and she let it.

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

Grace pulled her into the bathroom. She was shaking, scared beyond belief. Her hands were gentle as she pushed T'Lin to the toilet seat. A steady mantra of "It will be okay," floating around her.

T'Lin barely heard her. She had won. Somehow she had won. Her fingers felt stiff. She glanced down, noticing first the knife, which she had somehow retained, and then the caking of blood. Shock reverberated through her as she realized what she had done. Eyes widening in horror, she jolted in place, dropping the knife suddenly. She held out her hands, waving them wildly, as if they were something vile she could shake off. A low keened rent the air. "No, no, no, no, no, no, no...." panted out of her until it was a ragged sob. Blood drenched hands curled into claws, clenching the opposite arm, in a wild self hug. T'Lin rocked slowly on the toilet seat.

Grace had spun at the first clatter of the knife. She had known reality would set in but hadn't been certain of the result. Within moments the dazed girl before her had transformed into a shattered child, one intent on hurting herself. As T'Lin rocked, her nails dug into the soft flesh of her upper arms. Thin trickles of blood leaked from the gouges, but the girl didn't seem to notice. Gentle hands curled over the claws, and she shook her. "Stop it. Stop hurting yourself. He's not worth it. Just stop." She shook her a little harder, not stopping until the girl's wounded eyes met her own. "We need you to pull it together Pixie. The Satorians will not accept the death of their captain easily, especially not at the hands of a female. They will come for you, and Vek may not be able to stop them." Even as she spoke, they could hear the mutter of the raging arguments in the main chamber.

Tears clouded her eyes. "I killed him. I killed him."

"Don't you cry for him T'Lin Archer. Don't you dare cry for him. Yes, you killed him. It was a foolish move to make, that challenge, but I understand why you did it. Do you?"

The girl blinked. "Zack.... I did it because he was hurting Zack Henry." Her eyes slid past Grace to the boys hovering in the doorway. Her hands fell away from her arms as she caught sight of her brother. "I had to protect you. It's what I'm supposed to do. You're mine Sprite, don't you see? Ever since you were born you've been in my head. You're my baby brother and he would have killed you."

The little boy nodded solemnly. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that he could take care of himself; that Sorka wouldn't have hurt him, but he understood her. The need and love that had made her stand up for him, was the same as

that which drove him to protect her. He came to her and climbed up into her lap, his arms wrapping tightly around her. "I know Pix. I know. I love you too."

Grace stroked a hand over Zack's head. She started slightly as Aidan burrowed against her, needing comfort as well. One arm curled around her son, holding him close. "We need to get you cleaned up. Then we have to make some plans."

For the first time since she had entered this place, T'Lin felt a strange peace wash over her. "I'm ready." She helped Zack up and retrieved the knife from the floor. It felt heavier than it had earlier. Pushing the dark thoughts from her head, she rinsed both the knife and her hands. Afterward she studied them. Though they were clean, she could still see the blood, smell it. She knew it would be with her a very long time.

As Grace and the boys left the room, she stripped down to her underwear and washed quickly. Once that was done, she quickly drew her under slip back on. Made up of two pieces, the material was thick and could easily be an outfit in itself, though the Vulcan's would be scandalized if she used it as such. The waist length top was sleeveless. Vulcan practicality enforced the plainness of the garment. Four simple white ribbons were supposed to tie it closed. One remained, the very top one, though it was looking rather ragged. Grace had stitched the top together for her in an attempt at modesty, but her recent fight with Sorka had torn it so it gapped over her mid-drift. The lower part was like a skirt, a sort of half-slip that fell to just above her knees. Were she in full robe, there would be a longer over slip, also sleeveless. The over slip was heavy as well, falling like a straight, simple tunic. The rounded neckline and ankle length weight of it made the under slip an unnecessary addition, even with the knee high slits in the sides that allowed for extended leg room. The Vulcans, however, were staunch in propriety, and she had been expected to wear all the layers. The outfit was supposed to be covered by a more ornate outer robe, reminiscent of a kimono, including sashes and belts, followed by a flowing jacket of sorts. Children were rarely given decorative robes, as they were generally symbols of rank or ceremony. If T'Lin had her way, she would take her jumpers and dresses any day. The heat of the kitchens had forced her to shed her jacket and outer robe, both of which Grace encouraged her to wear around the Satorians. As she had not planned to leave the kitchens, and the Satorians rarely entered them, she had felt relatively safe removing the heavier garments. It wasn't as if she had been running around naked. Though, how she had fought successfully in the over slip remained a mystery to her. With efficient movements, she scrubbed the blood from the over slip as best she could. Once finished, she hung it from a nail in the door.

For a moment she stood and stared about her. Tasks completed, she wasn't quite certain what she was supposed to do. She felt different somehow, tainted, both old and new at once. She supposed she would have to get used to it. Her eyes lit on the knife in the basin of the sink. Grabbing it, she used it to slice into her over slip, tearing the hem away in strips. These she used to tie the knife to

her thigh. She studied her leg where the weapon was anchored, twisting this way and that. It didn't appear to be obvious under the loose garment, and she could only hope her captors had forgotten she had it.

As she entered the outer room, she knew she had to come up with a plan. No longer could she count on her father to come for her. She had killed a Satorian and she would be punished for it. Her eyes slid briefly over Grace, Aidan and Zack. Silence permeated the room as the arguments in the main hall stopped. Squaring her shoulders with a purpose, she moved across the room and began gathering the little bit of stuff she had. There wasn't much, shoes and her pocket knife. As she replaced the brick it was hiding under, she skimmed her fingers along the lines she used for marking time. *Thirteen, strange, it feels like forever.*

Finished with her gathering, T'Lin sat on the edge of the bed and motioned the boys to her. Grace sat next to her. "I think morning is the best time for us to move. The camp will be in chaos, they may even be doing something with Sorka's body which may buy us a little time. The guards will unlock the doors for us to go to the kitchen. The boys have about a half hour before they are expected to join Vek in the common area. It is not unusual for all of us to be moving around at that time. I think we can slip through the kitchen and out the back door. There is a hole in the fencing by the rear shed that we should be able to get through with a little work."

Grace glanced around the room as if it had ears. "All four of us out there might raise suspicions. Perhaps I should remain here?"

Three glares answered her. T'Lin took her hand. "We can't leave you, Grace. Nor could I leave the boys. You would all be punished for my actions. Do you honestly think they will let you live if we escape? Do you think any of us would be able to survive out there if we were constantly worrying about what was happening to you here? My Daddy will come for us, all of us."

The look Zack gave her was skeptical. "Will he Pix?"

"He will come for us!" Her voice was adamant in her certainty and he fell silent.

Grace stood and paced. "But I don't know how to survive out there. What will we eat? Where will we hide? How will we know when your father comes?"

"I don't know what we will do, but we have to. They will punish me for what I have done. I have to go, and I can't leave you behind. We will watch the birds and see what they eat, and we will watch to see what eats other creatures. We don't have a choice."

Grace closed her eyes and nodded. "Alright then, it's decided. First thing in the morning we move out. I can steal some food from the kitchen. That ought to help us a little. Let's get some rest so we are fresh for tomorrow."

As the others crawled up onto the bed, T'Lin gathered her over-slip and bundled the still damp material around her shoes. Sleep was a long time in coming.

The sound of the door slamming against the wall was their first sign of trouble. Four bodies rolled to the floor in defensive positions. T'Lin was the first up and her eyes widened in surprise at Sorka standing in the doorway. The man hissed as he located her. "Trata..." His steps were sluggish as he moved toward her. His chest was bare and a white swath of bandage wrapped around his stomach, disappearing into the waistband of his trousers. His eyes narrowed on her and T'Lin could feel the anger emanating from him. She edged slowly away from the bed and the others, hoping to keep his focus from them. She had made it half-way around the room before he spoke again.

"Trata, disrespectful little Trata. You are not worthy of the life granted you. You are mine now, to do with as I please."

T'Lin stiffened her spine. "I am not yours Sorka. I will never be yours. I beat you in fair combat. I have earned my right to exist."

His roar blasted the room. "You are Trata! You have no rights. Only a man may challenge a Satorian for the rights of combat."

She blinked as two other Satorians entered the room, followed by an Andorian. "You accepted the challenge Sorka, therefore you gave me my rights."

"You are nothing little Trata. You cannot give rights to something that has no existence."

She could feel a cold sweat beading down her spine. Her death was imminent. She knew it as clearly as she had known the fight was a defining point in her existence. She wanted it over. *The boys and Grace have a better chance of surviving without me.* Her next words came out as a taunt, inflaming Sorka, as she knew they would. "This Trata is T'Lin Archer and I did quite a bit of damage to you for nothing. Your lack of honor and courage is displayed for all because you accepted a challenge from me and lost."

A low growl of rage echoed through the room. Sorka's arm raised. T'Lin recognized the weapon in his hand as some kind of pistol. Relief flooded through her, with just a hint of regret. *He will kill me now.* Her eyes closed, and she took a step forward as if in welcome. *It is done now.*

The sound of the shot was muted by a desperate cry of "No!" T'Lin heard the thud of the bullet making contact, the soft gasp of pain as it connected. Her eyes flew open in time to see Grace propelled backward from the force of the weapon. As the woman collided with her, they fell to the ground, T'Lin's body cushioning Grace's. She barely registered the men arguing with Sorka as she shimmied out

from under her friend. T'Lin's hands flew automatically to the wound on Grace's chest, desperate to stop the flow of vital fluid from her body.

Blood poured from the wound. No matter how much she pushed against it or tried to stop it, blood continued to flow. It was everywhere, coating her hands and face, and the woman losing it. She glanced around, searching for help. The boys were frozen in place, watching helplessly. "Aidan, give me your shirt. Now!"

The boy blinked, then whipped the garment over his head, handing it to her. T'Lin shifted her hands one at a time, bunching the material over the wound, hoping it would help stem the flow. Again she searched the room. "Zack, get Vek."

"But.."

"Go! Aidan help me hold this!" She forced Aidan's hands on the bunched cloth. "Don't let up the pressure."

"Pixie..." The whispered voice was filled with pain, but T'Lin heard it. Her eyes sought out Grace's and she could see the awareness there. The light was fading from those beautifully expressive eyes and there was nothing she could do about it.

Moving closer to Grace's head, T'Lin leaned down and kissed her brow. "Shhh now, everything will be fine. Just be still."

"No. Listen to me Pixie, please." The girl nodded and leaned closer, one hand curling around Grace's. "This wound is mortal. I'm not going to get out of here..."

"Grace..."

"No. Promise me Pixie... promise me you will take care of Aidan... that you will see him free and safe... Please..." A shudder shimmered through the woman and her eyes closed.

T'Lin squeezed her hand. Time seemed to slow once more, moving in fragmented images. She could hear Grace's wheezing breaths, and Aidan's sobs. She could feel the menacing evil that was Sorka hovering over them. The door slammed open and Vek's curses filled the room. Boots rang out against the flooring as he hurried into the room. She felt Zack slide into place beside her and noticed his hands joining Aidan's on the blood soaked pad. Another shudder shimmered through Grace and T'Lin's eyes met hers once more. What she saw there frightened her. Leaning down once more, T'Lin pressed a kiss to Grace's cheek. "I promise Grace. I will care for Aidan. I will protect him with my life. I promise to see both my brothers safe and free."

A ghost of a smile slid across Grace's face and the shadows in her eyes seemed to disappear. "I give him to you then." Her eyes shifted to her son and she raised a weakened hand to touch his hair. The boy dropped to the ground beside her and buried his face in her neck. "I love you my sweet boy."

The boy was barely able to mutter a reply before he was being pulled from his mother's side. The other children were pulled away as well. Vek ordered his men to move Grace so they could better treat her. As the men did as they were bid, one spoke up. "Sir, it's too late. She's gone."

The children huddled together in stunned shock. Rage rolled through T'Lin. Her friend and protector was gone. Killed by Sorka's greedy hand. A growl of fury erupted from her throat and she was running at him, her stolen knife in her hand. She didn't remember pulling it free, only acknowledged the weight of it in her fist. There was no tactical advantage to her move, and she knew it the instant Sorka grinned. It didn't stop her though, nor did she dodge his coming fist. She wanted to try, to accept the defeat of it, and even feel the physical pain of the blow that numbed her arm, caused her to drop her knife, and sent her tumbling to the floor. Every bone in her body throbbed from the blow and the fall, but she didn't care. The pain helped to cover the grief, and her actions caused the result she hoped for.

Before Sorka could move toward her, Vek burst to life once more. His doubled up fist crashed into the Satorian's face as he ranted. "Damn you! She was mine, you had no right. You stupid, stupid fool! Your desire for that useless Krenath has cost me my slave..." Vek's rant was joined by equally aggressive words from Sorka, but T'Lin tuned them out as she moved closer to the boys. Several of Vek's men as well as many of Sorka's were watching the confrontation with avid interest, eager to see if more blood would be shed.

Moving slowly, she edged toward the open door. She urged the boys toward it as well, with her eyes and slow movements of her hands. With the camp distracted, the children had their chance and were eager to take it. As they edged out the door and into the shadows of the compound, T'Lin grabbed the small bundle she had placed by the door. As silently and stealthily as possible, the three young people put their grief on hold and crept out of the compound and into the woods, right through the front door.

The cool dampness of the woods surrounded them. The air was filled with the scent of rotting vegetation, but the children didn't care. Nor did they mind the rain that surrounded them. Both would help cover their escape. The wooded area was filled with streams and ponds. They were still close enough to the camp when the cry was raised. T'Lin motioned the boys into one of the streams, encouraging them to follow it downstream. This they waded through for about 50 feet before they came to a giant tree. Its branches were high, and difficult to reach, especially where they overlapped the water, but the children were not

deterred. T'Lin boosted the boys up into the three, and then opened her bundle of clothes. She quickly pulled out her over-slip and knotted the material in several places. Once finished, she tossed the makeshift rope to the boys. Knotting the laces on her shoes, she draped them around her neck and dropped her pocket knife into one of them. With the boys using each other as counterweight, she used the over-slip to climb the tree. Words didn't seem necessary as she urged them higher and higher into the tree. She nearly smiled as they came to a Y in the branches where some animal had dug out a hollow in the tree. It was barely big enough for the three of them, and smelled of decay and urine, but she didn't care. Urging the boys into it, she reached up and broke off a couple of manageable leafy branches. Then settling in with the boys, she arranged the branches so they were hidden and waited.

The waiting was the easy part. T'Lin knew the men would be looking for them. She hoped the rain and the water would help them hide. They had entered the stream making it look like they were going upstream, but she wasn't sure if the enemy would continue to underestimate them. The silence however, was dreadful. The silence allowed thought and thought allowed grief and grief threatened to overwhelm them all. She wanted to sing to the boys, comfort and rock them, but knew she couldn't. All she could do was hold them close and pray. Her arms curled tightly around them and they held onto each other.

The waiting in and of itself was longer than they expected, but not all that long. The rustling of movement through the vegetation came first, followed by the sound of voices raging curses. Every few feet, the Satorians would growl at the others for stealth or quiet, but it didn't seem to matter. The men from the camp were searching for three children in the dark and rain, and didn't care who knew about it. The children froze as their hiding tree was approached. They prayed that the enemy could no more see them in the branches of the old tree than the children could see those on the ground. Voices reached up to them, filled with frustration and disgust. Vek's was the most recognizable. "We have found no trace of them since they entered the stream. We have teams ranging up and downstream, as well as across the stream. This darkness and rain are not helping matters. If they've gone to ground we will never find them."

Sorka's response was gruff and furious. "If you had just given me the Trata when I requested her, none of this would have happened."

"Well YOU can explain to Arven why the children are gone. We will let him take it out of your pay. You owe me for the female as well."

"Bah! Arven is too caught up in his dreams of glory and vengeance to care about the young ones. He needs only to draw Archer into his trap. If the bait we left has done its part, then the children are no longer important. They are mine when I find them. The Trata's death is certain, but the boys can still be trained."

A sigh of disgust echoed through the air. “It is useless to talk to you. All you Satorians think of is war and death and slavery. Does nothing hold value for you? I am calling back the men and heading to camp. We will resume our search at daybreak. We can make use of some of the sensors on the ship to track them... if this life-forsaking rain stops long enough.”

“Perhaps you are right.” The children nearly jumped as his voice rose. “I will find you Trata, and when I do, I will drink your blood!”

Vek grunted in response. “Do what you want with the Krenath, but give Grace’s son to me. I would keep him.”

Sorka chuckled. “Done.” The sound of a hand clapping against someone’s back rose up to them. “Come, I will help you build a funeral pyre for your woman and perhaps I will find something to replace her with.” The voices faded as the men moved off. The children wondered if they had truly been granted a reprieve or if it was just a trick to try and draw them out. With those thoughts in mind, the waiting and the silence both became bearable.

Several hours later the rain stopped. The boys were sleeping against her but she couldn’t join them in dreamland. She couldn’t imagine ever sleeping again, even though she was so tired she could barely move. Glancing through the tree top, she could see the sky. The clouds were clearing and she could see a hint of stars sparkling above. It was strange that her first night of freedom would show her beloved stars. *A sign? I hope...* She chose to take it as such and felt the first bloom of something familiar in her chest. It was hope, and with it came a sense of relief so strong she nearly cried.

Slowly T’Lin eased herself away from the boys. She wanted to look around, both to make sure they weren’t still being tracked, and to get a feel for their surroundings. Food and water were also a priority. At her movements, the boys came instantly awake. It hurt her heart to see them anxious and uneasy, but she knew it was essential for their survival. For her purposes, it was just as well they were awake. Her voice was a low whisper when she spoke. “I’m going to look around. You two stay in the trees. Don’t come out of them unless they find you. As long as you stay still and silent, you should be fine.”

Zack blinked at her. “But Pix, I have to pee.”

T’Lin glanced around briefly. “Edge carefully to the other side of the tree and use the trunk. The smell may help distract predators, and the rain will help eliminate the rest. If you have to do anything else, try to stay in the trees. There are all kinds of hollows in these branches. If you can’t, stay near the water. Bury any waste, and cover yours tracks. I’m going to try to lay a false trail, so I don’t know how long I’ll be gone. Wait for me.”

She used the trees, moving slowly from branch to branch and tree to tree. When she could, she stayed over the water. When she couldn't, she moved higher in the branches. It took her longer than she would have liked to backtrack to where they had entered the stream, and longer still to move further upstream. The sky was growing lighter as dawn approached. Concern for the boys flitted through her head. For the first time since she had been here, she prayed for rain, hoping it would delay the return of the search parties. The smell of smoke filled her nostrils, and she shimmied further up her tree to see if she could find the source. Her location gave her a limited view of the compound. Flames danced wildly in the center courtyard. Hope and fear warred within her. If they were burning the base camp, then they would be leaving. *But if they leave, what will become of us?* It didn't occur to her to think it might be an accident and it only took a moment for her to realize they weren't burning the camp, but rather a member of it. Sorka had mentioned a funeral pyre for Grace, and T'Lin was pretty sure that was what she was seeing. With a soft sigh, she continued on her way.

It was dusk before she found her way back to the boys. Rain had begun to fall shortly after dawn. It had started as a light mist and increased to heavy, soaking sheets. The branches had become slick as she traveled over them, and the water below had flowed faster. She had followed the stream bed for several hours, finally finding a rocky location where she could drop down and not leave prints. From there she had made her way out of the stream and along the bank, this time deliberately leaving footprints. Finding a usable branch, she had made a half-hearted effort to conceal them again. The trail she made, led deeper into the forest, to a rocky incline. It was here she had noticed some trees that held a banana like fruit they had eaten at the compound. There were nests in the trees, and fallen fruit on the ground. T'Lin gathered a couple of bunches, tucking them in the waistband of her under-slip. Climbing the rocky ledge back into the trees, she headed back to her boys.

Zack was furious when he saw her. He wanted to lash out at her, yell and scream and pout, but he wasn't sure how safe they were. He settled for glaring. "We were getting worried Pix."

T'Lin nodded as she handed the boys her find. "I know. I'm sorry. I had to travel really far upstream to leave a false trail. I had to find a place where I didn't see any of their tracks. I figure they'll be back this way looking for us again. We should probably move further downstream, find a new hiding place. Did you guys see anyone while I was gone."

"No, nothing but frogs and crickets once the rain started back up." Aidan mumbled between bites.

"Good." T'Lin reached out a hand, stroking his cheek. "I think they had a funeral for Grace today. I saw a fire and Sorka had said something about it. I think it and the rain bought us some time." She gathered him close as tears filled his

eyes. He was quiet in his tears, but his grief transmitted itself. Zack curled into both of them as T'Lin began to hum softly.

Aidan was sleeping when T'Lin moved again. Zack was lying beside him, watching her. She shifted so she could pull off her shoes, staring hopelessly at the soaked material. "We need to protect our feet, but we are going to have problems with them if we wear wet shoes all the time. At the compound we could dry out, but here..." She shook her head. "I just don't know."

Zack sat up slowly. "Aidan and I don't have any. We left them at the compound."

T'Lin's eyes widened as she took in both boys bare feet. A tendril of guilt ran through her. She had grabbed her stuff, but the boys hadn't. They only had the clothes on their backs. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. "I didn't think..." She hadn't had time to put her shoes on last night, and her feet were scratched and bruised because of it. The boys appeared to be in similar condition. She studied her shoes again. They hadn't been made for the wear she was putting on them and she wondered how long they would last anyway. Her fingers slide over the stiff, wet material. They were half boots, coming to just above her ankle. *If I cut them right...*

Busily she went to work. Her little pocket knife hadn't been designed for the work she was using it for, but it held up admirably. She sawed at the leather-like material until it lay before her in ragged strips. Then she repeated the process on the hem of her over-slip. A soft giggle slipped out as she worked the strips.

Zack gaped at her. "What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking how scandalized the Vulcans would be if they could see us now. So much for proper dress." She waved the strips of cloth from her over-slip in emphasis. When she was done, they had three ragged pairs of sandals. "They won't last long, but hopefully by the time they wear out our feet will be tougher, that or we will be home."

Zack watched as she wound the strips of cloth around his foot, securing the heavier material to the bottom. "We will have to check the cloth to make sure we don't leave bits of it behind while we walk."

She nodded. "If we could find something else to bind them with, I could cut holes through them, but they still won't last long."

"There's other stuff if we need it. Tree bark, heavier leaves. These trees are covered in vines. The smaller ones we can use for carrying and tying, the larger ones we can use like ropes for climbing and stuff." He paused as she gently repeated the shoeing on Aidan, waking the boy in the process. "Pixie, we need to think about camouflage and stuff like that. Mine and Aidan's clothes are dark,

so we blend in okay there. You are wearing white though. It stands out.”

She nodded again. “I’ll take care of it in a few minutes. I was thinking we should probably get rid of our bloodstained stuff. It’s likely to attract predators, and we really don’t need that. We also have to worry about them tracking us. The rain will help most of the time, but not always. We should stay in the water or the trees. We will be less likely to leave a trail that way. I don’t think we should stay in any one place more than a couple of days. The less time we stay in one place, the less likely we are to leave a trace ourselves. We should probably use mud to help us hide too.”

Zack chewed on his lower lip. “Mud will be cold... might help us hide from their sensors.”

“Might help with the bugs too.” Aidan chimed in.

“Sounds like a plan then. Let’s get moving for now and find a new place to hide. We will deal with the rest later.” Tying her over-slip around her waist and gathering the banana skins, T’Lin dropped carefully into the water. She eased her way to the bank, and dug a deep hole. Burying the remains of their meal, she carefully disguised her tracks and headed downstream. The boys followed her. When another convenient tree was found, they used it, climbing into the safety of its branches and venturing away from the stream.

Abundant bodies of water made their plans a little easier, and after several hours of trek, the threesome found another hiding place. They had located a small pond at the base of a rock face. Water spilled lazily down the wall of rock in a misty cascade, as if it were an afterthought rather than an actual waterfall. A brief survey of the area found more wild fruit trees and a deep, but narrow cave. From the water lines in the cave, it was apparent it flooded. There was a section that seemed to stay above the flood line, and it would work for the three exhausted children. They had found it quite by accident, and the urge to burrow down was strong, but they knew they dared not stay long. If they could find it by accident, so could the Satorians.

Once the boys were settled and sleeping, T’Lin slipped out of the cave. The rain had slowed once more, and the stars winked at her through the clouds. Moonlight She took a deep breath, and followed a meandering trail of water that used the pond as its collection pool. As before, she dug a deep hole. The mud oozed between her fingers, coating them, weighing them down. It felt as Grace’s blood had as it cooled and she could see it then, as clear as if a light were shining on her. Tears streamed in silent tears down her face. Grief was fresh and strong. In that moment she vowed never to be weak or vulnerable again. Anger rolled through her, bubbling up and over the grief, swallowing it, and morphing it into something new. Her fists clenched and her eyes closed. She allowed the anger to rein, eradicating the helplessness, leaving nothing but fury

and the determination to survive. She stumbled into the stream and washed them off, scrubbing as if she would take the skin as well. The water was icy cold against her skin, but she ignored it, as well as the chill of the breeze surrounding her. Instead, she embraced them as she did the anger, using them to fuel her survival instinct. The smell of blood remain strong, flooding her nostrils and she dropped to her knees. Grief overwhelmed her, dropping her to her knees. Curling into a small ball, she rocked in place as the tears poured silently down her cheeks. When grief eased somewhat, she stripped out of her tarnished under-slip, and buried it with the rest of their trash. Her over-slip fell to just below her knees now, cold, wet, and caked with mud. With another quick check to make sure all signs of her presence were disguised, T'Lin headed back to the boys, and what little sleep she could get.

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A loud splash drew her back to the present. Zack stood before her, his eyes concerned. Aidan stood off to the side. She was startled she had allowed them to get so close. She took a moment to scan her surroundings, praying they were alone before she blasted them. “You are supposed to stay in the trees!”

Zack blinked, shocked by the anger in her voice. “I was worried about you. You haven’t moved for hours, and the Satorians are long gone now.”

T’Lin grabbed her brother’s shoulders and shook him slightly. “Never, never come looking for me Zack. Ever!” Her eyes cut to Aidan. “The same goes for you. They will kill me if they find me, and they would use you both to get to me. You have to be smarter than they are. I need you to be smarter than they are. No matter how scared you are, or how worried you are, you two have to take care of each other.”

“But Pix, I have to take care of you too.” He tried not to flinch under her stare.

Her grip eased somewhat, but not the intensity in her eyes. “I know Sprite, but the best way you can take care of me is to take care of yourselves. I need to know you will protect yourselves. If I can’t trust you to take care of yourselves, then I might as well give myself up to the Satorians now.”

Zack chewed on his lower lip. “But…”

She shook him again for emphasis. “No buts. They will not kill either of you. You are too valuable to them. But they will kill me. They know I will never leave you behind and I promise you here and now I won’t.” She took a moment to meet both sets of eyes before continuing. “If you want to protect me you have to listen to me. Stay quiet, stay in the trees, and stay together, but don’t ever come looking for me.”

Zack fought back the tears that threatened to fall. He didn’t want to be strong and he didn’t want to listen, but he understood what she was saying. “I promise, Pix.”

As she released him, her eyes went to Aidan again. The boy looked so solemn. “Aidan?”

Aidan closed his eyes, fear welling up inside him. He didn’t want to listen, but he didn’t know what he would do if she died like his mother. He nodded slowly. “Stay quiet, stay to the trees and stay with Zack. I promise too, Pixie.”

“All of it Aidan...you won't come looking for me again?”

The words caught in his throat, but he managed to spit them out. “I promise.”

“Okay... If we ever are separated, I want you guys to go back to wherever we camped the night before. If it isn't safe there, then keep backtracking. I will find you, I promise. And I also promise to stay hidden and keep myself safe, just so you won't have to worry. In fact, when I approach, I'll whistle.” She let out a low sound, followed by two shrill chirps. The boys responded with another familiar sound they had picked up in the forest, to which Pixie repeated her whistle. “I will repeat that sound three times. If I don't get a response from you, I'll eventually come looking.” She drew the boys close. “Daddy will come for us; we just have to stay alive until then.” As she said it, she prayed it was true.

The lack of rain was the first sign that she was dreaming again. She was in her woods, but sunlight sparkled through the trees. It wasn't weak sunlight either, but sharp and bright, forcing everything into glaring detail. She would take the dream though and its comfort, for it was far better than the nightmares she had been carrying. Turning in a slow circle, she looked around. Never had she seen so many shades of green, or so many colors. Flowers, previously unseen, stretched and opened, begging for a moment of life-giving light. Moisture glistened on the leaves of the trees around her, making a soft plopping sound as they landed in the puddles below. There was other noise too, a strange silence filled with sound, usually covered by the patter of rain. The sharp chirping of insects sang in harmony with the trickle of the stream. Closing her eyes, T'Lin tipped her face to the sun and soaked in the warmth. The boys' location fluttered briefly through her mind, but she pushed it aside, content to just be for the moment. The peace was comfortable and she wanted to stay there, but it was not to be. A sound, like footsteps, caught her attention and her eyes fluttered open, automatically searching out the sound. Her heart beat in a rapid tattoo as she found the source. *Mother... I am dreaming again of mother.* Afraid to move, she made eye contact with her mother, waiting.

T'Pol stepped forward. Her brow arched slightly as she took in the form standing there so still. “I've been searching for you... every night since I saw you last. I'm glad I finally found you again.”

T'Lin shook her head. “This is just a dream Mommy, just like last time. It's just my dream.” She raised a hand to cup a bright pink blossom on the bush near her. Pulling it to her nose, she inhaled its perfumed fragrance. It smelled strangely of the incense her mother burned when meditating. “At least you've brought beauty with you, and sunlight. I'm so tired of the rain.”

T'Pol stepped closer, unsure how to react to the girl. Her eyes flowed over her oldest child. She barely seemed a child anymore. Gone was the form of a little girl. Rather a young woman stood before her. The innocence of childhood no longer danced in those beautiful hazel eyes. Knowledge had taken up residence there, and grief. It saddened her to see it. Was it something she could still change? Somehow she doubted it. "If I am just a dream, why push me away. I have missed you."

T'Lin glanced up at her mother. Tipping her head to the side, she studied her as if trying to find something real. "I miss you too, Mommy." She whirled suddenly, in an angry circle. As she spun, her fist clenched around the blossom, ripping it free. Moisture leaked around her fingers from the bruised petals in a parody of blood. "It's not real! None of this is real! There is no beauty, no sun, and no you! I hate this place and I hate you for sending me here!" Anger shimmered in her eyes, when they met T'Pol's again. She threw the crushed flower on the ground and stomped on it. "There is no point in this, no point in hoping or believing because there is nothing to believe in. We are here and you are wherever you are and you aren't coming for us. I've accepted that." She paused. The sky was darkening as if in response to her mood. Her voice softened to a whisper, the anger gone. "I live in shadows and dreams now, Mommy, and I don't have time for dreams because the shadows are everywhere. We will die here." She turned from T'Pol and started walking back into the denser growth of forest.

"Wait! Please wait! Don't walk away from me." T'Pol ran forward, catching the girl by her shoulders. "I let you walk away from me before. I can't do it again." She pulled her back into her and wrapped her arms tight, holding T'Lin close. "I am coming for you T'Lin. Your father and I will never rest until we find you. We love you so much."

"You sent us away!" Anger pushed to the front once more. "You sent us here!"

"No!" T'Pol held her tighter, as if she could somehow protect her with her will. "No. We never meant for this to happen. We have always loved you, always. You are a part of us, you and Zack Henry. We could never abandon you. You are necessary to our existence. Your father and I, we don't know ourselves without you. We ache for you with every breath we take. We sent you away to protect you. That's all we wanted, to keep you safe. We never imagined you would be harmed. That is why we chose to send you to Soval. We thought he would be able to protect you better than anyone else."

T'Lin broke free of her hold with a gasp of fury. She spun to face her mother, fists clenched tightly at her sides. "You were supposed to protect us!"

T'Pol studied her daughter. This creature before her she barely knew, barely recognized. She didn't know how to handle the frustration bombarding her. For

a moment she transported back, to a time when this same girl had been a child, to the last time her child had told her she hated her. Her mind conjured up that image, that frightened child, and overlaid it on the young woman before her. *There she is, my baby... it's in the tip of the head and the posture, it's in her father's eyes... she's just afraid and striking out.* "Oh Pixie... I am so sorry. You are right. We were supposed to protect you. We made a mistake, your father and I. We thought we were doing what was best for you at the time, and we've lost you. We will find you though. We will never stop looking for you, never."

The anger faded as quickly as it began, and the girl slid to her knees. "It doesn't matter. It's not real, just a stupid dream." T'Lin started as comforting arms curled around her. "You're not real Mommy, please don't. I can't stand it."

"Shhhh... If I'm not real, if this is just a dream, then accept it and me. What harm is there in hope?"

"To hope is to be disappointed, it is not logical."

T'Pol rocked with the girl in her arms. "Perhaps not, but I am finding my logic is somewhat skewed these days. I could not survive without the hope that I will see you and your brother again someday. I keep meditating, hoping I will see you in this dreamscape, just so I can hold you and talk to you. There is no logic in it, but it is comforting. I will take what I can get and hold tightly to the rest. We will find you, Pixie. We get closer every day."

Tears slid silently down T'Lin's cheeks as she listened to her mother. She so desperately wanted to believe, to hope. "I'm so scared Mom. I don't know if I'm strong enough to do this. Zack and Aidan are so brave, but they are so thin. They don't laugh and play. Little boys should, you know? I don't want them to be little soldiers, but they can't be anything else. None of us can. Death stalks us here..."

"Hold on just a little longer, Pixie, please; just a little bit longer."

T'Lin nodded and snuggled deeper into her mother. "I'll try, but hurry okay? I don't like it here."

"Yes." T'Pol continued to hold her until the dreamscape faded.

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T'Pol's first thought when she opened her eyes was how empty her arms were. The ache there was steady, as if someone had amputated a vital part of her. She wrapped her arms about herself in an effort to ease the pain, and closed her eyes, wanting desperately to fall back into the dream. Reality intruded, in the form of her husband as he sat beside her. Not wanting to give up her brief connection with T'Lin, but unable to return to her, T'Pol sighed and leaned into her husband. It was a quiet moment, one of comfort. "I found her, Jonathan. At least I hope I did." His grip tightened slightly, but he said nothing. "She was so angry... so scared. I didn't want to leave her and yet I couldn't stay. She was so certain it was a dream, and maybe it was, but...she looked different from when I saw her last."

"Tell me." He shifted slightly, drawing her into his lap, surrounding her.

"She seemed older somehow, not just in form. Her eyes seemed ancient, as if she had learned all the dark things in the universe and knew she couldn't change them. I could barely see our little girl in them. She was covered in bruises and scrapes. She wouldn't let me hold her. I had to make her. She felt so real. Do you think she was real?"

Jonathan nuzzled his face in the curve of her neck and began a gentle rocking motion. "Yeah. Yeah, I do. I have to believe she's real too."

T'Pol closed her eyes, trying to force back the emotion flooding her. "Each day is harder Jonathan. Each day we search, following an ever winding trail and we get nowhere. Each day I seek her out only to find nothing and wonder if I'm giving us all false hope. What if this connection I made to her was only a dream?"

"I don't know. You were so certain a week ago, you made me believe. Every day is harder, but every day also brings us closer. It took us nearly a week to find Soval, and almost another for you to wake. We are going to find the ones who hurt him, and when we do, we will find the children. You just have to hold on a little longer."

She nodded, rubbing her face against his arm. "That's what I told Pixie."

"See, you believe. You just needed to be reminded. I..." The rest of his words were lost as he was paged over the comm.

"Bridge to Captain Archer"

Reluctant to release his wife, he drew her up with him, keeping a solid arm around her as he responded. "Archer here."

Hoshi's voice fairly hummed with excitement. "Sir, the Vulcans have sent a transmission. They have found V'Lar. She's alive and asking to speak to you."

Jonathan nearly sagged in relief. He flashed T'Pol a hopeful smile before answering. "Send it through to my quarters please."

"Yes, Sir."

He didn't bother to respond. His hand curled tightly in T'Pol's as they headed for the monitor. As the screen flashed to life, his heart beat faster. V'Lar's face filled the screen, the compassion in her eyes filling him with hope. Two alive from a ship that should have been dead. If there were two, was it possible for there to be more? He raised his hand in greeting.

The woman mimicked it with a nod. "It is good to see you again Captain, though I wish it were under better circumstances." At his nod, she continued. "Let us put the pleasantries aside, shall we. I wanted to talk to you as soon as possible. I would like to give you assurances, but I cannot. What I can tell you is five days ago I left a planet held by mercenaries. As of the morning I left, your children were alive."

Jonathan caught T'Pol as she sagged against him. "Alive? Both of them?"

V'Lar nodded in understanding. "Yes. They were both alive at the time. The children, Soval and I were the only survivors of the attack that I know of. We were held at a compound. There were approximately twelve Andorians, an unknown number of Satorians, and a Vulcan. I will file an official report shortly, but I wanted the opportunity to talk to you. I knew you would be concerned about the children. We have to find them quickly Captain, for they are in grave danger."

Jonathan struggled to focus on her words. He wanted to shout for joy. They had confirmation; his children had been seen alive. It was only a matter of time now. "What else can you tell me?"

"The group is run by an Andorian by the name of Arven. He claims his agenda follows the growing unrest among the Andorians and Klingons. The Federation makes him uneasy. However, the attack on the T'Barra was personal. He is keeping the revolutionaries happy by claiming to trade hostages for weapons, but Arven has another goal. Your children have no role in the overall power play except for their connection to Soval and Forrest. Their connection though, is only superficial. Arven has a vendetta against you, Captain. And he plans to use your children against you. I believe he is just biding his time until he has you in his trap."

Jonathan's brow furrowed. "Why me?"

"Arven believes you are responsible for the death of his sibling. He was ranting about P'Jem and your part in helping negotiate a new treaty between the Vulcans and Andorians eleven years ago."

He frowned. "If I dealt Arven some wrong, why would he not just call me out? Andorian honor has a code after all, and I am aware of it."

"I cannot say except I do not believe Arven all that rational a being. I would not put it past him to take his anger and frustration out on the children. I believe his second in command, the Vulcan, Vek, retains some logic and keeps them out of his sight for the most part. But he too is a capricious character. Throw in the Satorians, and it becomes an unsavory mixture."

T'Pol clenched her husband's hand. "Why are the Satorians involved? They haven't been an issue in years, preferring their own sector of space."

V'Lar shook her head. "Unfortunately, the Satorians are a volatile and unpredictable species. There has been an increase in activity along the Satorian borders. For the most part they generally fight amongst themselves, but they are also known for their mercenary skills. They are most likely hired muscle, nothing more." She took a deep breath, as if centering herself.

As Jonathan digested the information he had been given, he studied the woman on the view screen. V'Lar looked tired, worn about the edges. His concern for her well-being pushed to the front. "Are you alright, Ambassador?"

V'Lar nodded. "I am afraid I am a bit weary. The journey here was not an easy one. Captain Taruk has his people working on the shuttle I was sent back in. They are also searching for additional warp signatures in the area. By my estimation, I was only in the shuttle for about twenty hours. That should narrow our search perimeters. It is only a matter of time before we locate them." She shared a long look with T'Pol before continuing. "There are two humans with your children, a young woman and her son. It is my understanding they were captured by the Satorians. The woman, Grace, has taken on the care of Pixie and Zack Henry. She guards them as fiercely as her own child. I would consider it a personal favor if you return them to Earth with you."

"Of course." Jonathan's throat tightened. "Your help has been invaluable. You have given us more than we can ever repay."

V'Lar's expression softened. "There is no debt. Your children have become precious to me." She paused then, giving them a moment to digest everything. "Be careful Jonathan Archer, and good luck. Bring my grandchildren home

safely.” With that, the screen went dark.

Jonathan stood staring at the blank screen for a long moment as he held T’Pol. Hope welled up inside him, overflowing. Unable to contain it, he caught T’Pol close and swung her around in a small circle, a whoop of joy echoing through the room. “Alive T’Pol, they are really alive!”

Relief surged through T’Pol and she clung to him, his emotions flooding her. She drew them in, allowing them to mix with her own, until there was separation. As he set her feet on the floor, her hands came up to cup his cheeks. “Alive...” It was said on a breathless sigh, embraced fully as was his mouth on hers in a joyful, celebratory kiss.

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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.

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

"Wake up Pixie, please wake up." Zack's voice echoed insistently through her head, forcing her to consciousness. A dream she thought, a horrible horrible dream. She was warm, and felt safe, despite not knowing where she was. Perhaps it was because of the lap her head was resting on, or the hand stroking her hair, both were familiar. A gentle hand curled around her own and Zack's voice transmitted itself to her once more. "It wasn't a dream. Wake up." Forcing her eyes open, T'Lin met the amused gaze of her brother. He was semi-clean and wearing an overly large tee-shirt, Starfleet issue. She noticed Aidan beside him, similarly dressed. *Safe then, with Daddy.* \*I can hear you again Pixie, and I know you can hear me. Something happened when you helped me and you were in my head again.\*

Though his lips didn't move, T'Lin heard her brother clearly. She also noticed the ache in her head was nearly gone, though her hands burned like fire. It dawned on her then why she had felt so safe, so secure. Her father was near, and she was almost normal again. She glanced up as the hand on her hair stilled. Her father's tired eyes met hers. "I was so afraid you wouldn't come to us Daddy. I kept trying to tell you we were alive, but you walked away."

Pain etched itself in the lines of his face for a moment before he relaxed. His hand resumed its stroking. "When I heard the T'Barro had been destroyed and all hands lost, I couldn't fathom it. I was being told that there was no possible way you could have survived, and yet I couldn't understand why I didn't feel as though you were gone. Your mother took it differently. She told me you were silent. That silence confirmed your loss to her and overwhelmed her. She nearly gave into it. I was so angry and confused." He gave her a half-smile, that didn't reach his eyes. "I thought you were haunting me. I kept seeing this ghost of you, could almost hear you. I thought I was hallucinating. Then your mother woke up and told me she'd had a dream of you. She said you had told her you were alive and that I needed her. I did. I didn't want to give her false hope, but I couldn't bear the thought of her leaving me again. That very night the Vulcans contacted us and told us they had found Soval. Later V'Lar was returned and she stated that she had seen you alive. When Soval woke, he confirmed he had seen you both as well. It was only a matter of time before we found you. I wouldn't have stopped until I knew for sure."

Trip turned in his seat. "We've got the docking arm extended. Just a few more minutes and we will all be home."

Jonathan helped his daughter sit up, watching as she studied the bandages on her hands. "You burned them somehow when you attacked the Satorian. We think it has something to do with the energy discharge."

Zack nodded. "You got him good this time Pix. He had scorch marks on his chest." He flashed her a grin. "Guess frying 'em like a fish works on Satorians too."

She tried not to flinch at the image. "I killed him then?" At Zack's nod, she continued. "Good. He deserved to die. Did I burn Zack too?"

Archer answered this time. "No. I checked him over real good once we got to the compound. Other than a nasty scar he seems to be fine."

"I don't know how..."

"It's alright baby. You have always been unique, able to do things we never thought of. It's a part of who you are."

"I'm a freak."

"No. You are the daughter of a Vulcan and a Human. The possibilities are endless."

"But," she gave a small shrug. "What if I killed someone with just a touch?"

Archer studied her for a moment. "I don't think you could or would. I think you were so angry, so afraid, that it burst out of you."

"I wanted to hurt him Dad. I wanted him dead so he couldn't hurt anyone ever again. I wanted to hurt him for Zack and Grace, and me."

"And so you did. I won't say its right to take a life, but I think you did what you had to do. I'm just sorry you had to do it, that we hadn't done it for you. I don't think you are a bad person. I don't think you have it in you to kill indiscriminately. I don't even know if you can do it again. The knowledge though will make you cautious."

"How could I kill Sorka and heal Zack? It's not something Humans or Vulcans can do? And... it just doesn't seem right somehow."

"It's not something I am familiar with in either culture, but perhaps a benefit of the blend. I honestly don't know Pixie. As for the rest... I think you are struggling with the morality of it. How can a person have the ability to both heal and kill?"

"Yes."

"It seems to me, that life and death are equally balanced. If you have the power to remove death, then it seems realistic that the power to give it would be equal."



Two sides of the same coin."

"I don't want to hurt anyone."

Archer hugged her to him. "I don't think you could, Pixie, not without just cause. I think the possibility of it will make you more aware and cautious." The ship shuddered as the docking arm connected. "Let's get you inside and cleaned up. You are safe now and home and your mother desperately wants to see you."

She nodded, allowing him to help her out of the shuttle and into decon.

T'Lin wiped at the steamy mirror, trying in vain to clear the image. The girl staring back at her looked as insubstantial as she felt, all blurry around the edges and not quite in focus. It was an odd feeling, as strange as being clean and warm. The little bathroom in decon was barely big enough to hold a grown man, but to a girl who had not had access to a bathroom, it was perfect. She took a deep breath of the warm, scented air. Awkwardly she pulled clean panties and the loose fitting undershirt. It was a man's A-shirt, and was too big, but it covered the essentials and was clean. She rested her hands on the edge of the sink and studied the misty face before her. It didn't look like her face anymore. She wiped again at the mirror and sighed. The hum of the ship vibrated under her fingers and for a second her vision blurred as fear skittered along her nerve endings. Clean, warm, safe, all words that for the longest time were only represented in dreams. She squinted at the mirror girl and could have sworn the creature smirked at her. What if this wasn't real? What if it were another twisted dream? Maybe she was still on that horrid planet? She shook her head, trying to free herself from the thoughts. Dreams and mist and death, they were all a part of her reality. A face seemed to form in the mist behind her, a shadow of the woman it had once belonged to. A chill shuddered through her and she clenched her hands around her arms. She didn't know what was real anymore, nothing seemed real and yet everything did. Where was the line? What did it define? Pain shot through her hands and she moved them in front of her. The bandages were damp from her shower. Her father had tried to help her protect them so she could bathe, but the moisture had seeped in. Her hands felt strange and heavy, sticky. As she studied them, they grew heavier, wetter. Her vision blurred slightly and then the white material changed, blossoming with an ever widening pattern of crimson. She froze in horror, staring helplessly as the blood swallowed her hands and arms, climbing up and over her body. She shuddered again and slowly sank to her knees.

A rapid thumping on the bathroom door pulled her from her imaginings. A quick glance at her hand showed damp white bandaging, no blood in sight. It was an uneasy feeling, knowing the waking world could be lost so easily, much as the

life she had known had been. Another thump on the door, and an impatient voice echoed through her head. \*Pixie! Are you done yet?\*

She smiled slightly and opened the door. As much as she wanted to, there was no point in lingering. Doctor Phlox wanted to scan them all and make sure they were okay. She nearly smiled as Zack snuggled against her. \*I'm okay, I was just thinking.\*

\*I was worried. I could feel you were scared.\*

She hugged him. \*Just forgot myself for a moment. I'm better now.\* She allowed him to hold onto her as she entered the main chamber.

Jonathan watched his children as they came away from the bathroom. They had always been close, but they seemed even closer. He wondered if they would share that bond with T'Mir and he felt his heart lighten at the thought that they would be able to. He wondered how they would feel about a new sister. As T'Lin turned to talk to Aidan, her shirt shifted over her back and the bile rose in his throat. Half-healed scars covered her back, at least what he could see of it. "Pixie, come here please."

She glanced over her shoulder at him curiously, but came to him, her brow furrowing as he turned her back to him once more. Catching the hem of her shirt, he lifted it, the breath sucking out of his lungs.

Zack peeked over his shoulder and patted his father's arm. "It looks better then it did. 'specially with the mud off it."

Jonathan could barely speak. Dropping the shirt, he turned his daughter to face him and drew her down into his lap. "What happened?"

She buried her face in his neck and closed her eyes. "I was disrespectful."

"Disrespectful?"

"Yeah. I overheard Vek and Sorka discussing Grandfather and Grandmother, and said something. Sorka started messing with me so I spit in his face."

Aidan had moved closer in the telling, his eyes solemn as they met Archer's. "She's lucky he didn't kill her. He probably would have if my mom hadn't tried to protect her."

"Is that how your mother died?"

Aidan shook his head. "Sorka shot her."

“Grace died protecting me, Daddy. She moved in front of the bullet meant for me. She was always trying to keep me away from Sorka. I wouldn’t listen.”

Jonathan didn’t know what to tell her, what comfort to offer. The children didn’t seem to expect any, at least not in words. They curled against him and each other, so he did the only thing he could think of, he held them, and rocked them, grateful just to have them near.

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T’Pol was walking down the corridor to the Tuckers’ quarters when it hit her. The knowledge that her children were home swept over her in a wave so strong it nearly forced her to her knees. She stumbled, barely keeping her feet, and leaned against the wall for support. Her babies were home, and safe. She would be able to see them soon, to hold them. The relief was so strong she nearly sobbed with joy. It was the whimpering of the baby that forced her to move. She straightened slowly, her hands coming up to support the infant carrier against her chest. Freeing the child, she studied her for a long moment, nearly smiling as T’Mir waved her little arms energetically. Unable to resist, T’Pol cuddled the child close, kissing her downy hair. The warmth, weight and sweet baby smell carried her back in time and she allowed herself to examine those cherished memories briefly. The baby, however, had other things in mind and demanded her mother’s attention with another round of waving fists and soft baby sounds. Cradling the baby close, she noticed both the similarities and the differences between this child and her others; each unique, each precious, and each ensnaring her completely with their existence. It was a humbling thought, that something so small, could so completely take over her life. It amazed her how each child, even her youngest could mean so much.

It was while she was caught in these thoughts that Hoshi found her. The younger woman smiled as she approached. “It won’t be much longer now and she’ll get to meet her siblings.”

Tears nearly filled her eyes as T’Pol glanced at Hoshi. “Not long at all. I wonder what they will think of her.”

“Considering how much they adore my brood, I imagine they’ll be thrilled. Are you going to pass over the little poppet and go greet your older children, or are you going to hold her all night?”

T’Pol glanced at the baby then back at Hoshi. “I am afraid. I do not wish to let her go, and yet, I can’t wait to hold them. I...”

Hoshi reached for T’Mir, smiling as the baby cooed at her. “You could take her with you, but I think it would be best to leave her with me for a bit. It will give you

a chance to spend some time with them.”

T’Pol relinquished the baby with a soft sigh. “It is always easier to face what you know. I am afraid I won’t know my children any longer.”

“You will know them. You have fought too hard to get them back not to. Besides, if you wait too long, the crew will beat you to them.” Hoshi placed the baby to her shoulder and ran soothing little circles on her back. “Charlie is so excited, she won’t go to bed. She overheard Trip and I talking over the comm about the children, and insists on waiting up for them. I don’t have the heart to tell her no. She would just wake the others with her fidgeting anyway.”

“Perhaps I should take her with me?”

Hoshi smiled again. “She can wait a little longer. You on the other hand need to head for sickbay. Your family is waiting.”

“Yes.” With one last touch to T’Mir’s back, she turned and headed for sickbay. The wait seemed long, and her calm was hard to hold, but she managed. And when the doors finally opened, she held on for dear life.

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Phlox insisted on additional scans before releasing them. With his typical joviality and humor, he ran more scans, treated wounds, and gave shots. He listened with a combination of pride and awe as they recounted some of their adventures, and sympathized with the Archers as T’Lin spoke of her menstrual cycle. While she talked he shared a look with the Captain. The paternal horror in the man’s eyes almost made him laugh. It seemed none of them wanted to face the ramifications of the children growing up.

Trip had stayed with them as the doctor ran his tests. To pass the time, he regaled them with stories of his new daughter. In essence it allowed Jonathan and T’Pol to just be near their children, to hold them and enjoy them without having to worry about conversation. He had waited until the exam was mostly over before starting though. The children were fascinated. ...”And there Charlie, baby drool and spit up all over the front of her jumper, total horror on her face. She looks down at Samantha, shakes her finger at her and calmly tells her she needs to learn some manners if she wants Charlie to continue holding her. What does Sam do? She spits up on her again. I thought I was going to die laughing.”

T’Lin gave him a half-smile. “She sounds wonderful Uncle Trip. I can’t wait to see her.”

Jonathan leaned toward her on the bio-bed. "Would you like a little sister?"

A wistful expression filled her eyes as she nodded. Zack bounced up and down beside her. "A little brother would be okay too, Dad."

Archer chuckled. The last of the tension in him eased a bit. "Well, I'm afraid you'll have to settle for a sister." Both children turned wide eyes on him and he grinned. "She's waiting at Trip's to meet you."

"We have a sister? Really?" T'Lin was awed.

"Yeah, really. Her name is T'Mir."

Zack clapped his hand on Aidan's back. "You hear that Aidan? We have a new sister."

T'Lin glanced at Aidan and then Jonathan. "A sister and a brother, whatever will you do with four of us?"

He studied her for a long moment and sighed. "Love you, what else?"

A chattering Charlie met them at the door to her quarters. Her father had barely opened the door when she came flying out, first launching herself at T'Lin, and then Zack. While she hugged, she talked a mile a minute. "Chef told me you were dead! Do you know what dead is? It means I would never see you again. How dare you go off and get dead. It made everyone sad and cry. I missed you horribly and I am so glad you aren't dead anymore. Don't ever leave me again!" The children were barely able to nod in response to the non-stop words. Charlie paused for breath as her hand curled in Zack's. Her eyes lit on Aidan and she grinned. Tugging on Zack's hand, she asked, "Who's he?"

T'Lin answered, her eyes on her mother's. "He's my brother, Aidan."

"Another brother? Awesome. I wouldn't mind a brother." Charlie marched up to the startled boy and threw her arms around his waist, hugging for all she was worth. "Welcome to Enterprise Aidan."

The boy looked down into the dark, flashing eyes and mischievous face and felt his heart skip a beat. "Thank you," he said as he hugged her back.

As they were ushered inside, the chatter stopped. T'Pol walked over to the sofa where T'Mir lay. Holding her close, she introduced her to the children. They all cooed over her, T'Lin especially.

T'Pol picked up the baby. "Do you want to hold her?"

T'Lin nodded eagerly and accepted the baby, cradling her carefully to her chest. She was awed by the little face and bright eyes that seemed to smile up at her. She raised a hand, making sure the baby was secure first, and gently stroked the tips of her fingers over T'Mir's silky hair, smiling as the springy curls bounced back into shape after each stroke. "Isn't she beautiful?"

Charlie, who had leaned over her arm to get a better look, wrinkled her nose. "She's pretty 'nuff I guess. Don't know what you're all excited for. She's just a sister. I have plenty of 'em."

T'Lin couldn't tear her gaze away. "I know. But T'Mir is mine."

Ours too Pixie.

Yes, all of ours. We can't let anyone hurt her Zack. She needs us to protect her. I won't let her down, not like I did you.

We won't let her down, Pix, ever.

Her eyes locked with his as his hand came down over the baby's heart. Aidan shifted in the corner of her eye as he too seemed to take a protective stance. His hand hovered briefly over Zack's. T'Lin spoke softly. "Yes, we."

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

Jonathan rose silently from his bed and slid on a pair of sweat pants. It had been nearly six months since the children had been retrieved and still he couldn't stop himself from getting up during the night and checking on them. Teams had gone to work and expanded the children's rooms. The boys slept in one while the girls got the other. Pixie didn't seem to mind sharing a room with the baby, in fact, the child was never far from her. T'Pol had located a baby harness and adjusted it to Pixie's frame. Wherever Pixie went, she had T'Mir strapped to her, and if she didn't Zack or Aidan did. The baby wanted for nothing between the three of them and was strong and healthy now.

Enterprise had returned to Earth for the conferences she had been called home for initially, and the children had been reunited with V'Lar and Soval. The elders had been just as relieved as the children, and made a point to spend some time with them. Aidan and T'Mir, as well as the Tucker girls, were also included in the activities when time allowed.

While on Earth, Archer had looked into Aidan's family and found that the boy truly had no one left. He had briefly considered turning the child's care over to someone else, but the boy's attachment to the Archer children and their attachment to him was unbreakable, and after a talk with both his wife and children, Jonathan Archer had petitioned for legal adoption of the boy. When asked, Aidan had stated his place was with Zack and Pixie. Archer offered him his name and the boy accepted. He was a well behaved child and took excellent care of the others. He dedicated himself to his studies and had taken an interest in medicine, which thrilled Phlox to no end.

Jonathan entered the first room as quietly as possible and wasn't surprised to find the beds empty. More often than not he would enter Pixie's room and the boys would be sprawled across the small bed with her. He knew he should probably object, but he just didn't have the heart for it. The children seemed to need each other, and they didn't know he was obsessed with checking on them. When he went to wake them in the morning, they were usually back in their beds, or already awake. He figured it was a comfort thing and they would grow out of it. He entered Pixie's room, surprised to find her gone. A quick check of the crib showed T'Mir was missing as well. He tamped down on the panic and headed back to his own room, slipping into a sweat shirt. His eyes lingered briefly on the naked form of his wife. He ached to join her and wake her slowly, passionately, but the need to locate the children was stronger.

Slipping silently from his quarters, he headed for the turbo lift. He had a pretty good idea where they were. The first few times this had happened he had panicked. Now he just headed there automatically. Years ago one of the cargo

bays had been transformed into a combination school room and play area. It was there he found the children. They didn't notice the door opening so he slid inside and watched them from the shadows. Heavy mats covered the floor on one side of the bay. T'Mir was firmly strapped into an infant swing at the edge of the mats and the three youngsters were facing off. A random strategy of attack and defense raged in their actions as they fought. Were he not secure in their skills, Archer would have been worried, but all three had taken an active interest in different fighting styles. He only prayed there would come a time when they didn't feel the need to practice so much. He understood it for what it was, a need to feel in control, to not be a victim, to be strong. He had talked to the children, tried to help them through it, but they weren't inclined to tell him everything they had been through. He had been able to piece things together from their individual responses and from talking to V'Lar and Soval, but he couldn't help feeling he had let them down and now they no longer felt comfortable. T'Pol had suggested that maybe they were protecting them as parents from things that would hurt them. He couldn't imagine anything hurting as much as not having the children, but knowing they had been hurt and he couldn't change it, couldn't convince them to confide in him or another adult, came in a close second.

His eyes slid over his son. The boy was quick and alert, his moves strong and sure. The gauntness of before was gone. In fact, the boy seemed to have gotten taller, but he was also more solid, sturdy looking than before. At the rate he was growing, Jonathan was pretty sure the boy would be taller than his father. He bit his lip as Zack went flying over Aidan's shoulder. He hit the floor with a solid thunk, but was back on his feet in seconds. Both boys were shirtless and sweat ran down their backs. The scar on Zack's neck was faint now and caused him no problems, but the reminder of it made Jonathan ache for his child. While active, the boy was much more subdued than he had been. He rarely fussed about anything, and was the first to join his mother for evening meditation. As the days passed, the child became more Vulcan-like in his behavior. As before, T'Pol thought it was about control, specifically the things Zack had control over. Jonathan was inclined to believe her.

A soft grunt of pain drew his attention to his daughter. Like the boys, she was dressed in loose trousers. She was also clothed in a snug, sweaty tank top. He winced as he noted once more how much she had changed. She was beautiful and delicate, and turning into quite a young lady. He wondered briefly if he should have T'Pol talk to her, then figured it was probably a job for both of them. T'Pol and Phlox had been working with her to discover the depths of her healing abilities. She could heal a cut or even a break on it seemed any type of creature, but the task drew from her, usually exhausting her in a matter of moments. They were leery about having her practice the skill because even minor injuries seemed to take a lot of effort. T'Lin didn't particularly care for those skills anyway, seeing them as a necessary evil. She much preferred martial arts training. He didn't like the rough training she engaged in, but understood her need for it. She eagerly absorbed everything he, her mother and Malcolm chose to teach her.



They had even started researching the fighting techniques of some other races in an effort to allow her to learn all she wanted to know. Like her brother, Pixie had become more subdued, but she still balked some at meditation. She preferred to use her own method to relax and think and after a bit of discussion, they were inclined to let her have her way. Three days a week she meditated with her mother and brothers, and three days a week she could be found in the gym performing tai chi or some equally related art. Sundays she usually spent with him. It was still stilted and awkward but it was getting better. The two of them could be found in the gym doing some weight training. Afterward they would watch a water polo match or play with Porthos or something equally easy. Later the boys and T'Pol would join them and they would spend some quality family time. It was necessary to rebuilding their relationship and their family and he loved every minute of it. He found time for each of the boys during the week and T'Pol did the same. They hadn't gotten to the point where they took the children's presence for granted again, and he hoped he never did. He continued to watch the children, barely noticing as the door opened and T'Pol came in. He smiled as her hand curled in his. The two of them stood for a long time, watching as the children continued to practice different holds and maneuvers.

T'Pol tugged lightly on his hand, drawing him to the door. "They are safe, Jonathan."

He resisted for a moment and then let her pull him out the door. "I know. I just had to make sure."

"I check on them as well. You can't fight their monsters for them Jonathan, not anymore."

"I have to try. I keep thinking if I watch them, if I take better care of them, I can reverse the wrongs that have been done to them."

"You can't change it, you can only be there for them now."

"I know, but I have to try."

She gave him a knowing look and guided him to the turbo lift. "Better we teach them how to fight their demons on their own so they are not defenseless when they are alone."

"I know you're right, but I can't help how I feel."

Her hand came up and stroked his cheek. "Your feelings are part of what drew me to you. After all, how could a man with so much passion, so much love, so much emotion, possibly survive? And yet, not only do you survive, but you live each day to the fullest, thriving and growing and yet remaining the same. You have drawn me into your existence and I find myself willingly trapped here as

long as you are with me."

As the 'lift doors closed, he pulled her into his arms. "I love you T'Pol. I think I have from the first moment I saw you."

One delicate brow rose. "You had an odd way of showing it. I believe you threatened to knock me on my backside."

His hands slid down to cup the anatomy in question. "And a lovely one it is too." He kissed her gently.

She slid from his arms as the 'lift opened, taking his hand once more and leading him to their quarters and into their room. "It occurs to me, that you might seem more sincere if you show me."

A brilliant smile crossed his face, and the worries of the night fled for the moment as he lifted her onto the bed. "My pleasure, Ashal-veh."

And it was.