

Captain's Log, Stardate 348107.1

My former officer, Commander Terri Lu, has been summoned for a formal inquiry back on Termia. I have elected to accompany her as representation and Chief Engineer Phoenix has come along as well. I'm not looking forward to this procedure, having been through one myself not that long ago, but I feel my assistance is appreciated.

We've taken the Raptor back to Starbase Altaira to complete its refit and repairs to ensure that the problems we have had in the past don't show up again. We have taken the *Talon* and are enroute to Termia from Altaira. We have been traveling for three days and we should arrive by the end of the week. Tensions have been a bit high. We're all on edge, what with all that has occurred of late. Fara has been especially touchy, although I understand why. Trying to keep her busy on a small ship is proving to be an impossible task.

Terri sat back in the operations seat of the *Talon's* cockpit and tried to get comfortable. She looked over at the engineering station and saw Fara looking at her with glib amusement.

"You know, these seats aren't really made for pregnant women." Terri protested. She was debating on sitting in the back. At least the chairs back there were comfortable.

"Wasn't really in the plans when I designed it," Fara said, idly looking at her readouts. "Besides, on Corneria, you get knocked up, and you're taken off of active duty. Why you echidnas make it a personal option to stay in harm's way with a child onboard is beyond me."

"It's always been that way." Harry said from the pilot's seat. "Since long before there was a Confederation."

"It's fucking stupid is what it is," Fara muttered.

"Thanks," Terri said, sounding a bit hurt.

"Fara, knock it off," Harry hissed. "We're here to support Terri. You volunteered to come along, remember? She has to deal with a board of inquiry over the loss of the *Intrepid*. It's not exactly fun."

"Sorry," Fara muttered. "Don't take it personally, god! I just don't agree with some aspects of Starfleet policy." She grabbed an engineering kit and set it on her console. "Harry, the impulse unit is showing some weird readings. I'm gonna go check it out. It's probably nothing, but I don't want us crashing when we get to Termia."

"I'll leave it in your more than capable hands," Harry said, relieved that Fara was banishing herself to another corner of the ship before he had to.

Fara disappeared into the back compartment of the *Talon*.

"I'm glad she's out and about again, but I could really do without that bitch streak she's on." Terri said, shifting around in her seat, trying to get comfortable. "She's been snipping at me a bit more each day we're out here."

"Try to be patient," Harry said, keeping his eyes on his sensor readings. "She's not taking the loss of Nikolai well."

"I completely understand that, but taking shots at me isn't called for!" Terri scowled.

"It's not you. She's angry and lashing out. Just ignore it if you can." Harry replied with a heavy sigh. "Somedays, I can relate."

Terri thought for a moment before saying, "How are you handling it, Harry?"

Harry's eye twitched. He took a deep breath, trying to make sure he kept his voice as steady as possible, grateful she couldn't see his face. "As well as I can...I suppose."

"Oh," Terri said, deciding not to push the issue.

"I hate to tell you this, but...I am not sure how this is going to go for you." Harry said, quickly changing the subject.

"I know. I violated a direct order from an Fleet Admiral." Terri said.

"If it wasn't for your actions we wouldn't be here," Harry said, looking over his shoulder and giving her a reassuring smile. "Unfortunately, if you'd been able to save the ship...somehow. They might be a bit more forgiving."

"I wasn't expecting to get shot right in the damn core!" Terri huffed.

"I know," Harry said calmly. "Look, you got to remember, just stick to your reasoning and you'll be fine." He turned to the navigation controls to make sure the computer was doing its job. "Keep your cool, too. I really wish I could tell you it's going to work out in your favor."

They were quiet for some time, only the sound of the *Talon's* engines and the cockpit instrumentation filled the air.

"Harry?" Terri muttered.

"Yeah?"

"I'm really glad you are coming with me," Terri said quietly. "I'm...pretty scared. I think I was less scared while charging that cube."

Harry chuckled, and then he started to laugh. Terri started to laugh as well.

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The door to the *Talon's* cargo hold opened and Fara stepped through it. She sighed heavily, stretching her back. Being in that cockpit was hard, harder than it should have been. It was possibly where Land had bought it and with recent events, it was more than she could stand. She didn't know how Harry was comfortable being there. Maybe he just had a thicker skin. All she knew was that she needed to keep herself busy.

The *Raptor* was currently out of her hands, but it was in the equally capable hands of the Dock Master of Altaria Station. As much as she appreciated their little arrangement, the lack of work allowed her mind to wander into the dark tempest of her own emotions. She pulled off the access panel to the impulse unit and started to do her routine checks. This would keep her busy for a few hours, at least.

As she worked, probing the relays on the engine controls, memories of Nikolai started to flood her mind. Tears fell on the metallic surface of the impulse relay housing as she sobbed and soon the hold was filled with the echoes of her despair.

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"Aftermath"

Episode 22b, Special15

Writer: Vakash

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The lights were on as Harry entered Terri's condo in Logopolis, with Fara sullenly tagging along behind him. They had their hands full with Terri's bags. Fara carried the cat carrier, which held the rather irritated feline, Taber, inside of it.

"Are you sure you'll be ok here by yourself?" Harry asked Terri.

"I'll be fine," Terri replied

"Did we forget to turn off the lights when we left last?" Fara asked drolly as she came inside.

"No. I was expecting someone to be here," Terri smiled.

"Terri?" The question came from the living room.

Fara recognized the voice and looked around the two echidnas to see a middle-aged echidna woman with red hair getting up off the couch in the living room. Fara could have sworn she had seen this woman before. She just couldn't place her finger on it.

"Yes it is Nyota. I'm here!" Terri said cheerily.

The older echidna woman came up and embraced her warmly. "Look at you! You didn't tell me about that!" She noticed the bulge in Terri's abdomen and tsked. "It's bad enough you have to deal with everything else *and* that! How are you doing?"

"I'm fine." Terri smiled, "or, at least, as well as I can be. Nyota, this is Captain Harry Martinez. Harry, this is Commander Nyota Penda. She teaches at the Academy."

"A pleasure," Harry said, extending his hand after setting down the satchel.

Nyota shook his hand with an odd look of amusement on her face. "Charmed, Captain. Who is your other friend?"

"This is Fara Phoenix. She's—" Terri started but was cut off as Nyota snapped her fingers.

"Ah yes! Seat J26, fidgeting with her uniform the first day. The only student other than you that put in all the extra credit on the sims. Or course I remember her."

Fara blushed as she set Terri's cat carrier down and opened it's door. "Now skit!" she said to the creature as it bolted from the carrier disappearing into the depths of Terri's apartment, yowling as it went.

"I'm glad you stuck with Starfleet," Nyota said, smiling at Fara.

"Yeah, going on three years now. It's been miserable," Fara said flatly.

Terri glared at Fara, then turned back to Nyota. "She's...had a rough few months. We all have had."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Nyota said kindly.

"Yeah, well, flying high one month, shot down the next." Fara sighed, scuffing her shoes on the floor, glancing at Harry. She was desperate to flee the situation.

"Nyota was my sponsor to the Academy, as well as one of my teachers. She kept me mostly out of trouble when I was attending," Terri said. "She was sort of my second mom when I needed her to be."

Nyota laughed with a dismissive gesture. "All I did dear was not let you know how much rope you had to hang yourself with."

"That's true," Terri said, smiling warmly. "The Academy is on a break. She's going to help me out and keep me company. Fara, you are, of course, always welcome here."

"Sure," Fara said, "but I'm looking forward to seeing Harry's old stomping grounds. I would like some quiet while I putter around with the Talon."

"If you change your mind, I will be more than happy to give you two some time, if you need it." Nyota said, smiling.

"Thanks, but you two probably need time to catch up," Fara said, shrugging, desperately wishing Harry would make up an excuse for them to leave. She took out her cane and leaned on it, feeling her leg start to ache, and started to tap it irritably.

"Well, I for one am glad you won't be alone," Harry said, feeling the fur on the back of his neck stand on end for some reason.

"Don't worry about me, Harry, I'll be fine," Terri said. "I'll see you tomorrow, around 1900?"

"Of course," Harry said, nodding to Nyota. "Commander."

He turned to leave, heading back toward the *Talon*. Fara merely smiled, nodded, and swiftly followed him out the door. Terri waited for the door to shut before she let out a relieved sigh.

"Trouble?" Nyota asked.

"I'm really glad you're here," Terri said, smiling as she relaxed. "Fara has been...less than pleasant to be around. I'm glad she's decided to be Harry's problem."

"From what you told me, I would think you'd be empathetic towards her feelings," Nyota said.

"I am, but she's not, oh what's a good word? Normal?" Terri sighed. "When something upsets Fara's world, she acts like a malfunctioning computer terminal."

Nyota raised an eyebrow. "How's that?"

"She works like she normally would, just with a few extra erratic errors from time to time, until she inevitably crashes." Terri muttered. "It's...getting to the crash is not fun."

"I see." Nyota said, showing a bit more understanding than Terri expected. "I'm sure she's in good hands though." She walked over to Terri's luggage and picked it up. "So, since it's just us, would you like to go grab some dinner? I'm starving and I'd love to catch up with you!"

"That sounds great, let me get Taber taken care of and I'll be ready."

"That's fine, I'm surprised you brought him with you." Nyota said. "Little monster practically trashed this place when you lived here before."

"That's why I shipped him separately and kept him in Kitty Day Care Last time i was here with Fara. He's been on edge lately with everything and...."

There was a crash from the living room followed by a hiss and the sound of paws slipping on tile in flight.

Terri sighed and grit her teeth. "That was the vase, by the settee wasn't it?"

Nyota looked and then nodded. "It was. Don't worry about it."

Terri smiled at her mentor. "I wish I could be as cool and collected as you are about everything."

"Trust me, you don't want to know how I got this way," Nyota said cheerily, taking Terri's things to the master bedroom. "Now, let's go find some dinner!"

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The *Talon* flew through Termian airspace, heading towards Ketha Province.

“Something on your mind?” Harry asked over his shoulder as Fara sat on the small bench behind the pilot’s seat.

“Maybe,” she muttered. “I thought maybe I’d feel better getting away from everything, but...so far? Nothing. Just pain.”

“Give it time,” Harry said, checking their flight path. In a few moments he’d put in the request to drop to civilian flight levels with clearance to make a landing at his family’s home. Fortunately, there wasn’t much air traffic over Ketha Province, even during the busiest times of year.

“So...what’s this place like? Where you’re from?” Fara asked, listlessly kicking the base of the bench with the heels of her boots.

“It’s quiet, lots of space, *very* rural,” Harry replied.

“Didn’t you say there was a beach a ways from where you lived?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, swallowing suddenly. “But...I don’t really want to go there.”

That was the last place he wanted to go. That once serene place was now mired in the weight of a lot of things he didn’t particularly want to deal with.

“Well, maybe I wanna check the beach out,” Fara said.

“*You* can do whatever you want to do,” Harry said. “I’ll show you how to get there, but that’s it, alright?”

“What’s it like?” Fara asked.

“It’s just a natural beach, locals use it from time to time,” said Harry. “I’m sure you’d have some alone time if you really wanted it.”

“It sounds really nice,” Fara said. “When I was here, well, in Logopolis, every time Terri and I went to the beach it was just overcrowded and a bit noisy. I just want to listen to the waves.”

“Not a bad plan. We’re coming up on summer right now,” Harry noted. “You might want to bring something for rain though. It tends to rain unpredictably this time of year.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Fara said. “What’re you planning to do?”

“Well, my brother is on tour, so I may as well pay my aunt a visit. Maybe ride my monocycle when I don’t have to go over the inquiry details. Take some walks, read, I don’t know.” he sighed with a slight shrug.

Fara snorted amusedly. “I know the feeling.” She stood up to look out the viewport as Harry made a course correction and the *Talon* dropped in altitude, revealing fields of grains carpeting rolling hills and the ocean off to the far west.

“Please tell me they have some good beer here,” Fara asked with a mischievous grin.

“They do,” Harry chuckled, remembering that last time he had to be on his best behavior, but right now he didn’t have to behave. The idea sounded *very* appealing. “You know what? After we put down, we’ll go get some, my treat.”

Fara smiled at him gratefully.

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A half hour later, the *Talon* sat down on a hill near Harry’s childhood home. Its landing struts extended and it sat down gently in a field of tall wild grass. The shuttle powered down and

the aft gantry opened. Harry and Fara stepped out of the shuttle. Once they were clear, Harry keyed the control panel and the gantry closed and locked.

"You sure it'll be fine just sitting here?" Fara asked.

"It'll be fine. We're out here by ourselves for the most part. As long as it's locked we should be good." He walked over to the cargo area and slid the hatch open. A tray extended with Harry's monocycle in its spherical storage mode. He reached over and grabbed a small controller from the top of it and activated it. Using the controller, he moved it off the platform, letting it retract back into the *Talon*. He hit a few commands and the monocycle, still in storage mode, began to roll along behind them as they walked down the hill.

"So," Fara said, looking around. "This is the ol' homestead?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "It's not much compared to yours."

"At least your house is intact," Fara smiled wanly.

Harry chuckled. "Well, we don't have guards. My aunt is fierce enough, though"

"It's quaint," Fara said as they turned onto the drive.

"Quiet is a more fitting word," Harry said, eyeing the house and spotting lights on inside.

The doorway to the porch appeared to be opening letting in the evening breeze and soon a figure was seen standing there.

"Harry is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me Krysta," Harry called back.

"Ah! Well, I wondered who that was landing on my pasture. I was hoping it was you!"

Krysta laughed.

They approached and Fara could see the female echidna. She was older than either of them, was remarkably fit, and had more beads in her spines than Fara had ever seen before. Fara could tell by the shape of her eyes that she was definitely related to Harry, although very subtly.

"Bringing girls over again I see? You know this isn't your house, young man," Krysta teased with an amused grin.

"This is my Chief Engineer, Fara Phoenix," said Harry. "She's on furlough and needs to get away from everything."

Krysta seemed to have a moment of recognition as a smirk crossed her face.

"Hi," Fara said awkwardly. "Uh...Harry's told me a lot about you."

"Hopefully it's all been good," Krysta said, "or I'll box him about his ears."

Fara gave Harry a sly smile. She wanted to test that threat, but he returned a scowl, so Fara just shrugged.

"Oh please don't give her ideas," Harry sighed. "Look, I'm here to visit, help out for a few days and just relax. We have another colleague in a bit of trouble back in Logopolis."

"Another Inquiry?" Krysta asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Unfortunately," Harry said.

"Well, I have room this time, since your brother and his wife have already moved what they had to the new place down the road. This place has been feeling a bit lonely lately. I'd enjoy having company." Krysta said, wiping her hands on a small dish towel. "You know you missed your brother. He's off on Altaria. I hope you two aren't on the outs again."

"I know where he is, Krysta," said Harry. "I talked to him a while ago, before he left, when I was trying to call you."

Krysta looked relieved. "Well that's good to hear. I was just getting ready to cook supper for myself. I wasn't sure when you'd get here. What are you hungry for?"

"What are you having?" Harry asked.

"A root and grub salad," Krysta said, shrugging. "If you want beer you'll have to go get it yourself. You know I don't drink that poison."

Fara tried to keep the cringe off her face. She wasn't a fan of insects as food.

"Ok, we'll go to town and get some things," Harry said. "Don't worry, we'll share."

Krysta dug in her pockets, pulled out a key and tossed it to him. "Take your brother's car. Be careful with it. I don't like using it during the summer; it acts funny."

"Thanks!" Harry said grinning. "Don't worry, I'll take care of it. Can we stow our stuff on the porch until we get back?"

"You know the rules Harry," Krysta said smiling.

"Thanks!" said Harry as he put his duffel on the porch and motioned for Fara to do the same while the monocycle went to park itself behind the house. "Come on Fara. You'll love this. We'll be back in a bit, Krysta."

"Ok Harry, please don't wreck the damn thing again! I don't want to hear him bitching about it for another decade," Krysta said with a smirk.

Harry walked over to the barn with Fara quietly in tow and opened the doors, revealing the back of the stylish, convertible hovercar. He hopped in, activated its repulsors, and backed it out of the barn, leaned over and popped the door for Fara.

"Seriously?" Fara chuckled. "This is...really swanky for a hovercar. Cherry red too?"

"Yep!" Harry said, grinning.

Fara slid into the seat beside him and closed the door. "Shit! This is nicer than my dad's 93SFX Coupe. Well, it doesn't have a video player or a mini fridge, but it's still nice."

Harry turned the car around and put it in drive. "Strap in," he said, putting on his seat belt and a mischievous grin. "You haven't seen anything yet!"

Fara did so and Harry gunned the throttle. The vehicle tore up the drive, then passed the *Talon* on the road and Harry, seeing the road was clear, drifted onto the road and accelerated. Fara let out an excited whoop at the maneuver as she clung to the door because she hadn't got her belt fastened.

"I told you to strap in," Harry said, watching her scramble to buckle up.

"That wasn't fair!" Fara cried but she was laughing. "Stop trying to cheer me up!"

"Come on! You got to admit this is pretty great!" Harry said over the woosh of air as they zipped down the road. "Riding all this raw power, with the wind blowing through your hair, with the top down!"

Fara tried to scowl, but her lips kept betraying her.

"Yeah, alright...it is pretty great." she sighed, exasperated as she hooked her elbow over the door and rested her head in her hand.

Harry turned the radio on and music began to play from the speakers.

"I hope you don't get us in trouble driving like this." she grumbled.

"Nah! I'll slow down before we get too close to town." Harry replied.

After a few miles he did slow the hover car down to a much slower speed. Fara could see a clump of trees interspersed with some houses off to the side of the road that led into town. The town was small; the houses seemed to be simple, single-story affairs, with a few newer

prefabs amid some older shacks that looked like they'd been updated and fixed up. Downtown was a collection of brick, wood, and prefab buildings. Fara could see what appeared to be a local market, a mechanic's shop, a garage that looked like an art gallery as well. There was also a community center, a post office, other assorted shops, and a small replimat that looked like it was barely used. Harry pulled the car to a stop and the hovercar landed on its struts. Harry got out and shut the door.

"Are you coming?"

Fara shook her head. "Nah."

"You said you wanted some beer? I don't really know your tastes," Harry said, annoyed. "You can't complain if you don't participate."

"Fine!" Fara huffed, getting up out of the car and slamming the door.

"Are you going to fight me every step of the way out here? We're supposed to be taking it easy," Harry sighed.

"I'm trying. I just don't really feel like...I don't know...anything," she said, kicking a rock and watching it bounce down the gravel-covered street. She noticed a couple of the natives giving her curious, furtive glances. "What?" she snapped, causing the onlookers to flinch.

Harry chuckled. "Most people out here don't see many offworlders. Not too many wander out this far. Don't pay them any mind."

"I'm just not used to that," Fara said uneasily, moving closer to Harry. "You echidnas look all bug-eyed. When you stare at somebody, it's weird."

"Don't worry about it. Come on," he said, walking up to the door to the market and opening the door for her. "Let's get the supplies and we'll be on our way."

"What do you want to drink?" Fara asked as she stepped inside.

"I'm not picky," Harry said as he pointed to the back. "There's a sampler bar over there that you can try little thimblefuls. Just pick something you like and we'll grab it from the cooler."

"Hold up, they give out samples? Really?" Fara said, raising an eyebrow above a wicked smirk. "I like it here already."

"Just go get the beer," Harry sighed.

Fara smirked and sauntered to the back. "Can you try to grab some meat? I know you echidnas like your big bugs, but I'd like to eat something I can chew without it crunching!" she shouted over her shoulder.

"Don't worry, I got you covered," Harry replied, shooing her along.

Fara pursued the bar and quickly realized that she couldn't read any of the labels. She rolled her eyes, frustrated that things on other worlds wouldn't translate automatically. She could get an ocular implant that would automatically translate visual information for her, much like the implant behind her ear that did so for spoken language, but she wasn't interested in mutilating her eyeball for convenience. She'd had the audio translator put in at the behest of her father when she was on the *Gideon* years ago. She'd asked Doctor Okan about the procedure. He had assured her it was a simple, safe operation. She had her doubts. He had said the same thing about her leg and that had turned out to be a torturous recovery process.

She figured she could just match the labels if worse came to worse and set about filling the paper thimbles and tossing them back, looking for something that felt right. As she worked through the selection, she kept an eye on Harry's head, which was bobbing up and down as he went about grabbing supplies. If she was being honest, this place wasn't too bad. Life seemed

to move slowly here; it was simple, almost a complete inverse of the gleaming technological spires of Logopolis. The most technological things she'd seen so far was the aged replimat and the shiny new terminal the clerk had at the front of the store. She heard the bell over the door ring as an echidna couple entered the store and started chatting with the clerk. Fara just minded her business and kept sampling, casting a glance over at Harry from time to time to keep track of him.

She eventually sipped a lager that had a smooth, solid taste. Nodding, she memorized the label and walked over to the cooler. She grabbed two of the twenty four packs that had the same label as the lager she had sampled and lugged the cases over to the cart Harry was pushing around and set them in it.

"Isn't that going a little overboard?" Harry asked as she set them in the cart.

"Maybe. But you're having some of this too!" Fara hissed. "Besides, it's not like we can't afford it. We could probably buy out the whole cooler if we wanted!"

"Amberwave?" Harry said, noticing the cases. "Good pick. It's brewed locally, one of the ones I actually like."

"Thanks," Fara said, smiling and feeling a touch of pride. Her eyes fell on some folding chairs and coolers in the corner. "I'm grabbing some of that stuff for the beach," she said pointing.

"Alright, fine," Harry relented.

Fara's eyes lit up. "Do they have ice machines here?"

"What kind of a question is that? What do you think that big white cooler was out front?" Harry asked, exasperated.

Fara shrugged and stuck her tongue out at him before she sauntered off to the ice machine.

Harry couldn't help but grin. Seeing any glimpse of the old Fara was comforting. He grabbed their provisions as he watched Fara speaking to the clerk and pointing at him, and then grabbing a set of chairs and a cooler. She hauled them out to the hovercar and tossed them in the backseat. She grabbed two bags of ice and dumped them into the cooler before speaking to the clerk again.

"Harry!" Fara shouted, waving him over.

"Yes?" he asked as he approached.

"I am going to the clothing store next door!"

"Ok, that's fine," he called back as he turned his attention back to the purchase of provisions. "I'm sure I can find you."

When he looked up, he only saw a waft of her tail as she walked past the window. He shook his head, smiling as he set about finishing his shopping. The clerk checked his ID before he swiped the card. The older echidna seemed amused as he scanned the items from the cart.

"Something funny?" Harry asked.

"I was just wondering who was running around with James' hovercar since Krysta usually walks to town," he said with a shrug. "You must be Harry. We've never met, but Krysta speaks of you often."

"That's nice," Harry smiled as the clerk bagged up the food items.

"So who's the looker? That your wife?" The clerk asked.

Harry laughed. "Nah. She's my Chief Engineer. She decided to tag along and cause me headaches so I didn't get too comfortable." Harry leaned in conspiratorially. "Between you and me? For your own health, don't let her hear comments like that."

"A bit of a firebrand is she?" asked the clerk.

"She makes a field fire look like a decorative candle." Harry said with a smirk.

"I'll take your word for it," the clerk chuckled as he finished ringing up the items. "Total is gonna be 250 credits."

Harry paid and got his items and returned to the hovercar. He put anything perishable in the cooler, along with a few beers for good measure, then he found himself with nothing to do. He assumed whatever venture Fara was on was going well, since he didn't hear any screaming coming from the clothes store next door. He caught a glimpse of her through the window. She seemed to be fiercely looking for something and he figured it was best if he didn't bother her. Maybe she had the right idea. Maybe going to the beach wouldn't be a bad thing. Maybe he'd just have to swallow his apprehension of the strange revelation that the small piece from his ship he had found there was just going to be a mystery that he'd have to get to the bottom of.

He inwardly shuddered and reached into the cooler to grab himself a beer. He took a drink as he leaned on the fender of the hovercar. People watched him as they went about their business. At least this place, for the most part, made sense to him. These people lived their lives day by day, simply dealing with chores, work, kids, the harvest, meals, figuring out what program on the network to vegetate in front of before bed, all in blissful ignorance of the spiraling madness lurking far above them. They didn't have to contend with crazed Comendants, work around the machinations of some capricious Coyote, babysit giant space moths, fight the Borg, cure Polywater Viruses, or save starships from insane battle computers.

"God...I've got real problems," Harry muttered as he sipped his beer.

He took a long drink of his beer, wondering what had possessed him to run from everything. In his mind's eye he could see the young echidna he used to be, listless, angsty, and sadly roaming the streets of this town, fetching things for his aunt. What if he could reach across time and talk to himself? What would he tell him?

"Kid, whatever you're thinking, trust me, you're better off staying here." Harry muttered as he watched main street move slowly around him. "Be a mechanic, work on monocycles, customize them or whatever. Just stay here. Trust me, it will save you a *lot* of grief. Go find that girl you met on the beach and never let her go. Marry her, have a family, be normal and boring and be happy. Don't be looking up at the stars, because only heartbreak and misery lie up there." Harry chuckled bitterly. "You won't listen, will you? Ah...you stubborn bastard!"

He took a long drink and wiped his mouth. The bottle was empty, so he tossed it in a trash can and wandered over to a small shop where he used to get books and magazines. He always found it amusing that these things were still printed when they could easily be downloaded. Some people still liked that tactile feel of print materials. Plus, if you dropped a periodical, you didn't have to worry about cracking the damn screen on a datapad. He was glad to see the little shop was still open and he stepped inside. He waved at the owner as he headed for the fiction area. He needed a few new books, as he'd manage to destroy or lose the ones he'd brought with him. He made a mental note to scan these replacements into the *Raptor's* main computer so he could replicate them if they got lost again. The only things he seemed to actively remember to update were his models. He quickly found his favorite author and

discovered there were a few new books he'd come out with. He grabbed his replacements, as well as the new ones, and paid for them. As he left the shop he saw Fara emerging from the clothes store with a bag.

"All done?" Harry asked.

"Yep." she said, rummaging in the bag. She then pulled something out and threw it at his face. Harry caught it and scowled at her.

"You're a 34 regular, right?" Fara asked.

"Yeah," Harry said with a slight frown. "How do you know that?"

She rolled her eyes and tossed the bag in the back seat. "Seriously?"

"Oh yeah, right," Harry said, looking at the black and white striped short pants made out of a plasticized material. "What are these?"

"Swim trunks," Fara said as though it were the most obvious answer ever. "I'm not going there by myself, but I am going."

"What brought this on?" asked Harry.

Fara blew her hair out of her eyes as she opened the door to the hovercar and sat down. "I see all these farm boys peeking at me. One even winked at me. They're trying not to make it obvious, but they're clods. I don't want to be ogled when I'm trying to relax, so you are going with me when I go to the beach, even if I have to drag you."

Harry hopped into the driver's seat after tossing his bag of books into the back seat and gave her an incredulous smirk. "So I get the privilege of ogling you?"

"You ass!" she snapped, lunging over the center console and slugging his right shoulder, causing him to wince in pain, both of them laughing. "You better be glad I like you! I'd do a whole lot worse if I didn't!"

"Yeah, I know," Harry chuckled, starting the hovercar. "You better be glad I like you or I would throw you in the brig for assaulting a superior officer."

"You like me too much," Fara smirked, turning around in the seat and rooting around in the cooler for a beer. "We're not on duty, so bite me, *sir*."

"Are you feeling better?" Harry asked after they were back on the road. "You're a little more chatty as of late."

"A little, but when you're still miserable, does it matter?" Fara sighed, opening a beer and taking a drink.

"It does," Harry said.

Fara smiled at him, which seemed to bring some comfort. "What were you thinking about earlier?"

"When?"

"Before you went into the bookstore, while I was shopping," Fara clarified. "I saw you staring off into space."

"I was thinking I should have made different choices in my life," Harry replied. "It's just wishful thinking. I can't change anything at this point."

"At least you have a past to muse about," Fara muttered. "I have the last two years and a junk drawer of broken memories. I gotta just roll with it as it comes."

"I can imagine that missing so much makes it difficult to have a proper perspective on things," Harry added.

"Ha! You got that right!" Fara scoffed. "What sort of perspective would that be anyway?"

"I..." Harry hesitated. "I'm not sure I know anymore."

Fara sighed and leaned back in her seat as she continued to nurse her beer. They drove on in silence, eventually pulling into the drive and unloading the car. Harry looked around for Krysta and found her waving from her garden where she was picking some vegetables and herbs. Harry figured she'd already eaten, so he took the groceries inside and started on supper. Fara hauled the cooler over to the porch and leaned on the railing, starting her next beer.

"You could help?" Harry suggested.

Fara laughed. "PFFT! You know how I throw you out of Engineering when you try to help?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sure it would go the same way if I tried to help you cook. Thanks, but no thanks," Fara said, plopping down on the porch swing and taking a drink. "Cooking isn't really my thing and I didn't see any takeout places on the way over here. That's more my style. What are you making, by the way?"

"Orauch chops," Harry replied. "It's comparable to Cornerian pork."

Fara frowned. "Is it another damn bug?"

"Yes, it is," Harry chuckled. "A rather large one, but you won't be able to tell, trust me."

"Ugh," Fara grimaced. "Fine."

"It's chewy. That's what you said you wanted!" Harry said with mock indignance.

"It'd better be good and friggin' chewy!" Fara shouted back before noticing Krysta standing at the porch with an amused look on her face and a basket full of vegetables.

"Do you two always talk to each other like that?" Krysta asked Fara.

"Only when he irritates me," Fara said, leaning back in the porch swing before turning her head to shout into the house. "Which he is being *exceptionally* good at doing all day!"

"I can see that." Krysta said with a soft chuckle. She headed through the door only to catch Harry laughing as he was cooking.

"She seems to be in quite the humor," Krysta remarked as she went to clean and put her vegetables in the refrigerator.

"Trust me, anything from her is better than nothing." Harry said, rooting around in the spice drawer.

Krysta looked out her window at Fara and noticed a severe melancholy had suddenly pressed onto her features. She took a long look at Harry's face as he cooked. The way his brows were knotted, the weary droop of his eyes. His whole body language was giving him away. She walked over and carefully shut the door to the porch.

"Harry?"

He didn't seem to hear her as he worked on the Orauch chops.

"Harry!" Krysta barked softly.

"Hmm?" He said, looking up at her as if he was coming out of a trance.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing. Nothing is wrong," Harry said dismissively, turning his attention back to cooking.

"Harold. Andrew. Martinez." she said firmly.

Harry visibly twitched. The commanding, sharp, well-practiced tone of a parental figure piercing the independence of adulthood. It went clean through the protocols of Starfleet and grasped him by the base of the spine with one firm, icy claw.

"Do not lie to me in my kitchen, of all places!" Krysta hissed. "You have never lied to me before and you had better not start now!"

"I...I literally can't talk about it," Harry said, chewing his lip.

"Then skip the parts I'm not supposed to know!" Krysta growled.

Harry turned down the heat once the chops had been properly seared, covered them, and took a deep breath.

Krysta raised both eyebrows at him. "Well?"

"Dammit! Give me a moment!" Harry hissed back, slapping his palms on the stove. He walked across the kitchen to the far wall, then passed back to the stove, finding it pointless to try to go to another room because she'd follow him.

Krysta stood confidently, patiently waiting on him to continue. As always, his little display did nothing to intimidate her.

"You are already on strike two mister," she said sternly. "Don't push me!"

Harry glared, but then cast his gaze at the ground. "Sorry."

"Yes you are," Krysta said stiffly. "Now, tell me what's going on."

Harry took a deep breath. "I've been...going through a lot lately. I don't want to get into it, but it's wearing me down. It was bad enough, but now they're gonna make me relive all of it again tomorrow. I want to leave it all in the past where it belongs. Is that too much to ask?"

"Alright, fair enough," Krysta relented. "It's okay. You can spare me the details. I know you'll tell me when you are ready."

Harry smiled. "Thank you, really."

"You'd better keep an eye on your supper," she said, pointing at the aggressively sizzling pan.

"Huh? Oh!" Harry chuckled as he lowered the heat on the chops. "Hey, thanks."

"I got to make up two rooms. You two aren't sharing one in my house." Krysta noted as she stepped out of the kitchen. "You are getting the cot. Your lady friend looks like she could use a good sleep on a bed."

They heard the door open and turned. Fara was standing there, hesitantly dragging the cooler along with her. She was wobbling slightly. Harry was fairly certain it wasn't because of her leg injury. "Am I interrupting something?"

"No. I was just telling Harry I need to get your room ready. Excuse me please." Krysta said, leaving the room.

"How's the food coming? My stomach is not being fooled by the beer anymore," Fara asked with a belch, coming inside and sitting at the table.

"It's coming. This doesn't take too long to cook," Harry replied, grabbing some vegetables he'd bought. He set about chopping up the vegetables and tossing them in another pan.

Fara finished off her most recent beer and tossed the bottle into the trash can as she settled back in her chair. There was an air of alcoholic stupor on her face.

"How many of those have you had?" Harry asked.

"I dunno...maybe...five?" Fara giggled. "I have got nothing better to do, unlike you."

"I think you better back off a bit. That stuff can sneak up on you." Harry chuckled as he alternated between monitoring the meat and stirring the vegetables.

"I was *told* to relax. *This* is me relaxing!" Fara slurred matter of factly, resting her head on her hands and looking around through the haze of alcohol. "Relaxing by marinating my brain in alcohol! Yeah...that's the best way to relax."

"Trust me, we don't exactly bunk here for free. Krysta is going to put you to work while I'm out." Harry said with a smirk. "So, you may want to slow down a bit. Gardening with a hangover is brutal."

"Is that where you get it from?" Fara grinned goofily.

"Perhaps," Harry said, grabbing utensils for the both of them and setting them out.

"Trust me, it can't be anything worse than what I've been through," Fara slurred. "Hurry up with that grub, dammit!"

"It's almost done," Harry laughed, grabbing some plates and dividing up the portions. He then approached with both and slid Fara hers before he sat down. "I swear, some people are so pushy."

They started to eat. Fara poked at the chops experimentally, sniffing at it, gently prying off a piece of the chop. She popped it into her mouth and chewed gently.

Harry just sat, staring at her. "It's not going to bite back."

She chewed, and kept chewing. Harry waited, eyebrows raised.

"Quit staring," she snapped as awkwardly as one can with a mouth full of bug.

"Well? Am I as good a cook as I am a captain?" Harry smirked.

Fara rolled her eyes. "You *are* surprisingly good, and so is this."

"Thanks," Harry said with a smile, pointing at the cooler with his fork. "Can I get one of those beers?"

Fara shoved the cooler under the table towards him with her foot as she dug into her food. Harry shook his head, annoyed as he dug out a bottle and opened it. She could have at least handed him one. She probably wouldn't have let him in the cooler if she'd found her food offensive.

They were eating quietly when Krysta returned. She made herself some tea and grabbed the other chair at the table. She regarded the two of them curiously as they ate, the weird tone of their bickering had her eyeing the both of them amusedly.

"What?" Harry asked, noticing his aunt looking at him.

She smiled. "Nothing dear, just thinking is all. I take it you will be using your monocycle tomorrow?"

"Probably," Harry replied. "Fara doesn't really know how to use it."

"I have a few chores that I need done," said Krysta. "I do need the hovercar. I'm hoping I can get some help, may as well while you're here." Krysta said

"I'll be glad to help," Fara said, speaking up without further prompting.

"Oh, well thank you," Krysta said. "That's unexpected."

"I'm crashing here, may as well pitch in," Fara shrugged.

"Harry, your friends are always so helpful!" Krysta said, smiling at him.

"I try to run with a better crowd these days." Harry chuckled.

Fara smiled at him and returned to eating. "You know Krysta, if you need anything, we came in a ship." Fara noted as she swallowed. "You've got a free pass to anywhere on the

planet. It's got a small cargo hold, a transporter and a storage buffer to boot. So if you have anything big planned, now would be the time to ask."

"Really?" Krysta said, suddenly very intrigued.

"Sure. I don't mind," Harry said. "I requisitioned it for this trip and that covers any and everything we do with it. Shouldn't cause any problems."

"It sits in the hold a lot anyway," Fara said matter-of-factly. "It could use a few more hours of atmospheric flight. Other than Corneria and Mustafar, it hasn't got too many hours in the air."

"It's fine," Harry chuckled. "Knock yourself out."

"Really? I thought you'd bring up some damn regulation to beat me over the head with!" Fara cackled.

"Just do me a favor and wear a uniform when you're out and about?" Harry asked. "It's good public relations for Starfleet personnel to be seen helping civilians."

"Ugh! Fine. You're lucky that I happened to pack it...for some damn reason," Fara groused.

Harry grinned. "It's because despite your best efforts that I've been turning you into a respectable officer."

Fara glared as she forked one of the pan fried vegetable chunks and flicked it at him. Harry parried the airborne vegetable with his beer bottle and it bounced across the floor. He picked it up before Krysta could say anything and tossed it into the compost bin. Although he noticed Fara cowed under the disapproving glare of his aunt.

"Sorry, ma'am." Fara muttered defensively. "He's your nephew. You know how he is!"

"Harry, don't antagonize our guest, or you'll be scrubbing the floor before bed. Fara, same goes for you if you do that again." Krysta said, taking another sip of her tea. "This is my house, my rules, and we use proper manners at the table."

"Yes, ma'am." they both said.

Krysta finished her tea and got up to clean her glass. As she did, Fara stuck her tongue out at Harry and he rolled his eyes.

"Anyways," he continued, "just dress the part and it's all good. It probably won't even be questioned just make sure you park the ship somewhere legal."

"Works for me," Fara shrugged. "Krysta, you ever taken a ride in a hot rod shuttle?"

Krysta chuckled. "Not a 'hot rod one', no."

"Then we're gonna have a hell of a day tomorrow." Fara grinned. "Might want to make a list of stops. You've got the whole planet to pick from."

"I'll have a location ready before I go to bed," Krysta said with a smile. "I would appreciate it if you both pitched in and cleaned up before you turned in. You each have a room. I don't know what it's like on a starship, but in my house, unless you are married, you don't get to share a room, is that understood?"

"I'll take my old room," Harry said.

"It's just got a cot set up in it," Krysta said, "and my craft table."

"It's fine. Does Jame's room at least have a bed?" Harry asked.

"Yes. He left the one that was in there and got a new one for their house," Krysta said. "I got a new mattress and sheets. Since it's a guest bed now, your friend should be quite comfortable on it."

"Thanks, Harry," Fara said with a yawn.

"No problem. The cot is a step up from having to crash on the couch." Harry chuckled.

"That reminds me," Krysta sighed. "Something is wrong with the data doohickey. We had a bad storm a few days ago and my connection to the world net has been dead since then."

"Fara? Do you think you could take a look at it?" Harry asked.

"Tomorrow." Fara hiccuped. "I am a *bit* tipsy...and the engineering kit is in the Talon." Fara chuckled. "I don't want to twist an ankle or fall and whack my head...again. I'll get it first thing in the morning." She yawned again. "Good supper Harry."

"Thank you." Harry smiled. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

\* \* \*

## Logopolis, Undercity

The Undercity of Logopolis ran for several kilometers beneath the city, built around the vast support struts that held the city up. The city itself had been constructed over a long-dormant volcano. The bowels of this long dormant volcano had been filled with seawater due to the ravages of time and erosion. Over time, the water was pumped out and its routes sealed off to allow for more living space in the burgeoning metropolis among the vast twisting granite passages. The Undercity was in perpetual darkness, save for the light provided by the neon frescos that adorned every shop, restaurant and residence. Air was pushed into the Undercity via massive ventilation systems and heaved back out by the same systems, leading the locals to often complain about the "breath" of the Undercity, even though it was piped out to the outskirts of the city. One happy side effect of these massive systems was the pleasant ephemeral breeze that constantly moved through the vast cavern.

"So, you are going to be a mother soon? I don't recall that being in your career plans," Nyota said as they ate.

Terri flushed. She had been dreading this moment, but it was inevitable.

"It wasn't. We got busy and apparently neither one of us remembered to get our preventatives taken care of." Terri said.

"Don't be embarrassed. A lot of people wouldn't be around if it wasn't for negligence," Nyota smiled.

"Thanks...I think?" Terri paused for a moment. "Why didn't you ever become a mother?"

Nyota's smile evaporated. "Like you, I lost the man I loved and I knew I could not replace him." Nyota sighed. "Besides, I had you lot to look after, and that was enough, just getting you through the Academy."

"I wasn't that bad," Terri said defensively.

"*You* just don't remember a lot of it because of what happened to Karl," Nyota said. "I had to drag you out of that apartment every morning, have you escorted to your classes, and ride your tail to make you do your studies in the evening...I even had to remind you to eat. All you wanted to do was give up and cry the whole time. I know you wanted to mourn him, but I didn't want you to wash out of the Academy."

Terri flushed again. "You're right. I really don't remember much about it."

"Let's just say it was very challenging for me, but I got you through it." Nyota smiled. "So, tell me about this new guy. Are you going to get married?"

"We...didn't get that far," Terri muttered. "He did something...brash. It saved the *Raptor*, but might have cost him his own life. He's barely hanging on in a medical center on Altaria. He's been there for a while now and I've yet to hear anything."

"What's his name?" Nyota asked.

"Jonathan Land," Terri said, "a Cornerian, cute as a button, dumb as a bag of rocks."

Terri's attention was on her plate, so she didn't see the pain arrive on her mentor's face. But, that pain was still lingering when she looked up.

"Did you know him?" Terri asked, a bit confused.

"I know his father and I know they are not on the best of terms," Nyota said, taking a long drink. "Excuse me, I'll be right back."

Nyota stood and headed for the restroom in the back of the restaurant. Terri watched her go, a bit confused. She'd never seen Nyota act like that before. She decided that if Nyota tried to press the issue further, she would change the subject. She sighed and looked out the window at the vast neon lit Undercity. The streets were packed, with hover cars going by and the residents walking the catwalks above the roadways. All of them were going about their perfectly ordinary lives, all lit by the constant luminous glow of neon drowning out the dark.

Her imagination wandered as she looked at a couple strolling past. For a moment, she could see herself and Jack in their place. What if they were just normal, everyday people? What if they could just live their lives? She'd probably still be a technician, but what would he be? Probably still a pilot of some sort. He always said it was in his blood. They'd be together though, not having to deal with giant space creatures, hostile aliens. They would just be normal people.

Her thoughts were interrupted as Nyota returned to her seat.

"Are you doing ok?" Terri asked.

"I'm fine," Nyota replied as she sat. "How about you? You seemed to be looking out there like you were in a dream."

"Just thinking is all," Terri said with a shrug. "I think I'll be ready to go home after we get done eating. I have a big day tomorrow."

"I know," Nyota said, frowning. "I wish I could be there for you," she continued, flagging down the waiter to get her more wine. "Do you want another juice?"

"Sure. I'd rather have the wine, but that's not an option for another few months," Terri smiled.

Nyota chuckled. "I can imagine the wait has been brutal. Excuse me for indulging then," Nyota said, taking out a small plastic case from her purse, opening it, then rolling herself a small cigarette.

"I didn't know you smoked," Terri said.

The waiter came by to fill Nyota's glass, then left and came back with Terri's juice.

"How else do you think I got this mellow-toned voice of mine dear?" Nyota said, lighting it and taking a drag. "It's all-natural tobacco. I have a guy in Ketha I get it from."

"How long?"

Nyota took a drink from her wine glass. "A while. I just hide it well. I had to be a shining example for the impressionable young woman I was sponsoring after all," she said with a wink. "You're a grown-up now, so I'm sure you know nobody is perfect."

"I'm not one to judge. Before my pregnancy, I had my own pile of vices," Terri admitted as she continued to eat.

Nyota chuckled and put her head in her free hand. "A pile, huh?"

Terri nodded sarcastically. "You could, reasonably, call it a pile."

"I see!" Nyota laughed. "Well, you won't have time to miss them when you got that kid to look after." Nyota said with a smile. "Good reason to get rid of some bad habits."

Terri chuckled, but the same breath melted into a sigh. "Nyota?"

"Yes, dear?" she said.

"How much trouble am I in, actually?" Terri asked.

Nyota took another drag, tamped out the cigarette, and then slipped it in a case.

"The situation isn't ideal," Nyota said. "I've already reviewed what I could get my hands on. The things that stand out are these: you violated a direct order from a superior and you took an action that almost any other ship in that situation could have performed without endangering your civilian passengers. Also, you lost your ship."

Terri stared down at her glass. "That's what my Captain told me too. I was hoping to get a second opinion."

"Well Har—I mean, your Captain—is pretty savvy with such things," Nyota said with a small nod. "I wish I could give you better news."

Terri noticed the slip. "You started to call him by his first name. That's a bit odd," she giggled.

"I have been researching the matter as much as I could. I guess it's just got burned into the old memory," Nyota said, downplaying the matter. "Anyways, the point is, if it wasn't for that third strike, the other two could easily be forgiven."

"Let's say they do bust me, what might happen?" Terri said, her mind refocusing on her troubles, but filing the curiosity away for further prodding later.

"Absolute worst-case scenario? They drum you out of the service. I doubt that will happen though. Your record is good and you have nothing but glowing recommendations from your superiors. Minimally, they'll probably bust you down in rank, just enough so you learn from the experience but not so far you can't make your way up again. You'll definitely be placed on probation and probably not allowed to advance for a couple of years."

Terri sighed heavily.

"If you want my opinion, if they do decide to keep you on, you should immediately blow any leave you have saved up. Take some time and relax, get your head straight, and get ready for that baby," Nyota said. "I don't think anyone will reject that request. You'll still get maternity leave, of course, to get everything sorted out, so this'll just add a little time to that."

"I'm just really afraid," Terri said, frustrated. "I feel like every path I have before me is just terrible. I don't know what to do."

Nyota tutted and shook her head.

"You young people are always so dramatic, so busy with careers and all that. Trust me, you get to my age and you don't really see the draw of being up there anymore. Sure, it's full of wonders and adventure, but it's dangerous and cruel. You know that. If you do get kicked out, being a civilian isn't that bad. With your credentials, you'd find yourself just as busy for any tech company out there. They don't care what you did, as long as it wasn't homicide. They practically climb over each other to get anyone who retires, washes out, or quits Starfleet."

"And...you wouldn't be disappointed in me?"

Nyota laughed. "Is *that* what you're worried about?"

"A little," Terri admitted bashfully.

"You have never disappointed me," she said kindly, leaning across the table and petting her hand. "If you did, I would let you know."

"Thanks. That helps...a lot," Terri smiled, feeling some ease to her gloom.

"I could even hire you as a teacher's aide. Then I could see the little one anytime I wanted." Nyota chuckled. "I could be Aunty Nyota."

\* \* \*

The next day, Harry arrived at Terri's condo and they had breakfast. He tried to prepare her as best he could as they ate.

"You are damn lucky you have the steel trap memory of yours," Harry said. "The best you can do is just stay calm, stick to your story, and don't make excuses. They're going to be picking at you as much as they can. Don't give them any reason to rip you to shreds."

"So, is it an actual trial or a test of character?" Terri asked, stroking Taber as he sat curled in her lap purring away.

"Both," Harry said. "They're going to do their best to get under your skin and they know about your passenger. They're going to poke and prod and see if they can demonstrate that you weren't of a sound mind when everything happened. So, you have to keep your cool, because they are keeping theirs the entire time. They're holding a massive hammer over your head and looking for any reason to bring it down as hard as they can."

"I see," Terri said, rubbing her forehead. "I can't go over any of this anymore. My head hurts!"

"It's all right," Harry said, gathering up their dishes and taking them over to the recycler. "The Inquiry is at 1300. They'll start with a statement of purpose and introductions, then move to a brief overview of what happened. All that will last about an hour. Tomorrow, they present their case and the next day you present your defense. They cross-examine you and then they'll render a verdict. So rest, relax...well at least as much as you can."

"I'm really glad you're here," Terri said.

Harry smiled. "There's a reason you are given a choice to have a senior officer stand with you. You'd be an idiot to do it alone. It also shows that someone above you believes you did the right thing. You did what you thought was right at the time" He sighed as the recycler sucked the dishes in. "You still saved the day. That Subspace Niatic burst really messed that cube up. You bought enough time for the Prell to decide to finish the job. I just...wish it had played out better."

Both were silent as the recycler hummed. Each of them was carefully sorting the nightmares playing out on the backs of their heads, all in an attempt to avoid reliving that day once more. Terri found her voice first.

"I know," Terri said. "I'm sorry too."

Harry shook himself to lock the memories out again. "Don't second guess yourself. It doesn't help matters and I don't need you to be a nervous wreck. Both rounds with the Borg have been pyrrhic victories for Starfleet and they seriously need to get their shit together if we even hope to survive another encounter with them." Harry said, shaking his head.

“How’re the ship’s repairs coming along?” Terri asked, picking Taber up off her lap despite his protests and setting him on the ground before shooing him off.

“I’m still waiting to hear from the Dockmaster at Starbase Altairia,” Harry replied.

“I still can’t believe Fara lets someone else handle her ship,” Terri mused.

“They do good work,” Harry said as he stepped back into the sitting room. “You should have seen the ship after the last time the Altairians worked on her. The Raptor’s not the same ol’ bitch she used to be since they fixed us up last time.” He couldn’t help but smile. “It’s been pretty great actually. You don’t wake up in the middle of the night either freezing or being too hot, the lifts all work and actually stay on, the gravity in the gym stays functional so I can actually get an early morning swim without finding the pool spilling out into the corridor. I don’t get a sock in my morning coffee every third cup. Hell, even the replicated food is as palatable as it is on a heavy cruiser. Although, part of me thinks Major Hughes had something to do with that”

“Whose that?” Terri asked curiously.

“He’s the leader of the marine detachment they’ve assigned us,” Harry explained. “I think he must have some friends in high places, because he complained about the food once to me and then it suddenly got better.”

“So we have a detachment assigned to our ship now?” Terri asked, both eyebrows shooting up.

“Our privilege due to all our recent excitements. Starfleet wanted to prevent the ship from getting hijacked again, or another disaster like the Epsilon 3. They’ve been handy to have, especially as of late. They got to cut their teeth on the Borg during the battle, although I’m not sure which they did more damage to, the interior or the Borg.”

Terri frowned. “Do they escort away teams?”

“No,” Harry replied flatly. “But, I can deploy them if the situation is hazardous and it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Where do they stay?” Terri asked. “I thought we were basically out of accommodations.”

“On the ship, Deck 4,” Harry replied with a smirk. “They use the Cargo bay you converted for Ambassador Kolnov, although I’m sure they’ve done their own renovations. I don’t bother to ask. Hughes stays out of my way and I stay out of his. Occasionally, I get a requisition for a few odds and ends, but I barely see the man except for when he hands me his crack of dawn report.”

Terri chuckled. “So they just lurk in the belly of the ship?”

Harry chuckled. “Yeah, they pretty much have Deck 4 to themselves. O’mara sees them way more than I do, since her new lab is down there.”

Terri continued to smile. She wondered if O’mara got catcalled when she was down there. She made a mental note to ask her about it when she got back.

“I’m sure she just *loves* the attention,” Terri grinned.

“What do you think?” Harry snorted, rolling his eyes. “Though, now that you mention it, she does seem to be getting better at ignoring that kind of thing. We have to sweep fewer feathers up from the deck plating these days.”

\* \* \*

## Back in Ketha Province

Fara had taken a look at the transponder and, sure enough, a lightning strike had taken it out. Using the *Talon's* replicator, she made a new set of transponder chips with better grounding and higher surge resistance, ones that could take a hit from a full-blown interstellar ion storm. She then took the master control chip from the civilian model, scanned it, found it was fine, and reinstalled it in the transponder. She then noticed that the box it was in had been installed too close to the lightning rod grounding cable.

"Seriously? Who wired this damn thing up?" she hissed as she removed everything, again, and set about detaching the unit housing so she could move it away from the grounding line. She checked the amount of power cabling she had and noticed there was enough to set the housing up further along the wall.

She rolled her eyes. James had some talent, she had to admit that, but he'd have been a disaster of an engineer. Out of reflex, she made to shout at Knackt or Claudia to get her a spare fastener, but she stopped herself since none of them were present at the moment. She had to get her own tools, fetch her own things on this job. Snarling, she made her way back to the *Talon*, replicated a set of fasteners and then used the transporter to beam back. She had just finished mounting the casing when her ears twitched in response to a low distant rumble of thunder. She reached into her kit and pulled out a small injection-replicator, which she used to fill in the holes in the wood of the house from where the transponder had been mounted. The work was done.

Fara walked back into the house, past Krysta, who was reading a book and finishing her breakfast.

"I might have your transponder fixed," Fara said, heading for the living room.

"My what now?" Krysta asked, glazing up over the edge of her book.

"The data doohickey," Fara corrected herself, finding the remote on the coffee table. She turned the receiver on and waited for the vid screen to warm up. Suddenly, the multimedia menu popped up as a weather warning scrolled across the screen. "Should be better than new now."

Krysta came up and held her hand out for the remote. Fara handed it to her and then sat on the couch to give her leg a break. She had been working on getting off the cane lately and it was resulting in no small amount of pain. Short morning runs had been helping and, despite the pain, she was improving everyday.

Thunder rumbled outside as Krysta checked her favorite channels.

"Wow! You really did a good job! Normally a thunderstorm knocks the signal right out," Krysta said.

Fara chuckled. "That's the difference between terrestrial civilian equipment and Starfleet issue."

"Fara, you didn't have to do that," Krysta said. "Won't you get in trouble?"

Fara shrugged. "I was told to help. I'm not going to use inferior parts. Besides, the master chip is your old one. In fact, it was the only part of the whole transponder that wasn't a pile of crap. Don't worry, it's not like you are going to tap into classified channels or anything."

A thunderclap roared outside and the lights flickered slightly.

"Are we going to be able to get out of here today?" Krysta asked.

“Oh yeah, don’t worry about that,” Fara chuckled. “That ship out there has survived way worse than a planet-side thunderstorm.”

“I suppose that’s...reassuring?” Krysta said, not wanting to ponder the enormity that seemed attached to that statement. “I have some spare rain gear you can borrow when you’re ready to go.”

“Just take some time and make sure you have access to everything. We’re not in that big of a hurry,” Fara said, rubbing her leg.

“Ok, I’ll let you know when I’m done,” Krysta said, connecting all her other devices, making little sounds of approval as she worked. “You are right, Fara. It’s working better than it ever did! Thank you so much.”

“Not a problem,” Fara said. “I also relocated it on the back of the house. Whoever installed it had it too close to the lightning rod ground. That’s how it got fried, but the part you have out there now can just shrug one of those off even if it does get hit.”

“I told James it was acting weird, but he insisted it was fine,” Krysta huffed.

“Well, that’s the difference between a tinkerer and an engineer,” Fara said with a grin.

“I appreciate it. If we’re going to go, I should probably grab some slickers. It sounds like it’s really pouring down out there,” Krysta said as the rain drummed down on the roof.

“Sounds like a plan,” Fara said, getting up. Krysta left and came back with a slicker for each of them. Fara noticed that Krysta had grabbed a heavy-duty, slightly worn and well-traveled leather satchel, which she had slung over her arm.

“Alright, here’s the plan,” said Fara as they headed for the door. “The way into the Talon is in the back, so follow me and I’ll key in the codes and we can get in and get the door shut. Don’t worry about getting cold, the computer will detect we’re in there and engage life-support.”

Krysta and Fara made a mad dash for the *Talon*. Fara keyed in the passcode and the gangway lowered.

“God! I thought it would pour back home!” Fara spat as she and Krysta hurried aboard. Water was running off the slicker and into her face.

“Despite my misgivings of using a ‘ship’ I’m glad I’m not in the hovercar in this mess,” Krysta admitted, taking her slicker off as Fara did the same. “It doesn’t handle well when it dumps like this. James tells me it doesn’t have the proper repulsors to deal with standing water and he hasn’t been able to find some that will work with the engine.”

Fara scoffed. “Ha! Let me at ‘em and I’ll make that thing space worthy!”

“So, is this a shuttlecraft? It’s a little bigger than one’s I’ve seen before,” Krysta said as she looked around the small hold.

“It’s a modified cargo shuttle. We’re currently in the hold. The engine sits forward of us and the accommodations are above. No lifts though, so you have to use a ladder.” Fara explained quickly, undoing her hair and wringing out before putting it back in a ponytail. “Most shuttles are not much bigger than this hold.”

“I see,” Krysta said, listening intently. “This is exciting! To be honest, it took years to get used to using a transporter to get around the planet. You hear all kinds of horrible things about accidents with them.”

“Those incidents are few and far between,” Fara said, making a note to not even bring up the two incidents they had experienced on the *Raptor* in casual conversation before

continuing. "This ship is pretty reliable. I put her together myself, and she behaves a lot better than her bigger sister, in most respects."

Krysta laughed. "You talk like it's your child. It's a ship."

"It's a lot of work and TLC either way," Fara protested, crossing her arms in front of her.

"Then I'll feel less nervous, knowing you take it that seriously," Krysta allowed.

"Let's get up to the cockpit and you tell me where to go. Follow me," said Fara.

She left the small hold and climbed the ladder leading to the upper deck. She stepped through the hatch of the cockpit and the lights blinked on. Fara heard Krysta gasp as she stepped into the cockpit. Smirking to herself, Fara headed down to the flight controls and started the pre-flight. The rain splashing on the window gave her a strange sense of déjà vu, causing her fur to stand on end. She shook herself, hoping that would be enough to banish the feeling clawing its way up her spine.

"Where do I sit?" Krysta asked.

"Anywhere you'd like. You can't really do any harm." Fara said as the engines began to warm back up.

Krysta sat at the operations console and stowed her satchel under the console.

"Do you have your list Krysta?" Fara asked over her shoulder.

"I do," Krysta confirmed. "You told me to get whatever I thought I would need."

"Ok, first we're heading to Logopolis to get a conversion kit for those repulsors and some new ones," Fara said.

"You don't have to do that," Krysta protested. "I'm sure James would be livid if someone tweaked his hover car."

"I'm sure he's going to be more upset if that damn thing careens into a ravine on a rainy day and takes you with it. If he's anything like his brother, he'll deal with it." Fara said, excusing herself and requesting clearance from global air traffic control.

"I suppose you have a valid point," Krysta said, strapping herself in.

Fara got the clearance and she was about to lift off when she froze, one hand on the throttle. She'd never got to take Nikolai out on the *Talon*.

She clenched the controls, deaf to the traffic controller's request for confirmation from her. Shaking, biting her lip, remembering him and trying to not let it overwhelm her, she opened her mouth to respond. Nothing but a whimper came out of her as her tears ran down her cheeks. From the corner of her eye she could have sworn she saw him, leaning over the back of the com chair and admiring the vessel, smiling at her.

"Shuttle Talon? This is Termia Air Control. Please acknowledge that you have received your flight path clearance," someone said over the comms.

"Shuttle Talon acknowledging," said Fara, wiping furiously at her tears. "Climbing to 10.6 klicks, bearing 270, mark 65."

"Pilot Talon, verify fitness," the controller said sternly. "You sound distressed."

"It's nothing." Fara hissed. "I'm fine."

"Very well. Safe flight Talon. Termia Air Control out," said the controller, closing the channel.

"Everything ok?" Krysta asked.

"Yeah, just peachy. Hang on, this is a little rough," Fara said, retracting the landing struts, activating the thrusters, and pulling back on the yoke.

Krysta yelled in surprise as the engines kicked in and the *Talon* blasted skyward. Eventually, Fara leveled it off and settled into the flight path. Fara triggered the holographic overlay on the canopy, since they had flown into a raging thunderstorm. The *Talon* was buffeted a bit by turbulence, but it wasn't anything she couldn't deal with.

"What's shaking the ship?" Krysta asked.

Fara chuckled as she wiped her eyes. "It's just turbulence. All sorts of atmospheric phenomena can cause that. Since we're going through a storm it's to be expected. Don't worry though, we'll be fine. We should be in Logopolis in about 10 minutes."

"I wish I could see out a little better," Krysta said.

"Not a problem." said Fara as she toggled one of the screens so it displayed the terrain they were passing over to her console.

Krysta thanked her as she looked at the display in wonder.

It didn't take too much longer before Fara saw the sky markers for incoming traffic and used those to enter the city. She entered her destination and the flight control computers took over, guiding the ship. Eventually, they routed the *Talon* to an exit and descended down to the central marketplace, which was one of the larger spires they could see. Fortunately, there were some places to park a ship as large as the *Talon*.

A few moments later they were outside the craft once again and looking at the holographic directory, trying to figure out where to stop.

"It looks like the parts dealer is on floor 75," Fara said, relying on Krysta to read her handwritten note.

"James wanted me to grab some lumber. He was wanting to get the barn fully fixed up. The lumberyard is on floor 15." Krysat said, glancing between the list and the directory. "The rest of the items will involve a lot of walking around and shopping."

"I'm an engineer, not a carpenter," Fara chuckled.

Krysta laughed. "No no! I just need to get the supplies. I'm not expecting you to do that!"

"Oh good! I mean, if you want a starship, I'll need some time, but I'm sure I could bash one together for you in a year or two. But, a barn? I wouldn't know where to start!"

"You're funny," Krysta said. "Let's go get those hovercar parts first."

Fara smiled. The more she was with Krysta, the more she liked her.

"Alright," she said, walking over and grabbing a flat bed trolley. "Follow me and maybe you'll learn something about hovercars."

A bit later, the trolley was loaded down with various items. Fara used her near bottomless credit pile to pay for most of it, even though Krysta tried to insist she not do so. Krysta used her credits to buy most of the food items. Fara let the feisty old echidna have her moment of victory. It was getting harder to argue with Krysta the longer they shopped. In fact, just walking was getting harder. Fara found herself leaning on the cart more as her leg began to flare up. Termia's gravity was slightly higher than the 1G used on starships. Fara had assumed she wouldn't notice the difference, since she'd spent time on Termia before, but the damaged muscle in her leg sure knew the difference.

She sat on a bench as Krysta was into one of the stores. Gritting her teeth and trying to massage her thigh as it burned beneath her trousers, Fara let out a low growl. Even though that

maniac Owens had met her end at Harry's hands for what she did to her, Fara still wished she'd been able to beat on her as well for leaving her this damn injury that just refused to go away.

A brown paw entered her vision with a yellow capsule in it.

"Here, take this." She heard Krysta say.

"What is it? An anti-inflammatory?" Fara asked as she took the capsule.

"Yes, but it's not what they give you," Krysta replied. "You don't have any allergies to any kind of fish, do you?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Fara frowned, raising an eyebrow. "Does it help that I ate a lot of fish taco's last time I was here?"

"I think you'll be fine," Krysta laughed, holding out a bottle of water as well. "Just take it. It'll help with the leg. Harry told me what happened to you. It...sounds terrible."

"You have no idea, sister," Fara grumbled, taking the capsule and washing it down. "How long does this take to kick in?"

"About 10 to 20 minutes," Krysta said, sitting beside her.

"You mind pushing the cart?" Fara asked.

"Not at all. Oh!" Krysta pulled out a small data chip from her leather satchel. "I am supposed to give this to you. It has the transporter coordinates for the lumber we need to pick up before we leave."

Fara took it and nodded, slipping it into her trouser pocket. She then reached into her overcoat pocket, pulled out her folding cane, and extended it with a flick of her wrist. "I really am looking forward to when I don't need this damn thing anymore," she said, getting up and wincing.

Krysta looked at her. "If it helps, I'd estimate you are almost over the worst of it. It's just you are right in the middle of the worst of it."

"What? Are you a doctor?" Fara chuckled.

"I've got enough education to practice what I do and be licensed," Krysta said confidently. "It's how I earn my credits. I make remedies for various ailments for the folks out in the country that are leery of more modern alternatives or who's systems can't handle them."

"You sound like our ship's doctor." Fara said with a slight scowl. "He likes to concoct things in his lab when he's not forcing us to deal with grievous injuries."

"Pain isn't a bad thing. It teaches you what you can and can't do." Krysta shrugged. "If it didn't hurt, you'd probably injure it worse, and then it would never heal."

"I guess you have a point," Fara said, trying to get moving and feeling the stiffness subside a little. "If we're all done here, let's get loaded up and get back. I think I can at least get that car modified before I call it a day."

\* \* \*

Harry ground his teeth. He hated it when he was wrong.

No sooner had the formalities ended than Conroy, Kelb, and Egorov immediately went after Terri with both barrels. He had to stand there and witness the most severe three-on-one dressing down he'd ever seen in his whole career. Terri couldn't do anything but stand there and weather the storm, answering with only "yes sir" or "no sir" as the questions rained down on her.

They were trying to drive a point home with her and Harry felt that he'd ill-prepared her for such a flogging. When they entered the room, he'd had no idea they already had the hammer out and were ready to smash her right through the floor.

"The facts are thus, Commander Lu. Firstly, you violated the direct order of a flag officer. Second, after your flagrance, you then needlessly endangered civilian lives. Thirdly, you withheld vital information from flag officers who could have performed a similar, some would argue *identical*, action with their own vessels. Finally, your actions directly resulted in the destruction of the *Intrepid*, incurring mass casualties that were easily avoidable." Conroy finally took a proper breath, and then carried on. "The record does show that your actions directly contributed to a dubious victory in this particular instance. Regardless of that, the facts surrounding your insubordination and frankly abysmal decision making are irrefutable. Do you understand, Commander?"

"Yes, sir," Terri said for what had to be the hundredth time.

"Then you'll understand why we must do what we are about to do," Conroy said stiffly. "It is the judgment of this committee that you will be stripped of the rank of Lieutenant Commander and you will be demoted back to the rank of Lieutenant. It is our hope that you will learn from this experience."

"I understand, sir," Terri said in a voice barely reaching a whisper.

"Bailiff, if you will?" Conroy said

The court officer strode up and held out his hand to Terri. Shaking ever so slightly, Terri reached up to her collar and removed the pip. She deposited it in the bailiff's waiting hand. The officer turned smartly on his heel, marched up to the committee seats, and handed the pip to Conroy.

"You will return to our post aboard the Raptor under Captain Martinez," said Conroy as her taloned fist closed over the pip. Still speaking, she stood and approached Terri. "You are to be placed on probation for two years, after which time you will be eligible for promotion again. The *only* exception to this probation is for emergencies in which there is no one of higher rank than yourself, in which case you may temporarily take command of a vessel or team, per Starfleet Regulation 4418.2. The *instant* a senior officer is available to take command, you are to defer to them. Is all of that understood, Lieutenant?"

Conroy snapped the last question at her as she set the pip on the bar in front of Terri.

"Yes, sir," she said.

Harry bit his lip, glaring at Conroy. He wanted to say something, but knew it would be career suicide if he opened his mouth. To his surprise, he was being addressed now.

"Captain Martinez, the committee apologizes to you for your superfluous role today," Kelb said dryly. "Your presence has been considered and noted, but we are sure you can understand the nature of Lieutenant Lu's mistake and the nature of our judgment."

"I can and I do, sirs," Harry replied tersely.

"Excellent. This hearing is adjourned." Kelb declared as Conroy continued to glare at Terri. "Captain, you and Ms. Lu are dismissed."

They made it halfway down the corridor before Terri stopped. Harry paused a few steps past her, turning to ask what was wrong, but he didn't need to ask. Terri was sobbing as she stood there, shaking.

"I only did what I thought was right!" she choked.

"I know you did," Harry sighed as he stepped over and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "This is the part of the game they don't tell you about. Fleet command are a bunch of armchair generals. It's easy for them to look at data printouts and lecture us about the choices we made in a split second when death was just about to swallow everyone. You saved all our hides that day. Don't forget that, 'cause they can't take that from you. The thing to take away from this, and what they all saw today, is that you stood there, took responsibility, and you didn't break. You just took it. That definitely impressed them. Hell, you impressed me!"

"I...I did?" Terri gulped, looking at him with reddened eyes.

"Yes. In two years time, if you're still under me, I'll be putting in to get you promoted again." Harry said.

"You would?" Terri sobbed, leaning on him a little harder as she shook. "But...what about...that...everything they...."

"Just let them try to stop me." Harry smirked confidently.

Terri smiled, her sobs turning into a feeble chuckle. It was easy for her to pull him into a tight hug. It was just as easy for him to hug her back.

"Thank you for believing in me," she said, kissing his cheek.

"You've never given me a reason not to, Number One," he smiled back. "Hey? Why don't you come out to the farm tomorrow, have some dinner, and we'll try to put this behind us?"

"Can I bring a guest?" she asked.

"Commander Penda?" Harry guessed.

"Yes." Terri admitted with a sheepish smile.

"That'd be fine," Harry said. "I'll make sure to make plenty of food."

\* \* \*

The sun had made a return and a balmy afternoon had set over the farm. Fara panted as she worked. She'd changed out of her uniform to some utility trousers and a tank top. She had her hair tied back in a ponytail and a bandanna was wrapped around her forehead. The conversion had gone well so far and Krysta kept her going by bringing plenty of lemonade. She was just finishing hooking up the power supply again, checking a tricorder. The device indicated nothing was shorting or grounding out. Nodding, she closed the hood of the hovercar.

Working with her hands kept her mind busy...kept Nikolai's ghost out of her head...mostly.

The whir of an engine and a wheel crunching on gravel caused her ears to swivel, chasing the sound. She stepped out of the barn and found Harry getting off his monocycle. Fara stepped out of the barn, wiping her hands on a rag.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

Harry shook his head as he sighed. "Terrible. She may as well have walked into a firing squad. Complete waste of time, honestly. They could have done it over the damn network if they were just going to demote her back to Lieutenant!"

"Ouch," Fara said, wincing.

"Tell me about it," Harry said, sighing again. "Are you done with whatever you're doing? I could use a walk."

Fara nodded. "Sure, but I'd like to clean up first."

"Be my guest," Harry said.

A bit later, after she'd cleaned up and changed, Harry took his turn. She noticed he'd gathered up a yard trolley and tossed the cooler into it. She opened it up and saw it had several beers, some water, and he'd also put in some sandwiches and food as well. There were also some throw blankets as well. She assumed wherever they were going didn't offer that many amenities when it came to sitting. Her stomach rumbled as she remembered she'd neglected to get lunch. She pulled her cane from her belt and shoved it into the wagon, assuming she'd need it for later.

"Everything, ok?" She heard Krysta ask as she appeared on the porch. Krysta had been out in her garden while Fara fixed the hovercar.

"Yeah. I got the car fixed. I'll give it a little spin when we get back. I think we're going for a little hike." Fara said, nudging the cooler with her foot.

"Harry seemed a bit upset," Krysta noted. "I thought maybe I needed to intervene."

"Nah, we're fine," said Fara with a slight dismissive gesture. "I think he's more upset at what happened to our friend."

"Harry said you two were going for a walk," Krysta said. "Could I borrow you before you go to cut some vegetables for supper?"

"Sure," Fara said.

Fara followed her into the kitchen and took up a position by the sink. Krysta handed her a cutting board and a knife before she set about washing the soon to be diced vegetables. For a minute it was quiet as Krysta washed and then handed vegetables to Fara, who chopped them up with mechanical precision.

"So," Krysta said, finally breaking the silence of their little assembly line, "how close are you and Harry?"

The knife ceased mid-slice through an onion. Shrugging, picking up her chopping again, Fara said, "We're friends. That's all."

Krysta giggled as she bathed a potato.

"What?" Fara asked, frowning.

"The way you said that! You just confirmed what I thought," Krysta said as Fara scraped the onion into a bowl with the peppers that had already been processed.

"The hell does that mean?" Fara scowled.

"Darling, part of what I do is help young people with their relationships. I've learned a few things in my time doing so." Krysta smiled in a kind way that snuffed out the fire of Fara's indignation. "That woman—Nora—rest her soul, she was Harry's friend. You are a bit more than that to him. You don't have to hide it from me."

Fara flushed under her fur. She snatched the potato from Krysta and started rapidly chopping, trying to act as if she wasn't in this conversation.

"Slow down, Fara." Krysta said patiently. "We don't need blood in the food."

"Look...I need some air," Fara snapped as she stiffly set the knife down next to the decimated potato. "You mind?"

Krysta shook her head. "That's fine. We can take a little break."

She watched Fara go out on the porch as she washed her hands and grabbed the next few items for the meal. As Fara paced the porch, Krysta poured herself some juice. Before she could take a sip, her head snapped up, drawn by a familiar sound. Someone was sobbing and

Fara could no longer be seen pacing. Cautiously, Krysta went out to the porch. She found Fara wiping at her eyes.

"Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you," Krysta said sincerely.

"You...didn't," Fara sniffed. "You aren't wrong...Harry and I have...something, but it's...complicated." Fara sobbed a little, then laughed. "I'm sure it wouldn't work if we tried to de-complicate it. We'd probably kill each other."

Krysta gave her a knowing smile and nodded. "So what's stopping you? Men and women are always going to be at odds with each other. That's just nature."

"I already had my someone...my Nikolai." She tried to resist the tears, but they won and came cascading out once more. "He was wonderful and...and I loved him dearly! I...I...I...lost him! He's gone!"

She buried her face in her hands and howled. Krysta set her glass on the window sill and gently guided Fara over to the porch swing, trying to comfort her. She had seen heartache before, but whatever Fara was experiencing was on a whole other level. She fished out a clean handkerchief from her pocket and handed it to Fara.

"Take your time," Krysta said soothingly while she rubbed Fara's back.

Fara continued to cry while she tried to wipe the tears away. The tears refused to stop for several minutes, but eventually they turned back into staggered sobs and sharp breaths.

"That...that felt d-d-different than...than the other times," Fara confessed. "What...what happened?"

"Grief," Krysta said quietly, "and that won't be the last time it comes out. Tell me, what're you thinking right now?"

"That I don't really have a lot in my life," Fara admitted. "I have my work, my dad, although that's a whole other issue at the moment. A few friends, my ship. Any more though, it feels like all of that could just...poof!" Fara made a gesture with her hand as though something were exploding. She sighed. "I don't know if Harry told you, but my life is a blur up until a few years ago. I don't feel like dwelling on it is worth it. I'm too busy. At least, I was too busy." Fara leaned back in the porch swing and looked out onto the fields where the rain had decided to fall once more. "Then Nikolai came along. For just a moment, I really felt like my life was starting to make sense. But...now he's gone and I feel...so...so...lost!"

"That makes sense," Krysta said softly, looking out into the rain herself. "A long time ago, I loved someone too. We were going to start a family. He opted to join up with Starfleet, sort of an insurance policy to secure the future, as he put it. He died out there, in that merciless void, and I was left here."

"How'd you handle it?" Fara asked.

Krysta turned to her and waited until Fara looked at her to respond. "I'm only good at giving advice because I know what not to do. Experience and self-examination can be great teachers, if you are willing to learn from it."

"Oh," Fara said. "Does it ever stop hurting?"

"Time can only dull this kind of pain," Krysta said, running a hand through her spines, the beads in them jingling. "Eventually the memory is faint enough that we can reach out and try again. Personally, I'm getting a bit tired of being by myself; it loses its appeal after a while."

Thunder rolled as Fara asked, "Aren't you afraid you'll get hurt again?"

"No." Krysta said flatly as she reached over, took Fara's hands and looked them over. "You have a lot of damage, all these scars...and these are just the outside ones." She looked over at the nic in Fara's right ear. "How did you get all these scars?"

"It comes with the job," Fara said.

Krysta nodded. "And do you love what you do?"

"Most of the time," Fara admitted bitterly. "Why?"

"Bear with me." Krysta admonished. "With all your scars, some of them looked like they really caused you a great deal of pain. Did you ever abandon your work because of the injuries that brought the scars on?"

"Machines bite. It won't help if I throw a tantrum and run away each time I get a scratch." Fara said, not quite following.

Krysta smiled at her. "That's how I do it too. I got bit, hard, but I keep coming back. I keep living."

"Ohh!" Fara said, comprehension dawning in her eyes as Krysta let her hands go. Harry had told her something similar and now his words made sense.

"We can't live our lives in fear, nor can we let our scars define us, no matter how deep." Krysta said quietly. "If we did, no one would ever fall in love again, have more than one child, or even leave their house."

They heard the door open and Harry stepped out on the porch. He was dressed in jeans and a shirt, but kept his boots on. He still looked tense.

"Are you ready, Fara?" Harry asked as he finished toweling out his hair and hung the towel up on a line strung between the support posts of the porch.

"Yeah." Fara said in deep compilation. "I think I am."

"Go have fun. You helped enough," Krysta said, smiling and getting up to head back inside.

"Do you have your cane?" Harry asked. "It's a bit of a hike."

"Yeah, but I'll try to do without it," Fara said impatiently as she got to her feet. "You aren't going to make me pull all that, are you?"

"No," Harry said, walking over to the wagon and bending over to grab the handle as he called back into the house. "Krysta! I'm going to my quiet place!"

"Ok! You know when supper is!" Krysta yelled back.

"Let's go," Harry said, popping the cooler open and pulling out a beer before they started walking. He cracked it open as they headed for a trail that led behind the barn. Before they had got past the barn, Harry was already working on his second beer.

"Ease up there, Captain," Fara giggled. "You're hitting those a bit hard."

"It's just Harry for now," Harry hissed, polishing off the second bottle. "I requested a furlough after the bullshit I had to witness today."

"Oh..." Fara said, a bit taken aback. "Alright. I didn't think you'd be that upset."

"It's not just Terri It's everything," Harry growled, tossing the bottle at a rock sticking out of the ground and watching it shatter before grabbing two more and handing Fara one. Fara took it, but she couldn't help but hesitate. She wasn't used to seeing this side of him.

"The Raptor can be Rivas' problem. That tub is the last place I want to be right now." Harry snarled through gritted teeth. "I'd just be in the damn way. He can oversee the refit well enough!"

"I can drink to that," Fara said, opening her bottle and taking a swig.

Harry gave her a slight grin and started on his third, but he was slowing down as they continued down the trail with the trolley trundling along behind them.

The heat of the day was rapidly starting to pass and a cool breeze washed over the hills, bearing salty tang with it. Fara judged it was blowing in from the ocean.

"I'm so done with everything," Harry snapped suddenly, interrupting Fara's musings on the scent of the ocean. "For one brief, damn moment, everything in my life was going right! Then...poof! All gone!"

"I know what you mean," Fara muttered.

Harry looked over at her and she locked eyes with him. His shoulders slackened a little and she saw a slight reduction in the fire behind his eyes.

"Yeah...you would know, huh?" Harry smiled at her. "Aren't we a pair of sad sacks then?"

"Yup," Fara smiled a sad smile. "How much further do we have to go? You've got food in there and I'm hungry."

"Not far now. It's just over that little rise." Harry said, fetching another bottle. "I stowed a few sandwiches. I figured if I didn't, you'd probably complain."

They continued on until they came up on a wooded glen. The clearing was perched on the edge of a small pond with no discernible inlets. Fara glared at it until she spotted a slight rippling in the water across the pond. It was a natural spring.

"Your quiet place?" Fara guessed.

"Yeah. One of them." Harry said, pulling the wagon under the canopy of the largest tree, which was positioned close to the edge of the pond.

"It's nice," Fara said, ducking under the branch and feeling the cool air under the tree.

Harry laid out the blankets, then pulled the cooler out and set it up on them. He then sat down and pulled out a sandwich and handed it to her. Fara took it greedily, but thanked him before they both sat and began to eat.

After they finished, they took turns skipping rocks across the pond as they nursed their beers. Fara did her best to alternate between bottles of beer and bottles of water, but she was sure Harry was further along than she was. The Amberwave was made for echidnas and it didn't really take nearly as much for her to feel its effects as it did him. His gaze seemed distant, detached, as if he was just going through the motions of skipping stones while lost in his own thoughts.

"Harry?" Fara said, finally breaking the silence.

"Yeah?"

"Are you tired of hurting?"

He stood there, rolling a stone over in the palm of his hand. Fara watched as he glared at the water, his fist slowly clenching over the stone.

"I'm sure you already know the answer to that." he said, whipping a stone across the pond.

"That's not what I mean," Fara muttered.

Harry sat heavily next to her, abandoning his remaining flat stones. "Then what do you mean?"

Fara huffed and flopped back on the blanket. "Do you have to be so damn aggravating?"

"I would think you'd have it no other way," Harry smiled.

Fara looked at him and, in spite of herself, laughed. She then rolled on her side so she could gently shove him. "Stop being a smartass!"

Harry shrugged and Fara slugged him in his shoulder. He barely felt the blow due to the alcohol swimming through his system.

"Listen," Fara demanded as she sat up. "I'm being serious."

Harry turned to face her. "You have my full attention."

"We're both miserable. We both lost people we love. We can't do anything about it and I'm tired of suffering alone." Slowly, her eyes on his hands, she reached out and rested her hands on his. "Why should we suffer at all? Or, for that matter, why should we be alone?"

Harry chewed his lip and looked down at the ground.

"It...it wouldn't be appropriate," he muttered apologetically.

"You said you aren't an officer right now, that I'm talking to Harry the man, not the Captain." Fara said, grabbing his chin and tilting his head up so she could hold his gaze. "In this fucked up universe we live in, who has the goddamn right to say that you and I have to be miserable? I thought everyone in the Confederation had the right to pursue happiness, right? I'm sick of pursuing it on my own."

"It would be difficult," Harry said, but he remained locked in her gaze.

"Like it wasn't before?" Fara said.

Harry opened his mouth to say something, but stopped.

"Harry...we're two broken halves. We could maybe make something out of that." Fara said, scooting closer. "Isn't that better than nothing? It has to be better than this heartache and pain we're both feeling, right?"

Harry sighed, but he still hadn't tried to move away. "I'm...afraid. I don't want something to change how we are."

"Seriously? Harry, the polyvirus already did that!" she said.

"I care for you...a lot. I don't want to hurt you, Fara." Harry said, but something about his posture made the words feel half hearted. He was straining, but not against her. She could feel the slight vibration in his hands, the heat of his breath so close to her face. He was holding himself back.

"I don't think you ever could. You didn't then, I doubt you'll start now." she whispered, inching slightly closer, her nose nearly touching his.

"Fara..."

She closed the distance, her lips touching his, and he ceased his attempts at restraint.

\* \* \*

The hour was getting late. Krysta stood on her porch, watching the sunset, tapping her foot. She was hoping Harry would be back soon. She heard a timer go off and went to check on the food. A few moments later, after some stirring, she came back out and saw Harry and Fara emerging from behind the barn with the yard trolley.

Fara sighed heavily as they made their way back. Harry glanced over at her, one eyebrow raised.

"That bad huh?" he said quietly.

"Don't worry about it," Fara chuckled. "It's just...I was hoping that I'd feel a lot better, you know?"

"I..." Harry started, but failed. He sighed. "So it was that bad?"

Fara punched him in the arm. "*You* were great. I guess I just thought this would be a silver bullet, that suddenly we'd both feel amazing again."

"I do feel a bit better," Harry admitted with a shy smile.

"Well...I mean, so do I," Fara grinned back. "Maybe if we keep at it we'll eventually get out in front of it."

"I wouldn't object to that." Harry said. "I just want to make sure we don't ruin what we already have."

Fara's expression solidified for a moment as she grabbed his hand. "Harry, you couldn't ever replace Nikolai. I sure as hell can't replace Jayna. That isn't what this is about. This is about moving forwards. We've made it this far, right? I'm just asking you to hold my hand as we keep moving. Think you can handle that, Captain?"

"I suppose so," Harry said, smiling in spite of himself. "I guess a whole lot hasn't changed, huh? Just so you know, I'm still going to be a hard ass towards you. Don't think you can push me because of what we just did."

"If anything I expect you to be worse," Fara grinned. "Besides, I don't mind your hard ass one bit."

They both were laughing as they neared the porch under Krysta's tight stare.

"I'm glad to see you two are in a better mood," she said. "I wasn't looking forward to seeing you scowling at the table all evening."

"I'm doing better," Harry said. He smiled at Fara. "We both are."

"And how pickled are you, exactly?" Krysta asked.

"We didn't have that many! We've got...lemme see..." Fara checked the cooler and started giggling, realizing there was only one beer left. "There're a few left in the cooler! Um...so...how long until supper is ready?"

"Another twenty minutes," Krysta said as Fara snapped the cooler lid shut, keeping Krysta from peering into it.

"I'll go give that hovercar a quick look over," Fara said. "I'll make sure I get in a full test drive tomorrow sometime. I think I might be a little too tipsy for that right now. I can get it up and back down the drive in one piece." She let out a heavy hiccup. "I think?"

"That will be fine, thank you," Krysta said, eying Harry as he put the empty bottles in the recycling bin. "You could wash up and set the table," Krysta suggested. "I hope you were behaving yourselves out there."

"Don't worry! We picked up all the trash," Harry said, neglecting to mention the bottle he had smashed, taking a bag out of the cooler that had the scraps from the sandwich wraps and tossing it in the rubbish bin. "I'll get the table."

Krysta nodded as he walked past her into the house. She rolled her eyes.

"Krysta," Harry added from inside, "tomorrow I have some guests coming over. I'll get cooking duties, if that's alright with you?"

"Sure. I was just doing this to treat you both for Fara helping me out," Krysta said as she heard the whine of the hovercar engine go.

She looked up in time to see Fara disappear slowly up the drive with the vehicle.

"So, everything is ok?" Krysta asked as she stepped inside.

"As well as they can be," Harry replied from the washroom. "I was just a bit angry that Starfleet decided to waste our time with a formality, only to lay out a punishment they could have done from afar is all. I took some time off, since they thought it necessary to waste my time."

"You won't get in trouble will you?" Krysta asked as she leaned against the door frame.

"Nah. They granted the request. I requested two weeks and they gave me a month," Harry said.

"That's great," Krysta said with a smile. "You might get to see your brother when he gets back."

"It'd be nice," Harry smiled.

"Are you high?" Krysta asked with a frown. "You left here with all the world on your shoulders and now you seem almost right again."

"You know I haven't touched Bela in years, Krysta." Harry said, stung she would even suggest such a thing. "Drunk? Yes...a bit."

Krysta eyed him. "Well, I suppose you're right. I don't smell it on you."

She definitely smelled another scent on him that wasn't him. There was something else too, something that definitely wasn't Amberwave on his breath.

"It's just, we talked, had some beers, and Fara helped me work a few things out is all. She's an engineer. She's good at fixing things." Harry said dismissively.

"I bet she's good with her hands too." Krysta smirked.

Harry froze, eyes wide, like a child caught with their hand in the cookie jar. She could see him flush under his fur.

"Quit lollygagging and get the table set," Krysta cackled, returning to the stove to check on the meal.

Still blushing, Harry scurried off to get the table set.

Fara returned a few minutes later, parked the hovercar back in the garage as the clouds started to build in the horizon once more, indicating more rain for the night. She soon joined Harry and Krysta for the evening meal.

"I took it around the drive a little bit. It seems to handle better over big puddles now. At a minimum it stopped listing off to the left whenever it encounters a large amount of water." Fara said when Krysta asked how the car had handled.

"That's great," Krysta said. "I really appreciate it, Fara."

"So, we're going to be here for a bit apparently," Fara noted. "Do you have any other chores that need to be done?"

"I do, but we'll discuss it tomorrow. Just enjoy dinner," Krysta ordered with a wave of her fork.

"Harry?" Fara asked. "I do need to check the impulse exhaust units on the Talon. Would you mind giving me a hand in the morning?"

"Sure, if it's not raining out there," Harry said, motioning with his fork through the screen door where the sounds of rain running down the gutters could be heard. "After that, I want to grab some fish tomorrow. I know a good place up the road away. You should come with me. There's some great scenery along the way."

"Sure, sounds fun," Fara replied with a coy smile. "I guess I shouldn't be in such a hurry to keep busy"

"You still haven't got your beach time in yet," Harry reminded her.

Fara nodded. "Yeah, you're right, and you aren't getting out of it."

"The weather is supposed to let up tomorrow." Krysta said. "The rain is nice, but my sunfruits will drown if it doesn't let up. You two just relax. With the car fixed up, I can definitely take care of a few errands now."

"You know what? The Talon's impulse units can wait. Let's just take that trip Harry." Fara said.

"Sure thing." Harry nodded.

\* \* \*

## Logopolis

Terri stood on her balcony overlooking the ocean. The sun was slowly disappearing over the western horizon. Terri sipped the lemonade that Nyota had brought her. What she really wanted was a stiff drink, but that option was still off the table for a while.

"What's on your mind?" Nyota asked.

"I've been thinking about what you said and I think I will take that break." said Terri as she continued to stare.

"Good on you," Nyota said.

"My Captain invited us to dinner tomorrow at his place." Terri said in an offhand tone, sipping her lemonade again.

Nyota chuckled. "He isn't cooking, is he?"

Terri smirked. "Yeah."

"Is he any good?" Nyota asked.

"Well, he looked fine when I saw him. I assume if he was a bad cook, Fara would have given him a black eye already." Terri chuckled. "You don't get between her and food."

"You don't say," Nyota said as she leaned on the railing of the balcony. "I suppose we should go then. It would be rude to turn down the offer."

"I'm sure it will be fine," Terri said.

"Terri?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't let this bump in the road discourage you," Nyota said sternly as the sun set.

"I'm going to hit it hard once I have this baby and find out exactly what the hell is going on with Jonathan," Terri said. "I'm tired of not knowing...just waiting. I need to know if he's still there or if I...need to carry on with my life...without him."

"What will you do if he does come around?" Nyota asked.

"First? I'll tell him I love him. I...well I was horrible to him. He deserves to know how I actually feel." Terri's breath caught as her eyes teared up. "I...want to be the first face he sees...when he...he...."

"Easy there. You've had a bad enough day and you don't need to be working yourself up," Nyota smiled as she hugged her. "I'm sorry I asked."

"I'll be ok," Terri chuckled through her tears. "Things have just been so difficult lately, with losing my friends on the Intrepid...."

Nyota shushed her. "You will have more than enough time to work that all out. Stop being an overachiever and trying to do it all in one day! Trust me, a lot of this will take years to work through. Just focus on the things you can tend to now and the rest will come."

Terri sniffed and nodded. "You know, for someone who never had children, you make a pretty good mom."

Nyota let out a soft laugh. "It's not that hard to do. It just takes empathy and patience."

\* \* \*

## Later, Elsewhere

Admiral Conroy was getting ready to settle down for the evening when her video monitor signaled that she had an incoming transmission. Curious, she went to her desk. The computer indicated an incoming transmission from Nyota Penda. Frowning, she acknowledged the call.

"Commander Penda," she said as Nyota's face appeared on the screen. "How are you this evening?"

"I'm fine, Admiral," Nyota huffed.

"What brings you calling this hour?" Conroy asked.

Nyota looked pensive. "I'm sure you can understand the nature of my call."

"I do, but I'm sure *you* understand my position in the matter," Conroy replied stiffly. "However, we do need to keep up appearances. Unfortunately, Ms. Lu still made her own decisions, of her own free will, just as you have. I won't have you second guessing my choices. You *do* have my sympathies, but that is all. I am sure this is all quite confusing and upsetting, especially for you."

"It's...difficult," Nyota admitted. "It was hard enough just seeing how things have played out so far."

"Now, off the record," Conroy said, softening a little as she sat. "How is she?"

"She's resting. It took a bit to get her to settle down, but once she relaxed she was out like a light. Is there any update on Land?"

"None as of yet," Conroy replied, "but I was able to find the best person I could and get her placed on his case. She will perform to the best of her abilities, to help him."

Nyota frowned. "What about Doctor Rodon?"

"Your colleague is very good at what he does, but even he suggested that Doctor Oona would be the best choice, due to her specialization in xeno mammalian and marsupial neurology. He has, however, been monitoring Land's case and progress and offering whatever help he can. He's in the best hands available in Starfleet, so there's not much more I can do at this point."

"Thank you. I really appreciate that," Nyota said. "I just worry about Terri."

"I know you do," Conroy said. "Is there anything else?"

"No, thank you, Admiral," Nyota said with a dismissive wave. "You have a good night, Admiral."

Conroy shut off the terminal and leaned back in her chair, sighing deeply. The day had been taxing. The council was in full panic mode and had been demanding that more ships be built and more tactical measures be developed to deal with future Borg attacks. There were

even calls for funding to be diverted into the currently anemic weapon development programs. The fleet was stretched almost to the breaking point; everyone was on edge. The Prell were even poking their beaks into Confederation space, along the border. There had been no skirmishes yet, but they were definitely testing the waters.

She took a deep breath as she smoothed her feathers down. Sighing, she glanced at a portrait on her desk. It was times like this she really wished she had her twin sister to still confide in. The portrait on the desk was of her sister on her wedding day. She was with a tall, handsome, brown-furred echidna with white headfur who had an uncharacteristic smile. At that moment in time, they were both happy, and Conroy had been happy for them, despite the rest of her family's misgivings.

Avians tended to not choose life partners outside of their own race. It was usually looked down on in their society but a change had been occurring over the last several years and progress was slowly being made. The biggest concern put forward by orthodox Avians was that they couldn't breed with anything outside their own race. If interracial unions became normal, it would lead to a gradual extinction of their people. This was obviously an asinine argument, one Conroy never agreed with. Last she checked, there was an ever-growing supply of new Avians being born in space due to colonies or to their parents being away from home and making poor choices with romantic partners.

She shook her head to get her thoughts back in order. That stupid fear had caused enough problems and led to the death of her sister...and many others. The culprits would be dealt with soon enough though. It was just that, with recent events, Conroy was uncertain of the timetable now. All she could do was wait until she received a message. She was sure that message would come in its own time. She didn't need to be dwelling on things that repeatedly annoyed her when she had so much to work on already.

"Good night, sister," Conroy whispered, brushing the frame with her hand as she stood and went back to preparing for bed.

\* \* \*

## **The Next Morning**

Harry's monocycle zipped down the road, setting a fantail of leaves and water spraying behind them. Fara clutched him tightly, watching the scenery zip by through the visor of her helmet, feeling the whir of the engine through her legs on pegs her feet were resting on. The ride was surprisingly smooth, almost like flying a few feet above the ground. Fara was loving every minute of it.

"How far is this place?" Fara asked via the com circuit in her helmet.

"About another forty minutes if we don't encounter any obstacles," Harry replied. "Why? Do you need a break?"

"No! This is pretty awesome!" Fara crowed. "Can you go any faster?"

Harry chuckled. "I'm already going as fast as I legally can. Hold on!"

The bike hissed slightly as its suspension system shifted into a hydraulic-assisted vertical jump system. It quickly dipped down and leapt into the air, soaring a few yards before coming smoothly back down onto the roadway. Fara let out an excited whoop at the apex of the

jump and braced as they came back down on the blacktop. The monocycle's suspension absorbed the shock, the tire squealed on the damp pavement, and their speed dropped a little. Fara glanced back and saw that they'd leaped over a tree that had fallen on the road during the storm.

She gave him an affectionate squeeze and he touched her hand with one of his. "Nice one!" she giggled.

"You sure you want me going faster?" Harry said, keeping his eyes forward, glancing at the vehicle's sensor displays in his own helmet.

"If you can't go faster, I wouldn't object to another jump!" Fara laughed and she gave him another squeeze.

"All right," said Harry. "I'll see what I can do."

"It's supposed to be sunny and warm tomorrow! We're going to the beach," Fara insisted.

"Fine, we'll go," Harry said over his shoulder, spotting a rise in the road ahead of them. Harry thumbed the throttle and primed the jump system again. "Brace yourself, this is going to be a lot bigger."

They were both full of adrenaline and joy, neither of them knowing when or how this new ride would end. More importantly, they were both feeling something again. That was all either of them cared about as they took air off the rise in the road, the jump system hissing, both of them laughing as, for the first time in a long time, both of them felt free.

For now, for the first time in what felt like a lifetime, they were not alone.

THE END