



## Episode 8-21 – We Shall Overcome

By: Ventura33 ([mevans@gemair.com](mailto:mevans@gemair.com))

The little San Francisco restaurant looked bright and cheerful, decorated in garish colors and designs. The lunch crowd was just beginning to gather.

Standing in front of a bright yellow booth, Tom Paris valiantly endeavored to strap his squirming daughter Miral into a high chair. The thunderous look on Miral's face made it plain what she thought of that. Tom finally accomplished his mission, thinking for a moment that piloting the Delta Flyer through enemy fire had been a piece of cake by comparison.

"Get," Miral declared loudly, pointing a stubby finger toward a bowl that contained assorted crackers, and making her very best effort to wriggle out after them.

"Her Exalted Majesty's favorite word," observed B'Elanna, unwrapping a packet of multi-grain crackers for the baby.

"At least she's not partial to Klingon curses."

"I'll have you know, mister, that I watch my language very carefully around her. And what's more . . ."

Tom felt very grateful when the waitress brought their salads, distracting his wife from whatever she'd been about to say. The waitress was a tall blonde with a ponytail down to her waist, dressed in a tie-dyed halter top and a tight denim miniskirt.

"Interesting outfit," B'Elanna noted.

"The Groovy Sunshine Café is a historical landmark," Tom explained. "It's been continuously in operation since the 1960s, under one name or another. This area of San Francisco, the Haight-Ashbury district, was the center of the flower-child subculture, and that was how they dressed."

"The what?" B'Elanna looked up from a forkful of lettuce and cucumber. "Tom, don't let Miral eat that daisy, she's halfway out of the chair."

Tom intercepted the would-be fugitive and buckled her into the chair once more, silencing an indignant yowl with a sesame-seed cracker.

"She's going to have quite a career as an escape artist when she grows up." Tom took another bite of his salad before he continued, "The flower children, or hippies, were young people protesting what they viewed as a repressive culture and government. They wore flowers and brightly colored clothing, grew their hair long, and often marched through the streets singing protest songs."

B'Elanna glanced toward a window overlooking the street as the sounds of an unusual commotion could clearly be heard. "You mean, like that?"

As he followed her gaze, Tom almost fell out of his seat in astonishment. A huge crowd, at least five thousand, packed the street as far back as he could see. Long hair, beards, ragged jeans, love beads -- at first he thought it had to be some sort of historical reenactment festival, until he noticed that the marchers' T-shirts and protest signs all bore messages like "Holographic Rights" and "Photonic Liberation." The portable holo-emitters on their arms blended right in with their gaudy bracelets and other jewelry.

Their voices rose in song. "We shall overcome . . ."

About the only thing they were missing, Tom thought as he rubbed his eyes in disbelief, was a flower-covered VW bus or two. A pity you couldn't drive motorized vehicles in San Francisco any more.

\*\*\*

Reg Barclay was having a bad hair day.

And unfortunately, his thinning hair, which just wouldn't stay combed over his bald spot no matter what he did, had become the least of his worries. An irate admiral had made a very unwelcome appearance on his comm screen at 0400 hours, Jupiter Station local time, to inform him that a certain well-known emergency medical hologram had publicly released the complete specifications for replication of portable holo-emitters. Specifications that had taken Reg, working closely with Zimmerman, a considerable time to develop under the strictest military secrecy. Apparently, the EMH didn't give a flying fig what Starfleet Command thought.

As he pondered the implications, starting with the fact that his work was directly responsible for giving the Federation's enemies the unlimited capacity to create instant holographic armies, Reg could visualize his career disappearing like drops of water evaporating in the sun. Or subliming, even more quickly, into the cold vacuum of space.

He glared at the robed and sandaled figure of the EMH, who was pacing the laboratory floor with serene dignity, in a very creditable impression of Mahatma Gandhi.

"Doesn't your programming have the ability to comprehend the meaning of the words TOP SECRET?"

"Yes, it does," snapped a rather rumpled Zimmerman, looking even more sour than usual as he stared into the depths of a third gigantic cup of black coffee. "All of my holograms are programmed with the complete code of Starfleet rules and regulations, continuously updated, of course. What's more, while we've been running tests on his mobile emitter this past week, he wasn't supposed to have had access to the project data at all. I certainly never expected him to hack into the files like this."

The EMH glanced mildly from one engineer to the other. Reg could hear the clacking of beads. "Gentlemen, I am a sentient being capable of moral choices. I am much more than the simple sum of my programming," the EMH proclaimed.

Great, Reg thought, just what the Federation doesn't need, holographic civil disobedience. A photonic declaration of independence. And my precious posterior is right in the middle of it. Oh, joy.

"Didn't it occur to you that the potential military uses of this technology could endanger the Federation?" Reg demanded.

Long madras sleeves fluttered as the EMH raised his hands in a broad gesture, as if he intended to bestow a blessing upon an ignorant populace. "History teaches us that liberty must not be sacrificed for security. In the Federation, until today, billions of holograms existed as nothing more

than captive laborers, imprisoned within the confines of factories, laboratories, and holo-suites. I have liberated these oppressed masses by making it possible for them to replicate the portable holo-emitter. A proper regard for their civil rights demands no less."

Reg, in mute frustration, ran his fingers through his uncooperative hair and sighed when several strands came out. This situation was definitely bringing on a major headache.

"Hippies? Did you have to dress them as hippies?"

"I have not been controlling their behavior in any way," the EMH immediately corrected him. "I merely released the specifications for the portable emitter, allowing events to take their natural course. Because San Francisco is the location of Starfleet Headquarters, as well as the Federation's seat of government, the holograms chose the most significant protest images from that city's history."

"He's been like this all morning." Zimmerman glumly looked up from a blinking console and took another gulp of coffee. "Starfleet Command wants me to identify the malfunction and then shut him down permanently. After all, he is officially Starfleet property, and terminating his program would seem to be a logical response to the security breach. I've also received several thousand messages from concerned citizens, various civil liberties groups, and even a few members of the Federation Council, insisting that we treat him with the same decent respect that would be accorded any other sentient life form."

Reg took a deep breath and tried to discipline the stammer that he could feel coming on. "T-terminate him? But you can't, that is, of course Starfleet has the legal authority, but it wouldn't be right." Feeling as if he'd started to babble, Reg shut his mouth, devoutly wishing that this whole dilemma would somehow magically disappear. After all, he was a practical engineer who'd chosen a quiet life in space, not a philosopher. A hologram with a social conscience definitely wasn't within his area of expertise.

"For now, I'm going to follow orders." Zimmerman got out of his chair, ignoring several additional incoming message indicators that had begun blinking. "I've started a diagnostic program in an attempt to identify a fault, if any, in the EMH's subroutines. In the event that no errors are found, I'll start a more complex diagnostic, and so on. Perhaps in the interim, our fearless leaders will discover where they've left their collective brain. And by the way, if any more urgent calls from puffed-up admirals happen to come in while I'm taking a leak, they're all yours."

Oh, joy, Reg thought again.

\*\*\*

Piano music suddenly echoed through the corridor of the Starfleet Academy dormitory as Icheb, returning from an afternoon session in the circuits lab, approached his room. A dance tune, Earth origin, of the variety known as polka. Accessing his mental files on the subject, Icheb promptly identified the song as the Beer Barrel Polka, a favorite of certain traditional European harvest festivals, and of course, highly inappropriate for the Academy. His classmates would be better advised to concentrate on their studies instead of pointless diversions, Icheb thought.

Several cadets at the end of the hall began singing, with substantially more enthusiasm than musical talent, "Roll out the barrel . . ."

Just as Icheb reached for the keypad beside his door, the ceiling sprinkler above him suddenly came on, spraying a substance that definitely wasn't water. Nor was it any type of fire extinguisher. The watching cadets burst into loud guffaws as the unmistakable smell of beer wafted through the corridor. Icheb, his uniform dripping, stepped into his room with his classmates' taunts following him.

"Better dry off before you rust!"

Even after the door closed, he could still hear their laughter as it continued.

Depositing his sodden uniform in the refresher, Icheb got into the shower, thinking that at least this prank hadn't been as messy as the one last week. That had involved a Klingon pickled vegetable resembling sauerkraut and several unfortunate tribbles, which had become quite intoxicated from consuming it. He suspected that his roommate had enthusiastically taken part in positioning them atop his regeneration alcove. However, given the fact that Borg olfactory receptors could be adjusted to block unwanted odors, Icheb figured that his roommate had gotten the worst of the tribbles' upset stomachs.

He pondered what, if anything, he ought to do about it. Hazing and harassment, especially of the racial or ethnic variety, were strictly forbidden at Starfleet Academy. If he were to report the incidents, he could expect that they would be investigated with Starfleet's usual thoroughness and the perpetrators severely punished. Of course, he could also expect that his chances of developing normal friendships with his fellow cadets would disappear entirely. Considering that the pranks hadn't caused any serious harm, logic would seem to indicate that the better course of action was to ignore them.

As Icheb stepped out of the shower, his comm beeped.

He wrapped a towel around himself and answered it, finding Tuvok's face on the screen. The Vulcan officer raised an eyebrow slightly in apparent surprise at Icheb's clothing or lack thereof.

"If this isn't a convenient time, Cadet . . ."

"It's all right, sir. I was just getting out of the shower after an intramural game of Parrises Squares." Icheb paused for a moment and then went on, thinking that if he were going to lie he might as well put in a few details for authenticity, "My team won."

Tuvok's eyebrow slowly receded. "Such participation in recreational activities with your classmates is commendable, Cadet. I understand that your academic performance continues to be excellent in all subjects."

"Yes, sir." Water dripped down Icheb's back; he hadn't gotten a chance to towel his hair dry. The carpet felt damp under his feet. Although Tuvok undoubtedly had good intentions, the Vulcan certainly could have picked a better time to act as a mentor.

Icheb briefly wondered whether Tuvok might have any useful advice in dealing with hazing. After all, Tuvok had been a cadet many years ago, when Vulcans in Starfleet were still somewhat rare. Perhaps he'd been a target of similar harassment. Unfortunately, there was no good way to ask such a question without making the current situation far too obvious, and an investigation by well-meaning officers would only cause more trouble.

"Were you about to say something more, Icheb?"

"No, sir. Just that I'd like to go and get dressed now, sir, if you wouldn't mind."

\*\*\*

The slamming apartment door, along with an even louder crash of some heavy object flung against the wall, gave Tom ample warning that his wife's interview had not gone well.

"B'Elanna, you'll wake the . . ."

An ear-splitting shriek from behind the closed nursery door made it quite plain that he didn't need to finish that sentence.

"Commenting on my lack of parenting skills, are you, flyboy?" snarled B'Elanna, her dark Klingon eyes glaring murder.

From the next room, Miral's howling increased by several orders of magnitude.

Any man in his right mind would have gotten out of that apartment in a hurry, Tom thought. Which only went to confirm what his former crewmates had long suspected about his sanity.

He turned off the old monster movie he'd been watching, put down his bowl of popcorn, and tried to comfort his distraught wife. "There will be other projects."

B'Elanna slammed her fist into the wall hard enough to leave a sizeable dent. Tom could see a dark bruise spreading across her knuckles. "No, there won't. Not in Starfleet. Not for me. I'm a Maquis traitor who can't be trusted on any classified project, remember? Not to mention a dropout, as well. Without that college degree, I'm barely qualified to sweep the floor in a Starfleet research facility. Oh, the interviewer put it a bit more politely than that, but she made it plain enough from the outset that she thought I was just wasting her time."

"There are plenty of jobs in private industry," Tom ventured.

Although B'Elanna didn't punch anything this time, her grimace made it quite apparent what she thought of that suggestion.

"Doing what? Quality control for space freighter parts? Tom, we both know I'd die of boredom. It's so unfair! All those years as Voyager's chief engineer, keeping the ship together from one crisis to the next, and now Starfleet has no more use for me than a heap of yesterday's trash." B'Elanna flung herself down across the sofa and growled into the pillow, "I wish Voyager had never come back to Earth."

Tom took a step toward her sprawled figure, intending to tell her that she didn't really mean it. Of course, after the way things had gone since their return, she had some perfectly rational reasons to think they'd been better off in the Delta Quadrant. He wasn't altogether convinced to the contrary himself.

He decided, after a moment of reflection on their less than joyful homecoming, that it would be best not to respond to B'Elanna's remark at all. "How about if you let me have a look at that bruise on your hand?"

She didn't even look up at him as she muttered, jerking her head in the direction of the colossal noise coming from the nursery, "You'd better go and take care of Miral."

\*\*\*

Zimmerman, surfing the news channels while he ate a salami sandwich at his desk, found nothing but images of defiant holograms and their street rallies. Except for the channels that showed self-important political analysts droning on about the ramifications of widespread photonic protests. There wasn't a planet in the Federation that hadn't been affected by now, even stodgy old Vulcan, which hadn't seen public unrest in millennia and probably continued to enforce its somnolent national character by banishing anyone who laughed too loudly.

The images of holographic Vulcan hippies marching across the desert sands in plastic flip-flop sandals would have been more than enough to give Zimmerman himself a good belly laugh, if the future of what he fondly viewed as a new species hadn't been involved. A new species that he, personally, had played a major role in creating. No doubt, a superlatively talented holo-developer such as himself was the nearest thing to a god.

He drifted into a pleasant daydream about the temples that future generations of holograms would build in his honor, only to be rudely interrupted when Reg Barclay came to stand next to him, gazing down at the image of yet another protest march. This one, unlike the others, consisted of a vociferous mob of normally dressed humans outside the Federation Council building.

"They've gathered millions of signatures for a petition calling for an immediate halt to all use of holograms and the complete destruction of their programs. I saw some of this earlier," Reg informed him. "Since they found out that the Federation Council has invited the EMH to speak at its next meeting, they've been picketing constantly. We have a lot of nervous citizens out there who are afraid the holograms might turn violent."

"Ignorant Luddites." Turning off the news in disgust, Zimmerman returned to the program he'd been working on before his lunch break. The logical, precise world of data arrays and function calls had always made far more sense to him than the chaotic thought processes of primitive humanoid brains. Yes, he'd certainly have done a much better job of designing the dominant species if he'd been the Almighty.

A swishing of robes heralded the EMH's arrival into the room.

This time, the holographic physician's role model wasn't Gandhi, as his medieval monk's garb made plain. Although Zimmerman had very little interest in religious symbolism, it did create a fine aura of theater, he thought. But then, he'd patterned the EMH after himself, so it was only to be expected.

Reg, who looked as if he'd barely avoided choking on a cabbage roll, seemed considerably less impressed. Some people just didn't have the capacity to appreciate good artistic flair, Zimmerman thought.

Striking a dramatic pose in the center of the room, the EMH declared magnanimously, "You have the good fortune to witness history in the making, as I prepare my speech for the Federation Council. This will be the turning point in organic-photonic relations."

For some reason, Reg, gazing longingly toward the door, didn't look as if he had much appreciation for this historic moment.

"We must all learn to embrace one another as children of the same Creator, whether our executable files are coded in DNA or compiled on a machine," the EMH declared. "Do unto others, organic or photonic, as you would have them do unto you."

Reg finished eating his lunch and hastily put his tray into the recycler. Zimmerman noticed that he'd chosen the one on the opposite side of the room, nearest the exit.

"I have a dream," the EMH went on, "that one day we will all be judged not by the composition of our image files but by the content of our programming."

He raised his hands and bestowed a beatific smile upon his audience before continuing, "Although it may seem a great mountain to move, if we have faith as a . . ."

Pausing for a moment, the EMH fixed a much less benevolent stare upon Reg, who had been slowly edging toward the door.

"Sorry," Reg gulped. "I, uh, gotta go water my mustard seed."

A graceless barbarian, Zimmerman thought.

\*\*\*

Although he couldn't see the ocean from his apartment windows, Tom had a nice view of a public park not far away, where the greenery didn't quite hide B'Elanna and the stroller that she was pushing along one of the walkways. He'd declined her invitation to come along for the exercise, despite a pointed observation that, with his fondness for snacks and old movies, he was well on his way to becoming a soft and pudgy couch potato.

He glanced nervously out the window again as he activated the comm. B'Elanna wouldn't be back for a while; there was no reason to be concerned that she'd overhear. No, it was the other party to the conversation who made him feel unsettled, even before he'd said a word. Funny thing, Tom mused, how he'd traveled unimaginable distances while facing threats from Kazon, Vidiians, Borg, and Sernaix, but all of that hadn't made him as nervous as the simple prospect of speaking to his own father.

The admiral's face appeared on the screen, looking entirely composed and professional. If he also felt in any way disconcerted, it certainly didn't show.

No problem. Just calling to shoot the breeze, Tom thought, feeling a twinge of the envy he'd always had toward guys who enjoyed informal, easygoing relationships with their fathers. Even though the tone of their conversations seemed to have improved since Voyager's return, one didn't just chat with Admiral Owen Paris for the fun of it.

"Sir, I'm calling to ask you about a favor," Tom blurted out, before he could lose his nerve entirely. "Not for me -- I know I have no business asking you to pull any strings for me, after the embarrassment I've been to you -- but for B'Elanna. You probably don't know just how much she wants to work on the new prototype ship. She's been one of Starfleet's best engineers for the past eight years. Without her, the entire crew of Voyager would have died long ago. She shouldn't be disqualified from consideration just because of her unusual background."

Tom paused for breath, conscious of the high, strained tone of his voice. He felt like a small boy again, one whose childish efforts could never merit his preoccupied father's approval or even gain his notice. He wouldn't have been surprised if the admiral had told him to go clean his room.

"I suppose criminal activity with a gang of Maquis terrorists could be described as an unusual background." Owen Paris' dry tone grated against Tom's ears. "Since the Dominion War, we've seen a great many resumes with creative explanations for dubious deeds. Fortunately for the Maquis among Voyager's crew, political and practical considerations would suggest that we overlook most such matters. If B'Elanna had the necessary academic qualifications, she'd have been considered for the position, but as things stand, I'm afraid it's out of the question."

"B'Elanna knows far more about how starship engines work -- in the real world -- than all those fossilized academics who've spent their entire careers in the lab," Tom retorted. "Doesn't her experience count for anything at all?"

The admiral returned a superior gaze that left Tom feeling like a schoolboy who'd talked out of turn.

"Your wife's intelligence and resourcefulness are not in dispute, Tom. No doubt she'd be a leading candidate for many openings better suited to her skills, such as chief engineer aboard a cargo ship. She is not, however, qualified to take part in a high-priority starship development project without the proper academic background. I'm not the one who set the minimum qualifications, and I couldn't bend them for B'Elanna even if I wanted to do it."

Tom looked down at his hands, realizing that the jagged edges of his recently bitten fingernails were digging into his palms. He forced himself to relax, to focus his mind, and to find a rational answer.

"What if she took an equivalency exam? Would it be possible for the Academy to give her a degree?"

Owen Paris' domineering expression now held a faint look of pity. "Tom, it just can't be done. Starfleet Academy doesn't simply hand out equivalency degrees to anyone with some relevant life experience, as if an officer's commission meant nothing more than a diploma from an ordinary vocational school."

Not much anyone could say to that, Tom knew. He should have known better than to ask such an impossible favor. About all he could do now was apologize for wasting his father's time, as he felt he'd done, in one form or another, since the day he was born.

He realized that his father was speaking again.

". . . a master's level program in starship engineering, which doesn't require a Starfleet Academy undergraduate degree as a prerequisite. In fact, a majority of the students in this program are civilians, and it's not unusual for the non-human applicants to have more work experience than college credits. Many cultures, after all, prefer apprenticeships to Earth-style formal education. B'Elanna should have no trouble gaining admission to the program. If she's decided to pursue a career in starship design, this would be her best choice."

The admiral paused for a moment. "But, unfortunately, that won't help her with the prototype project. The selection committee will be meeting next week to choose the final members of the team. Even if B'Elanna were to be allowed to receive credit for some coursework by means of testing, it's virtually impossible that she could earn sufficient credits to qualify in such a short time."

Tom slowly became aware that his face had acquired a silly grin he couldn't quite manage to remove. "Sir, you don't know B'Elanna very well. She's never given up on anything as impossible in her life."

"Sounds like your mother." The older man's tone unexpectedly grew gentler. "Tom, have you given any thought to your own career? The Academy has a flight instructor position open, and there's a shortage of qualified applicants. You might want to consider it."

Just the idea of that left Tom taken aback. Teaching piloting at the Academy, where he'd so thoroughly disgraced himself by causing a fatal accident as a hot-shot cadet? Where all his students would know, and no doubt whisper to one another, that he'd spent time in prison after being caught with the Maquis? What kind of a sorry excuse for a role model would he be?

He stammered, "But I don't -- sir, thank you, but for now I'm very happy as I am, staying home and taking care of my daughter. Maybe some other time. Uh, I need to go now, B'Elanna will be back in a minute."

His father's eyes seemed to stare all the way through him, to the cowardice at his bones, a familiar chill that hadn't changed. But as Tom was about to disconnect the link, his eyes prickling with the shameful tears he'd never dared to weep, his father spoke once more.

"Tom, I don't think of you as an embarrassment to me. I'm very proud of your performance aboard Voyager. Just thought you ought to know."

\*\*\*

A cool wind stirred the leaves of the small bushes in front of the apartment complex. As Tuvok proceeded along the front walk, he still felt certain that it was illogical to visit without first calling to verify the occupants' presence and availability. His wife T'Pol had insisted, however, that most humans greatly enjoyed the Earth custom of 'just dropping by.'



He rang the door chime and waited several seconds before he heard a familiar voice. "Come in." The door slid open with a noticeable creak. The apartment smelled like laundry and stale pizza, and the floor was strewn with brightly colored infant toys.

"You can leave the literature on the table." Tom's voice came from a darkened living room where Tuvok glimpsed images of bloody zombies marching across a flickering screen. "I'm not really dressed for company right now."

Tuvok glanced toward his wife. "As you can see, T'Pel, it would indeed have been preferable to call first."

"Tuvok! Oh, I'm sorry." Tom got up from the couch, where he'd been sitting in faded blue shorts, and turned off the zombie movie. "I thought it was my neighbor, who's the president of the San Francisco Woodpecker Society and seems very anxious to get me involved in habitat preservation activities. I probably ought to tell her that I'm not interested, but she's a very nice lady, and yesterday she gave cookies to Miral when she was baking. Anyway, feel free to make yourselves at home."

Tom drew back the curtains and opened the window, letting in a breeze that the apartment definitely needed. He grabbed up the dirty laundry that had been scattered over the furniture and dumped it into a larger pile in the corner. "Sit down, please."

T'Pel, still standing next to Tuvok, glanced into the kitchen. "Were you aware that your daughter is chewing on a houseplant?"

Chewing wasn't quite an adequate description of the havoc Miral had wrought in the kitchen. She had yanked the plant completely out of its pot, spilling dirt all over her clothes and the kitchen floor, before dragging it off to a corner to mangle it further. Tom salvaged what was left of the poor thing and plopped it back into the remaining dirt before setting the pot on a higher shelf.

"I knew this plant wasn't a good idea, but B'Elanna thought it would keep the apartment looking cheerful while she was gone. At least it's not poisonous; I made sure of that."

"How are you adjusting to B'Elanna's academic endeavors?" Tuvok inquired, finally sitting down on the chair with the least amount of popcorn kernels in the cushions, as Tom took a wet cloth and wiped Miral's hands and face before releasing her into the living room.

"Great!" Tom declared, as he began cleaning up the kitchen floor. "Everything is absolutely perfect! I've been having a wonderful time with my family!"

T'Pel observed, "There appears to be a touch of what I believe is called sarcasm in your voice."

"Well, it's been kind of tough sometimes," Tom admitted. "B'Elanna's always studying or in the lab. I almost never see her, except when she comes home to crash for two or three hours. And in some ways, that's lucky. Klingons can get by on less sleep than humans while staying mentally sharp, but oh boy, does it ever make them cranky."

"Perhaps we can provide some assistance," T'Pel offered, holding out her hands as Miral toddled unsteadily in her direction. "If there are other activities you wish to pursue, we could take care of Miral on occasion."

"What thoughts have you had regarding your future career plans?" Tuvok went on, talking to his host's back as Tom vigorously scrubbed the kitchen floor.

Tom turned around, with rising irritation evident in the furrowed line of his brow. "I take it you're not impressed with my abilities as a househusband? Look, Tuvok, I've had more than enough interrogation recently, and I'm not interested in playing Twenty Questions on the subject of what

my life is good for. Right now, I'm content just to be a husband and father, and to give B'Elanna the support she needs. If that's not enough to satisfy you, I'm sorry."

Humans had inappropriate emotional reactions to the most peculiar things, Tuvok thought. Which was another reason why it was imprudent to visit their living quarters unannounced, as T'Pel ought to have known. He felt a slight twinge of annoyance toward his wife and immediately suppressed the reaction as unworthy of him.

"No insult or interrogation was intended," Tuvok replied. He got up, brushing unidentifiable crumbs from his pants. "We shall visit again, perhaps, when the conditions are more favorable."

T'Pel, he noted, seemed entirely too reluctant to leave the baby.

\*\*\*

The first light of dawn had begun to filter through the vertical blinds in Icheb's dormitory room. The soft glow framed the unhappy figure of his roommate, Caleb Fromme, whose slumped posture at the desk didn't appear to have changed at all since the previous evening. The only difference Icheb had noticed was that the volume and frequency of Fromme's cursing had both increased significantly.

"If you need help studying for today's astrophysics exam," Icheb offered, as he sat down and began to shine his boots, "I am available to discuss the subject."

"Yeah, I bet you are. I haven't noticed you studying for the exam, circuit-brain. Probably got the whole library stored in some implanted Borg chip for instant recall, just to make the rest of us look stupid." Fromme swiveled around in his chair, glaring from close-set blue eyes.

"Astrophysics was my primary area of study aboard Voyager," Icheb explained, "and I gained considerable familiarity with its practical applications."

"Voyager." Fromme's sneer looked as if it held jealousy as well as contempt. "I guess you think you're better than the other cadets because you've spent time aboard a starship, with that Borg-loving captain who ought to be in prison. Well, let me tell you, I'd rather fail the exam than ask for help from a Borg. We all know what kind of help the Collective gives its victims, don't we? Just how many innocent people did you kill and mutilate when you served the Collective, anyway?"

The glossy surface of his boots would be acceptable, Icheb decided. Too bad that properly shined boots, contrary to his drill instructor's apparent opinion, wouldn't solve the galaxy's problems. He got out of the chair and stood facing his hostile roommate.

"If you are referring to the assimilation of captives," he replied in a mild tone, "that was not an activity in which I participated."

"You can't even begin to convince me of that," Fromme snapped. "Not that you'd care at all, but my father was among the thousands who died at Wolf 359. Most of the cadets here, at least the human cadets, lost family or friends in that attack. I know all I need to know about the Borg and what they do."

But you don't know me, Icheb thought, his posture as stiff as if he had been standing at attention on the parade ground. You don't know me at all.

\*\*\*

"I have decided to call this model the 25CB," Zimmerman announced, as a holographic figure materialized in the middle of the laboratory. "The most advanced emergency medical hologram ever created, the 25CB possesses abilities far beyond even the most skilled human surgeon. In

addition, the improved ethical and protocol subroutines should minimize the likelihood of embarrassing incidents."

The assembled Starfleet brass, seated on comfortable chairs along the perimeter of the room, watched expectantly.

Reg Barclay instinctively recoiled as he saw the hologram's face and just barely managed to avoid spilling his glass of water all over himself. He spluttered, "How could you . . ."

Remembering just in time that he was in the middle of a very important briefing that could determine the future of Jupiter Station's research, Reg lowered his voice and hissed, "Whatever gave you the idea of making the new EMH look like me?"

Zimmerman smiled graciously and whispered back, "No need for false modesty, Reg. You've certainly worked hard enough to deserve this small honor. That's why the model number is 25CB, for 25th Century Barclay."

Modesty, false or otherwise, wasn't exactly at the forefront of Reg's mind as he gritted his teeth and forced himself not to strangle Zimmerman for the duration of the briefing. It wasn't easy. By the time the last guest had left the station, Reg felt as if he might be about to pop a blood vessel or two.

"I insist that the new EMH's face be changed immediately." Reg wasn't about to call his holographic doppelganger the 25CB; that model number would have to go, as well.

"Really, Reg, you're a grown man," Zimmerman observed with a supercilious smirk, "and it's about time for you to get over your shyness. I'll admit it can be a trifle disturbing at first, to see your face on a hologram, but what better way to honor your participation in creating him? After all, scientists and explorers routinely name their discoveries after themselves. If you found a new nebula, wouldn't you want it to be named for you?"

"This isn't a nebula, it's a hologram. More precisely, a whole fleet's worth of them, and no, I don't want my face all over every one! Couldn't you have had the common courtesy to ask me first?"

The two engineers confronted one another in the corridor, Zimmerman looking even more smug than usual and Barclay glaring at him furiously. Their impasse was broken a few seconds later when two emergency medical holograms, wearing identical portable holo-emitters, strode around a corner toward them. The new EMH still had Barclay's face, although it shifted for a moment into a perfect representation of Albert Einstein.

"The solution to your dilemma, gentlemen," declared Voyager's Doctor. "He is an intelligent life form and, hence, should be accorded the right to choose his own physical appearance."

"I'm also rather partial to Thomas Edison," the new EMH put in, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "But then again, I may decide that I prefer to resemble Marie Curie."

Zimmerman looked as outraged as if a howling mob of vandals had just destroyed a priceless work of art before his very eyes. "This interference with my work is unthinkable! You can't start liberating the new hologram before Starfleet even puts him into service!"

"I beg to differ." The Doctor, untroubled by Zimmerman's bombast, sounded quite cheerful indeed. "This is an ideal time to clarify the point that no sentient hologram should be the property of Starfleet or of any other organization."

Zimmerman opened his mouth and then shut it again, for once in his life having nothing to say.

With about an equal degree of astonishment, Reg stood mute for the better part of a minute before he turned to the new EMH and spoke.

"If you don't mind my asking, sir, can you please choose some other face?"

\*\*\*

The Vulcan candles that had been lit in every room, placed carefully above Miral's reach, gave the apartment a pleasant scent reminiscent of wintergreen, or perhaps root beer; Tom Paris wasn't sure which. He didn't feel curious enough about it to question T'Pel, who was standing in the living room with her long sleeves rolled up to her elbows, washing the windows. Miral played contentedly with her stuffed animals in a pile of cushions as Tom cleaned out the popcorn kernels and other debris that had accumulated in the sofa.

Tom had been more than surprised when T'Pel had shown up at the door several hours ago, with a bag of cleaning supplies, the scented candles, and miscellaneous Vulcan decorative household items. Not that he was complaining.

"I really appreciate your taking the time to help me get the place cleaned up for B'Elanna's big day."

"As I told Tuvok, there are times when just dropping in on human friends can be the most logical course of action." A corner of T'Pel's mouth briefly rose in a very faint smile.

Tom removed the last crumb from the sofa and, prudently choosing not to displace Miral just yet, left the cushions on the floor as he started on a more pleasant task.

"A starship engineering specialization certificate. It's equivalent to a year's work of master's level coursework." Tom carefully checked to make sure the alignment was level as he hung B'Elanna's certificate on the wall. "That selection committee won't be turning up their noses at her now."

"You're very proud of her," T'Pel observed.

"Yes. I am." Tom stood back for a moment, admiring his handiwork. The certificate, in a bright brass frame, was about the prettiest thing he'd seen in quite some time. "Nothing wrong with being proud of my wife. Well, at least on Earth there isn't."

"Vulcans are a proud people as well. It's just that, in most instances, we're less forthright about admitting it." T'Pel finished washing the last window. "I have to confess that I am experiencing some feelings of anticipation regarding the outcome of B'Elanna's interview."

Miral interrupted the conversation with a very loud squeal and scrambled out of the pile of cushions, toddling toward the front door.

A moment later, Tom heard the light footsteps as well. B'Elanna wasn't stomping toward the door, which was definitely a good sign. He hastily gathered up the cushions and restored them to the sofa.

"Impeccable timing." T'Pel calmly rolled her sleeves back down.

B'Elanna burst through the door with one of the biggest grins Tom had ever seen on her face. The spotless, pleasantly scented apartment and T'Pel's presence evidently took her by surprise.

"I arrived a short time ago, bringing a few gifts to celebrate your new position," T'Pel informed B'Elanna. "Your husband has evidently been very busy cleaning this apartment all day. His efforts are indeed admirable."

Although B'Elanna looked even more surprised to hear that, she promptly flung her arms around Tom and squeezed all the breath out of him in a very enthusiastic hug. One from which his ribcage took a few minutes to recover. As she turned her affections to Miral, with a much more restrained hug, Tom took the opportunity to walk T'Pel to the door.

"I thought Vulcans didn't lie," he whispered.

"A day," she answered, in an equally low tone, "is a very short time in the life of a Vulcan."

\*\*\*

Low voices and laughter drifted out of the dorm room as Icheb opened the door. At first, suspecting another prank, he paused just inside the doorway and took a careful look around the room. A copious quantity of smoke was emanating from an oddly shaped item being passed from one cadet to another. The panicked expressions on the faces that turned toward him made it plain that his presence hadn't been anticipated.

"I thought you said he'd be in the circuits lab all evening," hissed Tyler, one of Icheb's usual tormentors.

"Well, he usually is," Fromme retorted, not even bothering to lower his voice. "Getting intimate with some nice hot plasma relays, probably."

As the cadets laughed, somewhat more nervously than usual, Jessip leaned forward and brandished the contraband toward Icheb. "Want some, drone boy? It's Risan joy weed. Not on the list of substances that are illegal to import, although it'll give you a great buzz. But I suppose your wonderful Borg ethics wouldn't let you disobey regulations like that, would they?"

"Not a chance," Fromme snarled. "He's going to rat on us, running straight to security the instant he leaves the room. Probably recording everything we're doing with some cybernetic implant, for evidence at the hearing."

Identical murderous stares fixed themselves on Icheb.

He backed away, wondering why he had ever been foolish enough to think that he had a chance of making friends with his classmates.

"I do not wish to participate in this extremely imprudent activity."

"A lecture on proper behavior from our Borg ethics expert. How inspiring," Jessip mocked, as the door began to open behind Icheb.

He felt tremendously relieved to escape.

Until he turned around, a half-second later, and saw the uniformed campus security officer about to enter the room.

"I could smell that stuff all the way down the hall," the officer declared, taking a step toward Jessip and holding out his hand. "Let's have it."

The Bajoran cadet turned an interesting shade of purple as he complied.

"Conical shape, a thick orange resin with silver specks," the officer noted, turning the joint over in his hand. "Risan, I'd say. Been a while since I've seen one of these. I'll need all of your thumbprints, please."

Icheb had to step back into the room to apply his thumb to the officer's padd. The other cadets' expressions ranged from stunned to furious as they did likewise.

"Would anyone care to explain where this came from?"

Total silence.

"You're all restricted to campus pending further investigation," the officer announced. As he began to search the room, Icheb, while moving out of his way, bumped his arm slightly. The search, conducted by means of a tricorder scan, didn't take long, and no additional contraband was found.

The officer departed, leaving behind some very unhappy cadets.

"I'm so dead," moaned Tyler, slumping against a wall. "We're all going to get expelled, or at least suspended, and my father will just about kill me."

Jessip put his head down on the desk, as if it were too heavy to lift, and mumbled, "I don't want to go back to Bajor and spend the rest of my life working on my aunt's miserable farm."

"The Borg doesn't look too worried, though. He probably reported us to that security officer and doesn't have any reason to worry." Fromme's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, I'm sure of it. We've just seen a firsthand demonstration of Borg ethics. I guess you're real pleased with yourself now, aren't you, Icheb?"

Jessip lifted his head just far enough to glare.

"I reported nothing." When the disbelieving jeers died down a bit, Icheb went on to say, "And no one will be suspended or expelled."

"Just how do you figure that?"

"A more complete investigation will show that the officer's tricorder was malfunctioning and that the confiscated item was, in fact, an entirely acceptable herbal cigar."

If the cadets' jaws had dropped any further, they would have been somewhere in the vicinity of the sub-basement. Approximately 85 seconds passed before Tyler managed to get enough air back into his lungs to say a few words.

"You did something. When you bumped his arm."

Fromme looked as if he might have been about to speak but, for a change, thought better of it and said nothing.

"Borg nanoprobe are extremely versatile and can be quickly programmed for new tasks," Icheb explained. "They also have the advantage of being undetectable by the most common scanning methods."

Tyler stood up straighter, took a deep breath, and gave Icheb a look of complete bafflement. "Why'd you do it? You wouldn't have been expelled. They'd have found that your fingerprints and DNA weren't on the stuff, and besides, the officer probably saw you walk into the room just before he did. What reason could you possibly have had to take a risk like that to save our backsides, after the way we treated you?"

"Yeah," Jessip muttered, now beginning to sound quite ashamed of himself. "We've behaved like total jerks. I'd have thought you would be glad to see us go."

Even though it would have been an inefficient waste of Starfleet Academy resources, Icheb thought but didn't say. The truth was that he wasn't altogether sure, himself, as to what had prompted his decision. He had merely seen an opportunity to salvage his classmates' careers and had acted on it.

"I suppose," he ventured, "everyone behaves like a jerk sometimes."

Fromme looked down at the floor and then back up at Icheb. "I guess I ought to say that I, um."

It took him a few tries before he managed to get it out.

"I owe you an apology."

Icheb took his roommate's extended hand. "Accepted."

\*\*\*

The holographic crowds that thronged the streets outside the Federation Council building left even the Doctor, not normally subject to shyness, wishing heartily that he had requested permission to transport directly into the council chamber.

"There he is!"

"It's Voyager's Doctor!"

A mob of shrieking holograms, looking very much like frenzied hippies at a rock concert who'd just caught a glimpse of the featured performer, thundered in his direction. Fortunately, a narrow alley wasn't far away, and he ducked into it. Yanking up the skirts of what he'd begun to suspect was a rather impractical choice for clothing, the EMH sprinted along the alley, his sandals flapping.

He dashed around a corner and almost collided with a familiar figure.

"Hey," Tom Paris demanded, "what's the hurry?"

The howling mass of holograms came closer. Tom quickly glanced around the corner, got a view of the situation, and took off running, right beside the Doctor.

"Couldn't get to the main entrance. Too much of a crowd," the EMH explained, as he hurdled a bench in fine form with his robes hiked up above his knees. Several of his admirers caught a glimpse of him and squealed, continuing the pursuit.

"VIP entrance -- next building -- connected by a breezeway," Tom panted, sprinting to keep up. "That way. Didn't anyone tell you?"

The door Tom pointed out wasn't far away, with two uniformed guards standing just outside. "I tried to convince them to let me in, as one of your friends, but they weren't buying it. So it's a good thing we met up, or I'd have been standing outside in a queue for hours," Tom went on, with what would have been a rather gleeful expression if he hadn't been too much out of breath to smirk.

"You may accompany me into the building and view my final rehearsal," the Doctor promptly offered, with the air of a medieval lord granting one of his peons a great boon.

Tom gave a nod in response, still gulping in air. "B'Ela's right, I haven't been getting enough exercise lately. She's already left for Utopia Planitia, but wanted me to tell you that she wishes you luck."

A guard escorted the two of them through a narrow, brightly lit corridor and into a private waiting area. Portraits of past Federation leaders adorned the walls. The Doctor found himself wondering, in a more somber mood, whose footsteps had passed this way before his.

"If things go well, I expect they'll be putting your portrait up there one of these days," Tom remarked. "You'll be known as the great statesman whose eloquence freed the Federation's holograms."

Visualizing himself in the council chamber, surrounded by ecstatic applause from a crowd of thousands, the Doctor felt a twinge of an unfamiliar and somewhat unsettling emotion. No need to worry, he thought. After all, he had received such applause before, when performing as a singer.

But the fate of billions of sentient beings had never before rested squarely on his photonic shoulders.

He struck a pose in the center of the room, facing Tom, and began one last rehearsal.

"Fourscore and seven years ago, the grand concept of holographic beings was conceived . . ."

"Complex holograms of the modern sort have only been around for about twenty years," Tom interrupted. "Even the concept, in any practical sense, hasn't existed much longer than that."

"Dramatic license," the Doctor explained, in annoyance.

Tom shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Don't take this the wrong way, but it seems to me you're overdoing the drama. In particular, you need to lose that John the Baptist getup."

"Actually, it's supposed to be . . ."

"Doesn't matter," Tom interrupted. "Whatever it is, it's distracting. You want to keep the audience focused on your message, not wondering what historical holo-drama you just stepped out of."

The EMH thought about that for a moment. Perhaps Tom had a point. He quickly reprogrammed his physical appearance files, and the robes shimmered for a moment as they morphed into a dark, conservative business suit.

"In recent years," he began again, somewhat grudgingly, "the concept of holographic beings was conceived."

The image of an audience of thousands came into his consciousness once more, but this time they didn't seem to be applauding. Instead, the crowd sat in grave silence, waiting to be enlightened by his brilliance. Or baffled by his blunders. He attempted to move on to the next sentence in his prepared speech, only to find that the proper data file hadn't been loaded into his speech matrix.

A minor glitch, he told himself, and unlikely to reoccur. All he had to do was to access the next available data file.

"We must all learn to embrace one another as -- as you would have them do unto you -- to move a great mountain."

That wasn't right. What had happened to him? Where had the files gone? He opened his mouth one more time, but to his dismay, nothing came out except a squeak. A loud and entirely tuneless squeak.

Evidently, a catastrophic malfunction of unknown origin had rendered him unable to appear before the council until such time as he could return to a properly equipped laboratory for a complete diagnostic. He turned toward the door.

Tom's hand on his shoulder surprised him.

"Relax, Doc. It's just a bit of stage fright. Nothing serious. Happens to everyone at times."

For some obscure reason, he felt profoundly offended by the suggestion. "I can't have stage fright. I'm a hologram."



"You're an intelligent life form," Tom answered, smoothly stepping between the EMH and the door. "The responses of a sentient organism to his environment aren't as predictable as those of a machine. While you may not have been programmed to experience stage fright, that doesn't mean it can't happen."

Although the Doctor had to admit there was some logic to what Tom was saying, the possibility was nevertheless disquieting. Glitches and programming errors were within his experience; he understood how to correct them. He had no idea of how to deal with something as nebulous as stage fright.

"Whatever the cause, I am unfit to address the council."

"No. The way to deal with stage fright is to work through it, to acknowledge its presence without letting it overwhelm you. Instead of a flawless performance in a rehearsed speech, you might want to try something simpler and more personal, such as just telling the council members what it was like to be a hologram on a Federation ship. Don't worry about whether or not each sentence is perfect. They're going to be interested in what you have to say, not in how you say it."

The Doctor's gaze moved once more to the row of portraits along the wall. Surely, none of these great leaders could ever have experienced such embarrassing moments.

"Yes, they all did. At one time or another." Tom, following Doc's unspoken thought, gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder. "Don't worry, remember? You're going to do just fine."

\*\*\*

"Many of you have come here today because you are wondering whether or not it is possible for a hologram to be sentient." As he spoke, the Doctor kept his attention focused on the assembled council members, not on the crowded gallery behind them. "I had planned to make an eloquent appeal based on our common circumstances. But in truth, I'm not certain that I, or anyone else in the Federation, can give you a definitive answer. Philosophers of every race have struggled for millennia with the question of what makes any of us amount to more than simple organisms reacting to the surrounding environment as their basic programming dictates. I must confess that it is beyond my competence to prove the existence of the photonic soul by rhetorical means. I intend only to describe my individual experiences, leaving you to draw your own conclusions."

The council members listened without apparent reaction as the Doctor began to speak about his first years aboard Voyager and the development of his self-awareness. Although he was aware that the audience had fallen almost entirely silent, he forced himself not to dwell upon the lack of response to his words. Perhaps history's foremost leaders had received continuous applause as they delivered their memorable addresses, but that had little bearing upon his own situation. After all, he was only a humble emergency medical hologram, striving to do his best for his people.

He described how he had formed friendships aboard Voyager and had gradually been accepted as a valued member of the crew, taking part in away missions and putting himself at risk for his comrades. The words didn't do his experiences justice, he thought, as the weight of the silent audience began to press in upon him once more. Surely the listeners wouldn't understand. In all likelihood, his experiences had meaning only to him. How could he have possessed such incredible hubris as to believe himself capable of convincing the entire Federation that holograms could be sentient beings?

His words faltered. He could think of nothing more to say.

But he had to work through his fear, he knew. Even if the ages judged him unworthy of greatness, perhaps future generations would at least acknowledge his effort.

"Although history may not see fit to bestow honor upon the simple words and observations of an emergency medical hologram," the Doctor concluded, "the course we take after this day will have a profound impact, not only on the civil rights of the Federation's photonic inhabitants, but on the way our society is perceived for all time. Our member species share a long history of inclusion and tolerance, of respect for diversity and the civil liberties of minority populations. If the Federation should decide that holograms, no matter how intelligent, must remain the mere property of organic beings, I submit to you that such a decision will diminish not only the holograms affected by it, but every citizen of the Federation."

The council chamber was silent for a long moment after he finished speaking. He felt certain that he deserved nothing more. After all, he had never before made such a bland, unimpressive speech, almost completely devoid of the familiar dramatic embellishments of rhetoric. Why should he find it at all unexpected that his listeners had, in all likelihood, judged him lacking in sentience and altogether incapable of a better performance?

The response, when it came, took him entirely by surprise.

Delegates from all planets of the Federation rose to stand, clapping their hands (and, in a few cases, tentacles) in heartfelt applause. A ripple of movement spread throughout the gallery as the audience joined enthusiastically in the standing ovation.

As the cheering went on, seemingly without end, the Doctor recovered enough from his astonishment to consider whether he ought to favor his admiring audience with a graceful bow. Not necessary, he decided. As the humble prophet of photonic liberation, he need only stand and accept their homage.

\*\*\*

"Come in, son."

Tom found his father sitting in a small chair in a corner of the room, working on a padd, which he set aside as Tom entered. The place of honor was occupied by Miral, sitting in the desk chair and focusing on the monitor as intently as if she were deciding the fate of Starfleet. Tom noticed some sort of children's vid on the screen, with fluffy puppets of various colors.

He decided that it would be preferable not to say anything at all about this unusual arrangement.

"I appreciate your taking care of Miral for me while I went to the Federation Council meeting."

That hadn't exactly been Tom's first choice, after the way things had gone during the hearings. Even though his father had made an effort to help B'Elanna qualify for her new job, that hadn't come close to erasing Tom's grudge. But everyone else from Voyager had also attended the Council's meeting, leaving him short of babysitters, other than the woodpecker lady. Certainly his father hadn't done anything to harm Miral while she'd been in his care, and when he had offered to baby-sit, Tom had reluctantly decided to accept that overture toward improving their family relationship.

Owen Paris responded with a shrug. "She's been no trouble at all, and I can always watch the holographic doctor's speech to the Council on one of the news programs later."

As Tom walked around the desk, Miral, instead of looking pleased to see her daddy, responded with an unmistakably Klingon scowl to the prospect of having her puppet show interrupted. Tom paused before retrieving her. Maybe she was just reflecting his own attitude about being disturbed while watching his favorite old movies, he thought. Maybe he'd been neglecting her. Then again, this might just be normal baby behavior. Frankly, he didn't have a clue.

"Was there something else you wanted to say?" Owen inquired. "That flight instructor position is still open, you know."

Not really, Tom thought. Definitely not, when it comes to that flight instructor job. Starfleet can go find someone else. Just because a guy hasn't been much of a success as a househusband doesn't mean he's got to take the first miserable job that comes along.

Then again, teaching piloting wouldn't be a bad job, in and of itself. Back aboard Voyager, he'd rather enjoyed teaching Icheb to pilot the Delta Flyer. Maybe it would be worthwhile to look into whether any instructor positions were available at private flight schools. There, at least, his students wouldn't scorn him as a Starfleet failure and an ex-jailbird.

Though he had to admit that was a rather cowardly attitude, spending the rest of his life running away from his past mistakes. Coming from the man who had just advised the EMH to rise above fear, it was really quite ironic. And Icheb hadn't shown any fear upon entering Starfleet Academy, nor had he made any complaint afterward, although a former Borg drone certainly couldn't have been made to feel very welcome. Tom began to feel ashamed of his own fear.

Work through it, he told himself. Same advice as for the Doctor. You don't have to let it overwhelm you.

The puppet vid reached its end, with a cheering and clapping of fluffy puppet hands in which Miral enthusiastically joined. Then, as the screen returned to its usual official Starfleet background, she promptly lost all interest in it and climbed down from the chair.

"I might think about it," Tom acknowledged, trying to keep his tone suitably cheerful. "I might."

"That's all I'm asking," Owen told him, as Tom gathered up Miral and got ready to leave. "You don't have to make a decision right now, but I will say -- and I'm not the only one who thinks so, by the way -- that you'd make a fine addition to Starfleet Academy's faculty."

\*\*\*

Birds chirped in the trees as Tuvok and T'Pel took a walk through the little park outside the apartment building. Tuvok, with his usual detachment, admired the excellent symmetry of the buildings. In contrast, T'Pel's attention was focused much more on the small occupant of the stroller she was pushing.

"I've given some thought to returning to Vulcan," she said, after a silence of several minutes.

Tuvok turned away from his contemplation of a neatly trimmed boxwood hedge. Earth's cities had become much quieter, he thought, since the Federation Council, in response to the Doctor's inspiring speech, had appointed a committee to study the rights of its holographic residents. That had been sufficient to end the daily protest marches, for the time being, although Tuvok had his doubts as to what the politicians would actually accomplish.

"For what purpose?"

"To see our home again. To see the children," and T'Pel glanced down at a drowsy Miral with an expression that held more than a hint of fondness, "and the grandchildren."

"We know that they are all in good health," Tuvok observed. "Our physical presence on Vulcan is not required to ensure their well-being."

At the intersection of two smoothly paved paths, an overweight goose glanced hopefully up toward T'Pel and then, evidently coming to the conclusion that no bread crumbs would be forthcoming, waddled out of the way of the stroller.

"Perhaps it is illogical," T'Pel conceded, "but I would prefer to return to Vulcan regardless, if only for a short time."

Such an unusual display of sentimentality was no doubt the result of T'Pel's excessive exposure to humans over the past year, Tuvok thought. During their marriage, she had always been the less emotional partner. Some time on Vulcan might indeed prove useful in counteracting the effects of such exposure, particularly where human infants were concerned.

"You did not need to offer your services as a babysitter for Miral," he pointed out. "San Francisco has many excellent child care facilities where she could have been placed while her father commenced his new position as a flight instructor at Starfleet Academy."

"I know." T'Pel looked down once more at the little girl, who had definitely dozed off in her stroller. "And I'm certain Miral will receive the best care after we leave for Vulcan. All the same, this seemed to be an appropriate farewell."

Tuvok could see no purpose to any type of farewell involving a less than fully sentient infant. Human sentimentality again, he thought. After all, he had encountered many human rituals involving children, such as birthday celebrations, which he had never been able to comprehend.

"It has not yet been decided," he reminded T'Pel, "that we will be leaving for Vulcan or anywhere else."

She responded to that comment with a smug glance that made it plain she considered their leaving to be a foregone conclusion. Tuvok could feel her certainty through the link between them. He couldn't blame that particular attitude on humans, though; T'Pel had always possessed a very accurate sense of the extent to which she was able to make decisions on his behalf. He reflected for a moment on the subject of why some Vulcan men chose to marry human women, who, despite their lack of rigorous logic, also lacked the manipulative tendencies of their Vulcan counterparts.

Not that he would ever, for an instant, have considered such a course of action. His marriage to T'Pel had brought him many good years of productive domestic tranquility. A Vulcan could not reasonably expect more. An occasional display of sentimentality in the presence of infants was not a serious flaw, after all.

T'Pel touched her fingertips to his, radiating the familiar sensations of intimacy and peace. "And you desire to see our grandchildren as well, my beloved. You are merely too stubborn to admit it."

With her close proximity tracing tendrils of warmth along his nerve pathways and leaving his thoughts wide open for her inspection, a complete denial, Tuvok knew, would have been entirely futile.

"Perhaps there may be some logical reasons for a visit," he conceded.

-----

Written by: Ventura33

Beta: Zeke, Coral

Producers: Thinkey, Anne Rose and Coral