

Between a Rock And a Klingon

A Lieutenant Chekov Adventure



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1

Chekov hated being chased.

Being chased and lost was worse, though.

Just at the moment, he had no idea where he was going, and couldn't see well enough in the dark, primitive forest to get his bearings. If he had time to stop and think about it, he would probably be glad he hadn't yet tripped over some inconvenient tree root and broken an ankle or cracked his head on a rock. He would be even gladder that he hadn't fallen into a hole, or a trap, or the lair of some high-level predator. Bad enough that the Klingons were out to get him, he didn't need the local wildlife or vegetation to join in as well. All in all, he would probably been better to have skipped this round of shore leave, thank you very much.

He leapt over a fallen log, realizing at the height of his jump that his luck had run out. A deeper darkness almost hid a steep slope falling away from the log, and no amount of twisting in the air was going to put him on his feet. At least, not for longer than it took to pitch forward onto his face. He had that split-second insight, that fraction of a heartbeat crystallized in time, and remembered bits of advice from both unarmed combat training and working towards the obstacle course in his final year at the Academy. If you can't control the fall, control the landing.

Chekov stretched out his legs, pointing his toes forward, and curled his arms in to turn the jump into a slide, and tried not to think about the dirt, rotting vegetation, and animal dung that probably littered the side of the hill.

The landing still pushed the air out of his lungs, but he kept his head from striking the ground, and let his momentum and gravity carry him a little farther forward. When friction with the earth and vegetation slowed him enough, he grabbed at a small tree and used it to arrest his motion. One deep breath in, which he tried to hold to listen. The Klingons weren't stupid, and they wouldn't be shouting commands to each other back-and-forth to the forest. Warriors, and cunning ones, they would be trying to sneak up on their enemy, on him. He didn't understand why he was an enemy just now, but he also didn't understand why they were even on this planet. Pentos was a

designated Federation protectorate, if not actually a member, and if the border with the Empire was in sight, the Pentosian sat well on the Federation side of it. It was not disputed territory, by any stretch of any Klingon's imagination.

And protectorate could mean many different things. In the case of Pentos, it mainly meant 'leave us alone'. Only a very tiny land area had been allotted by the native sentients for a Federation presence, and only Starfleet personnel were permitted shore leave access to the limited facilities, and then only in small groups.

He'd been taking a nature tour on the fringes of that area and running from the Klingons had taken him well beyond that limit as well as getting him lost. If only he still had his communicator. If only he had anything.

Still lying on the ground, he let his breath out slowly and immediately drew another in. The Klingons couldn't be far away, but they weren't close enough to be making noise he could hear, so that was something. That was a good thing, really, or the beginnings of one. He found a tiny bit of sky above him, giving just enough light to see the three spear points appearing a few centimetres from his face. Perhaps not so good a thing.

He looked up, trying to pick the figures that held them out of the darkness, but they blended in almost too well. However much his vision adjusted, it would need to be nearly dawn before there was enough light for him to see much more than shadows. The spears pulled back, and one shadow moved, bending down to become a face he could almost see, dark spots for eyes and mouth in a more or less humanoid head. "Stay silent and you will live." The words slid so quietly through the small space separating them, it took him a moment to be sure he'd heard correctly.

Chekov bobbed his head up and down several times. He whispered back, holding his voice to no more than a breath across his lips. "Da. Silent."

A strong hand gripped his shoulder, squeezing once, then releasing to slide down and grab his hand, pulling him to his feet. "Stay close. We walk."

Chekov followed three shadows deeper into the forest, understanding only that the natives must be here for some

reasons of their own. Still, it would not be proper to refuse their hospitality when they had so graciously offered to move him away from the Klingons. He just had to hope they would be able, and willing, to provide further assistance.

2

In the full light of morning, Chekov reminded himself that the Pentosians were not primitives, but he had to keep correcting the evidence of his senses. Their dwellings were simple, and uncomplicated, but they were not simple huts of branches and limbs, no matter how much they looked that way in the darkness. He'd been brought to the edge of a village and shown to one of those small huts, and then left alone with only a single command. "Rest now."

With the adrenaline of the chase fading, the lateness of the day, and the physical exhaustion, it had been an easy command to follow, and he had slept well past the morning's first light, coming to himself again only when a knock came on the frame of the doorway.

He sat up quickly, alert, if not precisely awake. The variants on blue skin and white hair that were the dominant traits of the native Pentosians reminded him very much of Andorian tones, but the physical similarities ended quickly after that. With large eyes suited to the dim forest life on a dim world, the natives he had seen also seemed uniformly broad and muscular, if shorter than what would be considered human norm. The woman standing in the doorway, though some centimetres shorter than Chekov, who had never counted himself tall, likely had something near double his strength. He thought part of that might just be lifestyle, the primitive existence the Pentosians held to, and then he corrected the word primitive in his mind again. Almost uniformly as a people across the entire world, the Pentosians had chosen to follow biological sciences as primaries, and over centuries had engineered themselves, and their society, to mesh with the natural world. In effect, they grew almost everything they needed, and that included the hut he'd spent the night in as well as the spear his visitor held in her left hand.

He smiled, an expression their species shared. "Good

morning. Though it was very dark last night, I suspect you are one of those who saved my life?" Although, perhaps this particular Pentosian didn't share it. She didn't speak but nodded once. Pushing up from the small sleeping mat he had found by feel in the darkness, Chekov came to attention for an instant, and then bowed to her. "Thank you very much." He smiled again, hoping she might warm at least a little.

Her expression didn't change at all. "I saved you only because the ugly ones chased you. You should not be here."

His smile died, and Chekov resisted the urge to sigh, but diplomacy was important. "I do understand that, and it makes my thanks all the more sincere. I did not mean to trespass on your world and hope only that someone can point me back to the enclave so I may be on my way without disturbing you anymore."

She stepped back from the doorway, motioning for him to follow. "That is not for me to decide. You will see the Council."

He struggled to keep up, partly because she moved quickly, and partly because the path she led him on moved steadily upwards into larger trees than he'd ever seen before. Plus he had a hard time not looking around constantly. There were staircases and railings of living wood, platforms leading to small houses and dwellings every dozen or so meters they climbed, clusters of living places, and he ached to see inside of them, to see such things that weren't in the enclave, things that no human had ever seen before. He did suppose just being here was doing that for him, but he wished she would slow down so he could have a better look. Just when he began to fear that she was leading into the very top branches, they broke through a small canopy, and into what seemed almost like a giant clearing at least a hundred metres above the forest floor.

A flat wooden surface stretched away from him, spread between six or seven of the giant trees, a huge area where whatever passed for normal daily activity occurred. He began to revise his idea of a village into a town, or possibly even a small city. In the strange flat area before him, he could see several hundred residents at least, and very few of them carrying what he'd come to think of as the signature spear.

His guide left the staircase and walked straight across the center of the platform towards the distant far end, heedless of the stares and the ceasing of all activity as she passed and he followed. Species and dress made him stand out quite effectively. The people recognized very quickly that he was not one of them.

Chekov tried to smile and nod every time he made eye contact with someone, but it became difficult, and very quickly, since no one returned the gesture, or changed their expression to acknowledge his existence. They merely stared, golden, and sometimes emerald eyes unblinking. After a minute or so, he gave up trying, and worked instead to keep his guide in sight, matching her pace as best he could, all the while trying to pick out interesting things to see ahead of them.

A strange and alien place, but just familiar enough in almost every respect for him to understand what he saw. Shops and homes and staircases all not carved but grown from the giant trees around him and more staircase stretching far above to other, probably smaller platforms at various heights above him. Bridges of twirling tree limbs stretched between some of these here and there and sometimes he saw people in doorways and walking across those bridges. His sense of scale disappeared quickly, but perhaps another hundred metres above Chekov, almost lost in the leaves and branches, another large platform, larger, perhaps, than the one they were walking across.

They approached a narrowing of the platform, where two of the trees grew a little closer together and a steady flow of foot traffic moved. That traffic stopped in both directions as Chekov approached, and he became more and more self-conscious of the dirt and bits of vegetation that must still cover his uniform. Glancing down, he realized he did have some additional decorations, sprinkling if not covering his tunic. He would certainly be ashamed to report for duty in his current state. But he had no choice at the moment.

Through the narrow area, the trunks of giant trees stretching far above them to either side, the tops lost in yet more foliage, and he saw glimpses true sunlight when he looked up. Through the open space of the platform, he could make out, still several hundred meters ahead, a pavilion of some kind, its roof the first splash of real colour he'd noticed, and with a significant

gathering of people beneath it.

As they got closer, Chekov tried to understand what was occurring. There were many small groups of Pentosians engaged in various conversations, none of which were in Federation standard. He didn't have a hope of knowing what might be going on without a universal translator, but from the density of the local population, he somehow naturally assumed that this was some kind of center for business or government, perhaps both. He didn't have a clear idea of how the Pentosian economy worked, and didn't know if anyone else did either, and the same went for their government. But his guide made straight for the pavilion, so he had to assume that at least the Council, whatever that was, met there.

And then the silent staring gripped the edges of the pavilion. First, small groups had half of their conversation die as people facing outward caught side of him. Others eventually turned to look, also falling silent. Soon, Chekov could hear nothing but the wind twisting through the leaves about them and the gentle footsteps of himself and his guide.

The small crowd parted as they approached. Well, crowd didn't seem like quite the right word, but the people under the covered area certainly moved aside to let them pass. Their eyes remained on him afterwards however, and he felt each set clearly between his shoulder blades

As the final group of Pentosians stepped aside, he found himself facing a table that seemed to grow up out of the floor. It made two thirds of a hollow circle and eleven Pentosians sat around it, all staring at him with the same blank expression he'd come to expect.

If anything else might have convinced him that he wasn't approaching the seat of some primitive society, it was the disparate ages around the table. It seemed to be almost a universal truth for primitive peoples to select their leaders from among the oldest and therefore theoretically wisest of their members. But Chekov guessed that, though three of them would probably qualify as elders to gage purely by his human perceptions, the youngest person at the table was not much older than he was. The other seven seem to be spread out in between, if the normal standards of humanoid aging applied here. He

wondered if he were looking at some kind of democracy in action, but couldn't see why eleven leaders were needed for a Council in a community of such size. Of course, he realized he had no idea what the size of the community really was.

Bringing him to a halt to take up the open section of the circle, his guide dropped to one knee, bowed her head, and raised both hands, palms facing up with her spear resting across them. "I have brought the alien as commanded." She said something else, a long string of syllables in the local Pentosian tongue that Chekov had no hope of understanding. It had not occurred to him to bring a universal translator on shore leave, and he probably wouldn't have managed to keep that during the night's events, either. He wondered for a moment if he should kneel too, but she got up quickly, her spear returning to a resting position.

The woman at the center of the table spoke, her expression unchanging. Her first words were nothing Chekov could understand, but she switched to English soon enough. "Thank you, Elorra. We would question the alien. Please remain nearby. "

Elorra used her free hand to tap the opposite shoulder twice, nodded, and walked away without looking back. Chekov did not follow. He was the alien in question, though it wasn't often he thought of himself that way. Straightening his back, he cleared his throat and bowed. "Thank you for my life and for your hospitality."

The woman's expression did not change, completely blank to his eyes, giving him absolutely nothing to work with. "We have shown you no hospitality, merely a place to sleep. Whether or not we receive you remains to be seen. By the terms of our agreement with your people, you should not be here." Several of the other council members murmured to each other in their own language. The woman elevated her voice, asserting authority over any conversation. "We understand that circumstances were unusual and fluid. Still, we require an explanation. We require several."

Stretching his back by pulling his shoulders together, Chekov found himself naturally slipping into a parade rest posture. Not an interrogation, apparently, but certainly he was about to be questioned extensively. "I will provide whatever

explanations you require to the best of my ability.”

She leaned forward, forearms pressed to the table edge and steeping her fingers so that they made an open sphere between her palms. “I believe you mean that truthfully, but we require more than mere words. Will you share your memories?”

Would he share his memories? He had no idea that the Pentosians had any form of telepathy, and the idea of telepathy of any kind had always made him just a little uncomfortable, having someone else touch his mind directly, potentially influencing his thoughts. It was as natural as speaking or breathing to some species, but for humans, it had long been consigned to the realm of fantasy, whatever tests were sometimes conducted to build into your personnel file. At least, that’s where it had been in the days before they had begun to know the Vulcans and Betazoids. As Chekov’s experience of the universe grew, it seemed less uncommon than it once had. He nodded once. Would he share his memories? He didn’t really have the option to refuse. “I will.”

“Approach.”

Taking her as the leader in whatever process was about to occur, Chekov took the steps to stand with his belt almost touching the table. As he did so, each of the other Pentosians reached out to grasp the hands of the persons next to them. The two beside the woman who’d spoken instead each placed a hand on her bare neck as she stretched her hands forward towards him. He stretched out his own hands, prepared to have her grasp them, and wondered how much like a Vulcan mind meld it would be, especially with their minds so far apart.

She pressed her palms against his and a hundred or more tiny spikes drove into the flesh on each. He involuntarily stiffened at the sensation of not so carefully grasping a pair of small cacti. Not very like the Vulcan version at all, he thought, before his vision dissolved into a rainbow of sparkles.

3

He looked around as the tour group walked. The forest made the enclave seem quite a bit bigger than the cluster of buildings, gardens, and small field that visiting Starfleet

personnel were allowed access to. Broadly speaking, the enclave consisted of a circle of land exactly one-point-six-three kilometres in radius, most of which was near-pristine nature with a few paths leading through and around it to interesting sights. Actual Federation offices for the tiny station—he had a harder time saying starbase each time he needed a word—were underground. It was large for the size of the facility that had been built, even counting the subsurface levels, and the sparse amenities provided. Plus, there were quite a large number of specifications in the treaty that allowed the enclave. Chekov had been a little stunned trying to skim the 50,000-word document. After some reading, and some judicious heading selection, he concluded that the document could be summarized as if you were not Pentosian, you stayed inside the circle. There were no death penalty specifications or even harsh punishments, and there were no reparations to be paid for people who disobeyed, at least not on the Pentosian side, but it was certainly a mark on your record in Starfleet, and probably worthy of some disciplinary action. An explanatory note detailed that when whatever passed for central authority on Pentos met, every nine local years, one of the items on the agenda was always whether or not to renew the allowance of Starfleet on the planet.

The voting had been close on all three occasions so far.

He hoped he wasn't helping push things in the wrong direction.

So most of the enclave consisted of wild space, or as wild as things typically got on Pentos. The Pentosians liked nature to take its course as much as possible, but also had a strong sense of balance for their own society and monitored everything that might affect it. Modifications were not made lightly, and the enclave was one such, still hotly debated according to the orientation document.

For visiting Starfleet personnel interested, the permanent enclave staff could arrange walking tours of the wilder parts of the enclave. The *Enterprise* had only intended to stay in orbit for three days, and Chekov would only have one chance at a landing party, one chance to stretch his legs. He placed his name on the list for one of those walking tours before they had entered the system.

And he did not regret the choice. It was always nice to breathe clean, non-recycled air, and the plant species on Pentos had developed several chlorophyll analogues, names that he had not bothered to remember or even try because he was sure that Sulu would remind him soon enough, and these did not tend towards green, but rather blue or red. It made for a beautiful kaleidoscope, but also made it difficult for him to pick out details. That didn't bother him so much though, for it was not a new experience to be confused or overwhelmed by the sights and sounds on alien world, and frankly, he enjoyed it even if he found himself distracted and falling to the back of the small group as he took in the world around him.

In fact, assured that none of the local plants were harmful or toxic to humans, and that the sonic defense grid would keep any large-scale predators away from the enclave's edge without harm or difficulty, he wasn't worried at all about keeping up enough to hear the words of his guide. Instead, Chekov was far more interested in wandering along the path, seeing what he could see, enjoying the air and the scenery.

Beyond any doubt, Chekov would not have heard the transporter buzz had he been with the rest of his tour. And if he hadn't heard the transporter, he would not have turned around in time to see the Klingons materialize. Of course, if he had not turned around to see them materialize, they might not have noticed him as he walked slowly behind the out-of-sight group. Even if they had noticed him, he would not have known to take off running in the opposite direction to lead them away from the rest of the unarmed Starfleet personnel.

Well, not exactly the opposite direction, and he did wonder if it might have been smarter to run for the center of the enclave rather than past the edge to perhaps trip a sensor. But the rest of the personnel in the enclave would be no less unarmed than he was.

Hoping to lose the Klingons and circle back around, he tried to gain a little distance, maybe even find a few seconds to open his communicator and arrange for a transporter beam while the Klingons were left looking for him. If not, it was certainly better to lead them away from Federation personnel and towards nothing. Yes, he was technically out of compliance with the

Pentosian agreement, but, under one of Captain Kirk's unwritten rules, as long as you used common sense and produced a good result, forgiveness was often easier to get than permission. So he clamped his mouth shut on a yell and took off diagonally into the forest.

He felt his communicator chirp as he passed the warning line, making him less than fifty metres from the enclave's border. Allowing himself to breathe more as he ran, he ignored it, and the tingle of guilt that went with it. He didn't need to get very far into the forest, just far enough to keep them guessing. A few hundred meters most.

The whine of a disruptor disabused him of that notion quickly. To his left, and uncomfortably close, a small, leafy bush shivered and fell apart. The Klingon beam continued through the bush and dug a furrow in the soil beyond and Chekov was suddenly glad for dimming light and his luck in drawing a spot on an evening tour when there might be a greater variety of native wildlife to see. The gathering darkness might make the Klingons less likely to hit him, though it clearly made them more likely to fire on him. He began looking for bigger things to put between himself and his pursuers, to have something covering his back.

The next disruptor shot went wider, but with similar results.

He started being more careful about where he put his feet, as vegetation got thicker around him, and Chekov realized he wasn't being very quiet running through the forest, but at least he might be becoming a harder target. Choosing just the wrong moment to look back over his shoulder, a thick tree limb cracked across his chest, knocking him from his feet, driving the air from his lungs. His vision blurry, his ribs aching, he knew he couldn't let himself sit still. More than a second or two could cost him his life. No, would cost him his life since the Klingons were clearly willing to shoot him. Pushing back to his feet, he stumbled back into a run, not realizing for several dozen steps that he could no longer feel the comforting presence of his communicator on his belt, gently pressing into his side.

Not good. He was not quite lost, not yet, but he needed to keep an awareness of where the enclave lay behind him. He

felt reasonably sure at the moment he could find his way back as long as he lost the Klingons.

4

His vision cleared and Chekov realized he still stood in front of the Council. The blue-skinned woman across the table from him frowned as she stared into his eyes. To either side of her, the councilmembers removed their hands, and gradually all resumed their rigid sitting postures. No one spoke, though he could feel many eyes upon him. Expressions seemed a little less blank in a serious direction, and the speaker put a better name to the change for him. "I am confused."

Chekov tried on a smile he didn't feel. "What may I explain?"

"You may explain why you're here."

Chekov smile disappeared, replaced by a frown he definitely felt. "I think that now I am the one who is confused. I thought the memories that we just watched, my memories, told you how I came to be here." He wondered if there were something like a language barrier. His standard English was quite fluent, though he would always have a noticeable accent, but at least English was a human language, which gave it at least one similarity to Russian. Every new alien language had to be approached in a new way and he had no idea how aliens would approach English.

The woman wrinkled her nose, and he had no idea what the expression might signify to her. "Yes, they certainly establish that. But there were many things I did not understand about those memories, things I lack context for. Why you are concerned about our planet continuing to allow a Federation presence and why you consider it important. Who the ugly ones are and where they came from. What you were doing at the edge of the enclave. Why you did not seek help from those in your... tour group. I am confused."

Chekov tried to parse the group of statements. Explaining the Klingons to a people who had never wanted to bother with spacecraft or visiting other worlds, much less conquering them, would be difficult. And he had no idea why

they were here, though that would be interesting to find out if he could.

Perhaps it would be better to tackle the questions in order. “The Federation sees each species as unique and having a unique way of viewing the universe. Diversity is a fundamental principle of our society, as is the freedom of a society to make its own choices. I think I would choose for communication rather than isolation since there is always more to learn.”

He thought about his next words carefully. “The ugly ones, they are called Klingons. They are not our enemies, exactly, though they are certainly not our friends. They have a different way of looking at the universe than the Federation does. We have a peace treaty with them, but they are unsatisfied with it and wish to expand the territory they hold. Your world is somewhat near to the border in space that we share with them. That may be enough for them to want to disturb your peace, but there may be far more to it. I do not know.

“I was at the edge of the enclave, and listening to a lecture of sorts, albeit from a distance and not very closely, about the ecology of the area, from a Xenobiologist. It is a fascinating world, and I am always interested to learn new things.”

She continued to stare at him while he spoke, her expression smoother again, giving him nothing to work with, but that wasn't new. “And why did you deliberately run away from the rest of the group of humans. Is there not strength in numbers?”

Strength in numbers was an interesting concept, one he would like to revisit if he could. In this case, the Klingons' disruptors were a significant force multiplier. Too significant. “We were unarmed, a nature party seeking only to observe and learn. The Klingons... The Klingons carried weapons and clearly had other ideas. I had hoped to lead them away from the others, protect them, lose the Klingons and circle back around to rejoin my group. As you know, it did not work out quite as I had planned.”

Chekov thought the impassive Pentosian facial expressions might be more difficult to read than Vulcan, though he only had Mr. Spock for true comparison. It was probably the eyes. Though they didn't seem to be very expressive in the main,

Pentosian eyes were large and not quite like most humanoid eyes in his experience, nor like Catian, nor Reptiloid, nor quite anything else he had encountered. His interrogator had golden eyes, like most of the native residents, but the pupils, instead of being black, were merely a darker shade of gold. To his sight, it was difficult to see exactly where the pupil ended and the eye began. At a glance, without staring, it would look like all one color, gaining intensity towards the center. Focus was difficult.

Finally, she nodded, raising her voice. "Elorra, you will escort the alien back to the off-worlder enclave."

Chekov's rescuer appeared at his side. Peripherally, her movements seem stiff, and if, as he suspected, she liked neither him nor aliens in general, she was probably not happy with the order. "As you wish, Council Leader." She took a deep breath and threw out a long string of syllables in Pentosian. But the councilwoman made a clicking noise with her tongue, and they cut off in what seemed Chekov to be the middle of a sentence.

"We do not abrogate your right to question and understand, but the decision is made. You are familiar with the off-worlder, and you speak the language well. Few of the other rangers can make the second claim, and only two the first, not even as much as you. Be unhappy if you wish but be true to your nature and guide him to safety."

"Walking, it will take most of the day to get back to the edge. Longer, if the ugly ones are still about. I have but two eyes."

"We did not say this is a task for you alone, and you should certainly take those who are willing to make the journey at your side. We would not wish you lost to us merely to see the alien returned. Select those who will come."

Mouth pressed into a thin line, and she bowed, a fist wrapped around her spear. "I obey."

Elorra spun on the ball of one foot and started walking away. Chekov attempted to duplicate the bow. It didn't seem to him to be quite the same motion as any of the other cultures he'd visited, but usually small mistakes were forgiven foreigners fairly easily, at least for those foreigners who made an effort to respect local customs, and he made certain his bow was longer than those he'd seen. "I thank you very much for your help, and

when I am called upon to report, I shall certainly speak of your generosity and reiterate your desire to be left alone. With luck, no one will leave the enclave again anytime soon. Or, um, at all, I hope.”

The woman’s mouth twitched, one side lifting for just a moment, and it seemed to him that she allowed herself the briefest smile. “Your understanding is appreciated, but I wonder, should you be more concerned about keeping up with your guide at the moment?”

Glancing over his shoulder, Chekov saw that Elorra was already many paces way, heading in the direction she’d led him from. He turned back the Council and bowed again, more quickly this time. “Thank you. Thank you all.” He ran after Elorra, uncaring, if not unaware, of all the eyes the followed him.

5

Beyond any doubt, Elorra was very angry. Chekov didn’t need to be telepathic to read that in her body language, nor any more familiar with Pentosians than he was yet. Crowds, such as they were on the treetops terrace, parted for her before she got close, and he found himself trying to apologize, or at least smile apologetically, to everyone they passed. No one responded, of course, but he felt better having made the effort. It seemed likely that his body language might not match up with theirs in many respects, but the effort made him feel better.

She guided him almost all the way back to the staircase they’d come up, although, guided seemed like it might be the wrong word. Led didn’t work either. She walked quickly. He followed, keeping up as best he could.

At the edge of the long terrace, where the population density seemed much less, she stopped in front of what seemed to be a deep alcove in the trunk of the tree itself, or rather one of its larger boughs. Spinning around, she pointed in through the open doorway. “Wait there. Touch nothing.”

Chekov thought about saluting, or doing something equally sarcastic to acknowledge the brusque commands, resisting anything more than a raised eyebrow. He very much needed her assistance and wanted to retain some hope of

carrying on an actual conversation with her at some point. Humour might not be his friend at the moment. It was also easy to admit that she'd been given something to do that she didn't much like, which he couldn't hold against her. Still, it would have been nice to do something other than smile and nod. "As you say."

She turned away almost before he spoke, and he watched her retreating back, reading resignation and resentment across her shoulders. Perhaps it was only youth, but her feeling seemed to stretch beyond the typical distrust and dislike of off-worlders the Pentosians seemed to have. In his head, he was careful to generalize because she had no reason to dislike him specifically, other than as a convenient personification of something she did not like about her world. Trying not to sigh, he turned to examine the alcove, which proved to be quite a bit bigger than he'd initially suspected.

He wondered if there were a Pentosian name for this place, for it seemed to be not just a waiting area, but a place to invite silent meditation and reflection. What he'd thought of as an alcove was about three metres deep, broadening out into a room beyond the doorway. Like everything else, it didn't look as if it had been mechanically shaped, but rather grown from the tree, or rather having a tree grown around the empty space. If Chekov had not had cause to marvel at the bioengineering works of the Pentosians before, this room made sure he did now.

Ultimately, he stepped into a room with four rounded corners, a chair in each of those. Filtered light spilled through from the doorway, but in the farther corners, above two of the chairs, small shelves grew out of the walls and each held a bowl that emitted a soft green glow. He wasn't tall enough to see inside but expected the presence of some kind of bioluminescent plant or algae. In the center of the room, a small round protuberance came up out of the floor, something he wanted to call a table. On it, four smooth stones rested, each of uniform color, more or less, but each different than the others.

Chekov wondered what true the purpose of the room was. Besides the two chairs, and a tiny table of stones, there was nothing here. No decorations, and no food—which suddenly reminded him how hungry he was—and nothing really to do.

He'd never really done boredom very well. Without enough to do, his mind began to wander, and as an ensign fresh out of the Academy, that had almost gotten him into trouble more than once. Still, he had learned a few tricks during his service on the *Enterprise*, and after spending several minutes examining the stones, without touching them, he decided it was a good time to sit down and collect his thoughts, catalog the things he'd learned. The captain would expect a detailed report, and Commander Bolt, head of the enclave science team, would certainly demand an extensive debriefing. He hoped it wouldn't interfere too heavily with his duties.

Not that there was much to touch, but he decided to take Elorra literally. Ignoring the chairs, Chekov said down into a cross legged position, midway between the two chairs farthest from the door, and with his back against the wall. Holding his hands in his lap, he closed his eyes, and just let the quiet sounds of the high forest, and the occasional nearby intelligible voice, wash over him while he considered the things that would need to go into this report.

Most of what he'd seen was certainly already known. While Chekov might be the first member of Starfleet, the first human, to have actually seen this particular living place in person, it was well documented that the Pentosians grew almost everything, manipulating plants physically, biochemically, even genetically to produce the space and the things they needed. With methods he was aware of, he had no idea how the giant platforms stretching from tree to tree were created, but he had seen similar things on other worlds, and knew there were places even on Earth, places of long-standing habitation, and slower to adapt and absorb modern technology, where the people still trained trees and roots to grow into bridges of incomparable strength, not suitable for vehicles of course, but certainly for any humans who might wish to pass. Still, even trying to list all the things he had seen that appeared to be produced this way, including the room in which he now sat, would take hours.

He did not recall reading that the Pentosians were touch telepaths, and he had no way to know from where he sat if anyone knew that. Telepathy in any form was not a common thing, and the list of species possessing any form of telepathy

whatsoever was a short one. In the course of his career, he had certainly encountered things that might at least be close, and several more he could not doubt.

The Metrons and Melkosians both spring to mind, but the telepathy of the Pentosians seem to be closer to that of the Vulcans, if still quite different, not sharing thoughts so much as memories. He wondered what that meant for the receiver and if the Pentosian Council leader, and by extension those of the touching her, could continue to access those memories and even share them with others. Did the Pentosians have a self-generated racial memory, always growing and flowing and changing? That question excited him greatly.

And it hadn't felt at all like mind meld, not that he'd had too many of those, less a joining of minds and more a one-way sharing. He wondered if it did or could work both ways, and if the Pentosians could manage transmission with other species.

He also wondered at the natives being so isolationist, without crossing over the line into outright xenophobia, merely preferring to be left alone. In a flash of insight, and probably not an original one, he wondered if this was because probably everyone else who came to see them would be using what they considered to be far less natural technologies.

Chekov let his weight sag against the wood and kept his eyes closed, thinking that there must be something about the chamber design that made it so relaxing. He tried to wrap his mind around the feeling. Perhaps it was because he was really high in the forest, in a way that might have seemed unnatural before now, surrounded by a giant living creature that was not, in fact, trying to kill or eat him. That was a nice change. Given enough time, enough distraction, he might have fallen asleep again, though he'd slept very well the previous night, if not as long as he might have liked.

His stomach rumbled, loud and long, and Chekov reopened his eyes with a smile. Patting the offended anatomy just over the bellybutton, he was rewarded with another small gurgle. "Don't worry, I haven't forgotten you. As soon as we return to the enclave, I promise to stuff you until you're near bursting." He hated missing meals, but he had no idea what to eat here and had decided he wouldn't ask if it wasn't offered. It

wouldn't be first time he'd had to tighten his belt and continue the mission. He doubted it would be the last.

At which thought providence arrived in the form of Elorra.

Something closely resembling an apple, but with very dark blue skin, landed his lap. A small, oval loaf of bread, or something very much like bread, followed. Before he could look up, a soft, squishy bag of some sort joined the first two objects.

“Eat while you walk.”

And saw Elorra glaring down at him. Behind her, outside of the alcove, three more Pentosians waited. There was a clip on the squishy bag, and he felt it must be full of water. It might even hold onto his belt. It did on the first try and would stay there if he were careful while he got used to the sensation. He stood up with the apple in one hand and the bread in the other. “Thank you very much.”

She grunted. “So you don't starve to death before we get you home.” She turned away, walking to the door. “And if you feel the urge to talk to yourself again, don't. Quiet is better when walking the paths of the forest. You hear more that way.”

“Understood.” As he moved to follow, he tried, hopefully without looking too obvious, to examine the food in his hands more closely. Surely she would not have given him things unsafe to eat for humans, but how would he know? But just as surely, since Elorra had spent enough time near the Federation enclave, and somehow interacted with enough Federation personnel, that she spoke standard English very well, she would have some idea what might be safe for him. He had the impression that not many Pentosians spent such time or wanted to. Unless, perhaps, she had been assigned that duty by the Council. Another thing to add to her resentment, perhaps.

Finally, Chekov shrugged and decided that trust had to start somewhere. The taste of the bread reminded him somewhat of his mother's borscht which, based on history, none of his shipmates would ever believe.

6

Back on the forest floor, away from the city, the

Pentosians spread out around Chekov, five of them in total. Elorra had not bothered to introduce any of others, and none of them had volunteered names. Just as well, he supposed. He was tremendously curious about anything they might want to share, but if the Prime Directive did not exactly apply, at least the Pentosians were very concerned about cultural contamination, so he should share that concern and respect their wish to remain silent.

He tried to extend that to how quietly he moved through the forest, but in the first hour of their walk, Chekov felt Elorra had spent more time scowling at him for making too much noise than she had worrying about scouting their route ahead. Of course, she probably knew the trails and paths even seen better than she knew her own face, and he didn't think he was doing that badly, at least not for someone raised in cities and who spent his time mainly on starships and starbases as an adult. He might not be the most competent woodsman anyone had ever seen, but he didn't think he was making *that* much noise.

Eventually, the sun began to set, and he reminded himself that the day was only 20 hours long, give or take a few minutes. Considering how long he'd run the evening before, and how long Elorra had made him walk afterwards, he didn't think it even remotely possible that they could reach the enclave in daylight. In fact, he had begun to wonder why they didn't wait until the next day to make the trip. Elorra must surely be eager to be rid of him. That thought made him wonder again just exactly what she had against off-worlders. He doubted he would find out during the trip, or at all.

Here and there, light from the fading K-class sun slipped between the many layers of leaves to reach the forest floor, but mostly, the world around them had already grown dark to the point he had begun to pay more attention to where he might be setting his feet than to the path ahead. Elorra held up a hand to stop, dropped into a crouch, and motioned for Chekov to do the same next to her. Two of her four companions join them while the other two stood, facing away from the little group with both hands on their spears, watching the forest around them.

“Much as I dislike conversation, there are things I must ask you, off-worlder.”

He nodded, trying on a smile. “Of course. It is the least I can do to help you. I don’t suppose I can convince you to use my name?”

“Doubtful, since I do not know it.” When he opened his mouth to tell her, she shook her head. “And I do not care. It is not appropriate to the nature of our relationship for us to use personal names.”

Chekov felt his smile slide away but kept a frown from forming as he filed that bit of knowledge for future reference. “So, what should I call you?”

Elorra’s mouth twisted briefly and he wondered what answers she considered. “If you must address me at all, it is appropriate to say Ranger or Leader. For the others, because I see the question in your eyes, Ranger is also appropriate, but to avoid confusion, you should consider using Hunter or Warrior, if somehow the need arises.”

“I understand.” He didn’t, but he could accept their preferences in the situation even while not understanding how they would know which hunter or warrior he was talking to.

“Good. Now, tell me why the ugly ones are here, and what they want of our world.”

Chekov’s first thought was to object to the phrase “ugly ones” again, but he decided to save his breath. While he did not personally find the Klingons ugly, merely different, and only slightly in that, it was not his place to correct another culture’s standards. Even, especially, if he found them incorrect in his view. Instead, he focused on the question. But he had no idea what the Klingons might want specifically. Perhaps instead, he could speak in general.

“It is difficult to say with the information I have. From our perspective, there has not been a geological survey of your world, so we have no idea if there is anything they might want here in terms of resources. I can say that the Klingons pursue a very expansionist policy and are constantly pushing at the border. That border is closed, which they do not like. They may also consider that there is some advantage to be found for them if you choose to close your world Federation, even if only causing a certain amount of disruption to local relations. It would certainly be well within their normal operations.”

Elorra shook her head. “That doesn’t make any sense. We do not care where the border lines, or what your political differences might be with these Klingons. Why is there advantage to them if we decide to like you just a little less and so have the enclave closed?”

Chekov tried a small smile. Though he wasn’t sure it was the appropriate expression, it kept him from a grimace. “I think I would have to ask the Klingons, but from my experience, they are not good at leaving things as they are. They do not enjoy the status quo. Unless there is a force to stop them, if they want something, they take it. They are conquerors.”

“What can you tell me of their weapons?”

“That I hope we do not have to face them. They are difficult and deadly warriors. My experience suggests a taste for blades and cellular disruptors.”

“Both have the potential to ruin your day.” She stood, looking around, and he could not decide if the comment had been meant as a joke.

The other two members of the group followed suit, but Chekov took his time. “And you ask me these things now instead of before we left, because?”

“Because I have been told that more of them have been seen since last night and we will soon approach the depth to which they have walked into the forest.”

“Wonderful.”

Elorra shrugged and turned away to begin walking again in what he assumed was the direction of the enclave. Likely, these additional Klingons were the same ones who had chased him into the forest, or an expanded landing party from their ship. Either way, the thought did not give him comfort. While not all of his experiences with Klingons were bad ones, he thought it unlikely that this particular group might wish him well.

In any case, he would trust the Pentosians to get him safely back to where he belonged.

7

Twilight seemed to last a long time in the forest. While that reminded Chekov of summers in the northern Russia, it

didn't exactly make him comfortable at the pace Elorra was setting through the undergrowth. The darker it got, the harder time he had even seeing through the trees, never mind where he might be setting his feet.

It was nearly full dark when Elorra suddenly stopped the group, and with his non-Pentosian night vision, Chekov nearly ran into her before he realized it. She looked back over her shoulder, and while her face was mostly shadow, he had no problem visualizing a scowl there. He did see her head shake back and forth, and so settled in to wait, breathing as slowly as he could manage to reduce the volume of even that.

After a moment, he heard something that she must have several minutes before. Two quiet voices, speaking neither Pentosian nor English. He couldn't make out any of the words, but even so far away and such a reduced volume, easily recognized the harsh consonants of Klingon standard.

Elorra sank into a crouch, still staring straight ahead, and Chekov followed suit, not so much to mimic her as to make a smaller target in case the Klingons suddenly realized they were there and wanted to start shooting. He wished mightily for a universal translator, or even an earpiece programmed for Klingon. The second might actually be better, to but so long as he were wishing, a well-armed security detail from the *Enterprise* would be nice.

Not the first time since he graduated, Chekov wondered if he should perhaps study a little bit of Klingon. It was an idle thought, and an unrealistic. Languages had never been his thing. He barely got through his Standard English language requirements at the Academy class but, he thought, he had come through with a good command of the language. Besides, was that not what the universal translator was for?

Shadow moved to his right, and Elorra reached out to touch the shadow's arm. Contact remained for several seconds and then the shadow melted away again. Without warning, Elorra leaned towards Chekov and grabbed his neck, pulling his ear to her lips. "She has made a full circuit of the Klingon camp and counts ten. We will move back, and away, trying a different route." Remembering her prescription against talking, Chekov nodded and assumed she would take the motion for assent.

Following Elorra, he took two steps back the way they'd come and had lifted his leg for third when the entire forest around him flashed a brilliant white that destroyed the darkness, destroyed his vision, and released a pandemonium of crazed animal noises around them. Something pulled his sleeve, not roughly, exactly, but unsteady hand of someone keeping their balance, or trying to. He guessed that Elorra had been blinded as well.

His vision didn't clear right away, didn't even start to. Whatever had caused flash, the after image burned in his eyes, and the world around him had become a rippling gray color with nothing he could identify by shape.

Small animals and birds stumbled and flapped around them, screeching their blindness and discomfort, but those screeches did nothing to hide the whine of Klingon disruptors. He changed his mind about wanting to stand up, flipped his hand over to grab Elorra's wrist, and pulled her down to the ground on top of him.

"You stupid off-worlder, watch--?"

"They are shooting at us! Can you see where to run? Where to hide?"

"Of course I can't see!"

Someone screamed off to his left. It was a scream of pain and did not come with Klingon cursing attached. "Then concentrate on being a smaller target for now. We will run when we can see."

His sight began to coalesce into the shadows again, but the Pentosian forest had a deep night, and he had no idea how long it would take his eyes to adapt again even to how well they had been before. It seemed unlikely he would have that long.

Chekov wondered if, perhaps, his vision might return before Elorra's. Not that he was a biologist in any way, but it seemed to Chekov that the native Pentosians eyes were better adapted to nighttime conditions than his. Considering the dense forests and jungles that seemed to cover most of the planet's temperate and tropical land area as their primary environment, they'd be naturally more ready for lower light levels. It seemed likely they would have a harder time with a blinding flash, and while once the readjustment began, it might go faster, he thought

the initial recovery might be much more difficult for his guides.

Klingon voices. Closer now, snarling harsh words to each other. Chekov tried to understand, tried to pull some meaning from the speech based on the handful of Klingon words he knew, even as he desperately tried to force his eyes open wider to let in more light. He recognized the inherent danger, worried that another flash grenade would follow on the heels first. So he kept his head mostly down for long seconds, hoping for his eyes to see again.

Slowly, Elorra became a blurry humanoid shadow. The trees around him straightened, and the branches and plants gathered beneath them took on more definite shapes, though not nearly as defined as they were before.

Another Klingon shout, this one seeming much closer, convinced him they could afford to wait no longer. He moved his head closer to Elorra's. "How are your eyes?"

She practically snarled. "The ugly ones have blinded me, off-worlder. I cannot see a damned thing."

"Nothing?"

"I would say so, damn you! Are you deaf as well?"

"Keep your voice down, please. They are looking for us."

"Then we are done."

It gave him absolutely no satisfaction to be right about Elorra's eyes and now was not the time to point out how differences between people could be a good thing. The twin whines of two disruptors pushed him into making a decision. "Come. We must go." He started to rise, grasping her forearm, but she jerked it free of his hand.

"You are brain injured. I cannot see a thing. We will be lost immediately."

"Better lost than captured. I can see just fine." Or almost fine. And not so well in the dark.

"For a human."

Well, that was better than off-worlder, maybe. "Yes, for a human, one who sees better than you at the moment."

She growled before answering. "Very well." Her hand groped for his forearm and she allowed him to steady her as she pulled herself into a standing position. Her hand slid up his arm

and grabbed onto the uniform shoulder. "Stay low, stay quiet. Try not to lead us back exactly the way we came, if you can."

He didn't think he would have too much difficulty with that unless he were very unlucky. Other than having a general idea of where most of the Klingons were, he didn't really know which direction was which. Anything away from them would be preferable. "I will do my best."

"One hopes it will be good enough."

"Yes, one hopes." Chekov did, at least. As they pushed through the brush, he wondered if he were better or worse off than he had been the night before, and eventually decided on better. At least now he had someone to talk to. If they escaped.

8

After nearly half an hour by his own estimate, Chekov began to worry.

He felt it a wonderful thing that they had managed to leave the Klingons behind, at least for the time being. That none of Elorra's companions had managed to catch up with them was certainly concerning, but a more immediate issue was that Elorra's eyesight had not returned, not even to the point beginning to clear. If the others fell into the same recovery time, he had little hope that they had evaded the Klingons.

As time passed, and they moved farther back into the forest, in what Chekov hoped was a random direction, she clutched at his shoulder with more and more ferocity. He worried for her, both physically and mentally.

Eventually, they had to stop. He was getting them lost enough, and worried about leading them on a curved path through the dark back towards the Klingons. "We should stop and rest."

Her fingers dug into his flesh. "I can't see. I don't know where we are."

"Da. That makes two of us, at least for the not knowing. Are you thirsty? Do you still have water?"

"Yes, yes I should. Here, hold the spear."

Not letting go of his shoulder, she reached across her body to hold the spear out in front of him. He wished he could

see more than a long darker shadow among the marginally lighter shadows, but it was truly night now and he didn't think his eyes would adapt much further than they had.

When he took the weapon, Chekov was surprised at how heavy it wasn't. He had a feeling, like so much else the Pentosians created, that the spear had been grown, and probably from something very special, some tree that the Federation science team had not cataloged here. Was the blade made from something different? If so, how had the two parts been grown together? He did not want to take the chance of running his fingers across it in the dark. Painful wounds across one hand were among the last things he might need.

Elorra took a long drink from the flexible water pack she carried. While it softened her voice, it did little to calm the tension in it. "So what do we do?"

That, Chekov thought, was an excellent question, one for which he honestly had no easy answer. It was far too much to hope for that the Federation science team had allowed search parties to go beyond the edge of the enclave. By now, with him missing for more than a day, the Enterprise would certainly be conducting detailed sensor sweeps of the surrounding forest. But a sudden rescue by transporter beam seemed very unlikely. The local Pentosian forest, he knew, was dense with life. Picking out a single life form, even a clearly alien one, was not going to be easy even for Mr. Spock. Scanning for a shuttlecraft alone in an asteroid belt, a bit of refined metal and ceramic among the billions of tons of raw ore and rock, was a much easier task by comparison. One particular life sign among tens or hundreds of thousands was a much bigger challenge.

And he did not think he wanted to be rescued just at the moment. Mr. Spock would not know that Chekov was not alone. And he did not wish to leave Elorra in this condition. He also very much wished to find out what happened to the remainder of his escort. Though some of the sounds after the flash grenades had gone off told him clearly that not everyone had escaped.

"Now, we wait." The irony of that statement was not lost on. "For morning, if necessary, but more importantly for your eyes to recover. I will simply get us lost, more likely, if I have not already done so. And we can do nothing for the well-being of

your friends if we are lost in the dark, yes?”

She remained silent for a long time, fingers tight on his shoulder. He tried to imagine what thoughts might be going through her mind, and if he had managed to alter her preconceptions of humans at all, not that that has been his intent exactly. Finally, Elorra let out a long breath. “Yes, we wait. We try to sleep. But we will not be so stupid as to do so lying on the ground. Let the ugly ones contend with the sneaking predators. It seems unlikely that any will attempt to disturb us, but it is better to be safe. If there are surprises in the night, I would prefer them not being to us.”

“So, if we cannot sleep on the ground, where?”

Though he could not see it on her face in the darkness, Chekov swore he could hear a smile in her voice. “I would have thought you far more observant than that. Look around us, and tell me what you see.”

Chekov sighed. “Only trees, my friend, and that is precisely what I feared you meant.” The morning would tell whether he managed to sleep without falling out of one or not.

9

Judging by the aches in his shoulders and lower back, Chekov had survived the night.

It had taken them what felt like an hour to get high enough up in a tree that their dangling feet wouldn't smack a passing Klingon in the face. Of course, Chekov expected the Klingons would be carrying their equivalent of tricorders and would be able to pick them out from a few meters away at least, without having to wait for convenient toes.

He was surprised at the position he found himself in, once he was awake enough to understand it. In retrospect, it seemed like an excellent idea, and one perhaps he should have followed if he had the native balance to achieve it. During the night, Elorra had stretched out across several limbs at the same rough height. However, one of them was the one he had straddled to dig his back into a slight depression in the trunk. While having him handy had given her something extra to brace against, at some point, she'd also rolled over to more or less rest

her neck and shoulders across his legs. It had the effect of putting her basically in his lap, but also, helped to weigh him down against falling out of side of his tree. He very much doubted she'd done it on purpose, or even was aware she'd shifted position, and did his best not move to before she woke.

After a few minutes, he heard her breathe in short and sharply, and felt her not breathe for several seconds. When she did, it was the measured, shallow breathing of someone not exactly thrilled by the situation she found herself in. A gentle rustling suggested careful movement and the weight lifted from his leg. Chekov slowly counted to sixty, and then gave an exaggerated yawn while he arched his back, rewarded with several loud pops. She took the opportunity of his apparent distraction to push up off the limb completely and regain a seated position on the next branch over.

"It's about time you woke up, off-worlder." But the barely held hostility in her voice seemed almost perfunctory.

He yawned again, ignoring the jibe. "It is morning? Good."

"It has been morning for some time."

"Even better. How are your eyes?"

She hesitated, holding up a hand and wiggling her fingers. "A little blurrier than I would like, but I can certainly find my way around." Her eyes closed for a long moment and she swallowed twice before opening them again. "Thank you. I could not have gotten away on my own."

He smiled at her. "Of course, there was no question." And there hadn't been, but given her general feelings, how could she know that?

"As you say, but thank you anyway."

"You are welcome." He arched his back again and got two more cracks as things fell into place in his spine. Some stiffness remained, but in these difficult days, he could but move on. "Now, I think we need to know where we are."

"What?" Her body tensed, and her eyes narrowed, emerald gaze almost sparkling fire. It was, by far, the strongest visible expression of emotion he'd witnessed from her so far. "I know you must be eager to get back to the enclave, but—"

"No." Chekov shook his head and stared at her with

what he hoped was a hard expression. “The enclave will be there whenever I get back to it. We have something far more important to do this morning.”

“Oh?” The scowl slipped into a frown, a subtle difference, but perhaps he was learning to read her facial expressions, if only a little. “And what is so much more important than getting you off my planet?”

“There were six of us scattered through the forest when the flash grenade detonated, but I see only two of us here. Which means we are short four.” He raised both eyebrows. “I would very much like to know if any of the others still live. If they do, I intend to take them away from the Klingons.”

He had no trouble reading the wicked grin spread across Elorra’s face. “Perhaps, off-worlder, I am starting to like the way you think after all.”

10

Chekov tried to decide if it was worth the effort discarding his uniform shirt. It hadn’t gotten particularly cold in the forest the two nights he’d spent in it, but then he’d slept with his shirt on. He might be Russian, but that didn’t mean he actually believed himself invulnerable to a chill. Still, the gold tunic didn’t exactly help him blend in with the red and blue foliage surrounding them. In the end, he left it on, preferring not to have to explain to his travelling companion why he felt the need to partially undress, though he suspected she would have understood well enough. Attached to that thought was that he’d rather any sharp or scratchy bits of vegetation grab at his uniform instead of his flesh. Gold or not, out of place or not, the shirt remained. But perhaps he should consider making it dirtier.

Vision far from perfect, and Elorra complained about that only once more before they began moving back towards the ambush point, the Pentosian ranger saw well enough to determine their location and what direction they needed to take to return to the site of the attack. Almost grudgingly, she complimented Chekov on the direction he’d led them away from the Klingons, an angled line that took them quickly away from the avenue of pursuit. He chose not to admit that his choice had

been more or less random and that he thought they'd put more distance between them and the Klingon trap than they really had. Better to let things go, he thought, and accepted the minor praise.

Circling around a much larger area than the Klingons had used, they came to a place that clearly marked an encampment. There had been no fires, so far as Chekov could tell, but a great deal of trampled vegetation and wanton damage to trees, he suspected during armed combat practice. Bits of scattered ration packs lay strewn across part of the area, torn open and apart to be discarded when empty, or nearly. It was, frankly, a mess, but the Klingons were long gone.

"This is disgusting."

Chekov had certainly seen worse, but he kept his voice as level as possible. "Klingons are not consistently wise in the use of available resources."

Sparkling eyes turned on him. "That is a statement calculated to be neutral while still making a judgement that the subject is immature and has yet to learn better."

He shrugged but didn't smile. It was hard to disagree with the accurate statement. He was clearly being judgemental even while leaving the Klingons opportunity for improvement. "It is my nature to cast things in a positive light, where possible, and to assume future growth in understanding where not. The universe is not a fair place, so I see no reason to directly contribute to that unfairness."

"It seems a somewhat dishonest to me."

Chekov thought about not for a moment, considering if dishonest was really the word she wanted. Elorra's spoken English was excellent, but it was certainly not her first language, and they shared that of it. "It is not my intention to be dishonest with you or myself. My intent is more to not prejudice us against the Klingons beyond what events and direct experience this particular party of them is providing."

Defending his words seemed personal, and she pressed him further. "So the Klingons are not your enemies."

Another difficult statement to respond to. And yet, after a moment's thought, perhaps not. "I would say rather that they are my adversaries at the moment. Not quite the same thing. There is a peace treaty between the Federation and the Klingon Empire,

which may not stop them from seeking whatever advantage they can find, but that does not make us enemies.”

Mouth open to respond, Elorra’s eyes widened suddenly and she rushed a dozen steps away from the center of the former Klingon camp to drop to one knee in the trampled grass as he took a few steps forward to see what had captured her attention. Hidden by brush and long grass, a Pentosian man lay on his back, brilliant green eyes open to the sky but unseeing. When Elorra looked up, her eyes were hot, the skin around them tight. “Perhaps they are only your adversaries, but this certainly makes them my enemies.”

He finished his approach, slower than she had, his eyes never leaving the body. It was difficult for him to object to her phrasing. Judging by the bruises and cuts that could be seen though the almost shreds of his clothing, the man had clearly been beaten, severely, and most likely for information.

Information about Chekov.

He felt his jaw tighten and his teeth ground against each other. “For these particular Klingons, I most certainly agree.” Quietly, in his heart, he dismissed any doubts about the stakes of his current journey.

11

“His name was Irin.”

Chekov looked up from the body, the second they’d found, though this one had clearly died from a disruptor blast to the chest. The not-leather vest the man had worn had been pulped and the flesh beneath hadn’t fared much better. He knew from experience that the blunt force shock to man’s internal organs had been the cause of death. “I am sorry to not have known him better.” An understatement, to be sure. Chekov didn’t believe he’d actually heard the man speak.

“The first, at their camp, was Adiron.”

He didn’t know what to say. It was difficult to lose friends, and though he knew the life he had chosen held certain dangers, it wasn’t something you got used to. Elorra classed herself as a hunter and a warrior, but the little he knew of Pentosian culture, both of those were more traditional labels.

Ranger was more appropriate to what she actually spent her time on, and the title she hadn't given for him to call her, a steward of the forest. He was glad for the distinction, knowing Klingons also used the word warrior, and did not mean quite the same thing by it. In any case, on Pentos it was not a profession in which one expected to lose friends, though he suspected injuries must happen now and again. A civilized world, if by different measures than those the Federation used, so there were few occupations that were truly dangerous.

She was not used to losing friends, but so far today had seen the deaths of two.

Standing up out of the brush, Elorra now held two spears. She held one of them out to Chekov. "You are unarmed."

Once again, he had no idea what to say. It seemed a safe assumption that a primitive weapon in an advanced society had a special place. Given the ecological tendencies of the Pentosians, he doubted they allowed much in the way of more modern weaponry, but the gesture must be significant and if he said or did the wrong thing, it might be bad for relations with the native government, still a concern, but perhaps a secondary one at the moment.

Finally, Chekov reached out a hand, wrapping around the haft farther from the head than Elorra's. "I will do my best to bring honour to the weapon and its former wielder."

"It is difficult to ask more." She released the weapon completely to his grasp. "Come." Elorra pointed. "The ugly ones went that way."

And they'd done so leaving a trail even Chekov could easily follow.

12

"I have counted 16." Which was more than they'd seen the previous night. He struggled to keep his whisper low enough that it would not carry beyond the Elorra's ear.

She nodded. "I will agree to that number." Her acknowledgment made him feel better about his powers of observation. Occasionally, he did wonder if he was truly cut out for Starfleet. He felt easily distracted sometimes, no matter the

high standards he held himself to. She turned to stare at him. “It does not make for a good ratio.”

Chekov shrugged. “I am Russian. The odds have never been in our favor. It is something you get used to.” And in less stressful moments, he might have said something similar as a joke. Now, he found he meant it quite seriously. The odds did not matter, only what was right.

She inhaled, probably to say she thought he was human, but seemed to change her mind in the moment.

Without speaking, they agreed to withdraw several hundred yards, taking a few minutes to sneak back beyond sight of what must have been the river he’d caught a glimpse of from a distance the day before. What they had ahead of them required some planning, though more importantly it required them to be somewhere the Klingons did not suspect they could be.

Crouching behind a fallen tree larger than any he’d ever seen before, they kept their voices to whispers.

The look on the Elorra’s face brightened as they began to sketch out a rough plan. He suspected that she did not expect to survive. Further, she likely expected him to die as well. While that was certainly possible, even likely, any end he would suffer at the hands Klingons would likely be unpleasant as they tried to learn what he might know about their movements on Pentos and whatever Starfleet secrets he might be willing to spill. It would be long and drawn out, he was sure.

“They are loud and messy.”

“Da, but they are not stupid. They will be alert and aware, and we will have little time to get into their camp, find what we want, and get out again.” He drew a large circle in the dirt and then a small X. “If this is here, the shelters I was able to see are here, here, and here.” He poked spots inside the circle.

Elorra nodded. She pointed at the center one. “This one is the largest. There.”

“It is. And that seems to make it obvious to me. Too obvious. This one, though smaller, would certainly hold two prisoners.”

“It is also the one closest to us, though they might see things differently.”

“It is closer, but you are correct. And if you thought

someone might try to rescue your prisoners, would you expect a frontal assault?"

"No, but I would still be prepared."

"As would I. But remember that we are not Klingons. We will think differently than they do. They may be prepared for a frontal assault, but perhaps not so much for a frontal sneak."

Her expression drifted back to neutral. "What do you propose?"

He waved a hand through the circle, destroying everything they'd drawn. "Actually give them both what they expect and what they don't." He grinned. "And don't plan too much detail. Let us be fluid, reacting to the situation we find. With our limited equipment, we need to keep to simplicity."

13

Frontal assault was not at all the right phrase. Even assault was incorrect. Against sixteen Klingons, that, Chekov had to admit, would be suicide. The fact that he couldn't shake the feeling he was sneaking towards suicide anyway did absolutely nothing to deter him from their objective. He wished again for a transporter, a communicator, or even a half-charged phaser, anything that would help adjust the odds just slightly in their favour. There was nothing, of course, and again he did not feel as if should waste time and mental energy wishing the impossible. Not that he could help it.

He and Elorra had agreed to approach the Klingons from the same side, but many meters apart, and slowly coming together was an easy thing to do since she was far more adept than he at moving through the forest unseen and unheard, for reasons that had nothing to do with his less-gold-than-normal uniform shirt. But if he had been seen by the Klingons, they had made no sign of it and were waiting for the last possible moment to pounce. That last moment seemed to be near at hand. Nearby growling Klingon conversation was almost continuous, yet just distant enough to be safe if Chekov and Elorra remained silent, and he still felt the nearest shelter the most likely site for prisoners.

Doing his best to stay low, Chekov moved closer and

closer to the shelter, a simple dome of some artificial fibre, and wondered where Elorra might be. A flicker of movement off to his right through the trees, he saw a Klingon dressed all in black, forgoing the gold sash and shirt normally worn, step fully out of the shadow of a large tree, wicked knife held point down in a clenched fist high above his head. The Klingon took one slow and careful step, and then a second. Unless some unwary animal had wandered into the Klingon sphere of influence, there was only one thing he might be stalking, and Chekov not allow that.

The Klingon was turned just far enough away from Chekov that he should not be in the man's peripheral vision as he took two pounding steps forward, holding the spear like a staff for a strong overhand swing to bring down upon the Klingon's head. But those pounding steps made too much noise, and those incredible Klingon reflexes took over. The Klingon's body twisted, and the knife spun in his hand to point skyward and catch the spear in the blade's guard. There was no clash or clang of metal on metal, just a quiet thunk as the two weapons tapped together and the slow spread of a wicked smile on the Klingon's face

The Klingon reached out and grabbed at Chekov's spear with his other hand, and he pulled it back just in time to avoid losing it, although the warrior's fingers almost brushed the haft. The grin never left his face as he drew a second knife and took a step forward towards Chekov with one in each hand.

Chekov tensed, tip of the spear pointed towards the Klingon and held at eye level. He tried to relax, keep the muscles strong but at the same time loose and ready. He'd never trained for armed combat, at least not with a spear, but one of his instructors at the Academy had given a series of seminars on impromptu weapons. Comfortable was the wrong word, but he certainly felt less uncomfortable with a broom that happened to have a blade on the end instead of the sweeping surface.

And then it didn't matter how prepared or unprepared Chekov might be to use the weapon. The tip of another spear pushed out of the warrior's chest, and he looked down, color draining from his face as the shock shook his already dying body. He dropped both blades to the ground and clutched at the spear point with one flexing hand. It disappeared, and the Klingon

dropped to his knees, revealing Elorra standing behind him, her face far paler than her victim's had suddenly become, if in a blue direction.

Chekov circled the collapsing Klingon, staying well outside of reach as he moved to Elorra's side. She could not tear eyes from dying alien. "I never..."

He whispered back. "I understand. Taking a life is not an easy thing, but, as much a platitude as it sounds, what else could you do?"

She shook her head hard. "Nothing. But he more or less let me kill him. Why did he not call for help? There are fifteen others."

"It is not their way." Not a very good explanation for Klingon society or culture or traditions when I else, but it was one thing he had learned about them. "They work together only when forced, and then follow the strongest."

"Then they are stupid."

"No, only different. We are weak in their eyes, until proven otherwise. This one had no reason to believe that he, the Klingon warrior, was not easily more than a match for the purpose at hand."

She looked at him then, and Chekov was surprised to find her eyes glistening. "That may no longer be the case, not when they find him."

"True. But it will make them more cautious, and also more vicious. Come. We must check the shelters."

Elorra began to make for their target shelter, creeping up to the wall. Chekov hesitated, his eyes completely taken in by the dead Klingon in the grass. He didn't let that hesitation last long and took a step forward to jerk the disruptor pistol from the fallen warrior's belt and then retrieve one of the wicked daggers from the ground. The pistol did not comfortably fit on his side, too large compared to a standard-issue phaser. But it stuck their and left him feeling a bit more armed than he had before. Still moving is quietly as he could, he caught up with Elorra as she reached the nearest chest-high fabric dome.

Crouching down, she put her hands almost on the surface of the fabric and closed her eyes for a moment. Harsh Klingon words reached his ears from not nearly far enough away. Not for

the first time, but if he could force the thought from his mind for what he hoped would be the last, he wished for a universal translator. He would give a great deal to know what their intentions were on this planet, though he suspected any voices he heard randomly would just be making the Klingon equivalent of small talk.

“Wow, this field ration pack of dried gagh isn’t very good, is it?”

“Why no, it isn’t, but at least we have been provided with plenty of blood wine.”

“True. How long do you suppose it will be before we get off this stinking mud ball?”

“Whenever we finish the thing we came here to do and the Earthers have suffered enough, I suppose.”

“A good point. I should probably sharpen my bat'leth.”

“I did that last night, but my knives need oil. Let’s get drunk around the fire again.”

“An excellent idea.”

Too much imagination, Pavel.

Elorra suddenly opened her eyes and pulled her hands back from the shelter. She leaned back, twisting her spear to bring the blade to the fabric wall, but he held up a hand, the one with the Klingon knife, and she accepted the idea with a jerking nod.

The knife was incredibly sharp, and as it parted the fabric effortlessly, he couldn’t help but imagine what it might have done to the skin of, say, a young Starfleet officer. The fabric was thicker than he expected, secure and likely treated with various things to keep out the weather. Not so much anymore.

The dim forest light spilled inside, washing across the faces of two Pentosians lying there. One twitched, shrank away from the light, and tried to crane her neck to assess the sudden new danger, relief flooding panicked eyes when she caught sight of Chekov and Elorra.

The other wasn’t breathing.

Chekov looked at the panicked woman, placed finger over his mouth, and shook his head. Accepting it back from

Elorra, he carefully used one of the small side hooks on the Klingon dagger to slice through the fabric of the gag before gently freeing her mouth. First task accomplished, he looked up in time to see Elorra pull a hand back from the other Pentosian's forehead. She met his eyes and he found himself again surprised to see tears standing in hers, but the set of her jaw told him it wouldn't slow her down, and they had one friend to rescue yet.

He bent down to put his mouth next to her ear and tried not to be offended when she shrank against the body of her companion. "I'm going to cut your bonds. Can you walk?" He felt her head shake before he could lean back to make eye contact again.

The voice she responded with was rough, probably with suppressed, or released, screams. "No. Broken leg."

That wasn't what he'd hoped for. But then, he'd hoped to find both of the captives alive and well and ready to fight back. Dream big, his mother would always say, but be prepared to work for your dreams. "Da. Then I will carry you." He gave the spear to Elorra even as the frown scrunched up her face but ignored it in favour of crawling part way into the shelter to slice the rough fabric binding the woman's wrists and ankles. That task completed, he handed the dagger to Elorra as well and moved back to whisper in her ear. "I need your help to pull you from the tent. Do not kick or push. Noise is our enemy right now. Can you lift your legs if I am supporting your weight?"

She nodded again then demonstrated that she could raise both fully off the floor from where she lay. Most of the colour left her face as she did so, but she had more strength left than her captors might have liked.

Chekov surrendered the knife to Elorra as well, and slowly, as gently as he could, slipped an arm under the captive woman's shoulders, and another under her thighs. She hissed but shook her head when he looked at her. "Just go."

She was unfortunately heavier than she looked, which he should have expected. The life of a Pentosian Ranger was certainly conducive to muscle tissue. Breathing carefully, he lifted her just a few centimeters from the floor of the shelter, his back protesting more than he thought it should, and pressed his right knee against the ground for leverage. A small shuffle made

it far more noise than he wanted, and Chekov stopped to listen, controlling his breathing as best he could.

Elorra scowled and motioned for him to hurry. Other Klingon voices floated on the breeze. Sooner or later, one of them would certainly come to check on the prisoners, if only to add a little more abuse to their ordeal, an ordeal which one had already failed to survive. Remembering signs on one of the bodies they'd found, he amended that number to two as he slid over a few more centimeters so that he could rest the woman's backside on the ground, and shifted his own weight halfway through, switching which knee he pressed against the ground.

She seemed heavier the second time, but that was simply sore muscles which he would tolerate and only complain about so long as he lived to enjoy the recovery.

He set her down, he hoped gently, and smiled at the Pentosian woman. "And now for the easy part. I am afraid I have to ask you to stand up. I don't know that I can lift you from the ground, small as I am, but if I can get you on my shoulders, I think we will stand a chance to put some distance in."

Her nostrils dilated, and her head jerked up and down once. Elorra had no free hands, leaving it to Chekov to pull the injured ranger into a standing position balancing on one foot. No easy feat with a broken leg, but when the other option was to remain a prisoner of the Klingons, she found the will and strength even to a little of her weight on the broken leg to maintain her balance as he ducked to slip her into a fireman's carry. He hoped he'd only put pressure on the good leg in the process. Since she didn't complain more than a hiss of indrawn breath, Chekov assumed he guessed right.

Elorra passed the dagger to the other woman who gripped it so hard her knuckles lost colour in the corner of his vision, and Chekov wasn't sure he felt safer with the blade near him again or not. No time to think about it, though. They had to get away, and quickly. He stepped as lightly as he could, following Elorra into the forest in a different direction than they'd come from. He wondered if she were leading them to the enclave or back to her forest home and honestly had no idea which might be closer or a better option.

He was surprised how well he moved through the forest

environments, feet picking out sure spots mostly without having to check with his eyes first. While he certainly moved slower than he would have under his own power, even trying to sneak through the woods, it didn't seem as if he had an extra 60 or so kilos on his back. Carrying the ranger wasn't nearly the same thing as trying to lift her on one knee.

He had just enough time, two minutes perhaps, and they managed one hundred or so careful metres into the dense forest away from the camp, before he heard the first Klingon shout of alarm. Chekov began to run.

He hated being chased.

14

The shouts behind them remained fairly constant and, considering both his burden and the slim lead they began with, he couldn't understand why the Klingons hadn't caught up. Crashing through the forest, his breath and heart sounded loud his own years, and he couldn't imagine not leaving a clear trail through the brush and dirt behind him.

And yet, the Klingons didn't seem to get any closer, almost as if they didn't quite want to.

Almost as if they were herding prey.

"Ranger!" The word hissed out at the end of his breath. She dropped back couple steps, enough that her voice would not have to carry, enough that if she wanted to she could make peripheral eye contact.

"What is it?" Her own words didn't seem nearly so laboured, though she wasn't carrying another person across her shoulders.

He tried not to think about that too much, or the extra weight would begin to make him tired. Chekov chided himself, thinking he maybe wasn't quite so fit as he'd thought, but a fervent wish not to be Klingon prisoner kept him pushing hard. "Playing. With. Us."

She nodded, her steps making the motion a jerking bounce. "Yes. They are too many. The enclave too far."

"What. Then."

Elorra shrugged. "Every step is a longer life."

Every step is a longer life. He considered the words carefully over a dozen paces and then discarded the thought. It wasn't enough. The Klingons were treating them like prey, and whatever else Lieutenant Pavel Chekov might be, he was not prey. Young, yes. Inexperienced, perhaps by some measures. But he was well trained and had an excellent brain. He had not spent almost five years on the *Enterprise* to be run down in the woods by a pack of wolves.

But he needed time and space, time to think and space to breathe.

Chekov. "Change direction."

"But if we can reach your enclave--"

He cut Elorra off with another puff. "Klingons. Want that. So change. Direction."

Shaking her head, but not really having a reason to argue, she turned away from the line they'd been following, angling off at fifty or sixty degrees from it. Chekov tried kept his eyes on the ground ahead while she considered the situation. A stray tree root at this point would be devastating.

Foiling whatever trap the Klingons were planning to spring would only give them a little more life, and would also serve to irritate their enemies. Sooner or later, the three of them would have to make a stand of some kind. Counting sixteen Klingons, if they had been right about the total number, then one dead still made fifteen. He thought it unlikely that they would all be pursuing one lost captive and whoever had freed her, for that would mean they knew that Chekov and Elorra were alone. He didn't think there was any way they could know that without doubt and so they would plan accordingly.

Of course, he'd been wrong about a lot of things but still thought it likely the Klingons would have at least a token guard behind at the camp, perhaps only two or three lookouts in case someone else had been trying to sneak by. He wondered what sensors they might have had in the area, and if they dared to use communicators so close to a Federation enclave, isolated or not. The station on Pentos might not be set up for a listening station, but they certainly had monitoring systems on the planet, if only to try to absorb the local transmissions and culture.

And none of that helped them. Chekov kept running

because he had no idea what else to do.

15

Chekov saw a break in the trees, and eventually, to go with the change in light and colour ahead, his ears began to discern the crash of rushing water. His knowledge of the local geography was quite lacking, but Chekov remembered the river. Or a river. He had no idea if there might be more than one. But he knew a river, swollen with melt from the mountains, when he heard one. His lungs hurt, and his shoulders ached, but he kept running. “There is a way across?”

Elorra nodded. “A small bridge. You will have to balance carefully so you do not drop Jennari into the river.”

Chekov filed the name for future reference as he felt fingers dig into his shoulder. “I am glad you have kept your sense of humor. I have not carried her so far to throw her to the fish now.”

“Good to hear.” A quiet voice, near his ear and deeper than expected, but the fingers remained tight. The voice reminded him of someone he knew, but he didn’t have the processing power available to connect the necessary mental dots at the moment.

They broke out of the trees and he saw the bridge ahead of them. At the same time, Chekov began to have a clear idea of how wide the river was, at least a hundred metres. The bridge, close as it might be, seemed very small, fit for a single traveller at a time. It was not much wider than his feet placed side by side. For himself, he would not be worried under normal circumstances, but carrying Jennari was different. He focused on the bridge. *It’s okay, Pavel. You can do this.*

They slowed as they approached the foot of the bridge and Chekov was disturbed to find that when Elorra spoke, she wasn’t nearly empty of breath, recovering quickly. “You go first. If need be, I will be able to help steady you.”

Chekov did not remove the hand from Jennari’s shoulder to grasp the rail. He felt that would make his balance only worse than it already might be. He nodded and stepped onto the bridge, his eyes roaming over it to find that it seemed to be a mass of

tree roots grown and twisted together. The surface was flat and firm, though, and easy to find purchase on. Still, he was not above using his ribs to slide along the railing.

Beneath them, the water rolled by, perhaps not spring flooding, but definitely run off from somewhere, and he certainly suspected mountains, but they were far enough away in his mind that Chekov really had no idea what the geography in between might do. Still, at least one hundred metres wide and fast moving, that volume of water had to come from somewhere.

He tried to think about in a little detail, to distract his mind the fact that there was still another forty metres or more of bridge ahead of them by his reckoning. *Bozhe moi*, but he was going to be tired when he finally got to rest. He let the mountains go and focused solely on putting one foot in front of the other, on remaining straight and steady on the bridge. In doing, he nearly missed snatch of conversation between Elorra and Jennari.

“You know what must be done.”

“I know our privacy must be protected.”

“I am more concerned about our lives. I will not be their prisoner again and will throw myself into the river before that happens.”

“Jennari, I have lost—”

“I have lost them too, and more besides. You must do this. You have the strength, and the authority. I do not.”

“I... don’t know if I can.”

“You have less than half the traverse left to make that decision.”

Chekov wished he had some idea what they were talking about. As it was, he didn’t get enough from the conversation, but felt sure something else, something beyond his understanding, was being discussed, something more than just getting to the other side of the river. He kept his focus on the end of the bridge, the far bank got closer and closer, and he had more and more respect for whatever technology the Pentosians used to stretch living trees across such a span of rushing water with such strength to bear three full grown humanoids at any point.

“You must hurry. The ugly ones are coming.”

He wanted to respond to Elorra that she was welcome to carry him if she thought she could go faster, but the shouts

behind them gave him a new reason to move forward. Perhaps a dozen metres remained, and he could certainly take those quicker, whatever the railing might do the flesh covering his ribs in between.

His feet seemed heavy, but he pushed them forward anyway. Somewhere behind him, he felt footsteps slamming onto the bridge, ripples through the wood beneath him. The Klingons must have come, but he did not look back. Almost without realizing, he slid down the short ramp at the end of the bridge and stumbled as his feet touched dirt at the end.

Only then did he risk a glance back, seeing a Klingon on the bridge, blade in one hand and a disruptor in the other, and several more coming behind. He sighed. "Well, I suppose there's nothing left to do but run." Not that he could honestly call the pace he'd be able to manage running, but he would go on until he could not. And then, probably, he would find a way to go further.

He felt movement on his back. "No, put me down please, warrior. They are too close. Running will not help. Elorra, you must."

The stricken look on Elorra's face surprised Chekov, and he wished again for some idea of what had passed between the two women on the bridge. Tears welling up in her eyes, she gave a single stiff nod.

Chekov tried to object, to say he had plenty of energy left, but he was quite certain it was not an argument he could win. He slowly lowered Jennari to the ground, helped her sit against one of the trees whose branches stretched to form the bridge. Her face was still scrunched up as he pulled away, rolling first one shoulder and then the other, but she nodded and smiled at him. "Thank you for not leaving me."

"I could not."

She nodded "I think I understand." Her eyes moved to Elorra. "You have no time."

Chekov turned to see Elorra drop into a crouch at the foot of the bridge, her shoulders shaking. "I can't."

"You must."

The Klingon, still stalking forward, had come halfway across the bridge, and Chekov saw over the man's shoulder that

one of his comrades had stepped onto the bridge. This, perhaps, was a tenable position at least for a short period of time. He pulled the disruptor from his belt and while the few Klingon letters on the grip meant nothing to him, the firing stud was clear enough. A power level indicator would have been nice, however. He raised the weapon and pointed it at the approaching Klingon. He raised his voice. "If you come any closer, I will shoot you."

The Klingon didn't stop moving, but he did spare the attention to sneer back. "Ha! As if I am afraid of any weapon in the hands of an earther." He kept coming.

Jennari's voice came from behind Chekov. "Elorra, what has been done once can be redone. Will you have us die for a secret he doesn't care about?"

Chekov sighed. "I wish I had some idea what you are talking about." He did his best to steady the weapon, put his finger over the stud, and raised his voice. "I will not warn you again. Turn back."

In response, the Klingon raised his disruptor and pointed it at Chekov. With his own weapon, he had no doubt the man was a better shot at any distance.

But then the entire bridge seemed to shake, and Chekov dropped his gaze to Elorra. She still knelt at the foot of the bridge, her hands pressed against each side, as she whispered something he couldn't hear and probably wouldn't understand if he could. The bridge began to unravel, roots and limbs splitting into their component parts, and he realized just how many strands formed the platform he'd walked across. He thought only two or three large ones stretched across the entirely the river, but as they pulled apart, as they unraveled, he came to understand that the solidity of the construction had been a complete illusion. Hundreds, thousands of tiny strands of vegetation had woven themselves together to form the path across the water.

And now they were being unwoven.

Chekov couldn't believe what he was seeing. Plants did not move on their own. At least, not so they could be observed on a human scale. Oh, there were exceptions, probably on every world with life, but not trees. Trees defined slow. They stretched their lives and roots to catch the endless supply of sunlight. And yet here, things were different somehow. The Pentosians clearly

had ways of training the trees to grow in ways they wanted, and it wasn't merely time and patience, but some kind of advanced genetic engineering. And it could be reversed, for the bridge, made from the roots and limbs of many trees on each the side of the river, taught to grow together in a compact form that would allow pedestrians a means to traverse the flowing water safely, was about to no longer be a bridge. The trees were suddenly changing their minds.

The bridge began to come apart.

The Klingon took a moment longer to notice, lowering his weapon to take a pair of slow steps while his mouth hung open.

Then he began to run.

And not back the way he had come. The Klingon ran towards Chekov. On the one hand, he understood the logic. The Klingon must know he was more than halfway across the river, that he would have a better chance of reaching the closer side on foot or if he had to swim. Chekov doubted that type of logic was part of the way a Klingon might think, however. His prey was closer, that was what mattered.

He knew that to be at least partly an unfair thought. Klingons had a strange sense of warrior's honour. For the most part, they also had an intense, take no unnecessary prisoners, do whatever it takes to complete the mission, attitude, or at least every Klingons he'd ever met or read about did. While some were more controlled with their emotions, and here Colonel J'dek came to mind, the glory of the Klingon Empire stood far above personal safety in the normal Klingon mindset.

And so the Klingon ran towards them even as the bridge came unravelled. The speed at which the unraveling happened gave him no chance, and still finding steps in the last possible footing, he grabbed for the last bit of railing at the expense of both knife and disruptor. That railing pulled away from his fingers, retracting so quickly Chekov thought he heard splintering wood. The Klingon disappeared into the rushing water, and Chekov hoped the man could swim just well enough to be swept far downstream before finding the shore alive.

Lowering his weapon, he took the few steps towards Elorra, and knelt down at her side. His impulse to reach out and

put a hand on her shoulder died quickly. Whether it applied to Pentosians in general or not, he did not think she liked to be touched, and had tolerated it previously only through blindness.

“I have no idea what that cost you, but thank you for our lives. For my life, a second time.”

Elorra straightened her back and turned to face him. Somehow, the tears flowing down her cheeks did not surprise him in the least. And she did not acknowledge his gratitude. Instead, she took a deep breath and stood quickly, forcing him to mirror the action. “There is another bridge. It touches the edge of your enclave. It is still quite far, especially carrying another.”

He grinned at her. “What, you don’t think I want to leave her behind now, do you?” Elorra snorted, and if the grin on her face was short-lived, at least he had not imagined it.

“Ah, how sweet. As if I needed another reason to dislike earthers.”

Spinning in place, Chekov raised the disruptor, instantly training it on the Klingon as he pulled himself up the riverbank only a dozen or so meters downstream. Beside him, Elorra tensed and, faster than he could have reacted, reached down and scooped up her spear from where she had left it on the ground.

The Klingon laughed, spitting out a little water. “If, earther, you can figure out how to use a real weapon, you should kill me now. Otherwise, you are all dead.”

Chekov shook his head. “You could just sit there and recover and watch us walk away. Whatever your mission is, it is long since compromised.”

“If that is true, what do I have left save the personal satisfaction of killing you? Our mission, as always, was not compromised. My presence here shows the pathetic native species that, whatever you Federation cattle believe, you bring everything with you when you come, including your enemies. Your very presence here draws us.”

Could that really be it? It seemed ridiculous that the Klingons merely wanted to establish that the Federation was not all-powerful, something the Federation had never claimed, something Starfleet had never claimed. His reading of the enclave agreement summary clearly stated that the Federation had no wish to interfere in any way with Pentosian culture or

society. They merely want to study the native life of the world, or as much of it as Pentosians would allow. It said nothing about protection, or mutual defense, though he did notice in the files that in the event of planetary distress, Starfleet would answer the call for assistance. There was also a note that the Klingon border was not very far away. He wondered if that simple statement said something fundamental about both Federation and Klingon policy.

Something he might spend some time considering, if they ever got back to the enclave.

With a growl, Elorra took a single step forward, her right hand clenched around the spear as if she might throw it. Holding up a hand to block her, Chekov shook his head. "Do not become him."

"Those taken from us had a far less quick end than I'll give this one."

"Da. That is true. But it is a somewhat simplistic view of revenge. So I ask you, what will his death bring them?"

"Of course it is simplistic, but that changes nothing." She seemed to deflate a little. "Including the fact that you are right. What this does is delay us, and his companions will gather on the far bank. It will occur to them soon to start shooting at us, whatever the range. The longer we stand here, the greater the risk."

It was an excellent point, in so many ways. And since he did not have anything of substance to add, Chekov kept the disruptor leveled at the Klingon.

And the Klingon laughed as he pulled himself to his feet and stood, amused at what he must see as alien softness, but in no way cowed.

Chekov changed his point of aim and pressed the firing stud. The ground exploded less than a metre to the Klingon's left. While the laughter stopped, the smile remained intact. "So, it is possible for an earther to actually fire a weapon. I am impressed, but hardly afraid." He took a step forward and Chekov shifted aim again so disruptor came to the middle of the Klingon's chest.

"That will be quite close enough thank you." He made the words slow and clear to avoid the thickening of his accent that was the surest sign of stress. "I really do not want to kill

you.”

The Klingon took another step. “That is obvious. If our positions were reversed, you would not have crawled above the water line.”

“I am well aware of that.”

“You are weak.”

Chekov shook his head. “I have no interest in arguing with you. We are leaving now.”

“No. I do not think so.” The Klingon launched himself at Chekov, one arm outstretched as if reaching for the disruptor, though he certainly would have been satisfied with knocking it off the line of fire.

Chekov was conscious of Elorra raising her spear, but she had already killed once today and he would prefer to avoid having her do so again. As he took a step to one side, he deliberately put himself between her and the launching Klingon. In the same motion, he brought his knee up, hoping to catch the Klingon in the groin for a good distraction, but misjudged his opponent’s momentum so that the blow impacted ribs instead, just about what would be the solar plexus in humans.

It did not have a similar effect on the Klingon, who, with a broader skeletal structure, merely stumbled and turned, his face twisted into a snarl as he swung a fist at the side of Chekov’s head.

He’d stood against Klingons before, and in one case had made the mistake of selecting an opponent a good thirty centimetres taller and fifty kilograms heavier than he was. And he had not reckoned with the Klingon’s higher muscle density and heavier bone structure. This time, he didn’t give away nearly as much size to his opponent, and he understood the position he was in. But this was no bar brawl. His opponent would kill him if he could, whatever experience might have taught him.

Chekov remembered one of his Academy instructors was fond of saying that you had to live and learn. Otherwise, something would eventually kill you.

He swung almost half-heartedly, punching with the empty hand. If the blow had connected, it probably would have hurt his fist more than the Klingon’s face, but his opponent merely brought up both hands to meet the blow, smiling at

Chekov as he blocked. The Klingon glanced at the disruptor, obviously thinking about whether or not he should try to take it away. In that moment, Chekov drove his forehead into the Klingon's nose. Risky, considering the thickness of the other man's skull, but he placed the strike so well he felt it should have had a more devastating effect. Though the Klingon staggered, he did not drop to his knees as Chekov and hoped.

A sudden back hand blow surprised him, and Chekov took two steps away from the Klingon, trying to clear the ringing in his ears while keeping his opponent in view. He came quickly to the realization that if he didn't find a way to shorten the fight, he was going to lose.

Another instructor had often said that one should never underestimate a little man. Technique and training make up for size and strength anytime. Every time.

The past few days had given him much remembered wisdom from his academy years. He needed to start using some of it.

Angling his body to avoid a straight punch, Chekov threw an arm in between as a block, and used the twist to build strength in his body. He snapped the elbow back, and slammed it into the Klingon's face, breaking the man's already tender nose in a thick splatter of pink blood.

Pleased with the blow, and its results, he completely forgot about the legendary Klingon pain tolerance until the opposite fist slammed into the middle of his forehead with two audible cracks. Part of his mind registered those must be breaking fingers because you never hit something hard with something hard if you could avoid it. As he reeled back from the punch, Chekov slipped and hit the ground on his back. The air flew from his lungs and the disruptor from his hand. Not a position he wanted to be in. He had to get up again quickly, or this would be over.

And then, of course, the Klingon's hands closed around his throat so he couldn't get any air back. His vision, already sparkly around the edges, began to turn grey, and he beat his fists against the sides of the Klingon's head and neck, trying to force the other to let go. A flash of movement above saw the thick wooden handle of Elorra's spear come down across the

Klingon's neck. Once, twice, a third time. The hands slipped, and Chekov gasped and a smile sprouted on his lips as he remembered something that he and the Klingon had both forgotten. Chekov was not alone.

He clasped both his hands together, and swung them as hard as he could, connecting with the Klingon's jaw. The blow knocked the Klingon to the side, and another overhand swing from Elorra did the rest. The Klingon stiffened, and collapsed onto the dirt beside him with a long sigh.

Chekov sucked in the deepest breath he could manage and almost laughed. A blue hand appeared in front of his face, and he looked up in surprise, but did not hesitate before grasping it and allowing Elorra to help him to his feet.

"How many times are you going to save my life?"

She smiled, actually smiled, and the expression seemed so natural that he wondered why he'd ever thought it might be hard for her. "With a little luck, this will be the last time I have need to."

"I can absolutely agree with that. Thank you."

"You are welcome... Chekov."

His eyebrows moved upwards with the sudden progress, though Chekov didn't think that he would feel comfortable using her name out loud until she specifically granted him permission. He looked down at the unconscious Klingon, unsure whose breath was heavier. "We will have to tie him up somehow, or he will follow soon as he wakes."

"I had thought of that. There is not much available. Perhaps I should have killed him, but I didn't think you wanted me to." A shadow passed over her face, dimming the smile for a moment.

"I am glad you did not." He wished she hadn't killed the first Klingon back at the camp, grateful as he'd been at the time. It should never be an easy thing to take another sentient life. "Is there a way back across the river that perhaps the Klingons will have a difficult time finding?"

She nodded. "Yes, and for our purposes, it is quite conveniently placed, ending inside the border of the Federation Enclave."

It was convenient. Probably too convenient. The

Klingons had first beamed down inside the enclave's border, starting his whole adventure. She must have understood that the location of that bridge, if they knew of it, would not deter the Klingons much. It might not even slow them down and they had to know the trio's ultimate destination. But hope was good. "I think that bridge was pointed out during my tour of the enclave. It seemed wider and had a true guard rail on each side."

"Meant for actual crossing rather than emergencies."

"I did not realize we were so close." He looked to Jen and smiled. "Do you think you can handle being slung about by an off-worlder for a little longer? Perhaps long enough to reach some medical assistance?"

Jennari smiled as well. "If it were just a little closer, I would offer to carry you."

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"Chekov! Where the devil have you been?"

As he'd suspected, there had been search parties. The one that found them only a few minutes after they stepped across the bridge had an armed *Enterprise* security officer and Doctor McCoy as two of its members in addition to a man and woman from the enclave science personnel. "That is a fairly long story, Doctor. But first I have a patient for you."

"And I didn't bring anything for you. Set her down and start talking but make it as short as possible. Gently, man, she's not a sack of onions. There's a Klingon warship in orbit, you know. Never mind, I'd rather talk to her, anyway." McCoy had his medical scanner out before Chekov managed to lower Jennari to the ground, scanning quickly. "That's a lovely fracture in your left thigh. I would say there are two broken fingers on your right hand as well. Plenty of bruises and contusions, and I'm reading just a little bit of internal abdominal bleeding. Not serious yet, but it would have been a problem by tomorrow. What happened? Fall off a mountain?"

Jennari looked up at Chekov and he read a great deal of confusion in the large eyes, flavoured, perhaps, with a trace of panic. Funny how it had gotten so much easier to read emotions there in the past day or so. Smiling, he shook his head a little and

turned his gaze back to the doctor. “She was a guest of the Klingons overnight, camped a few kilometres from here. They were as hospitable as usual and had questions they wished for her to answer.” Another reason for guilt. Most of those questions had probably been about him.

His face softening immediately, McCoy kept scanning, looking for any medical issues that might have hidden from him on the first pass. “I’m very sorry, young lady.” He shook his head and put the scanner away, motioning for the security officer to come closer. “Unroll that grav stretcher please, ensign. Klingons on the surface as well as in orbit. Jim is not going to be happy.” Clearly, the doctor had no idea the dagger Jennari held was Klingon, and neither had he noticed the disruptor on Chekov’s belt. McCoy looked up at him. “And you are going to have a lot of reports to file, Lieutenant, at least once the *Enterprise* chases the Klingon ship away. Let’s get all of you back to what they call a medical facility here.”

Wondering what the possibility was of being granted political asylum to avoid a week’s worth of reports and forms, Chekov helped Ensign Tomarov shift Jennari onto the stretcher then activated it so she rose in the air to about waist level. This accomplished, he allowed himself to be gently pushed away from either end of the device so less exhausted people could ensure she made it to treatment in one piece.

Elorra stepped close enough to Chekov to speak quietly almost in his ear. “He seems abrasive for a physician.”

As opposed to a Pentosian ranger, Chekov thought, but did not say out loud. “Da. It is part of his charm.”

She held one of the spears out to him as they walked. “Take this.”

For several steps, he merely looked at the weapon, noting again how beautiful and straight it seemed to be and wondering again if it, like so much else on Pentos, had been grown instead of made. “I cannot. It was a great comfort in our trial and I hope I did not misuse it, but the weapon should more properly go to his family, I think.”

“Irin’s weapon should, and so it will. This one is mine.”

“I—” He almost stumbled. “I don’t have the words. I’m barely conscious of the honour you do me, Ranger.”

She shook her head, and he wondered if he saw another smile trying to escape. “You don’t need words, Chekov. Accept the gift in the spirit of friendship and memory.” She pushed it a little closer to him. “And my name is Elorra.”

His stomach trembling, Chekov opened his hand to accept the gift. The wood was warm and comfortable in his hand.