

HOUSE OF MIRRORED FACES

by

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I

PON FARR

Time of Mating

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LARA

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I wait, scanning the skies, as my many-times-great grandmothers waited on another world, pacing their tiny balconies and scanning the seas for the return of the seafaring men they had wed. I know the starfaring man I have wed would call my vigil illogical; his ship is no tall-masted whaler to appear on the horizon. Chances are that I will not sight it at all; it will be but a tiny new star,

appearing to hover as it momentarily matches its orbit to that of this planet. But *they* will know, those others in their sterile building, with their lighted panels and infinitely sensitive relays which sense so much more – and yet so much less – than the frail and faulty neurons and synapses of my body.

And yet I wait, because I must, because . . . somehow . . . I will know, without understanding how I will know.

That is illogical, he would say.

Nevertheless, I will know, I answer him.

We have these conversations often in my mind. Or rather, I have them. I know that we are not truly in communication, but my soul refuses to accept that.

The soul, he says reprovingly, *is an imaginary organ. It cannot be proven to exist.*

It does exist, my distant, logical mate. It can impel the body to action; it can inflame the mind beyond reach of your precious reason; it can lead the self to total negation. Can such a demonstrated force be nonexistent merely because we lack the skill to mount a slice of it on a microscope slide?

I think, therefore I am? he asks with quirked eyebrow.

Yes, I answer. And so I wait, remembering, and wait, anticipating. As the stars move in their inexorable rhythms, so is he driven by the inexorable rhythms of his own kind, independent of his will, perhaps even against his will, to

come to me from the vastness of his world to the confines of mine. I wait, and am satisfied that he will come, and think of the currents that draw us together.

My name is Lara Merritt, and I am of Earth. My father is a diplomat; a man whose profession, according to he who is now my husband, is to prolong any given crisis. But his own father is bound to the same yoke, and because of this binding, we are wed, as his father before him was wed to a human woman. I think of her now – the infinitely wise Amanda, who has spent more than half her life on this planet, *in* this Vulcan world but not *of* it.

I accept now that it was she who chose me for her son, that she has become the architect of my being because of a chance meeting. Through her urgings, her husband Sarek approached my father and the arrangements were made. I was angry at first, resentful, but eventually I came to see the wisdom of it. Even now I do not fully understand how that slim, determined woman managed it. She has the subtle strength of water wearing away stone, has Amanda, for I have discovered Sarek to be a stubborn man. If I could choose a wedding gift, it would be her secret strength, for she tells me her son has the same stubbornness. I have seen that in him, and it frightens me.

Still, the problem was there. He must marry, and the Vulcan elders must have yet another, stronger tie with the planet which – despite all its protestations to the contrary – is and always was the true power of the United Federation of Planets; the planet Earth, which was once my home but

is no longer.

So the arrangements were made, and over a year ago we stood before the elder T’Pau and were promised in the ancient way. Or so it appeared. When he touched me, he did not touch my mind, and when I confided this to Amanda, she only smiled her secretive smile and said, “Wait; it will come. It was the same for me. You have much to learn, Lara, and you have a teacher – which is more than I had. You have better than a year before the *pon farr* comes again, and by then you will be ready.”

The *pon farr*. It is upon him now, that violent, compelling drive that brings him to me. Am I ready? I think so, but I do not know. So I take the only action left to me. I wait, scanning the skies.

And now, on this night, the waiting is over. I know it, and as I turn to prepare for the morning, I can hear him saying . . . *This is most illogical.*

But I think, my husband; therefore I am.

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I come to Koon-ut-Kal-if-fee with the attendants I have chosen and those Amanda has chosen for me. I find myself shaking, and wish for a hand to hold, but there is none.

I catch a glimpse of him, and know as surely as if he had told me, that he too feels totally alone. The attendants he would have preferred have been barred from the ceremony

by T’Pau herself. Her reasoning is well understood. Seven years ago, tradition was broken here and the ceremony profaned. But there will be no challenge this time, no combat between men who are bound more closely than brothers.

The ceremony is brief, and then we are left along to go to the temple to make our joining complete.

Amanda has warned me that this man of Koon-ut-Kal-iffie will not be the quiet, dignified Starfleet officer whom I had met the year before. I had gone to Amanda’s home to meet her son, armed only with my resentment of her meddling and with my father’s promise that we would pursue the matter no further if I found him unacceptable. I had found a man of quiet, courtly dignity, a man aware of his place in the scheme of things beyond his control. He knew as well as I that this was no casual encounter, yet he made no reference to what might come of this. We spoke of my medical work, or his career, of the Starfleet service we shared.

I left with the knowledge that my life had been changed. Whether he in turn found me acceptable, whether the negotiations between my family and his came to fruition – none of it mattered. I knew it would be long before I would forget that elegant, lean body, the planes and angles of that somber face, and longer still before I would forget the irrational but undeniable surge of sexual excitement I felt

in

his

presence.

The man of that night had been distant, detached, correct; indeed he was a different man from the one who now crosses my fingers with his own in the Vulcan manner as we enter the temple. The only constant is the apparently impenetrable shield around that which we call self. I still do not know him; he is still protected – or imprisoned – behind that wall of his own building.

When we are within the chamber, he pulls me against him, and I lift my face for a kiss that does not come. The kiss has no place in the mindlessness of *pon farr*.

“Do not resist him,” Amanda has told me, “even though the instant will come when what you thought you desired becomes a violation of your deepest self. Remember that. Hold fast to it. Submission means life – resistance could mean death.”

Even though my body is aroused and my mind prepared, it is hard not to fight him. There is no courtship here, no pretended seduction, none of the delicate nuances of loveplay – only the naked and ugly face of lust. He is so intent, so single-minded, that what our bodies are doing verges on bestiality. I try to clear my mind, to concentrate on the sensations, to will myself to respond.

I catch his rhythm, the drive of his hips, the deep

shuddering thrusts, and try to climb the crest of the sensory wave building at my core. Now his hands touch my face, as they did in the ceremony of promise, and I know that this time will be different. I can feel his consciousness invading mine, ruthless, violently probing, experiencing, shining light into the corners I prefer to keep darkened.

I try to move away, but his grip is iron, and I realize suddenly that *this* is the violation Amanda spoke of; *this* is the assault I must not resist. The body accommodates itself to the act of mating, however bizarre its manifestations, but the mind does not.

I don't expect pain, but it rips through me like a bonesaw, driven by his need to know, to possess, and in my surprise I yank away with a "No – wait!"

He pins me, physically and mentally, and I feel a tearing as the force of his mind plunders my own memories and emotions – *no not there that's mine don't* – and he sees it all, ravages it all – lust and pain and pride and joy, shame and fright and love and longing, hunger and envy and loss; *don't go yes touch me there heal give me come back*– and there's an echo not of my own voice, underneath, inside, woven around and mixed through – *not good enough try harder mother don't show don't feel I burn betrayal earther shame father hide control alone conceal* –

I am behind his shield, and it is not a shield. It is a prison,

and it contains a lifetime of emotions repressed and denied, emotions relentlessly compressed into a tiny, infinitely dense pinpoint composed of joy and pain and elation and anger and hate; of lust and laughter and fear too long denied. Images and memories flash by, his and mine, shredded and remixed – a face, a gesture, a child's party, a casket, fragments of a song, light through a prism, snow angels, the movement of cloth across skin, walking over rocky ground, alien flowers that sing to the touch, rosin on toe shoes, flickering flame, the taste of lemon, fingers on strings, swimming in warm water, tiers of seats in a lecture hall, the softness of fur, a burgundy gown, a stone idol, the blare of an alarm, the smell of sweat, the feeling of grit on the skin, tired muscles, first sexual stirrings, bodies entwined, penetration – *is that what s/he feels?* – the panic of loss, falling, a handclasp, an arm around the shoulders, voices, red sky, a starfield, and darkness. Just darkness and freefall. And then nothing.

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Light. Light of the sun, not of the mind. It strikes my face and warms my body. My body, but no longer mine. My mind, but no longer mine. I cover my body, not from any need to warm myself, but from the need to become myself again. All my conditioning tells me I should feel degraded, used. But I do not. Nor am I fulfilled. I am suspended, nonfunctioning.

I call his name softly. “Spock . . .”

It was not my intention to awaken him, but he comes awake suddenly. There is an instant of disorientation, then it is gone. He looks at me, then away, embarrassed by his loss of control, uncertain perhaps of how much I remember, how much he may have revealed. He speaks my name, his voice rasping, and then breaks off. There seems to be no more to say.

It comes to me in this moment that this is my time, perhaps my only opportunity. We have the remainder of this day and the coming night before we are expected to leave this place. If we are to be truly wed in my way as well as in his, it must begin now while he is still uncertain. But what to say? How to begin?

His voice comes, low and hoarse and hesitant. “I am sorry, Lara, that it was painful to you. I did not mean to cause you pain.”

“No,” I say. “That’s no longer important. It was necessary. I understand that now.” I move toward him, dropping the robe, and he looks away.

“Spock – look at me.” There is no response. “Am I so repugnant to you?”

“No.” He looks at me, but there is no expression in his face.

I take another step toward him, and now we are nearly touching. “This is a woman’s body, Spock. It was made to

give pleasure, and to receive it.”

“This is not done for pleasure,” he says. “This is done for need.”

“The need *is* pleasure.”

“It is for the continuation of the race.”

“You are wrong,” I say evenly, realizing this may be the first time in his adult life anyone has dared to say those precise words to him. “You are a scientist; I am a doctor. You know as well as I that the mechanics of conception can be performed in a laboratory.”

“Perhaps it should be done so.”

“Perhaps,” I agree, and he quirks an eyebrow at me, surprised by my apparent agreement but cautious, still, of betrayal. “Or perhaps we should all be androgynous, like the Luridians. You must admit it would be a more efficient system. More logical.”

He stiffens, “Do not mock me, Lara.” There is danger in his voice, warning.

“I do not mock you, my husband.” It is the first time I have addressed him thus, and his gaze falters. “I am only trying to tell you – to show you – that there is a reason why we are created thus. The reason is pleasure, and joy, and love.”

“I do not know these things. I am incapable of giving what I do not have.”

Now. This is the moment. I take his hand in both of mine.

“You forget, Spock – I have been behind your wall. I know your mind – I know your soul. I’ve felt what you refused to feel. There is joy there, and love. Perhaps...” I falter, then go on. “Perhaps it isn’t for me, not yet. Maybe not ever.” Can he know what it costs me to say that? To admit it, and to know it? “But it *is* there. I felt it; I can nurture it, and if it isn’t for me...” I am perilously close to tears. I blink them away with a shake of my head. “If it isn’t for me, then I’ll accept that, and take my pleasure in having been present at the moment of its conception.” I turn his hand in mine, kiss the palm and the tips of the fingers. I find I am trembling, but it is not from the cold.

“Lara--”

I block his words with my fingers against his lips. “Centuries ago, Vulcans fought here for their mates. Seven years ago, you fought here for yours, and won, and gave her away because the price was too high. Now I demand that you meet my challenge.”

He looks down at me, and his dark eyes are full of some secret amusement. “I find this a most unorthodox way to conduct a battle.”

I permit myself a smile for the first time in months, and touch his cheek. “This, my darling, is only a minor skirmish.” And lift my face again. This time, the kiss comes. It is tentative, curious, and when my tongue touches his lips, he pulls away, as if surprised. I kneel on the pallet and pull him down beside me. “Do you find that

unpleasant?”

He considers for a moment. “Only unexpected,” he says.

“There are many things in loving that bring unexpected pleasure. Many kinds of touching beyond the touching of minds.” My fingers meet his face, tracing the line of cheekbone and jaw. “Infinite diversity in infinite combination,” I remind him.

His hand covers mine, captures it. “Yes,” he says, and when his mouth finds mine again, there is no hesitation, no drawing back. Only two people discovering each other as if for the first time.

Later, as dusk comes, we lie separate but touching, his fingers tracing patterns on my breast and belly.

“I begin to understand,” he says, “why Humans place so much value on this.”

“Are you won away from your heritage so easily, Spock?” I am teasing, but he takes me seriously.

“No. To understand is not to accept. And there is still much I do not understand.” He props himself on one elbow and studies my face. “You have known other men, Lara.”

“Yes.”

“And taken pleasure in their bodies?”

Apprehension crawls beneath my skin. “Yes.”

But he seems not angry, only curious. “And yet you did not

stay with them. Why?"

"Because... I guess because I never knew one who could let me lead my own life." The lie comes easily enough; it has been worn smooth by frequent use. The truth has sharper edges. I think for the first time in years of Garret, who wanted only another conquest to add to his list, and of Burr, who left me for a woman more beautiful than I. Did he see those things in my mind, or only the scars left behind?

It does not matter now; now there is only this one man, whose fingers leave trails of fire on my skin and whose mouth is a drug so sweet I would barter my soul for it. As perhaps I have.

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As we take our position for transporting, I feel rather as Eve must have felt when she was cast out of Paradise. Vulcan would strike many as a strange Eden, but it is the only one I have known.

The casting out had already begun before we came to this point, however. The days of our stay here were not many, and the nights far too few, yet even as they slipped through my hands, so did Spock draw away from me. On the last night, I awoke to find him gone, and when I searched for him I found him in the garden, staring at the sky even as I had done.

I felt betrayed, shut out, alone, and I silently cursed the

stars, willing them to fall from the skies. I would gather them in my hands and give them to him if it would keep his heart open to mine. But they only hung there, mocking me.

Even though I drew him inside again, wove a loving net to capture his spirit, his body had the cold tang of metal. Afterwards, he lay passive, staring through the open window at the stars.

Now, as we shimmer into being on the *Enterprise*, I see the face of the serpent for the first time – this ship and what it stands for, and this man and what he stands for.

There is relief in his smile as he steps forward. “It’s good to see you, Mr. Spock.” He turns to me. “And--”

He falters for a moment, unsure of how to address me. I let him stew for a moment before saying, “Dr. Merritt will do, Captain.”

“My wife prefers it thus,” Spock says, stepping down from the pad. “We feel it will eliminate a certain amount of confusion.”

“Yes, of course.” But he does not seem sure as he takes my hand to assist me down, an action I could have accomplished alone. “Welcome aboard the *Enterprise*” – ah – Dr. Merritt. I’m Captain Kirk.”

“I’m honored, Captain. We didn’t expect a welcoming committee.”

“A committee of two,” he says, indicating the man behind the transporter console. “Mr. Scott, my Chief Engineer.

And the honor is ours.”

Scott acknowledges me with a brief nod. He is obviously going to reserve judgment.

“Scotty, show – ah – Dr. Merritt to her quarters. Mr. Spock, I need you on the bridge.”

And so it begins. Why, then, do I feel it is an ending?

McCOY

Paperwork! Damn paperwork! The idea that a starship is propelled by matter-antimatter engines is an illusion; it runs on paper, preferably in triplicate form. I am relieved when Christine enters the office.

“Dr. M’Benga’s replacement is here,” she says stiffly.

I push the papers aside. “All right, Nurse Chapel. Send her in.” I have no time for Chapel’s annoyance today. Ever since she discovered Spock’s reason for going to Vulcan, she’s been about as much help as a broken tooth. I’m going to have to have a good talk with her, and soon. She’s too good a nurse to mope around like some lovesick adolescent.

I look up as the object of Christine’s animosity enters the office, and stand to take the tape she offers.

“Dr. McCoy?”

“Yes. And you must be--”

“Dr. Lara Merritt.”

“Ah . . . yes.” I slip the tape into the viewer and scan it, just to make sure I’m talking to whom I think I’m talking to. I resist the impulse to take a fuller look at the file; there will be time enough for that later.

“Sit down, Dr. Merritt. I’m very pleased to have you on the staff. And I understand congratulations are in order.”

“Sir?”

“On your . . . wedding?” If this thing has fallen through – like the last time – I’m going to have a large-sized foot in my mouth.

“Thank you, Doctor.”

I take another look at her. She is a small woman, and though her records indicate that she is 29, she looks younger. She is certainly not what I had expected. The few women I’ve known who appeared to get under Spock’s tough Vulcan hide have been rare beauties by any man’s standards. Dr. Lara Merritt is not a woman a man would give more than a passing glance. Oh, it’s all there – short brownish hair, eyes midway between blue and grey, a good enough figure in the short blue uniform – but somehow it doesn’t all come together. Here’s a girl who just missed being beautiful and who has settled for that nebulous tag we call “attractive”. She is waiting patiently, apparently undisturbed by my woolgathering. I switch off the viewer.

“Excuse me, Dr. Merritt. I was just – ah – taking a look at your record. This is your first deep-space assignment?”

“Yes, sir.” Her voice is husky and warm; it seems incongruously sensuous, coming as it does from a firm, non-nonsense mouth.

“And what was your work on Vulcan?”

“It’s all in the record, sir.”

“Yes – ah – but I prefer to – er – hear it from you. Gives me an idea of what you thought of it.” Dammit! This is ridiculous – *I’m* supposed to be conducting this interview!

“I served my residency on Vulcan, sir. My father is attached to the Earth embassy there. Then I joined Starfleet, and two years ago, I qualified for a research grant dealing with viral mutations. Because of the facilities available on Vulcan, I set up my project there. It also gave me a chance to be near my father.”

“Yes, of course. Well, your record is very impressive, and I’m pleased to have you on my staff.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

At least she has the grace not to point out that I just said that five minutes ago.

“I’ll have Nurse Chapel show you your office and the lab facilities, then, and I look forward to talking more with you this evening.”

“This evening, sir?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Didn’t anyone tell you? We’re planning a small dinner for you and Mr. Spock tonight. Nothing fancy, just a chance to get better acquainted.”

She reacts as if I’d touched a raw nerve. I think for a moment that she is going to jump out of the chair and run from the room. She collects herself visibly, then sits twisting her hands together. “With all due respect, sir, I’d like to be excused tonight. I don’t think – that is, it’s been rather...” She trails off, blushing.

“That’s quite all right, Dr. Merritt. I understand.” But I don’t. I buzz for Christine and tell her to show Dr. Merritt her office, then sit back, thinking. I had this woman figured all wrong. She’s not controlled; she’s damped down like a nuclear pile approaching critical mass. I’m going to pull her psychological profile, and if I don’t like what I see, I’m going to ground her. I don’t care if Starfleet *does* prefer to post married couples on the same ship, I *will not* have an hysteric female on my staff.

But first I’d better tell Jim not to uncork any champagne. The wedding dinner is definitely off.

“Stardate 3105.5; Chief Medical Officer Leonard McCoy recording. Initial Performance Rating, subject Lieutenant (j.g.) Lara Merritt, Serial Number ME8573715-874MD.

Professional Rating: 92% and improving. Subject's professional performance has been adequate. Subject

works well without supervision and is able to take initiative action. Subject's diagnostic and treatment techniques are acceptable but reflect a lack of experience in clinical practice. These are improving.

“Physical Rating: 100%. Subject is female Caucasian, home planet Earth, age 29. Height 160 cm, weight 41 kg. All physical responses excellent. Subject has an outstanding amount of stamina and is unusually strong for her size. This can be a tremendous asset in cases where the patient is unconscious or uncooperative.

“Psychological Rating: 80% and static. This is Subject's first deep-space assignment. After 30 days, she does not appear to have made any discernible adjustments to conditions of prolonged space duty. Subject displays a marked hostility toward one of her co-workers as well as a covert hostility toward her commanding officer. Subject spends most off-duty hours in her quarters and does not appear to be interested in establishing peer-group relationships.

“Summary: Subject's professional and physical ratings are acceptable, but psychological rating is marginal. Recommend Performance Ratings at 30-day intervals until such time as psychological rating improves. If no improvement is forthcoming within 120 days, recommend reassignment to a planetary post.”

In a pig's eye! I snap off the recorder. Recommendation – get that woman off this ship right now. There is nothing

quite so nebulous, nothing quite so frustrating, as trying to justify a reassignment order on the basis of a marginal psychological rating.

If I say a patient's skin doesn't *feel* right, I can order a dozen tests run until I pin down the problem. If I say a patient *smells* like he's got Rigellian influenza, I can have this whole crew immunized within hours. But if I say this woman means trouble, I have to have something concrete to back up my claim. If I can't produce that something, then all I can do is stand back and wait for the explosion, and hope there'll be enough pieces left for me to put back together.

For at least the tenth time, I put Lara Merritt's record tape in the viewer. It hasn't changed. There's still nothing there I can nail down, but it's not exactly a record to use as an example of prime Starfleet material.

There's that dive in her scholastic record, for one thing. Lara Merritt nearly flunked out of college in her junior year. She failed four out of six courses in the last quarter and just squeaked by in the other two. It must have taken a lot of summer-school cramming and a little judicious pull to get her reinstated.

That kind of dive in itself isn't too unusual. The reasons that crop up most frequently are personal problems that don't show up on a record – financial emergencies, affairs of the heart, or just suddenly waking up one morning and saying “What the hell am I doing *here*?” Especially in a

pre-med course.

Then, two years after joining the service, she requested a release. Wanted to quit and get married. And, boom, suddenly a fat research grant – certainly not justified by her performance in the field – and she packs her bags and heads for Vulcan, and Daddy.

Oh, yes. Daddy. The one who's "attached to the Earth embassy" on Vulcan. I'll say he's "attached". Frederick R. Merritt is *the* Ambassador to Vulcan. That certainly explains the research grant, and a couple of other things besides.

I feed the record through until I come to that baffling psychological profile again. I know you, Lara Merritt. You're right here in front of me, all neatly charted out. Now, what's a woman with a Sensuality Quotient as high as yours doing married to a Vulcan? That must have been some interesting honeymoon.

Well, this isn't getting me anywhere. I pull the Performance Rating tape, placing it in Jim Kirk's "Review" folder. I have no doubts that he will be camping on my doorstep as soon as he's read it.

Sure enough, he shows up just as I am finishing a late meal in the office. His face is grim.

"That bad, Bones?" he says, dropping the deck on the table.

I nod.

“Covert hostility toward the commanding officer?”

“In plain English, Jim, she doesn’t like you.”

He sits down and helps himself to the last cup of coffee in the carafe. “Where in the book does it say that the captain has to be Mr. Popularity?”

“It doesn’t, and you don’t. But somewhere in that book, it says that an officer has a responsibility to put aside personal feelings when they interfere with the performance of assigned duty. Both Dr. Merritt and Nurse Chapel seem to have forgotten that.”

He looks puzzled for a moment, and then understanding lights his features. “Oho. The old green-eyed monster rears its ugly head.”

“Spare me the ancient platitudes, Jim. This thing is serious. Christine took it pretty hard when she found out Spock was getting married again. Asking her to work with his wife is adding insult to injury. As for Lara – either somebody’s told her how Christine feels about Spock, or she’s figured it out for herself. That doesn’t really matter. What matters is that if the situation doesn’t improve, I swear I’m going to ground Dr. Merritt.”

“Maybe if I talked to her--”

“Absolutely the worst possible action. You’re a far greater rival to her than Nurse Chapel.”

“Me?” he yelps, and the hot coffee slops over the lip of the cup. “Me!” He comes out of the chair like a scalded cat –

or scalded captain.

“You’re dripping coffee on my desk, Jim.”

“The hell with your desk! You just suggested--”

“I didn’t suggest anything, and I am not casting aspersions on your rampant heterosexuality. It’s not at all unusual for a woman to be jealous of her husband’s male friends. You spend eight hours a day on the bridge with Spock. You work out together in the gym, you play chess by the hour, half the time you eat together--”

“There is a certain amount of ship’s business that cannot be conducted on the bridge. As my First Officer, Mr. Spock must be apprised of--”

“Don’t get defensive with *me*. I’m not the one who thinks you’re breaking up Spock’s happy home.”

He opens his mouth, and then realizes I am needling him. He sits back down, shaking his head. “One of these days, Bones...”

“But you can see you’re not the person to talk to her.”

“Yes. And I assume you’ve already tried.”

“I’ve talked to Lara and Christine both until I’m blue in the face. And within five minutes, they’re sniping at each other again. I do want you to talk to Christine. And ... as much as I hate to suggest it ... I think Spock is the one to talk to Dr. Merritt. She *is* his wife.”

“And you want me to talk to Spock.”

“You *are* the Captain.”

“Thanks a bunch.” He gets up to leave.

“Jim--”

He turns, waiting, and I find it’s not easy to say what I’m thinking. “Just have him tell her to lay off Christine. Don’t mention ... this other thing. It’s something she’s going to have to work out for herself.”

“Sure.” He looks at me and frowns, then crosses to the desk. “Bones ... I get the feeling you’re trying to tell me something.”

I hesitate. It’s something I can’t put into words. Not yet. “Just ... watch yourself. This could develop into a very sticky situation. I don’t want to see anybody get hurt.”

It seems a long time before he answers, and when he does, his face and voice reflect his concern. “Neither do I, Bones. Neither do I.”

I know he means it, but I am still uneasy after he has gone. This woman means trouble, and the first time she gives me cause, I will have her off this ship.

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LARA

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The article is not going well. I have been trying to correlate the research from my grant project into an article for the

IPMJ, but my mind wanders, and the notes I scribbled to myself weeks and months ago on Vulcan no longer seem to make any sense. I give up and shovel the entire mess into the top drawer of my desk.

I stretch back in the chair and reflect for the dozenth time that the quarters Spock and I now share seem to reflect our lives ironically well – together but separate. The partition separating two suites has simply been removed, so now there is one long room containing two work areas, each with a sleeping alcove and a small bathroom leading off of it. The marks on the bulkhead where the partition was removed are still new and glaring, but even if they were not there, the room would still be at war with itself. That portion which is his has not changed – it is still vaguely Oriental in its clean, uncluttered lines. The Vulcan lyre hangs untouched on the grilled divider, the pieces on the tri-level chess board are neatly lined up in preparation for a game that is yet to begin, the ancient-looking stone idol whose origin I do not know still scowls solemnly across the room.

The end of the room where I sit is – in contrast – as drab and impersonal as a sterile stopover room in some second-class hostel. The dichotomy annoys me, and I decide to unpack some of my personal items. It is a chore I have been putting off for some time – why, I do not know. It is certainly not for lack of time. I have copious amounts of that.

Spock is always gone when I awaken in the morning; he

seldom returns before I have gone to bed. What he does with his time, I do not know, for he has made it quite clear to me that I am not expected to share his off-duty hours.

Somehow, things are not working out as I had expected. Patience, Amanda had counseled. Rivers of patience, oceans of it. If only there had been more time together on Vulcan – more time to strengthen that precious bond before we were shoveled into the voracious maw of the *Enterprise*.

We have not made love since that last, unsatisfying night on Vulcan. This is more disturbing to me than I had anticipated. In the past, the needs of my body have been easy enough to fill. Even on Vulcan, there were meeting places where non-Vulcans congregated; places where a lingering look or half-concealed smile would bring a response from some appropriate stranger. Words would be exchanged, perhaps a few glasses of wine, and then an encounter that might last for an hour or for a few days before it was over and you said goodbye. No strings, no tears, no grand passion.

In the closed society of a starship, such an episode would be impossible, even if I wanted one. Which I don't. What I want is my husband – my elegant, beautiful husband, who learned so quickly the delights of the flesh, and who appears to have forgotten them just as quickly.

The door behind me slides open with a soft hiss, and he is standing there. I flush uncomfortably, wondering if my

thoughts have pulled him here. There is some kind of lingering effect from the mind-link; something I have not yet been able to nail down, but I often feel the presence of his mind in mine. The presence is not there now, and a look at him confirms that he has other things in mind. He is standing too rigidly, his face too carefully controlled.

“Lara,” he says, and even his voice is bound in careful, tight control. “I must speak with you. Now.”

>>>>> <<<<<<

I did not know it was possible to be so angry without exploding into apoplexy, or chair-throwing hysteria, or both. The training I received on Vulcan keeps me sated and tearless, but nothing I can do will stop the adrenalin from flooding my system, or keep the blood from roaring in my ears. When he is finished, he quite calmly goes to bed, leaving me fighting a face that will not stop burning and a stomach which is knotting like a nest of vipers.

I realize that I cannot stay in this cabin another instant without disgracing myself, and I leave wordlessly. There must be enough miles of corridors on this ship so that I can walk this anger to death.

Meddlers! How dare they! How could they do this to me? To him! Any gains I might have made in that brief interlude on Vulcan have been totally destroyed tonight by those ... those... I cannot even think of an epithet foul enough for those meddling, interfering...

“I have been informed...” he began. I’m sure he has been. By either Kirk or McCoy, or both of them in tandem – that unholy duo who fear that I might disturb the mighty workings of their precious ship.

They have shamed and degraded me as *pon farr* never could, and through me, him. A Vulcan’s integrity is more precious to him than life itself, and they have made me the instrument to threaten his honor. And Caesar’s wife thought *she* had to be above reproach!

Without conscious planning, I have come to the entrance to Sickbay, and on an impulse, I go in. It was a mistake, for she is there – Christine Chapel. I turn to go, but she calls my name. I turn, still seething. The cool composed nurse is gone. She is pale, and her eyes are red. Has she been crying?

“I think we need to have a talk, Dr. Merritt.”

“I have had quite enough talking this evening, Nurse Chapel.”

“Please – don’t go. We need to work this out now – tonight – before any more damage is done.”

The damage is already done, you foolish woman. What has been destroyed tonight may never be restored. Yet I do not leave. As much as I hate to admit it, she is right. If I am to keep this assignment, to be near Spock, to try to breach the wall between us, I must be able to halter my dislike for this woman.

“Very well.” I force myself to be casual as I sit down near her.

Now that I have agreed, she seems at a loss to know how to begin. Her face is angled down as she studies her nails. “Dr. M’Benga was a fine man and an excellent doctor,” she says haltingly. “It seemed rather unfair to me that he was arbitrarily transferred, and I took my resentment out on you. That was very unprofessional.”

“So is avoiding the truth.”

She looks up at me sharply, anger flaring in her eyes.

“I am neither blind nor stupid, Miss Chapel. Your dislike for me has nothing to do with Dr. M’Benga.”

She colors, caught in the lie. “How long--” she begins, and her voice catches. She doesn’t need to voice the whole question. I know what she means, even if she will not say it.

“Since the first time I saw you look at him.” Somehow, I am not angry any longer. The anguish is so plain in her face that I am reminded of myself years ago when Burr walked out of my life forever. Suppose I’d had to stay there, to work every day with the woman he’d chosen? I honestly think I would have done murder. But murder is not in this woman’s face, only loss.

“I didn’t know it showed,” she says softly.

“Not to others, perhaps.” I find I cannot meet her gaze any longer, yet there is something else I must say. “But what I

saw in your eyes – it was like looking into a mirror. Because I love him, too.”

She moves away, uncomfortable, and resumes what she had been doing when I came in.

Something in her movement strikes me, and I ask, “What were you doing here, at this hour?”

She is flustered. “This cabinet--” she says. “I’ve been meaning to--” She breaks off, looks at me with that bright blue gaze. “No more avoiding the truth, Dr. Merritt?”

“No more. And it’s Lara.”

She closes the cabinet door and sits down, hands folded. “This is where I belong,” she says. “This place – this work – it’s my anchor. As his work is his anchor. If by our actions we’ve cut him adrift from that – I don’t think I could stand it.”

“Nor could I.” Did I call her foolish? She has more wisdom than I, I think, and more courage as well. Had circumstances been different, she might well have attained what she wishes for. But I know now that our enmity is at an end. Neither of us is willing to destroy that which we battle for.

“Truce?” I ask, stepping toward her with my hand out.

“Truce,” she says, and surprises me by extending her own hand in the Vulcan salute, which I return with a smile.

“Now,” I say, “about this cabinet...”

^^^^^^^^^^

SPOCK

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She handles her anger well, for a Human, this wife of mine. On the outside, at any rate. Inside is a different matter, and it is this inner anger which is burning through the link.

There is a certain amount of anger in my own mind, too, though it is unworthy of a Vulcan to admit it. Anger, like all the base emotions, tends to disrupt one's efficiency.

She makes no attempt to defend her actions, nor does she offer to change them in the future. Yet she must change them if she is to continue her post on the *Enterprise*, and she wants that very much. It would be better for both of us, I think, if she were reassigned. Her presence here is disruptive, and her feelings toward the Captain make it nearly impossible for me to work with him when both are in the same room. There is also the fact that her actions reflect upon me, illogical though that is. Illogical or not, I cannot permit her to diminish my usefulness here, and if she is not able to come to terms with the situation, I shall be forced to insist on her reassignment. Or mine.

I have been among Humans long enough to know that leaving the room so abruptly is considered to be "rude". However, I have transmitted the message as charged, and I see no point in additional discussion. Further, it is

necessary to protect myself against the onslaught of raw emotion emanating from Lara.

Soon she leaves, and as the physical distance between us increases, I am able to diminish the link's impact. It has been fading gradually since we left Vulcan when the *pon farr* ended; I can manage to keep it on an unobtrusive level most of the time. Each time we came together as man and woman, it became oppressively strong, nearly impossible to tune out. Would it become so again if we lived together as man and wife in the Human manner?

She wants that, I know. In fact, she seems to devote a rather inordinate amount of thought to eroticism. Are all Human females thus? Impossible to determine, as she is the only one to whom I have been linked in precisely such a manner, and it is hardly the sort of thing one could expect to discuss with a woman. If she is typical of Human females, though, it does shed a great deal of light on many of the actions I have observed in others of her species and gender.

I can still feel her anger, simmering slowly now like a neglected cooking pot, and mixed with it are traces of shame and a curious kind of loss. Loss of what? Something she apparently finds quite important.

Enough. This speculation is pointless, and I still have staff evaluations to complete. I tune the link down to its finest, key into my workstation and begin calling up files for review.

Later, as I shut the workstation down, I am aware that the anger is gone.

>>>>> <<<<<<

LARA

>>>>> <<<<<<

The storage cabinet is indeed chaotic. She accepts my assistance without comment, and we work quietly for nearly two hours.

We are just finishing up when the doors hiss open. I recognize Lieutenant Sulu, the helmsman, whose Asian face is lined with concern. He is supporting a second crewman whose face is hidden because he is bent nearly double.

“Get him up on the treatment table,” I order.

As soon as Sulu releases him, the patient turns on one side and jerks his knees up toward his abdomen. I call Chapel to assist me in getting him turned and restrained so that I can examine him. I recognize him as the young navigator who so often works with Sulu, but I cannot recall his name.

“I’ll go get Dr. McCoy,” Sulu offers.

Chapel gives me a quick glance, then hands me the feiberg. “That won’t be necessary, Lieutenant. Dr. Merritt can handle this.”

I give her a brief look and she nods shortly. I pull the patient’s ID tag – Ensign Pavel Chekov – and hand it to

Chapel so she can pull up his file. He is thrashing against the restraints, muttering in Russian, and on an impulse I answer him in the same language, telling him not to worry. He gives me a fever-bright stare and relaxes slightly. Whether he understood my words or only my intent, I do not know.

A glance at the body-function monitors, coupled with what the feineberg has told me, gives me the knowledge I need. Sulu is still hovering at my elbow, uncertain.

“How long has he been like this?”

“I don’t know exactly, ma’am ... Doctor. I know he was sick this morning, but he wouldn’t go on sick call. He worked his watch and then went to his quarters. When I didn’t see him around this evening, I went to his room and found him like this.”

He still waits, expectant. When it finally dawns on me what he wants, I realize that I may have been too long on Vulcan, where people do not expect commendation for acting out of common sense. “Thank you for bringing him down, Lieutenant. You did the right thing.”

He lights up in a surprising display of relief. “He’ll be all right, won’t he?”

“He’ll be fine. You can come see him in the morning. Good night, Lieutenant.”

As he leaves reluctantly, Chapel returns with Chekov’s medical record. I glance at it to confirm my suspicions,

then tell her, “We’ve got a red-hot appendix here. Will you assist?”

“Yes, Doctor.” Two simple words. Two more links in the chain we are forging tonight. If I had time, I would reflect on that further, but I do not.

“Good. Give him 50cc’s of mangalidon intra-abdominally, and prep him.” I hope the anti-inflammatory drug will keep the infected organ from rupturing before we can get in and out. While she is working, I scan his file and find nothing to indicate that we have any problems to anticipate. Before the night is over, I will have cause to distrust such optimism.

The first problem comes when I open the abdomen and discover that the appendix has ruptured, sending its poisonous contents into the abdominal cavity. We suction him out as thoroughly as we can and expose the cavity to a good dose from the sterilite, but the specter of peritonitis still hovers. I order 100 cc’s of amprozene as a precautionary measure, but it turns out to be one order too many.

Before I have the incision closed, the patient arcs convulsively, ripping one of the arm restraints loose and catching Chapel full in the face with his flailing hand. She picks herself up and restrains him manually while I start in horror at the body-function panel, which seems to have gone mad.

“Anaphylaxis. Dammit!”

Chapel looks up at the indicators. “But he’s never had an allergic reaction to amprozene before!” She sounds vaguely accusing, as if he were doing all this purposely.

“Well, he’s having a beauty right now,” I reply, reaching for a spray hypo.

It is touch-and-go for more minutes than I care to count before the baravyl takes effect and he stabilizes. Finally the convulsions stop, the pulse and blood pressure return to normal, and he is quiet. I finish closing, and Chapel cautiously lets go of Chekov’s arm. She is wringing wet, and I feel a little damp myself.

“Shall I take him into recovery?” she asks.

“I’ll do it. Who was supposed to be on call tonight, anyway?”

“Nurse Hyland.”

“Well, go get her down here to monitor him, and then go to bed.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Chapel? – Christine?”

“Yes?” She turns from her position halfway through the door.

“Thanks.”

Chekov begins to come around as I am transferring him to the recovery room, and again I speak to him in Russian. It

has been so long since I used my mother's native tongue, and I had forgotten how softly beautiful the sound of it could be.

Then Hyland is there, still puffy-eyed from being awakened, and I give her my instructions before I stagger into McCoy's office and collapse on his couch.

>>>>> <<<<<<

I am slowly becoming aware that there is a crick in my neck, a buzzing in one hand where the circulation is cut off, and that I have neglected to remove my boots. Why? Then I remember where I am, and why. I push myself off the couch, still groggy. The human body was not designed to function on three hours of sleep. I will check my patient and go back to my own bed.

Nurse Hyland comes into the office carrying a covered tray. "Good morning!"

The sound I make does not reflect her cheer. She puts the tray down and removes the cover. "I thought you might like some breakfast."

I rub the gritty remnants of too-little sleep out of my eyes. "What I want is a hot shower and four more hours of oblivion." I fasten my hand on the coffee cup. "How is the patient?"

"Coming around. He's a little restive, but he doesn't seem to be in any discomfort now. I gave him the sedative you ordered right after you left. He was muttering something –

Russian, I think. Just before I gave him the injection, he looked right at me and said ‘You’re not her’. Other than that, not a peep out of him.”

I go into his room and check the chart. It looks good, and I am initialing it when Dr. McCoy enters. He gives us a surprised look, and before he can ask, I hand him the chart. He looks at it and asks, “Who assisted?”

“Nurse Chapel.”

He cocks a quizzical eyebrow at me in surprise.

“She did an excellent job. I can see why you value her so highly.”

He is checking the incision and running a feinberg over Chekov. “So did you, Dr. Merritt.”

“Thank you.”

He starts to say something else, but is interrupted as Captain Kirk comes into the room.

“Bones, I just ran into Sulu, and he said--” He spots me and breaks off, embarrassed. That tells me it was he who gave Spock the message I received last night. “Dr. Merritt,” he says in greeting.

“Captain.” I give him a cool nod.

Chekov stirs, tries to sit up. I put my hand on his chest and push him back gently. “Not just yet, Ensign.”

He looks at me, fuzzy with drug hangover. “You’re real,”

he says wonderingly, and catches at my hand.

I cannot help but smile at his expression. "I was the last time I looked."

"And you von't go away again?"

"I have to, for now. But I'll be back later."

"Promise?" he asks, this time in Russian.

"Promise," I answer him in kind. "Now rest."

He lets go of my hand and drifts off into sleep again. I realize that the Captain and Dr. McCoy have been watching in some amusement, and I pull away from the bed abruptly.

"If you don't mind, Doctor, I'd like to be relieved until 1200 hours."

"Of course, Doctor Merritt. Take the rest of the day."

"What I have requested will be sufficient, sir."

I leave, and realize that Captain Kirk has come with me. We are both heading for the turbolift, and as the doors hiss open he hesitates, waiting for me to enter first. I am in no mood to quibble over the archaic notion of male-female precedence, so I enter. He follows, and turns on a flashing smile.

"You seem to have made a conquest."

"Sir?"

“Ensign Chekov. Somebody should have warned you that he is extremely susceptible to lovely ladies.”

I close my eyes in annoyance. Even under the best of circumstances, I hardly consider myself lovely. At the moment, I feel decidedly grubby. “Captain--”

He is not to be stopped. “How about some breakfast? I have a few minutes yet before I’m due on the bridge.”

“No thank you. Sir.”

He is rebuffed, at least temporarily. But when the turbolift stops on my deck, he tries again. “If you have some time later on, perhaps you’d like to come up to the bridge. Most of our crew find it quite interesting, and I don’t think you’ve--”

“Thank you, Captain. I shall consider it.” I leave the turbolift, and as I walk down the corridor, I can feel his eyes on my back.

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KIRK

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Well, Jimmy-boy, you certainly struck out that time. What a cactus! She may be a better match for Mr. Spock than you thought.

I watch her go, stiff-necked and unspeaking, through the door to her quarters. There must be some way to get through that thorn fence. She’s a Terran, and a woman, and

an officer. And Spock's wife. Aye, there's the rub.

In spite of what I told McCoy, I am very much aware of the fact that she doesn't like me. I could handle that in any other crew member – have handled it in the past and undoubtedly will again in the future. But she *is* affecting my relationship with Spock. In some subtly malignant way, she is changing the way we work together, the singleness of purpose, the unspoken communication we have shared for years. There has to be a key to this, and I have to find it.



Perhaps I have found it. McCoy tells me that she has resolved her differences with Christine, apparently while they were operating on Chekov. Perhaps she feels we are overlooking her medical skills. We all rely so unthinkingly on McCoy that we tend to relegate his staff to a kind of professional limbo that reduces them to little more than technicians. That must be a difficult thing for any professional to handle. It's a wonder it hasn't surfaced sooner in someone else. At any rate, we'll give this a try.

When Spock and I enter the transporter room, the rest of the party is already there – Barnes from Security, Goldschmidt from Supply, and Lara, with her medical tricorder. She meets Spock's eyes, and I feel him stiffen behind me and falter for an instant. Neither of them knew the other would be included on this routine medical check and resupply of the scientific outpost on Banus V –

probably an underhanded trick, but I didn't feel like arguing it out with them beforehand.

I step onto the transporter pad, check to see that the others are in position, and give the order to energize.

We materialize just outside the main research building. Sidney Green, who's in charge of the outpost, greets us with obvious pleasure. The research team on Banus V is small – only four men – and their contact with the Banusian natives is minimal and restricted, due to the mandates of the Prime Directive.

He pumps my hand warmly, and with some difficulty I extricate myself in order to introduce the other members of the party. He has met only myself and Mr. Spock previously.

“It's good to see you, Captain. A year is a damn long time to go without seeing a new face.” He turns to Dr. Merritt. “And such a pretty one. Could I induce you to jump ship, Doctor?”

She responds with a smile and a shake of her head, and I reflect that it has indeed been a long year for Green. A year without a woman is just about what it would take to make a man consider Lara Merritt pretty. She is, by any man's standard, a plain little thing.

We leave Goldschmidt and Barnes to supervise the beamdown of supplies, and Green orders one of his technicians to assist. That settled, he invites us inside and

lays on an embarrassingly rich spread of food and drinks.

“Sid, what have you been doing with yourself this past year – besides running a winery?”

He laughs and sips at the emerald wine distilled from the native grapes. “You’d be surprised, Jim. Among other things, we’ve unearthed definite proof that there was a cataclysmic nuclear disaster here approximately 200 years ago.”

“You were investigating that hypothesis last year, Mr. Green,” Spock interjects.

“Yes, but only recently have we prevailed upon the natives to permit us to enter what they call ‘the old lands’. We’d picked up such high residual radiation readings that there was really no other defensible hypothesis, but we lacked supporting data. Now we’ve discovered--”

And he’s off on his favorite hobbyhorse. I really hate to interrupt him when he’s so obviously enjoying this rare opportunity to expound his theories to new ears. But when he begins to drag out artifacts, I must intervene.

“I really am sorry, Sid, but our time here is limited. We have a schedule to keep, and our meteorologist charted a magnetic storm front moving in. I’d like to break orbit as soon as possible.”

“Oh.” His face falls.

“Dr. Merritt will do her physicals, and you can prepare anything you’d like to have us transport back to the

Commission, and then we really must leave.”

He brightens somewhat and turns to Lara. “Well, my dear, I can see that Captain Kirk hasn’t changed a bit. He still thinks the galaxy turns entirely on the orbit of the *Enterprise*. But you, I must say, are a distinct improvement over Doctor McCoy. If anyone has to thump this old chest, I’m glad it’s a lovely young lady. Shall we go to the infirmary?”

Spock also excuses himself in order to give the facilities’ computers *their* annual physicals – though he certainly doesn’t express it that way – and I go outside to check on the progress of the supply beamdown.

Banus V is not a particularly hospitable-looking place. The blue of the late afternoon sky is muddy, and the terrain is sandy, studded with rock and sparse, sere vegetation. The buildings sit atop a small rise; below I can see a turgid stream and a few ill-tended fields. Downstream is a small collection of huts. Half-naked children and small furry animals tumble about the cooking fires, and their laughter reaches me on the faint breeze. Beyond the village, a group of older children are energetically tossing rocks and sticks at a scrawny bush.

An animal breaks from the cover of the bush and the children give chase, shrieking. The creature quickly streaks out of range, and the children pursue it, stopping briefly to retrieve their throwing-sticks.

Two men are approaching, and as they draw near, I can see

they are stocky, bandy-legged individuals, clothed in dressed skins. They are swarthy people, with a great deal of reddish-brown body hair. The larger of the two has a limping gait, and I notice that his left hand is crippled, curved in sharply at the wrist, the fingers splayed. He holds the arm protectively against his belly as he talks to Green's technician. The other, whose face has the bashed-in look of a seldom-successful fighter, is scrutinizing me thoroughly. His attitude shows neither fear nor aggression, merely curiosity, as he circles me from a distance of about a meter.

He seems fascinated by my boots, and I realize they may be the first he has ever seen, since Green and his crew habitually wear the low-cut oxfords issued to planetary research teams. At length, he gestures to his own clumsy sandals and then to my boots, repeating what sounds like "Kragh?" several times. His movements clearly indicate that he would like to trade.

I shake my head and look away pointedly. He approaches and touches my arm, and I see that in his other hand is a pouch. He withdraws a fistful of dark fibrous roots and offers them to me, again pointing at the boots. I shake my head again, wondering if I can extricate myself from the situation without offending someone who may or may not be of some importance in the village.

Apparently he is not, for the technician spots us and strides over purposefully. He barks a couple of words and makes a "beat it" gesture. The would-be trader crosses his arms in a resigned manner and trudges away, turning once to gaze

longingly at my feet.

“Dirty beggars,” the technician says. He is a young man, startlingly blonde. “If I were you, Captain, I’d keep my boots on tonight. They’ll steal anything that isn’t nailed down.”

“Thanks for the tip. But I don’t plan to be here long enough to need to take them off.”

He laughs harshly. “Wish I could say that!”

It seems, however, that we will be staying longer than anticipated. Dr. Merritt has finished her physicals and is packing away her medikit when Sid Green corners me in his office. He explains that the emissaries from the village carried an invitation to a village feast that night.

“Sorry, Sid. Duty calls.”

“I wish you’d reconsider, Jim. We’re finally reaching the point where the villagers trust us and are beginning to allow us to more fully examine the old lands. If we offend them by turning down this invitation, it could take months to regain that trust.”

“If you think it’s that important, Sid. I’ll have to check in with the ship first.” I pull out my communicator and comment, “It didn’t look like they’re that easy to offend, though.”

“What do you mean by that?”

I relate his technician’s actions toward the would-be trader,

and he frowns in exasperation. "That Rutledge!" he scowls. "He gives me twice the problems of my other two assistants." Then he grins ruefully. "But he also produces about six times the work they do. Ever had a crewman like that, Jim?"

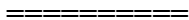
I have to grin back. "Dozens," I say, thinking of one in particular. I raise Scotty on the communicator, but his voice is thick with interference. "Scotty, we're going to be detained here for a while. What's the progress on that magnetic storm?"

"ETA in 17 minutes, Captain. And there's a second front movin' in six hours behind this one, ye know."

"Take her out of orbit, Mr. Scott, and get out of the way. Reassume standard orbit in four hours and we'll beam up then."

"Aye, captain. Tell Mr. Green to tie doon anythin' he doesna' want blown away. You're goin' to get some wild weather doon there."

"Will do, Scotty. Kirk out." I put the communicator away. "Well, Sid, we're all yours for four hours. As they say on Orion, bring on the dancing girls."



It seems that the entertainment on Banus V runs more to dancing men, however. We are regaled by dances of the hunt, dances of the gods, and dances that seem to have no meaning whatsoever beyond seeing who can remain

upright long enough to polish off the biggest portion of the tepid native beer from the apparently bottomless calabash in the center of the circle.

I pass on the latest offer of beer, but choose two bite-sized portions of meat from the proffered tray. Surprisingly, Spock does the same, and he takes an inordinately long time in making his choice, though a surreptitious movement a moment later tells me he has merely palmed the questionable delicacy.

“Did you notice the tray, Captain?” he asks.

“Not really.” I try to bring it to mind. “It looked like silver, though, didn’t it?”

“I believe it was a silver-platinum alloy, and most delicately worked. It would appear to be far beyond the capabilities of artisans in a civilization as primitive as this one.”

“An artifact, perhaps, from the previous civilization?”

“That would be the most likely conclusion.”

Before he can elaborate further, Sid Green pokes me in an unsubtle signal for my attention. An old man has taken the center of the firelit circle, and from the attention he is garnering, I would say he is of some importance.

“That’s Borol,” Green whispers. “He’s the Keeper of the Legends.” He switches on a tricorder as the old man spreads his hands and begins to speak in the quavering, high-pitched voice of the very old. As Green listens, his

face lights up with pleasure.

The language is nothing but gibberish to me, and my attention wanders to Lara's face. She is sitting on the other side of Spock, and the firelight softens the planes of her face and colors her skin with its glow. She could almost be considered pretty in this light, but for her expression. She is wearing a look of such helpless, bottomless agony that my gaze is drawn to follow hers.

On the other side of the circle is a cluster of children. They have been everywhere this evening, darting among the dancers and snatching at bits of food or an occasional untended gourd of beer. Now they are still, and for the first time I realize that almost half of them are grossly deformed in one way or another.

The tallest has only one arm; the other ends at what would normally be the elbow. Two vestigial protuberances extend from the arm – fingers? At his feet rolls a child with no legs at all; her forearms are heavily muscled, and as I watch, she hitches herself forward with them, tugging at a woman's skirt for a bite of meat. Here is a child with a cleft palate and harelip, there one whose body appears whole but whose boneless-appearing face and puffy, vacant eyes show the classic indications of severe retardation. Another twitches spastically, a silver stream of spittle breaking into droplets as her head jerks uncontrollably. They are all indescribably filthy, most of them with open, running sores.

My stomach rolls; I can look no more. I turn my eyes again to Lara's face. Tears are tracking her cheeks, and her lips are moving soundlessly. She seems to be saying, "the children ... the children." She makes a move toward her medikit, and I move quietly behind Spock to touch her shoulder.

"You can't," I say softly, hating the words but knowing they must be said. "None of us can. The Prime Directive--"

She turns toward me angrily. "But they're just *children!*" she says, and her voice breaks.

Spock reaches out and touches her hand. "They are mutants, Dr. Merritt. The heritage of a nuclear war." His voice is as gentle as I have ever heard it, and his eyes reveal that he, too, sees the horror and the waste and our helplessness to do anything to alleviate it.

"But they can be helped!" she insists. "They can be trained, be fitted with prosthetics and android components--"

"And mature, and live to breed more of their kind," Spock says. "Or die, and permit the healthy ones – the lucky ones – to bear children with less genetic damage. This technology cannot deal with members so unfitted for life in it. It would be a false kindness to try to change the children without changing their society."

She pulls away from him wordlessly, struggling for composure.

Green joins our group, his lined face flushed with

excitement. “This is fantastic!” he whispers, mindful of the tricorder behind him. “Borol is telling the legend of the firebringers – the story of the holocaust!” His eyes gleam in the firelight. “You have no idea how this will advance our studies! I’ll have it translated before you leave. You *must* hear this – it’s unprecedented!”

My voice is sharper than I intend when I answer him. “I don’t think we’ve got the stomach for it just now, Sid.”

>>>>> <<<<<<

LARA

>>>>> <<<<<<

I break away from them, stumbling into the darkness. Kirk starts after me; out of the corner of my eye I can see Spock’s restraining hand catch at his arm. I send him a wordless ‘thank you’ and see from his face that he understands. He draws Kirk back into the circle and I continue away from the firelight, away from the voice that rises and falls as it vomits forth the unspeakable tale.

At last I am out of reach of the sound, and I sink down on a boulder and try to control the nausea rising in my throat.

Out of the night comes a streak of flame – three children dashing away with a stolen torch. They appear to be whole, thank God. I don’t think I could stand to see another misshapen body tonight.

The torchbearer stumbles over something, falling against a smaller child, who screams in terror as her shaggy vest

bursts into flame. I rush toward them and knock the screaming child to the ground, beating at the flames with my hands and rolling her in the sand.

It is over in seconds, but the terrified child continues to scream. I try to quiet her and motion for one of them to hold the torch so I can see. Her burns appear to be superficial; the tough garment seems to have kept the flames away from her skin. There is a large blister on the back of her hand, and several smaller ones on my own.

I break a tube of regatril salve out of my medikit. If this constitutes violation of the Prime Directive, so be it. This is a healthy child, a normal child, and I will not stand by and see her suffer!

I hold her close, rocking her as I smooth the cream on her hand and then on my own. The anesthetic takes effect almost at once, and my hands stop stinging. I tell her it will be all right, knowing she can't understand my words any more than she could understand that the salve is antiseptic as well as anesthetizing, and that it contains a growth-promoter to speed healing and an agent to retard formation of scar tissue.

She quickly stops struggling and leans against me for an instant, a quicksilver bundle of bones and little-girl flesh, before she leaps away and the three vanish into the night, leaving the torch upright in the ground.

I sit still for a long time, savoring the feeling of her in my arms, against my breast, the silky hair under my chin. The

children ... the children.

I am slowly replacing the salve in the medikit when a woman steps out of the shadows. How long has she been watching? Have I broken some tribal taboo?

“Meestah--” she says, holding something out to me. “You fix, meestah?”

I am so astonished at hearing her words that it takes me a moment to realize she is holding a baby. Unable to believe my ears, I say, “You speak English?”

She nods shyly. “Rootlege teach,” she says hesitantly, stumbling slightly on the “r” sound. “You fix, please?”

I take the baby from her. It is a little boy about six months old. Its skin is fair, its hair a surprising blonde – the first one I have seen here. Unlike the other children, it is scrupulously clean, as is the woman.

The child appears healthy, but listless, and as I move it near the light, I can see old bruises slowly fading. The woman’s bare arms also bear bruise marks that appear to have been made by strong fingers, and a half-healed cut traces a line from the corner of her mouth down her chin. An evil suspicion darts into my mind and crawls down my back with a foul chill, but I hand the baby back to her, indicating the bruises.

“These are healing,” I say. “They are ... fixed.”

“No,” she says, and flips the baby over expertly. On the left buttock is a festering burn nearly three centimeters across

and about half that deep.

Oh, my God. The child's back and buttocks are ringed with similar scars ... old ones ... new ones ... all the same size. The suspicion grabs my entrails and I fight back the bitter taste of bile. "Who did this? This baby was burned deliberately! Who made these? Rootlege?"

She shakes her head and clutches the baby to her breast. "Please!" she begs, and her eyes fill with tears. "You fix – like other. Please, meestah!"

"Of course I will." I open the salve again and smooth it carefully over the new burn. "Hold him still – this will hurt." I spray an emollient on the half-healed wound and peel away the infected crust. The baby doesn't even squirm as I touch him with the balm. I cap the tube and hand it to the woman. "This will help your face, too," I say, touching her wound. "Please tell me who hurt your baby. Surely someone can protect you – help you."

Her eyes are utterly without comprehension. They show only fear, and I realize that she has placed herself in grave danger by seeking my help. She turns wordlessly and disappears into the night, leaving me shaking with impotent rage and a sickness I can no longer contain.

When it has passed, I start back for the buildings, wanting nothing so much as to get away from this hellish planet, yet knowing that even when it is light-years distant, the things I have seen tonight will haunt my dreams forever.

It is a nightmare, I tell myself. I am in Green's office, sleeping on his couch, and the face I see is a dream. Her voice is a dream. Her hands touching me are dream hands.

No. They are real. I sit up, and she is still before me, crying in earnest now. The half-healed cut on her face is broken open, thick blood coagulating on her chin. A new bruise purples her cheek, and her garment is torn and bloodied. Her hands are swollen, the nails broken and bleeding, and the little finger on one is either broken or dislocated. I reach for it, but she pulls away.

"Please," she begs. "Please." The rest is incoherent.

"What is it? What do you want of me?" It is too much. I cannot bear the weight of the deformed children, the abused children, the dying children.

She is repeating something, over and over. "Mantu," she says. "Mantu."

"What is mantu? Is that your baby? Is he hurt?"

"Gone," she says. "Mantu takes him to old lands."

"Who is Mantu?"

"Mantu is husban'. Tonight he drinks the fa'av ... he does this--" She gestures at her face. "--and takes Kaleef to old lands."

"Is he the one who burned your baby?"

“Yes.”

“His own child?” I know these things exist, but I cannot believe them.

She looks at the ground, begins speaking softly, her voice thick. “Mantu says ... Mantu says Kaleef not his baby. Mantu says gods take baby from old lands.”

Suddenly it all comes clear. “Rootlege” – Rutledge, the technician who made such a determined pass at me today that I threatened to put him in restraints during his physical. “Rootlege”, who taught this woman English. Rutledge, who is blonde, and a native man who says the fair-haired baby is not his own, who tortures a helpless child and takes him to the “old lands” for the “gods” to take.

“Your husband took the baby somewhere to abandon him? To leave him for the – gods?” I almost choke on the words. I would call them something else.

She nods.

“*Where* did he take Kaleef?”

“To old lands.”

“But where *are* they? Where are the old lands?” She gestures toward the door, and I step toward her. “Come with me. Show me!”

She struggles to rise, falls back, moaning. Something gleams in the half light, and I realize it is bone – her leg is

broken below the knee and she has somehow crawled or dragged herself to me for help, with that exposed bone furrowing through the dirt...

I cannot think of that. I will not think of it. Her agony, her desperation ... no. I close my mind to it. It is irrelevant; it is not germane to my purpose. I deny it. There is a job to be done. A job. A purpose.

Even a human mind can be trained in the Vulcan manner. I am in control. I have a function.

I grab a padd and stylus from Green's desk. "Show me. Here." She looks at me blankly. "Make a picture." Still she does not comprehend.

I sketch in the compound, placing two stick figures outside the building. "You," I say, indicating one. "Me." I make a few more hasty marks. God, let her understand! "The village. The river – the water – here. Your fields – your food places. Do you understand? This is a picture. Where are the old lands?"

Hesitantly, she points beyond the river. I make some humps. "These are the hills. In the hills? Beyond them?"

"Here," she says, and her finger stabs at a point beyond the hills. "Here are old lands." She shudders and falls across the padd, yanking it out of my hands.

I catch at her shoulders, holding her off the floor, as if stopping this one hurt would banish the others. I lower her gently and reach automatically for the medikit. To heal. To

help. That is my function.

To help whom? This woman? Or that child, crying somewhere in the dark? Crying. Alone.

There are others here, others to help this woman. I push open the door, and it is snatched from my hands by a wind that seems to have sprung up from nowhere. Noises born over the wind tell me the feast is still going on in the village.

“Spock!” I scream, knowing as I do so that he cannot hear; the wind is against me. “Spock,” I whisper, “help me.”

Help me? No, he would stop me. He would, or Kirk would. Hands off. Mustn’t touch. Prime Directive. Let the children suffer. Let them die. No! *NO!*

I must go. Me. Alone. To the child, crying in the night. To all the children.

^^^^^^^^^^

SPOCK

^^^^^^^^^^

Her scream, her need, burns through the link. But only for an instant. Then it is gone, snapped off, and in its place a deep and irrational loathing. Underneath is panic, and desperation.

“Captain--”

He snaps the communicator shut. “Scotty’s ready to beam

us up any time now, Mr. Spock. I suggest you locate Dr. Merritt.” He motions Barnes and Goldschmidt to join us. “I’d like to get out of here before the weather gets any worse. Scotty wasn’t kidding about tying everything down.” As he speaks, the first drops of rain begin to fall.

“Captain, Dr. Merritt is in some kind of trouble.”

“Trouble?” He is all attention now; “red alert” as Dr. McCoy calls it. “How--?”

I cannot explain it now, Captain, nor do I know the precise nature.”

He has not put the communicator away; he changes frequency now and calls her. “Dr. Merritt, this is the Captain. Please acknowledge. ...Dr. Merritt?” He turns to me and shrugs, then calls the ship.

“Scotty, stand by on that beamup. We’re having a little difficulty locating Dr. Merritt. Can you get a fix on her communicator and relay the location to us?”

“Aye, Captain.”

“How long do we have before the second magnetic stormfront hits?”

“Two hours and 12 minutes, sir.”

“And the magnitude?”

“Force nine, if our sensors are correct.”

“They are quite correct, Mr. Scott,” I am compelled to

point out. "I calibrated them before leaving the ship. And I think you will find that the second magnetic storm is estimated at force 9.027."

There is a brief pause, which somehow manages to convey his annoyance, before he concedes. "I have a fix on Dr. Merritt now, Captain. Her transmitter is receiving at the coordinates we have for Mr. Green's office, but she's nae respondin'. Shall I beam her aboard?"

"Negative, Mr. Scott. We'll take it from here. Kirk out." He puts the communicator away and we start up the hill. It is raining quite heavily now, and the celebration begins to break up, except for a few natives who seem to be overcome by the effects of the potent fa'av, the native beer.

Mr. Green and his staff follow us somewhat unsteadily; they seem to have partaken rather copiously of the drink themselves. Green is clutching the tricorder to his chest as if it were a child.

A child. Yes. There is something in the link, some resonance, that matches the feelings Lara had when she saw the deformed children. Is she attempting to treat them in Green's office? Then why the desperation?

We reach the office and the captain throws the light switch. The woman's body is sprawled across the floor, and as he rushes to her, I am checking the room for sources of danger. I find none, but I do find Lara's communicator on the floor near the couch. I toss it to him, and he flips it open.

“Kirk to *Enterprise*.”

“*Enterprise*. Scott here.”

“Scotty, have Dr. McCoy beam down to Sid Green’s office on the double, and with his medikit.”

“Aye Captain. Scott out.”

“Kirk out.” He starts to slip the communicator onto his belt, realizes he already has one there, and places it on Green’s desk instead. His face has the pinched, remote expression a man might wear in a slaughterhouse. “Mr. Spock, would Dr. Merritt be capable of doing this?” There is no apology in his need to ask.

“No, Captain. Not even in an all-in-combat situation. She has neither the physical nor emotional strength required. Besides, the woman was not beaten here. The room shows no indication of such a violent confrontation.”

“She couldn’t have come all the way from the village. Not like that.” He looks at the broken leg, the blood seeping slowly onto the floor.

“You underestimate the strength of the species, Captain, when driven by desperation.” As Lara is driven now.

Dr. McCoy materializes just inside the door, and without waiting for instruction crosses to the woman. He feels for a pulse, turns her over gently, and scans her body with the feinberg. He shakes his head.

“She’s gone, Jim. There was massive internal damage.”

The woman has been lying across a padd. I pick it up and recall the last image entered. It is a crude map, showing the compound, the village and fields, and the river, as well as the hills beyond it.

“Captain, look at this.”

He scans it with a frown. “What do you make of it, Spock?”

I shake my head. “Beyond the obvious – nothing. It is a representation of this immediate area.”

“And you have no idea of where Dr. Merritt is, or what kind of trouble she’s in?”

“I said I could not specify the nature of the trouble, I did not say I could not approximate her location.”

“Then *do it*, man!” Dr. McCoy says heatedly. As usual, he has thrown himself violently into a situation he barely understands.

“Captain, this is not a precise art. I can give you only a general direction to follow. May I point out that in two hours and four minutes, a magnetic storm of force 9.027 will intercept the orbital path of the *Enterprise*. A storm of such magnitude would certainly destroy the ship, should it not be clear of the area. Concern for any individual crew member cannot be permitted to jeopardize the lives of the rest of the crew.”

They stare at me incredulously, though I have endeavored to make both my motivation and my meaning clear to

them.

“Spock, that’s your *wife* you’re talking about!” McCoy says, aghast.

“My relationship to Dr. Merritt is irrelevant, Doctor. The risk factor here is unacceptably high.”

The captain’s voice is tersely controlled. “Mr. Spock, I’ll thank you to keep in mind that this is a command decision.”

“Captain, it was not my intention to abrogate your authority in this matter. I merely intended to point out--”

“And you have done so. You will beam back to the ship with the rest of the landing party and assume command. If I can’t locate Dr. Merritt in two hours, you will leave the quadrant. I’ll contact you later.”

“I do not believe you will be able to locate Dr. Merritt without my assistance. I should like to accompany you.”

He hesitates, then nods briefly. McCoy rises from his position by the dead woman. “Jim, whoever did this is out there. Just ... watch yourself, will you?”

“Will do, Bones. Explain what’s going on to Sid Green.” He relays his orders to Mr. Scott, and we step into the night. The rain is sheeting almost horizontally, driven by winds of near hurricane force. The air is ripe with the smell and taste of ozone, and a gigantic bolt of lightning arcs to the ground.

“Which way?” he shouts over the wind.

I do not have to reach for the link; it has been there all along, just under the level of conscious thought. Now it bursts through, vibrating, obsessed.

“Across the stream and into the hills.”

We put our backs to the wind and strike out in the darkness. I know that Jim, with the limited night vision of a Human, is able to see virtually nothing. It is a measure of this man that he knows when to follow as well as when to lead. Nor has he questioned the link. He accepts, and fights with whatever weapon comes to hand, whether it is of his own design or another's.

We plunge down a steep bank to the stream, swollen and roaring with the volume of the rains. A loose rock turns under my boot and I lose my footing, sliding toward the water.

“Spock!” He makes a dive and catches a handful of my shirt. The tough fabric holds, and I push myself back up the bank with heels and elbows. The sky lights up again, and I see a rude suspension bridge of sorts a few meters upstream. It is whipping in the wind and threatening to collapse at any moment, but it is there. We run for it, and though it swings dizzily under our weight, we cross safely.

Beyond the stream, the ground climbs sharply into the hills. The wet sand shifts and slides under our feet, and before we have gone three kilometers, we are both winded.

A rock escarpment offers some protection and we huddle there, fighting for breath in an atmosphere that suddenly seems liquid.

He flips out his communicator. “Kirk to *Enterprise*.”

“*Enterprise*. Scott here.”

“How much time have we got, Scotty?”

“An hour and 22 minutes, Captain.”

“Beam us down two hand torches, on the double.”

“Aye, sir.” Mr. Scott’s aim is impeccable; the two torches are within arm’s reach in minutes.

“Spock, do you have your tricorder with you?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“See if you can pick up a life-reading for Dr. Merritt.” He grins at me as he focuses the light from one torch on the instrument. “Not that I don’t trust your ... ability, whatever it is. I’d just like a little reassurance.”

I switch the tricorder for long-range scanning. “I am picking up a faint reading at course 169, range just under eight kilometers.”

He groans at the thought of the distance.

“It is moving slowly and erratically, Captain. That matches the sensations I am receiving through the link. Dr. Merritt seems to be searching for something.”

“What bothers me, Spock, is the thought of something searching for her. Let’s go.” He tosses me the other hand torch and we move out again.

The wind seems to be slackening a bit, but the rain continues to pour down. We have crested the hills now, and our progress is faster on the downward slope. Lightning continues to flicker, and I can see what appear to be ruins of some kind in the distance. Remnants of a road curve toward it, the pavement buckled and broken, huge chunks of it missing altogether. But it will afford better footing than the wet sand.

The landscape around us begins to look like some massive nursery where a petulant giant has run amok with building blocks. Portions of walls are standing, twisted girders thrust against the sky. The road is gritty with rubble.

I am running now, drawn by the urgency pouring through the link. The thought patterns are breaking up, becoming incoherent, lashing out at my mind like a frenzied animal. I am infected with her desperation. Nothing must be allowed to interfere. Nothing.

Something catches at my arm; I rip away, lashing out. The roar I make comes from the primeval mist of Vulcan’s violent past; something within me is shocked that I would be able to utter such a sound.

“Spock! Spock, what is it?” He is scrambling to his feet, up from where my mindless blow has knocked him.

I drop to my knees, pressing my hands to my own temples. I must diminish the link. Must regain control. Control. Narrow the passage. Control...

Slowly, I feel her madness leaving me. I become aware again of the driving rain, of Jim's hand on my shoulder, his face lined with concern.

"Spock, are you all right? What happened?"

I stand up, and begin scanning with the tricorder. "I am quite all right now, Captain. I believe I struck you, and I apologize."

He waves me off. "Is it Lara? Has something happened to her?"

"Nothing that hasn't been happening for some time. There was a ... surge in the link. I believe she is somewhere beyond this wall. About 50 meters away."

We clamber over the fallen stones, and find ourselves in what was once some kind of plaza. The remains of a fountain stand in the center, its spire tumbled and broken on the paving stones. The beam of my torch catches a slim figure disappearing around its base.

"Lara!" I call.

She turns, hesitates, and then runs toward us, her voice carrying ahead of her footsteps. "You must help me! He's out here, somewhere."

"Who is here, Lara? What are you looking for?"

“A baby. A native baby. Its father – well, not its father – one of the men brought it out here to abandon it. Its mother came to me in Sid Green’s office to ask me for help. I left her there – did you find her?” Her words are disjointed; she seems unable to stand still as she speaks.

“We found her,” the captain says. “We left Dr. McCoy with her.” He does not elaborate.

“Then you understand! You’ve got to help me! He can’t survive long in this.”

He looks at me with the unspoken question in his face, and I tell him, “Twenty-seven minutes, Captain.”

“We’ll help you, Lara,” he says. “But if we can’t find him soon, we must leave. Do you understand?”

She nods numbly.

“Why are you looking here?”

“She said he was taking Kaleef to the old lands. To leave him for the gods. I’ve been looking for church ruins – some kind of altar – something.”

I have been scanning with the tricorder. “Lara – there are no life forms registering except ours. If the baby was here ... he has not survived.” Her eyes, her mind, blaze at me, but I shake my head. “This is folly.”

“No!” she rages. “This is ... Human. Can’t you understand?” She steps toward me, her arm rising for a blow that never falls. She drops her arm, slumping.

“Please,” she whispers. “Please ... help me.” Her face is wet with a mixture of tears and rain, and her mind begs with a totality that is beyond reason.

I reach for her hand. “Come. I will help you.”

It is the captain who finds him. He approaches us as we search through the rubble of what had once been a lofty building. He holds a small bundle protectively against his chest.

“I’m sorry,” he says simply.

Lara takes the child from him. Its neck has been snapped, but the eyes are closed and there is a look of serenity on the tiny, still face. She holds the cold body for a moment, struggling to keep the tears inside.

“We have to go, Dr. Merritt. I’ll call Sid Green from the ship, and he’ll have someone come in the morning. The Banusians have to handle this in their own way. Do you understand that?”

She is still looking at the child’s face. “Yes, Captain,” she says. “It just seems cruel to leave him like this.”

He takes the child from her and places it on a fallen stone. After a moment, he strips off his shirt and covers the body.

She is beyond tears now; the link is sending only exhaustion and blackness. She sways and almost falls. I catch her arm, and she leans against me with need open in her face and mind. I put my arms around her, and the transporter catches us in that position, drawing us through

space, back to the sanctuary of the *Enterprise*.

>>>>> <<<<<<

LARA

>>>>> <<<<<<

I lie that night in the circle of his arms, but when I close my eyes, the visions come back to haunt me. Twice I awaken with my cheeks wet. The second time, he touches my face, and I can see the concern in his eyes.

“You must sleep, Lara.”

“I can’t. I dream – that baby.” I shudder.

I feel his mind invading mine, but it is different this time, gentle and caring. The light is not blinding this time; it is soft and golden, like slanting sunlight on a lazy summer afternoon. Unbidden, a line comes into my head ... *comfort me with apples* ... and I know he has picked it up, for he rewards me with that rarest of gifts, his slow smile. There is nothing erotic in his touch, yet I am comforted, and I begin to have some inkling of what it would be to be loved by this man.

>>>>> <<<<<<

I fully expect a reprimand from Captain Kirk regarding my behavior on Banus V, but the day wears on, and the summons does not come. I am in my office, correlating the results of some stress tests, when the doors hiss open. It is Pavel Chekov, and his round, open face lights with

pleasure when he sees me.

“I t’ought I’d find you here. Always vorking.” He parks himself on the corner of the desk.

“Starfleet wants these results tomorrow.”

“If I know Starfleet, they vant them yesterday.”

I have to grin at that; he is right, of course.

“Come up to the rec room vith me.”

I shake my head. “I really need to finish these.”

“The Federation von’t collapse if they don’t get them.” He takes a printout sheet from my hand and turns it face down. “I’ll bet you haven’t even eaten.”

Have I? I can’t remember. “I wasn’t hungry.”

He reaches over and cups my chin in his hand. “Come have some supper. And smile for me.”

How have I come to this easy intimacy? What began as a doctor-patient relationship quickly became infatuation on Pavel’s part. He seeks me out in my office or tracks me down in a rec room. He brings back oddities from landing parties he has been on; he draws me into the friendships he has made among the crew, and under it all is the tingle of flirtation.

And what of me? Am I so desperate for a kind word, for the loving touch of a man’s hand? To my shame, yes, I am. He is leaning forward; I know in a moment he means to

kiss me. And if he does ... oh, if he does...

I push back from the desk, forcing the smile he asked for. "You're right," I tell him. "Let's go eat."

There are half a dozen people in the rec room – Uhura, with her guitar, Sulu, Scotty, and three others whom I do not know. They greet us with smiles, and Uhura resumes her song as I take my tray from the servo-port.

"Don't run off," Pavel says, "I'll be right back." He disappears, and I pick at the meal, watching the others, envying their easy camaraderie.

I have given up on the meal and am putting the tray away when he comes back, swinging a balalaika. I cannot help but reach for the fine, smooth wood of the instrument.

"Where have you been hiding this?" I ask. "Oh, I haven't seen one in *years!*" He hands it to me, and I pick out a rusty scale. "Do you play?"

"Do I play?" He takes it back, and his fingers call forth a ripple like birdsong. "The Russians *invented* music!"

The others laugh indulgently. Pavel's chauvinism is known as affectionately as his accent. Uhura puts her guitar down. "Play something, Pavel," she urges.

"Now you've done it!" Sulu groans. "We'll be here all night listening to the glories of Mother Russia."

Pavel looks at him archly. "You have all the aesthetic sensitivity of a Cossack, Sulu," he says without rancor,

and begins to play – not a Russian song, but a love song. The vaguely Oriental sound of the balalaika gives it an exotic quality. When he finishes, Uhura picks up her guitar.

“Do you know this one?” she says, and begins to play. Their voices weave a pattern like sunlight through leaves, and I am suddenly homesick for the green Earth they sing of. Various crew members wander in and out, some calling for songs, some joining in, and the time goes by in a warmth and sharing I did not know until this moment that I had missed so achingly. Eventually, we run through everyone’s repertoire, and he does begin on the old Russian songs.

The first one is about a homely matchmaker who can find a husband for everyone but herself, and I translate – rather freely – as he sings. For some reason, Uhura finds this hilarious, and by the end of the song, she is in helpless tears.

“That’s it,” she says, wiping her eyes. “I’m getting punchy. Good night, all.”

“Aye,” Scotty says, rising. “Since the bairn obviously doesna’ know any drinkin’ songs--”

“Drinking songs?” Pavel says, stung to the quick. “*Drinking* songs! My friend, the Russians--”

“*Inwented* drinking songs!” we all chime in.

“Vell, ve did,” he says, assuming a look of pained indignation. And proceeds to demonstrate, at length. Time

flows like the vodka in the songs. It has become very late; I look around and realize I am the only woman in the room. And that I am enjoying it.

Pavel has apparently exhausted his supply of drinking songs. He begins to play something soft and sweet; after a few bars, I recognize it as a lullaby. The realization comes like a blow, and the face of the dead baby flashes behind my closed eyes.

“Don’t,” I say, and touch my hand to his on the strings.

He looks at me, puzzled. “All right.” He hands me the instrument. “Here. You play.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. I haven’t played in years.” But I take the balalaika from him. It is warm from his hands, sleek and smooth as a living thing.

“Play ‘Ninotchka’,” he says. “Everybody knows that one.”

Indeed, everybody does. It is the first song I learned after I mastered the chords. My fingers move hesitantly on the strings and then they take a life of their own, remembering what my conscious mind has forgotten.

“Do you know the words?” he asks.

I nod, and pick the chorus. It is a sad song, sung by a young girl who reminisces about her lover’s farewell to her as he went off to a battle from which he did not return.

I look up as someone enters the room. It is Captain Kirk, and Spock is with him. He is intent on what Kirk is saying,

his head bent slightly, wearing that look of concentration that so completely shuts out everyone else. My fingers stumble on the strings; my voice breaks.

Kirk sees us and sits down at the table. “Don’t let us interrupt you,” he says.

I hand the instrument back to Pavel. “If you’ll excuse me, Captain, it’s rather late.”

“I’d like to speak to you first, Dr. Merritt.” His implication is quite clear, and Pavel leaves along with the two or three diehards. Spock has not even bothered to sit, and he leaves without acknowledging my presence.

The mood of the room has changed abruptly from one of closeness to one of formal stiffness. Even the air feels different. “I’m sorry I broke up the party,” Kirk says.

I could say it was breaking up anyway, but I don’t. I know McCoy wants me grounded; he waits patiently for my first misstep. I assume Captain Kirk feels the same way, and I have given him a beauty of a cause. What I will not give him is my blessing for what he is about to do.

He is frowning, toying with an empty coffee cup someone has left behind. “The first time you run head-on into the Prime Directive,” he says, “it hurts. I know. I’ve still got the scars to prove it.” He grins ruefully, but I will not be drawn into the net he spreads so cunningly. He shifts uncomfortably in the chair. “I think I owe you an apology for getting you into that situation. I didn’t know ... about

the children.”

I am puzzled. He seems genuinely disturbed, and I am not prepared for that. “Am I on report?” I ask.

“Because I sent you into a situation I hadn’t prepared you to handle? No. There were ... extenuating circumstances.” A shadow seems to flicker across his face, and I remember the expression he wore as he covered the body of the child.

I try to remember that this man is the enemy, but I am unable to see him as one now. He was willing to help; he had an intimate acquaintance with my pain, while Spock... I will not think of that now.

He rises to leave. “I’m sorry, Lara.”

It’s all right, Captain.” And somehow, I think, it will be.

Part 2

McCOY

This is ridiculous, I tell myself. Swallow your professional pride and admit you’re at a dead end. Viral mutation is her field of specialty, after all. And I’m not doing Dan Korda any good by beating my head against a stone wall.

I snap off the medicomp. It's not telling me anything I don't already know. While on a routine planetary expedition, Korda apparently picked up a virus. It is mimicking viral pneumonia, but it isn't responding to standard treatment. If it is a mutation, I need her help. So why don't I ask for it?

Because I don't like her, dammit. I still smell trouble every time she walks into the room. And that fiasco on Banus V six months ago is just the forerunner. I really thought I had her then. I had my recommendation for reassignment all ready to send in with Jim's official reprimand. Only he didn't make one. I could have sent it in anyway, but that would have put Jim on the spot with Starfleet. I still remember our rather heated discussion of the matter.

I went to his quarters to ask when he was going to submit his report on the incident. "There's not going to be a report, Bones," he said. "In my judgment, it doesn't warrant one. If I make a report, I'll have to include a reprimand of Dr. Merritt's actions, and it'll be on her record for the rest of her career."

"And it should be. Her actions were irresponsible and unprofessional and--"

"Unprofessional?" He fixed me with a cool stare. "Tell me, Bones, if you could have gotten to that native woman earlier, would you have treated her?"

"Of course I would have."

“Even though, for all we know, it may be standard procedure on Banus V for a man to beat his wife to death if he thinks she’s been unfaithful? That’s a violation of the Prime Directive.”

“But you called me down there!” I snapped.

“Yes. I did. Because I had a human response to her pain. As you did. As Lara did – to the woman, and to the child. Because she is human. And a doctor. She’s also a rookie, and I put her into a situation she wasn’t ready to handle. I won’t let you or anybody else wreck her career because of a judgmental error on my part. That’s not my style, and you know it.”

“So you’re just going to let her waltz away scot-free?”

He shook his head, suddenly pensive. “She’s not free of what happened there, Bones. None of us are. God help any of us who could turn away from those children without ... without...” He was struggling to put his thoughts into words, an unusual affliction for him. “If we can turn away from that without seeing the waste, the terrible uselessness of what happened there, then we’re leaving the way open for it to happen again and again. And isn’t that what we’re here to prevent? Isn’t the whole idea of the Federation for us to evolve together to a point where we’re not tempted to blast each other back to the level of animals?”

I could see he was deeply disturbed by the incident, so I let it drop. But Dr. Merritt has been a sore point between us ever since. I made the mistake weeks later of referring to

the way she acts around Ensign Chekov, and he nearly took my head off.

“Why don’t you just get off her case, Bones?” he flared. “You’ve made your point. You don’t like her. Okay. When her professional performance falls below your standards, I’ll consider your professional recommendations. Until that time, I don’t care to hear any more on the subject.”

I gathered what was left of my dignity and departed the battlefield. We have not discussed Dr. Merritt since. Which is not to say that I have not thought about her. The one positive thing which came from the episode on Banus V was the change in her attitude toward the captain. The last of the Performance Evaluations showed that clearly, and I am left without a leg to stand on in my attempt to have her removed from my staff.

I leave my office and take another look at Dan Korda. He gives me a wan smile. “How’s it goin’, Doc?” he wheezes. The effort it costs him shows up immediately on the body-function monitors.

“It’s going fine, Dan,” I lie. “You just rest now, and we’ll get you back on duty soon.” I can feel his eyes on my back as I leave the room to call on Dr. Lara Merritt.

She looks up from the viewscreen, frowning.

“What do you think? Are we dealing with a mutation here?”

The frown doesn't go away. "I'd like to do some more tests on it. Meanwhile, I think we ought to run checks on everyone who was on that landing party."

I call for the information, and what I see makes my blood run cold. The party was composed of Korda, Ensigns Ron Chandler and Dean Walker, Yeoman Holly Martin ... and Spock and Jim.

I am reaching for the intercom when Nurse Chapel calls me from sickbay. "I have a new admission, Doctor, whose symptoms are the same as Lieutenant Korda's."

"Who is it?"

"Lieutenant O'Keefe, sir."

O'Keefe? I look at the computer screen again. He wasn't on the landing party.

"I'll be right there, Nurse." I feel a thickening of the skin on the back of my neck; a signal I have learned to heed. It doesn't go away as I examine O'Keefe. He is showing the same temperature spike, the same increased heart action and chest râles as Korda, and I remember uncomfortably that the two are close friends. By the time I finish admitting him, the signal has turned to a full red alert.

As I call the other members of the landing party down to sickbay, I am almost smothered by the sickening sense of urgency, of fighting against an indefatigable, many-armed enemy whose face is the grinning skull of death.

Jim is annoyed at me, because he knows what I'm going to say: "Bed, Jim."

"Bones, I've got a ship to run."

"Not with a temperature of a hundred and two, you don't. And your chest sounds like a wind tunnel. Everybody who was on that damn planet has this bug, even Spock. And it looks like it's contagious."

He is grumbling, but he yields. That in itself is an indication that he has been running on nerve for some time. They all have, from the looks of the test results. What is it in this man, I wonder for the *n*th time, that keeps not only himself but everyone he comes in contact with pushing, reaching for that second wind, that 101-percent effort?

Christine Chapel's appearance cuts off my musing. "Doctor--"

I know what she is going to tell me, and I don't want him to hear it. I meet her in the hallway. "It's Korda, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"About ten minutes ago. Dr. Merritt is with him."

She is standing by the bed, glaring angrily at the body-function panels, quiet now, over Korda's bed. I have never seen her lose a patient before, yet somehow I am not surprised to see that her reaction is much the same as mine – anger.

I call an orderly to take the body to the autopsy room and steer her into my office. When Korda's body appears on the table for the post-mortem, he will have become a weapon in my battle against death, but I will not witness this ceremony of my failure, nor will I permit my staff to witness it.

"Any ideas?" I ask.

"Not yet. I've got some things cooking in the lab." She ignores the chair I offer and begins to pace. "Dammit!" There is a fluidity in her movements uncommon for such a small woman, and there is an intensity in her that I find somewhat unnerving. She finally stops behind the chair and grips its back for an anchor. "What about the others?" she asks.

"They've all got Korda's symptoms. Yeoman Martin and the captain worst of all."

"Spock?"

"He's got something, Definite râles. Slight fever – not as marked as the others. Vulcan physiology--"

"I am familiar with it, Doctor."

I decide to ignore the rebuff; she is beginning to sound annoyingly like her husband. "What really bothers me is O'Keefe. He wasn't exposed to the primary source of infection, but he's got the same thing. If it's contagious, we could be in for a full-blown epidemic."

She casts off from the chair and begins pacing again. "This

thing looks like a bacillus, but it's acting like a virus. If we can isolate it ... maybe breed a less virulent strain, we might be able to come up with an immunizing vaccine."

"All right. Keep working on that, but keep hoping we won't need it. Maybe O'Keefe is just a coincidence."

He is not a coincidence. Within 24 hours, I have 12 new admissions – Nurse Chapel and Dr. Sanchez among them. Within 36 hours, the number of patients has climbed to 40, and we have had our second fatality – Holly Martin, the yeoman from the landing party.

After everyone seems to be settled for the night, I grab a cup of coffee and head for the lab. Dr. Merritt is injecting a large white rat and noting his number on a chart. "How's it going?" I ask.

She looks at me a little fuzzily, and I suspect that she, too, has been subsisting for the last day and a half on lukewarm coffee and grim determination. She shakes her head and hands me a padd with her test results on it. They are all negative.

I am trying to think of an approach she may have overlooked when Spock walks into the room. "What are you doing out of bed?" I snap at him. "You're sick."

"On the contrary, Doctor; I am fully recovered."

I go off to get a feiberg, and when I come back he is looking at the padd and talking to Lara. He sits down and submits impatiently to a quick scan, then looks at me with

an arched eyebrow. “Are you quite finished, Doctor?”

“Spock, I don’t know how you do it, but if everybody on this ship had your constitution, I’d have to take up knitting.” I wait for his comeback, but he makes none. Maybe he isn’t completely recovered after all. Then Lara touches his shoulder tentatively and the expression on her face makes me feel like the proverbial fifth wheel.

“I’m going to the bridge,” I announce. “I want Scotty to turn this ship around and get us to the nearest starbase while we’ve still got enough crew to do it.”

Mr. Scott, however, has other considerations on his mind. We are on a routine patrol along the Romulan Neutral Zone, and he refuses to break off the mission without an okay from Starfleet. I hang around the bridge impatiently for an hour while we wait for their response. When it comes, it’s hardly reassuring. We are instructed to remain on patrol until relieved by the *Potemkin*, which is currently docked at Starbase Nine for refitting. They estimate they can rendezvous with us in four standard days. Scotty looks at me with a shrug.

I am not happy with the decision. I have only four empty beds – five, if Spock is going to insist on being healthy – and no end is in sight. I need to make arrangements for vacating quarters on that deck for additional bedspace, and then I need a drink, and then I need to grab as much sleep as I can before the roll call of the sick begins anew.

Six hours later, Nurse Hyland is valiantly attempting to

revive me with alternate applications of hot coffee and cold facts. We have six admissions already that morning, including Lieutenant Uhura, who passed out at her board 10 minutes after reporting for duty. Ron Chandler, one of the men in the landing party, is growing progressively weaker. Jim seems to be holding his own, but nobody is making any improvement. And Dr. Merritt would like to see me in the lab.

The caffeine finally gets my heart started, and as soon as I can get my feet to track, I go down to the lab. They are both there – Spock looking healthier than I feel, and Lara wearing a wrinkled uniform that looks like she’s slept in it, which she probably has.

“Have you been here all night?”

“We were having too much fun to leave,” she cracks uncharacteristically.

Spock raises both eyebrows at her. “I would hardly refer to it as ‘fun’; however, it has been most productive.

“Then you’ve come up with something?” That news finishes what the caffeine started.

“I think so,” she says. “I took a blood sample from Spock and we seem to have isolated some antibodies. We’re culturing another generation now, and I’ve just injected some rats with first-generation serum. I thought you’d like to know.”

“That’s the best news I’ve had all day.” I should have

known better than to say anything. The words are hardly out of my mouth when I hear myself paged.

“Dr. McCoy to the bridge, please. We have a medical emergency. Dr. McCoy to the bridge.”

The medical emergency turns out to be Scotty, who has followed Uhura’s act by passing out on the bridge. The inventive engineer, however, has added a new finale. He managed to crack his skull on the control console on the way down, and is bleeding profusely from a 10-centimeter gash in his scalp. Like most scalp wounds, this one looks worse than it is. I follow the gurney down to sickbay and clean him up.

Time seems to contract around me; I move from bed to bed, from crisis to crisis, and yet have no sensation of moving at all. I see Dr. Merritt going into the critical ward and wonder how the lab tests are going. Hyland informs me that Chandler has stopped breathing on his own and is now on a respirator. I know we are going to lose him, and I snap at her without meaning to. She is back in a few minutes with a tray, insisting that I eat something. Before I can apologize, she is gone, blowing a wisp of hair off her forehead.

Whatever is on the tray tastes like sawdust; I compromise by lacing my coffee with cream and sugar and taking it with me to the lab. There is no one there but a technician scowling into the microscope viewscreen.

“What’s the problem, Penelli?”

“These cultures. They’re dead.”

I join him looking at the display. There is no movement on it; the cultures have indeed died. “What about the rats Dr. Merritt injected with first-generation serum?”

“I don’t know, Doctor. You’ll have to check with her.”

As I am reaching for the intercom to page her, she comes in, looking harried, and I give her the bad news. She bursts out with a fine old Anglo-Saxon epithet I haven’t heard since I left Georgia, glares at me as if I had personally killed the culture, and crosses to the rats’ cages. Her back is to me, but her words are as clear as etchings on a glass plate.

“We just lost Chandler.”

I am tempted to add a few choice epithets of my own, but I just can’t find the energy.

>>>>> <<<<<<

LARA

>>>>> <<<<<<

It begins to look as though something is finally going to break our way. The rats immunized with antibodies from Spock’s blood are resisting infection. The loss of the second-generation antibodies is annoying, and I have a suspicion that the cause was an inattentive technician. I will chase down that possibility as soon as I have time.

Time ... where does it go? It is walked to death in the

simple passage from bed to bed; it slips away in those few hours when hastily-snatched sleep is the only alternative to irremediable collapse.

We have 86 active cases and have had nine fatalities. *Enterprise* has a complement of a little over 75 percent of her crew, but she is wallowing along her immutable course as if she had less than half. The virus seems to be almost viciously selective, striking down those key members of the flight crew and often their immediate replacements.

The medical staff has also been virtually decimated; both McCoy and I have spent hours we could not spare going through personnel records to find healthy crew members who've had more than the mandatory basic first-aid courses. Anyone who can read a body-function panel or administer a spray-hypo is subject to being yanked out of his or her assignment and thrown into the front lines in our personal war against this menacing invader.

I am on my way now to the bridge. With less than 70 hours until our rendezvous with the *Potemkin*, I am going to try to persuade Spock to turn the con over to Lieutenant Sulu and come back to sickbay with me. We need his talents, his stamina, his ability to cut through the extraneous. If he will supervise the labs and continue with his experimentation on a possible cure, that will free me for work in the wards.

I am in the turbolift when the red alert klaxons kick on. I am tempted to return to sickbay when the doors open on the bridge. A tremor runs through the deck beneath my

feet, and Sulu's cool voice announces, "Deflected, sir."

The ship on the forward viewscreen is a small one, a CZ class with no markings. The commander must be mad to think he can take on a starship. Or desperate. The ship veers in a sharp bank, obviously getting ready to make a run for it.

"Phaser crew stand by," Spock says. He gets a nod from the ensign manning the communications board, and keys open a hailing frequency. "We repeat, this is the Federation Starship *Enterprise*. You are in restricted space. Identify yourself."

"She's pulling away, sir."

"Pace her, Mr. Sulu. Phaser crew, fire across her bow." The beams cut through the starfield, but the ship does not come about. "Tractor beam," Spock orders.

Sulu moves a toggle, consults the screen and then his board again. "They're not responding, sir."

"Manual override."

"It's not the controls, Mr. Spock. Tractor beam hasn't been activated."

"Engineering. This is Spock. Activate tractor beam." There is no response.

"CZ vessel pulling away again," Sulu notes.

"Increase speed to Warp Six. Engineering, please respond."

The voice that crackles through the speaker is harried. “Sorry, sir. This is Lieutenant Leslie. We’re having a little trouble down here.”

Spock chooses not to respond to the excuse. “Activate tractor beam,” he repeats.

“Yes, sir. Tractor beam activated.”

“Lock on target.”

“Sir--” the navigator interrupts. “They’re crossing into the Neutral Zone.”

Spock moves in the command chair for the first time, hunching forward and clasping his hands together. “Belay that order, Mr. Leslie. Break off pursuit. Secure from general quarters. Mr. Riley, return to course 159, mark eight.” He makes a temple of his index fingers and presses them against his lips in the gesture I have learned he uses when he is concentrating on something dancing just beyond his grasp. He does not appear to have noted my presence at all.

I suddenly realize I have just experienced my first combat action, and that I had expected something a little more dramatic. The bridge seems somehow out of kilter, and it dawns on me that only Lieutenant Sulu is in his accustomed place. Spock is in the command chair, and Chekov at the science console. The other faces are strange to me; I might be on some other starship entirely. The feeling is vaguely uncomfortable.

Without turning, Spock asks, “Did you want something, Dr. Merritt?”

Startled, I momentarily forget what my purpose for coming to the bridge was. “What was that all about?” I ask, stalling.

“Renegades,” Chekov answers me. “Probably running contraband.”

“Possibly,” Spock says. He swivels the chair around to face me, sitting back. He has not forgotten his question, or my evasion. “Doctor?”

I remember my purpose. “I’d like to see you in sickbay.” If I can get him off the bridge, even momentarily, I stand a better chance of enlisting his skills in the lab.

“My presence is required on the bridge.” He swivels away from me, and I approach the chair.

“The immunizing factor looks promising,” I tell him, “but we need another blood sample from you.”

He hesitates, rubbing at the bridge of his nose in a gesture I have often seen Captain Kirk make. Or perhaps it comes automatically with the con... I know that Spock, like every other crew member still functioning, is torn with the need to be in two places at once.

“Very well,” he says, rising. “Mr. Sulu--”

Chekov’s voice interrupts him. “Sensors indicate the CZ ship has returned to Federation space.”

Spock drops back into the chair. “Come about, Mr. Riley.” He does not spare me even an apologetic look. “Red alert, Ensign Howard.”

Chekov is shaking his head. “Whatever they’re running must be mighty important.”

“They are not ‘running’ anything, Mr. Chekov, or they would have continued on to their home port. They are either on a mission they consider highly important, or...” He does not complete the thought aloud. “Switch to extreme long-range scanning. Magnification factor 12 on the forward viewscreen.”

“Yes sir,” Chekov says, puzzled. He looks up from the sensor’s hooded screen. “What are we looking for, sir?”

“Mind your sensors, Mr. Chekov.” His eyes are fixed on the viewscreen.

In a few minutes, Chekov announces that he is indeed picking up something. On the viewscreen, the renegade CZ is clearly defined; beyond it is something more, hazy yet to my untrained eye.

“That,” says Spock with a nod toward the screen, “is what we are looking for.” The image wavers, clarifies. Now even I can make it out – a Romulan cruiser. So the CZ has reported our inability to apprehend it, and like a shark in the Earth ocean sensing a prey in trouble, the Romulan cruiser is circling for the kill.

“Please leave the bridge, Dr. Merritt.” He is intent on the

viewscreen.

I touch the arm of the chair, keeping my voice low. “Spock, I need that sample. It’s critical.”

“Send a technician up to take it here. I cannot leave the bridge. Now please return to sickbay.” Hidden under the words of request are the tones of command.

I am in the corridor leading to sickbay when we are hit again. This is no tremor – it is a sickening lurch that nearly throws me off my feet. The lights in the corridor dim; their power is being diverted to a place of greater need. Hopefully, the shields.

Sickbay is in chaos. Unrestrained patients have been thrown from their beds, IV’s pulled out, tubes tangled. Hyland and two other nurses are doing their best to put things back together when we are hit again. This time the lights go out completely. In sickbay itself, the auxiliary generators kick on in seconds, but the hallway remains dark except for the luminous emergency panels. I think of the patients housed in crew quarters and hope none of them are on life-support machines; power to quarters has no doubt been cut as well.

An automatic distress signal is beeping from the critical ward, and since the nursing crew has their hands full, I respond.

It is coming from Kirk’s bed. The body-function panel has gone mad. Pulse 190, pressure falling, respiration six and

so labored it is barely registering. I grab an oxygen mask and turn the petcock wide open.

“Hyland!” Get in here!” I shout, shooting another look at the panel. Temperature 106 ... what has happened to the coolant mechanism? Everything is falling apart...

Kirk is struggling against the pressure of the mask. Somewhere in the depths of his fevered mind, he is registering the pounding we are taking, and if I don't get restraints on him, he's going to be on his feet. I drop the mask and grab at his arm.

“Spock!” he yells. “Get down!”

I restrain one arm and reach across him, hunting for the other restraint. The deck pitches under me as we are hit again, and I am thrown across the bed, sliding to the floor on the other side with the tubes from the oxygen mask fouling my legs. Pushing up to my knees, I catch his other arm in the restraint.

“No!” he gasps. “Let me go! Spock!”

I disentangle the tubing and press the mask over his face. He sucks hungrily at the air for a moment before he begins fighting me again. Hyland comes in, scrubbing at a bleeding nose.

“Get me a respirator and a hypo of baravyl.”

“The respirators are all in use,” she says blankly.

“Then *steal* one, dammit!”

She wanders off, dazed, and I find myself wishing for Christine Chapel's uncomplicated efficiency.

I can see the problem in the coolant mechanism; a tube is kinked and the liquid is backing up. There should have been a routine check on it within the last hour. I can't reach the chart to check it, and it wouldn't do me any good if I could. Except to know whose frame to climb when this is all over. Again, I get the feeling that everything is falling apart.

Hyland comes back with the hypo setup, and a technician follows her pushing a portable respirator. I lubricate the feeder and entubate the device. "Free that coolant coil, will you?" I order the technician. "Hyland, get in touch with Engineering and tell them we've got to have power in the crew quarters on this deck. We've got patients in there."

"Dr. McCoy already did. He says we'll be getting casualties down here in a few minutes."

I inject the baravyl and watch the body function monitors as the heart rate starts to drop. Kirk stops fighting the nasal tubing, and I secure it.

"I want a special in this ward around the clock."

"There's nobody available, Doctor."

The technician is getting ready to leave. "What about you?" I ask. "What's your name?"

"Takagawa, ma'am."

“Takagawa, you are now a special-duty nurse. Hyland, brief her. And then get an ice pack on your nose. I think it’s broken.”

When the captain’s pulse has stabilized and his respiration has eased, I meet McCoy in the corridor and ask him about casualties.

“Three flash burns and a broken leg,” he says. The corridor rocks under us. “So far.” He glances upward. “I wish I knew what was going on up there.”

Whatever it is appears to be finished, at least temporarily, for the red alert klaxons cut off and the lights begin to flash yellow alert at us. When we have cared for the casualties, I try to find a technician to send to the bridge for the blood sample. It appears that locating one will be more time-consuming than going myself, so I collect a kit from the lab and go up to the bridge again.

Spock is at the science console with Chekov, and he bares his arm to me without comment. I draw three 10cc samples and tape a pressure pad over the puncture site. He returns to the command chair, and I turn to leave when my knees suddenly go to water and everything starts to spin. Chekov grabs my elbow with one hand and the tray of vials with the other, guiding me down into the reassuring solidity of a chair.

“Just a minute,” I say, putting my head down. Suddenly I am hollow and shaking as the delayed reaction hits me. The fear I hadn’t had time to acknowledge until now

suddenly grabs my chest. I remember once when I was a student there was an explosion and fire in the lab where I was working. I hadn't had time to be frightened then, either, until that night, when I'd started crying and had been unable to stop.

I sit up and clench my shaking hands together. The tremors start up my arms, and I look at them remotely, as if they belonged to someone else.

Pavel sets the tray down and catches my hands in his. He grins at me crookedly, a purpling bruise darkening his cheekbone. "It gets easier," he says. "I shook for three days after my first Romulan attack."

"Is it over?"

"For now. They're on their own side of the fence, licking their wounds, and we're on our side, licking ours."

"Then you think they'll be back?"

"Probably. That CZ was a Romulan Surveillance vessel. When we couldn't stop them, they decided we must be crippled, and they called in big brother for the kill. Now they've got a Gorn by the tail. If they let us go, they've got an unprowoked attack to explain. So they'll have to try to jam our communications and finish us off so we'll be just another question mark on Federation records."

The news is not reassuring. "Can they do it?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. But I do know I'd feel a lot better if *Potemkin* would come charging over the hill like

the Cossacks at Balaklava.”

“I’ve got a better idea. Let’s get out of here. Warp nine would be nice.”

“Da. If ve had any varp drive left.”

“So we just sit here and wait for them?”

“No. Ve pull ourselves together and get ready to hit them with everything ve’ve got left when the time comes. And hope it will be enough.” His face is somber; he looks more the soldier than I have ever seen him. Then a change comes into his eyes and he lifts one hand as if to touch my face. “Lara--”

I get up, hoping my legs will hold me. I don’t think I want to hear what he is going to say. Deathbed confessions can be awkward if the patient recovers.

“Thank you, Pavel. For being honest. And for being here.”

I pick up the vials and make it to the haven of the turbolift before I start shaking again.

>>>>> <<<<<

I prepare three cultures – one on plain agar, one on chocolate agar, and on impulse draw enough Vulcan blood from the supply to make a green agar for the third culture. I leave half a dozen requests to be called in six hours and stumble to my own quarters.

My head is buzzing with ideas for treating the cases we have, but I am too tired to sort them out. The epidemic, the

attack, the battle to keep Kirk alive, the sidestepping of Pav's attempt to voice his feelings, all have drained me to the point where I don't care if the Romulans or the virus get to us first. I only know I want it to happen when I'm asleep.

All attempts to maintain an Earth-normal day-night rhythm on the ship have been suspended; we are in a limbo of timelessness which increases the feeling of disorientation. I peel off my uniform and drag myself into the shower. Setting the spray on cold keeps me awake long enough to wash off the layers of accumulated grime, but no longer. I don't even remember having gone to bed, but I must have, because that's where I am when the red alert klaxons begin blaring again.

I am struggling into my boots when I think to look at the chronometer. I have slept almost seven hours. So much for leaving a wake-up call. I flip on the intercom and call the lab.

"This is Dr. Merritt. Have somebody get those cultures out of the incubator, stat. I'll be down in a few minutes." *As soon as I can get these damn boots on.*

I look down and realize I am trying to put them on the wrong feet. I stifle an urge to laugh at myself; I have the feeling if I give in to any emotion at all, it will rapidly become hysteria. I steal enough time to sit down on the bed and pull my mind together. I bless Amanda for supervising my training in the Vulcan technique of concentration, and

bleed the whole enigmatic, exasperating, fascinating race for having developed it at all.

I am halfway through the door when the deck bucks under me, and I fall against the frame. I taste the salty warmth of my own blood and my hand comes away from my lips stained. For a moment I am tempted to stay huddled against the doorframe, or better yet, under the bed. Then I think of Spock's single-minded concentration, of Pavel's promise to hit back as hard as possible, of Kirk's fight against his own treacherous body, and I know that I have to go on, too.

The corridors are busy with crewmen responding to the alert. One of them stops to ask if I'm all right. Apparently he doesn't recognize me, for he suggests I check into sickbay to get my lip tended. I suppress a laugh and send him on his way.

The admissions log in sickbay shows 12 new cases. The last one entered is Nurse Hyland, and I wonder if anyone is even bothering to keep track of them any more.

We are hit hard, and the lights flicker again. My knees start to shake, and I grab at the counter for support. I want to be with Spock, somewhere away from this. Somewhere quiet, somewhere safe. Then I think of his remoteness on the bridge and know he would refuse any haven I found for him if it meant giving over without the effort he is making now. I can't remake the universe for him, nor he for me. We can only deal with what we have.

I leave sickbay without even trying to make rounds. The culture trays are still in the incubator, but someone has turned the temperature down. I prepare a slide from each medium, and the rolling of the ship and the hits we are taking recede into the background. It seems I have always worked with a lab table that jolts in front of me and the echo of klaxons blaring in the background.

The culture from the agar medium is dead; I toss the slide into the disposal chute without even a twinge. The culture from the chocolate agar shows no life, either, and I reach for the last slide telling myself it doesn't matter. There's always something else to try.

The view on the display screen is swimming in front of me. I try for a clearer resolution twice before it hits me that the movement is not improper focus – it is the living antibodies, growing and functioning. I am seeing life – life that I have sustained and life that means hope for the rest of us.

I pull more Vulcan blood from the stock and start rebreeding, holding out enough second-generation growth to start the inoculations. If it works, fine. If it doesn't ... I'll try something else. There's always something else.

I make some notes on my chart and grab a technician to watch over the incubator. "Where's Dr. McCoy?" I ask.

"He went into his office a couple of hours ago and threatened to lobotomize anybody who came in after him. I think he's asleep."

I know the feeling. “When he comes out, tell him I want to see him. And don’t botch those cultures, or you’ll be the one with the free lobotomy.”

When the turbolift spills me on the bridge, the scene is quietly tense. The Romulan cruiser’s metal hide shows blackened patches as it maneuvers away from us sluggishly, and I wonder if *Enterprise* looks the same from their bridge. Spock is not watching the screen; he is watching Chekov, who is intent on the sensor readout. When he begins to speak, his back is to the command chair, but his voice is carefully level.

“Their main shield has completely collapsed. Power levels dropping below attack capacity.” He turns to face Spock and the elation he has kept out of his voice cannot be kept out of his stance or the expression on his face. An almost audible ripple of relief spreads through the bridge, but Spock has swung around to the forward viewscreen again.

“Hold your position, Mr. Sulu. Mr. Howard, maintain red alert.” He keys open a switch on his console. “Weaponry division, stand by. Maintain red alert.” He resumes his scrutiny of the Romulan cruiser as it drifts slightly toward us.

There is an uncomfortable stirring among the crew; a few glances are exchanged, but nobody says anything. I almost voice it for them – finish this! Put an end to this attacker now, before he pulls a knife out of his boot and slides it between our ribs.

Spock takes his eyes off the viewscreen long enough to acknowledge my presence. “What is it, Dr. Merritt?”

“I’m ready to start immunizing against the virus. I’d like to start with the bridge crew.”

“Please do so.” He turns back to the screen. “Mind your sensors, Mr. Chekov. I am particularly interested in the Romulans’ impulse and warp-drive power readings.”

I start the inoculations at the engineering console. I can’t decide whether to be awed or annoyed by Spock’s curt dismissal. One would think from his attitude that developing an immunizer against a viral mutation totally unknown scant days ago was as commonplace an event as getting up in the morning. I find it hard to believe I have lived with this man for over seven months and that he still addresses me as “Dr. Merritt” when others are present.

I have finished the engineering console and have injected Ensign Howard. I am moving toward Pavel when he waves me back. “Mr. Spock – the Romulans are moving toward us on impulse power. Sensors show a definite weakening of their matter/anti-matter shields. I think they’re going to try to ram us.”

“A logical assumption, Mr. Chekov. It is also logical to assume that their calculations indicate an imminent collapse of their matter/anti-matter shields. It would appear they intend to effect our destruction along with their own. Mrs. Sulu, range please.”

“Twelve hundred kilometers and closing. Moving at sublight speed.”

“Arm photon torpedoes.”

Instead of compliance, a voice comes back on the intercom. “Beg pardon, sir, but we haven’t the thrust to get them out to recommended firing range. If we fire them, we may very easily blow ourselves up.”

“Your recommendation is noted, Mr. Brock. Arm photon torpedoes.”

“Armed, sir.”

“Mr. Sulu, I want range reports at hundred-kilometer intervals.”

“Aye, sir. Range 1,000 kilometers and closing.”

The bridge falls into silence except for Sulu’s inexorable figures. I continue with the inoculations, feeling a little silly about making such a positive commitment to a future which may not extend more than a few minutes, but I don’t know how else to justify my presence on the bridge. And tractor beams couldn’t get me off it at the moment.

I enter the well of the bridge as Sulu is calling out, “Six hundred kilometers,” and I realize Spock is watching me with a look of quiet approbation. I look at him questioningly before crossing to the helm, and he gives me an almost imperceptible nod. I feel the sunlight of his mind touching mine and cannot help but give him a smile in lieu of the embrace I would prefer to give in recognition of

what his approval means to me at this moment.

“Five hundred kilometers,” Sulu says, and winces as I give him the injection. He looks up at me quizzically.

“We can’t have you catching this bug, Mr. Sulu. I think you’re just about indispensable.”

The black humor of it strikes him, and a grin tugs at the corner of his mouth before he turns back to the helm. “Four hundred kilometers and closing steadily.”

Spock has contacted engineering. “I want all available power channeled into weaponry. Shut down everything but life support and impulse engines.”

“Affirmative.”

“As soon as the projectiles are launched, divert all power to impulse engines and front deflector screens and prepare to deliver full reverse thrust on my signal.”

“Aye, sir.”

Sulu announces the range. Three hundred kilometers. Spock goes on shipwide intercom, and his voice comes booming back at us hollowly through the bridge speaker. The amplification reveals an undercurrent of fatigue I had not noticed until now.

“This is Commander Spock. All hands prepare for extreme concussive turbulence in approximately 93 seconds.” The click as he closes the connection echoes across the bridge. I find I am holding my breath.

“You’d better take his advice,” Sulu reminds me. I sit on the step down to the well and wrap one arm around the railing and the other around my medikit. “Two hundred kilometers.”

“Fire photon torpedoes.”

“Photon torpedoes away.”

“Full reverse thrust.”

The ship groans in stress and I barely have time to wonder if we are going to break up in the maneuver, when the viewscreen bathes the bridge in a blinding blue-white light. Ensign Howard reaches belatedly for the intensity controls, but he never completes the move. The roar and the shaking of the concussion is like being caught in an immense tidal wave. I am thrown against the railing and then wrenched away; I can feel muscle and tendon screaming at the stress. Or is it *Enterprise* herself screaming?

A body hurtles into mine from behind, breaking my hold on the railing. I curl myself around the medikit, somersaulting forward, and flash a thought to the cultures in the lab. Then my back slams into something hard and unyielding and the pain that shoots through me knocks everything else into oblivion.

When I can breathe again and stars have stopped shooting across my field of vision – I am aware enough to be startled by the fact that people actually *do* see stars – I realize the deck has stopped shuddering, people are picking

themselves up and shaking unbroken limbs, and somebody is laughing at the sheer joy of discovering he is still alive.

The whine of a feinberg registers in my mind, and I look up into Spock's face. Satisfied that nothing is broken, he lifts me to my feet, and I allow myself the luxury of leaning against him. He reaches around me to flick on an intercom, but makes no move to pull away.

“Engineering, report.”

“We're navigable, sir, just barely. Considerable structural damage in the forward compartments. Impulse engines look good, but we won't have warp drive again until we can make a starbase.

He closes the switch. “The Romulans, Mr. Chekov?”

“Their ship is totally destroyed, sir.”

There is no jubilation in Spock's face. Our own casualty reports are coming in, and they are grim. I move away from him reluctantly and walk into the turbolift, not waiting for sickbay to page me.

McCoy is on the verge of tearing his hair. There are nine reported fatalities and 14 seriously wounded crewmen, with two decks still to report. No one has begun to count the bumps and bruises; a nurse is handing out painkillers and sending the walking wounded back to their quarters. There is simply no place else for them to go.

It is almost eight hours before I can get back to the lab. The technician I had left to monitor the culture growth is gone,

snapped up by Dr. McCoy to help him administer the last of the inoculations. He did a commendable job in keeping the incubator from breaking up during the last attack, but the rest of the room is a clutter of broken vials and scattered notes.

I drop the broken glass into a disposal chute and start gathering up the papers, trying to remember the approach I was using on treating the infected patients. Several sheets of Spock's notes have become mixed in with mine, the figures and key words marching across the page in reflection of his own well-ordered mind. It seems years since we shared the quiet intimacy of that night in the lab. I have lost all sense of time and wonder when he last ate or slept.

My own notes chart a series of dead ends, and I pick through his again, rescuing missing sheets from under the lab table and behind the computer console. I note that he had called for a readout from the medicomp, the retrieval interrupted when he left to take Scott's place on the bridge. I request a condensation of the data he has pulled; it is a summary of cancer treatment used in the mid twenty-first century.

Cancer treatments? Cancer ... a viral mutation which can attack and metastasize with overwhelming speed. A viral mutation... Something begins to buzz in the back of my mind and I shuffle through his notes again. There – on the top half of the last page – a curving graph and the symbols under it indicating that it represents a particular sonic

wavelength.

Specific sonic disruption. The destruction of the nucleus of aberrant cellular structures. He was so close...

And so correct, as the treatment of half a dozen lab animals shows. In the next few hours, I lose only one of the treated animals, a female which had already gone into respiratory failure when I took her from the cage.

McCoy is irascible when I page him in his quarters, but the gruffness disappears when I give him the news. He is in the lab almost before I get the intercom shut off. He is smiling for the first time in days; we cannot work our way through the wards fast enough to suit him.

By the time we are finished, the cases in the critical ward where we started are already showing a definite improvement.

“Dr. Merritt,” he says formally as we are leaving the ward, “I would be most honored to buy you a drink. Or do you share Mr. Spock’s Vulcan disdain for the waters of life?”

“I do not. One of the greatest frustrations of life on Vulcan is the difficulty in finding anything to drink stronger than a *plomik* slush.”

He restrains a shudder and guides me into his office where he unlocks the liquor cabinet and reverently brings out a long-necked bottle. “Saurian brandy,” he announces, and pours two snifters. “I wish Jim was here.” He hands me the glass and reaches forth with his own. “*L’chaim*,” he says.

“*L’chaim*, Doctor. To life.” The spicy warmth of the brandy spreads through my limbs like honey, loosening the knots and smoothing the raw edges of my mind.

We drink in quiet companionship, and when I leave to return to my quarters, I find I am humming “Ninotchka” under my breath.

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Spock has his back to me when I enter the room. He is studying the computer screen, and a tray of food sits untouched at his elbow. I cross to him and put my hands on his shoulders. The muscles are tense as stone under my hands, and I begin to knead them. After a minute, I can feel the tension flowing out of them, and he reaches forward to snap off the screen. Before the image fades, I can see that it is the final list of fatalities from the day’s action.

He leans back against my hands and I run my palms down his back, reaching for the knotted length of the trapezius. But the angle is wrong; I can’t get any leverage.

“Why don’t you go and lie down, and I’ll give you the Lara Merritt special? No extra charge.”

My flippancy appears to have offended him, and he stands up. “That will not be necessary, Lara. Vulcans have the ability--”

“Yes, I know. Vulcans can do anything. I’m really beginning to believe that, you know.”

He looks at me quizzically, trying to decide whether or not

I am being facetious, then turns away, going into his own sleeping quarters.

It's not the Vulcan half I am concerned about – it's the human half trapped inside the Vulcan physique. The human side, that knows it needs food and sleep and even occasionally the loving touch of another human hand, even though its needs are denied by the rigidity of Vulcan tradition. Spock has never attempted to deny the fact that his mother is Human; such a negation of simple biological truth would never occur to him. Not on the surface, anyway. But what about within? What private Vulcan demon drives him to be smarter than anybody, stronger than anybody, more impassive than anybody? Is there a nagging, insatiable fear that if he allows the tiniest crack, the wall he has built around himself will crumble and leave the Human in him exposed and vulnerable to the pains and doubts that assail the rest of us?

Some private imp of my own impels me to my dressing table, and I take down a vial of nathuria oil and carry it with me into his bedroom. He is lying on his stomach with his chin propped on his fists. I sit down on the edge of the bed and uncork the vial. He flinches a little as the cold oil hits his bare skin, but he doesn't resist as I start to work it in. It warms quickly from the heat of his body, sending its spicy aroma into the room.

I tell him about the success we have had with the treatment of the virus. He seems pleased, but something is still disturbing him. There is still tension under my hands; he is

not yet ready to relinquish that iron control.

My hands are beginning to tingle from the relaxing effects of the oil, and I sit back. He rolls to his side and props himself on one elbow.

“Do you know that you are a remarkably talented woman, Lara?”

“Why, thank you, sir. Was that a compliment?”

“It was intended as an observation of fact.”

“Then that makes it doubly precious to me. A woman – a human woman, anyway – likes to hear occasionally that her man values her.”

“I value you highly.”

But not quite so highly as you value the Enterprise, my private imp insists.

He stretches a little, moving his shoulders as the heat of his body intensifies the soothing action of the oil, loosening the knots and warming his skin. He reaches out and touches the vial. “That is a most interesting substance.”

I swirl the amber liquid, and the light through the cut glass makes shifting patterns on the wall behind him. “On Argelius, it’s considered a most effective aphrodisiac.

He raises an eyebrow at me. “Indeed?”

Indeed. Whether it is the heady aroma of the oil, or McCoy’s brandy in my empty stomach, or just the

unaccustomed intimacy of our being together like this, something is most certainly having its effect on me. He touches my face and his touch sends a tremor through me that finishes what the brandy has begun. I feel the weariness he cannot or will not acknowledge and his bitter distaste for the deaths among our crew. There is even a kind of sorrow for the destruction of the Romulan ship and the lives it carried, and the sense of betrayal of his own code of pacifism ... a strange code to find in a military man, but there all the same.

“Is this a seduction, then?” he asks.

Yes ... no. Seduction implies the taking of something, some private succubus to draw the life from a man, when what I want is to give it back again. To put sunlight and gentleness back into the mind that touches mine.

“If you wish it to be,” I answer him, knowing he has already felt it in my mind.

“I do,” he says, and draws my body down across his own.

I shall be the particular succubus of his need, then, and draw away the sorrow and the guilt and the utter bone-crushing weariness of defeat that hides behind the mask of victory.

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Enterprise limps her way toward Starbase Nine, and I can hear Scotty in the next room, bemoaning the indignities suffered by his beloved engines. He sounds as tired of recuperating as I am. He is indicating that if someone would give him his pants and a magnetic torque infiltrator, he would have the *Enterprise* back on warp drive in minutes.

His optimism is greater than mine; I have seen the damage reports and I have a feeling he has not. If he knew how close we all came to buying the farm four days ago, he'd be after Spock with a claymore. Not that it was Spock's fault. He has been in to see me several times, and between the reports he has bootlegged in to me and our discussions of the incident, I know he did his usual superlative job. He has asked for commendations for Lieutenant Sulu and for Ensign Chekov, and I concur. The report which surprises me is McCoy's. He has not only commended Lara Merritt, he has recommended her promotion to full lieutenant.

He must have read the surprise on my face when I saw his report. "I still can't say I like her, Jim," he said. "But she did one hell of a job."

I can believe that. Somewhere I have a vague memory of her holding something down over my face with a determination surprising in a woman of her size. Maybe it was just my own weakness that made her seem strong. This bug has taken all the starch out of me. I woke up three days ago feeling like somebody had stolen all my bones. I got up yesterday, over McCoy's howls of protest, but it wasn't

long before I regretted the action. When he started in on me again, I was glad for the excuse to go back to bed.

I switch on the viewer. Though I have viewed this tape before, it is better than lying here staring at the bulkhead or eavesdropping on Scotty's conversation.

Petey's face stares out at me – *Pete's* face, I remind myself. At 19, he is suddenly very concerned with being addressed with the formality called for by his new station in life. The tape is choppy, fragmented. He obviously recorded it in the odd snatches of time available to him between classes. He looks so much like Sam did at that age that it is hard to watch him. He talks a great deal about someone named Sharon, and he makes me feel suddenly, unfairly, old.

“Am I interrupting?” It is Lara.

“Not really.” I reach out and stop the tape as she checks the hieroglyphics on my chart. She looks fresh and rested; happier than I remember her. A kind of sea-change seems to have occurred since I've been sick. McCoy, Lara, even Spock; they are all different somehow. I can't put my finger on it, but it is there.

“Are you as impatient as your Chief Engineer to get back to work?”

“I am. In fact, we've decided that if you won't give us back our clothes, we're going to make kilts out of the sheets. That was Scotty's idea.”

She runs the feinberg over my chest, then checks the

reading against the body-function panel. "I'd like to see that," she says, grinning. "I'll bet you've got terrific legs, Captain."

Her quick reply catches me off-balance. I am suddenly aware that for all her professional detachment, she is still very much a female. If she notices my discomfiture, she gives no sign.

"Sit up, please," she says, briskly professional again. She moves the feinberg across my back and follows it with her palm, beneath the hospital jacket. The touch of her hand against my bare skin is cool and disturbing. "Have you been up yet?"

"Yesterday."

She puts the instrument away. "You can lie back now. How long were you up?"

"About half an hour."

"And how did you feel?"

"Okay." I look into the level eyes and know she sees through the answer. I have an uncomfortable feeling she also knows why I find it hard to face the truth. "Well ... maybe a little wobbly."

"That's what I thought." She writes something on the chart and replaces it. "You're pushing your luck, Captain."

"Which means?"

"Which means you're laying yourself wide open for a

secondary infection. Back off. Give yourself a little time to recuperate.”

“Doctor’s orders?”

“Doctor’s orders.” She turns to go as an orderly brings in my lunch tray. She lifts the cover off a dish and nods in approval. “Looks good,” she says.

“Join me?” I ask on an impulse.

She shakes her head. “I’m meeting Spock in half an hour.”

“Then keep me company?” I envy her the freedom to walk out of this confining space.

She hesitates, then takes the tray from the orderly and dismisses him. As she moves the viewer away to make room for the tray table, she notices the frozen image of Pete, caught in mid-gesture with a lock of hair falling over his brow. There is open curiosity on her face.

“That’s my brother’s boy, Peter,” I explain. “He’s in his first year at the Academy.”

“How does he like it?”

“He loves it. Even though they’re running his fanny off. I remember my plebe year ... I think the most important thing I learned was how to fall asleep in 30 seconds. And how to wake up in ten.”

She laughs, and the soft sound of it tells me she shares a similar memory. “I did the same thing in my intern year,” she says. “Only we also had to learn how to get rid of

Corcoran's kisses."

"How to get rid of *what?*?"

"Corcoran's kisses. Jeff Corcoran was the resident in charge, and he was hell on wheels if he caught any intern sleeping on duty. Of course, we all did, so he had all the couches covered with a thick, nappy fabric that made marks on your skin if you laid down on it. We called them Corcoran's kisses."

"So you do you get rid of them?"

"You don't. We started swiping linens and covering the couches with them. We got quite ingenious at hiding towels and pillowcases." She looks down at the front of her uniform. "That's the only time in my life I ever had a bust." She laughs again, easily and without embarrassment, and I have to join her. She looks back at Pete's face. "He's a nice-looking boy. His parents must be proud of him."

I think of Sam the last time I saw him alive; his vibrancy echoing back poignantly from Pete's face. "They would be very proud of him, I think. Both his parents were killed on Deneva about five years ago."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

"I didn't think you were." But I reach out and turn off the viewer anyway. I can't look at Pete's face any more just now.

She sits quietly, watching me push food around the plate. Finally she says, "You must have been very close to your

brother.”

“I was when we were younger. Then I went into the Academy, and he was planning to enter when he met Aurelan. They got married, and he began to have second thoughts. It’s rather ironic in a way ... he decided against Starfleet because he thought – they both thought – it was too dangerous for a family man. Sam was always the cautious one.”

The memories of him are shouldering past one another now, each one eager to be seen and heard, and it’s important to me somehow for her to hear them; for her to know how it was with Sam.

“Once, when we built a raft – told everybody we were going to sail to Hawaii. They said ‘sure, kids, have fun’. I was ... oh ... seven, I guess, and he was nine. Just two kids with big ideas. But we meant it, you know? I mean, we had all kinds of stuff squirreled away. My dad was piloting a Mars shuttle then – it was ... I don’t know ... about a year, I guess, before we moved back to Iowa. Anyway, he’d bring things home – old T-rations, broken navigation instruments he’d conned out of the engineers. Things like that. And we’d cart this junk down to the raft until finally we decided we had enough. Sneaked out one night after everybody went to bed, and cast off for Hawaii.

“We caught an outgoing tide, and of course a couple hundred meters offshore, the raft starts to break up. With the tide running against us, we couldn’t make the shore,

but there were some rocks about 30 or 40 meters further out. We hung on to what was left of our raft and swam out to them, and sat there cold and wet the rest of the night. No matches, no light, no food. I figured we'd probably starve to death right there in sight of land, and maybe in ten years or so, they'd find our skeletons. It's funny now, but at the time I really believed it.

“Then, just after sunup, we heard a boat. I couldn't believe it. We jumped up and down and yelled like crazy men, and it turned toward us. It was our dad. Turns out Sam didn't want anybody to worry about us, so he left a note. My dad got up early that morning to go fishing and found it. Came looking for us. Which was a good thing, because when the tide turned, those rocks were under water.

“I was always getting us into something like that, and Sam was always pulling my tail out of the crack. It's hard to remember, sometimes, that he's not around to do it any more.”

She has been sitting quietly, a small smile playing around her eyes. She looks comfortable with the idea of Sam, and that pleases me for some reason.

“I wonder sometimes if he ever told that story to Pete.”

“If he didn't,” she says, “you should. I think he'd like to hear it.” As she is speaking, Spock comes in, and I wonder again if it is Spock who has changed, or if it is only my perception of him which has altered. His expression, his stance, his voice ... they are the same. But not the same.

“Dr. Merritt,” he says, gravely formal as ever. “I believe you were supposed to meet me in your office.”

She turns to look up at him, and the smile moves from her eyes to light up her whole face. “I believe I was, Spock. Am I late?”

He starts to say something, then thinks the better of it, addressing me instead. “Captain. I trust you are feeling better.”

“Much. Thank you for the company of your lady.”

He gives me his oddly formal nod of acknowledgement, and as they turn to leave, I notice that he reaches out to cross her first two fingers over his own in the traditional Vulcan manner. Spock, who dislikes being touched, and who seldom touches anyone of his own volition.

They take something with them when they leave; some quality of light or vitality, and the room seems suddenly confining again.



I wouldn't mind losing so much, I try to tell myself, if he weren't so damn cocky about it. But it doesn't do any good, and besides, it's not true. None of it. Chekov isn't cocky; he's just full of being 25 years old and healthy as a Russian dray horse. Forty-five minutes on the handball court with him, and I feel as creaky and debilitated as *Enterprise* herself. And I do mind losing, dammit. I mind it very much.

I used to get chewed out quite frequently at school for not being able to “lose graciously”, as they put it. Until I got to the Academy, where such things are understood. People often express surprise at the lack of emphasis on team sports there. No homecomings, no big games, no boozy weekends with old grads trying to be plebes again. Fairness, the administration said. There is no soccer on Rigel, no basketball on Vulcan. But it is something deeper than that. It is the awareness that it is not the function of a Starfleet officer to lose graciously.

Our physical training was rigorous, but it was against our own standards that we most often competed, or against the inexorable demands of the clock – against the complaining muscles and bruised psyches that came back again and again to strive for the ultimate effort and the ultimate victory. There is no such thing as a gracious loss.

All in all, I’m in a thoroughly foul mood. The only bright spot on the black horizon of my mind is the fact that we will be docking at the repair satellite for Starbase Nine in 36 hours. It has been a tedious trip; the first half spent in a sickbay and the second half spent on the bridge of a ship that’s only millimeters from being a basket case.

As I pass by the workout room, I notice that the doors are still jammed open, and this further sign of the ship’s multiple malfunctions increases my annoyance. I hit the manual closing switch, but they refuse to budge. Then I catch a glimpse of movement reflected in the backwall mirror.

It is Lara, and she has one foot precariously balanced on the molding that runs waist-high around the room. She arches her torso over the upraised leg, reaching with her outstretched arms, bending like a willow in the wind. As she straightens, she sees my reflection and turns toward me.

“Captain!” she calls in greeting. “Care to join me?” She twists her torso away from the wall and somehow winds up facing the other way. The upraised leg is now behind her, though it has not left the molding.

“Join you? It hurts just to watch you.” As I cross the room toward her, I can hear some kind of music coming from the playback unit on the deck. She grins up at me as she reaches downward, and I can feel my irritation beginning to melt away. This woman I had called a cactus now seems to be capable of creating an island of calm around her. One of us has definitely mellowed. Probably me – an indication of encroaching senility, no doubt.

I realize she has been speaking to me. “What? I’m afraid I was thinking about something else.”

“Obviously. ...I said ... if you’ve got a minute ... I need to ... ask you something. ..I’m almost ... done.” She isn’t puffing, exactly, but she measures her words to the rhythm of her movement. As I sit down, she turns her back to me, but I can see the reflection of her face in the mirror. It is flushed with exertion, and tiny wisps of hair frame her forehead and cheeks, held by the mist of perspiration. She

is doing something that looks like deep knee-bends, but they aren't, because the position of her feet and the angle of her knees are all wrong.

She is wearing some kind of one-piece garment that clings like a second skin; the lines of her shoulder blades and the hollow of her backbone are clearly marked, and her small breasts push like ripe young peaches against the tight, slick fabric. She is considerably more covered up than she is in her brief uniform, yet the impression is that she is wearing much less. I reflect that there is considerable difference between substance and form. It is an almost successful attempt to divert my mind from the reality of Lara Merritt as an individual female.

She steps away from the wall and does a couple of all-over stretches, then drops to the deck cross-legged and reaches for a towel to wipe her face.

“You wanted to ask me something?”

“Oh. Yes. I asked Mr. Scott, and he said it could be done, but I had to clear it with you. When we're docked for repairs, could I have somebody put a regular barre in here?”

“A what?”

“A ballet barre. About so big around and two or three meters long. It's mounted on brackets and stands out from the wall about 15 centimeters.”

“I see. Well, any request to alter standard gym facilities is

supposed to be accompanied by 14 pounds of red tape. But I'll put my career on the line and give you a definite maybe."

"Ah. A man of decision, I see."

"It comes with the captain's stripes."

The smile dances at the corner of her mouth again. How could I have ever thought of her as a plain little thing? She's as evanescent as sunlight on water, and just as hard to pin down.

"Seriously, I don't see why not. Tell Scotty I said go ahead."

"Thank you." She sways a bit to the music, humming under her breath.

"What is that song?"

"You don't recognize it?"

"The Federation Anthem?" I guess.

"It's the second-act opening from Krionis' *Aphrodite*. I thought everybody knew it."

"Not me."

"But ... the Federation Anthem? Come on, Captain."

"*Everything* sounds like the Federation Anthem to me. I'm tone-deaf."

"Not really."

“Really.”

She props her chin on her fist. “Another illusion blasted. I thought you were the man without a flaw.”

I know she is teasing, but still the comment stings. I have felt particularly flawed for the past two weeks. “I really do have to go,” I say, getting up. “Can I walk you home?”

She shuts off the playback unit and hands it to me as she stands. “I’ll even let you carry my books. And thank you again. That practice barre will really help.”

“You should have asked sooner. Have you been working out like that long?”

“Only for 25 years.” She catches my look. “You mean on the ship. Yes, every day if I can. I’ve done it for so long that I really feel lousy if I skip a day.”

“You make it look easy.”

“Thank you, kind sir.” She pauses at the entrance to the turbolift and drops a formal curtsey, incongruous in her pale-green tights. “Once upon a time, I was going to be the prima ballerina of the entire galaxy.”

“What happened?”

She gives a little shrug, and her face in profile is pensive. “Not enough ... push ... I guess. It’s a very narrow life. It’s like living in a glass bubble. There’s no reason to it for anything but dancing, and no room for anybody but yourself. I didn’t think I wanted to live that way. Sealed

off. You know?”

“I think so.”

“And then there’s the little matter of talent. The competition is killing, and I have a natural aversion to playing out of my league.”

“Do you?”

She turns to look at me as the turbolift stops on her deck. “That’s a rather cryptic remark.”

“I was just wondering how many Terran women would consider marrying a Vulcan to be playing in their league.” Something clicks shut in her face, and I regret the remark. Like Bones, I often find myself wondering about their relationship, but unlike him, I have never before questioned it out loud. She turns to go, and I step out with her, catching her arm. “I’m sorry. That was out of line.”

“May I have my playback unit, please?” Her face is as unreadable as Spock’s as I hand her the unit. She pulls away and starts down the corridor. It is disturbingly like an earlier parting, and for the second time this day I feel I am losing something. But this loss is one I will not tolerate.

“Lara!” I start down the corridor after her. Heads turn in the passageway; a starship is not a private place. I ignore them. “Lara!”

She stops as the door to her quarters slides open. “What is it, Captain?”

“I’m not going to discuss it out here.” My private losses – or victories – are not for public eyes.

“Come in, then,” she says, and I follow her into the room.

“I’m sorry. I had no right to say what I did. Your private life is your own.” She puts the playback unit on her desk, but doesn’t reply. “Didn’t you say, just a few minutes ago, that you didn’t want to live sealed off in a glass bubble? Well, if you come out, if you make room in your life for someone else, you’re going to get your toes stepped on sometimes. That’s life, lady, and you can be part of it, or you can shut yourself up like some princess in a tower. But you can’t have it both ways.”

For a moment, I think she is going to throw me out. Then she drops into a chair, propping her elbows on the desk and her chin on her fist. “Do you know what’s so damned infuriating about you, Captain Kirk?”

I can feel the pressure bands loosening in my head. “There have been a number of theories advanced. Would you like to add to the list?”

“Even when you’re wrong, you’re right.”

“Would you like to clarify that?”

She hesitates a moment, then shakes her head. “No. I think you’re clever enough to figure it out.”

Her grey-blue gaze is disconcerting, and I find myself remembering the touch of her hands in sickbay. *If she were not Spock’s wife...* “I think I’d better leave.”

She does not move, and the air between us is charged with the electric tension of a man and a woman acknowledging each other's sexuality for the first time. Finally she says, "Yes. I think you should."

The doors slide shut behind me, and I find myself in the corridor. The strange thing is that I still don't know if I've won or lost. Or even what it was that I was fighting for. It is a distinctly disturbing feeling.

>>>>> <<<<<<

LARA

>>>>> <<<<<<

I had not known, until we made planetfall on Starbase Nine, just how much I suffered from what veteran spacers call "landsickness". Spock is tolerant of my peculiar madness, though he says it has never afflicted him.

He is a man more comfortable within walls, securely in command of his environment. But he accompanies me when I get up before dawn to go outside and watch the huge red sun roll up across the mountainous horizon; he waits patiently as I examine the wonder of the blue grass, fine as a baby's hair, or drown my face in the exotic scents of the furry flowers. It is an almost sensual delight to feel real ground under my feet, to see the blue vault of sky arching over me, to smell the early-morning scent of rain on a vagrant breeze.

It is a common reaction, he says, particularly among those

on their first deepspace assignments. After months of confinement on a starship, breathing filtered air and eating synthesized foods, the sensory organs are overwhelmed by the varied input of an uncontrolled environment. His pedantic explanation does not diminish my joy.

He balks only when I suggest a picnic on our last day. “I see no logical reason,” he says, “to transport ourselves and our food to some distant point which is undoubtedly less comfortable, less convenient, and altogether less desirable than our present location.”

He would hardly have been amenable to any suggestion, however, because he has been invited to participate in a physics seminar today, and he is impatient to be gone. I sense in him the same restlessness that drove him in our final days on Vulcan. To a Vulcan, “rest” means merely the cessation of all activity. What we consider vacation seems to them an unnecessary dissipation of misdirected energy.

He leaves immediately after breakfast, and I spend only a few minutes looking out the window before I determine not to waste this last day sulking. I am just putting my boots on when someone sounds the door buzzer.

“Come in.” It is Captain Kirk, whom I have seen only briefly since the day I asked him about the practice barre.

“Is Spock here?”

“He went off with Gregor Timovitch. They’re going to spend a glorious day discussing variations in field density.

Or something equally esoteric.”

“Oh, the seminar. I’d forgotten about that.”

“I think there’s some coffee left. Would you like a cup?”

“No thanks. Actually, I was planning to hike up Aqinah this morning, and thought he might like to go.” He looks at me, thoughtful. “How about you?”

Purposely, I misunderstand him. “I thought I’d poke around some of the shops. Would you believe I haven’t spent a credit since we got here?”

He is neither distracted nor deceived. “That’s not what I meant.” He doesn’t add, “and you know it,” but we both hear it, anyway. “Come climb a mountain with me. I promise I won’t pry into your personal life.” He is wearing a wry grin, and I suddenly realize why. I am sitting on one of the twin beds, and its pristine cover and obviously unused state contrasts sharply with the unmade, tangled one behind me.

I can feel the blood burning in my face. Damn them all, the nosy, prying, would-be voyeurs. I have had full enough of the questioning glances and unspoken curiosity, and I want to stand up and yell, “Yes, dammit, we sometimes sleep together! And what’s more – we enjoy it. Both of us!” But I won’t lower myself to the level of their back-room humor. I will, instead, simply call his bluff.

“Yes, Captain. I’ll climb any mountain you care to point out.”

If he is surprised, he doesn't show it. "Why don't we leave the captain and the doctor at home? They seem to get on each other's nerves at times. Jim and Lara are much more compatible."

>>>>> <<<<<<

The trail winds along the side of the mountain like an ochre ribbon. The sign at the base says "Aqinah Summit, 6 km." I stop and look at the length of it stretching away before us, at the bluish trees that arch over its length, hiding the switchbacks beyond.

"I'm not sure I'm up to this."

"It's an easy climb. You could do it standing on your hands."

"On my hands and knees, maybe."

He looks at me, and his eyes are the same brownish-green as the stream that cuts down the mountainside. "It's funny," he says, "I never had you pegged as a quitter."

"I'm not."

"Then come on."

We start up the trail, and at first I match him stride for stride. On the third switchback, the angle increases sharply. I can feel the muscles in my calves protesting, and fix my eyes on his back as he gains on me. He is wearing a bright red backpack that moves laterally with the motion of his shoulders. He stops, turns around, grinning and cocky. I

take a deep breath and force another step, then another. As I grow closer, I can see that he is sweating, too. It is costing him something, then, this macho image he is projecting, and the knowledge pleases me.

“I thought I’d lost you,” he says.

“I can do it standing on my hands, huh?”

“This is the steepest part. There’s something I want you to see at the next switchback.”

“You may have to carry me.”

“You think I can’t?” He steps toward me; I really think he means to try.

“I think if you do, you’ll end up breaking both our necks, Captain.”

“Jim. We left the captain down there. Remember?”

“Oh yes. Down there ... with my common sense.”

He catches my hand and hauls me up the last hundred meters by main force. We break out of the trees at the turn of the switchback. The valley spreads beneath us in a vast panorama. The starbase facilities are militarily neat, like a toy town laid out by a fastidious child. The control tower for the airfield stands like a tall, exotic flower in the center. Beyond it lie the shops like sun-dogs around a sun. I can see the broad circles of fields, blue and green and gold in their bearing, and the wide tangle of park where Spock and I have walked. There are no words for it, and I feel an ache

in my chest that doesn't come from the exertion of the climb.

"You knew this was here?" I say when I can trust myself to talk.

"Yes." He is standing behind me, and he puts his hands on my shoulders, turning me toward the east. "Look – you can even see the coast."

I can, too. I can see the water, stained red with its load of plankton, beating against the black rocks, and a stretch of black sand beach curving out into the breakers. Small boats bob on the waves, their bright sails spread like birds.

"I make this climb every time we dock here. I never get tired of looking at it."

"And it's always like this?"

"No. It's different every time. You should see it with a storm rolling in." He turns me again, west this time, toward the peaks of the mountain range. "The thunderheads come down through that pass," he says, pointing. "It looks sometimes like they're touching the ground. They roll and boil like living things, and the ground beneath them is black with the rain. If the light is right, it can make a rainbow from the mountains to the sea, so bright ... so strong ... you feel like you could scoop it up with your hands."

I turn away from the view. "Thank you for bringing me, Jim."

He pulls his eyes away from the mountains. “Thank you, Lara, for not being a quitter.”

“We’re not at the summit yet.”

“You’ll make it. The rest is easy.”

“What does it look like from there?”

“It’s ... different. You can see it all, but it doesn’t make me feel like this. But I always go on, anyway. I don’t know why.”

“Maybe you’re a compulsive over-achiever.”

He grins at me. “Maybe.”

He is right about the summit. The base is dwarfed, out of focus somehow. The details of the coast are lost, and the sky is pierced jaggedly by the higher peaks that rise behind Aqinah Summit. They wear coats of snow, and the wind that whips off them is cold. We stay only a few minutes, to catch our breath and rub aching legs before we start down.

As the bulk of the mountain rises behind us, the cold of the summit becomes just a memory. The great red sun is directly overhead and our very shadows scurry for cover under our feet. Coming down should be easier, but it isn’t. The strain has shifted from muscles to joints, and now it is ankles and knees that complain instead of calves and thighs.

Just above the switchback where we had stopped before, the stream cuts across the path. We had crossed the bridge,

hardly seeing it after the view of the valley; now it is like an oasis.

It is a nondescript sort of bridge, spanning the water, its clean lines of metal alloy somehow incongruous here. I start across it, but Jim shuns its sterile width and starts to cross on the broad, moss-covered rocks that dot the surface of the water. I stand on the bridge, yelling encouragement and laughing at him. He is nearly across when he makes a miscalculation and slips into the knee-high stream.

He wades out, dripping and laughing, and sits down under a tree to strip off his wet boots. I join him, grateful for the shade, which falls across my arms and face as softly as a cloak of Orion velvet.

“First Hawaii, now this,” I tell him. “If I were a fortune-teller, I’d advise you to avoid journeys over water. You seem to be jinxed.”

“You think this was an accident? I always bathe my feet on a hike. Recommended practice.”

“True. But I think it’s also recommended that you remove your boots first.”

He makes a grimace of mock annoyance. “I always forget that part.” He slips out of the backpack harness and lies back on the grass, pillowing his head on his palms. He is relaxed and contented. The coiled-spring tension of a starship captain is gone. I am glad we left him behind. There is an ease between us, an atmosphere much like that

day in sickbay when he talked about his childhood.

“Penny for your thoughts,” he says.

“Oh, they’re worth much more than that.”

“I’m a very good credit risk.”

“Actually, they were about Captain Kirk.”

“Uh-oh. Do I want to hear them?”

“I don’t know,” I tell him. “Is he a friend of yours?”

“We’re on speaking terms. Sometimes I get the feeling he doesn’t approve of me much.”

“I get the same feeling.”

He looks at me, suddenly serious. “You shouldn’t. He thinks Lara is a pretty terrific lady. It’s just that Dr. Merritt keeps getting in the way.”

I don’t have an answer for that, and I look away. He is coming on very strong, and I don’t quite know how to handle it. This is different from the teasing flirtation with Pavel, and it frightens me somewhat. He makes me feel young and pretty and clever, and at the same time a little scared that any minute he’s going to discover he’s talking to and flirting with Lara Merritt – that plain, uninteresting nobody – and then he’ll go away and find somebody who’s really all those things he thought I was.

What am I doing here, anyway? I’ve got no business wandering around a mountain with a man who isn’t my

husband, particularly not with a man who makes me feel the way I'm feeling now. I love Spock, and he ... what? He loves me? Or just tolerates me and accepts my presence in his life and his bed as something which is inevitable and therefore should be utilized as efficaciously as possible?

"You're doing it again," Jim says.

"Doing what?"

"Slipping back inside that glass bubble. Don't do it, Lara. It looks very lonely in there."

The sound of the water over the rocks is a soft chuckle in the silence that lies between us. I know he is expecting a reply, and I choose the words as carefully as I would choose stepping-stones across a raging river. "Wolfe said that loneliness is the central and inevitable fact of human existence."

"Do you believe that?" There is a softness in his voice.

"Sometimes. Most of the time. Don't you?"

He doesn't answer. Instead, he looks at the interlacing pattern of leaves above him. The light filters through the leaves, playing changing patterns on the planes of his face. Finally he says, "I think this conversation is entirely too deep for a day like this in a place like this. It belongs to some quiet corner, late at night, over a brandy."

I think about the night in McCoy's office when he wished for his friend's presence as he poured drinks for us. Jim was there, in a way, in both our minds at least.

“Saurian brandy, I presume?”

He looks at me and flashes his quicksilver grin. “How did you guess?”

“Something McCoy said on the ship. Over a glass of it.”

“I didn’t know you two and Bones were drinking buddies.”

“We’re not, really. That was a very strange night. And it was very quiet. And very late.”

His expression is reflective, and he shakes his head. “You are a remarkable woman, Lara Merritt.”

His words are such a close echo of Spock’s on that same night that I feel the crawl of gooseflesh on my arms, remembering what came afterward. Jim looks at me, puzzled.

“Tell me something,” he says.

“What?”

“What were you really going to do today?”

“I told you. I was going shopping.”

“I won’t buy that. You’re not the shopping type.”

“How do you know what type I am?” His assumption annoys me.

“The shopping type wouldn’t spend every morning of a shore leave hiking through the park.” He goes on, cutting off the retort I am framing. “Don’t deny it. I’ve seen you.

That first day you looked like you wanted to get down and roll in the grass like a colt.”

His insight is uncanny, and I’m too embarrassed to admit he is right.

“So what were you planning?” he goes on, unwilling to leave it alone.

“Oh, nothing special. ... Well ... a picnic.”

“Alone?”

“Of course not! I thought maybe Spock and I--”

“Spock? On a picnic?” His face is a play of conflicting emotions. Finally he shakes his head. “I’d love to have seen that.”

“You don’t have to look at me that way. I don’t see anything so odd about it.”

“You amaze me. You really do. You’re going to make a Human of him yet.” He reaches for the backpack. “Well ... I try never to disappoint a lady. A picnic, she says. *Voilà!*” He pulls a piece of fruit from the pack and tosses it to me.

“What? No cold pheasant? No white wine?”

“Sorry, lady. We do the best we can with what we’ve got.”

“I’ll bet you didn’t even bring the salt.”

“Salt I’ve got.” He reaches into the backpack again and tosses the shaker at me. It slips out of my hand and rolls down the bank. We both reach for it at the same time, and

my chin cracks sharply into the back of his head.

“Ow!” I sit back on my heels, the back of my hand pressing against my lower lip. I can taste blood.

He turns quickly, grabbing my arms. “I’m sorry, Lara. Are you hurt? Let me see.”

I touch my lip gingerly and regard the tips of my fingers. “It’s all right, really.”

“No, it’s not all right.”

I look up at his face, very close, seeing the concern in his eyes become something else, something I have seen coming for days now, but refused to acknowledge. He bends his head toward mine, and I could move away, but I don’t want to. Instead I move to meet him, and he kisses me, tentatively at first, and then with a growing intensity as my arms circle his back.

What the hell am I doing to myself – to him? I break away, shaking, and we look at each other for a long time. Finally he says, “That didn’t happen.”

“No,” I agree. “It never happened. Never.”

“I think we’d better go.”

“Yes.”

We gather up our belongings without looking at each other, and as I follow him down the trail, I think that we have started a different kind of journey this day; one that we may never see an end to.

Enterprise is whole again, and to Mr. Scott's obvious relief, she seems none the worse for her narrow escape. Scott is something of an enigma to me, though there are doubtless many others like him in Starfleet. He loves this ship more passionately than any man ever loved a woman. I have seen him touch a control board with a caress as soft as a lover's, and Pavel says Scott often talks to her. And swears she responds.

He nearly drove the repair crew to mutiny, crawling through the exposed and injured entrails of his mistress, goading laggards, demanding perfection, rejecting whole days of work as being below his exacting standards. Now he is happy, and he prowls the corridors with his dark head cocked to one side, listening always to the siren song of his ship as she purrs in contentment.

Scott is alone in his satisfaction. The rest of the crew is somewhat less than happy with our current assignment, ferrying a cargo of dignitaries to a royal wedding on the planet Eos.

It seems that the young Matriarch of Eos, since her accession to the throne three years ago, has been somewhat less than a staunch supporter of the Federation. Even though Federation forces – in fact, Kirk's own *Enterprise* – assisted her in quelling some sort of minor rebellion during the first few days of her rule, her participation in Federation affairs has been given only grudgingly and at

the highest price she could command.

Now it seems that treaty negotiations with Eos regarding its considerable mineral wealth are at a particularly sensitive juncture, and the young Matriarch is stalling off the final negotiations, using her forthcoming nuptials as an excuse. Therefore, it seems the politically provident thing to send every Federation diplomat who owns a sash and a planetary commission to pay homage to the importance of the Matriarch's wedding.

The passengers are a touchy, temperamental lot, and to make matters worse – for me, at least – seem predisposed to an inordinate amount of space-sickness. I have handed out more sedatives and anti-emetics in the last two weeks than in the entire previous span of my career, and in not a few cases, placebos as well. Dr. McCoy ordered these, and his mood has been so foul since we left Starbase Nine that I have been totally unwilling to cross him.

Our moment of companionship after the epidemic seems long ago and far away. I find it difficult to believe that it ever happened, even though I have a service commendation and a promotion to show for it.

Now he glares moodily into his wine glass, and emits a sigh as the last of the beribboned ambassadors leaves the room. Only Jim, Spock, Dr. McCoy, and I remain amidst the litter of the formal dinner we have all endured. Two yeomen are clearing away the stained linen and empty glasses, glancing at us surreptitiously from time to time.

Their glances clearly say that they wish we would leave so they could go about their business. But neither Jim nor Spock seems inclined to end the evening, and I am too full of wine to contemplate any independent action.

McCoy pushes his heavy plate away from him and emits a grumble. "I swear I'm going to put the whole crew on a salad and clear broth diet when we dump these overstuffed delegates of Federation diplomacy. And if I so much as *see* another plate of lorvache in cream sauce, I'll resign my commission."

Jim grins at him, his hazel eyes sparking. "When this is over, Bones, I'll have a special medal designed for you. Crossed wine glasses on a field of chopped corfal."

"More likely a knife and fork propped over an open grave," McCoy snaps. "I could cure all those hypochondriacs with a balanced diet and a strong purgative."

"Testy tonight, isn't he?" Jim says to no one in particular.

"I can discern no change in the doctor's manner," Spock goads.

McCoy grumbles wordlessly at them. It is an old game, this two-on-one baiting, and one they all seem to enjoy, no matter whose turn it is to be the object of their needling. I do not play; I am not part of the trinity.

"They'll all be beaming down to Eos in the morning anyway, Bones. They'll have four days of wining and dining, and then you can put them all on bread and water

till we get them home.”

McCoy brightens visibly at the thought. “Do them all a world of good.” He looks across the table at Spock, and a gleam comes into his eye. “Going to the wedding, Spock?” The tone in his voice and Jim’s quick glance at my husband tell me that the balance has changed; it will now be Jim and McCoy who play off Spock.

“I do not believe anyone on the crew has been invited.”

“A mere oversight, I’m sure,” McCoy says, draining the last of his wine. “I should have thought that the lovely Matriarch would want you there. Perhaps you should give the bride away.”

“That particular Earth custom, Dr. McCoy, stemmed from the concept of females as chattel. It is hardly compatible with Eosian society.”

I am puzzled; there is definitely something going on here below the level of words. If Spock’s clipped tones had not told me, Jim’s careful study of my husband’s face would have done so. The game is no longer a game; McCoy is playing for blood.

“I suppose not,” McCoy replies. But the needle is in his hand and he is not willing to let it go without a few more thrusts. “Still, there must be some place in the ceremony for the rejected suitor.”

“As usual, Dr. McCoy, you have reached a highly erroneous conclusion. I find your feeble attempt at humor –

if that is what it is – most distasteful. If you will excuse us, Captain.” He starts to rise, extending his hand for mine in the Vulcan manner.

“You look a little confused, Lara,” McCoy insists. “Surely Spock has told you about Princess Kyra. He seemed quite taken with her the last time we were on Eos.”

“Bones, that’s enough,” Jim cuts in sharply, rising to his feet. “My apologies to you both,” he says, turning toward us. “I believe the good doctor has had too much wine.”

Spock’s fingers under mine are as icy as his voice. “Good night, Captain.” He does not speak to McCoy as we leave.

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SPOCK

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McCoy has gone too far this time. He will have to find another subject for whatever obscure emotional gratification he obtains from his provocations. I will no longer be the object of his cat’s-paw games.

What is happening to me? I am caught in the sticky, nebulous strands of other people’s emotions, cobwebs fouling my limbs and drawing across my face as the spider sits patiently in the center, waiting. Waiting to suck me dry. Who is the spider? Is it McCoy? Lara? Or is it my other self?

This marriage was a mistake. I should not have yielded to

T’Pau’s insistent entreaties. It seemed so simple at the time. Such a small price to pay for repatriation; a simple key laid in my hand by fortune. Simple and fitting. A woman was the cause of my loss; a woman would be the means to restore that which was taken away.

But not this woman. I should have refused. T’Pau wanted me back on the smooth path she had laid out for my life. She would have found another. A proper Vulcan woman, to wait in the time-honored way; to be chatelaine of my lands and mother of my children; to meet me in the mindlessness of *pon farr* and then withdraw, satiated; to function independent of me, content and complete in her own world.

And if she had not? Could I have continued to function, disinherited, disenfranchised, banished forever from my home? I think so. Alienation has been my shadow all my life. I was never at home there. My life is here, despite T’Pau’s plans for me. *I am Spock*. I am First Officer of the *Enterprise* – valued, respected, secure in what I am, what I do.

The seven-year cycle is not inviolable. I have known that for many years; when my bond with T’Pring was broken in the challenge arena, I did not die of the rutting madness. And when *pon farr* came again, I was drawn as much by T’Pau’s promise as by my bond with Lara. There have been other women. Not many, but enough. Females who by word or action made it clear that they were available without the potentially deadly arena of Vulcan’s *Koon-ut-Kali-if-fee*. One of them would have sufficed. One of them

could have quelled the fire of *pon farr* without the complications Lara brings.

She walks beside me now, back to our quarters, Vulcan training on the outside, calm, unquestioning. But inside is a very Human female alternating between curiosity and outrage. She seeks to protect me from what she views as emotional assault, not realizing that her 'protection' is in reality another attack on my integrity. Another set of emotions seeking to impress itself on my psyche.

She is a witch, this one. A sorceress. Did T'Pau know that? I doubt it. I did not know it myself until it was too late. And Amanda, my mother? Did she know it? For her Human hand was busy in this mating. I know it, yet I cannot know precisely where, or how.

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The invitation that comes in the morning is not precisely an invitation, despite its being couched in the flamboyant language of diplomacy. It is in reality a summons demanding the presence of Captain Kirk, Dr. McCoy, and myself at the reception this night at the palace of the Matriarch.

Jim reminds me, needlessly, of the importance of the delicately balanced treaty negotiations, promises a brief appearance limited to the demands of propriety, places his imposing stature on the front lines of the battlefield that stretches between McCoy and myself. It is not a new posture for him. He has more than once been the calm

voice of reason that kept my hands off McCoy's throat, and the doctor's from mine.

He places himself between us, not only emotionally, but physically as well as we enter the overheated, overcrowded reception hall. We are late; the reception line has been disbanded, and so we will have to stay long enough to make our presence known by seeking out those dignitaries whose business it is to nurse minor social gaffes into interplanetary malignancies.

As I scan the room, I am surprised by a Vulcan face. He stands in the midst of a group of Eosians, wearing the same violet and grey robes they affect. Before I have time to puzzle out his unexpected appearance, a very tall woman dressed in a severely cut, almost unornamented uniform, crosses the room toward me.

"Commander P'Lef," I greet her.

She acknowledges my greeting with a nod of her well-shaped head. "Mr. Spock. I see that your memory is as prodigious as your many other accomplishments."

"One can hardly forget a person of your importance to Eos, Commander. It would be in exceedingly poor taste."

She gives me a cold smile. From what I remember of the Commander, she would have as little use for the pleasantries of small talk as I have. Now she comes quickly to the point. "I am glad you are here. Her Matros wishes to see you. If you will come with me, please." She crosses the

crowded hall, ignoring the invitations to join this group or that, and I follow her down a hallway and into a small room.

When she leaves, the prowling feeling of déjà vu floods my senses. I have been in this room before, waited before for the girl who was then Princess Kyra of Eos. I cannot help but wonder what changes the past three years have wrought.

I do not have long to wait. She comes into the room like a slim shaft of moonlight, amethysts sparkling in her silver hair, her eyes reflecting the tints of the jewels. But the girl is gone, and in her place is a woman, an incredibly beautiful woman without a trace of the vulnerability she showed three years ago. There is a sureness in her walk as she crosses toward me with both hands out.

“Spock,” she says, and her voice is vibrant as the strings of a lyre. “I am so glad you came.” She takes my hands; accepts as her due the bow I make over them. “You didn’t have to wait for a formal invitation, you know. You are always welcome on Eos.” Her slanted eyes meet mine; I can feel the tentative touches of her mind as well. As before, she is too free with her telepathic power, too inquiring. I set a shield between us; busy thoughts of swarming bees.

There is a trace of petulance in her mind, in her voice. “You might at least say you’re glad to see me.” When I don’t answer, she drops my hands and walks away, then

turns on me, her diaphanous skirt marking the line of hip and thigh and foaming at her feet like breaking waves. “By the Comet, Spock, say *something!*”

“Why does a Vulcan wear the court robes of Eos?”

She smiles and nods, and her elongated canine teeth shine briefly. “Very good, Spock. Direct. Succinct. To the point. You haven’t changed.”

“And you have not answered my question, Your Matros.”

She is not accustomed to being spoken to in such a manner, and her face shows it briefly before she composes herself. Her long, slim fingers toy with the pendant stone of her necklace, trace the line of her collarbone. The look she gives me is pure sensuality, and I can feel the dark wings of her mind beating at the barrier I have erected between us. There is no entrance, and so she turns instead to my question.

“He is my Minister of Science. I have long wanted a Vulcan in my... court. The one I chose ... refused me.” She sits down on a chaise, toying with the folds of her skirt. “I understand why, now.”

“Do you?”

“I think so. I have made a rather careful study of Vulcan in the past three years. And a very particular study of one particular Vulcan. Shall I tell you what I have learned?”

“If you wish.”

“It will not be news to you, of course. But it might be interesting for you to learn that the facts are so easily accessible to anyone with the patience to search the records. Or the funds to pay someone else to search.”

She pours a glass of wine and offers me one. “No?” she says, as I wave the offer away. “Have it your own way, then. You usually do, I have discovered.” Her amethyst eyes are bright as she regards me over the brim of her glass, and I feel the assault of her conflicting emotions. Three years ago, she was a young and disturbing woman. Now she is older, and thoroughly dangerous.

“Almost eight years ago,” she begins, “you were charged on Vulcan with an offense called *kfa’at*. The term does not translate, I am told, but it seems to fall midway between blasphemy and treason. It arose from your actions during a ceremony which was supposed to be your wedding. You were tried in absentia and found guilty. The penalty was banishment from Vulcan. Your lands were seized by the state, and you were forbidden on penalty of death to ever return to your home.

“Then, two years ago, without explanation, the sentence was commuted. Your property was returned, and within weeks came the ceremony of promise between you and the daughter of the Earth ambassador, which was followed last year by your marriage to her.

“I am not a novice in the labyrinth of political maneuvering, Spock. Someone high in the Vulcan council

wanted that union between the Earth's Vulcan embassy and Vulcan's Federation embassy. Wanted it badly enough to see that your unfortunate ... lapse ... was forgiven, on the condition that you agree to the marriage. That was the price you had to pay for restoration of your lands and reinstatement in the good graces of your government. You bought your way back into Vulcan society with your marriage, Spock. All I want to know is – was it worth the price?"

"Yes." There is no hesitancy in my voice; my doubts are my own. She seems surprised.

"Do you love her, then?"

"Vulcan marriages are not predicated on that particular emotion. It is foreign to us."

"I know that, Spock." Her voice is softer now, entreating. "Now you are the one who doesn't answer *my* question. Do you love her?"

Indeed. *Do I love her?* I am not sure precisely what she means. It has been my experience that each person who expresses love perceives its attributes in a slightly different way. I know that I have grown to value Lara's company. I know I feel protective toward her; that I was so concerned for her safety during the Romulan attack that her presence on the bridge interfered with my efficiency. I know her body gives me pleasures and releases I had never dreamed existed. Is that what the Humans call love?

My mind-shield weakens; I can feel Kyra's mind probing my thoughts and filtering them back through her own parameters of reasoning, and I object to this invasion of my privacy. "I see no point in continuing this conversation," I tell her.

She smiles slowly, her amethyst eyes glittering. "I only have one other question, Spock. Does she know why you married her? Does she know what her dowry was?"

When I do not answer, she sits back on the chaise. There is a victorious relaxation in her movement. "You once thought to play chess with me, Vulcan," she announced. "Would you care for a game now?"

"I am under the distinct impression that we are already having one."

She laughs, and the sound is molten silver. "Better and better, Spock. We are indeed. And I offer you advance. From pawn to ... what? King? No, my husband-to-be holds that position. It is too restrictive for you, anyway. What about knight? You have the speed. You would have the freedom, the power. The protection of the queen. What say you, Vulcan?"

"And all it requires is the change from black to white. I presume you are white?"

"Of course. The advantage of the first move, you know. You needn't answer tonight. I go in the morning for a field trial of some young hawks. Come with us."

“I shall consider it.”

“I shall expect you, then.”

“I said I would consider it, Your Matros. Kindly keep in mind that even a pawn has the option of not moving.”

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I hardly hear the Captain's questions when I rejoin them. The questions in my own mind are too insistent. *Just how much does she know, and how did she learn it?* No doubt the records indeed gave her the gist of it, and she has drawn the correct inference from what is not written there. Or has she had access to more than she tells? The reasons behind the actions are locked in the souls of half a dozen people; even I do not understand them all.

When it became known on Vulcan that murder had not been done in the arena on that day so long ago, the logical assumption was that a premeditated hoax had been perpetrated. Had that been the fact, the charge of *kfa'at* would certainly have been justified. Nor could I return to clear myself without implicating Dr. McCoy, whose actions were motivated by the love he has for Jim. If I could present no defense, there was no reason for me to return for the Council's judgment. I could only accept it, and refuse to contemplate what would happen in seven years when the *pon farr* would come again.

Then, without explanation, had come a communication from T'Pau. Would I be interested in seeing the sentence

commuted? Would I, on those terms, be interested in committing myself to a politically-motivated marriage? I would, and I was. I knew that relations between Vulcan and the Federation had grown increasingly strained. What I did not know, nor do I yet, was how T'Pol managed to bully her proposal through the Council. My mother knows, I think; perhaps was even instrumental in some way I cannot perceive. Her communications to me, smuggled out during the period of my banishment, always held intimations of my eventual exoneration. Was she, in some way, Kyra's source? If not Amanda, then who?

It is something I mean to discover, and so I present myself at the appointed time and place.

The birds roost quiescently in their cages as the aircar speeds us silently to the hawking ground. They are streaked with the tans and greens and brilliant crimson of the desert land they hunt, and their powerful talons grip the stands. Their raptor's beaks jut forward from the brightly-colored hoods. They are mute, motionless, powerless until this woman's command shall free them.

She has taken the controls of the vehicle, over the objections of those charged with her safety, and she and I alone pull away from the others, curving and banking less than a meter above the rocky ground. Her face reflects the joy she feels in the intimate control of the powerful, responsive machine. We do not speak; her concentration is all on her craft. And she is good at it, bold and sure of herself in this as in so many other things. It is unfortunate

that one of the tasks of her husband will not be to master her. Still, it will be a wise thing to see her married. A wandering beauty is a blade out of its scabbard. An Earth poet said that, centuries ago. It is still an elemental truth.

She slides the aircar to a stop below a rocky scree. It hangs suspended, quivering like a wounded beast. “Did you enjoy the ride?” she asks.

“It was ... exhilarating. But is it wise to leave the others so far behind?”

“They’ll be along shortly. And there’s no danger here.”

“Are you so sure?”

She studies me, her head resting against the back of the seat. “You don’t approve of me, do you, Spock? You never have.”

“It is hardly my place to approve or disapprove of the Matriarch of Eos.”

“Even a cat may look at a queen. An Earth poet said that, too, I believe.”

So. She has been in my mind again, and this time I did not even feel her presence. I must be more vigilant in my screening. I shut her out, like dousing a flame of burning phosphorous. It is not easy. Without the skills I have gained from being linked with Lara, I doubt I would be able to do it.

Her eyes change colors even as I am watching; grow

darker as I shut her out of my mind. “You’re getting very good at that,” she says.

“The skill improves with the necessity of its use.”

“Do I threaten you, then?”

“If I wanted you to know that, I would not shut you out.”

She arches an eyebrow at me. “Touché, Mr. Spock. First blood to the Vulcan.” She twists around in the seat. “Here are Tisai and the others now. I told you they’d not be far behind.” She draws on her heavy falconer’s glove and leaves the car.

I watch as she approaches Tisai, the young Eosian who is so soon to be her consort. He is scowling, his handsome face dark with anger, and as he speaks to her, he jerks his chin in my direction. It takes no telepathy to know I should not leave my back unguarded against this one.

She laughs off his questions and calls two attendants to unload the hawks. Kyra takes the first and removes the hood with the nimble fingers of one hand. The bird looks about with quick, jerky movements of its head, orienting itself. It stamps on her gloved hand, fluffing its plumage and spreading its wings. She brings it to me where I stand by the aircar.

“This is Aquon,” she says. “This will be her first field flight.” The hawk fixes me with its ruby eye, then looks away, coiled tension in the line of its head and shoulders. “She is a kyrieta. The name comes from the sound of their

hunting cry – as does my own name. Perhaps that is why I have such an affinity for them.” She strokes the barred breast. The hawk submits, but there is no pleasure in it. “Come,” Kyra says, leading the way up the rocky spine of the hill behind us.

Tisai breaks free of the others and climbs with us, his hooded eyes as malevolent as those of the kyriet. Kyra watches the plains below as we climb, and in her distraction steps on a turning stone. Unbalanced by the weight of the hawk on her hand, she starts to tumble backward. Instinctively, I reach out for her; at the same time, Tisai reaches from the other side. His glare is murderous. I release my hold on Kyra and step back. I have no wish to challenge this young cockerel for his bride.

Kyra regains her balance, her glance flickering over both of us. In the distant north, a monolithic stone building rears against the horizon. Kyra gestures toward it. “P’mie,” she says. “Do you remember it?”

“Very well, Your Matros.” P’mie, once a rebel stronghold where we were briefly held prisoner three years ago. And a certain room within it, a room where I once reached into the most intimate depths of her mind in a desperate attempt to save both our lives.

“I was going to have it razed,” she says. “But I decided to leave it standing. As a reminder. And who knows? It might make someone a fine property some day.” Her message is clear. Does she really think she can buy any Vulcan with a

pile of stones?

The kyriet moves restively on her gloved fist. She beats her wings and rises the few inches the leather jesses around her legs will permit. “Soon, my beauty,” Kyra croons, stroking the feathered breast. “Soon.” Her gaze returns to me. “She is impatient. It is typical of the breed.” Kyra draws back her arm; flings it forward as she releases the jesses.

The hawk lifts off, her wingtips brushing my face. She mounts a thermal and goes into a lazy, circling climb, searching the brush below for some revealing flicker of movement. We sit on the warm rocks, watching her, and the sun climbs higher as she circles and quarters without finding quarry.

My mind circles and quarters with her, the questions burning to be answered. *Patience*, I counsel myself. *This is not yet the time.*

The bird hunts without success for nearly an hour before she lands, dejected and moody, on a shrub. The handlers bait her back with bits of flesh on leather thongs, and when they bring her to Kyra, she takes the hawk impatiently on her gloved fist.

“Bring out the nyhie,” she orders. “I’ll not have her go back without a kill.”

The handlers return to the aircar and remove a small cage. One of them brings out a small bird with brilliant sapphire plumage and throws it into the sky. The wind carries the

drum of its wingbeats to us, and the kyriet comes alive, straining at the jesses again.

Kyra launches the hawk like an ancient javelin. There is no lazy circling now, no searching for the rising thermal – only the beating wings as the bird climbs as swiftly and as surely as a launched spear. The brilliant plumage of the released nyhie flashes in the sun as the smaller bird makes for the towers of P'mie. The hunting hawk becomes only a speck against the sky, and Kyra presses a televiewer into my hands.

“Watch her,” she says, raising her own viewer.

It takes me a moment to focus the instrument, and a moment more to find the kyriet in its field. She seems to halt in midair at the top of her arcing flight. Then she folds her wings and plummets like a stone.

“Come in, my beauty,” Kyra murmurs, and the tone in her voice chills me. “Carefully now. Carefully.”

The hawk drops so rapidly I can hardly keep her in the viewer. Suddenly both birds are in the frame and the nyhie becomes aware somehow of the death falling from the sky. It fans its wings, slowing like a swimmer. It dives abruptly, then banks upward as if to meet its fate head-on.

I hear Kyra's voice, breaking now with the strain. “No! Break off, Aqun! Break off!” But the kyriet does not pull out of her deadly dive. Her cry splits the air, talons reaching. A split second before she plunges into the nyhie,

the smaller bird pulls itself over backwards with a reach of its sapphire wings. The hawk smashes directly into the nyhie's reaching claws. There is an explosion of feathers and the kyriet screams again as the locked forms plummet to the ground.

Kyra is meters ahead of me as she leaps and slides down the face of the scree. We reach the two forms at the same time the handlers do. They are locked in an embrace fiercer than love's, sapphire and crimson and tan mingled on the sand. The nyhie is limp and lifeless but the kyriet still lives, her wings beating feebly as one of the handlers reaches for her.

"She lives, Your Matros," he says. "I think, perhaps--"

"No." Her voice is harsh. "Finish her."

"But – "

"I said finish her! She'll never make another stoop without remembering this one. She's useless to me now."

The handler bows. "Yes, Your Matros." His ungloved hands move like a striking snake, and he snaps off the hawk's head as deftly as a man might break a weedstalk. I do not wish to watch the debasement of the hawk's death throes. I turn away and start for the aircar.

"Have you a weak stomach, Vulcan?" It is Tisai, who grins as he walks beside me. "I have heard that your kind have forgotten the way of the hunter."

"We have outgrown the need to obtain pleasure through the

destruction of other life forms, if that is what you mean.”

He is not rebuffed. “Later, I will fly the n’kaap. Then you will see something you won’t soon forget.”

There is already much to this day I will not forget. Kyra’s voice urging the kyriet on for the kill, and her face as she ordered its destruction ... these are new facets of her personality. This is not the girl who, when faced with the choice of taking a life or losing her own, froze into immobility. Being Matriarch has taught her much, I see, and not all of what she has learned is pleasant to dwell upon.

She joins us now, stripping off the heavy falconer’s glove, and she speaks to her betrothed as she would to a servant. “Leave us, Tisai. I have business to discuss with the Vulcan.” Again, the angry flush colors his face, and I can feel his glare on my back as we walk around the base of the scree, away from the eyes and ears of the others.

“It is unfortunate you lost your hawk,” I offer.

She makes a sound of disgust. “She was rash in her judgment. She forgot even the nyhie have claws.”

“You might learn from her, Matriarch. It is not unusual for the hunted to turn on the hunter.”

“Are you speaking of yourself, Spock?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps Tisai will become your nyhie. There is hate in that one.”

“He is utem. A braggardly fool. But he brings a fine dowry. And his family has many mining interests.” She gives me a sidelong glance. “He is also young and strong. He will give me fine daughters.”

When I make no reply, she goes on. “Not so fine as the ones you might have given me, had things been different.” She stops, shuts her eyes, the better to see them. “By the Comet, Spock, what rulers they would have made. Nothing in the galaxy could have stood against them!” She turns to me and takes my hands, and her eyes, open now, are bright with the thought of it. “It still could be!”

“Kyra, I have a wife.”

“And I shall soon have a husband. What difference does that make? Any daughters of my body are of the royal house. I offer you power, Spock, such power as you have never dreamed of! The galaxy could be ours to rule. Think of it!”

“You have big dreams for the ruler of a small planet. The Federation--”

“The Federation is dying, Spock, as T’Pau of Vulcan is dying.”

I pull her against me, circling her wrists with my hands, feeling the bones as my grip tightens. “Who told you that? Who pours such lies into your ears?”

She looks up at me, ignoring the pain I know I am inflicting on her. “They are not lies, Spock. T’Pau is dying.

There is discontent on Vulcan – you know that. The Council grows weary of seeing the planet’s finest young people swallowed up in the belly of the Federation. How long do you think Vulcan will stay in, once T’Pau dies?” She breaks away from me, rubbing the darkening bruises on her wrists.

I can feel the full power of her mind beating at me, demanding entrance, and I know I cannot keep her out much longer. My only defense is attack. “And where does Eos fit into this? I see no place here for your dreams of empire.”

“Vulcan will pull others away, and Eos among them.”

“The Romulan Empire would gobble you up in the blink of an eye. You cannot stand alone.”

“Nor do we intend to. We ally with Vulcan, with the Rigellian system, with all those who refuse to be maggots in the corpse of the Federation. We will have the Vulcan technology behind us, with Eosian and Lyran and Rigellian spacepower forming the striking arm. You must come with us, Spock, or be crushed.”

“You are mad, Kyra. It is you who will be crushed.” I turn away from her and start back toward the others.

“You’re a fool, Spock! A fool and a coward!” She flings her scorn after me. “I’ll see you broken. I’ll see you hung on a cross of your own making, and I’ll spit on you as I pass by. Do you hear me, Vulcan? *Do you hear me?*”

I fight against the anger that boils within me as I stride back to the makeshift camp, the anger that curls my hands into fists against my will, the anger that could have snapped her bones as easily as the hawk-handler snapped off the head of the kyriet. Being near this woman has always had this effect on me; has always assaulted the tight line of control a Vulcan must maintain against the black and boiling racial memories of a violent past. That is the danger in this woman, that is the deadly siren call she voices without words.

I must be alone. I must regain control. Control is all. The intellect is all. There is no anger. Anger is wasteful. *I ... will ... have ... control.*

I can feel it coming back. The body responds to the mind. My hands relax, but the images Kyra has planted begin to blossom. Is it true? Is T’Pau dying? And does she acknowledge her mortality? If she does, then she must soon summon me home. I had not thought it would come so soon. She has seemed as ageless as the very stones of Vulcan, as eternal as the twin planet that hangs always in our skies. She promised me a Human lifespan in Starfleet before I must return. The period of training she wants for me must be long. I was to have years of apprenticeship before I took my place in the Senate; years more before she hoped to place me in her own Council seat. If she dies soon, there will not be time, and I will be free of our bargain. Free!

What am I thinking of? Do I wish her dead? My own *tcha-*

klei? She was teacher, mentor, godparent, and more, all in the Vulcan tradition. I owe her loyalty above the family, above the gods, above life itself if it comes to that. So is the tradition. If not for her influence, I would never have been permitted to leave Vulcan for the vast reaches of Federation space. I would have been forever planetbound, forever locked within the bonds of my father's house. I made a bargain with her – I traded her the last half of my life for the freedom to do as I desired in the morning of my years. Would I break that bargain if she were not alive to see its honoring?

Tisai's voice breaks into my thoughts. I have walked unheeding into the midst of the Eosians. This is blindness that would have been fatal in other circumstances, that once nearly was so. The constant vigilance against Kyra's telepathy is making me careless. *Even the nyhie have claws...*

“Come, Vulcan, and I will show you what few outworlders see.” He gestures toward a freestanding crossbar and toward the mighty eagle that rests hooded there.

I recognize it as the n'kaap he spoke of – the near legendary predator of Eos, the n'kaap which spreads its wings on the banners of the royal house, immense and deadly in its power. Its hooded head is as large as a man's two fists clenched together, its curving beak shining like the deadly weapon it is. In ancient times, so the legend goes, n'kaap were trained to attack foot-soldiers in battle.

I can hear Kyra's voice from behind me, still shaking with rage. "Tisai! Cage him at once!"

"You promised!" Tisai argues. "You gave him to me. You said I could fly him."

"I said you could fly him when you are ready."

"I am ready now!" He extends his right arm, padded in a heavy gauntlet that reaches to his shoulder. "I have met all the tests. Fahí says I am ready." He gestures toward the handler, who is putting the smaller hawks away.

"He has done well, Your Matros," Fahí says. "The n'kaap has not been flown for weeks. He needs the hunt."

"And you promised!" Tisai puts in. "Is this how the Matriarch of Eos keeps her word? My mother will hear of this, Matros, and weigh it well against your other promises to my house."

Kyra is trapped by her own maneuvering. "Fly him, then," she snaps. "And I hope he takes your eye out." She stalks away to the aircar, getting in and slamming the door.

Tisai approaches the stand and slides his forearm under the wicked talons. The bird is so heavy that he must support his bearing arm with a grip from the other, and the corded muscles of his neck stand out with the strain. "Unhood him, Fahí."

The handler approaches the eagle with respect, murmuring to him as he loosens the lacings on the hood. The n'kaap stretches, looking about, declaring his sovereignty. He

opens his beak, and his hunting cry rings on the air, causing the smaller hawks to beat against their cages in apprehension.

“Look well on him, Vulcan,” Tisai says, coming toward me. “Look well on the might of Eos.”

The tensing of his stance warns me, and I step back, throwing up my arm as he launches the n’kaap at my face. I see the blur of the needle-pointed talons and sense the destruction in the raptor’s beak.

The talons lock on my arm and the weight of him pulls it down, exposing my eyes to his attack. I jerk my head away, feeling the gouge of flesh ripped from bone as the thrust of his lunge and my own movement send me over backwards. I hear Fahí’s shout and Kyra’s scream, both from far away as my free hand seeks the eagle’s throat. The bones of his wing-edges beat at my face like clubs as I roll, planting my knee on the great body. My hand tightens on the feathered throat and I rip my other arm free from the grip of the talons, feeling the blood spurt from torn muscle and tendon. There is no response in the fingers, so I use the arm as a brace to hold back the beating wings. I feel the bones crush beneath my hand, and the black blood of the n’kaap gushes from his beak. Even in death, he fights me, his talons reaching up to shred the fabric of my shirt and mark green rivers of blood along my ribs. But there is no longer the killer force in those talons, and the convulsions under me are the mindless upheaval of death.

I hear Tisai's shriek of rage, and his boot-tip catches the side of my chest, rolling me off the eagle's body and into the shifting sand. He leaps for me, and both my feet catch him full in the chest, throwing him back. Fahí pulls him to his feet, pinning his elbows back.

"Enough!" he barks. His expression turns to one of fright as the furious Kyra approaches him. "I am sorry, Your Matros. Had I known what he planned--"

His words are cut short as Kyra's open hand cracks against the side of Tisai's face. "Utemi!" she spits. "I'll have your heads for this. Both of you!" She turns to me as I push myself to my feet. "Spock. I did not mean--"

"No," I say, reaching for the transmitter at my belt. "You meant to put your mark on me in a different way." I call the ship and request to be transported aboard, and as the beam takes me, I feel my knees giving way.

Part 3

>>>>> <<<<<<

LARA

My husband sleeps, and the lines of his face are softened as the contours of a mountainside are softened by a blanket of snow. I move quietly as I dress, for I do not wish to wake him. In the six weeks since we have left Eos, he has been like a man possessed, driven by something he will not reveal, eating little and sleeping less, until I fear for his health.

The sedative I put in his tea this night will not harm him and it may give him some ease. I know no other comfort to give him now; he has brushed away my attempts at intimacy like a man would brush a bothersome insect away from his face, and without that strange link that comes into play when we make love, I cannot breach the wall with which he has again surrounded himself.

Now I am the one who cannot sleep, and I stand watching him with an ache inside me, an ache which seems to have gone on forever. But I know when it started. I can pinpoint it exactly. It started on the night he first beamed down to Eos; the night I tapped into the library section of the ship's computer and called for a readout on Kyra, Matriarch of Eos. It began the moment I saw her beautiful face and sensed rather than saw the latent cruelty in those slanted amethyst eyes.

What *was* she to him? What is she now? Impossible to ask of him, or of anyone, lest they see this festering cancer that eats away at my vitals. Were they lovers three years ago?

Did they become lovers again in their brief encounter this time? If not, why does he bear her mark so defiantly?

I look at the scar marring the line of his cheekbone – the scar he will carry to his grave – and I remember the vehemence he turned on Dr. McCoy that day in sickbay. He had transported up from Eos torn and bleeding, passing out briefly in the transporter room as Scotty called frantically for a medic. McCoy and I had reached him at the same time, but he waved me back, trusting himself instead to the ministrations of the man I thought he hated. Why?

He had watched with remote interest as McCoy went about the delicate work of repairing the tattered flesh of his arm, had made no objection to the plastiderm there or on the gouges across his ribcage. But he had stayed McCoy's hand when he started to apply the healing scar-retardant to the deep wound on his face.

“Leave it,” he said.

“It won't be very pretty, Spock. There'll be a mark, even with the plastiderm. Without it--”

Spock's uninjured hand closed on McCoy's wrist with such force I thought surely he'd break the bones, and the spray-vial dropped from the doctor's nerveless fingers.

“I said, leave it.”

Blue eyes met brown ones, and something passed between them in that moment, something that spoke of a past and a

present that was forever closed to my understanding.

“You’re sure?”

“I am sure.” And he released McCoy’s arm.

And so he carries her mark on his body. What does he see when he looks at it? What does he remember?

I leave the room to walk the echoing corridors of the sleeping ship. What am I searching for? Are the answers to my questions held somewhere in this vast ship? I doubt it. They are buried somewhere deep in the soul of my husband, and I know of no way to reach them, except the one way he has closed off to me.

I wander to sickbay and talk for a moment with Nurse Hyland, who is on duty. Nothing important is going on there, and she is clearly puzzled by my coming in at this hour. After some conversation which goes nowhere, I leave her.

The doors of the main rec room hiss open as I approach them, and I hesitate for a moment. The room is full with crewmen and women coming off the late watch. A young couple comes out, their arms locked about each other’s waists as they move down the corridor like some two-headed, four-legged beast, and they are laughing as they go. The sound of their laughter, intimate and throaty, is like a knife in my chest. I am no longer a part of their world. Pavel opened that door for me once, but it slammed shut when he left. Or perhaps I pushed it shut myself.

I miss his company more than I care to admit. He has gone on to another phase of his training, under another captain, and I remember what he told me when we said goodbye. He was funny, in a sad kind of way, that terribly intense young man, asking my promise to call on him if I ever had the need. There was something below the level of his words, something more than the wish to express the feelings I knew he had for me and which I kept turning away with a laugh or a flippant remark. He had worked closely with Spock, and I wonder now if he had sensed something of the alienation between Spock and me.

I pass on by the rec room and consider going down to the gym to work at the barre, to push my body into a state of numbness that will also numb my mind. But the thought of returning to my room for the playback unit and my tights seems too complicated to consider. It is easier just to walk, to concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other, and nothing more.

Enterprise is like a small city, and as a city dweller who goes only from home to work may find hidden alleyways on a midnight ramble, so I find the hidden alleyways of the ship. I discover an observation deck above engineering, a place I had not known existed. The beating heart of the starship is open below me, her pulse throbbing in the deck beneath my feet. Behind me is a heavy plasteel viewport; I could see the stars if I turned toward it. I do not wish to see them.

Instead, I curl my fingers through the protective grille

above the engineering deck and lean my forehead against it. It is cool and smooth against my skin, and it is permanent. It is not something that will dissolve just as I begin to have confidence in it.

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KIRK

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I keep telling myself that it will be all right, that it doesn't matter, that Spock's sudden and total withdrawal of the past weeks is really no different than the ones he has made in the past. I've never known him to be at ease with his Human side, the way he was before the mission to Eos, without rebounding into that physical and emotional isolation Bones calls "double Vulcan". I decided a long time ago that it's not some kind of hair-shirt penance he sets for himself, it's just the way he recharges his batteries.

But the argument sounds empty this time. Something *is* different. It's gone on for too long, and the quality of his isolation is somehow less a personal withdrawal than it is an outer distraction, invisible to the rest of us, but utterly compelling to him. And though it may be invisible to me, it is having its effect, both on Spock and on our relationship.

I'm not paranoid enough to think he's angry at me in particular; even at his most Human, he's never been subject to that kind of pettiness. Still, it's hard not to take it personally.

It isn't just my imagination that he disappears from the bridge as soon as his watch is over, that he hasn't been in the mess hall or the gym at the usual times, that he responds to my inquiries about ship's business correctly but briefly as if spending unnecessary words was painful. And it isn't my imagination that even when he's physically present, some part of the man I thought I knew is gone, leaving an almost hostile stranger in his place.

We've been friends for so long, on so many levels, that I find this extended withdrawal unnerving. It's hard not to take it personally; not to search through recent words and actions to find one that might have crossed the border of what he finds acceptable.

It seems to have begun the night before we beamed down to Eos, when Bones clearly stepped across that boundary. I know Spock had no relish for that meeting; that it was only my insistence that took him to the Matriarch's palace that first time. Yet he went back on his own initiative the second time, asking for a 24-hour shore leave with a manner that clearly warned me away from questioning his reasons. Beamed down and came back looking like he'd tangled with a sackful of bobcats, according to McCoy.

When I asked him about it, he shut me out with a cold stare that came as close to insubordination as I've ever seen him come. "Since the incident did not occur in the line of duty, Captain, it is not subject to an official report." That was the first open rebuff. The next one came a week later, as we prepared to bid a grateful farewell to the diplomats, and a

less than grateful one to Pavel Chekov.

His promotion and orders had come through on the way back from Eos, transferring him to the *Potemkin* for another phase of training. I'd seen him grow from a grass-green Academy graduate to a responsible young officer, and I wasn't alone in hating to see him go.

Sulu organized a send-off party that will probably serve as an unparalleled standard for the next hundred years. It had everything but a naked lady popping out of a cake, and somehow even that wouldn't have surprised me.

I started to point out this oversight to McCoy, but couldn't find him. Uhura told me that he and Scotty had discovered Spock hadn't made even a courtesy appearance, and were on their way to remedy this oversight, by force if necessary. It sounded to me like a scheme which could rapidly get out of hand, particularly considering the level of inebriation at the party. I made myself manifestly unpopular by ordering the bar closed before I left to track down one doctor and one engineer.

They were standing in the corridor in front of Spock's firmly closed door when I found them, debating the relative merits of a cutting torch versus a magnetic lock-pick. I had each of them by one elbow when the door slid back to reveal a Vulcan who was obviously at the end of his patience and ready to take stern action. He faltered for an instant when he saw me, and then stepped back from the doorway.

“Captain,” he said evenly, “I would appreciate it if you would inform these ... gentlemen ... that I desire neither their liquor nor their company.” He keyed the door shut without waiting for my reply, and the chill in his words seemed to crystallize in the air of the corridor.

I steered the two wobbly party-goers to their own beds, but long after they were dead to the world, I sat in my own quarters with my hand on the intercom switch, fighting the urge to call him. Fighting the urge to demand entrance to whatever arena it was where he was doing battle against an enemy I couldn't identify. Searching for the words to remind him he didn't have to fight it alone.

He's still fighting it, whatever it is, and the casualty toll is mounting. I'm not the only one having trouble coping with this stranger who wears Spock's face. I see Lara, pale and tense as she was when she first came on board, and Bones, sunk into that grumbling surliness that tells me he's deeply concerned. But McCoy won't talk about it, even if he knows what's going on, and I can't just casually stroll up to Lara and ask if she and her husband are having a spat. In the first place, it's none of my business; in the second place, I can't afford to get any more emotionally involved with Lara Merritt than I already am.

I had to be crazy to let it get started in the first place. The first time I caught a glimpse of her usually hidden sensuality, flowing like a deadly undertow in a falsely serene river, I should have run like a bandit. And probably would have, if she didn't also have the capacity to strike

sparks with her fierce pride, to hold a man at arm's length while that aching vulnerability surfaces fleetingly and then vanishes just as quickly. Seeing that leaves behind a disquieting feeling of something missed, something eminently precious but endangered, and it raises the kinds of feelings I thought I'd put away a long time ago. I'm not anybody's shining knight, and there are no dragons left to slay.

So why can't I let go of the feeling that I ought to be out there doing battle?

That frustration, that feeling of having missed some action I should have taken, settles down to a persistent gnawing that chews away at my consciousness and rampages through my dreams. Even now, with the quiet of ship's night all around, that nebulous dragon stamps around in my mind, rousting all the tried and true methods for gaining sleep. It's a restless, demanding presence, stilled only when I give up and dress.

All's quiet, all's orderly, on the bridge, as I knew it would be. I start for the mess, but decide the last thing in the world I need now is a cup of coffee. I decide to make one swing through engineering, just to assure myself that nothing is brewing there. There's no point in imposing my particular wim-wams on the engineering crew, though, and I set the turbolift to deposit me on the engineering observation deck.

The doors open soundlessly, and I realize I am not the only

person abroad this night; not the only one who seeks escape from private dragons.

>>>>> <<<<<<

LARA

>>>>> <<<<<<

“Lara?”

It is Jim. I have not been alone with him since that day we climbed a mountain – the day that never happened. Nor do I wish to be alone with him now. He complicates my life, makes the unbearable incomprehensible as well, and I don’t think I have the strength to deal with that right now.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. I’m fine.” The simple lie which is so much more palatable than the complicated truth.

“Are you sure?” He puts his hand next to mine on the grille, but makes no move to touch it. “What are you doing up here at this time of night?”

I move away from him to sit on the bench below the viewport. His nearness is threatening, yet I know the threat comes from me, not from him. He is watching me, curious, concerned, waiting for an explanation. “I couldn’t sleep,” I offer, looking at my hands. *Go away, Jim. Leave me alone. Please.*

“Maybe you should see a doctor.”

I look up at him sharply; he is grinning, but there is concern behind it. The weight of it is too heavy, like a smothering blanket. There is a lump in my throat as huge and sharp as a dilithium crystal, and I know I am about to commit the ultimate feminine folly – tears. I haven't cried in ... God, how long? I don't trust my voice; I just get up wordlessly and start to walk away.

He comes after me and takes my arm, not saying anything as he guides me to the nearest turbolift and orders it to his quarters. We pass a yeoman in the corridor outside his room, and she starts to speak to us, but the words die in her throat. I look at Jim's face – it is like an executioner's as we pass through the door.

“Sit down,” he orders brusquely, and stands with the desk between us, watching. Waiting for me to make the first move.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he says at last.

I shake my head.

“Is somebody giving you a hard time? If they are, tell me, and I'll see that it's stopped.”

“No. Nobody.”

“Then what is it?” He leans across the desk, bracing himself on his palms. “Lara, let me help.”

“I can't... This is something I have to work out for myself.” I can feel him watching me, but I don't raise my eyes to his face. He straightens up slowly, turns away to

key open a cabinet.

“I think,” he says, “it’s time for that conversation. The one I promised you on Aqinah.”

On Aqinah – on that day we have agreed didn’t happen. But he has made it happen again, so real I can feel once more the shade on my arms and his mouth on mine.

I recognize the long-necked bottle and the typical Saurian glasses, delicate as spider webs. He pushes one across the desk to me and settles himself in the other chair. “It helps to talk,” he says.

The crystal in my throat seems to be getting smaller. Perhaps the brandy will smooth the edges.

“I’ve been watching you, Lara. Every day that glass bubble has been getting smaller and smaller. If you don’t break out of it soon, it’s going to crush you.”

“I don’t think I can, now. Not ... not alone.”

The silence in the room is heavy with what he is weighing in his mind. Finally he says it. “It’s Spock, isn’t it?”

I nod. The crystal is back, sharper than ever. “I can’t ... I can’t reach him, Jim. I thought ... for a while ... but I never have. It’s like ... like he’s not even there. Or maybe it’s me. Maybe I’m the one who isn’t there.”

He looks at me, and his eyes are level as I meet his gaze. “You’re there,” he says. “Don’t ever think you’re not.”

The crystal in my throat bursts into a thousand pieces, and

I have to move or it will cut through my flesh. I push away from the desk and start for the door as the tears – those damned, weakling tears – spill over. He comes around the desk like a tiger and catches my arm. “Don’t,” he says, and touches my face with his hand. His touch is soft and warm and very, very Human.

I look away, but his hand guides my face back toward his. He says my name, and there is a tone in the sound of it that I have not heard before, a tone that sets up an answering vibration somewhere deep inside. He kisses me, and there is an urgency in it that I meet with my whole self.

Then there is nothing in the universe except the two of us at the eye of a whirling void, and the only reality is that of his arms as he picks me up and carries me across the room to ... what? To heaven, or to hell, but I don’t care any more, because whatever it is, it is of my own making and I am not alone any more.

>>>>> <<<<<<

And so it is done, as simply as that. If there is shame in our act, I do not feel it. Does he? I cannot tell. He goes on with his work, and I with mine, and when we meet there is nothing in his voice or his actions to tell what has passed between us. It is only in his eyes, in the look that lasts a second longer than necessary, and in the answering warmth within me that says I am no longer alone, no longer incomplete.

We are seldom alone together, but it does not matter. If the

times we share are few, they are doubly precious for their rareness; if they are not planned, it is because we want them so. If we allow simple circumstance to dictate our meetings, it is easier to pretend we are not guilty of a betrayal.

I cannot pinpoint the moment when I realize I am in love with him. The instant of love's beginning is like the instant of conception. The awareness comes slowly, many tiny clues building until there is a surety long before the stirring of life within the womb becomes evident.

For a while, I was able to delude myself that the relationship was based on nothing more than sexual satiation, but that swiftly passed. I have made love without being in love, and walked away without a backward glance, but now I cannot imagine a time when he was not an essential part of me; cannot conceive of a time when he will not be there for me, or I for him.

It began, I think, on Banus V, the moment I saw him bearing the body of the infant with the kind of tenderness that was there despite the fact that tenderness or the lack of it would never again make a difference. If I had any doubts, they were banished when he covered the child's body with his own garment.

I confess this to him once as we are lying together, and he smiles and colors in embarrassment.

"I'm afraid I'm much slower on the uptake than you are."

The response ignites my tendency toward teasing. “You mean you didn’t moon around for months with your hopeless love? I’m disappointed.”

He pushes a lock of hair off my ear and traces its outline with his fingertips. “I didn’t say that. I think I knew that first day I followed you into your quarters. Maybe it started a long time before that ... but that was the day I knew.”

“And you didn’t do anything about it?”

“I couldn’t, then. I didn’t know ... how you felt. I guess I thought if I ignored it, it would go away.” His eyes, his thoughts, are far away, and I find myself wishing I could see into his mind at moments like this. As I once did with the mind of another.

It is a curious thing, but my feeling for Jim does not alter my feeling for Spock. I still love him, still look for any sign that he wishes to return my love, but the sign does not come. The emotion is like an open wound, and if it will not heal, then it must be protected. So the wall between us grows taller and broader now that there are two who build it. It attains a symmetry that makes it seem natural and eternal; it has been there time out of mind and becomes just another part of our psychic landscape, comforting in its familiarity.

He seems to be spending a great deal of time working with his staff in the science department, and there is often someone with him at his console on the bridge. He observes and tutors and points out errors, but he seems to

be turning more and more of his duties over to his staff. I mention it to him one evening, in a passing remark, and he gives me a strange look; one of such quiet intensity that it makes my skin thicken with its coldness.

“It is necessary,” is all he says, and the subject is closed.

There is another thing, too, and it disturbs me though I don't know why. He has never in the past shown much interest in the correspondence I receive from my father; now he often asks me about it. There has been a change in the tone of the tapes; my father seems distracted and I hear from him less often than I once did. He never discusses embassy business, never has, but there is a tension in his face and voice as he relays news of my mother's family on Earth or activities of my friends from the research project.

As for Spock, he has received and sent more personal tapes in the past few months than he had in all our previous time together. He never discusses them with me; I know only that they are from Vulcan, and know that only because of something Lieutenant Uhura said to me one night in the officer's mess. And I know that when he gets one, he seems distracted and more distant than ever for days afterwards.

He is still not eating properly, and his always lean frame has grown nearly cadaverous. The planes and hollows of his face are like something sculptured from Argelian jade, and the bones in his wrists are plainly visible. I long sometimes to touch them, to reassure myself that living

flesh still covers them, but the wall is between us, solid and real.

McCoy mentions it to me one evening as he catches me in the main examination room. It is late; I am tired, and answer his query with a sharpness I had not really intended.

“He’s a grown man, Doctor,” I reply, “and well able to take care of himself.”

“My job,” McCoy says stiffly, “is to keep this crew as healthy as is humanly possible. You can tell him for me that if he doesn’t start eating, I’ll have him down here for a two-week session with an IV setup.”

“Is that an order? Or a threat?”

“Both,” he snaps. “And while we’re on the subject, I might as well tell you that you’re next on my list.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Hyland and the rest of the night crew say you’re down here at all hours for no reason at all. Your patient load is down 20 percent, and frankly, you look like hell.”

“Thank you, Doctor. You do wonders for my ego.”

“I’m not kidding, Merritt. Get up on the table.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“No, this is an examination. You’re three weeks overdue for your quarterly physical, and every time I go by Medical

Records, the computer shoots your file at me.”

He is right; I know he is. I’ve been putting off the physical just as I’ve been putting off some of my patients because it presented the path of least resistance. Now it is less difficult to yield.

It is comforting to hear the steady amplified thrum of my heartbeat on the body-function monitor. The surface of the table is cool and firm beneath me; I think I could go to sleep if McCoy would go away. The mosquito whine of the feinberg pierces through my musings; he seems to be taking a very long time. When I look at him, he is recalibrating the instrument to make a second sweep. I twist around and try to see the monitor.

“Lie still,” he snaps.

“Did you know your bedside manner is lousy?” I ask him as he makes a second scan.

“Did *you* know your red cell count is down so far it didn’t even register on standard calibration?” he counters.

“What?” I sit up. “Let me see that feinberg.”

“Are you questioning my diagnosis, young woman?”

“No.” I lie down again. Some things are not worth the effort.

“Had any dizzy spells?” he asks.

“No.”

“You should.”

“I’ll work on it,” I tell him.

He sits down at the medicomp and punches up my record, then busies himself at the recorder. “I’m changing your diet card,” he says. “And I want everything on your tray eaten, not dumped down the disposal chute. I’ll start you out tonight with a trigamma/B-12 compound, and I want you back in here day after tomorrow for another look. Now, what about this not sleeping?”

I shrug. “Just restless. Maybe I’m getting space-happy.”

“All right. I’m going to prescribe a mild sedative.” He takes another look at my record. I can see him backing it up to my initial physical. He frowns, hesitates, and then asks, “There’s not any chance that you’re pregnant, is there?”

“No.”

He looks back at the readout. “Are you sure? According to this, you’ve never been issued any contraceptives.”

“If you’ll look back a little further, Doctor, you’ll see that I took part in the Slattery experiments five years ago.” I am trying to keep my voice level, but I know the monitor is probably telling him as much as my words. “In fact, I was probably the prime reason the Slattery project was shut down. You see, I was the first of the subjects to exhibit the rather unfortunate side effect of his wonder drug.”

He shuts off the medicomp. “I’m sorry, Lara. I didn’t

know, and I should have taken a better look at your records.” It is the first time since the epidemic that he has spoken to me with anything less than thinly veiled annoyance.

“It’s all right, really. I mean, it’s not the sort of thing you casually mention over coffee – ‘By the way, I’m sterile.’ Sort of disrupts the conversation.”

He seems about to reply when someone comes into the room.

“Don’t you people ever go home?” It is Jim, and the sight of him both surprises and disturbs me. He looks around, curious. “Don’t tell me – you ran out of patients and you’re practicing on each other just to keep from getting rusty.”

“You’re getting warm, Jim. Dr. Merritt here has been living with Spock so long she thinks she can get along without red blood cells, too.” He turns away to ready a spray hypo with the trigamma injection, and Jim gives me a questioning look. I shake my head, but I can tell his question has not been answered.

“Nothing serious, I hope,” he says as McCoy administers the shot.

“Could be, unless we get a handle on it,” McCoy replies as he hands me a synthesizer card and a small bottle of sedatives. “I’m putting you on sick call,” he says. “Go back to your quarters and go to bed. If these don’t do the job, call me, and I’ll send up something stronger. And if I find

out you've been up wandering around, you'll be warming a bed in sickbay."

I sit up and swing off the examination table, and as I do, a wave of dizziness washes over me, blurring the edges of my vision. There is a firm hand suddenly under my elbow, another at my waist. A familiar hand.

"No dizzy spells, huh?" McCoy's voice seems to be coming from far away.

Somebody's voice is answering him; I am surprised to discover it is mine. "I told you I'd work on it, Doctor. Just following instructions."

McCOY

I don't know what to have examined first – my eyes or my head. All my instincts screamed trouble the minute I saw Lara Merritt, but this most damaging, most obvious one never occurred to me. Not until that day last week in sickbay, when it became as clear and as chilling as plague virus on a microscope screen.

It wasn't just his movement in catching her as she fell; he would have done that for any crew member. It was in his face and in his eyes and in the sure way his hand went around her waist, as if it belonged there. If Jim and Lara are not lovers, they soon will be. Can't she see it? My God, can't *he* see it? And Spock ... where does he stand?

Spock is many things, but he is not stupid. Naïve, at times, in the twisted labyrinth of Human sexuality, but not stupid. He knows. He must know, yet he does nothing to stop it. Is that what's stuck in his Vulcan craw?

He does come by sickbay later that same day, and I chew him out about not eating, but my diatribe lacks its usual vigor. He gives me that maddening Vulcan stare and then, surprisingly, acquiesces. "It will not be necessary for you to concern yourself with my eating habits any longer, Doctor. I have been somewhat preoccupied of late, but the problem which has been concerning me has been resolved.

After he leaves, I spend a long time staring at the closed door, but the answer doesn't appear there in letters of flame. Or in any way at all.

Eventually, Christine Chapel comes in looking for me. I can tell from her manner that she senses something is wrong. Apparently she has not seen it. Not yet. But a starship is no place to keep a secret, and when the gossip starts, she is going to be hurt by it as much as any of them.

For the second time this week, Spock is back in sickbay. We are shortly due to put in at Argelius II for a supply of iridium, and Jim has authorized a three-day stopover for shore leave. Since the men and women of Argelius are notoriously free with their favors, and since some of those favors tend to have rather lingering effects, I have spent the day inoculating the better part of the crew with various

exotic prophylactic compounds. Although it's just common-sense preventive medicine, the process always makes me feel like a second-assistant procurer at some lower-class whorehouse.

In addition, I am feeling a familiar tingling in my hands that forebodes something I don't like to think about. I am thoroughly tired and out of sorts; it is past 1900 hours and I haven't eaten since noon. All I want is a long shower and a longer bourbon and a chance to fill the rumbling tiger my belly has become. The last thing I expect to see is Spock coming through the doors, looking definitely ill-at-ease.

"Well, what is it, Spock? Don't tell me you're going to explore the fleshpots of Argelius. I don't think they make a prophylactic compound for Vulcans."

He looks at me blankly for a moment before a distinct expression of distaste covers his face. "Certainly not," he says. "I wish to speak with you about Dr. Merritt."

The tiger takes a healthy bite out of my stomach. *Don't do this to me, Spock. Don't make me be the one to put it into words.* I deliberately misinterpret his remark.

"Dr. Merritt is going to be just fine, Spock. She's responding well to treatment, and I took her off sick call this afternoon." *Let that be what he wanted to discuss.*

"I am not referring to that, Dr. McCoy. It is something else which concerns me at the moment." The tiger is chewing its way up into my throat, and I sit down as he goes on.

“Would you rate her as a competent physician?”

“What?”

“I believe my question was quite clear. What is your professional opinion of her medical abilities?”

My mind is backpedaling frantically. *What is he getting at?*

“She’s ... um ... adequate.”

“Only adequate?”

“Well, I ... what’s your point, Spock?” Out of habit, I almost add “Other than your ears?” but stop myself just in time.

He sits down across from me and temples his fingers. That’s a sign he’s about to expound on something. “One would have to be incredibly naïve not to realize that Dr. Merritt was posted to her current assignment less for her medical background than for her marital status and the duty assignment of her husband. I merely wish to know if, after serving for nearly a year, her performance is such that it could stand on its own merit.” He frowns as he realizes he has made a spectacularly bad pun, and begins to rephrase the question. “I mean, would her performance--”

“I know what you mean.” It is difficult to say which of us is more disturbed by his lapse. He would no more consciously play word games than the library computer would. It is a measure of his mental state that he would allow himself to blunder into such a statement. “May I remind you that performance ratings are confidential?”

“You may – if I may remind you that as First Officer, I am entitled access to them.”

“But you’re not asking as First Officer, are you?”

He gives me that level Vulcan gaze that produces a condition commonly known as “the willies” in 90 percent of the Humans who’ve ever been on the receiving end of it.

“No,” he says at last. But he does not elaborate.

I take a deep breath; it comes out sounding suspiciously like a sigh. “If you’d asked me that question the first week ... even the first month she was aboard, I’d have said ‘no, it isn’t’. However, right now, personal feelings aside, she’s professionally qualified for her assignment.”

“And that is your opinion.”

“Mine, or that of any CMO. If she couldn’t cut it after all this time, she wouldn’t be here.”

“Thank you, Doctor McCoy.” He unfolds his lanky frame from the chair. For some reason, the furnishings in sickbay always appear a size too small for him.

The tiger has retreated from my throat and resumed its patient nibbling at my hollow stomach. I get up and walk with him toward the door. “Have you eaten yet?” I ask him.

“If you are going to resume your dietary inquisition, Doctor--”

“I’m not. I just haven’t had my dinner, and I was going to ask you to join me. I hate to eat alone.”

“I should not wish to be the cause of disturbance to your delicate digestive tract.”

“Can’t you ever just give me a straight yes or no?”

“I was endeavoring to do so when you interrupted me.”

We are still sparring when we enter the officer’s mess. As usual, at this time of night, it looks more like the main rec room. There is a poker game going on in front of the servoport that delivers our dinner, and I look over Sulu’s shoulder to see he’s working on an inside straight. He looks up at us and calls for one card.

Spock quirks and eyebrow at him. “I wouldn’t,” he says.

“Ah, but I would, Mr. Spock,” Sulu says, but he does not pick up the card until we have left. Minutes later, I see him raking in the pot, and he gives me a broad wink. I nudge Spock and point at the grinning lieutenant.

“He was bluffing,” Spock says.

“It doesn’t make any difference, does it, if he won?”

Spock’s face is suddenly pensive. Am I getting more perceptive, or has the mask he habitually wears finally begun to grow thinner?

“No,” he says. “If he has attained his objective, his method is unimportant.”

I spear something that looks suspiciously like broccoli. I don’t like broccoli, and my synthesizer card carries that notation. “If you’re trying to con me into an argument on

whether the end justifies the means, I'm not going to bite." I bite. It *is* broccoli, dammit. I look suspiciously at Spock's plate. "Have you got my tray?"

He gives me a look of mortally wounded Vulcan dignity before his attention is diverted by the captain, who is approaching the table.

"What's the matter, Bones?" Jim says, sitting down across from us. "Is Spock proselytizing vegetarianism again?"

"I do not pursue hopeless causes, Captain," Spock says. "The good doctor has apparently made an error in the selection buttons, and he is attempting to transfer the blame to me."

"But that's *broccoli*, dammit!"

"Then don't eat it," Jim says calmly, as if he were explaining some patently obvious fact to a not-very-bright child.

Something in the back of my mind is saying that we shouldn't be able to sit here joking like this if what I think has happened has happened. I must be mistaken. The fatigue – and I refuse to consider it anything else – of the last few weeks has affected my judgment. These two men cannot possibly be involved in the intolerable situation I have dreamed up. It's a mirage, all of it. Even the broccoli begins to look better. I have all but convinced myself when Lieutenant Uhura and Lara come into the room.

They each get a cup of coffee and approach our table. Well,

why not? Wouldn't any woman come to sit with her husband in a similar situation? They seat themselves on either side of Jim. Uhura looks at my plate.

"You're not eating your broccoli, Doctor," she says.

"Do you want it?" I have loaded the hateful stuff onto my salad plate and am about to give it to her. I can see myself wearing it around my neck forever, like the albatross in that ancient poem.

She gives me a wide-eyed look and is about to reach for it when Jim says, "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Lieutenant."

"Why not?"

He allows himself a moment to think up a plausible excuse, the devilry shining in his eyes. "Well ... this is just a rumor, mind you." He looks around in an exaggerated gesture of caution and then whispers something in her ear.

She stifles a giggle. "No kidding?"

"Scout's honor." He holds up his hand, but his fingers are crossed. "Would I make up something like that?"

Uhura gives him a mock serious look. "Of course not." She looks back at me. "You'd better eat it yourself," she says. "If you're going down to Argelius, you'll need all your strength." She takes a sip of her coffee and looks at the plate. "Broccoli. Who'd have thought it?"

"Now see here--" I begin, but Sulu is approaching the

table. All I need is another heckler.

“Nyota,” he says, “do you remember those black roses I was telling you about? I checked on them tonight, and they’re finally blooming. Would you like to come see them?”

Uhura rolls her eyes at him. “Now there’s an approach I’ve never heard before,” she says.

“Would you rather come up to my quarters and see my Samurai suit?” he says with an exaggerated leer.

“I’ve *seen* your Samurai suit, mister,” Uhura says, and even Sulu joins in the laughter that follows her remark. “I think I’d rather see the roses.” She takes her coffee and leaves with him.

“Is it just my imagination,” Lara asks as they go, “or is there a decidedly libidinous air around here tonight?”

“Happens every time we get this close to Argelius II,” Jim says.

“Oh, yes. Argelius. Is it really as wicked as they say?”

“Wickeder,” Jim says with a grin.

“Oho. I can hardly wait.” She takes a careful sip of her coffee and blows into the cup. “Do you think I’m strong enough to handle it, Doctor?”

“I don’t see why not,” I reply. “Providing you take along a suitable escort to fight off the Argelian men. They’re worse than the women.” I have convinced myself by now that I

was wrong. I must be getting old and imagining things. Spock will take her into that rarified atmosphere and they'll come back looking like a bride and groom on the morning after, and everything will be back to normal. I might even beam down for a while myself.

“How about it, Spock? she asks. “Are we going?”

“I am in the midst of a project which requires my continued presence on the *Enterprise*,” he says, and his next words bring my careful fantasy down around my ears. “However, I see no reason why you should not go. Perhaps the Captain would accompany you. It is really not a safe place for a woman alone.”

Everybody at the table seems to stop breathing. Jim meets Spock's gaze, and his expression slowly changes from one of amusement to one I have never seen him give Spock – a curious look, tinged with what can only be called wariness. Lara looks at Spock's face, then follows his gaze to Jim.

Finally, she breaks the silence. “I'll have to think about that one,” she says, and picks up her cup. She starts to get up, and as she does, an ensign with two loaded trays passes behind her chair. He bumps her arm and the still-steaming coffee slops over her hand. She lets go of the cup and Jim makes an instinctive grab for it, which results in both of them being liberally spattered. The hapless ensign realizes what he's done, and I think for a moment he's going to faint and add the contents of his two trays to the mess.

“It's all right, Ensign,” Jim says, but I notice he is holding

his shirt away from his hide as he says it. “If you’ll excuse us, gentlemen. Dr. Merritt?”

They leave the room together, and in a few seconds, the incident seems forgotten. But not by me. I can’t believe what I’ve heard in the last minutes, nor can I bridle my tongue any longer. “Spock,” I hiss at him, “do you have any idea what you’re doing?”

He gives me that infuriatingly level, expressionless gaze he gave Jim only moments ago. “Yes Doctor,” he says. “I know precisely what I am doing.”

And yet I wonder. *Does he, indeed?* I am in my quarters, trying to convince myself that I could sleep if I went to bed, when my intercom beeps.

“McCoy here.”

“Doctor, could you come down to Lab Nine?” It is Christine Chapel’s voice, and it is oddly muted.

“Problems, Christine?”

“Just come down. I want to show you something.”

Christine is not given to cryptic remarks, or to shuttling people off on wild goose chases, so when she asks me to do something, I generally do it. I come into Lab Nine with a question ready for her, but she motions for silence. She takes my sleeve and pulls me past the shining rows of instruments toward the section where we keep the small

experimental animals. The banks of cages rise six feet off the deck all around the perimeter of the room. Small animals from all over the galaxy move restlessly, making their soft scurrying sounds and watching the figure that stands in their midst.

It is Spock, and he stands with his back to us and his fingers curled through the fine wire that composes the cages. He doesn't move, doesn't make a sound; just stands there staring at the caged animals. As I stand, hypnotized and repelled somehow by the sight, until Christine moves me away from the doorway and back through the lab.

"How long has he been in there?" I ask.

"I don't know, Doctor. I came down about 15 minutes ago to make sure Buchanan cleaned the cages like I told her to, and I found Mr. Spock in there. Just like that."

"Did you speak to him?"

She colors uncomfortably and avoids my eyes. "No, sir. I thought ... perhaps he was doing something important. I just ... I watched him for a few minutes..." Her voice trails off in embarrassment. She has spent too many years watching him, waiting for a sign that never came, and at this moment I'd give my right arm – hell, I'd give *both* arms, clear to the shoulders – if it had come. If it had, I wouldn't be standing here now, feeling powerless and hollow clear to my boots.

"And then you called me?"

“Not right away. But the longer he stood there, the stranger it seemed. Dr. McCoy, what’s going on? What’s wrong with him? He’s been so ... well, I know you’ve noticed it.”

“Yes, Chris. I’ve noticed it. Go on to your quarters; I’ll talk to him.” She is not convinced, but she leaves anyway, and I return to the doorway. He has not moved.

“Spock--” I call softly. He jerks his head up and turns around quickly. “Are you all right?”

“Of course I am. If I were ill, I would have notified you.” He walks past me abruptly and leaves me standing alone at the doorway.

It is then that I notice the cages.

At eye level, where Spock’s hands rested, the wire mesh is twisted grotesquely, warped out of its precise alignment into a tangle of ruined metal. I doubt he even realized he was doing it, but the thought of the power in those hands, operating independent of his tightly controlled mind, shocks and disturbs me. He has damaged and tangled the mesh beyond repair ... as the coming of the woman he calls his wife has damaged and tangled the straight lines and carefully calculated intersections of our own lives.

I remove the specimens from the damaged cages, slowly, because movement has suddenly become a great effort for me. The nausea is back, and the tingling in my hands and feet, and I suddenly find it hard to draw in enough air. I know the symptoms; I have had them before. Ironically, it

was Spock who discovered the means for a treatment then.

Had I known what I would go on to see – to be intimately caught up in – would I have accepted the extra years he gave me? I don't know. I only know that I cannot go on this way and retain my sanity, let alone my honor. And I know that the single course of action left open to me will be the most difficult thing I have ever had to do.

>>>>> <<<<<

LARA

>>>>> <<<<<

I strip off the sodden uniform and shove it into the laundry port. My mind is still numb from the incredible suggestion Spock has just made, and my motions are those of a sleepwalker.

Jim and I did not speak as we went to our separate quarters; did not even meet each other's eyes. I know the turmoil in his mind must match that in my own. *Why?* What was he saying in the words he left unspoken, and with that cool, unfaltering gaze? He was telling us he knows; of that I am certain. But what else? Was it challenge – or permission? It makes me realize how little I really know about the way his mind works.

His suggestion is unthinkable, of course. And yet ... and yet. The thought of spending three days with Jim ... the way long afternoon sunlight filters through drawn curtains in a quiet room somewhere. The thought of waking in his

arms ... the chance to lie touching, passion spent, and to say the all-important, unimportant things that are never spoken of outside those moments ... it is tempting indeed. But impossible.

I seek the cold comfort of my bed and lie staring until my eyes begin to burn. I will close them, but only for a moment.

>>>> <<<<<

I am dreaming; it is a curious sensation to know that I dream, as if my mind had splintered neatly in two so that half of it could experience and the other half analyze. I can hear the quiet movements of someone else in the room, but they do not relate to the images in the sleeping half of my mind.

I find myself again at the marriage grounds, and I hear T’Pau’s voice as she intones the words of the ceremony. But the words are not the right ones; they drift in and out of sequence with her actions. She begins to speak of *ni-var*, of that joining of disparate halves to create a whole greater than the sum of its parts, and then suddenly she is speaking of a vow. Its denial, she says, negates not only honor but heritage as well.

Now she speaks again the sacramental words from the ceremony of promise, and I echo them ... “parted from me and never parted; never and always touching and touched...” But instead of Spock’s voice repeating them, I hear T’Pau again, calling him in a voice that sinks to a

whisper below the level of my comprehension. Yet even without an understanding of the separate words, her tone is so compulsive that we are both drawn toward her. She lifts her arms in an abrupt gesture, and her black flowing sleeves, shot through with spangles, enfold us as she counsels us to live long and prosper.

Suddenly, without any sense of transition, we are within the temple, and I feel again as if for the first time the terrible, overwhelming intensity of Spock's mind invading mine. But this time, I do not shrink back. I meet it with an intensity of my own, and what was in reality a mindless mating becomes the most profoundly erotic experience I have ever had.

I am at once totally myself and totally my lover. Even as I taste the faint coppery tang of his mouth, I register a vague salty-sweet impression that I somehow know is what his senses register as he kisses me; I feel the familiar muscled contours of his body and the yielding, sweat-slicked human skin he touches. This, surely, is a *ni-var* that goes beyond the range of description, as the *I* that is *we* feeds on its own passion, its own self-induced/other-induced perceptions. The sensations are mingled and simultaneous, until my whole body is nothing but screaming nerves and tactile signals that cannot recover quickly enough to prepare for the next assault.

I jerk awake, and my mind is one unit again, but my body continues to respond to the vivid images. My skin is a solid sheet of flame and I am gasping for air like a drowning

woman. The covers on my bare skin feel like the rasping tongues of a thousand cats, and I sit up abruptly, throwing them back. My own nudity both fascinates and repels me, and I reach for a robe as though it was a stranger's eye that observed me. My knees are shaking as I stand up, drawn by the dim light that glows at the other end of the room.

He has taken off his uniform shirt and sits stretched out in the chair at the desk with his chin resting on his hand, a long slim figure, black on black. His face is in shadow, and as I approach him like a sleepwalker, I realize that not once in my dream did I see the face of my lover.

“Spock?”

He lifts his face, and the light falls across his eyes, cruelly touching the scar high on his cheekbone. He does not speak, but those dark eyes carry a message that twists my heart and closes my throat; there is such pain in them as I have never seen.

I try to force my own thoughts into words. “Just now, Spock, did you...” My tongue will not respond. “It was like...” I simply cannot go on. He turns his face away and the shadow covers his eyes again. I can see only the line of his cheekbone. And the scar.

“I have done nothing,” he says. “Has something disturbed you?”

“It was so real. I thought, perhaps...”

“No. You must have been dreaming.”

"I was. I dreamed of the temple, and T'Pau, and us. I dreamed of what should have been ... of what still can be."

"No." He gets up slowly and starts to walk away.

"Spock!" *Don't. Please, don't.* Then, softly – "I love you." Is it my imagination, or is there some stiffening in the line of his back as he stops, hearing the words I have perhaps left too long unsaid? They are strange, clumsy on my tongue as I repeat them. "I love you. I'm your wife."

He turns slowly, and the carefully-maintained control is back as he asks, "By whose standards, Lara? Not by the Terrans'--"

"Because you are not Terran!"

"--nor by the Vulcans'--"

"Because I'm not Vulcan! Does that mean we can't find some common ground?" I approach him, reach out a hand to touch him, but somehow, without moving, he withdraws beyond my reach. "What I felt – or dreamed – or imagined – was so ... vast ... so far beyond comprehension that there must be some room in it for us. Together."

Wordlessly, he shakes his head.

"But why? I don't understand. I don't ... know you any more." There must be some way I can get through to him. A moment ago, even though I was physically alone, the wall was gone, dissolved as though it had never been. I was within his interior fortress, but now he is not there. "Why did you – why do you want me to go away with Jim?"

That, at least, provokes a response. He tilts his head, raising one eyebrow. “You know why.”

“No. I don’t.”

“I thought it would please you.”

“*Please me?* Spock, it would destroy me. And him, too. Is that what you want?”

He frowns, caught up in a logic which has played him false.

“He can’t command without respect, Spock. How can he claim that respect if his crew believes he’s having an affair with the wife of his First Officer?”

Suddenly I hear my own words and know the truth in them, and what was beautiful has become ugly in the blink of an eye. I feel abruptly ill; what passed for passion a moment ago is now clammy sweat and a lurching in my stomach.

“I shall not hold that position much longer,” he says, and before I can digest this, he follows with “nor need you remain my wife.”

“What?” I must sit down before the dizziness overwhelms me. I sit on the edge of the desk and study his impassive face. “What are you saying?”

“I must go...” I can see him framing “home” in his mind; he changes it abruptly. “I must return to Vulcan.”

“But why, when your life is here?”

“That is over now. I must return to Vulcan, and I cannot take you with me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“T’Pau is dying,” he says, as though that explains everything. “And everything you and I have known is dying with her. If any of it is to be salvaged – any of it – the task falls to me and to the others like me who will work to preserve what she has built.” He sees the confusion written on my face and pulls the chair away from the desk. “Sit down,” he says. “I think perhaps these will clarify the situation for you.”

He keys open his personal locker and pulls out a stack of communication chips. He inserts one in the player, and T’Pau’s face appears on the screen. The sound of her voice brings back vividly the dream I have just experienced, but as I realize what she is saying, her message cuts through the haze of arousal like a laser scalpel cuts through flesh.

“Spock,” she begins in her hoarse, sibilant voice, “the time has come. Thee are needed here.”

>>>>> <<<<<<

It is several hours before the last of the messages has been played. I am numb from the implications in them, and when Spock has filled in the blank spaces, I come to the awesome realization that he means it; he is leaving Starfleet to try to hold together with his own powerful hands the crumbling edifice which has sheltered him for so

long. And it is something he cannot do from within.

Knowing what this decision has cost him, I can understand his remoteness, his intense need to be left alone in his pain. What I can't understand is his statement that he cannot take me with him. Unless...

If Vulcan wishes to break with the Federation, diplomatic ties with Earth will no longer be necessary. He will be free of me, then; free of this marriage which was forced on him.

So it was all a sham. A temporary convenience.

"No," he says, as though I had voiced my thoughts. Perhaps I have. "It was not a sham, Lara. Please believe that."

"Then why can't I go with you?"

He seems to weigh his answer carefully. Finally he says, "Vulcan will not be a pleasant place for Terrans. At some point the Council will doubtless expel all aliens."

The impact of what he is saying finally sinks through. "Your mother?" I ask.

"My father's influence will protect her, I think." He looks at me for the first time since he turned on the player. "My own power will not be that great. I cannot permit you to return to Vulcan because I cannot keep you safe there."

I hear his words, and beneath them I hear the revelation he will not otherwise make. Across the height and breadth of our mutually protective wall, he is reaching out to tell me

what he cannot or will not say in any other manner.

“There are many kinds of danger, Spock. There is safety only in the grave.” He looks at me for a long moment, his face impassive, then turns away. “I want to be with you,” I tell him. “I’m your wife.”

“I can arrange to have you freed of that obligation.” He does not look at me; his voice is flat, mechanical.

“Look at me,” I say softly. “Look at me and tell me that’s what you want.” All my chips are on the line now. If he calls, all is lost.

The line of his back does not waver. Wordlessly, he goes into the sleeping area and I hear the soft sigh as the bed receives him. He has left the gaming table with the final card still to be dealt.

I need to be alone somewhere, totally alone and freed of distraction. In a few hours, the first shore leave party will beam down to Argelius II, and I intend to be with them.

>>>>> <<<<<<

Though it is early morning by ship time, it is late afternoon in Randar, the spaceport capital of Argelius II. The attitude of the crowd on the streets is one of happy anticipation. Unescorted women, their clothes skin-tight and glittering, move through the shops, but their eyes seek the faces of men; the men from the *Enterprise* are objects of considerable interest. Their uniforms mark them for what they are – visitors looking for the fabled excitement of

Randar.

My desire to be alone, to sort out my thoughts and make some plan of action, is being swept aside in the crush of bodies. An Argelian man gives me a sidelong glance as we both stand before a shop window. He moves toward me. "They are beautiful, are they not?" he says, indicating the jewels in the window with a wave of his hand. The hand comes to rest on my shoulder, traces the line of my back and comes to rest lightly on my hip, fingers trailing inches above the hem of the short uniform skirt.

"They do not interest me," I say, moving away.

"No? That is most unfortunate," he says, but he does not appear too disturbed. He moves away to find someone more receptive.

There is a hostel at the end of the street. I move toward it, only to find my path blocked by another Argelian.

"Ah," he says, drawing the sound out with pleasure. "Another lovely lady from the stars. Tell me, Fleeter, have you ever seen the Argelian moon from the gardens of Randar?" I step around him without answering, but he falls into step beside me. "I have a lovely garden," he says, "We can wait for moonrise there."

"Beat it, chum."

He smiles knowingly. "Ah," he says, and again the sound is like a lover's sigh. "I see. You have already chosen a companion for the night."

“I do not seek a companion,” I snap at him.

He is genuinely puzzled. “What else would a Fleeter seek on Argelius?” he asks.

What else, indeed? I turn away from him, conscious of the stares. The uniform is like a sign around my neck, inviting the advances of Argelian men.

A dress in the window catches my eye. It is a long, flowing garment, loose and concealing, with wide sleeves that trail from the mannequin’s arms to the hem. It is a swirl of muted shades of blue and lavender and grey, shot with silver like a glowering sky hanging low over the surface of the sea. Not the dress of a prostitute or that of a seeker of adventure.

Even as I put it on, I am telling myself it is an outlandish purchase; as I pay for it, I ask myself where else I could possibly wear it. Yet as I walk out of the shop wearing it, my uniform tucked in a box under my arm, it feels ... *right*. It conceals me like some magical fog, and as I move down the street toward the hostel, there are no more advances made by the impetuous Argelians.

The room is cheaply ornate; the elaborately patterned draperies, on close examination, prove to be fraying and none too clean. But they serve the purpose. They shut out the fading afternoon light and most of the noise from the street. I wonder as I close them how many assignations they have sealed off from the raucous world outside.

But I am alone, at last, with my thoughts. The solitude does not comfort me. Spock has demanded a choice of me, whether he realizes it or not, and it is a choice I am not prepared to make. *Spock and Jim* ... they are like opposite sides of a coin; and like a coin, if split, would not the inherent value be demeaned? Yet a split seems unavoidable, and he has demanded that I choose. Or has he? To say I cannot go with him to Vulcan is not to say he wants me to go with Jim. But then why did he as much give his blessing to us? "*I thought it would please you,*" he said. Did he? And would it?

I did not lie to my husband. I love him; I want to be with him ... and I want him with me. In every way. And yet ... and yet...

Jim and Spock. Sunlight and shadow. How can I condemn myself to a life with only shadow ... or to one without the ease shadow brings from relentless sun? They both have a place. Without either, there is only fog. That is a possibility. To have neither. A possibility I can choose as an option or one I could drift into without realizing it.

I am suddenly aware of how tired I am. The brief sleep of last night provided no rest, and even if it had, the emotional storm which has buffeted me since then has wrung me dry. The street sounds are muffled; the light hangs in the stuffy room like a cloud of slash smoke, soporific and narcotic. I lie down on the wide bed, and close my eyes, but only for a moment.

At first I do not remember where I am; then I remember where ... and why. The street noise is cacophonous now, laughter and shouting and the raucous music of curbside musicians. A howler cuts through with its own noise as a security team's aircar speeds to the scene of some fight or accident.

My stomach rumbles alarmingly as I sit up; I am lightheaded with hunger and remember I have not eaten in 24 hours. I buzz the desk; the hostel clerk suavely advises me that there are no provisions made for delivering food to the rooms. He suggests I try the dining room or a restaurant. There are a number he would recommend...

I am sure there are, and each one willing to give him a fat kickback, no doubt, for steering the unwary into them.

It is fully dark when I pass into the streets again. A line of dancers whirls by me, but I ignore their invitations to join them. I walk quickly, purposefully, eyes front, and as usual the technique works. No one approaches me. The problem with this particular posture is that it does not give one much of an opportunity for sightseeing. Finally the demands of my stomach become too much to ignore, and I catch a particularly delicious aroma drifting into the street from an old stone building.

The interior is cool and darker than the brightly-lit streets. Somewhere within the dark reaches of the room there is a band; the gaily-dressed forms of dancers move like

iridescent butterflies through the gloom. I find a table in a corner and sit down.

As I look around, it becomes evident that this place is more bar than restaurant. The tables are small and most of them hold tall, narrow glasses rather than plates. There are perhaps half a dozen people sitting at the edges of the darkness; everyone else seems to be dancing.

I have almost decided to leave when a young woman in a brief costume walks past me carrying a tray. If, from outside, the aroma was heady enough to draw me in here, then the scent of the dish from only a meter away is enough to keep me where I am. I catch her attention and order a generous sample of the steaming concoction. As I wait, trying to ignore the complaints from my empty stomach, I am startled by the touch of a hand on my shoulder – a gesture which seems to be the standard greeting on this planet.

“My friend and I were wondering--” a voice begins as I turn around in annoyance, only to be surprised at the sight of a Starfleet uniform, blue as the one I have left in my room. Penelli and I recognize each other in the same instant, and the young technician’s face turns the brilliant crimson of a Vulcan sunset.

“*Dr. Merritt!*” he stumbles. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I would never have – I mean, you’re not ... we didn’t...”

“That’s all right, Penelli.” I note that his companion, in the red shirt of Engineering, is greatly enjoying his friend’s

discomfiture. The story will be all over the ship within minutes of their return.

Penelli is still trying to regain his composure. “No, ma’am. I mean, yes, ma’am. Doctor. I mean--” He breaks off, totally demoralized, and starts to make a formal salute before he realizes that since I’m not in uniform, that too would be a faux pas.

“Penelli?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Good night. And have fun.”

“Yes, ma’am. Good night, ma’am. Doctor.” He is totally befuddled, and even when his buddy takes his arm and hauls him away, he is still painfully red. Penelli is normally such a bashful soul that he must have approached me on a bet to begin with; after his disastrous performance, I wonder if he’ll have the nerve to try it again. From what I’ve seen of the Argelians, though, all he’ll have to do is stand still for 60 seconds, and he’ll have all the action he can handle.

The waitress brings my dinner, and with it a tall pitcher or something that looks suspiciously like beer. When I ask her about it, she smiles vaguely and says “The gentleman bought it.” Poor Penelli. He must have ordered it before he realized who I was.

I turn my attention to extracting my dinner from its spiny shell, dipping the meat in the pungent red sauce that

accompanies it. It is as delicious as it smells, and I am poking hopefully in the empty shell when a hand again touches my shoulder.

“Now look, Penelli,” I begin, turning around. But the face that greets me is that of a stranger, a massive Argelian whose smile for some reason sends a warning chill down my spine.

“It is customary,” he says, “to share one’s drink with the purchaser.”

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KIRK

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I look from the form in my hand to McCoy’s face across the desk from me. I still can’t put the two together in my mind.

“Why, Bones? And why right now? We’re only six months from end-of-tour.”

“I’m tired, Jim,” he says, and from the lines etched deeply in his face, I can see the truth of that. “I made my optional retirement date three months ago. I thought I could make it to end-of-tour, but I can’t.” He swivels away from me in the chair. “I have 30 days’ leave time coming, Captain. If you’ll authorize it, I’d like to beam down to Argelius and catch a commercial flight for home while the final separation papers are being processed.”

There is something else here, something being withheld, and I don't like it. "Okay, that tells me why now, but it still doesn't tell me *why*. We all get tired, Bones." He seems about to say something, but the only sound that comes from him is suspiciously like a sigh. Tired, yes. Like all of us. And getting ... older. Like ... all of us. I note that his hair is sprinkled liberally with grey. It could hardly have happened overnight. When...?

I force a grin. "Look, Bones, why don't you take shore leave, and when you get back, we'll talk about it again. You'd be surprised what 24 hours on Argelius can do for your outlook."

He flinches visibly at the name, and I remember the look on his face last night when Spock... No. I won't deal with that one right now. One sucker-punch at a time. McCoy seems to be regaining his composure, and he turns back to me, the familiar wry smile on his face.

"I'll agree that the Argelian women could change a man's mind about a lot of things, Jim, but even they don't have a cure for xenopolycythemia. In fact, they'd probably--"

"But you whipped that years ago," I interrupt. "The Fabrini treatments--"

"Are just that, Jim. Treatments. Not a cure, as we first thought. They cause the disease to go into remission, that's all. And the remissions get shorter each time."

I can feel the sudden sweat sticky in my palms. He really

means it. He's really quitting. "How long?" The voice doesn't sound like my own.

He shrugs. "The first remission lasted four years; the second, two. I had the last treatment just under a year ago, and the symptoms are back, stronger than ever. I've appended the test results to my request. Nurse Chapel has confirmed them."

I wave him away as he reaches for the packet. "You know that's not necessary, Bones. Not for me."

"No, but Starfleet will have to see them. It's a service-connected disability." He grins, but not with his eyes. "Fattens up the retirement check considerably, you know."

I try to imagine the *Enterprise* without him and fail completely. "But ... what will you do?"

Again the shrug. "Go home. Drink a lot of mint juleps. See my grandson. Did you know my daughter has a baby? Christopher Leonard Miller. Hell of a name to hang on a defenseless kid, isn't it?" This time the eyes smile, too, but there is something else behind them. "Shall we drink to Christopher Leonard Miller?"

"A little early in the morning for that, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I guess so," he says. He is uncomfortable now, wanting to stay, wanting to leave. "Do I get an answer, or are you going to red-tape me?"

"I wouldn't do that to you, Bones. Not after all--"

He lunges out of the chair, anger in his movements. “Spare me the violins, Captain. Can I get off this damn ship or not?”

Our eyes lock; behind his anger is a man perilously close to the breaking point. I scrawl my name across his request and hand it to him. “If you want to hand-carry that to Lieutenant Uhura, she’ll send it out top priority. You’re a free man, Doctor.”

Something very like a cloud flickers across his eyes, and he turns away with the packet. He mutters something as he leaves, but is gone before I can respond. It is so essentially McCoy that it should be funny, but somehow it isn’t. In his last official exchange with his commanding officer, Leonard McCoy’s final words are – “In a pig’s eye.”



There’s a hollow place inside; I find it hard to concentrate. I’m aware of the covert glances of the bridge crew. In less than an hour, the news of McCoy’s retirement is all over the ship. I wouldn’t be surprised to hear the entire exchange repeated verbatim over coffee in the main rec room. Right down to that last cryptic parting shot. And the other thing, the thing they’re all saying to themselves, the thing making them walk on eggshells on the bridge.

How’s the captain taking it? What’s he going to do?

Right. What *is* he going to do? He’s going to get off the bridge, for one thing. And get something for this no-sleep,

nervous-stomach headache, for another. McCoy has a pill for everything. Except ... McCoy isn't there any more. But Lara is.

Lara. I need ... I need some of your calm now. Share it with me, Lara. Make me feel 25 again and ready to whip the galaxy with one hand. You always do.

“Mr. Sulu, you have the con. I'm going down to sickbay.”

“Yessir. Captain?”

“What is it, Sulu?”

“Tell him ... would you ask him not to leave without saying goodbye, sir?”

“To all of us?” Uhura puts in.

“I'll tell him.”

I stop by his quarters before I go to sickbay. He is standing in the midst of what looks like the aftermath of a direct hit by a photon torpedo, shaking his head. “I don't understand this,” he says. “Where did all this junk come from?”

“You've been a long time collecting it, Bones.”

“Yeah. Maybe too long.” He slams something into a lumpy spacebag. “Ought to toss it all down a disposal chute.” He paws through the pile on his desk. “Here,” he says, tossing me something. “A souvenir.”

It looks like a spider, flying through the air at me, but as my hands touch it, I know immediately what it is – part of

the *ahn woon* he cut off my throat nearly eight years ago on Vulcan.

“That was a low blow,” I tell him.

“If the *ahn woon* fits...” he says, not looking at me.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know.” He is rummaging through drawers. I twist the cold leather in my hands, remembering the last time I held one. *Yes, Bones. I know.*

“The bridge crew,” I begin, but have to stop and start again. “They want to say goodbye in person.”

He mumbles something, still stowing things in the spacebag. “Do they know how long it would take me to say goodbye to four hundred and thirty people?” He turns his icy blue gaze on me suddenly. “Four hundred and twenty-seven,” he amends.

I read you, Doctor. Five by five. I turn and leave without another word, and I can hear him slamming drawers behind me.

Chapel is the only person in sickbay. She is packing up McCoy’s gruesome collection of skulls, and I remember for the first time in years that his fascination with them was what earned him his nickname. Christine hates the grisly collection; normally she won’t even touch it. Now she handles the ancient bones as if she didn’t realize what they were, and it is obvious that she has been crying.

“Have you seen Dr. Merritt?” I ask her.

She looks at me blankly.

“Lara. Have you seen her?”

“No, Captain. I think she went down to Argelius this morning with the first shore leave party.”

“Alone?” My voice is sharper than I intended, and she is not so preoccupied that she forgets to look properly wounded.

“I don’t know. Why don’t you check with the transport engineer?”

The transport engineer is also maddeningly vague. “I think she went with that bunch from the medical department. Hyland, Takagawa. I don’t remember who else.”

I hit the intercom with a building sense of panic that I keep trying to convince myself is unnecessary. “Uhura? See if you can raise Dr. Merritt on Argelius. I think she beamed down to--” I check with the engineer. “--to Randar.”

Too quickly, her voice comes back. “No response, sir.”

“Keep trying. I’ll be here in the transporter room for a few minutes. Then – I’ll let you know.” As Uhura signs off, I am turning on the tech. “Pull those records, mister. I want to know who went planetside in that party, and what the exact coordinates were.”

“Yessir.” He is just slow enough to give me a chance to work up a full-blown fantasy of half a dozen impossible

situations Lara could have gotten herself into. She doesn't know ... couldn't know. An unescorted woman down there, especially in a Starfleet uniform, is an open invitation. If she gets into trouble... *Spock*. He must have gone with her. Of course he did. He doesn't have the duty this watch, and he decided to go with her. The night watch cleared it and I didn't get the message. Somebody's butt will be on the line for this one.

"Here it is, Captain. Hyland, Takagawa, Dr. Merritt, Spindler, Holt, and Austin. They beamed down to the main plaza in Randar at 0600. Four hours ago."

"Mr. Spock didn't go with them?"

"No, sir. It was all women. I remember thinking--"

"Stow it, Lieutenant. You get on the horn to Uhura and have her try to raise any of them. If she makes contact, patch it to me in Mr. Spock's quarters."

He is very calmly tuning his lyre when I come through the doors without waiting for his permission. He looks up at me, eyebrows raised at this breach of the unspoken custom between us. I have never before entered here without express invitation. But then, I have never before been quite so angry with him as I am at this moment.

"Where is she?"

"Of whom are you speaking?" he asks calmly, ever correct.

"You know damn well. Lara. Your wife. Where is she?"

“I believe she has taken shore leave.”

“You let her go down there alone? Knowing what kind of cesspool it is?”

“The Argelians have a totally modern sanitation system, Captain. I do not believe there is a cesspool on the entire planet.”

“*Goddammit*, Spock, you know perfectly well what I mean!” I slam my fist onto the desktop, and for the first time realize I am still holding the strip of *ahn woon* McCoy threw to me.

“Here.” I toss it at him, and he catches it with a lazy grace that belies his quickness. He gets up and puts the lyre aside.

“What is this?”

“Take a good look at it, Spock. Because the next time I get one in my hands...” *Jesus. What am I saying?* I really am ready to take him on. Right here, bare knuckles, knowing he could wipe up the floor with me if he wanted to. Would he? I don’t know. For the first time in years, *I don’t know*.

He is watching me carefully. Waiting. I am making a total ass of myself, and I try to get back in control. Calm voice. Reasonable question: “Didn’t you even try to stop her?”

“No.”

“Are you crazy?” So much for calm rationality.

“I do not believe so, Captain. My most recent

psychological profile did not reveal any--”

“Stop it! Stop playing games with words. You always do that. You hide behind words; you make them into something they aren’t. Just like last night. What was your game then?”

“It was no game, Jim.”

“All right. We’ll thrash that one out later. Right now, we’ve got to get down there and find her before she gets herself hurt.”

“No.”

“She’s your *wife*, Spock. Don’t you care about her at all?” His chin comes up at that, and he seems ready to make some reply without weighing it first. But the Vulcan in him quickly regains control.

“It is because I care about her that I must let her do this thing.”

“What thing? Get herself raped?”

“The Argelians are not prone to violence, Captain. And in any case, I believe she is capable of defending herself. She needed a time alone. Away from ... away from the ship.”

“I am going to Randar. I am going to find Lara. Are you coming with me or not?”

“Is that an order?”

“Does it have to be?”

His eyes are calculating. Remote. Exactly as they were last night. He does not answer me.

“All right. If that’s the way it is, then that’s the way it is. Oddly enough, you’re in command. Go up to the bridge and relieve Lieutenant Sulu. I’ll be back when I get back.”

I leave without waiting for his response. In the transporter room, the engineer has had no luck in raising any member of the shore party. I hit the intercom again.

“Scotty? Get over to the transporter room with a security team. Issue them phasers.” *Phasers?* I must really be losing my grip. “Belay that. Just get over here with a team.”

“Trouble, sir?”

“Could be. We’ve lost a whole shore party. All women.”

There is a short pause as Scott considers this. “Aye, sir,” he says, and there is patient resignation in his voice. Almost every time we take liberty on Argelius, we have to round up a few stragglers.

I brief him as we take our place on the transporter platforms. “I want to know if any of our people down there have seen any of the landing party. I’m particularly interested in locating Dr. Merritt. I have a feeling she didn’t know what she was getting into.”

He gives me a curious look before he nods.

“Energize,” I order, and within seconds we are in the midst of the short Argelian twilight. “Split up. Hit every place

you can think of, and keep in touch with your communicators. We'll rendezvous back here in two hours."

We separate, and I start to scan the faces around me with a dawning sense of hopelessness. *Where am I going to start?* An Argelian woman smiles at me and lifts her eyebrows in invitation. I turn away and start to push through the thickening crowds. Alone, Spock said. She wanted to be alone. A hostel?

I check a dozen with no result. No one remembers a petite brunette in Starfleet blue. It is full dark now, or would be but for the bright lights of the streets. Someone sets off a skyrocket somewhere, and the faces turned toward it are bathed in its green glow. At least their inaction makes my progress through the crowd easier. *Progress toward what?*

The communicator demands my attention; it is Scotty, and his voice is hesitant. "I've picked up Yeoman Holt," he says. "And she's a wee bit unhappy, Captain. She says she has three more hours before she's due back."

"Has she seen Dr. Merritt?"

"Negative. She says Dr. Merritt left the others as soon as they beamed down. The rest of them were together ... for a while. Now they're scattered all over the city."

"Very well, Scotty. Carry on."

"D'ye want me to send Yeoman Holt back to the *Enterprise*?"

I hesitate, realizing for the first time that Scotty and the

others think we're looking for AWOLs, when in reality I have dragooned them into an entirely personal crusade.

"Negative, Scotty." I owe him some explanation ... don't I? "It's mainly Dr. Merritt I'm concerned about locating. Inform the others, please."

"Aye, sir. Scott out."

"Kirk out." I put the communicator back slowly, watching the continuing display of fireworks for a moment. Is Lara somewhere in this crowd, seeking the simple pleasures of sight and sound and sensation, or is she in trouble somewhere? Could her link with Spock extend across the miles that separate them now – separate them physically as well as emotionally? Would he know, this time, as he did on Banus V, if she needed help? And would he respond? Of course he would. Has any of us – myself included – ever called for his help and found him unresponsive? Never. Until this morning.

Have I been wrong to place my trust in him all these years, or has my own violation of his trust alienated him completely now? For that is what I have done. What we have done, Lara and I? There is no excuse, no provocation, no drive strong enough to justify what we have done to him. And yet ... and yet ... is none of the fault with Spock? If he is unwilling or unable to give her the full range of physical and emotional love she needs, can he not at least give her the kind of companionship and loyalty and love he has given me over the years?

It is as if he was determined to drive her away, ever since ... ever since we got back from Eos. And Kyra. Is that it? Was the undeniable chemistry between Spock and the Eosian Matriarch so strong that he has succumbed to the purely human desire for what he cannot have, and has determined to destroy what he could have in order to try to gain the ultimate prize?

I don't know. God help me, I don't know. And what, in my ignorance and unthinking actions, have I done to all of us?

Lara. If I find her ... *when I find her* ... we have to sit down together, all three of us, like civilized people, and try to patch together what we once had. No more evasions, no more unspoken truths. The cracks will still show, of course. They'll show forever, like the scar on Spock's face, but the vessel will be whole and serviceable again.

I turn away from the bursting rockets and the mesmerized faces that watch them, and as I do, I see two *Enterprise* crewmen coming out of a bar.

"Penelli! Brock!" Brock turns toward the sound of my voice, but Penelli is leaning against a wall and being violently ill. Brock is grinning; a constant, cocky grin that now annoys me almost beyond bearing. I start toward them.

"Have you seen Dr. Merritt?"

Penelli groans, and Brock laughs out loud. "I'll say we have! Penelli tried to pick her up! You should have been

there--”

“Where? In here?”

“Oh, no, sir. It was down on the wharf somewhere. About half an hour ago.”

“What was the name of the place?”

Brock looks puzzled. He has obviously been in many “places” this night. “I don’t know. Hey, Penelli, what was the name of that place where we saw Dr. Merritt?”

Penelli shakes his head and stands up straight. His face is chalky. “I don’t know. Jeez, Brock, get me back to the ship. I’m sick.”

“You’re going to be a lot worse than sick, Penelli, if--” I break off suddenly. “What do you mean, you tried to pick her up? She’s an officer, mister, and shore leave or no shore leave, the regs stand.”

“We didn’t recognize her at first,” Brock puts in. “She had on this ... dress.” His eyes spark as he remembers. “That was some dress. Anyway, Penelli apologized, and she wasn’t mad or anything.”

“Where ... was ... she?” My patience is wearing thin. It was never very thick to begin with.

“It was like a bar, you know? Down on the wharf. They had seafood.” At this reminder, Penelli groans again. “I think it started with an O,” Brock finishes triumphantly. “Yeah. Ola something.”

Terrific. Ola is the Argelian word for sea, and half the bars on the wharf are Ola something. And they all serve seafood. No matter. It is more than I had to go on a moment ago. At least she was all right when they saw her.

“Okay. Get Penelli back to the ship before he passes out on you. And tell Mr. Spock--” *What?* “Never mind. I’ll talk to him when I get back.”

I start for the wharf, trying to run through the milling crowd. The fireworks have ended, and the jostling throng and lines of dancers block my way like clawing tentacles of seaweed. I can smell the waters of the wharf, and the aroma of food and decaying fish mingle with the acrid tang of liquor and too many bodies. No wonder Penelli was sick. If Randar is a cesspool, then its wharf is the foulest layer.

The line of bars stretches out before me endlessly. Every other one seems to begin with Ola. I start with the nearest one.

I try four before I see the old stone building. Ola Gnarr, the sign says. Sea Treasures. There are no windows, and the dim light makes it difficult to see. The bartender is not helpful.

“Did you see a woman come in here alone about half an hour ago? About so tall. Brunette. She may have been talking to two of my crewmen.”

He waves his arm toward the room. “Take your pick,

Fleeter. If she's gone, there are plenty of others. Or maybe your friends will share.”

I resist the urge to flatten him and start deeper into the dimness. A woman's laugh rings out from the dance floor, and I try to see who made the sound. Before I can locate her, I hear the clatter of a chair being overturned, and I see an Argelian man pull a seated woman up by the arm. She is dressed in something grey-blue and floating, and as she pulls away from him, I see her face. Lara's face.

She looks scared, but mad, too, and she slaps the Argelian. The sound cracks sharply before it is swallowed up in the general din. I push my way to the table, ignoring the people between us.

“Having trouble, Lara?”

“Oh, Jim.” The relief is clear on her face. “Let's get out of here, please. Take me back to the ship.”

The Argelian turns, head and shoulders above Lara's slim figure. His face is scowling, and the expression, along with the line of bone structure and square solidity of his body, tell me this is not merely an insistent pleasure-loving Argelian. One of the dregs, then, that turns up on wharves and in spaceports all over the galaxy, looking for good liquor, bad women, and bar brawls wherever they go. And generally finding them.

“Get lost, Fleeter,” he says. “I have a bargain with this shalna, and she's trying to back out of it.”

Shalna. *Whore.*

The action is almost reflexive. I hit him full in the solar plexus with all my weight behind it. He falls back, overturning the table, and comes up swinging the remains of a broken pitcher. It whistles through the air as I dodge away, and I shake off Lara's hand.

“Don't, Jim!”

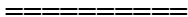
“Get out of the way, Lara.” I move back, maneuvering for room. The patrons have left the dance floor and are watching with interest. This could be nasty.

He kicks out at me, and I grab his ankle and heave his bulk across the open space. As he scrambles to his feet, I pull the communicator from my belt and throw it to Lara. “Get Scotty, and then have yourself beamed back to the ship.” As I throw, he hits me with a tackle, and the communicator flies into the crowd. I roll under his lunge, feeling the gritty floor peeling the skin off my face, and wonder where the broken pitcher is. I kick out, connect with something, and roll to my feet as he gets up again.

He comes at me with a roundhouse swing, and I step inside it, bringing the top of my head sharply up under his chin. He grunts and steps back, and I hit him with a double-handed blow at the muscled junction of neck and shoulder, and he drops to his knees.

I step back for an instant to clear my spinning head, and something very solid connects with the back of my skull. I

put my hands out to break the fall, and then there is nothing



Nothing but darkness, and something damp across my eyes. Blood? No. It's too cold. I put my hand up to touch it, and feel the restraining touch of warm fingers.

"Feeling better?" It is Lara's voice.

I sit up, and the cloth drops from my eyes. We are in a room somewhere. Not on the *Enterprise*, that's for sure. "Where are we?" The movement, or the words, or both, have set up a simultaneous ringing in my head and lurching in my stomach.

"My room. Lie down. How's your head?"

"Hurts like hell. What did he hit me with – a garbage scow?"

"Close. A piece of pipe."

I look at her face in the soft light from the lamp across the room, and think it's a face I could look at for a hundred years and never grow weary of. "Are you all right?" I ask her.

"Yes. Now."

"Why did you bring me here?"

"You looked like you needed a doctor." She smiles at me, a bittersweet smile. "And I didn't have much choice. I

couldn't find the communicator, and before the bartender hit you, he'd called the law. So I caught a skimmer and brought you here. By the way, you owe me a hundred credits."

"What for? Not that I'm ungrateful."

"Fifty for the bartender and fifty for the skimmer driver."

"They got to you, lady. The going rate is twenty-five."

"I didn't have time to haggle." She smiles again.

Ignoring the pounding in my head, I reach for her. Her kiss has no passion, only something tender and sad. She pulls away. "Don't, Jim."

I look at her soft profile. "I guess I've really loused things up for you, haven't I?"

"It takes two," she says, and gives a short, bitter laugh. "Sometimes three."

There doesn't seem to be anything I can say to that. She gets up and crosses to the window, drawing aside one of the draperies. "It's still going on down there. Don't they ever stop?"

"Not on Argelius. That's why I came looking for you."

"Did I say thank you?"

"No."

"Thank you. That makes twice you've come charging to the rescue." I know she is thinking of Banus V, and how

Spock and I searched her out in the night. Finally, without looking at me, she asks, “Is Spock – did he come with you?”

“No.” She has violated our unspoken agreement not to talk about him when we are alone together. Not since that first night have we acknowledged aloud the situation in which we find ourselves. We have ultimately come to believe in the illusion that if we didn’t put something into words, it didn’t exist.

“You didn’t tell him you were coming?” She looks at me in surprise.

“He knew.”

She considers this in silence, then leans her forehead against the window glass. There is a great weariness in the movement. “Tell me what to do.”

“I can’t.”

“I know that. But it would be such a luxury to have someone else run my life for a while. I don’t seem to be doing a very good job of it.” She moves away from the window to sit again on the edge of the bed. She takes my hand and traces the line of my knuckles with her finger.

“I love you, Jim. And I love Spock. It’s not supposed to work that way, but it did for me.” She looks at our intertwined fingers; I cannot see her face. “I think there’s got to be something wrong with a system,” she says, “that teaches its children the most important thing in the world is

to care about other people, and then tells them they can only care about one at a time.”

Something in her words kicks off a memory I didn't know I had – Spock standing in his quarters, saying “It is because I care about her...” And the peculiar deafness of anger that kept me from consciously hearing it. But I hear it now, and I think I begin to understand, dimly, what he is trying to do. But not why.

Somewhere in the city an ancient clock is chiming the hour, its sound clear over the street noises. “That’s the traditional signal, isn’t it?” she asks.

“For what?”

“For the end of the party. For the coach to turn back into a pumpkin.” She looks up at me and smiles. “Besides, I want to get back to the ship where I can really take a good look at that lump on your head.” She moves to the table and picks up a flat parcel. “I think I’d better change.”

She goes into the adjoining bathroom and closes the door, the action somehow saying as much as – or more than – her words have said. I swing off the bed and am pulling on my boots when I hear the commotion in the hallway, and rising over an unfamiliar voice are the outraged tones of Montgomery Scott.

Scotty. The rendezvous. I have forgotten it, and the determined engineer has no doubt had half the security department out tracking me down.

I open the door before the buzzer has a chance to sound. A plump Argelian is loudly protesting the decency of his establishment, while a skeptical Scotty is turning the air blue with his general denouncement of skimmer drivers and hostel clerks who work in league with the shalnas to relieve visiting Fleeters of their possessions. When he sees me, he stutters to a halt, his expression of relief mingled now with uncertainty.

“Captain Kirk!” he says. “We had the de’il’s ain time findin’ ye.”

“It’s all right, Scotty. I got ... involved.”

His glance goes over my shoulder, into the room, and from his expression and those on the faces of the security squad with him, I know what they are seeing, but I turn anyway. Lara, coming into the room, smoothing the skirt of her uniform and carrying her boots and hose in the other hand, looks up. The color drains from her face as she looks from Scott to me; then the lift of her chin tells me she’s prepared to gut it out.

Scotty pulls his eyes away from her to stare at me, and the color that comes into his face now is like an old bruise. He doesn’t say a word, but the expression on his face is more eloquent than any scathing speech his Gaelic tongue could have invoked. Finally he turns to the gawking security men and herds them gruffly away from the doorway.

“Come along now, lads. We’re hardly needed here, I think.”

They leave the room in an embarrassed silence, and Lara and I look at each other across a room that now seems a hundred miles wide.

>>>>> <<<<<<

LARA

>>>>> <<<<<<

How long we stand there, I cannot tell. Time is not linear in such moments; it coils and doubles back upon itself. It might have been moments, it might have been centuries. I have time to think on the irony of it, and to see its reflection in his eyes – that our private world should be shattered not in the peopled hive of the *Enterprise*, but here in a place we thought far from prying eyes and malicious tongues. A double irony at that, because this time of all times we have been together was innocent in fact if not in thought. If anyone was betrayed in this room, it was not Spock.

I am stunned out of my immobility by the insistent beep of my communicator, and when I reach for it, I find my hands are shaking and my voice is hollow as I respond. Uhura's voice is crisp and businesslike. "Dr. Merritt, please return to the ship at once. All shore leave has been cancelled."

Jim shoots me a look; I can respond only with a shrug. I have no more idea than he does what is going on.

He comes across the room and takes the communicator, and for an instant I am ready to snatch it back from him.

Scotty is no gossip, and if he chooses to instruct his men to forget what they saw ... or what they thought they saw ... there is some slight chance that this damning episode might go no further. I put my hand on his arm, mouth a silent “No!” at him, but he shakes off my restraining hand.

He is wearing his starship captain’s face and he wants to know *now* if something has threatened his ship, heedless of what the action might mean to his future command. “Lieutenant?” he questions sharply. “This is the Captain. What’s going on?”

There is an instant’s lull, a split second that might conceal a sharply indrawn breath or a swiftly understanding female mind. Then her voice comes through, trained and flawless and revealing no question. “We’ve received a priority one distress call from the Federation embassy on Parsus II, Captain. Shore parties have 30 minutes to respond before we break orbit. Do you wish to speak to Commander Spock, sir?”

A logical question, that, yet does it hold another tone?

“Negative. Alert the transporter room to lock onto these coordinates immediately. Two to beam up. Kirk out.” He snaps the communicator shut and in an automatic gesture returns in to his belt.

“I’m sorry, Lara.” He reaches out as if to touch me, but in that moment the transporter beam catches us, and the one totally illogical thought that zips through my mind is that I have left behind the Argelian dress.

The transport engineer does not meet Jim's eyes as we materialize on the ship. His face, turned studiously over the controls, is red, and he gives me a sly look as I step down off the platform.

Jim is out through the doors before they even stop moving, and I know he is on his way to the bridge. Some small cowardly corner of my soul admits I am glad I do not have to be there when he steps onto it and comes face to face with Spock. My own next meeting with my husband can at least be in the privacy of our quarters.

The room, when I reach it, is curiously out of kilter. It takes me a moment to identify why. It's a simple thing, really, once pinned down. It is only that Spock's Vulcan lyre is not in its accustomed place on the wall, but rather discarded carelessly in a chair. It is a jarring note in the otherwise severely neat room, and it speaks of some sudden interruption of his privacy; something so compelling that he put the lyre aside before the strings stopped sounding.

I pick up the instrument to return it to the wall, and as I do, I see the object on the desk. It's a narrow strip of leather less than a meter in length and about the width of my hand. I feel I should recognize it, but I don't. The ends are frayed, as though they had been cut, and it is stained with a faint white rime. I touch it tentatively, as if the action could tell me its history. It is curiously sinister, somehow, and I leave it where it is, placing the lyre in its proper place.

Still there is an air in the room that sets my teeth on edge, some psychic hangover with the resonance one sometimes has from walking over an old battlefield. A battlefield, yes, that's what this room was, and is – a place where two cultures clashed head-on, and in the resulting carnage it's impossible to determine who is victor and who is vanquished.

I cannot stay within these walls any longer. If there are to be stares and snide remarks, they must be met eventually. I have had my share of them in the last year; my armor has been built layer by layer. Perhaps I knew somehow all along that this test of its strength would eventually come. Like Spock, I have my anchor, and like his, mine is work.

Even though I am officially off-duty until tomorrow morning, I go down to sickbay. It is nearly 2100 by ship-time, and I am surprised to find both Dr. Sanchez and Nurse Chapel at work at the duty station. They look up at me, blue eyes and brown, and there is a chilling quality in Chapel's azure gaze. It is something I have not seen for nearly a year.

“Dr. Merritt,” Sanchez greets me. “I'm glad you're back. You and I are going to be quite busy until Dr. McCoy's replacement arrives, I'm afraid. Nurse Chapel and I have been trying to work out an equitable duty roster.” He goes on, but his words don't make sense to me.

“McCoy's ... replacement? But ... where is he?”

Sanchez halts in mid-sentence. “Oh. I forgot. You were on

... shore leave.” His dark face flushes. Among those few things in the galaxy which travel faster than the speed of light, gossip is quite possibly the fastest. “Dr. McCoy won’t be with us any longer. A great loss, I’m afraid. He was a fine surgeon.” He pushes the padd away. “If you’ll take a look at this, I’ll talk to you about it in the morning. Good night, ladies.”

He drifts away, a slight Latin shadow, a man of adequate skills, but by some quirk of personality or temperament, one who always seems on the outer fringes of any activity. A career officer, he always seems doomed to play a subordinate role, whatever the circumstances of his post. He was plainly made uncomfortable by my entrance, rather like a hostess who realizes too late that she has seated two implacable foes at the same table for dinner.

“Christine, what’s going on?” I ask when the doors have glided shut behind him.

“You tell me,” she says sharply.

“Will you stop talking in riddles and tell me where Dr. McCoy is?”

“I assume he’s on Argelius.”

“I thought all shore leave had been cancelled.”

“He isn’t on shore leave. He’s waiting for a commercial transport home.” She stumbles a little on that last word, closing her lips tightly over it as though it was a word she hadn’t intended to say. “He’s retiring. Quitting. Bailing out.

And if I had my time in, I would, too.”

“But why?”

“How can you ask that?” she flares. “*You*, of all people!” Then her face alters; she is looking back down corridors of time, going through doorways locked to me. “I’ve served with him for almost ten years. I’ve seen him stand up and fight every kind of illness you can name, and a hundred you couldn’t, and whip every one of them. Because he wouldn’t quit. Never.” She takes a deep and shaking breath. “You ought to be very proud of yourself, Dr. Merritt. You broke him. You infected this ship with a sickness there’s no cure for. He couldn’t cure it, couldn’t stop it, and rather than stay here and watch the corpse decay, he chose to leave.” She makes a sound that could be either a laugh or a sob, or both. “He always did hate autopsies.”

I am stunned by the ferocity of her attack. Whatever uneasy truce we had achieved is shattered now. By her light, I have not only stolen her grail, I have profaned it. There is no way I can tell her, nothing I can say that will convince her of the loneliness and the frustration and the effort upon effort I made until there was no more will left and I let the current take me.

When I do not answer her, she draws her dignity around her like a cloak and leaves the room, stiff-necked under the double yoke of anger and sorrow.

We are bound for Parsus II, straining at warp 8 to answer their chilling call for assistance. The planetary war brewing there for decades has erupted at last, catching in its violent net the very observers and diplomats sent there to stop it. At last report, they were trapped in a city under siege, and then, ominously, silence.

In the final hour before achieving orbit, Uhura tries unsuccessfully to raise them. Their continued radio silence is even more foreboding than their initial call for help.

I make a final check of the body function panel. It shows no discrepancies in the system of the young blonde ensign who lies on the diagnostic table. Farris was chosen to accompany the landing party, and I have a strong suspicion that his vague miasma of miscellaneous complaints has been suddenly engendered by that fact.

He has certainly shown no indication of ill health; his physiological responses are textbook perfect, and his libido is more than healthy – he keeps making meaningful remarks as I examine him. It is a problem every woman in medicine learns to sidestep early in her career, but this particular case is compounded by the fact that Farris was a member of the security squad which Scotty led on Argelius II.

“I’m certifying you fit for duty, Farris,” I tell him. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“Nothing an hour alone with you wouldn’t cure,” he smirks.

I ignore him and turn away to record the results of the exam in his file. It is then that I feel his hand high on the back of my leg. “Ensign,” I tell him with frost in my voice, “if you don’t move that hand, I’m going to break it off at the wrist.”

The hand drops; I hear him swinging off the table. “What’s the matter, Doc?” he asks. “Don’t I have enough rank for you?”

I turn sharply on him; if it would not mean total loss of control, I think I would slap him. “Consider yourself on report, mister.”

He gives a short, bitter laugh. “Somehow, Dr. Merritt, that doesn’t scare me much.”

“I’m not kidding, Farris. When you get back from your mission--”

“*Get back?*” His fair face reddens. “We’re not coming back! Not any of us! Why do you think your friend Captain Kirk gave this mission to Mr. Spock? It would be awfully convenient for the two of you, wouldn’t it, if your husband didn’t come back?”

This time, I do slap him, and the suddenness of the blow rocks him backward on his heels. “Get out of here, Farris.”

The expression in his eyes is chilling; he is about to speak when the doors slide open and Jim comes in. Farris looks at him, then at me, and shoulders past the captain. Jim raises an eyebrow at this breach of etiquette and starts to

call him down on it.

“Let it be, Jim.”

“What was that all about?”

“Nothing.” I can see he does not believe me, but he accepts it and makes no move to summon Farris back.

“I’m looking for Mr. Spock.”

“He isn’t here.”

“Obviously.” He turns to go; perversely, I call him back. I cannot believe what Farris has said, but I need a human voice to make the denial real.

“Jim – this mission. How dangerous is it?”

He comes across the room to stand within hand’s reach, and his face is grave, etched with tension. “Plenty,” he says. “We’ve been out of touch with them for nearly 36 hours. They could be anywhere on Parsus – or they could all be dead. But we’ve got to know, and get them out if they’re alive.”

“I want to go.”

“No.”

“You need a medic in the party.”

“Sanchez is going. It’s too dangerous for you.”

“But not for Spock?”

He looks at me for a moment, then at the doorway, as if

Farris were still standing there. He catches my shoulders. “What did he say to you?”

His sudden anger frightens me; when I don't answer, he gives me a shake.

“*What did he say?*”

“That you were ... that none of them would make it back alive. That you chose Spock to go because you hoped...”

The realization shakes him, and the strength goes out of his grip. “And you *believed* him?”

“*No!*” I don't mean to shout, yet somehow the room echoes with it. I lower my voice and try to control its tremor. “But Farris believes it. He was with Scotty at the hostel, Jim. He really believes you want Spock--” I can't say it. No more than I could plunge a knife into his chest. The words have done as well, both those said and those unsaid.

He drops his hands from my shoulders and paces the tight confines of the room. Finally he goes to the intercom and pages Spock. The response is slow in coming, and reluctance is in Spock's voice.

“I need to talk to you. Meet me in the main briefing room.” He cuts off the transmission before Spock responds, and when he leaves, I trail along behind him. As the doors of the turbolift slide open, he bars the entrance. “This doesn't concern you, Lara.”

“I think it does.”

He knows the truth of that. We are bound now like some unspeakable, impossible set of conjoined triplets, and nothing that any of us does can help but pull the other two along. He relents, and we walk together into the briefing room to find Spock already there.

I don't know what to expect from him; this is the first time I have seen him since returning from Argelius. I search his face, his posture, for some clue. It is a purely human expectation – surely there must be something there? Anger, jealousy, chagrin? Smugness, satisfaction? It was his idea, after all, that Jim and I go to Argelius together.

There is nothing there. Nothing but the air of fatigue he has worn for so long that it now seems part of his uniform. If he has slept in the past 36 hours, it was not in our quarters. He sits with his elbows on the tabletop, fingers templed, and acknowledges our presence. He does not appear to be surprised to see me here.

“I'm pulling you off the search party,” Jim says. No explanation. This particular wound is not one he wishes to expose.

“Circumstances require the presence of someone of command rank,” Spock counters. It is not a challenge. Not precisely. Yet the resonance between them is altered, charged, and even I can feel it.

“I'll take it, then. Or Scotty.”

“Captain, we have not been able to make contact with

Space Central on Parsus. *Enterprise* will be orbiting without clearance, and in view of the hostilities, she could well be fired upon by either side. In view of that possibility, neither you nor Mr. Scott should be absent.”

“You’ve had the con before when we were under attack.”

Spock looks at the tapering length of his fingers, then folds his hands together and lays them on the table. The symbolic flinging of the gauntlet?

“On those occasions,” he says slowly, “you were motivated by tactical considerations, or by circumstances beyond your control. This is neither. Your original assignment was the tactically correct one. Do not attempt to countermand it now. It is not worthy of you.”

I can restrain myself no longer. “Don’t you realize that half the crew thinks he’s sending you down there hoping you’ll be killed?”

He looks at me for the first time since we entered, and there is nothing in his gaze. Nothing. “Their opinions are of no importance. The captain is aware of his reasons, as am I. His initial decision was the proper one.”

“Mr. Spock, I am giving you a direct order--”

“Jim,” he says slowly, “Don’t.” His use of the name stops the captain cold. I have never heard him use it before, never heard quite that tone in his voice. Spock’s expression relaxes for the first time and there is something in his eyes almost like the ghost of a smile.

“It is unfortunate,” he says, “that Dr. McCoy did not himself see fit to leave a last set of orders.” The remark is cryptic to me, but obviously not to Jim. His head comes up, his posture relaxes slightly. His expression is not a smile, either. Not quite.

“You told me you never played that tape.”

“I believe it was Dr. McCoy who made that statement, Captain.”

It is a smile now, full and warming on Jim’s face. “All right, you stubborn Vulcan.”

“Pig-headed,” Spock amends.

“Yes.” Jim nods, remembering. “He would have.”

I am lost, shut out again by the memory they share. But whatever it is, I am thankful for it. The fog of emotion that threatened to crystallize into open conflict is gone; dissipated by the balancing force of a man who is no longer physically present, but whose understanding and compassion and love ... for both of them, I suddenly realize ... is still very much here.

“Just do one thing for me, Spock,” Jim says. “Get back safely.”

“I intend to.” He rises slowly, and I note that the tension is gone from his shoulders. “Will you accompany me to the transporter room? Both of you?”

They are still operating on some kind of unspoken

agreement; I can feel it even if I cannot identify its details.

“Yes,” Jim says, almost to himself. “An excellent suggestion.”

I find I have been maneuvered between them as we go into the corridor. It is a rather strange sensation; stranger yet is the sudden, light pressure of Spock’s hand seeking mine, not in the Vulcan manner, but in the Human one.

There is no break in the stride of either man as we approach the doors to the turbolift, and I suddenly realize it is not an oversight. We are not going to cross the deck to the transporter sealed in the car; we are going to walk the distance in the open corridors of the *Enterprise*. All three of us. Together. I’m not sure I wish to be paraded through the halls this way, like some spoil of war riding the victor’s chariot.

Spock’s hand tightens imperceptibly around mine; in some way he has anticipated my hesitation and is signaling me that he will not tolerate a scene. Jim flicks his glance my way quickly, looking for some sign, and I realize that he understood Spock’s purpose long before I did.

Very well. If I am to ride the chariot, it will be with pride. I move my hand under Spock’s grip, crossing my fingers with his, looking up at him. He gives me the barest nod, some flicker of a look I could call approval glowing briefly in his eyes. He lifts our hands to the precisely correct angle and slows his pace to match my own shorter stride. Jim slows, too, to remain even with us, and our journey seems

to take on some aspect of a royal progression. Heads do not turn, but I can feel the eyes of passing crewmen on us. Their unspoken thoughts are palpable in the air.

Scotty comes out of a corridor at right angles to us, and Jim speaks to him. Normally. As he would at any other time. There is just the barest hesitation in Scott's stride, then, wordlessly, he falls in with us, next to his captain.

Surely it is only my imagination that the corridor traffic is heavier than it would normally be. Even the grapevine takes a certain amount of time to begin to function at optimum efficiency. The trip to the transporter room, 30 seconds by turbolift, stretches to ten times that length.

The rest of the landing party is already assembled there, waiting on the transporter pads. Including Farris. He really does look ill, and I have a moment of second thoughts about his physical condition. He looks at the four of us as we come through the doorway, and a dull flush creeps up from his uniform collar. His jaw muscles are working, and I half expect him to blurt out some bitter charge.

Lieutenant Kyle steps back from the console, turning it over to Engineer Scott, and hands Spock his gear. Spock removes his hand from mine to take the equipment, and I have to restrain an urge to embrace him. It would not only be in poor taste, it would embarrass him unmercifully. Still, the urge is there.

He pauses, slipping the tricorder strap over his head, and gives me a look of surprise as if the force of the thought

has touched him. He mounts the transporter platform rather hastily – for him – still settling the strap across his chest and clipping the communicator to his belt. He checks the other landing party members quickly and gives Jim a brief nod. “Ready, Captain.”

Jim looks at him for a long moment, deciding something. Then he says it. “Good luck, Mr. Spock. And remember what I said.”

“I trust we shall not have to rely on luck. And I shall remember.”

Kyle shoots a questioning glance at Scotty, who responds with an almost imperceptible shrug. *I dinna ken wha’ they’re talkin’ aboot half the time*, the shrug says. *Ye ken how it is wi’ those two*.

“Energize,” Jim orders, and as the familiar whine begins, the six figures turn to sparkles of shimmering light, and then are gone.

Part 4

=====

KIRK

=====

I don't like this. Not any of it. Spock's initial report was typically terse – the embassy was abandoned, and they have commenced search operations for the members of the Federation contingent which sent the distress call. His last message was even more disturbing – “Captain, we are under fire. I am deploying the landing party to sheltered areas and will contact you when the barrage has terminated.”

That was over 90 minutes ago, and we have had no further communication from the surface of Parsus II. I swivel the chair around to face Uhura's board. “See if you can raise them,” I tell her.

“Yes, sir.”

The expression on Lara's face does nothing to reassure me. She is standing within arm's reach of the chair, in precisely the same spot where McCoy has stood hundreds of times during some major or minor crisis, and the look she wears is such a close duplicate of his that it should be funny. I fail to find it amusing.

Uhura shakes her head, the golden hoops dancing in her earlobes. “I'm not getting any re-- Just a moment, sir. Something's coming through now.” She listens intently, but her expression does not lighten. “No. It's from Space Central on Parsus.”

“Put it on audio.”

The controller's voice is weary. “Space Central to

Enterprise,” it says through the crackle of static. I hope it’s static, and not the background sound of explosions.

“This is *Enterprise*. We’ve been requesting clearance to orbit for some time.”

“Sorry, *Enterprise*. Things are a bit hot down here. State your intentions, please.”

“We are responding to a priority one distress call from the Federation Embassy. We are currently maintaining synchronous orbit over the city of Nyghos at 900 kilometers and have dispatched a search party to the surface. Request permission to maintain orbit.”

“You are cleared for that purpose. What is your estimated time to break orbit?”

“Undetermined, Central. We are out of contact with the party. What is the status in Nyghos?”

“The city is under attack by Selican ground forces. Communication has been disrupted, and we are currently--” A burst of static cuts through the transmission, and Uhura snatches out the earpiece with one hand while the other plays over the board.

“Come in, Central. Your transmission was terminated. Say again, please.” There is no response to her repeated attempts. Finally she turns to me. “Sorry, Captain. I can’t make contact.”

“Keep trying. And stay with trying to raise Spock.”

Nothing to do now but wait. That's the hardest part. Always has been.

Where are they? Just sitting here isn't accomplishing anything. Ought to be something we could do. All the technology in the Federation at my fingertips, and what good is it?

Where the hell are they?

"Captain?" Uhura is looking at me, a question on her face.

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"Did you say something, sir?"

"No, Lieutenant. Carry on."

"Yes, sir."

Did I? Possibly. Lousy habit, talking to yourself. Got to stop it, Kirk. They'll lock you up.

The minutes crawl by with agonizing slowness; we have been out of contact with Spock for over two hours. The bridge is so quiet I can hear my own heart beating. Lara reaches out and touches the back of my chair.

"They'll be all right," I tell her. I wish I could believe it. The magician's hat a starship captain is supposed to keep handy is empty. There are no more rabbits to pull out of it.

The sound is so sudden it makes us all jump. Heavy with interference, it rips through the open speakers with an unmistakable urgency.

“*Enterprise!* Acknowledge!”

“This is *Enterprise*.” Uhura’s voice is efficient as always as she responds.

“Lieutenant Kim. Five to beam up. Have a medic--” The static crashes through again, but it’s enough.

“Did you get the coordinates?”

“Yes, sir. Feeding them to the transporter room now.”

Lara is two jumps ahead of me as I start for the turbolift. “Have a medical team meet us in the transporter room,” she flings over her shoulder. “Tell them to haul ass!”

She doesn’t speak as the car carries us to the transporter room, but I know her thoughts are the same as mine. *Five to beam up*. Where is the sixth man? And who is he? Why Kim instead of Spock, unless...

No. I won’t consider that now.

We almost collide with the medical team as we step out of the turbolift. They are – as Lara ordered – hauling it. The efficiency of the transporter and its crew is so great that the process is nearly finished by the time we get there. The forms on the pad are gaining substance, and only one wears the Starfleet uniform – Lieutenant Kim.

He is supporting a woman who wears the standard green jumpsuit of an embassy team, as do the other three transportees. One of them collapses as the transporter effect loses its hold, and the technicians scoop him onto the

gurney.

“Lieutenant Kim – what about the others?”

“They’re still trying to locate the ambassador and the rest of her party, sir,” he says, handing the woman over to one of the technicians.

Lara is mother-henning her charges toward sickbay, and I take Kim to the briefing room where his report can be taped. He is brief and lucid; Kim is not a man easily rattled. The embassy, he reports, was abandoned when the party beamed down, and the city was under attack. Shields were down in several places and severely weakened in others. Communication was almost totally disrupted by the attacking Selicans, who were attempting – successfully, he adds – to keep the Nyghos air and space forces from retaliating.

In a nearby shelter, the landing party discovered a native member of the ambassador’s staff, who reported that the Federation party had taken groundcars and attempted to reach a Nyghos military base about 50 kilometers out of the city. The landing party commandeered another groundcar and went after them, but less than 10 kilometers out of the city had discovered the wreckage of the cars and the four staff members now aboard the *Enterprise*.

Spock had ordered Kim to remain there and continue trying to raise the ship while the rest of the rescue party searched the area. It was nearly 30 minutes before he could do so.

I log his report and go back to the bridge, but there is no news there. The anxiety is so thick you can taste it, and as end of watch approaches, the off-duty crew members seem reluctant to leave. They are proprietary of their positions, and no one wants to be absent when the news – good or bad – comes through.

I have seen the phenomena before. Or is it something more, something different this time? I can sense the same sidelong looks, the same nervous anticipation that was in the air when news of McCoy's retirement flashed through the ship. There are the same unvoiced questions, the same perversely human desire to touch the exposed circuit just to see if it's hot. It is not as intense, however, as it was before Spock made his bold statement with that walk through the ship.

Spock. What must it have cost him to run that gauntlet of eyes? He had to defy every shred of the Vulcan ironclad tradition of privacy to make that walk. But he pulled it off. He really did.

And Lara. A low blow, to pull that on her with no warning. Or did she know? As soon as Spock asked us to go with him to the transporter room, I knew what he really meant. Maybe she did, too. She came through with her spine stiff and her chin up, just as she would have stared Scotty down in that hostel room on Argelius.

But was it enough? Did our walk through the fire buy us anything? For a while, it seemed as though perhaps it had.

But the longer we are out of contact with the searchers, the thinner the crew's trust grows.

They are considering, perhaps, the thought Farris has planted. It would not be the first time, certainly, that a commander has used his power to dispose of a rival. There is, after all, ample historical precedent. King David. Uther Pendragon. Even Colonel Green, if you believe the stories. Not a particularly honorable group to be classified with.

Beat it, old bones! You're dead and gone to dust, and I've got no room for you in my mind or on my bridge. I have other things to do. Like checking on the condition of the party we beamed aboard.

Instead of answering my question, Lara counters by asking me to come to sickbay. Bones used to do the same thing whenever he had bad news. The expression on her face when I arrive at sickbay tells me to expect the worst, but the worst as I anticipate it isn't half the total.

"You've got to get the landing party back to the ship," she announces.

"Why?"

"The Selicans are playing a very dirty little game down there, Jim. It's called germ warfare – and our people are right in the middle of it."

"Are you sure?"

She sits down at the desk and pushes a data chip across the surface. "You want autopsy reports? Two of those people

we beamed back are already dead, and the other two are dying.” She swings the chair around so that her back is to me. “Sometimes I think we’d be better off back in the caves, throwing rocks at each other. You can *see* rocks, at least. This thing...” Her voice trails off.

“What are they using?”

“*Lymphococcus darvii*. Ever heard of it?” She goes on, not waiting for my answer. “It’s an airborne virus – colorless, odorless, tasteless – completely undetectable unless you’re scanning for it. It settles in the lymph nodes and mutates elements in the bloodstream. The body defense mechanisms goes mad and cannibalizes its own red blood cells. Technical cause of death is oxygen starvation. Not that it matters to the victim what the technical cause was.”

“And the landing party?”

She swings around to face me, and her expression is pale and drawn. “They were infected with the first breath they took on Parsus. There is an immunizing agent, but it has to be administered within six hours of exposure, or it’s totally ineffective.”

“Lieutenant Kim?”

“He’ll be all right. I gave him the IMT as soon as I knew what we were up against.”

“Suppose Sanchez recognized the symptoms--” I begin.

“Suppose he did?” she says, and she raises her voice for the first time, pushing out of the chair. “He had no IMT,

and no way to synthesize any. If they aren't immunized in two hours – less than that now – they ... will ... die. All of them.”

“All right. We'll get them back. Somehow.”

“How? We don't know where they are, we can't contact them--”

“Then we'll *find* them. Kim and I can beam down to where we picked him up.”

“I'm going with you.”

“No. If we can't make contact with the ship, we'd be stranded, too.”

I hope for acceptance; I expect argument. What I get is neither. Instead, she looks at me with a cold and level gaze.

“Then why are you going, Jim?”

“*Why?*” The frustration and tension of the last hours flares up in my voice. “Dammit, Lara, you just said--”

“I said they had to be brought back to the ship. Lieutenant Kim could head a search party. And he could take the IMT down so Dr. Sanchez can immunize them even if they can't get back in time. So why are you planning to go?”

“Those people are my responsibility!”

“Is that all?”

“Isn't that enough?”

“It would be, most of the time. Not this time. You've got to

go down there because you feel you've got to prove Farris was wrong. You'll find them and get them back safely because you have to. Not for Spock, not for the rest of the crew, but for yourself. For that damn crazy code of honor you've got all tangled up with those stripes on your sleeve."

Her shot is too close for comfort. She sees too much, this woman. There is no point in even denying it. "If you see that, then you know why I have to go."

"I never said you didn't," she replies softly. "But grant me my own kind of honor, too. Jim, if you go, and if you can't find them in time... Don't you see, I'll always wonder if maybe my being there wouldn't have made a difference."

She toys with the data chip, her eyes on the desk. Her words are slow in coming, and I can feel the struggle she is having. "There's a ... thing ... between Spock and me. It's strongest when..." She colors and her voice trails off. Then she pushes her hand through her dark hair and goes on. "I can't explain it, exactly. He knows, sometimes, what I'm thinking. What I'm feeling. On Banus, when I was searching for that baby ... I called out to him for help. And he came. You both did. But how ... didn't you ever wonder how he knew where to look?"

I remember his actions on that night – his statement that he knew she was in trouble long before the rest of us even suspected it; the compulsive drive that took us through that rain-whipped night. He, too, spoke of a link, and its force

was enough to drive him into a kind of frenzy I have seldom seen.

“Spock said something ... about a link. He didn’t want to explain it, and I didn’t press him.”

“I don’t think he *could* explain it. I can’t. It’s just something that ... happens, sometimes. If I can make it happen again – if he knows I’m on Parsus and trying to get to him... I have to try, Jim. I owe him that much. We both do.”

The web of lives crossed, of debts unpaid, of thanks never voiced and trusts violated, are heavy in the room. She has never asked for special favors, never called on our relationship for anything more than what we freely gave to one another. There is only one answer I can give her now.

“Can you be ready in five minutes?”

She looks up at me, and breaks into a grin, like the sun after a storm. “Four,” she says.

She is as good as her word; better, in fact. When I get to the transporter room with the rest of the party, she is already there. She injects the IMT with a quiet efficiency as I give Kyle his orders at the transporter.

“Hold our beamdown coordinates,” I tell him. “If we lose contact with the ship, I want that area monitored constantly. Any humanoid life form that stays within the area more than five minutes is to be beamed up.”

He nods, then a question crosses his face. “But, sir, what if

it's not one of our people?"

"Then you apologize profusely, Mr. Kyle, and put them right back where you found them."

"Yes, sir."

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LARA

>>>> <<<<<

As visual perception begins on Parsus, I have a moment of near-panic. Jokes about being materialized "inside solid rock" are frequent; though the transporter override is supposed to prevent that, there are always rumors. All I can see, all I can sense, is rock. Black and menacing, crushing in its immensity.

As my vision clears, I can see we are in a narrow canyon, split by a twisting road. The rock face rises on one side as sheer as the face of a building; on the other it is a tumbled mass of boulders and overhangs. The walls must rise nearly a hundred meters on either side of us, obscuring all but a tiny ribbon of metallic lavender sky. The eerily filtered light even gives our skin a purplish tint. I catch Jim staring at me and know I must look as ghastly to him as he does to me.

"Nice little place you've got here, Kim," he says.

Lieutenant Kim, who was mentally prepared for the psychotic landscape, is able to grin. "Thank you, sir," he

says. "I'm thinking of opening a resort right over there."

He motions at the two twisted groundcars. From the scars on the rocky wall, it appears that one car, negotiating a sharp curve, must have spun into the stone face and then into the path of the second car.

"I see you've got the foundations in already," Jim quips. He pulls out the communicator, but the interference is so heavy he isn't able to cut through to the ship. He changes frequencies and calls Spock, with no better luck, then gives me a look that says, "It's all yours."

He turns to Kim. "Where was the search party going to look?"

Kim motions at the sloping wall. "That wall is honeycombed with caves. The ambassador and her party were going to try to hide out there until dark."

Jim looks at the wreckage of the groundcars, then back at Kim. "So they just left the others here?" His expression is so readable I don't need a link – *And these are the kind of people I'm risking two ground parties to save?*

Kim is as embarrassed by his telling the story as if he had been part of the decision. "The ones they left weren't able to travel. I guess they thought--"

"Never mind. If we don't get off these coordinates, Kyle's going to beam us back up."

I have been scanning for virus traces, and the readings confirm what I already knew. The airborne infection is

present here, too. Even knowing that we have been immunized, I find myself almost hesitant to voluntarily draw the deadly atmosphere into my lungs.

“Here, too?” Jim asks.

I nod. “We’ve got an hour and 45 minutes to find them. And that’s pushing our luck. If they’ve been climbing – exerting themselves – the body metabolism speeds up, and the virus will act that much faster.”

He eyes the sloping, boulder-strewn wall. “If they climbed that, you can bet they were exerting themselves. It’s quite a haul. Can you make it?”

The words are out before I can stop them. “I could do it standing on my hands.”

He stops in mid-turn, looking back at me through time as well as space. Finally, he says, “You know, I think you could.”

I tell myself to think of Spock, to push the other thoughts from my mind. Nothing is to be gained by remembering anything else. Jim has gone on to other concerns; his mind is more disciplined than mine, even when someone is trying to sabotage his thought processes.

“Spread out going up the bank,” he says. “Try to keep visual contact, and don’t get so disoriented you can’t get back here. Check any cave entrance you find, but don’t go so deep you can’t see the entrance. If you can’t find them within the next 90 minutes, report back to the beam-up

point. Dr. Merritt, you come with me.”

The men spread out along the base of the sharp slope and we begin to climb. The footing is treacherous, and I am soon using both hands and feet to make any progress. Jim quickly gains several meters on me. He turns, putting his back to the slope, and tries to raise Spock on the communicator as I catch up. When that fails, he shouts, and the rock walls bounce his voice back at him in a cacophony of jumbled sounds.

He slides down the slope and gives me a hand up. “You’re throwing yourself off balance,” he says. “Hug the rock and push yourself up with your legs. You’re pulling with your arms.”

“This is a hell of a time for climbing lessons.”

We scramble up the slope to a narrow ledge. What had appeared to be just a darker patch on the face of the rock now reveals itself as a cave entrance, but no one is there. When the ledge narrows and then disappears, we climb again. I can feel the pulse pounding in my temples, and I gulp the thin air hungrily, all thoughts of its contamination gone now.

I am desperately aware that our time is running out. We enter cave after cave with no luck, and though we can hear the echoes of the voices of the other searchers, there is no answer from Spock.

Come on, Spock. Please. You’ve got to hear me.

What if it doesn't work? What if there never was a link – or, if there was ... what if it's not there any longer? Or what if he chooses not to acknowledge it?

No. There *is* a link. It's there. It's always been there, from that first violent coupling on Vulcan right down to the moment he stepped onto the transporter pad to keep me from giving in to that frivolous human impulse I unwittingly transmitted to him. He's always been there, in the corners of my mind, testing, observing, experiencing my emotions...

And if he has? Then he has known from the beginning what was happening between his wife and his captain.

Why, Spock? Why? If you saw it coming, why did you let it happen?

And the answer – from my memory? From his mind?

I thought it would please you.

The realization comes like a hammer-blow, with such force that it literally shakes me. I miss my footing, claw at a rock outcropping that comes away in my hand, and slide backwards, tumbling. The rocks cut through the skin of my hands and legs, and I call out – not for Jim. For Spock. With my voice, with my mind, with every nerve and fiber.

It is not his hands that stop my fall – it is another narrow ledge. Jim comes sliding down after me in a controlled fall of his own. Even in this eerie light, his face is ashen.

“I'm all right, Jim.”

“The hell you are.” He takes my hands, turns up the bleeding palms. “I’m sending you back to the ship.” He tries the communicator again, without success. “Can you get back to the bottom without breaking your neck?”

“No.”

“Then I’ll take you down.”

“No! I’m not going back without Spock.”

“Don’t be a fool, Lara!”

“Why not? I’ve done pretty well with it up until now.”

He gives me a sharp, distracted glance as he breaks open the medikit, but chooses not to respond to the remark. “Give me your hand,” he snaps, opening a packet of regatril.

“I’m not going back,” I tell him again.

“Let’s argue about it later. Give me your hand.” He spreads the cream on the cuts and watches in approval as it foams up, stopping the bleeding and anesthetizing the wounds. “Other hand.”

“They’ll get you for practicing medicine without a license,” I tell him.

“That’s McCoy’s--” he begins, and then breaks off sharply. “Sit down so I can do your legs.”

His touch is familiar and comforting, but as he finishes, the adrenalin begins to drain out of my system and I can feel

the shaky beginnings of shock.

He looks at me critically. “Lara, I want you to go back to the ship. We’ve been looking for nearly an hour. I can’t look for Spock and watch out for you at the same time. The link ... whatever it is, doesn’t appear to be working.”

“Yes, it is! I can--”

He makes a quick gesture for silence, scanning the sky. “Come on.” He pulls me to my feet and toward a narrow niche leading off the ledge. The rock overhang that juts out from it throws the opening into a narrow band of shadow. In a moment, I can hear what he has already heard – the drone of an engine.

A patrol skimmer appears in the narrow ribbon of sky, working its way down the length of the canyon, hovering a few meters above the sheer opposite wall. Half a kilometer up the canyon from us, it pauses, then rises into the air before loosing a phaser bolt. The sound of sliding rocks echoes up the length of the ravine. The pilot holds the craft steady until the dust of the rockfall has died, then continues his passage toward us.

In a few moments, he has passed out of sight along the canyon’s rim, and in a tight voice, Jim calls into the communicator for the landing party members to report. There is only static, then a portion of a word in a voice that sounds like Kim’s, then static again.

“Damn,” he says softly. “Selican patrols. If they sighted

Spock--”

“They have yet not done so, Captain.”

The sound of Spock’s disembodied voice makes my heart jump in mingled surprise and relief. His feet appear over the edge of the overhang above the niche, then the rest of his lanky frame as he lowers himself from the ledge.

“Although they know someone is here somewhere.” He continues his explanation, unruffled by his unorthodox entry. “One of their ground patrols spotted the groundcar we came in and appropriated it. It would now appear they have seen at least part of your patrol. That complicates things considerably.”

“Spock! You knew we were here?”

“You were hardly attempting to keep it a secret, Captain.”

I break a spray hypo out of the medikit clumsily; between the cuts on my palms and the anesthetizing effects of the regatril, my hands feel like lumps of foam rubber.

“IMT,” Jim says to his questioning look. “The Selicans are using a viral agent.”

“Dr. Sanchez assumed as much, but he was unable to isolate it with the equipment at hand.”

“Where are the others? Did you find the ambassador?”

“Yes. They are not far from here. Since we could not reach the *Enterprise*, we felt it prudent to stay out of sight.”

Jim looks at the sky. “And we blew your cover. Sorry, Spock.”

Spock quirks an eyebrow at him in an expression I have not seen in weeks. “That is a somewhat colorful, but essentially accurate statement, Captain, if I understand the term correctly.”

Jim grins at him with relief written in his eyes. “Kyle is monitoring the area around the wrecked groundcars. If you’ll get your party down there, they’ll be beamed up. I’ll round up my people and meet you there.”

He nods and starts to leave. “Wait!” I tell him. “I’m going with you. Your people haven’t been immunized yet.”

Spock looks at my rock-scraped legs, then takes one hand and turns it palm up. The touch has the force of an electric shock, and I can feel the touch of his mind, like a moth’s wing. “It was very foolish of you to come,” he says.

“That’s part of my charm,” I tease him. Then, seriously, “You know why I did.”

His eyes meet mine for a long moment; I can feel his mind probing again. Finally he says, “Yes.” I know that is as much of an admission as I am likely to get. The link is something we have never discussed. To admit this much, especially in front of another, is a considerable breach of the privacy he closes around himself.

He returns to examining my hands. “It is a very difficult climb, Lara. You could not make it in your present

condition. Please go back with the captain. I will take the IMT, and Dr. Sanchez can administer it.” He closes his hand over mine.

I have no more stomach for argument. “All right. Tell him it’s *Lymphococcus darvii*. He’ll know the dosage.”

He turns to Jim, still holding my hand. “See that she gets down safely.” Their eyes lock for a moment, and their mutual acknowledgement is as clear as it would have been if Spock had physically placed me in Jim’s arms.

“I will,” he says.

The descent is considerably faster than the climb, but it is still rough going. By the time we reach the cliff base, my hands have broken open and are bleeding again. Spock has taken the medikit, so there’s nothing I can do about it.

“Stand over there by the groundcars,” Jim instructs me. “Kyle will beam you up in a few minutes. I’ve got to check on the others.”

When he has gone, I climb a few feet up the base of the cliff, hoping I am out of the perimeter Kyle is scanning. I have no intention of beaming up until I see Jim and Spock back safely.

The skimmer makes another pass, and I hug against a boulder. If his sensors spot me, he gives no indication. My hands are throbbing, my knees are beginning to itch, and I sincerely wish we were all back on the *Enterprise* and a million miles away from this planet. I am exhausted, and I

wonder about Jim and Spock, still straining against time and the cliff, worrying about the Selican patrol, fighting the thin atmosphere.

It is very quiet in the canyon, and for the first time in many months, I feel totally alone. Then, somewhere from the back of my mind, comes a presence, and I know it is Spock's. It is there only for a moment, and again I know without knowing why, that he is absorbed in the task at hand and must return his total concentration to it. But the loneliness is gone now, and the time passes more quickly.

It is perhaps 20 minutes before a slide of pebbles cascades down the slope, and I turn to see him coming down the rocky cliff face in the same kind of controlled slide Jim had used earlier.

“I thought you were beaming up.”

Before I answer, he spots Jim and the rest of the landing party coming up the road, and goes out to meet them. The quickness in his stride reveals some further anxiety. They are out of earshot, but I can see Jim scanning the skies and then making a gesture at a rocky overhang ten meters up the slope.

Jim gives me an annoyed look as they approach. “I told you to beam up,” he says sharply.

“There's trouble, isn't there?”

“You bet there's trouble. Spock spotted a ground patrol coming up the canyon. Now get over there to the beam-up

point. You, too,” he says, gesturing at the men in his patrol.

As we are waiting for the pickup, I see Dr. Sanchez’ party making its way down the slope, and I step out of the perimeter. “Let Sanchez take the ambassador’s party up first. They’re all ill.”

He looks up at the slow progress Sanchez’ men are making with the ambassador and the two remaining members of her party. “All right. Kim, take two men and get up there to help.”

The skimmer makes another slow pass, and this time it cannot help but spot us, though no one makes any move toward cover. Spock catches me eyeing it warily and explains. “His phasers are not powerful enough to carry this far, and he cannot maneuver safely within the canyon. The ground party plans to do the job for him.” He turns to Jim. “The Captain, however, has other plans. Shall we go?”

They start down the base of the cliff toward the overhang as Kim and Sanchez and the rest of the party enter the beam-up perimeter. I can hear the rumble of the heavy groundcars the Selicans are using, and hope we can all get out before they come into phaser cannon range. The vanguard of the ground force appears around a twist in the road, and Jim and Spock scramble up the face of the cliff.

Positioning themselves with Spock above and Jim to one side of the overhang, they level their phasers at it. For a moment, nothing happens, and I can see the armored crawlers rolling up behind the vanguard. Then with an

echoing roar, the massive rock jumble breaks loose from the cliff face, rolling down the slope as the vanguard scrambles for cover.

They come back at a run, and Jim's face wears a wide grin. "That should keep them busy for a while," he says. "Sanchez, when you get on board, tell Kyle to beam up the second party right away. That slide won't stop them long."

Sanchez nods as he begins to shimmer out, and then there are only eight of us left in the canyon. The phaser cannon of the crawlers begins battering at the massive slide Jim and Spock have produced, and Jim shifts impatiently, motioning the rest of us onto the site.

"Go on, Lara."

"I'll beam up with you two."

Both their voices are rich with impatience, but the beam takes the rest of the second party as they walk toward me. The last of the barricade vaporizes under the onslaught of the Selican phasers, and Jim and Spock exchange glances. Apprehension is clear on Jim's face.

Suddenly, the ground pitches under us, and a blinding glare of light spills through the canyon as a monstrous rumbling seems to fill the air. I feel a hand jerking at my elbow; I am thrown hard against the rock wall with a lean and muscular form pressing against my back. The roar continues unbelievably long, though it must be only a few seconds in reality. Pebbles and larger rocks bounce against us as the

ground shakes and Spock's arms arch over both of us.

Now the rumbling stops, though the air is still filled with swirling dust and small bouncing stones. I look frantically for Jim. There is no sign of him anywhere. Just a massive cairn of rock at the spot where he and Spock had been standing moments before.

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SPOCK

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This is madness. I have made the wrong decision. Lara was farther from me, out of the direct path of the rockfall initiated by the crawler's phaser. It was Jim I should have pushed out of the way, and my alternative action has quite probably cost his life. Even as I begin to claw at the still-settling boulders, I cannot help but ask myself again – what is this woman, that she can so effortlessly abrogate all my training and discipline?

I have the answer almost at once; she is beside me, wrestling with rocks half again her size, her hands staining them with blood that spouts anew from the shredded flesh.

“Get back to the ship!”

“No. Not while there's still a chance!”

The avalanche has blocked the Selicans' view of us; it will be some minutes before they are within visual range. If that is enough time ... and if Kyle does not extend the

perimeter and beam us up before we find the captain...

I uncover a patch of sleeve, then a hand. Both are soaked with blood, but Lara finds a faint pulse. "He's still alive!"

The words push us both to an even greater effort, and in seconds we have uncovered the still and bleeding form. I pick him up, and for the first time in years send a silent prayer to Cas, or whatever deity this planet holds, that I am not doing more damage than has already been done. The perimeter of the monitored site is only strides away; it seems like parsecs. Lara looks up at me, and her face is ashen and strained with the emotions she cannot control.

"I do not know," I tell her, and then the beam takes us.

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Dr. Sanchez is not a happy man. In his brief tenure as Chief Medical Officer of the *Enterprise*, he has been presented with more crises and situations calling for expertise both in technical skill and command capability than had ever been his lot under Dr. McCoy.

He takes one look at us as we come into sickbay and pales under his olive complexion. It is Nurse Chapel who appraises the situation and directs an assistant to tend to Lara while the captain's far more critical injuries receive first priority.

"I'll let you know," she says. "We'll do what we can," she adds. Unnecessarily, but I do not point that out.

There are other matters to attend to as *Enterprise* breaks

orbit. Debriefings, a report on the situation on Parsus, verification of the use of viral agents – a petty problem for Federation authorities to stew over when the conflict is ended and a victor ... or survivor ... is declared – official death notifications pertaining to the diplomatic party, both for those already dead and those who will undoubtedly be so by morning.

It is a bitter irony that there will be no survivors of the ambassador's party. For all the good we have done on this mad mission, we would have been as well off to ignore their distress call. Better off, for had we stayed at Argelius, the man I name friend would not now be fighting for his life.

How could I have made such a mindless error? It would be a simple thing to blame Lara; had she not been there...

No. The fault, the misjudgment, was mine. Her presence there was the random factor and should not have altered my prime responsibility to my captain and ship. I have known for some time that Lara's presence alters my responses to any given situation; it was and is my responsibility to compensate for that tendency.

I finish the last of the paperwork and get it ready for dispatching over subspace radio, gathering up several items Jim has left. His desk is piled with the paperwork he hates. It is the only facet of command he clearly and consistently despises, and he has a tendency to postpone it until it threatens to overwhelm him. When the input reaches what

he calls critical mass, he barricades himself in the office and pushes half a dozen clerical yeomen to the brink of mutiny as he levels the pile.

That point is obviously approaching, from the look of his desk. As I reach for the intercom to summon a courier for my reports, I dislodge a folder from the stack, and the whole tottering tower slides to the deck. As I gather up the folders, I spot my own personnel file.

I put it in the stack myself, 24 hours ago. It contains my request to be relieved of active duty as quickly as possible. Now I weigh the folder in my hand.

Command, at the moment, is mine. I can forward this without his signature, on my own pro tem authority. If he does not survive, he will never see it. If he lives, it will be weeks before he is ready to assume command, more weeks before the request is acted on, and I cannot wait that long. T’Pau’s demands grow too strong. Already I have pushed her to the limits of her considerable patience.

The folder grows heavy in my hand.

That is nonsense. It is no heavier than it ever was. It is only a routine request, after all. I initial the form and mark it eyes only, then call the courier and put it out of my mind.

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It is quiet in my quarters, quieter than it has been for some time. There are certain disadvantages to sharing one’s living space. That will soon be something I no longer have

to tolerate. And my consciousness will be my own again, too. There will be no thought link to allow the raw emotions of a non-Vulcan to interrupt my concentration and clamor for my attention. All will be as it was before.

That is a fallacy, and I know it for one. For the rest of our lives, Lara will be able to contact my mind whenever she wishes to do so. Does she know that? I doubt it. She understands the workings of the link only vaguely. Like a child with a toy too advanced for her, she turns it over in her mind, randomly poking buttons and remembering the responses without any real understanding of what they mean.

If she did understand it, if she could control it properly, she would have known it was not necessary to transport down and then make that hazardous climb. The compelling nature of the marital link is second only to the *pon farr* drive; it can operate across half a galaxy.

Parted from me and never parted. Never and always touching and touched. She understands those words only on the Human level, never on the Vulcan one. What would she do right now, at this moment, if I called her through the link? Would she understand the drive that could pierce through her anesthetized sleep and pull her from sickbay with its undeniable force? No. She would not. And it is not a toy to be played with flippantly. Its full force could shatter a Human mind.

Lara had some inkling of that force at our first joining.

Even though her mind is strong and quick and well-disciplined for a Human, she took refuge in unconsciousness. I could have followed even into that sanctuary, but at a cost I do not care to consider. It was better for both of us that I let her go then, as I am attempting to let her go now.

Lara, why could you not be content with a Human mate? Why do you continue to pursue something you only vaguely understand, and turn your back on one who is your match in every way? You both have such a zest for life, you and Jim. Such an untrammelled joy in the gifts of each moment. And you would be good for him if he would only allow it. You would take away his frustrations and failures and fears, and replace them with something vital and courageous. I know you could; you have done it for me. But I have nothing to give you in return, and he does.

I feel you stirring now in your sleep. Are you dreaming? I could see that dream, if I wanted to. I think I will not try. Some things are best left unshared. Most things, in fact

What time is it? Strange that I should have lost track; I seldom do. But then, I have done many things this day that I seldom do. It is late, the quiet rhythm of the ship's night tells me that. How long does it take, I wonder, for a man to live or die? Longer for him than for many others, I think. Because I have never known him to admit defeat.

These Humans personify death as a stooped, robed figure with the grinning face of a skull. He would meet that

macabre vision standing upright, head raised, wearing that anticipatory half-smile of the warrior. Death is a foe he has seen before. Defeated before. Knows that it waits for him somewhere, but refuses to be cowed by the knowledge.

This is no end for a warrior – strapped down on a table in a sterile room, life ebbing slowly away. It is not what he would choose.

Choice. It is a fallacy to think such a thing even exists. We are all bound, by physical reality on one side and cultural expectations on the other. And we tiptoe on the narrow margin between them and call ourselves free.

I find myself staring at the intercom, willing it to light with Sanchez' voice. I am as powerless to force his call as I am to alter my own heritage. The call does not come until the small hours of the morning, and it is not Sanchez' voice at all, it is Christine Chapel's, slurred with fatigue.

“Mr. Spock, Dr. Sanchez would like to see you in sickbay.” She volunteers no more, and I do not ask.

Sanchez, too, is tottering on the brink of exhaustion. He is grainy-eyed and thick-limbed with it, a trace of Latin accent creeping unnoticed into his speech.

“Your wife's injuries are not critical,” he begins. “The captain's ...” He shrugs. “He is alive. Though as for why ... that I cannot tell you.”

“And your prognosis?”

From McCoy, this would have prompted an outraged

response. But this man is cut of a different cloth, and his lack of spirit disturbs me. "I have done what I could," he says. "The rest is up to him."

He does not leave so much as he just ceases to be a presence in the room, leaving me knowing little more than I did before. My thoughts are not sanguine as I stare at the door by which he has left.

"I wish Dr. McCoy was here."

"Wishing will not alter reality, Miss Chapel." My tone is sharper than I intended it to be. I do not wish to cause this gentle woman pain; I never have, but knowledge of the emotions she has toward me seems to make every statement a two-edged sword.

"No," she says, and the expression on her face tells me she has seen and felt both my meanings. "I guess it won't. But still, I'd feel better if Leonard were here."

"Would it really have made any difference?"

She watches me carefully. "I'm almost tempted to say yes," she says, "just to see if you'd do what I think you would."

"Which is?"

"Find him and bring him back here. Not that you'd have to, if he knew what had happened." She seems about to say something else, but thinks the better of it. "To answer your question – no, it wouldn't have made any difference. There's only one way to set broken bones, to treat concussion and shock and the half dozen other things

wrong with him. So I guess wishing for Dr. McCoy is just ... illogical ... isn't it?"

"Yes." I can give her no less than the truth. "It is also very Human."

She colors; whether she understands the admission I have just made, I do not know. "I came in to tell you that your – that Dr. Merritt is awake. Would you like to see her?"

"Yes." We walk past Jim's room; he looks more machine than man, wedded obscenely to a tangle of tubes and monitors. The body function indicators are hovering, all of them, toward the bottoms of the scales, and the faint blue trails left by the bone-knitting laser mark his skin in more places than I can count. Or dare to. Christine's voice reminds me there is another reason for my presence here, and I move away slowly.

Lara's face is pale and tense, and her mind hurls a question at me before I am through the door.

"He is alive," I answer. Has no one told her? Or has she not asked, wanting and at the same time not wanting to hear the answer?

She gives a long, shuddering sigh and turns her face to the wall. All the tension, all the drive, is gone from her form. Even in sleep, I have never seen her so open, so emptied of determination. Her apathy draws at my consciousness like a black hole, and I turn to leave.

"Spock." Her voice catches me at the doorway, some tone

in it halting my stride. “Take me with you.”

“You are in no condition to be released from sickbay.”

“No. When you go back to Vulcan. Take me with you.”

“There is no place for you there.”

“As a Terran? Or as your wife?”

“Lara, this is neither the time nor the place--”

“What *is* the time and place, Spock?” Some of the color is ebbing back into her face, and with it the tenacious drive I have come to know so well. “Every time I try to talk to you about it, you have something more pressing to attend to. It’s my *life* we’re talking about.”

“Your life is here.”

“Not without you!”

I cannot meet the intensity of her gaze, the intensity of her emotions pouring through the link with hurricane force. I study the deck as I respond to her outburst. “Lara ... here, on the *Enterprise*, you can live a full life, in Human terms, with Human companions.”

“I won’t stay here, Spock. Not without you. If Starfleet won’t transfer me, I’ll resign my commission.”

“You must not do that.”

“Why not? Because it doesn’t jibe with your plans for my future?” She sits forward in her intensity, demanding my attention. “Yesterday, when we walked through the ship

with Jim, what were you trying to do?”

“That was necessary.”

“For whom?”

“There were ... factors--”

“I *know* what the factors were, Spock. You didn’t do that for yourself, or for me. You did it for Jim, for that command that means more to him than anything else in the world. Don’t you see? If I stay here after you leave, he’ll lose what you bought for him yesterday.” She falters, and her eyes slide away from mine, color rising in her face. “You know that Jim and I...”

“Yes.” There is no need for her to give voice to something she views as a betrayal; something I viewed as life-giving for both of them.

“That’s over, Spock. Over and past. But no one would believe it if I stayed on. And sooner or later, it would cost him his command. Is that what you want?”

Her words have the ring of truth in them, like gold coins in the palm. She tried to tell me the same thing once before, but I was so locked onto the path of what seemed inescapable logic that I could not hear her truth. After being reared by a Human mother, after serving among Humans for 25 of their years, their motives and emotions are still incomprehensible to me. I study her face; she is still waiting for an answer.

“No. You know that was not the end I sought.”

“What *do* you want, Spock?”

She reaches out with her torn hands; in her agitation she has knotted the blanket in them and broken open the half-healed wounds. The movement causes the neckline of her gown to slide off one shoulder, revealing the faint blue track of the bone-knitting laser across her collarbone. She sees my eyes on it and sits back, drawing up the garment.

“When did that happen?”

“On Parsus.” She does not look at me as she says it.

“When on Parsus?”

“I don’t know.” She makes a vague gesture. “When we hit that rock wall, I think.”

Then I am responsible for that, too. Another injury I have caused by what seemed at the time a logical action.

“Look, it doesn’t matter. I may have done it when I fell. What does matter is your future. And mine. And Jim’s. Each of us has altered the lives of the other two. We can’t go back and undo that, no matter how much we’d like to. We have to go on and live out the rest of our lives. I’m asking to spend mine with you. But only if that’s what you want, too.”

Is it? Do I want this woman, with her maddening inconsistencies and flashes of intuitive understanding invading my consciousness at the most inopportune moments? It is not logical.

My father... What led him to choose a Human wife? Did he ever wrestle with the demands of a stern Vulcan conscience, as I am doing now?

But I am not Sarek. And she is not Amanda. She is ... Lara. Who touches something I thought beyond any Human's reach. Who opens doors, and if she cannot lead me through all of them, at least demands that I look at what lies beyond the threshold.

"If you wish to come to Vulcan, I cannot stop you."

"That's not what I asked. Do you want me there?" This, too, is Lara, who drives for truth and looks on it without flinching. She asks what I want – and I recognize it as not only her need to know. It is my need, too.

In all my life, I can remember only two other people who ever asked me that question – both women; one Vulcan, one Human. T'Pol and Amanda. What I wanted then, what I still want, is a life of my own. A life that has become centered on this ship and on the other things I have learned to want – the respect of one man. And the love of one woman.

If I cannot have the first, and if its denial costs me the second, is there logic in denying the third? No. The only answer I can give her is the one she wants to hear; the one I have denied wanting to give, time out of mind.

"I want you there, Lara. On Vulcan, or anywhere else I go. Come with me."

Part 5

II

TUAN FARR

Time of Waiting



AMANDA



The time grows near, and I am surprised to find in myself some quality of apprehension about this homecoming. It is not a happy occasion, washed as it is by the currents moving over Vulcan.

I look out across the courtyard as the last of the artisans pack up their tools and leave the neat stone house my son and his wife will call home now. It is a fine house, but not built with the loving care that went into this one. A house should be built by the people who will live there. Neither of them could be drawn into the planning or construction of their dwelling. My daughter-in-law, I fear, is not particularly domestic, and my son has never shown much

interest in his surroundings. The mandate I received from each of them in response to my queries was simple and direct – *do what you think best*.

The sound of a skimmer cuts through the drowsy afternoon's heat. Though the garden walls cut off my view of the street, there is only one reason for a skimmer cab to be here on this day. And since Sarek is not here to see, and to chide me for my impatience, I turn on the viewscreen that monitors the approach to our gate.

The skimmer pilot seems to be having trouble with his tiny craft. Instead of hovering at a comfortable distance above the street, it is stalled more than a meter from the ground, and its whining engines attest to his inability to force its further descent. Then the door slides back, and the first sight I have had of my son in 15 months is of him dropping lightly to the street. He turns, reaching up for Lara to lift her down.

My mind's eye catches that moment when his hands touch her waist and their eyes meet, and files it away as it would a treasured holograph. She smiles down at him for the briefest instant before she leans forward putting her hands on his shoulders and trusting herself to his control. He does not smile in return, my taciturn son, but there is an openness in his face I have seldom seen.

He places her on the street and lifts one hand to smooth back a strand of hair that has fallen across her cheek. There is such intimacy in the simple movement that I almost

expect him to follow it with a kiss. But he is still Vulcan after all, it seems, for he takes her hand in the traditional manner as they walk through the gate.

Quickly, I switch off the viewscreen. It was a most serious breach of conduct to spy on them like that. If they knew, I don't know who would be more embarrassed – Spock, or myself. Still, a mother ... a Human mother, anyway ... ought to be permitted some small indulgences. Shouldn't she?

The wind chimes in the entryway announce their passage through the garden. That gives me the excuse I need to open the door without admitting I have watched them. I can't resist a quick look in the mirror before I greet them. *Vanity*, Sarek would say, if he were here.

Calm yourself, Amanda. A proper Vulcan wife does not exhibit emotion.

I greet them with a reserve I do not feel. Lara is less inhibited. Her arms are young and strong around me as Spock hangs back, watching us.

“Come in, both of you. Let me look at you.” They are thinner, both of them, than I remember, and Lara's face is drawn with the kind of fatigue that comes from more than just one sleepless night. Spock looks strangely out-of-place without his Starfleet uniform, and a thin white scar mars the line of his cheek.

“Oh, Spock, look at your face!” The words tumble out

before I can stop them, but he moves away from the hand I put up to touch the mark, and quirks one eyebrow at me.

“In the absence of a mirror, that is a physical impossibility, Mother.”

“But what happened? What kind of doctors did they have on that ship--” His eyes warn me away from the subject, and I realize what I have said. “I’m sorry, Lara. I forgot.”

“It’s all right, Amanda.”

But it isn’t all right. I seem to have blundered into a subject they would rather not discuss. “Sit down, both of you, and we’ll have something cool to drink. Or would you like to have it in the garden? Then you can look at your house. Where are your bags? I’ll have them--”

“Mother.” His tone is gentle reproof, and rightly so. I’m trying to cover my embarrassment with empty words and succeeding only in producing babble. Something I have said, something I have done, has altered the air of intimacy I watched them share.

I bring the drinks into the room. Lara is perched on the edge of a chair that seems too big for her, watching Spock, who stands looking out into the garden. He is here, but his mind is elsewhere. Did I imagine that scene outside the gate? The air is electric, as if with the remnants of a quarrel.

Nonsense. Vulcans, in an intellectual debate, could shame Earth’s medieval scholars with their arguments of angels

and pinheads, but they do not quarrel. Still, there is something in the way she watches him that speaks of a deep personal problem unresolved. Something that disturbs her because it has given him – is still giving him – pain.

“Spock? Come and sit down. Have a glass of parra.”

“No, thank you, Mother.” He turns away from the window.

“Where is Sarek?”

He has changed, my son. No Vulcan should question another’s absence. “He is at Council, and will be here for dinner. As will your father, Lara.”

Lara takes the glass I offer, but she does not drink. She rolls it between her hands, watching the beads of moisture collect on its cool surface.

“Lara, I know you must be tired after your long journey. Would you like to rest until dinner?”

She darts an almost imperceptible glance at Spock before she replies. “That would be most welcome, Amanda. Thank you.” She is quick, this one. I knew that from the time she spent with us during *tuan farr* – that period between the Ceremony of Promise and the Ceremony of Joining – but I did not know just how deep her perception has grown since then.

She accepts without comment the accommodations made for her. It is only as I leave that she signals she understands my motives.

“Don’t press him too hard, please. Coming here has been

very difficult for him.”

“He’s my son, Lara.”

“He’s a Vulcan, Amanda,” she says, and closes the door.

As if she had to remind me. Haven’t I known it, and wept over it, and rejoiced in it, for all these years?

He greets my return with the slightest suggestion of a frown on his face. “Mother, I do wish you would rid yourself of the antiquated notion that travel is wearing. Commercial transports are hardly what they were when you came to Vulcan.”

“Well, something has worn that child to a shade. And you, too, if I may say so.”

“You just did.”

I refuse to rise to the bait. “Besides, she knew quite well that I wanted to talk to you, alone.”

He accepts the rebuff mildly enough, settling into a chair and templeing his long, graceful fingers. “I have had no news of T’Pau,” he says.

“She wants to see you tomorrow. She hasn’t much time left, Spock. She grows weaker every day. And her opponents grow stronger. Even the *agan-tuá* are involved now. They’ve been making plans for a long time, I think.”

This is news to him, and the frown deepens. “T’Faie?” he asks.

“She’s grown very powerful. And she’s never forgiven your father. This rebellion is a way to damage him and build her own power at the same time. I believe she means to replace T’Pau herself.”

“A Vulcan who joined the *agan-tuá*? The people would never accept that.”

“Vulcan is changing, Spock. ShiKahr is full of outworlders – Rigellians, Lyrans, even Eosians. They’re not dealing with the Council, they’re not here to trade, and they’re certainly not here as tourists.”

His expression lightens as he looks at me. “You have a suspicious nature, Mother.”

“A faculty I have found to be most useful when dealing with the likes of T’Faie.”

“Indeed.” He is doubtful, but still amused, and I sense that his mind is already elsewhere.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have a few things to do for dinner. There are some tapes in Sarek’s office you might like to review. He left them on the desk for you.” He rises to leave the room, and as we pass through the doorway, I cannot resist the impulse any longer. I catch his hand in both of mine.

“I’m sorry about the circumstances, Spock. But it’s very good to have you home.”



The dinner, which begins hopefully enough, quickly degenerates into sheer unmitigated disaster.

Ambassador Merritt has brought a fine bottle of rare Terran wine from his private cellar; it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, as are all Earth imports. But the wine has been carelessly handled in transit and the dried cork shatters as it is drawn. The wine has the bitterness of over-fermentation, and he is embarrassed by the failure of his gift.

Lara's obvious joy at seeing her father is soured like the wine when he makes the same parental blunder I did, commenting on her appearance.

"For heaven's sake, Papa," she snaps, "I'm not too thin, and I'm not overtired, either. Except of people telling me I look like a sick cat."

Spock gives her a long, cool look of disapproval, and she is doubly flustered. She apologizes, but the bloom is definitely off the evening.

Sarek, as always, is totally indifferent to food as long as it appears regularly, and Spock has always shared that indifference, except for a brief and typical voraciousness in his adolescence. Even then, he was less interested in quality than in quantity, as he tried to keep pace with the explosions of change and growth going on in his body. Only Lara's father is enough the diplomat to be enthusiastic about the meal, and to try to keep up the pretense of a Terran-style family gathering.

Dear Frederick. I knew him only as one of my husband's associates until I met his daughter. Over the past two years, he has become a close and dear friend. He is enthusiastic about all things Vulcan, and yet he remains totally Human, even to his pipe. He leans back in his chair now, contented, replete, with smoke wreathing his head like a wooly halo.

“The oddest thing happened at Council today after you left, Sarek,” he offers. It is the first mention any of us has made of affairs of state, and for some reason a tiny prickle of apprehension starts at the base of my neck.

“We were ready to adjourn, of course, when you left. The agenda committee was wrangling about that presentation the public parks group wants to make, when a young man burst into chambers with a bailiff hot on his heels, demanding an audience. It was the most incredible thing, really. Here was this young ruffian – an *agan-tuá*, from the looks of his clothes – claiming right of statement.” He shakes his head in wonderment and smiles. “This should amuse you, Sarek. He was informed, of course, that only landholders may claim right of statement at High Council, and he had the unmitigated gall to claim membership in your house.”

Frederick is so intent on his story that he does not see the electric look that passes between Spock and Sarek. “The bailiff tossed him out on his ear, of course. Imagine the audacity! I tell you, Sarek, these *agan-tuá* are becoming more troublesome daily. If you don't mind an outsider's opinion.”

“This young man--” Sarek says with a preciseness that chills even Frederick, “was his name Selek?”

Frederick frowns and puts the pipe down. His diplomatic antennae are alert now, and he senses he may have blundered into treacherous waters. “I believe it was. Do you know him, then? Surely there’s no validity in his claim.”

“It is totally valid. Selek is my grandson.”

Frederick turns as grey as the smoke that rises from the now-forgotten pipe. He is not a young man, and I think of heart attack or cerebral accident as he struggles for words or breath or both. He finally recovers enough composure to speak. “I am deeply sorry, Sarek. I meant no dishonor to your house. It just seemed such an incredible claim. No one in Council took it seriously.”

“That was their error, Ambassador Merritt, and one for which you are certainly not accountable. The boy has been living with his mother, and you are correct in identifying him as *agan-tuá*. However, if she has sent him to Council, or even if he has come of his own accord, it bodes no good. In fact, I believe it is sufficient cause to call an extraordinary session.”

Sarek folds his napkin precisely and rises with controlled haste. I can feel his agitation vibrating through the link, and think of his own diseased heart. He catches the thought, and shakes his head at me in an almost imperceptible gesture that tells me firmly to keep my own

counsel.

“Spock, this concerns your work here. You will attend me. If you will excuse us, ladies? Ambassador?”

Frederick is also rising. “Certainly. I shall, of course--”

“Ambassador,” Sarek says quietly, “this is an internal affair. Your presence will not be necessary.”

With practice borne of years in his trade, he continues the motion and the statement as though he had meant to say it all along. “I shall, of course, respect the Council’s integrity in this matter. You may reach me at the Embassy if I may be of any assistance. Again, Sarek, my abject apologies.”

But Sarek is already gone, and Spock with him. “I seem to have put my foot in it that time,” Frederick says, turning to us. “I *am* sorry, Amanda. Lara, come by tomorrow if you have time, and we’ll visit then.” He starts for the door, waving me back to my chair. “No, no, Amanda. I can blunder my way out alone. Much better, I hope, than I blundered my way in. Good night, ladies.”

The sound of the closing door echoes through the sudden silence of the house. The wind chimes mark his passage. I see Lara’s face, ghostly pale in the candlelight, still as an ice carving, eyes like the blue-grey shadows that mark thin ice on the rivers of my homeworld. Nothing to do now but explain.

“He didn’t tell you about T’Faie, did he?”

“No.” Nothing more. Even the voice is ice. She might be

Vulcan herself.

“It’s not what you think, Lara.”

“Really?” *I couldn’t care less*, she says with the inflection. But she does care.

“You knew Sarek was married before. That his wife was killed in an accident before we met.” Absently, she nods. “T’Faie is their daughter. She was fifteen when Sarek and I were married. She never accepted me as her father’s wife, and every day meant a small-scale war. When she learned I was pregnant, she said-- Well, it doesn’t matter what she said. She and Sarek ... well, you know how stubborn he is.”

I wish the wine had not been sour. A little wine might make this easier, somehow. “I’m not telling this very well, am I?”

“My mother died when I was fifteen,” she answers. “My father fell in love with a woman he worked with. I was the most obnoxious, interfering little bitch you could imagine, and they finally drifted apart. I’m sorry now that I did that to him. But at the time... I understand, Amanda.”

This is a facet I did not know she had. Might her sympathies lie with T’Faie, then? I go on, wishing someone else had told her. “She left, and went to stay at our property in the north. It was purest folly – a girl of that age. Somehow, she met an *agan-tuá*. Do you know of them?”

The ice sculpture is gone now. Complete confusion is in

her face. “Amanda – I’m not sure all this is necessary. T’Faie is Sarek’s daughter, and Selek is her son. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Then why carry it any further? This is obviously painful for you. Let it be.”

“I can’t. Not now. Because of what is happening here – you do know why Spock came home?” *Oh, please know, Lara.*

“He’s told me some of it. I don’t understand it all, but I accept it. The details are unimportant.”

“The details are most important. They’re like strands in a spider’s web. Touch one, and the whole web is affected. Some of it goes all the way back to Surak and the philosophy of logic he founded. The *agan-tuá* never accepted it.”

“*Agan-tuá*. That means ‘meat-eater’, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. And they are. They became wanderers in the desert, herdsmen, dabblers in the occult. That sort of thing. The antithesis of everything Surak stood for. Vulcans don’t speak of them to outworlders. They’re like the idiot cousins you read about in Earth history, locked up in an attic somewhere.

“Anyway, T’Faie met the leader of a small band of *agan-tuá*, and married him. Mostly to spite her father, I think. She knew he’d never accept it, and she was right. As far as he was concerned, she was dead. We simply never spoke of

her.

“A few years ago, about the same time this ... madness ... about withdrawing from the Federation started, there were reports that the *agan-tuá* were forming some sort of coalition. It was unheard of – like a broken glass reassembling itself. Rumors were that a woman had become their priestess-leader.”

“T’Faie?”

I nod. “She has Sarek’s skill at politics. Perhaps more, considering the kind of people she had to confront. Her husband had been dead for years by that time. Some even say she had him assassinated. I don’t know. But she’s hungry for power, and she knows enough about the workings of mainstream Vulcan society to make her a formidable enemy. She has the most dangerous kind of drive, Lara – a desire for power mixed with the very personal need to destroy the society she rejected. Or perhaps she sees *it* as having rejected *her*. That doesn’t matter. What does matter is that she’s very, very dangerous.”

The expression on her face tells me she understands. At least a little of it. We were wrong not to have told her before of T’Faie. But it was – and is – a difficult thing to speak of.

To Sarek, his daughter has been as one dead since she removed herself from her father’s house and renounced the bondmate he had chosen for her. To Spock, she was only a

name in the family history, to be acknowledged as his forebears and numerous cousins were acknowledged in that part of his education dealing with one's proper relationship within the family hierarchy.

And to Amanda? To me, T'Faie is a stone in the shoe. A reminder of a failure at a kind of mothering I did not seek, but a failure nonetheless. And an enigma in behavior. A full Vulcan, she should have been able to bridle her dislike of me.

Though they deny emotion in themselves, Vulcans are the most prideful race I have ever known, and the opposite face of pride is shame. T'Faie felt shame that her father would choose a Human mate, and felt guilt in the feeling. A double bind of emotions a Vulcan is not supposed to have.

Lara is not bound by that tradition, yet she keeps a tight rein on the questions and feelings I know must be singing inside her. She excuses herself now, with the disturbing, taut control I have seen in her before.

"I'm sorry, Lara. Sorry that this wasn't explained to you before, and especially sorry that it had to come tonight, of all nights."

"It's hardly your fault."

"That doesn't make it any less disturbing. But I guess every family has a skeleton or two rattling around in the closet. T'Faie is ours. At least, she's the only one I know about." I soften the statement with a smile. Her answering

expression is unreadable, but there is a flash of something in her eyes that seems to say she has an intimate acquaintance with both skeletons and closets.

“I hope she’s the only one you ever have to learn about, Amanda.” Her words hang in the air after she leaves, like the smoke from her father’s pipe, forgotten now on the table. And like the smoke, the words leave a bitter tang on the back of the tongue.

>>>>> <<<<<<

LARA

>>>>> <<<<<<

I manage to keep my composure until I reach my room; then the suppressed physical reaction hits me with shaky knees, sweaty palms, and a rolling stomach that promptly rejects the meal Amanda has spent the better part of the day preparing. The face that greets me in the bathroom mirror after I rinse my mouth is drawn and hollow-eyed. I hope it is a private face and not the one I wore in front of her.

She was right, of course, when she thought I assumed Selek to be my husband’s son. Knowing otherwise, I can ask myself now if it would have been so awful had that been the case. He ought to have sons, my husband, and since I cannot give them to him...

Even as an exercise in fantasy, the concept disturbs me. I am too tightly bound by my particular heritage, which says children should be conceived in love and nurtured by the

two people who gave them life.

I shut the fantasy off firmly and wash away the last traces of it in the shower. The bed, when I reach it, is narrow and firm. It sits high above the floor, scaled for the height of a Vulcan. It is almost exactly the same height as a hospital bed.

The thought triggers a memory I thought I had buried. But it is too recent and too raw, and I know even as I lie down that I'm going to relieve the last six weeks in this night.

>>>>> <<<<<<

For three days after the accident, Jim clung to that precarious tightrope that stretches between life and death, and it seemed at times that the whole crew walked it with him. Drawing each breath, willing each heartbeat with him, for him. Hoping, praying, *demanding* that he live. And he did. Against all odds, against all logic of what the human body can endure and keep on functioning, until at the end of the third day the word swept through the decks and corridors and rooms of the great starship – *He's going to make it.*

“At least three weeks flat on your back,” Sanchez decreed, and six days later I caught him walking around the edge of the bed; white-faced, clammy with cold sweat, and holding on to the railing for dear life ... but walking.

Four days later, Christine Chapel, prompted by that sixth sense inherent in all good nurses, walked in unannounced

past the sign that read “No Visitors” to find two of them – Chief Engineer Scott and a bottle of Scotland’s finest.

“It thickens the blood,” Scotty said with conviction.

There was a general celebration in the main rec room that night, and several crewmen’s blood got considerable thicker. I stopped by as I was coming off duty, but my appearance seemed to put something of a damper on the festivities. Speculation and gossip about the captain and the lady doctor had not disappeared; it had merely gone underground and become open to a wider variety of interpretation.

Lieutenant Uhura was just leaving as I went into the room, and the faint tightening of the line of her mouth as she saw me brought home a fact that disturbed me more than the speculations about my private life.

Uhura, as Chief Communications Officer, had transmitted my resignation, as well as Spock’s. She had not, I was sure, breached security regarding personnel matters, but she knew. And that knowledge colored her attitude toward us more than any question of what Jim and I had been doing alone in a hostel room on Argelius. She wondered and worried, I knew, about what Jim would do when he learned Spock was leaving. As I wondered and worried.

It was a worry that dogged my days as we continued our exploratory mission under Spock’s command. Jim grew stronger daily, and I knew the day would come soon when he would return to his duties as captain. And that when he

did, he would have to be told. As it turned out, we did not have even that much margin.

Two days after the episode of the smuggled Scotch, we met with the starship *Yorktown*, outbound from Starbase Nine. Among the items transferred in this scheduled rendezvous was the new Chief Medical Officer of the *Enterprise* – Dr. M'Benga.

M'Benga was a stocky, solidly-built man with skin like finely polished walnut. He appeared to be quite pleased with landing the plum assignment, back on a ship where he had served before. One of the first things he did on arrival was to stop by to see Captain Kirk, both to check on his progress and to hand over an unofficial communiqué from Commodore Stocker of Starfleet Command.

The communiqué, we later learned, held wishes that the Captain's recovery be swift, and suggested that Starfleet would appreciate knowing if Captain Kirk had given any thought to naming a new First Officer for the *Enterprise*. Jim's immediate response was to want to know what the hell was going on with Mr. Spock.

What was going on with Mr. Spock at that precise moment was most emphatically nobody's business but Spock's and mine. Suffice to say that it was a rare occasion when our work schedules happened to put us in our quarters simultaneously. And when one of us was just coming out of the shower at the time...

I was at that delicious point of half wakefulness and half

sleep, comfortable despite – or perhaps because of – that crowded tangle of arms and legs and sheets that occurs when two people occupy a bed designed for one, when the far-away sound of a buzzing intercom interposed itself like a pesky fly.

“Leave it,” I said, knowing what his answer would be.

“I cannot,” he replied, starting to untangle himself.

“Answer it here, then.”

“Lara--” he began, but I cut him off.

“I don’t think it would shock anyone too terribly. Unless, of course, you put it on visual.”

I had come into possession of some rather interesting information in the previous two weeks. Vulcans – at least, half-human ones – can blush. And do. As he did then. But he did take the suggestion, reporting “Spock here,” in a businesslike tone that totally belied his status at that moment.

The voice of the duty officer was properly apologetic, but not particularly shocked. “I’m sorry to disturb you at this hour, sir, but Captain Kirk would like to see you in sickbay. Immediately, he says.”

Spock’s intuition – he would call it logical foresight – was better than mine. I thought it an odd and rather peremptory summons and let it go with only that and a measure of jealousy at how quickly his attention could be summoned elsewhere. His own response was an abrupt tension I could

feel down the line of his body where it touched mine.

“Tell him I’ll be there shortly,” he said, snapping the intercom shut.

He dressed quickly and left me wondering naïvely what could possibly be so urgent as to interrupt that particular and rare interlude. Spock had been putting in 18-hour days since adding command duties to his own, and I was functioning on a particularly barbarous ten-hours-on and ten-hours-off which Sanchez had come up with as an equitable roster. There had been very few times when the two of us could manage a few hours alone to explore the new quality of our relationship.

The wall of non-emotion that had seemed so insurmountable when Jim and I confronted Spock about the mission to Parsus was gone. It began to crack, I think, when he took my hand on that long walk through the *Enterprise*; it was assaulted anew when Jim and I followed him down, and the last standing stones were rolled away that night in sickbay, when I pushed and pushed, not knowing for certain which way the last stones would fall. At that point, I hadn’t cared. I only knew I had to have an answer, one way or another. There was simply no place left to hide. Not for either of us.

I am not particularly proud of what I did that night. It was as painful and degrading as an act of rape, and it left us both victims, each psychologically naked to and defenseless against the other. But it banished the last traces

of the wall, left us both open to begin to build something new, something stronger than the old dividing barrier, because it was held together with the mortar of Human caring.

A measure of its effectiveness came later, when he returned. Instead of shutting himself up with what must have been an immensely painful memory, he opened himself to its sharing.

Jim was angry, confused, hurt. Hurt and hurting in body and mind; the body not yet fully healed, the mind assaulted by something he saw as betrayal, as deviousness, from one who had never served him that way before.

I will never know exactly what transpired between them in that sterile room. I only know they both survived it, both came away altered and no longer quite what they were before, but whole men, both of them.

I saw Jim briefly, the next morning. Dr. M'Benga had released him from sickbay, much to Dr. Sanchez' annoyance. Sanchez goes by the book, M'Benga by the man. There is a vast difference.

Jim was dressed and ready to leave. He still looked thin, the newly-regenerated skin taut and reddened across his cheekbones. The former ease between us was gone.

"Spock tells me you're leaving, too." Confusion in that face, and pain, too. *Oh, Jim, I'm sorry. I never meant...*
"Where will you go, Lara? What will you do?"

I realized then what I should have known. Spock told him I was leaving, but not all of it. He left that for me. My ... right? My responsibility.

“I’m going with him. To do whatever needs to be done.”

The silence was thick between us. Not only a Vulcan can build a wall. “I see,” he said, finally.

But he didn’t see. Not all of it. And it was better, I thought, kinder perhaps, to leave him with that. Better than to fan some spark to kindle into self-immolation. He retreated then into his Captain’s skin. “I’ll be sorry to see you go, Lara. You have the makings of a damn fine doctor.”

“Thank you ... Captain.”

Something came into his eyes then, some deep spark of a fine irony recognized and acknowledged. “You’re welcome ... Doctor.”

And it was that way until our papers came through weeks later and we prepared for departure. Both of us – all three of us – walking carefully around the edges of a wound that was slowly ... very slowly ... beginning to harden into a scar.

Like any half-healed wound, it is still tender to the touch, and now as I lie in this bed which isn’t mine, in a house which isn’t mine, I can feel the pain the probing has caused. Will it ever be a memory that doesn’t cause this kind of pain? I doubt it, somehow.

With that strange duality of time, the days pass quickly, grow into weeks almost without realization of it, and yet the individual hours of each day crawl by with agonizing slowness.

We are installed in the new house with proper ceremony, after I allow Amanda to tow and tug me into the domestic pettiness of choosing the furnishings for it. I had wished that she had done so, but as usual, there was a purpose behind her lack of action. I made a hundred decisions a day as to color and style and placement, and it gave me something to do with my hours. But the house is finished now, as finished as it ever will be. I do not think it will ever be a home.

I turn back to dancing again. Another prop to keep my body, if not my mind, occupied. But even the firm demands and concentration of resharpening a skill which has gone rusty after years of inadequate use are not enough.

I contact my former associates at the medical research center, and am rewarded for my persistence with a job in my former field – without the grant I had before. I begin to learn bureaucratic deviousness and find ways to continue the research I had been doing, with a new insight and respect for the financial maneuvering that is the lifeblood of medical research.

I am feeling especially pleased with myself on this particular afternoon. I have just managed to acquire the services of a first-rate lab tech, a young Vulcan woman I

had worked with under my previous grant. She has agreed to take a substantial salary cut to work with me, primarily because I can offer her considerably more autonomy than she had before.

I decide to reward myself with a half-holiday, and as I go home through the sunbaked midday streets, I am thinking of an afternoon of pure hedonism, without Spock's slightly disapproving looks.

I am barely inside the house, however, when the wind chimes announce someone's passage through the garden compound. I have a guilty moment of hoping it is not Amanda. She is not entirely approving of my work; she gave up a promising career when she married Sarek, and I sense she had expected the same of me. But Amanda had a son to occupy her time, something I will never have.

It is not Amanda, however, who comes through the entryway. It is Spock, and the grim set of his mouth tells me something is seriously wrong. He wastes no time with preliminaries.

"T'Pau is dead." The words, spoken, hang in the air like the after-image of a holographer's flash, freezing motion and thought.

"Oh, Spock, I'm sorry." I think of T'Pau as I last saw her, on the day Spock and I were wed; incredibly ancient to my eyes, emanating power and the vague malevolence too much power can sometimes carry with it. She would not have been an easy woman to know, and yet...

“Do not grieve for her, Lara,” he says sharply, but he has put the wrong interpretation on the emotion he reads in me.

“Not for her, Spock. For you. And for the others she left to follow the course she charted. What will happen now?”

He sits down and stretches out his long legs, still unfamiliar and vaguely uncomfortable in the dark Vulcan k’viet. I can almost see him willing the tension out of his body.

“For a few days, nothing. There are certain ... formalities to be observed. Like your Human custom of mourning, they serve as an excellent cover for the realignment of power. The Separatists will undoubtedly wish to promote one of their own people to Supreme Elder, and to place someone of their beliefs in the senate seat left empty. The *agan-tuá* will very probably make some demand for recognition – if they have a plan. The only certainty is that of change.”

Just how much change, and what form it is to take, I rapidly discover.

When the three days of formal observances are over, and I return to work, my new technician is waiting for me with the announcement that she will not be able to work with me after all. There is just the faintest trace of condescension in her voice. Half my staff makes similar announcements through the course of the day – all Vulcans, and all with the same vague, maddeningly elusive air of superiority.

In the days that follow, requests for equipment are lost or delayed, instruments mysteriously malfunction, and the background data for an experiment I have been setting up for weeks disappears. It hardly comes as a surprise when the division director sends me a blunt announcement that the project is being closed down. No, there is no other place for me anywhere on the staff.

I have been expecting it, but I am still angry, and it is an anger I do not bother to control or conceal when I go home. There is a meeting going on in Spock's study; half a dozen low, Vulcan voices drift through the door.

Dammit, Spock, *I* need you, too. Chuck this place. Let them hang on their own gallows. We have no need of them, and they don't want us here anyway.

I can feel his admonition, sharp as a whiplash across my consciousness, and even that angers me. There are no doors to slam in a Vulcan house – not even, it appears, the door of the mind.

I take the skimmer out of its dock and wind through the city streets, impatient for the openness of the desert. Once there, I drive furiously, mindlessly, wanting the speed to wash away the anger.

You chose this, I tell myself. *No one said it would be easy.* No, but no one said it would be like this, either. Or did they? “Vulcan will not be a pleasant place for Terrans,” he told me. “I cannot keep you safe there.”

I thought he spoke then of physical danger, of stealthy footsteps in the night and the white terror of *tal-shaya*. Not this insidious, unfightable race-hatred. How much more difficult must it be for him – carrying the bloodline the Separatists would excise from the planet, yet bound here by a vow to a dead woman, to a civilization perhaps itself in death throes.

*...We are the greatest city,
the greatest nation,
nothing like us ever was...*

Where did that line come from? Something dimly remembered ... something read in school, or quoted by an instructor to check the hubris of scholars who thought themselves unique. It was an Earth poet; I remember that much. And he was telling an essential truth, as poets are supposed to do. Only he couldn't have known it was a galactic truth as well.

Building up and tearing down ... it has gone on forever; will go on forever. And the wants and needs of two very insignificant beings can't change that. They – we – can only accept.

As my anger dissipates, so does the drive to flee the city. I turn the skimmer around, guiding it through the foothills and back to ShiKahr. The city rises like a mirage on the plains, as distant and independent and self-contained as the race that built it, beautiful and elegant and flawless on the surface. I have seen the beauty, and I have seen the other

face of ShiKahr, too ... the offworlders' bars and the streets where the powerless live. A third face of ShiKahr is beginning to emerge for me now. It is also a city where power dwells; power and the silent corruption, the dealing in lives, that so inevitably feeds it.

I guide the car through the streets, noticing the outworlders now, and realizing for the first time how few of them are Terrans.

The meeting has adjourned by the time I arrive, and the lengthening shadows begin to spell some coolness as the night draws near. Spock is near the fountain in the compound, his attention on a seedling that is withering under the pitiless sun of Vulcan's perpetual summer.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you this afternoon," I tell him, and explain the happenings of the day, and of the days that have gone before.

He nods in an abstracted way. "It has begun, then. I had not thought it would be so soon."

"Was it important? The meeting, I mean."

He sits beside me on the fountain's rim, and trails his hand in the water for a moment as if to wash away the day's business. "Yes, as such things rate their own importance." He closes his hand; the silvery water slips through, unchanged. "S'rakel is to have T'Pau's position as Supreme Elder, but the Separatists bought it at a high price. One of T'Pau's people will have his senate seat."

“You?”

He shakes his head, the ghost of a smile shadowing his mouth. “You overestimate my importance, Lara-kai.” He touches my cheek with a hand that is still cool from the fountain.

“That’s a wife’s prerogative.”

Again, the ghost of the smile, then it is gone like his fleeting touch. “Sarek is to have S’raket’s place.”

“Your father? But he’s Ambassador to the Federation.”

He shakes his head again. “There is no longer a Vulcan representative to the Federation. Word went out this morning. All Vulcans in service to the Federation are to withdraw. That is not an official announcement, of course. But it will happen.”

“They can’t do that!”

“They have.”

“But what about the ones in Starfleet? They can’t just walk off their assignments.”

“Those with commissions will resign. The others...” The full impact of it is beginning to sink in. The term is ‘civil disobedience’, and it is a euphemism that covers many potentially ugly things. “There is a purpose,” he says. “Prisoners must be guarded, fed, housed, and cared for. Energy and resources used in that manner cannot be turned against us in combat.”

An ugly chill is crawling up my spine. “Surely it won’t come to that.”

“That is why I am here, Lara. To see that it does not.”

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SPOCK

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There is more, but I cannot tell her that. Not now, not yet, even with the openness that has grown between us in the last months.

I cannot tell her of the bitter infighting in the Senate and the Council, or that even though my father will bear the title of Senator, I will be his eyes and ears and voice in the struggle ahead.

Sarek is himself in poor health; the heart condition which prompted his near retirement years ago has again begun to affect his stamina, and he plans to hold his official title only until he can see me safely in the position he has so recently accepted. He faces conflict in his personal life as well. It was only through purest luck I was able to deflect a meeting yesterday that could have had dire consequences for him. And may yet.

Sarek had been gone only moments when an aide, searching for him, came into my office. “There is a woman here, seeking to meet with Sarek,” he announced.

“He is no longer here. Tell her he is granting no audiences

until next week.”

The aide returned in a moment with the news that the visitor would not be put off. “Now she asks to speak with you.”

“With me? Who is she?”

“A kinswoman, she says. She is most insistent.”

“Very well.” I think I knew then, but refused to accept the thought. I returned to the work at hand, and she entered so silently I was not aware of her presence. How long she stood there, watching me, I do not know. It was some minutes before I became aware I was no longer alone; it was hours later before I realized that what had signaled her presence was the faint but pervasive scent of sohti. At the time, I only knew, suddenly, that I was being watched.

Old training, old habits, die hard; as I turned in the chair I was for a moment again a Starfleet officer, tensed and ready for a physical assault. If she noted the lapse, she did not comment on it.

“Spock.” She did not greet me with the traditional gesture; she simply waited for my acknowledgement.

“T’Faie.” That was all I gave her. The passage of the years had not changed her; she was beautiful as only a Vulcan woman in the prime of her life can be beautiful. She was tall, nearly as tall as I, and carried that haughtiness she inherited from our father. Her gaze was almost sleepy, but I knew that behind those sohti-dulled eyes, there was a mind

as quick and as vicious as that of a le-matya.

She sat down without waiting to be asked; she would have stood forever if she had waited for my invitation, and she knew it.

“My son seeks the rest of his heritage,” she said bluntly.

“To what end, T’Faie?”

“To know his proper place in the scheme of things, as all Vulcans must.”

“*Xa’an*.” I chose the word deliberately; it is not one I have often used, and never to a woman.

“There is no need to be vulgar, little brother. What other end could I have?”

“With you, who knows? You always have a purpose behind the obvious.”

She arched an eyebrow appreciatively. “You have gained insight, I see. You lacked that in your youth.” She examined her fingernails, stalling for time.

“The other purpose, T’Faie.”

She took her own time in answering. “Power,” she said at last. “Its acquisition and retention.”

“Then you have come to the wrong camp. I should think you would be looking to the Separatists.”

“I already am. But it never hurts to have a foot in each camp. You see, I do not underestimate you, either.”

“Then what makes you think Sarek will ever accept your son?”

“He won’t. But you will.”

“Indeed?”

“Of course, you will. Sarek needs the one thing he doesn’t have – time. Time to strengthen his position so he can turn it over to you. The Separatists have already decided they will concede to your demands – S’rakil will have T’Pau’s place, and Sarek will have his. If Sarek should become ... incapacitated too soon, your people will lose that Senate seat. And a man in his ill-health should not be subjected to any ... shocks, should he?”

I understand her meaning well. Never the show of the blade for T’Faie, when a quickly-glimpsed view of the sheath will do. “What is the price of your silence, T’Faie?”

“Only the concern a proper Vulcan should show for his poor, fatherless nephew. Exposure to the proper way of Vulcan life. Training in restraint. Selek lacks that. Even as his father did as a young man.”

“Be careful, sister. It would be a shame if the *tashai* found your body in an alley late some night.”

“You lack subtlety, Spock.”

“One is not subtle with a le-matya.”

She toyed with the folds of her sleeve for a moment, and I thought I had found a chink in her armor. But she was only

playing her game. “I saw your wife yesterday,” she remarked casually. Too casually.

“She is no part of this.”

She gave a mocking half-smile, and I knew my quick response had betrayed me. I had been too long among Humans ... or perhaps Humanness had been too long within me.

“No, of course not,” she said. “I was just making conversation.” She smoothed her hair back from her flawless face in a gesture that transcended race. I have seen beautiful women all over the galaxy use it, and always to make the same statement of their own beauty. With the point made, she went on. “She is a totally unremarkable young woman, even for a Human. Whatever do you see in her?”

“That is none of your affair.”

“Of course, now that her diplomatic connections are no longer important, you could terminate the relationship. You’ll never get any sons on that one.”

“You have made your statement, T’Faie. You may go now.”

She made no move to leave; went on as though I had not spoken at all. “But, then, I never understood why you released T’Pring. You should have taken her into the temple and klaajed her cross-eyed. I doubt Stonn would have wanted your leavings.”

“Get out of here, T’Faie.” I rose from the desk, anger

threatening to break loose the controls I had clamped down the moment I realized her purpose.

She, too, rose, but without haste. “Your Human half is showing, little brother. We shall speak of this again, and soon. I will let you know when to expect my son.”

Only when she had gone did I have the time and control to sort out and review the multitude of things left unsaid. She knew too much – entirely too much – about what had gone on in closed sessions of Federation proponents. That meant she had a listening device planted somewhere – or more likely, someone to feed her the information. And not only from our camp; we were not then certain that the Separatists were ready to concede to our demands. She knew of my rejection of T’Pring – a thing which happened when she was buried in the desert with the *agan-tuá*. And she knew of the reason behind my marriage – more importantly, she knew she could strike at me through Lara. That was something I fancied no one knew, except perhaps Lara herself. If T’Faie was not sure of that when she entered the office, she was sure of it when she left. I gave her that certain knowledge, placed another weapon at her disposal in an instant’s loss of control.

I am glad, in a way, when Lara tells me she has lost her position at the research center. The less she is out of the minimal protection afforded by the family compound, the less vulnerable she is to direct physical assault by one of T’Faie’s henchmen. Except that soon now ... very soon ... T’Faie’s son will share even that sanctuary.

That is a subject which must be broached soon. But I wait, hoping for the proper time. I should have learned from my experience with Jim that there is never a proper time for a painful discussion. There is only a time of one's own choosing, or the time of another's choice.

Still, there are defenses. T'Faie cannot breach all of them entirely. It is of utmost importance to her that her agents move freely through ShiKahr. A few words in the right ears, and they find they have lost much of that freedom. A trained *tashai* can spot an *agan-tuá* no matter what his disguise, and where there is an *agan-tuá* it follows as day follows night that there are violations of the law. Concealed weapons, stolen property, and sohti. Always sohti. They are never without it, never far from their caches.

Harassment, the delegation charges.

Clear and consistent violations of the law, the Council counters.

There is a danger, my sister, in having a foot in each camp. Neither side trusts the other completely, and no one is entirely sure which *agan-tuá* owes allegiance to whom.

So T'Faie is forced to wait, biding her time. She has had much practice at it. Who knows how long she planned her latest ploy, with her son as the leading edge? Since his coming to manhood? Since his birth? Or even before that?

It is Lara who gives me the opening I seek. With her work

at the research center terminated, she is at loose ends, and her restlessness grows. For all of her life, she has functioned either as a student or a Starfleet officer. I cannot restore the latter position to her, but the former opens several doors.

Vulcan history has never been the subject of an in-depth study by an outworlder, and she is daily confronted by customs and attitudes she has had to take on faith alone. She asks for a fuller understanding, and I make arrangements for a tutor. With that accomplished, I am able to turn an evening conversation with Sarek to the subject of Selek's education.

The boy has been at Council again, and on this particular afternoon has committed a social gaffe of such magnitude that he was forcibly removed from the visitor's section. I suggest to my father that Selek's action was motivated not by vindictiveness so much as by ignorance, due to his lack of proper training. It is hardly fitting, I point out, to have a member of Sarek's clan appear in public to display the lapses in his upbringing.

Sarek's agreement is grudgingly given, but it is given, nonetheless.

We have in the household, I remind him, an excellent tutor in Vulcan mores and manners, as well as in the traditions that gave birth to them. Would it not be fitting to include Selek in the course of study Lara has set out for herself?

He pierces me with that gaze that says he knows I have

been attempting to manipulate him, but there is no rancor in it. “You would have him in this household, then?” he asks sharply.

“Yours or mine; it makes no difference.”

His sigh is not so much defeat as it is resignation, and I press my point home. “If he is here, it also gives us the opportunity to keep a close watch on T’Faie and her people,” I point out.

He considers this for a moment, or appears to consider it. His decision, however, was made and voiced in that sigh. “You will speak to his mother?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Very well. But I’ll not have that spawn of the le-matya under my roof. You must be responsible for him – and answerable to any breach of conduct on his part.”

This assignment of liability is a particularly non-Vulcan statement, and emphasizes the depth of Sarek’s dislike of the boy and distrust of his mother.

It is an odd thing, perhaps – or at least physiologically inaccurate – to refer to Selek as a boy. By many standards he is a man – 25 years old or nearly so, taller and heavier than I, with that solidness of physique he inherited from his grandfather. In fact, he looks rather like Sarek, magnified by perhaps ten percent, as if freedom from the rigid bonds of Vulcan discipline had expanded Sarek’s being into this new, bolder version. It is rather his attitude and mental

state which prompt me to speak and think of him as a boy. He is as unpredictable and as dangerous as a rogue comet.

T'Faie brings him to my office at the close of the day on which she receives my message, and his face is drawn into a sullen scowl so open in its disgust that it would have shamed a child of five.

T'Faie apparently wants more to annoy me than to offer motherly advice to the son who is leaving her household, for she speaks as if he were not in the room at all. Her sleepy, indolent eyes have a certain amount of amused satisfaction in them as she greets me.

“Your avuncular concern will not go unremarked among the *agan-tuá*, little brother. When we attain our rightful power, your familial devotion will be amply rewarded.”

“I should not wish to base my livelihood on that prospect, T'Faie. It may be an excessively long time in coming to fruition.”

She does not appear disturbed. “It is amazing to me that you Federationists, with your much-vaunted logic, cannot see how untenable your position is.”

“Even an untenable position is preferable to one which leads to annihilation, sister. The Separatists' belief in our invulnerability will lead us only into chaos and destruction. Even if they should succeed in forming their republic, it does not necessarily follow that the *agan-tuá* will have any power within it.”

“But it does, Spock. To achieve and maintain power in the Republic, Vulcan will need warriors. Where will they come from, if not from that class which has never allowed the softness of pacifism to eat away at its core?”

There is enough truth in her words – about the need for warriors, though not necessarily about *agan-tuá* superiority in such fields – to shed a bit more light on her eventual goals. But a warrior needs more than sohti-induced blood lust. He needs discipline, too. I start to voice the thought, then realize that this, too, is part of her plan. She would have me train this pup to become the lead wolf of her pack.

“Well-planned, T’Faie. You must have been many years at this endeavor.”

“One strives to recognize opportunity when it appears. And sometimes to contrive its appearance at a fortuitous time.”

She appears to grow impatient with our discussion. Or perhaps she is disconcerted that I have seen the purpose behind her purpose so soon. At any rate, the tempo of the stately dance she has orchestrated undergoes an unsubtle alteration. “Teach him well, Spock. He has a right to your knowledge.”

“The bonds of kinship do not extend to include self-destruction.”

“You will survive. You are too valuable to be permitted to destroy yourself purposely, and too intelligent to do so inadvertently. You are a survivor. I have certain knowledge

of that fact, remember.” She gathers her light cape around herself. “Selek will have what his heritage entitles him to have. And you, Spock, will give him what he needs to cope with it.”

She leaves without waiting for any answer I might give. It is a gift I do not question too closely; I have no answer for her, anyway. There is no answer to a dance, to the carefully plotted steps and counter-steps that give the dancers the illusion of movement but which sooner or later return them to their starting positions.

In the meantime, however, I have Selek to deal with, and the sullen set of his mouth warns me that I will have plenty to occupy my time. The first clash is not long in coming, and it comes, as I knew it would, over sohti.

Lara has prepared a room for him, and he goes in, shutting the door behind him and shooting the lock loudly enough for us to hear it. Lara gives me a look, a Terran shrug, and says, “Well, that’s what locks are for, isn’t it?”

“Not really. The lock is there to tell the guest he may use it; in return, he is supposed *not* to use it. If he does, he indicates that he feels the need for it, which is a grave insult to his host.”

She links her arm through mine and draws me down the hallway. “Well, I don’t feel the least bit insulted. What I feel is extreme hunger. Selek was told it is mealtime, and if he chooses not to eat, that’s his problem.”

After the meal, Lara places a tape of Vulcan history in the reader and is quickly lost in her studies. If she is aware of the scent, she does not recognize its significance, and does not mention it. She only gives me a curious look as I leave the room.

The odor is almost overpowering as I go down the hall to his room. “Selek? I wish to speak with you.”

He takes his own time unlocking the door, and his expression when he opens it tells me he knows why I have come. I indicate the small mound of yellowish powder with a nod. “That is not permitted while you are here.”

“Why?”

“For one thing, it is illegal.”

He makes a sound of disgust. “Not for long. When we have legislative power--”

“Which you do not now have. It is forbidden because it distracts the mind and debilitates the body. You cannot complete your course of training – cannot even embark upon it – while you continue to ingest sohti.”

He scoops the powder back into its case, and places the case in a pocket of his k’viet. “I shall use it as I see fit. It is my property.”

There is more he wants to say, but it takes him a moment to work up the courage to say it. He wants this confrontation, wants it now, because he has to test the bounds. “If you want it, you’ll have to take it.”

“As you wish, Selek.” He does not mistake the statement for acquiescence. He goes into the hand-fighter’s traditional crouch as I move toward him.

The boy has not the slightest inkling of the proper way to defend himself against anything but the most primitive attack. It is ridiculously easy for me to overpower him; there is not even the sound of a struggle to disturb Lara. But under the uncoordinated, uneducated movements is a strength which, properly trained, would be formidable. I file that away in the back of my mind even as he hands over the box.

“I can get more,” he flares defiantly.

“I should not advise you to attempt it. We have much work to do, and I do not have the time to play games with you.”

“This whole charade is a game, *Uncle*.” He comes down with force on the last word, his dark eyes flaming. He knows, then. It was foolish of me to assume T’Faie would not have told him. That does not alter the situation, of course, though it may alter Selek’s response to it.

“You may consider it a game, if you wish. But its purpose is quite real, I assure you. Your mother and I have entered into a bargain, and I intend to fulfill my part of it, with or without your cooperation.”

My words are truth; he may interpret them any way he wishes. I will fulfill my bargain with T’Faie, but I shall do it at my own pace and in the order of my own choosing.

The studies of Vulcan's history must come first, then the mental disciplines which should have begun in Selek's infancy. Not until I know his mind and can predict his actions will I trust him with the physical skills he wants so much to learn. He is too strong, too young, too potentially deadly, to be given his own body as a weapon.

And I must see to it that Lara is out of his way before that happens. I see the way he watches her as the days grow into weeks, and what I see disturbs me deeply. I told Jim once that she was capable of defending herself against assault. She was, then; trained and in training as all Starfleet officers are. And she is strong for a Terran female, with her body disciplined and strengthened by the dancing she thinks I do not know about. But she is no match for a Vulcan male at full strength, and there is no training that could make her so.

It is not lust I see in Selek's open face, though he is subject to that, too, as are all *agan-tuá*. It is the realization that Lara is a vulnerable target, even though I am not. An assault against her, sexual or otherwise, would be an assault on me. A particularly fitting assault, by his reasoning, if it involved rape.

She is aware of it, an awareness intensified by seeing it in my own mind when we make love. "He doesn't frighten me," she lies, and her neck arches with bravado.

"Yes, he does. And that kind of fear is a healthy thing. Hold onto it, Lara. It makes you careful."

She hides her face against the base of my throat. “Sometimes it would be nice to be able to lie to you, Spock. You have enough worries without my adding to them.”

“Do not wish for that capability, Lara. A lie is a dangerous and cruel thing to tell another, regardless of your motivations.” It is also a dangerous and cruel thing to tell oneself, but I do not point that out to her.

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LARA

>>>>> <<<<<<

I know the truth of his words about lies, know even the unspoken one about lies to oneself. But it does not alter my desire to be able to conceal from him the way I feel about Selek.

From the first moment I saw him, he has made me uneasy, in a way that became identifiable as fear only recently, and then only partially. There is and was, first and strongest, an inexplicable revulsion, as though there was something unclean about him. It is an almost instinctive feeling of deep and essentially baseless distaste, like the queasiness some people have about insects or snakes.

He watches me, watches Spock, when he thinks he can do so unobserved, and in those sly, dark eyes, I see a number of unpleasant things. What kind of poison must have flowed from T’Faie’s breast to rear a child so full of evil?

In the daytime, with the tutor S'gref present, I feel the menace much less, though S'gref is so old that he would hardly present a barrier to violence. Perhaps it is because my mind is fully occupied during our classes, and I am less able to dwell on the danger Selek radiates. He is a belligerent scholar, though I sense a quick – if undisciplined – mind at work. He challenges virtually every statement S'gref makes, and in so doing, he forces much more information from that distinguished elder than I would have done. So Selek's presence, though occasionally disruptive, is probably a valuable thing in the long run.

The long evenings, when Spock and Sarek are frequently absent, are the worst times. I begin to spend them with Amanda. Our conversation, quite naturally, often centers around Spock, and I begin to see him through her eyes as well as my own. One evening very late, she gives me a gift I shall always treasure.

We are discussing ... or perhaps lamenting ... the killing schedule the two men are putting in – the long hours, the tense political maneuvering which seems to be going in favor of the Separatists, despite their struggles.

“I suppose it's selfish of me,” she says, “but I'm very glad you chose to come back here with Spock.”

“It's no different, I suppose, from your staying here with Sarek.”

She smiles, but her mind is suddenly far away, long ago, and I am guilty of the same uncontrollable curiosity about

her marriage that so infuriates me when Spock and I are its object. “Sarek is ... Sarek,” she says, as if that explained it all. “If I were not here, he would be much the same. But Spock needs ... he needs someone to remind him of his Humanness – to reflect that back to him as something worth cherishing. He’s like an invisible man in a house of mirrors, but you give him back his own image.”

I have to turn away at that, to hide the sudden burning in my eyes. “Thank you, Amanda.”

“No,” she says. “Thank you.”

I excuse myself, and go back to the quiet of my own dwelling. Though her words have pleased me, there is still – somewhere deep inside – a voice that says she would hardly have made that statement if she knew I came to Vulcan as much for Jim as for Spock.

We were all invisible, some part of each of us, in that house of mirrored faces that was *Enterprise*. Each of us saw some hidden corner of self only in the other’s eyes. And if I am Spock’s mirror, he is mine. If there is an empty spot in that reflection sometimes, it is because I am wholly Human, and he is not.

I think of other reflections in other eyes, sometimes – though not as often as I did when we first came here. ... What is he doing right now, at this moment? Does he think of me ... and of his friend? I wonder, too, in moments like this, just how much of him Spock sees in my mind.

He never speaks of Jim; in fact, never speaks of anyone from the *Enterprise*. It's as though he is able to neatly compartmentalize his mind. I wish I had that ability, that sureness that what he does at any given moment is the right thing to do. Once he had made up his mind to come back here, I don't think he spent an instant regretting it or wondering what would have happened had he chosen to defy T'Pol. Does he ever look back at the roads not taken? I doubt it, somehow. That is one unique Human frailty he has escaped.

My own life, in retrospect, is a tangled maze of roads not taken, of opportunities missed, and of blunders into thickets of my own making. I'll carry the scars of those blunderings – of those rainy midnights of the soul – to my grave and beyond, if such a state exists. If there are ghosts, and if the spirits of the dead can return, perhaps they are searching vainly for that road not taken, trying now to make the proper turning and thereby alter the life they no longer have.

I drift off to sleep with those thoughts meandering through my brain, so it is not surprising that I dream of Jim and Spock, standing at opposite forks of a path, each waiting to see which way I turn. Neither of them moves, neither says anything to try to persuade me, but I feel their eyes and the tug-of-war of their thoughts as I stand and stand and stand, not able to decide.

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The meetings, the maneuverings, the tallying of strength, go on as the deathly heat of summer drags on. The days grow shorter, and the heat gives way to the mild autumn season which is as close to winter as Vulcan ever comes. As the summer slips past, so do the hopes of the Federationists.

I can sense the fading of those hopes in both Spock and Sarek. Sarek, particularly, seems to be aging before my eyes, and each burden that slips from his wearying shoulders finds a new home on Spock's.

Selek grows more openly contemptuous of us as he, too, senses which way the dice will fall. He often absents himself from the house for two or three days at a time, and I count that more of a blessing than anything else.

I don't know why Spock tolerates him at all, nephew or not. When Selek speaks to his uncle, his voice drips with a contempt that makes me want to slap his handsome young face. He does not speak to me at all, which I find eminently satisfactory.

He left the compound this morning with that particular stride and manner which stated he had no intention of returning until the mood hit him, and S'gref and I spent a peaceful, if uneventful, session discussing the era of Vulcan's technological revolution. It is rather heavy going, and he rewards me by giving me a quite rare tape of poetry from that era, along with a written transcript of it. It has never been translated from the original language, and

S'gref suggests that I might find it challenging to try an English version.

I put it aside as he leaves, meeting Sarek and Spock in the entry to the compound. It is early for them to be home, but there is no air of holiday about either of them. They part wordlessly, each going into his own dwelling with his own thoughts.

Whatever those thoughts are, it would seem that Spock intends to keep them private. It is with an air of patient distraction that he puts aside my offer of food, and he shuts himself away in the study. I know better than to disturb him when he is in such a mood – though he would deny with arched brow that he is subject to any kind of “mood” at all.

The prospect of eating alone doesn't appeal to me, and I settle down at my desk with a playback unit and the tape S'gref gave me. The quality of the recording is not good, and the poet's voice is slurred. Irritated, I snap the unit off and pick up the written transcript, peering at S'gref's shaky script. The possibilities of the translation are fascinating, and I do not know how long I sit there engrossed with the painstaking literal translation while patterns of rhyme begin to form for its eventual English rendering.

The music seems at first to be coming from my own head, and it takes me a moment to realize it is not. It creeps under the door and slides through the curtained windows as subtly as fog and as unexpected as fog on this arid planet.

It is not the delicately webbed, mathematically precise music of Vulcan; it has the sound of legends spoken around a dying fire, of secrets shared, and the mingling of two themes, baritone and bass. The baritone carries some hint of a deep order; the bass holds the tones of incipient power. And yet they blend and complement each other and grow in scope.

The sounds fade away, then the bass theme is back like thunder, unrestrained by the precision of the other. As that realization comes to me, the baritone theme returns, only to be drowned in a wild paean of sound that cries of savage land and savage men and rings with the sound of swords.

I leave the cloistering room, and though there is only one possible source for the sound, I find I must confirm it. I pick up the recorder and a blank chip as I leave, wanting to capture the sounds, to assure myself later that I did indeed hear them. In the night garden, Spock sits with his head bent over the strings of the lyre as the sword clashes die away with the failing light. He looks up at me and mutes the sounding strings with his hand.

“Please go on,” I ask him.

I switch on the recorder as he begins anew, and for a moment I think it is a different piece entirely. There is a new voice to the lyre, delicate as a butterfly and strong as a shaft of summer sunlight, haunting and lyrical. It meets the baritone theme, and the two come together so cunningly in their difference that I think fleetingly of *ni-var*. The

baritone theme breaks through alone now, brooding, and the bass notes crash in with a menace that drowns it out. There is a measure of silence as the notes die out, then a reprise of the soprano notes, in a minor key this time, which fades away slowly, leaving its sweetness hanging in the long twilight. Spock puts the lyre down and I rub the gooseflesh from my forearms.

“That is most beautiful,” I venture. “Is it an original?”

He shakes his head. “It is very old. I learned it from a dje-kalla in my youth. He is long dead, I suppose, for he was very old then.” He looks at the lyre as if it could return the ancient teller of legend to life. “There seem to be fewer dje-kalla these days. Perhaps we have outgrown the need to hear our legends told.

“The historians say this one is a myth, you know, when they say anything at all. For the most part, they prefer to ignore it.”

“It must be a very powerful story, then, if they wish so much to see it die.”

The comment sparks some secret amusement behind his dark eyes. “You are most perceptive, Lara-kai.”

“Tell me the story, Spock. Be my dje-kalla this night, and tell me your Vulcan myth.”

He looks for the truth behind my desire, and sees it. There was a time on Vulcan, and not too long ago, when a man and a woman could pass a lazy evening hearing the old

stories and growing closer in their ancient, solemn words. A time when “kai” meant more than “wife” ... when it meant what I hear when he uses it with my name. There is a desire in all of us, buried more deeply in some than in others, but there all the same, to return to a simpler time. I would return to that if I could, and draw him back with me. It is all I have ever wanted, and I know he is aware of it.

“Very well, then,” he says. “You must come and sit at my feet to do it properly, and fill my purse with kamarr when I am done.”

“All your purse can hold, my greedy friend, and a meal to put in your pack as you travel down the road.” It pleases him, I can tell, that I know of the ancient custom, and I settle myself at his feet.

“This is the legend of Surak and T’Paal,” he begins, “and there are many who say it is not true. If T’Paal lived, there is no record of her being, yet it is true that Surak came to power under the reign of Selim.

“In the old times, Vulcan was ruled by warrior-kings, and one of the last of them was Selim of the high country. Selim and Surak were boyhood friends, so the story goes, and they spent their days at the games of the young body and their nights at the games of the ancient mind.

“Selim wept at the violent nature of his people, and determined that he would find a way to change it when he ruled. Surak counseled him in this, and urged him to look at the natural, unemotional order of the movements of the

stars and the patience of the growing things in the world about him.

“They grew apart as they grew older, as boyhood friends so often do. Selim came to rule, and the pleasures of the flesh wooed him away from his earlier concern for his people, while Surak withdrew into the mountains, where he began to formulate his philosophy of logic. And when Surak was ready to begin his teaching, he came from the mountains to the court of Selim, his ruler and his friend. But he found only chaos and strife at Selim’s court.

“Selim had chanced to see the woman chosen by his youngest brother, Sta’aj, and her beauty was so great that he could think of nothing but possessing her. When he could not convince Sta’aj to give the woman over, nor T’Paal to yield to his lust, he determined to challenge Sta’aj at *koon-ut-kal-if-fee*. The counselors of Selim advised against this, cautioning that the people of the high lands would never accept as their ruler one who had slain his own brother. They asked him to find a surrogate for the challenge, one who could defeat Sta’aj in combat, and give over T’Paal in victory.

“So when Surak came forth, speaking of logic and mental discipline, Selim would not heed the words of his boyhood friend. He could think only of T’Paal, and finding a warrior to win her for him. They all denied him, for Sta’aj was known for his skill with the *lirpa* and *ahn woon*. At last Selim came to his friend and asked that he issue *kah-if-farr* to Sta’aj, and in return for the woman, Surak would be

given the support of the king for the school of discipline he wished to establish.

“At first, Surak also denied him; not because he feared Sta’aj, but because he had vowed never to take a life. But Selim persisted, and as the time of *koon-ut-kal-if-fee* approached, Surak weakened.

“Some say that Surak, too, had seen T’Paal and was himself bewitched by her beauty; others say that Surak weighed the life of one man against the future of a race and found the purchase worth the price. Whichever it was, Surak agreed, and met Sta’aj in combat and slew him at the marriage grounds. But the friends of Sta’aj rose against Surak, and would have spilled his blood, and he took T’Paal and fled to the mountains, where they hid for many months.

“The legend says Surak grew to love the beautiful T’Paal, and she, him. He spoke to her of his dream for Vulcan, and she saw the truth of it. And though their love for one another was great, she saw that it stood between Surak and his dream, and because she was as wise as she was beautiful, she reminded him of his promise to Selim.

“So he took her back to the palace of the king, and handed her into his keeping, and Selim kept his bargain to endow Surak’s school.

“Then did T’Paal beg Selim to give her a month to prepare for the wedding, and so piteously did she weep and so prettily did she promise, that he granted her wish. And

when that month had ended, she begged another and another and another, until at last Selim's patience came to an end and he decreed that on the very next day and no other, they must meet at the marriage grounds.

“But when he sent the women to fetch her in the red dawn, they found T’Paal had defeated Selim again, and this time for eternity. For she had opened the veins of her arms and she lay dead in all her marriage finery.

“Selim’s rage knew no bounds, then, and he sent his warriors to seek out Surak and slay him, but he, too, was gone – fled to the mountains with his followers.

“And there they stayed, and learned, and grew in numbers and in the strength of their determination. And Surak’s dream became the dream of Vulcan, and when it passed from dream to reality, it changed the lives of millions yet unborn. And Surak’s name lives in the hearts and minds of every Vulcan for all time, but the names of Selim and T’Paal live now only in the legends of the dje-kalla, and in the songs they play.”

It is full dark now, and I see only the outline of his face, dimly lit by starshine. He is looking off over the low wall that surrounds the compound, looking toward the great dark bulk of the mountains that rise beyond the red desert, and I wonder if he sees them, or anything at all. I remember that in the old times, young men in training as dje-kalla were ritually blinded, so that their visions of the present might not cloud their visions of the past.

It was a violent place, this long-ago Vulcan, and there are those who fear it will become so again. They battle to keep the fear from becoming reality – battle with a ferocity not even matched in *kah-if-farr* and this man Spock the foremost warrior among them.

“Play it once more,” I ask him.

“It grows late.”

“It’s a song for late night, don’t you think?”

“A song is only a song. It has no preference for night or day.” He profile turns; he looks down at me. “And a legend is only a legend, Lara-kai. There is no truth in it.”

“Are you sure?” Even in the dark I can see – or feel – the questioning arch of his brow.

“No. And that is why I will play it for you one more time, and then no more.”

I hand him the lyre, and our hands touch for a moment on the strings; the sound they make might be a lover’s sigh on the arid night wind. He takes the lyre, and the music swells into the night. T’Paal’s theme soars like the scent of the exotic night-blooming flowers around us, and when he is finished he takes my hand and lifts me to my feet and we walk together into our house.

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Later, we lie together quietly, each locked in private thoughts. There has been no lovemaking this night, nor for

many nights past; his mind and attention are elsewhere, yet there is a quiet reassurance to be had from his physical nearness.

I had thought he was sleeping, but then his voice comes at me out of the dark, a creature of the dark itself. "Do something for me," he says, and it is not quite a request.

"If I can."

"Tomorrow, as soon as Sarek and I leave, take Amanda and go to the Federation Embassy. Stay there with your father until I come for you." It seems an odd request, but something in his tone tells me not to question him.

"If it's important to you--"

"It is," he says, and then no more.

Not only is Amanda not surprised at my request, she is ready before I am in the morning. Plainly, Sarek has made the same request of her. Her impatience is such that I do not even stop for breakfast; I merely grab a kfah from the bowl on the kitchen table. The fruit has an unpleasant mustiness to it, and I discard it after a single bite.

Amanda is quiet and withdrawn, wearing a worried frown, and we do not speak as we go through the streets. There is a quietness, a kind of tension in them, with few people about and those few intent on their tasks.

The secretary who greets us at the embassy is likewise distracted, and a prickle of apprehension I should have heeded earlier tells me something serious is afoot. Papa

greet us in an anteroom, wearing a worried frown that is a twin of Amanda's. As usual, he has his pipe clamped firmly in his teeth, and as usual, it has gone out.

"What are you two doing here, today of all days?"

"That's a fine greeting," I say, trying to lighten his mood.

"Aren't you glad to see us?"

"I'm always glad to see the two prettiest women on Vulcan," he says, pulling on his best Ambassador's face. "I'm just surprised to see you here today." Again, that reference. I start to make some comment, but my tongue will not respond.

"Sarek thought it best," Amanda says, and they exchange glances that rip through the suddenly thin fabric of my patience.

"Will somebody please tell me what's going on?"

Papa sits down, taking his pipe in his hands and looking vaguely surprised to find it there. "The Council is voting today on whether to stay in the Federation," he says.

"Today? But I thought the vote wasn't to come for some time yet."

Amanda cuts in with a smoothness that tells me she has known of this for some time. "Sarek and the others hoped to postpone it, but the Separatists have pushed the voting forward. Needless to say, they think it's to their advantage."

Papa fusses with his pipe and finally puts it back into his mouth, still unlit. "Your papa may be out of a job by nightfall," he says. His words make hardly any impression on me. His form is hazy, out of focus somehow, and he seems to be surrounded by a faint blue aura. I shake my head and rub at my eyes, and the aura goes away.

I find myself thinking of that vote ... and what it might mean. If Vulcan chooses to withdraw, Spock will have seen through his promise to T'Pol. We will be free to leave this place, free to build a life of our own somewhere else. His defeat would become my victory, and I cannot deny the selfish hope that the Separatists carry the day.

The galaxy is a broad place, and maybe that island of peace and calm is not an impossible dream, after all.

Part 6

III

KAH-IF FARR

Time of Combat



AMANDA

It is midafternoon when the messenger comes. I see him from the second-floor window as he comes up the walk, distant beyond the physical space that separates us, impassive and formal as he disappears from my line of sight.

It is only a few moments before I see him leaving. I start to say something to Lara, but her mind is light-years away today. She is behaving most oddly, and I cannot put my finger on it. She barely picked at her lunch, even though I know she ate only part of a kfah before we left the compound. I wonder if she may be coming down with something. Her face is flushed and there is an odd and musty scent about her, not at all like the perfume she generally chooses. She alternates between periods of fidgeting, as if her skin were put on that morning with an uncomfortable wrinkle to it, and long moments of musing, as she is doing now.

Obviously, she did not know the vote was to be today; still does not know why Spock told her to come here. I think sometimes he keeps too much from her. I cannot determine if it is because he cares for her too little, or too much.

Frederick comes into the room, and when his eyes meet mine, I know what news the messenger brought. He sits down heavily in one of the ornate chairs, breathing a deep sigh. He runs a hand through his grey hair, looking

suddenly very old, very frail.

“So,” he says. “It is done.”

Lara comes out of her daydream. “The vote?” she asks, and her face is flushed with excitement. “Have you heard something?”

“The vote was in favor of withdrawal. I have five days to close the embassy. A Federation ship will be permitted to pick us up, and then the ports will be closed to them. To us.” He looks across the room to me, a man whose world is tumbling, pulling down structures he has worked years to strengthen. “I’m sorry,” he says.

Lara is at his chair, on her knees, and her expression as she looks up at him is, incongruously, one of joy. “It’s all right, Papa. It will all work out for the best. You’ll see. Now maybe you’ll do what I’ve been nagging you to do for years. Retire. Give yourself time to do all the things you’ve ever wanted to do.”

He looks over her head at me, and his eyes hold the pain of a man whose beloved child has called his life’s work worthless. “This *is* what I’ve always wanted to do, daughter.” He gets up slowly, as if the movement gives him pain. “So much to be done...” he says.

“Is there something I can do to help” she asks. “Spock won’t be here for a while yet.”

He puts a hand on her cheek, sorrowful that she still doesn’t understand. “No. ...No... I think the time for that

is long past, my dear.” His mind is elsewhere long before he leaves the room. He is right that there is much to be done, and not by him alone.

I hate being here, though I understand the reason for it. Lara has neither emotion; she has dropped back into her musings. She is humming something under her breath. I do not recognize it, though I am sure I have heard it somewhere, and recently.

“What is that song?”

She stops in mid-gesture; it looks curiously like a dance movement, and her flushed face carries the look of a child with a lovely secret. “Just ... something I heard somewhere. There’s a story that goes with it. ...I thought it might make an interesting ballet.”

Ballet! I think she is losing her grip on reality. Doesn’t she know what this means, to all of us?

She hasn’t long to wait to begin that learning. As the shadows lengthen outside, the crowd grows before the gate. I can see them, standing aimlessly, and the rising wind carries the murmur of their voices to me. A skimmer from the *tashai* – the peace force – cruises by, and the loiterers disperse, but are back almost before the leaves stirred by the car’s passage have settled.

Lara joins me at the window, searching the faces below. “Who are they?” she asks.

Who are they, indeed? The manifestations of racial

madness, Sarek would call them. The new savages of Vulcan, freed from the caves and trees of their primeval minds. I see a few Vulcan faces in the crowd, though not many, and those are *agan-tuá* by their dress and bearing. Most are offworlders – tall, haughty Eosians, many of them; Andorians, Tellarites, a few Lyrans identifiable by their uniforms.

“They’re the reason Spock asked you to come here. There’s going to be trouble, and he wanted you out of it.”

“Trouble? Why? They have what they wanted. We’re out of the Federation.” She stumbles a little on the last word, and that odd, musty scent curls around us.

“I would have expected more insight from an ambassador’s daughter.”

She seems to be about to say something, but then her gaze goes past me, to the crowd, and concern appears on her face for the first time. I turn to see what she saw, and I spot him in the crowd, shouldering forward with the pack at his heels – Selek. He is smiling at first, until he begins to speak. I cannot hear his words, but I can hear his tone. It becomes more and more agitated, and he gestures toward the embassy gates.

At last he finishes, with a gesture that carries his arms upward. It is as if it were a command; the crowd surges forward toward the gates. A vanguard of stones precedes them, and I pull Lara away from the window as the strongest throwers find their targets on the ground floor.

The tinkling sound of breaking glass rings through the air.

She is frightened now, and I think Spock was wrong not to prepare her for this. “This can’t be happening,” she says, almost to herself. “Not on Vulcan.”

“Did you look at them?” I ask her. “How many Vulcans did you see in that mob? Real Vulcans, not *agan-tuá*? No, you don’t have to look.” I pull her down; she is actually about to get up and expose herself to view. “Those aren’t Vulcans. They’re jackals, drawn to the scent of anything dying. S’Rakel has set them loose on us, and when it is over, he can deny knowledge of their actions. It’s all really quite logical.” It was a poor attempt at humor, and she does not respond to it. She seems to be thinking of something else.

“The *tashai*--” she begins.

“Are not trained to deal with pogroms. Yes, pogroms. There is no other word for it. They’ll be seeking out Federationists tonight, and no other reason is necessary for them to burn and destroy and even up old scores. Half the *tashai* are no doubt on S’Rakel’s private payroll already. The other half are realists. We’ll be safe here at the embassy. S’Rakel has no desire to goad the Federation into an act of retaliation.”

As if to punctuate my words, the siren of the returning *tashai* skimmer pierces the room. One final stone finds its mark, bursting through the window beside us and scattering both of us with broken glass.

There are angry sounds as the crowd is dispersed to go about its clandestine business elsewhere. A glance through the shattered pane reveals two uniformed *tashai* standing solemnly at the gates. There will be no more stoning this night. Not here, anyway.

A splinter of flying glass has nicked Lara's cheek; she puts a hand to it to wipe away the blood and then looks at her stained fingers as if she'd never seen them before. "Where is Spock?" she asks, and her voice relays her nearness to tears. I have never seen her weep. This night seems to be one for all sorts of revelations.

"Out there," I answer her. "Somewhere. Trying to keep it all together."

"I have to find him." She pushes herself to her feet like a sleepwalker. "There's something I have to tell him." She starts for the door.

"No, Lara!" I pull at her arm.

"I have to find him," she repeats.

"He wanted you here! He knows you'll be safe here."

"No. Have to tell him..."

I shake her soundly. "Listen to me! You can't go after him now. You mustn't even think of him." She gives me a blank look and starts to pull away. There is more strength in her slim form than I would have guessed; it is all I can do to maintain my hold on her.

“Lara, listen to me! There’s danger tonight for Spock. For Sarek, too. They must be free to fight it – to stay alive at all. If you interfere by going out there – even by trying to use the link to summon him – you could distract his mind at a moment when his life depends on being able to think clearly. You *must* do as he asks.”

Something in my words seems to make an impression on her at last, and the determination goes out of her body like air out of a child’s balloon. She lets me lead her to a couch, push her down, cover her with a bright blanket. I stroke her forehead as I would a child’s, and I remember a time, a long-ago time...

No. That is past, that time when I had a son who could be comforted in that way. If I can do anything for him now, it is to keep his wife safe from harm.

“Sleep, Lara. Sleep, and wait for him to come. That’s all you can do for him now.”

“But I wanted to tell him...”

“I’m sure he knows. Don’t you think he does?”

She is relaxing now, and her face wears the child’s look of secrecy I had seen earlier. “Yes,” she says. “Of course. He always knows, doesn’t he?”

“Yes,” I tell her. “He always knows.” And in a few minutes, she does sleep.

Not even the sirens wake her later, and I stand alone at the ruined window, watching the sky lit with flames and

wondering, even though I know I shouldn't. *Where are they?* And asking only for their safety, wherever they are.

The glow of dawn is masked at first by the artificial dawnglow of the fires burning throughout ShiKahr. When at last the sun's rays break through the smoke and haze hanging in the air, they refract and shatter until the whole sky is as red as blood.

The night, this first physical night, is over at last, though for Vulcan's people, the dawn of reason will not come for a long time yet. I wonder, and not for the first time in the past months, if Sarek will be here to see that dawn.

I have been part of him for longer than I have been myself. I used to think it was impossible that I would ever be his widow. But I may be, even now, and not know it.

No. I put that thought aside. I would know it. I would feel the loss through the Sundering – through the loss of that terrible, beautiful link that we have shared for so many years. To lose it must be as real and as painful as losing an arm or an eye. Sarek lives, because I live. And even when he ceases to be real in the flesh, he will still exist in my mind. No one is dead who yet lives in another's consciousness. That statement is one he would vigorously refute as illogical, but I know the truth of it nonetheless.

“Amanda?” Frederick has come in so quietly I did not hear him. “I'm sorry I didn't make better arrangements for

you.” He looks about the room. “Did you sleep at all?”

“As much as you did,” I tell him, and his tired smile gives me his knowledge of the truth in that.

“I’ll have some breakfast sent up for you,” he offers, but I shake my head.

“I’m sure your staff has enough to do.”

He chuckles ruefully. “My staff,” he says. “All three of us. The one constant that has never changed in all the long history of diplomacy is that the household staff always disappears at the first sign of trouble. They’re an excellent weathercock, my dear. Although I’m sure you know that.” He sits down with a sigh that says he has not given himself even that small luxury for many hours, and as he does so, he sees Lara’s sleeping form. “At least someone had the good sense to do the logical thing,” he says.

“I don’t know,” I tell him. “I’m very concerned about her. She wasn’t at all rational last night.”

He surveys the broken window and the bloody sky beyond it. “No one was, Amanda.” He flexes his hands, and I realize for the first time his pipe is missing. He seems almost undressed without it. He pats his pockets absently, looking for it perhaps, without taking his eyes off his daughter. “I know what you mean, though. I saw it myself, yesterday.” He rescues a piece of hard candy from a deep pocket, unwraps it and pops it into his mouth absently. “The thing you have to understand about Lara,” he says,

“is that she thinks she can make things happen just by willing them to happen. She’s always been that way. I remember once when she was just a child--” He breaks off, looking back at me. “Ah, well, you’re not really interested in hearing that. Forgive an old man his maanderings, Amanda.” He pushes up from the chair. “I really do have to go. I’ll have someone bring you some coffee, at least.”

He leaves less cautiously than he entered; the closing of the door jerks Lara into wakefulness. She appears disoriented for a moment, her eyes flicking over the room until she remembers where she is, and why. Her face is white and drawn, and she winces as if in pain when she moves her head.

“Lara, dear, are you all right?”

“No,” she says, and her voice is thick and ragged. “I’m going to be sick.”

“Not in here, you’re not.” I pull her arm around my shoulder and hurry her down the hall to a bathroom.

She bends over the basin, retching painfully, but her empty stomach has nothing to expel. When the spasm has passed, she leans against the counter, white and clammy with cold sweat. I dampen a cloth and bathe her face, and some of the color comes back into it.

“I’m all right now,” she says after a few minutes have passed. But the hand she puts out to push the cloth away is shaking. There is that tight, polite uneasiness between us

that two adults share when one has been messily ill and the other has witnessed it.

“Well, you don’t *look* all right. Come and lie down again.” Once I have her installed on the couch, I offer to bring her some coffee, or hot parra.

“No. I couldn’t keep it down anyway.” She shudders with a sudden chill and draws the blanket around her shoulders. It is perhaps a trick of light that her skin has the cold pallor of finely polished marble, almost translucent and yet not real flesh at all. Whatever her ailment of last night, it seems to have left physical traces, if no behavioral ones. I think for a moment that she is about to slip back into sleep, then she starts with a sudden thought.

“Spock—?”

“Still no word from either of them.”

“But he was here. Last night.”

“No,” I tell her.

“He was! I saw him...” She trails off, disoriented and a little frightened, I think. “Amanda...” she begins. “Last night ... I saw things ... I heard things. I can’t explain it.”

“You were ill,” I tell her, but she will not dismiss it that easily.

“It was like being drunk,” she says, “or drugged. I remember leaving the compound yesterday ... and then only bits and pieces.” She looks past me at the shattered

window. "Some of it, I guess, wasn't my imagination. There really was a mob out there."

"Yes."

"And Selek was there, egging them on?"

"I wish that was part of your illusion, Lara. It was far too real."

"What's going to happen, Amanda? To all of us?"

"I wish I could tell you. For now, we just wait. That part hasn't changed, in all the hundreds of centuries of all the civilizations that ever existed. The men go out and fight their battles, glorious or foolish, on all the kinds of fields they can devise to try to destroy one another, and their women wait for them."

"We really haven't come very far then, have we?"

"No, I guess not."

She picks at the pattern of the blanket, then looks up suddenly at a sound from the street. We reach the window at the same instant, to see the broad gates swing inward as the two forms, so alike and yet so different, pass through.

Perhaps it is the flash of movement at the window that makes Spock look up; perhaps it is some emotion or unspoken message surging through their private link. Whatever it is, he raises that elegant and somber face, and his shoulders lose their weary slant as some new reserve of vigor and strength opens to his use.

Sarek does not look up, and something dark and evil squirms into life in a corner of my soul that does not bear too close examination. *Why is it, my dark half says, that she can reach so easily through that icy Vulcan reserve in a way you never did?* Never with him, never with his father. Is it Spock's own Human half? And if it is, why with her? She has something I'll never have, and for an instant I hate her for that.

She pulls back from the window, dropping the blanket and turning for the doorway like a child released early from the classroom. I know her thoughts as well as if they were my own; indeed they might have been my own, years ago, before I gave way to the reality of things as they are. "She thinks she can make things happen just by willing them to happen," her father said. What she wills now, though she does not see it that way, is a stripping away of the protection Spock has built throughout a lifetime. I cannot allow her to do that to him, not now in this hazy dawn which is in reality the twilight of a night that will be long and dark. He will need all his armor.

"Lara--"

She stops with her hand on the door. Her face wears that same expression I saw the first day on Vulcan as Spock lifted her down from the skimmer.

"Let him be what he still has to be," I advise her. And somewhere within me, a grotesque and blackened creature gloats.

For a moment, I think she is going to defy me, to do what her heart tells her, and then her hand slips from the door and she composes her face into the calm, unrevealing mask a proper Vulcan wife wears so well. Only the pulse beating at the base of her throat betrays her feelings as we leave the room together to descend the broad stairway and greet the alien, unreachable men we have chosen to love.

>>>>> <<<<<<

LARA

>>>>> <<<<<<

They stand bracketing my father, the two tall Vulcans, Spock lean as a sapling and Sarek sturdy as an old Terran oak. Despite Amanda's counsel, it is difficult not to reach out and touch him. Harder yet to keep my thoughts from doing so. From last night's jumble of nightmare and nightmarish reality, the clearest memory is my conviction that he is now free of a vow made to a dead woman, and I want so much to have a private time and place to share that conviction with him.

The men have not yet acknowledged our presence, but I know Spock feels at least part of the urgency of my thoughts through the link. An abrupt lift of his chin and the slow creeping of color into his cheeks and ears tells me he has misinterpreted – at least partially – my silent appeal.

Like some psychic hangover, the eroticism of some of the things I fantasized last night has crept unbidden into my

mind, and the inappropriateness of it here and now has embarrassed him and closed his mind to me more surely than a physical embrace would have. Amanda was wrong, whatever her motive, in stopping me, and I was wrong to heed her. I felt relief and receptiveness in his mind when he looked up at me from the walk, but it is gone now, sealed off and shielded.

He and Sarek finish their hurried conference with my father before they deign to notice us officially. His fingers under mine are as cold and as distant as his mind. There are a hundred things I want to tell him, a hundred questions dancing a mad ballet in my brain, but they will have to wait for the proper moment, if indeed it ever comes.

He is studying my face, clinical, remote. “You are unharmed?”

“Obviously.” I can be as remote as he. And then he reaches out and touches my cheek with his fingertips, and my wall is shattered.

“Your face is cut,” he observes.

Is it? I have no clear memory of that.

“A splinter of glass,” Amanda says, and his touch picks up my annoyance at her interruption. He breaks the contact, and I feel like a high-wire walker suddenly left without a balance pole.

“They were here, then,” Sarek says.

“Just as you predicted,” Papa tells him. “Beating their

chests and howling like kabori. But no real harm done. What of your work?"

"Done, most of it," Sarek tells him. "The ones they sought most eagerly are in a place of safety. It remains only for Spock and myself to join them, which we shall do when we have seen you three safely off-planet."

My hand tightens around Spock's. "Do you mean to banish us as well, then?" I ask.

"Your terminology is unfortunately," Sarek says.

"But essentially correct?"

The distress in Amanda's face tells me she was not aware of this portion of the plan. "Sarek--" she begins.

"This is not the place to discuss it," he says, and his tone is precisely the same as Spock's was when he said the same thing to me on the *Enterprise*.

"Hunger is a poor father to decision," Papa quotes. "Come and have some breakfast, and then I'll leave you to your discussion."

His secretary is placing the last of the plates as we enter the small balcony overlooking the garden, and I can't help but notice it is family ware, not the formal embassy table setting. Presumably the embassy dishes are packed ... or perhaps Papa is even yet playing his diplomatic games. I smell the sour sharpness of youbash and the strong odor of Terran coffee, and my stomach rolls.

“If you’ll excuse me, please--”

Amanda looks at me sharply, but not unkindly; moves as if to take my arm. “Perhaps you ought to go lie down again.”

Spock’s look demands an answer, and I really don’t want to elaborate. “I seem to have eaten something yesterday that didn’t agree with me,” I offer. “Perhaps that kfah I had for breakfast.”

Spock arches a questioning eyebrow, and I know he isn’t going to let it pass. But I’m hardly prepared for the intensity of his response. “There have been no kfah in the city for months. The season is over.”

He is right, as it happens, but I hadn’t thought of it until that moment. “Something else, then. Something I ate here.”

“You ate nothing here,” Amanda puts in. “And it *was* a kfah. A northern one, from its size.”

I am growing exceedingly bored with this conversation, and I cannot understand why Spock seems to find it so fascinating. He is looking at me with that same clinical expression he used before he touched my face, mixed now with something else, something I can’t identify. “I don’t see that it makes any difference,” I say crossly.

It seems to make a great deal of difference to Spock and Sarek, however, for they exchange careful glances. Spock pushes away from the table. “Come with me, please,” he says, and I follow him into an anteroom off the main hall.

“Tell me what happened,” he says, closing the door.

“Spock, this is silly.”

“Tell me what happened,” he repeats, and his measured tones brook no evasion.

I tell him, as well as I can, leaving out only the grotesque sexual circus that haunted the depths of the nightmare. He does not seem surprised, somehow, and when I am finished, he says a name. “Who?” I ask.

“Not who. What. Sohti – it’s a drug. The *agan-tuá* use it. And that gives us who – SeleK.”

“SeleK? But why?”

“To prove that he could, perhaps. He has a fondness for displaying what little power he has.” He looks away from me. “Lara, he meant to kill you. If you had eaten all that fruit, he would have succeeded. Don’t stay here where he can try again. Get off-planet with your father now, while you can.”

“Let’s both go.” The words pop out before I can stop them. “Come with me. You’ve done what T’Pau asked. Come away – leave SeleK whatever he and his kind want. It’s not your fight any more.”

He shakes his head. “It is only beginning. T’Pau knew this would happen. She wanted--”

“I don’t give a damn what T’Pau wanted! She’s dead! She has no right--”

“A promise is a promise,” he says.

“You made a promise to me, too. At the marriage grounds. Doesn’t that count for anything?”

He turns to look at me, and his voice is cautious. “Inherent in that promise is the responsibility to keep you from harm.”

“There are many kinds of harm, Spock. We’ve been over this time and time again. I thought we had it all settled before we left the *Enterprise*. I love you. I want to be with you. My feelings haven’t changed. Have yours?”

His eyes, meeting mine, show the first wavering in his determination to see me packed up and gone like so much excess baggage. “No,” he says, and looks away. “But I should advise you to keep open the option of leaving while it is still available to you. It may not be possible for you to leave once the spaceports are closed to Federation vessels.”

“I’ll take my chances. What about Amanda?”

There is quiet amusement in his eyes now. “You and my mother are quite possibly the two most stubborn women on Vulcan. I am sure she will do what she wishes to do ... just as you will.”

>>>>> <<<<<

Amanda’s determination to stay is somewhat shaken, as is mine, when we return home. With Spock and Sarek looking out for the welfare of other Federationist supporters, and Amanda and myself stowed away at the Embassy, no one was left to keep the rampaging vandals

away from our family compound.

The stone buildings will not burn, of course, but the walls are blackened and stained from the fires kindled inside. Everything movable seems to have been piled in the main room of each dwelling and set alight. Paintings and holographs have been slashed from their frames, and Sarek's collection of miniature statuary has been reduced to so many pieces of rubble. The neckpiece of Spock's lyre extends from one smoldering heap, and he steps over it without appearing to see it.

The exterior walls are spattered with whatever rubbish the mob could lay hands on, and there is not a whole window in either dwelling. Amanda's precious Terran books, given a separate pyre in the courtyard, would not burn entirely, and the despoilers did not take time to see the job through to its end. She picks one up, and it falls open to a color plate. She looks at it for a long moment, and I think she is going to weep. Then she tosses it aside angrily and goes on to examine the rest of the damage.

Some of it shows simple, mindless violence, but there are also indications of careful planning here. The wall of the fountain in the courtyard has been breached, and the waters permitted to flood the flower beds. Nothing living remains there; the smaller plants are crushed into the mud and the trees uprooted or hacked off grotesquely.

Spock kneels by the fountain's ruptured wall, running his fingers over the smooth surface of the break. He looks up

at me soberly, knowing I share his knowledge. That break was not made by a crude battering ram; its sealed edges show unmistakable evidence of the use of a phaser. Phasers are not readily available to the general population. Someone in that mob had access to a sophisticated piece of weaponry.

The sobering thought comes to me that, had it not been for Spock's warning, Amanda and I would have been here alone when the jackals came. Perhaps he reads some of that in my mind or on my face, for he rises and comes to me.

"You see?" he says. "Do you understand, now, why I wanted you out of this?"

"You're not running from it. Why should I?" There is no reproach in the tone, but I know he hears behind it echoes of the hours of terse discussion we had earlier in the day about whether he should leave. My dream of escape for us was just that – a drug-induced fantasy no more real than the ones in which a horned and bearded Spock coupled with me under a starflung sky while lust-filled faces ringed our two-backed form, waiting their turn as eagerly as I awaited their embraces. I shake the hideous memory from my mind, shamed by it and shamed by the loose-limbed pleasure it gave me at the time.

"Was it like this all over the city?" I ask, because I have to ask something, to give my mind something else to fasten on.

"Yes," he says. "Homes and shops, all looted and fouled

like this. We got perhaps a hundred people away to B'al Graai. More will come, if they can. And we will go there tonight, to begin to plan and rebuild.”

B'al Graai, Place of the Winds, the northern property held for centuries by Spock's family, has been designated the place of sanctuary for those Federationists who survived the night. I have never seen it, though it figures large in family history.

As we approach it in the gathering night, it is an eerie and isolated outpost, set in the base of the rocky, barren mountains. No lights flare from its windows, and from the outside it appears deserted.

Within its smooth stone walls, however, it is a warren of lost and injured people. The stench of fear, of blood, of unwashed bodies hangs within like moisture clinging to the walls of a cave, and the physician in me is appalled at the conditions.

“Spock, these people can't live like this!”

“It is not intended that they shall,” he reproofs me gently. “The important thing last night was getting them here.”

“All right, they're here. Now take me to your doctors and let's get to work.”

“There are no doctors. No equipment, either, and only such medication as we normally maintain here for household use. These people have only what they carried here with them. There was not sufficient time for complete

preparation.”

I do not wait for his suggestions or offers. I commandeer some few assistants, set them to bringing in water, finding the available medicines, and sorting the most seriously injured from those whose treatment can wait. Then I begin to work.

It is like the aftermath of some great natural disaster. Almost every conceivable kind of injury is represented, and after an hour of doing the best I can, I even discover a young woman in advanced labor. Slim and slight, except for the mound of her belly, she is hardly more than a girl. She is bruised and appears disoriented, though not in any real danger. Still, I am loath to leave her, though there are others who need attention. I am kneeling by her side, explaining what the progress of the labor will be and when to call me, when Spock reappears.

“S’gref is here,” he says. “I think you should see him.”

“This girl--” I begin.

“I will attend to this,” he says, and smoothly cuts off any objection I might have made about his qualifications as a midwife. “Go on.”

S’gref has been brought in by one of the most recent arrivals, and I feel an anger growing in me that this gentlest of men, this apolitical scholar whose only crime was association with Spock’s household, should have been so viciously and methodically brutalized. It would have been

the greater kindness, perhaps, to leave him to die in his own home, where they discovered him. His brittle old bones have snapped like so many twigs under the beating someone has administered, and his skin has the yellowing tone that tells of internal hemorrhaging.

He is struggling to speak, and even though I try to quiet him, he forces the words past his bleeding lips. "Important," he says. "To remember. See that someone--" He breaks off, coughing, and vomits a pool of black, frothy blood.

I clean his face as gently as I can. "Hush now, S'gref."

"Remember," he says. "Write it down."

"Yes," I tell him. "I'll see that it's done. Rest now, S'gref."

He clutches at my hand, and I feel the bone ends grate together in his fingers. There is more yet that he has to say, but he cannot seem to force the words into audibility. I lean over him, and the sibilant whisper burns into my ear. Then the pressure relaxes, and he is gone, beyond the reach of the one whose name he spoke.

Selek.

I feel the tears start and behind them wells the cold hate of helplessness. There is not even a blanket available to draw over the lifeless form; there are others who need his covering more. I pull it off with anger overflowing into my movements, and call someone to take him away. They show gentle respect for his form, nothing more. Human

emotion is out of place here, counter-productive. Perhaps these people are right to deny themselves emotional attachment to another. It must make their losses easier to bear. I dash the unshed tears away, wash my hands, and turn to the next case.

It has been perhaps an hour since I left Spock when I hear his voice. "Lara," he calls, and though the tone is low and even, it has the unmistakable ring of urgency in it.

He holds a newborn baby in his long, capable hands, but no welcome outraged cry comes forth. The child is a boy, well-formed, but turning the green-tinged azure that indicates anoxia in Vulcans. I take him, slick and warm from the mother's womb, dangling him by the heels and slapping his back in the ancient way.

There is no response, and I place him back in Spock's arms, freeing my hands to turn the tiny, moist head sideways and explore the toothless mouth with a crooked finger. There is, as I suspected, mucus in the mouth and upper throat. As I clear it out, I get a gag reflex from the infant, a good sign. "Hold him still," I instruct, and place my mouth over the child's mouth and nose. Careful, now. Exactly right. Too much force and the tiny, delicate lungs can rupture. Too little, and the effort is wasted.

... breathe ... wait ... breathe ... wait ...

I can feel the eyes of the mother on me as I continue to breathe for the child. Quiet. Waiting. Will she feel grief if the child does not live? Or does a proper Vulcan wife have

to repress even that instinct?

... breathe ... wait ... breathe ... wait ...

“Lara--” Spock says, and I know he is going to tell me I am wasting both his time and mine, when there are other tasks to be done.

... breathe ... wait ... breathe ... wait ...

There! A convulsive movement of the limbs, and the chest rises and falls on its own. And again. The child kicks out, nearly slipping from Spock’s grasp, draws a deep breath, and lets go that most joyous of sounds – the outraged squall of the newborn. The color pours into his contorted face as he protests the injustice of this cold and noisy, too-big world, and I look about for something to wrap him in.

There are only bloody, rough scraps of sacking, and then Spock hands the child to me, loosening the short cloak of his k’viet. It is torn, and none too clean, but it is the proper size, soft, and warm from his body heat. I think of another man, on another planet, stripping off his shirt to cover a child we were too late to save. If he has any memory of that, it does not show on his face as I hand the child to its mother.

She says nothing, and there is no readable expression on her face as she takes him. I feel a moment of resentment at her coldness, and in the next breath am thanking that same stoicism for making my job easier. The one thing I do not have to worry about here is shock. It is virtually unknown

among Vulcans, except in the very young who have not gained complete control of their bodies. Those patients I have already treated are quiet, withdrawn into the Vulcan healing trance, all extraneous systems shut off to permit them to heal themselves.

The remaining cases are minor burns, cuts, and bruises, but by the time I am finished with them, the meager supply of medicine on hand is completely exhausted. I try to locate Spock, to tell him, but he is no longer in the room. He is on watch, I am told, and I wonder how long it has been since he has eaten or slept.

I find an unoccupied corner and lie down, but my mind will not shut itself off. Someone has brought in a huge pot of steaming parra, and I give up the idea of sleep as a lost effort, pour out two mugs of the hot drink, and seek out my husband.

He is alone on a dark parapet, high above the quiet desert floor. He takes the mug wordlessly and continues to look out southward, toward the city. It is too far away to see the lights, but the dim glow on the horizon locates ShiKahr. We sit in quiet companionship while the soft sounds of the desert night stir the lazy darkness. I feel some of the tension drain from my mind and body as the moments stretch on.

“You need sensors,” I comment.

“We have them. In the cellars. Tomorrow, I shall see that they are made functional.”

“Is there really danger of an attack on B’al Graai?”

“Enough to warrant a watch.”

“For how long?”

“A few days. Probably at least until the spaceports are closed. Then S’Rakel will issue an official statement of regret, and pontificate upon the unfortunate excesses of the mob. Everyone will know, of course, that he set it loose, but the formalities must be observed.”

“Then what? Do we go back to ShiKahr?”

“It hardly seems worthwhile. The senators can travel into the city for Council sessions. Our planning can be done here. There is nothing else to go back for at this time.”

“How will they live? All these people?”

“There is sufficient food here, and water for a long time. In a few more days, we would have had medical supplies and plans for a physician.” The ramifications of what he has said suddenly strike me. Sensors, food, medical supplies. These plans have been long in the making, and only the advance of the voting date led to yesterday’s confusion.

“You knew this would happen, didn’t you?”

“The probability was quite high,” he admits.

“And yet you stayed.”

“It was necessary.”

“But why? If you knew it would fail?”

He walks to the end of the parapet and back before he answers me, and then he sits down for the first time, but his gaze is still on the desert below. "When I was a child," he says, "we used to come here every summer. I wanted very badly to climb that cliff face." He moves his head toward the forbidding rock face to the west of the house. "It is an extremely difficult climb; impossible for a nine-year-old child. But I wanted to make it. I had to make it. Finally my father told me to go ahead.

"He went with me to the base, and then he went away. And I climbed and fell, and climbed and fell, and climbed and fell again. And when the day was ending and I knew I had failed, he came to take me home."

I feel in his voice and in the touching of his mind the crushing sense of failure he felt then, and the shame of it. He does not often speak of his childhood, and then only to make a point, as he is doing now.

"When S'Rakel has climbed and fallen, when he knows he, too, has failed, Sarek and others like him will be waiting, to lead Vulcan home. I owe that to T'Pau. More than that, I owe it to S'Rakel, and to that child born tonight, and to his sons."

I feel something break away inside me, and I know it is the dying of a dream. Of my dream of peace and solitude for us, of a life together away from this place, these people, he calls his own. And I know, suddenly, why he told me the story of Surak and T'Paal. T'Paal, who gave up what she

wanted most in life that the man she loved might build his dream.

And if she had not? It is pointless to contemplate that. If she had not, there would have been no Vulcan as we know it; no Spock to hold my heart and future in his hands. And I would not be sitting here with slowly stiffening muscles in the long night of Vulcan, feeling my own dream die.

=====

KIRK

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I lie awake, sometimes, listening. Feeling the steady thrum of power that encompasses every part of the *Enterprise*. I don't know what I'm listening for; some difference, perhaps, in her heartbeat. It's not there, but she's a different ship.

You wouldn't think replacing three people out of a crew of over 400 could make that much of a difference. But it does. M'Benga's a good man, a good surgeon, and we have an easy, comfortable relationship now, but he's not Bones. Never will be.

The science department runs smoothly under Varyschenk – more smoothly, perhaps, than it did under Spock, because Varyschenk doesn't have that alienness about him that Spock always wore. Sulu's my First Officer now, and I couldn't ask for a better one. Except for the one I can't have.

And Lara. Nobody is Lara. That's not an assumption. It's a cold hard fact I thought I could live with.

There's no anger left in me now. There was for a while. I know I was a bastard to live with, to serve under, in the weeks that passed between the time they filed their requests and the time they left the ship. We were civil to each other, polite, remote – all the things civilized people are supposed to be in an intolerable situation – during the weeks it took Starfleet Command to red-tape its way through the muddle of forms and official approval they find so necessary to their continued operation. I suppose every petty bureaucrat has to justify his plush office and buxom secretary by making every simple operation a major undertaking.

Just a simple operation. Yeah, that's it. Like the amputation of a hand. Only they don't have the decency to do it in one clean stroke. They hack away at it with a butter knife.

Come on, Kirk. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Spock did the only thing he could do, being Spock. And Lara did the only thing she could do, being Lara.

And Kirk? Kirk stomped around like a Gorn with a sore tail and generally rode everybody's ass until end-of-tour, when he went out on the loudest, drunkenest, whoringest shore leave in the long history of Starfleet.

It didn't work, though. Because I had to come back. Back to a ship that's the same, but changed. Back to a crew that's the same, but changed. And back to a service that's

becoming something it hasn't been in over a hundred years.

The word comes slowly, filtering down through chain of command. Science expeditions scrubbed. Exploration missions scrubbed. Research people replaced by technicians, tacticians, weaponry and intelligence specialists. To hell with the acquisition of knowledge, we've got a political mess on our hands. Trouble brewing on Vulcan, on half the outlying planets in the Federation. We must not forget our prime function, gentlemen – the perpetuation of this comfortable little organization we have here. Can't have anybody rocking the boat. Get tough. Slap a few wrists, and they'll come back into the fold.

How can they be so blind? How, after generations of being affiliated with Vulcan, of dealing with Vulcans, can they choose not to see the determination there?

Word came four days ago. Vulcan's pulling out of the Federation. Get somebody out there to pick up our people. Whose sector is that? Damned if I know, with all the shuffling that's been done around here in the last six months. Wait a minute. Got it right here somewhere. Oh, yeah, *Enterprise*. Okay, fine, have Kirk whip over there and pick up our embassy team and anybody else who wants off-planet before they close the ports.

Somewhere, I think, the Great Bird of the Galaxy must be snickering into its wingtips over the delightful exigencies of fate that happened – just happened – to put the

Enterprise and her captain in that particular sector at that particular time. I had harbored the fond dream that by putting enough space, enough time, between myself and Vulcan, I could remove from my mind the thought of two very special people living there. Yet with the orders to pick up refugees, my first thought was for them.

Will they emigrate? Will she?

Part of me wants them both back on the *Enterprise*, even knowing what it would be like, with the shadow of the past falling across us all; even knowing it could put Spock in a position where he might have to lead an action against his own people. There is that hard, stubborn nugget of selfishness inside that says it wouldn't matter, when logic says of course it would.

But what if Spock should decide to stay, and Lara not...

Yes. What if...

And that's the real question, isn't it? That's what has me lying here staring at a bulkhead when I should be sleeping. Lying here wondering if Lara, having made her choice, is having second thoughts. Wondering if Spock, with that tortuous logic of his, knowing how Lara and I felt about each other, still has it in his stubborn mind that she and I ought to sail off into the stars together.

Felt? No, feel. Admit it, you still love her. Haven't stopped. Never stopped, not even for a moment, not even in the arms of other women.

“Captain?” The voice from the speaker is low, as if there were another person in the cabin who should not be awakened.

“Yes?” *There’s nobody here but me and my ghosts, honey, and they’re already awake.*

“You asked to be called when we established orbit around Vulcan.”

“Very good. Have you contacted the Embassy?”

“Yes, sir. Ambassador Merritt says they’re ready to begin beaming up at any time.”

Merritt? Of course. I’d forgotten. Then she’ll be there, surely. She’d want to say goodbye to her father, even if she’s decided not to leave...

A soft noise from the speaker reminds me that the scan officer is waiting for me to make some kind of response. “Advise the Ambassador that another officer and I have to beam down and verify the situation first. Then contact Commander Scott and have him meet me in the transporter room.”



Ambassador Merritt is somewhat of a surprise to me. I don’t know quite what I expected, but it is not this stocky, rotund man who looks rather like an overgrown koala bear. He holds an unlit pipe clamped firmly in his jaws, and he has the slightly distracted air of someone who is constantly assailed by petty interruptions demanding his immediate

attention. There is nothing about him of Lara, I think, but as he comes closer, I see his eyes – the same fine, expressive, grey-blue eyes I have seen in reality and dream for what seems like all my life.

“Ambassador, I’m Captain Kirk from the Federation Starship *Enterprise*. This is Commander Scott. We’ve come to evacuate your people.”

His handshake is warm and firm. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Captain, though I wish it were under happier circumstances. My daughter served under you on the *Enterprise* – perhaps you remember her?” There is no guile in his voice, but his question makes me a bit uncomfortable nonetheless. I decide to bull it through.

“Very well, Ambassador. I was hoping, in fact, that she might be planning to come off-planet with you. We’d like to have her back.”

He shakes his head regretfully. “She is determined to stay here, Captain, though I wish she would reconsider. She was most adamant about it this morning when she came by.”

“I see.” I hope my disappointment is not too apparent. “How many people in your party, then?”

“Thirty-five, including myself and my staff. Most Terrans have been gone from Vulcan for some time, as I’m sure you know. And we do have a considerable amount of cargo, I’m afraid.”

“No problem, Ambassador. If you’ll show me where it is,

we can begin the beam-up process immediately.” Once the cargo beam-up has begun, I have the opportunity to discuss the situation on Vulcan with the Ambassador.

“We’ve been asked by Starfleet Command to survey the situation here. Can Commander Scott and I move about the city freely?”

He eyes my uniform. “Not like that. I think I can lay hands on two k’viet for you. You won’t pass for Vulcans, of course, but there are plenty of off-worlders in the city. If you keep the hoods up to cover those Fleet haircuts, you should have no trouble.”

The garments he finds are old, but adequate. They are also stifling hot. He is right, however, about their allowing us to move with relative anonymity. We receive hardly a passing glance as we move through the shops and parrahouses, watching and listening. He is right, too, about the off-worlders in ShiKahr. They are everywhere, from everywhere – Eos, Lyra, Tellares. And they all bear the same stamp, marked on their faces and in their voices and posture. The terms have been different on different worlds and in different times – privateer, freebooter, mercenary, soldier of fortune – but they all mean the same thing: trouble.

Trouble is written, also, in the boarded, broken windows and smoke-blackened facades of the isolated shops and offices we see scattered randomly about the city. There seems to be no pattern to their location, and yet they are

most disturbing. A uniformed *tashai* hails me as I stand peering into one, and I have a moment of uneasiness, hoping he doesn't ask me for any identification. But he only points out the broken cornice overhanging the street, and suggests I move back.

"Looks like they had a little trouble here," I offer.

He arches one eyebrow in a gesture I find disturbingly familiar. "You have been out of the city perhaps?"

I would *perhaps* have been better off not to comment, but the only thing to do now is to play the hand I've dealt myself. "That's right. I've been in Pan Sohn." His expression does not change, and I decide to raise the stakes a little, just to see what he's holding. "It was the same way there."

"All over," he agrees. The Federationists, I think, will be much more reasonable now. Though, of course, S'Rakel has denounced the actions of the mobs as reprehensible."

"Yes, of course." I flash a Vulcan salute at him, and what I hope is a knowing smile. "Live long and prosper."

"Peace and long life," he replies, returning the gesture and moving on his way.

When his back is safely turned, I allow myself to expel a long-held breath. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Scotty step out of the concealment of a doorway, aggression in every line of his body and a dark Gaelic scowl on his face.

"Tha' was a near thing, Captain. I thought for a moment

we'd ha'e to take him on."

"Correction, Scotty. *I'd* have had to take him on. If either of us gets in over his head, the other is to return to the ship immediately. Our prime responsibility is to get those people out of here. Use all transporters simultaneously, if necessary, and never mind the power drain."

He looks disgruntled, but accepts it, knowing that my order applies to both of us equally. "Aye, Captain."

"That Vulcan's information jibes with what Ambassador Merritt told me about the rioting here. Let's make a quick sweep through some of the suburban areas and then get back to the ship." An idea growing in the back of my mind has transformed itself into compulsion, and Scott's open face, for once, is unreadable. He says nothing as we move into an area of the city where I have been only once before, when I accompanied Spock to his parents' home on a brief and somewhat uncomfortable Christmastime shore leave.

The streets begin to look the same, with all the houses hidden by their high walls, and it is obvious that there is no intelligence to be gained here. Still, Scott says nothing, and I begin to feel a helpless sense of impotence. How can I drag him off on this fool's errand, after what I've just told him about the importance of the evacuation? And how can I think that even if I should locate Sarek's house, that Spock or Lara would be there? It is the height of folly ... but folly is the child of compulsion.

Scott is growing antsy, and I know I can't justify this

quixotic search much longer, when I spot a gate whose lintel is made of intricately carved Argelian jade. I know that lintel; I bought it on Argelius and had it sent to Sarek in thanks for his hospitality on that long-ago shore leave. I cross the street with Scotty trailing behind me, uncomfortable but loyal.

“Captain--” he begins apprehensively as I push open the gate.

“It’s all right, Scotty. This is Ambassador Sarek’s home, I’m sure of it. I want to make sure ... everyone’s all right.”

“Yes, Captain.” His voice is short, but his formality speaks of his total understanding ... and disapproval ... of my actions.

The minute we pass through the gate, the stench of burned cloth and rotting vegetation hits me like a blow, and I feel my stomach tighten in apprehension. *Calm down*, I tell myself. He said he saw her this morning. And surely he would have said something if any of them had been injured. But how ... how could anyone have survived this kind of destruction?

The garden is in shambles, leaving the house – two houses – naked and defenseless against the sun. Two houses? Am I in the wrong place, then? Impossible that there would be two identical jade carvings, and yet...

“What is it?” Scotty asks, sensing my uncertainty.

“It’s ... different. I’ve only been here once, but--”

And then I see her, sitting on the rim of a ruined fountain. The sound of our voices has alerted her, and she rises slowly, frightened by the appearance of two hooded strangers in this private place. Scared but defiant at the same time. She hasn't changed, then. The soft hair a little longer, grazing her jaw, the slenderness drawn out like a taut bowstring, but essentially the same, and I feel a surge of emotion that threatens the stability of my knees.

"Lara--" I call, and push back the hood. Her face changes, like dawn thundering up out of a dark sea, and she breaks into a run toward me.

"Jim? Oh, my God – *Jim!*" She comes into my suddenly open arms at warp speed; her momentum is such that I have to lift her up and swing her around to keep both of us from falling. And, having her in my arms, the natural thing to do is to kiss her soft and waiting mouth.

It is like coming home, the scent of her, the yielding passion of her lips on mine, the touch of her arms around my neck, and every dream of her I've ever had fades into a pale replica beside this intense reality, this essence of woman in my arms. My woman. The woman all the gods in all the galaxies meant for me to have ... who belongs to my best friend.

I put her down gently, untwining her arms, suddenly very conscious of Scotty standing there, radiating disapproval like a star about to go nova. Incredibly, she doesn't feel it, or feeling it, brushes it aside as irrelevant. Her shining

eyes, huge in a face grown brown from the Vulcan sun, never leave mine.

“Jim – oh, Jim – how? What are you doing here? Why--?”

I force a laugh and hold her at arm’s length. “We’re here to evacuate the Terrans. You’re coming, aren’t you?” She has to come, now, after this. She can’t possibly deny what she felt an instant ago.

But she pulls away, slowly, hugging herself with the gesture a person in pain will use to keep from giving way to it. “No, Jim. I can’t. Please, don’t ask me.”

I step after her, forgetting about Scotty’s presence, forgetting my own quiet of an instant ago, forgetting everything but the intensity of feelings out of control now and rapidly turning to anger. I catch at her arm, jerking her around to face me.

“Why do you think I came out here, dammit? I can’t leave without you – can’t go on like this, not knowing from one day to the next if you’re all right, if you’re in trouble...”

She won’t meet my eyes this time, but I can see the silver track of one tear tracing a path down her cheek.

“Do you want me to beg you?” I ask, keeping my voice low, for her ears alone. “Is that what you want? To prove you can make me forget everything I’ve ever learned about dignity or self-respect?” My hand tightens around her arm. “All right – you’ve got it. Only don’t – please, Lara, *don’t stay here!*”

She rubs the tear away angrily, roughly. “I can’t come with you, Jim. Don’t you see that? You told me once you couldn’t run my life for me. Don’t try to do it now! Please, just go away before someone finds you here.”

Scotty has heard her last words, and he comes forward now with concern lining his face. “Captain, by the terms of our agreement wi’ the Vulcans, we’re required to break orbit less than two hours from now. We need to verify the closin’ of the Embassy, sir.”

I am caught on the horns of his truth. *But two hours...* I have gambled more with less chance of return. “Go on back to the Embassy, Scotty. Verify and beam up. I’ll join you on the ship when it’s time to break orbit.” I see the tightening of his jaw, feel the restrained movement and comment.

“That is an order, Mr. Scott,” I remind him. “You don’t have to approve of it, you just have to carry it out.”

There is a moment when Scotty’s better judgment wars with his sense of military discipline, then the years of subjugating his own desires win out, and he gives me a curt nod. “Aye, Captain.”

Lara watches him go, and finally says, “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“That’s my trademark – doing things I shouldn’t. Didn’t you know?”

“Jim ... don’t be bitter.”

“What the hell do you expect me to be? One minute you’re kissing me like ... like--”

“That’s not fair,” she breaks in. “You took me by surprise.”

I touch her face, reaching for a way to lighten the moment. “I’ll take you any way I can get you, lady. Including by force, if I thought it would do the job.”

She stiffens and draws away, and I realize she actually believes I would. “Hey – I was only teasing,” I tell her. “Bad joke. I’m sorry.” She looks so vulnerable, standing there with her back to me. I reach out and touch her shoulder and she flinches. “I’m sorry, Lara. You’re all right, aren’t you? I mean – nothing has happened, has it?”

She whirls around, eyes snapping, and her voice is high, shaking with sarcasm. “Oh, hell, no!” she flares. “Just a few minor inconveniences is all. Like losing my job and losing my home and having my father kicked off the planet and finding out I don’t have a license to practice medicine here any more. Certainly nothing to get upset about. And then you – you come charging in here just when I thought I’d finally gotten you out of my system. Damn you, Jim Kirk! *Damn you!*”

She comes at me swinging, and I trap her in my arms, holding her close, feeling her anger dissolve into tears of frustration. I lead her back to the edge of the fountain and sit her down, wiping away the tears with the broad sleeve of the k’viet.

“Hey, come on. I didn’t come clear across the sector to fight with you. I love you, you crazy lady. Now what’s all this about losing your home? You aren’t living *here*, surely?”

She takes a deep breath and looks around. “Not any more. We did, until Selek and his mob got through with the place, five days ago.”

“Who?”

“It doesn’t matter. There wasn’t really anything here to lose anyway.”

“But is everybody all right?”

She looks up at me and smiles that bittersweet smile. “He’s fine, Jim,” she says, understanding my question all too well. “As fine as any of us are.”

I have the sudden, unshakable feeling we are being observed, and fight the urge to turn around. “Is he here? Now?”

“No. We’re staying at--” She breaks off, a look of caution crossing her face. “We’re at a safe place. We couldn’t stay here, obviously. I came back to look for my medikit. It was locked away, and I’d hoped the looters missed it.” She makes a wry face. “I’d give my left arm for thirty minutes in the *Enterprise* pharmacy.”

“Level with me, Lara. How bad was it here? How bad is it?”

“Bad enough.” She tells me in her clear and concise manner about the tensions and infighting that led up to the vote, of the growing distrust of Terrans and her expulsion from the research center. It is only when she begins to talk of the night of the rioting that her account becomes confused, sprinkled with “Spock said” and “I guess”, colored by a kind of confusion which can’t be laid entirely to her being in the Embassy during the height of the riots. She is more definite about the evacuation of Sarek’s followers from the city, though she still carefully avoids telling me precisely where they are headquartered. Finally she comes back to her original point – the medikit.

“We don’t have any equipment at all, Jim, and no medicine of any kind. There are sick and injured people out there, and I don’t have any way to treat them. I came into the city this morning determined to buy, borrow, or steal what we need. But I’m a lousy thief, I guess, and nobody’s lending. That’s when I found out I don’t have a license any more. I tried to buy some broad-spectrum antibiotics at the central medical supply house, and the computer confiscated my authorization card. My medical license has been revoked, it seems. So I came out here to see if there was anything to be salvaged.” She spreads her hands. “I guess there isn’t.”

“Then why stay?”

“Oh, Jim, don’t start that again. I love him, and I want to stay with him. He hasn’t changed, but his world has. He needs a Human contact, because he’s Human, too. You gave him that once, and McCoy did, too, but he can’t have

that any more. So he has to have someone. Amanda knew that long before Spock did, I think, and she certainly knew it before I did. That's why she chose me for him." She stops, seeing the surprise on my face. "You didn't know that, did you? That it was an arranged marriage."

"No. I wondered about it, but I never asked." There are some things you don't ask, no matter how much you want to know. "But if it was Amanda, and not Spock--"

She puts a finger to my lips. "Don't say it. It doesn't matter any more, whose choice it was. It's mine now." She takes her hand away, lacing her fingers in her lap and studying them. "I used to think McCoy didn't like Spock, and that was why he baited him so. It took me a long time to realize he did it because he cared about him, and because he saw that if Spock didn't have someone, somewhere, to let that humanity out with – or on – he'd go up like a nuclear pile at critical mass. McCoy acted like a damping rod, but he could only do it by provoking Spock. You could do it with love. And now I have to do it both ways."

"*Enterprise* is a big ship," I tell her. "I think she has room for two more people."

"That wouldn't work either, Jim, even if he'd agree to come. We'd tear each other apart."

"It doesn't have to be permanent. Look, there's a new sector-wide pediatrics project being set up on Hadrian. They're crying for doctors, all kinds of science staff. I know I could get you an appointment there, and Spock

could write his own ticket. The children--”

“There are children here, too, Jim. I can’t turn my back on them. I’ll get equipment and medicine somehow, somewhere. In a few weeks, things will settle down here, and I can get a flight out to somewhere my license is still valid, and then--”

“Lara, listen to me. I’m going to tell you something I shouldn’t, and if you say I did, I’ll deny it. But it’s true. If you don’t come with me now, today, you’re not going to be able to get off-planet at all.”

“What?”

“There’s going to be a blockade. The orders came through yesterday. We’ll transfer our passengers at the sector boundary and then come back here with a patrol fleet. The Eosian council voted to withdraw from the Federation the same day Vulcan did. And the Lyran and Tellarite systems vote this week. They have space fleets, Lara, and the Federation isn’t going to stand around and wait for them to join forces. They’ll all be blockaded so tightly you couldn’t get a bicycle through.”

She is shaking her head as the full meaning of what I’m saying dawns on her. “You can’t do that! Our whole technology is based on interplanetary trade. If Vulcan is blockaded, she’ll fight, Jim. Fight for her life.”

“Would you rather fight the Romulans? They’re waiting to see which way the Federation jumps, but we know they’re

tooling up for a war. If we can't settle this thing, and quickly, we'll find ourselves fighting on two fronts, and we'll all go down. Then there won't be anything between here and the Coal Sack to stand in the Romulans' way."

She is looking off over the garden wall, toward the towering bulk of the mountains to the north. "I don't know what that was supposed to do," she says, "but what it did was make me feel pretty insignificant."

"That's not what I meant it to do, you know. I meant it to make you realize just how important you are to me."

She gets up, uncomfortable, and moves toward one of the empty houses. I follow her, unable to shake the feeling I had before, of being observed, though a glance around shows no watcher.

"You are, you know," I tell her as she steps across the threshold. "Important to me. I don't think I realized just how important, until I held you again. It was like the last few months never happened. Everything was new again. Everything was ... right, somehow."

She touches a torn drapery, hanging precariously from a broken support, then turns to face me, shoulders braced against the wall. "I told you – you took me by surprise. I was glad to see you, that's all."

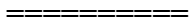
"Shall we try it again? When you're not surprised?"

"Jim, I don't think--"

"That's what's wrong with the world today. Too much

thinking. Don't think. Just feel." I cup her face in my hands and touch her lips lightly. She remains passive at first, and then I feel her arms around my neck and she leans against me, shaking like a leaf in the summer wind. She's like velvet and fire in my hands, and I know this is what I came to Vulcan for – this and no other thing, and I'd do it again and again if I had to, if I thought there was one chance in hell of having her for my own.

Damn you, she said, but I'm already damned, and no help for it.



The time, the precious, irreplaceable time, has flowed through our tightly clasped fingers like starshine, and now there is no more.

"Lara," I tell her, "It's time. We have to go." She stirs against me like a sleeping child, though I know she does not sleep, and there is nothing really of the child in this woman.

"No," she says, and puts a hand on my chest.

"We have to." I pull away, reaching for my shirt. "There'll be plenty of time later on."

"I meant no, I'm not going with you."

"But you said--"

"I said I loved you. I do. But I'm not leaving. I can't."

"You can if you want to."

She shakes her head. “What I want – the one thing in the universe I really want – is the one thing I can’t have. I want you not to be hurt. I want Spock not to be hurt. And yet I’ve hurt both of you. You, probably worst of all because I’ve taken something very precious away from you and I can’t give you anything to replace it.”

“Then what the hell was this all about? I thought--”

“That’s what’s wrong with the world today,” she says, and the ghost of a smile tugs at the corner of her mouth. “Too much thinking.”

I find I can’t meet her smoky gaze. “I guess I had that coming.”

“Yes, you did. But I’m not going to let you go away thinking you came slinking in here and seduced me. Everything that ever happened between us happened because I wanted it just as badly as you did.”

“Lara--”

“Now get out of here, Jim Kirk, before Mr. Scott sends a search party out after you. I don’t think I could handle that twice in one lifetime.”

“Promise me something. Two things.”

“What?”

“First, that if you ever change your mind, you’ll get in touch with me.”

The smile-ghost haunts her mouth again. “You’ll be among

the first to know,” she says.

“One other thing. Stay here for a few minutes after I leave. Give me half an hour at least.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask. Just promise.” She watches me, seeming to be waiting for something else, something that doesn’t come. Finally, she nods. Then there’s nothing else to say. No way to put off the inevitable. I contact the ship, and give the one order I don’t want to give...

“Kirk here. One to beam up.”

>>>> <<<<<

LARA

>>>> <<<<<

When he has gone, the air seems colder, the ruined house emptier, than one person’s passage should make it. Maybe part of the emptiness is inside me. The wind is starting to blow, and it rattles the dead leaves strewn across the courtyard like the sound of someone walking. It’s a spooky feeling, and I dress quickly, wishing I hadn’t made that second promise. I’m tempted to leave right now. He’ll never know.

But I’ve broken so many promises ... to myself, to Spock, to Jim. He had some definite purpose, and thirty minutes of my time isn’t so much to ask, after all. It is long enough, however, to give me time to realize that what I did today

was selfish and cruel. Perhaps, then, I am selfish and cruel. No *perhaps*. I *am*, and that is a bitter thing to face.

It was wrong to let him think making love would change my mind. I never told him it would. But I let him think that, and that was a kind of lie in itself. Unspoken lies are the worst of all. Spock said something like that once, though I can't remember exactly what prompted it.

The time is almost up. Have they already warped out of orbit?

The sound is so unexpected that it startles me, and I look around in a moment of panic before I can identify it as the whine of a transporter effect. Its origin can be only one place – *Enterprise* – and I don't think there's anybody from the *Enterprise* I want to see right now.

But the squat, lumpy shape materializing across the room is not even a remotely human one. The shimmer fades, and what I see is even more confusing. It is an old, well-worn spacebag, common enough to pass unnoticed anywhere. I have one mad moment when I think perhaps Jim – no, he wouldn't. Couldn't. But still, I wait, until it becomes apparent that no one and nothing else is going to materialize in this room. The other thought was insane on the face of it.

Cautiously, I approach the bag, though where that caution comes from, I don't know. If this came from Jim – and there seems no other possible source – then it cannot hold anything dangerous. Still, I give it a gentle nudge with my

foot. Solid, but bulky. There is a dull thunk as something inside, something metallic, shifts.

I kneel by the bag, pulling open the top, and the first thing I see is a standard-issue medical tricorder. I close the bag quickly and look around. This is crazy. There's no one here to see. But ... *oh, Jim.*

It's still there when I re-open the bag. And under it, vial after vial of broad-spectrum antibiotics, half a dozen spray hypos still in their cases, painkiller, stimulants, plastiderm ... and in the bottom, a brand new feinberg. Everything but a bone laser, and he'd probably have thrown that in, too, if he could have figured out how to make one fit.

But how ... my God, there's several thousand credits worth of equipment and supplies in here. How could he possibly have gotten this out of sickbay to start with, let alone account for it on the control log? Jim, my darling, somebody's ass is going to be on the line when this stuff comes up missing. How are you going to explain it?

For that matter, how am *I* going to explain it? The drugs, I suppose, could be transferred to other containers, except those in aerosol form. The tricorder, though...

To hell with it. If you don't have an explanation, don't give one. If necessary, bluff. Gut it out.

Very well, then, no explanations. I left B'al Graai to get medical supplies. I have them. No other explanation is necessary. Indeed, with the Vulcan respect for privacy, it

will not be expected that any would be offered. What I do, I do for my own reasons, on my own responsibility.

Jim's open-handedness with Federation equipment is nearly too much of a good thing, I discover when I try to pick up the spacebag. It is all I can do to lift it. I don't know how I am going to carry it to my rendezvous with Spock.

Never mind. I'll find a way.

He doesn't ask, when he meets me in the market plaza. He just hefts the bag, gives me a bowed eyebrow, and places it in the groundcar.

I had not intended to say anything about seeing Jim, about what he said of the coming blockade, yet now I find myself wishing for a moment to do so. But we are not alone, and I cannot discuss the matter in front of Sarek and the other senators who have journeyed into ShiKahr today for the first Council meeting since the vote. They are a quiet compendium, each lost in his own thoughts, and the air is heavy with unspoken plans and unfinished business. Even when we reach B'al Graai, there is no time for a private talk. There is no place to be alone in that great stone warren with its sudden and ill-prepared band of refugees.

Spock immediately adjourns with the other passengers so that they may continue their discussion, and I realize my presence in the vehicle inhibited their conversation as much as theirs did mine. Maybe more. Even here, I feel that slight hesitation in my presence. Earther. Alien. How

did he stand it, all those years, when *he* was the alien, the odd one, never quite trusted with the deepest, darkest secrets? Except by one man.

The thoughts bring a presence to my mind I don't particularly want. Not here, not now. There are controls. Even a Human can learn them...

I stow the supplies in the tiny room that has been designated – more by acceptance than official decision – as my rude clinic. Perhaps it was a storeroom once, deep underneath the towers of a younger B'al Graai. It still has that earthy scent of roots and herbs and soil. I set my mind to consider the items I now sort and put away and set out for use as though they were the ancient foods. Sustenance for the body, nothing more.

I make a quick tour, checking on the patients, administering antibiotics for infected cuts and burns, a growth-promoter to a man with a broken jaw, looking at the unsatisfactory progress of a shattered elbow. Delicate work, that, done in haste without proper tools. He won't have full use of that arm again. If I had a bone laser, though...

Oh stop it, Lara! God, you're greedy.

A painkiller for this burned child, then, who hasn't yet acquired the mastery to turn it off, and thank you, Jim. Wherever you are, whatever you risked to acquire this comfort for her.

By all indications, my decision was the correct one. As the days go by, no questions are raised about the origin of the equipment and supplies – not even by Spock, who most certainly recognizes their origin, if not their precise source.

I have come to a better understanding now of the link. I know he picks up general emotions and moods, and sometimes a direct thought, though that is also sometimes done by Humans who are close to one another. For specific memories, there must be the touching and the purposeful probing, and I think it requires the cooperation of the other. Since there seems to be no point in opening old wounds, I do not tell him I have seen Jim. If he knows, somehow, he does not mention it. There has, in any case, been little opportunity for the kind of privacy the link requires.

B'al Graai was planned for a large family and a large staff, but certainly not for the hundred-odd people it holds now. It is more crowded than *Enterprise* ever was, and it seems the dramas of our lives are constantly being played out center stage.

Like today. Word has come of another small group of Federationist supporters who have found safety near Pan Sohn. At the midday meal, there is talk of little else. Names are passed along the table with the food, and the girl whose child Spock delivered ten days ago shows a surprising breach of etiquette by becoming openly hopeful that her husband may be among the other group. As the names are exchanged, she waits with the color rising in her face. When her husband's name is not mentioned, she asks if the

listing we have received is complete.

“There may be others,” Spock tells her. “There is always a certain amount of confusion, a margin of error, in such cases.”

“Then he may be there?”

“It is not likely. Was he in Pan Sohn the day of the vote?”

“No, but--”

“Then we must assume him to be among the unidentified dead S’Rakel had cremated.”

“But if there is a chance--”

His voice is cold and level as he overrides her objections. “All the refugees are from Pan Sohn, T’Borr. Stofal is dead. Accept that. The pain you felt was the Sundering, not the beginning of your son’s birth.”

Her eyes close down then, and the flush drains from her cheeks. I can almost see her fighting for that terrible Vulcan control. The others carefully avoid looking at her, that they may not be tainted by this unseemly show of emotion. At length, she leaves the table, in control again but diminished somehow. I don’t know what propels me after her. It is some Human recognition of need, I suppose, but Spock reads the purpose in my mind or on my face, and he, too leaves the room.

In the hallway, away from the others, he catches my arm.

“No, Lara.”

He reminds me, oddly enough, of Amanda at this moment; of that morning she dissuaded me from running down the stairs to meet him. I have given much thought to that moment, much conjecture as to what might have happened if I had followed my instinct that morning. There was an instant when he walked through that gate, when his eyes and mind met mine, when he was ready to give up this self-appointed bondage. *If I had gone to him then...*

There is little of that man here now, holding my arm, asking me – no, *telling* me – not to respond to a Human emotion.

“Let me go!” She needs--”

“She has what she needs,” he replies, and his grip does not loosen. “She is a Vulcan.”

“*She’s a child!* And she has a need to believe her husband might still be alive. How could you do that to her? How could you be so cruel?”

His eyes bore into me. It’s like looking into deep black water, cold and still. “The truth is often cruel. The sooner she accepts Stofal’s death, the sooner she can adjust to her situation.”

“You can’t ask a person to live without hope!”

He drops his hand from my arm, and I can see him wrapping the cloak of Vulcanism around himself. “Hope is a Human emotion.”

“And one with which you, of course, are not familiar!” The

instant the words are out, I want to call them back. Something flares briefly in his eyes, then crumbles like a burning ember crumbles into cold and lifeless ash.

“There are more productive uses for one’s energy,” he says softly.

It is I who reach out for him now, but he turns away and leaves me standing alone in the empty hallway. If he hears me whisper “I’m sorry, Spock. I didn’t mean that,” he gives no indication of it.

Dammit, why are we so often at cross-purposes? Why do I let him goad me into saying sharp and hurtful things? It’s almost as if some arbitrary deity has decided that every minute of intimacy must be paid for with hours and days of alienation, of separateness, of being alone on this planet of empty eyes and shielded emotions.

I do not return to the dining hall, going instead to the clinic where I spend the remainder of the day ferociously pretending to be busy. Most of my patients have recovered. There remain only a few children, fretful and impatient that they cannot heal themselves as rapidly as their elders do.

It comes as a considerable surprise to me when Spock enters my office early in the evening. “Your presence is required,” he says.

My first thought is that someone has been injured, or is ill. Sarek? Each day he grows more drawn, more weary.

Spock has picked up the thought, or my movement for the

medikit. “Not as a physician,” he says. “As a member of the household. There is a certain ... ceremony to be held tonight. You will attend me.” It is not a request. His voice has that slightly condescending air Sarek so often uses when he is speaking to women or Terrans or other inferior species.

Anger is wasteful. Anger is counter-productive. Nothing will be gained by giving in to its demands. Biting my mental tongue, I follow him to the dining hall, surprised to see that everyone is there, plainly waiting for something. There is a subdued air of excitement in the room. The eldest of the senators stands at the head, with Sarek and Amanda at his left. At his right is an empty place, and Spock holds out his hand for the formal touch as he leads us to the waiting space. I take my cue from Amanda, who stands quietly with her fingers across Sarek’s, waiting. The mass clearing of minds is almost audible, and then comes the faint sound of temple bells. A wedding, then? Or a betrothal?

There is a small stirring at the far end of the room as the bell-bearers take their places before us, and then a slim, feminine figure enters, bearing something. It is T’Borr, and she carries her infant son – at arm’s length, as one might proffer a tray of fruit. I feel a sudden chill at this almost sacrificial presentation of the child. There are societies, of course, where widows and orphans are considered superfluous ... but not here, surely. Or is this another of those things Vulcans prefer not to speak of to outworlders?

There may be some tremor in my hand; there is certainly enough in my mind to alert Spock, and I feel his reassurance around me like a warm current in a sea of uncertainty. I have not felt this particular kind of resonance through the link since that last evening we spent in the garden, and it is as if the sharp words of this afternoon and the cold formality of a few moments ago had never occurred.

T'Borr stops a few feet away from us, and turns slowly, holding the child high. When she speaks, it is in the ancient formal tongue. "Attend me, brothers. Attend me, sisters. This is Skolann, first-born of T'Borr and Stofal, he who is inheritor of all things past."

She launches into a detailed description of the child's lineage, to the requisite ten generations, and I can begin to relax. A christening then, with Selekt's household honored as hosts of the ceremony.

The elder speaks now, and his words, too, are ancient and eloquent, polished smooth with centuries of loving use. He speaks of tradition, of family ties and ties that go beyond blood, and the rhythm of his words is a hypnotic fog, reaching out from the mists of Vulcan history. He speaks of respect and of duty ... God, how I have learned to hate that concept. It was duty that brought us here, that keeps us here, that wraps about us with chains stronger than any ever forged of any element known. And through it all is the warp and woof of tradition, going back to Surak and beyond. Of the concept of the tcha-klei, and the sanctity of

that relationship between adult and child, tcha-klei and tcha-tzin.

I grow weary of his words. I would much rather be exploring the tiny chink that seems to have appeared in Spock's icy demeanor. I steal a glance at him; he is watching the proceedings with his typical single-mindedness, as though there were not a million things more important at this moment than the christening of a child.

The elder is winding down now, and high time, too. No, he is off again on the subject of the tcha-klei, asking if one has been chosen for this child. The choice, T'Borr replies, has been made and freely accepted. It is time for the one chosen to step forward and acknowledge the lifelong relationship which will begin at this moment.

My mind is so far away that I do not at first realize why Spock is moving forward; when I do, it takes all my control to keep from plunging after him, to keep myself from demanding that he refuse to accept this new, unbreakable link in the chain that holds him here.

You can't! my mind cries out. *We'll never be free of this place!*

And his eyes, meeting mine with a fierce pride, and his mind, commanding – *Don't interfere. This is a thing I must do, as it was done for me. This is what I am.*

He places his fingers on the infant's temples ... gently, the

size and strength in them holding back, seeking only the gentlest contact. And the other hand finds T'Borr's face, seeking, I suppose, the depth of her commitment. It is a moment of such intimacy that the hot knife of jealousy slashes at my innards. That he should do this – could do this – for another woman's child, can never do it for a child of mine... If I had my hands around that young, slim throat of T'Borr's...

A presence comes into my mind as the three interlocked figures turn and proclaim their relationship to the others. I know the source, know almost the words it would use to express the concept, though it is not put into precise words.

This takes nothing from us, the presence says; this makes us more wholly a part of the society we live in. Accept it; look beyond your Human emotion.

There is a force to the presence I cannot resist and cannot fully explain. It is as if the presence and power of his mind were reshaping my soul and casting out the black and bitter things hiding there. Then the presence is gone, as he breaks off contact with T'Borr and the child, and the elder pronounces the ceremony completed.

I have room for other impressions now – the proud lift of Sarek's head and the bright suspicion of tears in Amanda's eyes. *Rites of passage...*

I have to be alone; I have to have a place and a time of privacy to sort out my thoughts. No one stops me, no one comments as I slip out of the room and back to the only

place of solitude I can think of. Like a rabbit going to ground in its burrow, I seek out the tiny room off the rough clinic, trying to sort out the thoughts that tear around in my head.

How could he accept such a binding responsibility – one which extends even beyond the political commitment which brought us here? And T'Borr – how could she allow him to touch that child, after the brutal words he spoke to her today? But he did touch the child ... and her ... and even if it was not in the same way he has touched me, it was close enough...

It takes nothing from us, the presence said. That warming, enfolding presence I have known and would know again, perhaps, if I could learn to keep a bridle on my tongue and another, stronger one, on my emotions.

Oh, Spock, help me. I can't do it alone. I need your patience, your wisdom, your strength. You make me see things beyond my own faulty vision. Please.

Sitting here alone in the darkness seems to help. Maybe if I can concentrate hard enough, I can reopen that pathway to his mind. I can summon his face in an instant – sometimes the vision of it falls suddenly on my consciousness when I don't even realize I'm thinking of him. If I could summon that presence as easily, or Spock himself, perhaps things might be different.

The times we've had together, good and bad, unwind in my memory like tapes on a viewer, and there are so many

scenes I would rewrite if I had the power to do so. Chances missed, words not spoken – or worse yet, words spoken that shouldn't have been.

I don't know what time it is, or how long I've been sitting on the rough cot, when I become aware of another presence in the room. A real presence, not a mental one. Spock has come in so quietly that I haven't heard him, and how long he has been standing there, I don't know. Perhaps he's been in my mind, too. I don't know that, either.

He makes a move to light the lamp, but I stop him. "You should not be sitting here alone in the dark," he says.

"I'm afraid I'm not very good company tonight. Besides, I'm not alone now."

He seems to have no answer for this – for once – logical observation.

"I was hoping you'd come," I admit.

"I know."

Of course he knows. He probably even knows the childish game I was playing with myself – like a scared kid promising some faceless god eternal obedience in return for getting out of just one more scrape. *Just this once, please, and I'll never ask anything again.* I used to do that. And I meant it – every single time. But something always got in the way of the perfection I'd promised myself.

I'm stalling. I know it, and so does he. "I wanted to apologize for what I said to you this afternoon. It was..."

No, that's not really what I want to say. "I had no right..." *That's not it, either.* "I'm sorry, Spock." But, having refused to admit himself capable of being verbally wounded, he is now bound to give me no sign that an apology is of any importance to him.

Still, he is here. He did understand my need to talk to him alone, did respond to it. Perhaps the impression of receptiveness I felt in him during the ceremony was real after all. Certainly it deserves another try.

"I was wrong when I said you expect Vulcans to live without hope. That ceremony tonight – hope was what it's all about, isn't it?"

He moves to sit beside me. "It is an acknowledgement of our past, and an affirmation of the continuance of our way of living," he says.

"That's what I said. Only – Humans call it hope."

He takes my hand, lacing his fingers through mine. "Word games, Lara-kai. Sometimes I think things would be much simpler if we had never developed language."

"Quieter, anyway," I offer, and he gives me that sidelong glance he so often substitutes for a smile. Then he looks away, pensive, and in the dim light that filters in from the next room, I can see that the expression on his face is much like the one he wore when he touched the child.

"Spock?" He makes a wordless sound that indicates he is listening, if only with one small corner of his mind. "Does

it bother you ... Do you ever regret the fact that we – that I – can't have children?" He is quiet for a long time, and I think that either he has not heard me, or has chosen not to respond. He studies our interlocked fingers, and the deep breath he takes would have been called a sigh if it had come from anyone other than a Vulcan.

"No."

Somewhere in this room was a woman who had promised to bridle her tongue. Someone else, I'm sure. It couldn't have been me.

"Tonight, when you touched T'Borr's baby, it seemed as if--"

"I do not wish to impose my peculiar heritage on any other being," he says with a vehemence I have seldom heard him use. "That was one reason--" He breaks off abruptly, but the words have been said. He can't summon them back, any more than I can pretend I haven't heard them. Or understood them.

"Another of your cruel truths, Spock? That was one reason you agreed to marry me?" *Don't say it. I don't want to hear it.*

"Yes." His fingers tighten around mine just as I am about to pull them away. "I thought it a fine irony. My own private ... revenge, if you wish ... on T'Pau. The one rebellion I could see. The one item she overlooked in her careful plans, and the one item I took great pains to

determine. T’Pau could engineer my birth. That was her right as Supreme Elder. She could plan my life. That was her right as my tcha-klei. But she could not force a continuance of the line. That was one thing I could choose, or not choose, for myself.”

“I see.”

“No. You only think you see. I tell you I hid your barrenness, like some private treasure, and you think it the only reason I accepted you.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No. There were the ... other reasons. You know them. Then, later, was the realization that you are all the things I cannot be. You fight, Lara. You never give in, not even when all the logic in the universe tells you that the prudent thing, the logical thing, would be to surrender. And you can dream without losing your hold on reality. You say what you are thinking, and even when you do not, it is right there.” He touches my forehead with the tip of his index finger, but there is no searching to the touch.

“And I hurt people sometimes. Even when I don’t mean to; even when I love them.”

“Yes. That, too. And are hurt in return. But it means you are alive, Lara. Every minute, with every nerve and fiber of your body. And knowing pain, you can also know pleasure.”

“Sounds like a pretty poor arrangement,” I tell him,

because I've got to say something, or shatter into a million pieces. "Lousy planning somewhere along the line."

"Sometimes the best moments are not planned," he says, and his searching hand touches my face, opening his mind to me and mine to him. "The greatest pleasures are those we never sought – never dreamed of seeking. You are all that to me, Lara."

Perhaps I speak his name; perhaps I only think it. It doesn't matter, really, because he knows my mind as well as he knows my body, and they both sing at his touch.

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The days and weeks that follow that night are jewel-like in their clarity and value. When we are apart, as we often must be, I can pick one out and hold it against the light of my mind, wondering at its brilliance and perfection, and warming myself in its light.

If he goes sometimes to the parapet at night, to stand watching the skies, I understand it and wait, content in the knowledge that he will seek me out when that moment has passed, and that we can create our own galaxy of stars and roam among it freely. If there is sometimes in his mind now the memory of the life he once had, and sorrow at its passing, I can see it as I never saw it before. I can share that, and add my own memories to it, and smooth away the jagged edges for both of us. When I see him speaking to the girl T'Borr, or holding the child, I no longer feel the violent thrust of jealousy. For I begin to understand, if only

a little, what it means to be tcha-klei.

I have not forgotten Jim, or his prediction of what was to come; I have only refused to dwell on it. But as the weeks grow into months, I am no longer so easily able to ignore it.

Blockade. It is not a particularly sinister-sounding word, but I am quick to learn to hate its sound. When someone goes into the city to fill a need we cannot provide at B'al Graai, they more and more often come back empty-handed, and ultimate reason is always the same – the blockade.

Are there no new k'viet to be had? No, for it seems that the factories that produce them can no longer acquire the Catullan dyes that gave them their brilliance. Substitution of inferior dyes caused a malfunction in the machinery, and the foundry that built it has been shut down – no more imports of raw Orion korgalite are available.

Are there no shoes? Oh, yes, there are plenty of shoes. But they are in Pan Sohn. The transport pilots refuse to fly them out, because the guidance systems in the cargo ships need active crystals, which are grown and polished on Rigel. Some shoes are coming in overland. They will be here tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, but you must be prepared to pay a little more for them.

And so it goes. A parra crop in the west has failed because a certain relay in the irrigation equipment malfunctioned, and no replacement was available in time. There is a shortage of tape for viewers that no one ever adequately

explains, and for some reason there is not a sewing needle to be had in all of ShiKahr.

It is not panic. Not yet. But people are becoming displeased; there are rumblings that S'Rakel's move to withdraw from the Federation was too hastily made. I remember what Jim said about the need to accomplish the Federation's goal quickly, and as each new sign of dissatisfaction filters into B'al Graai, I greet it with relish.

The members of the Council who came to B'al Graai with us also watch and listen and plan, and some of them feel confident enough to return to ShiKahr. They send back encouraging reports, and it seems to be only a matter of time before Sarek and his followers can force a reversal from the full Council.

Then the news becomes sober. The outworlders on Vulcan, the mercenaries and the scavengers, become impatient and aggressive. Tales of blockade-runners begin to come in, and we hear of hit-and-run battles in deep space. The Lyrans have a well-developed space force, and they threaten to break the blockade of that system. They feed their force to their nearest galactic neighbor, Eos, and rumor has it that the Eosians, fierce fighters that they are, have managed to capture a Federation destroyer, *Darius*.

I don't know the truth of that. I know only that I heard it the same day an Eosian messenger appeared at B'al Graai, demanding an audience with Spock. That surprises me, and makes me uneasy, for Sarek is the senator, and the head of

the household.

If Spock is surprised, there is nothing in his manner to show it. The message comes in the early evening, as he and Sarek are in the midst of a discussion of their own. Amanda and I are playing cards, and she is trouncing me soundly, because my mind is not on the game. Spock and his father exchange glances, as if this were something they had been expecting, and Spock leaves the room without comment. Amanda and I play out the hand, then I deal another, with one ear listening for the familiar step which does not come.

It grows later, and still he does not return. Amanda stifles a yawn and excuses herself for the night. I am uncomfortable alone with Sarek – I always have been – and in a few minutes, I make some remark about the lateness of the hour and leave. It is not weariness that guides my footsteps, however. It is a growing sense of uneasiness as I fail to locate either Spock or the Eosian.

Finally, in the kitchen, I spot the young Vulcan who relayed the message. His face is without guile or curiosity as he tells me Spock left with the courier almost an hour ago. They were bound for ShiKahr.

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SPOCK

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The message was brief enough, clear enough, and indeed

we had been expecting it for some time. It is only when I reach the appointed place that any surprise awaits me. Commander P'lef was hardly to be expected. She greets me formally enough, but behind that experienced mask, she watches carefully for any changes in my manner.

“It was good of you to come so promptly,” she says.

“Do not confuse courtesy with agreement, Commander.”

“Will you hear the offer before you make that decision?”

“I am here.”

She sits down for the first time since I have come into the room, and motions me to a chair. She seems hesitant, somehow; plainly she has no love for this task, but she plunges in, direct. “We have a destroyer.”

“So I have heard.”

“We have need of a commander for her.”

“That honor should go to whomever captured her.”

“She was taken at great cost. The squadron leader is dead, as are half the attack force. We seek someone with more skill.”

“Why come to me?” I know the answer to that, but it is necessary that she make the statement. I will not make P'lef's job any easier.

“You are the one we seek.”

“No, P'lef. We are on opposite sides in this.”

She goes on as if she had not heard my refusal. Indeed, she must have been prepared for it. "Full command rank goes with the offer. Name your price, Spock."

"Surrender of the Eosian forces. Petition for readmission to the Federation, on whatever terms their security council sets forth."

"You know I cannot offer that."

"Then we have nothing to discuss. I am committed to the philosophy and actions of the Federationists. To help prolong the efforts of the Separatists is not only illogical, it would be morally reprehensible."

"Men have changed sides before in this struggle. Even Starfleet men. Even *Enterprise* men." She watches carefully for my reaction to this. Though her statement is a surprise to me, I do not let it show. There is another message to her statement, and it has the resonance of warning. "His name is Farris," she says. "He has served with you before."

I join a face to the name; nothing more. He was an ensign in security, and a member of the landing party on Parsus II. Plainly, P'lef expected some reaction to the name; now she is puzzled, unsure if I am concealing my response or if I truly have none. There is more she wants to say, I am sure of that. An invitation, however oblique, must be extended.

"To my knowledge, Commander, being a turncoat is not contagious," I tell her.

She hesitates, warring with something within herself. “Spock...” She breaks off, tries again. “My Matriarch has a long memory.”

“So I have observed.”

“But she *is* my commander-in-chief.”

I make no reply. Whatever Kyra has in her mind is plainly distasteful to P’lef, but she is a soldier and I respect her for that.

“Do not make an irrevocable decision, Spock.”

“In this matter, Commander, I have no choice. I, too, have a commander-in-chief.”

She draws herself together. Some decision has been made. “I shall be here for ten days. If you should change your mind, please contact me.”

I rise, thinking the interview is at an end, but she pins me with her violet eyes, and the message in them is clear. *Listen to me. This is a coin I give you from my own purse. You may have need to spend it, and soon.*

“My ship, of course, cannot be held out of action that long. It will return in nine days.” *Do you understand?*

Not entirely, Commander, But I will not forget.

“Nine days or ninety, it makes no difference. I will do nothing to prolong this madness.”

Now she rises, too, extending both palms to me. “You are

an honorable man, Spock. I am glad that there are still a few left. I wish you luck in maintaining that honor.”

I press her palms with my own, and the resonance of danger, of warning, is so strong that It is all I can do to maintain the contact long enough to give a proper farewell.

I decline the courier’s offer of transportation back to B’al Graai, knowing that the information will be relayed back to Commander P’lef. It does not matter. It is easy enough to elude the watching eyes, and there are people I must see tonight.

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It has been six days since the message came from P’lef. Six days of watching, waiting for the further action she all but promised. No move has been made against me or against B’al Graai, but that does not mean none will be forthcoming. She has contacted no one else about taking command of the captured Federation destroyer *Darius*. My sources tell me that much. That means Kyra is sure she can force me into a position from which I cannot refuse her demand. So the waiting game continues. The next move must come from Kyra. Or from someone in league with her.

I learn just how far her reach extends on the evening of the sixth day.

I am going over the intelligence reports for the dozenth time, looking for a pattern that simply is not there, when

one of the men on security detail comes into the room.

“Sensors indicate a small party approaching from ShiKahr,” he reports.

“An attack force?”

“No; only one small aircar. They carry no weapons we can scan. They were hailed, and indicate they wish to parley.”

“Good. Contact Sarek and--”

“The person making contact specifically requested that you meet with her. It is T’Faie.”

T’Faie. Of course. She is in this up to her elegant ears, and I should have known that. “Tell her I will see her. And have a guard mounted around that car.”

If T’Faie is concerned that her plans for power are slow in being realized, she gives no sign of it. Nor does she give an indication of annoyance that I have let her cool her heels for half an hour before I meet her. She is looking out the window when I enter the room, apparently undisturbed by the cordon of men around her vehicle.

“It has been a long time since I was here,” she says conversationally.

“What do you want, T’Faie?”

“Only to see my dear family.”

“Sarek will not see you.”

“Pity. I should like to see his face when you tell him you

are accepting command of the *Darius*.”

“Neither of us will see that. I gave my answer.”

“You underestimate Kyra’s determination. She would give much to have you under her thumb. Or perhaps between her thighs.”

“What did she offer you, sister?”

She smiles her slow, chilling smile. “Enough.” She sits down comfortably on a broad lounge. “We had a very interesting visit on Eos. Tell me, Spock, what did you do to make her hate you so?”

“Nothing.”

She thinks that over for a moment. “And that was enough?”

“Apparently.”

“Some day you must explain to me this strange power you have over women. Did you refuse to bed her, or simply refuse to do it often enough?”

“T’Faie, you have the mind of a shalna.”

“Only when I am around you. As you know, even I am not immune to your magnetic charm.”

I clamp down on the growing spark of anger, shutting off my receptiveness to all external stimulation. Emotion, wasteful at any time, can become supremely dangerous when prompted by this woman. I want only to get her out

of here before she precipitates a scene with Sarek.

“What do you want, T’Faie?”

“You are repeating yourself, little brother.” She gets up and drifts toward the door, fingering a small statue on the table. I move away from her, feeling the malevolence of her presence, even though she does not look at me as she speaks. “I told you what I wanted. This is purely a social call. Won’t you offer me a cup of parra, at least?”

“T’Faie, your presence is highly offensive to me. I have no time for your games, and--”

The explosion of terror in the link shatters the barriers T’Faie’s goading has led me to erect, and I realize suddenly what her real purpose has been, who the real target is tonight.

She sees the birth of my movement for the door, and interposes herself. I reach out to thrust her aside, barely catching the flicker of movement as she draws the short-bladed knife from its scabbard in her sleeve. She does not mean it as a lethal weapon – her plans do not include my death – and the thrust is aimed for my side. I don’t really feel the rip of the blade until it strikes bone, but it throws me off-balance far enough so that the blow I land on her throat only knocks her back against the doorway.

She comes back at me, kicking and clawing, trying to keep my attention away from the desperation pouring through the link, wide-open now and searching for direction. I

catch her knife hand, yanking her away from the door, and plunge into the corridor, shouting for a security guard as the link breaks off, like a light going out. But I have a direction now. Down, into the cellars, into the clinic.

People are everywhere, suddenly, and I push them aside as I run for the stairway, cursing myself for a fool that I let T'Faie's nonsense distract me even for a moment. Lara was the target all the time. I should have known that, should have known T'Faie would try to use that lever to further her plans.

The corridor has never seemed so long. I can see the open doorway now, and now into the room itself, catching a blur of movement as Lara is flung onto the cot. Her fall is awkward, and I realize it is because her hands are bound.

She draws up her feet and plants a solid kick in the belly of her attacker, and as he staggers backward, I can see that it is SeleK, with the side of his face laid open from temple to jaw, and the sohti madness in his eyes. He does not see me; his attention is on Lara as he hauls her up by the shirt-front and cracks her across the face.

My leap carries me across the room and solidly into him. We both go down, crashing against the cot and overturning it. SeleK is the first on his feet, lunging at me with his arms raised for a double-handed blow. I step inside it, the edge of my hand slicing into his face. He hooks my feet out from under me, and I grab for his arm as I go down, twisting it up and back until I hear the pop of the shoulder

joint as it dislocates. Then I am up again, my hands on his throat, just so, for the *tal shaya*. One twist, and it will be over.

Then his eyes meet mine, and I know I cannot do it. Great Cas, forgive me, I cannot do it. There is that blood tie...

I push him away, and the fight is gone out of his stance as he cradles the injured arm and the room is suddenly filled with the people who have followed my rush down the corridor.

I see T'Faie, outraged and struggling in the firm grip of a security guard, and even Sarek and Amanda are in the crowd. Someone frees Lara, loosening the rough cords that have scraped the flesh from her wrists and removing the crude gag. She slips away from the supporting hands to seek the shelter of my arms.

Selek is regaining his breath now, the pain and the sohti making him bold. "Look at them!" he hisses. "The cowardly halfbreed and his treacherous whore!" He has learned from his mother, this one. When cornered in an indefensible action, attack.

"Now he fights for her!" he shouts. "Ask him why he didn't before, when she was rutting with the starship captain and giving him Vulcan's secrets!"

There is hesitation in the crowd, questioning, and T'Faie tries vainly to catch her son's eye and make him hold his tongue. I step toward Selek; I will silence him now, as I

should have when I had the opportunity, but Sarek's hand is on my arm.

"Your words are strange, Selek, for one who comes to do violence in the night."

"No violence was intended. She was to be taken before a Truther, brought up on charges of treason. How do you think the Federation ships mounted such an effective blockade so quickly? Because this one--" He gestures toward Lara with his good hand. "--this Terran slut told him where we were weakest, and he paid her for her words with this." He stoops and retrieves a medical tricorder from the overturned supply shelf. It bears the clear logo of Federation supply.

There is a shift in the atmosphere; even though we oppose the aims of the Separatists, the accusations Selek is making are serious. I look at Lara, at her white bruised face, and she meets my eyes, her mind reaching out for mine. *Not true. Not the treason part. You know that.* And the question. *Why? Why didn't you kill him when you had the chance?*

"This will not be settled here," Sarek says. "You may not take the woman tonight, not without papers and a proper escort of *tashai*. You have invaded my home and violated my hospitality, Selek. Not even a kinsman may do that. But because you are a kinsman, you may go now. Leave us, Selek, and take ... your mother ... with you."

Not once has Sarek looked at T'Faie; even now he is not willing to acknowledge her as his daughter. The hate is

plain in her eyes, and I think for a moment she will use her threat. I hope she does. Once said, the words will no longer have power. But she bites them back, and takes SeleK's arm as they leave.

Now Sarek turns to me, and there is pain in his eyes that even he, with his great control, cannot completely master. "They will return, with their charges, in the morning. See that your wife is ready. You may accompany her, if you wish." Then he leaves, and as if by common consent, the others leave with him.

The silence in the room is only of words; Lara's mind is a tangle of emotions – shame and anger and traces still of fear. Then she gathers herself up and begins to pick through the scattered medical supplies.

"You're bleeding," she says. I feel her need to do something to avoid what she knows must come, so I permit her to dress the knife wound with shaking hands.

"And now it is your turn," I tell her. She makes no reply as I smooth down the torn skin on her wrists and rub a healing balm on the bruises that are beginning to darken her body. "What happened?" I ask her.

She draws a deep, shaking breath. "I was in our room," she begins, "getting ready for bed, when someone came to the door and said there'd been an accident – I was needed in the infirmary. I don't know who it was – there was no one in the hall when I came out.

“Selek was waiting in the clinic. He didn’t say anything then about a Truther – he didn’t say anything at all, just started dragging me toward the corridor. I fought him – I hit him with something – I don’t remember what. Then he hit me, and I guess I must have blacked out, because the next thing I knew, we were in my office and I was tied up.

“He was ransacking the place and shouting – he wasn’t making any sense, Spock. I thought maybe I could get out before he saw me, but I didn’t make it. Then he really went berserk. He started knocking me around and shouting about rape ... I don’t know if that was what he had in mind, or if he was talking about someone else. I managed to get away from him again, and I think that’s when you came in.”

She puts down the piece of rope she has been twisting in her hands and braces her palms on the desk, fighting for self-control. “It was a lie, Spock. About me telling Jim secrets. My God, I don’t know any secrets to tell, and he wouldn’t have asked me anyway. He sent those medical supplies because he knew I couldn’t get them any other way.” She raises her face, meeting my eyes. “He was here, on Vulcan. The day they evacuated the Embassy. And Selek was right about ... about part of it. I’m sorry, Spock. We didn’t mean...” She turns away, and I can feel her fighting not to cry.

I touch her shoulder. “Come. We have much to do.”

“When do you think they’ll be here?”

“Sometime in the morning. But we will not.”

“What?” She turns to me, eyes wide.

“I will not let them take you.”

“You can’t do that! It’s not true, anyway. I’ll go before the Truther, we’ll mind-link, and it will be clear there’s no basis for the treason charge. The other...” She falters. “The other is just something I’ll have to get through.” She forces a wry grin, but there is no lightness in it. “They don’t cut off the breasts of adulteresses any more and cast them out into the desert, you know.”

“Lara, you don’t understand. You would never reach the Truther alive. That treason charge – that wasn’t the reason they came. I think it was meant only to cover your disappearance.”

“He meant to kill me?”

“Not tonight. I think they meant only to take you.”

“But why?”

“There is something T’Faie wants me to do. She thought I would agree if they had you, and if I had gone to the *tashai*, there would have been the treason story. You had fled, somehow, with Jim. Now come. You will need warm clothes. It is cold in the mountains at night.”

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I keep her too busy for other questions, though I can feel them in her mind as we make our hasty and secretive preparations. I choose waterbags, a few light tools, a hand

torch, and blankets. There is food in the mountains for those who know how to find it, and we will not be there long, in any case. We can elude them for three days, I am sure, and then I can get her to a place of permanent safety.

There is no reason to try for a groundcar. We go on foot, as my ancestors did. Perhaps as Surak once did, with the woman he was ready to sacrifice his dream for, and by dawn we are high in the same mountains where he hid. We stop to rest then, by a stream, and she drinks deeply of its coldness while I cut some roots for our meal. I can feel her weariness through the link. We have a few hours, perhaps, before they discover we are gone, and if I push her to exhaustion now, I cannot reach my goal.

It was, though, perhaps a mistake to stop, for now she has time to think, and to voice the question I felt in the aftermath of SeleK's attack. "Last night, Spock ... you were ready to kill him. I felt it. Why didn't you."

"He is a kinsman. The old prohibitions are strong."

"T'Faie doesn't seem to feel them. Why should her son be protected by them?"

It is time. There can be no more denials, no more evasion. "Because he is also my son."

In her face, in her mind, there is a terrible breaking, then denial, and then a revulsion that vibrates through the link like a physical blow. "No." She is shaking her head, fighting down a sickness I can feel in my own throat. "No.

That's a lie. He couldn't be. You couldn't..."

"Selek is my son, and T'Faie's."

No!" She screams it, and then, because she has to lash out at something, she lashes out at me.

I catch her shoulders and hold her away. "Lara, listen. I want to tell you how it was. That does not change it, does not excuse it, but I want you to know. Give me your hands."

"No. I don't want to hear it."

"You will not hear it. You will *know* it, through the link." Through my grip, I feel the shuddering of her slight frame. She will not meet my eyes, but she cannot escape my voice. "Lara..." There is a hoarseness to it, as though I was speaking through stones. "It is ... important to me."

She hesitates, still fighting back revulsion at this breaking of her culture's most ancient, most sacred taboo, this unforgivable violation. She is shaking her head as she extends her hands to me, shutting her eyes as if she could also shut her mind. I place her hands on my face, and mine on hers, creating a double link. Strong enough for a depth of understanding I have never before attempted with her, strong enough to pull to the surface that memory I have denied for so many years, denied and hidden and tried to forget.

I was a young man ... youth does not excuse it, but that was why it began. Because I wanted to leave Vulcan, and

Sarek opposed me. And Amanda, torn between husband and son, made a decision which cost her deeply – how deeply, I can only imagine. She came to me and asked what I wanted, and agreed to intercede with T’Pau on my behalf, suggesting that it would be better if I were to absent myself from the household while she did so. I wanted to stay, to make my own statement, but she convinced me that her way, her patient way, was best.

I took a pack and came into these mountains and tried to climb away and walk away my anguish, damning myself for letting my mother fight my battles, questioning whether I had the right to follow my own desires. Because I was lost in my own mind, I was not cautious enough, and I blundered into an agan-tuá hunting party.

The agan-tuá were jealous of their lands and of the secrecy of their comings and goings. It was not for an outsider to view them. They considered it great sport to hunt all manner things ... including men, if the opportunity arose. And when their quarry was run to earth, cornered and exhausted, the best sport of all began.

From the violent days of the old ones, the agan-tuá remembered the subtle tortures that can keep a victim alive for a long, long time. It takes no skill to kill a man cleanly. The greatest honor goes to the one who can sustain a life and elaborate on the old rituals. Even so, there comes a time when the sport grows tiresome, and the game must end. This time, though, there was to be a different ending.

The wife of their leader pointed out that I was from an important family. A wealthy family. Might I not be more valuable to them alive than dead?

I did not know how she knew me ... I did not care. I knew only that she made the pain stop, saw to it that I was left alone ... and brought me sohti.

Sohti. I did not know what it was, what it would do, and after the first few times, I did not care. You know, Lara, even though you did not admit that aspect of it to me. You know the blinding of logic, the unquenchable lust that answers to no control. It was not rape, though doubtless that is what she has told SeleK.

It must have seemed a colossal joke to her at the time; a fitting revenge on Sarek. When I realized what was happening, who she was... She told me, yes. Later, when she was sure she had conceived. I should have killed her then, but I didn't. I only seized the first opportunity and ran, like a coward, hating myself and more determined than ever to leave Vulcan.

I told no one of the experience, of the child. It was a shame I could not face. So he was left with her, to rear in hate, to nurse on lies until the time when she could find some evil way to use him. And when she found that way, when she brought him to me in ShiKahr ... I ran again. Not physically. I ran inside myself; I lied to myself, to you, to everyone, by not speaking a truth I could not bear. And this is the result...

I cannot continue. I break the hold, and her hands fall from my face, but I can still feel her mind turning the story over, touching it, beginning to accept and understand it. Her face is wet with tears, for herself and for me, and always that meeting, that offer: *Let me in. Let me help.*

“And you’ve never told anyone?”

“No.”

“All these years, you’ve lived with that?”

“I could not change the past. I am only sorry that I did not tell you before.”

Her eyes are far away, and her mind. “Secrets,” she says. “And half-truths. I’m sorry, Spock. The things we’ve done to each other, thinking it was for love. Nothing hurts more. Can you forgive me?”

“For what?”

“For what I thought. For what I’ve done, for the mess I’ve gotten you into.”

“That is not important now. What is important is that we keep moving.”

“Where?”

“To a place I know. For a few days.”

“And then what? We can’t hide out here forever.”

“We will not need to. Come along now, before the sun is any higher.”

We push on, through the rest of that day, though I feel her weariness growing and end the day by nearly carrying her up the final slope. The cave is much as it was when I last saw it years ago, musty with the smell of long-gone animals and years of dust and dead leaves.

I can see the towers of ShiKahr from the point above the cave. It will be an easy night's walk, tomorrow night. Into the city at dawn on the third day, then. To P'lef. But now is not the time to consider that. Now is the time for rest, and food, and keeping my plans from Lara. One more secret. One more half-truth. Because it is necessary. Because whatever pain it may cause is also necessary.

She is making a pallet with the leaves and the blankets, and pulling off the dust-caked clothes. Her body is white and smooth and supple. One worth remembering in the bad times, worth celebrating in the good ones. She catches my eyes on her, and a flush warms her skin as her mind touches mine, questioning.

Yes, Lara-kai. This time. This one more time.

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The trip to ShiKahr, like the trip to the cave, is made in darkness, warily, watching for patrols. We see two, and conceal ourselves from them in the stones of a ravine along the road.

The house that was never really home for us is still empty in the thin light of morning. It is not a good place, but it is

better than a hostel, where employees watch and talk. We will not be here long, in any case. I leave her there, knowing she would try to stop me if she knew what was in my mind. But her weariness makes her less sensitive to my shielded thoughts, and she accepts the need for her to stay behind.

P'lef does not seem surprised to see me, though her attitude holds some trace of sorrow. Yes, the ship is at the spaceport, and she is open to my offer. Twenty minutes of radio time, in exchange for my promise to leave with her. She knows, I think, but she does not question it. If there are consequences – and there are sure to be, from one source or another – she will answer them, and I will. It does not make any difference now.

If Lieutenant Uhura is puzzled by this call on a frequency she did not expect, her voice does not reveal it. There is a second of hesitation, of surprise, when I identify myself and ask to speak with Jim. He does not ask why. He asks only for the coordinates, for an hour to bring the ship within transporter range, and the contact is broken. I return to P'lef's hostel room.

“There is one more thing I must do, Commander, and then I will return. You have my word on that.”

She meets my eyes with her level gaze. “I know that,” she says. “You are still an honorable man, Spock. Even in this.”

As I am leaving, I spot one of T'Faie's men. Of course.

They would keep a watch on P'lef. There is no trust between these two. I wait in a side street until he passes, and then follow him until the opportunity presents itself. The nerve-pinch puts him out quickly, and I drag his unconscious form into an alley. There is no need for him to pay for his loyalty with his life, no matter how misguided that loyalty may be. There is time now.

Lara is cautious, not showing herself until she knows it is I. That is one thing I have taught her – caution. That, and other things she would have perhaps been better off never having had to learn. *Perhaps, when this is all over...*

No. Not again. Hope is, after all, a Human emotion, and there is no room for that now.

She senses something, and I can feel the questioning in her mind. It is time to tell her now. Part of it, anyway. “Jim is coming. You will go with him.”

“Are you out of your mind? He can't come here. And I can't leave you. Not now.”

“Yes, you must. Don't challenge me on this, Lara. It is what you have to do. It was wrong to bring you to Vulcan, and a weakness on my part. There will be no more of that.”

She argues, protests, threatens to go to the Truther herself, but I will not be moved.

Where is Jim? It has been more than the requested time, and the longer we stay here, the greater the danger. T'Faie's man will be conscious by now, and it will not take

long to relay the information. I have spent the extra time barricading the entrance to the courtyard and to the house itself, but the barriers will not hold long under concentrated attack.

The whine of the transporter effect comes as I hear the sounds of the searchers in the street. *Too soon for them, too soon.*

“Let’s go,” he says as soon as the effect releases him.

“Not me, Jim. Only Lara.”

“Like hell. You’re both coming back with me.”

I can hear them blasting away at the barricade. “I have no time to argue with you, Captain. Just get out, now.”

“Spock--” Lara says, resistance still in her tone. I step toward her, catching her face in my hands, using these last few seconds to convince her, knowing that if I do, she will keep Jim from attempting further action later. There is no time for delicacy now, no time to seek the well-worn pathways. I let it all explode in her mind, to be sorted out later if she wishes.

Get out of here, Lara. Go with Jim and don't look back. Get off my world; get out of my life. They'll destroy you if you stay, and everything I've done, every tradition I've defied to keep you with me and keep you safe has been just an empty gesture if you stay here and allow that. I won't permit it, because if you don't exist, then part of me – all that's left of me – won't exist, either. Because I love you.

Against every tradition of my race, against every tenet of order and logic, I love you. Treasure the memory, Lara, and know that I will treasure it, too.

Then there is no more time; they are through the outer barricade and in the courtyard now. I break the link with a brutal swiftness that leaves her reeling, grab her arm, and throw her against Jim.

“Go! Now!”

He gives the signal, and as the doorway begins to crumble, so do their outlines begin to dissolve, leaving nothing behind but the scent of her perfume in the air and a sudden, unexpected emptiness inside me.

>>>>> <<<<<

LARA

>>>>> <<<<<

It is quiet here, and almost peaceful, except for the nights. At night, the wounded men in this Starbase hospital want to talk. To each other, to me, to anyone who will listen. And they want to be talked to. How did I get here? What ships have I served on? Do I know Bittern, from the *Potemkin*? Have I ever met Nilsson, from the *Yorktown*? And was I here when Cooper came through? You'd remember Cooper, Doctor. He lost a hand in an engagement with the *Nyhie*.

You've heard of the *Nyhie*? They used to call her *Darius*, when she was a Federation ship. Before the

Eosians took her; before that renegade Vulcan took command.

Yes, I tell them. Yes, I know the *Nyhie*. Because if I don't tell them, they tell me. I've heard all the stories. Many times, most of them. The most recent one they take as an indication that the Vulcan has lost his reason. Either that, or he's the bravest damn man on either side of this crazy war that nobody will admit is a war.

It was out on the edge of Sector 9. *Enterprise* territory, since she's been off blockade duty. She was jumped by a Romulan patrol. Jesus, we haven't got enough troubles with the Separatists, now the Romulans are in it, too. Another few months and they'll be out in full force. Hell to pay, then.

Anyway, here was *Enterprise*, taking a hell of a beating, almost dead in space, when this destroyer comes out of nowhere, shooting up Romulans like some damn kind of Wild West show. I'm not kidding you. Like something out of Rodeo. Do you know Rodeo, Doctor? It's a resort planet, like nineteenth-century North America, on Earth. I'm going there, soon as I get liberty.

Oh, yeah, the destroyer. It was *Nyhie*, and she wiped up that patrol like a starship. They say he's modified her, somehow. They say the man's a fucking genius. Excuse my language, Doctor. Wiped 'em up and took off like a bat out of hell. Warp ten, they say. *Enterprise* didn't fire a shot at her. Craziest thing I ever heard of. Kirk got a reprimand for

it, I hear. They damn near took his command over it.

Crazy goddamn brass. Kirk's the best captain in the fleet. I put in for *Enterprise*, but I couldn't make the grade. Do you know Captain Kirk, Doctor?

Yes, I know Captain Kirk. And the renegade Vulcan. And why they did what they did. I don't tell them that, of course. I tell them to go back to sleep, and order a sedative for them, and see them healed and reassigned and replaced in the hospital beds by more young men with more questions and more stories to tell.

Sometimes, when I feel I can't face their questions or hear their stories any longer, I rotate to day duty. But that only leaves the nights to be endured alone.

By my own choice. There were other ... options. As many as two people in love can consider when there is a third person involved, also loved. But none that I could face; none that Jim could face in the long run, had he thought about them carefully. He is as driven in his own way as Spock was ... and is.

Two men, caught between forces they cannot control, forces that have placed them on opposite sides in a war neither of them wanted.

Did it have to happen this way? That's a question that echoes through my brain on the nights when I am alone. Was there one turning, out of all the turnings, that we could have taken to make things different?

If I had not been so attracted to Spock from that first meeting...

If Jim had never shown himself to me as anything but a starship captain...

If Spock had said earlier what he finally said in that last, burning link ... *I love you* ... would that have made a difference?

If...

That way lies madness. *Treasure the memory*, he told me. Oh, I do.

And then that ogre rears up in my mind. That monster we call Fate, and laugh at and fear, because its tricks can be so cruel. That fate – or that Humanness – that made us choose our turnings in those fragile moments when one word, one action altered, would have changed what later came. That fate which, I know, will one day bring them together, face to face across the void around them, and force them to decide, finally, whether their loyalties lie in professional honor or personal honor.

Those are the nights I flee my bed, or my office, driven into the night by the furies in my mind, to watch the skies, and wait. Because there is nothing else I can do. Just watch the skies.

And wait...

THE END

[Story continued in the sequel "Reflections of Honor" by
Lynda Carraher]