

STAR TREK :

NIGHT WHISPERS VOL 3

THE CONFRONTATION

A Star Trek Fan Fiction Trilogy
By New Author

APRIL L. PAYNE



The *Enterprise* arrives at the rendezvous point just hours ahead of schedule only to learn the *T'Mir* has experienced a slight delay. 24 hours — is that enough time for Spock and Brianna to patch things up between them? Or, just enough time for Sarkal to succeed in destroying what is left of their fragile, fragmented link?

In this on-going power struggle, which House will prevail?

Star Trek

NIGHT WHISPERS

Vol 3 - The Confrontation

**A Star Trek Fan Fiction By
April L. Payne**

Cover by Kirok of L'Stok & Stacey Dean

TrekUnited Publishing



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<http://tupub-books.blogspot.com.au/2014/04/al-payne-night-whispers-3-confrontation.html>

Published for TrekUnited by
TUPub-books.blogspot.com.au

First pdf edition 04/04/2014

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*For my late mother,
Maryalice,
who sadly passed before
she could read the end product,
and to my fellow writers of
the DreamWeaver's Writer's Group
who lent their ears,
their comments and their critiques.
Thank you!*

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1

November 17, 2285

Stardate: 8511.17

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

The compti chimed and Uhura flicked a toggle on her board, “Enterprise, Commander Uhura speaking,” she said into her microphone. Reaching up she adjusted the earpiece, giving it a slight twist, before she turned to the Captain sitting in his chair in the well of the bridge. “Captain Kirk, it’s High Priestess, T’Lar, from the T’Mir,” she said.

“Put it onscreen, Commander.”

“Aye, sir, onscreen.”

“*Captain Kirk*,” T’Lar greeted, with a slight nod of her head. She stood on the small bridge of the Vulcan shuttlecraft. There was a Vulcan male to her left, but he remained off-screen, for the most part, keeping out of view.

“Ma’am,” Kirk said, returning the nod to the image on the large view screen ahead.

“I regret to inform you that we are behind schedule and must put off the rendezvous by one full day,” T’Lar gave a sidelong glance to her left, as if to assign blame to the unknown male standing next to her. *“Apparently, one of our delegates had personal business that superceded his duties to the universe. We greatly apologize and expect to meet up with your ship at thirteen hundred hours, stardate eight-five-one-one point one- eight. So as not to interfere with our mission any further, we will send you the transmission from Starbase One, so that you might begin your analysis. We think you will find the events of interest.”*

“Thank you, ma’am,” Kirk said, then turned toward Uhura, “Prepare to receive the transmission, Uhura. And put it onscreen, if you will.”

“Aye, sir.”

“T’Lar out.”

“Kirk out.” For a moment the screen went blank. Uhura slipped a green rectangular diskette into a slot on her board and toggled a switch recording the video feed from the *T’Mir*.

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Kirk rubbed at his chin, deep in contemplation. So far, he and his crew had been stumped by events. Turning, he glanced over at the Communications Station and said, “Uhura, let’s see the footage taken from the space station again, stardated on the day both Admiral Komack and the *Rigi* of Sequar were killed. There’s got to be a connection, somehow.”

A flip of a few toggles later, “Onscreen, sir,” she returned.

Kirk stood and stared at the main view screen. All was quiet, as the entire Bridge crew concentrated on the images of tiny private star-skiffs that shot out of the distance, harassing the huge freighter vessels, just as the freighters pulled out of the station into intergalactic space. The tiny vessels came in a swarming fashion, much like angry bees from a hive, reminding Kirk of yellow-jackets. In the distance a lone vessel, barely a blip on the screen, left that swarm, heading directly for the space station’s main docking port. “There, you see

it?" Kirk pointed at the image. "In the upper left. See it? Uhura, magnify it, please."

"Aye, sir, point seven-seven magnification." The image of the tiny craft drew in large enough to read the call letters on the side of the skiff.

"Can you lock onto the craft's registry identification numbers?"

"Locking on, sir. The registry identification number appears to be sixty-three-twenty-two dash zero-one-sixteen, sir."

"Fascinating," Spock said, eyebrow elevated. "That is a Vulcan ship, sir. Both by the design and the registration."

"Uhura, find out who owns that ship."

"Jim," Spock said, touching his captain's arm. "Just because the ship is Vulcan, doesn't necessitate that the perpetrators of these assassinations are Vulcan. It is highly probable the vessel is stolen."

"True enough, but it does suggest a Vulcan influence. Certainly, it points to Vulcans behind the piracy problems, if nothing else. Besides, who but the Vulcans could teach these devils how to use that device?"

Spock returned to his station, tossing over his shoulder, "Do we have videos of the pirate attacks from four point four-two-eight years ago?"

“Uhura,” Kirk said, nodding at the communications’ officer. “Patch all Starfleet data on the subject, beginning with Stardate Eighty-zero-nine up to the present stardate, over to Mister Spock’s station, please. You have a clue, Spock?”

“Merely a theory, at this point, sir.”

“Aye, sir, sending over videos, starting with stardate eighty-zero-nine point zero-seven.”

Spock leaned over his scanner, his angular face awash in the blue light as he perused the videos of the pirates’ activity.

2

November 17, 2285,

Stardate: 8511.17

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

Vulcans were not sentimental nor were they often subject to fits of melancholy and yet both emotions had settled rather hard upon him. Spock was deeply troubled. So much so his concentration was lacking as he sat in the corner of the recreation room playing a game of tri-dimensional chess with Commander Sulu during the second of the day's brief breaks. It was rare for him to afford such time-off when so much had to be done about the ship, just another breach in Spock's

behavioral pattern, of late. His Vulcan discipline was giving way to the primitive emotions of his human-half. He was in great turmoil, although thankfully his *shield of reserve* spared others the revelation of his distress.

It was his usual habit to meditate before retiring for the night and last evening was no exception. After he had dined with his friends and soundly lost to Jim at chess, not once but three times in a row, Spock excused himself, and retreated to his quarters. Painfully tired as he was, however, sleep was elusive and no amount of meditation seemed to help. He was uncertain, at first, what was really bothering him, conceding the notion that Vulcans might well be behind the rash of pirate attacks troubling him to his core. That alone was bad enough. Such activities were diametrically opposite to Vulcan's philosophy of peace. Worse, still, was the theory that Vulcans were behind the terrorist threats, which was cause enough for humiliation, but Kirk had made it sound as if they were not just complacent but actively involved. "Training the devils," as he put it. Despite his personal feelings of betrayal on the part of his race, there was nothing he could do about it without more concrete evidence. Certainly, nothing that couldn't wait until the morning.

Then, quite unbidden, he realized his restlessness

went deeper and was far more personal in nature than that. He was alone. Tossing and turning in his bunk, reaching for her vainly, Spock had finally nodded off contemplating the dismal oneness of his existence. Vulcans, by nature, were not autonomous beings. They were joined at an early age, in fact, through the *mindmeld* that unified their essences, without losing their separate personalities, in order to draw them together at the “Proper Time,” the time of mating. He hated his autonomy. In all these years he had yet to get used to it, at the same time fearing it was his peculiar destiny to stand alone. He was different. An anomaly. A hybrid-Vulcan with human ancestry. Who in this wide universe, or beyond, would willingly contemplate sharing his soul?

No one, it seemed, his chosen bride even reluctant to come forth. No name, no date, no idea of what she looked like, all he had was a memory of her warmth. How whole he had felt whenever he was with her. Waking again in the morning he realized he still hadn’t relinquished the sense of restlessness that stirred in him. Illogical to assume, he supposed, that sleep would prevail over hours of meditation.

The primary cause, he believed, was sitting across the room encircled by her admirers. Brianna Cantrell was quite charming. Beyond her obvious physical attributes, she was witty, affectionate,

sometimes blatantly emotional, and yet she could mask it all becoming almost Vulcan in nature; Surprisingly, remarkably logical in her thinking when need be. Spock was jealous — of her for mastering both worlds when he could not and of the young men she held enraptured. Bothered that as she slowly integrated with the crew, he was suddenly no longer the center of her universe. Already, she was leaning on him less and less. He was, in effect, losing her.

Would she be willing to share his soul if he were free or would she back off, too, like the *Candidate* seemed wont to do now that an honest match was in the offering? He wished he could feel the future the way the lieutenant did from time to time. He would give anything to know the outcome, to know just where he stood with her, how completely implausible his hopes were.

And then there were the dreams. The *wanderings* into the lieutenant's head compounding things. Feeling at home where he didn't, couldn't belong. I don't love you. I can't love you. It isn't allowed by order of decree. "Mister Spock?" Sulu said again, growing concerned at the Vulcan's all too noticeable lack of concentration. He quite obviously wasn't into this game, failing to take his turn — again. He followed the first officer's gaze, smirking. "She's raised quite a gathering of admirers."

“Indeed. It is fascinating. But if you will excuse me. My presence is required on the bridge.” At once, Spock laid his king down, conceding the game. Sulu frowned, wondering what was wrong. Spock seemed to be making any number of concessions these days, as if he were already defeated on some level. It was wholly unlike him, watching as the Vulcan quietly left the deck.

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Kirk and Spock sat alone in the briefing room one deck below the bridge, a stack of colorful diskettes in front of them. Late in the afternoon, they had come very nearly to the end of the normal duty-shift. The ships’ compliment was full at last, and as the *Enterprise* drew nearer to the rendezvous coordinates, the work schedule progressed into a more typical load. It was gratifying. Having to leave port so quickly, it left the command crew with some unfinished ‘paperwork’, such as this, to attend. Kirk stretched, working his one arm for a moment trying to beat the fatigue.

“And that brings us to ...” he said, trying to read the label on the next disk as Spock picked it up and popped it into the computer. The Vulcan first officer was bringing him up to speed on the newest members of the crew, from all appearances on top

of things as usual, despite Kirk's earlier concerns. Perhaps, Spock merely needed a moment to adjust to his changing marital status, a chance to catch his breath. Like many a groom, he could be suffering the effects of 'cold feet', Jim supposed, wondering just what kind of a relationship his friend actually had with the woman in question.

Kirk was hoping she was good enough for him, that she could make Spock happy. His friend deserved that much at the very least, remembering the first wife chosen for him by his parents. T'Pring was nothing short of a contemptible witch, cold, calculating in her deceit, particularly in her choosing of Kirk as her *Champion*, at the last minute. She had planned it out so that one way or another she would reap the benefits of having been associated with the *House of Talek Sen Dene*, expecting to garner Spock's property while keeping her lover on the side, should Spock opt to keep her upon winning the *Challenge*, that is, counting on the fact Spock would remain in space.

Spock was well rid of her, but Kirk wondered just how many personal sacrifices the Vulcan was expected to make? For his family, for his planet. For Starfleet. Over the years he had faithfully discharged his duties whenever and wherever logically possible, seldom asking for anything in return. Sometimes he even got tripped up in it,

trying to balance family and career. Ultimately, he gave his life when it came down to it. Now, it seemed duty was calling him once again. To the altar with a woman he had never even met. And while she wasn't exactly a mail-order bride, more like an anonymous pen-pal, Kirk decided, given the circumstances, this scenario was taking on all the characteristics of just such a fiasco in the making. How was Spock to make it work, given all the logic in the universe? Kirk felt for his friend. Spock deserved more.

With a flip of a toggle the information was displayed on the small, multi-faced screen, calling Kirk back from his reverie. Jim settled himself back to business, scanning the dossier before him, containing his sudden amusement. Leave it to Spock to just keep plodding forward. Maybe that's what kept him going, Kirk decided of his friend, his devotion to said duty. Your life is a constant contradiction, my friend.

"Lieutenant Brianna Cantrell, Junior Grade, sir," Spock was saying.

"Excellent credentials. But," Kirk said, reading the document. "According to her record she's a fainter. She appears to collapse under pressure." Kirk paused, running down the results of her most recent mental exams, clearing her for duty, at least. He shook his head. He had the power to dismiss

her, remove her from his ship come the end of this mission, at least, seriously pondering the possibility. Would it help or hinder Spock if he did, he wondered? “I guess we know the whys of the sudden transfer from *Excelsior*.”

“Perhaps not all the whys. She is convinced her grandmother is responsible. I do know the order came down from the upper echelon. Her grandmother is the widow of the late Admiral Ilsen.”

“Yes. Given her family connections I’m not surprised. She’s unfit. But they couldn’t just bypass her legacy, all that wealth and influence. So they buried her in space. With us,” Kirk said, looking up. “What? I know that look.”

Spock drew in a quiet sigh. “I know what the record states. And I know that she nearly passed out on me two nights ago. But I have also been enlightened as to the nature of her current affliction. Not only have I discussed this with her but I have had a chance to review her medical record in depth,” Spock said, flicking a few more toggles on the monitor, calling up the data. “If you will look here,” the first officer pointed a long index finger at the screen, “you will see the secretly encoded blip.” Spock tapped the screen, revealing the hidden record, the comments from the Vulcan Embassy on the lieutenant’s behalf.

Kirk slipped on his bi-focals and leaned toward the screen to read, "She's suffering from a Vulcan *mindmeld*? Seems to be a lot of that going around."

"A broken *bondlink* to be precise. Jim, I urge you to let her heal. She does possess remarkable *Gifts*. And she did graduate in the top fifth of her class despite her loss and it's crippling effect. I believe she is strong enough to overcome this personal setback. I would be willing to stake my reputation on it. I know she wants nothing more than to move forward with her life."

"Well," Kirk said, scrubbing at his chin. "That casts a different light on things, now, doesn't it. Is that what this is all about? You've taken her under your wing? Why didn't you just say so the other night?"

"Captain?"

"Well, it makes perfect sense. The way you two seem to have hit it off. She being in your department and all. And out of all of us you're the one with considerable expertise and experience regarding trainees. She is newly graduated, after all. This is only her first assignment. It's logical for you to see her through whatever it is she's going through."

Kirk began to chuckle, shaking his head. Spock frowned his puzzlement. "Leave it to that old romantic. McCoy thought you were sweet on her. I

have to admit I was beginning to question it myself. I should have known better.”

“Yes. We all know I’m not capable of such feelings,” Spock said, quietly, wishing it were so. He was in love with her, Spock conceded, or so he was beginning to suspect, that uppermost on his mind when he arose this morning but it didn’t alter his situation. Kirk rose from his chair, casting the Vulcan a questioning look.

“Spock? Is there something you’d like to get off your chest?” he asked.

Spock was busily gathering up the diskettes and shutting down the unit. If he had been entertaining a change of heart in his decision to back away these two days, the information presented here, along with the message in the dream, was at last hitting home. His attentions to said lieutenant were wrong. More than wrong, he corrected, the situation increasingly impossible with all the talk.

Especially when he understood the recurrent nature of the dreams, he’d been having and his responsibilities in the matter. His obligation was to the *Candidate*. He was no longer a seventeen-year-old kid running away from unpleasant things, from a crown that sometimes pinched. He was the *First Son* of the *House of Talek Sen Dene* which meant fulfilling his duty toward the *Candidate*, no matter what he felt, reaffirming his resolve of only a day

ago to let his relationship with the little lieutenant naturally fizzle out, with his return to his normal work schedule.

It should be easy enough, he decided. He had ultimately seen her through her first two days managing, with or without McCoy's help, to even see her beyond duty hours. Confident and rather pleased at how well she was integrating with the crew, it seemed to him she was never at a loss for company, charming and gracious as she was. Chances were, she wouldn't even miss him, he reasoned with faltering logic in his sudden, profound grief.

"Nothing I'm aware of, Captain," he said, glancing up to catch that *'It's Jim, remember?'* look on his friend's face.

"Come on, I'll buy you a drink. You look like you could use one, my friend."

"If it's all the same. I would prefer Altaire water."

"I guess you would after the other night." Kirk chuckled, lightly resting his hand on Spock's shoulder.

"I'll meet you in an hour," Spock promised, breaking away from Kirk as they made their way out of Briefing Room One.



Brianna Cantrell walked around the perimeter of the main laboratory down on B-deck, clipboard tucked into the crook of her arm as she checked off this and that. She stopped momentarily to reset and re-calibrate each unit as needed, marking down results, restarting the tests for phase two. Finished with that, she handed Spock her clipboard for him to sign off. With the two of them working in tandem, it truly only took about thirty minutes each night, including conversation and tea.

Captain Spock almost always managed to have the water going before she could pass through the entire length of the Research Lab to his private alcove. How he got down from the bridge so fast was yet a mystery to her. She smiled, picking up her cup to rinse it out, getting it ready for tomorrow. His tea was left mostly untouched, unusually preoccupied today as he was. Was that worry she sensed?

Brianna Cantrell had gotten rather used to the nightly calls, the so-called unplanned rendezvous on the rec. deck, or elsewhere, for the past two days, taking it to be the norm, that when they stopped abruptly she found herself hurt and completely puzzled. She hadn't been aware he was only fulfilling doctor's orders and had gone right

back to his old habit of working fifteen to eighteen hour duty-shifts. In all actuality, when she stopped to look back, they had managed in some way to be together each day since she had arrived, if only briefly.

Constantly bumping into one another, mostly in their work capacities, they even ran into each other on their separate ways in and out of Dr. T’Nikha’s office any number of times — It was just so nice spending off-duty time getting to know one another. After today’s palpable absence, however, she grew concerned. Did he suddenly know her thoughts? Was the uncanny *oneness* she felt with him merely an illusion of her poor, lonely, fragmented self, something he really didn’t share?

Brianna Cantrell finished gathering things up, turning to see if he was ready, too. Perhaps, they would walk down to the wardroom together. Maybe share a meal ... she was doing it again. It was as plain as any writing on the wall. He had told her she wasn’t his woman. Strangely, this revelation went without explanation. What was that dream all about last night, anyway, if it wasn’t a message to that extent? That infernal flapping of wings roaring in her ears, even greater than before, warning her off along with the dogs snarling at her. Obviously, he had strengthened his mental barriers in an effort to keep her out.

Despite his dream state attitude toward her it was indeed a fare-thee-well. He had essentially kissed her goodbye. She sighed, still troubled, even after all day, by the resulting residual headache that always accompanied her breach of those barriers. As much fun as they appeared to have together, it was obvious it couldn't go on like this. Along with everything else, people were beginning to talk.

Perhaps that was behind his sudden retreat. He was a very private man, after all. And hadn't she herself resolved to remain politely distant? What had happened to that? Clearly weakening after another all day effort, Brianna Cantrell sighed again quietly. He really seemed as though he needed company just now and when all things were said and done they had decided, as friends, they would lean on each other. She felt guilty for having ignored him much of the day. Spock hadn't made a move to wrap things up. She frowned.

"Are you coming, Mister Spock?" she asked from the archway, ready to hit the lights.

"I have a few more things here."

"Oh. I could stay longer and help, if you like," she said, drawing back into the room. "Or, is this your sneaky, little way of going back over things and correcting my mistakes?"

"Illogical, madam," he said without looking up,

continuing on with the test he was running. "I am not in the habit of sneaking, for one. Nor would you benefit from such actions. I prefer correcting errors as they occur."

"Well, then. Let me help you so you can get out of here while there's still plenty of evening left. After all, everyone needs playtime." Up went the eyebrow.

"Have you been talking with Doctor McCoy?"

"No," Brianna Cantrell said, crossing her arms over her chest, shaking her head in dismay at him. "I just know that after tomorrow, things will likely pick up their pace and playtime will be scant. But if you're about to tell me Vulcans don't need play or socialization, save it. You seem to have forgotten, albeit conveniently, that I was born and raised there. Trust me. I know differently."

"Indeed?"

"Well, of course, there's always the possibility your *House* is different. And I don't mean to imply that what's true for one or two Vulcan families must naturally follow for all the rest of Vulcan, in general. But among my kinsmen at least, the term 'party animals' openly refers to the *Houses of Kooli Ton Lok* and *Seltu Dei Sei*. Strictly put in human terms, that is."

"Indeed?" Spock's eyebrow immediately launched itself into his hairline, bothered at her apparent

association with such rogues. These were the very same *Houses* behind his trouble, defaming him with their absurd allegations. He was instantly disturbed by the idea that somehow they had any association with the Lieutenant. They already had designs on the *Candidate*, which was bad enough. What had they to do with Cantrell? Especially having just learned of the resurgence of their objections to the proposed match, had they, somehow, cultivated an alliance with her to further distract him from his *Candidate*? It gave him pause. Sarkal, of the *House of Kooli Ton Lok*, made it clear he wanted the *Anomaly* and that she had promised to be his, his crony, Strone of *Seltu Dei Sei*, backing him all the way. Certainly, it would go a long way toward explaining the *Candidate's* reticence, of late, and why she continued to refuse his offer to stay during their *wanderings*.

Spock shook off his suspicions. While it was a certainty she was a major distraction to him, it was highly illogical to think Lieutenant Cantrell was employed by them for such wanton acts of subterfuge. Particularly, in light of the fact she seemed to be avoiding him whenever possible, most notably today. Both at breakfast and lunch she clearly saw him dining alone, opting to sit with Nash and some of the others, even after he'd nodded at her in invitation, continuing to ignore him during the break earlier, occupied by a bevy of

young male officers all jockeying for her attentions.

Given the fact he had decided to let things fizzle out between them, he should be gratified by the way she managed to carry on without him. He wasn't, however. Instead, he found himself greatly bothered by it, in fact. Jealous. Yet, another concern of his to add to the ever increasing list of concerns. Why was his thinking so muddled when it came to her? What was she doing to him?

He wasn't free, it shouldn't matter to him what she did or thought about him, or anything else, where she spent her time or with whom. And yet, despite how unfitting it was to think either of those *Houses* had that much power, he was burning to know just what her connection was with these two. Mildly troubled by it.

"I take it you partied often with these two *Houses*, then?"

"Oh, not me. Well, vicariously maybe. From the banister. I was always much too young to join in. T'Pran suggested it would be, '*most unseemly for an unbonded female to cavort with the likes of such cur*', as she put it. Besides, I was only twelve or thirteen at the time."

"Indeed? This T'Pran was in your father's employ and yet she addressed friends of your parents in this manner?"

“Hardly. They were miscreant friends of my two eldest brothers. I have to admit I never liked the way Sarkal looked at me. Or the things he would say. Like how one day he would own me. It used to give me chills. Still does in a way.”

“As in you had a *feeling* about him?”

“Maybe. But he really scared me, you know? I didn’t like the look in his eyes. The lust. So I would just play along with him. Trying to keep him at arms’ distance.”

“And you were how old? Earth years?” he asked. Brianna Cantrell nodded. “Did he ever *touch* you?”

“Thankfully, no. But I knew he wanted to.”

“T’Pran was right to keep you away from him.”

“Well, I was always very glad to hide behind her skirts. But what about you?”

“Hiding behind someone’s skirts was never my forte. T’Pran’s or otherwise.”

“No, of course, not! I actually can’t picture you doing that,” she laughed. “You really possess a remarkably dry wit, Mister Spock. But you know what I meant. You never answered my question.”

“We’ve hosted some lively soirees in my *House*,” he answered slowly, adding another drop of liquid to the vial he held. “My father is an ambassador, after all.”

“Ah. So then it’s just you?”

“I prefer things quiet after a long, busy day,” he said, latching the door on the centrifuge, adjusting a few dials before turning it on.

“Well, in that case I’ll just remove my noisy, little self and let you get on with your quiet, sir.”

“You do not have to go.”

“Oh, no?”

“I prefer it quiet, not dead,” he said, handing her another clipboard.

“Oh, I get it. You don’t like crowds.”

“It is as you said. You’re noisy enough.”

“Ah!” Brianna Cantrell was caught momentarily speechless. Spock deftly squelched the urge to laugh, curling his lips inward. “I simply can’t believe you said that! You who initiates any and all conversation.”

“I know. I am such a ‘bad boy’, as you put it,” he said, turning to gaze at her with warmth in his brown eyes, tilting his head to the side ever so slightly. Studying her as he was wont to do, trying to comprehend what it was she was doing to him. Admitting that whatever it was, he was enjoying it. Enjoying her.

Glad to be the object of her attentions again,

however short lived it may turn out to be. He knew with increasing certainty he had to give her up altogether for just these very reasons. He would ultimately have to let her go as his lab assistant, as well. That thought was painful, unexpectedly so. Again he experienced a shortness in breath. Why couldn't he back away from her?

"Oh, you just don't know who you're dealing with, do you?" she said, with mock seriousness. Spock's gaze was steady, hesitating in his response for only a moment.

"Bite me?"

"Don't think I won't. Unlike you, I never made any such promise."

"I am trembling in my boots. I'm so scared, madam."

"You're a Vulcan, do you expect me to believe that?" she said, leaning on the edge of the table, her arms folded. "But you should be scared. I may be small of stature but I will remind you so is the *Vengarian Bush tiger* and their bite is lethal."

"Woman, are you suggesting I have such a tiger by the tail?" He was beginning to think so. Damned if he did, damned if he didn't when it came to her.

"Black Widow, tiger. You figure it out, mister," Brianna Cantrell said, returning the clipboard to

him, giggling as she turned on her heels and headed toward the door again. "I'm going to dinner with or without you."

"As you wish."

"But in all seriousness, sir. Don't work too late. You're starting to look a little ragged around the edges."

"Indeed? You have been talking with Doctor McCoy."

"Have not."

"Not to worry, madam. I'm meeting Jim for a drink in twenty-three minutes," Spock said, catching her look. "Altaire water," he found himself saying, wondering why he felt the sudden compulsion to explain himself to her. Obviously she was wondering too, giving him a quizzical look, shaking her head slightly, suddenly giggling again.

"I don't care what you drink. You're a big boy."

"Then, why the look?"

"I was just wondering if you were going to wake me in the middle of the night for another headache cure, is all."

"I sincerely doubt it. Since my consumption of alcohol is rare in the first place, let alone in enough quantity to thoroughly obliterate my senses. And since Altaire water generally fails to promote such

ominous side-effects.”

“Really?”

“You may rest at ease, Lieutenant.”

“Well, then. You have a pleasant evening, sir.”

“Thank you. Ah — Lieutenant,” Spock hailed, surprising himself, as she turned to leave. Brianna Cantrell hesitated in the doorway again. Now that he had her detained, Spock was at a loss. What was he to say? That he merely wanted her company for yet a little while longer? Loathed as he was now to let her go. He still had twenty hours before the rescheduled rendezvous, a few more hours’ reprieve before he was obligated to put out this growing fire between them. “We are on later for a lyrette lesson, are we not? I do owe you one, after all,” he said, his logic admittedly faltering all the way.

Brianna Cantrell didn’t answer right away, gazing down at her boots, shrugging her shoulders and in general giving every appearance of one struggling with something before she said, “Sure.”

“Is anything wrong?”

“That’s just the problem, sir,” she said, looking over at him, meeting his gaze. “I don’t know.”

“Would it help if we talked about it over dinner?”

“Well, I suppose it never hurts to talk, sir.” Realizing one way or another she had to confront

him, about the barriers, about what it was he wanted from her.

Spock nodded with satisfaction. “Meet me in wardroom two at nineteen hundred hours, then.”

“Corner table, sir?” she said. Spock nodded. With that she promptly left the lab. Spock stared after her shaking his head. *Fascinating*.

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Dinner wasn’t what either of them expected. The deck was unusually crowded tonight. Profoundly loud. Buzzing. Exacerbating her day long headache. Brianna Cantrell had considered herself lucky arriving when she did, snagging their now familiar corner table although it would be difficult trying to have a personal discussion over this din, let alone in the company of so many. Packed in like sardines, as they were. Privacy, she was learning, was a rare commodity aboard a starship. And she was suddenly questioning her actions, her motives. Why was she here waiting for him? Pursuing a relationship where there obviously could be none, trying to redefine their friendship into something more, aware she was pushing.

Leaning into her hands, hardly aware of anything or anyone around her for the moment, she scrubbed

at her forehead, gently massaging her temples with her fingertips hoping to alleviate the persistent pain. What was wrong with her anyway, what could she be thinking? What more need he say or do to discourage her, for Surak's sake? She had just about decided to leave, that she should leave, her headache slowly abating oddly enough as the decision took hold, when Spock broke into her silent reverie.

“Another headache?” he gently asked, quietly setting his tray opposite hers taking a seat. She seemed prone to them, he thought, concerned. “Have you informed Dr. McCoy about them?”

“Um. I’ve been fighting it all day. I suppose I’ll learn —” she said, at once referencing the mental barriers she knew to be the cause and by doing so acknowledging his efforts to distance himself from her. Surprisingly, up went the eyebrow.

“Learn what, precisely? Have you been drinking again?”

“Huh?” she said, glancing upward as the others appeared walking toward their table. “Oh. Now, you’re teasing me. No, it’s not that,” she said, as he again gave her a puzzled look. Could it be he was unaware his defenses were hurting her? Before she could find out, or have any of her other burning questions answered suddenly they were not alone and it fast became apparent trying to dine together

had been a mistake. After all, it was not the first time they had been intruded upon partaking of a meal together.

“Hope you two don’t mind, but as you can see, it’s full up in here,” Dr. Chapel said, as she approached. She was all but dragging Yeoman Travers and a couple of others along with her, trays in hand, settling at the table without so much as getting a nod from the first officer or his companion. Taking a seat next to Spock, Christine gave Brianna Cantrell a rather pointed look. “Guess that’s why the two of you joined forces, eh?” The lieutenant merely returned the remark with an icy glare, glancing quickly at Spock and then around the room. It wasn’t that full, she thought, spying a few empty seats at other tables. Aware others had opted to leave them alone.

As it was, all hope of a quiet, thoughtful discourse between the first officer and herself, in which they may have possibly cleared the air between them, had just evaporated. It was as if Christine had planned it that way. Or was she the one still fighting destiny, wanting but being prevented from ever having? *T’Vor-Salach*, she thought bitterly, biting her lower lip. Who needed a marriage contract with a mere third party to get in the way when she had all these people running interference? Sadly, Brianna Cantrell realized her

time had just run out. With the rendezvous expected tomorrow, it was highly unlikely, given their respective work schedules, she and Spock would have any other chances to converse. She still had no idea whether or not to serve him tea.

Knowing that any minute now she could easily lose control by bursting into tears, which would be completely unacceptable, and feeling entirely conspicuous, Brianna Cantrell was soon excusing herself dumping her less than half-eaten meal into the bin before exiting the deck.

“Huh, wonder what’s gotten into her?” Yeoman Natalie Travers said.

Spock said nothing. He didn’t try to prevent her from leaving, although he shared her disappointment in the way things hadn’t worked out, especially knowing this would likely be their last evening together. All too aware there were several eyes watching, he realized he had no choice, really, than to take his time finishing his dinner, lingering over his tea before he, too, left the wardroom.

3

November 17, 2285,

Stardate: 8511.17

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

The rec-room was rather noisy and crowded at mail-call, the crew anxious for packages, and various items that could not be sent through cyberspace, to arrive. It was early evening, ships' time, Sunday fast coming to a close. They would rendezvous with the Vulcan shuttlecraft, *T'Mir*, by early afternoon tomorrow. A certain electricity was beginning to fill the air, the nervous anticipation of facing the unknown this mission would foist upon the untried crew.

Spock sighed quietly to himself. After dinner he had wandered down to the main rec-deck in anticipation of receiving something, anything, from his parents in regards to his intended. He rotated the glass before him. Jim had since taken his leave to review his mail in private, leaving Spock alone, although not for long. Dr. McCoy, looking around for a place to sit, spied the first officer at the corner table, a small bundle of plastic rectangles in front of him, the ‘postcards’ and video ‘letters’ stacked neatly together creating a rather colorful mosaic. “Mind if I sit with you or are you in one of your contemplative moods?” the doctor asked, as he slid into the empty chair opposite the Vulcan, not really giving the Vulcan a chance to object.

Spock looked up from his empty glass. The wedge of lime that now currently rested across the top two cubes of ice shifted again as the cubes, pocked with uneven holes melted fast, losing their form, liquefying in the pleasant warmth of the room. He raised an eyebrow at the intruder, giving a short nod of assent. McCoy settled back, as if ready to stay there a long, long time. “Funny, how life goes in circles,” he said.

“Indeed,” Spock murmured. Still, preoccupied. He flicked off the small translucent viewing screen, removing the plastic diskette; the ‘postcard’ he had been perusing. Instead of returning it to the top of

his stack, he hung onto it, playing with it, dropping an edge lightly onto the tabletop briefly and then sliding his fingers down the length of it, flipping it around again and repeating the process.

It seemed to come in waves — gnawing at the back of his mind, when he was careless enough to let his guard down, allowing the one word thought to edge its way into his consciousness. Family. Fortunately, this occurrence was rare, although he found himself struggling with it again this evening. He remembered the strong bout he'd had some years ago when Jim Kirk mentioned he was a father, passing around the most recent holograph of his boy, David. Jim had lost that same son very recently.

Spock glanced at the diskette from his cousin, T'Nuha, resting on top of his stack of mail. Vulcan tradition was strong and family was at its core, or so she liked to remind him. Perhaps that, along with the recent loss of Jim's only child, and all the talk of his own upcoming nuptials had brought it to the surface again. Or, perhaps, it was the deliberate lowering of his guard which enabled him to acknowledge — *and enjoy* — the delicate beauty of Lt. Cantrell. Which led him to wonder, briefly, just what a child of hers might be like ...

“Got a vid-letter from my daughter,” McCoy was saying, bringing the Vulcan out of his musings.

“She’s getting married. I’d like to invite you to the wedding. Jim’s already said he’d go. I sort of need support from the two of you in order to face Joanne’s mother. My — ex,” he said. “Funny, after all these years, we still don’t get along.” The doctor sighed.

Spock nodded in mute understanding. His own ‘ex’ had just made Stonn a father again, according to his cousin, T’Nuha, a friend of T’Pring’s, although Spock found T’Nuha’s logic seriously lacking, in keeping him apprised of such matters. T’Pring was no longer his woman and hadn’t been for years. Since what happened in her life had little impact on his — he could only surmise this was yet another not-so-subtle reminder of his neglected duty. Obviously, she knew nothing of his current marriage plans.

There were, however, new concerns about his future that did have an impact. The *House of Kooli Ton Lok* had, again, filed a formal complaint against him before the High Council in regards to the *Candidate*, Spock’s woman in question. They were seeking a full Tribunal in the matter, demanding a Stay on the marriage contract, first and foremost.

Sarek and his attaches were hard at work to defeat the motion, seeking logical alternatives, of course. Spock was at a loss, wondering, sadly, where all of this would lead? In the meantime, Stonn was now

the father of five. Curiously, Spock found himself grappling with a rather acute sense of loss ... his family, that wasn't.

"I shall be honored to attend, Doctor. It may prove interesting to see what sort of disruptive antics you'll pull at a human wedding," Spock said, abruptly pulling himself out of his ruminations.

"Spock, I'm — I'm truly sorry about what happened years ago at your wedding to T'Pring. Really I am. But I couldn't stand by and let you kill Jim. You're my two closest friends."

Spock waved him off. "I have always been grateful you did not allow me to kill Jim. She would not have been worth the price."

"Is that your way of saying you forgive me?"

"It is difficult to forgive when one does not bear a grudge. I am a Vulcan, Doctor. What you did was — logical."

"Well, now, coming from you, that's quite a compliment."

"Indeed, Doctor, which is how I meant it."

"Do you ever think of getting married again?"

"It is — my duty," Spock said warily. He tapped the 'postcard' he held against his other hand. He seemed slightly agitated for Spock, the doctor noted with concern.

“I mean, for instance, say you meet the perfect girl. You *bond* with her,” McCoy said, following Spock’s gaze across the deck. They both watched as Lt. Cantrell struggled to balance a rather awkward package in her arms along with her guitar and lyrette. She had Uhura’s assistance but it wasn’t enough. The lieutenant was obviously too amused by her situation, her laughter rippling across the deck.

Several young men were flocking to her rescue. One even slipped his arm about the lieutenant’s waist as he steadied the package with his other hand. For a moment, it seemed as though she fell against him, in fact, enjoying his attentions. Spock had taken notice, as well, bristling. McCoy quickly continued, “And then something catastrophic happens that separates the two of you,” he said, watching Spock’s reaction. “How would you go about finding her again?”

Spock took his eyes off of Cantrell. “Why would I have difficulty finding her? If she was my *bondmate*, I would merely summon her through the *link*. Doctor, what are you driving at? Have you been talking to Jim, lately?”

“What if that *link* was severed due to the nature of the catastrophe? Then how would you find her? I mean, would you know her again if you *touched* her in some other way? For instance, in you sleep?”

“Doctor, I urge you to desist. The fee for fishing without a license is rather substantial and you cannot afford the cost,” Spock said, slowly rising to his feet. He quietly gathered his packet of diskettes, ready to leave.

“Just think about it, Spock. How would you find her again?”

“What makes you so certain I would even try?”

“Maybe because you hoped to be married by now with a couple of kids. Who knows?” Once again McCoy’s attention drifted to Cantrell, watching as she gave the young man a swift elbow to the ribs, forcing him to release her. The package bobbed precariously with the movement. Brianna Cantrell’s icy glare removed any doubts the doctor may have entertained as to just where her affections lay. “Maybe, it can happen, yet. What do you think?”

Spock glared silently at the doctor for a moment, adeptly hiding his discomfiture. “How do you presume to know any of this?”

“Oh, I know you better than you think,” McCoy said, tapping at his own temple. “There’s still a residual.” McCoy was smiling at his own double-entendre, the residual of Spock’s *Katra* and of the *bondlink* that once existed between these two. T’Nikha appeared to be right. A little prompting, such as this was in order, if these two were ever

going to acknowledge the truth between them. He wondered just how long and how stubbornly Spock would resist it. He didn't know enough about the girl.

Spock shook his head, frowning. "That is most unfortunate. Good evening, Doctor," he said, stalking off toward Cantrell, feeling irrefutably naked. McCoy watched as the little lieutenant surrendered her package and instruments to Spock without resistance, the first officer escorting both women from the deck.

4

November 18, 2285,

Stardate: 8511.18

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

“Landing party to Captain Kirk—” she fiddled with the dial on her communicator, tapped it twice, then tried again, this time using a different tactic, at last changing the channel. “Landing party to Enterprise. Come in, Enterprise — Sir, look out!” she screamed, at once flinging the communications device aside, fumbling for her phaser. The tall, lean Vulcan, several meters below her in the parched river bed, turned slightly to acknowledge her warning and was

caught along the neck and shoulders by a flying predator. The creature virtually came out of nowhere! A huge pterodactyl-like bird, reminiscent of Earth's prehistoric era, swooped down upon the pair almost silently, like a stealth bomber. Gliding for the most part, she only just now heard the flapping of its great wings overhead. Ever so faint in the beginning, the flapping sound grew louder as it approached, causing her to turn and watch its descent in horror. Almost too late. Her heart thumped wildly in her chest. Chillingly, it reminded her of that T'ay'at'ma, so often haunting her dreams, of late. Who?

The Vulcan was hurtled to the ground with tremendous force, his tricorder dashing to pieces against a rock on impact. The giant winged beast was poised on the man's back, nearly as long as the Starfleet officer was tall. Going in for the kill, its long sharp talons glinted ominously in the luminescent orange glow of a phaser set on maximum force. In an instant the only reminder of its existence was the rather putrid, acrid smell of burning flesh. Trembling uncontrollably, at once she started down the embankment, small pebbles breaking loose beneath her booted feet, cascading before her in her haste. The Vulcan had not moved from where he lay. Eerily, sickeningly still.

"Husband," she panted. "Husband!" Reaching

him, she knelt down beside him and put an ear to his right side, where on a human his liver would be, straining to hear even the slightest of heartbeats from within. None. Hesitating, trembling even more now, she snapped on her tricorder holding her breath as she awaited the ominous readings, confirming what she already knew. He was dead.

Grief temporarily interfered with her control. She could feel hot tears prickling her eyes, blinked them back. She had to maintain – ‘You can handle this, you can handle this,’ she told herself, over and over, trying to summon her courage, to override this sudden, hideous sense of loss. With his consciousness ripped from hers, she felt as if half of her brain had been torn away. She was left feeling tiny, vulnerable, and completely alone.

She looked at the side of his face. A thick green ooze trickled from beneath his hairline, the blood already coagulating. Slowly, carefully she rolled him over and placed his head in her lap. She then sat chastened. What am I doing in your head again? “Spock?” She let out a tiny gasp. “Captain, sir? I’m so sorry. I don’t mean to be here, please forgive me. Is this what I’m doing to you? Am I killing you?” She sat there sobbing for a moment, paralyzed. Why, oh why, couldn’t she just do what he asked? Then, after what felt like ages, her instincts kicked in and she automatically

reached into the large pockets on her utility jacket frantically for a handkerchief, a piece of tissue – anything. Desperate, knowing already it was too late, she found her emergency medikit, a gift from her reluctant grandmother, that she had forgotten all about. Working with controlled speed she removed a large sterile gauze pad from it, gently pressing it to his head to stop the flow of blood, cleaning the wound.

He still had not come to. And he wasn't about to. He was dead. She struggled with her growing fear, at the pain of such a separation, of that tiny flapping of wings faintly heard now, right on the edge of her consciousness. Ominous in its presence, vaguely threatening, it was as if someone else was there lurking. Who?– Oh, her head hurt! Why did her head suddenly hurt so? She began to weep while her whole world flew apart – fragmented. She was lost. Alone. So alone! ... Holding him, rocking gently back and forth. Back and forth. She had lost Spock, again?

No, it can't be. Then she was back to tending his wounds. looking up, upon occasion, surveying the area. Hopeful that the captain or anyone else from their landing party would happen upon them. Divided into groups, somehow, they had lost contact with each other, either through faulty equipment, or some sort of undetected force field. She was

unsure which and was beginning to feel very much alone. Cut off. Empty. Scared.

"Sir," she gently coaxed, unable to conceal the slight tremor creeping into her voice. "Husband?" How could this be, what insanity was this that she could again be in Captain Spock's dreams? ... "This is no time to take a nap. Come on. Wakey, wakey. Please, oh please. Don't leave me like this," she faltered, patting his face to no avail. She looked skyward in supplication, at the clouds that continued to darken, wondering if God even reached this far out into the universe. Just now she felt deserted. "Help. Help me, what am I doing here?" she sobbed and was answered with a large raindrop that splattered against her cheek rapidly followed by another and another.

"Oh, great! Thanks a lot!" she ranted, but it did the trick. Spock stirred in her lap. Taking in a deep breath, filling his empty lungs, he came to and sat up abruptly.

"Who art thee? Where?" he asked, uncertain. He reached upward to touch his own forehead, glanced at the blood on his fingertips, frowned his confusion, "Qual se tu?" He squinted at her, "Lieutenant? Art thee well?"

"Aye, sir. I'm okay. But you were dead. You registered dead on my tricorder."

“Indeed.” He nodded. “But I am not dead, now.”

“No, but you did leave me. I felt you die. You were gone, sir.”

“It is all right, my heart. I’m here. I am right here.”

Brianna Cantrell thrust her eyes open before they were ready. “Ooh, ow!” she gasped. Her eyes smarted, as if they had been glued shut. Head throbbing, “Lights on,” she whispered, barely able to find her voice. The darkness gradually rescinded, melting into light as the computer complied, the sparse built-in furnishings in her quarters taking on more normal shapes. She remembered, as a child, how the furniture in her room used to grow into hideous phantoms, monsters scaring her in the dimness. It was so real, it seemed so *real*, she thought unable to shake herself loose from the dream, from the eerie, troubling sense of unease that filled her, to the dark whisperings of that tiny voice so near the edge of her consciousness warning her off, fanning her doubts. Her inner voice, perhaps? — and the acrid, putrid smell of burning flesh that clung to her nostrils. She held a hand just under her nose, trying to block out the smell. When that failed, she reached over and grabbed the jar of Vulcan tea, taking in a deep whiff of its fragrant woody, spiciness.

Again, touching the jar gave her an unexpected chill. She could *feel* the malice. Did he really wish her harm? Was that the message of the dream, for her to desist and leave him alone? Hot tears jabbed at her eyes, again. *Please don't push me away. It hurts too much.*

The lieutenant sat up, bracing a hand against her forehead as if to keep her brains from spilling out. Her head hurt worse than it ever had, what was going on? She looked around as if she expected someone or something to appear. Trembling. She tried to shake off her misgivings, tried to talk some sense into herself. It was just a dream, *wasn't* it? Slowly, she swung her legs out of the bunk. Wary. As if she still needed to keep watch. It was early yet. She hadn't heard any signs of life from the quarters next door or even much outside in the passageway. She was getting so used to Uhura popping in these last couple of mornings — Brianna Cantrell attempted to pass it off as simple anticipation when she knew the anxiety, the dream, had been real.

The closer they drew to the *T'Mir*, the more anxious she became. It was as if ... she didn't know what and that was what troubled her, most of all. Funny, in an odd sort of way, how it always seemed like the person she'd been '*visiting*' had just left the room once she awakened from one of her

unconscious *wanderings*. Only this time it was a bit different. As if there had been *two* such entities she'd been dealing with ... One hostile, one kind. She felt sick — was it merely the pain? Brianna Cantrell eased out of her bunk, showered, dressed and reaching out with her mind, prayed that Spock wouldn't ignore her entreaty. She needed him, needed to know he was all right. The last time she felt this way, something dreadful happened to him.

She pulled on her crimson duty jacket and sat at her desk in front of her computer monitor. Although her attempts were thwarted, she found herself still wrapped in Spock's warmth as if they had actually *touched*. How? — and why did she persist when he had essentially asked her to stop? Why couldn't she do this one favor for him? He had done so much for her already, with all of his random acts of kindness — and this was how she repaid him? Her own actions shamed her.

What used to be so comforting now frightened her, forcing her to face the possibility, at last, that her *moderator*, that *Spock*, had left her on purpose. For whatever reasons, he found it necessary and maybe even beneficial, to sever their *link*. Her father was correct, as usual, in saying her *moderator* had been toying with her. She was a novelty to him and when it wore off, he had deserted her. Yet, something *felt* so false about that

notion at the same time, troubling her anew.

Was Spock also now trying to block her entrance into his mind, cut her off from him entirely? Was that the cause of her headaches? Was the strange pulsating at the edge of her consciousness, and the misgivings she derived from it, effectively a warning beacon, another of his attempts to fend her off? Why else did her head hurt like this? Worse than when Starfleet put her through all of those tests. Who were the *they* and what didn't *they* want her to know? What were they keeping from her?

She cradled her aching forehead in her hands. Before he died, she never experienced headaches during their joint *wanderings*. Maybe because he was always happy to find her there, just like now. Certainly, the messages were mixed in these most recent dreams. He was delighted to see her and at the same time felt compelled to push her away? What was that all about? Confusing her even further was the way he always seemed to perk up a bit whenever she happened upon him, she realized. If this was the case, she was guilty of wholly misreading his intentions. Perhaps, she had always misinterpreted them. Brianna Cantrell rubbed at her forehead and temples wishing she could do for herself what she could do for others.

Sighing rather audibly, suddenly she was so unsure of which path she should adopt. Without

being able to speak frankly to him, how could she make up her mind? It all came down to serving him tea, or not. She couldn't go forward, and accept the contract, unless she knew he wished her to do so. That just wouldn't be fair, any more than her having thrown a sticky web about him, keeping him trapped.

If she loved him, she would let him go ... came the Voice.

If both of them weren't on the same terms regarding the marriage contract, it was completely unconscionable for her to pursue him like this, he having so obviously dumped her then, though he never made her feel that way, never once. Was she so lacking in dignity, her judgement so unsound? She sensed there was more to it than that. What about the censure? Logically, maybe Spock had to let her go. Perhaps, it was an act of mercy, on his part, knowing they could never meet, freeing her to move on. Or, perhaps, it was Spock's willingness to receive her that compounded what was ultimately her weakness, the sheer joy of being with him. Either way, she was letting him down, she realized, although she had tried to contain herself. Brianna Cantrell chewed on her lower lip, struggling to contain her emotions, refusing to give in, *I'm not going to cry anymore.*

She had to find her way off of this seesaw.

Brianna Cantrell drew her knees up, hugging them, needing the comfort. Mopping at her cheeks, she rested her head momentarily on her legs. Sitting up again, she reached over and flicked on her computer. Scrolling down through her files, she found her dream diary, and quickly dated and logged an account of this latest nocturnal fantasy to go along, with the others, already duly logged, just so someone could trace her descent into madness, because she did feel as if she was losing her sanity.

Like it or not, she was going to have to take it to the good psychiatrist again. She was just so confused, her emotions churning wildly about inside of her. Brianna Cantrell knew how very attracted she was to Captain Spock, knowing there was very little to be done about it, Vulcan propriety and custom being what they were. He need tell her only once she wasn't his woman. To persist was illogical.

She sighed, again, deeply.

Marriage contract or no, barriers suddenly existed where they hadn't before, most likely erected to keep her out, although they failed, as she so blithely came crashing through them ... she deserved the headache. Maybe — maybe they weren't so well-suited to each other, after all? Something inside of her twisted uncomfortably with the thought. That little voice inside of her warning her off again —

After all, it was up to her to respect the boundaries that lay between them, rather than attempt to change them. She sensed the logic behind the argument, and sought to obey it.

He was, more or less, asking that of her. She just had to figure out how to comply. In the meantime, she would continue her attempts at remaining politely distant, as well. Perhaps, he had already come to that conclusion himself and that was why he'd said what he'd said to her the other morning, shrugging off the telltale chill. It was the least she could do, she conceded, leaving her quarters for a long stroll about the decks before it became necessary, time-wise, to head to the wardroom for a bite to eat.

Curiously, at the moment of her resolve, her headache ... vanished.

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Spock awoke suddenly as if someone had whispered his name. Heart thumping, he stared numbly into the darkness which hung over his sleeping quarters like a shroud. He was at once acutely aware of *her* presence. Dreaming, he had been laying in her lap, her soft, gentle hands lightly stroking and caressing his face. At once a familiar

mind was probing his, *linking*, and for an ever so brief moment they *melded* into one. The sensation lingered for a while beyond the actual contact and on into his wakefulness. He was *aware* of her presence. How long had it been since he *felt* her like this? Gently stroking his mind, teasing him, really, in the same, rather intimate game they used to play so frequently in the past. Sporadic memories of her were trickling back rather often now and quite without warning.

A broad smile seized his aging features, wrenching his unaccustomed muscles into a grin, warmed by her *touch*. It really was *she*, his sweet, sweet *Candidate*. And it had been too long, he decided, it had been much too long. He hung onto the sensation, reveling in it, sending out his thought impulses, '*I'm here. I'm here*'. He hoped this time she would receive them that he could entice her to stay. It was inevitable, after all, they were to be betrothed. '*I have missed thee ...*' But already the *Candidate* was gone, slipping away from him yet again and for an eerie, inexplicable moment he thought he sensed the presence of Lt. Cantrell in her place.

And *someone* else? Confusing him. Who ...?

"Wait. No wait, don't go," he murmured, coming more fully conscious. He could feel that curious ache in his chest, yet again, with her sudden

absence. At the same time he fought what was becoming an all too easy impulse to reach overhead and open the compti channel to the lieutenant's quarters. Strangely, he needed some form of contact with someone — anyone. The ensuing emptiness almost consumed him.

Spock exercised a bit of discipline over himself, and settled back down into his bunk, instead. He was only vaguely aware of how increasingly dependent he was on one Brianna Cantrell, leaning on her, allowing her to fill this hideous void created by the *Candidate's* continual absence, as if Brianna Cantrell were suddenly his life-partner ... Or something. Odd, how he thought it was the lieutenant he detected, ever so briefly, just before the mental *link* dissolved again ... Most peculiar, in fact, that he should mix the personalities of these two women like that — unless— Was she trying to tell him it was *she*?

Fascinating. Spock sat upright in his bunk — Of course, it *all* fit.

“I am a fool!” he cursed himself, pulling the bed covers aside. He had told Jim, the other evening, they would not be strangers. That thought resonated through him, gave him pause. He was well aware there was something distinctly familiar about Lieutenant Cantrell that he denied from the very first moment they met. Confused by his own

reaction in this matter, he decided he was either profoundly stubborn, or simply obtuse. And then McCoy confronted him with a rather strange litany of questions — as if he knew something Spock didn't. He thought the doctor was fishing, when perhaps he was merely seeking confirmation ... even T'Nikha's reaction had been strange in regards to his concerns over Cantrell. She all but encouraged him to *enjoy the moment*.

Why? What was it they all knew, that he didn't?

First and foremost Spock was a scientist, yet he had been looking away instead of looking for answers. It was time he did some real research into the *whys* of his behavior, instead of carelessly allowing the formation of ties that would be equally disturbing to break when the time came for him to *bond* with another. Perhaps, if he started asking the correct questions, the answers would come more readily. Such as why he was spending so much time with the lieutenant when he knew he was about to be engaged in the first place?

The more he thought about it, examined the evidence, the more he came to realize in just how many ways she demonstrated who she was to him and how he continued to ignore the signs. So very practiced at subjugating his own emotions, he disregarded what his own senses told him — nearly altogether.

He wanted to *touch* her, *needed* to *touch* her, the metaphysical gap between them so painful that only by making some form of physical contact could they ease their collective distress. Even if it was something as simple as holding her hand, which he did, often, in his weakness, to his own shame, blatantly displaying his affection for her for all to see. Constantly, he fought the urge to open the ship-wide compti and declare the woman was his. This would be a sign of *Kiftiri* the Council would look for. They would be watching, of that, Spock was certain. If only it had dawned on him sooner. Instead, he ended up behaving every bit the saphead leading her up to a point and then cruelly withdrawing from her at the most inauspicious moments.

He had been concerned *his phantom* wouldn't accept him — and by his actions had nearly made it a self-fulfilling prophecy. By his own assessment, he had a great deal of damage to control, if he were to make amends, praying it wasn't too late to fix this. He wanted to love the woman who by arrangement was set to become his life-partner. He was acutely aware of just how deeply rooted his feelings were for Cantrell already, as it turned out, praying that he hadn't driven a fatal stake into their hitherto battered and bruised relationship.

At the same time, he was also acutely haunted by

the other presence he detected in their dream state. *Who?...*

Bursting with this revelation, he knew they had to talk. However, in glancing at the chronometer, he realized it was remarkably early. Zero-two-forty-eight hours. No doubt, the lieutenant would kill him if he awakened her now, good news or ill. He had been told Brianna Cantrell was less than her usual sunny self when rudely roused from her slumber. He smiled. It certainly wouldn't be fair of him to awaken her now, given how clearly exhausted she was when they spoke over the compti again last evening.

Humans, lacking the stamina the Vulcan race enjoyed, required rest in order to function properly. Spock also noted the lieutenant's coping skills had degenerated even further since she arrived, indicating just how marred her rest had been. Later today would be hard enough on her, emotionally, particularly should it turn out he was wrong. If he was in error, if his assessment of their situation was incorrect he was going to have to break it off with her. Currently, he possessed neither the stomach nor the will to do what then must be done. Break her heart. He decided he would let her sleep. He still had nine hours and twelve minutes before the rendezvous point was reached. And if he was correct about her identity, he hoped it left him

enough time in which to throw himself at her mercy, and begin the reparations she was due, if they were to make this work between them.

Heart and soul, he wanted it to work.

After all, this overwhelming sense of being *alone* again, this emptiness, was merely a feeling. And he was a Vulcan. So, why was he troubled by it? — Why wouldn't *she* stay? he pondered, uncertain which was harder to bear, her absence or the scattered, infrequent mini-*meldings* that comforted on the one hand but always left him ripped to shreds and wanting on the other. The latter, he decided as he swung out of the bunk. Dressing quickly he headed to the ship's gymnasium. It was like losing her over and over again, and despite the repetitiveness of it, the pain was something he never quite got used to.

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Shortly before he reached the ship's gym, Spock sensed *she* was awake, in fact, he *felt* her tickle his mind like *she* used to. He chose not to answer her call at that moment, but it did give him an idea. Upon reaching his destination, he decided to put his theory about *her* identity to the test, he would *call* her to him, like he told McCoy last evening. He

would simply use what was left of their *link* to make a conscious effort to contact her. He knelt down on the mat in the far corner opposite the ship's swimming pool. Steepling his fingers, he took a deep cleansing breath and began the slow climb inward. Once he was centered, he began to call to his *Candidate* much in the same fashion used when he was a *moderator* during the *Test*. If there was the residual of a previous *link* between himself and Cantrell, then she would likely hear his call and join him in the gym. That was his hope. And if not, better to find out now so as to soften the blow before the delegation — and his bride arrived. He just may need a bit of time to adjust. Certainly, Cantrell might need a moment or two, as well, since she, also, was to be part of the *psychic shield*.

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Brianna Cantrell slowly meandered down the dimly lit ships' passageways, leaving her quarters with no set destination or even a direction in mind. She just wanted to enjoy the peace of the early morning, try to get her head together. She remembered the almost ritualistic observance T'Pran put on the Vulcan sunrise until Brianna Cantrell, too, had come to look upon it with reverence, awe, and a special peace. Surprisingly,

Earth had its own ambience at sunrise. Brianna Cantrell was up early every morning, well in time to witness it.

Of course, stuck in a starship deep in space made that observance impossible, she thought, as she came away from the view port. Missing it, Vulcan and T'Pran at this moment, Brianna Cantrell was glad it was so early, as she wiped yet another escaped tear from her cheek. Oh, boy, she was a mess today, she chastised herself. Long hours and too little sleep, was her guess. She was nearly twenty-two, well old enough to do without a nanny.

Really, it was the silence. Although she understood it, it was still hard to bear. There was so much she was never able to say to the elderly Vulcan woman. So much, yet, she wanted to share. And she really, *really* needed direction right now. Her father had blithely suggested she trust her instincts, yet failed to mention she was walking into a full-scale assault on her senses, which would leave her shaken and confused to the core. Psychically blind. Spock had enemies, it was becoming all too apparent. Realizing all at once that the malice she *felt* during their joint *wandering* was directed at him, and not at her, as she first thought. Would she always have to withstand this kind of aggression as his consort?

Suddenly, she was concerned for the safety of their future children.

Which was precisely why she needed T'Pran's input, her guidance, in this matter. Brianna Cantrell struggled with her feelings of rejection. Mail call for her was abundant. All of her correspondence to T'Pran had been returned to Brianna Cantrell, unopened and unanswered — at least by T'Pran. Instead, T'Lar had stepped in telling her, via a vid-letter to desist in her attempts to contact her former governess. T'Pran had retreated to the Temple to seek the *Kolinahr*.

Brianna Cantrell was left feeling a tad bitter, as if her own mother had run out on her, just when she needed her the most. No one else understood her the way her old nurse did. Drawing in a ragged sigh, she stopped before the doors to the ships' gymnasium, surprised to find herself there. Funny, it was almost as if — was *he* calling to her, asking her to join him there? Was that an apology for not answering her initial *touch* — were they back to playing *mind-tag*, was that it?

The Game.

Lieutenant Brianna Cantrell hesitated, vacillating over the wisdom of going in. The memory of their game made her smile, despite her mood, yet it sparked her misgivings, as well. After all, had she not played his game in the first place, she wouldn't be here facing this awful choice, the pain of her indecision. She supposed she could talk to Spock

about her dilemma, but considering he was part of her problem, it would serve little purpose.

Standing, alone, in the corridor served no useful purpose, either. On an impulse, she took a deep breath, and hitting the pressure pad, entered the deck. She even tried to convince herself that going to the gym had been her own idea. After all, between the boxes she had been shuffling about, and the emotional roller-coaster she was on, she was beginning to hurt in places she never even knew existed. A good workout was just what she needed. She was also bothered at how easily she got away with lying to herself.

The lighting in the corridors was still set to ships' evening, still, soon to melt into ships' dawn. Brianna Cantrell squinted with the very bright lights of the vast deck. Immediately blinded for the first few seconds, she became aware only that she was not alone, as she feared she would be — that rather than *him* actually calling her, she was just lost. She was also thinking that, perhaps, all of the pressure and stress of these past few days had caused her mind to simply collapse inward on itself, that T'Nikha had applied the *mind-touch* therapy too late, resulting in her slipping quietly into insanity. No witnesses.

Brianna Cantrell pinched the upper bridge of her nose between her eyes. The thing that wouldn't go

quietly were these headaches, which didn't help her either, driving her nuts. She must have consumed a whole pharmacy of painkillers to rid herself of the sudden recurrence of this affliction just since she arrived aboard ship. Was this the one from last night, or a new one?

Before her sight returned, she also realized the occupant in the corner just passed the pool wasn't human, at least not fully, anyway. Smiling to herself, she should have known. The way they ran into each other gave her cause to think there was some sort of homing device built into each of them, or something. Was he constantly *summoning* her through what was left of their *link*, is that how he did it? Always two steps ahead of her, he certainly made it hard for her to keep up. Brianna Cantrell discreetly removed the moisture from her face, heading over to him. She fought the butterflies in her stomach and the sudden increased throbbing of her head, that nearly turned her stomach.

Was it just nerves?

She knew they had to talk, grateful for this last chance for a face-to-face before the delegation arrived. Last night had been a disaster. And even though he had called her later on, for which she was grateful, grilling him over the *compti* didn't appeal to her, not about things best kept private, between themselves. She tried a few times late last

night to bring up the subject, but the right moment never seemed to arise. Was it that she worried the conversation could turn acrimonious? She hoped not. No, more likely it was that such topics required a more personal approach where they face each other in the flesh, rather than talk it out over some electronic device. Apparently, they both knew it on a gut level. He also desired to talk last night, as indicated down in the lab.

Obviously, it was the setting that was off.

Seems, they were both given a second, third or even fourth opportunity. There was no skirting the issue, it was now, or never time, she sighed, wanting to get this over with, make a clean break of it, if that's what it came to in the end. Maybe it really was time to move on. Again, curiously, her headache dissipated with that thought. *Odd.*

“Well, good morning, Mister Spock, you're up early,” she hailed, as she approached the mat where he sat on his knees. Dressed in a simple off-white Temple robe, his head bowed slightly over his steepled hands, he appeared to be meditating. Brianna Cantrell flinched, drew a half a step back. “Sorry, I didn't realize you were —”

Spock looked up, “As are you, Lieutenant Cantrell,” he nodded cordially, then slowly came to his feet. He took a seat on a nearby bench. “What brings you here at this hour?”

“It was the uncanniest thing, sir,” she blushed, suddenly aware she had needs, of wanting to snuggle into those arms, feel his strength wrapped around her again. She remembered how good it felt, how safe and secure she was that first night they met, laying on the cold metal grid flooring together, nestled into him ... and just how very well she slept that night, for the first time in ages, knowing he was right there with her. How could she even begin to think about giving that up?

Unconsciously, she reached a hand toward her now fully throbbing head. Just like that, her headache was back. *Very odd, indeed.* Brianna Cantrell shrugged, continuing her explanation, “And I know it sounds crazy, but I was just taking a stroll about the ship when I thought I *heard* you calling me. So here I am ... and here you are,” she gestured in his direction. Things had started out so well between them, she found herself wondering where and when it had taken a wrong turn, becoming so awkward. *I took the wrong turn by invading his thoughts.* She could kick herself. If she hadn’t pushed, where might they be now?

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“Indeed?” Spock suppressed a grin, delighted. So,

she had heard him. Was it the old *link* — or a new one most recently forged he wondered? Worried. “I am gratified you chose to join me this morning.” He patted the seat next to him. “Please take a seat. We have much to discuss, you and I.”

Brianna Cantrell let out a sigh. “I know, sir,” she admitted. She cupped the back of her black duty skirt, smoothing it underneath her as sat down next to Spock. He reached over and took her small hand in his, lacing their fingers together. She glanced down at their hands and then into his eyes, battling her emotions, it appeared, “I am so sorry. I did it again,” she shook her head, gently stroking the back of his hand. Spock could feel her tremble with the movement and placed his free hand over hers hoping to lend her some comfort. Judging by the moisture standing in her large eyes, she was near tears. She glanced away from him, avoiding his eyes. Spock frowned. *Don’t shut me out.*

“Already I feel so close to you,” she said, her voice barely audible. “I know it’s not what you wanted, but I don’t know how to stop,” Brianna Cantrell’s voice broke and she reached for her handkerchief, dabbing at her nose, unable to forestall the flood of her emotions. “I’ve tried avoiding sleep, but then the dreams invade my wakefulness. And the lack of sleep has left me grumpier than an old *sehlet* with a thorn in his paw, to anyone within earshot. Which

doesn't do anybody any good, least of all, me. Am I going to be written up for this?"

"Negative," Spock said, giving her hand a slight squeeze, hurting along with her. Physical contact was good, Spock decided, soothing his own slightly disgruntled mood, wanting to pull her all the way into him and just hold her close. Their joint dream had been particularly disturbing. Illogically, he needed the comfort, fearing that somehow he had lost her. He was still smarting over this morning's unexpected contact with his *Candidate* and her subsequent rejection of him, as it were. She had pulled away so quickly, but then again, after the talk he'd given the lieutenant, he had to assume she was just trying to comply with his wishes. "Not unless, of course, I write myself up, as well."

"Sir?" She gave him a quizzical look, a lone tear streaking down her delicate cheek.

"I, too, am at fault here, Lieutenant," he confessed. "I was *reaching* again. Trying to seek out that missing part of myself. Reconnect with my phantom, '*She-who-is-without-name*.' All I had were fragments of what went on before between us. No name, no face, just an essence of you, without even so much as a viable guide to piece it all together.

"Until this morning, that is. I laid in my bunk contemplating the images of our recent joint *wanderings*, realizing that all the clues I needed

were right before me. With that simple acknowledgement, the kaleidoscopic pieces of memories came swirling together in my head to form a cohesive whole. And I recognized why you seemed vaguely familiar. Why it was that I, too, could not leave you alone. It is I,” he added, softly. “And I have missed you.”

“I don’t understand —”

“Doctor McCoy diagnosed it as PTRA,”

“‘*Post-traumatic retrograde amnesia*’?”

“Affirmative. My memory lapses, which were brought on by my death and the trauma of the subsequent *Refusion*. To which Doctor T’Nikha concurs.”

“I’ve heard of PTRA but never knew anyone who experienced it. Wait — You underwent the *Fal Tor Pan*? That suggests more than a mere clinical death, which is what I assumed it had to be. *If*, in fact, you really died.” Lt. Brianna Cantrell looked vexed, for a moment, troubled, distracted even, if he had to guess. “Did you lose all of your memories, sir?”

“Negative, you don’t forget everything but the details come back painfully slowly and in pieces. It is and has been ... difficult. I didn’t even recognize Jim and the others, at first. And then you came dancing through my dreams. You were my own little *phantom*. Oddly familiar and yet I didn’t know

who you were. Why or how we were connected. Or if you were even a real person. I just knew I needed to hold onto you, this time. I tried my best to get you to stay.”

“So all this time you’ve been playing ‘connect the dots?’”

“Affirmative,” Spock nodded. “And, painfully, rather poorly, at that. I am also well aware of what you have been through, most recently, for which I am partly to blame. Please forgive me, for being so egregiously late to the party.” More disturbing to him was the notion that someone *else* was in her head at that same time, participating in their joint dream, trying to pry them apart. Spock *felt* the malice. Had she given up on Spock and sought another? Had she chosen a *Champion*? Certainly, it was her right. He had just hoped ...

Spock felt sick. Naively, he believed all they had to do was *touch* again, *linking* their minds together, and all would be as it had been between them, with the exception that now he could finally reveal himself to her. And he would, at long last, know who *she* was.

“Sir?”

Spock gazed over at her, frowning, when she didn’t appear to comprehend. “I regret that it took me so very long to place you. You are the *Anomaly*,

are you not? Or am I grossly mistaken here?”

Brianna Cantrell blanched, “How do you know this? *That’s* not in my file.”

For a moment Spock thought she might pass out on him. Logically, she had lived a life of anonymity in order to spare her ridicule, something he had not escaped growing up. Spock reached around her shoulders and drew her into him, trying to shore her up. “Same way that I also know you sat the *k’Matra* four point two-eight-one-six years ago and were subsequently *touched* by a *moderator* in the *Corridor*.”

“What?” If she had any color left in her face, it was gone now. “ — does everyone know my shame? How do you *know* this?”

“It is I,” Spock smiled ever so briefly, gratified for the verification she supplied. “It would seem, Madam, that you and I have met our *destiny*,” he said, extending the first two fingers of his right hand, offering them to her in what was considered a very intimate gesture between lovers. He waited patiently for her to return the gesture, worried when it was slow in coming. “And by way of getting here, I have stepped all over you, to my deepest regret. Please forgive me.”

Fearful he had lost her, at once he recognized the seriousness of their situation and just how little

time he had to reset things between them. He nodded solemnly, withdrawing his hand when she leaned away from him. Lacking a clear understanding of what was going on, he was confused by this turn of events. And hurt. Perhaps, her reticence was a natural, protective backlash to the severing of said *link*.

It couldn't have been any easier on her than it had been on him. Indeed, far worse, he should think. For a time he was dead, while she had to go on living — trying to regain a certain perspective in her life with his absence, not entirely unlike Lt. Cantrell, he thought, suddenly haunted by that knowledge. Some months later and she was still hurting. Still grieving, which again, was the direct result of his actions, his own words having come back to bite him.

He did tell her she wasn't his woman. Even when attempting to do the right thing, he stumbled. *I am a fool*.

"Really?" Brianna Cantrell shrugged. "So, besides letting me know my cover is blown, what are you saying to me? That Saturday I wasn't your woman and now today I am? Is it always going to be this way between us, sir? Hot one minute and just as cold the next?" She stood up abruptly, poised to make her escape. "How unfortunate for me then, I'm really not so sure I'm up to it."

Her actions brought up the memory of that other someone he *felt* during their most recent *wandering*. Spock could feel the anger rise in him, concerned that he wouldn't be able to control it. He would gladly fight for this woman, felt a need to do so, inexplicably threatened as he was. Spock shot back, "That much is evident, given you have already chosen your *Champion*."

Hands on her hips, "I most certainly have not. And why are you always accusing me of doing things I haven't done?" She gazed at him quizzically, shook her head. "I can't tell you how many I've turned away since we first *touched*. All the opportunities wasted. Why would I choose a *Champion* now?"

Spock tapped his temple, "Then just who was it I *felt* in your head this morning?"

Brianna Cantrell shook her head, momentarily at a loss. "I — no one. Just that winged creature. I've not *touched* anyone but you, sir. Perhaps, what you *felt* were your own barriers, the ones I keep crashing through. Giving me such headaches ..." she winced.

"Barriers? Madam, I —" He had not employed barriers, which was part of the problem. Had he taken such proper measures to begin with, there was no way she could have breached them. He was twice concerned. He saw the pain in her eyes, *sensed* her reticence. Was she merely afraid of more pain? If that's what it was, he could hardly blame

her, but it was more than mere fear he *sensed*. There was a certain mistrust, as if somehow a covenant had been broken between them. For that, he grieved.

There was so much damage he needed to control. How was it possible for one Vulcan to wreak so much havoc? Was there enough time, was it even possible to reverse this setback? His cause wasn't helped much knowing their *bonding* was being put off for a later moment. How was he to fix this under the current restrictions? *Most illogical*. He drew in a quiet breath, to help him regain control. "Perhaps, if we examine the facts before us, Lieutenant."

"Such as?"

Her voice suddenly bore a cold edge, almost devoid of emotion. Chilly. Spock shook his head, coming to his feet. He took her hands in his, intertwining their fingers, trying to soften the blow. The choice was no longer theirs alone. Others, higher than his pay grade, had gotten involved in their situation. "Woman, if we are to carry through with this thing — if we are to be espoused, we must examine the truth between us. You are not, after all, the only one in pain over this," he said, watching as her lower lip quivered. Concerned for her, he said, softly, gently, "I was that *moderator*."



Brianna Cantrell instantly dissolved into tears. She nodded her head, swallowed, trying desperately to maintain a semblance of control. She had wanted him to say the words, wanted him to acknowledge her, not realizing until the last, just how much it would hurt.

“Yes, I know. Don’t you think I *know*? That sensation of distance we’ve felt, the familiarity, even the dreams. All the signs were there. We just managed to ignore them. *I* ignored them. I didn’t want to face the truth. Especially, when you didn’t seem to know me.”

He nodded solemnly, drawing in another deep breath to ease his own rising emotions. At the very least she deserved his side of what had happened between them.

“The truth is, I didn’t set out intentionally to *touch* you, as some have implicated. But in my profound curiosity over the strength of your abilities, it happened nonetheless. And I have not regretted it, except for the pain I have caused you, as a result.”

“I, too, meant no harm in *touching* you. I’d never extended out quite so far before. I didn’t know who or what ... I was so frightened and you were so very kind. You just held me. Made me feel safe. And then

when you were gone — I just wanted to meet you. I didn't mean for all of this ... for them to put a contract out on you, for *Surak's* sake. I'm so sorry. I'm so very sorry." She released his hands to cover her face.

Spock nodded. He pulled her back into him, offering her solace, however meager the attempt. "Indeed. We should have been allowed to meet. Back in the *Time of the Beginning*, our unauthorized contact would have been considered *Kiftiri*."

"Our *destiny*," Brianna Cantrell murmured. "That we were meant to be *one*?"

"There may be something to it. Certainly, I could not adhere to the restrictions placed on me by the High Council after your father's vehement objections. And the contention of a few Sons from the lesser *Houses* that I had taken unfair advantage of my position."

Brianna Cantrell retrieved her handkerchief again, dabbing at her nose, finally gazing up at him again. "I never knew about the censure, until very recently. Obviously, just another one of those startling little details my father chose to keep from me. He just kept repeating I was only seventeen at the time. I know he was just trying to protect me — I'm so ashamed. I didn't mean to cause you so much trouble. And now this ... I *am* going to be nuisance to you!"

Spock pressed a fingertip to her lips, quietly shushed her. “*Brianna-Kam*, you could never be a nuisance to me. I have never once regarded you as such. Never. It is *I* who owe *you* an apology for intruding into your life. It would seem the pain of separation was simply too great.” He paused, feeling the sting of their detachment even more acutely now that he knew the truth of their situation. ‘*Wait, no wait! Don’t go ... !*’ “Despite the censure, I chose, to *walk* in your dreams.”

“And I in *yours*,” Brianna Cantrell quickly asserted, tears again welling in her eyes, reliving the pain of losing him. She squeezed her eyes shut, keeping her emotions from spilling down her cheeks. “ ‘*Thy joint deceit*,’ ” she said, quoting the words from her parchment, fully comprehending them at last. “I was waiting for the day we would meet. I always knew it would happen. But in my *schoolgirl* fantasies, things were different than they are now.”

“I am ss – sorry,” Spock murmured, so softly Brianna Cantrell barely heard him. She didn’t at all appear happy at the prospects of being his bride. Spock was suddenly grieved by the whole affair, his mind flitting to that other entity in her head and the distinct possibility she was gearing up to *Challenge* him. *Over my dead body ...* “Instead of a mere wrist-slapping for violating the *Test* regulations,” he continued, hands clasped firmly

behind his back, this time. “I was forbidden to meet with the *Candidate*, reveal my identity to her, learn hers, or to present myself to her in any way, as a possible suitor. Or otherwise. It was the ‘otherwise’ I had difficulty understanding.”

Brianna Cantrell threw him a glance, stung by his withdrawal just now. “Why? It’s so simple, really. When you think about it. If our *link* hadn’t been broken,” she reached over, placing a hand on his arm, “— if I hadn’t *felt* you die — I would have known you in a heartbeat. I *did* know it was you the moment we met.”

“And yet, you said nothing.”

“What was I to say? You so obviously didn’t know me. Excuse me, but you look remarkably fit for someone who’s supposed to be dead? Everyone around me kept telling me you dumped me. Even Sarkal said I was merely a novelty to you and when the novelty wore off, you let me go. He was also careful to point out that he would never do that to me. And he’s been so persistent over the years. I’m beginning to think he meant it, too.”

Turning her back on him for a moment, she folded her arms across her chest, as if seeking comfort. Just as quickly, she swung back around toward him. Looking up at him, anger flickered in her eyes, “Tell me, why did you linger in my consciousness for so long if you never *intended* — why did you leave me

like you did? If that question makes you uncomfortable, then I beg your forgiveness, but I just need to understand why you left, before I recommit to being your life-partner because as it stands now, it sure seems to me my father is justified in his anger. You *were* toying with me. And you still are —”

“Madam, I *died*,” Spock said, quietly. “My leaving wasn’t intentional.”

“A lie?” she gazed at him hard. “How? It’s not normal for dead people to return to life. Not even a Vulcan, such as yourself. I may be young and naive, but I’m not stupid. I have to go,” she said, abruptly. She broke away from him, ready to retreat. “I have to get off of this seesaw. I just can’t do it anymore, it’s ripping me to shreds!”

“*Brianna-Kam*, I would speak with you,” Spock said, using his command voice. She stopped and turned back to glance at him. Spock softened his voice, “before we take tea, later.”

She threw her arms out from her sides, “Oh, for crying out loud, sir! What more is there to be said? It’s obvious you don’t want me —”

“Not want you?” Spock was stunned, he never meant to leave her with that impression, his worse nightmare realized. “Is that what you think?”

“You’ve made it all too clear, sir. But, thanks to

that happy little signed parchment, I just don't have the right to refuse you at this time." She put up her hand, seeing he was about to argue the point. "Oh, I know, I could refuse the contract by not serving you tea and all. But then you might get the mistaken impression I was going to call for *Challenge*. I can't do that, either. I have no desire for someone to die on my behalf. That would be a disaster. And certainly, I don't wish for you to perish. I'm just so confused by it all. And I need time to think. Far be it from me to be your '*ball and chain*'. That's not what I want, either. I just know I can't force you against your will. What kind of a marriage would that be?"

Spock felt the pain in her words, stung by them. He closed his eyes nodding his acknowledgment. When he spoke, his voice was thick, gravelly. If he couldn't make her understand that he hadn't intentionally left her, then it truly was over between them. He would be left with something far less than a marriage and far worse than being *alone*. He had to make her understand what happened. The truth of it, without all of the spin put out by those who opposed this match.

He tried again. Taking her gently by the shoulders, he gazed into her eyes. "I was on a training mission that went very wrong. I knew I wasn't going to survive. I tried to send you a message, tried to give you my thoughts. I would have given you my *Katra*

had you been near enough. I didn't choose to leave you, Bree. Logic dictated my actions."

"*'Forgive me'*," she whispered, staring off into the distance. Remembering. "You said, *'Forgive me, I wasn't careful enough'* and then you were gone. *Ripped* from me. Suddenly, my life was over. They tell me I collapsed. That I fainted dead away in the middle of a marching drill. Right on the *Grinder* ... I followed you. All the way to the *Light* — And you *left* me!" she shouted, lunging at him, pounding his chest with her fists.

Spock caught her arms, protecting himself, holding her in front of him, noting how that persistent gulf between them seemed to widen with the contention between them. They had to stop fighting each other like this. He had to do something before things between them disintegrated any further, precluding any possibilities of their ever getting back to the way they were, to feeling whole again, before ultimately they were deprived of the capability to fully reconnect.

That possibility nearly held him paralyzed with fear.

He watched, helplessly, as she broke into sobs.

"Yes, I *died*" he corrected. "I didn't choose to leave you. I never wanted to leave you. If I hadn't acted as I did, forcing the warp-drive back online, all

would have been lost. Jim, McCoy, Uhura. The trainees. All, Brianna. And you would still be alone,” he said, allowing her time for his words to sink in. “I had to do what I did. It was logical. Would you really have had me do differently? I am here, now. As a result.”

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“*Qual se tu?*” she said, at last, still grappling with the information she had taken in. The rumors had run rampant throughout the Academy of how Spock had saved the *Enterprise* and her crew, of how he had died in the line of said duty. Something to do with a *Project Genesis*. She even had an inkling of what that was at the time: a device that, when introduced to a lifeless planet or moon, would promote a reordered matrix, resulting in new growth — *renewed* life.

Uhura recently stated they sent his body into the orbit of some planet connected with that same device. In the meantime, the then *Admiral* Kirk, stole the *Enterprise* and when he returned three months later, Captain Spock returned with him, the evening news stating they had reported Spock’s death in error ... *some* error.

Brianna Cantrell closed her eyes in defeat, shaking

her head. She should have remained true to her own instincts, her first impressions. She knew he had died — she followed him to the *Light*. The only thing that bothered her now, was that Spock still remained closed off from her. Was he just as upset by this arrangement, as was she? They should have been allowed to meet, to make up their own minds whether or not to be joined properly, allowed to cultivate a relationship, at least, if one was to be had.

“No,” she said, struggling for calm. “No, you couldn’t have done differently. Forgive me. I — I didn’t understand the circumstances. No one would tell me what had happened to you. They still refused to tell me who you were. I just knew you were dead. — Or, that you had left me, at least. Especially, when I *sensed* your living essence again.”

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“That is because the censure was still in place. *Brianna-Kam*,” he said, hesitating. He continued holding onto her arms as if she were a tiger needing only the opportunity to lash out at him. “I walked with the *All*,” he began, sharing with her what he had only recently divulged for the first time to Dr. McCoy. “Apparently while my body regenerated,

although I am not at liberty to explain how that came about. It is *classified* information,” he added carefully. “I’m afraid your security clearance isn’t high enough.” Spock grinned ever so slightly, wishing he could alter her mood the way he sometimes could. He just wasn’t so very skilled at jesting. Or, at least, she didn’t seem to be finding the humor in any of this. Or the irony.

She shook the stray wisps of hair out of her wet face. Or tried to. “Does it have something to do with a *Project Genesis*?”

“Sh, *T’hy’la*,” he said, the endearment escaping from his lips before he could recall it. “That remains a forbidden subject. I don’t want to have to arrest you.”

“Arrest me? Oh, go away!”

Spock shrugged ever so slightly, giving her a sympathetic raising of both eyebrows, as he tilted his head to the side. “I am quite serious. I can tell you, however, that my friends contributed largely to my recovery. They defied Starfleet by bringing me home, body and soul. They helped with my *Refusion*. However, as you may have noticed, I am still recovering. And I have been struggling every night to get back to you. As were you. That was no phantom, Bree. It was I.”

Brianna Cantrell nodded her head, resolutely. “I’ll

have to remember to thank them. Your friends, that is. Do you think you could let go of me, now? You're putting my hands to sleep," she complained, composed now.

Spock eyed her, watchfully. "You do appear substantially calmer. You're not going to come at me again, are you?" he asked, as he released her.

Brianna Cantrell shook her head, placing a gentle hand briefly on his chest. "Forgive me, I just sort of lost it," she began, her eyes downcast. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"I deserved it. With what I've put you through I wouldn't blame you if you dumped the tea in my lap and walked away," he said. "It is of such matters that I wish to speak to you."

"Again, I must apologize. I still feel like you're being pushed into this, and I don't — I'm still so undecided about this whole tea-serving thing."

Spock gazed at her, stunned, his right eyebrow elevated but she kept her head down in submission, her eyes lowered and away from his scrutiny. She was still tightly *shielded*, her thoughts completely inaccessible to him at this point. In his growing dismay, he feared the highly probable rejection she could be gearing up for. Again, he felt sick. "Please explain," he said, in a clipped voice.

"You told the captain you were as good as

vaporized. I believe emotionally compromised is how you put it. And you said I wasn't your woman. Over and over. It doesn't take a genius, or someone with mind-powers, to figure it out. Just simple logic."

Spock shook his head, "*Brianna-kam.*"

"You once said you hoped we'd remain friends, no matter what should pass between us. Another lie?"

"Negative."

"Did you know then?"

"I knew only that a marriage was being arranged. That I was to be betrothed soon. And that I didn't want to lose you because of it. I had to tell you, you weren't mine to remind myself I wasn't free. I very nearly cheated on you. With *you*," he said, quietly. Allowing her time to absorb the impact of what he just said before he went on. "As for how we got here, again, it is my fault. I died without heir. Seven point eight-two months later my only sibling did the same.

"My father sought the Council to have the censure removed. Since I hadn't made a move to change my *unbonded* status in the four point eight-one-six-one years since we *touched*, it was logical for him to deduce I was waiting for you. Illogically hoping against the impossible. The *Matriarch*, however, in her unmitigated fashion, took things several steps

further. It puts me in a most untenable position, but I must tell you, the marriage was arranged not only to preserve Family Honor, but to save my property and my political positioning, as well. You, of course, have the right to *Challenge* me.”

Brianna Cantrell shook her head, shrugged her shoulders, “Like I said, I cannot. A fight to the death is murder,” she said. “Who am I to condemn someone to death?” Spock dropped his gaze, nodding, fully agreeing with her position. “Besides, I don’t exactly have someone waiting in the wings,” she added, glumly. “Oh, this is a real nightmare, isn’t it? Seems, we’re both hopelessly stuck, as you put it the other evening.”

“Poor choice of words on my part,” Spock quickly amended. “I would like to think there are always possibilities,” he said. “A truce, at least.” Spock reached down and took her hand again. “You tell me what *you* want. Drop the tea in my lap and I will stay out in space away from you. I will only trouble you in the *Season*,” he said, meaning *Pon farr*, the time of mating. Spock watched her as she huddled into herself, gripping his hand suddenly. Again, she struggled to contain her emotions.

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This really was a nightmare, Brianna Cantrell decided. No matter which way she turned there was no escaping the facts. He simply didn't want her. He couldn't make it any clearer. Well, then, since this was a time for total disclosure between them, she had better make her feelings known to him, before she went completely numb and could no longer feel a thing.

"I doubt I'd like that," she said, gripping his hand. "I'm not yet twenty-two — I could have eighty, ninety good years ahead of me. I'm awfully young to be condemned to a lifetime of loneliness," she said, swallowing her tears again. "Besides, I — ah — I rather enjoy your company."

"With luck there will be children."

"I want a *husband*. Or a friend, at the very least. And — " Spock held up his hand in a gesture for silence. Dutifully, Brianna Cantrell bit off the end of her sentence. Like it or not, he was the male and he was to be obeyed. He was Vulcan and as T'Pran was always quick to point out, it was 'their way.'

"You do not have to tell me now," he deftly interrupted. "Take your time. Go to your quarters and think about it. I'll meet you in the Forward Observation Deck when the delegation calls us. I need you to really consider what it is you want from me. Without the pressure of my being there."

Brianna Cantrell sighed. She just didn't know how much more of this she could take. She hated being treated like property, as if her feelings didn't matter. Damn it, it was her life up for grabs here. Was he expecting her to make all of the sacrifices? Just what was he going to give up? Was there to be no compromise? Or was his offer to stay out in space his idea of a concession? This was just so unacceptable and so unlike him ... he was usually so open with her. Why wouldn't he let them talk about it?

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“*And,*” she said again, glaring up at him. “I’d like to see this property I’ve purchased for you.”

“Forget the real estate, Bree. It is unimportant. I will sell it, if it pleases you.” *Only don’t look at me like that again ...*

“Don’t make vain promises to *me*. Don’t say what you will not *do*. I won’t *tolerate* that from you,” she snapped. Immediately, she caught herself, lowering her gaze again. And her voice. “Please. At least treat me with the respect of a friend.”

Spock nodded, head bowed. “It’s *Keldeen*, Bree,” he murmured.

“What?” she said, abruptly gazing up at him again. She shuddered as if chilled. Spock reached over, squeezed her hand. “No. They can’t take that from you. You own Keldeen?”

“No. You do,” he said. “I’ll have the papers drawn up by this afternoon. I’m putting it in your name. And anything else you want in this universe. If I own it or if I can get it, it’s yours. It is the least I can do after what I’ve put you through.”

“You still don’t get it, do you. It’s all a moot point if I can’t have you. But I suppose that’s too much to ask. Silly me. I had to go and fall in love with you. Against all the warnings. Everyone said it would be this way. But what’s worse, I thought you loved me, too — in your own way, at least. I mean, I really had myself convinced of it. Forgive me. I am *such* a babe in the woods.”

“I do not know how to love you,” he said, resolutely. Backing off, he snapped his mental *shielding* in place, shoring himself up against the continual onslaught of her grief. She admitted she couldn’t call for a *Challenge*. She was quite correct when she cited her lack of options earlier. It would be less than a marriage and worse than being *alone* if she felt trapped, forced against her will. He simply couldn’t bear it, if she came to resent him in time. “Or, at least I am uncertain I can give you what you need,” he clarified.

At once, Brianna Cantrell was up on her toes, placing her free hand on his face, again searching his eyes. Spock caught the glimmer of hope in her own, as she gazed up at him, warmed by it. “You’re doing just fine, so far,” she said. “You know, we’re both being rather silly about all of this. Completely illogical, acting as if an arranged marriage is something unique to us. It happens all of the time.”

“That much is certain. I have already been a victim of it once. Arriving at the altar just to have the whole thing erupt in my face. Perhaps, that is why my feet are cold.”

“Then let me help warm them,” she smiled, briefly. “You know we’ve really got such a good basis on which to build. We’re already *friends*. And I’m told, at least, that friends hug each other. They kiss each other,” she said, lightly brushing his lips with hers, withdrawing when he gave her no response. She ran her hand down his neck, over his shoulder and across his chest. “And sometimes they even engage in other activities that produce children.”

Spock tightened his grip on her fingers, still curled inside of his. He was most definitely on *the Edge*, glad that he was older and would be more tempered in his lovemaking, and less apt to hurt her as a result, despite the profound drive of *Pon farr*.

“You’ve been very quiet,” she continued. “You haven’t told me what *you* want. Besides a Vulcan

woman. Don't ask. I can't do that. I can't turn into one. I tried as a child to please T'Pran. But God doesn't answer those kinds of prayers."

Again, Spock shook his head, displaying the tiniest amount of annoyance. He really didn't want to put any more pressure on her at this moment, concerned because she already looked so pale and drawn. She had taken so many hits today, one right after the other. Why couldn't he keep from hurting her? "Unimportant at this juncture," he said, unable to keep the terseness out of his voice.

"Please," she was crying again, chewing on her lower lip, struggling to contain her emotions.

Spock closed his eyes briefly, squeezing her hand.

"It's not unimportant to me," she whispered. "Just tell me what it is *you* want. *Truthfully.*"

"I want a cup of tea served by you," he said, quietly at last, head bowed. "I want you to come to me. *Freely.*" Brianna Cantrell nodded her head, slowly stepping into him. She came easily to her the tips of her toes again, like an accomplished ballerina, reaching up to lightly kiss his cheek. The warmth of her lips sent a shiver through him. His whole body clenched.

"Who art thee? Where art thee?" she said, looking up at him, studying the angles of his face with her hands. Spock *felt* her gentle probing as she gazed

deeply into his eyes. He nodded, complying with her by lowering his *shield* just enough to allow her to *feel* the colors of his aura. To verify it was, indeed, *him*.

He welcomed her *touch*.

He wished he could lower his *shield* completely and bare his very soul to her, be *one* with her again right here and now. Quite simply, he could no longer stand the void. To do so, however, would risk losing her altogether. That he couldn't bear. After all, they hadn't hesitated before to take her away from him. He took T'Pau's stern warning to heart. The time to reveal his soul to Brianna was at the actual betrothal, not before. Instead, Spock cupped her tiny face in his hands, gently gathered the moisture from her cheeks, trying in some small way to bridge the gulf between them, so sharply felt.

"Hold me? I need to be held," she said, slipping her arms about his neck, burying her head into his shoulder.

"I'm here," he replied, leaning down into her again, wrapping his arms around her this time, pulling her in close. It had been so long since he held a woman, realizing he had waited far too long to hold this woman. He held her tightly noting he may have more here to lose than mere dignity. He ran a hand up and down her back trying to lend them both comfort. He so needed her touch, to ease his own

fears and his pain. From the state of things, he guessed, so did she.

He simply knew of no other way to guard them against the terrible, unseeable gulf that separated them, trying to ease what would be a rather sudden, brutal reminder of their severed status, the moment he dutifully closed his thoughts off from her again. Somehow, even holding her this close was proving insufficient. She was still so far away, her presence removed from him, giving him additional cause for anxiety.

'Parted from me' ... Spock drew her in tighter for a moment, masking his concerns. Perhaps, his emotions were simply getting the better of him ... *Who else had been in her head, with the intent of stealing away her affections?* It had happened before, that's how he ultimately lost T'Pring.

Brianna Cantrell nestled into him, "Wait, no *wait*. Don't go," she whispered into his ear, just as he snapped his mental *shielding* into place. He pulled away slightly, raising an eyebrow at her.

"We are constrained to play this by the book. First things, first," he gently admonished, smiling at her ever so briefly.

Brianna Cantrell wiped more tears from her face, as she, too, pulled away. "Guess we're guilty of more unauthorized *touching*," she said.

“Indeed, we are proving to be our own weakest links. I also know the wait has been intolerable. However, it is now only a matter of nine hours, I believe, until we reach the rendezvous point. Once the Delegation is aboard, I suspect the formalities will proceed without delay. At least, that is my hope. Starting with the customary introduction and followed by the obligatory Tea Ceremonial.”

“And the *bonding* will take place ... when, exactly?” Spock detected an air of anxiety in her question, as he searched her bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes. Apparently, he had gotten through to her, settling the confusion for her, he hoped. Why else would she ask?

He drew in a breath, disquieted that he had to disappoint her, yet again. Weary of being this messenger of bad tidings, it was as if someone had purposefully put stumbling blocks in his path, that there was a conscious effort on behalf of another to thwart his courtship of her. He offered her the first two fingers of his right hand again. His eyes were imploring as they bore into hers, awaiting her response. “You have waited a long time. I understand. I am gratified that you are still here, patiently awaiting my return.”

He held her gaze steadily in invitation, until she finally returned the gesture, lightly touching the inner surface of his fingers with the palm-side of

hers. He felt her tremble with the action. Spock ran the first two fingers of his right hand down her cheek and lightly across her lips, hoping to deflect her question by distracting her. Brianna Cantrell would not be put off.

“How *long*?” she pressed. “And why are they still punishing us?” She turned her gaze away from him, doing her best to conceal her own emotions. Lips trembling, along with her hands, Spock wondered how she could see through the standing tears in her eyes.

He reached over and cupped her face in his large hand, capturing the droplet that spilled down her cheek, with his thumb. “Staunchly, stubbornly waiting. Your fealty is commendable. I need such a woman and I am grateful you never gave up on me.”

“I tried.” Brianna Cantrell grabbed her hanky out of her pocket to wipe away the moisture from her face. “Believe me, walking away was uppermost on my mind. I just couldn’t in the end. Out of weakness. Out of fear. I don’t know which. And then after I met you ... it hurts so much to be near you. The need to *touch* ...” she placed a hand over his and pressed her face further into his palm. “You’re still so far away.”

Spock nodded, “Understood. It is greatly discomfiting.” Spock took his hand from her face and wrapped his arms around her, drawing her into

him again. In turn, she wrapped her arms firmly about his waist.

“Where do we go from here?” she looked up at him. “Is it even possible to be that close again?”

“I do believe in possibilities. It is also my hope that you will forgive my egregious missteps and allow us to start over. The other night you mentioned decisions that had to be made.”

“I see,” she said, dropping her arms down to her sides as she stepped away from him. “Back to that again, are we? Are you asking me to drop the tea in your lap and walk away?” she said. “Because now I really don’t know what you want. We have to agree on this, or it just won’t work.”

“Madam, how do you *do* that? You are not supposed to be in my head. We are under a strict mandate to refrain from such a practice until *Kiftiri* is clearly demonstrated. Before the High Council, in fact. As for when the *bonding* ceremony is to take place, I have to ask you to be a bit more patient. We really are in a mess over this, you and I. T’Pau made it quite clear we are not to *mindmeld* until we return to Vulcan.”

Brianna Cantrell folded her arms over her chest. “Don’t you mean, *if* we return? Because I have to tell you, I’m beginning to view this —”

“Madam ... most curious,” he squinted at her. “Are

you having a prescient moment?”

“I’m just scared.” Again, she shrugged. “This is my first mission and I don’t quite know what to expect.”

“Beyond insurmountable odds?”

Brianna Cantrell hung her head, nodded. “Hm, I have this sense things will get a whole lot worse before they begin to get better. Like, somehow, none of this is real. That this whole betrothal scenario is nothing more than a face-saving ruse, perpetrated by the noble *House of Talek Sen Dene*. Because among other things that little voice in my head — that winged creature, keeps telling me you’re deceiving me.”

Spock shook his head in denial. “I know of no deception. However, as for things getting worse, for us, they already have. Others have gotten into the mix. I’ve just recently learned there is a *Writ of Stay* filed against our marriage contract.”

“What? By whom?” Again the color left her face. She took in a deep breath, hugging herself. Spock expected her to drop to the floor any minute, unconscious, amazed when she kept her feet. *Tenacious little thing*. “Please tell me my father isn’t behind this.”

“Only if he’s a member of the special delegation. I do suspect the filing of said *Stay* was behind their

delay in departure. As for the mission, I will remind you, we have James T. Kirk in our corner. Among other attributes, he has uncanny luck. And ... I am here. I will not leave you *alone* again.”

“Captain, if I may speak intimately, sir.”

“Contrary to popular belief, *Mister* Cantrell, my first name is not Captain. Please speak your mind.”

“I’m in love with you, sir,” she said, wrapping her arms around his waist again. “I stayed because I love you.”

Spock pulled her in tight, relieved. “And you are my heart, *Brianna-Kam*. It is why I lingered in your consciousness for so long,” he said with a small grin. Cupping her face in his hands, again, he ran a thumb across her lips and leaning over, pressed his mouth gently against hers. This time to his satisfaction, he detected no hesitation on her part when she kissed him back. He smiled tenderly at her, “I confess, I am finding it remarkably pleasant to tell you so.

5

Cantrell's Quarters

Stardate: 8511.18

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

“Feeling better?” Spock asked, once they were inside of Brianna Cantrell’s quarters. Making it a quick stop on their way to the officer’s wardroom, Spock meandered about while Brianna Cantrell stepped inside the lavatory, presumably to splash cold water on her face. “You have a message,” he said, noting the blinking light on her compti console. He was greatly impressed with the transformation of her room, how organized it was, especially the objects she had

chosen to keep, giving the room a certain warmth and yet keeping a clean, uncluttered look about it at the same time.

“Much,” she answered, “since we finally got our talk out of the way. It was a tad more brutal than expected — No wonder I was dreading it so much,” she grinned, impishly. “How about you?”

“I am... okay, as my human friends would put it.”

“Oh, *no*,” she said, sounding disheartened.

Spock glanced toward the open lavatory door. “What is it?”

She was gazing into the mirror. “I look like some kind of *alien* frog. My eyes are all red and swollen. And my face... my face is *puffy* — I’ve turned into a *Rindagvarian*, just lacking a few appendages! Are you sure you wish to dine with me looking like *this* — *I’d* be afraid to dine with me,” she said, more to her image in the mirror, scrunching up her features. Brianna Cantrell continued with the cold water therapy, at last submerging her face into the sink full of water, when a mere splashing seemed to fail. Was she attempting to drown herself? When she looked up at him again, the tips of her bangs were wet. Spock grinned, and very nearly laughed out loud with her antics. At times her humanness was outright amusing, in an endearing sort of way. And he realized he was indeed okay with it, all of it. He

looked forward to spending her life with her. He was briefly disturbed, felt an uncomfortable pang, at the prospects he would most likely outlive her.

"If I were human, I would simply tell you, you are beautiful ... *fascinating*, and so are these," Spock said, momentarily distracted, reaching for one of two crystalline jars set on the built-in night stand. Holding the lid firmly in place, he tipped the jar onto his palm to study the family emblem etched into the side. "House of ... *Kooli Ton Lok*?" Putting the jar upright again, he carefully removed the lid to inspect its contents. "Hm, high-grade Vulcan tea." He did the same with the second jar. Something looked and smelled off about the yellow *Chi'tri'dya* powder. Spock frowned. "*Brianna-Kam*, where did you get these?"

"Huh? These, what?" she asked, peeking her head out from the lavatory door, still blotting her face dry with the hand towel. "Oh, those. Yes, they are lovely, thank you for sending them."

"I did not send them."

"No? Well, then, who did? They came with a note," she handed him the note card, the message on it scrawled in an uneven hand.

"Did you not inspect the inscription on the sides of the jars?" He took the note from her. "There is a family emblem along with the name of the House

etched into each vessel,” he said. Spock glanced at the note card, flipped it over and frowned as he read the message aloud, “*‘For our long-awaited Tea-Ceremonial, it is only fitting we have the very best.’* And you thought this was from me?”

“Well, of course — *didn’t* you? Handwriting looked a tad familiar,” she said, gazing around him to have another look at the note. “Or at least something *felt* familiar, anyway. It made perfect sense to me, given our history and the contract. And here I thought it was such a sweet gesture, too. Now, I’m not so sure. It does give off weird vibes. I don’t understand. If not you, who then?”

Spock held out a jar to her, pointing at the etching. “House *Kooli Ton Lok*, that’s who.”

Again, the color drained from her face. “What? What does he mean by that? You and I have a *signed* contract. I thought our nuptials were practically written in stone. No wriggle room, as it were.”

“A *stayed* contract,” he reminded. “Perhaps, the waiting message will help shed more light,” Spock pointed at the small blinking beacon on her monitor.

Brianna Cantrell frowned, “Oh now, who —” she depressed the playback button. “Busy morning, I must say.” A familiar face filled the small screen on

her desk.

“T’Bree,” said the young attractive Vulcan female. Spock noticed the slight show of emotion in the caller’s features, saw the standing tears in her emerald green eyes, her obvious show of distress. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know. Please forgive me. I would have stopped him if I could. I just didn’t know —” the message broke off.

Brianna Cantrell shuddered, violently. “Something’s very wrong here,” she said, gazing up at Spock, her own concern apparent. “That was T’Reesa.”

“Of the House, *Kooli Ton Lok*,” Spock interjected.

“Well, yes, she’s my friend. Are our *Houses* feuding to the extent I must cut off any and all ties with them? She’s my agemate. We grew up together. She’s like the sister I never had. Besides, she’s bonded to a different *House*, part of a new family, now. I would presume she has a new allegiance, as well.”

“You do know what is said about assumptions and the people who make them, do you not?”

Brianna Cantrell sighed, rolling her large eyes at him. “Are you implying T’Reesa and I are both ... *donkeys*, to put it nicely?”

“Negative, I merely inquired if you were familiar

with the saying. Obviously, you are.”

“*At any rate*, the last time we spoke was the morning of my *k’Matra*. She came to my room at the Temple, chatting mindlessly about her brother’s undying affection for me. I should have known what she was about. I was angry at her, then, but now I think she was trying to warn me, in her own way. Stuck between her loyalties, and a very hard place. Our friendship and her overbearing brother. It’s possible she was trying to warn me of his obsession with me, only I wasn’t listening. What do I do now — what do you suppose she means?”

“It is all right. I am right here,” Spock said, draping an arm about her, giving her a squeeze. “I trust you haven’t used either of these,” he said taking up both jars, keeping the note, too.

“No, I figured the *Chi’tri’dya* was for the joint sessions with the delegation and the tea — well, its purpose was explained in the note. So, of course I was waiting.”

“Good. As for what we do now, we are going to have to analyze these. If you will accompany me to the lab.”

Brianna Cantrell touched his arm, “Spock, you don’t think — oh, but you do. *Malice*. I *felt* it, too. In the dreams and when I touched the jar of tea... All of this time I’ve been looking at this from the

completely wrong angle — *you're* the target!”

“If it is the *tea*, as you said, then I would have to suggest someone is planning on taking us *both* out of the picture. Perhaps, the same someone who filed the *Writ of Stay*.”

Brianna Cantrell shuddered, involuntarily, again. Spock gave her another squeeze.

“Well, that certainly rules out my father,” she murmured.

6

Spock's Quarters

Stardate: 8511.18

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

Spock sat before his compti screen, patiently waiting while the call to this father on the *T'Mir*, set on scramble mode, was patched through. He fought to keep his anger in check. Sarkal, of *House Kooli Ton Lok*, had been a thorn in his side for too many decades. The youth was clearly out-of-control, spoiled, as the humans Spock served with might better put it. If Sarkal wanted something, he wanted it, and would allow no quarter for those who opposed him.

However, Brianna Cantrell was not Sarkal's chattel, nor would Spock allow her to become so. *Over my dead body*, was no idle statement made on his part. Spock certainly would have to be dead before that happened. Just what to do about it left the Vulcan prince without answers, this situation beyond his pay grade and his purview. They needed absolute proof Sarkal was in her head, which was heinous enough, let alone that Sarkal's intentions were those of interference with the reestablishment of a previous *bondlink*, to say nothing of his planned disruption of a duly negotiated marriage contract.

The *bride-price* had been fixed. Spock had already transferred the credits to Joseph Cantrell's account, all done *before* Spock had received word of the *Writ of Stay*.

If Spock had his way, he'd *bond* with his bride and root Sarkal out. Unfortunately for the couple, Spock's hands had been effectively bound in that regard. Again, he railed at the obstacles deliberately placed in his path. Was Brianna Cantrell correct when she sensed a possible ruse on the part of *House Talek Sen Dene*? Were they trifling with their own *First Son* in this? Spock doubted it, stifled his own growing frustration.

The screen winked on. To Spock's chagrin, Sarek looked a tad wearier than when he'd last seen his

father. Getting on in Vulcan years, as the elderly statesman was, Spock had the passing and disturbing notion Sarek might not walk among them for much longer. His dark brown hair was now nearly as white as his eyebrows had become. Deep lines, carved into his once handsome, angular face, gave him a more hawkish look. Sarek appeared pale, exhausted. Even his voice sounded tired, yet still carried with it an almost tender tone when he spoke. “My son.”

“I am gratified you took my call, Father.”

“What is of such an urgency that it cannot wait until we arrive, a mere five hours from now?”

“We have what could be classified as a serious problem. Sarkal has sent my wife two crystalline jars full of contaminated substances. I ran the tests myself, but there is plenty of material left over should the delegation desire to run their own tests for additional verification.”

“What contaminates are we discussing?”

“The *Chi’tri’dya* powder was improperly processed, which as you well know, is fatal. According to the note attached, the high-grade Tea he sent was meant for use at *their* Ceremonial. Tests indicate the tea has also been laced with improperly processed *Chi’tri’dya*. Clearly, he is the one who filed the *Writ of Stay*, and he expects to win, gaining

my bride as his. He must also have surmised he would be *Challenged* and I can only estimate he sought a cowardly end to his life before his misdeeds were discovered. Taking my wife along with him. Or me, too, since the male takes the tea first, which would ultimately leave my bride free for him to pursue in the end, should she not, also, imbibe the tea herself. He did tell my wife she would be his. That one day he would own her. Looks like he's endeavored long and hard to achieve his goal. Either way, he set things up so that he might very well prevail in the end."

"I trust the Lieutenant is unharmed?"

"Fortunately, we discovered the contaminants before use of either substance was required."

Sarek closed his eyes, deep in contemplation. When he opened them again, Spock saw remorse in them. "Father?"

"Sometimes, my role as diplomat is a grievous one, as it falls to me to inform Lord Sobel his only son is a miscreant. I remember when your brother, Sybok, stepped away from Society in pursuit of heresy. Banished from his home planet forever, his name banned from our lips, as a result. This is a time that tries a Vulcan's soul. Someday, by the Grace of the *All*, you'll have your own children, Spock. I pray your paternity will not be thusly tested, such as I have endured. I shall inform T'Pau and T'Lar of this

latest intrigue. And you are quite correct. Sarkal has been about creating havoc this entire trip. Fighting to gain passage as a member of this delegation and then holding up our departure for twenty-four point seven-five hours. May this information be enough to stop him.” Sarek started to rise from his seat.

“There is more,” Spock said.

Sarek reseated himself, nodded for Spock to go on. “Please continue.”

“I had hoped we were wrong on this, but we also have reason to believe he is affiliated with the pirate attacks. He owns a small star skiff that matches the registry numbers from one of the crafts seen in the video T’Lar sent over. And I would add, that the Lieutenant and I have been guilty of additional nocturnal *wanderings*, in which I felt the presence of another. I fear Sarkal is that other, although my bride never gave permission for him to enter her thoughts, nor is she aware of when and how this was achieved.”

“I see,” Sarek said.

“I suspect Sarkal may also be the one wielding the *psionic resonator*, in a vain attempt to control my wife.”

“What evidence do you have of this?”

“She suffers greatly from recurrent headaches, most recently and most particularly, after a *wandering*. She mentioned *barriers* she had crashed through, believing I had set them up to dissuade her entry. She also informs me of a voice in her head, directing her path, poorly disguised as a flapping of wings. If she obeys, the headache stops. If not, her head throbs. I fear he will kill her, since she is, by nature, most persistent. Willful, in fact.”

“Yes, Sarkal has raised quite a commotion over this entire *Incident*, making a mockery of Vulcan culture, while yet citing various points of Vulcan Law to achieve his end. Craftily twisting meanings to further his cause.”

“As if the end results can ever justify the means,” Spock added. “I have seen the news videos of the riots in the streets of *Shi’kahr*. Is Sarkal and his *minions*, for lack of another word, behind the disruptions, as well?”

“Indeed. I fear in his advanced years, Sobel was far too lenient, indulgent, with the boy, quite inconveniently leaving the rest of us to pick up after his mess. No matter. What is done, is done,” Sarek let out a tired sigh. “At any rate, it is a matter of record that Sarkal visited the Lieutenant while she was in Sickbay. T’Nikha was keeping her under sedation, for the most part, during her most recent stay, trying to abate the headaches you cite.

T’Nikha was of a mind they were due to the tests Starfleet put her through. It was under her express recommendations Starfleet stopped all such testing. Your suspicions, however, cast an entirely different light on those visits. Perhaps, they were not so benign in nature, as one might think. If Sarkal called upon her while the lieutenant was sedated ... she would have been completely vulnerable – *and* ignorant of his doings. Eager to reconnect, she may have very well been fooled into thinking it were you – until it was too late.”

Spock frowned. “We also have a record of a vid-message his sister left Brianna, warning her.”

“I will need any and all material –”

Spock reached for the small plastic rectangular diskette, fidgeting with it. He held it up in view of the camera. “Already pulled,” he said, adding, “If this is true, if he has indeed entered her thoughts without permission, then he is guilty of *kae’at-Klasa*. Of mind-rape.”

“This is most disturbing news, if true. Vulcan law is clear,” said Sarek. “If he did so while she was sedated, since her *personal mental shields* could easily be breached under the circumstances, Sarkal would be doubly guilty, as she had no defense and would be unable to grant permission, even if it were duly sought,” Sarek shook his head. “He will be tried and if found guilty, would no doubt be forced

to enter a Mental Sanitarium for treatment.”

“And if said treatment fails?”

“He will likely be ... banished from our planet. Just as your brother was. Lord Sobel is old and his health is poor. I doubt he will be able to withstand such a scandal. Most grievous, indeed.”

“In the meantime, what would you have us do? Is this enough for an effective counter claim? And if he *is* in her head, how do I protect my wife from further assault?”

“We will certainly have to ascertain that reality, if it exists. In the meantime, I recommend that she do as he directs.”

“Even if it destroys what remains of our link? I fear that is his ultimate goal. Delay and destroy,” Spock shook his head. “Father, I will not give up this woman. I ... *cannot*.”

“Understood, my son. Clearly, this bears more scrutiny. We may well need to catch him in the act, set up a *sting* operation, as the humans call it. I will do some consulting and get back to you with all due alacrity on a course of action under these specific circumstances. Sarek out.”

“Thank you, Father. Spock out.”

7

Kirk's Quarters

Stardate: 8511.18

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

“**Y**ou wanted to see me, Spock?” Kirk said. He was seated at the built-in desk in the section of his quarters used primarily as his office. He gave a quick glance up from the ‘paperwork’ strewn across the small built-in desk, the myriad of colorful diskettes scattered about, as Spock stepped just inside the doorjamb to his captain’s quarters. The time registered on the chronometer was barely zero-seven-twenty-three when Spock hailed his captain, requesting a brief

meeting before their duty shift began. After telling the first officer to come on up, Kirk smiled to himself at just how quickly the Vulcan arrived. Suddenly, his friend was behaving a little like a kid at Christmas, which Kirk took as a good sign. Given the events that were likely to unfold shortly after the *Enterprise* took on the Vulcan delegation, Kirk had a good idea of what this meeting was about, too, smiling to himself.

There were no regulations regarding romance, although protocol still dictated advising and essentially gaining permission from one's commanding officer in order to take on a spouse. Spock was Starfleet property, after all, and not entirely his own person. It was an old military law, viewed mostly as custom now and rarely was anyone's request to wed ever turned down. Certainly it wasn't on Kirk's agenda to deny his friend, particularly knowing T'Pol would have a great deal to say in the matter. Her law was the one that took precedence here, he was afraid. He just hoped Spock was all right with it.

"I thought, perhaps, you'd like to meet my intended," Spock said, taking Kirk a little by surprise.

"The shuttlecraft hasn't even docked with us yet, they're still five and a half hours out. How—"

Spock had that inexplicable and quite subtle twinkle in his eyes while he extended the first two fingers of his right hand out to his side, beckoning to the shrouded figure still in the passageway. Obediently, she reached upward as she approached returning his gesture. Lightly touching her fingers to his, in this manner Spock presented her, guiding her inward in one easy movement until she stood front and center before the desk. Kirk slowly rose to his feet, astonished. Swathed from head to foot in the mantle of her temple garb, the veil successfully obscured her uniform, and he couldn't make her out, unable to tell it was Lt. Cantrell, at first, although there was a haunting familiarity about her eyes...

“Spock, you brought her aboard? What did you do, have her beamed over ahead of the others? They're barely in range, what were you thinking?”

Brianna Cantrell's eyes twinkled with delight as she looked upward to Spock. He gave her a quick nod of his head and she was suddenly releasing the veil that obscured her features, turning to incline her head in Kirk's direction. Jim's mouth fell open. Spock came up behind her, placing his hands on the lieutenant's shoulders. “Meet my little *Candidate*, the only human to ever sit the *k'Matra*.”

“Well, I'll be — McCoy was right all along! She is your woman.”

"You mean. You didn't know?" Spock said. "Saturday you seemed so sure of yourself."

"It was just a hunch, is all. But I'm glad I was right. How about the two of you? Are you going to be all right? You hardly know each other. What happened to the idea you wouldn't be strangers?"

"We were never strangers," Spock said, gazing directly into Brianna Cantrell's eyes as she leaned back against him. Kirk drew back nonplused. He looked from one to the other. Spock was so tall and Cantrell so tiny, *'the long and the short of it'* came readily to his mind. There had to be a good thirty-three-centimeter difference in height between them. Brianna Cantrell's eyes were sparkling as she gazed up at Spock, obviously enjoying this whole thing.

"No, just incredibly stubborn," she said.

"Indeed," Spock said. "I fear our children shall suffer a double-dose of it. It shall make parenting all the more challenging. Wouldn't you agree?"

"You think?" Brianna Cantrell said. They had done it again, Kirk realized, locked everyone else out of their private little world. He shook his head.

"Listen to you two. Talking about children."

"Well, we do expect to have them someday," the lieutenant said.

Spock replying, "Indeed, it is the underlying

reason for marriage.” Looking up briefly, Spock graced Kirk with one of many signature expressions of surprise suggesting to Kirk, he of all people should know this. “Families are, after all, the universal cornerstone of most viable societies.”

Kirk drew himself up, grinning to mask his concern, as it suddenly dawned on him, “I think I’m losing my first officer.”

“Well perhaps, not right away,” Brianna Cantrell began, glancing toward Kirk briefly before turning her head slightly again to gaze up at Spock. “We really haven’t delineated things that far, yet. But I do know Spock isn’t ready to retire.”

“Well, that’s a relief. We still have a mission to complete. I need all hands.”

“And really I insist on one of us being at home with the kids,” she said. “I know what it’s like not having a parent there. And since the only real time I’ve given Starfleet so far is in training ...”

“You had a governess — ” Spock said, eyebrow raised. “And you said kids, as in more than one?”

“I *wanted* my mother,” Brianna Cantrell said, meeting his gaze. She had an impish expression on her face saying, “Kids, yes, since I’ve known for quite some time now, that I will give you identical twin sons. For starters ...” There was a devilish twinkle in her bright blue eyes. Kirk found himself

snickering silently.

“Madam, your point is well taken. We shall add that to our growing list of topics for discussion. We will find a logical way to make this work — for both of us.”

“Well, in the meantime,” Kirk interjected, “let me be the first to congratulate the two of you. If I can gain your attention, that is,” Kirk said, reaching for the compti button. Brianna Cantrell was blushing at once. “This calls for a toast. I’ll just call up ships’ stores. We should have some champagne on hand. And if you don’t mind, maybe we should call Bones in on this.”

“Jim, slow down,” Spock cautioned. “There’s nothing to toast, as yet. We aren’t even formally introduced. That will come after the delegation arrives. In the meantime, it is essential we abide by custom, even though this thing is virtually written in stone, although the ink may be running in a few key places,” Spock quickly amended, seeing Brianna Cantrell’s expression. “Then we will gather with family and friends and *bond* properly. Celebrate. Until that time, no announcements. We’ll be seen together often enough. People will get the general idea by that alone. Indeed, to their credit, many of the crew have already correctly surmised the nature of our relationship. Let’s just keep with the status quo for now. I just wanted you to be the first to

know.”

“Spock, I thought you said a contract has already been negotiated and signed. If I’m not mistaken, I thought you had already transferred the credits for the bride-price, too.” Kirk said, his face conveying his sudden concern. Spock gazed over at his captain and closest friend with something resembling disappointment in his brown eyes. As if he preferred not going down this road right now. Too late.

“Indeed, I have,” Spock hedged. Clearing his throat, Spock paused. “Yet, it would appear there’s been a delay.”

“A delay? Spock, I know that look,” Kirk said. “What’s up?” The first officer drew himself up, locking his hands behind his back. Brianna Cantrell turned slightly to look at him. His features were impassive, as usual, Kirk noted, keeping his eyes on his friend.

“Someone has filed a *Writ of Stay* against our marriage contract. And by so doing has placed gum into our works, slowing the entire process down considerably. Perhaps, indefinitely. Court cases of this nature can take ... years.”

“What?” Brianna Cantrell blanched. “You didn’t say *years* earlier. I can handle a delay, but this ... this is just *wrong*. We’ve already been kept apart for

nearly five years. When were you going to tell me?"

"I just did," Spock stated, placidly.

"Only because Captain Kirk asked. Spock," she said, gazing at him with an expression bordering on betrayal.

"You have already had everything but a photon torpedo launched at you today and it is still morning. I am concerned of what else this day might bring. And I didn't wish to spoil your mood. Not again. It took long enough to repair the first time around." Spock slowly shook his head, grasping her gently by the shoulders.

"If we're to be partners, you can't shelter me all the time. Stop treating me like I'm about to break! I'm supposed to help you *shoulder* the burdens, not become one myself."

Spock turned her toward him, embracing her face with his large hands. "And seeing you upset like this is somehow better? I do not understand. Where is the logic in that? It was my hope that, in a few hours' time, Sarek could get to the heart of this matter, sort it all out and have a viable plan of action. A countermeasure for us to explore. It is not my mission to go about driving the wedge further between you and your father. I am afraid that by *touching* you during your *Test*, I've done enough damage already, to my deepest regret. *Brianna-*

Kam,” he said, leaning down toward her trying to make eye contact with her. She’d dropped her gaze. Kirk shifted his weight from one foot to the other, feeling oddly out of place, uncomfortable, as if he were eavesdropping on them. “I am sorry. I shall endeavor to get better at this,” Spock promised, offering her his fingers again which she accepted, at last meeting his eyes.

“Are you now suggesting my father filed the *Writ*?”

“Negative.” Spock shook his head. “But, be prepared, he may well be called as a witness for the defense, even so. Sort of a repayment, if you will. You should know, if you haven’t surmised already, *House Kooli Ton Lok* is behind the *Writ*.”

“What is everybody hoping for?” Brianna Cantrell began to pace about. “That the delay will destroy what’s left of our original *bondlink*, so there is no going back? And hence the contract made null and void, as a consequence? I *knew* this marriage contract thing was simply a ruse. Springing out of the blue, as it did ... this whole thing is just about placating my father’s hurt feelings, to assuage the original insult. He only agreed to my sitting the *Test* in the first place because he was assured I wouldn’t be *touched* in any way.” She stood still for a moment, scooping the bangs from her face, frowning. The angry scar on the left side of her

forehead, was red and knotted. She rubbed at her upper arms, as if chilled. "Oh, no, that's not it, either. It's more like we're being maneuvered, like chess pieces. Played. Someone is playing us. Strategically aligning us on the board, awaiting checkmate."

"A logical assumption."

"It isn't real ... nothing is real ..." Brianna Cantrell hugged herself. "And in the meantime you could die — well, I won't let that happen, I don't care who's behind this!"

"Spock," Kirk quietly interjected. "Who else knew about this contract that would be inclined to file a *Writ* like this? Are there any other *Houses* involved that you can think of?"

"I believe it may well be Sarkal. Certainly, it was someone from *House Kooli Ton Lok*, according to the *Magistrate* and the legal documents I've perused. Sarek did confirm Sarkal was behind the delay in their departure. I doubt it would have been filed by Lord Sobel. That leaves Sarkal, *First Son* of his *House*. While I do not know for a certainty it was by his hand, I am inclined to trust my gut on this."

"Your gut?" Kirk questioned with a small grin. "You've come a long way, my friend. That's twice in one standard Earth year. There's hope for you, yet."

"As you wish," Spock said.

Brianna Cantrell placed her hand on Spock's arm gazing up at him imploringly, glancing quickly at Kirk before she went on. "But I'm of age, how could he? Correct me, if I'm wrong. That means we don't *need* a marriage contract."

Spock placed a reassuring hand over hers. "But one has been lawfully signed. We are all bound by it. Not to worry. Neither Sarkal nor the Courts can hold you hostage forever. If too much time goes by, I will simply exercise my right of *Ancient Claim* and impregnate you, if necessary. If that is acceptable to you — as a possible solution."

=/\=

"Ooh, I love it when you talk dirty," she murmured, trying to employ humor, as a means to shift the high tide of her mood. Brianna Cantrell swallowed around the sudden lump in her throat. For a short time this morning, for that brief moment in time after their discussion, when Spock just held her and she could *feel* his affection for her, everything was good again. Right. The way it was supposed to be. Now... This was all such a disaster. Why did everything always have to go wrong in her life?

She just knew she wanted to be with this man, grow old with him, spend that time discovering

life's secrets with him. Why was it so very hard? From the very beginning it had been hard. She busied herself practicing another mind-exercise gaining control, admirably disguising her emotions, although her efforts weren't lost on Spock. Brianna Cantrell nodded. "I meant what I said. If you can't wait ..."

He gave her a sympathetic tilting of his head — once his eyebrows climbed down out of his hairline, that is, momentarily shocked, Brianna Cantrell soon realized, at her all-too-intimate banter in front of others. Their fingers still touching, from there he gently took her hand giving it a light squeeze. Kirk was chuckling silently, his laughter infectious all the same, having caught the gist of her words, despite how she'd whispered them. Brianna Cantrell was suddenly giggling with him. It was either that or cry. Spock, however, went on completely straight faced, as always.

"Where are your wings, madam? For you most certainly are an imp," he jested lightly, resigning himself to the humor of it, smiling at her, despite himself. He chuckled ever so briefly.

"There, you see how that works?" she said, quietly. "I *can* be of help."

"I never once doubted it."

"I'll talk to my father," Brianna Cantrell said. "He's

got to see reason in this. I mean, after all, this is so ludicrous. I just don't understand how he could sign a contract, advise me to use my own judgement in accepting it, and then once he receives payment of the *bride-price* makes it all moot. Always controlling, never allowing me to live my own life. Well, I've had enough of it."

"My Heart, there is no evidence at this point your father has anything at all to do with this...*delaying* tactic." At once Brianna Cantrell reached upward placing a slender finger against his lips, warmed by the unexpected endearment he'd uttered. "I would further postulate," Spock went on, "that any actions he's taken thus far have only been in your express interest. I suspect he loves you very much."

"Well, all right. I will concede that. But you know, it took my parents four tries to have the daughter they always wanted. A daughter who began exhibiting extraordinary gifts at the tender age of eighteen months. Heralding more attention than anyone could want or imagine. Suddenly I wasn't theirs exclusively anymore. Particularly when the Vulcan government, in their overwhelming curiosity and zeal to study me, practically took me away from my family. Really, T'Pran monopolized so much of my time, relentlessly training me, I started to call *her* mother."

"Training that culminated in your sitting the

k'Matra,” Spock said. “Otherwise, we may never have met.”

“Yes.”

“They thought they were getting you back at last,” Kirk surmised, nodding. Brianna Cantrell inclined her head to him briefly, giving her attention over to Spock once again.

“You can imagine their dismay when you came along sweeping me off my feet.”

“Indeed, I can. Which is why I am inclined to allow Sarek some free reign here. This is what he does, after all. Give him time to do his part. He did persuade the High Council to remove the censure. I have every confidence —”

“And if he fails?” she said. “What about us?”

Spock nodded at her, giving her a most innocent expression. “Then I’ll turn you lose on them. *All* of them. In the end, it is suggested, *‘Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned’*.”

“Hm ... I don’t know about that,” she said slowly, staring at nothing suddenly, ribbing her arms as if chilled.

“*That* — was a joke,” Spock said.

“I’m sorry. I’m just starting to get a really bad feeling about this.”

Spock looked confused, “I thought you said things would turn out for the better, as far as my situation was concerned. I do not comprehend. You said you had a feeling then, too.”

“See?” Brianna Cantrell threw her arms up and out from her sides, displaying her frustration. “This is why I don’t predict the future. I can’t help it if someone swerved off the chosen path. Everything is subject to change. As a scientist you should know this. *Nothing* is carved in stone. Apparently not even marriage decrees. Or at least, as you suggested, the ink is runny on this one ... Oh, I just want it all to stop — I want this past year of my life back!” Brianna Cantrell said, her voice catching. Struggling to still herself, she practiced yet another mind-exercise, a speech-trick diverting her thoughts to something that would never make her cry. When she next spoke it was almost a whisper. “All I’ve wanted since we *touched* was to be your woman, to belong to you. I don’t understand —”

“You *are* my woman,” Spock said, concern gracing his countenance.

“Am I? By order of the Vulcan Council we’re forbidden to *touch*, until *Kiftiri* is proven and now as an added bonus there’s this *Writ* blocking our path. Would you like door number one or door number two,” she quoted from a popular game show. Spock frowned. He had learned in a very

short span of time that the more deeply affected she was about something, the more sarcastic her speech became.

He feared she was on a precipice, soon to fall off of an emotional cliff, taking her sanity with it. Perhaps, that was the plan all along, to break her. When she turned back to face him, he studied her eyes.

“Spock, the longer we’re stuck in this limbo the further apart we seem to drift. And this so-called *link* we’ve forged this time out isn’t nearly as strong. If it dissipates completely — I’m so scared. Why are they doing this?” She shook her head. “All I can think of, is they were never really serious about our betrothal going forward. They threw a bone to my father. Face-saving maneuver, at its worst.”

Spock reached over, gently gathering her to him. Lifting her chin, forcing her to look up at him. “I’m here, *Brianna-Kam*. I am right here,” he said. Brianna Cantrell nodded, grappling to hang onto her crumbling *shield of reserve*, to prove herself worthy of the *House of Talek Sen Dene*. Spock caught her gaze. “You mentioned a last option. Did your father in any way indicate what that was?”

“Negative, but my mother was urging me to *Challenge* the match. The *Voice*, too. If Daddy’s found someone to do just that ... But why would he

accept the transfer of credits, then? Why wouldn't he simply file a counterclaim, instead?"

"You said it yourself. Perhaps, by the purchase of time he is trying to obliterate all traces of our link. It is the logical thing to do. It is what *I* would do to rescue my daughter from the influence of a man I neither liked nor trusted. And clearly, he doesn't trust me."

"He just doesn't *know* you. Oh, God," Brianna Cantrell said slowly, a look of alarm in her bright blue eyes. "The woman becomes the property of the victor, does she not?"

"That is correct," Spock began as the compti chimed. For a moment she looked stricken, as if she may faint. He moved in closer to her, steadying her by grasping her elbow, glancing expectantly in the direction of the intruding sound.

"Well, it's not going to come to that," Kirk reasoned, reaching over to depress the button opening the channel. Pausing, he said, "We can work something out — I'll marry you," Kirk quickly added, "If it comes to that. I'm a ship's captain. I have that right."

"Unfortunately, it's not as easy as that, Captain. But thank you," Brianna Cantrell said.

Spock protectively drew Brianna Cantrell into him, "You merely work out the etiquette of being a

best man," he said, looking at Kirk. "One way or another, I am going to need one."

Brianna Cantrell looked at Kirk then at Spock and finally back at the ship's commander. "What did he mean by that? Spock, what do you mean?"

"He means," James Kirk said, drawing in a heavy sigh. "He doesn't want his bride, *you*, to pick me as a *Champion* this time around. And under no circumstances am I to accept the *Challenge*, if given," Kirk explained.

Spock nodded, "He *can* be taught," he muttered as Uhura came over the small, desktop screen.

"Captain, I'm receiving an urgent sub-space call for Mister Spock, only I haven't been able to reach him. It's Ambassador Sarek. And it's on scramble mode, sir."

"Patch it through, Uhura," Kirk said, nodding at his first officer. "Spock."

With a flick of a switch, Sarek's image filled the larger screen built into the bulkhead above the console along the north wall of the captain's quarters. Spock released Brianna Cantrell's elbow stepping into the compti's camera range in order to be seen. He held up his hand, respectfully inclined his head, while his father returned the customary split-finger greeting.

“My son. I have just apprised the delegation and the High Council of Sarkal’s intentions to block the marriage contract. They have in turn informed me he’s calling for a *Statutory Challenge* and a Full Tribunal of the Houses based on the claim the woman, Brianna Louise Cantrell, known also as the *Anomaly*, is his.”

“He has the audacity to reveal her identity in open court, making it a matter of public record? He will rob her of her privacy, of any peace. By what right — Just how does he know it is she? Her identity, as such, has been carefully preserved all of this time. I didn’t even know it was she.”

“He also alleges proof of said claim that the woman is his. An understanding with the latter and a prior verbal agreement with her father.”

“Daddy?” Brianna Cantrell blanched, coming to rest rather hard upon a nearby chair, drawing Spock’s momentary attention and his concern. “It isn’t true. I never said I’d be his. He’s lying. I don’t care if he is a Vulcan. He’s *lying*.”

“And I never gave the word — ” bellowed the voice of Joseph Cantrell somewhere off-screen. Sarek was seen working a set of controls in front of him. Another box popped onto Kirk’s screen, creating a three-way conference call including the Lieutenant’s father, Joseph Cantrell. “Sarkal came to me several times over these past four and a half

years, wanting to be her chosen *Champion*, should the need for one arise,” Joseph Cantrell said. “This last time I told him I’d consider it, but I never gave the okay,” Joseph said, directing his speech toward the ambassador. “I just didn’t want my daughter hoodwinked into a one-sided contract. Especially, one without wriggle room. I amended it, as best I could, to which we both agreed. But I still didn’t like the odds as given. What if in reality, you two didn’t get along? What if you flat out just didn’t like each other?”

“I couldn’t bear to lock my daughter into a contract she couldn’t break. It isn’t like you Vulcans make divorce easy, you know. I suppose it is logical after its own fashion — certainly, no one would have to put up with an ‘*Ex*’ the way your culture deals with it. But, since you take betrothals quite seriously, so much so, that they can only be broken through a *Challenge*, Vulcan-speak for divorce, what else was I to do? I knew my girl would have no part in somebody dying over her. So, I contacted Sarkal for his *professional* help in the matter. He is a lawyer, after all and he did help us right after the *Incident*. I only wanted to set it right. Like you, Sarek, we all look after our kids.

“But when Sarkal contacted me next, informing me of the filed *Writ*, I attempted to tell him this thing was a done deal. That I no longer required his

help to undo the contract. Thanks, but no thanks. He had the gall to tell me it was too late to stop him. He'd taken over the affair and that he was filing an injunction that would in effect stop the marriage from happening. We could negotiate until Saturn's rings dissolved, the wedding would never be allowed to go forward. I always knew the youth was off mentally, I just didn't realize how far he'd slipped in the ensuing years."

"Sarkal is a determined individual —" Sarek said, nodding thoughtfully. "And it would seem, completely untrustworthy."

"Oh, God! He said he'd own me one day ..."

Brianna Cantrell murmured, gazing at nothing. She gave the appearance of one completely distracted. Spock glanced over at her, worried, taking half a step in her direction. She had the end of her long braid in her hand, wrapping it around her index finger. "Over and over he promised it. Like a litany of threats."

"Over my dead body," Spock told her, reassuring her that he'd fight for her. To the death, if it came to that, although he was certain on most levels she hadn't heard him, submerged in her own thoughts and fears as she was. He frowned again.

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of ..." she muttered, her gaze far away.

“It is clear he is also a self-serving coward. Why else would he offer *Challenge* through the courts only and not directly to me?” Spock said returning his attention to his father and Joseph Cantrell on the other end of the compti screen. “It is obvious his concerns are not with Brianna, herself, but rather the notoriety he’d gain being the consort of the *Anomaly*.”

“And what about you, Spock? How do your own ambitions speak differently to that end?” Joseph said. “You only want her for her *gifts*.”

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“That, Sir, is a falsehood,” Spock began, rather disturbed. In his wildest imaginings he could never equate himself with the actions or motives of Sarkal, momentarily stung by the comparison which only served to prove his point that Cantrell neither liked nor trusted him. “I do not require, nor do I desire any more notoriety than that which I have already unwittingly garnered over my lifetime, to date. As it is, retiring to a quiet corner of the universe will not be easy for me. It would be illogical and unnecessary for me to hang onto the coattails of such a woman, to that end.

“I would also remind you of that which has been

previously disclosed. My needs are of a far more personal nature. I do not seek to *own* her as does Sarkal. She is my friend — Of whom I would make my *Life-Partner*. My wife. I have already promised you she will not want for anything. What more would you have me say — ”

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“Spock, I would have her thoughts,” Sarek said, cutting through the building emotion, putting an end to what he deemed a fruitless discussion at a time when alacrity was of the essence, valuable time clicking by. He needed the facts in this case from which they could construct a viable solution to the serious nature of the problem before them. He wasn’t going to stand idly by and allow his son to be cheated once more out of that which was rightfully his.

Spock turned toward Brianna Cantrell. She was desperately struggling to hold it together, frightened. He held out his fingers in her direction. “*Brianna-Kam*, attend,” he said rather sternly, pulling her out of her musings. When she looked up, her eyes were clear again, her focus back on the present situation. She stood up and dutifully heeded his call, bowing her head respectfully to Sarek’s image.

“You charge Sarkal with malfeasance,” Sarek began. “Yet, *you* are the human. Capable of lying more readily than he. I would know your allegiance, to whom you would belong. I will not allow you to blatantly take my son to *Challenge*. Like your own father, my logic, too, falters when it comes to my son. I’d sooner break the marriage contract myself rather than risk losing him again. I would have your thoughts, my child. Of every conversation, of every encounter you’ve ever had with Sarkal, son of Sobel of the *House of Kooli Ton Lok* — however inconsequential it may seem. Hold nothing back that we may ascertain the truth.”

Brianna Cantrell nodded solemnly.

“Doesn’t she have to touch him for that?” Kirk asked.

“She will,” Spock said, nodding as Brianna Cantrell gazed up at him for reassurance before bowing her head, preparing herself for the encounter. She was going to have to project herself across a considerable distance to reach the elderly statesman. She drew in a deep, cleansing breath. Stilling herself.

“With your permission, sir,” Brianna Cantrell began as she slowly lowered herself to her knees, centering herself momentarily before letting her essence rise up and away from her form. At once, her features went slack with her relaxed state. Sarek

closed his eyes. After only a few minutes' pause, he opened them again, nodding his head. Brianna Cantrell came back to herself, Spock helping her to her feet once more.

"He frightened you. Badly. And he still does," Sarek said. "However, it is possible Sarkal misinterpreted your reticence, your fear, for a certain coquettish behavior exhibited primarily by human females. He may have believed you were simply playing '*hard-to-get*'. But that you were interested in his offer."

"He never really made an offer, it was more his telling me how it was going to be and at any rate I never once considered it. I just wanted him to go away and leave me alone."

"Yes, that much is certain," Sarek paused, looking thoughtful for a moment. Turning, he spoke quietly with the aide that drew near, nodding. They were in one of the larger state rooms aboard the shuttlecraft, from what Spock could tell. "I will do what I can to clear up this matter. I have a counterclaim at the ready. It will not be an easy fight, however. Sarkal is a highly skilled lawyer and he is most determined to lay claim to this woman for reasons I no longer find illogical or incomprehensible. Your *gifts*, madam, are most profound."

"I am honored, sir," Brianna Cantrell said, with a

polite nod. "Although just now I'm probably more trouble than I'm worth."

"Probably," Spock said, receiving a frown of consternation from Kirk and a raised eyebrow from Sarek. He offered his fingers to her once again, saying, "But I want you anyway."

"That is the most illogical thing I've heard out of you, yet," she quietly teased, murmuring, "Told you, you couldn't live without me."

"Equally illogical, madam, but profoundly true. We are a pair, are we not?" It did the trick, Spock noted, as Brianna Cantrell broke into a wide grin, bringing her fingers to meet his.

Sarek nodded, encouraged by the easy manner between them. "The honor is ours that you would choose for your own, the *House of Talek Sen Dene*. As for the two of you," he said, attempting to regain their attention, glancing somewhere off screen to his right, reconnecting the vid-link to include Joseph Cantrell again. Their images side-by-side on Kirk's screen gave the illusion Cantrell was standing beside the Vulcan Ambassador.

"These proceedings are liable to take considerable time once they get started. But at what cost?" Sarek said. "Even with the inevitable win we could expect in the end, too much time has already been expended. Four point eight-one-six Earth years,

marking her coming of age. A luxury you clearly did not have then, my son. Or now, it would seem. It is only by the grace of the *All* that you were returned to us. That you are alive today, giving our *House* one last chance to expand and continue.”

Closing his eyes, clearly wrestling with himself, Sarek nodded his head and began again. “There is only one logical course open to us but we must act quickly. My son, I suggest you take your wife unto yourself. *Bond* with her before the lapse of time renders the option moot. And if need be, make the *Ancient Claim*. While you still have time.”

“Understood,” a wary Spock said. “But T’Pau was clear ...”

“Indeed, she was most firm. And there is a risk, but I judge it the lesser of two possible evils, in this matter. *Bond* with your wife and make the *Ancient Claim*.”

Brianna Cantrell glanced upward, trembling as she discreetly slipped her arm around Spock out of the monitor’s range. Joseph Cantrell, his eyes downcast while Sarek spoke, now gazed squarely at the monitor on his end as if he could actually look the couple in the eyes.

“Breezy. Forgive me for being a pig-headed, old fool. The last thing I want from all of this is to drive you away. If Spock’s the one you want. If he’s the

one who can make you happy, then do as the Ambassador says. I've talked with Sarkal. He means business. I've never trusted him. I should have known better than to have any dealings with him whatsoever — tentative or otherwise. He's not right in the head. Just remember, there is a proper order in all things. Remember who you are. And as for you, Captain Spock. You damned well better take care of my little girl. Do you understand me?"

"I see no reason to threaten my son, sir."

"Mister Cantrell," Spock said quickly, allaying any further friction in the matter. "I will. Spock out."

"*T'Vor, Salach*," Brianna Cantrell gasped with a sob, her tiny hand immediately covering her mouth.

"Negative. I will not allow the tragedy of that scenario," Spock assured her, as all at once he was leading the lieutenant over to a chair. Ever so slightly troubled, himself, by the eerie similarity of their situation to that of the story in the ancient folk song, he promptly dismissed his misgivings as blatantly, egregiously emotional. Concerning himself, instead, with Brianna Cantrell's sudden shakiness and her pallor, he made her sit, gently shoving her head down between her knees with every intent of warding off the anticipated lapse of consciousness. He glanced about Kirk's quarters, hoping to spy a decanter of brandy, reasoning a shot or two could be useful.

“Stay with me, *Brianna-Kam*,” Spock soothed, as he came to rest on his heels in front of her.

“Aye-aye, sir,” she nodded.

“Now will you let me marry you?” Kirk said.

Brianna Cantrell was suddenly in tears, an indication at least that she had made it passed the danger zone. “Oh, sure. And then I can face excommunication, as well. Why not?”

“I don’t understand,” Kirk said. “You’d be properly married. As a ship’s captain I’m fully vested —”

“I’m already on shaky ground with my family, as it is, for missing my brother Joey’s wedding, this passed weekend. I was recalled to my ship. I didn’t have a choice. So now, how do you think they’ll react missing *my* wedding altogether? I am the only daughter in the family,” Brianna Cantrell said, staring at the metal decking at her feet, taking the fine linen handkerchief Spock was offering her, murmuring her thank you before addressing Kirk once more. “And Sarek said to make the *Ancient Claim*.”

“If need be,” Kirk corrected. “Spock, tell her under the circumstances —”

“My father was suggesting it may be necessary to show proof of my *Claim* should Sarkal persist in his suit against us, once our marriage is finalized. Jim,

Sarkal is aboard the *T'Mir*. My father is correct. Time is short. If we are to be married, we must *bond* and consummate our union before our waning *link* dissolves completely." Spock said, rising to his feet again as Kirk pursed his lips to speak. Spock adding, "It is nonnegotiable."

"So, the wedding gets put-off for a few more months. These things take time to plan, after all. Spock, I realize your father hopes to avoid possible litigation, who wouldn't? But what's the rush? Sarek said he expects to win in any case and you've only just met. In person, that is. You need time —"

"Indeed, time is of the essence. In more ways than one, biology being what it is."

Kirk gazed hard at his friend. "Spock, are you suggesting —"

"That Sarkal was instrumental in keeping us apart originally," Spock answered, immediately biting off the end of Kirk's sentence, cautioning his friend with a look. Despite Brianna Cantrell's admonition it was clear he intended to downplay the severity of his situation for the sake of his young bride, who was already on the verge of collapse. Kirk himself wondered just how far gone Spock must be, realizing the onset had occurred under his own nose — explaining Spock's emotionally charged behavior, of late.

“Sarkal fought and won the first round by offering to smear me in court with enough innuendo,” Spock continued, “despite the lack of evidence and the falseness of his allegations, to further shame the *House of Talek Sen Dene*. In effect, making it impossible for T’Pau to continue on as High Councilor given the apparent lack of order in her own *House* and to keep me out of the political game in the future.

“His was a most persuasive argument, piggybacking the one Joseph Cantrell presented, suggesting I had misused my mind powers for personal gain. While I have not yet chosen to enter that arena, my family opted not to take that risk. I am in line for the *Chair*. And although it isn’t likely to be any time soon, T’Pau is old. And she has named me her successor.”

“High Counselor, Spock?”

“Vulcan has enjoyed peace for centuries with a Talek Sen Dene at the helm making it a logical choice. It is something my father has groomed me for. If I want it, I would have the full backing of my *House* and then some. That is also why this must be done properly, so as not to cause any further damage to the *House of Talek Sen Dene*. As you know, my family can ill-afford the scandal.

“And it is why, due to this entirely politically driven climate, T’Pau has ordered us to marry.

Right now any sense of malfeasance on my part has been nullified by the Council's general acceptance of *Kiftiri*, as a whole. Our timely marriage would serve to vindicate what happened four point five-two-seven years ago, as well as the Council for overturning the censure, that barred our meeting to begin with. Jim, if Brianna and I are to enjoy a life together, we must act and act now. Sarkal is a powerful attorney. He can, and no doubt *will*, tie this thing up in the courts for quite literally years."

"And you're okay with this?" Kirk said, shaking his head slightly, frowning.

"I would have enjoyed the privilege of asking her myself, but yes. It is what I want," Spock said, gently caressing the back of Brianna Cantrell's head as she slowly sat up again.

"And you?" Kirk said, turning to her.

"As I told my father, Spock doesn't need an edict to marry me. In so many ways I'm already his. Captain, what everyone seems to forget is that with the exception of a brief hiccup if you will, we've been together for nearly five years. Our *bondlink* was very nearly forged through the numerous mutual *wanderings* between us, born out of a deep-seeded need for us to be *one*. Despite his orders to the contrary, we were simply unable to let the other go. Even in death. I wish you could see that."

“Well, I do. Everyone does. It’s just —” Kirk turned to look at Spock. “You can be High Councilor with humans in the line?”

“I had no idea you were so intolerant, Jim. It speaks to the very heart of our philosophy. *IDIC, Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations.*”

“I didn’t mean — Well. This certainly presents a problem,” Kirk said, scrubbing at his chin.

“Indeed. I was under the mistaken impression the difficult part was over once I found the woman with whom I could settle down. I simply had no idea getting married was going to be so much trouble,” Spock said, gazing down at Brianna Cantrell. “Perhaps, we should have eloped.”

“Elope?” Kirk said, looking thoughtful for a moment.

“We tried that once,” Brianna Cantrell said. “Don’t you remember? That’s what got us into this fix.”

“This time we shall make it stick,” Spock said.

8

Kirk's Quarters

Stardate: 8511.18

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

Spock slowly came to rest again on his heels in front of Brianna Cantrell. Reaching for the pressure points along the side of her face, with a slight nod of his head, he encouraged her to do the same, murmuring, "With your permission ..."

"Oh, wait!" she quietly protested. "What about tea? Don't we have to? ..."

"You have already served me tea our first morning together, in case you've forgotten. To which I

readily accepted, if you will also recall.”

“Seems to me you fought me on it,” she reminded with a sly smile.

“I also let you win, in the end.”

“You *let* me win? Are you serious, am I hearing you right? Is that what you’re saying?” Brianna Cantrell shook her head at him. “Because it begs the question, do you always rewrite history in this way? And, besides, I thought we needed witnesses.”

“Now, who is doing the rewriting? Uhura and Christine were in attendance, then. Captain Kirk is here, now. So, you see, it *is* done. Now, if I may ...”

“Of course. Forgive me, I’ve learned how omissions can derail an otherwise airtight case. I don’t want any more trouble, is all.” Brianna Cantrell leaned forward, offering her consent to proceed.

“Uhura,” Kirk said, quietly in the background. “Patch me back through —”

Brianna Cantrell was no longer aware of Kirk’s quiet conversation or even of his presence in the room. Held transfixed, at once overtaken by Spock’s familiar warmth, she was aflame as again the essence of their separate beings spiraled toward one another, in brightly arrayed funnel clouds of color *felt* exclusively by them. Faster and faster they

whirled until their colors blended, their beings merging and expanding, becoming *one*.

Perhaps it was the proximity of their physical beings or the emotion that already bound them tightly together, whatever the cause, the sensation produced was far more intense than their original encounter. Yet, it was hauntingly familiar territory to them both. Indeed, they had each been here before, setting aside any and all doubts either of them may have had at the onset. Brianna Cantrell *felt* the colors of Spock's essence as he gently pushed through the layers of her consciousness ever inward to her core.

Picking up the fragmented rope ending, he began right away repairing the broken shards of their partial *bondlink*, strengthening it, completing it really for the first time. In this manner, he irrefutably locked their souls together, persistently forging a *link* that would continue to grow long after he ceased to caress her cheek, if all went well. She recognized the reds, blues and bright oranges of his being, comforted by them, amazed when they burst into vibrant shades of chartreuse and magenta as their auras blended. And when it was completed he slowly, gently withdrew from her.

Brianna Cantrell gasped, mentally clinging to him, reluctant to release him out of fear. She had searched for months to find him, after losing him to

death, once she *sensed* his living essence. Yet, even after they ‘*bumped*’ into each other most recently, he remained aloof to her, reluctant to pick up where they had left off. At least she had a plausible explanation as to why, now. Still, she was consumed with a foreboding of separation from him, of that hideous, insurmountable gulf that persisted between them, ripping them to shreds. He tarried for a moment or so longer, reassuring her of his fealty, focusing her on the *bondlink* freshly formed, instead.

Holding onto that thread, Brianna Cantrell tested its strength as he slowly backed off from her. Gasping slightly, she let out a little sigh as he finally disengaged from her, leaving her feeling heady and light. And yet at the same time she was aware of a lingering sensation, a warmth indicating he was *with* her, even still. They had finally managed to pick up right where they had left off and further. Wrapped up in that warmth, like a cozy blanket in the chill of an evening, she nearly burst into tears, realizing all at once the gulf was gone. She smiled radiantly. In the next instant she was gazing into his eyes, suffused with understanding as the meaning of the words she was about to recite winked into her consciousness.

She had them memorized from T'Pran's repertoire of tales, fantasizing as a girl how she would say

them at her own betrothal ceremony, although she'd never quite got the gist of them until now, as once again things were turning out so very differently in reality than in her dreams. Slowly, purposefully, Brianna Cantrell began the phrase, "*Parted from me and never parted ...*"

"*'Never and always touching and touched'*," Spock finished in unison with her as they both unconsciously leaned into each other, their lips brushing together ever so lightly.

"Oh, it's like you're still holding me," she whispered with a grin. "Welcome home, Sweetheart."

"Indeed, it is most agreeable to be home," Spock replied, returning her smile. He removed his hand from her cheek as she did the same. Brianna Cantrell was well-aware Spock's own emotions were leaping about inside of him, quite uncontrolled for the moment, much like hers, barely contained. Taking her hand, he then stood up, bringing her to her feet, too. Communicating with her through the *link*, they each placed a hand to the side of Kirk's face, initiating a *mindmeld* with him. Brianna Cantrell pressed into the mind of the ship's commander ever so gently, almost timidly, careful not to delve too deeply or to persist if she met resistance. In this manner the three of them were *melded* together, ever so briefly before Spock

terminated the three-way link.

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Kirk marveled at the intensity of emotion flowing through the couple, able to *feel* the unity of the *bondlink*, sensing that this was what he was to confirm. He had *mindmelded* before with Spock on rare occasion but it was nothing like this, not nearly as intimate in nature, nor as deep as he sensed this *bond* reached. He envied them, knowing he could never have the same close relationship such as theirs, or even what he would consider the human equivalent of such. He was all too aware he was married to his ship, his career, leaving no room for another. He acknowledged to himself he would have used Brianna Cantrell, had things turned out differently, and when he'd grown weary of the relationship, or when she'd have invariably demanded more from him, he would have moved on.

He recognized in the end, it was really better this way. This practically made her a sister-in-law, after all. For a moment longer Kirk allowed himself to revel with them and then withdrew, aware of their strong need for privacy just now. He stepped back slightly from them and they withdrew their hands.

He smiled weakly and shrugged feeling profoundly, hideously alone after they both disengaged.

“I guess the proper announcement is, it is done,” he said, his smile wan. “And now if nobody minds. I think champagne *is* called for. Certainly, *I* need a drink.”

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Spock watched Kirk, experiencing in his friend an inordinate sense of regret for some of the decisions he'd made, denying himself a family life, the tinge of jealousy Kirk felt just now. His life that wasn't. “Are you all right, Jim?” Spock said, careful not to smile outwardly, James Kirk waving him off all the same.

“I'm fine,” Kirk lied. With that, James Kirk turned back to the compti, busily chatting with first one source and then another, affording the couple as much privacy as he could for the moment. Spock shook his head, amused, turning his gaze on the lieutenant, his newly betrothed wife. Waves of unadulterated joy surged through him as once again he crouched before her.

Already the origin of the emotion was obscured. He allowed a small grin to escape then, as he perceived there would be no difficulty at all in

retaining the *bond*. As Kirk had pronounced, it was indeed done, for which he was inordinately pleased. She was his, at last. At least for now, he thought, quickly backing off of any doubts he harbored, as to how T’Pau would likely receive this news, knowing full well she could and just may destroy the *bondlink* between him and his bride. The Council had taken her away from him before.

At the same time he discovered he had a profound need to make love to Brianna Cantrell. Cupping her face all at once, he kissed her urgently, wanting to finalize his *Claim*. He recognized the origin of the need. *Pon farr*. She had indeed triggered something in him, he decided. He wondered just how long he could hold off, worried.

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Brianna Cantrell pulled away from him slightly. *Sensing* his need, smiling, she gently admonished him. “Oh, no you don’t. It may be more than a betrothal but it is still *less* than a marriage. And you said it yourself, it’s nonnegotiable, mister. Unless, of course you’re in trouble,” she said, gazing at him earnestly for a moment, her tiny hand along the side of his face as she scrutinized his features. Spock shook his head. He was going to have to

learn to 'guard' his thoughts from now on, he realized.

"I am — not in trouble, as you so quaintly put it," he assured her. "And trust me, you would know."

"A lie?"

"An acknowledgement of time," Spock said. "You needn't fear. It is under control, as of yet. I am merely suffering from an overwhelming need just now to be close to you. All perfectly normal immediately following a *bonding*. It goes along with the unbridled emotions."

"Hm," she smiled. "Me, too. You knew it would be this hard, didn't you. Once we *linked*?" she said, taking his hand.

"Affirmative," Spock said. "Of course, it is a gift. To be shared —"

"At the proper time. I'll make you a deal. You solve our problem, and I'll solve yours," she said, Spock all the while nodding as he pulled away from her to stand.

"Madam, you are my strength," he said, coming to his feet again, taking a moment to straighten his crimson jacket by tugging on the hem. "But you drive a most difficult bargain."

"I just want it to be right."

"Then that is how it shall be. Jim, if I may count on

your assistance. We have a civil wedding to plan, post haste. Jim?"

"Already ten steps ahead of you, my friend," Kirk said, clapping Spock's shoulder.

"Come on, we have a breakfast meeting to conduct. And I suggest, Mister Spock that you work on what you're going to say in your announcement," Kirk said, gesturing toward the door.

"My ... announcement?" Spock looked puzzled as he turned slightly to look back over his shoulder on his way out into the corridor.

"To our friends and crew. Of your recent betrothal and the upcoming wedding," Kirk said. "I've scheduled it for this evening. With the delegation boarding, that gives us less than a full day to make all the necessary arrangements."

"Indeed?"

"And you, Mister Cantrell," Kirk said, turning to the lieutenant.

"Sir?"

"Take all the time you need to find something suitable to wear to your wedding. I realize how important it is and I know it isn't going to be an easy task given the circumstances and the time constraints." James Kirk glanced at his wrist

chronometer. "It's already zero-eight-forty-nine hours."

"That is most generous of you, sir. I don't know what to say, how to thank you."

"You could start with a kiss," Kirk hedged, catching Spock's raised eyebrow as the three of them stepped into the port side lift. "Well, after all, I thought the Best Man was allowed to kiss the bride ... At least once."

"Should be interesting to see how you pull this off," Spock said, dryly. "Being the officiant and the Best Man all at once."

"And wedding planner, you forgot that one."

Spock drew in a quiet sigh, shaking his head ever so slightly. "Point well taken, Captain. Just do not overdo it." Kirk nodded and turning his attention over to the petite woman beside him, lightly kissed her on the lips, while wrapping his strong arms around her drawing her in close.

"Take care of him. He's like a brother to me," he whispered into her ear.

"Aye-aye, sir," Brianna Cantrell said, hugging him back. "I promise."

9

November 85, 2285,

Stardate: 8511.18

Conference Room 1 USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

“Two things, I would address this morning,” Spock began once they’d reached the table where the Inner Core group of senior officers waited in readiness. Assembled for the customary pre-mission breakfast, some were surprised to see the lieutenant. Normally this was a preliminary and informal meeting of department heads set to go over the status of the ship and crew in regards to the mission. Brianna Cantrell, herself, nearly bowed out at the last minute suffering

another slight anxiety attack as the doors to the lift opened onto deck three.

Bending at the waist with her hands braced against her knees, she hoped to keep from fainting by increasing the blood flow to her brain. Kirk gave the lieutenant a look shaking his head at her as he stepped out into the corridor before the couple. "We'll catch up," Spock said, his large hand on the small of her back to steady her.

"Is she going to be all right?"

"Her system is merely on overload."

"Too many changes in the last eight months," Brianna Cantrell said. "I just need a vacation."

"Will a few weeks of Seclusion, what you humans term a honeymoon do?" Spock said quietly, as Kirk went on ahead leaving the two of them alone.

"You are so unbelievably sweet. And this is so surreal. I can't believe after all this time. Bam! Here it is! Having to rush everything. It's not quite how I pictured it, you know? I sort of wanted to enjoy the process."

"I know. I am sorry, my heart."

Again, the unconscious endearment. She smiled, studying the checkerboard grid of the flooring. "For what?" she said, "it isn't your doing."

“No, but it fits the pattern. Considering every significant event in my life to date has been curiously marred.”

“Oh, I promised I wouldn’t drink and here I am ‘whining’ again.” Brianna Cantrell smiled, slowly straightening up. “I could sure use something, though.”

“If I may, perhaps some chamomile tea. It is known to have a calming effect,” Spock said. Brianna Cantrell reached up and touched his cheek with that, gazing intently into his eyes for a moment, wondering if he really was okay. She was feeling such a rush of emotions and not all of them hers.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

Brianna Cantrell nodded. “I suppose the most important thing is that we’ll be together. And so long as we’re properly married, that’s all that matters. So, let’s just go make some lemonade. Okay?” she said, gesturing him off the lift. “After you?”

“Lemonade? Madam?” he said, gazing at her curiously as he stepped into the corridor. “Does it also have a calming effect?”

“Oh, just go on!” She laughed as Spock reached back for her hand. He seemed almost giddy. Remarkably, his palm was ever so slightly clammy.

And Brianna Cantrell suddenly recognized that he was just as nervous as she was, although it was the only outward sign, surprised, as well, that she could pick it out of the onslaught of his emotions. She was amazed at the silent communication, the thoughts and impressions she was gleaning through their *bondlink* ... She simply had no idea of the scope a full *bonding* afforded. She wondered, too, if it would always be as jumbled as this, like several calls coming in all at once, bands crossing, hearing everyone talking at the same time.

“Are you okay?” she quietly asked, while they still enjoyed the privacy of the corridor. Spock came to a halt as they reached the door, before tripping the mechanism allowing entrance onto the deck where the others waited.

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“I do not wish to be parted from you,” he said, giving her hand another squeeze. He still needed her touch, to hold her close. He was, indeed, on the *Edge*, just as she feared, wanting only to be alone with her right now. Curiously, once again that wasn’t to be allowed. And he was worried about this new situation, the risks involved, acknowledging, too, that he couldn’t hide that from her, either. Their *bondlink* was simply too new, too

fragile to consider hindering the flow of emotions, even to protect her, as he was wont to do.

“Nor I, you. Spock, what is it?” He gazed into her blue eyes and realized he had to answer her. Leaving her out of the loop would only serve to further damage the already strained sense of trust between them, as so clearly demonstrated earlier. After all this time, with what they’d had to endure just to hang onto each other, he owed them this chance of healing, to rebuild their relationship, to truly be a couple. It simply wasn’t enough to communicate his feelings through the *bondlink*. She deserved more. Logic dictated he lower his *personal barriers* and really let her *in*.

Brianna Cantrell at least deserved to know what they were up against, his shortcomings, et al. Things were happening so fast they hadn’t had time to grow together. Once again, he was only too aware they were being short-changed in all of this
... .

“It occurs to me we are risking everything,” he began. “If we fail in our mission, we could be ordered to sever our *bondlink*. I will have lost you forever. Bree, I am half-human. I have — feelings. And I have done something. I have made a choice —”

“I know, it’s all right —”

“No, I don’t think you do. Just hear me. These feelings are new to me. And I believe that what I am experiencing at the moment can be described as an ‘emotional high’. It is perfectly acceptable at the early stage of a *bonding*. It will settle down. But you should know this before we go on. I would tell you, lest I should misrepresent myself to you in any way, that I am who I am, which is neither Vulcan nor human. Though I tend to lean more toward the Vulcan path. It is what I call myself.

“But for some time now and to my disgrace, I have been unable to expunge my feelings for you, nor have I suppressed them properly — nor, do I believe I even want to, particularly in light of our current status. It is a bit overwhelming and I am not exactly sure just what to do with them. But I am certain denying them is useless,” he confessed, studying her face waiting for the inevitable hint of disapproval, however fleeting, to register there. Instead, she looked quietly satisfied, gazing back at him with wonder, as if seeing him for the very first time.

Keeping a wary eye on her, he quietly added, “I can release you right here and now, if you so desire.”

“What? Spock, what are you saying? Why would I? —”

“It isn’t too late for you to change your mind, given this most unseemly revelation. No one would

blame you, least of all, me.”

“Spock. *Husband* — ” Now, her impatience showed. Spock drew back ever so slightly, rebuffed as he was. Inclining his head to her.

“But,” he said, daring to continue. “I would further tell you that I couldn’t breathe when you said it was over between us. When you threatened to walk away, suggesting you couldn’t take anymore. And as illogical as it seems, I don’t even remember what it was like before you came. It is as if time began for me when I met you. And although going on without you is a reality I may yet face in the distant future — since there is a high probability I will outlive you — I don’t believe it is something I could endure quite so soon. Not again. Whether it is of our choosing, or theirs. Certainly, I have no concept of how you did it.”

“It hasn’t been easy,” she said, looking down and away from him.

“No, that much is certain. I’ve watched you, not realizing I was the source of your pain. Can you forgive me? And, what is more important, trust me again the way you used to? I am here for you, no matter what happens. And I will always — hold these feelings for you,” he said at last, reaching out to lightly stroke her cheek, cupping her chin, tilting her face upward until she returned his gaze. He had wanted to tell her he loved her but his Vulcan

training was simply too ingrained in him. Instinctively, Brianna Cantrell knew this. As he closed his eyes, she was also aware of his pain and frustration, his sense of shame; both for what he was feeling and for being unable to voice it.

“Oh, Sweetheart, so what makes you think I’d want to go on without you now?” she said, suddenly swallowing her own emotions, trying her best to keep a brave face. Reaching upward, touching her fingers to his lips in the hope of silencing him, she was busy nodding her head at him. “It’s all right. I know. I *know*. You don’t have to say it. I love you, too.”

“Knowing it, isn’t the same as hearing it. I know you long —”

“Oh, if you get there someday but it doesn’t have to be all at once. Besides, I feel it through the *link*. I do. Come here,” she said, reaching upward for him. He met her halfway, wrapping his arms around her pulling her in close. “Spock, you may be half-human but you’re also Vulcan. I know this. And if it never happens, I promise I’ll love you anyway. For now, just hold me. You’re not the only one on this roller-coaster ride, after all.” He hugged her tighter with that, his frustration still apparent.

“Is it really so easy for you?”

“Actually, loving you has been the hardest thing

I've ever done, so far."

"No, I meant saying the words," he said, pulling away to gaze at her rather intently, again, that same pained, puzzled expression gracing his countenance. "When you really mean them."

"What's been hard is not saying them all this time."

Spock nodded. "Of course. You humans have a proclivity for voicing your innermost feelings quite readily. It is a quality that I lack. And that I sometimes — envy in others."

"You shouldn't be so hard on yourself," Brianna Cantrell said, playing with the outer edge of his jacket. Running her thumb and forefinger up and down the black beading there. "You can't help who you are, the way you were raised. The choice wasn't yours altogether. Spock, you've lived your whole life behind a wall of reserve. Sheltered. Protected. Suppressing any and all emotions."

"It's a rather tall wall and it's so hard to climb, particularly when you're not used to it. And the vocabulary is so foreign. Having to couch what you're feeling in non-emotional terms or just not say it at all. It's enough to drive most people crazy — Don't forget, I was raised in your society. I know how hard it is for you."

"And, well, I'm not a psychologist or anything, but

it occurs to me that at the same time you just may be the smallest bit afraid of investing yourself all the way. As you said, if we fail it could really be over between us. They could force us apart. The psychology at work here could be something as simple as, if you don't say the words aloud, it isn't real. And what isn't real, can't hurt — You think? Am I right?"

"I *think* that I shall have to leave it to your expertise in the matter, madam. The other 'A' in your title is anthropologist, after all. And you are a human, besides. While I am quite beyond myself in this area. I am — *regrettably* — so new at this. Rather green, as they say."

"Well, I hope it's not just a bad case of puppy-love you're experiencing!" Brianna Cantrell suddenly laughed, once again trying to employ a little humor. Usually it worked. Spock looked a bit bewildered.

"I beg your pardon? Madam, you are not a puppy —" he said, frowning his consternation.

"Oh, you are just too cute for words!"

"Indeed?" Up bounced an eyebrow.

"Tell you what," she said, sobering up. "Since it seems so important to you, maybe there's a way I could help out you a little bit. With a little prompting, perhaps? I mean, I could say something like, '*how much do you love me?*', if you like —"

“With all that I am,” he whispered. Brianna Cantrell clutched him tightly with that. “It is what I have been trying to tell you, though I am now certain it will be to my undoing.”

“Not if I can help it. And I won’t let you go. I promise. I don’t care who gives the order.”

“Are you certain you’re up to that fight?”

“With all that *I* am,” she said, releasing him, gracing him again with that crooked grin of hers, smirking at him really. “I told you, you’re stuck with me.”

“Indeed, madam. Thank you for that,” he said, kissing her squarely on the mouth.

“Oh, don’t be thanking me so soon. After this rather truncated wedding you’re going to owe me such a honeymoon, mister,” she said, winking at him. Spock gave her a raised eyebrow in response. Brianna Cantrell was relieved to see his emotions were clearly in abeyance, that familiar mantle of stoicism wrapped firmly about him once more.

“Indeed, madam, what could be more spectacular than traveling across the universe together? Albeit in a slightly less than luxurious starship, compared to the *Excelsior*, I will concede.”

“Ah!” she squeaked. “I don’t believe this. I was actually hoping for something a bit more intimate

— And less populated than *this* floating island. You know, somewhere where we could get to know each other — in the *biblical* sense. Well? Are you going to stand there and tell me I don't get a honeymoon, either? Or don't you want to be alone with me?"

"*Madam*," he scolded, frowning at her slightly. "I have every intention of locking the doors."

"Oh, you're such a *bad boy*!" she said, laughing, following him into the conference room.

"You have no idea." He smiled at her over his shoulder. "You will simply have to wait until I get you alone."

"Ah!" She blushed, standing with her arms locked over her chest. Spock chuckled ever so lightly to himself, having again rendered her speechless for the time.

"Attend," he murmured, leaning into her slightly, his hands clasped firmly behind him, suppressing a grin.

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In typical Vulcan fashion he was at once stepping ahead of her, preceding her over to where the others waited. Reaching the end of the table, standing beside him again at last, Brianna Cantrell

glanced around her, reading in the faces of those assembled curiosity, distrust, and in one instance, indignation, Nash's warning of '*Don't look to get in. On or off his arm,*' coming to mind. The first officer seemed oblivious to it, turning to the attending yeoman quietly ordering that a chair and another place setting be brought for the lieutenant. Was he being his typically stubborn self or was Nash way off in her assessment of this group?

Having been accommodated in short order, despite the unusual request, Brianna Cantrell remained standing nonetheless, her eyes downcast as Spock continued. "There is a rumor going around that I am getting married. That much is true. I am. There is also, disturbingly, a suggestion that I am being forced into said marriage. Because it is causing my bride deep consternation, I ask that you allow me to set the record straight on that. First of all, arranged marriages are not only customary but commonplace on Vulcan, even for some adults.

"In this case, I met my bride four point eight-one-six years ago under admittedly remarkable circumstances. Some have gone so far as to label it *Kiftiri*, destiny, in your vernacular. There may be something to it, since our minds *touched* while we were each engaged in an exercise of the intellect known as *Thought Projection*. And despite the efforts of outside forces preventing us from meeting

in the flesh and from properly courting all of this time, we managed to find a way to keep connected, as it were. Certainly, we were each aware of what we wanted from the other, that our needs corresponded. Enough so that she *felt* it when I died.”

“Of course. That is it, the veil I detected between you,” Dr. T’Nikha said, rather placidly, nodding her head in conviction. “You knew each other even though you had never met, drawn together on a subconscious level. Driven to be with the other against all odds, at all costs. Whispering to one another in your dreams, making and keeping your existence known and alive in each of your minds. *One* in thought, in essence, yet hopelessly separated in the flesh. Remarkable. I have read of such cases but this is my first legitimate experience with the phenomenon. I am honored to have been chosen for such a study.” She gazed from Spock to the little lieutenant standing nearest to him at the end of the table, noting Brianna Cantrell’s demeanor was at last quiet, still, as if she were finally at peace again. Whole.

“We did, indeed, *walk* in each other’s sleep,” Spock affirmed, amidst the chatter that erupted momentarily around the table. Christine Chapel shot a glance at both Uhura and Commander Archer. Archer glared coolly at Brianna Cantrell,

trying her best to will the young woman to look up at her and feel her disdain. Uhura just sat smiling. The first officer patiently waited it out, clearing his throat ever so subtly to regain their attention.

“The confusion resides in the fact that after my death and subsequent recovery my parents actively sought to bring us together. And while I was informed I was to be married soon, although they neglected to tell me to whom, my bride had the advantage over me, due to her inherent *Gifts*. She knew it was me, the moment we met shipboard. Whereas, I expected her to be part of the Delegation we will soon be taking on. So certain was I of this fact, I erroneously informed her, sadly on more than one occasion, she wasn’t my woman. When in fact, she was. Certainly, we have been constant companions since she arrived.

“And fortunately,” Spock continued. “She has most graciously forgiven me for the repeated blunders,” he said, eliciting chuckles from around the table as he inclined his head in Brianna Cantrell’s direction, while at the same time reaching over to gently caress her chin. Brianna Cantrell glanced upward at him for the first time since he began his speech, blushing slightly as she smiled.

Grateful for his kind words, she marveled at how easily he went about restating the facts in a truthful manner that not only clarified any misinformation

she'd unfortunately perpetuated herself, but also went about exonerating her as well. Always preserving her dignity, once again he was displaying the depth of his fealty, his caring, by turning the blame back around on himself when she was clearly at fault for opening her mouth to begin with. If he never said the words, Brianna Cantrell knew right then how much he truly loved her, at once fighting the rush of tears that stung her eyes.

With his thumb Spock swept away the teardrop that escaped, gazing steadily at her for a moment before he went on. "And in fact, Lieutenant Cantrell and I are now in a position to brief you on the newly upgraded status of our relationship. As of zero-eight-forty-nine hours, this date and in accordance with Vulcan Law and custom, she is my betrothed wife."

"You didn't," Uhura said, grinning widely.

"We did," came Spock's reply. "It has been a most arduous path attaining this status. For both of us. But we are finally here. Fully *bonded*. All that remains in finalizing our union are the two wedding ceremonies required to satisfy certain obligations of our differing cultures. Barring any more unseemly obstacles in our path, that is. Any additional snags." Spock found himself wondering if both ceremonies could be accomplished before the *injunction*, in the form of a restraining order, was

served to anyone in their party. Risky, but, yet they had to take this chance. “It is simply our request that you wish us well. And that you get us, as they say, to the church on time.”

“But I thought you were getting married right here on the ship, tonight,” Uhura furthered, puzzled at the suddenness of it. “Did you mean the ships’ chapel? And don’t you have to have to take tea together? That’s what the note suggested. I’m lost.”

“Already done,” Spock said, with a look.

“Oh, the Boston tea party we broke up the other morning ...” she said, giving Christine Chapel a quick glance.

“Precisely. She served me tea, and I accepted.”

“May I?” Dr. T’Nikha said, as she rose from her seat and approached the couple. Spock inclined his head to her, allowing her to place her hand at the pressure points along his face, his temple, the side of his nose and his chin, initiating a *mindmeld*. Brianna Cantrell glanced upwards, dubious, but with a slight nod from Spock dutifully complied, allowing the woman to *meld* with her also, thereby confirming their union. After a brief *linking*, the doctor pulled away, nodding. “May your *oneness* be fruitful in the sight of the *All* and may your life together be long and prosperous.”

“We are honored by your most gracious and kind

words,” Spock said, again inclining his head to the doctor.

“Thank you,” Brianna Cantrell murmured.

“So, what’s this snag, Jim?” Dr. McCoy said, leaning close.

Kirk spoke into his hand, keeping his voice low enough to allow only the ship’s surgeon to hear. “Seems somebody’s hell bent on keeping them apart. They’ve gone so far as to take out a *Writ of Stay* against their marriage contract and threatened further legal entanglements, should that fail.”

“We would like to be *one* in the flesh as well,” Spock offered, taking his seat, after holding the chair for his wife.

“Okay, people. Listen up,” Kirk said, as he called the meeting to order. “We have a great deal to accomplish in a very short time span.”

10

November 18, 2285,

Stardate: 8511.18

USS Enterprise NCC-1701-A, Hangar Deck

Walking side by side down the corridor to the hangar deck, Kirk noticed how nervous his first officer appeared. As far as Kirk knew, T’Pau wasn’t among the delegates, but several key members of her cabinet were. Perhaps, Spock feared reprisal for his actions. Several times, he caught the Vulcan smoothing down the front of his crimson uniform jacket, letting the breath he held out slowly. This was an odd thing to witness. Normally, Spock was much

more disciplined than this, to allow even a hint of emotion was simply out of character. Gone was any notion Spock was walking into a trap — held hostage, as it seemed to Kirk, by this *phantom woman* Spock constantly dreamed of, while obviously smitten with a certain junior officer. In many ways, his situation was working out for the better, the two opting to greet the delegation — and any ready discipline they might mete out, head on, clinging metaphysically to each other like a pair of grapevines.

Lt. Cantrell was remarkably pale, which also drew Kirk's concern. Was she about to faint on them? Or was it that she feared the likelihood Spock was about to confront the Elders, in a sudden, rash act of defiance? He had run away from home at the tender age of seventeen, *Earth* years, to join Starfleet, which would put him a little more than seven Vulcan years in age. Kirk guessed his friend was still rebelling, in his own quiet way. This ought to be good ... interesting, at least. Kirk also wondered how this would affect their overall mission, worried. He needed his first officer at peak efficiency.

The last time Spock acted so quirky, he was experiencing the effects of *Pon Farr*, the time of mating, which occurred for a Vulcan male every seven years or so. Kirk could see that biologically,

Spock was a wreck. Maybe, he wasn't even aware of his current behavior or intentions. Last time around, Spock didn't even recall giving Sulu orders to plot a course to Vulcan, diverting the ship from its original destination. Kirk had learned first hand just how badly the *Cycle* stripped Vulcans of their facade of Logic along with their *discipline* due to the huge amount of hormones coursing through their systems. Spock was increasingly irritable, another telltale sign his *Time* was near, and he did mention biology made their timeline all the more urgent. Kirk quickly did the math and realized his friend could well be in trouble, despite how much Spock tried to downplay his situation. Vulcan males had to mate or they would ultimately die. And like the salmon of Earth, would stop at nothing to get home to where they themselves had been spawned.

Had Cantrell, triggered it?

Just in looking at the two together gave Kirk his answer. He had never seen his friend this involved before, allowing himself to remember what he *felt* from them both during the joint *mindmeld* earlier. He was genuinely happy for the two of them and looked forward to joining them in marriage, should that option remain open, after the couple met with the delegation. Until he knew differently, Kirk would continue moving forward with those plans, as scheduled.

Standing in the doorway of the hanger deck, the *Enterprise's* welcoming contingent took their places: Kirk, Spock, Lt. Cantrell, Drs. McCoy and T'Nikha, Scotty, and three Security officers. Forming a reception line they waited to greet the Vulcan Delegation as they debarked, single file, from their shuttlecraft and walked toward them. Kirk recognized a few of them from Spock's *Fal Tor Pan* ritual, his *Refusion*. High Priestess T'Lar, T'Vek, Lord Savin, another elderly Vulcan female and Spock's parents, Ambassador Sarek and Lady Amanda, followed by two more Vulcan males and two additional older females. Lastly, two younger Vulcan males, making a party of twelve, in all.

Kirk wondered what happened to the thirteenth *House*, since it was his understanding all were to be represented. His question was quickly answered when Dr. T'Nikha fell into ranks with the Vulcans. Behind her came two fully armed Temple Guards.

Brianna Cantrell squeezed Spock's hand, looking stricken as Sarkal gave her a steely glance as he passed them by. She shuddered violently.

Spock leaned toward her slightly. "I'm told all of the *Houses* were to be represented during this mission. It was logical and the only fair way to take on the risks involved."

"If you say so ..." she returned, remaining wholly unconvinced. In another moment Spock *felt* her

immediate relief as she said, “Oh, look, T’Pran’s here, too. I hoped she would be here.”

Spock studied the delegates as they passed by, focusing on one of the elderly females that looked vaguely familiar to him. “Indeed? And all of this time, I thought she was a special arbitrator. I ran into her, almost literally, when I went to my parent’s home. She took my cab as I was exiting. I had no idea that was your T’Pran. *Most formidable*. And yet you turned out so...*normal*, speaking in human terms, of course.”

“Of course,” she grinned. “You honor me, sir. I have never been described as *normal*.”

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“So, you’ve taken it upon yourselves to defy our High Councilor’s orders,” T’Lar said, gazing at the couple as they met her privately in her quarters aboard the *Enterprise*. “You are *fully bonded*, I’ve been told. And now I can see the truth of it.” T’Lar gestured to her feet. Spock obediently knelt before the High Priestess, allowing the required *mindmeld* to confirm her suspicions. “Yes, it was, indeed, necessary,” she said, breaking off the *link*, waving her hand with a flourish. “You will serve him tea, nonetheless,” she told Brianna Cantrell, giving her

the 'eye' along with an inclination of her head.

"But we've already —" Brianna Cantrell started to object.

"*In the face* of your past history in this matter," T'Lar said, her tone stern. "T'Pau was emphatic that you both strictly adhere to Vulcan tradition and custom for this union to go forward. According to this, you two are to be wed. I have here a copy of the signed contract between your *Houses*," the High Priestess unfurled the long official hand-printed parchment. Brianna caught the bottom edge of the *T'ay'at'ma* skin page, clearly seeing her father's signature there just below Ambassador Sarek's large, flowery inscription.

"Spock," T'Lar continued, rerolling the official document into a tight scroll, gazing upward at the tall, slender Vulcan, using it to gesture toward Brianna Cantrell. "I present to you, your wife, Brianna of the *House*, Cantrell. T'Bree, we meet again," the elderly cleric said, with a slight nod. "Meet thy *Moderator*, thy soon-to-be-betrothed husband, Spock of the *House*, *Talek Sen Dene*."

"I will expect both of you on the Forward Observation deck at precisely fifteen hundred hours where we will proceed with the all-important Tea Ceremonial. This will take place in the presence of the entire delegation, that all of Vulcan's Ruling *Houses* may bear witness to your intent."

Brianna Cantrell gave Spock a furtive glance. He *felt* her reticence, unwilling for Sarkal to have any part in this. There was nothing to be done for it. Instead, Spock gently stroked her mind, hoping to ease her anxiety for the moment.

“You both will need to sign this marriage contract as well,” again T’Lar held the scroll aloft, “after you take tea, so that all may be in its proper order,” she said. “I’m telling you this now, lest you forget amidst any chaos that may well erupt during, or even prior to the actual ceremonial. I will leave it on the tray in plain view, so that you may do so, as required by Vulcan Law.”

T’Lar gave Spock a meaningful glance, locking her gaze with his.

“Understood,” he said. Claspings his hands, he respectfully bent at the waist in honor of the woman’s office.

11

November 18, 2285,

Stardate: 8511.18

USS Enterprise NCC-1701-A, Forward Observation Deck

At precisely fifteen hundred hours, Spock and Brianna Cantrell arrived at the Forward Observation Deck. Spock had swapped his uniform for a Vulcan ensemble more in keeping with the occasion. Looking every bit the Vulcan prince, he was richly dressed in a dark, flowing, multi-hued tunic with bell-sleeves, over closely fitting black slacks, also of a Vulcan design. He had exchanged his duty boots, too, for ones made from the skin of a *T'ay'at'ma*, dyed black, the toes

of which were curled gently back on themselves, giving him a rather regal look.

Lieutenant Brianna Cantrell caught her breath when she first saw him, stopping by her quarters as he did, to escort her to the ceremony. She, herself, was equally transformed, outfitted in her formal Temple frock. Closely fitted and sheath-like, the gown was multilayered and sheer in some places, mainly the blousy upper arm of the sleeves. The bodice, a soft cream-colored satin brocade was embedded with jewels, primarily blue sapphires, amidst a rich gold embroidery, resembling flowers on a vine. The blue of the gown accentuated the blue of her eyes. She wore the same headdress as before, minus the veils.

They were both stunning in their regalia.

Glancing about the large deck, the couple could see that the entire delegation was assembled. All were seated in a semicircle row atop giant throw pillows placed on the deck itself, in typical Vulcan style. Perhaps, due to the hot, arid temperature of their home planet, it was considered cooler nearer the floor and thus, more comfortable, explaining the habit. The moment Brianna Cantrell reached the deck, the ‘Voice’, began an odd litany of ‘*Don’t do it, don’t do it’ don’t do it*’, until it sounded like the flap-flapping of wings, she’d grown all too used to. She looked around for him, able to *sense* his presence

before she saw him, locating him at last. Sarkal sat about mid-center in the row, wrapped tightly in the gray robe of his House, cloaked in such a way that his identity was difficult to discern, flanked by Lord Savin and the other young, burly Vulcan male, Strone. Sarkal's presence made her so anxious, Brianna Cantrell could barely breath.

“Let us begin,” T’Lar said, taking her seat opposite the delegation, also on the floor, to Brianna Cantrell’s surprise. The cleric was well advanced in years, Brianna Cantrell hardly expecting the fluff of the pillow enough to protect her old bones from the insult of the hard deck. If T’Lar was uncomfortable, she didn’t show it. Instead, in typical Vulcan efficiency, she lost little time getting things started. She gestured to her aide, who brought forth an ornately designed porcelain tea pot full of hot water, the pot glazed in a deep cerulean blue, edged with a golden filagree, and dotted with gems, again blue sapphires, that completed a geometric design, along with a matching delicate china teacup and saucer.

T’Pran brought a tray bearing the tea leaves and the specified ground wedding spice, both the tea and the powder housed in ornately engraved crystal decanters, placing it before Brianna Cantrell with a nod of her head. These were not the ones previously in her possession, the ones from Sarkal,

to her relief. Rather, they bore the emblem of the *House, Talek Sen Dene*, a huge *Sehlet* rearing up in battle, beautifully etched into the sides of the small jars. The vessels were far more ornate, elegant, than that of Sarkal's, she noted, evidence of Spock's higher station.

Brianna Cantrell had been nervous ever since she and Spock met with the high priestess, aware something was in the works, but that she was effectively blocked from learning just what. She drew in a sigh, shared a glance with her former governess, trying to read her and then just gave up the pursuit when she perceived her efforts were futile. This appeared to be a group effort, she also noted, glancing at the assemblage. She could *feel* a certain static energy in the room. Had they erected a *psychic shield* to protect the couple? From what? she wondered. Sarkal? Preferring to just get on with it, she gently tugged on her long frock, raising the hem just enough to allow herself to bend more easily, as she came to rest on her knees before the very low octagonal table and the tea service laid out in readiness.

If Brianna Cantrell was unhappy that this part had been skipped earlier, she was equally confused by having to go through these steps now. They had already had their tea, despite the fact the words had been missing. The fact was, she *served* him tea —

and he *accepted* it. A Vulcan male didn't take service from a female who wasn't his. They had acted out the heart of the law, even if the letter, the promises, were omitted at the time. Was this all in the name of keeping up appearances, as T'Lar intimated, an effort by the Council of Elders to make sure nothing was skipped? Or, were the words, usually exchanged between the parties, that important?

She didn't have an answer, bothered by how many questions were stacking themselves in her queue, causing her thoughts to race. Mysteries to her, were puzzles. Puzzles begged to be solved. Left unresolved, she grew frustrated and ill-tempered, a place she didn't wish to revisit again today. This was to be a happy time. She scolded herself. Her throat was suddenly very dry and she began to feel anxious. She was all too aware of Sarkal's presence, bothered by it, wishing he didn't have to be here, taking part in a very personal moment in her life. He just didn't belong. She wanted him to leave, tried to will him to do so. In response, the strange flap-flapping in the back of her head, that began with her arrival, grew louder, so much white noise in her inner ear. So loud, she grimaced and put her arms over her ears trying, in vain, to block out the annoyance. "Oh, make it stop, please," she glanced at her husband. Spock sat so still on the opposite side of the little table that he appeared to be

meditating, just like the others in the delegation.

Gently, she stoked his mind, needing the comfort. She *felt* everyone's gaze upon her, all too aware of their scrutiny, her stomach doing flip-flops with the noise that had turned to pain. Her head felt as if it might explode. *'You thought you could circumvent things, but bad girls get punished ...'*

"No, you have no right to interfere, I won't ... *leave me alone,*" Despite her pounding head and shaking hands, Brianna Cantrell picked up the fine china tea pot. The lid rattled, betraying her anxiety. She put a finger over it to still it, persevering onward, pouring the hot water into the cup. Then, she took a pinch of the tea and sprinkled it over the water, swirling the cup gently until it changed from clear to a very light amber color.

Since this was a sacred ceremony, she next took a pinch of the powdered seed, specially grown for just such an occasion, to add a bite to the flavor. Spock's own mother had cultivated the plant shortly after his birth, in keeping with Vulcan tradition, Spock did like his tea hot and spicy. Brianna Cantrell grinned at the thought. The *'Voice'* was unhappy with her, she *sensed* the disdain, troubled all the more by the headache. Unconsciously, she touched her forehead with the fingertips of her free hand, busy swirling the cup again, forming the decoction, just as T'Pran had

taught her. Then, she just sat there, motionless, as if at a loss as to what to do next. Every time she raised the cup to hand it over to Spock, her hands shook so violently, the cup nearly rattled itself right off of the saucer upon which it sat. ‘*Don’t do it, don’t do it, don’t do it.*’ Came the litany, so loud, she could hear little else above it.

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“Is there something wrong?” T’Lar said, leaning forward, gazing hard at Brianna Cantrell.

“Much is wrong here,” Sarkal stated, without opening his eyes. “This entire ceremony is illegal. I have a *Writ of Stay*, granted by the courts,” he held up a scroll. “I demand this be stopped. You are operating *outside* of the Law.”

“There’s an odd energy in the room, don’t you *feel* it?” Brianna Cantrell said, hunkering her shoulders as if to avoid being hit in the head by something above her. “Don’t do it, don’t do it, don’t do it!” she echoed the ‘*Voice*’.

“Energy wave — *psionic resonator!*” cried Strone, covering his ears, as if that would help.

“Who, where—” came the query.

In answer, Strone pointed directly at Sarkal. “I told

you this would come to no good!” he accused.

Chaos, as promised, erupted throughout the deck. Vulcans leapt to their feet, poised for battle. Ambassador Sarek lunged at Sarkal, dragging the youth from his pillow. The triangular stone slipped from beneath the folds of Sarkal’s robe, clattering with a dull thud to the metal deck, breaking into fragmented shards. Sarkal’s concentration was also interrupted.

Lord Savin scrambled on his hands and knees attempting to gather all of the pieces of the lethal device, betraying his own involvement in the conspiracy.

“Most disappointing, Lord Savin, that you would lower yourself to this depth,” T’Lar said, her composure intact.

Sarkal struggled against the Temple guard that held him, ranting loudly at the perceived injustice. “I have a *Writ of Stay*. You can’t do this. Stop. I demand you stop this illegal action! You are operating *outside* of the law. She’s mine,” And then curiously, he began to sob. “The woman is mine ... Wait until the injunction clears the court, then we’ll see who is served tea! This will all be moot!”

Strone gazed at his cousin, shaking his head. “It’s over, Sarkal. Our Cause is lost. How could you allow that woman to drive you beyond your own

mind's reach, like this? We had bigger things to accomplish. I'm very disappointed in you. And you suggested I was the slow one. We'll just see who's the dim-witted one, now, won't we?"

"Don't you dare tell *me* when it's over. I'll let you and everyone else know when it's over, which will be never! I will have my day before the full *Tribunal*. Then we'll see whose Cause is lost."

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T'Lar gazed impassively at Brianna Cantrell, "Hast thee changed thy mind?"

"No." Brianna Cantrell shook her head. Curiously, the flapping and the pain in her head stopped abruptly. She glanced at the broken bits of stone on the deck, "I'm free," she said, grinning through the tears that streaked her delicate face. With a steady hand she handed Spock the cup.

Taking it from Brianna Cantrell, his eyes smiling at her over the rim, "With all my heart," he began, reciting the words of the ancient ceremonial, "with all that I am, I stand ready to make the *Ancient Claim*. If thee wilt have me." Spock then took a large swallow of the tea, signaling his desire for the match to take place, returning the cup to her.

Brianna Cantrell slowly, deliberately turned the cup around in her hands three times; a full three-hundred-sixty degrees bringing it around the last time so that the portion of the rim he had used now faced her. She sat holding it at the ready. She was to take a swallow of the same tea next, to show her willingness and her desire to submit to him. Keeping her eyes properly downcast she prepared herself, the words, she would use in her reply, “With all my heart, with all that *I* am I will have thee,” she said, taking her sip of tea.

“It is done!” T’Lar said, raising her voice above the continuing din, as the Vulcans struggled to contain Sarkal. Spock came to his feet, glanced over his shoulder at the ongoing disruption, wondering why none of them thought to render the youth unconscious? In a heartbeat, the first officer decided to act. Stepping into the ruckus, in a quick movement, he pinched the youth’s shoulder until Sarkal’s legs buckled beneath him and he passed out. Returning to the small table, Spock quickly signed the marriage contract T’Lar gestured toward, and smiling, handed the ancient, quill-like pen to his wife to do the same.

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"*Cause?*" Sarek asked, once Sarkal, Strone and Lord Savin were escorted by the Security team to an interrogation room near the Brig and once Sarkal had regained consciousness. Leaning forward on the small table between them, Sarek said, "Just what manner of *Cause* have the two of you been about? What sort of mischief have you perpetrated upon an unsuspecting universe? Speak. I will have answers." Strone quickly unburdened himself, divulging all the secret plans, and the identities of the rest of their conspirators, despite the glare Sarkal bestowed upon him, and the kicks to his shins he suffered under the table, along with the impotent *look*. Without the Stone, his mind powers were notably weakened.

"Prince Quinbar had his own father assassinated?" Sarek said, in disbelief. "Most disconcerting."

"He, too, hates the Federation, and will have nothing to do with it," said Strone, disdain in his voice. "That is the real enemy we fight. The intrusions, the losing of our Ways to that nefarious establishment. It has become a dictator to the universe. Do it this way, not that way, and on and on and on," Strone said.

"Ad nauseam," Sarkal grunted, putting on his best bored expression, managing a yawn.

"The United Federation of Planets had noble beginnings and is still, to this day, a very viable

institution,” Sarek interjected. “Many have been assisted, indeed, many societies have flourished under the auspices of this esteemed body.” Turning to the youth he added, “And you, Sarkal, are the *First Son* of your *House*. Why would you do this to your ailing father? It is *most* unconscionable.”

“I do it, not so much *to* him, as *to you*, Sarek. I would see your *House* decline in stature. You and yours are an unworthy lot. Be assured. This is not over. You can lock me up, but you cannot stop the wheels I’ve set into motion. She *will be* mine. I will *own* her, one day, very soon now, I should think. By now, Joseph Cantrell should have been served his papers. So, you see. It *is* over, just as I stated. Any actions you take from here on out will be *outside* the Law. Worm your noble way out of *that* scandal.”

At the conclusion of the interview, Captain James Kirk had them locked up. A short time later, the klaxons went off, the *Enterprise* crew alerted to the swarm of small space craft that played tag with the heavy cruiser.

“*Captain Kirk to the bridge,*” Sulu’s voice came over the compti.

Moments later, before Kirk even reached the bridge, the gaggle of star skiffs left this sector of space, to the puzzlement of all.

Until, in the midst of another set of alarms, Sarkal

disappeared from his cell.

12

November 18, 2285,
Stardate: 8511.18
Ship's Chapel

“Oh, I’m shaking,” Brianna Cantrell said as she stood in the corridor, just outside the ships’ chapel, waiting for Chief Engineer Scott to escort her down the very short aisle. He was late, which had her worried. By now Captain Kirk, Spock and Dr. McCoy, who would stand as the groom’s Best Man, were assembled inside, along with the rest of the primary bridge crew, Spock’s parents, and a few of the Vulcan delegates willing to participate in this ceremony.

Some, given the events of just a few hours ago, were a tad skittish to attend, taking Sarkal at his word. Did he have a backup device, a second copy of the lethal *psionic resonator* stashed somewhere? As far as Brianna Cantrell knew, he had somehow beamed off of the ship.

Uhura, Nash and Chapel were gathered around the bride, dressed in a montage of color and style, whatever finery they could come up with on the fly. The ladies, all, looked fabulous, even so.

Brianna Cantrell, herself, had settled on the simple off-one-shoulder white frock she'd worn at the reception several nights ago, after her graduation from the Academy, which seemed light years ago to her now. Choices were not in abundance, so she hoped the gown would do, since it turned out that out of the one-hundred-twenty-five women aboard, she was once again the shortest member of this crew. She simply hated being so petite. She ended up borrowing Crewman Barker's fancy, white, crocheted sweater nonetheless, despite how oversized it was on her, since covering her bare shoulder was a must in church. The sweater hung long, tastefully so, cresting just passed her hips. It would do in a pinch.

Brianna Cantrell gently rolled the sleeves at the cuff, so that her hands might be free, and that she might show off her latest trinket, a wedding

accessory, as it was described to her. She twisted her wrist allowing the ice blue gems on her bracelet to catch the light. Spock had gifted it to her from the Family's jewels, reserved for such occasions. He had selected the delicate, yellow-gold, ancient tennis-style wristlet, knowing she had a fondness for antiques.

"It's just about that time, Lieutenant," Dr. Christine Chapel said, sticking her head just inside the tiny ship's chapel, and then out again to glance up and down the passageway briefly. What was the hold up? Brianna Cantrell felt her stomach lurch with the news. Smiling nervously, she drew in long, steady breaths.

"Wait," Brianna Cantrell said, "Mister Scott isn't here, yet. It's bad enough Daddy's not here, but I can't imagine going down the aisle alone." Brianna Cantrell fidgeted with the bracelet turning it around and around on her slender wrist. Looking up, she gazed in the direction from which she expected Scotty to appear, just moment's before footsteps could be heard. However, it wasn't Scotty. Sulu appeared with a crate full of colorful flowers from his garden up in the Botanical Lab, the aromatic scents bursting into the hallway. Suddenly it was springtime.

"Sorry I'm late, ladies. We had a little trouble with the Keesorchinis. They're like Magnolias. You touch

their petals and they turn brown!”

“What’s this?” Brianna Cantrell said, smiling warmly at him, giving him a bear-hug when he handed her a carefully bound array of exotic blooms.

“Well, every bride deserves a bouquet, don’t you think? After all, what’s a wedding without flowers? Even a rush-job like this one,” he said, as he went about handing the others a small bunch each. Coming back he gazed into Brianna Cantrell’s eyes.

“Spoken like a true botanist,” Uhura laughed. “Sulu, they’re gorgeous. You’ve outdone yourself this year.”

“Hm, they just add so much,” Nash said. “And they smell nice, too. Sweet and musky all at once.”

“This is far more than I expected, I don’t believe this. Everyone’s being so sweet. Thank you. All of you,” Brianna Cantrell said, hugging the helmsman again.

“You’re not pregnant,” Commander Sulu said, ever so quietly, almost surprised.

“What? No, of course not. Not unless it happened over the compti. We haven’t — Well, you know. I’m mean, well, after all I am wearing white. Mister Sulu?”

“No, I mean I can tell by your eyes you aren’t.”

“Oh, my gosh! Is that what people are thinking?”

“Gives some people solace to think that’s how you landed him, that’s all. Why he chose you over them.”

“He wants me and I want him, where’s the mystery in that? I’ll let you in on a little secret. He has *feelings*, you know.”

“I know. Just thought you’d like to be prepared,” Sulu grinned. “All eyes are on your tummy. Because of the rush.”

“Oh, brother! And I suppose it never occurred to any of you that just maybe I’m not the one in trouble here. He *is* Vulcan, after all. Really, I’m too completely scandalized. And, besides all that, Mister Sulu, you and the others know very well the obstacles in our path and the reasons behind our haste. If we don’t get these two ceremonies over with before we’re served ...”

“Here’s the deal,” Sulu said, holding his hands out as if weighing something on an old-time scale, waving them up and down. “I know what I hear and I know what I’ve been told. I’m going to go with what I’ve been told. Now that I see what I’ve heard is wrong.”

“Oh! It just doesn’t end, does it.”

“I’m afraid not,” he grinned, chuckling light-

heartedly.

Brianna Cantrell sighed as all at once the burly Mr. Scott hustled toward them, adjusting his crimson uniform jacket, checking his pocket repeatedly, as if he was afraid he'd forgotten something.

Moments later, Sulu was framing his holograph, fussing about, arranging the makeshift veil atop Brianna Cantrell's head just so. "Oh, my gosh — rings!" the bride suddenly blurted out. "What are we going to do, it's a double-ring ceremony! Do we even have a license?"

"You don't remember signing it, do you. Honey, breathe," Uhura said, helping to fuss with the gown. "Already done. And Scotty was busy with the ring-detail," she said, smiling at the Scotsman. "I believe he's fashioned a temporary solution out of available materials."

"Let me guess. He's bent a couple of spoons to fit —" Brianna Cantrell said, casting the Chief Engineer a impish grin.

"Close," Uhura said, with a wink. "I hear he's rather pleased with the results."

"Aye, that I am," Scotty said, patting the pocket that contained the rings.

"Ladies, it's time," Nash warned. "The men are getting restless."

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“Uhura, what’s keeping you?” Kirk complained into his palm, tapping at the metal box in his hand annoyed at the continued delay in getting this ceremony started. He stood at the podium, glancing about the small room nearly filled to capacity, sensing the restlessness of the onlookers.

Where was the bride? He just wanted to get on with it, and be on their way to Vulcan before time turned against them. Sarkal was on the loose, doing God-only-knew-what, leaving the ship’s commander in a nervous state. Sarek was calm enough on the exterior, but Kirk could see it in his eyes, they had cause for concern.

“It’s Nash, sir,” came the tinny sound of a female voice, recalling the captain from his musings. “Commander Sulu is taking a few pictures. And you should see the lieutenant, sir. Wow! I swear she could make a gunny sack look good. She’s gonna knock your socks off, sir. She’s absolutely breathtaking.”

“That’s all well and good, Lieutenant, but we’re operating under a critical time constraint. Tell her to shake a leg and get on in here —”

“Ah, sir. There’s gotta be some recording of this

event. It's one of those once-in-a-lifetime things — re-respectfully. Sir.”

“Jim,” Spock said, coming up beside the captain, gently closing the metal box in his friend’s hand. “Give her the moment. We have time,” Spock said.

“A lie, Spock?”

“An expression of faith,” Spock countered.

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After a moment, Ambassador Sarek came forward, joining the small group of men. “Father?”

“I would say this,” Sarek began as he drew near, hands clasped in front of him. Nodding slightly as he gazed at his son. Spock was no longer a boy, having grown slightly taller than himself, but rather a Vulcan of some mature years, about to take on Vulcan responsibilities, at long last. Sarek was pleased with what he saw in his son. Poised, honorable and as a highly accomplished career Starfleet officer, he deemed him capable of comporting himself ably as a husband lacking only some timely, fatherly advice. Advice his own father, Skone, had passed along to him on his own wedding day.

“Spock, you are the Master of your *House*.

Discipline your wife with kind words and a firm but gentle hand, and your children likewise. Lead them in the path they must go — but always remember with Whom the Rule rests and to Whom in the end you would give account. If you do this, your wife will thank you for your diligence and your faith. And your blessings will be many. As have been mine in you, my son.”

Spock drew himself up momentarily nonplused at such praise from his father. Then all at once he was bowing at the waist as Sarek gave him a blessing. “I am honored by your kind words and shall heed the wisdom of them, Father.”

“Take care of her, Spock. She is a rare gem. And now your mother would have a word with you,” he said.

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Spock stepped forward into his mother’s waiting embrace, her hands crossed and upright. He met her palms with his, smiling ever so slightly at her. Nodding.

“She’s a little doll, that bride of yours,” Lady Amanda said.

Spock silently drew in a breath of resignation, “A

doll, Mother? I could hardly place her in such a benign category. We are talking of Brianna Cantrell, are we not?"

"Well, of course. Who else?" she shrugged, giving her son a wry grin.

"She is, after all, every bit a Vengarian bush tiger. Fanged, ferocious, completely unpredictable — And I seem to have her by the tail!"

"Oh, you don't mean that," Amanda chuckled, running her hand down his cheek.

"Or perhaps if you prefer, I should say sharp-tongued, strong-willed, moody, stubborn, sassy and completely spoiled. Choose whatever adjective pleases you."

"You're still angry, I see."

"Negative," Spock drew back, a little surprised. "I am enormously pleased with the outcome of our meeting. In fact, my bride says I should thank you and my father for your efforts in this endeavor. For ultimately bringing us together."

"Seriously, Son, do you get on well with her? Is she what you wanted in a wife — Are you happy about all this?"

"So many questions, Mother," Spock said, shaking his head ever so slightly at her, grinning without grinning, enjoying this game of tease. "You must

conclude, logically, that since I am here attempting to beat Sarkal at his own game that the answer you seek to all of your inquiries is in the affirmative. Profoundly. Otherwise, it would have been rather easy to allow this matter to simply die in the courts.”

“But you won’t let it die there.”

“No.”

“Because it’s Sarkal who wants her? I know you two are rivals.”

“Negative, he may view me as a rival, however, I see him more as a gnat. Annoying and in need of swatting, but only a gnat. Rather, it is Brianna, herself. She may be one feisty little woman but she is also witty, affectionate, charming and most generous of soul. In her own way, I suppose, she is a lot like you. I find that most agreeable. And I find that I cannot walk away. Now, if you will excuse me. I see it’s nearly time,” Spock said, seeing Uhura standing in the open doorway to the little chapel, holding her colorful bouquet level with her waist. Spock started to lead his mother back to her chair. Sarek met him halfway, extending his first two fingers to his wife and in this manner escorting her back to their seats.

“I believe you are needed up front, my son,” Sarek said. Seating his wife, the elderly statesman turned

to the Lady Amanda as he settled into his own chair. "Did our son address your concerns in a satisfactory manner, my wife?"

"He thanked us for arranging the marriage. Sarek, he's so in love with her."

"Amanda, he is a Vulcan, to speak openly of such things —" Sarek began, catching the impatience in her countenance. Amanda had waited a long, long time for this day and the promise of grandchildren it held. She and Sarek were only successful bringing forth the one child. "And this pleases you," he said at last, choosing to amend his statement.

"Very much, indeed."

Sarek nodded. "I, too, am pleased. She has the makings of a good wife. T'Pran has trained her to be obedient."

"That remains to be seen. According to our son he has a Vengarian Bush tiger by the tail."

"All the more reason his grip should be firm, Amanda."

"As firm as yours, my husband?" she teased, offering him her two fingers. Sarek gave her a wry expression as he returned the gesture.

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In only a moment, a wink of an eye really, the traditional human wedding march music was cued. Spock glanced behind him to see the bridesmaids making their way up the center aisle in a slow, hesitation style walk. Then the entire gathering was on their feet in expectation of the bride but curiously there was a bit of a delay. Five full minutes passed and suddenly Amanda gestured to her son. Stepping over to her Spock offered a brief possible explanation for the delay. Before Spock could return to his place Kirk was at his side. “Do you think she's changed her mind, Spock?” he murmured. Spock merely answered with an uplifted brow. However, he could sense through their *link* she was troubled by something. And then the long awaited moment arrived as the bride followed on Scotty's arm. Spock turned to watch, at once experiencing that odd swelling of delight deep in his chest, as he beheld Brianna Cantrell slowly moving toward him. To his dismay, he could see she had been weeping. Something had her upset. He just didn't realize what it was; astonished that she would block him out again like this. Troubling him all the more. Rather than add to their joint angst, he deftly shoved the emotion aside. *Shielding* it from her.

A vision in white Brianna Cantell seemed to float

toward him. Spock was transported out of himself hardly aware of anyone or anything else around him or of the enormous smile on his own face as she drew near. This was right. He wanted this to be forever, grateful she had chosen to go through life with him. He found he could hardly wait to share his experiences with her, things he'd seen, places he'd been, wondering where they would end up at the last. Hoping it would be a good life, at least, that they would know joy — beyond this moment. That they would truly be given the chance to explore the possibilities.

Suddenly Brianna Cantrell was beside him, Scotty handing her over to Spock, laying her makeshift veil back to reveal her face, kissing her gently on the cheek before taking half a step back from the couple. Her smile was radiant, her eyes moist with emotion. Spock, already holding her hand reached out with a steadying hand at her elbow as Kirk took the podium before them. Brianna Cantrell glanced up at Spock, busily mouthing the words, 'I love you', Spock responding with 'Always' when Chekov, the other groomsman, leaned way over and noisily cleared his throat to gain their attention.

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Brianna Cantrell closed her eyes. Eight months ago she thought her life was over, that she would have to go on without him. It had been difficult, sometimes certain as she was, she would never heal. But time had taught her she could do it. She'd watched her grandmother cope after Grandpa died. Lonely, grieving, Elisabeth got busy with things around her, proving to Brianna Cantrell life really does go on. You need only choose to be a part of it.

And then sometimes the *All* hands you a gift. Spock's ultimate return was nothing short of a miracle. She was beside herself when she knew he lived again and that he was eager, despite their earlier misunderstanding, to pick up where they left off, having no intention of going on without her. And now, here they were at last. She felt so blessed this was happening. So unworthy and so blessed, reminding herself to breathe as suddenly Captain Kirk was addressing them.

"It has long been one of the privileges of a ship's commander to join others in matrimony. Today, we are gathered here for just such an event. To join two very special individuals ... Do you, Spock, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, through good times and bad, through sickness and health, until death, do you part?"

"I do," Spock said.

“Brianna, do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband to have and to hold, through good times and bad, through sickness and in health, until death, do you part?”

“I do.”

“The rings, if you please,” Kirk said, reaching toward Dr. McCoy, who began to pat down his own pockets, worry creasing his aged features. Scotty was at once leaping to his feet, taking the rings from his own pocket and handing them both to the doctor, amidst a few twitters from the human contingency of onlookers. “Now, repeat after me, with this ring, I thee wed ...”

The rest was a dream as Spock, carefully took Brianna Cantrell's left hand with his at Kirk's direction, gently easing the attractive, though makeshift, metal cylinder onto her third finger.

Brianna Cantrell in her turn placed the other ‘ring’ on Spock's left third finger, saying, “With this ring, I *thee* wed.”

“And now, by the power invested in me and by the authority of the United Federation of Planets, I pronounce you, husband and wife.” Kirk smiled broadly. He leaned toward McCoy, who whispered “Kiss the bride.”

At one point Brianna Cantrell suffered a chill exchanging a worried glance with him as Spock

took her elbow again as a precaution, murmuring to her, “It is a bit chilly in here,” just as someone’s communicator bleated. Ambassador Sarek quietly got up and removed himself from the little chapel.

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Back in his guest quarters aboard the *Enterprise*, Ambassador Sarek transferred the vid-call to the larger screen built into the bulkhead. “I’ll go,” Joseph Cantrell said, to the image of Ambassador Sarek on his screen.

“Joseph, you are a fine business man but perhaps I’m better suited to the task. Diplomacy is called for in this situation, wouldn’t you agree? A light hand. And they are my people —” Sarek argued.

“You forget. They are also my people. I, too, bear Vulcan citizenship, for nearly thirty years, now. In this instance, I am merely a citizen taking my situation to the Council for arbitration. I have just cause and it is my right.”

“Joe, if you will allow me —”

“Sarek, they have moved up the date for this Tribunal and I’m closer in proximity. I can get there in just a few hours. If we don’t get this settled right here and now, all of our efforts are for naught

anyway! Like you said, your son doesn't have the luxury of time. Besides, I have to be the one. Most of this is my fault. Inadvertently my doing. Huh," he half chuckled. "She's always accusing me of manipulating things to a different outcome. She's right, you know. I didn't trust enough to allow things to play out naturally. You make your own luck, as they say. It frustrates her to no end. Yet, strangely now, if I want my daughter back I have to be the one to fix this."

"Do you know what you will do?"

"I plan to start by formally withdrawing my original objection, with the hope that anything stemming from it will automatically be negated. And then I'll ask the Tribunal for immediate dispensation."

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Kirk glanced over at Spock, who seemed to be having the time of his life in his own quiet way. Certainly, the Vulcan could hardly take his eyes off of Brianna Cantrell, Kirk noting their constant exchanges, the shy smiles, the silent communication that was going on between them throughout this ceremony. He'd give anything to be in love like this, feeling only too well that tinge of jealousy in the pit of his stomach. Again. He envied Spock this

moment.

And then it was over, McCoy at his elbow, nattering at him about something. Kirk came around the podium, about to kiss the bride, drawing a frown from both his first officer and Dr. McCoy, who flatly declared, “Not you, *him!*”

“Oh, right. You may kiss the bride,” Kirk said.

Having taken up her bouquet from Uhura again, Brianna Cantrell was busily freeing her right hand to touch Spock’s fingers in the customary Vulcan manner. “Every single, significant event,” Spock muttered to her. “Do you see how it is?”

Gazing up at her new husband, she whispered, “I see that you should come here,” all the while offering up her two fingers in anticipation.

But as usual, Spock was full of surprises, chuckling lightly as he brought his own hand toward her. Smiling at her, he was quite caught up in the moment and without a conscious thought was reaching over to touch her chin with his outstretched fingers, instead. Gently uplifting her face, he whispered softly, “I love you,” and was suddenly kissing her ever so briefly on the lips in what he interpreted to be a holy kiss, and so therefore, acceptable even to the Vulcans assembled. As he gazed deeply into her eyes, Spock marveled at just how easily the words came,

unbidden.

Brianna Cantrell giggled with delight, smiling widely. "I knew you'd find a way to salvage the moment," she murmured, kissing him again briefly. "I love you, too."

Pandemonium broke out among the *Enterprise* crew, hooplas and applause, Kirk calling for immediate order. He then introduced the newlyweds to the assemblage, and quickly wrapped things up. He signed the legal document, having the bride and groom and their witnesses do the same, handing the electronic clipboard back to Commander Uhura, with the admonition, "It's vitally important that you register this right away," he said.

13

Vulcan Year of Ni'roc

Stardate: 8511.18

Mount Seleya, Vulcan

The wind blew the fine white powder into drifts against the buildings making it difficult to find the door, the hallowed chamber of the High Council set into the side of a mountain, as it was. Joseph Cantrell shook the snow from his cap and jacket before entering. He was greeted by a pair of fresh-face aides barely out of their teens, was his guess. Both aides were so stoic, so poised for the youngsters they were, such was their training, a testament to the *Vulcan Way*.

The anteroom to the chamber was uncomfortably hot. He'd almost forgotten how widely ranged the temperatures were on this red rock in space. Bone-crushingly cold in the winters, so intolerably hot for most other races in the spring and summers, the waiting room was set at the temperature most Vulcans preferred, mid range at forty degrees Celsius.

Oddly, he missed it, only realizing just how much, now that he was here. Joseph Cantrell striped down a few layers of protective clothing while he waited. He smiled to himself, so many pleasant memories. His daughter was born here. She belonged here, he decided, her nature more Vulcan at times than human.

She belonged with Spock. It was his hope he could persuade the High Council of that, have them suspend Sarkal's objections out of hand and rescind the restraining order the young lawyer had illicitly procured. And if warranted, although he loathed to pursue it, given the extreme consequences not only to Sarkal, but to his entire *House*, he would apprise the High Council of the Vulcan's under dealings in this matter.

No wonder he *sensed* his daughter's hysteria a short time ago, during what should be her shipboard wedding. It wasn't Spock she mistrusted, nor was it Spock who was messing with her head,

after all, but Sarkal. Joseph began to shake. The Vulcan was obviously obsessed with his daughter, stalking her in his need to possess her. Joseph Cantrell was suddenly chilled to think what might become of her, should Sarkal succeed in his sick quest.

There was no doubt about it, Ambassador Sarek, his wife and son would be unable to attend the *Tribunal*, as it was turning out. Things were going just as Sarkal had threatened they might. You can't fight logic with logic, Joseph decided. Sometimes it required illogic, a quantum leap, if you will. Joseph realized, all at once, that he could play this game with Sarkal and ultimately beat him at it, and quite soundly, too.

Problem was, Spock was in trouble, prone to the unique torments of this race, despite his mixed heritage, and the kids no longer had the luxury of time. Nor did Joseph. If Spock died again, this time trying to live up to the promise Joseph had extracted from him, back when the rules to this game were far different, he would lose his daughter forever. He could try and reach them, release Spock from that vow, but he doubted it would help now. He simply had to go forward.

Joseph drew in a quiet breath, trying to retain an air of tranquility. The Vulcan people were not given to emotional outbursts, nor were they persuaded by

such. Logic ruled their every action, their every decision. Sarkal had suggested, however arrogantly, that Joseph was *only a human* and that the Council put more stock in the argument Sarkal had presented, rather than anything Joseph had previously said or done. The arrogant youth essentially took all the credit for the censure being placed upon Spock.

Well, that was then and this was now. Somehow Joseph would just have to make them listen, he decided, as the young female came to collect him, escorting him to the Inner Chamber. Joseph Cantrell took up his jacket, draping it over his left arm and fell in behind her, making his way to the chamber. He had to set things right again. Joseph was an experienced business man. This was not the first time where humbling himself before a board of directors was necessary to ultimately achieve his goal. He drew in a quiet breath. He would confess everything to the Council, formally withdraw his initial objection to the idea of *Kiftiri* and Spock's original intent to take her to wed and hope that they would see their way clear into aiding him in his cause.

His thinking was logical, Sarek had concurred with him that everything hinging on that original, primary objection should be made null and void once said complaint no longer existed, which

included, hopefully, Sarkal's newly filed injunction, registering a further objection to the proposed match. Feasibly, it could be thrown out immediately, if the Council agreed to look into the matter at once, granting Joseph's request.

"Most honored members of the High Council," he began in a strong voice. "Thank you for taking the time to hear me on this matter of great import. I bring to you an injustice for which I seek your wise counsel and your timely intervention, should you deem my request both worthy and logical ..."

What Joseph Cantrell didn't count on was the *mindmeld* requested of him at the end of his speech. It came from Lord Sobel, father of Sarkal, who understandably wanted to ascertain the truth in the matter. "We are old friends, Joseph," Lord Sobel began, "But you are,... if you will forgive me, ... human. Although I would state for the record ... that you have never ... had occasion ...to lie to me."

"I quite understand," Joseph said, deliberating in his mind the choices before him. He saw the look in his daughter's eyes when Sarek demanded the same of her. Yet, she submitted all the same. In the end Brianna was believed.

Joseph closed his eyes aware his heart rate had accelerated, so completely frightened at the prospects of someone else tromping through his psyche, his private thoughts, again. His first

experience left him in a great deal of pain and anguish. Did he really have what it took to go there again he continued to deliberate? In the end, he pushed passed his fears, forcibly reminding himself of his daughter, of Spock, and of everything he came here to do. Vaguely, he remembered nodding his head in consent and the neutral party that came forward reaching for the pressure points along Joseph's handsome, aristocratic face.

14

November 18, 2285,

Stardate: 8511.18

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

In short order, the group headed out of the chapel, making their way to the Forward Observation Deck, which had been transformed by the crew from the meeting place earlier into a festive reception for the couple, that quickly got under way. Lively, yet tasteful music was piped in through the ships' compti system, replaced at one point by an impromptu Vulcan concert, courtesy of the Vulcan delegates. The pungent fragrance of Sulu's flowers wafted across the deck, beautiful

arrangements dotting the room, adding color. The galley staff, attired in their dress uniforms, skillfully catered the event, weaving their way through the group, bearing trays of champagne or hors d'oeuvres of either Vulcan or human variety.

Spock hadn't left Brianna Cantrell's side all evening, clinging to his wife, as if these were their last moments together. Their behavior to most seemed like any ordinary newlywed couple, so much in love, so caught up in the newness of their unity, leaving those who attended the party with the same impression, as if the bride and groom were the only two people in the room.

Very few were privy to the obstacles still facing the couple if they were to prolong today's promise, this beginning. In reality, time was closing in on them and they were only halfway to their mark. Brianna Cantrell knew there was trouble, picking up on it early on. Somehow she *sensed* her father was at the heart of it. Already inordinately nervous, she could feel the beginnings of yet another headache. How? Dread filled her being. Anxiety closed in on her so much so that she had to compose herself, to cut off her tears before she even dared enter the chapel. Just when she had convinced herself she was being silly, her fears were vindicated. She could also see it in Sarek's eyes, *feel* it in Spock's embrace. However, the

Vulcans continued doing an excellent job of *shielding* her, using their collective mind-powers to effectively block her psychic receptors, keeping her blinded. Consequently, she learned little else, unable to discern the exact nature of the problem.

They couldn't keep her from feeling troubled, from worrying, if that was their purpose, which left her exasperated. She would much rather know what they were up against, to plan a defense at least. To know her father was okay. Instead of giving into her fears, Brianna Cantrell snuggled into her husband when he offered her a slow dance. Swaying to the music, she listened to his heartbeat shutting out everything else. Frightened of the 'morrow, tonight he was hers and that was all she wanted to think about. For his part, Spock stroked her mind periodically all evening, constantly reassuring her. Testing their *bondlink* for soundness.

The evening grew late and still they had received no official word calling them to appear before the *Tribunal*. Time was running short, their window of opportunity to beat the deadline back home dwindling into nonexistence, even at warp nine. The date for the *Tribunal* had been moved up, there was nothing they could do but wait.

They stayed at the party for as long as protocol dictated: the customary dance, first with each other

and then with their parents, Brianna Cantrell dancing first with Sarek and then with Scotty, in the absence of her own father while Spock tended to his mother. The cutting of the cake came next, in which Brianna Cantrell, disappointingly to some, very lovingly served her new husband his morsel instead of the promised smearing of cake. Spock had gone along with all of these human customs taking them in stride. However, when it came to removing and tossing his wife's garter he balked.

"I'm to do what?"

"Well, it's simple, Spock," McCoy cajoled. "All you have to do is reach up under her dress, pull off her garter and toss it behind you to the waiting bachelors."

"Is there a problem here?" Kirk asked as he approached. Spock looked positively vexed.

"I find the idea of flinging my wife's undergarments into a crowd of overanxious, testosterone infused, sex-starved males both unconscionable and unseemly. Possessing a piece of her under garments is likely to foster fantasies of her. I will not have it." In the end it was Sarek who came to the rescue. He took his son aside quietly conversing with him.

"There is a saying, '*When in Rome ...*'" he began. "Joe Cantrell has been called as a witness before the

Tribunal. I'm told he made planet fall about an hour ago. He did ask a favor of us."

"Which is?"

"He needs you to do some reconnaissance..."

When Spock came back, he knelt at his wife's feet and still shaking his head in disapproval reached under her gown carefully preserving her modesty before she had the chance to draw her dress up about her knees.

"Ooh!" she said, jumping ever so slightly. Blushing.

"Problems?"

"It's not that far up."

"Indeed?"

"What did your father say to you, anyway?" Spock gave her a thoughtful look, as if weighing his words carefully. Most of what Sarek said was not for Brianna Cantrell's ears, he had been informed. The Ambassador intimated that Sarkal had taken extensive measures to undermine the couple's union that there was a chance something may still be in play, subtly interfering with their *bondlink*. Sarek had *felt* it in the back of Brianna Cantrell's consciousness during their brief *mindmeld*. Something quite indistinguishable at the time, but it had played on the elder's mind. When caught,

Sarkal had given up far too easily. Sarek was doubtful they had fully exorcized it that afternoon. Additional measures may be required to truly set her free of him.

And now, coupled with what Joseph had said and Brianna Cantrell's current state of mind, the old ambassador deemed it a distinct possibility. Spock had mentioned, too, that she kept pulling away from him. Perhaps, she was reacting to a not-so-subconscious suggestion? If so, it could be the one damning piece of evidence needed to stop Sarkal, given his most recent act of subterfuge. Sarek would take his concerns to T'Nikha, hoping, also, that it wasn't too late to reverse any damage incurred.

In the meantime, Spock knew what to do.

Spock looked at his wife, "He said this is like a prelude to the *Ancient Claim*, where the witnesses wait to hear you cry out. By this act I am making a show of possession. That you are mine — And flinging it in their faces, as it were."

"Oh, and you like that idea," she said giving him that crooked little grin of hers.

"You *are* mine."

"Always. You needn't fear. Sweetheart," she said, gazing at him with concern. "Are you all right? You seem unusually — tense? Art thee well?"

“I am fine,” he said, under his breath as he slowly ran his hands down her leg drawing the garter belt with him, pulling it off of her foot. Never letting on that his dreams of making a life with her were crashing down around them, the bitterness he felt at such defeat. The anger. “And you, my heart? You seem a bit weary. Perhaps, we should consider retiring for the night? I believe we have satisfied protocol, have we not?”

“I just have to toss my bouquet and then we can leave.”

“Then I suggest we get on with it,” he said, coming to his feet and with his back turned, tossed the blue silk garter into the bevy of gentlemen so eagerly awaiting it. Disturbingly, Captain James T. Kirk was the one who caught it. The women were next, all lining up with a purpose, seen in their eyes. There was a certain intensity about them. If Spock thought the men overanxious, these females were vicious.

Commander Archer, surprisingly, was the one who ended up with the bouquet, which changed hands several times. She dived headlong into the foray to come out the victor, after ripping the flowers from Yeoman Travers’ grasp. It was ugly.

“Simply barbaric,” Spock said to his father in passing. As tired as the couple was, nearly an hour more passed before they were permitted to leave.

The ship's clock, hanging on the wall, chimed in zero-one-hundred hours when the bride and groom left the party, which broke up immediately afterward. Thirty minutes later the deck was completely swabbed and no traces of the reception remained.

Brianna Cantrell was practically asleep when Spock carried her from the lift, down the corridor and on into his quarters placing her temporarily in her antique, re-upholstered tub chair brought over from her room. "I don't want to say good night," she moaned, sleepily.

"Technically, it is good morning," Spock said, as he undid his shoulder strap, pulling his uniform jacket open with one easy yank.

"What are you doing? What am I doing here, these are your quarters?" Brianna Cantrell said, suddenly sitting upright looking around her and down at the arms of her chair, puzzling over how it got here. Spock was busily removing his boots. Setting them aside, he leaned over pulling open a drawer in the dresser.

"Here, put this on," he said, as he reached in and took out one of his tee-shirts, handing it over to her.

"And just how am I going to get back to my quarters like this? I can't stay here."

"Indeed, you can. By all accounts you are my

lawful wife and I refuse to spend another night unnecessarily separated from you. Besides, my father suggested it may be less awkward if we stayed the night together. Keep the tongues from wagging. Now, hop-to, mister,” Spock said, as he continued to shed his outer layer of clothing. Off came his jacket and the regulation turtleneck shirt underneath, carefully setting them aside. He came to rest on the bunk as he removed his socks.

“But,” she said.

“You’ll find your hair brush, toothbrush and various other sundry in the lavatory. And in the morning, I’ll retrieve a fresh uniform and accouterments for you.”

“We can’t *be* together.”

“No. However, we can sleep together. That’s all I am proposing. You are once again, dead on your feet. Perhaps, knowing I am right here will enable you to sleep better, at any rate. It is logical, Bree,” he said, coming to his feet again. “Unless, of course, you don’t want to be alone with me.”

“Oh, you know better. Undo me?” she said at last, turning her back toward him as she stood up, holding her hair up and out of the way as Spock bent to the task. “It isn’t that I don’t want to be alone with you. I don’t trust myself. I’m feeling *very married* at the moment.” She grinned to herself.

Sexy to start with, she found him even more so half-naked, she decided, his chest and stomach covered with straight, silky black hair, his muscles lean and well-defined, fanning her passion.

“That is because according to the rest of the known galaxy, you are. We merely have yet to satisfy Vulcan Law,” he said, as he leaned down into her. Brianna Cantrell could feel his warm breath against her skin as he was suddenly kissing her bare shoulder, nibbling on her neck.

“Oh, red-alert,” she quietly sighed. “Are you sure this is going to work? I mean, I know what you’re trying to do and why. And I think it’s very sweet and very noble of you. But if we eventually have to be apart — Well, I’d like to know you’re alive and well, somewhere. Besides, I really, really want to be with you — If just this once?”

Spock abruptly halted, forcing himself back to the reality of their situation. He lightly caressed her shoulders, cleared his throat. “Madam, you are trussed up like a Thanksgiving Day turkey,” he flatly declared, viewing the hooks as the enemy just now. Few in number, they were still quite the challenge for already shaky hands, the severity of which was increasing daily as the hormones raged within him. His pulse rate and his blood-pressure, along with his adrenaline level were all driven off the scale. His patience was equally at an all time

low, none of which helped his mood.

“Oh, for Surak’s sake it’s just a short row of hooks. I just can’t reach them myself, or I wouldn’t trouble you,” she snapped, unconsciously reflecting his state of mind. “Hey, hey, hey, easy does it, I like this dress.”

“I shall take the utmost care, madam.” Despite the hindrance, he had her released from the gown in a short time, carefully laying it across the chair while she pulled on his tee-shirt, which hung just long enough to be considered tasteful. Even so, Spock found himself grinning at her when she looked up. “Very, very nice, madam,” he breathed.

He wanted her and was beginning to question his own logic in bringing her into his residence like this, serving more to slowly unravel the need to wait for his own wedding ceremony, despite his princely status, before he *Claimed* her. Brianna Cantrell caught his gaze, and the meaning there, aware of his growing desire and, blushing with the knowledge, went into the lavatory to wash up. She was very concerned, too, that he might not be able to wait, his good intentions notwithstanding.

Spock continued stripping down to his skivvies, busily hanging up his uniform jacket, placing his boots into the closet. First things, first, he reminded himself. Knowing in his heart this may well be their only wedding night, he wanted to give it meaning,

purpose. And at the same time he struggled with the irony of again having to turn her down. He had his reasons. All logically based, of course.

He was, after all, doing this for her.

Brianna Cantrell was more correct than perhaps she knew, speculating only last night that this might be their only time together. Joseph Cantrell had been officially served, twenty-four hours earlier than expected or anticipated, although in retrospect, they should have numbered it among the possibilities. Both *Houses* now were put into a highly untenable position, operating unwittingly outside of Vulcan Law, in contempt of court by their actions.

However, it had been too late to halt the ceremony by the time the restraining order was physically placed in Cantrell's hands. Sarkal had, in fact, cheated, filing the injunction without waiting for Joseph's word to be given, prior to the delegation's departure, as if he'd anticipated their response to his threat and so hoped to catch them in this now highly compromising position. Obviously, Sarkal also underestimated their ability to identify him as the one behind the seditious plot, expecting the ship and those within it to be kept out in space long enough for the trial to be held and a decision reached all without the presence of the defendants in this action.

Actively working on ways to salvage their future, Joseph Cantrell, immediately upon being served, traveled back to Vulcan hoping to meet with the planet's High Council in an attempt to persuade them Sarkal's claims were invalid and false. There was also a semblance of hope that since Brianna Cantrell was of age, making a marriage contract unnecessary, they might yet skirt the contempt charge on that basis. They would know their status when and if the *House of Talek Sen Dene* was duly served. And if not, Spock could only hope to win the physical combat with the henchman in order to keep his bride, in keeping with the *Statutory Challenge*. Sarkal had been clever enough not to risk his own life in his pursuit of this woman.

Spock's ability to win the combat was an iffy proposition at best, given his current disposition. He was further into the *Plak-tow*, the *Blood fever*, than he cared to admit.

The odds were simply against them. So, all three men sought to *shield* Brianna from such a harsh reality, at least for the time being, striving to give her a pleasant memory of her wedding, along with her wedding night. Spock also chose not to consummate their union despite his need and hers, having promised Joseph Cantrell he would leave her virtue intact, just in case things went against them,

which in turn would also leave it open for the bishop to grant her an annulment, possibly circumventing the stigma and difficulty of a divorce, should they ultimately fail in their quest. She was young and would most likely find herself wanting to wed again in the future. Spock agreed with Joseph. Both wanted the way clear for her to do so. Spock felt he owed her that much.

When Brianna Cantrell returned from the lavatory, she was wrapped up in his bathrobe. Spock threw the covers back from the bunk, drawing the robe from her shoulders. "Maybe you should lock the door," she said, as she scooted to the far side of the bunk, leaving room for him.

"No, I don't think so," he said, pulling on the robe, wrapping it around himself, fastening it. "It works better as a deterrent, this way. Knowing someone might walk in."

"Oh," she said, snuggling up on her side facing the bulkhead. "Does that happen often?" she asked, realizing to her dismay there wasn't going to be any hanky-panky tonight, after all. She'd sensed his overwhelming desire but unlike early this morning, this was different. She knew he was in need, although it wasn't quite as pressing at this moment. She wondered, too, just how long he could continue to squelch it like that, worried for him, knowing, instinctively, that in only a matter of time there

would be a groundswell he could no longer fight, even so, but perhaps not tonight. She sighed softly to herself. Married and still a virgin ... Best she could hope for was a good night kiss, she supposed, gazing sleepily at the makeshift ring on her hand. Yawning. It was rather attractive. Who knew Scotty had such a latent talent? Her certainly masked it well.

Spock went to wash up and when he returned, she was nearly fast asleep. He stood over the bunk watching her for a moment and when she stirred he held out the first two fingers of his right hand to her. Brianna Cantrell, glancing upward at him for a moment trying to read him, averted her eyes again without returning the intimate gesture. He frowned. “What is it?”

“Nothing. I was just hoping your lips would find their way over to mine, is all,” she said, sighing rather audibly, pressing her same fingers against his, resolutely accepting that this was how it was. Spock frowned again slightly, taking a seat on the edge of the bunk, shaking his head.

“Most unseemly,” he said, as she sat upright pulling the tee-shirt over her knees, hugging her knees to her chest, carefully covering herself with the sheet.

“What, a kiss from the man I just married? Come on.”

“*Brianna-Kam*, you know we are not allowed to make love prior to the wedding ceremony on Vulcan.” Adding quietly, running his knuckles down her cheek, “To initiate what cannot be completed is illogical —”

“Funny, that didn’t seem to bother you at all this morning. And really, you were being such a bad boy, all but tickling my tonsils the way you were going at it. Certainly, you didn’t see me pushing you away,” she said. “And what about when you grabbed for my garter? Besides, what initiation? I just want a little kiss good night. You’ve got your hand on mine,” she pointed out.

Again he was shaking his head. “Imp. It isn’t the same,” he reasoned. “And this morning we weren’t sharing quarters.”

“Oh, fine! If that’s the game you want to play. Okay, how about if I promise not to rape you?” she said and then locking her arms about his neck, she suddenly pulled him into her, pecking him lightly on the lips. “There, see. You didn’t die.” Spock’s reaction was equally swift. Taking her arms from around his neck, holding them behind her back with one hand he was grabbing her ankles with the other. At once she found herself in a prone position. Straddling her in the next instant, he had her pinned against the mattress as *Brianna Cantrell* playfully squirmed in his arms.

“So, this is how it is? I say no and you persist against my wishes? You are an imp and you deserve that scar on your forehead. You are always pushing, Bree,” he reminded her. Holding her gently, he had her bound in such a way she no longer had the use of her arms. Brianna Cantrell continued to squirm, struggling against his hold, frustrated with her sudden immobility. “Problems?” he asked, innocently enough.

“None here, sir,” she said, still fighting against the hold he had on her.

“You would never admit it,” he laughed lightly. “How does it feel to have the tables reversed? Tell me, just which one of us has the tiger by the tail?” he asked, smiling playfully at her. “I think I’ll take you right here and now,” Spock said, and kissed her along her jaw line and then made his way down her neck, while she squirmed, fruitlessly.

“You wouldn’t. You said so yourself. We’re not allowed.”

“Oh, I get it. You don’t have to follow the rules but I do.”

“Not exactly. Hey, but I promised not to rape you.”

“I made no such promise,” he said, kissing the base of her throat, diligently working his way downward. “Nor do I believe it would be against your will.”

“Okay. Okay. Okay. I’m sorry. Really. I won’t trespass again,” she squealed, giggling with delight. Spock looked at her amused. He had nearly made it to her breasts before she conceded. Stubborn woman. Most persistent. He contained his mirth.

“Am I to understand you don’t wish to make love at this time?”

“Not if you don’t. I mean, I didn’t intend. I never — I just wanted a little kiss. Geez, lighten up. It *is* our wedding night, after all,” she pleaded.

“Of that I am only too aware, my heart. Unfortunately, I am also aware of the razor’s edge I find myself on when I’m around you. I do not understand precisely what it is. But all of my senses are heightened. You make me alive. And I know that right now especially, it is all I can do to make sure it is only your hand I’m holding.”

“It’s that bad for you?”

“Indeed. You have no concept. I have wanted you from the moment I first laid eyes on you. To this day I am amazed I was able to maintain control given the drunken state I was in. You should consider yourself fortunate. As it is, my logic seems to be escaping me tonight. It was my thought that if we spent it together you would sleep. Foolish endeavor, at best. Now, give me your kiss goodnight and I’ll get out of here.”

“Where will you go? — I mean. Will I still be a virgin when you leave?”

“You insisted on the risk. No guarantees, *T’hy’la*.”

“Oh, I see. You’re lying to me again.”

“I beg your pardon?” Up went the eyebrow.

“You do so play hard ball.”

“And I am damned good at it. So endeavor never to cross me again.”

“Oh there, now you see, Sweetheart? You couldn’t leave it alone. You just had to go and bait me. Don’t you know I can’t resist a challenge?” Brianna Cantrell was grinning like the Cheshire Cat as he released her. She raised herself on her knees, wrapping her arms around his neck to pull him in closer, pressing her lips against his tenderly. Spock gave in and kissed her back this time. She was smiling when she pulled away again. “There. See how nice that was?”

“Indeed, it was most pleasant. But I would advise you not to push it, *T’hy’la*. I am infinitely weary of cold showers. And I confess I am growing irritable.”

“You’re a bit warmer than usual, too,” she said, cupping his face in her hands, frowning, touching his forehead. “Almost feverish. Oh, Sweetheart, I’m sorry. I guess I really don’t know how it is. I’m such a babe in the woods. I just love you so much,” she

said, hugging his neck. "Forgive me?" Spock wrapped his arms around her again, holding her close.

"Always."

"How long can you hold out like this? Wouldn't it be better if we? —"

"That remains to be seen. I seem to be in the early stages," he lied. The *Blood fever* was often the result of unusual delay in mating for the males, an unnecessary and fatal side-effect of the *Pon farr*. But he wasn't about to let her know that. Touching her chin, he added, "Good night, Bree." Kissing the half-moon scar on her forehead, he retreated to the door. Brianna Cantrell's words stopped him.

"You know, if we pretend we've been married for, let's say, ten years or more, you could stay. I know it's selfish but I really don't want to be alone tonight. It is our wedding night. And it would be a tragedy, when you think about it. Not spending it together."

"Indeed? I can't speak for you but I know I won't be bored in ten years. Come, I have a better idea. Let's go watch the sun rise."

"Huh? What, are you suggesting we steal a shuttlecraft, go A.W.O.L.?"

"Negative. From the Forward Observation deck."

“How ... ?”

“The ship will be leaving the Sigma Rho System in about thirty-seven minutes. Have you never seen the sun’s rays kiss the edge of a planet? Here, put this on,” he said, withdrawing a short, black robe from his closet, the one Uhura liked so well. The one his friends had clothed him in when they sent his lifeless body into the orbit of the newly-formed Genesis planet. It hit him mid-calf, brushing the floor slightly on his tiny bride but it served its purpose. She was perfectly decent to go out and about.

He hesitated for a moment wondering if she would *sense* its history and an instant later she gave him the *look* which implied she had. He also *felt* through their *link* it was so. Hugging herself, she closed her large eyes for a moment. Spock gently caressed her shoulders. “Madam, you have a quality about you that makes anything you don look good,” he smiled.

“I am honored by your kind attentions, sir,” she said, inclining her head to him. To his surprise she said nothing to him on the subject, but then why should she expend the words when her entire demeanor had so clearly conveyed her sentiments? It did give her pause. Recovering quickly, she was teasing him. Her eyebrow elevated questioning his use of the word, “Kiss?”

Spock shrugged, “Perhaps one more for the road,”

he said, tenderly kissing her again. Brianna Cantrell was smiling when they pulled apart again.

"Hm, I could get used to this," she said, taking his hands, pulling him out of the door. "Tell me, if I keep traveling how many more will I get?"

"You bad girl," he teased as they walked down the corridors together, she in the lead.

"You started it. I merely questioned the idea of the sun's rays having lips."

"Fascinating. I could study you for a lifetime and never figure you out."

"Is that good or bad?"

"I don't know, yet. We will simply have to wait and see."

"I love you," she said turning around and walking backwards, pulling him along with her.

Spock nodded. "And you are, indeed, my heart, *Brianna-Kam*."

=/\=

For the longest time they stood before the floor-to-ceiling viewports, gazing out at the blackness of space, broken only by the twinkling of passing stars in the distance. Spock was right behind her, his

arms wrapped tightly around her as she leaned back into him, nestling her head against his chest. It was quiet except for the thrum of the ships' engines. Warp three, he surmised by the slight vibration beneath their feet. The *Enterprise* was headed for Spock's home planet. Unable to sustain Warp Nine for any real length of time without risking damage to the engines, the ship's speed was necessarily scaled back. Even so, they had gained enough parsecs to ensure their arrival in two days' time. Despite their haste, the *Tribunal* would have likely been convened, perhaps even concluded without them. The only real benefit now was in getting Spock home and properly wed before the *Plat Tow* claimed another victim. If, in fact, he was allowed to wed.

After awhile, in their growing fatigue, the two eased onto the teak decking, Spock with his back leaning slightly against the antique ships' wheel, while Brianna Cantrell, again, leaned into his chest. Half of Sigma Rho hung before them in complete shadow, as did the room about them, the ship pulling away from the system. Drowsy, Brianna Cantrell gave into the exhaustion. Spock sat holding her, listening to the gentle rhythm of her breathing, not for the first time.

Shortly thereafter, he attempted to get up with the express purpose of carrying her back to quarters so

that she might sleep more soundly. Instead, he managed to rouse her. Brianna Cantrell sat upright sleepily, yawning and stretching. He directed her gaze, pointing toward Sigma Rho, the sun's rays breaking over the rim of the darkened planet in a magnificent display of reflected light. She grinned, nestling back against his shoulder, murmuring through another yawn, "Hm, someone's morning star. That's so beautiful. And you're right, you know. The sun *did* kiss the planet. No wonder you stay up here in space. But I think we should sleep in a bed tonight. I hurt everywhere."

Sifting through the layers of the black silken robe to find the hem, she gathered it up around her bare feet before she attempted to stand, and said, "I am going to strip out of this getup and take a nice hot shower." Spock supported her arm as she came to her feet. "And coffee. Coffee would be good," she assured him, leaning back down to lightly kiss Spock's lips.

"Thank you for that image. I guess we know what kind of a shower I am going to be taking," Spock said, coming to his feet.

"Oh, I did it again. I'm so sorry," she said, hand over her mouth trying unsuccessfully to contain her amusement.

Spock shook his head, said reassuringly, "That's all right. I will attend to you later. But for now, it is

only zero-two-forty-three. I suggest we go back to bed.”

Several minutes later, he again carried her into his quarters depositing her onto the bunk. Quietly he settled next to her, cradling her in his arms as he drew the covers over them. Snapping off the lights. “You awake?” she suddenly said into the darkness.

“Hm.”

“I was just wondering. Which date are we going to celebrate?”

“Date?”

“You know, wedding date. Which one are we going to count, the first or the second?”

“You really can’t sleep, can you?”

“I guess not.”

“Interesting point, though. Perhaps we should celebrate the entire week. It is logical. The anniversary of our actual in-person meeting is on the fifteenth, our first wedding is the Eighteenth and our second wedding is scheduled for the twentieth, Earth calendar. I suggest we take the entire week.”

“Hm. Logical.”

“Now, go to sleep.”

“Aye-aye, sir. Good night.”

"I thought you didn't want to say good night?"

"That's when we had to go to separate rooms."

"Ah, so it's okay now. It is good for me to understand these things. I suppose it is logical in its own, skewed, highly feminine way. I think it even possible at some point to catch on —"

"Spock?"

"Yes, my heart?"

"Go to sleep."

"As you wish. Good night, *T'hy'la*."

15

November 18, 2285,
Stardate: 8511.18
Spock's Quarters

A little after zero-four-hundred hours, Brianna Cantrell began tossing and turning. “*Kalifée. No, kali-fahr,*” she gasped, coming awake rather abruptly. She’d had the dream again, glancing about her in the dark, unable to place herself, at first. Spock reached over and drew her head into his chest, lightly stroking her hair. By his calculations she had only been asleep fifty-two minutes.

“I’m here. I am right here,” he said gently.

"I'm okay," she panted. "I'm okay."

"Do you wish to talk about it?" he said after a time of silence.

"What?" she said, still not fully awake. Slowly Brianna Cantrell resettled next to him in the bunk. She could still hear that incessant flapping of wings. Louder and louder, it rested just on the edge of her consciousness. How was that possible? Sarkal had withdrawn from her during the struggle at the Tea Ceremonial. She saw the device, the *psionic resonator*, all broken into bits. Sarkal's *Gifts* were not terribly developed, nor very strong, which was why he was still unwed. He had so little to offer, added to the fact, he was never right in the head, slightly insane — beyond his mind's own reach, as the Vulcan's said.

Brianna Cantrell could *feel* the dark whisperings relentlessly playing on her insecurities. '*He is deceiving you!*' Was this just a residual, a leftover *sensation* only, as unreal as the nightmare that awakened her? She suffered a chill. Or had he fooled her into thinking he had withdrawn from her, when in fact, he had not? Brianna Cantrell shivered again, pulling the covers over her shoulders. What manner of trickery was this?

"*Brianna-Kam*," Spock said again, "do you wish to talk about it?"

“Oh, no. Not really. It’s — it’s always the same. There’s no point —”

“*Brianna-kam*, your heart is racing and your face is wet. Caused by a dream that has been plaguing you for a few nights running now. Perhaps, it would be better if we talked it out —” he said, reaching upward and snapping on the small overhead lamp.

Abruptly, Brianna Cantrell sat upright mopping her cheeks with the backs of her hands, drawing her knees into her chest, stretching the tee-shirt over them once again. Huddled into the corner of the bunk, the low curving overhead barely giving her clearance, she reminded Spock of a *So’ichi*, a small critter timidly venturing from its burrow. “No, I’m all right. See? I’m fine, now. Really. It’s stupid. It was just a dream.” She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, grinning at him when he gave her the ‘eyebrow’. “I’m fine. But I love you for being so concerned,” she said, stroking his face.

“Indeed? It works both ways, you know. Our *link*. I may no longer have the luxury of hiding from you. But then, neither can you from *me*. Not altogether, anyway. And I, for one, am not fine with this. I am greatly disturbed at your constant refusal to talk to me about it. As a matter of fact, you keep pulling away. At the very time we should be strengthening our *bondlink*. I have to tell you I find the distance it

is putting between us intolerable. Bree — do you regret *bonding* with me? Marrying me? We have been forced to act so quickly in this ...”

“No. Oh, no, of course not! How can you say that? Spock — I admit it has left my head spinning a bit. But that’s not it.”

“Then. What is it? I assure you, you have my complete attention.” When she grew quiet, huddling into herself and keeping her eyes downcast, Spock let his breath out. Slowly. Silently. Debriefing her on the nature and content of her latest dream wasn’t going to be easy, though that was the task before him. And even if that task hadn’t been given him by Sarek, at the behest of Joseph, Spock could no longer ignore the greater issues involved here, catharsis for her and healing for them both. Trust wasn’t something easily restored, Spock’s main motivation in this. As tightly *shielded* as she’d been keeping herself lately, he could still feel her pain. And his own as she constantly pulled away from him.

“You said, ‘*Kalifée*. No. *Kali-fahr*’ as you were waking —”

“I told you I don’t want to talk about it!” she snapped. How could she tell him Sarkal was still *walking* in her sleep? That was it — that flapping sound, the ‘Voice’ outside of herself. He had been playing mind-games with her and she had

unwittingly played along — for all of these weeks! And she had foolishly believed Sarkal was gone, that she was freed from his grasp. Yet, here he still was, up to his games again. How was it possible and how could she tell Spock? She was too ashamed. At once, she scooted back under the covers, rolling over to face the bulkhead, wishing she could hide, and knowing that was impossible at the same time.

Raising up on an elbow, Spock tilted his head to one side, placing a hand on her arm. She seemed perturbed all of a sudden. “Bree. It is illogical for you to carry this weight on your shoulders alone. If my brother were alive, he would tell you to ‘*share your pain and gain strength from the sharing*’,” he quoted. Leaning over her, he watched her as she wrestled with her demons, wiping the renegade tear from her cheek. Sneaking a quick, sidelong glance up at him, at last she spoke.

“Your brother, huh?”

“He was a little beyond his mind’s own reach, true enough, searching for *Sha-kha-ri*, but he might have been onto something.”

“I’m sorry. Happens to the best of them, I suppose.”

“And often the brightest. But he did know one thing — ”

"You're going to make me do this, aren't you."

"You need to exorcize the demons, so you can rest."

Biting on her lip, Brianna Cantrell suddenly squeaked in the tiniest of voices, "I can't believe I betrayed you!" She promptly broke down into harsh, painful sobs. Spock sat up, gathering her into him all at once.

"Sh, be still. You have not betrayed me. You could never betray me. Unless there is something to his claims, after all?" he said, searching her face.

"No," she said, drawing back from him. Shaking her head. "No!"

"Then how? In your dream?"

"Oh, all right!" she said, feeling so completely defeated by it all. She resettled into him, at his insistence, leaned into his chest. She could feel the rhythm of his heartbeat, comforted by it, glad he had insisted on staying together tonight. Glad for the protection of his embrace, snuggling into him. Spock drew the covers over her, wrapping his strong arms about her again when she caught a momentary chill. And then she began,

"We're at this place, inside this ancient, open-air temple out beyond the city. It's a circular temple, almost stadium-like, built on slabs of marble, or jade even, that graduate downward to a sandy basin-like

floor. The surrounding columns that define the enclosure are intricately carved while the rocks that form the archways leading inward are more roughly hewn with wind chimes of a jade-like stone marking the entrance, dangling in the breeze.

“There’s a much larger gong carved from the same material, or so it appears, having the same geometric shape at least, although it seems much, much newer somehow. Hanging from the center of the promenade. It overlooks the open ring of hot lava rocks. There’s some sort of steamy substance spewing forth from the pit. More than the volcanic gases — Incense, I think. I would guess, anyway. By the haunting, sweet fragrance of it.” Brianna Cantrell picked at the fabric of the blanket she huddled beneath, trembling.

“It’s rather rugged terrain way out here. There isn’t anything for literally miles, only the red horizon. And that infernal flapping of wings ...”

“Flapping of wings?” Spock interjected, pulling himself up a bit higher in the bunk.

“Hm,” she nodded. “And way, way over in the distance you can see the snow-capped peaks of Mount Seleya. It’s your family’s place of *Kunat’Kalifee*, I think. Your place of *Marriage or Challenge*,” Brianna Cantrell choked out the words. “And we’re all gathered here for the ceremony.”

Spock marveled at the accuracy of her description, wondering if sometime while she lived on Vulcan, during her travels, she'd come across his family's legacy. Concerned, too, that due to the nature of her *Gifts*, it may carry a greater significance. His father was right to send him on this mission, at last accepting the logic therein. And suddenly he was concerned by the odd reference. She'd mentioned it a time or two before, oddly enough. He had even *felt* it himself during their earlier joint *wanderings*.

Gently, he joined his mind to hers more directly, fearing that their *bondlink* wasn't as strong as he first believed, lightly probing along this additional *link* until he shared, firsthand, her memory of the dreams and all that she had experienced at the time it was happening, thoughts, feelings, her awareness of the interloper — Like the beating of tiny wings brushing at the back of her mind

How was it that Sarkal was back in her head, again *walking* in her sleep like this? Spock experienced a knot in his gut. Sarkal had been tackled by members of the delegation, the weapon he allegedly used to control Brianna Cantrell, destroyed in the ensuing scuffle. So, how ... ?

Was this why she constantly pulled away from her husband, seeking to protect Spock all of this time? To *shield* him as he had *shielded* her over the years? Or had she betrayed him, as confessed? No, that he

wouldn't, couldn't accept.

"It is all right, I am right here," he said, soothingly, aware of the growing wet splotch on his chest. Her tears, just as her words and remembrance of the subconscious images, tumbled forth now. Painfully. "Please continue," he said, as he held himself in trance with her.

"T'Pau is there with her entourage. Her personal guard, the bell-players and the armed guard. The *henchman* — His face is masked," she said, gesturing. Drawing a description with her hand, although she needn't have bothered. *Melded* with her, he saw what her mind's eye saw. "He's wearing a large triangular thing that fits over his nose and mouth extending down beyond his chin. I can't see who he is but there's something about him that disturbs me. The way he looks at me around the edges of his mask." Brianna Cantrell stopped for a moment, gathering her thoughts. Spock gently squeezed her arm.

"All is in readiness and it seems as if nothing can stand in our way. Not now. Not ever. I'm at peace, waiting only for you to finish striking the gong — Once, twice and then someone makes the call and it's up to me to respond. I just have to return with, '*Kalifahr*', and the marriage ceremony will begin.

"And I look over at you and I smile as I'm suddenly saying, '*Kalifee*'. But I don't know that

I've said it. In my mind I've spoken correctly, asking for the ceremony to begin, choosing marriage, but the look on your face, the incredulity — The pain in your eyes as if somehow I had betrayed you, as you just keep repeating, 'Kalifee, Bree? Kalifee?' — And the flapping of wings is so loud!" Brianna Cantrell closed her large eyes unable to rid herself of the image, throwing her hands over her ears to block out the incessant white noise.

"Suddenly everything is in chaos and out of nowhere steps Sarkal, smirking, saying he's my chosen *Champion* even though I'm not aware of saying anything further. And then I see he has the mask in his hands and I know at that moment he was controlling my mind, whispering, making me ask for *Challenge*, naming him as my *Champion*! I try to tell T'Pau I misspoke, but I can't get the words out and no one is listening anyway.

"And when she finally does hear me she says I can't take it back. *Challenge* is lawfully offered and now must lawfully go forward. Where's the logic in that?" Brianna Cantrell paused to wipe the tears from her face. "I'm beside myself, hysterical. I can't even get you to listen. Your mind has gone off somewhere — *Plak tow* or something, I don't know. And then out of the corner of my eyes I see Sarkal pick up a *lirpa*, brandishing the half-moon blade, testing its strength and suddenly he's lashing out at

you with it — *before* the bell-banners even stop resonating. He doesn't wait for the signal. True to form, he cheats!

"It's horrible. There's blood everywhere, splattering me in the face!" Brianna Cantrell put a hand to her face as if the blood was actually there. "I'm awash in it. And you fall at my feet, staring up at me with that look of pain and betrayal still in your eyes!" Brianna Cantrell burst into renewed tears with that, pulling away from him, sitting up. Spock returning to himself, traveled back along their *link*, gently disengaging from their secondary *mindmeld*. "Oh, God! Forgive me. *Please* forgive me! I can't believe I could betray you like that!"

"Bree, *Brianna-Kam*," Spock said, at once cupping her face in his hands in order to get her to look at him. "It was a dream. A hideous nightmare. But it was only a dream. It is not reality and you have not betrayed me. You could never betray me."

"Oh, no? Then what's he doing in my head, again?" she sobbed. Fighting for control, she sat upright, brushing the tears away using the sleeve of the tee shirt as a hanky, this time. "For a little while I was free today. How did he get back *in*?" Spock pulled open a small drawer in the headboard of the bunk, handed her a tissue.

"Thank you," she whispered, drawing in a few even breaths before going on. "Tell me something,

then. What could he actually do if he stands before the Tribunal without us? Besides formally object to the marriage, that is, if a priestess is even willing to perform the marriage rite? What if they accept his injunction? ... Would I still have to be the one to call for *Challenge*? Or would the court give him the right to call for it himself? I *need* to know. I need to understand if this was just a nightmare, or if it is in any way a premonition."

"Bree," Spock said quietly. "You should know the injunction has already been filed and your father has been served."

"What? When?" Brianna Cantrell looked stunned for a moment, tears standing in her eyes, her gaze far off.

"Do you remember when my father's communicator went off during our wedding?"

"I heard it bleep and then heard his voice. He must have left, to take it out in the corridor. I heard the pneumatic door open and shut and then I couldn't hear his voice anymore."

"That was your father calling to alert us. Sarkal filed the injunction before he informed your father of his intent, as it turns out. Calling for the full *Tribunal* to convene immediately, so this matter could be settled before the courts close for the High Holy Time. So there would be no time to file an

appeal until after the celebration of *Ku' Tan' Ye*.”

“Yes, that is just like him. He waited until we were on a mission, duty-bound to complete it, in fact, before we could even hope to head home again. And by his doing so, we would be forced into a compromising position. Married, but our union not sanctified. And in the meantime the pressures of *Pon farr* would likely overwhelm us, so even if we tried to refrain ... should we attempt to abstain from consummating our union, we would ultimately fail. And do so outside the bounds of the law. Or you would die. He has us. Maneuvered us into this trap. No matter what we do now, he's won. Checkmate. Your *House* ultimately fails, collapsing for lack of heirs and driven out of power by the weight of constant scandal.”

“Perhaps, that was his intention all along,” Spock said. “At any rate, we'll just have to see what comes on the 'morrow. Neither you, nor I know just which way the Council will rule on this. I, personally, have always believed in possibilities. For instance, your father may prove more persuasive than any of us give him credit for.”

“And in the meantime, Sarkal successfully manages to suck the joy right out of our day. I don't believe this — What right does he have? I'm not his. I was *never* his. It isn't like you stole me from him! This is just so — *wrong*.”

"*T'hy'la*. Did you not hear what I said?" She seemed so far away at the moment it had him worried. She wouldn't look at him, wouldn't meet his eyes.

"That he cheated, that like a good attorney he had more than one angle at play? Delaying the delegation's departure was a good move. You have to admit it was good. Good enough to enable his cronies time to serve Daddy with said court orders. And if that didn't work, by moving up the date for the *Tribunal*, he made damn sure we wouldn't reach Vulcan in order to defend ourselves and his case could be heard. What next? What else does he have in his little legal bag of tricks?"

"Perhaps, Sarkal was merely hedging his bet —"

"I mean, where does that leave us, now? Married, yet not. All because Vulcan won't recognize off-world marriages by its citizens."

Spock held up his finger in protest, "It is merely my nobility that provides this hindrance."

"Of course — I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head in dismay. "I thought I was prepared to fight. But I'm just so tired. I can't sleep. — And suddenly I feel like I belong nowhere. Displaced. Like I have no home. It's too far to go back. And we can't go forward — What do we do, now? What can we do, now?"

“Continue to go forward.”

“But —”

“As you stated, we have come too far to turn back. By Federation law, our marriage exists. Although, so long as it remains unconsummated there is a chance for annulment. A step up from divorce, at least. But at any rate, I cannot remain celibate indefinitely. And, as of yet, we haven’t been properly served.”

“Meaning?”

“There are two possibilities that come to mind. One, since you are of age, it nullifies the need for a marriage contract. Even if Sarkal succeeds in voiding the existing one, we might yet be allowed to marry. If we can cut through the legal red tape he’s set up, that is. It will be up to the *Tribunal*,” Spock said, slowly. “Or, he will have won his right to offer *Challenge*, in which case a Vulcan wedding will proceed one way or another.”

“I see,” she said, burying her head into her knees. “To the victor go the spoils. Now, I feel like chattel.”

“I am sorry. It isn’t meant to be that way.”

“Spock,” she said, suddenly looking up again. Trembling. Intense. She searched his eyes for answers, for comfort, at least. “We can’t go forward with this. Don’t you see what he’ll do? How he’s

manipulated all of us into this position. He isn't honorable. He'll stop at nothing. *Thinking* us there if he has to. He'll kill you. He *will* kill you."

Spock refused to accept her spin on this, slowly shaking his head at her, refusing to validate her fears.

"Oh dear, sweet God! He's been in my head. Oh, it's he. It was he all along! I feel so — so dirty! How did he even get *in*?"

"Come here," Spock said, pulling her into him, wrapping himself around her. "I told you I would not allow the tragedy of that scenario. And the theory is, he slipped passed your mental barriers while you were sedated."

"*Ka'et' klasa?* — You have a plan to stop him, right? Please, oh please, tell me you have a plan."

"I would like to think there are always possibilities. However, should it come down to it, I ask that you remember one thing. Not only are you my wife, you are my heart and as such I will not easily let you go."

"Oh, God! We are winging it again. I can't do this!"

"Negative. But I am asking you to trust me. And to hang on tight to me. To our *bondlink*. As your husband and as your friend. Will you trust me?"

Nodding, she said, “I trust you.”

“Good. Now seal it,” he said, tapping his chin. At once Brianna was smiling through her tears.

“Oh, you’d do anything for a kiss,” she said.

“Indeed, as I indicated earlier. I am getting a bit desperate,” he said, as she leaned into him, kissing his lips. For the longest time he held her there. Then all at once they were scooting back under the covers, Brianna Cantrell reclining against his chest as he pulled the covers over them. Running his hands slowly through her long hair, he gently stroked her back, doing his best to help lull her to sleep again.

Saying quietly, “You have to know Sarkal would be a fool to misuse his *mind-powers* in such a way. It is unlawful to disrupt a *bondlink* between others. A heinous crime. And he would not live long enough to enjoy his victory over me, were he so inclined. Death is the penalty for such an offense. I doubt he would behave so illogically, nor would he be so unwise.” Yet, even as he spoke, he knew with sudden clarity, that was exactly what Sarkal had been attempting.

“Hm,” Brianna Cantrell murmured, drowsily. “From your lips to God’s ear.”

“May it be so,” he said. When she was firmly asleep, Spock quietly eased out of the bunk and

taking a seat at his private communications console, woke his father giving him this latest information, and his interpretation of it. Grimly, Sarek concurred with his son's analysis. In conference for a quite awhile, planning their possible counter measures to such an attempt, the two determined it necessary to pass along such intelligence.

There was yet a chance Brianna Cantrell's dreams were more than prophetic in nature. If what Spock had *felt* during their brief *mindmeld* was indeed a fact, the allegations against Sarkal were grave. Sarek would have to ask T'Nikha, whose involvement in this affair had been mandated by the High Council, to verify their suspicions. And given Joseph Cantrell's intentions, Sarek deemed it necessary and logical to arm him with all the details. A message was immediately dispatched to the businessman via his personal compti. That done, Spock crawled back into the bunk with his wife snuggling into her warmth, his feet so cold they hurt with the chill in these quarters.

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Zero-six-hundred came and went, the ship's computer unheeded, Spock awaking instead to the sounds of his door shooshing open and closed and the lights slowly illuminating the room. He stared

bleary-eyed at the built-in chronometer right above him. He was incredibly fatigued. At first he attributed the rude wake-up call to his bride but she was still curled up next to him, buried under her long, blonde tresses.

“Well, good morning, sleepyheads,” Lady Amanda chortled, as she continued through the room toward the lavatory. “Getting an early start on my grandchildren, are we?”

“Actually,” Brianna Cantrell said, rather groggily, raising up on an elbow, pushing the hair up and away from her face. “That’s just a rumor. Our being pregnant. I’m still a virgin.”

“Still?” Amanda gave her son the ‘eye’, used against him his whole life when she was searching for the truth in the situation. Not that Spock was prone to telling falsehoods, quite the contrary. Amanda grinned at his uplifted eyebrow, his usual response.

“Mother,” he said, sitting up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bunk. He leaned toward his wife speaking quietly to her when his mother disappeared beyond the lavatory door. “When are we allegedly due? And when did I miss out on all the practice?”

“That I don’t know. Just that there is a group bent on watching my tummy!”

“Indeed,” Spock said, leaning his head slightly to one side, considering the matter. “Perhaps, we shouldn’t disappoint them.”

“Oh, go away!” Brianna Cantrell laughed. “I know what you want.”

“Practice. Practice is good,” Spock said, leaning into her kissing her, nuzzling her neck. Brianna Cantrell laughed, wrapping her arms around him, hugging him.

“I suppose, realistically, your mother isn’t getting any younger. You know. Your father made a point of it, too, last night, suggesting that more and more, it’s her fear she won’t live long enough to see her grandchildren. Did you see how her face was all lit up with the prospects, just now? I don’t think we have a choice —”

“Bree.”

“Oh, I know. We have a four-year plan, and after all I owe Starfleet, I mean —”

“I was afraid he’d cornered you. Listen to me,” Spock said, gently taking her tiny hand in his, lightly stroking the back of it, enjoying the soft, silky feel of her skin. “When and how many children we have is up to us and no one else. Not our parents, not the crew or even Starfleet — Pregnancy is still a gateway out of the service, if you want to take it. But it is our decision.”

“Understood. And I would like a little time to play in the stars.”

“Now, as far as I am concerned, I would prefer sooner than later. My mother isn’t the only one on a time clock. I am acutely aware of my own mortality, as you might imagine. But again, madam,” he said, gently cupping her chin. “You, also, have to be ready since you will bear the greater burden in this venture. At least for the period of gestation. Or, at least until they’re no longer spitting up on things. Or, perhaps, even until they’re off to college —”

“Ah!” Brianna Cantrell gasped. Easing out of the bunk she began to pace about. “I don’t think so, Bud. I’m going to need more help than that. You really haven’t a clue about any of this, have you?”

“My experience in dealing with pubescent or even prepubescent beings is negligible, at best. I am, however — willing to learn.”

“Good. One of us needs to —”

“And your qualifications on the subject are ... ?”

“I’ve ... held a baby. A few times. Most recently, one that was eight months old at the time. And I’ve changed exactly three diapers in my life. One was really messy, too. But you’d be gratified to know I didn’t throw up, nor did I take the offensive wrapping and bury it out back, unlike some people I

know. I dealt with the crisis. And remarkably, both the child and I survived.”

“Perhaps, we should both do some considerable research into the matter before blindly rushing in —”

“Yes,” she giggled, “it would be good to learn which end is up and how not to diaper the baby’s head!”

“You are, indeed, a sassy brat!” Spock said, at once grabbing her by the waist and pulling her back down on the bunk with him, holding her there while he tickled her, and otherwise nuzzled her neck.

“Stop it, stop it! You need to shave,” she giggled as he came to rest on top of her gazing intently into her eyes. “Actually, I helped my mother with Adrian. I’m not an expert but I’m not completely in the dark, either.”

“And this alleged eight month old child?”

“My nephew, Jeremy. Aaron’s son. His wife, Sandi, had a sitter who was in the habit of burying diapers out in the back garden! I came home to visit for a weekend just in time to catch her in the act.”

“That is disgusting.”

“I thought so. I promptly sent her home and took over,” she chuckled. At once, sobering up she

returned his gaze. “Thank you,” she said, quietly.

“For what?”

“For talking as if there were a future for us.”

“Madam,” Spock said, after a moment. “Tomorrow evening I will implant you with my seed and we will just see what comes of that. What our future holds.”

“Ooh, I love it when you talk dirty,” she said, tilting her chin upwards enticingly. “Is that a promise or a threat, mister?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” he uttered, his lips brushing hers ever so briefly. For a moment Brianna Cantrell thought she wouldn’t have to wait for the answer. Until suddenly, they were no longer alone!

“That’ll be just about enough of that, you two. Come on, rise and shine. We have so much to do and so little time,” Lady Amanda said, as she returned to the living quarters, the sounds of water filling the large jet-tub intruding upon the moment. “Spock, your father’s waiting on you for breakfast. He’s in the officer’s wardroom,” she said, handing him his toothbrush, hairbrush, and a fresh towel. “I think you’re going to want to use Jim’s quarters. There’s going to be a bit of traffic through here in a minute or two. And you my dear,” she said, gazing over at Brianna Cantrell. “Have a bath awaiting you.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet of you but really, I prefer a sonic shower —”

Spock gazed over at his young wife, eyebrow riding high. “The traditional bridal bath, my heart,” he said.

“Oh, of course.” Brianna Cantell sighed, murmuring, “The public bath, what a joy.”

“It takes some getting used to, I know,” Lady Amanda said, with a ready smile. “On Earth a bridal shower isn’t a shower at all but a party with guests bearing gifts. Whereas on Vulcan, it’s actually a bath with the guests bearing spices and oils to ready you for the bridal chamber. Personally, I thought I was going to die. My new mother-in-law thought I was nuts. But then, Vulcans don’t have the same sense of modesty as we humans. There’s a good girl,” she said, as Brianna Cantrell reluctantly headed into the lavatory, fluttering her fingers at her husband as he turned to leave. “Crawl into the tub and enjoy the warm bubbles —”

Taking up a fresh clothing for himself, Spock turned back to Brianna Cantrell before she disappeared into the lavatory. “Bree, happy bathing.”

“Oh, just go away already!”

“I shall see you at dinner,” he hailed, turning to his mother. “She will be free for dinner, will she not?”

“We’ll see. We have a rather full agenda,” Amanda grinned, shoving him gently toward the door. “Now, get out of here. You know you’re not allowed. I have no idea what you’re doing in here to begin with.”

“Mother,” Spock said, a touch of impatience in his deep voice. Catching her warning glance, he bit back the forthcoming argument. “All right, you don’t have to shove. I’m going,” he said, backing out of the room, somewhat surprised at his mother’s insistence. Turning at the last minute he caught himself just as the door split apart.

Stretched tautly across the opening, a mere thirty centimeters above the deck, was a single red thread placed there purposefully to trip him. It was an ancient Vulcan custom to taunt the groom in this manner. Spock prided himself on having spotted the trap, enabling him to carefully step over it. “Oh, yes. Of course,” he murmured as Amanda looked on.

In the next instant he was catching his foot on the string cleverly placed across Jim’s door as well and over he went with a loud thud.

“Oh, my goodness, Mister Spock!” cried Lieutenant Nash as she and the others approached. At once she was on her knees beside him. “Are you all right, sir?”

“Something wrong, Son?” Lady Amanda grinned,

at once rushing into the corridor.

“Most illogical,” Spock said, raising himself on his elbows as he sat there in the doorway across the corridor glaring up at her, shaking his head.

Lady Amanda merely shrugged, holding up her arms. “Well, after all you’ve got to fall over at least one of them or there won’t be any grandchildren.”

“Mother. I am finding your attitude in all of this entirely disconcerting.”

16

Bridge

Stardate: 8511.19

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

“Spock, I’m a little surprised to find you on the bridge this evening,” Kirk said, as he took the center seat, coming back from the dinner break. Spock looked up from his seat at the science console. “I don’t know why but I thought you’d be spending your leave time with your new wife.”

“Her agenda is rather full. There are certain customary rituals in which the bride partakes and from which the groom is excluded. The bridal baths,

for one.”

“Aye,” Scotty spoke up as he took the promenade walking toward them. “I’ve heard all about that. They’ve also given her a shower. She’s gonna be the cleanest, little bride by the time you get your hands on her, Mister Spock!”

“If I get my hands on her,” Spock muttered, practically under his breath. James Kirk frowned as he gazed over at his friend.

“Anyone heard from the senior Cantrell, yet? What sort of progress he’s making? Last thing I heard he had made his case before the *Tribunal*.”

“He asked and was granted an executive session when he arrived. The jury, as you humans say, is still out,” Sarek said from the entrance to the turbo elevator. “Permission to enter the bridge, Captain.”

“Permission granted,” Kirk said, looking up, swiveling in his chair to face the newcomer. “So, we don’t know where we stand, just yet, the nature of our status?”

“No, but it is a good sign that they were willing to hear him. My son?” Sarek asked quietly, coming to stand next to him, studying his son’s demeanor, the hands Spock struggled to keep still as he worked. Spock slowly looked up at his father.

“Father?”

“Perhaps, you should no longer try to hold out. Logically —”

“T’Pau did not honor the *Ancient Claim*, when Stonn made it, dismissing it out of hand. I will not risk it. I cannot — If things fail,” Spock paused to gather his thoughts, actively fighting the hormonal-driven surge of illogic that slowly consumed him, stripping him of reason. “It is logical to wait. This way, unconsummated, the bishop may grant her an annulment. Spare her the stigma and difficulty of a divorce.”

“You are giving up?”

“I am merely facing all the possibilities. She is — so human. I do not wish to her hurt any more by all of this than is necessary.”

“T’Pring wasn’t *bonded* to Stonn. She was *bonded* to you at the time,” Sarek reminded him. “I assume you’ve *bonded* with Brianna?”

“Yes. It was necessary.”

“So may this be.”

“I am all right.”

“You are, indeed, your mother’s son. Stubborn to the end,” Sarek said.

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"Thank you for joining me," Spock said, as soon as Brianna Cantrell made her way into the dimly lit Forward Observation lounge. A small table, draped in fine linen and set for two, stood ready in the far corner. Spock stood beside it. Candles flickered with her approach.

"This is so nice," she smiled. "You went to a lot of trouble. I'm sorry I'm so late into the evening. It must be nearly twenty-hundred."

"Twenty-thirty-four."

"Oh, wow. It's later than I thought" she said, wrapping her arms around his waist giving him a bear hug. "I know how important, this possibly being our last —"

"You smell very clean, madam. Two baths and a shower later. With one more pending tomorrow."

"Oh, stop!" she laughed. "Just hold me. I've had the most grueling of days."

"Indeed, one long party."

"I would much rather have spent it with you," she said, as he seated her. Coming back around to take his own seat, pouring them each a small glass of a rare Vulcan vintage, he held his goblet aloft lightly clinking the edge of hers.

"What's this? An attempt to loosen me up to your

advances, sir?”

“To my virgin bride,” he said, his eyes devouring her over the rim of his glass. Brianna Cantrell dropped her gaze, blushing.

“A temporary status only, I hope,” she said, raising her own glass, bringing the rim against his.

“Barring any more unforeseen delays, in twelve hours fourteen minutes I shall hold you closer than you’ve ever been held before.”

“Ooh, a most intriguing concept, sir. But I must confess after all the horror stories today I’m feeling a bit shy,” she grinned, taking a sip of her wine.

“Leave it to the matrons. They are supposed to put you at your ease.”

“I think Christine — Doctor Chapel was trying.”

“Yes, I heard about Christine’s most fiendish offer to thwart my *Claim*.”

Suddenly, Brianna Cantrell was laughing. “Well, news certainly travels fast aboard this ship — Oh, but you make it sound so awful! Really, she was just trying to be helpful.”

“I do hope you sent her and her little scalpel packing,” Spock gazed at her steadily for a moment, reaching over to gently caress her face. “You needn’t fear,” he said, running his knuckles ever so slowly up and down her cheek. “I will temper

myself so as not to hurt you too much.”

Brianna Cantrell squeezed her eyes shut, trying to contain her sudden emotions. Slipping her hand around his, she held it against her cheek for a moment. They weren't going to make it. The *Tribunal* had reached its conclusion without their presence, Sarkal's brief examined by the magistrate. The decision was all that was left, uncomfortably dangling over their heads, like the sword of Damoclese. The general feeling aboard the *Enterprise* was one of defeat. Still, they were all loathed to concede it, tenaciously pushing to the end, barring some miracle, simply waiting for that other shoe to drop by way of a restraining order against the two of them.

Spock had been correct when he noted they yet faced several possibilities.

Sarkal may have won his right to *Challenge*.

Or, they had years of endless waiting ahead of them, to validate their union, if the matter was allowed to work its way through the courts, rather than the more immediate remedy of *Challenge*, at the same time, fearing such a call. Any children they brought forth during the ensuing time would be regarded as lesser heirs, stripped of privilege.

Or worse, they could be ordered to sever their *bondlink*, this time for good. Then it would no

longer matter if they were granted the right some time later to wed. It was rare for a once severed *bondlink* to maintain any viability if renewed, let alone one twice severed as would be the case with them.

It would simply be too late.

“You are by far the sweetness man I have ever met. I wish we could remain here. Right here. Just as we are now. But time doesn’t stand still. Not even for me, as spoiled as I am. I’m not sure I’m ready for tomorrow.” Again she was swallowing her tears. “I don’t want this to be over. We really haven’t even started, yet —”

At that moment a yeoman appeared with a tray. Brianna Cantrell released Spock’s hand immediately with the intrusion, placing her own hands in her lap, keeping her eyes downcast. “I don’t feel much like eating,” she said, when the yeoman offered to serve her.

“Me either,” Spock said, dismissing the yeoman with a nod. Setting the soup tureen aside, the yeoman quickly went out. “I merely used it as an excuse to get you away from them. Get you alone. I wanted to spend this time with you and I don’t believe my mother is going to let me back into my own quarters tonight.”

“Your mother’s so sweet. Going through the

motions and all. I admire her faith.”

“She believes in us. *I* believe in us,” he said, topping off her glass. Brianna Cantrell grinned but there was no humor in it, he decided.

“You *are* trying to loosen me up,” she said, taking her glass again. “Here’s to tomorrow. And whatever it may bring.”

“*Brianna-Kam*,” he said, reaching over to tuck the stray wisps of hair behind her ear. He brushed her bangs aside, running his fingers ever so lightly over the scar there. “What is it you see?” Brianna Cantrell, eyes downcast staring into her wine, sat shaking her head.

“You know I don’t predict —” she began and then relented a little, her shoulders slumping slightly. She shrugged. “I will always love you. That won’t change.”

“Most illogical, madam,” he said, offering her his fingers. “Are you now in the habit of keeping secrets from me? At least tell me I haven’t lost you already.”

“You haven’t lost me,” she said, locking her two fingers around his. “I told you you’re stuck with me. Just like a little *Veridian* strip.”

“A tracking strip.” Spock was instantly nodding, eyebrows elevated as he considered what she said.

“Excellent. Then I shall always know where you are.”

17

November 20, 2285,

Stardate: 8511.20

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

“I remember telling him once when he was so very young, he couldn’t have his pet *sehlet* in bed with him,” Lady Amanda said quietly, gazing down at her son and his wife huddled together on the small, white sofa along the wall in the Forward Observation deck. They’d been looking for the couple for the past several minutes, the two failing to answer the various calls that went out. Obviously, they’d never gone to bed, preferring instead to remain together all night despite the

traditional restrictions.

Lady Amanda shook her head, grinning. “When I checked on him later, he wasn’t in his bed. I nearly panicked until a thought occurred to me and I found him curled up in Sooki’s bed next to his pet. He always seemed to do such silly things whenever you were away,” she said, casting a sidelong glance at Sarek. The ambassador merely nodded, reaching down to touch Spock’s arm.

“Son,” he called softly, Spock stirred nearly imperceptibly. “Spock, it is late. And the time has come. We must take your bride planetside for the final preparations. You will be called,” he said.

“I fell asleep,” Brianna Cantrell said, sitting upright, wedged between the back of the sofa and Spock as she was. She squinted with the now brightly lit deck, ships’ daytime. Sarek offered her assistance taking her arm, as she slowly eased over Spock coming to her feet on the teak flooring.

“Has the word been given?” Spock asked, his voice gruff with sleep, his eyes still tightly sealed.

“Not yet. But we’ve been told to proceed anyway. It’s all we can do,” Lady Amanda said.

“Is that logical?” Brianna Cantrell said.

“Of course,” Spock said, sitting up, at last. His hair was standing on end, on the one side. “We have not

yet been officially served with a restraint.”

“But,” Brianna Cantrell furthered.

“The fact that we know one has been filed is of no use until we are officially served. For all we know it’s been thrown out,” Lady Amanda said.

“Or Sarkal’s *Challenge* will be met today,” Sarek said. “The chance we took in trying to circumvent things. At any rate, we must depart and soon.” Sarek and his wife flanked the young woman, pulling her to the entrance to the deck. Spock came to his feet, drawing in a breath, raising his hand in the split-finger greeting. Brianna Cantrell turned back momentarily and bringing her hand to her lips, briefly, returned his gesture. Spock inclined his head to her, giving her a short nod of recognition. And in her head she *felt* his response of ‘*always*’.

Inclining her head, she returned his response and then went out, giving him that crooked little grin ever so briefly.

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Such was the image he held of her even up to the moment he received his call. They were to meet at the ancient site, his family’s place of *Kunat’ Kaliffee*. Still there was no word as to whether a wedding

would take place, though. Spock showered, shaved and otherwise made himself ready, all the same, after having meditated for three hours straight, unaware of the passage of such time.

He donned the same multicolored dress tunic he had worn to the *Tea Ceremonial*. All the dark hues gave it an almost monochromatic appearance, until one looked more closely to observe the various colors shimmering forth. A beautiful design, it was pleated with long free-flowing bell sleeves, the hem cut on angles as well as the neck. Again he'd chosen black trousers and his black *T'ay'at'ma* skin boots from his Vulcan wardrobe. No doubt, Brianna Cantrell would be pleased. He sent her another message via their *bondlink*, feeling a bit relieved, curiously, with her response. He couldn't get it out of his mind that Sarkal had been in her head. Was her nightmare just a memory of what happened during the Tea Ceremonial, or was it more prophetic in nature? How could Sarkal get back into her head — particularly without the use of the *psionic resonator*? The thought of a tracking device also played on his thoughts. Spock only knew that he needed to truly free her, to rescue his wife from this maniac's grip.

Spock was still lost in his thoughts when both Kirk and McCoy joined him.

"Somebody want to tell me why we're treating this

like a funeral?" McCoy grimaced. Once again, Kirk was pouring a round of brandy. This time, Spock declined. McCoy, frowned at him, whipping out his medi-corder, not so discreetly taking a reading of the Vulcan's vitals statistics; heart rate, pulse, et cetera. "Just what I thought. You're off the scale again. That little girl's driven you straight into a frenzy. How long did you think you could hide it, Spock?"

"Bones," Kirk cautioned, coming up behind Spock grasping him firmly.

"My God, Spock. You have a back-up plan, don't you?" McCoy said, looking Spock directly in the eyes, his concern palpable.

Spock lowered his gaze, shaking his head slightly. "Negative," he murmured. "I don't — want anyone else."

"Well now, that's the most illogical thing I've ever heard out of your mouth! Jim, what the hell do we do now?"

"We get him down to the planet," Kirk said, calmly. Shrugging.

18

In the Vulcan Year of Ni'roc,

Stardate: 8511.20

Talene Arena, Vulcan- Spock's place of Kunat'Kaliffee

They were still a little distance from the open-air temple when she heard the distinct resonance of a gong chiming, Spock calling his bride to the ceremony. Mellow, of good tonal quality, it still sent a shiver down her spine. She'd heard the same exact sound over and over again in her sleep these passed few nights. Brianna Cantrell bowed her head, calling upon all of her years of training in the *Vulcan Way*, striving to lock in her emotions while blocking out all that played into her

fears.

Security was inordinately tight as the bridal party approached, armed guards lining the path, a small fact she'd inadvertently omitted in her recounting of the dream, her ability to put any of it into words severely hampered by her emotions, too afraid that in voicing it, giving it credence, like a true prophecy it would somehow come to pass. Avoiding some of the incidents in her dream wasn't going to happen, she supposed. The guards, for instance, were necessary, logical, since T'Pau's life had been threatened very recently.

These threats had come mostly from *Outworlders*, since Vulcans rarely killed, the impetus behind it, knowledge that T'Pau's administration supported certain, unpopular Federation policies. Federation enemies were growing in their discontent universally, some laying the blame for the strength of its current administration over said policies, directly at T'Pau's feet. Vulcan, too, as a result was growing skeptical in its own right, questioning T'Pau's continued ability to lead them. For some, opposition to the Federation was outright in these areas, adding murmurings of a logical change in leadership to keep the peace.

Having all the security about merely added to Brianna Cantrell's unease. The *House of Talek Sen Dene* truly could ill afford such scandal. She walked

in silence behind the sedan chair bearing Vulcan's High Councilor. Head bowed, deep in thought, Brianna Cantrell tried her best to keep from trembling like a captured bird. Again, the gong resounded, the bell-players shaking their banners in response. The light tinkling of the tiny rows of bells wafted upward on the wind, signaling the arrival of the bridal party. Soon the call would go out and she would have to answer.

Brianna Cantrell dreaded that call, resolving in herself to speak in the common tongue, if need be. She could hardly get the words confused then. Something had to happen to alter the chain of events. Everything to this moment was an instant replay of her nightmare. Was there no relief? A change in the pinkish clouds overhead, perhaps, or even a bird flitting across the red strata? She was so alone at this moment, little girl lost.

Rounding a curve in the sandy path, the archway into the temple was clearly seen from this point, in another moment they were passing under the arch. Brianna Cantrell was surprised to see how many people were there waiting. Mostly guards, although her father and three older brothers were also present. Standing off to the side, in formation it seemed to her, arms folded over their chests. Tall, each one of them, they looked entirely like linebackers in a football game just waiting to take

the field. Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy waited nearby, as well.

Additionally, there were members of the High Council. Oh, this didn't bode well. Oh, God! Were they here to witness the *Statutory Challenge*? Brianna Cantrell's stomach began a regimen of flip-slops. This was all so surreal, like walking through a cloud, she was here and yet not here all at once, apart from herself. Drifting. Suddenly, she was aware of what it was the dream had been trying to tell her. It was a warning, flat out. They were indeed late in their arrival, the injunction obviously considered in court, perhaps only a few short hours ago and from all appearances a *Statutory Challenge* was to be entertained. *No!* She thought, nearly shrinking back. Why had she even bothered to dress up?

T'Pau was brought forward at that moment, assisted out of the sedan chair, taking her place on the carved stone seat. With the mountain behind her like a backdrop, she looked entirely regal, leaning ever so slightly on her delicately carved staff as she gazed out at the gathering, her aged features, impassive. To see her like this, one would wonder how anyone dared cross her.

Brianna Cantrell found herself drawn to the mountain and the pathway that led upward to the cave, the bridal chamber of the *House of Talek Sen*

Dene set deep inside. Her eyes followed the winding path etched into the mountainside after centuries of use to the opening above, and the guard that stood barring the way. She wondered for a moment just what significance that held? Was he there to protect or prevent access? She wondered, too, if she would ever see the inside, apart from her visions. Suddenly, she looked away.

Spock was standing on the platform near the gong, mallet in hand, coming to greet his Matriarch when she gestured him forward, kneeling at her feet while she assessed him through a brief *mindmeld*. Brianna Cantrell caught her breath. He looked so gorgeous, arresting, reminding her of the first time she'd seen him. Catching his eye, if only for a moment when he headed back to the platform, he seemed ready now to strike the gong for the third and final time.

Playfully she sent him a thought, stroking his mind really, hoping he'd play back, at once needing a little revelry, hoping for a clue, at least. Had T'Pau informed him just now of what was to take place? Sending him her message of, *'I love you with all my heart'*. Spock merely gazed at her, lifting his eyebrow while she grinned that all-knowing, crooked little grin he was so fond of. Play with me at least, please? Spock was inclining his head ever so slightly at her and Brianna Cantrell was

suddenly aware of how much he loved her, of how much he wanted her. Instantly, she was suffused with a sense of well-being, permeating her consciousness as he stroked her mind with his thoughts.

And then with a sharp, quick gesture the call went out. “*Kalifahr!*”

Brianna Cantrell, jolted back to the moment, her heart thumping wildly, hesitated, suddenly too afraid to speak when it came down to it, to say anything at all, lest her nightmare should turn into reality before her very eyes. At once she realized that in her dream she must not have called for *Kaliffee*, after all, the point of her confusion.

The nature of *Statutory Challenges* precluded the bride’s need to call for it. That was why no one would listen to her. Unless ... unless Sarkal’s claim had been denied by the Council, and being Sarkal, he had turned to other means, using his mind-powers instead to influence the outcome, as in *Ancient Times*. Such usage, for personal gain, was deemed unlawful now.

Frightened, nearly in a panic, Brianna Cantrell was gazing about her for what seemed like days, searching the crowd for the masked *henchman*, the armed guard who would only act if cowardice was shown during a *Challenge*. She finally located him, staring at him to the point of rudeness, she was

sure. Turning her gaze back to Spock, she was practically paralyzed with fear, someone nudging her from behind, T’Pran she thought, to get her to speak, at last.

At once she licked her lips, nervously, clearing her throat before croaking out her words. Her throat was so very dry. “Marriage. I choose marriage. *Kali* — Let the ceremony begin,” she said, reverting to the common tongue again at the last minute. She found herself struggling to keep from blurting out the word, *Kalifee* asking for *Challenge*, despite her efforts to *shield* herself from such an attempt. His mind was awfully strong — *He was here* — somewhere in the throng, her gaze darting back and forth. She couldn’t find him.

Oh, God, help me. What Thou hast put together let no man put asunder. Immediately after her brief supplication, she was practicing a mind-exercise, steeling herself for a fight, intrinsically knowing he could only control her mind if she let him. Peace washed over her and she hesitated, remembering her nightmare for one last time and then finding her voice at last, she spoke out strongly, this time in a clear, calm voice.

“*Kalifahr!*” Brianna Cantrell said.

There was movement in the crowd. Several shoulders slumped, the tension temporarily abated, or so it seemed. Spock nodded at her, ever so

slightly. He closed his eyes in relief, having crossed this first hurdle.

McCoy uttering, "Well, that's more like it."

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Spock traveled down their *bondlink*, found the hole in her psyche that Sarkal had carved for himself, and carefully patched it up. Bothered to find this trace of Sarkal's previous visits, the Vulcan attorney had obviously left something akin to a tracking device behind, a thread by which he could travel back and forth into Brianna Cantrell's mind, like a spider's web, a backdoor through her mental barriers, essentially.

Spock *felt* Brianna Cantrell tug on their *link* and he played back. Encouraged, he again raised the mallet, swinging it toward the center of the carved, six-sided jade gong, marking the beginning of the ceremony, praying that this time it really would commence with a wedding. He wondered if, once again, the Council's findings were in his favor. Certainly, it would appear so.

Although the not knowing was intolerable, particularly in his present state. Aware he was slipping ever further into the *Plak tow*, soon it would be irreversible without the release of mating,

if he even had the strength left for it. His logic, for the moment was absolutely shorn from him. Completely out-of-control, he had been here before, recognizing its imminence. He really was starting to come unglued – he needed his wife. Silently, he railed at the delays, aware that in his weakened state he just might not win the combat, if *Challenged* ... but he had just successfully rooted Sarkal out of Brianna Cantrell's head, of that he was certain, no small victory in its own right. Spock was convinced, too, that the freedom Brianna Cantrell felt during their *Tea Ceremony*, had been temporary, Sarkal's *thoughts* interrupted when he was tackled to the deck, causing the momentary release and her later confusion.

The gong's note resonated for nearly a minute, the silence otherwise unbroken as they awaited the signal from the presiding official. Spock had to wonder what was behind the delay, an imminent *Challenge*? He was further troubled when out from the press of people, Sarkal emerged to stand defiantly before the High Councilor, throwing the mask he'd hid behind to the ground at her feet, as if it were a gauntlet, directly challenging her authority. Joseph Cantrell fought to hold Erik back. Aaron and Joe, Jr., visibly tempered themselves, as well. Now was not the time to give into emotions, to anger. Even old Lord Sobel, who looked like death itself, seemed to draw himself up, standing

ever so much more rigidly than before. Spock glanced over at his bride, worried.

“Hear me!” Sarkal entreated.

T’Pau, set her aged features, scrunching her face to look even more menacing than before, turned a deaf ear. “*Kalifahr!*” she commanded.

The bell-players snapped to, shaking their banners relentlessly.

“No, I will be heard!” persisted the *First Son* of the *House of Kooli Ton Lok*.

T’Pau, slowly came to her feet, leaning heavily on her cane, as she prepared to take the two stone steps downward. Instead, she stopped, drawing herself up. “Dost thee continue to mock our *Ways*, Sarkal?” the High Councilor said. “Thy claim hast been discarded by the High Council, thy arguments in this case judged invalid. There is no objection pending between the principle parties involved. It has been formally withdrawn. A lawful contract of marriage has been signed in its place. Let no one stand in the way of its execution. *Kalifahr!*” she intoned again, the bell-banners singing out in compliance.

“This is by no means over, T’Pau,” Sarkal seethed. “Hear me, my brothers! My cause is just. I bring lawful objection —”

“*Kroika!*” T’Pau cried out, hand raised above the crowd, her black eyes smoldering. “Thee hast been warned. Withdraw thy objection now or suffer thy property to be divided between the injured parties – that of the *Houses, Cantrell and Talek Sen Dene.*”

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For a few minutes pause Sarkal stood motionless, glaring at the High Councilor and then he came to stand just before Brianna Cantrell, dangerously, oppressively close.

He towered over the tiny woman, menacingly. Studying her, searching her eyes. Brianna Cantrell kept herself tightly *shielded*. She knew what it was he wanted. Yet, suddenly she no longer felt intimidated by him. Bolstered by Spock’s quiet, reassuring presence and the way he gently stroked her mind via their *bondlink*. ‘*Hold onto me, Bree,*’ Spock silently encouraged her. ‘*Just hold on.*’ Her return was joyous, ‘*You did it, I’m free. I’m truly free this time!*’

“You want me,” Sarkal told her. “You need only say so now.”

“No, Sarkal,” she said, remarkably calm. She returned his piercing stare. “You are dirt. You are less than dirt. You are the dust I shake from my

boots. I do not want you. I never wanted you. I only feel —”

“No?” Sarkal bore a look of complete distraction, confused.

“*Sorry for you,*” she said, as he gazed at her trying again to press into her mind. He could find no way in, looking stunned that she could resist him. Someone had sealed up the rift in her psyche he had so carefully fashioned. Turning, he glared at Spock, receiving a raised eyebrow in return. Turning back Sarkal at once bowed before Brianna Cantrell.

“Forgive me.” And half-turning to T’Pau, he bowed low again, presumably acquiescing to the logic of his situation. “Forgive my outburst. I was mistaken. I withdraw my objection,” he said, at once darting through the crowd.

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In a lot of ways, it just seemed too easy, Kirk was thinking. McCoy shared a suspicious glance with him.

“Think he’ll be back?” the doctor murmured.

“Well, I came prepared for trouble if he does,” Kirk said, patting his right front hip-pocket, indicating

the phaser weapon hidden just beneath his crimson duty jacket.

“You brought a phaser to a wedding?”

“What’re best men for?”

“Oh, brother!” McCoy sighed just as Lord Sobel came to prostrate himself before Sarek.

“I, too, would plead forgiveness for the *House of Kooli Ton Lok*. My son is not himself. I fear he is quite beyond his mind’s own reach. Blinded by his own ambitions.” Quietly, Sarek touched the Vulcan’s shoulder and he rose to his feet, both elders giving the other a short, measured bow before Lord Sobel returned to his place.

Kirk and McCoy exchanged glances.

T’Pau descended the two steps as if nothing had ever happened, taking her place before the ring of red-hot lava rocks, great puffs of incense curling upward. Both Starfleet officers turned their attention back to the ceremony which now seemed likely to take place. Kirk had never been to an actual Vulcan wedding before, the last one he’d attended ended in a divorce, Vulcan style. He only knew Spock has said it would be brief. Given the nature of *Pon farr* and the desperate state the males were usually in when they came to this point, he could understand why.

Brianna Cantrell was suddenly weeping in her relief, chewing on her lower lip, discreetly wiping the moisture from her cheek, the image of her dream having been broken, at last. Again, someone behind her was handing her a lace-edged handkerchief. Turning to quietly thank her benefactor, all at once she was flanked by a pair of bell-players as they rang their chimes circling her, another pair circling Spock while other preparations went on. And then Spock was there reaching for her hand, offering her his fingers.

Lifting the hem of her Temple gown slightly with the one hand, she reached out with the fingers of her right hand lightly touching his in the customary fashion. She was trembling. Spock met her gaze, drawing her to him, both carefully stepping into the center of the *sehlet* skin rug laid out for them, as they came to stand before T’Pau. White fur. Tinkling bells. The chain of events had indeed been broken, the events of her original vision taking over with startling clarity.

Again the bell-players shook their banners circling the couple, this time while two others of the entourage loosely bound the couple together by draping a single long, sash across the front of their shoulders and down their backs. The mantle was made of a soft pink satin, richly adorned with the family crest and the names of the bride and groom,

ornately embroidered in blue and black thread. Later, the sash would be taken to the family's Hall of Ancestors, preserving this bit of family history by hanging it in its place of honor, alongside Spock's ancestors.

Crossing the ends of the sash, the acolytes busily tied it to keep it in place so the knot hung evenly between the couple, until an elderly woman came forward next for the finishing touch. Presumably one of Spock's relatives, it was the one who had offered her the handkerchief just now, Brianna Cantrell realized, at once recognizing in the aged features a likeness to Sarek — this was Spock's paternal grandmother, T'Kayla, life-partner of Skone. Sarek's mother. She knelt behind them and began sewing the edges of the sash together with more of that same red cord used to taunt the groom days before.

During this time, T'Pau was busy with the contents of a tray held by a servant. She sprinkled a beige colored powder into the silver pitcher and then a few grains more of another spice. She then busied herself by pouring a blood red wine into a chalice and otherwise arranged things on the tray. At last, the bells were silenced and T'Pau, having prepared the Marriage Cup, turned to face Spock and Brianna Cantrell, holding the intricately carved, crystal chalice aloft. Shaped like an Earthly

rose with two leaves staggered and curling outward, she held the heavy goblet by its thick stem, one hand underneath to support its weight.

“Spock, T’Bree, today thee comes before the Marriage Cup. Know that it is a solemn occasion and the troth thee art both to take, one that is far-reaching in nature. It is not to be taken in frivolity or lightness or without due consideration. For it binds thee one to another for all of the ages to come. Art thee prepared to make such a commitment? If so, take the cup and swear thine oaths to each other.”

With that T’Pau handed Spock the cup. Holding it before him he gazed steadily into Brianna Cantrell’s large, blue eyes. “As it was in the dawn of our days, as it is today, as it will be for all tomorrows, I take you, T’Bree, to be my wife. I shall comfort you and protect you. I shall shelter you and provide for you all of your life. With my body I honor you. With all that I am, I give my life to you.”

Spock then handed his bride the heavy chalice. Brianna Cantrell’s eyes widened momentarily with the unexpected weight of the glass, Spock waiting until her grip was firm before letting go. Raising the chalice to her lips, Brianna Cantrell tasted the tangy, bitter vintage, hoping she could keep from screwing up her features. It was at once sour like a lemon drop and bitter like a dark, dark ale.

Swallowing, tears came to her eyes.

And then it was her turn to declare her intent. Drawing in a quiet, calming breath Brianna Cantrell looked up at her husband, her lips trembling, barely able to contain the smile that threatened to brighten her entire face. Smiling without smiling, Spock nodded his encouragement. Brianna Cantrell began, finding it difficult to speak around the sudden lump in her throat and the tears that threatened to overflow, unable to quite contain her joy, the emotion in her voice, the dam that was about to burst forth.

“As it was in the dawn of our days, as it is today, as it will be for all tomorrows, I take you, Spock — to be — my husband.” For a moment, she seemed overcome with emotion, closing her eyes and swallowing a few times before she attempted to speak again. Spock tilted his head at her in sympathy.

Drawing in another calming breath, she went on. “Where you go, I shall go. Where you lodge, I shall lodge. For your people are my people. And your home shall be my home. With my body I honor you. With all that I am, I submit myself to you that we may be one.”

Handing back the heavy cup, she was crying again. Spock, his eyes smiling at her, took a large sip of the pungent wine within, an acolyte taking

the chalice from him again. At the same time, T’Pau raised her hand above them proclaiming in a commanding voice, “It is done! Seal thy troth.”

Spock was at once seeking the bitter remnants of the wine remaining on Brianna cantrell’s lips as the bell banners rang out loudly. It was the only such time an outward display of emotion was allowed, which was also why outworlders were, with very few exceptions, barred from Vulcan wedding ceremonies. Spock kissed his bride until the chimes ceased.

T’Pau patiently waited him out, speaking when he at last disengaged from his wife. “It is good thee art eager,” the ancient woman declared, the tiniest trace of a grin creasing her lined face. Kirk and McCoy exchanged glances, nodding in the direction of the Cantrells, all the humans present fighting to keep their mirth under wraps.

“Each of thee now holds a new office, new roles as husband and wife. As such, thee shalt wear the ring indicating thy station. The symbol of thy *House*. See here the raised image of the *sehlet*, fiercely loyal and protective. The symbol of the *House of Talek Sen Dene*,” she said, as she slowly rolled the tiny, intricately sculptured ring in her hand, displaying the two interconnected sehlets that encircled the center of the gold band, handing it to him. The rings were a work of the finest craftsmanship, of

art.

“Spock, take the ring and place it on thy bride that all who gaze upon her might know to which *House* she belongs.” Spock took Brianna Cantrell’s left hand gently slipping the shimmering white and yellow gold band T’Pau offered him onto her middle finger.

“From this day forward be ye consecrated unto me as my wife, according to the faith of Surak and the Laws of Vulcan.”

“And now T’Bree, as thy first official act of obedience, thee wilt place this ring on thy husband’s hand making thy covenant complete.”

“From this day forward,” Brianna Cantrell began, as she placed the new ring onto his left middle finger. “Be ye consecrated unto me as my husband, according to the faith of Surak and the Laws of Vulcan.”

“It is done!” T’Pau declared for a second time, sprinkling the couple with a mixture of rare herbs and dried flowers pungent with a fragrance similar to that of fresh roses and mint. “May thy *oneness* be fruitful in the sight of the *All* and may thy life together be long and prosperous. And now I commend you to the bridal chamber to make the *Ancient Claim*. Take her quickly, Spock,” T’Pau said, as Spock gently lifted Brianna Cantrell up into his

arms, ready to carry her off.

“T’Pau,” he said, giving the matriarch a troubled look. “She is a virgin —”

“There may yet be trouble ahead, Spock. Go now. Before the opportunity turns back on itself and the words thee uttered here today are for naught.”

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“Excuse me, ah, ma’am,” Captain Kirk said, drawing near. Having placed himself nearby during the ceremony, easily within earshot, he couldn’t help but overhear her admonitions to the couple. “What sort of trouble?” he asked, as Spock quickly waded through the onlookers carrying his bride on up the side of the mountain.

“It is Sarkal. His sense of logic is skewed. In his present state of mind he could be considered most dangerous. He may yet be back.”

“Well, for Pete’s sake, why not lock him up?” Dr. McCoy said, ambling toward them. “Don’t tell me there’s no room in that Vulcan philosophy for restraints. Ma’am.”

“Am I now to imprison my enemies simply because they disagree with me? So far, Sarkal has done nothing wrong. It is illogical to take away his

freedom.”

“What can we do to help?” Kirk asked.

“Stand guard as her family must now do, as per custom.”

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Sarkal sat unwittingly for hours out on a jagged rock which protruded straight up from the ground, watching the morning blossom into midday, growing into afternoon, shaking his fist at *T’Khut*, Vulcan’s companion planet, that lingered so close off the horizon it seemed possible to just reach out and touch it. He pondered the illogic of his situation. She was Spock’s woman, as impossible as that seemed. Most likely she was Spock’s woman, by now. Or would be shortly, unless Spock was a fool. Certainly, if it had been Sarkal, he would have *Claimed* her, by now. But perhaps, it wasn’t too late ...

No. That half-breed son of Sarek had won. Even after Sarkal had given her every chance of divesting herself of such a disagreeable association, the stupid, little human female failed to take the logical course. He still smarted from the insults she’d so readily flung at him. Calling him dust! He couldn’t get over how she’d resisted his mind-probe. Worse,

she seemed to have feelings for Vulcan's so-called *First Son*.

This was all of Spock's doing. He was so clearly controlling her ... Given the chance, Sarkal would have killed that no-account in a heartbeat, Vulcan well rid of his kind. Sarkal wondered what unlikely, hybrid, mutants they were bound to produce, the half-breed and the human female ...

Humans were interesting in that they were mostly unpredictable, bedding them quite pleasurable on that account, but he would never think or even remotely consider breeding with one. Even if the issue he brought into this universe were the product of his sadly, ill-chosen mistress, it would be infinitely superior to that of a mixed breed. T'Vir, he laughed sardonically, who simply wasn't good enough for his bridal chamber to be sure, being of common stock and far less *gifted* than most, was plenty pleasing on the mattress, nonetheless. No, he wanted to marry Brianna Cantrell simply for the control he would then exert over her and her *Gifts*. He had no intention of ever allowing her to reproduce. Any and all 'mistakes' would simply be discarded as early as detected. He would not allow her to carry it to fruition.

And then it occurred to him. They shouldn't be allowed to mate, the half-breed and the human female. It was illogical and unconscionable.

Someone should stop them. At once. They must be stopped. He should stop them, and with that he ran off into the long shadows of dusk, bent on storming the bridal chamber and stopping the atrocity about to take place!

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“So, does anyone know exactly what we’re guarding against, I mean beyond the eventuality of Sarkal’s return and for how long?” McCoy said, rubbing his hands together briskly. “It’s damn cold out here.”

“T’Pau said it was custom. She didn’t say for how long,” Kirk said, stamping his feet against the growing cold, warming his hands in his arm pits. Dressed in their normal duty jackets, they had no idea the weather would be this inclement. The phrase, ‘*hot as Vulcan*’ being their only experience any time they’d visited the planet. Joining Brianna Cantrell’s family, the two Starfleet officers assembled at the foot of the path, blocking access to the bridal chamber above.

Kirk gazed out into the open terrain. Nothing but desert for kilometers, all owned by the *House of Talek Sen Dene* for more than two millennia, now. The long shadows of late afternoon, stretching

across the barren terrain, were now blurring into twilight as the wind slowly picked up, swirling the sand into tiny dust devils, the sky streaked with vibrant blues and yellows. Dusk was at hand.

“To answer the second part of your question, first, it will most likely be a number of hours, yet. Here, you will need these,” Sarek said, having heard their inquiry, bearing heavy wraps for the two Starfleet officers as he drew near. “The newlyweds are permitted a certain amount of revelry on this occasion. It is expected of them, actually. After all, the expenditure of emotion is quite exhausting, as no doubt all of you know. They will need to sleep it off, so to speak.”

“Excuse me, did I hear you right? Did you say *emotion*?” McCoy said, his Southern drawl most apparent tonight. He gave Sarek a rather stunned, almost disbelieving look. “I thought you Vulcans shied away from such displays.”

“As you must know, Doctor, in all things there is a price, a sacrifice. — For us, this *Time of Mating* is rooted to our beginning. It is our way. Our devotion to Logic, worth the expense.”

“And the rest of the time?” Joseph Cantrell spoke up. “While he keeps his emotions bottled up, what then? My daughter is human — at the very least, she’s a cuddly type person. I’m afraid if she doesn’t get enough physical contact over time she’ll simply

wither away!”

“Well, I don’t think you have to worry about that,” McCoy said, at last. “I’ve seen them together.”

“Yeah,” Erik grinned, jabbing his older brother in the ribs. “I have a hunch they’re going to be just fine. Wouldn’t you agree, Aaron?”

“There is such a thing as giving people their dignity,” Aaron said, his tone carrying a warning as he gazed at his next younger brother. “I really think you should give it a rest.”

Joseph was shaking his head. “No, you merely deem it in poor taste.”

“In public, in the company of others, yes,” Sarek said, “Something my son and I must discuss, apparently. However, what goes on behind closed doors is no one’s business.”

“Well, what I mean to say is,” McCoy furthered, trying desperately now to get Spock off the hook he’d inadvertently hung him on. “There’s this barrier around Spock, if you will. Kind of a no-fly zone. People know not to just come up to him and casually touch him. But with the lieutenant that barrier doesn’t seem to exist. The rules don’t apply to her. Funny thing is,” McCoy chuckled, shaking his head. “I don’t think they ever did. In fact, they manage to touch all the time. Mainly in greeting, palms together, that sort of thing, nothing overt.

But yet, you knew something was going on between them. Personally, I'm happy for them. I think they're going to be great together."

"Well, you'll get no argument from me on that point," Kirk said, bringing the conversation back around to the original question. "However, just where do we come into this picture?" He preferred some hint in advance of what was expected of him in a situation. "I mean, obviously Sarkal is a potential problem. But I'm a bit curious. Where did this custom of standing watch originate? From what you're saying, it's more than simply witnessing the groom's *Claim*. We're all here for that," he noted, gesturing at the assembly of Spock's various family and friends still gathered around.

"Due to the inherent risks of the Vulcan desert, the creatures that inhabit these remote and desolate areas, it is customary for the bride's family to stand guard. To protect the couple while they lay vulnerable to attack."

"Creatures?" Kirk said, a bit dubiously, as he thought he saw something skittering about in the distance.

"The *l'ema'tya* tends to prowl this region, primarily at night," Aaron volunteered, grimacing as he gazed beyond the columns of the temple. "I don't like the look out there," he said. "The way the wind is kicking up. It's going to be a mean night."

Not that a bit of inclement weather would ever deter the *l'ema'tya*. Not even a sand storm.”

“Oh, I see.” Kirk frowned. He’d heard of these fierce beasts, Spock enlightening him a time or two when the Vulcan dared share a glimpse into his most private life experiences. His coming of age when he was called to pass a real life survival test, the *Kahswan*. Kirk didn’t relish running into one of these giant felines, glad he’d thought to bring a phaser weapon along.

“And, of course, in this case there’s also Sarkal,” Erik scoffed.

Bowing his head Sarek said, “That unfortunately is a factor which cannot be dismissed.”

Erik was most perturbed at his one-time friend. Mistrustful, still, even though his sister was safely wed to the groom of her choice. Vulcans weren’t normally predisposed to violence, but he might yet construe a way to mar the occasion, even so. It was going to be a long evening, he feared, glad when a few minutes later, Kirk was dividing them into teams, the time into Watch shifts, agreeing they’d break into said groups once Spock made his Claim.

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From the mouth of the cave Spock held the small white towel up for the witnesses below to see, proclaiming in a booming voice, "The woman is mine!"

Brianna Cantrell heard the deep resonance of the gong as it was struck three times, the light tinkling of the bell-banners carried upward on the wind that had picked up across the cold desert floor, whistling through the cave eerily. Suddenly she felt chilled. Something was wrong. The maidens, ever mindful of their duties, were at once covering her with another fur to keep her warm. Brianna Cantrell nodded at them politely, fingering her cross, bringing it to her lips in silent prayer.

Spock returned almost immediately, dismissing the maidens and crawling underneath the *l'ema'tya* skins with his wife. Having stoked the fire well before he left, the guard, Sizok, slowly ambled down the path after the maidens, meeting Kirk, McCoy and Brianna Cantrell's family at the base of the mountain.

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Both were asleep when Spock heard a noise and sat up quickly, reaching for the phaser weapon he'd hidden on the carved rock shelf behind them.

Brianna Cantrell gasped, and sat up as well, holding the furs over her.

“It is I, Sarek,” the old ambassador whispered into the darkness, bringing the lantern up to show his face. Hours had passed, the candles sitting in little crevices, dotted throughout the cave, having mostly sputtered out.

Spock lowered the sidearm. “Father,” he said, drawing in a quiet sigh.

“I am most disturbed at how deeply instilled your military training is, at how readily you take up arms. Do you now succumb to violence as an answer, Spock?”

“It was set on stun, only.”

“Which can kill at such close proximity, if I am not mistaken, my son. No matter. I’ve brought the clothing you laid out and your bags are loaded into the waiting transport. Gather your wife, my son. We must go quickly. Out the back way.”

“Trouble?” Spock said, hearing what sounded like a scuffle going on below.

“We’ve had a slight disturbance, however, it is more the wind. A sand storm is approaching,” Sarek said, handing over the bundle of clothing he brought with him.

“What kind of disturbance?” Brianna Cantrell

questioned. "Is ... is my father all right?" She said.

"Your father is safe, little one. Your brothers have encountered a *l'ema'tya* when it wandered in a few minutes ago, dragging along with it ... Strone of *Seltu Dei Sei*, I am afraid."

"Oh, my God. I *knew* ... Does he live?" Brianna Cantrell said. Separating the garments, the two began dressing, Brianna Cantrell reaching for her shirt and trousers, pulling them on under the covers, slipping into the fur lined boots.

"He is still alive but critical. Your brother, Erik, most bravely chanced distracting the beast long enough to wrest Strone away from it. Although I'm not sure what they planned to do if we had not arrived when we did to help subdue the beast. *L'ema'tya* females are quite vicious. Fortunately, your captain is also quick with a phaser. Hurry now. We must vacate the area before the storm hits."

"And what of Sarkal?" Spock asked, fastening the front of Brianna Cantrell's thick, winter parka, pulling the hood down about her face, making sure she'd be protected from the harsh, freezing temperatures of the Vulcan desert and the punishing grit of the sandstorm. Donning gloves, they were ready to leave.

"Yes, well that remains to be seen. According to

Strone, Sarkal is quite beyond his mind's own reach. Driven by his intense bigotry toward interracial to harm you both. When Strone tried to stop his cousin, Sarkal stuck him. He came to, just as the *l'ema'tya* attacked. Come quickly, the storm will not wait," Sarek said. He decided there was no point in telling the couple that the local constabulary was busy combing the area for Sarkal, his transport having been found, abandoned, a few kilometers away from Talene Arena. They were not responsible for what may have happened to him, nor was there anything they could do for him. Sarek refused to allow this to mar their wedding night.

He also refused to allow the press that had gathered in and around the area any air time, keeping the couple away from the inevitable feeding frenzy which would occur as a result of their appearance.

"Come along, my wife," Spock said, offering her two gloved fingers, as Sarek ushered the two out a secret passageway, down the back side of the mountain into the safety and warmth of the waiting transport. Ambassador Sarek took them directly to the space port where Lady Amanda awaited them, where they bid them farewell, seeing to it that the newlyweds got off quietly.

~And the human adventure continues ...

epilogue

In the Vulcan Year of V'Kai (New Dawn)
Standard Earth Year 2276
Grayson Castle, Earth

Ambassador Spock stood in the foyer of the ancient stone castle recognizing the empty rundown state of the place from when he originally inherited it from his maternal grandmother, in another time — years ago. This time he had inherited it sooner, with the untimely death of his mother. Stepping further into the entrance, his booted feet caught the scraggs of broken stones, sending them echoing across the cobbled floor. Hard to believe this place could be

made liveable again. Yet with Brianna's help they had done just that, and much more.

Carefully restored and appointed, this ancient pile of rock and pillars was transformed from an empty shell, into a real home. Juxtaposed against his memories of how he'd left it, it was a rude reminder of his present state of being, of all that he'd lost when he tumbled through that Black Hole into this parallel universe, years behind his own time.

So much in his life had changed, it was startling.

Through his memory's eye he could again enjoy the infusion of light, caught like a prism in the stained glass window, the Grayson Coat of Arms, above the ancient oak door, shimmering and vibrant. His oldest daughter, T'Nia, once likened it to little faeries dancing on the floor. So Vulcan and so Human both at the same time, she was a perfect blend of her parents. He loved her dearly, as he did the others. For a moment he could also hear the joyous sound of children as they ran through the halls and up those ancient stone steps to the floors above. Had he actually once wished for quiet?

That quiet was stifling ...

In a rare fit of nostalgia, no doubt brought on by recent events, he missed his life that once was. He was old and his beloved wife had long since passed away. Lonelier than he ever remembered feeling, it

was harder knowing his children were trapped in a different future — an alternate timeline. And that he would likely never see them or their progeny again. Perhaps, it was enough to know that they existed ...

Spock shut his eyes until his emotions abated. Hearing a noise, he turned to see his younger Self entering the foyer. Commander Spock was accompanied by a young blonde woman, who entered the room bringing her fingertips to rest lightly against the younger Vulcan's extended fingers. Already there was an obvious bond between them. *Kiftiri*, after all? Destiny? Nature does abhor a vacuum, he reminded himself.

Closing his eyes yet again, he cleared his throat of the emotion that rose from deep within himself, of the desires that set him aflame, still. "You ... ahem ... you're here," he said to the woman.

"Of course, where else should I be but here?" she said, that endearing grin tugging on the corner of her lips, the mischief setting her bright blue eyes sparkling as she chanced a sidelong glance at the Ambassador. How he did miss her. And their five children. She was not mistaken when she promised him identical twin sons. Sajik and Seraj, followed by T'Nia, another son, Serai and finally beautiful, little T'Kayla, so like her mother. Same huge blue eyes, same crooked grin and just as cunning, she stole his heart the moment he first held her.

Turning to his younger Self, "When did you meet? Are you not serving as a *Moderator*? In the upcoming *k'Matra*?"

"Already done," Commander Spock said. "That's where we encountered one another. On a metaphysical plane, that is."

The *Elders* were busy settling the Vulcan Colony, on the planet Ambassador Spock had found suitable, attempting to recreate their society, as close to normal as possible under their current circumstances. They had made progress in these seventeen years hence. A school was quickly established and the few children that survived, resumed their previous studies in *the Way*. *Others*, adults mostly, who subscribed to all that was Vulcan, were adopted into the tribe and considered every bit Vulcan, in the need to expand and flourish. In all, only ten thousand actual Vulcans, out of six billion, had survived when their home planet exploded. Obviously, Brianna Cantrell and her family were among those who escaped the inferno.

"T'Lar bid me come see her at the new temple," Commander Spock continued. "She had someone she deemed I should meet. T'Bree served me tea. She is to be my wife. Heretofore, I fought the notion of arranged marriages."

"As did I," Ambassador Spock said. He kept his

eyes lowered for fear the young woman would read his thoughts, something she was more than capable of doing. He wanted her, even now, but now was not his 'time'. His was in another universe, another Time where their children yet lived. Spock gazed at his younger Self and the woman, setting aside his own needs, with difficulty. How easy it would be to become *One* with her again, to persuade her to *join* with him, instead of his younger Self. He was so incredibly lonely without her. He realized to do so, could very easily upset the balance of this parallel universe, even further than it had been already, and that would be ...*wrong*. Turning to leave, he said, "You are a lucky man. Take care of her, she is a delicate desert flower and ... she will make you happier than you've ever known you could be or ever experienced."

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END