

A Star Trek Fan Fiction Trilogy By New Author

APRIL L. PAYNE

All is not well between Spock and Brianna Cantrell, as anticipated, upon their meeting. She arrives aboard the Enterprise, fully aware she is a bride and prepared to meet her would be groom, interacting with the Vulcan first officer on two levels. Spock, also, is meet his intended. prepared to However, unlike Brianna, Spock is unaware of what she is to him. Instead, tensions between them escalate. All the while. Brianna's nemesis, Sarkal is doing all he can to sabotage the tenuous bondlink that should lead to their marriage.

Can Spock and Brianna resolve their differences in time to combat the terrorists' threat? Is reconciliation possible, or is it their Fate to remain painfully trapped in what is more than a mindmeld but less than a marriage? Wanting but never being able to have ...

### **Star Trek:**

## **NIGHT WHISPERS**

## Vol 2 - The Deception

A Star Trek Fan Fiction By April L. Payne

Cover by Kirok of L'Stok & Stacey Dean

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For my late friend,
Vera,
who told me she was my first fan.
and to my best
friend,Cynthia,whose timely
critique made this draft possible.
Thank you.

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1

In the Vulcan Year of Ni'roc October 28, 2285 Mt. Seleya

t is not known if the Anomaly is stable enough to take on such an assignment," Lord Savin argued from his seat on the far side of the vee-shaped council table. Outside the wind howled swirling the fine white powder that lightly dusted the peaks of Mount Seleya into soft piles along the narrow pathway that led to this chamber.

The storm caught T'Pau's attention for a moment drawing her away from the discussion over which

she presided. It was a nasty night to come out, yet she had deemed the situation critical. Calling for a special session of the High Council, she was gratified that each of the thirteen Houses had heeded her call despite the weather and the political tensions that continued to plague her administration.

The *Rigi* had been murdered — and from what the Vulcans could surmise, by means of a *psionic resonator*, much like the one in Vulcan's past. *The Stone of Gol*, thought to be long destroyed, had been used to "think" people to death. How the Rindagvarians came by the design was curious and not yet discovered, nor who was behind their instruction in its use. For while is was known the Rindagvarians had mind powers that could potentially rival that of the Vulcans, their "craft" was far less perfected. The Vulcans needed to act, and swiftly, in order to contain this menace.

T'Pau shifted in her seat, noting how uncomfortable it had grown these last few sessions, drawing the coverlet across her knees, experiencing the chill of the Vulcan winter in this drafty chamber. Surveillance had also concluded that along with the *Rigi*, many prominent leaders of the Federation were targeted for assassination, as well, if certain demands were not met; stipulating copious credits in the form of interest free loans

and all current debts forgiven, the Rindagvarians also wanted free trade rights, essentially granting them favorite-planet status. Otherwise, they would be forced to reactivate their dilithium reactor. Were they the ones behind the continuing pirate attacks, attempting to make their point?

Disconcerting as it was, T'Pau learned she was also on said 'hit list'. So be it. In the meantime, she was still High Chair of the Vulcan Council and act, she must. The forensic pathologists had completed their autopsy with its glaring indictment against all civilized worlds. So, in light of these events, she had called this session to form her best diplomatic team to negotiate with the offending planet to forestall the war of the ages.

As they had in their own violent past, Vulcan would send emissary after emissary, if need be, to secure the peace for all. That much was a given, she thought, as she gazed at those locked in earnest debate. Choosing whom to sacrifice was another matter.

T'Vek rose from her seat just opposite, in ideology as well as placement around the council table, from the burly Lord Savin. "You've seen the reports out of Starfleet, the *Anomaly* had advanced knowledge of the incident. Dreaming in detail —"

"They test her as we did because she has *Gifts* they do not comprehend," Supak interrupted. His dark

eyes flashed as he gazed about at the council members. T'Pau had reason to question his fealty. He was one of the younger members of this elite body, easily swayed by the current shifting of political and philosophical views espoused by those who would return Vulcan to the Dark Times, the *K'uht'ma*. Earth had its own version of such a group, the Illuminati. The very name itself was an oxymoron.

"They test her because she is yet unstable," Lord Sobel replied. "This is what comes from the careless, unsupervised use of mind powers such as hers. She needed a handler, a mate to keep her powers under control!"

"She needs to be sequestered — cloistered from the Universe," Savin stated.

"One way to ensure her stability," Sarek interjected from the well, raising his voice just slightly above the others, "is to reunite her with her *moderator*. Let him act as her handler in this matter. She already suspects he lives. I see no harm -"

"No harm ... Sarek?" Lord Sobel sounded winded, his chin resting on his chest. Placing his hands against the ancient lettering etched into the surface of the table before him, himself just as ancient, he leaned heavily against the stone slab and rose slowly to his feet. "My son ... amongst a whole host of others ... yet awaits for her full healing in order

to pursue courtship rights ... and you would reinstate the one...who has caused this damage? Is it not enough he violated the censure placed upon him ... to begin with?"

"It was decreed *kiftiri*," T'Vek declared, rising from her seat. Her shadow cast a lissome figure against the walls behind her, dancing in the flickering candlelight. "And we were warned this could happen —"

"I ask simply that they be introduced," Sarek cut in. He paused momentarily as two servants entered the chamber adding oil to the hanging lanterns and exchanging the spent candles for new ones throughout the chamber. "If it is *Kiftiri*, if it is to be, Nature will take its course, but it is of little consequence at this time. She has the mental acuity needed in this crisis —"

"You would use this crisis, Sarek, to secure a mate for your long unwed son!" Sobel shot back.

"Yes," Sarek nodded, after a thoughtful pause. "I have come before this council on numerous occasions over the past four point one-six Standard Earth years to have the censure lifted, to allow these two to properly meet. I come to you now to that end, to clear my son of all accusations of malfeasance and to secure his property others would wrest from him as payment for his alleged misdeeds. It is logical at this time for you to

consider the matter. There have been two mysterious deaths," Sarek tossed the holographs of the Admiral's autopsy onto the center of the table. Council members took them up, passed them around.

"Admiral Komack was found dead in his bed, just hours before the Rigi collapsed," Sarek continued, "the synapses in his brain fried. This could only be done through psychic manipulation. First the Admiral and now this," he tossed a second batch of holographs onto the table. This set was of the Rigi's autopsy. "We are being taunted. The Anomaly will be pressed into service, of that I am certain. The strongest minds will have to effect a metaphysical shield to contain this threat until it can be neutralized. And my son, by virtue of experience and position as a Starfleet Intelligence officer, will also be amongst those chosen to aide the team. You must act to rescind the censure, now, otherwise you would foist her upon him violation of the censure. That I will not abide."

"He cannot be rewarded for such defiance."

"Who is to say marriage is the correct route for her?" T'Mira asked. "She should have been brought to the Temple —"

"Are our ways for *Outworlders?*" Savin erupted. "It is unfortunate enough she had to be trained in the *Way*, just to keep her mind powers in check, but to

infiltrate the Holy Order," his voice trailed off with a look from T'Pau.

"There are those who suggest it would be for her safekeeping ... and our own," Supak offered. "Highly trained monastics would guard her, while *shielding* the rest of us from undue psychic scrutiny. Who knows what she is capable of? Her *Gifts* are extreme, for a human."

Cross conversations erupted, echoing off the roughly hewn walls and vaulted ceilings of the Council's private chamber as the debate rose once again, revisiting old issues as it seemed they must. Was it *Kiftiri* that had driven these two souls together? Even T'Pau did not know the answer beyond a certainty. She glanced around her at the Noble assemblage wondering if this debate would never end? Sarek was correct in his observations, and T'Pau concurred, they had little choice if they were to preserve the peace for all.

The needs of the many ... the elderly Vulcan woman sighed, feeling the weight of this burden like no other in her recollection. The *Anomaly* would be called upon to use those very *Gifts* in the resolution of this current situation. But could they rely on her? Was she stable enough in the face of it, to carry on alone, battered and bruised as the broken *bondlink* had left her? Or must they reverse their prior ruling for the good of all? It was, indeed,

the question this Council must answer.

"We must decide," she said at last and a silence fell over the room. Only the wind outside and the beating of the flames from the flickering candles could be heard. 2

November 1, 2285 Islander Restaurant San Francisco, Earth

Joseph Cantrell sat back in his chair, staring at the legal draft set before him. The meeting wasn't going well. He was glad now that he had insisted it take place here in this very public spot, the *Islander* Restaurant, a notable place for fine dining. He glanced around him briefly at the other patrons, taking in the ambience of this place, the low lighting, the intimacy of the booths and the tables scattered throughout the center aisle, where he and his companion sat. Waiters and waitresses

flitted expertly from table to table toting heavy trays laden with food in a carefully choreographed dance, skirting close to each other, yet never once making contact. He would have preferred a booth, needing the quiet it offered, but his huge six foot six frame just didn't lend itself to such tight confines.

Joseph took in a deep breath, gathering into his lungs the pungent aroma of roast beef marinated in au jus. His guest was a strict vegetarian, but knowing the nature of the business they were to conduct on this cheerless evening, he decided some form of vengeance was in order. He reached for the pen, changed his mind and grabbed his wine glass instead, taking a sip of the rare vintage Cabernet Sauvignon. Stalling.

"Is the wording contrary to your liking?" Ambassador Sarek said, at last. His gaze was cool beneath the gently angled eyebrows flecked with bits of gray, his brown eyes beginning to reflect his advanced years. The Vulcan's demeanor exuded patience as he waited for an answer.

Joseph drew in a quiet breath, glancing away again unable to look the aged dignitary in the eye. He had lived on Vulcan for many years and he was familiar with the culture. He embraced it with all of its intricacies and subtle nuances, he just never dreamed it would creep its way into his own household so very intimately. Never dreamed he

would be signing such an agreement as this. So much of him railed against the notion, his hand nearly shook. "No," he said. "No, it's quite logically put. It just occurs to me now that perhaps something more provisional should be offered. You know, something with more wriggle room. We're talking about two people's lives here. What if they don't even get along? Hell, marriage is hard enough..."

"Arrangements of this nature quite often take place in your own culture. Human history is replete with it. I do not comprehend your continued reticence in the matter. As for whether or not they will get along, it is up to them to make it work. We must not forget how tenaciously they clung to each other after the Council ruled against such a match in the first place. It is *Kiftiri*, the will of the *All...*"

"Destiny, kiftiri, sounds more like a trap to me. Listen, Sarek. You've known me a long time. You know my word is good, why do we need this in writing?" he said, as he drew a line through some of the language on the page, striking it out, initialing each change as he went. "Here's what I recommend. Rather than jump off the deep end, let's just see how things work out. Put them together on the ship, and we'll go from there. What do you say?" Joseph shoved the amended paperwork across the table. Sarek barely glanced at it.

"It is not for me to say, the Council requires more than a mere promise. Reputations are on the line, the integrity of his family. This is a serious business, the — *moderator* in question was accused of malfeasance. Surely, you would not deny him the opportunity to prove himself unfairly maligned," Sarek said. "And what of your daughter? She pines away. Already certain damage may have been done. Why tempt fate? We all made an error in judgement four point one-eight Standard Earth years ago. It is time to rectify it, would you not agree?" With that he scribbled something on the page, initialed it and scooted it back across the tablecloth

Joseph made a pretense of studying the parchment. He noted the emphasis placed on the word moderator. He had requested the Ambassador withhold the identity of the man, for now, for reasons of his own. It was all part of his backup plan should the meeting go against him. Which it had been, steadily. Sarek was a skilled diplomat, with decades of experience under his belt. Joseph, although flustered, wasn't really surprised the elderly statesman had wrung concession after concession out of him. Still, he would not give in so easily. He had one minor ace up his sleeve, and he planned to play it.

"We must at least make the attempt," Sarek said,

breaking the uneasy silence. "If he does not find favor with your daughter after a time, she is free to *Challenge* him. And honor will have been served. If it were one of your sons who stood accused, Joseph, what would you do?"

With that Joseph looked up, startled, for a moment thinking that the father-to-father tactic Sarek employed had something to do with the identity of the man in question. Then he brought himself back to his senses. Sarek only had two sons, one who had disgraced himself and the *House of Talek Sen Dene* years ago, the rumor of his recent demise carried on the wind, and another son by his second union, Spock of legendary fame. To think, most believed it had been this second son who had died in action, of which the reports had been numerous, since the other one went unmentioned by name for some time now.

Yet, shortly thereafter Spock resurfaced, coming back to life, or so it appeared, adding more kindling to his already mythical status. Most likely, as it occurred to Joseph, Spock had been injured, however severely. Joseph had caught a news report stating the account of Spock's death had been in error, accepting the report the Vulcan had undergone the ritual of *Fal tor Pan* as an interesting part of Spock's recovery therapy. Perhaps, it was more for show, something rooted in Vulcan culture,

introducing him back into the fold, or something along those lines, he thought. He would have to ask Brianna about it, since she had made xenoanthropology one of her studies. From what Joseph had observed, Vulcans were, for all of their sophistication, a mysterious breed, balancing technological advancements and logic with a deep faith bordering on the superstitious.

How to exploit that, he pondered, in order to free his daughter from an uncertain fate? It was time to play his ace. "I'll agree to most of this, but this is how I want it to come down," he began and proceeded to lay out his plan, producing a legal document of his own for Sarek to sign. When Joseph was finished running down the finer points, Sarek was the one who looked thoughtful for a time. The Ambassador then leaned forward and with a bold stroke, signed the provisional agreement Joseph had countered with, Joseph doing the same, signing the parchment Sarek had presented, with a flourish.

"There," he said, handing it back to the Vulcan.

"It is done," Sarek echoed, easing out of his seat. He gathered both the paper and his copy of the provisional agreement Joseph was handing him, Joseph having slipped the small rectangular diskette out of the electronic recorder, coming to his feet as well.

"I shall take my leave. My secretary will make the needed adjustments to this contract and you will get a copy of it, forthwith. And I thank you for your courtesies tonight. The meal was exceptional. The next time Amanda comes to Earth with me, I shall bring her here. Good evening, Joseph."

"Live long and prosper, Sarek." With a polite nod, the Ambassador strode from the crowded restaurant. Joseph sat back down, pocketing the other diskette taken from the device, his copy. For a long time he just sat, finishing his wine and contemplating what he should do next. Certainly, he couldn't leave things as they were. A few minutes later, the bottle of rare wine exhausted, the giant bear of a man lumbered out of the establishment, grinning at the workers, calling many by their names and seeing to it his server was handsomely rewarded for the job well done.

"Good night, Mister Cantrell," the pretty young hostess called out as he left.

"Good night," he said, hesitating in the foyer, reading her name tag. "— Trudy. You're new here, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good name recognition, Trudy. Keep that up, you'll go far in this business." With a wink and a smile, he was gone.

3

November 6, 2285 Stardate 8511.06 USS Enterprise NCC-1701-A

Captain James T. Kirk announced, reading the official docket from the seat of his command conn. He glanced over the wire rims of his bifocals at his primary crew assembled together on the bridge for the first time in weeks, each putting his or her board through a series of checks. Back from his second camping excursion to Yosemite, it was still a mess up here he discovered, dismayed. Tool kits were splayed open

everywhere dotting the promenade and the well of the bridge. There was a constant buzz of crossconversations, too, a spark of electricity in the air as the work was nearing its completion. The retrofit in its final stages, the crew was aching to get on with it and get out into space.

They weren't the only ones, Kirk sighed.

He could not escape the little niggling sensation at the back of his brain that had worked its way down to his gut, setting it on fire. This time he couldn't blame it on Klingon food packs. Suddenly the very idea of pushing the outer edges of the envelope again, of stretching the known boundaries of the universe had taken on another meaning. It set him to tingling all right, but it was more of a chill, he decided. Or was it merely this unease that had crept into his consciousness? At the moment he had no answers and only vague questions.

Kirk shifted in his seat, forcing himself to concentrate on the business at hand — the lieutenant's orders. Shifting again, he was still struggling to find that comfortable spot. His old chair had eventually molded to his form, or so it seemed, wondering how long it would take for this chair to do the same. He grimaced. Yeoman Travers was quick to smile her sympathies.

"May I get you some coffee, sir?"

"That would be nice, Yeoman, thank you," he said, returning his attention to the dossier in front of him. He continued to scroll down through the electronic document, looking up briefly to find Travers waiting patiently. "Could you give me a minute with this?" he said in a friendly tone.

"I'll just get that coffee for you now, sir."

Kirk grinned in response, nodding in her direction after removing the antique spectacles he had been wearing. Glancing down at them briefly, the lenses newly repaired, he tucked them safely back within his uniform jacket. Again his mind wandered to the rumors, wondering if what he'd seen on the news this morning was even remotely related to the speculative talk going on all week. And if there was a connection, could the rumor ever become reality? Just how deeply involved were the Vulcans in this?

Kirk glanced over at his friend, Spock, fully absorbed in his work, and wondered how much he knew about what was going on? Was this growing situation behind Spock's subtle change in demeanor? Tight-lipped as ever, the Vulcan hadn't been forthcoming, leaving Kirk to wonder what had gotten into his first officer lately? Spock seemed ill at ease, almost restless, and for a Vulcan that alone was cause for alarm. Jim worried.

He had blamed Spock's current mood on his death and the refusion process. In some ways Spock's

recovery had been slow. Kirk had also received a full report from Dr. McCoy about the unusual, recurrent dreams the Vulcan was having. Yet, now in the face of all this unease, with Spock's parents having called him home, Spock's behavior no longer seemed mysterious. It could very well be that he was being pressured into leaving the Starfleet for political reasons. Talking to him about it, however, required finesse and timing.

Kirk let out a quiet sigh realizing Travers was at his elbow again, his cup of coffee at the ready. He took a sip, just what he needed, to temporarily dispel his misgivings. Savoring the richness of the brew for the moment, it allowed him to think more rationally. If Vulcan had decided to recall Spock, why not all Vulcans? He glanced back down at the dossier in his lap. Why send this new lieutenant to serve aboard his ship? he reasoned, drawing some comfort from that fact. After all, leaving her here and taking Spock with all of his experience would be — illogical. With that Kirk allowed himself to effectively 'stand down' from his concerns for the moment.

Slipping on his bifocals once again, "Let me see here," he read aloud, "one Lieutenant Cantrell, Junior Grade. Female. Science department. Xenoarchaeology, anthropology and navigation," Kirk finished, signing the orders. He handed the

clipboard back to Yeoman Travers, who smiled sweetly at her captain before she turned to leave.

"Excellent," came Spock's comment from the science station.

"It's about time. I vas seriously beginning to vonder if I vould have to take back my old position full time," Chekov complained from beneath his panel. Pavel had been moved laterally to Weapons Control, a position, by his performance, he found enormously challenging and gratifying. Kirk was just happy to have him back aboard.

"I was referring to the archaeological end of it," Spock said, tonelessly. He interrupted his work momentarily to glance upward from his panel at the captain. "We need a competent A and A officer if we are to venture forth into the unknown..."

"I understand your feelings on this, Spock," Kirk began. "I hope we garner that mission, too."

"Feelings, Captain?" Spock objected, his slanted right eyebrow rising to meet his shiny black hair in a typical expression of indignation. Kirk had come to know it was merely a mask Spock hid behind, but played along with him anyway.

"Forgive me. I meant your point of view." Kirk flashed his friend a grin, suggesting to Spock that he understood only too well what made the Vulcan tick, knowing, too, on a another level this was

merely Spock's attempt at humor. Smiling, James Kirk pocketed his spectacles again. Feelings did indeed come with the package, Kirk had learned over the years, heavily guarded, albeit, but there all the same. "You know Starfleet," he shrugged.

"Yes, it's run by humans," Spock's retort was sharp. The first officer returned his attention to his panel, flicked a few toggles and then swivelled around to his other board, his back to the center hub of the bridge. He was running the ship's computers through a series of tests, jotting down notes on his clipboard. Kirk chuckled lightly at Spock's typical response.

He was like a turtle, snapping back into his shell at the first hint of an emotional outburst, his attack on humans really an attack on himself in what he deemed a weak link in his Vulcan heritage. At least, up until this moment, Kirk had taken it that way. Now, in light of current events he wasn't so sure. It might be good for him to have another Vulcan aboard, Kirk decided, someone with whom Spock could better relate, perhaps. Or, perhaps, the sudden moodiness was a familiar precursor... . Kirk's thoughts drifted back to the Vulcan female. As McCoy suggested, it could explain the dreams. Was Spock *in need?* 

"Cantrell," Uhura suddenly said, above the din, breaking through the beeps, hums and whines of

the computers, and the various other clanking sounds erupting noisily as people worked around the bridge. She swung about in her chair to face the command conn, and sat tapping her pen against her lips in concentration. "Mister Spock, what region of Vulcan would the name Cantrell hail from?"

"It does not hail from anything Vulcan," the tall, lean alien assured her. Uhura looked perplexed. Kirk looked up abruptly, startled out of his muse. He had, himself, pronounced the incoming lieutenant a Vulcan.

"But," Uhura protested.

"It says here," James Kirk interceded, once again slipping the wire-rimmed bifocals onto his broad, handsome face as he took the clipboard back from the yeoman. "She has Vulcan citizenship," he said, viewing the document with distrust before offering it up for the first officer to inspect. *Citizenship*, he silently lamented. Spock wasn't the only one slightly distracted, it seemed, deciding his glasses needed cleaning. Raking them from his face he took the handkerchief from his back pocket with effort and polished the lenses vigorously. So much for the *Vulcan* female.

Spock was waving him off. "Vulcan citizenship does not make her a Vulcan. You seem disappointed, Captain." Kirk shrugged his broad shoulders smiling wryly, buying himself time as he

searched for a quick response, once again embarrassed at the oversight. Must be going senile....

"Well, you've been such an interesting study, Spock. I was hoping to learn something of the other half. I haven't met too many Vulcan females, as you know."

Again, Spock was giving him the 'eye'.

Kirk squirmed uncomfortably in his chair, turning his attention back to the clipboard, certain Spock could discern a hint of untruth in his captain's statement — if in fact he wasn't peering directly into Kirk's soul.

"Remind me to introduce you to a few," Spock said, dryly, his gaze immediately softening. At once James Kirk felt released from his scrutiny and noticeably relaxed only to catch Spock looking thoroughly amused in the next fleeting moment before he swivelled around to face his console, back to business that quickly.

"Anyway, this should please you," Kirk continued.

"I was never displeased," Spock returned, as he read the computer screen before him. He flicked another toggle on his board, stopping momentarily, his large hand sprawled across his console as he turned to give Jim Kirk his undying attention. Kirk looked at his friend. Was that a hint of annoyance

#### he detected?

There had been a steady stream of interruptions this morning, a few more than normal and to be honest, he didn't know why he was giving this matter so much of his energy. Boredom, perhaps. Not enough paperwork, he pleaded guilty. Or, he just needed the distraction from things well beyond his control, just now.

"She's fresh out of the Academy. We're her first assignment," he said.

This caught Spock's interest, Kirk noticed. The Vulcan was silent for a moment, no doubt calculating the endless possibilities of this good fortune. James Kirk smiled to himself. Spock had been yearning for fresh blood, someone inexperienced enough to conform to his methods of research, for years now.

He suspected Spock enjoyed his brief stint as an instructor at the Academy for much the same reasons. It gave him a chance to mold young minds. Were the trainees an effective substitute for the children Spock never had, Kirk suddenly wondered? Although Spock didn't show it, he had to be elated at such an opportunity, Kirk thought.

"May I see that dossier?" Spock asked. Kirk nodded to the young, dark-haired yeoman, who handed up the clipboard. Spock stood, leaning over the railing

slightly from the promenade to receive it. After scanning its contents, he commented, "Indeed? It would appear a most egregious error has occurred."

"How's that, Spock?" questioned the captain. Spock returned the clipboard to Natalie Travers, clasping his hands behind his back. It was his turn to tease.

"Why else would they make so logical a placement?" With that, he returned to his seat. Kirk smiled. He knew exactly what Spock meant. Starfleet Operations rarely exercised logic. If you joined the star service to see the universe, you were just as likely to wind up in a space-station somewhere, desk-bound. And any cadet knew if you wished to serve aboard a particular ship, you always listed it as second or third choice on your "dream-sheet," or better still, not at all.

"We are overlooking one thing, Mister Spock," Kirk said, running his hand over his chin. He pulled himself out of his chair, hopping up the two steps to the promenade to stand at the Vulcan's side. "And I don't mean this to ruin your day, but they could know exactly what they're doing," he said with an easy grin.

"That, of course, is a possibility."

"Anyway, knowing what it means to you, I sincerely hope she works out," James Kirk said,

placing a hand on Spock's shoulder. "And now, my friend, I'm going to bid you adieu."

"Captain?"

"I'm kicking you outta here. You're catching the noon transport, remember?"

"But I haven't yet finished ..." Spock said, rising slowly. He straightened his crimson jacket, squaring his shoulders.

"Hindeman can finish up." Kirk went over to the turbo-elevator, pressing the call button. He stopped abruptly and walking a few paces back toward Spock, gestured toward the empty car. The time had just presented itself and he needed a few answers. "Is it my imagination, or are you a little reluctant to go? Should you be worried about this meeting, Spock? I've been listening to the news. The reports coming ofVulcan concerning out demonstrations taking place there recently. Some kind of political unrest. A group, I believe, that's calling for Vulcan to drop out of the Federation. Or something on that order. I don't know. Is T'Pau's government in trouble all of a sudden? I didn't think that sort of thing could happen on Vulcan. I didn't think it was — logical."

"You would, of course, be referring to the *K'uht'ma*." Spock paused, looking thoughtful. "Logic," he said at last, clasping his hands behind

his back, "can be employed in any number of ways, Captain. It has its differences, good or ill. But rest assured this is most likely a minuscule flexing of political muscle by one of the *Houses* not currently in power. A bit of political posturing, if you will, from a lesser ruling *House*. It does occur from time to time. Although I am somewhat surprised to learn it has drawn intergalactic attention. And there has always been a faction of isolationists on Vulcan who would prefer the entire Universe keep out. They believe themselves to be the enlightened ones."

"Well, if it had, you certainly wouldn't be in existence."

"That would, no doubt, please them to no end. But as for my perceived reticence, it is strictly on a personal basis. Let's just say family business is often tricky, even at the best of times. Some issues that arose at my death are probably in need of resolving. Could be something as simple as getting my estate back. Signing some papers. Although my father's tone ... I could stay if you need me," Spock hedged.

"Go on, get outta here. Take your twelve days. We're not leaving space dock until Scotty solves the problem with the aft engines. We'll give you a holler," Kirk said, gently guiding his friend toward the lift. Spock was looking at him rather quizzically,

eyebrow uplifted.

"To holler when one cannot be heard is illogical," he said, straight-faced as always, stepping into the elevator.

"And say hello to your parents for me," Kirk smiled as the doors closed between them. He chuckled lightly to himself as he made his way over to the center seat and again took up the business of the day. Foolish of him to subscribe to rumors, he chastised. Obviously, he had given things far too much credence. And as for what was troubling Spock, like he said, it was most likely something as simple as signing a few legal documents in order to get his life back.

With that, Kirk took up the day's roster. If they were to garner that coveted five-year mission, a lot more work on this vessel had to be completed. And soon. He had already scheduled another shakedown cruise twenty-one days from now.

4

November 14, 2285, Stardate: 8511.14 Beach House, Pacific Coast, Earth

he wave undulated beneath her, cold white foam fizzing at her sides, as she floated along on her back. A chill shook her. She knew she couldn't stay there forever. It was much too cold this time of year. For now, however, she simply rode the crest as the water rushed to the shore and then slowly pulled back to start anew, lulling her into a rare sense of peace ...

"Cold? Have some coffee."

"Huh?" Brianna Cantrell startled, snapping back

into herself. She really had been metaphysically playing out on those waves, to her chagrin. Turning from the railing, she glanced at her father sheepishly, so certain he could read the shame of her *wandering* on her face.

"Were you asleep?" Joseph Cantrell asked, "or just wool-gathering?"

Brianna gave her father a weak smile, relieved for the moment at his apparent ignorance, noting the concerned furrow carved into his brow. "I don't sleep," she said, taking the coffee cup from him. "Sleep is the enemy. Only now the dreams are invading my wakefulness." Hugging the hot mug, she took a seat in one of the deck chairs. Sunset was still more than an hour away yet the waning light provided little warmth this time of year. Still there was no better place to observe the day's end, than out here on the deck, something Brianna used to do with her father back on Vulcan when she was a child. She needed the comfort of those memories right now.

A light went on inside the beach house. She glanced toward the window briefly at the movement inside. Preparations had started for the evening's barbeque.

Joseph leaned against the railing, his back to the Pacific Ocean. "You look terrible, Breezy."

"I suppose that's why Starfleet gave me R & R."
"Humph."

Smoothing the light blonde fringes that covered her forehead, for the most part hiding the scar there, she sighed, not meeting her father's eyes. "No, that's a lie. I'm shipping out in three days. Just when I was beginning to feel like some sort of guinea pig. A lab rat with no escape ... seems I may prove useful to them after all."

"Special Services, Bree?" Joseph frowned. He took a seat near hers and put a hand on her arm. "I know there's a lot going on in the universe of late. Lots of unrest ...

"I should have known they wouldn't let me be an ordinary lieutenant. And here I thought archaeology was the perfect outlet for my *Gifts*. Uncover a bone or a clay pot. Hold it in my hands for a moment and tell them who or what is was. Its use and why."

"Innocuous. Harmless. Safe."

"Safe," she nodded. Very little about the current situation had made it to the press. Reports of the *Rigi*'s collapse, of course, had trickled its way into the media and the funeral was telecast throughout the Federation. Starfleet was keeping a tight lid on the rest, including the use of a highly specialized team being brought together by the Vulcans at this

moment to spearhead what they hoped would be a preemptive strike against a band of still unknown terrorists. To that end, Brianna had been summoned despite Starfleet's earlier threat to rescind her commission.

Exactly how and why she would be used Brianna Cantrell could only guess at this moment, adding to her discomfiture. Giving specifics of her mission wasn't an option open to her, however. Whatever her father knew or felt was simply the result of his own divination — her *Gifts* had been hereditary. Many of her family members exhibited some level of psychic ability. Joseph Cantrell had also been a Marine some years ago, so Brianna knew he wouldn't press her for classified details. Instead, she let the roar of the surf below fill the void between them.

"Daddy, I'm so alone," she began again after a time. "And I'm scared."

"I know you are."

"On Vulcan they accepted my Gifts."

"On Vulcan they tried to train away your *Gifts*. They straight-jacketed you, kept you from exploring the depths and breadth of what God gave you. To His glory, Bree. And if you don't feel comfortable with what Starfleet wants, to hell with them, too. You just send those uniforms on a one-

way passage to the dry cleaners."

"Dad —" The glass slider was pulled open behind them, making a noise that caused Brianna to turn slightly.

"And if they squawk about the hundreds of thousands they expended on your training, I'll simply make a quick transfer of credits to cover it. After all I'm good for it. In fact, I can get Jonathan working on it right away."

"But Daddy ... Brianna sighed. Her father was next to impossible sometimes. "Dad," she tried again. "Being scared doesn't mean I can't handle..."

"We'll have you sprung by dinner tonight." Joseph's grin was small.

Brianna knew what he was doing — what he'd always done even when she was a small child — couching his intent with a bit of humor to snap her out of her present funk. To some extent it worked. She just wished he wouldn't always insist on fixing things for her.

"Dad, really. This was my choice of career —"

"Dad and his almighty credit account to the rescue again!" Erik Cantrell said, as he came out to the deck followed by two of their three brothers. He held up a small personal P.A.D.D. and waved it about before he plopped into a chair opposite his little sister.

"I can feel my arms growing shorter," she said. "He never lets me solve my own problems."

"Yours, too?" Erik teased.

"I wouldn't scoff, if I were you," warned Aaron, the eldest of the Cantrell brood. Erik grinned. "So, little girl, what's Dad getting you out of? Me — it was a couple of annoyance tickets."

"It was disturbing the peace," Aaron corrected, sliding the glass door closed behind him. "He had to go before the magistrate."

"More like destroying the piece," Joe, Jr. chuckled. "He's still editing the music a tad." Grasping his next older brother by the shoulders, he gave Erik a slight shake. "If only he wouldn't do it out on the deck at three A.M." Then he turned to Brianna. "Are you here for my wedding?"

Erik scrubbed at the blond frizzle on his chin. "What do you want from me? Sincerely. I'm a struggling musician — with shortened arms." He winked. "And you haven't answered my question." Erik gazed directly at his sister.

Brianna watched her older brothers with amusement, enjoying their usual banter. "I've been assigned to the *Enterprise* ..."

"That rust-bucket of a ship?" twelve year-old

Adrian complained. He stepped out onto the deck hugging his can of soda pop. "She's ancient! Well past her prime. What did you do wrong, Bree?" He glanced at her coffee mug and grimaced. "I thought you hated coffee?"

"Long cold nights of studying," she shrugged. "You get used to it." Adrian rolled his blue eyes and perched himself on the rail.

"Well, at least they've given you a ship, that's good." Erik clapped his hands, "Garcon, a beer. This calls for a celebration. Our little sister, at long last, has a ship."

"Not so fast. I was once assigned to the *Excelsior*, too, don't forget and before I could pack my bags they pulled me off again."

"Well," Aaron added, settling his tall frame into a seat in the corner of the deck, "that happens. It's Starfleet."

"Yes, but the *Excelsior* is set for a five-year mission. It's just what I needed. To put this all behind me. I mean, it's what everybody's urging me to do. Get over it and move on, right? That's what I'm supposed to do. Instead of sitting here like a wounded bird."

Erik leaned in close, "What does your heart tell you to do?"

Brianna's gaze was intense. "My heart," she said, "is what got me into this whole mess. The Vulcans are right to employ only Logic."

Erik shot his father a glance. Joseph nodded in the direction of the lower deck. "Why don't you fellas go fire up the barbeque?"

"It doesn't take three of us to do that —" Joe Jr. objected just as Erik rose, and placing a hand on his brother's shoulder gently guided him toward the steps.

"That's another way of telling us to get outta here," Erik quipped. "Come on."

"Adrian, go help your mother," Joseph said, nodding his head.

The boy drew in a breath, hopped down from his perch and made a big show of slumping his shoulders" I never get in on the good conversations!" He said, as he went back inside.

Brianna waited until it was just the two of them again, to speak. "I miss him so much, Daddy. Still."

"I know, Baby Girl, I know."

"When we were connected ... he had this way of ... I'm not sure how to explain it. It's like he was a counter balance. Does that make sense? Now I'm just ... alone. Adrift. I'm so sorry. I never intended to *mindmeld* with him. You always warned me. It

just ... sorta happened. I don't think he meant to, either, for what it's worth," she whispered, huddling further into the chair

Warming her feet on the fire ring strategically placed in the center of the deck, she had yet to acclimate to the dampness of a climate that spread it's chill all the way to her bones. They may have removed her physically from Vulcan, yet some part of the arid planet claimed her, still. No matter how long she remained on Earth, she could never get warm enough. She should never have played in the waves ...

"What about this so-called testing?" Joseph asked, at last.

Brianna Cantrell stared directly into the burning embers, "The psychological scanning? Piece of cake," she replied. "I guess that's really what this is about. My collapse ... Guess they just want to make sure I'm stable, for one. It's just that ..." she paused, fighting for control, retrieving a small rectangular piece of red plastic from her coat pocket, the computer diskette that contained her orders. She turned the flat object over and over in her tiny hands, belying her state of mind, trembling ever so slightly. "Well, I seem to be projecting, lately."

"You're wandering again?" Joseph shook his head. "Doesn't that make you something of a - a security risk?"

Brianna shrugged, gazing into her mug. "It's triggered some rather strange dreams," she said. "Like I'm looking through a kaleidoscope of memories that aren't quite mine. And I *felt* him again. Like he was there," she trailed off, her gaze suddenly clouded and far away again. "Like the *Watcher* is being watched ... I know he's dead. I felt him die. I just can't seem to let him go." Her voice, tiny and thin, came as a whisper.

"Less than a *bondlink*, more than a simple *mindmeld*. Isn't that how T'Pran described it?"

"Yeah," Brianna said. A tear broke free and rolled down her delicate cheek. She quickly brushed it away. "I just wanted ... I never got to see his face, Daddy. Never got to look into his eyes. I just had hoped one day ..."

"I made a judgement call nearly five years ago. You were seventeen. A baby, really."

"I know. It's okay," her shoulders slumped. "I don't hold you to blame anymore. Not really. It's just. I can't seem to tell fact from fantasy anymore, either. Reality apart from my dreams. What I want so much to be true — that he's *alive* — despite what that may mean."

Joseph hung his head and spoke softly. "You should always trust your instincts, Brianna. I need you to trust them now."

Gazing at her father's face she noted how much older he seemed these days. His deep auburn hair was tinged with white streaks, his full beard flecked with gray. Tiny lines edged his light blue eyes. She saw pain in them. "What do you mean? In what way? I don't —"

Joseph held out a hand to halt her questions, "I debated whether I should tell you this," he nodded, hanging his head. "But with the way everything played out in the end, I simply don't have a choice."

"Go on," Brianna prompted, growing uncomfortable.

"After your *k'Matra*, after the incident, we were flooded with marriage proposals. All *First Sons* from the Noble *Houses*. I never entertained them for a second. Threw every last one of them into the fire. Seals and all," Joseph Cantrell said.

"Dad?" Brianna felt the tingle of her whole body going numb. She shook her head, struggling to keep her jaw from going slack. On top of everything else, she had developed the unfortunate propensity for passing out, lately.

"You had your life all planned out," Joseph went on. "I wasn't going to let them take it from you. Good breeding stock, or no. You're not a horse. You're not property—"

"Ha! My life's plan," she cried suddenly, jumping

up to pace the deck. The auto lights popped on, dusk rapidly closing in. She set her coffee mug on a small side table, resting her hands on the back of her hips. "My dream to be a Starfleet officer quietly going nova. Brighter than bright at graduation and then just winking out. You do know they want to suspend my commission ... What is it you're saying to me? What are you telling me? That it isn't like you said? He wasn't toying with me after all? That he wanted me — to be his wife?"

"No, baby."

"What made you think I couldn't do both? Wasn't that for me to decide? Just who was treating who like property? It's *my* life! *My* choice!" Hugging herself, she walked toward the deck's edge. "I could have been his wife. Oh, God, you took that away from me. We could have had some real time —" A sob escaped and she quickly squelched it.

Joseph came up behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders as she gazed vacantly toward the ocean and the looming darkness. "You need someone who can love you. You're human, not Vulcan," he was adamant. "As much as you'll love him."

"Who are you to judge that?" she said, drawing in a ragged breath, shrugging away from him. "He loved me in his own way. I can't explain it."

"Someone who knows how an unintended *mindmeld* can mess with your head, that's who!"

"What?"

Joseph nodded, "It was long before I met your mother. Back when I was a Marine and stationed on Vulcan. But just like you, I believed I loved her. Through the *mindmeld* she made me think so — and all the time I was just a experiment to be discarded when she got bored. Her excuse? She was curious about humans."

"I'm sorry it didn't work out for you, but that's your story. It isn't mine —"

"Don't talk nonsense," Joseph said firmly, grasping her arms and looking directly into her eyes. "Don't you see? Your *moderator* wasn't even in the running. This is what I'm trying to tell you. He never even asked. So you see, he was never seriously interested. Why do you think they placed censure on him in the first place? Strictly for his conduct during your test? Hardly. He was toying with you. And they knew it."

"He used a mind trick on me? No, you're wrong, I don't believe it, I can't — What is the point in telling me all of this now? As if I don't hurt enough already."

Joseph dropped his hold on her. Scrubbing at his beard, he let out a tired sigh. "I met with an

advocate for his family week before last. You are to formally meet him. Your *moderator*. Now that you have all the facts, you can weigh things for yourself. You've always had good instincts. The rest is up to you, after that."

"So, my wanderings weren't triggered by the socalled *Phantom Effect*, after all. How long were all of you planning on keeping up this pretense?" Brianna shot him a glance, grabbing the railing hard. "Am I really that delicate you thought the truth would crush me? I've been such a fool. What are you saying to me?"

"I'm saying that had I to do it all over again ... ." Joseph cleared his throat. "It is possible mistakes were made four and a half years ago. And although I would likely take a similar course of action again ... you were so very young ... I would do anything to spare you this pain, now."

Brianna Cantrell's eyes filled with tears. She threw a hand over her mouth, wanting to heave, certain she was going to be sick. Gingerly, she lowered herself back into the deck chair. "Then, it's true. He left me." I felt him die, how can that be?

"I don't know or understand the circumstances. But, yes, it would seem so."

"I guess I don't understand just why he wishes to meet me now." Brianna scrubbed the tears from her

face, focusing on the red embers warming her feet. She felt cold all over. "Cur-curiosity?"

"It's his family. I believe they are earnestly trying to make amends." Joseph Cantrell handed her the scroll from inside his jacket. "If this doesn't sit well with you let me know. I do have another option available. It wouldn't take much to put it into play."

Huddling into herself, scroll in hand, Brianna Cantrell stared out at the ocean below. The sun had set like a fiery orange ball, dipping into the waves where the sky met the deep cerulean blue of the water. She could hear her older brothers laughing and carrying on down on the lower deck, full of merriment. Life for her had ended for a long time after her *moderator* died — left her — and she'd made a concerted effort to continue on, wanting only to honor his memory by being strong. Now, she was uncertain of what to think. "Alone. So *alone*," she whispered.

5

November 14, 2285 Stardate: 8511.14

Starship Enterprise NCC-1701-A, Earth's Orbit

irk pealed open his crimson duty jacket and slung it onto his bunk, heading into his private bathroom, when the compti chimed. Still trying to get back into work mode after his recent camping trip, this day seemed unusually long. All he wanted was a hot sonic shower, a bit of dinner and an early night. The crew had worked hard on the retrofit of the ship while he was off playing. It was time to get back down to business. There was a five-year mission up for

grabs and he had been busy haggling with the upper echelon prior to his leave, trying to procure the coveted assignment for his crew. To his surprise, he had met with resistance. Instead, he and his command crew were assigned leave, no arguments.

Kirk did admit to feeling renewed, if not in need of a more comfortable night's sleep in his bunk, this time. He had just about resolved to begin the haggling all over again in the morning when his thoughts were interrupted. He punched open the compti.

"Kirk, here," he said, letting out a tired sigh.

"Sorry to bother you, Captain," came the sultry sound of Uhura's voice, "but I've got Admiral Halsey on the line."

He expected Komack, who was in charge of Starfleet Operations. "Admiral Halsey? I thought he retired years ago. Pipe it to my quarters, Uhura."

"Aye, sir."

In another moment the white haired Admiral came into view on the small screen in Kirk's quarters. The man had to be close to the century mark in years, looking frail, aged. Kirk struggled into a clean duty shirt and took a seat at his desk. "Admiral Halsey — to what do I owe the honor, sir?"

"Kirk. I don't have to tell you about all the rumors circulating lately."

"Rumors, sir? I only know what I've seen on the news about the riots on Vulcan. Beyond that — If I've done something that should keep me from garnering this five-year mission —" he hedged. He had indeed heard the rumblings as he passed through the base, in and out of said conferences, the guarded statements from former colleagues, the furtive glances, wishing they had confided in him. Instead he came away with a slap on the shoulder, a meaningful look and the sense that his first order of business was to get this ship ready — and fast. Something was brewing in the galaxy, shaking the nerves of the Admiralty. But what?

Halsey nodded slightly, a slow mirthless grin tugging at the corners of his lined mouth. "Jim, Komack was found dead the morning of the conference. Although it looked like a stroke took him in his sleep, upon further examination, the autopsy revealed he was — murdered. Like the *Rigi*, the Vulcans believe this was done by 'thinking' him to death."

"Say, what?"

"According to the Vulcan physicians, the telltale mark of burnt synapses showed on the scan they did of his brain. Such marks were reminiscent of those left behind by the use of a *psionic resonator*,

often the only trace, used in the past for the purpose of – political assassinations. With the device to channel the energy, the user only need concentrate on the victim and the manner of death. Sarek informs me this was an ancient Vulcan practice employed before their adoption of Logic. Now this is worrisome, as it may harken back to that missing artifact stolen nearly five years ago. The artifact was a piece of this device thought completely destroyed long ago. Leaving very few clues behind, beyond the use of the device for the strike, it was the weapon of choice during Vulcan's Dark Ages. But, thankfully, the Ambassador has a plan on how to trap the perpetrators behind these heinous crimes and a way to counter any further attempts in the interim. Something about a psychic shield made up of Vulcans with very high esperratings. Monks, most of them. Personally, I never understood Vulcan mysticism."

"Me, either. It's a lot to take in."

"How soon until the *Enterprise* is fully operational?"

"My Chief Engineer informs me she'll be ready for shakedown by the end of the week."

"Excellent. You can head out at oh-five-thirty hours. You're to rendezvous with the *T'Mir* in three days and transfer the Vulcan Delegation onto the *Enterprise*. Further orders will await you when you

make the transfer."

"My first officer is away on additional leave —"

"Don't worry, Jim, I wouldn't hamstring you. He'll be aboard the *T'Mir*. Oh, and be careful, Jim. Halsey out." The view screen went blank. Kirk turned around in his chair, feeling as if he'd just been broadsided.

"Is it just me, or am I simply not allowed to go on leave without the universe going to hell while I'm gone?" 6

In the Vulcan Year of Ni'roc, November 10, 2285 Shi'Kahr, Vulcan

he House of Talek Sen Dene was in an uproar by the time Spock arrived home. Stepping out of the vehicle, he watched as a cloaked figure came down the front path at a hurried clip and commandeered his transport. The woman was careful not to let him see her face as she all but climbed over him to get into the back seat. Spock quickly reached in for his duffel bag and things.

Already she was ordering the driver to take off, leaving Spock with barely enough time to punch in

his code to pay for his ride. Curious, he watched as the hovercraft pulled away from the curb. Then he made his way up the slightly winding path to the front door of his parents' home, set deep into the mountain side. A soft tap and the door was flung wide.

"Spock, I'm afraid we lost track of time. We were just about to send for you," his mother greeted from the foyer. The ever-present sparkle in her blue eyes belied her tired demeanor, giving her son cause for concern. She gave him the briefest of hugs as he stepped inside. He lifted an eyebrow at her in surprise. Amanda had stopped hugging him in the human fashion when he was five years old.

"It's all right. I took a transport," he said, gently fending her off. He touched her open palm with his instead. Glancing briefly around him, Spock couldn't help but notice the flurry of activity going on, as his father's aides were busy gathering parchments and computer diskettes into briefcases.

Evidently, emergency meetings had taken place. The entire household had kicked into crisis mode. "What is the nature of the emergency, Mother?" he asked and then, strangely, she was on him again.

"You should have worn a hat," she mildly chastised, brushing the flecks of snow from his hair. She cupped his face for a moment with her hand, no doubt checking for a fever. She didn't fool him for a

moment. Eight point seven-four months ago he had died and everyone was treating him differently, as if he were somehow made fragile for the experience.

"I did not realize the weather had turned. It is early," he said. "And who was that outside? A Council Arbitrator? Are the *Houses* haggling again? This does not bode well for T'Pau."

"Come in from the cold, my son," Sarek ordered, suddenly appearing from another room, ignoring the question. Spock automatically braced himself mentally as if for impact, his father's presence rather commanding, as always.

"There's an old Earth saying, 'curiosity killed the cat'," Amanda said quietly, patting her son's hand briefly, uncharacteristically catering to his human half, again. Spock eyed her suspiciously as he handed over his heavy winter wrap. Taking the cue from his father, he grew quiet. He was increasingly certain by his father's attitude the announcement Sarek was about to make was something less than benign in nature. Wasn't he here to get his property back? His untimely death and the subsequent *Refusion* of his soul back into his body had made a slight mess of his estate.

While Amanda left to put away his things, Spock followed the elderly statesman into the formal living room. A fire blazed on the grate in a brave effort to stave off the bitter extreme of the Vulcan

winter. Spock nearly startled at the sight of T'Pau, seated before the cavernous maw of the ancient fireplace. He hardly anticipated her presence. Wrapped in heavy blankets across her lap she looked remarkably frail and old. Her hair was no longer jet-black with a wide streak of gray, but nearly all white now, her wizened face streaked with tiny, fine lines resembling rivulets. What was she doing here?

Spock raised his hand in greeting then clasping both of his hands together bowed low before the High Councilor. Sarek quietly ordered the servants out of the room and closed the double doors himself. Amanda had just enough time to slip back inside the room, standing unobtrusively in a corner near her son. Moral support? Spock wondered, spying her there out of the corner of his eye as he bent at the waist. Was he in need? His mind harkened back to the curious discussion with Jim Kirk right before he left to come here. Was there more to this meeting than putting his affairs to rights?

"Thee hast caused quite a stir, young Spock," T'Pau began, after returning his greeting with a gesture and a regal nod of her head. Up went his eyebrow. He was unaware of any noteworthy doings involving him, apart from the recent role he shared in saving Earth. Although his father congratulated

him on his conduct during the crisis, somehow he never got the impression he was being celebrated here at home. Really, it was just enough notoriety to get the paparazzi interested in him again, problematic as that was.

Maybe they had stirred up something?

His mind raced, but failed to grasp a reason for her comment. "You have me at a disadvantage, T'Pau," he said.

"Thee wast a *moderator* during the *k'Matra*. A time-honored position," T'Pau replied, getting right to the point. "Thy job wast to judge the strength and distance of the *candidate*'s thought projection. To keep that same consciousness inside the safe confines of the *Corridor* by deflection — only. What possessed thee to *touch* her?"

Spock straightened up again, stunned, to find his father offering him a glass of vintage Vulcan brandy. He accepted it readily, realizing he was going to need it, thrown completely off-guard as he was. A substantial portion of his memory on the subject was still clouded, broken into fragments and he couldn't place the pieces into a comprehensive recollection. "I do not understand, T'Pau. That was more than four point four-seven-six years ago," Spock began. Why bring it up, now?

"I believe the excuse thee gave at the time wast,

curiosity?" The old woman continued. Spock shot a quick glance at his mother suddenly wondering where this was leading. He couldn't go back and undo what was done. He did remember the fervor the incident had created, struggling to recall the details. The young woman in question had tested quite highly making her excellent breeding stock for any number of Vulcan's sons, despite the fact she was human, among them a few *unbonded First Sons* from the lesser Ruling *Houses*.

These were the ones who had brought the charges of malfeasance against Spock to the Council, he realized all at once, suggesting Spock had used his unique position to his advantage, usurping any and all other suitors by *touching* her first. Contact was inadvertent, that much he knew on a gut level, completely unplanned in any way. That fact, or even that Spock was older and in more need of a mate, made little difference to them. The *House of Talek Sen Dene*, great in prestige, was clearly under a politically motivated attack.

"At the time, the Council ruled I had indeed violated the test regulations. But what is more important, by *touching* the *candidate*, I had gained an unfair advantage over other possible suitors. I was effectively barred from pursuing her. I was even denied access to her identity."

"Was it, Spock? Truly over?"

Spock glanced up at T'Pau, studied her features. What was she driving at? He opened his mouth to speak and then shut it again, having no words to offer her.

"Didst thee also know she hast turned down every suitor to date? Thee hast, again, bent the rules to thy benefit. Thwarted the Council's attempt to balance the scales. Thee art a clever child! Less than a *bondlink*, more than a simple *mindmeld*. Thee hast found a way to defeat the censure by binding her to thee ever so gradually. Thread at a time."

"I did not," Spock said. He had no conscious recollection of that fact.

"A lie?" T'Pau's eyebrows shot upwards. "She *felt* it when thee died," the High Councilor exhorted, tapping her short staff against the parquet flooring in cadence with her words, flaunting her strongest evidence against him.

Spock unintentionally squeezed his glass. Allegedly, Vulcans were beyond prevarication. It was something they could not do. Of course, he was half-human and guilty of exaggeration whenever the occasion warranted it. And he was having memory lapses, as surely T'Pau was aware. Spock knew her actions were deliberate, *felt* her scrutiny, and fought to keep from squirming. Perhaps, she sought to shake him up in an attempt to jog his memory?

Spock drew in a silent, calming breath. What did they want from him now? He had abided by the censure, bitter as it had been to accept, trying to restore the honor he had inadvertently displaced by his actions. He was obviously mistaken when he believed the matter closed. When and how had he strengthened that thread between them he wondered, enough to nearly classify it a *bondlink*, the strongest of all links, strong enough to cause her pain at his death?

He simply did not know. Pondering, he sifted through his already tortured memory and came up blank. The answer remained a mystery to him. That was the issue at hand here, causing his family renewed consternation. It seemed impossible, wishing he could answer the question. He just did not know. Yet apparently, somehow, he had managed to hurt the *candidate*, again. Spock took a swig of the brandy, letting the fiery liquid numb his throat. Hurting her had never been his intent. It was the last thing he ever wanted to do. How one Vulcan could wreak such havoc ...

"I am unaware of how," he began, "perhaps, her high Esper-rating — "

"Kroika!" T'Pau cried. Amanda startled at such a shrill and sudden outburst. Sarek, perhaps a bit more practiced at containing his responses, merely squeezed his clasped hands more tightly,

momentarily closing his eyes. Spock immediately bit his lower lip. It was his tongue, obviously, that needed containing. "Dost thee deny walking in her dreams? Thee art both at fault.

Spock glanced over at T'Pau, astonishment flickering in his warm brown eyes. His dreams were personal, how did she come to know whether he wandered in them, or not? McCoy? Had he duly recorded Spock's recent confession to him on his medical records - was T'Pau keeping watch on him? Was he being spied upon? Surely, not. Yet, once more in his mind's eye he held the fragmented rope in his hands; the rope he had thrown the candidate years ago, he suddenly realized, when the dreaming began. The Game! At once his heart was pounding in his chest and the air seemed unusually thin. Was he, indeed, guilty as charged? Did the candidate hold the other end in her memory bearing witness to these alleged, illicit wanderings, revealed by the inevitable mindmeld to save her when he died?

It would explain the dreams he had been having lately, why he could not recall her name or her face just the essence of her ... McCoy was right. Spock felt the pain of his sudden autonomy all over again, her whole existence shattering in a single instant along with his inability to get back to her; reliving it more acutely as acceptance slowly settled in that

she was not a phantom but indeed a reality. The snapping rope in his dreams was obviously indicative of the *bondlink* that must have been carefully crafted between them, torn asunder at his death.

"Merely whispers of what had been," he murmured absent-mindedly. For a moment he fought with his emotions, waiting for them to subside. The pain had always been real.

"Thy parents have petitioned the Council to lift the censure that binds thee. The fact that thee died without an heir, bears more than a little weight in this matter. And indeed may have swung the deciding vote," T'Pau said. "The fact that thee art First Son of a greater Ruling House, also hast bearing. Someday, if it is thy fate, thee might even sit in this chair as High Councilor.

"Spock, thee art half-human and thy woman fully human. Know there are those who suggest such a union would further weaken the bloodline of *Talek Sen Dene*. Were it not for this current crisis threatening the Federation, a different decision may have been reached. As it stands, Logic has prevailed. The two of you will be needed to work conjointly to solve this threat. I am old. And Vulcan does not need this unrest among her *Houses*."

"Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations, T'Pau," Sarek said slowly, stepping forward slightly

from his position in front of the fireplace. He had wisely kept his peace during all of this. Spock looked over at his father, thinking at last, having wondered if he was going to offer even a modicum of support. "That is the basis of our entire philosophy."

"Thank thy father, Spock. It is due solely to his diplomatic skills that the ruling of the Council hast gone favorable for thee," the High Councilor said. Spock glanced around him completely confused. All he had was a need to reconnect to this woman, *She who is without name*, nothing else. The blank slate troubled him. He had lost so much of himself to it, of his life that could never be recaptured. He had died, and while he had spent time on that other planet outside of time, life had gone on without him. Why should there be a memory of it? Yet, these were memories that occurred while he lived. He only wished he could recall ...

Amanda, standing a short distance from her son, nearly sighed audibly in her relief. Spock could have been forced to pay an ample bride-price to the young woman's family, including forfeiting his property for auction for his alleged offense, without gaining a bride. That would hardly serve the purpose of the *House of Talek Sen Dene*.

T'Pau took a scroll from her lap, bound in red ribbon and sealed with Vulcan's crest, handing

Spock the official decree. He held it gingerly in his hands staring at the seal hardly daring to breathe. Somehow he was filled with a sense of foreboding knowing he was not yet off the proverbial hook.

T'Pau then threw her biggest punch at him. "Thee art to be married, great-grandson," she said, her words striking as surely as any physical blow, knocking the wind out of him. For a scary few seconds Spock couldn't breathe at all, his only hope, that he was adept enough at hiding his distress. He hardly heard the rest of the decision, taking another swig of the brandy as T'Pau spoke.

"Shortly, after the Vulcan Delegation arrives aboard the *Enterprise*, arrangements will be made for thee to present thyself to thy woman. When thy mission is complete, you will then present yourself to her family, as well. After a substantial bride-price has been negotiated, thee shalt *bond* with her properly, making thy betrothal official. The wedding ceremony to take place in a timely manner soon afterwards. Unless thy bride chooses *Kalifee*, to *Challenge* the match, which is the only recourse open to either of thee because of thy joint deceit," T'Pau said. "You will accept tea when she serves it to thee."

"But, I do not know this woman," Spock began, carefully. What happened to just meeting the girl? he wondered. Letting things unfold naturally — if

they liked each other, that is. It's what he had originally requested. "What if we aren't even compatible? T'Pau, I am an adult," he continued, every inch of him beginning to panic. There simply was no air in this room. Exactly when was it that he lost control of his situation?

Spock took a moment to compose himself. He could feel the adrenaline coursing through his veins, characteristic of the survival instinct, fight or flight. He was a Vulcan, he reminded himself, practicing a mind-exercise. He sought control, to at least remain poised. Stoic. It did the trick for now. He was much calmer when he next spoke having lost the impatient edge in his voice betraying the feelings hidden just beneath the surface. "As such I reserve the right to choose my own mate."

"Dost thee continue to mock our ways, Spock? Thee hast chosen," T'Pau said. Spock was gazing at the floor busily shaking his head.

# "Unacceptable."

"Thee hast chosen!" The Matriarch snapped suddenly, again pounding her staff against the polished wooden floor. The fire, dancing on the stone grate, suddenly popped loudly as if punctuating the point, sending a firework display of red embers into the air. It was the only warmth in the room Spock decided. T'Pau rose painstakingly from her chair, with Sarek's assistance. "Since she

will also be serving aboard your ship, I suggest you take time to get to know her. There is one codicil, however. And hear me well. You may not *mindmeld* with her until you both come together before the Council of Elders. *Kiftiri* must first be demonstrated. I shall rest now before traveling on to my own estate." With that, the ancient woman left the room.

Spock collapsed into the Ottoman, head hung, dropping his gaze to the brandy snifter in his hands. He took a huge gulp and then sat swirling the amber liquid around and around, fighting to keep his grip from tightening and popping the glass. The parchment was not spared, however. Once alone with his mother he spoke his heart.

"You said my feelings would return. Congratulate me, Mother. At the moment I believe I am experiencing murderous contempt."

Amanda came up beside him, gently embracing his shoulders, doing her best to diffuse his mood; quietly wresting the crystal brandy snifter from him. "I know this has come as a bit of a shock to you. But, really, considering the dangerous game you were playing, the Council was most generous in their judgement. All your father's hard work paid off."

"My father? Where the hell was he just now, while I was being hung out to dry? Besides, busily

orchestrating it!"

"Spock, that simply isn't true."

"Then how do you explain my being forced to marry a woman I do not even know. One I have never met. I am no longer seven years old," he said, referring to the common practice of arranged marriages, the *bonding* of mates usually taking place by the age of seven. It certainly held true for Spock originally betrothed to T'Pring at that time, although the wedding never took place.

As an *unbonded* adult, however, he was expected to arrange his own marriage. To date, Spock remained single. Paradoxically, because he hadn't found anyone else suitable, being denied the very bride he was now ordered to take. "That's really what this is all about, isn't it? My duty. My family responsibility."

"Well, surely, you knew you'd have to take another mate at some point in your life. Better if it's the one you want," Amanda reasoned. "All your father was trying to do -"

"I never had the first one," Spock suddenly erupted, cutting his mother off as he got up and left the room, stopping momentarily to drain the glass Amanda had set on the end table. He needed some air, still finding himself unable to breathe. His home was in chaos, his life suddenly not his own.

Obviously when he died, he had gone straight to Hell

He was dreaming, he reasoned, making his way down the hall. Another kaleidoscopic nightmare, like the ones that had been plaguing him lately. Nothing was making any sense at the moment. Except, perhaps, escaping back to the *Enterprise*, where at least he enjoyed some authority over things, a certain amount of control over his own destiny. He needed to be out in space, away from all of this.

"Spock," Amanda called after him. She followed her son to his bedroom where she found him stuffing the clothing she had just unpacked haphazardly into his duffel bag. Amanda sighed. "You're not being logical about this. Our family is among the oldest on Vulcan. It must continue. Sarek had two sons. Two chances for the family to flourish. Your brother, Sybok, threw it all away. Will you do the same?"

"Since we are content today to trouble ourselves over old news and events we cannot change, I will reiterate that I came at the proper time willing to fulfill my duty and marry the Vulcan woman my father chose for me. It was she who *Challenged* me," Spock said. "Should I have forsaken the family's honor by taking her to wife after such a blatant insult?"

"I won't go into a dissertation extolling the virtues of maintenance in a relationship. Suffice it to say you neglected her. And by that I'm not, by any means, condoning the immorality of her response to said neglect. Only that you were both at fault. I can only pray you were at least faithful to her during your long stretches of absenteeism. But you've been *unbonded* from her for years now. And you haven't made a move to amend your situation. I don't know how you've kept yourself alive," she said

Spock shot his mother a look. She was at once referring to the *Pon farr*, the time of mating which occurred for a Vulcan male every seven years, in which he had to mate or die; the open discussion of which Amanda well knew was socially unacceptable.

After a moment, she began anew. "Spock, when you died nearly nine months ago now, your father was devastated. His logic faltered," she added quickly, in answer to his raised eyebrow.

Amanda placed both of her hands on his arm in an effort to gain his complete attention. Once again she was trying to stop him from packing and leaving. "Mother," Spock quietly protested. He sensed that familiar edge of impatience about himself again, as did she. She tightened her grip on his forearm slightly.

"He went out to bring back your *Katra* so there would be something left of you. Something to denote you had existed. Do you realize you'd left nothing of yourself behind? It's only by some miracle you stand here, alive, today. And now with your brother gone, too — surely you must understand the urgency of our request. Isn't she the one you wanted, Spock? Why, four and a half years ago you seemed so interested ..."

"That was a long time ago, Mother. And I merely asked to meet her."

"I'd never seen you so excited about someone before. You claimed she was your soul-mate," his mother corrected. "Can't she be that again?"

"Mother, what if she doesn't accept me. I will not be pushed into this," Spock said, voicing his deepest fear in this matter. He was no stranger to rejection.

"Pushed into this? You asked your father to try and have the censure lifted. Right before you went out on that fateful training cruise. Oh, don't you remember?"

"I remember that I haven't even met her," he said as he slung his duffel bag over his shoulder and started for the door. In the hall he activated the compti channel to call for a transport and then waited out on the front stoop for it to arrive, shivering in the late afternoon sun. Again Amanda

followed him out, draping the heavy wrap, that he had forgotten to take in his haste, over his shoulders.

"For one who prides himself on his Vulcan heritage, I must say the longevity of your bachelorhood is distinctly human!" she retorted. Spock gazed at his mother, an eyebrow elevated. The remark smarted, but then again she always knew just where and when to stick him. He considered for a moment telling her he loved her and that he was not opposed to getting married, per se, but the words stuck in his throat.

He wasn't exactly enjoying his bachelorhood, as she called it. He was just completely scared by the prospects of marriage. A life-partnership, even if it was something he believed he wanted and needed, would require that he open up to someone, entirely. He didn't know if he could do that. Instead, Spock reached out with his right hand, lightly touching her uplifted palm with his in greeting.

"For the sake of the family, I shall come at the proper time. I will honor the summons. But don't expect me to be happy about it, Mother," he said, stepping over to the cab.

7

November 14, 2285 Stardate: 8511.14 Beach House, Pacific Coast

don't see why not. You can do anything," Brianna Cantrell said, and smiled her most beguiling smile. Joseph laughed heartily and wrapped his strong arm around her shoulders as they headed back to the beach house.

"Breezy, you do feed an old man's ego."

"I love you, Daddy. I'm going to miss you."

"I'm going to miss you, too, Little One."

"Did you know there was actually someone

shorter than me at the Academy? Of course, he wasn't human," she quipped, flashing him an impish grin as she padded up the wooden steps of the sun deck. Having removed her boots and socks before they took off for the walk along the beach, her poor cold feet were now caked with sand. Brianna stopped momentarily to brush them off, none too successfully, the wet sand behaving much like glue. Peering around two of her older brothers to see what they had cooking on the barbecue grill, in a swift movement, she deftly stole a piece of pineapple from the end of a kabob.

"Hey!" Aaron good-naturedly complained, waving the tongs at her.

"Breezy, it's going to be lonely without you," Joseph sighed to himself, watching the interplay. She was such a tease, always pushing. One of these days the little fly is going to get swatted, he thought. The old sehlet had finally had enough. They'd left the scar on her forehead purposefully as a reminder to ease off. She still hadn't learned.

The melodious sound of a beeper went off. Brianna reached down automatically to grab her communicator, flipping it open with a flick of her wrist. "Cantrell, here."

"Lieutenant, this is Commander Uhura of the Starship *Enterprise*. The captain sends his apologies for cutting your leave short. You're being recalled

to the ship. You have until zero-hundred hours to check in. Uhura, out."

"Ah, but ... wait," Brianna Cantrell said, with a tired sigh. She closed the lid, realizing the transmission had cut off before she could argue and glanced over at her father. Then she caught the look on Joe Jr.'s face. "Sorry, Joey," she shrugged, blinking the tears out of her eyes. "Looks like I'm not here for the wedding, after all."

"Who are we supposed to get at the last minute, Bree? You're a bridesmaid. A very short bridesmaid, I might add. Nobody will ever fit your dress. This is going to just kill Astrid, you know. She was counting on you."

"I said I was sorry. What more do you want from me? I'd be here if I could. You know that."

"All right, all right," Joseph said, placing himself between the two. "This has gone far enough. Duty is what it is, Joe. Don't be blaming your sister for having to report, as if she has some kind of choice in the matter." Turning to Brianna, "You're due for your final fitting upstairs."

"Dad —" Brianna gazed up at the huge bear of a man she called father, "There are bigger things going on in the universe than a family wedding this weekend."

"Your mother wants holograms, young lady, don't

argue."

"So, what are you going to do, paste me into the holo-album later, as if I was at the event? That is just so ludicrous ... illogical ... And completely unbelievable, besides."

Joseph Cantrell leaned over toward his eldest son, whispering into Aaron's ear. "Get on this," he said. Aaron nodded.

Brianna was shaking her head at them, throwing her arms up. "No. Don't any of you do anything. Not another thing. Please. Let's just let events play themselves out for once without all the maneuvering and twisting about to one's own advantage. Let me have *my* life," she pleaded. "Worts and all."

Brianna's expression softened as she looked up at Joe Jr.. He would never say it, but she knew he was hurt. "Orders are orders," she said flatly. "I'm sorry," she turned toward the house. "Please forgive me for wanting to get on board before they change their minds again."

"You have until zero-hundred hours to report," Joseph said, glancing at his wrist chronometer.

"I have to get my things together. And endure a photo-session."

"That's midnight to us civilians," Adrian said. He

was having a fit. "Go boldly, Bree. You'll be lucky if they get her outta space dock!"

"You ... just watch your tongue, young man! At least it's a starship," she said.

"Barely," Adrian quipped. "She's got to be at least thirteen years old. Well past her prime. Nothing but a rust-bucket due for the scrap yards ..."

"Your turn will come some day. We'll see what kind of ship you serve on."

"Oh, I'm not going to serve on a ship. I'm going to design them," Adrian stated. He knew where he was headed in life. He stormed off, all but slamming the glass door behind him.

"Then stay and eat. We'll get you to your ship on time," Joseph directed. He nodded at Aaron behind Brianna's back. He gave the Vulcans considerable latitude in this. However, he wasn't about to let them wreck Joey's wedding in the interim. Erik gave his older brother a look, crossing his arms in exasperation, shaking his head. In a few minutes Adrian returned bearing a gaily wrapped package from his closet. He handed it to his sister without ceremony. "Here. You're really gonna need this, now. But don't open it," he pointed a finger at her, "until after you get aboard. I mean it."

"Aye-aye," Brianna said, tousling his coppery hair.

After the evening meal, Brianna Cantrell stood on a stool outfitted in the burgundy, taffeta gown all pressed, fitted and ready to go, indulging her mother by posing for a plethora of holographs; her long blonde hair braided and twisted around her head. All the bridesmaids were to wear their hair up, a request of her brother's bride. Astrid didn't have to ask her to participate in the wedding party, despite what Grandmama asserted were society's rules of etiquette. Brianna felt honored to be included. Now it might be months before she even saw the video of the event.

She glanced over at her future sister-in-law, shaking her head ever so slightly. "I'm so sorry," she said. Astrid looked away. Brianna sighed. One look at Astrid's face and she found herself wondering if she hadn't taken too hard a line in the struggle for her independence. Perhaps she should allow Daddy to do what he could. She just didn't know. Something just felt so odd about this whole transfer thing, she thought, troubled by it, fighting another chill. Obviously, the situation had grown worse and the need to act was upon them.

"Mother, I don't get the point in this. What are you going to do, paste me into the wedding album later as if I were there?" she snapped, having a difficult time containing her own feelings of remorse.

"No, of course not. I just wanted to see you in it

now that it's fitted and hemmed. Make sure it's truly ready. Don't worry. Daddy will see to everything. You'll be here."

"Mom — *Mother*, this is my career. It's not some hobby I can put off for another time. I don't believe this. Why won't anyone in this family take me seriously?"

"Nonsense, dear. Of course we take you seriously. We're all very proud." The mother fussed, picking at the puffed elbow-length sleeves, checking the fit at her daughter's tiny waist. Brianna sighed. Her mother was already lost to the creative side of herself, mentally framing her picture. If the holograph captured the right mood, Louise would quite skillfully render the idea onto canvas later. Brianna would end up hanging in the Federation Art Museum, for all to see. "You look so beautiful. Now don't you go losing any more weight. There's hardly anything of you as it is."

Louise Cantrell frowned her concern, tucking her gray-streaked bobbed, hair behind her ears before reaching down and blousing out the bottom of Brianna's skirt. A youthful fifty-nine years, Louise was a classic Nordic beauty. Blonde and blue-eyed, of medium height and build, she managed to keep herself fit, constantly up and down the ladder hanging her own work for shows. Oftentimes, she escaped into her art when the universe proved too

harsh, too full of difficulties, like now. Had Joseph told their daughter everything, past and present?

They had agreed he would tell her. "Bree," Louise said, cupping her daughter's face in her hands, gazing at her earnestly. "I know a lot of things have been said. I know we haven't seen eye to eye on this issue. But I should think you wouldn't want to dishonor his memory by wasting away."

Tears welled up in Brianna Cantrell's eyes. Her parents had downplayed her feelings in the matter, like her grandmother, suggesting they were invalid. Questioning how could she conceivably love someone, mourn someone she had never even met. How could they possibly understand something they refused to even explore? Flatly, they had turned her down when she offered to demonstrate by *mindmelding* with at least one of them. Brianna knew how great a concession her mother was making to her at the moment and hugged her fiercely.

"Thank you for that much, anyway," she whispered, pulling away to brush the unexpected moisture from her cheeks. Louise was suddenly dabbing at her own eyes. "Believe me that was never in the game plan," Brianna said. "It's just hard to eat when there's a constant lump in your throat. But it's getting better. Really it is."

"I promised myself I wasn't going to do this,"

Louise sobbed. "I just worry about you so much. And now you're going away. Who's going to watch over you?"

"I'll watch over myself, Mom. I'm a big girl now. Figuratively speaking. And anyway, not to worry. Starfleet will see to that. They've got my meal-chit tagged, encoded, so that I get a happy little nutritional shake three times a day along with my regular rations. I'm back up to Regulation weight again."

"Starfleet. It was your grandfather's preferred method of escape, too. I can't understand it. You know the kind of people who make a career out of a military life. They lack ambition. Initiative," Louise said, fussing with the gown, tilting her daughter's chin just right to catch the light, creating her picture.

"Mother"

"Always needing orders to give them direction. Is that the kind of husband you want? You know, he just might not be an officer!"

"Where is this going? The contract has been signed, already, so why argue about it now? I have enough to contend with, with this mission. Besides, I'm going to be giving those orders. A lot of people in Starfleet are just like me. I'm ambitious. I know what I want out of life. But I don't want a husband

with so much ambition, he reminds me of the fellows lined up outside that door right now. Wanting to use me as a stepping stone to get to Daddy, to you and your money, influence and power. I want him to love me!"

"Jason Barrett loved you. Still does," Louise said quietly as she snapped several pictures from this angle and that. "I can't help feeling you're using Starfleet as a means to run away from him."

"Excuse me?"

"Louise," Joseph implored from the doorway. "The caterer's are on the compti. There's some kind of something about the menu? I don't know. You'd better handle it. It's just about time, little girl. Is that your bag?"

"Yeah, it's all packed. Thanks, Dad." Brianna, exasperated, swept the blonde hair back off of her face then turned, squarely facing her mother. "First of all, Jason and I were just friends. We were never anything else despite what he may have told you. And when I finally got fed up with him and ended our relationship do you know what he asked me to do?

"He wanted me to secure a showing for him at the Federation Art Gallery. He said it shouldn't be too difficult since my mother was so big in the art world. He said I owed him that much. I *owed* him!

He leached off of me from the very beginning starting with food and entertainment right up to the time when he started borrowing my hover car and then began to badger me to let him move in with me.

"I was living in the barracks! He thought I was living in some posh apartment off base. You should have seen his face when I enlightened him. I thank God I was saving myself for my husband and was never foolish enough to go to bed with him. Because, on top of everything else, he wanted that too. No, thank you, Mother. I don't think so."

"And your Vulcan *moderator* didn't want something from you, Bree? Be serious. Intellectual creatures that they are, I'll concede he wanted you for your mind. More specifically for your *Gifts*. But in the end to him you were simply breeding stock. Universally, men are men. And you'd better get used to it. Astrid, be an angel while I take this call," Louise said, quietly, as she left the room. Dutifully, Astrid took over for Louise, unhooking the back of Brianna's gown, as bidden.

"Why do they do this to me? Act all ugly about it when we all thought he was gone and then once he asks for me, and a contract is signed, they come unglued over it. Talk about split personalities — I wish they would make up their minds and just support me," Brianna said, struggling with her own

emotions, not quite mastering them as she normally could. Astrid gave her a hug.

"I don't know. They're scared, Bree. Afraid they're going to lose you, I guess. Scratch that. It's probably just nerves. It's been very frenetic around here, that's all. We're all a little loony. Last minute wedding details and such. Come, on. Let's get you out of this dress."

Maybe she would get to wear it someday, Brianna Cantrell thought as she finished dressing, repacking the gown in its protective garment bag, handing it over to her father when he came back in. The rest of her things, her crates and the old tub chair were already down at the loading dock, ready for transport. Erik would see to it they were beamed aboard her ship. "All set, Lieutenant?" Joseph said, nodding toward the door. She had already said her goodbyes once, hugging Astrid again.

"You're the best thing that ever happened to Joey. Take care of him. And please forgive me for not being able to be there."

"You take care of yourself," Astrid returned. Brianna sighed heavily. After all this time, suddenly this was it.

8

November 14, 2285 Stardate: 8511.14

Harbour Master Lounge, Spaceport One

an I get you your usual Altaire water, Captain Spock, while you wait?" the barmaid asked sweetly as Spock flung his duffel bag under the table and then took a seat in the usual back booth. Behind him, looming largely in the big bay window, the *Enterprise* floated in space dock, along with several other Federation vessels moored here this week, including the Starfleet's new *Excelsior*. Spock was rarely seen in here alone and then usually not for long. The

waitress set three cocktail napkins on the table in anticipation.

"Am I waiting?" he looked perplexed. The barmaid smiled.

"Well, of course. For your buddies. You know. Your cute doctor friend and that charmin' Captain Kirk. They'll be along shortly, I imagine. Either that or maybe you're catchin' the transport?" she said, nodding toward the captain's baggage and then glancing briefly up at the ship's clock that hung on a nearby bulkhead. It was nearing midnight at twenty-three-forty-one hundred hours, Starfleet time. She shook her head. "But sweetie, you can't possibly have time for a drink now. The last transport for the day is departin' in less than six minutes. You know, due to the strike, an' all. As if the civilian engineers don't already make a small fortune in credits, as it is. It'll take that long just to put your order in."

"I am on my way in. So you needn't fret about the time or the strike for that matter. Not on my account. And I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I am alone tonight, Mina. Sans the cute doctor and the charming Commander of the *Enterprise*."

"Oh now, Captain, did I say I was disappointed? Not in the least. 'Cause, that leaves me alone with the sexiest one in the group. And we just never get to talk when the others are around," she said,

handing him a menu of the award-winning hors d'oeuvres for which the *Harbour Master* Lounge was known. "Now, you just sit back and relax and let li'l ole' Mina take care of you."

Mina was particularly skilled at playing with the patrons, lightly teasing, nothing too serious. Usually, she gave Jim and Dr. McCoy the treatment. Those two would simply lap it up like sehlet cubs with a bowl of milk. Spock merely lifted an eyebrow. Mina left the table, exaggerating the swing of her hips just a little, for his sake and came back in less than two minutes with a tray and her order pad. She punched in a code on the tiny, handheld machine.

"See anythin' you like?" she asked, upon her return. Spock glanced up from the menu as Mina, leaning way over, afforded him a better view of her rather ample cleavage as she placed the bowl of popcorn in the center of the table. She also possessed a remarkable memory in knowing the Vulcan was particularly fond of the airy snack. However, tonight it was not the popcorn that was on his mind. The uniform she wore was rather tight and low-cut, already leaving little to the imagination. If the captain had looked tired and a bit worn when he came in, his features certainly brightened at that moment, she thought catching his assessing gaze.

Spock cleared his throat, enjoying the view. "Saurian brandy, please. Leave the bottle," he said.

"Anythin' else?" she said in a sultry voice, winking at him. Surprisingly, Spock found himself responding to her artful, albeit insincere, solicitation.

"Mina, I find you delightfully feminine. But as you and I both know, there's a hands-off policy at this lounge. Otherwise ..." he said, catching himself, returning his eyes to the menu. Otherwise I could very easily be persuaded, he thought. It would serve his father right.

"Ooh, Captain, comin' from you that's quite a compliment. I must say, you're very different when you're not with your friends."

"Indeed. I don't feel altogether myself at the moment. In fact, I would prefer not to feel anything at all." Clearly, the four-day trip back was not time enough for him to purge the strong emotions that roiled inside of him. He was still angered by the general attitude of his parents and the Vulcan High Council in this matter, assuming that somehow he could take feelings that were possible four point five-one years ago and simply reawaken them. Just like that. As if he controlled them with a switch; to say nothing of the fact that he had no clear memory of her.

If he harbored misconceptions about being Vulcan they, too, were deceived by his human-half. It wasn't as easy as that. He had spent most of his life denying his feelings, shamed by their very existence, instead of merely controlling them, like most Vulcans; the lessons of his mixed heritage extracted a price. Mercilessly teased growing up, feelings for him were a luxury he dared not afford lest he slip, consequently validating the charges of his agemates that he was not really Vulcan. Constantly he struggled to be driven by Logic alone, in his fear that they were correct in their assessment. He had only recently learned logic without emotions was void, something he had obviously missed growing up.

The disturbing part of all of this, Spock felt, was that he had experienced a twinge of love once, briefly, daring to hope for such a feeling again. Armed with this latest revelation, wasn't he entitled? Perhaps, not. But he had at least wanted a chance to know the woman who would become his life-partner, first. To develop those feelings, if they were possible. He hoped, at least, to like her ... Spock closed his eyes for a moment, struggling for control.

He had weathered the first storm, T'Pring, only to have her replaced with someone else he didn't know. What kind of a husband could he be to a

stranger? Would he spend the rest of his life trying to love her? That thought haunted him. "Well," Mina," tried again. "You've certainly come to the right place to get properly anesthetized. But what's got your skivvies in a bunch? I thought you Vulcans didn't have any. Feelin's, I mean."

Spock was silent for a moment, pondering her words. To be considered so stoic, so successful at concealing the emotions as to lead others to believe none existed, was indeed a compliment. And he accepted it as such. Certainly, it was the charge of every Vulcan to perpetuate this notion, a goal each must attain if they were to remain true to their race's ideology. In thinking about it he realized there was so much humans didn't comprehend about his race, the lack of Vulcan emotions being the greatest misconception. They were far more powerful than any human's, simply suppressed in order to comply with that which they held true: logic was the beginning of wisdom; mastery of emotion the cornerstone of peaceful coexistence.

One must never forget Vulcans had very nearly orchestrated their own extinction, all too readily acquiescing to their 'feelings'. Surak had led all of Vulcan to that toughly fought victory, the adoption of Logic. He was their Savior — Spock embraced the belief as readily as he recognized the existence of the *All*, finding himself at odds with those few who

neither accepted that fact nor acknowledged it but rather built alliances against it, rejecting Logic in favor of their emotions just as in the days of old, seeing their return to the Time of Darkness as their only True salvation. His own half-brother had been swept up into such heresy, finding himself banished from the planet as a result.

Scandalizing the *House of Talek Sen Dene*.

Somewhere in all of this there had to be a balance. How could his own mother, a human, survive the social atmosphere of her adopted planet if she didn't somehow understand his father cared for her, that Sarek loved her even if he was forbidden to show it? Humans needed affection, that much even Spock understood. He did wonder, all at once, finding himself desirous of a vigorous, in-depth debate on the matter. But with whom? He wished just now for the company of some of his Vulcan friends, Sokal, perhaps. Recognizing the latest of the hour, even so, he looked around for another choice. The barmaid? She had opened up the subject, after all.

Glancing up at Mina, however, he deemed it preferable to keep the Vulcan mystique intact, satisfying her inquiry with a disclaimer, instead. "As my friends are so often fond of pointing out, I am also half-human. And right now as it stands with my family, I am between an asteroid and a very

hard place. So, if you would be an angel ..." he said.

"Ah, now what's the matter? You can tell Mina. Can't possibly be as bad as all that," she said.

"I am afraid it is far worse. My life has been completely reassigned. It seems I am to take a wife." He couldn't believe the Council, ruling in his favor, had ordered him to marry a woman he didn't even know, over a *mindmeld* that had lasted precisely thirty-two seconds! If they had ruled against him, what? Face the loss of his property in payment to those who felt "injured" by his actions. He had been informed lawsuits had been threatened. Again, he felt the panic welling upwards. And the rage.

He needed a drink, recognizing the values in its anesthetic qualities; harboring mixed feelings over why his father offered him the brandy in the first place. Was he catering to the weakness of Spock's human-half? Or was he trying to appease his own guilt for having helped dig this grave?

"Oh. Got some cutie pregnant, did you? You and those bedroom eyes."

"Negative. How, on Earth, did you conclude that out of anything I said? As a matter of fact, it would have been far better for me and less complicated had I impregnated the woman, as you've suggested. Then I could have simply taken the child into my home and given him his proper place in the family.

But I *touched* her mind. For that I have to marry her." Site unseen!

"And be miserable for the rest of your life? You Vulcans certainly have an interestin' value system, I must say. Sweetie, I'm so very sorry. No chance of gettin' out of it?"

"Only if I died — again." The only way that would happen was if his bride *Challenged* him and he lost. He knew from first-hand experience that the ensuing fight was to the death. T'Pring had *Challenged* him and made Jim Kirk her *Champion*. Thanks to Dr. McCoy, Jim's death was merely clinical. But at least it served Vulcan custom and Spock was free to dispense with T'Pring as he saw fit. He hadn't managed to get that close to having a wife again.

Until now.

"I'll get that brandy," Mina promised smiling sympathetically, hips swinging as she left his table. Spock smiled ever so slightly, watching as the barmaid flitted from one customer to the next, duly earning her tips. She was good at her job, making each patron in her charge feel important. About half an hour and a partial fifth later, the Vulcan prince rose to leave, bottle in hand. Mina came over smiling ruefully. "Goodbye, Captain Spock. We'll miss you," she said.

"I am not dead yet, Mina. Or, married, even. But if you would like to kiss the groom, I shall bow to the humanness of it," Spock leaned forward toward the barmaid, swaying ever so slightly.

"Nothin' doin', spaceman. Hands-off means lips, too," she said firmly. She quickly caught him by the arms, steadying him.

"Imagine. After all these years I seem to have lost my space legs. Fascinating."

Mina shook her head.

"Someone should tell you Vulcans and brandy don't mix," she said, gently wresting the bottle from him. Vulcans weren't normally disposed to the imbibing of hard liquor, Altaire water being this one's staple, in particular. "I'm sendin' you home, Captain. Without the bottle, thank you. And out the back way to avoid trouble," she said, pulling on his arm to guide him along.

"If it's all the same to you, I'd rather return to my ship. The atmosphere isn't very friendly at home right now. My own father has dug the grave ..."

"Good night, Captain," Mina said, escorting the first officer off the premises via the kitchen route and out the service entrance to a side-alley wing of the space station. She had noticed the celebrity predators lurking about, cameras at the ready, choosing to protect the reputation of this usually

shy and retiring man. Not only was the captain the son of a high-ranking Vulcan Ambassador, he had managed to incur the interest of the paparazzi with his own exploits in space, gaining legendary status on more than just his own home planet.

Mina genuinely liked him. He was good people in her mind. He had a good heart and deserved the respite from all the publicity, having in fact enjoyed some peace for a time. But as luck would have it, the captain had unwittingly rekindled their interests with his latest endeavors; Mina having heard something about it being his discovery that the probe threatening Earth's very existence five months ago was looking for whale song. Again Vulcan's most eligible *First Son* was thrust rudely into the spotlight.

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Spock was grateful for Mina's insight into his desire to avoid the press. Particularly bad press as surely it would be in his present state. Shockingly, he had let himself get drunk. It was completely unlike him but there you have it. Without benefit of a spacecraft and a carefully calculated trajectory in order to safely slingshot around the sun, he couldn't turn back time and change the past.

There was some part of him that believed he had embarrassed her, at least a little. Once again, that had not been his intent. For that he was heartily

repentant and without further incident removed himself from the alley to return to the *Enterprise* at zero-zero-twelve hours. He'd left a nice tip for Mina, too. Now, standing on the ship's transporter platform, he struggled to keep from losing his balance.

Every time he took a step it seemed the ship would lurch. How could they possibly experience turbulence in space dock, he pondered? It was either that, or his feet had turned into rubber. A transporter malfunction? he reasoned, none too clearly. But at last he made it down the two steps, saluting the transporter technician who eyed him curiously as Spock handed him his communicator. "Spock out," the first officer stated as he left the room. The door hadn't even sealed behind him when Spock overheard the technician contacting Captain Kirk.

The hour was quite late, and the corridors virtually empty of personnel. Spock climbed into a turbo-lift, nearly passing out with the sideways motion of the car. He stopped the elevator quickly and sat down in the corner of the lift leaning into his duffel bag willing his mind to override the effects of the alcohol in his system before he went on. After a time he got off on D-Deck, section four preferring to take the long route to his quarters. Jim would no doubt be waiting for him, lecture at the

ready. Having successfully evaded the press, he simply was not ready to subject himself to that just now.

9

November 15, 2285, Stardate: 8511.15

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

he quarters were cramped, Lt. Brianna Cantrell decided — certainly smaller than what she anticipated after her training cruise aboard the *Excelsior*. Exhaling as she set the heavy crate on the small built-in desk, she was aware of just how hot it was in here. Had they set the thermostat higher expecting an actual Vulcan? All she knew is that she was completely spent, both physically and emotionally. Sleep sounded good about now, but she had buried her bunk, to her

deep regret, and there was still so much to do.

She never realized how easy it was to accumulate things staying in one place for so long — until she moved. What a mess, she sighed inwardly, grateful that the last of it had been beamed aboard. Now it was up to her to find storage for the vast majority of it. It wasn't to be an easy task. But at least, after a long, bumpy road, finally she was here, she thought warmly as she looked around her cubicle.

She had to admit her little brother was right. This vessel wasn't exactly state of the art like the *Excelsior*. It was indeed a bit of a rust-bucket, as Adrian put it. Antiquated.

Her quarters were even smaller than she'd had to get used to at the Academy or on the *Excelsior*. But, the good news was, they were hers alone. And in that she found satisfaction. Being the only daughter, she was unused to sharing quarters before the Academy.

Roommates, she learned the hard way, could be such a bother, worse than a little brother she decided, as she rummaged through a box and withdrew a bottle of *Saurian* brandy. "This isn't mine," she complained aloud, holding the bottle aloft. Continuing the search, going from one crate to another, she suddenly discovered a lot of the things stuck in her boxes weren't hers. She seriously wondered what she was missing in place

of all these little 'extras'. It was classic Candace, her previous roommate at the Academy. Candace was always leaving bits and pieces of herself everywhere she went, a veritable trail, Brianna Cantrell always the one stuck cleaning up the resulting mess.

It had been a lopsided relationship at best over the four years. She should have known better when Candace volunteered to do the packing. Brianna wondered how on Earth Candace McIntyre had graduated at all; too many parties, too little studying. Illogical. But she and Candace never saw eye-to-eye — on anything. Still, in her own way she was going to miss her. She could use a familiar face about now. Everything felt so new and strange it was disorienting, exacerbating her sense of being alone.

Uncorking the bottle of clear amber liquid Brianna Cantrell held it up toasting the absent roommate. "Live long and prosper, Candy," she said, then pursing her lips around the end of the bottle, tilted it upwards until she had a mouthful of burning, breath-stealing substance. Coughing and gagging, gasping for air, she quickly corked the bottle, dabbing a cranberry sleeve at the corner of watering eyes. "How do people drink this?" she shuddered, nestling the decanter back into it's hiding place in the box.

Leaning on the crate, a wave of melancholy swept over her. She was standing on the threshold of reality, the carefree days of schooling now over. And she had, perhaps, chosen a much harsher form of reality than most, she reminded herself. They weren't kidding when they said it was cold in space, suddenly aware of how cold it had grown in this cabin, and how quickly, she thought. Frowning, she tapped at the faulty environmental control, realizing she was more than a little bit scared.

Her first mission was overwhelming, at best.

Both Admiral Halsey and Ambassador Sarek seemed rattled in their joint conference at the hospital where they'd met with her explaining her orders before she was released. She was supposed to be part of the psychic shield, should the terrorists attempt yet another assassination. Two from her perceived list had met their end, with at least five more to go ... what if the shield, as a collective, managed to divert the death thoughts away from the intended target, yet failed to actually shield anybody? Is that what happened to Admiral Komack? Could they all die - would she die and did she have what it took to put herself on the line? She supposed that was why she'd been given leave at the last minute to be with her family - just in case she didn't return from this mission.

As if that wasn't enough to knock her off-balance,

learning this evening she was also to be a bride, and that finally she would meet her moderator in the flesh, left her more than a little confused. Was it all for naught, like granting a last wish? That's what it was beginning to feel like, anyway. Somehow, she was expected to believe her moderator had survived his death and his family was ready to welcome her into the fold. Her own father had signed the marriage contract. Yet, he proclaimed all the while, to be against arranged marriages. Why, then, did he continue to berate her moderator for allegedly 'dumping' her? Nothing made much sense to her at this moment — except that there was a real chance she might not survive and the Vulcan High Council knew it and they were trying to put things right again. That was the only viable explanation she could cling to, none of which was comforting in any way. Like before, she was growing uneasy. Disoriented. Dizzy. She grabbed onto a stack of shipping crates to help steady herself, lest she lose consciousness altogether.

Finally, the moment passed and Brianna Cantrell drew in a sigh, shaking herself back to the present. This wasn't getting the work done, she chastised herself, thinking it best to divert her own thoughts to something more constructive. There was no solace found within her private ruminations. Work — work was good, although she didn't quite know where to begin. She had to create a couple of

pathways; one to the lavatory and another to her bunk, she lamented, realizing just how tired she had become.

The day had been a long one, too, full of tearful, bitter goodbyes. Painful. Relentlessly, the events played over and over in her head. Joey wasn't speaking to her, knowing she was going to miss his wedding. For that she was truly sorry and she supposed she could play the ace up her sleeve, allowing her father to do what he did best; wondering in her spate of self-doubt, if she had been wrong to reject his offer so quickly? Brianna Cantrell was such a stickler when it came to doing things for herself, bolstered by her years at the Academy. No, she decided. At some point, she simply had to take a stand. Might as well be now, her own life had been put on hold long enough already. Besides, she was needed here, given a chance to use her Gifts in a way that would honor her Creator. Brianna was very tired of having others live her life for her, making the important decisions for her, as if she exhibited a propensity for ineptitude.

And in all honesty, the chance to meet her *moderator* was uppermost in her mind, which was something else she would rather not have postponed any longer. Four and a half years plus had already gone by, which was a long time by any

standards.

In looking at the situation, she came to realize she had no choice in the matter. Orders were, indeed, orders. She simply didn't know. Right now she felt so confused by all of this — maybe she really was incompetent. Perhaps, if she just went to bed and got a good night's sleep. She did have to report to Sickbay first thing in the morning for her shipboard physical...

"Better start there," she said aloud, glancing toward her burdened bunk, when her eye caught a gaily wrapped package on the edge of the small desk. It was the gift Adrian insisted she open after she got on board. Brianna Cantrell did love surprises and smiling picked her way toward it, eyeing it before she touched it. Her little brother was very unhappy at the prospects of her leaving.

Somehow her being away at the Academy for so long had not prepared him for an even longer absence once she won an assignment aboard a starship — the *Excelsior* would be gone for a good five years. Especially with Joey getting married and moving away to the research colony on *Triflar One*. He and his bride were going to be testing some new equipment there or something. Brianna wasn't even sure she understood. It was just one more adjustment for the little guy to make.

Adrian wasn't the only one slightly unprepared.

She had to admit she was going to miss him terribly, too, and wondered just what kind of a going away present he had found for her. He was usually quite inventive, she thought with some pride, for a little tyke. Almost as dastardly as their older brothers. Brianna eyed the package again, warily. There was a very large, prominent tag dangling from the rectangular present. It read, 'Pull me'.

She nodded to herself, "All right, Alice. Since you already feel like you've fallen straight down a rabbit hole and right into Wonderland, I'll bite." Immediately she was sorry for her actions. "Big mistake, Cantrell, you dummy!" she lamented, jumping back as the package began to whine and bloat up. She immediately fell over a crate and right into her swollen duffel bag in her efforts to give way. "Oh, ow," she put a hand to her aching hip. In a remarkably short time, the package was shearing itself of the bright red and gold wrappings, unfolding as it continued to grow. The thing, gray in color with round edges, was fast becoming huge as it pushed forward into the small living quarters and outward toward the door, all in the space of a couple of nanoseconds.

In essence, it appeared to have swallowed her cabin.

"Trick present, look out!" Brianna Cantrell pulled

herself off of the deck and dodging packing crates, rushed the cabin door. Releasing the lock on the hatchway, Brianna ran out into the curved passageway. The *thing* followed her, straining on the pneumatic door. With all of her might, the young woman held the door together at the middle in an effort to contain her brother's practical joke. *Oh great, now I don't have a place to sleep, either,* her mind racing on ways to get even. And she would get even, she promised herself.

But right now her priority was getting back into her quarters, hopefully without being noticed. Half-laughing to herself, she wondered how this was to be accomplished, when all at once she heard footsteps resounding down the passageway from somewhere just beyond the bend. "Oh, come on. I'm tired," she quietly moaned. "I just want to go to bed!" Lieutenant, J.G. Brianna Cantrell carefully turned around and without losing her grip on the door, tried to stand nonchalantly in the doorjamb.

It was only a harmless practical joke, embarrassing at best. However, with all of her recent trouble — just getting assigned to a starship, especially after that serious threat to decommission her was floated — the last thing she needed was to be caught in such an undignified and humiliating situation, especially on her first day. Oh, why not? she decided, as the footsteps grew nearer. It could go

alongside the 'breakdown' on her record. The one Starfleet had placed there blatantly ignoring the recommendations of the Vulcan Embassy on her behalf. And with all those extra tests they had put her through recently, surely her record would make for some pretty interesting reading.

Afraid she was fast losing credibility as an officer, Brianna Cantrell feared, too, Starfleet may need only the slightest provocation to make good on their threat. The last thing she wanted to do was add fuel to her own fire. She admitted to feeling incredibly shaky at the moment swallowing hard as suddenly, a tall, lean Vulcan appeared walking at a steady pace. Just her luck today, most Vulcans failed to tolerate shenanigans such as this. Few, if any, had a firm grip on humor, in general.

The junior officer drew in a breath and shrunk back into the jamb hoping he would walk right on by without even noticing her. Clamping down hard, she did her best to prevent any unwanted broadcasting of her thoughts, essentially, making herself run silent, still. Invisible. And it would have worked, too, she realized. He seemed to pass by without notice, until her hand, wet with sweat, squeaked against the metal door and he stopped abruptly, turning to glance over at her. A frisson of prickly needles shot up her spine.

Brianna Cantrell squeezed her eyes shut, like a

little child trying to hide. This was it she told herself, conceding, having noted the command insignia on his shoulder strap. She was had, vaporized ... Space dust! There would be no forgiveness here. To add to her troubles he was a captain, as well. Why not? She sighed to herself not knowing whether to laugh hysterically, or cry as she unconsciously gnawed on her lower lip. Adrian was a dead man. Oh, yeah. This was a promise.

"Lieutenant?" the Captain questioned, in a deep, rich voice that seemed to resonate right through her, calling her out of her reverie. Brianna looked up at him again and was immediately struck with the warmth of his brown eyes. She held his gaze as he approached her, properly disguising her rising sense of panic — and the sudden, strange attraction she felt toward him. She felt drawn to him and for a moment she even felt curiously faint, light-headed; his presence simply overwhelmed her and she clung tight to the door until she could steady herself.

"Evening, sir," she returned, on a surprisingly dry throat. He was so completely gorgeous, beckoning and forbidding all at once with a duffel bag slung over his broad shoulders as if he, too, had been recalled to the ship. Brianna was enjoying the sharp angles of his face. The hint of age there merely served to heighten his appeal. His was such an interesting face. Handsome. She found herself

wondering just what mysteries lay behind that stoic facade of his. She silently questioned the fire in his eyes, sensing there was definitely more to this particular Vulcan, than your average citizen of 40 Eridani A, otherwise known as Vulcan.

Watching her, as she watched him, he drew closer until they stood a mere forty standard Earth centimeters apart, but to her chagrin it wasn't close enough. He still seemed so very far away as if what lay between them was the great expanse of the Shi'kari Basin, surely an insurmountable gulf. Brianna Cantrell was at once struggling against her emotions. It was so uncomfortable it was painful, completely disconcerting. Where was this coming from? She didn't understand it, or what was happening.

She just knew she needed to be nearer to him. Odd, she thought. Ridiculous, even. What was it about him? Certainly, she couldn't breathe and immediately practiced a mind-exercise. Passing out right in front of him would serve her no purpose. Then it dawned on her what it was. Animal magnetism, she scolded herself, choosing to distract herself by focusing on his uniform jacket, clean and neatly pressed. That's all it was, attraction. A simple, biochemical reaction, to him in particular she noted, helplessly.

Vulcan males quite often elicited such responses

from females, especially *unbonded* ones, such as this one, making them harder to resist. It was common enough, she reminded herself, and completely foolish of her to think she'd be immune simply because she'd spent most of her life on that planet. However, this — this was insane — amplified, as it was. And she was blushing.

Brianna Cantrell sought yet another mind-exercise to maintain her now thready control, trying to get her mind off of the chemistry that was happening. She felt his gaze and looked up at him again. His expression was almost pained, as if he were trying to remember something but just couldn't ... while she tried very hard not to shudder with a new wave of chills. What is it about you? Then it dawned on her and she fought the tears that sprang to her eyes.

She had longed to meet him all these years and ... suddenly, here he was.

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Spock failed to recognize the rather petite human female who stood before him, though he felt he should, experiencing a rather peculiar form of deja vu` as he gazed at her. "Forgive me, Lieutenant, you seem very familiar to me. Do I know you?"

"Only in passing, sir. We sort of bumped into each other once. But it was a long time ago, I wouldn't expect you to remember the incident."

"I confess my memory doesn't quite serve like it used to, but had I met you I doubt I could ever forget the occasion."

She stood right before him, her back pressed against the cabin's hatch as if to forestall a flood and yet, to him, it felt as though she was several parsecs away. It was most uncomfortable and he eyed her curiously wondering just what it was about her, noting he'd also unconsciously taken another half-step closer to her. Did he know her? He gazed at her intently, hoping to jar some memory of it.

Five standard Earth feet tall, barely regulation, she was lean not scrawny at perhaps ninety-six, no ninety-seven pounds, he assessed. Well-proportioned. Her features were delicate, finely-chiseled with a full, sensuous mouth and wonderful almond-shaped eyes. Large, blue of a quality so luminous they were haunting, flecked with silver, and hard to ignore. And yet, should he dare to gaze into them, would he find himself trapped there forever? He got the sense she could see right through him. All-in-all, she was an exquisite example of feminine beauty, a most delightful creature.

And decidedly human, he thought, recalling himself, suppressing a grin. She was also remarkably self-possessed he quickly discerned,

suddenly realizing he wasn't picking up any mental broadcasting from her. He hadn't met too many humans who could shield themselves so effectively and was at once impressed. He gazed at her, rather perplexed. If they had met previously, it was a certainty he was either dead at the time for having failed to notice her, or the amnesia that plagued his entire recovery process, combined with the brandy consumed this evening, had left his memory woefully inefficient. Spock frowned.

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Brianna Cantrell *felt* his gentle probing as he tested her mental *shielding*, was actually glad when the *thing* on the other side of the door, which seemingly had a life of its own, grew insistent, drawing his focus off of her for a moment. She hadn't had to withstand such scrutiny in quite awhile, and nearly succumbed to his urging to let him *in*, struggling with herself as every fiber in her being suddenly screamed to let him *in*. Instead, gratefully, she struggled with the door, practicing yet another mind-exercise to renew her focus. Until she fully understood his intent, the how's and the why's behind his apparent dumping of her, she was frankly afraid to go down that road again, determined not to lose her head again, so readily.

"Is something wrong?" the captain asked, rhetorically, spying the door of the unmarked

quarters and becoming well aware something was amiss. You look as though you've been caught with your hand in the cookie jar, he thought, completely intrigued by her now.

"Wrong, sir? Of course not," Brianna pleasantly lied, watching as he lifted his right eyebrow at her. What else was she supposed to do, she pondered? Invite him in to be devoured by that — thing? Already she could hear the charges being read at her court martial. It's only my first day. She silently wailed.

Spock released his duffel bag, and reaching passed her to test the door, pushed against it with his fingertips. He did not like the feel of things. The locking mechanism seemed at fault. His probing seemed to unsettle things, too, he noticed as the little lieutenant renewed her struggle with the door. What was she attempting to hide? Amused, he decided to find out.

"Are these your quarters?"

"Aye, sir."

"There seems to be a malfunction with your doors. Stand aside," he ordered in a quiet fashion. Brianna Cantrell smiled nervously up at the dark-haired man. He was most persistent, she silently groaned, feeling her grip on the door weaken, wondering how she was going to get out of this. Standing aside

was the last thing she should do. But to defy an order from a superior officer ... with a heavy sigh the junior officer complied.

The day couldn't get any worse, after all. Or could it? "Aye, sir," she returned. Knowing they were on the brink of disaster, the lieutenant reached out with her hand as if to fend him off, reluctantly releasing her grip on the cabin door. Stepping away, as ordered, the mechanism on the door broke and at once the hatchway behind her popped apart with a deafening slam, freeing the monster.

"Hit the deck!" Spock ordered, instinctively grabbing the lieutenant, shielding her just as the thing inflated to its final size, sending both Vulcan and human sprawling to the deck. Brianna Cantrell's vision blurred instantly at his touch; the energy emanating from him was overwhelming, intense. If she wasn't already heading for the floor, she would have found it on her own, her legs simply giving way. Head-rush, chills, a kaleidoscopic myriad of now-familiar images swirled before her eyes: Flickering candles, the rhythmic jangling of tiny bells to the melodic drumbeat, clouds of incense filling the air. White fur.

She couldn't make sense of it, failing to interpret the message, although it often happened that way the impressions too few, at first, too obscure, to create a cohesive picture. Sometimes, it was like

working an old-time jigsaw puzzle without the benefit of a picture to guide her. Still, she was troubled by it, as if there was something more she just wasn't getting, playing on the edge of her memory. Danger. She sensed danger in the scenario, wondering from where or what the threat emanated.

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"This is nice. What the hell is it?" Spock soon asked, laying spoon fashion with the lieutenant on the cold, metal surface, his leg and arm still draped about her protectively. He may not have been saving her from an explosion, as he first believed, but at least he'd managed to bridge the gap between them, he thought smiling, ruefully. The physical contact was altogether pleasant and seemed to have a diminishing effect on the strange uncomfortable sensation of distance from her, as well. Odd. Fascinating, even, he thought, for a moment feeling decidedly disoriented. Must be the brandy? He became aware she was trembling and drew her in closer, admittedly reluctant to let her go. Also, fascinating.

"I don't quite know, sir. It's a going-away present," Brianna Cantrell said, slowly recovering her composure. Crouching underneath his arm with a new wave of chills, she marveled at the gentle strength of his embrace as he pulled her into him in

response to her shaking. Pressed up against the captain as she was, secretly enjoying the clean, fresh scent of him, the faint trace of brandy on his breath, she could almost feel the rhythm of his heartbeat. His touch was oddly comforting, almost familiar in the way it eased the rift between them, allowing her to feel safe in a manner that had eluded her ever since her *moderator* died some eight months ago. It sent a troubling question rippling through her.

*Qual se tu?* — Is it you? Was that the vague something at the back of her mind? Her father had confirmed what Sarkal told her — that her *moderator* yet lived, despite the fact she had *felt* him die. The conundrum baffled her, still. Yet, the longer he held her the more his touch confirmed it was he.

She always knew they would meet. She was just unprepared for this less than graceful introduction. *Qual se tu?* Brianna's heart began to pound in her ears. Perhaps, it wasn't death that separated them, but rather, someone having forcibly broken the *bondlink* between them. But who would do such a thing, particularly when *bondlinks* were considered sacred — T'Pau? As High Councilor she would have the power and the right.

Brianna Cantrell quietly sighed. Her father said her *moderator* had been censured and she did have that curious sensation her *moderator* lived within a

few days after her collapse. Somehow he had come back to life. She kept thinking, Lazarus, Lazarus. Comparing him with the Lazarus from the bible, called forth from his grave four days hence ...

In an effort to prove otherwise, her parents had contacted the Vulcan Embassy. T'Pau, herself, had returned the call. But when Brianna shared her rather persistent impressions on the matter with T'Pau, the High Councilor merely gazed intently at Brianna's image for several seconds without uttering a word. At last, she nodded curtly and said, "I grieve with thee," before signing off. A lie? If T'Pau had been made privy to their joint wanderings, censuring him for it, severing their bondlink as a result, the aged High Councilor certainly wasn't inclined to betray the confidence. Brianna, however, couldn't shake the sense that somehow they were in trouble for it. Even now.

But if that were the case, did it also mean her *moderator* didn't want her anymore? Lately that was father's favorite litany, at least. Was she a toy, to be discarded when she no longer held his interest? She closed her eyes against the sudden, unexpected pain of it, feeling completely disoriented, still trembling with the chills. The captain at once responded, as attentively as she knew him to be, by drawing her in even tighter for a moment as if to share his body heat with her, to

help ease her apparent discomfort.

This was not the embrace of a man who didn't want her ...

The lieutenant nestled into him in return. She had never been with anyone, patiently waiting for the one who had touched her mind, knowing for the longest time they would meet. She was rarely wrong, when it came to these feelings. So why, then, didn't she know he was going to die? Immediately she reminded herself she had been anxious all that week. So very anxious ... All at once she was bitterly aware of what she'd missed, allowing herself to accept the meager comfort this stranger afforded, suddenly realizing what it would have been like with him.

Alone. So alone ...

After what seemed like ages, she slipped her tiny hand inside his, grasping him by the thumb, gently lifting his arm off of her only slightly, enough to raise herself on an elbow without encouraging him to pull away altogether. Stranger or not, the physical contact was welcomed and she found herself reluctant to give it up just yet. She needed a moment longer to compose herself. And she didn't relish feeling that horrible gulf again. After only a brief hesitation she asked, "Is it safe to come out?"

"I believe we are out of danger," Spock said, gently,

involuntarily untwining himself from her as he sat up to take a better look. Brianna Cantrell nearly gasped audibly as he pulled away, was profoundly disappointed, though propriety had clearly dictated his actions. She rolled over and sat up. There was that uncomfortable gulf again. Rubbing her own arms for comfort, she quickly became aware of the warmth of his hand, as he nonchalantly laced his fingers between hers. Obviously, he felt it, too. With his other hand, Spock was pointing at the large, gray object that hung in midair above their heads. "It appears to be a life-size model of an old-time rubberized raft — a dinghy," he corrected himself.

Brianna Cantrell was on her feet in an instant, running her hands over the sides of the vessel, admiring it, peering over the edge to inspect the inside of the rubber craft. Forcing herself to focus on something else, something neutral. It did the trick, as always. In a moment she was completely engrossed in the raft. Better than absolutely throwing herself at him, as she was inclined to do. She said, "It's an Avon," glancing over her shoulder at him, her excitement uncontained. "How did he ever find it?"

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"Perhaps in an antique store," the Vulcan stated. "What would you need with a dinghy?" He liked her smile, Spock decided, content for now to sit on

the deck and watch her.

"It's a bit of a practical joke, sir," Brianna Cantrell replied. "Gads, I hope it comes with instructions, 'cause I haven't a clue how to deflate it!"

"Perhaps, if you went back to the beginning. How did you inflate it?" Spock asked, his eye catching a rather large, prominent tag dangling from a cord. He reached over, examining both sides. "'Pull me," he read and flipped the card. "And I believe it is pronounced, 'Bon Voyage'," he said with his best French inflection. Brianna was suddenly blushing violently, chewing on that lip again. He shook his head

"I couldn't ruin his entire day, sir, he'd so carefully set me up. It must've taken him weeks to think this one up. And," she hesitated. "I was curious."

"Indeed. It is a most dangerous attribute, wouldn't you agree? And just who is the perpetrator?" he asked.

"My little brother." A Vulcan eyebrow met precisely cut black bangs. Spock looked into pleading eyes, noted that her guard seemed to be slipping just a little, wondered if the gesture was sincere or calculated — and in favor of what, he pondered? Sympathy, from a Vulcan? As illogical as it seemed, he did find her most compelling, wondering just how much of it was the liquor

talking.

Looking into her sweet face, he decided after a moment she was being sincere in dropping her guard. It was, perhaps, an act of submission, much the same as a *sehlet* rolling over to expose its soft underside. He had to admit she was in it up to her elbows. It was only logical to surrender. Spock nodded. "I am most curious to know what your response to this matter will be, Lieutenant," he said, at last.

When the woman fervently shook her head, both the Vulcan's eyebrows flirted with his bangs again. "You do intend to respond, do you not? Rapidly and efficiently, I should think. You cannot allow him your dignity without payment in kind," he advised. Brianna's eyes widened.

"You mean you endorse ..."

"It is written in the siblings' handbook. Page three, paragraph one, article two-a, section seven, under the torturing and tormenting of younger brothers. 'No self-respecting older sibling shall allow his dignity to be bruised or otherwise impugned without payment in kind.' It goes on to list various examples of how this might be accomplished," he sounded quite serious. Brianna Cantrell suddenly burst into laughter, despite herself.

"You're kidding me. There's actually a handbook

out there somewhere?"

And then, remarkably, Spock was laughing, too. "Of course, I believe my older brother was responsible for penning the book in the first place. He certainly was rather adept at torturing and tormenting me," he said. He had a wonderful smile, Brianna decided. Regrettably, it and his mirth faded all too soon. Coming to rest on her heels, Brianna reached over and touched his arm, gazing intently into his eyes.

"Your loss is most recent," she said, suddenly. "I grieve with thee."

Spock nodded, "Thank you, Lieutenant." The moment passed and she withdrew her hand, albeit a tad awkwardly.

"I think the first thing I should do is kill it," Brianna Cantrell said. She glanced up and down at the huge, rubber raft. The first officer nodded in agreement.

"It does appear to have devoured your quarters and a fair percentage of the passageway," Spock assessed.

"My thoughts exactly," she laughed, suddenly relieved. She gazed at the Vulcan from the other side of the raft, reassessing him, extending a small hand to him in the Vulcan, split-finger greeting. 'You are to formally meet him,' her father said. There

was something about the captain's manner that put her immediately at ease, like that of an old friend, she thought. Brianna found herself less afraid — of the impending mission, of the coming marriage. Deciding that if the other senior officers aboard were this likable, there was a chance she could actually enjoy this tour of duty.

"Lieutenant Brianna Cantrell, sir. Junior Grade," she said, by way of introduction, as he returned the gesture.

"First officer Spock. Welcome aboard, Mister Cantrell," he replied formally. Brianna looked up at him with sudden recognition, her eyes wide. First officer Spock, Captain Kirk.

"My God, they've put me in with the Big boys!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You guys play hard ball."

"Jim plays hard ball. I play chess," Spock clarified. Suddenly Brianna was laughing again. He enjoyed the sound of it. Joyous, rippling like a waterfall over rocks. He found it most pleasant. And gratifying that it was something he'd said that caused it. Had he actually succeeded in telling a joke? By this time, Brianna Cantrell again realized the breach of protocol, inclining her head to him.

"What I mean to say is thank you, sir. It's an honor

to meet you," she said. Spock nodded his head slightly in polite acknowlegement, again impressed by her knowledge of Vulcan custom, and was about to suggest they get started clearing the passageway when footsteps resounded along the corridor. Brianna's reaction was rapid.

"Anyone I should worry about?" she asked, gesturing with her head in the direction of the approaching officer, although being in the company of the first officer had her fairly confident.

Spock followed her gaze to see Captain Kirk traveling toward them at a hurried clip. "Merely the ship's commander, Captain Kirk," he suggested.

"Ah! Space dust!" Brianna gasped, suddenly. Spock glanced back over at the junior officer, who was by this time leaning into the raft, puzzled by her exclamation.

"Space dust?" he questioned, leaning his head to the side.

"You know, as in vaporized," the woman explained, desperately searching for the inflation valve, although she knew it was a practice in futility. There simply was no time to deflate the beast. She found herself wishing instead to cower behind it until the danger had passed, the way she used to hide from T'Pran when discovery of her wrongdoing was imminent. "I just got here and

already I'm in the soup!" she furthered.

Spock didn't have time to comment on the merit of her statement. Kirk was upon them, arms akimbo, a look of concern across his handsome, broad face as he stood gazing down at his first officer. Spock glanced once more at the woman, who was by this time standing rigidly at attention having abandoned the search, and took immediate control of the situation. He was hard-pressed to comprehend his actions, finding fault perhaps in a misguided sense of chivalry. And, perhaps, his misuse of brandy. "Evening, Captain," he greeted from his position on the deck.

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Brianna Cantrell, hardly breathing, kept her eyes lowered, but she needn't have worried. Kirk barely glanced her way, and then only superficially, enough to notice she stood at attention. And that she was disarmingly beautiful. At the moment, however, he was more interested in the unlikely manner in which his friend was sprawled upon the deck. Leaning against the bulkhead Spock had one leg drawn up with an arm draped across it, his other leg extended and his free arm bracing himself in support ...

This was just a little too relaxed for the Vulcan. Could the rumor be true? When he received word from the transporter technician, he came looking

for Spock right away only to find he had not returned to his quarters. "At ease, Lieutenant," Kirk muttered at her, then voiced his concern, carefully sidestepping over Spock's extended leg and around the bow of the raft.

He squatted down to gaze into the first officer's face. "Spock? What are you doing back already? I thought you would be on the *T'Mir*. Are you all right? Have you been drinking?"

"Perhaps, just a little," Spock said. "A partial fifth. Brandy."

Kirk just looked at him with that revelation. "What is all this?" Kirk's tone was gentle as he took a sweeping glance at the pneumatic doors jammed open by a huge, gray boat that extended on an angle downward from the cabin to fill three-quarters width of the passageway.

"This is an exact replica of a twentieth century rubberized raft, Captain. An Avon, if I am correct."

Kirk stood back up, leaning over to grasp Spock by the elbow. That was indeed, brandy, on his breath. The Vulcan had been drinking, by his own admission. Other than that Spock didn't behave or sound particularly drunk as the technician had suggested. Just — what was the term he was looking for? Less precise? Kirk had seen some very strange things in his time but he wasn't sure just what to

make of this.

"I'll take your word for it," Kirk interrupted, tugging on Spock, trying to curtail the litany of one of the Vulcan's lengthy explanations. Failing in his effort, Spock went on — without missing a single beat.

"Designed to transport up to thirty people and supplies in the event of a disaster," he was saying. "It was, perhaps, the most highly rated escape vessel of its kind. A dinghy," he concluded, as Kirk drew him to his feet. The first officer swayed ever so slightly but before Kirk could reach out to steady him, he'd managed to regain his balance. Spock adjusted his jacket, brushing some of the dust off of his black duty trousers in an effort to regain some of his lost dignity. He was looking a little on the disheveled side, Kirk noticed, turning his attention back to the girl to find her in a similar state.

Her long light blonde hair, twisted into a braided crown about her head, was now lopsided and slowly slipping out of the pins that held it in place. Her features were frozen into a solemn expression, no doubt out of fear, he surmised, and smiled warmly at her hoping to put her at her ease. Then he turned his attention to the rubber raft.

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Brianna, too, was pondering the situation.

Although she held herself at ease, she hadn't relaxed, daring only to sneak a peak at Kirk finding him most attractive, in a human way. She learned little else, unable to hold his eyes long enough before he turned away, to realize anything more than that they were hazel and kind. Unsuccessful in her efforts to assess his reaction to all of this, she found herself wondering just how comfortable the brig accommodations were. Assault of a senior officer, destruction of Federation property, namely her cabin doors, being only a couple of charges, she could come up with at the moment ...

"A dinghy," Kirk repeated in a murmur, taking a minute to examine the device more closely. "On a starship," Kirk furthered, glancing back over his shoulder at Spock who stood, stoic as usual, with his hands clasped behind his back. "And just exactly what is it you were proposing to do with it?" he asked.

"Do with it?" Spock repeated.

"Yes, Mister Spock. Certainly it was brought aboard for a purpose," he paused when incomprehension swept the Vulcan's normally impassive features. "Let me put it this way. And I'm almost afraid to ask this. But, what's it doing out here in the corridor?"

"Indeed, as I stated earlier, this is a reproduction of an ancient rescue craft, Captain. It was designed to

inflate rapidly in an emergency by the pulling of a cord," Spock explained. Kirk still seemed a bit baffled. He frowned.

"What was the nature of the emergency?" he asked, glancing at both the junior lieutenant, still frozen at ease, and then back at his friend and first officer, Mr. Spock. Spock proffered the tag and with it more details.

"It would seem that the Lieutenant's family has a rather interesting tradition in the exchange of going-away presents," the first officer explained. Kirk began to chuckle lightly, turning the tag over in his hands.

"I'm beginning to get the picture, I think. Why didn't you just say that to begin with?" he said, coming to face the woman. She looked up at him with piercing blue eyes and Kirk felt oddly uncomfortable, as if she could see right through him. Spock could sometimes do that to him, although the Vulcan largely refrained from the practice. He shook her off, or tried to.

"Let me see if I've got this right, Lieutenant. You tried to unwrap the gift, saw the tag and obeyed it, pulling the cord on this thing," he confirmed.

"It was a mistake, sir. A big mistake," she admitted.

"As I can see," he smiled, glancing back over at Spock. "I'm going to leave you two to deflate that

beast. Oh, and Lieutenant ..."

"Sir?"

"Stow it in such a way it can't attack my ship again," Captain Kirk implored. "And Spock, welcome back? What did you do, get off the transport in time to get right back on for the return flight? That must have been one short meeting. I trust it went well, at least. Your property ...?"

"Intact, Captain. Thank you," Spock said. "But there are other concerns. Suffice it to say, I am as good as ... vaporized," Spock said evenly, cutting his friend off abruptly, throwing Kirk a warning look and then glancing discreetly over at the little lieutenant. "Or at the very least you could say, emotionally compromised."

Brianna's eyes flickered her interest as she glanced up at the tall, lean Vulcan. Kirk nodded his understanding.

"I'm sorry to hear that," the ship's commander said, concern gracing his visage as he slowly backed away from the two, turning again to continue down the corridor. "We'll talk later," he promised, leaving his subordinates alone to wrestle with the lifeboat.

"That would be well-advised, Captain," Spock agreed. He didn't much appreciate being reminded of his predicament, especially while in the company of such an appealing young woman.

# **10**

November 15, 2285, Stardate: 8511.15

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

irk was still chuckling by the time he reached Sickbay. The hour was late but luckily, Doctor McCoy's lights were still on in his private office. "Burning the proverbial midnight oil," Kirk murmured to himself. McCoy, like many of the others, found himself putting in long hours, in what Kirk guessed was a desire not to be outdone by these kids. With the exception of the bridge crew, they were all brand new recruits.

Nonetheless, Kirk had every confidence in this

newly forming crew of his. They were young, eager, bright and not about to spend their tour of duty orbiting Earth. Already they displayed the markings of excellence, undaunted by the hard work necessary to get this vessel in shape just to cruise to the other side of Orion's Belt and back, let alone take on the dangerous assignment he had just been handed.

All the hard work was paying off as the ship was slowly taking shape. But it was taking its toll on the older, ship's surgeon. Between Spock and McCoy, Kirk had his hands full, lately, feeling more like a nursemaid sometimes than the ship's commander. He regretted the announcement he was going to have to make sometime early tomorrow. Facing down the rampant pirate situation was only one part of the mission. Taking possible hits from an unknown source, was another. If the Vulcans were wrong about this and their ability to contain the situation, it could be disastrous for all involved. The last thing he wanted was to destroy morale.

He found McCoy in his office, seated before his computer terminal making notes on an electronic clipboard. The doctor turned to face Captain Kirk when he knocked. "What can I do for you, Jim?" he asked with a tired smile. The furrows in his aged face seemed deeper tonight. They were all exhausted. Kirk smiled in return, still snickering a

little over Spock's predicament out in the corridor with the raft

"Something for this headache," he began. Kirk had done his best to rotate the crew while they were in port for a brief amount of shore leave. Weekends off, at least for most of them. Even Spock was taking advantage of it, the Vulcan surprisingly restless of late. The captain of the *Enterprise* had to admit his own leave was hardly long enough to take the edge off, broken into two parts as it was with a crisis mission thrown in between.

He found himself contemplating a third trip to Yosemite, when all of this was over, wondering if both Spock and McCoy wouldn't benefit from the same. He couldn't get over the fact that Spock was drunk. Obviously, the man was dealing with something — or attempting to ignore it altogether, in his usual stubborn Vulcan manner.

Leonard McCoy got up from his chair, grateful for the interruption. He went over to a cabinet and withdrew two small pills from a jar handing them to his captain. Kirk took them, gulping them down with the glass of brandy he'd poured himself. "I think our Mister Spock is planning to take up white-water rafting," he said, pouring another shot. He held up the bottle in invitation. McCoy, back at his desk, declined with a shake of his head.

"Oh, yeah?" the doctor said, his voice perking up

with renewed interest. "Why's that?"

"He's up on D-deck-four right now getting handson experience with a rubber raft. I'm not sure, but I think the raft's winning."

"What, he's back already? I thought he had leave. Tens days or something. Some big family meeting."

"Guess it's all over."

"Hellava long way to travel for something so short! Why couldn't they just make it a conference call over the compti? Vulcans! So sophisticated — at least that's what they'd have you believe. And yet so antiquated in their methods sometimes. I don't know. What do you think this was all about, anyway?"

"Don't know exactly. Although he did say something about being as good as vaporized. He must be. He's drunk."

"Spock? Huh-uh. You don't suppose he lost his property to some kind of Vulcan probate do you? He died after all. Certified him myself."

"That would be a problem for his family all right," Kirk said. The *House of Talek Sen Dene* owned a considerable amount of property on Vulcan. It was part of their prestige, their power, wealth and influence. If the noble family ever lost its title, they'd still have a high social standing based on the

amount of property they controlled. But not if her sons kept losing it, Kirk mused.

In Vulcan tradition, each of her sons was given their own portions of the family's holdings. Sarek, the eldest male of the *House of Talek Sen Dene*, had subsequently meted out to his two sons their inheritance when they came of age. Sybok, the true *First Son*, had been given the larger portion based on his status, only to have it wrested from him when he was banished from Vulcan for his heretical ways. Sarek then bestowed upon Spock, his secondborn and youngest child, the crown of *First Son* and a double portion of property, *Keldeen*, which was his from birth and another estate, *T'Kelsen*. It was a sizable chunk of land, combined as it now was, befitting a Vulcan prince.

"To lose even a portion of that inheritance," Dr. Leonard McCoy said, letting his thoughts drift. "You know, they'd sooner sacrifice a son ..."

"Maybe they have. He assured me his property is intact. Although he did say there were other concerns ... Well, whatever it is, with the exception of getting drunk, he's taking it like Spock."

"As tight-lipped as an *Aldebaran* shell-mouth, no doubt."

"And completely focused on the matter before him."

"The raft," McCoy said.

"Well, it came with a certain blonde amenity," Kirk explained, measuring the air suggesting chest-high on him. "About so tall. Incredible blue eyes. Piercing. I'd say they were piercing. She seemed to be holding his attention."

"Uh-oh. Sounds like a case of lust at first sight and you didn't get her name," McCoy nodded. Kirk grinned, shrugging.

"Well, Spock seemed so completely wrapped up in her at the moment. I could hardly ... Lieutenant in the science department," he added when McCoy folded his arms across his chest, giving him the look. Kirk poured another drink, doing his best to ignore the doctor.

"This is Spock we're talking about," McCoy said. "When was the last time you saw him playing footsie with anyone? If he's getting anything on the side, it's the best kept secret this side of the *Neutral Zone*. Especially since the last time he knocked boots with someone aboard the same ship it was a complete disaster. Or are you forgetting how fast Christine dumped him and transferred off the ship!"

"In all fairness to Spock, our then *Nurse* Chapel took advantage of him. The *Blood fever* had only temporarily abated when he thought he'd killed me over T'Pring. Don't get me wrong. We're all

grateful she stepped in to help him out with his little 'problem'. But face it. She's not his type."

"And exactly what is his type?"

"Oddly enough? The little lieutenant on the upper deck. There was this certain familiarity between them. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. But, I think they know each other."

"Maybe that's where he's been spending so many of his weekends, recently."

"Maybe," Kirk said, thoughtfully, dismissing the notion as harebrained. "You've seen everyone on board at least once, Bones."

"Doesn't sound familiar right off." McCoy thought for a moment, frowning. Replacing the diskette, he called up the ship's roster on his computer. "But then, I've seen so many recently. And there are four-hundred-twenty-three people aboard, so far, with seven left to check in. One-hundred-two of them female. Let me work on it. I'll see if I can come up with a name."

"Thanks, Bones," Kirk said, as he turned to leave, setting his glass down on the counter next to him. McCoy's voice stopped him at the door.

"Does this mean you're getting back into action?" he queried.

"I'm not yet fifty," Kirk protested. "and not quite

ready to be put out to pasture." McCoy waved him off.

"I'm not criticizing. I think you ought to be out there prowling. It's about time."

"It's been ... difficult," the captain said, quietly.

"I know, Jim. Carol still not talking?"

"The good Doctor Marcus blames me for the loss of our son. You know, when the *Genesis* crisis began and I ran smack-dab into Carol again, it got me thinking."

"You should have married her, Jim."

"And give up my ship? That's what *she* wanted. She would have been more than happy to have me remain chained to a desk. I'd be there now if things were otherwise. And we all know *that*'s a mistake."

"Instead, you gave up your son."

"I'd give anything to roll back time. To have a chance to know David." Jim smiled wryly, filling another two fingers worth of the brandy in his glass. He downed it quickly. "I had half fancied that when all the commotion was over, Spock laid to rest and all the reports duly filed, Carol and I might pick-up where we left off some twenty odd years ago. That somehow the three of us might make a family, yet ... It's been nearly a year since David died. I guess whatever ties we had, have been

permanently severed." Kirk fell silent.

"I'll get that name for you," McCoy promised.

"She's — young," Kirk hesitated. Dr. McCoy said nothing at first and Kirk was afraid he was gearing up for a lecture. Then a wide grin broke out over the old doctor's visage.

"I think that's in her favor, Jim. It'll give her a fair chance of keeping up with you," he joked. "There's only one problem I can foresee in all of this."

"Oh, yeah? What's that?"

"What if she *is* Spock's woman?" McCoy said, suddenly uneasy. Unable to explain his misgivings even to himself.

"Well, we don't know that. I said they seemed to know each other. Besides, you said it yourself. He wouldn't make the mistake of dating someone on the same ship again."

McCoy shook his head again, in disbelief. "Oh, but *you* would. Where angels fear to tread ..."

"I think I'll just give her a few days to settle in before I take her on a tour of the ship." Captain Kirk's logic was faulty at best and McCoy eyed him suspiciously.

"You may have ultimately saved his life." McCoy found himself staring into Kirk's back as the captain abruptly left the room. "But don't figure he owes

you this," he said, the doors to his office shooshing closed even as he spoke. He went over to the brandy and poured himself a drink, after all, swallowing it in one quick shot. "Oh, boy!" he sighed. "I smell trouble ahead."

November 15, 2285. Stardate: 8511.15

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

he minute Captain Kirk was gone, Brianna Cantrell exhaled the breath she'd held for much of the time. Slowly she straightened her jacket, stifling a yawn, and her curiosity over what sort of trouble the Vulcan was in, afraid she already knew the answer to that one. Her father mentioned her *moderator* had endured a censure for his actions during her k'Matra, however unfair she thought the ruling was, in retrospect. Why was the punishment so one-sided? Or, perhaps, it wasn't.

She also had a "contract" out on her, a mandate for marriage to this man. From her reading of it, there was very little wriggle room to be had. She was a bride and might as well start planning the Event.

She looked up at the first officer only to find him watching her again as she searched his handsome, angular face for answers. Filled with a sudden remorse, how could she drag him kicking and screaming, as it were, down the proverbial aisle? She needed to know how he truly felt about all of this. Had he left her, as others repeatedly suggested, and in so doing, wrested himself free of the entanglement their unauthorized *mindmeld* created?

She should never have *touched* him. This was all of her fault. No wonder T'Pran was on her every other minute to keep her *wandering* thoughts to herself. Now, she understood why some suggested *mindmelds* were dangerous. Captain Spock was wearing that same perplexed expression he displayed earlier, as if he were trying desperately to remember something. But his *shield* was held tightly in place, aggravating the sense of distance between them.

Just another bit of frustration on this day. If Mr. Spock was unreadable, however, Captain Kirk's concern had been palatable. Brianna Cantrell was suddenly troubled by all of it, troubled that she was

at the heart of it. Certainly, Mr. Spock had grown quiet. She wanted into his head urgently. Wanted so much to put behind her the pain of being ... left. With the care Captain Kirk exhibited, it made her wonder if Spock had actually died — or had a near-death experience. There was something both men were concealing. Spock moved so that he was now standing immediately before her, gazing down at her intently. She felt so completely undone by his gaze, willing to give herself over to him entirely. Her difficulty to fight it was very strange. Peculiar, even

Brianna was instantly glad the young bucks back at the Academy weren't present to witness her lapse. She had become so adept at curtailing their advances they had dubbed her the Ice Princess. It was impossible to realize Mr. Spock had her melting with a single glance. Such grist for the old rumor mill, indeed. If word got out her former classmates would have a field day. She was afraid they would never let her live it down. It was disturbing how easily tables could be reversed. Lieutenant Cantrell was used to being the one in control. She had also been unofficially betrothed to someone wonderful then, she told herself. Nice to know she was still very much attracted to him, now. He looked rather good for someone who, purportedly, had died.

She sighed, a little too audibly, drawing in her

lower lip, completely frustrated now in her efforts to breach Mr. Spock's practiced *shield of reserve*. Maybe, she thought, that distance was there for a reason, sort of a 'no trespassers' sign. A warning as it were, she reminded herself, wishing now to just get on with their appointed task. And find a sweater, she thought, rubbing her arms. "He seems reasonable enough," she said, referring to Kirk, breaking the awkward silence.

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"He can be," Spock returned, grateful the captain had given him a reason to linger. He, for one, was in no hurry to be parted from this gracious creature. Glad he now had a mission, a logical reason to remain in her presence. And, if a moment earlier he had been wondering why he'd chosen this circuitous path to his own deck and quarters, the answer was right before him. He had simply been drawn here. Like a bee to a flower ...

Spock nearly smiled with that thought and was suddenly touching the braided loop that now hung down by her left ear. He nodded absent-mindedly. Her hair was indeed as soft and silky as it looked. Physical contact was most desirable, no matter how limited, he mused. Just to be near her ... He lifted an eyebrow. Fascinating.

"Say, listen, if you need to talk, I'm sure I could deflate this thing by myself," Brianna Cantrell

offered, nodding her head in the general direction Kirk had taken. She reached upward to tuck in a stray hair, her hand lightly brushing his in passing, noting again that his touch was oddly comforting. Familiar. "I must look a mess," she said, smiling nervously, once again struggling with her immediate and intense attraction to him. She could scarcely breathe.

"Negative," Spock was saying, shaking his head slightly in disagreement. "I find it a rather interesting look. Perhaps, as a possible fashion statement? Or fashion non-statement, as it were."

Brianna blushed. "Now, you're teasing me," she said, looking away.

Spock quickly withdrew, realizing his behavior was risky at best, clasping his hands firmly behind his back once more. What had gotten into him? First Mina and now the little lieutenant? Wasn't he in enough trouble already? Soon to be betrothed. "If you would rather I leave," he said, suddenly recognizing it might be the wiser thing to do; leave now while he still could, before he disgraced himself altogether. He was obviously not in control of his emotions at the moment, he decided, no doubt an interesting side-effect of his current, unbonded status. And the shock to his entire system realizing, again, he was suddenly no longer eligible. To say nothing of the brandy consumed earlier this

evening.

Leaving was the logical thing to do. She had given him the perfect out. But the thought of parting from the lieutenant was most disagreeable. She was nearly as intoxicating as the brandy, he concluded, amazed beyond all reason that she could affect him this way. Fascinating, he thought again, promptly being reminded that those who hesitate are often lost as just as suddenly his window of opportunity was abruptly slammed shut. Evidently, the lieutenant had changed her mind.

"No!" she said, perhaps a bit too quickly, Spock thought, noticing a strangely familiar edge of desperation in her objection, finding himself curiously relieved at the same time. He most definitely should go ... But the little lieutenant was smiling again, nervously, he guessed by the slight quiver to her lips. He, too, was undergoing an attack of nerves, strangely enough. Most unlike him. "I just thought ..." Brianna let the thought dangle.

"We are under orders," he asserted. "And you are a most pleasant diversion," he said, in answer to her unspoken question, stepping into her, gently catching her chin between his thumb and forefinger and gracing her with the briefest of smiles. He was completely taken with her. He knew, too, he wasn't exactly free to enjoy it. He was most definitely in

trouble here, Spock conceded, reminding himself he was as good as betrothed, the ceremonies to follow merely a formality. The Council left him no room to protest, no wriggle room, assuring him his hunting days were effectively over.

His behavior was both illogical and unseemly.

But, frankly, he didn't want to be alone with his thoughts just now. For the present, he preferred her company over Kirk's. *Knee-jerk?* he wondered. There was something so completely compelling about her. "If you don't mind, that is. I promise I'll behave," he said, more to himself than to her. *I won't* mindmeld with you or in some other way lead you to misconstrue my intent, he added to himself. I won't make promises ... almost adding, like before. Aloud he told her, "I won't bite."

"Ah, darn!" Brianna said, recovering at last. "And I was so looking forward to it." With that she flashed him an impish grin, his breach in etiquette obviously forgiven. Her bright blue eyes sparkled with mischief as she slipped away from him heading into her quarters. Spock caught the hull of the boat and turned it on its side to make way, smiling broadly at her. She was most delightful.

"I'm afraid I wasn't prepared to entertain anyone this evening. It's a dreadful mess in here," the lieutenant began, by way of explanation, covering her mouth as she suddenly yawned again. The

cabin was a shambles, a complete wreck she decided as they both squeezed in passed shipping crates haphazardly thrown into her quarters, stumbling over the paraphernalia that spelled the lieutenant's young life. At one point Captain Spock reached out to steady the lieutenant as a misplaced foot nearly took her to the deck. "Whoops! I really don't remember leaving that there," she cried. "The raft must have knocked it over."

"Careful," he cautioned, hanging onto her elbow.

"Kinda looks like someone stirred the room with a stick." Why did it look worse than before, she pondered? Were there suddenly more boxes than when she'd fled the room moments ago?

Spock looked around him in dismay. On the top of one crate alone he saw a blender, a can opener and a set of dishes. Was she setting up household? Illogical. Shaking his head, Spock bent down and immediately began shuffling crates, logically and methodically clearing a path through the tiny quarters, as if he couldn't stand it in such disarray. "From the state of things, I'd say that someone has been at it for hours. Do you come from a long line of pack rats or are you the anomaly?"

Brianna Cantrell shot him a glance with the word anomaly. Funny he should use that term with her. Did he know it was she? To the best of her knowledge, her identity was yet a state secret. *Qual* 

se tu? Brianna tried again with a shudder. She still couldn't get through his shielding or at least he was failing to respond to her, diligently focused on his task, as he was. Brianna suddenly found herself very uneasy. What if he really didn't want her, after all?

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Spock, in the meantime, found himself quite dizzy, conceding the possibility that dumping his head down was a bad move. Immediately, he was leaning into a stack of crates to steady himself. They rattled, making a clinking sound as if they contained glass bottles, or something. Perhaps, it was her stemware, he mused, shaking his head, trying to dispel the fuzziness from his brain. He looked over at the lieutenant. Brianna was blushing. "Mister Spock, really. You don't have to. I can get this all arranged. I only beamed aboard twenty minutes or so ago," she protested.

"Lieutenant," he said straightening up to point toward the raft. "How else do you propose we get at our appointed task? We cannot reach it from here," he assured her. He'd had way too much to drink. He suddenly had to sit down, taking the nearest crate, leaning back into the overstuffed duffel bag behind it. That's when he'd caught sight of the dress, carefully suspended from the bulkhead above the dresser, all fluffed out.

It was one of those big Ball gown types; a long, bulky, full-skirted number. Enormous. "Most illogical," he murmured, gazing up at it. Where was she going to put that thing, he pondered? What was her purpose in bringing it, even? It wasn't something one would wear casually, he should think. The closets aboard ship simply weren't that big. It would have to be compressed. Crushed, more like it. He certainly didn't recollect a Welcome Ball being on the schedule when he left for Vulcan.

How could he be attracted to someone so obviously dysfunctional? Or were all females this illogical in their traveling needs? This was a starship, not a floating hotel. As for the household goods, did she think it would be the same as living on base? He reached up to touch the hem of the burgundy gown.

"I am most disappointed, Lieutenant. What were you thinking? You are never going to have enough storage for all of this," he said. And then Spock's eyebrow shot into his hairline when his fingertips grazed the tiny strip of *veridian* placed alongside one of the crates next to him, calling his attention away from the dress for a moment. Odd. Suspicious, even. Well, she was an archaeologist, he slowly reasoned.

She probably owned some rather valuable equipment, amidst all this other 'stuff', in the

pursuit of her field, beyond what Starfleet might issue. Perhaps, even some unique specimens afforded her from earlier field work during her schooling. It was logical for her to have her crates tracked during shipment, he decided.

"I kinda figured that," Brianna Cantrell said. "But I want you to know some of this stuff isn't mine." The lieutenant had since joined him in his self-appointed task, busy on the other side of the room. She appeared to be looking for something, he noticed, glancing up at her to catch her poking through each crate as she moved them aside.

"Of course not. As an added bonus, your practical joker had it beamed into your quarters." Slowly this time, he returned to shuffling crates.

"Ah, that's not fair," she defended, casually poking through an open-ended crate. "This appears to be the handiwork of my ex-roommate. I thought it was strange she got off with only six boxes and two small duffel bags," Brianna complained, making a wry face, shoving a particularly heavy crate aside. What has Candy got in here? she wondered, hearing the distinct clink-clinking of glass bottles against one another. "I let it go at the time, but she acted so quirky. Now I know why. She was supposed to dispense with a lot of this ... stuff, for lack of a better term."

Spock glanced upward with the sound, was

suddenly at her side, arms encompassing her as he assisted her. This crate, too, appeared to have a *veridian* strip. That made seven in all. Six of one variety, one of another. "If you will allow me, Lieutenant," he said, gently taking over, disappointed when she slipped out from under him again. The physical contact, however minimal, was oddly satiating. He loathed letting her go and he was aware of constantly plotting, watching for a logical reason for it to occur again. *Fascinating*.

"I admit I've been remiss here. It's all been in storage for weeks. I haven't even looked at it, really ..."

"Remiss, Lieutenant? Is that what you call it? You keep proving your gullibility," Spock observed. "Perhaps, you should look at the broader picture here. By all appearances, your ex-roommate has dispensed with it, leaving you with a boat-load of useless items for which there is no storage. And while it displeases me to be the one who informs you of this," he said, reaching up to touch the hem of the dress again. "Life aboard a starship hardly lends itself to the use of taffeta and crinoline. Another useless item," he pointed out as he gazed at the gown. "Let me guess, a left-over from your graduation ball, perhaps?"

He then recalled himself and shoved another crate aside. Brianna shot him a wounded glance, wincing

with his remark. "I hate packing," she defended. "Candy offered to do it while I was out on my training cruise. We were told there wouldn't be much time between graduation and our final assignments. So why not? Worked that way for her, anyway. Of course, she doesn't have a grandmother like mine," Brianna sighed, turning to pick through another crate.

Spock's eyebrow shot upwards at the mention of her grandmother, casting her a sidelong glance. That sounded remarkably like the voice of experience. Could it be he wasn't the only one in the universe who had a difficult grandmother, as he once thought? He would have to remember to ask her about it sometime, letting it go, for now.

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Brianna Cantrell had her attention turned elsewhere, looking for a particular crate. It didn't seem to be here and that had her worried. The same grandmother who was responsible for getting her removed from the *Excelsior*, her orders belayed, when she insisted they run her through those psychological tests making certain she was 'fit for duty', had also insisted Brianna have what she termed a 'home box. Lieutenant Cantrell was not well-traveled. She had never really been off-planet before, in fact, when she left Vulcan to attend Starfleet Academy in San Francisco, Earth.

It had helped her tremendously to have all the things that made a place home right there in a single box, first one opened. Her icons, her bible, her favorite music discs, some knickknacks. Pictures of her family. Little things, really. Important things, like her stuffed toy sehlet and her hand-sewn quilt, depicting the Vulcan sunset.

Familiar things were indeed comforting, as Grandmama had said they would be. Now she was going off into deep space and she didn't seem to have it. It was disturbing. Upon reflection, Brianna realized the woman's advice wasn't all bad. With a heavy sigh, she tried another box.

"Looking for something in particular?" Spock asked, as he stood watching her for a moment, having worked his way around to the other side of the dresser. He was nearly to the small desk where the stern of the raft rested. "Perhaps, the shoes to this gown?" He was looking and sounding a bit exasperated, having discovered a plethora of ridiculous items she had brought with her.

Brianna Cantrell chose to ignore the remark, more concerned about the lost articles, continuing to ferret through another box. This was really odd, her inability to find her things. At once she closed her eyes, trying to get a mental fix on the whereabouts of the misplaced items. Reaching outward, she let her mind expand beyond herself. She had watched

as they were beamed out of her quarters at the Academy ...

"I am most curious, Lieutenant," Spock suddenly went on, disrupting Brianna's concentration, pulling her rather abruptly out of her meditation. Busily examining the evening gown once again, he did not see her startling back to the present, all too focused on the garment as he was. Irrationally, he wanted to see her in it. "Exactly when did you expect to wear this?"

Now he'd hit a nerve. Brianna Cantrell looked up at him, frowning. What was his sudden obsession with the dress, anyway? "On Sunday, sir. I expected to wear that on Sunday. But now as it stands, I don't think I'll be wearing it at all. Although my mother insisted I bring it along, just in case. Is that okay with you?"

"In case of what? It is hardly regulation. And as grandiose as it is, I seriously doubt it will do much to intimidate or impress the terrorists, either way." Again, his remark was rather biting. Brianna bristled.

"Just in case my faerie godmother makes a sudden appearance and enables me to go to the ball! Because, after all, that's what it's going to take. Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Indeed, I thought you were already, Lieutenant."

"I was wondering, sir. Is prevarication a habit with you? Or did I merely misunderstand what you said? Because I rather doubt with you being Vulcan, it could be a memory problem."

"I beg your pardon?" Her hit was a direct one. He was experiencing some difficulty in that department and although he was mostly back to normal now he was a bit sensitive about it. For a Vulcan. Even more troubling, though, was just how she knew this?

"You said you wouldn't bite," Brianna Cantrell reminded him. "Or did you simply mean, not with your teeth?"

Spock's eyebrows shot immediately into his hairline and for a moment he seemed completely nonplused. *Most impertinent*, he thought, secretly admiring her spunk. But, like his father he chose to ignore the remark rather than give it merit, saying at last, instead, "Lesson number one, Lieutenant. Always do your own packing. And unless your mother is your C. O., throw out her advise, as well."

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Brianna narrowed her eyes at him, making a face in his direction when he turned away from her again to finish clearing a path over to the lifeboat. *Totally humorless*, she thought. He was beginning to annoy her. Quietly grumbling, she barely

murmured, "How about if I simply throw *you* out," then went back to picking through her crate.

"That, of course, is your option, Lieutenant. But we have not, as yet, dispatched with the raft," he said over his shoulder. *Damn*, she forgot about his ears, she silently lamented, figuring she'd had just about enough for one day when she suddenly came across two loose bottles of the contraband *Romulan Ale* hidden beneath her things, startling with her discovery. She quickly shoved the bottles deeper into the box, hoping he didn't see them. *Lesson number two*, see lesson number one!

"Oh, damn," she muttered softly.

"How's that, Lieutenant?" Spock asked, as if he hadn't quite caught the comment, glancing back up at her briefly. She smiled weakly in his direction.

That's why not, she thought, suddenly in a panic. Was this some sort of joke? A parting gesture? Another one of Candy's perverted ideas of fun in an endless effort to get Brianna to loosen up? If so, Brianna failed to see the humor in it. It was neither funny nor amusing, considering a recent Starfleet communiqué suggested a need to crack down on the smuggling of such contraband. Just last month they had arrested four cadets. And at the moment, she had a captain in her quarters ...

Brianna Cantrell eyed him warily. A most

persistent one at that. *Damn. Damn. Damn!* Thank goodness, he seemed thoroughly engrossed in his task. Perhaps, he would stay that way ... Brianna took a few deep breaths. This wasn't happening, she told herself, willing herself not to faint, which happened all too readily these days, ever since her collapse.

She was definitely on psychological overload, here. Her body simply couldn't withstand any more stress and seemingly preferred massive shut-down over dealing with the situation. This wasn't a good trait to have developed, given her career choice, she chastised. She drew in another slow, calming breath. She would get through this, she promised, pushing through the blackness that threatened to overwhelm her, waiting for the dizziness to pass.

Brianna Cantrell knew those feelings about the brig were real. She merely misconstrued the why of it. Par for the course, lately. She just *felt* so blind! She could *feel* Mr. Spock's gaze on her back. She had managed to arouse his curiosity, anyway. *Damn.* "Oh, nothing, sir," she shrugged and then realized her folly.

To claim nothing was bothering her now would lead him into pressing the issue, unyielding as he was. She saw how persistent he was with her cabin doors. She should come clean. Confess all and beg for mercy, she thought as she began to shake. This

just wasn't happening. Maybe it was only two bottles. Or, better yet, colored water? Candy was rather pleased with her expansive collection of exotic bottles, displaying them filled with various liquids and such.

"And everything," she continued. "Just my life. Between my ex-roommate and my grandmother everything is spinning completely out of control. As always. No problems here, sir. All systems — normal."

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There was a slight sarcastic edge to her soft voice. Spock looked at her quizzically. Her color was suddenly odd. In a swift movement, he crossed the room and taking her by the elbows, lifted her onto a crate, gently pressing her head between her knees, holding her there despite her protests.

"Are you quite certain about that, Lieutenant? You look a little faint to me. And you are somewhat less than coherent at the moment."

"Well, what do you expect? What did *I* expect, really? My life's never been my own. From the very onset, T'Pran was there trying to mold me into something I wasn't, always reminding me my *human* behavior was most unseemly. I seriously doubt that even if I had suddenly sprouted Vulcan ears I could ever have pleased her. And do you

know what I just learned tonight?" she asked, abruptly sitting up the moment Spock took his hand away. Yet another mistake on her part. Bright swirls of light against a black background danced before her in a three-dimensional pattern, the color once against draining from her cheeks. "Daddy has been turning down suitors I didn't even know had inquired. How's that for a lack of control?"

Spock shook his head forcing her back down, not at all finding her father's behavior unseemly. On the contrary, as a parent it was her father's duty to arrange her betrothal — with or without her preferences in mind. So, what was so different about what Sarek had done? ... I am not a child. But then, neither was the lieutenant. "Keep your head down," he quietly ordered, his hand once again on the back of her neck, forcing her head between her knees.

"Okay. If you say so," she agreed, fighting the blackness.

"I say so," he said quietly, for the moment very concerned. He remembered something about a collapse on her record. He wondered if he should alert Sickbay, deciding instead to watch her for awhile. Closely. Starfleet did release her for duty. He wanted to give her a fair chance at it, first, before she was drummed out of the service for mental incompetency, he rationalized.

She seemed like a nice kid. Young woman, he corrected. She was a beautiful young woman, whom he liked instantly. Spock was also vaguely aware of his protective attitude toward her, reminiscent of a typical Vulcan male's response to his mate, he noted, promptly quashing the notion. But as inexplicable as it seemed, he did feel as if somehow he had just come home ... He gave the back of her neck a light, reassuring squeeze, shaking his head as Brianna Cantrell continued to rant.

"Even my roommate for the last four years hardly let me into our quarters because she was constantly entertaining, if you get my meaning ... And now she's left me a cute, little parting gift. Sort of a thank you, I suppose, for my being such a good sport about it all. Right? I mean, what's a little *Romulan Ale* between friends?"

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Brianna Cantrell stared at the deck between her legs, involuntarily held in this position as she was. Certainly, it gave her an interesting perspective of things, a chance to sort things out. To think. For instance, at least now she understood why she felt so anxious about the sudden transfer. She knew something was amiss. Damn her. Candy had acted quirky all right, with more reason than Brianna had allowed.

The lieutenant found herself wondering just how many bottles were peppered throughout her crates, making her look like a runner? Slowly, this time, she sat up when Mr. Spock finally released her head again, eyeing that last heavy, clinking crate suspiciously. He disappeared from the room for a minute into the lavatory, returning with a glass of water and a damp cloth to place on the back of her neck.

Who, if anyone, was supposed to receive the Ale aboard the *Excelsior*? Or just what was she expected to do with it, she wondered? Brianna took the washcloth from him. "Thank you," she said, running it over her face. It felt so cool. Soothing. Why would Candy do this to her? To get even, is that what she lifted from the bottles?

Brianna Cantrell hadn't been allowed to keep the choice assignment. Her grandmother had seen to that. Of course, Candy wasn't privy to such information, having shipped out before Brianna's orders had been belayed. She didn't know Lieutenant Cantrell had been reassigned to the *Enterprise. For a decidedly dangerous mission*.

Or, perhaps Candy was merely trying to save her own skin, as usual. Maybe that's how she had graduated? She had struck a deal with someone. Brianna Cantrell felt stupid and used. And angry, she thought, raking her fingers up through the

fringes that covered her forehead. The half-moon scar there was throbbing, a sure sign of her stress. Mr. Spock took the washcloth, held out the glass to her, quietly insisting, "Take a sip of this."

Brianna Cantrell did as ordered, wrinkling her nose. The water had an odd, tinny taste to it. She shuddered, handing him back the glass. "Oh, that's horrible!" she complained.

"Yes, I know. But it's cold and it's wet. If I had some brandy, I would give you a shot of that."

"Actually, there is some over there in that box," she directed, remembering the *Saurian* brandy she had come across much earlier. At least it was legal. Spock went to retrieve it. Lieutenant Cantrell buried her head in her hands. She had done nothing to deserve this, although she conceded the competition had been unusually vicious. Brianna had played hard, but she had played fair. She was an officer. That meant integrity to her. It's what her grandfather had taught her, anyway. She naively thought that was a given at the Academy.

This stunt, however, went beyond mere competition. It was designed to destroy her career altogether. And if her grandmother hadn't gotten into the mix, getting her booted off the *Excelsior*, Brianna may have had a chance of clearing herself by setting up the intended receiver of the goods. She may even have returned to her quarters to find

her room ransacked and the illegal booze gone. That could have been the end of it.

"Do you know what the capper is?" she asked, as Spock sifted through the box in pursuit of the brandy bottle. At last he found it, uncorking the top.

"Perhaps, you would be kind enough to tell me," he said, pouring three fingers' worth of the amber spirits into her glass of water.

"Grandmama going to Admiral Jeffries to have me pulled from the *Excelsior*. Where, I might add, the Junior officer's quarters are a whole lot larger than this. All because it's due for a fiver in deep space and she's afraid I'll get killed like my grandfather. She actually had them re-test my mental competency. Do you believe that? My own grandmother! She used my grief against me. To keep me here, stuck in space-dock on this antiquated, old, *rust*-bucket of a ship!" she wailed.

With God knows how many cases of contraband in my possession and no easy way to dispense with it. Lord, have mercy, I'm dead. "Funny thing is, I usually get a sense about these things ... I got nothing. And all of this time I blamed Starfleet for my belayed orders and all those extra tests. All sensors jammed ..."

This was clearly a no-win situation, such as the

Kobyashi Maru scenario all Seniors were required to attend. Brianna Cantrell found herself wondering if the compti system in these quarters worked better than the thermostat, since there was a very real chance she needed to contact the JAG office for a lawyer. "It's all over. I'm space dust," she muttered, shaking her head, staring off into the distance, tears, unchecked, streaming down her face.

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"Are you quite finished? Perhaps, then I could get you a little cheese to go with that whine," Spock said, wishing his current assignment was the extent of his worries. Life, however, was never as simple as that. At least, not his. *Try having your mate issued to you as easily as your boots*, he thought bitterly. "And I'd be careful about volunteering your opinion about this ship in front of too many people. Especially Mister Scott. It may be a rust-bucket, as you say. But it is *our* rust-bucket."

It was Spock, this time, who was handing out the brandy, slightly watered down as it was, offering it up as he approached her again. Checking himself. His impulsive human side was showing. And she didn't deserve to bear the brunt of it. She was not to blame for his twist of fate. The little lieutenant was quite perceptive. He did need to talk it out. "You may not have gotten the assignment of choice, Lieutenant, but it isn't the worse thing that could

happen," he said more gently, this time.

Brianna Cantrell took the glass from him, staring into it's contents, dubiously. All at once she got up and began pacing about the tight confines of her cabin. Spock kept his eye on her for a moment, but her constant back and forth movement only served to make him dizzy. He had to look away, taking a seat on the incriminating crate. Brianna turned to walk back toward him, feeling a sudden rush again.

"No. The worst thing is now I have to miss my brother's wedding on Sunday and the whole family is acting like I'm to blame! All I did was report for duty, as ordered. That, and," she paused to compose herself, blinking back the tears. Spock gazed at her, watching with unexpected satisfaction as she grappled and won control over her emotions. "What you're sitting on, sir," she said, surprisingly swallowing the drink in one gulp, shuddering involuntarily. "Hey, this stuff isn't too bad this way," she said, gazing into the bottom of the glass.

Spock got up off the crate, glancing over at her curiously before lifting the lid. He stuck his hands in amidst the packing material, having no real idea of what he was rooting around for, until his fingers made contact with the familiar ridges of a distinctive glass bottle. He pulled it out of the box, nodding his head, eyebrows uplifted. *Romulan Ale*.

"Oh, please, just shoot me now and get it over

with," she quietly pleaded.

"Not, at least, until you tell me what your intentions are regarding this, Lieutenant," he said.

"Turning myself in, sir?"

"And just what purpose would that serve? Are you now or did you ever intend to sell this?"

Brianna Cantrell fervently shook her head. "Huhuh. I didn't even know I had it until a moment ago."

"Excelsior. That's quite a coup. Unfortunately, it would seem you've also drawn a few enemies along with the honor."

"An honor I didn't get to keep, thanks to my grandmother. Maybe now at least I can get off this russ-buc — ship," she corrected, "and be home in time to attend my brother's wedding, after all. Do you think? Huh, maybe that was the master plan. Having my roommate pepper my crates with just enough *Romulan Ale* to get me arrested. My family puts up a little bail and I can still be home for the wedding ... That's it! Oh, I'm so sick of the meddling! How could I be so stupid. That's it!" she suddenly ranted, back to the pacing.

Spock was busy removing the packing material to expose the entire contents of the crate. There was only one more bottle of the contraband liquor. Brianna watched as he returned them both to their

former resting places, presumably to keep the evidence intact. He repacked the crate, closing the lid. "I see no reason to get so excited, Lieutenant. As far as I'm concerned ..."

"Oh, why can't they all just leave well enough alone? Look," she cried, coming to an open-ended crate. "These are the dishes I gave Joey and Astrid as a wedding gift. And I can't find my 'home' box. These aren't even my things. This has been one massive screw-up! If only my grandmother hadn't — *Ooh!* I didn't ask for her help. I didn't need her help! Thanks to her meddling I look completely incompetent!"

"Perhaps, if you will just listen —"

"I don't expect you to understand, sir. You couldn't possibly understand."

"Indeed?" Spock countered. "Grandmothers are a rare breed. It must be their exalted age that allows them to do and say exactly what they wish." He walked over to the stern of the raft and began searching for the valve. After what his greatgrandmother had just pulled ... he refused to complete the thought, suppressing the attached emotions once again. Brianna Cantrell stopped pacing to gaze intently at him. Spock *felt* her gaze, her gentle probing of him and looked up at her. "Humans do not hold the corner market on family — disharmony," he carefully replied.

"Sir, could it be that you and I share something of a like experience — when it comes to family dealings?"

"Lieutenant Cantrell, why do you think I'm so damn drunk right now?"

Brianna shook her head at him. "Personally, I didn't think Vulcans could get drunk. But besides all that, your *shields* are up, sir. I have no idea."

Spock turned to smile at her, with that. "I am also half-human. And it would seem we do indeed have something in common, that is why." He found what he was looking for and pulled the plug. The boat began to deflate, whining and hissing as the air escaped. "I was called home for a few days only to learn, that according to my family, I have abrogated my responsibilities — inasmuch as I have not fulfilled my duties in a fashion timely enough to suit them.

"So therefore, they are taking matters into their own hands. Right on up into those of my great-grandmother, in fact. Remarkably, it seems the *Matriarch* is in agreement. She, too, has chosen to meddle in my affairs. And she is one personality with enough clout to rock the entire Federation," he said. "I, too, have been completely vaporized by their current resolution of my situation."

Brianna Cantrell went over to the crate with the

dishes and selecting a teacup, poured the captain a shot of brandy, and another for herself, as well. "I'm so sorry. Salute," she said, raising her glass. "From one person who has been recently vaporized to another."

"Salute," he returned, gently clinking her glass with his.

They spent the next several minutes concentrating on the raft, in between their sips of brandy. Spock hauled the rubber boat in from outside, folding it over on itself, giving the lieutenant the bow, with the orders, "Hold this." Going back over to the entryway he pulled the broken doors closed as best he could. Then with Brianna's help, he moved the raft to the deck and together they proceeded to sit on it helping to accelerate the expulsion of trapped air.

"Do you know that just last week Grandmama offered Astrid, my brother's fiancee, a bribe to call off the wedding!"

"Did your brother wish to have the wedding cancelled?"

"No way. He was furious."

"The woman is evil."

"No," Brianna Cantrell laughed, "just driven."

"Like you."

"What?" Again, the lieutenant was laughing. Spock smiled at her briefly, resettling onto another portion of the raft after he had folded it in half again, rendering the available surface smaller. He was again feeling oddly contented as she sat so close to him, her back now leaning slightly against his, easing the rift between them considerably. Conversation ebbed along with the night, both falling silent after awhile. It had been an extremely long day for each of them.

"A Vulcan lyrette," Spock said, suddenly into the ensuing silence, having noticed it from this new vantage point. Brianna, her head resting on her knees, startled a bit having lapsed into that restive state just prior to dozing. She jumped up, walked over to where the instrument was safely nestled and brought it back to him, placing it into his hands.

"Yes, I know, sir. Another useless item."

"On the contrary. Do you play?" he asked, running his hands gingerly over the strings as if the thing were somehow sacred and deserving of such veneration.

"A little, sir," she said, involuntarily yawning. And stretching, like a cat, he decided. "I'm actually more proficient on a six-stringed guitar," she said. "Do you play?"

"Affirmative," Spock said, slowly. Turning the instrument over, his slanted, black eyebrows rose inquisitively, "This is a *Sabin*," he remarked. "They are most rare."

"Yes, I know. I believe there are only twenty-four in existence."

"Twenty-three," Spock corrected her. "Mine was destroyed when James Kirk blew up starship 1701."

"Oh, yeah, I heard about the *Enterprise* on the news. How sad for you. And of course, nothing else will do," she supposed.

"That is most illogical," he charged, reluctantly handing her back the instrument.

"Illogical, but somehow true," the woman impudently surmised. Spock lifted an eyebrow at her with that, gazing at her suspiciously, immediately seeking a mind-exercise. He very nearly did give up playing altogether when other makes of the instrument seemed only to offend his ears lacking, he felt, the truly pure resonance of a *Sabin*. Was there a breach in his *mental shielding*, through which he was unconsciously *broadcasting* his innermost thoughts? How else was she reading him so very easily?

He nervously found himself wondering about her origins. She was no ordinary human — even for a female with that legendary woman's intuition ...

and he was suddenly glad he'd had the rare opportunity to meet her on an informal basis like this. It was a dangerous feeling — one he would have to examine at length, later on. But for now he shoved it aside.

"Indeed. My father gave me his," he said. "Would you do me the honor of playing something?"

Her smile was immediate, and he experienced an odd feeling of delight deep in his chest. "Only if you promise to do the same in return, sir. I told you, I'm really not very skilled at this," Brianna argued, as she settled the wide end of the lyrette across her lap, the neck of the instrument curving upwards and slightly to the right. Draping her arms around and over it, she commenced to strum the instrument with the fingers of both hands, much as someone would a harp.

Spock watched as she cradled the instrument, shamelessly wishing he were the lyrette at that moment. Sounds emanated from the thing, not altogether unpleasant, but after too brief a sampling, Brianna Cantrell placed her arm over the strings to still their vibration. Sighing heavily. Silence resumed. "I could use a few more lessons," she said. Spock nodded.

"Will you allow me?" he said, as he scooted across the deflating raft to sit immediately behind her again. Wrapping his arms about her, he gently

shifted the instrument so that the narrow, pointed end rested against her right thigh as she sat crosslegged on the raft. This put the neck curving upwards and behind her neck to her left giving her less girth to contend with. It was a much more comfortable fit. She was so tiny, so delicate of frame, he thought. Next, he corrected her fingering ever so slightly.

"Try it again," he urged. She tried but then stopped abruptly, shaking her head as she turned around to face him, handing him the instrument.

"I don't think I'll ever get it. But the lesson was fun," she quipped, a twinkle in her bright eyes. Spock nodded and began to play, enjoying the desire he saw on her beautiful face when he looked up from time to time, the yearning to master the musical device so clearly evident there. She seemed to absorb the music he created. The feelings of joy it stirred in him were frightening, hazardous.

He hadn't meant to go on. He should be going, it was growing late. But when he'd finished she thanked him and stood up to retrieve her classical guitar, heedfully placed on her bunk. She had hand-carried it aboard personally, taking a moment to remove it from its case. "Do you know *'T'Vor-Salak'?*" Without answering, Spock began to play the ancient Vulcan folk tune. It was a love story. A tragedy, really, about a pair of young lovers caught

on the wrong side of a marriage contract, Salak slain during the ensuing *Challenge*. Brianna Cantrell placed her tiny hand atop Spock's to stop him and hastily sat down. She nodded her readiness, after tuning her instrument.

Quite unexpectedly, Spock found himself participating in a duet. It took a few measures before they were completely in harmony with one another, but when they fell into sync, the results were wondrous and satisfying. Deeply satisfying. However, guilt and shame were already beginning their derisive chant as Spock realized his response to her was an emotional one. He liked her instantly, wanting to explore all there was to know about her. Who she was, where she was going with her life, hoping to get to know her on so many different levels

Aware, too, that he wanted her. The desire to touch her simply overtook him, finding himself wanting very much to run his fingertips lightly over her hands enjoying the smooth, silky coolness of her skin as he watched her play. Noting, too, how the gentle overhead lighting glinted through her blonde tresses, dancing off her natural highlights whenever she moved her head. She was so delightfully feminine. So very beautiful it took his breath away, no doubt the impetus of his sudden longing, he surmised, awakening the sleeping

dragon within, marveling at its sheer strength. The thought surprised him. Yet, even more urgently he needed to *feel* her thoughts, to wrap his essence, his soul around hers and not let go, as if he had been there before ... *Qual se tu?* he questioned, none too clearly in his admittedly relaxed, drunken state.

Immediately Spock began backing away from the haunting thought, reasoning with himself. He was merely experiencing a biochemically driven, chain reaction. A simple case of his body chemistry responding to hers. Nothing mystical or mysterious about that. Admitting, however, that it was a rather rich mix, perhaps even toxic given his circumstances.

Taking a moment he stepped back from his desires, properly locking away his passion before she caught a glimpse of what he was feeling just now. Sighing ever so quietly to himself, he needed to turn his attention elsewhere. The sooner he contacted his intended the better, he determined, realizing again this week just how scarce the breathable air was.

In the meantime he would allow himself this one evening. With his new friend. He hadn't crossed over any lines, yet. And he wouldn't, he promised himself. He had already hurt the *candidate* enough, whoever she was. And himself, he noted. Why hadn't they given him her name? For the moment

he overcame the strict, unrelenting side of himself allowing him to enjoy two more duets with this woman before both gave into the fatigue fostered by the brandy consumed this night, settling over them like a warm, cozy blanket.

For a time, shattering the spell.

Somewhere deep in a box an ancient ship's clock chimed in zero-two hundred hours to find Spock sitting upright against the bulkhead, legs outstretched, yawning unabashedly now. Boots shorn, instruments heedfully placed, Brianna Cantrell had given up a solid fifteen minutes ago and having drifted off to a rather sound sleep, sidled over, unwittingly, to rest her head in Spock's lap, as if it were quite natural for her to do so. Certainly Spock didn't protest, nor did he mind in the least. He rather welcomed the contact, strangely enough, unconsciously fondling the soft, silkiness of her braided hair.

Her breathing was even now. Quietly, gently, as if he feared she was a phantom, he ran his fingers over the black trim on the back of her duty jacket, lingering over the section that curved across her shoulder blade. Why did the thought persist that he had just come home? "Qual se tu?" he whispered, a pained expression on his face... I wish. Life was never that simple, he reasoned.

# **12**

November 15, 2285, Stardate: 8511.15

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

This is the captain speaking," Kirk's voice came over the ship-wide intercom, "we will be leaving space dock in just about ninety minutes, en route to Alpha Quadrant, sector zero-zero-four, where we will rendezvous with the Vulcan Suttlecraft, T'Mir. All Bridge crew report to stations."

"Can't be. It was just," Brianna Cantrell said, as she sat up groggily, momentarily shocked and embarrassed to find her head in his lap, glancing at

her wrist-chronometer. "Zero-four-hundred hours?" she murmured in disbelief, hearing the last of the chimes and wondering how long she'd been in that position or if he was even aware of her profound breach of protocol — military and Vulcan. Spock was fast asleep. Still, in an upright position with his arms folded across his chest, he was leaning against the bulkhead. He looked entirely peaceful, his head dropped forward slightly.

Brianna smiled to herself. As awkward as it was on the one hand, from a strictly professional aspect, something felt so oddly right about it all the same. Secretly, she was glad that somehow, and for some inexplicable reason, he was still here this morning when he should have left hours ago. Her sleep had been so very restful for the first time in months. She gazed at him for a moment longer and then quietly gathering up her boots, headed into the lavatory to freshen up.

A quick sonic shower and a change of clothing, she emerged twelve minutes later still braiding her hip-length hair. She came over gently nudging the first officer awake, discovering he wasn't so easy to rouse, as she'd expected. "Captain? Mister Spock, sir? It's zero-four-seventeen hours. I don't know when you senior officers usually start the day, but I've got muster and accountability at oh-six-hundred hours," she said. "Oh, and the captain

announced he wants the bridge crew at their stations by zero-five-thirty hours."

"Ah, early call. Perhaps, we should head down to the wardroom for a bite to eat, then," he offered, eyes still closed. His head was pounding, throbbing, with a well-deserved hangover, to his chagrin. He sought a mind-exercise but it didn't seem to help this morning. The pain persisted.

"Ooh, I get an escort," Brianna Cantrell murmured, as she went about gathering his boots for him, wholly forgetting herself and that it wasn't yet her place to play servant to him, even for something as simple as this. Vulcans found it undignified for a woman to behave so toward a man who wasn't hers. While she recognized him to be her *moderator*, and a marriage contract had been duly signed, he hadn't returned the favor by acknowledging her, nor had he invited her to take up where they left off.

She still had no real understanding as to just why he left her in the first place, or, if he even wanted her back. Piecing together the little clues from their conversation, this marriage was likely arranged by his family. He had as much as said so, suggesting his *Matriarch* had stepped in. And he had told their captain he was emotionally compromised over his situation, leaving her certain he was none too pleased. Until she knew more, better to guard her

heart, she assessed. She also seemed to forget about his rather acute sense of hearing, again, until it was too late

"It is the least I can do, considering we slept together," he countered, taking his boots from her.

"Ah!" she gasped. "I can't believe you put it that way, sir! I'm so completely scandalized!" she said. Her cheeks growing redder by the nanosecond, Brianna Cantrell quickly ducked into the lavatory in her embarrassment, until she could compose herself. If she thought her position awkward before, it was worse now, wishing only to reclaim her remarks before she was suddenly and thoroughly entrenched in a conversation that was entirely too personal and in all likelihood would soon be spinning out of control — too late.

"It is what happened, Lieutenant," Spock was saying, in a rather matter-of-fact tone. They'd both simply passed out, no doubt the result of their over-imbibing last night, coupled with her emotional exhaustion. He slowly drew on his boots.

"Yes, I know. But humans will interpret that to mean we did it," she said, cringing again. For some strange reason she just couldn't help herself or hold her tongue this morning. He was just so easy to talk to it made the fact that he was Vulcan, and her superior officer, practically a moot point, she supposed. Hardly an excuse for such unprofessional

behavior, she wondered what he must be thinking, no doubt taking mental notes. This would not help her come time for her review and assessment.

Sticking her head out of the tiny lavatory, a look of consternation caressing her delicate brow, she was just in time to catch the unmistakable signs of his pain, palpable as they were to her in his briefly unguarded moment, even before he pinched the bridge of his nose. She frowned, daring to venture into the living quarters once more.

"Affirmative," he said. The lieutenant was neatly attired in the uniform of the day, a cranberry jacket over a dark gray-blue, ribbed turtleneck, designating the science division, and to Spock's pleasure, she had exchanged her duty trousers for a black skirt and long, knee-high black boots. The little lieutenant has legs. And cat feet, he decided having not heard her approach just as he got up to examine the cabin's broken doors, which hung limply in the jamb.

"No, I mean 'it'," Brianna Cantrell foolishly persisted. Thoroughly entrenched now, just as she feared, she had to clarify what she meant by her statements. The trouble she thought they might be in, reputation-wise, that is. As an officer, especially, one needed to worry about such things. Regrettably, she hadn't wasted any time stepping right into the thick of it. "You know, the wild thing.

The *dirty deed*. This," she sighed. Coming up beside him and taking him by the wrist with one hand, she busily demonstrated her meaning, suddenly stroking the back of his hand with the first two fingers of her other hand.

Spock's eyebrows shot upward immediately with the stimulation, quickly placing his free hand atop hers, stilling her movement. Casually touching a Vulcan was an egregious breach of protocol, let alone in such an intimate manner as this, considerably the same as taunting or teasing. Finding it offensive only so much as it threatened their restraint, Vulcans were stoic by mere generations of practice, not nature, the very need to be touched brought on by such physical contact considered a breach in control. And Spock was half-human, which in his mind made his control tenuous at best. Vulcans were also touch-telepaths, another reason for their restraint.

However, what Brianna had done, essentially, was initiate what Vulcans considered foreplay.

His smile was warm, all the same. "Careful, Lieutenant, or you'll get more of my attention than you bargained for," he said, gently extracting his hands from her grasp. The idea of having her for breakfast was acutely appealing to him all of a sudden and for that brief, unrestrained moment he wished she was his for the taking. He was

cognizant, too, of the deep crimson hue that suddenly suffused the lieutenant's delicate cheeks as she caught his gaze. She blushed so readily, he thought, and she seemed to be constantly chewing on her lower lip.

Old enough to know what she wants, innocent enough to be uncertain of getting it, and, perhaps, a little frightened by the prospect. Spock chuckled lightly, cupping her chin in his hand. You sweet little virgin, you, came his quick and accurate assessment of her, athough he wisely kept it to himself. He smiled gently at her, instead, completely intrigued by the prospect of 'going boldly where no man has gone before', however great the probability was against it. There were always possibilities, he thought, fighting the illogic of it, determining if the duty should ever to fall to him he would take it slow and easy with her. Chuckling ever so lightly, choosing his words carefully he said, "You are so very green."

"Green? You must be color-blind, I'm not an Orion slave girl," she laughed.

"As in inexperienced, Lieutenant," Spock attempted to explain. It was suddenly important to him that he did not offend her in any way. But she was smiling, a bit provocatively, and at the same time, shyly, as she looked up at him.

"Oh, I know what you meant. But I'd prefer to

leave my sex life out of this!" There it was flying right out of her mouth quite unbidden. Somebody just shoot me, now. Brianna Cantrell cleared her throat, glancing down at her boots, afraid and embarrassed to meet his eyes. "But at any rate, do you think they'll believe it? After last night, I mean," she said, chancing to look up at him again.

Spock looked at her with a hint of surprise on his face. Had she heard his thoughts, he wondered? She met his eyes as he released her chin. Worried that the prolonged contact had given her a way *in*. "Madam, I am a Vulcan," he stoically replied. He looked very dignified as he said it, Brianna thought, standing so straight and tall with his hands clasped behind his back again. Proud one, that.

"Yes, T'Pran warned me all about Vulcan males and the importance of keeping their hands off of mine," the lieutenant said knowingly, backing away from him slightly toward the lavatory again, as if she were about to run and escape her captor. She bumped into a stack of crates instead, and held her position.

"Indeed. And what else did this T'Pran teach you," he asked, stepping forward closing the gap between them again. It was as if he well knew the power he held over women, how beckoning and forbidding he was, all at once. Brianna Cantrell stubbornly held her ground, gazing up at him with an all-knowing

expression in her eyes. He would not get the better of her, she decided.

"If you will allow me, sir. I might be able to help you with that," she said.

"Help me with what?"

"You have a most dreadful headache."

"How do you know this?"

"I can see it." Brianna shrugged.

"Indeed. Perhaps, we should call it by what it really is, Lieutenant. I have a hangover. I was just completely unaware of *broadcasting* my thoughts ..." He seemed worried. Brianna Cantrell touched his arm and surprisingly Spock found himself grateful for the renewed contact.

"It isn't you," she said, "your *shield*'s intact. It's me. Sometimes, I see things. For instance, I was just wondering if you are regularly a heavy drinker or if this is merely how you react when given pretty disastrous news. Neither scenario seems to fit you. I would never take you to be a drunkard. You strike me more as the type who would just keep busy. Waiting for whatever it was to run its course. 'Specially if it's something you're powerless to change. *Kiftiri* being what it is, sir."

Spock shot her a glance. "Kiftiri — what do you know of my circumstance?"

"Only that you have been vaporized by something. You said so yourself last night. Your family taking over things. Whatever it is, sir, are you going to be all right?"

"Fascinating," he murmured, gazing at her intently. Her mental *shielding* was completely impenetrable. He frowned slightly. She wouldn't let him *in* and he was getting a bit frustrated. How was she able to do that so well, she was human? "I will be as soon as I get used to the idea," he assured her, his mind trailing two thoughts at once. Getting used to the idea of being effectively barred from the lieutenant's thoughts and the idea of getting married. "It's just turning out to be more difficult than I first thought," he admitted.

By all accounts, the thought of marriage wasn't easy for him. Conversely, he certainly hadn't counted on running into someone as attractive as the lieutenant before he'd even had time to digest the previous idea. It was a factor in the equation he never counted on, making his way wholly unclear to him. He was confused and unsure just how to proceed.

So far, he liked everything about Lieutenant Cantrell, her impish grin, the devilish twinkle in her eyes, the way she laughed. She had a kind and gentle manner about her and he found her curiously easy to talk to. Playful. It wasn't strictly

physical between them. Spock wanted to get to know her, wanted a chance to *feel* her thoughts and yet that could never be allowed, not now, certainly.

He was soon to be promised to another. The gesture of a *mindmeld*, in and of itself, was simply far too intimate, unseemly, even if they were simply to remain friends, however unlikely that possibility was. He knew they could never be 'just friends'. In looking at Cantrell he felt as though he were cheating on the *candidate*. He should be curious about her, not this woman. Logic dictated that he run like hell from the little lieutenant.

Yet, he couldn't, as if he were already strangely bound to her, having the odd sense she was already much, much more to him than merely a friend. Although he simply did not understand how. That thought haunted him. Most curious. "What is it you can you do for me?" he asked at last, helpless to fight it, curiosity once again strangling him. I shall be dead, for the sake of curiosity, just like a cat ... I've been dead before.

"If you'll take a seat, I'll show you," she said, looking around her for a likely spot. Certainly not the bunk, she decided, wishing at least her chair was empty, gesturing at last to the floor. Spock sat back down, legs extended in front of him, pulling her down beside him.

"I have to be right in front of you," she said,

protesting slightly. Yet, when he seemed to ignore her by not making appropriate room for her, she appeared properly annoyed and rather awkwardly straddled his lap. Spock was at once smiling at her predicament, placing his hands on her hips to steady her.

"I think it's possible that after this, we should consider ourselves very good friends. Wouldn't you agree?" he teased, in a deadpan manner. "You do recognize the intimacy of the position you're taking, do you not?" The lieutenant's mouth fell open with that remark and she lightly slapped his upper arm. Again she felt the heat rise in her face.

"Sir!"

"Careful, Lieutenant, that could be construed as an assault on a senior officer," Spock playfully warned, thoroughly enjoying this. Enjoying her.

Folding her arms across her chest, looking completely aghast and a tad put-out, Brianna was egregiously forgetting herself yet again, suddenly blurting out, "Ah! You *bad boy!* You're completely incorrigible. You're the one who wouldn't give room." Blushing, pressing onward because there was no other way for it, saying again, rather pointedly, "Do you want me to help you or not? — Sir." The acknowlegement of his rank was thrown in as a clear afterthought. Spock chuckled lightly.

"I am most curious as to what you think you can do, Lieutenant. Please proceed with your experiment. I shall endeavor to cooperate," he said, sobering up again.

Brianna Cantrell eyed him suspiciously at first, then clasping her hands together briefly, with her head bowed and her eyes closed, she centered herself before proceeding to place her fingertips lightly against his forehead and temples. Spock knew he should protest, but he didn't and found he was relieved when he realized this wasn't a *mindmeld*, precisely. It took a minute or two for her to locate the source of his pain.

Using her thumbs, she lightly made tiny circular motions outward immediately above the bridge of his nose, pressing her mind ever so gently into his. He could *feel* her *shielding* as she entered but none of her thoughts, like that of a healer he realized, singularly focused on her purpose. She located the throbbing nerve-endings and sent an impulse through to them. All at once the pain ceased.

Spock opened his eyes, rather startled, as she gently withdrew from his mind. What was that he *felt?* Another wave of deja vu`? Who was this Lieutenant Cantrell? And why did he have to want what he couldn't have? Brianna immediately jumped up from his lap, experiencing a chill. Spock sought to comfort her, and himself, reaching up to

lightly grab her arms to renew the physical contact.

The moment she broke contact, the distance between them was grossly exaggerated. He wanted to pull her into his chest and hold her close, but propriety dictated other actions. He was already dancing all over the line this morning, as it was. The longer he was with her, it seemed, the greater the temptation.

"It's cold in here," he said. "I'll send maintenance up right away to fix your thermostat and your doors. And anything else you might need," he said, unable to hide his awe. Brianna Cantrell at once leaned over to offer the Vulcan a hand in getting up. He held it, examining it, his expression and manner properly distant, sanguine once again as his curiosity took over.

"Headache gone?" she asked.

"Completely eradicated," he said. "You are an angel. With the hands of a healer. And up until recently, I didn't even believe in angels. Where did you learn this?"

Brianna shrugged, as Spock released her and quickly came to his feet. "I'm not a healer," she argued. "Or an angel, for that matter. There's just some things I can do. T'Pran helped me to focus the energy into a productive means. She even taught me how to do the *Vulcan death grip*."

"Nerve pinch," Spock corrected her. "It is just a nerve pinch."

"Sounds more impressive the other way," she reasoned. "At any rate, it served to keep my four brothers in line."

"Four?" Spock grinned, amused. "You are just too human," he teased, with a glint of admiration in his warm brown eyes that he either could not, or chose not to hide, she noticed.

"Well, I hope you're not going to hold that against me, sir."

"Negative. Come, let's go get you something to eat."

Spock listened to the girl chatter aimlessly about this and that, her family he thought, the life she left behind on Vulcan, concentrating primarily on the melodic sound of her gentle voice. Soft, sweet, strangely compelling — as some siren calling a sailor to his death upon a rocky coast. The image was both abrupt and startling, bringing him up short as he stiffened and halted in his tracks a few short meters before the turbo-lift.

"I'm sorry. I'm rambling on, aren't I? I have a tendency to do that when I'm tired."

"Negative. It's fascinating. Especially the part where you tangoed with the sehlet," Spock said,

gazing down at her. He was having some difficulty taking his eyes off of her. It was most disconcerting, as if all of his life's discipline had been shot out of the nearest torpedo tube. "You were, at the very least, persistent, were you not?"

"At the very least, sir. I'm afraid I still bear the scar from that one. My parents insisted the doctors leave it as a permanent reminder," she said, lifting aside the fringes that graced her forehead, giving him a slight glimpse of the angry gouge. "Now, I'm sort of attached to it. In a manner of speaking," Brianna Cantrell said, touching the half-moon scar on the left side of her forehead, catching Spock's bewildered look. "I mean, I'm not inclined to have it removed."

Spock nodded, "And how would you describe yourself now, Lieutenant?" he asked, as he moved toward the turbo-lift, depressing the button, calling the car to this deck and section. He then stood with his hands clasped behind his back, patiently awaiting its arrival. Brianna Cantrell caught up with him keeping her eyes downcast in the proper, Vulcan fashion, chancing to peek up at him only once, an impish grin playing on her sensuous lips; struggling to escape and brighten her entire face, he noted.

"Is this off the record, sir?"

Spock considered her question for only a moment,

replying, "Negative."

The young woman drew in a quiet breath. "Truth be told, sir. I was a brat then and I'm still a brat."

"That is good to know," Spock said, as he stepped ahead of her into the turbo-lift. "I, too, am used to getting my own way. I hope that your years at the Academy have taught you how to compensate for that."

"Aye, sir. I never said I was undisciplined. Merely that I get what I want."

Spock deftly hid his amusement at her reply, refraining for the time from asking her what it was she wanted, feeling nearly certain he'd give it to her, if it fell within his purview. Discomfited by that random thought he reminded himself she was not his woman, as once again he was stepping out ahead of her, as if he were her mate, when the lift emptied them onto C-deck, section four. He really needed to take his leave of her. Why was he finding it so difficult?

It was a short distance to the officer's wardroom from here and it was largely empty at this hour, not quite between shifts as it was. Spock hesitated, drawing her into the room, guiding her toward the row of food processors. As she ordered breakfast for herself, he scanned the room for certain familiar faces, the few officers he found trustworthy enough

to leave her with, that is. He was feeling oddly protective of his companion, and finding none present, Spock tossed his duffel bag underneath the table and sat down with her in the corner momentarily to have a cup of tea while he waited for just the right person to come along. He didn't have long to wait.

Uhura suddenly burst into the room, her effervescence preceding her as she seemed to enjoy some levity performed before reaching the wardroom. She was accompanied by another female officer. Spock couldn't see who it was but both women were behaving in a decidedly giggly, female fashion, no doubt over some profoundly deep secret they had discovered. He did wonder what it was women, in general, found so amusing, so often, waving them over when he caught Uhura's eye.

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"There she is — my next door neighbor," Uhura said, as she grabbed her companion's arm, leaning into the tall, lanky brunette in a conspiratorial attitude.

"The one with the raft?" Dr. Christine Chapel said, discreetly glancing toward the corner table.

"Every time I think of them all tangled up out in the passageway ..." Uhura tried her best to stifle another fit of giggles.

"Hm. Looks to me like he's still tangled up."

"Sh. Sh! I peeped my head out for only a second after I heard the crash. I don't think either one of them saw me. Let's give them their dignity," she said, swallowing her laughter as Spock hailed her over.

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The captain barely had his tea-bag unwrapped and was in the middle of a friendly dispute with the lieutenant about it, by the time the two officers reached their table. "Sir, wait! Don't do that," Brianna Cantrell said, taking her spoon to deflect the tea-bag Spock was trying to negotiate into his cup of hot water, while she wrested a pouch from underneath her belt. "You'll spoil the water."

"Lieutenant, if you please," he protested.

"I thought you might like some of this instead," she said, holding up the pouch she'd retrieved, at last.

"Vulcan tea," he said, getting a whiff of the pungent blend of tea leaves and spices grown solely on his home planet. It was a rare treat she was offering. Spock just gazed over at her, tilting his head to the side. "Lieutenant, why do I get the sudden impression that if I allowed it, you would spoil me?"

"What? Because I want to say thank you for all

you've done. In some simple, small way?"

"Unnecessary," he said, waving her off.

"Maybe. But I was taught to share," she said. Brianna opened the pouch, waving it slowly back and forth, tantalizing him with its potent aroma and then in a sudden movement, she was sprinkling the tea into both cups. "Oops," she said.

"Lieutenant," Spock playfully scolded, folding his arms across his chest and shaking his head. "Most unseemly," he murmured, chuckling quietly. She wasn't his woman. Serving him was considered undignified and yet he found himself amused rather than angry. Brianna Cantrell gave him an uncertain look, chewing on her lower lip — yet again. It was a most egregious habit. Spock shook his head, "You aren't in the least bit intimidated, are you?"

"By what, your rank? Maybe. Oh, but you mean the 'Vulcan mystique'." Brianna gazed over at him, an apologetic expression caressing her features as she shrugged. "I guess not so much, being born and raised there, after all. I'm sorry. Not going to waste it, are you?"

"That would be criminal," he said. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

"You're welcome," Brianna replied, eyes lowered, suppressing her amusement.

"Well, well, well, what have we here? The Boston tea party? Isn't this a cozy little scene," Commander Uhura said, as she and the doctor drew near, trays in hand. "Mister Spock, you're either back ahead of schedule or you're very late leaving. Which is it? Are you coming or going?" Spock stood up to greet them, surprised.

"I have recently returned. Christine?" he said with a little nod. Dr. Chapel set her tray down and was at once flinging her long, slender arms about the unsuspecting Vulcan's neck. The doctor was a handsome woman despite her age, Brianna Cantrell noticed. Not a speck of gray in her dark hair, though she had to be fifty-ish at least, the lieutenant guessed, feeling inexplicably threatened. How odd. The marriage contract was duly signed, after all. And unless Brianna, herself, called for *Challenge* at the *K'unat-Kalifee*, she didn't have a thing to worry about. Unless, this Christine was the reason he broke away in the first place. That thought was uncomfortable, deflating her mood.

The hug was brief, one that Mr. Spock didn't return in the slightest, though to Brianna it lasted for ages, while she silently fumed. She found herself hoping it wasn't mere Vulcan propriety that stayed his hand, that the doctor meant nothing to him. Showing emotion, speaking in emotional terms was considered vulgar, something Vulcans fought to

control — constantly, preferring to lock themselves behind a facade of logic, instead. Spock appeared no different. She may never know what he felt about the doctor. Brianna Cantrell sighed quietly.

"I see you're alive and well," Christine Chapel said, pulling away, smiling through her tears. "Forgive me. I know you don't like emotional displays."

"Indeed. Most kind of you, even, to speak to me. It would seem my recovery has been complete," Spock said, stoic as usual. He introduced everyone, inviting the two women to sit, giving Christine his chair. He bent down to retrieve his duffel bag and his cup of tea to take with him as Uhura sat next to Brianna.

"Pleased to meet you both," Brianna said with a slight nod. She glanced back up at Captain Spock, wondering when she'd see him next, already missing him. She tried not to let it show.

"It is agreeable to have you back aboard, Christine," Spock was saying, shouldering his bag. "I know Doctor McCoy sorely missed you."

"Thank you, Mister Spock. It's good to be back. And how about you? Did *you* miss me?"

"Let's not go down that road. Things will only begin to deteriorate. Rapidly, I should think." He inclined his head to them, politely. He was every bit the gentleman, Brianna thought, elegant and

refined. "Now, if you ladies will excuse me, I shall take my leave."

"Thank you again, for everything," Brianna Cantrell said. Spock inclined his head to her.

"The pleasure was mine, madam. If you find yourself in further need of assistance, I shall be on the bridge from now until seventeen-hundred hours. Beyond that I can be found on E-deck, section five. Do not hesitate to call. When you're settled," he added, "we shall set up a time for the lyrette lessons."

"You mean that, sir?" she asked, her eyes aglow. "I'm so completely honored."

He smiled briefly in return.

"Thank you for the tea and the remedy," he said, tapping his brow. "And again, welcome aboard."

"Likewise, sir, anytime." Brianna Cantrell smiled.

"Yes, Mister Spock," Christine said. Spock nodded vaguely at both Uhura and Christine Chapel, his eyes seemingly reluctant to pull away from the diminutive woman who sat with them. And then he left.

Uhura shot Christine a questioning glance. "Well, I'd like to know what's gotten into him? When did he suddenly become cruise director?" she asked. The doctor replied with a shrug.

"You tell me, I just got here," Christine said. "I haven't seen him in years."

The two older women both turned to the lieutenant, expectantly. Brianna, facing the exit, was watching him leave, experiencing an overwhelming sense of aloneness with his absence. His was such a powerful personality. It also didn't hurt that he was handsome, sweet, charming and *unbonded*, she reminded herself. Mr. Spock was, for whatever reason, in between wives. Not for long, she decided.

"Gorgeous, isn't he?" Christine prompted as soon as the first officer was out of earshot. She leaned closer to the younger woman, arms folded on the table in a conspiratorial attitude. Brianna Cantrell pulled back just a little.

"Yes. Yes, he is gorgeous. But so very far away," she murmured absent-mindedly, still caught up in her own thoughts.

"Oh-ho, he's distant, all right," Uhura chimed in. "Say listen, honey, there's almost no way to reach that man. You're better off keeping your own distance."

"That's not entirely true. He's just hurting right now."

"Hurting?" Uhura questioned.

"Uh-huh. Something's troubling him. But not to worry. He'll play the avoidance game for a bit and then he'll talk."

"Oh really?" Christine said. "And just how long have you known our illustrious Mister Spock?"

"Oh, we just met about," Brianna checked her wrist chronometer. "Five point two-five hours ago. Or so," she quickly amended. "Around zero-hundred hours. Somewhere in that region. Slightly after." Brianna shrugged and got up, dumping her tray in a bin. She knew exactly when they'd met. It was logged in her heart, embedded in her brain. His was not a mere impression made on her, but an impact at warp factor ten. But her feelings on the matter were simply too personal to share. Already these two were warning her off, as if it mattered, as if they could.

Somehow she knew it was already too late. I don't believe in love at first sight. I don't believe in it. Love at first touch, now, that was yet another thing. Brianna couldn't help but wonder if the captain felt it, too. And at the same time, she was certain he did, remembering he was the one who reached over and took her hand, earlier. "It was very nice meeting you both. But I have to check in with a Doctor McCoy for my initial ship board physical. By your leave," Brianna Cantrell said as she turned to leave.

"Carry on, Lieutenant," Uhura said.

"What was that all about?" Christine asked, as the junior officer left.

## 13

November 15, 2285, Stardate: 8511.15 USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

ome," Spock said in answer to the buzzer, keeping much of his attention on the data he was reviewing on the computer screen. He had made it to the exit of the wardroom, making it all the way back to his quarters, in fact, but it had cost him to pull away from her. Strange. Indeed, most peculiar, considering they had only met for the first time a mere five point two-five hours ago. No one had ever had that affect on him before. It led him back

to the siren theory, what it must be like to be alerted to the danger and immediately thrust out of harm's way, to be left with a distant, vague yearning.

Now, showered and shaved once more, he loathed being disturbed at this moment. It wasn't simply due to the lateness of the hour and the fact that he had places to be, half expecting it, really to be the little lieutenant, but he was hoping for a chance to properly and fully analyze his behavior regarding her. He had been with her all last night and still it wasn't enough. He could hardly stand being parted from her now, his mind rapidly designing a logical reason to bring them together again. And yet, he knew it was — wrong, given his circumstances.

Spock walked over to his bunk removing the crinkled scroll from the duffel bag sitting there. Troubling him, too, was the fact that last night, for the first time in the course of weeks, he hadn't had the dream ... The echo of what once was, he reminded himself, tapping the rolled parchment against his palm. It bothered him that McCoy's theory about his subconscious fantasies actually had merit, that he did need to be reconciled to the woman in his dreams, that she wasn't just some phantom he could dismiss. At the same time he was increasingly concerned that the lieutenant had managed to knock out all thoughts he had of his

candidate.

Was McCoy correct in a twofold manner? Would any woman do or was there something special, unique, about the lieutenant? One thing was certain, he had to meet with this *candidate*, he thought, as he gazed down at the parchment in his hand. They had to get together to sort this thing out, to come to terms regarding their situation. It was also a certainty that if things were going to work between him and this, his so-called chosen woman, he would have to get all thoughts of Lt. Cantrell out of his head.

Spock sighed quietly, determining he would have to study the decree later as the door to his quarters suddenly shooshed open, breaking into his thoughts. Gently, he tossed the scroll back into his bag, turning around to face the door. In stepped Doctor McCoy bearing a tray with a beaker full of a green solution and a shot-glass. The first officer found himself surprised, somewhat annoyed and disappointed it wasn't who he thought it would be. His emotions were entirely too close to the surface, lately. It was most disconcerting, though he carefully maintained his stoic facade.

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Dr. McCoy was rather surprised to find the first officer was only partially dressed, given the lateness of the hour. Hadn't their captain called the

Bridge crew to their stations and why hadn't Spock dutifully heeded the call? Clearly, the Vulcan wasn't himself, lately. Barefoot, bare-chested, Spock had on duty trousers and from the look of it, a damp hand-towel around his neck. His hair, although neatly combed, was wet and clinging to his forehead, dripping in fact, as if he had just stepped from a water shower. Hence the towel, McCoy surmised, figuring the Vulcan must have risen very late.

Over imbibing will do that to you, McCoy thought, shaking his head. Spock still cut a rather fine figure of a man for his age, considering he was turning fifty-three standard Earth years in about four months. Must be that damnable Vulcan physique. They lived longer than humans by about two to one! Physically, Spock seemed to favor his father's race, whereas everything the doctor had seemed to sag, mournfully, he thought fighting a tinge of jealousy.

In more ways than mere chronology, Spock was younger than McCoy. Certainly, being half-Vulcan had its upside. But surely it couldn't save him from the rigors of alcohol. He must have one hellava hangover, the doctor decided, slightly amused at the prospects. McCoy chuckled lightly to himself, never missing the opportunity to take a dig at his friend.

"Doctor?" Spock questioned, eyebrow raised in

curiosity at the intruder.

"I could've sent a nurse, but under the circumstances I thought discretion was called for. And besides," McCoy said, a rather pleased grin creasing his aged face. "I simply had to see this for myself." He placed the tray on the small desk.

"See what, Doctor?" Spock said, barely keeping the impatience out of his voice. He had no need for discretion, medical assistance, or this doctor's habitual prying. He reached for his duty shirt, a cream-colored, ribbed turtleneck, pulling it on over his head. He did not have time for this.

"I have it on good authority you have a hangover," McCoy said, as he uncorked the solution. He swirled the beaker slightly to stir the contents and then poured a dose, handing the shot-glass to the Vulcan who held up his hand in refusal.

"I do not."

It was McCoy's turn to be surprised. "Really? Is it you or can all Vulcans get completely plastered without suffering adverse side-effects?" McCoy immediately whipped out his medical tricorder with that revelation and began to scan his patient.

"Plastered?"

"Forgive me, Spock, I meant drunk. Jim said you came in drunker than a skunk last night. Told me to

send up one of my solutions, that you were gonna need it. Just goes to show you how busy I've been around here, lately. When Jim said you were back, I thought it was Tuesday night already."

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Spock shook his head, silently fuming. The doctor was clearly on a fishing expedition. Spock half-wondered what the good doctor would do with it, if he gave him the information he sought? Spock drew in a breath. He needed to talk, true enough, but he wasn't ready for McCoy to be so heavily involved in his personal business with his all too available advice. He would sooner talk to Jim. Or even the little lieutenant who, curiously enough, might just understand his predicament.

"I am afraid you have been misled, Doctor. I do not have a hangover," he said, quite truthfully, inordinately pleased not to give McCoy the satisfaction he sought, grateful to Lt. Cantrell and her talents, for sparing him. "Nor do I require one of your solutions."

"Not even a little one?" McCoy said, tapping lightly against the tricorder as if something was amiss.

"Negative."

"My tricorder shows you've been imbibing."

"Yes. That is true. But I am fine, Doctor. Now if you will excuse me. I have to get on with it. Doctor T'Nikha was kind enough to squeeze me in this morning and I do not wish to be late to the bridge."

"Nothing you'd care to share with your friendly, personal physician?"

"Doctor, while I realize you are understandably annoyed at Doctor T'Nikha's sudden, recent attachment to this ship, you must understand it is not a reflection on your capabilities as a physician. Physically, I am quite well, thank you. You merely lack the qualifications necessary to perform the *Mind-touch* therapy I require at this stage of my recovery. There are certain *Disciplines* of which you know nothing about. And T'Nikha is a highly trained, highly skilled, Vulcan psychiatrist. We shall all benefit from having her aboard."

"Some of us more than others, eh, Spock?"

"Precisely, Doctor. You may have housed my *Katra*, but you still have no idea what I've been through."

"Only because you won't share your experience with the rest of us."

"It is ... too deeply personal. I trust you will accept that explanation and continue to respect my privacy on the matter." McCoy gazed steadily at Spock for a moment, concern creasing his brow.

Spock said nothing, refusing to grant the physician any easement. His personal life was just that. Surprisingly, McCoy took the cue, although clearly he was hurt, catching Spock completely off-guard, the Vulcan unsure just what to make of it.

"Well, in that case I'm sorry I bothered you, Spock. And I'll report my findings to our Captain." He picked up his tray and turned to leave.

"Bones," Spock found himself saying, hesitating, relenting just a little. He rarely addressed the doctor by his nick name. Rarely allowed himself the intimacy, the familiarity such use implied. It did serve to get the doctor's attention, however. McCoy, halfway to the door, stopped and turned abruptly. "I walked with the *All*," Spock said quietly.

"You mean, God?"

"The very same," he said. "Now, if you don't mind, Doctor. I need a minute alone to prepare. *Mindtouch* therapy is very invasive."

"Then you knew that entity we encountered wasn't —"

"Indeed. Doctor, if you please," he said as he saw the physician to the door of his quarters.

# **14**

November 15, 2285, Stardate: 8511.16 USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

aptain Spock was coming out of a private examining room followed by a Vulcan female, when Brianna rushed into Sickbay. "Thee art making excellent progress, Mister Spock. Do not be overly concerned on the matter. These things take time," Dr. T'Nikha was saying. T'Nikha was a relatively young Vulcan at sixty-three standard Earth years.

She was tall, slender of build, like most Vulcans, sinewy of stature, with dark-brown eyes that

flashed her interest. She was lovely and Spock wasn't oblivious to it. He could easily let himself be attracted to her, if he wanted. She wasn't that much older than him, merely a decade plus one. However, not only was she married, he just wasn't free to choose to whom he gave his affections anymore and that perturbed him. Greatly.

Spock nodded quietly, glancing upward to see the lieutenant rushing into the outer office. His entire system was suddenly racing at the sight of her. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. He had hoped T'Nikha could give him a justifiable reason for his sudden lack of *discipline*. Instead, she merely served to mollify his concerns. Curiously, she had stopped just shy of telling him to enjoy the moment.

She was virtually no help at all.

"I'm sorry I'm late. I got lost," Brianna said to the nurse there.

"And you would be Lieutenant —?"

"Cantrell. To see Doctor McCoy."

"Right through there," the nurse said, indicating the room straight ahead. Dr. McCoy suddenly appeared across the hallway in the entrance to the main examining room. He nodded at his colleague and Captain Spock then glanced over at the newcomer.

"I'm Doctor McCoy," he hailed. "Chief surgeon. What can I do for you, young lady?" he asked, as she approached the group. He recognized her from the description Kirk had given. Brianna Cantrell came forward and extended her hand, nodding at the other two. Jim was right about her eyes. They were mesmerizing — No, magnetic, drawing you right in, ready to swallow you up whole ... Why did he have the impression she knew everything there was to know about him, all of a sudden?

"Doctor McCoy. Lieutenant, Brianna Cantrell, sir. J. G." Brianna said, shaking McCoy's hand. She then turned slightly toward the other two, raising her hand in the Vulcan greeting. "Doctor T'Nikha, how good it is to see you. I didn't know you were serving aboard the *Enterprise*."

"Humph!" McCoy grunted, feeling mostly shoved aside — ever since that female version of Spock got here, meaning Dr. T'Nikha, who seemed to constantly question his procedures and his medical opinions, he continued his silent rant. Making him feel next to useless, lately.

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"A temporary assignment only," T'Nikha said, in her thick Vulcan accent. "How art thee coping?" T'Nikha hadn't expected a starship assignment at all. Content for the most part to remain at the Academy where she enjoyed tenure as a staff

medical officer, the assignments were plentiful and interesting giving scope to her studies as a psychiatrist.

Also, a ground post position enabled her to keep regular hours. Time enough to share with her husband and children. Now, separated by only a few thousand kilometers of space, for the time being, she found the lack of direct contact most disagreeable. And illogical. Her children were quite young at thirteen and fifteen standard Earth years and in constant need of guidance. And, as she learned each night when she checked in with him, her husband seemed ill-equipped to deal with the antics of adolescence. It seemed T'Nikha was needed as the stabilizing force in the family.

She missed them.

Yet, she was most honored by the confidence Starfleet had placed in her and in her abilities. She was to treat the legendary Captain Spock who had died less than one standard year ago. And rather than suspend his service, when in many ways he was perfectly fit for duty, Starfleet had decided to further his psychological monitoring aboard ship, instead.

And there was something more requested of her by his family. It seemed the captain had a rather serious relationship with someone at the time of his death. His parents were curious to know if any

strands of said *bondlink* remained and if so, just how strongly rooted they were. Concerned because he had died without heir and it was their hope he would find his way back to her — But that he must do so on his own. On that they were clear. T'Nikha was in no way to interfere with the relationship, or lack thereof. Nor was Spock to be informed of her observances. On this matter she was to report solely to Ambassador Sarek.

It was a tall and rather fascinating order, but one that to date had reaped little yield. Until now, that is ...

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"I'm better," Brianna Cantrell answered, looking down. "I'm pushing through it."

"But not too hard I hope," T'Nikha said, casting Spock a sidelong glance, taking note of his immediate reaction to the lieutenant. There was a subtle change in the first officer's demeanor not lost on either of the physician's who were attending him. McCoy shot T'Nikha a questioning look. So, Spock wasn't immune to this girl's obvious charms, McCoy let his thoughts drift off.

"I had an unfortunate encounter with the 'Grinder'," Brianna was explaining, when McCoy pulled out of his muse, catching Spock's quizzical look. Already Spock was nodding his

understanding. "Doctor T'Nikha attended me first, after my collapse. Luckily, she was the one on call. I owe her everything. She's the one who recognized what was happening to me at the time and pulled me through."

"Ah, yes," McCoy said. "I remember the 'Grinder'. If you didn't have flat feet when you entered Boot, you certainly felt like it after marching endlessly on that thing! Two hundred square yards of unrelenting pavement. I've seen more kids lose it —"

"Indeed, Doctor," Spock said. "Like Klingons, it does not take prisoners."

"Well, that wasn't exactly my problem. But you, Captain?" Brianna Cantrell said, giving her entire attention over to Spock, at last. She was surprised and delighted to run into him like this so soon, choosing not to hide that fact. "Long time no see," she teased. Meeting his eyes, concern graced her gentle countenance. "Art thee well?"

"Indeed, Lieutenant. It is most agreeable to see you again," Spock returned, clasping his hands firmly behind his back, to halt their shaking, barely able to suppress a grin. Had the room suddenly grown brighter? Most illogical, he told himself but something had changed with her presence. It was as though someone had thrown on a light somewhere. "And you may rest assured, madam, I am perfectly

fit."

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McCoy glanced over at Spock, frowning his concern. Spock was never really immune to beautiful women, but normally he would simply turn it off. But he didn't seem inclined to do so with this one, not that it was such a terrible thing. Fresh, like a Georgia peach barely ripe enough for picking, she was lovely beyond words as Kirk had indicated. But why now, and why her? She was awfully young.

The old physician had a queer sense of deja vu` in looking at the girl. He glared hard at Spock, trying to comprehend what it was he was sensing about her. Was there an air of familiarity between Spock and the little lady, an intimacy, as Kirk indicated? In looking at them, they did seem to fit together, quite naturally.

So why then did McCoy have a vague sense of knowing her? A sense of belonging? Remnants of having held Spock's *Katra?* Could this be Spock's phantom? he wondered with a sudden flash of insight. Or am I just an old fool? the doctor reasoned, saying aloud, "You two know each other?"

"So, how long has it been?" Spock asked, ignoring the doctor. And everyone else in the room, it

seemed, locked onto her as he was. "Forty-two minutes, twenty-eight seconds."

"Too long, sir."

"Much too long, madam. Considering, If you had informed me of your appointment time we might have avoided the separation altogether. Or, at least, shortened the duration. And I most definitely could have kept you from getting lost."

"Indeed? I shall be more forthcoming from here on out, sir," she promised with a smile. Her eyes were sparkling. It was all Spock could do to keep from grinning at her in return.

"I believe a tour of the ship is in order. It is the least I can do."

"That's right, Spock. We can't have her going around bumping into bulkheads, can we?" McCoy reached out to take the lieutenant by the arm, muttering under his breath, "By the time the two of you get through with her she'll know this ship like the back of her hand!" Hadn't Kirk just outlined a tour for the girl himself?

Five feet of trouble, that's what you are, McCoy silently lamented, giving her the once over. He simply couldn't fault either of his friends for their taste in women. "Come along, young lady. Let's get started," McCoy said, drawing her into the main examining room. Or, at least, trying to.

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Brianna Cantrell followed along, gazing back over her shoulder at Spock. "Indeed? You keep giving your least, while I'm wondering about your best." Brianna cast him a sidelong glance, grinning impishly again. Was she using it against him, Spock wondered? It was certainly a most powerful tool.

"Nineteen hundred hours. Does that suit you?"

"You need only give the word, sir."

"C-deck, turbo shaft A," he said.

"Lieutenant, I'm a busy man," McCoy complained, continuing to tug on her arm, feeling as if a crow bar might be required to pry these two apart. Brianna reached up, fluttering her fingers at the first officer.

"Bye," she said.

"Until we meet again, Lieutenant. Doctor McCoy. Doctor T'Nikha," Spock said, taking his leave from Sickbay.

## **15**

November 15, 2285, Stardate: 8511.15

Sickbay, USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

r. T'Nikha quietly entered the main examining room where Dr. McCoy now had the lieutenant stretched upon an examining table. Caught on the long, rectangular monitor, displayed in differing hues of colored light, was the physiological portrait of one Brianna Cantrell, in full body silhouette. T'Nikha watched with interest as the senior medical officer ran their newest crew member through a series of tests.

Height, weight. Cardio-vascular. Ears, nose and

throat. Checking her off against the standard and her own chart. When he was done, and reached over to help the young woman into a sitting position, T'Nikha stepped up to the table requesting the chart. "May I, Doctor McCoy?"

"She seems fit as a fiddle. But of course, since you've treated her before you'd like a follow-up, I presume." McCoy could barely hide his annoyance. He didn't know what it was about this woman, but he felt as if she were constantly second-guessing him. First Spock and now Lt. Cantrell. Did Starfleet suddenly feel he was incapable of doing his job?

He was more tired than usual these past few weeks, feeling every bit his sixty-one years. But that's because they were all pushing to get back out into space. Where they belonged, he thought, giving up the chart and walking over to the small desk to jot down his notes in private. He wondered suddenly if T'Nikha was conducting a study of her own on human responses under such forms of stress. He scowled.

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T'Nikha was quick to return the electronic clipboard to him, turning again to face her patient. Brianna Cantrell watched the exchange between colleagues — in name only, she observed, not enjoying the fact that once again, she was the object over which they struggled for control. It was

nothing new to her, quite often finding herself in such crossfire. She knew, too, what T'Nikha wanted. A *mind-probe*. Brianna Cantrell suddenly felt naked, glancing over briefly at McCoy as if he could somehow supersede here, before nodding her acquiescence.

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T'Nikha closed her eyes, clasping her hands together momentarily. Reaching over, she placed her long, slender fingers alongside Brianna's face. The human was so petite, almost childlike in size, T'Nikha thought as she began her probe, hardly intimidating on the surface, yet, so very powerful when it came to her *Gifts*. T'Nikha had been warned to *shield* herself using extra care whenever *touching* the young woman as Brianna Cantrell displayed little restraint when *melding* with another mind.

It seemed an equally strong mind was required if Brianna's was to be tamed. T'Pran had always known it, endlessly seeking the right mate for her. Had he been found and lost? T'Nikha wondered, seeking discovery in the matter. Who next would be stuck in this human's web? Mister Spock certainly appeared drawn to her, unusually so in fact, triggering the Vulcan doctor's curiosity in the matter. His whole body language changed in Brianna's presence, his posture almost that of a

mate's. Were these two a *bonded* pair — in memory only, if no longer in essence, she wondered?

In their earlier conference together, Captain Spock had expressed a sudden lack of *discipline*, although he refrained from disclosing the exact area that was troubling him. Clearly he was struggling with the emotions that beset him under such failure. Shame, humiliation. Seeing him with the lieutenant, however, made things perfectly clear to those whose profession made them observers by nature.

He simply could not dissociate his interest in her. Most unusual for one such as Spock, priding himself on his Vulcan heritage, as he did. Hard to fathom that forceful intellect tripped up by one little human female. Extraordinary. It is what led T'Nikha into taking this action now. She had formulated a theory and was about to put it to the test.

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Brianna Cantrell steeled herself against the intrusion, giving way almost immediately to the doctor whose probe was ever so gentle, pushing lightly, delicately. T'Nikha reached in, feeling the fragmented rope end, the tattered remains of the once-forming bondlink, the doctor lingering there for some undisclosed reason. She then pressed elsewhere and in a minute broke the link, easing out as gently as she went in. "It is as I suspected. Most interesting."

"Yes, I've been wandering again," Brianna confessed in her aggravation. "What is it you want from me?" The lieutenant looked up but didn't meet T'Nikha's eyes as she discreetly wiped the tear from her cheek. It hurt to be reminded of her loss and just how active her feelings remained for him, upon meeting him, despite how she tried to step back and be objective. Yet, the glaring truth remained. No matter how she felt about him, things had changed for them. Could they put things back together again, given enough time? She simply didn't know. There were still too many unanswered questions. Why had he stepped away? Her instincts were telling her she should do the same. Step away, while there was yet time. In the end, Brianna Cantrell resented T'Nikha's need to dredge it all up again.

The fact that the Vulcans couldn't get over it, constantly needing to examine her mind in their inability to understand just how the phenomenon occurred, was their problem not hers. No amount of probing could alter the facts, nor could it change what had happened, nor fix their relationship after all of this time, she doubted. She just wanted to heal. Why couldn't they at least understand that and leave her alone? Brianna glared at the woman.

"Fascinating," T'Nikha said. "So unaware. Incredible. This bears more study. Doctor McCoy, I shall be in my private office. I thank thee for the

time with thy patient. Perhaps later we can assemble for a meeting. I have a case file I find necessary to discuss in conference."

"You want a consult?" McCoy said as he came to Brianna's side.

"Precisely, Doctor."

"Oh-ten-hundred hours."

"Agreed."

"You all right?" he said gently, once T'Nikha left the room. "Did she hurt you?"

Brianna Cantrell shook her head, gazing down at the floor from her perch. "I hurt myself, Doctor," she said softly, realizing more of an explanation was necessary, adding, "Mindmeld with a Vulcan male. It's the gift that keeps on giving, long after he's dead." She was at once hopping down from the table, an unmistakable sarcastic edge to her sweet voice. McCoy caught her arm assisting her to the floor.

"Katra?" he asked, having had some experience with that, at least. He had housed Spock's living soul for a while after the Vulcan's death. It was indeed a most painful ordeal, if you asked McCoy. He was glad to give it back to its rightful owner, glad to have Spock back among the living. In a lot of ways he felt closer to the Vulcan, now.

Understood him, if only a modicum, better.

"No, Doctor. I lost my *bondmate*. Are you finished with me? 'Cause I'm really very uncomfortable in here."

"Yeah, sure. I have everything I need. For now."

# 16

November 15, 2285, Stardate: 8511.15

Sickbay, USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

octor McCoy," T'Nikha began, with a slight inclination of her head toward him. Right at the stroke of the clock, oh-ten-hundred. Certainly, the good psychiatrist was punctual, if she was anything. It was a good thing McCoy had been able to pull away, himself, not wishing to garner an unfavorable opinion from his colleague.

"Call me Leonard," he offered, hoping to soften their dubious relationship. Things were tense

enough around here without undue professional friction added to the mix. Being on a first name basis just might remind *him* to loosen up a bit.

"Likewise, I am T'Nikha. I am glad we do not need to impress each other with our titles. I am already too aware of your accomplishments. I have seen your record, riddled with sound and innovative research in areas less tried than most physicians. The way you operate under fire — I wish only to prove myself worthy of your tutelage. I would learn from you what I can during this brief stint, treasuring the opportunity to see you in action. Perhaps?"

"Is this your first starship assignment?"

"Yes. Beyond my initial training cruise, that is. I have always served at the Academy. And then mostly in service to the upper echelon of Starfleet Command."

"Logically placed, of course. That's where all the pressure is, the stress."

"Perhaps, but you have seen many cases yourself."

"I do what I can for these folks. The psychological scanners help. But this is a new crew and I'm glad Starfleet has seen their way clear to assigning a living psychiatrist, a counselor at least, to each ship. It's long over due, if you ask me."

"It was on your recommendation that I am here. For one patient, in particular. I would speak of him, now. How long have you known Mister Spock? And more specifically, how long has he been involved with the lieutenant?"

"You mean, Cantrell?" McCoy said, scrubbing at his chin. So, his instincts were still with him, after all. Not so slow as he thought. "Well, now, that I'm not entirely sure of. She's been at the Academy all this time, as you seem to know. He was an instructor there for a brief time — Hey, now you listen to me. I'm not going to help you bury the man, if that's what you're after. I know Spock. I'm sure he kept whatever his interests were to himself. He wouldn't blatantly ignore Starfleet regulations, especially for personal gain. Damn, he almost let his father die once years ago, having to take over command of the ship when he did, all in the name of Vulcan logic!"

"Doctor — Leonard. I am not accusing Spock of any malfeasance. Of any misconduct whatsoever. This relationship predates the time of her training. Of that, I am certain. But I need to understand the nature of it. Most probably he did not court her openly during her Academy years, in keeping with regulations. Since he is a superior officer to her. Now it would be different, of course. As you must know, there are no regulations regarding romance.

It is important, however, to know just what she is to him. What his intentions are regarding her. On a personal level, only. He is in a great deal of pain in the matter. Of this, at least, his family is aware. And they have their concerns. That is all."

"Well," McCoy said, slowly stepping away from the counter, his back to her.

"Please. I need your help in this. To ask him outright is something his family has restricted. They do not wish to interfere. Just to understand."

"I can tell you about his recurring dreams, if that'll help."

"Yes," T'Nikha said, drawing closer to the computer, opening the hard-file copy she had made of Spock's medical records. "I have it right here —"

# 17

In the Vulcan Year of Ni'roc, Stardate: 8511.16 Vulcan Shuttlecraft, T'Mir

beast. Easily tamed when one had the proper expertise and the tools to decipher the latest codes. Sarkal sat in the semi-light of his tiny quarters aboard the *T'Mir* that he shared with his cousin, Strone. Added to the Vulcan Delegation at the last minute, Sarkal was reminded, once again, of just how far down in rank his *House* had fallen by the sheer lack of luxury these quarters offered. Clearly, he and his *House* were an afterthought.

Only after he argued that all the noble *Houses* should be represented, was the deadlock broken and the vote finally tallied in his favor. Pity, for them, he'd had to argue the point.

Then he was forced to share the space with this huge sehlet of a cousin. The burly brute of a Vulcan rolled over in the bunk, causing the bed to creak loudly. Sarkal twisted the earpiece further into his pointed ear in his frustration, hoping to block out all ambient noise. To top off the insult, Strone also snored.

If he didn't still need him, Sarkal would simply kill him in his sleep.

Focusing himself again, he caught the desired bandwidth, followed the beads emanating from the *Enterprise*, the transmissions streaking through parsecs of space to varying destinations. Mostly private codes. Personal codes. No problem. The *Enterprise* crew was a chatty group. No doubt, the personnel were busy informing their loved ones they would soon put out to deep space. According to one intercepted message from the Bridge, the heavy cruiser was expected to rendezvous with the *T'Mir*. On schedule, it appeared.

Sarkal had his doubts the *Enterprise* could keep the scheduled rendezvous, upon beaming aboard the *T'Mir*, himself, and learning that Captain Spock was not among the Entourage, as expected. Likely, they

would have to await his arrival, which would put them way off-schedule. Unless —Had the *Hybrid* one-upped him again? How was this possible? Keeping track of all that was going on around him, Sarkal was well aware the Starfleet officer was called home, most recently, presumably to learn his fate. Was he somehow back aboard his own ship, mingling with Lt. Cantrell — beyond the seeing eyes of her former governess or any other authorized chaperon? Surely, Spock could only have managed this feat had he turned around immediately and caught the transport back to Earth. Even at warp speeds, the journey took four days. Sarkal doubted the legendary prince could command that much luck.

Still, this left him with cause for concern. Certainly, it was a definite threat to the success of his Plan. Sarkal was going to have to act. The sooner the better. He could no longer hang to the shadows of her mind. He must manipulate his way into her subconscious.

He got up from the desk and gave his cousin a slap on his shoulder, trying to rouse the Vulcan out of his slumber. Strone grumbled and slowly pushed the covers off.

"Come on, get out of my bunk," Sarkal said.

"Your bunk?" Strone argued.

"Yes, in case you haven't noticed, my dim-witted friend, there is only one bunk in this cabin. I must enter her dreams once again, and I can't possibly reach a deep enough sleep on the cold, metal floor!"

"So, what's the big hurry? We'll be aboard the *Enterprise* in less than ninety-six hours — three days, at best. You can confront her then." Strone pulled the covers back over his shoulders.

"She's alone with him, that's why. No chaperon, even. It was only by a stroke of genius that her father insisted on complete anonymity between them until their 'formal meeting'. Which, of course cannot take place until the delegation arrives. And I rather doubt Joseph Cantrell had the additional foresight to put spies aboard to make certain they stay apart. Despite how desperate his claim is to thwart this marriage contract. He's human and he doesn't fully comprehend the power of a mindmeld. Nor, what his daughter is up against."

"And since when do you have the ability to project your thoughts that far, anyway? I thought that was the very reason you sought a union with her, to augment your ... shortcomings."

"I managed to break through her mental *shielding* when she was last in the Infirmary. The doctor was foolish enough to sedate her."

"And just how much did you pay this doctor for

the favor?"

"Don't worry, you'll get your fair share. Our coffers are well full."

"I'm guessing Cantrell also refused your offer of *Champion*. After all you've done for him, too. Pity, I had thought that was the best way to go about it. Rid the universe of the *Hybrid* and gain the *Anomaly* for the redemption of your *House*. All in a nice neat package deal."

"The man is a human ... he just doesn't understand."

"Well, I don't see any rush. What can happen in ninety hours that cannot be undone shortly thereafter? All we have to do is keep them apart and arguing for long enough until the remainder of their shattered *link* dissolves, which will, by nature, finalize their divorce. You always make things so much harder than they need be, Sarkal."

Strone stopped short. Sarkal was busy rifling through his luggage and was soon peeling back the leather wrappings that restrained the power of the Stone, much like peeling a banana. Sarkal's green eyes exuded an almost maniacal glow about them as he hefted the device in his hands. Strone was disconcerted. His cousin, whom he had supported without question all this time, was flirting with insanity. Indeed, Sarkal seemed quite beyond his

own mind's reach, judging by his expression. Strone experienced a chill. He also knew the strain on Sarkal had been great throughout this entire escapade. He was never whole to begin with, which is why Sarkal remained *unbonded* to date. None would have him.

"I don't wish to have to undo what could easily be prevented," Sarkal said, glancing up at Strone. "That's the hard way or have you never heard the human axiom, 'Old habits die hard.' Trust me, I need to be more proactive than I have been." Sarkal began to stroke the device slowly. Strone fought against shuddering overtly.

"Sarkal, you should be careful with that ... that *thing*. It's lethal, you know. One stray thought ... I didn't think you wanted her dead."

"No, you fool, but I do intend to make my point clear to her. I shall only employ this *touch* lightly. Just enough to ensure she hears the message."

"Again, how? You never could reach her before. What has changed? Is it the device?"

"No, though it does help. Once I made a pathway for myself, I've been able to reach right into her dreams. Nothing obvious, just a whisper here and there. The only way to completely destroy the remaining tendrils of their illicit *link* is to get them to push the other away. I must play upon her

doubts about his fealty, her fears that he left her. Convince her of its truth so that she'll set up the same protective *mental barriers* she used to resist my prior attempts to reach into her subconscious mind. Heretofore, I've kept to the shadows simply eavesdropping. The time has come for me to step up the game. I must confront her directly."

"But, won't she know? You're taking quite a risk, Sarkal."

"Yes, it is risky. But I cannot afford to lose my following now through a perception of ineptitude. That I am unable, even, to control a human female. as they'll likely see it. How do you think that would play out amongst our brethren, eh? Did you once ever stop to think about that? Well, I'll tell you, so you don't strain your brain. I'll lose my standing, that's how. I cannot abide that. Not when we've come so close. Not when I can already taste success. See myself seated in the Chair. Right now, all she has experienced is a slight flapping of wings, easily attributed to the Phantom Effect for all she would know, a residual aspect of her shattered link. What I intend to do these next two nights is to whisper to her, let her know that he is deceiving her. That he did, in fact, leave her - that he meant to do so."

Strone shook his head, making no move to get off of the bunk, "I'm not so sure you should do that."

"I told you up front. We could use this against his

House. Time is our ally, after all, and it is what I need if the *link* is to dissipate completely, during which time I shall continue my own attempts to *mindmeld* with her from such a distance. If I couldn't convince her father, I'll make sure she chooses me as her *Champion*. In the end, that is what matters. She needs to choose me over him. More than ever, I need to thwart the *Hybrid* once and for all, punish him for stealing her from me — again. He died and that left her free to be given to another. To me.

"And should have been. But then the Council stepped in and decided otherwise."

"Damn them. I'll make them pay, too. Every last one of them!"

"And what if your efforts prove futile? What then?"

"Well, there are other avenues at my disposal and some solace to be had in the knowledge that reunions of this kind are rarely successfully completed."

"This is true. I have heard of that. Some people can never be *linked*, which is why a provisional *mindmeld* is secured up front, as a test."

"Yes. And without a proper, viable, sustainable *link* there can be no marriage. According to Vulcan Law. Ironically, it seems the great and powerful

House of Talek Sen Dene, having first woven this Law, is about to be entangled by its own governing philosophies —"

A slow mirthless grin creased Sarkal's face. Then she would be his, he mused. His only option, to wait and whisper. For now. For the sake of his *Cause*, Sarkal had no other choice but to continue to assert his will upon her, directing her actions while she slept. He could in no way, allow the *Hybrid* to win in the end. All he needed was Time. To help ensure this, he had already filed a *Writ of Stay* with the Vulcan High Court. It's what made him late to board the shuttlecraft. In the end, he fully expected to prevail, so his action was well worth the gamble. Should the couple be kept apart long enough, the fractures in their purported *bondlink* would continue to decay. There would be nothing left for them to build upon.

And in the end, no union.

# 18

November 15, 2285, Stardate: 8511.15 USS Starship, Enterprise N

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

pock stepped off the lift onto the bridge. It was still very early, the chronometer above the main view screen reading, oh-five-twenty. Kirk swivelled in his chair, greeting his first officer with a smile. "Ah, Mister Spock you're just in time. We were about to fire up the engines and head out. Seems our shakedown has been belayed in favor of a rendezvous with the *T'Mir* in three days' time. We are to take on the Vulcan Delegation from there. Glad you could join us. After last night I

wasn't too sure you would be out of bed."

Spock shot Kirk a glance with his remark trying to realize if it was rooted in Spock's drinking binge or the thoughts he had entertained about the lieutenant, worried that he was unconscionably *broadcasting* his thoughts all over the place. "I beg your pardon, Captain?"

"Well, you know after your evening of ..." Kirk pretended to upend a bottle. Spock was lucky neither he, nor the Lieutenant, had died of alcohol poisoning, since they pretty much killed her bottle of *Saurian* brandy in the course of their evening together.

Unconsciously, Spock was smiling with the memories. The more she drank, the more she giggled with, it seemed, little or no provocation, at all. She was most delightful.

Spock caught Kirk's quizzical look and instantly wiped the mirth from his features. Then nodding to the remaining night crew, he proceeded to his station, placing his hand on the shoulder of the young man seated there. The circumstances were rare for Hindeman to begin the morning shift with the primary bridge crew. With Spock on leave, he was up early in his eagerness, anxious to man the science station as they left port. He startled when the captain greeted the first officer, flinching when the Vulcan's over warm hand clasped his shoulder

and he heard Spock utter the word, "Relieved."

"Oh, but, sir, it's just not fair, you have leave posted," Hindeman whined.

"As you will often note as you get older, Lieutenant, life seldom is. In the meantime, you are relieved," Spock said, nonetheless.

The first officer settled into what he deemed his chair and into the day's work ahead, delighted to learn they were heading out of space port and eager to feel the thrum of the ships' engines underfoot. Hindeman did a fine job but it was Spock's board and he had certain methods for getting it up and running that he had refined over the years. Some suggested Spock was inflexible. Others stated flat out he was stubborn.

Whichever description used, Spock preferred things done in his own way and no other. He had little difficulty admitting he was set in his ways. Spock was who he was. Beyond that, he needed to bury himself in his work — his only means of release. Anxious, just like he felt moments before he took part in the *k'Matra*, he realized how soon he would meet his intended.

And then there was the most troubling question of all. What to do about the lieutenant? Curiously enough, he had begun to mark time coincident with her arrival. It was as if no other time existed.

Already he was finding it difficult to remember what life was like before she slammed into his five point four short hours ago.

Somehow, it seemed longer than that. As if she had always been there in the back of his mind, somewhere nearby. He found himself questioning how he could possibly get through a day without her, wondering where in space such thoughts were coming from ... Most illogical.

Spock looked up from his console, momentarily glancing around the bridge, shaking himself free of such unauthorized thoughts, determining it best to get back to work. He would be with her again soon enough. They had a date to tour the ship; realizing it was a good thing he was Vulcan as it was going to require every ounce of his reserves to maintain such a balancing act. But for how long, he wondered? Even Vulcans weren't indestructible.

At precisely oh-five-thirty hours, the ship's crew began launch procedures. The running lights were all systematically switched on. A host of reports from all departments poured in through the bridge compti units advising the ship's commander of their readiness. The rest of the crew was abuzz. Nobody seemed disappointed to learn they did not garner the coveted fiver in space, finding solace in a dangerous and intriguing mission ahead. After the rendezvous with the *T'Mir* there would be plenty of

mapping and planet-hopping in the offing, to the others' delight.

Then if all went well, after restocking and refueling they would find themselves on their way to patrol the Sigma Rho system at an unhurried clip. It spurred countless speculation as to what or who might be found out there waiting.

For Spock, it was not what was out there that was his chief concern. The image of the lieutenant was suddenly foremost in his mind once again. And once again, he found himself experiencing her eyes. Large, almond-shaped, of a blue so intense in their clarity they were luminous. Haunting. Leaving him with a nagging, unanswered sense of — he didn't know what.

Spock shook himself free of the odd sensation. Five hours later, at the end of his regular duty-shift, he promptly left the bridge heading for the sanctity of his quarters. He needed a chance to sort things out with fewer human distractions. He was unusually fatigued and even a Vulcan mind was apt to play tricks under those conditions, he told himself.

# **19**

Stardate: 8511.15 Observation Deck USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

pock's entire face brightened when the turbo-lift doors parted onto C-Deck, at the end of his duty-shift to find the lieutenant there on time and ready for her promised tour. Strolling down the corridor together, they continued on their way to the forward observation deck via the rather bustling recreation deck. Music, 3-D holographic gaming, the deck was fully equipped and filled to capacity with a crew that needed to unwind. Noisy. In a corner somewhere,

were the strains of a lively debate.

"It was only a game, madam," Spock said, as they walked along together toward the snack vendors and, if they were lucky, a quiet corner where they could talk. The sheer number of people created quite a din of conversations, a constant roar, mixing none too harmoniously with the various forms of music pouring forth from several pockets around the vast room, assaulting his ears as they passed through the length of the deck. Uncomfortably, Spock felt the need to shout. "Are you always testing yourself? You are no longer in training, per se," he said, as they made it over to the snack corner.

Ordering up a cup of hot tea, he added just a pinch of sugar and another pinch of Terran ginger in an effort to simulate the spicy flavor of a particular blend of Vulcan tea, she doing likewise at the vendor adjacent to his, smiling up at him with the coincidence. "And while it is commendable and necessary to keep one's edge," he went on. "You should know I am not constantly evaluating you along those lines. You have already made more than a favorable impression on me."

"I am honored, sir," Brianna Cantrell said. She felt a rush of butterflies flitting around in her stomach suddenly, glad to know she still held his interest. She inclined her head slightly, following him, in the

Vulcan fashion — as if she were his woman, wending their way to the only vacant table. Off in a corner, on the fringe of the snack area closest to the vending machines, it seemed quieter and less crowded in this spot, to their joint satisfaction. Spock held out a chair for her, taking the opposite seat.

"You would do well to allow yourself a relaxing moment or two," he said, reaching across the table to cup her chin in his large hand. "You appear to have a quick temper, madam. I had the impression you were about to deck Crewman Rhoades."

"Well, you heard him, sir. He attacked my integrity. And you're correct. It was only a game, but for him to suggest I, in anyway, cheated — I never use my gifts that way, that's just so wrong, sir, on so many levels — Ooh, sometimes, the man simply gets on my nerves," she defended. "I won't be blamed for another's inadequacies. I've got enough of my own —" Spock released her chin to touched her lips with his fingertip, hoping to curtail her sudden rant.

Brianna drew in a breath, trying to keep from visibly reacting to Spock's touch, let alone his words. She felt so out of practice ... his hand was hot by human standards, his touch ever so gentle. She reveled in the contact, for the way it obliterated her sorrow, giving her back a sense of balance, at

least, that all was right in her world again, as if her heart was suddenly mended. "He's been like a fly," she said more calmly this time. "Actually, he's like my brother, Erik, equally annoying. Never knowing when enough is enough. Always pushing."

"Straining your Vulcan reserve to the maximum," Spock said. He leaned closer to her, unconsciously trying to rid them both of that persistent distance between them, which was far more prevalent again once he released her chin and pulled his hand away entirely. It was disconcerting. She dropped her gaze at once, avoiding him, looking off into the distance — anywhere but at him. She sighed quietly. Spock frowned. Where was she off to, just now? Don't shut me out.

Brianna Cantrell's heart was suddenly leaping wildly about in her chest, accompanying the butterflies in their unique symphony swirling inside of her. It was always this way when he focused his attention on her. She felt immediately awkward and unable to think, hoping she wouldn't say or do anything else to further embarrass herself — so much so, she was forced to keep her eyes from him

The last thing she wanted to do was destroy his apparent image of her. She already felt the shame of her earlier lapse in discipline, to which he eluded, blatantly allowing her emotions to get the better of

her, reacting as she had to Crewman Rhoades' taunting. Right in front of Spock, again, of all people ... Spock seemed to read her like a book. He was also busy trying to make eye contact with her, too. What else did he see when he looked at her she pondered?

"Forgive me, I was —" Brianna wrapped her hands around the mug of tea resting on the table, sitting on the edge of her chair as if she would jump up from it any second and escape.

"Lieutenant. There is nothing to forgive. I realize you have Vulcan citizenship. But you are also human. You are not expected -"

"But I was taught better than this," she said, gazing at him earnestly. "Really. I am *d'Vel'nahr*. Or, at least I used to be, although by my behavior you would hardly know it now. Certainly, T'Pran would cringe, if she could see me. All her teachings shot straight out the nearest torpedo tube ... I don't seem to be in control much at all, lately. Perhaps, being around so many humans," she said, shaking her head and sitting back into her chair more fully. Taking a sip of tea, she placed the cup and her arm back on the table again. Busily, she traced the lip of the gray Styrofoam-shaped ceramic mug around and around again, in her own way withdrawing from the uncomfortable subject. She sighed again. "I don't know. It's just. Well — I guess on top of it all

I'm a bit nervous, sir," she said, again dropping her gaze.

"Indeed? Then I submit by your own criteria, you have been rather nervous since you got here. While your grasp of Vulcan custom and protocol is rather commanding, your application seems capricious, at best. *Vulcan-by-Choice*, did you say? By whose choice, yours or someone else's?"

There was a moment of silence that followed. Someone's loud guffaws could be heard in the background. Spock sat back in his chair, momentarily nonplused. "That was not a criticism, Lieutenant. Merely an observation," he said, at last. She seemed unduly hard on herself, leaving him to wonder, *Vulcan-by-Choice* or not, who in their right mind had taught her to restrain herself so completely? — not that the lessons had taken entirely, leaving him slightly amused and curiously relieved at the same time. This T'Pran of hers sounded harder-nosed than his own father.

"I guess it was a bit insane to think I could ever be Vulcan."

"Perhaps, more for the fact that you are human," Spock said, gently. He reached over again, almost without presence of mind, to touch her arm. Brianna was wearing a white duty smock, a loose caftan-style tunic with a vee neckline and long, loose bell sleeves. Absent-mindedly, Spock rolled

the extra fabric at her cuff between his fingers. "Trust me, Lieutenant, I know. For me, it is a constant struggle."

"What're you actually two people in one?" she grinned, at last.

Spock felt the warmth of her smile, grinning ever so slightly in return. "If I may confide in you for a moment, there are times when I would actually prefer to throw my hands into the air and run ranting from the room, just as our good Doctor McCoy is so often inclined."

"But, your Vulcan-side holds you back?"

"Mercifully, yes. And then I just get on with it."

"Straining *your* Vulcan reserve to the maximum. I see how it is." She took another sip of her tea.

"Indeed. And if I may prevail upon you even further, it would be to ask that you not be unduly hard on my friend Lieutenant Cantrell. Judging her by standards that are impossibly high. If I have learned anything, it is to just be yourself."

"Oh, all the time, sir. But tell me, which self is you?"

Spock drew in a breath, sitting upright, shaking his head at her. "Madam, that sharp tongue of yours is going to lead to your undoing. Now, out with it."

"My tongue?" she said, innocently enough.

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"Negative. Although at this moment if feels as if I am pulling teeth. You were about to tell me what it is that has you so nervous."

"Oh, I don't think so, sir. Was I?" Again, she hid her mirth behind her cup, taking another sip of tea. Already it was cooling off, to her dismay. She preferred her tea hot, especially with the ginger in it. Otherwise, it took on a nasty taste, for which no amount of sweetener would help.

"You were, indeed, Lieutenant. You are acting very much like a caged *Le'mayta*. Something is troubling you. And it is my concern that if you do not let it out soon, your restraint will, at long last, give way and I shall next have to visit you in the brig for actually having assaulted someone. Be it Archer, Rhoades, or some other unsuspecting irritant. Either that, or you will simply implode. Now, are you going to divulge your secret, or do I have to pull rank on you?"

"Wow, you can be extraordinarily tough when you want to be, can't you."

"Shall I order you, then?"

"No, actually, I'll tell you what it is," she said, putting her teacup back on the table, rising to her feet, "but do you mind if we continue to talk as we walk? It's like I've got this electric current going through me. I could probably light up an entire

Christmas tree without effort."

"As you wish, madam," he said, also rising, "but isn't it rather early for Christmas?" Spock resumed his role of tour guide, leading the way off of the recreation deck.

Streaking through the universe at Warp Factor Three, the *Enterprise* was well on its way toward the scheduled rendezvous site. That thought alone had Brianna's stomach in a knot that began with Kirk's initial announcement to the crew early this morning, until the knot grew into butterflies beating her relentlessly. Soon, she would meet her *moderator*, officially, and be pressed into service. Was she up to it? she wondered, glad that Spock was here keeping her company, helping to stave off the dreaded loneliness of her *unbonded* status. Just being with him eased her fears, as it always did. Either way, she still had a decision to make.

To serve him tea or not, indicating her willingness to honor the marriage contract. If he accepted the cup from her, things would go forward as planned. She did hope to have an earnest talk with him, first, however. She needed to know just why he left her. Had he died? She stole a sidelong glance at the Vulcan. He looked rather fit, for a dead man, if that was the case. Still, it was difficult to grasp that someone could die and then come back to life again, just like that. It defied Logic, basic biology and just

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about everything else she accepted as truth. Would a clinical death result in a broken *bondlink?* 

He was correct, her struggle far too apparent to ignore. She had to tell him.

"I'm just a little afraid of what lies ahead, sir, is all. Decisions that have to be made. I mean, I used to believe in faerie tales ..." Lt. Brianna Cantrell said, "but not anymore."

"And what happened that made you change your mind?" Spock asked, unconsciously reaching over to hold her hand, giving it a slight squeeze.

Brianna glanced at their hands, intertwined, suppressing a grin, grateful for the physical contact. She returned the squeeze. "Real life ... it's sometimes harsher than expected."

"It is, indeed, Lieutenant."

"Unexpected events ... occur and then all at once your whole world implodes."

Spock nodded in agreement, "Taking with it your happily ever after."

"Yes, and all that you anticipated, all that you were working toward just ... evaporates. And you find yourself ... alone. Hideously —"

"- Painfully alone."

"Forgive me," she said, backing away from the

subject, aware she was missing her opportunity to divest herself of her greatest concern, afraid that when it came down to it, he would confirm her doubts, that he might ask to be released. She withdrew her hand from his grasp and folded her arms over her chest, trying on her own to ward off the *Gulf* between them. "I feel as though I'm taking up too much of your time today. Talking nonsense and all."

"Negative," Spock said. "But if you would rather I leave —"

She reached toward him, briefly, "No, not at all. I just don't want to be a nuisance to you." Worried that was exactly what she had become.

Spock folded his own arms over his chest and stared into her eyes, frowning, "Lieutenant Cantrell, where would you get such an idea? Did I not invite you on this tour?" he said, giving her a perplexed look.

Brianna Cantrell drew in a sigh, "I just sense a bit of reticence on your part. Almost as if you wish you were somewhere else, is all."

"That is not my wish," he said, nodding briefly at the passing technician, who kept his head down, as if to keep from noticing the couple as they ambled along. Brianna glanced quickly in his direction and once he had left them behind she turned back to find Spock frowning again.

Taken aback, Spock drew in a breath. It unnerved him that she seemed to know things left unspoken. In all actuality, he should be any place else, other than here with her. He knew it and had almost broken their appointment right before he left the bridge, although he had been unable to reach her in time to cancel. She had already left her quarters, if indeed she had even checked in there, and he wasn't inclined to call all over the ship in search of her.

Whether or not the delay in calling her was psychologically motivated, he couldn't say. When it came down to it, Spock had been pleasantly surprised and pleased to find her on C-deck when he arrived. That was more than ninety minutes ago. Despite what she suggested, he was finding her company most agreeable.

Spock stopped before a set of double doors, hesitating briefly, believing he had saved the best for last. In the center of each door was a free-form, trapezoid-shaped porthole. Brianna Cantrell couldn't see much. The room was dark beyond them. "This room has changed very little from the time of this ship's maiden voyage," Spock said. "Her first commander, a Captain Ilsen, I believe, decorated it like the bridge of an old-time sailing craft, circa the early nineteen hundreds, old Earth

calendar. It is the forward observation deck," he said, reaching over to release the locking mechanism on the doors.

"It is equipped with an emergency sending apparatus there in the center of the room," Spock furthered, as slowly a dim light glowed from somewhere port side of them, once they crossed the threshold. An old-time lantern hung from the overhead, Brianna discovered, gently illuminating the room without disturbing the view. Nearby, also, all polished and gleaming were an antique, brass binnacle, an antique compass, and an antique engine-telegraph, similar to the ones found on the ancient, seafaring cruise ships. Straight ahead, caught in the silhouette of the many floor-to-ceiling view ports, was a large, antique wooden ships' wheel mounted to the teak decking. Affixed to the foot was a polished brass name plate, engraved with the ship's name, USS Enterprise NCC-1701-A.

"Captain, I believe I've just come across my favorite deck. May I?" Brianna asked, hesitating, slowly reaching toward a spoke on the wheel, gingerly fondling it when Mr. Spock gave her an affirmative nod.

"I suspect it appeals to the archeologist in you," he said. Brianna Cantrell grinned her response, wrapping her hands around two of the spokes. She stood for a long time gazing out of the view ports.

They had just entered a star-system, the ship dropping out of Warp speed to thrusters only. Spock followed her gaze taking a seat on the small white faux-leather sofa resting along the starboard wall. Clearly defined planets hung against the blackness of space before them, so close, Brianna Cantrell was reminded of her dream, feeling as if she could actually reach out and touch them as the ship slowly cruised by, able to make out the land masses on each as they went. With those images, Brianna first knew she would be assigned to this ship. When she felt her moderator's embrace. confirming what she knew to be true, that he was, indeed, alive, it had also given her hope that they could reset their relationship, despite what others asserted about his actions. He really was everything she knew him to be. She wanted it to work between them, wanted very much to make him happy.

Spock watched her in silence. Brianna struggled with the sudden tears, realizing here they were together right on this deck, and he didn't seem to know it was she.

"Well," she said, at long last, releasing the breath she unconsciously held. She kept her back to him, blinking back the tears, hoping her voice wouldn't give her away, "I can say one thing. The *Excelsior* has many choice amenities, but it doesn't have a room like this. This was the *USS Potemkin* at one

time, wasn't it?"

"Indeed, you appear to know your ships," Spock said, getting up from the sofa to join her. He could *feel* the emotion in her voice, recognized her sense of regret. Troubled by it. He stood by her side, hands clasped firmly behind his back.

"As you pointed out, my grandfather, the late Admiral Ilsen, served aboard this ship years ago. They came into port around Vulcan and he brought me aboard, briefly. I was very young at the time. This is the only room I clearly remember."

"She was pulled out of mothballs and re-christened *Enterprise*, just for us. A thank you, if you will."

"Well, you guys did save the planet."

"Really, Lieutenant, my modesty."

"Oh, please. Don't tell me it was all in a day's work. I'm not buying it."

"More like three days, actually."

"Stop it!" she laughed, glad for the trick he used to divert her emotions.

"Stop, what?" Spock suppressed a grin, giving her a sideways glance.

"That, sir! You really can't help yourself, can you."

"Indeed, I am such a bad boy, as you put it earlier."

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"Oh, I was hoping you'd let that one slide on by. Nothing wrong with your memory, sir."

"Indeed, today I even know who I am."

"Oh, very good, sir!" she giggled with delight.

"Feeling any better about your assignment, Lieutenant?" he asked, as he brought his hand to rest on the spoke next to hers. Her comfort was again a priority for him — beyond that of ensuring she was an efficient member of the crew. He needed her to be happy here, uncertain why it held such importance to him, personally. The space was narrow between spokes and their knuckles brushed against each other's. Another unconscious effort to touch her? Be close to her, he wondered? Certainly, he felt her relax a bit with the contact.

Brianna glanced down at their hands, briefly, then up at him, smiling. "Infinitely better, since I met you, sir," she murmured. "Thank you."

"The pleasure, as always is mine, madam."

# **20**

November 16, 2285, Stardate: 8511.16

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

Shivering in the cold, black water, lost in the heavy fog, she was soaked to the skin, floating on all that was left of the dinghy. A piece of flotsam, really. Deserted. He had left her there, alone, to fend for herself. Shipwrecked and alone with only that singular gull above her to keep her company – that annoying flapping of wings overhead. Calling out its rather plaintive litany of, "Aach – aach. Left you. Deceived you. Didn't want you – Aach!" Trying not to listen, she touched

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the fragmented rope about her and wept again, despite herself. So alone. He wasn't going to come back for her; something had happened and he couldn't come. All at once, she was engulfed with nagging doubts as to his fealty toward her, as if the bird's wings were beating it into her.

Crying herself to sleep in her misery, when she awoke again, the water was still, like black glass, the moonlight reflected in its depths. The fog lifted! Suddenly the water was moving, disturbed by some motion, licking at her sides. Sharks?

Alarmed, she sat up upsetting her lonely raft to see him silhouetted on the banks of the shore, arms outstretched. Only a shadow against the night, she didn't need to see him outright to know it was he. As she always knew him. At once she began beckoning to him in her excitement. Already he was tossing her a rope, when from out of nowhere, the gull was suddenly swooping down on her just as she was snatching the rope end out of the water. She batted furiously at the bird as it persisted, causing her to drop the cord again, briefly, only to reclaim it a moment later; luckily her reflexes were that much quicker than those of the winged beast; the result of a more firm resolve, perhaps.

And then her moderator was in the water making his way over to her. She watched with

joy as he pulled closer to her, stroke after stroke. She wept this time not only to find him safe and alive, but still interested in her. Strangely, from the moment the gull flew off again, she was able to slough off her doubts, feeling instead her moderator's affection for her and a profound sense of well-being again. Diverting her attention briefly, she glanced upward at the bird's ascent, watching as it disappeared again into the stars above. A moment later she turned back to the swimmer cutting through the water on his way over to her. Overwhelmed, she was so very happy and relieved to see him.

"I thought ... I thought you weren't going to come back," she said, through her tears when he drew close enough, at last. She could hear the musical tones of the water breaking around him faintly when he resurfaced, coming up beside her.

"How could I not?" he said.

She gazed down at him bathed in moonlight, glistening, anxious to see in his face at last – hoping for some recognition, some sign he still wanted her, and was immediately struck by the gentle warmth of his brown eyes. – And hurt by the all-too-familiar pained expression gracing his features.

"Captain ...?" she questioned in her immediate confusion – and alarm to find herself in

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Spock's head when he had made no offer. Was she incapable of any restraint? Just as she was questioning her own motives, he reached upward and detached her veil.

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Brianna Cantrell startled awake hearing the last vestiges of the chimes from her antique ships' clock across the room. Sitting up, she glanced about her dark quarters as if she expected to find someone there. She could still feel his presence. Sighing. Obviously, she was bothered more than she thought that this mission would soon be underway, the rendezvous with the *T'Mir*, set to happen day after tomorrow at thirteen hundred hours, or thereabouts and the inevitable formal meeting of her moderator along with the awkwardness that would entail. Captain Spock was very gracious, but she could discern his reticence; translating, for her, into a restless night, plagued by dreams of a peculiar nature. Her covers were tangled, her disrupted from tossing and turning. She still had a very important, life-altering decision to make.

Sweeping long strands of hair out of her field of vision, she discovered her face was wet. She had been crying ... and, oh, how her head *hurt*.

Once again, she felt an uncanny, uneasy sense someone *else* had been watching her while she slept — beyond the sensation she normally felt

immediately following a true *wandering* — as if a third, uninvited party were involved. Just as quickly she shook it off, wondering where in all this mess she had stowed the aspirin?

Again, she jumped at the obnoxious verbal alarm of the ship's computer, this time, so near her head. The last thing she needed was some droning, mechanically feminine voice telling her it was time to get up. She'd get up when she was good and ready — and not a minute before. Had she a phaser weapon at her disposal, the comm-system in her quarters would be nonexistent. Slapping it off, instead, the lieutenant grumbled, settling against her pillow to glower at the chronometer on the bulkhead above her, trying to make sense out of the nonsensical or even her own emotions. She was experiencing some strong feelings regarding Spock, but although he was soon to be her betrothed, he never gave her permission to wander into his head, nor had her really acknowledged her in any way. What was she to do? Especially, if he was inclined to reject the contract? That was his right. Her only option was to Challenge, come the appointed time, which meant she would have to choose a *Champion* to fight Spock. That was something she could not do. The fight was to the death ... no wonder her sleep had been so disrupted. Time was slipping away and she was beginning to panic.

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A light tapping occurred at the lavatory door followed by the shooshing sound of it opening into her sleeping quarters, startling her again. Who? Brianna Cantrell quickly mopped an edge of the sheet across her cheeks. Hugging her knees, she curled up on her side and faced the bulkhead, as if in hiding she could somehow make it all go away. Suddenly, she was afraid she knew who it was.

Her heart was thumping wildly. Don't let it be he ... please. Brianna wasn't ready to face the captain just yet, own up to her shame, knowing she had wandered again last night — right into the first officer's sleep, unbidden. How could she do that? How could she even get *in*, she wondered, her tears renewed? Certainly, she couldn't breach his *shields* while awake.

Scrunching herself further down into the bunk, Lt. Cantrell drew the coverlet over her head in her disgrace, as the 'somebody', wandered about her quarters. She could hear whoever it was rifling through her crates. With her *moderator* there was an implicit invitation, born out of the original *mindmeld*, sparking the nocturnal 'visits', a thread that bound them together. Currently, there was no such thread between her and Spock, it having been nearly completely destroyed some eight months ago, and thus no implied invitation despite the amount of flirting between them. The mutual

wanderings done in this case, had clearly been born out of the *Phantom Effect*, that much she understood, even if she didn't know or understand why he'd left her. It was still wrong of her to interpret Spock's random acts of kindness for hello, come *in*.

She wasn't normally that kind of girl, she didn't mean to be that kind of girl. T'Pran had been right to always chastise her. It seemed she would never learn. What a wicked, sinful girl she was, forsaking the *Discipline* at every turn. The fact that Spock came to her most willingly hardly mattered. Just because a *bond* once existed between them didn't give her carte blanche now to tour his psyche on a whim.

Captain Spock possessed a kind, gentle soul. Intelligent, personable, caring and not so without wit and a sense of humor, she was constantly discovering, even for a Vulcan. How dare she take advantage of him this way? Shameless. Completely shameless. Brianna Cantrell wished she could simply crawl inside the nearest black hole and close it up around her. "It's so over! Somebody, please, have mercy and vaporize me now!"

"Feeling a little depressed this morning, are we?" came a woman's voice Brianna recognized but couldn't quite place. Sighing, she suddenly realized she had been spared a visit from Spock at this time.

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This person was rather 'noisy', the lieutenant picking up all kinds of mental *broadcasting* from her. Spock didn't *broadcast*, although there was something she picked up from him that allowed her to sense his presence, sometimes even before he entered the room, strangely enough.

"Lights on," the voice ordered, sounding entirely too chipper. That someone was standing immediately over her. Was that coffee she smelled? Brianna abruptly pulled the covers off of her face as the computer complied, the lights slowly rising to ships' daytime intensity.

"Who are you, Miss Congeniality?" Brianna Cantrell said, rolling over to face the intruder. "And what are you doing in my quarters ..." the rude, angry comment died on her lips as her unaccustomed eyes took in the rank insignia on the older woman's red sleeve. Commander Uhura met her gaze, two steaming cups in her hands.

She smiled brightly, "Well, it's certainly a fact, Lieutenant, no one will ever crown you with that title first thing in the morning. Humph! Miss Congeniality, I'll bet," she said.

"Oh, Commander Uhura? I beg your pardon, ma'am."

"Good morning, neighbor. Heard you shuffling boxes late into the night, figured you could use

this." She held up the coffee cup in invitation.

Spot inspection — Oh, no! Brianna thought, fumbling to roll out of her bunk and stand at attention. After only a couple of hours of shuffling last night she was hardly ready for that. Nor had she, as yet, been able to dispose of the contraband Romulan Ale. Or colored water — or whatever it was.

Had she actually made that frantic call to Captain Spock last night when it turned out to be six cases of the *Ale?* Or was that part of the dream? One or two bottles might be overlooked, as clearly Mr. Spock indicated. But seventy-two? Again, she felt sick. Every time she thought she had put her life back together, something else happened to knock her right back down. She was growing quite weary of this game, hoping that perhaps, she was still asleep and this was all part of a nightmare.

Alas, she deemed it as real as the ship's wake-up call, the alarm resounding once again. There had to be a way of deactivating that thing altogether. Brianna slapped it off again, before coming completely to attention. Uhura shot her a glance, seemingly enjoying playing the part of Senior Officer, making Brianna squirm just a little, as her superior made a cursory inspection.

The Communications Officer had been up for hours, after all, called to do a special favor for a certain Vulcan. Uhura found herself inordinately curious about this little girl Spock troubled himself to protect, fostering the appearance of his catering to Cantrell's every whim. Not only had he involved Uhura in tracking down the origins of the Romulan Ale in Cantrell's possession, certain as he was she was wholly innocent in the matter, he also seemed to be going out of his way to please her. Uhura remembered the morning they met in the wardroom and the way Spock, upon leaving, practically begged to do something, anything, for her. And when he found out she did have a problem, if you could call it that, he went all out to remove the obstacles facing her.

So, Uhura wanted to know, just who was it who suggested chivalry was dead? Not on this ship, apparently. Just when you think you've seen it all ...

Uhura shook her slightly graying head as if she were displeased, hiding her amusement as she continued her game, picking through a box or two in her curiosity. Spock's attitude was most peculiar, suddenly, acting as though by making Cantrell quite at home and comfortable here, he could induce her to stay. Someone should tell him the girl didn't have a choice. Well, so everyone knew he wasn't quite himself, yet. He was kind of restless, lately ... As if

in nervous anticipation, Uhura realized all at once. Was he waiting for her to arrive? Uhura gazed at her subordinate. Who are you, she pondered?

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Brianna Cantrell sampled the coffee as Uhura continued to inspect her crates. Confused, the lieutenant didn't know quite what to make of the situation. Was this an official call or was the Commander just being social?

"I see you brought your whole life with you," Uhura said, at last. "And I suppose you can explain away the ongoing mess? You've had a day and a half to get settled. Let me guess, you're too tired at the end of your duty shift to straighten these quarters, is that it?"

"No, ma'am. There's just more here than I thought and too little space in which to stow all of this — stuff." Brianna stifled a yawn, shivering, warming her hands with the coffee mug. The junk left her feeling mostly defeated. She wondered, again, about a need for an attorney, following the senior officer over to a particularly incriminating stack of crates. Heart pounding. She had nearly succeeded in finding all of her things, had even managed to find space for some of it, but what to do with the rest of it? And the *Ale?* She couldn't just dump it down the sink, it would reek. Besides all of that, what would she do with so many bottles, distinctive as they

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were? They would easily be traced. If she ever ran into Candace again ... "And it's not all mine."

"So, I hear," Uhura said, knowingly. She narrowed her large, black eyes, the lines at the corners crinkling ever so slightly as she gazed hard at the lieutenant. "Be thankful you have friends in high places. And that he trusts you implicitly. He sent me in here to help you with your little — *problem*."

Brianna Cantrell went ashen. "Oh, that's really very kind of you. But I —" she stopped short, turning her back to the commander. "Don't want to end up owing anyone..." Brianna murmured. She set the coffee mug aside and hugging herself, threw a hand across her mouth. So far, she had managed to stay out of that game, but that didn't mean she didn't know or understand the 'rules' of play. She bit her lower lip. She had just spent the night wandering into his head, too. What a little fool! 'Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly ...'

The commander was making herself quite at home, wandering about the small living space afforded the junior officers, poking through this box and that. Were all *Outworlders* lacking a sense of privacy? the younger woman lamented, as Uhura studied the small wooden icon in her hands, taken from the desk top.

"Nice piece," she commented, flipping the painting over to read the inscription on the back. "I see you're a collector of Byzantine art."

"I collect things that help me practice my faith," Brianna Cantrell said, making a quick knot with her robe ties as she crossed the small space between them, feeling particularly violated at the moment. "This isn't considered art. It's an icon. A 'window into heaven'. It's actually a copy of the oldest rendition of Christ known to exist," she furthered. "Five hundred ninety-nine A.D., if I'm correct. May I?" Brianna asked, carrying it back with her to the dresser top for safe keeping, this time. This particular copy by itself was nearly four hundred years old. A real treasure. Unnecessary handling could damage it.

"Well, you're the archaeologist," Uhura said, preferring to get down to the business at hand. The girl had given her chills without saying a word of reproach. She was seemingly unperturbed, her feelings positively masked — like Spock, Uhura suddenly thought, but with an even more haunting quality. "Seems to me you're all a little quirky," she muttered. Again those eyes. Uhura nearly shuddered. Brianna Cantrell continued to hold her in her gaze. Uhura smiled anxiously, trying another approach. "Looks like what you need is a moving sale."

"Or a garbage chute — but, like I said, it's not all mine," Brianna complained.

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"Possession is nine-tenths the law," Uhura said, giving the lieutenant a meaningful glance. The girl's piercing blue eyes flashed with that remark, Uhura noticed, and she almost blanched.

"That is true, isn't it," Brianna said. *Possession*, she thought woefully. *What an ugly word. I'm dead.* 

"A moving sale could be quite profitable. For instance, I'd pay you handsomely for this," Uhura said, testing the girl by holding up a statuette she found in one of the crates. "Or anything else of interest you may have to sell."

Brianna Cantrell began to tremble again and not from the chill in the air. Had Mr. Spock truly sent the commander in here to help her? Or was Uhura here possibly to entrap her, listening in on the line during their call? Where was Security and why didn't they simply arrest her? Or, perhaps, that's what she was doing, stalling until they could get here. Well, she wasn't about to give the commander the satisfaction by selling her anything, even if she was a bit short on credits at the moment. Another one of her stands for independence, she had turned Daddy down on his offer to continue her monthly allowance once she joined Starfleet and had started drawing her very own salary, however meager it was turning out to be.

She had done nothing wrong. "Oh, that? You can have that. It's useless."

"Oh, but you're kidding. It must be worth a small fortune."

"Hardly, the artist is a complete unknown. And after the way he's behaved, it's even lost all sentimental value. Considering, he suggested I lacked *'every essential ingredient necessary'* to inspire him. I'll let you be the judge. You're holding the evidence."

"Oh, but it's lovely —"

"It's supposed to be me."

"It — just doesn't resemble anything human," Uhura hastily added. "What happened? You wouldn't sleep with him so he broke it off?"

"Well, of course I didn't sleep with him. We were never a couple, for one. He was just a friend. Or so I thought, anyway. Besides, I was waiting for my —" Brianna Cantrell paused. So few people knew about her relationship with her moderator. Her parents felt the less said the better, making her feel ashamed of an encounter over which she had so little control at that time. Right now she felt the crushing weight of such a burden, increasingly aware she needed someone to confide in. Realizing, all at once, that outside of T'Reesa, and she was acting a bit quirky herself, lately, Brianna had no one.

"That is to say, I'm a bit old-fashioned and I believe in saving myself for the *Proper Time*. I mean,

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it is a covenant between a man and a woman. There is an order to things. Courtship, betrothal, marriage and then ... well, you know, the forging of said covenant. I was still a step and a half away," she murmured, shaking off the bitter reality of her situation, again. "But how on Earth did we get onto such a subject? Just take the thing. Really."

"Really?" Uhura was surprised. "Oh, but it must be worth something. Seriously, what do you want for it?"

Brianna paused, collecting herself, anxious to change the subject. "I'm not interested in making a profit on anything. What I'd really like to do is find Ensign Candace McIntyre and ship this all back to her. It's her stuff, for the most part. Her problem. I want nothing more to do with it."

Uhura nodded her head, "All of it?"

"Well, yes, what's hers."

"It can be done," Uhura said, calmly. Black, dancing eyes met blue and a devious grin slowly broke out across Uhura's lovely face.

"For a fee, I suppose. Commander, I don't need that kind of help."

"Nyota, please. Commander's too formal," she said, continuing to poke through the crates. She came up with the two extra bottles of *Romulan Ale* Brianna

had discovered the night before last. "These will do as payment."

"Hey, couldn't you get into all kinds of trouble? I mean, I don't want to burden anyone else with this," Brianna Cantrell pleaded. *Implicate anyone else*.

"What, for diverting cargo back to its proper destination?"

"For not reporting ... what?"

"Relax, Lieutenant. I did some digging early this morning, considering our executive officer is going way out on a limb for you. I wanted to make sure you weren't going to pull him down with you. He's not entirely himself, lately. And you, little girl, seem to have him a bit rattled this morning."

"Oh," Brianna said, shaking her head in dismay. "I didn't mean to ..." Her mind flitted back to the dream; their joint wandering. She closed her eyes, struggling against renewed emotions, to contain the tears. She was so completely scandalized. She just missed the relationship they once had so much right now. Even meeting him in person hadn't abated the pain of losing the thread that bound them together, previously. If she chose to walk away now, how could she even begin to heal? Perhaps, her continued wandering was an act of self-preservation?

Uhura glanced over at her, studying her for the

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moment. "Are you always this much trouble?"

Brianna couldn't speak. She would lose all control if she tried, shrugging her shoulders instead. And then the dam burst. "I don't know. Maybe," she whimpered. Tears stood in her eyes. T'Pran did seem to be on her every other instant, growing up. "Ever since he died eight months ago, things just keep falling apart." Brianna Cantrell broke into sobs.

Uhura, beside herself with what to do, gathered the younger woman into her arms, patting her back. Comforting her. "Well, I know. But he's all right now. You've seen that, haven't you?"

Brianna abruptly pulled away, completely confused by the images that swirled before her eyes, the impressions that bombarded her through Uhura's *unshielded* grasp ... The pain, her disbelief as Captain Spock lay completely lifeless on the examining table; as still as Uhura had ever seen anyone, so peaceful in his death; so cold to the touch; the resounding gong into the night and the sudden joy at seeing him alive again, rising from the stone slab in the Temple deep in Mt. Seleya, walking toward her ... just like Lazarus.

Is this where that particular impression had originated, from Commander Uhura? Over and over in her head Brianna had likened her *moderator* to the figure of Lazarus in the bible, at the very moment she had sensed he lived again, just a short

time, in fact, after she *felt* him die. A matter of days. Brianna Cantrell backed away from Uhura, the revelation from such an unexpected source taking her by surprise. Her own *shields* were woefully askew this morning, allowing her to trespass, however briefly, into the commander's unguarded thoughts. She gave the older woman a look of incomprehension.

"No. How can he be all right? How can anything be all right again when he's —"

"Well, mostly all right," Uhura conceded.

"Dead. You're talking about Mister Spock," Brianna said. She wiped the tears from her face, continuing to back away. Distance herself.

"Well, of course, weren't you?"

"He actually *died?* I know the evening news recanted the reports of his death, suggesting they had been in error or at the very least, premature. But people just don't come back from the dead. He died? Oh, I just don't understand. Then why —" *doesn't he know me?* Why is he playing games? Did he wish to be free from her and used his death or near death as the perfect way out of this entanglement? Breathe, Brianna, she reminded herself, releasing the breath she held.

Again, she felt faint, seeing the little stars dancing against a black background. She was either going to

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be sick or pass out, she hadn't quite decided which, yet. She grabbed the glass of water from her headboard and made her way over to the open crate, taking out a long-necked bottle, pouring herself a shot — or the last few drops of it, as it turned out, of the *Saurian* brandy. She and Spock had killed the bottle the other night. She sipped at the diluted drink, rolling the glass between her hands, staving off the blackness that threatened to consume her. She refused to give in. "Alone, so alone," she murmured. And so likely to stay that way, from the look of things.

Dr. T'Nikha stated it would take time for her psyche to heal, that without proper maintenance, the remaining thread would eventually wither and she would no longer *reach* for him sporadically. Soon she would no longer *feel* him with her, either. The *Phantom Effect* would fade away. The *wanderings* would cease. All she had to do was let go.

However, if she did let go, allowing the thread to stagnate, it would also mean they could never put things back together again. The divorce would be irreconcilable. Was she prepared for that? Could she just walk away, now that they had met in the flesh, with everything she felt inside? She had feelings for him — a real person, not a mere phantom. Yes, she could. If that's what he wanted.

She could do it for him.

"Forgive my outburst. I'm not myself this morning."

"Well, I suppose not with all of this to trouble you. But here's some news that might cheer you up," Uhura gestured to the crates. "Seems a certain, highly reputable shipping company in charge of supplying goods for the Delta Beta Conference, is in a quandary regarding seven misplaced crates of a foreign ale. All duly licensed and approved for shipment by the Federation. In honor of its guests. Upon checking, the last time anyone had clear record of it was Thursday evening."

"As in last night, Thursday evening?"

Uhura nodded "Between then and now it seems to have mysteriously disappeared. Can't imagine where it went, can you?"

"Erik must be frantic this morning." Erik was in charge of the shipment.

"Owner's son," Uhura supplied. She shook her head while making a tisk-tisk sound by sucking her teeth. "You give them everything ..." she sighed.

"He was helping me transport my belongings. Gristish was directing another order at the time — most likely to said Conference. Why Erik put him in charge? ... he must have placed it too close. Right

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into the beaming field. What an idiot!"

"Who, Gristish, or this Erik fella?"

"Both, actually. Erik for trusting him. And Gristish for being dropped on his head one too many times as an infant, or something. Believe me, the last thing either of us would do, is stab Daddy in the back. Especially with something like this. This could ruin him. His business —"

"Daddy? As in - your father?"

"Joseph Cantrell, yes —"

"Of Cantrell Shipping, of course. Oh, I get it, now. Spock is playing nursemaid?" Uhura questioned with a chuckle, hardly accepting that as the explanation for Spock's current disposition. Was he ordered to play mother-hen to some spoiled brat, rich kid? If so, he obviously had the wrong rich kid. The lieutenant didn't strike her as being the least bit spoiled. She was actually very sweet. So, even if he did pull such duty, he was getting off very easy. Or, maybe it was his duty to protect her. Uhura grinned. That he seemed to be doing very well. The Vulcan had actually seemed to break a sweat over this.

"Well, I'll tell you. I don't know if this was truly a shipping mishap, or an *im*practical joke. Either way it was lucky for you. For all of us, really, that Spock's the one who traced the shipment here

ahead of the upper echelon of Starfleet Command, regardless of why he did it. We can safely reroute it without leaving a trail. Spare your little brother this headache. And us, too. Everybody's happy."

"Older brother, although he doesn't often act it. That explains the cases. But the other —"

"Huh-uh," Uhura held up her hand. "Don't you even tell me. I don't want to know. But it just might be a good idea for you to do your own packing from here on out," the older woman gently warned. "It's safer that way."

"Aye, ma'am," Brianna Cantrell said. "Lesson number one."

"Ah, I see you've had the drill."

"Mister Spock was quite thorough."

"As always, I'm sure. I won't grill you any further, since I'm convinced, too, this was all just a snafu of some sort," Uhura said, taking up the two bottles of contraband and wrapping them in a cloth she brought with her, tucking them under her arm before she turned to leave. "Perhaps, when you've crossed the *Neutral Zone* for the first time, we'll take it out and celebrate," she said, with a wink. "In the meantime, I'm duly confiscating the evidence and giving you a firm warning. Oh, and please from here on out, see that you don't get Mister Spock into any more trouble."

## APRIL L. PAYNE

"Trouble? Oh, I would never ..." Brianna shook her head. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Thank you, ma'am," Uhura said, smiling. "Just live up to your record and stay out of mischief. That'll be enough. And give Mister Spock a break. He really is still recovering, you know."

He's not the only one ...

"Say," the commander said, glancing down at her wrist chronometer. "You had better get dressed. Unless, of course, you intend to show up for duty in your jammies." Brianna glanced down at her clothing, then over at the time. She had barely forty minutes until muster and accountability.

"Gads!" she hollered, setting herself in motion as Uhura started for the door. "And thank you again — Nyota."

"Glad I could help. I'll see you at lunch. We'll talk more."

"Oh, Commander?" Brianna said, all at once reaching for the statuette Uhura had set aside, handing it back to the Communications officer without ceremony. "You forgot this."

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes, I do, but it comes with a charge."

"Of course. How much —"

Brianna shook her head, crossing her arms over her chest. "Not in credits. Just keep a strict eye on it. No matter how many times I've tried giving it away, it has this rather unerring propensity for making its way back to me. It's most uncanny. Humph, you don't suppose it's cursed, do you?"

"Cursed?" Uhura said, uncomfortably. Brianna grinned.

"Oh, just enjoy it, I'm teasing, Commander. I'll see you at lunch."

# 21

November 16, 2285, Stardate: 8511.16

USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

She lay motionless upon a pool of water so deep and still it reminded him of black glass. Or rock – Obsidian so shiny and smooth it could be used as a mirror. Qual se tu? Could he have found her again at last – had he finally made it back to her? So far away, with only the light of the moon to illuminate her, all he could recognize for certain, was the familiar, filmy temple garb that swathed her head to foot. Curiosity drove him closer to the bank and he reached

forward shattering the water's calmness with his hand. Concentric circles grew outward from his fingertips, larger and larger, until the clear water licked at her sides. Suddenly, she awakened and sitting upright beckoned to him.

# As if she knew him!

Excitement rippled through him and he was at once securing the rope he held, tossing her the other end before stepping into the water, wading out into the deep toward her. She was still so far away. He dove headlong into the ripples of water, his heart thumping wildly, afraid if he didn't reach her this time, she would be gone forever! She had been taken away from him before and the thread that remained between them was so tenuous, worn and tattered, at best. Adding yet another worry, already he felt the sharks circling. He hastened his stroke, pulling at the water even harder.

"I thought," she sobbed, as he made it over to her, coming up beside her at long last. "I thought you weren't going to come back."

"How could I not?" he said, panting slightly from the swim, gazing up at her from the water's depths. Catching the hand she offered him, with his other hand he gently swept the long tendrils of wet hair back off of her face, releasing the veil that hid her features,

anxious to behold her for the first time. Startling. Suddenly, he was completely confused, concerned, as the face he saw was that of the lieutenant's. How ...?

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It was early Saturday morning when Spock emerged from his quarters again, ready to resume his normal duties. The work schedule for the day was rather a full one, the way he preferred it, hoping it would be enough to keep his mind off of his current difficulties. They were to rendezvous with the *T'Mir* in a mere thirty-three hours. He expected to meet his intended, in the flesh, shortly after the Vulcan Delegation came aboard. Unsure of the precise timeline the Elders had in mind, Spock began to think that, perhaps, this 'meeting' might even take place at the scheduled formal dinner the officers planned for the emissaries come tomorrow evening.

How fitting, and so in keeping with Vulcan culture, to announce his upcoming nuptials in front of his friends. Energized by that thought, he walked swiftly down the corridor toward the nearest turbolift and the day's promise he would be able to keep his focus. His attention was woefully divided these last couple of days with the lieutenant's arrival, his duty to this ship and crew eclipsed by personal ones that were becoming increasingly complicated

with each passing minute, to his chagrin.

Spock even attempted to seclude himself. He holed himself up in his quarters late Friday evening after he had dropped the lieutenant off at her quarters, intent on spending the remainder of his scheduled leave, alone, finding it necessary in order to regain a sense of balance. He was so shamefully out of control. At the very last, he turned to deep meditation when all other efforts proved futile, for all the good it did. Quite simply, he failed on all accounts to exorcize Lt. Cantrell from his thoughts. Even in sleep, what little he allotted himself, he sought her out dreaming restlessly, wandering where he didn't belong. After five hours, he gave up.

Unable to resist the *candidate* years before, and even after seeing where that led, he found himself, curiously, making a similar mistake now when it came to the lieutenant. He had spent three months retraining his mind after he underwent the *Refusion*, clearing out the cobwebs and countering the amnesia. Where was the *Discipline?* 

To make matters worse, last night he could swear he was with his *candidate* again. He *felt* her familiar *touch* ever so briefly, the dream suddenly turning, taking on a new slant, filled with the lieutenant's image where once the image of the woman was obscured, *Qual se tu?* Not likely, he asserted. He had

merely broken into Cantrell's sleep at that moment, if he had to guess, something he did not do easily. T'Nikha did advise him that what he was experiencing was all part of the *Phantom Effect*; a term used by Vulcan Healers to typically describe a spectrum of symptoms occurring when *bondlinks*, or even near *bondlinks*, as in his case, were suddenly, forcibly broken through death or other means. The unattached mind might *wander* searching for the missing part of itself, the sensation of oneness, present from time to time, subsiding as the damaged psyche healed.

Victims of the *Kaliffee*, the *Challenge*, sometimes suffered from it, as well. Especially when a divorce was unexpected, although usually to a far lesser degree, since the *link* was generally weakened through the lack of maintenance by the time a relationship reached the point of dissolution. Spock was familiar with that firsthand, although he agreed this time was so much worse, particularly upon waking again to find himself totally *alone*.

Ordinarily, he would accept what T'Nikha was telling him. He could even assert the possibility his troubled mind simply filled in the face of Lt. Cantrell, lacking any other input. He had yet to see even a holograph of the *candidate*, his intended, and was intentionally, or otherwise, kept unaware of her identity. He did, however, answer a distress call,

of sorts, from the lieutenant just a few hours ago, choosing to handle it from a distance. Perhaps, that's where his mind intermingled her image with his subconscious fantasies, having drifted off to sleep shortly thereafter, he reasoned. He hoped that was the case.

There were always possibilities. Yet, barring the fact that these last couple of nights were somehow different, leaving him to wonder what the hell he was trying to do to himself, his circumstances had changed dramatically. The sobering thought being that perhaps in her informed state, the *candidate* was also reaching for him again, in earnest, even as he reached for her. Logically, by now she would have received word of his survival, just as he was told he would marry her.

The candidate's was a very powerful mind quite capable of transcending great distances, of that he was certain, fostering the possibility they had actually reconnected briefly last night. Certainly, it felt as real as when he broke into Cantrell's sleep, a fact he no longer doubted. Curiously enough, it was also the only time he could breach the lieutenant's shields thus far, while she slept. All the telltale signs were present from Cantrell's ability to recount certain aspects of the dream — to her startled recognition when he did the same, taking them beyond mere coincidence.

This had very serious implications, raising an issue he could not ignore, he reminded himself, as he came around the curve, stepping into turbo-lift E. Spock drew in a sigh, finding himself greatly disturbed by the whole affair. He hung onto the lift's handle, giving it a twist and telling the computer which deck he desired. Hearing the thrum of the mechanics, the car took him careening to the left, throwing him to the deck before it began its ascent. A little fine-tuning was required, he decided, getting back to his feet, straightening his jacket, making a mental note of it. He grasped the sides of the car this time to keep from being thrown back upon the deck.

When he awoke this morning, he made the decision not to look up the little lieutenant right away, needing additional time to put this whole thing into perspective, to distance himself from her. He reminded himself this should have been done up front, the minute they met — before the spark between them ignited. Preventing a conflagration, after all, was far easier than putting it out again. Although, given the suddenness of it, he harbored some doubt it could have been prevented, either way.

Why was he so resistant when it came to avoiding trouble? He was a fool, that's why. His late halfbrother had a similar proclivity. Perhaps, it was in

his genes? Somehow, he lacked the imagination it required to ever see Sarek acting so shamelessly reckless as either of his sons, deciding it must be on the sides of their respective mothers.

So far this morning, Spock had defied the urge to be with the lieutenant, creating in him a false sense that once again he had mastered his human-half. For, surely, it was his human side that had so blatantly and unforgivably succumbed to her charm, he thought and then was rather startled when the turbo-lift opened up onto D-deck, section-four. What was he doing here on her deck, he pondered, even as he numbly stepped off the vehicle? Worried. The dream ran briefly through his mind again. 'I thought you weren't going to come back ...'

'How could I not?' ...

Absent-mindedly, he headed for her quarters, veering off to the port side before he caught himself. Firmly, he propelled himself back the way he came toward the turbo-lift and the officer's wardroom, thankful it was early and no one had passed him to witness his confusion. He wished it was unnecessary to ride the elevator to reach his destination, as he suddenly distrusted himself. He could easily, and without his conscious knowledge, in fact, ask for D-deck-four again, as he just demonstrated.

Spock frowned. His behavior was suddenly most peculiar, completely illogical and he wished only to escape, but the turbo-lift was otherwise occupied and he was forced to wait, his mind reeling. There were explanations, he told himself, mental breakdown being only one of them. Perhaps, he thought slowly, the answer was more basic. He could be experiencing the early stages of *Pon farr*. As of this moment, he had no mate. Or, barring that, perhaps the little lieutenant was emitting extraordinary pheremones, making her completely irresistible, he thought, distracted.

Spock shook off the notion. Even that was an example of the illogic of his deduction. She was human, not *Deltan*. What was more disturbing to him, in fact, beyond his inability to find the direct cause of his attraction to her, he appeared unable to purge her from his thoughts, his guard apparently locked in the 'down' position. Could not — or *would* not, he pondered, guiltily, as suddenly he was not alone. The first officer found that any resolve he had regarding Lieutenant Cantrell dissipated completely in her presence.

"Oh, good morning, Mister Spock," Brianna Cantrell greeted, coming up beside him, a little out of breath, due to her haste. Her manner was considerably subdued this morning, withdrawn, her eyes slightly red-rimmed as if she had been

weeping, much to his consternation. Most likely those weren't tears of joy she'd shed, although her remorse was understandable, with all that ale she had to worry about. Her brothers had pulled a number on her, no doubt putting a good scare into her.

Spock found himself disturbed at their thoughtless contrivance, risking their sister's career in the name of hijinks, giving her additional cause for sorrow. Didn't she already have enough to contend with? This could hardly be construed as a joke, by his interpretation. Most illogical. He found himself once more fighting the urge to drape a protective arm around her, wanting to pull her in close, let her know she had someone who cared. Someone she could lean on. She seemed so *alone* this morning.

Too alone, he thought, realizing she hadn't perked up the way she always did any other time he was around. She always seemed so happy to see him. Spock suddenly worried that he was the one who had made her cry that she was angry he had invaded her dreams last night. He had known women who cried when enraged. Christine Chapel, for one, crying as she threw things at him, preferably breakables. Their short-term relationship was tempestuous, at best. He shuddered, wondering if Cantrell had the same propensity, sadly acknowledging he would likely never find out.

He wouldn't blame the lieutenant if she was equally disturbed by the incident. Even if she had seemed pleased to see him at the time, though a little confused at first, it made a poor excuse for his breach in propriety. Her dreams were hers. He had no right to waltz through them, her acquiescence never really an issue of choice. Dreams being what they were, he was just there.

Spock didn't quite know what to say about it, how best to broach the subject, wanting simply to belay any discussion on the matter, indefinitely. Unfortunately, ignoring it as he first sought to do, wouldn't make the problem go away and since he was unwilling to further damage the *House of Talek Sen Dene* with his antics, regrettably, what choice did he have? He drew in a silent breath, standing with his hands behind his back looking forward at the doors to the lift.

He was very attracted to the lieutenant, wishing he could tell her so, that he could be as open with her in his waking moments, as he apparently was in his sleep and would be, were it not for that damned piece of paper. He had no right to even be thinking of her, let alone seeing her like this, in his own way allowing things to escalate. He had to face the fact that whatever he called it, a subconsciously driven impulse or a compulsion, he meant to see her this morning. He had been driven to do so and it simply

had to stop, he decided, determining to put an end to it right here and now. This morning.

Given the circumstances, it was the logical thing to do. Yet, the prospects of being separated from her, even for a moment, sent a dagger right through him ... he would much rather share with her how content he would be to run his fingers through her soft hair, across her porcelain cheeks, awaking beside her after a night's slumber ... he squeezed his eyes shut driving out the unwanted thoughts, the feelings that were beginning to stir in him.

"Good morning, Mister Cantrell," Spock replied, slowly, feeling quite helpless at the moment to fight it. The doors to the lift suddenly opened and the two stepped inside. They both reached for the coneshaped control lever, his hand grazing hers as she reached the hand throttle first. Spock secretly enjoyed the unauthorized contact; her skin remarkably soft. Lieutenant Cantrell was blushing. Spock closed his eyes relinquishing the controls to her with effort.

She still seemed so very far away. Again, he found it most peculiar. Puzzling over it, he tried to find a referent for the unusual connection, to no avail. He only knew that he was thoroughly miserable when he was constrained to leave her last night, after their tour of the ship was complete. He was thoroughly miserable standing beside her right

now, lacking the necessary freedom to touch her at will, the way he would be allowed in private if she were his woman, the lack of control defined by such a need, notwithstanding. He needed to put in abeyance the gulf that persisted between them.

"C-deck, sir? Officer's lounge?" she asked, giving the handle a slight twist. Again, she appeared tentative, he thought, her cheeks suffused with a delicate crimson. He wished he could find a way to evoke a smile, at least. Having her angry with him on top of everything else was ... unacceptable.

"Affirmative, Lieutenant. I have our usual table reserved," he quipped, testing her mood. Her blush deepened to his instant regret. Obviously, she was quite uncomfortable in his presence and he began to wonder if, in fact, he hadn't intruded upon her again this morning, his need to be near her overpowering his sense of propriety, once more.

Spock experienced a renewed sense of guilt, coupled with his old friend, shame, for his lapse in *discipline* and for dragging the little lieutenant helplessly into the thick of it. How he was able to break into Cantrell's sleep like that escaped him. Even now, she was tightly *shielded*. Where had she learned such control? Last night she confessed she was *d'Vel'nahr*, *Vulcan-by-choice*. Was it possible? You're so human ...

Increasingly, it became apparent to him something

had to be said about the dreams, especially last night's. If he had, indeed, made contact with the *candidate* and if the *candidate felt* Cantrell's presence, both their futures could be compromised.

Spock stood to lose his property, an obscene amount of credits — or even his life if the *candidate* wished to get ugly about it and press the issue. What was he thinking? He was the *First Son*, his conduct lately unbecoming his princely status. He just may have unwittingly, foolishly given his bride grounds for a statutory *Challenge*. Under these terms his soon-to-be-betrothed didn't even require a *Champion*, Spock would fight a henchman for his indiscretion. If he emerged the victor, he would be free but in adverse financial straits, as a huge brideprice would be extracted to compensate her family for the humiliation caused, and a fair amount of his property confiscated, to say nothing of his damaged status with his own family.

The lieutenant, on the other hand, currently enjoying Vulcan citizenship, would be publicly humiliated and then ostracized for her part in the indiscretion, stripped of her Vulcan citizenship she had worked so hard to attain. Since she wasn't the initiator, it hardly seemed fair to Spock. How could one Vulcan wreak such havoc? For both of their sakes, all three of theirs, really, he had to break things off with Cantrell, innocent as it was, so far.

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"I — ah — just wanted to thank you for helping me with my shipping problem," Brianna Cantrell began, breaking the uneasy silence, as she followed him off the lift onto C-deck. His touch had sent a shockwave through her. She found herself wishing she could snuggle into his arms, feel him holding her close. He seemed dreadfully far away, even though he stood less than half a meter away from her. *Alone. So alone.* She could hardly stand it.

Last night she had reached out and *touched* his thoughts. Again. No, that was impossible. Surely that sensation of oneness, however brief, was only a remembrance of what they had once shared. Instead, she had merely walked in Spock's sleep — not quite the same thing as being one with his mind. They were back at the beginning, their game reset, the resulting sensation more like being in the same room with him, as she was now, and yet slightly more connected, more acutely aware of one another. Awake, she was painfully aware of the gulf between them and how she couldn't get close enough to him except for the brief moments of physical contact, such as just now when they had both reached for the lift's hand throttle.

Again, he took his hand away ... always so proper. It hurt. Like that pained expression he often wore when he looked at her. He was doing it again. She

diverted her eyes, fearing his wrath. And rightly so. Vulcans prized their privacy. With all of their mindpowers, mental *shielding* was not merely a courtesy, but a must.

And *Mind-travel*, although often encouraged, was risky at best, requiring a Master's control to avoid delving into the thoughts of another beyond their wishes. To do so, was a heinous crime, *Ka'et Klasa*, on an even par with rape, on Earth. How could she have violated his space like that? Even if he didn't seem perturbed at the time, it was clearly wrong of her to persist like this, as if it were perfectly natural, expected even, for her to visit him in this manner. What once was, was no longer, something she had to keep in mind.

No wonder she had a headache, crashing through his *shielding* like that, with no regard for his privacy ... why couldn't she just control herself? Brianna owed him an apology, for several infractions, actually. Humbly, she began again. "And to say I'm sorry for calling you so late. So early, actually. I didn't stop to think if was after oh-two-hundred hours, sir." *I didn't mean to invade your sleep, sir.* Why couldn't she say it out loud? Get it over with. It was just so embarrassing.

She followed him over to the row of foodreplicators, picking up a diskette without giving her selection much thought. Placing it into the

computer, she waited impatiently for her tray, wishing only to get away, unable to hide from this. Spock, too, made a selection. She sneaked a peek at what he ordered.

Tea and *tabsheel*, or something that resembled it, anyway. It was a kind of hashed brown, potatocheesy thing. She would like to get permission to fix the recipe in that programming, although it looked better than what the machine turned out for her. Her eggs were way too runny, causing her already knotted stomach to lurch.

"I believe I stated you could call me at any time, Lieutenant, I meant what I said."

"Thank you, sir," she said quietly, avoiding his eyes." It's just that the Commander suggested... "she tried again.

"I trust Uhura has things well in hand?" Spock said, interrupting her, taking his tray from the vendor. He was glancing about the busy room in an abrupt manner, as if he couldn't wait to escape her company. He must be very angry, she surmised.

"Affirmative, sir. As a matter of fact, you weren't too far off in suggesting my practical joker had things beamed into my quarters. As it turns out, one of my brothers was at fault for the mix-up."

"Indeed? Only one of your brothers? I believe you have four of them."

"That's correct, sir."

"Aaron, Erik, Joe, Jr. And Adrian," he supplied, "your practical joker." Spock spotted a vacant table, nodding in its direction.

"You've peeked into my file."

"Only in the line of duty, Lieutenant. Would you care to join me?" Spock asked, as they reached the same corner table where they had shared her pouch of Vulcan tea, the morning before. "We do need to talk," he said. Again Brianna Cantrell was blushing.

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James T. Kirk looked about the large dining room, breakfast tray in hand and was soon crossing the deck to join Scotty and Dr. McCoy at a nearby table. "Well, good morning, gentlemen. Anyone seen Spock this morning? He wasn't in the gym, thought he'd be here," Kirk said, a little disappointed, aware of his closest friend's obvious distress. Something was, indeed, going on with the Vulcan. Kirk wondered just what had transpired at that family meeting?

"Canna say that I have, Captain," Mr. Scott replied.

"Sure this wasn't one of his fasting days?" McCoy said, sipping at his cup of coffee. Kirk nodded as he stabbed a piece of scrambled egg, ready to pop it into his mouth.

"Come to think o fit, he's probably already on the bridge," Kirk concluded.

"Aye," Scotty added, "he seems to live there."

"Anything wrong, Jim?" McCoy said. He studied the captain, looking for hidden clues as to what was bothering the man. Kirk shrugged his shoulders, nervously tapping the tines of his fork against his plate. They made a tinny, rat-a-tat against the hum of the dining hall.

"No, not actually," Kirk hedged. "It's just he hasn't been himself, lately. Since he got back from Vulcan, especially. Have you noticed how distracted he's become? Like he's wrestling with something."

"More like a salmon swimming *up*stream, if you ask me," Dr. McCoy said. "We've seen it before."

Kirk suggested, "The girl?"

"Aach! No way."

"Scotty, you know something?"

"Aye, Captain," the Scotsman began, his attention suddenly drifting to the lower deck of the large wardroom. "And I'm beginnin' to find out more. Will ya look at that —"

Kirk and McCoy followed Mr. Scott's gaze. Down below them on the lower deck, settling into the corner table was Spock and Lieutenant Cantrell.

"Guess he's not fasting, after all," McCoy said.

"Aye. And not so married to the bridge, I see. But then, he always takes his duty verra seriously. Nyota tells me he's playing nursemaid. Ya know who she is, dinna ya? The late Admiral Ilsen's granddaughter. And if that is nay enough of a burden for one wee lass, her father is Joseph Cantrell of *Cantrell Shipping*. He owns nearly all of Gamma quadrant and half again of Alpha, sectors fifteen through thirty. Bought the rights to the shippin' lanes before anyone thought we'd be out that far."

"Astute businessman, that."

"Heiress," McCoy stated. "From a remarkably prominent family."

"In other words, hands-off. Is that what you're saying?" Kirk said.

"Aye. But if I dinna know better ... From all appearances ... he's really smitten with her, isn't her? I can hardly believe it."

"Me, either." Kirk shook his head.

"I'd say the babysitter has fallen for the baby," McCoy said, flatly.

"Bones," Kirk frowned.

Scotty was shaking his head. "We're talking about Mister Spock here. T'is hardly likely, no matter

what it looks like," Scotty was adamant. Of all of them, he'd served with the Vulcan the longest. "He's no' capable of that emotion. How many times has he made that claim to us?"

"Thank you, Scotty." Kirk gave McCoy a quick nod of his head. Happy to win the point.

"I know," McCoy said. "I know. He's Vulcan. But I'll remind both of you, his father married a human. And it's just not so unusual for a man to seek out a woman who bears qualities of his mother." That shut the other two up. McCoy folded his arms across his chest and gave a short triumphant nod of his head

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Throughout breakfast, Brianna Cantrell could *feel* Mr. Spock gazing at her, as if on the verge of saying something, yet everything that came out of his mouth was either technical, distant or simply jobrelated. How had she heard Dr. McCoy describe it? 'As tight-lipped as an Aldeberan shellfish.' That's exactly how it was, she decided, curious as to why, too afraid she knew the answer to that question. At the same time, she wondered what he was waiting for. Oh, why have I started wandering again? Just when things were starting to rebuild between us.

He seemed interested. She certainly was, more than she expected, now that he was here in the

flesh. She hated to think that on a subconscious level she was trying to sabotage their budding relationship by intruding where she didn't belong. Always pushing, trying to make things happen faster in her impatience. Would that she could just reach out and *touch* him, make him *feel* her thoughts to let him know her mind and through that her heart, her very soul ... Gads! She was doing it, again. Why was he so very compelling? What was it about him?

There were too many questions this morning and far too little time to ponder an answer to any one of them, she decided. And he was watching her again. Nervously, although she tried her best to disguise it, she shoved the contents of her breakfast into the center of the plate. She was unsure why she had ordered it. She wasn't even remotely hungry, mostly because her head hurt so much. She was certain it had everything to do with her unauthorized entry into Spock's head. Mortified by it, how could she eat? Would he forgive her or had she just lost her one and only friend aboard this vessel?

Her lower lip began to quiver with the thought and Brianna Cantrell bit it trying to curb the emotions that beset her.

Spock suddenly sat back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest, an expression that closely

resembled exasperation filling his countenance. He shook his head. "I am most curious to know where it is you wander?" he asked. Then, sitting up again, he reached for the small can on her tray, shaking it up thoroughly before popping the lid.

"I beg your pardon?" The color drained from Brianna's face when she finally heard him. Watching him. Apparently, right into your head! Abruptly, there is it was, the question he meant to ask. The question she feared. He was giving her the opportunity to confess to what they both knew had happened last night. She would be wise to take what was given. She was just so completely scandalized she found herself at a temporary loss for words. Oh, somebody just shoot me now!

"You seem distracted this morning. And you have not eaten. Have you taken ill, Mister Cantrell?" he said, settling a straw into the opening before placing the nutritional supplement directly before her, quietly insistent about it. "You will just have to have two at lunch," he said. Brianna Cantrell grimaced, scooting the can aside again, for now, eliciting a frown from the first officer. He shook his head, clearly annoyed with her now, if he wasn't before.

"I'm all right. I just have a headache again this morning, is all." she glowered back. "And so completely mortified. It's just - I don't know," she

shrugged, finding it difficult to put it into words. How could she tell him? As much as she wanted to, she felt so awkward.

What she had done was so forward and undignified, given her current disposition. She knew she had to lay claim to her misdeed, but she just couldn't, shaking her head, dismally. "I'm afraid I'm not the best company this morning," she said, lamely, disappointing herself. She took a sip of the unwanted shake-like drink, just to appease him.

Coward! After everything he'd done for her thus far, too. This is how she repays him? she silently groaned. No wonder he'd dumped her. Brianna kept her eyes from meeting his, glancing about the nearly emptied room. Must be getting late, she thought, checking her wrist chronometer, as a majority of the people headed for their duty stations. Only a few lingered now, those having just got off the zero-four hundred to zero-eight hundred Watch. She started gathering her tray to leave, rising from her seat.

Spock's hand was immediately on her arm, preventing her from walking away. They needed to talk about what had happened between them. Ignoring it wouldn't alter the facts. He had hoped it would come up through the course of conversation, but she just wasn't talking his morning. He couldn't let her leave without apologizing to her. "I have

done something of an egregious nature. Forgive me," he said. "I never meant to offend thee."

Brianna Cantrell gazed back at him, stunned, seeing the crinkle in his brow. Closing her eyes, she was dangerously close to tears for the second time this morning. This was great, now he was blaming himself. Gathering her courage, she decided he could only hate her when he heard what she had to say. She practiced a quick mind-exercise, gaining enough control over herself to speak. She gazed steadily into his eyes, "Sir, is wasn't you, it was me," she admitted, at last. "It's my fault. I guess I just sort of wandered into your sleep. I don't know how, really. But sometimes ... I do that. I'm completely ashamed and very sorry." Brianna paused, taking her seat again. She held her breath waiting for his reaction, good or ill. "I really don't know what else to say."

Surprisingly, Spock removed his hand from her arm to gently curl her fingertips inside his, nodding his head at her.

"Fascinating," he murmured. He was amused at her confession that she could even begin to think this was of her doing. In all probability, it was simply a case of human arrogance on her part, to make such a claim. Even so, for a moment his heart skipped a beat, and the air seemed to grow thin and hard to breathe again. *Qual se tu?* he questioned

involuntarily. Immediately, he backed away from the notion again. While he did note certain mental capabilities on her record, and he reminded himself of her ability to cure his headache, this suggested an extraordinary power very few humans were known to possess.

Certainly, such a *Gift* would not have gone unexplored by the Vulcan Elders, particularly since she bore Vulcan citizenship. Spock had yet to find a reference to any such testing on her record and he had looked for it, seeking answers, looking for a semblance of logic behind his own aberrant behavior, of late, in regards to one Lt. Cantrell. Vainly, he hoped for an easy solution where there was none.

Spock sat quietly for awhile holding her hand, eyes closed and looking pained. At least, it was good to have it out in the open, he decided, drawing in a quiet breath. He was both intrigued by the phenomenon and deeply troubled by it. He was *in* trouble, he corrected himself. He should have never allowed such a thing to occur between them, his mind to *wander* where it couldn't belong, giving her access into his.

He wondered if he could control it, after all. He hadn't so far. It's what got him into this bind to begin with, according to T'Pau, wandering into the candidate's dreams. Now, he was twice hooked,

promised to one and suddenly wishing he belonged to another.

Powder keg. Spock realized he was sitting on a powder keg, both personally and professionally. This situation could ultimately drive the lieutenant from the ship. In many ways she already showed the classic signs of leadership potential. Intuitive, quick to grasp situations, she also demonstrated a boldness in her thinking, allowing her to step outside of the box for answers. The *Enterprise* needed officers like her. However, if she opted to transfer off this vessel due to his actions, he wasn't in a position to blame her, nor would he be able to stave off the excited whispers, nor explain his involvement in her sudden exodus; even if they both agreed it was for the best.

For years, he endured the dark whisperings, the hint of sexual harassment behind Christine Chapel's abrupt departure. They broke-up because he couldn't find it in himself to love her, nor could they get along, getting on each other's nerves very shortly after they became an 'item'. Shortly after she had offered herself to him in his Time of need — and he had shamefully, selfishly accepted, succumbing to the basest of needs — the need to mate or die, animalistic in his desire for self-preservation. In the end, she simply left the ship to pursue her doctorate in medicine. Nothing more,

nothing less.

This time, however, it was clearly his fault. There was no easy way out, either, stuck in a test tube with both ends blocked, the dreams suddenly becoming nightmarish. Spock decided he had to pick his way through this thicket very carefully, as the thorns were quite sharp and tipped with poison. He couldn't call things off with the *candidate*, and yet, neither could he find it in himself to walk away from the lieutenant, although it would be to their mutual benefit for him to do so. He needed to back away before things escalated into a most unhappy scenario for all involved ... Before he had the chance to hurt Brianna, as well. Strangely, he was aware it wasn't as easy as that.

Why couldn't he just leave Cantrell alone? He should have persevered years ago and become a monk. At once, he wished to divest himself of the complications of his personal affairs, involvement with a woman, once again, proving hazardous, messing up his life. He certainly wouldn't be dealing with any of this, if he had. Spock gently squeezed the lieutenant's hand, oddly comforted by her touch. It was as if in some way she was suffusing him with her quiet strength, helping him to realize, also, just how useless it was to continue going through the remainder of his existence alone.

Life was a paradox, nothing and everything fitting

into place. In her own way, the lieutenant was effectively forcing him into acknowledging his need for a woman, after all. Except — now, he seemed to have two, once again displaying his penchant for over-achievement.

Strange, how he began to feel the sudden rushing of a whirlpool ... "I cannot allow you to take full blame, Lieutenant. We both *wandered* where neither of us belonged. Although, I am most curious to know how this was achieved."

Spock could sense Brianna Cantrell's relief dimly through her touch, her *shield* only partially breached. It would be easy enough for him to slip through at this moment, to press ever so gently into her thoughts; stopping himself only because he lacked the necessary invitation and the fact his freedom was nonexistent. He refused to cross that line. It was unfortunate enough, he'd been in her dreams, with all of the attendant problems that was creating. He couldn't allow himself to truly *touch* her, as well. The gesture was far too intimate.

"I lost someone recently. It was rather sudden. Accident," Brianna said, quietly. "I was told I might wander sporadically."

Spock looked at her, a bit astonished, squeezing her hand reassuringly. So, that's what T'Nikha was treating her for, he quickly surmised. Her alleged ability to *wander* merely a temporary response to

what was obviously the undisclosed source of her grief. He knew she was far too remarkable a woman, in his estimation, to be unattached at her age, being nearly twenty-two Standard Earth years. But a severed *bondlink?* Now, at least, he understood her erratic behavior. So bruised, he thought, giving her hand another reassuring squeeze as he studied her. He would have to go back over her records. Somehow, he had missed this little gem. He wondered what else he may have overlooked, given his rather recalcitrant frame of mind, of late.

"I, too, have been recently — disconnected, shall we say," he nodded. "That would most certainly explain it," he pondered, aloud. Something more was puzzling him here, however. Missing was a very large piece of this story, he thought. That first evening she seemed upset her father was turning down suitors. Her sense of betrayal hardly seemed plausible, if she was already *bonded*. Spock decided to test his theory. "Forgive my inquisitiveness. The collapse on your record. That had nothing to do with marching, did it."

"No, sir."

"This someone you lost recently - bondmate?" he asked, trying to gather the facts into a cohesive picture.

"Almost. It seemed to be the direction we were

heading in, anyway. In a rather unorthodox fashion. I mean, there was no formal ceremony or anything. No tea. Just a *mindmeld* that should never have taken place." Brianna shrugged. "It's long and complicated and difficult to explain," she said, stopping to clear her throat. Her emotions were on the surface today. She swallowed a couple more times, blinking away the sudden tears, unsuccessfully.

"You were *bonded* in secret, weren't you, Lieutenant," Spock said, filling in the gaps for her. Brianna Cantrell slowly nodded.

"More or less. But how did you know? I mean. Like I said, nothing was ever formalized. It's just — well, they wouldn't let us meet, so we had to do something," she said. "In retrospect, it might not have been wise."

Spock could tell she was growing uncomfortable with the discussion, so he didn't press any further, thinking he detected shame through the slight breach in her *shield*. He understood. She had an overbearing father, forcing her into deceit. Spock knew something of overbearing fathers, having one of his own.

He had run away at seventeen Standard Earth years to get away from his, enabling him to make decisions for himself. His major rebellion was to join the Starfleet, rather than follow in his father's

footsteps at the Vulcan Science Academy. Sarek had Spock's whole life mapped out for him; from the woman Spock would marry, to what property he would tend, right on down to his career choice, if Spock had let him.

His father was still at it, once again arranging his long-awaited nuptials. Only this time, his father made it nearly impossible for Spock to wheedle out of it. It was completely unacceptable, especially in light of the fact he had just met the woman he wanted. Curiously enough, the one he had been waiting for ...

Brianna was fast losing her battle against her emotions. Spock frowned as a tear escaped, rolling down her delicate cheek. She wiped it away quickly. "I'm sorry. I don't seem to be in control today. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"It is all right, Lieutenant. It is a natural part of the grieving process. And you are human." Spock assured her, pulling the handkerchief from out of his back pocket, handing it to her. What's wrong is you've lost your lifeline. He considered his own fragmented rope. "You must have loved him very much," he said, gently. "Defying your family for him."

Brianna Cantrell nodded in the affirmative.

"My family doesn't understand. Certainly, Daddy

never approved of the situation to begin with. All I know is that now I'm so all *alone*."

"Humans are naturally autonomous," Spock said, concerned. Brianna was shaking her head.

"But once you've been *touched* ... I don't know if I'll feel whole again. Ever."

"You will. But it does take time," he said. Catching her questioning look, he added, "I know something of your pain and confusion. My first wife *Challenged* me. And although I quite eagerly severed that *bondlink* myself, I could not have experienced more pain at the detachment had I felt something for her. Illogical as that seems."

"You didn't love her?"

Spock lowered his gaze and shook his head. "I seriously doubt it. I am not capable of that emotion." Already Brianna Cantrell was giving him the *look*. Clearly, she didn't believe him, as if she saw right through his veneer, right through his shield of reserve and into his very heart. He was aware of being mildly uncomfortable under such scrutiny and lifted an eyebrow at her in response, choosing to amend his statement. "We certainly never consummated the union, although we were *linked* for several years. There might have been something there, at one time. Perhaps, I am not experienced enough with that emotion to make a

proper assessment."

"That I'll accept."

"Most gracious," he muttered. "At any rate, after a time, I was unaware of any traceable *link*."

"I'm having a difficult time letting go, I'm afraid."

As am I this time, oddly enough. Again, Brianna was fighting for control. Spock fought the illogical urge to gather her into his arms. To comfort her, hold her close. I'm here. He wondered where she found the strength to endure like this, in light of all these obstacles that continued to plague her, for which he admired her.

"So," she began again, her emotions briefly subsiding. "Where do we go from here? I mean, I hope you're not too angry to forgive me."

"Negative," Spock said. "I was never angry. Though, perhaps, troubled. And you?"

"I don't believe I could ever be really angry with you, sir," she said, quietly.

Spock was quick to respond, "Give me time, madam," knowing how all of his other relationships inevitably wound up. After at time of silence, he offered, "Friends?" His fingers still locked around hers, reluctant to break contact with her. She gave his hand a little squeeze in return, smiling shyly at him.

"Always," she said, amazed at his attitude. "I don't think we have a choice, do we? We do seem drawn together."

"Indeed, like a magnet to iron." Spock nodded, realizing he was signing his own death warrant as he spoke. T'Pau would most assuredly kill him when she got wind of this. Well, death isn't exactly unknown territory ...

"And I could really use a friend right now. Someone to lean on. Maybe, we could lean on each other?"

"That would be acceptable," Spock said, fighting with himself. *I can't leave her, not like this.* He silently succumbed to the need that consumed him, noting his indefatigable weakness when it came to her, realizing his initial assessment of himself was quite correct. He was indeed giving her exactly what she wanted. She didn't even have to ask for it, not directly. He should be on full-scale alert. Where was his control?

Brianna Cantrell studied him, gazing deeply into his eyes, trying her best to read him. His guard was securely in place. Suddenly, he was chuckling ever so lightly, looking away from her for just a bit. She found herself wondering if he was laughing at her feeble attempt to break through his mental shielding.

"You looked like a drowned rat," he said, referring to their joint dream. "Your hair falling all around you like long tendrils of seaweed."

She made a wry face at him. "Why, thank you, sir. Just what a girl wants to hear."

Spock shook his head at her, his smile wide now, unabashed. He was so surprising at times, such a puzzle, it left Brianna confused.

"If I were human, I would tell you how beautiful you looked, all the same."

"But you're Vulcan," she said. Spock was nodding, squeezing her fingers again ever so slightly. Reassuringly. He closed his eyes again briefly, unbeknownst to her, gathering his courage, staving off the pain. She needed and deserved to know the truth between them that he could never be hers. Why was the simple act of telling her so very difficult? Most illogical.

"And ... you are not my woman," he said, at last, quietly. Gently. For the moment appeasing his conscience, hoping she understood the gravity of his statement and that he could abide by it. Brianna Cantrell nodded, ran her thumb over his knuckles, squeezing his fingers in return before she removed her hand from his grasp and stood up to leave. Spock loathed to let her go.

"Understood," she said. There it was at last, what

he had meant to tell her. He was *unbonded*, but unavailable, despite their contract, although it was catching her completely by surprise, given his behavior. Quirky as it was, from time to time, he was certainly flirtatious, especially that first night ... the other night he was drunk, she was quick to remind herself. Not exactly of sound mind or body.

How could she be so wrong, mistake his attentiveness for affection like that? Faerie tales, she'd simply been caught up in the whole notion of *kiftiri*, she supposed. She felt so stupid. It was clearly too soon for any such feelings to have developed, hardly able to subscribe to the notion of love at first sight, let alone attribute such instant feelings to a Vulcan. Was she truly that lonely? If this wasn't love, what was it she was feeling, this uncanny connection to him? Did he feel it, too, or was Uhura right and he was only acting as a nursemaid in T'Pran's absence? Did she still *need* one?

At least he was letting her down easy, suddenly wishing she could pack up her things and head home, wondering if her father's offer to send her uniforms on a one-way ticket to the dry-cleaners was still open. *Coward!* It was okay. It had to be okay. She really wasn't quite up to a relationship, just yet, she thought miserably, immediately beginning to backpedal. A whole year had yet to

pass since Spock had died. Obviously, God wasn't finished testing her yet. This was just one more thing.

So, why did this hurt so badly? She could scarcely breathe, the air knocked right out of her, just as if he had kicked her in the chest. Was it because she made him feel too much? T'Pran had the very same reaction, pulling away from her, too. Brianna's head was swimming. She always knew they would meet. Not like this. Oh, please, not like this ... Brianna Cantrell glanced at her chronometer, rising to leave a second time. I'm not strong enough to lose you again, came the fleeting thought, quickly squelched.

Spock caught her arm again. "We're friends, only," she assured him. "And I'll try to stay out of your head from now on," she promised, more to herself than to him, blushing ever so slightly, wishing now only to get away. Spock wasn't content to let her depart and she seemed in too big a hurry to leave, suddenly. She tapped her watch impatiently.

"I have to go. I'm a bit overdue at my station. By your leave, sir?"

"Are you all right?" he asked, gazing at her with that pained expression. She sighed, shaking her head slightly. It was always like *him* to be so concerned. Such a kind, gentle soul. *But that was back when he wanted me. I know he did.* She couldn't stand to see that devastated look on

Spock's face, in his eyes.

"I'm just a little embarrassed to know you were in my head, sir. And — that I was in yours. I'm all right." She pushed the pain aside once again, putting on her 'happy face' as she called it as a child. 'Thee mustn't inflict thy emotions on others, especially the stronger, negative ones ...' as T'Pran always droned.

"There is nothing to be embarrassed about. It happened. That is all. I take full responsibility," he said. "I am a Vulcan," he reminded her, as if that were enough of an explanation. Brianna got up, dumping her tray into the bin for the maintenance crew, suddenly chuckling at the absurdity of his statement, at the absurdity of her own thoughts and emotions regarding this whole business. She was grinning that same impish grin she first displayed the night they met, which implied she knew more than she was admitting. She leaned over close to him.

"Yes, I know, sir. Your ears tend to give you away," she said, hurrying across the nearly empty room. There was one attendant wiping down the tables with a cloth. He looked up in their direction, then discreetly back down at his work. Spock's eyebrows had climbed completely into his hairline with her statement. Brianna was two tables away when the first officer stood up.

"Lieutenant," he hailed. She turned around, walking backwards briefly to give him her attention.

"Sir?"

"You should, perhaps, learn to guard your tongue. It's sharpness shall be your undoing," he said, inclining his head to her.

"Acknowledged, sir." Brianna Cantrell nodded at him, scurrying from the wardroom and away from him before she burst into tears.

# **22**

November 16, 2285, Stardate: 8511.16 USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

Prianna Cantrell sat quietly in the chair opposite Dr. T'Nikha in the dimness of the Vulcan's private office. She found it difficult to come here with the express purpose of baring her innermost thoughts and feelings, let alone ask for help, for some kind of relief. She didn't know how to stop the wanderings. Despite Spock's objections, she felt her sanity slowly slipping away. She was so confused, the signals she received so conflicting in nature. The sense she was

blind psychically persisted. That frightened her most of all. *Something* was wrong.

Now she sat here silently while T'Nikha made notes in her electronic file. Brianna Cantrell gazed about the rather stark, unadorned room. There wasn't so much as an artistic rendering on a wall to help draw away her focus. Brianna marveled at just how extensively the doctor wrote. T'Nikha's demeanor during Brianna's entire narrative was so very objective, devoid of emotion, she wondered if the doctor was listening to her at all, or perhaps, she'd fallen asleep? Sometimes, she caught her old nurse, T'Pran, napping, or having slipped into a meditative state, as the woman defended. Brianna Cantrell stifled a sigh.

She dreaded the moment when a *mindmeld* was required, routine in one of these visits. She had endured plenty of them after her *moderator*, after Spock died — disengaged, she corrected herself. Oh, indeed, he may well have died, as Uhura stated. But he most certainly was actively disengaging from her, all the same, despite the obvious attraction they felt for each other. Despite the arranged marriage. The signed parchment. The effort others had put in to bring them together. Why? Why was he doing this and why now? She needed the answer before she could move forward.

And just what was it, everyone was keeping from

her?

T'Nikha was suddenly stirring in her seat, nodding nearly imperceptibly. "Besides, the insomnia, are there any other problems?"

Brianna Cantrell drew in a breath. *Here we go* ... "Yes, actually. I didn't think much about it, at first. But, headaches. I've been having some rather severe headaches on and off. Usually after a *wandering*. But not every time. It's weird. Just like certain barriers aren't always there. And yet, when they are there, I simply crash through them with little regard. Hence, the headaches, I suppose. And at the same time ... Well, this is going to sound strange. But sometimes it almost seems as if someone *else* is there watching. A third party, I mean. And it just doesn't feel right, my being there."

"You say it doesn't happen every time?"

"No. Just now and then."

"Do you always 'visit' the same people when you wander? Or does it vary night to night?"

"Well, actually. It's not every night. It's been several nights in a row, most recently. But -"

"But, what?"

"I - I seem to focus in on just one person. It's like once I locked onto this individual, there was no need to go anywhere else. Like before. When I

touched ... my bondmate, for lack of another term. And then we began wandering in and out of each other's dreams, like it was natural for us to do so. Expected. Anticipated. T'Pran says I need to be bonded, as surely as if I were Vulcan."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. Growing up I kept feeling something was missing. I even thought for the longest time I had been a twin or something. But then, T'Pran would fill my head with such wonderful tales, Vulcan mythology. Faerie tales, really. This whole notion of *kiftiri*. I suppose in my own mind things became romanticized. And then I met *him* — metaphysically speaking. It was all different after that."

"You *mindmelded* with him. You are speaking of your late *bondmate*."

"Yes."

"And then the wanderings began."

"Oh, I always wandered as a girl. I mean. I did get it under control through training. So, yes. This was my first serious breach in *Discipline* since my training began. I don't know. It just *felt* so right. I wanted him. He wanted me. We belonged together. And then —" Brianna paused momentarily, her lower lip quivering, as she sought and gained control. "He was gone."

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"And how does it *feel* this time? Do you belong to this person, as you did then?"

"That's just it. In so many ways it's like he never left. But then sometimes ... I get the sense I shouldn't be there. That despite how pleased he seems to be to see me on the one hand, somehow it's all a lie and I shouldn't be there."

"And that's when you awaken with these headaches."

"Yes."

"All right," T'Nikha said, as she set aside her notes and leaned forward. "Now, give me your thoughts. Concentrate on the last time you experienced this pain — this headache — during a *wandering*," she instructed. Brianna shot her a glance, dismayed, as she reluctantly complied with the psychiatrist's wishes.

# 23

November 16, 2285, Stardate: 8511.16

Sickbay USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

Nikha, you look like a woman with a problem," McCoy said, as he poured himself a cup of coffee, joining his colleague in the physician's lounge. T'Nikha took a sip of her now tepid tea, nearly forgotten amidst the flurry of 'paperwork' in the form of multiple diskettes strewn across the small table in the corner of the room. She looked up at the newcomer, appreciating his intrusion at this moment. She was indeed troubled.

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"I am greatly disturbed to learn the situation between my two patients is disintegrating, Leonard. I am certain his family shall find this news most disagreeable."

"How do you mean?" McCoy said, dragging up a chair. "They seem friendly enough together." He knew. He had been keeping an eye on them, trying to help T'Nikha puzzle it out.

"He hast begun to put up internal barriers to ward off her advances. I have felt the sensation, what she experiences from time to time. A pulsating in the air, like a fluttering of tiny wings near her ear. It is most disturbing. Yet, he persists to beckon to her, as if he were loathed to let her go at the same time. As if reconciliation is still not only a possibility, but a probability. It is puzzling — almost as if a third party were, indeed, involved."

How had the lieutenant put it? 'Almost as if someone else is there watching' ... if that were so, it was a most egregious infraction of Vulcan sensibilities — of Vulcan Law. The thought was unconscionable and T'Nikha shook off the vaguely uneasy notion, sighing nearly audibly. No. This was simply a divorce situation. Perhaps, one of irreconcilable differences, since she could not outwardly perceive the area of difficulty.

This couple, who might otherwise be devoted to one another, for whatever reason could not tolerate

being bonded together, nor did it seem could they completely separate. T'Nikha grieved for them both, surmising it could be something as simple as their living apart having strained their relationship. Long-distance relationships, as it was with him being out in space for so long, sometimes years at a stretch, could be the culprit, here. Brianna, perhaps, had sought to amend the situation, albeit too late, by choosing to join Starfleet and ultimately through that, Captain Spock. T'Nikha promised herself time alone with her own husband, Senik, once the Enterprise returned to port. At once, she needed him and was grateful she shared a healthy relationship with him. She saw too much of this in her practice, too many ruined marriages.

Then, again, it could very well be an inability for this couple to sustain a *link*, despite the emotions at play between them. That, by itself, was reason to grieve. "I cannot subscribe to the notion he wishes her harm," she said aloud. "He is a Vulcan. Our very philosophy precludes —"

"Spock wouldn't hurt a flea unless it posed a threat to someone's life," McCoy interjected. "Maybe, he's unaware ..."

"The damage to her psyche is threat enough."

"What do you propose we do?"

"Seek understanding. They both still seem so

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oblivious to their circumstances, although that, too, is puzzling. It is at once as if they know each other. Intimately. And, yet, outwardly they appear as strangers. Flirting, dancing a courtly dance as if they had just met. Perhaps, it is merely professionalism that gives such an illusion. But to stand idly by and permit such harm ... "

"Sticky thing about orders." McCoy picked up his coffee cup and took a sip.

"Yes, indeed," she said, vacantly, undoubtedly following another train of thought, staring off into the distance. "And if Spock continues down this new path. If he chooses not to let her back in — it would be far better for her if she could but accept the finality of their divorce."

"Divorce?" McCoy said, stunned, all but slamming his cup down again. "Are you sayin' they're in the middle of a messy divorce? As in, these two were once *married*?"

"I have *touched* each of their minds, felt the shards that remain of a *bondlink* between them. It is not surprising his family is so concerned."

"Well, I'll be ... Is it over, over?"

"How do you mean?"

"You mentioned the chance of reconciliation. And I don't believe I'm about to ask this. But just what is

the probability of that happening? I mean, after all — what about the dreams. He's not happy being alone."

"That is what is so puzzling. She *felt* it when he died. But when did the divorce begin?"

"Before or after his death?"

"Precisely. She is persistent. She may have been very unwilling to divorce him and he had to die, for instance, to make a complete break from her."

"I see what you mean. We have our work cut out for us."

"Leonard. You must realize there is little we can do. Treat this as a Prime Directive situation. Too much interference —"

"I know. I *know*. But there's got to be *something* I can do. I owe him that much."

# **24**

November 16, 2285, Stardate: 8511.16 USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

pock was late. As incredible as that seemed, the Vulcan was now nearly forty minutes overdue at his post. His relief squirmed nervously at the science console, anxious for a bite to eat, and some sleep. Uhura glanced over her clipboard at him from the communications station shrugging her shoulders. Chekov cast a furtive glance at Sulu, who rolled his lidless brown eyes.

"Never thought I'd live to see the day," commented the helmsman. "Can't say death doesn't change you."

"Perhaps, he lost track of time," Chekov said from his position on the floor. The Russian commander was laying on his back, his head inside the panel as he fiddled with the inner workings of the navigation console. The *Enterprise* could have used a few more days in space dock.

"Spock? Are you kidding me?" Sulu said.

"Vell, he seemed to be having a rather hot and heavy discussion with that new lieutenant vhen I passed them by on my way out of the vardroom," Chekov furthered. "It vas wery intense."

"I thought I heard something about her wandering about the ship without shoes," offered the technician manning the Environmental Engineering station.

"All over her about regulations already, eh?" Sulu said. "That's our Mister Spock."

"For Meester Spock, he vas all over her all right. He vas holding her hand!" Chekov exclaimed. "You don't suppose ..."

Sulu began to chuckle. "That maybe he got lucky and their lift got stuck somewhere between decks?"

"I suppose even Wulcans might need a good roll in the hay from time to time." Chekov nodded.

"Every seven years, from what I hear. That puts

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him slightly overdue, if you ask me," Sulu said.

Captain James T. Kirk cleared his throat, "Gentlemen, there are far more interesting concerns facing us other than Mister Spock's private affairs. Your attention, if you please. On screen, Uhura."

"Aye, sir," Uhura said. With a flick of a toggle the forward view screen winked on to display a montage of pirate attacks on various UFP freighters from the past couple of months. Kirk gave the images his strict attention, frowning, before he swung around in his chair to catch the attention of the communications officer, again. This was, yet, another puzzle that needed solving.

"Uhura, page Mister Spock, please," he ordered and turned back to face the view screen, concerned. This was completely uncharacteristic of Spock. First breakfast and now this. In fact, there had been a subtle change in the demeanor of his first officer just in these past two days, ever since that meeting with his family. Almost as if someone or something was interfering with his sense of duty. Ever since her arrival, Kirk noted, unable to shake himself free of his own misgivings regarding Cantrell.

Was he a little jealous of the attention Spock paid her? Did he really believe this little girl was responsible for Spock's aberrant behavior of late? More likely it was related to his death and regeneration experience. The Vulcan did walk

around in a notable fog for months after his "recovery", startlingly naive again as to the many nuances of human behavior, where once he had been quite expert. He didn't really know his friends, at first, and still persisted speaking to Kirk rather formally, as if he had forgotten the ease in which he used to call the captain by his first name. Most likely, Spock was still in the process of 'finding' himself again. Kirk just didn't know what it was he was feeling, beyond the need to have that promised talk with a certain Vulcan. Something was going on.

Kirk also found himself worrying about Spock's well-being from another, rather frightening aspect. The newly-formed *Genesis* planet, from which Spock's body was regenerated, had exploded after all, the project a complete failure. Kirk's son, David, one of the scientists involved it its creation, had used an unstable substance. Was his friend headed for the same fate? Spock seemed somewhat unstable himself, lately. It was a bit unnerving. Kirk shuddered, realizing his thinking was less than rational. It simply could be, James Kirk, that you have become as overprotective as an old mother hen, frowned the starship captain.

=/\=

He was looking for reasons, he told himself as he lay on Dr. McCoy's examining table, something to blame. Dr. T'Nikha had ruled out any psychosis.

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That left the physical, which brought him here. McCoy was busy fussing about, running this test and that. Checking his heart-rate, his blood-pressure, his reflexes. Clucking to himself. Spock detested this. But he had to know what was behind his increasingly irrational behavior regarding the lieutenant.

There had to be something, he reasoned. If she wasn't giving off extraordinary pheremones, reminding himself yet again, that in all fairness she was human not *Deltan*, then the cause must be within him. *Pon farr?* Were the early strains apparent and he hadn't noticed them being so caught up in his attraction to her? It would explain why he couldn't shut her out of his thoughts. Why he was so out of control.

Alarmingly, he was looking forward to dreaming with her as he had last night, eagerly walking in her sleep, feeling as if he had been there countless times before. As if he belonged ... he let the thought dangle, dwindle out of his consciousness. Frightened by it. He hadn't felt this way in a horribly long time. Had dared not for fear it would all collapse upon him leaving him alone, wretched and in pain.

The few times in the past he presumed to open himself up to another being had proved disastrous. How could he expect acceptance from someone else

when he remained perpetually conflicted? Aware of his emotions and at the same time ashamed of them, unable to accept himself, really. Insecure. Indeed, it was an illogical assumption. Instead, retreating, Spock led the lonely life of a bachelor, remaining distant from any female who ever let on she cared about him, or that he had been attracted.

He flirted here and there, teased, played the game. Made love occasionally, but it never went beyond that, choosing to slam the door long before real intimacy was ever the question. He made a point of blaming it on being Vulcan and his inability to return the affection. The excuse was wholly inaccurate, although most people wouldn't realize it. Spock logically opted for the preemptive strike rather than face the inevitable rejection again and again.

He simply found the depth of their misunderstanding for whom and what he was excruciating. And they had dared call his *candidate* the *Anomaly*. He was the true anomaly, neither Vulcan nor human. In the meantime, he was also running on borrowed time, he reminded himself. *Unbonded*, *Pon farr* loomed before him, a menacing reminder of his own mortality. Had the little lieutenant somehow triggered it? Proximity was often a deciding factor in the actual length between *Seasons* — seven years being only an average. The

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further away from one's mate could extend the duration and conversely, when they were physically closer the Time was often shorter. He was undeniably attracted to Lt. Cantrell.

Spock worried. He may be *unbonded*, as yet, but he most certainly wasn't free. His marriage was being arranged even as he lay resting on this table, all the players being aligned on the board like chess pieces. His parents were seeing to all the details.

He didn't even need to be involved beyond the obvious moments when a groom's presence was required. Apparently so much so, no one had deemed it necessary to provide him with her name or even her likeness, as puzzling as that was. Soon after the Vulcan Delegation was taken aboard this ship, he would simply be called to present himself to the *candidate* and the process by which his bachelorhood would be rendered moot would commence. Time will have run out.

Meanwhile, what was he supposed to do with these developing feelings he had for Brianna, completely and irrefutably taking him by surprise? Seek the *Kolinahr* once more closing himself off from all emotion — from her — forever? It seemed like the only logical solution, yet when he had tried it once before his human blood prevented his success. It wasn't really what Spock wanted out of life. Logic without feelings was void. He knew that

now.

If, on the other hand, he were suffering the pangs of *Pon farr*, it wasn't something he could easily dismiss or reason away. In the grand scope of things, Spock was ashamed to admit his past resolutions of this problem had left seriously broken relationships in its biological wake, wondering painfully if Brianna would end up as merely another casualty added to his hideous stockpile. He was lucky Christine was talking to him, the others weren't. Spock closed his eyes. For once he understood exactly what it was he wanted and needed. Unfortunately, that knowledge failed to bring him peace.

"Your numbers are a tad elevated, but other than that you're perfectly fit, Mister Spock," declared Dr. McCoy upon completing the physical examination, rotating the table slowly to a vertical position for ease in debarking. Spock crinkled his forehead in a nearly imperceptible frown.

"There must be something ..." murmured the Vulcan in his astonishment, his gaze far away. He had hoped there was something. — Beyond the mere emotion itself. Again he couldn't breathe. Was it fear of the unknown, or shame over the illicit feelings he harbored for the lieutenant? Almost immediately, he recalled his thoughts, regaining that strict Vulcan composure as he tugged on his

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cream-colored turtleneck, fastening his cranberry duty jacket.

Not, however, before McCoy caught the note of distress in Spock's voice, although wisely the doctor let it pass without comment. He placed a gentle hand on the first officer's shoulder, saying lightly, "Perhaps some rest is all you need. I'm putting you on light duty for a couple of days. That's forty-eight hours." Adding quickly, "No arguments," wagging a warning finger at the man to still the forthcoming objection. "Or, I'll take you off-duty altogether."

"Doctor. This is not a good time. All hands are needed -" Spock began to reason. Logically, his argument was sound. In just thirty hours, they would make their rendezvous with the T'Mir. and he was needed to help sort out the pirate situation. Along with that, they also had to solve the random deaths occurring, all too frequently, taking out Heads of Planets from around the UFP. Their proposed mission was complicated, at best. It was not a good time for the crew to be short-handed. However, Spock's was a hidden agenda, needing as he so often did, to bury himself in his work. It was his preferred method of escape when things in his personal life became a bit - sticky. Suddenly the doctor was throwing his hands in the air in a flagrant, tantrum-like fit.

"Damn it, Spock, I said no arguments. You've been

spending nineteen out of every twenty-four hours working lately, as it is. Spending an average total of ninety minutes a day eating that leaves three and a half hours for sleeping. And I'm not sure just how much of that you've been doing lately. And don't tell me that as a Vulcan you can go a full fourteen days without sleep. Normally, I would agree with you, but you're still healing. Damn it, man, you were dead. Knock it back to eight working-hours. Normal duty for most personnel. Or, I will pull you from duty. As chief medical officer I have that obligation. And work out a solution to whatever it is. I know you, Spock and burying yourself in your work isn't going to solve anything."

"Of course, you are correct, Doctor."

"Damn straight," the doctor muttered, crossing his arms, surprised that the Vulcan gave up so easily, nearly derailing the need to argue. "Spock, you're Vulcan but you're not impervious. Give yourself some time, that's all I'm sayin'. Emotionally, physically and psychologically you've been through a horrendous experience. And you *know* it. You've gotta start takin' care of yourself. Or let somebody else do it! And I mean it. I don't want to see you on the bridge or in the labs. — Or holed up in your quarters the entire time." McCoy was adamant.

At that, Spock's right eyebrow shot up into his bangs. "Where would you have me spend my time,

# Doctor?"

"We have several recreation decks. Why don't you make use of them? Find a chess partner or something. Relax. Let your hair down. Start enjoying life, for Pete's sake."

"Let my hair down, Doctor?" Spock gave McCoy a puzzled look, shaking his head. "Most illogical," he uttered on his way out of Sickbay.

"Yes, and so is your behavior these past couple of days," the doctor said, when the Vulcan was safely out of earshot, even for those sensitive, pointed appendages.

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A moment later the turbo-lift doors popped open and Spock entered the bridge. It was unusually quiet and all eyes were on him. "Glad you could join us, Mister Spock," came Kirk's reply to the Vulcan's nod.

"I was — detained," Spock answered carefully, amidst a few unguarded twitters, knowing he had no excusable reason for being late for duty. Personal matters should be attended during personal time. He supposed he should have waited to see Dr. McCoy until the dinner break, as well. But again, it had been difficult to part from Brianna. Especially on such tenuous terms as they had managed to leave things. He needed to understand

why. Spock caught the fleeting images of the pirate skiffs attacking a huge freighter before the screen winked out.

On the one hand he had appeased his conscience by making Cantrell aware of where she stood with him. Yet, it left him feeling — lousy. As if a part of him just died. Spock realized he was feeling as empty as the view screen now was. He strode swiftly over to his post, taking the shoulder of the young man seated there. "Relieved," he stated, flatly.

For a long time Spock could feel the captain's probing glance on his back. It was disturbing and at once he straightened, turning to glare at Kirk. "Is there something you want, Captain?" he asked, with a trace of terseness in his voice, which he recognized as a defense mechanism. Jim may be his friend, but he wasn't one to allow such sloppy behavior from the crew, let alone one of his senior officers. If Kirk let down, even for an instant, the whole chain of command could come crumbling down about their shoulders. Discipline, like logic, was the driving force behind Starfleet and James T. Kirk's success as a starship captain.

Kirk swivelled his chair around, nodded at Uhura, who restarted the video feed.

Spock was suddenly struggling with a sense of guilt. Again. When his mother had suggested his emotions would resurface in time, he had no idea

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just how close under the skin they would rest. He felt naked. Transparent. It had taken him years to build up the hard, impenetrable *shield* of reserve he often hid behind. Layer upon layer of protective sheathing. Although he still maintained his sense of logic, he was mostly like a newborn. Completely vulnerable. He blamed all the rapid-fire changes in his life for his receding ability to cope.

Kirk met Spock's stare, narrowing his own hazel eyes in concern. "Are you all right, Spock?" The Vulcan consciously snapped his mental doors shut, all the while deftly sending the secretly encoded message to a certain lieutenant's computer screen down in the extensive research lab on B-deck. "I am perfectly fit, Captain," he said in a tone suggesting Kirk should keep his nose out of his affairs.

Kirk nodded quietly, stung by his best friend's attitude. Perhaps Spock *was* overdue for a good roll in the hay, he thought irritably.

He gazed into those guarded brown eyes. There was no way in, the curtain drawn veiling the inner turmoil. All right, Spock, damn you, if that's the way you want to play it, Kirk thought and returned to the business at hand. "Analysis, Mister Spock," James Kirk said, pointing to the images on the forward view screen. Spock stood up to study the screen, clasping his shaking hands behind his back.

"What in space is that?" Brianna Cantrell murmured, as suddenly a tiny dot blipped into the ancient ruins on Sigma Rho V, she was busy studying. It took her a minute before she realized it was a message cube. She discreetly glanced around her making sure no one was paying any attention. After all, she was already in enough trouble with the lieutenant commander. Late to muster and accountability this morning, as it was, she arrived during the day's announcements. She did not wish to further incur the wrath of Archer by her inattentiveness.

If only Mr. Spock hadn't detained her for so long over breakfast ... it was hardly the way she wanted to begin her first full day of her first assignment, being late, adding it to the list of her most infamous accomplishments to date. Apparently, she scoffed at herself, she wasn't satisfied with the random acts of chaos she had committed, thus far; ranging from destroying her cabin doors to invading the privacy of a very dear man whose only offense was in wanting to help ease her into life aboard a starship. She had successfully managed to annoy a few other superior officers along the way, too, mostly females, dazzling everyone with what must appear to be a most shameless and reckless incompetence — all in the time span of some two days.

How many times was it possible to shoot oneself

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in the foot, after all? She was beginning to wonder, as she tapped the dot with a manicured fingernail and the message filled a small balloon at the point of entry on her computer screen. She could feel herself smiling as she read the cryptic note, thoroughly amused by the whole thing, the idea of the transmission, as well as the message itself. He was so surprising. It read:

'The night is ours for the picking. 20:30 hr. Rec-Deck Two. One riff or two below the stars. Unless, of course, you are all strung out.'

Moving the cursor into the balloon, she deleted the message and quickly tapped out her reply, accepting the invitation. With the click of another button it was instantaneously returned to the sender. "Below the stars?" Brianna Cantrell pondered aloud, before it dawned on her he meant the sunken observation deck, otherwise known as the Forward Lounge, remembering it from her tour. Busy place.

"Secret admirer?" came a feminine voice at her shoulder. Startled, Brianna swung her chair around to face the woman. Humanoid from all appearances with dark hair and eyes, the woman had a small rippling of the skin at the crest of each ear resembling fish gills. Comely and pleasant enough with a ready smile, it was Brianna Cantrell's guess Nash was somewhere in her mid-twenties. The

woman extended her hand, "Bedula Nash, halfbreed," she said by way of a rather surprising introduction. "My dad's human. Met my mother while mining on Benaari III. Benaari women tend to flip over offworlder men."

"I've heard that. Brianna Cantrell," Brianna said, offering her hand to shake. "Human, raised on Vulcan."

"I knew I liked you. You have a rather quiet way about you — for a human."

"I am honored," she inclined her head to the woman. "But, would you mind telling my mentor that?"

"Only if you tell me which it is."

"I'm sorry?"

"Your little message-mate," she said pointing to Brianna's computer screen. "Or if you prefer, cubecourier, pen-pal, note-nut. Male, female, androgynous. What are you into? Come on, give. Secret-admirer?"

"No, just a friend," Brianna Cantrell insisted, feeling the heat suffuse her cheeks, suddenly, to her dismay.

"Nah."

"Just a friend."

"Okay, no need to get testy. But don't let Lieutenant Commander Archer catch you. She's in charge down here when Spock's not around, although she tends to run things his way, so it's sort of like he's right here, if you get my drift. Only he's a hellava lot nicer about it, mostly. Anyway, Mister Spock kind of frowns on that sort of thing. It's illogical. Or something. Who knows? He's a Vulcan." Nash rolled her eyes.

"Yeah. He is kind of cute that way, isn't he?"

"Oh, you've met him? Well, anyway, the lieutenant commander tends to go overboard with his requests. I guess she's trying, in her own way, to impress him or whatever. Can't tell if she's got the hots for him like half of the female population on this ship or simply bucking for a promotion? I mean, it's so bad, if he even remotely hinted he didn't like the color of the walls down here, she'd have them repainted by morning just to suit him! Can't help feeling a little sorry for her, though. I know he can't see her for Andorian prickle-berries, you know what I mean?"

"Sour-grapes, I see. Guess it's a good thing I failed to mention the reason I was late this morning. I was in conference with our resident Vulcan."

"So, you're the one. Ooh, yeah. Say, what was that all about anyway? I heard it was really hot and heavy."

"Hot and heavy?" Brianna Cantrell blanched. "Oh, dear. No. It's nothing like that. Believe me." After their morning conversation, the last thing she needed was a story like this reaching Spock's ears. She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks all the more. *Damn*. "He — ah. Was laying down some ground rules, is all."

"Ground rules?" Bedula chuckled. "Uh-huh. As in your cabin or his? Deny away, sweetie. But I think it's quite obvious he's finally broken his dry-spell. And, it seems his sights are set on you. Go figure. You're his latest little *honey*."

"But I'm not. How could I be? I just got here," Brianna said, thinking quickly. Or trying to. "I'm the one who was caught in the process of taking out her cabin doors with a rubber rescue craft the night before last. Mister Spock was merely kind enough to elucidate on the proper method for stowing such illogical and unnecessary gear, don't you know? *Those* ground rules."

"Yeah. I heard how he reamed you on that one." Bedula shook her head. "Oh, he's always very polite about it. But he never lets anyone off. You should feel privileged. Of course, he hasn't quite been himself lately, either. Anyway, what I've heard about you two so far would curl those platinum locks of yours. Hang-in, kid. We make this rendezvous and have some real work to do, it'll get

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a whole lot better. The upper echelon will finally have something to do."

"And the wagging tongues?"

"It's the upper echelon doing most of the wagging, don't you know? They're a real tight bunch. Don't look to get in. On or off his arm."

"I wasn't looking for anything, but thanks for the warning," Brianna Cantrell sighed. It was difficult to perceive, but this rumor mill was actually worse than the one on base at the Academy.

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"Sir," Spock began once Kirk finished receiving the engineering report. "If I may take my leave. I have some small business to attend down in the Research Lab this afternoon." Kirk glanced up over the rim of his bifocals at the Vulcan, bothered by the continued formality between them. What was eating at the man, he pondered?

"You haven't taken a break all day long, Spock. Take as much time as you need."

"Thank you, sir. I shall not be long." Spock exited the bridge taking the starboard turbo-lift to B-deck-two. Illogical as it was, he needed to be near Lt. Cantrell at the moment. He hadn't been able to divest himself from the overwhelming sense of loss he had experienced since breakfast.

Spock conceded she deserved his honesty, but this hurt. He had a knife plunged halfway into his chest, turning, digging deeper with each passing hour. Creating a hole. Something had to be done about it. He had to be with her, he decided, his better judgement taking a back seat on this ride — more like locked inside a photon torpedo casing, completely unaccessible, he thought, drawing in his lower lip.

He had to devise a logical means to bring them together until he could understand what she was doing to him and how to counteract it, if he was to come to peaceful terms with everything going on in his life suddenly, that is. He couldn't go on ad infinitum like this with his concentration shattered, which was admittedly the very least of his problems. Spock had spent half the morning working on it until he'd come up with a solution.

It was painfully simple and obvious. So obvious, in fact, no one was ever likely to suspect his reasoning. Pleased with himself at last, he stepped out of the turbo-lift and hurried down the corridor to the Research Laboratory. Entering the vast facility though, he already felt a deep sense of disappointment, as if he had just missed her. He found himself instead nearly accosted by the smothering attentions of his next in command while he vainly surveyed the area for the

lieutenant.

"Captain Spock, what brings you here this afternoon?" Lt. Commander Archer chortled. Redhaired and freckle-faced she was tall and rather solidly built. Perhaps a bit too muscular, he opined, giving every appearance she weight-trained daily in an effort to divest herself of any and all feminine curves. She had the personality to match, slightly rough around the edges and like her figure almost masculine in some ways. It was a pity. She could be a handsome woman if she allowed it.

Spock gave her an uplifted eyebrow. "The last time I checked, Lieutenant Commander, I was still head of this department."

"Well, of course, sir. I only meant ... What can I do for you, sir?"

"Nothing."

"Spot-inspection?" she sounded hopeful. They were all struggling against boredom, having little to do until the scheduled rendezvous and the commencement of their actual mission. Spock decided he would have to come up with some sort of logical diversion for them.

"I find myself in need of a lab assistant," he said, eyes still roving over the personnel. "She isn't here. What have you done with Mister Cantrell?"

"On reconnaissance, sir. Sent the little Nimrod down to engineering for some semi- Nahl fluid. Told her not to mistake it for the Nahl fluid. It had to be semi-Nahl. So we can lube the high-pot unit. It's important to maintain the test equipment, sir." Archer rocked back and forth from heel to toe as she spoke, her hands clasped firmly behind her back.

Spock shook his head. "Semi- Nahl fluid? Most illogical."

"Ah, come on, sir, you know it's tradition. She's new. And you know what the captain said in the meeting this morning about keeping up ships' morale. Since our mission is still a day or so off."

"Indeed. It will be most interesting to discover just how many can be caught completely unawares by stepping up the traditional send-off. We have our work cutout for us. But are we now in the habit of sacrificing virgins in the name of tradition, Mister Archer? To send Cantrell down, unarmed and defenseless, to that testosterone-infested grease pit of socially-challenged, sex-starved mechanics is unconscionable. I can only hope Mister Scott will intercede as a human prophylactic preventing conception. In the interim —" Spock halted. Again, it felt as though his entire system was on overload.

He gazed toward the open archway in anticipation. Immediately, Lt. Cantrell made her

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way into the room, patiently waiting at a slight distance for her debriefing. When she had the attention of both senior officers, Brianna took in a quiet breath, locking her arms behind her back in parade rest.

"Report, J. G.," Archer barked.

"Mister Scott laughed hysterically at my request," the lieutenant said. "And although he thought he could rally any number of willing donors, my best bet was to try Sickbay for some possible frozen specimens. Doctor McCoy, however, was not amused. Apparently I interrupted some important work he was doing. Although he did take me on a thorough tour of the cryogenics lab. Only vital organs are cloned and kept in deep freeze, should a need arise. It was most instructive. Will that be all, ma'am?"

Archer was nearly choking on her own laughter. Brianna frowned, narrowing her eyes at the woman.

*'Easy, Lieutenant,'* Spock silently implored, giving Cantrell a raised eyebrow.

Brianna Cantrell glanced quickly at Spock, her demeanor relaxing, before she turned back to Archer. "Or do you have some other ridiculous task for me to perform?" she said, sweetly, "I do have some legitimate research to complete."

"Hah! Got to love her. All she's lacking is pointed ears and upswept eyebrows! And a few more centimeters in height, maybe. Hah! That's it for today — as far as I'm concerned. I don't know what Mister Spock has for you, though. Unless it's to question whether or not you're even Regulation, J.G. They're sending them to us shorter and shorter, wouldn't you say, sir?"

Brianna Cantrell shot Archer a reproving glance then drew in a quiet sigh. An expression of disappointment reflected in her keen eyes as she looked up at Spock. "'Et tu, Brute'?" she murmured, as she leaned over to remove a boot in anticipation of being measured once again. Clearly she'd had enough hazing for one day.

"Unnecessary, Lieutenant," he said as he reached over to steady her, pleased on this occasion to find a logical reason to touch her. "You can keep your boots on. I'm strictly looking for a lab-assistant. If you're interested, that is."

"I might be," Brianna replied, coming to rest on both feet. As she straightened up Spock had no choice but to release her. The gulf again manifested itself more acutely once contact was relinquished. Only, surprisingly, it seemed wider. He drew in a quiet sigh watching her for any signs of reciprocity. Lt. Cantrell seemed content to divert her eyes, perhaps to compose herself, he decided. She did

seem properly annoyed at the moment. "What exactly are you proposing?" she asked, at last.

"Approximately one half-hour of your time, diurnally, immediately following duty hours. Week days, of course. And possibly on intermittent weekends when certain experiments reach a critical stage. I am conducting a number of studies at the moment. Be advised it won't reflect negatively on your record should you choose to pass on the opportunity. However, I would be most pleased if you would consider it."

"Oh, but sir," Archer cut-in. "I thought I've always made it clear I was available to you in that capacity."

"Thank you, Mister Archer. I shall keep that in mind should a further need arise in the future. For now, it is my opinion the lieutenant is more qualified for the job."

"Hah! Really. I must protest. I have seniority."

"Irrelevant since this is not a job promotion. You may carry-on, Mister Archer."

"But -"

"Carry-on, Mister Archer."

"Aye-aye, sir," the woman said, anger burning in her brown eyes as she loped off to another end of the room, watching from a distance.

"Is it my imagination, Lieutenant. Or were you ready to pop her one, just now? We've had this talk, Madam."

"Sorry, sir. I didn't mean to let my annoyance show. It's just — I'm a little sensitive about my height, is all."

"I take that to mean you are teased a great deal?"

"All the time. I should be used to it. But it's simply not something I can control and to be criticized for it ... You have no idea how many times I've been measured since I got here."

"There is an old Earth saying, 'Good things come in small packages.' Perhaps you've heard it. I have often found it to be true."

"Thank you, sir. That's really very sweet of you."

"About my proposal."

"I would be honored, sir."

"Excellent, Lieutenant. I shall be back down here at sixteen-oh-five hours. And then we can begin."

"I shall await you, sir," she said. With a polite nod of his head he was gone. Brianna crossed her arms over her chest, hugging herself as she watched him leave, warding off what was fast becoming an all too familiar ache accompanying his absence. Turning to head back to her station, she suddenly collided with Lt. Commander Archer. "Please excuse me, ma'am."

"Hah! You accepted didn't you. Well, let's get one thing straight, mister. You get your daily reports into me and on time or I'll put the kibosh on your extracurricular activities. It may be his department, but I'm running it. And I won't allow you to muddy up my record. So don't think your sloughing off on the job will be tolerated just because you have his personalized attention. Is that clear?"

"Aye-aye, ma'am. The thought never occurred to me to slough off on my job. Is that all, ma'am?" Receiving a nod Brianna beat a hasty retreat, finding Lt. Nash at her side the minute she returned to her console.

"Now you've done it," Lt. Nash said. "I tried to warn you."

"I can't help it if he asked me. What am I supposed to do, turn him down simply because she wanted the job? I don't think so. I could learn a lot from him. Methods of research. He's got one of the greatest scientific minds there is, after all."

"Yeah, and he's got a cute arse, too."

"Excuse me?"

"Cantrell, don't tell me you haven't noticed his derriere. Come on, girl, I saw you looking."

"Well, okay. He's gorgeous. Coming and going. So,

what? We're just friends."

"Nah. Nah, I don't buy it." Nash shook her head. "The evidence is stacking up too heavily against you, my dear. Besides, I saw the way he looked at you."

"What? That's ridiculous. We're just friends. Go away."

"Oh, my God! He's the one who sent you the message cube, isn't he? Oh, my God! Mister *Spock?*"

"Go away!" Brianna was instantly blushing, regretting never having quite mastered the art of controlling her biochemical reactions. She simply couldn't keep the blood from suffusing her cheeks. "You've all been cooped up in this tin can way too long. I told you. I'm not his woman, we're just friends," she hissed, flicking on her computer screen and for the time burying herself in her research. Worried. She couldn't afford Nash's assessment to reach the ears of their first officer — not after the rather serious breakfast conversation they had just this morning.

Now, she was thoroughly confused. He made a point, this morning, of making sure she knew there could be nothing between them, but then he asked her to be his lab-assistant? And he'd also invited her on a date, of sorts. Well, a lyrette lesson, at least.

Pretty much, he had taken up a goodly portion of her evening. What was she to make of that?

Maybe she hadn't read him so wrong, after all, if someone else claimed to see it. Maybe, he was just as confused as she was, uncertain of what he was feeling, let alone remotely knowing what to do about it. Obviously, he was totally unprepared for the strength of their mutual affection, despite their shattered *bondlink*. Although, he never said it aloud, she knew he, too, was having a hard time letting go. It was all so sudden, wasn't it? Was he just scared? He was a Vulcan. Admitting to feelings didn't come openly or easily to them, especially Spock — wondering, too, how she could possibly know that. He was so tightly *shielded* all the time.

Brianna certainly knew she was scared, thinking perhaps a berth on the *USS Excelsior* was unnecessary in order to find herself navigating into unknown universes. She was, beyond any doubt possible, already there and wondering what to do about it. When the duty watch was over and they both were shutting down their individual units for the day she glanced over at Nash and said, "Promise me you won't say anything. *Please*."

"Oh, all right. But only because I have the utmost respect for him and I like you. And because I *don't* like her."

"I think I've just made a friend today."

"Nah!" Lt. Nash smiled. "Welcome aboard, Cantrell. Say a few of us are getting together later tonight down on the Rec-deck. So, we'll see you around twenty-hundred hours?"

"Thanks, but I can't. I have an appointment."

"Oh, really? Let me guess. Hot date?"

"It's not what you think. I'm learning the lyrette. I have a lesson."

"Oh, really? I wouldn't mind taking a lesson or two from him myself," Nash said, glancing up as Spock reached the entryway to the lab. "See you tomorrow. And I'll want details."

"Oh, just go away!"

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Brianna Cantrell sat in the middle of her bunk gently strumming her guitar, humming, stopping to write down the cords on an electronic page then continuing. When she had it all worked out, she began to sing. She had a sweet, soprano voice that wafted faintly out into the corridor as well as into the adjacent quarters. Very shortly thereafter she received a knocking at the lavatory door. "Come," she hailed, waiting, looking up expectantly for the doors to part.

It was a rather unorthodox point of entry she conceded, even if it was a bit of a shortcut, but then

everything about this assignment so far was marred with eccentricity. Why not? She wasn't even supposed to be on this ship, yet here she sat. Grandmama pulls some strings and with the stroke of a pen — Voila! Stranger still, was quite literally bumping into her *moderator* a second time, only to prove in reality what an incredibly fascinating man he really was. One with whom she was also falling hopelessly in love, all over again. Too fast. Oh, how could it happen so fast — except to prove her feelings for him were true all along. She didn't love a phantom. She was in love with a real man.

Brianna drew in a sigh as Uhura smiled brightly making her way into the room. Out of uniform, Nyota was simply dressed in her native African caftan, the color, an array of browns and several shades of orange, accentuating the rich bronze of her skin. The communications officer was a strikingly handsome woman of not quite medium height, in her early forties, at most. "Hi," the senior officer greeted, as Brianna jumped to attention. "Oh, now none of that. This is a social call," Uhura said sternly, glancing around and then looking imploringly at the girl. "Got a minute? May I sit down?"

"Oh, of course. I'm sorry. How really rude of me," Brianna Cantrell said, sweeping the books, papers, star maps and the like off onto the floor near her

bunk so the commander could sit in her antique tub chair. The room was still pretty well cluttered with crates and various odds and ends. Junk, for the most part. Brianna Cantrell could only imagine what Uhura was thinking as she stood there, shaking her head.

"Well, there seems to be a little more room in here, at least," Uhura said, sitting.

"Yes, thank you. Now I just have to sift through the ruins and send Candy what's hers."

"I thought you'd be out socializing. This being our last evening before our 'guests' arrive, as it were. You do realize how important it is that you integrate — become one with the crew. The sooner the better, too. We do have a dangerous mission ahead of us. Out in deep space like this, we really only have ourselves to rely upon."

"Well, I was just taking a minute. I have a lesson later."

"That song you were playing. It was so soothing and gentle yet very foreign sounding. It's Vulcan, right?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. It's a lullaby. T'Pran used to sing it to me whenever I awoke from a nightmare. Which happened frequently when I was a kid. Now I tend to sing it when I'm feeling a bit melancholy."

"Huh-uh. Pack up your stuff."

"My stuff?"

"Your guitar and music and whatever else and come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"To the Rec-deck. Best way to beat the blues is to be around people."

"Oh. But I really should do some clean up around here," Brianna said, as Uhura tugged on her arm.

"You look like you're in a big hurry to do that. It'll keep, Lieutenant. And that's an order. Besides, I need you to teach me that song. Come on, girl, get your buns in gear," Uhura said, as she took possession of the lieutenant's guitar, while Brianna snagged her lyrette and song book, a handheld P.A.D.D.

"Yes, ma'am," she said, dutifully following her superior out of the room.

# **25**

November 16, 2285, Stardate: 8511.16 USS Starship, Enterprise NCC-1701-A

shift feeling decidedly and inexplicably restless. A sort of nagging sensation, it was temporarily abated only while he was in the lab with the lieutenant and again when he reached the Officer's lounge, curiously enough. He rather enjoyed the fact that he had Mr. Cantrell all to himself on his second visit to B-deck, much as he had the night they met, allowing him to focus solely on her without interruption. Orienting her as his

lab-assistant, watching as she performed the required tasks, the way she moved, taking it all in. She was remarkably pliable, conforming instantly to his methods — as if she could anticipate his needs. Fascinating.

The time spent together, however, was altogether too brief. He had promised up front not to keep her long, wishing now he'd had the foresight to invite her to dine with him. The moment she left him to go about her evening he experienced a miserable void. Leaving the lab shortly thereafter, himself, he stopped into his quarters, checked for any incoming messages, sub-space or otherwise. He had sent a message home, asking his parents for the candidate's name, or her private compti number, at the very least, knowing the message would be forwarded to them. All was quiet. No word from home, or even from the *T'Mir*, for that matter, which was odd, so grabbing up his lyrette, he headed for the Officer's lounge, grateful that he would see the lieutenant again tonight.

Immediately upon his entrance onto the deck his ears were struck by the distant sound of music. It created a rather pleasant atmosphere, he thought, carefully setting his lyrette aside, hoping it wouldn't interfere with his own scheduled session; aware she was near even before the familiarity of the melody registered with him. He was oddly

comforted by that knowledge. Again, fascinating.

After a quick bite to eat he began to set-up the chess set for their regular game, as planned. Jim was due at twenty-one hundred hours. That would leave him with just enough time to conduct the promised lesson, he was thinking, when he caught a most familiar sounding tune. Driven by curiosity, Spock set the black king down on a table in passing and taking up his lyrette, headed down a couple of steps following the strains of a guitar to the rear of the lounge.

The soft soprano voice accompanying the instrument wasn't Uhura's he soon realized, although Uhura joined in on the chorus here and there, adding a bit of harmony at the appropriate moments. As he listened more acutely, he realized the tune was indeed one the little lieutenant had played for him the night before last. He just didn't know she could sing. The Vulcan first officer drew closer to the small gathering formed in one corner of the sunken observation area, easing his way into the front row of bystanders.

There in the midst of assorted personnel was the tiny lieutenant delighting her audience with her talents. Commander Uhura sat nearby, Brianna's obvious mentor, prompting the girl to sing yet another song as soon as she had finished the last, turning what was supposed to be her lesson into an

impromptu sing-a-long session. Brianna Cantrell was smiling weakly as the crowd urged her on, seemingly having grown weary of the forced concert. Relief flooded her features when she caught Spock's eye.

"Oh, Mister Spock!" she hailed, half rising from her seat, flashing him the Vulcan greeting quickly before grasping up her own lyrette. "I'm quite warmed up and ready for the lesson. Favor us with a tune, first?" she needed a break. Spock inclined his head toward her, returning the greeting.

"Indeed. I shall be most honored to comply. So long as you accompany me, Mister Cantrell," he bargained, settling into the seat next to her. Brianna was instantly shaking her head, panic-ridden, her large eyes pleading in the same manner she had used on him before.

"Oh, but sir, I - I'm so unready for a recital," she protested, to no avail. She was so unaccomplished on the lyrette. At least, she felt so. "Especially after so brief a first lesson." Meaning the night they met when he merely showed her another way to hold the instrument and rearranged her fingering slightly.

"Do you know the words to *T'Vor-Salach?*" he asked, deftly ignoring her pleas.

"You're going to make me do this, aren't you," she

hissed under her breath.

"I would be most honored, if you would," he said quietly, watching her as she blushed. Brianna dropped her gaze to her lap, nodded resolutely. Clearly, yes was the only option he would accept.

"Oh, all right. But, please. Just the one. I'm just not ready ..." she pleaded, as Spock surprised her by gently removing her lyrette from her grasp, exchanging it for the guitar.

"As you wish, Lieutenant," he said. He inclined his head to her slightly, his eyes smiling at her. Taunting her. He seemed to be enjoying his little jest. Brianna Cantrell held his gaze, narrowing her eyes to blue slits. He was playing her just like a lyrette. Expertly.

"You —" she began, barely catching herself with a reminder they weren't exactly alone. Protocal and deccorum were the orders of the day, bad boy! She commented silently, instead, suddenly wondering if he heard her thoughts, since both of his eyebrows jumped upwards. She thrust her chin at him defiantly. Smugly. Spock's gaze was steady, questioning, his eyes still smiling.

He was at once shaking his head, ever so slightly. Was he making fun of her, just like yesterday morning? Taking in a deep sigh, when she realized she wasn't going to win this one, Brianna Cantrell

found the strings on her guitar, acquiescing for the time being. He was turning out to be quite the tease, promising herself she would find his Achilles heel.

She was infinitely more confident in her abilities with her classical guitar and began to play easily. They hadn't played together like this since their first meeting. However, unlike the time before they fell into sync immediately as if they had played together for years. She sang the song in Vulcan and much to everyone's surprise and delight, Spock joined in, blending his deep voice with her soft soprano, perfectly. Brianna was at once smiling.

They gazed steadily at one another, singing to one another, until it seemed to the audience she was T'Vor and he, Salach, the ill-fated lovers depicted in the song. It was a rather moving, ancient Vulcan ballad, even in a tongue foreign to most present, the performers' intensity drawing the audience in. When the last note was struck, the audience was fervent with its appreciation. Uhura was weeping knowing just enough Vulcan to pick out the story.

"You've been holding out on me, Mister Spock. I didn't know you could sing," Brianna Cantrell said, with a slight catch in her voice, clearing her throat. "That was beautiful." Spock inclined his head to her in acceptance of her praise while the lieutenant drew in her lower lip. Clearly the song had reached

her, also, the situation depicted perhaps too close to her own, he realized as she once again struggled to contain her emotions.

Concerned, Spock sought to distract her from them. It hadn't been his intention to inflict pain on her. It was just a song. Perhaps, if he had given it a bit more thought he would have selected another one. He seemed to be stepping all over her today, feeling rather clumsy around her. He was almost frightened of her, most certainly of his response to her.

Shamefully out of control, he was unconsciously blaming her for his own lack of *discipline*, he began to think, when it wasn't her fault, almost picking on her, he conceded. Tempering the need to gather her into his arms, he reminded himself, instead, that such a need was illogical. Although, he realized, guiltily, that he owed her solace, at least. "Tell me," he said, reaching over and gently plucking the escaped tear from her cheek. "Do you actually speak Vulcan or did you simply pick up the proper enunciation from those around you?"

Brianna closed her eyes briefly as he ran his knuckles up her cheek, grateful for the contact at last. Needing it. Why must it always be so hit and run, she wondered, her eyes springing open when his hand left her face? 'Wait. No, wait. Don't go.' She did notice that suddenly his leg was casually

brushing up against hers as if he had read her thoughts — again.

Was she *broadcasting?* She checked herself with a mind-exercise. —Or did he simply need her touch as much as she needed his, remembering yesterday morning when he'd hung onto her hand for so long. She caught herself, suddenly hoping this wasn't merely another psychological trick he was using to help soften more disturbing news from him. It was a certainty she was going to have to stop fantasizing about him if their relationship was to remain one of simple friendship.

Brianna Cantrell sighed ever so quietly, forcing herself to look at their situation a little more realistically. The gulf between them was only a creation of their mutual, disconnected status, their combined grief, if you will, she reasoned. There was really nothing so special or even unusual about that, she supposed, given the nature of bondlinks. It coincided with what she had been told to expect. Such a phenomenon didn't explain why he was in the process of leaving her in the first place, nor did it imply he wanted her back. Rather than helping, so far his actions did nothing more than confuse her. Instead, what he offered her was his friendship. If she was going to keep him in her life, she was going to have accept the terms as he presented them. This was one area where pushing would

likely yield her nothing.

"Much to my parents' chagrin, Vulcan is my primary language," she said.

"I thought as much. It is my guess, madam, you were raised in the Province."

"How did you know? Still peeking into my file?"

"I recognize the accent. Like you, it has a most endearing quality," he said, his comment not lost on Uhura as she shot him a glance. "I have property in that region."

"Really?" Brianna said, suddenly realizing what he was doing by getting her to focus on something else. Despite the fact she was human — or more for the fact she was raised in a society that frowned on such emotional displays, she found displaying her negative emotions before a crowd intolerable. She never could stand crying in front of others. It was rather sweet of him, thoughtful, to help protect her dignity like this. "When I was a little girl I used to fancy myself the mistress of a particularly beautiful estate on the Northern Crest."

"Indeed?" Coincidentally, his property was in that very location. Spock's eyebrow went up.

"We used to drive by it often on our way out of town. The structure is ancient, covered in a moss you only see on the Northern side. Almost castle-

like. It was clearly a fortress belonging to a land baron of days gone by but so well-kept you'd hardly guess its age. The grounds well-tended and plush."

"Lots of color, almost like an English garden?"

"Surprisingly so. Even the name of the place is beautiful. *Keldeen*."

"I am familiar with the estate." In fact, he was the owner of said estate, the very property saved by the arranged marriage. His birthright.

"I'm told the land there produces enough *shator* to feed the entire planet."

"That is correct."

"It's a shame, though. No one really lives there. Only the caretaker and his wife. Seems like such an ideal place to raise children."

"And what became of your pursuit to be mistress of the estate?"

Brianna shook her head, waving him off with a gesture and a smile. "A childhood fantasy."

"Another faerie tale?"

Brianna Cantrell smirked, "Maybe. I never learned who owned the property. Probably some old coot who's at the end of his family line. I don't know."

Spock's eyebrow went up again as he mouthed the word, coot. "Indeed? Perhaps, not old," he said, not

sure how to take her assessment of him, choosing not to disclose himself to her at this time. Even being very nearly fifty-three standard Earth years was not considered old by any stretch of the imagination when it came to Vulcans. He was, however, at the end of his family line. Odd, how she seemed to get things right even when under the guise of speculation. Spock gazed at her intently for a moment.

Then with a word and a gesture he dispersed the crowd so that he might conduct the lesson in private. "I shall endeavor to choose a more secluded setting next time," he promised. Eleven minutes later he was rising to leave, having spied Kirk on the upper level of the rec-deck, a black chess piece in hand. "I have to leave you, for now. I have a chess game."

"You're always so busy. Do you ever stop?"

"Why should I stop, madam?"

"You know, take some time out for yourself. To smell the roses, as it's said."

"I am already acquainted with that fragrance. Why would I -" He shook his head. "Madam, I ... Have you been conversing with Doctor McCoy?"

Brianna was giggling. "What? Oh, go on, I was just giving you a hard time. You are so very Vulcan," she teased, a twinkle in her bright blue eyes as she

offered him the Vulcan greeting.

"Thank you, madam," Spock said, in earnest, this time gingerly touching her uplifted palm with his for a moment. He walked away with his lyrette tucked under his arm and the sound of her joyous laughter filling his ears, suppressing his own grin.

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"Married, Spock?" Kirk said, gazing over the tridimensional chess board at his longtime friend and first officer, stunned by the news. He'd set out this evening to get to the root of Spock's moodiness, his friend displaying an increasing impatience, a restlessness, for lack of how to describe it, since his return from Vulcan two nights ago. James Kirk got quite a bit more than he bargained for, the revelation overwhelming. McCoy's concerns, once again, had been more than justified. Vulcan or no, Spock couldn't go on keeping this sort of thing to himself.

This was a life-change that could very possibly affect Spock's performance as an officer. And in fact, it seemed to be doing just that. It behooved him to get Spock to talk it out, in the hopes of diffusing his present mood. Spock was intent on the game, however, exchanging Kirk's rook with his own knight. "We thought this was about property." Kirk frowned. He needed that rook.

"My father saved my property by arranging the marriage. Problem is, I haven't even met her yet," Spock said, wishing he didn't have to talk about this right now. His mind was still on the lieutenant. Right or wrong it was her company he longed for, not even wanting to be here at this moment. Let alone have this disturbing exchange ...

"So, you don't know what she's like? That's barbaric. What if she's ..." Kirk placed Spock's king in jeopardy. "Check," he said, stopping to frame his thoughts as carefully and diplomatically as possible. This was his friend's future wife he was talking about. "Not exactly what you had in mind?"

Spock shot Kirk a glance suddenly afraid his thoughts were radiating outward from him, completely unchecked, quickly drawing his attention back to the tri-dimensional chessboard, frowning. "My mother assures me she is quite pleasing to the eye. I am more worried about her temperament. Her ability to adapt. I am rather set in my ways."

"Hadn't noticed," Kirk said. Spock looked up at him again, briefly, eyebrow elevated.

"Oh, really? Most kind of you to say so. Indeed, I am wondering if I'll wind up spending a majority of time away from her because close proximity breeds contempt."

"Hardly what one expects from a marriage. How in hell did you get into this sort of trouble? You, Spock?"

"Curiosity. She's the only human to ever sit the *k'Matra*. Jim, I was on the outermost edge of the *Corridor* when she suddenly came upon me," he said, surprisingly excited — about as excited as Kirk had ever seen Spock get, that is. "I was awestruck at the strength of her *thought projection*. Few Vulcans ever make it that far. With all the strange and stimulating occurrences we've experienced in our time and travels, I was simply unable to let this pass by without further exploration. I had to *touch* her thoughts. I just didn't expect —"

"To have to marry the girl? So much for your right to choose your own mate. Or not to choose, as in your case. All because you couldn't keep your thoughts to yourself? That's ludicrous. I'm sorry, Spock. There are times when I just don't understand your culture."

Spock shook his head. "I was going to say I didn't expect to find my soul-mate." Upon reflection, he did recall feeling that way about the woman who had shared his experience. And these last two nights, *touching* her again ... He felt his chest tighten. What if she didn't accept him — the way the lieutenant seemed to accept him? The first officer drew in a quiet breath.

He was completely torn in two. He was obligated to the *candidate*, in many ways finding himself still very much intrigued by her. Yet, right in front of him stood the lieutenant. Viable. Tangible. Real, whereas the *candidate* was still so much the phantom, as she had been all of these years, particularly over these last few months, his memories of her mostly hazy, now.

Certainly Brianna commanded the forefront of his thinking these past two days. And nights. Would he again visit her in her sleep? Worried, klaxons going off in the back of his brain, and yet at the same time, he looked forward to the possibility. He was, indeed, embroiled in another dangerous game. "It was not so much the original *mindmeld* with her, Jim, as it was my conduct after the censure was in place. I — walked in her dreams. For over four years. Right up to my death."

"You, what?"

"I thought I was being careful. I never once allowed her access to my identity. Neither did I gain hers. In keeping with the terms of the censure. But, evidently repeated visits of this nature lend themselves to the forging of a *link*. A *bondlink*."

"As in the *marriage link?*"

"She *felt* it when I died. She would have found her way to me, in time."

"Pon farr."

"Captain," Spock frowned. Kirk nodded his understanding, chuckling lightly.

"You would have found yourself having wild sex — with a total stranger."

Spock shook his head. "She would not be a stranger." A pained expression came over Spock's countenance. Strange, how Brianna Cantrell felt more like an old friend to him, and had from their first meeting. He just couldn't 'place' her, then or now.

Kirk frowned. "Oh, no?"

Spock shook himself free of such thoughts, once again relegating them to a very human response known as 'wishful' thinking. "At any rate, I shall meet with her before too long. Once the Vulcan Delegation is aboard. We shall be formally introduced and then take tea together under the careful scrutiny of a chaperon. The *mindmeld* portion of the actual betrothal will be held before the Council of Elders — after this mission is complete."

"I see. Spock, I'm afraid you've successfully shot yourself in the foot, on this one. Not only that, but it appears it was a fatal mistake, my friend. I don't know if I should congratulate you or give you my condolences. And what about the little lieutenant?

Where does she fit into all of this?" Kirk said, catching her out of the corner of his eye as she prepared to leave the rec-deck with Uhura, lyrette and guitar in hand.

James Kirk smiled. Spock followed his gaze. "I've heard reports," Kirk stated, letting his friend know the rumor mill was up and running, the latest gossip having reached the bridge, at last. "You two are awfully chummy. Knee-jerk, Spock? Or do you intend to keep her on the side? Is that your solution to this? Does she know?" he nodded in Cantrell's direction.

Spock noticeably bristled, resenting this blatant intrusion into his personal affairs. Jim may be his closest friend and his captain, but he was clearly out of line. Kirk must have guessed it, shrugging his broad shoulders at Spock, chuckling the way he often did when seeking to hide his discomfort. Kirk splayed his hands in front of him, "I just thought I'd ask. I mean, I don't want to step on your toes. But if you're taken —"

Over my dead body, Spock thought, quite literally meaning it. "The woman — and I are *friends*, Jim," he said, checking himself, stopping just shy of declaring the woman was his. He was feeling extraordinarily possessive of her, wondering where such thoughts were originating. He hardly knew her. Most illogical — and yet, maybe not. With care

he laid his king down in concession, guarding his emotions. "And as I've told you before, she is young and inexperienced." Spock left out vulnerable, refusing to give Kirk an added reason to pursue her.

"And I'd be well advised to leave it that way. Is that what you're saying, Spock? She's either your woman or she isn't. You can't have it both ways."

"Jim," Spock said, sternly, gaining Kirk's immediate attention. "This isn't about me. It's about her." The Vulcan rose and walked off in the direction of the lieutenant, insisting on taking the instruments from her. Kirk stared after him.

"Now, there's where you're wrong," Kirk muttered out of the Vulcan's earshot. By God, McCoy was right. Something did pass over the Vulcan's face when she appeared. Spock, you're headed straight for the abyss, my friend. He silently warned.

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"Well, here's where I get off," Brianna Cantrell said, as the three of them approached her door. "What's this?"

"Looks like someone's left you a gift," Uhura said, reaching down to pick up the small rectangular shipping box leaning just inside the door jamb of the lieutenant's quarters. It was unwrapped and tied simply with a cord, a small note attached. "Since when do we get door-to-door delivery? Mail

Call isn't even until tomorrow. Hm, says 'Urgent Delivery' on it. You don't suppose it's another going-away present."

"Oh, I hope not. Not like the last one, that is. I know what this is. I left something essential behind Thursday. Boy, Mom's quick with the mail."

"Indeed? Are you sure?" Spock said, handing her the instruments. She took them and the box Uhura was handing her, jostling the items in her arms.

"Reasonably, why?" she said, gazing up at him puzzled. "What else could it be?"

"You will know, of course, when you open it. Shall I help you in?"

"No, actually. My quarters are somewhat worse than when you last saw them. I'm really not ready for an inspection, sir."

"Very well, Lieutenant. I will spare you at this time, trusting of course that you will remedy the situation in due course."

"Absolutely, sir."

"Excellent. And now, if you ladies will excuse me, I shall bid you both a good night, then," he said with a slight nod of his head. Uhura caught the unmistakable twinkle in his eyes as he turned away.

"Oh, but sir? Just like that? What about this?" Brianna Cantrell said, jostling the items in her

arms, indicating the box. "I know you know something. Don't you think you owe me an explan —" Spock stopped and turned back to the women, nodding his head slightly.

"Indeed, forgive me, Lieutenant. I do owe you eighteen point two-eight minutes more on your lesson. I shall make it up to you, although I would be hard-pressed to do so tonight. If you will allow me, another time?" he said. Brianna gave him a short nod of concession.

"Of course. But that's not what I —"

"I'll see you tomorrow in the lab, then. Sixteen-ohfive hours. Good night ladies," he said again and once more started off down the corridor.

"Good night, sir." Brianna frowned, wondering why he was being so very abrupt. She turned back around stabbing at the button on the jamb with her elbow, opening the door to her quarters. With a nod she invited the commander to follow her in.

"So what's happening in the lab?" Uhura said.

"Oh, I'm assisting him with some projects he's got going. It's no big deal. I think he just wants a little company," she said, walking over to the bunk, carefully easing the box onto the mattress until she could set the musical instruments aside. Then she set about examining the package expressly for booby-traps and the like, muttering, "He's very

lonely right now, you know?"

"No, I didn't know. Lonely? I've never really looked at him that way. He's always fending people off. How can he be lonely?" Uhura was saying. Brianna hardly heard her. The tag held no clues, marked only with her name — although the writing looked vaguely familiar. Something made her vaguely uneasy, too. She remained standing before the bunk.

Sliding the string off she opened one end to find two small carved crystalline containers inside. Removing the lid of the first one, she noted the fine, yellow powder inside. Chi'tri'dya. This was for her use during the group "sessions" where the delegation would join their minds in order to create a "psychic shield." As she held the jar, something felt off about it. She carefully set it aside. The other jar held a very rare and special blend of Vulcan tea leaves — she breathed in its aromatic, woody fragrance and smiled. This was for her upcoming Tea Ceremony, which would signify a future betrothal, a promise to wed. Brianna grew quiet, still dubious of her participation in either "ceremony."

She gently shook the jar of tea to level the ingredients. A burst of aroma filled the air; a mixture of warm apples and cinnamon. All at once Brianna Cantrell grew light-headed, assorted

images flashed before her mind's eye. Impressions. The vision was over as fast as it began, but it left her almost nauseous. And terrified. Brianna Cantrell reached for the bulkhead above her, half-stumbling onto the bunk.

"What is it?" Uhura said, reaching out to steady her.

"Sometimes ... sometimes I get impressions. Images. Like I'm looking through an old-time kaleidoscope. You know? The way the colorful pieces of glass form a design at the bottom of the tube that changes instantaneously with each twist of the end piece. Reordering themselves to form a new design. My grandfather had one. He showed me once. Anyway, that's twice now I've gotten similar readings like that. I wish — Oh, nevermind."

"No, go on. What?" Uhura said, as she bent to retrieve the accompanying card that had fallen to the deck, glancing at both sides before handing it over. Tucking a leg underneath herself, she took a seat next to the lieutenant, and reached out to touch the lieutenant's arm, "You're in love with him, aren't you."

"What?" Brianna blushed. "I hardly know him. Don't be silly. I like him. A *lot*. But we just met. Besides, despite the rumors, I'm not his —"

"Going to stick with the story, eh? I have to admit,

he's never acted like this before." Uhura shook her head, puzzled. "It's really so unlike him. Don't look now, but I think you've gotten under that thick Vulcan hide of his." Brianna refused to comment, busily pulling the card from its envelope, believing she was effectively closing the subject, with the diversion of her attention. She read the message aloud.

"For our long-awaited Tea-Ceremonial, it is only fitting we have the very best." Oh, that's so sweet." Brianna glanced at both sides of the note card. Had he just acknowledged her? Was it at all possible? Again, it was written in a familiar hand, only she felt no comfort in it. Instead, she shuddered violently with the frisson that ran up her spine, chilling the room. Or, perhaps, her heating unit had gone out again. She rubbed her arms, seeking comfort, suddenly very uneasy.

"Still insist you're just friends?"

"What? Oh, you don't understand. This is just the *Vulcan Way.* They're huge on tradition and rituals. We're to take tea ... sometime after the Delegation gets here."

"So, he gave you some of his? How's that logical?"

"Well, mainly, I suppose because I didn't get a proper ceremonial the first time around. Guess, he's just trying to make it right, in his own way. Besides,

I told him I was having a hard time letting go. He understands what I'm going through right now. Being recently disconnected himself. Nyota, did you know his wife?"

"T'Pring?"

"What a lovely name. T'Pring."

"I can't say I knew her, no. I saw her on the compti once. She was beautiful. But I'd hardly call his disconnection from her recent. That happened, oh, I'd say at least thirteen-fourteen years ago."

"Oh," Brianna said, frowning. "Then I guess you didn't know this one."

"Spock was married again?"

"Well, betrothed, at least."

"Hm. Imagine that. Well, I'm not really so surprised. He's incredibly tight-lipped about anything personal. We didn't know about T'Pring until suddenly we had to get him to Vulcan. And I mean. It was urgent. We just thought he didn't date. After all, he's always claimed he was incapable of such emotions. Then, of course he proved it with Christine. Huh. Just when you think you know someone. You said he was hurting. Poor baby, I guess it just didn't work out *again*."

"Maybe," Brianna said, deftly ignoring the obvious warning. "But you did say he died. Anyway, I

wanted you to know we're really just friends."

"Hm, friends who enjoy tea together, you mean."

"Please," Brianna Cantrell said, touching Uhura's arm, her large eyes pleading. "The less said the better. He's having a tough enough time sorting things out as it is. He really doesn't need all this right now."

"I'll say. Relax," Uhura said, patting Brianna's arm. "I'd never do a thing to hurt him. We've been through too much together. But that must have been some heart-to-heart you two had this morning if you got all that out of him. I've got to hand it to you, honey. He's just not a talker."

"Really? That's all we've done since we met. I have to admit that it's a bit like old friends trying to play catch up after a period of absence. It's like we can't tell each other enough about ourselves. I mean. Well, you know. In lieu of a *mindmeld*. Which is something we can't do because, like I said. I'm not his woman. And it's just not permitted. I mean. Some people do it. But then some people give away their virginity, too."

Of course, neither had she divulged the circumstances under which she had met her late *bondmate*, preferring for now to keep some secrets. She was so very ashamed of her behavior leading up to the indiscretion. Spock was turning out to be

so very proper. She would rather he didn't know she was the *Anomaly* at this time.

He just might not approve. The chance being, he may so disapprove, he would turn away from her. She just didn't feel strong enough to risk it. unless, he already had discerned it was she, and that's what was behind his reticence. Brianna Cantrell swallowed the sudden emotion threatened to choke her. When the right time presented itself, when she had made up her mind which path to take, she would tell him everything. She had already hinted at some things. She only hoped he would accept the tea, should she offer it to him. And then it danced through her mind, he had already accepted tea from her that first morning, in fact. Was it binding, she wondered, worried? If it was, she really had usurped his right to choose, which was unfair of her.

"Uh-huh. Oh boy, he's got it bad. And you're right about one thing. He sure has things to sort out, all right. And so do you, I think. Because whether you like it or not, you're more than just friends. Take it from me." Uhura jumped off of the bunk and left Brianna's quarters via the adjacent lavatory.

"Oh, boy, I know, and that's part of the problem," Brianna Cantrell sighed quietly. Getting up from her bunk she set the sinister jar of tea on the bedside shelf and went to wash up for the evening.

Returning she sidled into her pillow, pulling the covers over her head, as she turned toward the bulkhead. "Believe me, I know. I just sort of bumped into him and instantaneously complicated his life! Oh, T'Bree, what are you going to do?"

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The compti chimed suddenly above her head and reaching upward, Brianna opened the channel. "Cantrell, here," she yawned, squinting with the onset of the bright lights overhead. All scrubbed up for the evening and changed into her pj's she wasn't quite asleep when he called. Rolling over, throwing her long braid over her shoulder, brushing the stray wisps of hair off of her face, she gazed upward at the tiny screen above her on the bulkhead.

"Forgive me for disturbing you, Lieutenant," Spock said.

"No, it's all right. I'm so glad you called. I wanted to thank you for the tea. That was really very sweet of you, sir," she said, yawning again, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Indeed," An awkward pause followed while Spock considered her words. Tea? Temporarily, he was at a loss — she must be referring to the tea he made for their session down in the lab. Glad that she hadn't reminded him of the illogic of his actions,

serving her as if she were his, nor had she given him a reproving glance. He was still confused as to just who she was, but if what he was beginning to suspect were true, and she was his *candidate* — and he had to admit the odds were stacking up in her favor — then he would have to make a new start with her, egregious as his behavior had been these past two days. To his relief, she seemed genuinely pleased. Strangely, having crossed this hurdle, his stomach was all aflutter, more so than before.

"What can I do for you, sir?" Brianna Cantrell was smiling. Was it so easy for her? Was he the only one feeling so completely vulnerable and ill at ease at this moment? Finding it difficult to breathe again, he wondered why he had even bothered calling her like this. He had no real business with her at this time just a need to address this annoying, painful sense of distance from her. True enough, it resided between them from the very start but with his attempt this morning to dissociate himself from her completely, he now found it astonishingly exacerbated. Something had to be done to curtail it, he decided. To stop the haemorrhaging, as it were. He couldn't lose her ...

"I am disturbed at the way we left things earlier."

"You mean with the lesson? Don't worry about it. Things happen. I didn't realize bringing an instrument to the rec-deck was an open invitation. I

was just trying to warm-up."

"I meant this morning. The way we left things."

"What? — Oh. You've thought it over and you've decided we shouldn't even be friends?" Was that a flicker of disappointment in her eyes?

"Negative. That is not what I meant," Spock said, quickly seeking to eradicate it, if that were indeed the case, though he ended up sounding ever so slightly exasperated. Which he was. She was doing it again. Filling in his unspoken thoughts and concerns. "Lieutenant, where do you come up with these things?"

"Oh, I dunno. Random thoughts in the air projected by little green men, who knows? May even be the product of independent thinking." She was yawning again. Clearly, he was keeping her awake.

"I'm neither little nor technically green."

"Well, so who said I was talking about you?" she laughed. Brianna Cantrell gazed up at his image on the tiny screen. He was obviously laying in his bunk, too. Clad in a regulation tee-shirt, his arm bent under his head in support. He seemed relaxed, his Vulcan veneer intact, but surprisingly she could tell he was far from at ease.

"I've been thinking about you all day. I just wanted

to know that you're all right."

"Really?" Brianna was suddenly beaming. "All day?"

"To my shame, yes, Lieutenant." Spock drew in a quiet breath. "And I find you are a most cruel captor. Like a black widow you've caught me in your web and I confess I am afraid of being devoured."

"Oh, well, I thought ... I mean. Logically, wouldn't we have to mate first? — before you started worrying about being consumed that is? For it to qualify as a true analogy, I mean. After all, I think that's why they're called widows. So you, see? There's nothing for you to worry about. Unless, of course you meant ..."

"Indeed? A most interesting concept," Spock said. "Just what are you suggesting, madam?"

"Suggesting? Oh, well I ... Oh. *Oh!* Well, *that's* not what I meant ..." Suddenly the lieutenant's cheeks took on a delicate crimson hue. "I only meant ... Well —"

"I promise. I would be most gentle."

"Oh, stop it, you are *so bad!* Really, you're terrible. I meant, I never promised not to bite, is all."

"As you wish, madam. And I must commend you on your ability to extricate yourself from such a snare. Excellent manoeuvring. I only wish I could do the

same. Already I feel your sting, madam."

"Oh. Is it enormously painful?" she asked, her brow ever so slightly knotted in her concern. "It's just that I like you so much. The last thing I would want to do is hurt you, sir."

"Nor do I wish to harm you, madam. Some things being beyond our control, as it were."

"Yes. I mean, believe me. Throwing a sticky web around somebody and forcing them against their will is not my usual modus operandi. Guess, I just sort of made an exception in your case. I was really hoping you'd like me well enough to want to stay on your own. But," she sighed heavily. "Can't always have what you want."

"That much is certain, madam. And I must confess I did stumble headlong into said web. My eyes were open at the time. Albeit — blinded."

"Just not watching where you were walking, eh?"

"Something like that. To my detriment, I find you most irresistible. Particularly when you smile. There is a certain luminous quality about you—"

"Hm. Moth to flame. I get it now. I guess I'll just have to find some way to release you, won't I? Perhaps if I try not to smile so much ..."

"Madam, to do so would render the same results as a full-scale eclipse. And since all living things require

sunshine, it would be illogical to allow you to dampen even the weakest ray."

"Then what's to be done?"

"I am sorry to disappoint you but beyond sacrificing myself, I have no answers at this time. There simply isn't enough data even to formulate a theory."

"I see. In other words, you're just as in over your head as I am."

"I admit I have gone quite beyond my own realm of experience in the matter."

"Sir, on that we concur. And in the meantime?"

"We simply say goodnight and get a good night's rest, Lieutenant."

"Fair enough, sir. Good night. Cantrell out."

"Good night, madam. Spock out."

# **END**



# THE CONFRONTATION

From the pen of April L. Payne

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