

# MIRROR PLAY



By George Frederic

# STAR TREK: MIRROR UNIVERSE

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By George Frederic

Star Trek Mirror Universe: Mirror Play George Frederic 2026© (Pseudonym)  
To contact the author: [newken2005@gmail.com](mailto:newken2005@gmail.com)

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# Contents

<b><i>MIRROR PLAY</i></b> .....	2
Part One.....	5
Part Two .....	11
Part Three .....	16
Part Four.....	20
Part Five .....	24
Part Six.....	28
Part Seven .....	31
Part Eight.....	33
Part Nine.....	34
Part Ten .....	39
Part Eleven .....	43
Part Twelve.....	44
Part Thirteen.....	49
Part Fourteen.....	52
Part Fifteen.....	54
Six Months Later.....	62

## Part One

Deep in the obsidian chambers of the High Command headquarters in Shi’Kahr, sealed away from the intense heat and red sunlight of the Vulcan high summer, a dozen councilors stared attentively at a holographic star map projected on a far wall. The green outline of Vulcan space glowed softly at the center; dark blue circles marked the space of familiar foes scattered at close range; and from a distant corner of the map a vile red stain spread slowly, inexorably, into empty deep space. All eyes watched; all waited for the High Councilor to speak, as was protocol. That man, Skon, finally rose. When he spoke, the weight he was carrying was unmistakable.

“My fellow councilors, the danger presents itself, here, with no mask. The contagion we loosed upon the galaxy four decades ago spreads rapidly. What we in our naïveté allowed the Terrans to steal from us has been adapted with unprecedented speed. It will soon overtake us. Every day, every hour, they near our space.” Skon met each gaze steadily “History will not grant us the luxury of a trial.”

Councilor Syrran leaned forward and put his hands together. He peered over the arch of his long fingers at Skon. Their unspoken hostility thickened the atmosphere in the shimmering heat.

“They come, and we wait. The Terrans are dangerous but distant. They spread now into empty space. There are immediate threats, here at our doorstep. Andor and Tellar continue their provocations. Perhaps they are working on an alliance. Their mutual disdain cannot outweigh their shared hatred of our world. They are our immediate problem, not some far-away horde of oil-burning apes.”

Skon averted his gaze for a moment. He glanced sidewise at Councilor T’Mek. She nodded. “The Terrans have proven far more resilient and resourceful than our ancient foes. Andor and Tellar have had centuries of warp technology and yet they timidly colonize only that which is near their home worlds. The Terrans stole a single ship less than four decades ago and now reach into deep space.” T’Mek looked back to Skon.

“The Terrans have become our greatest threat, given the frenetic pace of their advance,” he said. “The star map lays this out plainly. Terran ambition will lay waste all that it touches. I suggest we direct it elsewhere.”

Syrran sat forward in his chair. “You propose an alliance with the Terrans?”

“I propose a redirection of the Terrans,” Skon replied. “That we channel this contagion elsewhere.”

T’Mek spoke next. “We can contact the Terrans and propose a summit to discuss future contingencies. We can provide them with the incentive they need to direct their energy toward Andor, or Tellar, or both. In the meantime, we wait. If they destroy our ancient foes, so be it. If our ancient foes destroy them, so be it. And if they destroy one another – we have won a great victory.”

“Without striking a blow,” said Skon. “For the price of a subspace radio transmission, and an hour spent with their leaders.”

Syrran shook his head slowly. “No Vulcan diplomat would debase their name meeting with a Terran.”

“The task does not call for a diplomat,” said T’Mek. “This must be undertaken with the skill of an artist.”

“We propose,” said Skon heavily, “an alternate messenger. A man who represents all that is sublime about our race and our home world. A man who can speak to the Terrans in a way no diplomat could.”

Syrran sat back disapprovingly. “You speak in riddles, Councilor.”

T’Mek spoke directly. “We will send Solok, of Soran.”

Syrran’s voice carried more than a hint of disbelief. “The Poet Emeritus? The poet Solok?”

“The same,” replied Skon.

Syrran shook his head. “The poet emeritus? He has no political experience. He is a poet. He is a writer. You would send a poet to deal with wild beasts?”

“A word about his background, Syrran,” Skon said. “You know his father, Solek, of Soran.”

Syrran shook his head slowly. “I do not know this name,” he said dryly.

“Perhaps your memory fails you, Councilor,” said Skon. “He was neither a wealthy man, nor a poet. He was survey chief aboard the *T’Plana-Hath*.”

The silence in the room took on a pall. The words hung still in the hot air.

“*T’Plana-Hath*,” Syrran repeated.

“The survey ship that landed at Bozeman – the ship plundered by the Terrans,” Skon said, each quiet word swung with the force of a hammer. “The broken vial that loosed the contagion.”

“Solok’s father died at the hands of the Terrans,” said T’Mek. “There is no better man on Vulcan to speak with them.”

“He may refuse—” Syrran began.

“He will not refuse,” Skon said, flatly. “He is a prominent citizen, called to serve the High Command. He is a poet, gifted with a sense of history and destiny. He is an artist, and his way with words and pen unmatched. And he has, I believe, unfinished business with the Terran intruders.”

The great chamber fell quiet. The star map went dark. The air remained hot, still, heavy.

Syrran shook his head slowly. “This may be a miscalculation.”

“There are dangerous animals that prowl the wilderness,” Skon said heavily. “We cannot domesticate them, but we can cage them.”

Light years away, and one day later, the Directors of the Cabinet sat around the great mahogany table in their Kyoto fortress. Smoke filled the room from a half dozen cigars; the dim track lights cast each Director in shadow and backlit the husky man standing at the head of the long table, whose holstered pearl-handled pistol glistened through the smoky gloom.

“Director Garcia, present your report.” First Director Silas nodded toward a dark man with a black eyepatch who sat to his immediate right.

Garcia rose and read from a thin black and silver electronic tablet. “Last night the Directorate of Public Safety received a subspace transmission from the Vulcan High Command requesting that we dispatch a delegation to discuss what they called future contingencies.” The Directors looked shocked. Director Ramsey coughed and nearly spit out her shot of whiskey.

“The Vulcans?” she said, half smirking. “What brought them down off their horse to send us a message?”

“What a great honor,” Director Bia scoffed, his voice thick with sarcasm. “Our would-be masters will talk to us.” He half-raised his glass in an ironic salute.

“What did they want?” Director Callay pulled on her long cigar with disdain. “Future contingencies.”

“That was the extent of the transmission,” said Garcia.

“Riddles,” Calley snarled. “Hints.”

“And not one word about what they want,” said Bia. “Unadulterated arrogance.”

Director McKinley poured himself a thick finger of dark whiskey. “The hell with those freakshow sons of bitches.”

Silas barked, “Shut up! All of you!” The Directors, admonished, looked down at the table, then back up slowly. “The Vulcans reached out to us. We have something of value to them, or to their allies, or to their enemies. We will not pass up this opening.”

“Opening?” said McKinley.

“Opening,” echoed the First Director. “We take this opportunity to find out once and for all what they’re up to. Bozeman,” he said wryly, “was a long time ago.”

“The devils live three hundred years,” Ramsey said bitterly. “They have long memories.”

“But they have immediate needs,” said Silas. “And we will take their invitation.”

“Then you go,” said Director Bia, angrily, his finger twitching at his own sidearm. “You take a month-long trip through deep space to a nest of pointy-eared vipers.”

“You are bold, Director,” said the First Director. “Quite bold.”

“And I speak the truth, which makes me bold,” Bia said. “No diplomat will take the job. It is a fool’s errand and a suicide mission.”

“We will not send a diplomat, Director,” Silas said smoothly. “I have another in mind.”

“What lunatic would take that job or make that trip?” McKinley snorted.

The First Director smiled wryly through the smoke. “I propose we send our friend, Viscountess L.”

The room fell silent.

“Viscountess L,” repeated Director Belloni, until now silent. He was the most junior of the Cabinet Directors, just recently appointed three months ago. His innocence was perhaps refreshing. “I do not know this name.”

First Director Silas turned toward Belloni. “You are aware of Squire Carsted, are you not?”

“Of course,” said Belloni. “He was one of The Fifteen.”

“Yes, he was,” said the First Director. “One of the wealthy men who bankrolled the recovery after the Post-Atomic Horror.”

“And he was assassinated not long after,” said Belloni. “I do not see where you go with this, First Director.”

“He was killed in a melee with a subordinate,” said the First Director. “And his fortune passed to his issue, a son and a daughter, fraternal twins, then in their late teens.

They inherited their father’s immense wealth but none of his connections. Within a year, the son was assassinated, this time by a former associate of their father who had been named executor of the estate. He took possession of the son’s half of the estate, then summoned the daughter to Orphans Court, where she was to sign over her half. She arrived on time and entered the chamber, as ordered by summons, and she knelt before him as ward, as required by law. And when he reached down to hand her the document to seal, she drew a concealed dagger and ran it straight through his heart. Then she leapt to her feet and held the dagger at his advocate’s throat and on the spot made the poor man execute another document transferring the entire estate to her name. She entered

the court chamber a beaten teenage supplicant; she left one of the wealthiest women on the planet.”

“Remarkable,” said Belloni.

“Many of us at this table owe our seats to her, or to her late brother, or to her father,” Callay said quietly.

“There is no shame in that,” said Bia. “We all serve someone.”

“Serving her is no privilege,” sneered the First Director. “I do not owe Carsted nor either of His bastards nor any other of the Fifteen my chair. Though, for any of us Viscountess L is a dangerous animal. This is more demon than woman. She sleeps no more than two hours a night, I am told. She is completely carnivorous. She is an expert fencer. She forgoes shoes, no matter the surface or the weather. She is by all accounts arrogant, intelligent, beautiful, and avaricious. Those she cannot buy, she seduces. Those she cannot seduce, she murders.”

“Terrifying,” said Belloni, and the others at the table – some of whom knew quite well – did not disagree.

“She is now in her thirties. By all accounts she spends her time at her estate in California, fencing with trainers and bedding lovers. But we cannot count on her to remain there. Many of you are in thrall to her and owe her your chairs. All of us would do well to have her energies directed elsewhere permanently. I believe you see what I am saying.”

“Assassination?” said Bia.

“You are a fool to speak that way in a meeting, Director,” said Garcia. “You realize that.”

“No imagination,” said Director McKinley. “I see your point perfectly, First Director.”

“Yes,” said Silas. “Dispatch her to Vulcan. She may subjugate a new world. Or she may die far from Terra. Either way, a win.”

The other Directors sat silently. They may not have liked the First Director, but no one argued, no one spoke, no one reached for a sidearm.

In the Cabinet boardroom, silence was the highest form of respect.

He turned toward Garcia. “Director, prepare a summons for Viscountess L. She will carry our message to our rivals across the stars. And let’s wait for a fortuitous outcome.”

## Part Two

Twilight wrapped the castle in the Arlanga Mountains overlooking the Sas-a-shar desert. There, Solok—summoned on the pretense of dedicating a new monastery—met those who wished his presence upon the high parapets. The poet’s sinuous robes of bright silk, the sartorial badge of an accomplished intellectual, contrasted sharply with the black military garb of the three councilors.

Skon, the senior, approached and raised his hand in the Ta’al salute.

“Your presence honors us, Poet Emeritus.”

“I am honored by your own, Councilor.” Solok returned the salute.

“Poet Emeritus, we must put aside our deception,” T’Mek said abruptly. “We did not summon you here to commission a poem. We have a pressing matter, one which requires your assistance.”

Solok nodded. “I must admit I was suspicious. I know many masters. None of them have spoken of a new monastery.” He raised an eyebrow. “It seems illogical to use pretense, my lords. I am a loyal Vulcan, mature, civic-minded, and an altruist. I would have stood at your service for any lawful reason.”

“There are factors involved that required absolute secrecy to ensure success,” Skon said. “It is a matter of security.”

Solok looked surprised. “Security? I did not know that poets moved in such circles.”

“It involves an off-world threat,” Skon said.

“Again, Councilor, a matter in which I fail to see my utility.”

“The Terrans come ever closer. As we speak, their scout ships have reached the Ts’Shar Stars, and they have sent unmanned probes even further. We may find them unworthy and distasteful, but we must accept their presence as fact. They will arrive. We either manage their arrival, or we wait for it to crash upon us. The logical course is to accept the inevitability and prepare our response.”

“This does not seem, Councilor, to be the purview of a poet.”

“But it is, great teacher. Any response to such volatile beings that is rooted in diplomacy or politics leads to a forgone conclusion and a

kinetic response – war. But an artist – trained in the sublime, who approaches each problem with the understanding of the nuances present even in formal logic—brings a skill set no diplomat, no soldier, no politician would possess. There is no greater artist alive on Vulcan than you, Solok. The High Command requests your assistance.”

Solok closed his eyes briefly, opened them slowly. “My past, perhaps, has as much to do with this as my present, does it not, Councilor?”

Skon and T’Mek glanced at one another. Syrran looked ready to retort, to pounce on his fellow councilors. Solok understood and spoke to spare the Councilor the pain of a response. “I appreciate your recognition of my personal story, and your note that my family history provides a unique perspective. I accept that this history makes me the most logical instrument for your purpose.” Solok looked down at his folded hands, raised his head and looked toward the red-tinted sky. A warm wind blew from the desert, tempered by the high mountain pass. He gazed out across the broad vista below. The Councilor waited, silent, stoic, not knowing what he saw. Finally, he turned toward them, and his voice heavy with cold resignation, said, “So be it, my lords. I accept your commission. I will honor my duty as a Vulcan. I will bring my skills as a poet. And I will perhaps lay at rest, at last, the memory of my father. Provide the parameters of the assignment, and I shall prepare.” He raised his hand in salute.

“Live long and prosper.”

The Cabinet sat in anticipatory silence. There were no sounds but that of liquor being quietly poured into rocks, glasses and cigars being lit. Each director looked at the table, and discreetly at their timepieces. A few fingered their weapons. All waited.

And when a buzzer sounded at Director Garcia’s position, more than one startled. Garcia lifted the communicator, listened for a moment, and laid it back in its carriage without a word.

“Her transport’s arrived,” he said flatly. “She will be here momentarily.”

And then, as if the Director’s words had conjured a demon, the great doors burst wide and Viscountess L strode into the room.

There was no mistaking the entrance; it was that of a wild creature suddenly caged. Viscountess L stormed forward accusingly, her tawny hair shoulder-length, her amber eyes burning, her toned body tan and barely covered with a burgundy crop top and a short fringed burgundy skirt. A ceremonial dagger swung from the crimson sash that hugged her hips and a stiletto was bound to her ankle.

She came forward, confidently, arrogantly, barefoot, and sneering, and stopped just a few paces from the edge of the great table.

Silas set his cigar aside. “You forgot how to salute, Viscountess?”

“As you forgot your place, First Director,” L replied, with a harsh sneer that strangely enough highlighted the beauty of her face. “I hold here a summons,” she continued, raising a gold-colored page in her clenched fist. “A summons!”

“Issued per our prerogative and binding on any citizen,” Bia said arrogantly. The Viscountess fixed him with a cold stare and her teeth showed in a carnivorous snarl. “I gave you that chair, Director,” she said, her voice a seductive growl. “And I can take it back.” She eyed each director, her demeanor growing more imperious with every look. “Most of you sit at that table thanks to my family’s largesse. And you impertinent low-lives *dare* issue me a summons?”

“It is a matter of semantics, Viscountess,” Silas said, impatiently. “We wish to speak.”

“As if I wish to speak to you,” L replied, with a short, dismissive laugh.

Silas pounded the table. “Mind yourself, Viscountess. You may hold the leash of some of those at this table, but you do not hold mine.” He drew his pearl-handled pistol and lay it on the table in front of him, a bold and crystal-clear gesture. “This is a matter of great urgency. We require your presence.”

“Fuck you,” L sneered. “You have my presence.”

“You insolent ill-bred snob!” Garcia swore, half rising from the chair, his hand at his sidearm. “You forget yourself!”

L laughed sharply and shifted her stance, deliberately catching the dim backlight on the dagger at her hip. “As do you, Director. Remember whose bribes placed you at that table.”

Silas pounded the table again. “I demand your attention!”

“You have it for the moment, First Director.” L put her hand at her dagger, suggestively. “I advise you treat it with respect.”

“The Cabinet requires your service.”

L sneered, knowingly, smiled, viciously. “And this service is to be rendered off-world, is it not?”

Silas gave no sign of being taken aback. He had played too much poker in his day. But this woman had not posed a question. She had made a statement, with a tone of finality. “That is correct.”

L smiled again. “And this involves our tormenters on Vulcan, does it not?”

“Where did you get this information?” Garcia demanded.

L’s laugh cut him off. “I put you at this table, Director. I hold your leash. I hear your thoughts.”

Silas saw the unease run through his colleagues. The withering gaze and knowing bemusement of this striking woman had unsettled them. He had to regain control.

“The Vulcans have proposed a summit. Their message was vague and their motives are unclear. But we see an opening to gain more insight. Bozeman was a long time ago. Subspace radio gives us nothing but words. We need a face-to-face meeting to assess their motives; to see where we stand, to detect any sign of weakness or wavering that we could exploit. I will speak openly – you are well suited for this mission.”

L chuckled, and when she spoke it was with an expression somewhere between smile and sneer.

“I am well suited, am I not? My father gunned down, my brother and I forced to make our way through the Post-Atomic Horror alone, my brother – my other half – savagely torn from me. Yes, First Director, I am exceptionally well suited for a mission to hell. In fact, your friends at this table helped outfit me.” L fingered the hilt of her dagger, let her gaze fall

once more on each director. “Now point me to the show, Silas, before I lose interest.”

“As soon as the Vulcan High Command confirms our response,” Garcia said, reading from an electronic tablet, “the mission will begin. A deep space yacht with a full crew and security detail will be placed at your disposal. Upon your acceptance of the contract, a deposit of 50,000 new credits’ gold will be made to your designated bank account, with a second deposit of 50,000 new credits’ gold sent upon your successful completion of the mission.” He set the tablet aside. “We hope you find these terms acceptable and agreeable.”

“I find little that this Cabinet does either acceptable or agreeable, Director,” L said. “But I am, after all, a loyal subject.”

L snapped to attention, her bare feet set wide and her stance defiant, and with a savage grin that broadcast unbridled irony struck her chest with a closed fist and raised her bare tanned arm in a stiff salute. “For Terra,” she said.

And then, her vicious smirk making it perfectly clear that she harbored no thought of waiting for formal dismissal, she turned and paced from the room.

The Directors watched her go. They sat in silence, each with the same thought.

They had unleashed the hound. Now it was time to watch it hunt and see what prey it would retrieve.

## Part Three

The poet Solok and the monk S'alén walked slowly along the sun-beaten flagstones of the monastery path on Mount Selaya, Solok one reverent pace behind his elder. They passed an hour in silence, walking slowly, their minds clearing for the conversation the poet had requested and the monk had granted. In time the rocky barriers on either side of the path gave way to open air and a sweeping vista of The Forge desert below. It was here that S'alén stopped, and spoke, softly, to his seeker of counsel.

“You mentioned of a sense of ominous foreboding, Poet Emeritus. I ask, now, the source, if you know it.”

“A matter of state, great teacher.” Solok squinted into the sun. “One in which I find myself deeply involved.”

“An unusual position for a poet,” S'alén noted.

“Indeed.” Solok looked out over the desert. “The High Command has invited the Terrans to discuss future contingencies. The Terrans have dispatched an emissary with their response. I have been commissioned by the High Command to meet this emissary.”

“And those who commissioned you permit your free sharing of this fact?”

“I have received no instructions, other than to be present at the designated time, at the designated place. Otherwise, my movements are free and my actions unrestricted. My presence here is neither deception nor disobedience.”

“Tell me of your commission?”

“Only that the details are forthcoming.”

“And of the emissary?”

“I am told that she is a high-born noblewoman. I have been advised of her name and rank. That is the extent of my knowledge.”

“And the reason you were commissioned?”

“The High Command claims it is a recognition of my prestige and artistry. I believe otherwise. My opinion is that circumstances of my father's death four decades ago gives me a connection to the Terrans, however dark and tenuous, that few Vulcans have attained. The logic of

the High Command was precise, if not necessarily respectful of my memories.”

“And what causes this foreboding, Poet Emeritus?”

“I make, and have made my way, through the world with the pen. I know nothing of the political arts. To undertake a task for which one has no training is daunting.” Solok looked at the monk. “And I am uncertain also of my opposite number. Were I to face an emissary from a foe known to us, one from a race that we have had centuries to study, the uncertainty would be tactical, and not strategic.”

S’alen spoke gently. “Let us remember the principles of logic. About any given thing, there is that which is known, and that which is unknown. Of your foreboding, let us appraise. We know that the Terrans reach into deep space. We do not know their motives, or their goal. We know that they have dispatched a messenger. We do not know what message she brings. We know that the Terrans are dangerous. We do not know what danger this particular Terran presents. Those are the knowns that you possess and the unknowns that you face. It is logical to find the situation disconcerting. I do not envy your task, Poet Emeritus. Yet you are not without forewarning. We undertake many tasks without even that.”

Solok nodded solemnly and bowed his head slightly.

“Your logic is impeccable, great teacher. And your guidance is deeply appreciated.”

“Remember, Poet Emeritus, the Terrans are driven by chaos, but chaos is merely order we have not yet studied. Your task is not to conquer them with a blade, but to map the rhythm of their nature. Remember the foundation of your craft. A poet does not fear an empty page; he begins to write.”

Solok bowed his head, the logic of the old master clearing away the last remnants of his doubt. “I understand, great teacher. The page is set.”

S’alen acknowledged the gesture with a raised hand. “It is my privilege to put a mind at ease.” And then, almost imperceptibly, he smiled. “I ask you to consider this as well, Solok. The High Command did not select you to fail. They have entrusted you with a matter of great import to them. They trust you. Extend yourself the same respect.”

The star yacht *Abraxis* sped through the starless void between Sol and 40-Eridani, its jagged black and gray hull bearing the gold dagger and globe roundel of a Terran government vessel. The ship moved with alarming speed, its engines sending deep guttural growls to dissipate in the noiseless vacuum of icy space, its searchlights firing sharp narrow shafts of white to pierce the deep black darkness ahead.

Viscountess L stood under the vile ultraviolet lights of the cramped and noisy bridge, her eyes intent on the narrow viewscreen. The commander stood at parade rest alongside her, his heavy burgundy utility jumpsuit, like that worn by all of the crew, in stark contrast to L's scanty fighting garb. L stared at the viewscreen in silence for some time before finally speaking. "What is the status of the ship, Commander?"

"*Abraxis* holds its course, my lord. By your command we are running the reactors at full capacity. At last review, 110% of maximum rating."

"Good. Burn the warp coils if we have to."

"As you wish, my lord."

"What is our position?"

"We are closing on one parsec from the Vulcan homeworld, Viscountess."

"So, we arrive in seventy-two hours?"

"That estimate is correct, my lord."

"One parsec from Vulcan. Congratulations, Commander. *Abraxis* has now reached further into deep space than any Earth vessel or probe to date."

"It is an honor, my lord."

"It is an achievement, Commander. Your honor is in the passenger you carry."

"Yes, my lord."

L kept her eyes locked the viewscreen and spoke over her shoulder to the commander. "The navigator on third watch. Who is that?"

"Ensign Mai Thao Nguyen, my lord."

“Tell me of her.”

“She is our most junior officer, my lord. She recently completed basic training. This is her first deep space assignment.”

Viscountess L kept her gaze fixed on the screen. “Send her to my quarters.”

“At once, Viscountess.”

“You may need your secondary to cover navigation on third watch, Commander. I will advise if so.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Carry on, Commander.” With that, L turned sharply from the screen and strode from the bridge.

## Part Four

Ever since he had attained status of emeritus, Solok's days had taken on a remarkable and pleasant pace. Meditation filled his morning hours. He continued his *sha'mura* training in the afternoon. Evenings were spent with the mandatory hour of poetry composition he had demanded of himself since the very start of his career. Every ten days he presented to master candidates at the Academy of Arts. Once a month he gave public readings for an audience at the Hall of Culture. It was a life of quiet, paced tranquility and continual learning, part of the ideal to which all should aspire, according to the teachings of Surak.

Learning must continue through life, even if, he thought with irony, such learning was not pleasant. Recently he had learned that the demands imposed by others consumed all of a politician's day.

Solok stood on the twilight stone balcony of his home on the outskirts of Shi'Kahr overlooking the sprinkled lights of the capital's outer suburbs below. Skon had arrived before evening meal with two others, all of them in military garb, all of them carrying thick portfolios and electronic pads, none of them, in Solok's mind, welcome. He stood before them quietly.

Skon, as senior, spoke first. "Poet Emeritus, I present Deputy Councilor T'Pan, Director of diplomatic protocol for the High Command, and Vice Commander S'Trak, head of security at the capital airstrip."

"I am honored," Solok said quietly.

"They will advise you of the procedure we will follow." Skon turned first to the Vice Commander, who stepped forward one pace to speak.

"The memorandum signed with the Terrans agreed that their ship would traverse Vulcan space unescorted. Once they drop out of warp over the capital, we will undertake a remote scan of the vessel to ensure compliance with our security protocols. We do not know if their technology will detect this scan, but it will be conducted in a rapid manner that is not at all provocative."

Solok looked down at his hands and then up and over at the officer. “I am not sure, Vice Commander, that we can say for certain what the Terrans will or will not find provocative.”

“Agreed, Poet Emeritus. But we are charged with ensuring the safety of our citizens and property.”

“I understand.”

Deputy Councilor T’Pan spoke next. “The Vice Commander and I will formally accept the Terran envoy’s credentials at the airstrip. From there, I will lead a diplomatic reception detail as far as the Sh’Rhal Citadel.”

“And once there?” asked Solok.

T’Pan glanced briefly to Skon, then looked back to Solok. “Once there, I will stand down. At that point, you will be the senior official at the site.”

Solok remained stoic. He looked back out over the twinkling lights below, now glowing brighter as darkness began to envelope the plain. “I believe you mean to say, Deputy Councilor, that I will be the only official at the site.”

T’Pan remained quiet. She glanced again to Skon.

Skon spoke. “Please let us know if there is anything that requires clarification.”

“As of the moment, Councilor, all is very clear. I thank you for your instructions.” The two junior officers saluted. Skon said, “We thank you for your service. Live long and prosper.”

Solok raised his palm in salute and quietly watched them go.

They lay quietly across the large bed, the sweat of their naked bodies reflecting the lurid red lights of the chamber. L looked over at the young woman lying beside her. The ensign lay on her back, her breathing slow and serene, her skin luminous. She drifted in dreamy anticipation between deep sleep and daydream, her face relaxed, her silken hair undone and free. The ensign opened her eyes, turned her head slowly to face L.

“My lord—” she began, eyes half closed, voice a grateful, breathless whisper.

The Viscountess smiled slightly and held one finger up for silence, ran it softly along the young ensign’s smooth, delicate cheek. “Do not speak, girl.”

“I am —”

“That was an order,” L smiled, gently twirling a strand of the young woman’s soft hair.

The ensign smiled back, broadly, closed her eyes for a moment. “My lord, I—” And then, with reflexes honed for combat, L pounced. One palm shot out to grasp the ensign’s right shoulder and slam her flat back to the bed; one leg swung over, and in less than a second, with terrifying speed, she straddled the young woman, pinned both shoulders to the bed, her naked body a wedge to lock the girl beneath her.

“You defy an order, ensign?” she hissed, her eyes narrow, her tawny hair falling forward to half-mask her face. The ensign could not move; she lay gape-mouthed and wide-eyed, terror stricken, unclothed, ensnared. L gave a low and menacing growl, crushed the young woman’s shoulders deeper into the bed, her silhouette demonic in the shimmering red light.

“You wish for a lover, foolish girl. Let me tell you why you are here. I appreciate fine art. You are no more than a painting I have plundered and hung in my gallery. You are beautiful, an impulse thievery. You are no more than that.”

The ensign’s lips trembled. Her eyes were wide and unblinking, held open with every instinct of survival.

“Understand this, girl. I sleep with young men for relief, and old men for access. I sleep with young women for their aesthetic, and old women for their secrets.” The ensign’s breath came with difficulty. Her body shook. She could not move. L smiled again, fiendishly, and leaned in close, her lips brushing the young woman’s ear, her voice dropping to a freezing whisper. “Your utility in this chamber has already passed. But you still have a job to do. I am redlining these engines. And you will chart our course to 40-Eridani flawlessly, ensign. Because if your hand slips by even a fraction of a degree, I will personally paint my bulkheads with

your blood. Do you understand your utility now?" The girl managed a frantic, terrified nod.

"You are a fine work of art," she snarled, licking her lips as she rose slowly and relinquished her hold. "Now go. Serve your ship."

## Part Five

Solok moved silently through the sunlit, empty house, room to room, space to space. The afternoon was passing. He would not be able to compose this evening; words and logic would not come.

Solok walked to his study and stood at his writing desk. He lifted the top, pushed aside his tablets and portfolios and drew a jade box from a deep corner. He set the box down carefully, lifted the lid, and reached in to retrieve a scuffed and battered gold-colored cone, a battered brass plumb bob, as used by surveyors long ago. How long it had been since he held the object, he could not say; but it was now in his hand, and he slowly closed his eyes.

He is not meditating; he is traveling.

The boy is bent to his school tasks in a small room. Sunlight dapples on the floor. The father comes through the door. He is a young man, lean and strong, his workman's clothes thick with the red dust of his job. He stands tall as his son bows reverently.

His father smells of copper and dust; it is a comfortable smell. The boy watches, fascinated, as his father unpacks his surveyor's pack. He is an apprentice just begun, and as a daily duty he carries and cares for the tools of those who are journeymen and masters. The boy stares, entranced, as each item is taken out and arranged. It is the symmetry of the items on the table that draws him, the ease with which his father knows where each strange piece fits. And then, from all these intriguing and mystical tools, one thing stands out, and catches his eye. A pointed cone, shiny, golden, tipped with a black point, a fascinating item. Is it weapon? Amulet? What is this?

His father sees his gaze fix on the item. *Something draws your attention here, my son?*

That, the boy says, pointing. *What is that?*

*Something we rarely use now,* the father replies.

*Is it a weapon?*

*It is not.*

*A charm?*

*Of sorts. It is a tool, an ancient one used to determine a perfectly straight line, the clearest path. That is the nature of my profession. It was used by those who came before me.*

*Is it ancient?*

*This one is not. But it is the same as those that have been used for centuries. My colleagues now rely on other tools. But when those others fail, this one will work. When all else collapses, this one remains. It is simple, yet it always points the exact way we need.*

*May I touch it?*

*You may.*

*Is it gold?*

*It is brass.*

*Brass? Not gold?*

*Brass shares only its color with gold. It is humble. But no man has lied or died for love of brass. And though it is humble, it serves its purpose: to harness gravity to show alignment.*

The boy sets it aside, still looking at it. The father lifts and places it in its allotted space on the table. The boy returns to his school tasks.

Two days like any others pass. An evening like any other comes. The father arrives. The boy bows reverently, as expected. He turns back to his studies. His is interrupted by the father calling his name. The boy comes to him. The father reaches into his tool bag and draws forth the plumb bob and hands it to his son. He says simply, this is yours.

The son holds it in his hand, looks down at it in disbelief, feels its smooth golden surface, still warm from the heat of the desert. The son fights back both tears and a smile. Logic and duty do not permit him to show either. He stays stolid. Yet he as he looks at the lean, strong man standing before him, he sees deep eyes that speak of connection, and honor, and true and undying love. It is a promise made without words. It is a promise that cannot be forgotten.

A century has passed. The son is grown. The father is gone. The plumb bob remains.

Solok held the plumb bob in his hand, rolled it slowly, felt it, the pockmarked surface now gone cold in long idleness. Solok held it. A plumb bob, made of brass. And then, with his eyes closed and his fist

clenched on the brass, he allowed a long, low, mournful rumbling deep in his chest to explode in a violent cry of pain, a ferocious unbroken bellow, a long and furious and violent cry sent across time and space to echo of the dark and bone-dry prairies around Bozeman.

Viscountess L sat languidly behind the stainless steel table in the wardroom of her yacht, framed between the dark iron bulkheads overhead, lazily admiring the dull titanium blade of her long dagger. The commander and the sergeant-at-arms of her security detail stood at parade rest before her in the cramped room. She let a beat pass between their stiff-armed salutes and her first words. “Your reports?”

The commander spoke first. “My lord, *Abraxis* is on final approach to the Vulcan home world. We will drop out of warp over their capital in one hour.”

“Excellent timing, commander.” L admired her dagger, ran one perfect tanned finger along the blade and reached for a rocks glass half-filled with golden mezcal. “And you, sergeant?”

The sergeant spoke next. “As you know, Viscountess, the ship has maintained radio silence since entering Vulcan space. Ten minutes ago, we received a message from the Cabinet.”

L raised one eyebrow and smiled slightly. “The Cabinet? I am honored.” She set her dagger aside, sipped some more liquor, set the rocks glass aside, leaned back against the steel wall, idly reached back to roll her fingers over one of the rivets there. “What did this message say?”

The sergeant raised an electronic tablet and read mechanically. ““The Cabinet will now take this opportunity to express its appreciation of your embassy off-world and to extend best regards for your mission.””

L’s lips tightened, and her amber eyes sparkled. She looked for a moment like a schoolgirl suppressing an ill-timed naughty thought. She sat straight and tapped the table. Her eyes closed, and opened, and closed and opened again. She crossed her bare, tanned arms at her chest. She tapped one bare, tanned foot below the table. She drew two, and then three, and then four deep breaths.

And then, with an abandon that startled the two officers standing before her, she threw her head back against the bulkhead and let loose a violent crescendo of unbridled, unhindered, and unironic laughter that echoed down the narrow passages of the jagged steel ship now closing in on the Vulcan home world.

## Part Six

A feudal lord had carved the citadel at Sh'Rhal from the red sandstone cliffs in the wilderness at the edge of the Forge, at a time when architecture was meant to intimidate and a place was chosen for its strategic worth. Long suffering and wasteful conflict and the teachings of Surak had brought Vulcans domestic peace, but reaching into the stars had taught them that the need for intimidation remained. That was why this remote place, carved of red stone and signifying a readiness for kinetic response, remained in use as a site for diplomatic summits. No off-worlder could remain completely confident in the presence of this menacing desert stronghold and its testament to ancient discord.

Solok sat patiently at a stone table in the darkened gatehouse of the citadel. He had arrived before dawn. He had meditated. Now he waited. An onyx and quartz device, no bigger than his palm, rested on the table. It was a remote pager. It was an integral part of any politicians' garb. That he carried one now had forced him to confront his feelings; after much contemplation, he decided the closest word to serve as an analogy for this item that he reluctantly possessed was leash.

There had been a time he had taken some comfort in seeing politicians and merchants and soldiers and the bureaucrats at the university tethered to their pagers, waiting for calls from those whom they served or supervised, while he answered only to a regimen of his own making.

Now he had been forced to admit that vanity and arrogance had seeped into his mind. The teachings of Surak mandated self-reflection, for it was one of the many required paths to betterment. This device had forced him to admit that weakness, and to confront it. That was not the reason this device had been crafted, but it served to remind him that all things may have a utility beyond their stated purpose.

When he returned to writing, it would be a fine subject for a poem.

And then a dim white light glowed beneath the quartz window, and the pager hummed. Solok drew in his breath, stood, straightened his robes, and reached down slowly to silence the device. He closed his eyes,

breathed deeply again, and walked toward the door framed in blazing midday sun.

Klaxons blared through the narrow passages, throbbing white lights pierced the ultraviolet gloom, the bulkheads and fixtures shuddered, and crewmen in burgundy utilities scrambled in every direction as *Abraxis* churned slowly down to the landing strip at the Vulcan capital. The commander and sergeant at arms did their best to maintain parade rest on the violently vibrating metal deck of the sally port, where Viscountess L faced the hatch. They were soldiers and did not spend much time in contemplation, but both noticed – though did not dare say – the preternatural calm this woman displayed in this atmosphere of sensory and singular chaos. Her burgundy crop top now bore a single gold pauldron at the left shoulder. A gold sash draped her waist, just below her tanned midriff. Her dagger hung near as low as the edge of her fringed burgundy skirt. Her bare feet held steady on a deck that shook incessantly. And her posture was straight and arrogant as ever.

The harsh grinding of the engines grew louder, until it became the only sound, drowning out the klaxons and the barked orders and the static from dozen speakers. And just when the noise reached a cacophonous climax, there came an impact, a violent jolt, a slow whirling churn of engines powering down, and *Abraxis* came to rest on Vulcan ground.

Viscountess L turned from the door to face the two officers.

“I would say we’ve arrived, would you not?” Her amber eyes twinkled; she wore a very slight, very knowing smile.

“A correct estimation, my lord,” the Commander flatly.

L chuckled. “We share a great grasp of the obvious, Commander.” She looked over her shoulder to the hatch, then turned back to the officers. “A pity you can’t accompany me, Sergeant.”

The sergeant took a breath. He did not want to speak out of turn; he had, however, been addressed by a superior. “Permission to speak freely, my lord.”

L raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued. “Permission granted.”

“I must advise that every protocol in place requires officials of your rank to be escorted by a full security detail.”

L cocked her head. “The memorandum signed with the Vulcans stipulated I am accompanied by no more than one aide. You doubt the wisdom of the Cabinet?”

A flash of fear crossed the sergeant’s face. He remained at parade rest, but his eyes said he would rather bolt. L saw this, noted it, and then laughed. “I jest, sergeant. I know regulations. I know the Cabinet granted the Vulcans an exception for me. The cowards who signed that memorandum wouldn’t have agreed to leave this ship without a platoon of armed men. And they would have sent me here blindfolded with a flyswatter if they thought I’d have gone.” She turned back to the door. Two red and green lights overhead flashed once. She looked up at the lights, looked at the door, and said simply, “To the show.”

And then great clouds of steam shot from the pressure locks flanking the hatch, the door fell away, and the Viscountess stepped tall and arrogant and barefoot into the blinding sunlight of the Vulcan high summer.

## Part Seven

The suns were nearing their zenith. Their rays were like hammers. The air shimmered. The red earth glowed, ablaze.

Solok stands at the great gate of a looming red sandstone cathedral hewn into the rocks of a red sandstone cliff. His robes are scarlet and gold. They are robes that must be earned, not purchased, not gifted. Only those who have attained the rank of master craftsman are permitted to wear them; in generations past, permitted even to touch them. But these robes, earned with great study and great toil, carry no particular meaning today. His rank must be earned over. He was a master of his chosen craft, yet this is not his craft. Today he should wear the gray robes of a base apprentice. His clothes convey no status today. The unseen thoughts in his mind must be his shield and badge today. He waits at the gate with his hands folded serenely before him.

Two black silhouettes moved ponderously down the metaled road to the citadel through the heat shimmer, the low and ominous growls of their engines the only sound in the desert: two hulking armored land carriers, black, with translucent slits for windows. They stop just meters from the citadel gate. A door on the lead armored car swung up and out with a hiss. A young Vulcan male in a black diplomatic dress uniform emerged to stand at rigid attention. A Vulcan female, also in diplomatic dress, emerged and joined him at attention. And then a human female emerges.

There was a gold pauldron stamped with the dagger and globe at her shoulder and a gold sash at her waist, but Viscountess L thought them a showy bother. She dressed with the prerogative of her wealth, to intimidate, to seduce, to fight. For practical purposes, she could be naked and unencumbered with little effort: to duel, to grapple, to evade, to run, to swim, to climb; to wrap her toned arms around the body of a lover, if so moved; to feel the sun or the rain or the wind on her bare skin, if she wished to remind herself that she lived. She steps onto the blazing metaled road; whatever she feels in the soles of her bare feet is not pain. The red Vulcan dust coats the fine small beads of sweat on her bare arms

and shoulders and legs. She finds the feeling sensual. She walks toward the gate with her arms swinging measured menace.

T’Pan followed two paces behind Viscountess L to the gate. They stood before Solok. Red dust swirled in small devils across the ground. T’Pan stood rigidly to the side.

“Solok, of Soran, Poet Emeritus of Vulcan, Dean Master of the Academy of Arts and High Culture, Special Plenipotentiary of the High Command, I present Viscountess Carsted-L, Envoy Extraordinary of the Cabinet Directors of the Terran State.”

T’Pan took one measured step backwards and stood at attention. The two emissaries locked eyes.

Solok raised his hand in Ta’al. “Live long and prosper, Viscountess.”

Viscountess L slammed her fist to her chest and raised her arm in the stiff-armed state salute. “For Terra, poet.”

T’Pan remained at attention. “My lords, my detail will now stand down. The High Command extends its sincere wish for the success of your mutual endeavor here. I will await your summons to return.”

With that, she turned sharply back to the armored transport. The attendant held the door. She entered, he entered, and the vehicle roared away.

The two emissaries stood alone in the red dust and shimmering heat at great gates of the citadel in Sh’Rhal.

## Part Eight

Two creatures native to Earth are the cobra, a serpent, and the mongoose, a carnivorous mammal. They share a unique relationship. Their mutual animosity transcends the predator-prey dynamic. They do not compete for the same resources; they live on a continent of abundance. Yet their hatred is fabled. Native culture and colonizers have both elevated their rivalry to legend and story.

The cobra is graced with stunning colors and powerful venom, legendary stealth, dazzling speed. It strikes in a manner best described as theatrical, displaying its spectacular hood, swaying as if to mesmerize its target with elegance and grace before striking with fangs as sharp as daggers.

The mongoose is an ancient animal that defies easy classification. It has the tenacity of a canine, the reflexes of a feline, the sensory acuity of both, and an intelligence far exceeding either. It is a homely animal, unimpressive at first glance, yet no one who has witnessed it in battle will ever forget its ferocity and skill.

If the cobra strikes first, its fangs may pierce the mongoose, and its venom may stop its heart. But the mongoose, with sharper senses, greater strength, and unexpected speed, invariably triumphs.

Each animal commands a position in the mythology of their shared homeland, and each is honored with a pose in the holistic physical disciplines practiced there. The fame of their ferocious rivalry has spread far beyond their land of origin. The reason, many speculate, is that these creatures battle on a level that transcends a predator-prey relationship, with an emotion seen only in humans: hatred.

No one knows the source of this ancient animosity.

Perhaps these creatures were not meant to share the same time or space.

But they do.

And so, they fight.

## Part Nine

They faced one another across a broad stone table in the anteroom of the citadel. Solok's hands rested calmly crossed on the polished stone table. Viscountess L sat back in her chair, one arm on the table, the other held down at her side, hand unseen.

VISCOUNTESS L: I find nothing of value off-world, Poet Emeritus. I admire beauty. We have a great deal of beauty on Earth. Every single creature I've laid eyes on off-world has sickened me.

SOLOK: I apologize if my appearance induces an adverse reaction in you, Viscountess.

VISCOUNTESS L: A pig doesn't apologize for being dirty.

SOLOK: I do not know this metaphor, Viscountess.

VISCOUNTESS L: You are what you are. It doesn't mean I have to enjoy looking at it.

SOLOK: Beauty is entirely subjective, Viscountess.

VISCOUNTESS L: And my time is being wasted. Of all the subjects my father forced me to study, philosophy was my least favorite.

SOLOK: From our brief acquaintance, Viscountess, you did not strike me as being of a contemplative nature.

VISCOUNTESS L: There's that poet's eye.

SOLOK: It is a requisite of my profession.

VISCOUNTESS L: Those who sent me here, and those who own them, look to the stars. They see infinite wealth, cheap labor, captive markets, and great glory. I possess all of that already. I don't need to offend my senses with the carnival oddities infesting this galaxy to get more of what I already have. But that is just my opinion. I am but one poor, small girl in the world. Destiny calls my race. We are the superior species. We are the only ones equipped to rule this galaxy.

SOLOK: A far-reaching ambition for the leaders of a planet where millions die of starvation and neglect, Viscountess.

VISCOUNTESS L: Where the weak die. We recognize weakness, Poet Emeritus. We confront it and we conquer it. You do not. You and your fellow off-world creatures venture a parsec or two beyond your home

world and call it empire. You bypass rich planets for fear of a few clubs and sharp sticks.

SOLOK: Contact with a world does not convey ownership, Viscountess.

VISCOUNTESS L: Though you long for it. You devils would strip a world of its last cloud if you had the audacity to take it. Give me what I need, and I will give you the worlds around Vega.

SOLOK: The Vega system is not yours to bargain away, Viscountess.

VISCOUNTESS L: Not yet. But give us what we need, and we will make it ours. Your world is dying, Poet Emeritus. I can smell it on you. You're running out of water. You're running out of air. Your soil is drained. Your last resources are being scraped. You posture and pretend and broadcast your preeminence to the galaxy, yet you allow miserable primitives on the Vega worlds to enjoy cool air and unsullied oceans right under your nose.

SOLOK: Your ambition outstrips your abilities, Viscountess. You have only been able to send survey ships as far as Vega.

VISCOUNTESS L: We've reached Vega. You know that.

SOLOK: Even pastoral populations can overwhelm a survey ship, Viscountess. My father and his companions learned this to their detriment.

VISCOUNTESS L: Survey ships now. Hand me your technology, and we will send battlefleets. Once we have cleansed Vega of those primitives, we will hand it to you, to loot and thieve as you see fit.

SOLOK: If all you have to offer is conquest, Viscountess, remember that Vulcan is capable of waging that without your help.

L gave a small sneer of disdain. Solok spoke softly.

“We have had very little time to learn one another’s traits, Viscountess. I speak not of us, who despite our stations in life remain but two people in a single room. I am referring to our star systems. Let us review the record of contact between our species to date.

“Fifteen years ago, the crew of an experimental Earth vessel lost control of their trajectory and collided with a manned Vulcan research probe. Officials from both planets met for an exchange of the critical data recorders. Five years later, your gendarmerie assisted in the arrest and extradition of three Vulcan criminal fugitives who had taken refuge near

your outpost on Charon. And two years ago, there was a brief meeting when you permitted one of our recovery ships to salvage a disabled deep-space carrier that had drifted near Pluto. After, of course, your own salvage crews had stripped the ship of all but its hull and the remains of the crew.” Solok sat back. “There is likewise an unsubstantiated story that the crew of a Vulcan research craft that had been observing your first-ever satellite launch was stranded and spent some time living incognito at a remote mining settlement. That is an unconfirmed account considered non-canon by most historians.”

“So, three times,” L shrugged. “Four, if you count the urban legend.”

“There was one other encounter between our species, Viscountess. A fifth time. Certainly, the most important contact we have had to date, perhaps destined to be considered the most important contact we will ever have.”

L sat still. Her eyes narrowed. Her jaw set. Her hands began closing slowly to fists.

“You know the incident to which I refer, Viscountess.”

L shook her head slowly, snarled, and then slammed her palm on the table. “I was wondering how long before you threw Bozeman in my face, poet.”

Solok did not flinch at the slam. He did not change his calm expression at the snarling. His voice did not change. “I had no intention of throwing anything in your face, Viscountess.”

“Then why is it being mentioned, poet?”

“The incident at Bozeman is why you are sitting here today. The technology looted from the survey ship has brought your people into the stars, and you to this table. That part of our mutual history will never change.”

“And your pathetic whining about it will never stop.”

“Stating a true and obvious fact is not whining, Viscountess.”

“Were your Vulcans invited?” L snarled sarcastically. “Were they ever called down by to visit?”

“Every Vulcan ship carries a mandate to explore contact with warp-capable civilizations. The *T'Plana-Hath* obeyed a standing order to initiate contact. “

“A standing order to meddle?” L smiled savagely. “An assumption that your presence is always desired?”

“The crew was in fact fascinated that a species which had just engaged in global thermonuclear war was able to so quickly launch a warp-capable ship. They wished to investigate and engage with those who had launched it.”

“Fuck around and find out, Vulcan.”

“That metaphor is unfamiliar to me, Viscountess, although I believe I can extrapolate it constitutes a warning that a continued course of reckless behavior could result in adverse consequences.”

“You learn quickly, Poet Emeritus.”

“Words are, Viscountess, my chosen profession.”

“Then I suggest you craft your next sentence carefully.” L reached below the table and drew her dagger.

“What do you offer us?”

Solok did not look at the dagger. His eyes remained calm. His hands remained folded.

“In return for fifty years of peace, we can provide the technology you need for your continued expansion into deep space.”

“Any technology that we need? And expansion in any direction?”

“Any technology approved by the Science Academy. Any expansion approved by the High Command.”

L scoffed. “Then you offer nothing.”

Solok’s voice remained flat and calculated. His words, however, formed darts.

“For the representative of a world that has only recently emerged from thermonuclear civil war, that has only recently advanced beyond low-level, near space exploration, and that continues to suffer from poverty and internal strife, I would think you would be grateful for any technology we could share.”

L’s eyes narrowed. Her jaw set. Her teeth clenched. Her toes curled on the sandstone. And her mind snapped.

“You smug bastard. You arrogant bastard!”

She grasped her dagger and lunged with all her strength across the table.

## Part Ten

Solok kept his powerful hand clenched around L's wrist. L kept her dagger touched to Solok's chest.

Neither would break the mutual stare.

The tip of L's dagger had pierced Solok's robe at his chest. The puncture was not deep, but the point was, he had to admit, painful. A dollop of dark green blood oozed around the embedded point. The Terran had made several miscalculations, not the least of which was overlooking an admonition of even her own military historians: you must fight the enemy you face, not the enemy you desire.

She had aimed for what he believed was his heart; had Solok not intercepted her strike, the dagger would have struck his lung – potentially fatal, but not the lethal blow for which she had hoped. She had aimed here for a kill strike. That was her miscalculation.

Yet even so, this strike, from a Terran, was incredibly fast. Her speed had exceeded that of many Vulcans. Her ferocity was unmatched. She had impressed Solok as a potentially formidable opponent from the moment they had met. His powers of observation, he noted, were still quite efficient. He counted himself indeed fortunate that he had stopped her before she could inflict anything worse than a shallow puncture wound.

Nonetheless, it was uncomfortable.

The Vulcan's grip on her wrist was unlike any hold L had ever experienced. She could not release the dagger – one could make no more fatal mistake than losing one's weapon in the face of an enemy – but her arm and hand were immobilized, painfully immobilized, by the steel trap of the Vulcan's hand. No man could do this. No bear could do this. These creatures were strong; she had to give them that. She would not wince. She would not cry out. She would hold her dagger tight and push forward best she could. She had drawn blood. But she hadn't, apparently, weakened him.

And the pain in her wrist was agonizing.

Solok kept his eyes locked on hers. "I believe, Viscountess, we are in a position where negotiation is our only logical course of action."

L seethed at her helplessness, her dagger literally in this creature's chest, but her arm unable to push it any deeper and her wrist being crushed by a grip unlike any she had ever experienced let alone thought possible.

“Go to hell, Vulcan.”

“I realize this may be asking a great deal of you, Viscountess,” Solok said. “But consider our situation logically. In our immediate stead, you have a weapon literally at my chest, and I have your arm effectively locked, using only a fraction of my strength.” For emphasis, since it was logical to demonstrate the veracity of his claim, he clenched slightly tighter. The action brought the desired result of a sharp drawing in if breath on the part of the Terran. He continued. “Our mutual discomfort aside, we cannot maintain this position forever. And I do not fault your response. I do not want to do you any harm.”

L looked genuinely surprised. This man's business was words; she had not expected him to use those words at all.

“What are you talking about?”

“Aside from your recent loss of temper, those who wish to harm me are not in this citadel. Neither, I believe, are those who wish to harm you.”

L cocked her head involuntarily; she was genuinely curious.

“I will not ask you to share your state secrets, but I have already told you the terms I was allowed to offer: technology licensed by our Science Academy, expansion approved by our military, and five decades of disarmament. Those who commissioned me knew that no sovereign planet, let alone the regime that governs yours, would ever accept those conditions.”

“Of course not,” L said.

“Witness the reaction it provoked in you,” Solok said, glancing down once at the dagger still piercing his robes. “Now, consider the memorandum signed by our respective regimes,” Solok said. “You left your ship with no escort and only one aide, who in turn had to remain behind in the capital. I find it unusual that any government would accept terms allowing their emissary to move through a potentially hostile populace unaccompanied by security.”

L looked at him slyly. “And what army was coming for you, poet?”

“None, Viscountess. My point exactly. As you saw, the reception detail which brought you here departed within minutes of our formal introduction.” Solok breathed in deeply. “You have freely shared your opinion of our race, Viscountess, an opinion that I am sure is shared by your fellow humans. I disagree, of course, with your assessment. I do not, however, fault you or your fellows for dismissing that which is different. We Vulcans, too, have our own beliefs about humans.”

“Keep them,” L snapped. “I’m sure they’re ugly. And unfounded.”

“I had no intention of sharing them, Viscountess. That would serve no logical purpose other than to deepen our mutual suspicion. But these beliefs exist nonetheless, and they are harbored by the Councilor of the High Command. One of these beliefs is that your species is bloodthirsty and untrustworthy. If that is truly believed, which I know it is, then they would not abandon me here with a creature that they viewed as dangerous. Unless, of course, my life was not important.”

L did her best to remain expressionless, to hide the fact that she was not only in great pain but also listening attentively to this creature. Solok continued.

“My belief is that I was sent here to gauge the exact limits of Terran aggression. At best, you would accept terms tantamount to a Vulcan protectorate. At worst – at least from my point of view – a savage Terran would have slaughtered our world’s pre-eminent poet, providing a narrative that would the High Command an excuse to pursue either a policy of isolation or unleash a more kinetic response.”

L licked her lips, smiled lightly in spite of the pain. “And I thought I worked for some bastards.”

“That is also the case, Viscountess. I know little of your background, other than what our diplomatic service shared with me, which was exactly what your regime shared with them. I know only your name and your status as a noble in the Terran hierarchy. I am in the realm of speculation now, but I will venture you are not by training a diplomat.”

L smiled again. “The dagger gave it away.”

Solok cocked his head. *That*, she thought, *was as close to a laugh I’d get out of him.*

“Your energetic response to my offer was indeed one reason. But before that, you freely shared thoughts that any diplomat, even one dispatched from a regime as ruthless as your own, would never share. The pillage of worlds not your own – that was logical, because that is what your regime can offer. Your expressed personal revulsion at my planet, my people, and my being.” With that, Solok squeezed just a little harder and admonished himself for the pleasure he took in the Terran woman’s biting of her lip, “Diplomats may hold such disparaging opinions, but will never share them. Your regime sent you instead of a diplomat – a high-born noblewoman, outspoken, opinionated, and combative.”

L stared. She could learn something from this man.

“The High Command had their own reasons for seeking this summit. Though not its original intent, that invitation in turn gave your Cabinet an opening to act in its own self-interest.”

Solok kept his grip tight. He stared unblinking into the amber eyes of the woman opposite him. “Ask yourself, Viscountess, for only you can answer these questions: is there any reason – wealth, vengeance, fear, or anger – that would motivate those who sent you here? Do they stand to gain anything if you are killed on Vulcan or are marooned in deep space?”

L looked into Solok’s eyes. His face was blank. His eyes were deep. His words were not wrong.

And slowly, she did the hardest thing she had ever done in her life.

She released her grip on the dagger and let it clatter to the table below her hand.

## Part Eleven

Solok immediately released his grasp, and L drew back her arm. She cradled her deeply bruised wrist against her breast instinctively, then quickly dropped and concealed her aching arm to her side when she caught herself showing that weakness.

“You are a strong man, Vulcan.”

Solok glanced down at the dark green stain at the front of his robes. “And you no doubt a formidable knife fighter, Viscountess.”

“And none of that will do us any good against our respective bastards,” L said flatly, angrily.

“I am not sure I understand, Viscountess.”

“I’m far from home. And you’re being evicted.”

“An apt analogy for our dilemma. But while the situation is dire, we are not without certain advantages.”

“Advantages?” L smiled. “Skills, perhaps. Advantages? I fail to see.”

“One advantage are opponents who underestimate us. That is an enviable position in any battle. The other is surprise.”

“Surprise?” L asked.

“I believe those who sent us here were hardly expecting our return. They will be certainly surprised to have it happen so soon.”

Solok lifted his hand and showed L his pager. L smiled wickedly.

## Part Twelve

The three councilors had been summoned by pager before evening meal. They arrived at the High Command within minutes. They exchanged no greetings. They stood in the dark caucus room, each stolid, each quiet, each seething at the other. This was not the call they had expected. Had they allowed themselves the illogical emotion of hope, their aide would soon call and tell them that a mistake had been made. Rather than label it hope, they preferred, each in their own mind and silent way, to call this illusion.

That illusion evaporated for each as soon as they heard the echoes of boots in the adjacent empty obsidian debate hall. They glanced at one another and then glanced at the door. The last illusion – the last hope – vanished when it opened, and Deputy Councilor T’Pan stepped inside and stood at attention.

“My lords, Poet Emertius Solok and Special Envoy Carsted-L of Terra.”

T’Pan stood at rigid attention as the two diplomats entered. Then she turned smartly on her heel and stepped from the room. The door closed behind her with a small, portentous click.

The caucus room took on a vibrancy until now absent, Solok’s scarlet and gold robes and L’s burgundy and gold fighting garb eclipsing the black and gray uniforms of the High Command. The councilors had been trained as soldiers and raised as Vulcans. They would not express what they felt. Solok raised his hand in greeting.

“I trust our return did not disrupt your routines, Councilor,” he said, humbly.

“We await your report, Poet Emeritus,” Skon said. His eyes narrowed with anger. His face remained expressionless.

“I am not sure, Councilor,” Solok said slowly, “that you will find my report to your liking.”

The councilors remained still. Each secretly wished to draw the liras with which they had been trained as apprentice soldiers and slash the poet, the Terran, and any other in the room. However, this conversation may unfold, each was certain that it would not be pleasant.

“The Viscountess has made me aware of your machinations, Councilor. She intends to make them public.”

“What are you talking about, poet?” Skon said, the façade cracking slightly. “What do you mean, machinations?”

L crossed her arms and spoke like an exasperated parent to an untruthful child. “Please stop. The bribe you sent to me on Terra, before I arrived.”

Skon turned his fierce indigo gaze on her. “You are lying, Terran. We do not engage in bribery. Certainly not with a criminal regime,”

“I tried to tell you that I wasn’t a warlord or a Director or one of the oligarchs, that I’m only a lowly woman of no import.” L looked downcast. “I wish I was as important as you think I am, Councilor.”

“What is this woman saying, Councilor?” T’Mek said, her voice was uneasy and unsteady and unwell.

“And you must be T’Mek,” L said, looking at the Councilor sheepishly. “I apologize if I mispronounced, the words were garbled in the transcription.” L shuffled one bare foot meekly. “Your things are so much more advanced than ours.”

“What is this? T’Mek said. “What are you talking about?”

“The offer you extended,” L said, her voice quivering. “I apologize, Councilor, but as I told your friends, I am only a handmaid.” L looked dispirited. “I wish I was important. I am not I’m only a humble servant.” She looked down, looked back up sheepishly. “I’m sorry.”

Syrran exploded. He had held back too long. “I told you not to bring these deceitful monsters here! I told you to have no dealings with them! I told you!”

“Silence!” Skon shouted, his own restraint vanished. “Solok, what madness is this!”

Solok turned to L. “Viscountess, I believe this conversation has entered a place best navigated by a Vulcan.”

L bowed her head servilely, meekly brushed back a wayward strand of tawny hair, kept her gaze cast down at the floor. “As you wish, Poet Emeritus.”

Solok looked at the councilors and spoke serenely. “Viscountess L informed me of a bribe that the High Command offered her to concoct

reports of an undisclosed Vulcan superweapon soon to be deployed to blackmail Terra unless they surrendered to us immediately. Knowing that her government did not have an effective counter, you expected them to surrender. This surrender would have resulted in your ability to claim victory over the Terrans and ensure continued public support and unlimited funding for your chosen projects.” Solok spoke calmly, softly, unfazed by the slack-jawed looks of three Councilors. “This public support being necessary to undermine subversive elements currently being fomented by Councilor Syrran.”

The other two councilors turned their heads angrily to Syrran. He opened his mouth to retort; for once, strangely for a politician, no words came. Solok continued to spare them the embarrassment of a response.

“Although she has documentation of the bribe, she felt it imperative to act. She informed her government of the superweapon, which in turn queried both the Andorians and Tellarites. They, in turn, became quite as alarmed as the Terrans.”

“That is illogical and a base lie,” Skon hissed.

Solok looked at the councilors innocently. “So, no such superweapon exists?”

“It does not,” Skon said through clenched teeth. “Nor does this bribe, nor does this document.”

“It is a lie!” T’Mek said, louder perhaps than she wanted.

“It is also, Councilor,” Solok said gently, “an accusation. While I can verify neither the veracity nor the legality of her statement, I can state without question that it is an accusation.”

Skon’s fist clenched at his side. “I will have you butchered, Terran.”

L raised her eyes, downcast through the conversation, and blinked. A tear formed, blurred the amber of her iris. “I did what I thought was right, sir.” She put her head down demurely, wiped away the tear, looked up blinking back more tears. “I would let you punish me. But,” she said, apologetically, “I have diplomatic immunity.”

Solok tilted his head. “I believe the Viscountess is correct on that account, Councilor.”

“No one will believe this lying Terran!” Skon said angrily. “She is a liar! This is slander.”

Solok spoke professorially, with quiet dignity, with humble respect. “May I remind you, Councilor, that you made an opening to discuss future contingencies with the Terrans. You initiated the meeting. You accepted the credentials of this envoy. To have commissioned me to negotiate the well-being of our world with an emissary whose sincerity was suspect from the start would have been illogical.”

Solok spoke calmly. L looked on, willing to learn.

“While it may be unfounded, an accusation has been made. If informed, the authorities must investigate. Unfortunately, their chief witness cannot be held accountable in our court of law, and in fact may be absent soon. Any formal civil action to address a charge of slander likewise makes the accusation public and likewise cannot be pursued against an absent party with legal immunity. Most dangerously, the general populace, should they hear of this, will hear only fragments, and as we know logic is a power exercised by the individual and lost by the mob.”

“My friends and associates are not subversives!” Syrran said, his bared emotions part anger, part fear. “This woman is lying! It is slander!”

Solok looked sad. “The public and the authorities alike will believe that untruth to the Terrans will have brought our ancient enemies into array against our world, and that the negligence shown by the High Command has been scandalous and borders on the criminal. Likewise, that a member of the High Command is actively undermining its authority. I believe that your continued service is out of the question. If you resign now, in the interests of continued civic order I will not ask for any public penitence or formal apology, nor will I recommend prosecution to either the state advocate or investigation by the V’Shar. They take my advice, of course, at their discretion.” Solok looked at them all with a touch of stern serenity. “Acceptance of these terms would be most logical.”

Skon and T’Mek closed their eyes heavily. Syrran bit his lip, an unusual failure of discipline.

“Our apprentices are unprepared,” T’Mek protested. “They are but candidate members. They have only the slightest experience, no true

work of state, drafting resolutions, minor diplomatic chores, routine supervision of training maneuvers, nothing of any weight. They are not ready.”

“If an apprentice is unready,” Solok said drily. “The fault lies with the master.”

T’Mek said nothing.

“They are candidate members and legally eligible to serve,” Solok said. “They are soldiers and know duty may fall to them at any time. They will serve, for they are Vulcans.”

Syrran looked at Solok. “We trusted you.”

“You called upon me, Syrran. Had I remained in my study, and had the Viscountess remained on her estate, we would have passed our lives as poet and heiress. That scenario did not come to pass. It was you and your colleagues who set the events of this timeline in motion.”

The three disgraced councilors filed from the room. At the doorway, Skon looked at Viscountess L. His face was stoic. His eyes were not.

“You have not succeeded, Terran. You will die with your dream unfulfilled.”

Viscountess L put her head back haughtily and spoke with a soft, seductive smirk. “Mark my words, Skon: your grandchildren will serve my empire.”

And the brief flash of anger she caught in his pitch-black eyes was more delicious and more filling than any slab of bloody steak she had ever devoured.

## Part Thirteen

Viscountess L waited in a vacant reception hall while Solok broke the disheartening news to the five assembled candidate councilors, each now elevated to the High Command. Never had five apprentices, tasked until now with minor diplomatic chores and the drafting of resolutions from templates, taken the silver rank badge of High Command Councilor at once. Never had the master soldiers and politicians of the High Command vanished at once. Never had a poet stood before five Councilors of state in these chambers.

“These are unfortunate circumstances, my lords,” he said, the five young candidates, three male and two female, each doing their best to maintain stoic, military bearing. “You take on enormous responsibilities at a time of great turmoil.”

“We ask your guidance,” one of the male candidates said.

“I am here to share it,” Solok said kindly. “Though you know that I am but a poet.”

“My name is—” one of the males began, but Solok held up his hand.

“Your name is not needed, Councilor. You serve on the High Command. I am a loyal Vulcan. I obey without question any lawful and logical order you may issue in your official capacity.”

“Yes,” the apprentice said, not sure he had heard correctly, not believing that a distinguished elder wearing the robes of an accomplished artist had just sworn unbroken obedience to an apprentice politician.

“We would appreciate your advice, Poet Emeritus,” one of the females said.

“I am honored that you seek my advice, Councilor. On what matter can I be of service?”

“On anything,” said one of the males, unashamed. “On any matter.”

“I am humbled, Councilor. These are momentous decisions for which I have no training.”

The Councilor shifted uneasily. They were the High Command. They were soldiers. They were the heads of state. They were to lead. They did not waver. They did not beg.

And they did not know what to do.

Solok continued, his voice calm and measured and comforting. “I can offer only my humble perspectives, given as a citizen with no particular experience in statecraft, and with the greatest respect for your authority. On the matter of the former High Command, I believe it would be in the public interest not to broadcast the reasons for their departure. We must maintain civic order. We must not allow either domestic malcontents or our rivals on Andor and Tellar to either detect or perceive weakness or dissension.”

“That would be a good course of action,” said one of the females.

“Nor do I believe you should place yourselves in the position of harrowing the disgraced Councilor. They have resigned. It is logical to allow them to live as penitents. They will never return to public life.”

“Most logical,” said one of the males.

“And you must consider your response to the conspiracy between Andor and Tellar. For that matter, I believe the most logical course would be full partnership with Terra.”

“Terra?” said one of the males.

“Terra will provide the counterweight to the new combined threat that we face. I would suggest you reach out to them, after a short period, perhaps two months. At that time, offer them an alliance and technical exchange. In my experience, we on Vulcan know the benefits of order. And as we know, the Terrans thrive in disorder.”

Solok let his words hover, fixed his kindly gaze on each of enthralled and attentive young officers. “I ask you with all due respect, Councilor, to recall what we have all been taught. That logic and progress result from the union of unlike elements and the balance of opposing forces. There could be no better application of this principle to statecraft than an alliance with our opposites.” Solok closed his eyes humbly. “I would be honored if you would consider my modest suggestion.”

The Councilor stood at rapt attention. One of the females said, “We appreciate your suggestions, Poet Emeritus, and will take them under consideration.”

Solok bowed his head slightly. “I am honored and humbled, Councilor.” He raised his hand in salute. “And now I ask your permission to be excused. I wish to say goodbye to a friend who is departing on a long trip, and to return to my study, there to compose. I am, after all, a poet, with only the most limited understanding of high state affairs.”

## Part Fourteen

Viscountess L and Solok stood in the *porte-cochère* outside the great hall. An armored car and diplomatic reception detail waited nearby for a signal from either of them.

“Your performance does not disappoint, Poet Emeritus.”

“I found your own impressive as well, Viscountess. As to the next part of our agreement, permit me one hour of preparation. I will have an answer for you at the end of the hour, after which your work may begin. I estimate that your engineers will have it completed within less than ten hours.”

“Eight hours with my motivation,” L said with a cruel laugh.

“You know your crew and its limits, Viscountess. I defer to you in that regard.”

“Excellent choice, Poet Emeritus. And our next act?”

“We will send two messages to your Cabinet.”

“Do tell. I’m intrigued.”

“Your vessel has maintained radio silence since entering Vulcan space, is that correct?”

“Of course,” L smiled. “I can say that we still don’t really trust you, Vulcan.”

“A logical precaution. In that case the first message will be an urgent request to break radio silence, sent from your commander to his superior on Earth.”

“Only that?” queried L.

“Only that,” confirmed Solok.

“And the second message?”

“That message I will compose, Viscountess.”

“Fair enough,” said L. “After all, you’re the poet.”

Some few hours later, and some distance away, in the dimly lit and smoky boardroom in Kyoto, First Director Silas puffed twice on his cigar, placed it down in a black crystal ashtray, and leaned back in his

chair. “We have some news to share.” He turned deliberately to his right. “Director Garcia, our message.” Garcia nodded acknowledgement. “Fifteen minutes ago, we received this message from the Vulcan High Command.” Garcia raised his tablet and snarled as he read. ““The Terran government ship *Abraxis* carrying Special Envoy Carsted-L and her party crashed on approach to an outpost at Delta Vega in Vulcan space after reporting an engine misfire. There were no survivors.” Garcia looked up at his fellow Directors, then back to his tablet. “The High Command regrets this unfortunate event and extends its sincere condolences to the Cabinet Directors and the people of Earth.”

Silas lifted his cigar, puffed once, looked around the table slowly, said flatly, “And there we are, ladies and gentlemen.”

Though none of the Directors said a word, their sidelong glances carried all the weight of a deep, comradely, and celebratory toast.

## Part Fifteen

The junior councilors, now elevated to the High Command, stood clustered around their new mentor in the small caucus room, their gray military apprentice uniforms incongruously bearing the silver rank belts of Councilor of the High Command. Solok stood in their midst, a peacock among crows, his gold and yellow robes almost blinding in the gray room.

“One more matter of import, my lords, before I complete the duty to which I have been called. I have been informed by the supervisors of the Science Academy that engineers there are working on a device to conceal an object traveling in near space.”

The councilors looked at one another. They shifted uneasily.

Solok continued. “This device is powered by a single red mercury battery; is approximately the size of a furnace used to heat a dwelling; and is designed to cloak an object of up to one hundred and fifty meters length. It is operational but has not yet been tested in an actual off-world flight.”

One of the young Councilor raised his hand, not unlike a student seeking permission to address a master. “The device has inherent dangers, Poet Emeritus. To effectively cloak, it must be tied to the running deflectors. Any debris field that activates these deflectors can potentially overload the battery.”

“Potentially?” Solok asked, one eyebrow raised in pedagogic inquiry. The Councilor shifted uneasily.

“Red mercury is notoriously unstable, Poet Emeritus, which is why testing has been delayed until a more suitable alternative can be theorized—”

“Theorized?” Solok asked, again with an eyebrow raised, again with the tone of a teacher granting his student another chance at the correct answer.

“It is dangerous,” the Councilor said at last, downcast.

“But most useful.”

“Of course, Poet Emeritus. Such a device would give us incredible tactical advantage.”

“And given the current unrest in our immediate systems, would it not be logical to deploy this tactical advantage as soon as possible?”

“It has not been tested in deep space flight, Poet Emeritus. It is—”

“I think, given the current state of emergency, we should expedite testing.”

“We would risk a ship and crew, Poet Emeritus,” one of the young female Councilor protested, shrinking back even as she said it.

“What if we were to find another ship and crew to risk,” Solok said. “Would the inherent risk now be one we could tolerate?”

The councilors looked on, fascinated.

“A Terran vessel of the proper length and power capacity currently waits at the capital airstrip. It is scheduled to depart in one day. This vessel will be required to enter deep space and travel a distance of approximately seventeen light years, maintaining a minimum speed of warp three, for a journey of approximately fifteen days. Would such a run be an adequate test?”

The young male councilor spoke again. “It would be more than adequate, Poet Emeritus. But it is—it is a Terran vessel.”

“The laws of physics and principals of engineering apply to Terrans as well as Vulcans, Councilor.”

“But—Poet Emeritus—forgive me—we would be sharing extremely confidential technology gained at great expenditure of wealth and labor with the—with the Terrans.”

“We know that this device will give us great tactical advantage, yet it must be tested before it is deployed. We know that this testing must be vigorous, yet we do not know if the inherent dangers will destroy those who test it. “

Solok looked at each councilor humbly. “We also must know that, despite our cultural and intellectual superiority, we are not the only sentient and industrious beings in the galaxy. Our foes are certainly working on this technology. So too are the Terrans. They will develop this eventually. Let us share it now. If it works well, they owe us a debt. If it fails catastrophically on return—no Vulcan vessel and no Vulcan life has been lost.”

The councilors all stood rigid and silent. The senior of these junior apprentices spoke first.

“That is the logical conclusion, Poet Emeritus.”

“Thank you for your endorsement, my lord.” Solok breathed in deeply again. “One more suggestion. The Terrans will accept our offer, but they are by nature suspicious. They will want their own engineers to conduct the retrofit. Provide them with the device and instructions. They will do the rest.”

The councilors remained at reverent attention. Their young spokesman said, “Thank you for your guidance, Poet Emeritus. The High Command will consider and act upon your generous suggestions now.”

“Thank you, Councilor. I am glad to be of service.” Solok raised his hand. “I remain at your behest my lords, if called I shall come. And now,” he said with a sigh, “I will return to my study. I have been too long from my craft.”

For a group of people whose penchant for chaos had caused sirens and alarms to sound across a dozen worlds, the Directors of the Cabinet seemed wildly unnerved when red lights flashed and alarms blared in their own boardroom. Each one frantically swiped tablets and swilled their liquor straight from the bottle; this was a workday quite unlike any other.

First Director Silas stood at the head of the table, his eyes wild. “A hoax, a false flag, someone drunk on duty!” he screamed. “Which one of you treacherous bastards is behind this! Tell me!”

“It’s not a hoax, damn it, this is confirmed!” Garcia shouted. “A ship dropped out of warp over our private airstrip ten minutes ago. Directly over the airstrip!”

“With no approach and no clearance!” Silas shouted, incredulous. “A spaceship!”

“Yes, First Director, a spaceship!” Bia yelled, standing, angrily waving his tablet. “The report is right here! Right here!” He spilled his bottle of scotch and made no effort to retrieve it. “Look at your tablet, Silas! Look at it!”

“A spaceship! Undetected by any listening posts, unnoticed by any picket ships, not seen by a satellite, not picked up by weather radar!” He pounded the table, scattered his own tablet, his cigar, his rocks glass, his pistol, his bullets. “Damn you all, which one of you did this!”

“Listen to them, Silas, for all that you hold holy shut up and listen!” Ramsey said, all decorum lost in panic. “There is a ship that materialized over our airstrip right now! Screaming that it’s fake won’t make it go away!”

“Then whose ship is it, damn it!” he swore. “Who can sneak up on us like this!”

Director Garcia drew in his breath. “It’s the *Abraxis*, First Director.”

Silas stopped. He stood straight. He cocked his head. He looked to the man at his right.

“*Abraxis* crashed in Vulcan space. Three weeks ago.”

“Apparently,” Director Callay said dryly, her hand trembling as she poured some liquor. “Not the case.”

“It can’t be,” McKinley said quietly, not believing himself.

The calm that had washed over Silas vanished as quickly as it had come. He shouted at the room. “*Abraxis* crashed in Vulcan space! Three weeks ago, and fifteen light years away!” He slammed the table again. “God damn you all! Who is responsible for this!”

And as if those words were a magic incantation, the great doors of the boardroom were thrown wide and ten men in burgundy utility jumpsuits, to various degrees unshaven, burst into the room with long 10mm carbines and heavy .50 caliber pistols at ready. Before any of the Directors could pull their own handguns, they found menacing carbine and pistol barrels aimed pointblank at their heads and necks. For a body that rarely worked in harmony they showed surprising unity of reaction. They gaped in disbelief.

The alarms fell quiet. The red lights stopped flashing.

And Viscountess L strode through the door.

She wore her burgundy crop top, gold pauldron, and titanium dagger, all coated with a patina of fine red dust. Her bare feet left crimson

marks of red dust on the laminate. And she faced the Directors with her eyes narrow, a small smile crossing her face.

Silas saw her, and his face twisted into demonic caricature. “You are not here!” He screamed ferociously. “You are dead! You crashed and burned in Vulcan space! You are not here! You are a ghost!”

“No, First Director,” the Viscountess smiled. “I am an angel.” And with a determined grace, her bare feet propelling her in a way to which no shod athlete could aspire, she leapt and landed with her stance set wide and her dagger held ready atop the table, in front of the First Director. Then she pushed him into his chair with her free arm and ran her blade through his heart.

Silas did not cry out. He looked up into the woman’s amber eyes, a mix of disbelief at her presence and dismay at his mortality. He looked as if he wanted to speak. And then his eyes closed, and L drew back her blood-soaked dagger, and First Director Silas, late of Kyoto, fell forward to the table, one arm outstretched, dark red blood pooling on the wood beneath his chest.

The Directors looked on, agape. L spun with a terrifying grace and landed behind the First Director’s chair. She faced the Directors. She held her bloody dagger at arm’s length, lowered to the floor in salute. “*Piste est libre*,” she said, with a slight bow.

“You killed a Cabinet Director,” Callay gasped. “You murdered a state official!”

L did not acknowledge her. She placed one hand on her hip, held her bloody dagger casually over her shoulder, let the tip touch the gold pauldron. “Moving on to our next agenda item. Each of you has a tablet. This I know. And now,” she said, extending her free hand to take her own battered black tablet from the sergeant of her security detail, “each of you will receive a confidential message.” She held her tablet aloft and made a visible demonstration of pressing the tablet send button with her thumb. “A bank account number has just been sent to your private message folders. You will each begin the transfer of all your liquid assets to that account. You have ten minutes.”

“You thieving bitch!” Garcia slammed the table and bolted upright from his chair, oblivious to the man slumped over bloody and

dead on the table to his left, oblivious to the man in a burgundy utility jumper with a .50 caliber pistol at his back. “I will see you in hell!”

L made a move, as if her feelings had been hurt. Then a cold small smile crossed her dusty face, and her eyes sparkled, and she looked to the open door.

“Ensign Nguyen!” she called. The directors sat transfixed. From the hallway came a petite young woman in a burgundy utility jumper, youthful and radiant despite her military uniform, her silken black hair tied back in a tight ponytail. She stood at parade rest in front of the great table, her exquisite face now an impervious mask of duty.

“Present, my lord.”

L nodded slightly toward the man at her right. “Director Garcia gave you an order.”

“At once, my lord.”

Then Ensign Nguyen snapped into a shooting stance, and drew a sleek black .22 revolver from her utility belt, and aimed at it Garcia, who registered one last look of shocked disbelief before the petite young woman cocked the hammer and pulled the trigger and fired a bullet that sent him crashing backwards from his chair, and sent him to hell.

The ensign lowered her weapon and stood at parade rest. “Order in compliance, my lord.”

L nodded once and tilted her head appreciatively. “Well done, Ensign. Carry on.”

The young woman slammed her fist to her heart and raised her arm. “My pleasure, my lord.” Then she turned from the room.

L looked the other Directors. “Your ten minutes start now.” And with bitter looks of resignation, or wide-eyed looks of fear, or hybrid expressions of both, the remaining Directors pulled out their tablets and began to type.

For some time, there was no sound in the room but that of tablet keys being softly touched. Ten minutes later, her wealth having more than quadrupled, L watched the last pair of trembling hands set a black and silver tablet on the mahogany table. “And now, you will each compose a message of resignation.”

The were audible gasps. Bia slammed the table, oblivious to the handgun at the back of his head.

“Resign! That's impossible! No one has ever resigned the Cabinet without—” he stopped, the words caught in his throat. “It would be madness!”

L smiled. “You are quite dramatic, Director.”

Ramsey began talking, frantically, rapidly, her words accelerating as she spoke. “You don't understand,

Viscountess, you can't understand, you must understand, the situation one lives with as a Cabinet Director, there are—”

“Enemies you've made?” L said, innocently.

“There are—”

“Scores to be settled?” L queried, guilelessly.

“We face—”

“The grieving relatives of slain rivals seeking retribution and vengeance?” L asked.

“We will have no protection!” Ramsey cried. “Don't you understand that! We will be helpless! It is a death sentence! It is—”

Ramsey's wild and fearful expression suddenly dropped to defeated acceptance, as chilling realization dawned, and L's feigned and innocent expression broadcast dark amusement, as the protesting director went ashen and deflated in her chair. L smiled and addressed the room. “Next agenda item.”

At this cue each director felt the cold barrel of a handgun at the nape of their neck. “Draft, but do not yet send, your resignations.”

One by one, Ramsey, Bia, McKinley, Callay and Belloni lowered their eyes to their tablets.

L watched them work, and when the last tablet was set down, she reached over and casually rolled the slumped figure of First Director Silas away and off the table, to fall with a thud at her feet. She pointed to Belloni, sitting wide-eyed at the end of the table.

“You there. You are?”

“Director Belloni,” he replied, his voice unsteady.

“Bask in the glory of the title for the next few minutes, Director,” she smiled. “Do you have any training in the law?”

“I am an advocate at the Regents Court, I am—”

“Spare me your resume, Director, I do believe you. You will now draft the final ordinance of this Cabinet.” She walked casually around the table, stood next to Belloni, drew her dagger and held it at his throat. The Director looked at her side-eyed, too terrified to tremble.

“A final task in your official capacity, Director. Once you’ve finished, this council will conduct its closing item of official business. You will all cast one last vote, and then you will all hit the send buttons on your resignation messages, and then you will all go out to make your way in the world.”

Belloni cast his eyes down at the blade at his throat, and then fearfully up at the woman who held it.

“What do you want me to write?”

“A resolution transferring all Cabinet powers to Viscountess Carsted-L, citizen, as Life and Reigning Empress and Overlord of the Terran Empire.” She placed her bare foot on the table next to him and tapped his cheek with the flat of her titanium dagger. “You may begin now.” The Director gave her one last terrified look and turned down to his task.

## Six Months Later

She stands in the great empty white hall as evening falls. She stares out the open doors of the balcony to the darkening city beyond. She wears a black silk kimono tied at the waist with a golden sash, tailored for her with a loop at the hip to hold her titanium alloy dagger. It is her only garment. She walks barefoot across the marble floor. The feel of cold smooth stone on the soles of her feet does not ground her. She had once tried to explain that strange lack of grounding in this place away by telling herself that this floor sat forty feet above the earth. She knew at the time, and knows now, that is not the case. She had stood barefoot on metal decks a dozen light years in the sky and felt grounded. This now is different.

There are momentous events to occur this evening, ones for which she has worked six months. She feels no excitement. The show will unfold. She knows the ending. Having labored so long to bring it about, she now, oddly, would like the finale to be passed. Much has been that way of late. Much has been – unaligned.

He had imagined his first ever visit off-world a brief excursion to one of the sacred moons on which Vulcans had stepped when they first took to the stars; perhaps to a monastery world, or even to a neutral place known for beauty. He had not imagined a trip of two weeks to a place of gray industrial slums, incredible cacophony, oppressive humidity, a place no Vulcan aspires to see. He reminds himself that beauty is highly subjective.

He arrives at the great gray concrete fortress at the appointed time. His entrance is surprisingly simple. A single escort leads him through echoing halls of concrete and tile to a narrow-enclosed staircase, up three echoing flights of steel stairs to a broad steel catwalk landing. Another man stands at attention there and holds a steel door wide and closes it behind him.

They faced one another across thirty feet of white marble floor, a striking woman in a black kimono and a dignified man in scarlet and yellow robes.

He enters a room that is wide and white, its size fitting for the ruler of a dozen worlds, its decoration surprisingly sparse for one who had once told him that she loved things of beauty. There are in fact only two tall banners of red and black, bearing the dagger and globe roundel of the empire, flanking the open doors of a great balcony, framing a sprawling vista of low and dimly lit gray buildings receding off to the horizon beyond.

The silence here is all-enveloping. The breeze through the great opened balcony is cool. There is no sound.

They are not attractive creatures, these Vulcans, and their gaudy robes do not lend themselves to anything but pretense and condescension. This one, though, he is different. This one has dignity, bearing, a presence. He had the strength of three men. And his mind was moved like no other. She had seen him face thugs who had upended his life and would have left him for dead and laid them all low without raising a hand or raising his voice. She will call it courage. Perhaps these qualities transcend worlds. Perhaps, she thinks with a touch of wry amusement, she is becoming a philosopher.

The great hall in which they stand is cold and stark and white, a broad plain of marble between them.

When they speak, their voices will echo.

This is the same Terran who strode barefoot across the blazing metaled road at the desert citadel to salute him. Her features have not changed, her bearing is the same, her clothing remains minimal, her adornments fashioned more to dispatch an enemy than to bedazzle a lover. Something now, however, is different. Six months ago, she strode across a blazing desert road barely dressed, barefoot, confident, sent on false premises by petty grifters to die on a distant world, but strangely enough energetic and dynamic and completely in her element. This evening she stands in this great concrete fortress, barely dressed, barefoot, and confident, the unchallenged ruler of dozen worlds, but strangely enough, leashed and caged and confined. He finds it a melancholy change.

“Welcome to my home, Poet Emeritus.”

“Your invitation honors me, Empress.”

Solok walked toward her slowly, stopped some paces away.

“I trust your trip from Vulcan was comfortable?” L motioned for him to walk with her toward the balcony.

Solok strolled at her side. “As comfortable as one can expect, yes. I thank you for your inquiry.”

L chuckled and looked away out the window. “I’m surprised you are here as a private citizen and not special plenipotentiary of your young friends on the High Command.”

Solok shook his head slowly. “I have had my single foray into politics, Empress. I am here in my capacity as a poet. I am giving two public readings for Vulcan technicians working at the yards, as part of the cultural enrichment program initiated by our Academy of Arts and High Culture for Vulcans laboring off-world.” Solok nodded briefly. “It is a tie to home that they do relish.”

“Their performance here does not disappoint.”

“Vulcans have a strong work ethic, Empress.” Solok glanced over at the tall banners flanking the balcony door. “Additionally, the High Command, though initially taken aback by your advice, eventually endorsed and has now enthusiastically adopted your suggestions for recruitment and motivation. Forced conscription and the detention of family members have proven effective incentives.”

“I have moments of inspiration, poet,”

“Indeed. The High Command admitted they would not have considered such measures had you not endorsed them. They have expressed admiration for the results, and for your inspired suggestion.”

“They recognize genius.”

“They freely seek advice.”

“I imagine so,” L said with a slight smile. “They struck me as quite clingy,”

“An apt description, Empress. They continue to seek my counsel. I recently made a humble request that they limit their enquiries to no more than once a week. I must guard my time.”

A distant alarm buzzed discreetly. L nodded to Solok, and together they stepped to the balcony. They stood side by side and faced the western sky. L held her hands behind her back at parade rest. Solok folded his hands before him in contemplative calm.

“I appreciate your visit,” L said. The words and the tone surprised Solok. They were words, and a tone, he had not yet heard from her.

“I am honored that you chose me for this moment, Empress.” He watched a dull salmon sunset spread along the distant horizon. “I must freely admit, this is not a diversion I would readily seek. I came, to be completely honest, because I knew the occasion meant a great deal to you.”

L glanced at him sidelong. “You did not wish to disappoint a friend.”

Solok looked at the sunset. “Your assistance extricated me from a dilemma. You proved to be both a formidable foe, and when needed, a valuable and steadfast ally. I wished to repay that service by honoring your invitation.”

L tilted her head back, kept her eyes on the horizon. “I see.”

“And,” Solok said, his eyes locked on the slow spread of red light along the dimming horizon, “I did not wish to disappoint a friend.”

They turned their gaze away from the sunset to look at one another. Their eyes, anthracite and amber, exchanged a silent salute. They looked back to the horizon together.

A low rumble came across the urban plain below. Far away, framed in the distant setting sun, they saw the imperial starship *God Of War*, lead ship of its class, float slowly upwards to hover over the sprawling city. The dark, faraway silhouette hung motionless over the distant yards, framed against the sunset sky, the rumbling growing in intensity.

L let her hand rest at her dagger, ran her fingers along the hilt, drew the comfort she needed from its titanium edge. It stood ready to serve. Solok reached into his robes, pulled forth a dull brass plumb bob on a braided nylon string, and dangled it over the edge. It found a straight line.

The nacelles of the starship glowed fire red, the low rumble became a resounding roar, and a flash of light filled the twilight sky as the imperial starship *God Of War* jumped to warp, pierced the sky, and launched into the stars.