

STAR TREK :
NIGHT WHISPERS VOL 1

**THE
INCIDENT**

A Star Trek Fan Fiction Trilogy

By New Author

APRIL L. PAYNE



In the midst of a Vulcan ritual, the Time-honored k'Matra, Spock unwittingly meets his future bride through a metaphysical encounter. Normally celebrated, it is used against him instead, sending T'Pau, Matriarch of the House of Talek Sen Dene, into crisis mode. Was it the rare occurring Kiftiri (Destiny), as claimed, or had T'Pau's great-grandson cleverly manipulated the circumstances to his own advantage?

Already a son of Sarek's has disgraced the Family. Has Spock done the same? In a time of civil and political unrest, High Councilor, T'Pau, had to be certain. Her House could ill-afford the scandal ...

Star Trek:
The Original Series

NIGHT WHISPER S

Vol 1 – The Incident

A Star Trek Fan Fiction By
April L. Payne

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Stacey Dean

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

First pdf edition Sep 17 2012
Second pdf edition May 27 2013
First ePUB edition May 27 2013
Third pdf edition April 18 2014

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*For my late father,
George F. Dewdney,
who told me to
"never give up my dreams"
and to my husband, Les,
who believed in me,
even when I didn't.*

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Prologue

**In the Vulcan Year of V'Tah,
Standard Earth Year 2264
Mt. Seleya**

Hot swirls of dry air rifled through the folds of her robe, sending sprays of dust devils across the path. Stopping, T'Pran glanced across the expanse of the barren desert basin below. Pinks, blues and purples softened the harsh red skyline in a wondrous display of harmonious discord as if the artist, Nature, had gone wild splattering color everywhere. It would be night soon. Quickly, T'Pran tucked the blanket around the baby in her arms. Protecting her charge from the stinging grit of

the brewing sandstorm, she also sought to conceal the toddler's identity from view. It was risky bringing a human child to the Temple, yet there was no other way for them to understand why she had made such an unusual request. In T'Pran's eyes, she saw no choice. And soon, she hoped, the High Priestess would agree.

Climbing the winding narrow path up the mountain ridge, she reached the Temple at last. Holding the child close, the old Vulcan woman made a small bow to the monk guarding the entrance. Bare-chested, with only a white sarong about his waist, he was muscular, formidable, unreadable as any Vulcan should be and more. Years of *discipline* had stripped him of emotion, not a hint could be discerned. T'Pran had a momentary pause, wondering if he might judge her. He had achieved what few Vulcans in all actuality could, the *Kolinahr*, the complete eradication of all emotion. At one time T'Pran, herself, had strived for that goal – and failed.

Without speaking, he took up a mallet and lightly struck the center of a huge bronze gong. A deep melodious resonance announced T'Pran's arrival. Swallowing a momentary trepidation, she went inside. It had been years since she had studied within the walls of this auspicious dwelling. She had very nearly taken her vows when another calling led her to help raise others' children. Abruptly, she left the

Temple, left the priesthood, much to her Mentor's chagrin. Would T'Lar look kindly upon her now? She hoped so, she needed T'Lar's help and her blessings to proceed as requested.

Twice, recently, she had met with the panel of Elders, laying out her case. Today, as instructed, she had brought the child in question for them to examine.

As T'Pran glanced about her, it was gratifying to be home, if only for this short time. The Temple had been carved out of the mountain's side. Roughly hewn, with vaulted ceilings, the main chamber was huge, designed to house hundreds in assembly, but not well-lit. It took a moment for T'Pran's eyes to adjust to the dimness of the chamber, longer due to her advanced years. She hesitated until her path was clear, lest she fall and drop the child on the cold stone floor. Soon the flickering of torches along the walls guided her steps and she ambled down the aisle to the dais at the center of the room. There she was met by the High Priestess, herself. Tall, imposing in her white temple frock, her face lined with age, she gazed down at T'Pran with hawkish brown eyes.

“You have brought her?” T'Lar asked, from the steps above.

“I have,” T'Pran answered, unwrapping the child.

Large blue eyes peered out at the Vulcan women from beneath the hood of her tiny cloak, haunting in their gaze, and for an instant bearing a wisdom far too advanced for her tender eighteen standard Earth months of age. T'Pran glanced at the High Priestess. Though careful not to display surprise in her demeanor, the cleric had witnessed — T'Pran was certain of it — that strange all-knowing glint the baby often had. Her own reaction had been similar, herself choosing to ignore it in the beginning. In this case, decreeing it a trick of the lighting in the chamber would be logical. Before long, however, T'Pran knew T'Lar and the others would be forced to acknowledge what she had come to accept; this innocent child was special in a most intriguing and dangerous way. She just hoped they would agree with her on what must be done.

Silently, T'Lar turned to lead them into the inner chamber where the examination and inquiry would take place. Before she'd gone a single pace, the priestess straightened her stance in an involuntarily reflex, jerking her head back to gaze hard at T'Pran and then at the child and back again. Her expression resisted giving into what T'Pran knew was consternation. The furrows in her cheeks cut more harshly into her face as T'Lar frowned at the curious sensation. "How? By what means? Trickery?" she asked, cupping the child's face to gaze into an otherwise innocent countenance.

T'Pran had experienced it often enough herself to know what T'Lar was going through at this moment; a slight tickle that rippled through her head beginning at the back of her cranium all the way to the frontal lobe; the thoughts of another brushing up against her mind. How could this be, she was fully *shielded*? T'Lar was likely asking herself, just as T'Pran had queried when the phenomenon first began. Yet the act had been perpetrated over and over until T'Pran was forced to conclude the source was none other than the baby in her charge.

“T'Pran, you were once a promising student, an acolyte of high regard. What manner of mockery heralds your return?”

T'Pran had since removed the child's hood, the now loose blonde wisps of hair falling about the tiny girl's forehead and cheeks adding to her sweetness. Leaning into her old nurse, the child chewed playfully on a chubby finger and giggled in delight.

“It is no trick,” T'Pran stated with the proper detachment. “It is why I asked to bring her here for ... evaluation. She is human —”

“The ability to lock minds with another is strictly inherent in Vulcans,” T'Lar insisted. “There must be some mistake in her known heritage.” She lifted the hem of her robe and started again for the inner chamber.

“There is no mistake,” T’Pran furthered, arguing against the dismissal. The old woman found herself having to pick up her pace to keep up with the cleric whose steps now seemed driven. “She is an anomaly, to be sure.”

“We shall see.” Wending through the dimly lit back halls of the chamber, they came upon a set of tall stone doors. T’Lar pushed them open.

The lively debate inside came to a halt as the women entered the windowless chamber. Several clerics were seated around the boomerang-shaped stone table, seven in all. A musky incense permeated the air. Candlelight from ancient torches played with shadows on the bare stone walls. T’Pran shifted the weight of the child in her arms, and gazed impassively at each of the clerics assembled to make judgement on her request. T’Lar took her place, center seat and nodded to her colleagues. “Just outside you informed me the child is fully human. This cannot be, if what you suggest is truth. She cannot possess the ability to *mindmeld*.”

“I have provided this panel with the physician’s reports,” T’Pran began. “I do not know through what means she comes by these *Gifts*, only that as a human she lacks the proper *discipline* required to control them. I ask permission to train her in the *Way*.”

“Perhaps, it is her unusually high count of extra-sensory perception that merely simulates a *mindmeld*. I have to agree it cannot be a true joining of minds,” T’Vek offered up, reading from a tiny handheld computer.

“It would appear she is of great intelligence,” another added, comments and questions flying randomly from around the table. “Fully human, you say?”

“Were I to accept the veracity of the reports,” Sobel interrupted, shifting lazily in his seat. Minister of Intergalactic Affairs, he was also the High Council’s liaison to the Council of Elders. “I would have to suggest she be properly mated to a Vulcan when she reaches maturity, since it is clear she will need a Vulcan’s mental acuity and Logic to combat the frivolous use of such a *gift* and guide her to a more benign status.”

“What is it you are suggesting, Lord Sobel?” T’Lar inquired.

“*Unbonded*, she is what humans would call ‘a loose canon’.” Looking up with pale green eyes that held the child’s gaze, Sobel added, “I do not accept the reports.”

T’Pran drew in a quiet breath. She knew convincing the clerics would take a demonstration. Yet, she had no power to make the child perform. It

was often random, like right outside the chamber just now, when the child might deem it amusing to drop into another's head. Sometimes, more often in fact, the child *wandered* thusly in her sleep. T'Pran regretted the long nap Brianna Cantrell had taken during their travels up from the Province. A cranky child would serve no good purpose, either. T'Pran had opted to let her sleep.

Her dilemma was, once the council ruled the matter would be closed. Getting an appeal was rare, especially without additional evidence to prove the case. T'Pran was prepared to defy her Elders and the High Council by training the child in secret, if need be. She hoped with a bit of optimism she may yet be vindicated in bringing her cause to the panel of Elders. The nature of the inquiry turned and that hoped soon ebbed.

At last T'Pran set the toddler on her feet while she addressed the council's remaining questions. Smiling, shy in manner, the little one came when coaxed and one of the clerics sat her on the edge of the table. A moment later the woman uttered, "*Kae'at k'lasa.* She shows no restraint. This cannot be allowed." Quickly, she passed the baby along to the one sitting on her right.

In a ripple effect, the panel members reacted, the child's mind bouncing from one to the next like a beach ball on the waves in her playful manner. Each

in their turn were troubled, expressing doubt and ... alarm.

“I do not understand how she comes by such *gifts*,” Sobel said, his face drained of color as he held her out and away from himself as if she carried some disease, passing her along to the next Elder. “But this cannot go unchecked. The nature of a human is unpredictability. Left untrained she is a danger — and a threat.”

“I cannot accept that she is fully human,” T’Vek uttered, eyes wide with awe.

After only a few moments’ exposure to the child’s *Gifts*, T’Lar escorted the governess and her tiny charge out of the chamber again. In the quiet of the corridor she said, “You were quite correct to bring her here. *Discipline* in the *Vulcan Way* must begin at once. This matter will now go before the High Council, but I entreat thee. Do not wait until the Council agrees to it, they are quite capable of debating the issue to its own demise. Also, it would be wise to put her family through a certain rudimentary training as well, in order for them to learn how to thwart such unwanted probing of their thoughts. The child is too young to realize the implications and the ramifications of her unlawful acts.”

“She broke through our own practiced *shields* —”

T'Lar nodded. “*Kae'at k'lasa. Mind rape.* We were unprepared for such ... mischief,” T'Lar concluded. “Go at once and speak to no one other than her immediate family of such events. If word gets out, the child will have no peace. I must go now and consider my own course of action in this matter. Sobel is correct, her *Gifts* exceed the common Vulcan's abilities to *shield* their minds from such an assault. She could be a danger and *in* danger from those less scrupulous. Keep me informed as to her progress.”

Bowing before the High Priestess, T'Pran swaddled the tot once again and quickly headed out of the Temple.

1

**September 5, 2281
Stardate 8109.05
Space Port One**

“**S**pock,” Kirk greeted the Vulcan, grabbing the back of the chair opposite the captain. “You’re back from yet another training cruise. Good to see you survived the ordeal.” He took a seat and flagged the barmaid from across the *Harbour Master Lounge*.

“Where’s Doctor McCoy?” Spock asked. The room was bustling with Starfleet personnel as well as an assortment of civilians, all traveling in and out of the space port that rotated in Earth’s orbit. Glancing out

of the large observation window, the inside trellis of the space station was gently illuminated against the blackness of space. In the distance a row of commercial starships was berthed port side of the station. Starfleet housed her vessels starboard. It was evening and most of the work had scaled back for the day. A few workers in space suits hovered over a freighter across from the lounge, but mostly the docking area was deserted.

“Oh, he’ll be along,” Kirk grinned wryly. “He was just finishing up with the required annual physicals, posting today’s reports to the board.”

“Ah, up to his eyebrows in brass,” Spock nodded. He gazed over at Kirk and Kirk met his eyes.

“You want to tell me what’s on your mind? You didn’t just call us over for a drink. I know you,” Kirk pointed a finger at the Vulcan, “and that’s your troubled look.”

Spock drew in a breath, straightened in his seat and attempted to wipe away any such remnants of emotion from his features. As if to ignore Kirk, he turned to the waitress, gestured to his empty glass and requested another. Kirk just smiled.

“Altaire Water?” she asked.

“Make it brandy.”

“Ooh, take it easy with the hard stuff, there,

Captain, okay?" she flirted shamelessly, giving Spock an exaggerated wink as she set a fresh bowl of pretzels on the table.

"Make mine a scotch," Kirk said.

Punching the order into her hand held device, she toddled off again, losing herself in the crowded room. From time to time the rough upbeat of music pounded off the walls, along with the occasional laughter and buzz of chatter overall. It was a busy night. Kirk took in the scene, patiently waiting for his friend to speak.

"T'Pau contacted me today," Spock began in a little while. Unconsciously, he reached for his empty glass and began to twirl it, leaving uneven **rings** embedded in the tablecloth.

"Oh?"

"I have been asked to take part in a Rite of Passage. The *k'Matra*. It is a time-honored event."

"And this has you worried?"

"I'm to be a *moderator* in that portion of the test which is held in secret. It is a most prestigious role, usually reserved for Vulcans much older than myself. Only those who, themselves, have successfully passed through the *Corridor*, as it is called, qualify to moderate it for another."

"Successfully pass through? As in survive?"

“That to which you refer is the *Kahswan*, and it is indeed about survival. I am referring to the *k’Matra*, a much later test, which evaluates an individual’s mind gifts. Like the *Kahswan*, it is another opportunity to achieve and prosper in life.”

“Mind gifts, secret rituals,” Kirk let out a breath. “I’ve never understood Vulcan mysticism. Sounds a bit like hazing.” He popped a pretzel into his mouth, his eyes following the movement in the room. Several young women in a group had caught his eye. Splitting his attention, he was already in flirt mode. He glanced quickly at Spock.

“It is who we are, Jim.”

“Yes, I’m beginning to understand that. What does it entail? Not physical violence, I hope.” Kirk’s mind shot back to another Vulcan ritual in which he nearly killed Spock during what he thought was only to be a symbolic battle. The brunette in the corner was winking at him, drawing his attention to her. “Did you accept? Or was that even an option?”

“Yes,” Spock said. “I accepted. There was an unanticipated obstacle and a *moderator* had to be replaced. My name was at the top of the roster, it would appear, though I was never conscious of placing myself on said list. And it is not the *Kunat’Kalifee, Admiral*.” Spock gave Kirk a pointed look. “There is no violence. In fact, the whole point

of the *Corridor* is to provide a safe arena through which the *candidate* may project her thoughts.”

Kirk took his eyes off the sweet little miss in the corner, straightened in his chair and waved his hands at Spock. “Project? Wait, back it up a bit, what exactly are you talking about?”

“Things metaphysical, Jim. Once each of the *moderators* is in place, projecting our thoughts beyond the body —”

“Are we talking about astral projection. As in *Remote Surveillance*? I’m not sure I subscribe to such a notion —”

“Precisely, Admiral. From there we shall make a unified and very subtle call for the *candidate* to come forth. If done properly, the *candidate* will not only comply, but believe the act was of her own volition allowing us to gauge the strength and distance of the projection.”

“So, then what’s the problem?” Kirk asked his friend.

Spock frowned his annoyance. He took in a deep breath. “Vulcans employ a different gauge than mere wealth to determine power. Those with the greatest acumen, along with an affinity toward *Mind Gifts*, have always been held in high esteem by our society,” he stated, his finger now tracing the rings left by the glass. “But in *ancient times* the results of

this test were used to make matches with the Noble *Houses*. And in some circumstances today it is still regarded as a prelude to such—”

“You said ancient times ... ah ...” Kirk grinned, digging into the bowl of pretzels, nodding his head slightly and grinning wickedly. “You’re afraid you’ll like her numbers and you’ll have no logical recourse to refuse her, is that it?” He popped the pretzel into his mouth just as the barmaid arrived with his drink. James Kirk nodded at her, taking a sip of the scotch and continued to chuckle at Spock’s raised eyebrow.

“I find your ability to make such quantum leaps of illogic fascinating.”

“Well, just tell me one thing, is she beautiful?”

Again Spock lifted his eyebrow. “Immaterial, since I neither know her, nor will I ever.”

“Are you sure? Sounds like you could be missing out on something.”

“So, what did I miss?” McCoy said, standing at the table’s edge, grinning from ear to ear.

“Oh, not much,” Kirk said, leaning back in his chair. “We were just discussing the pros and cons of Vulcan mysticism.”

Spock merely locked his arms over his chest and tilted his head in Kirk’s direction. McCoy pulled up the third chair at the table and took a seat. “Speaking

of things Vulcan," he said, scraping the chair against the metal grating of the deck as he got settled. "Did you hear about the theft? It made the evening news."

Kirk had his drink halfway to his mouth. He took a quick sip and shook his head, shouting. "Theft?" The music finally died down again.

Spock was quick to fill in the gaps, "An artifact from the Vulcan Museum was taken. It was part of a special exhibit on intergalactic tour."

"Ancient weaponry," McCoy interjected.

Spock gave the doctor a glance then went on, "Authorities speculate the theft occurred between destinations, since the items were carefully inspected, packed and signed off by the Curator of the Sigma Prime Museum as well as Commodore Shackley in charge of the tour's security at the time of shipment. And yet it turned up missing when it reached Star Base 12."

"Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm damned uncomfortable knowing a weapon of that caliber is floating about the universe in God knows whose hands!" McCoy ranted, busy flagging down the barmaid.

"Doctor," Spock lifted both slanted eyebrows. "Once again your emotions have superseded your intellect."

“Spock,” Kirk frowned, sitting up. “What do you know about this?”

“I know,” Spock began, folding his hands and resting them on the tabletop, “That while it is disconcerting to lose a bit of our history, there is little concern over a useless fragment, such as what was taken. Vulcan historians and scientist alike concur on the matter. It is regrettable but insignificant.”

“Well, call it what you will,” McCoy said, “It’s a sad state of affairs when others feel the need to ripoff a planet’s heritage. And if it’s so useless, where’s the motive? Beyond avarice, that is. They have to have a market for it somewhere.”

“Could just be a collector of odd artifacts,” Kirk said, swallowing the last of his Scotch. He admitted to having a modest collection of antiques, himself.

“Well, now there’s another topic. The pirates and the Black market. Things have been spiraling out of control, lately. Jim, when is the top Brass planning on doing something about it?”

“You know Starfleet,” Kirk shrugged. “Soon as the paperwork goes through.” His smile was sardonic as he pushed out of his chair. “At any rate, gentlemen, it’s been a delight but duty calls,” he said, glancing at his wrist chronometer. “I have to get back to flying my desk. And all that paperwork,” he winked.

“Spock, good luck on the test. Bones, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Zero-nine-hundred,” the doctor smiled. He watched as Kirk threaded himself through the crowd then turned back to the Vulcan. “You sure we have nothing to worry about? And what’s this test Jim mentioned?”

“It is simply a Rite of Passage I’ve been asked to take part in. And like the stolen artifact, nothing of major consequence.”

“Glad to see you haven’t changed one bit. You’re as tight-lipped as ever, my Vulcan friend.”

“And you are as irascible as ever.” With that, Spock raised his glass in a toast.

McCoy reached for his own glass, glanced at Spock and then lifted his drink. “You drive me nuts, you know that, don’t you?”

“The *feeling* is mutual,” Spock said, and finishing off his brandy, he paid his tab and walked out of the lounge, leaving McCoy to ponder the universe.

2

**In the Vulcan Year of Pey'leh,
Standard Earth Year 2281
Mt. Seleya**

It was the time of the harvest. The pungent aroma of the *Chi'tri'dya* plant wafted on the warm breeze, filling the Temple with the curious mixture of wine and sweet apples as the acolytes went about gathering the berries for processing. They worked undisturbed turning the fruit into a potent by-product, as if the upcoming Rite of Passage, this year's *k'Matra*, wasn't marred by Signs and so they suffered no ill boding. T'Lar gazed into the distance, barely able to make out the

wedge of the larger orbiting planet, *T'Kirin*, for the closeness of it's twin, *T'Khut*. Aligned so directly on this night, unlike centuries past, she almost suffered a chill.

She turned to make her ascent up the narrow winding steps to her office and caught a glimpse of Sarkal, son of Sobel. "T'Lar," he hailed her from down the corridor. Was there to be no peace tonight? He broke away from his escorts and hasten toward her. "T'Lar," he entreated again, "what logical reason do you have to exempt me from participating in this test? I have met all the requirements —"

"All, save one," she answered him. "You are well acquainted with the *candidate*. You should have informed us of this." Lifting the hem of her long robe, she made her way up to the small private chamber above, dismayed that he followed along behind her. His footfall came heavy against the stone steps.

"But we have never touched minds. I fail to understand —"

T'Lar held up her hand stilling his oncoming speech. Turning quickly she glared at the young Acolyte behind them who lingered overlong at her task of refilling the oil in a nearby hanging lamp. With a nod of her head T'Lar invited Sarkal inward agreeing to hear his petition, deftly shutting the

stone door on inquiring ears. The soft glow of candlelight met their eyes. It was far brighter in here than the narrow staircase they had ascended. T'Lar squinted.

Moving about the small chamber tending to last minute details, she said, "You know the *candidate* and she knows you. She might seek you out, sensing a familiar presence, and then her test will be made invalid. I cannot allow it and the Rules forbid it for just such a reason."

Stopping at a side table, T'Lar arranged the candles for the coming ceremony making sure the wicks had been properly trimmed and that the carved stone jar housed enough granules of incense. Sarkal stood like a statue just inside the room, tall and ominous, she thought, when she looked up again. She gazed at the young Vulcan looking for clues in order to discern his current disposition.

"T'Lar, do not deny me this chance. I need to be a *moderator* —" He took a step into the room, one hand extended in supplication.

T'Lar's glance was sharp. "Need?" she said. "Explain, that I might understand." If she had witnessed the telltale fidgeting of one in the throes of *Pon farr*, she might be able to forgive his less than logical outburst. However, there was no sign he was in such a desperate state. She turned her gaze away

again. The sun was setting, the sky outside the window slowly turning a deep magenta. She could feel a soft cooling breeze on her cheeks as it wafted inward ruffling the sheer fabric of the curtain. It would be evening soon and she was grateful for the respite from the grueling heat of the day.

“Forgive me, High Priestess,” he said, bowing low. “I am merely asking for an exception to the Rules.” Again he took an imposing step closer. T’Lar cast him a glance and moved to the sideboard where her assistant had prepared a small spread of crackers and dried fruit for her evening repast.

“She has been dubbed the *Anomaly*, this test will be proof of her status. Is it your desire to thwart her in this, you who are a friend of her family?” she said, lighting a flame beneath the clear beaker of water for some tea. “Or is it your goal to artificially augment her rating?” T’Lar closed her eyes, drawing in a silent breath. Would that she could escape the responsibilities of this upcoming evaluation for just a little while. Sarkal’s presence hung over her like a pall, however, diverting her from her usual evening meditation, her only means of rest between now and tomorrow’s ceremonies. Experiencing a slight chill again she moved further away from him.

“It is said the *k’Matra* might be used by those seeking a mate. T’Lar —”

The High Priestess turned to face the persistent young male. "What is it you want, Sarkal? You sought a position on the outer perimeter of the *Corridor*. Were you hoping that as a member of a *Ruling House* you would have first bid on her? It is no secret you seek to elevate your political standing. If she tests out the way it has been predicted she will make a most desirable mate. And the *Gifts* she brings will open doors to her heirs, it is true. Many *First Sons* have already made their desires known to us. You would not be the first in line — should her father desire to arrange a match. Much remains to be seen."

"It is late," Sarkal said. "There must be thirteen *moderators* in place. How will you replace me now? You must let me proceed."

"A replacement has been found," T'Lar said, turning back to her tea water. She sprinkled a few nodules of spice into the beaker, watching as the clear liquid changed into a light amber. A sweet aroma filled the air. A hint of Night Blooming Jasmine. "Even as we speak he is going through the screening process. And thanks to your attempts at deception, his screening shall be all the more intense.

"What of him, T'Lar? Tell me, has he met the requirements? Does he, too, seek the *Anomaly* for his mate?"

“The information you seek cannot be divulged. The *moderators* are to be anonymous. It is our *Way*.”

“It is much whispered that T’Pau seeks to have her great-grandson mated to her. His *House* cannot be allowed to rise any higher. Already his Clan holds too much power. And you would allow this? What about the blood lines? He is already a hybrid... .”

“This audience is over, Sarkal, son of Sobel. I can speak no more of these things. Do not test thy elders in this. The consequences are ... dire.”

“I will increase my rank and that of my *House*, T’Lar. She will be mine, that is a given. If not through this Test, then by other means.”

“Then it is for you to go forth and seek your path. I cannot be of service to you. You are dismissed.”

For a moment rage flickered in those emerald orbs of his. T’Lar drew herself up, chin jutted outward. Hesitating for only a moment the young Vulcan clasped his hands in front of him and bowed low.

“I am gratified you gave audience, T’Lar.”

As soon as he was gone, the elderly cleric eased herself onto the chair by the window. “Young, impetuous fool,” she said to no one.

3

**In the Vulcan Year of Pey'leh,
Standard Earth Year 2281
Mt. Seleya**

Brianna Cantrell arrived at the Temple in a swirl of secrecy. Met at the back entrance by a small, specialized team of Temple Guards and Maidens, they quickly threw a blanket over her head and holding it over her like a tent, ushered her inside. There they formed a vanguard around her and escorted her hastily through a series of wending darkened halls toward a narrow stairway. The building proved larger and deeper than it appeared from the outside or maybe it was just that she

couldn't see much, swathed in this hot blanket, as they scurried along like rats in a ship's hold. It was quiet in here, too, with the stillness that befalls a monastery during the hour of prayer — until the echo of conversation up ahead made the group come to a halt. Without so much as exchanging glances it was understood they would go no further until the way ahead was clear. Brianna Cantrell took the opportunity to lift the blanket enough to peer out at her surroundings.

A smile curled her lips upward. It was just as she supposed. Rich velvet tapestries lined the wide central hall providing a warming touch amidst the gray stone. Illuminated only by crude oil sconces, which hung on the walls in place of a much more advanced technology, each arras told the individual history of the thirteen Ruling Houses. In the soft glow of the lamps, too, Vulcan's violent past was revealed. Glinting off of ancient weaponry displayed in glass cases beneath the wall hangings, the armory was unique to each family, much like the heraldry of ancient Earth. Unused for centuries, it was kept here as a silent call for vigilance, lest they forget themselves and slip back to the ways of eternal darkness.

Studying the molten rock carving along the western wall, Brianna Cantrell soon realized it was possible, here, to escape the trappings of space travel, of

starships, the Federation and intergalactic politics, of racial bigotry and bias. In this place of refuge all were welcome, even a Terran such as herself. The Temple exuded peace, and yet there was *something* ... an uncomfortable niggling at the back of her neck ran down her spine that nearly made her shudder. Bumped along in her path suddenly, the group was moving again, T'Pran moved to her side.

"T'Bree, do not dawdle," she said, tugging the blanket downward. "The sun nearly sets. Thee must not be seen."

Brianna Cantrell gave her governess a quick nod, though despite the admonition, she stooped to remove her sandals that she might feel the smoothness of the ancient rocks beneath her feet. Cool despite the heat of the day, in was her hope to pay homage to those *candidates* who had walked this path before her, hardly believing she was following in their footsteps.

She wanted to soak in every moment of this occasion, every aspect, to revel in it with all of its pomp and circumstance — instead what she felt was *bombarded*. Brianna Cantrell stopped at once and stood still on the stair alerted by the prickly chill that rushed up her spine, sending a million icy needles jabbing at her in warning. She straightened her stance.

There was a disturbing energy, a negative force permeating the hallways. Electrifying the very atmosphere of the monastery that had held such peace a moment before, it disrupted the tranquility of day's end. Suddenly, the air seemed too thin for her to breathe and gasping she pushed the blanket aside again. Her gaze darted to the sides and all around hoping to glimpse the possessor of such a sinister aura. At the same time she wished only to get away, to retreat into the shadows lest she be discovered. Yet, for the moment her feet refused to obey her mind's command and she remained frozen in place. Panic-stricken, she gasped piteously.

"T'Bree, where art thy thoughts, Child?" T'Pran said, over her shoulder.

Jarred from the trance at last by her governess' familiar voice, she snapped to picking up her pace and was soon right on the elderly woman's heels. It was all she could do to keep from reaching out and grasping the woman's robes, to hide amidst the many folds of it like some small child. Peeking over her shoulders one final time, though the blanket was again in place, she kept pace with her escorts the rest of the climb upwards.

The third story room was open, airy, with a large window overlooking the courtyard. Brianna Cantrell breathed deeply of the fresh night air, once freed from her shroud. Her misgivings had melted away,

surprisingly, too. She placed her single piece of luggage just inside the door and setting her sandals down, slipped back into them. Furnishings were sparse. There was a stone ledge underneath the window and a large raised dais in the center of the room with a brazier in the middle of it, already lit. Plumes of incense wafted upwards in great curls of gray-white smoke. "Where is the bed?" she asked, looking around. "Am I not to sleep tonight?" Almost instantly the teenager yawned.

"We have not forgotten thee art Human and therefore lack the stamina of a Vulcan," T'Pran said, turning to retrieve a small bedroll already set aside in the room.

As Brianna Cantrell watched, it occurred to her that T'Pran was walking slower again today than normal, her movements deliberate as if each step pained her. Brianna Cantrell found she had to look away, struggling with the notion that all too soon T'Pran would pass away taking with her a very large chunk of the teenager's heart. Instead, Brianna Cantrell busied herself inspecting the bundle suddenly placed in her arms. It appeared to be nothing more than a mat made of long reeds tied together. When she glanced up again, giving the Vulcan a questioning look, T'Pran merely inclined her head. "It is our Way."

"I'll bet," Brianna Cantrell grinned. "The Vulcan

Way or *T'Pran's* Way? No wonder I woke up on the floor so often after a nap when I was little."

"Thee wast always on a mat and thee wast always covered with a blanket."

"And yet my mother was always complaining about it," Brianna Cantrell said, though her smile faded, replaced by a concerned frown. *T'Pran* ambled to the door, taking up the satchel. Brianna Cantrell moved to her side. "You always took care of me. You still do," she said, gently taking the bag from her old nurse. Brianna Cantrell held open the luggage, careful to allow *T'Pran* the dignity of serving her; watching as the old woman unburdened it, laying her things out for her on the ledge beneath the window, carefully refolding the nightgown before setting it aside.

"It would seem for a time our paths crossed," *T'Pran* said, patting Brianna Cantrell on the cheek, her mouth twisted up into that almost smile of hers. "Thee hast given me much, Child of my Heart. Thee wast my greatest challenge. Now thine is of another path. After tomorrow thee wilt have no more need of me."

"Untrue. *T'Pran*," Brianna Cantrell gazed at the floor battling the tears that threatened to escape and cascade down her face. She hated goodbyes, especially since in her young life goodbye often

meant she'd never see that individual alive again. Annoyed, she didn't quite seem in control today, chastising herself. Too many conflicting emotions washed over her at once, waves of adrenalin coursing through her. She was powerless and a bit sad amidst the excitement of this moment. Change was a difficult thing, she decided. After tomorrow many things would change and the world she knew would undoubtedly be left behind.

"I —" she cleared her throat. "I shall always need you, Moi'ma."

"Yes, my Child," T'Pran nodded. "Come, let us take tea together one last time." Leading the girl over to a rustic table, the elderly woman fixed a decoction of herbs and Vulcan tea leaves, sprinkling a powdered yellow substance, a powerful opiate derived from the *Chi'tri'dya* plant, into it before serving it to her student.

The tea was hot with ancient spices, raking at the inside of her throat. Brianna Cantrell sat with her eyes closed allowing the potion to do its work, filling her mind with a strange euphoria. After just a few more sips, her head bobbed forward onto her chest and T'Pran eased herself into the chair opposite the girl. "Tell me, Child, what did thee see? Out in the corridor and again on the stairs?"

Brianna Cantrell began to shake her head, trying to

dispel the rapid images that came to her unbidden. “No,” she whimpered. “I don’t want to know.”

“Thee hast a *Gift*, T’Bree, thee must help us. Thee must use it. Suppress thine emotions, let them drift away until only the events remain in your mind. They cannot hurt thee. They are just images. What didst thee *feel* on the steps, just now?”

“I don’t know. Please ... something.”

“Take thyr time. Relax.”

“I can’t — malice. I felt waves and waves of malice.”

“Most interesting,” T’Lar spoke from the open doorway. “T’Pran, do you always work your students so hard the night before a test?” The senior cleric ventured further into the room and reaching down cupped the girl’s chin to gaze into her face.

“Open your eyes.”

Brianna Cantrell slowly obeyed, her eyes fluttering and readjusting to the dim light.

“T’Lar?”

“Greetings, T’Bree. And be at peace. We are honored to have you among us.”

4

**In the Vulcan Year of Pey'leh,
Standard Earth Year 2281
Mt. Seleya**

Starlight splashed across her face from the window, reminding her of how little she had slept. Rolling over, Brianna Cantrell found after hours of tossing and turning she was only half on the mat. That accounted for the cold permeating her bones, or at least part of it. One would think on a planet such as this, hot and arid, one would neither know nor dislike the cold. This was different. She'd felt the same sinister quality in the air as when she first arrived. Who or what?

Brianna Cantrell sat up groggily running a hand up through the fringes that covered her forehead to the knotted half-moon scar above her left eyebrow. For a moment she felt disoriented, uncertain of her location, but her roaming gaze soon found T'Pran staring at her from the chair in the corner, the curl of steam and the fresh aroma rising from the cup inviting wakefulness. Hot mint tea.

“Thee hast slept late,” T’Pran said, easing out of her chair. Brianna Cantrell was quick to rise and assist the woman.

“But, it’s not yet dawn ...”

“Drink thy tea, we must hurry and get hee ready.”

A few minutes later, after they had finished their tea, Brianna Cantrell gazed at her image in the ancient mirror while her governess helped her dress. The filmy blue material of her Temple gown behaved much like the Earthen silk of China. Close fitting and sheath-like, clinging to the curves of her youthful figure, it was multi-layered with sheer bell sleeves. The bodice and long cuffs that entwined most of her slender forearms were embeded with blue gems upon a satin cream-colored brocade with rich gold embroidery resembling flowers on a vine.. Pulling it on over her head, tugging the fabric in place, it flowed over the small rounded mounds of her breasts accentuating newly broadened hips that

announced her blossoming womanhood. Long, it hid all but the toes of her hand-stitched, *T'ay'at'ma* skin boots.

I look like some sort of bride. She quietly sighed, biting her lower lip to keep it from trembling. She wished it were her wedding day rather than the task looming before her. Running a hand over her stomach to smooth the fabric yet again, she hoped the wave of nausea would abate. The air seemed unusually hot already, her mouth dry. She couldn't seem to catch her breath. It was silly to feel this way, she decided, it was just a test. She had taken so many over the years and passed them, too. This was merely a final. Yet, she felt unconvinced, perhaps because there was more at stake.

"I still don't see why part of the examination must be done in secret," she began. "How can I do my best, if I don't know what's expected of me? I mean, what if I fail?"

"Hold still," T'Pran said, as she worked the closure on the back of the gown. Grasping Brianna Cantrell's arm, she gently turned her to the front again. "Thee hast demonstrated thy ability many times. Thee shalt not fail." T'Pran stopped fussing with a sleeve long enough to sweep Brianna Cantrell's hand aside, giving her a warning glance. "Thee wilt soil the fabric," she said, then bent to her task of straightening the gown's train. "Why is it

thee doubts thy abilities?"

"Because just maybe it's a ... a fluke, something in the water? Or maybe I'm just good at guessing things."

T'Pran made a tisk-tisk sound with her teeth.
"Child...."

"Well, everybody says I'm different. They call me the *Anomaly*, for Surak's sake. What if once I'm off-planet, the powers dissipate? Then what do I do?"

"Thee wouldest have to reconcile thyself to being an ordinary human. A terrible task."

"*Moi'ma!*" Brianna Cantrell frowned at the image in the mirror, locking gazes with the elderly Vulcan. T'Pran gave her a most subtle twitching of her lips and in a moment the girl was smiling in response.

"Thee hast not changed," T'Pran said. "In all these years of struggle, thee remains *so* human. I should have listened to the Council when they suggested it was an impossible task to train such a child in the *Vulcan Way*." With that T'Pran settled the jewel-bedecked cap atop Brianna Cantrell's blonde head, secured it with two hat pins and then fastened the sheer drape underneath her chin and another across her narrow nose. The headdress completely swathed the girl's head, and much of her brow, coming to a point between her eyes. Pearls danced on the edge of the fringe when she turned to glance at the elderly

woman.

“But —”

“And remove this,” T’Pran said, putting a finger just below the point of the cap, into the furrow between Brianna Cantrell’s large eyes. “It is a telltale sign of thy turmoil. Today thee art Vulcan. Thee must suppress what thee feels inside.” With a quick gesture T’Pran made a circular motion before the girl’s face as if to catch a winged insect buzzing about her head. Clasping her wrinkled hand into a tight fist, she said, “Release it,” and uncurling her fingers blew air across her palm. “It is of no consequence.” It was a gesture made often by the old woman when Brianna Cantrell was a child, training her ever so subtly in the *Way*.

Brianna Cantrell closed her eyes and exhaled slowly trying to quell the storm brewing in her stomach. The effort, useless. When she opened her eyes again, it was to catch T’Pran’s gaze. “Child, what *is* it?”

“I don’t ... I don’t *know*, exactly. Something. Perhaps, it is only the threat of the sandstorm?”

“Child of my heart,” T’Pran shook her head. “Thy emotions are beyond the stratosphere today. Thee hast time in which to still thyself.” T’Pran held her open hand out, gesturing to the molten rock carving, a *T’ay’at’ma*, resembling the pre-historic pterodactyl

of Earth, at rest, its leathery pinions pinned to its side. The brazier was once again lit and ready for use. Incense billowed forth from it, inviting tranquility of mind.

Dropping her gaze respectfully, Brianna Cantrell nodded. "I beg forgiveness for my emotional display," she solemnly replied, bowing ever so slightly, palms together. She did not move until T'Pran left the small chamber. Nor did she attend to her meditation right away, once the nurse was gone. Instead, she turned to gaze out of the high tower window momentarily, preferring to lose herself in the surprising activity in the darkened courtyard below. She was so nervous. She just wanted to delay the inevitable for a time.

Vulcans, illuminated by a smattering of torches dotting the winding walkways, ambled about the cracked, parched grounds forming small groups. Dressed in their formal garb, from what she could see, and judging by their ornately decorated headdresses many *Houses* were represented, some of a rather high station, so denoted by their long, flowing, and in some cases, elaborate dark robes. Soon they would be lining up to begin the procession. Brianna Cantrell felt her stomach twist itself into knots. In her nearly eighteen Earth years, she had never experienced excitement, nor anxiety, quite like this.

“Sandstorm, hurricane, earthquake, some kind of cataclysmic force ...” she murmured. Something was about to happen, that much she could *sense*. Brianna Cantrell drew her attention away from the people below to study the horizon beyond the ancient rock walls of the temple, distracting herself yet again. The black sky would be a vibrant red come midday. Even now, she detected, or thought she did, the waves of thermal energy as it danced off the barren desert floor that surrounded them. The temple was situated on the fringe of the township, furthest from the water table. Only the heartiest vine survived in these temperatures. Colorful rocks and stones mingled with these succulents decorating the garden of the temple in place of flowers that could not grow for the flaming, molten white sun.

Watching, Brianna Cantrell soon ascertained the movement wasn't thermal waves, as she first guessed, but rather the Acolytes who busied themselves in the distance, keeping to their daily routine, despite the upcoming ritual. It was logical, to work at this hour, given the torridness expected with the sunrise. Her self-appointed vigil was interrupted only when the heavy, wooden door of her chamber groaned on its ancient hinges. “T'Reesa, hello,” Brianna Cantrell said, without turning around.

The tall, slim Vulcan girl slipped through the wide

door closing it gently behind her. "How did you ... it is disconcerting how you do that. *Humans* ..." the young Vulcan teased.

"What are you doing here? I'm not supposed — "

"As your friend, I wanted to be the first to congratulate you and to say I rejoice with you on your achievement."

"What achievement? I haven't done anything, yet. But thank you." Brianna Cantrell gazed at the newcomer, noting the sallow skin tones of her sharply defined features; her high cheekbones and long, narrow nose; the black eyebrows angling upward over emerald green eyes, ever sparkling with mischief. She was a beautiful girl and despite her reserved demeanor, the human could easily read the excitement in T'Reesa's countenance, although to T'Reesa's credit, it was Brianna Cantrell's *gift* of 'sight' that had given her away.

"You are about to sit the *Test*. That is achievement enough. And you are quite welcome." T'Reesa inclined her dark head slightly, coming to sit with her friend at the window.

"What? Out with it," Brianna Cantrell giggled, leaning into the other girl in a friendly nudge. For the moment she was grateful for the respite. "You've come with *something* on your mind to say. It's practically dangling from your tongue!"

“How is it you can do that when my thoughts are completely and properly *shielded*? It is not logical.”

“Evasion,” Brianna Cantrell said in a sing-songy voice, attempting to lighten her own mood. Her case of giggles betrayed her strained nerves. “A question instead of an answer.”

“Very well. I shall tell you, but first I would ask another question. Has he chosen one for you, yet?”

“Chosen?”

“Your father. Has he made his choice of mates for you? It is time and it is custom. Today you are sitting the *k'Matra* just as I did last week. And last night — I was bonded to Senjil.”

“Senjil? The one who is apprenticing at the Embassy?”

“The very same. And I will tell you another thing. When we were alone he stroked the back of my hand. You *know* what that means. He is nearing his *Time*. It shall not be long before we are married and our union consummated. By this time next year I shall have a child.”

“T'Reesa!” Brianna Cantrell squealed, delighted, with the broadest of smiles. She raised her hand in the Vulcan greeting and the girls lightly touched palms. “I'm so very happy for you. I know you've had your eye on him.”

“And now it is your turn. We are of the same age. Just like me, your betrothal must be arranged. It *is* our *Way*.”

Brianna Cantrell quietly sighed. After giving her friend a troubled look she shook her head, turning to gaze out the window again. “Oh, I do love your people so, your customs. But after all don’t you think I’m *too* human? Besides, it is not *our* way. And my father forbids it.”

People who had been gathered loosely into groups, were slowly lining up to begin the procession as others scurried to join them. Brianna Cantrell did not want to have this conversation at this time. As much as she wanted to be a part of the fabric of this culture, to truly belong, her fantasy was being interrupted just now by the reality of her situation. It mattered little how much she trained or how much she exercised a Vulcan demeanor, which admittedly wasn’t often, she was not one of them. She would not leap from this momentous event, as so many of her Vulcan friends did, into marriage, remembering all too painfully the arguments between her father and her governess on this very issue. T’Pran had tried to push the idea and very nearly lost her position over it. Today, of all days, Brianna Cantrell had more pressing concerns, other things more prominently on her mind. If she should fail

“So you say, but you have been *raised* Vulcan,”

T'Reesa said, her hands clasped quietly in her lap. "It is illogical for your father to shirk his duty. If he is at a loss for someone suitable —"

"But, my father — he didn't — he never intended —" Brianna Cantrell shook her head. "We weren't to *become* Vulcan, ours was merely to understand —"

"My brother, Sarkal, wants you."

"Y-yes," Brianna Cantrell said, trying unsuccessfully to curb the emotion in her voice. "He has made his desire quite well known to us by the many unsolicited chores he performs around my father's estate. T'Reesa —" Brianna Cantyrell drew in a breath, discomfitted. Sarkal had made rather a pest of himself, of late, coming nearly on a daily basis to her father's home, always to stare at her, it seemed.

Unsettling, it was as if he meant to press his thoughts into hers from a safe distance, anxious to keep his endeavor to bind her to him, a secret. Still, she was aware of his attempts, she did *feel* something if only for a moment's pause, like a cloud passing over the sun, casting a brief shadow upon the desert floor. Thwarted, he would depart again, his grin, bereft of all sentiment, serving only to remind her of that which he had promised so often over the years, 'One day I will own you.'

Brianna Cantrell dropped her gaze, not wanting her

friend to read what she could not hide in her face, while she tried to keep from shuddering. "I do not want him. Anyway, my *father* —"

"Why not? He is of noble birth and will someday sit on the Council in my father's place — Or is it you have your eye on someone of a greater *House*? I know other *First Sons* are interested. Perhaps, the landlord of *Keldeen*? You have always held such high ambitions, T'Bree."

Brianna Cantrell shot her a glance, feeling the slight mockery in the way T'Reesa emphasized her Vulcan name. At once she was sorry she ever shared the fact that she fancied the architectural design of the aforementioned estate. "Don't you think that odd?"

T'Reesa rose from the ledge. "You are human and therefore given to such emotions."

"No, that others are interested in me as a possible mate."

"You have *Gifts*. And so you are valuable to those who would increase the worth of their *Houses*."

Brianna Cantrell followed her off the window seat, standing with her arms crossed over her chest. "Well, it isn't a case of ambition on my part. I told you. There is no one. I've been very devoted to my studies. You know I'm going off to college soon to study xenoarchaeology. Hopefully to the Starfleet

Academy, if I get accepted. And frankly, right now I just want to get through this day!" she said, hoping to put an end to the discussion. Just then the faint, light tinkling of the bell banners met her ears, drawing her attention back to the square below. It was still so dark....

Time was ebbing, Brianna Cantrell thought, with another surge of fluttering in her stomach. She watched stone-faced, frozen with a sudden terror, as four large Vulcan males arranged themselves in the front of the line, their bell banners held aloft. In only a short time she would be escorted into the sanctity of the inner temple. And she had not prepared herself. "You have to go. It's almost time and I ..." T'Reesa was already at the door.

"I will see you later at the reception. Today I, too, represent my *House* — now that I am a bonded Lady. Be at peace, my friend. I have a suspicion you, too, will soon be betrothed. My brother is most determined."

"You think?" Brianna Cantrell re-crossed her arms, hugging herself, narrowing her blue eyes into slits masking her concern. She was not at all looking forward to *another* barrage of correspondence from him. This had all the earmarks of a nightmare in the making. She was infinitely grateful at the moment her father was against the idea of arranged marriages in the first place, let alone taking place at what he

deemed her rather tender years.

She was troubled, too, that despite how close the two girls had become over the years, her friend's allegiance, at this particular moment in Brianna's life, belonged exclusively to her older brother. T'Reesa had come here expressly to act as a special envoy to *his* cause. Brianna Cantrell knew it and struggled to suppress her outrage. She loathed Sarkal of the *House of Kooli Ton Lok*, she was frightened of him, but she could never tell T'Reesa that. It took every ounce of her training to *shield* this fact from her dearest friend. Inwardly she shuddered with the very notion she could be given to him, her hands clammy. *Ugh!*

“I know he will exhaust all logical means to wear your father down. He will not give up until he wrests a marriage contract from Joseph Cantrell. He is — How do you humans call it?”

“Bull-headed, stubborn ...”

“Yes. Your language is most colorful. Either word will suffice.”

“Well, so's my father! Oh, T'Reesa, really! How you do love to tease.”

“Love? That is an emotion. We as a people do not deal in emotion. I am merely stating a fact.”

“Well, here's a tantalizing little fact for you. I think

I have a better chance of getting struck by lightning than getting betrothed any time soon."

"Do not give up so easily. I know Sarkal won't. Again, be at peace, my friend. And may you do well," T'Reesa said, inclining her head and then she was gone.

Brianna Cantrell came to her feet staring after the Vulcan. *Peace?* How was she to find peace with all these things suddenly swirling around in her head? Her heart thumped wildly. There was so little time, too. She gasped, hearing the jangling of the bell banners once again. A third time and the procession would begin. Brianna Cantrell began to feel herself panic. How *dare* T'Reesa come up here just now, distracting her with things she well knew could not be. T'Reesa should *know* better, having just sat this test herself, making her fully aware of what it entailed.

Throwing herself heavily upon her knees in front of the molten rock, Brianna Cantrell hid her face in her hands seeking a quick way into a higher consciousness. She had to put all of this behind her and focus instead solely on the moment at hand. The *Test*. Brianna Cantrell sighed. There was little to be done for it. Her concentration was fractured, serenity, evasive. Her tiny hands were clammy and cold, a telltale sign of her panic. "Why do I do this?" she sighed again, raising her hands in supplication.

She should know better than to make such a foolish attempt, leaving out essential calming steps, as if shortcuts existed. She could hear T'Pran's constant admonitions, "Stop pushing, T'Bree. Let it come naturally." Brianna Cantrell ripped her hands away from her face and stared into the flame set beneath the rock, drinking deeply of the incense that engulfed her.

She slowed her breathing and began the spiral climb inward to her own place of peace, calming her mind. Tranquility rippled through her as she centered herself. She could feel her fears melt away, all of her cares drifting aloft, shrinking, disappearing altogether. At last she was floating and all was well again. Then rather impulsively, as if she were suddenly being called to do so, she shot her consciousness upwards. Higher and higher she allowed her essence to rise, lifting out of her body until she hovered over the chamber focusing on the human form in the corner, suffering a chill as she did so.

The poor little girl, she thought, gazing down at herself. *The poor, poor little human girl*. Momentarily, she lamented the rigors of a lifestyle not entirely of her choosing. Shaking herself free again of such self-absorption she continued on until she was quite beyond herself. Brianna Cantrell hovered briefly over the Temple, over the city;

somewhat hesitant at first, and then finding her courage, she soared up through the reddish strata of Vulcan to the blackness of space.

On and on she rose, exhilarated by the complete and necessary freedom of it. It was difficult having to be so controlled all the time, holding everything in, containing her emotions against her nature, keeping her mind in check and from roaming freely as it was wont to do. Streaking through space like this, the atmosphere breaking over her like water in a wave, she was able to shrug off the shackles and just let go. Just *be*. The exercise was a safety valve, of sorts, that even Vulcans employed from time to time. In the face of such strictures, it kept them sane.

This was good.

This is what she needed at this moment in order to release her frustrations. She could feel herself expanding, becoming one with God's universe, humbled by the vastness of His creation as she went. Continuing on, passed planets and stars to another part of the galaxy, she sailed further and further away than she had ever gone before ...

Until she was no longer *alone!*

Gasping, she tried to stop her forward momentum. This sort of mind-exercise was generally a solitary practice. A form of meditation, a prayer, it was a deeply personal experience she was unused and

unwilling to share. And yet, suddenly this other soul was just *there*. Looming out of nowhere, beckoning and forbidding all at once, he sent her reeling on her own shock waves. His presence was quite overwhelming.

At once she could *feel* the *colors* of him, the bright oranges, tans and blues of his aura, shifting ever so subtly with his mood. She detected a distinctly masculine orientation about him and found herself drawn, despite her reservations, by the warmth emanating from his very soul. Trembling, she could not breathe. Just how far out beyond herself had she *reached*? How much farther could she go? To quite literally bump into another entity, another being — who — or, what?

Curiosity drew her closer. Certainly, this was a created being such as herself, one of God's own. That much she could sense, though little else. He, too, was so tightly contained. Perhaps, he was also here meditating?

Brianna Cantrell felt a sudden grabbing, tickling sensation deep in the pit of her stomach. She shouldn't be here it was ... *wrong*. She let the thought dangle. Frightened, uncertain of what she should do, she tried to hold herself at bay, treading air, struggling to depart to some other plane lest she inadvertently intrude upon the other's thoughts.

She simply didn't know what to do. T'Pran had taught her always to keep her thoughts to herself, to shield them from unintentional psychic scrutiny and to never pry her way into another person's mind. Entering the thoughts of another without express permission was a heinous crime every bit as invasive as rape. Indeed, it was a form of rape, *kae'at k'lasa*, subject to strict penalties under the Law. It was of no use, however. She could not pull away, nor did he seem able to resist what could only be likened to a gravitational pull. Somehow, she had gotten too close. Her fault again, she sighed. This day was fraught with mistakes.

Immediately, both she and this other being were caught in what felt like a whirlpool, seemingly of their own creation, born not merely out of a resistance to each other but to the artificial natures thrust on them by training. Their collective thoughts and emotions, once released, had collided forming a maelstrom of sensation swirling rapidly around them. The more they struggled to get away the faster the whirlpool rushed until, quite helplessly, the two spiraled toward one another, contact inevitable. Brianna Cantrell felt a roaring, burning sensation jetting upwards from her toes and on throughout her body as closer and closer they drew to each other. He was quite close now, dangerously so.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry, she whispered.

Suddenly her ears burned and even the roots of her hair tingled. She was aflame, melting, losing herself as the colors of their separate beings mingled, blending into new shades. Wary and yet undeniably curious she felt herself acquiesce, granting permission as, for only a brief moment, their two minds became one....

5

**September 8, 2281
Stardate 8109.08
USS Exeter**

It was a duty to be performed like any other, Captain Spock decided. He found it curious, though, that the upcoming event should have him so preoccupied, more so as the appointed time drew near. In an effort to clear his thoughts, he glanced upward at the cadets manning various stations around the bridge, trying to focus on something else. Listening, he tried to fill his mind with the pings, whirrs and hums of the ship's computers, the sounds undulating across the deck in

a melodious concerto. All seemed well, down to the gentle thrum of the engines felt beneath his booted feet.

Still, the nagging sensation persisted.

Deftly, he resisted the urge to place a hand over his stomach to quell the churning within, reaching for the pen instead. Forcing his mind onto the paperwork in his lap, Spock signed the last of the documents and handed the yeoman the electronic clipboard before vacating the center seat. He then began a leisurely stroll about the circular promenade. He gave a fleeting glance over the shoulders of the cadets to check their progress before his appointment called him away.

“Steady as she goes, Mister Howard,” he said, noting the fidgety fingers of the youthful helmsman. Again he wondered about his own sudden case of nerves. He could have been speaking to himself. Perhaps, it was the area of space? He speculated, mentally ticking off a checklist to include a conference with the ship’s chief medical officer to discuss the possibilities, as he moved to the next station. Certainly it couldn’t be the exercise in which he was about to participate. That would be illogical, he mused, he wasn’t the one being tested, after all.

Again, Spock wondered how his name got onto the list of possible substitute *moderators*. Had T’Pau

just selected him at random — or did she have a purpose? Spock stopped short, his eyebrow jumping upward at the notion. He gazed across the bridge of the ship. Just what was she up to? Again, he found himself moderately nervous, though he could not perceive why. *Most unusual*, he reflected, wondering if this *Test* was indeed the source of his sudden ... discomfiture?

Continuing on his rounds, he stopped to look at the clipboard the dark haired young engineering officer handed him, meeting her eyes momentarily. He noted the sparkle of mischief there when she looked back at him. Spock gave his attention over to the report. He did so wonder why T’Pau had chosen him among countless others. Was this an attempt to play matchmaker, his private unmet needs so apparent? Disquieting as it was, it forced him to acknowledge his guilt in neglecting certain ... *unavoidable* aspects of his life. Preferring a heavy workload to addressing the obvious, he had managed to stave off the inevitable these past thirteen point two-five Earth years since his divorce from T’Pring. He did not need such help.

Signing the document, his eyes followed the graceful movement of the engineer, enjoying the curve and the slight swish of her hips as she made her way into the turbo-lift, clipboard in hand. It wasn’t until she turned to face him again, fluttering

her fingers at him in a wave goodbye, that he realized he'd been staring. Spock drew himself up and straightened his jacket. He was also becoming acutely aware of females again, more so than normal, which was problematic. Still, he had several months before it became ... critical. Spock broke away from this line of thinking, hiding from it once again.

Perhaps, his sense of disquiet was simply a rudimentary reaction to the unknown. He had never been a *moderator* before and the rules were stringent; no direct contact with the *candidate* was allowed; he was to keep his thoughts *shielded* at all times during the course of the *Test*, and to merely resort to deflection should the *candidate* be inclined to exceed the boundaries of the *Corridor*. Whatever the reason, it was disturbing to feel so off-kilter, as Jim Kirk might describe it.

Diverting his thoughts, he glanced around the bridge once again at the trainees in his charge, satisfied that with their level of competency he could leave them with their first officer for a while. The time had come. He gave the commander a nod.

“Mister Patterson, you have the conn. I shall be in my quarters until further notice.” Although it was a training mission he added, “I am not to be disturbed except in an extreme emergency.” He then turned to leave the bridge.

“Aye, sir.”

Alone in his quarters Spock sought a mind-exercise in preparation of the part he would play in the *Test*. He would be one of several buoys, cosmic ‘markers’ as it were, forming a safe metaphysical *Corridor* in space. From this auspicious and secret configuration handed down from the Ancient Times, the *moderators* would quietly observe and report later to the Elders if and when the *candidate* reached their location. They would also act as a barrier to keep the essence of the *candidate*’s spirit safe from attack, since the novice herself was likely unskilled enough to ward off the *Unseen Forces* during her unplanned journey.

Lighting several candles around his quarters Spock stopped to adjust the wick of one that hadn’t burned down right during its last use until the flame sparked and took hold. Again a wave of anticipation rolled over him. His control seemed lacking today and that gave him pause. He took a deep cleansing breath, focusing himself.

Continuing with his preparations Spock ignited a small lump of coal sprinkling a few nodules of incense over it, watching as the fragrant smoke curled upwards, filling the room with a sweet, musky vanilla fragrance. He changed out of his crimson duty jacket into one of a more native styling; black with long bell-sleeves and far less

constricting than his uniform. It was the jacket Uhura fancied and once attempted to bargain away from him. If it hadn't been for his family crest emblazoned down the front in bold white lettering, he might have considered a trade, he thought in fond remembrance, before settling his mind to the task at hand.

Suddenly it was time. Spock knelt before his personal altar in the corner near the foot of his bunk. The rock-carved *Gryphon* bore an almost angry attitude, the light gray smoke of the incense rolling out of the holes in its beak, curling over the pointed tip of its extended tongue. Spock steepled his fingers and after centering himself, projected his mind beyond the confines of the *Exeter* out into space. Streaking through the void, a sense of peace settled over him once again, wrapping him securely in a blanket of logic.

At last he felt the presence of the others. Joining the psychic nebula, he checked in briefly with his fellow *moderators* along the relay advising them he was in position. Together they began the ritualistic chant, calling to the *candidate*, ever so subtlety, enticing her outward. Then they waited and watched. Spock was uncertain if the *candidate* could even come close to his location on the outer edge of the *Corridor*, reminding himself it could be a lonely wait, making up his mind to simply take this time to

meditate.

He found himself wondering what all the commotion was about, the *Anomaly* having captured the imagination of the entire planet, or so it appeared. She was human, after all. Most illogical, he decided, doubting the veracity of the reports he had heard regarding her abilities, many of them unsubstantiated, and no doubt highly exaggerated. Spock was astonished to learn so many wished to join with her. Illogical for T'Pau to think he might desire to do the same. Or that he could find a mate in this manner, if that was what she was about. Such occurrences were rare....

Losing himself in thoughtful introspection, to his surprise the wait was over. *Feeling* the thoughts of the others as they reported her whereabouts along the circuit, all at once she was there, he could *feel* her presence, her consciousness hurtling toward him with tremendous force ... with Spock smack in the middle of her trajectory!

Fascinating, he thought, caught up in the moment, strangely unable to move. He needed to deflect her, to keep her inside the *Corridor*. That was his purpose at this instant, not to limit her rating by blocking her path. Yet, he lingered just where he was until the last possible moment, apparently not entirely in control of the situation or his own responses, to his chagrin. What was the matter with him? Scrambling aside too

late, his curiosity got the better of him and he found himself glancing off of her *mental barriers*.

Energy waves emanated from her, unleashed thoughts and emotions forming around her like a whirlpool. For a moment he spun away from her in a free fall, only to be caught up again in a riptide effect as he swirled right back into her path, drawn into her like a magnet. Undaunted, he pulled away again. This time he whirled away even faster and was caught up in the ensuing wake, nearly whipping him right into her. Over and over he attempted to disengage to no avail, each pass bringing him still closer to her until the delicate essence of her being teased him through a rift in her *shield* and he was intrigued.

Floating aimlessly, stranded in her current, he was caught in the undertow that plowed him down until he lost all sense of direction, spiraling helplessly toward her yet again. Aware now that she, too, struggled against him Spock tried to pull away ... Too late. A familiar euphoria swept over him as bright colors swirled adjacently. Forming two separate cones, they moved closer and closer to one another until they began to intertwine. At once she was all around him and within him, an incredible warmth that caressed his soul.

Spock quaked uncontrollably.

Had this been his whole purpose for lingering, to 'touch' her, to learn first-hand what the others merely supposed? The situation was both disconcerting and fascinating, contact expressly forbidden, beyond mere deflection. *Touching* her was not his place — his was to guard against just such an encounter by keeping her within the *Corridor*. Yet, her song was alluring, sweet in its call, and he found himself drifting toward her despite himself. What made her different, special, irresistible? He would know.

Spock hesitated, struggling between his inquisitiveness and his duty, his logic and his emotion. He needed to withdraw from her, he tried, but like one possessed, he felt himself giving into the impulse, unable to resist that which he knew he should.

He blamed his human half for his weakness.

Basking in the radiance of her, instantly he knew what it was about her that called to the others, to him, and he did not wish to shake her off. He *needed* ... Spock gave one last fruitless effort to resist the quite natural inclination to *join* with her, knowing he was in direct violation of the Rules, before surrendering to the moment. Deftly, he reached into her mind heeding the most basic of Vulcan urges, his need to be bonded to another tantamount.

“Who art thee? Where art thee?” she asked, a little frightened. Hesitant. She was trembling like a little bird.

“I’m here,” he said, experiencing an odd swelling of delight deep in his chest as his being enveloped hers. Drawing her inward, comforting her, he held her ever so briefly *feeling* her thoughts; so warm, so fresh, so unmarred by the Universe. She was pure in her thinking, as yet unfettered by cynicism, and he felt her quiet strength. The fire of curiosity burned deep within her despite her trepidation of the moment, marking her intelligence. And there was something more, although he was hard-pressed to define it, but suddenly, remarkably, he felt as if he had just come home. Wanting to stay, yet knowing instinctively he must release her at once, his reluctance to part from her nearly won over. At the very least he must remain anonymous. That much was certain. Nor could he allow himself to learn who she was, he knew that — although a moment longer and he would be unable to defy the urge to reveal his very soul to her. *Touching* her at all, let alone so deeply, he already worried he had nullified her *Test*. Immediately, Spock eased out of the link before he committed any further infractions.

“Wait! No, wait! Don’t go! — ”

Cut off from her, Spock gasped for air, realizing he’d been holding his breath. What just happened,

what had he done? *The unthinkable.* He closed his eyes for a moment trying to still his soul, to counter the light-headedness that engulfed him. Her last thought impressions clung to his memory like a sticky web and Spock shifted slightly on his knees. Uncomfortable, feeling her pain at the separation as if it were his own, he wasn't supposed to *mindmeld* with her! *What had he done?*

Confused, he tried to take it all in, comprehend it, to grasp at last all the ramifications of such an encounter. Instead, he found himself completely nonplussed. He was uncertain how to react. There was no logic to define what had just happened, nothing by which to guide him back to where he was a moment before.

All was changed.

Having just broken every rule of a *moderator*, he knew by the very nature of things he was in trouble. T'Pau had trusted him and he had performed to the lowest possible level. Screwed up, as Jim would put it. How or why had he allowed this to happen — habit? Had *mindmelding* so often over the years with countless entities become such an integral part of his exploration, part of his unique methodology of discovery, that he now showed little restraint? Was he so very lacking in all *Discipline*? Apparently, he had also forgotten just how rare and special such *linkings* really were and their true purpose.

It would seem so ... until now, that is.

“Fascinating ...” Spock murmured over slightly shaking, steepled hands.

He was now, of course, compelled to contact the High Councilor to report this infraction, wondering what disciplinary measures she would in turn be compelled to mete out to him. He wondered at the same time what havoc he had wrought upon the *candidate*, as well. Instantly, he regretted any harm he may have inflicted on her. Hurting her in any way was certainly something he never intended.

Yet, at the same time he was smiling like a fool, he realized, as another wave of euphoria swept over him. His renewed excitement was difficult to contain. She had *touched* him in a place no one had ever *touched* him before, their souls connecting, igniting however briefly, and he was in awe. The only other time he had felt this giddy was during his *V'Ger* experience. That, too, had been profound. He remembered laughing out loud, the way he wanted to now. Who was this delightful creature — this sweet woman, so accepting of both his halves all at once without questioning him, without judging him, filling in the gaps in his soul as if she belonged there? And why did it hurt to be separated from her? Was he still feeling *her* pain?

Or was she more of a siren, calling him to some

form of destruction? Up bounced the eyebrow. Ill-equipped to deal with it, all he knew was that he had to meet her, driven, as if by some force yet unfathomed, to be *One* with her again.

Spock drew himself up, trying to reassert his sense of logic, his thoughts refusing to be contained. His behavior was illogical — *Or was it?* Perhaps, this was T’Pau’s intention — did she see him as needing a mate? Wasn’t that for him to decide? Nonetheless, the thought of the *candidate* clung to his mind and he longed for her *touch*. What was happening?

He squeezed his eyes shut grappling for control, not in the least comprehending what had become of his strict, Vulcan composure, recognizing his response to her had been an emotional one. That thought by itself scared him just a little, but he had been *alone* for so long now, empty really, as if an integral part of himself had been missing since his divorce. And in that brief, inexplicable moment he had felt *something*, even if he couldn’t explain it. The flicker of an emotion he once felt years ago, a sense of belonging only deeper, perhaps, as if she completed him in a way he had never experienced before.

In that moment it became apparent that he had foolishly denied himself companionship for too long. While his logical side tried to grapple with it, his emotional side leapt to the forefront.

Dare he hope?

Spock remained kneeling before the molten lava rock statue drinking in the incense that billowed forth from it, settling himself, regaining a sense of calm before he bypassed the relay and projected his thoughts directly to T'Pau. He had to settle things with her. The encounter, however encouraging to him, had been a definite breech of protocol. He begged forgiveness for any infraction caused by his inadvertent contact with the *candidate* and then hesitated, vacillating over trying to gain her identity. In the next moment he *felt* T'Pau's thought impressions.

He sensed annoyance on T'Pau's part, which was never a good thing, he decided, giving up the inquiry too late, however. T'Pau, Matriarch of the *House of Talek Sen Dene*, had read her great-grandson's thought impressions only too easily before he had dismissed his folly.

“Thee asks? Wilt thee continue to mock our ways, Spock?” she scolded him. Spock, thoroughly chastised, fought to conceal his emotions, lest he be further humiliated. The remark stung. Contrary to her opinion on the matter, he was not in the habit of mocking Vulcan tradition. Nor did he recall asking anything, yet the question, *“Who is she?”* lingered on the edge of his awareness, as if it were an entity existing somewhere outside of himself.

“*Forgive me,*” he said and eased out of the *mind-link*, as well as his restive state. Then quite without his conscious thought, he stepped over to his computer console and requested the communications officer send a sub-space transmission to his parents on Vulcan. Determined to meet the woman in question, he would work things out through them, deeming it well within Vulcan propriety for him to inquire after her. He would ascertain if she was promised or not and if another man stood in line before him. In this way he reserved a chance for her to be presented to him and his offer duly considered before she was given to another. Then, if it turned out she was free, and if everyone was in agreement, he could be home in as little as two weeks to meet with her properly.

6

**In the Vulcan Year of Pey'leh,
Standard Earth Year 2281**

Mt. Seleya

T’Lar straightened in her chair, alerted. Monitoring the *Secret Test*, she felt a disturbance along the relay. Easing out of her meditative state, she picked up the hammer from the nearby table and struck a single note on the miniature gong standing in the corner. A temple maiden was quick to respond, entering the chamber. “How may I serve thee?” she asked with a respectful bow.

“Bring the *candidate* and her governess directly to

me," T'Lar said, her impassive features shrouded in the shadows of predawn. "Speak to no one in passing."

"I hear and I obey," the maiden uttered and again, with a bowing of her head, left the small chamber.

T'Lar rose from her seat, let out a breath and stood at the window gazing out. Colorful fingers of light streaked the awakening sky and somewhere in the distance a *T'ay'at'ma* glided across the barren desert expanse, silhouetted against the jagged mountain range in the distance. Another sand storm was brewing. Every time they had dealings with the human girl... . "So," she said aloud, "it has happened."

Signs abounded this morning and in the days leading up to this moment. Yet, she remained unmoved. Since the time of the *Enlightenment*, it fell to the Clerics to erect that careful balance between Logic and Vulcan Mysticism. The reading of such Signs took diligence and care. She dare not give them more sway than warranted.

Closing her eyes again, the High Priestess let her thoughts drift outward, reconnecting with the minds that formed the *Corridor*. Continuing her observations, T'Lar sensed the rumblings among the participants comprising the metaphysical chain. Others had *felt* the same commotion and were

unwisely drawing conclusions in the matter. This would not do.

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The heavy wooden door scraped against the rock flooring. Jarring her concentration, Brianna Cantrell didn't look up. She *sensed* the presence of others in the room, refusing to respond. To do so would mean breaking away from him, something she didn't want to do. *So close, so close, who art thee?*

"Come, child, it is time," T'Pran said.

In another moment she felt a hand on her shoulder. Her attention was shattered and in that nanosecond she could feel the tendrils of his mind pulling away from hers. *No!* Panicking, Brianna Cantrell cried out as the probing abruptly ceased, "Wait! No, wait. Don't go!"

She continued to *reach* for him but by the time she renewed her focus, it was too late. The tenuous *link* had been shattered and he was gone. She had lost all contact with him. She glanced about her, confused, her eyes briefly meeting those of the temple maiden. "Wh-what, who?"

The maiden at once leaned over reaching for the sides of Brianna Cantrell's face to initiate the *mindmeld*, her long straight hair falling over her shoulders with the movement.

Brianna Cantrell shrugged her off, pulling back. She began to *reach* for *him* again, but all that was left was an emptiness; a bitter, unassuaged loneliness she had never understood before, coupled with an overpowering longing to be *One* with him again. *Who are thee? Where are thee?* She pondered, knowing all too well there was no time to seek him out, to re-establish contact, nor any guarantee she could find him again if she had the time. He was gone. Hot tears stabbed at her eyes.

“Alone. So *alone*,” she whispered, straining around the lump in her throat.

“What is it, child? Where hast thee been?” T’Pran gently asked, from her position by the door. She ventured a few steps forward, but it was not her place to interfere. The acolyte T’Lar had sent would do the assessment.

Brianna Cantrell stared at the wispy remnant of incense wafting up from the lava rock. Taking in the dregs of its sweet, woody perfume, she grappled for self-control, overflowing with the memory of an encounter too intense to ignore.

“For a moment I was with ... he ...” she stammered. Words were a hopeless commodity, she decided, particularly when mixed with guilt for having so arrogantly forsaken the *Discipline*.

What had possessed her to *Wander* like that, on her

testing day, too? she lamented. Secretly, she was delighted to learn she still claimed the ability — and not just in her sleep, but it showed she still had much to learn. Was she even ready for today's test?

She glanced at T'Pran, then back at the temple maiden who stood solemnly observing. She could *feel* T'Pran's questions, knew her old nurse was scrutinizing her with a highly trained eye. It was the acolyte she had to fear, however. At once T'Lar's assistant put her fingertips to the side of Brianna Cantrell's face, this time insisting on the mind probe. "Give me thy thoughts," she said. Brianna Canrell was powerless, nodding her assent as the woman gently probed her psyche.

The *mind-link* was brief. To Brianna Cantrell's shame the encounter was still so prevalent in her thoughts she couldn't conceal it. She steeled herself against chastisement, but none came, which left her puzzled.

The woman broke off the *mindmeld* and stood up. "*Kiftiri!*" she murmured, barely able to disguise her sense of awe as she gazed at Brianna Cantrell.

"Child?" T'Pran prompted, drawing nearer to the girl. She glanced at Brianna Cantrell, then at the temple maiden and back at her charge. "Where hast thee been?"

"It is done. Follow me," the acolyte ordered,

recovering her non-emotional state, cutting off any further discussion before she left the room.

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“Come,” T’Lar said, expecting T’Pran and the child. Turning from the window, she found herself greeted by the High Councilor, T’Pau, instead. For a moment the Matriarch looked stricken, leaning more heavily on her rod than ever before. At once T’Lar gestured her superior inward. “T’Pau?”

“There has been an incident,” the High Councilor began.

“Yes ...” T’Lar nodded. “I have sent my assistant to assess the situation. It was an encounter — from all appearances.”

“Of which my great-grandson begs forgiveness.” T’Pau said. “It was unintentional.”

“So he claims. Perhaps it is *Kiftiri* — Destiny. We shall see what is truth.” T’Lar waited for her sovereign to take a seat before taking hers, receiving a short nod from T’Pau for her to do so. She eased herself into the chair thinking the High Councilor looked more aged tonight. Her long black hair, now widely streaked with white, was piled atop her head in a coil of braids, her hawkish features, pinched. Decades of rule had since bent her wraithlike form, the weight of her responsibilities suddenly dampening the fire in her dark brown eyes. They

were both beyond their years, T'Lar mused, having been girls together. She, too, felt her age.

“So,” T’Pau clipped the word, “you also *felt* his thoughts?”

“The entire *Corridor* echoed with his admission,” T’Lar said. “He did not close off his thoughts, nor narrow his transmission.”

“It is possible he was still seeking contact with the girl, however unconscious the act,” T’Pau concluded.

T’Lar nodded in agreement. “Such is the risk whenever humans are involved.”

“This is not about the girl alone. My great-grandson is himself half-human.” T’Pau got up, walking around the chair, keeping her back to the cleric. She gazed at nothing in particular. The room, still bathed in the semi-light of dawn when she came in, had gradually taken on more light. “Then there is no way to keep this a private matter?”

“Already speculation abounds.” T’Lar got up and walking over to the sideboard, poured two small cups of steaming tea. She came to stand next to her longtime friend, handing her one. “An encounter of this nature has not occurred in generations.”

“If it had been anyone else ...” T’Pau gripped her carved rod, her knuckles losing their color. “This

does not bode well for the *House of Talek Sen Dene*."

"As you stated, it was unintentional. Will you convene a hearing immediately?"

"Yes. It is necessary to clear up the matter at once. Complete the assessment. And conduct your investigation into this matter. Spare no one. Then we shall see what must be done." With that T'Pau set aside her teacup and left the room.

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"Child?" T'Pran questioned her again.

Brianna Cantrell couldn't breathe, let alone speak. The void was so intense she felt as if she had been kicked in the stomach knocking the wind right out of her lungs. How was she to go on another minute without him? How? Could somebody tell her *how*? Anger and grief occupied twin spots in her belly. She wrapped her arms tightly about her waist and rocked gently back and forth unable to utter a word, deep in thought. Tears ran down her face like an endless waterfall. She wiped at them with her hand. They would not be abated.

The maiden's words rippled through her, haunting her, teasing her in her sudden failure. 'It is done,' she'd said. What was that supposed to mean? What was done? Her test? Couldn't she see something more important had happened? She could take this

test at any other time — or had her indiscretion disqualified her? For a moment panic joined the party in her stomach but just as quickly it vanished. She didn't know and she didn't care. She just wanted *him* back. That's what mattered. Shoving aside the short fringes that covered her forehead, she leaned over and sobbed bitterly into her hands.

After only a moment, T'Pran touched her shoulder and she gazed into those familiar eyes. "Where hast thee been?" she asked. Concerned added another furrow to her brow.

"I don't know!" Brianna Cantrell seethed, in her overwhelming shame. In another breath Brianna Cantrell decided it would be better to let the matter rest without discussion. Struggling for composure, she mopped her face, blew her nose in the kerchief from her bag and drew in a ragged breath. "Nowhere, I guess," she said, "I was nowhere. You startled me, is all."

"A lie?" T'Pran said, eyeing her suspiciously, wiping the tear from the girl's delicate cheek.

"A need for privacy," Brianna Cantrell countered. Taking in a cleansing breath, she stood indicating she was ready to follow after the temple maiden to the ceremony.

"Thee must concentrate on the moment at hand," the old woman chastised, drawing herself up.

Brianna Cantrell avoided the eyes of her governess. The bell banners rang out clear and crisp, demanding attention. Brianna Cantrell hesitated. T'Pran was right, her concentration was completely shattered. Again. What did it mean, *Kiftiri* — Destiny?

Who was this soul, this entity she had ‘bumped’ into and what did he want from her? And why now? She had to go in there in a minute for the test of her life and she was a mess. First, T'Reesa and now this? How could she allow herself to be sabotaged like this, to be put off her purpose? She had worked far too hard, had trained against her nature for too much of her young life to allow her ambitions to be derailed now. She needed the validation she would receive should she be successful today. *Would he want her any other way?*

Swallowing around the congealed emotions in her throat, she decided she would sort this all out later, at a more appropriate time — should one arise. Finding it most difficult to let any thought of him go, she assured herself, that she would make time, later. Haunted by the incident, by him, she just couldn’t let him go and followed behind T'Pran just as preoccupied as the day before when she arrived. She was not at all prepared to complete her *Test*.

7

**In the Vulcan Year of Pey'leh,
Standard Earth Year 2281**

Mt. Seleya

T'Pran led the way from the room down the narrow, dark passageway to the stairs that wound ever downward. From there they exited the *Hall of Ancient Thought* to traverse the courtyard square outside. The heat was unrelenting, more so for the human than the Vulcan. Brianna Cantrell was grateful for the material of her frock, blocking out most of the sun's intense rays.

At last they reached the doors to the Inner Temple. Two men bearing large, sharp *lirpahs*, the half-moon

blades glistening in the sun, guarded the sanctuary. They stepped aside easily with the proper words from the old governess, "The *candidate* begs permission from the Holy One to enter." Brianna Cantrell in tow behind her, clearly in a restive state, stepped out of the harsh sunlight into total darkness.

Lacking the inner eyelids Vulcans possessed, it took several seconds for her sight to return. The deep, narrow hall rose to a stony, vaulted peak several meters high, lighted only by torches along the walls and the sun's rays suffused through stained glass windows lining the angled ceiling. The windows cast eerie, colorful patterns on the cobbled floor far below. Spectral, the designs were vibrant, hypnotic. Brianna Cantrell was held transfixed wondering how many people who entered this hall had become forever lost in the power of their spell.

The bell banners sang out, recalling her from her reverie, breaking the oppressive silence that permeated the Grand Hall.

No longer could she hear only the shooshing of her skirts. She became aware of the presence of people, specifically the members of the Vulcan High Council, each of the thirteen *Ruling Houses* represented, gathered in the sanctuary to witness the *mindmeld*. Until now, she had never quite realized the vastness of this hall. The room was packed to overflowing. One thousand Vulcans or more filled

every nook and cranny. No one wanted to miss this momentous event. Each row was crammed with people who dared not move lest they bump headdresses and send them toppling into the aisle.

Brianna Cantrell could feel their presence, their collective intelligence as she made her way down the center of the hall. She fought to ignore it, to keep her mind focused on what lay ahead without *broadcasting* her own thoughts. To do so cost her all the years of intense training in the Vulcan Tradition. Getting to the top of the aisle seemed to be taking forever, her ascent slow like that of a bride's. With all eyes on her, she was glad at least that her skirt stopped at the top of her booted feet so she needn't fret about tripping on her hem. At last, she reached the top of the aisle, where T'Pran left her, to join a row of maiden-acolytes as they awaited the ceremony.

There were several temple maidens to either side of the altar. Dressed in long, sheer mulit-layers of fabric, sleeveless, hinting at their lean forms underneath, they appeared almost to float as they walked about, busy attending to various duties. All of them wore the two-pronged, crystal band across their foreheads, formed in a 'V', their hair waist-length or longer flowing freely down their backs.

Brianna Cantrell drew in a deep breath, centering herself as she raised her hand in the customary, split

finger greeting. She bowed her head in respect for High Councilor T’Pau, who sat on her throne to the right of the carved stone steps that led upward to the altar. Dressed in the finery of her station, her long, flowing robes of a deep black with a mauve trim, fell in pleated furrows around her feet. Unlike the others T’Pau was sans a headdress, but carried an intricately hand-carved, black-lacquer staff, instead. Yet a handsome woman, she was formidable.

Above her, the equally wizened T’Lar stood deep in meditation, her white hair crowned with a cone-shaped hat, swathed by a mantle held in place by a two-pronged headdress of crystal, pink in hue, forming a ‘V’-shape above her forehead, just like that of the maiden-acolytes. The High Priestess wore robes of white edged in a rich red satin brocade, draping about her lean form. Hands raised in supplication, the huge rings she wore on her fingers twinkled in the ambient light, catching Brianna Cantrells’s eye as she tried to take in everything about this moment. Slowly, T’Lar lowered her arms again and Brianna Cantrell had a sense that things were about to begin.

Dropping to her knees at once, Brianna Cantrell kept her head bowed and her hands steepled as she awaited the approach of the High Priestess, T’Lar. However, things didn’t commence as expected. For a scary few seconds she was left to worry her actions

of just moments ago had disqualified her.

T’Pau got up from her throne, took a few measured steps back toward the High Priestess bowing low before her in a repentant attitude, visibly shaken for a briefly unguarded moment. T’Lar reached down and touched the side of the High Councilor’s face, *melding* with her then nodded her head for the ceremony to proceed. At once a gong resounded and the jangling of the bell-banners filled the uneasy silence. It was T’Pau who stepped forward to address her, much to Brianna Cantrell’s confusion, using her Vulcan name. It soon became apparent T’Pau would be presiding over the *Test*.

Tall and lean, the High Councilor made her way slowly over to where the petite human knelt. She raised her wrinkled hand returning the greeting, a solemn expression gracing her wizened face. “T’Bree,” she intoned, the name rolling off her tongue. “You seek what no Outworlder may achieve. You seek *IDIC* — *Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations*, the blending of two minds into one thought. Thee seeks to achieve the *mindmeld*. This is not without risk. And you are *human!*”

Brianna Cantrell flinched with T’Pau’s inflection on human. She spat the word as if in contempt of the race. Brianna Cantrell’s worse fears came to surface. She may be barred this chance to prove her abilities altogether. T’Pau may simply and quite

emphatically, from the sounds of it, throw her out of the temple. Again there was a quiet rustling throughout the lofty chamber as if that idea occurred to the observers, as well.

T’Pau was suddenly leaning close to her. She cupped Brianna Cantrell’s chin in a remarkably soft, hot hand, bending down to peer into the kneeling girl’s face. Brianna Cantrell met the aged woman’s gaze. “Dost thee seek to mock the Vulcan people, child?” she said softly, her tone cold, dangerous.

Brianna Catrell, admittedly a bit more stubborn than was good for her, returned the icy stare with piercing blue eyes that equally threatened to bore a hole into the old High Councilor. She was not, as T’Pau suggested, an *Outworlder*. She was born here, refusing to take kindly to the insult. “I seek *IDIC*,” she answered, coolly. The old woman abruptly withdrew her hand from Brianna Cantrell’s chin and stepped back.

“So be it,” she spoke crisply. “Thee seeks, also, recognition of thy Vulcan citizenship. If thee fails in thy attempt to achieve *IDIC*, know that thee also fails to achieve thy sought after recognition. Thee shalt forever be known as an *Outworlder*. Dost thee still wish to proceed in this foolish endeavor?” the High Councilor inquired again.

Brianna Cantrell found the stakes highly

unfavorable. Give up her inherent rights for a failed attempt? She wasn't merely a citizen of Vulcan, an *Outworlder* granted rights like her parents and others, she had been raised in the *Vulcan Way*, extending to her a rare privilege. Up to this moment she had been allowed in where others were banned. She closed her large eyes, bowing her head in an effort to still herself, to seal herself off from the tears that threatened to break through her practiced *shield of reserve*.

Her parents had been granted Vulcan citizenship many years ago, but without the nuance of training, they had not even been allowed to attend this ceremony. The *Vulcan Way* was shrouded in mystery from antiquity, the Vulcan people jealous to keep it that way. In many ways, Joe and Louise Cantrell were still considered *Outworlders*, despite their legal status, or even their many years of residence on this planet, and therein lay the difference.

T'Pran said she would not fail. Could she humiliate her governess further by running away from the challenge once it was given? Which was the greater humiliation, to try and fail or to not try at all? Brianna Cantrell opened her eyes, raising her head to gaze up at the woman who held her very future in her hands. She needed to fully *belong*. "I am ready to proceed," she announced in a clear, calm voice.

"Excellent," came T'Pau's reply, as if satisfied with

the girl's show of mettle. With a signal from the Priestess, T'Lar, the bell banners resounded once again. T'Pau touched her fingertips together for a moment of preparation and then sank to her knees before the girl. Brianna Cantrell drew in a breath, readying herself for the contact then she looked up, catching the old woman in her gaze.

"With thy permission," Brianna Cantrell said, as she reached forward with the fingers of her right hand, spread. The old woman nodded her consent and Brianna Cantrell brought her hand to the woman's lined face placing her thumb against her chin, her index finger against the left nostril and her middle finger at the pressure point at the woman's temple. A warmth generated at the point of contact. Brianna Cantrell *felt* the old woman's natural resistance slowly give way as she gently pressed into her mind, searching, careful not to delve more deeply than invited.

Slowly, at first, a familiar euphoria swept over them both. Brianna Cantrell was floating somewhere out beyond herself, colors swirling into gossamer funnel clouds of energy invisibly between them. She began to perceive memories that were not her own; People, places, sensations. There was so much here, two-hundred-twenty-one standard years' worth of memories plus her own, that Brianna Cantrell felt lost for a time unable to choose which strand to

follow. Strangely, she settled into a particular memory, as if T'Pau meant for her to share in it, guiding her to it, in fact.

She saw Solkar, strikingly handsome in his youth. Tall, lean with deep brown eyes that bedazzled all who gazed into them. She was aware, too, of feelings that were not her own but rather those of his young bride trembling as she drew near the marriage cup, swept up in the power of that gaze ... Brianna Cantrell *sensed* the strength of T'Pau's love for him. She shook her head slightly, afraid of being absorbed by such an unfamiliar memory and the feelings it evoked in her. She wondered why T'Pau had led her here until Brianna Cantrell's own mind momentarily flitted back to the soul *she* had 'bumped' into such a short time ago. Reminded of it suddenly, and finding herself similarly mesmerized by *him*, she forced herself to back away from it, move on, sifting through the layers for another, safer strand to follow.

Too late.

Already, T'Pau knew of her encounter. And just how profoundly affected Brianna Cantrell was by his *touch*. She was aware, too, that the High Councilor was conducting her own search, carefully picking through her mind to gain the confirmation she sought. Brianna Cantrell was at once humiliated and angered, not ready to share such a private moment with anyone, let alone the High Councilor, who was

until this moment a complete stranger. Yet, T'Pau had done nothing wrong. Brianna Cantrell had, quite inadvertently, led her there herself. She had simply been unable to resist the probing, thrown off her guard with the memories of Solkar — as if *compelled* to share a similar moment in return.

Retaliation was swift as the girl focused on a particularly vivid memory. She played with a *sehlet*, a dangerous game of tease. The huge, bear-like creature reared back, suddenly raking a powerfully sharp paw across her face ... T'Pau found the memory distressing, the child's trauma intense with fright. She backed away from the emotion, vaguely aware it was not her own, realizing the *mind-link* had been complete.

And broke it.

Brianna Cantrell lowered her hand and opened her eyes. Abruptly, T'Pau pushed back the fringe of Brianna Cantrell's headdress to examine the half-moon scar in the upper left hand corner of the girl's forehead — a lasting reminder of the formidability of *sehlets*.

A hush fell over the room as T'Pau rose to her feet and moved to the rear of the dais, her back turned to the Council, deferring to the High Priestess as she spoke in undertones. Abruptly, T'Lar turned to glance back at Brianna Cantrell, her head tilted in

contemplation, her slanted eyebrow raised nearly to the edge of her headdress. She then spoke a few words in a mutter, her hands raised above her head in supplication. Somewhere in the distance a deep gong resounded.

Brianna Cantrell felt weary to the bone, completely drained. T'Pau had largely resisted the *mindmeld*, perhaps to prove Brianna Cantrell's ability. Or perhaps, she thought suspiciously, to see her publicly humiliated by her failure. Maybe that was why T'Pau had chosen that particular memory, hoping the girl would withdraw rather than let it be known she had so shamefully broken the *Discipline*. But Brianna Cantrell hadn't backed down and well, the sky didn't fall, either. Surprisingly. *Fascinating*, she thought, at once crinkling her delicate brow at her rather curious choice of expression, knowing it wasn't quite her own....

Besides, T'Pau's motives no longer mattered, she decided, so long as they understood one another. Brianna Cantrell surreptitiously watched the aged High Councilor as the ritualistic chanting resonated throughout the temple; T'Lar chanting loudly in a commanding voice, receiving a corresponding response from the maidens, interspersed with the clang of the giant gong. T'Pau seemed equally weary, as if her age had suddenly caught up to her and at that moment Brianna Cantrell knew that she

and the High Councilor did indeed understand one another, recognizing the same stubborn persistence in the old woman during the mind-probe.

The girl resisted a smile as T’Pau turned back to her. “It is done!” she proclaimed. “T’Bree, thee hast proven thyself a Vulcan in every sense. Thee hast earned the privilege to wear the symbol of *IDIC* — with honor.” T’Pau stepped aside as T’Lar held open the *Latinum* chain. Dangling from its center was a round medallion, pierced by a triangle, a sparkling rare blue gemstone set at the tip of the triangle. Brianna Cantrell lowered her head allowing the Priestess to place it around her neck. It was surprisingly heavy, or maybe she was just acutely aware of it, resisting the urge to reach up and fondle the medallion, even so. Brianna Cantrell was never more proud than at that moment, tears once again threatening to break through her practiced *shield of reserve*.

The High Councilor then raised her hand once again in the Vulcan greeting. “Live long and prosper, T’Bree.”

“Peace and long life, T’Pau,” Brianna Cantrell murmured, bowing her head in respect for the woman’s high office.

8

**In the Vulcan Year of Pey'leh,
Standard Earth Year 2281**

Mt. Seleya

The bell banners rang out, the gong echoing loudly this time, as Brianna Cantrell was escorted up and out of the long, dark chamber after what seemed like hours. The girl could hardly contain herself as she rose up out of the temple to be blinded anew by the glare reflected off of rock.

Her senses were soaring and for the moment she forgot herself, hugging her old governess fiercely in her exultation. They had accepted her at last. She had gained their respect. She had gained T'Pau's

respect. Brianna Cantrell's unbridled emotion nearly knocked the elderly Vulcan woman off her feet. T'Pran gripped the girl's arms with hot hands and freed herself from such a vulgar display, chastising her sharply. Tears streaked Brianna Cantrell's delicate face.

T'Pran sucked her teeth, gathering the droplets of water with a loving hand, shaking her gray-white head. "Will thee not learn? Come, child. Thy parents await thee at home."

A few minutes later Brianna Cantrell was changed out of her temple frock into a simple hooded off-white robe. They left through a side gate out to the desert beyond, waiting in the shade of the Temple. Brianna Cantrell's mind wandered off, ruminating over the events of the past hour and all of her conflicting emotions that went with it. At last, she relived her encounter with whomever it was, vaguely troubled by it, as was T'Pau, or so it seemed.

She was engrossed in her thoughts until a shimmering hover-car appeared out of the heat waves and suddenly, she was filled with trepidation. *Don't let it be Daddy driving.* He had said he would pick her up and would most likely spend the entire trip home quizzing her on all that had happened. She wasn't exactly ready to face those questions at the moment, with good reason.

The whine of hydraulics met their ears, waves of refrigerated air buffeting them as the top of the candy apple red hover-car lifted to allow their admittance. To Brianna Cantrell's intense relief, it was Aaron at the wheel, her eldest brother smiling, giving her a short nod while T'Pran proceeded to hand Brianna into the rear seat of the car. The elderly Vulcan woman leaned in, and out of habit, locked the safety belt around the girl. Instead of getting in she cupped the girl's chin in her hand. "I can teach thee no more, *Brianna-Kam*. Thy *destiny* awaits thee now," she said affectionately.

Brianna Cantrell was suddenly fighting a chill that ran directly up her spine. She stared meaningfully at her old governess receiving a nod. "*Him?*"

"Him, Bree?" Aaron spoke, suddenly. "Him, who?"

"You know who he is?" Brianna Cantrell said, leaning forward.

"I know only that he is a *moderator*. It is *Kiftiri*," T'Pran said. "Thy destiny."

"But that's a thing of legends. Of children's stories. It isn't real. It's ... fantasy. T'Pran — "

"At the center of every legend there is an element of truth. One cannot fight it when two souls are meant to be together. United. These things happen, although it is so rare it becomes a thing of myth. Not to be believed."

“But — ”

“Go in peace, child.”

“May thee live long and prosper,” Brianna Cantrell said, gazing deeply into the old gray eyes of her nurse, her own blue eyes turning to liquid. Her throat swelled again with emotion as she struggled for control. T’Pran stepped back out of the vehicle then raised her hand in the Vulcan greeting before turning to be assisted back through the Temple gate by a pair of maiden-acolytes. Raising herself in the seat, half leaning out of the vehicle, Brianna Cantrell felt panic welling up inside of her. T’Pran was leaving her? How could she do that now, at a time like this?

“T’Pran! T’Pran, wait! I don’t understand ...”

“It is in the alignment of the planets. *T’Khut* and *T’Kirin* passing us in their closest, most synchronous orbit. That is the time of *Kiftiri*. When the need for two souls to be together defies all convention. Rest assured, though we part company I shall not abandon thee. I shalt seek to arrange thy betrothal,” T’Pran said, turning her attention back to Brianna.

“Betrothal!” Aaron fairly squeaked. “Oh, no you don’t! Who is this guy, Bree? When and where did you meet someone to suddenly be talking betrothal? You know what Dad has to say about that. You’re just a kid!”

“I’m seven Vulcan years. It’s common to get

betrothed at this age.”

“You’re not Vulcan. You’re not even eighteen standard *Earth* years. T’Pran, you’ve been warned before. No matchmaking!”

“Young Master Aaron, do not meddle in affairs you do not comprehend. This match was made by a much Higher Source,” T’Pran said, pointing skyward.

“Bree, get back in the car,” her eldest brother quietly warned.

“Aaron, no. T’Pran,” Brianna Cantrell muttered, dropping resolutely into the back seat once more, vainly heeding her brother’s advice.

“Who is this guy?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to talk about it!” Brianna Cantrell felt completely out of control today, to her shame. With all this talk of destiny and betrothal, on top of T’Pran suddenly leaving she felt completely overwhelmed, stunned. “I can’t believe she’s staying. She’s leaving me,” Brianna Cantrell murmured, gazing at her hands folded in her lap.

“She made her decision last week.”

“But why? And why wasn’t I told?”

“Because we’re going home to Earth and you already had enough to think about with this Vulcan

test-thing, okay? And anyway, one way or another you'll be going away to college," Aaron said. "I don't know of any dormitory that permits a governess to room with her charge." He gazed at his little sister through the rearview mirror. She was staring out the side window at the Temple towering above them, seemingly impassive. After a moment she returned his gaze, catching his blue eyes in the mirror.

"I could just as easily study at the Vulcan Science Academy," she began, her mind racing. "She's been everything to me," Brianna Cantrell murmured.

"We're going *home*, Bree." Aaron started the engine of the luxury hovercraft, glancing back at his sister again.

"I am home," she stated flatly.

"Yeah. And I suppose somewhere on this hot rock there's bound to be an important archaeological find," Aaron agreed. "But ever since you were eight years old, all you've talked about is playing in the cosmos. Studying ancient ruins and old bones and stuff. And now when it comes right down to it, you're ready to give it away. Out of misplaced loyalty, no less. Who is he, Bree and how long have you been seeing him on the sly like this? You know Dad is going to kill you."

"I haven't been seeing anyone. I just sort of met

him today. I don't even know who he is. We *mindmelded* during my Test. I just know I can't leave now. He'll be here. We have to meet ... ”

“You miserable coward. Here. It came today,” he said as he leaned forward momentarily rifling through a small storage compartment on the dash of the vehicle.

“What came today?”

“What came today? *It*,” her brother mocked, sounding exasperated. “What you've been racing to the mail terminal for every day these past few weeks.” Aaron tossed a small, plastic rectangle back to her.

“I've been accepted?” She caught the blue diskette easily, popping it into the terminal in the back seat. The Starfleet emblem filled the tiny screen. She eagerly scrolled through the data. “No, this is impossible. I can't leave now ... ”

“Congratulations class of '85. Do you see who sponsored you?”

“T'Pran?”

“It would appear your nanny has some very high ranking connections. You've been officially kicked out of the nest.” Aaron waited for the reality to sink in. “Go ahead and cry if you feel like it. She isn't watching you. Or would you rather drive?” he

tempted her. Brianna Cantrell considered his offer for a moment then nodded.

“I’ll drive.” The two exchanged seats and in a moment Aaron was decidedly sorry he had offered her the wheel. Brianna Cantrell popped the car into gear and tore out across the expanse of desert terrain kicking up whirlwinds of dust into great billowing clouds as they whizzed by. It was a harrowing flight as she cut thinly around boulders and crags sticking upright out of the ground, nearly scrapping some in passing in an effort to prove, he didn’t know what.

“Stop at the edge of the desert! You don’t even have a license!” the young man pleaded, gripping the back of her seat until his knuckles had turned white. She stopped the vehicle abruptly and popped the hatch. Aaron haltingly stepped out into the searing heat, soaked with perspiration. She had scared him half to death. Brianna Cantrell looked up at him innocently, following the trickle of sweat as it made its way from his forehead down the end of his narrow nose to his strong chin. He was a rather tall young man, towering over the top of the car.

“Out of there!” he ordered, less than pleased with the record-breaking speed with which they had arrived. “You’re crazy. You know that? You have no fear!” he chastised.

“Oh, don’t I?” Brianna Cantrell shrugged,

clambering out of the driver's seat. "Is that your professional opinion? Because a moment ago I was a miserable coward. And I was wondering if your assessment of me has changed, in the last five minutes or so. 'Cause otherwise I'm exhibiting truly psychotic tendencies. In which case you'd be correct. I am crazy."

"Enough! Enough already. I'm not dancing the logical two-step with you," Aaron was ranting now. Brianna Cantrell gazed up at her eldest brother, studying his handsome face, holding his eyes. She was reading him. And quite easily, too.

"You're going to miss this place, aren't you?" she said gently. Aaron glanced away from her, uncomfortable, feeling naked. He hung his head, letting the tears fall freely.

"I'm going to miss you," he said, gathering the tiny woman into his arms.

9

**In the Vulcan Year of Pey'leh,
Standard Earth Year 2281
Mt. Seleya**

The Vulcan High Council had cloistered themselves away in their private session chamber. Every one of the thirteen *Ruling Houses* was represented, gathered in twos and threes around the ancient ornately carved rock table. From her seat at the apex of this v-shaped slab, T'Pau's slight grin escaped most of the Council members as she gazed about her, watching them as they talked, noting the alliances in their various groupings. Lately, it seemed she had lost their fealty, many

skipping such sessions. Yet, curiously enough, once the call of malfeasance went up against a *Ruling House*, a family member from her own *House* specifically, not one of the High Council dared miss this momentous event.

These deliberations were deemed historic, some were overheard to utter, the weight of the consequences apparently far too heavy. On the one side, the human girl had tested quite high, making her an attractive mate for any number of Vulcan's eligible sons. They argued that her marriage arrangement would require great care and deliberation which, when translated, meant none wished to be ruled out of the running so very easily as it now appeared they might. Some worried, too, that although she had passed the *Test*, which bore witness to her control over said *Gifts*, she was human and that left the level of her restraint unpredictable. Some remained wary. On the other side, *Kiftiri* was such a mystical occurrence, how could they ever be sure that alone had prompted the *mindmeld*?

All this chatter left T'Pau wondering, what significance did the encounter hold? Nothing of this nature had occurred in a millennium, true enough, and it was logical to seek direction in the interpretation of such an event. Yet, she sensed there was something more to it, a turning point in Vulcan's

history, perhaps. That thought was discomfiting.

Vulcan mysticism being what it was, layered in traditions older than their more current philosophical disciplines of the last two millennia, it could not be ignored despite her knowledge that this signified more trouble for herself, politically. If she didn't handle this correctly ... The aged woman drew in a quiet sigh. Perhaps it was time for her to start thinking of stepping down, for the good of Vulcan, for the good of her *House*. There were others now ready and capable of holding the *Ruling Houses* together, able to lead the Senate for the good of their planet, she thought, spying Sarek out of the corner of her dark brown eyes. She was old. And Vulcan did not need this haggling amongst her *Houses*!

T'Pau gazed around the table again, each seat now filled, and nodded at the guards. Slowly the two brawny Vulcans drew the huge doors shut, standing guard on the other side, lirpahs at the ready, should passage be challenged. There was yet some illogical comfort knowing they were there and she was hard-pressed to discover just what gave her cause for concern. Setting it aside with a quick mental trick, she moved onto the issue at hand, that of exploding the myth of malfeasance surrounding her great-grandson's actions in the *Corridor* during the *Test*, and getting onto what should be the order before them, that of designating the metaphysical encounter

kiftiri, and the drafting of the marriage decree, should all parties be willing. She did not foresee the depth of their arguments, to her own detriment.

Tapping her lacquered staff upon the cobbled floor, the stones as multicolored and as varied as Vulcan's deserts, the rat-a-tat resounded drawing all members to attention. When all was still, she spoke.

"From the *Time of the Beginning*, it has been the task of the High Council to decipher the nature of such occurrences, particularly when it affects the status of the Noble *Houses*, of which this body is comprised. Our task is to assign meaning to this event and to decide what now must be done. In times past, the *k'Matra* was not merely for assessment, and still today it can often be said some find a suitable mate at the posting of these results. Rarer still, are those who art drawn together by means other than their own. This is what we are to decide. For a *moderator* has *touched* the mind of a *candidate* within the *Corridor*, whether by fate — or design."

At her words a murmuring broke out around the table, "*Kiftiri*," uttered on more than a few lips. Again, T'Pau smiled grimly and called them to order with the gentle striking of her staff on the floor.

"We will hear testimony from those witnesses as were present," she said. "Bring forth High Priestess,

T'Lar." The large doors swung open with the clanging of a gong and in strode the elderly scribe, dressed in the simple off-white robes of her office this time, bearing a large, thick book under one arm. Taking her place in the well of the room, she placed the tome on the lectern before her, and faced the Council, gazing at each with an assessing eye. She then gave T'Pau the traditional split-finger greeting along with a nod of her head. T'Pau responded in kind.

"I ask of thee, T'Lar, thy testimony regarding the events of last T'ah."

"On the forty-seventh day of Mir'oy, in the year of Pey'leh," T'Lar began in a husky voice. "An extraordinary session of the time-honored *k'Matra* was held. The people were called and the clergy assembled in order to assess and evaluate the mental powers of she, who is known as the *Anomaly*. Those of us intimately involved in the ceremony were aware things might not proceed in the usual fashion, since a human was included. And indeed, something out of the ordinary did occur, but not that which could be foreseen.

"*Kiftiri*, High Councilor," T'Lar continued. "Is the phenomenon which drives two souls together, their need to be *One*, defying all convention. Metaphysical in nature, it is not easily defined by Logic, nor measured by science, as we know it.

Rather, it is divinely directed as stated in Scripture."

T'Lar carefully parted the linen pages of the ancient book, yellowed and frayed at the edges, to a predetermined section, from which to read. Placing her hand on the open book, she closed her eyes and recited the passage:

"And it came to pass in the days of his youth a great stirring fell upon him, and Miroch climbed mount Gol and therein he sat in contemplation, sending his thoughts out upon the desert. Wast there no one with whom he could share his soul? Now Miroch was a faithful servant and had labored hard and the All wast pleased with him and decreed it was not good for a Vulcan to be alone. And out of the air the All caused a whirlpool, lifting up the minds of each handmaiden who sat in obedient meditation, sifting through their souls until Miroch shouldest find his mate. And so it was that T'Ril wast drawn to him and Miroch to her, and neither could break away, swept up into a maelstrom as the essence of their beings swirled toward the other, blending and becoming One. Miroch joined with T'Ril and the All saw that it was good and wast pleased."

Rustling occurred around the room as various councilors shifted in their seats. T'Lar closed the book carefully, allowing for a moment of silent reverence for the Holy Words before she went on.

“Though it is a rare occurrence,” she said at last. “It is not without precedence. Numerous instances have been recorded over time in the Great Book of Ages. Sirit and T’Lia of the *House of Kooli Ton Lok*, Tinok and Lita of *Venri Pol Lei*, Suval and T’Mer of *Talek Sen Dene*, to name only a few. This is not a thing easily ignored, for art we to mock the doings of the *All?*” T’Lar gazed at the faces of the men and women of the High Council, eyeing them carefully, sizing them up.

“Just as it was stated in Scripture,” she said. “I believe it was beyond both *moderator* and *candidate* to control the circumstances surrounding their encounter. I have heard both accountings and on their behalf I can tell you, a struggle to keep to themselves did ensue. Both attest to what can be described as a gravitational pull, their ultimate joining, the inevitable outcome of such proximity. As such, there was no conscious intention to violate the Rules of the *Test*.”

“You say, neither had ill intent. Yet it is true, T’Lar, many had already voiced their interest in the *Anomaly*,” came the deep voice of Lord Savin, drawing T’Pau’s attention to his seat at the far end and to her right. From the *House of Rikni Tol Sare*, Savin bore the dark, swarthy look of his people with hooded eyes that bespoke the harshness of the eastern region. He was yet handsome, strong and

tall, despite the number of seasons he had witnessed. T'Pau had almost married him, and would have, had she not learned just in time of Solkar's intentions, preventing her from serving Savin tea on the day that would have proclaimed their courtship. Savin was fair-minded, and bade her no ill-will in the matter. Indeed, he married T'Mit instead, a fair maiden who gave him seven sons to strengthen his *House*. T'Pau had always wondered, however, if a time would come when it was logical that her slight should be returned in some manner. She gave his words heed as he spoke.

"Who is to say subterfuge was not at play, here?" Savin continued. "That a way to cut through the endless suitors had not been found when fate should befall him, making him a *moderator* at such an opportune time. No, I say the *moderator* took this opportunity to secure the future of his ailing *House*. Look how long he has resisted taking a mate. Why does he now choose the one whose list of suitors runs so long? This was by design, I agree, but not necessarily divine."

T'Pau serenely listened to the argument, nodding at T'Lar when Savin had finished. "Art there any more questions to be put forth to the High Priestess?" Silence filled the room. T'Pau dismissed the cleric. "Call forth the Temple Maiden, T'Ria," bade the High Councilor.

T'Lar stepped away from the podium taking her place in the gallery. Once again, the long doors swung wide emitting entrance to the tall, lissome temple maiden.

“T’Ria, did you have occasion to *touch* the thoughts of the *Anomaly*?” T’Pau asked, once the young temple maiden had taken her place in the well.

“Yes, High Councilor.” T’Ria said. “I was bid by the High Priestess to summon forth the *Anomaly*. Upon reaching her chambers, I found her deep in meditation and when she was roused it was as if she had disengaged from a *mind-link*. I found it necessary to examine her thoughts.”

“And what did you discover during the *mindmeld*?” T’Pau asked, catching a glimpse of several as they took a renewed interest with the question.

“The memory of another’s presence was so clearly manifested in her mind. And she was in such pain at his absence, as if they had been *One* — always. Yet their *link* was fragile in its newness, not long in its existence. As to defy all logic. By all reckoning, the signs are there. If this encounter is not the divine will of the *All*, I am unable to define it.” T’Ria concluded.

“I would like to ask,” The young Lord Senjil

began. "Was the *moderator* in question carefully screened, as were the others? Do we know beyond all doubt he had made no prior acquaintance with the *candidate*?"

"The *moderator* has been in space for several years," Sarek offered from the gallery.

"He was screened as thoroughly as all the others, and then some," T'Lar said, stepping back into the well.

For hours upon hours they debated, long into the night, until days had past and still nothing had been resolved. First the term *kiftiri* was discussed, then whether or not such a thing truly existed, graduating into the *moderator's* possible deception in the matter, the discussion coming back around to the nature of *kiftiri* once more. T'Pau let out a quiet sigh. They broke to neither eat nor sleep, taking testimony from each new witness to no avail. And still the question lay before them, in T'Lar's own words, an echo from days earlier: Who were they, the Council must ask themselves, besides arrogant savages, to deny this union out of hand?

"It is *Kiftiri*," T'Lar stated clearly, unperturbed by the incessant circle of arguments that prevailed over this session. "It is not for us to judge what the *All* has decreed. Do we put ourselves above the Creator? Was it not the Creator who gave us Logic?"

“I do not purport we abandon our religious tenants for mere ideological disciplines. Neither should we negate that which keeps us civil,” Lord Sotak shot back.

“Logic,” began old Lord Sobel, his tired form slumped in a heap upon the table unable to hold itself upright any longer. His breathing was labored, his words difficult to comprehend. “But others have waited a lifetime for the *Anomaly* to come of age. Should they be barred in their pursuits? I think not, High Councilor. I ... think ... not.” He then fell silent.

“I believe what Lord Sobel would tell us, but for his labored breath,” Senjil stated, rising from his chair to place his hands on the old man’s shoulders. “Is that the *moderator* in question overstepped his bounds. By being the first to *meld* with her, he has usurped the intentions of those left waiting. He has in effect, spoilt her toward another’s *touch*. Regardless if she would have any of them.”

“You are mistaken, my young Lord Senjil,” came the measured voice of Sarek. “The *moderator* in question had no intention of usurping anyone. What happened was beyond all reckoning. None are to blame in this. But if you deem her spoilt, damaged goods, then there is a logical resolution before us. Declare it by what it is, *Kiftiri*, and let the match take place, or not according to the parties involved,” he reasoned.

Lord Sobel waved his hand. "I've stated this before ... her mental acuity," he gulped for air. "requires handling. It is our duty to see that ... she is ... properly mated. Care must be taken ... in selecting... said spouse, however. He must be thoroughly vetted if we are to ... obviate any such threat of her powers."

With that a hearty din broke out, voices uncommonly raised and T'Pau was forced to pound the stone flooring with her staff to bring order. *This is the Vulcan heart, this is the Vulcan soul ...* she reminded herself.

More viewpoints were sought and still the debate rose, growing, taking on a life of its own as others, scorned in their desire to pursue the *Anomaly*, poured in to testify. T'Pau, her *House* at the very core of the disturbance yet again, kept her silence choosing to preside over the meeting as High Councilor only, Sarek representing their family's interests with his usual flair, in her stead. She hoped it was enough.

The ancient woman cast a glance at T'Lar. It was always so much easier to deal with these things when said prospective mates were children. As adults, the rules were quite naturally different and entangled when too many parties interfered. Even when all involved maintained their sense of Logic, the process usually became complicated, as she was now witnessing. She gazed at the row of young

males for evidence of heat, the *Plak tow*, gratified none displayed any telltale signs that accompanied the strains of *Pon farr*. She wondered again if indeed her own great-grandson was near his *Season*, driven at all costs to join with this little human girl by biology and not so much this mythical force, as T'Lar suggested. She came away without satisfaction, however, her decision none the easier to make.

Shifting nearly imperceptibly in her seat, T'Pau felt every bit her two hundred-twenty-one years, as long shadows cast spectral images flickering against the walls from candles that grew dim. Another day was passing. This had to come to an end, she concluded. Vulcan could ill afford the haggling of her *Houses* in light of recent events. Emerging once more was the disturbing mysterious rumbling for a change of regime based on reckless accusations of malfeasance and the illegal use of *mind powers* against those within her own *House*. Her mind flitted to earlier events with Sybok, Sarek's eldest son, at the center of the trouble spewing forth his heresy and ultimately exiled for his wrongful ways, thirty-two years hence. And now Sarek's youngest son was accused before the High Council. When, in fact, Spock had done nothing wrong.

To show there was no ill-intent, her great-grandson would have to assume the role of husband, she had

just about decided, as had a majority of others it now appeared. Somewhere amidst this unseemly fracas the tide of opinion had shifted, to her relief, when in strode the *First Son* from the Noble Clan of *Kooli Ton Lok*. Sarkal, a noted attorney, was the son of the ailing Lord Sobel, who sat three seats down on T'Pau's left. Tall against the shadows, Sarkal stood at the open end of the slab, center stage, to address the High Council. And in those shadows the High Councilor could just make out the features of his cousin, Strone, always at Sarkal's side, it seemed. She found it disturbing.

Sarkal's narrow eyes surveyed every one of them as he slowly took in their faces, as if he would remember each and every detail of this moment. "I come to you tonight, not merely to represent myself and the other would-be suitors of the *Anomaly*," Sarkal began in an even voice. "But also to represent said *candidate's* family. I am hereby charged to convey this message to the High Council," he said, holding up a tiny, gray cube, placing it on the podium before the council. "It is a recording from the *Anomaly's* father. His voice, as you will realize, has been disguised for purposes of security. But it has been verified to be the *Anomaly's* own father, as my voice pattern expert shall testify." With a nod from T'Pau, Sarkal activated the audiotape.

They listened to the impassioned voice of a father

in pain, desperately trying to protect his child. His anger was tangible, wafting in the air about them as if he stood in the center well before them. His outrage was apparent that such a thing should happen over his initial misgivings regarding the test from the onset, and all the assurances he'd been given that no harm would befall his daughter. He also alluded to his sense of betrayal that a *mindmeld* had even occurred, despite those assurances. Upon hearing such biting commentary, some stirred restlessly in their seats. His last statement hung in the air, without response. They had no words to assuage the situation. His opinion could not be countered.

“We are human — ” boomed the deep voice from the small recording device. “Creatures of feelings — and my daughter is hardly more than a baby. I want her to have a chance to grow up, unfettered from some marriage contract — foisted upon her by some group of dispassionate arbiters lacking in all compulsion to ever look back at the havoc their decisions may have wrought! She needs to be free to fall in love with someone when she’s old enough to know what love is. Don’t do this to her. Don’t trap her in a loveless marriage. And don’t suggest she has the right to *Challenge* because I know my daughter. And that simply isn’t an option. She could never condemn someone to death.”

For a few seconds silence clung to the hall. Then Sarkal took up the argument, citing law, verse and line, supporting his position. He spoke at length, never once wavering from his point, despite the outward absurdity of his accusations. "We must take action here, good Council. We must uphold the Laws of Surak. *Mind-powers* must not be used for personal gain. The *moderator* in question has violated said Law. He called the *candidate* specifically to himself and then entered her thoughts, unbidden."

T'Lar rose from her seat in the gallery. "Not — unbidden," she countered, gaining the required nod from T'Pau to speak further. "Permission was sought and granted. We are not speaking today of mind-rape, Sarkal. Merely a violation of the *Test* rules."

"Nonetheless, he did *touch* her, didn't he?" Sarkal said coolly.

His words resonated and T'Pau saw the disturbing change in disposition around the table, a little political shifting of the wind. Were the various factions merely looking for a logical excuse to trounce her family? The thought was disturbing.

"I agree she should be well-suited but there are others to be considered," Sarkal continued, " — when, as a human, she reaches her full maturity."

Lord Savin stood up, hands clasped in front of him.

He held Sarkal's gaze for a long moment and then closed his eyes briefly before he began to speak. "It grieves me to see the noble clan of *Talek Sen Dene* from the great *House of Surak* troubled so acutely by its heirs. All of Vulcan suffers from it, our children too keenly influenced by *Outworlders*. We must take a stand. We must set an example."

"Yes," came T'Pau's reluctant acceptance. "And what saith the Council?"

Reaching out to either side T'Pau grasped the hands of the councilors seated there. Each in turn took the hands of those next to them until all were connected in a moment of silent communion. There would be no outward discussion, no one in the gallery would be aware of how the vote would go or who had proposed what. Instead, the High Council would present a united front in the matter. At last, it was done. They broke hands and T'Pau opened her eyes.

Three days had passed and T'Pau, defeated in her aim to shelter her great-grandson, her own scheme to have him wed gone amiss, listened as the Council rendered its verdict. Impossible, she thought, how the simple act of *touching* someone could be misconstrued into something so sinister in nature. *Kiftiri* it was, or so they had ruled, but Spock was found guilty of misusing his *mind-powers* nonetheless. He had voluntarily *reached* into the

Anomaly's mind and *touched* her thoughts, binding her to him, or at least usurping the intentions of the others. He would be censured for the misdeed, and barred from pursuing her or from gaining her identity — neither was he to disclose his own identity to her.

“And if indeed it is *kiftiri*, the destiny of these two souls to be together,” Sarek said, offering up his final argument, a warning born out of his defeat. “What becomes of them if we deny their union, as you now prescribe, High Councilor? What is to keep them from seeking the other out, endlessly, despite the censure? Are they to know no peace, then?” Sarek said, his eyes bearing a haunted quality, the others in the room chilled by the gravity of his words. With that, he gave the Council a curt nod and in his usual flourish, the esteemed Ambassador turned and strode from the council chamber, his long flowing sleeves fluttering in the breeze of his hurried gait.

This was a travesty, to be sure, the High Councilor silently opined, bringing her arm down slowly, letting the heavy round stone she held drop against the slab in a controlled fall. It resonated long into the deep recesses of the chamber replacing the silence of the room. “So, it is decreed,” she said.

It was done.

APRIL L. PAYNE

And once again Spock was denied a bride.

10

**In the Vulcan Year of Pey'leh
Standard Earth year 2281
Mt. Seleya**

Several pathways led from the Temple steps, multicolored smooth stones mined from the mountain itself, creating an intricate geometric design as seen from the sky. Each path circled around, ultimately joining the main path down the sides of the mountain. Sarkal chose the most direct route anxious to take the news of his victory to the Cantrell family. Deep into his thoughts, he hadn't expected to meet up with anyone at this time. He fought to keep from startling when

Strone's voice came from behind, in the shadows of the Temple building itself.

"Sarkal."

Sarkal pulled the hood of his cloak firmly over his head and walked straight ahead, ignoring the petition. Strone slipped into a steady gait next to his cousin, the two walking silently in stride. Halfway down the path from the Temple they exchanged words. "Did it go well?" Strone asked at last.

"We won," Sarkal said, struggling to keep the mirth from his features.

"Just see that you make every advantage of it, young Sarkal." From the side path a large dark figure emerged. The cousins stopped. "I did my part," the dark one continued, "see to it that you do yours."

Sarkal's gaze was steady, cursing the need of this one's assistance. "Make the contact and bother me no further." Turning, Sarkal felt himself jerked backward, forcing him to face this most uneasy ally. Glancing down at the large hand grasping his upper arm and then back into black eyes, he shrugged off the grip and made his way down the sloping path again.

11

September 29, 2281
Starfleet Academy
San Francisco, Earth

He had, indeed, been alone for much too long, or so it became apparent. But in the face of his missteps, should he have asked his parents to put him on the list of suitors? It was an impulsive act, he admitted, one he already regretted sitting here waiting for word and sweating like a bridegroom, as if a consort could possibly have been selected this quickly — as if approval to meet *her* would be granted, he corrected. That was what he was waiting for, not just any bride.

It had only been three weeks since the *Test* and his unseemly encounter. The training cruise had been successfully completed and he was back in port at his base quarters enjoying a short leave in between graduating classes. There was still enough time for him to comfortably travel home — at least for a long weekend. He had accrued plenty of leave time on the books. A brief meeting would perhaps be enough. For the time being.

Spock was instantly gratified that his mission as a training instructor at the Academy and his recent promotion to the rank of captain would lend itself to some flexibility, allowing room for an active courtship. Meeting the woman was only the first step, although to that end, things seemed inordinately slow, complicated, leaving him to ponder the feasibility of the whole thing.

At last his deep space connection came through. Were he human, he would have given a shout. Spock remained sedate in his chair, however. Dubious on the one side, he fought the illogical sense of hope that swelled in his breast when his mother's handsome face coalesced on the small *compti* screen.

So much depended on whether they even liked each other, should the interest prove mutual, he could hardly plan beyond it. In fact, he may be so far back in the line of suitors, a mere introduction was moot.

That was probably it, what his mother was finding so difficult to tell him. Yet, he remained undaunted. Instead, intrigued by his little mystery woman, he made the decision — should they be allowed to further their budding relationship, that is — not to neglect this one as he had T'Pring. His father had chosen her for him according to Vulcan custom, but the two never really got on. Spock ran away to space and later by his own inattention, allowed another man to slip into his betrothed's thoughts, stealing her affections away.

Being one to learn from his mistakes, he would carefully attend this new *bondlink*. After all, this woman was special, he had sensed that the moment they *touched*.

To that end, Spock had unconsciously taken measures to keep himself uppermost in the *candidate's* mind. Unable to regain his shattered peace from the moment they broke contact, he had sought her out in his slumber, traveling down that residual psychic *link* into her very dreams several times already, since the original incident. Indeed, he *felt* the remnants of her *touch* even now having *wandered* into her sleep again last night. He didn't know what it was about her. He just couldn't seem to stay away. And *she*, too, always seemed glad that he had come.

Spock shifted slightly in his chair, again studying

his mother's visage trying to read her. His initial excitement when the call came through dissipated. Now, he was barely able to breathe, the news the Lady Amanda bore unbelievably distressing to her son. He clasped his hands together, index fingers extended and touching as he drew them to his face in contemplation.

"Two things," his mother was saying. "She's young."

"How young?" Spock asked. "She must be seven to sit the *k'Matra*."

"She's a little more than seventeen and a half standard Earth years. Seven point three-nine, I believe. In Vulcan years."

"Not so young that we shouldn't at least meet. What we experienced was extraordinary. I fail to understand the harm here," Spock said. "I am merely asking to meet her. Anything else can wait."

"It's not as easy as that, I'm afraid."

"The other obstacle?" The depth of that line of suitors, no doubt.

His mother visibly sighed. "She's human," Amanda said, quietly.

"I see." Spock nodded resolutely. "I am a fool to believe my life will ever be my own. That my choices will ever be deemed sufficient. Tell me,

Mother, if I were still the second son would that fact make any difference?" Spock assumed at once that his social position had everything to do with it. He was *First Son* of the *Ruling House of Talek Sen Dene*. It just never occurred to him before that fact would stand in his way.

His father, the *Elder Son* of the *House* had married a human. Of course, his first marriage to a Vulcan princess had produced a true *First Son*; the one who had ruthlessly jammed the crown onto the head of his younger half-brother before he fled in disgrace. He had left Spock with all the pressures, family responsibilities and trappings of their Nobility. Trappings that were beginning to pinch, Spock decided, shifting uncomfortably in his seat again.

So this was to be his legacy ... it was all he could do to conceal his anger. Amanda gazed at her son with kind eyes that bespoke her understanding. His path had never been easy. At last he spoke.

"I tried to follow the Traditional course. With a woman I never found entirely acceptable, nor agreeable. Now in a manner I cannot explain I have found my soul-mate. I have *touched* her and felt my future. There was *something* there, Mother. Even in that fleeting moment. You may tell my father if I am denied this woman, it is highly unlikely I shall ever wed. I am not threatening. I am merely pointing out that the odds are increasingly against it. The

possibilities dwindling.”

“Spock, it’s not about the *House of Talek Sen Dene*. We haven’t even gotten that far. It’s about the feelings of a father.”

“Mother, my father is Vulcan. He does not subscribe ...”

“Hers, not yours,” Amanda said. “You *touched* a human girl and her human father is furious! You would have had an easier time of it, I’m afraid, had you been caught on the couch groping his teenaged daughter. That he understands. But you *mindmelded* with her. And in some real sense, I suppose, he perceives that as the greater threat. Because through the *mindmeld*, she really does become yours.”

Spock tilted his head to the side. “Are all human fathers typically this jealous?”

“Some. And some human mothers, too,” she confessed, the hint of a grin playing on the corners of her mouth. “There have been one or two women you’ve brought around over the years I haven’t felt were good enough for you.”

“Indeed?”

“Indeed,” she said, allowing the smile.

“Where do we go from here?”

“We don’t. Her father forbids any pursuit of the

matter. He wants her to grow up and fall in love with someone when she's old enough to know what love is. He won't release her name. We don't even know who the father is. He spoke to the Council through an electronic disguise."

"She is the *Anomaly*. No other human has sat the *Test*," Spock reasoned, leaning back in his chair.

"Yes, of course. But her true identity has been carefully preserved all these years by order of the High Priestess, T'Lar. Even High Councilor T'Pau who presided over the *Test* is bound by Oath not to reveal who she is. Try to understand, dear. It has always been for her protection."

"I see," Spock said, quietly. He drew in his lower lip in a manner his mother would recognize as a sign of distress.

"I'm so sorry, son." Amanda shook her head, looking vexed, her aged blue eyes sympathetic. "This whole thing has gotten completely out of hand. It's become politicized. Other *Houses* have gotten into the middle."

"You would, of course, be referring to Sarkal of the *House of Kooli Ton Lok* and his cousin Strone of *Seltu Dei Sei*," Spock said, sitting forward again.

"As per their habit of late, yes. Using any opportunity afforded them to jockey themselves into a better political standing. Or so it would appear. I

know of the rivalry that exists between you two —”

“Mother, that presumes ego. As a Vulcan —”

“Oh please, dear, it’s only too plain Sarkal wishes he were you. And it seems he may now have an ally in the *House of Rikni Tol Sare*.”

“Lord Savin?”

“The very same. Now, spare me the litany and just listen,” Amanda said carefully. “You’re not to press the issue. By order of the Council. Don’t defy them. Promise me you’ll let the matter drop. At least for now. The *House of Talek Sen Dene* can ill afford the scandal.”

“And my father? I would know his views. I presume he is most displeased. This certainly will not serve to ease things between us.”

“Your father has retreated to his meditation.”

“Both his sons have caused him disgrace.” Spock sighed quietly. “It is something I swore I would never do.”

“You cannot make up for the sins of your brother. And if there is any disgrace in all of this, it’s in the actions of the others. Not yours. *Kiftiri*, Spock. That’s what T’Pau has labeled it and T’Lar has concurred with her. Your father is merely — *frustrated* — at his inability to make the Council see reason. I only wish I had known what was

happening at the time. I witnessed her test. At the reception later that evening I exchanged a few pleasantries with her. Oh, she was completely veiled and we weren't given her name. I couldn't pick her out on the street, I suppose ...”

“There is nothing you could have done, Mother. I, on the other hand, am going to have to climb Mount Gol and attempt a second time to become a monk,” he said.

“Oh, Spock, no. Don't give up. In only a few, short years she'll be of age. Why, I was barely twenty when I married your father.”

“But I do not know who she is,” Spock insisted.

“Sometimes you simply have to rely on a higher source. *Kiftiri*, Spock. If you're truly meant to be together, you'll meet again,” his mother assured him.

Spock wished he shared her illogical rationale just now. He signed off and went to bed later that evening feeling the pain of his autonomy more acutely than ever before. In the twilight of sleep, he *reached* for the girl, reliving the memory of their encounter like a video recording over and over in his head until, sound asleep, he was no longer *alone*... .

12

**March 21, 2285
Starfleet Academy
San Francisco, Earth**

Spock headed out to the small deck of his base quarters, stopping to lean against the railing that overlooked the bay. It was chilly outside, the city still wrapped in winter of an evening, despite the calendar. For a Vulcan it was an uncomfortable, damp cold uncharacteristic to the aridness of his home planet, but he enjoyed the way the lights glistened off the waves, the smell of ocean life hanging on the breeze. Tomorrow would find him aboard the *USS Enterprise* once again breathing

distilled, recycled air. It was nights like this that made him wonder why he'd traded planetary life for one in space.

And he was restless — *she* was restless, he clarified. He gulped the air for her as if in so doing he could make her breath easier. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the *feel* of her, *She-who-was-without-name*; the sweetness that brushed up against his thoughts, surprisingly so warm. She sought his comfort. He loathed to turn her away even though he was constrained to do so. *I'm here*, he replied, pressing his thoughts into hers before letting her go. Who was she? he pondered again and would he ever know her beyond these fleeting moments when their minds unconsciously intertwined?

Not likely.

Spock turned from the ocean to glance through the glass sliders leading back to his modest base apartment. The view screen in the wall had just popped on as programed, displaying the evening news. He noted the date and the topics before returning his gaze to the murky depths of the Pacific. To hope was illogical, he knew it. But for the fact he was Vulcan, frustration would have him in its grip. Four and a half years had past since their initial encounter and everyday his connection to her grew stronger. It was as if he could reach out and feel her standing beside him right now, yet it was mere

illusion; just the essence of her.

He knew, too, that she was awake — and troubled.

Still, for the entirety of this time, nearly half a decade, the Council remained relentless. Unforgiving. He might as well plead with a dead *sehlet*, for all the good it would do, his efforts no less wasted than if he stood before the High Tribunal in full Clan regalia, as certainly his father had done and would soon do again on his behalf, reminding them of his family's noble status and the uncertainty of their *House*. It was no secret that Spock was the last in Surak's direct line. Dare they allow that line to be broken?

The High Council's current behavior would suggest so. Their constant refusal to lift the censure bespoke of typical Vulcan pride, their arrogance thinly disguised behind a facade of Logic. To give in now would be to admit they had erred in their original decision; their Logic hopelessly flawed.

As for Spock, he was trapped in what was fast becoming more of a marriage on a metaphysical plane, and considerably less than a betrothal in the physical world since he did not, and could never, know her.

For that he grieved and sought only to lend her his continued fidelity, tending to her in her need as he did now trying to quell her unease; disturbed by the

warning she pressed into his thoughts of, '*Be careful.*'

After a time Spock left the deck to warm himself inside. He listened to the news, noting that once again space pirates were harassing Federation freighters, before he recycled it to the top of the broadcast. He made a cup of Vulcan tea and settled down at his tri-dimensional chess set, challenging the computer before going to bed for the night. Tomorrow would be a long day starting with a departmental meeting with the Academy brass, then on to conducting a final *Kobayashi Maru* scenario before heading out on a training cruise with his latest batch of cadets. Spying the large, ancient volume of *A Tale of Two Cities* sitting unwrapped on the end table, he reminded himself that somewhere in the midst of his day he would also have to present this gift to one James T. Kirk. Tomorrow, after all, was Kirk's birthday.... .

13

**March 26, 2285
Starfleet Academy
San Francisco, Earth**

Brianna Cantrell awoke again that morning with an exaggerated sense of unease. Such feelings had plagued her for better than a week now and she was no longer able to shrug them off. Cadet Cantrell pulled herself out of her bunk. Looking around her at the others still soundly asleep, something was *wrong*. She could *feel* it. Hugging herself, rubbing her hands over the goose bumps from the sudden chill, she headed into the common lavatory to bathe, hoping to dispel her misgivings; pleased at least she had made it in here before the other cadets.

Enjoying this rare moment of privacy, she stood in

the sonic shower stall letting her thoughts drift outward, tugging on that tiny psychic thread hoping for a quick response from him, as per their usual game. Once she made contact with him, things would be better. He always had this way of calming her down, she thought with a smile. With his mere *touch* he made her feel so secure, at peace. But again today it was rather slow in the coming, as if he were preoccupied and he just stroked her mind to let her know he was there. Nothing more. It was most unusual, since he had shown himself to be quite attentive, lending credence to her *sense* that something was dreadfully amiss.

Getting ready quickly, she was polishing the sheen on the tips of her boots just as the klaxon blasted the others out of bed. And while the others scrambled about, Brianna Cantrell headed off to start her day — which wore on without respite. Glancing up from her studies, her anxiety increased until she actually found herself looking forward to the afternoon's drill, figuring the physical grind would relieve her tension in so many ways. An hour later she discovered, once again, she had figured wrong. Brianna Cantrell gazed about her ever so briefly at the sea of cadets marching in formation, as they turned to dress right, feeling as if she may drown at any given moment in a tide of crimson jackets. Huge amounts of adrenalin coursed through her veins until she thought she would jump right out of her skin.

Her breathing was labored and ragged.

It wasn't simply the unusual heat of this day, she thought, glancing at the bright sky over San Francisco, resisting the urge to break formation by mopping away the perspiration from her forehead. Her sense of foreboding had increased markedly. Suddenly, marching back and forth, over and over, her head was in a vise, her skull crushing inward, for all she could tell, and she couldn't catch her breath. She could *feel* her *moderator* tearing away from her — piece at a time, each tendril stretching, pulling away from her brain like bare wet skin stuck to vinyl and someone was tugging the two fabrics apart! Light-headed, dizzy, the sky before her, once cloudy and blue, became pitch black with tiny white dots dancing merrily in front of her eyes. Down she went, smacking the hot, hard pavement with a dull thud.

=^=

“Give me thy thoughts,” Dr. T’Nikha was saying as Cadet Cantrell slowly came around, the Vulcan groping toward the side of Brianna’s face with long, spindly fingers.

Brianna Cantrell hardly heard the request, barely conscious, carried into Sickbay on a human litter, two of her fellow midshipmen supporting her in a chair-like hold. “Huh? Wait, don’t leave — she said, squinting her eyes against the bright lights of exam room one. At once, the room was spinning and she

felt herself going limp again, scarcely aware as the two placed her onto the examining table.

Suddenly, she was somewhere beyond herself, floating, watching the events unfolding in the room below her. The doctor and corpsmen worked with controlled speed, trying to ascertain what malady had befallen her, scanning her from head to foot, taking notes, listening to the hurried accounts from the two who had brought her in.

The cadets were speaking rapidly, almost over each other. Midshipmen Ryan and someone else. Ryan was her friend, Brianna Cantrell thought guiltily, and he seemed so very concerned. It was in his eyes, in his face. She was sorry to put him through this.

The other one she didn't know, though she was not surprised to learn he knew something of her with the way rumors flew. She was so used to all the questions, all the fellows asking after her, constantly following her with their eyes. Rather comely, or so she had been told, she was also different due to her *Gifts* and her Vulcan training. Quite simply, she was a magnet for attention. It was something her mother said she had to get used to.

"It's so hot out there, Doc. It's supposed to be spring, but, I mean, it's ninety degrees. I think she just gave into the heat," Ryan offered.

"That's a laugh," the other cadet said. "She's

supposed to be from Vulcan.”

“Yeah, but we’ve been marching for nearly two hours out there on the *Grinder*. Thanks to that idiot, Matthews, poppin’ off at the C. O. like that,” Ryan said.

“I dunno,” the second cadet shrugged. “The way she just went down. I mean, she said something —

The doctor looked up at him expectantly.

“She said, ‘Wait. Wait, don’t go’,” Ryan supplied. “And somethin’ ‘bout havin’ to find him again. We couldn’t get out of her who it was she was lookin’ for. It’s not like anybody broke ranks or nuthin’.”

Had she spoken? Brianna Cantrell didn’t remember uttering a word but obviously she must have, as stated. Most curious.

“And then she just collapsed,” the second cadet reported. “Just like that,” he snapped his fingers. “Crumpled to the ground like a wet rag.”

Her *moderator* had left her, Brianna Cantrell thought, just like that. For a stunned moment, she couldn’t breathe again, letting herself drift further beyond those in the room. Drifting ever upward and away....

“Thank you, gentlemen, I shall take it from here,” the doctor said, in dismissal. Turning to her assistants as the two went out, she immediately ruled

out a heat stroke as a possibility, reaching once more toward the form on the table to initiate the mind-probe.

=^=

Quite detached for the moment, Brianna Cantrell found their concern for her rather confounding. She was all right. It had been rather frightening at first, *feeling* him with her one minute and then horribly cut off the next, but she had seen which direction he had traveled away from her. All she need do now was follow the thread and she would find him again. That was how she had found him before. Always the thread. More like a thickened rope these days, it served as a guideline, a psychic *link* by which she could travel, hand over hand, until she *felt* his presence again. And he was likewise always gratified to see her, as he put it. She just wanted to be sure everything was all right between them. After all, he had never taken off so abruptly before that it physically hurt her, not since the first time, anyway. Previously, his comings and goings were always so very gentle. Today's sudden withdrawal had left her in a physical state of shock.

She took one more quick look at the form on the examining table and the people hovered over her. The midshipman was correct, she did look just like a rag, she decided, so completely relaxed, and then off she flew, knowing it would be all right. That it had

to be all right. She would find him and see for herself, needing just a little reassurance to squelch the growing doubts she had inside. The hideous, growing void.

But she was wrong. Horribly, terribly wrong.

This time he wasn't there. There was *nothing at the end of the rope!* The ends were rather frayed, she noted, almost forming a flower-like design the way they were splayed apart and floating, catching her attention momentarily, nearly capturing her, transfixed. What had happened to him? How could he just leave her like that?

Snapping to, she began spinning around, gazing about her in every direction. Frightened, unbelievably *alone*, she was suddenly lost. Confused, unsure even, of how to get back to herself. And then she could see him up ahead. Heart pounding, nearly sighing in relief, immediately she rushed forward following him to the tunnel. She watched the bright *Light* beckoning to him as he approached. "*Wait!*" she called out. "*Wait, don't go!*"

Caught in the silhouette of the *Light's* glare, her *moderator* turned to glance back over his shoulder at her, featureless, as always, continuing to guard his anonymity to the end. All she could make out was his silhouette, the elegant points of his ears. He

stood there gazing back at her for a moment and she could *feel* his words, '*Forgive me, I wasn't careful enough,*' and then into the tunnel he went.

Brianna Cantrell was in a panic. "*Wait! No!*" she cried. She tried to follow but someone was suddenly tugging at her from behind. Shaking the someone off, she rushed toward the tunnel again, trying to reach the *Light*, only to be pushed back rather brusquely by the entity guarding its entrance, this time. The interloper was again at her elbow, putting up quite a battle with her now, calling to her, trying to force her back out of the *Light*. Brianna Cantrell was losing her will. Desperate. In pain. She struggled against the horrific void. '*Wait. No, wait. Don't go!*' she cried. Arms outstretched, she sobbed uncontrollably.

Her *moderator* was so close she could almost touch him. She would touch him but for that being behind her wrenching her away. "*Please,*" she wailed. Her *moderator* turned one last time and gently shook his head at her just as the tunnel sealed up around him and he was gone. "*It is not your time ... It is not your time ... It is not your time,*" echoing in her ears as the tunnel winked out of existence.

=^=

Brianna Cantrell came to rather abruptly filling her lungs with air again at last, to find herself lying on a cot in the infirmary surrounded by corpsmen and

doctors, and staring into the eyes of that interfering Dr. T'Nikha, the one who had forcibly tugged her back.

“There you are. Stay with me this time, Lieutenant, J. G.,” Dr. T’Nikha said, lightly patting Brianna’s cheeks. In a reflex action Brianna Cantrrell brushed her hand away, frowning at her. The monitor on the wall above her head blinked with bright yellow and orange lights, making a warbling pinging sound as her vital statistics found their normal rhythm again. “You had us quite concerned. We nearly lost you. Can you speak to me? What is your name?”

“Bree – Cadet Brianna Cantrell, ma’am.”

“Day?”

“Tuesday.”

“Do you know where you are?”

“Sickbay?”

“Very good, Lieutenant,” the doctor said, taking up the electronic clipboard and jotting down a few notes. Nodding at the others in the room, they filed out taking with them the emergency equipment. Brianna Cantrell attempted to sit up only to be gently pushed back into the pillow. “You must lie back now and rest. I shall conduct a few more tests to verify significant damage has not occurred. Until then, you shall remain in Sickbay.” Dr. T’Nikha

nodded and headed for the exit. Pausing in the doorway, the Vulcan doctor returned to the bedside and in an unprecedented display, sat on the edge of the cot.

“I grieve with thee, Cadet Cantrell. The loss of one’s *bondmate* is most traumatic, as you have just experienced. You were near death. But it could have been worse. Insanity is more often the side-effect when one’s mate dies suddenly. Had you been alone ...” the doctor paused a moment to regroup. She met Brianna Cantrell’s eyes. “Will his people be coming for you?”

With that Brianna Cantrell burst into tears. What could she say? She didn’t even know who *he* was, let alone his people. Nor had she shared her continuing encounters with her parents or even her brothers. What was she to tell them now? She would just as soon they didn’t know. Her father was going to kill her once he found out. She laid back against the pillows and wept.

“Weeping is good,” the doctor said, as she made her way out of the room.

14

**In the Vulcan Year of Ni'roc,
Standard Earth Year 2285
Shi'Kahr, Vulcan**

Sarkal sat in the semi-dark of his office preparing yet another brief when a slight tapping came at the door. Glancing at the chronometer on the wall, it was late, yet the visitor was expected. He nodded at his companion, who took to the shadows in the hallway leading from the main room. The Vulcan pulled open the door, the small lamp splashing the barest amount of light upon the darkened stoop. "Come," he said, as the stranger slipped inside. Sarkal led the way to his desk set into

an alcove, the walls surfaced with raw stone, giving his work area a distinct cave-like appearance. He gestured for the man to sit in the ample chair facing it while he poured a glass of iced tea.

“I’m glad you took my call,” Reynolds said, wiping the perspiration from his brow. Stripping off his outer jacket, he hung it over his arm. “You Vulcans like the heat. It’s quite warm in here.”

“Did you bring it?”

“Yes,” he said.

Dressed in rough dirt-filled clothing, Sarkal surmised the human had been tending his dig right up to the moment of this appointment. He had mentioned he was building in the *Shei’Ro’kan* Basin. Foolish of him to work alone in such a dangerous remote region, thought Sarkal, as he watched his guest pull a leather-bound package from the folds of his jacket and set it on the edge of the massive desk.

“I wasn’t sure just what to do with it. I was just excavating the property, putting in the plumbing lines — I have all the proper permits to be digging there —

“I am certain you do,” Sarkal said, forming his lips into a straight line as he handed over the tea. “I am curious, though. What makes you think this item is of such import that you would bring it to me for

safekeeping? My subscribed area of law does not make me an expert in antiquities. My practice involves crime, such as it exists on Vulcan."

Shrugging off the inquiry Reynolds went about untying the cord on the package. "Just have a look. I'm sure the government — and others — would be more than anxious to get their hands on this. I need you to tell me if I have a claim. This could be worth millions of credits to me, if I found the right buyer."

"I see." Sarkal watched as the wrappings fell away revealing the corner of an intricately inscribed rock. He fought to keep from trembling in excitement, to keep the glee from taking over his features at his profound turn of luck.

"I've looked it up," the man went on. "It is part of the Stone, the *larger* portion, some say."

"Yes, that would be the ancient *Stone of Gol* from the look of it; broken and scattered centuries before, lost to the ages, or so it was believed. And you just happened upon it during your excavations? Do you really take me to be so daft? Explain to me how this isn't the bit of antiquity stolen from the special exhibit four point zero-three-five Standard Earth years ago. I should call the authorities at once." Sarkal made a gesture toward the compti unit on his immaculate desk, watching Reynolds carefully.

"Go ahead, if you must. I didn't steal anything. But

take a look at it first. You'll see it's different from the piece stolen. Like I said, it's larger. Much larger."

With one eye on the human, Sarkal gingerly took up the rock, careful to hold it by the leather wrapping underneath and compared it to the ancient picture called up on his computer screen. His eyes glowed as he held up the stone, examining it from all angles. Yes, it was indeed a different piece from the one in the museum catalog. "It matches the bottom left point of the triangle. See? Here and here," he gestured to some markings. "Who else knows of this discovery?"

"None, no one. I thought it best to verify what I'd found before making any announcements."

"Not even a friend?"

"No," Reynolds shook his head.

"I thought you humans were more excitable than that."

"Like I said over the compti, I needed some advice before I went public with the find."

"You do understand that I am bound by law to confiscate this until your claim can be legitimized? I shall be certain to keep it safe while I do some digging of my own into this matter, so to speak. And should it be revealed you are not a thief, I will gladly

help you negotiate a most generous compensation from the Vulcan Cultural Society.”

“Yes, that would be fine. I’m actually relieved not to have it on me. There are ... people —”

“Good. I shall apprise you of its proper dispensation just as soon as I get word. By the way, do you know if it will work? All broken into shards like this?” Sarkal said, as he wrapped the prize up again and tied it up with the cord. He gave a short nod, gazing at a point beyond the human, to his companion crouched behind the end table in the corner of the room.

Reynolds shifted uncomfortably, glancing about. “It might,” he said, struggling to reclaim his jacket. He got to his feet. “According to what I’ve read some experts do, mostly Vulcan archaeologists. Others say no. Although the same that say no, also want it destroyed completely.”

“Yes, that would be wise, I think,” Sarkal said, coming around to the front of the desk again, package in hand. “We would not want it to fall into the wrong hands. Do you know what the *Stone of Gol* was used for, Mister Reynolds?”

Reynolds’ smile trembled as he slowly backed up, shrugging, bumping into something. “I just know it was some kind of ancient weapon. But that hardly seems likely — unless it was used to bludgeon

someone to death—" Reynolds' voice cut off in a sickly gurgle, the attack coming from behind as his neck was snapped in one easy movement. *Tal'Shaya.*

"Indeed?" Sarkal said. "I would never think to use the *Stone* in such a barbaric manner. Dispose of him."

"And then what, Sarkal?" Strone said, arms clasped over the chest of the now dead man.

Sarkal had already turned away, his back to his companion as he hefted the *Stone* in his hands. Stooping, he tapped in the combination code opening the safe behind his desk and removed yet a second, similarly wrapped packet. A moment later two pieces from the same *Stone* lay nestled together perfectly on the desk. "And then we shall see what yield to our Cause this little gem shall afford us, my cousin. How best we can use it to bend the Council to our will ..."

"I thought you just wanted the *Anomaly* —"

"Well, of course," Sarkal said, turning again to ferret through the visitor's pockets. Coming up with his wallet and identification diskette, he immediately glanced through them before seeing to their disposal. "First things, first. You should leave while the light is wan. Dump him into the Basin. He shall not be missed, I think. Not a single holograph in there," he

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said, casually tossing the billfold into the incinerator.
“It is a terrible thing to be alone.”

15

Somewhere Outside of Time and Space ...

Thurt to be out of the *Light*. After he left his lying body, the being previously known as pock had stepped into the Brightness and was transported elsewhere. A distant planet, perhaps. He was unsure where really, though he marveled at the striking palette used to define this place. The sky above was a most brilliant blue, the body of water he sat beside, crystal, and the earth beneath him a green so rich and deep in hue he nearly wept. Flowers dotted the hillsides in a bright array with the colorful shale of a desert threaded in between, the marriage

of both his worlds, perfected.

He was at Peace. Here, he truly *belonged* — something he never really knew during his previous existence. Yet the tug of that failed life refused to abate. From time to time his vision became cloudy. Thoughts and feelings foreign to him invaded his mind. Chaos. Tumult. His awareness had been split, parts of him remaining in that realm.

How?

His eyes grew heavy and soon he fell into a restful slumber. Undisturbed, his sleep was long until a being stood beside him, gently prodding him awake. "Is it time?" he asked, sitting up. "Am I to stand and be Judged?"

"It is time, just not yours," the Messenger replied. "Otherwise I would allow you to sleep until you were perfectly rested. Then you would wander amongst your loved ones for a time before returning to review those moments in your life where you faced a Choice. Only then would you be asked to stand before the *All*. No, I must ask you to leave this place. You are to return to that life from which you've come."

Spock stood, perplexed. Glancing about him, they were no longer at the lake's edge. He was on the Edge, overlooking the Void — and beyond that, the *Genesis* planet at the heart of the *Moutara Nebula*.

“I must leave this place? The *Light*? Why would I do this? I am at Peace ... Leaving isn’t —”

“Logical?” the Messenger laughed gaily. “See? You have not forgotten yourself. I will not pretend. Returning will be most uncomfortable for you, more so than anyone else, I am afraid. Yours has been a bitter, lonely life full of challenge and emotional pain. But see,” he pointed to the distant planet and with that gesture, as if he commanded it, the image zoomed toward them like a telescopic camera lens coming into focus. The white of clouds mixed with the clear blue skies were replaced by swirls of green, as space compressed first the atmosphere and then the lush vegetation of the newly formed planet. Amidst the fauna, alone and unprotected, an infant sat crying piteously. “Your body lives and you must return to it at once.”

“I cannot,” Spock said, already feeling the anguish of being outside the Presence.

“Why not?” the Messenger further challenged. “You still can effect change in that life. Not everyone who comes to the *Light* is given such a chance. What of your body,” the Messenger pointed again. The earth began to rumble beneath the baby and the infant howled in pain as he morphed into a small child. “Your body ages — rapidly. You must not delay —”

“My *katra*, my soul, is housed within another, how shall I return? ...” Even as these thoughts left him, Spock could feel himself being sucked into a vortex, drawn away from the *All*, from the *Light*, from this place of profound Joy.

“Use the Time wisely, my son,” the Messenger beckoned in a faint echo, “and go in Peace.”

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All time was lost to him. Alone, yet not alone, he could hear the confusion of another soul upon which his own *Katra* was nestled. One being, two souls housed within, he struggled to break free. To be heard. *Take me to the steps of Mount Seleya*, he repeated. He had to break through the other’s consciousness if he was to be saved. Despite how he fought to stay with the *All*, now that he was here, he fought for his life.

Intrinsically, Spock knew if he were brought home to Vulcan, the priestesses would know what to do. They would help him achieve a oneness between soul and body again. But did McCoy fully understand? McCoy was human. *Remember*, Spock pressed into his friend’s mind, fighting to break through the layers of unrelenting grief. Even if his body were not alive again, his *katra* needed to be returned home to Vulcan. He hoped to trigger the message he gave during his *mindmeld* with the doctor just before he stepped into the radiation-filled

chamber to wrench the ship's engines back online.

He had to get out of McCoy's head! Too many emotions, unconstrained. Spock writhed in pain at the onslaught. He had to make his friend understand. He had to be heard.

Take me home. Climb the steps of Mount Seleya.

Somewhere in all the muddle of collective thoughts, Spock began to hope survival was possible. Then he was lost to all thoughts, drifting into an induced sleep. His host had no doubt been given a sedative to keep him, *them*, quiet.

More chaos ensued a few hours later — at least he perceived time moving ever so slowly. He tried to hitch a ride and ordered poison from a bar before sleep came again. Then he found himself back at his station aboard the *Enterprise*. Eyes didn't understand what the brain told him they were seeing but at last he gave the reading of the instruments. The others aboard looked astonished.

Again he slept, his concept of Time challenged. Was it hours or days since he left the *All*? Weeks? He had no answer, he only knew that he was scared. Brought into the Temple at *Mount Seleya* at last, he watched as the living, breathing Spock, the unconscious shell of his former self, was borne inside on a litter by male acolytes. While his host, Dr. McCoy, and the others gathered around, they

placed 'Spock' on a slab.

A brief ceremony was prescribed to amend the current situation, in which McCoy was made aware of the dangers to him in this process called *Fal-Tor-Pan. Refusion*. It was made clear both souls were in jeopardy. If the process failed, what would become of his *katra*? Would his body fail again, too? Spock wanted to know. And what about McCoy? Would he be irreparably damaged? When asked, the doctor agreed to participate in the ancient Ritual, despite how unsure the Vulcans were of its applications. McCoy lay on a stone slab opposite the living body of Spock and closed his eyes.

Hours passed. As with all things, Time would not be rushed. In many ways it was a birth, of sorts. Spock needed to leave this host and find his way to his old body, made new and alive again in a mystery brought about by the regenerative powers of that experimental *Genesis* device....

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Plummeting into the unknown, images whizzed by him like layers of clouds, wispy and lightweight. Spock was passing through a psychic *Corridor* surrounded by the thoughts of those he knew, guiding him to the form on the other table, lest he give into the intoxicating call of a boundless existence. Again he felt free. At Peace.

And he balked, just for a moment.

Why should he confine his *katra* to that fragile form?

You must go back. It is not your time ...

He heard the Thoughts and obeyed at long last, spreading himself into the shell of the man known simply as Spock until he felt tethered by the physical weight of its being. Confined — yet strangely content to be so.

He sat up and wondered who all these people were and what they had to do with him... .

16

**September 2, 2285
Starfleet Academy, Medical Lab
San Francisco, Earth**

“**N**o. No, you can’t ... you mustn’t ... don’t ...” Brianna Cantrell began to moan. Those that observed her troubled slumber jotted down notes on their electronic clipboards after gazing at the monitors above her head. Heart rate, pulse, breathing pattern. All were elevated as the nightmare increased in its intensity. The glow of the device cast an eerie yellow light upon her less than flaccid features. The subject began to toss. The technician nearby made sure the

restraints were in place so she wouldn't fall off the narrow examination table. All was under control.

In another moment Admiral Komack came into the room. "What's the subject matter this time? More of the same?"

"Perhaps you should hear for yourself." Doctor Ramsey gestured Admiral Komack to the bedside chair. Brianna Cantrell was promptly awakened. "Tell me your dream," he ordered, activating the recorder.

"It's all in pieces," she sobbed, raking the tears from her face. "Bits and pieces all over the place and it won't stick together."

"What's in pieces?"

"Huh? Oh," used to the routine by now, Brianna Cantrell groggily recounted what she saw, gesturing with her hands. "It's triangular in shape. Stone, I think ... and he's picked five. Heads of planets. All dead. He wants ... all dead. T'Pau. Others —" she winced. "My head ... oh my head, make it stop. He wants ... No. No, you can't ... you mustn't ... don't ..." She drifted back to sleep with the help of a hyperspray in the arm.

"She knows." Ramsey gestured to the door leading out of the exam room.

"The threats, yes." The silver haired Admiral

followed the physician. "They began pouring in through Intelligence last week. I was concerned this was some kind of parlor trick. But after the *Rigi*'s surprise arrival —"

The doctor nodded. "She's had the same dream depicting the nature of his collapse for these past three weeks."

"Collapse? We'll post extra guards." Komack allowed his shoulders to slump then straightened them again. "How she even knows of the *Rigi*'s meeting with the Federation Council is a mystery. It's been kept hush-hush. Top Secret. I didn't even know until after you called me. Is she spying on all of us in her sleep? She's either one hell of a tool or the greatest liability to the Starfleet."

"Aye, sir," Dr. Ramsey said, stopping by the computer to remove the recording diskette from the drive. "We've got a partial list of intended victims. But it's all conjecture at this stage. She's speaking in riddles in her sleep."

"So are the terrorists at this point. What we're getting is mostly garbled."

Ramsey held up the diskette. "She gives a different head of planet each time we wake her, but it's always the same five. T'Pau, Franklin, Norak, Teklev and Gorak. Oh, and Kintawa's name pops up sporadically. They've targeted the founding five

planets of the Federation. And the head of Starfleet Command," he added, quietly.

"Well, at least that's something — But still no leads as to who or what poses the threat, is that right?"

"Perhaps with time ... the dreams are escalating in intensity."

"Doctor, we haven't got the time! You've got to press —"

"If we press too fast and too hard we'll lose her. You saw her readings. Her brainwave activity is off the charts. She's not a tracking device. She's a human. Her body can't take the strain. I will work as long as I can to get you the clues you need, Admiral, but you must let me proceed with all due consideration for my patient."

Ramsey pressed the yellow rectangular diskette into the Admiral's palm. Komack gazed at it for a moment before pocketing it. "We've increased security in each sector. But without knowing to any degree of certainly who's making the threats —" Komack gazed hard at Ramsey. "What's your next move?"

The doctor put his hands in his back pockets and shrugged. A furrow creased his young brow. "For now? Keep her sedated. Unless you want her head to explode. Already she's complaining of headaches. It's like she's running on half a battery and her body

can't handle the load. Vulcans are meant to be in pairs, joining their minds at marriage —”

“She's not Vulcan —”

“I know, I know but it's like her brain is wired that way or something. I'm not entirely sure how T'Nikha explained it. We should probably consider retiring her commission and mustering her out of the service altogether.”

“So, you're jumping on *that* bandwagon, are you?” Admiral Komack folded his arms across his chest, unconsciously puffing himself up. “Joining forces with the Vulcans on this.”

Ramsey nodded, keeping his eyes lowered if only for a moment. Then he met the Admiral's stare. “Yes, I guess I am. Either way we've got to stop the probes, at least for now. It's having an adverse effect on her —”

“I'll tell you about adverse effects, Doctor.” Komack pointed a finger, stopping short of jabbing the much younger man in the chest. “If those death threats come anywhere close to being carried out, it'll be all out interplanetary war. We're talking several Heads of Planets. We've got to solve this puzzle and fast.”

Shaking his head, Ramsey held up a hand. “What if she's some kind of weapon sent here to distract us? While we're busy trying to solve the riddles of her

uncanny dreams, somewhere that radical group is plotting to strike.”

“We considered that, but we’ve done a thorough check of her background. She’s not a subversive. I’m afraid she’s more of a pawn. Somebody is using her to get to us.”

“Or she’s entirely sincere. The woman has a gift. We could use it to our advantage. Carefully controlled, she could possibly bring us right to them.”

“My thoughts exactly, Doctor. Keep me posted. I’ve got to make my report to the Fleet Admiral.”

“But I won’t risk killing her.”

“It might not come to that. Ambassador Sarek has presented a partial plan of action to the Federation Council. He carries a lot of weight with them. And I’ve seen the plan. It has merit. For now, get her back on her feet.”

17

September 2, 2285

Stardate: 0985.02

Bridge starskiff, T' Bree 6322-0116

“**W**ill it work, have you tried it out, yet?” Ambassador Muroghna asked, his tentacles waving wildly around him. Displeased by the Federation’s constant yet consistent rejection of his petitions, he was anxious for something to go as planned today. It was vital they unseat the *Rigi* of Sequar, if his government were to continue mining the abundant minerals found on their neighboring planet, freely, that is.

“We’re moving into the testing phase even as we speak.” Strone assured him.

“So, who’s the target?”

“My, but you people are an inquisitive bunch,” Sarkal said, barely looking up from his work. “So many questions, Ambassador, who would ever surmise you were so well suited to your work as a diplomat?” He adjusted the magnifying eye piece before he went back to carefully assembling the newly reconstructed stone parts of what he hoped would be a functioning version of the ancient *Psionic Resonator*. “Either you trust us or you do not. At any rate, you speak too much and I must confess I find all the incessant chatter ... annoying.”

“First, we must make sure the thing fits together,” Strone interjected when the Ambassador geared up for more discussion on the matter. “And that the newly forged pieces do, too. Have you selected the ship?”

“The ship?” For a moment the Ambassador appeared lost, confused.

“Yes,” Sarkal continued. “We must continue our joint harassment of the Federation shipping lanes to throw them off-kilter. Last thing we need do, is tip our hand, as it were. It is all part of the Plan. Tell me, Muroghna, are you on board with the Plan or are you just playing us like you do the Sequarians?”

Caught in his own puffery, Muroghna began making chittering noises as he searched for words that continued to elude the normally gregarious Rindagvarian. He grabbed the back of Sarkal's chair, swiveling him around until the young lawyer faced him. "Our intentions are to move forward on the path already set. Make no mistake about that, Vulcan. It is vital we have the *Pergium* and *Dilithiam* crystals so abundant on Sequar. There is no turning back. Just see to it that you get that device up and running and we'll take care of the rest."

"You dare threaten me? You forget yourself," Sarkal peeled the alien's long, scaly fingers from the chair back and threw his arm away from him. Swinging back to the desktop he took up his work once again, gingerly using a set of tweezers to hold the tiniest pebbles in place while the adherent dried. "You need me more than I need you. I have the weapon of my ancestors and like them an inherent ability to use it. Without us you cannot wield its force, Muroghna. While your people may have psychic abilities, they are wholly untrained. There is no discipline in you. You need us," Sarkal gave the alien a sidelong glance, his green eyes glaring, "without our ... *assistance* ... your cause will likely be lost along with your poor excuse for a civilization."

Strone leaned forward, letting his mere size work to intimidate the Rindagvarian. “I caution you, do not interrupt him again. Once he releases his emotions, he cannot quickly recall them. You may very well end up the first target.”

“That would be interesting, your having to explain away my sudden ... demise, shall we say? I submit you need us more than we need you, after all is said and done.”

“Do not push me. I have connections in some very high places. One tip from me and your entire scheme will end up before the Federation Council. Game over.”

“We’ll see who has the higher place. I have a few connections of my own,” Muroghna said, glancing quickly at the tiny craft’s navigation panel. “Am I reading those coordinates right? Are we headed to Vulcan? But what about this week’s Conference ... It’s vital I appear. But I will be terribly late, if we divert to Vulcan.”

“Did I ever tell you how I lost my finger?” Strone asked, taking their fellow conspirator by the shoulder and leading him off the tiny bridge of the skiff. “Let’s away to the galley and I shall gladly regale you with the lesson I learned early on in my dealings with my cousin, lest you inadvertently trigger his hot temper.”

18

**In the Vulcan Year of Ni'roc,
September 3, 2285
Lok'beh, Vulcan**

The night was clear, dark, the stars shining brightly against the black velvet sky of Vulcan's desert, the only light. Sarkal stood, tall and lean, at the entrance to the cave watching with a keen eye for any movement across the barren desert floor. At the first hint of motion he dared to signal, one quick flickering of a lantern. Then he waited. A glint of light, on and off, came in response. Good.

Slowly they arrived, one by one, until every place

was filled around the low ancient slab, eight of them in all, the beginnings of his cabinet. Wrapping his long, gray robe around him he stepped into the cave again, coming around the bend and into the main cavern. Candlelight flickered upon the roughly hewn surfaces, casting eerie shadows and distorting the features of his fellow conspirators.

Sarkal had chosen this ancient remote spot for many reasons, not only the security offered by it, but also for the symbolic nature of the site. This was his family's place of *Kunat'Kalifee* and this cavern, their Chamber of Origins. He had yet to use this hollow for its real purpose, but he expected to amend that soon, too. And for Vulcan, he hoped that the plans conceived in this chamber would result in a rebirth of his home planet.

The somber, handsome son of Lord Sobel, took his place at the head of the slab. Green eyes looked coolly upon the faces of his allies, appraising the intent of the hearts and minds of each before he motioned for them to sit, on portable chairs they had all lugged with them. Had this not been so serious a business, one might look upon him as a boy play acting, imagining himself in his elderly father's current role as T'Pau's Councilor of Intergalactic Affairs. But it was no game he was playing on this dark evening, the chill of the wind bespeaking an early winter as it whipped across the desert floor,

candles flickering, nearly scudding out for a moment's pause.

"Brethren," he began, slowly walking behind the group. "We are of one accord. In our own struggles to retain our identity, our culture continues to erode, diluted by the unseemly influence of so many *Outworlders* who invade our society. Constantly we are asked to abandon the very things that make us Vulcan in favor of the more generic forms adopted by the Federation of Planets. The way of the Federation is insidious, creeping into one's manner of speech, one's daily life, filtering in unnoticed across the netwide news as the major source of information and entertainment — advertisements. There is no escaping."

Sarkal sighed quietly, closing his eyes for a moment's meditation. Opening them again at last, he continued, "The time has come for those of us who carry this burden to act. Ours is a sacred Cause. While T'Pau panders to the wishes of the Federation, it is this very institution, once thought noble in its formation, that is the root of our degradation. If we are to preserve that which was passed down to us from the *Time of the Beginning*, we must resolve to overthrow the current Regime. It is T'Pau from the *House of Surak*, the Noble Clan of *Talek Sen Dene*, which has wrought this catastrophe upon all of Vulcan."

“The *House of Spock*, you mean,” Syral said, contempt dripping from his tongue.

Sarkal’s grin was slow. Inclining his head in Syral’s direction, he politely acknowledged him. “It is this Clan, *Talek Sen Dene*,” Sarkal continued. “This *House* of Surak *and Spock* whose actions have put us in this bind. This *House* has decreed against certain use of our natural abilities, harnessing, constraining our mind-powers against our wills. Making it unlawful, in fact, to use them for personal gain — For which it has now, most certainly, come back to roost, one of their own caught in an untenable web of deceit. Perhaps now they will listen. And listen they must. For, I say, how are we to guard ourselves against such an onslaught as we are now experiencing, if we continue to deny our own built-in defense systems? How can we perceive the threat having stood down for too long from our much needed vigilance?”

Sarkal tossed the enlarged photos he had secretly acquired before them on the slab, copies of the very same intended for presentation to the Federation Council. A murmur went up filling the cavern.

“Yea, even now, the Federation cowers and trembles at such a weapon wielded by a race so provincial in nature they do not recognize nor accede to a higher Authority in this matter! And so they look to us to diffuse this evil. Save us, they

clamor, from such a calamity of wills. And to their wishes we dance like puppets on a string!"

Sarkal glanced down at the cold, reddish brown slab, running his fingers lightly along the smooth edge as he slowly began to walk around the narrow end from where he stood, continuing into the room behind the company. "We will answer their call, but for our own purposes. And so, once again as in the *Dark Times*, we shall tap into skills once neglected, but never forgotten...." Sarkal's voice trailed off, in pursuit of another deeper thought. He knew he could use this crisis to his own end, a deep satisfaction settling upon him as if his life's goals were about to come to fruition. It was illogical, in fact, to let a crisis go to waste....

"Brethren," he continued. Stopping in front of the fire ring in the center of the dwelling, Sarkal reached down to pick out a slender log, snapping it easily in two before using it to stir the fire, adding a few more logs to the blaze as he spoke. "I do not say we abandon all reason. Nay, Logic must guide us here — now more than ever. But we must also *feel* with our hearts, *perceive* with our hearts, *lead* with our hearts if we are to save our home world from such an insidious invasion." Sarkal paused momentarily, sensing their collective discomfort at his words, though he had chosen them carefully.

"Just as that band of dissidents led by Sybok and

others expounded,” Syral interrupted, breaking the uneasy silence. He glanced at the others seated on low chairs around the stone slab that rested on two boulders a meter or so off of the floor.

“Yes,” Sitok nodded. “I remember. They were exiled from the planet for their endeavors.”

“They claimed emotion was the key to inner peace,” said Sorel. “Dare we? —”

Sarkal waved them off. “In everything, there is a risk. They weren’t so far off the mark, gentlemen, I have studied their philosophy. It is logical at its core. But we must first abandon the restrictions Logic places upon us if we are to harness this power. We must tap into our emotions if we are to put such skills to the task. It is the only way. We will do this to save the Federation and all who subscribe to it. Then we can press T’Pau’s government to give us what we want or be Unseated. And I, too, shall achieve legendary status among my people... .” Again, Sarkal’s voice trailed off.

Strone of *Seltu Dei Sei* came around the corner and into the cave at that moment. He stood glancing about the table, and began to speak in a hearty voice, lest his cousin lose the momentum of the moment. “It is the Federation who would steal our very heart — our very soul if we let them. Look what association with *Outworlders* has wrought —”

All eyes turned to the newcomer.

“What news have you, Cousin?”

“It is as you predicted, Sarkal,” Strone said, meeting Sarkal’s eyes. Pulling the hood off of his head, he stood just inside the cave’s entrance. His cheeks were flushed a vibrant green from the long walk across the desert sands. “The *Hybrid* has made a second bid for her.”

“Surely not,” Sitok stated, his long face, impassive. “The Council must forbid it. He is already a half-breed. To further thin down the bloodline of such a noble clan can only accelerate the dilution of our Society as a whole.”

“This could have been avoided, but for the actions of the Council,” young Satel spoke up. “It shall be their undoing. Under T’Pau, under the House of *Talek Sen Dene*, they acquiesced. *Outworlders* should never be made privy to our training, our sacred rituals.”

Sarkal held up a hand, stemming the brewing debate. Then he leaned forward as if to better hear his cousin’s words, placing his hands on the slab to support himself.

Strone nodded his dark head. “Again some are attempting to pass this off as *Kiftiri*. Just as you said they would. How did you perceive this happening?”

“He is a *Talek Sen Dene*,” Sarkal said, slowly straightening his stance. He closed his eyes for a moment, thinking. “As with all things, it is about power.”

“*Kiftiri?*” Syral said, glancing quickly at the faces of those around him. “What is it you are suggesting? *Kiftiri.*” He spat the word.

“She belongs to me,” Sarkal cut in, struggling to maintain his composure, to temper himself. The trembling within him was nearly uncontrollable. “She is mine. I will not abide ... This is not of her doing. She is an innocent. It is he. Once again he has tried to usurp me. This cannot be allowed. She is not some tiny *So'itchi* alone in the desert upon which the *T'ay'at'ma* preys. The *Hybrid* cannot swoop in and take what is mine.”

“If they rule it *Kiftiri* — Sarkal? How is it he always profits like this?” Strone voiced his concern, trudging across the small chamber.

Sarkal stopped abruptly and turned to face the huge Vulcan beside him. More brawn than brain, at least he knew he could count on Strone’s loyalty... . Sarkal took in a quiet breath, centering himself. “He does not always succeed, my cousin. Think. What once would have worked in our favor will now be instrumental in his defeat. We can turn this against him.”

“Cousin?” Strone said, giving his cousin an uplifted eyebrow. “Are you even listening to what I said?”

“You must learn to control your passions, *t’hy’la*. This is most fortuitous. We can use this to our gain. Do you doubt me?”

“No, yours is the power —”

”Tut — Sarkal raised a slender finger to still his companion. “Be careful, Strone. Lest we divert too much attention in our direction.”

“Brethren,” Sarkal continued, as if Strone’s words brought him back from a place far away. Strone took a seat. Sarkal went on. “Vulcan is ours. We must take *back* what is ours. We must *rule* what is ours. We must find the passion within us to *fight* for it. We will use this crisis to our own end. Together we will fight off this common foe, honing our forsaken skills in the process, working for a resolution to the threat through diplomacy and cunning of our own brand. We will think *them* to death using our own mind-powers to strike back when need be in order to wrest peace from the hands of these common terrorists.” *And if a misdirected thought or two strikes one of our own ... who would be the wiser?*

Sarkal contained his amusement, “And then onto our own agenda. For who, then, could question our motives? We will have shown ourselves to be true patriots and our message will be heard. And the so-

called Clan of *Talek Sen Dene*,” he said, wiping the dirt from his hands, turning back toward those gathered. “This House of *Spock*, must be the first to sacrifice itself in this just Cause.”

The wind outside gave up an eerie howl, sending a chilling echo throughout the cavern. The ensuing draft rifled through clothing and hair, lifting up a photo carrying it wafting into the fire ring behind them.

Sarkal paused again and the slapping of several hands upon the stone danced in his ears, a welcome show of support. He drew in a quiet breath and returned to his place at the head of the low slab, the very surface where he would take the *Anomaly*, making the *Ancient Claim*, *very soon now*, he cajoled himself.

“High Counselor,” came the young, tenor voice of Satel. “How do we go about it? T’Pau’s approval ratings are inordinately high. Despite how we view it, the populace favors her handling of current events.”

“We will demonstrate, take to the streets, just as the *Outworlders* do, but we will hold the banner of Vulcan high,” Syral offered. “We must secede from the Federation. It is the only way.”

“Negative,” Sarkal cut in. “Rather than just to the streets, as before, we will take to the stars

resurrecting our band of pirates ... we must keep the pressure on. Disrupt the shipping lanes of the Federation. Cut them off from their supplies and bring them to their knees."

"But how do we make the Vulcan people follow? We are a founding member of that body. How do we make them understand the dangers of remaining one with the Federation?" Sedok stated, his fist finding the flat surface of stone.

"We will fight this battle from within," Sarkal said over his shoulder. "The Laws of Surak are obsolete, written for another time. Many know this already. They will heed our call to act. And I — I will wed the *Anomaly*," he announced without ceremony. "Her powers are most extraordinary and once *bonded* to me, I shall wield her strength to my own means."

"But," Strone stared at his friend and cousin, his slanted brown eyebrows raised in his skepticism, "the High Council —"

"Is deliberating even as we speak over what to do regarding her current disposition, yes, I know. How the death and resurrection of one Vulcan can prompt the High Council into action, defies logic, in the face of greater concerns." Sarkal waved his hand in the air, shaking his head. "No matter. Do not let yourselves be troubled, brethren. Whatever the

NIGHT WHISPERS 1 - THE INCIDENT

outcome, it can be utilized to our advantage. Scandal being what it is. It is all part of the Plan... .”

**September 10, 2285
Starfleet Academy Infirmary
San Francisco, Earth**

Stepping out of the chilly ancient halls of the courthouse, Sarkal was assaulted by the pungent ocean scents that clung to the heavy air. It was most displeasing. He loathed San Francisco with its stinking humid atmosphere, able to feel the salt deposited on his skin. Yet, he had been gratified for this chance to come to Earth. Assisting a client who was hopelessly entangled in the conflicting exportation laws to which he'd fallen prey, one look at the charges had told Sarkal it could

have been handled via the compti, or even by proxy. He refused, however, to pass up a chance to see — *her*. This case provided Sarkal with the perfect cover.

As expected, court had adjourned early, the judge ruling in his client's favor granting a dismissal of all charges. Glancing at his wrist chronometer, Sarkal left the courthouse, determining he had just enough time for a brief visit with his intended before he was constrained to catch his flight back home to Vulcan. Due back in court there in less than five point six-two days, he would have to keep the visit quite short. He didn't need much time to accomplish his task.

Sighting a cab, he hurried down the steps of the old dwelling deftly claiming the ride by sliding quickly into the back seat before any of the others in the swarm behind him had a chance. "Starfleet Academy Infirmary," he ordered and then settled back against the seat.

A number of years had passed since he'd last seen Brianna Cantrell, although due to her father's notoriety, he had caught a glimpse of her in a recent holograph or two as she made the netwide gossip columns every so often, most recently for her tragic collapse. A rare beauty in the making as a child, she was simply stunning in her womanhood, even if the holographs were said to do her an injustice, he

thought, gazing at her image on the tiny electronic notepad he carried. Her overwhelming healthful appearance in no way detracted from his purpose, but rather explained to the ignorant just what held him attracted, why he persisted in his quest despite her continued resistance. She would be quite the show piece on his arm, quite the conquest.

Let them think what they would.

He now knew the truth of why she had refused all correspondence from him. Would, that he had acted sooner. Foolishly, he believed it was the normal militaristic restrictions placed on the early training of the cadets which barred him contact. Yet, strangely after said time period had elapsed she continued to ignore him, which had taken him aback since he had always made his intentions known to her. Still he had not acted, allowing the *Other* to become fully ensconced. No matter. He could even forgive her egregious behavior over these past four point seven-two- five years. She was free of the *Hybrid*, through a perverse twisting of Fate, and Sarkal meant to utilize this rare opportunity to claim her once and for all, while the window was still wide open.

Closing his eyes, he prepared himself for what he was about to do. In only a few minutes the cab pulled into the visitor's parking lot of the Academy, having been waived through the gates by the Marine

on duty once Sarkal flashed his credentials at him. Ignorant fools, Sarkal thought as he got out of the transport and hurried into the main lobby of the hospital.

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Dr. T'Nikha stood once again gazing at the monitor above Brianna Cantrell's head, taking notes. Just when she thought the girl had turned a corner in the healing process, back she was in Sickbay insisting her *bondmate* was alive. She could *feel* him. No doubt the recent testing Starfleet had been putting her through had jarred her emotions, reawakening memories of his *touch*, which should have been allowed to dissipate gradually. She would approach the Admiral again to put a stop to it, for the girl's own well being, though she held little hope of success in light of recent events.

She stood to the side of the hospital cot, gazing at her patient. "Do you recall what I told you three days after your *bondmate's* death when you insisted he was alive, then, too? This *sensation* you are experiencing is a little like a phantom limb." T'Nikha jotted a quick note on her clipboard. "One often goes through a phase in which the hand or leg or other extremity still feels attached even though it has been severed. In time, such a feeling dissipates, and this will, too."

"But this is different. I know it was *he*." Brianna

Cantrell gazed up at the Vulcan physician, her eyes hopeful. "Not a dream, or an illusion ... *real*. Just as surely as it ever was."

"Yes, I am certain if felt quite real. Memory is a powerful thing." Dr. T'Nikha walked to the end of the bunk putting the electronic clipboard back in its place.

"And the *wanderings*?" Brianna Cantrell turned away, battling her emotions. "All those years of training ..."

"Uncontrolled?"

"My mind just flits off willy-nilly."

T'Nikha frowned ever so slightly, making a mental note of it. She came back to stand at Brianna Cantrell's side. "That, too, is an unfortunate manifestation of the syndrome. And merely emphasizes my point. It is all part of the *Phantom Effect*. It should diminish with time. Once you fully accept that he is no more, your subconscious won't have need to search for that missing part of your soul. In the meantime I recommend you —"

"What about the dreams, the nightmares?"

Brianna Cantrell's gaze was intent. T'Nikha fought to hold her eyes nonetheless, all the while wanting to turn away and hide. The clerics had posted a warning in the human's medical file, given the

nature of her *Gifts*. T’Nikha could now attest to the lack of exaggeration in those reports. She felt oddly naked and sans any further skepticism on her part.

“I saw the *Rigi* arrive hours before it actually happened,” Brianna Cantrell went on. “Weeks, in fact. Over and over ... And another thing. He *will* collapse during the meeting and ... die. His hearts will all just stop. How do I even know these things? It frightens me so —”

T’Nikha placed her hand on the girl’s shoulder, nodding her understanding. “You must ... guard yourself. Particularly while *wandering*. You are in a most vulnerable state. At any rate, I have given you a sedative to help you sleep. Your mind is weary from lack of rest and as such is more often prone to tricks —”

“But you haven’t given me an answer,” Brianna Cantrell sobbed, “no one will. And that keeps me stuck in this nightmare.” Tears flowed across her temples and on into her ears, wetting the pillow beneath her head, her large blue eyes now bloodshot. Clearly, the girl was exhausted.

T’Nikha studied her impassively. “We will speak more on this again tomorrow.”

Hearing faint footsteps, T’Nikha turned to the nurse who came up beside her, whispering into her ear. The nurse was young, a level Three cadet and still in

training to a large extent. T'Nikha's expression altered only slightly with the raised eyebrow. "Show him in," she said. Turning toward Brianna Cantrell again, "You have a visitor."

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Sarkal stood, tall and solemn in the doorway awaiting a signal from the physician allowing him to approach. "Do not stay long. The sedative should take effect very shortly," T'Nikha said, in passing, as she went out.

"I overheard just now what your doctor said." Sarkal came to the foot of the bunk. "So, you believe he yet lives?"

"I have nothing to say to you, Sarkal." Brianna Cantrell turned on her side, away from him.

"Perhaps, not. But there is much I would say to you. I have news," he said, slowly making his way over to the window, bedside. Parting the blinds, he gazed out at the cadets marching in the distance. "It may even be in your interest to know your *sensors* have not failed you. Unlike what your physician asserts. Your *Gifts* are true, he does live, your — *moderator*." Turning around again Sarkal leaned over to look into Brianna Cantrell's face, anxious to see her response as he went on. Gripping her arm when she tried to turn away, amused, he watched as grief filled her eyes again. "Yes, so how does that

make you feel, T’Bree? To know he left you, after all.”

“You’re lying.”

“I am a Vulcan —”

“Then you exaggerate.” She met his gaze. “Call it what you will an untruth is an untruth. It is what I’ve come to expect from you.”

“Continue to deny that which you know, T’Bree, in your inescapably *Human* manner. The fact remains. He left you.” Standing upright again, Sarkal walked back over to the end of the bed. He could hear the muffled sounds of her sorrow, her sniffling.

“No, it wasn’t like that. He died.”

“Apparently,” he said, picking up her chart that dangled from the end of the bed, giving it a surreptitious glance, “he wasn’t Vulcan enough to handle you so he simply cut you lose when things got a little sticky. Most egregiously, I might add. I would never do that to you. Yet you rebuff me every chance you get. Do you recall what I told you? What I have always told you.” He set the chart back in place and turned to face her again. “You are mine. You will be *mine*. *I will own you.*”

Brianna Cantrell had fallen into slumber, the sedative mercifully talking hold of her. Sarkal watched her breathing pattern, noting her chest rise

and fall in a steady slow pace. In and out, he matched her, willing his mind outward, seeking to *link* it with hers in her unconscious state. Colors danced forming parallel cones like wind kicked up into a funnel, ever approaching one another, tongues of flame licking at their sides ... *you are mine.*

"I'm afraid I must ask you to leave, now," the young nurse said, coming into the room. Sarkal, momentarily startled by the intrusion, gave a short quick nod of his head and then left. The nurse, shuddering with the sudden chill, pulled the covers over Brianna Cantrell's shoulders before continuing on her rounds.

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September 11, 2285
Starfleet Academy Infirmary
San Francisco, Earth

~**S**he was struggling up the side of a mountain, grasping at every crag and cranny, her fingers desperate to reach the summit. The wind was relentless, buffeting her cruelly from every side threatening to dislodge her tenuous foothold, sending pieces of the gravelly mountainside biting into the tender flesh of her face.

And overhead, somewhere, crying into that wind was a T'ay'at'ma, undoubtedly, searching for carrion, maybe even herself, if

she fell. She glanced warily over her shoulder to the dizzying depths below. She wasn't so awfully large she couldn't be carried off, harnessed by those great, powerful talons ripping into her flesh! She could hear the pulsating wings, the bird swooping downward until the flap-flapping of its leather pinions echoed in her ears, filling her with dread — like a small voice calling to her, nearly persuading her to turn back — give up this pursuit.

Yes, turning back was what she should do, before she fell, before that prehistoric creature took her for prey. It was logical.

After all, it was as if Nature itself was against this ascent. Strangely, she had climbed this way many times before in the past, up this very spire, in fact, and yet it never seemed so difficult as now. She hugged herself flat against the precipice as another gust roared up from the side, pummeling her anew. The message repeated itself, 'Turn back', whistled on the wind from somewhere on the edge of her thoughts. Along with that peculiar, persistent fluttering of wings — suddenly, she felt terrified.

Her eyes were stinging with grit. Squeezing them shut, she let the tears fall. Perhaps, it had been too long since she had come this way. Perhaps, she was no longer up to it, afraid of being hurt again — of losing her

footing and plummeting headlong into the abyss below. She shouldn't be here. She should turn back. Yet, something was slowly awakening in her. A tiny voice long dormant, whispering to her, beckoning her to come, the echo of some profoundly wonderful, distant encounter lasting mere seconds ... Yes, that was it, why she had come this way again. He was calling to her just as before — and she needed to answer him — to touch his mind and be one with him again.

The blast stopped abruptly as if conquered by some unseen force. The T'ay'at'ma suddenly flew off. She opened her eyes and with one final thrust propelled herself to the top, catching her breath as she gazed out at the panorama before her. She was unbelievably high up, so high the sky was as black as space. Tentative, she rose to her feet and then turned to gaze about her in every direction. The brightly dotted space scape before her went on forever, some planets nearly close enough to touch, others merely winking spots of fire.

It was wondrous to behold. So much so, in fact, she had to remind herself to breathe. Then, from out of the blackness, shot a shimmering, blazing hot comet arcing across the field of stars. Dazzling in its brilliance at first she thought it must be the Enterprise, leaving behind it swirls of colors so rich — and unique in their pattern she felt she should

know them. She did know them, suddenly excited, trembling, at once weeping with joy.

"I'm here. I'm here!" she cried as the colors slowly dissipated, fading into a rainbow of stardust showering down upon her, surrounding her, winking out altogether; filling her with his undeniable presence one more time ... ~

"Ah!" Brianna Cantrell came awake, dragging a hand over her face. She hated the sedatives. They always left her feeling woozy. The dream had been powerful, most strongly involving her tactile senses; the sensations perceived still swirling around her holding her captive — and giving her a headache besides, she lamented; The screech of that horrible winged creature still rang in her ears ... the stinging grit against her face felt so real. She gently examined her cheek with her fingertips expecting to find an abrasion there; the welcome feel of her *moderator's* warm embrace was also real, his essence wrapped around hers, essentially giving the illusion of a hug anyway. Given their circumstances it was the only way he had ever held her.

She found herself longing for the actual physical contact. And uncertain it would ever be. After all, despite what Sarkal told her, she had been led to believe her *moderator* was dead. She had witnessed the *Light*; watched, as he went into the tunnel,

leaving her behind. Pulling away from the pain, Brianna Cantrell glanced around her at the gray-green walls. Disoriented. Adrift. She was still in Sickbay. Why?

“Good morning,” Dr. T’Nikha greeted from the small desk to the side of the room. “You cried out in your slumber.”

“I was having a very strange dream. Familiar and yet not. I felt another presence — beyond that of my *moderator*. Something I felt once a long time ago. Malice. Waves and waves of ... malice.”

“Well, you’re awake now. And images can’t hurt you. Oh,” T’Nikha said, her hand grazing the pocket in her long white lab coat. “Admiral Komack stopped by, briefly. He left this for you, Lieutenant.” T’Nikha popped the small, thin red plastic rectangle into the viewer and pulled the bedside tray over so Brianna Cantrell could peruse it. “Your orders, I believe.”

“Hm, he’s given me leave. I get to go home for a few days before I report to the ... *Enterprise*? ”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I was hoping to regain my billet aboard the *Excelsior*, is all. Instead of a fiver in deep space, I’m being redirected to ... *Special Services*? ” Brianna Cantrell continued to scroll down the orders. “Guess there’s some really bad stuff going on in the

universe.”

“Indeed. They’ve been busily grooming you for this mission all these weeks.”

“What if I refuse?”

“Why would you do this?”

“I know, I know, I have mind powers and a duty to use them,” Brianna Cantrell shrugged, taking the diskette out of the slot. “I just thought they couldn’t force me, against my will, is all.”

“No, you are correct. They cannot force you. And the Vulcan High Council would back you all the way, on that. But I do believe it was T’Pau, herself, who specifically asked for your inclusion.”

“Well, then,” she sighed heavily. “I guess that is that.” Brianna Cantrell’s hands trembled as she fidgeted with the diskette, turning it over and over in her palms. “Who am I to go up against T’Pau? Been there, done that once, and most certainly do not plan on ever doing it again.” She dropped the diskette into her lap to press the heals of her hands against her closed eyes. “And, do I ever have a headache!”

T’Nikha withdrew a couple of brightly colored capsules from a vial in the drawer and handed them over to her patient with a glass of water. “Here you go, these should help.” She patted Brianna Cantrell’s shoulder, “You should try to remember, it is always

an honor to serve," she said.

"I'll try to remember that — while my brain is busy melting."

21

**September 8, 2285
Yosemite State Park
California, Earth**

~Fog swirled around his feet swallowing him up as he ran across the deck to the stern of the ship. He had to reach her but he couldn't see. All was black; the night sky, the water below, mixed with the cold, gray shards of heavy mist. Several times he lost his sense of direction. 'Where art thee?'

Stopping, he tested the rope about his waist. Briefly, he felt her tugging on the other end. She was there, he could feel her, yet he

couldn't shake the notion something was wrong. Reaching the row of dinghies where he'd left her seemed impossible. 'Don't give up! I'm here,' he silently shouted, just as the deck left his feet, and he caught himself against the railing.

Awash in the cold sting of salty water he gripped the rail firmly to keep from being swept overboard. The danger passed, he reached for the joint tether — and came up empty. Somehow, inexplicably, amidst the chaos and the fog he had lost his end. Air refused to fill his lungs as though he'd been kicked in the gut.

He couldn't lose her!

Experiencing a new emotion, panic, he fell at once to his knees groping desperately in the darkness. The deck was cold and slick under his touch but he paid little heed. Nothing mattered, so long as he could avoid going back to how he was without her, alone and miserable. Finding the lifeline again, he took it up, startled to find it stretched across the transom uncoiling rapidly as if someone had deployed the dinghy — yet, the small rescue craft creaked eerily to and fro from its launch station, empty; its lone passenger pitched into the depths below!

Stunned at this revelation, hesitating for a nanosecond, the realization struck him that

she would be gone from him forever. Jolted into action, he grasped at the rope. Bracing his feet against the sides, he pulled hand over hand until a huge wave splashed over the railing threatening his grip. The ship lurched, the tension on the rope snapped, flinging him against the hard, slick deck.

"No!" he gasped, scrambling to his feet again. Rushing to the rail, he gazed into the blackness beyond the ship. Nothing was there except the broken rope end waving freely as it hurtled itself away from him, disappearing into the fog. The dinghy, what was left of it, now dangled loosely from its pulleys. Having smashed into the side of the ship, it was now broken into bits, the precious cargo it bore a moment ago, nowhere to be seen. "Overboard! Woman overboard," he choked out the words in vain, looking around him for help. No one was there and he was beyond himself to help her. He ran down the length of the vessel, searching the dark waters without result, hollering vainly into the void. Slowly, logically, he gave into the reality of the situation.

She was gone.

Despite his best efforts he had failed her, the weight of such a reality, enormous. Dismally, he sank to the deck, forlorn, staring down at the fragmented rope end still clutched in his raw, burnt hands. He struggled to breathe

around the sharp, burning, stabbing pain deep in his chest. She was gone, parted from him in a manner he could not explain, her whole existence shattered in a dreadful instant ...~

Spock began to toss about in his sleep, back and forth, on the cold hard ground. Who art thee, where art thee? "Qual se tu? Qual se tu ..." *Is it you?* He needed to awaken, to pull out of the emotions that threatened to consume him. But to awaken was to leave her behind ... a most disquieting thought.

=^=

McCoy heard a thrashing sound, emanating from across the fire ring, and it brought him awake. He lay still, worried. Early yet, the sky still clung to darkness, so dark he couldn't even see his own hand before his eyes. He wondered if perhaps a bear had invaded their campsite. It was a troubling notion. He failed to pack along a phaser on, this, their second trip to Yosemite. He had Jim Kirk to blame for hustling all three of them off the ship immediately upon their return to port. The *Enterprise* required further repairs and after their bizarre encounter with that entity posing as God, the command crew were given additional shore leave.

Listening, he heard a low moan. "Qual se tu?"

Was that Spock? Couldn't be. There it was again. It almost sounded like ... a sob? Was he injured?

McCoy's thoughts flitted to the possibility of a ransacking bear again. Perhaps, that was what had awakened him so suddenly. Certainly, it felt as if someone or something had invaded their campsite. Eerily, a presence lingered like a trail of perfume ... He sat up on an elbow and strained to see ahead of him. It was no use. He felt along the sides of the aluminum-coated thermal mat he laid upon for his pack and a torch by which to see. He found both.

Spock seemed to have settled a bit, but McCoy was taking no chances. His friend had died, and was only alive due to an unstable substance used in the formation of the *Genesis* experiment. The newly formed planet, born out of the activated *Genesis device*, had imploded. Irrationally, he feared for Spock, whose dead body had been shot out into the orbit of the *Genesis* world only to be reformed and brought back into existence on that planet's surface, in what was nothing short of a miracle, if you asked him. And Spock was acting a tad unstable, lately. Moody, irritable, almost as if the *Season* were upon him. Another cause for worry.

Taking up his palm-sized medi-scanner McCoy crept over to where the Vulcan lay and activated the device. The quiet whirring sound filled the blackness.

“I assure you, Doctor, that I am well.”

McCoy jumped. "You could have saved me the trouble by sayin' so in the first place."

"You didn't ask."

"Well, I'm askin' now." McCoy fell back on his heels and consequently nudged their sleeping captain.

"Has anybody made coffee yet?" James Kirk sat up, throwing the blanket off his legs. "I'll get some firewood," he offered and slipping into his boots, stumbled off sleepily. A tiny beam of light pierced the night ahead of him, until he disappeared from their sight. McCoy lit the lantern, bathing his features with an ethereal glow, and turned to face a recalcitrant Spock.

"You were having a nightmare. A doozie. Care to talk about it?" He held the lantern aloft to have a good look at the Vulcan's face and caught the flicker of emotion that ran briefly across Spock's sallow countenance before he could *shield* it from view again, the Vulcan snapping shut just like an *Aldebaran shellmouth*, noted McCoy.

Spock dropped his gaze, "I do not."

"Same dream as before? Same players? Was it the girl again?" In the dimness McCoy went about stoking what was left of their fire. A few red embers remained from the night before. Fanning these, he added some leftover tinder, some twigs and leaves

from the ground gathered into a small nearby pile.

Spock pulled himself out of his nest and took a seat on a log, quietly pulling on his boots. McCoy cast him a sidelong glance as he worked. He knew Spock to be a very private man and likely resented this intrusion into his private life, yet a connection remained between them that even Spock could not deny. McCoy frowned as Spock let out a quiet breath as he stared into the burgeoning fire. Clearly, the Vulcan was disgruntled.

“Doctor, how can you have housed my *katra* within your own consciousness and yet still know so little of who I am?” He took up his lyrette and positioned it securely in his lap, as if to play. Hiding again, McCoy surmised, as Spock so often did. Yet, he also knew it was a means of distraction for the Vulcan, something to which he could logically turn his attention. *I know you better than you think*, he silently groused and was startled when Spock looked up at him, as if he’d heard these inner thoughts.

“Please, I ask that you forget I ever sought your assistance in this matter. It is of no consequence. Merely an aberration, a trick of the imagination —”

“Next thing you’ll be telling me, it’s a bit of undigested potato!” McCoy gestured with the stick he’d been using to shove the fire around, stabbing the air in Spock’s direction with it. “My God, Spock,

you sound like Scrooge. He was in denial, too. But let me point this out to you, my pointy-eared, green-blooded ... *hobgoblin* of a friend. Whatever you may think, you are not impervious. You died and when you were brought back you didn't even know us."

"Your point, Doctor?"

"You still have memories secreted away in that thick subconscious of yours. The more painful, the deeper they're likely to be suppressed. Trapped in there. And sooner or later, whether you approve of it or not, they have to come out. The fact that they are attempting to surface can only mean you are closer to a full recovery. And they're gonna continue to play out in your dreams until you face them, head on." McCoy finished with a sharp nod of his head.

Spock drew in a breath, gazing down at his booted feet. An owl hooted in the distance and for a moment his phantom was with him again. Her essence teased him, darting all around him like ectoplasm, enveloping him with her warmth. He paused unable to realize just how he was supposed to make contact with a shadow. *She* was gone and that was pain enough, nothing more than a whisper that came in the night, reminding him of what he'd somehow lost, the details of which evaded him. He did not relish going over the memories he now faced, the *something* that was on the edge of his memory.

The unanswered *why*.

"It is difficult, Doctor, nearly impossible to say where this fraction fits in. I am *alone*. Autonomous. For all the good that bit of information does you." That was the other side of this equation, the only factor that mattered now. Strangely enough, Spock had thought by this time in his life he would be married with a child or two. It was expected of him, was his *duty*, something he actually longed for at this juncture. Instead, he had died without an heir, a mate or even any prospects of such. He had been sorely remiss in his life, or so it would appear. And yet....

"Why don't you tell me what you *do* remember?"

Spock stared off into the distant gloaming. Dawn was threatening to remove the cover of his darkness. And in the distance he could see a tiny pinprick of light. Kirk was on his way back. He was loathed to speak, yet sensed the wisdom in McCoy's words to unburden himself. He did so, warily.

"There was this ... game ... we would play. A mental form of tag, if you will. Have you never wondered what was meant by the words? : '*Parted from me and never parted; never and always touching and touched*,' recited again at the marriage ceremony? Vulcans have learned to rely upon their psychic ties to each other, since the open expression of emotion is frowned upon in our society. It is all

part of our personal, private lives, the *mindmeld* that tethers a couple together. The silent communication that goes on between them, forging a strong mental *bond* that unites them one to another.”

McCoy startled a bit at this revelation and leaned forward so as not to miss a single nuance of what the Vulcan was sharing with him. “Are you telling me you were married again?”

Spock shook his head. “I have no recollection whatsoever of forming a *bondlink* with anyone. Yet, in my dreams there are times when I can *feel* the thoughts of another brushing up against my mind, unbidden, yet welcome. As if she belonged there.”

“The girl.”

“Other times, it is I ... *reaching* for her,” the admission caught on his tongue and Spock fell silent. “If you please. There is no use in discussing _____”

“Oh, no?” McCoy stopped filling the camping kettle with water from a jug to stare at his friend. They had obviously brushed against the heart of the matter, the raw edge of something. This was not the time for him to clam up like that *Aldebaran shell mouth*, which Spock was so often wont to do. If McCoy thought it would keep him from doing so, he would have dropped the kettle and the jug to grab the Vulcan by his shirt collar. “Face it, this girl,

whoever she is, meant a lot to you — otherwise you wouldn't be strugglin' so hard night after night to get back to her." Resuming his task, McCoy hung the kettle on the tripod over the fledgling fire. "Think about it, Spock. Grasp the logic."

Spock shook his head. "What logic, Doctor? I have no name, no face. I do not know her. She does not exist beyond the realm of my imagination."

"Perhaps, not as somebody you know. But you do need a woman." McCoy gave him a meaningful glance, just as Kirk arrived back with more wood.

Spock set his lyrette aside again and stood up. Frustrated, he certainly didn't need a dream to remind him of how lonely he was, despite what Dr. McCoy thought. He was well aware of the emptiness of his life. He'd only brought the matter to McCoy in the first place because of its frequency and his concern it would hamper his efficiency as a Starfleet officer. Now he regretted ever mentioning it.

The chill air went through him and he nearly shuddered. Again he felt *her* presence, as if she were more than a mere phantom. Spock stared passed McCoy into the night. *Qual se tu?* Is it you? he silently asked. *She* was with him, taunting him. And then *she* was gone. He fought to keep from sighing aloud.

Glancing at both men, "If you will excuse me,"

Spock said, and turned heading out of camp to find a tree. It ended the discussion for now, but Spock knew that like a bulldog, McCoy would not let the issue go until he had thoroughly chewed that bone, to Spock's immense regret.

22

September 11, 2285

Stardate: 8509.11

Vulcan Embassy, Earth

Lord Savin entered the room finding he had a visitor who sat in a plush high-backed chair sipping tea, awaiting him. Savin nodded at the Gray, short and curt. “Your ... Grace, I wasn’t expecting you this evening,” the Vulcan Councilor said, shutting the hotel door quietly behind him. “In fact, I am surprised you accompanied your father, the *Rigi* on this trip, let alone visit me here. It is risky for you to be here.”

“My father insisted I witness first hand — to have

an “insider’s view,” if you will of the workings of the United Federation of Planets. He cited this trip as viable governing experience for me, his Heir. So, have you tested the device, yet? We need to choose a target. My people are growing restless.”

Lord Savin poured himself a cup of the spicy Vulcan tea, seating himself in a chair opposite his guest. “My ... operatives are working on it.”

“I am troubled by your Ambassador Sarek’s involvement. His activities could jeopardize our mission.”

Lord Savin blanched, knowing the new *Rigi* was targeting Sarek, in his not so subtle manner, and Savin could not bring himself to go that far. Given his prior, unfortunate history with their Matriarch, suspicion would naturally and quite logically settle over his own *House*. Attempting to smooth things over, Savin pulled his lips into a straight line, baring his teeth in his best effort to smile, “Do not worry. By the time my operatives get done with his esteemed *House*, his credibility will be decimated,” he knocked back the drink in his hands and swallowed hard. “Completely beyond repair. All is well.”

“And what of these ... operatives?” the prince asked, fingering the brocade pattern on the chair’s arm. He sampled the tea, grimaced, and set the glass

aside. “Can they be fully trusted? We cannot afford to fail. You know what is at stake. And it must be done in such a way that it cannot ever be traced back to me. Those are the conditions. Should at any time suspicion be cast in my direction, I shall have to disavow all knowledge of involvement.”

“How can you doubt us? Did we not bring you essential knowledge of the device, reliable schematics from which to build it anew? Even as we speak, the pieces are all falling into place. Everything is in motion to ensure both parties the victory we mapped out and deserve. Rest assured that between the Vulcan High Council and the Federation Council, the *House of Talek Sen Dene* will not comprehend what struck them. The rest is up to you.”

“You brought us pieces and schematics, but you didn’t leave it with us to build anew. Your ‘mouthpiece’ kept it. I believe it is he that presumes to build it.”

“Yes. It was a matter of trust, as I am certain you understand. And need I remind you, I hold the same conditions. Should my involvement be made known, I would face public disgrace, a stint in a mental facility with the expectations my thinking would be reoriented and if my *rehabilitation* is deemed ... unsuccessful, I would have to end my own life. Again, publicly. Or face permanent exile. Do not

fear," Lord Savin said, "we have chosen one among us whose ambitions will motivate him to take all care, indeed."

Lord Savin unveiled the device made of ancient stone and held it aloft for inspection before he handed it to his co-conspirator.

"Ah, it has been beautifully crafted," Prince Quinbar said. "Such intricate carvings. So precise. Pity, its use is so insidious," he said, hefting the stone in his slender gray hand.

"Careful," Lord Savin warned, "I would not want a stray thought to inadvertently take either one of us out in the process. Would never do to become an unintended test subject, now would it?"

The Gray lost all color in his face, leaving him a pale bluish shade as he began to tremble, "You Vulcans are always so cautious. So fearful of your own mind powers. Unlike us."

"We know from past experience how such power, unharnessed, can escalate. Logic dictates —"

"Who, then, should be our first test subject?" Quinbar interrupted. He set the replicated *Stone of Gol* on the table before him. Reaching for the decanter behind him he poured them both a cup of hot Vulcan tea. Lord Savin opened a small crystalline box and took a pinch of the fine powder within, sprinkling it into their cups. The yellow

substance let off a mist of steam, its musky, apple fragrance pungent, causing a heady effect in the men.

“Someone who will garner the attention of both the Federation and Sigma Rho V,” the Vulcan suggested.

“Yes, and also put the Rindagvarian leadership on notice. We will not be further abused. I hear Admiral Komack is set to speak at the Conference tomorrow ... ” Prince Quinbar said, rising from his chair.

“Let’s just say, I hope he sleeps well tonight.”

“I will expect a full report upon our next transmission,” returned the prince. “Until then, may you live long and prosper.”

“Peace and long life to you, my friend.”

23

September 12, 2285

Stardate: 8509.12

Starfleet Headquarters, San Francisco

“Sir, sir you’re going to be late for the conference —” the aide said, as he pushed open the Admiral’s bedroom door. Admiral Komak lay too still on the massive four-poster bed. The morning sunlight streamed in through the floor-to-ceiling windows giving ample illumination to the entire room, but most especially across the Admiral’s slack face. The brightness by itself was enough to awaken most. Yet, the admiral lay unnaturally still. The aide stood, puzzled, frozen

in fear. "Ss-sir?"

When he failed to rouse the admiral, the young man fumbled for his communicator to call for help.

In only moments the hotel police and Starfleet Security scoured the room, the emergency medics examining the body and noting the time of death sometime between the hours of midnight and three p.m. Massive heart-attack cited as the cause of death....

24

**September 12, 2285
Federation Council Hall
San Francisco, Earth**

“ **A**nd I say remove the sanctions. You’ve held my people hostage long enough with your archaic methods of withholding that which we need to survive.” Ambassador Muroghna picked the invisible lint from one of his many sleeves. An imposing figure with six sets of arms, he waved the other five sets wildly as if he were batting at unseen flying insects. Swathed from head to toe in reams of a shiny black and gold material, it was a wonder he could move at

all. "And you call yourselves civilized! We've done nothing wrong —"

"The proliferation of fusion weaponry is against Intergalactic law ..." President Kintawa presented the epitome of patience as he presided over this session of the Federation Council. Unflappable. "Do you deny the charges?"

"Energy ... it's about energy!" Muroghna shot out of his seat along the south wall of the chamber and pounded a hand on the rail. From somewhere amidst the folds of fabric he pointed a long, accusing forefinger. "Our planet is furthest from our sun —"

"Yes, I must concur with my, ah ... *neighbor*," the *Rigi* of Sequar gave a slight nod to the assemblage as he entered the chamber, "it is cold in space." Followed by a wake of diplomats and aides, a bevy of secret service personnel, the tall, gangly, gray-skinned Regent of the second planet in the Sigma Rho System cut a swath between the stadium seating on his way to the podium in the center well. "But I would reiterate, Rindagvar's desire for energy has everything to do with their repeated failed attempts to acquisition my planet. Gentlemen, I implore you. We've barely enjoyed five seasons of peace since the cease fire was imposed by this esteemed body." The *Rigi* gestured to the assembly of ambassadors, representative of each planet in the Federation, the seats filled to maximum. "While we have not

achieved the proper level of self-sufficiency which would enable us to assume full-membership in the Federation, we ask — nay, we *demand* your full protection. There are those who seek to destroy us.”

The *Rigi* held up a small rectangular blue disk, waving it for all to see before slipping it into the computer drive at the podium. “As you can see by the satellite images, the Rindagvarians’ energy exploits are much more advanced than any domestic usage would permit. Hardly innocuous, as my neighbor would submit.”

“Lies! *All — lies!*” Muroghna was a-quiver, his arms all waving independently. His gray-green reptilian textured skin suffused with a bright orange in his rage.

“You must act and act now,” spoke the *Rigi*. “Break the cycle of debate and non action. Every minute you delay another stage is completed.” With the push of a button the personal view screens around the room activated as a slide show of images began. The huge view screen, behind the President’s podium, too, displayed the images for all in the room to see.

Muroghna cast his eyes to the mini screen before him. Color drained from his face. “I will not stand here and be accused!” He drew himself up, folded several arms over his chest, bringing sheaves of

material along with the gesture. Tipping his chin upward, rather dramatically, he proceeded toward the doors of the chamber. Turning his overlarge head, he narrowed his bulbous yellow eyes. "Mark my words you have not heard the end of this! Unlike Vulcan, Rindagvar is no puppet of this questionable body of buffoons! We have a right to our own sovereignty. We have a right to our own source of power —"

"You have no right to usurp *our* sovereignty. To wage war on a peaceful people such as ours —" a gurgling noise choked off the Rigi's voice and the tall, lanky Gray crumpled to the marble floor. Ambassador Sarek was the first to reach his side, his seat at this assemblage near the end of the bottommost tier. Touching the alien's shoulder, he called out his name. Getting no response, he found the location at the back of his left elbow feeling for a pulse. There was none. Next, he listened with his acutely tuned pointed ears to the Sequarian's chest. Not a single beat was detected. "His hearts have stopped."

Muroghna stood frozen in place. "Impossible, he has four backups. Never really understood why their race should need such a redundant system, myself..."

The majority of bipeds in the room gave him a quick quizzical glance. He stared back at them

letting all of his arms wave in unison this time, and shouted. "For the Deity's sake, get a doctor!"

Starfleet medics stormed into the room, but the *Rigi*'s entourage, now gathered around their fallen monarch, merely shook their heads, their sorrow evident as the high-pitched keening began. "It is too late," Sarek announced, coming to his feet. "The *Rigi* of Sequar is dead."

"Prince Quinbar — where is the prince? He must be protected!" cried the Sequarian Secretary of State, glancing about the assemblage, frantically.

"No!" Muroghna again looked pale. "Say it isn't so. You will not blame me for this. They are always blaming Rindagvar for their woes. We will not be held responsible! We have a right to our own sovereignty!"

The chamber exploded in a cacophony of chatter. Wild accusations were levied as the assemblage split on who was to blame for this inexplicable event. Again, President Kintawa used his gavel to quiet the room as Starfleet Security covered all the exits, their laser pistols draped across their arms. "Order! I will have order!"

Sarek returned to his seat. He studied the images still on the screen, puzzling over the notion of two inexplicable deaths in one day. Word had spread, schedules rearranged, once it was learned that

Admiral Komack would not be speaking at today's conference. He had died overnight, seemingly in his sleep, according to the young male aide who discovered his body. Sarek had worked closely with Admiral Komack, knew him to be in superb health despite his advanced years. Sarek felt the pangs of concern. Having taken the Admiral into his confidence, along with the *Rigi*, filling them in on his plans to stop the terrorists' threats, it left the Vulcan disconcerted to know that now, both were dead.

Had the conspirators just put his family on notice? And anyone else bent on stopping them? Slipping a diskette into his viewer, he used this moment of chaos to copy the *Rigi*'s entire presentation for himself. What he saw was unsettling, at best. Coupled with the discovery of the Admiral's sudden demise, he grew apprehensive. If upon further investigation his suspicions were founded, the Federation had more to worry about than the mere death of one Head of Planet.

Again the gavel resounded.

"Mister President," Sarek began, "in light of these most recent events, I ask you to allow Vulcan to take control of the decedent for purposes of an autopsy. It is possible we may be able to solve this mystery. Perhaps, a private conference is in order?"

President Kintawa looked thoughtful. Then with a final lowering of his gavel, he dismissed the Council, handing over the control of the aftermath to the Federation Bureau of Intelligence. "So be it," he told the Ambassador from Vulcan.

END

Night Whispers continues with...
Vol 2 - The Deception

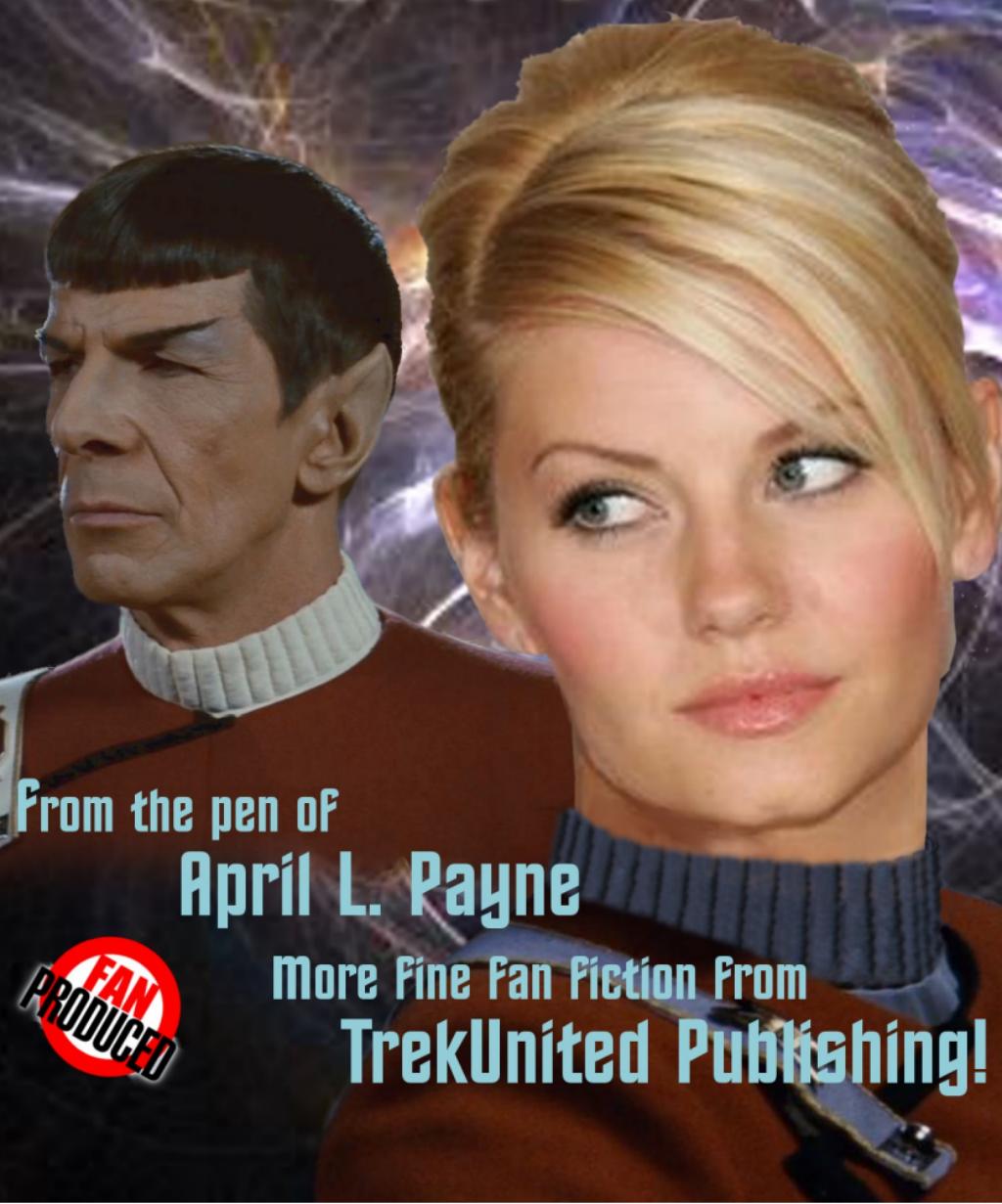
All is not well between Spock and Brianna Cantrell, as anticipated, upon their meeting. She arrives aboard the Enterprise, fully aware she is a bride and prepared to meet her would be groom, interacting with the Vulcan first officer on two levels. Spock, also, is prepared to meet his intended. However,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

NIGHT WHISPERS 1 - THE INCIDENT

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

Night Whispers continues
with Vol 2...

THE DECEPTION



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